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# Mechanistic insights into carbon dioxide utilization by superoxide ion generated electrochemically in ionic liquid electrolyte†

Ahmed Halilu, <sup>ab</sup> Maan Hayyan, <sup>\*bc</sup> Mohamed Kheireddine Aroua, <sup>\*de</sup> Rozita Yusoff <sup>\*a</sup> and Haneef F. Hizaddin <sup>ab</sup>

Understanding the reaction mechanism that controls the one-electron electrochemical reduction of oxygen is essential for sustainable use of the superoxide ion ( $O_2^{\bullet-}$ ) during  $CO_2$  conversion. Here, stable generation of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  in butyltrimethylammonium bis(trifluoromethylsulfonyl)imide [BM $Am^+$ ][TFSI $^-$ ] ionic liquid (IL) was first detected at  $-0.823$  V vs. Ag/AgCl using cyclic voltammetry (CV). The charge transfer coefficient associated with the process was  $\sim 0.503$ . It was determined that [BM $Am^+$ ][TFSI $^-$ ] is a task-specific IL with a large negative isovalue surface density accrued from the [BM $Am^+$ ] cation with negatively charged C(sp $^2$ ) and C(sp $^3$ ). Consequently, [BM $Am^+$ ][TFSI $^-$ ] is less susceptible to the nucleophilic effect of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  because only 8.4%  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  decay was recorded from 3 h long-term stability analysis. The CV analysis also detected that  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  mediated  $CO_2$  conversion in [BM $Am^+$ ][TFSI $^-$ ] at  $-0.806$  V vs. Ag/AgCl as seen by the disappearance of the oxidative faradaic current of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ . Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) detected the mechanism of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  generation and  $CO_2$  conversion in [BM $Am^+$ ][TFSI $^-$ ] for the first time. The EIS parameters in  $O_2$  saturated [BM $Am^+$ ][TFSI $^-$ ] were different from those detected in  $O_2/CO_2$  saturated [BM $Am^+$ ][TFSI $^-$ ] or  $CO_2$  saturated [BM $Am^+$ ][TFSI $^-$ ]. This was rationalized to be due to the formation of a [BM $Am^+$ ][TFSI $^-$ ] film on the GC electrode, creating a  $2.031 \times 10^{-9}$   $\mu F\ cm^{-2}$  double-layer capacitance ( $C_{DL}$ ). Therefore, during the  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  generation and  $CO_2$  utilization in [BM $Am^+$ ][TFSI $^-$ ], the  $C_{DL}$  increased to  $5.897$   $\mu F\ cm^{-2}$  and  $7.763$   $\mu F\ cm^{-2}$ , respectively. The  $CO_2$  in [BM $Am^+$ ][TFSI $^-$ ] was found to be highly unlikely to be electrochemically converted due to the high charge transfer resistance of  $6.86 \times 10^{18}$  k $\Omega$ . Subsequently,  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  directly mediated the  $CO_2$  conversion through a nucleophilic addition reaction pathway. These results offer new and sustainable opportunities for utilizing  $CO_2$  by reactive oxygen species in ionic liquid media.

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## 1. Introduction

The global abundance of  $CO_2$  is estimated to be more than 550 ppm in the next 3–8 decades mainly due to the high levels of anthropogenic activities.<sup>1</sup> As of 2020, the amount of  $CO_2$  in the atmosphere is 420 ppm and this can disrupt the conventional

climate cycle, thereby increasing the chance of harsh weather.<sup>2</sup> To combat this deviation from the 350 ppm equilibrium threshold of global  $CO_2$  levels, international and governmental agencies have agreed to cut down 90% of global  $CO_2$  emission through capture and utilization techniques.<sup>3,4</sup> The utilization of  $CO_2$  entails a strategic change in its chemical stability ( $\Delta G_{fCO_2}^\circ = -396$  kJ mol $^{-1}$ ), with the resultant formation of the desired product.<sup>5</sup> Also, sucking one ton of  $CO_2$  directly from the atmosphere as a capture technique costs about \$94–232.<sup>6</sup> This indicates that  $CO_2$  is apparently a relatively inexpensive C-1 feedstock for the synthesis of a variety of commodity chemical products.

In the utilization of  $CO_2$ , the main focus is on the alteration of the 4+ oxidation state of C(sp). Accordingly, many catalytic conversions of  $CO_2$  into fuels and drop-in fuels, such as electrochemical,<sup>7</sup> thermochemical,<sup>8</sup> and photochemical<sup>9</sup> means, have been investigated. Further utilization of  $CO_2$  as a cheap C-1 feedstock has been reported to produce carbon

<sup>a</sup> Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 50603, Malaysia. E-mail: ryusoff@um.edu.my

<sup>b</sup> University of Malaya Centre for Ionic Liquids (UMCiL), University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 50603, Malaysia. E-mail: maan\_hayyan@yahoo.com

<sup>c</sup> Chemical Engineering Program, Faculty of Engineering and Technology, Muscat University, P. O. Box 550, Muscat, P.C. 130, Oman

<sup>d</sup> Centre for Carbon Dioxide Capture and Utilization (CCDCU), School of Engineering and Technology, Sunway University, Bandar Sunway, 47500 Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. E-mail: kheireddinea@sunway.edu.my

<sup>e</sup> Department of Engineering, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YW, UK

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nanotubes (CNTs) as a 100-fold cheaper option than the conventional chemical vapor deposition.<sup>10–12</sup> Other electrochemical CO<sub>2</sub> utilization techniques largely produce oxocarbons.<sup>13–15</sup> Recently, we reported the production of peroxydicarbonate (C<sub>2</sub>O<sub>6</sub><sup>2-</sup>) as an oxocarbon which serves as a carboxylating agent.<sup>16</sup> Quantum chemical computations were employed to gain insights toward the most probable interactions of the molecules mediated by superoxide ion (O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>), and the subsequent formation of C<sub>2</sub>O<sub>6</sub><sup>2-</sup>. To support possible scale-up, understanding the mechanism that governs the process of CO<sub>2</sub> conversion either to oxocarbons, fuels or commodity chemicals is mandatory. In general accounts regarding CO<sub>2</sub> utilization by O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> or any conventional means, this is a major drawback that could limit CO<sub>2</sub> conversion. Especially when using O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> to promote CO<sub>2</sub> conversion, a medium that could capture CO<sub>2</sub> and sustainably retain O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> for utilization is desired. Due to the intriguing properties of ionic liquids (ILs) such as the large electrochemical potential window, high ionic conductivity, strong thermal and chemical stability, and low vapour pressure, they have been used to capture CO<sub>2</sub> during electrochemical conversion.<sup>17–21</sup> In addition, the solubility of CO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> in ILs is high.<sup>22–24</sup> These IL properties facilitate direct electrochemical conversion of O<sub>2</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub> even under ambient conditions.<sup>16,25–27</sup> Also, ILs are suitable media for generation of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> mainly due to their capacity to hold radicals for a sustained period of time.<sup>16,28–35</sup> The kinetics of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in ILs fall in the range of ~10<sup>-5</sup> to 10<sup>-3</sup> s<sup>-1</sup>, indicating that O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> can exhibit noticeable long-term stability.<sup>31,36–38</sup> The composition of ILs also plays a primary role. For instance, it was reported that imidazolium-based ILs react with O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> to produce the corresponding 2-imidazolones.<sup>35,39,40</sup> This is an indication that the electrochemistry of O<sub>2</sub> to generate and implement O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> is strongly influenced by the nature of the IL-cation.<sup>41</sup>

