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Catechol–TiO₂ hybrids for photocatalytic H₂ production and photocathode assembly†‡

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Visible-light driven H₂ evolution in water is achieved using catechol-photosensitised TiO₂ nanoparticles with a molecular nickel catalyst. Layer-by-layer immobilisation of catechol–TiO₂ onto tin-doped indium oxide electrodes generates photocathodic currents in the presence of an electron acceptor. This approach represents a new strategy for controlling photocurrent direction in dye-sensitised photoelectrochemical applications.

Immobilising molecular dyes onto wide band-gap metal oxide semiconductors is a well-established strategy for preparing tuneable, visible-light responsive materials from relatively inexpensive components. This approach was pioneered for solar energy conversion in dye-sensitised solar cells (DSCs)¹ and is an emerging field in the area of solar fuels synthesis.² In the majority of dye-sensitised systems, photoexcitation occurs in the dye (HOMO–LUMO transition) followed by fast charge injection into the semiconductor (Type I sensitisation, Fig. 1a). This approach has been effective in H₂ production using dye-sensitised photocatalysis (DSP)^{2a} and in forming photoanodes for dye-sensitised photoelectrochemical cells (DSPEC);^{2b,c} however, the translation of DSP systems to photocathodes is more challenging, often relying on low-performance p-type semiconductors (such as NiO)³ or molecular engineering⁴ to control the direction of electron transfer.

Charge-transfer sensitisation, in which photoexcitation occurs directly from a surface-adsorbed molecule to the semiconductor conduction band (Type II, Fig. 1a), has recently been explored as a

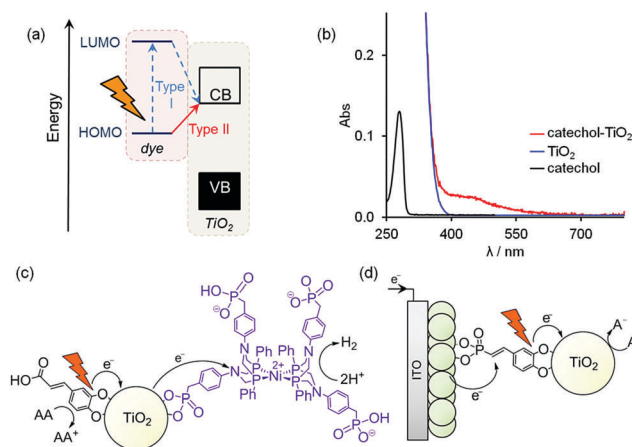


Fig. 1 (a) Energy transfer in Type I (two-step) and Type II (one-step) dye-sensitised TiO₂ systems; (b) diffuse reflectance absorption spectrum of catechol-modified TiO₂ compared to bare TiO₂ and the transmission spectrum of catechol in water (catechol shown is DHCA); (c) solar H₂ production in DSP system (AA = ascorbic acid); (d) layer-by-layer photocathode incorporating catechol–TiO₂ (A = acceptor; catechol shown is DHSP).

low-cost alternative in DSCs⁵ and solar fuel production.⁶ Type II sensitisation is known to occur in TiO₂ functionalised with phenol and enediol groups, such as catechols.^{5d} These groups bind to Ti⁴⁺ ions on the surface of TiO₂, forming complexes that absorb visible light due to ligand-to-metal charge-transfer (Fig. 1b).⁷ This one-step transfer from dye to TiO₂ results in very fast electron injection (on the order of fs),^{5b} and, importantly, by avoiding excitation into the dye LUMO the charge-transfer is inherently directional (Fig. 1a and Fig. S1, ESI†). Type II sensitisation also occurs between carbon nitride and TiO₂, and has been used to enhance solar light-driven H₂ evolution with hydrogenase,⁸ and to form photoanodes for photoelectrochemical water oxidation.⁹

