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## Aim and shoot: molecule-imprinting polymer coated $\text{MoO}_3$ for selective SERS detection and photocatalytic destruction of low-level organic contaminants<sup>†</sup>

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A sensitive and selective SERS sensor with easy and excellent recyclability is highly demanded because of its great potential application in complex detection environments. Here, using methylene blue (MB) as a model target, a semiconductor-based SERS substrate composed of a  $\text{MoO}_3$  nanorod core and a uniform molecule-imprinting polymethacrylic acid shell (MIP) with a thickness of 4 nm was designed and fabricated ( $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIP}$ ) to achieve selective detection. The key to the successful coating of the ultrathin uniform MIP shell lies in the pretreatment of a  $\text{MoO}_3$  core with nitric acid, providing sufficient surficial hydroxyls for the anchoring of a polymer precursor. The molecule-imprinted voids for MB were formed simply *via* light irradiation as a result of photocatalytic degradation by a  $\text{MoO}_3$  semiconductor. This core-shell MIP composite shows a high SERS selectivity towards low-level MB in a mixed MB/CV solution. The enhanced factor (EF) is high, at  $1.6 \times 10^4$ . More importantly, the selective detection allows the further photocatalytic recycling of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIP}$  in an "aim-and-shoot" way, which well preserves the detection selectivity and sensitivity towards MB at least for 4 cycles. Based on decreased sensitivity with the increasing shell thickness (10–24 nm), a MIP-gating charge transfer mechanism is proposed to demonstrate the high EF instead of the molecule-enrichment effect. This "aim-and-shoot" strategy is expected to push forward the prosperous application of selective SERS for trace detection in versatile environments.

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### 1. Introduction

Surface-enhanced Raman scattering (SERS) is an extremely sensitive and rapid analytical tool for the detection of molecules in the fields of chemistry, biology, medicine, environmental monitoring, *etc.*<sup>1–7</sup> In recent years, SERS has attracted considerable attention since it can reveal structure, composition and concentration of target molecules even at a single-molecule level by measuring fingerprint characteristic vibrations of molecules.<sup>8–11</sup> However, high sensitivity is not the only factor for a satisfactory SERS sensor during the practical application, other significant factors including tunable selectivity, high stability and multiple recyclability are also desirable. In particular, in consideration of the complicated fingerprint spectrum from each molecule, it is highly challenging to selectively

identify a specific target from a variety of interference species, especially for ones with low concentrations.

The molecule-imprinting technique (MIT) has witnessed a tremendous advance in chemical and biological sensors because of the remarkable selectivity and affinity towards target molecules.<sup>12–15</sup> Interest in combining molecule-imprinting polymers (MIPs) with SERS has recently surged for the significantly improved selectivity of the substrate besides the sensitivity. For examples, Bompard *et al.* have reported a nanosensor for the determination of (S)-propranolol based on MIP and SERS.<sup>16</sup> Holthoff *et al.* prepared a SERS substrate based on MIT for the highly selective detection of 2,4,6-trinitrotoluene (TNT).<sup>17</sup> Chang *et al.* demonstrated that surface-imprinted core-shell Ag nanoparticles can significantly improve the sensitivity for SERS detection of 4-mercaptopbenzoic acid.<sup>18</sup> Lv *et al.* fabricated a thin imprinted polymer layer on the surface of gold nanobelts for selective SERS detection of protein biomarkers.<sup>19</sup> The current study relevant to the combination of SERS and MIPs are generally limited to noble metals of Ag and Au.<sup>16–19</sup> Unfortunately, the noble metals have drawbacks including high-cost, low biocompatibility, poor reusability and instability, which largely restrict their wide applications.<sup>20–22</sup> Great effort has been devoted to improve the application performance of noble metal

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substrates. For example, nanocomposites combining plasmonic metal with semiconductor have been elaborately designed to achieve a photocatalytic recyclability.<sup>23–27</sup> On the other hand, semiconductor materials such as  $\alpha$ -Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, Cu<sub>2</sub>O, Mo<sub>3-x</sub>, TiO<sub>2</sub>, and MoS<sub>2</sub> actually have also been revealed to be SERS-active.<sup>28–33</sup> However, up to now, no selective and recyclable SERS substrate simply based on semiconductor has been designed mainly due to the low sensitivity.

