Unraveling the Function of an MgO Interlayer in Both Electrolyte and Solid-State SnO₂ Based Dye-Sensitized Solar Cells

Pablo Docampo,† Priti Tiwana,† Nobuya Sakai,‡ Hidetoshi Miura,§ Laura Herz,† Takurou Murakami,‡ and Henry J. Snaith*†

†Clarendon Laboratory, University of Oxford, Oxford, OX1 3PU, United Kingdom
‡Toin University of Yokohama,1614 Kurogane-cho, Aoba-ku Yokohama, 225-8503, Japan
§Chemircia Company Ltd., Tsukuba, Ibaraki 3050047, Japan

Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: The coating of n-type mesoporous metal oxides with nanometer thick dielectric shells is a route that has proven to be successful at enhancing the efficiency of some families of dye-sensitized solar cells. The primary intention is to introduce a “surface passivation layer” to inhibit recombination between photoinduced electrons and holes across the dye-sensitized interface. However, the precise function of these dielectric interlayers is often ambiguous. Here, the role of a thin MgO interlayer conformally deposited over mesoporous SnO₂ in liquid electrolyte and solid-state dye-sensitized solar cells is investigated. For both families of devices the open-circuit voltage is increased by over 200 mV; however, the short-circuit photocurrent is increased for the solid-state cells, but reduced for the electrolyte based devices. Through electronic and spectroscopic characterization we deduce that there are four distinct influences of the MgO interlayer: It increases dye-loading, slows down recombination, slows down photoinduced electron transfer, and results in a greater than 200 mV shift in the conduction band edge, with respect to the electrolyte redox potential. The compilation of these four factors have differing effects and magnitudes in the solid-state and electrolyte DSCs but quantitatively account for the difference in device performances observed for both systems with and without the MgO shells. To the best of our knowledge, this is the most comprehensive account of the role of dielectric shells in dye-sensitized solar cells and will enable much better interfacial design of photoelectrodes for DSCs.

1. INTRODUCTION

The dye-sensitized solar cell (DSC)¹² is a very attractive low-cost technology for photovoltaic devices. Their reasonably high efficiency and projected low cost of manufacture have garnered a considerable amount of attention over the last two decades.³,⁴ However, more progress needs to be made before they become a viable alternative to the established silicon photovoltaic devices. DSCs are composed of a transparent conductive oxide (TCO), typically fluorine-doped tin oxide, over which a mesoporous layer of a metal oxide is deposited. This mesostructure is then sensitized with a light absorbing dye, filled with a hole transporter, typically a redox active electrolyte, and finally capped with a regenerating top contact, typically platinum. Photovoltaic action arises from photoexcited electrons in the sensitizer, which are transferred to the conduction band (CB) of the metal oxide and then transported through the mesostructure to the TCO. Meanwhile, the hole on the dye is regenerated by the electrolyte which then diffuses through to the platinum counter-electrode.

One aspect that is particularly critical for efficient device operation is the interaction of charges at the interface between the metal oxide and the electrolyte/hole transporter, as well as with the dye. Recombination between holes in the hole-transporter and electrons in the metal oxide, occurs across this interface. Minimizing this loss as well as correctly matching the energy levels of the photoexcited sensitizer to the CB of the metal oxide requires careful engineering of the interface to achieve maximum power conversion efficiencies. There are many ways through which to tune the nature of the interface, from coabsorption of small organic molecules with the dye to depositing conformal shells of metal oxides over the whole mesostructure.⁵⁻⁸

Shells of metal oxides have a profound impact on the different solar cell performance parameters, as they affect diverse characteristics from inhibiting recombination, to enabling a higher degree of dye loading depending on the isoelectric point.⁶⁻¹⁰ Of particular interest is a thin MgO layer over SnO₂-based DSCs, as it enables the efficient operation of this type of devices under normal simulated sunlight conditions, where devices barely reach 1% power conversion efficiencies without treatment in some cases and can reach over 7% after the addition of the MgO layer.⁶¹¹¹² This choice of material as
the mesostructure does not deliver quite as high power conversion efficiencies as TiO2 based devices, which can reach up to 11% power conversion efficiency with the iodide/triiodide redox couple,13 mainly due to its early stage of development. However, the use of TiO2 as the mesostructured material limits the choice of dyes that can transfer charge efficiently to its CB, which in state-of-the-art devices typically means an optical band gap of about 1.48 eV. In SnO2 the CB is located about between 0.3 and 0.5 eV farther from vacuum than TiO2, which allows us to target narrower band gap sensitizers in combination with currently available electrolyte/hole-transport systems, which in turn opens up the possibility of aiming for higher achievable power conversion once all losses have been minimized.13 Beyond possible efficiency motivations, concerning stability, SnO2 has a band gap of 3.8 eV and is a less efficient photocatalyst than TiO2 which should give less stringent demands for UV filtration. For the conventional electrolyte system based on iodide/triiodide, there is a loss to power conversion efficiency not only due to charge recombination but also due to hole regeneration, because a large overpotential is required to activate the multistep process in the redox active electrolyte.14 A way to minimize this loss is to move away from the established electrolyte system and replace it with a solid-state hole transporter, typically Spiro-OMeTAD,13,15 where no interelectrolyte system and replace it with a solid-state hole transporter, typically Spiro-OMeTAD,13,15 where no inter

