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Physicochemical Transitions and Polymerization Dynamics in Multi-Generational Dentin Adhesives: A Critical Review of the Resin-Dentin Composite Interface

Vanita D. Revankar[1,*], Harikaran Jeyakkodi[2], Adhavan Balaji K.L.M.[3], Nandhini K.[4], Manoharan Subhashini[5], Thenmozhi R.[6]

Abstract

*Adhesive dentistry has undergone a transformative refinement over the past three decades, transitioning from technique-sensitive, multi-step etch-and-rinse protocols to streamlined universal formulations. This narrative review critically synthesizes evidence from thirty peer-reviewed investigations to evaluate the evolution of dentin bonding agents from the fourth through the eighth generations. The analysis places particular emphasis on the physicochemical dynamics of the resin-dentin interface, including interfacial bond strength metrics, marginal integrity, and microleakage behavior. Furthermore, it examines the profound influence of operative variables—such as etching strategies and restorative material compatibility—on the longevity of the hybrid layer. Data from in vitro models indicate that eighth-generation and universal adhesives consistently demonstrate enhanced shear bond strength values, frequently ranging between **26 and 40 MPa**, which often surpasses the performance of earlier simplified systems. However, the review identifies significant methodological heterogeneity within the literature and highlights that technique-related parameters, specifically selective phosphoric acid enamel conditioning, often exert an influence equal to or greater than the generational classification of the adhesive itself. Despite these favorable laboratory outcomes, long-term randomized clinical evidence remains sparse, revealing a persistent translational gap between bench-top evaluation and real-world clinical durability. Ultimately, this review provides a mechanistic, evidence-based framework for adhesive selection while identifying critical priorities for the development of future bioactive and hydrolytically stable formulations capable of resisting enzymatic degradation at the interface.*

***Author for Correspondence**
Vanita D. Revankar

[1,2]Professor, Department of Conservative dentistry & Endodontics, Vinayaka Mission's Sankarachariyar Dental College, Vinayaka Mission's Research Foundation (Deemed to be University) Salem, Tamil Nadu, India
[3,4,6]Assistant Professor, Department of Conservative dentistry & Endodontics, Vinayaka Mission's Sankarachariyar Dental College, Vinayaka Mission's Research Foundation (Deemed to be University), Salem, Tamil Nadu, India
[5]Associate Professor, Department of Conservative dentistry & Endodontics, Vinayaka Mission's Sankarachariyar Dental College, Vinayaka Mission's Research Foundation (Deemed to be University) Salem, Tamil Nadu, India

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INTRODUCTION

The integrity of the resin-dentin interface represents one of the most complex challenges in polymer science applied to biomedical engineering. Over the past thirty years, adhesive dentistry has evolved from multi-component systems toward simplified, high-performance macromolecular networks designed to bridge the gap between biological collagenous tissues and synthetic restorative composites [1,2]. This transition—spanning from the fourth-generation multi-step protocols to contemporary eighth-generation "universal" adhesives—highlights a shift in focus

from purely micromechanical interlocking to sophisticated chemical chelation and surface-active monomer technology [3].

At the core of this interface is the **hybrid layer**, a bio-composite zone where the penetration and subsequent polymerization of monomers within a demineralized dentin matrix determine the success of the restoration. The physicochemical stability of this layer is governed by the diffusion kinetics of monomers such as **Bis-GMA, HEMA, and 10-MDP**, alongside the volatile dynamics of solvents like ethanol and acetone. Despite advancements in shear bond strength [2,4], which now frequently reach the **26–40 MPa** threshold, the polymer-dentin bond remains susceptible to hydrolytic degradation and enzymatic cleavage by endogenous matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs).

The variability in clinical performance often stems from the interplay between the degree of conversion of the polymer network and the operative conditioning of the substrate. Specifically, the influence of selective phosphoric acid etching on enamel versus the self-etching capability of acidic monomers on dentin creates a heterogeneous bonding environment. This review provides a critical analysis of the polymerization dynamics and interfacial behavior of multi-generational adhesives. By synthesizing data from thirty peer-reviewed investigations, it establishes a mechanistic framework for understanding current material limitations and identifies the trajectory for the next generation of bioactive, hydrolytically stable polymer composites in restorative dentistry.

