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## Suppression of the metal-to-semiconductor transition in nanocrystalline $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$ via crystallite size control

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Nanocrystalline  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  with controlled crystallite sizes was synthesized to investigate the effect of crystallite size on the metal–semiconductor transition. Magnetic susceptibility measurements revealed that the transition fraction for  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  with an average crystallite size of 11 nm was approximately 60% of that observed for  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  with a crystallite size of 30 nm, indicating suppression of the phase transition. Differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) showed that the observed transition enthalpies were  $302 \text{ J mol}^{-1}$  and  $850 \text{ J mol}^{-1}$  for the smaller and larger crystallite sizes, respectively, showing a reduction in the transition enthalpy with decreasing crystallite size. Thermodynamic calculations suggest that this suppression arises from surface energy contributions, which reduce the transition enthalpy with decreasing crystallite size. These results indicate that reducing the crystallite size offers an effective means of controlling the metal–semiconductor transition in  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$ , contributing to the development of tunable phase-transition materials for advanced functional materials.

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### Introduction

Magnéli phase titanium oxides, with the general formula  $\text{Ti}_n\text{O}_{2n-1}$  ( $3 \leq n \leq 9$ ), represent a fascinating class of materials known for their diverse functional properties, including electrical conductivity,<sup>1–7</sup> electrochemical performance,<sup>8–24</sup> heat storage capability,<sup>25–36</sup> and switching behavior.<sup>37–42</sup> Among these,  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  is particularly noteworthy, as it exhibits metallic behavior at room temperature and possesses the highest electrical conductivity of any known metal oxide. Owing to these exceptional properties,  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  has attracted significant attention for potential applications in fuel cells and electrode catalysts, prompting extensive research in these areas.<sup>8–10,12,14,17–22</sup> The single crystal of  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  undergoes a two-step phase transition involving metallic, disordered, and ordered semiconductor phases as a function of temperature.<sup>1,2,43–47</sup> At room temperature,  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  exists in a high-temperature (HT) metallic phase.

Upon cooling to 150 K, it undergoes a transition to an intermediate-temperature (IT) semiconductor phase, followed by a further transition at 130 K to a low-temperature (LT) ordered semiconductor phase (Fig. 1). In the HT phase, all the Ti atoms adopt a  $\text{Ti}^{3.5+}$  state in a charge-delocalized system. In contrast, the IT phase is a charge-localized state comprising distinct  $\text{Ti}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Ti}^{4+}$  ions. The transition from the IT to the LT phase corresponds to an order–disorder transition, where the randomly distributed  $\text{Ti}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Ti}^{4+}$  ions become arranged in an ordered configuration. These transitions are designated phase transition I (HT  $\rightarrow$  IT) and phase transition II (IT  $\rightarrow$  LT), respectively. Theoretical studies have predicted the emergence of superconductivity in  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$ ,<sup>48–50</sup> spurring efforts to realize superconductivity by applying pressure to the semiconductor LT phase or by stabilizing the metallic HT phase at room temperature.<sup>51,52</sup> Since the 1970s, extensive efforts have been made to control the phase transitions in  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  via vanadium substitution.<sup>43,53–56</sup> Although these studies did not succeed in stabilizing the HT metallic phase at low temperatures, they did report the suppression of phase transition II. More recently, in 2017, introducing oxygen vacancies into  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  thin films was reported to suppress phase transition I and II, thereby retaining the metallic phase at low temperatures and inducing superconductivity.<sup>57</sup> In 2020, we demonstrated that reducing the crystallite size of  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  to approximately 50 nm suppresses phase transition II, resulting in a simplified, one-step phase transition via phase transition I only.<sup>58</sup>

