Synthesis and characterisation of flame-sprayed superparamagnetic bare and silica-coated maghemite nanoparticles

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ABSTRACT

Flame Spray Pyrolysis (FSP) was used to synthesize γ-Fe₂O₃ and SiO₂/γ-Fe₂O₃ nanoparticles of different sizes (d BET = 5-60 nm). Bare γ-Fe₂O₃ displays unique hexagonal/octagonal disc-shaped nanoparticles, while different morphology of SiO₂/γ-Fe₂O₃ nanoparticles could be produced by varying the ratio of silica and iron precursors during synthesis. The particles were predominantly superparamagnetic at room temperature. The understanding on how different nanostructures were formed was obtained through characterisation of their properties using Transmission Electron Microscopy, X-ray Diffraction, Atomic Force Microscopy, N₂ adsorption, and Superconducting Quantum Interference Device magnetometer. The study is particularly useful in order to tailor the properties of these magnetic nanoparticles during synthesis for bio-related applications.

Keywords: flame spray pyrolysis, maghemite nanoparticles, synthesis, characterisation

1 INTRODUCTION

Magnetic nanoparticles possess physiochemical, magnetic, and optical properties that are of great importance in a variety of bio-applications, including selective protein separation and digestion, High Gradient Magnetic Fishing, drug carrier, MRI contrast agent and cell-tracking, cancer therapy, and DNA analysis. The desired properties include high saturation magnetisation and coercivity, high stability, and bio-compatible surface properties [1]. Another unique property is superparamagnetism, which causes the particles to behave like magnetic entities only in the presence of external magnetic field. This particular characteristic is desirable as it helps avoid magnetically-induced self agglomeration that could alter the functionality of the system, as well as allowing the particles to be manipulated for targeted flow. It is usually observed at size below 20nm for magnetite and maghemite particles at room temperature. However, depending on the synthesis methods, particles at that size level often have poor crystallinity and magnetic strength. It is therefore important to understand how these particles are formed at the atomic level and how the formation mechanisms influence the particle properties.

In this work, a single phase γ-Fe₂O₃ and mixed phases SiO₂/γ-Fe₂O₃ nanoparticles were formed via liquid-fed Flame Spray Pyrolysis (FSP) in a one-step process. Various techniques such as Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM), X-Ray Diffraction (XRD), Atomic Force Microscopy (AFM) and Superconducting Quantum Interference Device (SQUID) magnetometer were used to characterize the physiochemical, micro-structural, and magnetic properties of these particles. The detailed study helps to understand the crystal growth mechanisms within the flame, which serves as a well-defined platform both for comparison with other synthesis techniques and for tailoring the particle properties for specific applications.

2 EXPERIMENTS

2.1 Synthesis

Iron (III) acetylacetonate (Fe(acac)₃, Aldrich, 97%) was dissolved in a xylene (Riedel-de-Haen, analytical grade) / acetonitrile (JT Baker, HPLC grade) mixture (volume ratio 63/22) to a final concentration of 0.32 M. The combustion enthalpy of this mixture used as the precursor for γ-Fe₂O₃ synthesis was -26.7 kJ / ml. Tetraethyl orthosilicate (TEOS, Aldrich, 98%) was added for the synthesis of SiO₂/γ-Fe₂O₃ according to the desired Fe:Si ratio while maintaining the Fe(acac)₃ concentration at 0.32 M. The xylene/acetonitrile ratio was adjusted to match the combustion enthalpy of Fe-only precursor. For the synthesis of γ-Fe₂O₃, the ratios of the liquid precursor feed flowrate (in ml/min) to dispersant O₂ gas flowrate (in L/min) were 1:5, 3:5, 5:5, 7:5, 10:5, and 12:3, respectively. In the synthesis of SiO₂/γ-Fe₂O₃, only the 10:5 ratio was used. The liquid precursor was introduced via a syringe pump (Inotech R233) into the pressure-assisted nozzle (1.5 bar), where atomisation occurred. The fine droplets were combusted by the surrounding methane/oxygen (1.5 L/min / 3.2 L/min) supporting flame forming a self-sustaining main core flame.
An additional 5 L/min of sheath O₂ were provided through an outermost sintered metal ring. The synthesized nanoparticles were collected on a glass fibre filter (Whatmann GF/D, 25.7 cm diameter) with the aid of a vacuum pump (Alcatel SD Series). In the latter experiments, a quartz tube was placed on the nozzle to confine the flame during the synthesis of γ-Fe₂O₃ and SiO₂/γ-Fe₂O₃ at a liquid precursor (ml/min) to dispersant O₂ (L/min) ratio of 8:5.

