

1 Estimating the soil clay content and organic matter by means of
2 different calibration methods of vis-NIR diffuse reflectance spectroscopy

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10

11 **Abstract**

12 The selection of calibration method is one of the main factors influencing measurement
13 accuracy of soil properties estimation in visible and near infrared reflectance spectroscopy. In this
14 study, the performance of three regression techniques, namely, partial least-squares regression
15 (PLSR), support vector regression (SVR), and multivariate adaptive regression splines (MARS)
16 were compared to identify the best method to assess organic matter (OM) and clay content in the
17 salt-affected soils. One hundred and two soil samples collected from Northern Sinai, Egypt, were
18 used as the data set for the calibration and validation procedures. The dry samples were scanned
19 using a FieldSpec Pro FR Portable Spectroradiometer (Analytical Spectral Devices, ASD) with a
20 measurement range of 350–2500 nm. The spectra were subjected to seven pre-processed
21 techniques, e.g., Savitzky–Golay (SG) smoothing, first derivative with SG smoothing, second
22 derivative with SG smoothing, continuum removed reflectance, standard normal variate and
23 detrending (SNV-DT), multiplicative scatter correction (MSC) and extended MSC. The results of
24 cross-validation showed that in most cases MARS models performed better than PLSR and SVR

25 models. The best predictions were obtained using MARS calibration methods with CR prep-
26 processing, yielding R^2 , root mean squared error, and ratio of performance to deviation values of
27 0.85, 0.19 %, and 2.63, respectively, for OM; and 0.90, 5.32 %, and 3.15, respectively, for clay
28 content.

29 **Keywords:** Organic matter; clay content; reflectance spectroscopy; PLSR; SVR; MARS.

30 **1. Introduction**

31 Diffuse reflectance spectroscopy is considered as a promising method for the estimation of
32 soil properties and a low cost alternative to traditional soil analysis methods because of its
33 efficiency. Furthermore, determination of soil organic matter (OM) and clay content is complex
34 and requires more chemical reagents and caution especially in salt-affected soils (Richards, 1954;
35 Jackson, 1973). Whereas, visible and near infrared reflectance spectroscopy (VNIRRS) requires
36 little sample preparation and provides accurate estimation of several soil properties from one
37 spectral reading (Viscarra Rossel et al., 2006; Vohland et al., 2011). VNIRRS reflects the
38 compositional and structural information of molecules at spectral wavelengths of 350–2500 nm.
39 The analytical ability of VNIRRS depends on the repetitive and broad absorption of VNIRRS
40 light by C–H, O–H and N–H bonds (Li et al., 2008; Xuemei and Jianshe, 2013), determined as
41 overtones and combinations in the NIR range.

42 Different spectral pre-processing methods have been used to transform soil spectra, remove
43 noise due to light scattering, emphasise features, and extract useful data for quantitative
44 predictive models. Spectral pre-processing methods represent an important phase in multivariate
45 calibration (Buddenbaum and Steffens, 2012) and have enhanced the accuracy of predictive
46 models (Bilgili et al., 2010; 2011; Mashimbye et al., 2012). Typical spectral pre-processing
47 includes smoothing, normalisation, scatter correction, continuum removal, and derivative

48 algorithms. For instance, first- and second-derivative absorption spectra have been used by [Ben-](#)
49 [Dor et al. \(1997\)](#) to enhance spectral information and demonstrate spectral changes during a
50 decomposition process. [Stevens et al. \(2010\)](#) used derivatives and Savitzky–Golay (SG)
51 smoothing to enhance the performance of their models to predict soil organic carbon level.
52 [Rinnan et al. \(2009\)](#) reviewed the most common spectral pre-processing methods for near-
53 infrared spectroscopy. They concluded that, the optimal pre-processing method for a spectral data
54 set in a calibration model is the signal transformation that gives the best regression performance
55 after rigorous and comprehensive validation for all possible variation in the data.

56 The prediction mechanisms that may be used in a spectral calibration model depend on the
57 corresponding spectral interaction of the predominant soil chromophores ([Vohland et al., 2011](#)).
58 Therefore, selection of the calibration method and its performance in modelling reflectance
59 spectra is one of the main factors for calibration success ([Mouazen et al., 2010](#)). Several
60 calibration methods based on VNIRRS have been used to predict soil properties, including
61 organic matter (OM) and clay content, among them partial least-squares regression (PLSR) is the
62 standard method used for its simplicity and robustness ([Farifteh et al., 2007](#); [Vasques et al.,](#)
63 [2008](#)). The PLSR approach has inference capabilities, which are useful to model a probable linear
64 relationship between the measured reflectance spectra and soil attributes ([Farifteh et al., 2007](#);
65 [Viscarra Rossel and Behrens, 2010](#)). Further, this approach enables the modelling of several
66 response variables simultaneously, while effectively addressing strongly collinear and noisy
67 predictor variables ([Wold et al., 2001](#)). However, the complex and non-linear reflectance
68 behaviour in soils suggests that the use of linear models such as PLSR may be insufficient
69 ([Vohland et al., 2011](#)).

