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# Hydrożele białkowo-polisacharydowe w projektowaniu innowacyjnych układów strukturotwórczych i nośników substancji bioaktywnych

Protein-Polysaccharide Hydrogels in the Design of Innovative Structure-  
Forming Systems and Carriers for Bioactive Substances

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*Pragnę z całego serca podziękować jednocześnie dedykując tę rozprawę doktorską,*

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## **Streszczenie**

### **Hydrożele białkowo-polisacharydowe w projektowaniu innowacyjnych układów strukturotwórczych i nośników substancji bioaktywnych**

W ostatnich latach obserwuje się wzrost świadomości konsumentów w zakresie problemów zdrowotnych oraz zrównoważenia środowiskowego. Istnieje również potrzeba projektowania nowej żywności funkcjonalnej, obejmującej produkty roślinne o zwiększonej wartości odżywczej i biodostępności składników bioaktywnych. Zatem, uzasadnione jest ciągłe poszerzanie wiedzy na temat składników pochodzenia roślinnego, które mogą potencjalnie pomóc w kreowaniu wyglądu, konsystencji i smaku innowacyjnych produktów.

Celem pracy doktorskiej było określenie właściwości fizykochemicznych binarnych hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych oraz opracowanie układu modelowego, w którym hydrożel pełniłby funkcję składnika strukturotwórczego i nośnika substancji bioaktywnej. Badania podzielono na 4 etapy zgodnie z zakresem pracy. Rozpoczęto od analizy bibliometrycznej literatury dotyczącej hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych (przy użyciu oprogramowania VOSviewer) oraz charakterystyki wybranych preparatów białkowych (białko grochu i białko pszenicy) i polisacharydowych (guma gellan, guma konjac, inulina, maltodekstryna, babka plesznik i guma tara). Wybrano do dalszych badań dwa biopolimery - białko grochu (jako dodatek 12,5 g/ 100 g hydrożelu) i babkę plesznik (jako dodatek 0,5 g/ 100 g hydrożelu). Określono wpływ pH (7, 4,5 i 3) i stężenia NaCl (0, 0,15 i 0,3 M) na właściwości fizyczne tych hydrożeli. W końcowym etapie zbadano wpływ metody indukcji na właściwości układu zawierającego antocyjany z ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu (w ilości 2 g/100 cm<sup>3</sup> wodnej fazy hydrożelu). Zastosowano innowacyjną metodę sekwencyjnej indukcji, łącząc indukcję termiczną z wtórną indukcją nietermiczną tj. homogenizacją ultradźwiękową (25 kHz, 70 W, 100% puls, 100% amplituda, temp.  $20 \pm 1$  °C) i obróbką wysokimi ciśnieniami hydrostatycznymi (500 MPa, ustawniona temperatura  $20 \pm 1$  °C, temp. max w trakcie ciśnieniowania  $30 \pm 1$  °C). Otrzymane układy analizowano pod względem stabilności fizycznej, parametrów mikroreologicznych, teksturalnych, barwy, wydajności wiązania antocyjanów z ekstraktem, analizy FT-IR, mikrostruktury, ogólnej zawartości związków fenolowych, aktywności przeciwtutleniającej (ABTS, DPPH) oraz stabilności termicznej. Przeprowadzono analizę statystyczną uzyskanych wyników (analiza wariancji jedno- i dwuczynnikową ANOVA, test Tukey'a). W celu efektywnego podsumowania zgromadzonych danych, wyniki po każdym etapie, poddano analizie składowych głównych (PCA) oraz hierarchicznej analizie skupień (HCA).

Na podstawie analizy bibliometrycznej wykazano, że badania nad spożywczymi hydrożelami binarnymi uzyskanymi z połączenia białka roślinnego i polisacharydu jako materiałów budulcowych są stosunkowo nowym obszarem badań o charakterze interdyscyplinarnym. Jednocześnie podkreślono, że ich innowacyjność polega na zastosowaniu podejścia "Bottom-Up Design" do opracowania nowych funkcjonalnych matryc żywieniowych. To podejście pozwala na kontrolowanie interakcji pomiędzy



białkiem a polisacharydem w celu otrzymania złożonej struktury o zindywidualizowanych właściwościach, które mogą pomóc w opracowaniu innowacyjnych i prozdrowotnych produktów spożywczych.

Charakterystyka właściwości fizycznych preparatów białkowych i polisacharydowych pozwoliła wyłonić preparaty (białko grochu, guma gellan, guma konjac i babka plesznik), które charakteryzowały się zdolnością do tworzenia struktur żelowych (współczynnik ciecz-ciało stałe  $SLB < 0,5$ ). Układy otrzymane z użyciem tych preparatów wykazały wysoką stabilność fizyczną (index niestabilności  $< 0,06$ ). Preparaty białka pszenicy, maltodekstryny i gumy tara nie utworzyły struktury żelowej ( $SLB > 0,5$ ). Na podstawie analizy głównych składowych oraz analizy skupień wybrano białko grochu i babkę plesznik jako składowe hydrożeli do dalszych badań. Analizując widma FT-IR, dla układu z białka grochu, babki plesznik i ich binarnego hydrożelu, potwierdzono występowanie oddziaływań asocjacyjnych (kompatybilność termodynamiczna), pomiędzy ich łańcuchami, w postaci interakcji międzymolekularnych, w tym van der Waalsa i elektrostatycznych. Wykazano, że synergiczne działanie białka grochu i babki plesznik umożliwia otrzymywanie hydrożeli o korzystnych właściwościach fizycznych, przy jednoczesnym zmniejszeniu stężenia biopolimerów potrzebnych dotworzenia struktury żelu.

Na podstawie wyników z kolejnego etapu stwierdzono, że modyfikacja wartości pH i dodatku NaCl skutkowała powstaniem hydrożeli o zróżnicowanych właściwościach fizycznych. Badane hydrożele sklasyfikowano jako słabe żele o podobnych właściwościach do produktów takich jak ketchup, jogurt czy budyń. Indukcja przy niższym poziomie pH (szczególnie pH 3 i 4,5) i bez dodatku NaCl prowadziła do tworzenia się słabych, smarownych hydrożeli, o czym świadczyły: tangens kąta przesunięcia fazowego ( $\tan(\delta) \approx 0,26$ ) oraz wartość odkształcenia w liniowym zakresie lepkosprężystym ( $1,39 < \gamma [\%] < 2,18$ ). Dodanie NaCl (0,15 i 0,3 M) przy tych samych wartościach pH (pH 3 i 4,5) poprawiło stabilność strukturalną. Przy pH 3, wraz ze zwiększeniem stężenia NaCl z 0 do 0,15 M odnotowano średni wzrost wartości modułów G' i G'' o około 95 razy, a w przypadku zwiększenia stężenia NaCl z 0 do 0,3 M wzrost ten osiągnął nawet 170 razy. Zastosowanie niższego pH i wysokiego stężenia NaCl skutkowało wzmacnieniem oddziaływań elektrostatycznych między białkiem grochu i babką plesznik, czego efektem było powstanie hydrożelu o korzystniejszych właściwościach fizycznych, w tym wysokiej stabilności strukturalnej. Wykazano, że podczas indukcji wpływ NaCl na właściwości hydrożeli uzależniony był od pH układu.

Analizując parametry w ostatnim etapie, stwierdzono, że indukcja wtórna z użyciem homogenizacji ultradźwiękowej (U5 i U10) lub wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych (P5 i P10), prowadziła do powstania układów hydrożelowych o istotnie różnych właściwościach fizykochemicznych. Użycie wtórnej indukcji ultradźwiękowej USH spowodowało powstanie układów o niskiej stabilności fizycznej i twardości (0,07 N), co negatywnie wpłynęło na zdolność wiążania ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu ( $EE_{U5} = 3\%$ ;  $EE_{U10} = 9\%$ ) oraz na końcową aktywność przeciwitleniającą (ABTS<sub>U5</sub> = 3,6 mg TE/ 100 g s.s.; ABTS<sub>U10</sub> = 3,1 mg TE/ 100 g s.s.). Dodatkowo, wydłużenie czasu



indukcji do 10 minut (U10) spowodowało największą degradację polifenoli (9,31 g kwasu chlorogenowego/ 100 g s.s.) w porównaniu z układem kontrolnym ( $TPC_C = 18,4$  g kwasu chlorogenowego/ 100 g s.s.). Natomiast, zastosowanie wtórnej indukcji wysokociśnieniowej HHP doprowadziło do powstania układów o zwartej mikrostrukturze (widocznej na mikrofotografiach SEM), czego efektem była wysoka zdolność wiązania antocyjanów z ekstraktem wewnątrz układu ( $EE_{P5} = 20\%$ ,  $EE_{P10} = 33\%$ ). Układy modelowe na bazie hydrożelu z białka grochu i babki plesznik, zawierające ekstrakt z owoców czarnego bzu otrzymane poprzez wtórną indukcję HHP wykazały wysoką aktywność przeciwitleniającą, przy czym dziesięciominutowa indukcja HHP pozwoliła osiągnąć najwyższą zawartość polifenoli ogółem w strukturze ( $TPC_{P10} = 22,7$  g kwasu chlorogenowego/ 100 g s.s.) oraz najwyższą aktywność przeciwitleniającą (ABTS<sub>P10</sub> = 5,8 mg TE/ 100 g s.s.; DPPH<sub>P10</sub> = 1,08 mg TE/ 100 g s.s.).

Na podstawie wyników wykazano, że istnieje możliwość opracowania układu modelowego o właściwościach prozdrowotnych na bazie binarnego hydrożelu z białka grochu i babki plesznik, w którym hydrożel ten pełnił funkcję składnika strukturotwórczego i jednocześnie nośnika substancji bioaktywnej. Ponadto wykazano, że metody i parametry indukcji istotnie wpłynęły na kształtowanie właściwości fizykochemicznych układów hydrożelowych. Jednocześnie należy podkreślić, że sekwencyjna technika polegająca na zastosowaniu indukcji termicznej i wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych przy odpowiednio dobranych warunkach (pH = 3 i dodatek NaCl na poziomie 0,3 M) umożliwiła otrzymanie układu hydrożelowego o optymalnych właściwościach fizykochemicznych do tworzenia zarówno składnika strukturotwórczego jak i nośnika substancji bioaktywnych.

Słowa kluczowe – hydrożele białkowo-polisacharydowe, białko grochu, babka plesznik, właściwości fizykochemiczne, ekstrakt z owoców czarnego bzu, metody indukcji, homogenizacja ultradźwiękowa, wysokie ciśnienia hydrostatyczne



## Summary

### Protein-Polysaccharide Hydrogels in the Design of Innovative Structure-Forming Systems and Carriers for Bioactive Substances

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in consumer awareness regarding health issues and environmental sustainability. This has led to a growing need for the design of new functional foods, particularly plant-based products with enhanced nutritional value and bioavailability of bioactive compounds. Therefore, it is justified to continually expand the knowledge of plant-derived ingredients that can potentially aid in shaping the appearance, texture, and taste of innovative products.

The aim of this study was to determine the physicochemical properties of binary protein–polysaccharide hydrogels and to develop a model system in which the hydrogel would function as both a structure-forming component and a carrier of bioactive substances. The research was divided into four stages in accordance with the scope of the work. It began with a bibliometric analysis of the literature on protein–polysaccharide hydrogels using VOSviewer software, as well as the characterization of selected protein preparations (pea protein and wheat protein) and polysaccharide preparations (gellan gum, konjac gum, inulin, maltodextrin, psyllium husk, and tara gum). Based on the obtained results, two biopolymers were selected for further study: pea protein (added at 12.5 g/100 g of hydrogel) and psyllium husk (added at 0.5 g/100 g of hydrogel). The influence of pH levels (7, 4.5, and 3) and NaCl concentrations (0, 0.15, and 0.3 M) on the physical properties of these hydrogels was determined. In the final stage, the impact of the induction method on the properties of a system containing anthocyanins from black elderberry fruit extract (at 2 g/ 100 cm<sup>3</sup> of the hydrogel's aqueous phase) was examined. An innovative method of sequential induction was applied, combining thermal induction with secondary non-thermal induction—namely, ultrasonic homogenization (25 kHz, 70 W, 100% pulse, 100% amplitude, temperature of  $20 \pm 1$  °C) and high hydrostatic pressure processing (500 MPa, set temperature of  $20 \pm 1$  °C, maximum temperature during pressurization of  $30 \pm 1$  °C). The obtained systems were analyzed in terms of physical stability, microrheological and textural parameters, color, efficiency of anthocyanin binding from the extract, FT-IR analysis, microstructure, total phenolic content, antioxidant activity (ABTS and DPPH assays), and thermal stability. Statistical analysis of the results was conducted using one-way and two-way ANOVA, along with Tukey's test. To effectively summarize the collected data, the results after each stage were subjected to principal component analysis (PCA) and hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA).

Based on the bibliometric analysis, it was demonstrated that research on food-grade binary hydrogels obtained by combining plant proteins and polysaccharides as building materials is a relatively new and interdisciplinary field. It was also emphasized that their innovativeness lies in the application of a "Bottom-Up Design" approach to develop new functional food matrices. This approach allows for controlling the interactions between proteins and polysaccharides to obtain complex structures with



customized properties, which can aid in the development of innovative and health-promoting food products.

Characterization of the physical properties of protein and polysaccharide preparations led to the identification of materials—pea protein, gellan gum, konjac gum, and psyllium husk—that exhibited the ability to form gel structures (solid–liquid balance coefficient SLB < 0.5). Systems prepared using these materials showed high physical stability (instability index < 0.06) due to the formation of the gel structure. In contrast, preparations of wheat protein, maltodextrin, and tara gum did not form gel structures (SLB > 0.5). Based on principal component analysis and cluster analysis, pea protein and psyllium husk were selected as hydrogel components for further studies. Analysis of the FT-IR spectra for the system containing pea protein, psyllium husk, and their binary hydrogel confirmed the presence of associative interactions (thermodynamic compatibility) between their chains in the form of intermolecular interactions, including van der Waals and electrostatic forces. It was demonstrated that the synergistic action of pea protein and psyllium husk enables the production of hydrogels with favorable physical properties while simultaneously reducing the concentration of biopolymers required to form the gel structure.

Based on the results from the next stage, it was concluded that modifying the pH values and adding NaCl resulted in hydrogels with varied physical properties. The studied hydrogels were classified as weak gels with properties similar to products like ketchup, yogurt, or pudding. Induction at lower pH levels (particularly pH 3 and 4.5) without the addition of NaCl led to the formation of weak, spreadable hydrogels, as indicated by a phase angle tangent ( $\tan(\delta) \approx 0.26$ ) and a strain value in the linear viscoelastic range ( $1.39\% < \gamma [\%] < 2.18\%$ ). The addition of NaCl (0.15 and 0.3 M) at the same pH values improved structural stability. At pH 3, increasing the NaCl concentration from 0 to 0.15 M resulted in an average increase in the storage ( $G'$ ) and loss ( $G''$ ) moduli by approximately 95 times, and increasing the NaCl concentration from 0 to 0.3 M led to an increase of up to 170 times. The use of lower pH and higher NaCl concentrations enhanced electrostatic interactions between pea protein and psyllium husk, leading to the formation of hydrogels with more favorable physical properties, including high structural stability. It was demonstrated that during induction, the effect of NaCl on the properties of the hydrogels depended on the pH of the system.

Upon analyzing the parameters in the final stage, it was determined that secondary induction using ultrasonic homogenization (U5 and U10) or high hydrostatic pressure (P5 and P10) led to the formation of hydrogel systems with significantly different physicochemical properties. The use of secondary ultrasonic homogenization (USH) resulted in systems with low physical stability and hardness (0.07 N), which adversely affected the binding capacity of black elderberry fruit extract ( $EE_{U5} = 3\%$ ;  $EE_{U10} = 9\%$ ) and the final antioxidant activity ( $ABTS_{U5} = 3.6 \text{ mg TE/100 g d.m.}$ ;  $ABTS_{U10} = 3.1 \text{ mg TE/100 g d.m.}$ ). Additionally, extending the induction time to 10 minutes (U10) caused the greatest degradation of polyphenols (9.31 g chlorogenic acid/100 g d.m.) compared to the control system ( $TPC_C = 18.4 \text{ g chlorogenic acid/100 g d.m.}$ ). In contrast, the



application of secondary high-pressure induction (HHP) resulted in systems with a compact microstructure (visible in scanning electron micrographs), leading to a high capacity for binding anthocyanins from the extract within the system ( $EE_{P5}=20\%$ ;  $EE_{P10}=33\%$ ). Model systems based on a pea protein and psyllium husk hydrogel containing black elderberry fruit extract, obtained through secondary HHP induction, exhibited high antioxidant activity. Notably, a ten-minute HHP induction achieved the highest total polyphenol content within the structure ( $TPC_{P10}=22.7$  g chlorogenic acid/100 g d.m.) and the highest antioxidant activity ( $ABTS_{P10}=5.8$  mg TE/100 g d.m.;  $DPPH_{P10}=1.08$  mg TE/100 g d.m.).

Based on the results, it was demonstrated that it is possible to develop a model system with health-promoting properties based on a binary hydrogel of pea protein and psyllium husk. In this system, the hydrogel serves both as a structure-forming component and as a carrier of bioactive substances. Furthermore, it was shown that the methods and parameters of induction significantly influenced the physicochemical properties of the hydrogel systems. Notably, the sequential technique involving the application of thermal induction and high hydrostatic pressure under appropriately selected conditions ( $pH=3$  and  $NaCl$  addition at 0.3 M) enabled the formation of a hydrogel system with optimal physicochemical properties, capable of serving both as a structure-forming component and as a carrier of bioactive substances.

**Keywords** — protein-polysaccharide hydrogels, pea protein, psyllium husk, physicochemical properties, black elderberry fruit extract, induction methods, ultrasonic homogenization, high hydrostatic pressure



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## **Wykaz publikacji stanowiących pracę doktorską**

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*Mój udział szacuję na 80%. Polegał na współudziale w opracowaniu koncepcji manuskryptu, zebraniu literatury, przeprowadzeniu analizy bibliometrycznej zebranej literatury, przygotowaniu wstępnej wersji manuskryptu oraz uczestniczeniu w przygotowywaniu ostatecznej wersji manuskryptu.*

*\*Jestem autorem korespondencyjnym.*

**[P2] Hilal, A.\*; Florowska, A.; Florowski, T.; Wroniak, M.: 2022. A Comparative Evaluation of the Structural and Biomechanical Properties of Food-Grade Biopolymers as Potential Hydrogel Building Blocks. Biomedicines, 10(9), 2106. <https://doi.org/10.3390/biomedicines10092106>; IF: 4,7; MEiN<sub>2022</sub>: 100 pkt.**

*Mój udział szacuję na 70%. Polegał na współudziale w opracowaniu koncepcji manuskryptu, zebraniu literatury, zaplanowaniu doświadczenia, doborze metod badawczych, przeprowadzeniu doświadczenia, opracowaniu i interpretacji wyników oraz uczestniczeniu w przygotowaniu wstępnej i ostatecznej wersji manuskryptu.*

*\*Jestem autorem korespondencyjnym.*

[P3] **Hilal, A.\***; Florowska, A.; Domian, E.; Wroniak, M.: 2024. Binary Pea Protein-Psyllium Hydrogel: Insights into the Influence of pH and Ionic Strength on the Physical Stability and Mechanical Characteristics. *Gels*, 10(6), 401.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/gels10060401>; IF: 5; MEiN<sub>2024</sub>: 20 pkt.

*Mój udział szacuję na 70%. Polegał na współpracy w opracowaniu koncepcji manuskryptu, zebraniu literatury, zaplanowaniu doświadczenia, dobiorze metod badawczych, przeprowadzeniu doświadczenia, opracowaniu i interpretacji wyników oraz uczestniczeniu w przygotowaniustępnej i ostatecznej wersji manuskryptu.*

\*Jestem autorem korespondencyjnym.

[P4] **Hilal, A.\***; Florowska, A.; Florowski, T.; Rybak, K.; Domian, E.; Szymański, M.; Wroniak, M.: 2024. Effects of Sequential Induction Combining Thermal Treatment with Ultrasound or High Hydrostatic Pressure on the Physicochemical and Mechanical Properties of Pea Protein–Psyllium Hydrogels as Elderberry Extract Carriers. *International Journal of Molecular Sciences*, 25(16), 9033.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijms25169033>; IF: 4,9; MEiN<sub>2024</sub>: 140 pkt.

*Mój udział szacuję na 65%. Polegał na współpracy w opracowaniu koncepcji manuskryptu, zebraniu literatury, zaplanowaniu doświadczenia, dobiorze metod badawczych, przeprowadzeniu doświadczenia, opracowaniu i interpretacji wyników oraz uczestniczeniu w przygotowaniustępnej i ostatecznej wersji manuskryptu.*

\*Jestem autorem korespondencyjnym.

**Łączna wartość IF – 19,6; punkty MNiSW – 280 pkt.**

## Wykaz skrótów i oznaczeń

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Znaczenie i jednostka</b>
a*	barwa czerwona/zielona [-]
ABTS	aktywność przeciwitleniającą wobec rodnika ABTS [mg TE/ g s.s.]
b*	barwa żółta/niebieska [-]
C*	nasycenie barwy [-]
DPPH	aktywność przeciwitleniającą wobec rodnika DPPH [mg TE/ g s.s.]
EE	zdolność wiązania ekstraktu [%]
EFE	Suchy ekstrakt z owoców czarnego bzu
EI	indeks elastyczności [ $\text{nm}^{-2}$ ]
G'	moduł zachowawczy [Pa]
G"	moduł strاتności [Pa]
GG	guma gellan
h	odcień barwy [°]
HHP	wysokie ciśnienia hydrostatyczne
INU	inulina
KG	guma konjac
L*	jasność [-]
LVR G'	moduł zachowawczy w liniowym zakresie lepkosprężystości [Pa]
LVR $\gamma$	odkształcenie [%]
MD	maltodekstryna
MSD	średnie przemieszczenie kwadratowe w funkcji czasu dekorelacji [ $\text{nm}^{-2}$ ]
MVI	indeks lepkości makroskopowej [ $\text{nm}^{-2}$ ]
PP	białko grochu
PS	babka plesznik
RP	zdolność redukcji jonów żelaza [mg TE/ g s.s.]
SLB	współczynnik ciecz-ciało stałe [-]
$\tan(\delta)$	tangens kąta przesunięcia fazowego
TG	guma tara
TPC	ogólna zawartość związków fenolowych [mg kw. chlorogenowego/ 100 g s.s.]
UHS	homogenizacja ultradźwiękowa
WI	indeks bieli [-]
WP	Białko pszenne
YI	indeks zażółcenia [-]
$\Delta E$	całkowita różnica barwy [-]
$ \eta^* $	lepkość zespolona [Pa·s]
$\eta^2$	wielkość efektu

## 1. Wstęp

Współcześni konsumenti coraz częściej poszukują produktów, które dostarczają korzyści zdrowotnych wykraczających poza podstawowe wartości odżywcze. W ostatnich latach obserwuje się wzrost świadomości konsumentów w zakresie problemów zdrowotnych oraz zrównoważenia środowiskowego. Istnieje również potrzeba projektowania nowej żywności funkcjonalnej, obejmującej produkty roślinne o zwiększonej wartości odżywczej i biodostępności składników bioaktywnych. Zatem, uzasadnione jest ciągłe poszerzanie wiedzy na temat składników pochodzenia roślinnego, które mogą potencjalnie pomóc w kreowaniu pożądanego wyglądu, konsystencji i smaku żywności. Hydrożele spożywcze mogą się okazać kluczowe dla rozwoju innowacyjnych produktów spożywczych z uwagi na ich unikalne właściwości fizykochemiczne. Mogą być one stosowane również jako składniki poprawiające właściwości sensoryczne produktów roślinnych lub jako nowatorskie systemy wiążania i dostarczania związków bioaktywnych.

Hydrożele to trójwymiarowe sieci hydrofilowych polimerów wykazujące właściwości lepkosprężyste. W sektorach biomedycznym i farmaceutycznym hydrożele cieszą się dużą popularnością i są wykorzystywane m.in. jako rusztowania dla komórek w hodowlach komórkowych, a także jako nośniki substancji farmakologicznych stosowanych w leczeniu schorzeń skóry, stawów i układu pokarmowego. W przemyśle spożywczym, tradycyjne zastosowanie hydrożeli ogranicza się m.in. do produkcji np. galaretek i kisielu. Chociaż mogą one wniesć dużo innowacyjnych aplikacji ich szersze zastosowanie jest wciąż marginalne. Hydrożele spożywcze, mają bowiem między innymi obiecujący potencjał jako elementy aktywnych opakowań i sensorów inteligentnych opakowań, a także jako mimetyki tłuszczy w produktach niskołuszczowych. Ponadto mogą być stosowane jako czynniki poprawiające właściwości teksturalne i stabilność żywności o obniżonej zawartości cukru, jak i żywności roślinnej. Dzięki ich zdolności do tworzenia strukturalnej matrycy mogą być wykorzystane jako systemy wiążania i dostarczania związków bioaktywnych do wybranych części układu pokarmowego.

Właściwości hydrożeli zależą od szeregu czynników, z których najważniejszy to rodzaj zastosowanego do ich tworzenia biopolimeru. W przemyśle spożywczym mogą być one otrzymywane z białek, polisacharydów oraz ich mieszanek. Kolejnym istotnym aspektem jest dobór odpowiednich warunków ich wytwarzania, takich jak metoda

indukcji, pH i siła jonowa systemu, które w znaczący sposób wpływają na właściwości fizykochemiczne. Dostępna literatura w niewystarczającym stopniu dostarcza informacji na temat spożywczych hydrożeli otrzymanych z połączenia białek roślinnych i polisacharydów, pod kątem kombinacji różnych biopolimerów, metod indukcji, właściwości fizykochemicznych oraz potencjału aplikacyjnego jako funkcjonalnych matryc zdolnych do poprawy jakości, wartości odżywczej i biodostępności składników bioaktywnych.

Podsumowując, badania nad hydrożelami spożywczymi na bazie białek roślinnych i polisacharydów otwierają nowe możliwości w projektowaniu żywności. Prowadzone badania nad hydrożelami mają na celu dostarczenie nowych informacji na temat wpływu różnych czynników na ich właściwości fizykochemiczne, w tym teksturalne, reologiczne, stabilność fizyczną, barwę, retencję składników bioaktywnych oraz właściwości przeciwwałutowej. Uzyskane wyniki mogą przyczynić się do opracowania innowacyjnych, zrównoważonych, funkcjonalnych układów hydrożelowych jako nośników substancji bioaktywnych.

## 2. Przegląd piśmiennictwa

### 2.1. Hydrożele białkowe i polisacharydowe

Hydrożele to lepkosprężyste układy, składające się ze splecionych łańcuchów polimerowych tworzących trójwymiarową sieć [Li i in. 2021]. Charakter hydrofilowy hydrożeli jest spowodowany obecnością w ich łańcuchach polimerowych reszt takich jak grupy aminowe, karboksylowe i hydroksylowe. Takie sieci hydrożelowe mogą utrzymywać w swojej strukturze duże ilości wody (nawet 99% w/w), zachowując przy tym właściwości ciała stałego [Khalesi i in. 2020; Cao, Mezzenga 2020]. Na końcową stabilność sieci hydrożelowej istotnie wpływają źródło i skład polimerów oraz rodzaj usieciowania (Tabela 1). W rezultacie struktura hydrożelu, jego właściwości lepkosprężyste i zdolność zatrzymywania wody są zależne od dobranego polimeru oraz od metody przygotowania (warunków, w tym pH i ładunku jonowego układu oraz metody indukcji) [Gul i in. 2022].

**Tabela 1.** Klasyfikacja hydrożeli w oparciu o źródło i skład polimerowy oraz rodzaj sieciowania [Khalesi i in. 2020].

Kryteria klasyfikacji	Typy hydrożeli
	Naturalny
Źródło polimeru	Syntetyczny
	Hybrydowy
	Jednopolimerowy
Skład polimerowy	Dwupolimerowy
	Wielopolimerowy
	Usieciowany fizycznie
Rodzaje sieciowania	Usieciowany chemicznie
	Usieciowany enzymatycznie
	Wielosieciowany

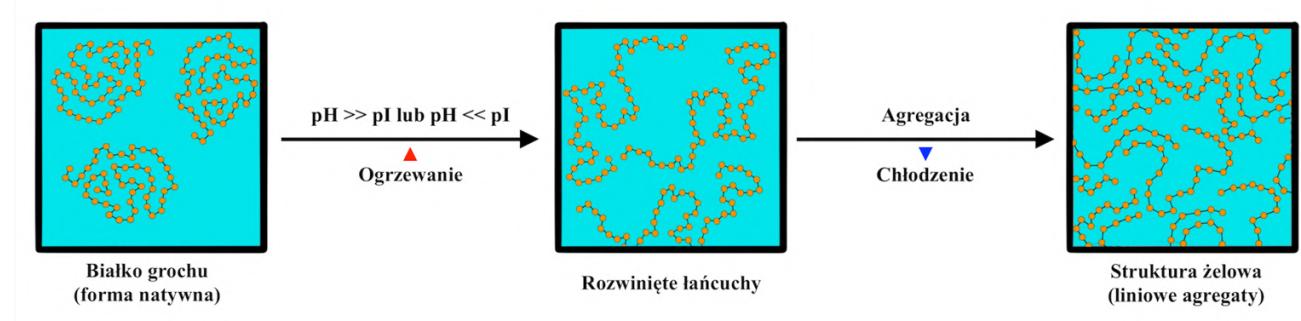
W przemyśle spożywczym do uzyskania hydrożeli stosuje się wyłącznie jadalne biopolimery, do których zalicza się białka (tj. białko serwatkowe, kazeina, albumina jaja kurzego, żelatyna, białko sojowe, grochu, gluten, bobu, łubinu, zeiny, itp.) i polisacharydy (tj. skrobia, pektyna, celuloza, guma arabska, karagen, chitozan, alginian, inulina, guma gellan, itp.) [Tan, McClements 2021; McClements, Grossmann 2021; Li i in. 2022]. Polimery te wyróżniają się szerokim zakresem funkcjonalności oraz potencjałem do rozwiązymania problemów zrównoważonego rozwoju środowiska, ponieważ są odnawialne, przystępne cenowo, biokompatybilne i biodegradowalne,

w porównaniu do syntetycznie otrzymywanych polimerów [Wankhade 2020; Cui i in. 2021; Mahmood i in. 2022].

Białka, są makrocząsteczkami zbudowanymi z aminokwasów połączonych ze sobą wiązaniem peptydowym. Źródła pochodzenia białek (tj. zwierzęta, rośliny, algi lub grzyby) jak i ich rodzaje (fibrylarne tj. kolagen oraz globularne tj. białko serwatkowe i białka zapasowe roślin) mają wpływ na ich właściwości funkcjonalne. Ponadto białka różnią się pod względem takich cech, jak rozpuszczalność, zdolność do agregacji, denaturacji oraz tworzenia sieci hydrożelowych. Białka globularne są powszechnie obecne w roślinnych surowcach i odgrywają kluczową rolę w przetwórstwie spożywczym [Munialo i in. 2018a; Klost, Drusch 2019]. Są zwiniętymi biopolimerami z grupami hydrofobowymi skierowanymi do ich wnętrza i grupami hydrofilowymi odsłoniętymi na zewnątrz. Taka orientacja molekularna cząsteczki sprawia, że są one zwykle rozpuszczalne w wodzie [Klein, Poverenov 2020]. Proces denaturacji białek globularnych prowadzi do odsłonięcia grup hydrofobowych co prowadzi do szeregu interakcji międzymolekularnych, które mogą mieć charakter kowalencyjny i niekowalencyjny [Munialo i in. 2018a; Klost i in. 2020]. Oddziaływanie o charakterze kowalencyjnym są nieodwracalne i zwykle obejmują powstanie agregatów połączonych mostkami disiarczkowymi. Oddziaływanie niekowalencyjne są odwracalne i zwykle obejmują wiązania wodorowe, oddziaływanie hydrofobowe, oddziaływanie elektrostatyczne i oddziaływanie van der Waalsa. Te wszystkie interakcje międzymolekularne prowadzą do agregacji białek, która ostatecznie, przy krytycznej wartości stężenia, prowadzi do przejęcia zolu w żel o zorganizowanej strukturze odpowiedzialnej za lepkosprężyste właściwości układu (Rysunek 1) [Panahi, Baghban-Salehi 2018].

Do otrzymania hydrożelu z białek niezbędny jest proces indukcji, czyli proces, który inicjuje agregacje i dalsze formowanie struktury żelowej [Munialo i in. 2018b]. Można to osiągnąć za pomocą różnych metod, od tradycyjnych po bardziej innowacyjne. Najbardziej konwencjonalnym podejściem jest żelowanie indukowane termicznie, w którym denaturacja termiczna powoduje rozkład i agregację białek. Dodatkowo, ten proces można wzmacnić poprzez modulację wartości pH [Chen i in. 2017b; Zhu i in. 2021] i siły jonowej dyspersji białkowej [Chao i in. 2017; Wang i in. 2022]. Inną popularną metodą jest żelowanie indukowane enzymatycznie, gdzie enzymy, takie jak transglutaminaza, katalizują reakcje sieciowania pomiędzy białkami [Ruzengwe i in.

2020; Wang i in. 2022c]. Do niekonwencjonalnych metod otrzymywania hydrożeli białkowych można zaliczyć indukcję wysokimi ciśnieniami hydrostatycznymi [Luo i in. 2021; Peyrano i in. 2021], ultradźwiękami [Zhang i in. 2021a; Wang i in. 2022d], pulsacyjnym polem elektrycznym [Wang i in. 2022b; Taha i in. 2022], wysokimi siłami ścinającymi (np. występującymi przy ekstruzji) [Schmid i in. 2020; Zhang i in. 2022d]. Chemiczne indukowanie żeli białkowych jest rzadziej stosowane w przemyśle spożywczym ze względu na potencjalną toksyczność niektórych używanych związków i problemy związane z bezpieczeństwem końcowego produktu. Przykładowo, taki związek jak aldehyd glutarowy może być użyty do zainicjowania procesu żelowania poprzez tworzenie wiązań kowalencyjnych pomiędzy cząsteczkami białek, co prowadzi do powstania wysokostabilnych żeli [Xi i in. 2021; Zhang i in. 2022c].



**Rysunek 1.** Mechanizm formowania struktury żelowej na przykładzie białka grochu, opracowanie własne na podstawie Cao, Mezzenga [2020]; Li, i in. [2021].

Białka globularne pochodzenia roślinnego pozyskiwane z roślin strączkowych, od dawna odgrywają ważną rolę w produkcji żywności ze względu na ich wartość odżywczą oraz właściwości funkcjonalne [Aschemann-Witzel i in. 2020]. Wśród białek roślinnych to białko sojowe początkowo zyskało największą popularność i było szeroko badane, ze względu na szereg właściwości technologicznych i pełen profil niezbędnych aminokwasów. Jednakże, z czasem pojawiły się obawy dotyczące jego alergенноści oraz kontrowersje względem GMO, co skłoniło do poszukiwania alternatywnych białek. W wyniku tego wzrosła popularność białka z grochu, które oferuje podobne właściwości funkcjonalne, jednocześnie będąc mniej alergenem i uzyskiwane z upraw zrównoważonych, niemodyfikowanych genetycznie [Zhao i in. 2020; Boukid i in. 2021]. Wraz z rozwojem sektora żywności roślinnej (wegańskiej), stosowanie białka grochu jako składnika teksturowórczego ma znaczący potencjał w produkcji analogów mięsa oraz nabiału [Aschemann-Witzel i in. 2020; McClements, Grossmann 2021].

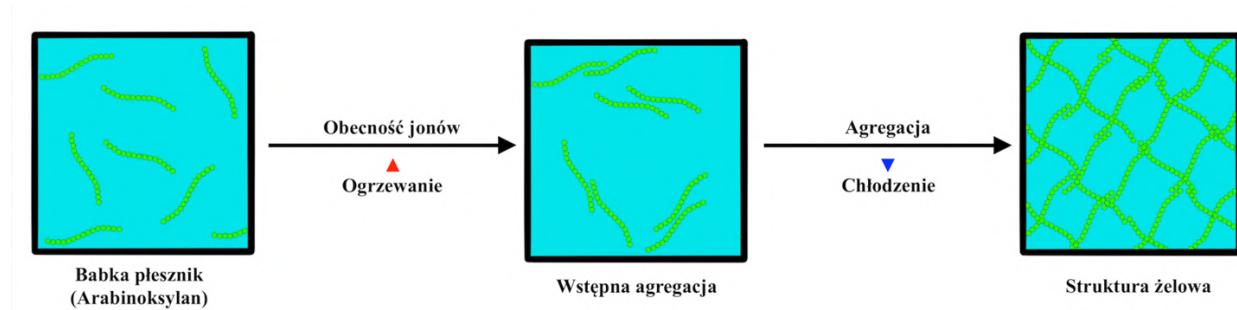
Białko grochu (*Pisum sativum*) składa się w 65–70% z białek zapasowych (tj. legumina, wicylina, konwicylina i albumina). Skład białek globularnych (zapasowych) różni się w zależności od genotypów grochu i stosunku leguminy do wicyliny [Stone i in. 2015; Zhu i in. 2021]. Do produkcji koncentratów białka grochu (zawartość białka 50–55% s.s.) wykorzystuje się tzw. metodę suchego frakcjonowania, która polega na oddzieleniu skrobi od mieszaniny za pomocą ciepłego strumienia powietrza. Z kolei przy wytwarzaniu izolatów białek grochu (zawartość białka > 80% s.s.) stosuje się mokrą ekstrakcję, w której składniki o niskiej masie cząsteczkowej oraz białka są ekstrahowane z mąki przy użyciu wody w środowisku zasadowym. Następnie białka globularne są izolowane przez selektywne wytrącanie w punkcie izoelektrycznym, po czym przeprowadza się ich neutralizację i suszenie [Klost, Drusch 2019; Sridharan i in. 2020; Boukid i in. 2021]. Aby uniknąć redukcji funkcjonalności natywnych białek, można zastosować nowe, hybrydowe metody. Opierają się one na separacji fizycznej, w której drobna frakcja mąki grochowej (uzyskana po frakcjonowaniu na sucho) jest zawieszana w wodzie, a następnie frakcjonowana poprzez wielowarstwową separację z wykorzystaniem sił odśrodkowych i/lub dodatkowego oczyszczania (np. przy użyciu dializy lub ultrafiltracji), co pozwala zwiększyć czystość białka do poziomu 75–90% suchej masy [Geerts i in. 2018; Wang i in. 2020b].

Polisacharydy są makrocząsteczkami zbudowanymi z wielu jednostek monosacharydów połączonych wiązaniem glikozydowym. Źródła pochodzenia polisacharydów (tj. rośliny, algi, grzyby czy bakterie) jak i ich budowa, mają wpływ na ich właściwości funkcjonalne. Ponadto różnią się one pod względem takich cech, jak rozpuszczalność, zdolność do agregacji, stabilność termiczna oraz zdolność do tworzenia sieci hydrożelowych. Najpopularniejsze z nich to skrobia, pektyna, celuloza [Manzoor i in. 2020]. Biopolimery polisacharydowe o właściwościach żelotwórczych po całkowitym uwodnieniu i w określonym stężeniu oraz w odpowiednich warunkach, zaczynają oddziaływać między sobą, tworząc strefy połączeń co z kolei prowadzi do ich sieciowania [Stephen i in. 2016; Auriemma i in. 2020]. Przy krytycznym stężeniu danego biopolimeru i przy pewnym stopniu usieciowania dyspersja polisacharydowa ostatecznie zamienia się z zolu w żel. Polisacharydy mogą tworzyć żele pod wpływem różnych metod indukcji, z których każda umożliwia specyficzną kontrolę nad właściwościami końcowego układu żelowego [Manzoor i in. 2022]. Najczęściej stosowaną metodą jest indukcja termiczna, która inicjuje żelowanie takich polisacharydów jak skrobia, agar czy

inulina [Lee i in. 2017; Min i in. 2021b; He i in. 2024]. W przypadku niektórych polisacharydów konieczne jest użycie indukcji termicznej wraz ze zmianą wartości pH (np. wysokometylowana pektyna), lub dodatkiem jonów (np. niskometylowana pektyna, alginian i karagen) [Zhou i in. 2020; Cao i in. 2020; Hu i in. 2021; Cui i in. 2022]. Mniej popularne metody obejmują żelowanie indukowane enzymatycznie (np. dodatek lakkazy do indukcji żelowania pektyny) [Chen i in. 2019; Pan i in. 2021] oraz wysokimi ciśnieniami hydrostatycznymi [Larrea-Wachtendorff i in. 2019, 2021; Liu i in. 2020a].

Hydrokoloidalne polisacharydy, takie jak skrobia, pektyna, celuloza, guma arabska, karagen, chitozan, alginian, czy guma gellan, zostały szeroko przebadane i są powszechnie stosowane w przemyśle spożywczym [Saha, Bhattacharya 2010; Manzoor i in. 2020]. Natomiast łuska babki plesznik (psyllium) pozostaje stosunkowo mało znana, zwłaszcza w kontekście jej łączenia z białkami roślinnymi w celu otrzymania hydrożelu binarnego.

Babka plesznik (*Plantago afra* L.), zwana również psyllium, należy do rodziny babkowatych (*Plantaginaceae* Juss.). Łuski nasion babki plesznik zawierają około 80% rozpuszczalnego błonnika, w skład którego wchodzą głównie arabinozy (23%), ksylozy (75%) oraz śladowe ilości innych cukrów [Belorio, Gómez 2020; Franco i in. 2020]. Arabinoksylyny są zdolne do tworzenia sieci żelowych stabilizowanych kowalencyjnymi wiązaniem sieciowymi. Żelowanie arabinoksyelanów (Rysunek 2) jest inicjowane przez ich uwodnienie i ogrzanie lub poprzez dodatek enzymów (np. lakkazy) lub jonów (np.  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ ).



**Rysunek 2.** Mechanizm formowania struktury żelowej na przykładzie babki plesznik, opracowanie własne na podstawie Cao, Mezzenga [2020]; Li, i in. [2021].

Kinetyka procesu żelowania arabinoksyelanów zawartych w psyllium zależy między innymi od temperatury i pH dyspersji [Anderson, Simsek 2018; Yu i in. 2021]. Ponadto,

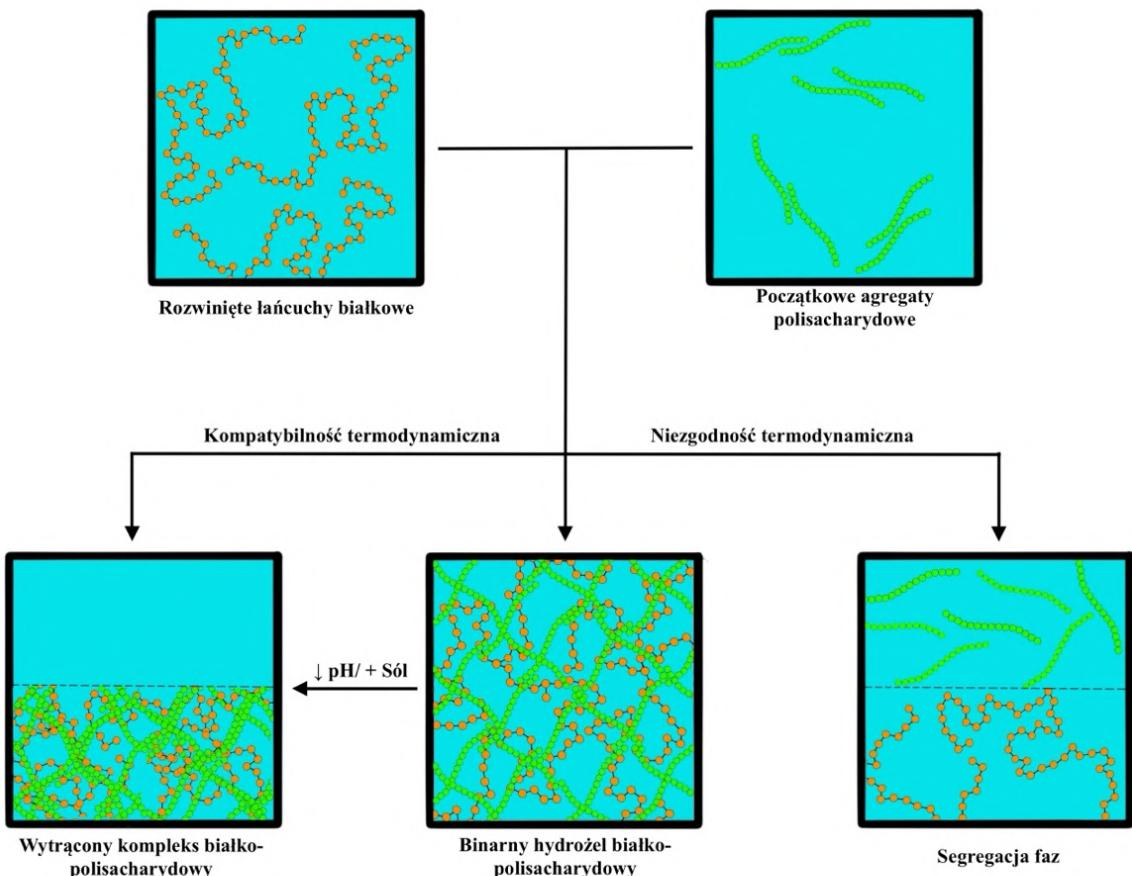
na zdolność do tworzenia struktur żelowych oraz ich właściwości mają wpływ cechy molekularne arabinoksyelanów. Silne sieci żelowe uzyskuje się z arabinoksyelanów o wysokiej zawartości reszt kwasu ferulowego, dużej masie cząsteczkowej i niskim stopniu podstawienia reszt arabinozy w łańcuchu głównym arabinoksyelanów. Żele arabinoksylane wykazują dużą zdolność zatrzymywania wody, do 100 g wody na gram suchego usieciowanego polimeru [Yildirim-Semerci i in. 2024]. Dodatkowo, rozpuszczalne w wodzie arabinoksyly są błonnikiem pokarmowym wspierającym zdrowe funkcjonowanie okrężnicy i obniżającym poziom cholesterolu w krwi. Obecnie psyllium w przemyśle spożywczym jest wykorzystywane jako dodatek do makaronów, pieczywa oraz produktów ciastkarskich [Franco i in. 2020; Agrawal 2021].

## 2.2. Binarne hydrożele białko-polisacharydowe

Hydrożele oparte na pojedynczych biopolimerach, takich jak białka lub polisacharydy, często mają pewne ograniczenia, takie jak słaba zdolność zatrzymywania wody, niska wytrzymałość mechaniczna i stabilność fizyczna, co ogranicza ich zastosowanie w przemyśle spożywczym [Yang i in. 2021b; Zha i in. 2021]. Aby zniwelować te ograniczenia, opracowano hydrożele binarne, które łączą dwa różne polimery – białka z białkami [Borderías i in. 2020; Guidi i in. 2022; Zhang i in. 2023], polisacharydy z polisacharydami [Dafe i in. 2017; Florowska i in. 2022; Zhang i in. 2022a] lub białka z polisacharydami [Liu i in. 2020c; Kazemi-Taskooh, Varidi 2021; Zernov i in. 2022]. Dzięki zdolności do tworzenia wiązań kowalencyjnych i niekowalencyjnych między tymi składnikami, hydrożele binarne charakteryzują się lepszymi właściwościami fizykochemicznymi [Akhtar, Ding 2017; Fan i in. 2022].

W zależności od ładunków elektrycznych obu biopolimerów wyróżnia się dwa rodzaje wzajemnych oddziaływań mieszanek białkowo – polisacharydowych [Le i in. 2017; Warnakulasuriya, Nickerson 2018]: niezgodność termodynamiczna i kompatybilność termodynamiczna (Rysunek 3). Niezgodność termodynamiczna polega na działaniu segregacyjnym faz i zachodzi w przypadku, gdy oba biopolimery noszą te same ładunki lub jeden z polimerów jest naładowany a drugi nie, lub oba polimery są nienalażowane. Wówczas odpychanie elektrostatyczne lub brak odziaływań międzycząsteczkowych prowadzą do utworzenia dwóch faz. Przy dostatecznie niskim stężeniu białka i polisacharydu te dwie fazy tworzą jedną. Gdy stężenie polimerów wzrasta zachodzi separacja faz, której efektem jest powstanie dwóch faz – jednej bogatej w białko a drugiej w polisacharyd. Natomiast, w przypadku kompatybilności

termodynamicznej, istniejące stosunkowo silne elektrostatyczne przyciąganie między białkiem i polisacharydem, prowadzi do asocjacji faz [Bealer i in. 2020; Cortés-Morales i in. 2021].



**Rysunek 3.** Oddziaływanie asocjacyjne i segregacyjne pomiędzy białkiem a polisacharydem w układzie. Opracowanie własne na podstawie Le i in. [2017]; Warnakulasuriya, Nickerson [2018]; Cortés-Morales i in. [2021].

W zależności od czynników takich jak powinowactwo między białkami i polisacharydami, ładunek molekularny i konformacja cząsteczkowa, mogą powstawać różne typy struktur białkowo-polisacharydowych. Dodatkowo, kiedy stężenie jednego biopolimeru jest niewystarczające do utworzenia stabilnego hydrożelu, dodanie innego biopolimeru jako drugiego składnika budulcowego może poprawić właściwości fizykochemiczne układu, umożliwiając utworzenie stabilnej struktury żelowej [Yang i in. 2021b]. Wykorzystując wiedzę o interakcji między tymi dwoma biopolimerami, można uzyskać szeroki zakres binarnych hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych o różnych mikrostrukturach i właściwościach fizykochemicznych.

Do przykładowych synergistycznych mieszanek białkowo-polisacharydowych można zaliczyć mieszankę białek serwatkowych i skrobi [Lavoisier, Aguilera 2019], czy

mieszankę kazeiny i karagenu [Tang i in. 2019], które pozwalają otrzymać binarne hydrożele charakteryzujące się nowymi i interesującymi właściwościami reologicznymi i mikrostrukturalnymi oraz lepszą stabilnością fizyczną. Zernov i in. [2022] udowodnili, że połączenie chitozanu i kolagenu umożliwia otrzymanie hydrożelu, który może pełnić funkcję jadalnego rusztowania (ang. scaffolding) do hodowli mięsa komórkowego. Popularnym białkiem roślinnym stosowanym w żywieniach jest białko sojowe, które także po połączeniu z polisacharydami, może tworzyć binarne hydrożele o nowych właściwościach technologicznych. Przeprowadzone dotychczas badania obejmowały między innymi kombinacje: białko sojowe–guma z włókna kukurydzianego [Yan i in. 2020], białko sojowe–inulina [Florowska i in. 2020b], białko sojowe–karagen [Zhang i in. 2021b], białko sojowe–alginian sodu [Shahbazizadeh i in. 2022]. Kombinacje innych białek roślinnych i polisacharydów są obecnie zbadane jedynie w niewielkim stopniu. Do takich przykładowych kombinacji można zaliczyć: białko grochu–rozpuszczalny polisacharyd sojowy [Zhan i in. 2019], białko grochu–inulina [Florowska in. 2020b], białko zeiny–pektyna [Kaushik i in. 2020], białko grochu–alginian sodu [Wang i in. 2022c].

Podsumowując, interakcje pomiędzy białkami odzwierzęcymi (tj. białka żelatynowe, białka serwatkowe i kazeinowe, białka albuminowe, itd.) lub białkiem sojowym i polisacharydami są dobrze zbadane i opisane w literaturze. Natomiast wraz ze wzrostem zainteresowania produktami roślinnymi celowe jest podjęcie badań prowadzących do określenia właściwości oraz warunków tworzenia hydrożeli białkowo–polisacharydowych z wykorzystaniem innowacyjnych, zrównoważonych i niealergennych surowców roślinnych.

### **2.3. Indukcja hydrożeli**

Indukcja procesu żelowania w hydrożelach binarnych, składających się z białek i polisacharydów, opiera się na podobnych mechanizmach jak w przypadku hydrożeli pojedynczych biopolimerów. Najczęściej stosowaną metodą jest indukcja termiczna, która umożliwia żelowanie zarówno białek, jak i polisacharydów. Ciepło inicjuje proces denaturacji i agregacji białek, a także prowadzi do formowania sieci żelowej w polisacharydach [Cao, Mezzenga 2020; Li i in. 2021]. Dodatkowo, warunki indukcji termicznej można precyzyjnie kontrolować poprzez zmianę pH i/lub dodatek soli, co pozwala na otrzymywanie układów o różnych właściwościach. W przypadkach, gdy hydrożele mają pełnić funkcje matryc strukturalnych lub nośników termolabilnych

związków bioaktywnych, zasadnym jest zastosowanie nietermicznych, niekonwencjonalnych metod indukcji. Tego typu metody pozwalają na uniknięcie degradacji bioaktywnych składników wrażliwych na wysoką temperaturę [Rostamabadi i in. 2023b].

### 2.3.1. Modulacja warunków żelowania poprzez modyfikację pH i dodatek soli

Właściwości hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych mogą być precyzyjnie kontrolowane poprzez warunki ich indukcji, w tym przez pH i dodatek różnych soli, które są kluczowymi czynnikami wpływającymi na rodzaj i siłę interakcji międzymolekularnych [Yang i in. 2021a]. pH układu odgrywa rolę regulującą stopień jonizacji grup funkcyjnych w białkach i polisacharydach [Wu i in. 2020]. Przy pH niższym od punktu izoelektrycznego białka ( $I_p$ ), łańcuchy polipeptydowe mają dodatni ładunek, a łańcuchy polisacharydowe, zawierające grupy funkcyjne (np. karboksylowe), są ujemnie naładowane. Te sprzyjające warunki umożliwiają interakcje elektrostatyczne, które są siłą napędową do zapoczątkowania powstawania kompleksów białkowo-polisacharydowych, prowadzących do późniejszego procesu żelowania [Chen i in. 2017; Klost i in. 2020b; Zhu i in. 2021].

Dodatek soli polegający na wprowadzeniu jonów ( $\text{Na}^+$ ,  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ , itp.) do układu, dodatkowo reguluje interakcje pomiędzy białkiem a polisacharydem. Dodatek jonów w umiarkowanym stężeniu zmniejsza odpychanie elektrostatyczne między podobnie naładowanymi grupami w biopolimerach, umożliwiając lepsze upakowanie agregatów i bardziej efektywne uformowanie sieci [Danielsen i in. 2020]. Jony dodatnie mogą działać jako mostki między ujemnie naładowanymi grupami polisacharydów a odsłoniętymi reaktywnymi grupami białek, zwiększając usicciowanie w strukturze żelowej. Prowadzi to do bardziej wytrzymałego i spójnego układu żelowego o lepszych właściwościach mechanicznych i lepkosprężystych. Obecność jonów może prowadzić do interakcji hydrofobowych i lepszej agregacji białek, co dodatkowo stabilizuje uzyskany hydrożel [Dahal, Schmit 2018; Wang i in. 2018]. Jednak nadmiar jonów w układzie może ekranować ładunki elektryczne w biopolimerach, co osłabia siłę oddziaływań elektrostatycznych i destabilizuje strukturę hydrożelu [Liu i in. 2020b; Chen i in. 2021].

Precyzyjne dobranie pH i stężenia danej soli w układzie białkowo-polisacharydowym jest kluczowe do otrzymania optymalnego środowiska dla interakcji międzymolekularnych. Optymalizacja tych parametrów pozwala na uzyskanie

wystarczająco silnych interakcji elektrostatycznych, aby utworzyć stabilną sieć, jednocześnie nie blokując możliwości powstania innych połączeń, takich jak wiązania wodorowe i interakcje hydrofobowe, które również mogą skutecznie przyczyniać się do zwiększenia stabilności otrzymanego hydrożelu [Li i in. 2023].

### 2.3.2. Niekonwencjonalne metody indukcji

Metoda indukcji hydrożeli jest kluczowym czynnikiem determinującym integralność strukturalną, a także właściwości fizykochemiczne otrzymanych hydrożeli. Konwencjonalna indukcja termiczna, choć w prosty i skuteczny sposób pozwala na otrzymanie hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych, ma pewne ograniczenia [Klost i in. 2020; Zhu i in. 2021]. W przypadku produkcji hydrożeli mających pełnić funkcje matrycy strukturalnej żywności lub nośnika termolabilnych i bioaktywnych składników, indukcja termiczna może powodować degradację tych związków [Ćorković i in. 2021; Zabot i in. 2022]. Potrzeba nowych metod indukcji wynika więc z konieczności stworzenia warunków żelowania, które pozwolą na zachowanie właściwości prozdrowotnych związków bioaktywnych przy jednoczesnym uzyskaniu hydrożeli o pożądanych cechach technologicznych.

