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# Precipitation synthesis and characterization of SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> heterojunctions for enhanced photocatalytic H<sub>2</sub> production†

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This study reports the development of SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> heterojunctions, a hybrid semiconductor photocatalyst with varying mass percent ratios using a facile precipitation method for hydrogen (H<sub>2</sub>) production. The synergistic effect between the SnO<sub>2</sub> nanoparticles and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> sheets suppresses the charge recombination and enhances carrier separation, leading to improved photocatalytic activity. The nanocomposites demonstrate increased hydrogen production across all composites, with SC-20 sample (*i.e.*, 80% SnO<sub>2</sub> and 20% g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>) achieving the highest H<sub>2</sub> production rate of 287.7 μmol g<sup>-1</sup> h<sup>-1</sup>, that is, 1.87-fold and 1.63-fold higher than that of SnO<sub>2</sub> and of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> counterparts, respectively. Furthermore, the nanocomposites maintain excellent photostability. Specifically, SC-20 achieves approximately 1500 μmol H<sub>2</sub> evolution per 5 hour-cycle. The facile precipitation-based synthesis and enhanced photocatalytic activity of the SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> nanocomposite position it as a reliable, cost-effective, and sustainable candidate for solar-driven hydrogen production and other clean energy applications.

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## Introduction

Population growth and rapid industrialization have significantly increased the global demand for energy, which is predominantly met by finite, non-renewable petroleum resources.<sup>1–3</sup> The continuous depletion of these energy reserves, combined with the environmental damage caused by their combustion, has accelerated global warming and climate change, creating an energy crisis that threatens both energy security and environmental sustainability.<sup>4–8</sup> To address these critical issues, relevant stakeholders have prioritized the development of alternative energy sources that are environmentally friendly, sustainable, and cost-effective. In this context, hydrogen energy has emerged as a promising solution to mitigate the energy crisis and to reduce environmental pollution due to its clean nature and high energy content.<sup>9</sup>

Prominent approaches to produce hydrogen include semiconductor-based photocatalytic water splitting. In

particular, such a method has gained significant attention as a renewable and eco-friendly approach, as it not only provides a clean energy source but also reduces ecological pollution by decreasing reliance on fossil fuels.<sup>10,11</sup> Over the past few decades, various semiconductor materials explored for this purpose, specifically metal oxide materials including SrTiO<sub>3</sub>, TiO<sub>2</sub>, ZrO<sub>2</sub>, Ta<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>, ZnO, WO<sub>3</sub>, and SnO<sub>2</sub>, have been systematically studied for their photocatalytic properties.<sup>1,4,5,12–14</sup> However, these materials face significant limitations. For instance, TiO<sub>2</sub> and SnO<sub>2</sub>, with a large bandgap energy, absorb only UV light, utilizing merely 4% of sunlight. On the other hand, materials like ZnO are prone to photo-corrosion under illumination, while WO<sub>3</sub> is inactive for H<sub>2</sub> production due to its low conduction band edge potential.<sup>13–15</sup>

In response, several composite photocatalysts have been developed to address these limitations, among which graphitic carbon nitride (g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>) emerged as a promising candidate.<sup>16,17</sup> g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> is a metal-free polymeric semiconductor with a suitable bandgap of 2.7 eV, enabling efficient sunlight absorption and charge carrier excitation.<sup>18,19</sup> Additionally, its high chemical and thermal stability, attributed to its polymeric structure and degree of polymerization, render it a robust material for photocatalytic applications.<sup>20,21</sup> Furthermore, g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> is cost-effective and can be readily synthesized through the simple thermal decomposition of urea.<sup>22</sup> As a result, it has been extensively explored for photocatalytic hydrogen evolution,<sup>23,24</sup> and a variety of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-based heterostructures have been reported, including BiOCl/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>,<sup>25</sup> and CdS/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>,<sup>26,27</sup> and

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metal oxide-based ones such as  $\text{Bi}_2\text{WO}_6/\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ,<sup>28,29</sup>  $\text{TiO}_2/\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ,<sup>30,31</sup>  $\text{ZnO}/\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ,<sup>32,33</sup> and  $\text{TaON}/\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ,<sup>34</sup> which have shown promise in suppressing charge recombination and enhancing photocatalytic performance through the formation of heterojunction.<sup>35–39</sup>

Among metal oxide-based heterostructures, tin dioxide ( $\text{SnO}_2$ ) is notable due to its non-toxicity, low cost, and excellent optical, physical and photoelectrochemical properties,<sup>40,41</sup> which understandably finds wide range applications in, *e.g.*, energy storage, gas sensing, solar cells, photocatalysis, electronics, and electrochemical cells.<sup>42–44</sup> In the context of photocatalysts, previous studies have shown that  $\text{SnO}_2$  outperforms  $\text{ZnO}$  and  $\text{TiO}_2$  as an electron acceptor, making it a more appealing candidate for such a system.<sup>45</sup> With these properties,  $\text{SnO}_2$  thus constitutes a rational choice to be coupled with  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  to enhance its photocatalytic performance.<sup>46</sup> In recent years, several studies have reported the synthesis of  $\text{SnO}_2/\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  heterostructures for photocatalytic hydrogen production using various methods, including ultrasonic-assisting deposition,<sup>47</sup> sol-gel,<sup>48</sup> hydrothermal,<sup>49,50</sup> and solid-phase methods.<sup>51,52</sup> While these techniques offer advantages like crystallinity, good interfacial contact, and promising  $\text{H}_2$  evolution performance, they are often time consuming, require high temperature and pressure, and involve toxic solvents and specialized equipment, making them less scalable and environmentally friendly.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, developing simple, low-cost, scalable and eco-friendly techniques to synthesize  $\text{SnO}_2@/\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  photocatalyst for hydrogen evolution is highly desirable.

