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“Click” dendrimer-Pd nanoparticle assemblies as enzyme mimics: Catalytic *o*-phenylenediamine oxidation and application to colorimetric H₂O₂ detection

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Dendrimers have already been successfully used in nanoparticle (NP) catalysis for many years, particularly for Pd NP protection towards carbon-carbon coupling reactions. In this paper, assemblies between Pd nanoparticles and two generations of “click” dendrimers, with respectively 27 (dendrimer-1) and 81 (dendrimer-2) triethylene glycol (TEG) termini are examined for catalytic peroxidase-like oxidative activity. This catalysis is investigated with *o*-phenylenediamine (OPD) and H₂O₂ as the substrates in water, displaying different colours. The dendritic effect is negative upon increasing generation, i.e., dendrimer 1-Pd nanoparticles show the best results, providing values with a V_{max} of $1.49 \times 10^{-9} \text{ M s}^{-1}$ and K_m of 3.02 mM as obtained with the Michaelis-Menten model. The detection limit is 0.82 μM of H₂O₂ detection with dendrimer-1-PdNPs, and both dendrimer-Pd nanocatalysts exhibit excellent robustness of catalytic activity, a water-dispersive state being stable for at least 2 months, thus showing a promising mimic as peroxidase catalysts.

Introduction

Hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) is a strong oxidant, appearing as a by-product of many oxidase enzymes. Thereby, it is an important mediator in food, pharmaceutical, clinical, industrial and environmental analysis.¹⁻⁵ Peroxidase enzymes use H₂O₂ to catalyse substrate oxidation. Peroxidase activity can be used as well for the detection of hydrogen peroxide, which is essential to biochemical analysis for application in biological and environmental processes.^{6,7} Natural enzymes, such as for example horseradish peroxidase (HRP),⁸ have the disadvantages of expensive cost and complex preparation. As a result, much work has been devoted to produce stable, highly sensitive and low-cost enzyme mimics as H₂O₂ biosensors. Since Gao et al. first reported that Fe₃O₄ nanoparticles (NPs) could be used to detect H₂O₂ and showed peroxidase-like activity similar to HRP,⁹ various nanomaterials have been proposed as enzyme mimics (nanozymes) in the detection of H₂O₂, such as magnetic NPs,^{5,10,11} graphene oxide,¹²⁻¹⁴ silver alloys nanostructure,⁴

Au@Pt nanostructures,¹⁵ and ruthenium nanomaterials.¹⁶ Qu and his group have proposed graphene quantum dots as peroxidase mimics,^{12,13} identified their substrate binding sites¹³ and recently reviewed and classified nanozymes.¹⁴ There are examples of dendrimers¹⁷⁻¹⁹ that have also been proposed as enzyme mimics.^{20,21} Dendrimer-RNA NPs have been reported to generate protective immunity against several lethal viruses.²² Polyamidoamine (PAMAM) dendrimers with encapsulated metal NPs have also been shown to function as catalysts for some reactions,^{23,24} and this principle has been extended to some other dendrimer families.²⁵⁻²⁸ In particular “click” dendrimers synthesized by CuAAC “click” reactions between azido-terminated dendrimers and alkynes show excellent performances as catalytic NP supports due to their encapsulating properties and compromise between the stabilising triazole coordination to transition metals and freedom of nanoparticle surface sites.²⁹⁻³²

We report here “click” dendrimer-palladium (Pd) NPs as peroxidase enzyme mimics of H₂O₂ sensing using *o*-phenylenediamine (OPD) oxidation by H₂O₂ to 2,3-diaminophenazine (DAP). Pd NPs that do not require sophisticated ligands are among the best NPs in catalysis, and their catalytic properties, comparable to those of molecular catalysts, are already well known.³²⁻³⁶ The two “click” dendrimers used here are known^{30,37} and contain respectively 27 (dendrimer-1) and 81 (dendrimer-2) triethylene glycol (TEG) termini and 9 and 27 1,2,3-triazole ligands (Figure 1). So far, dendrimer-NP assemblies have not yet been employed as peroxidase enzyme mimics. Equation 1 shows the oxidation of

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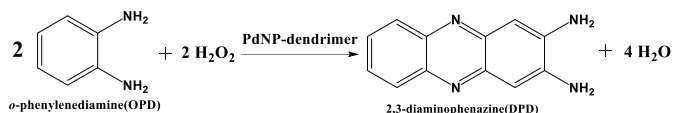
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o-phenylenediamine (OPD) by H₂O₂ forming 2,3-diaminophenazine (DAP) in the presence of the Pd-dendrimer nanocatalysts. The impact of OPD concentration, H₂O₂ concentration and pH as well as the role of the dendrimer generation are assessed to determine their influence on the peroxidase-like activity.