Zaawansowane metody fizyczne, takie jak wysokie ciśnienia hydrostatyczne (ang. high hydrostatic pressure - HHP) i homogenizacja ultradźwiękowa (ang. ultrasound homogenization - USH), oferują znaczące korzyści w porównaniu z tradycyjną metodą indukcji termicznej, w tym zachowanie właściwości bioaktywnych i wzmacnienie integralności strukturalnej hydrożeli [Khatkar i in. 2020; Rostamabadi i in. 2023a; Rostamabadi i in. 2023b].

Główny mechanizm działania wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych (zazwyczaj w zakresie od 100 do 600 MPa) na biopolimery polega na zakłóceniu oddziaływań niekowalencyjnych pomiędzy łańcuchami białkowymi i polisacharydami, co z kolei prowadzi do ich agregacji [Luo i in. 2021; Zang i in. 2023]. Pod wpływem wysokiego ciśnienia białka globularne rozwijają się, co w następstwie agregacji, prowadzi do utworzenia się struktury żelowej [Peyrano i in. 2021]. Dodatkowo, wysokie ciśnienie prowadzi do kompresji agregatów co może skutkować zwiększoną wytrzymałością mechaniczną i stabilnością struktury żelowej [Florowska i in. 2020a; D'Aniello i in. 2023].

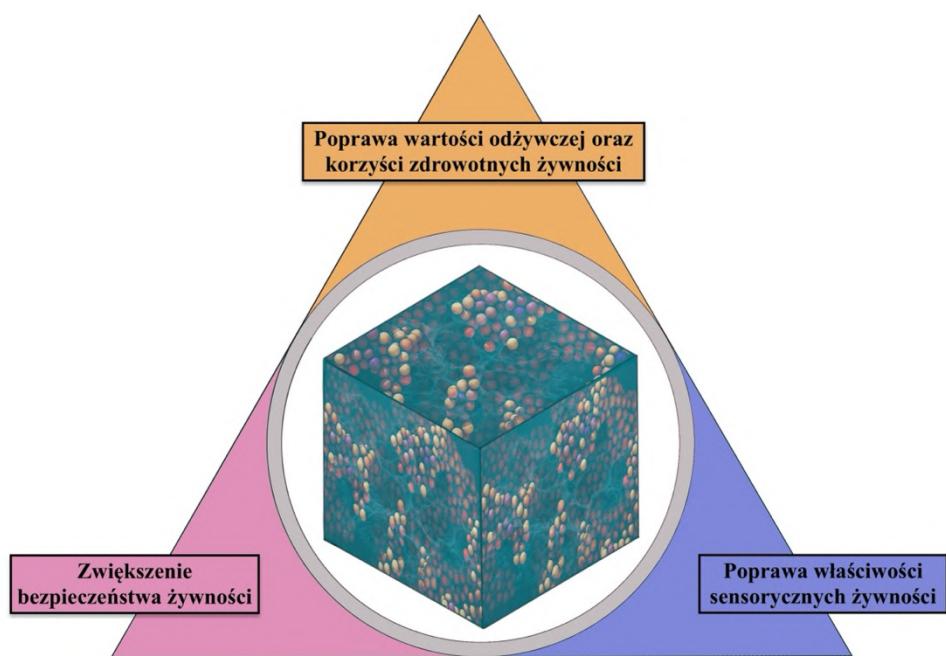
Homogenizacja ultradźwiękowa generuje zjawisko kawitacji [Naik i in. 2021], które prowadzi do powstania intensywnych sił ścinających. Siły te rozbijają większe agregaty powstałe w niekontrolowany sposób i pomagają w równomiernym rozłożeniu łańcuchów biopolimerowych w całej objętości układu. Pozwala to poszczególnym łańcuchom na swobodniejsze wzajemne oddziaływanie i tworzenie nowych wiązań. Skutkuje to powstaniem drobniejszych agregatów i bardziej jednolitą siecią żelową [Zhang i in. 2021a; Yue i in. 2022; Lin i in. 2024]. Na podstawie danych literaturowych wiadomo, że obróbka ultradźwiękowa (w zakresie 30-100% amplitudy) białka grochu, wpływa na jego właściwości hydratacyjne i prowadzi do uzyskania wyższej wytrzymałości strukturalnej hydrożeli w porównaniu do tych indukowanych tradycyjnymi metodami [Khatkar i in. 2020]. Dobór czasu jak i mocy obróbki ultradźwiękowej pozwala kontrolować wielkość powstających agregatów umożliwiając tym samym uzyskanie wymaganych właściwości hydrożelu.

Możliwe jest również łączenie różnych metod indukcji odzwierciedlając etapowość procesów wykorzystywanych do produkcji żywności. Stąd, innowacyjnym podejściem zastosowanym w tej pracy było użycie sekwencyjnych kroków do indukcji polegających na łączeniu różnych metod indukcji w celu wykorzystania zalet każdej z nich. Stosując to podejście w celu indukcji hydrożelu białkowo-polisacharydowego, na początku prowadzi się indukcję termiczną (wstępna) białka co pozwala na rozwinięcie jego struktury i stworzenie wstępnych agregatów. Następnie po schłodzeniu układu białkowego następuje dodanie polisacharydu oraz związku bioaktywnego, po czym otrzymany układ jest poddawany wtórnej indukcji przy użyciu wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych lub homogenizacji ultradźwiękowej. Zastosowanie HHP jako indukcji wtórnej, prowadzi do wzmacniania oddziaływania między agregatami białkowo-polisacharydowymi, tworząc docelową strukturę żelową wraz z uwięzionym składnikiem bioaktywnym [Peyrano i in. 2021; Mao i in. 2024; Zhang i in. 2024]. Alternatywnie, zastosowanie homogenizacji ultradźwiękowej jako indukcji wtórnej może prowadzić do lepszej dyspersji biopolimerów, skutkując bardziej jednorodną strukturą żelową, zawierającą bioaktywny składnik [Cai i in. 2022; Yuxuan i in. 2024]. Wpływ łącznego zastosowania indukcji termicznej z wysokim ciśnieniem hydrostatycznym lub homogenizacją ultradźwiękową na właściwości hydrożeli jest tematem wciąż słabo zbadanym. Lepsze poznanie mechanizmów zachodzących podczas tych procesów

pozwołłoby na opracowanie bardziej efektywnych metod wytwarzania hydrożeli o dostosowanych właściwościach fizykochemicznych.

#### 2.4. Potencjał aplikacyjny hydrożeli

Dzięki swoim unikalnym właściwościom fizykochemicznym, szczególnie teksturalnym, reologicznym, stabilności fizycznej, retencji składników bioaktywnych oraz właściwościom przeciwyutleniającym, hydrożele białkowo-polisacharydowe, mogą znaleźć szerokie zastosowanie w przemyśle spożywczym [Li i in. 2021]. Na rysunku 4 przedstawiono trzy główne filary zastosowań hydrożeli w przemyśle spożywczym.



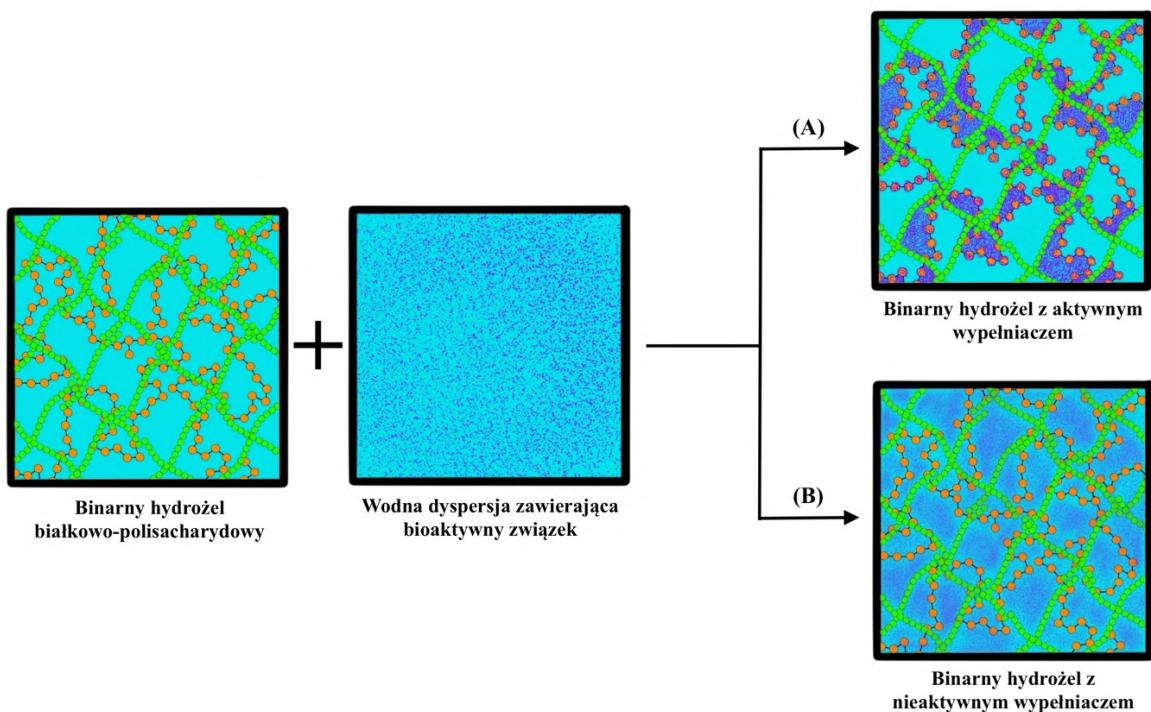
**Rysunek 4.** Główne obszary zastosowań hydrożeli w przemyśle spożywczym. Opracowanie własne na podstawie Hilal i in. [2023].

Unikatowe struktury hydrożelowe, mogą być wykorzystywane w rozwoju innowacyjnych i prozdrowotnych artykułów spożywczym [Cao, Mezzenga 2020; Zhang i in. 2020]. Dzięki podobieństwu do włóknistej struktury i soczystości tkanek mięsa, hydrożele mogą być wykorzystane w produkcji roślinnych analogów produktów mięsnych [Cornet i in. 2020; Gul i in. 2022; Tan i in. 2023]. Ponadto, z uwagi na ich podobieństwo do matryc komórkowych oraz wysoką biokompatybilność z żywymi tkankami, hydrożele spożywcze są wykorzystywane do wytwarzania rusztowań w produkcji mięsa hodowlanego [Enrione i in. 2017; Naahidi i in. 2017; Wollschlaeger i in. 2022; Chen i in. 2023]. Odpowiednio dobrane biopolimery i warunki procesu umożliwiają uzyskanie hydrożeli o właściwościach teksturalnych zbliżonych do produktów mlecznych. Dzięki temu możliwe jest wytwarzanie roślinnych analogów

produktów nabiałowych, takich jak desery, o pożądanej kremowej konsystencji [Sim i in. 2020; Boehm i in. 2023]. Hydrożele mogą także skutecznie zastępować tłuszcze w żywności, przyczyniając się do wytwarzania produktów niskokalorycznych z tzw. „czystą etykietą” [Razavi, Behrouzian 2018; Domínguez i in. 2021; Barragán-Martínez i in. 2022; Tomić i in. 2022].

Najnowsze badania wskazują, że hydrożele mogą odgrywać coraz większą rolę w stabilizacji, ochronie i transporcie związków bioaktywnych w żywności [Wijaya i in. 2017; Tan, McClements 2021; Li i in. 2022]. Dzięki zdolności do kontrolowanego uwalniania tych substancji w określonych miejscach układu pokarmowego, hydrożele zwiększą także ich biodostępność. Dostępne badania potwierdzają ich potencjał m.in. jako nośników do dostarczania witaminy A, E oraz witamin z grupy B [Kundu, Banerjee 2019; Martinez i in. 2021; Rana i in. 2021; Mir i in. 2022], albuminy surowicy bydlęcej (BSA) [Yang i in. 2013], kurkuminy [Ambeebila i in. 2019], antocyjanów [Liu i in. 2022], kwercetyny [Oh i in. 2019], resweratrolu [Wu i in. 2022], oraz galusanu epigallokatechiny (EGGG) [Wang i in. 2022e]. Ponadto, dostępne badania wskazują, że hydrożele mogą być użyte do wiązania i dostarczania bakterii np. *Lactobacillus Plantarum* ATCC:13643 [Dafe i in. 2017; Yuxing i in. 2023].

W wyniku wprowadzenia do układu hydrożelowego związku bioaktywnego, związek ten może pełnić dwie role: aktywnego lub nieaktywnego wypełniacza. W przypadku pierwszej roli (Rysunek 5A), uzyskany hydrożel charakteryzuje się tym, że wprowadzony związek bioaktywny wchodzi w interakcje z biopolimerami budulcowymi, co przyczynia się do wytworzenia stabilnej struktury hydrożelu. Natomiast w roli nieaktywnego wypełniacza (Rysunek 5B), wprowadzony związek nie oddziałuje ze strukturą hydrożelu lub oddziałuje z nią w minimalnym stopniu [Farjami, Madadlou 2019; Li i in. 2021; Liu i in. 2021a].



**Rysunek 5.** Rodzaje oddziaływań pomiędzy binarnym hydrożelem białkowo-polisacharydowym a prowadzonym związkiem bioaktywnym. Opracowanie własne na podstawie Farjami, Madadlou [2019]; Li i in. [2021].

Wyniki dotychczasowych badań prezentowanych w literaturze wskazują na korzystny wpływ łączenia białek i polysacharydów na właściwości fizykochemiczne uzyskanych binarnych hydrożeli, co z kolei poszerza ich potencjał aplikacyjny w przemyśle spożywczym. Pomimo tego, dostępna literatura dotycząca binarnych hydrożeli spożywczych wciąż nie zawiera pełnych informacji, szczególnie w kontekście wykorzystania białek roślinnych, takich jak białko grochu i mniej popularnych polysacharydów jak babka plesznik. Stąd, zasadne było podjęcie badań nad tymi układami żelowymi celem zrozumienia wpływu różnych warunków i metod indukcji na końcowe właściwości tych układów.

### **3. Cel, zakres pracy i hipotezy badawcze**

**W** niniejszej pracy przed rozpoczęciem badań został postawiony jeden główny cel badawczy, którego realizacja w zaplanowanym zakresie badań zakłada sprawdzenie postawionych hipotez badawczych.

Celem pracy doktorskiej było określenie właściwości fizykochemicznych binarnych hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych oraz opracowanie układu modelowego, w którym hydrożel pełniłby funkcję składnika strukturotwórczego i nośnika substancji bioaktywnej.

Zakres pracy obejmował:

- analizę bibliometryczną dostępnej literatury na temat hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych;
- ocenę właściwości fizycznych wybranych preparatów białkowych i polisacharydowych, jako składowych hydrożeli spożywczych oraz wybór wariantów recepturowych do dalszych badań;
- określenie wpływu pH i stężenia NaCl stosowanych podczas indukcji na właściwości fizyczne binarnych hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych otrzymanych na bazie białka grochu i babki pęcznik;
- ocenę możliwości otrzymania układu modelowego na bazie hydrożelu z białka grochu i babki pęcznik pełniącego funkcję nośnika składnika bioaktywnego – bogatego w antocyjany ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu; w tym także, określenie wpływu metody indukcji hydrożelu z użyciem wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych lub homogenizacji ultradźwiękowej na właściwości fizykochemiczne otrzymanych układów modelowych.

Hipotezy badawcze:

- **H1.** Tematyka spożywczych hydrożeli binarnych uzyskanych z połączenia białka roślinnego i polisacharydu jest stosunkowo nowym obszarem badań o charakterze interdyscyplinarnym [P1].
- **H2.** Synergiczne działanie białka grochu i babki plesznik umożliwia otrzymywanie binarnych hydrożeli o korzystnych właściwościach fizykochemicznych, w tym przy zmniejszonym stężeniu biopolimerów potrzebnych dotworzenia struktury żelu [P2, P3, P4].
- **H3.** Metody i parametry indukcji żelowania istotnie wpływają na kształtowanie właściwości fizykochemicznych binarnych hydrożeli z białka grochu i babki plesznik [P3, P4].
- **H4.** Istnieje możliwość opracowania układu modelowego o właściwościach prozdrowotnych na bazie binarnego hydrożelu z białka grochu i babki plesznik, w którym hydrożel ten pełniłby funkcję zarówno składnika strukturotwórczego jak i nośnika substancji bioaktywnych [P4].

## 4. Organizacja badań, materiał doświadczalny i metody

### 4.1. Organizacja badań

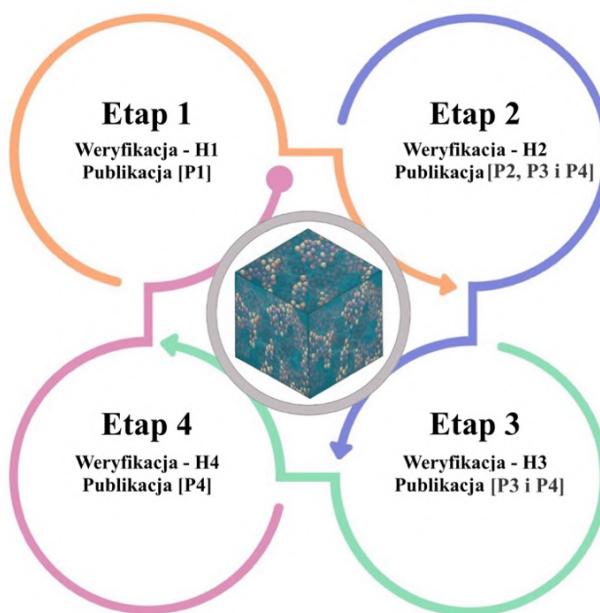
R<sub>e</sub>alizację zakresu badań zaplanowanego w niniejszej pracy doktorskiej podzielono na cztery etapy badawcze (Rysunek 6):

**etap 1** – analiza bibliometryczna dostępnej literatury na temat hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych;

**etap 2** – ocena właściwości fizycznych wybranych preparatów białkowych i polisacharydowych, jako składowych hydrożeli spożywczych oraz wybór wariantów recepturowych do dalszych badań;

**etap 3** – określenie wpływu pH i stężenia NaCl stosowanych podczas indukcji na właściwości fizyczne binarnych hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych otrzymanych na bazie białka grochu i babki plesznik;

**etap 4** – ocena możliwości otrzymania układu modelowego na bazie hydrożelu z białka grochu i babki plesznik pełniącego funkcję nośnika składnika bioaktywnego – bogatego w antocyjany ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu; w tym także, określenie wpływu sekwencyjnej metody indukcji hydrożelu z użyciem wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych lub homogenizacji ultradźwiękowej na właściwości fizykochemiczne otrzymanych układów modelowych.



**Rysunek 6.** Organizacja etapów badań oraz publikacji, w których weryfikowano poszczególne hipotezy badawcze.

## 4.2.Materiał doświadczalny

### 4.2.1. Dane bibliometryczne

Dane bibliometryczne zostały wyodrębnione z bazy danych Scopus (<https://www.scopus.com/search/form.uri?display=advanced>) w październiku 2022 roku. Proces zbierania danych opierał się na kompleksowym zgromadzeniu literatury istotnej dla badań nad binarnymi hydrożelami spożywczymi, otrzymanymi z białek i polisacharydów. Wyszukiwania danych polegały na użyciu ciągu zapytań obejmujących takie wyrazy jak „protein polysaccharide food hydrogels,” „food biopolymer hydrogel,” oraz „food hydrogel,” które były używane do przeszukiwania tytułów i streszczeń publikacji. Wyszukiwanie zostało ograniczone do okresu obejmującego lata 2012-2022, co miało na celu odzwierciedlenie najnowszych i najbardziej istotnych osiągnięć w tej dziedzinie w ciągu ostatniej dekady. Aby zapewnić istotność i jakość danych, bazę ograniczono do artykułów badawczych i przeglądowych. Dalsze udoskonalenie danych polegało na wykluszeniu artykułów zawierających określone wyrazy (np. „aerogels,” „oleogels”) oraz eliminacji artykułów z obszarów niezwiązanych z tematem, takich jak ekonomia i finanse, informatyka, zarządzanie i rachunkowość, matematyka, nauki społeczne, energetyka, nauki planetarne, neurobiologia, pielęgniarstwo i nauki o zdrowiu. Ostatecznie uzyskano zbiór danych obejmujący 297 artykułów (239 badawczych i 58 przeglądowych), które stanowiły materiał do analizy bibliometrycznej [P1].

Przykładowy ciąg zapytań:

```
TITLE-ABS(Food AND protein AND polysaccharide AND hydrogel) OR (TITLE-ABS(Food AND biopolymer hydrogel) OR TITLE-ABS(food hydrogel)) AND PUBYEAR>2012 AND PUBYEAR<2023 AND PUBYEAR>2012 AND PUBYEAR<2023 AND PUBYEAR>2017 AND PUBYEAR<2023 AND PUBYEAR>2017 AND PUBYEAR<2023 AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE, "final")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "re"))
```

### 4.2.2. Materiał do wytwarzania hydrożeli

Do etapu drugiego [P2] zastosowano: białko grochu (**PP**, NUTRALYS® F85F, Roquette Frères, Francja), białko pszenicy (**WP**, NUTRALYS® W, Roquette Frères, Francja), maltodekstrynę (**MD**, GLUCIDEX® 1, Roquette Frères, Francja), gumę gellan (**GG**, high acyl Type 900, C.E. Roeper GmbH, Niemcy), gumę konjac (**KG**, Type CKHY 1240, C.E. Roeper GmbH, Niemcy), babkę plesznik (**PS**, type 10351, C.E. Roeper

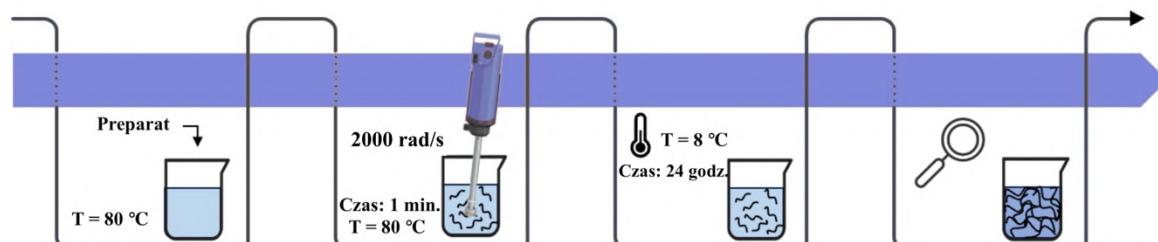
GmbH, Niemcy), gumę tara (TG, Type 5000, C.E. Roeper GmbH, Niemcy), inulinę (INU, Type Orafti® HPX, BENEON GmbH, Niemcy).

Do etapów trzeciego i czwartego [P3 i P4] zastosowano: białko grochu (PP, NUTRALYS® F85F, Roquette Frères, Francja), babkę płesznicę (PS, type 10351, C.E. Roeper GmbH, Niemcy), kwas cytrynowy (Agnex, Polska), cytrynian sodu (Agnex, Polska), sól kuchenną (o'sole, Polska), a wyłącznie do etapu czwartego – suchy ekstrakt z owoców bzu czarnego (EFE, GreenVit, Polska; zawartość antocyjanów 25%).

#### 4.3. Metody

##### 4.3.1. Otrzymywanie hydrożeli

**Etap 2 [P2]** – próbki do badań otrzymano według schematu przedstawionego na rysunku 7. Przy ustalaniu poziomu stężenia dla każdego preparatu uwzględniono optymalne stężenie żelujące opisane w dostępnej literaturze. Białko grochu (PP), białko pszenicy (WP), inulinę (INU) i maltodekstrynę (MD) zastosowano w stężeniach 20 g/100 g hydrożelu. Gumę konjac (KG) i babkę płesznicę (PS) w stężeniach 1,5 g/100 g hydrożelu. Gumę gellan (GG) i gumę tara (TG) w stężeniach 0,4 g/100 g hydrożelu.

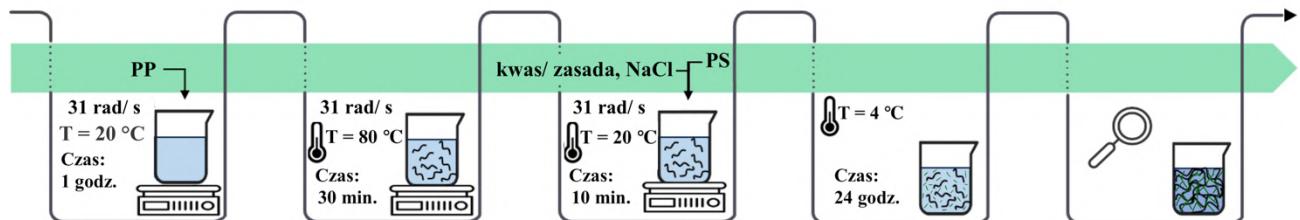


Rysunek 7. Schemat otrzymywania próbek do badań w etapie drugim [P2].

W celu uwodnienia wybrane preparaty białkowe i polisacharydowe zostały zdyspergowane w wodzie destylowanej przy użyciu homogenizatora (X120, CAT GmbH, Niemcy) – prędkość obrotowa wynosiła ~ 2000 rad/ s, w temperaturze 80°C. Uzyskane dyspersje przechowywano przez 24 godziny w temperaturze  $8 \pm 1$  °C w celu tworzenia struktury żelowej. Po tym czasie próbki kondycjonowano do osiągnięcia temperatury  $20 \pm 1$  °C, po czym poddano je badaniom.

**Etap 3 [P3]** – próbki do badań otrzymano według schematu przedstawionego na rysunku 8. Indukcja badanych hydrożeli polegała na hydratacji białka grochu PP (12,5 g białka/100 g hydrożelu) w wodzie destylowanej (temp.:  $20 \pm 1$  °C) przy ciągłym mieszaniu (31 rad/ s) przez 60 minut za pomocą magnetycznego mieszadła z funkcją

grzania SCI280-Pro (Scilogex, Connecticut, USA). Otrzymaną dyspersję białka podgrzewano do  $80 \pm 1$  °C przez 30 minut przy ciągłym mieszaniu (31 rad/ s). Po schłodzeniu dyspersji do  $20 \pm 1$  °C dodawano babkę plesznik PS (w stężeniu 0,5 g/100 g) i ponownie dyspersję mieszano przez 10 minut (31 rad/ s).



Rysunek 8. Schemat otrzymywania próbek do badań w etapie trzecim [P3].

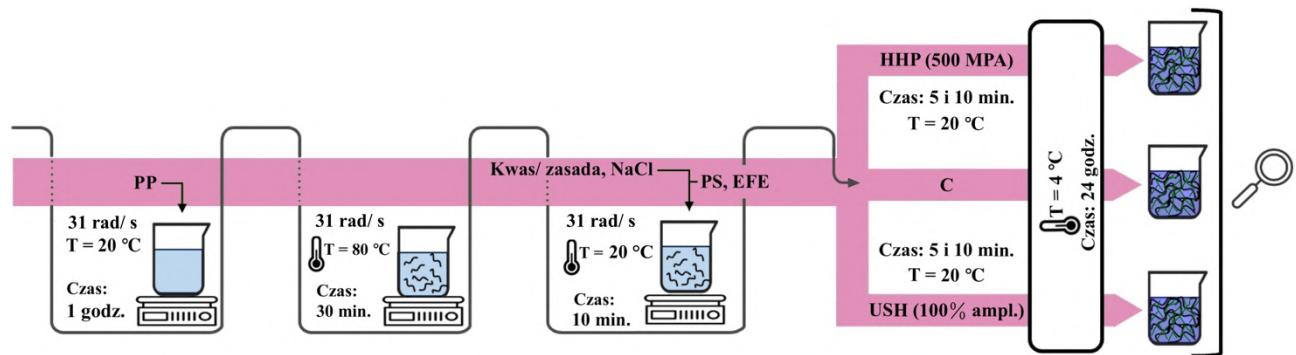
pH dyspersji zostało dostosowane (7, 4,5 i 3) przy użyciu roztworów 1 M kwasu cytrynowego oraz 1 M cytrynianu sodu. Siłę jonową dyspersji zmodyfikowano poprzez dodanie NaCl (w stężeniu 0, 0,15, 0,3 M). Następnie uzyskane dyspersje przechowywano przez 24 godziny w temperaturze  $4 \pm 1$  °C w celu wytworzenia struktury żelowej. Po tym czasie próbki kondycjonowano do osiągnięcia temperatury  $20 \pm 1$  °C, po czym poddano je badaniom. W tabeli 2 zaprezentowano kodowanie uzyskanych próbek hydrożeli oraz warunki ich indukcji (pH oraz dodatek NaCl).

Tabela 2. Kodowanie próbek badanych w etapie II oraz warunki indukcji hydrożeli.

Kod próbki	pH	Dodatek NaCl (M)
pH3S0.0	3	0,0
pH3S0.15	3	0,15
pH3S0.3	3	0,3
pH4.5S0.0	4,5	0,0
pH4.5S0.15	4,5	0,15
pH4.5S0.3	4,5	0,3
pH7S0.0	7	0,0
pH7S0.15	7	0,15
pH7S0.3	7	0,3

**Etap 4 [P4]** – próbki do badań otrzymano według schematu przedstawionego na rysunku 9. Dyspersję białka grochu uzyskano w podobny sposób jak w etapie drugim. Po schłodzeniu dyspersji białkowej do  $20 \pm 1$  °C, pH układu doprowadzono do wartości 3 (przy użyciu 1 M roztworów kwasu cytrynowego i cytrynianu sodu), dodano również NaCl (0,3 M). Następnie, dodano babkę plesznik PS (0,5 g/100 g hydrożelu) oraz suchy ekstrakt z czarnego bzu EFE (2 g/100 cm<sup>3</sup> wodnej fazy hydrożelu), a następnie dyspersję

mieszano przez 10 minut za pomocą magnetycznego mieszadła z funkcją grzania (31 rad/s).



Rysunek 9. Schemat otrzymywania próbek do badań w etapie trzecim [P4].

Próbki podzielono na trzy grupy - tabela 3 objaśnia kodowanie i zastosowane obróbki. Pierwsza grupa obejmowała hydrożele kontrolne indukowane termicznie (C). Druga grupa obejmowała hydrożele indukowane termicznie, a następnie poddane homogenizacji ultradźwiękowej (USH, 25 kHz, 70 W, 100% puls, 100% amplituda, zanurzenie sonotrody - 15 mm) przez 5 (U5) i 10 (U10) minut przy użyciu homogenizatora ultradźwiękowego P200St wyposażonego w tytanową sonotrodę S26d7 (Hielscher Ultrasonics GmbH, Teltow, Niemcy).

Tabela 3. kodowanie próbek badanych w etapie III oraz metoda i czas indukcji hydrożeli.

Kod próbki	Indukcja wstępna	Indukcja wtórna	Czas trwania indukcji wtórnej [min]
C		-	-
U5		Homogenizacja ultradźwiękowa (25 kHz, 70 W, 100% puls, 100% amplituda), temp. 20 ± 1°C	5
U10	Ogrzewanie do 80 °C przez 30 min	Homogenizacja ultradźwiękowa (25 kHz, 70 W, 100% puls, 100% amplituda), temp. 20 ± 1°C	10
P5		Wysokie ciśnienia hydrostatyczne (500 MPa), temp. 20 ± 1°C	5
P10		Wysokie ciśnienia hydrostatyczne (500 MPa), temp. 20 ± 1°C	10

Homogenizację ultradźwiękową dyspersji prowadzono z okresowymi przerwami (jedna przerwa dwuminutowa dla U5, 3 przerwy dla U10) w kąpieli lodowej mieszając ręcznie, aby zapobiec przegrzewaniu próbek (temperatura utrzymywana była na poziomie 20 ± 1 °C). Trzecia grupa obejmowała hydrożele indukowane termicznie, a następnie poddane obróbce wysokimi ciśnieniami hydrostatycznymi (HHP, 500 MPa, ustaliona temperatura wynosiła 20 ± 1 °C, temperatura maksymalna w trakcie ciśnieniowania wynosiła 30 ± 1 °C) przez 5 (P5) i 10 (P10) minut przy użyciu Paskalizatora U5000/120

(Unipress, Warszawa, Polska). Następnie wszystkie uzyskane dyspersje przechowywano przez 24 godziny w temperaturze  $4 \pm 1$  °C, aby wytworzyć strukturę żelową. Po tym czasie próbki kondycjonowano do osiągnięcia temperatury  $20 \pm 1$  °C, po czym poddano je badaniom.

#### 4.3.2. Metody analityczne

**Wizualizacja danych bibliometrycznych [P1]** – mapowanie danych zostało zrealizowane przy użyciu oprogramowania VOSviewer (wersja 1.6.18, CWTS, Leiden, Holandia) do mapowania scjentometrycznego. Dane, w tym wszystkie szczegóły dotyczące 297 znalezionych artykułów, zostały wyeksportowane, a następnie przeprowadzono analizę współwystępowania słów kluczowych w zależności od roku publikacji [Park, Nagy 2018; Sweileh i in. 2018; Han, Gong 2021].

**Stabilność fizyczna i kinetyka destabilizacji [P2, P3, P4]** – wyrażone jako indeks niestabilności i zmiana indeksu niestabilności w funkcji czasu. Badanie przeprowadzono za pomocą analizatora dyspersji LUMiSizer 6120-75 (LUM GmbH, Berlin, Niemcy), który mierzy intensywność przepuszczanego światła bliskiej podczerwieni [Florowska i in. 2020b].

**Parametry mikroreologiczne [P2, P3, P4]** – badane parametry: średnie przemieszczenie kwadratowe w funkcji czasu dekorelacji MSD [ $\text{nm}^{-2}$ ], współczynnik ciecz-ciało stałe SLB [-], indeks elastyczności EI [ $\text{nm}^{-2}$ ], indeks lepkości makroskopowej MVI [ $\text{nm}^{-2}$ ]. Pomiar przeprowadzono przy użyciu urządzenia Rheolaser Master (Formulaction, L'Union, Francja) wykorzystującego technikę dynamicznej spektroskopii dyfuzyjnych fal MS-DWS (ang. Multi Speckle Diffusing Wave Spectroscopy) [Cristiano i in. 2020].

**Parametry tekstury [P3, P4]** – Pomiaru twardości [N] oraz adhezji [N] otrzymanych hydrożeli dokonano przy użyciu teksturometru TA-XT2i (Stable Micro Systems, Wielka Brytania), wyposażonego w cylindryczną głowicę o średnicy 0,5R (prędkość przesuwu głowicy wynosiła 1 mm/s, a jej głębokość zanurzenia w żelu 5 mm). Do pomiaru smarowności [N·s] teksturometr wyposażono w przystawkę SpreadabilityRig (prędkość przesuwu głowicy wynosiła 3 mm/s) [Florowska i in. 2022].

**Parametry reologiczne [P3]** – Pomiar przeprowadzono przy użyciu reometru oscylacyjnego Haake Mars 40 (Thermo Scientific, Karlsruhe, Niemcy) wyposażonego

w płytki o średnicy 35 mm z ząbkowaną powierzchnią oraz przerwą między płytami wynoszącą 1 mm. Przeprowadzono dwa testy w celu wyznaczenia charakterystyki lepkospożystej otrzymanych hydrożeli oraz ich wytrzymałości: test przemiatania odksztalcaniem oraz test przemiatania częstotliwością. Badane parametry uzyskane w teście przemiatania częstotliwością przy amplitudzie odksztalcania 1%: moduł zachowawczy  $G'$  [Pa], moduł stratności  $G''$  [Pa], tangens kąta przesunięcia fazowego  $\tan(\delta)$  oraz lepkość zespolona  $|\eta^*|$  [Pa·s]. Badane parametry uzyskane w teście przemiatania odksztalceniem przy częstotliwości 1 Hz: moduł zachowawczy LVR  $G'$  [Pa] i długość liniowego zakresu lepkospożystego reprezentowana przez wartość odksztalcenia LVR  $\gamma$  [%] [Chen i in. 2017a; Cichońska i in. 2022].

**Parametry barwy [P2, P3 i P4]** – pomiar parametrów barwy  $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ ,  $C^*$  i  $h$  [ $^\circ$ ] wykonano za pomocą stacjonarnego kolorymetru CR-5 (Konica Minolta, Tokio, Japonia) w systemie CIE ( $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ ) [Sobel i in. 2020]. Wyliczono również całkowitą różnicę barwy  $\Delta E$  pomiędzy próbками [P2, P3] oraz pomiędzy otrzymanymi próbками a próbką kontrolną [P4]. Ponadto, wyliczono indeks zażółcenia (YI) [P3] oraz indeks bieli (WI) [P2, P3] na podstawie wzorów:

$$\Delta E = \sqrt{(L_1^* - L_2^*)^2 + (a_1^* - a_2^*)^2 + (b_1^* - b_2^*)^2}$$

gdzie:  $\Delta E$  – różnica barwy pomiędzy próbками,  $L_1^*$ ,  $a_1^*$ ,  $b_1^*$  – składowe barwy dla próbki 1,  $L_2^*$ ,  $a_2^*$ ,  $b_2^*$  – składowe barwy dla próbki 2.

$$YI = 142.86 \cdot \frac{b^*}{L^*}$$

$$WI = 100 - \sqrt{(100 - L^*)^2 + a^{*2} + b^{*2}}$$

Gdzie: YI – indeks zażółcenia, WI – indeks bieli,  $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$  - składowe barwy dla danej próbki.

**Zdolność wiążania ekstraktu [P4]** – zdolność wiążania ekstraktu EE [%] obliczono na podstawie zawartości antocyjanów (C) związanych wewnątrz struktury hydrożelu, określonej przy użyciu spektrofotometru UV-VIS (Genesys 180, ThermoScientific, USA), zgodnie z metodologią opisaną przez Chi i in. [2019].

$$C = \frac{(A_{\text{pH}1,0} - A_{\text{pH}4,5}) \times M_w \times DF \times 1000}{\varepsilon \times l}$$

gdzie: C - zawartość antocyjanów ( $\text{mg}/100\text{ cm}^3$ ),  $\varepsilon$  - współczynnik ekstynkcji dla cyjanidyno-3-glukozydu ( $26900\text{ dm}^3/\text{mol}\cdot\text{cm}$ ), l - grubość zmierzonej warstwy roztworu (1 cm),  $M_w$  - masa molowa cyjanidyno-3-glukozydu (449,2 g/mol), DF - współczynnik rozcieńczeń.

$$\text{EE} = \frac{C_B - C_A}{C_B} \times 100$$

gdzie: EE – zdolność wiązania ekstraktu [%],  $C_A$  – zawartość wykrytych antocyjanów w fazie wodnej po odwirowaniu,  $C_B$  – całkowita zawartość wprowadzonych antocyjanów (0,5 g).

**Widma FT-IR [P4]** – pomiar wykonano przy użyciu spektrofotometru Cary 630 (Agilent Technologies Inc., Santa Clara, CA, USA). Przed przeprowadzeniem analizy FT-IR, hydrożele zamrożono w temperaturze  $-20 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$ , a następnie suszono sublimacyjnie. Otrzymane próbki zostały zmielone na proszek. Pomiar FT-IR przeprowadzono w zakresie długości fal od 500 do  $4000\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , wykonując 32 skany przy rozdzielczości  $4\text{ cm}^{-1}$  [Rybak i in. 2022].

**Zdjęcia mikrostruktury [P4]** – do uzyskania mikrofotografii suszonych hydrożeli użyto skaningowego mikroskopu elektronowego Hitachi TM3000 (Hitachi, Tokio, Japonia). Analizę prowadzono przy napięciu przyspieszającym 15 kV, pod ciśnieniem 100 Pa, przy powiększeniu  $\times 1000$  [He i in. 2020].

**Ogólna zawartość związków fenolowych [P4]** – określona jako TPC [ $\text{mg kwasu chlorogenowego}/100\text{ g s.s.}$ ]. Pomiar przeprowadzono z użyciem techniki spektrofotometrycznej, polegającej na reakcji barwnej z odczynnikiem Folina–Ciocalteu [Rybak i in. 2022]. Reakcje przeprowadzono na 96-dołkowych płytach. Następnie, absorbancję przy 750 nm zmierzono za pomocą czytnika płyt Multiskan Sky (Thermo Electron Co., Waltham, MA, USA).

**Aktywność przeciwitleniająca [P4]** – określona przez następujące parametry: ABTS [ $\text{mg TE/g s.s.}$ ], DPPH [ $\text{mg TE/g s.s.}$ ], zdolność redukcji jonów żelaza RP [ $\text{mg TE/g s.s.}$ ]. Aktywność przeciwitleniającą próbek wobec roztworów ABTS, DPPH badano z użyciem metody spektrofotometrycznej [Rybak i in. 2020]. Reakcje przeprowadzono na 96-dołkowych płytach. Następnie, zmierzono absorbancję za pomocą czytnika płyt Multiskan Sky (Thermo Electron Co., Waltham, MA, USA). Zdolność redukcji jonów żelaza (RP) przeprowadzono zgodnie z metodyką opisaną przez

Świeca [2016]. Odpowiednio przygotowane mieszanki inkubowano w ciemności w temperaturze 50 °C przy użyciu inkubatora (INCU-Line ILS 10; VWR, Radnor, PA, USA). Następnie, dodano wody destylowanej i roztwór chlorku żelaza (III). Po 10 minutach zmierzono wartości absorbancji.

**Stabilność termiczna [P4]** – Stabilność wyrażono zmianą masy [%] oraz pochodną ubytku masy DTG [1/ °C] w funkcji temperatury. Do przeprowadzenia analizy stabilności termicznej uzyskanych hydrożeli użyto termograwimetru (TGA/DSC 3+, Mettler Toledo, Greifensee, Szwajcaria). Materiał poddano pirolizie w zakresie temperatur od 30 do 600 °C, z prędkością ogrzewania  $10 \pm 1$  °C na minutę, w atmosferze azotu (przepływ 50 cm<sup>3</sup>/min) [Merino, Athanassiou 2023].

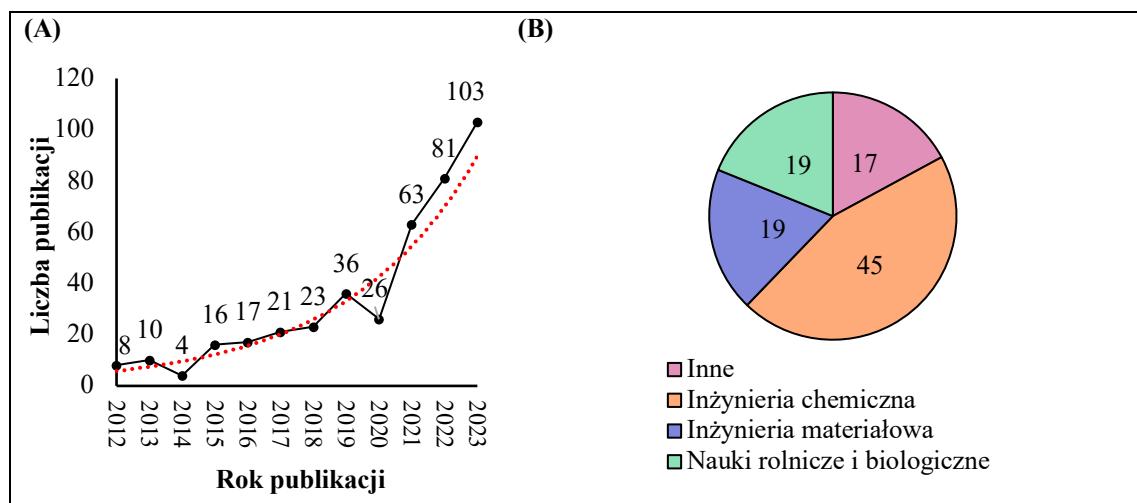
**Analiza statystyczna [P2, P3, P4]** – doświadczenie wykonywano w trzech powtórzeniach ( $n = 3$ ), a wartości przedstawiono jako średnie z odchyleniem standardowym ( $\pm SD$ ). Zgromadzone dane zostały poddane analizie statystycznej przy użyciu oprogramowania Statistica 13.3 (TIBCO Software Inc., Palo Alto, CA, USA). W celu oceny istotności różnic w średnich wartościach mierzonych parametrów hydrożeli przeprowadzono analizę wariancji jedno- i dwuczynnikową (ANOVA) oraz zastosowano test Tukey'a do podziału na grupy jednorodne, przy poziomie istotności  $\alpha = 0,05$ . Przeprowadzono również analizę składowych głównych (PCA) oraz analizę skupień (HCA).

## 5. Omówienie i dyskusja wyników

### 5.1. Analiza bibliometryczna dostępnej literatury na temat hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych

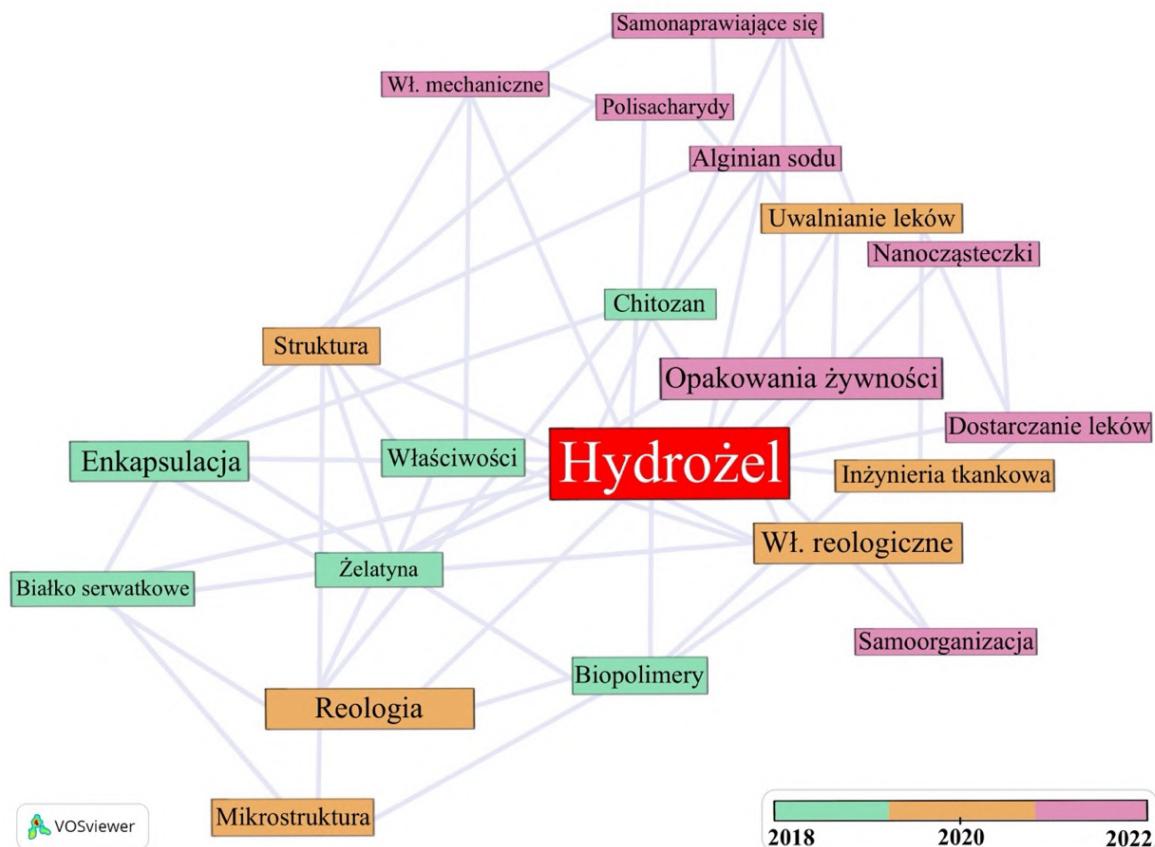
[P1] Hilal, A.\*; Florowska, A.; Wroniak, M.: 2023. Binary Hydrogels: Induction Methods and Recent Application Progress as Food Matrices for Bioactive Compounds Delivery — A Bibliometric Review. Gels, 9(1), 68. <https://doi.org/10.3390/gels9010068>

Przeprowadzono analizę łącznie 297 dokumentów, z czego 80,5% stanowiły artykuły badawcze, a 19,5% artykuły przeglądowe. Na rysunku 10A przedstawiono liczbę publikacji na temat hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych w żywności, które ukazały się w ciągu ostatnich dziesięciu lat. Na rysunku 10B przedstawiono główne obszary tematyczne, w których opublikowano analizowane artykuły w ciągu ostatnich dziesięciu lat (badania przeprowadzone w bazie danych Scopus w październiku 2022 roku). Analizując dane zaprezentowane na Rysunku 10A, zaobserwowało powolny, ale systematyczny wzrost liczby publikacji w latach 2014–2019. Od 2020 roku odnotowano dynamiczny wzrost liczby artykułów na temat hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych w żywności. W 2020 roku liczba publikacji na ten temat osiągnęła 63, a w 2022 roku — 73. Wzrost liczby publikacji na temat hydrożeli spożywczych odzwierciedla zwiększające się zainteresowanie ich potencjalnymi zastosowaniami w sektorze spożywczym [Zha i in. 2021; Manzoor i in. 2022].



Rysunek 9. (A) Liczba publikacji na temat spożywczych hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych opublikowanych w ciągu ostatnich dziesięciu lat (B) oraz główne obszary tematyczne, w których zarejestrowano te publikacje [P1].

Publikacje naukowe dotyczące spożywczych hydrożeli skupiały się na trzech głównych obszarach tematycznych: inżynieria chemiczna, inżynieria materiałowa oraz nauki rolnicze i biologiczne (Rysunek 9B). Inne obszary (17%), w których zarejestrowano publikacje obejmowały: fizykę i astronomię (7,7%); biochemię, genetykę i biologię molekularną (5,9%); farmakologię, toksykologię (1,6%); immunologię i mikrobiologię (1,5%); medycynę (0,5%). Ta różnorodność obszarów tematycznych potwierdza interdyscyplinarny charakter badań nad hydrożelami otrzymanymi z użyciem białek i polisacharydów. Li i in. [2021] stwierdzili, że w porównaniu z niektórymi obszarami nauk takimi jak biomedycyna i inżynieria tkankowa, badania nad zastosowaniami hydrożeli w obszarze nauk o żywienności są wciąż stosunkowo marginalne, chociaż ten stan rzeczy wskazuje również na szerokie możliwości rozwoju tej tematyki badań w tym obszarze.



**Rysunek 11.** Uproszczony schemat sieci słów kluczowych opartej na ich współwystępowaniu (pomiędzy 2018 a 2022). Rozmiar ramki reprezentuje częstotliwość współwystępowania danego słowa kluczowego. Skala kolorów odzwierciedla średnią liczbę publikacji na rok [P1].

Ponadto, Cao i Mezzenga [2020] stwierdzili, że rozwój innowacyjnych zasad projektowania hydrożeli spożywczych jest ściśle związany z procesem interdyscyplinarnej wymiany wiedzy pomiędzy obszarami nauki. Na rysunku 11

przedstawiono sieć współwystępujących słów kluczowych w stosunku do średniej liczby publikacji na rok (w latach od 2018 do 2022). Na jej podstawie stwierdzono, że artykuły opublikowane około roku 2018 skupiały się w dużej mierze na właściwościach hydrożeli biopolimerowych (na bazie białka serwatkowego, chitozanu czy żelatyny) w kontekście używania ich do enkapsulacji.

W 2020 artykuły dotyczące hydrożeli biopolimerowych były badane pod kątem ich właściwości reologicznych, jak i micro- i makrostruktury ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem ich zastosowania w inżynierii tkankowej i do kontrolowanego uwalniania leków. W 2022 kontynuowano badania nad hydrożelami jako nośnikami leków z uwzględnieniem mechanizmu ich dostarczania do odpowiedniego punktu układu pokarmowego. Ponadto, wzrosło zainteresowanie właściwościami mechanicznymi hydrożeli jako potencjalnych materiałów do produkcji opakowań żywności ze względu na ich zdolność do enkapsulacji nanocząsteczek, samoorganizacji i samonaprawiania się [Deng i in. 2022; Guo i in. 2023].

Na podstawie przeprowadzonej analizy bibliometrycznej przedstawionej w publikacji **[P1]** potwierdzono hipotezę H1. Wykazano, że badania nad spożywczymi hydrożelami binarnymi uzyskanymi z połączenia białka roślinnego i polisacharydu jako materiałów budulcowych są stosunkowo nowym obszarem badań o charakterze interdyscyplinarnym. Jednocześnie należy podkreślić, że biopolimery spożywcze są dobrze znane i zbadane w przemyśle spożywczym i można je znaleźć w różnych produktach spożywczych, w których pełnią funkcje wiążące, żelujące lub stabilizujące. Jednak innowacyjność obszaru badań nad binarnymi hydrożelami białkowo-polisacharydowymi polega na zastosowaniu podejścia "Bottom-Up Design" do opracowania nowych funkcjonalnych matryc żywieniowych. To podejście pozwala na kontrolowanie interakcji pomiędzy białkiem a polisacharydem w celu otrzymania złożonej struktury o zindywidualizowanych właściwościach, które mogą pomóc w opracowaniu innowacyjnych i prozdrowotnych produktów spożywczych.

## **5.2. Charakterystyka różnych preparatów białkowych i polisacharydowych, jako składowych hydrożeli binarnych**

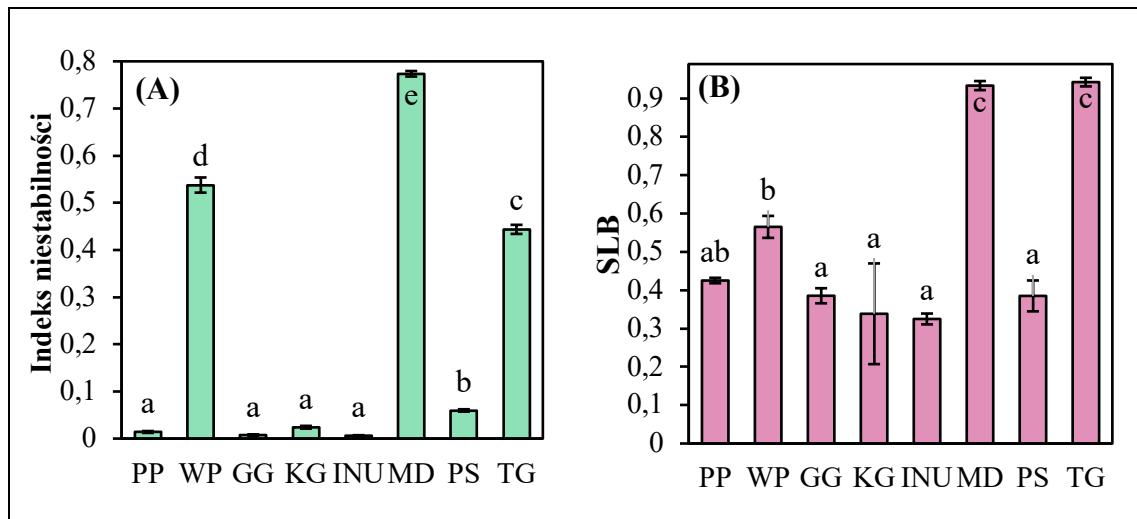
[P2] Hilal, A.\*; Florowska, A.; Florowski, T.; Wroniak, M.: 2022. A Comparative Evaluation of the Structural and Biomechanical Properties of Food-Grade Biopolymers as Potential Hydrogel Building Blocks. *Biomedicines*, 10(9), 2106. <https://doi.org/10.3390/biomedicines10092106>

[P4] Hilal, A.\*; Florowska, A.; Florowski, T.; Rybak, K.; Domian, E.; Szymański, M.; Wroniak, M.: 2024. Effects of Sequential Induction Combining Thermal Treatment with Ultrasound or High Hydrostatic Pressure on the Physicochemical and Mechanical Properties of Pea Protein–Psyllium Hydrogels as Elderberry Extract Carriers. *International Journal of Molecular Sciences*, 25(16), 9033. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijms25169033>

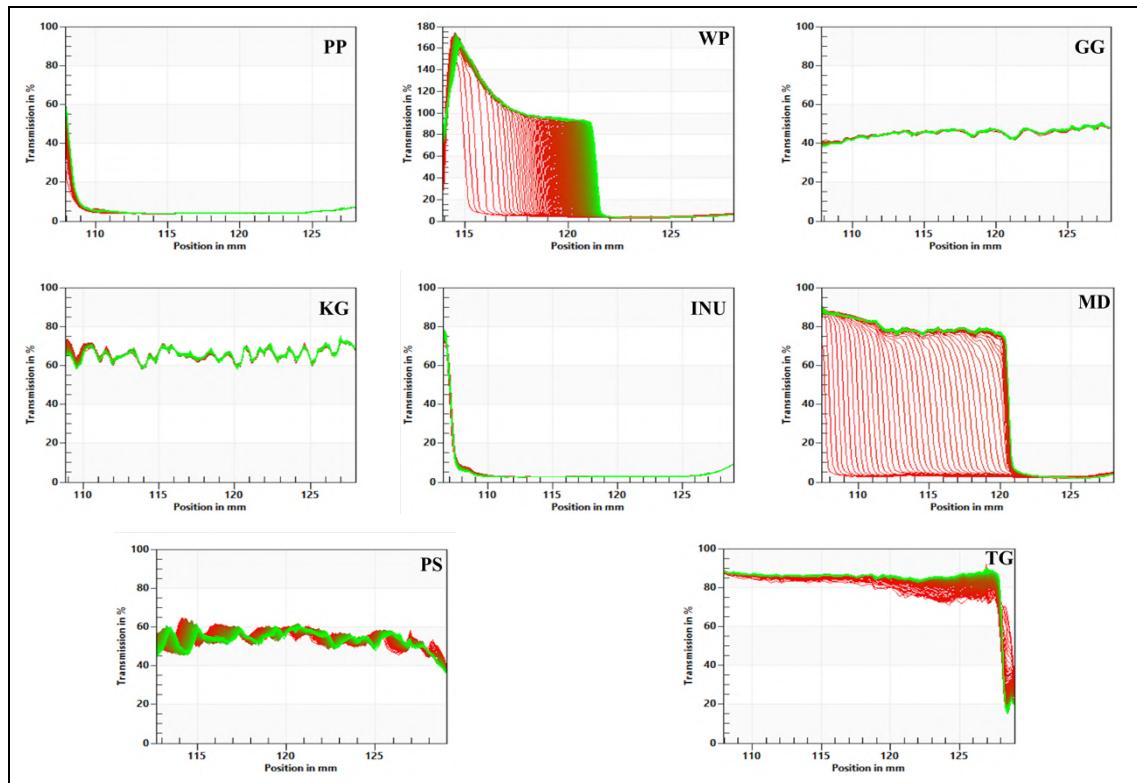
W celu selekcji składowych hydrożeli do dalszych badań przeprowadzono wstępne badania nad właściwościami fizycznymi układów uzyskanych poprzez indukcję termiczną wybranych preparatów białkowych (białko grochu i białko pszenicy) i polisacharydowych (guma gellan, guma konjac, inulina, maltodekstryna, babka plesznik i guma tara). W tym etapie zbadano następujące parametry: stabilność fizyczną, kinetykę destabilizacji, parametry mikroreologiczne (MSD, SLB, EI i MVI) oraz parametry barwy ( $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ , WI i  $\Delta E$ ). Następnie, przeprowadzono analizę składowych głównych (PCA) i analizę skupień (HCA), które pozwoliły wyłonić grupę preparatów jako potencjalnych materiałów budulcowych binarnych hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych [P2]. Ponadto, najbardziej korzystny hydrożel otrzymany na bazie białka grochu i babki plesznik poddano analizie składu przy użyciu spektroskopii FT-IR w celu zidentyfikowania zmian w strukturze chemicznej oraz interakcji między składnikami hydrożelu [P4].

