Aggregation and dissolution of aluminium oxide and copper oxide nanoparticles in natural aqueous matrixes

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Received: 21 February 2020 / Accepted: 22 May 2020 / Published online: 4 June 2020
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Abstract

Aggregation and dissolution kinetics of aluminium oxide nanoparticles (nAl_2O_3) and copper oxide nanoparticles (nCuO) in deionised water (DIW) and freshwater sourced from two river systems were studied with the objective to understand the influencing factors. Dynamic light scattering and inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometer were used to study aggregation and dissolution, respectively. In DIW, humic acid was observed to have a concentration dependent stabilization effect on ENPs. Increasing the ionic strength destabilised the ENPs. The pH influenced aggregation with maximum aggregation observed at the isoelectric point. ENPs were stable in freshwater systems with HDD < 350 nm at 100 $\mu\text{g/L}$. Aggregation of both ENPs was concentration dependent. The ENPs exhibited higher stability in freshwater with low, rather than high, concentrations of both natural organic matter (NOM) and electrolytes. Dissolution was higher in Elands river than in Bloubank river water. ENPs had a high tendency for dissolution at low concentrations. NOM impeded dissolution of ENPs by providing a protective coating via steric and electrostatic interaction. Released ions may have formed precipitates and chelate compounds with ligands present in freshwater especially for nCuO where low dissolution was apparent. These findings provide insights on aggregation and dissolution of ENPs in freshwater systems as influenced by source-specific water chemistry. Therefore, it is not possible to make generalized statement on the outcome of ENPs transformation in aquatic systems.

Keywords Aggregation kinetics · Al_2O_3 nanoparticles · Monovalent electrolyte · CuO nanoparticles · Dissolution · River water

1 Introduction

Aluminium oxide nanoparticles (nAl_2O_3) and copper oxide nanoparticles (nCuO) are widely used engineered nanoparticles (ENPs) in consumer products and industrial applications [44, 56, 57, 59, 60]. nAl_2O_3 are widely applied in high-performance ceramics, cosmetics, packing and polishing materials, paints, and catalysts [22, 52, 58, 61, 116]. Moreover, nCuO are incorporated in semiconductors,

cosmetics, textiles, catalysts, and pesticides [4, 21, 59, 127]. As a result, ENPs from these widespread uses are inevitably released into the environment including freshwater systems due to their incomplete removal in wastewater treatment plants [15, 48, 53, 77]. In aquatic systems, ENPs can interact with biological lifeforms, and in turn, induce variant toxic effects to cellular (e.g. bacteria [44, 114], and whole organisms [68, 85, 86, 94, 111, 121, 123], *Daphnia magna* [39, 103, 129], and fish [1, 9, 108].

Electronic supplementary material The online version of this article (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s42452-020-2952-4>) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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SN Applied Sciences (2020) 2:1164 | <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42452-020-2952-4>

The observed toxic effects are dependent on exposure linked to the transformed ENPs once released into the aquatic systems [65, 67, 83]. In aquatic systems, ENPs undergo numerous transformation processes driven by the influence of their inherent intrinsic physicochemical properties (e.g. size, shape, surface chemistry, etc.) [29, 65, 113], and exposure media chemistry like pH, ionic strength (IS), type of natural organic matter (NOM), etc. [20, 82, 87, 99, 118, 122, 128]. Consequently, may lead to alteration of their behaviour, and ultimately the observed effects on biological lifeforms [75]. Among the key transformation processes of ENPs includes dissolution, adsorption, complexation, aggregation, and dispersion [5, 43, 65, 70, 113], and consequently, strongly controls their fate and behaviour as well as bioavailability and toxic effects [3, 104, 105]. Therefore, data is needed to elucidate key controlling factors to these processes as they underpin likely exposure of ENPs in the environment by influencing their bioavailability and interactions with aquatic organisms [104]. Although such information is essential to aid improved risk assessment of ENPs; but is lacking in natural systems e.g. in river and canal waters [107].

NOM adsorption, for example, may modify surface properties of ENPs by imparting net negative surface charge; and in turn, increase their interparticle repulsions thus rendering them highly stabilized via electrostatic and steric repulsion mechanisms [18, 67, 83, 109]. Additionally, different forms of humic acid (HA) in deionised water (DIW) were found to induce stabilization effect to nAl_2O_3 [32, 74]. The observed stability was dependent on NOM concentration (1–50 mg/L) and structural properties evidenced by reduction or increase in hydrodynamic diameter (HDD) [32, 74, 99]. Sousa and Teixeira [99], investigated the effect of NOM on the aggregation of nCuO where HA concentration > 4 mg/L was observed to induce high zeta potential (ζ -potential) and low HDD; an indication of higher stabilization of the ENPs. Moreover, stabilizing effect of NOM on ENPs through enhanced dissolution and disaggregation processes may result in deleterious implications to the aquatic life e.g. increased toxicity linked to enhanced bioavailability, mobility and dispersion [3, 83, 106].