Eq.1

Experimental

Chemicals and reagents

Sodium hydroxide, sodium borohydride, disodium tetrachloropalladate palladium acetate, hydrogen peroxide, *o*-phenylenediamine and sodium citrate dihydrate were obtained from Sigma-Aldrich. Ultrapure water (Thermo Fisher Scientific INC., USA) was utilized for the preparation of all aqueous solutions.

Synthesis of the dendrimer-1-PdNPs and dendrimer-2-PdNPs assemblies

Dendrimer-1 and dendrimer-2 (Fig. 1) have been synthesized following a previous report.³⁷ The ¹H NMR spectra of dendrimer-1 and dendrimer-2 are shown in Fig. S1 and Fig. S2. The nanocatalyst dendrimer-1-PdNPs and dendrimer-2-PdNPs were prepared by a facile one-step method. Typically, dendrimer-1 (0.4 mg, 1.5 equiv. TEG branch per metal) dissolved in 1 mL water and Na₂PdCl₄ (2.94 mg, 1 equiv) dissolved in 1 mL water were mixed in 2 mL water by magnetic stirring for 30 min at room temperature (rt, ~25 °C), then 1 mL of freshly prepared NaBH₄ aqueous solution (10 equiv. per metal) was quickly added. The mixture was allowed to stir for 30 min at rt, and the resulting nanocatalyst was directly used *in situ* without further treatment. For the synthesis of dendrimer-2-PdNPs, the steps are similar to those used for dendrimer-1-PdNPs, the molar ratio of Pd: TEG branch: NaBH₄ is 1: 1.5: 10.

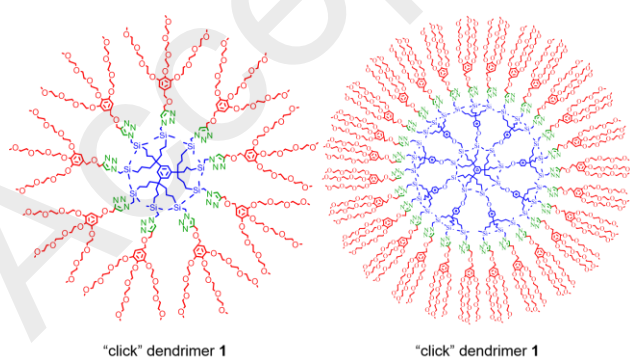


Fig. 1 Molecular structures of dendrimer 1 and dendrimer 2.
General procedure for oxidation of *o*-phenylenediamine

In a quartz cuvette with 1 cm optical path, were added 0.4 mL of H₂O₂ 30%, 0.2 mL of OPD solution (0.1 mol L⁻¹, (freshly prepared) and 2 mL of citrate buffer (pH 3.0). For the pH study, the pH of the citrate solution was adjusted to 5 and 7 by addition of a small amount of HCl. Then, 0.1 mL dendrimer-1-PdNPs or dendrimer-2-PdNPs were added to the system.

For the synthesis of Pd/Fe₃O₄@dendrimer-1, dendrimer-1 (0.4 mg, 1.5 equiv. TEG branch per metal) dissolved in 1 mL water and Fe₃O₄ (0.23 mg, 1 equiv per metal) were mixed in 1 mL water by magnetic stirring for 20 min at rt, then Na₂PdCl₄ (2.94 mg, 1 equiv) dissolved in 1 mL water was added. The reaction mixture was stirred for 10 min, then 1 mL of freshly prepared aqueous solution of NaBH₄ (10 equiv. per metal) was quickly added. The mixture was allowed to stir for 30 min at rt. The reactions were monitored by UV-vis. spectroscopy (Varian Cary 100 scan) in full scan mode (350-600 nm) in the interval of 30 min at 22 °C. A new band at 450 nm started to increase in the presence of the catalyst, indicating the formation of the oxidation product (DAP). The absorbance data were converted to DAP concentration using the extinction coefficient ($\log \epsilon_{450} = 4.33$).³⁸ The effect of OPD concentration (1.725 - 17.25 mM), H₂O₂ concentration (6.3 - 75.6 μM) and pH (3.0 - 7.0) were assessed to determine their influence on the peroxidase-like activity.

