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## Magnetically controllable sponges for crude oil, mercury, and arsenic removal

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In this work, we present three different pathways to render commercial melamine sponges, both magnetic and hydrophobic, thereby offering them the capacity to effectively and selectively remove crude oil and heavy metals from aqueous environments. The magnetic properties were endowed by the deposition of as-synthesized iron oxide nanoparticles, functionalized with hydrophobic oleic acid and oleylamine ligands, via a large-scale synthesis. Aiming for an even higher hydrophobicity, terminal vinyl groups were attached to the pristine and modified sponges through a sol-gel hydrolysis of VTES@SiO<sub>2</sub>. The magnetic materials were thoroughly characterized and evaluated for their efficiency in water purification applications, regarding the adsorption of crude oil and heavy metal pollutants. Each pathway of preparation was effectively practical for a different application. The initial coating of the sponges with a hydrophobic layer (Sp-h-m) enhanced the adsorption and the retention of iron oxide nanoparticles, resulting in materials with a maximum magnetization of  $25 \times 10^{-3}$  emu. This modified sponge also exhibited the highest removal of metal ions (As<sup>3+</sup> and Hg<sup>2+</sup>) from aqueous solutions within 60 minutes, and its extraction efficiency was evaluated in systems with single metal ions (250 ppm) and in the removal of metal ions (As<sup>3+</sup> and Hg<sup>2+</sup>) from aqueous solutions within the same time frame. It was evaluated for its extraction efficiency in systems with single metal ions (250 ppm) and under competitive conditions (500 ppm of toxic metals in total). The coating with a hydrophobic layer, following the deposition of the magnetic nanoparticles (Sp-m-h), led to further improvement of the sponge's hydrophobicity (from 129° to 140° water contact angle; WCA), excellent selectivity to crude oil, and water repellency. The magnetically modified sponges exhibited significant initial adsorption capacities (60–100 g g<sup>-1</sup>) and average adsorption capacities (35–65 g g<sup>-1</sup>) over 15 cycles. The high selectivity, adsorption/desorption efficiency (up to 99.8%), their adsorption capacity for As and Hg metal ions and their responses to external magnetic fields confirmed the suitability of the developed magnetic sponges for water purification systems. The versatility of the proposed modification route allows the preparation and optimization of specific magnetic sponges for targeted applications.

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### Environmental significance

Melamine sponge is an excellent absorbing material, non-toxic and low cost, with chemical and mechanical stability. Its 3D porous structure possesses functional groups, allowing its effective modification with other nanomaterials to obtain targeted properties, such as magnetic response and hydrophobicity. We propose versatile routes for the modification of the sponge, aiming to develop composite materials that deal with the pollutants of oil and heavy metal ions in aqueous environments. The modifiers, based on magnetic iron oxide and silica nanoparticles, are not only environmentally friendly by composition, without toxic halogen components, but they are also attached to the sponges' matrix, thus avoiding any secondary pollution. Through remote navigation, the magnetic hydrophobic modified sponges offer safe decontamination of water under extreme or hazardous conditions.

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removal of hazardous metal ions ( $\text{Cu}^{2+}$ ) from wastewater.<sup>6</sup> The PU@rGO sponge exhibited a  $\sim 100\%$  removal within 2 h at low  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  concentrations (6 ppm). Most importantly, magnetic nanoparticles, when dispersed in water, can effectively remove  $\text{Pb}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Cr}^{6+}$  through electrostatic mechanisms, as reported by Wang *et al.*<sup>38</sup>

In the present work, a low-cost, commercially available melamine sponge was used for the preparation of ecologically friendly magnetic hydrophobic adsorbers for the removal of crude oil and heavy metal ions from water. A thermolytic one-step reaction was employed for the synthesis of hydrophobic iron oxide nanoparticles in organic solvents before the main dip-coating modification procedure of the sponges in the stable colloidal suspension. Aiming for a greater water repellency and a high adsorption efficiency, an additional sol-gel silanization with hydrophobic vinyl ligands was applied before and after the deposition of the magnetic nanoparticles, thus altering the functional terminations on the sponge's surface. The prepared magnetic-hydrophobic melamine sponges were characterized and evaluated for both crude oil and heavy metal ion ( $\text{Hg}^{2+}$ ,  $\text{As}^{3+}$ ) removal from water. The influence of the attached magnetic ( $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ ) and hydrophobic (VTES@ $\text{SiO}_2$ ) nanoparticles and their synergetic effects as well as the sequence of the modification processes of the modified sponges were evaluated on the crude oil and metal selectivity.

## 2. Experimental section

### 2.1. Materials

The commercial Wevora WR-009 melamine sponge was employed as a substrate. Tetraethylorthosilicate (98%,  $\text{Si}(\text{OC}_2\text{H}_5)_4$ , TEOS) was purchased from Arcos and absolute ethanol (99.8%) from Thermo Fisher. Ammonia solution (25%,  $\text{NH}_4\text{-OH}$ ) and *n*-hexane (99%) were purchased from Carlo Erba, while triethoxyvinylsilane (97%,  $\text{C}_8\text{H}_{18}\text{O}_3\text{Si}$ , VTES) and oleic acid (90%,  $\text{C}_{18}\text{H}_{34}\text{O}_2$ , OA) were from Thermo Scientific. Iron(III) acetylacetonate (70%,  $\text{Fe}(\text{C}_5\text{H}_7\text{O}_2)_3$ ), oleylamine (70%,  $\text{C}_{18}\text{H}_{35}\text{NH}_2$ , OLE), arsenic(III) chloride (99.99%,  $\text{AsCl}_3$ ), mercury(II) chloride ( $\geq 99.5\%$ ,  $\text{HgCl}_2$ ), mercury standard for AAS ( $1 \text{ g L}^{-1}$  Hg in nitric acid), and arsenic standard for AAS ( $1 \text{ g L}^{-1}$  As in nitric acid) were acquired from Sigma Aldrich.

