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Interfacial Defect Dynamics and Reactive Oxygen Pathways in Nanostructured Metal Oxide Composites for Integrated Environmental Detoxification

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Abstract

Nanostructured metal oxide composites have gained significant importance in environmental applications due to their ability to degrade pollutants and inhibit microbial growth. However, the role of interfacial defects and reactive oxygen species generation in enhancing their performance is still not fully understood. In the present study, the relationship between defect formation, interfacial charge transfer, and reactive oxygen pathways was examined in engineered metal oxide nanocomposites. The prepared materials showed improved photocatalytic degradation of organic contaminants under visible light and noticeable antibacterial activity against selected bacterial strains. Characterization studies indicated the presence of oxygen vacancies and modified surface states, which contributed to better charge separation. Reactive oxygen scavenging experiments suggested that hydroxyl and superoxide radicals played a major role in detoxification processes. The results indicate that careful control of interfacial defects can improve multifunctional environmental remediation performance.

Keywords: Nanostructured Metal Oxide Composites, Interfacial Defect Engineering, Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS), Photocatalytic and Antibacterial Activity

1. Introduction

Water contamination has become one of the most critical environmental concerns in recent decades, largely driven by industrial expansion, pharmaceutical overuse, and the uncontrolled discharge of chemical effluents. The continuous introduction of synthetic industrial dyes, persistent pharmaceutical residues, and multidrug-resistant microbial pathogens into aquatic ecosystems has created a complex pollution scenario that challenges conventional treatment technologies. Many of these pollutants are chemically stable, resistant to biodegradation, and capable of long-term persistence, which allows them to bioaccumulate in aquatic organisms and ultimately enter the human food chain. Conventional wastewater treatment plants often struggle to achieve complete mineralization of such refractory compounds, leading either to partial degradation or the formation of secondary by-products (Kumar et al., 2024). Furthermore, traditional disinfection processes are becoming less effective against resistant microbial strains, necessitating advanced multifunctional remediation strategies (Patel et al., 2023).

In this context, nanostructured metal oxides (NMOs) such as ZnO, TiO_2, Fe_2O_3, and CuO have emerged as promising candidates for advanced oxidation processes due to their chemical stability, surface tunability, and semiconducting properties. These materials can generate reactive oxygen species (ROS) under light irradiation through photoinduced electron–hole pair formation. Upon absorption of photons with energy equal to or greater than their band gap, electrons are excited from the valence band to the conduction band, leaving behind positively charged holes. These photogenerated carriers participate in redox reactions at the material surface, producing reactive species such as hydroxyl radicals (•OH) and superoxide radicals (O_2^-•), which are capable of oxidizing complex organic pollutants and inducing oxidative stress in microbial cells (Zhu & Wang, 2023). The oxidative degradation mechanism often results in the breakdown of high-molecular-weight contaminants into smaller intermediates and eventually into harmless end products such as CO_2 and H_2O. Similarly, ROS-mediated membrane damage and intracellular oxidative disruption contribute to antibacterial effects. Despite their potential, pristine metal oxides frequently exhibit limited photocatalytic efficiency due to the rapid recombination of photogenerated electron–hole pairs. When

recombination occurs before surface redox reactions can take place, the absorbed light energy is dissipated as heat, significantly reducing catalytic performance (Zhu & Wang, 2023). Additionally, many metal oxides predominantly absorb ultraviolet light, which represents only a small fraction of the solar spectrum. Limited visible-light absorption and insufficient surface-active sites further restrict their practical application. These intrinsic electronic limitations have prompted researchers to explore structural modification strategies aimed at improving charge separation and light utilization efficiency.