70 Compared to linear and non-parametric regression methods, multivariate adaptive regression
71 splines (MARS), a nonparametric method that estimates complex nonlinear relationships among

72 independent and dependent variables (Friedman, 1991), has been effectively applied in different
73 fields (Luoto and Hjort, 2005; Bilgili et al., 2010; Felicísimo et al., 2012; Samui, 2012) and
74 generally exhibits higher performance results. Bilgili et al. (2010) used MARS to model soil
75 properties, including soil OM and clay content, and reported that MARS provided better soil
76 property estimations than those by PLSR method. The support vector regression (SVR), a
77 nonlinear method based on the statistical learning theory, which was proposed by Vapnik (1998),
78 is capable of using fewer training data for learning in high-dimensional feature space and
79 employs a set of linear equations to obtain the support vectors (Xuemei and Jianshe, 2013). In
80 addition, SVR is capable of modelling linear and nonlinear relationships and solving calibration
81 problems with high performance (Suykens and Vandewalle, 1999). Recently, Viscarra Rossel and
82 Behrens (2010) successfully used SVR for modelling soil OM and clay content based on
83 reflectance spectroscopy. SVR has gained extensive application in soil spectroscopy, because of
84 its advantages and high performance (Viscarra Rossel and Behrens, 2010; Vohland et al., 2011).

85 A robust method for estimating the OM and clay content must provide sufficiently accurate
86 measurements and be cost-effective without excessive complexity, and applicable at different
87 spatial scales and in different environments (Stevens et al, 2008; Reeves, 2010). Numerous
88 studies have shown the potential of VNIRRS for digital soil mapping (Viscarra Rossel and
89 McBratney, 2008; Viscarra Rossel and Chen, 2011; Sidiki et al., 2014). Moreover, remote
90 sensing (RS) and VNIRRS combined together could be more efficient and cost-effective than
91 traditional soil mapping techniques (Lu et al., 2013; Nawar et al., 2014b). In particular, RS and
92 VNIRRS should be suitable for digital large-scale mapping studies where soil data are sparse
93 such as in the case of salt-affected soils. Although several of the studies estimated OM and clay
94 content using VNIRRS, effective and reliable methods for the accurate estimation in salt-affected
95 soils have not been implemented to date. This research aims to fill this gap and to advance the use

96 of diffuse reflectance spectroscopy for assessing OM and clay content in the salt-affected soils
97 based on spectral library with limited soil samples. The main goals of this study were (1) to
98 investigate the feasibility of using VNIRRS to predict OM and clay content in salt-affected soils;
99 (2) to select the most effective pre-processing methods for OM and clay content estimation; and
100 (3) to compare between PLSR, SVR, and MARS models for optimal estimation of OM and clay
101 content.

102 **2. Materials and methods**

103 *2.1. Study area*

104 The study area is the El-Tina Plain, which is located on the north-western Sinai Peninsula in
105 Egypt between longitudes 32°20'35" and 32°33'10" E and latitudes 30°57'25" and 31°04'28" N
106 and has an area of approximately 175 km² (Fig. 1). The El-Tina Plain is characterised by arid
107 conditions, with annual rainfall ranging from 33.4 mm to 70.3 mm. The mean air temperatures
108 ranged from 7.5°C to 23.3°C in winter and between 16.3°C and 35.6°C in summer. The mean
109 evaporation is high and ranges from 3.6 mm/day to 7.3 mm/day. The land surface is nearly flat
110 and ranges in elevation, from below sea level to 5 m above sea level. [Nawar et al. \(2014a, b\)](#)
111 found that soil texture varied from loamy sand to clay, and the soil salinity (EC_e) ranged from 3.3
112 to 166 dSm⁻¹ and the mean salinity value was 33.03 dSm⁻¹, indicated that the soils in the study
113 area were highly salt-affected. [Nawar et al. \(2011\)](#) classified the soils of the El-Tina Plain into
114 two orders—Entisols and Aridisols, which include eight subgroups: Typic Aquisalids, Typic
115 Haplosalids, Aquic Torriorthents, Typic Torriorthents, Aquic Torripsamments, Typic
116 Torripsamments, Gypsic Aquisalids, and Gypsic Haplosalids.

117 **(Fig. 1)**

118 *2.2. Soil sampling and analysis*

119 One hundred and two topsoil samples (depth, 0–20 cm) were collected in the study area
120 between 28 August and 12 September 2012 (Fig. 1). The collected soil samples were air-dried,
121 crushed, and passed through a 2-mm sieve and the resulting fine earth (<2 mm) was retained for
122 analysis. OM content was determined using the modified Walkley and Black method (Page et al.,
123 1982). Particle size distribution was measured using the pipette method (Kilmer and Alexander,
124 1949). Samples (20 g) were dispersed in 400 ml of distilled water containing 10 ml of 10 percent
125 sodium hexametaphosphate by stirring with high-speed mixer for 30-60 m, and then settled for 30
126 seconds. Suspensions wer poured through 325 mesh sieves, and delivered into 1000-mL
127 graduated cylinders. Aliquots of 10 ml were taken at a 10-cm depth following a settling time as
128 calculated by Stokes' equation (Baver, 1965). Water from the aliquots was evaporated, the fines
129 dried at 105° C and the amount of suspended solids weighed. The remaining dispersed sample
130 was passed through a 300-mesh sieve; the retained sands were washed, dried at 105° C, and
131 fractionated using a nest of sieves. For pretreatment, OM, soluble salts and gypsum in the
132 samples were removed prior to particle-size analysis. OM was removed using hydrogen peroxide,
133 H₂O₂, 30%. Gypsum was removed by heating the sample to 105° C and dialysis (Rivers et al.,
134 1982). Soluble salts were removed by dialysis against water.

