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Circularity in polymers: addressing performance and sustainability challenges using dynamic covalent chemistries

Dynamic polymeric materials are uniquely positioned to enable plastics waste reduction thanks to chemical innovations, advances in thermomechanical models, and the emergence of economic and environmental assessments of materials circularity. This review presents a multidisciplinary overview of the challenges and opportunities towards the design of sustainable and recyclable macromolecular materials for a circular economy via advances in dynamic covalent chemistry. Cover artwork was created by Kelly Walker.

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Circularity in polymers: addressing performance and sustainability challenges using dynamic covalent chemistries

Tianwei Yan, ^{ab} Alex H. Balzer, ^{ab} Katie M. Herbert, ^{*b} Thomas H. Epps, III ^{*abcd} and LaShanda T. J. Korley ^{*abcd}

The circularity of current and future polymeric materials is a major focus of fundamental and applied research, as undesirable end-of-life outcomes and waste accumulation are global problems that impact our society. The recycling or repurposing of thermoplastics and thermosets is an attractive solution to these issues, yet both options are encumbered by poor property retention upon reuse, along with heterogeneities in common waste streams that limit property optimization. Dynamic covalent chemistry, when applied to polymeric materials, enables the targeted design of reversible bonds that can be tailored to specific reprocessing conditions to help address conventional recycling challenges. In this review, we highlight the key features of several dynamic covalent chemistries that can promote closed-loop recyclability and we discuss recent synthetic progress towards incorporating these chemistries into new polymers and existing commodity plastics. Next, we outline how dynamic covalent bonds and polymer network structure influence thermomechanical properties related to application and recyclability, with a focus on predictive physical models that describe network rearrangement. Finally, we examine the potential economic and environmental impacts of dynamic covalent polymeric materials in closed-loop processing using elements derived from techno-economic analysis and life-cycle assessment, including minimum selling prices and greenhouse gas emissions. Throughout each section, we discuss interdisciplinary obstacles that hinder the widespread adoption of dynamic polymers and present opportunities and new directions toward the realization of circularity in polymeric materials.

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^aDepartment of Chemical & Biomolecular Engineering, University of Delaware, Newark 19716, Delaware, USA. E-mail: twyan@udel.edu; ahbalzer@udel.edu; lkorley@udel.edu; thepps@udel.edu

^bCenter for Plastics Innovation (CPI), University of Delaware, Newark 19716, Delaware, USA. E-mail: herbertk@udel.edu

^cDepartment of Materials Science and Engineering, University of Delaware, Newark 19716, Delaware, USA

^dCenter for Research in Soft matter and Polymers (CRiSP), University of Delaware, Newark, 19716, Delaware, USA

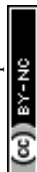


Tianwei Yan received a BS in Chemistry from Peking University in 2016. He completed his PhD in 2021 at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign under the supervision of Prof. Damien Guironnet. His work primarily focused on the synthesis of polyolefin-based block copolymers. In the summer of 2021, he started a postdoctoral position under Prof. Thomas H. Epps, III and

Prof. LaShanda T. J. Korley in the Center for Plastics Innovation (CPI) at the University of Delaware, where he works on valorization of plastics waste.



Alex H. Balzer received a BS in Chemical Engineering from North Carolina State University in 2015. He completed his PhD at Georgia Institute of Technology in 2022 under the supervision of Prof. Natalie Stingelin. His work focused on structure-property interrelations for polymers in photonics and electronics. Alex joined CPI at the University of Delaware in 2022 as a postdoctoral researcher working on valorizing plastics waste.



Introduction

Polymeric materials are indispensable in modern society due to their high strength-to-weight ratio and durability.¹ Over the past ~70 years, plastics use and production have outgrown those of most other man-made materials, such as cement and steel,^{2,3} and ~390 million tons of plastics were produced globally in 2021.⁴ That amount is expected to grow exponentially over the next 30 years under various production scenarios.^{4,5}

Accompanying this rapid growth of plastics are the negative global impacts derived from the linear economy model, in which raw materials are collected, transformed into products, and eventually discarded as waste.⁶ Additionally, the majority of plastics production consumes non-renewable natural resources, and the current handling of post-consumer products results in further resource depletion,^{7,8} waste accumulation,⁹ and environmental (micro)plastics contamination.^{10–12} In response to these concerns, efforts have intensified to generate

a more circular, closed-loop plastics consumption model.¹³ Within the closed-loop framework, one approach to minimize virgin resource input and waste accumulation is to adopt a reduce, reuse, remanufacture, and recycle system (Fig. 1).^{13–16}

Although achievable in principle,^{17–21} several critical challenges prevent fully closed-loop circularity for polymer plastics waste.^{22–25} For example, thermosets (*e.g.*, epoxy resin, vulcanized rubber) comprise ~20 wt% of manufactured polymeric materials and are generally considered unrecyclable.^{26–28} The permanently crosslinked architecture of thermosets imbues these materials with solvent resistance and increased mechanical robustness; however, this structure also eliminates the ability to reprocess the networks *via* most mechanical or chemical means.^{27,29} Thus, thermoset-based polymers are typically landfilled.^{26,30} In contrast, thermoplastics (*e.g.*, plastic bottles, films) are considered more recyclable using the aforementioned approaches.³¹ In thermoplastics, polymer chains associate mainly by intermolecular forces and can flow at elevated temperatures, yet polymer chains can irreversibly cleave or crosslink during mechanical recycling.^{22,32} The addition of virgin polymer is required to regenerate products with comparable properties to the original polymeric materials, which undermines full circularity.^{14,22}

Another major obstacle to the circularity of polymeric materials is the unfavorable cost of recycling *vs.* virgin feedstock production.¹⁶ This high cost, present in both mechanical and chemical recycling, is the result of multiple factors, including waste collection, sorting, and total energy consumption.³³ For example, sorting is necessary to separate different plastics and avoid significant property reduction of mechanically-recycled materials as a result of mixed waste.^{20,34} During chemical recycling, additives and impurities in real plastics waste also can adversely affect catalyst activity, decreasing process efficiency and increasing total energy demand.^{22,35–40} These recycling costs are rarely recovered in the value of recycled materials, leading to low recycling rates of plastics (*e.g.*, 10 wt% for high-density polyethylene (HDPE), 5 wt% for low-density polyethylene



Katie M. Herbert received her BS (2011) and MS (2013) in Chemistry from Central Michigan University. She completed her PhD in Molecular Engineering at the University of Chicago (2019) and continued her studies at the University of Colorado Boulder as a Postdoctoral Associate (2019–2022). Her research focused on the design and synthesis of dynamic covalent and supramolecular polymer

networks targeting multi-responsive materials for applications that included adhesives, robotics, and cell culture. In March 2022, she joined CPI at the University of Delaware as the Scientific Program Manager.



Thomas H. Epps, III is the Allan & Myra Ferguson Distinguished Professor of Chemical & Biomolecular Engineering at the University of Delaware and holds a joint appointment in Materials Science & Engineering. Prof. Epps is the Director of Center for Hybrid, Active, and Responsive Materials (CHARM) and the Center for Research in Soft matter & Polymers (CRiSP). He is also the

Deputy Director of CPI. His research interests include renewable chemicals and polymers from biomass and polymer waste streams, ion-conducting nanostructured materials, polymer thin films, and self-assembling polymers for nucleic acid delivery.



LaShanda T. J. Korley is a Distinguished Professor of Materials Science & Engineering at the University of Delaware and holds a joint appointment in the Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering. Prof. Korley is the Director of CPI and the Co-Director of CHARM. She is also the Associate Director of CRiSP. Her research focuses on bio-inspired materials, film and fiber

manufacturing, plastics recycling and upcycling, stimuli-responsive composites, fiber-reinforced hydrogels, and renewable materials derived from biomass.



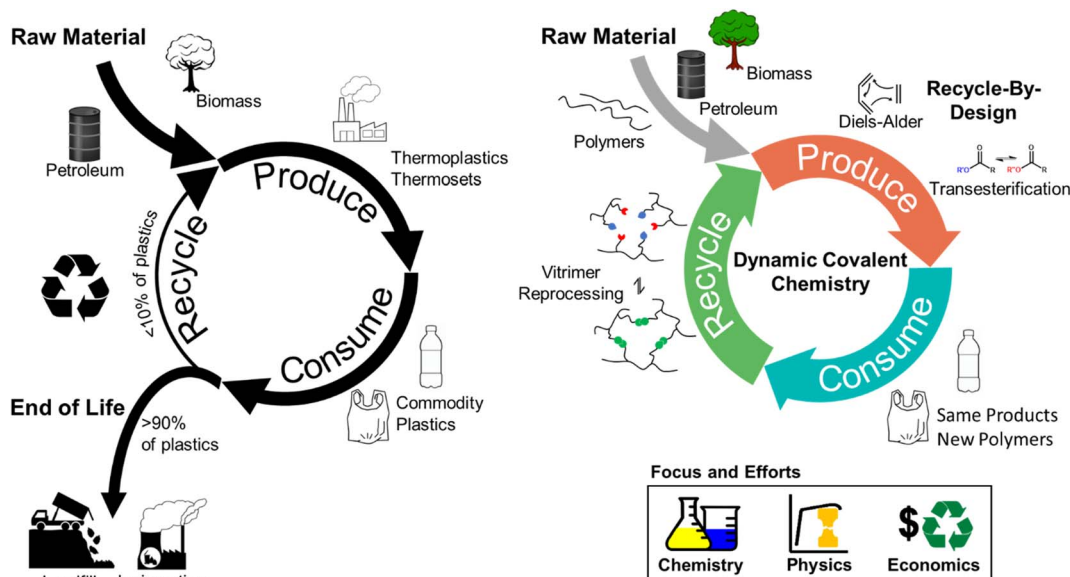


Fig. 1 The circularity challenge. (Left) Conventional recycling efforts result in less than 10 wt% of plastics being recycled and over 90 wt% of plastics being landfilled or incinerated. Commodity plastics and plastic products are produced from petroleum- and bio-based feedstocks; however, challenges in conventional recycling processes limit full circularity. Recycling rates are illustrated by a thinner recycling arrow vs. end of life. (Right) Closed-loop circularity realized by dynamic covalent chemistries leads to increased retention of plastics in the production and consumption cycle. Polymeric materials are designed for specific recycling conditions through dynamic covalent chemistries, such as Diels–Alder and transesterification. Feedstocks can include petroleum, biomass, and existing commodity polymers. The same plastic products are produced using the new dynamic covalent chemistry-based polymers and reprocessed through reversible bond-breaking and reforming. Interdisciplinary efforts, including an expanded suite of available chemistries, structure–property relationships, and economic/environmental assessments, are still needed to realize the widespread implementation of dynamic covalent chemistry in closed-loop circularity.