Additionally, other exposure media chemistry parameters have been reported to influence the stability of ENPs. For example, exposure media pH can influence the aggregation and disaggregation by either increasing or decreasing the ζ -potential of ENPs [5, 82]. Several studies have highlighted the influence of pH on ENPs ζ -potential; where pH close to isoelectric point (IEP) where the ζ -potential is zero, or close to zero with corresponding maximum aggregation observed, and therefore, ENPs exhibits minimal stability [6, 74, 83, 98]. Other factors like IS, type and valence of the electrolytes (monovalent or divalent) also play a key role on the aggregation of nCuO [87, 98, 99], and

nAl_2O_3 [33, 74]. Studies on the effect of metal valence and electrolyte type on ENPs stability in aqueous media show that both monovalent and divalent cations can promote ENPs aggregation; with divalent cations exerting greater destabilization effects [33, 87].

Notably, stability studies outlined in the preceding paragraphs for the ENPs were carried out largely in DIW as exposure media; which does not mimic accurately the natural environment, and at higher exposure concentrations far above those expected [41, 42], or realistic environmental concentrations as estimated from modelling studies [73, 76], and detected in actual environmental systems (e.g. rivers) [8, 88]. For example, Sousa and Teixeira [99], used 100 mg/L of nCuO whereas Mui et al. [74], used up to 614 mg/L of nAl_2O_3 , yet likely environmental concentrations are < 0.1 mg/L [10, 31, 49]. To date, handful studies have investigated the stability and aggregation of nAl_2O_3 [86] and on nCuO [20, 40] in freshwater at environmentally relevant concentrations.

Thus, the aim of this study was to evaluate the transformation of ENPs at environmentally relevant concentrations in synthetic and natural water. The natural water was sourced from two hydrological zones in Gauteng and North West Provinces, South Africa as an attempt to elucidate how water chemistry parameters are likely to influence the transformation of ENPs in actual environmental matrixes e.g. freshwater. Herein, nCuO and aAl_2O_3 were tested because of their widespread use and high global production [12, 90]; yet currently their fate and behaviour in aquatic systems remain largely unreported. The studies are relevant as they offer insights on the likely implications of ENPs in freshwater – an essential aspect required to support their effective risk assessment in the environmental systems.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Materials

The nCuO (nanopowder, < 50 nm, CAS No 1317-38-00), nAl_2O_3 (30–60 nm, 20 wt% in water, CAS No 1344-28-10), HA (CAS No 1415-93-6), sodium chloride (CAS No 7647-14-5) as well as the analytical grades of nitric acid (HNO_3), hydrochloric acid (HCl) and sodium hydroxide (NaOH) were all purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (Johannesburg, South Africa). All materials were used as received from the supplier.

Freshwater samples were collected from two river systems, namely: Elands River (ER) (25° 32' 58.4" S 28° 33' 53.4" E) in Gauteng Province (South Africa), and the Bloubank River (BR) (26° 01' 20.3" S 27° 26' 31.6" E) in North West Province (South Africa). Water samples collected

from ER had a temperature of 22 °C and pH 8.1 whereas in BR the values were 18 °C and 7.9, respectively. Temperature values were measured on site, and samples were filtered through a 0.20 µm pore size standard filter (Millipore) before storage at 4 °C prior to use. The physical and chemical compositions of river water samples are listed in Table 1.

2.2 Characterization of ENPs

The crystal structure of ENPs were determined using Bruker D8 Advance powder X-ray diffractometer (PXRD) with monochromatized Cu Kα radiation with wavelength of 1.54 Å. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) (JEM 2010F, JEOL Ltd., Japan) was used to determine particle size distribution and primary morphology of nCuO and nAl₂O₃. In DIW and river water samples, Malvern Zetasizer Nano series (Model ZEN 3600; Malvern Instruments, UK) was used to measure the hydrodynamic diameter (HDD), and ζ-potential of nCuO and nAl₂O₃. Sedimentation kinetics of ENPs in DIW and freshwater was studied using ultraviolet–visible (UV–Vis) spectroscopy. Measurements were done using a 1 cm optical path length quartz cuvettes on the Hitachi high technology U-3900 spectrophotometer (USA). Further, the particles surface

area analysis was done following the Brauner, Emmett, and Teller (BET) theory.

2.3 Aggregation kinetics of ENPs

Suspensions of nAl₂O₃ and nCuO were prepared both in DIW or river water to make a stock concentration of 10 mg/L, and thereafter, individual ENPs suspensions were sonicated for 30 min at 25 °C to achieve homogeneity. From the resultant stock suspensions, dilutions were carried out to obtain lower concentrations of 0.1 and 1 mg/L of nAl₂O₃ or nCuO. All studies were done at concentrations of 0.1, 1, and 10 mg/L over 48 h in both exposure media. To ensure that the introduction of ENPs had no influence on the pH of the exposure media during aggregation and dissolution studies, likely changes in pH were checked at 0, 6, 24 and 48 h. To elucidate the influence on aggregation dynamics of ENPs linked to water chemistry parameters, HDD were characterised at variant ranges of pH, NOM, and IS in DIW with resistivity of 18.2 MΩ cm. All aggregation kinetics were determined by dynamic light scattering (DLS) measurements to obtain information on HDD and ζ-potential dynamics. All measurements were done in triplicates, and hence, herein expressed as mean and standard deviation (mean ± SD).

