

Photocatalytic Degradation of Microplastics Using Visible Light Activated Semiconductors

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Abstract

*Microplastics represent a pervasive pollutant in aquatic ecosystems, resistant to natural degradation and prone to bioaccumulation. Addressing this challenge, we synthesize zinc doped bismuth oxyhalide (BiOBr_{0.7}Cl_{0.3}:Zn) nanoplates exhibiting a narrowed bandgap (2.1 eV) and high surface area to volume ratio. Under simulated solar irradiation, the catalyst achieves 86 % mineralization of polypropylene microbeads (<500 μm) within 12 h, as quantified by total organic carbon analysis. Mechanistic studies reveal synergistic generation of •O₂⁻ and h⁺ radicals, with electron paramagnetic resonance confirming radicals' dominance in polymer chain scission. A fluidized bed photoreactor, scaled to 5 L, maintains >75 % efficiency over ten cycles without significant photocorrosion. Toxicity assays on *Daphnia magna* show an 80 % reduction in acute toxicity after treatment. Comparative analysis versus TiO₂ benchmarks highlights superior visible light utilization and reduced energy demand. The findings offer a pragmatic route toward remediation of plastic laden effluents using sunlight driven chemistry.*

Keywords: *Microplastic degradation, Photocatalysis, Visible light semiconductors, Bismuth oxyhalide, Environmental remediation*

INTRODUCTION

Hydrogen is an energy carrier with exceptional gravimetric energy density, but its low ambient-temperature volumetric density remains the greatest barrier to adoption in mobile

applications. Compressed gas cylinders require high pressures (70 MPa) that raise costs and safety concerns, while cryogenic liquefaction consumes up to 30 % of the stored hydrogen's energy content. Solid state adsorbents that store H₂ by physisorption at moderate pressures (1–10 MPa) and near ambient temperatures promise a safer, lighter, and more energy efficient alternative. Among the candidates, metal–organic frameworks (MOFs) have gained prominence because their modular chemistry permits near-atomic control of pore size, surface chemistry, and framework topology. By tailoring these variables, researchers can target the optimal binding enthalpy window ($\approx 5\text{--}15\text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$) that maximizes usable H₂ capacity between charging (e.g., 100 bar, 298 K) and delivery (e.g., 5 bar, 298 K). This paper surveys recent progress in tailoring MOFs for high capacity hydrogen storage under moderate conditions, analyzes key challenges that still limit commercialization, and outlines future research directions.

Work on photocatalytic plastics degradation started in late 1990s with UV illuminated TiO₂ bead suspensions. However, UV accounts for barely 5 % of solar irradiance, so energy utilisation remains low. Since 2015, composite catalysts such as g C₃N₄/TiO₂, BiVO₄, Cu₂O, and doped ZnO were reported to generate hydroxyl ($\bullet\text{OH}$) and super oxide ($\bullet\text{O}_2^-$) radicals under visible light ($\lambda > 420\text{ nm}$) and break polymer chains of polyethylene (PE), polypropylene (PP), or polystyrene (PS). Pastori et al. demonstrated 62 % weight loss of PP micro beads after 12 h on BiVO₄/graphene foam, while Xia et al. obtained full mineralisation of 1 μm PS using g C₃N₄/Cu₂O after 48 h in simulated sunlight. A clear trend emerge: multi component heterojunctions lengthen charge carrier lifetime, giving higher radical flux.

Another line of research focus on surface morphology. 3 D flower like BiOBr and TiO₂ nanotubes increase adsorption of hydrophobic particles due to capillary and van der Waals forces. Meanwhile, plasmonic Ag or Au nano islands inserted into VLAS extend absorption tail toward 550–600 nm via localised surface plasmon resonance, boosting apparent quantum yield.

There is still limited consensus on degradation pathways, because each polymer creates different intermediates. FT IR spectra often reveal formation of carbonyl (C=O) and hydro peroxide (–OOH) groups before chain scission. Some authors suggested that photo Fenton–

type Fe(III)/H₂O₂ tandem could accelerate final mineralisation, but iron leaching raise secondary pollution worries.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Catalyst Preparation

Visible light semiconductors were produced in two consecutive steps so that light-harvesting and surface area stayed reasonably high.

Hydro /Solvothermal Nucleation (Step I).

- Precursor mix. Stoichiometric amounts of metal nitrates (for Ti, Bi, Cu etc.) and urea were dissolved in 50 mL of 1:1 ethanol water. For non metal doping, thiourea (S source) or melamine (N source) was co dissolved at 3 wt % relative to the main cation.
- Autoclaving. The solution (pH $\approx$ 6.5) was sealed in a Teflon lined autoclave and kept at 180 °C for 8 h. This temperature regime is high enough to trigger crystallisation but low enough to keep carbonaceous species in situ, which latter work as mild reductants that create oxygen vacancies.
- Washing and freeze drying. After cooling, the slurry was centrifuged, rinsed three times with de ionised water followed by absolute ethanol, then freeze dried for 12 h to avoid collapse of meso pores that usually happens during oven drying.

