

Cite this: *Energy Environ. Sci.*, 2024, 17, 2541

# High-efficiency unbiased water splitting with photoanodes harnessing polycarbazole hole transport layers†

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The construction of uniform heterojunctions for effective hole transport in a nanoporous BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode is highly challenging, despite its promise for unbiased photoelectrochemical (PEC) water splitting. Herein, we grew a nanoscale conjugated polycarbazole framework (CPF-TCB) on nanoporous Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and exhaustively assessed its hole extraction capability. Type II band alignment in the CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> heterostructure enabled effective hole transport by suppressing charge recombination, enhancing both the fill factor and stability of the photoanode after loading a cocatalyst. The NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode generates a superlative water oxidation photocurrent density of 6.66 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> at 1.23 V versus the reversible hydrogen electrode. By combining the photoanode with a perovskite photocathode and a perovskite/Si solar cell, two types of PEC tandem devices exhibit solar-to-hydrogen conversion efficiencies of 6.75% and 9.02%, which are the topmost records under tandem illumination mode. This work provides a significant step for designing high-performance organic–inorganic hybrid photoelectrodes for solar hydrogen production.

Received 4th October 2023,  
Accepted 21st February 2024

DOI: 10.1039/d3ee03353h

rsc.li/ees

## Broader context

Photoelectrochemical (PEC) water splitting is a promising technology to produce green hydrogen and reduce the carbon footprint. High solar-to-hydrogen (STH) conversion efficiency and long-term stability of tandem devices must be achieved for the commercialization of the PEC approach. Bismuth vanadate (BiVO<sub>4</sub>), providing a high photovoltage, has been considered an excellent photoanode material for tandem devices, but nanostructuring and hole transport layers (HTL) are necessary to overcome its charge recombination issue. However, it is very challenging not only to explore HTL materials with suitable band structures for BiVO<sub>4</sub>, but also to uniformly coat it on the nanostructure. Herein, we demonstrate a conjugated polycarbazole framework (CPF-TCB) as a new hole extraction layer for a nanoporous molybdenum-doped BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode for unassisted solar hydrogen production. The intimately contacted CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> heterostructure forms a type-II band alignment, reinforcing charge separation. After loading a cocatalyst, the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode combined with a perovskite photocathode and a perovskite/Si photovoltaic cell affords remarkable STH conversion efficiencies of 6.75% and 9.02%, respectively. The high-performance tandem devices demonstrate the prospective potential of organic–inorganic hybrid photoanodes for unassisted solar hydrogen production.

## Introduction

Photoelectrocatalysis, which is more efficient than photovoltaic–electrocatalysis in the manufacturing process and photocatalysis in yield, is highly promising for solar hydrogen production.<sup>1–3</sup> The trade-off between photovoltage and photocurrent based on the band gap of a single photoelectrode requires an electrical bias to exceed the water splitting voltage, which is a challenge in the photoelectrochemical (PEC) approach.<sup>4</sup> To overcome this challenge, unassisted water splitting using tandem devices comprising dual light absorbers has

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d3ee03353h>



been attempted to maximize photovoltage *via* light harvesting.<sup>5</sup> In terms of solar-to-hydrogen (STH) conversion efficiency for tandem devices, bismuth vanadate (BiVO<sub>4</sub>) is an essential photoanode material owing to its suitable band gap, enabling both high photovoltage and absorption spectrum separation with posterior absorber materials.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, a short carrier diffusion length (~70 nm) incurs charge recombination,<sup>7</sup> lowering its photocurrent density far below the theoretical value of 7.5 mA cm<sup>-2</sup>.

In addition to the nanostructuring of BiVO<sub>4</sub> to reduce the diffusion path, it is necessary to introduce charge transport layers to reinforce charge separation.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, since hole transport is more susceptible to being blocked by potential barriers along the carrier passage, it is necessary to develop a competent hole transport layer (HTL) to improve the fill factor (FF) of BiVO<sub>4</sub> in order to secure high operating points of tandem devices. Unlike the various metal oxides, such as SnO<sub>2</sub>,<sup>9</sup> WO<sub>3</sub>,<sup>10</sup> TiO<sub>2</sub>,<sup>11</sup> and In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>,<sup>12</sup> that plainly construct type II band alignments favorable to electron transport under BiVO<sub>4</sub>, the inorganic material pool for HTL is highly limited. Owing to its stringent requirements such as a low band gap, high durability, and more negative conduction band edge than that of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, only few types of research on HTL have been reported. Quantum dot synthesis from carbon<sup>13</sup> and black phosphorous<sup>14</sup> or elemental doping for carbon nitride<sup>15</sup> has been attempted to form staggered band edges onto BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Although these 2-step approaches of coating after phase formation are advantageous for ensuring conductivity, possible degeneration in PEC performances by clogging the pores of nanostructured BiVO<sub>4</sub> or blocking light also exists.

Conjugated polymers have been widely investigated in organic photovoltaics<sup>16</sup> and perovskite solar cells.<sup>17</sup> Their fascinating nature of tailored band structures stems from the diversity of functional groups.<sup>18</sup> In addition, high electrical conductivity is retained without post-processing since the  $\pi$ -electrons delocalized by alternating single bonds and double bonds facilitate charge flow.<sup>19</sup> These delocalized electrons in the  $\pi$ -conjugated backbone also contribute to electrochemical stability by preventing charge accumulation. Despite these favorable features for HTL, few studies have been applied to nanostructured photoelectrodes owing to the difficulty of their direct growth without reducing the specific surface area. Forming a heterojunction between nanoporous BiVO<sub>4</sub> and conjugated polymers with optimal band structures through conformal growth provides a breakthrough to the chronic issues in the efficiency and durability of photoanodes.

