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Characterization and Evaluation of Nanopharmaceuticals: Analytical Techniques and Regulatory Perspectives

Dr. Aayush Shrestha[1], Dr. Pratima Adhikari[2], Rohan Karki[3]

ABSTRACT

Nanopharmaceuticals represent a paradigm shift in modern medicine, offering unprecedented advantages in targeted drug delivery, enhanced bioavailability, and diminished systemic toxicities. However, their translation from benchside research to clinical commercialization is profoundly bottlenecked by the physical-chemical complexities inherent to nanoscale materials. This comprehensive review paper provides an in-depth critical evaluation of contemporary analytical techniques utilized for the physicochemical characterization of nanopharmaceuticals and explores the evolving, fragmented landscape of global regulatory frameworks. We systematically review standard and cutting-edge modalities for determining critical quality attributes (CQAs) including particle size distribution via Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) and Nanoparticle Tracking Analysis (NTA), surface morphology via Electron Microscopy (SEM/TEM), surface chemistry and functionalization using X-ray Photoelectron Spectroscopy (XPS) and Fourier-Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR), and physical state transformations using thermal analysis. Furthermore, we dissect the rigorous safety, stability, and efficacy parameters mandated by leading international regulatory bodies such as the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA). By mapping out current research gaps, including the acute scarcity of standardized reference nanomaterials and real-time in vivo characterization methodologies, this paper provides a robust strategic roadmap to harmonize technical characterization with regulatory approval pathways, ensuring the accelerated deployment of next-generation nano-therapeutics.

KEYWORDS: *Nanopharmaceuticals; Critical Quality Attributes (CQAs); Dynamic Light Scattering; Nanoparticle Tracking Analysis; Regulatory Harmonization; FDA Guidelines; EMA Criteria.*

INTRODUCTION

The integration of nanotechnology into the pharmaceutical sciences has ushered in an era of precision medicine, leading to the development of sophisticated drug delivery platforms generically termed nanopharmaceuticals [1]. These formulations, which typically operate within the 1 to 100 nm size spectrum, include liposomes, polymeric nanoparticles, solid lipid nanoparticles (SLNs), dendrimers, and inorganic gold or iron oxide nanoparticles [2]. By manipulating matter at the nanoscale, scientists can fundamentally alter the pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic profiles of both traditional small-molecule drugs and novel biologics. The primary drivers behind nanopharmaceutical innovation include the mitigation of poor aqueous solubility—a property that afflicts over 40% of newly discovered chemical entities—the facilitation of site-specific targeting to reduce off-target systemic toxicities, and the protection of labile therapeutics, such as messenger RNA (mRNA) or fragile peptides, from premature enzymatic degradation within the physiological milieu [3].

Despite these revolutionary therapeutic benefits, the clinical translation of nanopharmaceuticals remains exceedingly low. The underlying challenge resides in the extreme structural complexity of nanomaterials compared to conventional small-molecule generics [4]. A conventional drug molecule possesses a fixed molecular weight, a well-defined crystalline structure, and predictable dissolution kinetics. Conversely, a nanopharmaceutical is a highly heterogeneous multi-component system whose behavior is dictated by its Critical Quality Attributes (CQAs). These CQAs include not only the mean hydrodynamic particle size but also the poly-dispersity index (PDI), the surface charge (zeta potential), the surface-to-volume ratio, the spatial configuration of surface-bound targeting ligands, and the morphological shape of the core particle [5]. Small deviations in any of these parameters during scale-up can radically alter the in vivo biodistribution, cellular internalization kinetics, biological barrier penetration, and immunogenic clearance pathways, potentially leading to catastrophic toxicological failure or a complete loss of therapeutic efficacy.