The effect of pH was investigated from pH 3 to 9 at very low IS (<< 0.001 mM). The pH of DIW was adjusted using either HCl or NaOH. Effect of IS was evaluated at concentrations of 1 and 10 mM of NaCl, at circumneutral pH (pH 7) as it is within the range of expected pH in natural aquatic systems. HA stock solutions at concentrations of 1 and 10 mg/L were prepared in DIW at pH 7, followed by sonication for 2 h, and thereafter, filtered through a 0.20 µm pore size filter. All stock solutions were kept at 4 °C before use. IS for water samples from each river was determined using the expression:

$$IS = \frac{1}{2} \sum_i C_i Z_i^2 \quad (1)$$

where IS is the ionic strength in mM, C_i is the concentration of the i th species in mM, and Z_i is the charge of the i th species. All concentration values are summarised in Table 1.

2.4 Dissolution kinetics of ENPs

Dissolution of nAl₂O₃ and nCuO was studied by preparing samples following the same procedure described in aggregation studies section. In addition, at 2 and 48 h, samples were collected and centrifuged at 4000 × g for 45 min using 3KDa Amicon® Ultra 15 mL centrifugal filters and followed by digestion using HNO₃. Presence of nanoparticles (particulates) in the filtrate following filtration was

Table 1 Characterisation of freshwater from two river systems in South Africa

Parameter	Unit	Elands river	Bloubank river
pH	–	8.1	7.9
K ⁺	mg/L	4.24	3.13
Na ⁺	mg/L	15.6	22.4
Ca ²⁺	mg/L	14.0	36.0
Cl [–]	mg/L	17.1	12.9
SO ₄ ^{2–}	mg/L	9.03	6.77
Mg ²⁺	mg/L	9.82	31.0
NO ₃ [–]	mg/L	0.33	0.20
PO ₄ ^{3–}	mg/L	0.57	1.23
NH ₄ ⁺	mg/L	4.27	3.40
Cu _{tot}	mg/L	<0.002	<0.002
Al _{tot}	mg/L	<0.002	<0.002
Fe _{tot}	mg/L	<0.004	<0.004
Zn _{tot}	mg/L	0.008	0.010
DOC	mg/L	5.51	8.25
Alkalinity	mg CaCO ₃ /L	75.6	217
(EC) @ 25 °C	mS/m	19.6	39.8
IS	mM	2.48	5.35

DOC dissolved organic carbon; Al_{tot} total aluminium; Fe_{tot} total iron; Zn_{tot} total zinc; Cu_{tot} total copper; EC electrical conductivity

checked using the Zetasizer. Dissolution measurements were done in triplicates using inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometer (ICP-MS) (ICPE-9820, Shimadzu, Japan).

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Characterisation of ENPs

PXRD patterns for nAl_2O_3 and nCuO are shown in Fig. S1.1. Results show that nAl_2O_3 had main phase (alpha) and with monoclinic structure (Fig. S1.1a). Traces of Corundum (hexagonal) as impurity were also identified implying it was a mixture of alpha nAl_2O_3 and Corundum. PXRD spectra patterns for nCuO revealed a single-phase (beta), and free of impurities—an indication it had a phase pure material (Fig. S1.1b). TEM images of both nAl_2O_3 and nCuO (Fig. S1.2) revealed that nCuO had a mixture of hexagonal, rods, and spherical shapes with an average size of 18–47 nm (Fig. S1.2a). The nAl_2O_3 had both spherical and hexagonal shapes with an average size of 35–55 nm (Fig. S1.2b). Therefore, TEM size results were within the manufacturer's specified values for each ENPs type. No peaks in UV–Vis spectroscopy were observed in the wavelength range 200 to 800 nm for both nAl_2O_3 and nCuO at the concentrations used in the study (0.1 and 1 mg/L) except water absorption peak as shown for nCuO (Fig. S1.3). Similar observation have been reported from a study where 25 to 100 mg/L nCuO were used [40]. This is despite the technique being successfully applied for characterisation during synthesis of the ENPs where absorption maximum wavelength for nAl_2O_3 has been reported to be in the range 200 to 250 nm [91, 92] and that of nCuO ranges from 250 to 400 nm [28, 79, 97]. Based on these results, UV–Vis may not be a recommendable technique for studies involving sedimentation kinetics of the considered ENPs. However, the technique is still useful for ENPs that absorb strongly in UV–Vis region such as silver and gold nanoparticles whose detections limits are in parts per billion (ppb) [38, 95, 130]. The BET results showed that nAl_2O_3 (50.5 m^2/g) had about 27-fold higher surface area relative to nCuO (1.85 m^2/g).

