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Review Article

### PICKERING EMULSIONS STABILIZED BY POLYPHENOL: A MINI-REVIEW

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#### Abstract:

*Emulsions are formulations of widespread use in several areas and are configured as a dispersion of liquids that do not mix in the absence of amphoteric molecules. However, conventional emulsions are increasingly obsolete due to problems such as the use of non-biocompatible and biodegradable synthetic surfactants. In this sense, there is currently a quest to develop formulations based on Pickering emulsions that are characterized by being stabilized by particles/polymers, which give them some advantages, with the improvement of stability being the main one. In this article, a general discussion was carried out on the aspects that involve these systems and then the focus is reverted to Pickering emulsions stabilized by particles from secondary plant metabolism, specifically polyphenols. These molecules have a structure composed of rings that gives them an apolar character and hydroxyl groups that provide polarity to the molecule, thus being amphiphilic. Considering these characteristics, it was demonstrated that polyphenols are configured as molecules that have a stabilizing potential in Pickering systems, especially when it comes to using in the pharmaceutical and food industries, since these particles effectively stabilize formulations, contributing to inhibition physical-chemical degradation, such as coalescence, Ostwald maturation, and lipid oxidation, leading to greater stability and a possible increase in shelf life.*

**Keywords:** Pickering emulsions; particles; stability; polyphenols.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Emulsions are characterized as a heterogeneous dispersion system of two or more immiscible liquids, in which one of the liquids is dispersed as small spherical droplets in a continuous phase. This characteristic of emulsions makes such systems play important roles in different fields, including the pharmaceutical, petrochemical, cosmetics, and food industries [1]. To obtain a stable emulsion that is viable for the incorporation of substances, stabilizers must be added to the formulation, such as amphiphilic molecules, known as surfactants [2-4]. However, it is already known that some of these substances can be harmful to the human organism [5] and the environment [6]. Thus, an alternative may be the use of solid particles or polymers to stabilize the systems, which are now called Pickering emulsions.

Some studies have already reported that these emulsified systems have advantages over conventional ones, such as, for example, the reduction of the possibility of instability phenomena such as coalescence. Another advantage would be that the particle-stabilized interface can be modified after forming the emulsion to provide additional functionality. The improvement of characteristics, such as conductivity, responsiveness, porosity, among others, can also be highlighted as a beneficial factor. Furthermore, solid particles derived from plants (phytoparticles) can be used in these formulations, which is favorable, since it leads to greater safety for *in vivo* use [7-10].

Due to these factors, Pickering emulsions are already well documented in the literature, presenting mainly synthetic stabilizers, such as carbon nanotubes [11], silica nanoparticles [12], cellulose derivatives [13], among others. However, these particles can also present a certain degree of toxicity to the organism [14]. In this sense, in recent years, there has been a more intense search for Pickering emulsions stabilized by phytoparticles.

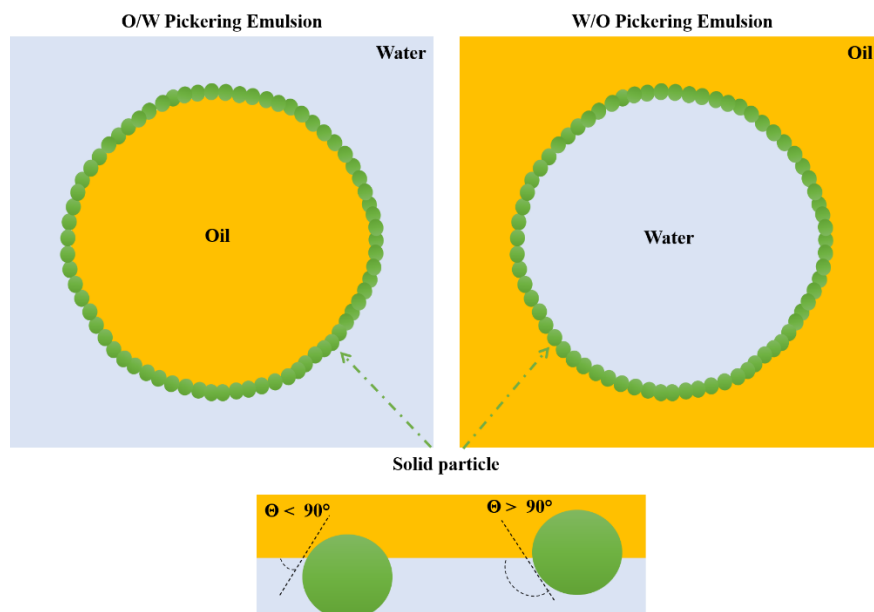
Phytoparticles, as they are derived from natural products, tend to have greater biocompatibility, being considered “ideal” for the development of Pickering emulsions in the food, pharmaceutical, cosmetic, agrochemical, etc. areas. Some studies have already reported the use of polyphenol particles for stabilizing emulsions [15-17]. Polyphenols are secondary metabolites of plants that have aromatic nuclei in their chemical structure containing hydroxylated substituents and/or their functional derivatives, which give them an amphiphilic character, such as surfactants [18].

