Blocking Nonspecific Primer Amplification in Loop-Mediated Isothermal Amplification with TrueLAMP

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Abstract

Loop-mediated isothermal amplification (LAMP) is a rapid nucleic acid amplification technique suited for point-of-care testing but prone to nonspecific amplification and false positives, especially in colorimetric formats. We evaluated TrueLAMP, a polymerase formulation containing a proprietary inhibitor that selectively suppresses primer-driven nonspecific amplification while preserving target-specific reactions. Using a simple semi-real-time colorimetric LAMP setup, TrueLAMP completely blocked amplification in no-template controls and maintained robust detection of RNA and DNA targets at 65 °C for 90 min. With SARS-CoV-2 RNA as a model, TrueLAMP achieved a limit of detection of 250 copies per reaction, showing 96.9% sensitivity and 100% specificity. TrueLAMP thus substantially improves LAMP reliability and prevents false-positive amplification, enabling accurate semi-real-time colorimetric LAMP monitoring using unmodified, off-the-shelf equipment to support point-of-care and resource-limited diagnostics.

Keywords: Loop-mediated isothermal amplification (LAMP); colorimetric LAMP; nonspecific amplification; false positives; point-of-care diagnostics; TrueLAMP™.

Introduction

Loop-mediated isothermal amplification (LAMP) has become a prominent method for rapid nucleic acid detection due to its high amplification efficiency and suitability for isothermal conditions, making it ideal for point-of-care and field testing [1–4]. Despite its enormous potential as a research and diagnostic tool, LAMP's broader use has been limited by a persistent and widely encountered problem: nonspecific amplification in the absence of template DNA or RNA. This nonspecific amplification can lead to false positives in no-template controls (NTCs) and testing samples, making LAMP testing unreliable [5–7].

Confronted by these false positives, researchers naturally suspect contamination and spend considerable time and resources to identify the source, such as replacing reagents and consumables, cleaning equipment, implementing separate preparation and reaction rooms, or incorporating uracil-DNA glycosylase (UDG) and dUTP systems to prevent cross-contamination. When nonspecific amplification persists, practitioners often redesign and screen new primer sets. The recurring problem frustrates users and frequently leads to the abandonment of LAMP-based projects.

Several recent strategies have attempted to overcome LAMP's nonspecific amplification by coupling the reaction to sequence-specific nucleases such as CRISPR/Cas12a or programmable Argonaute (pAgo) proteins. In these systems, the nuclease is activated only when the correct target sequence is bound by a complementary guide RNA or DNA, thereby rejecting off-target or primer-derived amplicons and improving assay specificity [8–11]. While effective, these hybrid approaches introduce additional reagents, guide design steps, and detection layers, increasing assay complexity and cost.

Experiencing these challenges, we hypothesized that nonspecific amplification in LAMP is an intrinsic property of the chemistry itself, originating from primer–primer interactions and secondary structures that can be extended by Bst-type polymerases with low fidelity and high processivity. Several mechanistic studies have directly supported this mechanism, showing that false-positive or LAMP signals in NTCs arise from primer-dimer amplification, self-priming hairpins, or mispriming events [5, 12–14].

Here, we describe TrueLAMP, a polymerase formulation incorporating a proprietary inhibitor designed to selectively block nonspecific primer amplification without compromising target-specific amplification. Furthermore, unlike LAMP-coupled CRISPR or pAgo and other sequence-specific post-LAMP detection systems, TrueLAMP suppresses primer-intrinsic nonspecific amplification directly within the LAMP reaction, retaining the simplicity, accessibility, and low cost that make isothermal amplification appealing for point-of-care applications. We evaluate TrueLAMP across multiple primer sets and demonstrate its effectiveness in blocking false positives while maintaining robust amplification of target nucleic acids.