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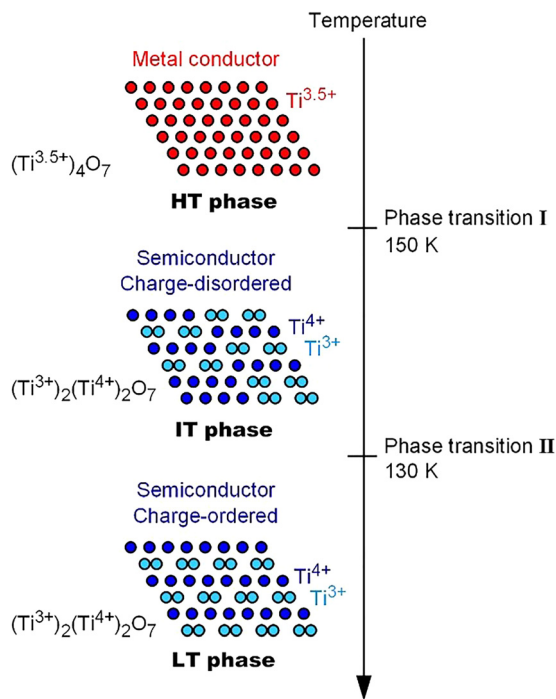


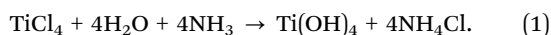
Fig. 1 Schematic illustration of the two-step phase transition in a single crystal of  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$ . The high-temperature (HT) metallic phase transforms into an intermediate-temperature (IT) semiconductor at approximately 150 K (phase transition I), followed by a second transition to a low-temperature (LT) semiconductor phase near 130 K (phase transition II). In the HT phase, Ti ions exhibit a mixed valence state of  $\text{Ti}^{3.5+}$ , and separate into  $\text{Ti}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Ti}^{4+}$  ions in the IT and LT phases.

In this study, we investigated the effect of crystallite size on phase transition I by synthesizing  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  nanocrystals with further reduced dimensions. Starting from titanium chloride, a precursor was synthesized and subsequently subjected to annealing *via* hydrogen reduction to obtain  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  samples with average crystallite sizes of 11 and 30 nm. Temperature-dependent measurements revealed that smaller crystallite sizes led to a more pronounced suppression of the phase transition. Thermodynamic modelling using a mean-field approximation suggested that this suppression arises from the contribution of surface energy to the Gibbs free energy.

## Results and discussion

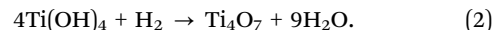
### Materials and characterization

A mixed solution containing 420 mL of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ , 1.40 mL of  $\text{TiCl}_4$ , and 9.60 mL of aqueous  $\text{NH}_3$  (25 wt%) was prepared in a 1-L container. The solution was stirred at 50 °C for 20 h in an oil bath, forming  $\text{Ti}(\text{OH})_4$  precipitates (eqn (1)).<sup>35</sup> These precipitates were separated by centrifugation, washed with ethanol, and dried at 60 °C for 24 h,



The resulting precipitate was then calcined under hydrogen flow for 5 h under two different conditions: 1.0  $\text{dm}^3 \text{min}^{-1}$  at

950 °C for **1** and 0.5  $\text{dm}^3 \text{min}^{-1}$  at 1000 °C for **2**, forming a black powder,



X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analysis confirmed the composition of the resulting powders to be  $\text{Ti}_{4.00(8)}\text{O}_{7.00(8)}$ ; Calc.: Ti, 63.1 wt%. Found: Ti, 63.1(8) wt% for **1**, and  $\text{Ti}_{4.00(8)}\text{O}_{7.00(8)}$ ; Calc.: Ti, 63.1 wt%. Found: Ti, 63.0(6) wt% for **2**.