135 *2.3. Spectral measurements*

136 Diffuse reflectance spectra of soil samples were measured using a portable spectroradiometer
137 (FieldSpec-FR, ASD), with a measurement range of 350–2500 nm and a resolution of
138 approximately 10 nm and sampling interval of 3 nm in the short-wave infrared domain (Hatchell,
139 1999). The measurements were conducted in a dark laboratory environment. Plastic dishes were

140 used to keep the soil samples, which were levelled off to a thickness of 2.0 cm (Mouazen et al.,
141 2007). A light source (halogen lamp) illuminated the sample surface with a 45° zenith angle from
142 a distance of 30 cm. Spectral measurements were taken from nadir at 1.5 cm height above the
143 sample. . Three spectra were collected from the central area of each sample. The final spectrum
144 measurement was attained by averaging the three representative spectra of each sample. The
145 reflected radiance from a white reference panel with known reflectance was recorded before
146 scanning each sample. To calculate the absolute reflectance of the samples, the radiance from
147 each sample was divided by the radiance from the white reference panel and multiplied by the
148 reflectance of the reference panel.

149 *2.4. Pre-processing transformations*

150 Seven types of spectra pre-processing were used , including (1) raw spectra (R), (2) Savitzky–
151 Golay (SG) smoothing, (3) first-derivative spectra with SG smoothing (FD-SG), (4) second-
152 derivative spectra with SG smoothing (SD-SG), (5) continuum removed reflectance (CR), (6)
153 standard normal variate and detrending (SNV-DT), 7) multiplicative scatter correction (MSC),
154 and (8) extended MSC (EMSC). The details about this spectral transformation can be found in
155 the review by Rinnan et al. (2009) and Buddenbaum and Steffens (2012). The continuum
156 removal was performed using ENVI 5.0 software (Exelis Visual Information Solutions, Inc.). All
157 the remaining pre-processing methods were carried out in MATLAB (Version 8.0; The
158 Mathworks, Natick, MA, USA).

159 *2.5. Multivariate calibration models*

160 Three models, PLSR, SVR and MARS, were constructed based on the measured reflectance
161 spectra (R) with seven spectral pre-processing methods and the measured values of OM and clay

162 content of the 70 soil samples. In addition to cross-validation, 32 samples (neither used in the
163 calibration of the models nor in the cross-validation) were used for the independent validation.

164 *2.5.1. Partial least-squares regression*

165 PLSR is a popular regression method that is often applied in chemometrics, and it was
166 introduced and statistically described by [Geladi and Kowalski \(1986\)](#) and [Wold et al. \(2001\)](#).
167 This method is frequently used to conduct quantitative spectral analyses ([Viscarra Rossel and](#)
168 [Behrens, 2010](#)), and the algorithm follows a linear multivariate model to relate the predictor (X)
169 and response (Y) variables and select successive orthogonal (latent) factors, thereby maximising
170 the X and Y covariance or the covariance between the spectra (X) and a measured soil property
171 (Y). Compared to multiple linear regression, PLSR is an appropriate method for managing data
172 with severe collinearity in the independent variables, particularly in cases where the sample size
173 is small. To determine the number of latent factors when using PLSR, leave-one-out cross-
174 validation (LOOCV) was used ([Efron and Tibshirani, 1994](#)) to prevent over- or under-fitting the
175 data, which may produce models with poor performance. The root mean squared error (RMSE)
176 of the predictions and the coefficient of determination (R^2) were ascertained to identify the
177 optimal cross-validated calibration model. Generally, the model with the highest cross-validated
178 R^2 value and lowest RMSE value is selected. The PLSR process was performed using MATLAB
179 (Version 8.0; [The Mathworks, Natick, MA, USA](#)).

180 *2.5.2. Support vector regression (SVR)*

181 SVR is a powerful calibration model based on the kernel learning methods ([Vapnik, 1999](#)).
182 This method utilises an implicit mapping of the input data into a high dimensional feature space
183 defined by a kernel function ([Karatzoglou and Feinerer, 2010](#)). The epsilon-SV regression (ϵ -

184 SVR) uses training data to obtain a calibration model as the so-called ε -insensitive loss function,
185 which is able to map independent data with deviation smaller or equal to the ε deviation from
186 dependent training data. Errors within the predetermined distance ε from the true value are
187 ignored, whereas errors greater than ε are penalised using parameter C (Vohland et al., 2011).
188 Consequently, SVR reduces the complexity of the training data to an optimal number of so-called
189 support vectors.

