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Enhanced Two-Photon Absorption with Novel Octupolar Propeller-Shaped Fluorophores Derived from Triphenylamine

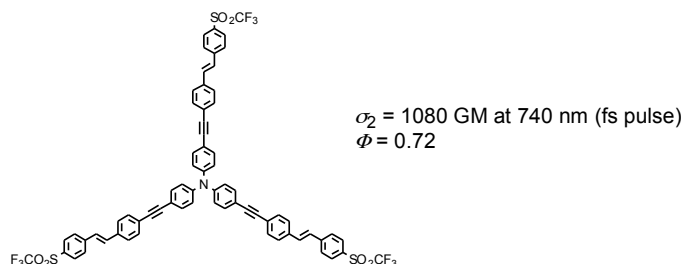
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ABSTRACT



Novel octupolar fluorophores derived from the symmetrical functionalization of a triphenylamine core with strong acceptor peripheral groups via phenylene-ethynylene linkers have been synthesized and shown to exhibit high fluorescence quantum yields, very large TPA cross-sections in the red-NIR region and suitable photostability.

Molecular two-photon absorption (TPA) has attracted growing interest over recent years owing to the many applications it offers both in material science and in biological imaging. These include microfabrication,¹ 3D optical data storage,² optical power limitation,³ localized photodynamic therapy,⁴ and two-photon laser scanning fluorescence imaging.⁵ These applications call for the design of specifically engineered compounds displaying enhanced TPA cross-sections. In the case of two-photon excited fluorescence (TPEF) microscopy, high performance fluorophores must exhibit both high fluorescence quantum yields (ϕ) and large TPA cross-sections (σ_2) in the red-NIR range (700-1200 nm), corresponding to the biological

optimal window for reduced photodamage.⁵ Photostability is also an important feature to consider for TPEF-based applications.

The optimization of molecular TPA has largely focused on one-dimensional dipolar^{6,7} or quadrupolar^{3,7,8} structures, and so far only little attention has been devoted to the design of optimized octupolar structures,⁹ although it has been realized that increased dimensionality and branched structures^{10,11} could lead to highly effective multiphoton absorption. In this perspective, we have investigated a series of novel three-branched octupolar fluorophores with the aim of optimizing their TPEF cross-section ($\sigma_2\phi$) in the NIR region, as well as ensuring suitable photostability.

Our trigonal derivatives are derived from the symmetrical functionalization of an electron-donating triphenylamine core with three conjugated branches (Scheme 1) bearing electron-withdrawing (A) end-groups (**12-15**). Although octupolar derivatives based on triphenylamine cores have been shown to lead to high quadratic polarizabilities,¹² only few examples of such derivatives have been shown to display large TPA cross-section,^{9a-c} calling for further engineering of the basic structures.

To examine the role of octupolar symmetry, we also have investigated a structurally-related analogue bearing only electron-releasing D peripheral groups (**11**). Following the same line of reasoning, we have selected strong acceptor peripheral groups using in particular the triflyl moiety (compounds **13, 15**), a powerful acceptor,¹³ which has not been considered yet in molecular engineering of TPA. Rigid (**11-13**) or semi-rigid (**14, 15**) conjugated rods built from phenylene-ethynylene and phenylene-vinylene units were used to allow Intramolecular Charge Transfer (ICT) to take place between the core and the peripheral groups while maintaining fluorescence. In order to enhance the TPA cross-section, we have investigated molecules of increasing size from 2.9 to 4.3 nm in diameter. B3LYP ab-initio calculations indicate that the molecules adopt a propeller-shaped structure (Figure 1), the core nitrogen being trigonal and the conjugated branches twisted by about 40°.

