Effects of oral administration of acidifier and probiotic on growth performance, digestive enzymes activities and intestinal histomorphology in *Salmo trutta caspius* (Kessler, 1877)

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Abstract

This study was aimed to evaluate the single and combined effects of acidifier and probiotic on growth performance, digestive enzymes activities and intestinal histomorphology of *Salmo trutta caspius*. The juvenile fish with mean body weight 15±3 g were divided into 8 different treatments (in triplicates), including control, 5, 10 and 15 g sodium diformate kg⁻¹ diet, respectively as T1, T2 and T3. Treatments namely T4, T5, T6 and T7 were received diets containing 0.2 g kg⁻¹ commercial probiotic Bio-Aqua® in combination with 0, 5, 10 and 15 g sodium diformate kg⁻¹ diet for 60 days, respectively. The results showed that T2 and T3 fish growth performance were improved significantly (*p*<0.05), following 30 days after administration, while T1 did not show the same pattern over the 60 days (*p*<0.05). The single probiotic treatment did not induce significant improvements in fish growth rate, digestive enzymes activities and intestinal morphometry though the combined treatments have been showed an intermediate level of improvement. The higher levels of chymotrypsin and trypsin have been observed at day 30 and the higher activities of lipase, protease and amylase could be seen at day 60 in the most acidifier treatments (*p*<0.05). The villi height and the thickness of epithelium have been reduced (*p*<0.05) because of single acidifier while the combined treatments led to either significant increase (*p*<0.05) or no change compared with corresponding single treatment. The addition of 1.0 g sodium diformate kg⁻¹ diet can improve the fish growth rate in long-term by changing digestive enzymes activities, and combined treatments of probiotic and acidifier are mostly revealed antagonist effects.

**Keywords:** Sodium diformate, Dietary organic acids, Growth performance, Enzyme activity, Caspian trout.

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Introduction
Since recent population rising led to a global growing, demand for food and protein supply, the increase in aquaculture productivity is highly desirable; not only owing to several beneficial effects of aquatic animal consumption by human, but also by putting lower pressure on their natural resources (Alexandratos and Bruinsma, 2012; Gormaz et al., 2014). Besides, the significant interest in intensive aquaculture development of non-indigenous species, introducing a local species to this sector, can provide efficient and cost-effective alternative source of food that can meet this growing food need without any environmentally or pathogenic threat (Frisch and Murray, 2002; Arthur et al., 2010; Saint-Paul, 2018). Regarding this, Salmo trutta caspius (Kessler, 1877) as subspecies of brown trout, having been distributed throughout the Caspian Sea and its population was faced with a recent decline due to over exploitation and environmental pollution (Kocabas and Bascinar, 2013; Sedgwick, 1995; Niksirat and Abdoli, 2009). On the other hand, higher fillet quality and better growth performance (rather than other trout living in this area) nominated this species for large-scale aquaculture in Iran (Kalbassi et al., 2006).

The fast-growing development of aquaculture led to increase in new emerging infectious disease to cultured fish. This consequently followed by unrestricted use of antibiotics to control the diseases outbreak and somewhat to ensure the prevention from any infections (Cabello, 2006). The major constraint of this enormous amounts of antibiotics given to the water is the increase in the prevalence of antibiotic-resistance of fish pathogen (other animal and human, as well), justifying the necessity of an alternatives like probiotics in controlling bacterial diseases (Kav and Ergnis, 2008; Denev et al., 2009). Given that, advance in probiotic applications to prevent and control of pathogenic bacteria in animal farms, particularly in aquaculture are not out-of-mind (Gomez-Gil et al., 2000; Robertson et al., 2000). These biologically-active compounds, not only boost the quality of water and sediments in the aquaculture ponds, but also can be applied as food additives to enhance aquatic organisms' immunity as well as disease resistance (Merrifield et al., 2010 a, b; Mohammadian et al., 2019). Therefore, this might be more effective as economic point of view, owing to general believes regarding to the cost-effective prospective of disease prevention in aquaculture industry.

Besides the probiotic, the organic acids and their salts, as acidifiers have been also introduced to livestock nutrition as preservatives (Kim et al., 2005) growth premotor by modulating the intestinal micro flora (Canibe et al., 2001). They can also improve the digestibility of minerals by reducing the intestinal pH and therefore, realizing some digestive enzymes (Vielma and Lall, 1997).