The limit of detection (LD) was calculated using Eq. 2.

$$\text{LD} = \frac{3 \times \text{standard deviation of blanc}}{\text{sensitivity of the analytical curve}} \quad \text{Eq. 2}$$

The Michaelis Menten model, usually employed to model enzymatic reactions with substrate concentration in excess, was adjusted to the experimental data in order to obtain the kinetic parameters V_{max} and K_m (Eq. 3).

$$V_0 = \frac{V_{max} \cdot [S]}{K_m + [S]} \quad \text{Eq. 3}$$

Therein, V_0 is the initial reaction rate, V_{max} the maximum reaction rate, K_m is the Michaelis constant which represents the affinity of enzyme toward substrate, the value of K_m being equal to the substrate concentration at which the reaction rate is half of the maximum reaction rate, and $[S]$ is the substrate concentration.

Results

Characterization of the nanomaterials

Dendrimer-1-PdNPs and dendrimer-2-PdNPs were fabricated in a one-step process in which NaBH₄ acted as the reductant of Na₂PdCl₄. The triazole groups in the dendrimers terminated by 27 resp. 81 triethylene glycol (TEG) termini (Fig. 1) stabilized the Pd NPs. The obtained Pd NPs were characterized by TEM and XPS. The average size of the PdNP of dendrimer 1 determined by TEM is 2.5 ± 1 nm, and the shape of the Pd NP core is quasi-spherical (Fig. 2a). Dendrimer-2-PdNPs also showed a quasi-spherical shape with a PdNPs size of 3.6 ± 2 nm (Fig. 2b). The dendrimers were further characterized by XPS measurements

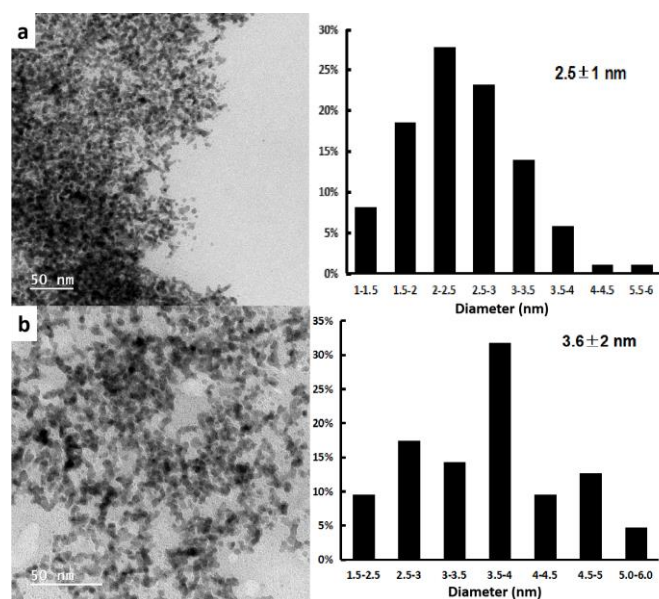


Fig. 2 Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM) of a) dendrimer-1-PdNPs; Pd NPs size: $2.5 ± 1$ nm; b) dendrimer-2-PdNPs; Pd NPs size: $3.6 ± 1.5$ nm.

to investigate the surface composition (Fig. 3 for dendrimer-1-PdNPs and Fig. S3-S6 and Table S1-S2 for dendrimer-2-PdNPs). The signals at 284.8, 286.4, 288.2 and 289.4 eV in the C1s spectra of dendrimer-1-PdNPs correspond to C-C, C-O/C-N, C=O and O-C=O, respectively. The signal N 1s at 400.4 eV is assigned to N-C binding, whereas the band O 1s in 532.4 eV is attributed to C=O binding. In the Pd 3d spectra of dendrimer-1-PdNPs, the signal at 334.8 eV is assigned to Pd(0) NPs, whereas the signals at 335.5 and 337.4 eV are assigned to Pd^{II} (with two distinct types). These results further support the successful formation of Pd NPs with dendrimers **1** and **2**.

