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Numerical Simulation of Atom-Transfer Radical Polymerization of *tert*-butyl Methacrylate

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Block copolymers based on *tert*-butyl methacrylate (tBMA) have many uses, such as thermo-responsive polymers, amphiphilic copolymers, and many applications in the medical field. Atom-transfer radical polymerization (ATRP) is the main technique to produce these controlled macromolecular architectures. This paper provides a simplified kinetic modeling and computational study of tBMA ATRP. The main objective is to understand the behavior of chemical species in the reaction and its influence on polymer properties (molecular weight and dispersity). The proposed model presented good reproducibility of the experimental data, with average errors less than 10%. The simulations indicated a strong initiator and catalyst concentration dependence on the monomer conversion. Although the highest initiator proportion induced a dispersity increase in conversions less than 20%, in general, for tBMA ATRP, the range of operational condition cannot affect dispersity directly. In addition, our finds about the effect of K_{eq} on polymer properties indicated that to conduct the reaction using catalyst systems with K_{eq} around 10^{-5} - 10^{-6} would provide very low dispersity polymers in a fast reaction time.

Keywords: ATRP, *tert*-butyl methacrylate, simulation, modeling.

1. Introduction

Recent achievements in polymer engineering have provided conditions for the synthesis of materials with specific properties for application in microelectronic devices ^{1,2}, cosmetics ³, paints ⁴, UV-absorbents coatings and adhesives ^{5,6}, and mainly in the medical field ⁷⁻¹⁰. Until the early 1990s, materials with controlled architecture were mainly synthesized by ionic polymerization ¹¹. Despite the advantage in reducing chain transfer and termination reactions, these techniques are very sensitive to impurities ¹². Alternatively, free-radical polymerization (RP) is more robust for industrial operations, which use impure materials and, in many cases, require a wide operating temperature range. Even having this potential for industrial processing, the lifetime of radicals in propagation is very short, hindering macromolecular structure control ¹².

With the recent emergence of reversible-deactivation radical polymerization (RDRP) techniques, it was possible to extend the radicals livingness by including chemical species that provide a period of "dormancy" between short periods of activity through a reversible mechanism ¹². Thus, it was possible to add the advantages of radical polymerization with the characteristic of macromolecular control of ionic polymerizations. There are three mechanisms based on RDRP: nitroxide-mediated radical polymerization (NMP) ¹³, reversible addition-fragmentation chain transfer radical polymerization (RAFT) ¹⁴, and atom-transfer radical polymerization (ATRP) ¹⁵.

The ATRP technique presents a great advantage over other RDRP, expressed by the range of polymerizable monomers, initiators and solvents, most of which are commercially available ¹². It is a very attractive technique due to the ease of experimental conduction, with low reaction temperature ¹⁶. In addition, the ATRP technique provides the synthesis of specific forms for the preparation of differentiated architectures, such as block copolymers, stars, brushes etc. ¹⁷. The desired architecture and narrow molecular weight distribution (MWD) provided the ability to design molecules for multiple applications, such as adhesives ¹⁸, cellulose-based elastomers ¹⁹, drug delivery systems ^{20,21}, antifouling surfaces ²², lubricants ²³, dispersants ²⁴, etc.

Block copolymers based on *tert*-butyl methacrylate (tBMA) have many uses, such as in its incorporation in thermo-responsive polymers with a lower critical solution temperature ²⁵, peptide-polymer conjugates with self-organizing property and biological activities ²⁶, well-defined amphiphilic graft copolymers ²⁷, polymers with very good electrochemical ²⁸ and magnetic performances ²⁹, and also many applications in the medical field ³⁰⁻³³. This recent application growth of tBMA-based materials suggests a need for in-depth knowledge of synthesis by ATRP. Many of the published papers present experimental results without a brief description of optimized conditions or an analysis of the reaction conditions influence on the material properties, and few research papers deals with tBMA simulations. Some traditional examples of works dealing with ATRP modeling for several monomers can be found in the literature ³⁴⁻⁴⁶.

