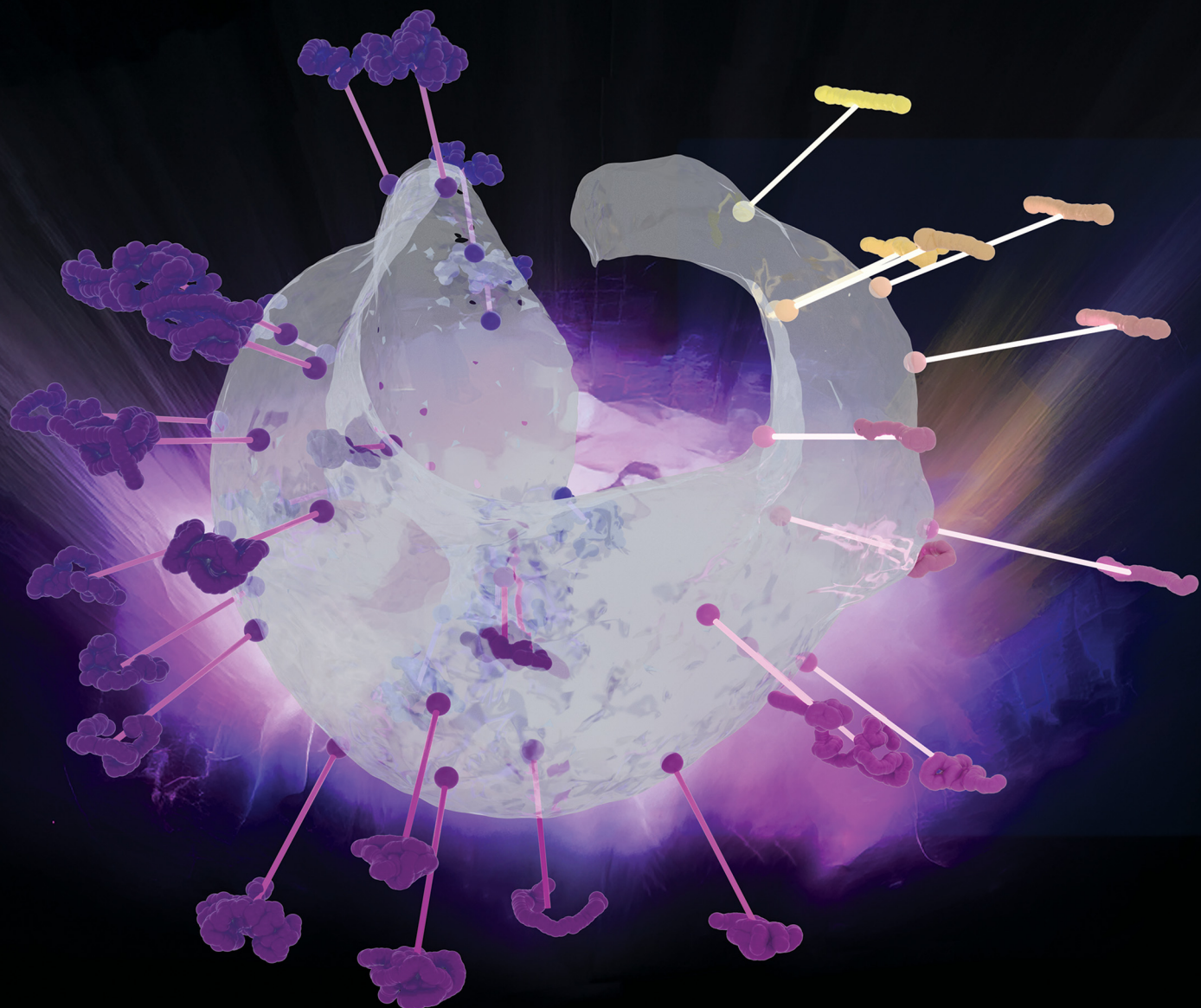


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Howard A. Stone, Michael A. Webb *et al.*
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Effect of shear flow and precursor polymer design on single-chain nanoparticle formation

Matthew D. Chertok,^a Howard A. Stone ^{*b} and Michael A. Webb ^{*a}

Single-chain nanoparticles (SCNPs) are a class of materials formed by the intramolecular cross-linking and collapse of single polymer chains. Because their morphology dictates suitability for specific applications, such as nanoscale reactors and drug delivery vehicles, understanding how to control or tailor morphologies is of interest. Here, we investigate how the morphology of SCNPs depends on both precursor chain attributes, such as linker fraction and backbone stiffness, and an imposed shear flow. Using coarse-grained molecular dynamics simulations, we generate an ensemble of structures from 10 800 unique SCNPs, some formed under quiescent conditions and some in shear flow—the latter of which has not been studied previously. We then characterize morphologies by analysis of a three-dimensional embedding space obtained through unsupervised learning of the simulated structures. This reveals how SCNP morphology depends on dimensionless parameters, related to precursor-chain attributes and shear rate, and offers insight into their relative influence. We find that shear rate has comparable influence to the degree of polymerization and the blockiness of reactive sites. Furthermore, shear, which can be externally controlled independent of precursor chain synthesis, can have persistent effects on morphology, such as enhancing compaction of SCNPs based on chain stiffness. This work provides guidelines for designing SCNPs with targeted characteristics based on five dimensionless variables and illustrates the utility of machine learning in analyzing SCNPs formed across a range of conditions.

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1 Introduction

Single-chain nanoparticles (SCNPs) are polymeric materials formed by intramolecular folding and cross-linking of individual chains, mimicking the compactness, and sometimes function, of natural proteins.^{1–4} In one manifestation, precursor chains comprise a polymer backbone bearing side groups (linkers) that can interact *via* non-covalent, covalent, and dynamic-covalent chemistries,^{4–6} yielding compartmentalized nanostructures. The resulting materials have numerous prospective applications, including in catalysis,^{7–10} CO₂ reduction,¹¹ drug delivery,^{12–14} medical imaging,¹⁵ and bio-sensing.^{6,9,16–20} A general expectation is that different morphologies of SCNPs may confer distinct functional advantages.

Many morphological outcomes have been highlighted in prior work, ranging from tadpole-like to globular structures.²¹ Experimentally, small-angle X-ray and neutron scattering studies have shown that the Flory exponent ν , which characterizes the scaling of the radius of gyration (R_g) with backbone length

(N) as $R_g \propto N^\nu$, ranges from $\nu \approx 0.56$ in the self-avoiding coil limit to $\nu \approx 1/3$ in the compact globular limit.^{16,22} For example, Vo *et al.* experimentally examined the effect of charge positioning on SCNPs for drug delivery and reported that tadpole-like morphologies produced charge distributions that achieved higher cancer-cell uptake than those exhibited by globular or elongated forms.²³ To effectively design towards specific functions, it is important to understand how tunable precursor parameters (*e.g.*, linker fraction, patterning, chain stiffness, degree of polymerization) influence morphology.