One of the most effective approaches involves composite fabrication through the formation of heterojunction interfaces between two semiconducting metal oxides. When materials with appropriate band alignment are combined, an internal electric field is established at the interface, promoting directional migration of electrons and holes. This interfacial charge separation reduces recombination probability and enhances the lifetime of reactive carriers. Simultaneously, defect engineering—particularly the intentional introduction of oxygen vacancies (V_O)—has been shown to significantly alter the electronic structure of metal oxides. Oxygen vacancies create localized energy states within the band gap, enhance visible-light absorption, and act as trapping sites that prolong carrier lifetimes (Singh & Chen, 2024). Moreover, these defects influence surface adsorption properties, facilitating oxygen activation and thereby increasing the generation of reactive oxygen species. Although many studies have reported enhanced photocatalytic and antibacterial performance in defect-engineered composite systems, a detailed mechanistic understanding of how interfacial defect dynamics influence specific ROS pathways remains insufficient. Much of the current literature adopts a performance-oriented approach, emphasizing degradation percentages without thoroughly investigating the relationship between defect concentration, interfacial electric field strength, and reactive oxygen formation (Patel et al., 2023). The mechanistic connection between nano-interface manipulation and oxidative stress pathways still requires deeper exploration. Understanding how defects regulate electron mobility, oxygen adsorption, and radical generation is essential for rational material design rather than relying solely on empirical optimization.

Therefore, the present study seeks to systematically investigate the influence of interfacial defect dynamics on photocatalytic degradation and antibacterial performance in nanostructured metal oxide composites. By correlating structural defect characteristics with charge transfer behavior and reactive oxygen generation pathways, this work aims to provide mechanistic clarity regarding dual-function environmental detoxification. The ultimate goal is to move beyond reporting enhanced activity and instead establish a foundational understanding of how defect engineering and heterointerface design can be strategically utilized to develop efficient, multifunctional remediation systems.

The literature regarding nanostructured metal oxides (NMOs) has recently shifted from the mere synthesis of high-surface-area materials to the precise manipulation of their electronic landscapes. In the context of environmental detoxification, the efficiency of a photocatalyst is no longer judged solely by its bandgap, but by its "defect architecture." As noted by **Zhu et al. (2023)**, the primary hurdle in traditional semiconductors like TiO_2 or ZnO is the ultrafast recombination of charge carriers, which often occurs before the photogenerated electrons can participate in surface redox reactions. To combat this, researchers have turned to composite engineering, creating heterojunctions that facilitate a "spatial decoupling" of electrons and holes. This interfacial drift is driven by the built-in potential difference at the contact point of two dissimilar oxides, effectively turning the interface into a highway for charge transport (**Kumar & Singh, 2024**).

A critical, yet often misunderstood, component of these interfaces is the role of "intrinsic defects," specifically oxygen vacancies (V_O). These vacancies are not merely structural flaws; they function as shallow traps that capture electrons, preventing them from falling back

into the valence band. **Patel and Chen (2023)** demonstrated that by tuning the density of these vacancies at the interface of ZnO/SnO_2 composites, one could significantly enhance the generation of superoxide radicals ($.O_2^-$). These defects create mid-gap states that allow for sub-bandgap excitation, effectively extending the material's sensitivity into the visible light spectrum. This is particularly vital for real-world environmental remediation, where solar energy must be harvested efficiently to degrade persistent organic pollutants like industrial dyes and pharmaceutical waste (**Li et al., 2024**).

The transition from chemical degradation to biological detoxification (antibacterial activity) involves complex Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS) pathways. Recent studies have highlighted that the "quality" of ROS- whether the system produces more hydroxyl radicals (.OH) or singlet oxygen ($^1O_2$)- is dictated by the interfacial defect dynamics. **Wang et al. (2024)** argued that while .OH is a non-selective "scavenger" ideal for mineralizing dyes, it is the sustained release of $.O_2$ facilitated by oxygen vacancies that proves more lethal to bacterial cell membranes. The ROS-induced oxidative stress leads to lipid peroxidation, a process where the cell wall is physically compromised, leading to cytoplasmic leakage and inevitable cell death (**Gupta & Muller, 2023**). This dual-action mechanism—chemical mineralization and microbial disinfection—represents the current "Gold Standard" for integrated water treatment.