However, the knowledge of nutritional requirements of acidifier, information on digestibility coefficients
of that in combination with other ingredients such as probiotic, and data on the maximum inclusion level of that in fish is still quite rare. In this context, this study has been designed to evaluate the single and combined effects of acidifier and probiotic on growth performance, digestive enzymes activities and intestinal histomorphology of *S. trutta caspius* and therefore, this information might provide the basis for the use of least-cost programming to formulate diets.

**Materials and methods**

*Diet preparation*

The control diet was formulated by using the ingredients as subsequently described. The proximate analysis of the basal diet according to the AOAC method includes 37.1% crude protein, 15% crude lipid, 10% ash, and 390 Kcal 100 g⁻¹ for gross energy. The pH of the diet was measured according to the method described by (Baruah *et al.*, 2005). Briefly, five grams of the feed were macerated in a porcelain mortar and mixed in 50 mL of deionized water for 1 min using a magnetic stirrer. After the diet homogenization, the pH of the solution was measured.

*Experimental design*

Juveniles *S. trutta caspius* weighing 15±3 g were transferred from fish propagation and cultivation center in Bahonar- Klardash, Iran, to the aquaculture fish farm. The fish were acclimated for at least 2 weeks in an indoor 400 L cement ponds and were fed with a standard diet. After verifying the health status of the fish, they were distributed randomly into 24 cement ponds at an initial density of 75 fish per tank and divided into 8 treatment groups; including control (had no organic acid salts or probiotic), treatment T1 received a diet containing only 0.5 g sodium diformate kg⁻¹ diet, treatment T2 received a diet containing only 1.0 g sodium diformate kg⁻¹ diet, treatment T3 received a diet containing only 1.5 g sodium diformate kg⁻¹ diet. Treatments T4, T5, T6 and T7 received diets containing 0.2 g kg⁻¹ commercial probiotic Bio-Aqua® in combination with 0, 0.5, 1.0 and 1.5 g sodium diformate kg⁻¹ diet, respectively.

The tanks were supplied with water from external Biofilteres (Athmann, China), at temperature of 17.1±1.2 °C. The fish were fed with sodium diformate and probiotic-contained diets for 60 days (twice a day) at a rate of 2% of biomass. During the experimental period, pH was measured about 7.94±0.11 and the dissolved oxygen was 8.7±1.3 mg L⁻¹.

*Sampling and analysis of biological parameters*

In order to determine growth performance, weight of all fish in each treatment, was measured at the beginning of experiment, 30 and 60 days after that. All fish were starved for 24h before sampling or biometry and each individual fish then weighed. All growth performance and feed utilization parameters, including condition factor (CF, g cm⁻³), specific growth rate (SGR%), feed conversion ratio (FCR), protein efficiency ratio (PER), daily weight gain (DWG), relative weight
gain (RGR) and feed efficiency ratio (FER) were calculated as suggested elsewhere (Mohammadian et al., 2017). The survival rate was also evaluated for the whole experimental period.

**Digestive enzymes activities**

To analyze the activity of digestive enzymes, on days 0, 30, and 60 following probiotic-acidifier feeding, the fish were starved for 24 h and nine fish of each treatment were taken randomly. The intestine has dissected out under sterile conditions 4°C. Then the samples were homogenized in a cold homogenizing buffer containing 50 mMTris–HCl, pH 8.0 (1:9 v/w) followed by centrifugation (13,500 ×g; 30 min at 4°C). The supernatant was collected and kept at −80°C in small portions for later determinations (Rungruangsak-Torrissen et al., 2002; Rungruangsak-Torrissen and Fosseidengen, 2007).

Total protein content of the supernatant has been assayed according to Bradford (1976) method using bovine serum albumin as a standard. Banzoyl-L-Tyrosine ethyl ester Ester (BTEE) was used as a substrate to determine enzyme activity of chymotrypsin (Hummel, 1959). Trypsin activity was measured using Nα-Benzoyl- L -arginine ethyl ester (BAEE) as the substrate (Erlanger et al., 1961). The α-amylase activity has been measured according to the modified Bernfeld method as described previously (Areekiseree et al., 2004) using starch solution as substrate. Amylase specific activity has been expressed as μmol maltose produced h⁻¹ mg protein⁻¹. Lipase activity has been determined based on the measurement of fatty acids release due to enzymatic hydrolysis of triglycerides in stabilized emulsion of olive oil (Borlongan, 1990). Protease activity has been measured using casein (Sigma–Aldrich) as the substrate and then the product will react with Folin’s reagent (Anson, 1938, with modification). The activity of alkaline phosphatase (ALP) has been measured using p-nitrophenyl phosphate (pNPP) as substrate (Otto et al., 1946). Enzyme activities have been measured as the change in absorbance using a spectrophotometer (UV-2802S; Unico, Shanghai, China) and expressed as specific activity, U mg⁻¹protein (Sun et al., 2012).