As a response, in this study we report the successful synthesis of  $\text{SnO}_2@/\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  hybrid photocatalyst *via* a simple and cost-effective precipitation method, which is widely recognized for producing metal oxide nanoparticles under mild conditions (ambient temperature and pressure) without the use of toxic gases.<sup>54–57</sup> To the best of our knowledge, no previous studies reported the use of precipitation-based synthesis for constructing  $\text{SnO}_2/\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  heterojunctions for photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  production. To address this gap, we systematically varied the mass ratios of  $\text{SnO}_2$  to  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , and we found SC-20 sample (*i.e.*, 80%  $\text{SnO}_2$  and 20%  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ) to deliver the highest and stable photocatalytic hydrogen production, indicating an optimal interface for charge transfer. Aided with various materials characterization, the improved hydrogen production is attributed to the enhancement in the photo-induced charge carrier separation and suppressed charge recombination. This performance positions our synthesis strategy to be comparable with other complex methods employing noble metal catalysts, highlighting its potential for further optimization and practical applications.

## Experimental section

### Chemicals

All chemicals, including urea ( $\text{CH}_4\text{N}_2\text{O}$ ),  $\text{SnCl}_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and  $\text{NH}_3$  were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich without further purification. DI water was produced using water distillation apparatus DU-L4 MEDILAB.

### Synthesis of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ nanosheets

$\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  nanosheets were prepared using the bath sonication method. First, 10 g of urea ( $\text{CH}_4\text{N}_2\text{O}$ ) was heated in a muffle furnace at 550 °C for 3 h to produce bulk  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , which was subsequently ground into a powder. To convert this into nanosheets, 0.05 g of  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  powder was sonicated in 50 mL of distilled water for 90 min. The material was washed seven times with distilled water and dried at 70 °C for 24 h, yielding the desired light-yellow  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  nanosheets.

### Preparation of $\text{SnO}_2$ nanoparticles

$\text{SnO}_2$  nanoparticles were synthesized *via* precipitation. First, 2.5 g of  $\text{SnCl}_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  was dissolved in 50 mL DI water under stirring. A diluted ammonia solution (4 mL of 35% ammonia in 26 mL DI water) was added dropwise under continuous stirring to the  $\text{SnCl}_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  solution until the mixture turned milky at pH 9. The precipitate was washed five times with DI water by centrifugation, dried at 60 °C for 24 h, ground into a powder, and annealed at 400 °C for 2 h.

### Preparation of $\text{SnO}_2@/\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ nanocomposites

$\text{SnO}_2@/\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  nanocomposites with varying mass ratios were synthesized *via* a precipitation method as illustrated in Fig. 1. Initially, a measured quantity of  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  was dispersed in DI water, followed by the dissolution of  $\text{SnCl}_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  under continuous stirring. A 35% ammonia solution was added dropwise to the mixture under stirring until a milky precipitate formed at pH 9. The precipitate was washed five times with DI water, dried at 60 °C for 24 h, ground into a fine powder, and annealed at 400 °C for 2 h. The prepared composites were labeled as SC-X, where X denotes the at% of the  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , that is, SC-10 comprises 90%  $\text{SnO}_2$  and 10%  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , SC-20 does 80%  $\text{SnO}_2$  and 20%  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , SC-30 does 70%  $\text{SnO}_2$  and 30%  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , and SC-40 does 60%  $\text{SnO}_2$  and 40%  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ .

### Physiochemical characterizations

Various characterization techniques were employed to analyze the properties of the prepared samples. XRD (JDX-3532, JEOL) with Cu K $\alpha$  radiation ( $\lambda = 1.5418 \text{ \AA}$ ) at 40 kV and 30 mA confirmed the tetragonal structure for  $\text{SnO}_2$ , hexagonal structure for  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , and the coexistence of both in  $\text{SnO}_2@/\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$  composites. FTIR (Cary 630, Agilent Technologies) identified Sn–O and C–N vibrational modes in  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , respectively. SEM (JSM-6490A, JEOL) revealed sheet-like morphology for  $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , particle morphology for  $\text{SnO}_2$ , and heterojunction formation in the composites. UV-vis (PerkinElmer) spectra showed enhanced absorbance in the visible region for the composites. PL (LS45 PerkinElmer) investigated the lower recombination of photo-generated electrons.

### Photoelectrochemical measurements

Photocurrent (PC) measurements and electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) were performed using a CHI-660E electrochemical workstation with platinum counter electrode,



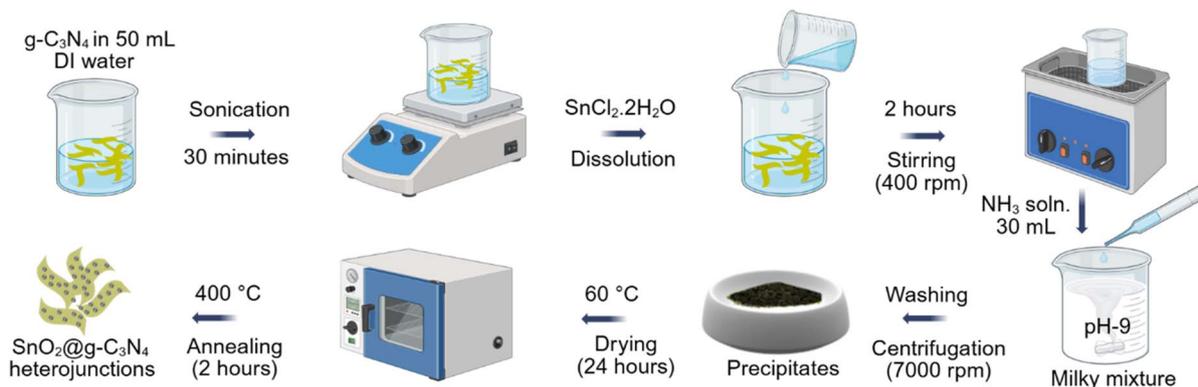


Fig. 1 Step-by-step schematic illustration of synthesis of  $\text{SnO}_2@g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  nanocomposites. First, the pre-synthesized  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  nanosheets are dispersed in 50 mL of deionized (DI) water. Subsequently,  $\text{SnCl}_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and  $\text{NH}_3$  are added to the solution, followed by stirring and pH adjustment. After washing and drying, the resulting precipitates are then annealed. The final product,  $\text{SnO}_2@g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  composites, appears as light-yellow sheets with black dots on the surface.

