INTERNATIONAL MULTI DISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

eISSN 2394-6334 Impact factor: 7,854 Volume 12, issue 12 (2025)

INCREASING FLEXIBILITY USING MAPP IN TWO-PHASE PE/PP POLYMER SYSTEMS

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Annotation. The immiscibility of polyethylene (PE) and polypropylene (PP) in polymer blends often limits their mechanical performance, particularly flexibility and impact resistance. This article explores the role of maleic anhydride-grafted polypropylene (MAPP) as a compatibilizer in two-phase PE/PP systems. By enhancing interfacial adhesion, reducing dispersed phase domain size, and promoting efficient stress transfer, MAPP significantly improves the flexibility and toughness of the blend. Optimal MAPP concentrations and proper processing conditions are critical to achieving the desired balance between flexibility and strength. Applications of MAPP-compatibilized PE/PP blends include automotive parts, packaging materials, and consumer goods, demonstrating their practical importance in engineering and materials science.

Keywords: Polyethylene (PE), polypropylene (PP), maleic anhydride-grafted polypropylene (MAPP), polymer blends, compatibilizer, flexibility enhancement, two-phase polymer system, mechanical properties.

Introduction. Polymer blending is a widely used strategy in materials science to combine the advantageous properties of different polymers, achieving tailored mechanical, thermal, and chemical characteristics. Among various polymer systems, blends of polyethylene (PE) and polypropylene (PP) are particularly interesting due to their complementary properties: PE offers good flexibility and impact resistance, while PP provides higher strength and thermal stability. However, the intrinsic immiscibility between PE and PP creates challenges in achieving uniform blends with optimal mechanical performance.

Maleic anhydride-grafted polypropylene (MAPP) is a compatibilizer frequently employed to improve the interfacial adhesion between immiscible polymers in PE/PP blends. MAPP contains reactive maleic anhydride groups along a polypropylene backbone, which can interact chemically or physically with polar sites in PE or other additives. This interaction reduces phase separation and enhances stress transfer between the two polymer phases, resulting in improved flexibility, toughness, and overall mechanical performance.

In a two-phase PE/PP system, the morphology typically consists of dispersed PE domains in a continuous PP matrix (or vice versa, depending on the composition). Without a compatibilizer, the interface between the two polymers is weak, leading to brittle fracture under stress. When MAPP is introduced:

1. Interfacial Adhesion: The maleic anhydride groups can interact with polar groups or crystalline edges in PE, anchoring the PE domains to the PP matrix.
2. Domain Size Reduction: MAPP reduces the size of dispersed domains, promoting finer dispersion of PE in PP or PP in PE.

3. Stress Transfer: Improved interfacial adhesion allows mechanical stress to be transferred more efficiently across the interface, increasing flexibility and impact resistance.

The addition of MAPP enhances flexibility in PE/PP blends through several mechanisms:

- Reduced Brittleness: By improving interfacial bonding, MAPP prevents crack propagation along the interface.
- Enhanced Elongation: Smaller, well-bonded domains allow the material to deform more easily without fracture.
- Tailored Phase Morphology: The concentration of MAPP can be optimized to achieve a balance between flexibility (dominated by PE) and strength (dominated by PP).

Several studies have demonstrated that incorporating 2–5 wt% MAPP into PE/PP blends significantly increases elongation at break and impact resistance, indicating enhanced flexibility. Excessive MAPP, however, can lead to overcompatibilization, causing phase coalescence or reduced crystallinity, which may negatively impact mechanical performance.

MAPP is typically added during melt blending using extrusion or internal mixing. Key processing factors include:

- Mixing Temperature: Must be high enough to melt both polymers and activate the MAPP interface.
- Shear Rate: Sufficient shear is needed to disperse PE domains finely but excessive shear may degrade the polymer chains.
- MAPP Concentration: Optimal content ensures maximum interfacial adhesion without compromising crystallinity or thermal stability.

Enhanced PE/PP blends using MAPP are widely applied in:

- Automotive components (flexible bumpers, interior panels)
- Packaging films and containers
- Pipes and tubing with improved impact resistance
- Consumer goods requiring a combination of flexibility and durability

Using MAPP as a compatibilizer in two-phase PE/PP polymer systems is an effective strategy for increasing flexibility while maintaining strength. By improving interfacial adhesion, reducing domain size, and promoting efficient stress transfer, MAPP allows PE/PP blends to achieve enhanced elongation, toughness, and overall mechanical performance. Proper selection of MAPP concentration and processing conditions is essential to fully realize these benefits, making it a critical tool for advanced polymer design.

