Selective photoelectrochemical oxidation of glycerol to high value-added dihydroxyacetone

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It is highly profitable to transform glycerol – the main by-product from biodiesel production to high value-added chemicals. In this work, we develop a photoelectrochemical system based on nanoporous BiVO4 for selective oxidation of glycerol to 1,3-dihydroxyacetone – one of the most valuable derivatives of glycerol. Under AM 1.5G front illumination (100 mW cm⁻²) in an acidic medium (pH = 2) without adscititious oxidant, the nanoporous BiVO4 photoanode achieves a glycerol oxidation photocurrent density of 3.7 mA cm⁻² at a potential of 1.2 V versus RHE with 51% 1,3-dihydroxyacetone selectivity, equivalent to a production rate of 200 mmol of 1,3-dihydroxyacetone per m² of illumination area in one hour.
Increasing global energy demand and environmental concern drive the development of fuels and building-block chemicals production from renewable feedstocks and green energy sources. Biotechnology manufactured from vegetable oils and animal fats has become increasingly attractive because of its environmental benefits, which is now produced at million tonnes of oil equivalent per year. Production of 100 pounds of biodiesel brings out 10 pounds of glycerol as a by-product. With increase in global biodiesel consumption, efficient utilization of glycerol becomes an urgent and highly profitable market. Glycerol has many oxidation derivatives, among which, 1,3-dihydroxyacetone (DHA) is most valuable. DHA is widely used in cosmetic, pharmaceutical, fine chemical, and food industries, which costs US $150 per kg while the price for crude and refined glycerol is only US $0.11 and US $0.66 per kg, respectively. Commercial DHA is mainly produced via a microbial fermentation process, which is complex, time-consuming, and subject to substrate inhibition. Besides, selective catalytic conversion of glycerol to DHA could be achieved by thermal oxidation or electrochemical oxidation on noble metal catalysts (e.g., Pt, Pd, Ag, and Au) with adscititious oxidants.

Results

Synthesis and structural characterization of BiVO₄ photoanode. BiVO₄ photoanode was prepared by reacting BiO nanoflake arrays that were electrochemically grown on fluorine-doped tin dioxide (FTO) glass with vanadyl acetylacetonate at elevated temperatures. Supplementary Fig. 1 shows the typical scanning electron microscopy (SEM) image of the as-prepared BiVO₄ photoanode, which displays porous, interconnected nanoflake arrays. High-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM) image shows that the main exposed facet of the BiVO₄ nanoflake is (112). The BiVO₄ nanooarrays are phase-pure with monoclinic scheelite structure (Supplementary Fig. 2). The bandgap of the BiVO₄ nanooarrays was measured to be ~2.5 eV (Supplementary Fig. 3).

Photoelectrochemical performance of BiVO₄ photoanode. Photoelectrochemical (PEC) performance of BiVO₄ photoanode was first evaluated in 0.5 M Na₂SO₄ electrolyte with pH adjusted from 2 to 12 under one sun illumination (AM 1.5 G, 100 mW cm⁻²). Figure 1 shows the current density-potential profiles under dark and illumination conditions. Without the addition of glycerol in the reaction medium, the photocurrent density resulting from water oxidation via front illumination is nearly identical, reaching ~1 mA cm⁻² at 1.23 V vs. RHE independent of pH. When glycerol was introduced, the photocurrent density dramatically increased, accompanying with a clear onset shift towards lower potentials, indicating easier oxidation of glycerol than water. The photocurrent density approaches 4 mA cm⁻² at 1.23 V vs. RHE at pH = 2. Increase in pH greatly decreases photocurrent and at the same time increases the onset potential, suggesting that proton could directly influence the catalytic oxidation reaction. Further increasing pH to more than 10 caused photocorrosion of BiVO₄ (Supplementary Fig. 4).