### 2.2. Synthesis of iron oxide nanoparticles (sample: NPs)

The nanoparticles were synthesized following a slightly modified, previously reported work.<sup>39</sup> In a typical experiment, 4 g  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  in acetylacetonate salt form was dissolved in a mixture of 19 mL oleylamine and 1 mL oleic acid. Thermolytic synthesis was performed. The mixture was stirred under reflux and the temperature was raised to 250 °C. The reaction proceeded for 2 h and the solution was cooled to room temperature. Afterwards, 50 mL of ethanol was added to the iron oxide nanoparticles solution to precipitate the formed nanoparticles, which were effectively collected through a magnetic separation procedure. The suspension was disposed of and the process was repeated

three times to purify the iron oxide nanoparticles from any remaining oleylamine on the nanoparticles' surface. The large-scale synthesis was accomplished, and 1 g organophilic iron oxide nanoparticles were dispersed and stored in hexane. The final concentration of the hexane solution was set at  $10 \text{ mg mL}^{-1}$ .

### 2.3. Preparation of magnetic sponges (sample: Sp-m)

The melamine sponge was cut into pieces with dimensions of  $2 \text{ cm} \times 2 \text{ cm} \times 0.5 \text{ cm}$ , and  $10 \text{ mg mL}^{-1}$  iron oxide NP hexane solution was used for its immersion. They were submitted to a multiple compression/decompression procedure that was manually applied to ensure the infusion of the nanoparticles into the pores of the sponge. Then, the sponges were dried at 60 °C in an oven for 24 h to evaporate any remaining solvent and further stabilize the iron oxide nanoparticles on the sponge. This type of magnetic sponge is denoted as Sp-m.

### 2.4. Preparation of magnetic and hydrophobic sponges (sample: Sp-h-m)

The melamine sponges were cut into pieces with dimensions of  $2 \text{ cm} \times 2 \text{ cm} \times 0.5 \text{ cm}$  for this preparation procedure as well. A sol-gel process was selected for the synthesis of silica nanoparticles adsorbed on the skeleton of the melamine sponges. A similar procedure to that of Gao *et al.*<sup>11</sup> was followed: 4 mL of TEOS was added to 40 mL of absolute ethanol under stirring under ambient conditions. Then, 1.6 mL  $\text{NH}_4\text{OH}$  was added, and the solution was kept under stirring for 48 h under ambient conditions for the successive hydrolysis and the formation of  $\text{SiO}_2$  nanoparticles. Subsequently, the pristine sponges were impregnated with the mixture for 6 h. After the first modification step, the  $\text{SiO}_2$  sponges were rinsed with ethanol to remove excess silica nanoparticles, and they were then introduced into a solution containing the silane coupling hydrophobic agent. The latter consisted of 40 mL of absolute ethanol with 4 mL of VTES and 1.6 mL of ammonia solution. The sponges remained under stirring for 24 h. After their removal, the sponges were rinsed with ethanol and air-dried at room temperature. They were then further submitted to the same process as the Sp-m sample, including immersion and compression/decompression cycles in the iron oxide nanoparticles' solution—the procedure ended by drying the samples at 60 °C in an oven for 24 h. The new composite sponge is denoted as Sp-h-m.

### 2.5. Preparation of superhydrophobic and magnetic sponges (sample: Sp-m-h)

The magnetic sponges, sample Sp-m, were also subjected to the silanization process with VTES for the synthesis of superhydrophobic magnetic sponges. Namely, the Sp-m sponges were immersed for 6 h in the TEOS/ $\text{NH}_4\text{OH}$ /ethanol solution, which had been previously hydrolyzed for 48 h. They were rinsed with ethanol before their transfer in the VTES/ $\text{NH}_4\text{OH}$ /ethanol solution, where they remained under



stirring for 24 h. The final sponges, denoted as Sp-m-h, were rinsed with ethanol and dried at room temperature.

## 2.6. Evaluation of crude oil removal from water

The performance of pristine and modified sponges in removing crude oil from aqueous environments was evaluated using sponge pieces with dimensions of 1 cm × 1 cm × 0.5 cm. Their oil selectivity, adsorption capacity, and reusability were assessed in water/oil systems with different amounts of oil. Specifically, for the selectivity evaluation, 60 g of water and 0.5 g of crude oil were placed in plastic containers where oil spots were formed on the water surface due to their immiscibility. The sponges were added to the oil/water system, which was stirred at 300 rpm for 60 min. Then, the sponges were removed from the containers, pressed to release the adsorbed quantity and returned to the oil/water systems. This procedure was repeated 6 times. For each cycle, the weight of the sponges was recorded before and after the adsorption.

For the assessment of adsorption capacity and reusability, oil-rich systems composed of 60 g of water and 10 g of crude oil were prepared. In this case, a thick oil layer completely covering the water surface was formed. The sponges were added to the systems and remained under stirring for 30 min. Similarly, the sponges were removed, pressed to release the adsorbed oil and returned to the system. The sorption-desorption procedure was performed 15 times. For each cycle, the weight of the sponges before the adsorption (pressed) and after the adsorption (with the adsorbed oil) was recorded. The values were used to calculate the adsorption capacity (AC) using eqn (1) and (2):

$$AC_{m/m} = \frac{m_a - m_b}{m_b}, [\text{g g}^{-1}] \quad (1)$$

$$AC_{m/v} = \frac{m_a - m_b}{V_s}, [\text{g cm}^{-3}] \quad (2)$$

where  $m_b$  is the mass of the sponge before adsorption (pressed),  $m_a$  is the mass of the sponge after adsorption (with the adsorbed oil) and  $V_s$  is the volume of the sponge (0.5 cm<sup>3</sup>).