$\text{Ag}/\text{AgCl}$  reference electrode, and 0.5 M  $\text{Na}_2\text{SO}_4$  electrolyte solution.

### Photocatalytic $\text{H}_2$ generation measurements

Photocatalytic hydrogen production was evaluated in a flask irradiated by a 300 W xenon lamp (CEL HXF300), equipped with a cutoff filter ( $\lambda > 420$  nm). For the experiment, 20 mg of the prepared sample was dispersed in 80 mL of aqueous solution containing 10% methanol as the hole scavenger, *via* ultrasonication. Prior to irradiation, the system was purged with nitrogen ( $\text{N}_2$ ) for 15 min to eliminate any residual oxygen. The reaction was carried out under continuous stirring and illumination for a period of 5 h, and the amount of hydrogen produced was quantified using gas chromatography (GC-2014, Shimadzu).

## Results and discussions

As the first step of our study, we investigate the structural properties and the molecular composition of our prepared samples using X-ray diffraction (XRD). Fig. 2a shows the obtained XRD patterns of pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and  $\text{SnO}_2$ , their composites, as well as the corresponding JCPDS references for  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and  $\text{SnO}_2$ . The diffraction pattern of pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  shows a characteristic peak at  $2\theta = 27.5^\circ$  corresponding to the (002) reflection of its graphitic stacking structure, which matches perfectly with the corresponding standard reference (ICSD 01-087-1526), confirming the hexagonal structure of pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ .<sup>58</sup> In the case of pure  $\text{SnO}_2$ , observed peaks at  $26.4^\circ$ ,  $34^\circ$ ,  $38^\circ$ ,  $51.5^\circ$ , and  $65^\circ$  correspond to (110), (101), (200), (211) and (301) planes, respectively, corroborating the tetragonal rutile structure of the  $\text{SnO}_2$  (JCPDS 41-1445).<sup>59</sup> Examining the patterns of the composites (SC-10 to SC-40), the coexistence of both hexagonal  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and tetragonal  $\text{SnO}_2$  phases is confirmed, in that the corresponding patterns comprise the characteristic peaks of the constituents.<sup>60</sup> This finding thus corroborates the successful formation of heterojunction structures, notably without introducing any impurity phase. In detail, the intensity of the  $\text{SnO}_2$

diffraction peaks gradually decrease with increasing  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  content from SC-10 to SC-30. Interestingly, among the composites, SC-40 shows a diffraction pattern closely resembling with pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , likely due to the higher  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  content in SC-40.

Moreover, FTIR spectroscopy was performed to analyze the chemical bonding and functional groups of the samples. As shown in Fig. 3, the pristine  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  exhibit peaks at  $1243\text{--}1637\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , which correspond to C–N and C=N stretching vibrations, at  $808\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , which is attributed to the tri-s-triazine ring structure, and at  $3180\text{--}3331\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , which belongs to N–H stretching mode.<sup>58,61</sup> For pure  $\text{SnO}_2$ , a broad peak at  $659\text{ cm}^{-1}$  represents the Sn–O stretching mode in Sn–O–Sn.<sup>62</sup> To this end, the absence of additional peaks in the spectra of pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and  $\text{SnO}_2$  confirms their high purity, consistent with the XRD data above. In the case of the composites (SC-10 to SC-30), the

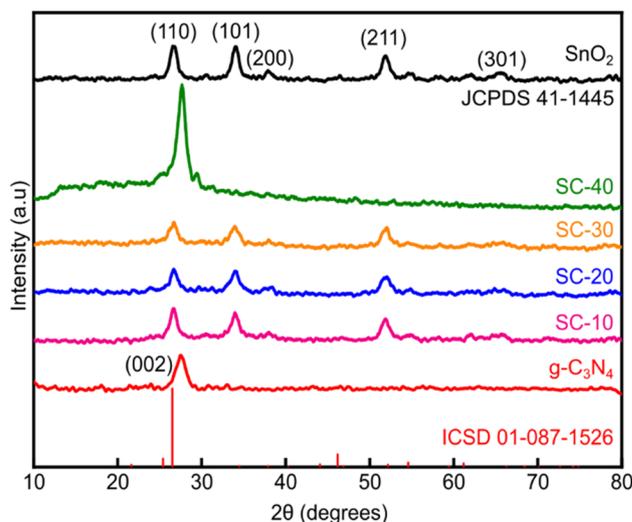


Fig. 2 X-ray diffraction pattern of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ,  $\text{SnO}_2$ , and their composites, alongside its standard reference. The coexistence of both  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and  $\text{SnO}_2$  signature peaks in the composite samples confirms their successful formation.