Na rysunku 12 przedstawiono wyniki indeksu niestabilności (Rysunek 12A), współczynnika ciecz-ciało stałe SLB (Rysunek 12B) a na rysunku 13 przedstawiono profile transmisyjne badanych układów. Stabilność fizyczna uzyskanych układów jest istotnym parametrem w ocenie zdolności danego biopolimerów do tworzenia trwałej struktury żelowej. Badanie stabilności układów przeprowadzono z wykorzystaniem fotowirówki LUMiSizer. Wyznaczono indeks niestabilności oraz profile transmisyjne dla każdego badanego układu. Analizując wartości indeksów niestabilności (Rysunek 12A)

stwierdzono, że w przypadku białka pszenicy (WP), gumy tara (TG) oraz maltodekstryny (MD) doszło do największej destabilizacji układu.



Rysunek 12. Właściwości fizyczne badanych układów [P2]. (A) indeks niestabilności; (B) współczynnik ciecz-ciało stałe (SLB), gdzie a, b, c - wartości średnie oznaczone tymi samymi literami nie różnią się istotnie przy  $\alpha = 0,05$ .



Rysunek 13. Profile transmisyjne dla układów zawierających: białko grochu (PP), białko pszenicy (WP), gumę gellan (GG), gumę konjac (KG), inulinę (INU), maltodekstrynę (MD), babkę plesznik (PS) i gumę tara (TG). Czerwone linie reprezentują transmisję światła na początku analizy, a zielone linie reprezentują transmisję światła na końcu analizy.

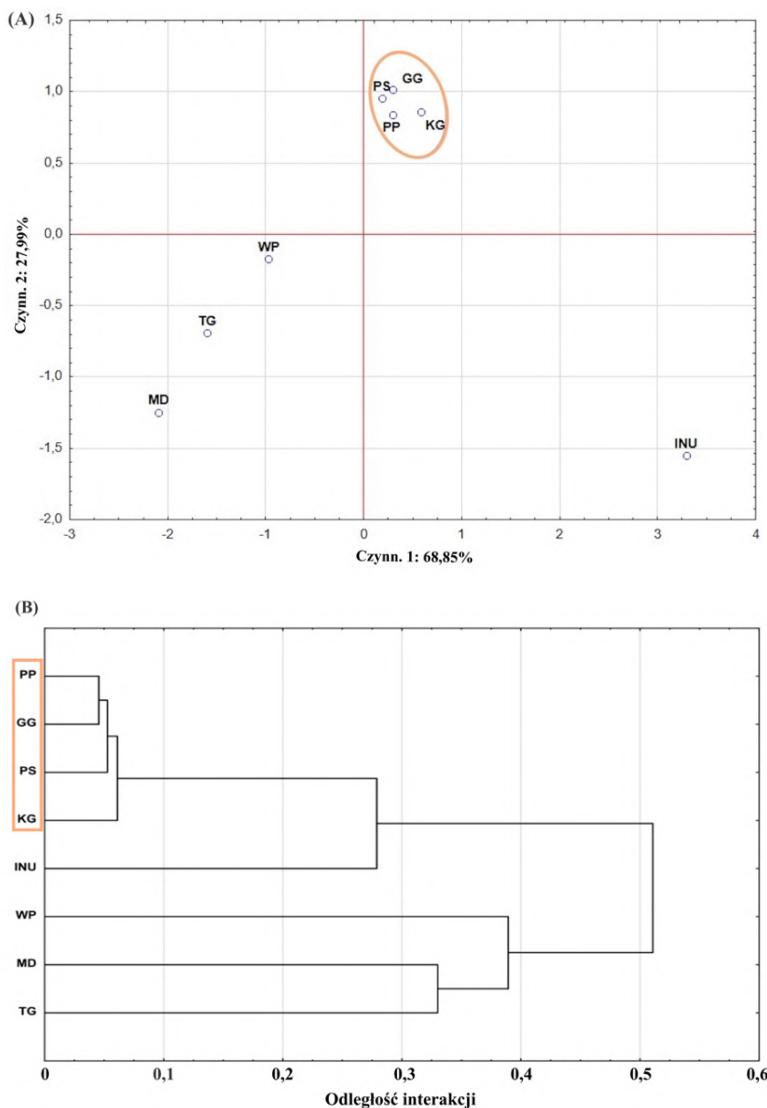
Profile transmisyjne WP i MD (Rysunek 13) reprezentowały ruch cząstek, które wskutek działania sił odśrodkowych przesuwały się wraz z frontem destabilizacji ku dnu próbki, co spowodowało kompresję strukturalną i w konsekwencji wydzielenie się wody.

Natomiast, destabilizacja układów zawierających białka grochu (PP), gumę gellan (GG), gumę konjac (KG), inulinę (INU) i babkę plesznik (PS) była wolniejsza. Wysoka stabilność fizyczna preparatów PP, GG, KG, INU i PS prawdopodobnie mogła wynikać z utworzenia sieci, która działała jako struktura stabilizująca. Qayum i in. [2021] w swoich badaniach zaobserwowali, że jednorodna i zwarta struktura utworzona przez laktoalbuminę wpływa na stabilność fizyczną podczas działania siły odśrodkowej oraz na zdolność zatrzymywania wody w uzyskanych żelach. Natomiast, niska stabilność fizyczna, taka jak w przypadku preparatów WP, MD i TG świadczyła o słabo rozwiniętej strukturze żelowej lub jej braku [Feng i in. 2021].

Właściwości mikroreologiczne zostały określone za pomocą metody dynamicznej spektroskopii dyfuzyjnych fal MD-DWS przy użyciu urządzenia Rheolaser Master. Metoda ta umożliwia przeprowadzanie pomiaru w sposób nieinwazyjny (układ w stanie spoczynku). Współczynnik ciecz-ciało stałe (SLB – ang. solid-liquid balance index) odpowiada bezwymiarowemu stosunkowi modułu zachowawczego  $G'$  do modułu stratności  $G''$ . Współczynnik SLB jest wprost proporcjonalny do właściwości lepkosprężystych próbek i służy do wskazania zmian w zachowaniu próbki [Cristiano i in. 2020]. Na podstawie wyników SLB (Rysunek 12B) wykazano, że układy uzyskane z białka pszenicy (WP), maltodekstryny (MD) i gumy tara (TG) charakteryzowały się przewagą modułu  $G''$ , co świadczyło o braku struktury żelowej ( $SLB > 0,5$ ). Z kolei w przypadku preparatów PP, GG, KG, INU i PS, ich układy cechowały się przewagą modułu  $G'$  ( $SLB < 0,5$ ), co potwierdziło utworzenie stałej struktury żelowej – próbki wykazały właściwości sprężyste charakterystyczne dla ciał stałych [Yating i in. 2022].

Na podstawie uzyskanych wyników przeprowadzono analizę głównych składowych (PCA, Rysunek 14A) oraz analizę skupień (HCA, Rysunek 14B). W przypadku analizy PCA wykazano, że czynnik 1 był dodatnio skorelowany z indeksem elastyczności EI ( $r = 0,91$ ) i lepkością makroskopową MVI ( $r = 0,94$ ). Natomiast ujemnie skorelowany był z indeksem niestabilności ( $r = -0,94$ ) i SLB ( $r = -0,96$ ). Czynnik 2 był natomiast skorelowany ujemnie z indeksem bieli WI ( $r = -0,90$ ). Wyłoniono układy, które charakteryzowały się zdolnością do tworzenia stabilnych struktur żelowych o podobnych właściwościach mikroreologicznych (Rysunek 14). Do tej grupy należały układy z białkiem grochu (PP), gumą gellan (GG), gumą konjac (KG) i babką plesznik (PS). Układy te charakteryzowały się utworzoną strukturą żelową, która nie różniła się istotnie względem wartości EI i MVI. Ponadto, wykazano, że układ INU wyróżniał się

najwyższą wartością indeksu elastyczności (EI) i indeksu lepkości makroskopowej (MVI) co świadczyło o utworzeniu bardziej zwartej struktury ( $EI = 0,31 \text{ nm}^{-2}$ ;  $MVI = 0,059 \text{ nm}^{-2}$ ).

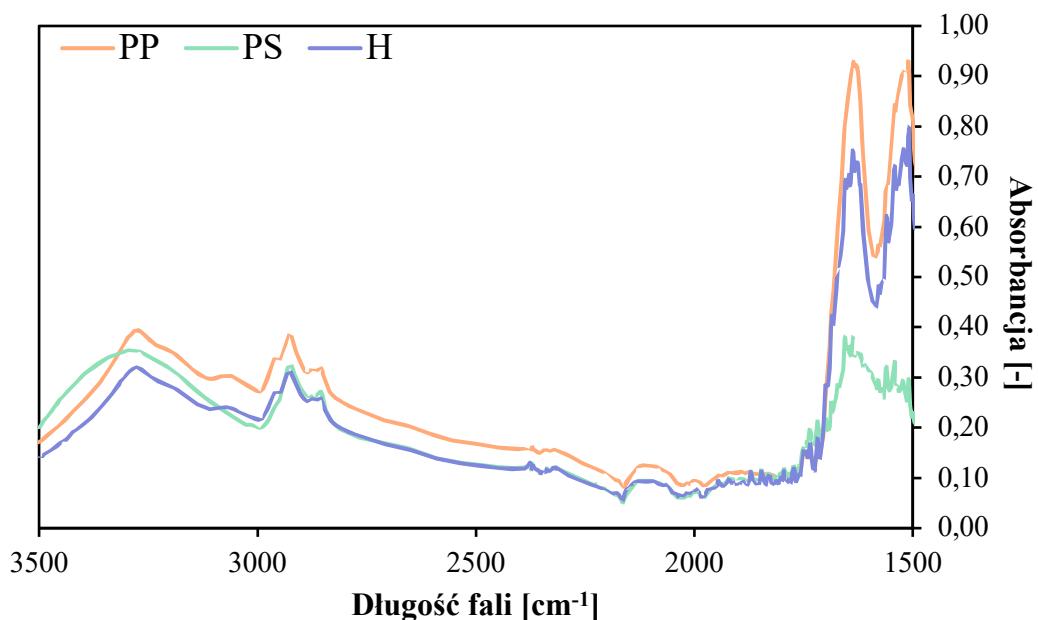


**Rysunek 14.** Analiza składowych głównych PCA (A) oraz hierarchiczna analiza skupień HCA (B) uzyskanych próbek [P2].

Do dalszych badań wybrano zatem jako składowe hydrożeli, białko grochu (PP) oraz babkę płesznic (PS). Dokonując wyboru preparatu z babki płesznic dodatkowo kierowano się jego właściwościami prebiotycznymi. Dzięki jego obecności w układzie pokarmowym zwiększcza się lepkość treści pokarmowej, uczucie sytości oraz skutecznie spowalniający jest rozkład i wchłanianie składników odżywcznych [Belorio, Gómez 2020; Agrawal 2021]. Dodatkowo, połączenie babki płesznic z białkiem grochu może stanowić efektywny sposób na uzyskanie matrycy do kontrolowanego dostarczania substancji bioaktywnych do jelita grubego. Babka płesznic, nie ulegając rozpadowi

w górnym odcinku przewodu pokarmowego, pozostaje nienaruszona aż do momentu fermentacji przez mikrobiotę jelitową. Dzięki temu hydrożele zawierające babkę plesznik mogą chronić efektywnie substancje bioaktywne przed degradacją w żołądku i jelcie cienkim, umożliwiając ich efektywne uwalnianie w jelcie grubym [McClements 2017; Wang i in. 2022a].

W celu analizy międzycząsteczkowych interakcji w hydrożelu uzyskanym z połączenia białka grochu (PP) i babki plesznik (PS) użyto spektroskopii FT-IR. Wszystkie analizowane próbki wykazywały typowe piki dla składników pochodzenia organicznego (Rysunek 15) [Sivam i in. 2012].



**Rysunek 15.** Widma FT-IR w zakresie 1500–3500 cm<sup>-1</sup> dla białka grochu (PP), babki plesznik (PS) oraz dla binarnego hydrożelu (H) [P4].

Analizując widma FT-IR białka grochu (PP) wykazano charakterystyczne pasmo amidowe I ( $\sim 1650$  cm<sup>-1</sup>), przypisywane drganiom rozciągającym grup karbonylowych (C=O) w wiązaniach peptydowych skorelowane z drugorzędną strukturą białka. Dodatkowo, obecność pasma przy około 1625 cm<sup>-1</sup> sugerowała, że dominującą strukturą drugorzędną białka była struktura  $\beta$ -harmonijki. Ponadto pasmo amidowe II ( $\sim 1550$  cm<sup>-1</sup>), związane z drganiami deformacyjnymi N–H oraz drganiami rozciągającymi C–N, mogło się nakładać na charakterystyczne drgania C–C łańcuchów bocznych aromatycznych aminokwasów (1500–1600 cm<sup>-1</sup>), co wskazywało na obecność fenyloalaniny i tyrozyny w badanym preparacie [Moreno i in. 2020]. Pasmo przy  $\sim 2900$  cm<sup>-1</sup> wyraźnie wskazywało na drgania rozciągające wiązań C–H w alifatycznych

łańcuchach bocznych aminokwasów, takich jak alanina, walina, leucyna, izoleucyna i prolina. Pasmo przy  $\sim$ 3290 cm<sup>-1</sup> reprezentowało drgania rozciągające N–H z grup aminowych obecnych w szkielecie polipeptydowym białka grochu [Ertugrul i in. 2021].

Analizując widma FT-IR babki plesznik (PS, Rysunek 15) oraz badania przeprowadzonego przez Waleed i in. [2022], odnotowano charakterystyczne pasmo w okolicach 1630 cm<sup>-1</sup>, związane z drganiami rozciągającymi grup karbonylowych (C=O) grup acetylowych, występujących w niektórych cząsteczkach ksylanu i arabinoksylanu. Intensywność tego pasma koreluje ze stopniem acetylacji, co w przypadku badanego preparatu wskazało na niski stopień acetylacji [Ren i in. 2020].

W widmie FT-IR hydrożelu uzyskanego z białka grochu i babki plesznik (H, Rysunek 15) wykazano nowe interakcje między składowymi. Odnotowano zmniejszenie intensywności pasm w zakresie 1500–1700 cm<sup>-1</sup>, co sugerowało zmiany strukturalne białka po jego denaturacji oraz interakcji z PS [Moreno i in. 2020]. Niu i in. [2019] w swoich badaniach nad interakcjami pomiędzy babką plesznik a białkiem serwatkowym, zaobserwowali wzrost intensywności pasm absorpcyjnych przy 1401 i 1648 cm<sup>-1</sup>, co wskazywało na tworzenie dodatkowych wiązań C=O i C–N, prawdopodobnie wynikających z reakcji karbonylowo-amoniowej. Natomiast w przypadku widma próbki H odnotowano obniżenie intensywności tych pasm, co mogło wskazywać na powstanie interakcji van der Waalsa lub interakcji elektrostatycznych pomiędzy cząsteczkami, co z kolei mogło ograniczyć swobodę drgań tych grup (tzw. efekt ekranowania) [Xue i in. 2020; Mengyao Liu i in. 2023].

Na podstawie przeprowadzonej analizy widm FT-IR wykazano, że pomiędzy białkiem grochu a babką plesznik występowały oddziaływanie asocjacyjne (kompatybilność termodynamiczna) w postaci interakcji międzycząsteczkowych, w tym van der Waalsa i elektrostatycznych. Dzięki tym obserwacjom udowodniono występowanie synergii pomiędzy tymi dwoma składowymi wybranymi do dalszych etapów badań.

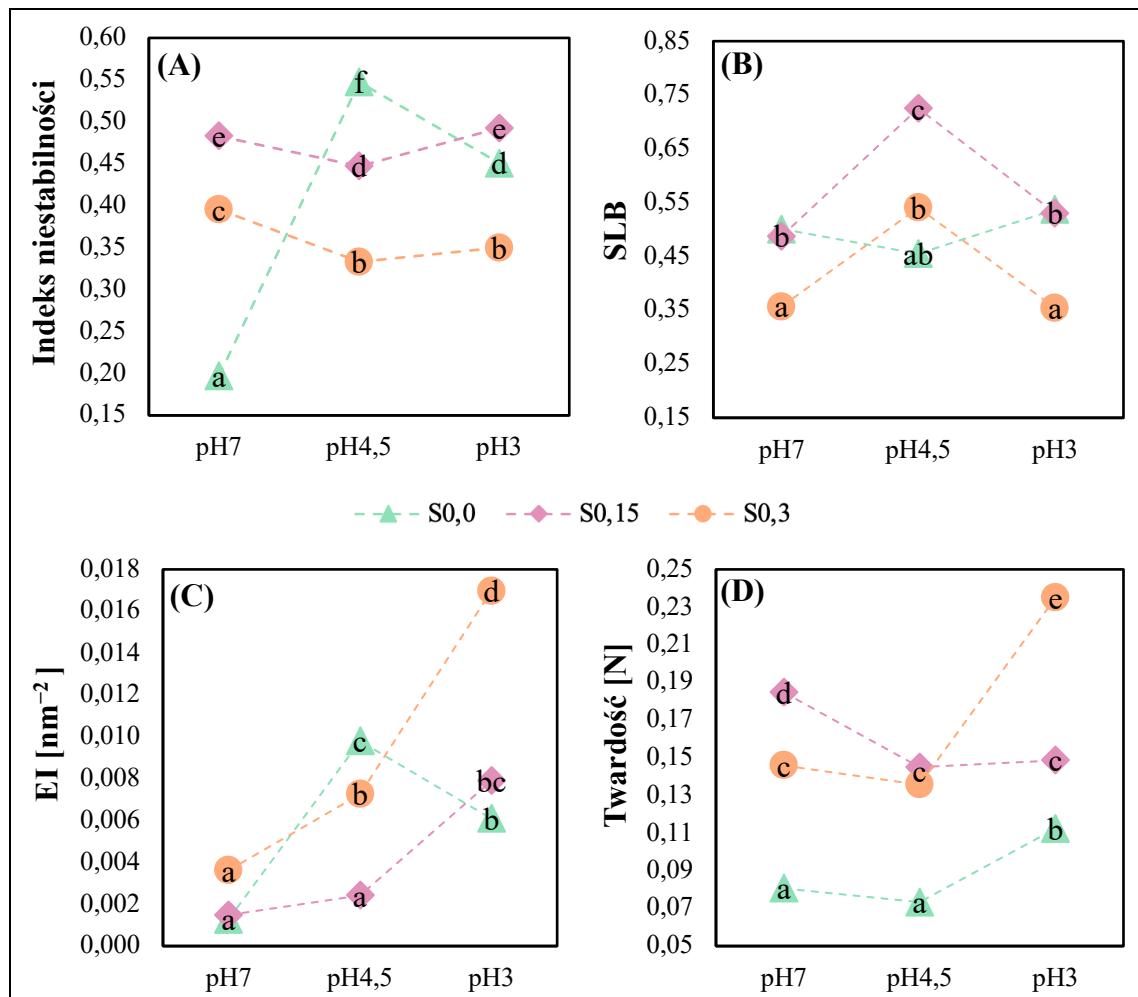
### **5.3. Określenie wpływu pH i stężenia NaCl na właściwości fizyczne hydrożeli uzyskanych z białka grochu i babki plesznik**

[P3] Hilal, A.\*; Florowska, A.; Domian, E.; Wroniak, M.: 2024. Binary Pea Protein-Psyllium Hydrogel: Insights into the Influence of pH and Ionic Strength on the Physical Stability and Mechanical Characteristics. Gels, 10(6), 401. <https://doi.org/10.3390/gels10060401>

W celu zbadania wpływu warunków indukcji termicznej (pH i stężenia NaCl) na właściwości fizyczne hydrożeli otrzymanych z białka grochu (PP) i babki plesznik (PS), przygotowano dziewięć hydrożeli. Wartość pH utrzymywano na trzech poziomach (7, 4,5 i 3), a NaCl dodawano w stężeniach 0, 0,15 i 0,3 M. Przeanalizowano następujące parametry: stabilność fizyczną, kinetykę destabilizacji, parametry mikroreologiczne (MSD, SLB, EI), parametry tekstury (twardość, adhezja, smarowność), parametry reologiczne ( $G'$ ,  $G''$ ,  $\tan(\delta)$ ,  $|\eta^*|$ , LVR  $G'$  i LVR  $\gamma$ ) oraz parametry barwy ( $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ , WI, YI i  $\Delta E$ ). Ponadto podano wartości wielkości efektu ( $\eta^2$ ) - miara ta określa jaka część całkowitej wariancji była wyjaśniana przez dany czynnik lub interakcję czynników. Następnie przeprowadzono analizę składowych głównych (PCA) i analizę skupień (HCA), na podstawie których wybrano najkorzystniejszą wartość pH oraz dodatku NaCl do dalszego etapu badań [P3].

Jednoczesna modyfikacja wartości pH jak i stężenia NaCl ( $\eta^2_{(pH \cdot NaCl)} = 0,989$ ) istotnie wpływała na stabilność fizyczną analizowanych hydrożeli (Rysunek 16A). Najwyższą stabilnością fizyczną charakteryzował się hydrożel otrzymany przy pH 7 bez dodatku soli. Obniżenie pH do 4,5 spowodowało zmniejszenie stabilności hydrożelu. Jednak dalsze obniżenie pH do 3 skutkowało ponownym wzrostem stabilności. Stwierdzono także, że wpływ siły jonowej, regulowanej poprzez dodatek NaCl, na stabilność hydrożeli był zależny od pH. Zaobserwowano obniżenie stabilności hydrożelu indukowanego przy pH 7 po dodaniu NaCl, natomiast w przypadku hydrożeli otrzymanych przy niższych wartościach pH (4,5 i 3) stwierdzono stabilizujące działanie NaCl, szczególnie przy najwyższym badanym stężeniu NaCl (0,3 M). Lei i in. [2022] dokonali podobnej obserwacji w przypadku hydrożeli otrzymanych z białka orzecha włoskiego i κ-karagenu, gdzie dodatek jonów  $Na^+$  istotnie poprawił siłę wiązań między biopolimerami, co skutkowało powstaniem znacznie bardziej jednolitej i ściśle związanej struktury żelu o zwiększonej zdolności zatrzymywania wody. Chen i in. [2017b] doszli do wniosku, że zwiększenie siły jonowej ma podobny wpływ na agregację białek

sojowych co obniżenie pH układu. Ponadto zaobserwowali, że dodatek NaCl wpływał na zwiększenie siły oddziaływań między łańcuchami białkowymi, co skutkowało zwieszeniem wielkości i gęstości agregatów prowadząc do powstawania bardziej heterogenicznej mikrostruktury żelu.



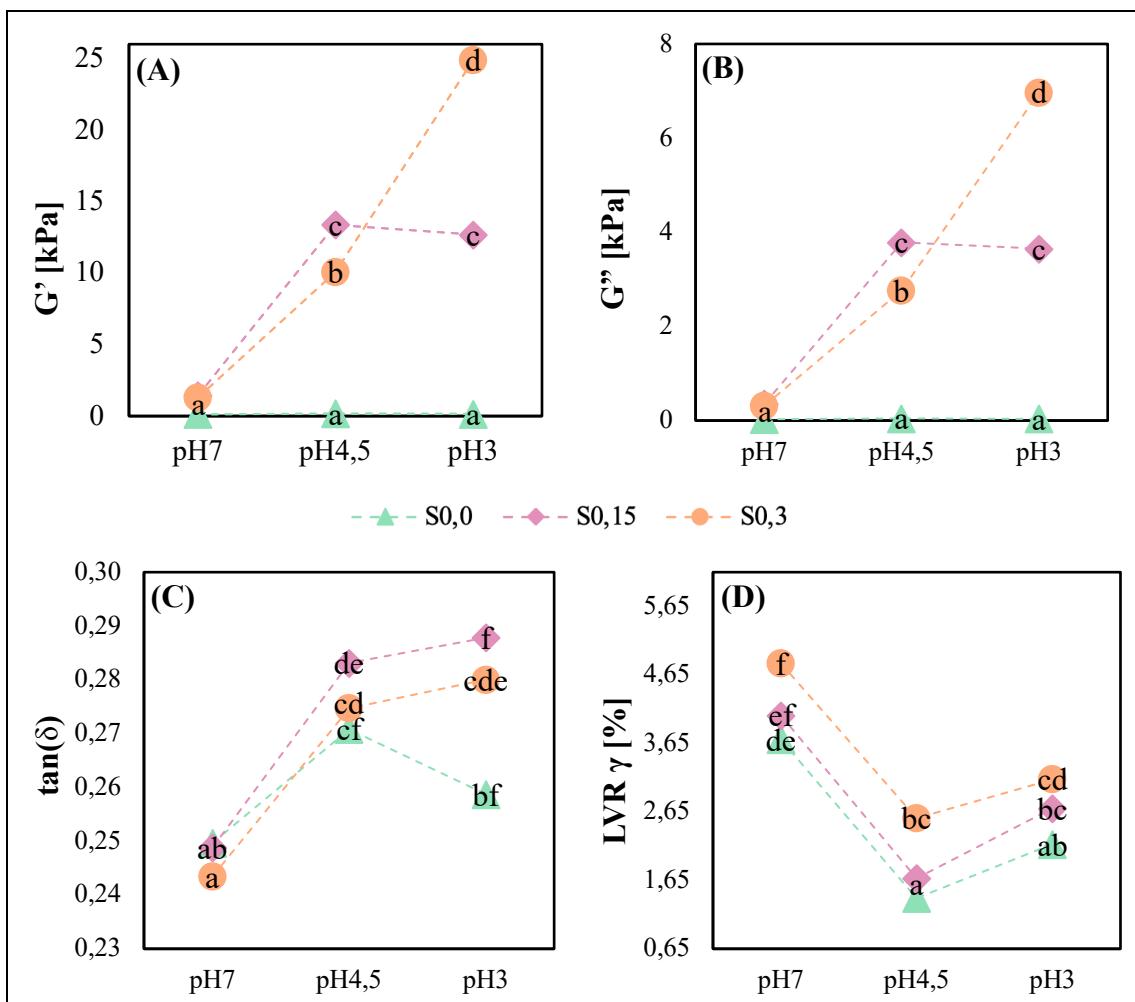
**Rysunek 16.** Wpływ pH i dodatku NaCl na stabilność fizyczną, parametry mikroreologiczne i tekstury otrzymanych hydrożeli [P3], gdzie a, b, c - wartości średnie oznaczone tymi samymi literami nie różnią się istotnie przy  $\alpha = 0,05$ . (A) indeks niestabilności; (B) współczynnik ciecz-ciało stałe SLB; (C) indeks elastyczności EI; (D) twardość.

Analizując wartości współczynnika ciecz–ciało stałe (SLB) (Rysunek 16B), indeksu elastyczności (EI) (Rysunek 16C) oraz twardości (Rysunek 16D) wykazano, że zarówno pH, jak i siła jonowa istotnie wpływały na właściwości mikroreologiczne i teksturalne uzyskanych hydrożeli. Stwierdzono, że dodatek NaCl miał silniejszy wpływ na zmienność SLB ( $\eta^2_{(NaCl)} = 0,838$ ) i twardości ( $\eta^2_{(NaCl)} = 0,974$ ), podczas gdy pH silniej wpływało na zmienność EI ( $\eta^2_{(pH)} = 0,959$ ). Obniżenie pH do 4,5 spowodowało, że hydrożel indukowany bez dodatku NaCl charakteryzował się przewagą właściwości typowych dla ciała stałego ( $SLB < 0,5$ ). Jednak dalsze obniżenie pH do 3 skutkowało

powrotem SLB do wartości początkowej. Ponadto dodatek NaCl zmodyfikował ten trend, prowadząc do wzrostu wartości SLB dla hydrożeli otrzymanych przy pH 4,5, przy czym maksymalna wartość SLB została osiągnięta przy stężeniu soli 0,15 M. Natomiast dla hydrożeli o pH 7 i 3 dodatek 0,3 M NaCl spowodował wyraźne zwiększenie modułu G', o czym świadczyła wartość SLB bliska 0,355.

Niska wartość współczynnika SLB świadczy o utworzeniu się mocnej struktury żelowej [Gagliardi i in. 2020]. Hydrożele indukowane przy pH 3 i dodatku soli (0,3 M) wykazywały najwyższe wartości obu parametrów. Poprawa parametrów mikroreologicznych (SLB i EI) oraz teksturalnych (twardość) w przypadku hydrożeli indukowanych przy pH 3 wraz z dodatkiem NaCl na poziomie 0,3 M mogła być wynikiem wzmacnienia oddziaływań elektrostatycznych pomiędzy biopolimerami [Dahal, Schmit 2018]. Przy pH 3 (poniżej punktu izoelektrycznego białka) zmniejszył się ładunek ujemny na łańcuchach białkowych, co z kolei spowodowało zmniejszenie odpychania elektrostatycznego i zwiększenie przyciągania między nimi a ujemnie naładowanymi grupami polisacharydowymi babki plesznik. Sprzyjało to tworzeniu silniejszych oddziaływań między składowymi, co z kolei spowodowało powstanie bardziej zwartej i stabilnej sieci żelowej. Dodatek NaCl w stężeniu 0,3 M zwiększył siłę jonową roztworu, co doprowadziło do ekranowania ładunków powierzchniowych biopolimerów. Ponadto, jony sodu mogły działać jako mostki jonowe między ujemnie naładowanymi grupami karboksylowymi babki plesznik a ujemnymi lub neutralnymi fragmentami białka grochu. To dodatkowo mogło wpłynąć na wzmacnienie sieciowania między ich łańcuchami poprzez tworzenie wiązań jonowych i redukcji odpychania elektrostatycznego [Wang i in. 2018].

Ponieważ hydrożele są układami lepkosprężystymi, analiza ich właściwości reologicznych w warunkach dynamicznego ścinania dostarcza informacji na temat ich natury i zachowania pod wpływem niewielkich odkształceń, które są skorelowane z stopniem usieciowania i heterogenicznością sieci biopolimerowych [Moelants i in. 2014; Chen i in. 2017a]. W celu przeprowadzenia analizy użyto reometru oscylacyjnego Haake Mars 40. Na podstawie wyników przemiatania częstotliwością (Rysunek 17A, B i C) stwierdzono, że wszystkie uzyskane hydrożele wykazały właściwości lepkosprężyste charakterystyczne dla słabych układów żelowych, takich jak ketchup, jogurt, budyń [Kasapis, Bannikova 2017].



**Rysunek 17.** Wpływ pH i dodatku NaCl na parametry reologiczne otrzymanych hydrożeli [P3], gdzie a, b, c - wartości średnie oznaczone tymi samymi literami nie różnią się istotnie przy  $\alpha = 0,05$ . (A) Moduł zachowawczy  $G'$ , (B) moduł stratności  $G''$ , oraz (C) Tangens kąta przesunięcia fazowego  $\tan(\delta)$  uzyskane w teście przemiatania częstotliwością przy amplitudzie odkształcania 1%; (D) Długość liniowego zakresu lepkosprężystego (LVR) reprezentowana przez wartość odkształcenia  $\gamma$  (%) uzyskana w teście przemiatania odkształceniem przy częstotliwości 1 Hz.

Hydrożele modyfikowane dodatkiem NaCl wykazywały zwiększoną wytrzymałość na odkształcenia w porównaniu do hydrożeli referencyjnych (bez dodatku NaCl), niezależnie od wartości pH. Obserwowana poprawa właściwości mechanicznych sugerowała utworzenie bardziej usięciowanej struktury żelowej, co mogło wynikać z wzmożonych oddziaływań elektrostatycznych pomiędzy biopolimerami w obecności NaCl. Próbki indukowane z dodatkiem 0,15 M NaCl wykazały wzrost wartości obu modułów  $G'$  ( $\eta^2_{(NaCl)} = 0,984$ ) i  $G''$  ( $\eta^2_{(NaCl)} = 0,983$ ). Wzrost ten obserwowano wraz z obniżeniem pH z 7 do 4,5 (Rysunek 17A i B). Natomiast w przypadku indukcji hydrożelu z dodatkiem 0,3 M NaCl, zmiana pH z 7 do 3 istotnie zwiększyła wartości  $G'$  i  $G''$ , osiągając maksymalne wartości przy pH 3. Dodatkowo, przy pH 3, wraz ze zwiększeniem stężenia NaCl z 0 do 0,15 M odnotowano średni wzrost wartości modułów  $G'$  i  $G''$  o około 95 razy, a w przypadku zwiększenia stężenia NaCl z 0 do 0,3 M wzrost

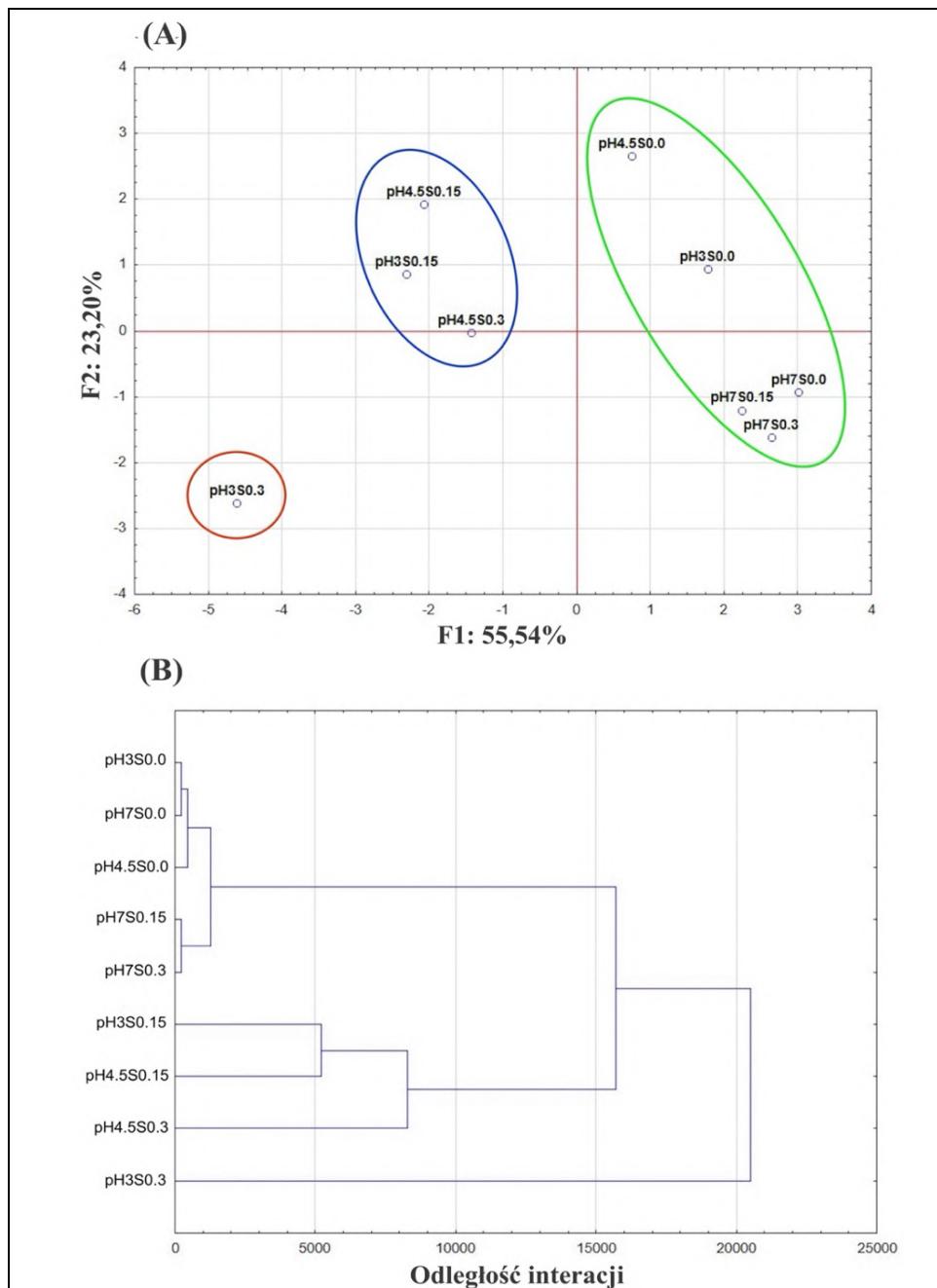
ten osiągnął nawet 170 razy. Tanger i in. [2022], w swoich badaniach nad wpływem pH i siły jonowej na właściwości żelujące białek grochu, zauważyli, że dodatek soli przy pH 3 prowadził do powstania silniejszej struktury żelu, co było spowodowane zwiększeniem interakcji pomiędzy agregatami.

Tangens kąta przesunięcia fazowego  $\tan(\delta)$  charakteryzuje stopień lepkosprzęzistości badanego układu i jest definiowany jako stosunek  $G''$  do  $G'$  (Rysunek 17C). Gdy analizowane układy wykazują właściwości elastyczne charakterystyczne dla ciała stałego, wartość  $\tan(\delta)$  jest mniejsza niż 1. Natomiast w przypadku układów, w których dominują właściwości lepkie typowe dla cieczy, wartość  $\tan(\delta)$  równa się lub jest większa od 1 [Fan i in. 2022]. Na podstawie wyników analizy statystycznej stwierdzono, że pH było najistotniejszym czynnikiem wpływającym ( $\eta^2_{(pH)} = 0,936$ ) na wartość  $\tan(\delta)$  uzyskanych hydrożeli. Zaobserwowano, że wszystkie warianty hydrożeli wykazały wartość  $\tan(\delta)$  niższą niż 1 (w zakresie od 0,24 do 0,29) przy 1 Hz, co oznaczało, że otrzymane próbki w stanie spoczynku wykazywały właściwości lepkosprzęziste zbliżone do ciał stałych, ale można je łatwo było rozsmarować [Kasapis, Bannikova 2017].

Długość liniowego zakresu lepkosprzęzystego (LVR), reprezentowana przez wartość odkształcenia  $\gamma$  (%), świadczyło o stabilności strukturalnej analizowanych układów (Rysunek 17D). Zaobserwowano, że wraz z obniżeniem pH do 4,5 długość LVR uległa skróceniu, natomiast po osiągnięciu pH 3 długość ta ponownie wzrosła ( $\eta^2_{(pH)} = 0,939$ ). Ten trend zaobserwowano we wszystkich badanych hydrożelach, niezależnie od dodatku NaCl. Jednak dodatek soli (przy pH 7 i 3) istotnie zwiększył wartość  $\gamma$ , co prawdopodobnie było wynikiem powstania bardziej wytrzymałej sieci żelowej [Tanger i in 2022].

W celu efektywnego podsumowania danych zgromadzonych w badaniu uzyskane wyniki poddano analizie składowych głównych (PCA) oraz hierarchicznej analizie skupień (HCA) (Rysunek 18). Analizę PCA przeprowadzono z wykorzystaniem 12 aktywnych zmiennych. Zidentyfikowano dwie główne składowe (Rysunek 18A): składowa 1 (F1) wyjaśniała 55,54% zmienności, a składowa 2 (F2) – 23,20% zmienności. Składowa 1 była ujemnie skorelowana z  $G'$  ( $r = -0,95$ ),  $G''$  ( $r = -0,96$ ),  $|\eta^*|$  ( $r = -0,95$ ). Składowa 2 była dodatnio skorelowana z indeksem niestabilności ( $r = 0,64$ ) oraz ujemnie skorelowana z  $\gamma$  ( $r = -0,80$ ). W związku z tym, składową 1 (F1) zinterpretowano jako

warunki indukcji sprzyjające uzyskaniu hydrożeli o wysokiej elastyczności, natomiast składową 2 (F2) – jako warunki prowadzące do uzyskania hydrożeli o wysokiej stabilności strukturalnej.



**Rysunek 18.** Analiza składowych głównych PCA (A) oraz hierarchiczna analiza skupień HCA (B) uzyskanych hydrożeli [P3].

Na podstawie rozmieszczenia hydrożeli w przestrzeni głównych składowych (Rysunek 18A) oraz wyników analizy odległości interakcji (Rysunek 18B) stwierdzono, że największa grupa (zielona) reprezentowała hydrożele o niskich wartościach G' i G'', które zostały indukowane przy pH 7, 4,5 oraz 3 (bez dodatku NaCl), jak również przy pH 7 (z dodatkiem 0,15 i 0,3 M NaCl). Dodatkowo, przy pH 4,5 i 3 (górną część grupy)

uzyskano hydrożele o niższej stabilności strukturalnej. Druga grupa (niebieska) zawierała hydrożele uzyskane przy pH 4,5 (z dodatkiem 0,15 i 0,3 M NaCl) oraz przy pH 3 (z dodatkiem 0,15 M NaCl), które charakteryzowały się wysokimi wartościami modułów G' i G'', lecz stosunkowo niską stabilnością strukturalną. Jedynie hydrożel pH3S0.3 wykazywał największą odmienność w porównaniu z innymi hydrożelami (największa odległość interakcji, Rysunek 18B). W związku z tym stwierdzono, że indukcja przy tych parametrach (pH 3 i z dodatkiem 0,3 M NaCl) prowadzi do uzyskania układu o najbardziej elastycznych właściwościach oraz wysokiej stabilności strukturalnej.

Na podstawie wyników przedstawionych w publikacjach **[P2, P3 i P4]** potwierdzono hipotezę H2. Wykazano, że synergiczne działanie białka grochu i babki plesznik umożliwia otrzymywanie binarnych hydrożeli o korzystnych właściwościach fizycznych, w tym przy zmniejszonym stężeniu biopolimerów potrzebnych dotworzenia struktury żelu. Jednocześnie należy podkreślić, że modyfikacja wartości pH i dodatku NaCl skutkowała powstaniem hydrożeli o zróżnicowanych właściwościach fizycznych. Hydrożele te sklasyfikowano jako słabe żele o podobnych właściwościach do produktów takich jak ketchup, jogurt czy budyń. Indukcja przy niższym poziomie pH (szczególnie pH 3 i 4,5) i bez dodatku NaCl prowadziła do istotnych zmian barwy układu i tworzenia się słabych, smarownych hydrożeli. Dodanie NaCl (0,15 i 0,3 M) przy tych samych wartościach pH (pH 3 i 4,5) poprawiło stabilność strukturalną i moduły G' i G'' hydrożeli. Zastosowanie niższego pH ( $3 < IP$ ) i wysokiego stężenia NaCl (0,3 M) skutkowało wzmacnieniem oddziaływań elektrostatycznych między białkiem grochu i babką plesznik. Efektem było powstanie hydrożelu o korzystniejszych właściwościach elastycznych oraz wysokiej stabilności strukturalnej. Dodatkowo wykazano, że podczas indukcji wpływ NaCl na właściwości hydrożeli uzależniony był od pH układu.

#### **5.4. Wpływ metody indukcji na właściwości fizykochemiczne modelowego układu otrzymanego na bazie hydrożelu z białka grochu i babki plesznik, zawierającego ekstrakt z owoców czarnego bzu**

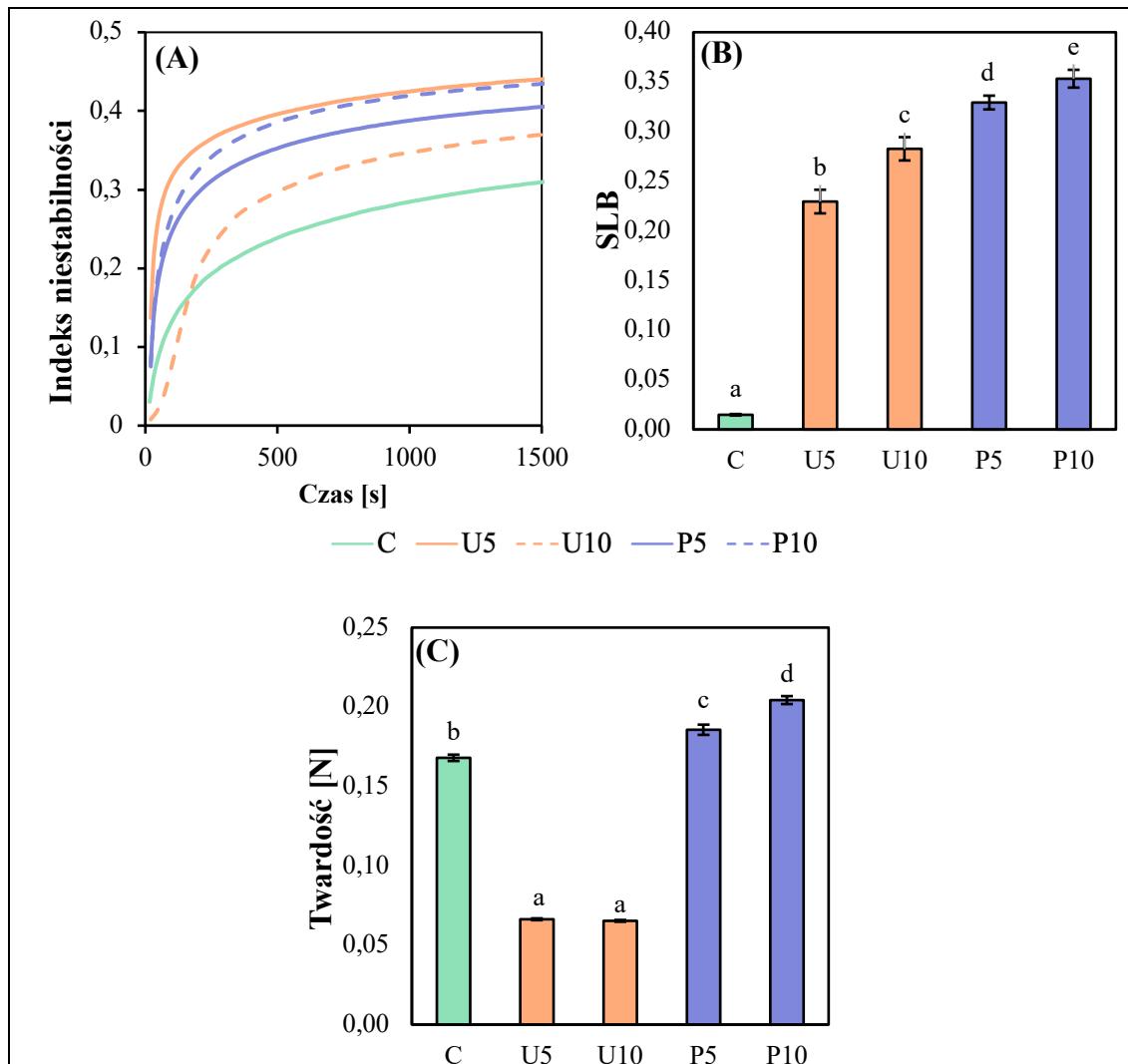
[P4] Hilal, A.\*; Florowska, A.; Florowski, T.; Rybak, K.; Domian, E.; Szymański, M.; Wroniak, M.: 2024. Effects of Sequential Induction Combining Thermal Treatment with Ultrasound or High Hydrostatic Pressure on the Physicochemical and Mechanical Properties of Pea Protein-Psyllium Hydrogels as Elderberry Extract Carriers. International Journal of Molecular Sciences, 25(16), 9033. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijms25169033>

Przydatność technologiczna hydrożeli uzyskanych z białka grochu i babki plesznik w przemyśle spożywczym jest ściśle zależna od ich właściwości, które determinowane są między innymi metodą ich indukcji. Hydrożele otrzymane przy pH 3 i stężeniu NaCl wynoszącym 0,3 M mogą stanowić obiecujące matryce do stworzenia układów do dostarczania bioaktywnych związków stabilnych w niskim pH, takich jak antocyjany. W poprzednich etapach badań hydrożele były otrzymywane z zastosowaniem tradycyjnej metody indukcji termicznej, która może prowadzić do degradacji dodanych labilnych związków bioaktywnych. Aby uniknąć tego ograniczenia, zastosowano nowatorską sekwencyjną technikę otrzymywania hydrożeli, łączącą dwie metody indukcji. W pierwszym kroku wykorzystano indukcję termiczną (indukcja pierwotna) w celu zainicjowania agregacji białek grochu. Po schłodzeniu układu, doprowadzono pH do wartości 3 i dodano 0,3 M NaCl, babkę plesznik oraz ekstrakt z owoców czarnego bzu (EFE). Następnie układ poddano kolejnej indukcji (indukcja wtórnna), z wykorzystaniem nietermicznych metod, takich jak: homogenizacja ultradźwiękowa (USH) lub wysokie ciśnienie hydrostatyczne (HHP).

W celu określenia wpływu metody indukcji na właściwości fizykochemiczne uzyskanych układów modelowych zbadano: stabilność fizyczną i kinetykę destabilizacji, parametry mikroreologiczne (SLB i EI), parametry tekstury (twardość, adhezja, smarowność), parametry barwy ( $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ ,  $C^*$ ,  $h$  i  $\Delta E$ ), zdolność wiązania ekstraktu EE, widma FT-IR, mikrostrukturę (SEM), całkowitą zawartość polifenoli TPC, aktywność przeciwtleniającą (ABTS, DPPH i RP) oraz stabilność termiczną (zmiana masy oraz pochodna ubytku masy w funkcji temperatury) [P4].

Na podstawie przeprowadzonych badań zaobserwowano, że obie indukcje wtórne z użyciem homogenizacji ultradźwiękowej (USH) i wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych

(HHP) istotnie wpłyneły na współczynnik ciecz-ciało stałe (SLB), kinetykę destabilizacji oraz twardość (Rysunek 19).



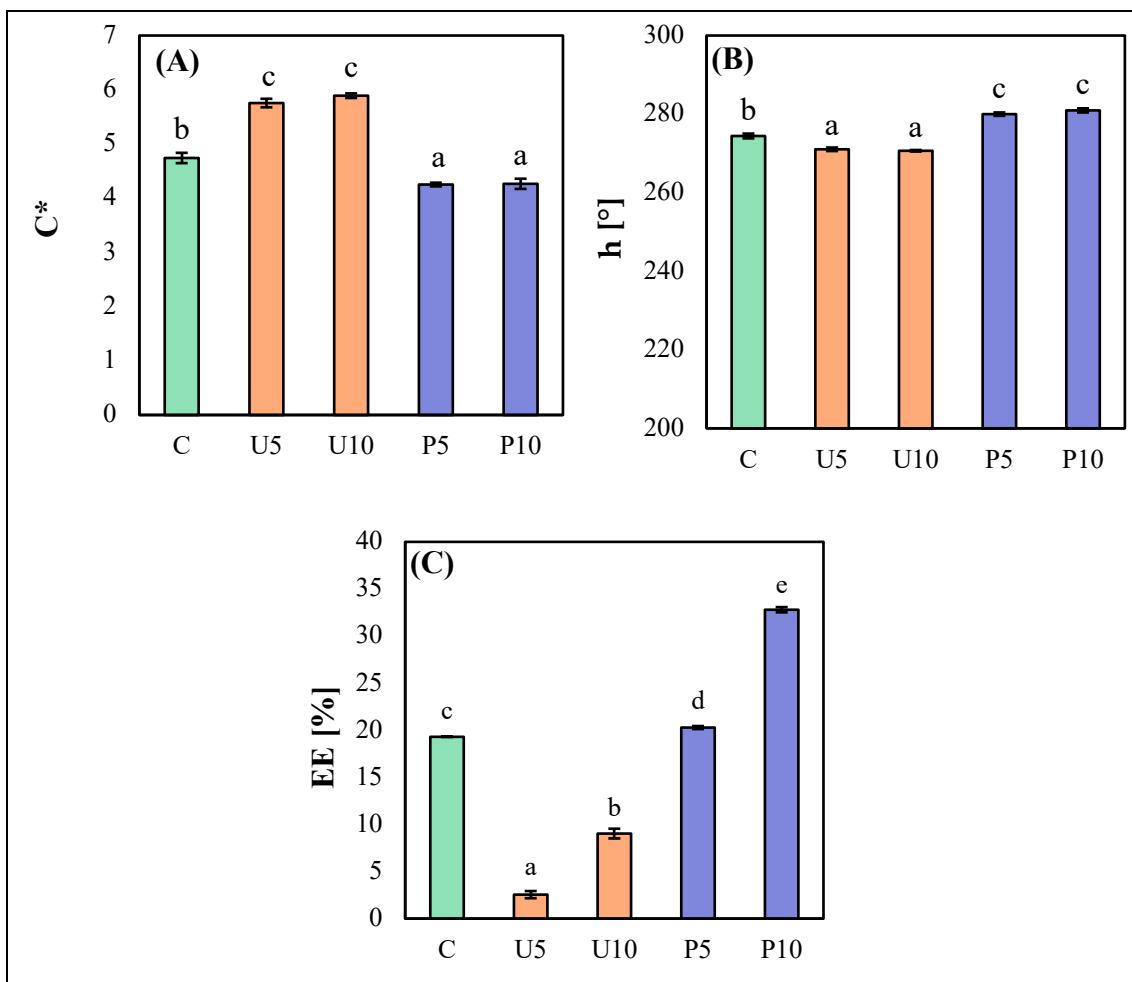
**Rysunek 19.** Wpływ metody indukcji na: **(A)** SLB, **(B)** kinetykę destabilizacji, oraz **(C)** twardość uzyskanych hydrożeli [P4], gdzie a, b, c - wartości średnie oznaczone tymi samymi literami nie różnią się istotnie przy  $\alpha = 0,05$ .

