

INCORPORATING PALM KERNEL MEAL, COWPEA HUSK AND SOYBEAN HUSK AS PROTEIN SOURCES IN CATFISH DIETS: EFFECTS ON GROWTH, HEMATOLOGY AND INTESTINAL HISTOLOGY

Received: 29 May 2025

Accepted: 15 August 2025

Published: 30 September 2025

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of replacing fish meal (FM) with soybean husk (SBH), palm kernel meal (PKM), and cowpea husk (CPH) on growth performance, feed utilization, and intestinal histology of catfish. Four experimental diets were formulated with different proportions of PKM, CPH, and SBH to partially replace fish meal. Juvenile catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*) were fed these diets for ten weeks. The results indicated that inclusion of these alternative protein sources had significant effects on growth performance and feed utilization compared to FM diet. The weight gain recorded in this study was as follows: SBH (119.5 ± 68.02) > CPH (113.2 ± 53.14) > FM (104.3 ± 56.82) > PKM (86.73 ± 31.51). Feed conversion ratio ranged from 1.25 ± 0.57 (SBH) to 1.52 ± 0.56 (PKM). *C. gariepinus* fed the diet PKM had the lowest protein efficiency ratio (2.09 ± 0.76), followed by those fed the FM (2.57 ± 1.40) and the CPH diet (2.74 ± 1.28). To a larger extent, the dietary protein sources significantly influenced serum hematology parameters. *C. gariepinus* fed the FM diet had the highest white blood cells count (133.0 ± 2.51), which was significantly higher than all other groups ($p < 0.0001$). The range of red blood cell values observed in this study was 2.08 ± 0.13 to 2.62 ± 0.13 . Histological examination indicated modifications in intestinal morphology, suggesting possible metabolic adjustments to the experimental diets. Fish fed the FM had the highest villus height (441.2 ± 22.6), followed by SBH (398.3 ± 7.51), PKM (279.2 ± 15.65), and CPH (142.3 ± 10.84). Villus width and muscular thickness also followed this pattern, with fish fed the FM diet having the largest villus width (153.7 ± 9.06), significantly greater than all other groups ($p < 0.0001$). Overall, incorporating CPH, and SBH into catfish diets appears to be a viable replacement for conventional fishmeal-based diets; however, further studies are required to determine optimal inclusion levels for achieving maximum growth and well-being

Keyword: Alternative protein, Agricultural by-products, Intestinal morphology, Blood biochemistry, Growth.

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Introduction

Total fisheries and aquaculture production (excluding algae) has significantly expanded in the past seven decades going from 19 million tons (live weight equivalent) in 1950 to an all-time record of about 179 million tons in 2018, with an annual growth rate of 3.3 percent (FAO, 2022). Projections of about 96 million metric tons of fish were raised in aquaculture in 2023, compared to 90.6 million metric tons that were (fishing) captured same year (Dauda et al., 2023). Feed is necessary in aquaculture, just like in animal husbandry, to guarantee good production, particularly in intensive culture systems that demand a lot of input (Boyd, 2020).

One of the most significant species of cultured fish and one of the most commonly used fish products is *Clarias gariepinus* (Kari et al., 2021). Farmers are aligning themselves with the culture of catfish farming, which is growing in importance and is catching up to tilapia production (Mbokane et al., 2022). This is because catfish farming provides low-cholesterol animal protein which lowers food insecurity and creates jobs (Montgomery et al., 2022). Fish farming intensified to meet the rising demand for fish has resulted in high stress levels, low wellbeing, and delayed growth performance of aquaculture species (Nasr et al., 2021).

Since feed makes up over 50% of the entire production expenses in the aquaculture business, feed is a crucial component (Mzengereza et al., 2014). The costliest feed ingredient in aquafeeds is the source of protein (Lim et al., 2023). Fishmeal is considered the gold standard protein due to its balanced amino acid content, which is perfect for the healthy growth and development of fish (Perez-Velazquez et al., 2019). Fish by-products and wild-caught fish are used to make fish-meal, an industrial product (Wan, 2015).

Fishmeal is a major source of aquafeed worldwide. However, the rising demand for fish and fish products has caused its price to continuously rise, greatly affecting the market price (Jannathulla et al., 2019). To cut feed costs, several plant-based proteins are now utilized in place of fish-meal, either totally or partially (Jannathulla et al., 2019). Aquafeeds with plant-based protein diets have long been known to perform worse than those with fish-meal (Egerton et al., 2023) due to an inadequate amino acid profile, decreased palatability, and the existence of anti-nutritional factors (ANFs) that have an impact on the performance of farmed fish as a whole (Maundu, 2020). The main objective of using plant-based proteins is to offer fish-meal as a more affordable substitute. Finding a less expensive option isn't the only factor, though (Gutasi, 2021). Moreover, the production of these plant-based proteins needs to be sustainable without affecting the health and growth of fish (Magbanua and Ragaza, 2024). Conventional methods for assessing the general health of fish and their reaction to various proteins and diets include hematological and histopathological studies (Docan et al., 2018). A few of the plant-based protein sources that are used are soybean husk, cowpea husk, and palm kernel meal (Senthilkumaran et al., 2022). These plant sources are more broadly and cheaply accessible worldwide than fish-meal (Senthilkumaran et al., 2022). An agricultural by-product of the oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis* Jacq) industry, palm kernel meal (PKM) is regarded as an agro-industrial waste (Ng and Chong, 2002; Sangavi et al., 2020). The crude protein content of PKM ranges from 12 to 21%. In addition, PKM is said to be widely available and reasonably priced in many tropical nations (Botello-León et al., 2022). One ingredient that can be purchased in huge quantities for incredibly low costs is soybean husks (Shuaib et al., 2023). Numerous fish species' dietary protein requirements can be covered and met by these plant-based protein sources (Jia et al.,

2022). While lysine and methionine are typically absent from plant-based proteins (Gorissen et al., 2018), this is somewhat compensated for by minuscule amounts of crystalline amino acids. Consequently, the aim of this study was to evaluate the effects of soybean husk, cowpea husk, and palm kernel meal as protein sources on growth performance, feed utilization, intestinal histology, and health of catfish using full blood count and liver function test as indicators.