Ammonium based ILs are renowned to be stable to nucleophilic attack by O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> unlike imidazolium-based ILs.<sup>31</sup> It was found that the C(sp) in the trimethyl-*n*-hexylammonium [TMHAm<sup>+</sup>] cation is negative, while the carbons at the 2-, 4- and 5-positions in 1-ethyl-3-methylimidazolium [EMIm<sup>+</sup>], and 1,2-dimethyl-3-propylimidazolium [DMPIm<sup>+</sup>] are positive.<sup>42–44</sup> In principle, negatively charged atoms are less susceptible to the nucleophilic influence of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>, unlike positively charged atoms.<sup>45</sup> Stable ILs are required in the promotion of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>-driven catalysis, particularly for CO<sub>2</sub> conversion.<sup>16,29</sup> Most CO<sub>2</sub> conversions mediated by O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>, especially in ILs, are limited by the need of unravelling the mechanism of the process.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, this is an inherent challenge that needs to be addressed.<sup>46</sup>

This work is a major advance of our earlier study, which centred on the use of COSMO-RS and Gaussian calculations to unravel the fundamental mechanistic understanding of the transformation of CO<sub>2</sub> by electro-generated O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> to produce C<sub>2</sub>O<sub>6</sub><sup>2-</sup>.<sup>16</sup> The experimental electrochemical impedance spectroscopy approach was employed for the first time to understand the mechanism of CO<sub>2</sub> utilization by O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in an IL to result in C<sub>2</sub>O<sub>6</sub><sup>2-</sup> generation. COSMO-RS and quantum

chemical calculations using the COSMOthermX and Gaussian 09 software packages were also conducted as a necessary guideline to gain insights on the fundamental chemical properties of the molecular architecture of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>/ILs/CO<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub>. Then, O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> was electrochemically generated and utilized for conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> in butyltrimethylammonium bis(trifluoromethylsulfonyl)imide [BMAm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>]. The long-term stability of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in [BMAm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] was confirmed using the UV-vis irradiation kinetics of dynamic O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> degradation. [BMAm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] is structurally different from the ones reported in the literature,<sup>31</sup> considering that it is made of negatively charged carbon atoms, which was found as suitable medium for sustainable generation of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>. Although many reports showed electrochemical reduction of O<sub>2</sub> to O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in other ILs,<sup>31</sup> we are not aware of any study that has elucidated the mechanism of O<sub>2</sub> reduction to O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> therein, and subsequent utilization of CO<sub>2</sub>.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1 Materials

The ILs used in this study were butyltrimethylammonium bis(trifluoromethylsulfonyl)imide [BMAm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] (purity ≥ 99%, IOLITEC) and 1-ethyl-3-methylimidazolium bis(trifluoromethylsulfonyl)imide [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] (purity ≥ 98%, Sigma Aldrich). These ILs were selected following the geometry guideline in our previous studies, which provided capacity for stable O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> generation.<sup>16,31,32,34,47,48</sup> These were all obtained with <1% moisture content, which was determined using a Karl Fischer titrator (V30S). The IL structures are presented in Scheme 1. Dimethylsulfoxide (DMSO; purity ≥ 99.97%) was purchased from Fisher Chemicals. Potassium superoxide (KO<sub>2</sub>, purity ≥ 99.9%) was purchased from Sigma Aldrich. Throughout the experiment, ultra-high purity gases N<sub>2</sub> (purity ≥ 99.999%), and O<sub>2</sub> (purity ≥ 99.999%) were used as purchased from Gaslink SDN Malaysia.

### 2.2 Computational analysis

**2.2.1 COSMO-RS analysis.** COSMO-RS analysis using the latest COSMOthermX software package was conducted based on BP-TZVP-C30-1401-ctd parameterization.<sup>49</sup> In a typical procedure, the [BMAm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>], [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] control, O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>,



Scheme 1 Structures of (a) [BMAm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and (b) [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>]

O<sub>2</sub>, and CO<sub>2</sub> geometries were first built and optimized with the Tmolex software package based on the Hartree-Fock level of theory and def-SV(P) basis set.<sup>50</sup> The IL-anion bis(trifluoromethylsulfonyl)imide ([TFSI]<sup>-</sup>) exists in the latest COSMOthermX database. Therefore, it was isolated and used without further treatment, but the COSMO-files of other molecules were generated at the DFT level of theory using the Beck-Perdew-86 functional.<sup>51</sup> During the generation of the COSMO-files, the zeta valence potential (def-TZVP) basis set<sup>52</sup> was used. After generating the COSMO-files for [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>], the [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] control, O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>, O<sub>2</sub>, and CO<sub>2</sub>, the job functional for a molecular mixture in COSMOthermX was sought to produce the most probable interaction among the molecules. Consequently, their  $\sigma$ -profiles and surfaces were isolated as additional outputs.

**2.2.2 Global electrophilicity index.** The geometry of [BMamm<sup>+</sup>], the [EMIm<sup>+</sup>] control, O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>, and CO<sub>2</sub> was optimized in the ground state using the Hartree-Fock level of theory using the singlet default spin mode and 3-21G basis set in the Gaussian 09 software.<sup>53</sup> To extract their respective highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) and lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO), further energy analysis at the same level of theory was conducted on the optimized geometries. New molecular orbitals were updated and the respective molecular orbitals were visualized in terms of molecular orbital cubes. The HOMO and LUMO energies were used to calculate the chemical hardness ( $\eta$ ) and chemical potential ( $\mu$ ) from eqn (1) and (2), respectively.<sup>54</sup> Eventually, using eqn (3),<sup>54,55</sup> the global electrophilicity indices ( $\omega$ ) were computed.

$$\eta = \frac{1}{2}(E_{\text{LUMO}} - E_{\text{HOMO}}) \quad (1)$$

$$\mu = \frac{1}{2}(E_{\text{HOMO}} + E_{\text{LUMO}}) \quad (2)$$

$$\omega = \frac{\mu^2}{2\eta} \quad (3)$$

where  $\eta$  = chemical hardness,  $\mu$  = global electronic chemical potential, and  $\omega$  = electrophilicity index.

### 2.3 Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS)

EIS measurements of [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] media were performed in galvanostatic mode using a three-electrode system in an aluminium foil Faraday cage present in a glove box with an N<sub>2</sub> environment. The three electrodes are glassy carbon (GC): OD: 6 mm, ID: 3 mm, platinum (Pt): 5.7 cm, BAS Inc., and Ag/AgCl: 6 mm. A sine amplitude of 100  $\mu$ A in a frequency range of 100 kHz to 100 mHz was used during the measurement. To investigate the mechanism of radical driven catalysis, EIS measurements were conducted in O<sub>2</sub>-saturated [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and O<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub>-saturated [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] in potentiostatic mode using the same set of electrodes at a 10 mV amplitude. The total harmonic distortion of the AC signal in [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] was determined.