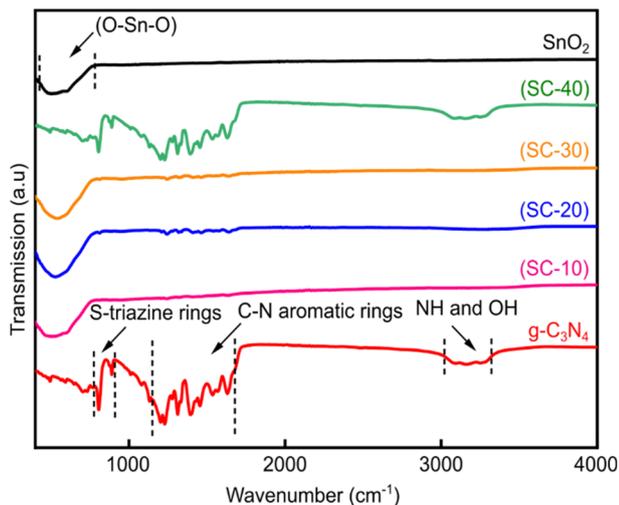


Fig. 3 FTIR spectra of pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ,  $\text{SnO}_2$ , and their composites in the range of  $500\text{--}4000\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . The characteristic C–N, C=N, and Sn–O bonds, along with some additional bonds, are observed in pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and  $\text{SnO}_2$ , as well as their coexistence in the composites.

distinct vibrational modes of both  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and  $\text{SnO}_2$  are observed, corroborating the successful formation of the nanocomposites. The FTIR spectrum of SC-40, however, closely resembles that of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , again indicating a dominant presence of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  in this composition.

Last, Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) was employed to analyze the morphology of the synthesized samples. As shown in Fig. 4a and b, pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  exhibits a sheet-like morphology, though the sheets are not distinctly visible due to agglomeration. Meanwhile, Fig. 4c and d confirm the formation of well-defined  $\text{SnO}_2$  nanoparticles with average diameters around  $94.5\text{ nm}$  (Fig. S1†). When integrated into a heterostructure, the

$\text{SnO}_2$  nanoparticles are expected to spread uniformly on the  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  sheets (Fig. 4e and f). In addition, energy dispersive X-ray (EDX) analysis confirmed the elemental composition and purity of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ ,  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $\text{SnO}_2@g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  nanocomposite (Fig. S2†). Specifically, the  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  spectra displays distinct peaks corresponding to elements C and N, while  $\text{SnO}_2$  shows peaks attributed to elements Sn and O. Finally, the  $\text{SnO}_2@g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  composite exhibits peaks Sn, O, C and N, confirming no impurity and creation of highly pure composite.

Next, we proceed to investigate the photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  production performance of the synthesized heterostructures, along with those of their pure counterparts. To this end, we performed the photocatalytic reaction under visible light irradiation for 5 h (Fig. 5a). First we note that the hydrogen production of pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  is higher than that of  $\text{SnO}_2$ , throughout the reaction. Converting into production rate, pristine  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  exhibits  $\text{H}_2$  production of  $175.98\text{ }\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}\text{ h}^{-1}$  compared to  $160.84\text{ }\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}\text{ h}^{-1}$  of  $\text{SnO}_2$  (Fig. 5b). This behavior can be explained by the narrower bandgap, and thus higher visible light absorption, of  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  compared to  $\text{SnO}_2$ , as we will show later. Notably, and of our interest here, all four composites exhibit greater hydrogen generation than pure  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , indicating the formation of an effective heterojunction that promotes interfacial charge transfer and suppresses photogenerated charge recombination. Among the composites, the champion sample is SC-20, whose production reaches  $287.7\text{ }\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}\text{ h}^{-1}$ , which is 1.63 times higher than  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and 1.79 times higher than  $\text{SnO}_2$ . This performance enhancement can be attributed to the optimal ratio between  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , which ensures sufficient interfacial contact for charge while maintaining visible light absorption. From the results in the composites it is evident that as the amount of  $\text{SnO}_2$  increases, the hydrogen production increases, reaching a maximum at SC-20. Surprisingly, further increasing the  $\text{SnO}_2$

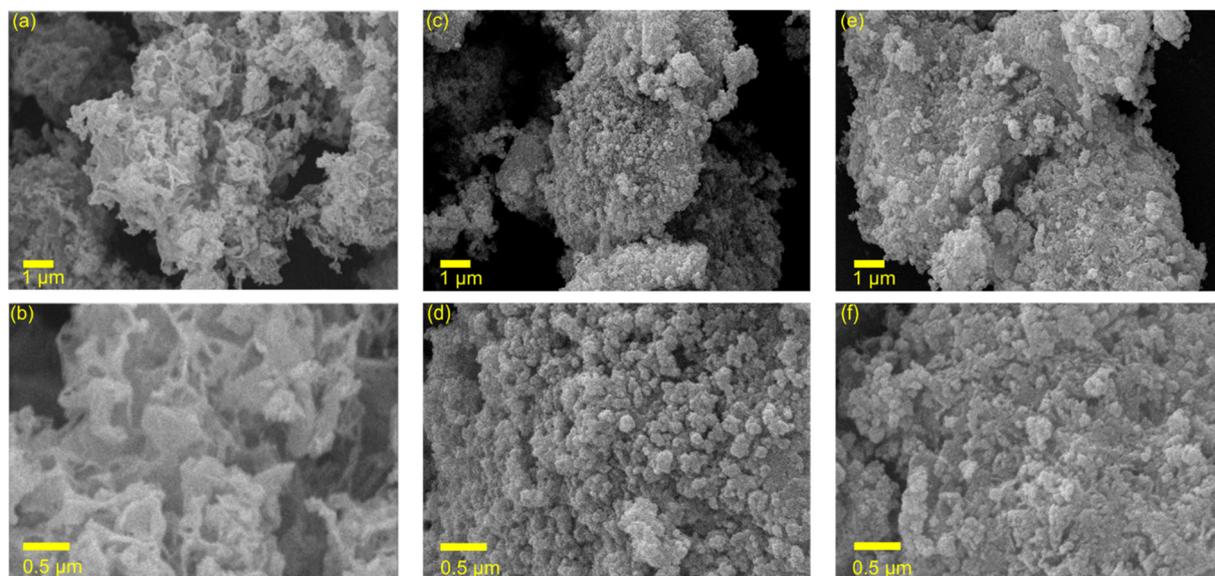


Fig. 4 Heterostructure morphology. SEM image of (a and b)  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , (c and d)  $\text{SnO}_2$  and (e and f)  $\text{SnO}_2@g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  nanocomposites.  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  assumes sheet-like morphology, while  $\text{SnO}_2$  does particle-like morphology. In the composite form, both these morphologies are observed.

