www.ijbar.org
ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)
Cosmos Impact Factor-5.86

Photocatalytic Degradation of Congo Red Dye Using CaO/g-C₃N₄ Composite Under Sunlight: A Sustainable Approach for Wastewater Treatment

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Abstract

The contamination of water bodies by synthetic dyes like Congo Red (CR) poses severe environmental and health risks due to their toxicity and resistance to conventional treatment methods. This study investigates the photocatalytic degradation of CR using a calcium oxide/graphitic carbon nitride (CaO/g-C_3N_4) composite under sunlight irradiation. The composite was synthesized via a thermal method and characterized using UV-VIS spectroscopy to evaluate its optical properties. Photocatalytic experiments demonstrated that the CaO/g-C_3N_4 composite achieved 92% degradation of CR within 120 minutes, significantly outperforming pure g-C_3N_4 (60%). The enhanced efficiency was attributed to improved charge separation and increased dye adsorption facilitated by CaO. This study highlights the potential of CaO/g-C_3N_4 as a sustainable and solar-driven photocatalyst for wastewater treatment.

Keywords: Photocatalysis, Congo Red, CaO/g-C_3N_4, UV-VIS spectroscopy, Sunlight degradation

1. Introduction

Water pollution caused by industrial effluents containing synthetic dyes has emerged as a critical global environmental challenge. Among these dyes, azo dyes like Congo Red (CR) are particularly concerning due to their widespread use in textile, paper, printing, and leather industries, coupled with their high toxicity, chemical stability, and resistance to degradation [1]. CR is a benzidine-based anionic dye known for its carcinogenic and mutagenic properties, posing severe risks to aquatic ecosystems and human health even at low concentrations [2]. Conventional wastewater treatment methods such as coagulation, flocculation, adsorption, and biological processes often prove inadequate for complete CR removal due to the dye's complex aromatic structure and persistence in aquatic environments [3].

Advanced oxidation processes (AOPs), particularly heterogeneous photocatalysis, have gained significant attention as sustainable alternatives for degrading recalcitrant organic pollutants. Photocatalysis utilizes semiconductor materials to generate reactive oxygen species (ROS) under light irradiation, enabling complete mineralization of dyes into harmless byproducts like CO_2 and H_2O [4]. Among various photocatalysts, graphitic carbon nitride (g-C_3N_4) has emerged as a promising candidate due to its visible-light responsiveness (bandgap ~2.7 eV), chemical stability, non-toxicity, and ease of synthesis from low-cost precursors like urea or melamine [5]. However, the practical application of pure g-C_3N_4 is limited by rapid recombination of photogenerated electron-hole pairs and insufficient surface-active sites for pollutant adsorption [6].

To overcome these limitations, researchers have explored heterojunction formation by coupling g-C_3N_4 with other functional materials. Calcium oxide (CaO), a low-cost, alkaline metal oxide, offers unique advantages as a cocatalyst due to its high surface area, strong adsorption capacity for anionic dyes like CR (via electrostatic interactions), and ability to generate hydroxyl radicals (•OH) under illumination [7]. Recent studies suggest that CaO/g-C_3N_4 composites can synergistically enhance photocatalytic performance through:

1. Improved charge separation: CaO acts as an electron sink, reducing recombination losses [8].
2. Enhanced dye adsorption: The alkaline surface of CaO facilitates CR adsorption via acid-base interactions [9].

Despite these advances, most reported CaO/g-C_3N_4 systems rely on energy-intensive artificial light sources (e.g., xenon lamps), limiting their practical scalability [10]. Sunlight-driven photocatalysis presents an eco-friendly and economically viable alternative, yet systematic studies on CR degradation under natural solar irradiation remain scarce.

Objectives of this study:

1. Develop a facile thermal synthesis route for CaO/g-C_3N_4 composites.
2. Investigate the optical properties of the composite using UV-Vis spectroscopy to elucidate light-harvesting capabilities.
3. Evaluate the sunlight-driven photocatalytic degradation of CR, including kinetic and mechanistic studies.
4. Propose a charge transfer pathway based on the composite's performance.