### Crystallite size and morphology

Room-temperature X-ray powder diffraction (XRD) patterns and Rietveld analysis confirmed that the synthesized samples of **1** and **2** were pure  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  with a triclinic crystal structure (space group:  $P\bar{1}$ ) (Fig. 2a and b). The refined lattice parameters were as follows: **1**:  $a = 5.5980(5) \text{ \AA}$ ,  $b = 7.1294(5) \text{ \AA}$ ,  $c = 12.4514(10) \text{ \AA}$ ,  $\alpha = 95.070(6)^\circ$ ,  $\beta = 95.068(5)^\circ$ ,  $\gamma = 108.837(4)^\circ$ ,  $V = 464.87(6) \text{ \AA}^3$ , and for **2**:  $a = 5.5983(2) \text{ \AA}$ ,  $b = 7.1241(2) \text{ \AA}$ ,  $c = 12.4606(3) \text{ \AA}$ ,  $\alpha = 95.057(2)^\circ$ ,  $\beta = 95.147(2)^\circ$ ,  $\gamma = 108.777(2)^\circ$ ,  $V = 465.00(2) \text{ \AA}^3$  (Tables S1–S4). These lattice parameters were consistent with those reported for  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$ .<sup>45,47,58,59</sup> The crystallite sizes, estimated by Rietveld analyses, were  $11.1 \pm 0.2 \text{ nm}$  for **1** and  $29.6 \pm 0.4 \text{ nm}$  for **2**. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images revealed that

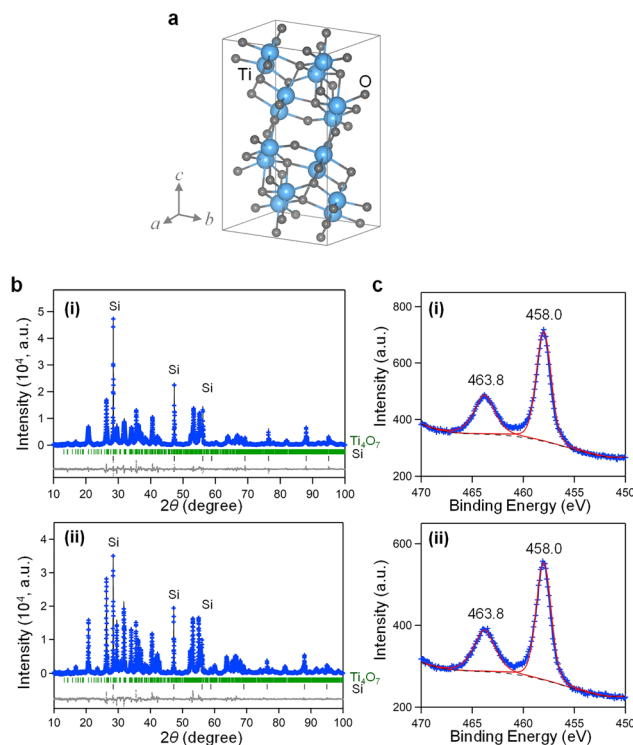


Fig. 2 Crystal structure and valence state of nanocrystalline  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$ . (a) Schematic representation of the crystal structure of  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$ . (b) XRD pattern and Rietveld analysis for (i) **1** and (ii) **2**. Blue circles indicate the observed data, black lines represent the calculated patterns, grey lines show the difference between observed and calculated data, and vertical bars mark the expected Bragg reflection positions for  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  (green) and the Si internal standard (grey). (c) XPS spectra of the Ti 2p peak for (i) **1** and (ii) **2**. Blue markers indicate the observed data, red lines represent the fitted peaks using a Voigt function, and black dashed lines show the background.



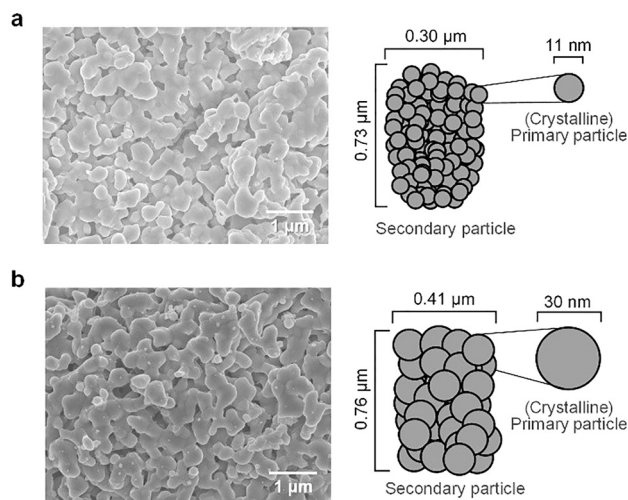


Fig. 3 SEM image (left) and schematic representation of particle morphology (right) for (a) **1** and (b) **2**.