Materials and Methods

Reagents and Enzymes. TrueLAMP™ kits were from Boltii Diagnostics Inc. (Salt Lake City, Utah), consisting of TrueLAMP polymerase and 2× TrueLAMP buffer. The inhibitor composition is proprietary and not disclosed by the manufacturer. SARS-CoV-2 RNA (NR-52347) was obtained from BEI Resources, NIAID, NIH.

Primer Sets. Four independent LAMP primer sets targeting the SARS-CoV-2 genomic RNA were used to assess the performance and generality of TrueLAMP: one proprietary set (N008) from Boltii Diagnostics and three published sets referred to as "Lamb," "N27," and "M3." The Lamb primer set corresponds to the SARS-CoV-2 RT-LAMP design by Lamb et al. (2020) [15]. The N27 and M3 primer sets derive from the LAMP optimization study by Huang, Tang, Ismail, and Wang (2022) [16], with full sequences available in the supplementary data (mmc1.pdf) of that publication. All primer sequences used here exactly match those reported. Final primer concentrations were 0.2 µM (F3/B3), 0.4 µM (LF/LB), and 1.6 µM (FIP/BIP).

Semi-Real-Time Colorimetric LAMP Setup. A Stratagene PersonalHyb oven (Model 401030) was set at 66.7 °C to achieve an internal reaction temperature of 65 °C at the location of the 8-strip reaction tubes, confirmed by a liquid thermometer. Eight-strip reaction tubes were photographed at 15-min intervals through the oven's glass door using a stationed iPhone SE (2nd generation, Apple, Cupertino, CA) (**Figure 1**). Magenta intensity of reactions in the photos was quantified using a CMYK colorimeter app (ColorMeter RGB Colorimeter, White Marten GmbH, Stuttgart, Germany) by recording the maximum magenta of each reaction just beneath the meniscus using the colorimeter's fixed minimum aperture. It is important to maintain the position of the phone unchanged, as the photographing distance and angle can change the numerical reading of the magenta intensity.

LAMP Reactions. Reactions were carried out per the manufacturer's instructions. Each 10 µL reaction contained 5.0 µL 2× buffer, 0.05 µL polymerase, 1.0 µL 10× primer mix, and either 1.0 µL nuclease-free water (NTC) or template (RNA or DNA). Reactions were incubated at 65 °C for 90 min. Positive reactions turned yellow/orange; NTCs remained red. Color changes were quantified via colorimeter analysis.

Statistical Analysis. Quantitative colorimetric data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean ± standard deviation). Group comparisons of magenta intensity over time were performed using the Mann–Whitney U tests. Differences were considered statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. For binary outcome

data, including sensitivity and specificity assays, Fisher's exact test was used to assess categorical associations. Confidence intervals (95% CI) for proportions were calculated using the Clopper–Pearson exact method. All statistical analyses were conducted in GraphPad Prism (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA) and Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Corp., Redmond, WA).

