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► **To cite this version:**

Angeliki Eirini Dimou, George Maistros, Philippe Poulin, Nikolaos D Alexopoulos. In situ control of graphene oxide dispersions with a small impedance sensor. *Nanotechnology*, 2021, 10.1088/1361-6528/ac2dc8 . hal-03406033

HAL Id: hal-03406033

<https://hal.science/hal-03406033>

Submitted on 27 Oct 2021

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In situ control of graphene oxide dispersions with a small impedance sensor

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Abstract

Carbon-based nanomaterials (CBNs), such as graphene and carbon nanotubes, display advanced physical and chemical properties, which has led to their widespread applications. One of these applications includes the incorporation of CBNs into cementitious materials in the form of aqueous dispersions. The main issue that arises in this context is that currently no established protocol exists as far as characterizing the dispersions. In the present article, an innovative method for quick evaluation and quantification of Graphene Oxide (GO) dispersions is proposed. The proposed method is Electrical Impedance Spectroscopy (EIS) with an impedance sensor. The novelty lies on the exploitation of a small sensor for on-site (field) direct dielectric measurements with the application of alternating current. Five different concentrations of GO dispersions were studied by applying EIS and for various accumulated ultrasonication energies. The low GO concentration leads to high impedance values due to low formed current network. The ultrasonication revealed two opposing mechanisms that are happening simultaneously: it facilitates the flow of the electric current due to the formation of a better dispersed network (break of the agglomerates), nevertheless the [surface](#) hydrophilic structure of the GO is damaged with the high accumulated ultrasonication energy. The dielectric measurements were exploited to express an appropriate quantitative “quality index” to facilitate with the dispersion control of the nanostructures. An intermediate concentration of GO is suggested (about 0.15 wt % of the binder materials) to be optimal for the specific engineering application, ultrasonicated at approximately 30 to 65 kJ. The investigated methodology is highly novel and displays a high potential to be applied in-field applications where CBNs must be incorporated in building materials.

Keywords: Electrical Impedance Spectroscopy (EIS); Graphene Oxide (GO); Dispersions; Ultrasonication Energy;

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61 1. Introduction

62 Nanomaterials possess original properties and novel characteristics in comparison to their equivalent
63 bulk materials [1]. One category of nanomaterials is carbon-based nanomaterials (CBNs) and includes
64 among other carbon nanotubes (CNTs), nanodiamonds and Graphene (G). Those materials combine
65 extraordinary physical and chemical properties, *e.g.* electrical conductivity and high mechanical strength
66 [2].

67 Graphene Oxide (GO) is a derivative of Graphene and contains different oxygen functional groups. These
68 oxygenated groups are the reason for G and GO to have some differences in their mechanical and
69 electrochemical properties, *e.g.* [3]. G and GO have been used so far in many different applications [4],
70 such as lithium-ion batteries, supercapacitors, biosensors, etc. One of the most challenging application
71 of G and its derivatives is their incorporation in construction materials such as cement and concrete. The
72 majority of investigations on this research topic demonstrated that these materials when added in small
73 weight percentages (wt%) in the respective matrices, increase substantially the mechanical, electrical and
74 piezoresistive properties, *e.g.* by Metaxa [5] and Guo et al. [6].

75 Possibly the best strategy to incorporate the CBNs in the cement matrix is the prior (appropriate)
76 dispersion of the nanomaterials in the mixing water with cement. This task has been challenging to
77 overcome so far, not only in the case of cement-based composites but also in all CBN applications, since
78 the nanoparticles tend to agglomerate in solutions. This phenomenon leads to the reduction of the specific
79 surface area of the nanoparticles [7], as well as to an inhomogeneous dispersion of the nanoparticles in
80 the cement matrix. Zhao et al. [8] reported that the lack of homogeneity results in the creation of weak
81 zones in the final product. To this end, it is extremely important to break down any-formed agglomerates
82 and to efficiently disperse the nanoparticles ~~in order to form so that~~ a stable system ~~is formed~~. To achieve
83 this goal, different dispersion systems and methods have been investigated in the literature for the CBN
84 dispersion and representative research articles are reported in ~~Table 1~~ Table 1.

85 The literature review revealed that the application of ultrasonic energy, is possibly the best means to
86 achieve 'good' CBN dispersions. Several differences were noticed regarding the type of additional agents
87 employed (surfactants, superplasticizers, etc.) to increase the dispersion "quality". There are also several
88 attempts to chemically functionalize the nanomaterials before their dispersion phase. For example, Wang
89 et al. [9] functionalized GO with polyether amine, while Sezer and Koç [10] acid-functionalized CNTs
90 and silver-decorated CNTs to enhance their capability to be efficiently dispersed.

122 Apart from forming dispersions with the necessary CBN type and concentration, another important issue
123 is their characterization in terms of dispersion degree. The zeta potential (ζ) through Dynamic Light
124 Scattering (DLS) is a widely used method, e.g. in [8], [10]_and [11], to characterize an aqueous
125 dispersion. Another method that is frequently exploited to characterize the stability of such dispersions
126 is Ultraviolet-Visible (UV-Vis) Spectroscopy, e.g. [12]_and [13]. Vallejo et al. [14] calculated several
127 rheometric parameters, while Konios et al. [15] determined their solubility factors. A literature review
128 with the available methods to characterize the dispersion of nanomaterials in solutions can be found in
129 Table 1~~Table 1~~. All these methods can be performed on the same system to get an advanced-insight of
130 the dispersion with the combination of all available (conventional and less-conventional) methods for
131 the advanced characterization control. Nevertheless, most of these methods suffer from~~are subjected to~~
132 limitations, like including the need to dilute the suspensions, the use of specific cells with well-defined
133 optical characteristics, the need of large analysis instruments, etc. All these factors are limiting the ~~This~~
134 widespread and easily implementation~~is why they cannot be easily implemented~~ for the in-situ
135 characterization of suspensions in various environments and applications.

136 The present article aims at introducing a light and versatile methodology for the nanomaterials dispersion
137 control with a small sensor by exploiting Electrochemical Impedance Spectroscopy (EIS). By measuring
138 the dielectric properties, process-related conclusions can be made~~investigated~~. Dielectric Analysis, also
139 known as impedance spectroscopy, is an already mature technology for the measurement of the dielectric
140 properties, the investigation of the mechanisms and the kinetics of reactions, as well as of properties of
141 porous materials, e.g. by Macdonald [16].

142 As far as the characterization of the dispersions of nanomaterials is concerned, Impedance
143 Spectroscopy~~EIS~~ has also been applied successfully. For instance, Alfonso et al. [17] examined GO
144 solutions in Milli-Q water and Isopropyl Alcohol to find relatively small values of dielectric permittivity
145 in graphene oxide materials in comparison to previous studies. Baltzis et al. [18] applied impedance
146 spectroscopy~~EIS~~ to study epoxy composites with CNTs and milled carbon and found out that the results
147 indicated an inverse dependence between the magnitude of impedance and the dispersion duration. The
148 reason for this increasing interest on the characterization of systems with this method is the simplicity of
149 the method and the relatively low cost of the measuring technology.

150 In the present study, a novelty is introduced for the proposed methodology that exploits a small (field)
151 sensor for in-situ direct dielectric measurements with the application of alternating current. It is noted
152 that the classic EIS setup with the parallel electrodes makes the exploitation of the methodology difficult

153 in on-field applications. Also, EIS has already been applied to study the behaviour of cementitious
154 materials, as described in [19] and [20], but this would not be feasible in field.

155 The present article focuses on the first step of the production of GO/cement composites, i.e. the
156 development of the aqueous nanoparticle dispersion before being added in the cementitious matrix. The
157 final research target is to produce a composite with electrical and piezoresistive properties, thus
158 permeating [the](#) sensing ability. To this end, it will be shown that the proposed method can be used for a
159 quick, efficient, and quantitative evaluation of the CBN dispersions in applications. To achieve this
160 target, five different GO dispersions with varying GO concentration will be produced. Ultrasonication
161 energy with a probe ultrasonicator is applied on all [aqueous](#) dispersions and their electrical properties are
162 measured through the application of EIS. The results of the methodology are analysed to characterize the
163 dispersion control and several other [analytical](#) techniques like Fourier-Transform Infrared Spectroscopy
164 (FT-IR), Raman Spectroscopy and Optical Microscopy were also used to support the findings [of the](#)
165 [present investigation](#).

166 **2. Experimental investigation**

167 The experimental flow diagram can be shortly summarised as follows: firstly, the water and graphene
168 oxide are mixed to form the GO dispersion. Then, ultrasonication energy is applied to the [aqueous](#)
169 dispersion, while impedance scans are recorded at different accumulated ultrasonication energy values.
170 Samples at the same ultrasonication values are isolated to be examined with analytical methods, *e.g.*
171 optical microscopy, FT-IR and RAMAN spectroscopy. The results are assessed to fully analyse the
172 [aqueous](#) dispersions so that an optimal concentration and amount of ultrasonication energy can be
173 proposed. A schematic representation of the flow diagram of the present article is given in [Figure 1](#).

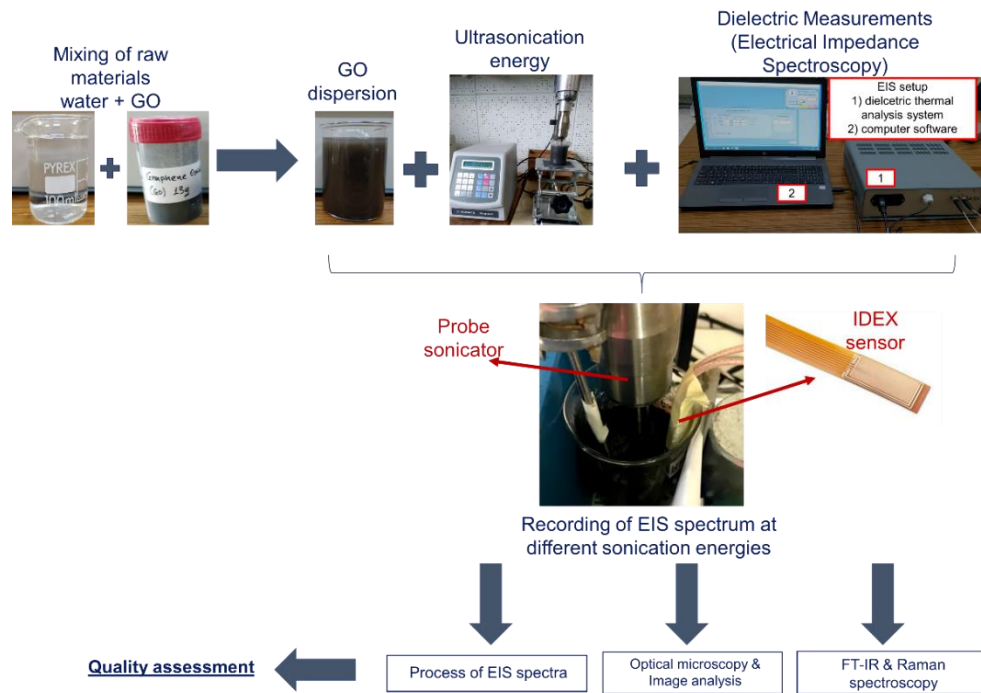


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the experimental procedure.