Catechol-containing dyes based on alizarin red have been studied for DSP and for photocurrent switching applications;¹⁰ however, these dyes are also Type I sensitisers.^{5d} To our knowledge, the only example of purely Type II visible-light driven H₂ evolution uses phenolic resin-sensitised TiO₂ nanoparticles,

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with Pt as the H₂ evolution catalyst (HEC) in the presence of a sacrificial electron donor (SED).^{6b,c}

Replacing noble metals with inexpensive catalysts and moving towards SED-free systems are both important goals in achieving sustainable fuel synthesis. Here we take steps towards addressing these challenges by developing a new route for assembling noble metal-free photocathodes. First, we demonstrate that Pt can be replaced by a 3d transition metal catalyst to form an active Type II DSP system (Fig. 1c). We then develop a SED-free photoelectrochemical system, using the directionality of the charge-transfer complex to form photocathodes on a conductive electrode support (Fig. 1d).

For the DSP system, a range of charge-transfer dye-sensitised TiO₂ powders were prepared by mixing simple catechol derivatives (Fig. 2a) with commercial P25 TiO₂ nanoparticles (average crystallite diameter 21 nm, 8:2 mixture of anatase:rutile). The resulting coloured powders exhibited broad light absorption over the visible range (Fig. S2, ESI†). The dye loadings ranged from 75–172 nmol (mg TiO₂)^{−1} (Table S1, ESI†). These loadings correspond to an estimated footprint of 0.5–1.1 nm² molecule^{−1}, consistent with reported ranges for sub-monolayer to monolayer coverage of catechols on TiO₂.¹¹

Photocatalysis solutions were prepared by suspending the dye-P25 powders (2.5 mg) in aqueous SED solution (ascorbic acid, AA, 0.1 M, 2.25 mL). We selected the HEC [Ni(P^{Ph}₂N^{C₆H₄CH₂P(O)(OH)₂)₂]Br₂, **NiP** (Fig. 1c), as it has previously been shown to be highly active in aqueous DSP¹² and DSPEC.^{3a,4b} **NiP** (50 nmol) was added to the dye-P25 suspension as a solution in methanol (1 mM) before the photoreactors were purged with N₂ and irradiated with simulated solar light ($\lambda > 420$ nm, AM 1.5 G, 100 mW cm^{−2}). The formation of the hybrid DSP system (Fig. 1c) is supported by FTIR and UV-vis}

spectroscopy (Fig. S3, ESI†), with an estimated **NiP** loading of 38 nmol mg^{−1} for caffeic acid (CA)-P25 (calculated using the difference in absorption at 450 nm of a **NiP** solution before and after exposure to TiO₂). No H₂ was detected in control experiments without AA, TiO₂ or **NiP**, or with NiCl₂ in place of **NiP**.

AA can also sensitise TiO₂ through charge-transfer interactions, resulting in small amounts of H₂ evolution in the absence of additional catechol during visible light irradiation (Fig. 2b, “none”); however, all *ex situ* functionalised powders enhanced the activity compared to bare P25 (Fig. 2b and Fig. S4a, ESI†). The highest activity was obtained with CA (Fig. 2), with an activity with respect to the powder of 273 ± 29 $\mu\text{mol H}_2 \text{ g}^{-1}$ after 4 h. The activity per hour of 73 ± 3 $\mu\text{mol H}_2 (\text{g TiO}_2)^{-1} \text{ h}^{-1}$ was maintained over the first 4 h, equivalent to a turnover frequency (TOF) per Ni catalyst of 3.6 ± 0.2 $\mu\text{mol H}_2 (\mu\text{mol NiP})^{-1} \text{ h}^{-1}$ and TOF per catechol of 0.6 ± 0.2 $\mu\text{mol H}_2 (\mu\text{mol CA})^{-1} \text{ h}^{-1}$. This result is comparable to that reported for the phenolic resin system with Pt (105 $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{ h}^{-1}$).^{6b} The TOF_{Ni} is an order of magnitude lower than previously reported for the equivalent system with a Ru tris(bipyridine) dye, **RuP**,¹² but **RuP** can directly reduce **NiP** in solution, whereas the catechol derivatives cannot. The lower extinction coefficient and faster recombination rate of the charge-transfer band relative to that of metal-based dyes (ps¹³ vs. ns– μs ^{2a}) are also expected to contribute to the difference in activity.