content leads to a decline in hydrogen production at SC-10. This decline can be attributed to the shielding effect, as the  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  nanosheets become fully covered by  $\text{SnO}_2$  nanoparticles. Since  $\text{SnO}_2$  is a wide-bandgap semiconductor, this coverage inhibits the effective absorption of visible light, thereby reducing hydrogen production.<sup>63,64</sup> Furthermore, the hydrogen production level in SC-40 is comparable to that of pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , as the high  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  content dominates. This observation is consistent with the XRD pattern of the SC-40 above. Establishing that SC-20 outperforms all other composites, in the subsequent discussion we will focus on SC-20, alongside pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and  $\text{SnO}_2$  for further analysis regarding the enhancement mechanism.

To better understand the enhanced hydrogen evolution performance of SC-20 compared to its counterparts, additional verification of its optical properties is necessary. To assess the light-harvesting capabilities, UV-vis spectroscopy

was conducted in the wavelength range of 200–800 nm. The UV-vis spectra of pure  $\text{SnO}_2$ ,  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , and  $\text{SnO}_2@g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  nanocomposites, along with their corresponding Tauc plots, are presented in Fig. 6a–d, respectively. Pure  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  shows strong absorption in the visible region due to its narrow bandgap (2.62 eV), while  $\text{SnO}_2$  exhibit absorption predominantly in the UV region, attributed to its wider bandgap (3.29 eV). Notably, SC-20 sample demonstrates a broader absorption across both visible and UV regions. The Tauc plot of the composite SC-20 reveals an apparent bandgap of approximately 2.75 eV, which represents the integrated optical response of the heterostructure. This apparent bandgap likely arises from the synergistic interaction between  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , leading to enhanced photoresponse and improved photocatalytic activity.<sup>65,66</sup>

Furthermore, to evaluate the separation efficiency and photoresponse of the photocatalysts, time-resolved photocurrent measurements were carried out under visible light illumination. In a photocurrent analysis, the sample is sandwiched between electrodes and then excited by a light pulse to generate charges. The photo-generated charges produce current on the electrodes, measured under light-on and light-off. The light-on phase represents charge buildup on electrodes, while light-off phase shows charge decay. As shown in Fig. 7a, SC-20 heterojunction exhibits the highest and most stable photocurrent density compared to pure  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ . The sharp photocurrent spikes under light-on and rapid decay during light-off indicate fast charge generation and relatively good carrier mobility. This enhanced photocurrent response in SC-20 can be attributed to improved charge separation and interfacial coupling between  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , which facilitate directional charge transfer and reduce recombination losses. To further investigate charge transport dynamics, electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was performed. In the Nyquist plots shown in Fig. 7b, SC-20 displays the smallest semicircular arc radius, indicating the lowest charge transfer resistance among the tested samples, followed by  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  and  $\text{SnO}_2$ . The decreased arc radius for SC-20 validates the formation of an efficient heterojunction, supporting the photocurrent findings. Moreover, photoluminescence (PL) spectroscopy was employed to assess photo-generated charge carrier recombination behavior in photocatalysts. In Fig. 7c SC-20 displayed significantly quenched photoluminescence intensity, compared to pure  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ . This quenching is the evidence of enhanced suppression of charge carrier recombination in the composite. These results collectively indicate that SC-20 heterostructure exhibits enhanced charge carrier separation, faster interfacial electron transport, and reduced recombination rates compared to the pure components.

Last, to evaluate the long-term photostability and practical viability of our  $\text{SnO}_2@g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$  (SC-20) nanocomposite, a four-cycle photocatalytic hydrogen evolution test was conducted, with each cycle lasting 5 h under visible light irradiation (Fig. 8). Throughout all four cycles, the  $\text{H}_2$  evolution rate remained nearly constant, suggesting excellent structural and photo-electrochemical stability. The consistent performance indicates