Analizując kinetykę destabilizacji (Rysunek 19A), stwierdzono, że układ kontrolny (C) wykazywał najwyższą stabilność. Zastosowanie homogenizacji ultradźwiękowej (USH) oraz wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych (HHP) spowodowało obniżenie stabilności. Wtórne indukcje mogły destabilizującą wpływającą na termodynamiczną stabilność białek, przyspieszając proces denaturacji. Biorąc pod uwagę kluczową rolę aktywnych wypełniaczy, którymi są białka w natywnej konformacji, w zapewnieniu stabilności struktury hydrożelu, zastosowanie wtórnej indukcji mogło prowadzić do całkowitej denaturacji białek, co w konsekwencji osłabiło strukturę układu [Khalesi i in. 2020].

Wydłużenie czasu trwania indukcji z użyciem zarówno homogenizacji ultradźwiękowej (USH), jak i wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych (HHP) zwiększyło wartości współczynnika SLB (Rysunek 19B). Niemniej jednak, wartości te pozostawały poniżej 0,5, co oznaczało, że badane układy charakteryzowały się dominującymi właściwościami ciała stałego. Hydrożele otrzymane z użyciem HHP (P10) charakteryzowały się najwyższymi wartościami SLB.

Analizując wyniki twardości (Rysunek 19C) stwierdzono natomiast, że hydrożele otrzymane poprzez USH charakteryzowały się niższymi wartościami tego parametru, co było prawdopodobnie spowodowane występowaniem sił kawitacyjnych podczas procesu agregacji, które osłabiły powstałe agregaty podczas indukcji termicznej, co z kolei wpłynęło na osłabienie struktury żelowej [Inthavong i in. 2019; Su, Cavaco-Paulo 2021]. Natomiast hydrożele otrzymane z użyciem HHP wyróżniały się najwyższymi wartościami twardości – hydrożel P10 był 2,8 razy twardszy niż U5 i U10. Wysoka wartość parametru twardości wskazywała, że HHP prawdopodobnie spowodowało kompresję utworzonej struktury żelowej, jednocześnie prowadząc do utworzenia heterogenicznego układu. Mogło to prowadzić do zapadania się struktury oraz powstania obszarów zapełnionych fazą wodną, co jest potwierdzone przez wysoką wartość SLB [Luo i in. 2021].

Otrzymane w tym etapie hydrożele z wprowadzonymi do układu antocyjanami z czarnego bzu charakteryzowały się ciemną, bordową barwą ( $L = 3,63$ ;  $a = 4,72$ ;  $b = -0,37$ ) wynikającą z dodanego ekstraktu. Analizując wpływ metody indukcji na charakterystykę badanych hydrożeli, stwierdzono istotne różnice w parametrach barwy hydrożeli indukowanych wysoką temperaturą i homogenizacją ultradźwiękową (USH) przez 5 i 10 minut (U5 i U10) oraz wysoką temperaturą i wysokimi ciśnieniami hydrostatycznymi (HHP) przez 5 i 10 minut (P5 i P10) (Rysunek 20A i B). Zastosowanie USN jako indukcji wtórnej istotnie zwiększyło nasycenie barwy ( $C^*$ ) badanych układów, natomiast w przypadku HHP nasycenie barwy istotnie obniżyło się. W przypadku odcienia barwy ( $h$ ) zaobserwowano odwrotną tendencję – USH spowodowała obniżenie wartości tego parametru, podczas gdy HHP istotnie zwiększyło jego wartość. Zmiany nasycenia i odcienia barwy mogły wynikać z wpływu powstałej struktury hydrożelowej na rozmieszczenie ekstraktu wewnątrz matrycy. Zmiana charakteru oddziaływań pomiędzy barwnikiem a matrycą żelową mogła prowadzić do zmian w spektralnych właściwościach absorpcji światła [Montes i in. 2005].



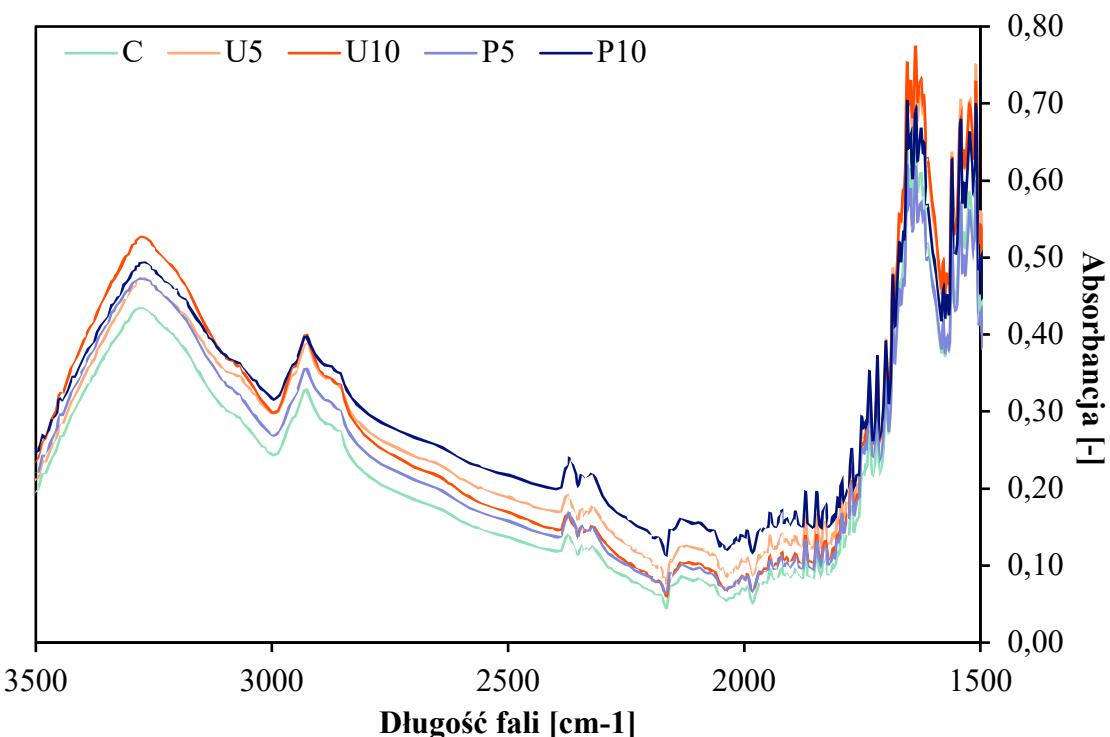
**Rysunek 20.** Wpływ metody indukcji na: (A) nasycenie barwy  $C^*$ , (B) odcień barwy  $h$ , (C) zdolność wiązania ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu [P4], gdzie a, b, c - wartości średnie oznaczone tymi samymi literami nie różnią się istotnie przy  $\alpha = 0,05$ .

W przypadku wydajności wiązania ekstraktu (EE, Rysunek 20C), odnotowano, że indukcja wtórna z użyciem USH istotnie obniżyła wartość EE ( $EE_{U5} = 3\%$ ;  $EE_{U10} = 9\%$ ) w porównaniu do próby kontrolnej ( $EE_C = 19\%$ ). Mogło to być spowodowane zjawiskiem kawitacji, które ograniczyło proces agregacji cząsteczek, prowadząc do utworzenia mniej wytrzymałej sieci polimerowej. W konsekwencji taka struktura nie była w stanie efektywnie wiązać cząsteczek ekstraktu. Zwiększenie wydajności wiązania w przypadku zastosowania dłuższej, dziesięciominutowej obróbki USH prawdopodobnie było spowodowane efektem rozrzedzenia układu, co doprowadziło do równomiernego rozproszenia agregatów białkowo-polisacharydowych poprawiając jednorodność struktury żelu. Lepsza jednorodność mogła zwiększyć zdolność wiązania ekstraktu, zapewniając bardziej spójną sieć, co tłumaczyło wyższą wartość EE w porównaniu do krótszego czasu działania USH (5 minut) [Cai i in. 2022; Yuxuan i in. 2024]. Natomiast użycie HHP do indukcji wtórnej spowodowało istotny, w porównaniu z hydrożelem kontrolnym C, wzrost wydajności wiązania ekstrakt ( $EE_{P5} = 20\%$ ,  $EE_{P10} = 33\%$ ).

Zastosowanie HHP najprawdopodobniej prowadziło do fizycznej kompresji struktury żelowej, co pozwoliło na zwiększenie ilości ekstraktu zamkniętego wewnątrz matrycy. Podobne tendencje zaobserwowali Mao i in. [2024], badając wpływ wysokiego ciśnienia hydrostatycznego na hydrożele otrzymane z białka sojowego jako nośników ryboflawiny. Zhang i in. [2024] w swoich badaniach nad wpływem HHP na właściwości alginianowych hydrożeli jako nośników antocyjanów odnotowali, że HHP sprzyja pęcznieniu sieci żelowej, co z kolei poprawia zdolność wiązania ekstraktu wewnątrz matrycy hydrożelowej.

Zaobserwowane różnice w wydajności wiązania ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu (EE, Rysunek 20C) pomiędzy hydrożelami otrzymanymi za pomocą dwóch metod indukcji wtórnej: USH oraz HHP, tłumaczyły zmiany w nasyceniu ( $C^*$ ) i odcieniu (h) barwy (Rysunek 20A i B). Indukcja wtórnna z zastosowaniem HHP doprowadziła do kompresji matrycy hydrożelowej, tworząc gęstą sieć biopolimerową zdolną do skutecznego wiązania ekstraktu. Prowadziło to do obniżenia wartości  $C^*$  oraz podwyższenia wartości h poprzez równomierne zamknięcie ekstraktu wewnątrz struktury żelowej. Natomiast zastosowanie USH doprowadziło do powstania słabszej struktury hydrożelu o mniejszej zdolności wiązania ekstraktu, co skutkowało jego obecnością na powierzchni hydrożelu, zwiększając wartości  $C^*$  i obniżając wartość h.

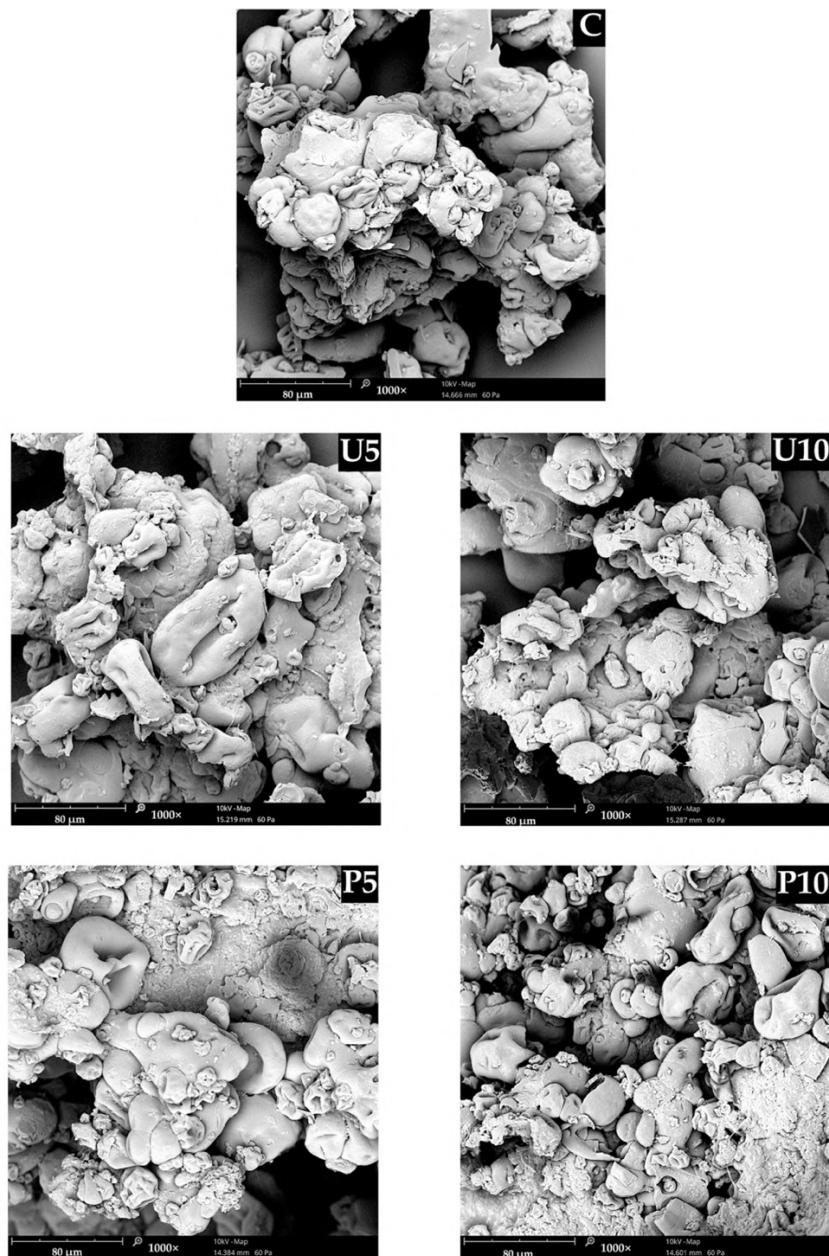
Na podstawie analizy widm FT-IR (Rysunek 21) stwierdzono, że indukcja termiczna połączona z homogenizacją ultradźwiękową (U5 i U10) i wysokimi ciśnieniami hydrostatycznymi (P5 i P10) powodowała minimalne zmiany w składzie chemicznym matrycy hydrożelowej. Przebieg widm dla próbki kontrolnej i próbek poddanych wtórnej indukcji był podobny.



**Rysunek 21.** Widma FT-IR w zakresie 1500–3500 cm<sup>-1</sup> dla układu kontrolnego (C), układów otrzymanych za pośrednictwem wtórnej indukcji USH przez 5 i 10 minut (U5 i U10) oraz układów otrzymanych za pośrednictwem wtórnej indukcji HHP przez 5 i 10 minut (P5 i P10) [P4].

Zaobserwowano wzrost intensywności pasm w obszarze długości fali 3260 cm<sup>-1</sup>, odpowiadających wibracjom grup O–H lub N–H, oraz w obszarze 1640 cm<sup>-1</sup>, odpowiadających wibracjom amidu I. Hydrożel U10 charakteryzował się najintensywniejszymi pasmami w tych obszarach, co mogło świadczyć o wpływie wtórnej indukcji na zwiększenie stężenia grup hydroksylowych lub aminowych w wyniku degradacji lub rozcięcia łańcuchów biopolimerowych [Liu i in. 2020b]. Dodatkowo zaobserwowano zwiększenie intensywności pasma w obszarze 2920 cm<sup>-1</sup>, odpowiadającego wibracjom grup C–H alkilowych, co prawdopodobnie świadczyło o tym, że obie indukcie wtórne trwające 10 minut (U10 i P10) zwiększyły dostępność grup alkilowych obecnych w łańcuchach bocznych aminokwasów i łańcuchu polisacharydowym [Asaithambi i in. 2022]. Badania nad wpływem obróbki HHP na układ składający się z białka sojowego,  $\beta$ -glukanu i kwasu ferulowego wykazały, że obróbka ta wpływa na zwiększenie liczby wiązań wodorowych oraz interakcji hydrofobowych. Było to spowodowane zwiększeniem ilości struktur  $\beta$ -harmonijkowych białka, czego skutkiem było powstanie bardziej zwartej i uporządkowanej struktury [Jin i in. 2020].

Na podstawie analizy mikrostruktury (Rysunek 22) stwierdzono, że obie indukcje wtórne USH i HHP wpływały na mikrostrukturę uzyskanych układów hydrożelowych. Zauważono również, że czas trwania obróbki oddziaływał na otrzymaną strukturę.



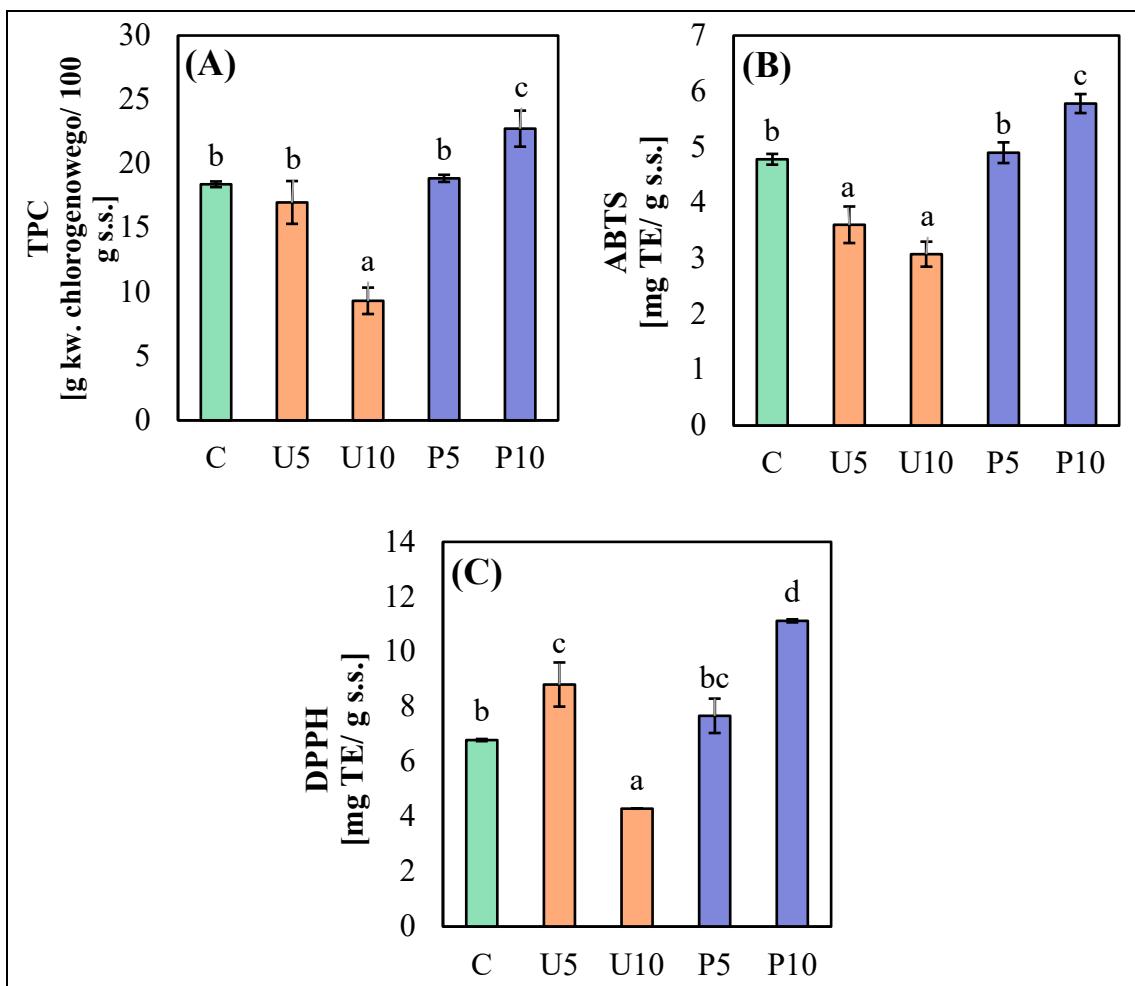
Rysunek 22. Mikrofotografie SEM układów hydrożelowych w powiększeniu 1000× [P4].

Zaobserwowano, że mikrostruktura próbki U5 charakteryzowała się widocznymi agregatami o różnych wielkościach i kształtach. Natomiast dłuższa indukcja USH doprowadziła do zmniejszenia różnorodności w wielkości i rozmieszczeniu agregatów, co prawdopodobnie było wynikiem zwiększonej kawitacji generowanej przez fale ultradźwiękowe [Yue i in. 2022]. Z kolei mikrostruktura układów uzyskanych w wyniku indukcji HHP charakteryzowała się bardziej żartą strukturą w porównaniu do próbek

indukowanych ultradźwiękami oraz żelu kontrolnego. Spośród wszystkich analizowanych próbek, układ P10 charakteryzował się najbardziej rozwiniętą powierzchnią, z najmniejszą ilością pustych przestrzeni między agregatami, co mogło tłumaczyć najwyższą zdolność wiązania ekstraktu (EE, Rysunek 20C).

Zastosowanie indukcji wtórnej HHP wzmacniło proces agregacji, prowadząc do powstania zwartej i spójnej sieci, która była w stanie fizycznie zamknąć fazę wodną zawierającą ekstrakt. Ponadto zwiększała się liczba miejsc wiążących między białkiem grochu, babką płesznicą a antocyjanami obecnymi w ekstrakcie [Florowska i in. 2021; Peyrano i in. 2021]. Z kolei, gęstsza i bardziej splatana sieć hydrożelowa mogła zwiększyć retencję fazy wodnej zawierającej ekstrakt, jednocześnie minimalizując jego dyfuzję poza strukturę, czego efektem była zwiększoną zdolność wiązania ekstraktu [Yuan i in. 2018; Yang i in. 2021b; Liu i in. 2022].

Na rysunku 23 przedstawiono wpływ indukcji wtórnych USH (U5 i U10) oraz HHP (P5 i P10) na zawartość polifenoli ogółem (TPC) w układach (Rysunek 22A) oraz na ich aktywność przeciwitleniającą wobec rodnika ABTS (Rysunek 22B) i DPPH (Rysunek 22C). W przypadku układów otrzymanych poprzez indukcję wtórną USH i HHP trwającą 5 minut (U5 i P5) nie zaobserwowano istotnych różnic w zawartości polifenoli w porównaniu do próbki kontrolnej ( $TPC_C = 18,4 \text{ g kwasu chlorogenowego/} 100 \text{ g s.s.}$ ). Jednak wydłużenie czasu indukcji do 10 minut przyniosło inne efekty. W przypadku próbki U10 wartość TPC obniżyła się, natomiast dla P10 wartość TPC wzrosła. Dziesięciominutowa indukcja wtórna HHP (P10), w porównaniu z układem kontrolnym (C) ( $EE = 19\%$ ), poprawiła retencję polifenoli ( $TPC_{P10} = 22,7 \text{ g kwasu chlorogenowego/} 100 \text{ g s.s.}$ ), chroniąc je przed degradacją, co koreluje z wysoką wydajnością wiązania ekstraktu ( $EE_{P10} = 33\%$ , Rysunek 20C). Dzięki indukcji HHP uzyskano bardziej efektywne wiązanie ekstraktu, co wskazuje na lepszą ochronę polifenoli przed degradacją. Natomiast, zastosowanie indukcji USH przez 10 minut doprowadziło do obniżenia wartości TPC ( $9,31 \text{ g kwasu chlorogenowego/} 100 \text{ g s.s.}$ ). Było to prawdopodobnie spowodowane degradacją polifenoli, która zaszła w wyniku powstawania stref wysokich temperatur spowodowanych kawitacją [Jordens i in. 2016].

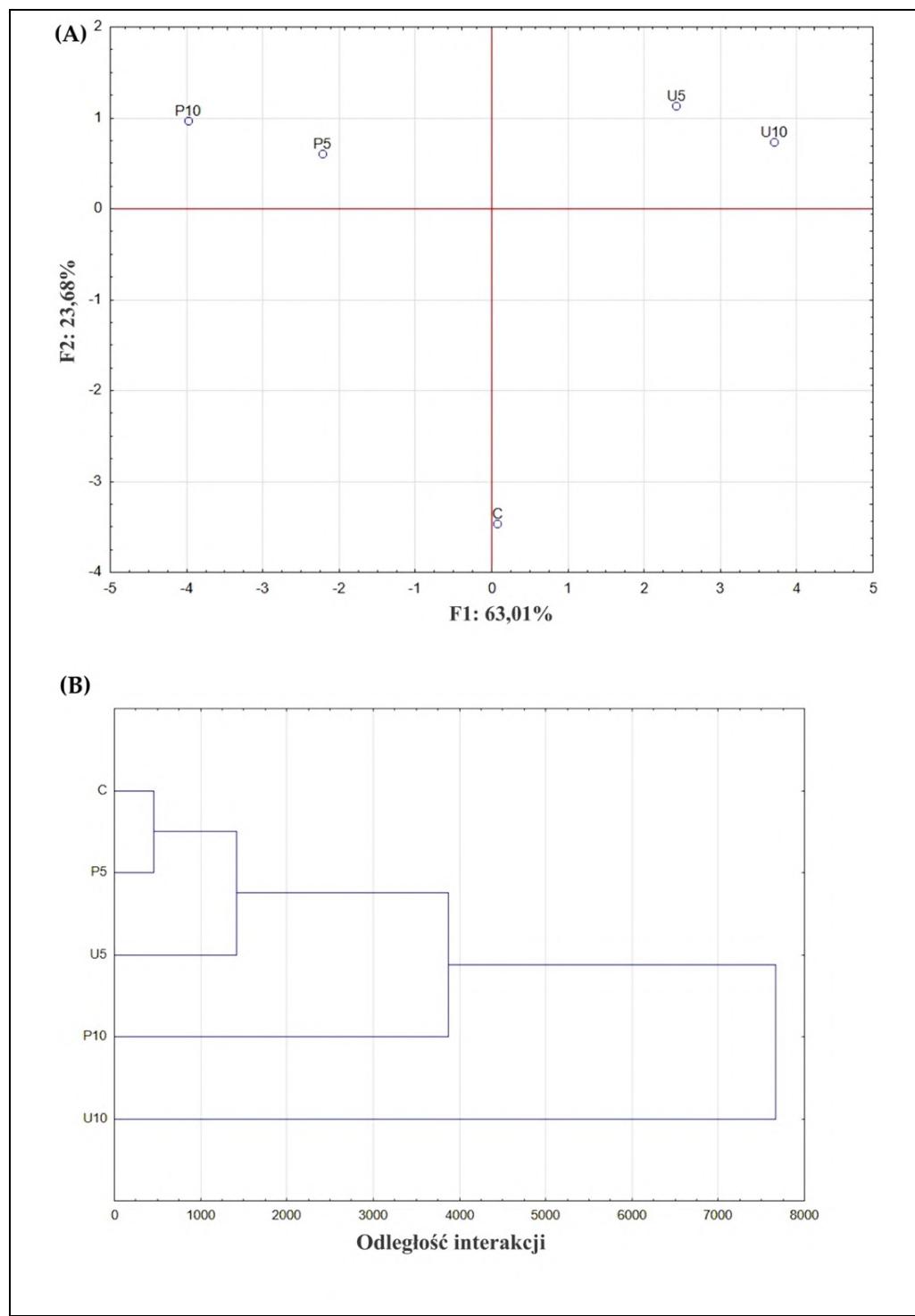


**Rysunek 23.** Wpływ metody indukcji na: (A) zawartość polifenoli ogółem TPC, (B) aktywność przeciwitleniająca oznaczona wobec rodnika ABTS oraz (C) aktywność przeciwitleniająca oznaczona wobec rodnika DPPH [P4], gdzie a, b, c - wartości średnie oznaczone tymi samymi literami nie różnią się istotnie przy  $\alpha = 0,05$ .

Na podstawie uzyskanych wyników stwierdzono również, że indukcja USH (5 i 10 minut), w porównaniu do układu kontrolnego ( $ABTS_C = 4,8 \text{ mg TE/ 100 g s.s.}$ ), istotnie obniżyła wartości aktywności przeciwitleniającej ( $ABTS_{U5} = 3,6 \text{ mg TE/ 100 g s.s.}$ ;  $ABTS_{U10} = 3,1 \text{ mg TE/ 100 g s.s.}$ ) (Rysunek 23B). Z kolei zaobserwowano, że wraz z przedłużeniem obróbki HHP aktywność przeciwitleniająca, oznaczona wobec rodnika ABTS, wzrosła ( $ABTS_{P10} = 5,8 \text{ mg TE/ 100 g s.s.}$ ). Analizując aktywność przeciwitleniającą oznaczoną wobec rodnika DPPH, odnotowano, że U5 miało lepszą zdolność neutralizacji tego rodnika niż układ kontrolny C ( $DPPH_C = 6,8 \text{ mg TE/ 100 g s.s.}$ ;  $DPPH_{U5} = 8,8 \text{ mg TE/ 100 g s.s.}$ ) (Rysunek 23C). Mogło to wynikać ze zwiększonej jednorodności matrycy, prowadzącej do równomiernego rozmieszczenia ekstraktu w strukturze żelowej. Dodatkowo zaobserwowano, że wydłużenie czasu indukcji USH do 10 minut (U10) obniżyło tę aktywność ( $DPPH_{U5} = 4,3 \text{ mg TE/ 100 g s.s.}$ ). Było to najprawdopodobniej spowodowane powstaniem słabej struktury żelowej, która nie była

w stanie skutecznie zamknąć ekstraktu, jak również degradacja spowodowana wysokimi temperaturami i utlenianiem wynikającym z efektu kawitacji powstającej przy zastosowaniu USH [Jordens i in. 2016; Wang i in. 2020a]. Natomiast wydłużenie czasu indukcji wysokimi ciśnieniami HHP do 10 minut (P10) spowodowało istotny wzrost aktywności przeciwitleniającej oznaczonej wobec rodnika DPPH ( $DPPH_{P10} = 1,08$  mg TE/ 100 g s.s.). Mogło to wynikać z powstania bardziej zwartej struktury żelu (Rysunek 22), która zamknęła większą ilość ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu (EFE), chroniąc go przed degradacją [D'Aniello i in. 2023]. Dodatkowo stwierdzono, że obróbka HHP prawdopodobnie spowodowała usunięcie pęcherzyków powietrza z układu, co mogło ograniczyć utlenianie zamkniętego w jego strukturze ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu [Florowska i in. 2021; Zhang i in. 2022b].

W celu efektywnego podsumowania zebranych wyników przeprowadzono analizę głównych składowych (PCA) oraz hierarchiczną analizę skupień (HCA) (Rysunek 24). Analizę PCA wykonano przy użyciu 16 aktywnych zmiennych. Zidentyfikowano dwie główne składowe (Rysunek 24A): składowa 1 (F1) wyjaśniała 63,01% wariancji, a składowa 2 (F2) wyjaśniała 23,68% wariancji. Składowa 1 była dodatnio skorelowana z nasyceniem barwy C\* ( $r = 0,96$ ) i ujemnie skorelowana z smarownością ( $r = -0,97$ ), twardością ( $r = -0,95$ ), wydajnością wiążania ekstraktu EE ( $r = -0,91$ ), zawartością polifenoli ogółem TPC ( $r = -0,88$ ) oraz aktywnością przeciwitleniającą oznaczoną wobec rodnika ABTS ( $r = -0,98$ ) i DPPH ( $r = -0,74$ ). Z kolei, składowa 2 była dodatnio skorelowana z współczynnikiem ciecz-ciało stałe SLB (SLB,  $r = 0,91$ ) oraz indeksem niestabilności ( $r = 0,91$ ) i ujemnie skorelowana z indeksem elastyczności EI ( $r = -0,89$ ) oraz adhezją ( $r = -0,86$ ). Biorąc pod uwagę te zależności, pierwszą główną składową zinterpretowano jako miarę metody indukcji, która wpływała na zamknięcie ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu wewnętrz struktury żelowej, a co za tym idzie, na ogólną aktywność przeciwitleniającą. Drugą składową zinterpretowano jako miarę metody indukcji, która przyczyniała się do ogólnej stabilności fizycznej utworzonej struktury hydrożelowej.



**Rysunek 24.** Analiza składowych głównych PCA (A) oraz hierarchiczna analiza skupień HCA (B) uzyskanych hydrożeli [P4].

Na podstawie rozmieszczenia próbek w przestrzeni głównych składowych (Rysunek 24A) oraz odległości interakcji (Rysunek 24B) stwierdzono, że indukcja wtórna z użyciem homogenizacji ultradźwiękowej (U5 i U10) lub wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych (P5 i P10), prowadziła do powstania układów hydrożelowych o istotnie różnych właściwościach fizykochemicznych. Użycie wtórnej indukcji ultradźwiękowej

USH spowodowało powstanie układów o niskiej stabilności fizycznej i elastyczności, co negatywnie wpłynęło na zdolność wiązania ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu oraz na końcową aktywność przeciwitleniającą. Dodatkowo, wydłużenie czasu indukcji do 10 minut (U10) prawdopodobnie spowodowało dalszą degradację polifenoli, co tłumaczyło największą odległość interakcji (Rysunek 24B).

Zastosowanie wtórnej indukcji wysokociśnieniowej HHP doprowadziło do powstania układów o zwartej strukturze żelowej, czego efektem była wysoka zdolność wiązania ekstraktu wewnętrz układow. Układy modelowe na bazie hydrożelu z białka grochu i babki plesznik, zawierające ekstrakt z owoców czarnego bzu otrzymane poprzez wtórną indukcję HHP wykazały wysoką aktywność przeciwitleniającą, przy czym dziesięciominutowa indukcja HHP pozwoliła osiągnąć najwyższą zawartość polifenoli ogółem w strukturze oraz najwyższą aktywność przeciwitleniającą.

Na podstawie wyniki badań przedstawionych w publikacjach **[P3 i P4]** potwierdzono hipotezy H3 i H4. Wykazano, że istnieje możliwość opracowania układu modelowego o właściwościach prozdrowotnych na bazie binarnego hydrożelu z białka grochu i babki plesznik, w którym hydrożel ten pełniłby funkcję zarówno składnika strukturotwórczego jak i nośnika substancji bioaktywnych. Ponadto wykazano, że metody i parametry indukcji żelowania istotnie wpłyńęły na kształtowanie właściwości fizykochemicznych otrzymanych układów hydrożelowych. Jednocześnie należy podkreślić, że sekwencyjna technika polegająca na zastosowaniu indukcji termicznej i wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych przy odpowiednio dobranych warunkach ( $\text{pH} = 3$  i dodatek  $\text{NaCl}$  na poziomie 0,3 M) do tworzenia zarówno składnika strukturotwórczego jak i nośnika substancji bioaktywnych.

## **6. Podsumowanie i wnioski**

Z realizowane w ramach pracy doktorskiej badania pozwoliły na zweryfikowanie założonych hipotez badawczych oraz ich potwierdzenie, jednocześnie wykazano zasadność podjętej tematyki badań nad właściwościami fizykochemicznymi binarnego hydrożelu otrzymanego z białka grochu i babki pęczniki.

Na podstawie uzyskanych wyników sformułowano następujące stwierdzenia i wnioski:

1. Badania nad spożywczymi hydrożelami białkowo-polisacharydowymi mają charakter interdyscyplinarny i koncentrują się na ich potencjalnych zastosowaniach jako nośników leków lub bioaktywnych związków, umożliwiających ich kontrolowane dostarczanie i uwalnianie, a także jako samoregenerujących się powłok do produkcji opakowań w przemyśle spożywczym.
2. Pomimo zwiększającego się zainteresowania potencjalnymi zastosowaniami hydrożeli białkowo-polisacharydowych w sektorze spożywczym, badania w tym obszarze pozostają wciąż ograniczone, co wskazuje na potrzebę dalszego rozwoju i eksploracji tego interdyscyplinarnego tematu.
3. Fizyczne sieciowanie białka grochu i babki pęcznik umożliwia uzyskanie binarnego hydrożelu, który wykazuje korzystne właściwości fizykochemiczne. Dodatkowo występowanie interakcji międzycząsteczkowych pozwala na zmniejszenie ilości biopolimerów potrzebnych do formowania struktury żelowej.
4. Kształtowanie właściwości fizykochemicznych otrzymywanych binarnych hydrożeli na bazie białka grochu i babki pęcznik jest ściśle zależne od dobranych warunków i metody indukcji żelowania.
5. Efekt dodatku NaCl podczas indukcji hydrożelu z białka grochu i babki pęcznik jest istotnie zależny od pH układu. Ponadto wykazano, że indukcja hydrożelu binarnego w pH 3 z dodatkiem 0,3 M NaCl pozwala na uzyskanie układu pełniącego funkcję strukturotwórczą oraz nośnika związków bioaktywnych stabilnych w niskim pH, takich jak antocyjany.
6. Wykazano, że sekwencyjna metoda indukcji, obejmująca wstępную indukcję termiczną, a następnie homogenizację ultradźwiękową (USH), nie znalazła zastosowania do wytwarzania układu modelowego na bazie hydrożelu z białka

grochu i babki plesznik, jako nośnika bogatego w antocyjany ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu.

7. Wykazano, że sekwencyjna metoda indukcji, obejmująca wstępnią indukcję termiczną, a następnie zastosowanie wysokich ciśnień hydrostatycznych (HHP), stanowi obiecującą technikę wytwarzania układu modelowego na bazie hydrożelu z białka grochu i babki plesznik, jako nośnika antocyjanów z ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu.

Wyniki badań zaprezentowane w tej pracy mają charakter nie tylko poznawczy, ale i wdrożeniowy. Stworzono podstawy do opracowania nowego układu hydrożelowego na bazie białka grochu i babki plesznik, który mógłby pełnić funkcję składnika strukturotwórczego oraz nośnika substancji bioaktywnej np. w deserze wegańskim. Należy jednak zaznaczyć, że zasadne jest kontynuowanie prowadzonych badań, a w szczególności rozszerzenie ich o optymalizację parametrów procesu indukcji w celu podniesienia wydajności wiążania ekstraktu z owoców czarnego bzu oraz poprawy stabilności fizycznej, ale także analiza skuteczności wiążania ekstraktu podczas testów przechowalniczych w warunkach chłodniczych oraz analiza właściwości przeciwitleniających przed i po trawieniu in-vitro wraz z określeniem biodostępności antocyjanów.

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- 1) Prezentacja pt. „The effect of sodium alginate and chitosan on the properties of inulin hydrogels”; E-konferencja, National Scientific Conference „e-Factory of Science” – V edition, 10.04.2021 (**Adonis Hilal**, Anna Florowska, Małgorzata Wroniak).
- 2) Prezentacja pt. „Microrheological and destabilization behaviors of protein and polysaccharide colloidal dispersions”; E-konferencja, National Scientific Conference „Understand the Science”, 25.09.2021 (**Adonis Hilal**, Anna Florowska, Małgorzata Wroniak).
- 3) Poster pt. „Assessment of the physical properties of the wheat protein-maltodextrin dispersions”; E-konferencja, National Scientific Conference „e-Factory of Science” – VII edition, 09.04.2022 (**Adonis Hilal**, Anna Florowska, Małgorzata Wroniak).
- 4) Prezentacja pt. „Assessment of the physical properties of protein-polysaccharide hydrogels”; National Scientific Conference „3rd Summer Scientific On-line School”, 06.08.2022 (**Adonis Hilal**, Anna Florowska, Małgorzata Wroniak).
- 5) Poster pt. „The potential application of plant-based protein-polysaccharide hydrogels in the food sector”; Virtual International Conference „Plant productivity and food safety: Soil science, Microbiology, Agricultural Genetics and Food quality”, 15-17.09.2021 (**Adonis Hilal**, Anna Florowska, Małgorzata Wroniak).
- 6) Poster pt. „Assessment of the physical properties of the wheat protein-maltodextrin dispersions”; E-konferencja, National Scientific Conference „e-Factory of Science” – VII edition, 09.04.2022 (**Adonis Hilal**, Anna Florowska, Małgorzata Wroniak).
- 7) Poster pt. „Effects of Processing Conditions of High Hydrostatic Pressure (HHP) on Gelling Abilities and Properties of Inulin—Soy Protein Hydrogels”; The 3rd International Electronic Conference on Foods: Food, Microbiome, and Health—A Celebration of the 10th Anniversary of Food’s Impact on Our Wellbeing, 1–15.10.2022 (Anna Florowska, Tomasz Florowski, Patrycja Goździk, **Adonis Hilal**)

- 8) Poster pt. „Protein-Polysaccharide Hydrogels: Recent Application progress as Food Matrices for Bioactive Compounds Delivery”; Food Symposium 3.0 - LSU AgCenter/ MENDEL/ SGGW, 20–24.03.2023 (**Adonis Hilal**, Anna Florowska, Małgorzata Wroniak).
- 9) Poster pt. „Plant-based Burger Patties: a review of the Polish market”; Food Symposium 3.0 - LSU AgCenter/ MENDEL/ SGGW, 20–24.03.2023 (Agnieszka Tyszewska, Anna Pakulska, Natalia Spychaj, **Adonis Hilal**, Anna Florowska).
- 10) Poster pt. „Oyster Mushrooms: potential use in the production of plant-based meat substitutes”; Food Symposium 3.0 - LSU AgCenter/ MENDEL/ SGGW, 20–24.03.2023 (Natalia Spychaj, Anna Pakulska, Agnieszka Tyszewska, **Adonis Hilal**, Anna Florowska).
- 11) Prezentacja pt. „The influence of pH and NaCl on the physicochemical properties of protein-polysaccharide hydrogels for bioactive compound delivery”; Xth International Session of Young Scientific Staff „Food Science Development. Sustainable Future”. Warsaw, 11-12.05.2023 (**Adonis Hilal**, Anna Florowska, Ewa Domian, Małgorzata Wroniak).
- 12) Prezentacja pt. „Chemical Contaminants in Rapeseed Oils from The Polish Market”; 19th Euro Fed Lipids Congress and Expo. Poznań, 20.09.2023 (**Adonis Hilal**, Małgorzata Wroniak, Karol Łysiak).
- 13) Poster pt. „Comparison of quality and safety analysis of market cold pressed and refined rapeseed oils”; 19th Euro Fed Lipids Congress and Expo. Poznań, 20.09.2023 (Małgorzata Wroniak, Karol Łysiak, **Adonis Hilal**).

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Review

# Binary Hydrogels: Induction Methods and Recent Application Progress as Food Matrices for Bioactive Compounds Delivery—A Bibliometric Review

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**Abstract:** Food hydrogels are biopolymeric materials made from food-grade biopolymers with gelling properties (proteins and polysaccharides) and a 3D network capable of incorporating large amounts of water. They have sparked considerable interest because of their potential and broad application range in the biomedical and pharmaceutical sectors. However, hydrogel research in the field of food science is still limited. This knowledge gap provides numerous opportunities for implementing their unique properties, such as high water-holding capacity, moderated texture, compatibility with other substances, cell biocompatibility, biodegradability, and high resemblance to living tissues, for the development of novel, functional food matrices. For that reason, this article includes a bibliometric analysis characterizing research trends in food protein–polysaccharide hydrogels (over the last ten years). Additionally, it characterizes the most recent developments in hydrogel induction methods and the most recent application progress of hydrogels as food matrices as carriers for the targeted delivery of bioactive compounds. Finally, this article provides a future perspective on the need to evaluate the feasibility of using plant-based proteins and polysaccharides to develop food matrices that protect nutrients, including bioactive substances, throughout processing, storage, and digestion until they reach the specific targeted area of the digestive system.



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## 1. Introduction

Hydrogels are viscoelastic aqueous matrices composed of crosslinked polymer chains forming a three-dimensional hydrophilic network. This three-dimensional system contains molecules, fibers, or particles, with water or an aqueous phase serving as the dispersion medium [1]. The hydrophilic character of hydrogels is caused by some hydrophilic residues (such as amino, carboxyl, and hydroxyl groups) of the polymer(s), along with the nature and density of the formed network connections. Such networks can hold large amounts of water (even 99% *w/w*) in their structure while maintaining solid-like properties [2]. The type (physical or chemical) and density (number of crosslinks) of network connections formed by these polymers help to maintain the final gel network. As a result, the structure, viscoelasticity, and water-holding capacity of hydrogels are highly dependent on the polymer source (natural or synthetic), method of preparation (induction method), ionic charge, and the size of the network [3].

Hydrogel materials are widely used, with significant applications in medical, cosmetics, textiles, agriculture, and recently in the food sector as well. Because of their broad range of applicational potential, researchers have been studying hydrogels for years. The biomedical and pharmaceutical industries have primarily implemented hydrogels as delivery systems [4,5], scaffolds for cell cultivation [6], and tissue engineering [7]. However, when it comes to the food industry, the implementation of hydrogels is constrained by restrictions

on the use of certain ingredients that need to be food-grade, generally recognized as safe (GRAS) by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the USA and included in the EU list of permitted food additives laid down in Regulation EC 1333/2008. According to their origin, food-grade biopolymers are divided into proteins and polysaccharides. These biopolymers have a great potential to address today's consumer health and environmental sustainability concerns since they are renewable, affordable, biocompatible, biodegradable, and edible, as well as having a wide range of functionalities and gelation routes [8]. Proteins and polysaccharides are primary functional components in developing food colloidal systems since they can create and modify food matrix structures, textures, sensory properties, and shelf life.

Protein-based hydrogels are formed when the protein molecules unfold, revealing hydrophilic and thiol groups [9]. This unfolding of the structure (denaturation) process can be initiated by heating, pH, or salt modulation. The denaturation allows the chains to interact via covalent interactions (by hydrophobic or electrostatic interactions, hydrogen bond formation, and less frequently, disulfide bond formation). The covalent interaction between the polymer chains leads to their aggregation, forming a three-dimensional gel structure [10]. Among plant-based globular proteins, such as soy [11,12], pea [10,13], wheat [14,15], and zein [16,17] are reported in the literature to have an excellent gelling ability, similar to their animal-based proteins counterparts (whey and egg) [18,19]. The formation of polysaccharide hydrogels is less complicated than that of globular proteins. Polysaccharide hydrogel formation can be induced through various methods, among others heat and cooling, pH and salt modulation, the addition of sucrose, and freeze-thaw cycles [20]. Among the widely used in the food industry polysaccharides that have gelling abilities are carrageenan [21,22], chitosan [23,24], alginate [25,26], inulin [27,28], starch [29,30], cellulose [31,32], gum arabic [33,34], gellan gum [35,36], etc.

Binary hydrogels composed of proteins and polysaccharides were developed to avoid some of the limitations such as poor water holding capacity and weak gel strength, physical instability, etc. imposed by hydrogels prepared with a single biopolymer [37]. A different combination of proteins and polysaccharides can be used to create such binary hydrogels: protein–protein, polysaccharide–polysaccharide, and protein–polysaccharide [38]. Proteins and polysaccharides can effectively form binary hydrogels due to their ability to interact with each other via non-covalent and covalent interactions [39]. Furthermore, when the concentration of one biopolymer is insufficient to form a stable hydrogel, adding another biopolymer as a filler component can improve the physicochemical properties of the system, allowing the formation of a network structure [40,41]. A wide range of protein–polysaccharide binary hydrogels with various microstructures and physicochemical properties can be obtained based on the interaction between those two biopolymers, the individual properties of each used component, and the applied induction conditions [42]. An example would be a binary hydrogel composed of a whey protein/starch mixture, distinguished by new and intriguing properties [43]. It was discovered that the synergistic interactions between casein and carrageenan also improved hydrogel's rheological and microstructural properties [44]. Zernov et al. [45] reported that mixing chitosan and collagen makes it possible to produce a hydrogel that can act as an edible microcarrier for cultured meat. Furthermore, soy protein—a model plant-based protein mixed with polysaccharides—can form binary hydrogel and gain new properties as a food ingredient [46,47]. Combinations of soy protein gels and polysaccharides tested by other researchers are as follows: soy protein–sodium alginate hydrogel [48], soy protein–carrageenan hydrogel [49], soy protein–inulin hydrogel [50], soy protein–corn fiber gum hydrogel [51]. Other plant-based proteins and polysaccharides are also being studied regarding their ability to form binary hydrogels. Among them, the most popular in the literature are pea protein–sodium alginate hydrogel [52], pea protein–soluble soybean polysaccharide hydrogel [53], and zein protein–pectin hydrogel [54].

Since studies on the topic of food hydrogels are still minimal in comparison to biomedical or pharmaceutical hydrogels, there are immense opportunities to contribute to the

development of the food industry through a cross-integration between areas with advanced knowledge. Regarding model behavior, food biopolymer hydrogels might be more complex than synthetic hydrogels [37]. Despite this, a proper hydrogel design based on a thorough understanding of the mechanisms in food matrices can improve the final food matrix's quality, nutrition, and nutrient bioavailability [41,55]. Therefore, using a bibliometric analysis as a research performance investigation tool for detailed databases can reveal trends and patterns in scientific research areas worldwide. This statistical tool has raised researchers' considerable interest in providing an in-depth view of the advancements in binary hydrogels' food processing and applications [41,56,57]. The purpose of conducting a bibliometric analysis is not to discuss the findings of the identified papers but to characterize research trends in a chosen field of knowledge [58,59]. The significance of this manuscript is to provide a mixed review that combines bibliometric analysis and a literature review of the latest developments in hydrogel induction methods and the present research findings on the topic of protein–polysaccharide hydrogels as a food matrix.

## 2. Methodological Procedures

The article presents a literature review emphasizing protein–polysaccharide hydrogel induction methods and the application progress of protein–polysaccharide hydrogels as food matrices to supplement the information provided by the bibliometric analysis.

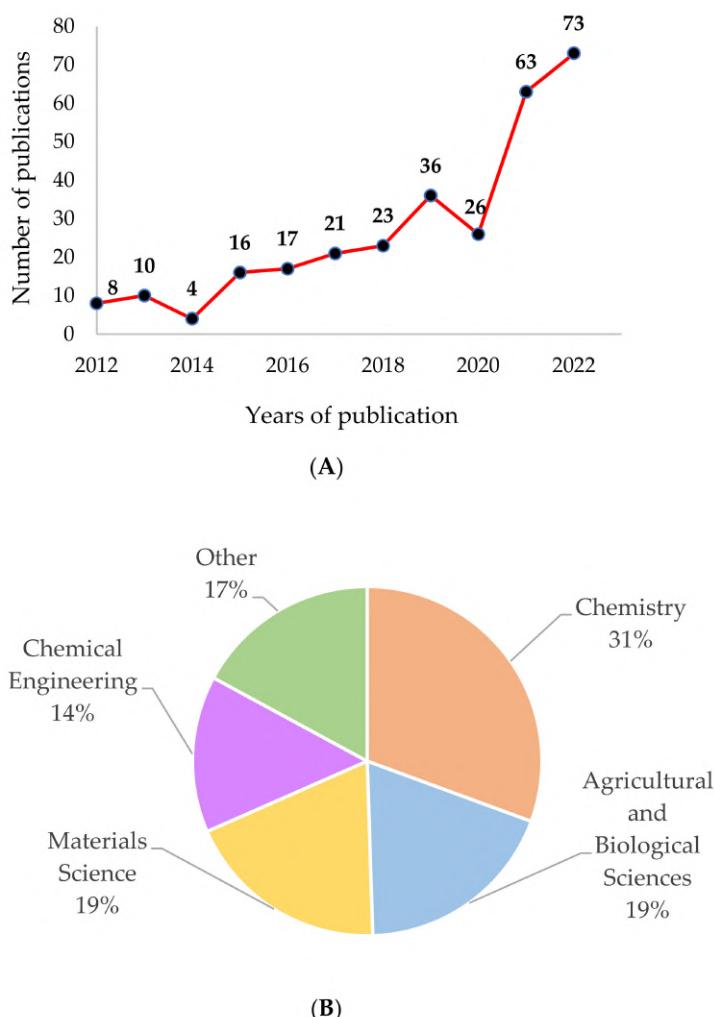
In this study, a mixed methodology was carried out, including a bibliometric analysis of papers obtained from the Scopus database (<https://www.scopus.com/search/form.uri?display=advanced>, accessed on 1 December 2022) and a literature review emphasizing the induction methods and the application progress of protein–polysaccharide hydrogels as food matrices. A survey was carried out in the Scopus database (in October 2022) to access the papers used to perform the bibliometric analysis. The methodological procedure adopted for the bibliometric analysis was divided into two general phases, the data collection phase, and the data mapping/visualization phase.

The entered query string included the terms “protein polysaccharide food hydrogels”, “food biopolymer hydrogel”, and “food hydrogel” as search words in the publication's titles and abstracts. The publication timeframe was set from 2012 to 2022, and the types of documents were considered: articles and reviews. Some words were excluded (e.g., aerogels, oleogels, male, female), as well as some research areas (e.g., economics and finance, computer science, business management and accounting, mathematics, social sciences, energy, planetary sciences, neuroscience, nursing, and health professions) to refine the study. A result of 297 documents was obtained, of which 239 were articles and 58 were reviews, all in the final publication stage.

The data mapping/visualization phase was accomplished using a state-of-art scientometric mapping tool provided by VOSviewer software (version 1.6.18, CWTS, Leiden, The Netherlands). The data, including all the details regarding the 297 documents found by the search engine in the Scopus database, were exported, and a performance analysis was carried out to discover the general patterns of research on protein–polysaccharide hydrogels. A cluster analysis was carried out based on the keywords co-occurrence and the bibliographic coupling of in-country collaborations [60–64].

## 3. Bibliometric Analysis

A total of 297 documents were analyzed, of which 80.5% were articles and 19.5% were review papers. Figure 1 shows the evaluation of the scientific publication on protein–polysaccharide food hydrogels registered in the Scopus database in 2012–2022. Figure 1A shows the number of publications, and Figure 1B represents the main subject area of the publications.



**Figure 1.** Evaluation of the scientific publications. (A) The number of publications registered on the topic of protein–polysaccharide food hydrogels over the last ten years; (B) the main subject area in which the publications registered on the topic of protein–polysaccharide food hydrogels over the last ten years (research carried out in the Scopus database in October 2022).

By analyzing the data presented in Figure 1A, a slow but systematic growth of the number of publications, it in years 2014–2019, can be observed. Currently, since 2020, there has been a dynamic increase in the number of published articles on protein–polysaccharide food hydrogels. In 2020, the number of publications on this topic reached 63, and in 2022—73. The growth in the number of published documents reflects the awareness of the potential uses of hydrogels in the food sector. This growth could be caused by the food industry's growing concern about providing enough nutritious food for everyone while protecting natural resources. This growing concern has resulted in the faster development of plant-based foods and hybrid food products (from animal and plant sources), which have emerged as a new growing trend that can help the sustainability challenge [65]. The growing interest in the development of plant-based foods (including hybrid foods) has increased the number of studies on food hydrogels, which have the potential to improve the appearance, texture, flavor, mouthfeel, and functionality of these new products [20,37,66–68].

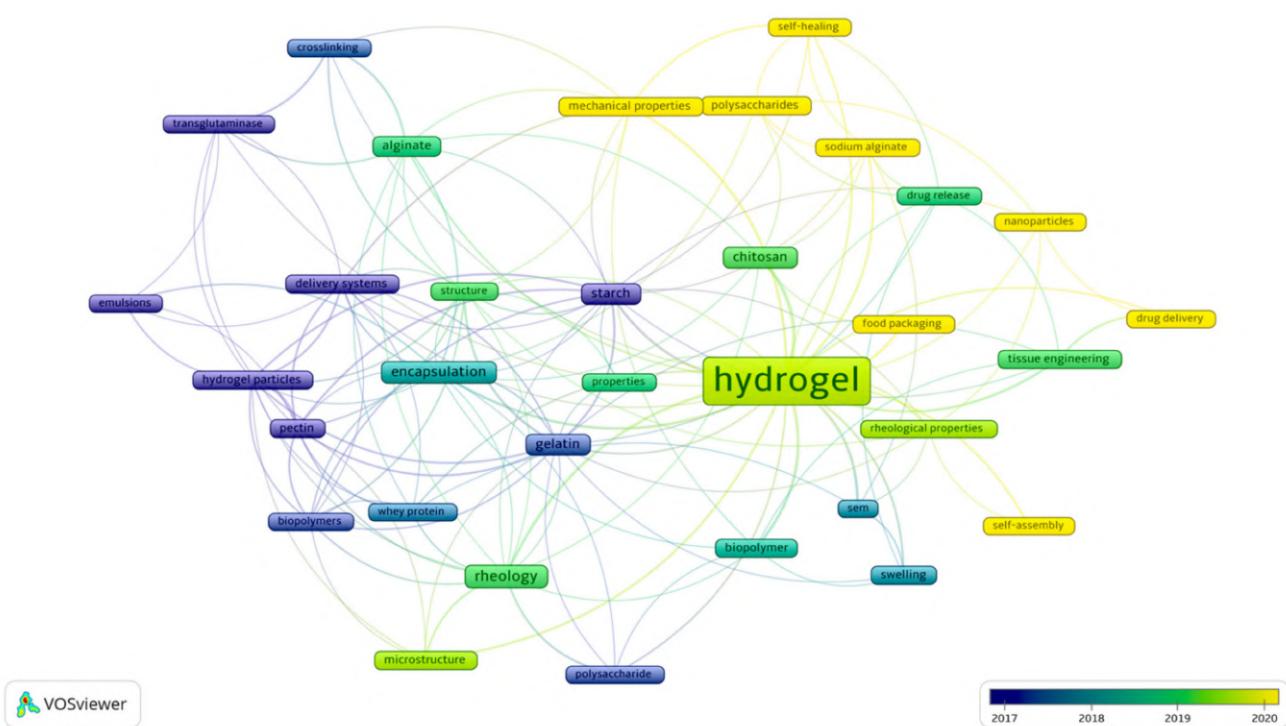
The scientific papers that addressed the topic of protein–polysaccharide food hydrogels were published mainly in four subject areas (Figure 1B): chemistry (31% of published documents), agriculture and biological sciences (19%, which include food science), materials science (19%), and chemical engineering area (14%). The other areas in which the analyzed scientific documents were published were physics and astronomy (7.7%); biochemistry, genetics, and molecular biology (5.9%); pharmacology, toxicology, and pharmaceutics

(1.6%); immunology and microbiology (1.5%); medicine (0.5%). These research areas prove the interdisciplinary aspect of protein–polysaccharide food hydrogels [1,8].