190 In this study, the models were developed using the LIB-SVR algorithm with type epsilon-SVR
191 and radial basis function (RBF) kernel. The optimal parameters of SVR, namely, cost, epsilon,
192 gam (γ), and sig² (σ^2) were adopted to regulate the models. For each combination of cost, γ , and
193 σ^2 parameters, the RMSE of cross-validation was calculated, and the optimum parameters were
194 selected, which resulted in the smallest RMSE. Further, we optimised cost in the range of 1–10
195 and epsilon and γ in the range of 0.01–0.1. X-block compression using PLS with 4 components
196 were selected to process the data. The LOOCV was used for the validation process. The LIB-
197 SVR model was built by utilising PLS Toolbox (Version 7.9; Eigenvector, Wenatchee,
198 Washington) and MATLAB (Version 8.0; The Mathworks, Natick, MA, USA).

199 2.5.3. Multivariate adaptive regression splines

200 MARS is an explanatory data analysis (data mining) technique developed by Friedman
201 (1991). Recently, MARS was applied as a regression method in several disciplines (Shepherd and
202 Walsh, 2002; Yang et al., 2003; Bilgili et al., 2010; 2011; Nawar et al., 2014) and was generally
203 reported to show better performance than that by conventional statistical methods. The MARS
204 analysis uses basis functions to model the predictor and response variables (Hastie et al., 2009).
205 To construct the basis functions, MARS splits the data into sub-regions (splines) with different
206 interval ending knots where the regression coefficients change and fits the data in each sub-

207 region by using a set of adaptive piecewise linear regressions. These basis functions are
 208 subsequently used as new predictor variables for modelling purposes. Each basis function may
 209 contain nonlinear and variable interaction factors of the second and third order as well as linear
 210 combinations. The basis functions take two forms, one for the values on the left of the knot
 211 (negative) and one for the values on the right of the knot (positive):

$$212 \quad Y = \max(0, Xf - cf)$$

$$213 \quad Y = \max(0, cf - Xf)$$

214 where cf is the threshold value for a predictor or knot and Xf denotes a predictor variable
 215 (Bilgili et al., 2010). The number of knots and basis functions are determined using a forward
 216 stepwise procedure in which a deliberately over-fitted model is first constructed. Next, backward
 217 stepwise elimination is applied during which the basis functions that do not contribute
 218 sufficiently to the accuracy of the fit are discarded to obtain a final model of the proper size
 219 (Friedman, 1991).

220 To measure lack of fit, avoid over-fitting, and improve prediction, the redundant basis
 221 functions are removed one at a time using a backward stepwise procedure. To determine which
 222 basis functions should be included in the model, MARS uses a modified form of the generalised
 223 cross-validation method (GCV, Vidoli, 2011). The GCV is the mean squared residual error
 224 divided by a penalty dependent on the model complexity and is expressed as follows:

$$225 \quad GCV = \frac{\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n [y_i - f(x_i)]^2}{\left[1 - \frac{C(m)}{n}\right]^2}$$

226 where n is the number of observations, $f(x_i) = \hat{y}_i$ and $C(m)$ is the cost-complexity measure of a
 227 model containing m basis functions used to penalise the model complexity to avoid over-fitting

228 by introducing a cost for the added basis functions in the model. Additional basis functions in the
229 model provide greater flexibility but also add complexity, and MARS attempts to minimise
230 model complexity by selecting the optimal model based on the lowest generalised cross-
231 validation value. The MARS analysis was performed using the ARESLab toolbox (Jekabsons,
232 2011) with selected adaptations based on MATLAB 8.0 software.

233 2.6. Prediction accuracy

234 The R^2 , RMSE, and ratio of performance to deviation (RPD), which is the standard deviation
235 divided by RMSE were used to assess the performance of the OM and clay content prediction
236 models. The RPD was classified into three classes by Chang et al. (2001): category A (RPD > 2)
237 includes models that accurately predict a given property; category B ($1.4 < \text{RPD} < 2$) has limited
238 predictive ability and category C (RPD < 1.4) has no predictive ability. These classes were
239 considered in the current work to compare the performance of different modelling approaches to
240 predict OM and clay content.

241 3. Results

242 3.1. Soil data

243 The results of the descriptive statistical analyses for 70 soil samples were shown in Table 1.
244 The OM content of the samples was low with the mean and maximum values of 0.85% and 2.3%,
245 respectively (Table 1). The OM content >1.0% accounted for 66% of all samples. Clay content
246 ranged between 0.02% and 54.3%, with a mean value of 27.22%, and samples with clay content
247 >40% comprised 71% of all soil samples, indicating that clay texture is dominant among the soil
248 samples. Further, a high correlation was noted between soil OM and clay content ($r = 0.63$).