### 2.4 Electrochemical generation of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>

[BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] were vacuum dried for ~6 h at a temperature of ~56 °C as a form of purification step. One mL of the IL was poured into an electrochemical cell. The GC, Pt and Ag/AgCl electrodes were clamped therein and placed in a sterile jacketed cell kept in a glove box with an N<sub>2</sub> environment. These electrodes were connected to an Autolab potentiostat model PGSTAT302N. The latest Nova 2.1 data acquisition software through a computer was used to control the electrochemical process taking place in the cell. During the process, N<sub>2</sub> was first directed to the electrochemical cell through a gas channel, ensuring an inert environment. Then, O<sub>2</sub> was sparged and cyclic voltammetry (CV) measurements were conducted in the jacketed three-electrode system. In accordance, the charge transfer coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) governing the process, solubility ( $C_0$ ) and diffusion coefficient ( $D_0$ ) of O<sub>2</sub> in the IL were determined using eqn (4)–(6),<sup>34</sup> after chronoamperometry analysis using an ~11  $\pm$  2  $\mu$ m (dia.) carbon fiber ultramicroelectrode.

$$i_p = (2.99 \times 10^5) \sqrt{\alpha D_0 \nu A^2 C_0^2} \quad (4)$$

$$E_p = E^{\circ'} - \frac{RT}{\alpha F} \left[ 0.782 + \ln \left( \frac{D_0^{1/2}}{k^{\circ}} \right) + \ln \left( \frac{\alpha F}{RT} \right)^{1/2} \right] \quad (5)$$

$$i_{ss} = 4nFD_0C_0r_0 \quad (6)$$

where

$i_p$  = cathodic peak current (A),

$i_{ss}$  = steady-state current (A),

$\alpha$  = charge transfer coefficient,

$A$  = surface area of the macro-working electrode (cm<sup>2</sup>),

$C_0$  = bulk concentration of O<sub>2</sub> (mol mL<sup>-1</sup>),

$D_0$  = diffusion coefficient of O<sub>2</sub> (cm<sup>2</sup> s<sup>-1</sup>),

$\nu$  = potential sweep rate (V s<sup>-1</sup>),

$E_p$  = peak potential for the cathodic current (V),

$E^{\circ'}$  = formal potential of the reaction (V),

$R$  = universal gas constant (J mol<sup>-1</sup> K),

$T$  = absolute temperature (K),

$F$  = Faraday's constant (96 485 C mol<sup>-1</sup>),

$k^{\circ}$  = standard heterogeneous rate constant (cm s<sup>-1</sup>),

$n$  = number of electrons,

$r_0$  = radius of the ultra-microelectrode,

$I$  = current (A),

$t$  = time (s).

### 2.5 Long-term stability of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in DMSO containing the IL

The long-term stability was tested as described earlier.<sup>32,47</sup> A UV-vis spectrophotometer (PerkinElmer-Lambda 35) was used to measure the absorption spectra of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>. Initially, DMSO, [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>], and [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] were vacuum dried overnight at 60 °C. In addition, KO<sub>2</sub> was placed in an air tight container with molecular sieves. The KO<sub>2</sub> was transferred into the DMSO and the superoxide chemically generated therein was calibrated. A blank solution of ~0.05 g of the IL in ~5 mL

DMSO was prepared after making  $\sim 0.05$  g stock of the IL in a closed vial. This was followed by preparing a fresh solution of  $\text{KO}_2$  in DMSO. The UV-vis for the blank and 5 mL of  $\text{KO}_2$  in 0.05 g IL/DMSO solution was measured immediately by repeating the scans for 180 min steps for  $[\text{BMAm}^+][\text{TFSI}^-]$  and  $[\text{EMIm}^+][\text{TFSI}^-]$  media. The kinetics of  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  in these media were determined and the reaction rate constant was evaluated. The long-term stability of  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  in DMSO containing the IL was then monitored.

## 2.6 Utilization of $\text{CO}_2$ by $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$

The utilization of  $\text{CO}_2$  by  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  was measured at ambient temperature in a three-electrode cell, containing a GC working electrode, Pt counter electrode and Ag/AgCl reference electrode present in a glove box with an  $\text{N}_2$  environment. In a cyclic voltammetry experiment, 1.0 mL of  $[\text{BMAm}^+][\text{TFSI}^-]$  was systematically sparged with  $\text{N}_2$  to expel any available impurities. Therefore, a  $0.1 \text{ L min}^{-1}$  flow of  $\text{O}_2$  and 0.034 mPa of  $\text{CO}_2$  were administered into the  $[\text{BMAm}^+][\text{TFSI}^-]$  batch-wise. The medium was subjected to potentiostatic control (*i.e.*, 0.1 to  $-1.3 \text{ V vs. Ag/AgCl}$ ) under different sweep rates (*i.e.*,  $9 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$  to  $144 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$ ) during cyclic voltammetry.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1 COSMO-RS analysis

Fig. 1 shows the  $\sigma$ -profiles of the  $[\text{BMAm}^+]$  and  $[\text{EMIm}^+]$  IL-cation compared with the  $\sigma$ -profiles of  $[\text{TFSI}^-]$ ,  $\text{O}_2$ ,  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  and  $\text{CO}_2$ . The possible non-covalent interactions of the molecules and ions can be estimated through the  $\sigma$ -profiles from COSMO-RS analysis.<sup>56</sup> In general, the  $\sigma$ -profiles are classified within three possible sections based on the charge density measured in units of  $\text{e nm}^{-2}$  or  $\text{\AA}^{-2}$ .<sup>57</sup> In this section, we are adopting the measurements in units of  $\text{e nm}^{-2}$  throughout. Therefore, in the first section of the  $\sigma$ -profiles, the molecule's hydrogen bond donor (HBD) capacity can be assessed at  $\sigma < -0.820 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$ . Accordingly, from Fig. 1a, the HBD behaviour in  $[\text{BMAm}^+][\text{TFSI}^-]$  occurred at  $-0.904 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$ , which could be due to the contribution from the C-H group.<sup>58,59</sup> Similarly, the HBD behaviour in  $\text{CO}_2$  ( $\sigma = -1.040 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$ ) originates from

the positive character of the carbon in  $\text{CO}_2$  with sp hybridization that is hydrogen-like, and potentially avails an interaction with  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$ . The second section within the  $\sigma$ -profile is a non-polar region that occurs within the range of  $-0.820 \text{ e nm}^{-2} < \sigma < +0.820 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$ .  $[\text{BMAm}^+][\text{TFSI}^-]$  (Fig. 1a) and the control  $[\text{EMIm}^+][\text{TFSI}^-]$  (Fig. 1b) have a non-polar range at  $-0.384 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$  and  $-0.188 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$ , respectively. Also, the non-polar range for  $\text{O}_2$  and  $\text{CO}_2$  was  $-0.084 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$  and  $+0.328 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$ , respectively. These non-polar regions signify where the molecules have their electrons distributed more symmetrically and do not possess an abundance of charges at their opposite sides.<sup>60</sup> The third section, which occurred at  $\sigma > +0.820 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$ , represents the hydrogen bond acceptor (HBA) region. This region was isolated for  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  at  $+1.660$  to  $2.340 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$ . For  $[\text{TFSI}^-]$ , the HBA region occurs at  $+0.912 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$  due to the presence of oxygen or fluorine in the molecular structure of the anion. Generally, the HBA plays a crucial role in establishing a bond with HBD species.<sup>61,62</sup> However, since  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $[\text{BMAm}^+]$  have HBDs, then  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  has the potential to interact with their HBDs, considering no other strong competitive counter effects.

### 3.2 Frontier molecular orbital (FMO) analysis

One of the best theories to describe the chemical stability of a molecule is the FMO theory of the highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) and lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO).<sup>63</sup> Considering  $[\text{BMAm}^+]$ ,  $[\text{EMIm}^+]$ ,  $\text{CO}_2$ , and  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$ , their HOMO and LUMO 3D renderings in terms of the isovalue surface are shown in Fig. 2a-d. These HOMOs and LUMOs may provide valuable data on the energy distribution and behavior of the molecules. There are two scenarios for the ground state HOMO or LUMO regarding these molecules: (1) symmetric isovalue surfaces, where the sizes of the green and brown 3D renderings are the same, and (2) asymmetric isovalue surfaces, where the sizes of the green and red 3D renderings are not the same. The green-colored 3D rendering represents a negative isovalue surface, while the brown-colored rendering represents a positive isovalue surface. These isovalue surfaces define the geometry of the IL molecules especially when their electron densities are rendered as colored 3D objects.<sup>64,65</sup> Therefore, from Fig. 2a, the HOMO of  $[\text{BMAm}^+]$  with both negative and

