Source apportionment of volatile organic compounds in Hong Kong homes

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Article history:
Received 17 March 2011
Received in revised form 7 May 2011
Accepted 9 May 2011

Keywords:
Volatile organic compounds
PCA/APCS
Source apportionment
Hong Kong

1. Introduction

Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are main pollutants in the air [1,2]. In the atmosphere, VOCs react with NO, in the presence of sunlight to generate photochemical oxidants such as ozone, organic nitrates, peroxides and carbonyls [3]. Hence, it significantly affects the oxidizing capacity and the radiative balance of the atmosphere. On the other hand, many VOCs are proved to be toxic and some, such as formaldehyde and benzene, are carcinogenic [4,5]. In addition, the secondary VOCs, ozone and OH radical generated in the photochemical reaction are often more hazardous to human health and environmental quality [6]. Importantly, since indoor VOC concentrations are generally higher than those outdoors, and people spend most of their time indoors at home, the potential for VOC exposure is the greatest in indoor environment [7–10]. Although simple quantification of VOCs is meaningful, source characterization and apportionment are vital and integrated parts of indoor air evaluation [11]. Identification and apportionment of sources of potentially harmful VOCs in indoor environment provide the only mechanism of lowering levels of these VOCs indoors and ultimately lead to cost effective reduction in population exposures [12].

As such, a number of studies were carried out globally to understand the indoor sources of VOCs in residences. These studies indicated that smoking, cooking, cleaning products, consumer products, renovation products, building materials and carpets were the main VOC sources or activities in homes in Europe, the United States and Asia [12–22]. In most cases, the sources of VOCs at homes were investigated in a qualitative way by using univariate and multivariate analyses [14,18,22,23], mixed linear regression analysis [16,24], variance component analyses [25], random and mixed effect models [26], and the most favorite technique i.e. principal component analysis (PCA) [8,11,12,18,19]. Quantitatively, limited studies were undertaken to determine the source contributions to indoor VOCs at homes [17,27].

Receptor-oriented source apportionment models have often been used to identify sources of air pollutants and to estimate source contributions to air pollutant concentrations. The most widely used models are the chemical mass balance (CMB), principal component analysis (PCA)/absolute principal component scores (APCS), positive matrix factorization (PMF), and graphical ratio analysis for composition estimates (GRACE)/source apportionment by factors with explicit restriction (SAFER), incorporated in the UNMIX model. Among these models, principal component analysis (PCA) is often used as an exploratory tool to identify the major sources of air pollutant emissions and to select statistically independent source tracers [14,28–30], whereas the computation of APCS for each sample is followed by the regression of sample mass concentrations on these APCS to derive each identified source’s estimated mass contribution [28]. For instance, Miller et al. [30] successfully apportioned sources of VOCs in indoor environment by applying PCA/APCS model to TEAM (Total Exposure Assessment Methodology) study data.