Citation is one of the most critical indicators of a publication's relevance [69]. Table 1 provides the most cited publications during the ten years. Moreover, to determine the current trends in scientific research on the topic of protein–polysaccharide food hydrogels, the keywords' co-occurrence in the studied documents was performed. It can be observed that the most recent publications are related to the topic of polysaccharide hydrogels and hydrogels properties, such as self-healing, self-assembly, and mechanical properties (Figure 2).

**Table 1.** The 10 most cited original research papers on the topic of binary hydrogels from 2012 to 2022.

Sr. No.	Material	Induction Method	Key Findings	Applications	Ref.
1	Xanthan gum/ $\beta$ -lactoglobulin	pH (4.4)	The complexation between the polymers resulted in a functional hydrogel, in which the structure strength mainly depended on xanthan gum.	Encapsulation of bioactive molecules	[70]
2	Whey protein/ pectin Whey protein/ alginate Whey protein/xanthan	Heat (90 °C)	The study provided information on the release mechanism of the obtained emulsion-filled hydrogels. Whey protein/pectin hydrogel had the highest release exponent.	Bioactive compounds delivery matrices	[71]
3	Gelatin/glucan	Heat (45–120 °C)	In comparison with pure gelatin the gelatin/glucan hydrogel exhibited improved mechanical properties.	Food and pharmaceutical	[72]
4	Konjac glucomannan/gum tragacanth	Heat (60 °C)	The obtained hydrogel was formed mainly by hydrogen bonding. The hydrogel exhibited a significant thermosensitive behavior between 35–45 °C.	Thermosensitive delivery system	[73]
5	Gelatin/tara gum	pH (3.5–11.0) and ion (salt: 0–300 mmol/L)	A synergistic effect of tara gum of the gelatin gel structure was observed. The hydrogel formation was not affected by the pH. The addition of salt (50 mmol/L) had the most significant on the mechanical attributes.	Food rheology modulation and delivery system	[74]
6	Caseinate/pectin	Enzymatic (transglutaminase)	The hydrogels obtained using enzymatic crosslinking exhibited significant integrity under pH ranging from 6 to 8. Both enzymatically crosslinked and not crosslinked network displayed a high stability to heating and low pH.	Delivery matrices for lipophilic bioactives	[75]
7	Gellan gum/collagen	Heat (90 °C)	A new process of gelation was proposed, which is based on dripping the gellan-anthocyanin dispersion into the cold (10 °C) collagen dispersion. The obtained network exhibited high anthocyanin retention (>84%).	Encapsulation of bioactive molecules	[76]
8	Starch/alginate	Ion (CaCl <sub>2</sub> )	The retention of insulin was >80%. The obtained hydrogel exhibited promising properties in terms of safe delivery of insulin via oral pathway.	Insulin oral delivery system	[77]
9	Soy protein/ $\kappa$ -carrageenan	Heat (80 °C)	The hydrogel with the addition of 0.6% $\kappa$ -carrageenan displayed the most dense and uniform structure. Additionally, $\kappa$ -carrageenan protected the soy protein and the embedded flax lignans from erosion caused by digestive enzymes.	Carriers for water-soluble bioactive compounds	[78]
10	Alginate/inulin Chitosan/inulin	Heat (80–90 °C)	The addition of alginate or chitosan had no significant impact on the gelling ability of inulin. Chitosan (0.5 g/100 g) addition improved the stability of the obtained hydrogels.	Functional ingredient for developing new health-promoting food products	[29]



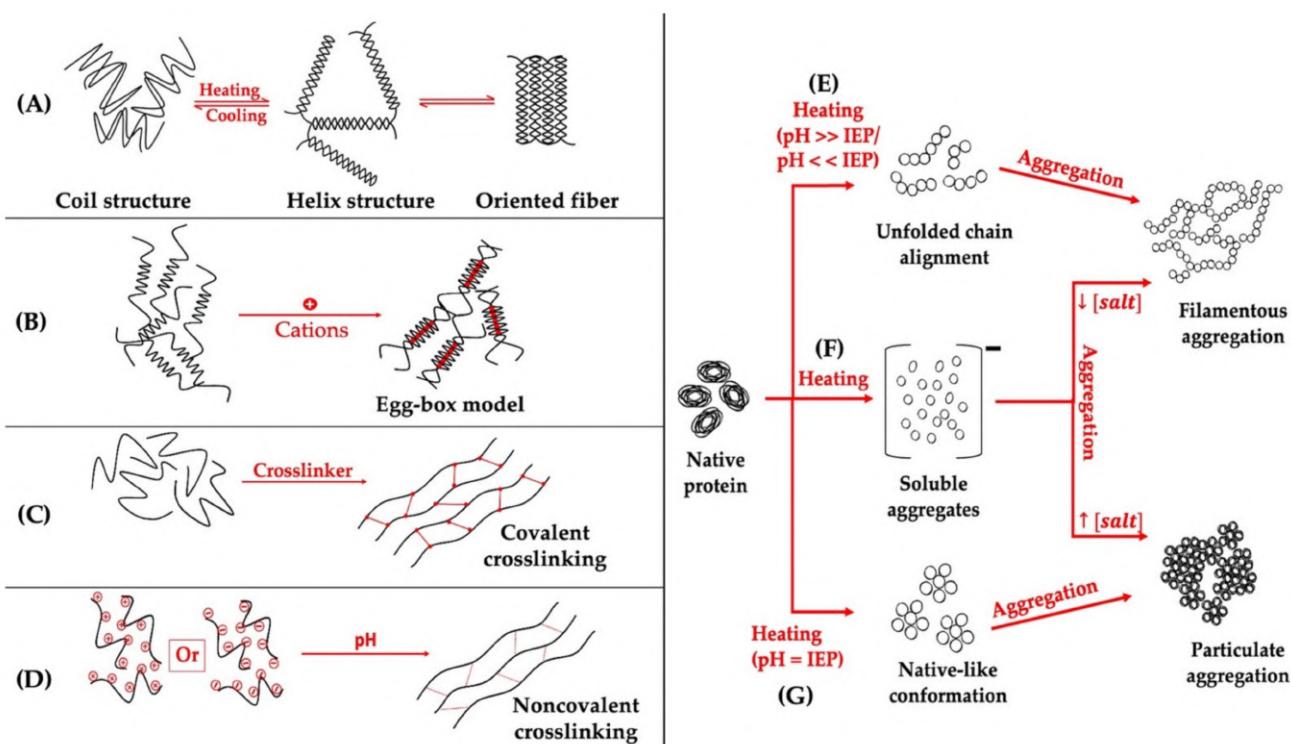
**Figure 2.** Visualization of the keywords network based on their co-occurrence. The frame size represents the frequency of the keyword's co-occurrence. The color scale represents the average number of document publications per year.

Most of the studies concerned the application of hydrogels in food packaging and drug delivery. Auriemma et al. [79] stated that polysaccharide hydrogels have a promising potential in developing drug delivery systems aimed at controlling and targeting the delivery of many drugs. Despite their potential, many breakthroughs in clinical studies of the release mechanisms are needed to use these hydrogels as drug carriers while also focusing on the SbD (safe-by-design) approach. The standardization of the analysis regarding the release mechanisms of hydrogel delivery systems is a crucial topic in the meaningful, intelligent delivery systems design [80,81]. Protein–polysaccharide food hydrogels have received significant attention because of the growing need to replace plastic packaging with new, safe, and biodegradable materials. Additionally, researchers are trying to implement the knowledge from disciplines, such as the pharmaceutical one, to develop hydrogel-based packaging materials with the ability to release bioactive compounds that could prevent the growth of harmful microorganisms while protecting the food product from moisture and nutrient loss [82,83]. The study of co-occurring keywords helped isolate two main interlinked clusters. The first and most significant cluster included observations of hydrogels from the perspective of self-assembly, swelling, and rheological properties, with the word hydrogel the most highlighted. The second cluster focused on encapsulation from the perspective of biopolymers, hydrogel particles, emulsions, and delivery systems. These two clusters showcase the transition from studies concerning the model properties of such hydrogels (cluster 2, before 2018) to the application of these hydrogels in tissue engineering, drug release and delivery, and the current application of self-assembly and self-healing hydrogels in food packaging (cluster 1, after 2019).

#### 4. Hydrogel's Induction Methods

Two factors need to be met to form a food hydrogel. The initial one is that the used biopolymer has hydrophilic groups, whereas the second one is the presence of crosslinking strength between the particles and molecules to initiate the aggregation process and the final formation of the network [1]. Figure 3 illustrates the main mechanisms of polysaccha-

rides and proteins hydrogel formation. Based on the crosslinking mechanism of gelling, hydrogels can be divided into physically-, chemically-, enzymatically-, or multi-crosslinked. Physically crosslinked hydrogels are systems in which noncovalent interactions between the polymers are the precursor interactions that lead to the development of the structural network. Such physical mechanisms include electrostatic interactions [84], hydrogen bonds [85], crystallization [86], metal-ligand coordination [87], stereocomplex crystallization [88], hydrophobic interactions [89], conformation transformation [90], host-guest interaction [91], molecular specific binding [92], and  $\pi$ - $\pi$  stacking [93]. Chemically crosslinked hydrogels are also known as “true gels”. They are obtained through the formation of covalent bonds between two polymers (Figure 3C). These kinds of junctions are usually non-reversible, permanent, and highly stable. Chemically crosslinked hydrogels can be obtained by free radical polymerization (pathway via monomers) [94] or by using crosslinkers, high-energy radiation, and the chemical reaction-pathway via polymers [95,96]. Enzymatically crosslinked hydrogels are obtained using enzymes such as trans-glutaminase [97], tyrosinase [98], laccase [99], horseradish peroxidase [100], etc. Notably, many hydrogels are obtained through multi-crosslinking mechanisms, using at least two described mechanisms depending on their structural complexity [101–103].



**Figure 3.** Illustration of the main mechanisms of formation of polysaccharides (A–D) and globular proteins hydrogel (E–G). (A) temperature-induced gelation of coil structure polysaccharides (e.g.,  $\kappa$ -carrageenan), (B) ion-induced egg-box gelation of alginate, (C) covalent crosslinking-induced gelation (e.g., epichlorohydrin for cellulose hydrogel induction, glutaraldehyde for chitosan hydrogel induction), (D) pH-induced gelation (e.g., induction of pectin hydrogels), (E,G) temperature- and pH-induced globular protein gelation, (F) temperature- and ion-induced globular protein gelation [8,79,104].

Through the years, many food hydrogel induction methods have been developed and applied in the food sectors [8,39,105]. The most conventional, well-studied methods of inducing proteins and polysaccharides gelation are pH, temperature, ion modulation (physical crosslinking methods), and enzymatic crosslinking. The recent development in the field of hydrogels brings new, unconventional induction methods, such as high-pressure and pulsed electric field [106,107]. The most crucial induction methods are discussed further below.

#### 4.1. pH Induction

The pH induction is a cost-effective, simple, safe, and widely used food hydrogel induction method. By modulating the pH of the protein and/or polysaccharide dispersion, it is possible to affect the solubility, molecular conformation, and charge, as well as the zeta potential of the used biopolymers, altering the attractive and repulsive forces between particles, allowing the formation of intermolecular and intramolecular interactions that lead to the formation of the gel structure. Moreover, the conformational changes in the structure of proteins may occur [108,109]. Hydrogels obtained by pH induction can be utilized, among others, in the encapsulation of bioactive compounds. Zhan et al. [110] reported that it is possible to encapsulate curcumin in a zein-whey binary system using the pH-induced method. In other report, the pH-induced method was used to obtain an economical and environmentally friendly chitosan colloidal gel system with the potential for food or pharmaceutical formulations [111].

#### 4.2. Heat Induction

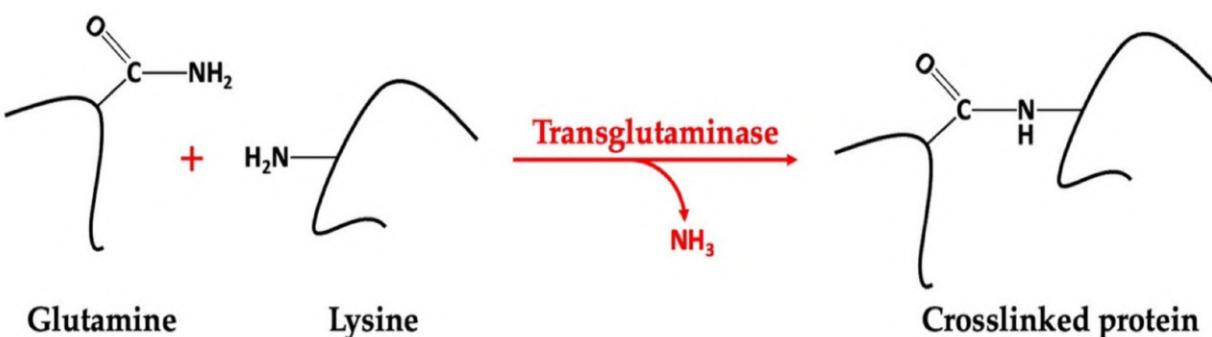
This induction method is a “green” and environment-friendly method widely applied in food hydrogels. In the case of protein (globular proteins) hydrogels, the heat induction method involves two stages: protein unfolding (denaturation) or dissociate, and then the interaction and aggregation of the unfolded molecules caused by the interaction between their functional groups, allowing for the preparation of higher molecular weight complexes [112]. Lui et al. [113] reported in their study that they obtained a pectin-whey protein hydrogel with high structural strength and storage modulus by heat induction. Furthermore, Fu et al. [114] studied the heated-induced gelation of soy protein isolate at the subunit level. Depending on the polysaccharide structure and their source, a gel structure via heat induction can be produced, and examples may be cellulose (and its derivates) [115], curdlan [116], glucomannan [117], starch [118].

#### 4.3. Ions Induction

The ions induction method, in some cases also known as cold induction (esp. in case of pre-denatured protein gel induction), is the addition of a salt ion (e.g.,  $\text{Na}^+$ ,  $\text{K}^+$ ,  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$ ) to induce the formation of gel structure, which is also a very widely used method. The gelation process of the protein and polysaccharides can occur when the electrostatic repulsive interaction between the polymers is decreased or removed [119,120]. Recently, Zhou et al. [121] have reported that adding  $\text{Na}^+$  to a low-methoxyl pectin and soy protein dispersion affected the texture and viscoelastic properties of the cold-induced hydrogel. Additionally, they reported that only the addition of a low concentration of  $\text{Na}^+$  positively affected the studied properties. On the other hand, k-carrageenan gelation can be induced by adding  $\text{K}^+$  ions, as was studied by Chen et al. [122]. Additionally, it was demonstrated that it is possible to produce a composite hydrogel using chitosan and oxidized tannic acid by adding  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  [123].

#### 4.4. Enzymatic Induction

By adding enzymes to biopolymers, it is possible to induce the formation of a hydrogel through a biochemical path in which the enzymes play the leading role in constructing the gel structure. Enzyme-induced gelation is based on the insertion of covalent crosslinks. The use of transglutaminase, which can induce protein gelation by promoting intramolecular and intermolecular crosslinking of the peptide chains (Figure 4), is one example of such an enzymatic induction [124].

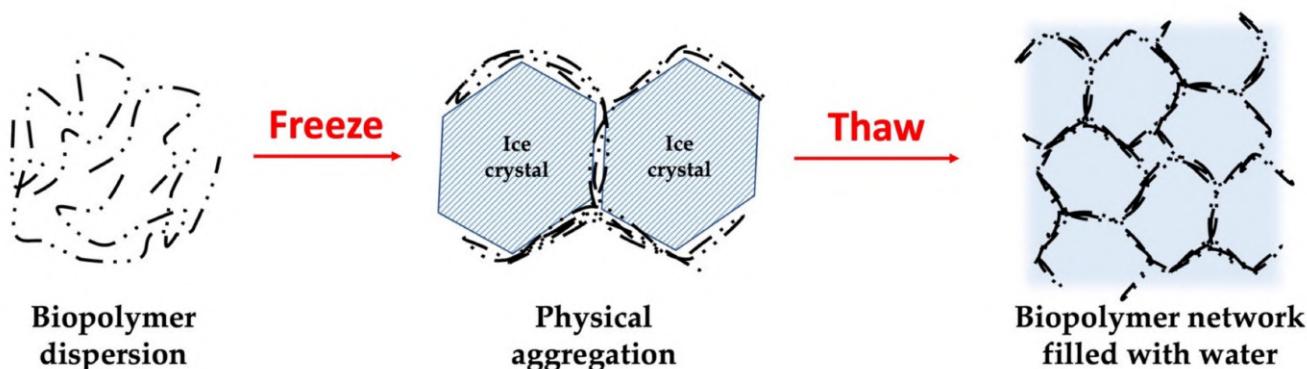


**Figure 4.** Schematic representation of protein crosslinking mechanism induced by transglutaminase [125,126].

The characteristic of transglutaminase-induced hydrogel crosslinking is related to the composition and conformation of the protein [127]. Transglutaminase has been effectively used in the induction of different types of proteins, such as soy protein [128], Bambara protein [129], as well as in the induction of binary-protein hydrogels composed of gelatin and carrageenan [130]. The other example can be protease, e.g., produced by *Bacillus licheniformis*, that can be used to induce the hydrolyzes  $\alpha$ -Lactalbumin, which can then be used for the preparation of an amphiphilic peptide hydrogel used among others in the encapsulation of curcumin [131].

#### 4.5. Freeze-Thaw Induction

This method involves freeze-thaw cycles, leading to phase separation and crystallization that affect the polysaccharide chain, allowing for the interaction between the chains by microcrystalline junction zones. This method is based on a repeated freezing process, storing in subzero temperatures, and thawing the dispersion in high temperatures [132]. Figure 5 represents the freeze-thaw induction method of cellulose nanocrystals. Xu et al. [133] studied  $\beta$ -glucan freeze-thaw gels as the carrier for the encapsulation of curcumin. They reported that these gels have great potential in developing natural drug delivery carriers. This induction method proved to be effective when it comes to thermolabile bioactive substances.

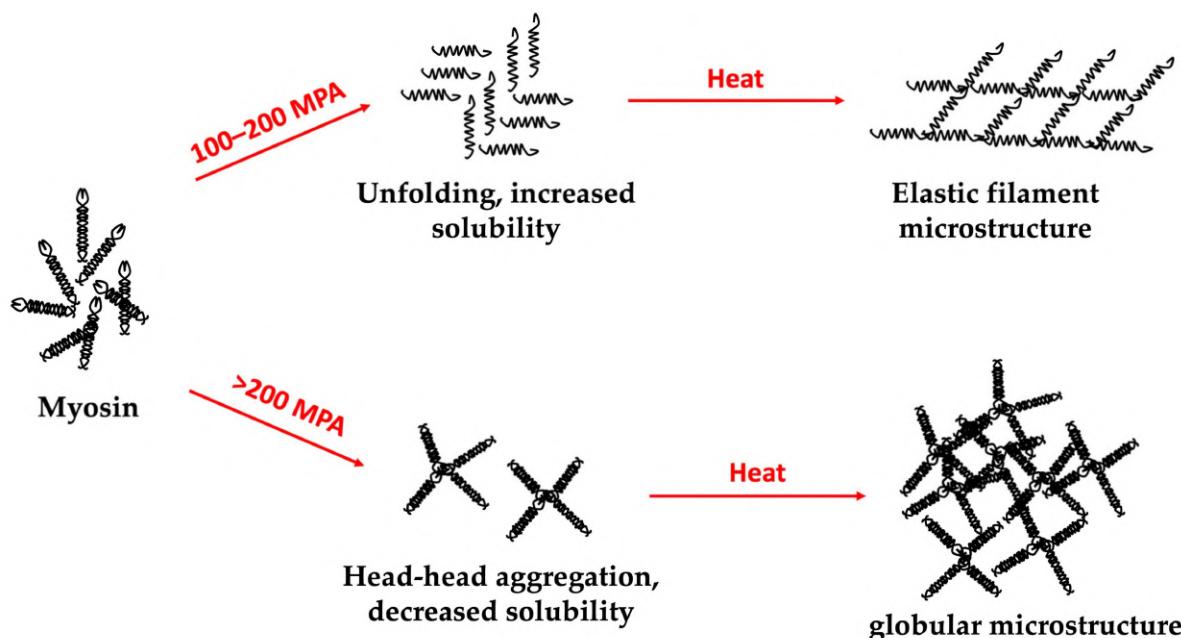


**Figure 5.** Schematic representation of freeze-thaw induction effect on cellulose nanocrystals hydrogel network formation [134,135].

The freeze-thaw induction method proved very effective in regulating hydrogel's textural properties while not negatively affecting its stability, even when two polymers were used in structure formation. This induction method was also demonstrated in research conducted by Shang et al. [136], where the effect of starch addition and freeze-thaw conditions on the water retention and texture properties of konjac glucomannan hydrogels was studied.

#### 4.6. High Hydrostatic Pressure Induction

High hydrostatic pressure (HHP) induction is a novel method that has been extensively studied in terms of its ability to modify the physical properties of the protein and polysaccharide hydrogels. HHP provides the structural modification, aggregation, fragmentation that leads to gelatin production [137]. HHP can also transform protein structures by destroying the hydrophobic and electrostatic interactions, which influences denaturation, aggregation, and gelation. This induction technique can be used by itself or in combination with other induction methods (Figure 6), such as temperature induction [138].

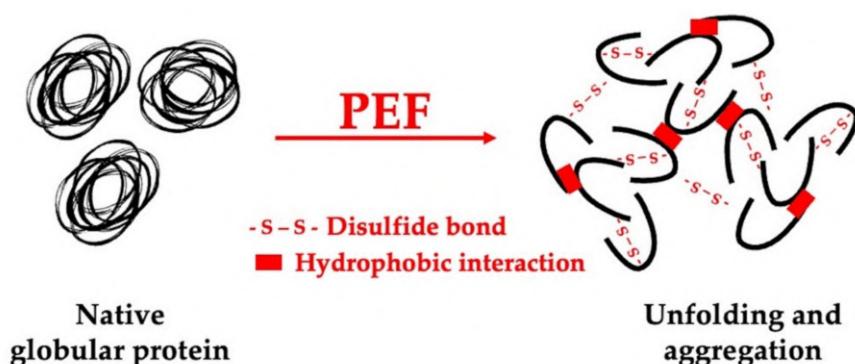


**Figure 6.** Schematic representation of HHP- and heat-induction effect on myosin hydrogel microstructure [139,140].

Luo et al. [141] have studied the effect of HHP on the gelation behavior and microstructure of quinoa protein isolate dispersions. They found that using HHP induction allowed them to obtain hydrogels similar to the ones induced using heat treatment. Moreover, when using HHP, it is possible to obtain hydrogels at lower induction temperatures, which has excellent potential in incorporating thermolabile food compounds and nutraceuticals into the quinoa protein gel matrix. In a study conducted by Florowska et al. [28] regarding the effects of pressure level and time treatment of HHP on inulin gelation and properties of obtained hydrogels, the use of HHP pressure (higher than 300 MPa) was reported. The obtained hydrogels had higher stability and a more compressed and changed structure, which resulted in higher yield stress, lower spreadability, and more rigid and adhesive hydrogels. On the other hand, Liu et al. [142] stated that the induction of starch hydrogels using high pressure resulted in starch gels with different functional properties compared to those obtained by heat induction. The authors also reported that such a starch induction method might be of interest for food processing.

#### 4.7. Pulsed Electric Field Induction

Pulsed electric field (PEF) is a new physical method used to improve processes such as extraction, fermentation, dehydration, decontamination, etc. [143,144]. Figure 7 represents the effect of PEF on globular proteins. In addition, according to Giteru et al. [145], PEF treatment has the potential to be used to alter the functional properties of proteins and polysaccharides by inducing structural or conformational changes [146,147].



**Figure 7.** Schematic representation of PEF induction effect on globular protein [148,149].

The use of a moderate pulsed electric field caused the structural unfolding of the myofibrillar protein of the porcine muscle, which resulted in the formation of a uniform and compact gel structure [150]. PEF treatment can also change myofibrillar protein hydrogels' water distribution and mobility [151]. Moreover, the study conducted by Zhu et al. [152] on the use of the distributed electric field to induce the orientation of nanosheets resulted in the formation of complex anisotropic structures. These findings can be applied in the formation of hydrogels with biomimetic functionalities. PEF can be coupled with other induction techniques to design more complex hydrogels with specific functions [153].

### 5. Application Progress of Hydrogels as Food Matrices

Hydrogels present a wide range of properties (including high water content, flexibility, softness, and compatibility), making their application highly tunable for different food systems. Protein–polysaccharide composites have been so far successfully used only in the food packaging industry as they possess an oil barrier, water solubility, and tastelessness [154]. The commercially used edible films are produced mostly from cellulose and whey protein biopolymers [155], or alginate and collagen [156].

However, one of the critical characteristics of hydrogels is their similarity to living tissues, which can open new avenues for their use in food, particularly in the production of meat analogs [3]. Hydrogels can be used as base structures (matrices) when designing new food products since they can play a crucial role in achieving structure stability, sensory attributes, and nutritional aspects, such as being carriers for a wide range of nutrients and nutraceuticals [157].

Hydrogels have also been used successfully as fat mimetics in different food systems. Paglarini et al. [158] in their research demonstrated the potential of soy protein emulsion-filled hydrogel as a fat mimetic in frankfurter sausages. They reported that the sausages prepared using this emulsion-filled hydrogel exhibited the same hardness as traditional frankfurters. Moreover, Domínguez et al. [159] reported that the correctly chosen hydrogel formulation does not modify the sensory characteristics of meat products and allows for the reduction of both total fat and saturated fatty acids. Furthermore, the latest studies on hybrid gel prepared using canola oil/candelilla wax oleogel and gelatinized corn starch hydrogel also demonstrated the potential of hybrid hydrogels to be used as an alternative to commercial shortening to produce cookies with low-saturated fat content [160].

Recent research advances have recognized the utilization of bio-based biodegradable materials for food packaging to address the growing problem of the widespread use and misuse of petroleum-based polymeric materials [161]. Hydrogels prepared using biopolymers have great potential in manufacturing traditional, active, and intelligent food packaging. Hence, by embedding antimicrobial compounds (e.g., silver nanoparticles) into a hydrogel matrix, such a hydrogel can find use in the manufacturing of active packaging, which can reduce or inhibit the growth of harmful microorganisms [162]. Hydrogels can

also be used to develop biosensors for intelligent food packaging, conveying information about a product's freshness or the presence of contaminants [163–165].

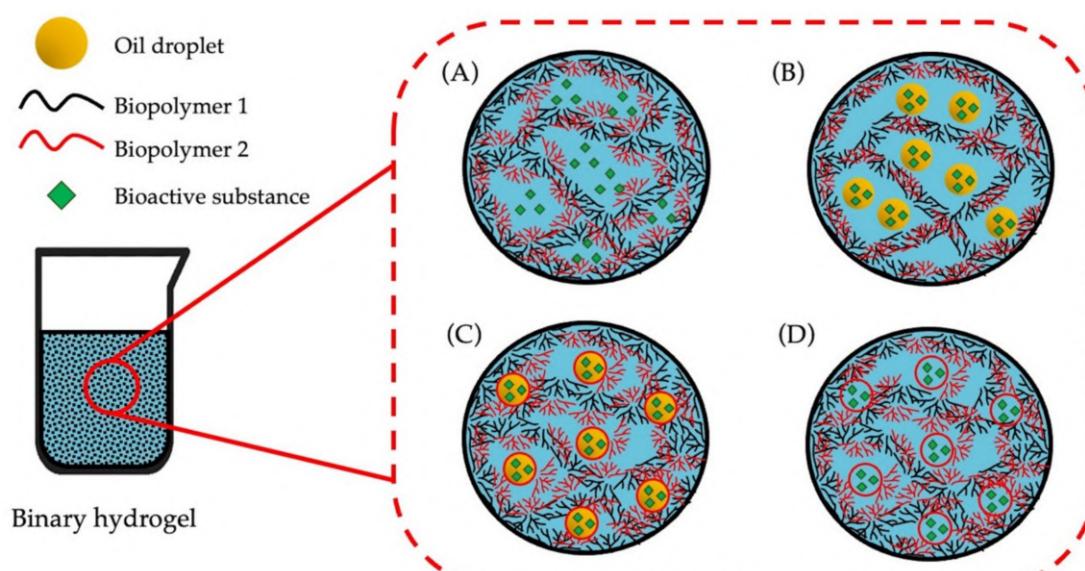
The most recent trend in using hydrogels is the development of matrices that can replace animal-based food products in terms of texture and nutritional aspects. The food sector is increasingly becoming more concerned with providing enough nutritious food for everyone while protecting natural resources. That is why plant-based foods and hybrid food products (from animal and plant sources) are a new growing trend that can help with this sustainability challenge [65]. While developing new healthier foods using plant-based ingredients, the goal is to achieve the desired appearance, texture, flavor, mouthfeel, and functionality using healthy and sustainable plant-derived ingredients, such as lipids, proteins, and carbohydrates [65,166]. Additionally, plant-based products are often deficient in essential nutrients, such as vitamins (B<sub>12</sub>, D, etc.) and minerals (iron, zinc, etc.). As a result, there is a growing interest in fortifying such food systems with these nutrients. This fortification can be taken a step further by adding nutraceuticals such as carotenoids, curcuminoids, and polyphenols to improve the healthiness of these plant-based food systems. It is critical to comprehend how these ingredients can be integrated to form complex matrices resembling those found in animal-derived foods, as well as how the properties of these matrices affect the physicochemical and organoleptic properties of the final product [167]. Therefore, in this paper, the advancements in using hydrogels as bioactive substances carrying food matrices will be further discussed.

### 5.1. Encapsulation and Delivery Systems of Bioactive Compounds

Hydrogels are increasingly used as encapsulating and delivery agents because of their high encapsulation efficiency, biocompatibility, low cost, and environmentally friendly properties. These properties can be achieved due to their porous nature caused by the three-dimensional structures in which crosslinked polymers form large interstitial spaces that are densely packed with water. These interstitial spaces can also incorporate various nutrients and bioactive compounds [3]. That is why these spaces can be utilized to overcome some challenges related to adding health-beneficial substances to food products; for example, low thermal and chemical stability, poor solubility, and undesirable flavor organoleptic profile. Encapsulating the bioactive substances in hydrogels makes it possible to protect them from external environmental factors during production, storage, and even after consumption. Such factors include oxygen, heat, light, pH, enzymes, etc. [168–170].

Moreover, by mixing proteins and polysaccharides, it is possible to obtain improved structural and functional properties, which can be explained by the formation of protein-polysaccharide complexes via covalent and noncovalent interactions. These binary protein-polysaccharide hydrogels can be used as a matrix for embedding hydrophilic and hydrophobic compounds [171]. Hydrophobic compounds can be embedded into a hydrogel by first preparing an emulsion containing these bioactive substances and then introducing the biopolymers to the emulsion, resulting in an emulsion-filled hydrogel [172]. Both hydrophilic and hydrophobic compounds can either form the gel network, contributing to the strength and stability of the final hydrogel—such compounds are called active fillers (Figure 8C,D). However, the embedded compound might not interact or can interact minimally with the gel network—such compounds are called inactive fillers (Figure 8A,B).

Protein and polysaccharide hydrogels can be used as delivery systems for polyphenols, a group of compounds (over 8000 phenolic compounds) with a range of physiological functions, including antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, anti-virus, antibacterial, and immunity enhancement. These functional properties are mainly related to the phenolic groups and the conjugated double bonds [173]. Polyphenols are widely used in the food industry, but their bioavailability still imposes challenges because of their poor solubility and stability [174]. That is why many researchers are involved in designing a food-grade hydrogel carrier that can protect those compounds from oxygen, heat, light, and pH degradation. The latest finding regarding the use of hydrogels as delivery systems for phenolic compounds and vitamins are mentioned below.



**Figure 8.** Schematic representation of the way in which bioactive substances can be embedded into a hydrogel matrix. (A) The hydrophilic bioactive substance is an inactive filler; (B) the hydrophobic bioactive substance is encapsulated in oil droplets and the oil droplets are inactive fillers. (C) the hydrophobic bioactive substance is encapsulated in oil droplets and the oil droplets are active fillers; (D) the hydrophilic bioactive substance is an active filler; Based on Farjami et al. [172], Liu et al. [41] and Li et al. [1].

Curcumin, a phenolic compound extracted from turmeric (*Curcuma longa* Linn.), has been well known for its health-promoting properties (antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, antirheumatic, immunomodulatory, anti-carcinogenic). However, it exhibits poor water solubility and low bioavailability after ingestion [175]. Recently, proteins and polysaccharides-based hydrogels were developed to improve curcumin's stability and bioavailability. George et al. [176], in their research on cellulose-chitosan-zinc oxide composite hydrogels for the encapsulation of curcumin, reported that the loading efficiency reached 89.68%. In addition, the obtained hydrogel exhibited an antimicrobial effect on *Trichophyton rubrum* and *Staphylococcus aureus* and a controlled release at pH 7.4. In another study, curcumin was embedded in a chitosan/lotus root pectin hydrogel with an efficiency of 90.3% and improved solubility and stability [173]. Moreover, a nanoparticles-in-microparticles hydrogel system was fabricated by electrospray technology for curcumin colon-targeting oral delivery, which enabled curcumin release and entry to the macrophages [177]. Kour et al. [178] studied the effect of nanoemulsion-loaded hybrid biopolymeric hydrogel beads on the release kinetics, antioxidant potential, and antibacterial activity of encapsulated curcumin. They found that the high structural stability of the obtained carriers and their effective delivery of curcumin can provide a novel and tailored formulation out of polymers for oral drug delivery.

Epigallocatechin gallate (EGGG) is a catechin phenolic active compound with several health-beneficial properties, such as antioxidant, anti-tumor, antiviral, antibacterial, and cardio cerebral vessel protective. The polyhydroxy structure of catechins makes them unstable in neutral and alkaline pH. Additionally, they can be glucosylated or methylated by gastrointestinal tract enzymes, making them highly unstable and biologically unavailable [179]. To improve the stability and release of EGGG, Wang et al. [180] prepared a composite protein-polysaccharide hydrogel using carboxymethyl konjac glucomannan and gelatin. Authors reported that obtained hydrogels had better pH-sensitive properties, which enhanced the encapsulation and the bioavailability of EGGG. Furthermore, Yu et al. [181] reported that EGGG added to collagen hydrogels acted as an active filler by narrowing the pore size and strengthening the collagen fiber network. This effect

was due to the formation of covalent bonds between lysine and EGCG. What is more, the incorporation of nanofiber particles coated with epigallocatechin-gallate (EGCG) into gelatin methacryloyl hydrogel reduced the free-radical-derived cellular damage when using 3D tissue fabrication (ex vivo) [182]. Wu et al. [183] demonstrated that using konjac galactomannan with the addition of oxidized hyaluronic acid enhances the stability and control release of EGGG. Other studies also reported the positive effect of EGGG on the structural remodeling of soy protein-derived amyloid fibrils hydrogel [184].

Resveratrol is another poorly water-soluble polyphenolic compound that exhibits various physiological properties (e.g., oxidative stress, anti-inflammatory, anti-obesity, anti-cancer, etc.) [185]. Additionally, to its poor water solubility, resveratrol is characterized by a fast metabolism in the gastrointestinal environment, which affects bioavailability. Fan et al. [186] prepared pea protein particles with calcium-induced cross-linking in which they encapsulated resveratrol. This encapsulation led to enhancing the physicochemical stability of the compounds, as well as led to a better antioxidant ability. Other studies on the improvement of resveratrol stability included the preparation of a resveratrol-loaded nanostructured lipid carrier hydrogel that significantly enhanced anti-UV irradiation and anti-oxidative activity in vitro and in vivo [187]. Currently, Pickering emulsion presents a high potential in the encapsulation of resveratrol. Based on Wu et al.'s [188] reports, it is possible to conclude that Pickering emulsion prepared using sodium alginate and pectin has a promising potential in developing low-calorie food products while contributing to the delivery of resveratrol to the gastrointestinal tract.

Anthocyanins are water-soluble flavonoids with high antioxidant activity. Their use in the food industry is limited due to their rapid degradation triggered by the pH value. They also have a low bioavailability and recovery rate after ingestion because of their low resistance to environmental changes [189]. Additionally, Jin et al. [190], in their study, prepared a konjac glucomannan and xanthan gum hydrogel in which they embedded anthocyanins. They reported that this synergistic hydrogel enhanced the thermal stability of anthocyanins at various pH values (3.0, 6.0, and 9.0). Ćorković et al. [191] also reported that the use of carboxymethylcellulose hydrogel as polyphenol carriers, specifically anthocyanins, helped preserve their antioxidant capacity. These findings showcased that proper formulation of food hydrogel, including the proper selection of biopolymers, can significantly maximize the retention of anthocyanins. In the current study conducted by Liu et al. [192], it was reported that the efficiency of anthocyanin encapsulation in gelatin/gellan hydrogel was high because of the high density of the formed structure. Moreover, the gelatin/gellan hydrogel protected the embedded anthocyanins during digestion, increasing its bioavailability in the small intestine. However, the proper selection of hydrogel building components is critical because anthocyanins may be degraded rather than protected, as observed in the studies of Kopjar et al. [193], in which the fortification of anthocyanins-loaded pectin hydrogel with apple fibers caused a substantial degradation in the retention of the anthocyanins. Furthermore, hydrogel loaded with anthocyanins can also be utilized as a colorimetric pH indicator to monitor, for example, the freshness of food products [166,194,195].

Quercetin, a flavonoid with beneficial properties, such as exhibited antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, anticancer, and cardioprotective, also exhibits low solubility and physico-chemical instability, making it hard to be absorbed and utilized by the human body [196]. Several hydrogel systems have been recently prepared to protect this compound from the environment and raise its bioavailability. Quercetin-loaded pH-sensitive gellan gum hydrogels were induced using an ionotropic gelation method, and it was found that the obtained hydrogel beads had a pH-responsive release behavior. This release behavior improved the intestinal stability of this bioactive substance [35]. Moreover, Liu et al. [197] developed a lotus root amylopectin-coated whey protein hydrogel to protect quercetin. They reported that the obtained hydrogel enhanced the stability of quercetin while improving its bioavailability (in mice). In another study, linseed oil and quercetin were co-loaded to liposome-chitosan hydrogel beads. Based on the obtained results, the authors found that the chemical stability of quercetin could be improved by loading liposomes into hydrogel

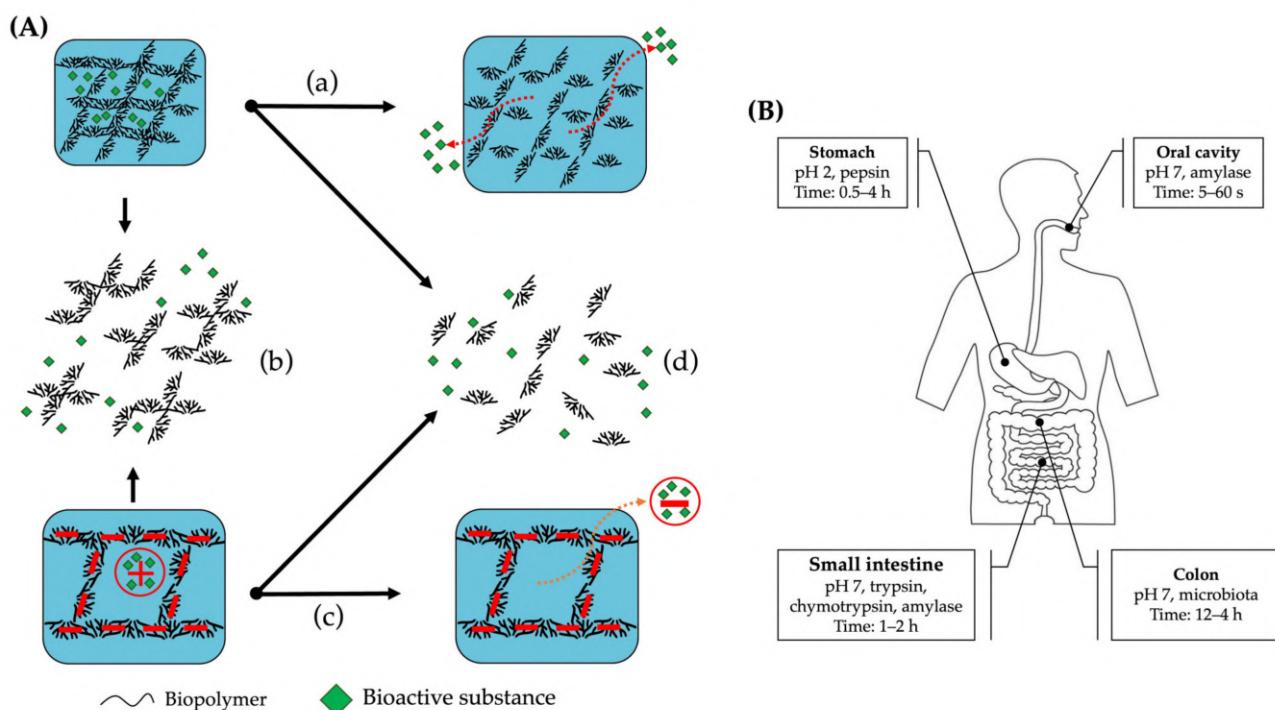
beads [198]. Moreover, Hu et al. [199] studied the co-encapsulation of epigallocatechin and quercetin in double-emulsion hydrogel beads and reported that obtained hydrogel beads inhibited oil digestion while increasing quercetin bioavailability.

Hydrogels obtained using food-grade biopolymers (proteins and polysaccharides) have been utilized for vitamin protection and delivery. The complexation of vitamin A and milk protein has been proven to increase the water-solubility and the light and heat stability of this vitamin [200]. Moreover, Rana et al. [201] also reported that vitamin A-loaded caseinate complexes improved vitamin A bioavailability. Similarly, Kaur et al. [202] highlighted the potential of chitosan and gelatin-based hydrogel to deliver vitamin B<sub>1</sub>. A chemically crosslinked cellulose–hemicellulose-based vitamin B<sub>12</sub>-loaded hydrogel was also reported to be effective in releasing this vitamin when the *in vitro* release is performed in successive buffers (from pH 1.2 to 7.4) [203]. Furthermore, β-cyclodextrin-soy soluble polysaccharide-based hydrogel was used to encapsulate and deliver vitamin E, showcasing the tunability of the swelling release properties of this vitamin both *in-vitro* and *in-vivo* [204]. Moreover, Martinez et al. [205] reported that the incorporation of vitamin E into a bigel (a combination of a hydrogel and an organogel) increased the diameter of the inner phase and the strength of the obtained structure. Mir et al. [206], in their research on glycerol-crosslinked guar gum monoaldehyde-based superabsorbent hydrogels for vitamin B<sub>6</sub>, concluded that the release of vitamin B<sub>6</sub> depended on the pH of the medium (at pH 7, the concentration of the released vitamin was 79.2%).

### 5.2. Bioactive Substances Targeted Transport and Controlled Release

Because of the ability of hydrogels to hold large amounts of water or biological fluids, they can be used as carriers for bioactive substances, which can be embedded in the 3D hydrogel's structure. Hydrogels have significant potential in developing targeted release systems, which can release the embedded substances into the digestive tract. When choosing biopolymers such as building blocks, what needs to be taken into consideration is their digestibility [207–209]. Proteins are known to be very efficiently digestible because of multiple peptidases in the digestive system. Additionally, denatured proteins in hydrogels obtained using heat induction are even more digestible [210]. On the other hand, polysaccharides have diverse digestion pathways, which depend on their type. For example, starch digestibility varies from rapidly digestible to indigestible. Some starches can be rapidly hydrolyzed by amylase in the mouth or the small intestine [211]. However, some polysaccharides, such as inulin, pectin, alginate, etc., can only be fermented by the microbiota in the colon [212,213].

Binary protein–polysaccharide hydrogels that deliver bioactive compounds to specific areas of the digestive tract can be developed based on the properties of the biopolymers used as hydrogel building blocks. These hydrogels can be designed to deliver the bioactive substance in the right place and time under the influence of factors such as pH, temperature, enzyme, or microbiota. These factors affect the hydrogel's 3D structure, leading to its swelling or shrinkage and the release of the compound [214,215]. Based on the physiological conditions in different parts of the human digestive tract, it is possible to design a suitable hydrogel to deliver the bioactive compound to the targeted delivery site. The embedded bioactive substances can be released (*Figure 9A*) via swelling (change in volume), disintegration (dissociation of electrostatic coacervates), change in the molecular interactions (e.g., change in the electrostatic interaction between the bioactive compound and the polymeric building blocks), erosion (fermentation by the microbiota, digestion by enzymes) of the hydrogel's carriers [216]. For the hydrogels to deliver the embedded compound to the oral cavity, stomach, or small intestine, they should be pH- and enzyme-sensitive (*Figure 9B*). When the targeted site is the colon, the used hydrogel should be pH-sensitive and fermentable by the microbiota [208].



**Figure 9.** Food hydrogel and the digestive system interaction. (A) Potential pathways for targeted compound release from hydrogels: (a) swelling; (b) disintegration; (c) molecular interaction; (d) erosion. (B) Schematic representations of physiological conditions (pH, enzyme, and retention time) of the gastrointestinal tract [207,216,217].

Certain hydrogels can respond to chemical changes in the pH and ionic composition in the environment surrounding them. This response leads to changes in the structure of the polymer network. Such hydrogels are called pH- and ion-responsive [218]. Xie et al. [219] reported that they synthesized a hydrogel using Chinese quince seed gum, which has promising potential for the oral delivery of drugs. Furthermore, Sariyer et al. [220] developed pH-responsive alginate and  $\kappa$ -carrageenan hydrogels for the targeted release of bovine serum albumin. The targeted delivery of albumin to the intestines was achieved through diffusion and polymer structure relaxation. Temperature-responsive hydrogels are another type of carrier that respond to the changes in the temperature of the environment they are in by swelling or shrinking, which allows for the bioactive compounds to be released from the gel structure [221]. Temperature-responsive hydrogels might not be used to deliver bioactive substances to the stomach, small intestine, and colon but instead for oral (buccal) delivery. The such hydrogel can be developed to release the embedded substance at a temperature of 37 °C. Baus et al. [222] assessed in-vitro methods for the characterization of mucoadhesive hydrogels prepared using biopolymers, such as hydroxyethyl cellulose, carboxymethyl cellulose, xanthan gum, hyaluronic acid, and sodium alginate. They found out that xanthan gum had the highest resistance to the removal by artificial saliva. They also reported that based on the residence time of hydrogels, it is possible to develop a formulation with the best mucoadhesive properties for the delivery of bioactive compounds to the buccal area. Another type of hydrogel undergoes changes in its structure because of the activity of a specific enzyme. These hydrogels are enzyme-responsive and can be used to deliver a compound to a specific region of the digestive tract—where the concentration of enzymes, such as proteases or amylases, are the highest. The microbiota can also release the embedded compounds since it also produces enzymes that are not produced by the human gastrointestinal tract and can hydrolyze specific bonds of the biopolymers present in the 3D structure of the hydrogel. Wang et al. [223] developed an intestine enzyme-responsive polysaccharide-based hydrogel using carboxymethyl chitosan embedded with

an antitumor-selective kinase inhibitor. They reported that the obtained hydrogel was able to enhance the therapeutic efficiency.

Because of the wide range of possibilities in developing protein–polysaccharide hydrogels, it is possible to design hydrogels that can be responsive to multiple stimuli depending on the targeted delivery area. Zhao and Li [224] obtained pH- and temperature-responsive hydrogels using Tremella polysaccharides, carboxymethyl cellulose, and nonionic surfactants as the main hydrogel building blocks. Whereas Liao and Huang [225] obtained a pH- and magnetic-responsive hydrogel using carboxymethyl chitin, for which the swelling structure degree can be regulated depending on the concentration levels of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ , the release mechanism is triggered by pH modulation.

## 6. Concluding Remarks and Future Perspectives

Protein–polysaccharide hydrogels have great potential for overcoming the limitations of hydrogels prepared with a single biopolymer, such as poor water-holding capacity and gel strength, as well as physical instability. In this review, we conducted a bibliometric analysis to characterize research trends in food protein–polysaccharide hydrogels (over the last ten years). We also discussed the latest development in conventional methods of inducing proteins and polysaccharides gelation (pH, temperature, ions modulation, and enzymatic crosslinking) and the new, unconventional induction methods, such as high-pressure and pulsed electric field treatment. Additionally, the newest developments regarding the application of hydrogels as food matrices, specifically as carriers for the targeted delivery of bioactive compounds, were discussed.

The studies regarding protein–polysaccharide hydrogels in food science are still minimal. This knowledge gap allows for new findings to be implemented in developing novel hydrogels for food applications. This hydrogel development can be achieved through a cross-integrated multidisciplinary approach between the food industry and other industry areas with advanced hydrogel knowledge (pharmaceutical, biomedical).

Protein–polysaccharide hydrogels have a promising potential in food applications by improving the stability and increasing the nutritive value of food systems while building a structural matrix that can be utilized as non-invasive bioactive compounds-targeted delivery systems. These highly tunable hydrogel properties can allow for the development of new, health-promoting plant-based or hybrid food systems that provide consumers with all the necessary nutrients based on their physiological needs. Therefore, there is considerable room for further research in a wide range of food hydrogel applications. There is a particular need to assess the possibility of using building blocks, such as plant-based proteins and polysaccharides, to develop a food hydrogel matrix that will protect the bioactive compound during processing, storage, and digestion, while increasing the bioavailability of these bioactive substances in the specific targeted area of the digestive system.

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## Article

# A Comparative Evaluation of the Structural and Biomechanical Properties of Food-Grade Biopolymers as Potential Hydrogel Building Blocks

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study was to conduct a comparative assessment of the structural and biomechanical properties of eight selected food-grade biopolymers (pea protein, wheat protein, gellan gum, konjac gum, inulin, maltodextrin, psyllium, and tara gum) as potential hydrogel building blocks. The prepared samples were investigated in terms of the volumetric gelling index, microrheological parameters, physical stability, and color parameters. Pea protein, gellan gum, konjac gum, and psyllium samples had high VGI values (100%), low solid–liquid balance ( $SLB < 0.5$ ), and high macroscopic viscosity index (MVI) values (53.50, 59.98, 81.58, and  $45.62 \text{ nm}^{-2}$ , respectively) in comparison with the samples prepared using wheat protein, maltodextrin, and tara gum ( $SLB > 0.5$ , MVI: 13.58, 0.04, and  $0.25 \text{ nm}^{-2}$ , respectively). Inulin had the highest elasticity index value ( $31.05 \text{ nm}^{-2}$ ) and MVI value ( $590.17 \text{ nm}^{-2}$ ). The instability index was the lowest in the case of pea protein, gellan gum, konjac gum, and inulin (below 0.02). The color parameters and whiteness index (WI) of each biopolymer differed significantly from one another. Based on the obtained results, pea protein, gellan gum, konjac gum, and psyllium hydrogels had similar structural and biomechanical properties, while inulin hydrogel had the most diverse properties. Wheat protein, maltodextrin, and tara gum did not form a gel structure.



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**Keywords:** protein; polysaccharide; mechanical properties; microrheology; physical stability; gel matrix

## 1. Introduction

Hydrogels are a three-dimensional network of hydrophilic polymers with viscoelastic properties. Creating a matrix with high-water content is possible due to the formation of structural networks [1]. Hydrogels have aroused a wide range of interest due to their promising applications as tissue engineering materials [2,3], controlled-release drug delivery carriers [4,5], biomedicine materials [6,7], soft robotic components [8,9], and biosensors [10,11], etc. However, in recent years, the need to address issues such as resource renewability, sustainability, and affordability has been recognized. Furthermore, some applications, particularly in the biomedical [12], food [13], pharmaceutical [14], and cosmetic [15] sectors, require non-synthetic building blocks (polymers).

Naturally sourced hydrogel building blocks (biopolymers) have great potential in achieving the above-mentioned goals, while being biocompatible, biodegradable, and edible. These biopolymers are proteins and polysaccharides with different biomechanical and functional properties [16]. Natural biopolymers are typically obtained from natural resources such as animals (e.g., gelatin [17], whey protein [18], chitosan [19]), plants (e.g., soy protein [20], pea proteins [21], inulin [22], cellulose [23]), microorganisms (e.g., gellan gum [24], curdlan [25]), and algae (e.g., carrageenan [26], agarose [27]) via bioprocessing and chemical modification. Furthermore, because of the high reactivity of their functional groups, these biopolymers can be modified to meet the demands of various specific functions (mechanical properties, solubility, gel structure, etc.) [28]. Although it is a recent trend,

plant-based biopolymers are increasingly gaining more interest due to their functional properties and sustainability. Plant polysaccharide-based biopolymers (e.g., gellan gum, konjac gum, inulin, maltodextrin, tara gum, cellulose, starch, pectin) and plant protein-based biopolymers (e.g., soy, pea, zein) are promising hydrogel building blocks [12].

Protein and polysaccharide hydrogels are generally induced by physical (heating, cooling, shear forces, etc.) and chemical (pH modulation, salt addition, etc.) induction techniques, or by a mixed technique to achieve the desired properties [13]. They are mostly formed by physical crosslinking (electrostatic, hydrogen bonding, hydrophobic, or Van der Waals interactions, or their combination). Chemical crosslinking can also occur in the case of the formation of disulfide bonds, the use of enzymes (e.g., glutaminase), or the use of the Millard reaction to induce the cross-linkage of the polymeric chain [1]. When food-grade (safe for human consumption) biopolymers are combined, their gelation and physicochemical properties change. Moreover, combining proteins and polysaccharides can result in a wide variety of structures [29,30]. Such binary food-grade hydrogels can be made by a simple physical complexation, meaning that they can be tuned with variables such as mixing ratio, pH, and ion strength [31].

Biopolymer hydrogels have a wide range of potential applications in different sectors. They can be used in tissue engineering to mimic the extracellular matrix (ECM), providing a non-immunogenic biocompatible scaffold [32]. Pre-gel hydrogels are injected, and when applied, they form the appropriate structure that conforms to the shape of the tissue defect. They are considered ideal matrices in the repair of articular cartilage due to the large amount of bound water [33]. Many studies have shown that hydrogels prepared using natural polymers act as an accelerating anti-inflammatory agent in wound healing [34,35]. Hydrogels are highly permeable to various drugs. They are used to release the drug molecule via physical or chemical changes in their structure [36]. For example, these systems are being used as a novel treatment for skin cancer. They are used for transdermal drug delivery, which improves the transport of antitumor agents. However, this treatment system is only applicable to the treatment of skin cancer, as cancerous lesions in other tissues are not readily available to hydrogels. Nevertheless, researchers are attempting to develop hydrogel drug carriers to deliver anti-cancer agents in the treatment of colon, breast, and ovarian cancer [37]. Moreover, natural biopolymer-based hydrogels are being tested for their ability to be used in the production of nontoxic, renewable, wearable, and stretchable biosensors. These hydrogel-based biosensors have a promising potential for detecting physiological parameters, such as body motions and temperature, physical, respiratory rate, humidity, heart rate, and environmental conditions variability. Therefore, they can play crucial roles in everyday human health care [28,38,39]. Because of their ability to deliver and maintain an appropriate therapeutic dose, hydrogels are also widely used in ophthalmic drugs. The high water content and active ingredients of hydrogels increase the effectiveness of treatment, allowing the drug to remain on the surface of the eyeball for up to seven times longer than drugs that do not use hydrogels [40]. Additionally, biopolymeric hydrogels can mimic fat and sugar in various foods. By incorporating the hydrogel into a fat-free (light) product it is possible to maintain the desired creaminess and mouthfeel. This can be achieved by the increasing of mouth surface lubrication, which gives a similar effect to fat [41]. Biopolymeric hydrogels can also be used to control the release of sugars to compensate for the loss of flavor intensity caused by the reduction of sugar and salt in gelled foods [42,43]. Furthermore, the digestion of the denatured proteins used in gel formation is very efficient due to the abundance of peptidases present in the gastrointestinal tract. On the other hand, the digestion of polysaccharides varies extremely. Some types of starch are rapidly hydrolyzed by amylase in the mouth and small intestine, while most other polysaccharides, collectively known as dietary fibers, are not digested but can be fermented by the prebiotic bacteria (e.g., inulin, pectin, psyllium) [44,45]. This can allow the use of biopolymer hydrogels to prolong the satiety effect of foods, and more importantly to enhance the gastrointestinal stability of bioactive compounds they can be carrying [46]. Some applications of biopolymeric hydrogels are highly interdisciplinary (drug delivery

system, matrix for tissue culture, etc.). For example, proteins and polysaccharides can be used to produce hydrogels that can deliver bioactive substances, including drugs (pharmaceuticals) to a specific section of the gastrointestinal tract, while protecting the bioactive compound from harsh digestive conditions [47]. These functional bioactive compounds delivery systems can be incorporated into food systems to deliver nutraceuticals. They can also act as therapeutic and smart platforms for carrying pharmaceuticals in many branches of medicine (cardiology, oncology, immunology, and pain management) [2]. Food-grade biopolymers used in the production of hydrogels are safe when used as implantable materials or in cell culture, which is also required in the production of non-mammalian edible scaffolds for in-vitro meat production, which is gaining popularity [48]. Biopolymeric hydrogels are also well known for their biodegradability (related to the possibility of metabolizing into products harmless to humans and the environment) [49].

