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# Hydration or hydroxylation: direct synthesis of fullerenol from pristine fullerene [C<sub>60</sub>] via acoustic cavitation in the presence of hydrogen peroxide

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A green and clean approach that requires low energy and avoids the use of any toxic or corrosive reagents/solvents for the synthesis of potential fullerenol moieties [C<sub>60</sub>(OH)<sub>n</sub>·mH<sub>2</sub>O] was proposed in this investigation, in which pristine fullerene (C<sub>60</sub>) in dil. H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (30%) aqueous media was ultrasonicated (20 kHz, 200 W) at 30% amplitude for 1 h. The attachment of hydroxyl groups (–OH) was investigated *via* FTIR and the quantification of –OH groups attached to the C<sub>60</sub> cage was conducted *via* elemental analysis. The number of secondary bound water molecules (mH<sub>2</sub>O) with each fullerenol molecule [C<sub>60</sub>(OH)<sub>n</sub>] was measured *via* TGA, and the estimated average structure of fullerenol was calculated to be C<sub>60</sub>(OH)<sub>8</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O. The synthesized fullerenol was moderately soluble in water and DMSO. Furthermore, the size of the synthesized C<sub>60</sub>(OH)<sub>8</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O particles determined by both AFM and DLS analysis was found to be in the range of 135–155 nm. The proposed ultrasound-assisted acoustic cavitation technique encompasses a one-step facile reaction strategy, requires less time for the reaction, and reduces the number of solvents required for the separation and purification of C<sub>60</sub>(OH)<sub>8</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O, which could be scalable for the commercial synthesis of fullerenol moieties in the future.

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## Introduction

The discovery of fullerene (C<sub>60</sub>) by Sir Harold Kroto and his group in 1985<sup>1,2</sup> pioneered the new chapter of fullerene chemistry in the domain of carbon allotropes and gradually this new area of chemistry has provided versatile fullerene (C<sub>60</sub>) derivatives<sup>3</sup> with potential features that could be exploited in numerous technological applications. Fullerene C<sub>60</sub>, which is specifically known as Buckminster fullerene, is a carbon allotrope and has been incessantly reported as a useful potential carbon nanomaterial for various biological and metallurgical applications.<sup>4–6</sup> However, owing to its insolubility in most organic and inorganic solvents,<sup>7,8</sup> it is difficult to employ in many prospective studies. This tough to dissolve feature could be overcome by introducing various hydrophilic functional groups on the C<sub>60</sub> cage.<sup>9–14</sup> Fullerenol, which is also known as fullerol, polyhydroxylated fullerene and hydroxylated fullerene, is one of the mostly pronounced and water-soluble fullerene derivatives<sup>15</sup> that has been derived by the hydroxylation of the C<sub>60</sub> molecule in various ways (both solvent-associated and solvent-free methods) over the past few years. Ever since the first preparation of fullerenol, it has been a great challenge to increase the attachment of more hydroxyl groups

(–OH) onto the C<sub>60</sub> cage as well as to make the synthesis simpler and faster. The attachment of the largest number of –OH groups [C<sub>60</sub>(OH)<sub>44</sub>·8H<sub>2</sub>O] has been reported by Kokubo *et al.*<sup>16</sup> Zhang *et al.*<sup>17</sup> reported the synthesis of C<sub>60</sub>(OH)<sub>27.2</sub> *via* mechanochemical means where potassium hydroxide was used as the hydroxylation reagent with C<sub>60</sub> and the two mixed vigorously in a ball mill. Wang *et al.*<sup>18</sup> reported another solvent-free reaction path to obtain C<sub>60</sub>(OH)<sub>16</sub> using a dil. H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (30%) and sodium hydroxide mixture. The use of alkali was very common in almost all the reported successful methods for the preparation of fullerenol together with other chemicals, *e.g.*, sulfuric acid (H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>) and nitric acid (HNO<sub>3</sub>), various solvents *e.g.*, toluene (C<sub>7</sub>H<sub>8</sub>), benzene (C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>6</sub>) and tetrahydrofuran (THF) and phase transfer catalysts (PTC) *e.g.*, tetrabutylammonium hydroxide (TBAH).<sup>19–21</sup> The methods proposed by Zhang *et al.*,<sup>22</sup> Alves *et al.*,<sup>23</sup> Kokubo *et al.*,<sup>24</sup> Lu *et al.*,<sup>25</sup> Zhang *et al.*<sup>26</sup> and Wang *et al.*<sup>27</sup> to prepare fullerenols with different numbers of –OH groups are also associated with the use of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, NaOH and in some cases PTC. However, although the previous methods were proven to be successful for the synthesis of moderate to highly soluble fullerenols, it is difficult to remove the impurities obtained from NaOH and PTC which contaminate the synthesized fullerenol.<sup>27,28</sup> In some cases the higher solubility of fullerenol was due to the presence of Na<sup>+</sup> impurity introduced during the synthesis.<sup>23</sup>

Also, the reaction time is much longer with these methods (from several hours to days) to generate and incorporate –OH groups onto the C<sub>60</sub> cage. In this context, the development of simpler and faster approaches for the synthesis fullerenol, which

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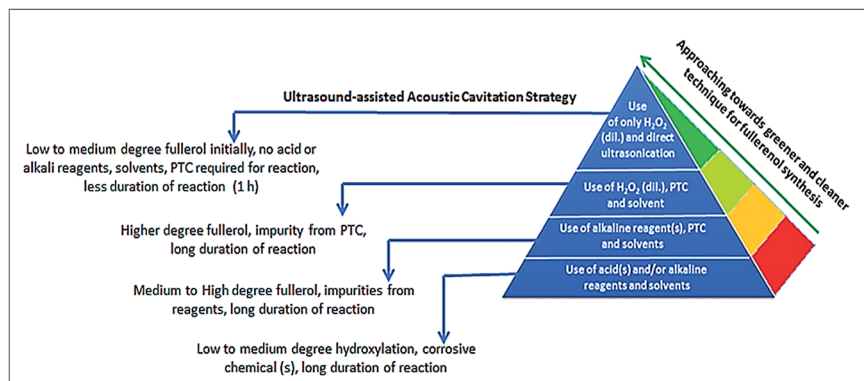