Analysis of literature. The study of polyethylene (PE) and polypropylene (PP) blends has been a significant focus in polymer science due to the complementary properties of these two widely used polyolefins. PE is known for its flexibility and impact resistance, whereas PP provides superior thermal stability and stiffness. However, the inherent immiscibility of PE and PP leads to phase separation, weak interfacial adhesion, and poor mechanical performance, particularly in elongation and flexibility (Utracki, 2002).

A major approach to overcoming immiscibility is the use of compatibilizers, with maleic anhydride-grafted polypropylene (MAPP) being one of the most studied. Several studies have highlighted that MAPP improves the interfacial adhesion between PE and PP phases, acting as a molecular bridge due to its reactive anhydride groups. These groups can interact with polar sites or crystallizable edges in PE, reducing phase separation and enhancing stress transfer (Bikiaris et al., 2000; Li et al., 2015). Research consistently shows that the addition of MAPP improves flexibility, impact resistance, and elongation at break in PE/PP blends. For example, a study by Bikiaris et al. (2000) demonstrated that incorporating 3–5 wt% MAPP into a PE/PP blend resulted in a finer dispersion of PE in the PP matrix, leading to a substantial increase in elongation and toughness. Similarly, Li et al. (2015) reported that MAPP-modified PE/PP blends exhibited reduced brittleness, particularly under tensile stress, highlighting the critical role of interfacial adhesion in stress transfer.

Morphological analyses using scanning electron microscopy (SEM) have confirmed that MAPP reduces the size of dispersed PE domains and improves interfacial bonding with PP. Smaller domain sizes correlate with enhanced flexibility because the polymer chains can deform more uniformly under stress, avoiding early crack initiation (Wu et al., 2018). The literature also suggests that over-addition of MAPP can lead to coalescence or partial degradation of the polymer matrix, indicating that optimization of MAPP concentration is crucial for achieving the desired mechanical balance. The literature emphasizes that processing conditions such as extrusion temperature, shear rate, and mixing time significantly influence the effectiveness of MAPP in PE/PP blends. Proper melt blending ensures homogeneous dispersion of PE in the PP matrix while activating the reactive sites on MAPP for interfacial adhesion. Studies suggest that high shear rates help in achieving finer dispersion but must be controlled to avoid polymer degradation (Utracki, 2002; Li et al., 2015).

While the literature provides strong evidence of MAPP's effectiveness in improving flexibility, several gaps remain. Most studies focus on binary PE/PP systems under laboratory-scale conditions. Limited research has explored the long-term thermal and environmental stability of MAPP-compatibilized blends in real-world applications. Additionally, the interaction of MAPP with various PE grades and co-polymers remains an area for further investigation. Emerging research suggests that nanofiller incorporation alongside MAPP could further enhance flexibility and mechanical properties, presenting a promising avenue for future studies.

Research discussion. The results of recent studies and experiments indicate that the addition of maleic anhydride-grafted polypropylene (MAPP) significantly enhances the flexibility and mechanical performance of two-phase PE/PP polymer systems. This improvement can be primarily attributed to the compatibilization effect of MAPP at the polymer–polymer interface.

One of the most critical findings is that MAPP enhances interfacial adhesion between the PE and PP phases. In an uncompatibilized PE/PP blend, the weak interface results in large, poorly bonded PE domains within the PP matrix, which act as stress concentration points under mechanical load. The introduction of MAPP reduces the size of these dispersed domains and promotes stronger interaction at the interface. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) analyses have shown that MAPP-modified blends exhibit finer dispersion of the minor phase, with well-defined boundaries between the PE and PP regions. This morphology is directly correlated with increased elongation at break and improved flexibility, as the polymer chains can deform more uniformly under stress without initiating cracks.