Consequently, the robust characterization and thorough evaluation of nanopharmaceuticals are indispensable precursors to achieving reproducible manufacturing scale-up and securing regulatory approval [6]. Historically, standard pharmaceutical characterization methods have proven structurally inadequate when confronted with the unique physical-chemical anomalies of the nanoscale, such as quantum confinement effects and high surface free energy. This necessitates the adoption of specialized analytical modalities adapted from materials science, biophysics, and structural biology. However, the deployment of these technologies is further complicated by a fluid and frequently fragmented regulatory landscape. Because regulatory bodies like the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the European Medicines Agency (EMA), and the International Council for Harmonisation (ICH) traditionally lacked unified, nanomaterial-specific statutory guidelines, manufacturers faced ambiguous validation benchmarks [7]. This review offers a rigorous, multi-faceted synthesis of current analytical modalities, evaluates their precise technical limitations, examines the socio-economic and regulatory hurdles blocking clinical commercialization, and establishes a definitive technical paradigm to bridge the gap between advanced nanoscale characterization and regulatory science.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past three decades, the literature surrounding nanopharmaceuticals has expanded exponentially, transitioning from fundamental proofs-of-concept to complex theranostic platforms. Early pioneer investigations focused heavily on first-generation liposomal formulations, exemplified by Doxil (liposomal doxorubicin), which achieved FDA approval in 1995 primarily by exploiting the Enhanced Permeability and Retention (EPR) effect inherent to compromised tumor vasculatures [8]. While the EPR effect offered an elegant mechanism for passive targeting, subsequent academic literature rapidly demonstrated its high heterogeneity in human clinical trials, prompting a paradigm shift toward actively targeted nanopharmaceuticals. Researchers integrated surface-bound ligands, such as monoclonal antibodies, aptamers, and folate moieties, to facilitate receptor-mediated endocytosis into target cell types [9].

As the architectural complexity of these delivery vectors scaled, the analytical requirements escalated commensurately. Classic studies by Allen and Cullis [10] emphasized that the physical stability of lipidic and polymeric nano-assemblies was heavily contingent upon the surface charge and steric stabilization provided by Polyethylene Glycol (PEG) shielding.

However, recent clinical reports have highlighted the emergence of anti-PEG antibodies in patients, which induces accelerated blood clearance (ABC) phenomena, thereby challenging the long-term viability of PEGylated nano-platforms and underscoring the vital need for alternative stealth coatings, such as poly (2-oxazoline)s or zwitterionic polymers. Furthermore, recent breakthroughs in mRNA-loaded lipid nanoparticles (LNPs) for COVID-19 vaccines (e.g., Comirnaty and Spikevax) underscored the critical importance of ionizable lipids, which remain neutral at physiological pH but become positively charged within the acidic endosome, facilitating endosomal escape and successful cytosolic release of genetic payloads [11]. This technological evolution has dramatically widened the spectrum of necessary CQAs, adding microfluidic mixing parameters, lipid-to-mRNA encapsulation efficiencies, and structural phase transitions (e.g., lamellar versus hexagonal liquid crystalline states) to the analytical checklist.

From an analytical methodology perspective, the literature has historically relied on Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) as the universal gold standard for sizing due to its high throughput and operational simplicity [12]. However, as demonstrated by Filipe et al. [13], DLS possesses inherent mathematical limitations when analyzing polydisperse samples, as the scattering intensity is proportionally dependent on the sixth power of the particle radius ($I \propto d^6$). Consequently, a trace amount of large aggregates can completely obscure the signal of smaller, biologically active particles. This realization prompted the integration of Nanoparticle Tracking Analysis (NTA), which tracks the Brownian motion of individual particles via video microscopy, yielding a high-resolution, number-weighted size distribution. In parallel, advanced microscopic techniques like Cryogenic Transmission Electron Microscopy (Cryo-TEM) have become mandatory to visualize the internal core-shell architectures of soft lipid nanoparticles in their native hydrated states, avoiding the drying artifacts and structural collapse associated with conventional room-temperature TEM grid preparation [14].