(LDPE), less than 1 wt% for polystyrene (PS), polypropylene (PP), or poly(vinyl chloride) (PVC) in the U.S.),^{41,42} motivating the need for innovative recycling strategies.

Dynamic covalent chemistry (DCvC) in polymeric materials provides a synthetic pathway to address circularity challenges, including unrecyclable networks and irreversible chemical changes (Fig. 1).^{21,43,44} The characteristic high reversibility and stimuli-responsiveness of DCvC^{45–47} permit bond breaking and reforming during the recycling of corresponding modified polymeric networks (*e.g.*, dynamically-crosslinked epoxy resins),^{48,49} unlike conventional thermosets. Furthermore, the irreversible structural changes and subsequent property deterioration from conventional recycling approaches can be mitigated or even circumvented by DCvCs. For example, industrially recycled poly(ethylene terephthalate) (PET) suffers from property deterioration (*e.g.*, after 2 cycles, the melt viscosity decreased by 50%) due to thermal and shear degradation during the extrusion process,^{16,50} whereas a DCvC-modified PET with reconfigurable ester linkages displays reprocessability with minimal mechanical property loss over 3 cycles.^{51,52} Finally, DCvC can reduce recycling costs associated with reprocessing conditions, separations, and end-product valorization. The bond activity and tunable nature of DCvCs allow polymeric materials to be recycled at lower temperatures (*e.g.*, sterically hindered urea bonds and alkoxyamine can lower the reprocessing temperatures of corresponding materials from over 140 °C to less than 40 °C), decreasing energy requirements.^{53–56} Beyond thermal reprocessing, DCvC provides opportunities to

recycle plastics *via* selective dissolution and/or depolymerization under mild conditions. For example, a boroxine-crosslinked polymer is recoverable *via* depolymerization in an ethanol/*N*-methylpyrrolidone (NMP) solvent mixture at 30 °C, but remains suitable for many applications due to its mechanical strength, thermal stability, and hydrophobicity.^{57–59} The tunability of DCvC allows for potential implementation within current industrial manufacturing processes, leading to reduced investment in additional infrastructure.^{60,61} In some cases, DCvC incorporation has even been shown to improve select material properties (*e.g.*, chemical sensing, shape memory effects),^{44,62} adding value to offset the recycling costs.⁶³

Although the implementation of DCvC in polymeric materials is promising, there remain practical challenges (*e.g.*, processing condition development, cost) before this strategy can be extended to the broad range of applications and recycling conditions inherent to polymer production. The synthetic design of DCvC for incorporation into polymeric materials must tailor properties to fit industry-level (re)processing requirements,⁴⁴ such as fast stress relaxation⁶⁴ and robustness, after repeated recycling.⁶⁵ The balance between dimensional stability during application and material flow during reprocessing in dynamic polymeric materials is a challenge as the overall relaxation rates are dictated by DCvC bond reconfiguration and polymer chain motion.⁴⁷ Thus, a fundamental understanding of structure–property relationships and physical models for DCvC-based polymers is necessary to predict performance and to develop appropriate (re)processing conditions to enable



circularity.⁶⁶ To align academic advances with wide-scale adoption, the generation of required data sets (*e.g.*, reprocessing temperatures, performance after multiple cycles, relevant reagents) is pivotal but currently limited.²² Techno-economic analysis (TEA) and life-cycle assessment (LCA) will be critical to evaluate the costs and environmental impacts during the production/recycling processes of DCvC-containing polymers.

In this review, we describe the role and associated challenges of DCvCs in the development of closed-loop, recyclable polymer materials. Many reviews highlight synthetic advances in DCvCs and dynamic polymers;^{67–71} thus, that topic is not extensively covered herein. Instead, we focus on the application of these motifs towards circular polymers. First, we briefly summarize the key features of DCvCs and examine how each feature can be leveraged to promote the circularity of polymeric materials. Next, we outline the advantages and challenges in DCvC for both recycle-by-design polymers and existing commodity polymers. Then, we discuss the thermomechanical properties that impact dynamic covalent polymers from the perspective of their underlying polymer physics, which can guide the design and optimization of recycling processes. Finally, we highlight the practical limitations and opportunities toward the implementation of dynamic covalent chemistries in the circular economy using elements derived from economic and environmental studies (TEA and LCA), including minimum selling price and greenhouse gas emissions. By considering all facets of DCvC-containing polymer recycling, we provide a more comprehensive viewpoint on enhancing the circularity of polymeric materials.

Dynamic covalent chemistry for polymeric material design

The concept of dynamic covalent chemistry was described by Rowan *et al.* in 2002,⁴⁵ as an extension of supramolecular chemistry to the covalent level. DCvC proceeds by the equilibration process of bond breaking and reforming, which leads to the efficient formation of products under thermodynamic control.⁴⁵ At the molecular level, these bonds undergo reversible exchange without unwanted side reactions,⁴⁵ making DCvC attractive in many arenas, including drug delivery,^{72,73} robotics,^{44,74} sensors,^{75,76} and recycle-by-design polymers.^{21,77,78}

In general, dynamic bonds are designed with three key properties in mind: thermodynamic reaction equilibrium, reaction rate, and stimuli-responsiveness (Fig. 2). The reaction equilibrium defines the reversibility of the bond, and the equilibrium constant, K , is exponentially proportional to the change in free energy upon product formation, or ΔG . Structural design strategies (*e.g.*, altering steric hindrances,⁵³ electronic effects⁷⁹) can tune this equilibrium, providing pathways to develop additional DCvC reactions and modulate the dimensional stability of the resulting material in corresponding applications. One example is the use of a hindered urea bond to alter the equilibrium of C–N bonds in polyureas and poly(urethane-ureas).⁵³ Although an unmodified urea bond is quite stable, the hindrance imposed on the nitrogen atom by bulky

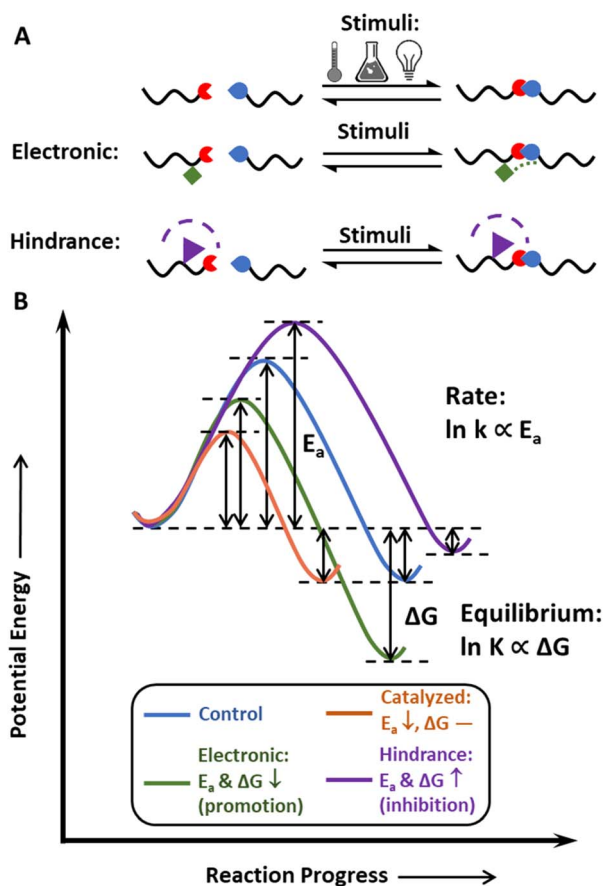


Fig. 2 (A) Generic dynamic covalent chemistry scheme related to equilibrium control through electronic/steric effects. (B) Control of reaction equilibrium and rate (rate constant: k) via steric hindrance and electronic effects. Blue: control. Orange: catalyzed. Green: electronic effects (promote the reaction in this case). Purple: steric effects (inhibit the reaction in the case shown in (A)).

alkyl groups weakens the C–N bond by disturbing the coplanarity and conjugation effect of the carbonyl and amine groups, resulting in reversible, dynamic urea bonds⁸⁰ and leading to reprocessable networks crosslinked by these bonds.⁸¹ In another illustration of the impact of equilibrium on material properties, imine-based dynamic covalent networks exhibited improved water-resistance due to the conjugative effect of C=N–X structures *via* the incorporation of electron-withdrawing functionalities,^{79,82,83} yet also maintained good recyclability *via* dynamic bond exchange in solution.⁸⁴