Herein, selective and high sensitive SERS substrate based on MoO<sub>3</sub> nanorod was fabricated through the finely controllable coating of an ultrathin molecule-imprinting polymethacrylic acid layer. The prerequisite for the successful coating is an acid pretreating of MoO<sub>3</sub>, forming abundant hydroxyls for the anchoring of silane coupling agent, 3-methacryloxypropyltrimethoxysilane (MPS). The MoO<sub>3</sub> nanorods were adopted due to its easy synthesis, low cost, excellent chemical stability and nontoxicity. MB was used as a model target and embedded into the polymer shell by directly involving into the coating process. Through a simple light irradiation, MB was photocatalytically eliminated, leaving memory voids inside the shell. This core-shell structured MoO<sub>3</sub>@MIPs exhibits high selectivity towards MB with an enhanced factor of  $1.6 \times 10^4$ , which is resulted from the MIP-gating charge transfer between MoO<sub>3</sub> and MB instead of the molecule-enrichment effect. Finally, this selectively “aimed” MB molecules can be photocatalytically eliminated (shot). The recycled substrate through the unique “aim-and-shoot” way can well preserve its detection performance at least for 4 cycles.

## 2. Experimental section

### 2.1 Materials

Molybdenum powder, 3-methacryloxypropyltrimethoxysilane (MPS), hydrogen peroxide (H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, 30 wt%), acetonitrile (ACN), methanol (MeOH), crystal violet (C<sub>25</sub>H<sub>30</sub>N<sub>3</sub>Cl; CV) and methylene blue (C<sub>16</sub>H<sub>18</sub>N<sub>3</sub>SCl; MB) was bought from Aladdin, ethyl alcohol, acetic acid (CH<sub>3</sub>COOH), nitric acid (HNO<sub>3</sub>), N,N'-methylene diacrylamide (MBA), azobisisobutyronitrile (AIBN) and methacrylic acid (MAA) was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich. All chemical reagents were of analytical grade and the water used in all experiments was ultrapure water.

### 2.2 Preparation of SERS substrates

**Synthesis of MoO<sub>3</sub> nanorods.** MoO<sub>3</sub> nanorods were synthesized according to the previous report.<sup>38</sup> Briefly, 4 mL of 30 wt% H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> aqueous solution was dropwise added into a 50 mL round-bottom flask containing of 0.478 g Mo powder in an ice-bath. The mixture was fully stirred at room temperature for 30 min, a transparent yellow solution was formed. Subsequently, 4 mL of H<sub>2</sub>O was added to the solution. The final mixture was transferred into a 30 mL Teflon vessel and hydrothermally treated at 180 °C for 12 h. The product was collected by centrifugation and washed with distilled water for three times. White solid MoO<sub>3</sub> nanorods were prepared after drying at 60 °C under vacuum for 12 h.

**Synthesis of MoO<sub>3</sub>@MIPs hybrid.** 200 mg of the synthesized MoO<sub>3</sub> nanorods were dispersed in 30% HNO<sub>3</sub> solution for 24 h

at 25 °C to modify the surface of MoO<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles with hydroxyl group. The activated MoO<sub>3</sub> nanorods were dried at 60 °C under vacuum for 12 h. The MoO<sub>3</sub> nanorods, modified with hydroxyl group, were added into 14 mL of ethanol–water (4 : 1, v/v) solution, then 1 mL of MPS was dropwise added into the above solution. The mixture was heated at 80 °C for 24 h under nitrogen protection in order to modify MoO<sub>3</sub> nanorods with MPS. The product (MoO<sub>3</sub>–MPS) was washed with ethanol and dried under vacuum at 60 °C for 12 h. The MoO<sub>3</sub>@MIPs hybrid was produced by distillation–precipitation polymerization: the template MB (0.02 g) and the functional monomer MAA (0.1 mL) were dissolved in ACN (80 mL) in a 100 mL round-bottom flask. MoO<sub>3</sub>–MPS (200 mg), MBA (0.088 g) as the cross linking agent, and AIBN (0.02 g) as the initiator were added to the solution. The mixture was stirred at room temperature for 30 min. Then the reaction system was proceeded in distilling apparatus at 90 °C for about 6 h after 40 mL of the acetonitrile was distilled. The as-made composite was washed with acetonitrile and methanol–acetic acid (4 : 1, v/v) solution to remove the surficial MB. Then the remaining MB embedded the shell was further degraded under a 300 W xenon lamp equipped with a solar simulator for several times. For comparison purpose, the non-imprinted MoO<sub>3</sub>@NIPs nanocomposites were prepared in the absence of the template MB using the same method.