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The aim of this study is to simulate the performance of the ATRP of tert-butyl methacrylate, covering a wide range of experimental conditions, evaluating such influence on molecular weight, dispersity, and kinetic behavior. Our simulations were carried out with the intention to further test and validate the simplified kinetic model proposed for the ATRP of tBMA. Our approach included reproducing experimental data from literature and also predicting the behavior at conditions different from those addressed experimentally.

2. Mathematical Modeling and Simulations

A simplified mathematical modeling was developed using the kinetic mechanism described in Table 1. In this mechanism, the primary radical (R^*) is originated from initiator oxidization (RX), catalyzed by the activator (C) and with possible reaction to monomers (M) to achieve further propagation. The propagating radicals (P_n^*) can be reversibly deactivated by XC to form the dormant species (P_nX). For model simplicity, only the termination by disproportionation was considered. Other side reactions were neglected in this study. From the elementary reactions in Table 1, mass balance equations for all reacting species in a batch reactor are described by Equations 1-6.

$$\frac{d[RX]}{dt} = -k_a[RX][C] + k_{da}[XC][R^*] \quad (1)$$

$$\frac{d[C]}{dt} = -k_a[RX][C] + K_{da}[XC][R^*] - k_a[P_nX][C] + k_{da}[XC][P_n^*] \quad (2)$$

$$\frac{d[P_n^*]}{dt} = -k_p[P_n^*][M] - k_{tr}[P_n^*][M] - k_{td}[P_n^*][P_m^*] - k_{da}[XC][P_n^*] + k_a[P_nX][C] \quad (3)$$

$$\frac{d[P_nX]}{dt} = k_{da}[XC][P_n^*] - k_a[P_nX][C] \quad (4)$$

$$\frac{d[M]}{dt} = -k_p[P_n^*][M] - k_{tr}[P_n^*][M] \quad (5)$$

$$\frac{d[P_n]}{dt} = k_{td}[P_n^*][P_m^*] + k_{tr}[P_n^*][M] \quad (6)$$

From Equations 1-5, the method of moments was used to predict number-average molecular weight, weight-average molecular weight, and dispersity. Moments equations were calculated by Equations 7-9, in which were developed equations of order “zero”, “one”, and “two” for each species (“living”, “dormant”, and “dead” polymers) (Appendix).

$$\mu_i = \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} n^i [P_n^*] \quad (7)$$

$$\delta_i = \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} n^i [P_nX] \quad (8)$$

$$\lambda_i = \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} n^i [P_n] \quad (9)$$

μ_i is the moment of order “i” for the “living” polymer with chain length equals “n”; δ_i is the moment of order “i” for the “dormant” polymer with chain length equals “n”; and λ_i is the moment of order “i” for the “dead” polymer with chain length equals “n”.

The zeroth order moment physically represents the concentration of polymer chains in the system. The first order moment represents the concentration of monomeric units that have been incorporated into the polymer chains. The zeroth and first moments can be related to the polymer chain length distribution⁴⁷. Thus, average properties were obtained by equations 10-12.

$$M_n = MM \times \frac{(\mu_1 + \delta_1 + \lambda_1)}{(\mu_0 + \delta_0 + \lambda_0)} \quad (10)$$

$$M_w = MM \times \frac{(\mu_2 + \delta_2 + \lambda_2)}{(\mu_1 + \delta_1 + \lambda_1)} \quad (11)$$

$$\mathcal{D} = \frac{M_w}{M_n} \quad (12)$$

M_n is the number-average molecular weight; M_w is the weight-average molecular weight; and \mathcal{D} is the dispersity.

Table 1. kinetic modeling and parameter values.