Here, we demonstrate the hole extraction of a conjugated polycarbazole framework (CPF-TCB) layer on the nanoporous molybdenum-doped BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>) photoanode. Electropolymerization is utilized to conformally deposit CPF-TCB on Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> by elaborately controlling the growth *via* sweep cycle, and their uniform thickness is identified by transmission electron microscopy (TEM). After coating a tannic acid-based NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub> cocatalyst, the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode exhibits exceptional PEC water oxidation with a high photocurrent density of 6.66 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> at 1.23 V *versus* a

reversible hydrogen electrode ( $V_{\text{RHE}}$ ). X-ray spectroscopic analyses reveal the electronic environment of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, and density functional theory (DFT) calculations suggest a theoretical basis for the charge transport within the heterojunction. Systematic studies on the charge carrier dynamics verify the hole transport capability of CPF-TCB, and confirm that the enhanced PEC performances originate from the type II band structures. For unbiased solar hydrogen production, two types of PEC tandem devices using the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode with a perovskite photocathode and a perovskite/Si solar cell are fabricated. These tandem devices measured under tandem illumination mode (mode T) attain excellent STH conversion efficiencies of 6.75% and 9.02%, respectively, which are the foremost records among not only BiVO<sub>4</sub>-based, but also mode T tandem devices. This study reveals that CPF-TCB is a key material in photoanodes for high-efficiency and high-durability PEC tandem devices.

## Results and discussion

The fabrication processes of photoanodes are schematically illustrated in Fig. S1 (ESI†). All designs of the photoanode were carried out with a focus on efficiently separating and transferring charges generated in BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Firstly, BiVO<sub>4</sub> was synthesized from electrodeposited BiOI nanoplates as a precursor to possess nanopores, providing a large specific surface area and short diffusion path.<sup>6</sup> During the annealing process, the removal of surface trap sites in BiVO<sub>4</sub> was induced by molybdenum doping.<sup>15</sup> For maximization of the surface area and electron extraction, vertical nanorod-type SnO<sub>2</sub> was introduced as an electron transport layer (ETL) under the photoanode.<sup>9</sup> The thin CPF-TCB layer was directly synthesized onto the surface of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> using electropolymerization, and the CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode was dip-coated with tannic acid-based NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub> acting as a cocatalyst. Conformal coating of conductive polymers on BiVO<sub>4</sub> without filling its nanopores is highly challenging. As illustrated in Fig. 1(a), the electropolymerization we adopted is sophisticated in that the monomers can intimately contact all surfaces of the photoanode. As a building block to construct the conjugated polycarbazole framework, we employed 1,3,5-tris(*N*-carbazolyl)benzene (TCB) which contains carbazole. Among various aromatic units, such as benzene, thiophene, and pyridine, carbazole applied in the conjugated polymer backbone contributes to the electrochemical stability because of its electrophilic substitution in the nitrogen atom and the aromatic ring.<sup>20,21</sup> The CPF-TCB films were electropolymerized on the Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode by linear sweep voltammetry, and their thickness was controlled by the sweep cycle. In the current density–potential ( $J$ – $V$ ) curves (Fig. S2, ESI†), increases in the current density were observed around 1.2 V as the sweep number increased. This indicates that as the monomers polymerized, the formed larger frameworks increased the number of sites where additional monomers could attach.<sup>22</sup> We observed that the bright yellowish Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> surfaces became cloudy after polymerization, and also





Fig. 1 Structural characterization. (a) Schematic illustration of the electropolymerization of CPF-TCB on Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (b) XRD of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (c) Top-view and (d) cross-sectional SEM images of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (e) TEM and (f) HRTEM images of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (g) FFT pattern of monoclinic Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>.

confirmed a color change to yellow when coated on the fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO), as shown in Fig. S3 (ESI<sup>†</sup>).

The X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns in Fig. 1(b) were indexed to monoclinic BiVO<sub>4</sub> (PDF# 04-010-5173), showing that the crystal structure of BiVO<sub>4</sub> was unchanged after deposition of CPF-TCB. In the top field-emission scanning electron microscopy (FESEM) image of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Fig. 1(c)), the coexistence of nanopores and ETL-derived mesopores was observed, leading to the maximized surface area of the photoanode. The overall morphology of the 2.5 μm-thick vertical photoanode suitable for light absorption was confirmed through the cross-sectional FESEM image (Fig. 1(d)). Since the CPF-TCB thin layer with optimal sweep cycle was indistinguishable, we prepared Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> with 40 time-swept

CPF-TCB. As exhibited in Fig. S4 (ESI<sup>†</sup>), even at high cycle numbers, the CPF-TCB layer was uniformly coated on Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> without agglomeration and clogging of nanopores. The corresponding energy dispersive X-ray (EDX) mapping indicated the uniform distribution of C and N elements from CPF-TCB on the BiVO<sub>4</sub> surface. The CPF-TCB film with the optimal sweep cycle was revealed in the TEM image. As shown in Fig. 1(e), the CPF-TCB thin layer conformally covered Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. The high-resolution TEM (HRTEM) image (Fig. 1(f)) showed that under the optimal sweep cycle, CPF-TCB grew uniformly onto Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> with a thickness of 5 nm. The amorphous nature of CPF-TCB was consistent with the characteristics of electropolymerized polycarbazole frameworks in previous studies,<sup>22,23</sup> and also corresponded to the XRD results showing no



difference before and after deposition (Fig. 1(b)). The lattice fringes with interplanar spacings of 2.57 and 2.63 Å in two directions correspond to the (020) and (200) planes, respectively. The fast Fourier transformation (FFT) patterns in Fig. 1(g) show the diffraction spots for the (200) and (020) planes, indicating the crystalline monoclinic phase (*I2/b* group). These results matched well with the XRD analysis, identifying the suitable phase for water oxidation.<sup>24</sup>