Unlike proteins, whose amino acid sequence deterministically specifies their folded structure,¹ it is important to recognize that SCNPs form by stochastic collapse, yielding a distribution of outcomes, and precursor chain attributes may be likewise characterized by an ensemble of specific chains.^{4,24,25} Nevertheless, ensemble-averaged morphologies can be predicted for a given set of precursor attributes, and numerous molecular dynamics (MD) simulations have examined how these attributes bias SCNP structure.^{1–4,26–31} These studies describe several notable trends. A higher overall linker fraction promotes uniform backbone compaction, whereas at low linker fractions, blocky arrangements localize cross-linking and produce anisotropic tadpole-like structures with a compact head and an elongated tail.⁴ Introducing orthogonal linker species, which react exclusively

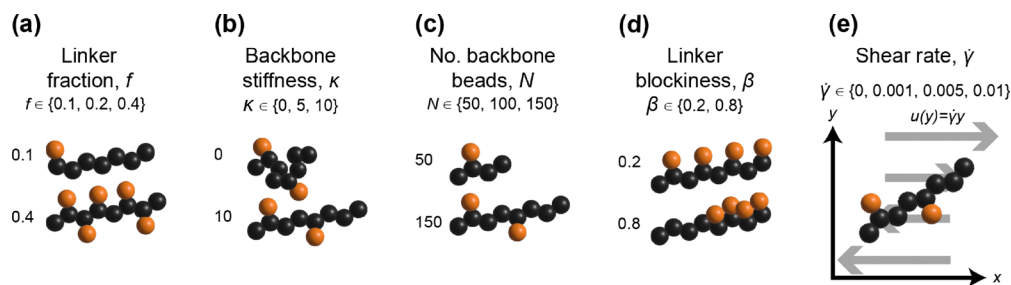
^a Department of Chemical and Biological Engineering, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA. E-mail: mawebb@princeton.edu

^b Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA. E-mail: hastone@princeton.edu



There are several reasons to consider SCNP formation behavior under non-equilibrium conditions. In industrial and biological settings, from extrusion³³ to blood circulation³⁴ and intracellular biophysical processes,³⁵ polymer chains are subject to flow, necessitating an understanding of how non-equilibrium conditions affect nanoparticle morphology. Additionally, imposing flow may offer an additional means of morphological control. The conditions imposed by shear are often characterized by the Weissenberg number ($Wi = \dot{\gamma}\tau_p$), which is a dimensionless parameter that compares the time-scale for shear ($\dot{\gamma}^{-1}$) to an intrinsic relaxation time of the polymer (τ_p). Physically, $Wi \gg 1$ indicates that the chain is deformed more rapidly than it can relax, promoting elongation, while $Wi \ll 1$ implies that the chain has sufficient time to return toward its equilibrium coil. Using multi-particle collision dynamics (MPCD), Formanek and Moreno investigated the effect of shear flow on fully cross-linked SCNPs.^{2,31} For isolated SCNPs, they found that cross-linking constrains extensibility, leading to only modest increases in the radius of gyration with shear rate, scaling as $R_g \sim Wi^{0.59}$.³¹ The dominant structural response to shear was anisotropic deformation with elongation along the flow direction and minor compression in the gradient and vorticity directions. Moreover, the mode of motion under elevated Wi was found to depend on cross-linking density. In particular, sparsely cross-linked SCNPs exhibited tumbling dynamics, while more compact globular forms showed a hybrid behavior combining tumbling with tank-treading, in which the overall shape remains aligned with the flow while monomers circulate around the center of mass. Notably, both studies focused on the response of pre-formed SCNPs to shear. The question of how shear applied during cross-linking might influence SCNP morphology has been less explored.

In this study, we aim to understand how shear flow, in conjunction with other design parameters, influences the formation and morphology of SCNPs. To explore this, we investigate a five-dimensional parameter space comprising the linker fraction f , the chain stiffness parameter κ (in units of the basic energy ε), the degree of polymerization N , the blockiness β of the linker pattern, which quantifies the clustering of reactive beads, and the applied shear rate $\dot{\gamma}$ (Fig. 1). Together, these parameters define a tractable design space for assessing how structural and processing conditions influence SSCP assembly that is also, in principle, experimentally accessible.^{25,41–45} We



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use MPCD to perform 10 800 MD simulations using a phenomenological polymer model⁴ across this parameter space, and we organize the dataset with unsupervised ML. This enables analysis on the relative influence of each parameter on morphological outcomes and the interrelationships amongst these variables. Ultimately, this reveals consistent impacts of shear that may also offer practical guidance for future SCNP design.

2 Methods

2.1 Simulation details

2.1.1 Phenomenological model of SCNP formation. All systems are treated at a phenomenological level aimed at capturing essential physics of SCNPs and their formation but without explicit connection to specific chemical manifestations. Precursor polymer chains consist of coarse-grained beads of two types: backbone beads and linker beads. The degree of polymerization is equal to the number of backbone beads, denoted N , and the number of linker beads is denoted N_L . Interactions are generally described using a modified Kremer-Grest framework.⁴⁶ In particular, all beads interact *via* the Weeks–Chandler–Andersen potential

$$U_{\text{WCA}}(r) = \begin{cases} 4\epsilon \left[\left(\frac{\sigma}{r} \right)^{12} - \left(\frac{\sigma}{r} \right)^6 + \frac{1}{4} \right], & r \leq 2^{1/6}\sigma, \\ 0, & r > 2^{1/6}\sigma, \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

where r is the center-to-center distance between two beads. Irreversible reactions between linker beads, which occur based on certain geometric criteria (see simulation procedure), are used to model intramolecular cross-linking of precursor chains to yield SCNPs; following any reaction, the two linker beads are considered directly bonded. Directly bonded beads have a stretching energy given by the finitely extensible nonlinear elastic (FENE) potential

$$U_{\text{bond}}(r) = -\frac{\epsilon}{2} k_{\text{bond}} \left(\frac{r_0}{\sigma} \right)^2 \ln \left(1 - \left(\frac{r}{r_0} \right)^2 \right), \quad (2)$$

where k_{bond} and r_0 are constants. In addition, groups of polymer beads connected by two bonds have a bending energy given by

$$U_{\text{angle}}(\theta) = \kappa \epsilon (1 + \cos \theta), \quad (3)$$

where θ is the angle formed by the three interacting polymer beads and κ is a parameter that controls polymer stiffness (Fig. 1b); this quantity can also be related to the Kuhn length of the precursor polymer chain (SI, Fig. S1).

Throughout this work, σ and ϵ are used as characteristic units of length and energy, respectively. Each polymer bead has a characteristic unit mass, m . These quantities set the characteristic unit of time to be $\tau = (m\sigma^2/\epsilon)^{1/2}$. All systems employ $k_{\text{bond}} = 30$ and $r_0 = \frac{3}{2}\sigma$. For polymer stiffness, κ is varied across systems and applies to all angles except those between two backbone beads and a linker bead, for which $\kappa/\epsilon = 0$.