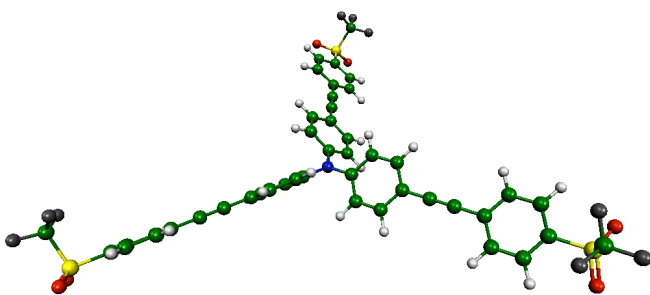
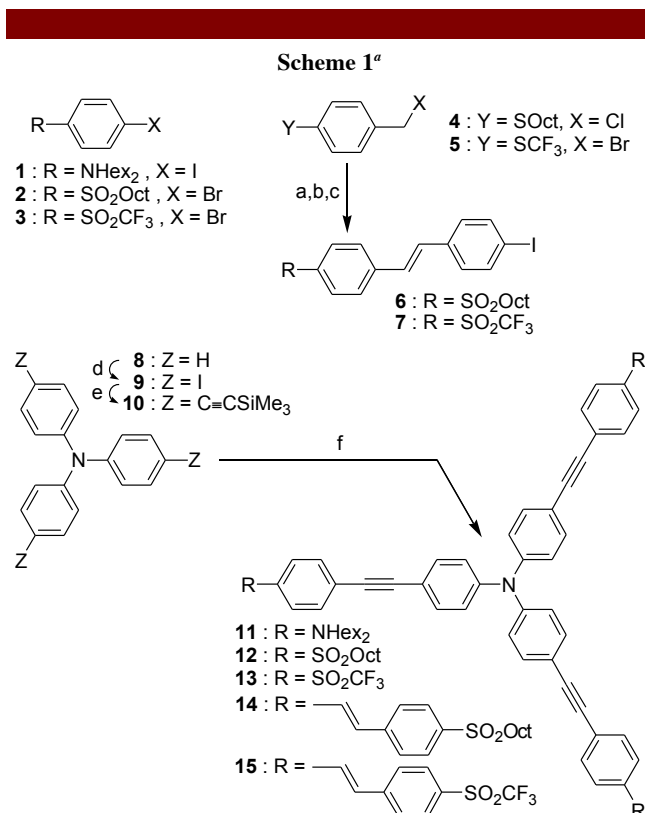


Figure 1. B3LYP optimized geometry of fluorophore **13**.

The synthesis of these fluorophores is based on the three-fold Pd(0)-catalyzed cross-coupling reaction of the nitrogen-cored building block **10** (Scheme 1) with aromatic iodide (**1, 6, 7**) or bromide (**2-3**) derivatives. The synthesis of the triphenylamine reagent **10** was achieved by triiodination¹⁷ of triphenylamine, followed by a triple Sonogashira coupling with ethynyltrimethylsilane. The extended building blocks **6** and **7** were obtained from the halo derivatives **4** and **5**, respectively, in a three-step sequence (Michaelis-Arbuzov reaction, oxidation and Horner-Wadsworth-Emmons condensation with 4-iodo-

benzaldehyde). All new fluorophores have been fully characterized by NMR, HRMS and elemental analysis data.

The photophysical properties of the new series of trigonal fluorophores are shown in Table 1 and Figure 2.



We observe that all fluorophores display a broad absorption in the near UV-visible violet region and exhibit high fluorescence quantum yield (about 0.8) independently of their end-groups (D or A) or conjugated branch nature. In contrast their fluorescence lifetimes are significantly affected by the nature of the peripheral groups. We observe that the octupolar derivatives (**12-15**) display longer fluorescence lifetimes than the analogue bearing only donor peripheral groups (**11**). Interestingly, the powerful triflyl acceptor leads to a noticeable increase of the fluorescence lifetime, while an increase in the length of the branches by the addition of a phenylene-vinylene unit results in a decrease of the fluorescence lifetime.