249 (Table 1)

250 3.2. *Effects of pre-processing methods on modelling*

251 Results showed that the different pre-processing methods had considerable effects on the
252 performance of OM and clay content regression models (Table 2). Compared with the PLSR
253 model without pre-processing (raw [R] spectra), CR, FD-SG, and SD-SG improved the model
254 performance. Models based on CR showed the best accuracy ($R^2 = 0.52$ and 0.82 , $RMSE =$
255 0.36% and 7.10% , and $RPD = 1.45$ and 2.34 for OM and clay content, respectively), followed by
256 FD-SG ($R^2 = 0.45$ and 0.67 , $RMSE = 0.38\%$ and 9.6% , and $RPD = 1.35$ and 1.46 for OM and
257 clay, respectively) and SD-SG ($R^2 = 0.42$ and 0.53 , $RMSE = 0.39\%$ and 11.44% , and $RPD = 1.31$
258 and 1.46 for OM and clay, respectively). In contrast, PLSR models based on SNV-DT, MSC, and
259 EMSC spectra resulted in lower estimation accuracies. For OM, the worst performance was with
260 EMSC ($R^2 = 0.33$, $RMSE = 0.42\%$ and $RPD = 1.23$), and SNV-DT produced the worst
261 performance ($R^2 = 0.18$, $RMSE = 15.42\%$ and $RPD = 1.08$) for clay content. Even though, the
262 performance for OM with SG ($R^2 = 0.51$) was better than raw spectra, the results with for clay
263 ($R^2 = 0.50$) were lower than FD-SG and SD-SG ($R^2 = 0.67$ and 0.53). Furthermore, both FD-SG
264 and SD-SG included smoothing step. Thus, the calibrations of the three spectral types that
265 achieved better results with PLSR (CR, FD-SG, and SD-SG) besides raw spectra were used for
266 calibrating the SVR and MARS models.

267 Figure 2 presents PLS regression coefficients for both OM and clay content PLSR models, and
268 shows the correlation between both OM and clay content and reflectance spectra of the selected
269 four pre-processing methods. The regression coefficients showed both positive and negative
270 correlations at various wavelengths across spectra. The highest correlation for OM was found at
271 600 nm for raw spectra and at 1900 nm for CR, FD-SG, and SD-SG spectra. For clay content, the
272 highest correlation observed is at 600 nm for raw spectra. The spectrum for CR showed positive

273 correlation at 700 and 1400 nm, and negative correlation at 1900 and 2200 nm. Positive
274 correlations were obtained for FD-SG and clay content at 1400 nm, but at 1900 and 2270 nm, the
275 correlation was negative. The highest reflectance magnitude (albedo) of samples was low
276 (maximum 35%), except for five sandy samples (40–60%).

277 **(Table 2)**

278 **(Fig. 2)**

279 *3.3. Performance of PLSR, SVR, and MARS for estimating OM and clay content*

280 The calibration methods considered in this study provided different prediction accuracies of
281 OM (Table 3, Figures 3 and 4). For the calibration data set, the best results were obtained using
282 MARS based on CR ($R^2_{\text{Cal}} = 0.85$, $\text{RMSE}_{\text{Cal}} = 0.19\%$, and $\text{RPD}_{\text{Cal}} = 2.63$; Table 3; Fig. 3),
283 whereas the least acceptable results for OM were shown by PLSR and SD-SG spectra ($R^2_{\text{Cal}} =$
284 0.42 , $\text{RMSE}_{\text{Cal}} = 0.39\%$, and $\text{RPD}_{\text{Cal}} = 1.31$; Table 3; Fig. 3). Thus, the MARS model
285 outperformed the SVR and PLSR models with respect to the R, CR, and SD-SG, but for FD-SG,
286 the SVR model showed better result ($R^2_{\text{Cal}} = 0.74$, $\text{RMSE}_{\text{Cal}} = 0.26\%$, and $\text{RPD}_{\text{Cal}} = 1.96$). In
287 addition, SVR showed good performance for modelling OM, and all the calibration models had
288 RPD above 1.4. The worst results for SVR was with R and SD-SG ($\text{RPD}_{\text{Cal}} = 1.52$ and 1.44 ,
289 respectively).

290 **(Table 3)**

291 **(Fig. 3)**

292 Using the validation dataset, the prediction of OM content was close to the calibration results
293 for MARS and SVR with improvement for PLSR results. The results of MARS and PLSR with
294 CR were the better accuracy ($R^2 = 0.81$, $\text{RMSE}_{\text{Val}} = 0.22\%$ and $\text{RPD} = 2.27$ for MARS, and $R^2 =$
295 0.79 , $\text{RMSE}_{\text{Val}} = 0.28\%$ and $\text{RPD} = 2.16$ for PLSR). The validation for SVR was close to the

296 calibration results yet not as good with $R^2 = 0.65$, $RMSE_{Val} = 0.29\%$ and $RPD = 1.69$. The better
297 results for SVR were received with FD-SG $R^2 = 0.75$, $RMSE_{Val} = 0.26\%$ and $RPD = 2.00$.
298 Considering a relatively large number of samples in the calibration step, MARS, PLSR and SVR
299 were found to be suitable methods for determining OM content of salt-affected soils. The slopes
300 for the MARS and PLSR models with CR as well as SVR with FD-SG using the validation data
301 set were well distributed along the 1:1 line, indicating good validations, whereas the slopes for
302 MARS, SVR and PLSR with R, FD-SG (except SVR) and SD-SG spectra with the validation
303 dataset were under the 1:1 line, indicating under-estimation of OM (Fig. 4).