To summarize, it can be stated that food-grade biopolymers (protein and polysaccharides) have a great potential in the biomedical, food, pharmaceutical, and cosmetic sectors due to their renewability, sustainability, affordability, biocompatibility, biodegradability, and edibility. Nonetheless, due to the lack of publications on this topic, preliminary comparative studies of the gelling ability of different biopolymers and their potential as hydrogel building blocks are needed. For this purpose, eight food-grade biopolymers were selected to evaluate their gelling ability and potential as hydrogel building blocks.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Material

Pea protein (PP, NUTRALYS® F85F, protein content 88%, ash 10%), wheat protein (WP, NUTRALYS® W, protein content 85%, ash 10%), and maltodextrin (MD, GLUCIDEX® 1, dextrose equivalent (DE) 5, ash 0.5%) were obtained from Roquette Freres, (Lestrem, France). Gellan gum (GG, high acyl Type 900, particle size: min. 95% mesh through 80 mesh), konjac gum (KG, Type CKHY 1240, particle size: min. 90% through 100–120 mesh), Psyllium Husk Powder (PS, type 10351, purity: 95%, particle size: 60 mesh), and tara gum (TG, Type 5000, particle size: min. 80% through 100 mesh) were obtained from C.E. Roeper GmbH, (Hamburg, Germany). Inulin (INU, Type Orafti® HPX, average degree of polymerization DP  $\geq$  23) was purchased from BENEOP GmbH (Mannhei, Germany).

### 2.2. Samples Preparation

The optimal gelling concentration described in the available literature was considered in determining the concentration level for each biopolymer. Pea protein (PP), wheat protein (WP), inulin (INU), and maltodextrin (MD)—concentration 20 g/100 g. Konjac gum (KG) and psyllium (PS)—concentration 1.5 g/ 100 g. Gellan gum (GG) and tara gum (TG)—concentration 0.4 g/100 g. The preparation of the samples involved dispersing the chosen biopolymers in distilled water (80 °C) using a homogenizer (20,000 rpm for 1 min). Then the solutions were stored (in 20 mL glass vials) for 24 h at a temperature of 8 °C to let them develop a gel-like structure.

### 2.3. Methods

#### 2.3.1. Volumetric Gelling Index (VGI) and Sample Appearance after Inversion

The VGI was used to assess the degree of hydrogel formation. It is a parameter that expresses the ability of a dispersion to form a gel structure. When the gel structure is not formed, VGI equals zero, and when the sample is completely gelled, VGI equals 100%. VGI is calculated based on the following equation [19]:

$$VGI = \frac{V_G}{V_T} \times 100$$

where  $V_G$ —volume of the formulated gel,  $V_T$ —total volume of the sample. The reported values represent the averages of three replicates. Furthermore, the samples were evaluated

in terms of their appearance after the vials were inverted. It is a visual test to determine whether a sample has formed a gel structure or is still a sol [50].

### 2.3.2. Microrheological Properties

The Rheolaser Master device (Formulaction, L'Union, France) was used to investigate the microrheological properties of the samples. The device operates based on dynamic MS-DWS (Multi Speckle Diffusing Wave Spectroscopy) technique in the near-infrared (wavelength of 650 nm). The detector captures the interfering backscattered waves, and the measurement results were recorded using the Rheotest software [51]. Based on the obtained raw data, the following microrheological parameters were determined: Mean Square Displacement (MSD) curves, elasticity index (EI) [ $\text{nm}^{-2}$ ], solid–liquid balance (SLB) [ $\text{nm}^2$ ], and macroscopic viscosity index (MVI) [ $\text{nm}^{-2}$ ]. The MSD value is the mean of several scattering trajectories of the particle movement as a function of time in the analyzed sample. EI is directly proportional to the elastic modulus ( $G'$ ) and is calculated as the reciprocal of the MSD value at the plateau. SLB corresponds to the dimensionless ratio of modulus of elasticity and modulus of viscosity loss  $G'/G''$ . MVI is the equivalent of the apparent viscosity at zero shear and is calculated as the reciprocal of the MSD slope [52]. The reported values represent the averages of three replicates.

### 2.3.3. Physical Stability

The physical stability of the obtained gels was assessed using LUMiSizer 6120-75 (L.U.M. GmbH, Berlin, Germany). This physical stability assessment technic involves subjecting the samples to centrifugal force while illuminating the entire sample cell with near-infrared (NIR) light. The sensor simultaneously measures the intensity of transmitted light as a function of time and position over the entire sample length, and the data is converted and recorded using the provided software (SepView 6.0; LUM, Berlin, Germany). For this analysis, the following parameters were used: dispersion volume 1.8 mL; wavelength 870 nm; light factor 1; 1500 rpm; experiment period 15 h 10 min; interval time 210 s; temperature 20 °C. Based on the recorded data, the destabilization behavior (fingerprint) was obtained, and the instability index was computed [53,54]. The reported values represent the averages of three replicates.

### 2.3.4. Color Parameters

The color parameters were measured using a CR-5 stationary colorimeter (Konica Minolta, Tokyo, Japan) in the CIE system ( $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ ) with a D65 illuminant. Before each use the device was calibrated, and to exclude the mirror image of the measurement vessel (diameter 5 cm, height 2 cm) in which the sample was placed, the specular component excluded method was used. The measurements were taken five times for each of the three replicates (at a temperature of  $20 \pm 1$  °C). The brightness of the studied sample is indicated by the  $L^*$  color parameter that ranges from 0 to 100 (higher values means brighter samples). The  $a^*$  parameter represents the share of green (negative value) and red (positive value) color. The  $b^*$  color parameter values represent the share of blue (negative value) or yellow (positive value) color in the samples [55]. The reported values represent the averages of three replicates. Additionally, to determine the whiteness of the obtained samples, the whiteness index (WI) of each dispersion was calculated as follows [56]:

$$WI = 100 - \sqrt{(100 - L^*)^2 + a^{*2} + b^{*2}}$$

where:  $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ , and  $b^*$  refer to the color parameters of each analyzed sample. To determine the color differences between all the samples, the total color difference parameter  $\Delta E$  was calculated as follows [55]:

$$\Delta E = \sqrt{(L_{s1}^* - L_{s2}^*)^2 + (a_{s1}^* - a_{s2}^*)^2 + (b_{s1}^* - b_{s2}^*)^2}$$

where:  $L_{S1}^*$ ;  $a_{S1}^*$ ;  $b_{S1}^*$  and  $L_{S2}^*$ ;  $a_{S2}^*$ ;  $b_{S2}^*$  refer to the color parameters of the compared samples. The color difference between the samples can be estimated as not noticeable for the observer, when  $0 < \Delta E < 1$ ; only experienced observers can notice the difference, when  $1 < \Delta E < 2$ ; unexperienced observers can notice the difference, when  $2 < \Delta E < 3.5$ ; clear color difference is noticed, when  $3.5 < \Delta E < 5$ ; an observer notices two different colors, when  $5 < \Delta E$ .

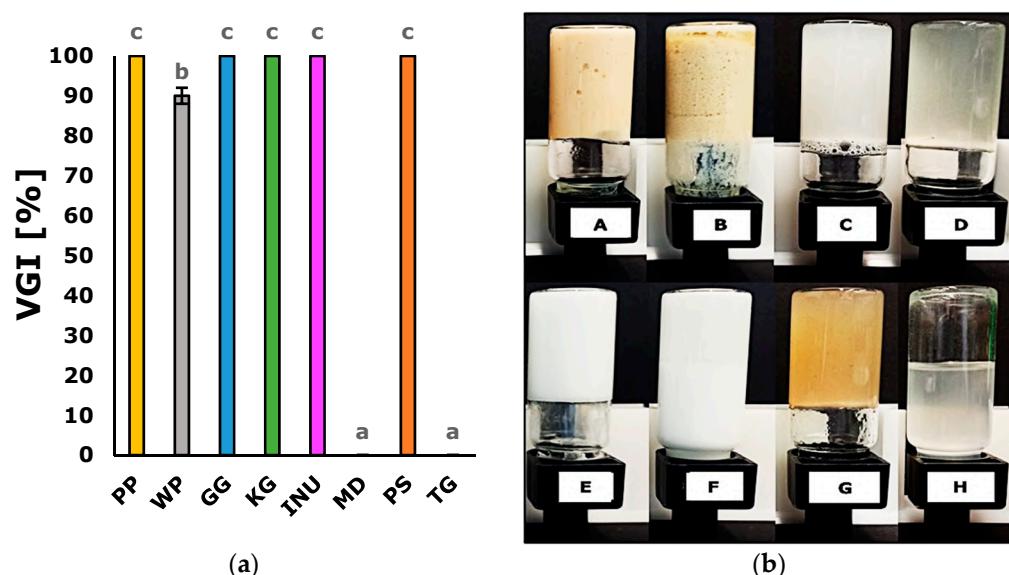
### 2.3.5. Statistical Analysis

One-way ANOVA analysis of variance was used to determine the significance of differences between the average values of microrheological parameters (EI, SLB, MVI), the instability index, and the color parameters ( $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ ), and the whiteness index (WI). Tukey's test at significant level = 0.05 was used to confirm the significant differences between the biopolymers. Additionally, the results were assessed using the principal component analysis (PCA) and hierachal cluster analysis (HCA). All the analyses were performed using Statistica13.3 (TIBICO Software Inc., Tulsa, OK, USA).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Volumetric Gelling Index (VGI) and Sample Appearance after Inversion

To determine the ability to form a gel structure by the tested biopolymers the volumetric gelling index (VGI) was determined. The mean values of VGI and the images of the analyzed biopolymers are presented in Figure 1. Based on the visual evaluation, as well as VGI of the obtained samples, it was found that pea protein (PP), gellan gum (GG), konjac gum (KG), inulin (INU), and psyllium (PS) formed a gel-like structure (VGI = 100%). Maltodextrin (MD) and tara gum (TG) were fluid (VGI = 0%). In the case of wheat protein (WP), it was observed that the structure was not homogenous, and some of the aqueous phases got separated (it resembled an insoluble complex that has precipitated, VGI = 90%). It was also observed that GG, KG, and PS were slightly transparent compared to the other samples.



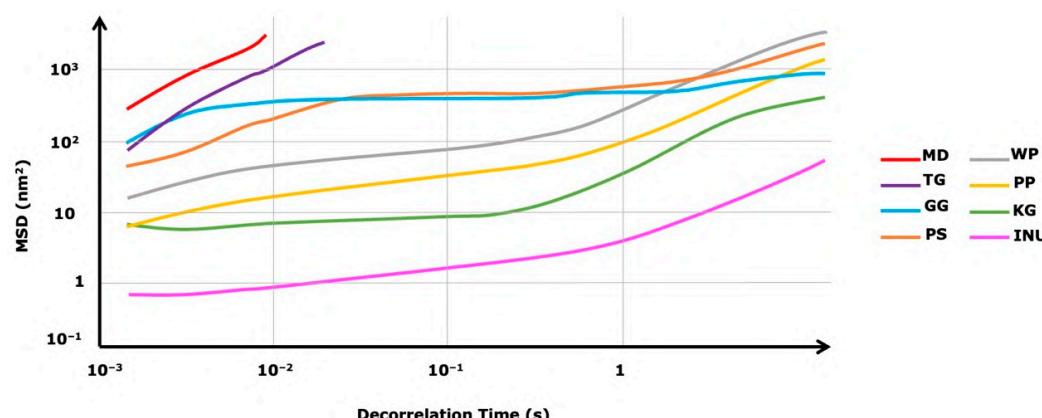
**Figure 1.** Volumetric gelling index (a) of the samples obtained using the analyzed biopolymers, and the appearance of the samples in the vials observed immediately after inversion (b), where: (A) pea protein—PP; (B) wheat protein—WP; (C) gellan gum—GG; (D) konjac gum—KG; (E) inulin—INU; (F) maltodextrin—MD; (G) psyllium—PS; (H) tara gum—TG. According to Turkey's test, the values followed by the same letter (a–c) do not differ significantly ( $p > 0.05$ ).

### 3.2. Microrheological Properties

The microrheological properties were determined using the MD-DWS method, which allows for the measurement to be carried out in a non-invasive way (no mechanical/external

stress). The rectilinearity of the MSD profiles indicates that the analyzed sample is fluid, exhibiting Newtonian fluid behavior. The non-rectilinear curve path occurs at the transition from fluid to sol. When the examined samples change from sol to gel the MSD profiles achieve a plateau. This means that the particles are not able to move freely due to the formation of a network interaction.

The mean square displacement MSD of each analyzed biopolymer as a function of decorrelation time is presented in Figure 2. Based on the presented MSD profiles, it was observed that in the case of MD and TG the MSD profiles were the most rectilinear, meaning that the particles were freely moving in the continuous phase (fluid/liquid samples). On the other hand, in the case of GG and PS samples, the MSD profiles path was less rectilinear, which means that they were in a sol state (or they were exhibiting properties of a soft gel structure). KG, PP, WP, and INU had non-rectilinear MSD curves that were moving closer to the baseline (INU MSD profile was the closest to the baseline). Additionally, the profiles began to plateau, meaning that the freely moving particles got entrapped in a network structure (cage) that was formed by the viscoelastic system.



**Figure 2.** Selected mean square displacement MSD of the analyzed biopolymers, as a function of decorrelation time.

The mean values of the microrheology parameters: solid–liquid balance (SLB), elasticity index (EI), and macroscopic viscosity index (MVI) are presented in Table 1. SLB is directly proportional to the viscoelastic properties of the samples and indicates changes in the ratio from liquid-like to solid-like behavior. The samples with the significantly highest SLB value were maltodextrin (MD) and tara gum (TG), which means that they exhibited a more liquid-like behavior—no gel structure ( $SLB > 0.5$ ). On the contrary, PP, GG, KG, INU, and PS exhibited more solid-like behavior ( $SLB < 0.5$ ), which can be due to the formation of a gel structure in these samples. In the case of the WP sample, SLB was  $0.57 \text{ nm}^{-2}$ , which means that the sol was close to getting to the gelling point where  $SLB = 0.5$ . The elasticity index (EI) is directly proportional to the storage modulus  $G'$  and provides information about the sample's elasticity, which is due to the solid-like characteristic. Based on the obtained EI values, only INU differed significantly from the rest of the biopolymers, with the highest EI value ( $31.05 \times 10^{-2} \text{ nm}^{-2}$ ). Although the SLB values of PP, GG, KG, and PS showed that they exhibited more solid-like behavior, they had low EI values (comparable to the EI values of MD and TG), which can suggest that their gel structure was softer (less elastic). The MVI value of the inulin (INU) samples reached the highest value, which correlates with the elasticity index (EI). PP, GG, KG, and PS had significantly higher MVI values than those of WP, MD, and TG, which proves that although they all had comparable EI values, the WP, MD, and TG did not form a gel structure.

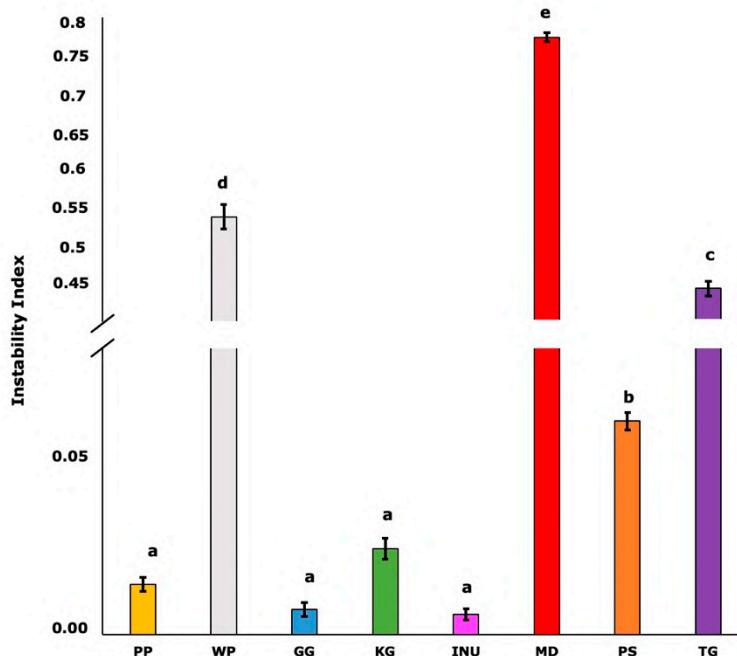
**Table 1.** Comparison of the microrheological parameters of the analyzed biopolymers.

Samples	Microrheology Parameters		
	SLB [nm <sup>-2</sup> ]	EI × 10 <sup>-2</sup> [nm <sup>-2</sup> ]	MVI × 10 <sup>-4</sup> [nm <sup>-2</sup> ]
PP	0.43 <sup>ab</sup> ± 0.01	2.30 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.25	53.50 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.76
WP	0.57 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.03	0.55 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.05	13.58 <sup>a</sup> ± 2.85
GG	0.39 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.02	0.19 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.02	59.98 <sup>b</sup> ± 2.20
KG	0.34 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.13	3.70 <sup>a</sup> ± 1.25	81.58 <sup>b</sup> ± 3.75
INU	0.32 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.01	31.05 <sup>b</sup> ± 3.54	590.17 <sup>c</sup> ± 20.14
MD	0.93 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.01	0.11 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.01	0.04 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.00
PS	0.39 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.04	0.22 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.05	45.62 <sup>b</sup> ± 5.21
TG	0.94 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.01	0.08 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.01	0.25 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.01

All values are mean with standard deviation ( $n = 3$ ). According to Turkey's test, the values followed by the same letter (a–c) do not differ significantly ( $p > 0.05$ ).

### 3.3. Physical Stability

Physical stability is an important parameter in characterizing the ability of biopolymers to form a hydrogel. To assess the physical stability of the analyzed biopolymers, the instability index was calculated. This parameter ranges from 0 for a stable sample to 1 for an unstable sample. The mean values of the instability index for each biopolymer are presented in Figure 3.

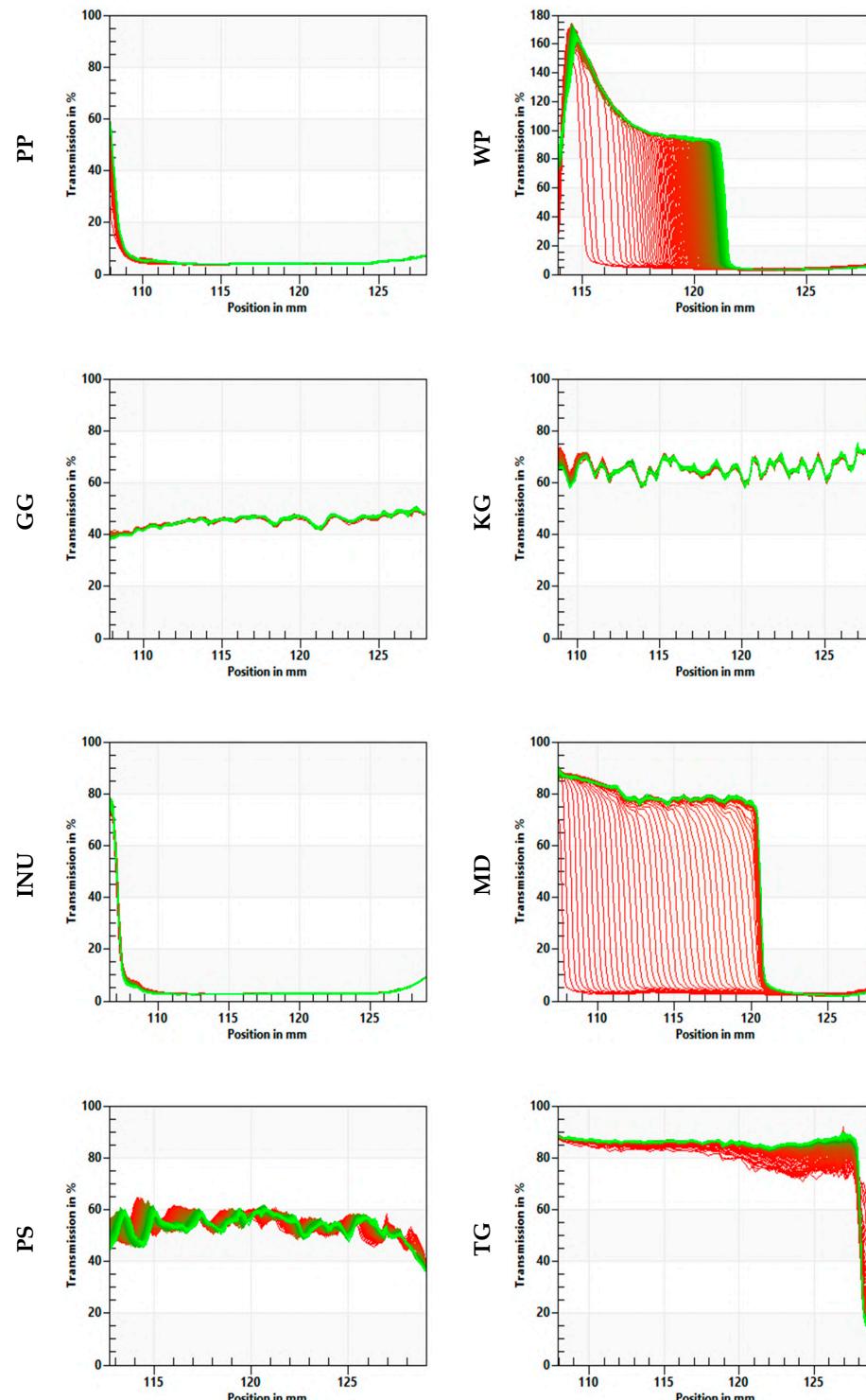


**Figure 3.** Instability index of the analyzed biopolymers. According to Turkey's test, the values followed by the same letter (a–e) do not differ significantly ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Pea protein (PP), gellan gum (GG), konjac gum (KG), and inulin (INU) samples had the lowest value of the instability index (below 0.02). The instability index of PS was significantly higher than PP, GG, KG, and INU, but still relatively low (0.06). Higher instability indexes were recorded for TG (0.44), WP (0.54), and the most physically unstable were the samples prepared using MD (0.77).

The “fingerprints” or transmission profiles indicate changes in the particle concentration within the analyzed samples using the STEP technology (space-time resolved extinction

profiles). In the case of each biopolymer, the evolution of the transmission profiles provides the necessary information on the kinetics of concentration changes caused by phase separation. Additionally, based on the transmission level through the analyzed samples, it is possible to observe the transparency of some systems. The “fingerprints” transmission profiles for each biopolymer are presented in Figure 4. The destabilization was regarded as the structural compression of the sample and the formation of a water layer on the surface.



**Figure 4.** Evolution of transmission profiles (“fingerprints”) of the analyzed biopolymers. The red lines represent the extinction profiles of the sample at the beginning of the analysis and the green lines at the end of the analysis (STEP technology-space and time resolved extinction profiles).

A structural compression was observed in the case of WP, MD, and TG. However, the destabilization of the system was the fastest for maltodextrin (MD) and wheat protein (WP). Based on the transmission profiles, the most stable samples were PP, GG, KG, INU, and PS. Gellan gum (GG), konjac gum (KG), and psyllium (PS) samples had high transparency, which was indicated by the high transmission of the near-infrared (NIR) light through the cell. The light transmission was around 40% for GG, 70% for KG, and 50% for PS. Although the KG and PS samples were stable, a movement in the particles' concentration (including the air that might have become entrapped in the structure during the preparation process) could have caused the fluctuations observed in the fingerprints.

### 3.4. Color Parameters

The mean values of the color parameters ( $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ , and  $b^*$ ) and the whiteness index for each biopolymer are presented in Table 2. Each biopolymer has a characteristic color which is visible in Figure 1 and can be proved by the values of the color parameters that were significantly different for each biopolymer. The highest value of  $L^*$  parameter was recorded for INU and MD. While the highest  $a^*$  value was recorded for PP and the highest  $b^*$  value was in the case of PP and WP. These color parameters affected the whiteness index, which ranged from 15.35 to 91.92. It is worth mentioning that the PS and TG samples had the highest whiteness index due to being the most transparent.

**Table 2.** The color parameters ( $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ , and  $b^*$ ) and the whiteness index of the analyzed biopolymers.

Samples	Color Parameters			
	$L^*$	$a^*$	$b^*$	WI
PP	72.45 <sup>f</sup> ± 0.02	3.44 <sup>g</sup> ± 0.00	20.31 <sup>g</sup> ± 0.00	15.35 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.02
WP	68.63 <sup>e</sup> ± 0.04	1.30 <sup>f</sup> ± 0.03	20.75 <sup>g</sup> ± 0.07	22.68 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.01
GG	42.53 <sup>d</sup> ± 0.02	-1.27 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.00	-2.48 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.09	24.61 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.02
KG	22.69 <sup>b</sup> ± 1.32	-0.19 <sup>d</sup> ± 0.08	-0.58 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.37	42.46 <sup>d</sup> ± 1.32
INU	92.06 <sup>h</sup> ± 0.18	-0.77 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.02	1.23 <sup>e</sup> ± 0.15	62.37 <sup>e</sup> ± 0.15
MD	90.41 <sup>g</sup> ± 0.25	-0.44 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.02	0.73 <sup>d</sup> ± 0.10	65.60 <sup>f</sup> ± 0.25
PS	24.78 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.21	0.13 <sup>e</sup> ± 0.08	5.00 <sup>f</sup> ± 0.16	90.37 <sup>g</sup> ± 0.20
TG	15.37 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.44	-0.19 <sup>d</sup> ± 0.03	-2.00 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.10	91.92 <sup>h</sup> ± 0.44

All values are mean with standard deviation ( $n = 3$ ). According to Turkey's test, the values followed by the same letter (a-h) do not differ significantly ( $p > 0.05$ ).

To comprehensively determine the difference between the studied biopolymers, the total color difference parameter ( $\Delta E$ ) was calculated (Table 3). It was found that in most of the cases,  $\Delta E$  values determined between different biopolymers were higher than 5, which means that the observer notices two different colors. Nonetheless, only an experienced observer could notice the difference ( $1 < \Delta E < 2$ ) between INU and MD. Additionally, there is a noticeable difference in the color between PP and WP.

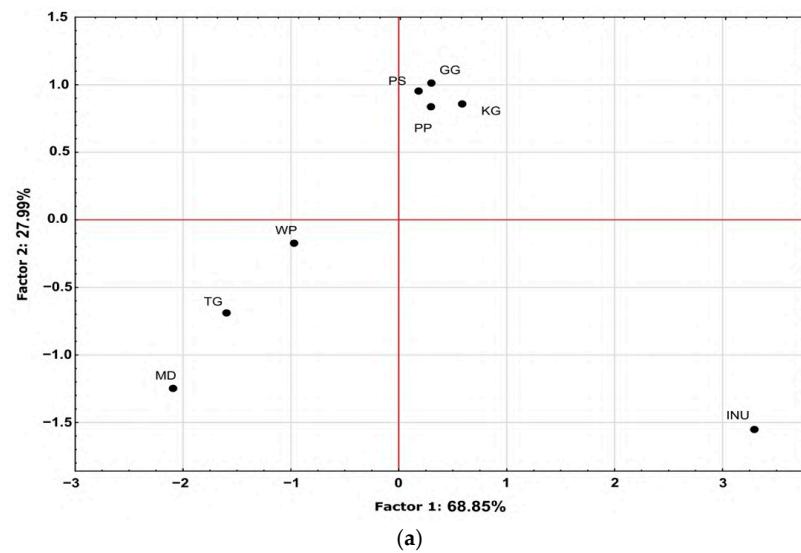
### 3.5. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and Hierarchical Cluster Analysis (HCA)

The PCA and HCA of the obtained result are presented in Figure 5. The principal component analysis (PCA) indicates the relation between the investigated parameters. Two major factors were identified: factor 1 describing 68.85% and factor 27.99% of the variance (96.84% in total). As shown in Figure 5 (PCA and HCA), the analyzed biopolymers differed significantly and could be divided into three groups. The first includes WP, MD, and TG. The second group includes PP, GG, KG, and PS. Inulin (INU) was the only biopolymer that had the largest difference in terms of both factors. However, based on HCA, INU was most similar to PP, GG, KG, and PS. PP, GG, KG, INU, and PS differed the most from WP, MD, and TG, which is also shown by HCA (the biggest distance).

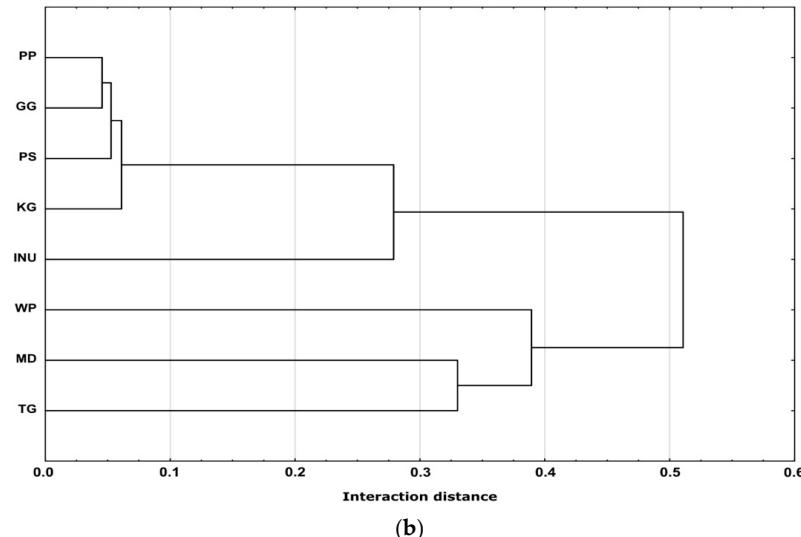
**Table 3.** The color difference parameter ( $\Delta E$ ) between the analyzed biopolymers (values are mean;  $n = 3$ ).

Samples	PP	WP	GG	KG	INU	MD	PS	TG
TG	61.38	57.93	27.18	7.45	76.75	75.08	11.72	-
PS	50.17	46.60	19.31	5.96	67.38	65.765	-	-
MD	26.84	29.63	47.98	67.73	1.75	-	-	-
INU	27.68	30.56	49.66	69.39	-	-	-	-
KG	54.08	50.67	19.96	-	-	-	-	-
GG	37.89	35.03	-	-	-	-	-	-
WP	4.40	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
PP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Depending on the  $\Delta E$  values the color difference between the samples can be estimated as not noticeable for the observer ( $0 < \Delta E < 1$ ), only experienced observer can notice the difference ( $1 < \Delta E < 2$ ), unexperienced observer also notices the difference ( $2 < \Delta E < 3.5$ ), clear difference in color is noticed ( $3.5 < \Delta E < 5$ ) and observer notices two different colors ( $5 < \Delta E$ ).



(a)



(b)

**Figure 5.** Principal component analysis PCA (a) and hierachical cluster analysis HCA (b) of the analyzed biopolymers.

#### 4. Discussion

In the present study, eight biopolymers were analyzed in terms of their volumetric gelling index, microrheological properties, physical stability, and color parameters. Based on the volumetric gelling index (Figure 1), PP, GG, KG, INU, and PS formed a gel structure. This observation was confirmed by the microrheological properties of the analyzed samples. PP, GG, KG, INU, and PS exhibited a more solid-like behavior in comparison to WP, MD, and TG (Table 1). The mean square displacement profile of INU (MSD, Figure 2) was non-rectilinear and the closest to the baseline, indicating that it had the most viscoelastic properties. This observation was confirmed by INU having the highest elasticity index and macroscopic viscosity index value, which were caused by the formation of a gel structure (network). When using physical (mechanical and thermal) induction techniques, inulin can form a hydrogel with a sponge-like structure. The formation of inulin hydrogel is based on particles attraction caused by Van der Waals forces [57]. Furthermore, Beccard et al., (2019) [58] in their studies stated that inulin gelation is based on a crystallization process, which explains why (in terms of PCA and HCA, Figure 5) inulin hydrogels differed significantly from the other biopolymers. On the other hand, PP, GG, KG, and PS had significantly comparable microscopic viscosity index values, which means that the particles movement was similar in each sample. In the case of pea protein (PP), the gel structure depends on the ratio of soluble and non-soluble protein molecules that might disturb the gel structure due to the difference in the degree of cross-linking. The high elasticity of the pea protein hydrogel might suggest that a high number of soluble aggregates formed a network, leading to a highly dense structure [59]. Based on the induction technique (heat-set gelation, while pH > 6 or <4), it is possible to obtain a fibrillar (linear) aggregates network with high elasticity [60]. Similarly, gellan gum (GG) [61], konjac gum (KG) [62], and psyllium [63] exhibit a similar ability to form a fibrillar gel network with junction zones (stabilized by hydrogen bonds, electrostatic forces, hydrophobic interactions, Van der Waals attractions, and molecular entanglement). This might explain the similarities in terms of the analyzed parameters between PP, GG, KG, and PS (Figure 5). Moreover, in the case of the solid–liquid balance (SLB), PP, GG, KG, INU, and PS had the lowest values (SLB < 0.5), which confirms the formation of a gel structure ( $G' > G''$ )—the samples exhibited typical solid-like (elastic) behavior [64]. On the other hand, WP, MD, and TG did not form a gel structure, which was observed based on the MSD profiles (Figure 2). Although WP had a non-rectilinear profile, the results shown in Table 1 confirmed the dominance of liquid-like behavior over the solid one. However, in the studies conducted by Wang et al., (2017) [65] concerning the changes in chemical interactions and protein conformation during heat-induced wheat gluten gel formation, the authors stated that the heat treatment (above 60 °C) of a wheat protein dispersion resulted in the formation of a wheat protein gel structure. The formation of wheat protein hydrogel is related to the presence of glutenin, which after hydration is responsible for the strength and elasticity of the gel structure. However, in the case of a less flexible (brittle) gel structure, wheat protein might contain more gliadin [66]. Based on Kanyuck et al., a (2019) study [67] concerning the influence of temperature on network formation of low DE maltodextrin gels, it can be stated that high induction temperature may weaken the gel structure of maltodextrin. The temperature could be the reason for the lack of the gel structure in the analyzed maltodextrin samples. The tara gum aqueous dispersion exhibited a predominantly viscous behavior. This is in accordance with the study by Huamaní-Meléndez et al., (2021) [68] in which they stated that tara gum has thickening abilities comparable to guar and locus gum.

The physical stability results (instability index and fingerprints, Figures 3 and 4) suggest that the gel structure formed by PP, GG, KG, and INU significantly affected the stability of the samples (instability index < 0.02). PS was also stable (0.06), but this instability index value was significantly higher in comparison with PP, GG, KG, and INU. This might be due to psyllium containing husk particles (visible in Figure 1) which have sedimented during the test. The high physical stability of PP, GG, KG, INU, and PS might be due to the formation of a network that acted as a stabilizing structure when the samples were subjected

to the centrifugal force during the test. Florowska et al., (2022) [19] in their studies on inulin hydrogels with the addition of sodium alginate and chitosan, also reported the high physical stability of inulin hydrogels. Furthermore, the hydrogel's water-holding capacity is related to its physical stability [69]. This relation was stated in Qayum et al., (2021) [70] a study in which they observed that the uniform and compact structure formed by lactalbumin affects the centrifugal (physical stability) and water-holding capacity of the obtained gels. High physical stability is critical in biomedical applications, particularly in tissue engineering, when designing a scaffold using a solid free fabrication technology to ensure the preparation of a 3D matrix in the desired morphology, capable of supporting tissue growth [71,72]. However, in the case of WP, MD, and TG, the samples were highly unstable due to the absence of a gel structure. According to Feng et al., (2021) [73], the low stability of polymeric network structure might be caused by the weak interactions (or lack of interaction) between the water and the polymer, which leads to a low resistance during deformation. The hydrogel structure might be destabilized by acceleration forces or vibrations during storage. Therefore, Zhang et al., (2022) [27] in their study on thixotropic composite hydrogels based on agarose and inorganic hybrid gellants, indicated the importance of increasing the ratio of the residual gel mass by adding more agarose, to achieve improved physical stability of the analyzed hydrogel. The research conducted by Florowska et al., (2020) [54] covering the addition of selected plant-derived proteins as modifiers of inulin hydrogels properties, also confirms that the addition of a gelling biopolymer (in this case protein) resulted in a more compact hydrogel structure and higher physical stability in comparison to the control sample.

The color of hydrogels is one of the main characteristics determining the quality of the products in which they are used, and it has a decisive influence on consumer acceptance or rejection in the case of food and cosmetic products [74]. Due to the different origins of the analyzed biopolymers, their color parameter (Tables 2 and 3) differs significantly, which was also confirmed by the images of the obtained samples in Figure 1. In the case of all the analyzed biopolymers, the observer will notice two different colors ( $\Delta E > 5$ ). However, in the case of pea protein (PP) and wheat protein (WP) the observer can notice a clear difference in color  $3.5 < \Delta E < 5$ , while in the case of inulin (INU) and maltodextrin (MD), only an experienced observer can notice the difference between their colors. It can be also observed that GG, KG, and PS are more transparent than the other biopolymers (although PS has a higher  $a^*$  and  $b^*$  parameter—more yellow tones). The color parameters of inulin hydrogels are in accordance with the available literature [19,54]. Novel edible composite films made of whey protein isolate and zein also showed similar values of the color parameters to those of the pea protein (PP) and wheat protein (WP) samples. However, in the case of gellan gum, based on Li et al., (2019) [75] a study concerning the effect of gellan gum on the functional properties of low-fat chicken meat batters, it was observed that the  $L^*$  value was correlated to the gellan gum structure. The increase in the water content of the meat batters caused the disruption of the gel structure, resulting in a lower lightness. Therefore, when designing a new product, the color parameters of the hydrogel are crucial, as they can influence the overall reception of the final product.

## 5. Conclusions

Based on the achieved results, and in the investigated gelling conditions, pea protein, gellan gum, konjac gum, psyllium, and inulin had the most promising gelling ability—they were able to produce highly elastic and physically stable hydrogels. Moreover, pea protein, gellan gum, konjac gum, and psyllium hydrogels had similar structural and biomechanical properties, while inulin hydrogel had the most diverse properties. Wheat protein, maltodextrin, and tara gum were similar in terms of the analyzed properties and did not form a gel structure. Since the combination of two biopolymers might result in hydrogels characterized by a broader range of structural and biomechanical properties, and enhanced interdisciplinary, and biomedical application potential, additional studies are currently being conducted.

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## Article

# Binary Pea Protein–Psyllium Hydrogel: Insights into the Influence of pH and Ionic Strength on the Physical Stability and Mechanical Characteristics

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**Abstract:** Food hydrogels, used as delivery systems for bioactive compounds, can be formulated with various food-grade biopolymers. Their industrial utility is largely determined by their physicochemical properties. However, comprehensive data on the properties of pea protein–psyllium binary hydrogels under different pH and ionic strength conditions are limited. The aim of this research was to evaluate the impact of pH (adjusted to 7, 4.5, and 3) and ionic strength (modified by NaCl addition to 0.15 and 0.3 M) on the physical stability, color, texture, microrheological, and viscoelastic properties of these hydrogels. Color differences were most noticeable at lower pH levels. Inducing hydrogels at pH 7 (with or without NaCl) and pH 4.5 and 3 (without NaCl) resulted in complete gel structures with low stability, low elastic and storage moduli, and low complex viscosity, making them easily spreadable. Lower pH inductions (4.5 and 3) in the absence of NaCl resulted in hydrogels with shorter linear viscoelastic regions. Hydrogels induced at pH 4.5 and 3 with NaCl had high structural stability, high G' and G'' moduli, complex viscosity, and high spreadability. Among the tested induction conditions, pH 3 with 0.3 M NaCl allowed for obtaining a hydrogel with the highest elastic and storage moduli values. Adjusting pH and ionic strength during hydrogel induction allows for modifying and tailoring their properties for specific industrial applications.

**Keywords:** textural properties; microrheology; physical stability; delivery system; gel induction; protein gels; food systems



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## 1. Introduction

Currently, consumers are looking for products that provide health benefits beyond essential nutrition. Developing functional foods (including plant-based alternatives) has become a growing area of interest in the food industry. Developing functional hydrogels is crucial for enhancing food quality and nutritional value [1]. Hydrogels made from biopolymers like pea protein and psyllium husk have significant potential to improve the mechanical properties of food products while also serving as delivery systems for bioactive compounds [2–4]. The properties of these hydrogels are influenced by pH and ionic strength, and understanding their combined effects on pea protein–psyllium hydrogels is essential for creating food products with targeted textural and functional attributes while adhering to specific pH and salt content (ionic strength) requirements for various product categories [5–7]. This approach can allow for the fine-tuning of the gelation process, structural integrity, and bioactive compound entrapment and delivery, aligning with the growing demand for functional foods that offer enhanced texture, stability, and health benefits [8].

Such binary protein–polysaccharide food hydrogels result from combining two different biopolymers, offering advantages through precise control of polymer ratios [9].

Moreover, their properties can be customized for specific needs using, among others, induction methods [7]. They can be induced using both conventional and unconventional methods, or a combination of both. Conventional induction methods include heat treatment, pH and ion modulation, freeze–thaw cycles, and enzymatic crosslinkers [8,10]. On the other hand, unconventional induction methods include high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) [11,12] and pulsed electric field (PEF) [13]. Depending on the biopolymers and the hydrogel induction method, binary hydrogels can be formed via various mechanisms, such as ionic cross-linking, covalent cross-linking, or physical interactions [1,14].

During induction, pH affects the charge on biopolymer molecules, which in turn determines the degree of electrostatic interaction. Near the protein's isoelectric point, the net charge is minimized, promoting aggregation and gel formation [15,16]. Ionic strength modulates electrostatic shielding, enhancing molecular interactions and promoting a more compact, cross-linked network [17]. Shifting pH away from the isoelectric point increases pea protein solubility, while optimal ionic strength can precipitate it, facilitating gelation [18]. Psyllium, rich in arabinoxylan, forms weak gels when used alone [19]. However, when combined with pea protein under controlled pH and ionic strength, it can enhance the gel network's stability and water-holding capacity [20,21].

Pea protein derived from *Pisum sativum* L. has attracted the food industry's interest due to its high nutritional value, good functional properties, hypoallergenic properties, and lack of concerns related to genetic modification. The proteins present in peas are salt-extractable globular storage proteins (65–80%) [22,23]. When hydrated and subjected to specific conditions (high temperature, pH above or below the isoelectric point, and increased ionic strength), these globular proteins can aggregate and form a uniform and highly crosslinked gel network [16,24]. This capability enables their application as a texturizing agent and a delivery system for bioactive ingredients. Additionally, it was proven that globular proteins, when unfolded, can bind to phenolic compounds (mainly via hydrophobic interactions and hydrogen bonds), resulting in a conjugate with higher thermal stability, antioxidant activities, and better-gelling properties [25–27]. On the other hand, psyllium seed husk, derived from the *Plantago ovata* plant, serves as a rich source of natural dietary fiber, primarily composed of arabinoxylan. Notably, the digestibility of arabinoxylan in humans is restricted [28,29]. Due to its hydrophilicity, psyllium mucilage has been reported to have potential use as a water-binding and moisture-retaining agent. Additionally, psyllium has been associated with beneficial effects related to satiety, cholesterol reduction, and prebiotic properties [30]. Psyllium mucilage was proven to have a weak gel-like property. When present in the small intestine, it can raise chyme viscosity, effectively slowing down the breakdown and absorption of nutrients [19].

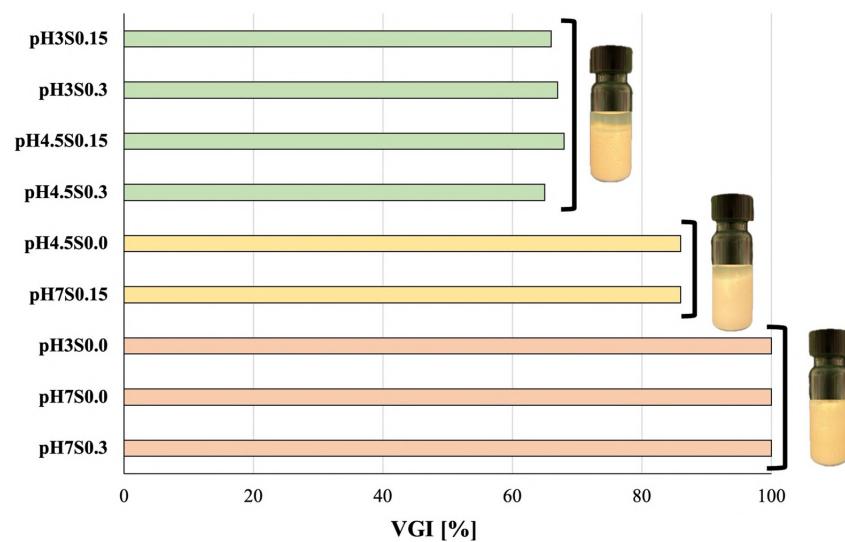
Modulating the pH value and the ionic strength enables precise control over hydrogel texture and firmness, making them suitable for food products like plant-based meats [31–33] and dairy alternatives [34]. Additionally, pH and ionic strength are crucial for the entrapment and controlled release of bioactive compounds in functional foods, ensuring the hydrogel's integrity and the desired release rate of bioactives [35,36]. Bioactive compounds such as vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and probiotics have been encapsulated within hydrogels, which improve the stability of these compounds and control release routes in the digestive system [37]. In addition, hydrogels can protect bioactive compounds from denaturation or degradation during processing (such as high temperature and exposure to light). Bioactive compounds sensitive to various factors (e.g., anthocyanins, β-carotene, quercetin, and curcumin) that can cause their degradation should be protected by incorporating them into a hydrogel carrier. This requires adjusting the induction method, which includes modulating pH and ionic strength, to design carriers tailored to specific bioactive substances [37,38]. Furthermore, the pH and ionic strength of the final food product can also critically affect the properties of the hydrogel structure, which can consequently affect the bioactive functionalities of the embedded substances.

Combining pea protein and psyllium shows great synergistic potential in producing a binary hydrogel with structural, textural, and nutritional advantages. Pea protein can

contribute to the hydrogel's structural integrity due to its inherent gelling and thickening properties. Psyllium can enhance the water-binding properties of the matrix, contributing to the overall stability of the hydrogel [8,39]. Despite that, there is limited information on pea protein–psyllium-based binary hydrogels, especially in the context of their properties under different pH and ionic strength conditions. This research aims to evaluate the induction conditions, such as the influence of pH and ionic strength on the physical stability and mechanical properties of binary pea protein–psyllium hydrogel for delivering bioactive compounds.

## 2. Results and Discussion

The volumetric gelling index (VGI) was calculated to determine the effect of pH and NaCl concentration modulation on the formation of a gel structure. Figure 1 depicts the VGI values and the appearance of the analyzed hydrogels.



**Figure 1.** The volumetric gelling index (VGI) of the analyzed hydrogels and the appearance of the hydrogels in the vials. The columns differentiated by color differ significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ).

Based on VGI values, it can be observed that the sample induced at pH 7 without the addition of NaCl entirely formed a gel structure. At low pH and without the addition of NaCl, only the hydrogel obtained at pH 4.5 did not form a complete gel structure. However, the increase in ionic strength at pH 7 only affected the gel structure when the addition of NaCl was equal to 0.15 M, while the addition of 0.3 M NaCl did not affect the value of VGI (100%). Moreover, increasing the ionic strength at lower pH values decreased this value to ~65% significantly. This effect might be due to the higher rate of interactions between the proteins, which is caused by the change in the ionic strength of the polymeric chains. Consequently, these interactions affected the formed structure by expelling a certain amount of water in the syneresis process [5].

For the hydrogels obtained without the addition of NaCl, the decrease in the pH value from 7 to 4.5 affected  $L^*$  by significantly increasing its value to 75.40 (Table 1). However, a further reduction in the pH to 3 decreased the value of  $L^*$ . The same trend was observed in the case of the hydrogel obtained with the addition of NaCl (0.15 M). On the other hand, 0.3 M NaCl did not affect the value of  $L^*$  at any pH. Based on the  $\eta_2$  coefficient, it can be concluded that both pH values and NaCl addition had a strong effect on  $L^*$  variance. The values of  $a^*$  increased significantly when the pH decreased from 7 to 3 for both hydrogels without and with the addition of NaCl (0.15 M). Furthermore, the  $b^*$  values increased when decreasing the pH from 7 to 4.5 for hydrogels induced at high ionic forces (0.15 and 0.3 M NaCl), and then the  $b^*$  values dropped when reaching pH 3 for all the hydrogels. In the case of the  $b^*$  parameter, NaCl addition had the most potent effect on the variance

( $\eta_2 = 0.958$ ). These interdependencies were also observed in the case of the whiteness index (WI) and the yellowness index (YI), where the NaCl concentration had the highest effect on these color parameters at each tested pH. The decrease in the whiteness and increase in the yellowness of the analyzed hydrogels can be due to changes in the protein conformation and the interactions between protein molecules, which, in turn, affect their solubility. This was also observed by O'Flynn et al. [40] in their studies on the solubility of a commercial soy protein isolate at pH values of 2.0, 6.9, and 9.0. Thus, it can be stated that at a pH lower than the isoelectric point, the solubility of proteins can be decreased, which might affect the color parameters of the analyzed sample [41,42].

**Table 1.** Color parameters of the analyzed hydrogels ( $n = 3$ ).

Samples	Color Parameters				
	L*	a*	b*	WI	YI
pH3S0.0	73.85 e $\pm$ 0.07	4.50 cd $\pm$ 0.07	17.12 a $\pm$ 0.05	68.42 d $\pm$ 0.04	33.12 a $\pm$ 0.06
pH3S0.15	67.70 a $\pm$ 0.11	5.60 e $\pm$ 0.03	21.40 c $\pm$ 0.02	60.86 ab $\pm$ 0.08	45.15 c $\pm$ 0.04
pH3S0.3	68.07 b $\pm$ 0.12	5.28 de $\pm$ 0.05	22.28 cd $\pm$ 0.24	60.71 ab $\pm$ 0.23	46.76 cd $\pm$ 0.57
pH4.5S0.0	75.40 f $\pm$ 0.06	3.41 ab $\pm$ 0.07	19.37 b $\pm$ 0.15	68.51 d $\pm$ 0.06	36.70 b $\pm$ 0.25
pH4.5S0.15	69.11 c $\pm$ 0.13	5.35 de $\pm$ 0.04	22.41 cd $\pm$ 0.05	61.47 b $\pm$ 0.13	46.32 cd $\pm$ 0.18
pH4.5S0.3	68.12 b $\pm$ 0.03	5.16 de $\pm$ 0.01	22.80 d $\pm$ 0.02	60.47 a $\pm$ 0.01	47.82 d $\pm$ 0.02
pH7S0.0	72.02 d $\pm$ 0.02	2.49 a $\pm$ 0.03	19.19 b $\pm$ 0.04	65.98 c $\pm$ 0.03	38.06 b $\pm$ 0.08
pH7S0.15	68.03 b $\pm$ 0.08	3.44 ab $\pm$ 0.04	21.50 c $\pm$ 0.05	61.32 ab $\pm$ 0.09	45.16 c $\pm$ 0.15
pH7S0.3	68.04 b $\pm$ 0.24	3.86 bc $\pm$ 1.06	21.66 cd $\pm$ 1.22	61.18 ab $\pm$ 0.88	45.49 cd $\pm$ 2.61
Statistic ANOVA, $\eta_2$ [-]					
pH	0.979	0.881	0.696	0.548	0.542
NaCl	0.999	0.820	0.958	0.994	0.977
pH·NaCl	0.977	ns	0.653	0.871	0.692

a, b, c...—mean values in columns differentiated by letters differ significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ).  $\eta_2$ —coefficient indicating the extent of the effect of factors, pH, NaCl concentration, and pH·NaCl. ns—nonsignificant. WI—whiteness index; YI—yellowness index.

The color difference parameter ( $\Delta E$ ) was calculated to comprehensively determine the effect of pH and NaCl concentration modulation on the obtained hydrogels (Table 2). In most samples, it was found that the difference between the obtained hydrogels higher than 5, meaning that the observer could notice two different colors [43]. Reducing the pH from 7 to 3 had a more significant effect on  $\Delta E$  values in hydrogels obtained without the addition of NaCl ( $\Delta E$  in the range of 3–3.5) compared to those obtained with the addition of NaCl, 0.15 M ( $\Delta E \sim 2$ ) and up to 0.3 M ( $\Delta E$  in the range 0.5–15). However, when analyzing the effect of increasing the ionic strength in hydrogels obtained at the same pH, it was observed that a more significant change in the values of  $\Delta E$  occurred at low pH, 3 and 4.5 ( $\Delta E$  in the range of 7–8) compared to pH 7 ( $\Delta E \sim 5$ ).

The instability index was computed to assess the physical stability of the obtained hydrogels. This index ranges from 0 for stable to 1 for unstable samples. Table 3 shows the mean values of the instability index for each tested hydrogel. Both pH and salt concentration modulation significantly affect the physical stability of the analyzed hydrogels. Lowering the pH value from 7 to 4.5 (without modulating the ionic strength) increased the instability index value, indicating that the stability of the hydrogel decreased. However, when the pH reached 3, the instability index value significantly dropped. The increase in the ionic strength caused the value of the instability index to rise for the hydrogel induced at pH 7 while causing a drop in the index values for the hydrogel at pH 4.5. A similar trend was observed in the case of lowering the pH from 7 to 3 with the addition of 0.15 M NaCl. Nonetheless, a reversed effect was observed when the pH was decreased from 7 to 4.5 for hydrogels with the addition of 0.3 M NaCl, where both hydrogels at pH 4.5 and 3 had significantly higher stability. This effect could be due to forming a more robust gel structure

caused by this ion modulation, which affected the interaction between the biopolymers by reducing the repulsion between them. Lei et al. [44] made a similar observation, in the case of walnut protein–κ-carrageenan composite gels, where the addition of  $\text{Na}^+$  significantly improved the bond strength between the biopolymers, resulting in a much denser and more uniform gel structure with improved water-holding capacity. In a study concerning the effect of adding NaCl on the thermal aggregation and gelation of soy protein isolate, Chen et al. [45] concluded that increasing the ionic strength, in many aspects, is similar to decreasing the pH value of the system. Moreover, the addition of NaCl affected the size and density of the elementary protein aggregates, leading to a more heterogeneous microstructure, which can decrease the water-holding capacity of such hydrogels.

**Table 2.** The color difference parameter ( $\Delta E$ ) between the analyzed hydrogels.

Samples	pH3S0.0	pH3S0.15	pH3S0.3	pH4.5S0.0	pH4.5S0.15	pH4.5S0.3	pH7S0.0	pH7S0.15	pH7S0.3
pH7S0.3	7.40	1.79	1.55	7.72	1.98	1.73	4.88	0.45	-
pH7S0.15	7.37	2.18	1.99	7.68	2.37	2.15	4.71	-	
pH7S0.0	3.42	5.76	5.74	3.51	5.20	5.95	-		
pH4.5S0.3	8.10	1.53	0.54	8.24	1.09	-			
pH4.5S0.15	7.15	1.75	1.05	7.25	-				
pH4.5S0.0	2.94	8.26	8.11	-					
pH3S0.3	7.79	1.01	-						
pH3S0.15	7.57	-							
pH3S0.0	-								

The values presented in that table are mean ( $n = 3$ ). Depending on the  $\Delta E$  values the color difference between the analyzed hydrogels can be estimated as not noticeable for the observer ( $0 < \Delta E < 1$ ), only an experienced observer can notice the color difference between the hydrogels ( $1 < \Delta E < 2$ ), an inexperienced observer can also notice the color difference ( $2 < \Delta E < 3.5$ ), clear color difference noticed ( $3.5 < \Delta E < 5$ ), and the observer can notice different colors ( $5 < \Delta E$ ).