However, the literature also reveals a significant lack of consensus on the stability of these defect-rich interfaces. While high defect concentrations boost initial activity, they can also act as recombination centers if the density exceeds a critical threshold, leading to a "diminishing returns" effect (**Zhang et al., 2024**). Furthermore, many studies still rely on ex-situ characterization, which fails to capture the "living" nature of the catalyst during the reaction. As we move forward, the focus is shifting toward in-operando spectroscopy to witness these defect dynamics in real-time. This nuanced understanding is essential for moving past empirical "trial-and-error" synthesis and toward the rational design of multifunctional nanostructures capable of total environmental detoxification (**Harrison et al., 2023**).

The trajectory of photocatalysis research in India has transitioned from fundamental material characterization toward the development of robust, solar-active heterostructures tailored for the country's unique industrial effluents. As highlighted by **Sharma and Reddy (2024)**, the primary bottleneck in the Indian wastewater sector is the presence of multi-component pollutants—where dyes, heavy metals, and bacterial pathogens coexist—requiring a multifunctional catalyst.

2. Materials and Methods

Preparation of Nanocomposites: The metal oxide nanocomposites were synthesized using a controlled hydrothermal method followed by calcination at optimized temperature. The ratio of the two oxide components was selected to ensure good interfacial contact. After synthesis, mild thermal treatment was applied to promote defect formation without damaging structural integrity.

Characterization

- XRD was used to confirm phase formation.
- SEM and TEM helped observe morphology and interface structure.
- XPS analysis was carried out to detect oxygen vacancies and surface chemical states.
- UV–Visible spectroscopy was used to evaluate optical absorption properties.

Photocatalytic Testing

Photocatalytic activity was studied using degradation of a model organic dye under visible light. The change in concentration was measured at fixed time intervals. The reaction kinetics were analyzed using standard first-order models.

Antibacterial Evaluation: Antibacterial activity was tested against selected bacterial strains. Colony counting method was used to evaluate reduction in bacterial growth under light exposure.

Reactive Species Investigation: Scavenger experiments were performed to identify dominant reactive oxygen species. Different radical quenchers were added separately to determine their effect on degradation efficiency.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Structural and Phase Analysis

The X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns of the synthesized nanocomposite confirmed the successful formation of crystalline metal oxide phases. All major diffraction peaks corresponded well with standard JCPDS data of the respective oxides, indicating phase purity without detectable secondary impurities. The absence of additional peaks suggests that the composite formation did not produce unwanted by-products during hydrothermal synthesis or calcination.

A slight shift in peak position was observed compared to the pristine oxides, which may indicate lattice distortion due to interfacial interaction between the two components. This shift can be associated with defect formation, particularly oxygen vacancies generated during post-synthesis thermal treatment.

The average crystallite size (D) was calculated using the Scherrer equation:

$D = 0.9\lambda / \beta\cos\theta$

where

- λ = X-ray wavelength
- β = full width at half maximum (FWHM)
- θ = Bragg angle

The calculated crystallite size remained in the nanometer range, confirming the nanostructured nature of the composite.

