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# Bottlebrush Block Copolymers at the Interface of Immiscible Liquids: Adsorption and Lateral Packing

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**ABSTRACT.** Amphiphilic bottlebrush block copolymers (BBCPs), having a hydrophilic bottlebrush polymer (BP) linked covalently to a hydrophobic BP, were found to segregate to liquid-liquid interfaces to minimize the free energy of the system. The key parameter influencing the outcome of the experiments is the ratio between the degree of polymerization of the backbone ( $N_{BB}$ ) and that of the side-chain brushes ( $N_{SC}$ ). Specifically, a spherical, star-like configuration results when  $N_{BB} < N_{SC}$ , while a cylindrical, bottlebrush-like shape is preferred when  $N_{BB} > N_{SC}$ . Dynamic interfacial tension ( $\gamma$ ) and fluorescence recovery after photobleaching (FRAP) measurements show that the BBCP configuration influences their areal density and *in-plane* diffusion at the fluid interface. The characteristic relaxation time associated with BBCP adsorption ( $\tau_A$ ) and reorganization ( $\tau_R$ ) was determined by fitting time-dependent interfacial tension measurements to a sum of two exponential relaxation functions. Both  $\tau_A$  and  $\tau_R$  initially increased with  $N_{BB}$  up to 92 repeat units, due to the larger hydrodynamic radius in solution and slower *in-plane* diffusivity, attributed to a shorter cross-sectional diameter of the side-chains near the block junction. This trend reversed at  $N_{BB} = 190$ , with shorter  $\tau_A$  and  $\tau_R$  attributed to increased segregation strength and exposure of the bare water/toluene interface due to a tilting and/or

wiggling of the backbone chains, respectively. The adsorption energy barrier decreased with higher  $N_{BB}$ , due to a reduced BBCP packing density at the fluid interface. Overall, this study provides fundamental insights into macromolecular assembly at fluid interfaces as it pertains to unique bottlebrush block architectures.

**KEYWORDS** *Bottlebrush block copolymer surfactants, polymer architectures, chain configurations, assembly dynamics, adsorption energy barrier*

**INTRODUCTION.** Macromolecular surfactants, referring to polymers containing both hydrophilic and hydrophobic functionality that generate interfacial activity, will segregate to water/oil interfaces to reduce the free energy of the system. Relative to their small-molecule counterparts, macromolecular surfactants offer unparalleled tunability with respect to size, architecture, and composition, enabling a diverse range of chemical and physical properties that contribute to a versatile platform of microreactors,<sup>1, 2</sup> templates,<sup>3-8</sup> and structures for delivery,<sup>9-12</sup> oil recovery,<sup>13-15</sup> and encapsulation.<sup>16-18</sup> Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the liquid-liquid interfacial assembly of polymer surfactants is important for advanced materials designs.<sup>19</sup> Recent studies have described the assembly dynamics, packing behavior, and mechanical properties as a function of polymer architecture, including linear,<sup>20-26</sup> star,<sup>27</sup> and bottlebrush (co)polymers.<sup>28-33</sup>

The extensive steric repulsion between densely grafted side-chains of bottlebrush polymers results in backbone stiffening and side-chain extension, and produces physical properties that are distinctly different from their linear analogs.<sup>34-38</sup> Fundamental parameters for tuning bottlebrush

architectures include the backbone degree of polymerization ( $N_{BB}$ ), sidechain degree of polymerization ( $N_{SC}$ ), and grafting density (defined by number of repeating unit with polymeric sidechain/total repeating units of the backbone). Recent discoveries of bottlebrush polymer assembly in the bulk,<sup>39-42</sup> as thin-films,<sup>42, 43</sup> and at liquid-liquid interfaces<sup>28-33</sup> demonstrate that the bottlebrush configuration is crucial to both solid-solid and liquid-liquid interfacial assembly. Factors such as random vs. block structure,  $N_{BB}$ ,  $N_{SC}$ , and grafting density influence interfacial assembly kinetics and surfactant properties. For example, Verduzco<sup>44</sup> and Sing<sup>45</sup> combined scattering techniques with viscosity measurements to study the solution configuration of bottlebrush homopolymers as a function of  $N_{BB}$  and  $N_{SC}$ . Their findings showed the importance of the  $N_{BB}:N_{SC}$  ratio, finding star-like (spherical) shapes when  $N_{BB} < N_{SC}$ , worm-like configurations (flexible cylinders) when  $N_{BB} \gg N_{SC}$ , and a star-to-bottlebrush transition when  $N_{BB} \sim N_{SC}$ . This variation in solution configuration is important for controlling assembly dynamics and packing at liquid-liquid interfaces.