## 2.7. Evaluation of heavy metal ion removal from water

Furthermore, both pristine and modified sponges were evaluated regarding their ability to remove heavy metal ions (*i.e.* Hg<sup>2+</sup> and As<sup>3+</sup>) from single metal ion aqueous solutions under dynamic conditions. The dynamic adsorption experiments were carried out using an experimental set-up of three small-scale columns, using 5 mL PVC syringes, filled with the tested sponges. The sponges were arranged in a particular way to obtain a uniform bed height. Three columns were prepared for each sample to examine the reproducibility of the experimental results. They were adjusted to three-channel micro-flow variable-speed peristaltic pumps (BQ80S, LeadFluid Co. Ltd) *via* silicon pipes, enabling the simultaneous upward inlet of the solutions into 3 columns. The columns were washed with double deionized water prior to adsorption experiments with an upward flow equal to 0.07 mL min<sup>-1</sup> (0.5 rpm) for 24 h to

remove any soluble salts and stabilize the bed porosity. Afterwards, the adsorption efficiency of the sponges regarding the Hg<sup>2+</sup> and As<sup>3+</sup> was evaluated using an initial metal ion concentration equal to 250 mg L<sup>-1</sup> and an upward flow mode of the inlet solution with a rate equal to 0.35 mL min<sup>-1</sup>. To assess the selectivity between the two heavy metals, an experiment with both arsenic and mercury cations at a concentration of 250 mg L<sup>-1</sup> each was performed. The examined flow rate was selected based on the size of the columns, the permeability of the beds and laboratory trials. The experiments were conducted at ambient temperature and the effluents were collected from the top of the columns. The collected effluents were stored at 4 °C prior to analysis *via* F-AAS, using an external calibration method on a PerkinElmer PinAAcle 500 series flame atomic absorption spectrometer. The procedure followed is given in detail in the subsection of the heavy metal ions' evaluation.

## 3. Characterization techniques

The chemical composition was evaluated through FTIR spectra, which were recorded on a Thermo Nicolet iS50 instrument in attenuated total reflection mode from 400 cm<sup>-1</sup> to 4000 cm<sup>-1</sup>. The crystalline structure was analyzed using X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns from 2° to 80° (2θ), which were obtained with a Smart Lab Rigaku diffractometer (Cu Kα radiation). The surface morphologies were analyzed with scanning electron microscopy (SEM) using a JEOL 7401f field emission SEM and the samples were sputter-coated beforehand with Au. For the size, shape and distribution of the iron oxide nanoparticles, an FEI Talos F200i field-emission (scanning) transmission electron microscope (Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) was used and the nanoparticles were drop casted from hexane solution on copper grids for the analysis. The TEM was operated at 200 kV and equipped with a windowless energy-dispersive spectroscopy microanalyzer (6T/100 Bruker, Hamburg, Germany). Mössbauer spectra were collected using a conventional transmission spectrometer with a <sup>57</sup>Co(Rh) source moving with constant acceleration at RT. Isomer shifts are given with respect to metallic iron at RT. The spectra were least-squares fitted using the IMSG program.<sup>40</sup> The magnetization curves were recorded on a DXV-220 vibrating sample magnetometer (VSM) with the external magnetic field varying from -10 to 10 kOe. The surface wettability was evaluated through an Ossila contact angle goniometer.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Iron oxide nanoparticles and magnetically modified sponges

Nanophase magnetic iron oxide nanoparticles were synthesized and coated under a thermolytic reaction in the presence of OA and OLE as ligands. Afterwards, they were incorporated into either pristine or modified melamine sponges, according to the procedure described in detail in the Experimental section and presented in Scheme 1.





**Scheme 1** Illustration of (I) the sol-gel process for the synthesis of hydrophobic coating and (II) the functionalized (the representations of the ligands with curved lines) magnetic nanoparticles (black spheres) in either the pristine sponge or the organophilic sponges.

The OA and OLE ligands employed in this work are widely used for the synthesis of colloidal nanoparticles.<sup>41</sup> Oleylamine is used as a high-boiling-point solvent, thermolytic, and capping agent,<sup>39</sup> while the addition of oleic acid provides higher stability to the final nanoparticles, specifically for non-polar solvents. The organic layer encapsulating the nanoparticles prevents their aggregation and offers them solubility in organic solvents through the growth of hydrophobic interactions between the aliphatic chains of OA and OLE. The magnetic behavior of the organophilic nanoparticles' dispersion was examined using a permanent magnet, as shown in Fig. S1, where their ferrofluid behavior is presented, confirming the successful synthesis.

The crystalline nature of the as-synthesized nanoparticles was evaluated by XRD analysis. This technique cannot distinguish between the oxide types of nanoparticles, specifically the formation of either magnetite (Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>) or maghemite ( $\gamma$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>), as both have a cubic spinel structure. In Fig. 1a, we present the XRD patterns of the nanoparticles in comparison with the diffraction peaks of magnetite (JCPDS: 96-900-5839) and maghemite (JCPDS: 96-900-6317). The diffractogram reveals the reflections at 30.23° (202), 35.57° (311), 43.25° (400), 54.02° (422), 57.2° (511), and 62.93° (440). From the most intense reflection, the average crystallite size of the surface-modified nanoparticles was calculated using an XRD analysis software according to the Scherrer equation:  $D = K\lambda/(\beta \cos \theta)$ , where  $D$  is the crystallite size,  $K$  is the Scherrer constant,  $\beta$  is the full-width at half-maximum (FWHM), and  $\theta$  is the Bragg diffraction angle.<sup>42</sup> The calculated average crystallite

size, as determined by the equation, is  $\sim 8$  nm for the iron oxide nanoparticles. In Fig. 1b, TEM images at a 100 nm and 50 nm scale present the various geometries of the synthesized nanoparticles. Their size fluctuates from 6 nm to 17 nm and a representative size distribution diagram can be seen in Fig. S2. The synthesis and the *in situ* functionalization of the iron oxide nanoparticles did not cause any aggregation in the suspension. Their shape is polyhedral, and it is a natural evolution of their nucleation and growth under the synthetic conditions used.<sup>43</sup>