The formation, structure, and dynamics of SCNPs are modeled using the multi-particle collision dynamics (MPCD) formalism.^{47,48}

Simulations are performed with and without shear flow. MPCD efficiently captures hydrodynamic interactions and thermal fluctuations in a system by using a solvent of momentum-conserving streaming particles. However, these streaming solvent particles do not interact with the polymer beads other than through momentum-exchange. In addition, standard MPCD algorithms do not strictly conserve angular momentum.⁴⁷ However, Götze *et al.* showed the lack of angular-momentum conservation negligibly impacts velocity fields in non-rotating, velocity-driven flows (e.g., flow between parallel plates).⁴⁹ Consequently, this issue is not expected to have major influence on the results of the present study.

2.1.2 General simulation protocols. All simulations are performed using HOOMD-blue version 4.9.⁵⁰ Cubic simulation cells are used with edge lengths set as $\max(100, N)$, where N is the number of backbone beads; this choice mitigates flow artifacts⁵¹ and polymer self-interaction at a reasonable computational expense. Dynamics are integrated with a time step of $\delta t = 0.005\tau$, following Wani *et al.*⁵² MPCD simulations use a collision interval of $\tau_{\text{collide}} = 20\delta t$, a collision angle of $\alpha = 130^\circ$, and a cell number density of $\rho = 5/\sigma^3$. The temperature is set such that $k_B T = \epsilon$, and is regulated using a Maxwell–Boltzmann thermostat.^{48,50} Periodic boundary conditions are applied in the x and z directions, while no-slip, reflecting boundaries are imposed in the y direction. Where appropriate, shear flow is induced by translating these boundaries at equal and opposite velocities along the x axis.

Systems are initialized with a single, linear precursor polymer chain at the center of the simulation cell; its end-to-end vector is oriented in the (1, 0, 1) direction. From this initial configuration, simulations are performed for 10^6 time steps without any cross-linking. During this initial period, configurations are saved every 10^5 steps to yield ten independent starting configurations per precursor chain. From each of these configurations, simulations are then performed for 2×10^7 time steps, which is sufficient to allow for near-complete cross-linking and sampling of fully reacted configurations (Fig. S3). During this SCNP-formation period, linker beads are allowed to react. Generally, 10^7 steps sufficiently determines the morphology of the SCNP, and few reactive events occur after that point (see SI, Fig. S3), which is consistent with the work of Liu *et al.*³⁰ Thus, in the last 10^7 time steps of the SCNP-formation period, system configurations are saved every 10^6 steps for analysis. In total, we consider 216 unique parameter sets ($f, \kappa, N, \beta, \dot{\gamma}$), five distinct chains corresponding to each parameter set, and ten replicates per chain. This results in 10 800 simulations and a total of 108 000 SCNP configurations.

2.1.3 Cross-linking protocol. During the SCNP-formation period, all pairs of free (*i.e.*, not previously reacted) linkers are evaluated for potential bond formation every 100 integration steps. This interval was selected as a compromise: more frequent evaluations would substantially increase computational cost due to the additional overhead, whereas less frequent evaluations risk missing viable interactions. Bonds are formed based on three criteria.^{4,28,29} First, their separation distance must be $r \leq 1.3\sigma$. Second, both backbone-linker-linker angles



characteristics of the polymer is captured *via* the Weissenberg number,

where τ_p describes a polymer relaxation time, which depends on κ and N .⁵³ Details of the relaxation time computation are provided in Section 2.3.5. Experimentally, several strategies exist to tune both the degree of polymerization and the stiffness of polymer chains. For instance, incorporation of side-chain groups has been shown to increase backbone rigidity in systems such as polystyrene⁵⁴ and polynorbornene,⁵⁵ while block copolymerization between side-chain-bearing and unsubstituted polystyrene provides additional control over stiffness.⁵⁴ The degree of polymerization can be modulated by adjusting the stoichiometric ratio of monomers to chain transfer agents,^{41,43} or by employing physical methods such as sonication.⁵⁶ Furthermore, synthetic approaches allow for precise positioning of reactive side groups along the backbone.^{25,45,57} Thus, the simulated parameter space corresponds directly to experimentally accessible properties.

In addition to the simulations described in Section 2.1.2, simulations are also performed to assess whether shear applied during cross-linking induces persistent morphological differences. These simulations utilize the same MPCD parameters and parallel-plate geometry as in the cross-linking runs but with no shear (*i.e.*, stationary plates). Linker reactions are also disabled to prevent further cross-linking. The final configuration from the SCNP-formation period is used as the initial state for these simulations. Each simulation is run for 1.2×10^7 time steps. The first 2×10^6 steps are discarded for equilibration/system configurations are saved every 10^6 steps over the remaining 10^7 steps for analysis. Across all replicates and parameter combinations, this procedure yields an additional 108 000 SCNP configurations.

Several dimensionless quantities are defined to characterize systems and help elucidate morphological outcomes. The number of backbone beads N is an important parameter that is naturally dimensionless. The linker fraction describes the density of reactive moieties on the precursor polymer chain and is given by

The distribution or patterning of linkers is described by a normalized blockiness parameter, β , given by

with

and

In eqn (6), the summation is over backbone beads, and $1_{k,k+1}$ is an indicator function equal to unity when the indexed beads are both functionalized (or not) with a linker bead and equal to zero otherwise. The resistance to bending for a polymer is compared to thermal energy through the dimensionless quantity $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T}$. Fig. S1 provides a relationship between $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T}$ and the persistence length. The strength of shear flow relative to

2.2.1 Scope of parameter space. Precursor polymer chains are constructed according to the specification of the degree of polymerization N , linker fraction f , normalized blockiness β , and polymer stiffness κ . In this work, we investigate precursor chains with $N \in \{50, 100, 150\}$, $f \in \{0.1, 0.2, 0.4\}$, $\beta \in \{0.2, 0.8\}$, and $\frac{\kappa \varepsilon}{k_B T} \in \{0, 5, 10\}$. Although we consider precursors with 50–150 beads, each bead may be interpreted as representing multiple monomeric units. This allows our coarse-grained model to capture the behavior of SCNPs at molecular weights more comparable to those reported experimentally.^{58–60} The values of f are informed by the work of Patel *et al.*⁴ who reported that the effect of f diminished above this range. Moreover, the values of β simply span low- and high-blockiness regimes, as its influence was found to be secondary to that given by f . The incorporation of $\kappa \neq 0$ is distinct from the work by Patel *et al.*⁴ Lastly, shear rates are set as $\dot{\gamma} \in \{0, 0.001, 0.005, 0.01\}$, yielding Weissenberg numbers $Wi \sim 10^0$ – 10^2 . The combination $(N, f, \beta, \kappa, Wi)$ defines a parameter set that fully specifies the system and conditions for the simulations.