both samples exhibited coral-like morphologies with dimensions of  $0.73 \pm 0.30 \mu\text{m}$  in the major axis and  $0.30 \pm 0.12 \mu\text{m}$  in the minor axis for **1**, and  $0.76 \pm 0.24 \mu\text{m}$  in the major axis and  $0.41 \pm 0.15 \mu\text{m}$  in the minor axis for **2** (Fig. 3 and Fig. S1). Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) confirmed that both samples consisted of sintered crystallites several tens of nanometers in size and that the crystallites of **2** were larger than those of **1** (Fig. S2). Combining XRD, Rietveld analysis, and SEM imaging, **1** was found to consist of secondary particles with a size of approximately  $0.7 \mu\text{m}$  in the major axis and  $0.3 \mu\text{m}$  in the minor axis, composed of primary crystallites of approximately  $11 \text{ nm}$  (Fig. 3a). In contrast, **2** comprised secondary particles with a size of approximately  $0.8 \mu\text{m}$  in the major axis and  $0.4 \mu\text{m}$  in the minor axis, built from primary crystallites of approximately  $30 \text{ nm}$ . X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) profiles recorded at room temperature are shown in Fig. 2c and Fig. S3, and S4. The observed binding energy peaks at  $458.0 \text{ eV}$  (Fig. 2c),  $463.8 \text{ eV}$  (Fig. 2c), and  $529.4 \text{ eV}$  (Fig. S3 and S4) correspond to  $\text{Ti } 2p_{3/2}$ ,  $\text{Ti } 2p_{1/2}$ , and  $\text{O } 1s$ , respectively. These values are consistent with those reported for the HT phase of bulk  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$ ,<sup>29,60</sup> indicating that the Ti centers in the synthesized  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  (**1** and **2**) exhibit a valence state of  $+3.5$  at room temperature, characteristic of the metallic phase (Fig. S5).

### Temperature dependence of the magnetic susceptibility

The temperature dependence of magnetic susceptibility ( $\chi_M$ ) curves for **1** and **2** are shown in Fig. 4a and b, respectively. For both samples,  $\chi_M$  decreases upon cooling, indicating a transition attributed to phase transition I, where the HT phase ( $\text{Ti}^{3.5+}$ ) transforms into the IT phase comprising  $\text{Ti}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Ti}^{4+}$ . Defining the transition temperature as the temperature at which 50% of the transition occurs, the transitions for **1** were observed at  $138 \text{ K}$  (cooling) and  $140 \text{ K}$  (heating), whereas for **2**, these were observed at slightly higher temperatures at  $146 \text{ K}$  (cooling) and  $147 \text{ K}$  (heating). The transition amplitude in **1** was approximately 60% of that observed in **2**.

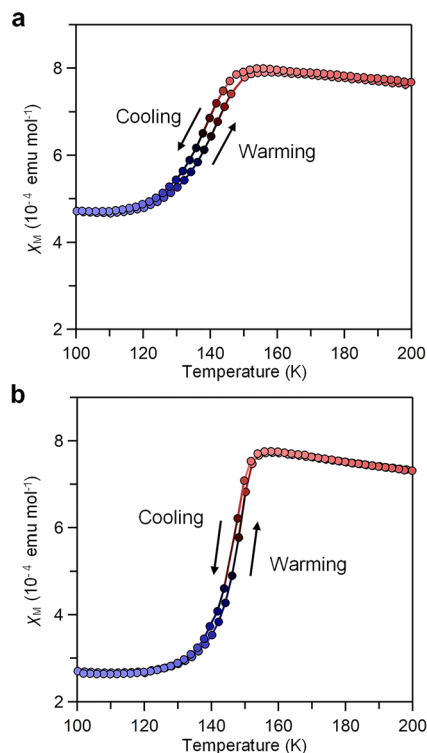


Fig. 4  $\chi_M$  versus temperature plot per mole of  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  for (a) **1** and (b) **2**, measured under an external magnetic field of  $5000 \text{ Oe}$  with a temperature sweep rate of  $\pm 1.0 \text{ K min}^{-1}$ .