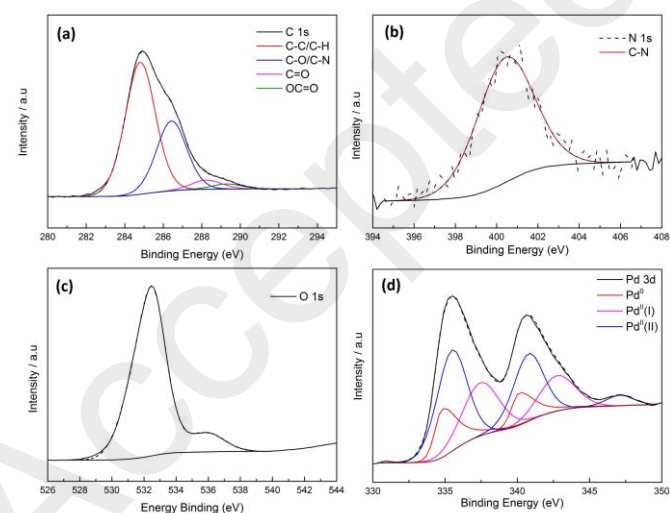


Fig. 3 XPS signal from (a) C 1s of dendrimer-1-PdNPs (b) N 1s of dendrimer-1-PdNPs (c) O 1s of dendrimer-1-PdNPs and (d) Pd 3d of dendrimer-1-PdNPs.

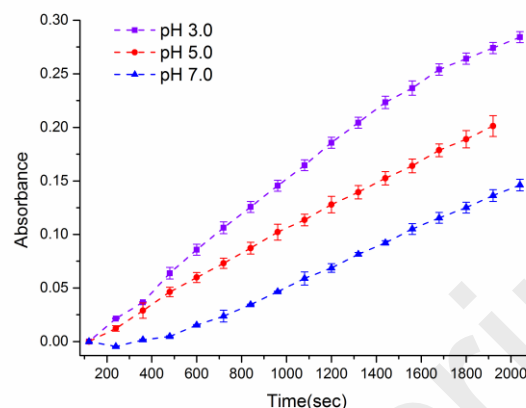


Fig. 4 OPD oxidation by dendrimer-1-PdNPs at various pH values. General conditions: 0.1 M OPD; 10 mM H₂O₂ 30%; 2 mM dendrimer-1-PdNPs.

Nanocatalysed oxidation of *o*-phenylenediamine

Several factors affect the catalytic activity of OPD oxidation including the solution pH, OPD concentration and H₂O₂ concentration. The pH effects on the reaction are shown in Fig. 4 and Fig. S11 (ESI). The activity increased with decreasing pH from 7.0 to 3.0, with the maximum absorbance at pH 3.0. The reaction rate decreases in the order pH 3.0 > pH 5.0 > pH 7.0 (Fig. 4). This indicates that, for pH 3.0, the maximum absorption wavelength in the UV-vis. spectrum is 450 nm (Fig. S7). Upon pH increase from 3.0 to 7.0, a hypsochromic shift is observed, with a maximum absorption at 412 nm for pH 7.0. This effect is associated to the chemical behaviour of the DAP molecule whose pK_{a1} is 1.0-2.0 and pK_{a2} is 5.1.³⁹ Therefore, for the other experiments, pH was fixed at 3.0.

Both dendrimer generations (dendrimers **1** and **2**) were used to stabilize the Pd NPs and applied in the OPD oxidation reaction. Besides that, the fresh and two-month-old PdNP@dendrimer were compared, and the addition of magnetic Fe₃O₄ NPs on PdNP@dendrimer was also evaluated. The experiments were performed at pH 3.0 in order to evaluate the effect of different catalysts in the OPD oxidation reaction, and the results are shown in Fig. 5. In 80 minutes of reaction, the efficiency followed the order: dendrimer-1-PdNPs (aged 2 months) < Pd/Fe₃O₄@dendrimer-1 < dendrimer-2-PdNPs < dendrimer-1-PdNPs. These results show that dendrimer-1-PdNPs is the best catalyst. Besides, there is a negative influence of Fe₃O₄ on the catalyst dendrimer-1-PdNPs, i.e. the peroxidase-like activity of Fe₃O₄/dendrimer-1-PdNPs is not as good as that of dendrimer-1-PdNPs, although Fe₃O₄ has often been used previously as support for this type of reaction.^{5,9,10} Importantly, dendrimer-1-PdNPs was used in water-dispersive state for at least 2 months and then still possessed peroxidase-like catalytic activity.⁴⁰