Reaction type	Reaction	Constant	Value	Reference
Initiation	$RX + C \xrightleftharpoons{k_0} R^* + XC$	K_{eq0}	1.8×10^{-7}	This study
Propagation	$P_n^* + M \xrightarrow{k_p} P_{n+1}^*$	k_p	$2.4 \times 10^6 \exp(-2658/T)$	[34]
Polymer activation/deactivation	$P_nX + C \xrightleftharpoons{k_{da}/k_a} P_n^* + XC$	K_{eq}	1.8×10^{-7}	[33]
Termination by disproportionation	$P_n^* + P_m^* \xrightarrow{k_{td}} P_m + P_n$	k_{td}	$2.57 \times 10^{10} \exp(-2943/T)$	[35]

To validate de mathematical modeling, the polymerization of tert-butyl methacrylate (tBMA) by Zhao et al.⁴⁸ was considered. The authors conducted the homopolymerization of methyl methacrylate (MMA) and tBMA, and also the copolymerization of these two monomers using p-Toluenesulfonyl chloride (pTsCl) as initiator, CuCl and 4,40-Dinonyl-2,20-bipyridyl (dnNbpy) as catalyst system at 100 °C. In all polymerization, the molar ratio of $[p\text{-TsCl}]_0/[CuCl]_0/[dnNbpy]_0$ was set to be 1/1/2. The initial monomer content was 70 wt% and 30% of p-Xylene. Based on these experimental conditions, to conduct the modeling validation of this study, the reactants concentrations expressed in Table 2⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰ were used.

To analyze a wide range of reaction conditions that are not described in the literature, after the model validation, simulations were performed considering a multivariate analysis of monomer, catalyst, and initiator concentrations, as proposed by Vieira et al.⁵¹. Its effects were evaluated on the kinetics of monomer consumption as well as on polymer average properties (molecular weight and dispersity). In addition, the effect of the equilibrium constants on the chemical species concentration profile, as well as materials properties were evaluated. The k_a was kept fixed, while the k_{da} was being increased. This analysis is of great importance in the choice of catalyst, since each catalytic system will present a different value. Based on this information, it was possible to identify interesting values for the process conduction and the best choice of catalytic system.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Model validation

This section presents the comparison of experimental data from literature and simulations using the mathematical modeling developed. The simulated monomer conversion, number-average molecular weight, and dispersity were compared with the experimental data reported by Zhao et al.⁴⁸ at different experimental conditions. Attention was paid to the relation between the broadness and the skewness of the polymer dispersity and its average molecular weight.

Figure 1 compares the experimental data and simulation results of the monomer conversion as a function of time at 100 °C, considering two different proportions of catalyst (0.36 % and 0.5 % CuCl). Monomer conversion evolution as a function of polymerization time can be related to the change of the total radical concentration and deactivator concentration of persistent species.

Analyzing Figure 1, it is possible to see that experimental data are almost fully represented by the simulations. For both situations, the percentage reproduction error values of the experimental data using the modeling proposed in this work were calculated. An error of 4.56% and 6.58% was obtained for the reproductions using 0.5 and 0.36% CuCl, respectively. It can be seen from this analysis that the model is not only able to reproduce the monomer conversion quite satisfactorily, but it can also evaluate the effect of the catalyst concentration on monomer conversion.

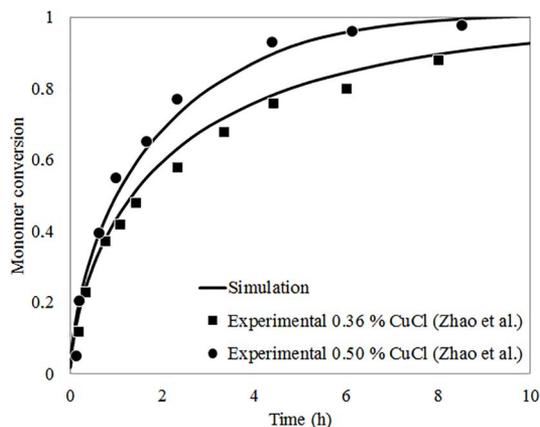


Figure 1. Comparison of experimental and simulated monomer conversion as a function of time of tBMA ATRP at 100 °C with molar ratio $[tBMA]_0:[I]_0:[C]_0$ equals 140:1:1 (0.36 % CuCl / weight) and 140:1:1.4 (0.5 % CuCl / weight). Experimental data from the literature (Zhao et al., 2008)

Figure 2 illustrates the experimental data and simulations for the evolution of number-average molecular weight as a function of monomer conversion. From this figure, it is possible to notice that the simulated molecular weights are in agreement with the experimental data. However, at high monomer conversions, there was a deviation from experimental data that can be explained by the simplicity of the modeling used. The model did not consider gel effect and also considered that only termination by disproportionation was occurring. In addition, other chain transfer reactions (to dimer, primary radicals, etc.) were not considered, which could contribute for the poor reproducibility at high monomer conversions. In despite of the simplifications described, a linear increase of M_n as a function of monomer conversion was observed, confirming the controlled polymerization, with general good reproducibility by simulations.