Materials and methods

Formulation of the experimental diets and feeding

Table 1 shows the experimental diets used for this study. In formulating the diets, substantial amount of fish meal was progressively replaced with soybean husk

(SBH), cowpea husk (CPH) and palm kernel meal (PKM) until equal amounts of protein (approximately 35%) were obtained. Following procedures previously described by Ayisi et al. (2017), the formulated diets were prepared. In brief, the progressive enlargement method was used to mix all of the dry ingredients (Zhou et al., 2007). In a mixer, the dry ingredients were combined with vegetable oil and distilled water to form a moist dough that was then pelleted using a single screw dry type extruder (Model: LM 70) fitted with a 2-mm die. The dry extruded and sun dried 2-mm pelleted diets were then sealed in plastic bags and kept at room temperature until needed. *C. gariepinus* were fed to apparent satiation, three times daily at 8:00 am, 12 noon and 4:00 pm.

Table 1 Composition of experimental diets

| Ingredients | FM | CPH | SBH | PKM |
|------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Fish meal | 35.00 | 27.50 | 22.00 | 23.50 |
| Soybean husk | 30.50 | 25.00 | 30.50 | 30.50 |
| Cowpea husk | 0.00 | 15.50 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Soybean husk | 0.00 | 0.00 | 18.00 | 0.00 |
| Palm kernel meal | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 15.50 |
| Maize | 13.50 | 13.00 | 10.50 | 11.50 |
| Wheat bran | 10.00 | 8.00 | 8.00 | 8.00 |
| Premix | 1.50 | 1.50 | 1.50 | 1.50 |
| Vegetable oil | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Starch | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 |
| Salt | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 2.00 |
| D-L methionine | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0.50 |
| D-L lysine | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0.50 |
| H-histidine | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0.50 |
| Total | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 |
| Proximate composition | | | | |
| Moisture | 90.49 | 90.30 | 90.73 | 90.15 |
| Protein | 35.8 | 35.42 | 35.53 | 35.75 |
| Lipid | 11.51 | 10.78 | 11.05 | 10.93 |
| Ash | 10.07 | 10.04 | 10.85 | 10.35 |

Experimental conditions and design

The experiment was carried out in concrete tanks with dimensions of 1.5 m x 1.5m x 1.2 m (length, breadth and depth). Five hundred healthy *C. gariepinus* with initial weight of approximately 2.5 g were purchased from a commercial farm and transported to the rearing facility. Prior to the onset of the trial, fish were acclimatized to the rearing

conditions for 2 weeks and fed on commercial diet with protein content of 32%. At the onset of the trial, the fish were distributed into four groups with duplicates and fed their respective diets. Each tank was stocked with fifty fish.

Measurements of the biological indices

Feed utilization and growth performance were measured following formulas previously used by Mutalib et al. (2023).

Feed intake = The total amount of feed consumed (g) during the total number of trial days is the feed intake (FI).

Feed conversion ratio (FCR) = Feed intake (g) / Weight gain (g).

Protein efficiency ratio (PER) = Wet weight gain (g) / Protein intake (g)

Weight gain (WG) = Final weight (g) – Initial weight (g)

Protein intake = protein content of feed x feed intake

Specific growth rate (SGR) (%) = $(\ln \text{ final weight (g)} - \ln \text{ initial weight (g)}) / T \times 100$, where T is the number of feeding experimental (feeding) days

Blood biochemical analysis

After 10 weeks of feeding trial, blood from experimental fish were sampled as previously described by Abarike et al. (2018). Using a 2 mL disposable syringe, whole blood was drawn and then poured into two separate tubes—one for the liver and kidney toxicity test and the other for the haematological analysis—both of which contained EDTA to prevent the blood from clotting. The blood was subsequently sent to the laboratory of E-MED Diagnostic Services for the haematological parameters and plasma constituents to be determined using a haematological analyzer.

Proximate composition

Samples from whole body fish and experimental diets were sent to the laboratory for protein, lipid, moisture, and ash analyses. The AOAC (2003) standard methods, as reported by Ayisi et al. (2021), were employed to analyze the aforementioned parameters. Briefly, samples were oven dried at 105 °C to a constant weight to determine moisture content. Following digestion with concentrated H₂SO₄, crude protein was measured using the Kjeldahl method and a Kjeltac Auto 2300 Analyzer. Protein is

expressed as a percentage of dry weight (% DW). The crude lipid content was measured by homogenizing the samples and extracting the lipids (Folch et al., 1957). The samples were burned at 550 °C for 4-6 hours in a muffle furnace to determine the amount of crude ash.

Histological examination

Six fish per group had sections of their intestines removed, which were then quickly preserved in a Bouin solution for histological examinations. Samples of tissue were promptly preserved in a Bouin solution. After that, fixed samples were subjected to a series of alcohol solutions with increasing grades (70–100 percent) to dehydrate them. Following the dehydration procedure, tissues underwent xylene deparaffinization, paraffin embedding, 5 µm sectioning, and Hematoxylin and Eosin (H&E) staining (Kim, 2013; Ismail, et al. 2020). A Leica light microscope was used to examine the slides, and an eyepiece camera was used to capture the images. ImageJ version 1.54 was used to determine the target cells in each section (National Institutes of Health, USA). An average of ten target cells per section served as the basis for each section's measurements.

Statistical analysis

The gathered data was statistically analyzed using Graph Pad Prism (V.5.03). The data is presented in tables using the standard error of the mean (SEM), which is represented as the mean ±. To compare treatment means, One-way Analysis of Variance and Tukey's multiple tests were applied to all the data. Differences are considered significant for all data at the 0.05 probability level (P<0.05). Pearson's correlation was conducted to ascertain the relationship between selected parameters. Results of correlation analysis is presented in figures.

Results

Effects of dietary protein sources on growth and feed utilization

Table 2 is a summary of the effects of different protein sources on the growth and feed utilization of *C. gariepinus*. FW and FL were significantly influenced by different protein sources ($p = 0.0002$ and 0.0044 respectively). The highest FW (122.0 ± 68.12 g) and FL (25.07 ± 4.00 cm) were observed in *C. gariepinus* fed diet SBH. Similarly, feeding *C. gariepinus* with diet SBH recorded the highest WG (119.5 ± 68.02 g) and was significantly higher than *C. gariepinus* fed diet PKM with a WG of 86.73 ± 31.51 g ($p < 0.0001$). There was no significant difference in feed intake ($p = 0.1369$). There was, however, a significant difference in feed conversion ratio

($p = 0.001$). *C. gariepinus* fed with diets FM, CPH, SBH and PKM recorded FCRs of 1.27 ± 0.53 , 1.27 ± 0.57 , 1.25 ± 0.57 and 1.52 ± 0.56 , respectively. There was no significant difference in protein intake ($p = 0.9514$). Protein intake (PI) ranged between 40.43 ± 1.92 (FM) and 41.35 ± 1.83 (PKM). *C. gariepinus* fed with diets CPH and SBH recorded PIs of 41.21 ± 0.81 and 41.21 ± 1.95 , respectively. Protein efficiency ratio (PER) was significantly altered among groups ($p = 0.0002$). Feeding *C. gariepinus* with diet SBH recorded the highest PER (2.90 ± 1.65) and was more significant than all other groups. The least PER (2.09 ± 0.76) was observed in *C. gariepinus* fed with diet PKM, followed by diet FM (2.57 ± 1.40) and diet CPH (2.74 ± 1.28).