The high activity of CA relative to the unconjugated analogue 3,4-dihydroxyhydrocinnamic acid (DHCA) is consistent with the red-shift in the absorption spectrum and increase in both the catechol binding constant and the electron injection efficiency associated with greater conjugation.^{5b} The activity per dye molecule also reflects this trend for 2-(3,4-dihydroxybenzene)thiophene (DHBT; Fig. S4b, ESI†); however, the lower loading of DHBT on TiO₂ compared to CA (Table S1, ESI†) resulted in a lower activity per gram (Fig. 2b). Ring conjugation (2,3-naphthalenediol, ND) did not enhance activity (Fig. 2b and Fig. S4b, ESI†), which is likely due to the comparatively low visible light absorption of ND-P25 (Fig. S1, ESI†).

The turnover number per Ni (TON_{Ni}) increased with decreasing **NiP** loading (Fig. S5a, ESI†) and increasing CA-P25 powder loading (Fig. S6a, ESI†). However, the corresponding activity per gram decreased with decreasing **NiP** loading (Fig. S5b, ESI†) and reached a maximum at a CA-P25 loading of 1.25 mg (Fig. S6b, ESI†). Since increasing the powder loading increases both the dye loading and the particle:Ni ratio, it can be inferred that the H₂ production rate is limited by the generation and supply of electrons to **NiP**. This conclusion is supported by the decrease in activity of the system on decreasing the light intensity (Fig. S7, ESI†). The external quantum efficiency (EQE) of the most active system (5 mg CA-P25, 50 nmol **NiP**) was measured to be 0.09 ± 0.01%.

Since light absorption is related to the number of catechol-TiO₂ surface interactions, light absorption per g can be enhanced by using smaller nanoparticles to increase the surface area. We synthesised TiO₂ nanoparticles by a previously reported method (pure anatase, average diameter ~7 nm, AN7-TiO₂, see Fig. S8, ESI† for TEM)¹⁴ and tested both these and commercial pure anatase nanoparticles (10 nm, AN10-TiO₂, Fig. S7, ESI†) under the standard DSP conditions (CA-TiO₂, 2.5 mg, 50 nmol **NiP**).

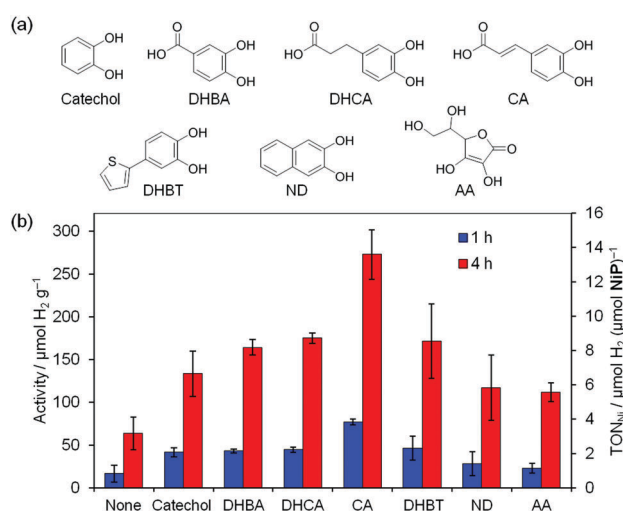


Fig. 2 (a) Chemical structures of charge-transfer dyes used in this study (catechol = 1,2-dihydroxybenzene, DHBA = 3,4-dihydroxybenzoic acid, DHCA = 3,4-dihydroxyhydrocinnamic acid, CA = caffeic acid, DHBT = 2-(3,4-dihydroxybenzene)thiophene, ND = 2,3-naphthalenediol, AA = ascorbic acid); (b) comparison of visible-light driven H₂ evolution with charge-transfer dye-functionalised P25 TiO₂ powders in the presence of a molecular Ni catalyst, **NiP** (0.1 M AA, pH 4.5, 2.5 mg powder, 50 nmol **NiP**, 2.25 mL, $\lambda > 420$ nm, AM 1.5 G, 100 mW cm^{−2}, 25 °C).