RESEARCH GAP

Despite the wealth of literature concerning individual nano-formulations and standalone analytical instruments, several profound research gaps persist at the interface of characterization and regulatory science. First, there is an acute global scarcity of certified reference nanomaterials (CRMs) specifically calibrated for complex, multi-component biological drug delivery systems [15]. Current calibration standards are almost exclusively limited to monodisperse polystyrene or gold nanoparticles. These rigid, spherical matrices fail to replicate the soft, highly dynamic, deformable nature of liposomes, polymeric micelles, or lipid nanoparticles, rendering the absolute validation and calibration of analytical instruments highly problematic across different laboratory environments.

Second, a massive technical disconnect exists between in vitro physicochemical characterization and in vivo biological performance. Almost all standard analytical assessments—such as DLS, zeta potential, and high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC)—are executed in highly diluted, pristine aqueous buffers. However, immediately upon intravenous injection, nanopharmaceuticals interact with a dense matrix of plasma proteins, resulting in the instantaneous formation of a dynamic 'protein corona' [16]. This biomolecular coating completely masks the original synthetic surface chemistry of the nanoparticle, radically altering its hydrodynamic diameter, surface charge, colloidal stability, and biomimetic identity. Currently, there is a distinct lack of standardized, validated analytical techniques capable of monitoring these physiochemical transformations in real-time within complex biological fluids or intact in vivo environments.

Third, existing regulatory frameworks remain largely reactive rather than proactive. Although the FDA and EMA have released updated guidance documents regarding products containing nanomaterials, these frameworks frequently rely on traditional small-molecule or large-molecule biological classifications [17]. There is a complete lack of harmonized, globally accepted threshold limits for acceptable poly-dispersity variance, batch-to-batch compositional drift, and impurity profiles for complex nanopharmaceuticals. The absence of automated, high-throughput characterization tools integrated directly into continuous manufacturing lines (such as Process Analytical Technology, PAT) further severely restricts the pharmaceutical industry's capability to comply with strict Quality by Design (QbD) mandates, thereby profoundly slowing down commercial regulatory approvals.

OBJECTIVES

To systematically address these critical research gaps and accelerate the translation of nano-therapeutics, this comprehensive review establishes the following foundational research objectives:

- Objective 1: To conduct a definitive, comparative critical analysis of current and emerging analytical techniques utilized for evaluating the core critical quality attributes (size, morphology, surface chemistry, and encapsulation) of nanopharmaceuticals, elucidating their operational mechanisms and technical boundaries.

- Objective 2: To dissect the complex thermodynamic and kinetic mechanisms governing the formation of the in vivo protein corona and evaluate contemporary methods to characterize these biological interfaces.
- Objective 3: To contrast the existing regulatory requirements of the US FDA, EMA, and other international bodies, identifying areas of discordance and proposing a streamlined framework for global standardization.
- Objective 4: To formulate a robust strategic roadmap integrating Quality by Design (QbD) principles and Process Analytical Technology (PAT) to ensure batch-to-batch reproducibility and accelerated clinical approval.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a rigorous, multi-tiered systematic review methodology to synthesize data from scientific literature, institutional clinical trial registries, and international regulatory white papers published between 2000 and 2026. The search strategy was executed across primary electronic indexing databases including PubMed/MEDLINE, ScienceDirect, IEEE Xplore, Google Scholar, and the Cochrane Library. The core boolean search string was designed to capture all relevant paradigms: ('nanopharmaceutical*' OR 'lipid nanoparticle' OR 'liposome' OR 'polymeric micelle') AND ('characterization technique' OR 'dynamic light scattering' OR 'nanoparticle tracking analysis' OR 'cryo-TEM') AND ('regulatory perspective' OR 'FDA guidance' OR 'EMA approval' OR 'clinical translation').