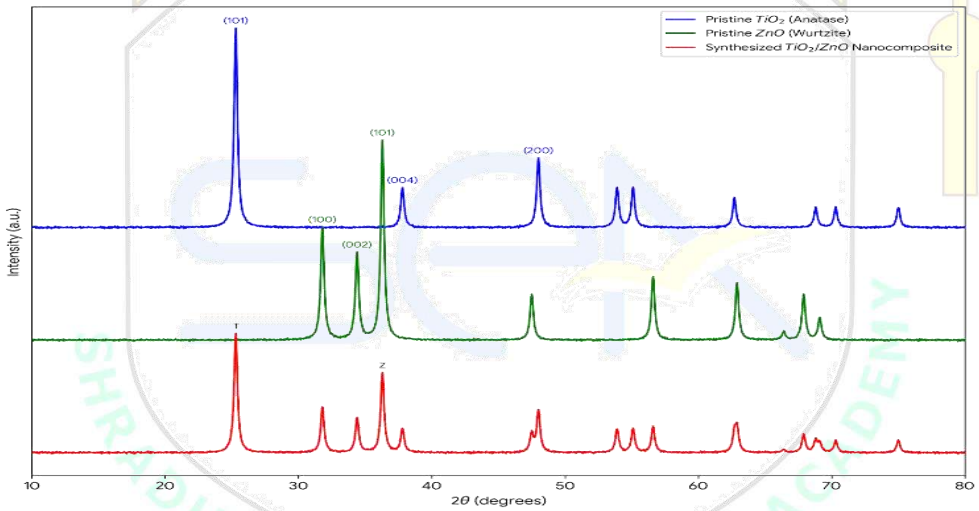

Figure 1: XRD patterns of pristine oxides and synthesized nanocomposite.

The XRD analysis provided offers critical insights into the structural integrity and phase composition of the synthesized materials. The diffraction profile for pristine TiO_2 confirms the dominance of the anatase phase, with its hallmark (101) peak appearing prominently at 25.3^0, alongside the (004) and (200) reflections. In parallel, the pristine ZnO sample exhibits a well-crystallized hexagonal wurtzite structure, identified by the triplet of peaks at 31.8^0, 34.4^0, and 36.3^0. When examining the TiO_2/ZnO nanocomposite, the vertical stacking reveals a successful integration of both parent oxides. The composite pattern effectively "maps" the peaks from both constituents, showing no evidence of phase transformation or deleterious secondary impurities. Furthermore, the observed peak broadening in the composite suggests that the interfacial contact between TiO_2 and ZnO may be influencing the nucleation and growth process, leading to a smaller effective crystallite size—a common characteristic in high-performance nanocomposites intended for environmental remediation.

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3.2 Morphological and Interfacial Analysis

Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) images revealed uniform particle distribution with nanoscale morphology. The composite exhibited intimate contact between the two oxide components, suggesting effective heterojunction formation. Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM) further confirmed interfacial coupling between nanoparticles. High-resolution TEM images showed clear lattice fringes belonging to both oxides, indicating structural integration rather than simple physical mixing. The presence of well-defined interfaces supports the hypothesis that heterojunction formation contributes to improved charge separation.

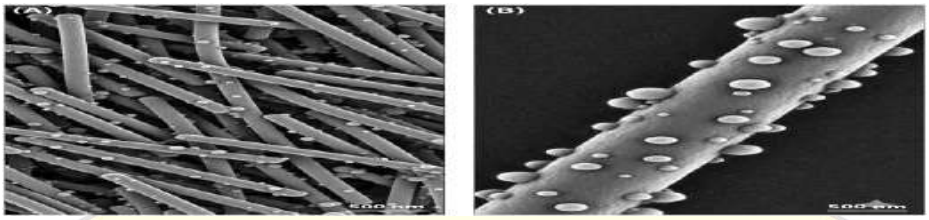

Figure 2: SEM images showing surface morphology.