Reaction equilibrium indicates the tendency of dynamic bonds to exchange, whereas reaction rate determines the time required for these bonds to rearrange. To display dynamic features on the macroscopic level, the reversible reaction must achieve equilibrium within a relevant timeframe (*e.g.*, 10–10³ s for common molding procedures) after exposure to an environmental stimulus.^{66,85} The reaction rate and reprocessing time of a dynamic polymer reflect the mechanism and kinetics of the specific DCvC, denoted by the activation energy, E_a (Fig. 2B).^{86,87} Some DCvCs are intrinsically fast with a relatively low E_a . For example, under mild temperatures



a reprocessable epoxy resin with 1,5,7-triazabicyclo[4.4.0]dec-5-ene decreased the reprocessing temperature by 70 °C (from 240 °C to 170 °C) with a reprocessing time of 10 min.^{97,100}

Aside from catalyst design, catalyst loading also affects reprocessing conditions, although it does not influence the activation energy of the dynamic exchange. For instance, increasing the catalyst amount from 1 mol% to 5 mol% has been shown in some cases to decrease the stress relaxation time by approximately one order of magnitude, which subsequently decreases the reprocessing time.¹¹⁴ Albeit a promising route to tailor relaxation times, economic considerations also must be taken into account during catalyst selection to balance projected cost with returns on material property improvement. Using the previous example, it is important to evaluate whether the cost to increase catalyst loading from 1 mol% to 5 mol% (*i.e.*, the cost of the catalyst itself) is offset by the expected value returned by a lower overall reprocessing time.

In addition to potential hurdles related to catalyst cost, concerns have been raised regarding catalyst compatibility, catalyst leaching, and environmental impacts.⁹⁰ These issues have motivated researchers to design catalyst-free vitrimers by inserting catalyzing functional groups directly into the dynamic covalent polymer.^{115,116} When the inserted species are incorporated in close proximity to the reaction center (Fig. 5A), this effect is referred to as neighboring group participation (NGP).^{64,117–119} For example, catalyst-free dynamic ester exchange was achieved *via* the engagement of a neighboring acid group close to the transesterification center. This structural modification resulted in the formation of transient cyclic anhydrides and free alcohols, enabling a dissociative dynamic exchange.¹¹⁵ Expanding upon this phthalate monoester mechanism, Du Prez and collaborators introduced a tertiary amine on the beta position of the hydroxyls (Fig. 5B),⁶⁴ further decreasing the relaxation times by a factor of 500 through a dual NGP mechanism (relaxation times, $\tau^* \sim 1$ s below 160 °C).⁶⁴ The resultant fast exchange and relaxation time enabled the reprocessing of chopped samples through industrially relevant processing techniques (*e.g.*, extrusion), which is a promising improvement for physical recycling at scale.^{64,91} A recent publication reported an alternative NGP transesterification *via* beta-keto activated exchange instead of neighboring acid and amine participation, allowing 5 cycles of consecutive remolding at mild conditions (*e.g.*, 70–100 °C).¹²⁰ The concept of NGP also has been introduced to optimize other DCvCs to expand the reach of recycling conditions for related materials. For example, the incorporation of a neighboring tertiary amine accelerated the boronic ester exchange by five orders of magnitude.⁸⁷ Yet another study integrated NGP-assisted silyl exchange into DCvC-modified polystyrene, increasing the reaction rate by three orders of magnitude and decreasing the corresponding reprocessing temperature by 30 °C.¹²¹ In general, these NGP approaches are a promising direction for significant rate enhancements in DCvCs while reducing the need for small-molecule catalyst additives.¹¹⁷

When incorporating the above strategies to accelerate DCvC reactions, the trade-off between exchange rates and material performance needs to be considered. Faster exchange rates in

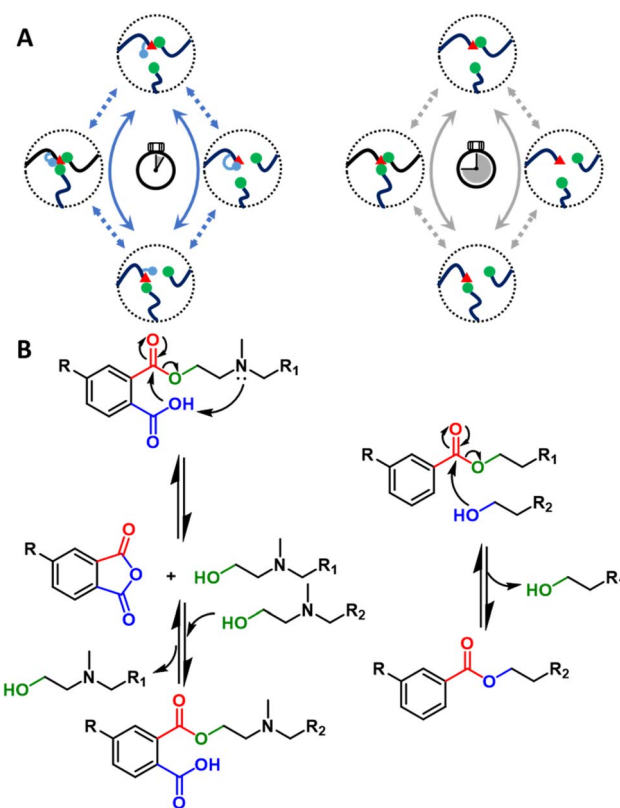


Fig. 5 (A) General NGP-assisted mechanism of DCvC (left). Non-NGP mechanism of DCvC (right). (B) Proposed NGP mechanism for rapid transesterification (left). Non-NGP transesterification (right).

DCvC-based polymeric materials can facilitate reprocessing but also lower the upper limit of operating conditions under which the material will maintain mechanical integrity. The latter negatively impacts the application potential, particularly in high-performance thermoset materials expected to function in harsh environments (*e.g.*, elevated temperatures, high mechanical stress).^{22,44,122} DCvC-based material designs that balance reprocessing conditions and target uses are crucial to enabling circularity without affecting performance.

Approaches for creep resistance in recyclable systems. Maintaining dimensional stability under operating conditions in recyclable, DCvC-based polymeric materials requires complementary approaches that specifically target reprocessability and creep resistance.⁹⁶ One strategy to enhance the creep resistance of dynamically crosslinked networks is to suppress the undesired bond exchange by increasing the DCvC E_a . According to the Arrhenius equation, a higher E_a of these reactions results in stronger temperature dependence and narrower temperature windows for activation of the corresponding DCvC.⁹⁶ For example, alkoxyamine chemistry is a well-known, dynamically reversible reaction with a high activation energy (up to 120 kJ mol⁻¹).^{62,123,124} As a result, an alkoxyamine-modified rubber network that was fully reprocessable at 140 °C behaved as a permanently crosslinked network even at elevated temperatures, displaying limited creep (0.14% at 80 °C after 2 h). Similarly, bis(dialkylamino) disulfides (R₂NS-SNR₂)



exhibited an activation energy of 110 kJ mol^{-1} , resulting in minimal creep at higher temperatures (0.07% at $70 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ after 13.9 h) as well as a steep temperature dependence (0.07% at $70 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, 1.9% at $100 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, and 12.5% at $130 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ after 13.9 h).¹⁰³

Another pathway to suppress creep is to introduce an appropriate level of permanent crosslinking.^{47,125,126} In one study, crosslinked networks containing various fractions of dynamic boronic esters and irreversible linkages demonstrated that stress relaxation and creep can be moderated by the addition of permanent crosslinks that lend increased structural integrity.¹²⁵ A hybrid network with $\sim 80 \text{ mol}\%$ permanent crosslinks suppressed the relaxation yet still permitted repeated healing.¹²⁵ In another system, an epoxy resin crosslinked *via* dynamic transesterification incorporated 40 mol% of thiol-epoxy permanent crosslinks into the network. The relaxation time of the vitrimer almost doubled, and creep was reduced by 65–71%, yet the material maintained full reprocessability *via* hot pressing.⁴⁷

It is also possible to inhibit creep *via* combinational strategies of DCvC modification and non-covalent interactions. For example, a synergistic effect was achieved in a system of vitrimers featuring dynamic imine exchange with integrated metal-complexes.¹²⁷ Adding 5 mol% of metal ions to coordinate with flexible imine bonds induced further crosslinking of the vitrimer *via* non-covalent bonding and simultaneously doubled the activation energy of dynamic imine exchange ($107.3 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$ vs. 52.3 kJ mol^{-1}). This combined approach enhanced the creep resistance by raising the initial creep temperature by $60 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ (from $60 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ to $120 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, Fig. 6).¹²⁷

Tuning equilibrium towards improved stability and reprocessability. In addition to long-term dimensional stability, recyclable polymeric materials must maintain reprocessability, healability,^{54,55} stability,⁷⁹ and strength during use.⁵³ By tailoring the equilibrium of a DCvC-based system, the resultant material can be constructed to enhance one or more of these properties. One example is the stabilization of imine bonds by electronic

conjugation.¹²⁸ The dynamic imine bond is known to dissociate in the presence of water; however, the equilibria of imine exchange and solvolysis are influenced by neighboring N or O atoms (*e.g.*, hydrazone, acyl hydrazone, oxime),⁷⁹ facilitating control over reversibility.⁷⁹ Therefore, in an effort to improve the water-resistance of imine-based dynamic covalent resins, conjugated oxime bonds (33 mol%) were introduced into the networks. The oxime-modified vitrimers demonstrated improved structural integrity in the presence of water, with reduced 24 h water uptake (weight gain of $\sim 1\%$ vs. $\sim 48\%$) when compared to unmodified networks.⁸⁴ Moreover, the oxime-modified imine vitrimers maintained their mechanical performance and chemical recyclability.⁸⁴