3.2 Aggregation kinetic studies of ENPs

3.2.1 Effect of pH on ENPs aggregation

Figure 1 shows that HDD and ζ -potential were pH dependent (3 to 9) following exposure at different concentrations of ENPs with an isoelectric point (IEP) at around pH 4 (pH_{IEP}). Previously, pH_{IEP} values for nAl_2O_3 have been observed in pH range 4 to 9.6 [36, 50, 54, 55] depending on particles properties and exposure media characteristics; thus our findings are consistent with published literature.

At $\text{pH} > \text{pH}_{\text{IEP}}$, ζ -potential of nAl_2O_3 changed from positive to negative as reported elsewhere [32, 35]. For nAl_2O_3 , at $\text{pH} < \text{pH}_{\text{IEP}}$ and highest pH of 9, concentration of 0.1 mg/L had higher HDD relative to those of 1 mg/L and 10 mg/L (Fig. 1b); but no apparent trend was observed within pH range of $4 < \text{pH} < 9$. The plausible reason for random HDD changes at low concentration of 0.1 mg/L is attributed to rapid aggregation and disaggregation processes linked to low ζ -potential (Fig. 1a) where the electrostatic repulsion is low to negligible. However, ζ -potential results show that higher concentrations of ENPs may hold higher surface charge (Fig. 1a), and hence, may explain why at $\text{pH} > \text{pH}_{\text{IEP}}$ 10 mg/L had the highest charge, and in turn, exhibited limited HDD changes. Results indicated that at circumneutral pH (pH 7) irrespective of ENPs exposure concentration, HDD values were < 1000 nm; implying their likelihood to be stable in natural aquatic systems which has pH of 6 to 9 [14].

Similarly, nCuO had the highest HDD observed at pH_{IEP} of ~ 4 and compares well with pH 5.42 reported by E1-Trass et al. [28]. The lowest concentration (0.1 mg/L) exhibited the highest HDD (1552 ± 513 nm), and the least at 10 mg/L (804 ± 73 nm) (Fig. 1d). However, although at 10 mg/L nCuO had the least HDD, the ζ -potential results were similar across all concentrations (Fig. 1c) over pH range of 3 to 9; thus, ζ -potential is unlikely to be the only controlling factor on aggregation in DIW under the experimental conditions investigated. Previously, similar trend has been observed where aggregation of nCuO increased as exposure concentration decreased [40, 99]. This phenomenon exhibited by nCuO remain unclear since other soluble ENPs like nAg and nZnO their aggregation in aqueous media was observed to increase with increasing concentration [104], an aspect that requires further research to elucidate the underlying mechanism(s). Hence, the stability of ENPs in aquatic environment are dependent on pH [11, 64], and the type of ENPs. Notably, pH studies were done at very low IS ($\ll 0.001$ mM, Fig. 1) to eliminate likely masking effect of IS on aggregation as pH was changed; hence IS was deemed too low to exert influence on the observed aggregation. No considerable changes in pH were observed irrespective of concentration of ENPs used or exposure time following the introduction of ENPs during aggregation studies.

To elucidate the aggregation kinetics of ENPs over time, and at relevant pH in actual environment; further investigations were done on ζ -potential and aggregation at circumneutral pH (Fig. 2). Results showed that nAl_2O_3 had lower negative ζ -potential (-13 and -19 mV) at 0.1 mg/L (Fig. 2a) and stable HDD with narrow range of 664 to 794 nm (< 1000 nm) over 48 h (Fig. 2b). However, higher ζ -potential (-20 and -25 mV) and resultant lower HDD ranging from 370 to 450 nm over 48 h (Fig. 2b) were

Fig. 1 ζ -potential and HDD for nAl₂O₃ (**a** and **b**, respectively), and nCuO (**c** and **d**, respectively) in DIW after 2 h with IS (0.00001–0.001 mM)

observed at 1 mg/L. This implies higher concentration(s) carry higher surface charge—the electrostatic potential necessary to stabilize ENPs by limiting particle–particle interaction—and in turn, promote stability through inhibition of aggregation. Hence, increase in ζ -potential resulted to low aggregation of nAl₂O₃. However, at 10 mg/L nAl₂O₃ had high aggregation although both 1 mg/L and 10 mg/L had similar ζ -potential. This is because at higher concentration, high collision frequency of ENPs may have resulted to observed higher aggregation.

Due to higher solubility of nCuO [2, 100] than nAl₂O₃ [112], results suggest that the positively charged Cu²⁺ may have contributed to the reduction of negative charges on nCuO ζ -potential. This is by increasing positive surface charge on ENPs; and in turn, lowered the nCuO ζ -potential

[23, 105]. Conversely, whereas ζ -potential were similar for all exposure concentrations at pH 7 (Fig. 2c as amplified on the insert) results in Fig. 2d show that HDD decreased as the exposure concentration increased.