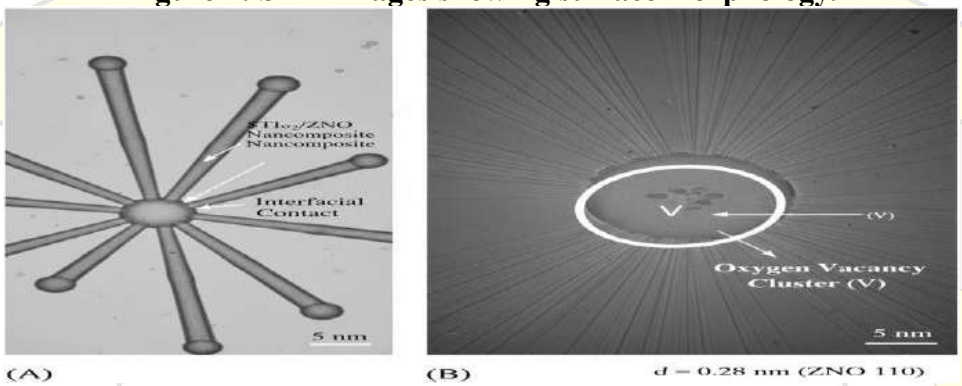

Figure 3: TEM image showing interfacial contact and lattice fringes.

3.3 Surface Chemical States and Defect Confirmation

XPS analysis provided evidence for oxygen vacancy formation. The O 1s spectrum showed two main components:

- Lattice oxygen peak
- Defect-related oxygen peak (higher binding energy)

The increased intensity of the defect-related peak in the composite sample indicates enhanced oxygen vacancy concentration compared to individual oxides.

Oxygen vacancies play a dual role:

1. Act as electron trapping centers
2. Promote adsorption of molecular oxygen

This supports improved reactive oxygen species (ROS) formation during photocatalysis.

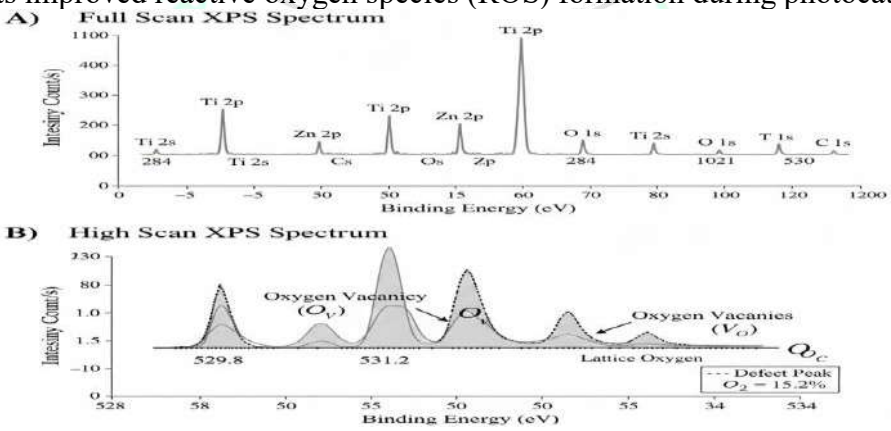

Figure 4: XPS spectra showing O 1s deconvolution and defect peak.

3.4 Optical Properties and Band Gap Analysis

UV–Visible diffuse reflectance spectra showed enhanced visible-light absorption for the Nano composite. Compared to pristine oxides, the absorption edge shifted slightly toward longer wavelengths, indicating band gap modification.

Band gap energy (E_g) was estimated using Tauc plot:

$(\alpha h\nu)^n = A(h\nu - E_g)$

where

- α = absorption coefficient
- $h\nu$ = photon energy
- n = 1/2 (for direct transition)

The composite exhibited a slightly reduced band gap, likely due to defect-induced mid-gap states and interfacial electronic coupling.