The photoelectrochemical water oxidation of the fabricated photoanodes was evaluated in a three-electrode cell with 1 M potassium borate (K-B<sub>3</sub>) buffer (pH 9.5) under AM1.5G solar illumination. To investigate the optimal thickness of the CPF-TCB layer for Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, the electropolymerization of CPF-TCB was executed with different sweep cycles (5, 10, and 20 cycles). In the *J*-*V* curves of the CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanodes (Fig. S5, ESI<sup>†</sup>), they exhibited similar photocurrent densities at 1.23 V<sub>RHE</sub>, whereas CPF-TCB with 10 cycles exhibited the largest polarization. This indicated effective charge separation, and it was confirmed to grow to a thickness of 5 nm under 10 cycles (Fig. 1(f)). The PEC characteristics of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> before and after the 10-cycle deposition of the CPF-TCB layer were evaluated with and without the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub> cocatalyst. The *J*-*V* curves for four types of photoanodes are presented in Fig. 2(a). The photocurrent density of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> was measured to 3.82 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> at 1.23 V<sub>RHE</sub>, which is higher than that of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> (3.30 mA cm<sup>-2</sup>). The improvement was more pronounced with the cocatalyst, with NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> reaching a remarkable photocurrent density of

6.66 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> at 1.23 V<sub>RHE</sub>, which is higher than that of NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> (6.09 mA cm<sup>-2</sup>). This means that CPF-TCB contributes to effective hole transport from Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> to the cocatalyst. To verify the exceptional photocurrent density, linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) measurements of five NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanodes fabricated by the same process were conducted. Fig. S6 (ESI<sup>†</sup>) shows a minor variation in PEC performances between samples, indicating that the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode has good reproducibility. As shown in the SEM images of NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> (Fig. S7, ESI<sup>†</sup>), no structural changes were observed in the photoanode before and after the LSV measurement, indicating that CPF-TCB and NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub> effectively protect Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and promote water oxidation. The resulting significant enhancement in 0.4 ~ 0.8 V<sub>RHE</sub> is advantageous to provide high power at the general range of the operating point in PEC tandem devices.<sup>25</sup> The contribution of CPF-TCB to the power of the photoanode was quantitatively evaluated by the fill factor, as shown in Fig. 2(b). It is noteworthy that the maximum power point with the CPF-TCB layer was achieved at a more cathodic potential of 0.65 V<sub>RHE</sub> compared to that without the layer (0.75 V<sub>RHE</sub>), indicating that CPF-TCB served to elevate both photocurrent and photovoltage. Based on the rectangularity at the maximum power point, we calculated the FF of the photoanodes using the following equation:

