Cavitation in Drying Droplets of Soft Matter Solutions

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(Received 6 May 2014; published 25 August 2014)

When a droplet of a soft matter solution is dried, cavities are often formed in the droplet, giving a hollow sphere in the end. A theoretical model is given for this phenomenon. It is shown that the formation of a gel-like layer (skin layer), which has a finite shear modulus, is essential for the phenomenon to take place. The condition for cavity formation (how it depends on the shear modulus and thickness of the skin layer), and the variation of the droplet volume and cavity volume after the cavity formation are examined.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevLett.113.098301

When soft matter solutions (polymer solutions and colloidal suspensions) are dried, cavities are often formed in the dried material. The phenomena are frequently observed in spray drying [1,2]: a quick drying of small droplets of soft matter solutions in air. It is known that this process often produces hollow particles at the end of the process. The phenomena are important in many industries (materials, food, and pharmaceuticals), and also in the development of new functional particles [3–5]. Despite the importance, existing studies of the phenomena were done mostly from the application side, and not many studies have been done from the physics point of view. Accordingly, basic questions such as why and when cavities are formed have not been answered clearly. In this Letter, we shall give a simple theoretical model for the phenomena.

It is generally believed that cavitation is closely connected to the formation of a skin layer created at the surface of droplets during drying. The skin layer is a concentrated region of polymer or colloidal particles, and has a rheological property distinctively different from that of bulk solutions [6–8]. Recent experiments done for the slow drying of sessile droplets confirmed that cavities are formed after the skin layer is formed [9,10], but the precise relation between the skin layer and the cavity formation has not been clarified theoretically. Though it has been known that skin layers cause various instabilities in the drying droplet, such as the formation of dimples or wrinkles [11–14], the effect on the cavitation has started to be studied only recently [9,10].

To clarify the connection between the skin layer and the cavity formation, we consider a simplified problem, i.e., the drying of a spherical shell of a gel containing an inner solvent fluid [see Fig. 1(I)]. Here the gel is a model of the skin layer, and the inner solvent fluid is a model of bulk solutions. Clearly such a model neglects some important aspects of real systems: in reality, the skin layer is evolving: its mass and physical properties are changing in time, and the inner fluid contains a solute whose spatial distribution is varying in time. Here we ignore these effects, and use a simple model to keep the analysis at a reasonably transparent level and to elucidate the essential physics in the mechanism of cavity formation. With this simple model, we can discuss why cavities are formed, and how the elasticity of the skin layer (the shear modulus and thickness) affects the cavity formation, etc.

Figure 1 is a sketch of the time evolution of our system. First a skin layer is formed at the surface of a droplet of a soft matter solution [Fig. 1(I)]. We regard the skin as a spherical shell of a gel, and consider the time evolution of the system after the gel is formed. The evaporation of the solvent is expressed by the weight loss of the droplet \( \Delta W = W_0 - W \), where \( W_0 \) and \( W \) are the initial and the current mass of the droplet. With further evaporation of solvent, the droplet shrinks as in Fig. 1(II), and, under a certain condition, a cavity appears as in Fig. 1(III). If a cavity appears, the final state will be a hollow sphere as in Fig. 1(IV).

We shall discuss the time evolution of the system assuming that the droplet is in equilibrium for a given value of \( \Delta W \), and calculate the cavity size as a function of \( \Delta W \); i.e., we shall discuss the evolution of the system as a function of \( \Delta W \), but not the time evolution of \( \Delta W \) itself.

FIG. 1 (color online). Behaviors of a droplet of a soft matter solution in drying. See the text for explanation.

\[W = W_0 - \Delta W\]
Now suppose that when a solvent of mass $\Delta W$ is taken out from the droplet, the droplet surface has a radius $r_d$, and that there is a cavity of radius $r_c$. We assume that both the solvent and solute are incompressible and have a constant density $\rho$. Then the mass conservation is written as

$$\Delta W = \frac{4\pi}{3}\rho[r_0^3 - r_d^3 + r_c^3],$$

(1)

where $r_0$ is the initial value of $r_d$.