Table 2 Effects of different protein sources on growth and feed utilization of *C. gariepinus*

| | FM | CPH | SBH | PKM | p-value |
|-----|------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------|
| IW | 2.65 ± 0.96 | 2.53 ± 0.79 | 2.56 ± 1.01 | 2.50 ± 0.79 | 0.6207 |
| FW | 106.9 ± 56.84^{ab} | 115.8 ± 53.29^b | 122.0 ± 68.12^b | 89.21 ± 31.42^a | 0.0002 |
| FL | 24.43 ± 3.82^{ab} | 24.84 ± 3.56^b | 25.07 ± 4.00^b | 23.31 ± 2.95^a | 0.0044 |
| WG | 104.3 ± 56.82^{ab} | 113.2 ± 53.14^b | 119.5 ± 68.02^b | 86.73 ± 31.51^a | < 0.0001 |
| FI | 105.0 ± 5.00 | 116.3 ± 2.30 | 116.0 ± 9.53 | 115.7 ± 5.13 | 0.1369 |
| FCR | 1.27 ± 0.53^a | 1.27 ± 0.57^a | 1.25 ± 0.57^a | 1.52 ± 0.56^b | 0.0013 |
| SGR | 5.18 ± 0.80^{ab} | 5.36 ± 0.69^{ab} | 5.43 ± 0.83^b | 5.08 ± 0.69^a | 0.0073 |
| PI | 40.43 ± 1.92 | 41.21 ± 0.81 | 41.21 ± 1.95 | 41.35 ± 1.83 | 0.9514 |
| PER | 2.57 ± 1.40^b | 2.74 ± 1.28^b | 2.90 ± 1.65^c | 2.09 ± 0.76^a | 0.0002 |

IW: Initial weight, FW: Final weight; FL: Final length; WG: Weight gain; FI: Feed intake; FCR: Feed conversion ratio; SGR: Specific growth rate; PI: Protein intake; PER: Protein efficiency ratio.

Proximate composition of whole body

A summary of the proximate composition of the whole body of *C. gariepinus* fed different protein sources is shown in Table

3. This study revealed a non-significant difference in protein content between the initial fish and the four experimental groups ($p = 0.1441$).

Table 3 Proximate composition of whole-body *C. gariepinus* fed different experimental diets

| | Initial | FM | CPH | SBH | PKM | p-value |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|---------|
| Moisture (% DM) | 75.81 ± 1.45 | 75.48 ± 0.93 | 78.18 ± 1.20 | 77.19 ± 1.27 | 76.12 ± 2.13 | 0.6769 |
| Protein (% DM) | 16.44 ± 0.20 | 15.80 ± 0.35 | 15.62 ± 0.57 | 15.19 ± 0.31 | 16.38 ± 0.40 | 0.1441 |
| Lipid (% DM) | 10.17 ± 0.26 | 9.05 ± 0.24 | 9.88 ± 0.30 | 9.84 ± 0.32 | 9.88 ± 0.21 | 0.0792 |
| Ash (% DM) | 3.78 ± 0.38 | 3.93 ± 0.28 | 3.68 ± 0.22 | 3.64 ± 0.24 | 3.78 ± 0.38 | 0.9264 |

It is worth noting that the initial protein content was higher than that of the

experimental groups. Protein content of fish fed diets FM, CPH, SBH, and PKM was

15.80±0.35, 15.62±0.57, 15.19±0.31, and 16.38±0.40, respectively. There was no significant difference in ash content ($p = 0.9264$). Whereas the initial fish had ash content of 3.78±0.38, *C. gariepinus* fed diet FM had ash content of 3.93±0.28. *C. gariepinus* fed diets CPH, SBH, and PKM recorded ash contents of 3.68±0.22, 3.64±0.24, and 3.78±0.38, respectively. Similarly, there was a non-significant difference in moisture content of *C. gariepinus* fed different protein sources, as well as the initial fish ($p = 0.6769$). The initial moisture content was 75.81±1.45, while that of *C. gariepinus* fed diets FM, CPH, SBH, and PKM was 75.48±0.93, 78.18±1.20, 77.19±1.27, and 76.12±2.13, respectively. The lipid content of experimental groups and the initial fish did not vary significantly ($p = 0.0792$). Lipid content as recorded in this study ranged between 9.05±0.24 and 10.17±0.26.

Hematology

Table 4 shows hematology parameters of *C. gariepinus* fed four different protein sources. To a larger extent, different protein sources affected hematological parameters of catfish. In this study, WBC, RBC, HGB, HCT, MCH, PDW and MCHC of *C. gariepinus* were significantly altered by different protein sources ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, RDW, LYM, and GRA were all significantly altered by different protein sources ($p < 0.05$). There was however, no significant differences in MON, PCT, MVP, and PLT ($p > 0.05$). The highest WBC (133.0±2.51) was recorded in *C. gariepinus* fed diet FM and was significantly higher than all other groups ($p < 0.0001$). *C. gariepinus* fed diets CPH, SBH, and PKM recorded WBC of 107.6±3.44, 108.6±2.84, and 109.0±4.93, respectively. RBC recorded in this study ranged between 2.08±0.13 and 2.62±0.13. The least RBC was recorded in *C. gariepinus* fed diet and was significantly lower than *C. gariepinus* fed diets CPH and PKM ($p = 0.0133$). RBC recorded in this study ranged between 2.08±0.13 (FM) and 2.62±0.13 (CPH).