Tailoring the equilibrium also plays an important role in reprocessing conditions for DCvC-based polymers. For example, the homolysis temperature of alkoxyamine C–ON bonds can be adjusted from $140 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ¹²⁴ to as low as $15 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ^{54,55} by leveraging the electron-withdrawing effect of neighboring substituents. With an appropriate molecular design to shift the equilibrium, it is even possible to convert a non-dynamic reaction into a DCvC that displays reprocessability under mild conditions.⁵³ A well-known example is the hindered urea bond. A conventional urea bond is stable, but sterically hindering and twisting the C(O)–N bond facilitates dynamic dissociation and reconstruction.⁵³ Inspired by the facile amidolysis of bulky amides, Cheng and collaborators measured the equilibrium constants and rate constants of urea bond dissociation with different bulky amines.⁵³ By adjusting the bulkiness of the amines, the equilibrium constants varied by up to six orders of magnitude.⁵³ Among the investigated amines, a secondary amine containing a *tert*-butyl urea group displayed a moderately reversible equilibrium constant ($7.9 \times 10^5 \text{ M}^{-1}$) and a non-negligible dissociation rate (0.21 h^{-1} at $37 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$), indicating balanced bond stability and exchange rate.⁵³ A crosslinked poly(urethane-urea) gel containing hindered urea bonds on the main chain was prepared with a diisocyanate, a bulky diamine, and polyol

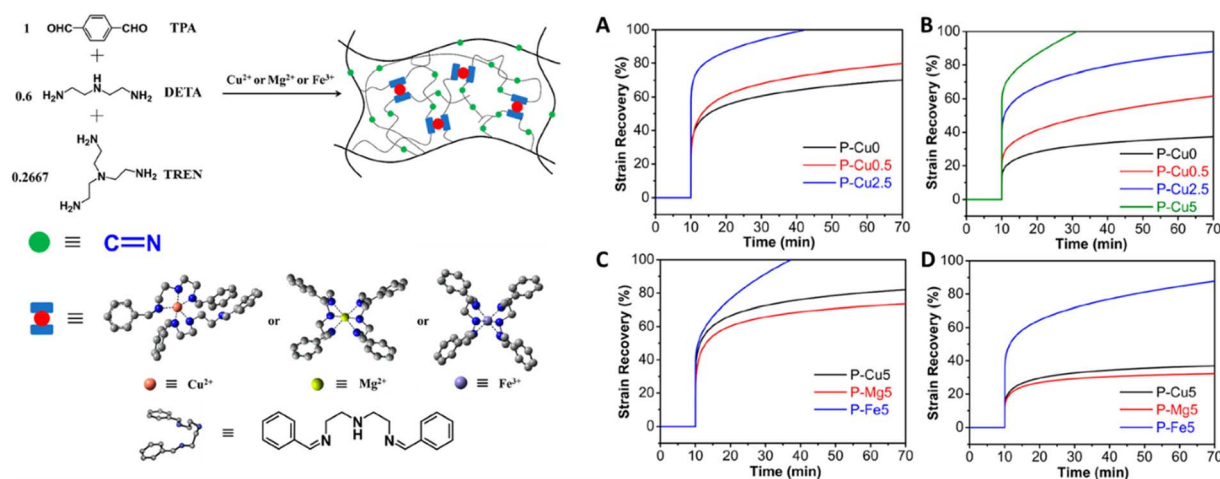


Fig. 6 (Left) Polyimine–metal complex vitrimers synthesized from terephthalaldehyde (TPA), diethylenetriamine (DETA), and tris(2-aminoethyl)amine (TREN). (Right) Strain recovery curves to show the creep response of the polyimine–metal complex vitrimers at (A) $60 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, (B) $80 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, (C) $100 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, and (D) $120 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$. Adapted from ref. 127 with permission from the American Chemical Society, copyright 2020.



crosslinkers (Fig. 7).⁵³ Self-healing (*i.e.*, the failure strain recovered to 50% at 1 h, 87% at 12 h) was achieved at 37 °C. The results revealed the importance of manipulating equilibrium as a powerful tool in designing circular polymeric materials *via* facile adjustment of chemical structures.⁵³

Cheng's work on self-healing poly(urethane-urea) gels inspired a series of recyclable polymeric networks that leverage the bulkiness of the amines to tune polymer backbone chemistry.^{81,129} A recent report highlighted the application of this hindered urea bond in a recyclable PMMA-based material.⁸¹ The PMMA-based network was crosslinked by a hindered urea-functionalized dimethacrylate and then reprocessed for three cycles to yield homogeneous films. The recycled material showed no decrease in gel content (>99%) and no significant change in tensile storage modulus, suggesting recovery of crosslink density.⁸¹

Limiting side reactions to maintain mechanical integrity.

Even with these highly engineered dynamic bonds, a large number of recyclable dynamic polymers experience diminished mechanical integrity or reduced crosslink densities after a few cycles of reprocessing.^{102,130,131} Although the recyclability of these polymers has been improved significantly in comparison to existing plastics, this loss poses limits to full circularity as the ultimate goal. One main reason for the irreversible failure of recycled dynamic polymers is that side reactions often alter the chemical composition and architecture of the polymer systems. Although DCvCs are commonly touted as reversible reactions without unwanted side reactions,⁴⁵ reprocessing of dynamic polymers can disrupt the integrity of the reversible motif. This problem can occur through permanent modification to polymer backbones.¹⁰⁷ For example, Nicolai and collaborators revealed that polyisoprene vitrimers displayed significantly deteriorated mechanical performance (*e.g.*, more than 50% tensile strength loss) after more than one reprocessing cycle (30 min, 150 °C)

due to oxidative degradation of the polyisoprene chains in air.¹⁰⁷ Although these side reactions have not caused severe issues in lab-scale polymer recycling experiments, extensive application of dynamic polymeric materials vulnerable to these unfavorable reactions may exacerbate potential long-term problems in material circulation.^{89,132} There have been limited successes in overcoming such instability issues, such as incorporating antioxidants or implementing inert gas protection to avoid backbone oxidation,¹⁰⁷ or constructing a hydrophobic environment inside the material to resist moisture,¹³³ but there is much room for improvement in this aspect.

The loss of reversibility also can be caused by the gradual consumption of dynamic functional groups.¹²² Examples of these undesirable reactions include hydrolysis of esters and isocyanates,^{89,90,134} and dimerization/trimerization of isocyanates.¹³⁵ The design of more chemically-robust DCvCs is a strategic focal point related to polymer circularity. Poly(siloxanes) represent one of the most well-known examples of robust, chemically-, and thermally-stable dynamic polymer networks.¹²¹ The equilibrium of siloxane exchange has been well-studied for almost 70 years¹³⁶ but was just recently applied to dynamic polymer systems.¹³⁷ The dynamic Si-O exchange can be initiated by silanols and enables chain reconfiguration in crosslinked poly(dimethylsiloxane) (PDMS) and other siloxane-containing networks for self-healing and recycling purposes.¹³⁷⁻¹³⁹ As one example, a siloxane-crosslinked epoxy polymer was reprocessed twice at a high temperature (220 °C) without significant change in crosslink density, suggesting sufficient thermal stability during recycling.¹³⁹ In addition to siloxanes, Si-O exchange also has played a critical role in polymers crosslinked by silyl ether linkages,^{65,121,140,141} which displayed reprocessability at elevated temperatures and thermal stability against side reactions. In a study of PE-based networks crosslinked by silyl ethers, these properties were exemplified by a high degradation temperature

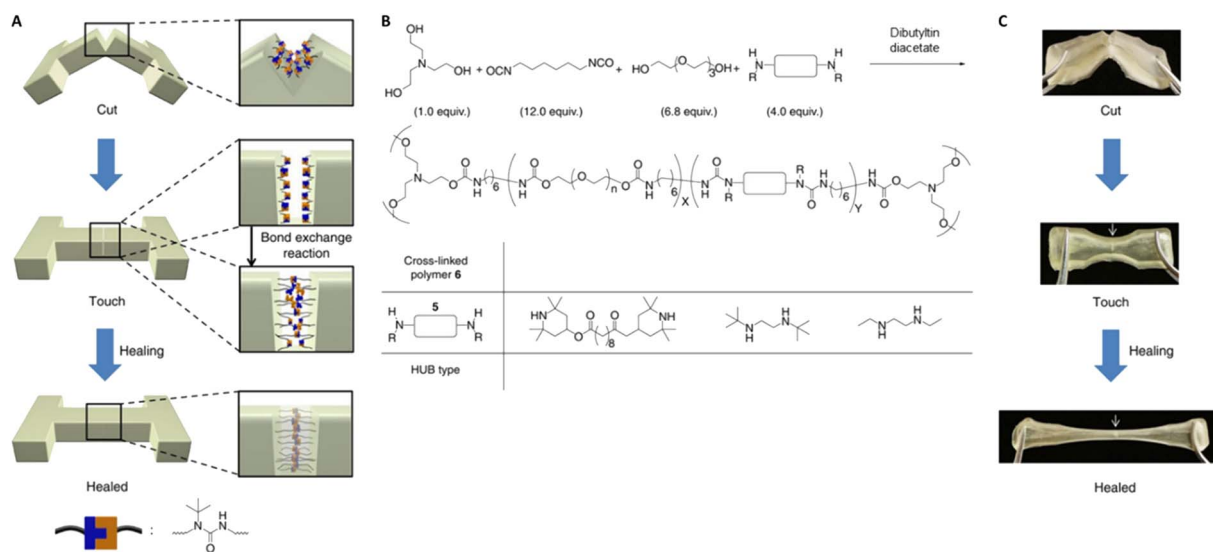


Fig. 7 Preparation and self-healing of a crosslinked poly(urethane-urea) gel with hindered urea bonds. (A) Illustration of the self-healing process *via* bond exchange. (B) Synthetic route to generate the polymer. (C) Selected snapshots during the self-healing experiment of poly(urethane-urea). The arrow indicates the cut position. Adapted from ref. 53 with permission from Springer Nature, copyright 2014.