Fig. 1 Applying the greener and cleaner ultrasonic cavitation strategy to synthesize fullerene in a facile and faster way compared to other conventional methods.

are tailored by the use of minimal reagents and customized with easy purification and separation steps, is urgently required in fullerene chemistry. In this investigation, a facile method is demonstrated to overcome the above-mentioned barriers to a great extent *via* the direct ultrasonication of  $C_{60}$  in the presence of dil.  $H_2O_2$  (30%).

Several studies<sup>29–31</sup> evidence that ultrasonication in  $H_2O_2$  associated aqueous media results in the formation of the hydroxyl radical ( $\cdot OH$ ) which generates hydrated  $C_{60}$  as  $C_{60}@(H_2O)_n$ .<sup>32–34</sup> Alternatively, it will be advantageous if the formation of  $\cdot OH$  radicals can be tuned to form potential fullerene moieties as well rather than just leaving it as hydrated  $C_{60}$ . Based on this, we explore an ultrasound induced acoustic cavitation strategy whereby with optimal ultrasonic variables (30% amplitude and 1 h sonication at pulse mode), pristine  $C_{60}$  is functionalized with  $-OH$  groups in aqueous media in the presence of dil.  $H_2O_2$  (30%). Following the synthesis, quantitative analysis is conducted with the functionalized  $C_{60}$  to determine the average structure of fullerene that could be potentially derived by this ultrasound assisted acoustic cavitation technique.

It is worth mentioning that the synthesis of fullerene using  $H_2O_2$  as a hydroxylation reagent has been practiced before, but in association with other solvents and/or reagents and PTC as well.<sup>18,24</sup> In this regard, herein, we propose a simpler technique which avoids the use of multiple reagents/solvents as well as PTC and thus produces fullerene more easily and efficiently in comparison to the methods reported thus far. Fig. 1 represents the chronological development of the methods proposed for the synthesis of fullerene over years and the salient features of the technique proposed in this study in comparison. Only dil.  $H_2O_2$  (30%) is used as a hydroxylation reagent and no other supporting reagents and/or solvents or PTC are used for the synthesis. Besides, the reaction time is reduced to 1 h and unreacted  $C_{60}$  is only present as an impurity, the separation of which is easy after the reaction.

In the present method direct ultrasonication induces cavitation bubbles in the liquid  $H_2O_2$  and  $C_{60}$  containing aqueous media. Continuous formation and then their collapse generate high energy transient hot spots inside the liquid media which dissociate water molecules into hydrogen and hydroxyl radicals.

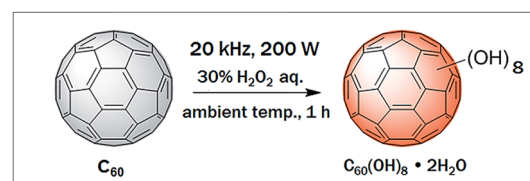


Fig. 2 Synthesis of water soluble fullerene *via* acoustic cavitation induced by ultrasound at ambient temperature, within 1 h reaction time and in the presence of dil.  $H_2O_2$  (30%).

These hydroxyl radicals in turn combine and form  $H_2O_2$ . Further disassociation of  $H_2O_2$  due to the effect of acoustic cavitation generates  $-OOH$  anions and/or  $\cdot OH$  radicals which are exohedrally attached to the  $C_{60}$  cage by either nucleophilic attack or successive radical addition, respectively.<sup>35–39</sup> Fig. 2 represents the experimental conditions for the synthesis of fullerene.

The attachment of  $-OH$  groups onto the  $C_{60}$  cage was identified by Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) and the number of  $-OH$  groups and bound water molecules were determined by elemental analysis and thermogravimetric analysis (TGA). The common formula of fullerene is  $C_{60}(OH)_n$ , where  $n$  is the number of  $-OH$  groups attached to each  $C_{60}$  cage which could vary from 2 to 44.<sup>16,24,40</sup> However, the presence of  $-OH$  groups on the  $C_{60}$  cage also binds some water molecules, and the number of bound water molecules increases with an increase in the number of  $-OH$  groups attached to each  $C_{60}$  moiety. Therefore, the most accurate formula of the fullerene molecule that could be obtained practically is  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$ ,<sup>24,39</sup> where  $m$  is the number of secondary bound water molecules associated with each fullerene moiety. Elemental analysis together with TGA clearly support that the average structure of the synthesized fullerene obtained by the present ultrasound-assisted technique is  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$ .

## Experimental

### Materials & equipment

Pristine  $C_{60}$  (98%) was purchased from Sigma Aldrich (USA) and used as the starting material to synthesize fullerene. Hydrogen peroxide ( $H_2O_2$ ) aqueous solution (30% reagent grade) from



R&M chemicals (UK) was used as the hydroxylation reagent. Type II pure water (TOC < 50 ppb) was obtained from a Milli-Q system (Merck Millipore Integral 5, France). A Bandelin Sonoplus (UW 3200, 20 kHz, 200 W, Germany) with a titanium horn sonotrode (MS 73) was employed to introduce ultrasound. A graduated centrifuge tube (50 mL, angle 60° conical bottom) was used as the reactor or treatment vessel. A refrigerated circulator water bath (Julabo F34-ED, Germany) was used to maintain the reaction temperature close to ambient temperature during ultrasonication. Toluene (AR grade) was obtained from R&M Chemicals (Malaysia) for the separation and purification of unreacted  $C_{60}$  from  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$ . Dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) was obtained from Wako Pure Chemical Industries, Ltd (Japan) to check the solubility of synthesized fulleranol. After separation and purification, the  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot 2H_2O$  dispersion was dried in a freeze dryer (Christ Alpha 1-2 LDplus, Germany).

