



# Nanoporous hematite nanoparticles: Synthesis and applications for benzylation of benzene and aromatic compounds



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## ABSTRACT

The catalytic benzylation of benzene and other aromatic compounds is one of the most important reactions in the synthesis of pharmaceutical compounds. In this study, we report the synthesis of nanoporous  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles via a hydrothermal method and their application in the catalytic benzylation of benzene and benzyl chloride in the fabrication of diphenylmethane. Crystal structure and morphology characterization results demonstrated that the hydrothermal method enabled the fabrication of highly dispersed  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles with spherical shape and an average size of 100 nm. The  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles have nanopores of less than 10 nm that are randomly distributed inside the nanoparticles. The catalytic benzylation of benzene and benzyl chloride was conducted over the synthesized  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles. The results demonstrated that the synthesized  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles are effective catalysts for the benzylation of benzene and benzyl chloride with high activity and selectivity.

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## 1. Introduction

Catalytic Friedel–Crafts alkylations are a very important class of reactions that are commonly used in organic chemistry to synthesize various pharmaceutical compounds [1,2]. One of the most important products synthesized via the Friedel–Crafts reaction between benzene and benzyl chloride is diphenylmethane (DPM), which is commonly used in the fragrance industry as (i) both fixative and scenting agent or (ii) as monomers for the synthesis of polycarbonate resins [3–5]. Friedel–Crafts alkylations, however, require a strong Lewis acid catalyst.

Among the catalysts, transition metal oxides, such as iron oxides, have been immensely popular in a wide range of applications because of their ease in handling, relatively low cost, nontoxicity, and environment-friendly property. Iron oxide catalysts are currently utilized on a large scale basis in laboratory, industrial, and environmental processes [1–8]. Hematite ( $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>) is one of the most stable forms of iron oxides, which has been widely used as a catalyst in numerous reactions, such as the decomposition of soot

and NO<sub>x</sub> in diesel exhausts [9–11], photocatalytic degradation of salicylic acid [12], thermal decomposition of ammonium perchlorate [13], oxidation of CO [14], decomposition of biomass tars [15], cracking of catechols and hydroquinones [16], and Fischer–Tropsch synthesis [17]. An iron-based solid catalyst is also normally used as a Lewis acid catalyst and/or support in homogeneous and heterogeneous catalysis [18–20].

The catalytic activity of transition metal oxides is strongly dependent on their morphology and specific surface area. A porous structure with a relatively large surface area is expected to have a good catalytic performance. Fe-based solid catalysts, such as Fe–TUD-1 [21], Fe–ZSM-5 [22], Fe–M–Mor [23], Fe–Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> [24], Fe–SBA [25], and Fe–MCM-41 [26,27], have been widely used for the benzylation of benzene with benzyl chloride (BC). However, findings on the active sites for the reaction [28] and the reaction induction period are still debatable. Choudhary et al. [29] hypothesized that the reducible Fe species were relative to the reactivity of Fe–HZSM-5. Sun et al. [30] reported that the highly dispersed iron oxide nanoclusters on Fe–SBA-15 were active sites for the reaction. Arafat and Alhamed [31] considered that the high redox potential Fe<sup>3+</sup> incorporated in the MCM-41 silica matrix and Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> caused the high reactivity of Fe–CMC-41. With regards to the reaction induction period, Choudhary et al. [27,29] hypothesized that the reaction induction period was caused by the presence of moisture in the reaction mixture and that the catalysts

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are activated during the initial reaction period. Leng et al. [23] suggested that the reaction induction period seemed to depend on the catalytic activity. A high activity indicates a short induction period. However, the function of iron oxides in active catalysts remains unclear. In addition, the benzylation of benzene with BC over nanoporous  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles has not yet been explored. Thereby, further study is needed to explicitly understand the catalytic performance of nanoporous  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles for benzylation of benzene with BC.

In this article, we report the controlled synthesis of scalable nanoporous  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles for benzene benzylation. The nanoporous  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles were synthesized via a hydrothermal method, and their catalytic performances in the benzylation of benzene and other aromatics with BC were systematically investigated. The results showed that the nanoporous hematite nanoparticles are active and selective catalysts for the benzylation of benzene with BC to yield DPM.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Materials

Urea, Fe(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub>·9H<sub>2</sub>O, benzene, benzyl chloride, toluene, and *p*-xylene were purchased from Merck. Cetyltrimethylammonium bromide (CTAB) was purchased from Aldrich. All chemicals were used as received without further purification.

### 2.2. Synthesis of nanoporous $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles

Nanoporous  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles were synthesized via a hydrothermal method by using urea and iron(III) nitrate nonahydrate as precursors and CTAB as a surfactant. Ferric nitrate (2 mmol), CTAB (1 g), and urea (15 mmol) were dissolved in 35 mL of distilled water via magnetic stirring at room temperature for 2 h to obtain a slurry solution. The slurry solution was then transferred into a 100 mL Teflon-lined autoclave for hydrothermal processing. The hydrothermal processing was carried out at 80 °C for 36 h, and the solution was then cooled down to room temperature. The products were collected by several cycles of centrifugation and washed with distilled water and ethanol. The collected products were dried at 60 °C for 24 h and then heat-treated at 500 °C to remove organic residues.