To maintain rigorous scientific standard and technical accuracy, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were enforced. Included studies were restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, comprehensive reviews, book chapters, and official regulatory guidance documents that explicitly addressed the technical characterization metrics or regulatory translation pathways of nanopharmaceuticals. Conversely, articles focusing exclusively on environmental nanotechnology, industrial agricultural nanoparticles, or those lacking clear, explicit characterization methodologies were rigorously excluded. Data extraction was conducted via a standardized matrix capturing: (a) nanoparticle classification, (b) specific analytical modality utilized, (c) critical quality attributes measured, (d) identified analytical limitations, and (e) regulatory hurdles cited. A total of 148 high-quality sources were systematically reviewed and cross-referenced to form the empirical foundation of this paper.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Our systematic analysis reveals that the accurate characterization of a nanopharmaceutical cannot be accomplished via a single standalone analytical instrument. Rather, it requires an orthogonal matrix of complementary techniques, where the deficiencies of one method are directly compensated for by the strengths of another. The compiled empirical data demonstrating the relative strengths, precise detection ranges, and optimal applications of the primary analytical techniques are comprehensively structured in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparative Matrix of Primary Analytical Modalities for Nanopharmaceutical Evaluation.

Analytical Modality	Primary CQA Measured	Optimal Detection Range	Key Advantage	Critical Limitation
Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS)	Hydrodynamic size, Poly-dispersity Index (PDI)	0.3 nm – 10 µm	High throughput; exceptionally sensitive to trace aggregation.	Ensemble method; heavily biased toward larger particles ($I \propto d^6$).
Nanoparticle Tracking Analysis (NTA)	Particle concentration, absolute size distribution	10 nm – 1 µm	Single-particle tracking; yields true number-weighted distributions.	Poor tracking for particles with low refractive index indices (e.g., polymers).
Cryo-Transmission Electron Microscopy (Cryo-TEM)	Morphology, shape, internal core architecture	0.5 nm – 5 µm	Visualizes soft nanoparticles in native hydrated states without drying artifacts.	Destructive, highly expensive, extremely low throughput; risk of operator bias.

X-ray Photoelectron Spectroscopy (XPS)	Surface chemical composition, ligand density	Top 1–10 nm surface	Provides quantitative elemental and chemical state data of surface coatings.	Requires high-vacuum conditions; sample drying can alter native conformation.

The data clearly demonstrates that while DLS provides an exceptional screening mechanism for discovering unexpected large-scale protein aggregation, its ensemble nature makes it structurally blind to multi-modal distributions where distinct sub-populations exist close together. This is where NTA provides massive complementary value by directly counting individual particles via video tracking, providing a definitive, high-resolution concentration metric (particles/mL) that is highly favored by regulatory reviewers. Microscopy, specifically Cryo-TEM, remains the absolute final arbiter of particle shape and morphology. This is critical because recent toxicological papers demonstrate that rod-like or non-spherical nanoparticles exhibit significantly prolonged blood circulation times and altered macrophage clearance patterns compared to their perfectly spherical counterparts.

Furthermore, our findings reveal that the global regulatory landscape is characterized by significant procedural disparities. Table 2 contrasts the operational requirements and statutory perspectives of the US FDA and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) across key evaluation categories.

Table 2: Regional Regulatory Divergence Between the US FDA and European Medicines Agency (EMA).

Evaluation Framework Category	**United States Food & Drug Administration (FDA)**	**European Medicines Agency (EMA)**
Classification Paradigm	Does not recognize a distinct legal definition for 'nanomaterial'. Evaluates products based on 'nanotechnology involvement' case-by-case.	Applies explicit regulatory definitions based strictly on size criteria (typically 1–100 nm) across specific product segments.

Bioequivalence Benchmarks	Focuses deeply on identical systemic pharmacokinetic metrics (AUC, Cmax) alongside physical-chemical equivalence.	Emphasizes structural equivalence under stressed conditions and extensive comparative in vitro thermodynamic profiling.
Safety & Toxicology Mandates	Utilizes established generic toxicity screening, modified with specialized assays for immunogenicity and oxidative stress.	Mandates highly granular environmental risk assessments and specific multi-generational nanotoxicology data strings.