EVOLUTION OF MACROMOLECULAR ADHESION STRATEGIES

The Etch-and-Rinse Paradigm: Interpenetrating Polymer Networks (4th & 5th Gen)

Fourth-generation systems established the foundational three-step protocol based on the formation of a collagen-resin interpenetrating network. Phosphoric acid conditioning (35–37%) demineralizes the inorganic phase to a depth of **5–8 \mum**, creating a high-porosity scaffold. Subsequent infiltration of hydrophilic monomers (e.g., **HEMA**) and hydrophobic cross-linkers (e.g., **Bis-GMA**) results in the "hybrid layer." Fifth-generation systems attempted to simplify this by combining the primer and adhesive into a single solvent-rich phase [4,5].

From a polymer science perspective, these systems are highly sensitive to the **Hansen solubility parameters** of the solvent. Over-drying causes the collagen network to collapse due to high surface tension, preventing monomer diffusion. Conversely, excess moisture triggers **phase separation** [2,6], where the hydrophobic resin forms "water trees" within the polymer matrix, significantly compromising the **degree of conversion** and increasing susceptibility to **enzymatic hydrolysis** via matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs).

Self-Etch Systems: Integration of Acidic Functional Monomers (6th Gen)

Sixth-generation adhesives introduced amphiphilic monomers that act as simultaneous etchants and primers. With a pH range of **1.5–2.5**, these monomers partially dissolve the smear layer while integrating it into the polymerizing interface. This approach ensures **infiltration-demineralization congruency**, theoretically eliminating the voids often found in etch-and-rinse systems. However, the reduced acidity often leads to lower **enamel etching patterns**, limiting the mechanical interlocking on inorganic-rich substrates compared to phosphoric acid conditioning
[5,7].

All-in-One Formulations: Challenges in Chemical Compatibility (7th Gen)

The consolidation of etchant, primer, and adhesive into a single solution (7th Gen) introduced significant **macromolecular stability challenges**. The coexistence of highly acidic monomers, hydrophilic resins, and water in a single bottle promotes **pre-cure hydrolysis** and suboptimal polymerization. The resulting polymer network often exhibits high **water sorption** and residual solvent entrapment, which plasticizes the resin matrix and reduces the **glass transition temperature (T_g)** of the interface, leading to premature mechanical failure [6,8].

Universal Adhesives and Multi-Mode Polymerization (8th Gen)

Current "universal" or eighth-generation systems represent a sophisticated shift toward **chemical chelation**. These formulations typically incorporate **10-Methacryloyloxydecyl dihydrogen phosphate (10-MDP)**, a functional monomer that forms stable calcium salts with hydroxyapatite.

The inclusion of **nanofiller reinforcements** and optimized solvent systems (e.g., ethanol/water co-solvents) improves the **viscoelastic properties** of the adhesive layer. These systems are designed for multi-mode application, allowing the clinician to manipulate the interfacial chemistry based on the substrate's mineral content [2,4].

INTERFACIAL POLYMER MECHANICS AND BOND PERFORMANCE

Mechanical Characterization of the Resin-Dentin Interface

Recent literature demonstrates that eighth-generation adhesives achieve statistically superior shear and microtensile bond strengths, with mean values consistently within the **26–40 MPa** range. From a materials science standpoint, this enhancement is not merely due to "stickiness" but is a result of:

- **Nano-Layering:** The formation of highly organized MDP-Ca salts at the molecular level.
- **High Cross-linking Density:** Optimized photo-initiator systems that ensure a higher degree of conversion even in the presence of acidic monomers.
- **Solvent Evaporation Kinetics:** Improved vapor pressure management during air-thinning, reducing the density of micro-voids within the polymer.
- **Filler Reinforcement:** The use of silanized silica or zirconia nanoparticles to distribute occlusal stresses more uniformly across the hybrid layer.