### Characterization

The formation and attachment of -OH groups onto the  $C_{60}$  cage was identified by Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) (JASCO FT/IR-4100). Quantification of the attached -OH groups was attained by elemental analysis using a Yanaco, CHN Corder MT-6. Thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) was performed on a Mettler Toledo instrument (TGA/DSC 1/LF/1100, Switzerland) to measure the amount of secondary bound water molecules with  $C_{60}(OH)_8$ . The particle size of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  in solution was measured using a Photol, FPAR-1000HR. The thickness of the  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  particles was examined *via* a 5500 Agilent Technologies AFM (USA) using an ultra-sharp tip (non-contact high resonance frequency, nanosensor probe). The morphological study was carried out using a Quanta 400 (USA) field emission scanning electron microscope (FE-SEM).

### Synthesis of $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$

Pure  $C_{60}$  (200 mg) was added to 30%  $H_2O_2$  (20 mL) and subjected to ultrasonication (30% amplitude, 200 W, pulse mode) for 1 h at ambient temperature. To avoid a rapid increase in the temperature owing to ultrasound dissipation through the liquid media, the reactor was fitted with a refrigerated circulator water bath which maintained the temperature inside the reactor close to ambient temperature. Initially,  $C_{60}$  was immiscible in aqueous  $H_2O_2$  and was a colorless heterogeneous mixture which turned light brown after 30 min of ultrasonication. Subsequently, in the next 30 min of ultrasonication it turned into a completely dark brown dispersion (Fig. 3a).

### Separation and purification of $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$

Since pure  $C_{60}$  was used as the starting material to synthesize fulleranol and no other reagents were used except 30%  $H_2O_2$  for hydroxylation, after the reaction it was easier to separate the impurity, *i.e.* unreacted  $C_{60}$ , than the reported methods. After washing the dark brown dispersion with an equal volume of toluene 10 times, unreacted  $C_{60}$  was separated from  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$ . After adding toluene in the dispersion, two separated layers were formed immediately; the bottom layer was dark

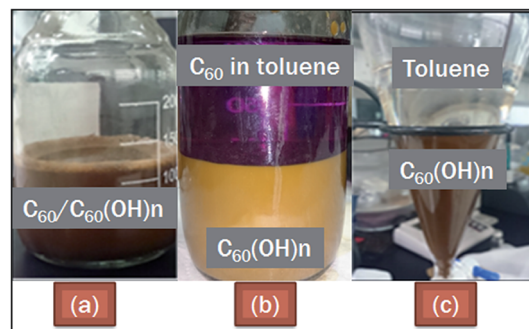


Fig. 3 (a) Dark brown dispersion immediately after ultrasonication. (b) Separation of unreacted  $C_{60}$  from  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$  using toluene. (c) Clear top layer of toluene after 10 times repeated washing. Here,  $n = 8$  and  $m = 2$  which were finally determined by elemental analysis and TGA.

brown and the upper layer was initially dark purple due to the dissolution of unreacted  $C_{60}$  particles into the toluene layer (pristine  $C_{60}$  is soluble in toluene and gives a purple colored solution) (Fig. 3b). Washing with toluene was repeated until the dark purple top toluene layer turned colorless, which indicated the complete removal of unreacted  $C_{60}$  from the brown layer (Fig. 3c). The dark brown dispersion containing  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$  was then separated from the toluene layer and dried in a freeze dryer for 30 h ( $-40^\circ\text{C}$ , 0.12 mbar).

## Results and discussion

### Identification of -OH groups

To identify the functional group(s), the dried  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$  was analyzed *via* FTIR (Fig. 4a). The clear broad peak at  $3395\text{ cm}^{-1}$  within the range of  $3600\text{--}3100\text{ cm}^{-1}$  indicates the characteristic O-H stretching, which does not appear in the IR spectrum of pristine  $C_{60}$  (Fig. 4b) but has been reported to be present also in the IR spectrum of pristine  $C_{60}(OH)_{12}$  (Fig. 4c),<sup>24</sup> thus this initially confirms the attachment of -OH groups onto the  $C_{60}$  cage after functionalization.

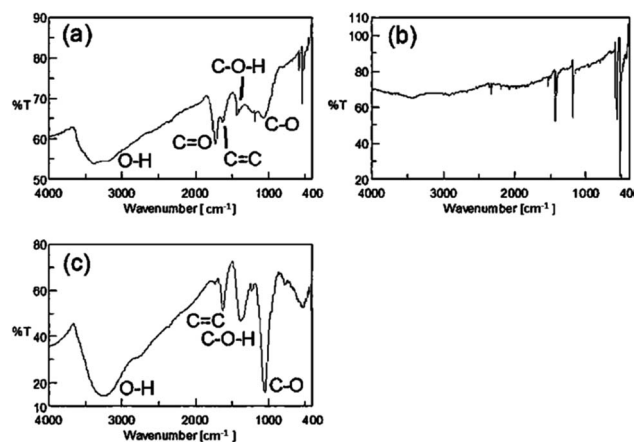


Fig. 4 FTIR spectra of (a) product  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$ , (b) pristine  $C_{60}$  and (c) pristine  $C_{60}(OH)_{12}$ .



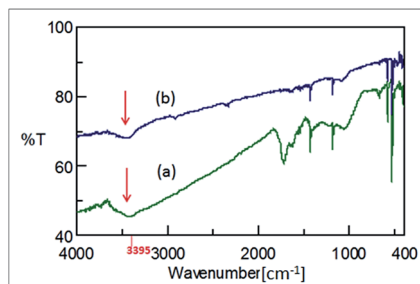


Fig. 5 IR spectra of  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$  obtained via ultrasonication (a) in the presence of dil.  $H_2O_2$  (30%) and (b) in type II pure  $H_2O$  without any  $H_2O_2$ .

