



CuTi₂S₄/REDUCED GRAPHENE OXIDE ASSISTED PHOTOCATALYTIC DEGRADATION OF REACTIVE BLACK-5

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Abstract

Photocatalytic degradation is one of the most attractive, low-cost and sustainable technologies for removing pollutants from waste water. Especially dual metal sulfide-combined graphene-based materials are excellent photocatalysts due to their faster electron transfer ability. Herein, we developed copper titanium sulfide (CuTi₂S₄) composite-anchored reduced graphene oxide (rGO, CuTi₂S₄/rGO) material by a feasible hydrothermal approach. The prepared CuTi₂S₄/rGO material was employed for a degradation of reactive black-5 (RB-5). During the synthesis process, the conversion of graphene oxide into reduced graphene oxide is followed by the in situ deposition of Cu, Ti and S precursors. The resultant material can significantly promote the interfacial contact between CuTi₂S₄ and rGO, leading to the formation of an active CuTi₂S₄/rGO composite material. The highly effective anchoring of CuTi₂S₄ over the rGO material facilitates the transfer of photogenerated electrons from CuTi₂S₄ to rGO, altering the photocatalytic degradation of RB-5 efficiency under visible light irradiation. In addition, CuTi₂S₄/rGO reveals a higher photocatalytic response with a band gap of 1.8 eV, which is mainly attributed to the higher adsorption and desorption sites and the excellent charge carrier ability between rGO and CuTi₂S₄ composite. These studies provide excellent strategies for developing highly stable and effective rGO-based catalyst materials for purifying pollutants and their related applications.

Keywords: Photocatalyst, Cuti₂s₄, Reduced Graphene Oxide, Hydrothermal Approach, Reactive Black-5.

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1. Introduction

Due to the growing population and the usage of various products, huge environmental issues have arisen, especially organic pollution which is generated from cosmetics, textiles, and various industries [1–4]. Particularly, the industrial waste contains various traces of metal ions such as Cr, Cd, Hg, As, and various organic pollutants [5]. Especially the hexavalent of Cr has a huge toxic nature and is also a non-biodegradable pollutant, which creates enormous health issues such as liver damage and cancer. At the same time, it releases the one of the major organic pollutants of phenolic compounds, which also has impacts on human health. So it is best to remove it before putting it into the running water. These pollutants can be detached by various physical, chemical and biological methods like precipitation, adsorption, reverse osmosis, ozonization, ultrafiltration, and flocculation [6].

Among the various methods, photodegradation is of superior interest and an excellent treatment for removing toxic chemicals and pollutants [4]. As a result, various studies have focused on the photocatalytic approach for the removal of epidemics. In recent years, metal chalcogenide materials have become more attractive and suitable candidates for various applications, including optoelectronics and energy storage, as well as biomedical applications [7–11]. Due to its higher conductivity which significantly improves multiple application performance compared to that of metal oxides. Among the various types of chalcogenides, CuS has great potential in the fields of catalysis and photovoltaics [12]. In one of the reports, Krishnamoorthy et al. prepared the CuS nanoparticles using a one-step hydrothermal approach. The resultant yield of the covalent phase of cubic-shaped CuS nanoparticles demonstrated a higher pseudo-capacitor nature [13]. In addition, Saranya et al. reported that the various morphologies of CuS nanostructures were prepared by the hydrothermal treatment with the aid of copper chloride, thiourea, and thiosulpahte precursors. They proved that the obtained CuS hexagonal phase and their urchin and nanoplate morphologies

significantly improved the optical properties with a band gap of 2.12 and 2.18 eV [14]. Notably, the co-precipitation yield of the CuS nanoparticles richest has the highest electrical conductivity of 72.9 S/cm at 55 °C, as reported by Ramalingam et al [15]. Similarly, Bejjai et al. also utilised a similar method for the preparation of CuS, altering the Cu forerunners such as CuCl₂, CuCl, and CuSO₄ combined with thiourea (S source) and fixing their molar ratio. They demonstrated that the type of Cu source and the Cu/S molar ratios are mainly responsible for varying the band gap from 2.05 to 2.34 eV and improving the absorbance of visible light [16]. However, the single compounds along with the low separation efficiency of photogenerated charge carriers, are very essential for large-scale application studies.