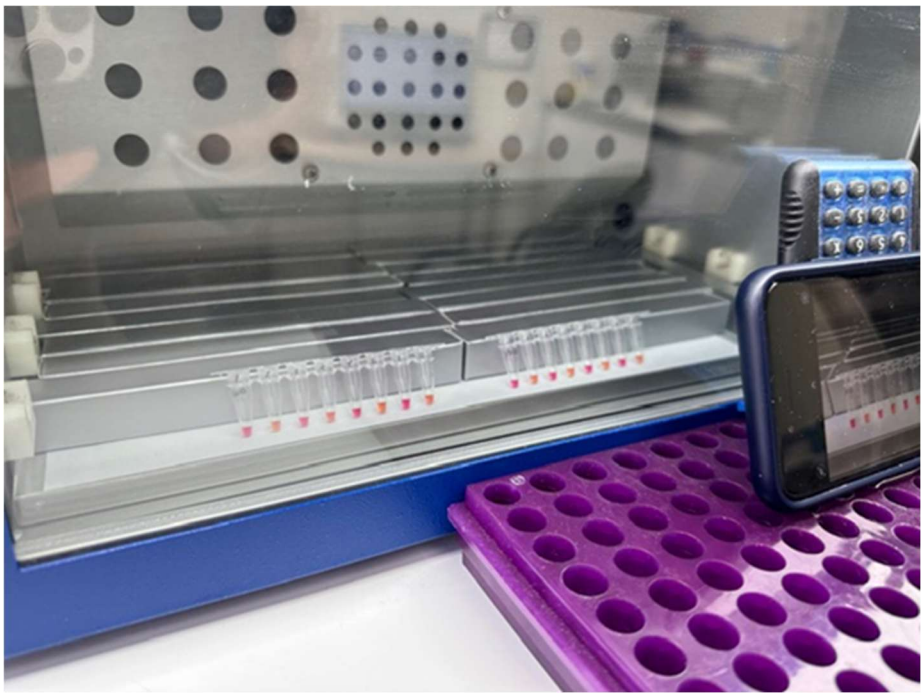

Figure 1. Semi-real-time colorimetric LAMP setup. The 8-strip LAMP reaction tubes were placed upright in a convection oven at 65 °C. The reaction tubes were photographed every 15 min through the oven's glass door using a stationary smartphone. Magenta intensity was quantified from each snapshot using a CMYK colorimeter app.

Results

Blocking Primer-Driven Nonspecific Amplification

To evaluate whether TrueLAMP blocks nonspecific, primer-driven amplification, NTC reactions with a nonspecific amplification-prone M3 primer set [16] were performed using conventional Bst polymerase lacking the LAMP inhibitor and the TrueLAMP polymerase containing the inhibitor, under otherwise identical conditions. Magenta color intensity was monitored every 15 minutes for 120 minutes at 65 °C (**Figure 2**). In reactions with conventional Bst polymerase, the magenta intensity decreased progressively from 51.5 ± 1.3 at 15 min to 22.3 ± 1.5 at 120 min, indicating extensive color loss consistent with nonspecific primer amplification. In contrast, TrueLAMP reactions maintained stable red color throughout the incubation, with magenta intensities remaining between 55.3 ± 1.0 and 54.5 ± 3.1. Statistical analysis confirmed that TrueLAMP consistently maintained significantly higher magenta intensities than Bst polymerase at all time points (Mann–Whitney $p = 0.028–0.029$). TrueLAMP maintained complete color stability in NTCs throughout the 120-minute incubation, confirming blocking of nonspecific LAMP amplification.