304 **(Fig. 4)**

305
306 Compared to OM, clay content was determined with higher accuracy. CR transformed spectra
307 produced the best calibration models for clay estimation with PLSR, SVR, and MARS models.
308 The MARS results outperformed PLSR and SVR models, with all spectra pre-processing types,
309 and the best results were recorded with CR ($R^2 = 0.9$, $RMSE_{Cal} = 5.32\%$, $RPD = 3.15$; Table 4;
310 Fig. 5). The clay content results of MARS with raw spectra showed good performance ($RPD =$
311 2.41), and those of the SVR were good with all spectra types and RPD ranged from 1.44 to 2.13.
312 The best result for SVR was obtained with CR ($R^2=0.78$, $RMSE_{Cal} = 7.7\%$ and $RPD = 2.13$;
313 Table 4; Fig. 5). PLSR generated good results and the RPD ranged between 1.44 and 2.34. The
314 best result for PLSR was with CR and achieved R^2 of 0.82 , $RMSE_{Cal}$ of 7.1% and RPD of 2.34.

315 **(Table 4)**

316 **(Fig. 5)**

317 For clay content, validation results with CR were the best among all models with $R^2 = 0.79$,
318 $RMSE_{Val} = 7.60\%$ and $RPD = 2.24$, $R^2 = 0.72$, $RMSE_{Val} = 7.75\%$ and $RPD = 1.90$, and $R^2 = 0.64$,
319 $RMSE_{Val} = 8.84\%$ and $RPD = 1.67$ for MARS, PLSR and SVR, respectively (Figure 6 and Table
320 4). Validation accuracy of SVR was the worst and slightly lower than the calibration results,
321 however still reasonable for a relatively small validation data set (R^2 between 0.52 and 0.64,
322 $RMSE_{Val}$ between 8.84 and 11.35%, RPD between 1.44 and 1.67). The slopes for MARS, PLSR
323 and SVR models with CR using the validation dataset were well distributed along the 1:1 line of
324 the calibration models, indicating good fit, whereas the slopes for MARS, SVR and PLSR with
325 R, FD-SG and SD-SG spectra using the validation dataset were over the 1:1 line, indicating over-
326 estimation of clay content (Fig. 6).

327 (Fig. 6)

328 4. Discussion

329 4.1 Soil spectra

330 Significant absorbance features around 1400, 1900, 2200, and 2400 nm were observed. These
331 are strongly associated with free water OH features at 1400 and 1900 nm and clay lattice OH
332 features at 1400 and 2200 nm (Vicente and Souza, 2011). The strong absorptions near 1416 nm
333 and 1911 nm in the spectra indicate the presence of water bound in the interlayer lattices (Bishop
334 et al., 2008). The absorption feature near 2200 nm may be likely associated with the absorption of
335 Al–OH, and the small absorption feature near 2280 nm may appear because of Fe–OH, as Fe is
336 exchanged in the octahedral sheet, e.g. in montmorillonite. In the spectra, the slight shoulder at
337 2340 nm may represent illite or mixtures of muscovite minerals (Post and Noble, 1993).

338 Many studies have concentrated on sensitive spectral wavebands and their relationship with
339 OM content (Viscarra Rossel et al., 2006; Bartholomeus et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2010; Tekin et

340 al., 2012; Nocita et al., 2014). For instance, Viscarra Rossel et al. (2006) reported that the
341 wavelengths 410, 570, and 660 nm in the Vis range showed good correlations with soil OM.
342 Furthermore, Wang et al. (2010) reported 5 wavelength bands (440, 560, 625, 740, and 1336 nm)
343 as the optimal spectral bands for the estimation of soil OM under laboratory conditions.
344 Bartholomeus et al. (2008) found the highest correlation between absorption and soil organic
345 carbon at wavelengths between 640 nm and 690 nm. In addition, Nacita et al. (2014) reported an
346 absorption peak centred at 600 nm that was associated with the high estimation of soil organic
347 carbon. The results of the present work also showed that the highest correlation for OM was
348 found at a region between 550 and 680 nm of the raw spectrum, which may be associated with
349 soil colour (Mouazen et al., 2007). This is consistent with the results of Bartholomeus et al.
350 (2008) and Nacita et al. (2014), suggesting that the raw spectral reflectance in the 550–680 nm is
351 sufficiently sensitive for evaluating the OM content in soil.

352 Viscarra Rossel and McBratney (1998) found that the significant wavelengths for estimating
353 clay content in the NIR range were 1600, 1800, 2000, and 2100 nm. Lagacherie et al. (2008)
354 reported that the wavelength 2206 nm of CR was the optimal band for quantifying clay content.
355 A similar result has been confirmed by Viscarra Rossel et al. (2009), who reported that the
356 absorption features at 2206 and 2207 nm of the CR spectrum are the optimal wavelengths for
357 estimating defined clay minerals. Our study results are in line with the results achieved in these
358 previous studies, showing that the features at wavelengths 1900, 2000, and 2200 of the CR had
359 strong correlation with clay content (Figs. 2b).