**Table 3.** Instability index, textural properties, and microrheological properties of the analyzed hydrogels ( $n = 3$ ).

Samples	Instability Index	Textural Properties			Microrheological Properties	
		Strength (N)	Adhesion * (N)	Spreadability [N·s]	SLB	EI $\times 10^{-3}$ (nm $^{-2}$ )
pH3S0.0	0.45 <sup>d</sup> $\pm$ 0.02	0.11 <sup>b</sup> $\pm$ 0.01	0.04 <sup>d</sup> $\pm$ 0.01	13.3 <sup>c</sup> $\pm$ 1.3	0.54 <sup>b</sup> $\pm$ 0.04	6.1 <sup>b</sup> $\pm$ 0.1
pH3S0.15	0.49 <sup>e</sup> $\pm$ 0.01	0.15 <sup>c</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	0.02 <sup>b</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	26.2 <sup>ef</sup> $\pm$ 0.8	0.53 <sup>b</sup> $\pm$ 0.04	7.9 <sup>bc</sup> $\pm$ 0.6
pH3S0.3	0.35 <sup>b</sup> $\pm$ 0.02	0.24 <sup>e</sup> $\pm$ 0.02	0.04 <sup>d</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	24.3 <sup>e</sup> $\pm$ 1.8	0.35 <sup>a</sup> $\pm$ 0.01	17.0 <sup>d</sup> $\pm$ 1.3
pH4.5S0.0	0.55 <sup>f</sup> $\pm$ 0.01	0.07 <sup>a</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	0.01 <sup>a</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	13.3 <sup>c</sup> $\pm$ 0.7	0.45 <sup>ab</sup> $\pm$ 0.04	9.8 <sup>c</sup> $\pm$ 1.7
pH4.5S0.15	0.45 <sup>d</sup> $\pm$ 0.01	0.15 <sup>c</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	0.03 <sup>bc</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	28.6 <sup>f</sup> $\pm$ 2.1	0.73 <sup>c</sup> $\pm$ 0.04	2.4 <sup>a</sup> $\pm$ 0.5
pH4.5S0.3	0.33 <sup>b</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	0.14 <sup>c</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	0.04 <sup>d</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	19.1 <sup>d</sup> $\pm$ 1.8	0.54 <sup>b</sup> $\pm$ 0.01	7.3 <sup>b</sup> $\pm$ 0.9
pH7S0.0	0.20 <sup>a</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	0.08 <sup>a</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	0.05 <sup>e</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	8.0 $\pm$ 0.6	0.50 <sup>b</sup> $\pm$ 0.04	1.3 <sup>a</sup> $\pm$ 0.1
pH7S0.15	0.48 <sup>e</sup> $\pm$ 0.01	0.18 <sup>d</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	0.06 <sup>e</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	3.5 <sup>a</sup> $\pm$ 0.2	0.49 <sup>b</sup> $\pm$ 0.06	1.5 <sup>a</sup> $\pm$ 0.2
pH7S0.3	0.40 <sup>c</sup> $\pm$ 0.01	0.15 <sup>c</sup> $\pm$ 0.01	0.04 <sup>d</sup> $\pm$ 0.00	5.7 <sup>ab</sup> $\pm$ 0.2	0.36 <sup>a</sup> $\pm$ 0.03	3.6 <sup>a</sup> $\pm$ 0.7
Statistic ANOVA, $\eta^2$ [-]						
pH	0.952	0.912	0.942	0.980	0.771	0.959
NaCl	0.970	0.974	ns	0.909	0.838	0.912
pH·NaCl	0.989	0.930	0.906	0.933	0.804	0.927

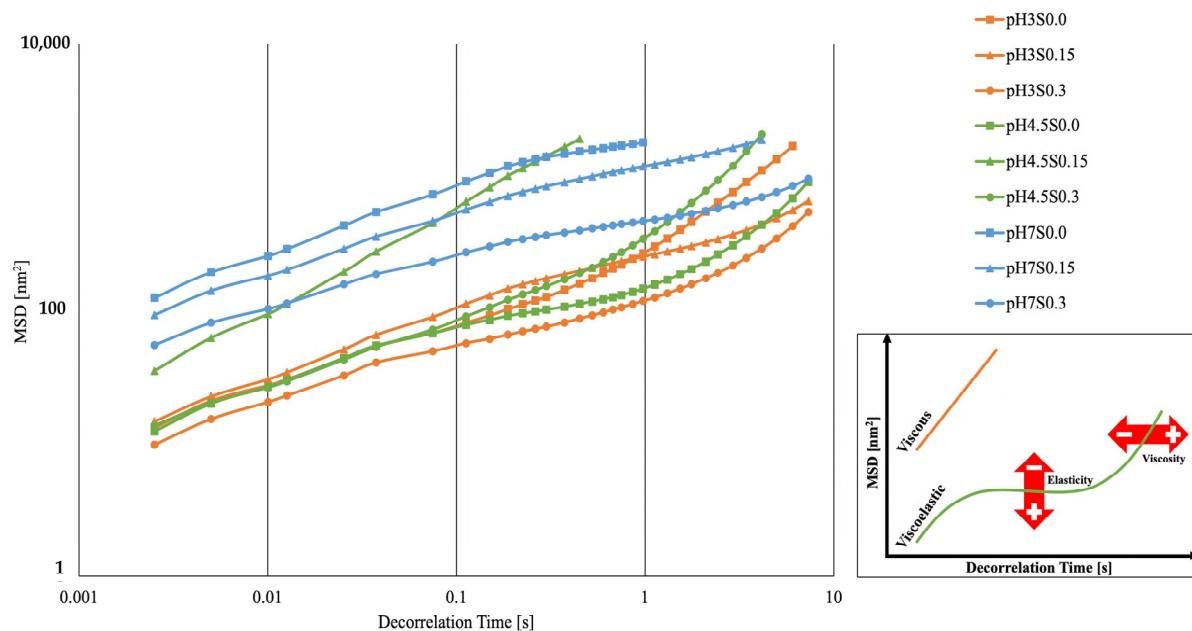
a, b, c...—mean values in columns differentiated by letters differ significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). \* Absolute value |Adhesion|.  $\eta^2$ —coefficient indicating the extent of the effect of factors, pH, NaCl concentration and pH·NaCl. ns—nonsignificant. SLB—solid–liquid balance index; EI—elasticity index.

When the texture measurement data were analyzed (Table 3), it was found that only the transition from pH 4.5 to 3 increased the strength value (the force needed to immerse the texture analyzer probe into the hydrogel structure) of the analyzed hydrogels. The strength values significantly decreased when changing the pH from 7 to 4.5 for the hydrogels not containing NaCl. Moreover, by increasing the NaCl content, the strength of the hydrogels

induced at pH 3 proportionally increased, while in the case of pH 7 and 4.5, the strength value only increased when 0.15 M NaCl was added. Further NaCl addition (0.3 M) caused a significant drop in strength for the hydrogels induced at pH 7. Both pH and NaCl addition strongly affected the strength variance ( $\eta^2 = 0.930$ ). The increase in strength could be due to the strengthening of electrostatic forces, hydrophobic interactions, hydrogen bonds, and disulfide bonds between the biopolymer chains, resulting in a more rigid microstructure. In the case of adhesion, which shows the force needed to separate the analyzer probe from the hydrogel, NaCl addition had a nonsignificant effect compared to pH on the variance of this parameter. A downward trend in the adhesion values was observed when decreasing the pH from 7 to 4.5 (hydrogels induced without NaCl) and from 7 to 3 (hydrogels with the addition of 0.15 M NaCl). However, the decrease in pH for the hydrogels induced with the addition of 0.3 M salt did not affect the adhesion values. The lowest adhesion value was recorded in the case of the hydrogel induced at a pH of 4.5 and without NaCl addition. This effect might be due to the low attractive and repulsive forces (no net charge) observed by Schuld et al. [46] in their studies on NaCl and acid-induced soy protein hydrogels.

In the case of spreadability, when decreasing the pH from 7 to 4.5 (for all the hydrogels with and without NaCl addition), an increase in the value of spreadability was noticed, meaning that these hydrogels needed higher job input to be spread evenly between two surfaces. Moreover, a further decrease in pH (from 4.5 to 3) in the case of hydrogels obtained with salt (0.15 M) caused a drop in the value of spreadability. On the other hand, a rise in the analyzed value was noticed in the case of hydrogels obtained with the addition of 0.3 M NaCl. The high spreadability value of the hydrogels obtained at pH 3 and 4.5 with the addition of NaCl could be attributed to the formation of protein aggregates and interactions between them. However, the hydrogels obtained at pH 7 displayed inferior spreadability and high adhesion values due to the higher unbound water [47,48].

By analyzing the solid–liquid balance index (SLB) and elasticity index (EI) values (Table 3), it was noticed that both pH and ionic strength significantly affect the microrheological properties of the obtained hydrogels. NaCl had a more substantial effect on the variance of SLB ( $\eta^2 = 0.838$ ) while pH had a stronger effect on the variance of EI ( $\eta^2 = 0.959$ ). Nonetheless, both parameters affected the elasticity index of the obtained hydrogels. The decrease in the pH value from 7 to 4.5 shifted the properties of the hydrogel (induced without the addition of NaCl) to more solid-like ( $SLB < 0.5$ ). However, a further decrease in the pH value to 3 caused the hydrogel to exhibit more viscous (liquid-like) properties ( $SLB > 0.5$ ). Furthermore, the addition of salt changed this trend, causing the SLB index of hydrogels at pH 4.5 to reach higher values, with the hydrogel at pH 4.5 and the addition of 0.15 M NaCl reaching the highest value. NaCl (0.3 M) at pH 7 and 3 caused the hydrogels to exhibit highly solid-like properties. In the case of the EI, it was observed that only the hydrogel induced with the addition of salt exhibited higher elasticity when the pH value decreased [46,49]. Based on the analysis of the average trajectory of numerous particles in the obtained hydrogels, the Mean Square Displacement (MSD) was obtained as a function of decorrelation time (Figure 2). The analyzed samples had mostly viscoelastic properties, exhibiting the properties of soft gels (weak gels). The non-rectilinear MSD curve moving close to the baseline indicates that more particles were immobilized (caged) by the obtained gel network. The hydrogel induced at pH 3 and 0.3 M NaCl exhibited predominantly viscoelastic properties. On the contrary, the hydrogel induced at pH 7 and 4 (with 0.15 M NaCl) presented the least viscoelastic properties—their MSD curves leaned towards becoming more rectilinear, presenting more viscous characteristics.

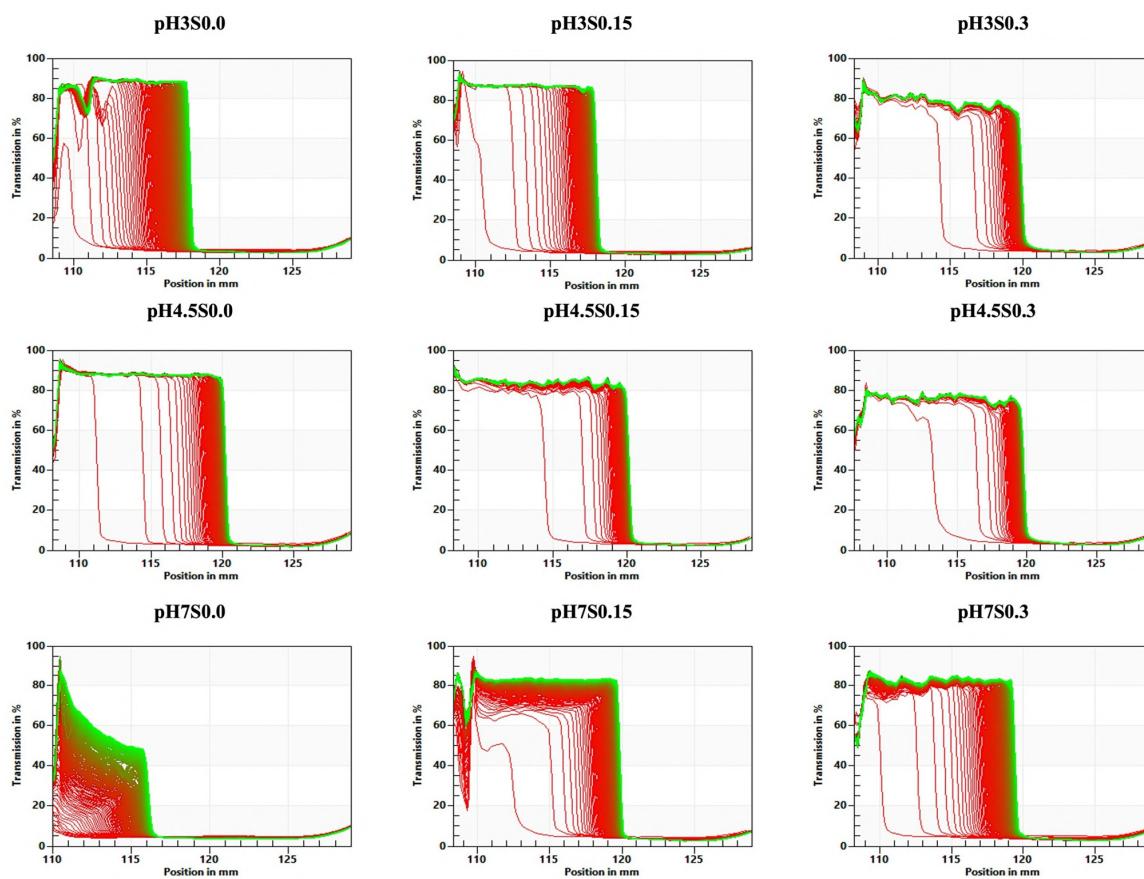


**Figure 2.** Mean Square Displacement (MSD) as a function of decorrelation time for the obtained hydrogels. The values presented in the figure are mean values ( $n = 3$ ).

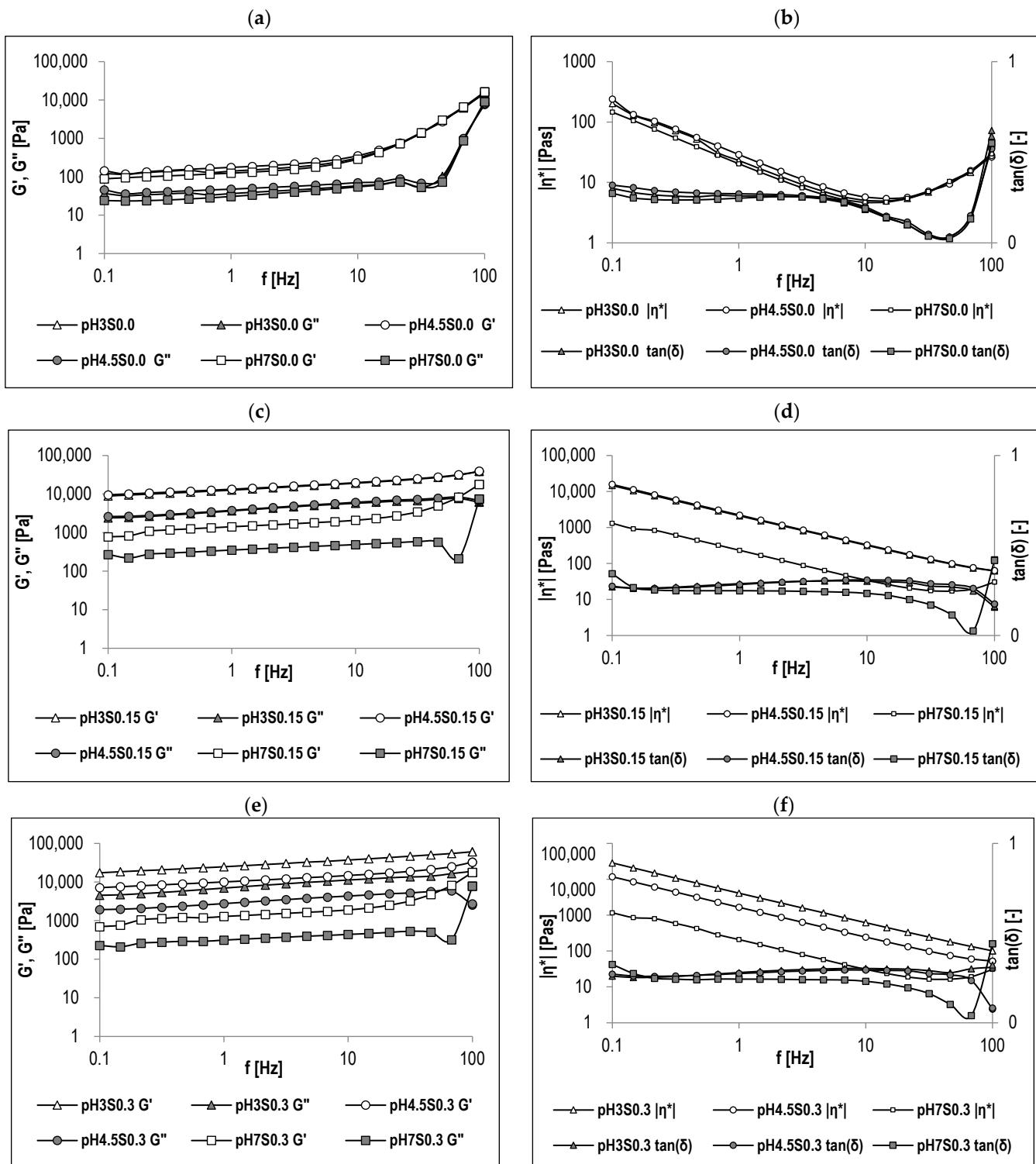
The transmission profiles obtained through STEP technology (space-time resolved extinction profiles) serve as ‘fingerprints’, indicating variations in particle concentration within the analyzed samples (Figure 3). For each obtained hydrogel, the changes in transmission profiles offer crucial insights into the kinetics of particle concentration fluctuations caused by the centrifugal forces leading to phase separation. After subjecting the hydrogel samples to centrifugal force, structural compression was observed. This compression is depicted by a decrease in light transmission in the right corner of each graph. The destabilization front moved downward in the sample, meaning that the highest particle concentration was at the bottom of the sample. At the same time, a transparent water phase remained in the upper parts [50,51]. Based on the transmission profiles, it is possible to conclude that the slowest destabilization changes occurred in the hydrogel induced at pH 7 (without the addition of salt). The structural compression was more significant when the pH was decreased from 7 to 4.5 (for all the hydrogels). However, the quickest compression occurred in the hydrogel induced at pH 4.5 without NaCl. Moreover, the hydrogels obtained with the addition of 0.3 M NaCl (at each of the pH values) were less affected by the centrifugal force applied during the analysis than the other hydrogels.

Because hydrogels are viscoelastic systems, analyzing their rheological character under dynamic shear conditions provides information on their nature and behavior under slight deformations. The parameters determining a system’s rheological character are its primary structure, external factors, and observation time. As a result, dynamic (oscillatory) rheology tests are used to understand this characteristic, which is correlated with the degree of cross-linking and heterogeneity of the biopolymeric network [52,53]. Figure 4 showcases the evolution of mechanical spectra  $G'$ ,  $G''$ ,  $|\eta^*|$ , and  $\tan(\delta)$  as a function of frequency ( $f$ ). These values are displayed on a logarithmic-logarithmic graph, showcasing three decades of oscillation frequency, ranging from  $f = 0.1$  to 100 Hz. These mechanical profiles were acquired within the linear viscoelastic range (1% deformation), preserving the original structure of the samples. Frequency sweep is a valuable tool for evaluating a sample’s viscoelastic attributes across varying timescales. Moreover, it facilitates the determination of critical parameters such as the storage (elastic) modulus ( $G'$ ) and the viscous (loss) modulus ( $G''$ ). The storage modulus ( $G'$ ) gauges a material’s elastic behavior by quantifying the energy stored during shear. In contrast, the viscous modulus ( $G''$ ) assesses its viscous response by measuring heat dissipation. The resulting storage and loss moduli

offer valuable insights into how a material will perform in various applications, helping industries design products with specific mechanical properties and desired performance under different stress conditions [54,55]. Based on the presented spectra (Figure 4a,c,d), it can be observed that all the obtained hydrogels present viscoelastic characteristics specific for a weak gel system (such as ketchup, yogurt, custard) [56] since  $G'$  remains above  $G''$  over the experimental frequency range, the separation of the  $G'$  and  $G''$  curves is less than one decade, and  $\tan(\delta)$  reaches values higher than 0.2. Moreover, it can be concluded that hydrogels formed with the addition of NaCl, compared to those without NaCl, show greater gel strength or cross-linking density regardless of pH because both moduli assume higher values and are almost independent of frequency (Figure 4c,e). In weaker gels formed without NaCl, the mechanical spectra show some dependence on the oscillation frequency, and the range of the elastic plateau occurs at lower oscillation frequencies, up to frequencies where  $\tan(\delta)$  begins increasing (Figure 4a,b). Furthermore, the complex viscosity  $|\eta^*|$  (Figure 4b,d,f) decreased with increasing frequency in the frequency range of the elastic plateau, indicating that the investigated hydrogels exhibit shear-thinning behavior. The available studies have also reported similar rheological characteristics of such binary protein–polysaccharide hydrogels [57,58]. Moreover, Zhang et al. [59], in their studies on the rheology and microstructural properties of gelatin-tara gum hydrogels, stated that salt addition affects the gel network structure by screening interactions, leading to a notable decrease in rheological properties. The most pronounced effect occurs at NaCl concentration  $\sim 50$  mmol/L, due to the salting-in effect. However, they observed that higher salt concentrations significantly increase gel strength and prevent phase separation at low pH.



**Figure 3.** Evolution of transmission profile “fingerprints” of the obtained hydrogels. The red lines indicate light extinction at the starting point, and the green lines represent light extinction at the end of the analysis.



**Figure 4.** Mechanical spectra of the obtained hydrogels are presented graphically as functional relationships  $G'$ ,  $G''$ ,  $|\eta^*|$ , and  $\tan(\delta) = f(\text{Hz})$ . **(a,b)** without NaCl, **(c,d)** with 0.15 M NaCl, **(e,f)** with 0.3 M NaCl ( $n = 3$ ).  $G'$ —storage (elastic) modulus;  $G''$ —viscous (loss) modulus;  $|\eta^*|$ —complex viscosity;  $\tan(\delta)$ —degree of viscoelasticity.

The hydrogels' LVR (linear viscoelastic region) occurs at low shear stress when the moduli are independent of increasing stress (the system's response is independent of the deformation magnitude, and the structure is maintained intact). Because structural properties correlate well with elasticity, the length and value of the LVR of the elastic

modulus ( $G'$ ) can be used to assess sample structure stability [60,61]. The values of LVR determined in this study are presented in Table 4. Decreasing the pH affected the  $G'$  value significantly only in the case of hydrogels induced with NaCl ( $\eta_2 = 0.940$ ). This tendency was not observed in the case of the samples induced at a pH value of 7. Additionally, the length of LVR represented by  $\gamma$  (%) indicates the structural stability of the analyzed systems. It was observed that when decreasing the pH from 7 to 4.5, the length of LVR was reduced, and after reaching pH 3, this length increased again. This trend was observed in all the obtained hydrogels, regardless of the NaCl addition. However, salt addition significantly increased the  $\gamma$  value, which might be due to the formation of a more robust gel network. Nonetheless, in the case of the samples induced at pH 4.5, only the addition of the highest NaCl concentration (0.3 M) affected the system's stability, which is also in correlation with what was observed in the case of the instability index (Table 4, Figures 1 and 2).

**Table 4.** Rheological parameters of the obtained hydrogels under oscillatory testing at 20 °C, which includes LVR (linear viscoelastic region) values obtained in the amplitude sweep test at 1 Hz; elastic ( $G'$ ) and viscous ( $G''$ ) moduli,  $\tan(\delta)$ , and complex viscosity  $\eta^*$  values at 1 Hz obtained in the frequency sweep test at a strain of 1% ( $n = 3$ ).

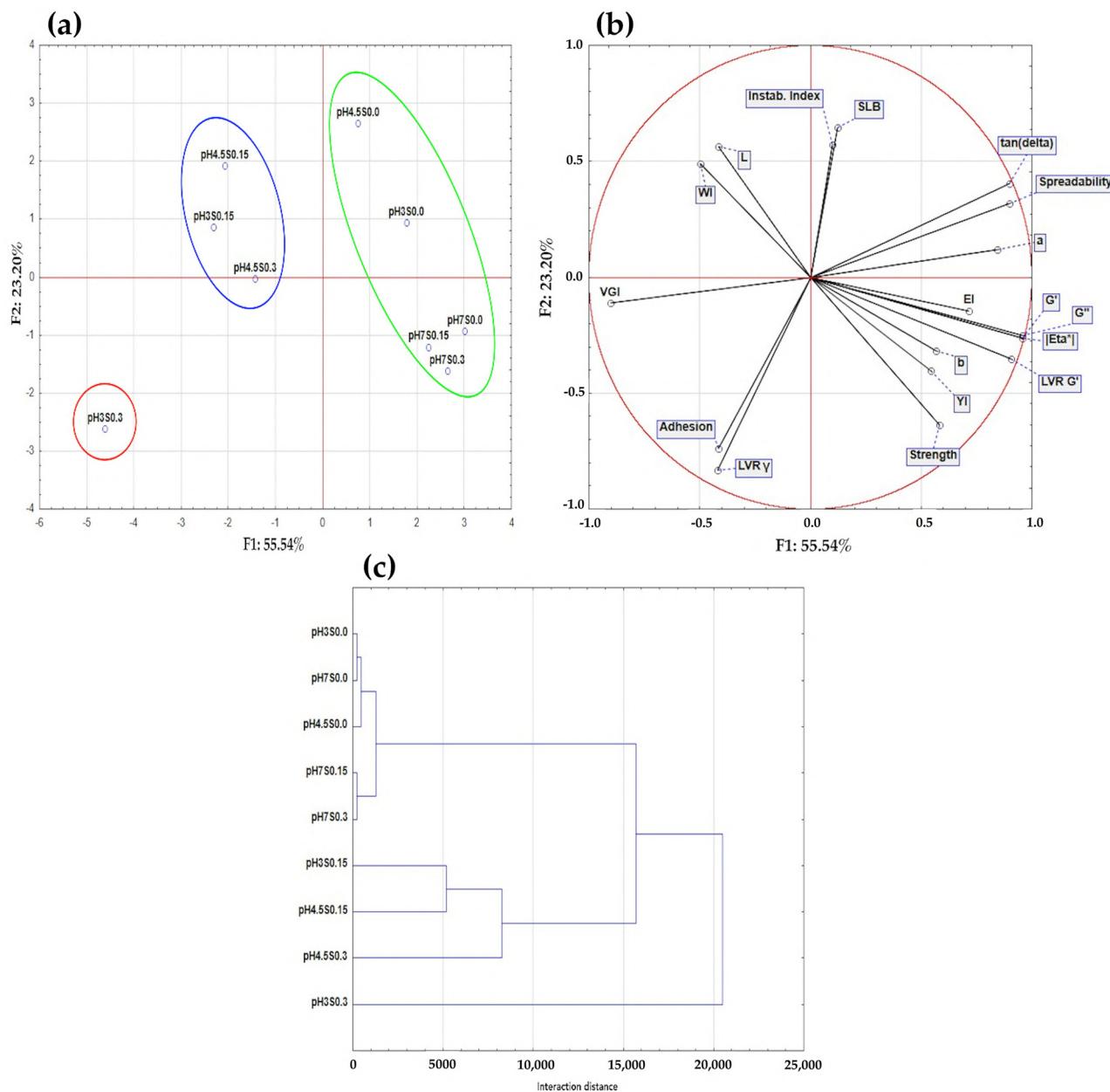
Samples	LVR			Frequency Sweep. Values at 1 Hz		
	$G'$ Plateau [kPa]	$\gamma$ [%]	$G'$ (kPa)	$G''$ (kPa)	$\tan(\delta)$ (-)	$ \eta^* $ (Pa·s)
pH3S0.0	0.37 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.05	2.18 <sup>ab</sup> ± 0.17	0.14 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.03	0.04 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.01	0.26 <sup>bf</sup> ± 0.01	23 <sup>a</sup> ± 4
pH3S0.15	15.7 <sup>b</sup> ± 1.6	2.70 <sup>bc</sup> ± 0.26	12.7 <sup>c</sup> ± 1.0	3.65 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.26	0.29 <sup>f</sup> ± 0.00	2100 <sup>c</sup> ± 160
pH3S0.3	36.8 <sup>d</sup> ± 6.8	3.13 <sup>cd</sup> ± 0.37	24.9 <sup>d</sup> ± 1.0	6.97 <sup>d</sup> ± 0.29	0.28 <sup>cde</sup> ± 0.00	4110 <sup>d</sup> ± 160
pH4.5S0.0	0.80 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.02	1.39 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.04	0.17 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.03	0.05 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.01	0.27 <sup>cf</sup> ± 0.00	29 <sup>a</sup> ± 0
pH4.5S0.15	10.7 <sup>b</sup> ± 2.6	1.68 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.33	13.4 <sup>c</sup> ± 1.7	3.79 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.50	0.28 <sup>de</sup> ± 0.00	2210 <sup>c</sup> ± 280
pH4.5S0.3	23.5 <sup>c</sup> ± 1.6	2.56 <sup>bc</sup> ± 0.05	10.1 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.9	2.76 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.23	0.27 <sup>cd</sup> ± 0.00	1660 <sup>b</sup> ± 140
pH7S0.0	0.14 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.04	3.71 <sup>de</sup> ± 0.59	0.12 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.05	0.03 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.01	0.25 <sup>ab</sup> ± 0.00	19 <sup>a</sup> ± 1
pH7S0.15	1.2 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.2	4.06 <sup>ef</sup> ± 0.34	1.42 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.18	0.35 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.04	0.25 <sup>ab</sup> ± 0.00	233 <sup>a</sup> ± 29
pH7S0.3	1.4 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.3	4.82 <sup>f</sup> ± 0.04	1.28 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.32	0.31 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.09	0.24 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.01	210 <sup>a</sup> ± 54
Statistic ANOVA, $\eta_2$ [-]						
pH	0.917	0.939	0.982	0.982	0.936	0.982
NaCl	0.940	0.768	0.984	0.983	0.712	0.984
pH·NaCl	0.891	ns	0.978	0.978	0.718	0.978

a, b, c...—mean values in columns differentiated by letters differ significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ).  $\eta_2$ —coefficient indicating the extent of the effect of factors, pH, NaCl concentration and pH·NaCl. ns—nonsignificant.  $G'$  Plateau—elastic modulus at the plateau;  $\gamma$ —length of LVR;  $G'$ —storage (elastic) modulus;  $G''$ —viscous (loss) modulus;  $\tan(\delta)$ —degree of viscoelasticity;  $|\eta^*|$ —complex viscosity.

Based on the values of  $G'$ ,  $G''$ ,  $|\eta^*|$ , and  $\tan(\delta)$  at 1 Hz (Table 4), it can be concluded that both pH and NaCl concentration have a significant effect on the variance of the parameters. The effect of decreasing the pH for the samples induced without salt on the values of  $G'$  and  $G''$  was nonsignificant. However, when the samples were induced with 0.15 M NaCl, both moduli values were increased when the pH dropped from 7 to 4.5. In the case of hydrogel induction with the addition of 0.3 M NaCl, the change from pH 7 to 3 significantly increased the values of  $G'$  and  $G''$  (reaching the highest values at pH 3). Additionally, at pH 3, the increase in the NaCl addition from 0 to 0.15 M caused the moduli to increase by 95 times on average, while the increase from 0 to 0.3 M caused the moduli to increase by 170 times. Zhu et al. [16] studied strong and elastic pea protein hydrogels formed using the pH-shifting method. They found that this method altered the protein chain structure, creating more active sites that enhanced intermolecular interactions. Moreover, studies on the impact of citric acid concentration and pH on the mechanism and rheological properties of whey protein hydrogels concluded that the induction of protein hydrogel at a low pH value affected the formation of the gel network, resulting in a more rigid hydrogel [62]. Furthermore, Tanger et al. [5], in their study on the effect of pH and

ionic strength on the thermal gelation behavior of pea protein, noticed that the addition of salt at pH 3 led to the development of a stiffer gel structure caused by a high entanglement of the protein. The degree of viscoelasticity,  $\tan(\delta)$ , is defined as the ratio of  $G''/G'$ . When the analyzed systems exhibit solid-like (elastic) properties,  $\tan(\delta)$  is lower than 1. However, for systems with more liquid-like (viscous) properties,  $\tan(\delta)$  is higher than 1 [63]. In the case of the obtained hydrogels, all the variants had a  $\tan(\delta)$  value lower than 1 at 1 Hz, ranging from 0.24 to 0.29, meaning that the formed hydrogels left at rest have properties similar to a solid but can be easily spread, such as yogurts, ketchup, and jams.

The obtained results were subjected to a principal component analysis (PCA) and a hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA). These two statistical methods were chosen to effectively summarize the data gathered in this study. The PCA was conducted with 12 active variables. Two principal components were identified (Figure 5a,b): Component 1 (F1) explained 55.54% of the variance, and Component 2 (F2) explained 23.20% of the variance. Combined, these two components account for a total of 78.74% of the variance in the results. Component 1 is strongly positively correlated with VGI ( $r = 0.90$ ). On the other hand, a negative contribution of this factor was found for  $G'$  ( $r = -0.95$ ),  $G''$  ( $r = -0.96$ ),  $|\eta^*|$  ( $r = -0.95$ ), and spreadability ( $r = -0.90$ ). Component 2 is positively correlated with the instability index ( $r = 0.64$ ) and negatively correlated with  $\gamma$  ( $r = -0.80$ ) and adhesion ( $r = -0.70$ ). Considering the above interdependencies, the first principal component can be interpreted as a measure of the conditions under which the hydrogel can form a gel structure with high elastic properties. In contrast, the second component can be interpreted as a measure of the conditions under which the hydrogel can form a structurally stable system. Based on the hydrogels' distribution across the space of the principal components (Figure 5a) and the interaction distances shown in HCA (Figure 5c), it can be concluded that the first and the most prominent cluster on the right from the center (green cluster) represents the hydrogels with the highest volumetric gelling index values but low  $G'$  and  $G''$  values (less elastic). These hydrogels were induced at pH 7, 4.5, and 3 (without NaCl addition) and pH 7 (with 0.15 and 0.3 M NaCl). Additionally, at pH 4.5 and 3 (the upper part of the green cluster), it was possible to obtain hydrogels with lower structural stability. The next cluster is the one in the upper left from the center (blue cluster), showcasing that the induction at pH 4.5 (0.15 and 0.3 M NaCl) and pH 3 (with 0.15 M NaCl) results in hydrogels with high  $G'$  and  $G''$  moduli but low structural stability and VGI. However, only the sample induced at pH 3 and 0.3 M NaCl (pH3S0.3) showed the most significant difference from the other hydrogels (highest interaction distance, Figure 5c). The hydrogel exhibited the most elastic properties at pH 3 and 0.3 M NaCl and had high structural stability. Nonetheless, it still exhibited a low VGI value, which might have been caused by the high interactions between the biopolymers leading to the loss of a certain amount of water.



**Figure 5.** Principal component analysis PCA: (a) score plot, F1 versus F2 of all samples. (b) Score plot, F1 versus F2 of data from determinations used as variables. and hierarchical cluster analysis HCA (c) of the obtained hydrogels.

### 3. Conclusions

To summarize, altering pH and ionic strength resulted in pea protein–psyllium hydrogels with varied properties, all characterized as weak gels. Lower pH levels (notably pH 3 and 4.5) led to significant color changes and produced weak, easily spreadable gels without NaCl. Adding NaCl (0.15 and 0.3 M) at these pH levels improved the hydrogels' structural stability and moduli, with the hydrogel at pH 3 with 0.3 M NaCl showing the highest elasticity and stability. This study demonstrates a critical relationship between pH and ionic strength, where NaCl's impact during hydrogel induction highly depends on the pH. The industrial utility of these hydrogels is determined by their inherent properties, which dictate their specific applications. Hydrogels produced under low pH and high ionic strength conditions are promising delivery systems for low-pH-stable bioactive compounds, including anthocyanins. Further research is essential to validate their potential as food texture enhancers and effective delivery systems.

## 4. Materials and Methods

### 4.1. Materials

Pea protein (NUTRALYS® F85F, protein content 88%, ash 10%) was obtained from Roquette Freres (Lestrem, France). Psyllium husk powder (PS, type 10351, purity 95%, particle size 60 mesh–250 µm) was obtained from C.E. Roeper GmbH (Hamburg, Germany). Citric acid (purity ≥ 99.5%) and sodium citrate (purity 95%) were purchased from the local food ingredient supplier Agnex (Białystok, Poland).

### 4.2. Hydrogel Induction

The investigated hydrogels' induction involved pea protein hydration (12.5 g of protein/100 g) in distilled water while stirring for 60 min, using a heating magnetic stirrer (300 RPM). The obtained protein dispersion was heated to 80 °C for 30 min. After cooling the dispersion to 20 °C, psyllium husk was added (concentration of 0.5 g/100 g), and the dispersion was stirred for 10 min (300 RPM). The pH of the dispersions (from 7 to 4.5 and 3) was adjusted using 1 M citric acid and 1 M sodium citrate solutions. The ionic strength of the dispersion was modified by adding NaCl (to 0.15, 0.3 M) (Table 5). Then, the obtained dispersions were stored for 24 h at 4 ± 1 °C to develop a gel structure.

**Table 5.** Explanation of hydrogel sample coding.

Samples Code	pH	NaCl Addition (M)
pH3S0.0	3	0.0
pH3S0.15	3	0.15
pH3S0.3	3	0.3
pH4.5S0.0	4.5	0.0
pH4.5S0.15	4.5	0.15
pH4.5S0.3	4.5	0.3
pH7S0.0	7	0.0
pH7S0.15	7	0.15
pH7S0.3	7	0.3

### 4.3. Methods

#### 4.3.1. Volumetric Gelling Index (VGI)

The VGI was used to determine the degree of hydrogel formation. It is a parameter that expresses a dispersion's ability to form a gel structure. The VGI equals zero when no gel structure is formed and 100% when the sample is completely gelled. The VGI is calculated using the equation below [50].

$$\text{VGI} = \frac{V_G}{V_T} \cdot 100, \quad (1)$$

where  $V_G$ —volume of the formulated gel and  $V_T$ —total volume of the sample. The reported values represent the averages of three replicates.

#### 4.3.2. Color Parameters

A Minolta CR-5 colorimeter (Minolta, Japan; light source D65; measuring head hole: 8 mm) was used to measure the color components in the CIE L\* a\* b\* system at the surface of the obtained hydrogels. The total color difference ( $\Delta E$ ), whiteness (WI), and yellowness index (YI) indexes were calculated using the obtained L\*, a\*, and b\* parameters.  $\Delta E$  was computed to determine the color differences between the obtained hydrogels. The total color difference  $\Delta E$  was calculated based on the following equation [43]:

$$\Delta E = \sqrt{(L_{s1}^* - L_{s2}^*)^2 + (a_{s1}^* - a_{s2}^*)^2 + (b_{s1}^* - b_{s2}^*)^2}, \quad (2)$$

where  $L^*_{S1}$ ;  $a^*_{S1}$ ;  $b^*_{S1}$  and  $L^*_{S2}$ ;  $a^*_{S2}$ ;  $b^*_{S2}$  refer to the color parameters of the compared hydrogels. The whiteness (WI) and yellowness (YI) index were calculated using the following equations [64]:

$$WI = 100 - \sqrt{(100 - L^*)^2 + a^{*2} + b^{*2}}, \quad (3)$$

$$YI = 142.86 \cdot \frac{b^*}{L^*}, \quad (4)$$

where  $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ , and  $b^*$  refer to the color parameters of each analyzed hydrogel. The reported values represent the averages of three replicates.

#### 4.3.3. Physical Stability and Destabilization Behavior

LUMiSizer 6120-75 (L.U.M. GmbH, Berlin, Germany) was used to assess the physical stability and destabilization kinetics of the obtained hydrogels. This assessment method involved centrifuging the hydrogels while illuminating the entire sample cell with near-infrared (NIR) light—STEP technology (Space and Time Extinction Profiles). The sensor measures the intensity of transmitted light as a function of time and position over the entire sample length, and the data are converted and recorded using the provided software (SepView 6.0; LUM, Berlin, Germany) [65]. Before running this analysis, the following parameters were established: dispersion volume 1.8 mL, wavelength 870 nm, light factor 1, 1500 rpm, experiment period 15 h 10 min, interval time 210 s, and temperature 20 °C. The destabilization behavior (fingerprint) was obtained from the recorded data, and the instability index was calculated. The values reported are the averages of three replicates.

#### 4.3.4. Textural Properties

The texture analysis was performed using a texture analyzer (TA.XT Plus, Stable Micro Mixtures, Surrey, UK) with a 5 kg load cell. The texture analyzer was equipped with a 0.5 cm diameter cylindrical flat probe (P/0.5R) to measure the strength (N) and adhesion (N) of the hydrogels. The sample penetration depth was set at 8 mm, the measurement speed was 1.0 mm/s, and the temperature was 20 °C. To measure the spreadability (N·s) of the obtained hydrogels, the texture analyzer was equipped with a TTC Spreadability Rig. The measurement speed was set at 3.0 mm/s. The gathered data were processed with the Exponent version 6.1.4.0 (Stable Micro Mixtures, Surrey, UK) equipment software. The values reported are the averages of three replicates.

#### 4.3.5. Microrheological Properties

The microrheological properties of the hydrogels were investigated using a Rheolaser Master device (Formulaction, L'Union, France). The device operates in the near-infrared region (wavelength of 650 nm) using the dynamic MS-DWS (Multi Speckle Diffusing Wave Spectroscopy) technique. The interfering backscattered waves are captured by the detector, and the measurement results are recorded using Rheotest software 1.4.0.11. The following microrheological parameters were determined using the raw data obtained: mean square displacement (MSD) curves, elasticity index (EI) ( $\text{nm}^{-2}$ ), and solid-liquid balance (SLB). MSD represents the mean of several scattering trajectories of particle movement as a function of the time of the analyzed hydrogel. SLB is the ratio ( $G'/G''$ ) of the elastic modulus to the viscous modulus. The reciprocal of the MSD value at the plateau is used to calculate EI, which is directly proportional to the elastic modulus ( $G'$ ) [50,66]. The values that are reported are the averages of three replicates.

#### 4.3.6. Rheological Properties

A Haake Mars 40 rheometer (Thermo Scientific, Karlsruhe, Germany) was used to measure the rheological properties of the obtained hydrogels. A plate (35 mm in diameter, 1 mm gap) with serrated platens was used, and their temperature was kept at 20 °C. Two different small-amplitude oscillatory shear tests were performed (20 °C): strain sweep and

frequency sweep. The strain amplitude test was performed at a constant frequency of 1 Hz with a strain ranging from 0.1 to 100% to identify each hydrogel's linear viscoelastic region (LVR). The frequency sweep test was then performed with a frequency range of 0.1–10 Hz and a constant strain of 1%. The frequency sweep test was used to determine the parameters describing the viscoelastic behavior of the samples, which included the elastic modulus ( $G'$ ), viscous modulus ( $G''$ ), complex viscosity ( $|\eta^*|$ ), and loss angle  $\tan(\delta)$  as the ratio of  $G''$  to  $G'$ . The values reported are the averages of three replicates.

#### 4.3.7. Statistical Analysis

The data acquired from the experiments were analyzed using Statistica 13.1 (StatSoft, Krakow, Poland). The effects of pH and NaCl concentration modulation on the experiment's observed results were determined using analysis of variance (ANOVA). Tukey's test was used to determine the significance of the differences at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . The results were also evaluated using principal component analysis (PCA) and hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA).

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Article

# Effects of Sequential Induction Combining Thermal Treatment with Ultrasound or High Hydrostatic Pressure on the Physicochemical and Mechanical Properties of Pea Protein–Psyllium Hydrogels as Elderberry Extract Carriers

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**Abstract:** Entrapping bioactive ingredients like elderberry extract in hydrogels improves their stability and functionality in food matrices. This study assessed the effect of sequential thermal treatment with ultrasound (US) or high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) and treatment duration on pea protein–psyllium hydrogels as elderberry extract carriers. Measurements included color parameters, extract entrapment efficiency, physical stability, textural properties, microrheology, FT-IR, thermal degradation (TGA), SEM images, total polyphenols content, antioxidant activity, and reducing power. The control hydrogel was obtained using only thermal induction. Both treatments impacted physical stability by affecting biopolymer aggregate structures. Thermal and US combined induction resulted in hydrogels with noticeable color changes and reduced entrapment efficiency. Conversely, thermal and HHP-combined induction, especially with extended secondary treatment (10 min), enhanced hydrogel strength, uniformity, and extract entrapment efficiency (EE = 33% for P10). FT-IR and TGA indicated no chemical structural alterations post-treatment. Sequential thermal and HHP induction preserved polyphenol content, antioxidant activity (ABTS = 5.8 mg TE/g d.m.; DPPH = 11.1 mg TE/g d.m.), and reducing power (RP = 1.08 mg TE/g d.m.) due to the dense hydrogel structure effectively enclosing the elderberry extract. Sequential thermal and HHP induction was more effective in developing pea protein–psyllium hydrogels for elderberry extract entrapment.

**Keywords:** binary hydrogel; protein–polysaccharide interactions; delivery system; microstructure; textural properties; antioxidant properties; anthocyanins



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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the growing consumer focus on health and wellness has significantly boosted the demand for functional foods, which are designed to provide additional health benefits beyond basic nutrition. These foods often incorporate bioactive ingredients such as essential oils, vitamins, prebiotics, and probiotics [1,2]. Lately, there has been an increasing trend in developing pro-healthy foods (functional foods) through the addition of natural extracts containing antioxidants. Among these, anthocyanins, including cyanidin-3-glucoside, cyanidin-3-sambubioside, and peonidin-3-glucoside, predominantly found in elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* L.), are recognized for their antioxidant properties [3,4]. Despite these advantages, anthocyanins are highly prone to degradation during food processing and storage, resulting in decreased bioavailability and effectiveness. Consequently, there is a critical need for effective strategies to stabilize and deliver these compounds in food systems [5–7].

Hydrogels, three-dimensional networks of cross-linked polymers, offer an innovative approach for the entrapment and protection of anthocyanins. Their unique characteristics, including softness, elasticity, and high water retention capacity, render them ideal matrices for enhancing the stability and delivery of sensitive ingredients [8–10]. Integrating hydrogels into food formulations can enable precise control over texture and mouthfeel, aligning sensory attributes with consumer preferences, while also serving as carriers for anthocyanins [10–13]. Selecting appropriate components for the hydrogel is crucial to achieving these desired functional and mechanical properties [14].

Combining two biopolymers can yield hydrogels with more customizable properties. Prior research indicates that pea protein and psyllium can serve as effective building blocks for a binary hydrogel matrix [14,15]. Pea protein's gelation properties facilitate the formation of robust networks, which provide the hydrogel with necessary structural integrity [16]. This characteristic imparts mechanical strength and stability, critical for the hydrogel's role as a carrier of anthocyanins. Studies have demonstrated that protein complexation, via direct binding and co-assembly, is an efficient method to enhance anthocyanin stability [17,18]. Psyllium, rich in the polysaccharide arabinoxylan, possesses notable water-binding capacity and gel-forming abilities, alongside its prebiotic benefits [19,20]. The incorporation of psyllium into pea protein-based hydrogels significantly enhances the hydrogel's viscosity and stability, thereby augmenting its efficacy as a structural matrix and delivery system for anthocyanin entrapment [21–23]. While protein–psyllium hydrogels exhibit significant advantages, such as edibility, biocompatibility, improved functional properties, and notable nutritional benefits (including psyllium's prebiotic properties), there are also notable challenges that need to be addressed. These include potential complexities in gelation control and sensory attributes that may affect consumer acceptance. These challenges require precise control through the formulation and processing conditions to achieve the desired gel properties [24,25].

Hydrogel induction refers to the processes employed to initiate and control the formation and structuring of hydrogels. Conventional methods for inducing gelation in pea protein–psyllium hydrogels typically rely on thermal induction, wherein heating is used to trigger the gelation [16,26]. However, this approach can destabilize sensitive bioactive compounds such as anthocyanins [5]. To overcome this limitation, a novel combined approach can be adopted. Initially, thermal induction is employed to induce protein gelation by heating the pea protein to its gelation temperature, thereby unfolding and forming an initial network. After cooling, psyllium and elderberry extract are incorporated, and the network formation is further refined by the assistance of high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) or ultrasound (US). These additional treatments enhance the structuring of the hydrogel network, improving its functional properties and stability, which enhances the entrapment of anthocyanins in the matrix [24,27]. The use of HHP (100 to 600 MPa) as an additional step in the induction enhances the network by promoting protein interactions through their further unfolding and aggregation [28,29]. Additionally, the physical compression caused by high pressure on the forming structure can influence the further entrapment of anthocyanins, leading to a dense and cohesive hydrogel. Meanwhile, US treatment improves the dispersion of biopolymers, resulting in a more homogeneous and organized hydrogel, which can also influence the anthocyanins entrapment efficiency [30]. Ultrasound treatment (30–100% amplitude) can be deployed in the restructuring of pea protein, which can affect its hydration properties, leading to a higher structural strength when compared to traditionally induced hydrogel [31]. This combined method aims to leverage the initial thermal gelation with the advanced structuring capabilities of HHP and US to develop new and highly customizable hydrogels. This combined method aims to leverage the initial thermal gelation with the advanced structuring capabilities of HHP and US to develop pea protein–psyllium hydrogel for anthocyanins entrapment.

Despite extensive studies exploring various protein–polysaccharide combinations for hydrogel formation, such as those involving animal-based proteins like whey and casein [32] and plant-based proteins like soy and pea [18,33], there is a notable gap in

research concerning the specific synergy between pea protein and psyllium, particularly for anthocyanin-rich elderberry extract entrapment. Additionally, the potential of combining traditional thermal induction with advanced non-thermal methods like HHP and US remains underexplored, specifically in the context of influencing the physicochemical and mechanical properties of the matrices, as well as the entrapment efficiency of the elderberry extract. These gaps underline the necessity of investigating the unique combination of pea protein and psyllium, as well as the innovative application of sequential thermal and non-thermal induction techniques. This study hypothesizes that combining thermal induction with high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) or ultrasound (US) treatments will enhance the structuring of pea protein–psyllium hydrogels, thereby improving their functional properties, stability, and entrapment efficiency of the elderberry extract. The aim was to investigate these combined methods' effects on the physicochemical and mechanical properties of the hydrogels, ultimately developing structures with improved integrity, stability, and enhanced antioxidant activity. By addressing these research gaps, this study contributes to the enhancement of functional foods and the development of innovative hydrogel-based delivery systems.

## 2. Results and Discussion

The analysis of color parameters (Table 1) reveals distinct effects of 5 and 10 min of ultrasound (U5 and U10, respectively) and high hydrostatic pressure (P5 and P10, respectively) treatments on the optical properties of hydrogels. The lightness ( $L^*$ ) remained consistent across all treatments compared to the control hydrogel (C), indicating no significant impact on brightness. However, ultrasound treatments (U5 and U10) significantly increased the  $a^*$  values, indicating a shift towards the red spectrum, while high-pressure treatments (P5 and P10) significantly reduced  $a^*$  values. For the  $b^*$  values, ultrasound treatments resulted in a significant increase, whereas high-pressure treatments decreased this value. The chroma ( $C^*$ ) values were significantly increased by ultrasound treatments (U5 and U10), suggesting more saturated colors compared to the control hydrogel (C). Conversely, high-pressure treatments (P5 and P10) significantly decreased chroma compared to the control. The hue angle ( $h$ ) showed a significant decrease in ultrasound-treated samples (U5 and U10), indicating a perceptible shift in hue towards the red spectrum. In contrast, high-pressure treatments (P5 and P10) caused a significant increase in hue angle compared to the control, indicating a shift towards the blue-green spectrum. These differences in  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ , chroma ( $C^*$ ), and hue ( $h$ ) could be attributed to the formed structure and whether the extract is effectively distributed within it. When the extract became entrapped within a hydrogel structure, the environment surrounding the pigments changed, which might have impacted the hydrogels' optical properties, reducing their ability to interact with light as freely as they would in a solvent [34]. To comprehensively determine the impact of the treatment type and duration on the color of the obtained hydrogels (U5, U10, P5, and P10) in comparison to the control hydrogel (C), the total color difference ( $\Delta E$ ) was determined (Table 1). Analyzing the obtained results, it was found that  $\Delta E$  for U5 and U10 differed the most from the control sample. However, this color difference was only noticeable for experienced observers ( $1 < \Delta E < 2$ ). On the other hand, in the case of P5 and P10, the color difference was not noticeable for any observer ( $0 < \Delta E < 1$ ).

**Table 1.** Effects of sequential thermal and non-thermal induction on the color parameters ( $L^*$ ,  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ ,  $C^*$ ,  $h$ , and  $\Delta E$ ) and extract entrapment efficiency (EE) of the obtained hydrogels.

Samples	Color Parameters						EE [%]
	$L^*$	$a^*$	$b^*$	$C^*$	$h [^\circ]$	$\Delta E$	
C	3.63 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.17	4.72 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.09	-0.37 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.06	4.7 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.1	274 <sup>b</sup> ± 1	-	19 <sup>c</sup> ± 0
U5	3.69 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.03	5.75 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.08	-0.10 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.06	5.8 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.1	271 <sup>a</sup> ± 0	1.1 ± 0.1	3 <sup>a</sup> ± 0
U10	3.66 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.03	5.89 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.04	-0.07 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.03	5.9 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.0	271 <sup>a</sup> ± 0	1.2 ± 0.0	9 <sup>b</sup> ± 1
P5	3.40 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.01	4.18 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.05	-0.74 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.04	4.3 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.0	280 <sup>c</sup> ± 0	0.7 ± 0.0	20 <sup>d</sup> ± 0
P10	3.44 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.14	4.19 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.09	-0.81 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.05	4.3 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.1	281 <sup>c</sup> ± 1	0.7 ± 0.1	33 <sup>e</sup> ± 0

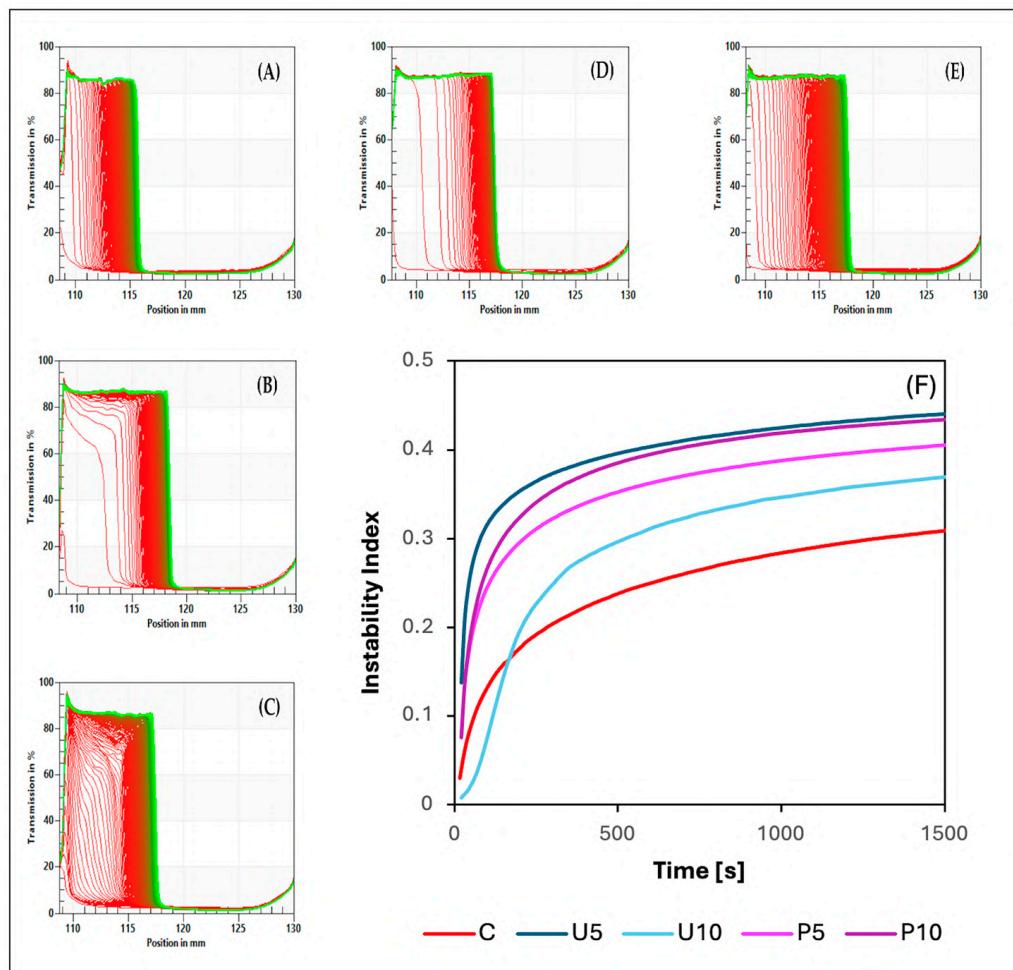
The average ( $n = 3$ ) values in columns with different letter symbols differ significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ). The color difference between U5, U10, P5, and P10 in comparison to C was estimated using  $\Delta E$  values: if  $0 < \Delta E < 1$ , the color is determined as not noticeable for the observer;  $1 < \Delta E < 2$ , only experienced observers can notice the difference in colors;  $2 < \Delta E < 3.5$ , unexperienced observers also notice the difference in colors;  $3.5 < \Delta E < 5$ , clear color difference in colors is noticed;  $5 < \Delta E$ , observer notices two different colors. Samples description: C—Control hydrogel induced via thermal induction; U5 and U10—Thermal induction followed by ultrasound treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively; P5 and P10—Thermal induction followed by high hydrostatic pressure treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively.