The third parameter that was evaluated in the OPD oxidation reaction, using the dendrimer-1-PdNPs, was the OPD concentration. According to the UV-vis. curve (Fig. S8 and Fig. S9), the colour of the solution changes with the increase of OPD concentration, and the reaction kinetics was found to follow

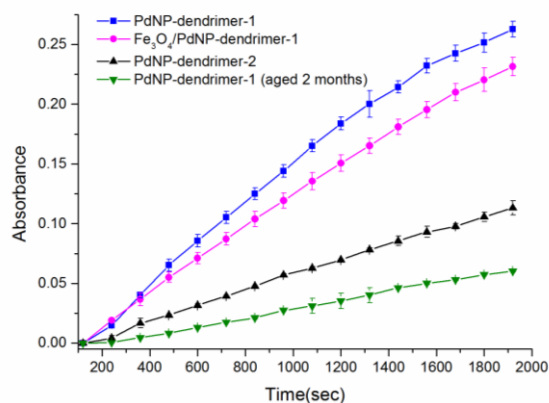


Fig. 5 OPD oxidation by dendrimer-1-PdNPs, dendrimer-2-PdNPs and dendrimer-1-PdNPs (aged 2 months). General conditions: 0.1 M OPD; 10 mM H₂O₂ 30%; 2 mM of the catalyst and pH 3.0.

the Michaelis-Menten model (Fig. 6). The V_{max} and K_m values obtained were, respectively, $V_{max} = 1.49 \times 10^{-9} \text{ M s}^{-1}$ and $K_m = 3.02 \text{ mM}$. V_{max} is an indicator of the catalytic activity, whereas K_m indicates the affinity of the catalyst for the substrate.^{8,38} The values of V_{max} and K_m are favourably comparable to those of other materials as shown in Table S3. The system was used for the quantification of H₂O₂ and, for this purpose, an analytical curve was constructed (Fig. 7). A satisfactory correlation was observed (correlation coefficient > 0.9), and the absorbance of oxidized OPD increased with the increase of the H₂O₂ concentration (Fig. 7a). Meanwhile, these changes with the increase of H₂O₂ concentration were observed by the naked eye (Fig. 7b), the solution containing the dendrimer-1-PdNPs becoming yellow-orange from colourless. There is a linear relationship between the absorbance of oxidized OPD concentration ranging from 6.3 to 75.6 μM (Fig. 7c), and this reaction kinetics also followed the Michaelis-Menten model. The V_{max} and K_m values obtained were, respectively, $1.06 \times 10^{-8} \text{ M s}^{-1}$ and 9.04 mM. The detection limit for dendrimer-1-PdNPs was found to be 0.5 μM (Table 1). These parameters are compared to those reported in other studies of the literature (Table 1).

Discussion

The “click” dendrimers being known as excellent templates for late transition-metal NPs, and particularly Pd NPs, they were certainly good candidates as enzyme mimics when associated to Pd NPs. The “click” dendrimers **1** and **2** therefore stabilise very small PdNPs due to the intra-dendritic triazole coordination. Such a small NP size is a condition for good efficiency, since the efficiency is related to the total NP surface. Another parameter to consider is the substrate access to the PdNP surface. With the dendrimers, the intra-dendritic location of the PdNPs may introduce a steric constraint for substrate access to the PdNP surface. The dendritic effect involving a lower reaction rate of the larger dendrimer-2-

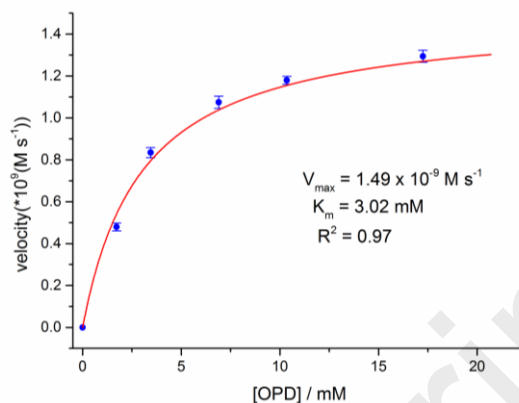


Fig. 6 [OPD]-Velocity curve obtained using the Michaelis-Menten model. General conditions: 10 mM H₂O₂ 30%; 2 mM dendrimer-1-PdNPs and pH 3.0.