In addition, graphene oxide (GO) is proven to be the most adopted material for the degradation of dyes owing to its impressive properties, such as its large surface area, higher functional groups, attractive band structure, higher mechanical strength and higher conductivity [4]. In this regard, great attention was focused on the graphene metal oxide composite, which altered the concentrations and their ratios. In this regard, recently, Muthukrishnaraj et al. developed a graphene-incorporated Cu₂O composite by the precipitation method. They established that the 2 wt% incorporated Cu₂O composite exhibited remarkable degradation efficiency for methylene blue (97.9%) and methylene orange (96.1%) [4]. Further, Arumugam et al. synthesised the photocatalytic material of NiS and reduced graphene oxide (rGO) through the hydrothermal approach by utilising nickel chloride hexahydrate and sodium sulfide hydrate sources. They attested that the obtained NiS/rGO revealed a greater photocatalytic degradation activity against methylene blue, and its removal percentage reached 87% [17]. Dutta et al. claimed that the ZnS/rGO composite delivered a higher photocatalytic activity (99.9%) than that of hollow ball-shaped ZnS (degradation activity, 97.14%). They mentioned that the higher surface area and the better charge carrier transportation are the main reasons for improved photocatalytic activity [18].

On the other hand, CuS/rGO composites are also excellent materials, and they are considered suitable materials for the application of photodegradation of organic pollutants [19,20]. Cherifi et al. developed the CuS/rGO composite with different width ratios through the hydrothermal approach and achieved remarkable photocatalytic activity under visible light irradiation [21]. In addition, CuCo₂S₄/RGO composites delivered admirable photocatalytic degradation for the malachite green pollutant. The 3% rGO in CuCo₂S₄ and its synergistic effect are highly beneficial for improved performance, as was testified by Vadivel and co-workers [22]. Consequently, Cu₂SnS₃/rGO, with flower-shaped morphologies derived from thiourea and polyvinylpyrrolidone sources, exhibited notable photocatalytic performance for the degradation of Rhodamine B [23]. Similarly, Ca/ZnIn₂S₄ and CuCo₂S₄ materials combined with rGO also effectively improved the photocatalytic performance [22,24,25]. Recently, we prepared the CuZr₂S₄ doped with rGO composite by employing copper nitrate, zirconium oxy nitrate, and metallic sulfur. The as-prepared CuZr₂S₄/rGO material significantly promoted the M-O-M moieties and the nanoflower-like morphology, which resulted in enhanced photocatalytic performance [26].

Inspired by these strategies, we have developed a bimetallic sulfide (CuTi₂S₄) of reduced graphene oxide composite by a single-step hydrothermal process. The introduction of copper nitrate, tetraethoxy titanium (tetraethyl ortho titanate), and metallic sulfur in reduced graphene oxide significantly influences functional groups and their morphologies. Subsequently, the resulted CuTi₂S₄/rGO material displayed the cubic crystal structure and CuTi₂S₄ combined stable sheet-like morphologies, and the higher Cu, Ti, and S contents in rGO greatly modified the photocatalytic activity of reactive black-5 dye removing process. The higher photocatalytic performance can be ascribed to the higher absorption and desorption abilities along with the excellent charge carrier capability between rGO and CuTi₂S₄ composite. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report on the

utilisation of the above-mentioned precursors for developing a highly ordered sheet like CuTi₂S₄/rGO composite using photocatalytic studies of the reactive black-5 degradation.

2. Experimental section

2.1 Chemicals and reagents

Copper nitrate (Cu(NO₃)₂·3H₂O) were obtained from the SRL. Ethanol (CH₃OH), sodium nitrate (NaNO₃), reactive black-5, dimethyleneamine and the metallic sulfur were procured from Alfa Aeser. Sodium hydroxide (NaOH) was purchased from Merck. Tetraethoxy titanium (tetraethyl orthotitanate, Ti₄(OCH₂CH₃)₁₆) was purchased from Sigma Aldrich.

2.2 Synthesis of pure CuTi₂S₄ and rGO combined CuTi₂S₄ nanocomposite

A single step preparation of reduced graphene oxide based on our previously reported method [26]. The synthesis process of CuTi₂S₄ composite was done by a hydrothermal approach in a one-step process. Initially, 3 mM of copper nitrate was mixed in ethanol (30 mL) and the obtained mixture was added dropwise to 3 mM of tetraethoxytitanium (Ti precursor) and 3 mM of sulfur solution under magnetic stirring for 2 h. Consequently, the obtained composites was transferred into an autoclave and heated at 140 °C for 8 h. Finally, the precipitate was filtered, washed with ethanol and dried to produce the CuTi₂S₄ composite material.