### Calorimetric measurement of the phase transition

To investigate the phase transition observed in the temperature dependence of the magnetic susceptibility, DSC measurements were performed to quantify the enthalpy change (Fig. 5). An endothermic peak was observed at  $144 \text{ K}$  for **1** and at  $149 \text{ K}$  for **2**. These peak positions aligned with the transition temperatures derived from magnetic susceptibility, confirming that **2** transitions occur at higher temperatures than for **1**. The observed transition enthalpies ( $\Delta H_{\text{obs}}$ ) were  $302 \pm 16 \text{ J mol}^{-1}$

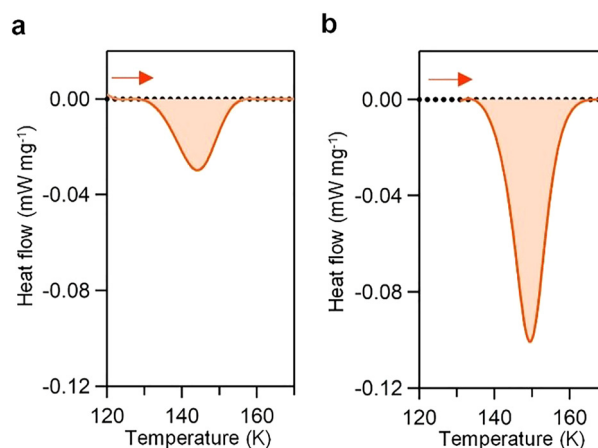


Fig. 5 DSC curves during the heating process for (a) **1** and (b) **2**, recorded at a temperature sweep rate of  $\pm 20 \text{ K min}^{-1}$ .



for **1** and  $850 \pm 33 \text{ J mol}^{-1}$  for **2**, corresponding to approximately 15% and 43% of the values reported for bulk single crystals.<sup>6</sup> These results suggest that the transition enthalpy decreases with decreasing crystallite size.

### Thermodynamic calculation for nano-crystalline $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$

In this study, phase transition **II** was suppressed, and only phase transition **I** was observed. The transition fraction for **1** was approximately 60% of that for **2**, and the transition temperature was slightly lower for **1**. To understand this behavior, the Slichter-Drickamer (SD) model, a mean-field approximation equation that thermodynamically describes phase transitions,<sup>61</sup> was employed. In the SD model, the Gibbs free energy ( $G$ ) is defined using the following equation:  $G = x \Delta H_{\text{trans}} + \gamma x(1-x) + T\{R[x \ln x + (1-x) \ln(1-x)] - x \Delta S_{\text{trans}}\}$ . Here,  $\Delta H_{\text{trans}}$  and  $\Delta S_{\text{trans}}$  are the transition enthalpy and entropy, respectively, and  $x$  represents the fraction of  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  units in the metallic phase, whereas  $(1-x)$  corresponds to the semiconductor phase fraction.  $\gamma$  is the interaction parameter between the metallic and semiconductor phase units, and  $R$  is the gas constant. Based on the experimentally observed  $\Delta H_{\text{obs}}$  and  $\Delta S_{\text{obs}}$  values from DSC measurements for **1** and **2**, the calculated Gibbs free energy curves at various temperatures are shown in Fig. 6a and Fig. 6b, respectively. These curves showed that at high temperatures, the metallic phase is

