Stratification of polymer–colloid mixtures via fast nonequilibrium evaporation†

Kyoungmun Lee and Siyoung Q. Choi

In drying liquid films of polymer–colloid mixtures, stratification in which polymers are placed on top of larger colloids is studied. It is often presumed that the formation of segregated polymer–colloid layers is solely due to the proportion in size at fast evaporation as in binary colloid mixtures. By comparing experiments with a theoretical model, we found that the transition in viscosity near the drying interface was another important parameter for controlling the formation of stratified layers in polymer–colloid mixtures. At high evaporation rates, increased polymer concentrations near the surface lead to a phase transition from a semidilute to concentrated regime, in which colloidal particles are kinetically arrested. Stratification only occurs if the formation of a stratified layer precedes the evolution to the concentrated regime near the drying interfaces. Otherwise, the colloids will be trapped by the polymers in the concentrated regime before forming a segregated layer. Also, no stratification is observed if the initial polymer concentration is too low to form a sufficiently high polymer concentration gradient within a short period of time. Our findings are relevant for developing solution-cast polymer composites for painting, antifouling and antireflective coatings.

1. Introduction

Solution-cast polymer composite films composed of polymer matrices containing colloidal particles have been widely studied for many applications, including paints, coatings, and cosmetics, because they provide highly tuned macroscopic properties relative to the pure polymer through a simple manufacturing process. The controlled properties of the dried films are largely dependent on the spatial distribution of the polymer and colloid, which is strongly influenced by the solvent evaporation process. In particular, stratified layers consisting of a polymer layer on a colloidal layer have exhibited highly improved antifouling performance and photoactive properties.

Several previous studies have demonstrated ways of controlling the segregated layers of polymer–colloid mixtures in an equilibrium state. However, relatively little is known about how polymer–colloid mixtures can be stratified during the simple, fast and inexpensive nonequilibrium solvent evaporation process. Although solvent casting is one of the simplest manufacturing methods, from coffee ring stains to many industrial applications, the inherent nonequilibrium nature of drying has made it difficult to clarify the underlying mechanism.

As a solvent evaporates, the spatial distribution of the solutes in liquid films is determined by two competing factors: diffusion and receding drying interfaces. Solutes tend to distribute uniformly in drying films with a diffusion constant $D$, while a nonuniform concentration gradient is developed by the downward velocity of the interface $v_{\text{ev}}$. Which of the two phenomena dominates can be quantified by the dimensionless Péclet number $Pe = v_{\text{ev}}z_0/D$, where $z_0$ is the initial film thickness. If $Pe > 1$, the solutes cannot diffuse uniformly within the time of evaporation, and they accumulate near the top of the film. On the other hand, the drying film shows almost uniform distribution if $Pe < 1$.

In binary colloid mixtures, it was recently shown that stratifications with smaller colloids placed on large colloids can be realized if $Pe$ is larger than $1$. This occurs when the concentration gradient of both the large and smaller particles increases near the liquid/air interface. Fortini et al. proposed that the inverted stratification was caused by an imbalance in the osmotic pressure between the larger and smaller colloids. Zhou et al. suggested that the stratification phenomenon could be explained quantitatively using a diffusion model, with cross-interaction between the colloids. Sear and Warren argued that diffusiophoretic motion induced by the concentration gradient of the smaller components can exclude the larger colloids from the drying interfaces.