This peak was not intense when  $C_{60}$  was ultrasonicated in type II pure water ( $H_2O$ ) under the same experimental conditions but in the absence of any  $H_2O_2$  (Fig. 5b), which indicates that the use of  $H_2O_2$  in aqueous media is a more efficient approach to introduce  $-OH$  groups onto the  $C_{60}$  cage rather than only using  $H_2O$  for the synthesis of fullereneol in this ultrasound-assisted technique.

The peaks at 1625, 1427 and  $1057\text{ cm}^{-1}$  (Fig. 4a and 5a) could possibly be attributed to the bond stretching of  $C=C$ ,  $C-O-H$  and  $C-O$ , respectively.<sup>41,42</sup> Indeglia *et al.*<sup>42</sup> emphasized that the presence of  $C-O$  bond stretching is inevitable in all the fullereneols which perhaps indicates the formation of hemiketal groups prior to the hydroxylation of the  $C_{60}$  cage. In contrast, in the sample sonicated only with water, these significant peaks, which display the characteristic bond stretching of fullereneol, were absent in the IR spectrum (Fig. 5b), and thus also support that to synthesize fullereneol moieties *via* this ultrasound strategy the presence of  $H_2O_2$  plays an important role in intensifying the hydroxylation. The additional peaks at 575 and  $525\text{ cm}^{-1}$  in the finger print region ( $<1000\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) in the IR spectra of  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$  (Fig. 4a and 5a) are the characteristic peaks of pure  $C_{60}$ , therefore these peaks are not attributed to any potential functional group(s). However, there could have been a trace amount of unreacted  $C_{60}$  remaining in  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$  during separation and purification, which is possibly responsible for these peaks in the IR spectra of  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$ . We cannot rule out this possibility especially when we scale-up this method for the mass production of  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$ .

### Estimation of the number of $-OH$ groups and the structure of fullereneol

IR spectra alone are not enough to determine and confirm the  $-OH$  groups, their numbers and the structure of fullereneol. Therefore, elemental analysis was conducted to determine the composition and average structure of  $C_{60}(OH)_n \cdot mH_2O$ . The number of bound water molecules ( $m$ ) within the  $C_{60}(OH)_n$  structure was calculated *via* TGA. After the ultrasound-assisted functionalization of pure  $C_{60}$ , the average composition of C and O (C: 82.6 wt% and O: 17.2 wt%) in  $C_{60}(OH)_n$  was first obtained from SEM-EDS analysis. In pure  $C_{60}$ , no trace of oxygen (C: 100%) was detected before the reaction which predicts the formation and presence of some oxygen containing functional

Table 1 Empirical formula of  $C_{60}(OH)_n$  synthesized in the presence of dil.  $H_2O_2$  (30%)

	% C	% H	$H_2O^a$ (wt%)
Experimentally obtained	80.52	0.96	5.58
Estimated average structure calculated for-			
$C_{60}(OH)_2 \cdot 8H_2O$	80.18	2.02	16.0
$C_{60}(OH)_4 \cdot 6H_2O$	80.36	1.80	12.1
$C_{60}(OH)_6 \cdot 4H_2O$	80.54	1.58	8.1
$C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$	80.72	1.35	4.0
$C_{60}(OH)_{10} \cdot 1H_2O$	79.30	1.33	2.0
$C_{60}(OH)_{10} \cdot 0H_2O$	80.91	1.13	0

<sup>a</sup> Measured by TGA, difference between exp. and calc. should be within  $\pm 1\%$ .

group(s) in the functionalized  $C_{60}$ . However, EDS cannot analyze the presence and composition of hydrogen present in a sample. The composition and structure of  $C_{60}(OH)_n$  was finally deduced from elemental analysis (Table 1).

In the elemental analysis of fullereneols if the product is a pure single isomer and can be purified totally, the difference should be within 0.4%, but generally the product fullereneol is a mixture of many isomers and it is very difficult to separate the isomers from each other. Therefore, from our many synthetic experiences, even with reaction conditions completely the same as much possible, the difference in elemental analysis is somewhat large even though the chemical and physical properties of the fullereneol are essentially the same. Due to this fact, we always judge the average molecular formula of fullereneol within 1% error of elemental analysis [Tables 1 and 2]. From elemental analysis it became evident that the number of  $-OH$  groups attached to each  $C_{60}$  cage is  $n = 8$ . The composition (C: 80.52%, H: 0.96%) obtained from elemental analysis is similar to that calculated theoretically for the structure of  $C_{60}(OH)_8$ , thus the structure of  $C_{60}(OH)_n$  synthesized by the present ultrasound strategy was calculated as  $C_{60}(OH)_8$  (Table 1). Similarly, elemental analysis was conducted to estimate the number of  $-OH$  groups that could possibly be attached when pristine  $C_{60}$  was sonicated in only type II pure  $H_2O$  without the addition of  $H_2O_2$ . By this method the number of  $-OH$  groups that could be attached to the  $C_{60}$  cage is only 2 ( $n = 2$ ) (Table 2), which again supports the role of  $H_2O_2$  in intensifying the hydroxylation.

Table 2 Empirical formula of  $C_{60}(OH)_n$  synthesized only in the presence of type II pure  $H_2O$

	% C	% H	$H_2O^a$ (wt%)
Experimentally obtained	92.41	0.57	1.4
Estimated average structure calculated for-			
$C_{60}(OH)_2 \cdot 2H_2O$	91.14	0.76	4.6
$C_{60}(OH)_2 \cdot 1H_2O$	93.27	0.52	2.3
$C_{60}(OH)_4 \cdot 0H_2O$	91.37	0.51	0

<sup>a</sup> Measured by TGA, difference between exp. and calc. should be within  $\pm 1\%$ .