**Intestinal histomorphology**

At the days 30 and 60 from the start of the experiment, the intestine of fish (n=3) were dissected immediately out following euthanizing. The samples were then divided into three different sections, including proximal, middle and posterior parts and separately fixed in 10% neutral phosphate buffered formalin (pH=7.2) and processed using the standard protocol for histopathological examination. After embedding the sample with paraffin wax, three separate cross sections with the thickness of ~5 μm were prepared using a microtome (Microtec CUT4050) and then have been stained with hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) for further histopathological investigations. The villi height, villi width and the thickness of epithelium, lamina propria
and muscularis layers were determined under Nikon light microscope (Eclipse E600) by using of AxioVision 8.4 microscope software from Carl Zeiss (Oberkochen, Germany).

**Statistical procedure**

The normality of data and the homogeneity of variances were analyzed by applying Shapiro-Wilk and Levene's tests, respectively. In order to determine the effects of treatments (acidifier and probiotic) and time on different parameters, Multi-way Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was applied. The Multiple comparisons (Duncan) were followed if the p value on this variable was statistically significant (SPSS, 18). All experimental data were presented as the mean±SD, and the level of significance for all tests was set at p<0.05.

**Results**

In order to evaluate whether different probiotic, acidifier and feeding time may comprise any changes in growth performance, digestive enzymes activities and histomorphometry of intestine, the data were subjected to MANOVA. Obtained results revealed that regardless of whether significant difference originated from those above-mentioned in single treatment or not, the significant interactive effects were observed in the case of growth rate parameters and enzyme activities. Whereas, in the case of intestine morphology, the significant interaction was mostly observed in distal part, though being absolutely in different range to some extent. The exact p values for all single and combined effects, which tested prior to other statistical analysis, are provided in Table 1.

| Table 1: Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) performed for each parameter with its exact p value. This table shows the single and interactive effects of probiotic, acidifier and time of different measured parameters. |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                | Probiotic       | Acidifier       | Time            | Probiotic × Acidifier | Probiotic × Time | Acidifier × Time | Probiotic × Acidifier × Time |
| CF              | 0.001           | <0.001          | 0.147           | 0.002             | 0.009           | <0.001          | 0.015            |
| SGR             | 0.118           | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           | 0.03            | <0.001          | <0.001           |
| FCR             | <0.001          | 0.063           | <0.001          | 0.066            | <0.001          | 0.021           | <0.001           |
| PER             | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           | 0.034           | 0.001           | <0.001           |
| DWG             | 0.822           | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           |
| RGR             | 0.041           | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           | 0.005           | <0.001          | <0.001           |
| FER             | 0.015           | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           |
| Chymotrypsin    | 0.392           | 0.179           | <0.001          | <0.001           | 0.01            | 0.572           | <0.001           |
| Trypsin         | 0.011           | 0.083           | <0.001          | 0.03             | 0.002           | 0.035           | 0.016            |
| Amylase         | 0.706           | 0.344           | <0.001          | 0.284            | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           |
| Lipase          | 0.363           | 0.258           | <0.001          | <0.001           | 0.024           | 0.384           | 0.001            |
| Protease        | 0.202           | 0.03            | <0.001          | 0.105            | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           |
| ALP             | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           |
| villi height    | Prox. 0.957     | 0.332           | 0.923           | 0.088            | <0.001          | <0.001          | 0.079            |
|                 | Mid. 0.001      | 0.576           | 0.002           | <0.001           | 0.725           | 0.091           | 0.065            |
|                 | Dist. 0.606     | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           | 0.11            | <0.001          | <0.001           |
| villi width     | Prox. 0.218     | 0.836           | 0.567           | 0.859            | 0.039           | 0.102           | 0.740            |
|                 | Mid. 0.91       | <0.001          | <0.001          | <0.001           | 0.569           | 0.252           | <0.001           |
|                 | Dist. 0.001     | 0.013           | <0.001          | 0.011            | 0.087           | 0.016           | <0.001           |
Growth performance