HGB was induced in *C. gariepinus* fed diet SBH (8.66±0.29) and was significantly higher than *C. gariepinus* fed diet FM which recorded HGB of 6.47±0.19 ($p < 0.0001$). Also, feeding *C. gariepinus* with diet CPH recorded GRA level of 2.82±0.14 and was significantly lower than *C. gariepinus* fed diet FM ($p < 0.0001$). Feeding *C. gariepinus* with plant protein sources led to elevated levels of LYM and were all significantly higher than *C. gariepinus* fed diet FM ($p < 0.0001$). LYM as recorded in this study ranged between 88.49±1.84 (FM) and 110.2±2.47 (SBH). RDW, MCHC, and PDW ranged from 5.21±0.28 to 8.00±0.25, 28.73±0.67 to 35.77±0.95, and 7.33±0.14 to 9.58±0.48, respectively. In the case of PDW and MCHC, the least values were recorded in *C. gariepinus* fed diet FM with the highest recorded in *C. gariepinus* fed SBH. In the case of RDW, the highest was recorded in *C. gariepinus* fed diet FM and the least observed in *C. gariepinus* fed SBH. There was significant difference in HCT, MCV, and MCH levels. Higher levels of HCT and MCH were observed in *C. gariepinus* fed plant protein diets (CPH, SBH, and PKM) and were significantly higher than *C. gariepinus* fed FM ($p < 0.05$).

Kidney function test

Table 5 shows kidney function of *C. gariepinus* fed diets with different protein sources. With the exception of serum potassium ($p = 0.0005$) and chloride ($p = 0.0047$), there were no significant modifications in creatinine ($p = 0.3945$), urea ($p = 0.8884$) or sodium ($p = 0.4724$). *C. gariepinus* fed diets with SBH and PKM diets recorded the highest concentrations of potassium (6.04±0.23 and 6.09±0.28, respectively), while the highest chloride concentrations were observed in *C. gariepinus* fed diets FM (102.7±3.58) and CPH (109.2±11.31). Creatinine concentration ranged between 33.25±2.49 and 39.21±5.20, while urea ranged between 2.79±0.26 and 3.00±0.19.

Table 4 Erythrogram of *C. gariepinus* fed four different protein sources.

| | FM | CPH | SBH | PKM | p-value |
|------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------|
| WBC | 133.0±2.51 ^b | 107.6±3.44 ^a | 108.6±2.84 ^a | 109.0±4.93 ^a | < 0.0001 |
| RBC | 2.08±0.13 ^a | 2.62±0.13 ^b | 2.50±0.14 ^{ab} | 2.61±0.06 ^b | 0.0133 |
| HGB | 6.47±0.19 ^a | 8.06±0.21 ^b | 8.66±0.29 ^b | 8.21±0.35 ^b | < 0.0001 |
| HCT | 27.43±1.19 ^a | 31.26±0.79 ^b | 32.99±0.78 ^b | 32.74±1.07 ^b | 0.0011 |
| MCV | 138.3±1.82 ^b | 113.1±3.89 ^a | 116.6±4.66 ^a | 117.4±3.46 ^a | < 0.0001 |
| MCH | 35.43±0.66 ^a | 42.71±0.92 ^b | 44.18±1.05 ^b | 43.13±1.22 ^b | < 0.0001 |
| PDW | 7.33±0.14 ^a | 9.25±0.34 ^b | 9.58±0.48 ^b | 7.63±0.34 ^a | < 0.0001 |
| MCHC | 28.73±0.67 ^a | 34.86±0.47 ^b | 35.77±0.95 ^b | 34.29±0.88 ^b | < 0.0001 |
| RDW | 8.00±0.25 ^c | 5.65±0.21 ^{ab} | 5.21±0.28 ^a | 5.80±0.27 ^b | < 0.0001 |
| PLT | 46.74±1.46 | 48.50±2.63 | 42.80±1.64 | 49.58±1.72 | 0.0862 |
| MVP | 6.10±0.22 | 5.12±0.18 | 5.38±0.31 | 5.68±0.37 | 0.1102 |
| GRA | 4.63±0.16 ^c | 2.82±0.14 ^a | 2.85±0.22 ^a | 3.28±0.23 ^b | < 0.0001 |
| LYM | 88.49±1.84 ^a | 103.8±2.97 ^b | 110.2±2.47 ^b | 109.9±2.98 ^b | < 0.0001 |
| PCT | 0.03±0.00 | 0.02±0.00 | 0.02±0.00 | 0.02±0.00 | 0.0898 |
| MON | 14.59±0.27 | 15.31±0.50 | 15.81±0.51 | 14.60±0.63 | 0.2552 |

Table 5 Variation in the kidney function test of blood of *C. gariepinus* fed different protein sources.

| | FM | CPH | SBH | PKM | p-value |
|------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------|
| Creatinine | 33.25±2.49 | 35.68±3.57 | 39.21±5.20 | 34.92±5.98 | 0.3945 |
| Urea | 2.89±0.24 | 2.79±0.26 | 3.00±0.15 | 3.00±0.19 | 0.8884 |
| Sodium | 168.7±8.44 | 159.5±19.77 | 157.4±21.43 | 159.5±19.63 | 0.4724 |
| Potassium | 5.16±0.36 ^{ab} | 4.31±0.33 ^a | 6.04±0.23 ^b | 6.09±0.28 ^b | 0.0005 |
| Chloride | 102.7±3.58 ^{ab} | 109.2±11.31 ^b | 95.41±6.06 ^a | 99.05±11.10 ^a | 0.0047 |

Liver function

Table 6 represents variations observed in the liver function of *C. gariepinus* fed different protein sources. AST and ALT levels were enhanced in *C. gariepinus* fed plant protein sources. The highest AST (121.7±6.71) and ALT (109.5±10.36) were observed in *C. gariepinus* fed diet CPH, with the least AST (82.13±4.77) and ALT (77.73±7.49) observed in *C. gariepinus* fed diet FM. Both AST and ALT were significantly different amongst groups ($p = 0.0001$ and 0.0140 , respectively). There was no significant alteration in ALP (0.3750), irrespective of

protein source. Feeding *C. gariepinus* with diet CPH recorded a GGT of 2.63 ± 0.30 , and was significantly higher than *C. gariepinus* fed diets SBH and PKM. In all cases, the highest concentrations of TB (0.93 ± 0.11 ; $p < 0.0001$), DTB (0.69 ± 0.12 ; $p = 0.0001$), IDTB (0.35 ± 0.07 ; $p = 0.0159$) and TP (41.52 ± 9.09 ; $p = 0.0002$) were observed in *C. gariepinus* fed diet PKM. There was a significant difference in ALB levels among treatments ($p = 0.0039$). It is worth noting that the highest concentration of ALB (16.42 ± 3.42) was recorded in *C. gariepinus* fed diet SBH.