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would allow a higher dye loading.\textsuperscript{6,10} We do indeed observe higher dye loading; however, absorption spectra for films with and without the MgO surface treatment indicate that the magnitude of the increase in light absorption, which is only a 9\% difference over the solar spectrum, does not account for the difference in short-circuit current (see Supporting Information).

In addition to the changes in photocurrent, for both liquid and solid-state cells an increase in open-circuit voltage of \(\sim 200-300\) mV for SnO\(_2\)-MgO devices is observed, as compared to the bare devices. Solid-state devices fabricated from TiO\(_2\) nanoparticles incorporating this surface treatment show a trend similar to the one observed for electrolyte devices, although in this case, the gain in voltage does not offset the loss in current and hence no gains in performance were observed (see Supporting Information). In the past, the change in voltage has been attributed either to a CB shift, due to a possible surface dipole formation after the addition of this layer, or to reduced recombination at the SnO\(_2\)/hole transporter interface.\textsuperscript{6,9,11,12,20-24} It is also possible that during the chemical bath deposition of the insulating metal oxide precursor, a Sn-Mg-O composite may be formed, which would also result in a CB shift; this has been demonstrated to occur with a ZnO and MgO alloy.\textsuperscript{25}

To further elucidate the role of this layer in our devices, we have performed small perturbation transient photocurrent and photovoltage measurements to extract information about the transport and recombination. In Figure 2 we show the transport and recombination characteristics of the DSCs incorporating the MgO coating and bare devices, plotted against charge density. All measurements are taken under a background illumination from white light diodes with a range of light intensities ranging from an equivalent 100 mW cm\(^{-2}\) solar illumination to 2.5 mW cm\(^{-2}\). See the Experimental Section for a description of the technique. The transport lifetimes at short-circuit conditions for the devices with and without the MgO coating are overlapping at most points studied in the electrolyte cells, as shown in Figure 2a). For the solid-state cells, although slightly different, the transport lifetimes are close at high illumination conditions, indicating that the MgO treatment has little influence on the transport limiting trap sites. We note that the charge collection rate in the solid-state cells is a few times faster than the electrolyte cells, presumably due to the thinner films employed (2 versus 8 \(\mu m\)).

Concerning the electron recombination lifetimes, there appears to be an upward shift to longer times in the curves of recombination lifetime versus charge density; i.e., the MgO treated cells have slower recombination under the same charge density conditions. For liquid electrolyte devices, the change is small at just about twice the recombination lifetime at the same charge density, whereas the trend for the solid-state cells is much more pronounced, where a change of almost an order of magnitude is observed. The difference between liquid electrolyte and solid-state devices may be related to the different recombination mechanisms; i.e., recombination in electrolyte devices is a two-electron process where an intermediate complex must be formed.\textsuperscript{26} The fact that reduced recombination is observed suggests that the MgO layer is passivating the surface states, or presenting a physical barrier inhibiting recombination.\textsuperscript{27} We are more inclined to believe that the MgO is passivating recombination sites, because this method for deposition only results in what appears to be a monolayer coating of MgO upon the SnO\(_2\) surface.\textsuperscript{17} This is also consistent with a study by Prasittichai et al. on Al\(_2\)O\(_3\) coated SnO\(_2\) via ALD, where recombination is mainly retarded by the first layer deposited.\textsuperscript{8} Although the reduction in the recombination lifetime is significant (2-fold for electrolyte and 10-fold for solid-state DSCs), it is not enough to explain...
the 200–300 mV shift of the open-circuit potential. We would require over a 100-fold increase in the recombination lifetime to induce such a shift in open-circuit voltage.28 If the total increase in open-circuit voltage cannot be accounted for by inhibited recombination, then it is possible that the addition of the MgO interlayer results in a shift in the surface potential of the oxide. Indeed, such a shift has been postulated before for both SnO2 and ZnO coated with MgO or Al2O3.8,25 To probe this, we have again used the transient photovoltage and charge collection measurements to extract a differential capacitance as a function of open-circuit voltage. This capacitance−voltage data is presented in Figure 3 and is representative of the location and shape of the tail of the density of sub-band gap states in the metal oxide with respect to the electrolyte/hole-transporter redox potential. The substrate capacitance was found to be several orders of magnitude smaller than that of the mesoporous metal oxide (see Supporting Information) and was therefore disregarded. For the electrolyte and solid-state cells there is a clear positive shift in the position of the “density-of-states” (DOS) of around 200 mV at high capacitances. The small change in slope in the capacitance−voltage data presented indicates that in addition to a shift in the surface potential, there is also a passivation of surface states, consistent with other reports in literature.24 We note that as only the tail of the conduction band states can be measured with our setup, the actual conduction band edge shift could be larger than the one measured, and hence only a lower bound can be determined in this study. For the solid-state devices presented, the change in slope after the addition of the insulating interlayer is much more pronounced. This may be the result of passivation of the deepest surface traps by the MgO interlayer, which are more visible due to the lower charge density in the film for these type of devices. This result may explain why the recombination lifetimes are increased by an order of magnitude for the solid-state devices, whereas only a factor of 2 is observed for the electrolyte devices. The combination of the surface potential shift and recombination inhibition quantitatively account for the relative shift in open-circuit voltage observed in the JV curves of the solar cells presented in Figure 1.