Table 2. Set of reaction conditions used in model validation at 100 °C.

Validation	$[TBMA]_0$ (mol L ⁻¹)	$[p\text{-TsCl}]_0$ (mol L ⁻¹)	$[CuCl]_0$ (mol L ⁻¹)	$[dnNbpy]_0$ (mol L ⁻¹)
Monomer conversion as a function of time	4.79	0.034	0.034	0.068
Number-average molecular weight and dispersity	4.79	0.017	0.017	0.034

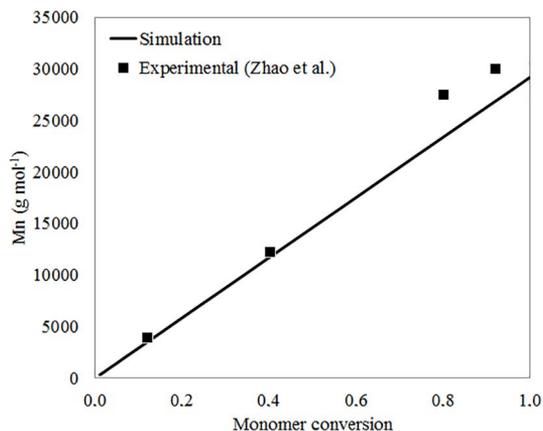


Figure 2. Comparison of experimental and simulated number-average molecular weight development as a function of monomer conversion of tBMA ATRP at 100 °C with $[tBMA]_0:[I]_0:[C]_0$ equals 280:1:1. Experimental data from the literature (Zhao et al., 2008)

Figure 3 illustrates that the dispersity assumes low values for both the experimental and the simulation results. There was a very good reproducibility of experimental data by simulations. Fischer described that when considering only activation, deactivation, propagation, and termination by disproportionation in ATRP mechanisms (neglecting diffusional limitations), dispersity tends to assume low values in a wide range of monomer conversion⁵², according to the results found in the simulations and experiments described in Figure 3. In addition, it is important to highlight here that number- and weight-molecular weight distributions are mainly determined by the dormant polymer and only slightly influenced by the dead polymer^{53,54}. In addition, although polymer dispersity is very useful to characterize the broadness of number-molecular weight distributions, it cannot be used to describe broadness of weight-average molecular weight⁵⁵.

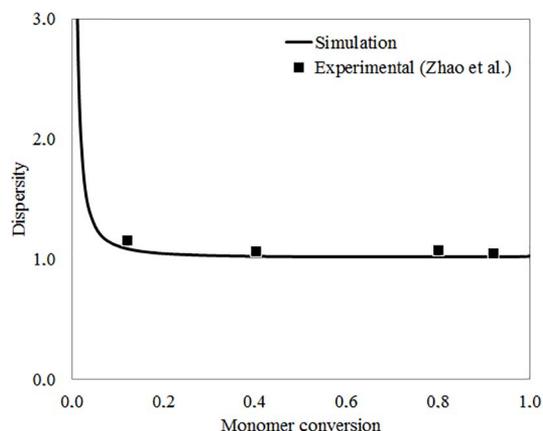


Figure 3. Comparison of experimental and simulated dispersity as a function of monomer conversion of tBMA ATRP at 100 °C with $[tBMA]_0:[I]_0:[C]_0$ equals 280:1:1. Experimental data from the literature (Zhao et al., 2008)

3.2 Analysis of reactants concentration on the average properties

Figure 4 (a) and (b) shows that monomer concentration does not influence on its conversion, confirming de pseudo-first order behavior. An increase of initiator concentration increases the polymerization rate. This situation is quite common, since high concentration of initiator produces more “living” polymers that present a direct influence on the rate (as can be seen in monomer consumption kinetic expression). In addition, it is important to note that tBMA conversion is also dependent on catalyst concentration, since the concentration of this reagent is present in the expression of the activation rate of the polymer chains which will lead to an increase in the concentration of propagating radicals. Note that the same variations in the ratios of initiator and catalyst provide equal effects on monomer conversion. These results are very important considering reactor design issues, for example analysis of residence time.