$$FF (\%) = [J_{MP}(1.23 - V_{MP})]/[J_{SC}(1.23 - V_{ON})]$$

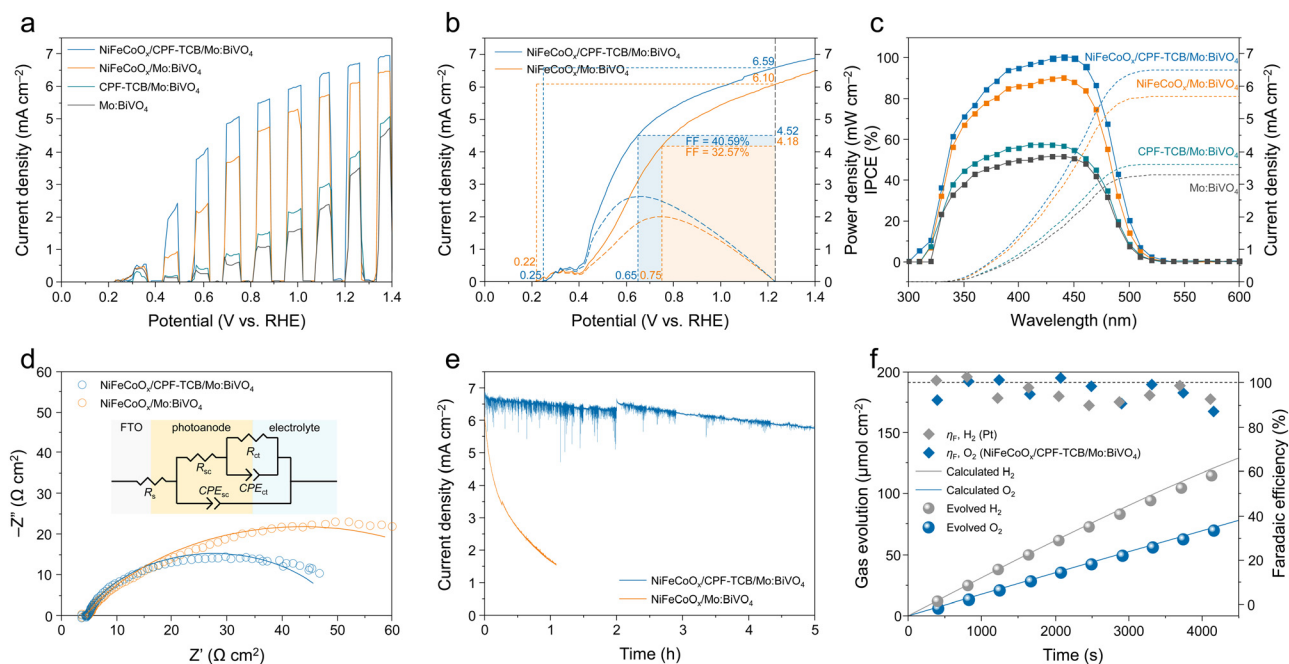


Fig. 2 Photoelectrochemical water oxidation. (a) *J*-*V* curves of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, and NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanodes. (b) Fill factors of NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanodes. (c) IPCE at 1.23 V<sub>RHE</sub> and integrated current density of the Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, and NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanodes. (d) EIS Nyquist plots at 0.5 V<sub>RHE</sub> and (e) *J*-*t* curves at 1.23 V<sub>RHE</sub> of the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanodes. (f) Faradaic efficiency and gas evolution at 1.23 V<sub>RHE</sub> of the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanodes. All measurements were conducted in K-B<sub>3</sub> buffer (pH 9.5) under AM1.5G 1 sun illumination.



where  $J_{MP}$  and  $V_{MP}$  are the current density and potential at the maximum power point, respectively,  $J_{SC}$  is the current density at  $1.23 V_{RHE}$ , and  $V_{ON}$  is the onset potential. When the CPF-TCB layer was inserted between NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub> and Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, the FF increased from 32.57% to 40.59%. The improvement in power efficiency makes application to PEC tandem devices more advantageous. The photoactivities of photoanodes were also verified by the incident photon-to-current conversion efficiency (IPCE) measured at  $1.23 V_{RHE}$  (Fig. 2(c)). In photoanodes containing CPF-TCB, the increases in IPCE were confirmed in the wavelength range below 500 nm, regardless of the presence of the cocatalyst. Especially, the maximum value of NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> was improved by 10% compared to NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, achieving near-complete IPCE near 450 nm. The IPCE spectra were integrated with photon flux over wavelength to revalidate the current density. The integrated photocurrent densities of all four types of photoanode practically matched the current density in the  $J$ - $V$  curves (Fig. 2(a)).

The hole extraction ability of CPF-TCB was further proven by electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) measurements conducted at  $0.5 V_{RHE}$ , where large photoactivity differences appeared. The Nyquist plots were fitted with an equivalent circuit as indicated in Fig. 2(d), and their values are tabulated in Table S1 (ESI<sup>†</sup>). The charge transfer resistance ( $R_{ct}$ ) of NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> ( $41.45 \Omega \text{ cm}^2$ ) was similar to that of NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> ( $42.65 \Omega \text{ cm}^2$ ), showing the same charge injection of the cocatalyst. For the charge transport resistance ( $R_{sc}$ ) in the photoanode, NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> had a lower value of  $5.525 \Omega \text{ cm}^2$  compared to NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> ( $36.13 \Omega \text{ cm}^2$ ). The significant decrease in  $R_{sc}$  indicates that the enhancement of the PEC performance sprang from the hole extraction behavior of CPF-TCB. The durability of the photoanodes was examined by chronoamperometry at  $1.23 V_{RHE}$ . As shown in the current density–time ( $J$ - $t$ ) curves (Fig. 2(e)), the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode ran stably for 5 h, whereas the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode exhibited a sharp degradation within 1 h. This means that CPF-TCB plays a role as the protective layer as well as the HTL for Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. The improved stability is also indirect evidence of the efficient hole extraction of CPF-TCB. The instability of the photoanode is derived from the hole accumulation causing self-oxidation of BiVO<sub>4</sub>. The expedited charge separation by CPF-TCB prevents the hole accumulation, enhancing the PEC stability. Furthermore, gas chromatography was conducted to collect the evolved gas and measure the faradaic efficiency. As shown in Fig. 2(f), faradaic efficiencies of nearly 100% were acquired in both the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode and Pt cathode, indicating that generated charges were fully consumed for oxygen and hydrogen evolution. It was also confirmed that the actual gas evolution rates were close to the calculated values.

The formation of the CPF-TCB layer was further proved by Fourier transform-infrared (FT-IR) spectroscopy, as shown in Fig. 3(a). Within the wavenumber range of 1000 to  $1800 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  where typical polymer bonding is observed, no peaks were observed for Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. On the other hand, several peaks were

identified in CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, among which peaks at 1223, 1329, 1438, 1462, and  $1591 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  were found to originate from the carbazole functional group in CPF-TCB. These spectra most directly verify that the amorphous CPF-TCB thin film was well formed on Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. To further demonstrate the charge transport behavior of CPF-TCB and the resulting changes in the electronic states of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, X-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS) was employed for the V K-edge of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> with and without CPF-TCB. In the Fourier-transformed extended X-ray absorption fine structure (EXAFS) spectra (Fig. S8, ESI<sup>†</sup>), the peak corresponding to V–O bonding was observed around  $1.3 \text{ \AA}$  for both samples, confirming that CPF-TCB had no influence on the interatomic structure of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. X-ray absorption near edge structure (XANES) spectra for the V K-edge in Fig. 3(b) show the electronic state changes. After forming the CPF-TCB layer on Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, the pre-edge peak shifted from 5469.4 to 5469.8 eV, and the edge peak shifted from 5501.4 to 5502.6 eV. The prominent shifts indicate the relative electron transport towards Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> due to charge separation caused by the hole extraction of CPF-TCB.<sup>26</sup>