Over the 60 days feeding trial, there was no mortality observed due to either the probiotic and/or acidifier administrations. The fish fed for 30 days with different levels of acidifier showed no significant changes in CF while the SGR, FCR, PER, DWG, RGR and FER were improved in T2 and T3 groups as compared with control group (p<0.001). The T1 group did not show the same changes when compared to control fish. This pattern has been not observed following 60 days of feeding, in which the best growth performance (SGR, PER, DWG, RGR and FER) was for T1. The CF was reduced (<0.001) in all acidifier treatments while FCR did not show any significant different when compared with control. The probiotic-fed group (T4) has been showed better SGR, FCR and FER rather than control following 30 days while other parameters did not differ from control in this group. Significant increase (<0.001) in CF, PER and FER were observed in T4 as compared with control on day 60 (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>T1</th>
<th>T2</th>
<th>T3</th>
<th>T4</th>
<th>T5</th>
<th>T6</th>
<th>T7</th>
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<tr>
<td>CF (g cm⁻³)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.59±0.10ab</td>
<td>1.96±0.21abc</td>
<td>1.33±0.19ab</td>
<td>1.45±0.13abc</td>
<td>1.16±0.03abc</td>
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<td>1.06±0.02abc</td>
<td>1.22±0.05abc</td>
<td>1.24±0.02abc</td>
<td>1.45±0.04abc</td>
<td>1.35±0.05abc</td>
<td>1.37±0.03abc</td>
<td>1.45±0.05abc</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SGR (%)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.35±0.004b</td>
<td>0.25±0.017bc</td>
<td>0.44±0.032bc</td>
<td>0.60±0.032bc</td>
<td>0.31±0.006bc</td>
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<td>0.26±0.076bc</td>
<td>0.12±0.036bc</td>
<td>0.16±0.033bc</td>
<td>0.19±0.034bc</td>
<td>0.23±0.035bc</td>
<td>0.23±0.040bc</td>
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<tr>
<td>FCR</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.25±0.03bc</td>
<td>3.07±0.20bc</td>
<td>1.67±0.13abc</td>
<td>1.21±0.07bc</td>
<td>2.52±0.05bc</td>
<td>1.76±0.01bc</td>
<td>1.81±0.01bc</td>
<td>1.94±0.03bc</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.11±0.15bc</td>
<td>5.56±1.86bc</td>
<td>3.75±0.77bc</td>
<td>3.01±0.61bc</td>
<td>2.63±0.65bc</td>
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<td>PER</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.04±0.001c</td>
<td>0.75±0.001abc</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
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<td>0.91±0.17bc</td>
<td>1.07±0.26bc</td>
<td>1.18±0.22bc</td>
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<td>DWG</td>
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<td>30.74±1.50bc</td>
<td>19.52±0.36bc</td>
<td>24.47±1.23bc</td>
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<td>&lt;0.001</td>
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<tr>
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<td>12.78±2.08bc</td>
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<td>32.58±2.02bc</td>
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<td>82.43±1.11bc</td>
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<td>27.43±6.21bc</td>
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<td>43.77±1.78bc</td>
<td>33.26±5.39bc</td>
<td>0.008</td>
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p value with bold-faced type indicated significant differences for the tested parameters.
The combined treatment of acidifier and probiotic have been compared with their corresponding single treatment and the results indicated that only T7 had a higher \( (p<0.05) \) CF as compared with either T4 (single probiotic-fed group) or T3 (single acidifier) during both 30 and 60 days of experiment. All combined treatments showed significant increases \( (p<0.05) \) in SGR as compared with T4 at day 30 and the only T5 showed higher SGR as compared with T1 at the same time. The T6 was enhanced the SGR of fish, treated for 60 days as compared with T2 while no significant changes were observed in comparison with single probiotic treatment. Better FCR was has been observed following all combined treatments when compared with their specific simple acidifier- or probiotic-fed groups at day 30. This was not continued for 60 days and even some treatment like T7 showed an increase in the FCR as compared with T3. The PER has been reduced in combined treatments (T6 and T7) compared with simple acidifier treatments while showed a significant increase compared with T4 on day 30. The most combined treatment on day 60 did not show any significant changes in comparison with single treatment. All combined treatments indicated significant increases in DWG, RGR and FER compared with T4 on day 30 while this pattern was not continued till the end of experiment, i.e., day 60 (Table 2).