Furthermore, this class of compounds, according to the literature, is responsible for many of the biological activities exerted by plants, such as antioxidant and anti-inflammatory potential [19], anticancer [20], antimicrobial [21], among others. Thus, it is observed that the use of these particles has advantages, since, in addition to playing a role in the interface of the emulsion droplets, leading to stability with resistance to coalescence, they are biocompatible.

## 2. General aspects of Pickering emulsions

The first reports on emulsions stabilized by solid particles were evidenced in the studies of Pickering (1907). Until then, these formulations were exclusively stabilized by surfactants, forming “soap emulsions”. A difference that can be highlighted between these two types of colloids is the interfacial characteristic. This is because Pickering emulsions generally have droplets with greater surface charge and thickness due to adsorption of particles at the droplet interface, which can be considered an obstacle to fusion, thus preventing the phenomenon of coalescence [22,23].

The particles, to stabilize the Pickering emulsions, must obey some criteria, such as they cannot be prone to solubilization in any of the phases (aqueous or oily), being, therefore, partially moistened by the two phases simultaneously. The contact angle of a particle represents the wettability of that solid at the interface. Therefore, if the particle angle is less than 90° in the aqueous phase, a larger part of these particles will be present in the aqueous phase, thus stabilizing oil/water emulsions (O/W). And if, on the other hand, the angle in the aqueous phase is greater than 90°, the particle will preferably be present in the oil phase, thus stabilizing water/oil (W/O) emulsions (Figure 1). Another factor that influences the stabilization of these emulsions is the size of the particles. The stability of these colloids is generally inversely proportional to the size of the particles, that is, the smaller the particle, the greater the packaging efficiency, leading to stabilization due to the formation of a more homogeneous interfacial layer. This is because the spontaneous desorption-free energy of the interface ( $\Delta G$ ) is proportional to  $r^2 (1 - \cos \theta)$  where  $r$  is the particle radius (for spherical particles) and  $\theta$  is the particle contact angle at the interface. If the contact angle is not close to 0 or 180, the value of  $\Delta G$  can be 1000s of  $kT$ , therefore, once the particles are adsorbed at the interface, there is a greater difficulty in being removed. In other words, there is a huge energy barrier inhibiting coalescence, generating very stable emulsions [16,23-25].



**Figure 1. Schematic representation of the stabilization of a Pickering emulsion by particles.**

It is also worth noting that studies have already shown that particle-stabilized emulsions have long-term stability against coalescence and Ostwald ripening [26]; besides, when compared with conventional emulsions, the particles present, even with a low amount in the system, greater stabilization capacity [27,28]. Thus, over the past few years, studies have shown success in obtaining Pickering emulsions. Marto *et al.* (2016) [26] demonstrated the viability of hydrophilic emulsions stabilized by starch, in addition to the high biocompatibility, being a promising vehicle for carrying drugs in the treatment of topical diseases. Shah *et al* (2016) reported the protective effect of the Pickering emulsion on curcumin transport, enhancing its antioxidant effect [29]. In turn, Gong *et al* (2017) developed stable O/W emulsions with good size controllability from the use of cellulose nanocrystals as stabilizing particles, thus having the potential to produce new formulations [30].

It is essential to point out that, currently, there is a process of searching for formulations that have renewable and natural elements in their composition [31]. In this sense, there is an increase in the study of Pickering emulsions stabilized by particles derived from plants, such as proteins [32] and carbohydrates [33]. There is also a class of molecules derived from the secondary metabolism of plants and which have aroused interest, the polyphenolic compounds, which will be discussed below.

### 3. Phenolic compounds

The basic monomer in phenolic compounds is the phenolic ring and, depending on the molecular structure, these compounds can be categorized into several classes, the main ones being phenolic acids,

phenolic alcohols, flavonoids, lignans and tannins [34]. Polyphenols are a class of secondary metabolites from plants and are present in most species, such as *Spondias mombin* L. [35], *Eugenia uniflora* L. [36], *Punica granatum* L. [37], being, in each of these species, related to biological activities, such as antimicrobial, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antidiabetic, among others. However, in addition to studies on biological properties, in recent years, the technological potential related to these compounds has also been investigated in the pharmaceutical, cosmetic, and food industries.

