A Contemporary Assessment on Composite Titania onto Graphitic Carbon Nitride-Based Catalyst as Photocatalyst

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Abstract

Titanium dioxide (TiO₂) has drawn widespread interest by researchers as a precious semiconductor that is responsive towards photodegradation of various pollutants. This catalyst has its own limitations such as fast electron-hole recombination, wide band gap, and can only be utilised under ultraviolet (UV) region. In order to overcome these problems, the addition of a metal-free dopant is a common practice to prevent electron-hole recombination and enhance photodegradation under visible light. Among various types of metal-free catalysts, carbon nitride material has received much attention due to its numerous benefits such as good in terms of physical and chemical strength, as well as an attractive electronic band combined with a band gap (2.7 eV). This review summarised recent works in the development of titania incorporated with graphitic carbon nitride (g-C₃N₄) for enhanced photocatalytic activity.

Keywords: Photocatalyst; titanium dioxide; graphitic carbon nitride; heterojunction; visible light.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Recently, the industrial development has caused a major threat towards aquatic life and the environment. This is due to industrial wastewater production such as from pesticides, heavy metals, dyes, pharmaceuticals, and personal care products, which are not simply biodegradable [1, 2]. The utilisation of polluted water resources that are toxic and carcinogenic often leads to human health problem and aquatic life threat [2]. Therefore, many researchers have created various methods to solve this problem by using conventional treatment processes such as adsorption, chemical, and biological treatment. However, some contaminants in wastewater are intractable to degrade by applying these conventional processes. Nowadays, advanced oxidation process (AOP) is the most promising technique and has been explored by researchers to degrade various types of pollutants [3].

The photocatalytic reaction using a heterogeneous catalyst, which is one of the AOPs, has emerged as a destructive method that can mineralise most organic pollutants [4]. The use of semiconductor materials for that purpose has gained attention by many researchers for removal of organic pollutants from an aqueous solution. Various semiconductors such as TiO₂, ZnO, Fe₂O₃, CdS, and ZnS can act as photocatalysts for light-induced redox process. Among them, titania (TiO₂) is the first semiconductor that was initially explored by Fujishima and Honda during photoelectrolysis of water to H₂ in 1972 [3]. TiO₂ has been studied extensively as a photocatalyst due to its inexpensive, chemically and photo-stable, non-toxic, and reusable. However, the fast electron-hole recombination and wide band gap of TiO₂ (~3.2 eV) limit its photoactivity and it is only applicable for ultraviolet (UV) irradiation [3-6]. Hence, many efforts have been devoted to extend the optical response of the
photocatalyst by incorporation of TiO\textsubscript{2} with g-C\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4}. A short review on recent studies of TiO\textsubscript{2}/g-C\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} composite is covered in this paper.

2.0 TITANIUM DIOXIDE

Titanium dioxide (TiO\textsubscript{2}) is present in three phases, which are anatase, rutile, and brookite. Anatase and rutile are formed in a tetragonal structure whereas brookite appears in an orthorhombic structure as shown in Figure 1 [7]. These phases are similar based on the octahedral structure with different assembly patterns of each octahedral chain. Among them, anatase TiO\textsubscript{2} is the most widely used in photocatalytic reaction and favoured for modification with other materials due to higher density of localised state that attributed towards slower charge carrier recombination [8, 9].

![Figure 1. TiO\textsubscript{2} crystal structures [7].](image)

Photocatalysis reaction conducted in visible light irradiation has become the main focus nowadays since it requires low energy for catalyst activation [10]. Even though TiO\textsubscript{2} is a promising photocatalyst, it is unable to absorb visible light due to its wide band gap energy, which limits its application range [6, 8, 10]. Hence, efforts have been devoted to prolong the optical response of TiO\textsubscript{2} from UV to the visible light region and various strategies have been explored including doping with metals or non-metals, dye or semiconductor sensitisation, and surface modification [11-13]. Nevertheless, it is a big challenge to obtain viable visible light active materials that are easily prepared, efficient, stable, and inexpensive.

3.0 GRAPHITIC CARBON NITRIDE (g-C\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4})

Polymeric g-C\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} is depicted in Figure 2. Both triazine and heptazine have been discussed as possible tectonic units to constitute stable allotropes of g-C\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4}. Based on density functional theory (DFT), the structure based on repeating heptazine units is more stable than the triazine units.