2.3 Analysis

2.3.1 Standard structural characterization. Simulation trajectories are used to compute the gyration tensor $\mathbf{G} \in \mathbb{R}^{d \times d}$ defined as

where $\mathbf{r}_i \in \mathbb{R}^3$ is the position vector of bead i , and the center of mass is

Diagonalization yields $\mathbf{G} = \text{diag}(\lambda_1^2, \lambda_2^2, \lambda_3^2)$ where the diagonal elements $\lambda_1^2 \geq \lambda_2^2 \geq \lambda_3^2$ are the principal moments

where y_n is the measured response for sample n and $W_{i,n}$ is W_i for the given sample, and $\nu_n \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \omega_{\text{obs}}^2)$ is a Gaussian noise term. The intercept c_0 and slope c_1 are assigned independent uniform priors over physically plausible ranges. Following the recommendations of Gelman,⁶² a half-Cauchy prior is placed on the unknown noise scale,

$$p(\omega_{\text{obs}}) = \frac{2}{\pi\omega_0} \frac{1}{1 + (\omega_{\text{obs}}/\omega_0)^2}, \quad (14)$$

with $\omega_{\text{obs}} \geq 0$ and the scale parameter ω_0 set to the empirical standard deviation of the observations. The prior is evaluated on a log-spaced grid spanning $0.01\omega_0$ to $10\omega_0$.

To evaluate the posterior, a Cartesian grid is used for c_0 , c_1 , and ω_{obs} . At each grid point $(c_{0,i}, c_{1,j}, \omega_k)$ the Gaussian log-likelihood is

$$\begin{aligned} \log p(\mathbf{y} | c_{0,i}, c_{1,j}, \omega_k) = & -\frac{N}{2} \log(2\pi\omega_k^2) \\ & -\frac{1}{2\omega_k^2} \sum_{n=1}^N (y_n - c_{0,i} - c_{1,j} W_{i,n})^2. \end{aligned} \quad (15)$$

Adding the log-prior for ω_{obs} yields the joint log-posterior. Numerically marginalizing over ω_{obs} (summing over ω_k) gives a two-dimensional posterior surface $p(c_0, c_1 | \mathbf{y})$, from which samples are drawn of (c_0, c_1) . A shear-induced effect is deemed statistically significant at the 5% level if at least 97.5% of the posterior mass for the slope satisfies $c_1 > 0$ or $c_1 < 0$. Equivalently, the 95% Bayesian credible interval for c_1 must exclude zero. Rejecting the null hypothesis $c_1 = 0$ indicates that the corresponding morphological property is systematically affected by shear applied during SCNP formation.

2.3.5 Computation of polymer relaxation time. To obtain the Weissenberg number, Wi , we must compute a characteristic polymer relaxation time τ_p . For this, we use a representative end-to-end vector relaxation time, $\tau_{\mathbf{R}}(\kappa, N)$, which is a function of κ and N . For each precursor chain, i , we compute the normalized correlation function

$$C_{\mathbf{R}}^{(i)}(t) = \frac{\langle \mathbf{R}(t' + t) \cdot \mathbf{R}(t') \rangle_i}{\langle \mathbf{R}(t') \cdot \mathbf{R}(t') \rangle_i} \quad (16)$$

where $\mathbf{R}(t) = \mathbf{r}_N(t) - \mathbf{r}_1(t)$ is the end-to-end vector at time t , and $\langle \cdot \rangle_i$ indicates an ensemble average for a simulation of the chain i , which here is treated equivalently to a time average (*i.e.*, all configurations can be used as a representative at t'). The normalized correlation function is then approximately fit as

$$C^{(i)}(t) \approx \exp[-t/\tau_{\mathbf{R}}^{(i)}], \quad (17)$$

to obtain $\tau_{\mathbf{R}}^{(i)}$. Representative autocorrelation decays are shown in Fig. S2. Data is then aggregated across all trajectories containing chains with the same κ and N to obtain the median. We employ the relation

$$\tau_{\mathbf{R}}(\kappa, N) = 0.051N \left(\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T} N + \frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T} + N \right), \quad (18)$$

which is obtained using symbolic regression to data on the median end-to-end vector relaxation time observed for precursor chains with a given κ and N . Eqn (18) is also shown in Fig. S2. This approach produces reasonable scaling behavior to distinguish systems of differing κ and N .

For this procedure, 540 separate simulations are performed, spanning 54 distinct precursor chain parameter combinations, with 10 unique chains per combination. In these simulations, cross-linking is disabled, and the parameter space is defined as $f \in \{0.1, 0.2, 0.4\}$, $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T} \in \{0, 5, 10\}$, $N \in \{50, 100, 150\}$, and $\beta \in \{0.2, 0.8\}$. Each simulation is run for 5×10^6 steps, with configurations saved every 100 000 steps.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Organization of SCNP morphologies

To broadly characterize the morphologies of the SCNPs, we use unsupervised learning to project each configuration into a three-dimensional embedding space with coordinate axes $\mathbf{Z} = (Z_1, Z_2, Z_3)$. Unless otherwise noted, the configurations analyzed here are sampled while the systems remain under the same shear conditions as those applied during cross-linking. In this space, we observe a continuum of morphologies, with similar morphologies positioned in close proximity.

Fig. 2a illustrates that the embedding space is organized primarily by R_g . Moving from left (high Z_1) to right (low Z_1), R_g increases, corresponding to a transition from globular (low R_g , blue) to stretched (high R_g , yellow) configurations. Additionally, Fig. 2b demonstrates a secondary organization according to the relative shape anisotropy, A_3 . In particular, we observe a shift from spherical to asymmetrical structures along bands of constant R_g as one moves across each band. The apparent organization by R_g and A_3 , without explicit supervision on either descriptors, suggests these as major distinctive features of SCNP morphologies.

The low-dimensional embedding arranges SCNP configurations in an overall intuitive manner. Fig. 2c provides specific connection to morphological classes by overlaying representative chain snapshots onto the embedding space. The upper left portion of the plot ($Z_1 \gtrsim 5$) is populated by compact, nearly spherical SCNPs. Traversing the curved manifold rightward toward smaller Z_1 yields progressively more elongated structures, illustrating the secondary organization by asphericity. By further decreasing Z_2 and Z_1 , the morphologies evolve into highly anisotropic tadpole and necklace configurations. For example, Fig. 3 displays eight exemplar chains from specific regions of the embedding space. The visual samples are reminiscent of globular (Fig. 3a),^{4,27} tadpole (Fig. 3b),^{4,63} and necklace-like (Fig. 3c)^{4,28} morphologies previously reported in the literature. The figure further shows how locality in the embedding space implies morphological similarity. An increased prevalence of stretched, linear structures likely results from shear applied during simulations.