In a way similar to binary colloid mixtures, it has been proposed that a polymer–colloid mixture can yield the same stratified layers if the $Pe$ values of both the polymer and colloid are larger than $1$. However, these results have only been
2. Results and discussion

2.1 Structure of dried films of polymer–colloid

Mixtures of an aqueous polystyrene (PS) suspension with a mean diameter $d_c = 1 \mu m$, and poly(ethylene glycol) (PEG) or poly(vinyl alcohol) (PVA) were used as a model system for stratification. The molecular weights of the polymers of PEG $M_n$ (number average molecular weight) 6000 g mol$^{-1}$, PEG $M_w$ 20 000 g mol$^{-1}$, PVA $M_n$ (weight average molecular weight) 6000 g mol$^{-1}$, and PVA $M_w$ 13 000–23 000 g mol$^{-1}$ (PVA $M_w$ 18 000) were chosen to meet the condition of radius of colloid ($R_{\text{colloid}}$) $>$ radius of polymer ($R_{\text{polymer}}$). Before drying, the film solutions contained an initial volume fraction of $\phi_{i,p} = 0.01$ or $0.04$ for the polymer and $\phi_{i,c} = 0.67 \times \phi_{i,p}$ for the colloid, respectively. The volume ratio between polymer and colloid was selected to show a clear difference of stratified layer and non-stratified layer in the final dried films. The mixture solutions were deposited on glass substrates as $z_0 = 1.25$ mm. The evaporation was performed at an ambient temperature and a relative humidity of 23%, resulting in an initial polymer Pe´clet number $Pe_i,p > 1$ (Fig. S1, ESI†). All of the experimental systems are summarized in Table 1. When the evaporation was completed, the final film morphologies were analyzed with the help of scanning electronic microscopy (SEM) and ImageJ analysis.

After complete drying, the polymers were enriched at the top of the films for PEG $M_n$ 6000 g mol$^{-1}$ ($\phi_{i,p} = 0.04$) [Fig. 1(a)] and PVA $M_n$ 6000 g mol$^{-1}$ ($\phi_{i,p} = 0.04$) [Fig. 1(c)] while the other 6 dried films shown in Fig. 1(b, d) and 2(a–d) were not segregated, but randomly distributed. Although the stratified layers in Fig. 1(a and c) also showed different degrees of stratification, there was a clear difference between the stratified layers [Fig. 1(e)] and non-stratified layers [Fig. 1(f), 2(e and f)].

2.2 Modified theoretical model of dynamic stratification

As the solvent evaporated at $Pe > 1$ for both polymer and colloid, the descending air/water interface $z_{\text{interface}}$ compressed the polymer and colloid, and they accumulated near the drying interface. From previous studies,$^{24,36}$ the transition of the polymer concentration in a drying film $\phi_p(z,t)$ can be written as

$$\phi_p(z,t) \approx \phi_{i,p} \left( 1 + Pe_p \exp \left( -\frac{|z - z_{\text{interface}}|}{D_p/v_{ev}} \right) \right),$$

(1)

$$z_{\text{interface}}(t^*) = z_0 - v_{ev} t^* = (1 - t^*) z_0$$

(2)

if the Péclet number of the polymer $Pe_p \gg 1$, where $t^* = tv_{ev}/z_0(0 \leq t^* \leq 1)$ is the dimensionless time. Here, $Pe_p$ and the diffusion coefficient of the polymer $D_p$ can be expressed as a function of drying time when $Pe_p$ and $D_p$ vary slowly. Since the

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Table 1 Various polymer–colloid systems tested

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colloid</th>
<th>Polymer</th>
<th>$R_g^a$ (nm)</th>
<th>$\phi_{i,p}$</th>
<th>$Pe_i$</th>
<th>Stratification</th>
<th>$t_c^<em>/t_s^</em>$</th>
<th>$t_s^*$</th>
<th>$t_c^*$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PS ($r = 500$ nm)</td>
<td>PEG $M_n$ 6000</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1.012</td>
<td>0.928</td>
<td>0.917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PEG $M_n$ 20 000</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1.153</td>
<td>0.670</td>
<td>0.581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PVA $M_w$ 6000</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>0.818</td>
<td>0.243</td>
<td>0.297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PVA $M_w$ 18 000</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>0.911</td>
<td>0.400</td>
<td>0.439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>0.994</td>
<td>0.873</td>
<td>0.878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>0.882</td>
<td>0.707</td>
<td>0.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>0.466</td>
<td>0.118</td>
<td>0.253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Colloid was fixed as PS to exclude gravitational effect during drying ($\rho_{PS} \approx \rho_{water}$). A total of 8 systems were experimentally studied under $\phi_{i,p} : \phi_{i,c} = 3 : 2$, $z_0 = 1.25$ mm and 23% relative humidity conditions. See ESI.
viscosity growth derived from the increased polymer concentration can be accompanied by the kinetic arrest of the colloidal particles, $t_{c}^{*}$ can be determined as the time when the volume fraction of polymer reaches the concentrated regime $\phi_{p} = \phi_{p}^{**}$. We consider that the colloidal particles at the drying interface ($z = z_{\text{interface}}$) are kinetically arrested when the polymer fraction reaches $\phi_{p}^{**}$ at $z = z_{\text{interface}} - r_{\text{colloid}}$