### 4. Polyphenols particles as emulsion stabilizers

In 2011, for the first time, Luo and colleagues described the tendency of flavonoid molecules to accumulate in the interface of O/W emulsions, stabilizing them [24]. This is because these compounds have, in their structures, hydroxylated groups that contribute to the hydrophilic nature and rings that confer apolarity to the molecules, contributing to the hydrophobic characteristic, thus being an amphoteric molecule. In 2012, this same research group studied the pH interference in Pickering emulsions stabilized by three different flavonoids - rutin, naringin, and tiliroside - observing a trend towards better stabilization at a higher pH, when the zeta potential was also present in values higher in modulus, which facilitated the dispersion of the droplets. Since then, it has been possible to observe an increase in research related to this topic [38].

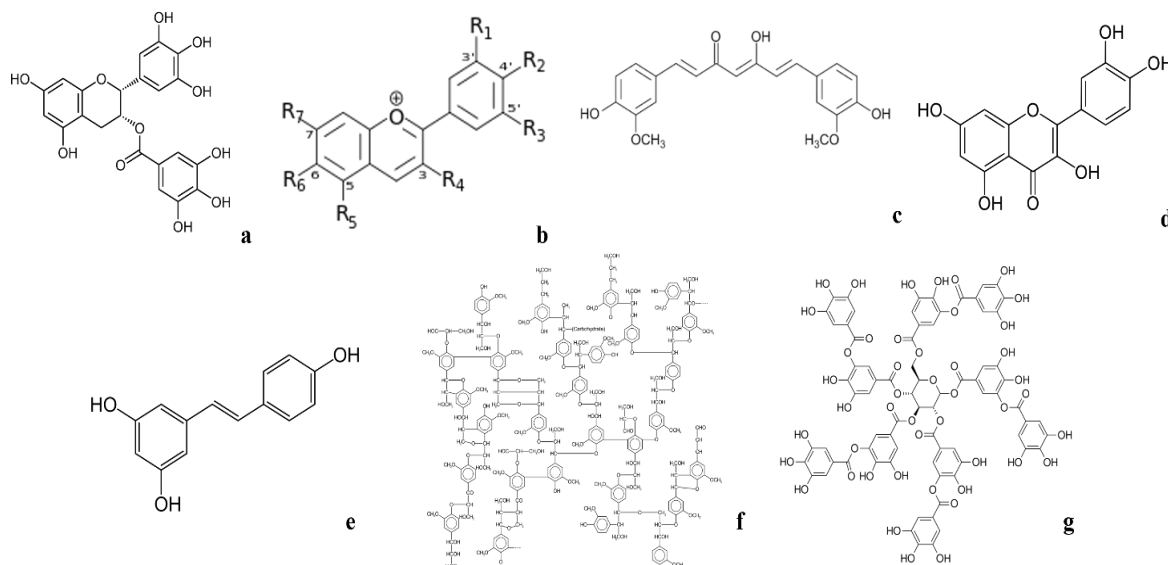
#### 4.1 Epigallocatechin-3-gallate

Epigallocatechin-3-gallate (Figure 2) is the major compound in the catechin class [39]. One of the main characteristics of this flavonoid (flavonol) is

its antioxidant capacity, being the main compound responsible for this biological response in green tea [40,41]. This molecule has been increasingly studied because of its ability to bind to proteins, for example, improving its functionality in food and pharmaceutical products [42].

Su et al. (2020) produced nanoparticles of lactoglobulin and epigallocatechin-3-gallate complexes to stabilize lutein emulsions, obtaining satisfactory results. This is because the complexed nanoparticles ( $\beta$ -IgENPs) obtained smaller sizes

than the lactoglobulin particles ( $\beta$ -IgNPs) due to the formation of a compact structure between the components, in addition to greater thermal resistance, thus being more stable. Another point that should be highlighted is the antioxidant property of the compound that was important for the formulation since lutein is an unsaturated and very passive molecule of degradation in the processing and storage stage due to oxidative processes resulting from chemical reactions and thermal stress [43].



**Figure 2. Chemical structures of polyphenols related. a - epigallocatechin-3-gallate; b – flavylium ion (anthocyanins); c – curcumin; d – quercetin; e – resveratrol; f - lignin; g – tannic acid.**

#### 4.2 Anthocyanins

It is known that there has been a tendency to complex polyphenolic particles with proteins, aiming to find more efficient stabilizers by adding functional properties to the formulation, such as antioxidant activity [44]. The structure of anthocyanins consists of two aromatic rings and a heterocyclic ring, which gives this molecule antioxidant capacity since it can interact with reactive oxygen species.