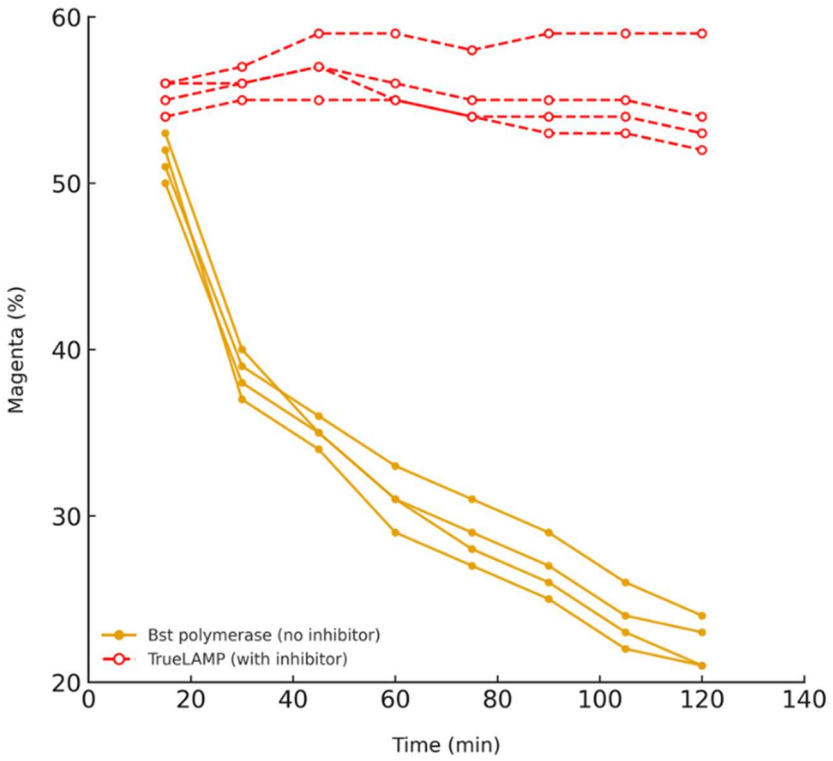

Figure 2. Suppression of nonspecific primer amplification by TrueLAMP. LAMP reactions with the nonspecific amplification-prone M3 primer set were performed in the absence of template using conventional Bst polymerase (without nonspecific LAMP inhibitor) or TrueLAMP polymerase (with nonspecific LAMP inhibitor) under identical conditions. Decline in magenta intensity indicates nonspecific primer amplification. TrueLAMP reactions showed no detectable color change over 120 min, confirming complete suppression of primer-driven amplification.

Amplification of SARS-CoV-2 RNA by Multiple Primer Sets

To assess the reproducibility and primer-set independence of TrueLAMP performance, we compared semi-real-time colorimetric LAMP amplification of SARS-CoV-2 RNA and NTCs using four independent primer sets (N008, Lamb, M3, and N27) across four replicate experiments at 65 °C (**Figure 3**). In all cases, NTC reactions maintained stable magenta color with no significant change throughout the 90 min reaction period (mean intensity 61–64 %), confirming the suppression of nonspecific amplification. In contrast, RNA-containing reactions exhibited rapid decreases in magenta intensity beginning at 15 min and reaching >50 % reduction by 30 min. Statistical analysis (Mann–Whitney U test) confirmed significant differences between RNA and NTC reactions ($p < 0.05$) for all primer sets from 15 min onward, with $p < 0.001$ after 30 min. These results demonstrate that TrueLAMP reliably amplifies target RNA while fully blocking background primer amplification, independent of primer design or target locus.