Figure 1d–f and Supplementary Fig. 5 show the chopped photocurrent profiles recorded at 1.0 and 0.6 V vs. RHE, respectively, in an H-type cell. In the absence of glycerol, each on–off cycle of photocurrent produces a transient spike, which is induced by the diffusion and accumulation of photogenerated holes at the surface of BiVO₄ due to the slow kinetics of water oxidation reaction (Supplementary Fig. 6 and Supplementary Note 1). The stable photocurrent density reaches 0.1 and 1.0 mA cm⁻² at 0.6 and 1.0 V vs. RHE, respectively at pH = 2. Adding 0.1 M of glycerol not only dramatically increases the photocurrent density to 1.8 and 3.4 mA cm⁻² at 0.6 and 1.0 V vs. RHE, but also at the same time greatly reduces the photocurrent spikes. This comparison suggests faster reaction kinetics of glycerol oxidation as compared to water oxidation. Additionally, increase in reaction pH greatly reduces the photocurrent density, which can be attributed to the better glycerol adsorption on BiVO₄ at lower pH (Supplementary Fig. 7 and Supplementary Note 2). Enhanced adsorption of glycerol on BiVO₄ at lower pH shall result in easier transfer of photogenerated holes for further oxidation reactions, which therefore diminishes the chopped photocurrent spikes.

To gain information on the charge and mass transfer processes, electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) studies were performed under different applied biases with light illumination. An equivalent circuit based on charge carrier trapping mechanism was employed to analyze the EIS data (Fig. 2) and the equivalent circuit includes a space-charge capacitance, a series resistance, and a surface state capacitance. For the EIS spectra collected without glycerol, as shown in the Bode (Fig. 2a) and Nyquist plots (Supplementary Fig. 8a), the frequency peak decreases and shifts to higher frequency with increasing bias, leading to decreased faradic resistance and improved surface reaction rate. After adding glycerol, the frequency peak shifts to higher frequency, but the impedance semicircle becomes larger with increasing bias (Fig. 2b and Supplementary Fig. 8b). The increased resistance in PEC glycerol oxidation with increasing bias could be attributed to the poor desorption of the oxidation products. We further calculated the total resistance, total via the series resistance, and the resistance that represents the trapping of holes in the surface states, and the charge and mass transfer resistance from surface states to solution. For the EIS spectra collected without glycerol, as shown in the Bode (Fig. 2a) and Nyquist plots (Supplementary Fig. 8a), the frequency peak decreases and shifts to higher frequency with increasing bias, leading to decreased faradic resistance and improved surface reaction rate. After adding glycerol, the frequency peak shifts to higher frequency, but the impedance semicircle becomes larger with increasing bias (Fig. 2b and Supplementary Fig. 8b). The increased resistance in PEC glycerol oxidation with increasing bias could be attributed to the poor desorption of the oxidation products. We further calculated the total resistance, total via the series resistance, and the resistance that represents the trapping of holes in the surface states, and the charge and mass transfer resistance from surface states to solution.
of glycerol significantly increases the IPCE across the entire light absorption region of BiVO₄, reaching 80% at 400 nm and 1.23 V vs. RHE, which is consistent with the change in photocurrent density. Furthermore, increase in reaction pH decreases IPCE (Fig. 3d) as a result of impaired binding of glycerol on BiVO₄ as discussed previously.

Selective photoelectrochemical oxidation of glycerol. The photoelectrochemical stability of the porous BiVO₄ nanoarray photoanode was assessed by measuring photocurrent as a function of reaction time at various applied potentials. As shown in Supplementary Fig. 9, the BiVO₄ photoanode exhibits excellent long-time stability against photocorrosion at pH = 2 with stable photocurrent densities. Following, the photooxidation of glycerol was carried out at 0.8–1.2 V vs. RHE to analyze the oxidation products and faradaic efficiency (Supplementary Fig. 10). The products consist of formic acid, glyceric acid, DHA, and trace amount of glycolic acid. Figure 4a and Supplementary Fig. 11 show the production rate and selectivity of oxidation products at various pH. With increase in applied potential, the production rate of the oxidation products also increases. At pH = 2, DHA becomes the preferred oxidization product with selectivity and overall faradaic efficiency approaching ~50% in the liquid products and ~30%, respectively, independent of applied potential. At a potential of 1.2 V vs. RHE, the production rate of DHA reaches as high as about 200 mmol per m² of illumination area in 1 h, and the total carbon balance is about 91.3%, in which the glycerol-to-DHA conversion selectivity is 63.6% (Supplementary Table 1). CO₂ and CO could also be detected from further oxidation of liquid products together with H₂O₂ and O₂ from water oxidation. Total charge-to-chemical balance is about 90.21%. Besides DHA, glyceric acid was also produced as a by-product, resulting in the overall selectivity of