Despite these laboratory advancements, the **translational gap** remains; in vitro models often fail to account for the **hydrothermal fatigue** and **polymerization shrinkage stress** (C-factor) encountered in the complex oral environment [3,5,7].

Influence of Multi-Stage vs. Simplified Polymerization

Regardless of generational classification, the architecture of the interface is dictated by the sequence of monomer application. Multi-stage systems (e.g., separate priming and bonding) facilitate superior phase separation control. By applying a volatile primer first, the solvent (ethanol/water) effectively displaces water within the collagen scaffold [9,10].

Subsequent application of a high-viscosity, hydrophobic resin promotes the formation of a dense, highly cross-linked polymer network with a low permeability coefficient. In contrast, "all-in-one" simplified systems act as semi-permeable membranes; their inherent hydrophilicity increases water sorption and osmotic flow, which plasticizes the polymer matrix and accelerates the cleavage of ester bonds within the resin backbone [5,11].

Methodological Heterogeneity and Material Compatibility

The performance of 6th and 7th-generation systems often exhibits high variance due to the thermodynamic compatibility between the adhesive and the restorative composite [8,12]. Discrepancies in the literature are frequently linked to the degree of conversion (DC), which is sensitive to:

- pH-dependent inhibition: The acidity of some self-etch monomers can interfere with the tertiary amine initiators in dual-cure composites.
- Solvent Evaporation: Residual solvent acts as a plasticizer, lowering the modulus of elasticity of the hybrid layer.

Therefore, the generational label is a less reliable predictor of performance than the specific monomer-to-initiator ratio and the chemical compatibility of the restorative interface.

Structural Benchmark: The 5th Generation Interface

Despite the emergence of newer formulations, 5th-generation adhesives remain a mechanical benchmark due to their ability to form a robust interpenetrating network (IPN). When the collagen scaffold is kept hydrated (wet-bonding), the infiltration of Bis-GMA/HEMA resins creates a high-density resin-tag morphology that effectively resists mechanical stress. Their continued relevance in research is due to this predictable, high-energy mechanical interlocking [9,13].

ETCHING STRATEGY: INTERFACIAL MORPHOLOGY AND TRANSPORT

Total-Etch: High-Aspect Ratio Microporosities

The etch-and-rinse strategy utilizes 37% phosphoric acid to increase the surface free energy of the substrate. This creates high-aspect-ratio microporosities and a demineralized zone of 5–8 \mum. While this allows for deep resin tag penetration, the resulting interface is highly dependent on the Flory-Huggins interaction parameter between the resin and the moist collagen; any mismatch leads to nanoleakage at the base of the hybrid layer [14,15].

Self-Etch: Surface Modification and Chemical Chelation

Self-etch mechanisms rely on acidic functional monomers to modify the smear layer, creating a shallower but more uniform transition zone (0.5–2 \mum). This approach minimizes dentinal tubule hydraulic conductance, reducing post-operative sensitivity. However, on high-mineralization substrates like enamel, the etch-depth is often insufficient to create the surface area required for long-term mechanical stability [15,16,17].

Selective Enamel Etching: The Hybrid Kinetic Approach

- The current consensus in polymer-dentin bonding favors a selective-etch strategy. This involves:
- Phosphoric Acid on Enamel: Creating high-energy micromechanical retention in the inorganic-rich substrate.
- Self-Etch Monomers on Dentin: Utilizing chemical chelation (e.g., MDP-Ca salt formation) to bond to the organic-rich substrate without risking deep collagen collapse.
- This dual-kinetic approach optimizes the interfacial bond strength while maintaining the hydrolytic stability of the dentin-polymer complex [18,19]

Viscoelasticity and Hydrolytic Degradation Kinetics

A pivotal factor in the longevity of the resin-dentin interface is the **viscoelastic behavior** of the adhesive layer. Once polymerized, the adhesive must act as a stress-absorbing buffer between the high-modulus restorative composite and the lower-modulus dentin. However, the high concentration of hydrophilic monomers like **HEMA** in simplified systems (7th and 8th Gen) increases the **Equilibrium Water Sorption** [18,20,21].