Table 1: List of dispersion evaluation methods for different dispersion systems of CBNs.

Ref.	Nanomaterial	Dispersion system	Concentration / Content	Dispersion method	Evaluation method
[12]	G	water and superficial active agents (SAAs)	01 wt%, 0.025 wt% and 0.05 wt% (of cement)	1) Stirring of the SAAs and water 2) Ultrasonic disruption in 1 – 6 stages (duration of each stage: 5 min.)	UV-Vis Spectroscopy Sedimentation test
[21]	GNP	water and melamine dispersant	0.2 g GNPs with 1 g dispersant/200 g water/4 g cement.	1) Hand stirring of water and dispersant. 2) High power ultrasonic vibration for 5 min and cooling down in a water bath for another 5 min. (3 times)	Visual rating Image analysis
[22]	Multilayer Graphene Sheets (MLG)	isopropanol	0% to 0.033% by weight of cement	MLG and Isopropanol solutions was directly poured in the matrix. No additives (superplasticizer, water-reducing agents, or surfactants) were employed.	Visual rating Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM)
[23]	GO	water and superplasticizer (solid power)	0.01 wt%, 0.03 wt%, and 0.05 wt% of cement	1) GO and water were stirred uniformly. 2) The superplasticizer was added and the solution was stirred until complete dissolution 3) The solution was ultrasonicated for 5 min.	Visual rating Atomic force microscopy (AFM)
[10]	Chemically Functionalized Multiwall CNTs	water with and without surfactant	0.1 wt %	Sonication with probe type sonicator for 15 min (3 s pulse, 1 s wait cycles) at constant temperature 23 ° using an ice-cooled bath.	Transition Electron Microscopy (TEM) DLS Thermal conductivity measurements
[14]	Polycarboxylate chemically modified GNPs	propylene glycol and water	0.25, 0.50, 0.75 and 1.0 wt%	Ultrasonication for 200 min in an ultrasound bath	DLS Rheology and viscosity measurements
[11]	GO	solution of chloride salts of Ca ²⁺ , K ⁺ and Na ⁺	0.035 mg/mL	Sonication for 15 min with a cup-horn sonicate processor	Visual Rating DLS
[15]	GO and reduced GO (rGO)	water and 17 organic solvents	0.5 mg/mL	Sonication in an ultrasound bath cleaner for 1 h and then mildly centrifugation at 500 rpm for 90 min	UV-Vis Spectroscopy Raman Spectroscopy

[17]	GO	Milli-Q water and Isopropyl Alcohol	0.4 – 3 wt %	1) Centrifugation for solvent exchange 2) Sonication with a tip sonicator (30 min) 3) Ultracentrifuge process for 1 h	Electrical Impedance Spectroscopy
[18]	MWCNTs and Carbon Black	two-part low viscosity epoxy resin	0.5 wt % MWCNTs 2 % CB	Shear Mixing - Use of laboratory dissolver apparatus (dispersion under vacuum conditions)	Electrical Impedance Spectroscopy
[24]	CNTs	water-based suspensions with ionic surfactant (added in cement matrix)	0.2 – 0.8 wt % of cement	1) Sonication process 2) Application of vacuum for 45 minutes to remove any residual air bubble	Porosity and pore size distribution measurements (assessment referring to the cement matrix)
[25]	CNTs	Aqueous suspensions with ionic surfactant commonly plasticizer-type dispersant	Surfactant Suspensions 0.5 and 1 wt% CNTs. Dispersant suspensions 0.4 - 1.6 wt%	Sonication Process	UV-Vis Spectroscopy
[26]	Single Wall CNTs	Aqueous solutions of sodium dodecylbenzene sulfonate	0.5 wt %	1) Sonication 2) Ultracentrifugation	UV-Vis/NIR spectroscopy Raman spectroscopy Atomic force microscopy

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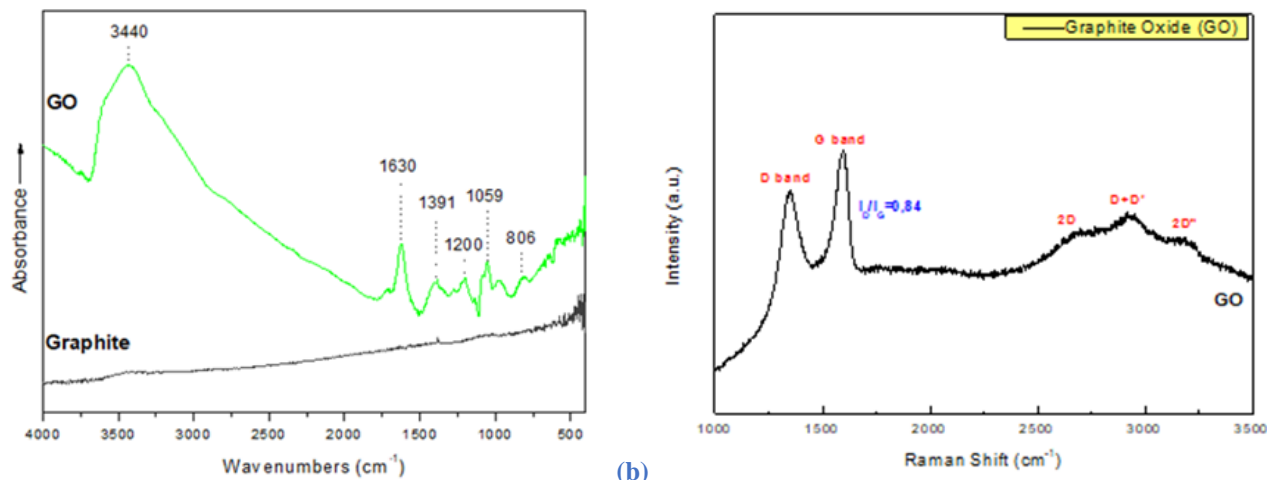
199 2.1 Materials

200 Graphene Oxide (GO) was synthesized at the University of Ioannina, Department of Materials Science
 201 & Engineering (Prof. D. Gournis and Prof. M. Karakassides), via the following procedure: 10 g graphite
 202 (powder) was added to a mixture of 400 mL sulfuric acid (H₂SO₄ 95-97 %) and 200 mL nitric acid (HNO₃
 203 65 %) in an ice bath, the mixture was stirred for 45 minutes. Then 100 g powdered KClO₃ was slowly
 204 added in the mixture in small portions. After 18 h the reaction was terminated by pouring the mixture
 205 into deionized water. The product was washed thoroughly until pH of 6.0 was attained. The sample dried
 206 at room temperature.

207 The structural characteristics of Graphite and GO were studied with FT-IR and the results can be seen in
 208 [Figure 2](#) ~~Figure 2a~~. Graphite does not absorb infrared light and that explains the absence of clear peaks.
 209 On the other hand, GO presents several peaks which come from the vibrations of Oxygen groups, while
 210 the carbon double-bond vibrations (C=C) appear at 1630 cm⁻¹. More specifically, the peak at 3440 cm⁻¹
 211 corresponds to the extension vibrations of C – OH and the humidity. The peaks at 1720 cm⁻¹ and 1059
 212 cm⁻¹ come from the carboxyl group vibrations of the bonds C=O and C-O₂ respectively. The deformation
 213 vibrations of hydroxyls of C – OH groups are spotted at 1391 cm⁻¹ and finally the peaks at 806 cm⁻¹ and
 214 1200 cm⁻¹ correspond to the bond vibrations C – O and C – O – C of the epoxy-groups. The results are
 215 in accordance with other GO spectra, such as [reported in \[27\]](#) and [\[28\]](#).

216 The Raman spectrum of GO was measured at the University of Ioannina and is given in the diagram of
 217 [Figure 2](#) ~~Figure 2b~~. ~~It where shows~~ all characteristic bands [are shown](#). D Band at 1353 cm⁻¹ is attributed

239 to sp^3 hybridization due to imperfections and deformations during Graphite oxidation. 1st order G Band
 240 at 1597 cm^{-1} is attributed to sp^2 hybridized carbon atoms of the Graphite net. The ratio (ID/IG) of the D
 241 and G bands shows the formation of functional oxygen groups during the oxidation process and was
 242 found equal to 0.84.



243 (a) (b)
 244 **Figure 2: (a) FT-IR spectrum of Graphite and GO (b) Raman spectrum of GO.**

245 The dispersion medium in this study was bottled water, more representative of water used in cement
 246 applications than Milli-Q water. The water samples were produced by Epirotic Bottling Industry S.A.
 247 (VIKOS S.A.), Ioannina, Greece. The pH value of the water sample was 7.3. Shih et al. [29] showed that
 248 at low pH values, the carboxyl groups of GO are protonated such that the GO sheets form aggregated
 249 due to the lower degree of hydrophilicity. At higher pH, the carboxyl groups are deprotonated. On the
 250 other hand, Wu et al. [30] found that at alkaline pH with cation presence GO suspensions destabilize due
 251 to cross-linking of GO sheets through interacting with GO surfaces. Taking these facts into account, a
 252 product with slightly alkaline pH with low concentration of ions was chosen.