The synthesis of CuTi₂S₄/rGO nanocomposite was performed as follows: 250 mg of prepared CuTi₂S₄ material was mixed with 30 mL of ethanol solution and continuously stirred for 2 h. Consequently, the above mixture was blended with 150 mg of rGO solution. Then the attained mixture was transferred to an autoclave and kept in a hot air oven at 140 °C for 8 h. Finally obtained precipitate was washed several times with ethanol labelled as CuTi₂S₄/rGO.

2.3 Characterization

The structures of the pure CuTi₂S₄ and rGO combined materials were inspected by an X-ray diffractometer (XRD) Rigaku with a scan rate of 3°/min and recorded a 2 theta range of

10 to 90°. Then, Raman spectra from a model of LabRAM HR evolution (Horiba) with a wavelength of 532 nm was used to confirm the formation of the CuTi₂S₄/rGO structure. The morphologies and elemental percentages of prepared CuTi₂S₄/rGO were examined by field emission scanning electron microscopy (FESEM), ZEISS (EVO LS 15, Germany) instrument and elemental dispersive X-ray (EDX) analysis was performed with the help of AMETEK, Z2-17 analyzer (USA). Further, the insight morphology and their crystalline nature analyses were carried out by high resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM, FEI). Fourier transform infrared spectra with a model of Bruker Optic, GmbH, Germany (SENSOR 27) were used to evaluate the bonding site of CuTi₂S₄/rGO materials.

2.4 Evaluation of photocatalytic performance

A photocatalytic study was carried out using a homemade photocatalytic reactor system using organic reactive dye under UV-Visible radiation and illuminated by a tungsten halogen lamp (500 W). Then the reactor temperature was controlled by a continuous flow of water in its outlet. Then, 100 mL of 20 ppm dye solution containing 50 mg nanocomposite catalysts employed as the photocatalyst in the photoreactor. Continuously, after switching on the lamp, the resultant concentration of dye was measured with the help of an Elico UV-Vis spectrophotometer. Afterward, the effect of oxidants was estimated in a similar way with

the addition of measured quantities of oxidant solution (1 M) to the dye solution.

The percentages of degradation was estimated as $\frac{C_0 - C}{C_0} \times 100$

Here C₀ and C are the initial concentration and the concentration of the dye after degradation, respectively.

In addition, the degradation analysis was carried out by Langmuir-Hinshelwood kinetic model and its formulas as follows

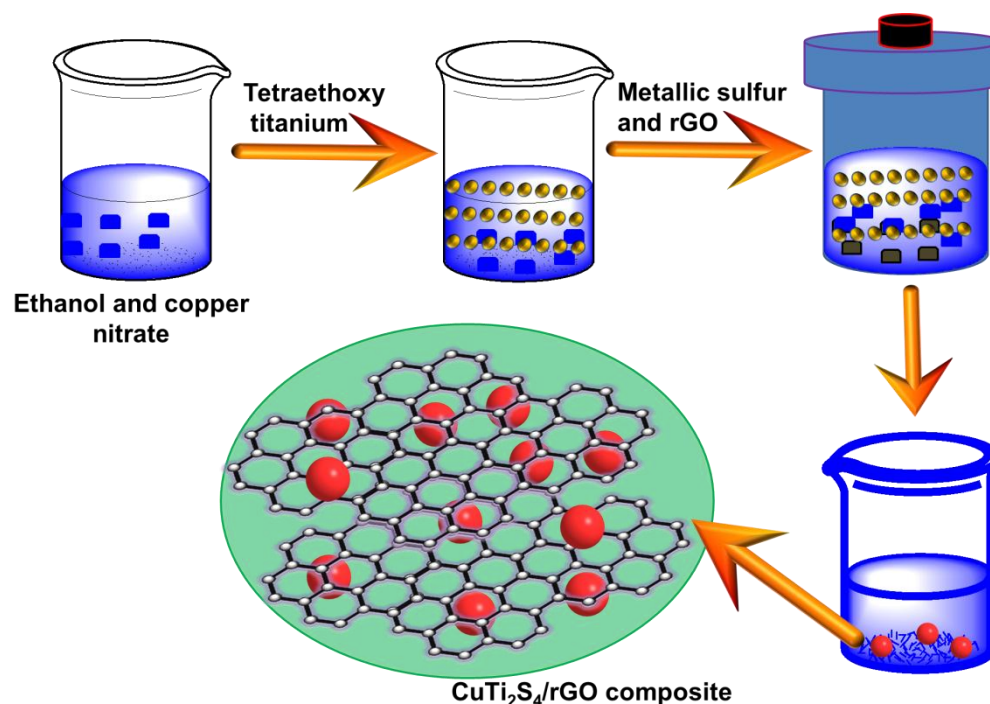
$$R_s = \frac{kKc}{1 + Kc}$$

Here, r_s and C are the specific degradation reaction rate (mg/min) and the concentration of the dye (mg), respectively. The k and K are the reaction rate constant (min) and the dye adsorption constant. Besides, the C is small, the above mentioned equation and obtained apparent pseudo first-order equation is