\[
\phi_{p}(z_{\text{interface}} - r_{\text{colloid}}) = \phi_{p}^{**}.
\]  

Meanwhile, increasing the concentration gradients of the small polymers can also create the diffusiophoretic drift velocity of larger colloids $v_{\text{diffusiophoresis}}^{37,38}$

\[
v_{\text{diffusiophoresis}} = \frac{9}{4}D_{p}\nabla \phi_{p}
\]
under the condition of $R_{\text{colloid}} \gg R_{\text{polymer}}$. Since there is an assumption that $\tau^* \text{Pe}_p$ should be large enough in eqn (1), the polymer concentration gradient at the interface $\nabla \phi_p = -v_{\text{ev}} \phi_{\text{interface}}/D_{\text{p}}$ is applied from the simple 1D diffusion model. This gives the diffusiophoretic velocity of the interfacial colloids with the combination of $\phi_{\text{interface}} = \phi_{p,1}(1 + \text{Pe}_p \tau^*)$ originating from eqn (1) at $z = z_{\text{interface}}$

$$v_{\text{colloid,interface}} \approx \frac{9}{4} \text{Pe}_p \phi_{p,1} (1 + \text{Pe}_p \tau^*).$$

(5)

The time at which the colloid begins to stratify during the evaporation process ($t^*_s$) is determined by comparing $v_{\text{colloid,interface}}$ and $v_{\text{ev}}$. Near the time when evaporation begins, the gradient of polymer concentration is not too large and $v_{\text{colloid,interface}}$ does not overcome $v_{\text{ev}}$. In this state, both the polymer and colloid simply accumulate at the drying interface. If the concentration gradient of the polymer is large enough for the formation of a higher colloidal diffusiophoretic velocity, however, $v_{\text{colloid,interface}}$ is larger than $v_{\text{ev}}$ and it starts to create stratified layers in the drying film. We consider the time $t^*_s$ when $v_{\text{colloid,interface}} = v_{\text{ev}}$, resulting in

$$v_{\text{colloid,interface}}(t^*_s) = v_{\text{ev}}.$$  

(6)

The final morphologies of the drying polymer–colloid mixtures are determined by the two competing time scales $t^*_s$ and $t^*_c$. There are three regimes for the predictive analysis of the stratification of polymer–colloid mixtures. The first is $t^*_c/t^*_s > 1$, where the downward motion of the colloidal particles appears before $\phi_p z_{\text{interface}} \approx r_{\text{colloid}} t^*_s = \phi_p^{**}$. The second is $t^*_c/t^*_s < 1$, where the polymer volume fraction reaches $\phi_p^{**}$ before the evolution of $v_{\text{colloid,interface}}(t^*_s) = v_{\text{ev}}$. The third is $t^*_c \approx 1$, where $t^*_c$ reaches the time at which evaporation ends ($t^* = 1$), even though $t^*_s$ precedes $t^*_c$.