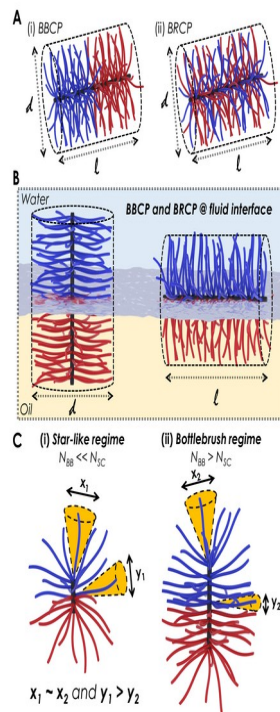
In prior work, the stability of water-in-oil emulsions prepared using *bottlebrush random copolymers* (BRCs) as a function of  $N_{BB}$  and  $N_{SC}$  was described by Matyjaszewski and coworkers,<sup>30</sup> where the mole fraction and length of poly(ethylene oxide) (PEO) side-chains proved important for stabilizing water/xylene emulsions. Notably, emulsions stabilized by BRCs were more stable than those with their linear analog (PEO-*b*-poly(*n*-butyl methacrylate)); among branched polymers (both star- and bottlebrush-like), BRCs with lower  $N_{BB}$  produced smaller droplets. We recently reported the influence of  $N_{BB}$  on the initial interfacial assembly kinetics, packing behavior, and *in-plane* diffusion dynamics of BRCs,<sup>28</sup> finding larger  $N_{BB}$  to result in slower initial assembly, involving reconfiguration of randomly distributed (hydrophilic-hydrophobic) side-chains, and faster *in-plane* diffusion dynamics.

*Bottlebrush block copolymers* (BBCPs) present a distinctly different set of considerations. In contrast to BRCPs, BBCPs do not require extensive side-chain reconfiguration for interfacial assembly, due to the intrinsic separation of hydrophilic and hydrophobic domains. A distinctive feature of the BBCP case, in comparison to the bottlebrush homopolymer, is that the solvent quality (good, theta, or poor) for each block imparts a unique local chain conformation. Under selective solvent conditions, this drives BBCP assembly into well-defined nanostructures.<sup>46-49</sup> For example, using amphiphilic BBCPs to template porous microspheres, Song and coworkers demonstrated that the interfacial instability of water/oil interfaces to result in spontaneous emulsification.<sup>8</sup> Emulsion droplet diameters and, therefore, microsphere pore sizes were adjusted with  $N_{BB}$ : as  $N_{BB}$  increased, the lower curvature of the water/toluene interface produced larger pores. The backbone rigidity, which is related to the BBCP grafting density, proved crucial for tuning pore sizes with  $N_{BB}$ ; incorporating a flexible segment between two side-chain blocks led to a broader pore size distribution. This and other studies<sup>48, 50-58</sup> demonstrate that the bottlebrush polymer architecture represents an emerging opportunity to impart the macroscopic properties of emulsions and the morphologies of the resultant nanoscale structures.

As illustrated in **Figure 1A**, the axial length ( $l$ ) and diameter ( $d$ ) of both BBCPs and BRCPs increase with  $N_{BB}$  and  $N_{SC}$ , respectively. For BRCPs, interfacial reconfiguration establishes hydrophilic-rich and hydrophobic-rich domains for adsorption to a fluid interface, in which backbone orientation must be parallel to the water/oil interface. As  $N_{BB}$  increases, the projection area per polymer increases, reducing the packing efficiency.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, for BBCPs, the backbone orientation at the fluid interface is prone to adopt perpendicular to the water/oil interface, making their projection area per molecule more sensitive to  $N_{SC}$  than  $N_{BB}$  (**Figure 1B**).

We note, however, that the bottlebrush polymer configuration at the liquid interface may differ from the schematic depiction in **Figure 1B**, which is due to the fact that both backbone and side-chains are not in the super-stretched limit, but rather they have flexibility some extent.<sup>49, 59</sup> Thus, although prior studies examined the relationships between BBCP architecture and solution assembly, key fundamental questions remain concerning BBCPs at fluid interfaces, including the impact of  $N_{BB}$  on: 1) *in-plane* diffusivity; 2) bending rigidity of the BBCP assembly; and 3) adsorption energy barriers.

Here, we describe the assembly of BBCPs at fluid interfaces as a function of  $N_{BB}$ . By maintaining the  $N_{SC}$  of the two different side-chains and fixing the molar ratio of hydrophilic-hydrophobic side-chains at 1:1, we used the  $N_{BB}:N_{SC}$  ratio to tailor macromolecular shape from spherical to flexible cylindrical. The time-dependent interfacial tension (IFT,  $\gamma$ ) was monitored by tensiometry measurements, giving information on assembly dynamics, packing efficiency, and adsorption energy. Fluorescence recovery after photobleaching (FRAP) experiments provided information on the *in-plane* diffusion of BBCPs at the fluid interface. These studies establish fundamental structure-property relationships between BBCP architectures and their dynamics at fluid interfaces.



**Figure 1.** Schematic illustrations of (A) BCCPs and BRCPs with hydrophilic (blue) and hydrophobic (red) side-chains; (B) bottlebrush orientation at the water/oil interface; (C) schematic representation of the volume occupied by a side-chain located at the BCCP backbone chain-end (diameter  $x_1$  and  $x_2$ ) or block junction (diameter  $y_1$  and  $y_2$ ).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Synthesis and solution chain configuration of BBCPs*

