New Particle Formation from the Vapor Phase: From Barrier-Controlled Nucleation to the Collisional Limit

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Cite This: J. Phys. Chem. Lett. 2021, 12, 4593–4599

ABSTRACT: Studies of vapor phase nucleation have largely been restricted to one of two limiting cases—nucleation controlled by a substantial free energy barrier or the collisional limit where the barrier is negligible. For weakly bound systems, exploring the transition between these regimes has been an experimental challenge, and how nucleation evolves in this transition remains an open question. We overcome these limitations by combining complementary Laval expansion experiments, providing new particle formation data for carbon dioxide over a uniquely broad range of conditions. Our experimental data together with a kinetic model using rate constants from high-level quantum chemical calculations provide a comprehensive picture of new particle formation as nucleation transitions from a barrier-dominated process to the collisional limit.

Nucleation from the vapor phase is the first step leading to new particle formation, giving it paramount importance in many atmospheric and technical processes. Understanding condensation of CO₂ from the supersaturated vapor, for example, is important in processes ranging from cloud formation on Mars to CO₂ recovery from flue gas or natural gas, via supersonic separation or cryogenic distillation. In the presence of pre-existing particles, condensation may be initiated by heterogeneous nucleation. In their absence, new particles are formed via homogeneous nucleation.

Under homogeneous conditions, new particle formation via nucleation is conceptually straightforward. Clusters are assumed to form and grow by monomer (single CO₂ molecule) addition and decay by monomer loss. If the saturation ratio S is large enough to ensure that cluster formation rates exceed cluster decay rates (i.e., S > 1 and the vapor is supersaturated), new particles are produced. Here, S = p/pₑq, where p is the vapor pressure and pₑq is the equilibrium vapor pressure above the appropriate condensed phase. Within the framework of nucleation theory, the cost of forming a surface between the existing metastable phase and the new stable phase introduces a free energy barrier that decreases in height with increasing supersaturation, and the barrier maximum occurs at the critical cluster size n*. Once S is high enough that the barrier vanishes, particle formation is largely governed by the kinetics of dimer formation. Such barrierless processes are not normally referred to as nucleation, but the term new particle formation is still appropriate.

Exploring the transition from nucleation controlled by a free energy barrier to nucleation in the barrier-free, collisional limit is, however, extremely challenging, because most nucleation experiments are optimized for a limited range of pressures and temperatures. Thus, experiments either probe conditions where the free energy barrier dominates or the collisional regime where reactive species, typically acids and bases, form extremely stable clusters. Recently, experiments have been developed to probe particle formation of weakly bound species, for example water, CO₂, and various binary CO₂-containing mixtures, in the collisional limit under conditions of extreme supersaturation. To our knowledge, no experimental studies to date have explored the entire range from barrier-controlled nucleation to the collisional limit for a single system, and data in the transition regime are extremely limited. Theory and simulation have explored this regime more extensively, but questions remain on how well theory can capture the experimental trends in the transition region and in both limits.

The performance of theoretical approaches for predicting new particle formation rates depends mainly on the accuracy of the calculations and the chosen model. In this study, we present a comprehensive dataset for carbon dioxide over a uniquely broad range of conditions, which allows us to test the predictions of a kinetic model based on rate constants from high-level quantum chemical calculations. Our data provide new insights into how nucleation evolves in the transition between barrier-controlled and collisional regimes, offering a more complete picture of new particle formation from the vapor phase.
with which the collision and evaporation rates can be calculated for clusters with sizes close to that of the critical cluster. When the process is fully kinetically controlled, i.e., evaporation of even the smallest clusters is negligible, the collision rate of two molecules determines the formation rate. The rates of collision and cluster growth can be calculated using the kinetic theory of gases, possibly corrected for long-range intermolecular forces. Cluster evaporation rates are considerably more difficult to calculate. One approach is to compute the cluster formation free energy using quantum chemistry (QC) and then calculate the evaporation rate using detailed balance (together with the collision rate). Unfortunately, the evaporation rates obtained with this approach depend exponentially on the free energies, and even small uncertainties in the latter can cause errors of several orders of magnitude in the former. Advances in computational power and recent improvements in computational chemistry have, however, helped overcome these obstacles. Key improvements include more accurate quantum mechanical methods, especially more affordable variants of the gold-standard coupled cluster method CCSD(T) and systematic approaches for configurational sampling of molecular clusters (SM, Section S3). Consequently, computational studies can now provide deep insight into the formation of complex molecular clusters, e.g., in the atmosphere. However, state-of-the-art computational methods have not previously focused on the exploration of the transition regime between barrierless particle formation and nucleation controlled by a free energy barrier.