The formation and attachment of  $-OH$  groups were further confirmed by TGA (Fig. 6). The weight loss (wt%) of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  was observed from room temperature to  $900^\circ C$  at a rate of  $10^\circ C \text{ min}^{-1}$  under  $N_2$  flow at  $20 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ .

An initial weight loss (5.58 wt%) was observed from room temperature to  $100^\circ C$  which indicates the loss of bound water molecules. Since the number of  $-OH$  groups attached to the  $C_{60}$  cage is less than 10, the weight loss (5.58 wt%) for secondary bound water in  $C_{60}(OH)_8$  could be observed from room temperature to  $100^\circ C$ .<sup>16</sup> From this percentage of weight loss, the number of bound water molecules associated with each  $C_{60}(OH)_8$  molecule was calculated to be 2 ( $m = 2$ ) which is shown in Table 1 as well the estimated complete structure of the synthesized fullereneol.

After the decomposition of bound water the degradation continued to around  $226^\circ C$ , which could be due to some of the intermediates such as epoxy or hemiketal oxygen and/or carbonyl oxygen generated during the ultrasound-assisted reaction.<sup>41–43</sup> These intermediates may be present in  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  in trace amounts but possibly will not hinder the characteristic physical and chemical properties of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$ . However a detailed understanding of these intermediates present in fullereneol is not yet fully accomplished which encourages further studies. Dehydration of the  $-OH$  groups (16.85 wt%) attached to the  $C_{60}$  molecular cage mostly occurred in the second step of TGA at around  $396^\circ C$ , the value of which is very close to that theoretically calculated (15.2%) for the dehydration of 8  $-OH$  groups. The degradation observed at around  $714^\circ C$  is due to the sublimation of  $C_{60}$  molecules. Together with the elemental analysis, the TGA result manifests that  $C_{60}$  could actually be successfully functionalized to fullereneol via ultrasound-assisted hydroxylation in the presence of aq.  $H_2O_2$  and the average structure of the fullereneol derived from these empirical studies is  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$ .

In applying this technique for the production of fullereneol it is also necessary to explore the yield of the prepared  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$ . In this work, the yield was verified by repeating the experiment three times. The yield of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  was

investigated based on both the amount of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  obtained after drying and the amount of unreacted  $C_{60}$  separated after reaction. The yield was found to vary between 2.18 and 4.04%. There is always a possibility of material loss during the process of drying, especially directly from the liquid state to solid state, which should be considered in any future work when reproducing the proposed method to prepare  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$ . The yield achieved is not high on the laboratory scale; however by optimizing the reaction conditions, selecting different solvents for separation and purification, improving the drying method to avoid any loss of the material, the yield of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  could be increased using the proposed ultrasound method.

### Particle size measurements

Usually the particles of fullereneols having a fewer number of  $-OH$  groups have been reported to be aggregative and the particle size may vary in the range of 50–300 nm.<sup>41</sup> DLS analysis and AFM scanning were carried out to investigate the size and morphology of the  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  particles, respectively. For the particle size measurements,  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  was dissolved in DMSO ( $0.33 \text{ mg mL}^{-1}$ ). As a polar aprotic solvent, DMSO can dissolve both polar and nonpolar compounds.  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  in DMSO initially formed a suspension which was then centrifuged (TOMY, LC-200) for 5 min at 7500 rpm to obtain a clear solution of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  in DMSO. Both the suspension and the solution (collected as supernatant after centrifugation) were analyzed for particle size measurements via the DLS method. The average particle size of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  in the suspension was found to be larger (312 nm) (Fig. 7b) than that in the solution (120 nm) (Fig. 7a).

Also, larger sized particles of about  $13.9 \mu m$  could be seen in the suspension (Fig. 7b) which could either be due to the highly aggregative nature of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  along with some intermediates possibly present as described in the earlier section of this study or due to the presence of trace amounts of unreacted pristine  $C_{60}$  which remained in the sample after the separation process. Hence, we infer that  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  when dispersed in DMSO contains particles of a wider size range and thus could be considered as a polydispersed suspension, which after centrifugation provides a clear solution of uniform sized particles of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  of about 120 nm. The particle size was further verified using the topography vs. distance chart (Fig. 8b) obtained from the AFM analysis of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$ .

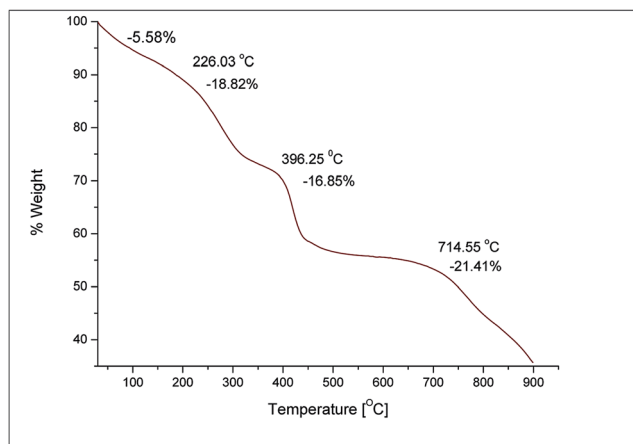


Fig. 6 TGA chart for measuring the weight loss (wt%) of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$ .