As water molecules infiltrate the polymer network, they act as plasticizers, disrupting interchain hydrogen bonding and reducing the **Glass Transition Temperature (T_g)**. This transition from a glassy to a rubbery state compromises the dimensional stability of the hybrid layer. Furthermore, the "water trees" formed by phase separation act as conduits for endogenous enzymes, accelerating the **scission of ester bonds** within the methacrylate backbone. Future polymer designs must therefore focus on **hydrophobic-rich cross-linkers** that maintain a high **Storage Modulus (E')** even in aqueous environments [5,9,22] (Table 1).

The evolution of adhesive dentistry is characterized by a transition from technique-sensitive, multi-step protocols toward high-performance macromolecular networks designed to bridge biological tissues and synthetic composites. The **Etch-and-Rinse** strategy utilized in fourth and fifth-generation systems relies on phosphoric acid demineralization to a depth of 5–8 \mum, creating a high-porosity scaffold for the formation of a collagen-resin interpenetrating network. **Self-Etch** systems (6th and 7th Gen) introduced acidic functional monomers with a pH range of 1.5–2.5 to modify and integrate the smear

layer into the polymerizing interface, which theoretically eliminates voids through infiltration-demineralization congruency. Contemporary **Universal or 8th Generation** adhesives represent a sophisticated shift toward chemical chelation, incorporating 10-MDP monomers that form stable calcium salts and organized nano-layering. These modern systems frequently reach shear bond strength thresholds of 26–40 MPa by optimizing cross-linking density and solvent evaporation kinetics to resist hydrolytic degradation and enzymatic cleavage at the hybrid layer (Figure 1).

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Adhesion Chemistries, Macromolecular Architecture, and Interfacial Dynamics

Feature	4th & 5th Generation (Etch-and-Rinse)	6th & 7th Generation (Self-Etch)	8th Gen & Universal (Multi-Mode)
Dominant Monomer Chemistry	Dimethacrylate-based (Bis-GMA / HEMA / TEGDMA)	Amphiphilic Acidic Monomers (e.g., PENTA)	Functional Monomers (10-MDP) / Polyalkenoic Acid
Interfacial Mechanism	High-energy micromechanical interlocking	Smear layer dissolution and integration	Chemical chelation and organometallic bonding
Adhesive Layer Thickness	3–8 µm (Pronounced hybrid zone)	0.5–2 µm (Thin transition zone)	1–2 µm (Molecularly integrated)
Solvent Dynamics	High vapor pressure (Acetone/Ethanol/Water)	Water/Ethanol (Hydrophilic focus)	Optimized Ethanol/Water co-solvents
Macromolecular Architecture	Collagen-Resin Interpenetrating Network (IPN)	Integrated Smear-Resin Matrix	Organometallic Nano-layering
Equilibrium Water Sorption	Moderate to High	High (Acts as semi-permeable membrane)	Low (Hydrophobic-rich network)
Polymerization Kinetics	Generally high Degree of Conversion (DC)	Variable; sensitive to pH-dependent inhibition	High DC (Enhanced photo-initiators)
Shear Bond Strength (SBS)	20–30 MPa	18–30 MPa	26–40 MPa (Triple-layer optimal)
Primary Degradation Pathway	Enzymatic collagen cleavage (MMPs)	Hydrolytic plasticization of resin matrix	Minimal (Bio-degradation limited)