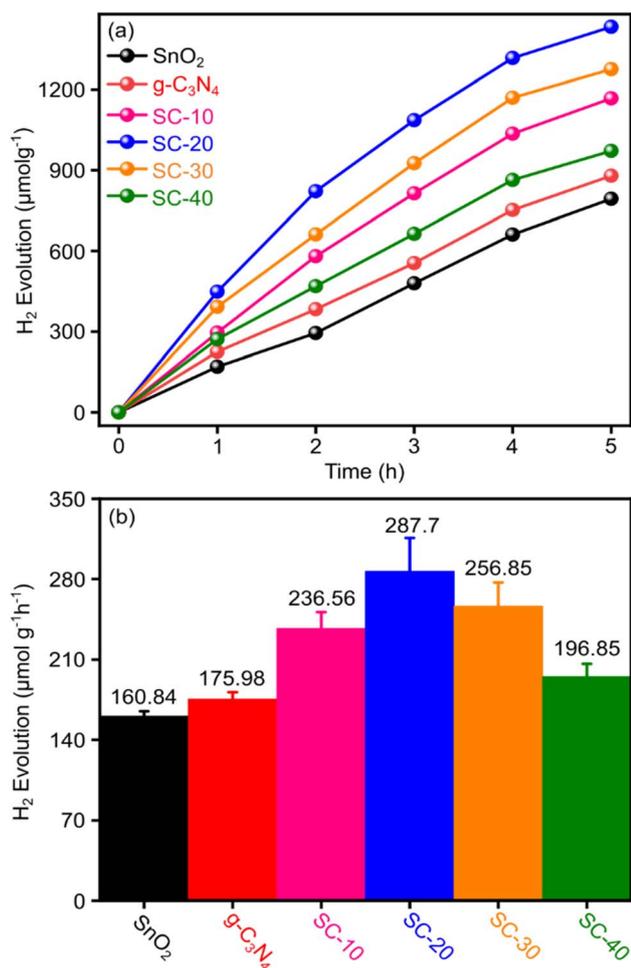


Fig. 5 Photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  production performance of the as prepared  $\text{SnO}_2$ ,  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , and their composites. (a)  $\text{H}_2$  production over 5 h, showing SC-20 achieving the highest performance; (b)  $\text{H}_2$  production rate per hour, where SC-20 outperforms pure  $\text{SnO}_2$ ,  $g\text{-C}_3\text{N}_4$ , and other composites, a clear increasing trend is observed from SC-40 to SC-20, reaching a value of  $287.7 \mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ . However, a further increase in  $\text{SnO}_2$  content (SC-10) results in a decline in  $\text{H}_2$  production, indicating SC-20 as the optimal composition.



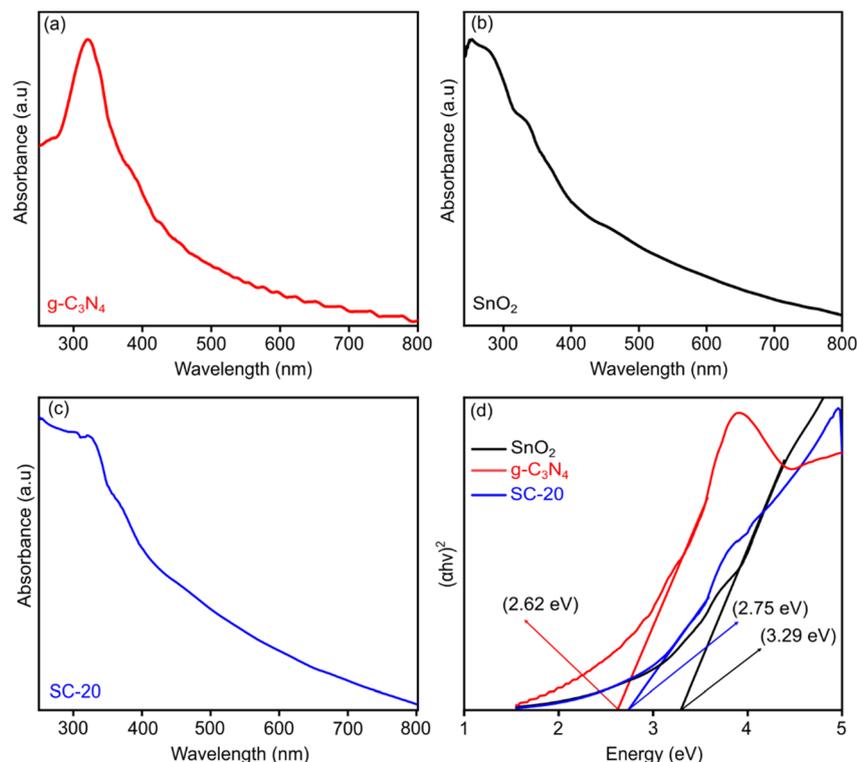


Fig. 6 Optical properties of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, SnO<sub>2</sub>, and SC-20 composite. UV-vis spectra of (a) g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, (b) SnO<sub>2</sub> and (c) SC-20 composite, along with their corresponding Tauc's plots shown as in (d). The band gaps were estimated to be 2.62 eV for g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, 3.29 eV for SnO<sub>2</sub>, and 2.75 eV for SC-20. The slight increase in band gap of SC-20 compared to g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> is due to incorporation of SnO<sub>2</sub>, while maintaining visible-light absorption, indicating successful heterojunction formation.

that the heterojunction interface effectively prevents photocorrosion and supports stable charge separation over extended illumination periods. Specifically, SC-20 achieves approximately 1500  $\mu\text{mol H}_2$  evolution per 5 hour-cycle, demonstrating negligible performance loss. This robustness surpasses that of many conventional such as TiO<sub>2</sub>, ZnO, Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, and WO<sub>3</sub> based

photocatalysts, which typically exhibit a noticeable decline in activity due to rapid charge accumulation, poor stability and limited visible light absorption.<sup>67–70</sup> The photocyclic results thus highlight the material's potential for real PEC applications requiring long-term operation without catalyst regeneration or replacement.