Macromonomers containing poly(dimethylsiloxane) (PDMS) and poly(ethylene oxide) (PEO) side-chains were synthesized by amidation or esterification of *N*-(carboxyhexyl)-*cis*-5-norbornene-*exo*-2,3-dicarboxyimide with PDMS-NH<sub>2</sub> or PEO-OH, yielding NB-PDMS and NB-mPEO, respectively<sup>28</sup> (synthetic and characterization details provided in Supporting Information, **Figure S1** and **S2**). Using these macromonomers, the amphiphilic BBCPs containing PDMS and PEO side-chains were synthesized by ruthenium benzylidene-initiated ring-opening metathesis polymerization (ROMP) with (H<sub>2</sub>IMes)(Cl)<sub>2</sub>(pyr)<sub>2</sub>RuCHPh.<sup>60</sup> This approach resulted in high monomer conversion and fast polymerization kinetics, while ensuring 100% grafting density, yielding BBCPs with one side-chain per repeat unit. For BBCP preparation, we began by performing ROMP of NB-PDMS in anhydrous THF, which revealed first-order polymerization kinetics and nearly quantitative conversion in just five minutes (**Figure S3**). Then, the addition of NB-mPEO to the active chain-end produced the desired BBCP, with evidence from size-exclusion chromatography (SEC), where growth of the second block produced peaks at shorter elution times corresponding to higher molecular weight polymer (**Figure 2B**). As anticipated for a controlled polymerization of this type, adjusting the macromonomer:initiator ratio (or [MM]:[G3]) exerted control over  $N_{BB}$  of the resultant BBCPs. **Table 1** summarizes BBCP characterization, including molecular weight and polydispersity index (PDI) values estimated by size-exclusion chromatography (SEC). The molecular weight and PDI of the resulting BBCPs range from 47 to 503 kDa and 1.16 to 1.54, respectively (**Table 1** and **S1**). The higher PDI value



for **P4** is likely due to catalyst deactivation, which may impact on polymer diffusivity and interfacial assembly behavior.<sup>61</sup>

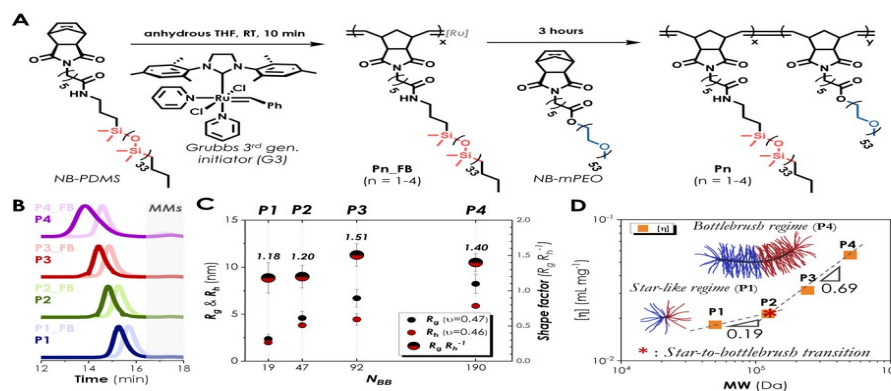
**Table 1.** Characterization data for BBCPs **P1-P4**.

entry	Target $N_{BB}$ ([MM]/[G3])	$M_{n, theo}$ (kDa)	$f_{PEO}$ (%)	Actual $N_{BB}^a$	$M_{n, MALLS-SEC}$ (kDa)	$M_{w, MALLS-SEC}$ (kDa)	PDI
<b>P1</b>	20	53.0	49.6	19	50.0	59.2	1.18
<b>P2</b>	50	132.0	50.1	47	123.7	144.0	1.16
<b>P3</b>	100	265.0	49.8	92	242.6	289.3	1.19
<b>P4</b>	200	530.0	49.5	190	502.9	778.8	1.54

*a.* Actual  $N_{BB}$  denotes that each bottlebrush block copolymer has polymeric side-chains with a number of “Actual  $N_{BB}$ ” in average.

To investigate BBCP solution configuration, dynamic light scattering (DLS) and static light scattering (SLS) experiments were performed. DLS analysis of BBCPs with different  $N_{BB}$  values (**Figure S8** and **S9**) showed a shift in the size distribution peak of  $R_h$  towards larger values, indicating an overall increase in size, while SLS measurements of the radius of gyration ( $R_g$ , **Figure S10**) allowed calculation of the shape factor ( $R_g R_h^{-1}$ , a dimensionless value that reflects the shape and mass distribution of scattering objects in solvent).<sup>62</sup> For **P1** ( $N_{BB}$  19) and **P2** ( $N_{BB}$  47), shape factors of 1.18 and 1.20 resemble those of a spherical star polymer (1.14 in the theta condition), as predicted by Zimm theory (**Figure 2C**).<sup>63</sup> In the  $N_{BB} < N_{SC}$  regime, increasing  $N_{BB}$  did not significantly alter the aspect ratio but did increase the local density of side-chains, confirming the expected spherical shape in toluene, consistent with a star-like regime.<sup>63, 64</sup> **P3** ( $N_{BB}$  92) had the highest shape factor of 1.51, similar to that of a randomly branched polymer (1.7, Zimm theory, theta condition,  $N_{BB} > N_{SC}$ ) with a rigid cylindrical configuration.<sup>63</sup> As  $N_{BB}$  increased further in **P4** ( $N_{BB} \gg N_{SC}$ ,  $N_{BB}$  190), the shape factor decreased to 1.40, attributed to