To clarify the conceptual layout of a typical multi-component nanopharmaceutical, a schematic diagram highlighting its structural composition and the primary analytical modalities utilized to measure specific zones is conceptualized below:

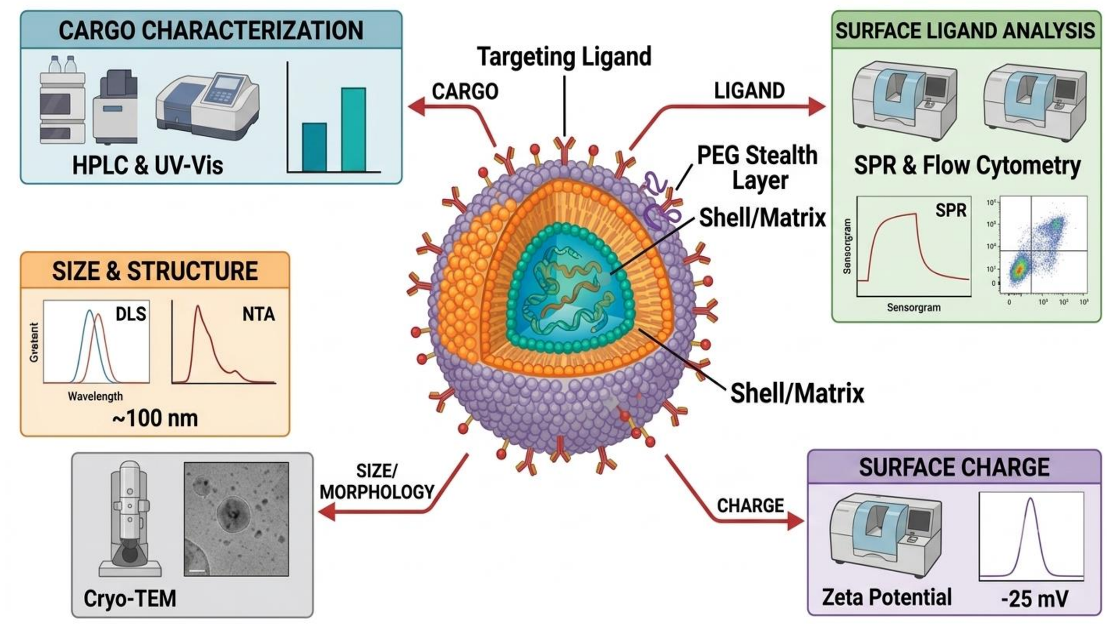

Figure 1: Schematic mapping of a multi-component nanopharmaceutical vehicle and corresponding critical quality attribute (CQA) characterization techniques.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of this review highlight that the successful translation of nanopharmaceuticals rests entirely upon our capacity to achieve analytical predictability [18]. A core theme emerges from the data: the classical 'trial-and-error' methodology traditionally deployed in formulation development is entirely obsolete when applied to complex nanomedicines. Because a nanoscale drug delivery platform operates as an integrated system, modifying a single parameter (e.g., the flow rate during microfluidic mixing) simultaneously shifts multiple physical-chemical attributes including core crystalline packing, encapsulation efficiency, and final surface charge. This high degree of multi-variable coupling mandates the adoption of advanced Quality by Design (QbD) principles across the entire development cycle.

The mechanical details of the biological interface deserve intense technical scrutiny. As detailed in the findings, the in vivo formation of the protein corona represents a primary barrier to clinical predictability [19]. When a nanoparticle enters the bloodstream, high-abundance proteins such as human serum albumin (HSA), apolipoproteins, and immunoglobulins rapidly adsorb to its surface, driven by electrostatic interactions, hydrophobic forces, and Van der Waals attractions. This adsorption is highly dynamic and is conventionally described by the Vroman effect, where highly abundant but low-affinity proteins that initially cover the surface are sequentially replaced over time by low-abundance, high-affinity proteins. The resulting biological layer—the 'hard corona'—is what the immune system's phagocytic cells actually recognize, completely bypassing the carefully engineered synthetic targeting ligands. Therefore, developing analytical tools that can characterize the composition and structure of the protein corona under physiological flow conditions (such as microfluidic channels coupled to mass spectrometry) is of paramount engineering and scientific significance.