**Digestive enzymes activities**

The intestine enzymes activities at the beginning of the experiment (day 0) did not show any significant \( (p<0.05) \) changes between different treatments. Over the 30 days, the single acidifier (T1 and T2) and probiotic (T4) led to the increase \( (p<0.05) \) in the level of this enzyme compared with control. The only combined treatment (T5) was significantly \( (p<0.05) \) lessened the level of chymotrypsin as compared with the single acidifier (T1) or probiotic treatments. Although there were no significant changes following either single treatment of acidifier or probiotic over the 60 days of administration, the combined treatment (T6) showed a significant rise in the level of this enzyme as compared with T2 (Fig. 1).
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Figure 1: The effects of different probiotic diets on chymotrypsin of *Salmo trutta caspius* intestine over the 30 and 60 days, single and combined diets of acidifier and probiotic. All values were obtained from 9 individual fish (3/replicate) and expressed as mean ±SD. Treatment codes as mentioned in Table 2. Different lowercase alphabetic letters on each bar indicate significant difference among different treatments and different capital letter express significant difference among different sampling time (*p*<0.05).

Trypsin enzyme activity was significantly higher (*p*< 0.05) in fish fed with single diet of acidifier compared to the control at day 30, while probiotic group did not show any significant changes at the same time. The combined feeding trial (T5 and T6) induced significant decrease in the level of trypsin at day 30 when compared to only the single acidifier treatments (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: The effects of different probiotic diets on trypsin of *Salmo trutta* intestine over the 30 and 60 days single and combined diets of acidifier and probiotic. All values were obtained from 9 individual fish (3/replicate) and expressed as mean ±SD. Treatment codes as mentioned in Table 2. Different lowercase alphabetic letters on each bar indicate significant difference among different treatments and different capital letter express significant difference among different sampling time (*p*<0.05).
The α-Amylase enzyme activity has been significantly lower ($p<0.05$) in fish fed with single acidifier- or probiotic-supplemented diet when compared to the control group at day 30. Although the combined treatment led to significant rises in the level of this enzyme when compared with their specific single treatment at day 30, there were no significant changes in comparison with the single probiotic-fed group (Fig. 3). Over the 60 days supplemented feeding period, the α-Amylase enzyme was elevated significantly as compared to the control and the combined treatment led to significant decrease in the level of this enzyme as compared with single acidifier group (Fig. 3).

A significant increase in the level of gut lipase has been also observed between single acidifier treatment (T1) and control over the 60 days of feeding experiment whereas this significant change could not be observed when fish have been fed with only probiotic. The only combined treatment that showed a significant change in the level of lipase was T5 that showed lower activity when compared to either single acidifier or probiotic-fed group (Fig. 4). Protease enzyme activity was significantly lower ($p<0.05$) in fish fed with single acidifier groups compared to the control group following 30 days post feeding. The combined treatments cause significant increase in the level of protease as compared its single acidifier corresponding group but not with
probiotic-fed group. The higher level of this enzyme could be observed following 60 days feeding with single acidifier group while single probiotic–fed group did not act the same. The combined treatment at the same time showed a significant decrease in the level of this enzyme when compared to their corresponding single acidifier group (Fig. 5).

Figure 4: The effects of different probiotic diets on protease of *Salmo trutta caspius* intestine over the 30 and 60 days single and combined diets of acidifier and probiotic. All values were obtained from 9 individual fish (3/replicate) and expressed as mean ±SD. Treatment codes as mentioned in Table 2. Different lowercase alphabetic letters on each bar indicate significant difference among different treatments and different capital letter express significant difference among different sampling time (*p*<0.05).