253 2.2 Experimental methods

254 Five different GO solutions were prepared and the exact amounts of GO and bottled water are presented
 255 in [Table 2](#). The GO quantities were selected so as the suspensions could be afterwards used for
 256 the preparation of cement-based nanocomposites at concentrations ranging from 0.05 wt% and up to 0.20
 257 wt% of the binder, as shown in the last column of [Table 2](#). GO and water were weighed and
 258 placed in a beaker for the dispersion process and were hand-stirred before the first measurement.

259 **Table 2. Mix proportions of the investigated GO dispersions.**

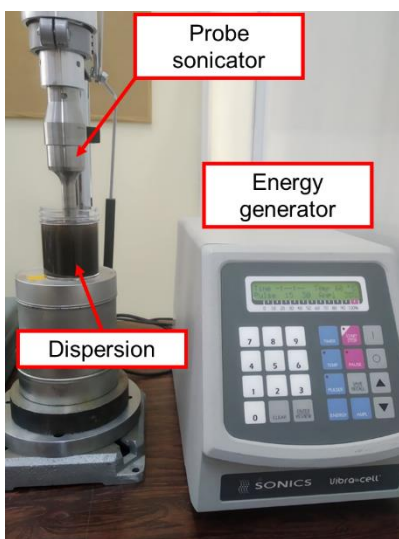
Solution number (#)	GO (g)	Water (mL)	wt % of binder
GO_0.05	0.07	100	0.05 %
GO_0.10	0.14	100	0.10 %

GO_0.15	0.21	100	0.15 %
GO_0.175	0.25	100	0.175 %
GO_0.20	0.28	100	0.20 %

260

261 The dispersion process was accomplished by applying ultrasonication energy with a probe type
 262 ultrasonicator. The energy generator was the VCX-500 model and the nozzle model was CV-334 model,
 263 both produced by the company SONICS & MATERIALS®. A temperature sensor was also used to
 264 simultaneously record the temperature values. The process consists of 360 ultrasonication cycles with
 265 each cycle containing a 15 s pulse and a 30 s wait. Therefore, the total amount of time needed for each
 266 solution is 4.5 h, a time frame that corresponds to about 100 kJ of ultrasonication energy. The
 267 ultrasonication experimental setup is shown in Figure 3. The impedance scans were recorded for different
 268 accumulated ultrasonication energy values, namely 3 kJ, 12 kJ, 30 kJ, 65 kJ and 100 kJ for 100 mL each
 269 of the different investigated GO dispersions.

270 The effect of ultrasonication energy on the functional groups of GO was also observed for a given
 271 concentration (namely 0.15 wt%) through the recording of the FT-IR Spectra with a Bruker – Tensor
 272 27 spectrometer and Raman Spectra. Spectra at different ultrasonication energies were recorded at the
 273 same accumulated ultrasonication energy levels, namely at 3 kJ, 12 kJ, 30 kJ, 65 kJ, and 100 kJ. The
 274 dispersion evaluation included optical microscopy with a Leica DM-RX microscope at samples
 275 ultrasonicated at the respective ultrasonication energy values. The micrographs obtained from the optical
 276 microscopy were subjected to image analysis using the ImageJ software [31] to determine the average
 277 agglomerates size of agglomerates.



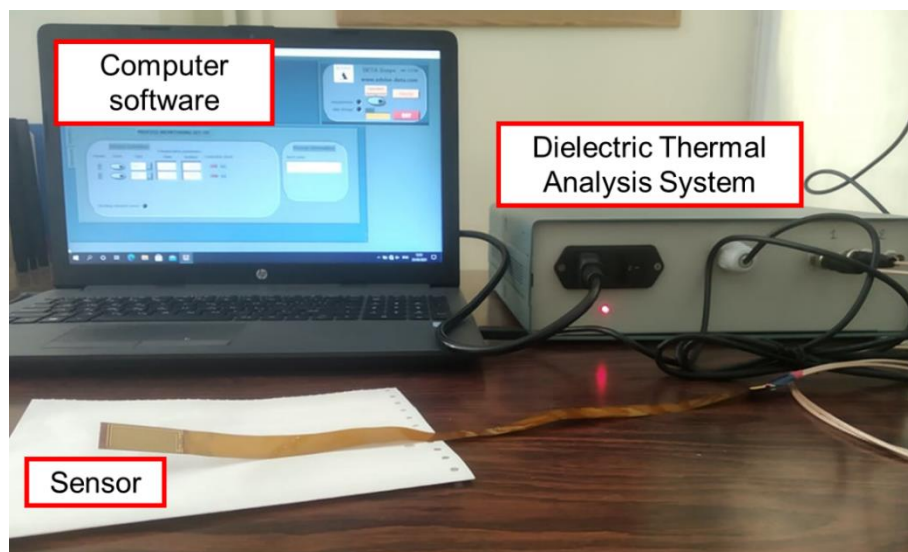
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279 **Figure 3. The experimental test set-up with the ultrasonication equipment on the GO dispersion of the present study.**

303 EIS was performed during the ultrasonication process using a Dielectric Thermal Analysis System
304 DETA-SCOPE[®] supplied by ADVISE, Chios, Greece as shown in [Figure 4](#). The hardware setup
305 was connected to an interdigital dielectric sensor IDEX[®], film-shaped, produced by Netzsch[®], Germany.
306 The specific sensor was selected for the present application due to the small geometrical dimensions,
307 approximately 10 mm in width and 30 mm in length. EIS with an IDEX sensor is a high accuracy- and
308 established analysis method already used to investigate various well-known systems, as in [32], [33] and-
309 [34].

310 Additionally, the selected impedance measuring device is light weight, making the whole experimental
311 setup portable and very easy to use in almost all possible applications. The DETA-SCOPE[®] applies
312 sinusoidal excitation voltage of 10 V amplitude with frequency ranging from 0.1 Hz to 100 kHz. The
313 measurements are recorded by the data acquisition software of the system. The first tests were performed
314 on (plain) bottled water, followed by the five GO dispersions with different GO concentrations. For each
315 dispersion, more than 20 impedance scans were recorded during the whole ultrasonication process and
316 the process was repeated twice for each different concentration of the dispersion. Each dispersion was
317 produced three times (3x) to record the respective spectrum so as to ensure repeatability of the procedure.

318 Processing and interpretation of the impedance measurements can be accomplished by studying the
319 Equivalent Circuit Model (ECM) [35]. This procedure is usually challenging, because more than one
320 possible solution may fit the experimental data accurately, *e.g.* [36]. The issue of the non-singularity of
321 the fitted model can be overcome if there is a deep understanding of the physiochemical processes and
322 phases included in the system under investigation (*e.g.* double layer capacitance, solution resistance,
323 polarization resistance, or porous electrodes).



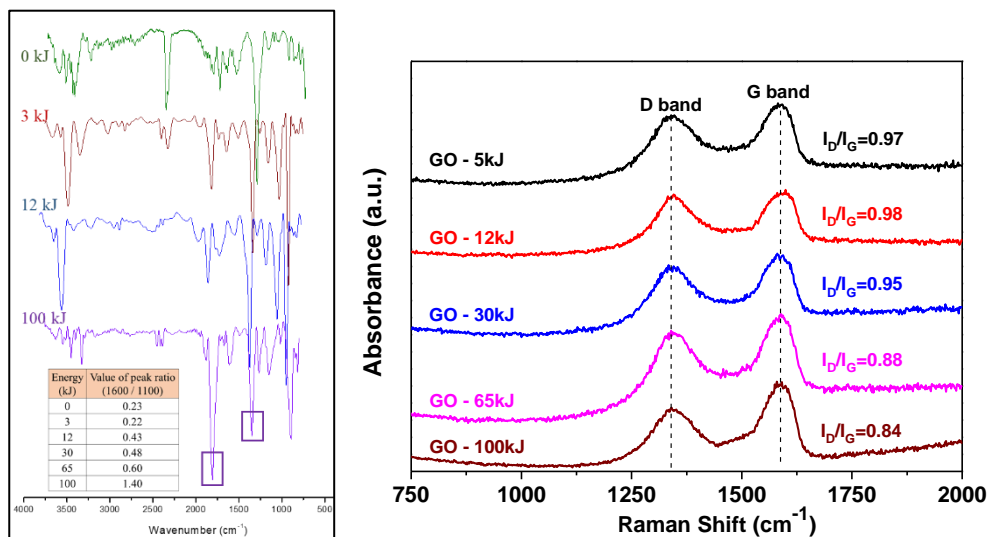
324
325 **Figure 4. EIS experimental test setup**

326 3. Experimental results

327 3.1 Instrumental analysis methods

328 The FT-IR spectra were recorded for all the above-mentioned ultrasonication energy values and the
329 results are presented in Figure 5, where the peaks at 1600 cm^{-1} and 1100 cm^{-1} are marked. The goal is to
330 investigate whether the high accumulated ultrasonication energy values can destroy the already formed,
331 specific functional groups. It is already known by Zhang et al. [37] that ultrasonic conditions lead to the
332 exfoliation of graphene oxide [37]. For this reason, the ratio of two standard GO peaks was calculated
333 for the different energies. It is known that the peak at 1600 is related to the sp^2 lattice of the Graphene
334 structure, while the 1100 peak refers to C-O- functional group. The ratio of the intensity of the peaks is
335 calculated for all energies ($\text{Intensity}_{1600} / \text{Intensity}_{1100}$). The calculated ratio increases as the
336 ultrasonication energy value increases, showing that the GO structure is affected by high accumulated
337 ultrasonication energy. All the main peaks continue to exist, but their intensity gradually changes,
338 indicating an affected chemical structure. This implies that a mechanism is evident dealing with the
339 destruction of the functional groups at the surface of the nanostructures, or perhaps ~~The present results~~
340 ~~could be explained by ato~~ the partial reduction of the GO sheets (exfoliation of graphene oxide) by
341 ultrasonication. It is also noted that the peak at 2200 - 2500 is attributed to the presence of GO.

342 The Raman spectra also confirms a change in the GO structure with high accumulated ultrasonication
343 energy values. The characteristic bands are also marked in Figure 5, namely D-band and G-band. The
344 ratio of the intensity of D/G Bands was also calculated and ~~it is a~~ can be considered as a measure of
345 defects in the structure [38]. Likewise, Farah et al. [39] used the same ratio to study the reduction
346 phenomena. As shown in the graph, the ratio of the intensity of those peaks ~~lowers~~ decreases as
347 ultrasonication energy increases, thus showing consistency with the FT-IR results.