backbone flexibility or wiggling. We note that Sing and coworkers similarly described a rigid cylindrical shape of bottlebrush homopolymers with  $N_{SC} = 30$  (poly(L-lactic acid)) at  $N_{BB} = 87$ , based on intrinsic viscosity,  $R_g$ , and  $R_h$  measurements, and coarse-grained simulations.<sup>45</sup> The observed trend in **Figure 2D**, illustrating the shape factor, aligns with the "asphericity" vs. molecular weight plot described by Sing, from 0 (spherical) to 1 (elongated). In their study, increasing  $N_{BB}$  initially led to a decrease in asphericity when  $N_{BB} < N_{SC}$ , followed by an increase when  $N_{BB} > N_{SC}$ , consistent with the trend observed in the shape factor (**Figure 2C**). The intrinsic viscosity ( $[\eta]$ ) proved sensitive to shape change, with a sharp transition in the scaling exponent near **P2** in the  $[\eta]$  vs. molecular weight plot (**Figure 2D**), indicative of a star-to-bottlebrush transition ( $N_{BB} \sim N_{SC}$ ).<sup>45</sup> From the aforementioned studies and our light scattering experiment results, **P1** assumes a spherical configuration, while **P2** is ellipsoidal with both falling in the star-like regime. **P3**, on the other hand, lies in the bottlebrush regime with a rigid cylindrical shape, while the bottlebrush configuration of **P4** may be viewed as a flexible cylinder. Characterization data of BBCP in solution, including dynamic and static light scattering, and intrinsic viscosity, are in the Supporting Information (**Figure S8-S11**).



**Figure 2.** (A) Synthesis of BCBPs by ROMP of NB-PDMS and NB-mPEO; (B) MALLS-SEC traces of different  $N_{BB}$  of BCBPs; (C) Summary of  $R_g$ ,  $R_h$  and shape factor (defined by  $R_g R_h^{-1}$ ) as a function of  $N_{BB}$  of BCBPs,  $\nu$  denotes the scaling exponent of  $R_g$  or  $R_h$  vs.  $N_{BB}^\nu$ ; (D) Intrinsic viscosity vs. MW in log-log plot, which showed star-to-bottlebrush transition around **P2**.

### *Interfacial tension (IFT) measurements and jamming experiments*

To assess the fluid-fluid interface properties of BCBPs with different  $N_{BB}$  values, we conducted pendant drop tensiometry experiments with droplets of DI water (10  $\mu$ L, pH 5.7) suspended in 1 mg mL<sup>-1</sup> toluene solutions of BCBPs **P1-P4**. The droplet shape was monitored over time and the resulting principal curvatures were fit to the Young-Laplace equation to determine dynamic interfacial tension ( $\gamma$ ) values.<sup>65</sup> As  $N_{BB}$  increased from **P1** to **P4**, the quasi-equilibrium  $\gamma$  (as  $-d\gamma/dt$  approaches 0) also increased, indicating less efficient polymer coverage at the droplet interface (**Figure 3A**). The rate of change of  $\gamma$  at  $t = 1$  sec ( $-d\gamma/dt_{t=1 \text{ sec}}$ ) showed a weak correlation with  $N_{BB}$  (**Figure S12E**), presumably due to a super-convection of BCBPs when

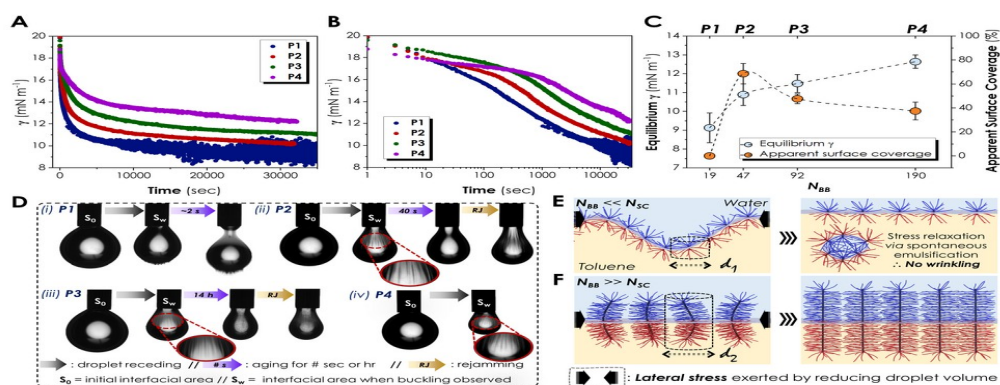
the water droplet was injected into the BCCP-containing toluene solution. However,  $-dy/dt$  at  $t = 50\sim 100$  seconds decreases with increasing  $N_{BB}$  (**Figure S12F**), which is attributed to slower diffusion for larger  $N_{BB}$  values and is consistent with the trend observed in **Figure S9**, *i.e.*, where the change in  $R_h$  as a function  $N_{BB}$  is shown (**Figure S10**).

The observed increase in  $\gamma$  with  $N_{BB}$ , as shown in **Figure 3C**, can be understood by considering the solution conformation of BCCPs. **P1** had the lowest  $\gamma$ , decreasing to  $\sim 9$  mN m<sup>-1</sup> at long times. As the configuration of the BCCP transitions from spherical (**P1**) to ellipsoidal (**P2**) to rigid cylindrical (**P3**), the BCCP can adopt a *tilted* configuration at the fluid interface due to thermal fluctuations, increasing the projected area per macromolecule at the interface and, therefore, an increase of  $\gamma$ . For **P4**, the added flexibility of the cylindrical structure will also allow for *wiggling* of the backbone, exposing even more of the bare water/toluene interface and a higher value of  $\gamma$  (**Figure 3F**).