(>400 °C), as well as nearly constant tensile strength and failure strain after three cycles of reprocessing *via* compression molding (150 °C, 400 psi, 20 min).⁶⁵

Another robust DCvC, the D–A reaction, occurs by a [4 + 2] cycloaddition mechanism to form a cyclohexene D–A adduct which can dissociate under elevated temperatures *via* a reversible pathway.⁹³ The D–A reaction is a “click” reaction that exhibits several advantages for recyclable thermosets, including excellent efficiency, selectivity, and a catalyst- and byproduct-free nature. As one example, a series of small molecule-based thermosets were prepared *via* catalyst-free D–A curing^{142–144} from monomers composed of multiple furans/maleimides linked by various spacer groups.^{142–144} The reversibility of the D–A reaction was demonstrated through continuous reprocessing for five cycles,¹⁴³ which was enabled by the D–A adducts that partially dissociate at elevated temperatures and fully recover at 80 °C during the post-curing.¹⁴³ In another illustration, a poly(hydroxyaminoether) was formed utilizing an epoxy resin crosslinked with furfurylamine and bis(maleimide).⁹⁸ This crosslinked network was recycled through compression molding, and by virtue of the dynamic reconfiguration, exhibited similar tensile strength (30.2 MPa *vs.* 30.2 MPa) and strain-at-break (159.0% *vs.* 142.7%) as compared to the original sample.⁹⁸

For situations in which side reactions may be unavoidable, strategies to minimize their effect through DCvC mechanism regulation have been demonstrated with the aid of catalysts. For example, the recycling of polyurethanes (PUs) and non-isocyanate polyurethanes (NIPUs) has been achieved (*e.g.*, 140 °C, 11 MPa for 2 h with a catalyst for reprocessing);^{145–147} however, selectivity and side reactions related to dissociative pathways hampered reprocessing without the catalyst.^{145,146} The reactions exhibited dual mechanisms involving both associative transcarbamoylation and dissociative reversible isocyanate/cyclic carbonate aminolysis.^{135,146,148} To suppress undesirable pathways, new and more efficient catalytic systems that lower reaction temperatures and balance these dynamic exchange processes have been developed to improve the circularity of PUs.¹³⁵

DCvCs with similar mechanisms to urethane transcarbamoylation such as thiourethanes, also have been investigated as crosslinks with improved control against side reactions.^{99,149,150} For example, a recyclable (110 °C, 10 MPa for 15 min) poly(thiourethane-urethane) elastomer was prepared from PU prepolymers and a trifunctional isothiocyanate crosslinker.⁹⁹ A small-molecule model study revealed that the dynamic thiourethane exchange displayed a similar dual mechanism as discussed above, such that both the dissociative reversible addition and the associative thiol exchange occurred.¹⁴⁹ Incorporation of a small excess (10 mol%) of thiol groups promoted this duality to improve material circularity by suppressing deleterious side reactions (*e.g.*, isocyanate dimerization/trimerization) that accompany the dissociative pathway.¹⁴⁹

Beyond temperature – expanding stimuli-responsiveness. In addition to a thermal stimulus in DCvC research, light is an important trigger that could enhance recyclability. One of the

advantages of using photodynamic reactions is the elimination of many side reactions initiated by heat, such as photodynamic cycloaddition.^{151–153} As one example, methyl 4-[2-(4-pyridyl) ethenyl]cinnamate crystals were photo-reversibly polymerized ($\lambda > 280$ nm, -10 °C) *via* [2 + 2] photo-dimerization. The resulting cinnamate-based polymer was depolymerized with shorter wavelength UV irradiation ($\lambda = 254$ nm, 2 °C) and then resynthesized under the same initial polymerization conditions.^{154,155} In another case, naphthalene-functionalized PMMA was photo-crosslinked with di-triazolinedione linkers *via* visible light-driven cycloaddition ($\lambda > 400$ nm).¹⁵⁶ The crosslinked/decrosslinked state was readily switched on and off by a light source, resulting in the transition between rigid and pliable forms.¹⁵⁶ This class of dynamic reactions can occur at mild temperatures in the absence of other reagents, which effectively prevents competition with side reactions. Fine control of the wavelength enables chemical selectivity over UV- or visible light-induced side reactions, as well as additional spatial and temporal tailoring for high-end processing.¹⁵⁷

Aside from suppressing side reactions, expanding the toolbox of available stimuli beyond heat broadens potential applications and recycle/reuse scenarios. One of the most versatile DCvCs is disulfide exchange. Responding to various external stimuli, such as light,⁹⁵ pH,^{158,159} redox potential,¹⁶⁰ ultrasound,¹⁶¹ pressure,¹⁶² and mechanical force,¹⁶³ the disulfide bond exhibits a responsive behavior that can be tailored to versatile reuse and recycle designs.^{95,103,164} This broad applicability is driven by the diversity of anionic or radical mechanisms in disulfide exchange or thiol-disulfide interchanges.^{158,159,165} The photo-responsiveness of disulfide bonds has been shown useful for polymer recycling *via* photo-degradation to recover monomers^{166,167} and healing^{166,168,169} through bond reconfiguration to repair scratches and cracks in the presence of UV light.^{95,170} For example, an epoxy resin utilizing a disulfide crosslinker exhibited healing after UV irradiation for 3 min,⁹⁵ demonstrating the potential contribution of disulfide chemistry to circularity by promoting repair and reuse to extend product lifetime. Thermal treatment remains an option for reprocessing disulfide networks, similar to many other DCvCs.^{103,164,172} In one study, a homogeneous film with unaltered mechanical properties could be obtained by hot-pressing (150 °C, 30 bar, 20 min) a fragmented poly(urea-urethane) elastomer containing disulfide bridges.¹⁷²

Disulfide networks also undergo decrosslinking in solution through reduction of the disulfide linkages into thiols in the presence of small molecule thiols or phosphines (*e.g.*, 50 °C, 24 h in dimethylformamide),¹⁷¹ showcasing the potential for chemical recycling.^{95,166} The recycling of DCvC-crosslinked polymers *via* selective dissolution and decrosslinking under mild conditions provides a potential opportunity to simplify sorting procedures, as a complementary strategy to mechanical recycling.^{57–59} After solvent-based reprocessing, the refabricated polymers from recovered monomer exhibited no loss in properties, leading to an ideal, circular polymer economy.⁴³ In fact, a large fraction of networks based on DCvCs, such as alkoxyamine,¹⁷³ D–A reaction,⁹⁸ transcarbamoylation,¹³¹ and thiourethane exchange, have exhibited recyclability *via* decrosslinking



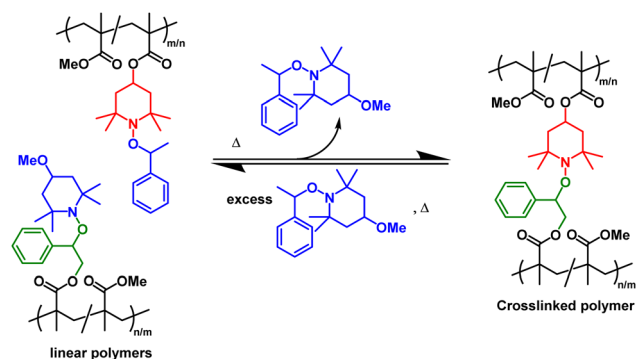
or depolymerization in solution with the assistance of the corresponding DCvC compounds.⁹⁹ For example, PMMA networks crosslinked by alkoxyamine can be dissolved with an excess of small molecule alkoxyamines to yield linear polymers, and then re-crosslinked by adding more alkoxyamine-containing PMMA to shift the equilibrium back towards network formation (Scheme 1).¹⁷³ However, the separation and purification of recovered polymer components, as well as the consumption of chemical reagents, can be limiting factors for the solution-based recycling of these dynamic covalent polymers.

To overcome the aforementioned obstacles, the use of pH and common solvents in solution-based recycling has attracted increasing attention. DCvCs, such as imines,^{174,175} boronic esters,¹⁷⁶ and boroxines,⁵⁸ are viable alternatives that don't require excess chemical consumption and related waste generation. In an example of solvolytic recyclability of imine-based dynamic covalent polymers, a DGEBA epoxy resin was cured using vanillin and *m*-xylylenediamine.¹⁷⁴ Thermal remolding of these imines led only to partial recovery of the original material strength (~40% loss). However, the imine hydrolysis under mildly acidic conditions (0.2 M HCl solution, $V_{\text{H}_2\text{O}}/V_{\text{THF}} = 2/8$, 25 °C, 8 h) and subsequent evaporation led to a defect-free recycled network with > 90% strength recovery.^{174,177} The improved properties of the chemically-recycled polymer in comparison to mechanically-recycled materials (*e.g.*, almost unaltered tensile strength, failure strain, and Young's modulus *vs.* the original network)¹⁷⁵ demonstrated that dissolution of DCvC-based polymeric materials is a promising and complementary pathway to circularity for common thermosetting materials, such as epoxy resins.^{174,175}

Boronic esters and boroxines also are popular DCvCs in trimer design because of their reversible nature at ambient temperatures and facile decrosslinking with excess alcohols.¹⁷⁶ For example, phenylboronic acid-terminated poly(aryl ether ketone) oligomers (PAEK) and (3-(3-carboxy-4-trifluoromethylphenoxy)-phenyl)boronic acid (CB) were used to design a recyclable PAEK-CB polymer.⁵⁸ The PAEK-CB polymer was fabricated in solution *via* dynamic crosslinking of boroxine, displaying good mechanical performance and

recyclability through dissolution and depolymerization in the presence of ethanol (30 °C, 1 h). Following filtration and evaporation, 90% and 93% of the chemically-intact PAEK and CB were recovered, respectively.⁵⁸ The repolymerized PAEK-CB fabricated from recycled monomers showed nearly identical mechanical properties after five continuous cycles,⁵⁸ indicating the recyclability *via* dissolution of this boroxine-crosslinked system.