2.3 Comparison of experimental results and the theoretical model

As described above, the prediction of polymer–colloid stratification can be estimated using the competition between $t^*_s$ and $t^*_c$. For the time dependent volume fraction of the polymer in the drying films, evaporation rates were determined by measuring mass reduction (Fig. S2, ESI†). To calculate the time dependent (or concentration dependent) polymer diffusion coefficient, the average volume fractions of polymer in the drying film were used to estimate $D_p$ (see Fig. S4, ESI†). Here, the self-diffusion coefficient of the polymer is used rather than the collective diffusion coefficient due to the slow polymer diffusion caused by the presence of colloids as the concentration increases (Fig. S3, ESI†). The transition of the volume fraction of semidilute entangled $\phi_c$ to the concentrated regime $\phi^{**}$ in good solvent was determined by the specific viscosity $\eta_{sp}$ slope transition $^{29,30,46}$ shown in Fig. 3. From the slope transition of semidilute unentangled ($\eta_{sp} \sim \phi_p^{1.3}$) to semidilute entangled ($\eta_{sp} \sim \phi_p^{0.9}$), $\phi_c$ of the polymer in good solvent was measured. Similarly, $\phi^{**}$ can be estimated using the slope transition point between the semidilute entangled regime ($\eta_{sp} \sim \phi_p^{0.9}$) and the concentrated regime ($\eta_{sp} \sim \phi_p^{4.0}$), where $x > 3.9$.

In drying films of polymer–colloid mixtures, the final film morphology can be predicted using the three regimes in the ($t^*_c, t^*_s$) plane. Regime 1 with $t^*_c/t^*_s > 1$ indicates clearly stratified layers in the dried films. Regime 2 represents nonsegregated layers, because $t^*_c$ appears before $t^*_s$. Regime 3 also shows nonstratified layers in the final morphology of the complete dried polymer–colloid mixtures, since $t^*_c$ appears very close to 1 ($t^*_c \approx 1$).

The theoretical predictions based on eqn (3) and (6) and the experimental stratification results from 8 different systems are presented in Fig. 4. There is good agreement between the model prediction and experimental results.

However, the model prediction does not show excellent agreement with experimental studies, especially for the PVA $M_w$ 6000 ($\phi_{p,i} = 0.04$) system, which appears to be closest to $t^*_c/t^*_s = 1$. This might be due to the air/water interfacial activity of PVA $M_w$ 6000 (Fig. S6, ESI†), which can lead to a smaller $t^*_c$ under real drying conditions, but it cannot bring $t^*_c$ forward since $t^*_c$ is related to $z = z_{\text{interface}} - r_{\text{colloid}}$, not $z = z_{\text{interface}}$. To reduce the interfacial activity effect of PVA $M_w$ 6000 ($\phi_{p,i} = 0.04$) on stratification, we moved the point to deviate from $t^*_c/t^*_s = 1$ in our theoretical model by changing $v_{\text{ev}}$. As it deviates from $t^*_c/t^*_s = 1$, the theoretical prediction becomes consistent with the experimental result for PVA $M_w$ 6000 ($\phi_{p,i} = 0.04$) (Fig. 5).

2.4 Conditions for polymer–colloid stratification

To analyze the general conditions for polymer–colloid stratification, we represented $t^*_c$ and $t^*_s$ in another experimental parameter. As mentioned above, the polymer-on-top structure can be formed when the two conditions, both $t^*_c < 1$ and $t^*_c/t^*_s > 1$, are satisfied. From eqn (3) and (6), $t^*_c$ and $t^*_s$ are (see ESI†)

$$\phi^{**} - 1 \approx \frac{\eta_{sp}}{\text{Pe}_p (t^*_c)}.$$  

(7)
The polymer solutions are in the semi-dilute entangled regime for the stratification to happen, $t_*/t_s^* > 1$. Theoretical predictions of 8 different systems are denoted as symbols in the diagram, and the experimental results are represented by colors. Blue indicates regime 1 ($t_*/t_s^* > 1$) where a stratified layer is expected and red shows regime 2 ($t_*/t_s^* < 1$). Orange designates regime 3 ($t_*/t_s^* ≈ 1$) (Fig. S5, ESI†). The green indicates the intermediate state where a stratified layer is observed in experiments while it belongs to regime 2 in model prediction. All data points show overall agreement with one exception, the filled green triangle, which also appears close to $t_*/t_s^* = 1$.