This assessment is supported by the apparent surface coverage (ASC, **Figure 3C**), determined from the ratio of the interfacial area of the droplet ( $S_w$ ) when wrinkling occurs (during reduction of droplet volume) to the initial interfacial area ( $S_0$ ), as shown in **Figure 3D**. When a quasi-equilibrium  $\gamma$  was achieved, the surface area of the W/O interface was reduced by receding the syringe and hence droplet volume.  $S_w$  was recorded when wrinkles at the W/O interface were observed during the receding process. Even though **P1** has the lowest  $\gamma$ , no wrinkling was observed (**Figure 3C**). Notably, spontaneous emulsification occurred during the interfacial tension (IFT) measurement for **P1**, but not for **P2-P4**. The lower bending modulus of **P1** results in a higher interfacial curvature compared to larger BCCPs.<sup>6, 8</sup> The flexibility of this assembly induces undulations of the fluid interface as the areal density of **P1** increases and the

interfacial tension decreases, leading to spontaneous emulsification (**Figure 3E**).<sup>66, 67</sup> Thus, despite the high binding energy imparted by the amphiphilic structure of **P1**, spontaneous emulsification continually reduces the number of polymers at the interface, thereby avoiding wrinkling. Increasing  $N_{BB}$  from 19 to 47 removes the tendency for spontaneous emulsification, due to the higher bending modulus of the interface. Consequently, upon reducing the droplet volume, wrinkling results in an ASC of ~69% (**Figure 3C and D**). As  $N_{BB}$  increases, we expected ASC to likewise increase due to the higher binding energy per BBCP and higher bending modulus of the resultant assembly. On the contrary, a substantial decrease in ASC was observed, from 69% (**P2**) to 37% (**P4**), likely due to a lower packing density of BBCPs with higher  $N_{BB}$  due to thermally induced backbone *tilting*. Additionally, macromolecular *wiggling* in **P4** further contributes to the decrease in ASC (**Figure 3F**). In our previous work, bottlebrush random copolymers (BRCs) with similar  $N_{BB}$  values exhibited no such wrinkling (for all BRCs investigated), and instead produced spontaneous emulsification at even lower polymer concentrations (0.1 mg mL<sup>-1</sup>).<sup>28</sup> Thus, BBCP orientation normal to the fluid interface produces a more robust droplet interface with significantly higher bending modulus.

For the BBCP interfacial assemblies described here, the wrinkles created by interfacial jamming are not fixed but rather relax as they reorganize over time. For example, for **P2**, when wrinkling occurred at the droplet interface, the reduction in droplet volume occurred in <1 min, while for **P3**, the relaxation required 14 hours, despite its lower ASC (**Figure 3D**). This extended relaxation time likely arises from the higher local density of side-chains near the block junction (**Figure 1C**) that contribute hard particle-like properties<sup>68</sup> and thus slower stress relaxation kinetics.



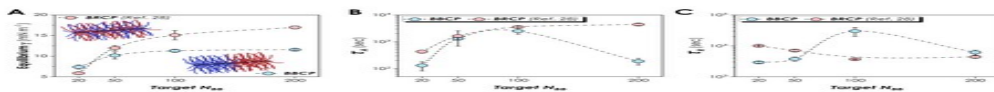
**Figure 3.** Dynamic interfacial tension measurement with (A) linear-linear and (B) linear-log plot as a function of  $N_{BB}$  (P1-P4). (C) Summary of equilibrium IFT and ASC as a function of  $N_{BB}$  of BCCP. (D) Snapshots of droplets at different stages of P1-P4, where the first snapshot for each BCCP was taken at equilibrium stage. Schematic illustrations of (E) lower  $N_{BB}$  and (F) higher  $N_{BB}$  BCCPs at water/toluene interface.

### *Bottlebrush polymer interfacial assembly: impact of block vs. random architecture*

The results described to this point suggest bottlebrush polymer microstructure to be pivotal for determining assembly characteristics at fluid interfaces, in accord with **Figure 1B** whereby the block architecture assembles normal to the fluid interface, while the random architecture lies parallel to the interface. Here we compare BCCP assembly to our prior report on random bottlebrush structures containing similar PEO and PDMS side-chains, performing experiments with  $0.001 \text{ mg mL}^{-1}$  BCCP solutions in toluene. The dynamic interfacial tension at the water/toluene interface was determined using pendant drop tensiometry ( $10 \mu\text{L}$  water droplet, pH

5.7, **Figure S13A**). For BBCPs, the equilibrium  $\gamma$  ranged from 7 mN m<sup>-1</sup> (**P1**,  $N_{BB}$  20) to 11 mN m<sup>-1</sup> (**P4**,  $N_{BB}$  200), as shown in **Figure 4A**. Overall, the BBCPs exhibit relatively similar equilibrium  $\gamma$  values, suggesting a similar projected area per macromolecule at the fluid interfaces, which in turn supports their normal orientation (**Figure 1B**). In contrast, for BRCPs,  $\gamma$  increased from 6 to 17 mN m<sup>-1</sup> when going from  $N_{BB}$  20 to 200, since the *in-plane* orientation of the polymers at the interface decreases packing efficiency at higher aspect ratios.  $\gamma$  vs. time plots analyzed by fitting to a sum of two exponential relaxation functions, revealed two distinct relaxation times associated with initial *adsorption* and the subsequent *reorganization* kinetics (**Figure S13B-E**). These insights highlight the adsorption mechanism of bottlebrush polymers of distinct architectures, where the architecture must markedly alter the characteristic relaxation time. Unlike BRCPs, the BBCP block structure does not require significant side-chain reconfiguration upon approaching the fluid interface, due to its inherent division into hydrophilic-rich and hydrophobic-rich domains. The first characteristic relaxation time associated with adsorption ( $\tau_A$ ) to fluid interfaces follows similar trends for the BRCPs and BBCPs for  $N_{BB} = 20$  to 100, where the BBCP exhibited much shorter  $\tau_A$ , demonstrating the importance of BRCP reconfiguration of BRCP at the initial stage of assembly. However, for target  $N_{BB} = 200$ , the segregation of the two chemically distinct blocks for the BBCPs, absent any significant reorganization of the chain at the interface, led in faster adsorption (**Figure 4B**). The second characteristic relaxation time ( $\tau_R$ ) is associated with reorganization of copolymers already present at the interface.  $\tau_R$  for the BRCPs with lower  $N_{BB}$  values have longer relaxation times in keeping with their higher packing efficiency reflected in the lower  $\gamma$  (**Figure 4C**). For the BBCPs,  $\tau_R$  increased with  $N_{BB}$  from 20 to 100, then decreased at  $N_{BB} = 200$  (**Figure 4C**). The