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) analysis of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, CPF-TCB, and their heterojunction was carried out to scrutinize the electronic structures, and the wide spectra are presented in Fig. S9 (ESI<sup>†</sup>). As shown in Fig. 3(c), after the deposition of CPF-TCB, the V 2p<sub>1/2</sub> and 2p<sub>3/2</sub> peaks shifted from 523.53 and 516.13 eV to the higher binding energies of 523.86 and 516.56 eV, respectively. The Bi 4f<sub>5/2</sub> and 4f<sub>7/2</sub> peaks also shifted from 163.83 and 158.53 eV to the higher binding energies of 164.16 and 158.86 eV, respectively (Fig. S10, ESI<sup>†</sup>). In contrast, the N 1s peak (400.20 eV) in carbazole slightly moved to the lower binding energy of 400.16 eV, as exhibited in Fig. 3(d). These tendencies in the binding energy are attributed to the strong interfacial interactions between CPF-TCB and Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>.<sup>27,28</sup> Depth profiling was performed while etching the surface of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> by irradiating Ar plasma with time variation. The N 1s peak intensity gradually decreased over time and completely disappeared after 10 min plasma, indicating that the 5 nm-thick CPF-TCB layer was etched in 10 min. On the other hand, the V 2p peak intensity remained constant after a slight decrease over time, and the Bi 4f peaks maintained high intensity regardless of time. The transition of peak positions during etching was ascribed to the change in the interaction between CPF-TCB and Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Meanwhile, the final NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode was also analyzed by XPS, as shown in Fig. S11 (ESI<sup>†</sup>). The compositional elements of the cocatalysts were revealed in the Ni 2p (873.3 and 855.6 eV for 2p<sub>1/2</sub> and 2p<sub>3/2</sub>), Fe 2p (724.3 and 710.9 eV for 2p<sub>1/2</sub> and 2p<sub>3/2</sub>), and Co 2p (796.5 and 781.8 eV for 2p<sub>1/2</sub> and 2p<sub>3/2</sub>) spectra. The C 1s peak was deconvoluted into three peaks representing the C=O (288.6 eV), C–O (285.5 eV), and C–C (284.5 eV) bondings, which were derived from the tannic acid chelating metal ions.<sup>29</sup> Metal–(hydro)oxide bondings (M–O and M–OH) that appeared in the deconvoluted O 1s peaks were also attributed to the cocatalyst.<sup>30</sup>

To theoretically scrutinize the charge transport behavior within the CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> heterostructure, DFT calculations were





Fig. 3 Spectroscopic analyses of the conjugated polycarbazole frameworks. (a) FT-IR spectra of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (b) V K-edge XANES spectra of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (c) V 2p XPS spectra of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> with different Ar plasma etching times. (d) N 1s XPS spectra of CPF-TCB and CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> with different Ar plasma etching times.

utilized. As suggested in Fig. S12 (ESI<sup>†</sup>), a single layer of CPF-TCB positioned on the (010) surface of BiVO<sub>4</sub> was established as the DFT calculation model to elucidate the spatial distribution of charge density differences. Fig. 4(a) shows the 3-dimensional charge density difference across the CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> interface. The charge redistribution mainly occurred at the interface of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, and electrons accumulated around the surface of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. It is one piece of evidence indicating favorable charge transport at the interface of the heterostructure, which is consistent with the aforementioned results of XAS and XPS analysis.<sup>23,31</sup> Additionally, the planar-averaged charge density difference along the z-direction normalized to the CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> heterostructure was calculated to investigate quantitative changes (Fig. 4(b)). Strong charge accumulation on the surface of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> indicates that electrons are mainly transported from CPF-TCB to Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> at their interface. According to Bader charge analysis, about 0.05 electrons per supercell are transported from the CPF-TCB layer to Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> (010). After reaching the equilibrium state, a built-in electric field is developed by the net charge accumulation across the CPF-TCB/BiVO<sub>4</sub> heterostructure, promoting charge separation.<sup>32</sup> Thereby, these calculations provide support for



Fig. 4 DFT calculations. (a) Charge density difference across CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (b) Planar-averaged charge density difference  $\Delta\rho$  ( $\Delta\rho = \rho_{\text{junction}} - \rho_{\text{BiVO}_4} - \rho_{\text{CPF-TCB}}$ ) along the z-direction for CPF-TCB/BiVO<sub>4</sub>.

the crucial charge transport role of CPF-TCB shown in PEC measurements.

The hole extraction capability of CPF-TCB was further demonstrated by Mott-Schottky (M-S) analysis under light-off. Comparing the M-S plots shown in Fig. 5(a), the flat band potentials of TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> were almost identical. It was in line with the  $J-V$  curves in Fig. 2(a), where there was no difference in the onset potential of the two photoanodes. However, the slope of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> was lower





Fig. 5 Charge carrier dynamics. (a) M–S plots of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (b) OCP-derived carrier lifetimes of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (c) Steady-state and (d) time-resolved PL of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. (e) Energy band diagram of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>.