360 *4.2. Influence of pre-processing methods on estimation models*

361 In this study, the pre-processing methods significantly affected the results of calibration
362 models (Table 2 and Fig. 2). For OM, CR pre-processing achieved the best performance followed

363 by SG and FD-SG methods. Similarly, CR pre-processing achieved the best performance for clay
364 content models followed by FD-SG and SD-SG methods. Although PLSR results with SG for
365 OM ($R^2=0.50$ and $RMSE=0.37\%$) were better than models with the raw spectra ($R^2=0.44$ and
366 $RMSE=0.39\%$), the results of clay content modelling, contrary to OM models, were better for the
367 raw spectra ($R^2=0.56$ and $RMSE=11.08\%$) than for the spectra processed with SG technique
368 ($R^2=0.50$ and $RMSE=12.42\%$). Furthermore, smoothing using SG technique was included in FD-
369 SG, and SD-SG pre-processing methods. Using SG, SNV-DT, MSC, and EMSC led to the
370 deterioration of the models accuracy as compared to the PLSR model based on raw spectra.
371 SNV-DT is sensitive to the noise in the spectrum (Rinnan et al., 2009).

372 CR was the best pre-processing method for the PLSR, SVR, and MARS estimation models in
373 this study. CR has also been successfully used in some other studies for predicting soil properties
374 (Lagacherie et al., 2008; Weng et al., 2008; Nawar et al., 2014a). For example, Lagacherie et al.
375 (2008) recorded improvements in the estimation of the clay content by using reflectance
376 spectroscopy after implementing CR pre-processing on the soil spectra. On the other hand, FD-
377 SG was used to improve the estimation of OM (Vasques et al. 2008). The reason of better
378 performance of CR, as well as FD-SG and SD-SG pre-processing methods was effective noise
379 removal and enhanced signal-to-noise ratio, beneficial for OM and clay content estimation.

380 4.3. Comparison of PLSR, SVR, and MARS estimation models

381 In our study, the PLSR, SVR, and MARS methods were used to compare the estimation of soil
382 OM and clay content. Generally, the accuracy of the PLSR, SVR, and MARS models is affected
383 by variations in the soil texture and moisture content (Farifteh et al., 2007), and a successful pre-
384 processing method for the spectral data may improve the performance of such models (Vasques
385 et al., 2008; Rinnan et al., 2009). Amongst the three investigated multivariate techniques, MARS

386 performed best. Compared to MARS, the two other multivariate techniques (SVR and PLSR)
387 showed a noticeable decrease in accuracy with PLSR performing somewhat better than SVR in
388 the validation data set for OM and clay content estimation.

389 For OM estimation, MARS provided very good calibration accuracies depending on the pre-
390 treatment method used with R^2 between 0.70 and 0.85, $RMSE_{Cal}$ ranged between 19% and 28%,
391 and all RPD higher than 2.0, except with FD-SG (RPD=1.86). The best model performance (R^2
392 =0.85 and $RMSE_{Cal} = 0.19\%$) was obtained using MARS with CR. The accuracy of the test set
393 validation is good and in the same range as the calibration (RPD close to 2.0). These models
394 particularly showed good $RMSE_{Val}$ around 0.35%. The validation accuracy was slightly lower but
395 reasonable (R^2 between 0.49 and 0.62, $RMSE_{Val}$ between 0.43% and 0.54%, RPD between 1.26
396 and 1.57).

397 As shown in Table 3, the PLSR model with CR pre-processing performed relatively well
398 compared to MARS and better than SVR with CR as well as with SD-SG and R for the validation
399 data set. The good accuracy of PLSR with validation data set may be attributed to the fine texture
400 of the soil samples (75% of samples had clay texture) The best results among SVR models were
401 with FD-SG ($R^2 = 0.76$ and $RMSE = 0.25\%$). CR generally emphasises the spectral absorption
402 features (Clark and Roush, 1984) and may improve the estimations. Weng et al. (2008) recorded
403 improvements in the estimation of the soil salinity content by using reflectance spectroscopy after
404 implementing CR pre-processing on the soil spectra. Our study results showed that CR generally
405 improved these estimations compared to estimations from the raw spectra. SVR produced good
406 results with FD-SG ($R^2 = 0.76$ and $RMSE = 0.25\%$), which was better than that by PLSR, but not
407 as good as the results obtained by using the MARS model.

408 Compared to published results obtained using MARS ($R^2_{\text{Cal}} = 0.79\text{--}0.91$) (e.g. Shepherd et al.,
409 2002; Bilgili et al., 2010; Viscarra Rossel and Behrens, 2010), SVR ($R^2_{\text{Cal}} = 0.73\text{--}0.89$) (e.g.
410 Viscarra Rossel and Behrens, 2010; Vohland et al., 2011; Peng et al., 2014), and PLSR ($R^2_{\text{Cal}} =$
411 $0.79\text{--}0.85$) (e.g. Vasques et al., 2008; Bilgili et al., 2010; Viscarra Rossel and Behrens, 2010), the
412 OM models used in the present study may be considered as good according to the standard by
413 Chang et al. (2001). The estimation quality of the OM was dependent on the different pre-
414 treatment and calibration methods. For instance, the MARS model developed with raw spectra,
415 CR and SD-SG produced better results than the PLSR and SVR (Table 3). However, the results
416 of SVR with FD-SG were better than the MARS and PLSR. Similarly, averaging the spectra
417 consistently optimised the calibrations with PLSR. Averaging and smoothing of the spectra
418 removes noise and may eliminate factors that lead to nonlinearities (Bilgili et al., 2010). The
419 MARS method typically yields better results when a nonlinear relationship between absorption
420 and concentration exists, whereas the PLSR model fits only linear relationships (Brown et al.,
421 2006; Mouazen et al., 2010; Viscarra Rossel and Behrens, 2010).