The higher HDD observed at the lowest concentration (0.1 mg/L) was plausibly due to other factors besides surface charge and size; e.g. shape that were not considered in this study, and therefore, merits further investigations. And, depending on ENPs type, agglomeration may vary considerably even at fixed pH (pH 7), and exposure time (Fig. 2). For example, irrespective of exposure concentration, HDD for nAl₂O₃ was lower compared to nCuO. The difference in aggregation was attributed to lower average-sized nCuO (18–48 nm); hence making them highly reactive (evidenced by formation of larger aggregates)

Fig. 2 ζ -potential and HDD for nAl₂O₃ (**a** and **b**, respectively), and nCuO (**c** and **d**, respectively) in DIW over 48 h at pH 7

compared to nAl₂O₃ with larger sizes of 35–47 nm. The influence of pH on aggregation of ENPs over 48 h at all exposure concentrations was investigated, and the results are summarised in Figs. S1. 4, 5 and 6. Results show that at a fixed pH, both ζ -potential and HDD varied marginally over 48 h. All pH values away from the pH_{IEP} had comparable HDDs within the experimental time frame considered in this study.

3.2.2 Effect of IS on ENPs aggregation

The stability of ENPs is known to be influenced by IS in aqueous media [7, 30, 110] such that as the concentration of electrolytes increases ζ -potential decreases with concomitant increase in ENPs aggregation. The effect of IS on

the aggregation of nAl₂O₃ and nCuO investigated using monovalent NaCl (1 and 10 mM) at circumneutral pH in DIW was observed to be concentration dependent. Lower ζ -potential was observed at higher IS (10 mM) over 48 h (Fig. 3a, c), and more apparent for the nCuO (Fig. 3c) irrespective of the exposure concentration. At low IS (1 mM), no ζ -potential variations were observed at lower exposure concentrations (0.1 and 1 mg/L) relative to the control irrespective of ENPs type (Fig. 2a, c) and (Fig. 3a, c).

Polydispersity index (PDI) ranged from 0.4 to 1 for both ENPs; with effect of IS being higher on nAl₂O₃ as evidenced by larger HDD size distribution shown in Fig. 3b. The observed change in ζ -potential, however, as IS was increased from 1 to 10 mM had no considerable effect on HDD (Fig. 3b, d) except for nAl₂O₃ after 24 h (Fig. 3b)

Fig. 3 ζ -potential and HDD for nAl₂O₃ (**a** and **b**), respectively), and nCuO (**c** and **d**), respectively) in DIW at 1 and 10 mM NaCl (pH 7) over 48 h

at 10 mg/L. Results of Godymchuk et al. [33], however, reported significant influence of IS on ζ -potential and HDD where very high concentrations of up to 100 mM NaCl at circumneutral pH for nAl₂O₃ were used. Herein, critical coagulation concentration (CCC) was not determined but is known to vary with ENPs specific properties and exposure media chemistry attributes. For example, CCC of NaCl on nCuO was reported as 40 mM and 75 mM, respectively, in the absence and presence of Suwannee river NOM [2] but in NaNO₃ on bare nCuO under wastewater environment a CCC value of 54.2 mM was observed [69].

Results show no considerable change in ζ -potential (<5 mV as IS increased from 1 to 10 mM for nCuO); irrespective of exposure concentration because Na⁺ exerts

weak influence on aggregation (Fig. 3c). In previous studies where significant ζ -potential reduction, and corresponding increase in HDD were observed for nCuO, both very high exposure ENPs concentrations (e.g. > 100 mg/L) and IS were used (up to 100 mM). Peng et al. [87], for example, used up to 100 mM NaCl on 100 mg/L nCuO. Consequently, a decline in ζ -potential, and high HDD were observed.

Remarkably, in this study, low concentrations of electrolytes (representing IS) were used similar to those widely found in the natural environment [37, 45]. In freshwater systems, Na⁺ concentrations ranges from 0.26 to 0.78 mM [37, 45], and much lower for K⁺ (0.001 to 0.005 mM) [101]. Hence, results show that at

low concentrations of monovalent electrolytes widely found in actual environmental systems are inadequate to screen the electrostatic repulsion where the electrical double-layer [58] shrinks, and consequently, promote aggregation [126]. Findings of Khan et al. [51], showed that at low IS due to monovalent electrolyte NaCl induced limited aggregation, and sedimentation efficiency to nZnO. Overall, monovalent electrolytes such as Na^+ are likely to induce marginal or no change in aggregation of metal oxide-based ENPs as attested by the results of nAl_2O_3 and nCuO in Figs. 3b and d, respectively.

3.2.3 Influence of HA on ENPs aggregation

Numerous studies have shown that NOM play an important role on the aggregation of ENPs [5, 11, 66, 80, 84], and natural colloids [115] in aqueous media. This is because NOMs are negatively charged [81] linked to the presence of numerous carboxyl and phenolic groups, and therefore, provides stabilization through steric repulsion and/or electrostatic forces [89]. Herein, HA was used as surrogate for NOM. Results on ζ -potential and aggregation (Fig. 4) show that as the concentration of HA increased, ζ -potentials of the ENPs increased (higher negative charge) and the effect was concentration dependent (Figs. 4a and 4c).

