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# ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> photocatalysts: enhancing CO<sub>2</sub> reduction through improved adsorption and photocatalytic performance†

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Nowadays, the widespread concern over controlling CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and mitigating the adverse effects of greenhouse gases on global climate has attracted significant attention. In this study, g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> was synthesized by thermopolymerizing urea. Subsequently, ZIF-8 was combined with g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> using an *in situ* deposition method, resulting in the fabrication of ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composite photocatalysts at various molar ratios. Effective incorporation of ZIF-8 into g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> suppressed the recombination of photogenerated electrons and holes, thereby enhancing CO<sub>2</sub> capture capacity and preserving light absorption capabilities. The ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composite demonstrates excellent photocatalytic performance for CO<sub>2</sub> reduction, where the optimized material exhibited a CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption capacity 1.52 times that of pure g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and increased the conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> to CH<sub>4</sub> by more than sevenfold. This study harnesses the superior CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption properties of metal–organic frameworks to develop more efficient photocatalysts, enhancing CO<sub>2</sub> conversion efficacy and offering insights for developing efficient photocatalysts that utilize CO<sub>2</sub>.

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## 1 Introduction

Graphitic carbon nitride (g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>) has emerged as a semiconductor material with significant potential in the realm of CO<sub>2</sub> photocatalysis, attributed to its distinctive advantages. This non-metallic semiconductor is composed of carbon and nitrogen, elements abundantly available on Earth. It features a relatively small bandgap of approximately 2.7 eV, enabling a high responsiveness to visible light. Additionally, g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> exhibits superior resistance to acids and bases and maintains its integrity under illumination. Its structure and properties can be readily tailored, offering commendable photocatalytic activity.<sup>1</sup> However, the prevalent issues currently include low photogenerated electron–hole separation efficiency and low CO<sub>2</sub> absorption capacity.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the development of new materials or the enhancement of CO<sub>2</sub> photocatalytic reduction through doping, compositing to form heterojunctions, and other methods, represents a current research focus. In fact, several adsorbents, such as graphene, activated carbon, zeolites, and certain mesoporous materials, have been employed in conjunction with specific photocatalysts to

augment the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub>. However, the improvement achieved through these combinations is often quite limited. The catalysts currently in use commonly suffer from issues such as light shielding, photocapture of charges, occupation of redox active sites, and non-selective adsorption of reactants and products.<sup>3</sup>

Metal–organic frameworks (MOFs) are a new class of crystalline porous materials with periodic network structures, self-assembled from metal clusters or metal ions and organic ligands through coordination bonds. They hold significant promise in applications such as adsorption and catalysis. MOF materials have demonstrated strong capabilities in CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption. Based on this, our experiment proposes that combining MOFs with semiconductor photocatalysts can significantly enhance CO<sub>2</sub> capture performance, thereby increasing the efficiency of photocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction.<sup>4</sup> ZIF-8 (zeolitic imidazolate framework-8) is a type of MOF material with a zeolite topology structure formed by the coordination of Zn<sup>2+</sup> ions with 2-methylimidazole. ZIF-8 possesses a large specific surface area, high porosity, regular pore channels, good thermal stability, water resistance, CO<sub>2</sub> affinity, and the combined advantages of traditional zeolite molecular sieves and MOFs in terms of chemical stability. Furthermore, it has two other features: one aspect is associated with the inherent transparency of ZIF-8.<sup>5</sup> The integration of ZIF-8 into semiconductor matrices scarcely detracts from their photonic capture capabilities. Another aspect is associated with the selective adsorptive properties of ZIF-8. ZIF-8 exhibits a pronounced preference for adsorbing CO<sub>2</sub>, the primary reactant, while maintaining a low affinity towards the resultant reduction products, such as CH<sub>4</sub> and CH<sub>3</sub>OH.<sup>6</sup>

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Moreover, ZIF-8 can typically be synthesized through three common methods: synthesis in methanol solution;<sup>7</sup> synthesis in a mixed solution of methanol and aqueous ammonia;<sup>8</sup> and solvothermal synthesis in DMF.<sup>9</sup> Research has found that ZIF-8(MeOH) has a larger external surface area and more acid–base sites, thus exhibiting significantly higher catalytic activity than ZIF-8(NH<sub>4</sub>OH) and ZIF-8 (DMF).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, this study chose to synthesize ZIF-8 by the stirring method and introduced g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> on this basis, modifying ZIF-8 onto the surface of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and investigating its enhanced effect on CO<sub>2</sub> reduction performance. The *in situ* prepared ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composite material has stronger light capture ability, higher charge separation efficiency, and greater CO<sub>2</sub> absorption capacity. As a result, compared to traditional urea-thermal polymerized g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, the yields of CO and CH<sub>4</sub> are significantly improved, with the yield of CH<sub>4</sub> increasing more than sevenfold.

## 2 Experimental

### 2.1 Chemical

All reagents with analytical reagent grade were used as received without further purification. Urea, zinc nitrate hexahydrate, 2-methylimidazole, methanol were purchased from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd. Deionized water was used throughout the experiment.