To check whether the shift in short-circuit current for solid-state devices is due to poor charge collection efficiency, we have estimated the recombination lifetime at short-circuit as a function of light intensity (in galvanostatic mode, or constant current transient photovoltage decay). In combination with the results from Figure 2a,b, we have calculated the charge collection efficiency for both electrolyte and solid-state devices, as shown in Figure 4. With the MgO interlayer, the solid-state cells exhibit a charge collection efficiency of over 85%; however, this drops to as low as 60% for the bare devices at full solar light intensity conditions. Coupled with a slight reduction in dye loading, this quantitatively accounts for the reduction in short circuit current for the bare solid-state cells. In the case of liquid-electrolyte based devices, Figure 4a), the charge collection efficiencies for both devices incorporating the MgO interlayer and bare mesostructures are remarkably similar, at over 95% for the whole range studied. This is in contradiction to most literature on this subject where usually bare devices incur extreme recombination losses that lead to poor charge collection efficiencies, completely limiting the device performance to under 1% power conversion efficiencies.5,12,21 For the liquid electrolyte devices fabricated in this study, the main role of the thin MgO layer is that of a surface potential shift toward...
a vacuum. The fact that recombination characteristics only vary by a factor of 2 for both treated and untreated cells is particularly important to the viability of using SnO$_2$ as the mesoporous metal oxide for low band gap dyes. Comparing the overall recombination rate for the electrolyte based cells to the solid-state cells, as shown in Figure 2, is helpful to understand why a much stronger inhibition to recombination is observed for the solid-state cells upon MgO treatment. For the bare devices under a similar charge density of 10$^{17}$ cm$^{-3}$, the recombination for the electrolyte cells is 300-fold slower than the solid-state cells, and for the SnO$_2$-MgO devices under a charge density of 10$^{18}$ cm$^{-3}$ the electrolyte cells are 30-fold slower. The characteristic slow recombination in the iodide/triiodide system is due to specific nature of the multistep charge generation and recombination mechanism.$^{26,29}$ This exceptionally slow reaction appears to be the rate determining process, rather than changes to the metal oxide surface.