longer  $\tau_R$  is to be expected, since macromolecular size increases and the shape of the molecule is of secondary importance. However, the decline in  $\tau_R$  at highest  $N_{BB}$  may reflect a transition from ellipsoidal to rod-like (**Figure 1C**). When  $N_{BB}$  increases from 20 to 50, a star-like configuration persists, but the diameter of a cross-section of side-chains near the block junction decreases ( $y_1 < y_2$  in **Figure 1C**), due to side-chain stretching. At the quasi-equilibrium stage, inter-molecular steric repulsion, resulting from the increase in  $N_{BB}$  ( $y_1 < y_2$ , **Figure 1C**), governs *in-plane* reorganization of the assembled BBCPs. Therefore, reorganizing BBCPs of higher  $N_{BB}$  values (*e.g.*,  $N_{BB}$  100) is slower relative to the less-sterically congested and softer BBCPs (*e.g.*,  $N_{BB}$  19). However, when  $N_{BB}$  increases further to 200, *wiggling* of the entire chain (**Figure 2D**) would expose bare water/toluene interface (**Figure 3F**), providing more interfacial area for reorganization (**Figure 4C**), and thus shorter  $\tau_R$ .

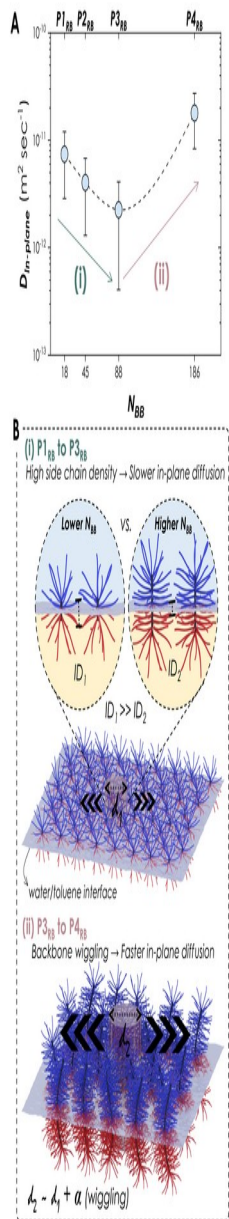


**Figure 4.** (A) Comparison of the equilibrium  $\gamma$  of BBCP (blue) and BRCP (red, Ref. 28); Characteristic relaxation time related to the (B) macromolecular adsorption and (C) reorganization of BBCPs and BRCPs (adapted from Ref. 28, Copyright 2022 Wiley-VCH Verlag GmbH and Co. KGaA, Weinheim).

### *In-plane diffusion dynamics of bottlebrush block copolymers*



To further evaluate the dynamics of BBCP reorganization at the fluid interface, fluorescence recovery after photobleaching (FRAP) experiments were performed, which probes the diffusion of labeled-BBCPs at the interface.<sup>69</sup> For these experiments, Rhodamine-B-functionalized BBCPs (**P1<sub>RB</sub>**-**P4<sub>RB</sub>**) were synthesized with the same targeted  $N_{BB}$  values as **P1**-**P4**. Details of the polymer synthesis, emulsion preparation, FRAP experiments, and diffusion coefficient calculations are given in **Figure S6-S7, S14**. The *in-plane* diffusion coefficients derived from these experiments ( $D_{in-plane}$ , **Figure 5A**) were distinctly non-monotonic going from **P1** to **P4**.  $D_{in-plane}$  decreased from  $7 \times 10^{-12}$  to  $2 \times 10^{-12} \text{ m}^2 \text{ sec}^{-1}$  with increasing  $N_{BB}$  (18 to 88), attributed to the decreased cross-sectional diameter of side-chains near the block junction and the shorter inter-side-chain distance ( $ID_1 > ID_2$ , **Figure 5B**, (i)). Inverting this initial trend, BBCPs with  $N_{BB}$  186 showed a higher  $\gamma$  and lower ASC due to backbone *wiggling* (**Figure 3C** and **F**). The unoccupied water/toluene interface generated by this backbone *wiggling* facilitates *in-plane* diffusion. As a result, the diameter of the projection area per macromolecule of **P4<sub>RB</sub>** ( $d_2$ ) is greater than that of the lower  $N_{BB}$  BBCPs ( $d_1$ ), leading to faster *in-plane* diffusivity (**Figure 5B**, (ii)). These findings align well with characterization of  $\gamma$  vs. time (**Figure 3A**), providing further support for our understanding of the key impact of bottlebrush configuration on relaxation time.