than that of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>, indicating that the donor density ( $N_D$ ) of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> increases when it forms a heterojunction with CPF-TCB. The donor density was calculated by the following equation and tabulated in Table S2 (ESI<sup>†</sup>):

$$C^{-2} = (2/\epsilon\epsilon_0 A^2 e N_D) [V - E_{FB} - (k_B T)/e]$$

where  $C$  is the capacitance of the space charge layer (F),  $\epsilon$  is the dielectric constant ( $\sim 68$ ),  $\epsilon_0$  is the permittivity of the vacuum ( $8.854 \times 10^{-12}$  F m<sup>-1</sup>),  $A$  is the surface area (m<sup>2</sup>),  $e$  is the electron charge ( $1.062 \times 10^{-19}$  C),  $V$  is the applied potential (V),  $E_{FB}$  is the flat band potential (V),  $k_B$  is the Boltzmann constant ( $1.381 \times 10^{-23}$  F m<sup>-1</sup>), and  $T$  is the temperature (298 K). The higher donor density of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> ( $2.125 \times 10^{20}$  cm<sup>-3</sup>) than that of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> ( $1.438 \times 10^{20}$  cm<sup>-3</sup>) indicates that CPF-TCB enhanced the charge separation as the HTL. The open

circuit potential (OCP) transient decay profile is a powerful tool, providing information about the behavior of charges induced by the photovoltage.<sup>33</sup> As shown in the normalized OCP profiles (Fig. S13, ESI<sup>†</sup>), the CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode exhibited faster decay than Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> under light-off. The faster decay profile is caused by the rapid relaxation of charge carriers in the elimination of the illumination, conversely indicating the boosted charge separation under illumination. The carrier lifetime ( $\tau_n$ ) was quantified by the following equation:

$$\tau_n = -[(k_B T)/e](dOCP/dt)^{-1}$$

where  $dOCP/dt$  is the time derivative of the OCP transient decay. As presented in Fig. 5(b), the carrier lifetime of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> is 2.18 ms, which is shorter compared to 6.18 ms for Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>. The faster decay time is indicative of



the larger charge recombination after light-off, indicating the expedited charge separation of the heterojunction under illumination.<sup>34,35</sup>

To make a comparison of the charge recombination behavior in the two BiVO<sub>4</sub>-based photoanodes, photoluminescence (PL) analysis was executed. Fig. 5(c) shows the steady-state PL spectra of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> with and without CPF-TCB, displaying peaks at 550 nm originating from radiative charge recombination. The PL emission was intensively quenched in forming a CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> heterojunction, meaning that the HTL suppressed the intrinsic radiative recombination of charges in Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub>.<sup>36</sup> The benefit of the heterojunction was further supported by time-resolved photoluminescence (TRPL), elucidating the charge carrier kinetics (Fig. 5(d)). The decay obtained at the PL peak of 550 nm was fitted by the biexponential decay model as shown below, offering two carrier lifetimes ( $\tau_1$  and  $\tau_2$ ).

$$I(t) = A_1 e^{-t/\tau_1} + A_2 e^{-t/\tau_2}$$

where  $I$  and  $A$  are the intensity and amplitude, respectively. As tabulated in Table S3 (ESI<sup>†</sup>), the  $\tau_2$  values associated with non-radiative decay caused by trap sites were similar (0.2058 ns and

0.1455 ns). However, the radiative recombination-related  $\tau_1$  of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> (1.750 ns) was shorter than that of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> (3.899 ns). The average carrier lifetime ( $\tau_{\text{avg}}$ ) also decreased from 1.830 to 0.6740 ns after depositing CPF-TCB. These lifetime drops denote the expeditious extraction of photoexcited holes by CPF-TCB as a hole transport layer.<sup>37</sup>

The fundamental cause of effective charge separation in CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> was disclosed in the band structure analysis. Ultraviolet-visible (UV-vis) spectroscopy was measured, and the absorption spectra calculated by the measured transmittance and reflectance were converted to Tauc plots, as shown in Fig. S14 (ESI<sup>†</sup>). The optical band gaps of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> and CPF-TCB were 2.44 and 3.20 eV, respectively. Ultraviolet photoelectron spectroscopy (UPS) was utilized to precisely determine the work functions and band edge positions, as suggested in Fig. S15 (ESI<sup>†</sup>). The secondary electron emission (SEE) spectra revealed the work function of Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> (4.25 eV) and CPF-TCB (4.11 eV) from the difference with the source energy. From the valence band (VB) spectra in the low binding energy region, the energy differences between the Fermi level and VB maximum were verified. The band structure of CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> was constructed by combining UV-vis spectra and UPS, as illustrated in Fig. 5(e). The CPF-TCB formed a type II