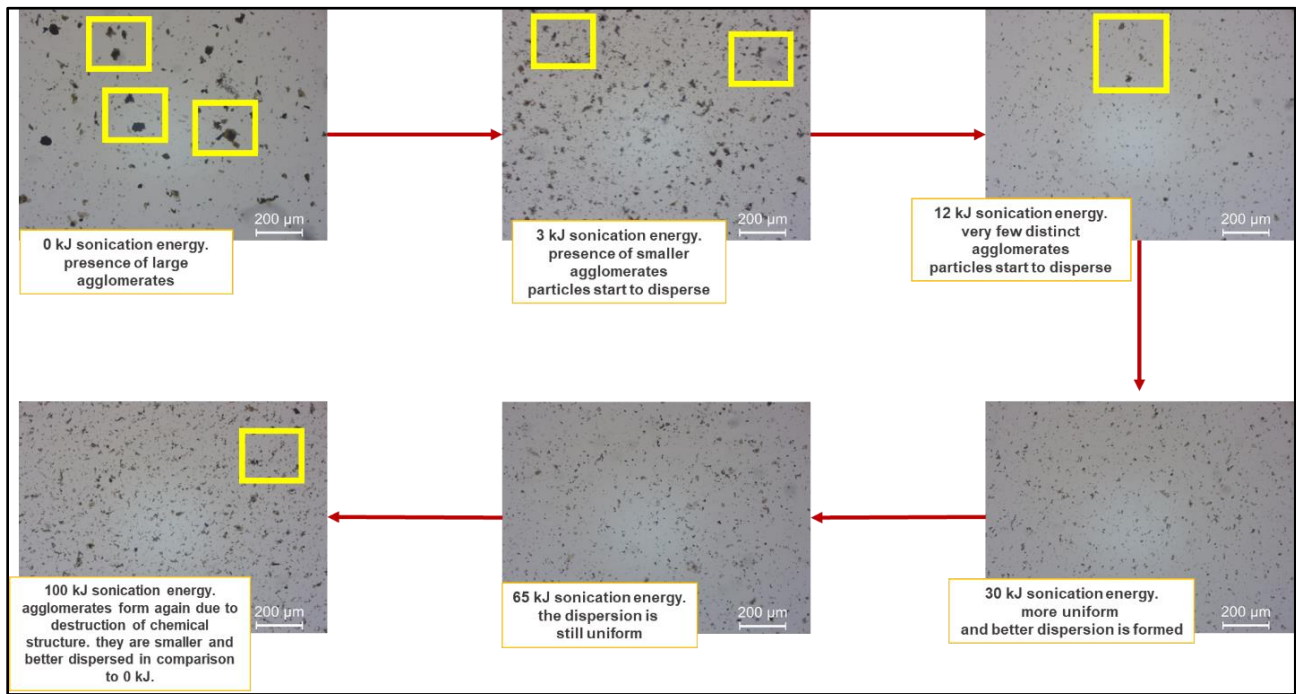
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375 **Figure 5: FT-IR spectrum (left) and Raman spectrum (right) of GO_0.15 (0.15 wt%) dispersion at different**
376 **ultrasonication energy values.**

377 ~~Figure 6~~ displays the images obtained from the optical microscopy analysis and for ~~the~~ different
378 accumulated ultrasonication energy values. As can be seen from the Figure, large agglomerates can be
379 noticed at the non-ultrasonicated samples, ~~since they were not ultrasonicated at all with.~~ ~~The~~ average
380 size of the noticeable agglomerates ~~is being~~ approximately 45 μm . ~~The application of low~~ ~~A small amount~~
381 ~~of~~ ultrasonication energy level (3 kJ) is enough to break up the largest agglomerates ~~and the~~
382 ~~nanostuctures start to disperse~~. More specifically, ~~there are~~ two distinct groups of agglomerates can be
383 identified. The first ~~of the~~ group contains the larger agglomerates of the order of magnitude of 30 μm
384 in diameter (~ 30 % smaller than the ones with 0 kJ energy) and the second ~~one~~ group contains the lower
385 agglomerates of the order of magnitude of 13 μm in diameter (~ 60 % smaller than the ones with 0 kJ
386 energy). After the application of 12 kJ ultrasonication energy, the nanostructures are even better
387 dispersed and quite few agglomerates were noticed, having with an average diameter of approximate 21
388 μm .

389 Further application of ultrasonic ~~ation~~ energy leads to a better dispersion of the nanoparticles, since the
390 number of the agglomerates is further reduced. For instance, at 30 kJ ultrasonication energy value, the
391 average agglomerate diameter is less than 10 μm . However, at 100 kJ ultrasonication energy value,
392 several agglomerates have started to form again, and the average diameter of the largest ones is
393 approximately 15 - 20 μm , though this time they are uniformly dispersed.

394 The reason for this re-agglomeration with the high ultrasonication energy level ~~that~~ can be attributed to
395 the alteration of chemical structure of the nanostructures, i.e. the destruction of hydrophilic groups and
396 of the decrease of the lateral size of the GO (often called as exfoliation in the literature). Hydrophobic
397 agglomeration is a phenomenon used to describe the aggregation of hydrophobic particles in aqueous
398 suspension due to the hydrophobic attraction between the particles [40]. Thus, hydrophobic
399 agglomeration takes place, because extensive amounts of ultrasonic energy lead to destruction of
400 hydrophilic groups and a more graphene-like structure (hydrophobic structure).



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Figure 6: Optical microscopy images for the GO 0.15 wt% dispersion and for the different ultrasonication energy values.

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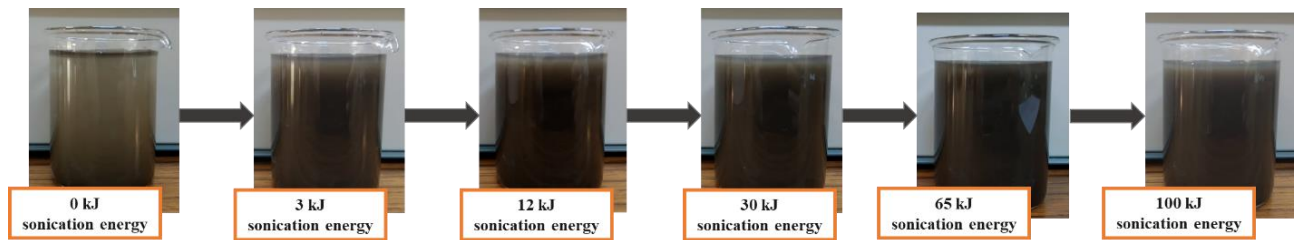
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For comparison purposes, ~~Figure 7~~ [Figure 7](#) shows the side view of the beaker with the GO dispersion (100 ml) at 0.15 wt% concentration and for the different investigated ultrasonication energy values. After 12 kJ, the colour of the dispersion seems to be more uniform all over the container. This observation with a naked eye may result to erroneous interpretation, since the optical microscopy results showed completely different results in terms of agglomeration size. To this end, it is recommended that the visual rating is not an appropriate method to evaluate the “quality” of the dispersions or the dispersion control of the nanostructures.

Mis e



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Figure 7: Visual evolution of the side view of the GO 0.15 wt% dispersion for the different investigated ultrasonication energy values.

431

3.2 Electrical impedance spectroscopy results

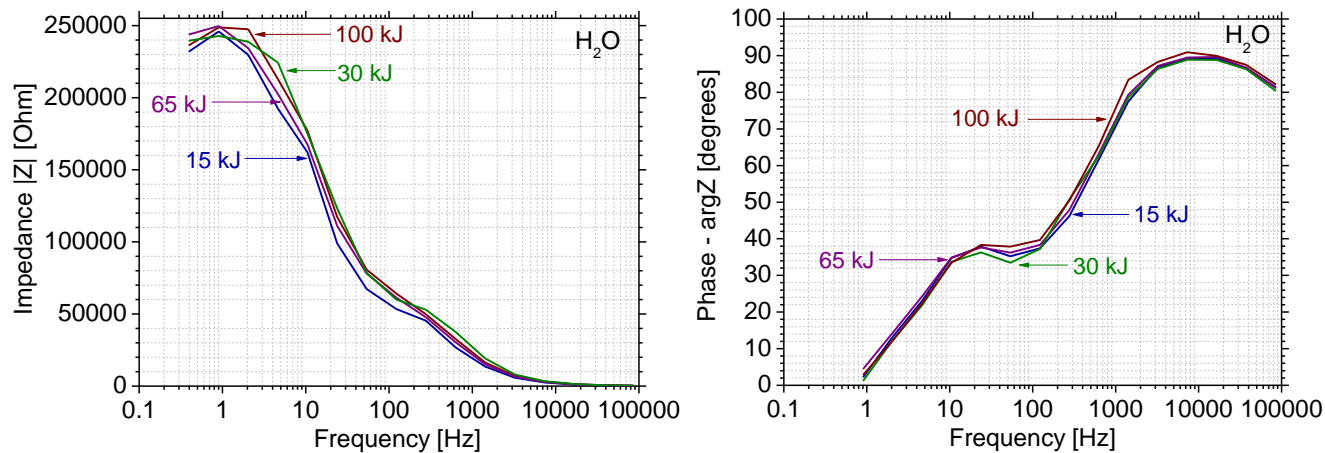
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434

The first set of measurements was conducted on bottled water to capture the background impedance of water used in the study and to ensure the repeatability of the procedure. [The tests were repeated three times \(3x\) and repeatability of the dielectric measurements was assured.](#) The Bode impedance plots of

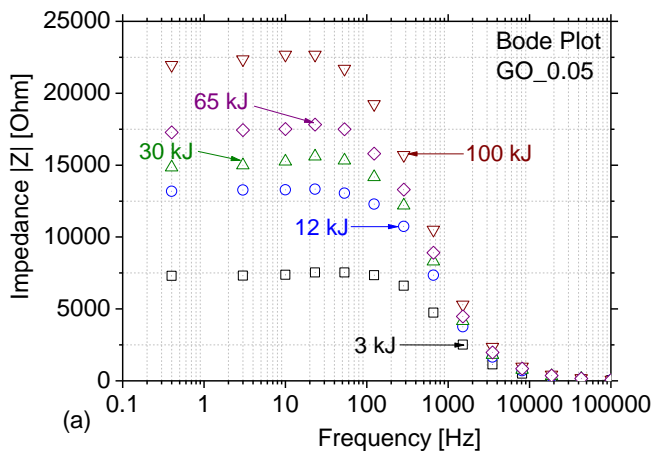
453 bottled water in [Figure 8](#) present the impedance modulus $|Z|$ and phase angle $\arg Z$ measurements
 454 of the bottled water [vs. versus](#) test frequency. As expected, the Bode impedance plot shows that the bottled
 455 water is not affected by the ultrasonication energy level and the impedance vector is characteristic of
 456 water.