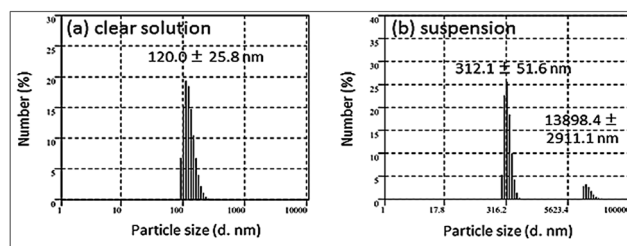


Fig. 7 Particle size measurements: (a)  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$ /DMSO solution (collected as supernatant after centrifugation) and (b)  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$ /DMSO suspension ( $0.33 \text{ mg mL}^{-1}$ ).



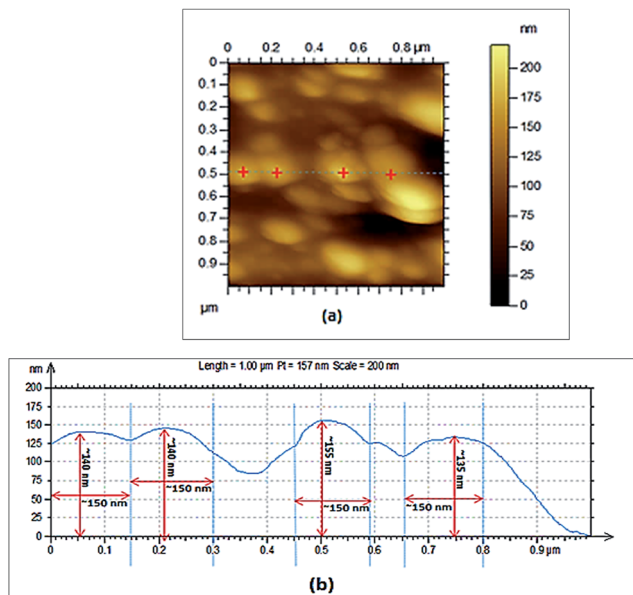


Fig. 8 (a) AFM image showing the topography of the  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  particles on mica substrate within a scan area of  $1 \mu m \times 1 \mu m$ ; particles under the scanning line are marked with red crosses. (b) Topography vs. distance chart for thickness measurement, where the  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  particles show a consistent width of around 150 nm and the average height of the particles under scanning line is between 135 and 155 nm.

The cross section of the AFM image shows that the width of the particles is around 150 nm and their height varies from 135 to 155 nm (Fig. 8b), which indicates that the synthesized  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  particles could be considered spherical in shape with a diameter in the range of 135–155 nm. The average width and height of the particles obtained from the AFM analysis are congruent with the particle sizes ( $120 \pm 25.8$  nm and  $312 \pm 51.6$  nm) obtained by DLS analysis for the saturated solution of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  in DMSO (Fig. 7a) and suspension of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  in DMSO (Fig. 7b), respectively.  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  is considered as the first member of the polyhydroxylated fullerene group to show solubility in water at a low concentration and at the same time forms aggregates when dispersed in water or DMSO. Therefore, some bigger particles are observed in the suspension of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$ /DMSO. This aggregation is observed in both the AFM and SEM images. The image (Fig. 8a) and height profile (Fig. 8b) obtained from the AFM analysis reveal that the individual particles of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  are actually not finely separated from each other, rather they are assembled in the form of nearly spherical shaped aggregates with a range of sizes.

The SEM image (Fig. 9) provides further insight into the aggregation of the synthesized  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  particles when they are in the powder form. In the powder form, the  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  particles are much more aggregative and even display sizes bigger than 300 nm, but when they are dispersed in solvent(s), aggregation is less effective. Also, this aggregation nature decreases with an increase in the number of  $-OH$  groups attached to each  $C_{60}$  molecule.<sup>16</sup> Even though  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$

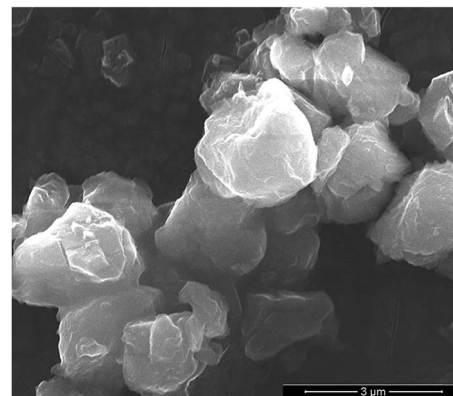


Fig. 9 SEM image of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  (20 kV, magnification of 30 000 $\times$ ).

exhibits amphiphilic behavior, it is moderately polyhydroxylated; as a result the interaction potential between the particles becomes more effective than the intermolecular hydrogen bond potential which ultimately causes Brownian aggregation, and results in variable sizes of self-assembled  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  particles in the suspension.<sup>26,44</sup>

### Color and solubility

$C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  obtained after separation, purification and drying was not completely black, rather it was nearly brown (Fig. 10a), and when dispersed in DMSO it gave a dark brown color suspension (Fig. 10b). Fullerenol having more than 10  $-OH$  groups is observed to be dark brown in color, which gradually shifts from dark brown to yellow with an increase in the number of  $-OH$  groups (Fig. 10c), as previously reported.<sup>24</sup>

The solubility of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  was examined both in water and in organic solvents, *i.e.* DMSO, toluene and benzene (Table 3).

It is noteworthy to mention that  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  moderately dissolves in water at a lower concentration owing to its amphiphilic nature. It was found to be soluble in DMSO but did not show any solubility in toluene and benzene. On the other

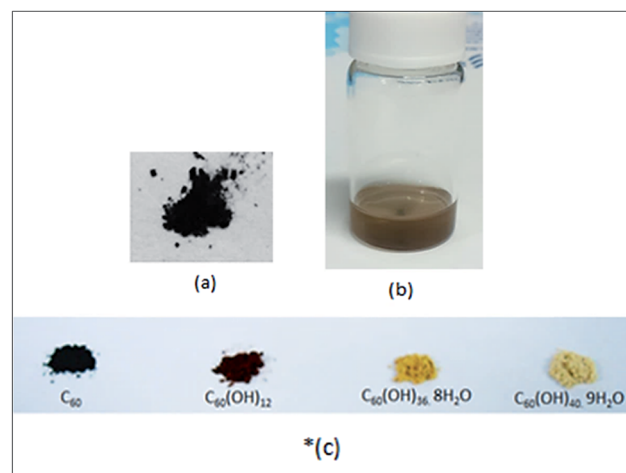


Fig. 10 (a)  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  after drying, (b)  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  in DMSO ( $0.33 \text{ mg mL}^{-1}$ ) and (c) colors of different fullerenols previously reported [\*reprinted from Kokubo *et al.* (ref. 24)].