Increasing the polarity of the solvent leads to a slight bathochromic shift of the absorption band of octupolar

fluorophores (**12-15**), and to a more pronounced red shift in their emission band (Table 1). Such positive solvatochromic behavior can be related to an ICT phenomenon taking place between the fluorophore center and periphery.^{18,19}

The TPA spectra of fluorophores **11-15** in the 740-950 nm range were determined by investigating their TPEF in solution according to the protocol described by Webb and coworkers²⁰ in the femtosecond regime. We note that

Table 1 Photophysical and Two-Photon Absorption Characteristics of Fluorophores **11-15**.

compd	$\lambda_{\text{abs}}^{\text{OPA}}$ (nm) ^a		$\log \epsilon^b$	$\lambda_{\text{em}}^{\text{OPA}}$ (nm) ^c		stokes shift (cm^{-1}) ^{b,d}	$\phi^{b,e}$	τ (ns) ^{b,f}	$\sigma_2(\text{GM})^{b,g}$	
	toluene	CHCl_3		toluene	CHCl_3				at 2 $\lambda_{\text{abs}}^{\text{OPA}}$	at 740 nm
11	385	384	5.06	411	450	1600	0.77	0.88	15	30
12	388	392	4.91	424	449	2200	0.77	1.27	150	160
13	405	409	4.78	450	502	2500	0.78	1.49	420	495
14	397	399	5.13	446	500	2800	0.79	1.07	660	1065
15	408	409	4.97	473	542	3400	0.72	1.29	740	1080

^a One-photon absorption maximum. ^b In toluene. ^c One-photon emission maximum. ^d Stokes shift = $(1/\lambda_{\text{abs}} - 1/\lambda_{\text{em}})$. ^e Fluorescence quantum yield relative to fluorescein in 0.1 N NaOH as a standard ($\lambda_{\text{ex}} = 470$ nm). ^f Experimental fluorescence lifetime. ^g TPA cross-sections; 1 GM = 10^{-50} $\text{cm}^4 \cdot \text{s} \cdot \text{photon}^{-1}$; TPEF measurements were performed using a mode-locked Ti:sapphire laser delivering 80 fs pulses at 80 MHz, calibrating with fluorescein.

the TPA spectra of the octupolar fluorophores **12-15** (Figure 3) exhibit a relative maximum close to twice $\lambda_{\text{abs}}^{\text{OPA}}$, indicating that the lowest energy excited-state is both one-photon and two-photon allowed.²¹

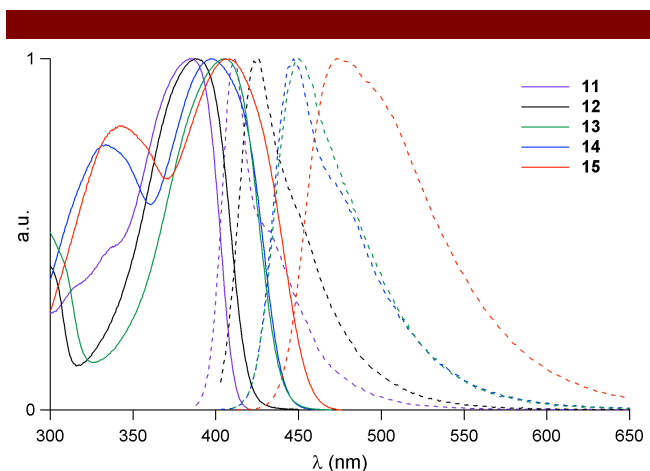


Figure 2. Normalized absorption and emission spectra of fluorophores **11-15** in toluene.

We note that the character of the end-groups significantly affects the TPA response. The tris-acceptor octupolar fluorophores display much larger TPA cross-sections than their tris-donor counterpart (**11**). For instance, molecule **13** shows a TPA cross-section more than one-order of magnitude larger than molecule **11** of similar size. Moreover we observe from the comparison of fluorophores **12** and **13** that increasing the acceptor character of the end-group does lead to an important increase in the TPA cross-section (Figure 3), in correlation with a concomitant

increase in the Stokes shift (Table 1) and a red shift of both the absorption and emission spectra (Figure 2).