Table 6 Variation in the liver function test of blood of *C. gariepinus* fed different protein sources.

| | FM | CPH | SBH | PKM | p-value |
|------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|---------|
| AST | 82.13±4.77 ^a | 121.7±6.71 ^b | 114.4±12.54 ^b | 109.2±7.18 ^b | 0.0001 |
| ALT | 77.73±7.49 ^a | 109.5±10.36 ^b | 92.19±5.03 ^{ab} | 82.0±3.30 ^a | 0.0140 |
| ALP | 16.80±5.05 | 16.62±3.74 | 14.15±3.73 | 16.15±2.82 | 0.3750 |
| GGT | 2.00±0.30 ^a | 2.63±0.30 ^b | 1.54±0.15 ^a | 1.81±0.18 ^a | 0.0237 |
| TB | 0.48±0.04 ^a | 0.40±0.03 ^a | 0.64±0.05 ^a | 0.93±0.11 ^b | <0.0001 |
| DTB | 0.29±0.02 ^a | 0.26±0.02 ^a | 0.43±0.08 ^{ab} | 0.69±0.12 ^b | 0.0001 |
| IDTB | 0.18±0.03 ^a | 0.15±0.02 ^a | 0.26±0.02 ^{ab} | 0.35±0.07 ^b | 0.0159 |

| | | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------|
| TP | 31.40±4.59 ^b | 27.18±8.83 ^a | 38.61±6.63 ^{bc} | 41.52±9.09 ^c | 0.0002 |
| ALB | 13.35±3.49 ^a | 12.15±2.05 ^a | 16.42±3.42 ^b | 15.75±2.37 ^{ab} | 0.0039 |

AST: Aspartate aminotransferase; ALT: Alanine aminotransferase; ALP: Alkaline phosphatase; GGT: γ -glutamyl transferase; TB: Total bilirubin; DTB: Direct total bilirubin; IDTB: Indirect total bilirubin; TP: Total protein; ALB: Albumin

Intestinal histology

Table 7 and figure 1 summarizes changes in the mid-intestinal structures of *C. gariepinus* fed different protein sources. Villus height, villus width, and muscular thickness were significantly altered by protein source. The highest villus height was in fish fed diet FM (441.2±22.6),

followed by SBH (398.3±7.51), PKM (279.2±15.65), and CPH (142.3±10.84). This pattern was also observed for villus width and muscular thickness, with the highest villus width (153.7±9.06) in fish fed diet FM, significantly higher than other groups ($p<0.0001$).

Table 7 Mid-intestinal histopathological examination of *C. gariepinus* fed diets with different protein sources

| Item (μm) | FM | CPH | SBH | PKM | p-value |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------|
| Villus height | 441.2±22.6 ^d | 142.3±10.84 ^a | 398.3±7.51 ^c | 279.2±15.65 ^b | <0.0001 |
| Villus width | 153.7±9.06 ^b | 56.87±9.45 ^a | 69.42±3.65 ^a | 41.59±5.40 ^a | <0.0001 |
| Muscular thickness | 114.2±2.925 ^d | 54.96±4.15 ^a | 96.28±5.23 ^c | 71.51±1.773 ^b | <0.0001 |

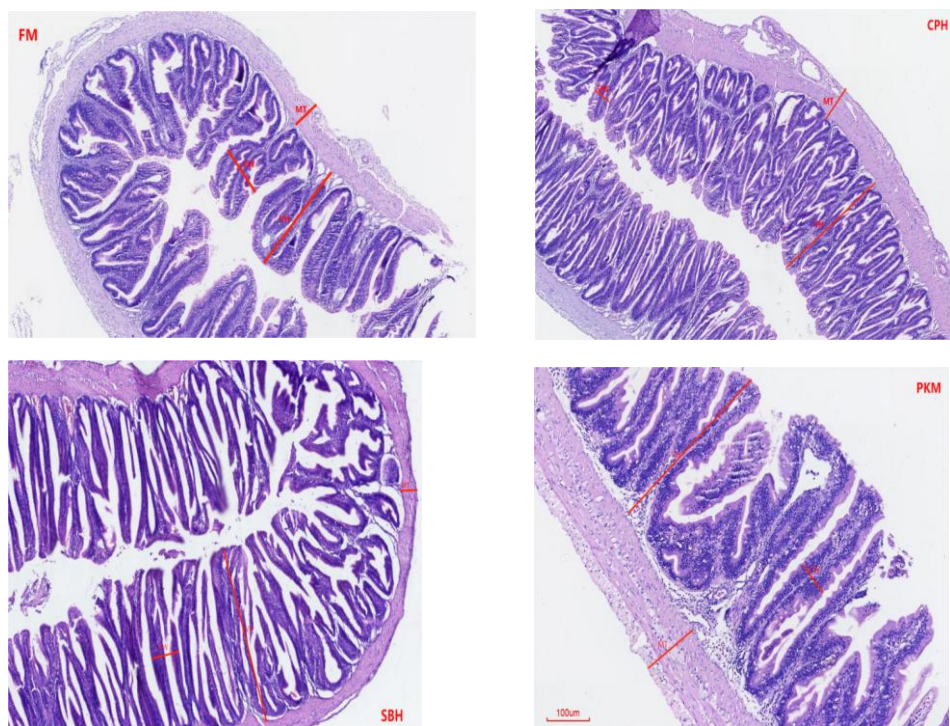


Fig 1. Morphological appearance of the mid intestines of *C. gariepinus* fed different plant protein diets (FM, CPH, SBH and PKM) under the light microscope. All photos were taken at 40X; the scale bar represents 100 μm .

Correlation between growth, feed utilization and serum biochemical parameters

Fig 2 shows correlation linear (R) Pearson correlation between growth, feed utilization and serum biochemical parameters. PDW correlated significantly with growth and feed utilization parameters. PDW correlated

positively with FCR (0.005), and negatively with WG (0.024), ADWG (0.0247), PER (0.0247), and FW (0.0244). There was however no significant correlation between other serum biochemical parameters (WBC, RBC, HGB, HCT, MCV, MCH, MCHC, RDW, PLT, MPV, GRA, LYM and PCT) and growth performance, and feed utilization.