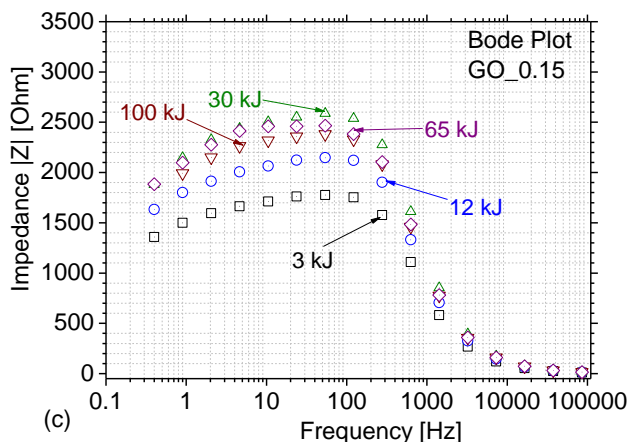
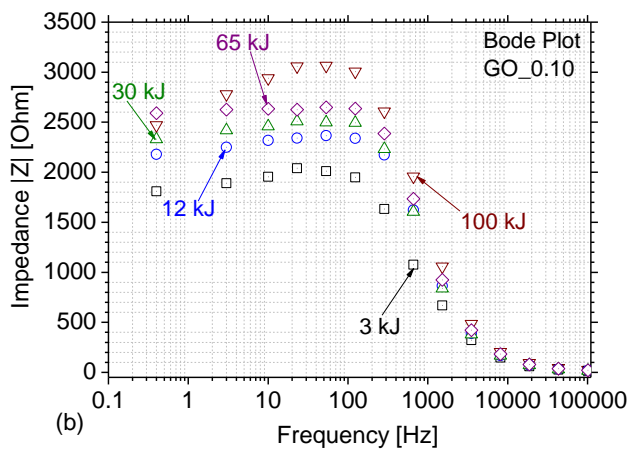
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458 **Figure 8: Measurements of impedance modulus (left) and phase angle (right) versus test frequency for the bottled**
 459 **water (solvent).**

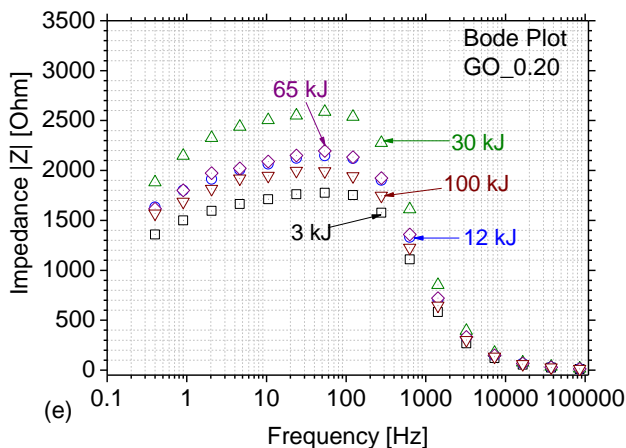
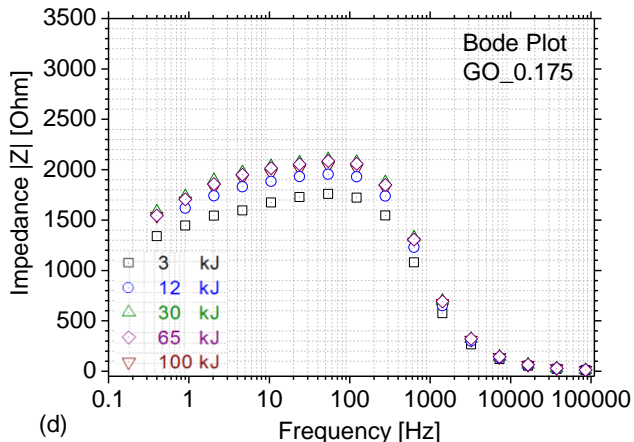
460 The Bode impedance plots in [Figures 9a to 9e](#) refer to the five (5) investigated GO concentrations and
 461 present the impedance vector against test frequency for different accumulated ultrasonication energy
 462 values. The GO_0.05 dispersion exhibits the highest impedance modulus values. There is a general
 463 tendency for increasing impedance modulus at low frequencies when the ultrasonication energy increases
 464 with the exception of the highest GO concentration. The dominance of ionic conductivity is evident in
 465 the GO dispersions at frequencies below 100 Hz considering the interdigital structure of the sensors and
 466 the fringing electric field created above the sensor surface. The above-mentioned tendency could be a
 467 result of partial reduction of GO with [ultra](#)sonication as there will be less ions after reduction. As the
 468 concentration of GO in the aqueous dispersions [increases](#), the overall magnitude of the impedance vector
 469 decreases indicating higher concentration of charged species, such as ions, in the electric field.
 470 Qualitative and quantitative analysis of the spectra will be [made-discussed](#) in the following section.



471



472



473

474 **Figure 9: Bode plots of the five different investigated GO dispersions (GO concentration from 0.05 wt% and up to**
 475 **0.20 wt%) at different ultrasonication energy levels.**

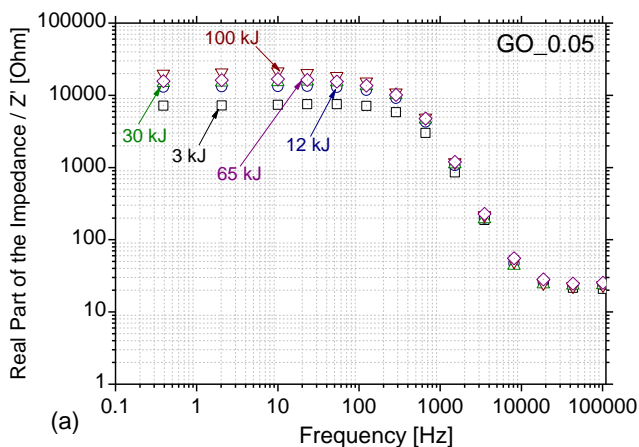
476 As the ultrasonication energy increases, it is expected that the dispersion becomes more uniform with
 477 lower size of agglomerates as well as that GO reduction is promoted. Both of these effects lead to
 478 increasing impedance levels in the GO dispersion. By the application of ultrasonication energy; the form
 479 of cavitation micro-bubbles and their collapse because of the energy excess leads to the creation of micro-
 480 jets and shockwaves, thus facilitating de-bundling to achieve better dispersion of nanoparticles [41].

481 **4. Discussion of the results**

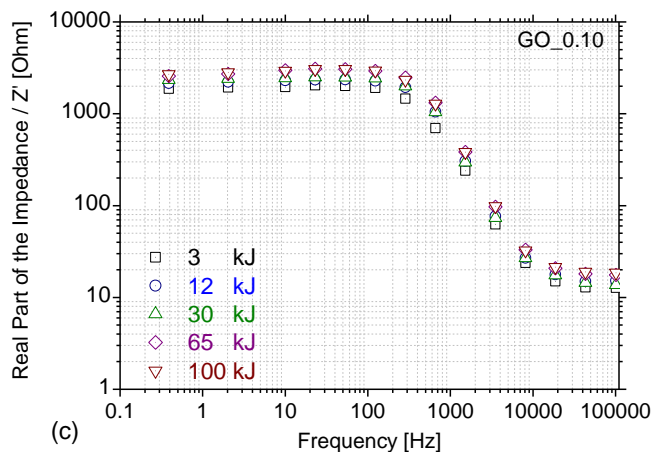
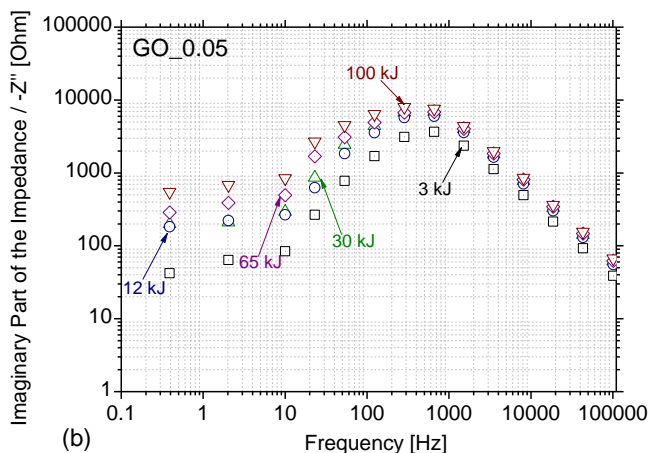
482 **4.1 Analysis of the impedance values**

483 The output results of the [electrical impedance EIS](#) experiments are the modulus of the electrical
484 impedance $|Z|$ and the phase angle of the impedance θ , from which the real and imaginary part of the
485 resistance can be calculated. [Figure 10](#) presents the real and imaginary impedance parts for all GO
486 dispersions and the different, pre-defined accumulated ultrasonication energy levels. At the
487 concentrations of 0.05 wt.% and 0.10 wt.%, the real part of the impedance at low frequencies increases
488 as the ultrasonication energy level increases. This effect is less pronounced as the GO concentration in
489 the dispersions increases. At all GO concentrations higher than 0.05 wt %, two distinct relaxation
490 processes are observed in the imaginary impedance plots on either side of the minimum value at the
491 frequency of 25 Hz.