It is well known that the ratio of Fe<sup>2+</sup> and Fe<sup>3+</sup> cations during the synthesis can influence the ratio of magnetite and maghemite phases in iron oxide nanoparticles.<sup>44,45</sup> Mössbauer spectroscopy is a powerful tool for identifying the phase composition in as-synthesized nanoparticles. As magnetite is easily oxidized to maghemite with time, directly after their synthesis the nanoparticle solution was frozen to 125 K for the measurement. Thus, we expect minimal oxidation. The experimental spectrum along with theoretical simulations are plotted and presented in Fig. 1c. The sample can be fitted using three well-defined and one broadened sextet (Table 1). The spectrum, obtained at 125 K, has a characteristic asymmetry associated with magnetite, allowing the sextets to be assigned to magnetite A (one sextet) and B (three sextets) sites by their distinctive isomer shift values. The subspectral areas of the sextets yield an A:B area ratio of 1:1.85. This differs but only slightly from that expected from well-crystallised stoichiometric magnetite, 1:2. This observation combined with the broad range of the three subspectra associated with the B site





**Fig. 1** (a) The XRD pattern, (b) TEM images, and (c) the Mössbauer spectrum of the iron oxide NPs (non-stoichiometric magnetite), (d) the FT-IR spectra of all the evaluated materials (non-stoichiometric magnetite NPs and the modified sponges), and (e) the XRD patterns of the three modified sponges.

indicates that the sample is composed of non-stoichiometric magnetite.

Regarding the chemical composition of the capped magnetic nanoparticles, FTIR analysis is provided in Fig. 1d. The intense vibrations at the high frequencies of  $2956\text{ cm}^{-1}$

are assigned to the C–H mode, and those at  $2920\text{ cm}^{-1}$  and  $2852\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are ascribed to the symmetric and asymmetric  $-\text{CH}_2-$  vibrations of the aliphatic chains of oleic acid and oleylamine.<sup>46</sup> These peaks, in comparison with the pure oleic acid, are slightly shifted towards lower frequencies due to adsorption to the solid surface and the close packing of hydrocarbon molecules surrounding the nanoparticles.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, the stretching vibration of the  $-\text{N}-\text{H}$  in oleylamine on the nanoparticles' surface is not evident at the expected wavenumber of  $3322\text{ cm}^{-1}$  due to its low intensity. The adsorptions centered at  $1558\text{ cm}^{-1}$  and  $1457\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are attributed to the asymmetric and symmetric stretching vibrations of the bidentate  $-\text{COO}$  group, respectively.<sup>46</sup> The presence of both carboxylate bands confirms the attachment of oleic acid on the surface of the nanoparticles. A low-

**Table 1** Mössbauer simulation parameters for the spectrum of iron oxide nanoparticles recorded at 125 K

Subspectrum	Site	Isomer shift ( $\text{MM s}^{-1}$ )	Hyperfine field (kG)	Area (%)
1	A	0.38(5)	490(3)	35(3)
2	B	0.77(5)	478(3)	20(3)
3	B	0.64(5)	441(5)	35(3)
4	B	0.7(1)	279(10)	10(5)



intensity peak at  $1296\text{ cm}^{-1}$  corresponds to the  $\text{-C-O}$  stretch, while the intense band of the characteristic  $\text{-C=O}$  asymmetric band of oleic acid is absent, verifying the bridged conjugation. At lower frequencies, the strong adsorption at  $584\text{ cm}^{-1}$  is attributed to the  $\text{Fe-O}$  bond, which indicates the formation of an iron oxide network with oleate groups bridged on its surface.<sup>48</sup>

Afterwards, the NPs were incorporated into either a pristine sponge or one coated with a hydrophobic silane agent.<sup>49</sup> FT-IR analysis was conducted to confirm the chemical modifications (Fig. 1e). The FTIR results reveal the characteristic adsorption bands of the pristine sponge at  $809\text{ cm}^{-1}$  (bending vibration) and at  $1546\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $\text{C=N}$  stretching vibration). The peaks at  $1331\text{ cm}^{-1}$  and  $1448\text{ cm}^{-1}$  correspond to the  $\text{-C-H}$  bending vibrations. The peaks at  $1689\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are assigned to  $\text{C=C}$  mode, and at  $2848\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ,  $2916\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , and  $2958\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are attributed to the  $\text{-CH}_2$  symmetric asymmetric and  $\text{C-H}$  vibrations.<sup>49</sup> In all magnetically modified sponges, the  $\text{Fe-O}$  vibrational mode appears at  $562\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . In contrast, in the hydrophobically modified sponges, vibrations assigned to the vinyl characteristic groups<sup>11</sup> occur at  $2980\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $\text{-C-H}$ ),  $3022\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $\text{C-H}$ ), and  $3061\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $\text{=C-H}$ ). Additionally, others evolved at  $1601\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , indicative of the  $\text{-CH=CH}_2$  stretching,  $1409\text{ cm}^{-1}$  for the  $\text{Si-CH=CH}_2$  bending, and  $963\text{ cm}^{-1}$  for the  $\text{C=C}$  vibrations.<sup>49,50</sup> The characteristic broad band of  $1097\text{-}1043\text{ cm}^{-1}$  is further detected and attributed to the asymmetric stretching vibrations of the  $\text{Si-O-Si}$  siloxane bridge,<sup>51</sup> while its symmetric stretching

vibrations appear at  $800\text{ cm}^{-1}$  and its out-of-plane deformations at  $412\text{ cm}^{-1}$ .<sup>52</sup> The peak at  $751\text{ cm}^{-1}$  is attributed to  $\text{Si-CH}_3$  bonding and  $\text{Si-O-C}$ ,<sup>53</sup> while  $\text{C-H}$  deformation modes at  $1275\text{ cm}^{-1}$  and  $1004\text{ cm}^{-1}$  are most likely related to remaining  $\text{Si-O-CH}_3$ .<sup>53,54</sup> Thus, both the iron oxide nanoparticles and the VTES@ $\text{SiO}_2$  have successfully modified the surface of the melamine sponges.