**Table 3** Solubility of  $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$  in comparison to  $C_{60}$  in different solvents

	Water	DMSO	Toluene	Benzene
Fullerene ( $C_{60}$ )	X	X	O	O
Fullerenol [ $C_{60}(OH)_8 \cdot 2H_2O$ ]	O <sup>a</sup>	O <sup>a</sup>	X	X

X = not soluble, O = soluble. <sup>a</sup> Soluble at lower conc.

hand, pure  $C_{60}$  dissolves both in toluene and benzene but does not show any solubility in water and DMSO.

### Reaction pathways

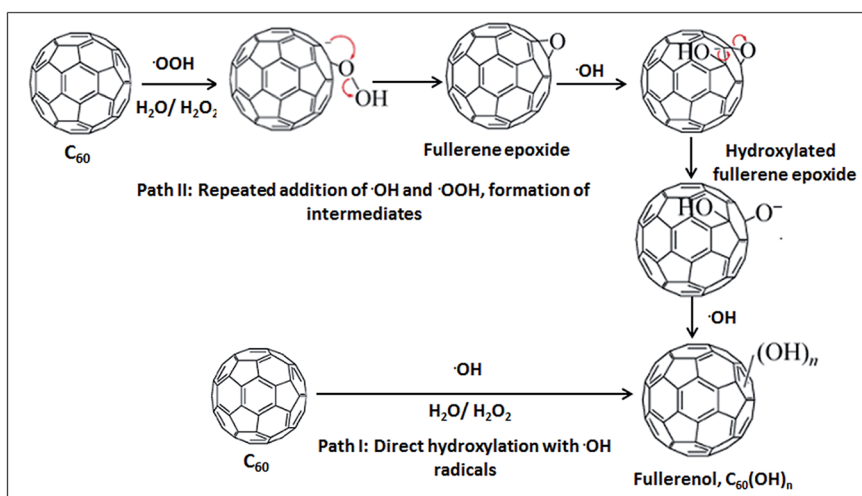
Acoustic cavitation generated from ultrasonication results in chemical reactions inside liquid media.<sup>45</sup> When acoustic cavitation is induced throughout liquid media (30%  $H_2O_2$  in this case) it produces cavitation bubbles and upon continuous ultrasonication these bubbles form and collapse randomly. The collapse of these bubbles produces transient local hot spots with intense local heat and pressure inside the liquid media which assist in high-energy chemical reactions among the molecules either trapped inside the cavitation bubbles or present in the liquid media.<sup>46,47</sup> In this investigation, due to ultrasound induced acoustic cavitation, radicals such as  $\cdot OH$ ,  $\cdot OOH$  and  $\cdot H$  originate from  $H_2O$  and  $H_2O_2$  molecules.<sup>31,48,49</sup> Especially, the formation of  $\cdot OH$  radicals due to the thermal decomposition of aqueous media has been found to be evident by electron spin resonance (ESR) and spin trapping<sup>29,30,50–52</sup> studies.  $H_2O_2$  is thermodynamically unstable and dissociates into  $H_2O$  and  $O_2$  under thermal decomposition. During ultrasonic cavitation,  $H_2O$  and  $H_2O_2$  molecules are trapped inside microbubbles, and when these bubbles collapse with the enormous amount of heat (several thousand degrees K) and pressure (hundreds of atmospheres)<sup>53,54</sup> the molecules decompose to  $\cdot OH$  and  $\cdot OOH$ <sup>55,56</sup> radicals. The reaction may progress in two pathways simultaneously (Fig. 11).  $\cdot OH$  radicals as reactive oxygen species (ROS) attach onto the  $C_{60}$  cage to give

fullerenol (Path I), and/or  $\cdot OH$  and  $\cdot OOH$  radicals attack the electron deficient  $C_{60}$  double bonds in a nucleophilic reaction and this leads to the formation of fullerene epoxide [ $C_{60}O_n$ ] as an intermediate in the first stage (Path II) which is similar to the mechanism of the Bingel reaction.<sup>37,57</sup> Further, the repeated attack of  $\cdot OH$  (or  $\cdot OOH$ ) on  $C_{60}O$  *via* an  $S_N2$  reaction results in polyhydroxylated fullerene or fullerenol.

Repeated epoxidation may take place which produces successive epoxide groups *e.g.*,  $C_{60}O_2$  and  $C_{60}O_3$ . These epoxide groups could be possible candidates to generate other intermediates *e.g.* hydroxylated fullerene epoxide [ $C_{60}(OH)_xO_y$ ]<sup>16,58</sup> during sonolysis. Additionally, the subsequent ring opening of  $C_{60}(OH)_xO_y$  with  $\cdot OH$  can result in the formation of fullerenol.<sup>59</sup> The formation of these intermediates during the sonolysis of  $H_2O_2$  or  $H_2O$  in the presence of  $C_{60}$  is inevitable, and their presence in the final fullerenol (although in a trace amount) cannot go unnoted. However, because they are only present in trace amounts in the fullerenol they are not expected to cause any significant impact.