Figure 4 (c) and (d) illustrates that a higher initiator concentration tends to reduce the polymer number-average molecular weight. This characteristic was expected based on the classic concept of one initiator-one polymer chain. However, the multivariate analysis did not influence considerably on dispersity at high monomer conversions (see Figure 4 (e) and (f)). In both figures, for the highest proportion of initiator there was a dispersity increase in conversions less than 20% (circled regions). This behavior can be attributed to the amount of radicals formed in initial stages. Many of the “living” polymers formed are available for termination, and the deactivation step could still not have been achieved, which could be contributed for the higher dispersities. In addition, the simulations also demonstrate the increase in dispersity with decreasing catalyst level, indicating the existence of a threshold value for the catalyst level in cases where the level of control over chain length is important. Despite this behavior at low monomer conversions, in general, for tBMA ATRP, the range of operational condition cannot affect directly on dispersity, which is a very good result in terms of material processability and applications.

3.3 Analysis of the equilibrium constant effect on chemical species behavior and average properties

In addition to the termination, propagation and chain transfer reactions, ATRP also has the equilibrium reaction between dormant chains and polymer radicals. The rate constant of the equilibrium reactions depends on monomer and chain end type, polymerization temperature, catalyst type and polymerization medium. The equilibrium constant (K_{eq}) is the ratio of the activation (k_a) to the deactivation (k_{da}) rate constants.