The analysis of extract entrapment efficiency (EE) reveals significant differences in the efficacy of ultrasound (U5 and U10) and high hydrostatic pressure (P5 and P10) treatments in entrapping extracts within the hydrogel matrix. Based on the results (Table 1), it was observed that ultrasound treatments (U5 and U10) significantly decreased the EE compared to the control, with U5 showing the lowest entrapment efficiency at 3% and U10 slightly higher at 9%. This could be due to the formation of a weaker gel structure, which was not able to entrap the extract. Subjecting biopolymers to the effect of ultrasound (US) treatment during induction leads to a cavitation process, which might slow down the formation of large aggregates. However, higher ultrasound treatment power or longer treatment duration has been proven to positively affect the technological and physical properties of biopolymers. The prolonged exposure to ultrasound (10 min) can lead to more uniformly dispersed aggregates (due to thinning effect), which improves the homogeneity of the gel structure [35,36]. This improved homogeneity can enhance the entrapment of anthocyanins by providing a more consistent network, which might explain the higher EE value compared to the shorter treatment duration (5 min). In contrast, high-pressure treatments (P5 and P10) significantly increased the EE compared to the control, with P5 achieving 20% and P10 reaching the highest entrapment efficiency at 33%. The increased EE observed in high-pressure-treated samples suggests that the application of high hydrostatic pressure enhances the structural integrity of the hydrogel matrix, facilitating the entrapment of anthocyanins. Similar tendencies were observed in the research of Mao et al. [37] focusing on the effect of HHP on riboflavin-loaded soy protein isolate cold gel. This increase in the entrapment efficiency of the extract can be attributed to the sequential thermal and high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) induction. This process enhanced the swelling of the gel network, thereby improving the retention of the extract within the hydrogel matrix [38].

The observed differences in the entrapment efficiency (EE) of elderberry extract between ultrasound-induced and high-pressure-induced hydrogels explain the variations in  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ , chroma ( $C^*$ ), and hue ( $h$ ) values (Table 1). High-pressure treatments compressed the hydrogel matrix, creating a dense network that effectively entrapped the extract. This resulted in reduced  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ , and  $C^*$  values, with the extract distributed and entrapped within the structure, shifting the hue ( $h$ ) towards the blue-green spectrum. Conversely, ultrasound treatments produced a weaker hydrogel structure, leading to low extract entrapment, increasing  $a^*$ ,  $b^*$ , and  $C^*$  values. The extract was more concentrated near the surface, shifting the hue ( $h$ ) towards the red spectrum.

STEP technology, which stands for space-time-resolved extinction profiles, provides distinct transmission profiles that act as unique “fingerprints” (Figure 1A–E), reflecting fluctuations in particle concentration within analyzed samples [39]. These profiles are crucial

for assessing the kinetics of particle concentration changes induced by centrifugal forces, resulting in phase separation within the samples. By studying these transmission profiles, observable structural compression occurred, evident in decreased light transmission in the right quadrant of each graph. The propagation of destabilization within the samples moved downward, indicating maximal particle concentration towards the base of the sample, while a less particle-concentrated liquid phase was observed in the upper regions. Based on the destabilization kinetics (Figure 1F), it can be concluded that destabilization in U5, as well as P5 and P10, occurred the quickest, followed by U10. Conversely, the control sample (C) exhibited the slowest destabilization changes. Subjecting the samples to ultrasound (US) and high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) treatment might disrupt weaker interactions that could have formed between the biopolymers, leading to a less physically stable structure. Additionally, these treatments might affect protein stability from a thermodynamic perspective, decreasing the kinetic stability and increasing the unfolding rate. Folded proteins can act as active fillers in a hydrogel structure; thus, the complete unfolding of all proteins might decrease mechanical rigidity, thereby affecting network formation and relaxation [24,40].



**Figure 1.** Effects of sequential thermal and non-thermal induction on the transmission profiles “fingerprints” (A–E) and the destabilization kinetics (F) of the obtained hydrogels ( $n = 3$ ). Samples description: (A) control hydrogel C induced via thermal induction; (B,C) thermal induction followed by ultrasound treatment for 5 and 10 min, U5 and U10, respectively; (D,E) thermal induction followed by high hydrostatic pressure treatment for 5 and 10 min, P5 and P10, respectively. For (A–E), the red lines represent light extinction at the starting point, and the green lines represent light extinction at the end of the analysis.

The physical stability of the obtained hydrogels was assessed using the instability index, which ranges from 0 (indicating stability) to 1 (indicating instability). Table 2 presents the average instability index values for each sample. The control hydrogel (C) exhibited the highest physical stability. Both ultrasound (US) and high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) treatments, along with increased treatment durations, led to a decrease in physical stability. This reduction in stability is likely attributed to the impact of these treatments on the size and density of pea protein–psyllium aggregates, which may have resulted in a more heterogeneous microstructure and a diminished water-holding capacity in the hydrogels [39,41].

**Table 2.** Effects of sequential thermal and non-thermal induction on the instability index (physical stability) and textural and microrheological parameters of the obtained hydrogels.

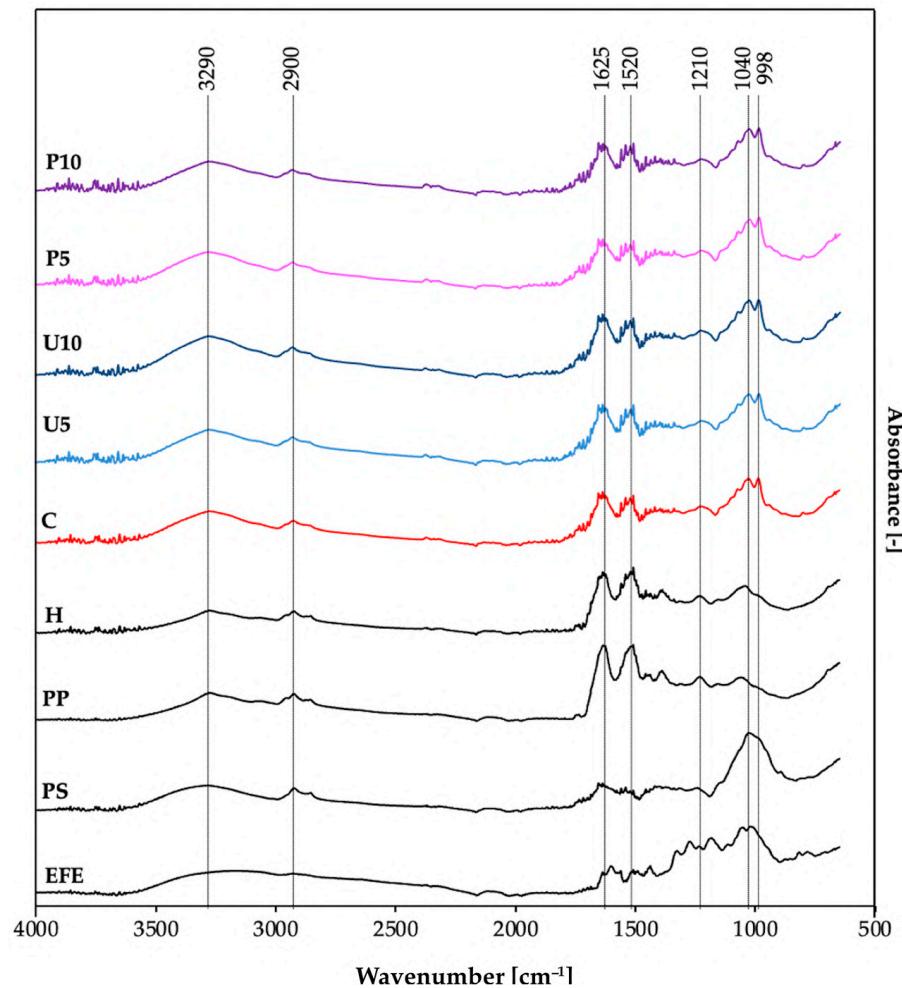
Samples	Instability Index	Textural Parameters			Microrheological Parameters	
		Strength [N]	Adhesion [N]	Spreadability [N·s]	EI [ $\text{nm}^{-2}$ ]	SLB [-]
C	$0.35^{\text{a}} \pm 0.03$	$0.17^{\text{b}} \pm 0.00$	$0.08^{\text{d}} \pm 0.00$	$3.27^{\text{ab}} \pm 0.76$	$0.057^{\text{c}} \pm 0.005$	$0.01^{\text{a}} \pm 0.00$
U5	$0.41^{\text{b}} \pm 0.00$	$0.07^{\text{a}} \pm 0.00$	$0.01^{\text{a}} \pm 0.00$	$0.33^{\text{a}} \pm 0.02$	$0.030^{\text{b}} \pm 0.002$	$0.23^{\text{b}} \pm 0.01$
U10	$0.46^{\text{c}} \pm 0.00$	$0.07^{\text{a}} \pm 0.00$	$0.01^{\text{a}} \pm 0.00$	$0.19^{\text{a}} \pm 0.00$	$0.017^{\text{a}} \pm 0.003$	$0.28^{\text{c}} \pm 0.01$
P5	$0.43^{\text{bc}} \pm 0.01$	$0.19^{\text{c}} \pm 0.00$	$0.04^{\text{c}} \pm 0.00$	$4.71^{\text{b}} \pm 0.91$	$0.016^{\text{a}} \pm 0.003$	$0.33^{\text{d}} \pm 0.01$
P10	$0.45^{\text{c}} \pm 0.01$	$0.20^{\text{d}} \pm 0.00$	$0.03^{\text{b}} \pm 0.00$	$8.79^{\text{c}} \pm 0.22$	$0.026^{\text{ab}} \pm 0.001$	$0.35^{\text{e}} \pm 0.01$

The average ( $n = 3$ ) values in columns with different letter symbols differ significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ). Samples description: C—Control hydrogel induced via thermal induction; U5 and U10—Thermal induction followed by ultrasound treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively; P5 and P10—Thermal induction followed by high hydrostatic pressure treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively.

The data presented in Table 2 reveal significant impacts of ultrasound and high-pressure treatments on the textural and microrheological parameters of hydrogels. Ultrasound treatments generally decreased strength, adhesion, spreadability, and elasticity while increasing the solid–liquid balance, suggesting a disruption of the hydrogel network. This effect is attributed to cavitation forces that disrupt protein–polysaccharide aggregates, leading to a drop in the structural elasticity (EI). Both the application of US and its duration influenced the viscoelastic properties of the samples, with elastic properties still being predominant (SLB < 0.5). This aligns with the available literature, suggesting the increase in liquid phase movement between the structures caused by the formation of a weak network [42,43]. Conversely, high-pressure treatments increased strength and spreadability while also increasing the solid–liquid balance (SLB). P10 exhibited the highest values of textural properties and SLB (which was still below 0.5), indicating a gel structure formation capable of entrapping the extract-rich liquid phase (EE = 33%). Similar observations were made by Luo et al. [28] in their investigation of HHP’s impact on quinoa protein gelation, suggesting that HHP induces the formation of a heterogeneous structure with large protein aggregates. The heterogeneity in the formed gel structure for P5 and P10 might have played a crucial role in contributing to structural collapse.

The physicochemical and mechanical properties of the obtained matrices, including mechanical characteristics, structural morphology, and entrapment efficiency, are influenced by intermolecular forces among the building blocks. Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FT-IR) was employed to analyze these interactions by identifying molecular vibrations and stretching patterns of specific molecular groups within the samples (Figure 2). FT-IR analysis was conducted individually for each building block—elderberry fruit extract (EFE), pea protein (PP), and psyllium (PS). Subsequently, the analysis was conducted collectively for all prepared hydrogels (H, C, U5, U10, P5, P10), where H was a pea protein–psyllium hydrogel without elderberry fruit extract. The obtained FT-IR spectra revealed four main regions: the “single bond region” ( $2500\text{--}4000\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ), the “triple bond region” ( $2000\text{--}2500\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ), the “double bond region” ( $1500\text{--}2000\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ), and the

“fingerprint region” ( $1500\text{--}600\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ), which are unique to specific molecules. All analyzed samples exhibited distinct peaks, affirming their organic origin [44].



**Figure 2.** FT-IR spectra for the building blocks (EFE, PP, and PS) and the obtained hydrogels (H, C, U5, U10, P5, and P10). Samples description: EFE—Elderberry fruit extract; PS—Psyllium; PP—Pea protein; H—Pea protein–psyllium hydrogel without elderberry fruit extract; C—Control hydrogel induced via thermal induction; U5 and U10—Thermal induction followed by ultrasound treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively; P5 and P10—Thermal induction followed by high hydrostatic pressure treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively.

The FT-IR spectra analysis of the elderberry fruit dry extract (EFE) revealed six major peaks. Given that the extract contains 25% anthocyanins, the overlapping of characteristic peaks of anthocyanins and other compounds (such as phenolic compounds) was considered. The peak observed in the region between  $1600\text{--}1650\text{ cm}^{-1}$  represents the stretching vibrations within the aromatic rings present in the anthocyanidin core [45]. The peaks in the region of  $1000\text{--}1250\text{ cm}^{-1}$  represent C–O stretching in aromatic rings and C–O–C glycosidic linkages, indicating that sugars (such as sambubiose) are attached to the anthocyanidin core. The broad band in the region  $3300\text{--}3500\text{ cm}^{-1}$  indicates the presence of hydroxyl groups (O–H) [46].

Psyllium husk (PS) polysaccharide is composed of  $\beta$ -1,4-linked D-xylose units (xylan) and arabinoxylan (a  $\beta$ -1,4-linked D-xylose backbone with  $\alpha$ -1,3-linked L-arabinose side chains). Based on the FT-IR spectra (Figure 2) and previous research by Waleed et al. [47], the following characteristic peaks can be observed: the polysaccharide backbone region ( $1000\text{--}1250\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ), which encompasses various stretching vibrations such as C–O–C stretching between sugar units in the xylan and arabinoxylan backbone, and C–O stretching

arising from the hydroxyl groups. The small peak at approximately  $1630\text{ cm}^{-1}$  is associated with the C=O stretching vibration of acetyl groups present in some xylan and arabinoxylan molecules. The intensity of this peak correlates with the degree of acetylation, indicating that the psyllium used had a low degree of acetylation. This low acetyl group content leads to a higher affinity for water and increased final viscosity. The peak around  $3300\text{--}3500\text{ cm}^{-1}$  suggests the presence of O-H stretching of hydroxyl groups on the sugar ring and may also indicate the presence of intermolecular hydrogen bonding [48].

The pea protein (PP) exhibited a characteristic peak in the Amide I band region ( $1600\text{--}1700\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) associated with C=O stretching vibrations, which are the strongest and correlate with the protein's secondary structure. The peak position at  $1625\text{ cm}^{-1}$  suggests that the dominant secondary structure is  $\beta$ -sheet. Additionally, the Amide II band ( $1550\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ), associated with N-H bending and C-N stretching vibrations, may have been overlapped by the characteristic C-C stretching vibrations of aromatic amino acid side chains ( $1500\text{--}1600\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ), indicating the presence of phenylalanine and tyrosine in the pea protein [49]. The peak at  $2900\text{ cm}^{-1}$  strongly indicates C-H stretching vibrations in the aliphatic side chains of amino acids such as alanine, valine, leucine, isoleucine, and proline. The peak at  $3290\text{ cm}^{-1}$  represents N-H stretching vibrations from the primary amine ( $\text{NH}_2$ ) groups present in the amino acid backbone of pea protein [50].

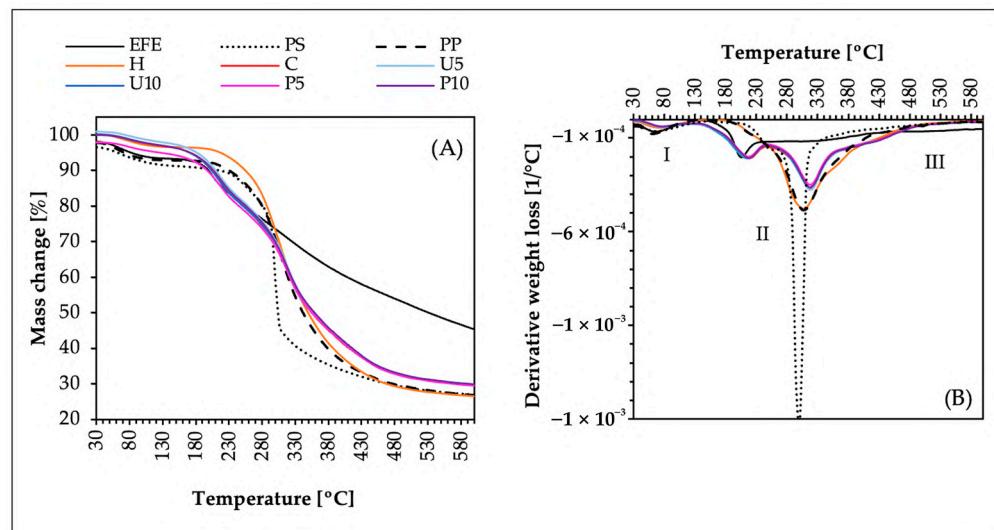
The hydrogel obtained from pea protein and psyllium husk without the addition of EFE (H) exhibited new interactions between these molecules. The disappearance of the strong peak between  $1000$  and  $1200\text{ cm}^{-1}$  in the H hydrogel spectrum, compared to the reference spectrum of pure psyllium husk (PS), indicates interactions between the hydrogel components likely due to hydrogen bond formation between the sugar units and protein. Additionally, a decrease in the intensity of the peaks between  $1400$  and  $1700\text{ cm}^{-1}$  suggests structural changes in the pea protein, including unfolding and aggregation. The broadening of these peaks may reflect the presence of a mixture of different secondary structures caused by heating [49]. In contrast, Niu et al. [21] observed increased intensity of absorption peaks at  $1401$  and  $1648\text{ cm}^{-1}$  in psyllium and whey protein interactions, indicating the formation of additional C=O and C-N bonds likely resulting from the carbonyl-ammonia reaction.

Obtaining a pea protein–psyllium hydrogel with the addition of elderberry fruit extract (EFE) caused significant changes in the presented spectrum (C). A new overlapping double peak ( $850$  and  $1200\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) was observed, likely indicating hydrogen bonding between hydroxyl groups (OH) of anthocyanins (present in the elderberry extract, EFE) and carbonyl groups (C=O) of pea protein, resulting in a modified vibrational pattern. Additionally, a slight increase in the peak at  $\sim 3300\text{ cm}^{-1}$  might be attributed to the presence of additional hydroxyl groups (OH) from the added extract. The broadness of this peak suggests that the OH groups exist in different chemical environments within the sample—some free or weakly interacting, while others are involved in hydrogen bonding with functional groups in pea protein or psyllium.

Sequential thermal, ultrasound (U5, U10), and high hydrostatic pressure (P5, P10) induction did not significantly alter the FT-IR spectra. These findings suggest that ultrasound (US) and high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) affect the overall morphology—such as pore size, density, and homogeneity—without significantly modifying the chemical bonds within the hydrogel matrix. This observation aligns with the study by Jambrak et al. [51], where ultrasound treatment on soy protein isolate revealed minimal changes in chemical composition based on FT-IR spectra. However, alterations in protein aggregation behavior were noted, indicating changes in protein interactions without affecting individual amino acid bonds. Similarly, ultrasonic treatment of chitosan exhibited no significant changes in characteristic peaks, suggesting the primary chemical structure remained intact while changes in crystallinity were observed [52]. Conversely, some studies report that US treatment can alter the conformation and chemical interactions of biopolymers due to cavitation-induced temperature increases, leading to protein denaturation and degradation of thermolabile components [53]. In our study, US treatment was performed in an ice bath to mitigate overheating, and the absence of changes in FT-IR spectra may be attributed to the pre-

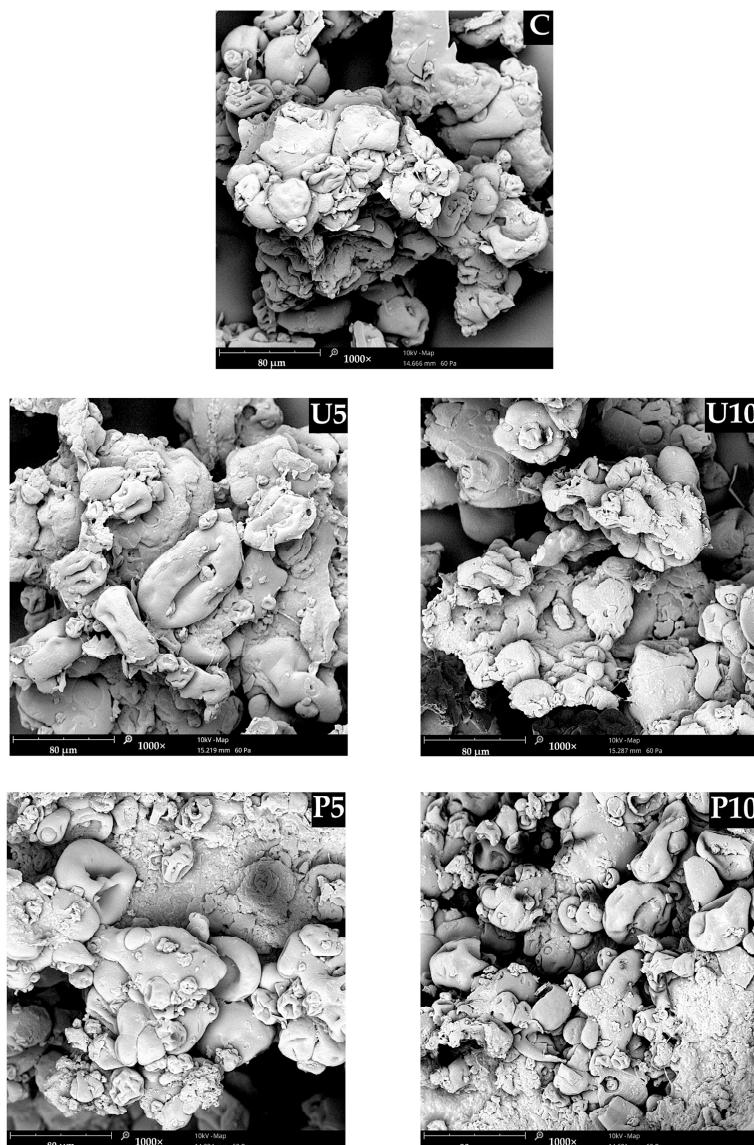
denatured state of pea proteins from prior thermal induction. In the case of HHP treatment, previous studies on soy protein and flaxseed gum indicated a decrease in glycation sites and alterations in protein secondary structure [54]. Jin et al. [55] demonstrated that HHP could induce morphological changes in soy protein hydrolysates/β-glucan/ferulic acid complexes, transforming them from primarily spherical to irregular shapes, influenced predominantly by binding interactions among the components. Moreover, HHP has been shown to significantly modify molecular weight distribution, average particle size, and morphological arrangement or orientation of various polysaccharides [56].

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of interactions and potential changes within the hydrogels, the thermogravimetric analysis (TGA and DTG) of the obtained samples was performed. By analyzing both the functional group interactions (FT-IR) and the thermal behavior (TGA and DTG), it is possible to indicate if the occurring interactions between the components potentially influence the overall thermal stability. Figure 3 shows TGA (A) and DTG (B) of the analyzed samples. All samples showed an initial phase (I), between 30 °C and 130 °C, related to the evaporation of moisture or adsorbed water from the samples, as well as the loss of volatile compounds. The dried samples contained a low amount of water, resulting in minimal mass losses ranging from 2.8% to 8.5%—the highest mass loss was in the case of psyllium (PS). The main decomposition phase (II) was observed between 130 °C and 480 °C and can be divided into two sub-phases. The mass loss in this phase ranged from 39% in the case of EFE to 67% in the case of H (pea protein–psyllium hydrogel without elderberry fruit extract). The lower sub-phase (130–240 °C) represents the start of the thermal degradation of low-stability components, including side chains and low-molecular-weight oligomers. In this sub-phase, a weight loss was observed only in the case of elderberry fruit extract (EFE) and the hydrogels containing the extract (U5, U10, P5, and P10). This substantial weight loss corresponds to the degradation of sensitive compounds like anthocyanins, other polyphenols, and vitamins [57]. The incorporation of elderberry extract into pea protein–psyllium hydrogels (no matter the induction technique) resulted in a slight increase in the thermal resistance to degradation from 209 °C to 220 °C. The opposite observation was made by Cetinkaya et al. [58] in their study on gelatin nanofibers with black elderberry. They observed a slight decrease in the thermal resistance on the sample after mixing gelatin and the elderberry extract together (from 212 °C to 190 °C). The upper sub-phase of the main decomposition phase (II) occurred between 240 °C and 480 °C. In this sub-phase, a thermal degradation was observed in the case of all the analyzed samples except for the elderberry extract (EFE). Furthermore, the samples containing EFE (U5, U10, P5, and P10) showed slightly smaller weight loss (~64%) than pea protein–psyllium hydrogel without elderberry fruit extract (H) ~67%. During this sub-phase the most significant weight loss was observed, which is due to the primary structures breaking down into smaller, volatile molecules, often resulting in the release of CO, CO<sub>2</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>O, and various hydrocarbons [59]. In the third phase (III), the temperature range was from 480 °C to 600 °C. The weight loss during this last phase was similar to all the analyzed samples ~3% except EFE, for which the weight loss was approximately 9%. This is due to elderberry extract (EFE) containing more thermally labile organic compounds that decompose and volatilize over a wide temperature range. Thus, it can be summarized that the samples containing elderberry extract (U5, U10, P5, and P10) were more stable than elderberry extract by itself (EFE), which might be due to the formed hydrogel structure and the polyphenols–protein interactions. These hydrogels have similar degradation phases to those of their building components (PP and PS). Sequential thermal-, ultrasound (U5, U10)-, and high hydrostatic pressure (P5, P10)-induced hydrogels showed similar thermal stability in all phases compared to control hydrogel (C), indicating that these additional treatments did not significantly alter the thermal degradation profile of the samples.



**Figure 3.** Phases of the thermal degradation analysis of the building blocks (EFE, PP, and PS) and the obtained hydrogels (H, C, U5, U10, P5, and P10). (A) Thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) and (B) derivative thermogravimetry (DTG). Samples description: EFE—Elderberry fruit extract; PS—Psyllium; PP—Pea protein; H—Pea protein–psyllium hydrogel without elderberry fruit extract; C—Control hydrogel induced via thermal induction; U5 and U10—Thermal induction followed by ultrasound treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively; P5 and P10—Thermal induction followed by high hydrostatic pressure treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively.

Based on the analysis of SEM microscopic images (Figure 4), it can be concluded that sequential thermal-, ultrasound (U5, U10)-, and high hydrostatic pressure (P5, P10)-inductions affected the microstructure of the obtained hydrogels. It was also noticed that the treatment duration also had an impact on the final structure. The microstructure of U5 appeared to have fewer fractured aggregate boundaries than U10. Additionally, the longer ultrasound treatment resulted in diminished variations in the size and distribution of the formed aggregates. This is due to the increased cavitation generated by the sound waves, creating rapid pressure fluctuations [60]. On the other hand, the microstructure of the hydrogels obtained via sequential thermal and high hydrostatic pressure treatment was characterized by a more compact structure when compared to U5, U10, and C. Out of all the analyzed samples, P10 had the most well-spanned microstructure, with fewer voids present between the aggregates; this explains the highest extract entrapment efficiency (EE) presented in Table 1. Multiple studies have reported consistent findings regarding the impact of high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) on biopolymeric hydrogels [28,61,62]. The sequential thermal and high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) induction could have enhanced the aggregation process, resulting in a compact and cohesive network that was able to physically confine the water phase containing the extract, while also increasing the binding sites between the pea protein, psyllium, and anthocyanins present in the extract. Moreover, this denser and more entangled hydrogel network minimized the voids in the structure, increasing the water-holding capacity and restricting the diffusion of the extract, thereby ensuring effective entrapment [63–65]. A similar relationship between structural density and entrapment efficiency was observed by Liu et al. [10] in their studies on gelatin–gellan gum hydrogels for the release of anthocyanins in the digestive system. They attributed this relationship to the water-soluble nature of anthocyanins present in the extract, which affected their entrapment due to the increase in water fixation within the gel network; this increased the entrapment of the extract.



**Figure 4.** Effects of sequential thermal and non-thermal induction on the microstructure of the hydrogels. Magnification 1000 $\times$ . Samples description: C—Control hydrogel induced via thermal induction; U5 and U10—Thermal induction followed by ultrasound treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively; P5 and P10—Thermal induction followed by high hydrostatic pressure treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively.

Table 3 presents the effects of sequential thermal, ultrasound (U5 and U10), and high hydrostatic pressure (P5 and P10) treatments on the total polyphenol content (TPC) of pea protein–psyllium hydrogels. This parameter subsequently influences antioxidant activity and reducing power. The TPC for samples subjected to additional 5-min ultrasound (U5) or high hydrostatic pressure (P5) treatments did not show significant deviations compared to the control hydrogel (C). The TPC values ranged from 16,987 to 18,865 mg chlorogenic acid equivalents/100 g (d.m.) for U5 and P5, respectively. However, extending the treatment time to 10 min had different effects: for U10, the TPC decreased, while for P10, the TPC increased. The stability of polyphenols is influenced by various factors, including the presence of oxygen, pH levels, temperature, and other elements [66]. The extended ultrasound treatment (U10) resulted in polyphenol degradation. In contrast, the 10-min high HHP treatment (P10) enhanced polyphenol retention, correlating with increased extract entrapment efficiency (EE) as noted in Table 1. This improved entrapment likely protected the polyphenols from degradation. In the control hydrogel, with an EE

of only 19%, the anthocyanins were inadequately protected, leading to lower TPC values compared to the P10-treated samples. Similar trends were observed in antioxidant activity and reducing power measurements. The ultrasound treatment (US) significantly reduced the free radical scavenging activity measured by the ABTS assay compared to the control hydrogel (C). On the other hand, U5 had higher values of DPPH and RP than C, which could be due to the increased homogeneity of the matrix, leading to a more uniform distribution of the extract in the hydrogel. Notably, increasing the duration of US treatment from 5 (U5) to 10 min (U10) decreased the values of the DPPH assay and reducing power (PR). This could be due to the formation of a weak gel structure unable to effectively entrap the extract, as well as degradation caused by localized high temperatures and oxidation from the cavitation effect, which introduced oxygen into the system [67,68]. On the contrary, increasing the HHP treatment time from 5 (P5) to 10 min (P10) caused a significant increase in all the assessed parameters. This improvement might be attributed to the formation of a more compact gel structure (Figure 2), which entrapped a larger amount of the elderberry fruit extract (EFE), protecting it from degradation. Additionally, HHP treatment likely caused air bubbles trapped in the system to escape to the hydrogel surface, reducing oxidation of the entrapped extract [62,69].

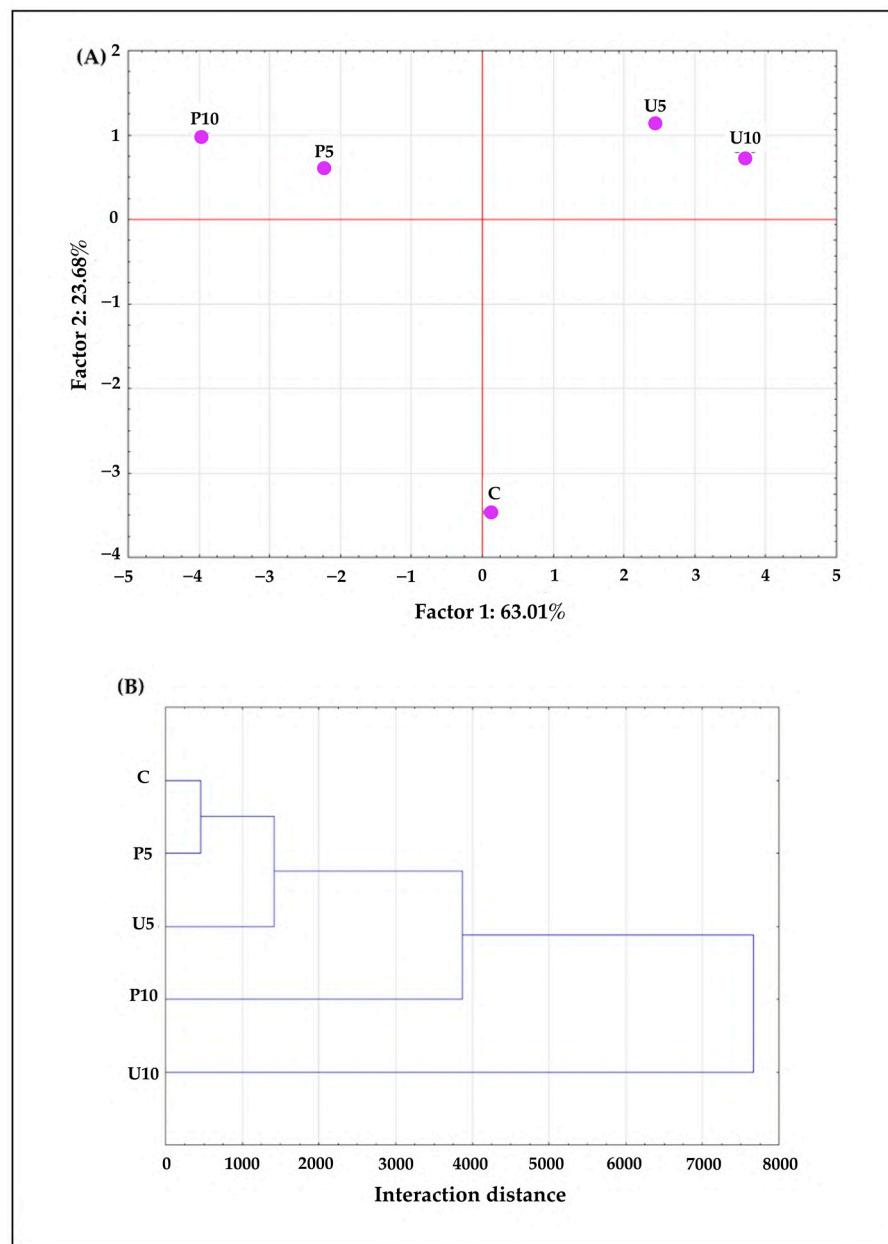
**Table 3.** Effects of sequential thermal and non-thermal induction on the total polyphenols content (TPC), antioxidant activity (expressed by ability to neutralize ABTS and DPPH radicals), and the reducing power of the obtained samples.

Samples	TPC [mg Chlorogenic Acid/100 g d.m.]	ABTS [mg TE/g d.m.]	DPPH [mg TE/g d.m.]	RP [mg TE/g d.m.]
C	18,403 <sup>b</sup> ± 221	4.8 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.1	6.8 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.0	0.87 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.03
U5	16,987 <sup>b</sup> ± 1668	3.6 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.3	8.8 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.8	0.98 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.01
U10	9317 <sup>a</sup> ± 1031	3.1 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.2	4.3 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.0	0.80 <sup>a</sup> ± 0.02
P5	18,865 <sup>b</sup> ± 278	4.9 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.2	7.7 <sup>bc</sup> ± 0.6	0.89 <sup>b</sup> ± 0.01
P10	22,741 <sup>c</sup> ± 1405	5.8 <sup>c</sup> ± 0.2	11.1 <sup>d</sup> ± 0.1	1.08 <sup>d</sup> ± 0.02

The average ( $n = 3$ ) values in columns with different letter symbols differ significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ). Samples description: C—Control hydrogel induced via thermal induction; U5 and U10—Thermal induction followed by ultrasound treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively; P5 and P10—Thermal induction followed by high hydrostatic pressure treatment for 5 and 10 min, respectively.

Principal component analysis (PCA) and hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA) were applied to the obtained results to efficiently summarize the data collected in this study. PCA was performed using 16 active variables. Two principal components were identified (Figure 5A): component 1 (Factor 1) accounted for 63.01% of the variance, and component 2 (Factor 2) accounted for 23.68% of the variance. Together, these components explained 86.7% of the total variance in the results. Component 1 is strongly positively correlated with chroma C\* ( $r = 0.96$ ). On the other hand, a negative contribution of this factor was found for spreadability ( $r = -0.97$ ), strength ( $r = -0.95$ ), EE ( $r = -0.91$ ), TPC ( $r = -0.88$ ), ABTS ( $r = -0.98$ ), DPPH ( $r = -0.74$ ), and RP ( $r = -0.64$ ). Component 2 is positively correlated with the SLB ( $r = 0.91$ ) and instability index ( $r = 0.91$ ). The negative contribution of factor 2 can be observed for EI ( $r = -0.89$ ) and adhesion ( $r = -0.86$ ). Given these interdependencies, the first principal component can be interpreted as a measure of the induction method that can attribute to the entrapment of elderberry extract and, consequently, the overall antioxidant activity. The second component can be interpreted as a measure of the induction method, contributing to the overall physical stability of the formed gel structure. Based on the sample distribution within the principal component space (Figure 5A) and the interaction distances observed in HCA (Figure 5B), it can be concluded that sequential thermal, ultrasound, and high hydrostatic pressure induction result in hydrogels with significantly different properties. The sequential thermal and ultrasound induction resulted in hydrogels with low structural stability and elasticity, negatively affecting the entrapment efficiency of the elderberry extract and the final antioxidant activity. Furthermore,

extending the treatment time to 10 min (U10) may have caused additional degradation of the polyphenols, explaining the highest observed interaction distance (Figure 5B). On the other hand, the sequential thermal and high hydrostatic pressure induction resulted in hydrogels with high entrapment efficiency due to the formation of a compact gel structure capable of entrapping the extract. However, this structural compression also led to high SLB values. Nonetheless, these systems exhibited high antioxidant activity, with 10 min of HHP treatment yielding the highest total polyphenol content and antioxidant activity.



**Figure 5.** Principal component analysis PCA (A) and hierachal cluster analysis HCA (B) of the obtained hydrogels.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Materials

Pea protein (NUTRALYS® F85F, protein content 88%, ash 10%) was obtained from Roquette Freres (Lestrem, France). Psyllium husk powder (PS, type 10351, purity: 95%, particle size: 60 mesh) was obtained from C.E. Roeper GmbH (Hamburg, Germany). Elderberry fruit dry extract (EFE, min. 95% pass 80 mesh, anthocyanins content 29%, polyphenols

content 40%, carrier: maltodextrin) was obtained from GreenVit (Zambrów, Poland). Citric acid, sodium citrate, and NaCl were purchased from the local food ingredient supplier Agnex (Białystok, Poland).

### 3.2. Hydrogel Preparation

The hydrogel preparation process was based on previous studies with slight modifications [14,15]. It involved hydrating pea protein (12.5 g of protein/100 g of hydrogel) in distilled water for 60 min under constant stirring (300 rpm) using a heated magnetic stirrer. After that, the protein dispersion underwent heating at 80 °C for 30 min. Post-cooling to 20 °C, the pH of the dispersion was adjusted to 3 (using citric acid and sodium citrate), and the ionic strength was modified by adding NaCl (0.3 M). Psyllium husk (0.5 g/100 g of hydrogel) and elderberry dry extract (2 g/100 mL of hydrogel's water phase) were introduced, and the dispersion was mixed for 10 min (300 rpm). The samples were divided into three groups (Table 4). One group was control hydrogels induced via thermal induction (C). Another group was thermal induction followed by ultrasound treatment (U) (25 kHz, 70 W, 100% pulse, 100% amplitude, sonotrode immersion at 15 mm) for 5 (U5) and 10 (U10) minutes using the ultrasound homogenizer P200St equipped with a titanium sonotrode S26d7 (Hielscher Ultrasonics GmbH, Teltow, Germany). The ultrasound treatment of the dispersions was conducted in an ice bath to prevent the samples from overheating (the temperature was kept at 20 ± 1 °C). The third group was thermal induction followed by high hydrostatic pressure treatment (P) (500 MPa, 20 °C) for 5 (P5) and 10 (P10) minutes using the U5000/120 Pascalizer (Unipress, Warsaw, Poland). Then, the obtained dispersions were stored for 24 h at 4 ± 1 °C to develop a gel structure. Once this duration elapsed, the samples were conditioned to a temperature of 20 ± 1 °C, following which they underwent testing to evaluate their properties. Table 4 explains the coding and inductions used for the hydrogels.

**Table 4.** Explanation of hydrogel coding and the sequential inductions used.

Samples Code	Primary Induction	Secondary Induction	Secondary Induction Duration [min]
C		-	-
U5		Ultrasound treatment (25 kHz, 70 W, 100% pulse, 100% amplitude)	5
U10	Heating at 80 °C for 30 min		10
P5		High hydrostatic pressure (500 MPa)	5
P10			10

### 3.3. Color Parameters Measurements

A Minolta CR-5 colorimeter (Minolta, Japan; light source D65; measuring head hole: 8 mm) was used to measure the color components in the CIE L\* a\* b\* system at the surface of the obtained hydrogels [14]. Through color measurement, four components were derived—L\* (brightness), a\*, b\*, C\* (chroma), and h (hue). The L\*, a\*, and b\* components enabled the calculation of the color difference coefficient, expressed as delta E ( $\Delta E$ ). This coefficient quantifies the disparity between two colors and is determined by the following formula:

$$\Delta E = \sqrt{(L_C^* - L_P^*)^2 + (a_C^* - a_P^*)^2 + (b_C^* - b_P^*)^2} \quad (1)$$

where  $L_C^*$ ;  $a_C^*$ ;  $b_C^*$  refer to the color parameters of the control hydrogel (C) and  $L_P^*$ ;  $a_P^*$ ;  $b_P^*$  refer to the color parameters of hydrogels induced with the additional treatment. The reported values represent the averages of three replicates. The extent of color difference between samples can be interpreted based on  $\Delta E$  values: not perceptible to the observer ( $0 < \Delta E < 1$ ), detectable by experienced observers ( $1 < \Delta E < 2$ ), noticeable by unexperienced observers ( $2 < \Delta E < 3.5$ ), distinctly visible color difference ( $3.5 < \Delta E < 5$ ), and clear differentiation of two colors by the observer ( $5 < \Delta E$ ) [70].

### 3.4. Entrapment Efficiency (EE) Measurements

The entrapment efficiency was calculated based on the entrapped anthocyanins determined using the pH differential method with a spectrometer, based on the methodology of Ge et al. [71] with slight modifications. The samples were centrifuged for 10 min at 10,000 rpm. Subsequently, 20 mL of the resulting liquid phase was diluted to 100 mL with distilled water. Then, 5 mL of the prepared solution was further diluted to 25 mL using potassium chloride buffer (pH 1.0) and sodium acetate buffer (pH 4.5). The samples were stored in a dark place for 20 min at room temperature ( $20 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$ ). Following this incubation period, the absorbance was measured at wavelengths of 510 and 700 nm against distilled water using a UV–VIS spectrophotometer (Genesys 180, ThermoScientific, Boston, MA, USA). The total anthocyanin content of the liquid phase was calculated using Equation (2) as follows:

$$C = \frac{(A_{\text{pH}1.0} - A_{\text{pH}4.5}) \times M_w \times DF \times 1000}{\varepsilon \times l} \quad (2)$$

where  $A_{\text{pH}1.0}$  and  $A_{\text{pH}4.5}$  are the maximum absorbance of the sample diluted with the buffers at pH 1.0 and 4.5, respectively;  $M_w$  is the molecular weight of cyanidin-3-O-glucoside (449.2 g/mol);  $DF$  is the dilution factor;  $\varepsilon$  is the extinction coefficient (26,900 L/mol·cm);  $l$  is the path length (1 cm); and 1000 is the conversion factor from grams to milligrams. The anthocyanin entrapment efficiency was calculated using Equation (3) [72] as follows:

$$\text{EE} = \frac{C_B - C_A}{C_B} \times 100 \quad (3)$$

where  $C_B$  and  $C_A$  are the total anthocyanin content of the sample before and after centrifugation, respectively. The analysis was performed in triplicate.

### 3.5. Physical Stability and Destabilization Behavior Measurements

The physical stability and destabilization kinetics of the hydrogels were evaluated using the LUMiSizer 6120-75 (L.U.M. GmbH, Berlin, Germany), which operates based on STEP technology (Space and Time Extinction Profiles), involving centrifugation under near-infrared (NIR) light [14,39]. For this analysis, the following parameters were used: dispersion volume of 1.8 mL, 870 nm wavelength, 1500 rpm, 15-h 10-min experiment duration, 210-s intervals, and temperature  $20^\circ\text{C}$ . The transmitted light intensity was monitored over time and position across the sample length using SepView 6.0 software (L.U.M. GmbH, Berlin, Germany). The destabilization behavior (fingerprint) was derived from recorded data, and an instability index was calculated based on three replicates' averaged values.

### 3.6. Textural Measurements

Textural analysis of the hydrogels was conducted using a TA.XT Plus texture analyzer (Stable Micro Mixtures, Surrey, UK) equipped with a 5 kg load cell and specific probes. A 0.5 cm diameter cylindrical flat probe (P/0.5R) measured hydrogel strength [N] and adhesion [N], with a set penetration depth of 8 mm, a measurement speed of 1.0 mm/s, and a temperature of  $20^\circ\text{C}$ . Spreadability [N·s] was assessed using a TTC Spreadability Rig at a measurement speed of 3.0 mm/s [39]. Data analysis was performed using Exponent version 6.1.4.0 software (Stable Micro Mixtures, Surrey, UK). Reported values represent averages from three replicates.

### 3.7. Microrheological Measurements

The microrheological properties of the hydrogels were studied using a Rheolaser Master device (Formulaction, L'Union, France) employing near-infrared light at 650 nm wavelength and the MS-DWS technique. Backscattered waves interference was captured by the detector, and Rheotest software 1.4.0.11 recorded the results. Parameters derived from raw data included mean square displacement (MSD) curves, elasticity index (EI)

[nm<sup>-2</sup>], and solid–liquid balance (SLB) [-]. SLB is the ratio of elastic modulus (G') to viscous modulus (G''). EI, calculated from the reciprocal of MSD at the plateau, indicates the proportionality to G' [14,73]. Reported values are averages from three replicates.

### 3.8. Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy Measurements

Infrared spectra were measured using a Cary 630 spectrophotometer (Agilent Technologies Inc., Santa Clara, CA, USA) equipped with a single-bounce attenuated total reflectance (ATR) diamond crystal interface. Before conducting FT-IR analysis, the hydrogels underwent freezing at –20 °C followed by freeze-drying. The resulting freeze-dried samples were ground into a powdered form. FT-IR measurements were performed within a wavelength range of 500–4000 cm<sup>−1</sup>, utilizing 32 scans at a resolution of 4 cm<sup>−1</sup> [74]. Analysis involved pressing the dried sample against a crystal using a pressure clamp, with five scans recorded for each sample. Data collection was executed using MicroLab FTIR software 5.7.

### 3.9. Thermal Degradation Measurements (TGA and DTG)

Thermal stability was assessed using a thermogravimeter (TGA/DSC 3+, Mettler Toledo, Greifensee, Switzerland). Approximately 5 mg of the crushed material was placed in open 70 µL alumina crucibles and subjected to pyrolysis, ranging from 30 to 600 °C, with a heating rate of 10 °C per minute, under a nitrogen atmosphere (flow rate of 50 mL/min) [75]. The thermograms were analyzed using the STAR software (version 16.10) from Mettler Evaluation. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the thermal behavior, both TGA (thermogravimetric analysis) and DTG (derivative thermogravimetry) are presented. The analysis was performed in triplicate.

### 3.10. Microstructure Morphology—SEM Analysis

To examine the microstructure of the freeze-dried hydrogel samples, they were mounted on double sticky tape, coated with a thin layer of gold, and observed using a Hitachi TM3000 scanning electron microscope (Hitachi, Tokyo, Japan). Analysis was conducted at an accelerating voltage of 15 kV, under a pressure of 100 Pa, and at a magnification of ×3000 [76].

### 3.11. Chemical Analysis

#### 3.11.1. Total Polyphenols Content (TPC)

The samples' total phenolics content was evaluated through a spectrophotometric technique, involving a color reaction with Folin–Ciocalteau reagent [74]. The extracts underwent a double dilution with distilled water, and subsequent reactions were carried out in 96-well plates. A 5-fold diluted Folin–Ciocalteau reagent (40 µL) was added to 10 µL of the extract, followed by the addition of 250 µL of a 7% sodium carbonate solution after 3 min. Then, the solution was incubated for 60 min at room temperature in the absence of light exposure. The absorbance at 750 nm was measured utilizing a Multiskan Sky plate reader (Thermo Electron Co., Waltham, MA, USA). The absorbance of the blank sample, wherein the extract was substituted with the extraction reagent, was also recorded. Two repetitions were performed for each tested extract. For polyphenol content quantification, a calibration curve was established employing chlorogenic acid (Sigma Aldrich, Switzerland) within the concentration range of 0–100 g/mL. Findings are presented as milligrams of chlorogenic acid per 100 g of dry matter.

#### 3.11.2. Antioxidant Activity (AA)

To evaluate the antioxidant properties of the samples, spectrophotometric methods were employed. This involved assessing the capacity to reduce Fe<sup>3+</sup> ions (RP), the 2,2-diphenyl-1-picrylhydrazyl radical (DPPH<sup>•</sup>), and the cation radical 2,2-azinobis(3-ethylbenzothiazoline-6-sulfonate) (ABTS<sup>•+</sup>) [77]. To induce the formation of free radicals, stock solutions of DPPH and ABTS were prepared 24 h prior to analysis. Initially, 25 mg of

2,2-diphenyl-1-picrylhydrazyl was weighed and transferred into a 100 mL volumetric flask, then diluted to 100 mL using a 99% methanol solution. The ABTS solution was created by dissolving 38.4 mg of 2,2-azinobis(3-ethylbenzothiazoline-6-sulfonate) in 10 mL of distilled water, followed by the addition of 6.6 mg of potassium persulfate. These solutions were then refrigerated. Prior to analysis, working solutions of the radicals were prepared by diluting the stock solutions with 80% ethanol. The dilution aimed to achieve a concentration displaying absorbance in a 1 cm cuvette at a wavelength of 515 nm for DPPH and 734 nm for ABTS, approximately reaching 0.7 AU (absorbance unit). The reactions were conducted in 96-well plates. The analyte solution was diluted fivefold. Initially, 10  $\mu$ L of extract and 250  $\mu$ L of radical solution were combined in the well, mixed, and the absorbance was measured for DPPH after 10 min at 515 nm, and for ABTS after 6 min at 734 nm, relative to 80% ethanol. Simultaneously, the absorbance of the radical working solutions was monitored. Antiradical activity was determined by the reduction in absorbance of the radical solution in the presence of an antioxidant, and it was expressed as mg of Trolox per gram of dried material. Each extract was analyzed in duplicate for this determination.

### 3.11.3. Reducing Power (RP)

The analysis was conducted following the methodology outlined by Świeca [78], with minor adjustments. In a 96-well plate, 25  $\mu$ L of the extract, 75  $\mu$ L of distilled water, and 50  $\mu$ L of 1% aqueous potassium ferric cyanide solution were combined. This mixture was then incubated in the dark at 50 °C using an incubator (INCU-Line ILS 10; VWR, Radnor, PA, USA). After 20 min, 50  $\mu$ L of 10% trichloroacetic acid was added. Subsequently, 100  $\mu$ L of the solution was transferred to an empty well, followed by the addition of 100  $\mu$ L of distilled water and 20  $\mu$ L of 0.1% iron (III) chloride solution. After 10 min, the absorbance values of the solutions were measured at 700 nm against the reagent sample using a plate reader. The iron ion reduction capacity for each sample was quantified as mg of Trolox. This determination was carried out in duplicate.

### 3.12. Statistical Analysis

The gathered data were statistically evaluated using Statistica 13.3 software (TIBCO Software Inc., Palo Alto, CA, USA). To assess the significance of differences in the average values of measured parameters of hydrogels, ANOVA was performed. Tukey's test was used to determine the significance of the differences at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . Furthermore, the results underwent evaluation via PCA and HCA.

## 4. Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that sequential thermal and ultrasound induction resulted in significant color changes and increased chroma values, reflecting less effective entrapment of the elderberry extract. Conversely, thermal induction followed by high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) treatment, particularly with extended durations (10 min), improved hydrogel strength, uniformity, and extract entrapment efficiency. Both treatments led to greater physical instability by altering the aggregate structures of the biopolymers. FT-IR analysis indicated that neither treatment caused chemical structural changes, although their effects on the hydrogel properties suggest physical interactions between the molecules. Thermal gravimetric analysis (TGA) revealed that both US and HHP treatments did not significantly impact the thermal degradation profile. Notably, HHP treatment significantly enhanced extract entrapment efficiency, resulting in better preservation of polyphenol content and antioxidant activity, attributed to the formation of a denser and more compact gel structure.

Overall, the hypothesis that combining thermal induction with high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) or ultrasound (US) treatments would enhance the functional properties and stability of pea protein–psyllium hydrogels for effective anthocyanin entrapment was partially verified. The sequential thermal and high hydrostatic pressure (HHP) induction outperformed the ultrasound-assisted induction in enhancing the structural integrity, entrapment

efficiency, and antioxidant properties of elderberry extract-loaded pea protein–psyllium hydrogels. Despite concerns over physical stability, attributed to irregular distribution of pea protein–psyllium aggregates, HHP demonstrated significant promise. These findings underscore HHP as a promising method for developing functional matrices with enhanced retention of elderberry extracts. Further research is essential, particularly to enhance the entrapment efficiency, physical stability, and evaluate the suitability of sequential thermal and HHP induction for innovative food product development using elderberry extract-loaded pea protein–psyllium hydrogels.

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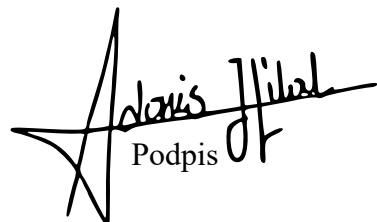
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adonis Hilal". Below the signature, the word "Podpis" is written in a smaller, printed font.



Warszawa, 20.09.2024

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Podpis

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*Florowska*

Podpis



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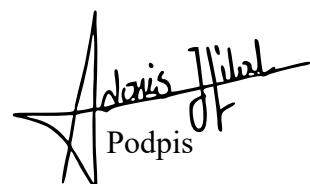
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**Szkoły Głównej Gospodarstwa  
Wiejskiego w Warszawie**

### **Oświadczenie o współautorstwie**

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*Hilal*

Podpis



Warszawa, 16.09.2024.

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Podpis





Warszawa, 12.09.2024

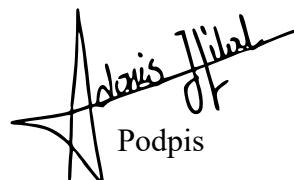
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Warszawa, 12.09.2024

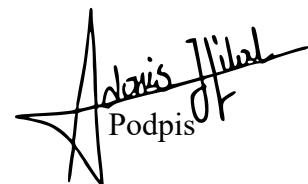
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