![Figure 2. Representation of g-C\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} based on a) triazine and b) heptazine units [14].](image)

Particularly, g-C\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} has become one of the most intensively researched photocatalytic materials due to its capability to be used in visible light radiance [15, 16]. Besides, g-C\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} has high thermal stability, biocompatible, and resistant to oxidation and hydrolysis processes. The constricted band gap of g-C\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} (~2.7 eV) enables it to penetrate visible light up to 460 nm [17].
However, g-C₃N₄ still consists of high recombination probability of photogenerated electron-hole charge carriers that limits photocatalytic efficiency.

### 4.0 TiO₂/g-C₃N₄ COMPOSITE

In improving photocatalytic activity, one of the strategies is to use a composite of two or more semiconductor photocatalysts that can absorb different parts of solar spectrum [18]. Composite semiconductors can also improve electron-hole separation due to the band off-sets and charge-transfer across interfaces. The coupling of carbon nitrides such as g-C₃N₄ with other semiconductor materials has gained interest of many researchers, for example the production of g-C₃N₄/TiO₂ and or TiO₂/g-C₃N₄ composites [19-21]. These composites show great improvement in the efficiencies of photoactivity, thus promote its applications in energy production and environmental remediation. Recent studies on this photocatalyst are shown in Table 1. The composite catalysts showed high photodegradation performance towards various pollutants under visible light, which are attributed by the optimum band gap factor and better electron-hole pair separation.

| Photocatalyst | Synthesis Method | Pollutant | Band Gap (eV) | Performance | References |
|---------------|------------------|-----------|--------------|-------------|------------|
| TiO₂/C₃N₄ core-shell nanowire arrays | Hydrothermal | Bisphenol A | 2.90 | 95% | [21] |
| Core-shell structure g-C₃N₄@TiO₂ | Sol-gel approach in-situ coating re-assembled | Phenol | 1.70 | 30% | [22] |
| TiO₂/g-C₃N₄ hollow nanotube | Molten salts | Rhodamine B | 2.48 | 95% | [23] |
| TiO₂/g-C₃N₄ mesostructured nanosheets | Facile calcination-sonication assisted method | Phenol | 2.31 | 93% | [24] |
| Core-shell TiO₂@g-C₃N₄ hollow microspheres | Two-step self-assembly procedure with the assistance of ultrasonic dispersion | Rhodamine B | 2.75 | 93% | [25] |
| Porous g-C₃N₄/TiO₂ heterostructure | In-situ assembling of small needle-like TiO₂ on the surface of ultrathin g-C₃N₄ sheets | Acid Orange | 2.90 | 82% | [26] |
| Mesoporous TiO₂/g-C₃N₄ microspheres | Facile nanocoating | Phenol | 1.50 | 25% | [27] |
| Brookite/anatase TiO₂/g-C₃N₄ heterojunction | Facile nanocoating | Phenol | 1.80 | 20% | [28] |
| Carbon nitride/titania nanotubes | High-temperature calculation method | 2-chlorophenol | 2.60 | 90% | [29] |

### 5.0 MECHANISM OF TiO₂/g-C₃N₄ COMPOSITE

Most of the TiO₂/g-C₃N₄ composites show a similar proposed mechanism. When TiO₂/g-C₃N₄ is exposed to visible light, the photon could be absorbed directly by g-C₃N₄ to generate the electron-hole pairs in valence band (VB) and conduction band (CB), respectively [30]. The electron from g-C₃N₄ can easily migrate from its CB to the CB of TiO₂ since g-C₃N₄ has more negative CB level (-1.12 eV) than TiO₂ (-0.29 eV) [31]. Meanwhile, the holes from TiO₂ surface will migrate to the VB of g-C₃N₄. The electron on CB of TiO₂ can abduct O₂ to generate superoxide anion radical (•O₂⁻), which is one of the active species that can oxidise the pollutant. Meanwhile, the holes on g-C₃N₄ also play an important role in photodegradation process by forming hydroxyl radical (•OH) when reacted with water. The pollutant will be decomposed to form CO₂ and H₂O via photocatalysis with the reactive •O₂⁻ and •OH as illustrated in Figure 3.
6.0 CONCLUSION

From this review, it can be concluded that the coupling of these two semiconductors will increase the efficiency of electron transfer separation process. Consequently, the electron life is significantly prolonged and recombination process can be reduced, thus resulting in remarkable photocatalytic degradation of pollutants.

Acknowledgements

This research work was sponsored and supported by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia through Research University Grant No. 19H04.

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Figure 3. Mechanism for photo-degradation of TiO$_2$/g-C$_3$N$_4$ composite [30].
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