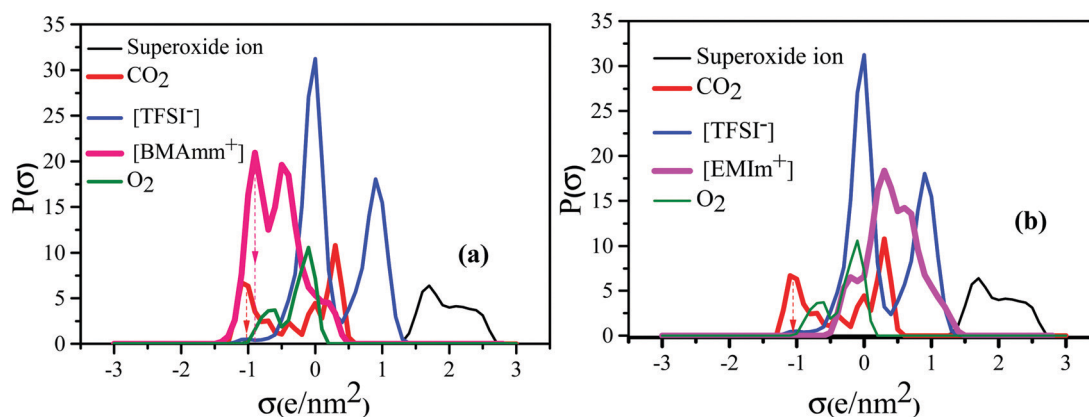


Fig. 1 COSMO RS analysis showing the  $\sigma$ -profile of (a)  $[\text{BMAm}^+]$  and (b)  $[\text{EMIm}^+]$  IL-cations compared with  $[\text{TFSI}^-]$ ,  $\text{O}_2$ ,  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  and  $\text{CO}_2$ .

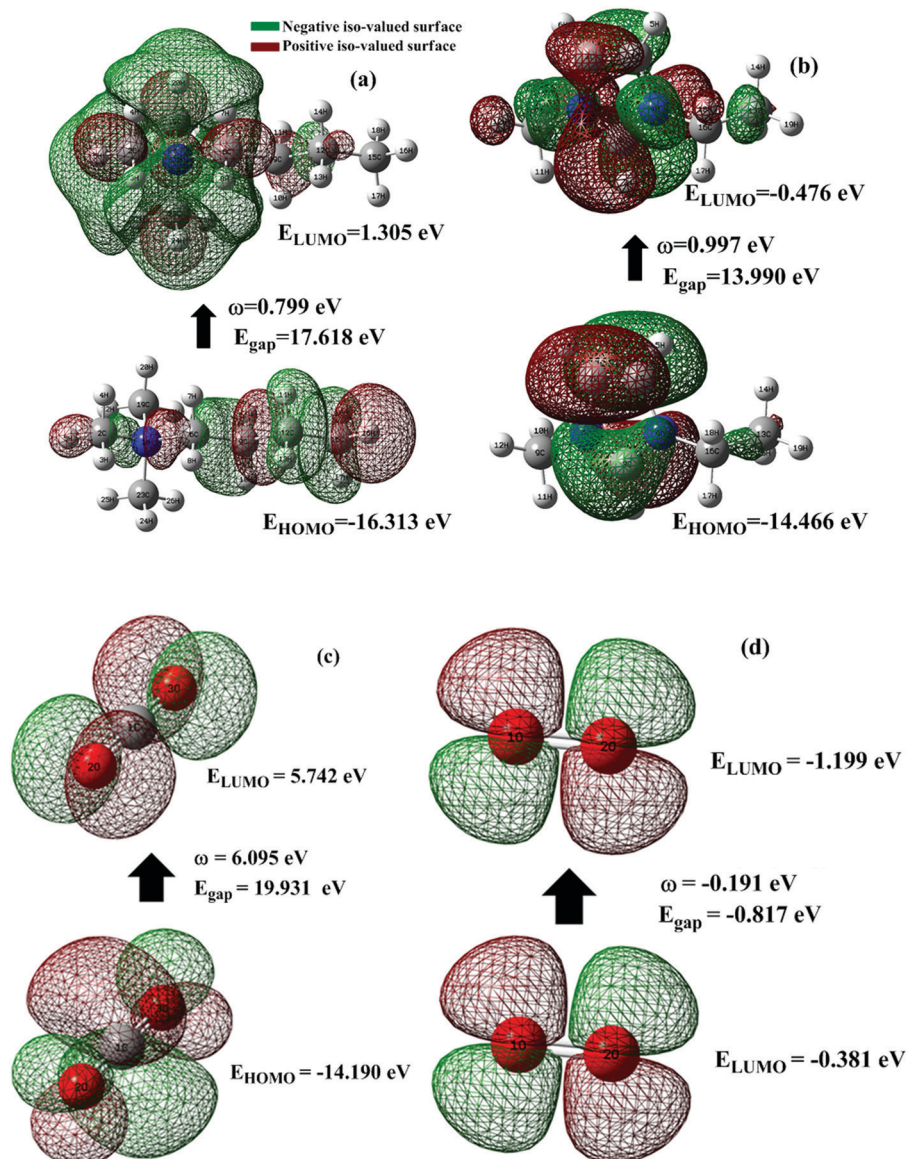


Fig. 2 Frontier molecular orbital showing the 3-D rendered isovalue surface for (a) [BMamm<sup>+</sup>] and (b) [BMIm<sup>+</sup>], (c) CO<sub>2</sub> and (d) O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>. The green color coding signifies a negative isovalue surface while the brown color coding signifies a positive isovalue surface at the Hartree–Fock/3-21G level of theory.

positive isovalue surfaces is distributed across the IL-cation, excluding (–CH<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> that is linked to the nitrogen. The positive (colored brown) and negative (colored green) isovalue surfaces are symmetrical. The LUMO of [BMamm<sup>+</sup>] is different from the HOMO of [BMamm<sup>+</sup>]. The LUMO is distributed all over [BMamm<sup>+</sup>] excluding (CH<sub>3</sub>). However, the negative isovalue surface is larger than the positive isovalue surface, and hence they are asymmetrical. Considering [EMIm<sup>+</sup>] in Fig. 2b, the HOMO and LUMO have an almost symmetrical distribution of either the positive or negative isovalue surface. In the HOMO, the shape is not majorly different from the LUMO. This kind of symmetrical distribution of the HOMO and LUMO isovalue surface can be seen for O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> and CO<sub>2</sub>, as shown in Fig. 2c and d.

The HOMO energy represents the possible ionization potential, while the LUMO energy represents the electron affinity. In accordance, a high HOMO energy corresponds to a more

reactive molecule with electrophiles while a low LUMO energy signifies a less reactive molecule with nucleophiles.<sup>66</sup> The difference between the HOMO and LUMO energies represents the energy gap ( $E_{\text{HOMO}} - E_{\text{LUMO}} = \Delta E_g$ ), which dictates the chemical reactivity and kinetic stability of molecules.<sup>67</sup> According to Fig. 2a and b,  $\Delta E_g$  for [BMamm<sup>+</sup>] (17.618 eV) is greater than  $\Delta E_g$  for [EMIm<sup>+</sup>] (13.990 eV). This implied that [BMamm<sup>+</sup>] has less polarization with higher molecular stability. Similarly, as shown in Fig. 2c and d,  $\Delta E_g$  for CO<sub>2</sub> (19.931 eV) is greater than  $\Delta E_g$  for O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> (–0.817). This implied that O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>, which has a lower value of  $\Delta E_g$  than CO<sub>2</sub>, [EMIm<sup>+</sup>], and [BMamm<sup>+</sup>], has more polarization with low ionic stability.