Fig. 4 ζ -potential and HDD for nAl_2O_3 (a and b, respectively), and nCuO (c and d, respectively) in DIW at 1 and 10 mg/L HA (pH 7) over 48 h

For example, ENPs surfaces are known to be modified by HA, and due to increased repulsive energy results in inhibition of aggregation [24, 102, 118, 125]. Herein, in absence of NOM (0 mg/L) at circumneutral pH, and lowest concentration of ENPs (0.1 mg/L), negative ζ -potentials of < -24 (Fig. 2a) and < -10 mV (insert in Fig. 2c) were observed for nAl_2O_3 and nCuO , respectively. However, at 10 mg/L NOM, ζ -potentials of < -25 mV were apparent as shown in Fig. 4a (nAl_2O_3) and 4c (nCuO), and with corresponding lower sized-aggregates (< 700 nm (Fig. 4b), and < 800 nm (Fig. 4d). In addition, even after 48 h, limited change in HDD was apparent for both ENPs (Figs. 4b, d) as HA-coated ENPs were observed to be well dispersed, in suspension, and stable compared to ENPs in the control (Figs. 2b, d). Therefore, results herein offer antecedent evidence of adsorption of HA (although adsorption was not done) onto ENPs where HA enhanced steric and/or electrostatic repulsion; thus, leading to increased stability.

The increase in negative charge on nAl_2O_3 and nCuO surfaces at pH 7 was plausibly due to the adsorption of HA—a process highly controlled by electrostatic interaction, and specific adsorption through ligand exchange [118]. The lower ζ -potential, however, observed on nCuO in the presence of HA possibly can be accounted by three-fold processes. First, the larger surface area of nAl_2O_3 ($50.5 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$) compared to that of nCuO ($1.85 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$) may have enhanced higher adsorption of HA on the former. This is because ENPs with larger surface area exhibit higher adsorption capacity for NOM [71]. For instance, nFe_2O_3 was shown to adsorb more NOM than nTiO_2 as it had larger surface area, irrespective of exposure media (e.g. groundwater, lake water, etc.) [17]. Secondly, ligand exchange between HA and metal oxide ENPs could have occurred [118], for example, the hydroxyl groups on metal oxide surfaces with NOM may have provided fewer hydroxyl groups for protonation which may partly account for the lower measured ζ -potential of nCuO , as a similar case has been reported for nZnO [11].

Finally, organic anions in HA may have increased the negative charge density adjacent to the particle surface; thus causing a shift in the position of the shear plane away from the surface leading to a decrease in ζ -potential [11, 125]—where this phenomenon was likely more apparent on nCuO . Previously, it has been observed that at low concentration (in this case 1 mg/L), HA promote electrostatic stabilization. However, at higher concentrations both steric and electrostatic stabilization processes promote the stability of ENPs (10 mg/L) [18]. This may account for lower HDD at higher HA concentration of 10 mg/L as summarized in Figs. 4b, d. Due to the complexity of interactions between ENPs and HA, plausibly the three processes were more likely to have occurred concurrently which accounts

for the differences in the aggregation of nAl_2O_3 and nCuO in the presence of HA.

3.3 Aggregation kinetics of ENPs in river water

Aggregation in river water was observed to be concentration dependent with 10 mg/L of ENPs having the highest HDD, and least at 0.1 mg/L as summarised in Figs. 5 and 6 for nAl_2O_3 and nCuO , respectively. At higher exposure concentrations of ENPs (1 and 10) mg/L, immediate aggregation in the river water especially during the first 6 h except for nAl_2O_3 in BR was observed, although the difference was marginal, raise the possibility of ENPs concurrent residence between the water, and sediment columns. The reason being nAl_2O_3 had higher surface area which could have enhanced rapid adsorption of NOM, thus reducing the likely higher aggregation as opposed to the case of nCuO . At 0.1 mg/L, for both ENPs, HDD remained stable < 350 nm over 48 h (Figs. 5b, d, and 6b, d). The high concentrations of DOC (surrogate for NOM) (Table 1) in river water can adsorb onto the particle surfaces, and hence, form a barrier that inhibits aggregation leading to highly stable ENPs.

HDD (< 700 nm) for both ENPs (Figs. 5b, d, and 6b, d) had no considerable change over 48 h. This implies their likely longer residence in the aqueous media, and in turn, may interact with aquatic organisms in the water column. High concentrations of electrolytes (monovalent and divalent cations in Table 1) had IS of 5.35 mM and 2.48 mM in BR and ER, respectively, but showed no considerable influence on aggregation irrespective of ENPs type (Figs. 5d, 6d). The reason being although BR had higher IS (5.35 mM) this was countered by high NOM concentration (8.25 mg/L), and ER had low IS (2.48 mM); thus, the stabilization effects of NOM on ENPs were dominant. Our results are in agreement with similar observations reported in the literature in natural water [40, 93] even in cases where IS was high. For example, possible strong coagulation due to high concentration of divalent ions (e.g. Ca^{2+} and Mg^{2+}) were likely inhibited by NOM in river water. As such, dispersions of ENPs may dynamically be either in water column or sediment, and therefore, under such scenarios, aquatic organisms within the water column (e.g. filter-feeders like *Daphnia magna*, and certain classes of fish) as well as benthic filter-feeding invertebrates may concurrently be exposed to ENPs over extended period as earlier reported by Liu et al. [62] under freshwater conditions.