### 2.3 Characterizations

The transmission electron microscopy (TEM) was performed on a JEOL 2100 LaB6 TEM, at an accelerating voltage of 200 kV. The morphologies of the samples were obtained using scanning electron microscope (SEM) (JSM-6360LV). The X-ray diffraction (XRD) spectrum analysis of MoO<sub>3</sub>@MIPs was performed on a Rigaku D/max 2550 VB/PC apparatus. Fourier transform infrared spectra (FT-IR) were recorded with a Nicolet Avatar 360 spectrometer (USA).

### 2.4 Adsorption experiment

5 mg MoO<sub>3</sub>@MIPs or MoO<sub>3</sub>@NIPs nanocomposites were placed in a round-bottom flask which mixed with 20 mL MB solution with initial concentrations of 32 mg L<sup>-1</sup>. The mixture was stirred in a thermostatic oscillator for 5 h at 25 °C. The concentration of MB was measured by UV-vis spectrometer. The adsorption capacity ( $Q$ ) of MoO<sub>3</sub>@MIPs or MoO<sub>3</sub>@NIPs was calculated as follows:<sup>39</sup>

$$Q = \frac{(C_0 - C_t)V}{W}$$

where  $C_0$  (mg L<sup>-1</sup>) is the initial concentration of MB,  $C_t$  (mg L<sup>-1</sup>) is the MB concentration at the time  $t$ ,  $V$  (L) is the volume of solution, and  $W$  (g) is the mass of the MoO<sub>3</sub>@MIPs or MoO<sub>3</sub>@NIPs.

### 2.5 Measurements of SERS sensitivity

Raman spectra were evaluated by a micro-Raman system (Renishaw inVia-Reflex). Before SERS measurements, 5 mg of MoO<sub>3</sub>@MIPs hybrid were added to 1 mL of MB solution in a centrifuge tube for 30 min. Then 20  $\mu$ L of the mixture were

transferred to a glass slide (35 mm  $\times$  25 mm scale) and dried in dark naturally. Raman spectra were obtained using 532 nm laser (0.5% power) as the excitation light source with 50 $\times$  objective. And the accumulation time was 10 s.

## 2.6 Recyclability experiment

The substrates were recycled by photo-degradation after SERS characterization of the MB adsorbed on  $\text{MoO}_3$ @MIPs: 100  $\mu\text{L}$  of water was dropped on the used substrates. Then the substrate was irradiated with a 300 W xenon lamp equipped with a solar simulator (AM 1.5) for 30 min, and dried in air. The following Raman spectra were produced to evaluate the degradation degree of MB. This process was continued until no Raman signal of MB could be found. The cycles were repeated for four times on each sample to check the reusability characterization of  $\text{MoO}_3$ @MIPs.

## 2.7 Enhancement factor (EF) measurement

20  $\mu\text{L}$  of the mixture of  $\text{MoO}_3$ @MIPs and  $10^{-5}$  M MB was dropped on the glass slide and dried at room temperature. As a comparison, 20  $\mu\text{L}$  of  $10^{-2}$  M MB aqueous solution was dropped on a glass slide. Raman spectra were obtained using 532 nm laser (0.5% power) as the excitation light source with 50 $\times$  objective, and the accumulation time was 10 s.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1 Preparation and characterization of $\text{MoO}_3$ @MIPs

The fabrication route to  $\text{MoO}_3$ @MIPs is shown in Scheme 1. First,  $\text{MoO}_3$  nanorods were synthesized *via* a hydrothermal process, which were then dispersed in  $\text{HNO}_3$  solution to form

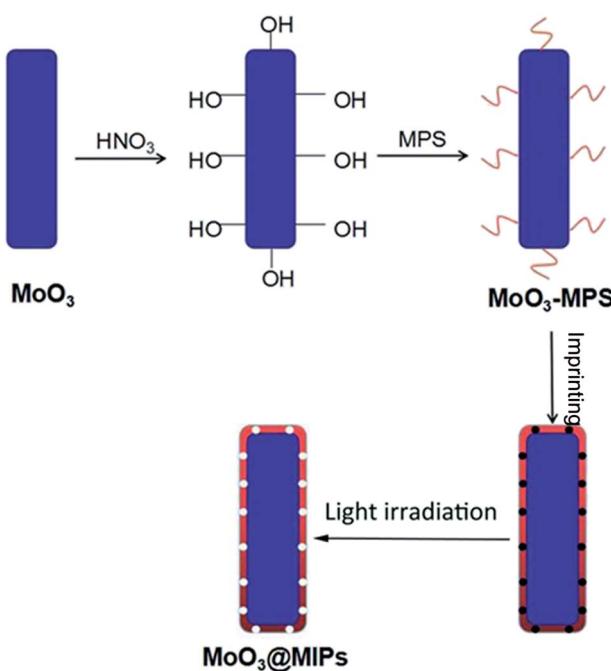
surfacial hydroxyls for the further anchoring of MPS through an ester exchange reaction ( $\text{MoO}_3$ -MPS). The  $\text{MoO}_3$ -MPS was coated with a MB encapsulated polymethacrylic acid layer, and then the embedded MB was eliminated through light irradiation to form molecule imprinting voids.