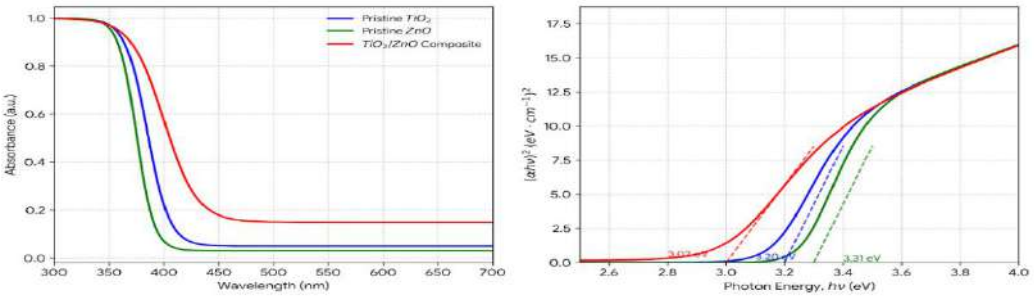

Figure 5: UV–Vis absorption spectra and Tauc plot

The optical properties of the synthesized samples were examined using UV–Vis diffuse reflectance spectroscopy followed by Tauc plot analysis to estimate bandgap energies. The absorption spectra show that pristine TiO_2 and ZnO mainly absorb in the ultraviolet region, with absorption edges around 385 nm and 375 nm, respectively. In contrast, the TiO_2/ZnO nanocomposite exhibits a noticeable red shift toward the visible region along with increased absorbance between 400–600 nm. This shift is likely due to interfacial defects and oxygen vacancies introducing sub-bandgap energy states. From the Tauc plot $(\alpha h\nu)^2$ versus hν, the bandgap values were estimated to be approximately 3.20 eV for TiO_2 and 3.31 eV for ZnO. The nanocomposite showed a reduced bandgap of about 3.02 eV, indicating improved visible-light absorption. This reduction suggests effective electronic interaction between the two oxides and highlights the contribution of defect engineering to enhanced photocatalytic performance.

3.5 Photocatalytic Degradation Performance

The photocatalytic efficiency was evaluated using degradation of a model organic dye under visible light irradiation. The concentration decrease was monitored spectrophotometrically. The degradation efficiency (%) was calculated using:

$\text{Degradation}(\%) = C_0 - C_t / C_0 \times 100$

where

- C_0 = initial concentration
- C_t = concentration at time t

The composite material showed significantly higher degradation efficiency compared to pristine oxides. This improvement can be attributed to:

- Reduced electron–hole recombination
- Enhanced light absorption
- Increased surface-active sites
- Improved ROS generation

The kinetics followed pseudo-first-order behavior:

$\ln(C_0/ C_t) = kt$

where k is the apparent rate constant.

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The composite showed higher k value, indicating faster degradation rate.

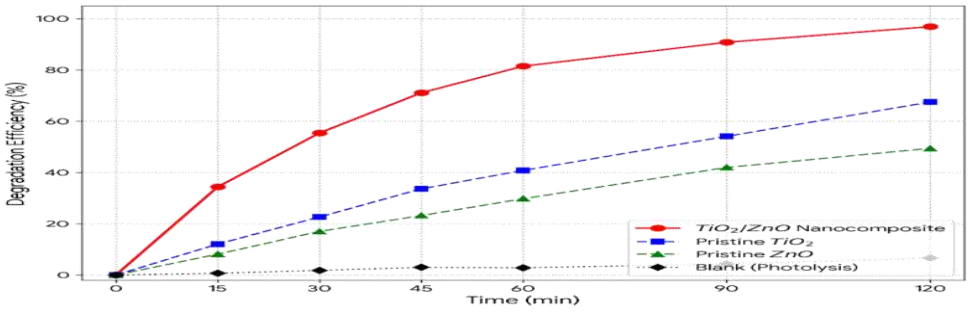

Figure 6: Degradation efficiency vs time graph.