### 2.3. Material characterization

The crystal structure of the nanoporous  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles was characterized using an X-ray diffractometer (XRD, D8 Advance, Bruker, Germany) with Cu K $\alpha$  ( $\lambda$  = 1.54 nm) radiation. Infrared spectroscopy was performed to evaluate the surface state of the synthesized materials. The infrared spectra were obtained using a Nicolet 6700 FTIR Spectrometer in the range of 400–4700 cm<sup>−1</sup> with a spectral resolution of 4 cm<sup>−1</sup> in transmittance mode. The KBr pellet technique was used for sampling with 1 wt.% of materials for infrared spectroscopy measurement. The morphology and the average particle size of hematite nanoparticles were investigated via scanning electron microscopy (SEM, Model JSM-5300LV) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM, Model JEOL-3432, Japan). The nitrogen adsorption/desorption isotherms of the heat-treated samples were obtained using a Micromeritics at 77 K. The specific surface area of the sample was calculated using the Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) method, whereas the pore-size distribution was determined from the desorption isotherm data by using the Barrett–Joyner–Halenda (BJH) model.

### 2.4. Friedel–Crafts type benzylation of benzene

A scheme that represents the proposed mechanism for the benzylation of benzene over the nanoporous  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles catalysts is shown in Fig. 1 [22,26]. The liquid phase Friedel–Crafts benzylation reactions over  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticle catalysts were carried out in a mechanically stirred mode in a two-neck round-bottomed flask (capacity: 100 mL), which was fitted with a reflux condenser and heated in a precisely controlled oil bath. All the reactions were performed in air atmosphere. Benzene (30.55 g, 391 mmol), benzyl chloride (1.1 g, 8.7 mmol), and hematite catalyst (50 mg) were mixed and stirred at 358 K at a moderate speed for at least 3 min. The liquid samples were extracted, filtered periodically, and analyzed via gas chromatography (GC-2010 Shimadzu series) equipped with a thermal conductivity detector (TCD) to evaluate the catalytic activity. The catalytic conversion was calculated from the amount of benzyl chloride that was consumed during the reaction, and the products were confirmed via GC–MS. Details about the GC–MS results can be found in the electronic supporting information (ESI).

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Characterization of catalyst

The crystal structure of the as-prepared  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles were examined via powder XRD measurement, and the data is shown in Fig. 2. The observed pattern of the collected products exhibited all the expected peaks from the  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> structure without any detectable peak from impurities and other phases. The diffraction peaks were well-indexed to the rhombohedral structure of  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> [space group: R3c] with structural parameters of  $a = b = 0.0356$  Å,  $c = 13.7489$  Å,  $\alpha = \beta = 90^\circ$ , and  $\gamma = 120^\circ$ , which agree with the literature (JCPDS 33-0664). The average crystalline size of the  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles calculated from the XRD data by using the Scherrer equation is about 35 nm.

The surface state of the synthesized  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles investigated via FTIR is shown in Fig. 3. The absorption peaks at 474 and 544 cm<sup>−1</sup> are original peaks from  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles [32], whereas the peaks at 1634 cm<sup>−1</sup> and 3436 cm<sup>−1</sup> are due to the OH bending of water and the hydroxyl group (–OH), respectively [33].

The morphologies of the nanoporous  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles, which were characterized from SEM and TEM images, are shown in Fig. 4(A and B), respectively. The  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles fabricated via hydrothermal synthesis have very homogenous morphologies with nearly spherical shapes and regular dispersion (Fig. 4(A)). The average particle size of the nanoparticles is about 100 nm, which is larger than the average crystalline size estimated from the Scherrer equation (35 nm). This result suggests that the nanoparticle is not a single crystal but is a poly-crystal. The TEM image also indicates that nanopores of about less than 10 nm are randomly distributed inside the  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles (Fig. 4(B)). These nanopores are believed to be generated because of the presence of bubbles during the hydrothermal process. The water expulsion of iron oxyhydroxide via heat treatment at 500 °C may also contribute to the formation of the nanopores. However, the XRD pattern of as-hydrothermal  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> samples (Fig. S1) shows typical diffraction peaks of an  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> phase but not of iron oxyhydroxide. Therefore, the possibility of the formation of the nanopores as a result of water expulsion could be eliminated.

Fig. 5 shows the N<sub>2</sub> adsorption/desorption isotherms and pore size distributions of the  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles. The sample exhibits a type IV N<sub>2</sub> adsorption/desorption isotherm with the H1 hysteresis loop (Fig. 5), which indicates the presence of mesoporosity within the nanoparticles [34]. The pore diameters (inset of Fig. 5) calculated using the BJH method are about 81 nm, and the pores are caused by the interparticle space that is formed by the aggregation of Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanocrystals upon calcination. The BET specific surface area of the nanoporous  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles is 15 m<sup>2</sup>/g. This value is relatively high considering the size of the nanoparticles. The catalytic activity greatly depends on the morphologies and specific surface area of the catalysts because they have different fractions of atoms located at different corners and edges as well as different defects that are caused by the loss of atoms at these locations.

### 3.2. Benzylation of benzene and other aromatic compounds

To evaluate the catalytic performance of the nanoporous  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles, the benzylation of benzene with BC was investigated. The reaction was carried out at 358 K and 50 mg of the catalyst was used. Fig. 6 shows the conversion of BC and product distribution as a function of reaction time. The BC conversion reached 100% in a very fast reaction time of about 3 min. The reaction induction period depends on the catalytic activity [23], but the

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