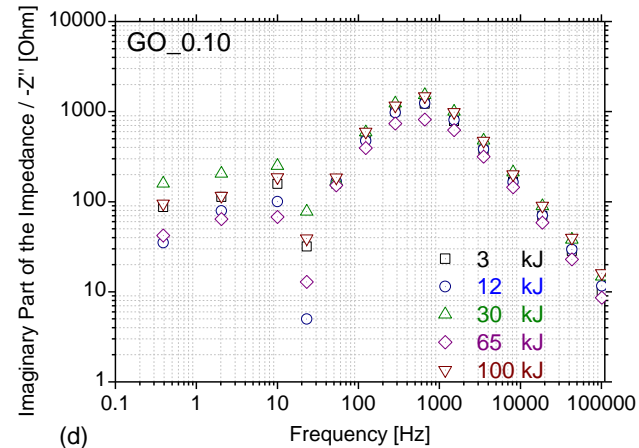
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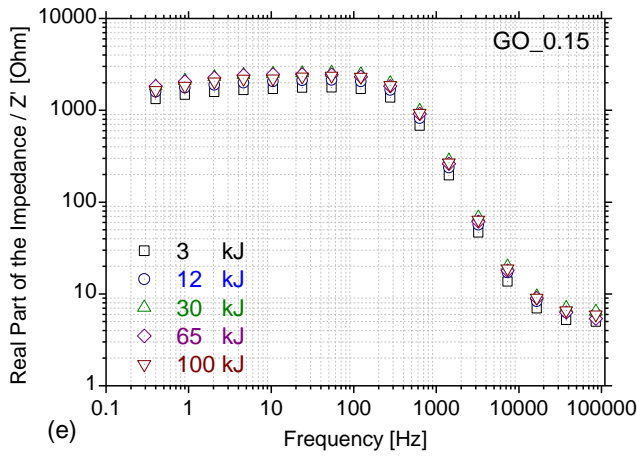


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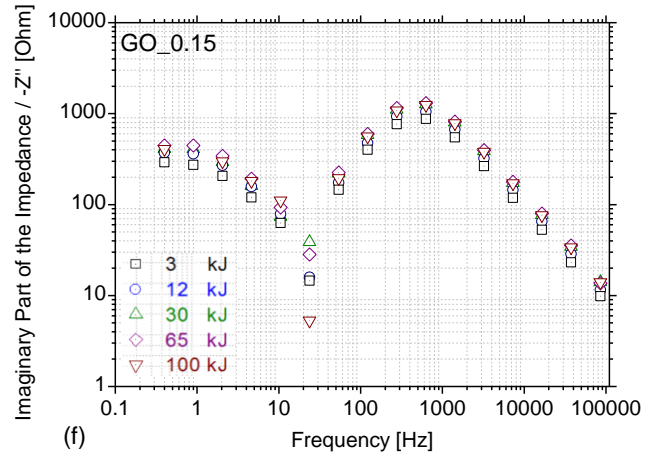


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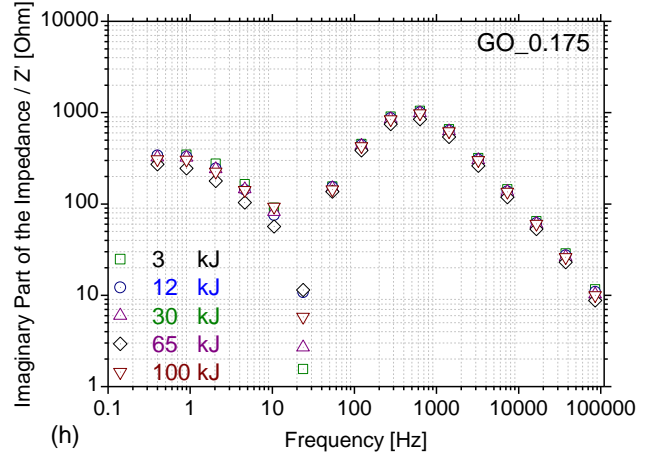
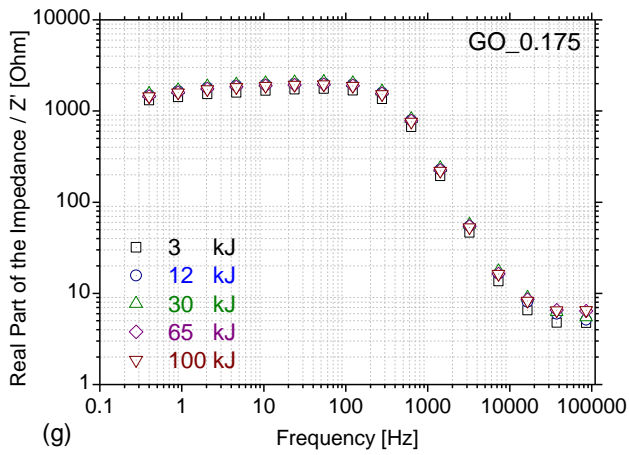




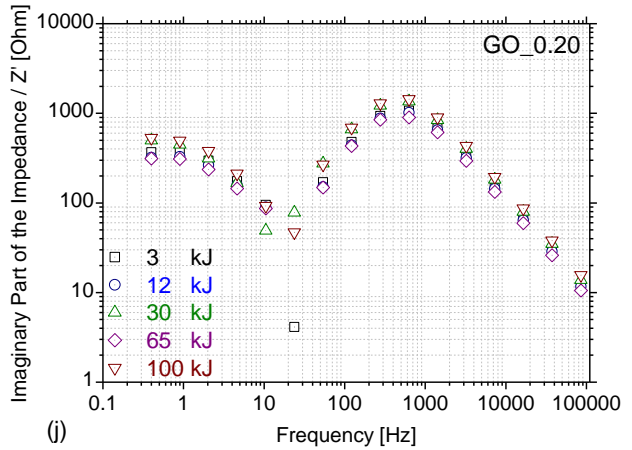
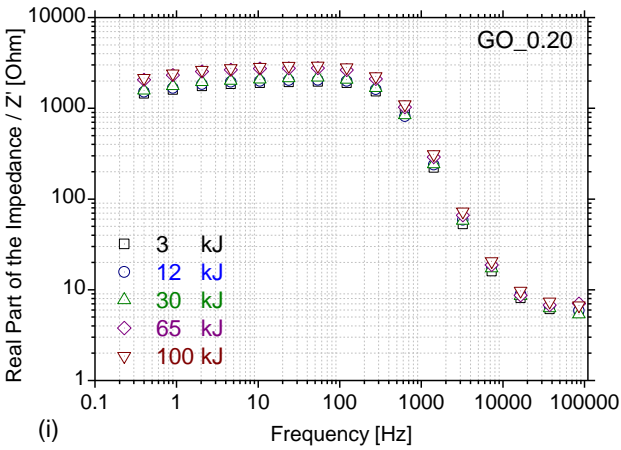
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Figure 10. Real and imaginary parts of the impedance for the investigated GO dispersions (GO concentration from 0.05 wt% and up to 0.20 wt%) and for the different ultrasonication energy levels.

502

4.2 Equivalent circuit modelling

503

The proposed equivalent circuit modelling (ECM) is an evolution of the classical Randle-cell model [42]

504

that contains elements corresponding to the different processes present in our system, i.e. the interface

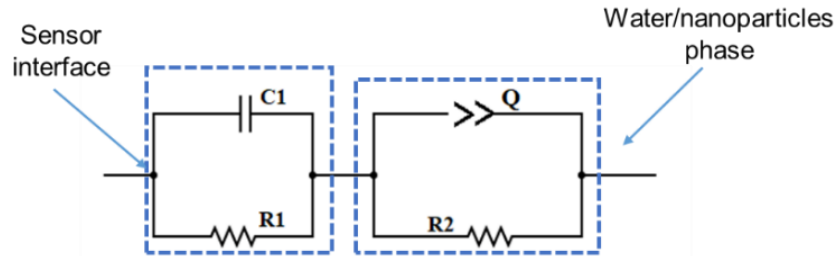
505

between the dispersion ~~and~~ the Kapton film of the sensor and the active phase of nanoparticles

506

dispersion. As shown in Figure 11, the ECM consists of two branches according to the previous

507 description with four elements. The capacitor C_1 and the resistor R_1 are the double layer capacitance and
 508 the charge transfer resistor, respectively and they refer to the electrical double layer at the interface of
 509 the dispersion and the film. In series with this branch we find the components of the water / GO
 510 nanostructures phase in terms of a parallel connection of the constant phase element (CPE), which is
 511 symbolized with Q , and the resistor R_2 .



512
 513 **Figure 11: Proposed equivalent circuit model for the aqueous GO dispersions.**
 514

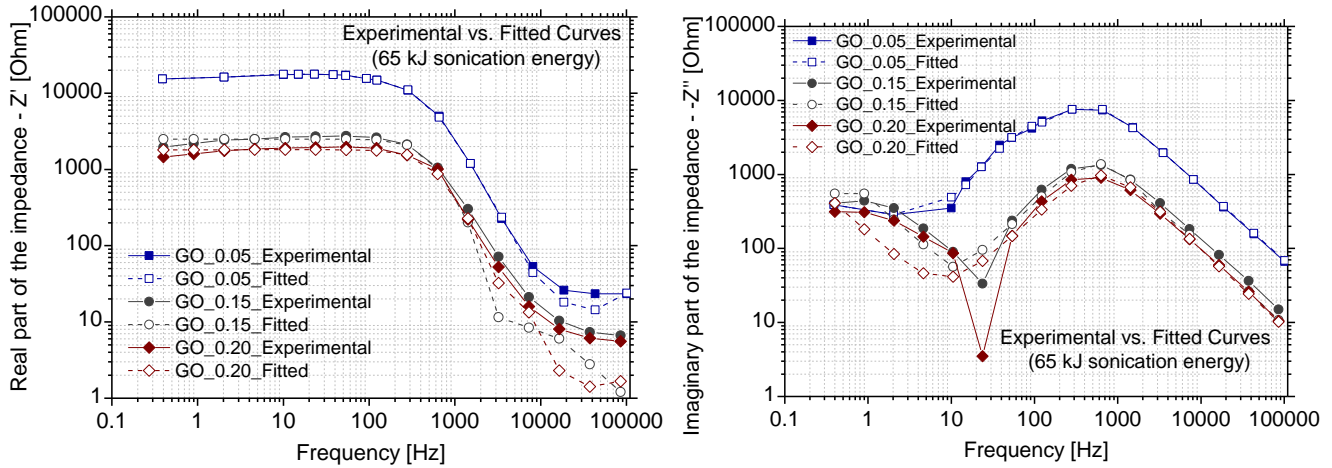
515 **Table 34: Characteristics of the elements used for the proposed equivalent circuit model.**