From eqn (S14) of ESI† where $t_s^*$ is the dimensionless time when $\eta = \eta_c$ (viscosity when $\phi_\text{p} = \phi_c$) from eqn (S10) of the ESI†. If we neglect the last term in eqn (12),

$$t_*/t_s^* \approx \left(\frac{\phi^{**} - 1}{\phi_{\text{p}}^{**} - 1}\right) \frac{\eta(\tau^{**})}{\phi_{\text{p}}^{**} - 1}.$$  

To satisfy the condition of $t_*/t_s^* > 1$ for polymer–colloid mixtures, $t_*/t_s^* = 1$ can be expressed as

$$4 \frac{1}{\phi_{\text{p}}^{**} - 1} t_s^* \approx \frac{4 \phi_{\text{p}}^{**} - 1}{9 \phi_{\text{p}}^{**} - 1} \eta(t_s^*) > 1,$$  

where $\phi_{\text{p}}^{**}$ and $\phi_{\text{p}}^{**}$ are the Pe of the polymer at dimensionless time $t^{**} = t_s^*$ and $t^{**} = t_s^*$, respectively. The first condition for the stratification to happen, $t_s^* < 1$, is

$$\phi_{\text{p}}^{**} - 1 \eta(t_s^*) > 1.$$

The polymer solutions are in the semi-dilute entangled regime close to $\phi_\text{p} = \phi^{**}$ when $t^{**} = t_s^*$ and $t^{**} = t_s^*$, $\eta(t^{**})$ is

$$\eta(t^{**}) = \left(\frac{1 - t_s^*}{1 - r}\right)^{3\eta_c}(\eta_c - \eta_s) + \eta_s$$

where $\eta_c$ and $\eta_s$ are the viscosities when $\phi_\text{p} = \phi_c$ and $\phi_\text{p} = \phi_s$, respectively. The dotted line corresponds to $t_*/t_s^* = 1$ in the theoretical model only by increasing $v_{\text{ev}}$. As it stays away from $t_*/t_s^* = 1$, the intermediate stratified morphology where a stratified layer is observed in experiments while it belongs to regime 2 in the model prediction becomes consistent with the model prediction.
stratification,

\[ \left( \frac{\phi^{**}}{\phi_{iP}} - 1 \right) > 1, \]  \hspace{1cm} (15)

\[ \frac{4}{9} \phi_{iP} < \phi^{**} < \frac{4}{9}, \]  \hspace{1cm} (16)

\[ \phi^{**} > \frac{4}{9}. \]  \hspace{1cm} (17)

It is interesting to note that the predicted stratification of the polymer–colloid mixtures does not depend on the drying rate \( v_{ev} \), or \( Pe \), as long as \( Pe > 1 \). This tendency can also be seen in Fig. 6, which shows the theoretical predictions of the 8 systems above, with \( v_{ev} \) values changed. Ignoring the data points of \( Pe_{i,P} \leq 5 \), which fail to follow the aforementioned assumption that \( Pe > 1 \), all the other points belong to the same regime once the polymer type and initial volume fraction are determined. This is quite plausible since the increase in polymer concentration near the drying interface accelerates both \( t_{c}^{*} \) and \( t_{s}^{*} \) in a similar order. Thus, it might be hard to create stratified layers in polymer–colloid mixtures only by varying the evaporation rate \( v_{ev} \), or \( Pe \). Altering other properties that can increase \( t_{c}^{*}/t_{s}^{*} \) to larger than 1, such as utilizing the interfacial activity of the polymer [PVA \( M_w 6000, \phi_{i,P} 0.04 \) in Fig. 1(c) and 4] or the gravitational velocity from the density difference shown in Fig. S7 (ESI†), could be another solution to achieve stratified layers in polymer–colloid mixtures.