**2.1.1. The synthesis of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>.** g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> was prepared using a high-temperature condensation method, with urea as the precursor. The process involved placing urea in a covered Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> crucible, heating from room temperature to 550 °C at a rate of 8 °C min<sup>-1</sup>, maintaining this temperature for 3 hours, and allowing the material to naturally cool, resulting in the formation of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>.<sup>11</sup>

**2.1.2. The synthesis of ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>.** Employing an *in situ* method to fabricate ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composites. To enhance the integration of ZIF-8 with g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, the experiment first involves the combination of Zn(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>·6H<sub>2</sub>O with g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>. The specific steps are as follows: 0.63 g of zinc nitrate and 1.26 g of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> are weighed and added to 60 mL of methanol, followed by ultrasonication for 1 hour, during which the zinc nitrate dissolves. Then, 60 mL of a methanol solution containing 1.6 g of 2-methylimidazole is quickly poured into the above solution, maintained under ultrasonication for 30 minutes, and then mechanically stirred for 8 hours. The mixed solution is centrifuged, and the resultant mixture is dried at 60 °C for 6 hours to obtain the ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composite photocatalytic material. To investigate the effects of different ZIF-8 to g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> ratios on the photocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction performance, experiments were designed with composite photocatalytic materials at different molar percentages of 20%, 40%, 60%, and 80%, denoted as Z20CN, Z40CN, Z60CN, and Z80CN, respectively. Pure ZIF-8 was also prepared utilizing the procedure described previously, with the exclusion of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> addition.

### 2.2 Characterization of photocatalyst

The phase structure of the catalysts obtained from the experiment was qualitatively analyzed using X-ray diffraction (XRD),

with the measurements carried out using a D8-ADVANCE X-ray diffractometer from Bruker, Germany. The micro-morphology of the catalysts was observed using a dual-beam field emission scanning electron microscope (SEM), specifically a GAIA 3 XMN model from TESCAN, Czech Republic, equipped with an energy dispersive X-ray (EDX) scanner for quantitative and qualitative analysis of the elemental distribution within the catalysts. Prior to testing, gold sputtering was performed using a JFC-1600 ion sputter from JEOL Ltd, Japan. High-performance imaging X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was used for qualitative analysis of the composition and chemical states of the catalysts, with measurements taken using an ESCALAB 250Xi from Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA. Binding energies of all samples were calibrated to the C 1s peak at 284.8 eV. FT-IR was employed to analyze the structure and functional groups of the catalysts, using an FT-IR 1200 spectrometer from ST Japan, with pure KBr as the background and a scanning range of 4000 to 500 cm<sup>-1</sup>. Ultraviolet-visible diffuse reflectance spectroscopy (UV-vis) was used to analyze the light absorption properties of semiconductor materials, their electronic structures, and to calculate the band gap width of semiconductor materials. The measurements were carried out using a U-3900 spectrophotometer from Hitachi, Japan, with a test wavelength range of 200–800 nm. Photoluminescence spectroscopy (PL) was utilized to analyze the migration, transfer, and separation efficiency of photo-generated electron–hole pairs in semiconductors, with the characterization performed using an F-4600 high-performance imaging X-ray photoelectron spectrometer from Hitachi, Japan, obtaining photoluminescence spectra of the samples under an excitation wavelength of 370 nm. Thermogravimetric analysis was conducted in an oxidative atmosphere utilizing a DTG-60H analyzer from Shimadzu, Japan. Nitrogen adsorption–desorption isotherms were quantified using an ASAP2460 from Micromeritics, USA. CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption measurements were performed at room temperature using Micromeritics ASAP 2460 from Micromeritics, USA. Electrochemical testing of the photoelectrochemical properties was performed using a 1260 A + 1287 A electrochemical workstation from Solartron Analytical, UK, with the excitation light source provided by a PLS-SXE300 xenon lamp from Beijing Perfectlight Technology Co., Ltd, and transient photocurrent tests were conducted at 0.1 V for a duration of 540 s.

### 2.3 Examination of photocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction performance

In this experiment, a typical gas–solid CO<sub>2</sub> reduction reaction was selected.<sup>12</sup> It is to prevent the impact of water photolysis on the experiment. If a hydrogen source is introduced, the photo-generated charges and energy produced by the catalyst would suffice to meet the demands for both photocatalytic water splitting and CO<sub>2</sub> reduction.<sup>13</sup> The experimental procedure is as follows: the photocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction performance was evaluated in a 250 mL photoreactor equipped with an optical quartz window. The opening of the reactor was sealed with a silicone stopper, and a 300 W xenon lamp simulating sunlight served as the light source, positioned approximately 15 cm



above the reactor. 0.5 mL of H<sub>2</sub>O and 50 mg of catalyst powder were added to the sealed glass reactor, uniformly dispersed on a glass plate. Before illumination, the reactor was evacuated and then filled with 20 mL of high-purity CO<sub>2</sub> (99.999%). After 3 hours of light irradiation, the products were analyzed using a gas chromatograph (GC-2014C, Shimadzu, Japan) equipped with a flame ionization detector (FID) and an automatic sampler. The reported gas volumes represent the average of three experimental trials.