Element	Impedance (Z)	Units
R_1, R_2	R	Ohm
Q (or CPE)	$1/[Q_0(j\omega)^n]$	$F \cdot s^{n-1}$
C	$1/(j\omega C)$	F

516
 517 CPE is a non-intuitive circuit element that is used to describe responses of real-world systems [43] and
 518 [will be used in the present investigation to address in our system the reasons for its appearances are](#)
 519 inhomogeneity and non-uniform current distribution. Q_0 corresponds to the admittance of the ideal
 520 capacitance and n is a constant with a range of 0 to 1, with $n = 1$ referring to a pure capacitor and $n = 0$
 521 referring to a pure resistor, e.g. [43]. [Likewise](#), Han et al. [44] introduced the constant phase elements to
 522 describe stacked graphene oxide in solid humidity sensors. As reported in [that study this research article](#)
 523 and [also](#) noted in the present [research investigation](#), the frequency behaviour of GO is too complicated to
 524 be presented using simple RC circuits. Hence, the introduction of CPE was deemed necessary as a circuit
 525 component, commonly used to express an imperfect capacitor in a circuit of distributed resistors and
 526 capacitors. The reason for this non-uniform current distribution lies firstly on the van der Waals
 527 attractions among nanoparticles and the double-layer electrostatic repulsions, e.g. [30] and [45]. Also,
 528 the presence of metal and non-metal ions can cause a destabilisation of the GO mixtures, playing a critical
 529 role in the dispersion [46].

530 [Figure 12](#) shows the [equivalent circuit](#) model ([ECM](#)) predictions versus the experimental results for a
 531 given ultrasonication energy, namely 65 kJ and for three different GO dispersions. It can be seen that the

553 proposed ECM fits well to the experimental results. The parameter values derived from the ECM analysis
 554 are given in Table 5, again for the 65 kJ ultrasonication energy and for all investigated concentrations.



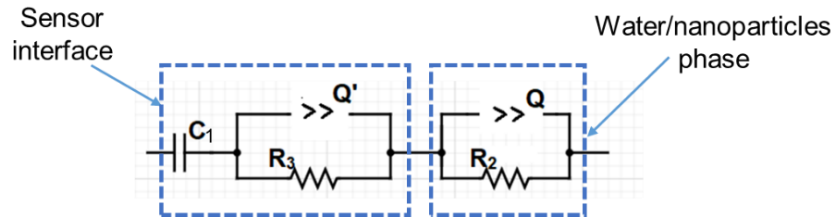
555
 556 **Figure 12:** Calculated results for the proposed equivalent circuit model at 65 kJ ultrasonication energy and for three
 557 different GO concentrations.

558 **Table 45:** Values of the circuit elements of the model shown in Figure 11 for all different GO concentrations at 65 kJ
 559 ultrasonication energy value and the respective relative standard deviation.

Element	GO_0.05	GO_0.10	GO_0.15	GO_0.175	GO_0.20
R_1 (Ohm)	$1.6 \cdot 10^4 (\pm 1.3 \%)$	$2.1 \cdot 10^3 (\pm 7.9 \%)$	$1.8 \cdot 10^3 (\pm 3.7 \%)$	$1.8 \cdot 10^3 (\pm 6.8 \%)$	$2.2 \cdot 10^3 (\pm 7.7 \%)$
C_1 (F)	$2.2 \cdot 10^{-8} (\pm 1.2 \%)$	$4.4 \cdot 10^{-4} (\pm 1.5 \%)$	$7.5 \cdot 10^{-4} (\pm 27.4 \%)$	$6.4 \cdot 10^{-4} (\pm 21.8 \%)$	$9.8 \cdot 10^{-4} (\pm 28.5 \%)$
R_2 (Ohm)	$1.6 \cdot 10^3 (\pm 14.3 \%)$	$2.5 \cdot 10^3 (\pm 1.0 \%)$	$2.4 \cdot 10^3 (\pm 2.2 \%)$	$1.9 \cdot 10^3 (\pm 2.3 \%)$	$1.8 \cdot 10^3 (\pm 2.5 \%)$
Q (F·s ⁿ⁻¹)	$2.2 \cdot 10^{-7} (\pm 27.2 \%)$	$2.2 \cdot 10^{-7} (\pm 13.7 \%)$	$7.1 \cdot 10^{-8} (\pm 32.1 \%)$	$7.8 \cdot 10^{-8} (\pm 35.5 \%)$	$9.9 \cdot 10^{-8} (\pm 39.4 \%)$
n (-)	$0.98 (\pm 5.2 \%)$	$0.98 (\pm 1.6 \%)$	$0.96 (\pm 4.1 \%)$	$0.96 (\pm 5.1 \%)$	$0.94 (\pm 4.5 \%)$

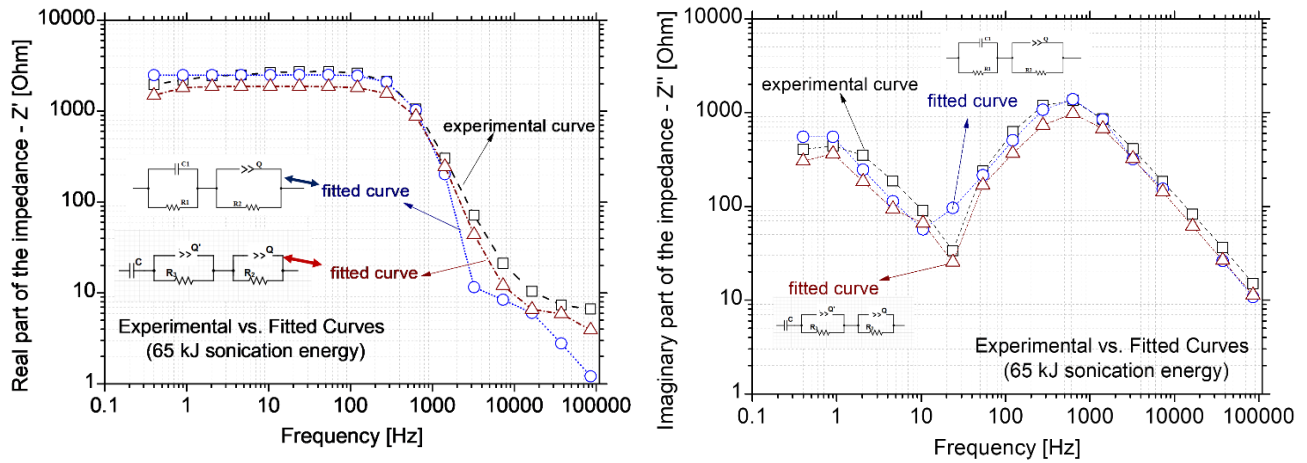
560
 561 Although there is an overall good fit of the experimental data, the proposed circuit fails to model the
 562 relaxation phenomenon with high accuracy and more specifically the local minimum in the imaginary
 563 impedance spectra. For that reason, a revised ECM has been proposed to model the response of the
 564 dispersions for GO concentrations higher than 0.10 wt.%, which is presented in [Figure 13](#). In
 565 an attempt to improve the representation of the electrode polarisation phenomena at the sensor surface at
 566 lower frequencies and its separation to the relaxation phenomena at the bulk of the dispersion, the $C - R_1$
 567 branch of the first ECM is replaced by a capacitor in series with a $Q - R$ element. The addition of an extra
 568 $Q - R$ element in series to the first proposed circuit will be more suitable for the high concentrations of the
 569 GO dispersions, but it will be not so appropriate for the dilute solutions. [Figure 14](#) demonstrates the
 570 fitting results of GO_0.15 dispersion at different ultrasonication energy values, while the respective
 571 values of each element can be seen in [Table 6](#). The comparison of the fit of ECMs to the experimental
 572 data shows that the values of the parameters in both $Q - R$ elements change slightly within the range of the
 573 standard deviation of their values. Because the n values of the $CPEs$ is close to 1, the Q value is

574 representative a pure capacitor, and the fact that the Q value remains nearly unchanged makes sense
 575 physically as the permittivity of the solution is expected to remain unchanged considering the low
 576 concentration of GO in the dispersion. Furthermore, the observed slight drop in R_2 is expected as the GO
 577 concentration increases. Therefore, to accurately model the dispersion, the sensor interphase is better
 578 described by the revised ECM.



579

580 **Figure 13: Updated ECM for the investigated GO dispersions with GO concentrations higher than 0.10 wt.%.**



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583

Figure 14: Comparison of the predictions of the two proposed circuit models at higher GO concentrations for the (a) real and (b) imaginary parts of the impedance.

584

585

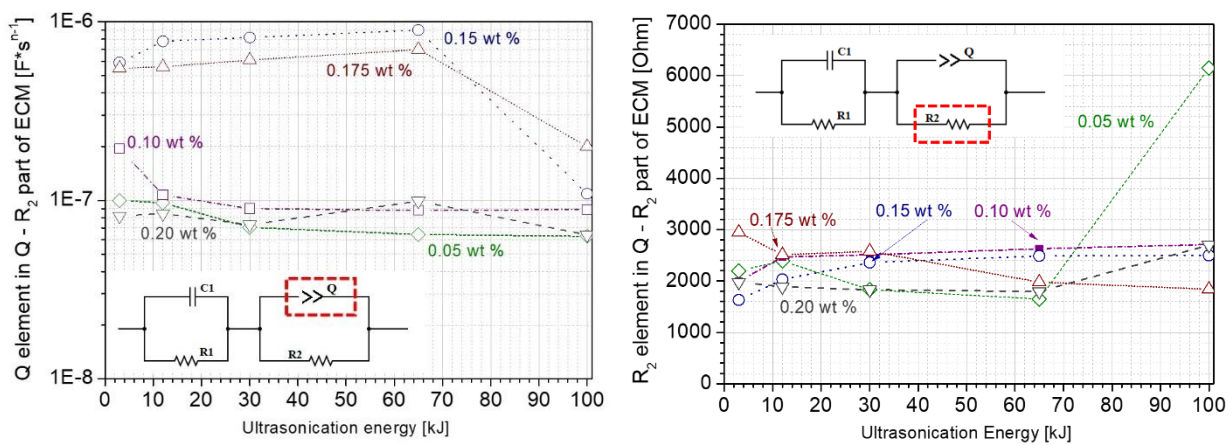
Table 56: Values and the respective relative std. deviation of the proposed circuit elements at the updated ECM at 65 kJ ultrasonication energy value.