422 Very good predictions for clay content were obtained using MARS ($R^2_{\text{Cal}} = 0.90$) and good
423 performances were obtained with PLSR ($R^2_{\text{Cal}} = 0.82$) and SVR ($R^2_{\text{Cal}} = 0.78$). Table 4 shows
424 that the calibration models with CR performed well and provided the best results for MARS,
425 PLSR, and SVR, respectively. These results were consistent with previous studies for estimating
426 clay content based on reflectance spectroscopy ($R^2_{\text{Cal}} = 0.82\text{--}0.91$) (Shepherd and Walsh, 2002;
427 Lagacherie et al., 2008; Bilgili et al., 2010; Viscarra Rossel and Behrens, 2010). For example,
428 Bilgili et al. (2010) obtained good results for estimating clay content of 512 soil samples
429 collected from northern Turkey, by using MARS and PLSR and reported R^2_{Cal} of 0.89 and 0.82,

430 respectively. According to [Chang et al. \(2001\)](#), the predictive performance of the MARS model
431 in this study was high.

432 In line with findings of [Kuang and Mouazen \(2011\)](#), it is believed that a fundamental factor
433 that improved the performance of the models in this study was a wide range of clay content (0.0–
434 54.3). Furthermore, the model performance depends to a large extent on variability encountered
435 in the data set, including soil types ([Stenberg, 2010; Wang et al., 2010](#)).that due to variety of
436 parent material can have considerably different physical and chemical characteristics influencing
437 soil spectra. Thus, if soil heterogeneity increases regression can be more successful and this may
438 influence the model accuracy. [Kuang and Mouazen \(2011\)](#) confirmed that although R^2 and RPD
439 increase with variability measured as SD and range, RMSE also increased. The high performance
440 for estimating clay content in the current research obtained with MARS and SVR may be
441 attributed to the wide range of variation of clay content as shown in Table 1.

442 The performance of the MARS, SVR, and PLSR models to predict soil properties is evaluated by
443 R^2 , RMSE, and RPD. Of all models, MARS showed higher performance than PLSR and SVR for
444 estimating clay content and OM, except SVR with FD-SG in calibration and PLSR with CR in
445 validation step. According to [Chang et al. \(2001\)](#), estimation models of soil properties with RPD
446 >2 are considered as accurate calibration models. The performance of OM and clay content
447 predictive models were good in terms of RPD. MARS provided very good models for clay
448 content estimation ($RPD_{Cal} = 3.15$) with CR. Good models were also received for PLSR (RPD_{Cal}
449 $= 2.34$) and SVR ($RPD_{Cal} = 2.13$) with CR. For OM, a good model was achieved by MARS with
450 CR ($RPD_{Cal} = 2.63$), and a satisfactory model by SVR with FD-SG spectra ($RPD_{Cal} = 1.96$).

451 The predictive models used in this study have not been tested on digital hyperspectral airborne
452 or satellite images. They will be tested using airborne or satellite imagery at a selected study site

453 where further work is currently being conducted. Future research should focus on possible
454 integration between spectra obtained in the field or in the laboratory, and spectra from airborne or
455 satellite imagery. This integration could be useful for accurate OM and clay content mapping that
456 employs predictive models (Lu et al., 2013; Nawar et al., 2015). These estimation models should
457 be subjected to further examination and optimisation before broad application in soil mapping, as
458 the estimation accuracy of OM and clay contents in the field could be negatively affected by
459 several factors that are well controlled in laboratory conditions, such as spectral mixture,
460 atmospheric conditions, and spatial variability of soil moisture content (Gomez et al., 2008; Ben-
461 Dor et al., 2009).

462

463 **5. Conclusions**

464 In this study, different pre-processing methods were utilised for the estimation of OM and clay
465 content in salt-affected soils based on VNIRRS, and the accuracies were compared between
466 PLSR, SVR, and MARS models. The CR and FD-SG pre-processing methods had strong positive
467 influence on the performance of most models. Overall, MARS was the most reliable method for
468 estimating the OM and clay content under laboratory conditions and provided better estimations
469 than the SVR and PLSR at both the calibration validation steps. The main strengths of MARS
470 method, besides accuracy of modeling OM and clay content in salt-affected soils, are the lower
471 costs compared to the conventional field-based approaches and simplicity to transfer models to
472 image pixels for digital soil mapping. It is proposed that these estimation models undergo further
473 testing and optimization before broad application in soil mapping. For instance, appropriate
474 methods of atmospheric correction and elimination of spectral noise (e.g., vegetation influences)
475 are needed to advance laboratory-based models to operational soil mapping of large areas.

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