This data-driven approach may be helpful in revealing hard-to-characterize morphologies or otherwise providing



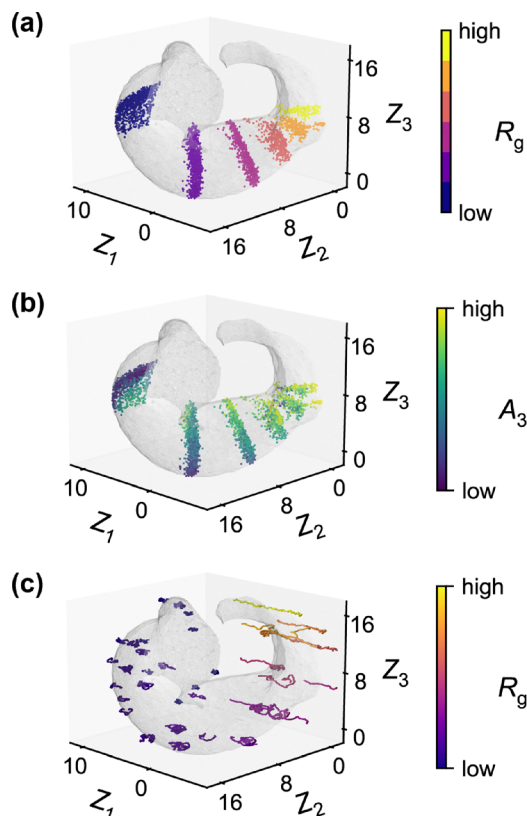


Fig. 2 Organization of morphologies for SCNPs in a three-dimensional embedding space determined by the uniform manifold approximation and projection (UMAP) unsupervised learning algorithm. For clarity, subplots (a) and (b) display slices of the embedding space rather than the entire manifold, with a continuous spectrum of morphologies present between the depicted bands. (a) Six bands of constant R_g across the embedding space. (b) The same bands in (a) but annotated by the relative shape anisotropy. In both (a) and (b), each marker represents an SCNP configuration that is mapped to the coordinates along the embedding axes, Z_1 , Z_2 , and Z_3 . (c) A subset of chain conformations depicted near their coordinates in the embedding space. In each panel, a gray silhouette traces the full extent of the configuration manifold within the embedding space. All quantities are colored by the value associated with single configurations.

quantitative connections between morphologies and their corresponding precursor attributes. For instance, if the goal

is to generate tadpole-like structures for which a precise mathematical definition is lacking, one may examine the embedding space (Fig. 3a–c) until a region of desired structures is identified (Fig. 3b). By selecting a small region of the embedding space, observing the predominant morphology, and recording the chain attributes and Weissenberg conditions associated with that region, one can, in principle, design precursor chains that are likely to form the target morphology.

3.2 Unsupervised learning reveals property–morphology relationships

To explore how precursor chain variables affect final structures, we map the dominant value of each input feature across the embedding space. Specifically, in Fig. 4, we annotate (by color) each SCNP configuration in the embedding space with system attributes. We also color by R_g to verify the trend between position and R_g noted in Fig. 2a and compare to variation in attributes.

Fig. 4 reveals several broad trends with respect to the studied parameters. The connection between R_g and embedding space location is fairly smooth, shifting from smaller values on one side to larger values on the other (Fig. 4a). Higher f generally produces more compact conformations (Fig. 4b), and $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T}$ tends to correlate with larger R_g , although there is considerable overlap between $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T} = 5$ and $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T} = 10$ (Fig. 4c). The effect of N is less pronounced. While the high- R_g region is primarily populated by long chains ($N = 150$), a subset of short chains ($N = 50$) on the right side of the embedding space also exhibits large R_g (Fig. 4d). Cross-referencing between Fig. 4b and c reveals that these high- R_g short chains have low f and high $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T}$, suggesting that linker fraction and bending rigidity can overshadow chain length N in determining morphological outcomes. This is consistent with the wormlike-chain relation proposed by Benoit and Doty,^{64,65}

$$R_g^2 = \frac{L_c L_p}{3} - L_p^2 + \frac{2L_p^3}{L_c} \left[1 - \frac{L_p}{L_c} \left(1 - e^{-L_c/L_p} \right) \right], \quad (19)$$

which shows that for a persistence length L_p and contour length L_c , $R_g \propto \sqrt{L_c}$ if $L_c \gg L_p$. Since $L_c \propto N$, a change in

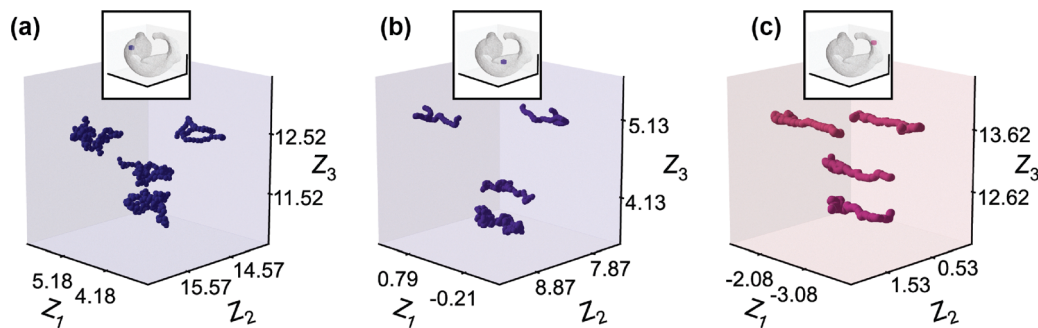


Fig. 3 Representative regions of the embedding space and corresponding SCNP morphologies. (a) Globular chains at low Z_1 . (b) Semi-elongated structures at intermediate Z_1 . (c) Elongated rod-like morphologies at high Z_1 . Insets indicate the location of each zoomed-in region within the embedding space.