Thus, Ju et al. (2020) proposed the development of nanoparticles based on soy protein and anthocyanins, forming the SPI-ACN complex to thus stabilize a nanoemulsion from these solids [45]. In this study, it was observed that the increase in anthocyanins led to a gradual shift from the peak particle size distribution towards smaller sizes, which is ideal for stabilizing Pickering emulsions [16]. Also, antioxidant activity of these nanoparticles was shown against the radicals DPPH and ABTS<sup>•+</sup>, which could also be noticed in other studies with flavonoids [17,46], demonstrating that such activity was a result of hydroxyls present in

anthocyanins, which allowed for better long-term stability by decreasing lipid oxidation.

#### 4.3 Curcumin and quercetin

Curcumin is a polyphenol (phenylpropanoid) found in the rhizomes of the *Curcuma longa* species. Its structure consists of two aromatic rings with two hydroxyl groups and two methoxy groups, being a molecule already known for its antioxidant activity [29,47]. Quercetin, in turn, is considered the main dietary flavonoid [48] and is also considered an antioxidant [49]. The use of these two polyphenols to manufacture a delivery system for bioactive compounds, demonstrating antioxidant capacity, has already been reported [50].

Zembyla and collaborators, since 2018, have investigated the potential of curcumin and quercetin polyphenols to act as stabilizers for emulsified dispersed systems [16]. It was found for the first time that the particles of the two molecules are more hydrophobic, thus stabilizing emulsions of the W/O type. Furthermore, it was observed that, due to the packaging characteristic of the quercetin droplets, the hydroxyl groups are less exposed and,

therefore, the pH variation did not affect the contact angle of the quercetin particles, differently from what happened with those of curcumin, leading to a drastic change in the surface charge of this flavonoid. This allowed choosing a more satisfactory pH, since the zeta potential, at pH 3, was closer to zero for both particles, thus favoring hydrophobicity. Besides, in this study, it was also possible to define at which concentrations of curcumin and quercetin there would be the formation of smaller droplets with less free crystals in the continuous phase. As it was the initial study, the particle shapes were also elucidated, with polyhedral curcumin and quercetin being an almost perfect crystalline stick, which is responsible for the greater resistance of the film formed by quercetin particles to curcumin.

In 2019, the same authors proposed, based on previous experiments, the stabilization of emulsions from the formation of a complex between the polyphenol crystals already elucidated and proteins isolated from whey. It was noticed that particles complexed with proteins showed greater efficiency in stabilization, suggesting that the complex is stabilized by electrostatic bonds, in addition to hydrogen bonds, which contributes to this result [51].

Now in 2020, studies have shown that Pickering emulsions co-stabilized by quercetin and curcumin showed greater stability when used with isolated whey protein complex (WPI) or whey protein microgel (WPM), corroborating the previous results. Additionally, it was observed that the WPM particles increase the stability of the formulation by two mechanisms: adsorption on the surface of the droplets and by the formation of mixed crystal flakes composed of polyphenols, WPM particles and small water droplets in the oil phase attached to the surface of the main water droplets [52].

#### 4.4 Resveratrol

Resveratrol is also a phenylpropanoid, consisting of aromatic and hydroxyl rings attached to it [53], thus, like other polyphenols, it has some biological activities, such as antimicrobials and antioxidants, taking into account that such effects are linked to the structure of these molecules. Cheng *et al.* (2020) developed the resveratrol-zein-pectin complex, that is, in this study, in addition to the phenolic compound - a stilbene - and protein, pectin, a polysaccharide, was also added to the formulation [54]. In this study, it was observed that, in addition to an improvement in the stabilization property of peppermint oil emulsions, the particles of the resveratrol-zein-pectin complex demonstrated synergism in microbial activity, since the value of the Minimum Inhibitory Concentration of microorganisms studied decreased significantly,

corroborating studies that demonstrate antimicrobial activity related to this polyphenol [55,56], contributing to an antimicrobial activity over the storage time. Wei and colleagues designed a co-delivery system for coenzyme Q10 and resveratrol by developing a zein and propylene glycol alginate (PGA) nanoparticle for carrying resveratrol [42]. The study aimed to obtain an interfacial stabilization of emulsions for the incorporation of Q10, in addition to studying the resveratrol property of protecting the coenzyme from degradation processes, due to its antioxidant property [57], thus having the potential to be a new vehicle for bioactive ingredients.