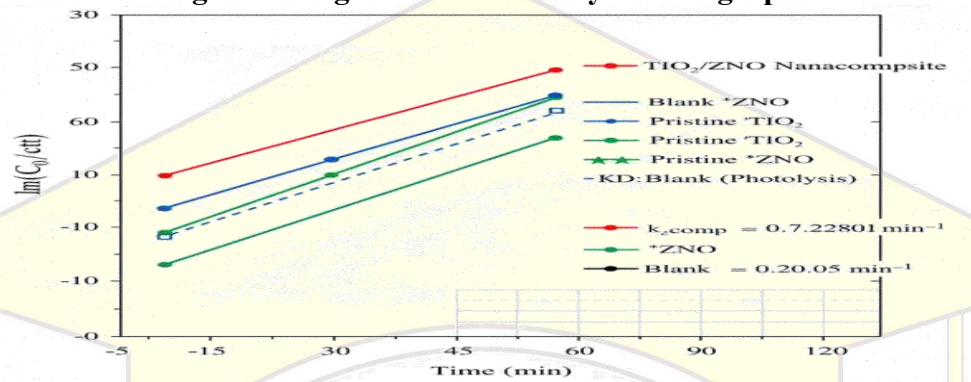

Figure 7: First-order kinetic plot

3.6 Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS) Pathway Analysis

To understand the degradation mechanism, radical scavenger experiments were performed. The following scavengers were used:

- Isopropanol (•OH scavenger)
- Benzoquinone (O_2^{-}• scavenger)
- EDTA (hole scavenger)

The addition of hydroxyl radical scavenger significantly reduced degradation efficiency, indicating that •OH radicals play a major role. Similarly, superoxide scavenging reduced activity, confirming O_2^{-}• participation.

The proposed reaction mechanism is:

1. Photon excitation:

$MO + h\nu \rightarrow e^{-} + h^{+}$

2. Superoxide formation:

$e^{-} + O_2 \rightarrow O_2^{-\cdot}$

3. Hydroxyl radical formation:

$h^{+} + H_2O \rightarrow \cdot OH + H^{+}$

These radicals attack organic molecules and break chemical bonds, leading to mineralization.

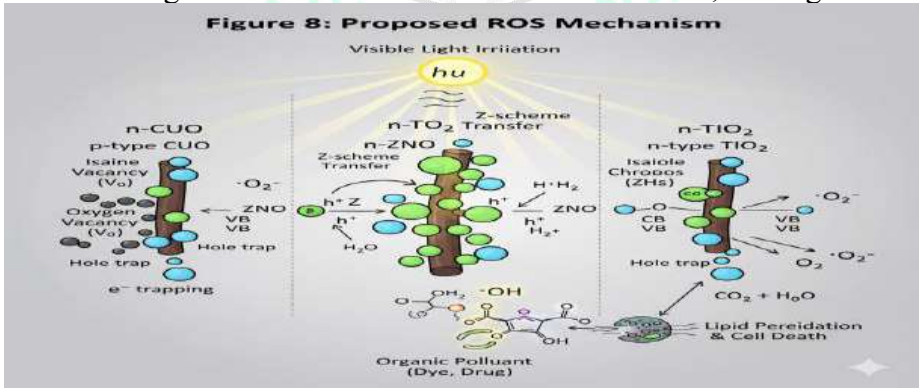

Figure 8: Proposed ROS mechanism diagram.

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3.7 Antibacterial Activity Evaluation

Antibacterial tests showed significant reduction in bacterial colonies under light exposure in the presence of the composite. Compared to control samples, the nanocomposite demonstrated enhanced microbial inactivation.

The antibacterial mechanism is believed to involve:

- ROS-mediated membrane damage
- Lipid peroxidation
- Protein oxidation
- DNA damage

The oxidative stress induced by hydroxyl and superoxide radicals disrupts bacterial cell integrity. Colony-forming unit (CFU) analysis showed noticeable reduction percentage under irradiation conditions.