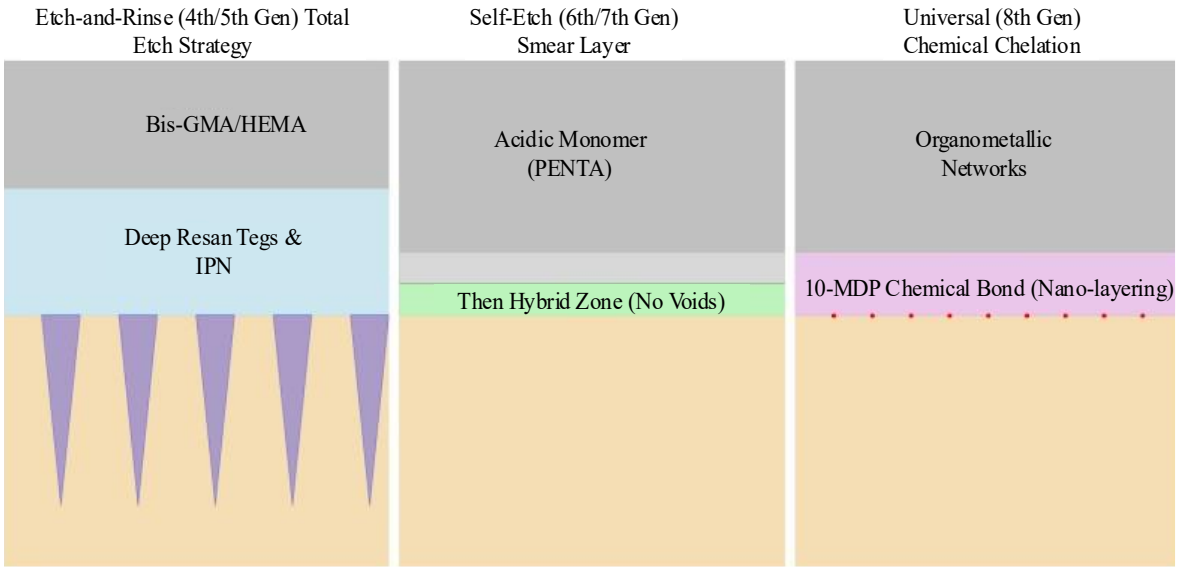

Figure 1. Schematic Evolution of Resin-Dentin Bonding Mechanisms

INTERFACIAL SEALING AND DEGRADATION KINETICS

It is well-established that high initial bond strength values do not inherently ensure long-term sealing efficacy. The integrity of the margin is governed by a complex interplay of **polymerization shrinkage**

stress, the **Coefficient of Thermal Expansion (CTE)** mismatch between the polymer and the mineralized substrate, and the **permeability** of the adhesive layer [20,23,24].

Recent evaluations of eighth-generation systems indicate a significant reduction in dye penetration compared to their predecessors. This is attributed to optimized **cross-linking density** and improved **hydrolytic stability**. However, the long-term durability of the marginal seal is challenged by:

- **Hydroscopic Expansion and Water Sorption:** Hydrophilic monomers (e.g., HEMA) act as "water bridges," allowing moisture to infiltrate the polymer matrix. This leads to plasticization, lowering the storage modulus (E') of the interface.
- **Enzymatic Bio-degradation:** The ester bonds within conventional dimethacrylate resins are susceptible to cleavage by host-derived Matrix Metalloproteinases (MMPs) and salivary esterases.
- **Nanoleakage Dynamics:** The presence of micro-voids at the base of the hybrid layer—often caused by incomplete solvent evaporation—serves as a precursor to catastrophic interfacial failure [24,25].

Factors Influencing the Translational Gap

While **in vitro** shear bond strength (SBS) provides a baseline, it fails to account for **Fatigue Resistance**. In a composite journal, it is important to note that the **Dynamic Mechanical Analysis (DMA)** of these adhesives often shows a significant drop in properties after thermocycling.

- **The C-Factor Influence:** In constrained configurations, the **polymerization shrinkage stress** can exceed the early tensile strength of the polymerizing adhesive, leading to "debonding-on-setting."
- **Enzymatic Scission:** The focus is shifting toward **inhibiting the catalytic site** of MMPs through the incorporation of quaternary ammonium monomers (e.g., **MDPB**), which provide antimicrobial activity and enzymatic protection simultaneously.