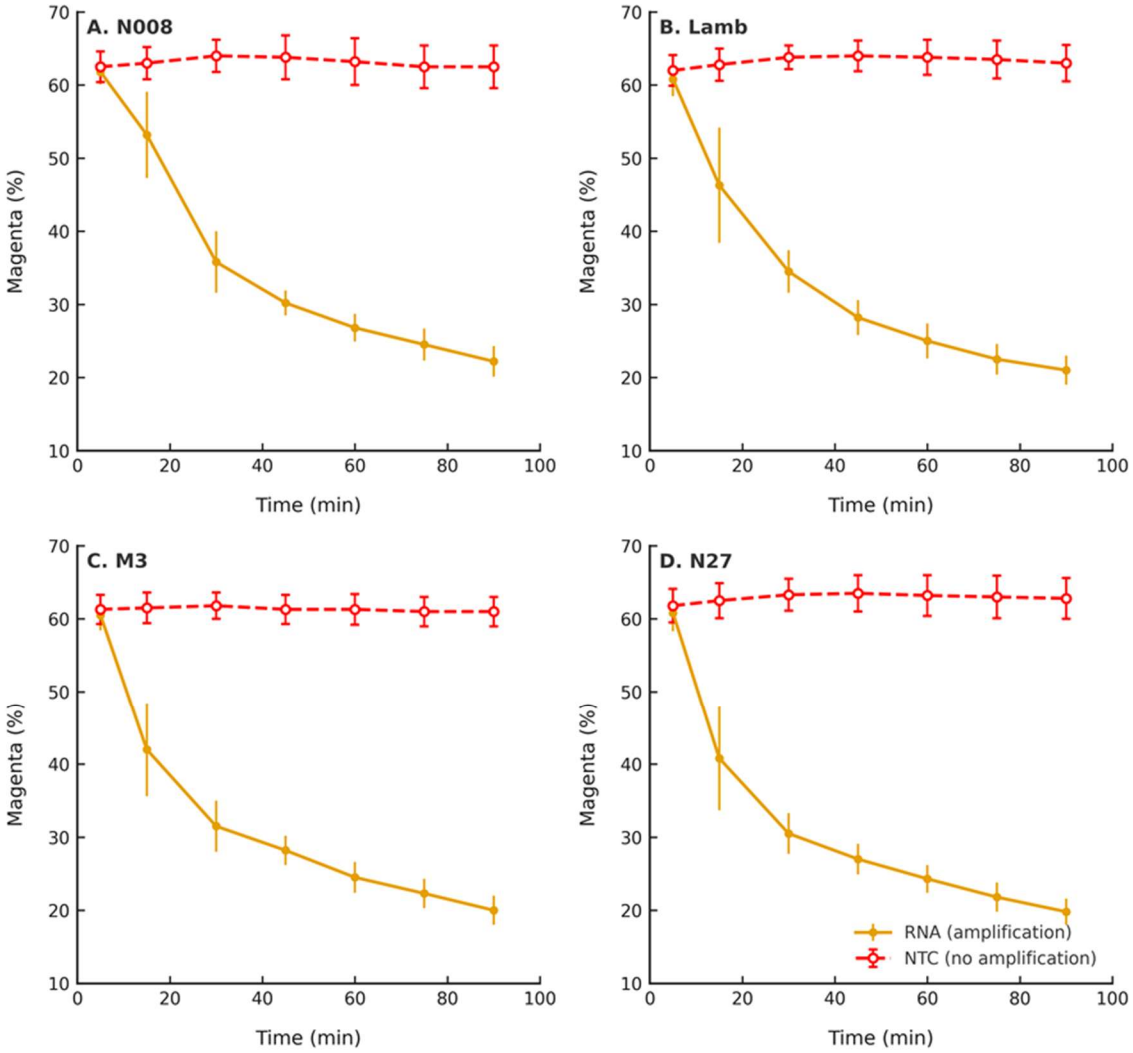

Figure 3. Amplification of SARS-CoV-2 RNA with four independent primer sets. Semi-real-time colorimetric LAMP reactions were performed at 65 °C using TrueLAMP with the N008, Lamb, M3, and N27 primer sets. RNA reactions (orange, solid lines, filled circles) showed strong amplification kinetics, while NTCs (red, dashed lines, open circles) remained stable. Each curve represents the mean ± SD of four replicates.

Limit of Detection (LOD)

To determine the analytical sensitivity of TrueLAMP, SARS-CoV-2 RNA was serially diluted (1000–16 copies/µL) and amplified using the Lamb primer set at 65 °C in an oven. Reactions containing ≥250 copies consistently produced positive amplification, while 125 copies or fewer yielded inconsistent or no amplification after 90 min. To confirm the LOD, three independent 8-strip reactions each containing one NTC and seven 250-copy RNA samples were amplified under identical conditions. After incubation, all NTCs remained red, and 20 of 21 RNA reactions (95%) turned yellow, confirming successful amplification (**Figure 4**). The detection probability at 250 copies per reaction was 95% (95% CI: 77–99%), establishing 250 copies as the LOD for the Lamb primer set using TrueLAMP. It is worth noting that similar RT-LAMP performed in a 65 °C water bath showed inconsistent amplification and a higher

apparent LOD (>1000 copies) compared with reactions in a 65 °C convection oven, whereas DNA-template LAMP did not. The cause of this discrepancy remains unclear.