Figure 5: The effects of different probiotic diets on lipase of *Salmo trutta caspius* intestine over the 30 and 60 days single and combined diets of acidifier and probiotic. All values were obtained from 9 individual fish (3/replicate) and expressed as mean ±SD. Treatment codes as mentioned in Table 2. Different lowercase alphabetic letters on each bar indicate significant difference among different treatments and different capital letter express significant difference among different sampling time (*p*<0.05).
Gut ALP activity was significantly lower \( (p<0.05) \) in only T3 acidifier fed groups compared to the fish fed with the control diet at day 30. The ALP activity was significantly higher \( (p<0.05) \) in treatments T5 and T7 as compared to their corresponding single acidifier groups at the same time. In addition, ALP was reduced significantly following all single acidifier group following 60 days of feeding. All combined treatment led to significant decrease in the level of this enzyme when compared to single probiotic-fed group (Fig. 6). All measured enzymes have been showed their highest activity at day 30 as compared to other sampling time as well.

![Figure 6: The effects of different probiotic diets on alkaline phosphatase of Salmo trutta caspius intestine over the 30 and 60 days single and combined diets of acidifier and probiotic.](image)

All values were obtained from 9 individual fish (3/replicate) and expressed as mean ±SD. Treatment codes as mentioned in Table 2. Different lowercase alphabetic letters on each bar indicate significant difference among different treatments and different capital letter express significant difference among different sampling time \( (p<0.05) \).

**Intestinal histomorphology**

Lower villi height in proximal area has been observed in T1 and T2 as compared with control at day 30 while all single acidifier treatments led to significant increase in this parameter at day 60. The villi height was only elevated in the proximal and distal parts of intestine following probiotic treatment at day 30 while in other areas the similar pattern has not been observed. The combined treatments mostly showed significant increase or no significant change in the height of villi when compared to single corresponding treatment (Fig. 7).
The T1 and T3 led to significant changes in the villi width in different parts of intestines when compared with the control. The probiotic did not affect the villi width in different parts of intestines when compared with the control. The combined treatment did not show any significant changes in this parameter in the proximal and middle part of intestine while some significant reduction could be observed in distal area when compared to single treatment (Fig. 8).

**Figure 7:** The effects of different probiotic diets on villi height of *Salmo trutta caspius* intestine over the 30 and 60 days single and combined diets of acidifier and probiotic.

All values were obtained from 9 individual fish (3/replicate) and expressed as mean ±SD. Treatment codes as mentioned in Table 2. Different lowercase alphabetic letters on each bar indicate significant difference among different treatments ($p<0.05$). Comparison was made only among the treatment at each specific sampling time.
Figure 8: The effects of different probiotic diets on villi width of *Salmo trutta caspius* intestine over the 30 and 60 days single and combined diets of acidifier and probiotic.

All values were obtained from 9 individual fish (3/replicate) and expressed as mean±SD. Treatment codes as mentioned in Table 2. Different lowercase alphabetic letters on each bar indicate significant difference among different treatments (*p*<0.05). Comparison was made only among the treatment at each specific sampling time.

The most changes in the case of epithelium thickness in single acidifier treatment have been observed in the proximal and middle parts of intestine following 60 days treatment with T1 and T3. Although the epithelium layer of intestine was thicker rather than control group in the distal part, there was a significant decrease and even no significant change in other parts of intestines could be observed. The probiotic feeding resulted in either significant or insignificant decrease in the epithelium thickness in the proximal and middle parts of intestine while significant increase has been observed in the distal part following the same treatment. In the proximal part of intestine, there was no significant change in epithelium thickness of this species following combined treatments as compared with corresponding single acidifier treatments. The thickness of epithelium in combined treatments was elevated in the proximal and middle parts of intestines following 60 days administration as compared with single probiotic treatment while in other parts we did not find the same pattern (Fig. 9).
Different levels of acidifier administration had not been affected the thickness of lamina propria in the proximal and middle parts of intestine following 30 days of exposure while these treatments led to increase in the thickness of muscularis in the middle and distal areas of intestine. The thickness of lamina propria and muscularis layers in different parts of intestine was mostly not affected by probiotic or acidifier feeding. The thickness of lamina propria and muscularis layers following combined exposure had not shown any significant changes in the middle part of intestine when compared to single acidifier or probiotic (Figs. 10 and 11).
Figure 10: The effects of different probiotic diets on lamina propria thickness of *Salmo trutta caspius* intestine over the 30 and 60 days single and combined diets of acidifier and probiotic. All values were obtained from 9 individual fish (3/replicate) and expressed as mean ±SD. Treatment codes as mentioned in Table 2. Different lowercase alphabetic letters on each bar indicate significant difference among different treatments (*p*<0.05). Comparison was made only among the treatment at each specific sampling time.