We focus on particle formation of CO2 for two reasons. First, CO2 is an important and representative nonreactive species for particle formation via weakly bound clusters. Second, CO2 is a simple enough molecule for high-level quantum chemical calculations to estimate cluster free energies directly and predict nucleation rates from first-principles. Combining measurements within conventional supersonic Laval nozzles with those in the postnozzle flow lets us clearly observe a smooth transition from nucleation controlled by a barrierless particle formation to a free energy barrier.

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The Journal of Physical Chemistry Letters pubs.acs.org/JPCL
onset data in the overlap region (at $p_{CO_2} \approx 13$ Pa, $T \approx 67-70$ K) confirms the continuous trend from a linear behavior (dashed black line) of $\log(p_{CO_2})$ as a function of $1/T$ at higher pressures and temperatures, to a flattening curve at lower pressures and temperatures. This reflects a transition from nucleation controlled by a roughly constant barrier to nucleation controlled by collision rates (vide infra). It is noteworthy that the data in Figure 2 cover 8 orders of magnitude in onset pressure and 1 order of magnitude in temperature with a large region that could only be covered by the joint OSU/ETH experiments. Nevertheless, the ideal gas assumption is still valid over the entire range of pressures and temperatures for which new particle formation rates were calculated.

The Volmer plot does not provide direct information about the experimental nucleation rates $J_{exp}$ an important quantitative measure for a comprehensive comparison (Figure 3).

Comparing values of $J_{exp}$ is, however, less straightforward than comparing onset data, because $J_{exp}$ is more strongly influenced by the ratio of carrier gas to CO₂. In particular, the number of collisions between carrier gas molecules and nucleating CO₂ clusters determines the degree of thermalization CO₂ clusters achieve during nucleation. This, in turn, influences the nucleation rate, because poorly thermalized clusters are hotter and less stable than thermalized clusters. As the carrier gas to CO₂ ratio decreases, lower nucleation rates are measured at the same system temperature and $p_{CO_2}$. This explains the apparently poor agreement in the experimentally determined nucleation rates $J_{exp}$ from OSU and ETH in the overlap region (Figure 3A; Section S2); rates recorded at roughly the same CO₂ pressure ($\sim 10$ Pa) and similar temperatures ($T$ of 65.8 and 62.9 K, respectively) differ by $\sim 2$ orders of magnitude. We note that in this region the OSU experiments use carrier gas to CO₂ ratios of $\sim 200:1$, whereas the ETH experiments operate at ratios of up to 1:1 (Table S3). At these $p_{CO_2}$ values,
nucleation rates are more strongly influenced by poor thermalization in the ETH experiments than in the OSU experiments. The OSU experiments are also affected by poor thermalization at higher $p_{CO_2}$ where the carrier gas to $CO_2$ ratio decreases to $\approx 2.5:1$.

To account for the different degrees of thermalization—for a given experimental setup or between setups—we determined the nucleation rates $J$ expected under fully thermalized conditions by correcting $J_{exp}$ with the factor $f$ derived by Feder et al.$^{33}$ (Section S1.C)

$$J = \frac{J_{exp}}{f} \quad (3)$$

These values of $J$ at fixed $p_{CO_2}$ and $T$ can now be compared directly, because they no longer depend on the carrier gas to $CO_2$ ratio. Figure 3B shows that the agreement between the OSU and ETH values for $J$ at $p_{CO_2} \approx 10$ Pa is now almost perfect given the experimental uncertainties and a temperature difference of $\sim 3$ K. The correction closes the significant gap observed for $J_{exp}$ (Figure 3A) almost completely and results in nucleation rates that increase continuously with increasing pressure, until they level off at the highest pressures (Figure 3B). The alignment of $J$ is equally good for results correlated by supersaturation (Figure S1B).

**Modeling of new particle formation.** Experimental observations are further supported by a kinetic model of particle formation that relies only on molecular properties. Cluster evaporation rates are determined using rate constants obtained from a combination of configurational sampling and high-level quantum chemical (QC) calculations (Section S3). Under the current conditions, only the addition or loss of single monomers need to be considered to calculate time-dependent cluster concentrations using the Becker–Döring model.$^{34}$ Detailed balance is assumed for the association (monomer addition) and the evaporation (monomer loss) rate constants at $S = 1$. Thus, evaporation rate constants are evaluated from cluster Gibbs free energies determined by accurate quantum chemical (QC) calculations (after configurational sampling of all relevant cluster structures) and association rate constants evaluated from gas kinetic theory (Section S3). With approximately constant monomer concentrations, the isothermal nucleation rate constant $J_{iso}$ is given by the steady-state solution of the rate equations (Section S3). Accounting for nonisothermal effects leads to $J_{noniso}$.