MACROMOLECULAR ARCHITECTURE AND POLYMER NETWORK DYNAMICS IN MULTI-GENERATIONAL ADHESIVE COMPOSITES

The evolution of adhesive dentistry is fundamentally defined by a transition from viewing bonding agents as simple "glues" to treating them as dynamic macromolecular networks engineered to bridge biological collagenous tissues and synthetic restorative composites. The Etch-and-Rinse strategy (4th and 5th Gen) utilizes phosphoric acid to demineralize the inorganic phase to a depth of 5–8 \mum, creating a high-porosity scaffold for the formation of a collagen-resin interpenetrating polymer network (IPN). Self-Etch systems (6th and 7th Gen) introduced amphiphilic, acidic functional monomers to integrate the smear layer into the polymerizing interface, which theoretically eliminates voids through infiltration-demineralization congruency [5,26]. Contemporary Universal or 8th Generation adhesives represent a sophisticated shift toward chemical chelation, incorporating 10-MDP monomers that form stable calcium salts and organized organometallic nano-layering. From a polymer composite perspective, these modern systems achieve superior shear bond strengths of 26–40 MPa by optimizing cross-linking density, utilizing nanofiller reinforcements, and managing solvent evaporation kinetics to resist hydrolytic degradation and enzymatic cleavage by matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs) at the hybrid layer [27].

The study by Zecin-Deren *et al*. [28] demonstrates that a **triple-layer application** of simplified self-etch and universal adhesives significantly improves **shear bond strength (SBS)** compared to single-layer protocols. By increasing the **adhesive layer thickness** and ensuring a more robust macromolecular network, multi-layering mitigates the semi-permeable nature and high water sorption typical of "all-in-one" formulations. Specifically, Single Bond Universal achieved its highest performance with three layers, suggesting that increasing the density of **10-MDP** and chemical chelation sites can help bridge the translational gap between laboratory results and clinical durability

SYNTHESIS OF EVIDENCE AND FUTURE POLYMER PERSPECTIVES

Mechanisms for Optimized Clinical Performance [6,28,29]

Based on the synthesis of current macromolecular and clinical evidence, the following parameters are critical for achieving interfacial longevity:

- **Utilization of Functional Monomers:** Universal and eighth-generation formulations incorporating **10-MDP** are preferred due to their ability to form stable, insoluble calcium-monomer salts, providing chemical reinforcement to micromechanical interlocking.
- **Selective Kinetic Conditioning:** Pre-treating enamel with phosphoric acid while utilizing self-etching monomers on dentin optimizes the surface energy across heterogeneous substrates.
- **Solvent Management:** Meticulous air-thinning is required to manage the vapor pressure of ethanol/water co-solvents, ensuring that residual solvent does not interfere with the **kinetics of polymerization**.
- **Inter-material Compatibility:** The chemical synergy between the adhesive photo-initiator system and the restorative composite is a more significant predictor of success than the adhesive's generational classification [25,30].

Priorities for Next-Generation Polymer Research

Future investigations in dental polymer science should transition from observational bond-strength studies toward **bio-instructive and stable formulations**, focusing on:

- **Enzymatic Inhibition:** Integration of monomers with inherent MMP-inhibitory properties (e.g., quaternary ammonium methacryaltes) to prevent collagen degradation.
- **Hydrolytically Stable Networks:** Exploration of ether-based or thiourethane-modified resins that offer superior resistance to water-mediated cleavage.
- **Bioactive and Biomimetic Interfaces:** Development of "smart" polymers capable of inducing **ion-remineralization** (releasing Ca^{2+} and PO_4^{3-}) at the hybrid layer to bridge the gap between synthetic and biological tissues.
- **Advanced Characterization:** Utilizing **Micro-Raman Spectroscopy** and **Atomic Force Microscopy (AFM)** to quantify the degree of conversion and nanoleakage at the molecular level.

CONCLUSION

The progression from fourth- to eighth-generation dentin bonding systems reflects continuous refinement in adhesive chemistry and clinical protocol. Eighth-generation and universal adhesives demonstrate superior laboratory bond strength and improved marginal sealing relative to simplified predecessors.

However, adhesive performance is multifactorial. Technique sensitivity, etching strategy, composite interaction, and substrate characteristics significantly influence clinical outcomes. Generational categorization alone is insufficient to predict longevity.

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