We assume that the initial thickness of the gel, $h_0$, is much smaller than $r_0$. In such a case, each part of the gel shell is isotropically compressed in the plane tangent to the surface. Let $\lambda_t$ and $\lambda_n$ be the elongation ratios (current length/original length) in the plane and normal to the plane. They are given by

$$\lambda_t = \frac{r_d}{r_0}, \quad \lambda_n = \frac{h}{h_0},$$

(2)

where $h$ is the thickness of the gel in the current state. Equation (1) then gives

$$\lambda_t^3 = 1 - \frac{\Delta W}{W_0} + \left(\frac{r_c}{r_0}\right)^3 \Delta p,$$

(3)

The free energy of the system is written as

$$F_{out}(\lambda_t, \lambda_n, r_c; \Delta W) = 4\pi r_0^2 h_0 f(\lambda_t, \lambda_n) + 4\pi r_c^2 \gamma$$

$$+ \frac{4\pi}{3} r_c^3 \Delta p,$$

(4)

where $f(\lambda_t, \lambda_n)$ is the free energy density of the deformed gel per unit volume (in reference to the initial state), $\gamma$ is the surface tension, and $\Delta p$ is the difference in the outer pressure $p_{out}$ and the pressure in the cavity $p_{in}$. $\Delta W = p_{out} - p_{in}$.

Notice that $\Delta p$ is positive in the usual condition since cavitation is not favored for the liquid. The value of $p_{out}$ is clear, but the value of $p_{in}$ needs some discussion. If the cavity is filled with solvent vapor, $p_{in}$ is equal to the equilibrium bulk vapor pressure of the solvent. However, it has been shown that the cavity is usually filled with air (and other gas molecules dissolved in the solvent liquid) [15,16]. If air is dissolved in the solvent, $p_{in}$ is equal to the pressure of the air when it is dissolved, and $\Delta p$ is essentially zero. (In fact experimental measurement [9] indicates that $\Delta p$ is small (less than 0.1 bar) and remains almost constant throughout drying.) From a theoretical viewpoint, $p_{in}$ is a dynamical quantity, determined by the diffusion speed of the dissolved gas molecules [9]. In this Letter, we avoid such a complication, and proceed assuming that $\Delta p$ is a positive constant.

In Eq. (4), we ignored the surface energy term of the gel phase (such as $4\pi \gamma r_d^2$ for the outer surface) since it is small compared with the elastic energy. Though this is usually the case, corrections may be needed if the gel shell is very soft or very thin [17].

The explicit form of the deformation free energy $f(\lambda_t, \lambda_n)$ of a gel has been discussed in many literature sources (see, e.g., Refs. [18,19]). Using such expressions, we can calculate the equilibrium state by minimizing Eq. (4) for a given value of $\Delta W$. This is done for two situations.

**Small deformation.**—If the deformation is small, $f(\lambda_t, \lambda_n)$ can be expressed by a quadratic form of the strain $\epsilon_t = \lambda_t - 1$ and $\epsilon_n = \lambda_n - 1$ as

$$f(\lambda_t, \lambda_n) = \frac{K_0}{2} \left(2\epsilon_t + \epsilon_n\right)^2 + \frac{2G_0}{3} \left(\epsilon_t - \epsilon_n\right)^2,$$

(5)

where $K_0$ and $G_0$ are the osmotic modulus and the shear modulus of the gel, respectively.

Notice that $\lambda_t$ is constrained by $\Delta W$ and $r_c$ [see Eq. (3)], but $\lambda_n$ (or $\epsilon_n$) can be determined independently of the other parameters. The condition $\partial f/\partial \lambda_n = 0$ gives $\epsilon_n = \epsilon_t/[4/(3)G_0 - 2K_0]/[K + (4/3)G_0]$, and Eq. (5) is written as

$$f(\lambda_t) = \frac{1}{2} K_{e} \epsilon_t^2 \quad \text{with} \quad K_{e} = \frac{12K_0G_0}{K_0 + (4/3)G_0}.$$  

(6)

By Eq. (3), $\epsilon_t$ is expressed by the reduced cavity radius $r_c/r_0$, or the reduced cavity volume $v_c = (r_c/r_0)^3$ as

$$\epsilon_t = \left[1 + \left(\frac{r_c}{r_0}\right)^3\right]^{-1/3} - 1 \approx \frac{1}{3} \left(v_c - \frac{\Delta W}{W_0}\right).$$

(7)

Hence the free energy is written as

$$F_{tot} = \frac{1}{2} V_0 \rho_{eq} \left[\frac{1}{9} \left(v_c - \frac{\Delta W}{W_0}\right)^2 + \frac{\epsilon_e}{h_0} v_c^{2/3} + \frac{\Delta p}{3 \rho_{eq}} v_c\right],$$

(8)

where $V_0 = 4\pi r_0^2 h_0$ is the initial volume of the gel shell, $\rho_{eq}$ is the elastic length defined by $\partial \epsilon_e/\partial \epsilon_t = \gamma/\pi r_0$, and $p_e$ is defined by $p_e = K_{e}(h_0/2r_0)$.  