## 3 Results and discussion

### 3.1 Characterization of the photocatalysts

X-ray diffraction analysis was conducted to study the crystal structure of each sample, with the results shown in (Fig. 1). g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, Z20CN, and Z40CN all exhibited characteristic diffraction peaks of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> at 12.8° and 27.6° (JCPDS Card No. 87-1526),<sup>14</sup> corresponding to the (100) and (002) planes of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, respectively.<sup>40</sup> The (100) plane reflects the in-plane periodic arrangement of the tri-s-triazine ring structure of the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> molecular skeleton, while the (002) plane indicates the interlayer stacking of conjugated aromatic ring structures.<sup>15</sup> The strong and pure diffraction peaks of ZIF-8 indicate its high crystallinity. Multiple characteristic crystal planes of ZIF-8, including the (010), (002), (112), and (022) planes, can be observed in the XRD pattern, consistent with previous reports.<sup>16</sup> The standard peaks of the synthesized ZIF-8 were also compared with the simulated ZIF-8 (JCPDS 00-062-1030) and are depicted in Fig. S1.† The diffraction peaks of composites doped with different ratios of ZIF-8 show slight variations. In Z20CN and Z40CN, the (002) plane of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> is clearly visible, due to the lower doping amount of ZIF-8; however, in Z60CN and Z80CN, the intensity of the (002) peak gradually decreases. Notably, the position of the (002) peak shifts towards a lower angle, indicating an increase in the lattice spacing due to the addition of ZIF-8.<sup>17</sup> As the amount of ZIF-8 increases, the diffraction peaks of ZIF-8 become more

prominent while the characteristic peaks of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> gradually weaken, suggesting an effective composite formation between ZIF-8 and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>.

Field emission scanning electron microscopy (FESEM) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) were employed to investigate the microstructure of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, ZIF-8, and Z60CN. As depicted in (Fig. 2a), g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> exhibits a layered stacking of agglomerated clusters,<sup>18</sup> characterized by a relatively loose structure with irregular morphology and size. (Fig. 2b) shows the rhombic dodecahedral morphology of ZIF-8, with micro-crystals measuring 80–100 nm in diameter, demonstrating well-crystallized particles, regular shapes, and uniform dispersion.<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 2c) reveals the uniform distribution of ZIF-8 octahedral cubic particles on the surface of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, with the agglomerated clusters of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> in the composite product undergoing fragmentation, thereby enhancing the overall particle dispersion and uniformity. The TEM image of Z60CN (Fig. 2d) further confirms the uniform deposition of ZIF-8 on g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> sheets, indicating a tight integration between the two. The energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) elemental maps of Z60CN (Fig. 2e–h) clearly demonstrate that, beyond the presence of carbon (C) and nitrogen (N), zinc (Zn) is also uniformly distributed within the composite material.<sup>20</sup> These outcomes decisively validate the formation of an effective composite between g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and ZIF-8, aligning with the X-ray diffraction (XRD) observations detailed earlier.

Thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) under air was utilized to ascertain the actual ZIF-8 loading in the samples. As Fig. 3a illustrates, the three samples demonstrated excellent thermal stability with less than 10% mass loss between 0–350 °C, likely due to the loss of impurities adhered to the surface or within pores, and water adsorbed on the surface. Decomposition of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> commenced at approximately 550 °C, culminating in complete sublimation and decomposition. ZIF-8 exhibited a weight loss of around 70% from 350 °C to 600 °C, indicative of the metal–organic framework's collapse, leaving ZnO as the residue. Within the same temperature range, Z60CN showed an 85% weight loss, with ZnO being the remaining product, which correlates with ZIF-8 deposited on the Z60CN surface. With ZIF-8 molecular weight at 227.6 g mol<sup>-1</sup>, including one Zn atom (65.4 g mol<sup>-1</sup>), the additional ~8% mass loss of Z60CN compared to g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> allowed for the calculation of the actual ZIF-8 loading on the composite Z60CN to be 63.3%. This confirms the actual presence of ZIF-8 in the prepared samples aligns with the designed values.

Fig. 3b delineates the Fourier-transform infrared (FT-IR) spectral profiles for a suite of photocatalysts. The spectral signatures of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composites exhibit congruent stretching vibrational modes, evidencing that the quintessential lattice structure of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> is retained after surface modification. The absorption peaks observed in the range of 3000–3500 cm<sup>-1</sup> for g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and the ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composite samples are attributed to the stretching vibrations of the NH and NH<sub>2</sub> functional groups,<sup>3,21</sup> while the peaks from 1200 to 1630 cm<sup>-1</sup> are due to the typical stretching vibrations of the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> heterocycles. The absorption peak at 815 cm<sup>-1</sup> for both g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and the composite samples corresponds to the