However, further estimation of the electrophilicity index showed that [EMIm<sup>+</sup>] has a more positive character than [BMamm<sup>+</sup>]. This is because the electrophilicity index of [EMIm<sup>+</sup>] is  $\omega = 0.977$  eV at the Hartree–Fock/3-21G level of theory, while that of

[BMamm<sup>+</sup>] is  $\omega = 0.799$  eV at the same level of theory. Also, CO<sub>2</sub> has a more positive character than [EMIm<sup>+</sup>] and [BMamm<sup>+</sup>], judging from its electrophilicity index, which is  $\omega = 19.931$  eV. The high value of the electrophilicity index makes the ion more electrophilic and susceptible to attack by O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>.<sup>16</sup> To precisely confirm the degree of the positive character of [BMamm<sup>+</sup>], [EMIm<sup>+</sup>], or CO<sub>2</sub>, further extraction of their Mulliken atomic charge distribution was carried out at the Hartree-Fock//3-21G level of theory. The Mulliken atomic charges, shown in Fig. S1a (ESI<sup>†</sup>), indicate that all the carbon atoms in [BMamm<sup>+</sup>] are negative. In Fig. S1b (ESI<sup>†</sup>), C(sp<sup>2</sup>) in the imidazole ring of [EMIm<sup>+</sup>] has a +0.642 e a.u.<sup>-2</sup> Mulliken atomic charge. Also in Fig. S1c (ESI<sup>†</sup>), C(sp) in CO<sub>2</sub> has a +1.083 e a.u.<sup>-2</sup> Mulliken atomic charge. These Mulliken atomic charges are insightful to probe the chemical process capability of the molecules.<sup>68,69</sup> This could rationalize why [BMamm<sup>+</sup>] has a large negatively charged isovalue surface while [EMIm<sup>+</sup>] has a more positive character.

### 3.3 Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy analysis

Fig. S2a and b (ESI<sup>†</sup>) show the total harmonic distortion profile and a sinusoidal profile of the voltage for the EIS measurement with GC in [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] vs. Ag/AgCl, respectively. In the [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] medium, the total harmonic distortion ranged from 0 to 14% and signified that the medium was stable enough to provide at least 86% undistorted electrical power flow. This is confirmed from the sinusoidal pattern shown in Fig. S2b (ESI<sup>†</sup>). Accordingly, Fig. S2c (ESI<sup>†</sup>) presents the Nyquist plot, which is used to estimate the resistance of the [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] medium. In the Nyquist plot, two semicircles can be seen as indicated in the inset. The first and hidden semicircle represents the integral resistance ( $R_1$ ) of [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>].<sup>76,77</sup> The hidden semicircle and the two obvious ones represent the electron transfer process. Based on EIS modelling, the time constant for the hidden semicircle was associated with only the electrolyte ([BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>]) resistance  $R_1$ , which was estimated to be  $\sim 1277$   $\Omega$ . The last two semi-circles are associated with the resistive-capacitive (RC) circuit.<sup>78</sup> However, the value of  $R_2$  and  $R_3$  was 7.102 k $\Omega$  and 20.662 k $\Omega$ , respectively. These resistances (*i.e.*,  $R_2$  and  $R_3$ ) are associated with capacitance  $C_2 = 19.316$   $\mu\text{F cm}^{-2}$  and  $C_3 = 19.02$   $\mu\text{F cm}^{-2}$ , respectively, and they are peculiar to the charge transfer process. Comparing the Nyquist plot for [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] (Fig. S2d, ESI<sup>†</sup>),  $R_1$  was 0.364  $\Omega$ , and the value of  $R_2$  and  $R_3$  was 12.938 and  $1.389 \times 10^3$  k $\Omega$ , respectively. These resistances are also associated with a capacitance of  $C_2 = 12.008$   $\mu\text{F cm}^{-2}$  and  $C_3 = 17.165$   $\mu\text{F cm}^{-2}$ , respectively. Comparing the Nyquist plots for the [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] media, the charge transfer resistance  $R_2$  is larger in [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] (*i.e.*,  $R_2 = 12.938$  k $\Omega$ ) than in [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] (*i.e.*,  $R_2 = 7.102$  k $\Omega$ ). This makes [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] less suitable compared with [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>].

### 3.4 Electrochemical generation of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in the ILs

Fig. 3 shows the CV waves for the electrochemical generation of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] after sparging

them with O<sub>2</sub>. In Fig. 3a and b, O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> is generated in [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and in [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] at  $-0.823$  V and  $-0.915$  V vs. Ag/AgCl, respectively, for a 144 mV s<sup>-1</sup> sweep rate. As the sweep rate was reduced to 100, 81, 64, 36 and 9 mV s<sup>-1</sup>, the O<sub>2</sub> reduction potential in [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] was  $-0.825$ ,  $-0.812$ ,  $-0.795$ ,  $-0.777$ , and  $-0.747$  V vs. Ag/AgCl, respectively. Similarly, the O<sub>2</sub> reduction potential in [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] was  $-0.908$  V,  $-0.903$  V,  $-0.896$  V,  $-0.888$  V, and  $-0.857$  V vs. Ag/AgCl at potential sweep rates 100, 81, 64, 36 and 9 mV s<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. By comparison, the reduction potential of O<sub>2</sub> reduction in [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] was lower because the charge transfer resistance was lower in [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] (7102  $\Omega$ ) than that in [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] (12938  $\Omega$ ). In these media, the CV waves for their cathodic and anodic separations, or their cathodic peak ( $E_p^c$ ) and the half peak potential ( $E_{p/2}^c$ ) separations are higher than 60 mV (Fig. 3a–d and Table S1, ESI<sup>†</sup>). This implies that the electrochemical process for the generation of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> was irreversible according to the Nicholson criterion.<sup>33,39,70</sup> By implication of the irreversible process, the O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> generated was available for further reaction. According to Fig. 3a and b, the reverse oxidation CV waves show that O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> generated in [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and in [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] is stable, regardless of whether the process is diffusion or surface controlled.<sup>16,47</sup> Moreover, comparing the peak current density with the sweep rate as illustrated in Fig. 3c and d, the linear variation postulates that a diffusion controlled process dominates O<sub>2</sub> reduction in the bulk IL medium and this is unlikely on the surface of the electrode.<sup>71,72</sup>

### 3.5 Long-term stability of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in DMSO containing the IL

To study the long-term stability of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>], UV-visible (UV-vis) analysis was employed. UV-vis was carried out with DMSO serving as a supporting medium for [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>]. Accordingly, Fig. 4(a and b) shows the absorbance spectra of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> generated in DMSO containing individually the respective [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>]. The absorbance band for O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in the supported ILs evidently occurs around 250–270 nm.<sup>32,35,73</sup> Therefore, for [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>], the steady absorbance for O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> was at a  $\sim 255$ – $259$  nm excitation wavelength. Similarly, the steady absorbance for O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in DMSO containing [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] was obtained at a  $\sim 263$  nm excitation wavelength. These absorbance spectra decreased slightly with time. The kinetic data associated with this decrease is shown in Table 1. Accordingly, an 8.4% decay of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> radicals was observed in the [BMamm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>]-based medium. On the other hand, at the same duration, a 46.1% decay of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> was observed in the [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>]-based medium. These indicate that [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] was not a suitable medium to be employed for generating stable O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>.<sup>31,36,74</sup> The high decay of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in the [EMIm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>]-based medium is consistent with the observation that the [EMIm<sup>+</sup>] end has more positive character with an electrophilicity index of  $\sim 0.997$  eV, and a C(sp) Mulliken charge of +0.642 e a.u.<sup>-2</sup>. The estimation of the kinetic rate constant associated with the decay of O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> in DMSO containing the respective IL was further used to differentiate the prowess