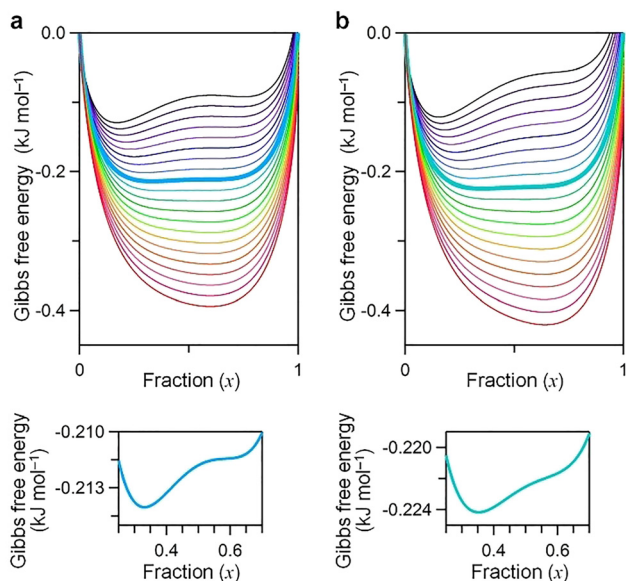


Fig. 6 Temperature-dependent Gibbs free energy ( $G$ ) versus metallic-phase fraction ( $x$ ) curves between the charge-delocalized and charge-localized phases for (a) **1** and (b) **2**, calculated using the Slichter-Drickamer mean-field model at 2 K intervals from 170 K to 130 K (upper panels). Enlarged views around the phase transition region are shown in the lower panel. The curve for **1** corresponds to 146 K, and that for **2** to 148 K. The thermodynamic parameters used were:  $\Delta H_{\text{trans}} = 500 \text{ J mol}^{-1}$ ,  $\Delta S_{\text{trans}} = 3.36 \text{ J K}^{-1} \text{ mol}^{-1}$ , and  $\gamma = 2500 \text{ J mol}^{-1}$  for **1**; and  $\Delta H_{\text{trans}} = 850 \text{ J mol}^{-1}$ ,  $\Delta S_{\text{trans}} = 5.67 \text{ J K}^{-1} \text{ mol}^{-1}$ , and  $\gamma = 2500 \text{ J mol}^{-1}$  for **2**. The transition fraction of **1** is 60% of that of **2**. In the calculation,  $\Delta H_{\text{trans}}$  was set to  $500 \text{ J mol}^{-1}$  for **1**, which corresponds to the transition enthalpy value assuming the same fraction of transition as in **2**.

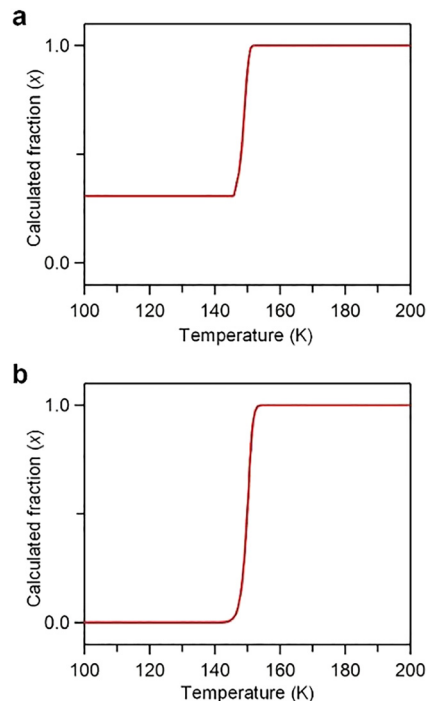


Fig. 7 Temperature dependence of the calculated fraction using the SD model, incorporating the effect of particle size distribution. The particle size distributions were assumed to follow a Gaussian distribution, with a mean size of  $11.1 \pm 0.2 \text{ nm}$  for (a) **1** and  $29.6 \pm 0.4 \text{ nm}$  for (b) **2** (Fig. S7).

thermodynamically more stable (SI, S6). However, as the temperature decreases, a shift occurs, and below approximately 130 K, the semiconductor phase becomes more stable. The calculated transition temperatures were 146 K for **1** and 148 K for **2**. Although slight, this difference is consistent with magnetic susceptibility measurements, which similarly showed a slightly higher transition temperature of **2**.