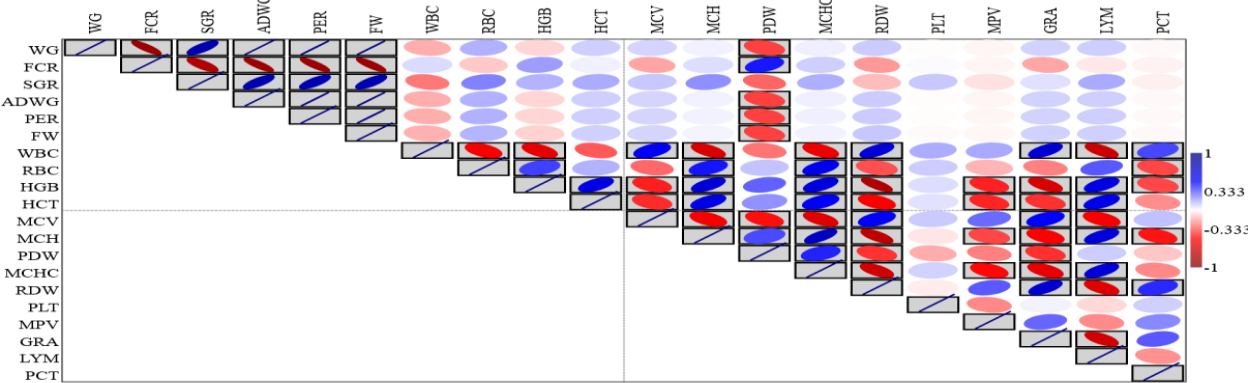


Fig 2. Correlation between growth, feed utilization and serum biochemical parameters

Correlation between growth, feed utilization and changes in intestinal morphology

Figure 3 shows correlation between growth, feed utilization and changes in intestinal

morphology. No significant correlation was observed between intestinal structures (villi height, villi width and muscular thickness) and growth performance, and feed utilization.

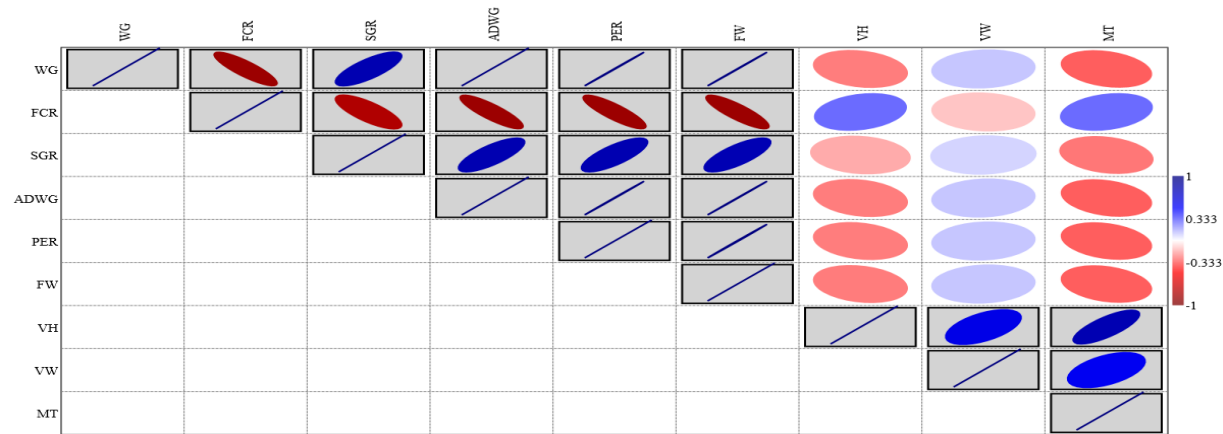


Table 8 shows P-values and R-values for Pearson correlation between intestinal structures and growth and feed utilization. There was a moderate positive correlation between villus width and ADWG ($r = 0.4969$, $p = 0.1106$), weight gain ($r =$

0.4969 , $p = 0.1106$), and PER ($r = 0.4969$, $p = 0.1106$). Also, similar observation (moderate positive correlations) was observed between muscular thickness and ADWG ($r = 0.0510$), PER ($r = 0.0510$), and FW ($r = 0.0516$). Notably, villus height

showed negative, though non-significant, correlations with several parameters including weight gain FCR ($r = 0.0748$, $p =$

0.2886), ($r = 0.1197$, $p = 0.2533$), and SGR ($r = 0.3180$, $p = 0.1641$).

Table 8 P-values and R-values for Pearson correlation between intestinal structures and growth and feed utilization.

| Parameter | P-value | R-value |
|------------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Weight gain and Villus height | -0.25332 | 0.1197 |
| Weight gain and Villus width | 0.11059 | 0.4969 |
| Weight gain and muscular thickness | -0.31467 | 0.0510 |
| FCR and Villus height | 0.28857 | 0.0748 |
| FCR and Villus width | -0.11235 | 0.4900 |
| FCR and muscular thickness | 0.28831 | 0.0750 |
| SGR and Villus height | -0.16413 | 0.3180 |
| SGR and Villus width | 0.08291 | 0.6110 |
| SGR and muscular thickness | 0.26546 | 0.1024 |
| ADWG and Villus height | -0.25332 | 0.1197 |
| ADWG and Villus width | 0.11059 | 0.4969 |
| ADWG and muscular thickness | 0.31467 | 0.0510 |
| PER and Villus height | -0.25332 | 0.1197 |
| PER and Villus width | 0.11059 | 0.4969 |
| PER muscular thickness | 0.31467 | 0.0510 |
| FW and Villus height | -0.25491 | 0.1173 |
| FW and Villus width | 0.11103 | 0.4952 |
| FW muscular thickness | -0.31388 | 0.0516 |

Weight gain (WG), feed conversion ratio (FCR), specific growth rate (SGR), average daily weight gain (ADWG), protein efficiency ratio (PER), and final weight (FW).

Discussion

Contrasting results have been reported with respect to the effects of substituting fish meal with plant-based protein in diets of different species (Cheng et al., 2010; Bu et al., 2018; Dossou et al., 2018; Al-Thobaiti et al., 2018; Egerton et al., 2020; Kari et al., 2021; Cai et al., 2022; Roslan et al., 2024; Serrano et al., 2024). This study reports that FL, FW, WG, SGR, ADWG and FCR were significantly altered by the source of protein, with *C. gariepinus* fed with CPH and SBH performing better. This is in agreement to previous studies that reported that substituting FM with plant-based meals did not compromise growth (Sheikhzadeh et al., 2012; Kpundeh et al., 2015; Guo et al.,

2016). It is not surprising SBH performed better than the control diet and PKM. This is because soy products, with their high digestibility, high protein content, and well-balanced amino acid composition, have long been used as the most effective substitute for fish-meal in aquaculture diets (Macusi et al., 2023).

In order to estimate the amount of feed required for the fish's growth cycle, the feed conversion ratio (FCR) is a crucial metric for aquaculture farmers to calculate the activity's profit margin (Kari et al., 2021). Based on actual feeding practices, the FCR can be used to predict the feed cost (Roslan et al., 2024). The FCR (1.25 ± 0.57) of *C. gariepinus* fed SBH diets was the highest.