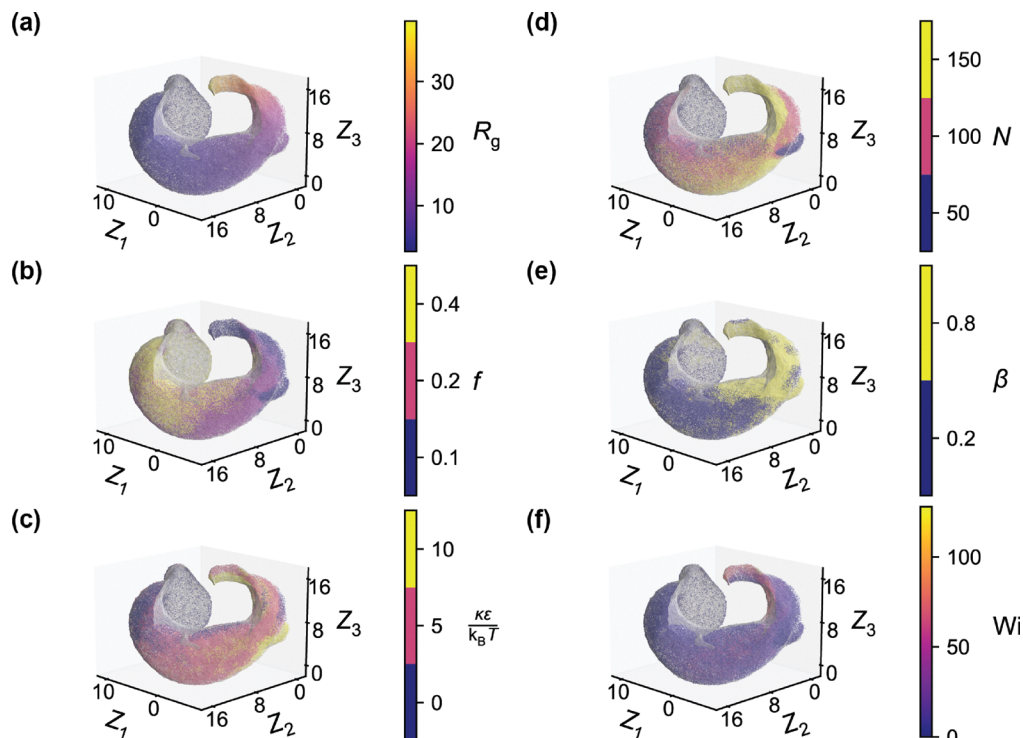


Fig. 4 Correlation between precursor properties (b)–(f) and embedding space regions. Points are colored by the median within a small radius. Panels show the embedding colored by: (a) radius of gyration, R_g (included to illustrate how precursor chain properties map to structural outcomes), (b) linker fraction, f , (c) reduced stiffness, $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T}$, (d) degree of polymerization, N , (e) relative linker blockiness, β , and (f) Weissenberg number, Wi .

N is expected to yield a comparably small change in R_g as N becomes large.

Beyond these broad trends, the arrangement of linker beads along the backbone plays a smaller role. Examining the effect of β (Fig. 4e) reveals that regions with higher R_g often display blockier arrangements, but numerous exceptions imply that β has less influence than other features. Finally, when SCNPs are under shear, the Weissenberg number (Fig. 4f) shows a weak positive relationship with R_g , but the visual correlation is less pronounced compared to other inputs, particularly f or $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T}$.

However, because shear is an external condition rather than a parameter determined by precursor chemistry, it merits consideration as a means to bias morphological outcomes^{31,66,67} when precursor chemistry is constrained.

3.3 Analysis of individual parameter effects on morphology

From Fig. 4a–c, f and $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T}$ appear strongly correlated with R_g . Motivated by this qualitative observation, we aim to more clearly assess influence by examining the marginal distribution of the size-contour ratio, $\frac{R_g}{L_c}$, with respect to f and $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T}$. The marginal distribution of a variable describes its overall variability and central tendency by averaging over other variables, thereby conveying the isolated behavior of that variable irrespective of any dependencies.

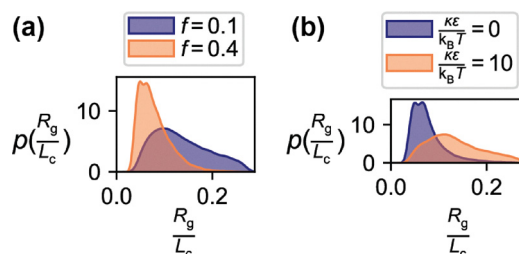


Fig. 5 Marginal distributions of the dimensionless radius of gyration, $\frac{R_g}{L_c}$, for SCNPs with (a) linker fraction $f = \{0.1, 0.4\}$ and (b) backbone stiffness $\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T} = \{0, 10\}$.

Fig. 5 shows that as the linker fraction increases, the distribution shifts toward smaller $\frac{R_g}{L_c}$ values and narrows, reflecting more compact configurations (Fig. 5a); this behavior aligns with previous findings by Patel *et al.*⁴ In contrast, increasing chain stiffness $\left(\frac{\kappa\epsilon}{k_B T}\right)$ pushes the distribution toward larger values and broadens it, indicating that stiffer chains tend to remain more extended (Fig. 5b). This result contrasts with the findings of Moreno *et al.*, who observed that stiffer chains formed more compact structures;²⁷ however, Moreno *et al.* based cross-link formation solely on a distance criterion between linker beads, whereas we adopt both distance and angle-based criteria.⁴



We speculate that this discrepancy arises from our inclusion of an angle criterion during bond formation. In the model of Moreno *et al.*, cross-links form solely based on the spatial proximity of linker beads, with the additional restriction that linkers bound to directly adjacent backbone beads cannot react with one another. However, this still permits reactions between linkers attached to backbone beads separated by only one monomer (*i.e.*, neighbor + 1 linkers). Among flexible chains, such short-range reactions rapidly deplete available linkers, thereby hindering global chain collapse. Steric constraints in stiff chains inhibit these local reactions, permitting the formation of longer-range cross-links. By contrast, our model imposes both distance- and angle-based criteria for bond formation. This combined requirement suppresses near-neighbor reactions irrespective of backbone stiffness, thereby enabling long-range cross-linking in flexible chains. Fig. S10a shows that disabling the angle criterion, as in the approach of Moreno *et al.*, yields more extended morphologies compared to those we obtained.

Next, we quantify the relative importance of each input feature in determining the fully cross-linked morphology. To do so, we fit a third-order polynomial, using system parameters as dependent variables, to predict the median $\frac{R_g}{L_c}$, $\left(\frac{R_g}{L_c}\right)$. We then assess feature importance by randomly shuffling each variable one at a time, refitting the model, and recording the change in the coefficient of determination R^2 (feature permutation). This process is repeated 1000 times per feature to ensure robustness; variables that cause a larger change in R^2 are considered more influential.

Fig. 6a shows that this model achieves strong predictive performance. This suggests that the dimensionless quantities

are meaningfully connected to the size-contour ratio, and that evaluating the importance of these features for model predictions may be more likely connected to the underlying physical trends as well. Following this, Fig. 6b shows that f has the greatest impact, while β has the least influence under the simulated conditions. These results are consistent with findings from Patel *et al.*⁴ who reported that linker fraction has a stronger influence on morphological outcomes than blockiness. Notably, the Weissenberg number, which depends on relaxation time (Fig. S2) and shear rate, plays a greater role in determining morphology than blockiness. This is despite the latter being an intrinsic property of the chain and shear rate being an externally imposed condition.

To visualize the combined effect of the three most influential variables on $\left(\frac{R_g}{L_c}\right)$, we consider the design space spanned by those features in Fig. 6c, which conveys a clear trend. Namely, $\left(\frac{R_g}{L_c}\right)$ decreases (color change from yellow/orange towards red/purple) when transitioning from short, stiff chains with low linker fraction (bottom left) to long, flexible chains with higher linker fraction (upper right). This confirms these parameters as dominant determinants of morphology. In addition, decreasing f or increasing κ tends to increase variability (increasing size of spheres). The implication is that flexible precursor chains with a high fraction of crosslinking moieties consistently produce compact morphologies, whereas chains with either high stiffness or a low linker fraction yield SCNPs with more variable structures. These trends are similar to those found in morphology dispersity measures proposed by Patel *et al.*⁴ but now observed for SCNPs formed under shear flow.