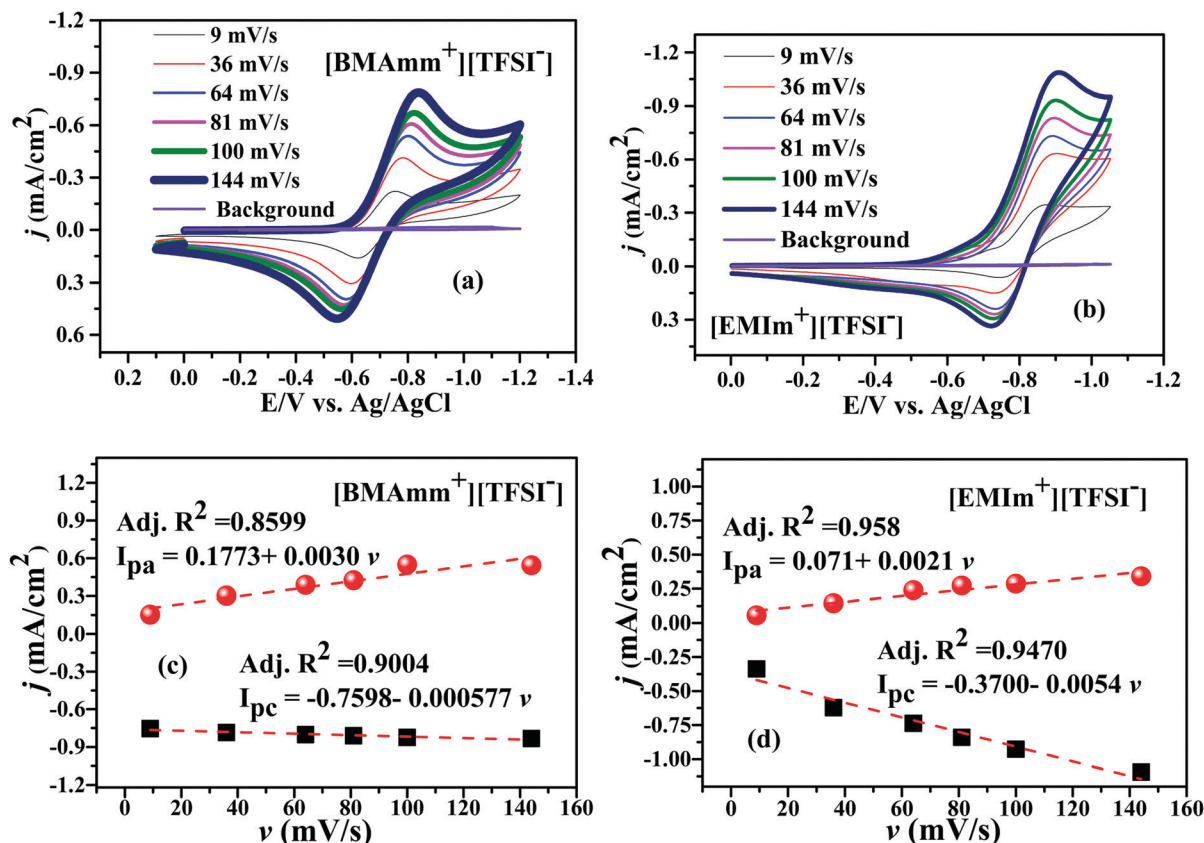


Fig. 3 CVs of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  generation in (a)  $[BMAMm^+][TFSI^-]$  and (b)  $[EMIm^+][TFSI^-]$ , and current density against sweep rate in (c)  $[BMAMm^+][TFSI^-]$  and (d)  $[EMIm^+][TFSI^-]$ .

of these media. It was found that the  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  decay in the  $[BMAMm^+][TFSI^-]$  and  $[EMIm^+][TFSI^-]$ -based media followed a 2nd order reaction and was estimated to be  $0.147 \times 10^{-5}$  and  $0.320 \times 10^{-5} M^{-1} s^{-1}$ , respectively. The  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  decay in DMSO containing  $[BMAMm^+][TFSI^-]$  was close to that for  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  in DMSO containing  $[EDMPAm^+][TFSI^-]$  by 9%.<sup>47</sup>

### 3.6 $CO_2$ conversion by $O_2^{\bullet-}$ in $[BMAMm^+][TFSI^-]$

Considering the high stability of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  in  $[BMAMm^+][TFSI^-]$ , it was further used as a medium for  $CO_2$  conversion.

The  $[BMAMm^+][TFSI^-]$  was saturated with  $CO_2$  or  $N_2$ ; on reducing the sweep rate from 144 to 9 mV s<sup>-1</sup>, a resulting background CV pattern was observed with no visible faradaic current that can be attributed to any redox process taking place (Fig. 5a-f; blue coded-line denoting the blank). This indicates that  $CO_2$  was not electrochemically active and  $[BMAMm^+][TFSI^-]$  contained no electrochemically active impurities. According to Fig. 5(a-f), the  $CO_2$  utilization by  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  is evident from the disappearance of the reverse oxidation wave for  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  generation when both  $O_2$  and  $CO_2$  are sparged



Fig. 4 Absorbance spectra of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  generation in DMSO in the presence of (a)  $[BMAMm^+][TFSI^-]$  and (b)  $[EMIm^+][TFSI^-]$ .

Table 1  $O_2/O_2^{\bullet-}$  long-term and short-term stability parameters

IL	2nd order rate constant $\times 10^{-5}$ ( $M^{-1} s^{-1}$ )	Total consumption % of $O_2^{\bullet-}$	$D_0 \times 10^{10}$ ( $m^2 s^{-1}$ )	$C_0$ (mM)	$\alpha$
[EMIm <sup>+</sup> ][TFSI <sup>-</sup> ]	0.320	46.1	1.830	10.200	0.405
[BMAMm <sup>+</sup> ][TFSI <sup>-</sup> ]	0.147	8.4	1.770	5.590	0.503

in [BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] electrolyte. This is an indication of spontaneous consumption of  $CO_2$  and  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ .<sup>16,29</sup> The consumption of  $CO_2$  by  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  is in strong agreement with the literature to confirm selective *in situ* production of  $C_2O_6^{2-}$  due to the increase in the potential forward reductive peak.<sup>16,75</sup> The forward reductive peak potential was also raised from  $-0.750$  V (*i.e.*, for only  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  before  $C_2O_6^{2-}$  generation) to  $-0.806$  V vs. Ag/AgCl (*i.e.*, after  $C_2O_6^{2-}$  generation) for a  $9$   $mV s^{-1}$  sweep rate.

This pattern is similar for other sweep rates, such as  $36$   $mV s^{-1}$  ( $-0.784$  to  $-0.855$  V),  $64$   $mV s^{-1}$  ( $-0.798$  to  $-0.880$  V),  $81$   $mV s^{-1}$  ( $-0.811$  to  $-0.890$  V),  $100$   $mV s^{-1}$  ( $-0.825$  to  $-0.900$  V), and  $144$   $mV s^{-1}$  ( $-0.841$  to  $-0.930$  V).