This suggests that this group was able to utilize feed more effectively (Aglago et al., 2021). This finding suggests that the best course of action for African catfish future growth in the aquafeed industry may be to replace FM with SBH. Serrano et al. (2024) observed no significant alteration in PER when FM was replaced with Anean lupin in diets of Rainbow trout.

When introducing a new feed, it is crucial to investigate the proximate composition of body tissue (Rani et al., 2016; Roslan et al., 2024). There were no discernible changes in proximate composition of this study. The absence of a significant difference between the dietary groups implies that FM, CPH, SBH, and PKM were successfully incorporated into *C. gariepinus* diets to achieve nutritional balance. The non-significant differences in whole body proximate composition observed in this study is consistent with earlier findings that no appreciable changes in proximate composition were observed in summer flounder (Enterria et al., 2011) or blunt snout bream (Ahmed et al., 2019) fed varying protein sources. Similarly, there was no discernible change in the proximate composition of rockfish when plant protein sources were substituted for FM in their diets (Kim and Cho, 2024). Also, there was no significant alteration in the proximate composition of the whole body when *C. gariepinus* was fed diets with fish meal replaced by plant protein (Nasr et al., 2021). In contrast to this study, the proximate composition of pearl gentian grouper (Chen et al., 2019) and red drum (Minjarez-Osorio et al., 2016) changed when different plant-based protein sources were substituted for fish meal.

The age or size of the fish as well as the varying rates of nutrient deposition in tissues among various species are the reason for the variations observed in the effects of replacing FM with different plant-based proteins as reported in different studies (Mzengereza et al., 2022).

The activities of aminotransferases, such as γ -glutamyl transferase (GGT), aspartate aminotransferase (AST), and alanine aminotransferase (ALT), catabolize amino acids and transfer amino groups to α -keto acids. These processes also mirror the balance of amino acids in the diet (Cheng et al., 2010). AST and ALT are known to be important indicators for protein metabolism and/or ammonia excretion (Zhang et al., 2019). The transaminases (ALT and AST) and ALP catalyze trans-amination reactions to help the body metabolize other macromolecules and xenobiotics. They also regulate physiological functions. As a result, changes in their behavior enable the immediate detection of harm to the liver and kidney functions and serve as indicators of the organisms' ability to maintain the integrity of these tissues (Bharti and Rasool, 2021). As a result, we also looked at the enzyme activity (IU/L) of ALT, AST, and ALP in the serum of *C. gariepinus* that were fed diets varying in protein sources in this study. In this study, substituting fish oil with plant protein sources (Palm kernel meal, Soybean husk and Cowpea husk) resulted in an increase of AST concentration. This is in line with previous report by Zhang et al (2020) which documented an increase in AST levels when fish meal was replaced with rapeseed meal in diets for juvenile Asian red-tailed catfish (*Hemibagrus wyckioides*). Feeding *C. gariepinus* with plant-based protein diets led to an increase in both ALT and AST. The heightened levels of ALT and AST in these groups could potentially result from altered protein catabolism metabolism or hepatic cell membrane lysis, which allows these enzymes to seep into the fish's bloodstream (Bharti and Rasool, 2021). The hepatic cell's degeneration could be the cause of the rise in AST (Abalaka, 2013). These cytoplasmic serum enzymes are only released into the bloodstream following the damage that has been done to these cells (Jafarpour, and Fard., 2016). Elevated levels of ALT and AST in the plasma are indicative of liver impairment and cellular or hepatocellular

damage resulting from anti-nutritional factors (ANFs) present in plant-based ingredients in the liver, heart, or muscle (Kari et al., 2021).

Contrary to this study, Cai et al. (2022) observed no significant differences in the concentration levels of TP when gibel carp were fed diets with different protein compositions. The increase in total protein as observed in *C. gariepinus* fed SBH and PKM could be due to an increase in the non-specific immune response (Mohamad and Abasali, 2010). When diagnosing different liver and kidney diseases, albumin is required. Albumin, the most prevalent protein in blood plasma, serves as a transporter for a variety of compounds in circulation, thereby maintaining the health of the body (van de Wouw and Joles, 2022). In this investigation, ALB levels were raised when *C. gariepinus* was fed SBH and PKM. However, *C. gariepinus* fed CPH showed a marked decline. As noted by Andrews et al. (2011), a decrease in some essential plasma levels may be the cause of this drop in ALB levels.

In this study, feeding *C. gariepinus* with plant-based protein generally led to hyperbilirubinemia blood conditions. An obstruction of the bile ducts is most likely the cause of the hyperbilirubinemia (Bharti and Rasool, 2021). The haematological variable known as gamma-glutamyltransferase (GGT) enzyme is clinically measured as a biomarker for liver health (Rastiannasab et al., 2016). GGT modifies and breaks down movable proteins. The ability of *C. gariepinus* fed diet CPH to catalyze the transfer of glutathione's gamma-glutamyl moiety to an acceptor, which could be an amino acid, peptide, or water, may be explained by the higher GGT content seen in this group (Adamu and Nwadukwe, 2013).

Haematological variables such as white blood cells (WBC), red blood cells (RBC), hemocrit (Hct) and hemoglobin (Hb) are

increasingly being used to monitor fish health (Maftuch, 2018). WBC in blood aid in an organism's immune responses; RBC controls the amount of oxygen delivered to bodily tissues; Hb is essential for metabolism; and haematocrit (Ht) establishes the volume of RBC (Esmaeili, 2021). According to Fagbenro et al. (2010), blood analysis is an important indicator for assessing the physiological condition of cultured fish as well as the effects of diets and other stressors on the health of fish. Hematological test results can be impacted by food, feeding schedule, age, sex, and environmental factors (Teixeira et al., 2000; Ibrahim et al., 2022). The assessment of various physical conditions in fish is frequently done through hemato-biochemical studies (Pradhan et al., 2012; Sharmin et al., 2016; Jahan et al., 2019; Billah et al., 2022; Howlader et al., 2023). Feeding *C. gariepinus* with plant protein sources (CPH, SBH, and PKM) led to lower levels of RBC. This is in agreement with a previous report that suggested that higher levels of soybean meal fed to beluga lowered RBC (Hosseini and Khajepour, 2013). *C. gariepinus* fed diet SBH recorded the highest HGB in the blood. Better oxygen transport in tissues leading to improved growth may be the cause of the highest level of HGB seen in *C. gariepinus* fed diet (Esmaeili, 2021; Hossain et al., 2022; Howlader et al., 2023). One of the most important indicators of fish health is WBC count (Khieokhajonkhet et al., 2023). In this study, feeding *C. gariepinus* with plant-based protein lowered WBC levels in the blood and could be inferred to have compromised the cellular defense of *C. gariepinus*. According to Clauss et al. (2008), an increase in WBC counts within the normal range indicates that fish have stronger cellular defenses against infections. There was significant alteration on levels of HGB, HCT, MCHC, MCV, and MCH in this study. This is contrary to earlier report that documented no significant differences in these parameters when fish meal was replaced with kernel meal and sunflower