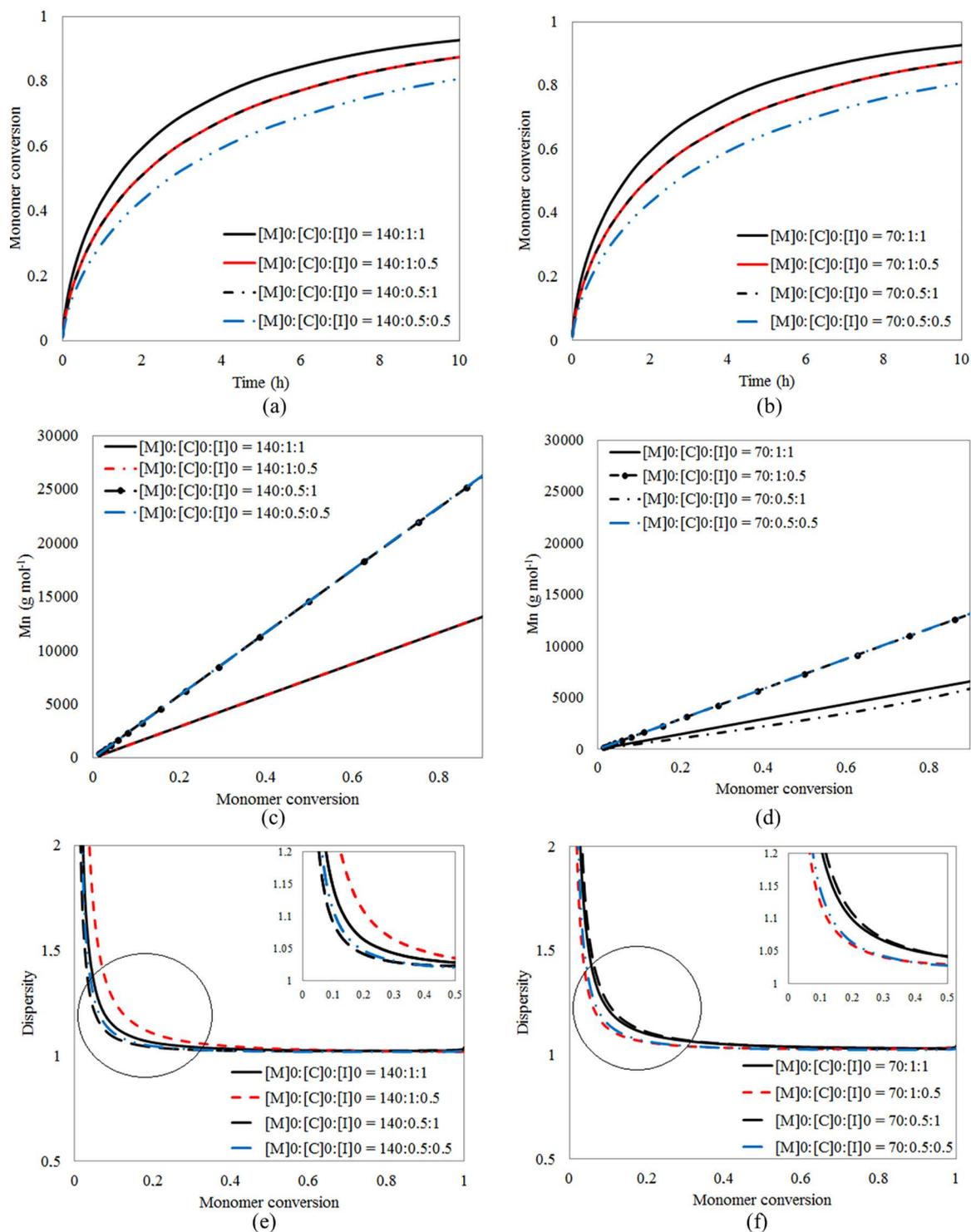


Figure 4. Analysis of reaction conditions on monomer conversion and polymer properties

Figure 5 shows the effect of K_{eq} ranging from 10^{-4} to 10^{-6} (typical values for commercial ATRP systems) on (a) dispersity, (b) monomer conversion and (c) number-average molecular weight. In these figure, k_{da} was changed while k_a was kept constant, and the same proportion of reactants were maintained for each simulation.

For equilibrium constant equals 1.8×10^{-5} , dispersity values (Figure 5 (a)) increase and move away from the unit, reaching a value of 1.3. However, it can still be considered controlled polymerization (dispersity less than 1.5) even though a better control of the polymerization would be achieved by equilibrium constants lower than this value (see dispersity for $K_{eq} = 1.8 \times 10^{-6}$).