Our experimental and modelling studies on polymer–colloid stratification show different results to the previous simulation study by Cheng and Grest,\(^{42}\) which demonstrated the kinetic arresting of nanoparticles in the polymer-enriched surface layer with strong polymer–nanoparticle interactions. The difference might come from the size ratio of polymer and colloid. In our studies, we chose systems having size ratios of \( R_{colloid}/R_{polymer} \) of 150 and 70. Stratification can occur in the systems having a size ratio of 150 while it cannot occur in the systems having a size ratio of 70 since \( t_{c}^{*}/t_{s}^{*} \) becomes smaller than 1 as the size ratio decreases. This implies that a non-stratified layer would be observed if the size ratio decreased to 5 as in the work of Cheng and Grest.\(^{42}\)

In addition, in several simulation studies,\(^{43,44}\) it was shown that the stratification phenomena could be controlled by changing...
the drying rate $v_{ev}$, or Pe, in binary colloidal mixtures. This discrepancy may come from the differences in fundamental characteristics between polymer and colloid. However, all of the stratification results in polymer–colloid mixtures that can be predicted by our modified model shown in Fig. 6 were not confirmed experimentally. Our modified model is very simple with several assumptions. These assumptions and simplicity might be another cause of the inconsistent results between binary colloids and polymer–colloid mixtures in controlling stratification by changing the drying rate $v_{ev}$ or Pe. There might be some missing points in our simplified model, which could be clarified by further studies.

### 3. Conclusion

In summary, we demonstrated that dynamic stratification of polymer–colloid mixtures can be achieved by controlling viscosity near the drying interface, which results from increasing polymer concentration. When the polymer–colloid solution evaporates, the polymer starts to increase in solution viscosity near the air/water interface within a relatively very short time, unlike colloidal suspensions. Since the transition in viscosity due to the polymer can cause the kinetic arrest of colloidal particles, which hinders the diffusiophoretic downward motion of colloids, stratified layers are only observed if the formation of a stratified layer precedes the transition in viscosity near the liquid/air interfaces.

Our model calculations for $t_c^*$ and $t_s^*$, inspired by a previous study, show that the segregation of polymer–colloid mixtures can only occur under the condition of $t_s^*/t_c^* > 1$, unless the solute fraction of the polymer is sufficiently low. The requirement for stratification, $t_s^*/t_c^* > 1$, implies that the stratification of polymer–colloid mixtures may not rely on the drying rate if Pe $\gg 1$, since both $t_c^*$ and $t_s^*$ vary in a similar order as $v_{ev}$ changes. Our model calculations are further supported by the consistency between the model prediction and final experimental film morphologies.

In other words, for the stratified layers in polymer–colloid mixtures, a polymer volume fraction that is not too low is necessary. If the polymer volume fraction is too low, it takes a fairly long time to create a sufficiently high concentration gradient of polymer that can induce diffusiophoretic motion of colloidal particles in the drying solution. In addition, both Pe and $\phi^{**}$ should be sufficiently high to achieve a stratified layer in drying polymer–colloid mixtures. For a large Pe, the evaporation rate should be fast or the polymer size should be large at the constant initial film height. However, since a larger molecular weight of polymer leads to a lower $\phi^{**}$, it is better to use a lower molecular weight of polymer and fast evaporation rate to satisfy larger values in both Pe and $\phi^{**}$, which are the prerequisites for stratification in polymer–colloid mixtures.

In more general terms, the consistent results of the experiments and model prediction may shed light on methods of controlling surface enrichment in general solution–cast polymer composites. The ability to predict morphology in a simple nonequilibrium solvent evaporation process is highly desirable for preparing materials whose surface properties are crucial to performance, such as antireflective or organic photovoltaics. Our insights on how polymer concentration affects colloidal dynamics and stratification can be exploited to control segregated layers in solution-cast polymer–colloid mixtures.

### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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### Notes and references

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