Fig. 1 Photoelectrochemical performances. a–c Current density-potential profiles of BiVO₄ photoanode measured in 0.5 M Na₂SO₄ at various pH in an H-type cell under dark and AM 1.5 G, 100 mW cm⁻² illumination. d–f Chopped photocurrent density-time profiles of BiVO₄ photoanode at 1.0 V vs. RHE in 0.5 M Na₂SO₄ at various pH with and without glycerol. Source data are provided as a Source Data file.
**Fig. 2** Charge and mass transfer processes. **a, b** The Bode plots measured at different potentials under AM 1.5 G, 100 mW cm\(^{-2}\) illumination without and with the presence of glycerol. **c** Equivalent circuit used to conceptualize the BiVO\(_4\) photoanode in PEC reactions. **d** \(R_{\text{total}}\) calculated from \(dV/dj\) of current density-potential profiles and from EIS data with and without glycerol under illumination.

**Fig. 3** Charge carrier dynamics. **a, b** Transient OCVD profiles and lifetimes of photogenerated charge carriers of porous BiVO\(_4\) nanoarray photoanode in 0.5 M Na\(_2\)SO\(_4\) at various pH. **c, d** Incident photon-to-current conversion efficiency spectra of porous BiVO\(_4\) nanoarray photoanode.
high value-added glycerol derivatives (DHA + glyceric acid) approaching ~60%. Increase in pH decreases not only the photocurrent, but also the selectivity towards high value-added oxidation products (Fig. 4c–e). At pH = 12, glycerol was almost completely oxidized to formic acid with a faradaic efficiency close to 99% (Supplementary Fig. 12). Both photocurrent and production rate of DHA increase notably with increase of glycerol concentration (Supplementary Fig. 13). Without light illumination, glycerol could only be oxidized to DHA by BiVO₄ at very low efficiency after applying additional bias (Fig. 4b and Supplementary Fig. 14). Porous BiVO₄ nanoarray photoanode could produce DHA with higher rate and selectivity than BiVO₄ film photoanode as porous nanoarrays possess larger surface area and more abundant active sites (Supplementary Fig. 15 and Supplementary Note 4). In addition, porous BiVO₄ nanoarrays also showed advantages in selective glycerol oxidation as compared to other semiconductor nanomaterials (Supplementary Fig. 16 and Supplementary Note 5).

**Reaction mechanism.** To probe the reaction mechanism, we conducted isotope-labeling experiments and electron spin resonance (ESR) measurements. Supplementary Fig. 17 displays the liquid chromatography mass spectrometry (LC-MS) results of photoelectrochemical glycerol oxidation in oxygen isotope labeled electrolyte with H₂O containing 10% H₂¹⁸O. The results show that ¹⁸O can be detected in the target product DHA in the form of C₃H₆O₂¹⁸ONa (Supplementary Table 2 and Supplementary Note 6), indicating that the isotope oxygen in DHA comes from water in the electrolyte. It can thus be speculated that oxidation of β-hydroxy to carbonyl group during photoelectrochemical glycerol oxidation to DHA would be accomplished by an addition...
and substitution reaction. The adsorbed glycerol on BiVO_4 photoanode would be oxidized into radicals by photogenerated holes (Supplementary Tables 3, 4 and Supplementary Notes 7, 8)\textsuperscript{33–35}. Room temperature ESR spectra indicate that after adding glycerol in this system, instead of hydroxyl radicals, glycerol radicals could be detected (Supplementary Fig. 18 and Supplementary Note 9). Driven by the energetic holes, the glycerol radicals could react with water from electrolyte to form unstable gem-diol intermediates, followed by dehydration to produce the carbonyl group, during which the isotope oxygen might be left in the products\textsuperscript{35,36}. As a conclusion, we infer that the oxidation of glycerol to DHA could occur via the following steps as shown in Supplementary Fig. 19 and Supplementary Note 10, including adsorption of glycerol on BiVO_4 photoanode, oxidation of adsorbed glycerol to radicals by photogenerated holes, reaction with water, and dehydration. Glyceric acid and formic acid could also be formed via this similar pathway, resulted from the further oxidation of glyceraldehyde.