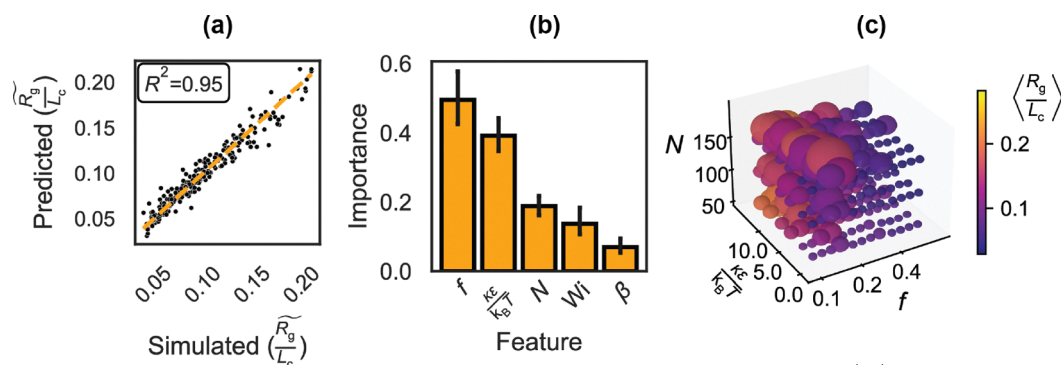


Fig. 6 Analysis of importance of input parameters based on polynomial regression. (a) Predicted versus actual $\left(\frac{R_g}{L_c}\right)$. Each data point corresponds to the set of chains that share the same standard parameter space values. (b) Parameter importance by feature permutation. The data provides the median R^2 change from 1000 random shuffles per variable, with error bars indicating the interquartile range. A larger value indicates greater importance. (c) Three-dimensional scatter of the top three predictors f , $\frac{\kappa}{k_B T}$, and N , in which the color of each sphere denotes $\left(\frac{R_g}{L_c}\right)$ and its radius corresponds to the interquartile range. $\left(\frac{R_g}{L_c}\right)$ is computed for each point in the standard parameter space, and spheres are spaced slightly to separate each (β , Wi) combination associated with the same $\left(f, \frac{\kappa}{k_B T}, N\right)$.



3.4 Influence of chain characteristics on shear-induced morphological changes

We next demonstrate how the effect of shear on morphology depends on precursor chain characteristics by specifically contrasting systems formed with $Wi = 0$ versus $Wi > 0$. Fig. 7a and

b illustrates cases where shear increases or decreases $\left(\frac{\bar{R}_g}{L_c}\right)$, respectively. In the first case, which relates to flexible precursor chains with a low linker fraction, shear leads to more extended conformations (Fig. 7c and d). Under quiescent conditions ($Wi = 0$), linker beads can more easily react due to the flexibility of the chain. However, under flow, shear stress exerts a force on the chain, stretching it into an elongated conformation rarely observed under quiescent conditions. This alignment reduces

the likelihood of cross-linking by increasing the total distance between reactive sites while shear is maintained.

In the second case, which relates to precursor chains with high stiffness and a high linker fraction, shear promotes more globular structures (Fig. 7e and f). We speculate that this effect results from the competition between shear stress and backbone rigidity. Without shear, stiffness inhibits reactive moieties from coming into proximity, even at high linker fractions. However, under shear, the velocity gradient induces tumbling and transient bending as the chain aligns with the flow direction. This shear-induced flexing occurs because, at high Wi , the applied stress overcomes the bending potential of the chain, drawing reactive sites closer together and increasing the number of cross-links. Consequently, we observe more compact structures relative to similar chains under quiescent

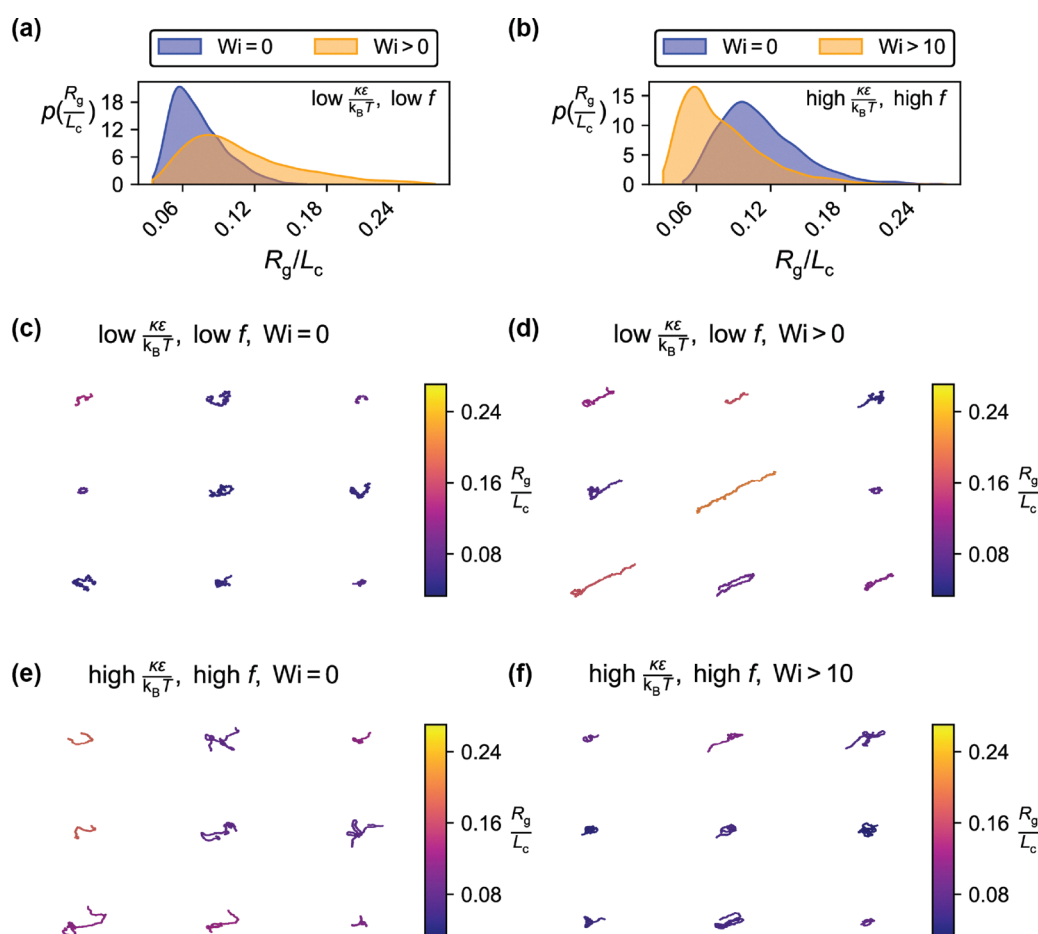


Fig. 7 Analysis of the effect of shear on SCNPs. Observed distributions of $\frac{R_g}{L_c}$ for SCNPs formed under quiescent conditions ($Wi = 0$) and in shear flow ($Wi > 0$) for precursor chains with (a) flexible chains with few reactive linkers ($\frac{KE}{k_B T} = 0, f = 0.1$) and (b) stiff chains with a high density of reactive linkers ($\frac{KE}{k_B T} = 10, f = 0.4$). In (a), nonzero Wi raises the median relative to quiescent conditions; in (b), nonzero Wi lowers the median. Representative configurations of SCNPs with low $\left(\frac{KE}{k_B T}, f\right)$ (i.e., the same attributes as in panel a) under (c) no shear and (d) shear conditions. These SCNPs tend to be globular under quiescent conditions but stretch under shear. Representative configurations of SCNPs with high $\left(\frac{KE}{k_B T}, f\right)$ (i.e., the same attributes as in panel b) under (e) no shear and (f) shear conditions. These SCNPs tend to exhibit tadpole and necklace-like shapes at $Wi = 0$ but become more compact at elevated Wi .