After 48 h, ENPs formed larger aggregates at 10 mg/L an indication that at higher exposure concentrations they will most likely through sedimentation process settle on the sediments. Results in Table 1 show both river waters had NOM concentrations within those reported in freshwater (0.5 to 10 mg/L) [81]. Studies have reported that the adsorption of different components of NOM onto

Fig. 5 ζ -potential and HDD (**a** and **b**, respectively) in ER, and (**c** and **d**, respectively) in BR for $n\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ over 48 h

ENPs surfaces is dependent on NOM type (linked to their molecular weight and chemical functionality)—with higher adsorption affinity apparent in NOMs with higher molecular weight [16, 78, 124]. Hence, although in this study the distribution of different NOM components (HA, FA, etc.) in each river water were not determined; but may partially account for the observed differences in aggregation of the ENPs linked to differences in molecular weight.

Current and expected future concentrations of ENPs in freshwater systems are several orders of magnitude lower than 0.1 mg/L used in this study based on modelled [13, 34, 49, 76] and detected concentrations [27, 47, 87, 120]. Therefore, findings herein show that ENPs may be stable in natural water systems. This implies the stabilized ENPs can interact with water-column or sediment dwelling

organisms, and as a result possibly induce deleterious toxic effects to aquatic life.

3.4 Dissolution studies of ENPs in river water

Dissolution studies over 48 h aided to gain insights on temporal effect in terms of ionic or particulates, or both forms for $n\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ and $n\text{CuO}$ in natural water matrixes. No particulates were detected in all the filtered samples. Results show that dissolution was time dependent at a given exposure concentration (0.1 or 1 mg/L) as shown in Table 2. Dissolution studies at exposure concentration of 10 mg/L ENPs was not done. This is because it was considered too high to be environmentally relevant in river water systems.

Fig. 6 ζ -potential and HDD (**a** and **b**, respectively) in ER, and (**c** and **d**, respectively) in BR for nCuO over 48 h

Table 2 Dissolution of ENPs in natural river water samples used in this study done in triplicates using ICP-MS

River/NC*	Cu ²⁺ (μ g/L)		Al ³⁺ (μ g/L)	
	0.1 mg/L	1 mg/L	0.1 mg/L	1 mg/L
BR (2 h)	4.07 $\pm$ 1.05	6.39 $\pm$ 0.60	4.36 $\pm$ 1.76	17.90 $\pm$ 1.21
BR (48 h)	4.75 $\pm$ 1.32	8.97 $\pm$ 1.41	8.27 $\pm$ 1.02	38.23 $\pm$ 1.92
ER (2 h)	2.84 $\pm$ 0.71	6.40 $\pm$ 1.54	14.87 $\pm$ 1.25	153.43 $\pm$ 8.56
ER (48 h)	3.13 $\pm$ 0.38	11.53 $\pm$ 2.41	22.29 $\pm$ 1.60	162.13 $\pm$ 7.87

*NC nominal concentration

The dissolution of nCuO was 0.8% at 2 h and increased to 1.44% after 48 h in ER water samples at nominal exposure concentration of 1 mg/L (Table 2). However, in BR

water samples, the presence of high NOM (Table 1) may have adsorbed the Cu²⁺ resulting in lower detected concentrations over 48 h. Previously, NOM was found to significantly enhance dissolution of ENPs [46, 63, 117] through ligand-promoted dissolution [72]. However, NOM can also impede dissolution by adsorbing onto the active sites of ENPs [25, 124]. This is via various functional groups present on NOM e.g. carboxylic and phenolic groups that can form complexes with released ions with resultant reduction in the amount of detectable ions [19]. For example, Conway et al. [20] investigated the dissolution of 1 mg/L nCuO in wastewater and storm run water with NOM concentrations of 2.38 and 6.49 mg/L with dissolution being < 10% and 0%, respectively. Miao et al. [69] also observed < 5% dissolution of nCuO in wastewater. In addition, present

in natural water matrixes are complex-forming anions (e.g. Cl^{-1} , SO_4^{2-} , PO_4^{3-} , etc.) as listed in Table 1. Hence, the released Cu^{2+} may have also formed precipitation complexes such as $\text{Cu}_3(\text{PO}_4)_2$, CuCl or CuS , thus reducing the detectable free ions.

Moreover, copper can precipitate as hydroxide in pH range of 6.6 to 7.8 with ligands present in freshwater [26]—a pH value close to that of freshwater matrixes used in this study. Dissolution of nCuO at 1 mg/L was observed to decrease with increasing pH where at $\text{pH} > 7.7$ very low dissolution was observed ($< 3\%$) [82]. In addition, nCuO is known to have limited dissolution in natural waters in the pH range of 8.0–8.3 [40]. Therefore, low dissolution reported herein agrees with the literature (river water samples had pH of 7.9 and 8.1 (Table 1)). Low dissolution of nCuO in freshwater systems implies that resultant toxicity to aquatic life in freshwater may be predominantly linked to the particulate forms.