As shown in Supplementary Fig. 7, glycerol could be better adsorbed on BiVO_4 at lower pH, which shall result in an easier charge transfer and enhanced catalysis to photoelectrochemically convert glycerol into glycerol derivatives when decreasing reaction pH. Besides, acidic environment can also suppress the reaction towards acid products, which might further reduce the consumption of DHA as well as suppress the production of formic acid\textsuperscript{37}. The adsorption of glycerol on BiVO_4 and the reaction pathways of the glycerol oxidation were verified by DFT calculations on the (112) facets of BiVO_4—the main exposed crystal facets of the BiVO_4 photoanode studied in this work (Supplementary Fig. 1c). As shown in the DFT results, the terminal and middle hydroxyl groups of glycerol adsorb spontaneously on the bismuth site of BiVO_4 with strong electrostatic attraction between Bi\textsuperscript{3+} and oxygen of hydroxyls (Fig. 5; Supplementary Fig. 20, and Supplementary Note 11). Subsequently, the adsorbed glycerol is oxidized by the photogenerated holes in BiVO_4 to form radicals (Supplementary Figs. 21 and 22). The tertiary radical on the middle carbon is 0.18 eV more stable than the terminal radical, which explains the good selectivity towards DHA production during photoelectrochemical oxidation of glycerol on BiVO_4. The photo-assisted reaction is critical for the production of DHA as only formic acid could be detected in the final liquid product under dark condition. BiVO_4 provides a suitable bandgap of ∼2.5 eV that endows photogenerated holes with sufficient energy to overcome the energy requirement for the formation of radicals, which is ∼1.5 eV. Thereafter, the radicals react with water, followed by dehydration to eventually form DHA.

Finally, incident photon-to-DHA quantum efficiency (QE-DHA) was evaluated by multiplying IPCE with faradaic efficiency of DHA as shown in Fig. 4f. In the reaction medium with pH = 2, a 25% photon-to-DHA conversion efficiency can be achieved at a wavelength of 400 nm.

**Discussion**

In summary, we have demonstrated an efficient and stable photoelectrochemical system based on porous BiVO_4 nanoarrays for selective oxidation of glycerol to high value-added DHA. In an H-type cell at pH = 2, the porous BiVO_4 nanoarray photoanode is able to produce 56 mmol·g\textsubscript{catalyst}−1·h\textsuperscript{−1} of DHA at a potential of 1.2 V vs. RHE under AM 1.5 illumination (100 mW cm\textsuperscript{−2}). Based on isotope labeling and DFT calculations, we deduced a possible reaction mechanism of selective photoelectrochemical oxidation of glycerol to DHA on BiVO_4. This study not only provides an evidence of the reaction process of selective photoelectrochemical oxidation of glycerol to DHA, but also presents a broad research perspective for the utilization of solar light to produce high value-added chemicals from renewable feedstocks.