Next, the effect of crystallite size distribution on the phase transition was considered. Assuming an average crystallite size of 11 nm for **1** and 30 nm for **2**, which possess the size distributions shown in Fig. S7, we investigated the effect of the size variation. Based on our previous findings for trititanium pentoxide,<sup>35</sup> where  $\Delta H_{\text{trans}}$  was observed to vary approximately linearly with particle size, we used the expected  $\Delta H_{\text{trans}}$  values (inset in Fig. S7) in SD model calculations (SI, S8). As shown in Fig. 7, the calculated transition fraction for **1** was approximately 60% of that for **2**, consistent with experimental observations. These results indicate that crystallite size strongly influences phase transition behavior. Specifically, phase transition **I** is progressively suppressed as the crystallite size decreases.

## Conclusions

In this study,  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  with a controlled nanoscale crystallite size was synthesized, and the effect of crystallite size on the metal-semiconductor transition (phase transition **I**) of  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  was investigated. The temperature-dependent magnetic susceptibility measurements revealed that the transition fraction for



the sample with an average crystallite size of 11 nm (1) was approximately 60% of that for the sample with an average crystallite size of 30 nm (2). This suppression of the phase transition is attributed to the nanoscale effect, where a reduction in crystallite size leads to a decrease in the transition enthalpy owing to the surface energy contributions. Control over phase transitions, phenomena that critically govern the functional properties of solid materials, remains a major challenge in materials science. This study suggests that the metal–semiconductor transition in  $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$  can be effectively suppressed by reducing the crystallite size to the tens-of-nanometers scale. Based on an aqueous titanium chloride precursor, the synthesis method offers the potential to synthesize metal-substituted compounds using various metal chlorides. Therefore, the combined strategy of crystallite size control with metal substitution presents a promising route to stabilizing high-temperature metallic phases at lower temperatures.

## Experimental section

**Measurements:** elemental analysis was performed using XRF with a RIGAKU ZSX Primus IV instrument (Energy resolution: 8.3 eV for Ti and 6.9 eV for O). The sample morphologies were measured using SEM (JEOL JSM-7500FA; spatial resolution: 1.4 nm) and TEM (JEOL JEM 2010F; spatial resolution: 0.23 nm). XRD patterns were collected using a Rigaku Ultima IV instrument with a  $\text{Cu K}\alpha$  light source ( $\lambda = 1.5418 \text{ \AA}$ ). The  $2\theta$  step width was set at  $0.02^\circ$ , and the maximum deviation from the true peak position was  $0.0028^\circ$ . Rietveld analyses of the XRD patterns were performed using Rigaku PDXL software. The XRD patterns were calibrated using Si powder.<sup>62</sup> XPS spectra were recorded at room temperature using a JPS 9010 TR instrument (JEOL, Ltd, Japan; energy resolution: 1.05 eV) equipped with an ultrahigh-vacuum chamber and an Al  $\text{K}\alpha$  X-ray source (1486.6 eV). Terahertz time-domain spectroscopy (THz-TDS) was performed using an Advantest TAS7500 system. Magnetic measurements were performed using a Quantum Design MPMS superconducting quantum interference device (SQUID) magnetometer (magnetic moment resolution:  $10^{-8}$  emu). The enthalpy changes associated with the phase transition were determined using a Rigaku DSC system (Thermo plus EVO2; thermal resolution:  $0.1 \mu\text{W}$ ), with liquid nitrogen ( $\text{N}_2$ ) employed as the cooling medium.

## Author contributions

T. K. conducted the sample synthesis, characterization, data analysis, and calculations, and contributed to the manuscript preparation. R. S. performed sample synthesis and characterization. T. K. also assisted with XPS measurements and their analysis. V. C. A. and M. N. performed THz conductivity measurements. S. O. contributed to data analysis. H. T. designed and supervised the study, contributed to all measurements and calculations, and wrote the manuscript. All authors participated in discussions and revision of the manuscript.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

## Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Supplementary information (SI): crystallographic data, size distribution, TEM images, XPS spectra, THz conductivity spectrum, temperature dependence of Gibbs free energy, Gaussian distribution of the crystallite size, and relationship between Gibbs free energy, crystallite size, and transition enthalpy. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d5ma01459j>.

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