Almost all the results can be explained by the influence of the MgO treatment upon recombination and surface potential. However, the apparent anomaly of higher photocurrent observed in the bare electrolyte cells still requires explanation. We note that we have observed this trend every time, with a number of different SnO$_2$ pastes over tens of experiments. To probe possible changes to charge generation, we have employed time-resolved terahertz-pump optical-probe photoconductivity spectroscopy. The samples we have studied are dye-sensitized mesoporous SnO$_2$ in vacuum where Z907 is used as the sensitizer. We note there is no electrolyte or hole-transporter present to purely probe the electron transfer phenomena. We have used Z907 as the sensitizer here because D102 gave very little signal in the terahertz set up, possibly due to the requirement for the presence of a polar medium to operate effectively.$^{30}$ As the terahertz radiation passes through the sample, it accelerates mobile charge carriers and is hence attenuated. The magnitude of the change in transmission of the terahertz pulse following photoexcitation of the system is proportional to the photoinduced change in conductivity ($\Delta \sigma$) and hence representative of the number of free carriers injected into the SnO$_2$ conduction band ($\Delta \sigma = e\Delta N\mu$) where $e$ is the charge of an electron, $\Delta N$ is photoinjected electron density, and $\mu$ is its mobility). In Figure 5 we show the normalized transient photoconductivity signal. Complete charge injection in SnO$_2$, sensitized with Z907 takes place within the first few hundred picoseconds, slightly slower than TiO$_2$ though still fast.$^{31}$ However, in the case of MgO treated SnO$_2$, charge injection is significantly slower and still not complete within the nanosecond measurement window. As will be discussed elsewhere,$^{32}$ there is a light-soaking effect in sensitized SnO$_2$ films, both with and without MgO treatment, where injection and photocurrent improve during illumination. Data in Figure 5 is shown for the final steady-state value in both cases. The absolute photoconductivity values cannot be directly compared with each other, due to sample-to-sample variation; however, the general trend observed is that higher photoconductivity values at 1 ns are observed for bare devices.

The time-resolved photo conductivity measurements are consistent with faster and more efficient electron transfer in the bare dye-sensitized systems. The slower injection in the dye-sensitized SnO$_2$-MgO films is consistent with poorer electron transfer and at this rate of hundreds of picoseconds to nanoseconds, we would expect the injection to not compete entirely favorably with nonradiative decay channels. Hence this spectroscopy is entirely consistent with the slightly higher short-circuit photocurrent for the bare SnO$_2$ liquid electrolyte cells.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The role of a thin MgO layer, chemically deposited over mesoporous SnO$_2$ structures in liquid electrolyte and solid-state dye-sensitized solar cells has been investigated. The treatment has four significant influences upon the optical and electronic characteristics of the solar cells, and these effects have differing levels of importance for either solid-state or liquid electrolyte based solar cells:

1. There is at least a 200 mV positive shift in the conduction band edge, which is the predominant factor increasing the open-circuit voltage in both cells.

2. There is an increase in the electron lifetime by approximately 2-fold for electrolyte and 10-fold for solid-state cells. This has only a small influence on the electrolyte cells, though it significantly contributes to further increased open-circuit voltage and increased photocurrent (charge collection efficiency) for the solid-state cells.

3. There is a reduction in the electron injection rate and efficiency, which results in a marginal drop in photocurrent for the electrolyte cells upon MgO treatment. Notably for the solid-state cells, the possibility of reductive quenching of the excited dye (where hole transfer can occur prior to electron transfer) may negate this aspect.

4. There is a marginal increase in the dye loading upon MgO treatment, which will contribute slightly to increasing the photocurrent in the solid-state cells but will have negligible influence upon the thicker electrolyte cells.

These clear findings ascertain the viability of using SnO$_2$ electrodes for DSCs and indicate that careful choice and control of the surface coating could result in competitive electrodes for DSCs and open new possibilities for low band gap dyes and stability.
4. EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

Substrate Preparation. Fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) coated glass sheets (15 Ω/□ Pilkington) were etched with zinc powder and HCl (2 Molar) to obtain the required electrode pattern. The sheets were then washed with soap (2% Hellmanex in water), deionized water, acetone, and methanol and finally treated under an oxygen plasma for 10 min to remove the last traces of organic residues. The FTO sheets were subsequently coated with a compact layer of SnO2 (100 nm) by aerosol spray pyrolysis deposition of butyltin trichloride 95% (Sigma-Aldrich) mixed with ethanol in a 1:10 precursor:ethanol ratio at 450 °C using air as the carrier gas. During the deposition of the compact layer, the electrodes were masked so that the SnO2 only covered the FTO and not the etched glass (otherwise short-circuiting would occur).

A homemade SnO2 mesoporous paste prepared in the same way as Ito et al.33 from <100 nm particle size nanopowder (549657 Sigma-Aldrich) was then doctor bladed by hand using Scotch tape and a pipet on the SnO2 compact layer coated FTO sheets for the solid-state DSCs to achieve a final thickness of 1.5 μm. For liquid electrolyte DSCs, the paste was screen-printed, in the shape of a square with a 5 mm side, several times to achieve a thickness of ~8 μm. The sheets were then slowly heated to 500 °C (ramped over 1/2 h) and baked at this temperature for 30 min in air. After cooling, slides were cut down to size and soaked in 20 mM Mg acetate in ethanol bath for 1 min on a hot plate set at 100 °C (boiling the ethanol in the bath). After rinsing with ethanol and drying in air, the electrodes to be used in solid-state DSCs were coated with a paste of Al2O3 nanoparticles (see below for details of paste) to give a buffer layer with a dry film thickness of 100 nm, whereas the electrodes to be used in liquid electrolyte DSCs were not coated with this Al2O3 layer. The substrates were subsequently baked once more at 500 °C for 45 min in air, then cooled down to 70 °C and finally immersed in a dye solution for 1 h.