By increasing the distance between the core and peripheral electroactive groups, we aimed at extending the multidimensional charge transfer phenomenon and increasing the nonlinear response.²³ This strategy turned out to be effective, as observed from the comparison of fluorophores **12** and **14**, which bear similar acceptor end-groups: increasing the molecular weight of the molecule by 30% (and increasing the size by about 50%) leads to a 4- (respectively 6-) fold enhancement in the TPA cross-section at 2 $\lambda_{\text{abs}}^{\text{OPA}}$ (respectively 740 nm). This also leads to a red-shift and broadening of both absorption and emission bands (Figure 2), as well as to an increase in the Stokes shifts, consistent with an increase of the core-to-periphery ICT. A similar trend is noted when comparing fluorophores **13** and **15** (Table 1) - but to a lesser extent - while the main effect lies in the major broadening of the TPA spectrum towards the NIR region. As a result, the elongated octupolar fluorophore **15** bearing strong acceptor peripheral groups maintains sizeable TPA cross-section at 900 nm (Figure 3). Finally, we stress that the use of phenylene-ethynylene linkers in the conjugated branches (in place of the more classical phenylene-vinylene linkers) leads to improved photostability, as indicated by the absence of photodegradation either upon pulsed-laser or prolonged lamp irradiation for derivatives **12** and **13**.

In summary, we have designed and investigated novel multipolar fluorophores derived from a triphenylamine core. By enhancing the multidimensional ICT between the core and the peripheral groups, we produced fluorophores that combine very large TPA cross-sections in the red-NIR region, high fluorescence quantum yields and suitable photostability. This strategy led to octupolar fluorophores

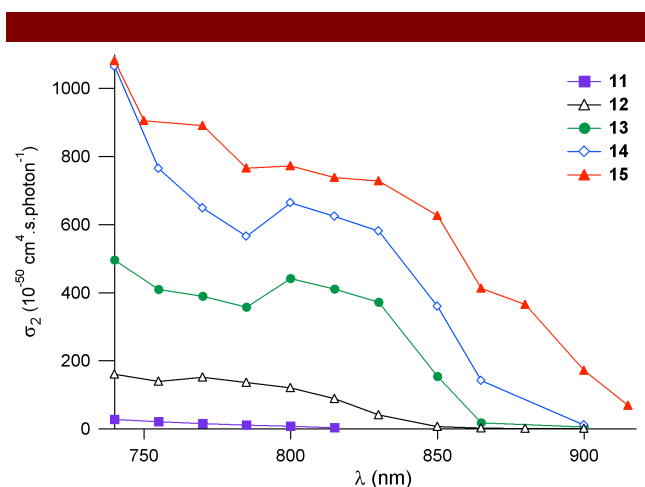


Figure 3. TPA spectra of fluorophores **11-15** in toluene.

that exhibit some of the highest TPA cross-sections measured to date in the NIR region and in the femtosecond regime.²⁴

Furthermore, our study provides evidence that the TPA cross-sections of such derivatives can be significantly enhanced in the NIR region with elongated derivatives bearing strong electron-withdrawing peripheral groups, leading to new directions for further engineering of their TPA properties. In particular by modifying and lengthening the conjugated branches, even larger TPA cross-sections should be attainable.²⁵

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Supporting Information Available: Computational details. Photophysical methods (absorption, fluorescence and TPEF). Description of all new fluorophores. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

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(24) PRL-701: $\sigma_2 = 600$ GM at 796 nm (Z-scan);^{9b} crystal violet: $\sigma_2 = 1980$ GM at 752 nm, (TPEF, $\phi = 0.015$);^{9c} compound **9** from ref. 10f: $\sigma_2 = 1265$ GM at 770 nm, (TPEF, $\phi = 0.80$).

(25) In particular by replacing the phenyl moieties by a fluorene unit^{10f} and/or triple bonds by double bonds (but at the expense of reduced photostability).