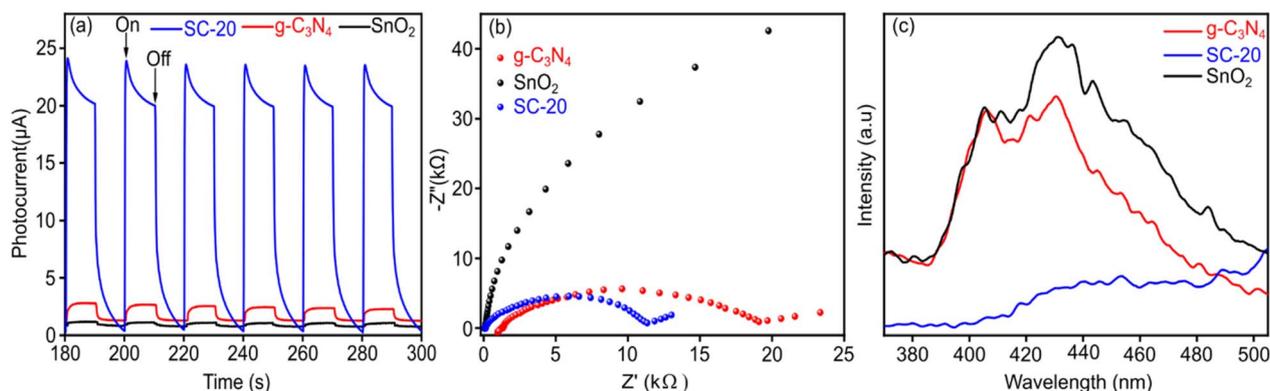


Fig. 7 Photocurrent, EIS, and PL analyses of SnO<sub>2</sub>, g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, and SC-20. (a) Transient photocurrent response of pure SnO<sub>2</sub>, g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, and SC-20 composite under chopped visible light irradiation, shows that SC-20 exhibits a higher photocurrent compared to pure SnO<sub>2</sub> and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, attributed to the synergistic effect in SC-20. (b) Nyquist plots of SC-20, g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, and SnO<sub>2</sub>, illustrating their electrochemical impedance properties. SC-20 exhibits the smallest semi-circle, confirming the low charge transfer resistance in composite as compared to pure counterparts. (c) PL spectra of SC-20, g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, and SnO<sub>2</sub>. SC-20 shows the lowest PL, indicating low charge recombination under illumination of visible light.

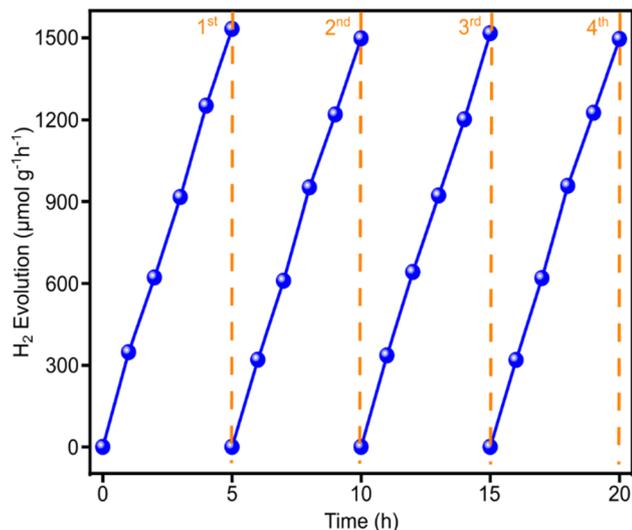


Fig. 8 Photostability of SC-20. Time-dependent H<sub>2</sub> evolution of SC-20 over four consecutive 5-hour cycles under visible light irradiation. Our best composite SC-20 maintains nearly constant H<sub>2</sub> production rate across all four cycles, demonstrating its strong photostability.

### Comparative study

Having established the enhanced performance of our heterostructures compared to their pure counterparts, it is then interesting to benchmark them against other works reported in the literature employing similar heterostructures, however using different synthesis routes. As shown in Table 1, our composite, synthesized *via* a simple precipitation method, achieved a hydrogen evolution of 287.7  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ , positioning it within the middle range of previously reported works. Notably, the heterostructures incorporating Pt as a co-catalyst or utilizing more advanced nanostructures such as quantum dots or nanodots have shown superior performance, often exceeding 1300  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ . However, these methods often need precise control over nanostructures formation and multistep complicated synthesis methods, which can limit large-scale production. In conclusion, while advanced nanostructures and Pt incorporation boost H<sub>2</sub> evolution, our coprecipitation-based SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> nanocomposites offers a competitive balance of photocatalytic performance, synthesis simplicity, and cost-effectiveness. These findings suggest that further enhancements of photocatalytic activity may be possible through the

incorporation of co-catalysts like Pt or quantum dots, as well as through refined interface engineering strategies.

### Photocatalytic mechanism of SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>

To close the discussion, a Z-scheme heterojunction mechanism is proposed based on band structure alignment and charge transfer behavior to explain the enhanced photocatalytic activity of SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composite. As illustrated in Fig. 9, g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> is a visible light-driven photocatalyst with bandgap  $\approx 2.62$  eV (*cf.* Fig. 6d) while the photoresponse of SnO<sub>2</sub> is limited to UV-region with a bandgap  $\approx 3.29$  eV (*cf.* Fig. 6d). Furthermore, the conduction band position of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> is ( $-1.12$  eV *vs.* NHE) while SnO<sub>2</sub> have ( $0.05$  eV *vs.* NHE).<sup>78,79</sup> upon solar illumination, both SnO<sub>2</sub> and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> are excited to generate electron-hole pairs. In the Z-scheme configuration, photogenerated electrons in the conduction band of SnO<sub>2</sub> recombine with holes in the valence band of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> at the heterojunction interface. This unique charge transfer pathway preserves the highly energetic electrons in the CB of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> and the strong oxidizing holes in the VB of SnO<sub>2</sub>, effectively enhancing the overall redox capability of the heterojunction.<sup>60</sup> As a result, the photogenerated electrons in the conduction band of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> take participation in the reduction of H<sup>+</sup> ions to produce H<sub>2</sub>. Meanwhile, photogenerated holes in the valence band of SnO<sub>2</sub> oxidize water molecules,

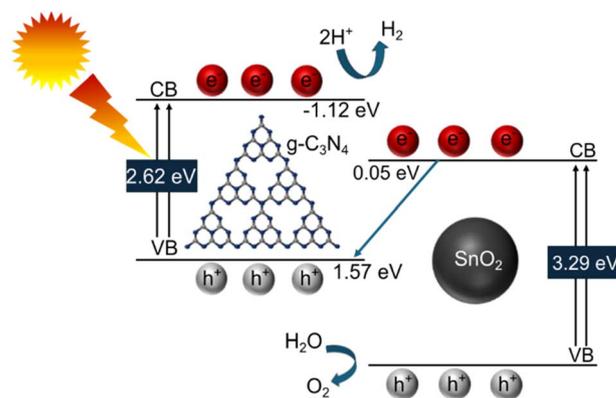


Fig. 9 Probable mechanism of the SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> photocatalyst: sunlight excites electrons in the valence band of g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, which transfer to the SnO<sub>2</sub> conduction band, driving the reduction of H<sup>+</sup> ions to H<sub>2</sub>. Simultaneously, holes oxidize water to generate O<sub>2</sub>. The diagram highlights the synergistic effect of combining SnO<sub>2</sub> and g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, to enhance photocatalytic performance.