Before delving into the crystalline structure of the composite sponges, as mentioned in a previous work,<sup>55</sup> the pristine Sp sponge exhibits a broad band around  $24^\circ$ , indicating its amorphous structure. Some additional peaks observed in its XRD pattern were related to the sample holder. The XRD patterns of the magnetic sponges are presented in Fig. 1e. The modified composites exhibit characteristic reflections of iron oxide nanoparticles at  $30.23^\circ$  (202),  $35.57^\circ$  (311),  $43.25^\circ$  (400),  $54.02^\circ$  (422),  $57.2^\circ$  (511), and  $62.93^\circ$  (440), which are observed in all samples. In the Sp-h-m and Sp-m-h samples, the additional diffraction peak at  $9.08^\circ$  (110) signals the coexistence of the magnetic nanoparticles with the  $\alpha$ -phase of VTES@ $\text{SiO}_2$ .

The 3D porous network of the sponge is successfully maintained in all the modified sponges, as evidenced by SEM analysis (Fig. 2). For the Sp-m sample (Fig. 2a), a thick layer at the branches of the sponge is observed, consisting of accumulated polyhedral nanoparticles, along with some agglomerated entities. Energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy detects the three elements, C, N, O, originating from the sponge and the ligands, in addition to Fe and O of the iron oxide nanoparticles.



Fig. 2 SEM images and the corresponding EDX spectra of the (a) Sp-m, (b) Sp-h-m and (c) Sp-m-h samples.



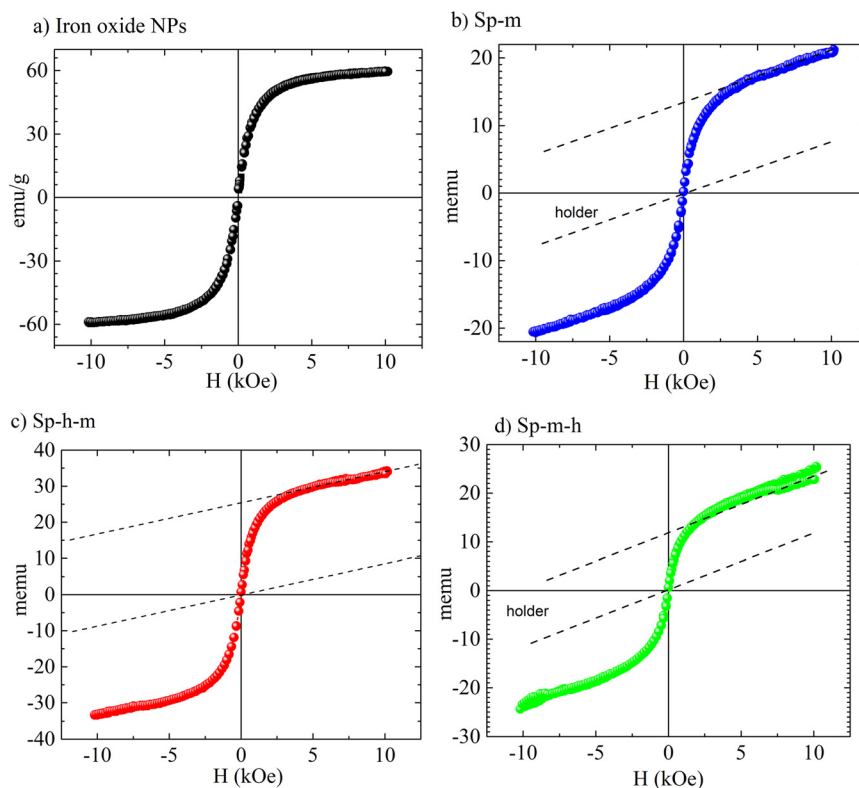
In Fig. 2b, where Sp-h-m is depicted, the deposition of the iron oxide nanoparticles on the superhydrophobic sponge significantly increases the roughness of the fully covered sponge. Some compact assemblies are present at the nodes of the sponges' 3D network, and upon higher magnification, additional irregular and spherical cavities can be observed. These cavities are probably formed by the introduction of iron oxide nanoparticles and the evaporation of the dispersion solvent, offering various micro- and nanostructures on the three-dimensional sponge, which are crucial for their superhydrophobicity<sup>56</sup> and beneficial to adsorption applications.<sup>57</sup> The sample's EDX spectrum revealed all the previously identified elements, in addition to silicon, which was found in a higher percentage compared to iron.

For Sp-m-h (Fig. 2c), where VTES@SiO<sub>2</sub> adsorption was performed after the deposition of the iron oxide nanoparticles, a thick smooth layer grew on the surface, which could hinder the access to the iron oxide nanoparticles, protecting them. This could be useful for certain applications. Its EDX spectrum showed all the elements of the modified sponges, with a prevalence of Si over Fe. The modifications performed on the sponges were successful, allowing for the maintenance of the open pores and elasticity of the initial 3D network, which is crucial for the adsorption processes. Moreover, their surface was homogeneously covered on the interior and the exterior.

The high surface roughness achieved is attributed to the hydrophobic interface of some composite sponges, resulting from their low surface energy.<sup>34,58</sup> These multi-hierarchical micro- and primarily nano-structures<sup>57</sup> may significantly benefit environmental applications for the purification of aqueous environments.