The SEM images indicate both of  $\text{MoO}_3$  and  $\text{MoO}_3$ @MIPs are monodispersed one-dimensional nanorods (Fig. 1a and b). The TEM image of  $\text{MoO}_3$  (Fig. 1c) reveals a width of *ca.* 170 nm and a length of *ca.* 10  $\mu\text{m}$ . A thin uniform polymer shell with a thickness of *ca.* 4 nm can be observed after the coating (Fig. 1d). No obvious morphological change is found before and after the polymer coating. In contrast, the absence of  $\text{HNO}_3$  treatment leads to a non-uniform coating of polymer shell (Fig. S1†).

The crystal structure of  $\text{MoO}_3$  and  $\text{MoO}_3$ @MIPs nanorods were characterized by XRD analysis (Fig. 2), where the dominant diffraction peaks at  $2\theta = 12.91^\circ, 23.69^\circ, 26.00^\circ, 27.61^\circ, 39.39^\circ, 46.51^\circ$ , and  $59.10^\circ$ , correspond well to the indices of (020), (110), (040), (021), (060), (210), and (081) planes of orthorhombic  $\text{MoO}_3$  phase (JCPDS card no. 05-0508), respectively.  $\text{MoO}_3$ @MIPs show similar but weaker diffraction peaks due to the presence of a polymeric shell.

The FT-IR spectra indicate all the  $\text{MoO}_3$ -based samples before and after modification show characteristic bands of  $\text{MoO}_3$  at 3437, 1629, 997, 864, and 560  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (Fig. 3). For  $\text{MoO}_3$ -MPS, additional bands appear at 1696  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , 2936  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  and 1129  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , which are arisen from  $\text{C}=\text{O}$ ,  $-\text{CH}_3$  and  $-\text{Si}-\text{O}-\text{C}-$  groups, demonstrating MPS has been successfully modified on the surface of  $\text{MoO}_3$ . For  $\text{MoO}_3$ @MIPs, the strong absorption peak at 1731  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  is assigned to the bending vibration of carboxyl group, confirming the formation of polymethacrylic acid on the surface of  $\text{MoO}_3$ -MPS.

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) measurements were further performed to verify the surface composition. Fig. S2† shows the XPS survey spectra of  $\text{MoO}_3$  nanorods before and



Scheme 1 Schematic diagram for synthetic process of  $\text{MoO}_3$ @MIPs.