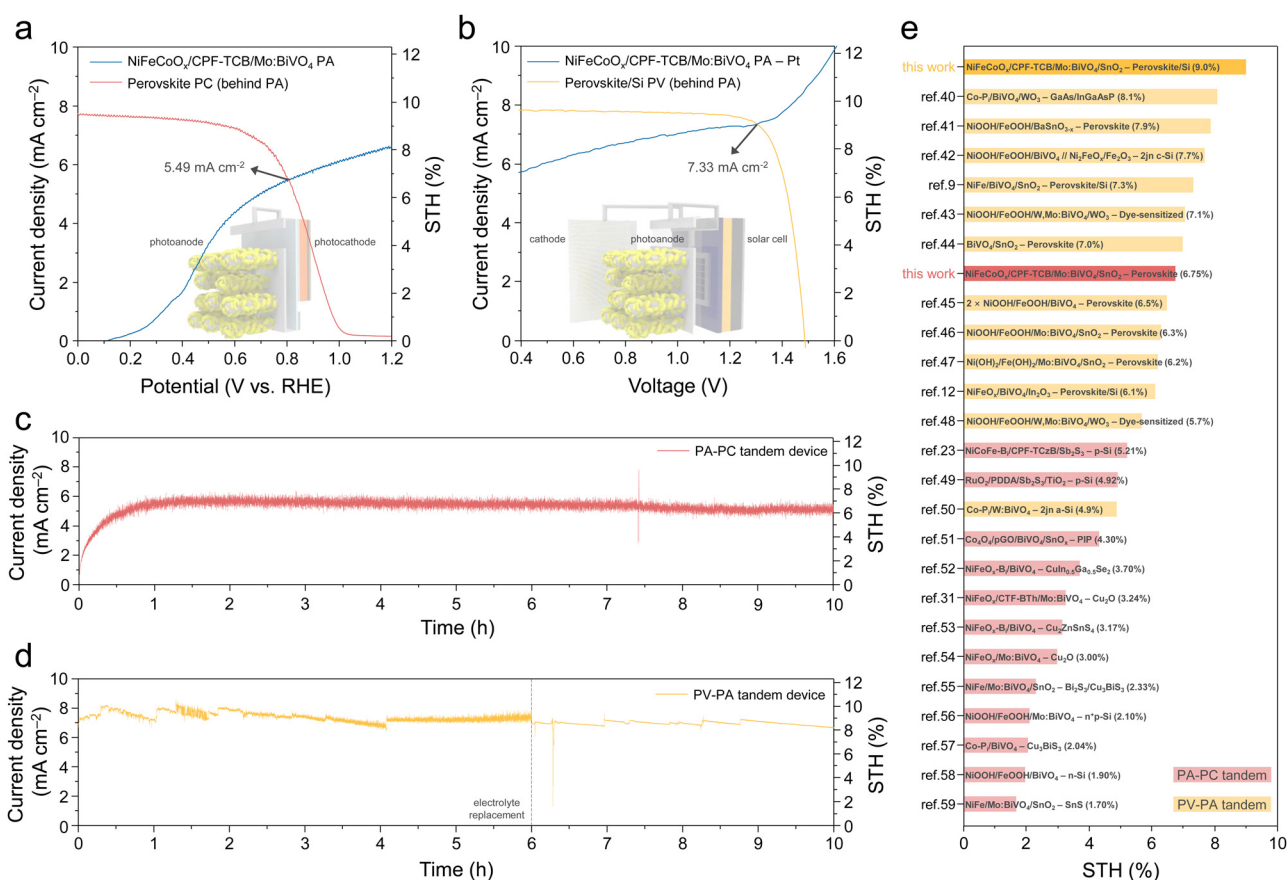


Fig. 6 Unbiased solar hydrogen production. (a) Three-electrode  $J$ - $V$  curves of the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode and perovskite-based photocathode (behind the photoanode). (b) Two-electrode  $J$ - $V$  curves of the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode-Pt cathode and perovskite/Si solar cell (behind the photoanode).  $J$ - $t$  curves of the (c) unbiased PA-PC and (d) PV-PA tandem devices. (e) STH conversion efficiency benchmarks of the PA-PC and PV-PA tandem devices in mode T. All measurements were conducted in K-B<sub>1</sub> buffer (pH 9.5) under AM1.5G 1 sun illumination.







JASCO). The UPS spectra were measured using XPS (AXIS Nova, KRATOS) with He I (21.22 eV) source.

### Photoelectrochemical measurements

A Xe arc lamp (LS 150, Abet Technologies) was used as a light source. Its illumination and intensity were calibrated with AM1.5G filter and Si photodiode (S300, McScience), respectively. The PEC measurements were carried out using a potentiostat (Ivium-n-Stat, Ivium Technologies) in the three-electrode cell with the Ag/AgCl electrode and Pt mesh. Water oxidation of the photoanodes was measured in 1 M K-B<sub>i</sub> buffer (pH 9.5), and proton reduction of the perovskite photocathodes was measured in 0.5 M K-P<sub>i</sub> buffer (pH 7.0). All of the measured potentials were converted into RHE by the Nernst equation:

$$E_{\text{RHE}} = E_{\text{Ag/AgCl}} + E_{\text{Ag/AgCl}}^0 + 0.059 \times \text{pH}$$