conditions. This counterintuitive trend is consistent with the mean-field model of Winkler for semiflexible polymers in shear, which predicts that increasing shear rate causes semiflexible chains to behave more like flexible chains.⁶⁸ Experimental studies on actin filaments in shear further support this interpretation, as they directly reveal buckling, high-curvature U-turns, and snaking motions that transiently bring backbone segments separated by large contour distances into contact.^{35,69} Thus, even though shear is not the dominant factor controlling morphology, it can nonetheless bias outcomes across precursor chains with shared attributes. While synthesis of SCNPs under shear flow has not yet been systematically explored, such conditions are naturally present in many polymer processing environments. Our simulations therefore provide a conceptual framework for how shear could influence SCNPF formation and open avenues for future experimental investigation.

3.5 Persistent effects of non-equilibrium cross-linking

To determine whether shear applied during cross-linking has a persistent effect on SCNPF topology, we examine how f , $\frac{KE}{k_B T}$, and Wi affect the distribution of topological domain sizes within the SCNPF. A topological domain in an SCNPF comprises all monomeric units between the two most distant reacted linkers. Consequently, SCNPFs with only a few topological domains (and large domain sizes) usually possess highly crosslinked, dense network structures, whereas those with many domains (and lesser domain sizes) exhibit more fragmented and loosely connected architectures.

Fig. 8a shows that for all $\frac{KE}{k_B T} \geq 5$ for $N = 150$, increasing Wi shifts the distribution toward larger domain sizes; equivalent analyses for $\frac{KE}{k_B T} = 10$ are provided in the SI, Fig. S5.

We speculate that general increase in topological domain size at elevated Wi occurs because shear facilitates contacts between contour-distant moieties. Accordingly, applying shear during cross-linking may promote larger loop formation in systems with high backbone rigidity. Moreover, we find that under both low and high Wi , increasing f shifts the distribution toward larger domain sizes. We also find that for $f = 0.4$, increasing $\frac{KE}{k_B T}$ increases the median topological domain size, consistent with Moreno *et al.*²⁷ These results collectively highlight shear flow as a valuable tool for systematically tuning topological connectivity for precursor chains with high stiffness or high linker fraction.

We next evaluate whether shear applied during cross-linking has a persistent effect on SCNPF morphology. To do so, we first extract the SCNPF configurations obtained under shear, then continue the simulations under quiescent conditions until the structures equilibrate. The relaxed morphologies are subsequently projected onto the previously constructed embedding space, which includes configurations from both $Wi = 0$ and $Wi > 0$. Then, we track the difference in centroid coordinates for SCNPFs cross-linked under zero-shear *versus* high-shear conditions.

Fig. 8b shows that, for chains with identical $\left(f, \frac{KE}{k_B T}, N, \beta\right)$, cross-linking under shear and then relaxing under quiescent conditions yields average morphologies that are distinct from

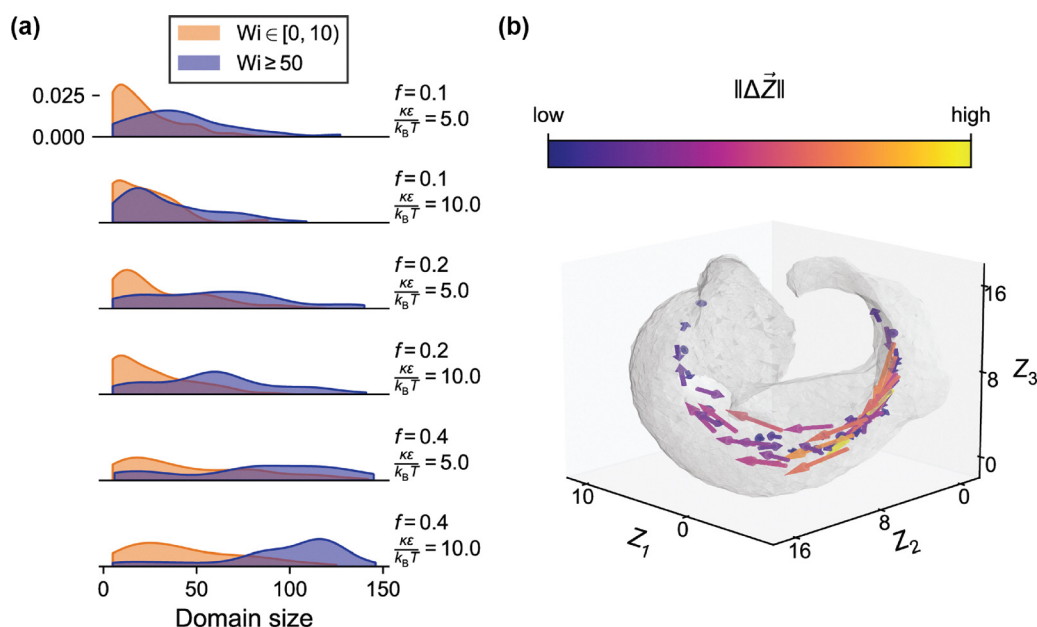


Fig. 8 Examination of shear-induced changes to morphology at quiescent conditions. (a) Observed distributions of SCNPF topological domain sizes for selected linker fraction f and stiffness parameters $\frac{KE}{k_B T}$; all chains have $N = 150$ beads. Low Weissenberg number ($Wi < 10$) is shown in orange; high ($Wi \geq 50$) in blue. Y-Axis bounds are consistent across all plots. (b) Representative sampling of displacement of embedding-space centroids between SCNPFs cross-linked at $Wi = 0$ and at the maximum simulated Wi for each parameter set. Arrows originate at the $Wi = 0$ centroids and point to the high- Wi centroids. Color encodes the displacement magnitude as another guide to the eye.



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relation of polymer stiffness parameter κ to persistence length; computation of relaxation time; validation of reaction protocol; topological domain sizes; and relaxation under quiescent conditions. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d5sm00729a>.

The data associated with this study is publicly accessible as a dataset, SCNP-Shearflow-10k, deposited in the Zenodo data based under accession code <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17203738>. Relevant code and simulation files associated with this study are available at <https://github.com/webbtheosim/md-simulation-files/tree/main/2025-scnp-shear>.

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