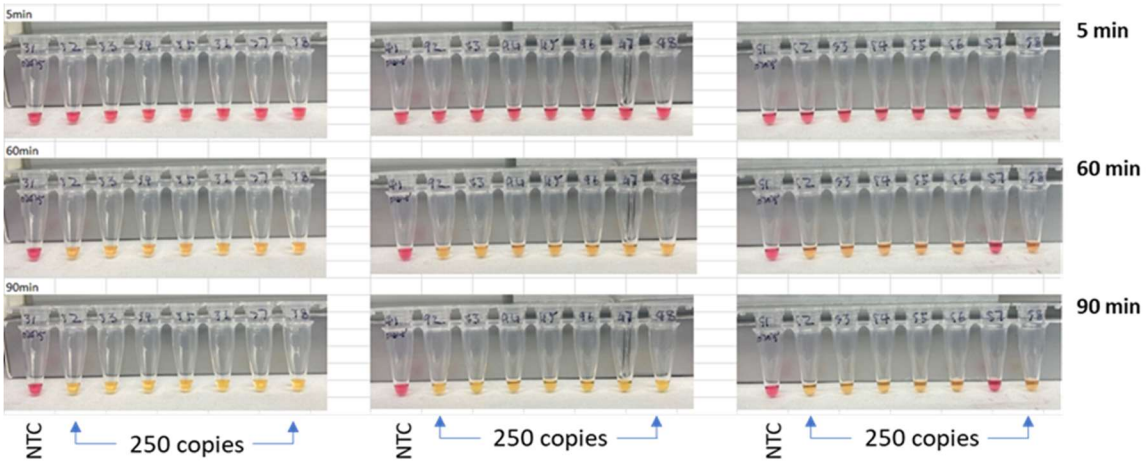

Figure 4. Limit of detection (LOD) of TrueLAMP using the Lamb primer set. Serial dilutions of SARS-CoV-2 RNA (1000–16 copies/µL) were tested at 65 °C using TrueLAMP with the Lamb primer set. Reactions containing ≥250 copies consistently produced positive amplification, while lower concentrations yielded inconsistent results. Triplicate 8-strip confirmations showed 20/21 positive reactions (95% detection probability; 95% CI 77–99%), establishing a LOD of 250 copies per reaction.

Analytical Sensitivity and Specificity

At 65 °C, using the N27 primer set, TrueLAMP detected 250 copies of SARS-CoV-2 RNA in 31/32 reactions and produced 0/34 positives in NTCs (**Table 1 and 2**). The resulting analytical sensitivity was 96.9 % (exact 95 % CI, 83.8–99.9 %) and specificity was 100 % (exact 95 % CI, 91.6–100 %). Positive and negative predictive values were 100 % and 97.1 %, respectively, with an overall accuracy of 98.5 %. Fisher's exact test confirmed a highly significant association between RNA and NTC outcomes ($p = 5.0 \times 10^{-18}$), consistent with robust detection and complete blocking of false positives.

Table 1. Analytical results of TrueLAMP for the detection of SARS-CoV-2 RNA.

Condition	NTC (n = 34)	RNA (n = 32)	Total
Negative amplification	34	1	35
Positive amplification	0	31	31
Total	34	32	66

Assays were performed using the N27 primer set at 1× LOD (250 copies per reaction).

Table 2. Diagnostic performance metrics of TrueLAMP for SARS-CoV-2 RNA detection.

Metric	Estimate	95 % CI	Notes
Sensitivity	96.9 % (31/32)	83.8 – 99.9 %	Clopper–Pearson exact
Specificity	100 % (34/34)	91.6 – 100 %	Clopper–Pearson exact
Positive predictive value (PPV)	100 % (31/31)	90.8 – 100 %	
Negative predictive value (NPV)	97.1 % (34/35)	85.1 – 99.9 %	
Accuracy	98.5 % (65/66)	91.8 – 100 %	
Fisher's exact test (p)	5.0×10^{-18}	—	Two-sided
Diagnostic odds ratio	$\gg 1$	—	Strong testing accuracy

Discussion

LAMP is a powerful nucleic acid detection method with major advantages for point-of-care diagnostics. However, persistent nonspecific amplification has long limited its reliability and broader adoption. Such nonspecific products primarily result from primer–primer interactions and self-priming events that occur in the absence of a template, enabled by the strand-displacing and low-fidelity activity of Bst-type polymerases [5, 12–14].