The magnetically modified sponges were submitted to magnetization measurements at room temperature to evaluate their magnetic properties. Fig. 3 shows the hysteresis magnetization loops of a sample consisting only of nanoparticles and representative samples of sponges loaded with magnetic nanoparticles. The magnetite NPs exhibit a saturation magnetization of 60 emu g<sup>-1</sup> and negligible coercivity and remanence, indicating superparamagnetic behavior.<sup>59</sup> The saturation magnetization is higher than that reported in some other studies,<sup>60,61</sup> but lower than the bulk value which is to be expected for nanoparticles.<sup>62,63</sup>

To evaluate the magnetic behavior of sponges loaded with magnetic nanoparticles quantitatively, the reference sponges (without magnetic nanoparticles) and the sample holder were first measured to estimate the background magnetization contribution. These measurements indicate that the background magnetization varied linearly with the applied magnetic field. As a result, an appropriate linear variation of magnetization due to the background was subtracted from



**Fig. 3** Room temperature magnetic hysteresis loops for all four samples. The hysteresis curve of (a) the non-stoichiometric magnetite NPs recorded in powder form, with the Y axis presented in emu g<sup>-1</sup>. For recording the hysteresis curves of the Sp-m, Sp-h-m and Sp-m-h samples, small pieces of the modified sponges were measured. Their magnetization is provided in memu and the contribution of the sample holders' curve is also presented for clarity (dashed lines). The modified sponges were weighed: (b) 1.5 mg Sp-m, (c) 2.2 mg Sp-h-m, and (d) 2.5 mg Sp-m-h.







Fig. 4 For the selectivity experiment, (a) the adsorption capacities  $AC_{m/m}$  and  $AC_{m/V}$  of the sponges for the 1st cycle of the adsorption, (b) the gravimetric/gravimetric adsorption capacities for the 1st cycle (initial  $AC_{m/m}$ ) and for the repeatability experiment of 15 cycles (average  $AC_{m/m}$ ), (c) the gravimetric/volumetric adsorption capacities for the 1st cycle (initial  $AC_{m/V}$ ) and for the 15 cycles (average  $AC_{m/V}$ ).

reaching an initial  $AC_{m/m}$  of  $\sim 100 \text{ mg mg}^{-1}$  and average  $AC_{m/m}$  of  $\sim 65 \text{ mg mg}^{-1}$ , which are very close to the values for the pristine Sp ( $\sim 117 \text{ mg mg}^{-1}$  and  $\sim 66 \text{ mg mg}^{-1}$ , respectively). The sponges with additional hydrophobic modification, *i.e.* Sp-h-m and Sp-m-h, exhibited lower initial  $AC_{m/m}$  ( $\sim 70 \text{ mg mg}^{-1}$  and  $\sim 60 \text{ mg mg}^{-1}$ ) and average  $AC_{m/m}$  of  $\sim 35 \text{ mg mg}^{-1}$ .

All the modified sponges exhibited excellent gravimetric/volumetric AC. For the Sp-m sponge, the initial  $AC_{m/V}$  was found to be  $\sim 1300 \text{ mg cm}^{-3}$  and the average  $AC_{m/V}$  was  $\sim 745 \text{ mg cm}^{-3}$ . The Sp-h-m and the Sp-m-h sponges also showed similar or higher AC than the pristine Sp, the values of which were  $\sim 1175 \text{ mg cm}^{-3}$  as initial and  $\sim 657 \text{ mg cm}^{-3}$  as average  $AC_{m/V}$ . These findings suggest that modifying the melamine sponge with  $F_3O_4$  through the selected route enhances the overall oil adsorption capacity of the sponge. The additional hydrophobic modification with VTES@ $SiO_2$  nanoparticles decreases the initial oil uptake but does not significantly affect the average oil adsorbance capacity within the frame of 15 cycles. The regeneration of the sponges by washing with hexane and ethanol and drying overnight resulted in a return to  $\sim 70\%$  of the initial AC and to  $\sim 95\%$  of the hydrophobicity (water contact angle; WCA). It should be noted that despite the large thickness of the oil layer on the water surface, the pristine sponge Sp exhibited water release after the 5th cycle, which became more prominent after the 9th cycle. Some water release was also observed for the sponges with final magnetic modification, Sp-m and Sp-h-m, after the 7th and

the 12th cycle, respectively. Such a phenomenon was not observed for the sponge with final hydrophobic modification, Sp-m-h, which makes it highly effective in oil separation from the water surface. Importantly, the sponges with both magnetic and hydrophobic properties can be maneuvered at a distance on the oil/water surface in a direction defined by an external magnetic field (Fig. S7 and S8).

In addition to establishing the magnetic response at the sponges, sufficient hydrophobicity needed to be achieved and further retained through the repeated oil adsorption/desorption cycles and their purification. The wettability of the composite's surface was evaluated through contact angle analysis, and the measured values are presented in Fig. 5. When the droplet of deionized water was shed upon the melamine sponge, it was immediately absorbed and no contact angle could be measured (not shown). This is related to its superhydrophilicity and the presence of the abundant polar groups  $-NH_2$ ,  $N-H$  and  $-OH$  on the melamine's surface.<sup>67</sup> After the modifications of the sponges, the contact angle increases, and the surfaces exhibit superhydrophobic properties. The droplet of deionized water remained stable upon the surface. Generally,  $SiO_2$  nanoparticles have a hydrophilic character in nature; however, when they are functionalized with a hydrophobic silane agent, they obtain superhydrophobic properties.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, since the magnetic nanoparticles are coated with ligands consisting of large aliphatic chains, they offer a hydrophobic interface,<sup>68</sup> which





Fig. 5 (a) Photos of the Sp-m, Sp-h-m and Sp-m-h samples as well as their initial contact angles with a droplet of water and (b) the contact angles after the oil extraction and the subsequent purification process.