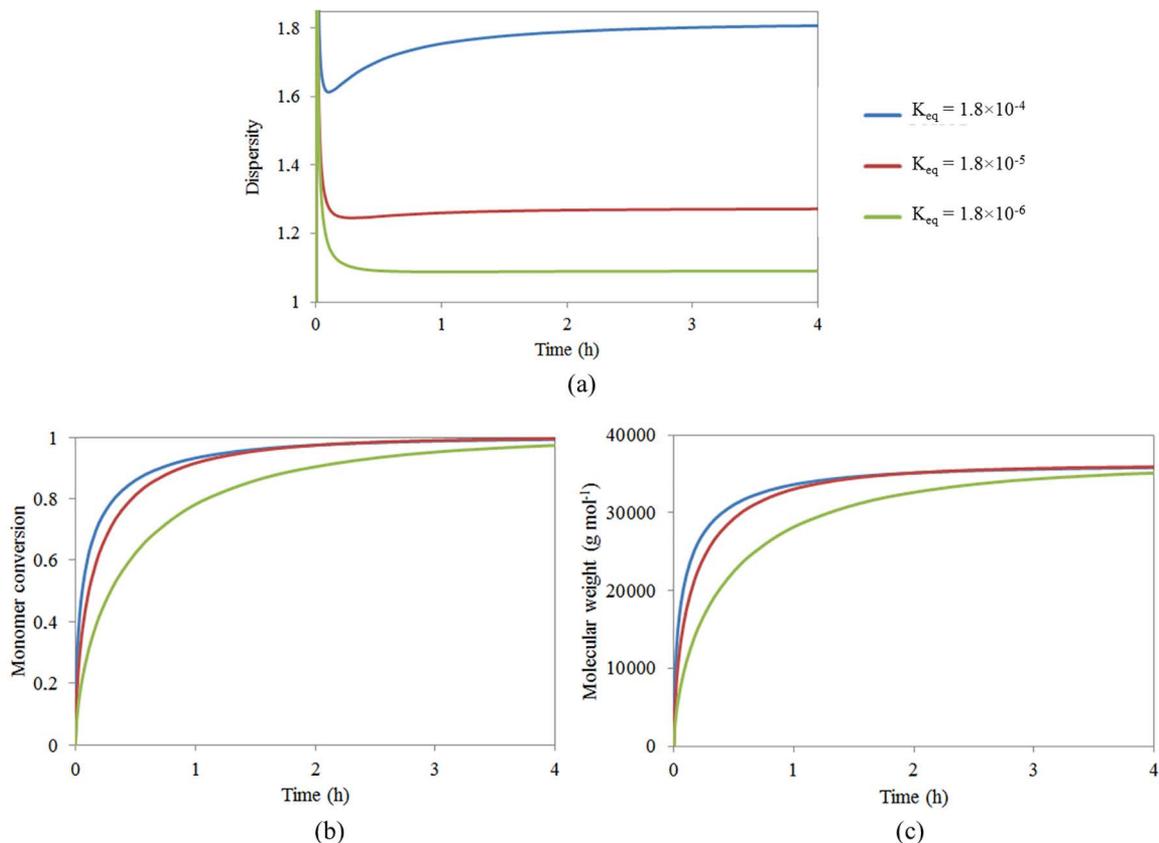


Figure 5. Analysis of equilibrium constant effect on polymer properties

Figure 5 (a) also indicates that for $K_{eq} = 1.8 \times 10^{-4}$, there are a strong deviation from polymerization control, suggesting that there is a threshold for the K_{eq} around 10^{-5} , above which there is no ATRP typical behavior. In general, by increasing k_{da} , the equilibrium is shifted towards higher dormant chain concentrations. Having more dormant chains in the system decreases monomer conversion and degree of polymerization (for the same time). On the other hand, a higher k_{da} improves the control over the chain length distribution and, hence, produces polymers with smaller dispersities^{16,56}.

Figure 5 (b) shows the monomer conversion as a function of time for the same three values of equilibrium constants, in which it is possible to observe that, as the equilibrium constant increases, monomer conversion also increases. Thus, when $K_{eq} = 1.8 \times 10^{-6}$, in the first minutes the conversion is significantly increased and at the time of 4 h unit is reached. For other values, the increase occurs more rapidly. Thus, when referring to the polymerization kinetics, it is possible to see that, for high equilibrium constants, it increases significantly and tends to be smaller for a controlled radical polymerization.

The lower equilibrium constants (10^{-8} - 10^{-10}) are the most ideal for a controlled synthesis using ATRP; however, considering design issues, it could be very small depending on K_{eq} value, decreasing considerably the polymerization rate.

Based on these results, it is possible to infer that for the polymerization of tBMA, it would be interesting to choose catalytic systems that provide equilibrium constant values around 10^{-5} , in order to ensure dispersities less than 1.5, with a high rate of polymerization. In addition, for the molecular weight (Figure 5 (d)), as the equilibrium constant increases, the number-average molecular weight also increases, following the monomer conversion behavior. However, the magnitude of the molecular weight will be controlled by manipulating the amount of initiator as described in the previous section.

4. Conclusion

This paper investigated operational conditions and equilibrium constant effect on chemical species kinetics and poly(tert-butyl methacrylate) properties. The simplified model developed fitted the experimental data in a satisfactory manner. Simulation results showed that tBMA conversion is initiator and dependent on catalyst concentration. Although for the highest initiator proportion there was a dispersity increase in conversions less than 20%, in general, for tBMA ATRP, the range of operational condition cannot affect dispersity directly, which is a very good result in terms of material processability and applications.

In addition, it was verified that higher values of equilibrium constant could not cause loss to the polymerization control if the threshold for the K_{eq} (around 10^{-5}), is respected. Therefore, to conduct tBMA ATRP, it would be very interesting to use catalyst systems with K_{eq} ranging from 10^{-6} - 10^{-5} .

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Supplementary material

The following online material is available for this article:
Appendix