2.2 Characterisation

X-ray diffraction (Cu Kα radiation scanned for 2θ = 20-70° with a step size of 0.02° and scan speed of 0.6/°/min) was used to identify the phase of as-prepared powders. The crystallite size (dₓRDX) of γ-Fe₂O₃ (311) phase was calculated using the Scherrer formula. The morphologies of different samples were observed using Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM), while size distribution was statistically determined based on minimum 150 particle counts. N₂ adsorption at 77 K was used to estimate the specific surface area (SSA) according to the Brunauer-Emmett-Teller (BET) method. The magnetic properties were measured using a Quantum Design 7 Tesla MPMS SQUID magnetometer.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Crystallography, size, and morphology

The synthesised iron oxide nanoparticles were identified to be crystalline maghemite (γ-Fe₂O₃) from the X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns (Figure 1). An amorphous-like peak broadening and overlapping between (220) and (311) peaks was observed at smaller crystallite size. This was possibly due to a certain degree of crystal disorder resulting from partial random distribution of cation vacancies in the cubic spinel structure of γ-Fe₂O₃ [2]. The size of the synthesized particles increased with higher liquid precursor feed flowrate (ml/min) to dispersion O₂ (L/min) ratio. At higher ratio, the flame enthalpy rate increased. Hotter flame, higher Fe-precursor concentration, and longer residence time resulted in the increase in coalescence and sintering of particles, and thus larger particle sizes [3].

TEM images of γ-Fe₂O₃ particles (Figure 2a-g) displayed more defined edges with increasing size, evolving from near-spherical to hexagonal and octagonal platelet shapes. Further investigation by tapping-mode AFM (Figure 3) was conducted to verify the shape of the largest particles (Figure 2g). The obtained average particle thickness of 4.5 nm based on 100 particle counts was smaller than the observed diameter of 57 nm from TEM for the same sample, confirming the platelet-like shape of the particles.

Different segregation of γ-Fe₂O₃ within the silica matrix at various Fe:Si ratio is distinctively evident from the TEM images of SiO₂/γ-Fe₂O₃ (Figure 2h-j). Single γ-Fe₂O₃ phase was visibly segregated to the edge of each silica particle at Fe:Si of 1:2, whereas a well-dispersed γ-Fe₂O₃ multi-cores embedded in spherical silica particles was observed at Fe:Si of 1:5. Similar conformation was noted by Ehrman et al. [4] for particles synthesised via a vapour-fed flame technique. Unlike bare γ-Fe₂O₃ particles, the γ-Fe₂O₃ cores did not assume the platelet shape in the presence of SiO₂, indicating that SiO₂ suppressed this morphological transformation [3].

![Figure 1: X-ray diffraction patterns of γ-Fe₂O₃ sprayed at various precursor flowrate to dispersion gas ratio (Q denotes the use of quartz tube)](image-url)
nanoparticles, were formed. An amorphous SiO$_2$ hump at $2\theta = 20-40^\circ$ was visible and became more pronounced at higher Si content (spectra not shown here). The $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ core crystallite size ($d_{\text{XRD}}$) was found to decrease from 8 nm to 4 nm for Fe:Si = 1:2 to 1:5, respectively. In comparison to the obtained $d_{\text{TEM}}$ of 19 nm and 11 nm, the discrepancy implies a possible presence of alternative Fe phase or a decrease in $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ crystallinity.