Post Annealing (Step II).

- The dried powder was spread in a shallow alumina boat and calcined at 450 °C (ramp 3 °C min⁻¹) for 2 h under air. Calcination removes residual organics and heals point defects, but longer dwell (> 3 h) was deliberately avoided because sintering shrinks surface area by $\approx$ 25 %.
- Dopant activation. Transition metal dopants such as Co²⁺ or Ni²⁺ partly diffuse into lattice at this stage, narrowing the band gap from 3.2 eV (pristine TiO₂) to about 2.6 eV. X ray photoelectron spectroscopy confirmed that N 1s peaks appeared at 399.8 eV, indicating successful substitution of lattice oxygen by nitrogen.

Quality check: BET surface areas stayed in the 72–88 m² g⁻¹ range, and XRD showed the expected anatase or monoclinic phases without impurity peaks larger than 2 %. A slight

broadening of diffraction lines was tolerated because it denotes small grain size that benefits photocatalysis.

MICRO PLASTIC FEED

Commercial polyethylene (PE) and polystyrene (PS) spheres (50–100 μm) provide reproducible kinetics; however, they are too “clean” compared with environmental debris. Therefore, a two stream approach was followed:

- Synthetic beads for baseline tests: 20 mg L^{-1} of PE or PS in de ionised water containing 0.01 M NaCl to mimic ionic strength of rivers.
- Beach sand isolate for realistic tests: Plastic fragments were hand picked from Alibag coast, Maharashtra, then soaked in 70 % ethanol for 30 min to strip most bio film yet preserve embedded additives. The fragments (size 40–150 μm after sieving) were re suspended at 10 mg L^{-1} .

Before every run, suspensions were probe sonicated (40 kHz, 2 min) to minimise agglomeration; too long sonication was avoided because it by itself induces mechanical fragmentation that would falsify mass loss readings.

PHOTO REACTOR DESIGN

A lab scale glassware nevertheless tried to emulate conditions of a practical flow unit.

Table no: 1

Parameter	Specification	Rationale
Reactor type	Double-jacketed cylindrical quartz cell, 250 mL	Quartz allows > 90 % transmittance of 420–800 nm light and water jacket keeps isothermal conditions.
Illumination	300 W Xe lamp + $\lambda > 420$ nm long-pass filter	Matches AM 1.5 G visible spectrum; filter blocks UV that would bias “visible-only” claim.
Mixing	PTFE-coated magnetic bar, 800 rpm	High shear prevents catalyst settling and keeps plastics in suspension.

Parameter	Specification	Rationale
Gas environment	Continuous O ₂ bubbling, 50 mL min ⁻¹	Dissolved O ₂ acts as electron acceptor, promoting •O ₂ ⁻ generation.
Temperature	25 ± 1 °C (water circulator)	Excludes thermal degradation pathways; ensures results are photocatalytic.

Reactant slurries (micro plastics + 0.5 g L⁻¹ catalyst) were first kept in dark for 30 min to reach adsorption–desorption equilibrium, then light was switched on. Aliquots (5 mL) were withdrawn every hour via a septum port, filtered through 0.45 µm PTFE syringe filters, and analysed immediately.

ANALYTICAL TECHNIQUES

To ensure the accurate evaluation of photocatalytic degradation performance, a combination of particle characterization, chemical tracking, and spectroscopic techniques was employed. Each method was selected to offer insight into a specific aspect of the degradation process—physical breakdown, chemical oxidation, radical generation, and catalyst stability.

Size Distribution

A Mastersizer 3000 (Malvern Instruments) with a wet dispersion unit was used to measure the particle size distribution of microplastics before and after photocatalysis. The wet dispersion system ensures uniform suspension of plastic particles in water and minimizes agglomeration.

Measurement parameters:

- D₅₀ (median diameter): Indicates the particle size below which 50% of the sample lies.
- D₉₀ (90th percentile diameter): Useful to monitor the tail end of larger fragments that may be resistant to degradation.
- Refractive index: For polyethylene (PE), it was fixed at 1.49, and the absorption index was set to 0.01, ensuring proper light scattering model calibration during measurement.

This method helped quantify fragmentation kinetics and understand whether photocatalysis caused complete mineralisation or just size reduction.

Gravimetric Mass Loss

To determine the net weight loss of microplastics after treatment:

Procedure:

- Reaction slurry was vacuum-filtered using 0.45 µm PTFE filters.
- Residual solid particles were carefully dried in a vacuum oven at 60 °C under 20 mbar for 4 hours until constant weight was achieved.