A key feature in this solvent-responsive system is the ability to selectively recycle the PAEK-CB *via* depolymerization from mixed polymers, simulating a plastics waste stream (Fig. 8).⁵⁸ This selectivity plays an important role in enabling recycling in complicated, heterogeneous, mixed plastics waste streams, reducing the effort required in separation and sorting, and ultimately, minimizing the property loss of recycled polymers caused by residual contaminants.³³ Similar selective chemical recycling of DCvC networks *via* dissolution from mixed commodity polymers has been accomplished *via* diketoenamine hydrolysis and reversible nucleophilic aromatic substitution of cyanurate.^{57,59} The corresponding polymers were depolymerized and extracted in monomer form through hydrolysis (5 M H₂SO₄, 25 °C, 12 h) and base-catalyzed alcoholysis in refluxing ethanol (5 wt% K₂CO₃, 90 °C, 16 h), respectively.^{57,59} Although there is still room for improvement with respect to the time required for depolymerization, these



Scheme 1 Reversible crosslinking/decrosslinking reactions between the complementary reactive alkoxyamine units (denoted in red and green) in linear polymethacrylates precursors. The reaction is tuned by the small-molecule alkoxyamine byproduct (denoted in blue) Adapted from ref. 173 with permission from Springer Nature, copyright 2013.

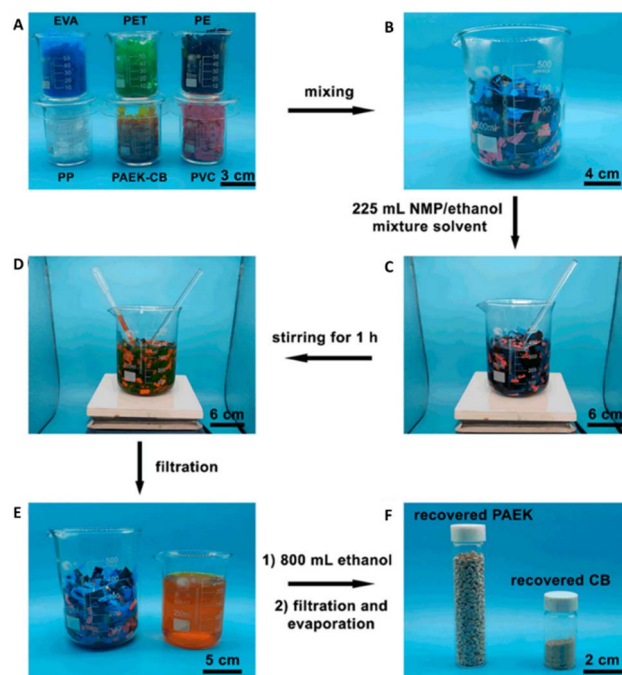


Fig. 8 Selective separation of the PAEK-CB polymer from mixed plastic waste streams. (A) PAEK-CB polymer (~8 g) and five types of commodity plastics (~42 g) were (B) combined in a beaker to generate a plastic mixture. (C) *N*-methylpyrrolidone (NMP)/ethanol was added to the plastic mixture and (D) stirred for 1 h at 30 °C. (E) The filtrate containing PAEK and CB monomers was separated from the remaining plastic solids and (F) PAEK and CB monomers were isolated from the filtrate. Adapted from ref. 58 with permission from the American Chemical Society, copyright 2022.



reprocessing, which is a common occurrence in PE mechanical recycling.¹⁶

In addition to the reprocessing of modified HDPE, the vitrimer crosslinked by dioxaborolane groups displayed efficient weldability with PMMA modified with the same DCvC, without the need for an extra compatibilizing tie layer.¹⁰⁵ The chemical compatibility of the dioxaborolane-containing polymers improved general adhesion between PMMA/PE layers, whereas the dynamic bond exchange reinforced the welded seam through the formation of covalent bridges between the two vitrimers.¹⁰⁵ The dynamic interfacial adhesion presents a promising route to recycling mixed, multi-layer plastics with reduced sorting and minimal contamination from additives (*i.e.*, compatibilizers). The strategy is complementary to the selective dissolution approach above, but both methods can simplify the sorting process of mixed dynamic polymer waste streams and reduce the cost and labor of a closed-loop framework for the plastics circular economy.¹⁸²

PP, another commodity plastic, also has been successfully valorized *via* a similar approach.¹⁸³ PP was grafted with maleic anhydride in a melt compounder and subsequently crosslinked with a tetrafunctional thiol linker in the presence of an organic base catalyst during extrusion.¹⁸³ The dynamic thioester crosslinking not only increased the tensile strength of PP, but also enabled versatile reprocessing *via* compression molding, injection molding, and fused filament fabrication 3D printing, with minimal impact on the mechanical properties (*e.g.*, tensile strength, failure strain) after several cycles, if the PP vitrimer was cooled slowly to reconstruct the crosslinks.¹⁸⁴

Dynamic crosslinking of polyolefins (*e.g.*, PE, PP, ethylene/propylene copolymer rubbers) *via* grafting of maleic anhydride has become a popular approach. Followed by subsequent functionalization of the anhydride, other types of DCvC, such as the Diels–Alder reaction,^{185,186} transesterification (Fig. 9A),^{60,182} imine exchange,¹⁸⁷ and silyl ether exchange,¹⁸⁸ have been implemented in polyolefin vitrimers. Real post-consumer polyolefins also were utilized as feedstocks for transesterification-based vitrimers to highlight the compatibility of DCvCs with additives and contaminants, revealing the potential to upgrade real plastics waste.^{60,182} Overall, polyolefin vitrimers showed comparable, or even slightly improved, strength and Young's modulus, and enhanced creep resistance induced by crosslinking *vs.* their thermoplastic precursors (Fig. 9B and C).⁶⁰

Polyolefins remain a key target for DCvC functionalization to improve recyclability; however, other commodity polymers also exhibit enhanced circularity with post-polymerization modifications. In a recent investigation, Saito and collaborators reported that the PS block in a styrene-ethylene-butylene-styrene (SEBS) block copolymer could be functionalized directly with boronic esters through iridium-catalyzed aromatic C–H borylation, followed by dynamic crosslinking with hydroxyls on the surface of silica nanoparticles to form a composite.¹⁸⁹ The dynamic exchange in this crosslinked PS network led to reprocessability *via* compression molding in air; however, the tensile strength of the DCvC-containing PS gradually diminished during recycling (~83% of original strength after three cycles) due to backbone oxidation, highlighting an area of

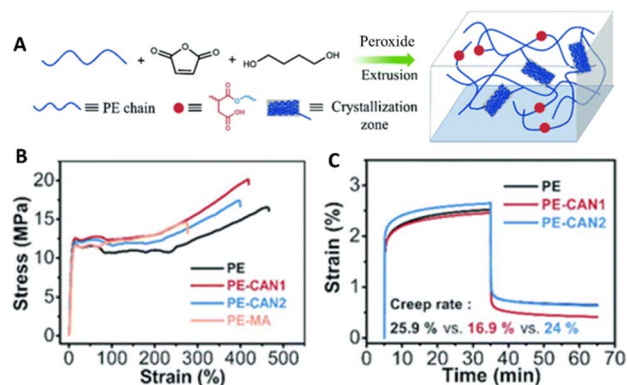


Fig. 9 Preparation and properties of maleic anhydride grafted polyethylene (PE-MA) and polyethylene covalent adaptable networks (PE CANs). (A) Scheme of preparation and structure of PE CANs. (B) Tensile testing curves of PE, PE-MA, and PE CANs. (C) Creep rates and curves at 50 °C *via* dynamic mechanical analysis (DMA) before and after modification. Adapted from ref. 60 with permission from The Royal Society of Chemistry, copyright 2021.

improvement for future studies.¹⁸⁹ In addition to the aromatic C–H activation, another study probed the use of azidoformate with dioxaborolane moieties to functionalize PS *via* an aliphatic C–H insertion mechanism of nitrenes.¹⁰⁷ The functionalization was achieved *via* compression molding and reactive extrusion, suggesting the potential to implement this method at an industrial scale.¹⁰⁷

As the world's third-most widely produced plastic,¹⁹⁰ PVC suffers from the chemical instability of C–Cl bonds and a poor recycling rate as a consequence.⁴¹ In an effort to improve the recyclability of these polymers, Yagci and collaborators reacted commercial PVC with elemental sulfur, which effectively incorporated dynamic polysulfide linkages into the network.¹⁹¹ The crosslinked PVC exhibited reprocessability *via* thermal treatment up to three cycles, demonstrating the dynamic nature induced by the polysulfide linkages.¹⁹¹ However, deleterious side reactions (*e.g.*, dehydrochlorination, irreversible crosslinking) on the PVC backbone progressively altered the polymer properties and eventually inhibited network reconfiguration after three cycles of reprocessing.¹⁹¹ Further research is needed in this area to develop DCvCs that also stabilize the PVC backbone or do not trigger main chain deterioration.