EIS in potentiostatic mode was used to study the mechanism of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  electrogeneration and  $CO_2$  utilization in [BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] on the GC electrode. In the  $O_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>],  $CO_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and

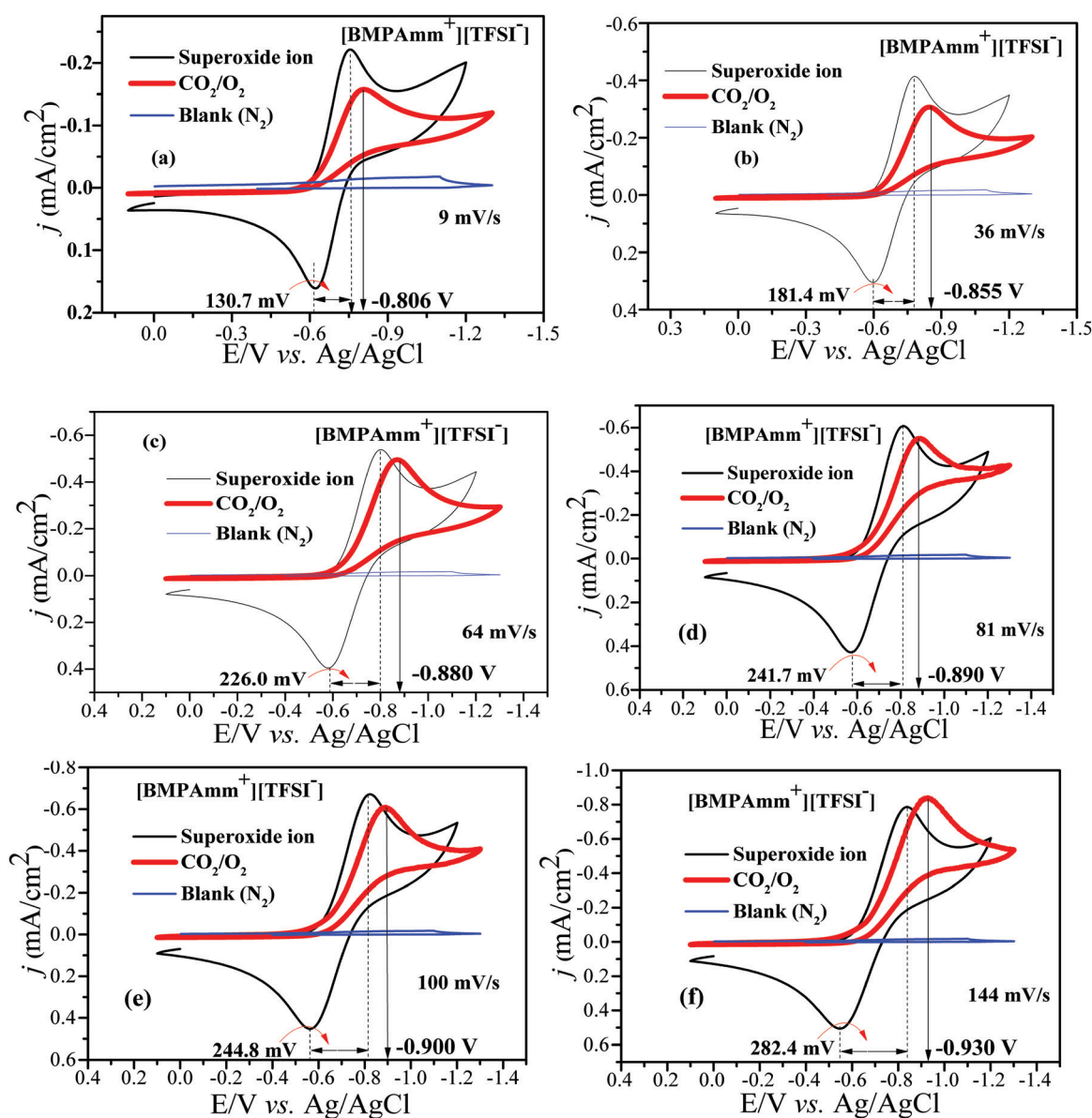


Fig. 5 (a–f) CVs of  $CO_2$  conversion by  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  in [BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] after sparging with  $N_2$  (background),  $CO_2$ ,  $O_2$ , and  $CO_2/O_2$  simultaneously at  $27$  °C, GC vs. Ag/AgCl at various sweep rates.



$O_2/CO_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] electrolytes, EIS measurements were conducted at  $-0.773$ ,  $-0.360$ , and  $-0.360$  V vs. Ag/AgCl, respectively. The EIS spectra detected in the  $O_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>],  $CO_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and  $O_2/CO_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] electrolytes are presented in Fig. 6. In the  $O_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and  $O_2/CO_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] electrolyte (Fig. 6a and b), the Nyquist plot shows a typical feature: in the high frequency region, a small semi-circle can be observed, which corresponds to the electron transfer process. By contrast, in the low-frequency region, a bigger semi-circle was detected, showing a total of two circles which correspond to two time

scales that are associated with the resistor capacitance circuit (EC).<sup>78</sup> The EIS is modelled by a modified Randles EC<sup>79</sup> (Fig. 6a–c), where  $R_1 = R_e$  is the electrolyte resistance,  $R_2 = R_{ct}$  is the charge transfer,  $C_2$  is the double-layer capacitance and  $W$  is the Warburg impedance. The EC is described by four elements corresponding to four impedance parameters. This denotes a system with two time-constants. The low-frequency region detected in  $CO_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] shows a straight line, Fig. 6c. This pattern is associated with a diffusion limited process.

It was found that  $R_e$  varied in the following order: 5.467, 4.378, and 2.116 k $\Omega$  for the  $O_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>],



Fig. 6 Nyquist plots detected in (a)  $O_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>], (b)  $O_2/CO_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and (c)  $CO_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>]. Bode plots detected in (d)  $O_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>], (e)  $O_2/CO_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and (f)  $CO_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>].

Table 2 EIS parameter in the equivalent circuit model

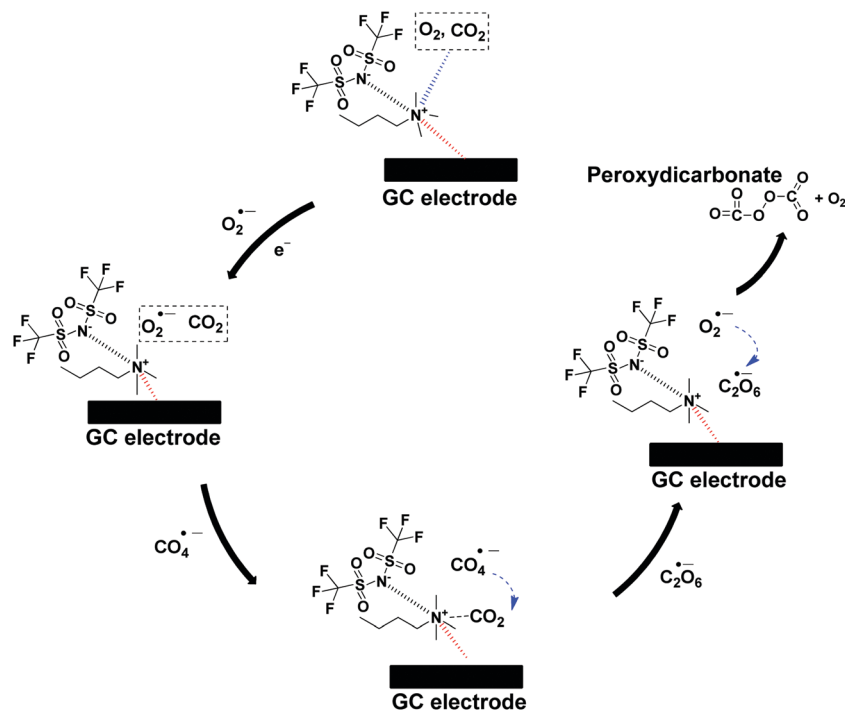
Catholyte	$R_e/k\Omega$	$R_{ct}/k\Omega$	$C_2/\mu\text{F cm}^{-2}$	$W/\Omega \text{ s}^{1/2} \text{ cm}^2$
$\text{O}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm <sup>+</sup> ][TFSI <sup>-</sup> ]	5467	261.467	5.897	293 191
$\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm <sup>+</sup> ][TFSI <sup>-</sup> ]	2116	$6.86 \times 10^{18}$	7.764	426 284
$\text{O}_2/\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm <sup>+</sup> ][TFSI <sup>-</sup> ]	4378	79.00	7.507	82 444