The final charge-transfer complexes were formed by depositing TiO₂ nanoparticles onto the DHSP-functionalised IO-ITO. In

In the absence of O₂ (N₂ purged solution), small cathodic currents were maintained for the bare IO-ITO|DHSP|AN7-TiO₂ electrodes (Fig. S20, ESI[†]). Although **NiP** could be immobilised onto the electrodes (maximum loading of 29 ± 3 nmol per cm²; UV-vis spectroscopy), photo-driven H₂ evolution was not achieved

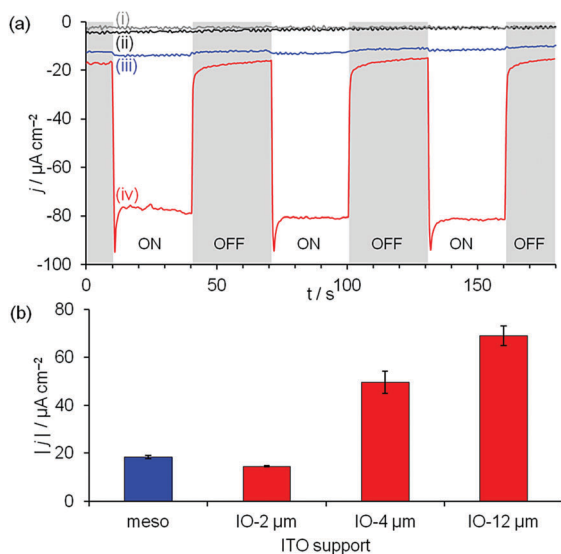


Fig. 3 (a) Chronoamperograms under chopped irradiation of (i) IO-ITO|DHSP, (ii) IO-ITO, (iii) IO-ITO|AN7-TiO₂ and (iv) IO-ITO|DHSP|AN7-TiO₂ electrodes. (b) Effect of ITO morphology and thickness on visible-light photocurrent of IO|DHSP|AN7-TiO₂ electrodes. Due to the hierarchical structure consisting of macro- and mesopores, the effective surface area of IO-2 μm ITO is lower than 1 μm mesoITO. Conditions: Na₂SO₄ (0.1 M), pH 4.5, 0.3 V vs. RHE, 100 mW cm⁻², $\lambda > 400$ nm, room temperature, under air.

with these electrodes. It is possible that the phosphonate groups in **NiP** may displace either some or all of the DHSP groups from the surface of TiO₂. **NiP** can also bind directly to ITO, by-passing the dye-TiO₂ construct. Therefore, although the layer-by-layer design successfully generates a directional, dye-sensitised electrode, further catalyst design is required in order to fully translate the DSP system to DSPEC.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated that catechol-TiO₂ complexes are effective photosensitisers for driving sacrificial H₂ evolution with an earth-abundant molecular catalyst, forming a fully noble metal-free Type II DSP system. Using a layer-by-layer method, we have transferred the dye-sensitised TiO₂ to an electrode to form a Type II photocathode. The excellent size match between the hierarchical IO-ITO support and the TiO₂ nanoparticles is critical for high dye-TiO₂ loading. The obtained photocurrents with a sacrificial electron acceptor are comparable to those obtained with Type I dyes, indicating that this is a promising means to control photocurrent direction and allow the use of n-type metal oxide supports (such as ITO) in DSPEC applications. This work represents an important first step in translating functional DSP systems to DSPEC; however, challenges in coupling these electrodes to a H₂ evolution catalyst will need to be overcome in order to apply them for sustainable solar fuels synthesis.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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