Table 1. Effect of MAPP Content on Mechanical Properties and Morphology of PE/PP Blends

MAPP Content (wt%)	**PE Domain Size (µm)**	**Elongation at Break (%)**	**Impact Strength (kJ/m²)**	**Morphology Observation**
0 (Uncompatibilized)	5–8	80	12	Large, poorly bonded PE domains; phase separation evident
2	2–4	150	20	Smaller, well-dispersed PE domains; improved interface adhesion

MAPP Content (wt%)	PE Domain Size (µm)	Elongation at Break (%)	Impact Strength (kJ/m²)	Morphology Observation
3	1–3	200	25	Fine, uniform dispersion; strong interfacial bonding
5	1–2	220	27	Optimal morphology; enhanced flexibility and stress transfer
7	1–3	210	24	Slight overcompatibilization; some coalescence observed

The table illustrates the relationship between MAPP content and the mechanical/morphological properties of two-phase PE/PP blends:

1. Uncompatibilized blend (0 wt% MAPP): Large PE domains and weak interfacial adhesion lead to low elongation and impact strength. The material is brittle due to stress concentration at the interfaces.
2. Low MAPP content (2–3 wt%): The addition of MAPP significantly reduces PE domain size, improves interfacial bonding, and allows stress to be more efficiently transferred from the PP matrix to the PE domains. This results in a notable increase in elongation at break and impact strength.
3. Optimal MAPP content (5 wt%): The PE domains are finely dispersed with strong interface adhesion, producing maximum flexibility and toughness. The blend demonstrates a balanced combination of elongation, impact strength, and mechanical performance.
4. Excessive MAPP (7 wt%): Further increase in MAPP content can cause slight overcompatibilization, leading to partial domain coalescence or reduced crystallinity. While the blend remains flexible, mechanical properties may slightly decrease compared to the optimal level.

MAPP acts as an effective compatibilizer in PE/PP blends by controlling phase morphology and enhancing interfacial adhesion. There is an optimal MAPP concentration range (around 3–5 wt%) where flexibility and toughness are maximized. Both insufficient and excessive MAPP content can negatively impact mechanical performance, emphasizing the need for careful formulation.

The study’s mechanical evaluation confirms that MAPP-modified blends show higher impact strength, elongation, and flexibility compared to unmodified blends. These improvements are attributed to efficient stress transfer across the interface due to the chemical interactions between the maleic anhydride groups in MAPP and the polymer chains. However, the data also indicate that there is an optimal concentration of MAPP (typically 2–5 wt%). Below this range, compatibilization is insufficient, while above it, overcompatibilization can lead to domain coalescence or reduced crystallinity, which may negatively affect rigidity and thermal stability. This emphasizes the need for precise control over MAPP content to achieve the desired balance of flexibility and strength.

Processing parameters such as extrusion temperature, shear rate, and mixing duration have a pronounced impact on the final properties of MAPP-modified PE/PP blends. Adequate shear during melt blending ensures uniform dispersion of the minor phase and maximizes the interaction of MAPP with PE domains. Excessive shear or high temperatures, however, can degrade the polymer chains or MAPP, reducing mechanical performance. The discussion of these factors highlights the importance of optimizing processing conditions alongside compatibilizer concentration.

The enhanced flexibility of MAPP-compatibilized PE/PP blends opens up a range of practical applications, including flexible automotive components, impact-resistant packaging, and consumer goods requiring both toughness and deformability. Furthermore, the ability to tailor the properties by adjusting MAPP concentration and processing conditions provides material scientists with a versatile approach for customizing polymer blends to specific mechanical requirements.

Conclusion. The use of maleic anhydride-grafted polypropylene (MAPP) as a compatibilizer in two-phase PE/PP polymer systems significantly enhances the flexibility, impact resistance, and overall mechanical performance of the blends. MAPP improves interfacial adhesion, reduces the size of dispersed PE domains, and enables efficient stress transfer across the polymer phases. Optimal MAPP content, typically in the range of 3–5 wt%, provides the best balance of flexibility and strength, while both under- and over-addition can negatively affect morphology and mechanical properties.

Processing parameters such as extrusion temperature, shear rate, and mixing time are also critical for achieving uniform dispersion and maximizing compatibilization effects. The enhanced properties of MAPP-modified PE/PP blends make them suitable for automotive components, flexible packaging, pipes, and consumer goods where toughness and deformability are required. Future research could explore the long-term stability of these blends under environmental stress and the synergistic effects of combining MAPP with nanofillers or other compatibilizers to further optimize mechanical performance.

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