### Future prospects

To explore the potential applications of fullerenols, it is indeed essential to produce high quality fullerenol which means not only higher water solubility but also free of any impurities. The presence of impurities, which generally come from the preparation process, makes fullerenol undesirable for any specific biological and metallurgical applications. More importantly, the commercial value of fullerenol depends on the presence and percentage of impurities. Moreover, a faster approach is desirable to facilitate the commercial production of fullerenol. The proposed technique for the preparation of hydroxylated  $C_{60}$  by ultrasonication in the presence of  $H_2O_2$  is free from the use of additional hydroxylating reagents, *i.e.* NaOH,  $H_2SO_4$ , and PTC (causes impurities in fullerenol), which is a cleaner approach to produce fullerenol in an easier and a faster way. Previously,  $C_{60}(OH)_{12}$  was used as a starting material to synthesize highly soluble fullerenols [ $C_{60}(OH)_{36}$ ,  $C_{60}(OH)_{40}$ ] by vigorously stirring



**Fig. 11** Possible reaction paths in the ultrasound-assisted synthesis of fullerenol in the presence of dil.  $H_2O_2$  (30%).



with dil.  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  for several days.<sup>24</sup> Similarly  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_8 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  synthesized by this method could be used as a starting material to further produce fullerlenols containing a greater number of hydroxyl groups, *e.g.*  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_{24}$ ,  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_{36}$  and  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_{40}$ . Moreover, compounds that express specific biochemical functions, which are required for diagnostics as well as drug therapy studies, can be derivatized from  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_8 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  by conjugating it with other potential functional groups or biomolecules. The conjugation of folic acid with  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_8 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  produced *via* this method is currently under investigation as an extended study of this work with the view to develop a highly sensitive biosensor for early stage cancer detection. Further potential applications for  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_8 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  synthesized by the proposed method of ultrasonication include as an antioxidant since it offers higher antioxidant activities compared to the fullerlenols that have more hydroxyl groups, *i.e.*,  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_{24}$ ,  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_{26}$  and  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_{36}$ ,<sup>39</sup> an electrochemically active nanomediator since based on density functional theory (DFT) it has also been found that fullerlenols having less hydroxyl groups are thermodynamically more stable than those containing more hydroxyl groups due to the symmetric orientation of the  $-\text{OH}$  groups around the  $\text{C}_{60}$  molecular cage,<sup>60,61</sup> a light harvesting material in solar cell applications<sup>62</sup> and the preparation of rich carbon structures of different shapes, sizes and isomeric orientations recently termed as Janus particles for various other applications.<sup>44</sup>

It is anticipated that there must be a substantial difference between the levels of energy generated during continuous ultrasonication and pulse mode ultrasonication which should be also addressed in future investigations. In addition, the duration of ultrasonication may cause a remarkable difference in the structure of fullerlenol. Besides the variables of ultrasonication (time and power input), it is equally important to optimize the other parameters in future studies, *i.e.* temperature, size and geometry of the treatment vessel, nature and concentration of any dissolved gas, concentration of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ , solute to reagents ratio ( $\text{C}_{60}$ : 30%  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ ,  $\text{mg mL}^{-1}$ ) and height of the mixture in the treatment vessel, where all of them alone or together can play vital roles in producing fullerlenols possessing different combinations of  $-\text{OH}$  groups and bound  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  molecules in addition to increasing the yield of  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_8 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  while applying the proposed ultrasound technique for the synthesis of fullerlenols.

## Conclusion

Herein, we have proposed a facile and fast approach to prepare fullerlenol *via* the ultrasound-assisted hydroxylation of  $\text{C}_{60}$  only in dil.  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  (30%) which acts as a hydroxylating reagent and we have quantified the possible structure of fullerlenol that could be derived by this technique. It appears that during the ultrasonication of pure  $\text{C}_{60}$  in aqueous media, even only in the presence of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ , not only leads to the hydration of  $\text{C}_{60}$  in the reaction media but also results in the generation of potential fullerlenol candidate(s), which upon quantitative analysis has been identified as  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_8 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ . Since no alkali, acids or PTC have been used for the synthesis, the proposed method offers

a greener and cleaner approach towards the hydroxylation of the  $\text{C}_{60}$  cage compared to existing methods. Quantitative studies reveal that this hydroxylation technique assisted by ultrasonication in the presence of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  can lead to the formation of fullerlenol possessing an average structure of  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_8 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and with an average yield of 2%.  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_8 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  was found to be amphiphilic and thus moderately soluble in water at a low concentration and it could further be exploited as a starting material to prepare highly water soluble fullerlenol moieties. The presence of aq.  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  intensifies the hydroxylation and enhances the number of hydroxyl groups ( $n = 8$ ) on the  $\text{C}_{60}$  cage in comparison to that obtained ( $n = 2$ ) while applying the same ultrasonication but only in the presence of pure water. This indicates that  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  plays a vital role in the hydroxylation which could have potential to obtain fullerlenol moieties, where the yield could be increased by varying the concentration of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ . The proposed technique encompasses a one-step reaction strategy, requires a short time for the reaction, offers a green and clean approach with a low energy requirement, avoids the use of any toxic or corrosive reagents for the synthesis, and reduces the number of solvents required for the separation and purification of  $\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_8 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ . Hence, this potential approach should further be investigated to for the scale-up mass production of fullerlenol moieties for a wider range of technological applications.

## Author contributions

The manuscript was written through contributions of all authors.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

## Abbreviations

AFM	Atomic force microscopy
$\text{C}_{60}$	Fullerene
$\text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_n \cdot m\text{H}_2\text{O}$	Fullerlenol
DMSO	Dimethyl sulfoxide
DLS	Dynamic light scattering
FE-SEM	Field emission scanning electron microscopy
FTIR	Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy
$-\text{OH}$	Hydroxyl group
PTC	Phase transfer catalyst
SEM-EDS	Scanning electron microscopy with energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy
TGA	Thermogravimetric analysis





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