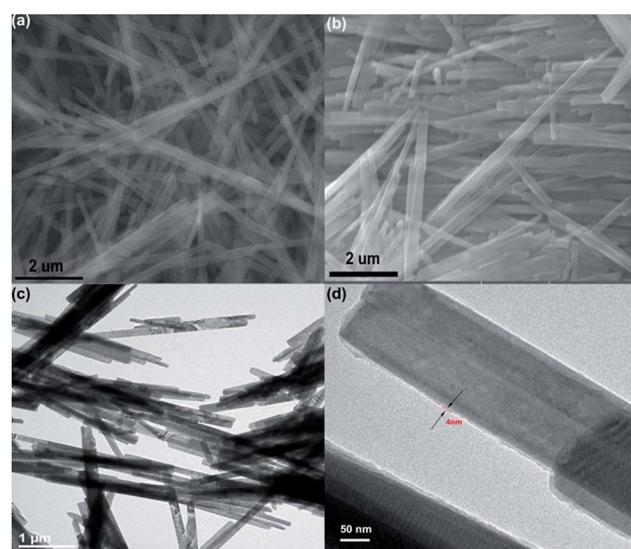
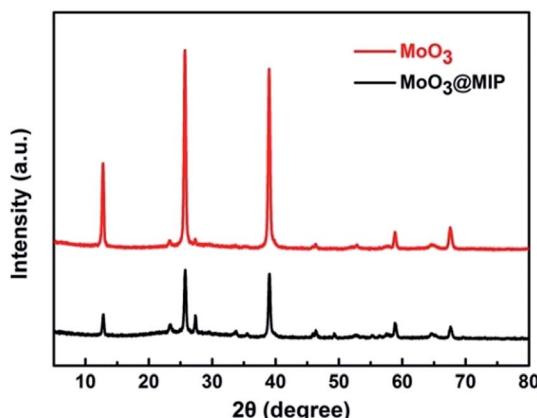
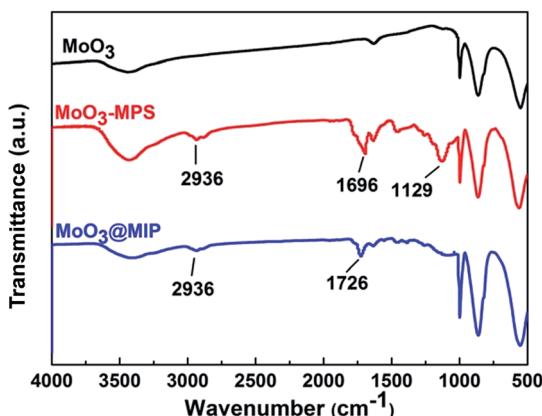


Fig. 1 SEM and TEM images of  $\text{MoO}_3$  nanorods (a, c); SEM and TEM images of  $\text{MoO}_3$ @MIPs (b, d).

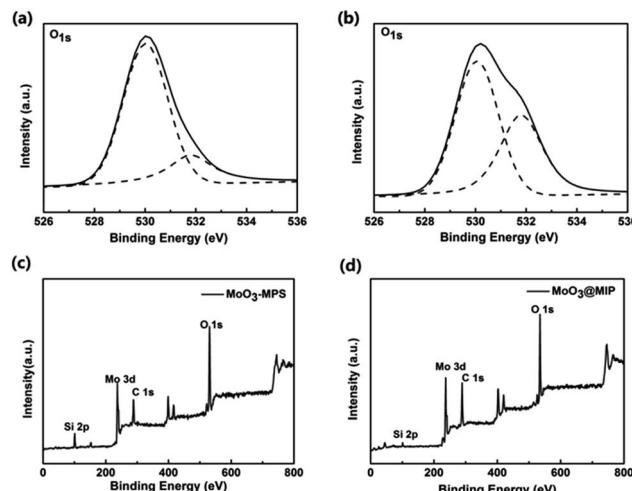
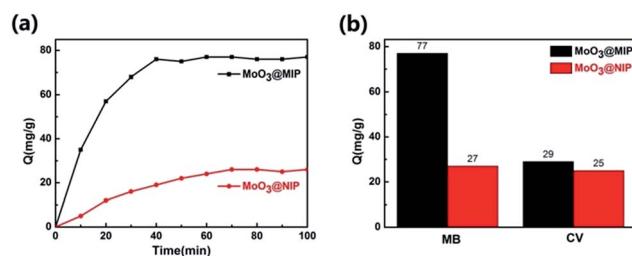


Fig. 2 XRD patterns of the  $\text{MoO}_3$  and  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  nanorods.Fig. 3 FT-IR spectra of the  $\text{MoO}_3$  nanorods,  $\text{MoO}_3\text{-MPS}$ , and  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$ .

after treating with  $\text{HNO}_3$ . The O 1s region of the samples can be fitted into two peaks at 530.04 eV and 531.82 eV attributed to molybdenum–oxygen bonds and the surface hydroxyls, respectively (Fig. 4a and b). It is obvious that the  $\text{HNO}_3$  treatment leads to the appearance of more –OH groups, verifying the uniform coating of polymer shell is related to the existence of abundant surficial –OH groups. Moreover, compared with the XPS survey spectrum of  $\text{MoO}_3$ , new peak appear at approximately 101.6 eV (Si 2p) for sample  $\text{MoO}_3\text{-MPS}$ , confirming the successful anchoring of MPS on  $\text{MoO}_3$  nanorods (Fig. 4c). The content of C increases to 35.32% up from 19.17% while that of Si decreases to 3.06% down from 9.12% when the MIP layers are further coated onto the  $\text{MoO}_3\text{-MPS}$  surface (Fig. 4d).