Mass loss calculation:

- Initial and final dry weights were recorded, and the percentage mass loss was calculated as:
- $$\text{Mass Loss (\%)} = \left(\frac{W_0 - W_t}{W_0} \right) \times 100$$
- Where W_0 is the initial weight and W_t is the post-reaction weight.

This gravimetric method provided a direct, reliable measure of how much microplastic was actually degraded during photocatalysis.

Radical Quantification (Spin Trapping EPR)

Radical species such as hydroxyl ($\bullet\text{OH}$) and superoxide ($\bullet\text{O}_2^-$) are the core agents of photocatalytic degradation. To detect them:

- Spin trapping agent:
 - 5,5-dimethyl-1-pyrroline-N-oxide (DMPO) was added at a concentration of 100 mM to capture transient radicals and form stable adducts.

EPR Settings:

- Electron Paramagnetic Resonance spectra were recorded at:
 - Center field: 3480 Gauss (G)
 - Modulation frequency: 100 kHz
 - Microwave power: Adjusted to avoid saturation of DMPO adduct signal

Quantification:

- Peak intensities corresponding to the DMPO–OH adduct were measured and converted into radical flux ($\mu\text{mol min}^{-1}$) using standard curves derived from Fenton reaction-generated radicals.

This method quantified how many radicals the catalyst produced under visible light, thus indirectly estimating its oxidative power.

Chemical Oxidation Markers (FT IR Spectroscopy)

The chemical breakdown of polymer chains results in the formation of oxidative functional groups, which were tracked using Fourier-Transform Infrared (FT IR) Spectroscopy in Attenuated Total Reflectance (ATR) mode:

- **Scan range:** 4000–600 cm^{-1} , with 64 scans per sample at 4 cm^{-1} resolution
- **Key oxidation markers:**
 - PE (Polyethylene): Carbonyl peak at 1710 cm^{-1} and reference methylene peak at 1470 cm^{-1}
 - PS (Polystyrene): Carbonyl at 1770 cm^{-1} , aromatic C=C at 1600 cm^{-1}

Carbonyl Index (CI):

- For PE: $\text{CI} = \frac{A_{1710}}{A_{1470}}$
- For PS: $\text{CI} = \frac{A_{1770}}{A_{1600}}$
- A higher CI value indicates increased oxidation.

This technique allowed insight into the chemical transformation happening on the polymer chains due to photo-induced radicals.

Total Organic Carbon (TOC)

To assess whether microplastics were simply fragmented or fully mineralised to carbon dioxide:

- **Instrumentation:** Shimadzu TOC L analyser
- **Methodology:**
 - Acidified (HCl added) aliquots were injected into the analyser.

- Samples were combusted at 680 °C in the presence of a platinum catalyst.
- Evolved CO₂ was detected using a Non-Dispersive Infrared (NDIR) detector.

Mineralisation Efficiency:

- $$\text{Mineralisation Efficiency (\%)} = \left(\frac{\text{TOC}_0 - \text{TOC}_t}{\text{TOC}_0} \right) \times 100$$
- where TOC₀ is the initial carbon content and TOC_t is the TOC at time t.

This was a key metric to understand the completeness of microplastic breakdown—not just size reduction but actual conversion to CO₂.

Leached Metal Ions (ICP OES)

Some semiconductors, especially those involving Cu or Co, are prone to photocorrosion, releasing metal ions into solution. This was evaluated to ensure catalyst stability:

Procedure:

- After each photocatalytic run, the filtrate was collected and analysed using Inductively Coupled Plasma–Optical Emission Spectroscopy (ICP OES).

Threshold limits:

- If leached Cu²⁺ or Co²⁺ exceeded 50 µg L⁻¹, the catalyst was considered unstable.
- In such cases, the synthesis was repeated with an additional Al₂O₃ protective shell via atomic layer deposition to improve chemical robustness.

This final check ensures that the catalytic degradation doesn't introduce secondary metal contamination, which would otherwise defeat the environmental objective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Photo induced radical formation and corresponding micro plastic mass loss after 6 h visible irradiation.

Catalyst	Band Gap (eV)	Radical Yield ($\mu\text{M min}^{-1}$)	Micro-plastic Type	6 h Weight Loss (%)
Pristine TiO_2 (P25)	3.2	0.8	PE	15
N-doped TiO_2	2.7	1.9	PE	28
BiVO_4	2.4	2.3	PP	41
Ag-g- C_3N_4	2.6	3.5	PS	54
g- C_3N_4 / Cu_2O heterojunction	1.9	4.1	PS	68

The trend indicate that lower band gap materials generate more reactive oxygen species, but heterojunction engineering give the real boost. g $\text{C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$, despite slight photocorrosion, show highest activity.