Table 1 H<sub>2</sub> evolution performance of SnO<sub>2</sub>/g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>-based photocatalysts reported in the literature

Photocatalyst	Preparation method	Amount of H <sub>2</sub> gas evolved	References
g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub> /SnO <sub>2</sub>	Solvent evaporation followed by calcination	132 $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1}$	71
Pt g <sup>-1</sup> -C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub> /SnO <sub>2</sub>	One pot pyrolysis	241 $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1} \text{g}^{-1}$	72
<b>SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> nanocomposites</b>	<b>Coprecipitation</b>	<b>287.7 <math>\mu\text{mol h}^{-1} \text{g}^{-1}</math></b>	<b>Our work</b>
Pt g <sup>-1</sup> -C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub> /SnO <sub>2</sub>	Simple calcination	627 $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1}$	73
g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub> /SnO <sub>2</sub> -Pt	Physical mixing	900 $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1} \text{g}^{-1}$	74
C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub> -SnO <sub>2</sub> -Pt	Hydrothermal	1060 $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1} \text{g}^{-1}$	75
SnO <sub>2</sub> QDs/g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	Thermal decomposition	1305.4 $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1} \text{g}^{-1}$	76
SnO <sub>2</sub> nanodots/g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	One-step polymerization	1398.2 $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1} \text{g}^{-1}$	77



generating O<sub>2</sub>. The synergistic effect between these two components enhances overall photocatalytic performance. This mechanism aligns well with the experimental findings, including increased photocurrent response, reduced charge transfer resistance (EIS), and quenched PL intensity all of which confirm efficient charge separation and transport in the SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> heterostructure.

In addition to improved and charge carrier dynamics, the hydrogen adsorption on the catalyst surface is a critical factor influencing overall HER efficiency. Literature-based Gibbs free energy ( $\Delta G_{H^*}$ ) studies provide further thermodynamic insight into this aspect.  $\Delta G_{H^*}$  is a key thermodynamic parameter for evaluating a material's catalytic activity toward the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER).<sup>80</sup> It reflects how favorably hydrogen atoms bind to the catalyst surface, which in turn governs the balance between adsorption and desorption steps. Ideally, an effective HER catalyst should have a  $\Delta G_{H^*}$  value close to zero, ensuring that hydrogen atoms can adsorb and desorb efficiently. If  $\Delta G_{H^*}$  is too positive, hydrogen adsorption is unfavorable, leading to sluggish HER kinetics. If it is too negative, hydrogen binds too strongly, hindering H<sub>2</sub> release.<sup>81</sup> For pristine g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>, previous theoretical studies have reported a  $\Delta G_{H^*}$  value of approximately  $-0.54$  eV, indicating relatively strong hydrogen binding and potentially slow desorption.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, SnO<sub>2</sub> surfaces have shown  $\Delta G_{H^*}$  values ranging from 0.85 eV to 2.37 eV at different crystallographic orientations and adsorption sites, suggesting unfavorable hydrogen adsorption that may limit the generation of active hydrogen intermediates.<sup>83,84</sup> Although the Gibbs free energy of hydrogen atom adsorption for the SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> heterojunction itself has not yet been theoretically investigated, the significantly improved experimental hydrogen evolution performance observed in this study and previously explored studies suggests that interfacial charge redistribution may help tune  $\Delta G_{H^*}$  closer to the thermoneutral range. This highlights the need for future theoretical studies to better understand the active sites and mechanisms of hydrogen adsorption in such heterostructures.

## Conclusion

In summary, we have successfully synthesized SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> heterojunctions using a cost-effective and environmentally friendly precipitation method. Four composites with varying mass ratios of SnO<sub>2</sub> to g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> (SC-10, SC-20, SC-30, and SC-40) were prepared to evaluate their photocatalytic performance for hydrogen production under solar illumination. Among these, SC-20 (80% SnO<sub>2</sub>, 20% g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub>) exhibited the best performance, achieving the highest H<sub>2</sub> production rate (287.7  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ ) due to its optimal heterojunction structure, which effectively suppressed charge recombination and enhanced electron transfer to the conduction band. Compared to previously reported works, employing complex synthetic routes or noble metal co-catalysts, our approach offers a practical balance of photocatalytic efficiency, material simplicity, and stability. Importantly, the excellent photostability of our SnO<sub>2</sub>@g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> composite, demonstrated over extended cycling, further reinforces the potential of this system for sustainable solar-to-fuel

applications. Furthermore, this synthesis platform can be enhanced by introducing additional functional components such as Pt co-catalyst or nanostructure modifiers to further improve charge carrier dynamics and overall efficiency.

## Data availability

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in the article and its ESI.†

## Author contributions

R. K.: investigation, formal analysis, data curation, validation, visualization, writing – original draft. S. S. A.: investigation. H. I.: investigation. S. S. N.: writing – original draft. S. Z.: conceptualization, data curation, methodology, validation, supervision, resources. F. A. A. N.: data curation, validation, supervision, resources, funding acquisition, writing – review and editing.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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