### 3.2 Rebinding performances of $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$

The adsorption experiments were carried out to evaluate the rebinding ability of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  for MB. Fig. 5a presents the adsorption kinetics curves of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  and  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$  for MB. The  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  binding capacity for MB is about 77 mg g<sup>-1</sup>, much higher than that for  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$  (27 mg g<sup>-1</sup>). In addition, the adsorption equilibrium is easily reached within 40 min for  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  and 70 min for  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$ . These

Fig. 4 XPS spectra of O 1s for  $\text{MoO}_3$  (a) and  $\text{MoO}_3\text{-HNO}_3$  (b); survey spectra of  $\text{MoO}_3\text{-MPS}$  (c) and  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  (d).Fig. 5 (a) Adsorption kinetics curves of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  and  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$  for MB; (b) adsorption capacities of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  and  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$  for MB and CV.

results verify that the MIP layers indeed possess imprinted cavities with enrichment ability for MB.  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  exhibits much higher adsorption capacity for MB than that for CV, while the amount of MB and CV adsorbed on  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$  is almost the same (Fig. 5b), demonstrating the excellent selective adsorption capacity of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  towards the target molecule MB.

### 3.3 SERS sensitivity of the $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$

Fig. 6 presents the SERS spectra of MB using  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  and  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$  as substrates. Strong signal of MB with a concentration of  $10^{-5}$  M can be observed from  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$ . When the concentration is decreased to  $10^{-6}$  M, the signal of MB is still clearly present (Fig. 6a). In contrast, the band intensity of MB ( $10^{-5}$ ) significantly decreases when  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$  was used and no signal of MB can be observed at a lower concentration (Fig. 6b,  $10^{-6}$  M). Fig. S3a† presents the standard curve of MB. The above results well demonstrate the sensitivity of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  towards the detection of MB. The enhancement factor (EF) for MB on  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  substrate is further evaluated by the following equation:<sup>34</sup>

$$\text{EF} = \frac{I_{\text{SERS}}/N_{\text{SERS}}}{I_0/N_0}$$



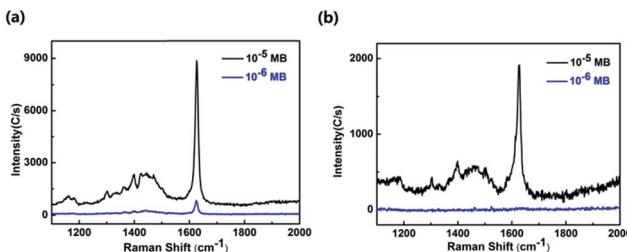


Fig. 6 SERS spectra of MB from  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  (a) and  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$  (b).

where  $I_{\text{SERS}}$  and  $I_0$  are the intensities of the Raman peaks from the SERS and normal Raman spectra.  $N_{\text{SERS}}$  and  $N_0$  are the average numbers of detected molecules in SERS and normal Raman measurement. The SERS spectra of MB detected on  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  substrate and glass slide are shown in Fig. S3b.† The calculated EF of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  is  $1.6 \times 10^4$ , which is hard to be obtained simply from the semiconductor substrates.

### 3.4 SERS selectivity of the $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$

To testify the selectivity of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  for MB, CV with similar molecule structure was adopted as a control. Fig. 7 shows SERS spectra of MB and CV on  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  and  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$ . Weak SERS signals of CV ( $10^{-5}$  M) with a comparable intensity can be observed from  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  and  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$  (inset, Fig. 7a), which both disappear at a lower concentration (Fig. S4,†  $10^{-6}$  M), demonstrating the non-selectivity of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  towards CV. For the mixture composed of equivalent MB and CV ( $10^{-5}$