was expected as the dispersion is stable only in non-polar solvents. The average contact angle measured for the Sp-m sample is 129°. The contact angle of the hydrophobic and magnetic composite sponges is dependent on the sequence of their preparation (Sp-m-h and Sp-h-m). Both demonstrate higher contact angles than Sp-m, but lower than Sp-h. When the final step of the modification is the adsorption and silanization process (Sp-m-h), they have a CA of 140°, higher than of Sp-h-m with 132° CA, when the final step is the deposition of the magnetic nanoparticles. After their application in the oil removal, the sponges were rinsed with *n*-hexane in order to remove their adsorbed quantity. Their form was slightly changed after the manual desorption cycles, but their hydrophobic properties remained. In Fig. 5b, the contact angles of the sponges after the oil experiments are gathered. There was a slight decrease in the range of 5°–10°, indicating the preservation of superhydrophobicity for all modified sponges and their stability after repetitive adsorption/desorption cycles.

Overall, the recorded adsorption of  $\sim 100 \text{ g g}^{-1}$  and repeatability of  $\sim 65 \text{ g g}^{-1}$  for 15 cycles are among the highest published in the literature for different types of sponges.<sup>26,27,30,69,70</sup> In our work, the performance is attributed to the synergy of the selected modifiers of the sponge's surface. Specifically, the silicon oxide mediator ( $\text{SiO}_2$ ) is readily attached on the sponge and is subsequently modified with the hydrophobic silane (VTES), thus guaranteeing high stability and hydrophobicity. In addition, the use of magnetic nanoparticles modified with large aliphatic chains allows their immobilization on the sponge's skeleton, providing magnetic response and hydrophobicity. Moreover, the deposition of  $\text{VTES@SiO}_2$  as a final coating onto Sp-m (see Fig. 2c) further stabilizes the nanoparticles and increases the water repellence, thus leading

to the superior performance of Sp-m-h, which demonstrated the highest number of adsorption cycles without uptake of water.

#### 4.3. Heavy metal removal: mercury and arsenic

**Evaluation of heavy metal ion removal from water.** Furthermore, both pristine and modified sponges were evaluated regarding their ability to remove the heavy metal ions  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  and  $\text{As}^{3+}$  from single metal ion aqueous solutions under dynamic conditions of 60 min total time.

The sorbed metal content ( $q$ ,  $\text{mg g}^{-1}$ ) by the modified sponges (eqn (3)) and the removal percentage (%) (eqn (4)) of the examined metals from the aqueous solutions were defined as follows:

$$q = (C_0 - C) \frac{V}{m} \quad (3)$$

$$\text{Removal (\%)} = \frac{(C_0 - C)}{C_0} \times 100 \quad (4)$$

where  $C_0$  and  $C$  are the initial and final solute metal concentration ( $\text{mg L}^{-1}$ ),  $V$  is the volume of the solution (L), and  $m$  is the mass of the modified sponges (g). Each data point was calculated as the mean value between the three replicate columns at the same time interval, while the error bars represent the relative difference of the measurements.

The sponges (Sp-h-m, Sp-m and Sp-m-h) were applied to adsorb metal ions. Fig. 6a indicates the experimental data for the adsorption of  $\text{As}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  using single metal ion aqueous solutions (the concentration of each metal ion was



Fig. 6 (a) The adsorbed quantities of  $\text{As}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  in  $\text{mg g}^{-1}$  of Sp-m, Sp-h-m and Sp-m-h sponges in the experiments of single metal ion solutions and (b) the adsorbed  $\text{As}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  on the Sp-h-m sponge in the experiment of competitive adsorption.



fixed at 250 ppm) on the examined sponges. Based on the acquired results, the Sp-h-m sponge exhibited the highest adsorption capacity for both heavy metals. More specifically, its adsorption capacity towards  $\text{As}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  was 20.5 and 20.3  $\text{mg g}^{-1}$ , respectively, which decreased to 19.9 ( $\text{As}^{3+}$ ) and 20.1 ( $\text{Hg}^{2+}$ )  $\text{mg g}^{-1}$  for Sp-m-h and further to 19.4 ( $\text{As}^{3+}$ ) and 19.2 ( $\text{Hg}^{2+}$ )  $\text{mg g}^{-1}$  in the case of the Sp-m sponge. It is possible that Sp-h-m demonstrates the highest adsorption capacity, as a synergetic effect exists between the magnetic and the hydrophobic modifications of the sponge. As seen from SEM, lots of cavities are present that can permit the diffusion of metal ions to both iron oxide nanoparticles and VTES@ $\text{SiO}_2$ , which further enhances the accessible surface area for the adsorption. Moreover, its higher saturation magnetization among the modified sponges can influence the attraction and simultaneous extraction of metal ions from the aqueous solution. The Sp-m sponge previously presented the best oil removal due to the large surface of iron oxide nanoparticles, but in the metal removal application, it seems to have the lowest capacity. On the Sp-m-h sponge, VTES@ $\text{SiO}_2$  covered the NPs and blocked the available surface. Phase changes due to further oxidation of magnetite could have also altered the properties, in addition to the higher oxygen content. The interactions driven by the cooperation of these functional groups enrich the mechanism of adsorption, from physical adsorption and electrostatic interactions to hydrogen bonding and surface complexation.<sup>67,68</sup>