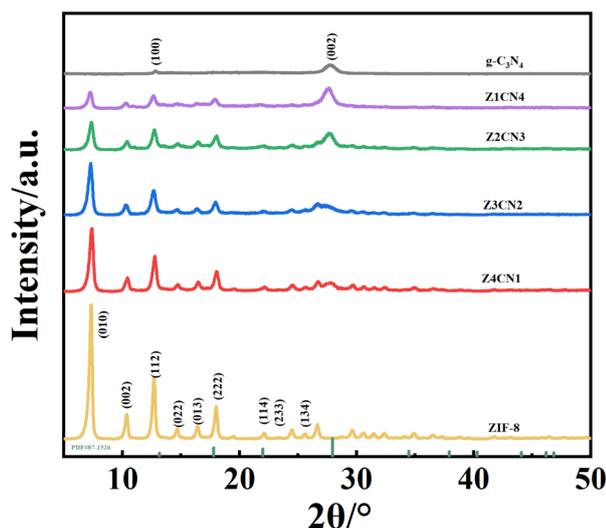


Fig. 1 XRD patterns of diverse photocatalysts.



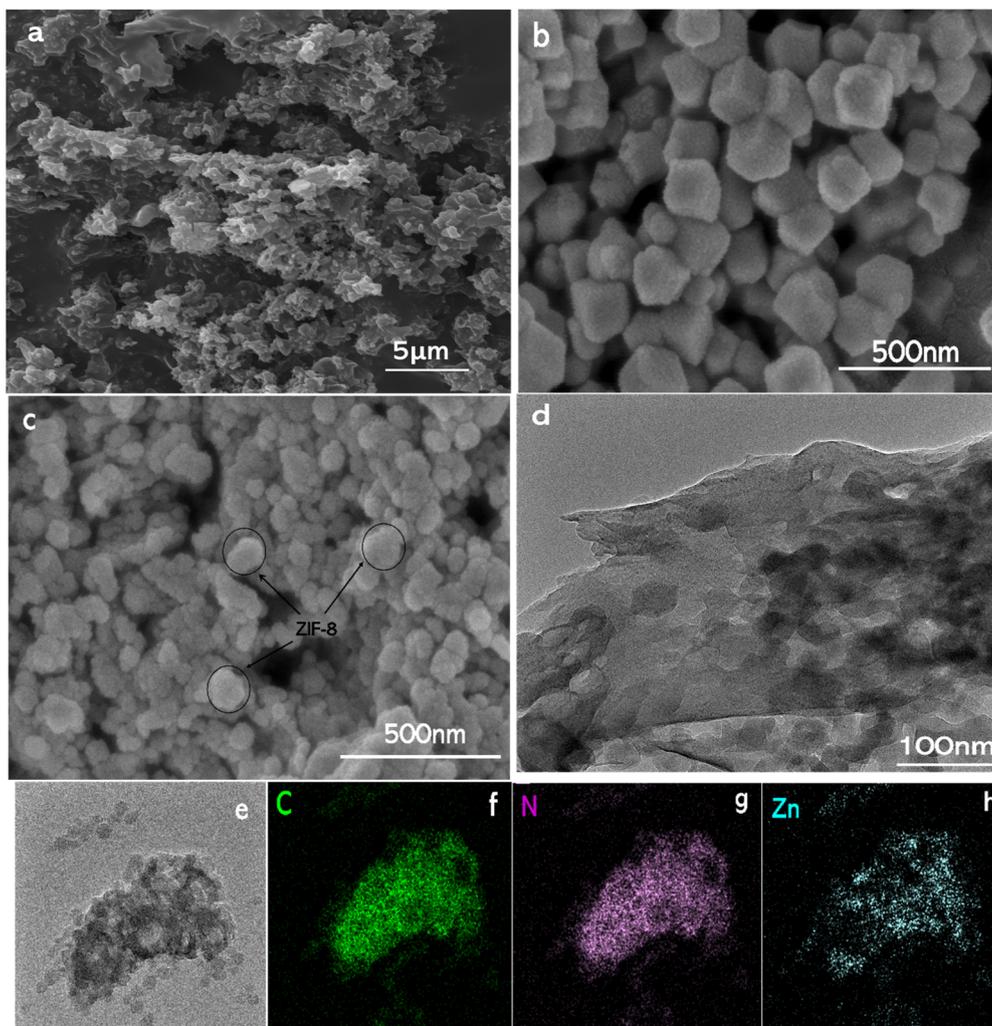


Fig. 2 SEM images of (a) g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> (b) ZIF-8 (c) Z60CN; (d) TEM images of Z60CN; (e–h) the EDX elemental maps of Z60CN.

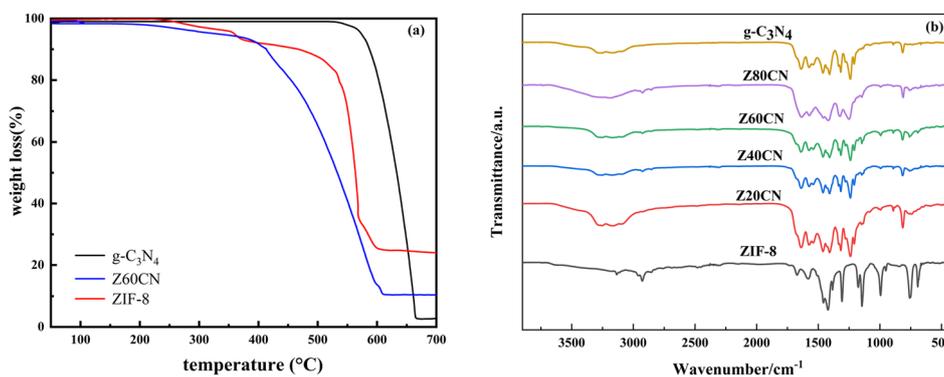


Fig. 3 (a) TG analyses of sample ZIF-8, g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and Z60CN; (b) the FT-IR spectra of different photocatalysts.