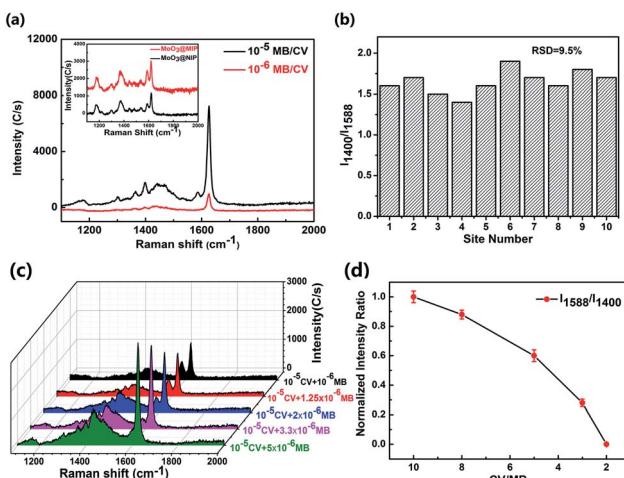


Fig. 7 (a) SERS spectra of  $10^{-6}$  M and  $10^{-5}$  M of MB/CV mixtures on  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$ . Inset: SERS spectra of CV ( $10^{-5}$  M) on  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  and  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{NIPs}$ ; (b) intensity ratio of the peak at  $1400 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  and  $1588 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  on 10 measured sites and the calculated RSD; (c) SERS spectra of mixtures composed of  $10^{-5}$  M CV and lower level of MB ( $10^{-6}$  to  $5 \times 10^{-6}$  M); (d) relationship between normalized  $I_{1588}/I_{1400}$  and  $C_{\text{CV}/\text{MB}}$ . For every detected sample, SERS spectra were obtained from ten different spots. To exclude the interference from surficial molecules, the  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIP}$  substrates immersed from the mixture of CV and MB were washed with acetonitrile and methanol–acetic acid (4 : 1, v/v) solution.

M), strong SERS signal characteristics of MB is clearly observed, accompanied by a weak peak at  $1588 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  attributed to the carbon skeleton vibration of CV (Fig. 7a). Only MB can be detected when the concentrations of MB and CV both decreases to  $10^{-6}$  M, further verifying the selective sensing ability of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  towards MB. In order to exclude the randomness, the SERS intensity ratio of the peak at  $1400 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  and  $1588 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  obtained from the  $10^{-5}$  M MB/CV mixture were measured. The relative standard deviation (RSD) of SERS intensity ratio is about 9.5% as determined from the SERS spectra of the  $10^{-5}$  M MB/CV mixture (Fig. 7b), which are collected from 10 random sites on the same substrate (Fig. S5†).

To further demonstrate the selectivity of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIP}$  towards MB, the SERS spectra of mixed solutions with a fixed  $C_{\text{CV}}$  ( $10^{-5}$  M) and a lower  $C_{\text{MB}}$  ( $10^{-6}$  to  $5 \times 10^{-6}$  M) were recorded, where the signal of MB can always be clearly observed although  $C_{\text{MB}}$  keeps lower than  $C_{\text{CV}}$  (Fig. 7c). To more distinctly reveal the selectivity, the intensity ratio of bands at  $1558 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $I_{\text{CV}}$ ) and  $1400 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $I_{\text{MB}}$ ) for the spectrum collected at  $C_{\text{CV}/\text{MB}} = 10$  was normalized, the decrease of  $C_{\text{CV}/\text{MB}}$  from 10 to 2 causes the dramatic reduction of  $I_{\text{CV}}/I_{\text{MB}}$  from 1 to 0 (Fig. 7d). The above results well prove the excellent selective performance of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  towards target molecules.

### 3.5 Recyclability and stability of $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$ substrates

In addition to the sensitivity and selectivity, the recyclability of SERS substrates is also important for reducing cost and increasing resource use efficiency in practical applications. During the preparation process, photocatalysis of the  $\text{MoO}_3$  core has proven to be effective in degrading embedded MB. Therefore, the recycling experiment was further proceeded by the following steps: after one cycle of SERS detection for MB, the substrates was irradiated by simulated sunlight for a certain time, and then re-conducted SERS analysis. Fig. 8a shows that no obvious MB peaks are found after 90 min irradiation, which indicates that the target molecules are completely decomposed. After 4 cycles of detection-irradiation process, there is no obvious decline in the SERS intensity of MB, suggesting the good stability and reusability of the  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  substrate.

Moreover, the selective detection of MB in a mixed MB/CV solution demonstrate MB can be readily extracted into the MIP layer and inside locked, which further allows a selectively photocatalytic elimination of embedded MB in a precise “aim-and-shoot” way. To investigate the “aim-and-shoot” effect on

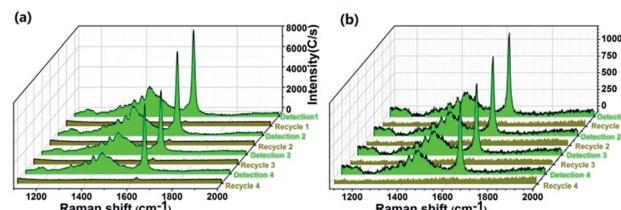


Fig. 8 (a) SERS spectra of  $10^{-5}$  M MB on  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  before and after self-cleaning for 4 cycles; (b) SERS spectra of the mixture of  $10^{-6}$  M MB and CV on  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  before and after self-cleaning for 4 cycles.