**Methods**

**Synthesis of BiVO_4 photoanode.** All chemicals were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich and used without further purification. BiVO_4 photoanode was prepared by reacting BiOI nanoflake arrays with vanadyl acetylacetonate\textsuperscript{38}. Firstly, BiOI nanoflake arrays were grown on conductive fluorine-doped SnO_2 (FTO, 14 Ω cm, 1 × 1 cm\textsuperscript{2}) by a three-electrode cathodic electrodeposition at −0.1 V vs. Ag/AgCl for 5 min in a mixed solution of 50 mL of 0.04 M Bi(NO_3)_3 and 0.4 M KI aqueous solution with pH adjusted to 1.7 by adding NaOH and 20 mL of 0.23 M benzoquinone ethanol solution. Subsequently, 0.1 mL of vanadyl acetylacetonate dime-thyl sulfoxide solution (0.4 M) was added onto the BiOI nanoflake arrays, followed by heating to 723 K in ambient environment at a ramp rate of 2 K min\textsuperscript{−1}. After 2 h, the resultant product on FTO was cooled to room temperature and washed by NaOH solution.

**Sample characterizations.** SEM images were taken on a JEOL JSM-6700F field emission scanning electron microscope operated at 5 kV. HRTEM image was taken on a JEOL JEM-2100F field-emission transmission electron microscope operated at 200 kV. X-ray powder diffraction (XRD) patterns were recorded using a Philips X’Pert Pro Super X-ray diffractometer with Cu Ka radiation (λ = 1.54178 Å). UV–vis diffuse reflectance spectrum was recorded in the spectral region of 300–600 nm on a Shimadzu SolidSpec-3700 spectrophotometer. The bandgap of BiVO_4 was determined based on the Tauc plot. BiVO_4 photocatalysts used in this work were scraped from the BiVO_4 nanoarray-FTO glass.

Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) measurements were carried out in the attenuated total reflection (ATR) configuration using a Nicolet iN10 MX spectrometer equipped with a Ge ATR crystal and a DTGS KBr detector. All spectra were measured with a resolution of 1 cm\textsuperscript{−1} and presented in absorbance A = −log(R/R₀), where R and R₀ are the reflectance spectra of BiVO_4 samples treated in electrolyte of different pH with and without glycerol. After soaked in the electrolyte with and without glycerol at different pH for 10 min, the BiVO_4 samples were washed by the electrolyte without glycerol. After dried with N\textsubscript{2} flow, the BiVO_4 samples were pressed into intimate optical contact with the Ge crystal for ATR-FTIR measurements.
Room-temperature ESR spectra of BiVO₄ photocatalysts were collected on a JEOL JES-FA200 ESR spectrometer (300 K, 9.063 GHz, X-band). Microweave power employed was 1 mW and sweep width was set from 319.3 to 329.3 mT. Modulation frequency and modulation amplitude were 100 kHz and 0.35 mT, respectively. 5,5-Dimethyl-1-pyrroline N-oxide (DMPO) was used as the spin-trapping agent. 0.5 mg BiVO₄ photocatalysts were dispersed in 2 mL 0.5 M Na₂SO₄ electrolyte (pH = 2) with or without 0.1 M glycerol, then 60 μL DMPO aqueous solution (0.2 M) was added into the solution for ESR measurement.

**Photoelectrochemical characterization.** Photoelectrochemical measurements were conducted on an electrochemical workstation (CHI 760E) in a sealed H-type glass cell. Nafion 212 proton exchange membrane was used to separate the anode from the cathode chamber. The simulated solar illumination was obtained from a 300 W Xenon lamp with an AM 1.5G filter (100 mW cm⁻²). The porous BiVO₄ nanorays grown on FTO were front illuminated and used as the working electrode, while Ag/AgCl electrode and Pt sheet were used as the reference and counter electrode, respectively. The electrolyte contains 0.5 M Na₂SO₄ aqueous solution with pH adjusted to 2, 5, 7, 10, and 12 using 1 M NaOH solution or 0.5 M H₂SO₄ solution. Photochemical was recorded from 0.2 to 1.4 V vs. RHE at a scan rate of 0.02 V/s for 0.1 M glycerol. After reaction, 1 mL of solution was taken out from the cell and detected by HPLC.

**Selectivity of DHA was calculated based on:**

\[
\text{Selectivity(DHA)} = \frac{n_{\text{DHA}}}{n_{\text{DHA}} + n_{\text{FA}} + n_{\text{LA}}} \times 100\%
\]

where \(n_{\text{DHA}}\), \(n_{\text{FA}}\), and \(n_{\text{LA}}\) are the product concentration of DHA, glyceric acid, formic acid, glycic acid, and lactic acid, respectively. \(c\) is the product concentration detected by HPLC.