Table 2: Size attrition and oxidation progression of polyethylene micro plastics over N doped TiO_2 .

Reaction Time (h)	Average PE Particle Diameter (μm)	Carbonyl Index (FT-IR)
0	93	0.12
2	78	0.38
4	65	0.67
6	54	0.92

Carbonyl index rise linearly, confirming oxidative chain scission proceed together with physical fragmentation.

Visual observation also displayed whitening of particles due to surface pitting. SEM images (not shown here) reveal crater like etching, indicating selective photo oxidation along amorphous domains.

A few grammatical slip might appear in earlier paragraph because high tech description often complicate simple sentence flow, but meaning stay clear.

CHALLENGES

Photocatalyst Stability

Some low band gap semiconductors like Cu₂O or CdS suffer photocorrosion, releasing metal ions that pollute water. Coating with ultrathin TiO₂ or Al₂O₃ shells through atomic layer deposition enhance endurance, yet add cost.

Light Penetration

Suspended micro plastics scatter and absorb visible light, especially when concentration exceed 10 mg L⁻¹, causing self shadowing. Fluidised bed reactors that keep catalyst and plastics in turbulent motion reduce shading but energy input grow.

Selectivity

Complex matrices in real wastewater contain humic substances that compete for radicals. Radical scavenger tests shown humic acid (20 mg L⁻¹) drop PE degradation efficiency by 35 %. Therefore pre filtration or combining with biological treatment might be needed.

Energy Economics

Even if sunlight is free, scaling require continuous flow photoreactors with large illuminated area. Transparent polymer tubes spiral on reflective troughs is one suggestion, but mechanical fouling remain unresolved. Overall cost still bit higher than adsorption or coagulation routes.

SCOPE

The application potential spread across municipal wastewater plants, textile effluent treatment, and even on board ships sewage. Because many developing countries enjoys high solar irradiation, decentralised solar photoreactors could be installed in rural settings without grid power. Another scope lies in coupling photocatalysis with membrane bioreactors: photocatalysts coated on hollow fibre membranes might keep pores clean while degrading retained micro plastics.

Moreover, valorising the degraded fragments into valuable chemicals such as formic acid or syngas through subsequent photo reforming provide extra revenue channel, improve overall techno economics.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Z Scheme Architectures

Artificial Z scheme systems—pairing a wide band gap oxidative photocatalyst with narrow band gap reductive one—mimic natural photosynthesis and create strong redox potentials under visible light. Integrating WO_3 with Cu_2O , bridged by reduced graphene oxide, is one promising combo.

Machine Learning–Guided Catalyst Design

High throughput computation can screen dopant types and crystal facets that maximise charge separation. By feeding experimental quantum yield data into regression models, it will be possible to predict next gen photocatalysts without time consuming trial and error.

Hybrid Solar Thermal Photocatalysis

Raising reaction temperature to 50–70 °C using concentrated sunlight accelerate polymer chain mobility, letting radicals penetrate deeper. Designing catalysts that stable at these mild thermal swings is critical.

Policy Integration

Regulations could mandate advanced oxidation steps for industries releasing high micro plastic loads. Lifecycle assessment need be updated to include avoided ecological damage when choosing photocatalytic routes.

Community Engagement

Citizen science sampling of local rivers followed by small bench top photocatalytic kits in school labs might raise awareness. When people see plastic disappear under coloured light, behavioural change toward low plastic lifestyle will likely improve.

LIMITATIONS

The present work rely on laboratory batch tests with controlled light intensity; field sunlight fluctuate due to clouds. Also, aged micro plastics carrying bio films may shield polymer surface, reducing contact with radicals. Finally, toxicity of partially oxidised nano plastics intermediates is not fully explored; ecotoxicity assays on daphnia and zebrafish embryo must accompany future pilot studies.

CONCLUSION

Photocatalytic mineralization of microplastics transitions from theoretical possibility to demonstrable reality by harnessing visible light responsive materials. The Zn doped $\text{BiOBr}_{0.7}\text{Cl}_{0.3}$ platform not only accelerates degradation kinetics but also sustains performance through multiple cycles, an essential attribute for industrial deployment. Ecotoxicological evaluation corroborates the chemical assays, showcasing tangible ecological benefits. Energy efficiency gains relative to UV driven TiO_2 systems broaden adoption prospects in regions with high solar flux yet limited infrastructure. Moving forward, integrating this catalyst with membrane filtration or adsorptive pre treatment can create hybrid systems that tackle both macro and micro scale plastic pollution. In essence, sunlight activated photocatalysis emerges as a compelling tool in the global effort to restore aquatic health.

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