Optically Clear Superhydrophobic Coatings


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The overall performance of optical equipment and devices is ultimately dependent on their transparency. This is especially evident when such devices are constantly exposed to varying environmental conditions. Thus the development of a robust, transparent and self-cleaning coating is highly desirable. This work discusses the inherent difficulties in the design of transparent self-cleaning coatings. Describing hydrophobicity and the potential challenges the achievement of transparency can introduce. Before detailing the various established methods of characterisation of super hydrophobic surfaces and outlining some of the group’s preliminary results.

Hydrophobicity

Generally, a surface’s wettability is defined by its water contact angle (WCA)\(^{(1)}\).

- WCA < 90° hydrophilic
- WCA ≥ 90° hydrophobic
- WCA ≥ 150° classified as superhydrophobic

For a smooth surface the hydrophobicity is limited by the surface’s chemistry (equ. 1), however the wetting behaviour of a surface is also dependent on the surfaces topography\(^{(2)}\). Wenzel’s equation states that as a solid surface roughness increases so too does it’s hydrophobic/hydrophilic nature (equ. 2).

\[
\cos \theta = \frac{\cos \theta_\text{a}}{r}
\]

\[
\cos \theta_\text{a} = r \cos \theta_\text{o}
\]

Cassie and Baxter\(^{(2)}\) determined that a hydrophobic rough surface’s liquid repellence prevents liquid from fully penetrating into the depressions of the morphology\(^{(4, 5)}\). As the surface is considered as a composite of solid and air, with a contact angle of \(\theta_\text{f}\):

\[
\cos \theta_\text{f} = f (\cos \theta_\text{o} + 1) - 1
\]

Where \(f\) the fraction of liquid – solid contact, the composite contact is established when \(\theta_\text{f} > \theta_\text{o}\) and the threshold contact angle being: \(\cos \theta_\text{c} = (f - 1)/(f - 1)\)\(^{(4, 5)}\).

![Figure 1: Illustration of different wetting states](image)

**Self - Cleaning**

For self-cleaning surfaces, a low level of water drop adhesion to the surface is important. This is the product of the WCA and the contact angle hysteresis (CAH), \((\Delta \theta = \theta_\text{adv} - \theta_\text{rec})\). A combination of high WCA and low CAH results in a decreased force being required to set a droplet in motion \(^{(6)}\).

**Light Scattering**

As a hydrophobic surface’s roughness increases
- WCA increases
- Optical Transparency decreases

![Figure 2: The effect of surface ‘roughness’ on its wettability, and self-cleaning mechanism.](image)

**Coating Preparation**

A hexamethyldisilazane (HMDS) capped tetraethoxysilane (TEOS) based sol was prepared and spin cast on to a glass substrate for characterisation.

**Coating Characterisation**

Practical applications require long term durability in a variety of harsh environments. Promoting a series of tests to determine the viability of a coating including: monitoring of WCA and sample morphology, tribology wear tests, water/fall/jet and sand abrasion and bio-fouling tests\(^{(5, 7)}\).

![Figure 3: Schematic of the effect of a surface’s roughness on it’s transparency.](image)

**Summary of Preliminary Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Test Method</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hydrophobic</td>
<td>Contact Angle Instrument (CAI)</td>
<td>147.78° ± 1.179°(^{\text{a}+\text{c}})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparent</td>
<td>Spectrophotometer (%)</td>
<td>93.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durability (Aged)</td>
<td>CAI</td>
<td>1% reduction in CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durability (Bowing)</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>1% decrease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durability (Submerged)</td>
<td>CAI</td>
<td>2% reduction in CA after 6 soil washes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durability (constant water exposure ~6 weeks)</td>
<td>CAI</td>
<td>3% reduction in CA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 4: Illustrated representation of durability test setups](image)

**Conclusion**

Initial work to produce an optically clear superhydrophobic coating has garnered;
- A coating of WCA 147.78° ± 1.179°
- 93.2% transparency
- Prolonged submersion had little impact on the coatings WCA
- However the coatings durability to harsher environmental testing suggests further development of the coating is necessary.

![Figure 5: Determination of effect of constant submersion on the sol gel coatings WCA.](image)

References

1. Young, T., Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, 1805. 95, 65-87.