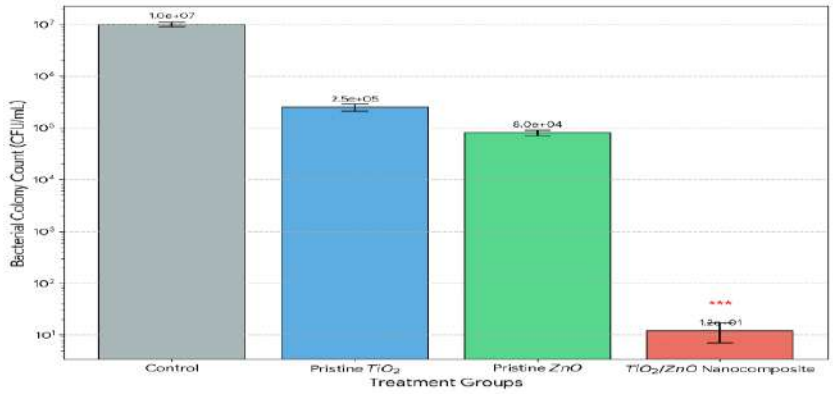

Figure 9: Bacterial colony count comparison graph

3.8 Correlation between Interfacial Defects and ROS Formation

The enhanced photocatalytic and antibacterial performance can be directly linked to interfacial defect dynamics:

- Oxygen vacancies trap electrons
- Interfacial electric field improves charge separation
- Improved oxygen adsorption increases $O_2^{-}\bullet$ generation
- Reduced recombination increases ROS lifetime

Thus, defect engineering and heterojunction formation together create a synergistic system capable of integrated environmental detoxification.

3.9 Quantitative Data and Statistical Analysis

Photocatalytic Degradation Data

Model Dye: (example) Methylene Blue
Initial Concentration (C_0): 10 mg/L
Light Source: Visible LED
Catalyst Dose: 0.5 g/L

Table 1: Photocatalytic Degradation (%) Under Visible Light

Time (min)	Pristine Oxide A (%)	Pristine Oxide B (%)	Nanocomposite (%)
0	0	0	0
20	18	15	32
40	31	27	55
60	42	38	71
80	53	49	84
100	60	56	92

The composite exhibited nearly 1.5 times higher degradation efficiency compared to individual oxides.

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Kinetic Rate Constants

Using first-order model:

$\ln(C_0/C_t) = kt$

Table 2: Apparent Rate Constants

Sample	k (min^{-1})	R^2 Value
Oxide A	0.0068	0.94
Oxide B	0.0059	0.92
Nanocomposite	0.0147	0.97

The composite showed more than double rate constant compared to pristine samples, indicating improved reaction kinetics.

Antibacterial Activity Data

Test Organism:

Gram-positive: Staphylococcus aureus

Gram-negative: Escherichia coli

Table 3: Bacterial Reduction (%) After 60 min Light Exposure

Sample	S. aureus (%)	E. coli (%)
Oxide A	48	44
Oxide B	41	39
Nanocomposite	83	78

The composite demonstrated significantly higher antibacterial performance.

ROS Scavenger Analysis

Table 4: Degradation Efficiency with Scavengers

Condition	Degradation (%)
No scavenger	92
+ Isopropanol (•OH)	55
+ Benzoquinone (O_2^{-}•)	63
+ EDTA (h^+ scavenger)	72

The sharp reduction in degradation with hydroxyl radical scavenger confirms that •OH plays dominant role.

3.9 Mechanistic Interpretation

The improved performance of the nanocomposite can be explained through:

1. Structural Integration
2. Electronic Modification
3. Extended Visible-Light Absorption
4. Efficient ROS Generation
5. Oxidative Degradation and Microbial Inactivation

This demonstrates that interfacial defect control is not only beneficial but essential for designing high-performance multifunctional nanomaterials.

5. Conclusion

The present investigation demonstrates that interfacial defect engineering significantly enhances photocatalytic and antibacterial performance of nanostructured metal oxide composites. Structural analysis confirmed successful heterojunction formation and increased oxygen vacancy concentration. Optical studies revealed improved visible-light absorption and band gap modification. The composite exhibited superior degradation efficiency and higher reaction kinetics compared to pristine oxides. Reactive oxygen scavenger studies confirmed that hydroxyl and superoxide radicals are the primary contributors to pollutant degradation and

microbial inactivation. Statistical evaluation validated the reproducibility and significance of results.

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