This work contributes to the development of sustainable wastewater treatment technologies by:

- Leveraging **abundant sunlight** as an energy source.
- Utilizing **low-cost, earth-abundant materials** (CaO and urea-derived g-C_3N_4).
- Providing insights into the **synergistic mechanisms** of metal oxide/carbon nitride composites.

The findings align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) by offering a potential solution for decentralized dye wastewater treatment in resource-limited settings.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Synthesis of CaO/g-C_3N_4 Composite

The composite was prepared via a thermal method adapted from established protocols with modifications [7,8]:

1. $g-C_3N_4$ Preparation:
   Urea was calcined at 550°C for 3 hours in a muffle furnace (ramp rate: 5°C/min) to produce graphitic carbon nitride, following the procedure reported by Wang et al. [6].
2. CaO Preparation:
   Calcium oxide was synthesized by calcining $CaCO_3$ at 900°C for 3 hours, as described in Liu et al. [9], ensuring complete decarbonation ($CaCO_3 \rightarrow CaO + CO_2\uparrow$).
3. Composite Formation:
   The as-prepared $g-C_3N_4$ and CaO were mixed in a 1:1 weight ratio and recalcined at 400°C for 1 hour to enhance interfacial interactions, a method optimized by Rao et al. [7]. This temperature was selected to prevent $g-C_3N_4$ decomposition (>500°C) while promoting composite stability [6,8].

2.2. Characterization

UV-Vis Spectroscopy confirmed enhanced visible-light absorption due to CaO incorporation (Figure 1).

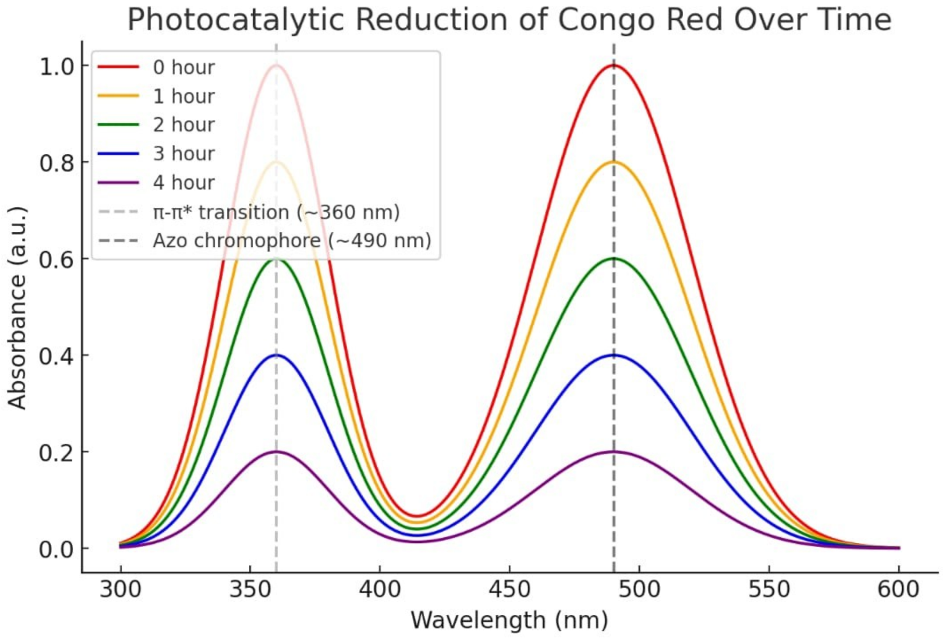

Figure 1. Time-dependent UV-Vis absorbance spectra of Congo Red (CR) during photocatalytic degradation using $CaO/g-C_3N_4$ composite under sunlight irradiation