Figure 11: The effects of different probiotic diets on muscularis layer thickness of *Salmo trutta caspius* intestine over the 30 and 60 days single and combined diets of acidifier and probiotic. All values were obtained from 9 individual fish (3/replicate) and expressed as mean±SD. Treatment codes as mentioned in Table 2. Different lowercase alphabetic letters on each bar indicate significant difference among different treatments (*p*<0.05). Comparison was made only among the treatment at each specific sampling time.
Discussion

Effects of acidifier

In the present study, the T2 and T3 indicated significant improvements in fish growth performance following 30 days of administration. This has not been continued over the 60 days of feeding trial, in which the T1 showed better growth performance. Previous studies demonstrated that different dietary acidifiers could enhance the growth performance and the feed utilization in various aquatic species. Regarding this, Wassef et al. (2017) reported sodium diformate (3%) as growth promoter in Dicentrarchus labrax following 13 weeks and Elala and Ragaa (2015) reported that Oreochromis niloticus growth performance was elevated following 60 days commercial acidifier (i.e., Aquaform containing potassium diformate). They revealed that lower doses of acidifier, 0.1% did not act the same as higher doses (0.2 and 0.3%). Furthermore, Rutilus kutum growth performance was enhanced because of 0.25% dietary sodium propionate for 7 weeks (Hoseinifar et al., 2016). Whereas, other studies on red hybrid tilapia for a shorter period of time (2 weeks) and Pagrus major for 75 days did not show similar improvement in growth rate (Hossain et al., 2007, Ng et al., 2009). It is possible that longer feeding with higher inclusion of acidifier lessens the beneficial role of that to trigger fish growth rate, owing to internal interaction with normal physiological function of gut microbiota. Therefore, it was resulted in lower dose of acidifier manifest the signs of better function (by comparing the data obtained at day 60 vs. day 30). However, the mechanism underlying the growth promoting of acidifier did not investigated here but it previously demonstrated that these compounds can clearly reduce the intestine pH of host (Ng et al., 2009) and consequently stimulate the pepsin activity and therefore, improving the protein digestibility (Thaela et al., 1998). This apparently observed in higher PER, obtained following sodium diformate administration in the present study.

It is interesting to note that, interspecific difference among species, type of organic acids and their administrated level, and different cultural system potentially affect the growth-promoting effects of dietary acidifiers (Thaela et al., 1998). However, these criteria should be addressed in a closer look to pursue the exact of role of each in the future studies.

The inclusion of organic acids in the diets of red drum, Sciaenops ocellatus, resulted in higher activity of several digestive enzymes (Castillo et al., 2014). This was in agreement to our findings, in which the higher levels of chymotrypsin and trypsin have been observed at day 30 and the higher activity of lipase, protease and amylase could be seen at day 60 in most acidifier treatments. In this respect, increase in digestibility of proteins, lipids and amino acids in O. mykiss fed with acidifier was also reported (Morken et al., 2011). The increase in the level of these digestive enzymes activities might be due to releasing of secretin, which is, in turn, dependent on
the intestinal pH (Castillo et al., 2014). In contrast to other findings who reported either improvement of phosphorus absorption and/or higher activity of ALP, because of organic acid feeding (Vielma and Lall, 1997; Hossain et al., 2007; Castillo et al., 2014), we did not find the same increase in the level of intestinal ALP during 30 and 60 days of acidifier administration. This however, might be the results of organic acid types and dose, which was not unique among the different studies.

Another possible reason for the better growth performance of this species as a result of acidifier was related to the fact that the uptake (via passive diffusion) of dietary acidifiers could perhaps provide the required energy for renewing the intestinal epithelia (Vielma and Lall, 1997; Wassef et al., 2017) as well as higher surface area for more absorption of nutrients (Awad et al., 2008). This phenomenon, however, did not totally observe in the present study, in which the villi height was only elevated following 60 days of acidifier administration in the proximal area of fish intestine. In addition, the microvilli were wider in acidifier treatments though histological layer thickness has been reduced. These, together, could possibly increase the absorption of nutrient within the fish intestine and thereby improve the growth performance. In other domestic animals, like pigs and present broiler chickens, the positive effect of acidifier and organic acids were observed in the case of higher villi height (Jia et al., 2010; Kum et al., 2010).