Solid-State Solar Cell Assembly. The indolene dyes used were D102,34 and D149 0.2 mM in a 1:1 volume ratio of tert-butanol and acetonitrile. The robust Z646 electrolyte used was composed of a mixture of 1.0 M PMII, 30 mM I2, 0.5 M 1-butyl-1H-benzimidazole (NBB), and 0.1 M GuNCS in 3-methoxypropionitrile (MPN). After being washed by acetonitrile and dried under air flow, the sensitized electrodes were assembled with the counter electrode by melting a 25 μm thick Surlyn gasket. To prepare the platinum coated counter electrode, first a hole was sandblasted into an FTO slide. A drop of 5 mM (H2PtCl6) ethanolic solution was then spread over the FTO and then it was heated to 400 °C for 15 min under air. The internal space between the working and the counter electrodes was filled with Z646 electrolyte using a vacuum backfilling system. The hole was finally clogged with a melted Surlyn sheet and a thin cover slide.

Solar Cell Characterization. Solar simulated AM 1.5 sunlight was generated with an ABET solar simulator calibrated to give 100 mW cm−2 using an NREL calibrated KG5 filtered silicon reference cell. The JV curves were recorded with a Keithley 2400. The solar cells were masked with a metal aperture defining the active area of the solar cells, which were approximately 0.12 cm−2. The photovoltage decay measurement was performed by a method similar to that by O’Regan et al.36-39 and as described elsewhere.35 In essence, a steady-state background white illumination from an array of diodes (Lumiled Model LXHL-NW8 white) is first applied to the cell, filling up a fraction of the available sub-bandgap states that will be proportional to the intensity applied. Then, a short pulse was generated from red light diodes (LXHLDN98 redstar, 200 μs square pulse width, 100 ns rise and fall time), which is irradiated on the cell and its response is recorded with an oscilloscope. The perturbation light source was set to a suitably low level such that the decay kinetics were monoexponential. This enabled the charge recombination rate constants to be obtained directly from the exponential decays measured with a 1 GHz Agilent oscilloscope. When the measurement is performed at fixed potential conditions, i.e., potentiostatic mode, the oscilloscope is set with the 50 Ω port and the generated charge (ΔQ) by the pulse can be directly extracted by integrating the photocurrent decay curve. When the measurements are performed at fixed current conditions, i.e., galvanostatic mode, the oscilloscope is set with the 1 MΩ port and the current generated through the small perturbation pulse is not allowed to exit the device and hence the response measured with oscilloscope is purely dependent on the recombination kinetics of the system, and the perturbation voltage (ΔV) can be extracted. By doing these two measurements at either open or short circuit, we can directly measure the differential capacitance as a function of voltage for the system as C(V) = ΔQ/ΔV.

To extract the transport lifetimes as a function of charge density, the monoexponential decay dynamics of the cells were measured in potentiostatic mode with different applied background light intensities with a suitably low perturbation pulse. The charge density was then extracted as explained below. The diffusion coefficient (Dg) can be calculated as $D_g = \frac{r^2}{2 \tau_{\text{trans}}}$ where $r$ is the thickness of the film,40 and $\tau_{\text{trans}}$ is the transport lifetime at short circuit conditions.

To extract the charge density of the films at short circuit conditions, the transport lifetime ($\tau$) against short circuit current ($I$) was fit as $I = A \tau^b$.41 After the relationship between short circuit current and transport lifetime was established, the current density ($J = J_0 e^{-b/\tau}$) was calculated iteratively as
$$\Delta I_n = I_n(t) - I_n(t+\Delta t)$$

$$= I_n(e^{-t/t_i}) - I_n(e^{-(t+\Delta t)/t_i})$$

$$= I_n(1 - e^{-\Delta t/t_i^3})$$

$$I_n = I_{n-1} - \Delta I_{n-1}$$

The resulting values for the short circuit current were then integrated to find the charge density.

## ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### Supporting Information

Current–voltage characteristics of solid-state TiO$_2$ devices. Absorption spectra. Plots of recombination lifetimes vs charge density. Voltage against capacitance plot. This information is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org

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