**Figure 5.** (A) *In-plane* diffusion coefficients obtained from FRAP experiments with different  $N_{BB}$  (P1<sub>RB</sub>-P4<sub>RB</sub>) after aging the emulsions for 1 day. (B) Schematic illustrations of two different scenarios as a function of  $N_{BB}$  of BCCPs, where (i) the increasing side-chain density near the block junctions hinders *in-plane* diffusion due to increased steric repulsion between bottlebrush polymers, and (ii) backbone wiggling (when  $N_{BB} \gg N_{SC}$ ) provides additional space for *in-plane* diffusion.

### ***Adsorption energy barrier calculations***

In an effort to quantify our understanding of the fundamental interfacial assembly behavior of BCCPs, we consider the energetic barriers associated with interfacial adsorption. Initially, the water/toluene interface is unoccupied, allowing BCCPs to diffuse to, and adsorb at, the interface, an overall free energy reduction. Successful BCCP interfacial adsorption depends on the orientation of the diffusing macromolecules, since this impacts contact of the PEO block and the fluid interface. As the system approaches equilibrium, and available fluid interfacial area decreases, a significant energy barrier ( $\Delta G_{aeb}$ , *aeb* stands for an adsorption energy barrier) for PEO penetration into the BCCP assembly must be overcome (**Figure 6A**). This barrier must include effects of inter-bottlebrush repulsion and unfavorable PEO-PDMS interactions, as reflected in the Flory-Huggins interaction parameter between PEO and PDMS (thin-film  $\chi_{\text{PEO/PDMS}} \sim 0.225$  at room temperature<sup>70</sup>). We define a distance between the junction point of the BCCP and the plane of the interface (sublayer, **Figure 6A**) that reflects the distance at which BCCPs approaching the interface begin to experience repulsive forces from BCCPs already present at the interface.

To quantify  $\Delta G_{aeb}$  for BCCP interfacial assembly, we utilized the theoretical framework of Ward and Tordai<sup>71</sup> on the diffusion and assembly behavior of interfacially active molecules from bulk (solution) to a liquid interface, or *vice versa*:

$$\Gamma(t) = 2c_0\sqrt{\frac{Dt}{\pi}} - 2\sqrt{\frac{D}{\pi}} \int_0^{\sqrt{t}} c_s d(\sqrt{t-\tau}) \text{ Eq. 1}$$

where  $\Gamma$  defines BCCP surface coverage at the fluid interface,  $c_0$  denotes BCCP concentration in the oil phase,  $D$  is the effective diffusion coefficient,  $c_s$  represents BCCP sub-surface concentration, and  $\tau$  is an arbitrary dummy variable of integration. Solving Eq. (1) requires two

boundary conditions: i) a short time approximation,  $t \rightarrow 0$  and ii) a long time approximation (equilibrium stage,  $t \rightarrow \infty$ ). We only consider the latter, due to convection caused by injection of the water droplet during the initial interfacial tension measurement ( $t \rightarrow 0$ ), which complicates the diffusivity calculation and the origin of assembly dynamics.<sup>72</sup> By using the Gibbs isotherm ( $d\gamma = -nRT \Gamma d \ln c$ , where  $R$  is the gas constant,  $T$  is the temperature in Kelvin, and  $n=1$  for non-ionic surfactants<sup>73</sup>), and taking the limit  $\Delta c \rightarrow 0$  ( $\Delta c = c_0 - c_s$ , where  $c_0$  is BCCP bulk concentration and  $c_s$  is concentration of BCCP in the sublayer), it can be written as:

$$\gamma_t = \gamma_{eq} + \frac{RT \Gamma_{eq}^2}{c} \sqrt{\frac{\pi}{4Dt}} \quad Eq. 2$$

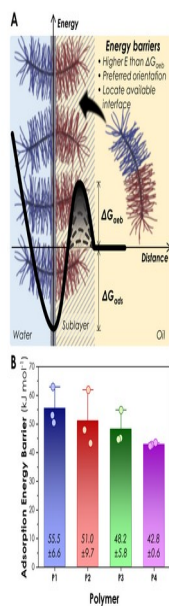
To calculate the effective diffusion coefficient ( $D_{eff}$ ), we first obtain  $\Gamma_{eq}$  from the Gibbs isotherm using the equation  $\Gamma_{eq} = -(RT)^{-1} d\gamma(d \ln c)^{-1}$  at various molar concentrations (**Figure 16A-D**). Next, by plotting  $\gamma$  vs. (time)<sup>-1/2</sup> from **Figure S15** and determining the slope of the plot at  $t \rightarrow \infty$  (**Figure S16E-H**), we can calculate the  $D_{eff}$ :

$$D_{eff} = \frac{\pi R^2 T^2 \Gamma_{eq}^4}{4c^2 \left( \frac{d\gamma}{d(t^{-1/2})_{t \rightarrow \infty}} \right)^2} \quad Eq. 3$$