In addition to the single metal ion experiment (non-competitive system) the Sp-h-m sponge, which indicated the most enhanced capacity, was submitted to an additional experiment. A mixed metal ion aqueous solution was prepared with 250 ppm concentration of each  $\text{As}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  ion (total 500 ppm of toxic metals). The results are compared and presented in Fig. 6b. The adsorption capacity of the Sp-h-m sponge towards  $\text{As}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  in the competitive conditions decreased in the mixed solution, in relation to the adsorption values for the single metal ion solutions. With these competitive conditions, the adsorption values were 18.9 and 18.4  $\text{mg g}^{-1}$  against  $\text{As}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$ , respectively. Compared with the adsorption values of the single metal ion solutions, the adsorption capacity is slightly affected due to the competition of one metal ion with the other to occupy the modified sponge's sites, decreasing by about 8% for  $\text{As}^{3+}$  and by 9.4% for  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$ . It is thus concluded that close to 500 ppm  $\text{As}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Hg}^{2+}$  together were adsorbed overall effectively. Iron oxide nanoparticles are excellent platforms for sorption of heavy metal cations, while both the pristine sponge and the silica layer can facilitate water purification processes. The efficiency of the magnetite crystals that are employed in our work is proven by the fact that the Sp-m sample that does not contain silica layers already adsorbs both  $\text{Hg}(\text{II})$  and  $\text{As}(\text{III})$ . In previous studies, Faulconer *et al.* utilized iron oxide nanomaterials which achieved excellent  $\text{Hg}(\text{II})$  removal efficiency. The proposed adsorption process involved a strong binding affinity of the iron oxide surface with divalent

mercury ions through coordination with oxygen atoms.<sup>71</sup> Arsenic removal poses a more complicated picture in the literature due to the stability of both  $\text{As}^{3+}$  and  $\text{As}^{5+}$  cations, two forms that may coexist due to redox reactions with the nanoparticles, as in the case of zero-valent iron NPs. In a comprehensive paper by Wei *et al.*, it was revealed that the ionic strength of the solution had a negligible effect on the adsorption of both  $\text{As}^{3+}$  and  $\text{As}^{5+}$  in iron oxide nanoneedles.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, our work indicates that there is no competition between the two heavy metals in terms of adsorption capacity (see Fig. 6b). The latter, coupled with the fact the adsorption capacity is rather similar, indicates an adsorption mechanism through interaction with under-coordinated oxygen sites. The pH of the solution is acidic; hence we exclude the formation of hydroxide species with reduced solubility and removal of the heavy metals is due to adsorption by the modified sponges. By this straightforward preparation method of these multifunctional magnetic hydrophobic sponges compared to others,<sup>73,74</sup> both ions present in the solution are adsorbed in high quantities in only 60 min. Typical regeneration processes involve mild treatment with 2 M NaOH solution<sup>75</sup> for arsenic adsorption and electrolysis for mercury.<sup>76</sup> To that end, even small pieces of the magnetically controllable sponge can efficiently lead to the purification of water systems to the levels required by the World Health Organization (0.01 ppm for As and 0.006 ppm for Hg) and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (0.01 ppm for As and 0.002 ppm for Hg). Notably, according to our cost and scalability evaluation (not presented here), the large-scale synthesis and commercialization of the developed magnetic hydrophobic sponges is totally feasible due to the low-cost raw materials and processing.

## Conclusions

A large-scale synthesis of iron oxide nanoparticles with hydrophobic chains was accomplished in a one-step thermolytic reaction prior to their incorporation on pristine and hydrophobic modified sponges. The phase composition of the nanoparticles with a size lower than 18 nm consisted of non-stoichiometric magnetite with a saturation magnetization of 60  $\text{emu g}^{-1}$ . The modification of the chemical composition and morphology of the sponges was achieved by their straightforward immersion in ferrofluid solution. The new micro- and nanostructures obtained by three different methods exhibited exquisite magnetic properties, which benefited the removal of both crude oil and heavy metals from aqueous environments. The modified magnetic sponges exhibited high adsorption capacity (60–100  $\text{g g}^{-1}$ ) and high selectivity to oil that was attributed to their strong hydrophobic behavior (WCA 140°), allowing only oil adsorption. This behavior was more pronounced when VTES@ $\text{SiO}_2$  nanoparticles were deposited as the last layer, thus exposing the hydrophobic vinyl terminations to the oil-water interface, achieving greater water repellency. The



efficiency of Sp-m was also noticeable due to its high surface area for oil adsorption. The surface hydrophobicity of all magnetically modified sponges was retained after repetitive cycles of application. New synergetic effects have arisen from both VTES@SiO<sub>2</sub> and Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>, creating additional cavities, offering higher magnetization and more functional groups available for the metal ions, which contributed to the high efficiency of Sp-h-m, adsorbing 250 ppm in a single ion solution of As<sup>3+</sup> and Hg<sup>2+</sup> in 60 min. This modified sponge also demonstrated excellent performance when both 250 ppm As<sup>3+</sup> and 250 ppm Hg<sup>2+</sup> were present in the solution during the competitive metal ion system. Thus, the sequence of the modification steps influences the performance of the magnetic modified sponges dependent on the application. This finding allows preparation and optimization of effective adsorbing materials for specific water purification applications, *i.e.* crude oil or heavy metal ion (As<sup>3+</sup> and Hg<sup>2+</sup>) adsorption.

## Author contributions

P. B.: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft. N. T.: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft. M. P.: formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft. E. D.: formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft. E. S.: investigation. N. B.: investigation. E. A. P.: methodology, investigation, writing – original draft, writing-review and editing. M.-A. G.: methodology, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. N. L.: writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. T. L.: investigation, writing – review and editing. L.-A. T.: investigation, writing – review and editing. V. K. T.: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, visualization, writing – original draft. P. D.: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing-original draft, supervision, visualization, project administration.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Data availability

Data for this article are either included in the manuscript or available upon request to the corresponding authors.

Supplementary information (SI): captures of the ferrofluid and the magnetic modified sponges with the application of an external magnetic field out and in an oil/water system; table of the data derived from the selectivity and oil capacitance experiments along with their photos and videos, size distribution diagram for the iron oxide nanoparticles and optical microscopy images for the Sp-h-m sample. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d5en00549c>.

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