where  $E_{\text{Ag/AgCl}}$  is the measured potential (V) versus the Ag/AgCl electrode, and  $E_{\text{Ag/AgCl}}^0$  is 0.198 V at 25 °C. For the  $J$ - $V$  curves, the potential was swept toward the anodic direction with a scan rate of 20 mV s<sup>-1</sup> under chopped illumination. The IPCE was measured with separated light by a monochromator (Mono-Ra150i, Dongwoo Optron) at 1.23  $V_{\text{RHE}}$ . The current density was calculated by integrating the spectral current density, obtained by multiplying the spectral photon flux by IPCE, over the wavelength. The EIS was recorded from 100 kHz to 1 Hz with an amplitude of 10 mV at 0.5  $V_{\text{RHE}}$ . The EIS Nyquist plots were fitted with ZView software (Scribner Associates). The  $J$ - $t$  curves were recorded at 1.23  $V_{\text{RHE}}$ . The gas chromatography system (7890B, Agilent Technologies) was connected to an air-tight H-cell with the photoanode and Pt mesh to calculate the faradaic efficiencies and gas evolution rates at 1.23  $V_{\text{RHE}}$ . The M-S plots were recorded at a frequency of 1 kHz with the cathodic potential scan in a dark box. The donor densities were calculated by the slope of the plot. On the open circuit condition, the OCP of the photoanodes was stabilized for 10 min under illumination, and the OCP decay was recorded for the next 10 min after light-off. The OCP-derived carrier lifetimes were calculated by differentiating the OCP with respect to time. The  $J$ - $V$  curves of the perovskite photocathode were recorded behind the photoanode in the 3-electrode cell with the Ag/AgCl electrode, Pt mesh, and 1 M K-B<sub>i</sub> buffer (pH 9.5). After combining the photoanode and photocathode, the  $J$ - $t$  curve of the PA-PC tandem device was measured under the bias of 0 V. The  $J$ - $V$  curves of the perovskite/Si solar cells were measured using the potentiostat (CHI 608C, CH Instruments) and the AAA-graded AM1.5G solar simulator (PEC-L11, Pecell Technologies) calibrated by standard Si cell with quartz filter (91150 V, Newport). The  $J$ - $V$  curves of the 2-electrode cell with the NiFeCoO<sub>x</sub>/CPF-TCB/Mo:BiVO<sub>4</sub> photoanode and Pt cathode were recorded in 1 M K-B<sub>i</sub> buffer (pH 9.5), and those of the solar cell were measured behind the photoanode. After connecting the bottom electrode of the solar cell to the photoanode and the top electrode to the cathode, the  $J$ - $t$  curve of the PV-PA tandem device was measured under the bias of 0 V. The STH conversion efficiencies of the tandem devices were calculated using the following equation:

$$\text{STH} (\%) = J_{\text{OP}} \times 1.23 \times \eta_{\text{F}} / P_{\text{in}}$$

where  $J_{\text{OP}}$  is the operating photocurrent density (mA cm<sup>-2</sup>),  $\eta_{\text{F}}$  is the faradaic efficiency, and  $P_{\text{in}}$  is an incident solar power (100 mW cm<sup>-2</sup>).

### Computational details

The spin-polarized DFT calculations were performed using the Vienna Ab initio Simulation Package (VASP) with the projector-augmented wave method for the core region and a plane-wave kinetic energy cutoff of 400 eV. The generalized gradient approximation (GGA) in the form of Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) for the exchange–correlation potentials was used. The DFT+ $U$  calculations were performed with Hubbard– $U$  correction of  $U = 3.25$  eV to the d-electrons of Bi to account for the on-site correlation effects. A  $7 \times 5 \times 7$  gamma-centered Monkhorst–pack sampled  $k$ -point grid was employed to sample the reciprocal space for the bulk BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Monkhorst–pack  $k$ -point meshes of  $2 \times 2 \times 1$  were used for structure optimization and property calculation of the BiVO<sub>4</sub> (010) slab, CPF-TCB, and the heterojunction CPF-TCB/BiVO<sub>4</sub> (010) heterostructure. The large vacuum layers of these slab models were set at least 15 Å in the  $z$ -direction for the isolation of the surface to prevent the interaction between two periodic units. The optimized lattice constants of BiVO<sub>4</sub> were  $a = 7.338$  Å,  $b = 11.727$  Å,  $c = 5.188$  Å,  $\alpha = \gamma = 90.00^\circ$ , and  $\beta = 135.01^\circ$ , respectively. The surface of BiVO<sub>4</sub> (010) was carried out using the slab model composed of  $p(4 \times 3)$  supercells with four metal atomic monolayers. The bottom two atomic monolayers of BiVO<sub>4</sub> (010) were fixed at their bulk positions, while the remaining atomic layers and 2-dimensional CPF-TCB layer were free to move in all directions until the convergence of energy and residual force on each atom were less than  $1 \times 10^{-4}$  eV and 0.05 eV Å<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. To describe the charge transfer process in the CPF-TCB/BiVO<sub>4</sub> heterostructure, the dipole moment on the  $z$ -direction was calculated, and the planar-averaged charge density was acquired by averaging the charge density on the  $xy$  plane toward the  $z$ -direction.

### Data availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are available within the main text and the ESI.† All relevant data are available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

### Author contributions

H. W. J., J. Y. K., J. M., and M. S. K. supervised the project. H. W. J. and J. W. Y. conceived the project and designed the experiments. J. W. Y. fabricated and measured the devices, and analyzed the experimental results. S. G. J. fabricated the perovskite/Si solar cells. C. S. J. fabricated the perovskite photocathodes. J. K. performed the density functional theory calculations and helped to analyze the X-ray absorption spectra. H. R. K. helped to analyze the carrier dynamics. T. H. L. carried out the transmission electron microscopic characterizations.



S. A. L. helped to analyze the experimental results. W. S. C. conducted gas chromatography measurements. S. L. helped to synthesize conjugated polymers. H. L. helped to measure the photocathode. J. W. Y. and H. W. J. mainly wrote the manuscript. All authors discussed the results and commented on the manuscript at all stages.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) grant funded by the Korea government Ministry of Science and ICT (MSIT) (2021R1A2B5B03001851, 2021M3H4A1A03057403). This work was also supported by the KRISS (Korea Research Institute of Standards and Science) MPI Lab. program. H. W. J. gratefully acknowledges the KRISS MPI Lab. program. J. W. Y. acknowledges the NRF grant funded by the Korea government MSIT (RS-2023-00213786). The Inter-University Semiconductor Research Center and Institute of Engineering Research at Seoul National University provided research facilities for this work. We thank the Pohang Accelerator Laboratory for providing the synchrotron radiation source at the 7D beamline.

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