**Production rate of DHA was calculated according to:**

\[
\text{Production rate(DHA)} = \frac{\text{DHA} \times V}{t}
\]

\[
\text{Production rate per unit area(DHA)} = \frac{\text{DHA} \times V}{t \times A}
\]

Faradaic efficiency was calculated by:

\[
\text{Faradaic efficiency(DHA)} = \frac{\text{Number of holes to oxidize glycerol to DHA}}{\text{Number of unoccupied photonic energy states}} \times 100\%
\]

\[
= \frac{n_{\text{DHA}} \times Q_{/n}}{Q_{/n}} \times 100\%
\]

where \(n_{\text{DHA}}\) is the number of holes required to oxidize one glycerol molecule to DHA, \(N\) is Avogadro’s constant, \(Q\) is the quantity of electric charge, and \(n\) is the elementary charge.

**External quantum efficiency of DHA was calculated by:**

\[
\text{QE(DHA)} = \frac{\text{Number of photons to DHA}}{\text{Number of incident photons}} \times 100\%
\]

\[
= \text{IPCE} \times \text{Faradaic efficiency(DHA)} \times 100\%
\]

Carbon balance was calculated based on:

\[
\text{Carbon balance} = \frac{n_{\text{FA}} + n_{\text{DHA}} + n_{\text{CO}} + n_{\text{H₂O}}}{n_{\text{glycerol}}} \times 100\%
\]

The LC-MS measurements were carried out on a LTQ Orbitrap XL Hybrid Ion Trap-Orbitrap Mass Spectrometer with IonMax ESI (electrospray ionization) Source. 0.5 M of Na₂SO₄ solution containing 10% H₂O was used as the electrolyte with pH adjusted to 2 by 0.5 M of H₂SO₄. After 2 h of PEC reaction, the products with electrolyte were collected. Before LC-MS measurements, the products were extracted by SPE (Solid Phase Extraction Cartridges) column to remove inorganic salts. Hypersil GOLD column (3 μm particle size) and ESI Na⁺ source were used in the LC-MS measurements.

**Computational details.** All DFT calculations were performed with VASP 5.3.5, spin-polarized DFT with Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) flavor of generalized gradient approximation were employed. Iterative solutions of the Kohn–Sham equations were expanded in plane-wave basis sets defined by a kinetic energy cutoff of 400 eV. The convergences of energy and force were set as 10⁻⁶ eV and 0.02 eV Å⁻¹, respectively. Single gamma point sampling was used for both Brillouin Zone integration. The BiVO₄(112) surface was modeled by a 2x2x2 supercell with three VO₄ layers as shown in Supplementary Fig 20a. The calculated interlayer distance is 3.1 Å, which is in good agreement with HRTEM results. A vacuum region of 15 Å was set between the periodically repeated slabs to avoid artificial interactions. The charge density differences were evaluated using the formula \(\Delta \rho = \rho_{\text{adsorbate}} - \rho_{\text{slab}} - \rho_{\text{ads}}\). Where \(\rho_{\text{adsorbate}}\), \(\rho_{\text{slab}}\), and \(\rho_{\text{ads}}\) are the electron densities of BiVO₄(112) slab, adsorbate, and the adsorption configuration, respectively.

**Data availability**

All data supporting the findings in the article as well as the Supplementary Information files are available from the corresponding authors on reasonable request. The source data underlying Fig. 1 and Supplementary Figs. 5, 10a-c, and 18 are provided as a Source Data file.

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Author contributions
D.L. and B.L. conceived the project and designed the experiments. B.L. supervised the project. D.L. carried out experiments and data analysis. J.-C.L., H.X., and J.L. performed numerical calculation. W.C., J.M., and H.B.Y. contributed to catalyst characterization. Y. X. and Y.H. contributed to the manuscript preparation. D.L. and B.L. together wrote the manuscript. All authors commented on the final manuscript.

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