bending vibrations of the triazine structure in g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>.<sup>42</sup> The absorption peaks in the range of 1350–900 cm<sup>-1</sup> and at 800 cm<sup>-1</sup> are assigned to the in-plane and out-of-plane bending vibrations of the imidazole rings.<sup>22</sup> Notably, the absorption peak at 815 cm<sup>-1</sup> for the ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composite samples shifts to

a higher wavenumber, which may originate from structural distortions of the triazine ring units in ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>. Additionally, a new characteristic peak at 422 cm<sup>-1</sup> appears for ZIF-8 and its composites, corresponding to the stretching vibration of the



Zn–N bond,<sup>23</sup> further corroborating the effective composite formation between the two materials by the *in situ* method.

Fig. 4a–d display the XPS spectra of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and Z60CN. As shown in the full scan spectrum in Fig. 4a, C, N, and O elements were detected in both g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and Z60CN, with the O 1s peak plausibly attributable to the adsorption of CO<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>O molecules on the sample's surface. The characteristic peak of C 1s at 284.8 eV serves as a charge correction reference for the analysis of the elements. Fig. 4b shows the high-resolution C 1s spectrum, where the characteristic peak in g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> at a binding energy of 287.80 eV corresponds to the sp<sup>2</sup> hybridized orbitals of aromatic N=C–N.<sup>24</sup> In Z60CN, this peak shifts by 0.05 eV to a lower binding energy at 287.75 eV, suggesting effective composite formation between ZIF-8 and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and indicating charge transfer or changes in the chemical environment on the surface of the triazine rings. Fig. 4c presents the high-resolution N 1s spectrum, with g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> fitted with two

characteristic peaks at 398.45 eV and 400.00 eV, corresponding to the C=N–C within the triazine rings and the bridging nitrogen atoms N–(C)<sub>3</sub> hybridized orbitals,<sup>25,26</sup> respectively. The peaks in Z60CN shift to 398.6 eV and 400.2 eV, indicating that the chemical state of N is influenced by the composite of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and ZIF-8. Fig. 4d reveals two distinct peaks at 1022.1 eV and 1045.2 eV, corresponding to Zn 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and Zn 2p<sub>1/2</sub>, respectively. The observed chemical shifts in the carbon and nitrogen elements in Z60CN relative to g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> further indicate the effective integration of ZIF-8 into the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> lattice, in alignment with the findings from X-ray diffraction analysis.

The UV-vis absorption spectra of the samples (Fig. 5a) reveal that the absorption capacity of ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> in the ultraviolet and visible light regions is enhanced compared to g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, with the absorption edge of each experiencing a red shift. Notably, the absorption edge of Z60CN shifts to 456 nm, indicating a significant improvement in visible light absorption. The bandgap energy ( $E_g$ ) can be calculated using:

$$ah\nu = A(h\nu - E_g)^{(n/2)}$$

The calculated bandgap energies for g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and Z60CN are 2.76 eV and 2.71 eV, respectively, indicating that the integration of ZIF-8 reduces the bandgap of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> by 0.05 eV. Thus, the red shift and the narrowing of the bandgap in Z60CN suggest that it can excite electrons from the valence band to the conduction band at lower energies than g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, potentially enhancing the efficiency of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction during photocatalytic processes.

Fig. 5b presents the photoluminescence (PL) spectra of different photocatalysts. It is observed that the fluorescence intensity of ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composites is significantly lower than that of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, indicating a much slower recombination rate of

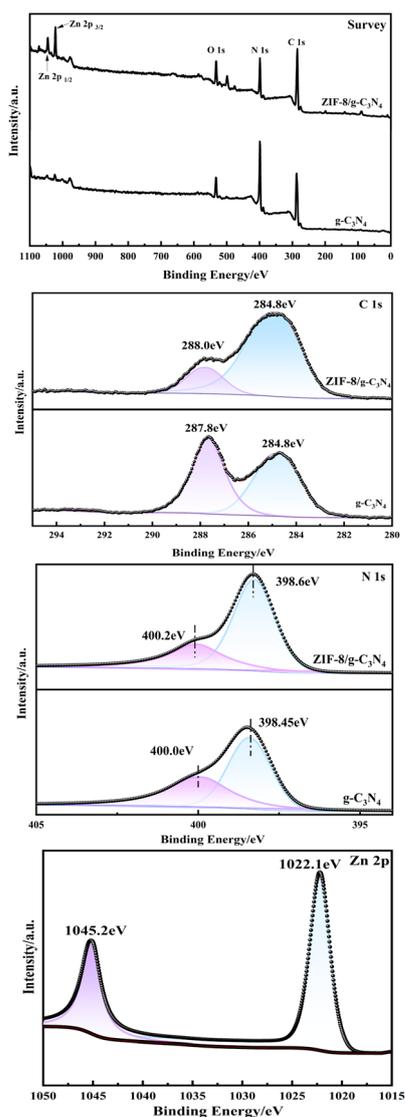


Fig. 4 (a) XPS full scan spectrum of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, (b) C 1s, (c) N 1s, (d) Zn 2p.