The methods used here allow us to access the largely unexplored transition between these two limiting regimes, independently via experiments and calculations (vide infra). With their exponential dependence on cluster formation free energies, nucleation rates offer one of the most direct and sensitive comparisons between experiment and QC-based modeling. Figure 3 reveals a very good agreement between the experimental results and the theoretical predictions (Table S8) over the entire range of experimentally determined nucleation rates of $J \approx 10^{15}$–$10^{19}$ cm$^{-3}$s$^{-1}$, with differences of at most $\sim 3$ orders of magnitude, for both the nonisothermal (Figure 3A) and the isothermal (Figure 3B) rates. The QC data has a general accuracy of a few $k_B T$ leading to a rough uncertainty of 1 order of magnitude in $J_{iso}$. Additional errors may arise from insufficiently accounting for thermal contributions from all existing cluster configurations and the assumption that all vibrations are (quasi-)harmonic and uncoupled, which might not be completely valid, as the small $CO_2$ clusters may behave in a liquid-like manner at the studied temperatures. Given the complexity of nucleation processes and the very high sensitivity of nucleation rates to system parameters, such good agreement is extremely encouraging. This is especially true in light of the 1 order of magnitude uncertainties in the absolute values of the experimental rates and the fact that the theoretical predictions are essentially free of adjustable parameters and made independently of the experimental results.

**From nucleation to the collision limit.** While nucleation rates are highly sensitive to local conditions, their value alone does not provide information on the nucleation regime, i.e., high barrier limit, collisional limit, or transition regime. Comparing experimental onset data to model predictions (Figure 2A) offers a way forward. The change in the trend of the Volmer plot, from a linear decrease of $\log(p_{CO_2})$ (dashed black line) with $1/T$ at higher pressures and temperatures to a curve flattening at lower pressures and temperatures clearly suggests a change in nucleation regime. The experimental trends in Figure 2A are captured by model predictions for rates that cover the same range (10$^{15}$–$10^{19}$ cm$^{-3}$s$^{-1}$), using the kinetic/QC model ($J_{iso}$ full lines) and a hard sphere collision model neglecting evaporation ($J_{HS}$, dotted lines, see Section S3.A). The agreement between the experimental data, $J_{iso}$ and $J_{HS}$ for the coldest vapor ($T \approx 30$ K) indicates that the collision limit is approached at the highest supersaturations. This is qualitatively reflected in the very low nucleation barrier calculated from QC (Figure 4) and a very small critical size $n^{*}$ (Figure 2B and Table S8). At $T = 31.2$ K, the nucleation barrier $\Delta G^{*} \approx 4k_B T$ or $\sim 1$ kJ/mol, roughly the accuracy of the QC calculations, which are thus consistent with essentially collision-limited nucleation, i.e., $\Delta G^{*}$ and $n^{*}$ on the order of $k_B T$ and 1, respectively.

The large and rapid deviation of the experimental data from $J_{HS}$ as the temperature rises above $\sim 70$ K (Figure 2A) indicates that nucleation is now dominated by the presence of a substantial free energy barrier. At $T \approx 92.3$ K, for example, $\Delta G^{*}$ is $\sim 15k_B T$ or $\sim 13$ kJ/mol—a value much larger than the accuracy of the QC calculations—and $n^{*}$ is $\approx 5$, clearly indicating barrier-limited nucleation. Furthermore, the linear behavior of the data observed in the temperature range between $\sim 70$–$90$ K coincides with the appearance of an approximately constant $\Delta G^{*}/k_B T$ (Section S4, eq S22: at a large enough $n^{*}$, the functional form of the temperature dependence largely reflects that of $p^w(T)$). The QC calculations show that the nucleation barrier becomes broader (Figure 4A) but not higher in this range (see Figure 4B region with $\Delta G^{*}/k_B T \approx$ constant above $p_{CO_2} \approx 100$ Pa). The linear behavior extends to even lower saturations (higher temperatures, green squares and yellow triangles in Figure 2A), with a generally very minor dependence on the value of the nucleation rate (almost overlapping $J_{iso}$ curves), again explicable by classical nucleation theory (Section S4).

The theoretical results at high and low saturation confirm that the measurements for temperatures between $\sim 40$ and $70$ K indeed probe the transition regime. The QC calculations predict that $\Delta G^{*}/k_B T$ increases steeply with decreasing supersaturation (Figure 4B) as does $n^{*}$ starting from close to unity (Figure 2B), i.e., with decreasing saturation, we see a transition from collisional-controlled to barrier-controlled nucleation. The agreement between experiment and the independent theoretical prediction for both the onset (Figure 2A) and rate (Figure 3) data is encouraging. For $CO_2$, the trend in the onset data can also be captured by classical
nucleation mechanisms by combining experimental data and QC-based kinetic modeling. The Volmer plot shows characteristic trends, from a linear behavior where the barrier is substantial to an increasingly flattened curve that extends from the transition regime to the collisional limit. Starting from the collisional limit, the barrier height, critical cluster size, and nucleation rate increase with decreasing supersaturation and plateau in the region of barrier-dominated nucleation.