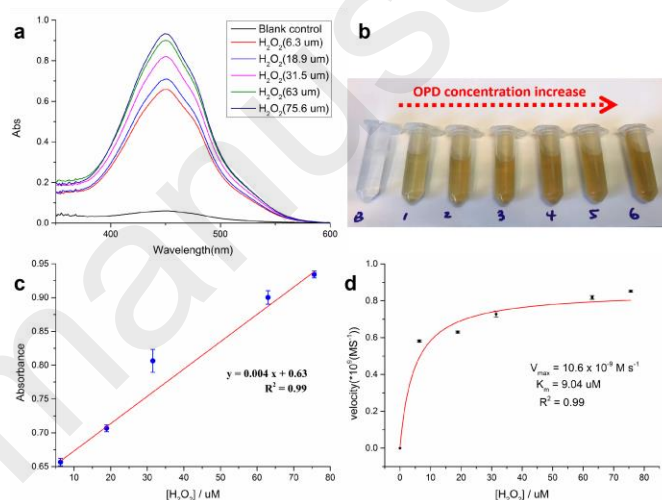


Fig. 7 Variation of the H₂O₂ concentration with dendrimer-1-PdNPs. General conditions: 0.1M OPD; 2 mM dendrimer-1-PdNPs. (a). UV-vis. spectra for various H₂O₂ concentrations; b. colour changes of oxidized OPD in the presence of dendrimer-1-PdNPs with H₂O₂ at various concentrations; c. linear calibration plots of absorbance of oxidized OPD at 450 nm; d. [H₂O₂] velocity curve using the Michaelis-Menten model).

PdNPs compared to dendrimer-1-PdNPs may be taken into account by this parameter. Finally, the H₂O₂ concentration is also directly related to the peroxidase-like catalytic reaction rate. Therefore, reaction rates recorded here were lower than in some other reports, which is directly caused by H₂O₂ concentration that was lower in the present study. The values obtained here are comparable to the best literature data, demonstrating that the present nanocatalyst not only has a comparably lower detection limit, but also possesses the advantages of excellent water dispersion and stability, which emphasizes the potential of dendrimer-1-PdNPs to function as an excellent catalyst in peroxidase-like reactions. Table 1 concerns only OPD for comparison with the results obtained in

Table 1. Comparison of the analytical parameters for the quantification of H₂O₂ reported in other nanomaterial-based enzyme mimics.

Catalyst	Linear range (μM)	Detection limit (μM)	pH	Reaction Temperature	Ref.
Ag-CoO NPs	5 - 20	3.47	5.0	r.t.*	[4]
MnFe ₂ O ₄	100 - 15000	30	7.0	r.t.*	[41]
Fe ₃ O ₄ @Cu@Cu ₂ O	400 - 1500	200	8.0	25 °C	[42]
CuS nanorods	1.0 - 1000	0.11	4.0	45 °C	[43]
Cu co-doped carbon dots	5 - 200	1.1	6.0	35 °C	[44]
dendrimer-1-PdNPs	6.3 - 75.6	0.5	3.0	22 °C	This work

*Room temperature

this work. Catalysts mimicking peroxidase have sometimes also previously been used for 3,3',5,5'-tetramethylbenzidine.^{8,45-47}

Since the diameter size of dendrimer **1** is about 10 nm,^{30,31} the smallest PdNPs are much smaller than the dendrimers and stabilised by the intradendritic triazole ligands along the dendritic triazole tethers, whereas larger PdNPs are most probably stabilised inter-dendritically. Concerning dendrimer-**2** PdNPs, their dispersity is clearly, from the TEM images, much larger than that of the dendrimer-**1**-PdNPs, with a size culminating around 3.6 nm. The kinetic results with dendrimer-**1**-PdNPs show that they are more efficient than dendrimer-**2**-PdNPs due to their small size and easier access of substrates in less bulky tethers.

Conclusion

Stable “click” dendrimer-Pd NP assemblies, utilizing the synergy between intradendritic triazole coordination to the Pd NP surface and bulk of the dendritic core, tethers and cavities, mimic peroxidase enzyme for OPD oxidation in aqueous solutions. A typical Michaelis–Menten kinetics is observed for the reaction in the presence of the dendrimer-Pd NP assemblies with a low detection limit of H₂O₂. Comparison with literature results indicates that the performances reached in H₂O₂ detection using this excellent method are among the very best ever obtained. With these advantages, the optimized dendrimer-**1**-PdNP nano-assembly is a promising biomimetic nanocatalyst (nanozyme¹²) with other possible applications in biosensing, biomimetism and environmental monitoring.⁴⁸

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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