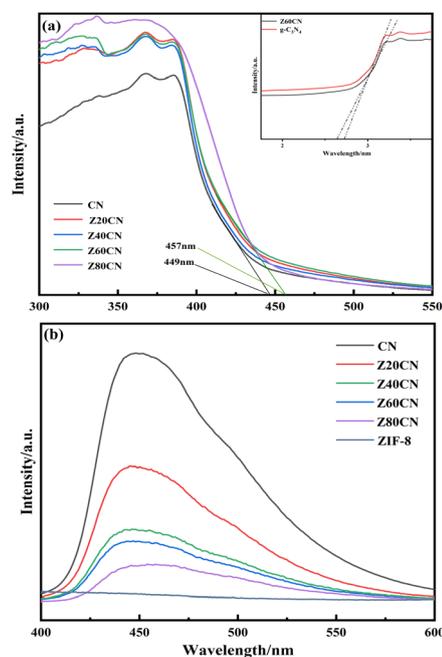


Fig. 5 (a) UV-vis and corresponding relationship between optical energy changes of different samples, (b) PL.



electron–hole pairs in the composites. This slow recombination facilitates more effective separation and migration of electron–hole pairs.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the introduction of ZIF-8 markedly suppresses the recombination of charge carriers within  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ . This suppression contributes to a higher utilization rate of electron–hole pairs,<sup>41</sup> thereby enhancing the activity of the photocatalyst and leading to a more efficient photocatalytic reaction.<sup>28</sup> ZIF-8 not only improves the light absorption properties of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  but also boosts the photocatalytic efficiency through the diminution of charge carrier recombination rates.

Fig. 6 displays the transient photocurrent response of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and Z60CN. The transient photocurrent intensity of Z60CN is notably higher than that of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , indicating that a greater number of electrons per unit time pass through the Z60CN electrode, which suggests a higher efficiency of photogenerated carrier separation. This is in agreement with the fluorescence test results discussed earlier.

### 3.2 Adsorption performance

Nitrogen adsorption measurements were employed to characterize the pore structure and specific surface area of the synthesized samples. A larger specific surface area in catalysts typically indicates more adsorption and active sites, which may

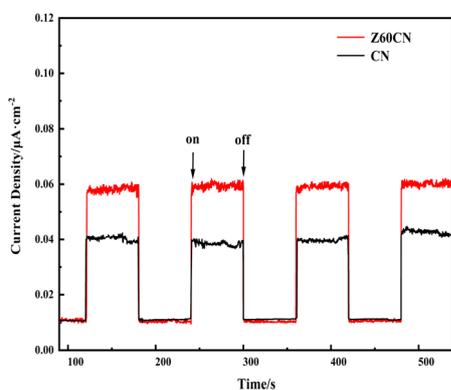


Fig. 6 Transient photocurrent response graphs of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and Z60CN.

translate to higher catalytic performance. Fig. 7a presents the adsorption–desorption isotherms of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and Z60CN, both of which exhibit type IV classification.<sup>29,30</sup> The presence of  $\text{H}_3$  hysteresis loop in the relative pressure ( $P/P_0$ ) range of 0.60–0.95 suggests the presence of mesopores.<sup>31</sup> The hysteresis loop observed in the isotherms extends across a substantial range of relative pressures, signifying a heterogeneous mesopore size distribution. This is substantiated by the commensurately broad pore-size distributions delineated by the Barrett–Joyner–Halenda (BJH) analysis. Table 1 enumerates the specific surface areas, pore volumes, and average pore diameters for each of the samples. Overall, in this study, the construction of a composite photocatalyst was demonstrated to increase the specific surface area of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , resulting in more small-sized mesopores.<sup>32</sup>

There is ample literature documenting that the adsorption of  $\text{CO}_2$  on the surface of photocatalysts is a primary key step affecting the pathways and kinetics of photocatalytic  $\text{CO}_2$  reduction reactions.<sup>33</sup> An in-depth study of the  $\text{CO}_2$  adsorption performance of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , Z60CN, and ZIF-8 samples was conducted *via*  $\text{CO}_2$  adsorption isotherms shown in Fig. 7b. Notably, all samples exhibit a linear relationship between  $\text{CO}_2$  adsorption capacity and relative pressure ( $P/P_0$ ) in the range of 0.1 to 1.0.<sup>34</sup> This relationship suggests that the interactions between  $\text{CO}_2$  and the samples are predominantly physical.<sup>35</sup> In the relative pressure ( $P/P_0$ ) range of 0.2–1.0, the  $\text{CO}_2$  adsorption capacity of Z60CN is significantly higher than that of pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , which is attributable to Z60CN higher specific surface area, thereby exhibiting more pronounced  $\text{CO}_2$  adsorption. In summary, the introduction of ZIF-8 to modify the  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  photocatalyst effectively tunes its adsorption properties.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.3 Photocatalytic $\text{CO}_2$ reduction performance