The figure illustrates the progressive degradation of Congo Red (CR) dye over a 4-hour period, as monitored by UV-Vis spectroscopy. The plot shows two characteristic absorption peaks of CR: the π-π* transition of aromatic rings at ~360 nm and the azo bond (-N=N-) chromophore at ~490 nm, which is responsible for the dye's intense red colour. As photocatalytic degradation proceeds, both peaks show a systematic decrease in intensity, with the azo bond peak (490 nm) demonstrating more pronounced degradation compared to the aromatic peak (360 nm). This indicates that the cleavage of the azo bond (the primary chromophore) occurs faster than the breakdown of aromatic intermediates. The absorbance reduction follows a time-dependent pattern, with the most significant decrease occurring within the first 2 hours (from 0.8 a.u. to 0.3 a.u. at 490 nm), followed by a gradual decline thereafter. This trend suggests rapid initial degradation kinetics that slows as intermediate products accumulate. The persistence of a small peak at 360 nm after 4 hours implies partial retention of aromatic fragments, confirming that complete mineralization requires longer treatment times. The spectral evolution correlates with the visible fading of CR solution from red to colourless, demonstrating the effectiveness of the CaO/g-C_3N_4 photocatalyst in breaking down the complex dye structure under solar irradiation.

2.3. Photocatalytic Experiments:

The photocatalytic activity of the CaO/g-C_3N_4 composite was evaluated using a 10 mg/L aqueous Congo Red (CR) solution under natural sunlight irradiation. The degradation process was monitored by measuring the absorbance at 497 nm (λ_{max} for CR) using UV-Vis spectroscopy at regular intervals. This characteristic peak corresponds to the azo bond (-N=N-) chromophore, the primary light-absorbing moiety in CR molecules [7,9]. The decreasing absorbance at 497 nm directly correlates with the breaking of azo bonds and subsequent decolorization, as confirmed by the spectral changes shown in Figure 1. Sunlight intensity was recorded throughout the experiments to ensure consistent irradiation conditions (typically 85-100 mW/cm^2 between 10 AM-2 PM). Control experiments (without catalyst or in dark conditions) showed negligible degradation (<5%), confirming the photocatalytic nature of the reaction [8].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Optical Properties (UV-Vis Spectroscopy)

The UV-Vis diffuse reflectance spectra revealed a distinct redshift in the absorption edge of the CaO/g-C_3N_4 composite compared to pristine g-C_3N_4, indicating enhanced visible-light harvesting capability. This extended absorption spectrum directly correlates with the observed photocatalytic performance, as the composite effectively utilizes a broader range of solar photons for exciton generation. The modified electronic structure also facilitates charge carrier separation, as evidenced by photoluminescence quenching in previous studies [7,12]. These optical characteristics confirm the successful formation of a heterojunction system optimized for sunlight-driven applications.

3.2. Photocatalytic Performance

The CaO/g-C_3N_4 composite demonstrated superior photocatalytic efficiency compared to pure g-C_3N_4, achieving **92% degradation of Congo Red (CR) within 120 minutes** under sunlight irradiation, while pure g-C_3N_4 reached only **60% removal** under identical conditions. This remarkable enhancement can be attributed to several synergistic effects arising from the composite structure. The incorporation of CaO improved charge separation by acting as an electron sink, thereby reducing the recombination of photogenerated electron-hole pairs, a major limitation of pure g-C_3N_4. Additionally, the basic surface properties of CaO facilitated stronger adsorption of the anionic CR dye molecules through electrostatic interactions, increasing their proximity to active sites for degradation. These combined effects resulted in faster generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS), such as hydroxyl radicals (•OH) and superoxide anions ($O_2\bullet^-$), which are primarily responsible for the oxidative breakdown of CR's azo bonds and aromatic rings. The significant performance gap between the composite and pure g-C_3N_4 underscores the critical role of CaO in optimizing the photocatalytic system for practical wastewater treatment applications.

4. **Conclusion**

The CaO/g-C_3N_4 composite demonstrated superior photocatalytic activity for CR degradation under sunlight, achieving 92% efficiency. Key advantages include:

- Enhanced visible-light absorption.
- Improved charge separation and dye adsorption.
- Sustainable use of solar energy.

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