refreshing the detection performance of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$ , the recycling experiment was further carried out in a mixed solution ( $10^{-6}$  M). Fig. 8b shows that no obvious MB peaks can be detected from the first-run used MB/ $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  after 45 min irradiation, implying the total elimination of adsorbed MB from  $10^{-6}$  M MB/CV mixture. After 4 cycles of detection-refresh, there is no obvious decline in the selective SERS performance, demonstrating the excellent recyclability of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  through the “aim-and-shoot” way.

### 3.6 Mechanism

In order to study the SERS mechanism, the enrichment effect of the MIP shell thickness on the SERS activity was further explored. Fig. S6† shows core–shell  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIP}$  nanorod with shell thicknesses in the range of 4–24 nm. Since the precursor concentration for the generation of MIP voids is set to be excessive (see Experimental section), the MIP void is assumed to be uniformly distributed in the shell. It is obvious the peak intensity of MB significantly decreases with the increasing shell thickness (Fig. 9a), demonstrating the signal enhancement is not governed by the molecule-enrichment effect. The specific relation between the detection sensitivity and the MIP voids density in a fixed objective Raman lens (1  $\mu\text{m}$ ) was further plotted by normalizing the intensity at  $1625\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $\nu_{\text{C}-\text{C}}$ ) from the sample with the thinnest shell (4 nm) and the MIP voids density in the sample with the thickest shell (24 nm, Fig. 9b). It is obvious that the 70% increase of the voids density leads to over 90% decrease of the peak intensity, suggesting the MB molecules distributed near the outer surface do not contribute to the enhanced SERS signal. As is well known, the semiconductors cause the SERS signal mainly through the charge transfer (CT) effect,<sup>35–37</sup> which requires an intimate contact between analyte and the surface of semiconductor. The contact may be significantly retarded in the case of a thick polymer shell around  $\text{MoO}_3$  nanorod, decreasing the electronic transfer efficiency. On the basis of the above analyses, we anticipate a MIP-gating CT mechanism to demonstrate the selective and sensitive SERS performance of  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIP}$  nanorod with a thin shell thickness of 4 nm, where the MIP layer plays the role as a gate, selectively allowing the reaching of target molecules to the surface of inner  $\text{MoO}_3$ . Most of molecules may be retained in the MIPs sites far from the semiconductor in the case of

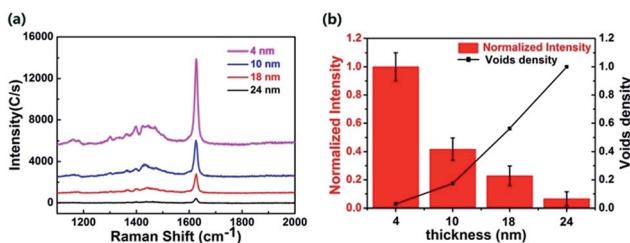


Fig. 9 (a) SERS spectra of MB on  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  with shell thickness ranging from 4 to 24 nm. (b) Relation between the normalized peak intensity at  $1625\text{ cm}^{-1}$  and shell thickness. The voids density in a fixed lens radius is approximately calculated based on shell thickness according to the same preparation process for the SERS substrate.

a thicker shell, decreasing the enrichment efficiency near the surface of  $\text{MoO}_3$ . Only those reached and locked on the surface of  $\text{MoO}_3$  through the complexing between Mo and functional groups containing S and N are responsible for the remarkable SERS signal in a CT way.

## 4. Conclusions

In summary, we have successfully synthesized a novel  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  hybrid with a uniform and ultrathin shell (4 nm) through the pre-treating  $\text{MoO}_3$  with  $\text{HNO}_3$  and using MB as the model target. A selective SERS performance with a detection limit of  $1.6 \times 10^4$  was achieved and the SERS substrate can be photocatalytically recycled through a simple and effective “aim-and-shoot” way. The MIP-gating CT mechanism is proposed to illustrate the selective and sensitive SERS detection based on a series of control analyses on  $\text{MoO}_3@\text{MIPs}$  with thicker shell but decreased sensitivity. We believe this “aim-and-shoot” strategy with excellent sensitivity, selectivity, and recyclability can greatly push forward the development of semiconductor-based SERS technology for complex detection.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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