In a typical gas–solid system, the photocatalytic  $\text{CO}_2$  reduction capabilities of all fabricated samples were assessed under irradiation from a 300 watt xenon lamp without an ultraviolet filter. Control experiments confirmed that in the absence of both photocatalyst and light exposure, byproducts such as CO and  $\text{CH}_4$  remained undetected. Although it has been demonstrated in recent years that some MOFs exhibit photocatalytic activity

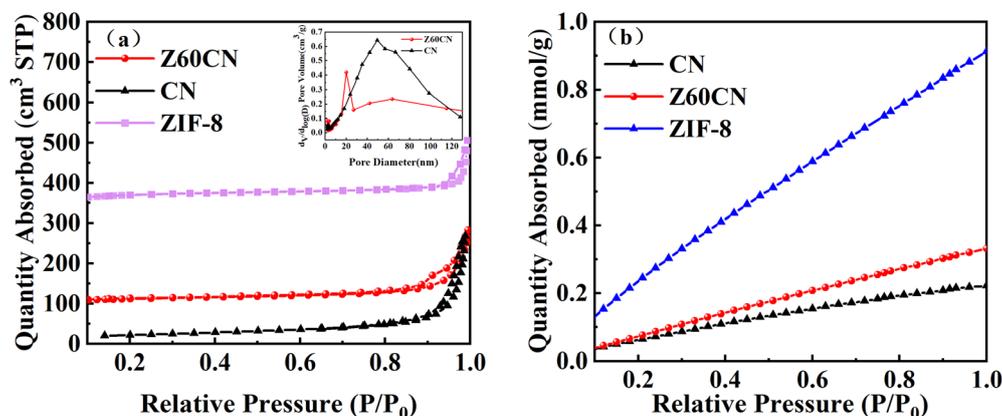


Fig. 7 (a)  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption–desorption isotherms and pore size distribution curves of sample CN and Z60CN (b)  $\text{CO}_2$  adsorption curves of the sample CN, ZIF-8 and Z60CN.

Table 1 Comparison of the SBET, pore volume, average pore size, CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption

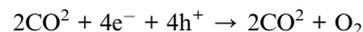
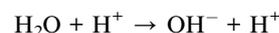
Sample	S <sub>BET</sub> (m <sup>2</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	Pore volume (cm <sup>3</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	Average pore size (nm)	CO <sub>2</sub> adsorption (mmol g <sup>-1</sup> )
g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	73.87	0.41	22.40	0.21
Z60CN	363.41	0.43	4.80	0.32
ZIF-8	1182.69	0.78	2.64	0.91

for CO<sub>2</sub> reduction under light irradiation,<sup>37</sup> no organic products were detected during prolonged CO<sub>2</sub> photoreduction using pure ZIF-8 as the photocatalyst. This observation that, within the context of this investigation, the presence of both light irradiation and the photocatalyst are essential prerequisites for the effective of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction.

As shown in Fig. 8(a) and (b), as marked increase in the photocatalytic activity for generating CO and CH<sub>4</sub> was achieved with g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> photocatalysts composited with ZIF-8. The total yield of CO and CH<sub>4</sub> increased with the extension of light irradiation time. For Z20CN composited with ZIF-8, the yield of CO production increased by about 70% after 3 hours (Fig. 8a). Meanwhile, for Z60CN composited with ZIF-8, the yield of CH<sub>4</sub> production could be increased by more than 7 times after 3 hours (Fig. 8b). It is important to note that the amount of ZIF-8 composite is crucial for photocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction. As delineated in earlier discussions, the addition of ZIF-8 substantially amplifies CO<sub>2</sub> capture, serving as an essential preliminary phase to the ensuing photocatalytic conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> into CO and CH<sub>4</sub>. It is generally observed that an increase in the CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption capacity of a semiconductor photocatalyst is directly correlated with an improvement in its photocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction efficacy. Therefore, initially, as the amount of ZIF-8 composite increases, the yield of photocatalytic CH<sub>4</sub> continuously increases. However, the amount of ZIF-8 composite seems to have a dual effect on the performance of photocatalytic CH<sub>4</sub> production. When the molar ratio of ZIF-8 to g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> is 6 : 4 (sample Z60CN), the highest yield

of photocatalytic CH<sub>4</sub> production after 3 hours is achieved, reaching 2.56 μmol g<sup>-1</sup>. Although the introduction of ZIF-8 can enhance CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption, the poor conductivity of ZIF-8 may inhibit surface charge transfer, as also confirmed by the analysis of fluorescence spectra and transient photocurrent responses.<sup>43</sup> To assess the durability of the ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composite photocatalyst, we recovered the catalyst after the reactions and conducted XRD comparisons, as shown in Fig. 8(c). The results indicate that the ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composite maintains excellent stability for the photocatalytic reduction of CO<sub>2</sub>, showing no significant changes in the crystal structure, which suggests its high durability in photocatalytic applications.