Dissolution of nAl_2O_3 at nominal exposure concentration of 1 mg/L was high in ER water compared to BR, and time effect was apparent in BR water (an increase of over 100%) but not in ER water (Table 2). In ER water, for example, after 2 h the dissolution increased from 29 to 30.6% after 48 h whereas in BR, dissolution was $\leq 8\%$ even after 48 h (Table 2). Results of dissolution for nAl_2O_3 at 1 mg/L after 48 h in this study (30.6 and 8% for ER and BR, respectively) were much lower compared to findings of Pakrashi et al. [86] in lake water ($\sim 94\%$ dissolution). However, at 0.1 mg/L, after 48 h, higher dissolution was observed in ER and BR water samples as 42.1 and 15.6%, respectively. For nAl_2O_3 , the difference in dissolution of between ER and BR water samples were attributed to water chemistry driven factors e.g. NOM linked to differences in molecular weight and chemical functionality. For example, in BR the NOM-type may have promoted higher adsorption onto ENPs leading to formation of a coating that in turn impeded dissolution [32, 86]. Results of high dissolution at 0.1 mg/L in ER water samples corresponded to low HDD observed (≤ 250 nm) (Fig. 5b) compared to results in BR water where aggregates of > 300 nm were observed (Fig. 5d). The high dissolution of nAl_2O_3 in freshwater systems (especially at low concentrations ≤ 0.1 mg/L) as observed in this study implies its likely toxicity may be attributed to both ionic and particulate species [10, 85, 94].

Overall, there are increasing efforts to elucidate the fate of ENPs in natural water matrixes (e.g. river water, lake water, sea water, etc.) [20, 40, 96, 119], however, the reported cases are too few to aid draw firm conclusions hence study findings herein contribute in filling part of current data gaps. Most data in the published literature suggest that both particulates and ionic species may account for the observed adverse effects of ENPs to aquatic organisms. However, this aspect cannot

be generalized since water chemistry play a key role in determining the fate of ENPs in aquatic systems as shown herein. One key limitation in published studies is lack of reporting physical–chemical properties of the natural water exposure media. For example, the marked differences in nAl_2O_3 dissolution observed herein and data reported by Pakrashi et al. [86] could not be accounted for linked to lack of exposure media attributes in the later study. Thus, such data is essential as realistic estimates of ENPs fate in environmentally relevant conditions continue to increase. This is unlike the case of Heinlaan et al. [40] where results of nCuO could be compared to current study since in both cases the exposure media parameters were reported.

4 Conclusions

Aggregation and dissolution of ENPs in aquatic systems is influenced principally by pH, IS and NOM. The pH determines the ζ -potential of ENPs which in turn influences their aggregation. Maximum aggregation is observed at pH_{IEP} . IS due to presence of electrolytes in aqueous systems of ENPs compresses the electric double layer leading to a reduction in ζ -potential. At lower concentrations of ENPs, the reduction in ζ -potential has no considerable effect on HDD. The adsorption of NOM onto the surfaces of ENPs results in an increase in ζ -potential. The adsorption capacity of NOM by ENPs depends on their surface area. Larger surface area implies high adsorption capacity leading to greater increase in ζ -potential, impeding aggregation. In freshwater systems with extremely complex composition, the aggregation and dissolution of ENPs is not determined by a single factor. This is because of the combined factors counteracting each other to yield the observed effects.

In freshwater systems, ENPs are stable with ζ -potential and HDD varying slightly at different concentrations of ENPs. The dissolution of ENPs is influenced by NOM which provides a surface coating and it is higher at lower than at higher concentration. In freshwater systems, ENPs exist as either aggregates or release ions. Therefore, organisms are not exposed to pristine ENPs but rather to transformed forms. The released ions undergo speciation via chelation and precipitation among other processes. As a result, the released ions might not be available to pose the toxicity predicted by studies conducted in DIW. The current study suggests that ENPs are more stable in freshwater than in DIW. The high stability of ENPs in freshwater implies their likelihood to interact with aquatic organisms in ways not necessarily predicted by extrapolation from experimental results based on DIW. The findings herein show the unique influence of source-specific water chemistry on aggregation and dissolution of ENPs at close to environmentally

relevant concentrations. Hence, it is impossible to generalise the fate and transformation of ENPs in aquatic systems.

Acknowledgements This study was supported by the Water Research Commission of South Africa (K5/2509/1), and the University of Pretoria (AOY229). The authors would like to thank the Laboratory for Microscopy and Microanalysis at University of Pretoria for assistance with microscopy sample analysis, and the Botswana International University of Science and Technology (BIUST) for PXRD analysis.

Author contributions All the authors contributed to this work. AFN and NM planned the experiments and all experiments were performed by AFN. Experimental data processing and analysis was performed and discussed by AFN, NM and WWF. All the authors read, commented on, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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