For many applications where nucleation plays a key role, reliable theoretical predictions of the conditions and rates at which nucleation occurs would be tremendously useful but are largely missing. The CO₂ example presented here demonstrates the predictive power of the combined QC kinetics approach—not only for a special regime but over the entire range of nucleation behaviors. Future studies will have to explore how far the predictive power of the present model can be extended to other systems. Be it from the experimental or from the theoretical side, the question whether general trends over different regions of nucleation behavior will also occur in multicomponent systems will be an exciting route to follow—particularly for systems that show nucleation enhancement or suppression.⁷,¹⁴,⁵⁰

**ASSOCIATED CONTENT**

**Supporting Information**

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.jpclett.1c00762.

Additional information about the experiments and the calculations are provided in Sections S1–S4, Tables S1–S8, and Figures S1–S3 (PDF)

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**Figure 4.** (A) Free energy barriers $\Delta G(n)/k_BT$ for the noted experiment conditions (Tables S1–S3). The dashed line corresponds to $\Delta G(n)/k_BT$ calculated at the lower level of theory for $p_{CO_2} = 0.04$ Pa (Section S3.C and Table S8). The barrier broadens as its height increases. (B) Barrier heights $\Delta G^*/k_BT$ based on QC calculations for all experimental conditions increase rapidly with $p_{CO_2}$ leveling off for $p_{CO_2} > \sim 10$ Pa. Filled symbols indicate conditions for which nucleation rates are measured.

nucleation theory with suitably chosen parameters (Figure S3). But, as detailed extensively in Dingilian et al.,²³ the agreement with the experiments depends sensitively not only on the substance but also on (1) the choice of theory, (2) the choice of physical property values, and (3) an assumption regarding the state of the critical cluster (“liquid-like” or “crystalline”).²⁵ For the range of physical properties and classical nucleation rate expressions investigated there, the ratio of measured to predicted nucleation rates varied from $10^{-6}$ to $10^{18}$. While reliable *a priori* predictions of experimental nucleation rates can hardly be expected from any variant of classical nucleation theory, the QC-based kinetics approach of the present work was able to predict the conditions under which nucleation is plausible and quantify the nucleation rates to within a few orders of magnitude.

Outlook: The present study shows that new particle formation can be understood over the entire range of possible...
Author Contributions
R.S. and B.E.W. conceptualized the work, led the experiments, and wrote and edited the paper together with contributions from K.K.D., M.L., J.Ku., J.Kr., R.H., and H.V. H.V. coordinated and supervised the computational work. T.K. ensured the consistency of the quantum chemical methods used. K.K.D. conducted the OSU experiments and analyzed data with experimental contributions from M.L. M.L., J.Kr., and C.L. conducted the ETH experiments analyzed data. J.Ku. performed the configurational sampling, some of the lower-level QC calculations, and participated in the kinetic modeling. R.H. worked on the kinetic model and classical theory and derived some analytical expressions for the QC nonisothermal correction. B.R. tested and selected the force field parameters. F.K. performed the highest accuracy QC calculations. All coauthors have read the paper.

Author Contributions
K.K.D., M.L., and J.Ku. contributed equally.

Notes
The authors declare no competing financial interest.

Data Repository: All data needed to evaluate the conclusions of the paper are presented in the paper, the Supporting Information, or are deposited on the ETH Research Collection under DOI: https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000462780. Additional data related to this paper may be requested from the authors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
Financial support was provided by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF project numbers 200020-172472 and 200020_200306 and the NCCR MUST), ETH Zürich, National Science Foundation (NSF Grants CHE-1464924, CHE-1900064), European Research Council project 692891-CLOUD Measurements. Science 2016, 354, 1119–1124. A. Rissanen, M. P.; Rondo, L.; Sarnela, N.; Schobesberger, S.; Sengupta, K.; Simon, M.; Sipilä, M.; Smith, J. N.; Stozkhov, Y.; Tomé, A.; Tröstl, J.; Wagner, P. E.; Wimmer, D.; Winkler, P. M.; Worsnop, D. R.; Carslaw, K. S. Global Atmospheric Particle Formation From CERN CLOUD Measurements. Science 2016, 354, 1119–1124.

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