Equation (8) is plotted as a function of $v_c$ in Fig. 2. If $\Delta W$ is small, the free energy has a minimum at $v_c = 0$, so there is no cavity. When $\Delta W$ becomes large, the free energy curve starts to have another local minimum at a positive value of $v_c$. The critical point at which such a local minimum appears is determined by $\partial F_{tot}/\partial v_c = \partial^2 F_{tot}/\partial v_c^2 = 0$. This gives the following critical cavity volume $v_c^* = \left(\frac{\epsilon_e}{h_0}\right)^{3/4}$ and weight loss $\Delta W^*$:

$$v_c^* = \left(\frac{\epsilon_e}{h_0}\right)^{3/4}, \quad \Delta W^* = 4 \left(\frac{\epsilon_e}{h_0}\right)^{3/4} + 3 \frac{\Delta p}{2 \rho_{eq}}.$$  

(9)

With further increase of $\Delta W$, the value of the local minimum decreases and becomes equal to that at
$v_{c} = 0$. The weight loss $\Delta W^{(e)}$ at this state is of the same order of $\Delta W^{r}$, i.e., $\Delta W^{(e)} = 2(3\epsilon_{c} / h_{0})^{3/4} + 3\Delta p / 2p_{c}$. If the system can choose to take a state of minimum free energy, a cavity will appear when $\Delta W$ becomes equal to $\Delta W^{(e)}$. However, it is known [15,20,21] that such a thermodynamic argument usually does not work since the cavitation of gas molecules dissolved in liquids is strongly affected by nanosized bubbles or contaminant particles. In this Letter, we shall avoid this issue, and proceed regarding $\Delta W^{r}$ as the characteristic weight loss at which cavities appear.

The theory described above gives the following physical mechanism for cavitation. As the solvent evaporates, the gel is compressed, and the elastic energy of deformation increases. To reduce the elastic energy, a cavity is created. Notice that in this mechanism, it is essential for the skin phase to have a finite shear modulus. If the shear modulus $G_{0}$ is zero, $K_{c}$ is equal to zero, and cavities never appear during the drying process.

The critical weight loss $\Delta W^{r}$ decreases with the increase of the elastic constant $K_{e}$ and the gel thickness $h_{0}$, i.e., with the increase of the compression modulus of the gel slab. This is natural since the driving force for the cavity formation is the elastic force of the compressed gel shell.

**Large deformation.**—Though the linear theory is convenient to understand the physics in a simple form, it is not accurate in practice since the actual value of the critical strain $\epsilon_{c} = (1/3)(v_{c} - \Delta W^{r} / W_{0})$ is large. In such a case, a nonlinear theory is needed. Here we show a result of such a nonlinear analysis using the following expression for the elastic deformation of polymeric gels [18,19]

$$f(\lambda_{1}, \lambda_{n}) = \frac{G_{0}}{2} \left[ 2\lambda_{1}^{2} + \lambda_{n}^{2} - 3 + \frac{1}{n_{0}v_{m}} \phi_{0} \left( (1 - \phi) \ln(1 - \phi) \right. \right.$$  
$$+ \chi \phi(1 - \phi) \left. \right] ,$$  

where $G_{0}$ is the shear modulus, $\phi_{0}$ is the volume fraction of polymer in the gel at its initial state, $\phi = \phi_{0} / (\lambda_{1}^{2} \lambda_{n})$ is the volume fraction at the current state, $n_{0}$ is the number of subchains per unit volume, $v_{m}$ is the molecular volume of a polymer segment, and $\chi$ is the Flory-Huggins parameter representing the affinity between the polymer and the solvent.