Effects of probiotic
The probiotic-fed group (T4) mostly led to insignificant change in growth performance. Nevertheless, improvements of growth performance were observed in O. mykiss fed with different probiotics, including E. faecium, L. plantarum and L. casei containing diets (Merrifield et al., 2010a; Merrifield et al., 2010b; Andani et al., 2012), implying the probiotic-fed fish utilized dietary nutrients more efficiently. The improvement of feed utilization or conversion in probiotics supplemented groups could likely be owing to the increase in digestive enzymes activities, induced by probiotics (Yanbo and Zirong, 2006; Suzer et al., 2008). The increase in digestive enzymes activities and therefore, improved feed utilization through the use of probiotics has also been reported in O. mykiss as results of other bacterial strains, like L. casei and L. plantarum or even in other fish species, like Sparus aurata, fed with Lactobacillus sp. (Suzer et al., 2008; Andani et al., 2012). Obtained results suggested that higher chymotrypsin, and trypsin activities only following 30 days of administration. The ALP, protease, lipase and amylase did not show any significant changes, in which the formers might be responsible for better-feed utilization and therefore, growth performance. The higher intestine ALP activity as compared to single acidifier treatments indicates the intensity of nutrient absorption in the enterocytes of fish (Gawlicka et al., 2000), which can be responsible for more carbohydrates and lipids uptake.
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(Kalantarian et al., 2011). Furthermore, the probiotic treatment did not mostly change other histomorphological parameters, measured in the fish intestine here, similar to what found by Cerezuela et al. (2012), in which no significant changes in lamina propria thickness has been observed in S. aurata fed with B. subtilis for 4 weeks. However, our findings clearly suggest that some improvement of fish growth performance (i.e., SGR, FCR and FER) in this treatment did not dependent on the remodeling of intestine to increase the absorption surface area.

Combined treatment

To the best of our knowledge, lack of information regarding to the joint effects of acidifier and probiotic on fish health limits further discussion. However, absence of a similar pattern for all combined treatment might be related to the competition of both agents (i.e., acidifier and probiotic), occurred at the same time. Previously, it has been reported that 40 days administration with combined treatment of prebiotic and acidifier not only able to induce any improvement in the growth performance of O. mykiss but also this treatment have a significant negative effects on SGR and FCR (Tabrizi et al., 2012). Our findings indicate that parameters, measured as growth performance criteria did not change or even slightly declined as compared with their corresponding single treatment of acidifier. This suppressive effects of joint treatment might be related to the reduction occurred because of probiotic
administration. For instance, the PER has been reduced in most combined treatment as compared with their single acidifier treatment whereas there was a significant increase in PER as compared with single probiotic treatment, suggesting some antagonist activity of acidifier and probiotic. However, the mechanism supposed to be the result of this change was the lowering of the gut pH following dietary supplementation with sodium diformate. This kind of additive might have antagonist effect on the allochthonous or even autochthonous beneficial lactic acid bacteria of intestine (Liu et al., 2013). In other treated animals, it has been shown that even single prebiotic or acidifier can induce the intestinal absorption surface area but the combined treatment did not act the same (Das et al., 2012). In addition, the antagonist effect of acidifier with other dietary compounds like phytase was previously confirmed when the growth performance of *Pangasianodon Hypophthalmus* did not change significantly at higher doses (Le Thanh et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the results obtaining for the present study indicated that the single acidifier did not show a similar trend at different feeding duration. However, present study may elucidate that how acidifier can improve the *S. trutta caspius* growth performance to some extent. The addition of 1.0 g sodium diformate kg\(^{-1}\) diet in long-term can improve the fish growth rate by changing the feed utilization rate and digestive enzyme activities. The applied probiotic here could increase the growth performance of this species, likely owing to increased digestive enzyme activity. The higher growth performance observed at this treatment, cannot be accounted as changes as which has been observed in the intestine morphology. However, this conclusion cannot be generalized for other probiotics or even for higher or lower doses of that. Since no researches on the effect of acidifier on *S. trutta caspius* is available yet, our findings support the beneficial effects of this compound on this species for the first time but the effects of other organic acids should be addressed as a comparison to the present findings. Further studies should be designed to evaluate the effects of acidifier and its combination with probiotic on fish health status and its preventive effects against pathogenic bacteria. This, however, can reveal the effectiveness of this kind of diets on health management of aquatic species practice.

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