Apart from adapting commodity polymers for enhanced recyclability, incorporating DCvCs provides alternative recycling strategies for degradable condensation polymers, such as PET and PUs.^{51,147} For example, PET was reactively extruded *via* an autocatalyzed NGP transesterification in the presence of a polyol crosslinker containing an adjacent tertiary amine.^{51,52,192} The resultant PET vitrimer displayed enhanced creep resistance *vs.* the neat PET and was reprocessable to yield transparent and uniform products *via* compression molding, extrusion molding, and injection molding for 3 cycles with mechanical property (*e.g.*, storage modulus) retention greater than 90%.^{51,52,192} In contrast, as mentioned earlier, PET recycled through conventional reprocessing suffered from property deterioration (*e.g.*, brittleness, decreased melt viscosity) after two cycles of



bond exchange of the vitrimer network.^{200,201,204} The impact of ΔE_{sw} was investigated and found to have an inverse relationship with extrusion rate.²⁰¹ A theoretical and computational study using the inhomogeneous sticky Rouse (IHR) model revealed that,^{208–210} for crosslink exchange reactions, the viscous flow activation energy from rheology (E_a^{rh}) is usually greater than the activation energy of small molecule analogues (E_a^{sm}), which agreed well with the empirical observations.²⁰³ This difference highlights the reprocessing time dependence on the timescale of dynamic covalent crosslinks and polymer segmental relaxation.^{85,211} Neat polymers with lower T_g s will have faster relaxation times for the same dynamic covalent chemistry than a neat polymer with a higher T_g .²⁰³ Segmental relaxation of the polymer chain is generally disregarded at temperatures well above T_g . Nonetheless, as the temperature nears T_g , Williams–Landel–Ferry²¹² (WLF) and Vogel–Fulcher–Tammann^{213,214} (VFT) equations describe the non-Arrhenius temperature dependence. One study used a dynamically crosslinked PS copolymer with one fast-exchanging amino-modified group and one slow-exchanging unmodified silyl ether crosslinker, which changed the topological freezing temperature by 70 °C (from 117 °C to 47 °C).¹²¹ This design led to WLF-described dynamics at a temperature within 30 °C of the T_g , and eventually more Arrhenius-like dependence at higher temperatures.¹²¹ In addition to the exchange mechanism and temperature dependence, another notable difference among dynamic polymers is that many of these polymers contain dynamic bonds in the backbone (e.g., polyesters, imine-based dynamic polymer systems).¹²² Therefore, when the dynamic crosslinks change, the backbone relaxation timescale of the polymer chains also changes. The structural variation poses new challenges to models that attempt to predict activation energies and viscous flow behavior of DCvC-based polymers.

Dissociative chemistries also can experience structural variations, thus models with exclusively associative DCvCs at crosslinking points are inadequate to describe the behavior of dissociative networks. One major difference is that dissociative dynamic networks usually experience a decrease in crosslink density at elevated temperatures. The reduced crosslinking is determined by an enthalpy change (ΔH) of the dissociative reaction.^{78,215} Usually, the considerable ΔH value of the dynamic dissociative reactions, such as the Diels–Alder reaction (-157 kJ mol^{-1}),⁸⁸ supports the empirical conclusion of the temperature dependence of crosslink density. Yet, in anilinium-salt-based dynamic crosslinked networks, which undergo dissociative exchanges, the equilibrium constant (K_{eq}) has minimal temperature dependence if the ΔH value is quite small (e.g., -2.8 kJ mol^{-1}).²¹⁵ As a result, the net decrosslinking is negligible over a wide temperature range, and the network exhibits the same Arrhenius viscosity dependence with temperature as vitrimers. The crosslink exchange mechanism does not necessarily influence the practical reprocessing behavior of dynamic covalent polymer networks, which suggests the design of recyclable dynamic polymers can be considered with fewer constraints. Thus, the focus can be shifted to parameters necessary for bond exchange (e.g., temperature, light) and recycling convenience.²¹⁶ As a result of

rational chemical design, 1,2,3-thiazolium-based poly(ionic liquid) networks displayed either an Arrhenius dependence with temperature like vitrimers or a significant decrease in crosslink density characteristic of dissociative networks, depending on the varied ΔH value of the dissociative reaction.²¹⁷ The two different rheological responses influence recycling and refabrication processes, with the depolymerizable dissociative networks favoring applications requiring local or temporary flow.²¹⁷

The physical explanation of the diverse rheological behavior and viscous flow activation energies in dynamic polymer networks inspires more subtle adjustments to the physical properties. Kalow *et al.*²¹⁸ discovered from both theoretical prediction and experimental characterization that, in dynamically crosslinked polymer systems, acid-derived crosslinkers with a common exchange mechanism exhibited vastly different stress relaxation rates without impacting the stiffness or viscous flow activation energy. In other recent studies,^{195,219} supported by both theoretical and experimental investigations, researchers modified the polymer chains with pendant functional groups to adjust the viscous flow activation energy and relaxation behavior. The content of exchangeable groups had only a minimal effect on crosslink density.^{195,219} Additionally, this adjustment resulted in an improved recovery ratio of the strength and strain-at-break (>90%) after reprocessing. These insights provide innovative strategies to fine-tune specific aspects of the flow properties of dynamic polymer networks under recycling conditions.

In the discussion above, it is assumed that the DCvC groups are homogeneously dispersed throughout the polymer. However, the impact of phase separation between the dynamic crosslinks and polymer backbones should be considered when reprocessing real DCvC-containing polymers. The influence of phase behavior on dynamic exchange reactions is complicated and has various effects on polymer recycling. For example, the dioxaborolane-based HDPE vitrimer investigation discussed previously also showcased the impact of phase separation.¹⁰⁵ When the HDPE was functionalized by 1,2-diol instead of dioxaborolane, phase separation induced by the diol prevented vitrimerization using bis-(dioxaborolane).¹⁰⁵ Even in the subsequently crosslinked HDPE vitrimer, the gel fraction was lower in comparison to other HDPE vitrimers ($\sim 32\%$).^{104,105,220} In a follow-up study,²²¹ the authors revealed that the HDPE vitrimer experienced macroscopic phase separation into dioxaborolane maleimide-rich and -poor regions (Fig. 10) due to the polarity of DCvC functional groups. The phase separation, as indicated by the polymer's opaque appearance, prevented full crosslinking of the HDPE and resulted in a relatively high soluble fraction of the vitrimer.²²¹ Interestingly, although a low gel fraction often is undesirable for polymer networks, the non-grafted phase-separated PE chains functioned as lubricants at the processing temperature and led to shorter stress relaxation times than anticipated, which could be exploited to adjust the recycling conditions of these vitrimers.²²¹ This study exemplifies the complexity of modification of commodity polymers in comparison to small molecules.¹⁰⁵



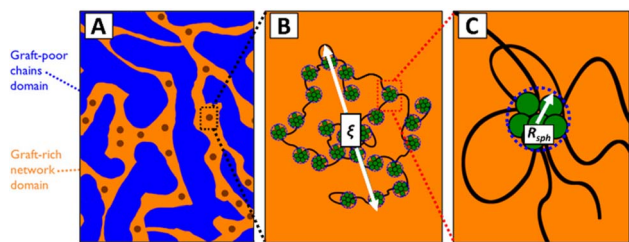


Fig. 10 Hierarchical morphology of HDPE vitrimer with crosslinker/graft-rich and -poor phases. (A) Fractals are represented by dark circles. (B) ξ is the fractal length scale. The aggregates, PE chain bridges, and PE chain loops inside are illustrated. (C) A closer look at a single graft-rich aggregate is shown within the radius R_{sph} . Associated PE chain bridges, loops, and dangling ends also are displayed. Adapted from ref. 221 with permission from the American Chemical Society, copyright 2019.

From another perspective, awareness of phase separation motivates approaches to enhance network homogeneity.¹⁰⁴ For example, ethylene copolymerization with comonomers containing dioxaborolane groups led to a more uniform distribution of DCvC groups on the polymer backbone, increasing the gel content to 93–99% while maintaining the tensile strength after two reprocessing cycles.¹⁰⁴ In addition to *de novo* copolymerization, implementing DCvC crosslinkers with good solubility and high reactivity into polyolefins could be an alternative approach to obtain homogeneous, recyclable dynamic covalent polymeric materials (e.g., carbene and nitrene crosslinkers with alkyl spacers to tune the polarity and solubility in the polymer phases).^{107,222}

There are opportunities to leverage heterogeneities in DCvC-containing polymers to tune mechanical properties and recycling conditions. Common post-polymerization modifications to polyolefins, such as maleic anhydride grafting,⁵⁵ can induce microphase separation. The high polarity of maleic anhydride leads to graft-rich clusters, but homogeneity is improved through the introduction of polar groups to the nonpolar polyolefin backbone.^{223,224} One study compared a nonpolar polyolefin (ethylene/propylene copolymer, EPM) and a polar polymer (ethylene/vinyl acetate copolymer, EVM)¹⁸⁵ in which both EPM and EVM polymers were grafted with maleic anhydride, functionalized with a furan-containing imide, and then dynamically crosslinked with bis(maleimide) *via* the Diels–Alder reaction.¹⁸⁵ Due to the polarity difference, microphase separation occurred in the EPM-based dynamic network, but not in the EVM-based dynamic network. Consequently, after melt reprocessing, the EPM-based network exhibited almost identical mechanical performance (97% retained hardness, 7% compression gain), whereas the EVM-based network displayed moderate property loss (83% retained hardness, 27% compression loss). The authors speculated that the microphase separation in the EPM-based network resulted in polar domains with enriched furans and maleimides remaining in close vicinity, which aided the recovery of the crosslink density after the reprocessing.¹⁸⁵ Another study highlighted how the phase-separated clusters of associating bonds led to a high rubbery modulus and extended rubbery plateau region of the network.²²⁵

Although this investigation used a telechelic associating polymer, similar conclusions can be extrapolated to DCvC-containing polymers and how percolation of the phase-separated domains could lead to enhanced mechanical properties and recycling.²²⁵ Overall, aside from chemical explorations of DCvCs that have shown promise in research about enhanced circularity,^{22,44,122} addressing the structure–property relationships of DCvC-based polymers is important to realize the full potential of dynamic covalent chemistries for complete polymer circularity.