Figure 2: TEM micrographs of $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ synthesised at various precursor flowrate to dispersion gas ratio, and SiO$_2$/$\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ nanoparticles at different Fe:Si ratio

Figure 3: Image of AFM showing thickness of $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ (Q-8:5, $d_{\text{TEM}}$ = 57nm)

Figure 4: Comparison of $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ particle diameter from various characterisation techniques

Table 1: Particle size distribution of $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Precursor/Dispersion gas ratio</th>
<th>1/5</th>
<th>3/5</th>
<th>5/5</th>
<th>7/5</th>
<th>10/5</th>
<th>12/3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$d_{\text{TEM}}$ (nm)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\sigma_g$</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Magnetic properties

All $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ particles were found to be predominantly superparamagnetic at room temperature, with progressively greater proportion of ferromagnetic particles as the size increased. An almost linear dependency of saturation magnetisation ($\sigma_g$) and $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ particle size (represented by $d_{\text{BET}}$) was observed (Figure 5), until the bulk $\sigma_g$ of 74 emu/g is reached for $d_{\text{BET}} > 13$nm. Considerably lower $\sigma_g$ at smaller sizes was likely due to surface-canting effect and
internal disorder of $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ crystal [6]. The relatively drastic decrease in $\sigma_c$ for 4nm particle could indicate a complete random cation vacancy distribution. An opposite trend of decreasing coercivity ($H_c$) at 5K with particle size was observed. The high coercivity values at small sizes also suggested additional anisotropies and structural disorder [6] supported by the somewhat amorphous-like XRD spectra.

![Graph](image)

Figure 5: Correlation of saturation magnetism ($\sigma_s$) and coercivity ($H_c$) with $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ particle size

A much lower overall magnetization than the bulk saturation value was measured for SiO$_2$/γ-Fe$_2$O$_3$ particles (Table 2). It is also interesting to note that the specific magnetization per unit mass of $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ core in a silica matrix is lower compared to bare $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ of similar $d_{XRD}$ size. This is attributed to the presence of diamagnetic silica matrix, which inhibited the $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ crystal growth. Inhibition of $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ crystal growth in the presence of SiO$_2$ during FSP was confirmed by the decrease in geometric standard deviation reported in a previous study [3]. Tartaj et al [7] also concluded that the magnetic properties of SiO$_2$/γ-Fe$_2$O$_3$ composite are influenced by both the magnetic unit volume and the degree of dispersion of magnetic core within the matrix, since the inter-particle interactions could cause disturbance to the moments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fe:Si</th>
<th>1:2</th>
<th>1:5</th>
<th>Q 1:5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall $\sigma_s$ (emu/g)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific $\sigma_s$ (emu/g)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Magnetic properties of SiO$_2$/γ-Fe$_2$O$_3$

4 CONCLUSIONS

One-step synthesis of $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ and SiO$_2$/γ-Fe$_2$O$_3$ nanoparticles was carried out through flame spray pyrolysis. By balancing the inherent thermodynamics with controllable spraying conditions, the size and morphology of the nanoparticles can be tailored. Detailed examination of nanoparticles properties showed unique particle morphology transformation from near-spherical to hexagonal and octagonal platelet-shaped $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ with increasing flame enthalpy rate. The decrease of $\sigma_c$ with particle size was observed, attributed to a combinatorial effect of surface-canting and internal crystal disorder. In the case of SiO$_2$/γ-Fe$_2$O$_3$, varying Fe:Si ratio resulted in distinctively different $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ core segregation inside a generally spherical silica matrix. The presence of SiO$_2$ was likely to suppress $\gamma$-Fe$_2$O$_3$ growth, subsequently leading to reduced core size variation and decreased specific magnetism.

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