$$R_s = kKc = K_{app} C \left(= - \frac{dc}{dt} \right)$$
$$-\ln \left(\frac{C}{C_0} \right) = k_{app} t$$

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 CuTi₂S₄/rGO material structure and characterization



Scheme 1. Schematic representation of the preparation of CuTi₂S₄/rGO composite by hydrothermal process.

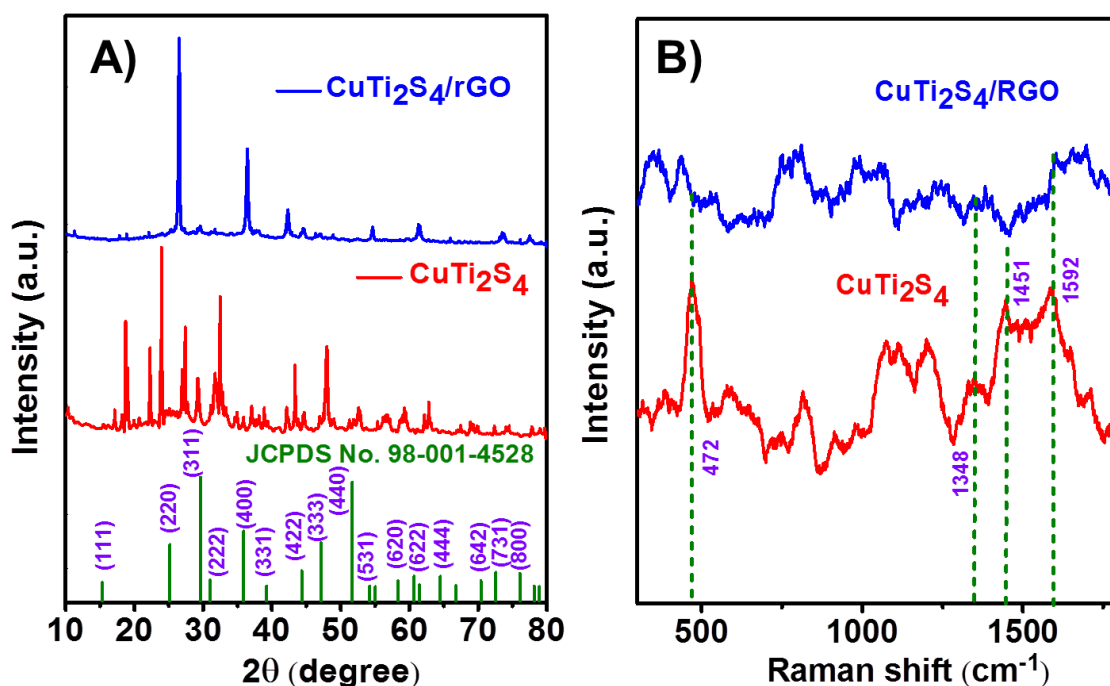


Figure 1. (A) XRD pattern and Raman spectra of prepared the CuTi₂S₄/rGO and pure CuTi₂S₄ materials.

Scheme 1 illustrates the schematic preparation of the CuTi₂S₄/rGO composite material. Initially, copper nitrate was dissolved in ethanol and then titanium precursor of tetraethoxytitanium was added under constant

stirring. Then the addition of metallic sulfur was combined with Cu and Ti precursors to promote a CuTi₂S₄ under a hydrothermal process. Afterward, the CuTi₂S₄ was mixed with the rGO solution. The resulting product

was transformed into a CuTi₂S₄-anchored rGO composite during the hydrothermal treatment. **Figure 1A.** the XRD pattern, the main peaks are at 15.3, 25.1, 29.6, 30.9, 35.8, 39.2, 44.3, 47.1, 51.6, 54.2, 58.3, 61.4, 64.5, 70.4, 72.5 and 76.0°, which are indexed to (111), (220), (311), (222), (400), (331), (422), (333), (440), (531), (620), (622), (444), (642), (731) and (800) planes, respectively. Such observations are well matched with JCPDS:98-001-4528, indicating the cubic crystalline structure of CuTi₂S₄/rGO and pure CuTi₂S₄ and the space group of Fd-3m [27–30].