In this investigation, across the spectrum of synthesized photocatalysts, CO<sub>2</sub> is predominantly converted into CO and CH<sub>4</sub> as the primary outputs in the photocatalytic reduction process. The possible mechanism for the formation of CH<sub>4</sub> can be described by the following reaction formula,<sup>38</sup> based on the presence of different intermediate products:



Based on the results above, a possible degradation mechanism was proposed in Fig. 9. Although the ZIF-8 in the composite cannot be excited by the visible light, the g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> component can be excited. Under illumination, g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> can be excited to generate electron-hole pairs, with the excited electrons transitioning from the valence band (VB) to the conduction band (CB). The conduction band of ZIF-8 is more negative

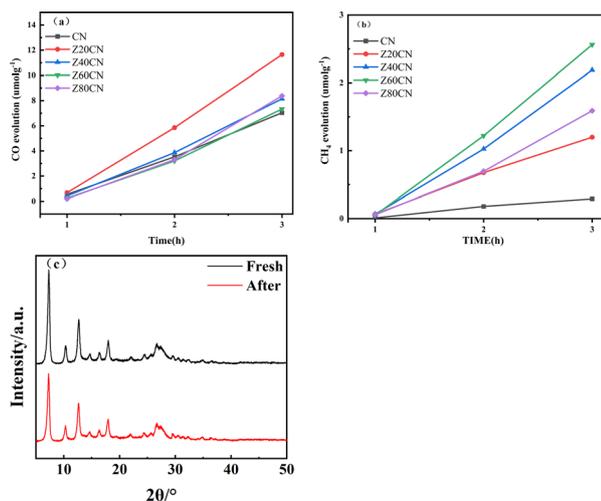


Fig. 8 (a) Comparison of CO production rates for the prepared samples. (b) Comparison of CH<sub>4</sub> production rates for the prepared samples. (c) XRD patterns of Z60CN before and after the catalytic reactions.

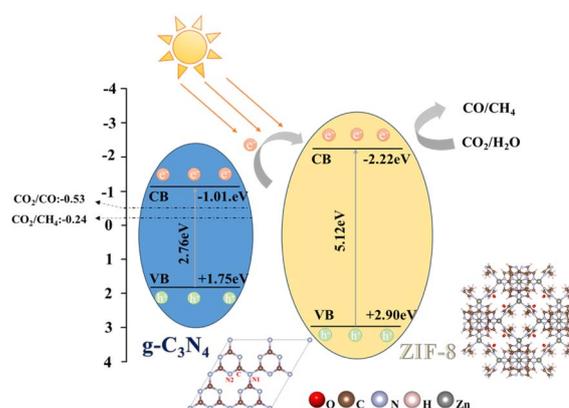


Fig. 9 Mechanism diagram of ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> photocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction.



compared to that of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, prompting the electrons to migrate towards the energetically favorable conduction band of ZIF-8. Given ZIF-8's large surface area and high porosity, it exhibits strong CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption properties. Thus, the electrons flowing to ZIF-8 interact with the adsorbed CO<sub>2</sub>. Since the CB potential of ZIF-8 (−2.22 eV) is more negative than the potential of the CO<sub>2</sub>/CH<sub>4</sub> redox couple,<sup>39</sup> the accumulated electrons in the CB of ZIF-8 can effectively reduce CO<sub>2</sub> to produce CH<sub>4</sub> and CO.

## 4 Conclusions

The ZIF-8/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> series of composite photocatalytic materials was synthesized using an *in situ* deposition method. The designed composite photocatalytic materials largely inherit the optical absorption characteristics of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, enhance photocatalytic redox capability, improve efficiency of charge separation, and possess excellent CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption capacity. The findings demonstrate that the Z60CN composite photocatalyst displays enhanced photocatalytic performance, reaching a methane production of 2.56 μmol g<sup>−1</sup> in 3 hours, which is 7 times that of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, without the addition of a sacrificial agent. Z60CN shows lower photoluminescence (PL) intensity and higher photocurrent density than g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, suggesting that this structure is conducive to interfacial charge transfer. Moreover, ZIF-8's limited inherent conductivity impedes charge transfer within the system. Notably, as the proportion of ZIF-8 in the composite increases, the photocatalytic efficiency of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction for Z80CN declines compared to Z60CN. This illustrates a trade-off between charge transfer efficiency and CO<sub>2</sub> capture capabilities in the composites. Therefore, the precise quantification of ZIF-8 is pivotal in enhancing photocatalytic efficacy. This research offers fresh perspectives on the development of effective CO<sub>2</sub> photocatalysts, leveraging the synergistic interactions between semiconductor nanostructures and metal–organic frameworks.

## Author contributions

Y. H. S. and L. Y. synthesized the samples and performed the performance tests. R. F. W. and S. L. A. conceived the idea, coordinated all stages of this research, and supervised the work. Y. H. S. and Z. H. wrote the manuscript. All authors contributed to the manuscript.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

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