By Eqs. (4) and (10), the free energy of the system can be expressed as a function of $v_{c}$. The equilibrium value of $v_{c}$ is determined by minimizing the free energy for values of $\Delta W$. A result of such a calculation is shown in Fig. 3, where the reduced cavity volume $v_{c} = (r_{c} / r_{0})^{3}$ and the reduced droplet volume $v_{d} = (r_{d} / r_{0})^{3}$ are shown as a function of $\Delta W$ by solid lines. For comparison the corresponding curve obtained by the linear theory is shown by dashed lines [18]. Both the linear and nonlinear theories predict that a cavity appears when $\Delta W$ exceeds a critical value $\Delta W^{c}$, but the...
The value of $\Delta W^*$ is different for the two theories, which indicates the necessity of the nonlinear analysis.

Notice that once a cavity is created, the droplet volume $v_d$ stops decreasing, or even increases slightly with the increase of $\Delta W$: once a droplet is created, the evacuated volume of solvent is filled by the cavity, and the apparent volume of the droplet does not change significantly. Therefore the apparent size of the dried droplet is essentially determined by the critical volume at which the stable cavity is created.

Figures 4(a) and 4(b) show how $v^*_c$ and $\Delta W^*/W_0$ depend on $\ell_c/h_0$. [Here the result is shown in the range of $\ell_c/h_0 < 0.4$ since for large values of $\ell_c/h_0$, Eq. (4) becomes incorrect as the surface tension of the gel phase becomes non-negligible.]

When $\ell_c/h_0$ is small, the deformation is small at the critical point. In this case the result agrees with that of the linear theory; i.e., both $v^*_c$ and $\Delta W^*$ increase with the increase of $\ell_c/h_0$. On the other hand, the nonlinear analysis gives a prediction qualitatively different from that of the linear analysis. As shown in Fig. 4(a), the critical cavity volume $v^*_c$ has a maximum as a function of $\ell_c/h_0$, and decreases with the increase of $\ell_c/h_0$ for large $\ell_c/h_0$.

The behavior for large $\ell_c/h_0$ can be understood as follows. For a large deformation, the elastic energy becomes less sensitive to strain due to the nonlinear elasticity of the polymer network. Therefore, the horizontal axis $\ell_c/h_0 = 2\gamma/(K_e h_0)$ can be viewed as a change of the surface tension $\gamma$. With the increase of surface tension, smaller cavities are favored, and therefore $v^*_c$ decreases.

Figures 4(c) and 4(d) show how $v^*_c$ and $\Delta W^*$ depend on $\Delta p$. With the increase of $\Delta p$, the cost of creating a cavity increases [see Eq. (4)], and therefore $\Delta W^*$ increases. On the other hand, $v^*_c$ decreases since again smaller cavities are favored for large $\Delta p$.

We now discuss the relevance of the theory to experiments. Sadek et al. [10] reported that in the drying of whey protein solutions, a cavity appears when the droplet weight decreases by 40% of the initial weight. On the other hand, our theory gives $\Delta W^*/W_0 = 0.4$ if we estimate the physical parameters from their paper ($h_0 = 20 \mu m$, $G_0 = 10$ kPa, $\gamma = 80$ mN/m). This indicates that our theory is giving the right order of magnitude for the cavitation condition. Furthermore, their observation that the apparent volume of the droplet $V_d$ remains almost constant after the cavity is formed is consistent with our theoretical result shown in Fig. 3.

The system studied here is an idealization of real systems. In reality, the actual problem is much more complicated. The skin layer is probably a viscoelastic
liquid, and its thickness and relaxation time vary as drying proceeds. Moreover, the pressure difference may change during the whole process. However, we believe the mechanism underlying these phenomena has been given here. We will report the result of more realistic models in a separate paper.

This work was supported by NSFC under Grants No. 31128004, No. 91027045, No. 10834014, and No. 11175250. F. M. thanks the National Basic Research Program of China (973 program, No. 2013CB932800) for support and Dr. T. Yamamoto (BUAA, China) for his suggestions in writing the Letter. M. D. thanks Professor B. Cabane (ESPCI, Paris) and Professor O. Hassager (DTU, Denmark) for their insightful guidance for the drying phenomena, and the Otto Moensted Foundation, which allowed M. D. to stay at DTU when the Letter was written.

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