#### 4.5 Lignin

Lately, lignin has been the subject of investigation due to its characteristics as a biopolymer and its natural occurrence - second most abundant after cellulose [58]. Various functional groups of this molecule, such as aliphatic hydroxyls, phenolic hydroxyls, carbonyl, and carboxyl, give it this polymeric potential [59]. Considering these characteristics, a range of studies started to be developed to explain the potential of lignin application in different areas, such as nano-engineering [60], in the synthesis of thermoplastics [61], production of carbon fibers [62], among others. In 2019, Bertolo and collaborators obtained nanoparticles based on lignin extracted from the bagasse of the bark and studied its effect on the emulsion interface for curcumin encapsulation. Furthermore, the organosolvent-LNPs was considered the most efficient stabilizer, retaining 73% of curcumin in its encapsulated form after 96 h. Therefore, this study demonstrated the potential of nanostructured lignins for bio-based fields and highlights the influencing factors in the choice of methodologies to produce LNPs [63].

Li *et al.* (2019) sought to formulate antibacterial phase change microcapsules (microPCM) with n-eicosane core and polyurea (PU) shells via Pickering emulsion modeling, where lignin would function as an emulsion stabilizer and reducing agent to incorporate silver into the microPCM. As a result, Ag/lignin microPCMs exhibited a well-defined spherical morphology of the core-shell, high encapsulation efficiency (69.0%), and good thermal durability. Also, they showed good antibacterial activity, with great potential in industrial applications, such as biomedical, textile, and construction areas [26].

#### 4.6 Tannic acid

Polyphenols have aromatic rings and OH groups that are fully reactive to proteins and amino acids and can interact with proteins over a wide pH range. Tannic acid, rich in hydroxyl groups, can interact strongly with polysaccharides and proteins,



in addition to having antioxidant, antibacterial, and antiviral properties [64].

In 2015, Zou and collaborators studied the interaction of zein, a protein derived from corn, with tannic acid, proposing a gel formulation with better application in the food area, since most of the previous studies used synthetic particles [7]. It was observed, in this work, that the ZTP (particles zein/tannic acid) were efficient in stabilizing the oil droplets and lead to a crosslinking phenomenon, forming a continuous network at the oil interface, favoring the formation of Pickering emulsion gels. More recently, in 2018, these same authors studied the influence of ZTP hydrophobicity on the rheology of these gels, varying the amount of tannic acid, reaching the conclusion that, increasing the oil's polarity, the gel would present with a greater or less resistance depending on the hydrophobic or hydrophilic character of the nanoparticles [65]. These results demonstrate that there may be an adjustment of the rheological properties of the formulation, providing interesting resources for various applications in the food industry. This tendency to assess the crosslinking of the zein/tannic acid complex had also been assessed in the studies by Hu and collaborators [66].

In addition, in 2019, Luo and colleagues developed edible oleogel stabilized by polyphenol tea particles obtained from palmitate and in later studies evaluated its drying properties, to develop a more convenient product for the industry, not only for its technological properties such as also antioxidant, coming from polyphenols [67]. The influence of tannic acid on the efficiency of protein emulsification has also been studied for ovalbumin to apply it to food [68]. In 2019, Narukulla and collaborators proposed the study of the influence of this tannin on the stability of re-dispersible emulsions based on polyacrylil hydrazide nanoparticles (PAHz-Ag NP). The authors observed that there was a synergism between tannic acid and PAHz-Ag NP, which, within a formulation, presented as good stabilizers and allowed the obtaining of powders and oils with satisfactory characteristics, being, therefore, an ecological alternative to oil emulsions and powders already available [69].

## 5 CONCLUSIONS:

Pickering emulsions have been widely described in the literature. In studies related to this formulation, one can see some advantages over conventional emulsions, which further stimulates research on these solid-stabilized colloids, mainly due to the possibility of using plant-derived particles for their stabilization, such as proteins, polysaccharides, among others. In this sense, this review allowed a

more specific and in-depth perception of Pickering emulsions stabilized by polyphenolic compounds, molecules derived from the secondary metabolism of plants, and which are well documented due to the range of biological activities they can perform, this being an advantage, a biocompatibility. These studies have shown that, in addition to providing technological characteristics to emulsions, these metabolites, of which flavonoids and tannins are examples, confer antimicrobial and antioxidant characteristics to the final product, which adds to stability. Therefore, it was observed that the formulations resulting from the studies targeted in this article are promising for use in the food and pharmaceutical industry, since they have shown greater physical-chemical stability and, in some cases, have enabled the encapsulation and delivery of bioactive compounds for improved delivery.

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