In the context of the “*activated-diffusion mechanism*” of the adsorption barrier in the surfactant assembly, Liggieri, *et al.*<sup>74</sup> used the Arrhenius-type equation ( $D_{eff} = D e^{\frac{-\Delta G}{RT}}$ ,  $D$  from DLS, **Figure S9**) to calculate  $\Delta G_{aeb}$ . **Figure 6B** shows  $\Delta G_{aeb}$  for BCCPs **P1-P4**, wherein the values monotonically decrease from  $55.5 \pm 6.6$  kJ mol<sup>-1</sup> (**P1**) to  $42.8 \pm 0.6$  kJ mol<sup>-1</sup> (**P4**). To understand this trend in  $\Delta G_{aeb}$ , we consider BCCP configuration. As  $N_{BB}$  increased, the sublayer thickness also increased due to architecture of the BCCPs (**Figure 6A**). However, we need to separate the effect of sublayer thickness from the trend in  $\Delta G_{aeb}$  because if the sublayer thickness were the

main contributing factor, **P4** with the highest  $N_{BB}$  would have the highest  $\Delta G_{aeb}$ , which is counter to our observation (**Figure 6B**). We emphasize that the decrease in adsorption energy at higher  $N_{BB}$  values must be a consequence of backbone tilting and wiggling associated with the higher aspect ratio bottlebrush polymers, since inter-chain interactions alone would create a significantly larger barrier at higher  $N_{BB}$ .

As discussed above, at higher BBCP aspect ratio, tilting and wiggling at the liquid interface exposes bare water/toluene interface, resulting in an increase in  $\gamma$  (**Figure 3C**). This in turn reduces the effective density of the components and the magnitude of nonfavorable interactions experienced by approaching BBCPs, consequently lowering  $\Delta G_{aeb}$ . When the PEO block penetrates into the PDMS block of the BBCPs at the liquid interface, the incoming BBCP experiences the highest repulsive force. When the PEO block reaches the liquid interface, it is drawn into the water phase until the junction point localized at the water/toluene interface to minimize free energy (**Figure 6A**). For further context, comparative analysis of BBCP interfacial adsorption to that of ligand-functionalized nanoparticles and conventional diblock copolymers is presented in **Figure S17**. We note that the upon full insertion of the BBCP into the interfacial assembly, the interfacial tension and the free energy are decreased, so  $\Delta G_{ads}$  is negative.



**Figure 6.** (A) Schematic energy diagram of BCCPs either in the bulk or at the water/toluene interface. The two free energy change,  $\Delta G_{aeb}$  (adsorption energy barrier) and  $\Delta G_{ads}$  (energy gain upon BCCP adsorption) represent the adsorption energy barrier and energy gain by placing the BCCP from the bulk, respectively. (B) Average  $\Delta G_{aeb}$  as a function of  $N_{BB}$ .

## CONCLUSION

In summary, we described the  $N_{BB}$ -dependent fluid-fluid interfacial assembly kinetics, packing efficiency, *in-plane* dynamics, and adsorption energy barrier of bottlebrush block copolymer surfactants. The change of macromolecular configuration in solution proved critical in describing the interfacial assembly behavior. Equilibrium  $\gamma$  increased with  $N_{BB}$ , which indicates lower interfacial coverage at higher  $N_{BB}$ . For **P1**, spontaneous emulsification was induced by interfacial instabilities, reflecting a lower bending rigidity at lower  $N_{BB}$ . The decreasing ASC with  $N_{BB}$  suggests that the BBCPs with higher  $N_{BB}$  adopt a tilted configuration, or undergo backbone wiggling, exposing bare water/toluene interface and reducing ASC. Reducing [BBCP] to 0.001 mg mL<sup>-1</sup> allowed direct comparison to equilibrium  $\gamma$ ,  $\tau_A$ , and  $\tau_R$  of the BBCPs with the BRCPs containing similar side-chain chemistry. BRCPs showed increasing equilibrium  $\gamma$  with  $N_{BB}$ , while the BBCP  $\gamma$  values plateaued, demonstrating that the backbone orientation of the BRCPs and BBCPs are parallel and perpendicular to the water/toluene interface, respectively.  $\tau_A$  and  $\tau_R$ , determined by fitting a sum of two exponential relaxation functions to the dynamic  $\gamma$  plots, initially increased with  $N_{BB}$  (**P1** to **P3**) attributed to larger  $R_h$ , slower solution diffusion, and smaller cross-sectional diameter of side-chains near the bottlebrush block junction, which impedes reorganization. However, both  $\tau_A$  and  $\tau_R$  decreased as  $N_{BB}$  increased further to 190 (**P4**), which is attributed to increased segregation strength and exposure of new water/toluene interface due to the backbone wiggling and enhanced reorganization. These results were further confirmed by FRAP experiments, where the *in-plane* diffusion coefficients decreased as  $N_{BB}$  grew from 19 to 92, but increased at  $N_{BB}$  190, sharing the same trend as  $\tau_R$ . The adsorption energy barriers for

BBCPs with different  $N_{BB}$  were calculated, showing a correlation between the  $\Delta G_{aeb}$  and chain configuration, *i.e.*, backbone tilting and wiggling at the fluid interface. Overall, the assembly behavior of BBCPs at different  $N_{BB}:N_{SC}$  ratios provides invaluable insight into designing tailored macromolecular systems in fluids. By understanding the interplay between the  $N_{BB}:N_{SC}$  ratios and the bottlebrush chain configurations, informed decisions on selecting the optimal macromolecular architecture for particular applications are enabled. A deeper understanding of how BBCP shape and configuration affects macroscopic physical properties at fluid interfaces is vital for future applications of these types of macromolecular surfactants. Overall, this study establishes general design rules that guide consideration of BBCPs as surfactants, empowering researchers to harness their unique properties and tailor the performance of systems with precision.

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## **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

The authors declare no competing interests.



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*Table of contents for this paper*