Economic and environmental assessments in DCvC-based polymer recycling

While progress in synthetic and physical understanding of dynamic polymers is promising, the potential economic and environmental impact of DCvC-containing polymeric materials remains relatively unknown. Quantitative value-chain benchmarks, such as minimum selling price (MSP) and life-cycle greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, have become increasingly important in the scale up of specific processes, particularly when evaluating circular design *vs.* conventional, linear approaches.²²⁶ TEA and LCA are important tools for determining these quantitative values to provide additional insights about the overall effect of a new material or process on the economy or the environment. TEA typically incorporates technical and financial input parameters (e.g., costs, benefits, risks) to evaluate economic performance.²²⁷ An LCA study generally involves compiling energy and emissions information across material value chains (e.g., transportation, production, consumption) to assess environmental impacts.²²⁸ Over the last few years, several TEA and LCA studies have been published on the recycling of commercial polymers.^{33,229–236} In a recent example, the LCA of an exploratory, lab-scale synthetic process for the upcycling of poly(acrylic acid) revealed a 10-fold decrease in global warming potential ($\text{kg CO}_2 \text{ kg}^{-1}$) and cumulative energy demand (MJ kg^{-1}) when an acid-catalyzed hydrolysis approach was employed *vs.* a base-mediated route.²³⁷ The study revealed key method optimization parameters to minimize the impact on the environment at an industrial scale, which may have been overlooked in a lab-scale study that excluded LCA.

In contrast to the cases of commercial polymers, TEA and LCA investigations of recyclable dynamic polymers are quite scarce due to the nascency of the field and the lack of industrial-scale application. For the rare instances in which TEA and LCA have been applied to recyclable dynamic polymer research,²³⁸ the results highlighted the potential of DCvC-based materials to reduce the cost and emissions during recycling.²³⁸ More importantly, TEA/LCA identifies the main contributors to elevated costs and emissions among the steps of the production/recycling process, motivating system optimization. For example, in practical application, only a fraction of the recycled polymer will be recovered from the waste stream and survive the recycling process. To maintain the material output of each cycle, recycled products must be supplemented with



pristine polymer, increasing the expected cost and emissions of recycling dynamic polymers. Therefore, to lower the overall cost of the material, it is worthwhile to optimize the pristine material at a lab scale, using TEA/LCA to guide the synthetic pathways.

One of the few DCvC-containing materials with accompanying TEA and LCA is polydiketoenamine (PDK), which exhibits dynamic exchange of diketoenamines in the presence of an acid.^{238,239} The stiffness of PDK networks was readily tuned by adjusting the formulation with commercially-available soft and hard diamine monomers,^{238,240} indicating the versatility and applicability of PDKs for applications such as flexible packaging and vehicle/aircraft parts. Recycling was achieved using acid-triggered selective depolymerization and was compatible with additives and mixed plastics waste (Fig. 11),⁵⁹ showcasing PDK as a promising DCvC-based polymer for circular design.

According to TEA and LCA,²³⁸ ideal 'circular' PDK resins showed significant decreases in MSP (\$1.5 kg⁻¹ vs. \$45 kg⁻¹) and GHG emissions (2 kg CO₂e kg⁻¹ vs. 86 kg CO₂e kg⁻¹) per unit mass in comparison to the primary PDK resin.²³⁸ However, as discussed above, a fraction of the recyclate was lost during the waste recovery and recycling process.²³⁸ Even assuming 100% PDK waste recovery, the MSP was \$9 kg⁻¹ (as opposed to

\$1.5 kg⁻¹ for the ideal circular resin) due to material losses during the chemical recycling process that needed to be supplemented with the more expensive primary PDK.²³⁸

In light of the TEA/LCA observations, subsequent work²³⁹ targeted optimization of the synthesis of primary PDK,²³⁸ such as limiting the use of *N,N*-dicyclohexylcarbodiimide and 4-(dimethylamino) pyridine in favor of more cost-effective and environmental-friendly alternatives.²³⁹ By strategically modifying the synthetic route, the MSP and GHG emissions of primary PDK were reduced by 58% (\$45 kg⁻¹ to \$19 kg⁻¹) and 66% (86 kg CO₂e kg⁻¹ to 29 kg CO₂e kg⁻¹), respectively.²³⁹

In addition to PDKs, a dynamic polymer containing D-A adducts and hydrolyzable acetal functionalities was reported to be self-healable and closed-loop recyclable.²⁴¹ This dynamic polymer was prepared from bis(maleimide), biomass-derived 5-hydroxymethyl furfural, and pentaerythritol. The dynamic D-A reaction led to self-healing under heat treatment (30 min, 130 °C), and chemical recycling was achieved *via* acid-catalyzed hydrolysis of cyclic acetal as well as retro-Diels-Alder reaction.²⁴¹ A multi-solvent extraction method was employed to recover 95 wt% of the original polymer as monomer and D-A adducts by fractionation in different green solvents.²⁴¹ TEA indicated that the MSP of the recycled polymer (\$8.17 kg⁻¹) was

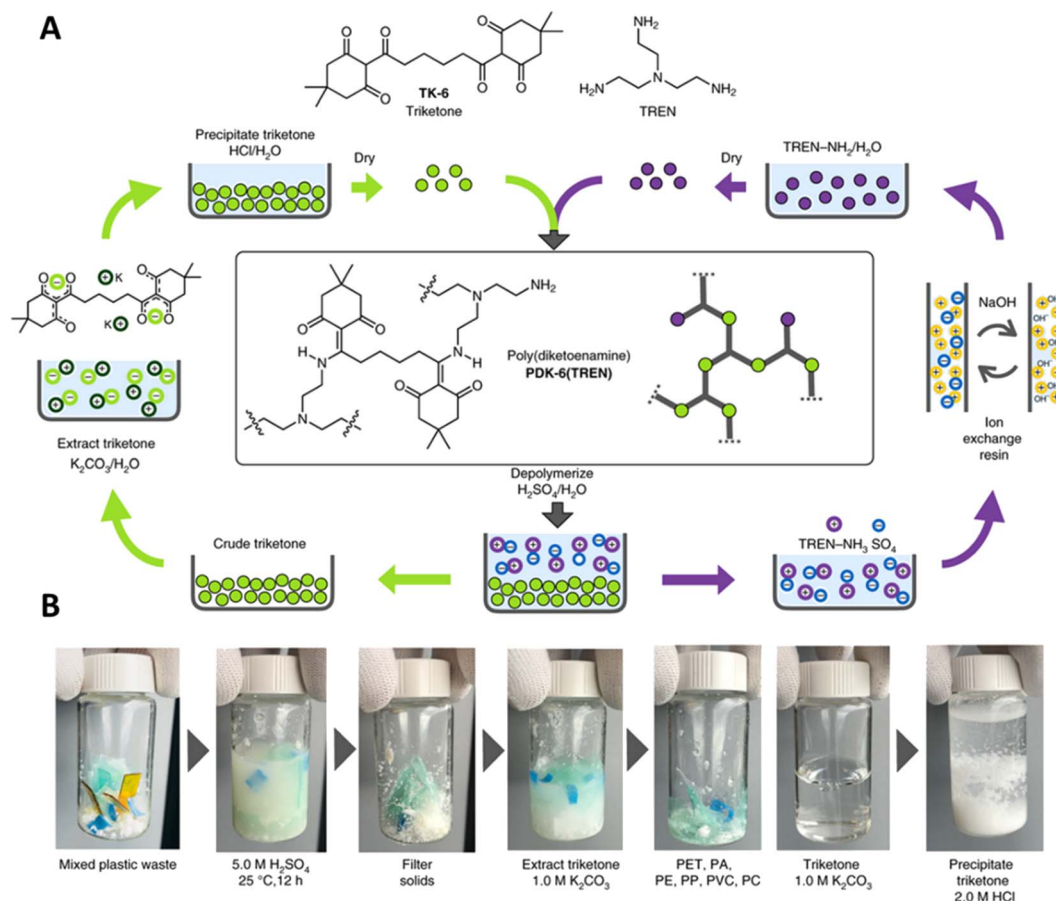


Fig. 11 The preparation and recycling of PDKs. (A) The circular design of network PDKs. The starting polyamines and ditopic triketones are recycled after hydrolyzing PDKs in a strong acid. (B) Photographs suggest the orthogonality of depolymerization and monomer recovery in the presence of PET, nylon-6,6 (PA), PE, PVC, and polycarbonate (PC). Adapted from ref. 59 with permission from Springer Nature, copyright 2019.



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