meal (Kumar et al., 2010; Rahmdel et al., 2018). Replacing FM with SBH, CPH and PKM significantly altered HCT levels. This indicates that *C. gariepinus* suffered negative effects when FM was substituted with these plant protein sources because higher hematocrit values are thought to pose a risk to farmed fish's health (Hardy, 2010). However, as previously noted by Lall and Kaushik (2021), the lower level of haematocrit seen in *C. gariepinus* fed FM diet is indicative of the inhibitory impact of phytate and glucosinolates on the bioavailability of important minerals for cell synthesis, such as iron and zinc.

The hemoglobin level in each red blood cell is known as the mean corpuscular hemoglobin concentration (MCHC), and it can be used to measure animal anemia (Habotta et al., 2022; Zakaria et al., 2022). A MCHC value of less than 28 g/dL frequently denotes anemia. All groups' MCHC values in this study ranged from 28.73 to 35.77 g/dL, indicating that none of the experimental fish were anaemic. There was an increase in MCHC and MCH levels in *C. gariepinu* fed plant-based diets. Elevation of MCH, a hemoglobin marker in erythrocytes, and MCHC suggest that feeding *C. gariepinus* plant-based diets may affect hematopoiesis and damage red blood cells in circulation (Hassan et al., 2023). The highest mean corpuscular volume (MCV) content was observed in *C. gariepinus* fed FM diet. This may be due to the inhibition of erythropoiesis which to a larger extent is confirmed by the least RBC observed in this study (Ahmed and Ahmad, 2020).

In this study, there was no significant difference in levels of creatinine and urea and is similar to previous report by Nasr et al. (2021). With the exception of ALP ($p=0.3750$), all other parameters were significantly different. In this study, substituting fish oil with plant protein sources (palm kernel meal, soybean husk and cowpea husk) resulted in an increase of AST concentration. This collaborates with

previous report by Zhang et al (2020) which reported an increase in AST levels when fish-meal was replaced with rapeseed meal in diets for juvenile Asian red-tailed catfish (*Hemibagrus wyckioides*). The hepatic cell's degeneration could be the cause of the rise in AST (Abalaka, 2013). These cytoplasmic serum enzymes are only released into the bloodstream following the damage that has been done to these cells (Jafarpour, and Fard., 2016). Contrary to this study, Cai et al. (2022) observed no significant differences in the concentration levels of TP when gibel carp were fed different diets with different protein compositions. In this study, there was a decrease in GGT concentration when *C. Gariepinus* was fed SBH and could imply healthy liver. This is because, a decrease in Gamma-glutamyl transferase (GGT) concentration in plasma may have a positive impact on liver health (Bongiorno et al., 2022).

A metabolic waste product excreted with urine, creatinine levels rise in blood when renal malfunction occurs (Bharti and Rasool, 2021). Elevated levels of urea and creatinine may be caused by decreased kidney clearance or renal tissue breakdown, glomerular dysfunction, or both (Amin and Hashem, 2012). In this study, there was no significant elevation of urea and creatinine levels and signify no renal malfunction. The non-significant effects of different protein sources on creatinine levels observed in this study is comparable to previous report by Ismail, et al. (2020) when fish meal was replaced with soybean or/corn gluten meal in Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*) diets.

When introducing a novel feed, it is important to evaluate the length and width of the villus in order to gain an understanding of the processes involved in the digestion and absorption of proteins (Roslan et al., 2024). During feeding trials, the histological structures of the digestive organ are assessed to provide crucial information on the fish's capacity to digest

food as well as potential health effects of the new diets (Dzifa et al., 2022). The measurement of intestinal villi height, muscle layer thickness, and goblet cell count are used to assess the health of the intestines, including absorptive capacity and digestive functions (Khojasteh, 2012; Pirarat et al., 2011). A decrease in the height and width of intestinal villi as well as muscular thickness as observed in fish fed CPH, SBH as well as PKM diets may indicate a reduction in the digestive tract's absorption area and nutrient absorption (Mahmoud et al., 2020). The reduction in VH, VW and MT as observed in this study may also be attributed to the presence of anti-nutritional factors in the plant-based protein sources which could lead to lots of deteriorations in intestinal morphology (Zhang et al., 2013). The reduced villus length as observed in *C. gariepinus* fed diets CPH, SBH and PKM as compared to FM could imply the inability of *C. gariepinus* to adapt and protect the guts as a response to the anti-nutritive factors in plant-based protein sources (Mzengereza et al., 2020). The perceived lower nutrient absorption did not correlate positively with growth and nutrient utilization and call for further studies to elucidate the clear relationship. This study is in agreement with previous studies that reported decrease in villi height and width when FM were replaced with plant-based protein sources (Roslan et al., 2024). On the contrary, earlier reports showed that substituting FM with plant-based protein in diets of fish resulted in an

increase in the length of villus (Ur'an, et al., 2008; Bansemer et al., 2015; Matulić et al., 2020). Kari et al. (2021) observed that histopathological changes of the intestines may vary depending on the feed utilized in the experiments and the species under consideration and that might have accounted for the variation in impacts of diets in different studies. The correlation analysis of the histological structures of the intestines and growth, and feed utilization observed in this study did not have any influence on growth and feed utilization.

Conclusion

This study concludes that inclusion of soybean husk as alternative protein sources had significant positive effect on growth performance or feed utilization compared to fish meal diet. Also, feeding *C. gariepinus* with plant-based protein sources significantly altered haematological parameters, function of the liver and kidney. Histological examination, also, indicated significant modifications in tissue morphology, pointing to possible metabolic adjustments to the novel dietary formulations. All things considered, adding PKM, CPH, and SBH to catfish diets as protein sources seems like a viable replacement for conventional fishmeal-based diets; however, more study is required to determine the ideal levels of inclusion for optimum development and well-being as well as their comprehensive effects on health and nutritional composition of fish.

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