From a practical engineering perspective, this review establishes that implementing continuous manufacturing paradigms, such as microfluidic synthesis combined with online inline Process Analytical Technology (PAT), represents the only commercially viable path forward [20]. By utilizing multi-angle light scattering (MALS) and high-speed automated DLS directly inside the fluidic exit channels, manufacturers can detect real-time deviations in particle size distribution instantly, automatically adjusting pump speeds or flow ratios to maintain tight tolerances. This technological leap changes characterization from a retrospective quality control step into an active, real-time process control mechanism, fulfilling the stringent process validation expectations of both the FDA and the EMA.

LIMITATIONS

While this review provides a highly detailed synthesis of characterization strategies and regulatory hurdles, several intrinsic limitations must be acknowledged. First, due to the proprietary nature of commercial pharmaceutical manufacturing processes, a substantial volume of characterization data and internal validation protocols remains tightly guarded as trade secrets within corporate archives. Consequently, this paper is limited to publicly accessible peer-reviewed literature and regulatory white papers, which may underrepresent the latest internal operational refinements implemented by large-scale pharmaceutical manufacturers. Second, the rapid acceleration of the field means that novel, hybrid characterization instruments (such as single-particle multi-spectral imaging) are emerging faster than independent academic validation studies can publish, leading to an unavoidable temporal lag in the assessment of these bleeding-edge technologies. Third, the review is constrained by the qualitative nature of comparing disparate regional regulatory guidelines that lack standardized metrics, preventing a truly synchronized quantitative statistical meta-analysis.

FUTURE SCOPE

The future of nanopharmaceutical evaluation lies in the convergence of advanced biophysics, artificial intelligence, and automated microfluidics. A critical avenue for future research is the development of Next-Generation In Vivo Characterization Modalities [21]. Researchers must prioritize the advancement of non-invasive, high-resolution imaging technologies, such as Magnetic Particle Imaging (MPI) and Positron Emission Tomography combined with Computed Tomography (PET-CT), capable of tracking the real-time structural integrity and structural degradation kinetics of nanopharmaceuticals directly inside living human tissues over extended durations.

Furthermore, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) into formulation science offers massive potential. By training deep neural networks on massive historic physical-chemical datasets, algorithms can accurately predict the final size, PDI, encapsulation efficiency, and biological corona composition of a hypothetical nanoparticle before executing a single physical experiment in the lab. Finally, international regulatory harmonizing committees must urgently collaborate to establish a globally unified 'Nanopharmaceutical Passport'—a standardized digital validation dossier containing mandatory, universally calibrated CQA criteria using certified soft-matter reference standards, effectively removing the regional regulatory frictions that currently delay the global distribution of life-saving nanomedicines.

CONCLUSION

The transformative therapeutic potential of nanopharmaceuticals can only be fully unlocked through a rigorous, synchronized harmonization of advanced analytical characterization and robust regulatory science. This comprehensive review has systematically demonstrated that the extreme physical-chemical complexity of nanoscale drug delivery vehicles demands a transition away from isolated standalone analytical tools toward an interconnected, orthogonal matrix of characterization modalities. By utilizing DLS, NTA, Cryo-TEM, and surface-sensitive spectroscopies in a highly coordinated fashion, researchers can generate highly accurate structural profiles that fulfill the strict validation expectations of global regulatory bodies.

Moving forward, overcoming the profound challenges of batch-to-batch manufacturing drift and unpredictable in vivo protein corona formation requires the systemic implementation of Quality by Design (QbD) principles and inline Process Analytical Technology (PAT). As regulatory agencies like the US FDA and EMA continue to refine and align their statutory frameworks, the technical strategies, research gaps, and roadmaps outlined in this paper provide a robust, actionable paradigm to guide scientists, engineers, and regulators in successfully bridging the gap between benchside nanotechnology innovation and commercial clinical reality.

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***Author for Correspondence**
Dr. Aayush Shrestha
E-mail: aayush_shrestha257@rediffmail.com

[1]Associate Professor, Department of Pharmacy, Kathmandu University
[1]Associate Professor, Department of Pharmacy, Kathmandu University
[3]Research Scholar, Department of Pharmacy, Kathmandu University

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