By selectively blocking primer-driven amplification, TrueLAMP effectively prevents false positives without compromising speed or efficiency for true targets. Its built-in selectivity enables clear colorimetric distinction between true positives and NTCs, even after extended incubation (up to 24 hours). This property allows convenient endpoint colorimetric testing in the field without the need for strict observation timing or continuous monitoring. It could also obviate reliance on the subjective threshold time (T_t) used in conventional real-time LAMP, providing a more direct and definitive readout.

The absence of amplification in NTCs across multiple primer sets indicates that TrueLAMP is broadly applicable to diverse primer compositions and targets. Importantly, the suppression mechanism preserves reaction temperature, kinetics, and simplicity, ensuring compatibility with existing LAMP workflows. This makes TrueLAMP readily adaptable to laboratory, field, or educational use with only basic equipment, such as a digital oven, as demonstrated in our semi-real-time colorimetric imaging setup. To our knowledge, it is the first reported method of a semi-real-time colorimetric LAMP using unmodified, off-the-shelf equipment, supporting its application in resource-limited settings.

We observed that RT-LAMP, but not DNA-LAMP, performance differed between oven and water-bath incubations: only oven incubation yielded consistent and sensitive RT-LAMP amplification. This suggests that heat transfer dynamics or oxygenation in water baths may influence early reverse transcription, which may require slightly lower optimal temperatures than DNA polymerization. Until this effect is clarified, we do not recommend water-bath incubation for RT-LAMP assays.

TrueLAMP achieved a limit of detection of 250 RNA copies per reaction with the Lamb primer set and comparable results with other SARS-CoV-2 primer sets, including N27, as well as a human RNP primer set for DNA detection. Users should empirically evaluate the LOD of their own primer sets under intended conditions, as performance may vary by primer design—an inherent feature of LAMP rather than a limitation of the TrueLAMP polymerase.

TrueLAMP's diagnostic performance underscores its reliability: across replicate assays at 1× LOD, it achieved 96.9 % analytical sensitivity and 100 % specificity, with a statistically significant separation between positive and NTC reactions ($p = 5.0\times10^{-18}$, Fisher's exact test). These results demonstrate excellent diagnostic discrimination and concordance with molecular assay standards, confirming TrueLAMP's analytical robustness.

In summary, TrueLAMP resolves one of the most persistent issues in isothermal amplification—primer-driven nonspecific amplification—while retaining the hallmark speed, simplicity, and sensitivity of LAMP. It establishes a reliable and adaptable foundation for molecular diagnostics and point-of-need testing, especially in resource-limited settings.

Conclusion

TrueLAMP suppresses primer-intrinsic nonspecific amplification while maintaining robust and rapid target detection in semi-real-time colorimetric assays using a digital oven and a smartphone. Its inherent selectivity allows clear visual distinction between positive and negative reactions, even after extended incubation, ensuring reliability across diverse primer sets and DNA/RNA targets. These features not only strengthen the analytical performance of colorimetric LAMP but also prevent false positives and enable flexible endpoint testing without the need for precise observation timing or specialized instruments. Together, these advantages position TrueLAMP as a practical and dependable platform for nucleic acid detection in research, diagnostics, and field applications.

Acknowledgments

The following reagent was deposited by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and obtained through BEI Resources, NIAID, NIH: Quantitative PCR (qPCR) Control RNA from Heat-Inactivated SARS-Related Coronavirus 2, Isolate USA-WA1/2020, NR-52347.

Conflict of Interest Statement

Z.C. is the inventor of the TrueLAMP technology and a founder of Boltii Diagnostics Inc., which manufactures the TrueLAMP kit. The author declares no other competing interests.

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