Element	GO_0.15	GO_0.175	GO_0.20
C_1 (F)	$2.9 \cdot 10^{-4}$ (± 6.3 %)	$3.4 \cdot 10^{-4}$ (± 34.1 %)	$4.2 \cdot 10^{-4}$ (± 45.3 %)
R_3 (Ohm)	$2.4 \cdot 10^3$ (± 7.7 %)	$2.1 \cdot 10^3$ (± 7.1 %)	$1.8 \cdot 10^3$ (± 9.6 %)
Q' (F)	$1.2 \cdot 10^{-4}$ (± 3.4 %)	$1.5 \cdot 10^{-4}$ (± 3.2 %)	$1.7 \cdot 10^{-4}$ (± 4.1 %)
n' (-)	1.03 (± 46.3 %)	1.02 (± 44.1 %)	1.03 (± 57.0 %)
R_2 (Ohm)	$2.3 \cdot 10^3$ (± 1.4 %)	$2.0 \cdot 10^3$ (± 1.4 %)	$1.8 \cdot 10^3$ (± 1.6 %)
Q (F·s $^{n-1}$)	$7.6 \cdot 10^{-8}$ (± 22.1 %)	$9.5 \cdot 10^{-8}$ (± 21.4 %)	$1.2 \cdot 10^{-7}$ (± 25.7 %)
n (-)	0.96 (± 4.1 %)	0.98 (± 2.4 %)	0.97 (± 2.9 %)

586

587 The values of R_2 and Q are given in Figure 15 as a function of ultrasonication energy and for different
 588 GO concentrations. As far as the dependence of the ultrasonication energy on the ECM parameter values
 589 is concerned, the fit has revealed small changes on the Q - R element of the water – nanoparticles phase.

590 As the n value remained close to 1, Q is representative of pure capacitor and its value did not change
 591 with the ultrasonication energy for each GO concentration. ~~During sonication~~ there are two effects with
 592 opposing expected effects on the impedance during ultrasonication: the breaking of GO agglomerates
 593 towards a finer distribution which decreases the distance between the nanoparticles in the dispersion,
 594 thus decreasing impedance levels. The second effect is the ~~and the~~ damage in the hydrophilic nature of
 595 the nanostructure with simultaneous ~~reduction~~ decrease of the lateral size of GO, which increases the
 596 impedance level. These effects cannot be discerned in the impedance spectra and the resulting parameters
 597 of the ECMs. To this end, a sort of a kind of “optimal” ultrasonication energy must be considered to
 598 introduce the appropriate energy to break the large GO agglomerates and not to completely destroy the
 599 surface structure of the GO nanoparticles.



600
 601 **Figure 15: Values of elements Q (left) and R_2 (right) of the proposed electrical circuit models.**

602

603 4.3 Introduction of a quality index in aqueous dispersions

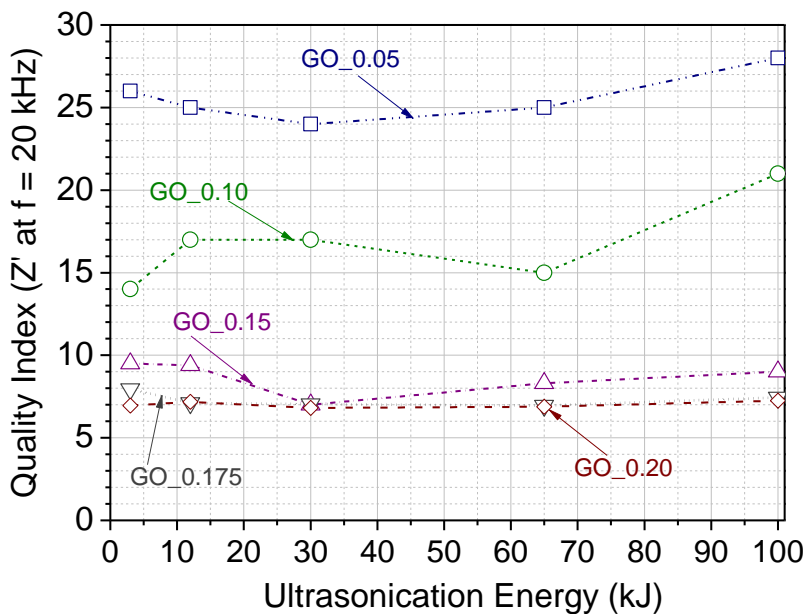
604 To facilitate the evaluation of the dispersion (dispersion control), a relevant quality index (QI) will be
 605 proposed. To this end, the proposed quality index can facilitate the dispersing stage of the nanostructures
 606 that, in latter stage, the appropriate dispersion can be mixed with the binder material and thus can be
 607 applied for the appropriate intervention.

608 Having examined the dispersion in terms of dielectric properties and having performed the appropriate
 609 instrumental analysis methods, the quality index that is proposed is the real part of the impedance [Z'] at
 610 a high frequency, higher than 10 kHz. The choice of the real part of the impedance was based on the fact
 611 that a decrease in Z' is an indication of simple electrolyte in the solution, *e.g.* [17]. The suggestion of a
 612 high frequency value was selected in order to avoid polarisation and/or the relaxation phenomena that
 613 appear in lower frequencies in many physical and chemical systems, *e.g.* [47], [48]. In present study, Z'
 614 is taken at 20 kHz, as described in the following eqn. (1):

615 $QI = Z' = |Z| \cdot \cos(\arg|Z|)$ at high frequency (higher than 20 kHz) (1)

616 As shown in Figure 16, Z' decreases as concentration increases, but for constant ultrasonication energy
 617 [level](#). As far as the ultrasonication energy is concerned, Z' presents a minimum at an intermediate
 618 ultrasonication energy and for all investigated GO concentrations. This is logical, since the structure has
 619 been affected due to partial destruction of functional groups, as shown by Raman and FT-IR analyses in
 620 the previous sections. Taking Figure 16 into consideration, ~~which contains all the previous analysis,~~ for
 621 any concentration higher than GO_0.10 the Z' value is distinctively small, thus resembling a good
 622 electrolyte. Regarding ultrasonication energy, all GO concentrations display a local minimum at medium
 623 values of ultrasonication energy of 30 kJ or 65 kJ. Therefore, an optimal combination of 0.15 wt% of the
 624 binder ultrasonicated at ~~about approximate~~ 60 kJ is proposed, since it would require a smaller GO
 625 [concentration that would lead to less material used in real engineering applicationseonsumption](#).
 626 However, any range from 0.15 wt % up to 0.20 wt % of the binder ultrasonicated at an intermediate
 627 energy level could be accepted.

628 To this end, the involvement of a quality index for the dispersion control of relevant nanostructures is
 629 very tempting and would facilitate the quantitative selection by means of the appropriate concentration,
 630 type and ultrasonication energy of the nanostructures. To the best of the authors' knowledge, such a
 631 quantitative index is not proposed in the literature so far for the dispersion control of any kind of
 632 nanostructures.



633
 634
 635 **Figure 16: Variance of the proposed quality index as a function of ultrasonication energy and for the different**
 636 **investigated GO dispersions.**

637

638 5. Conclusions

639 The conclusions of the present investigation can be summarised as follows:

- 640 • A novel method to study [aqueous](#) carbon nanostructure (Graphene Oxide – GO in the present
641 investigation) dispersions is investigated, based on alternative current electrochemical ~~real~~ impedance
642 spectroscopy. The novelty also lies on the application of a very small sensor that can be used on field
643 applications, where the application of instrumental analysis methods is not possible.
- 644 • The application of ultrasonication energy leads to two competing mechanisms. At the beginning the
645 ultrasonic energy contributes to the formation of conductive networks as it effectively breaks the
646 agglomerates. This was confirmed by dielectric measurements through the change in impedance
647 values as well as by analytical investigations. Nevertheless, at high energy level the ultrasonication
648 destroys the surface groups of the nanostructures and the GO-particles, [decreases their lateral size](#)
649 [and at high energy level](#) tend to re-agglomerate.
- 650 • The GO-dispersions were modelled with the use of [several](#) equivalent circuit models. A constant
651 phase element was found to better describe the inhomogeneities of the dispersion.
- 652 • A quality index was proposed for a quick, quantified evaluation of the dispersion degree. It is
653 proposed this index to be equal to the real part of the impedance at a high frequency, as it is easy to
654 [be calculated](#) and a low value in Z' is an indication of simple electrolyte in the solution.
655 ~~Also~~[Additionally](#), there are no polarisation phenomena in [such](#) high frequencies.
- 656 • Based on the investigation on the specific application (i.e. nanostructures in aqueous solution for civil
657 engineering applications), the optimal combination of concentration and ultrasonication energy is
658 0.15 wt% of the binder with ultrasonication energy values of approximate 30 to 65 kJ.

659 Acknowledgements

660 The authors would like to acknowledge the financial support provided in the framework of the Research
661 Project: AKEISTHAI – Self-Healing and Self-Sensing Nano-Composite Conservation Mortars (MIS
662 5031866), co-financed by Greece and the European Union. The GO nanomaterials were produced at the
663 University of Ioannina, Department of Materials Science & Engineering (Prof. D. Gournis and Prof. M.
664 Karakassides) and under the framework of the joint research project “Self-healing and self-sensing nano-
665 composite conservation mortars – AKEISTHAI” among National Centre for Scientific Research
666 “[Demokritos](#)”, University of the Aegean, University of Ioannina, and cement manufacturer TITAN S.A..

667 Conflict of Interest

668 The authors declare that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication.

669 **Author Contributions**

670 Conceptualization: N.D.A. and G.M.; methodology: A.E.D. and G.M.; experimental work: A.E.D.;
671 validation: N.D.A., G.M., P.P. and A.E.D.; writing-original draft preparation: A.E.D.; writing – review
672 and editing: N.D.A., G.M. and P.P.; All authors read and approved the manuscript.

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