$\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>], and  $\text{O}_2/\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] electrolytes, respectively. The double layer capacitance ( $C_2$ ) associated with  $R_e$  also varies in the following order: 5.897, 7.764, and 7.507  $\mu\text{F cm}^{-2}$  in the respective  $\text{O}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>],  $\text{O}_2/\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>], and  $\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>]. Comparing the double layer capacitance detected in these media, an apparent peculiarity can be observed. This suggests that the mechanism of  $\text{O}_2$  reduction to  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  and the subsequent  $\text{CO}_2$  utilization by  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  in these media were associated with different charge mobility. The reasonable explanation is that [BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] got adsorbed on the surface of the GC electrode to form a thin film layer. By virtue of sparging  $\text{O}_2$ ,  $\text{CO}_2$  or  $\text{O}_2/\text{CO}_2$ , the gases are expected to get absorbed by [BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>]. These contributed to different polarizations with a consequence of different double layer capacitances. Further analysis of the charge transfer resistance ( $R_{ct}$ ) revealed that the process is faster in  $\text{O}_2/\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] ( $R_{ct} = 79 \text{ k}\Omega$ ). This  $R_{ct}$  is lower than the ones detected in  $\text{O}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] ( $R_{ct} = 261.467 \text{ k}\Omega$ ) or  $\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] ( $R_{ct} = 6.86 \times 10^{18} \text{ k}\Omega$ ). It can be noticed that the  $R_{ct}$  value detected in  $\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] was extremely high. This result can inspire the suggestion that charge mobility therein is almost absent. Therefore, under this

condition,  $\text{CO}_2$  conversion would not occur but it can be available for direct nucleophilic oxidation by  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$ .

The Bode plots detected in the  $\text{O}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>],  $\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and  $\text{O}_2/\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] electrolytes are shown in Fig. 6d-f. In the  $\text{O}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and  $\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] electrolytes, only one peak can be seen and both have a similar frequency response (Fig. 6d and f). By contrast, in  $\text{O}_2/\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>], there are two peaks (Fig. 6e). These results indicate that the mechanisms of  $\text{CO}_2$  utilization by  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  and  $\text{O}_2$  reduction to  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  were different. However, the mechanism of  $\text{O}_2$  reduction or any possibility of electrochemical  $\text{CO}_2$  reduction may be similar since they both have similar BODE impedance profiles.

The impedance parameters obtained following the fitting of the EIS experimental results by using the equivalent circuits displayed in Fig. 6 are listed in Table 2. It can be observed that the charge transfer resistance detected in  $\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] is significantly higher than the ones observed in the  $\text{O}_2/\text{CO}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] and  $\text{O}_2$ -saturated-[BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>] electrolytes, indicating that intermediate movement therein may be unlikely. This indicates that  $\text{CO}_2$  might be absorbed and remained available for direct interaction with  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$ . These results further confirmed the

Scheme 2 The proposed mechanism of  $\text{CO}_2$  utilization by  $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$  in [BMAMm<sup>+</sup>][TFSI<sup>-</sup>].

$O_2^{\bullet-}$  catalyzed  $CO_2$  reduction. Hence, reducing the activation energy and the overpotential of  $CO_2$  reduction can be ascribed to the high charge transfer resistance.

### 3.7 Catalytic mechanism

The  $CO_2$  utilization by  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  in ILs investigated by many researchers necessitates the need to elucidate the proper catalytic mechanism.<sup>16,29,31</sup> Therefore, the mechanism is described as follows: firstly,  $O_2$  and/or  $CO_2$  will diffuse and get absorbed by  $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$  due to the linear  $\sigma$ -profiles of  $O_2$ ,  $CO_2$  and  $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$  which centered at their non-polar ends with  $\sigma = -0.791 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$  to  $\sigma = 0.81 \text{ e nm}^{-2}$ , as explained in Section 3.1. Therefore, the  $O_2$ -saturated- $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$ ,  $O_2/CO_2$ -saturated- $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$  or  $CO_2$ -saturated- $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$  further got momentarily adsorbed on the surface of the GC electrode through participation of the IL moiety to form an IL layer. It was shown that the IL layer could be formed during the electrochemical process occurring in the IL.<sup>80</sup> Then,  $O_2$  will diffuse through the bulk from being absorbed by the  $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$  solution to the vicinity of the GC electrode.  $O_2$  could be possibly transferred through the space between the adsorbed IL layer and the GC electrode surface. Eventually,  $O_2$  gets reduced to  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  via single electron transfer on the GC electrode. Due to the extremely high charge transfer resistance for  $CO_2$  saturated media,  $CO_2$  will follow a different mechanism (see Table 2), whereas the charge transfer resistance value for  $O_2/CO_2$ -saturated- $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$  was very small (see Table 2). Accordingly, the  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  that is electrochemically generated can be postulated to attack the C(sp) center of  $CO_2$ , which is highly susceptible because of its positive Mulliken charge (see Fig. S1c, ESI<sup>†</sup>). During the process, the rate-determining step is the first electron transfer from the cathode to the absorbed  $O_2$  to form the highly-energetic  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  radical. The generated  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  interacted with  $CO_2$  via nucleophilic addition to induce the formation of  $CO_4^{\bullet-}$ .  $CO_4^{\bullet-}$  further followed a consecutive reaction step with  $CO_2$  to form  $C_2O_6^{\bullet-}$ . In another step of the consecutive reaction between  $C_2O_6^{\bullet-}$  and  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ ,  $C_2O_6^{2-}$  was formed along with  $O_2$ . The reaction summary is presented in Scheme 2. The results are in agreement with the  $CO_2$  conversion by  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  in aprotic solvents.<sup>75</sup> The result also revealed a strong advance that  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  was undergoing a nucleophilic addition to  $CO_2$  due to the extremely high charge transfer resistance in the  $CO_2$  saturated  $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$ . This rendered  $CO_2$  to be highly unlikely to undergo electrochemical transformation to  $CO_2^{\bullet-}$  as conventionally reported.<sup>81</sup> The mechanism of  $CO_2$  conversion by direct addition of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  is observable and plausible because  $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$  was significantly stable for the process due to its large negative isovalue surface, unlike aprotic solvents.

## 4. Conclusion

$[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$  was successfully used as a task-specific electrolyte for electrochemical  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  generation and conversion of  $CO_2$  into  $C_2O_6^{2-}$ . It was found that large negative isovalue surfaces

accrued from negatively charged carbon atoms in ILs like  $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$  could induce them to be less susceptible to attack by  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ . In contrast, the IL large positive isovalue surfaces accrued from at least one positively charged carbon atom such as in the case of  $[EMIm^+]$  can induce them to become more susceptible to attack by  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ . The consequence of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  susceptibility can be measured quantitatively using the long-time stability from UV-vis irradiation analysis. Accordingly, it was noticed that the  $[BMamm^+]$  based IL recorded significant  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  long-time stability by allowing only 8.4% decay. This rendered the IL a suitable medium for a radical driven  $CO_2$  utilization process. Moreover, the  $C_2O_6^{2-}$  produced in the  $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$  medium was detected by the total disappearance of the oxidative faradaic current for the  $O_2^{\bullet-}/O_2$  couple. Therefore, the mechanism of  $CO_2$  utilization by  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  is limited by  $O_2$  electrochemical reduction to  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ . The  $CO_2$  was found to be electrochemically stable due to the high charge transfer resistance in  $CO_2$  saturated  $[BMamm^+][TFSI^-]$ . It is expected that this work will open more research opportunities toward using ILs as promising media for electrochemical reactions and applications of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  in organic synthesis of speciality chemicals or drop-in fuel molecules. The study can also serve as a protocol toward the use of different IL media in unraveling the chemistry of reactive oxygen species and their industrial relevance.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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