Further, the structure and formation of pure CuTi₂S₄ and rGO-combined CuTi₂S₄ composites were further examined by the

Raman spectra, which are displayed in **Figure 1B.** From the Raman spectra of the CuTi₂S₄/rGO sample, the low-intensity D band, which was observed at 1348 cm⁻¹, corresponds to the disorder band (sp³ hybridization), respectively. In contrast, the high-intensity G band appeared at 1592 cm⁻¹, indicating the presence of graphitic carbon (sp² hybridization) in samples [31–34]. More importantly, the strong band obtained at 1451 cm⁻¹ confirms the presence of two metals with different coordination bonds [35]. Compared with pure CuTi₂S₄ samples, the composite CuTi₂S₄/rGO revealed a high intensity peak at 472 cm⁻¹, which is confirmed of the availability of Cu₂S in CuTi₂S₄/rGO [36].

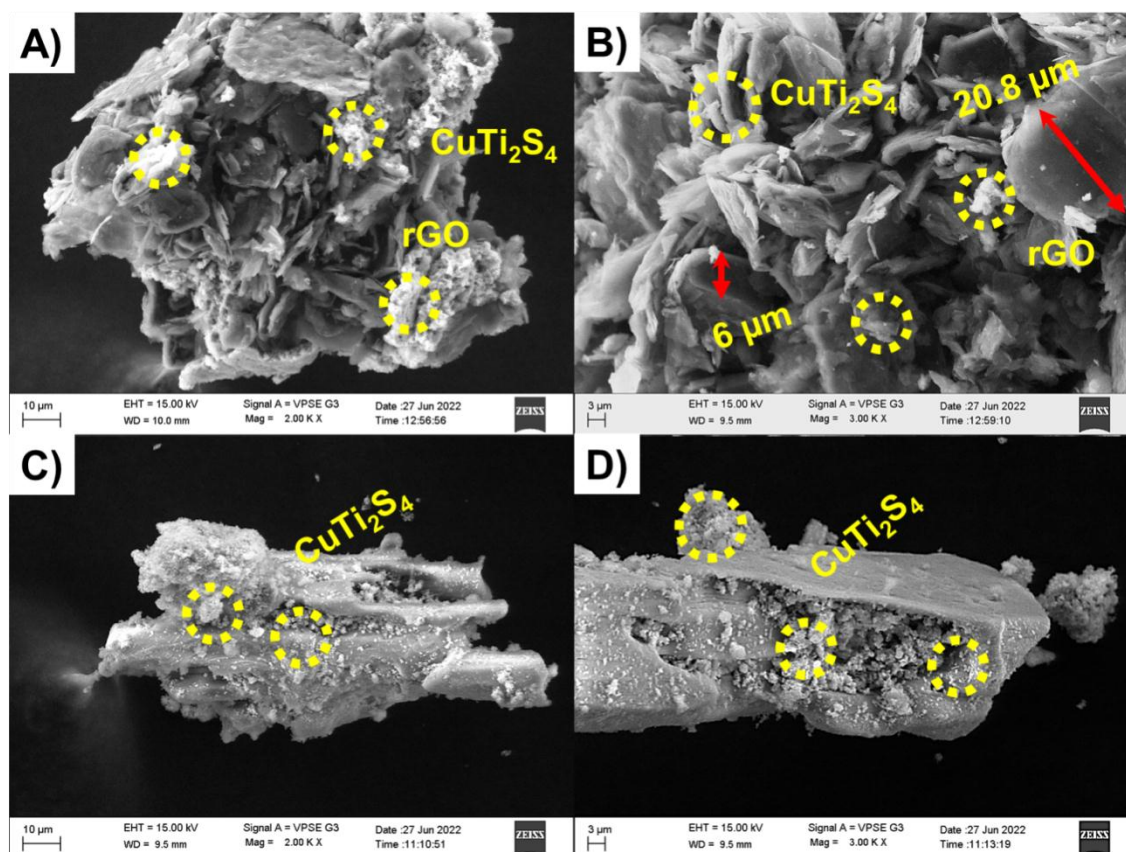


Figure 2. Low and high magnification FESEM images of the prepared the (A, B) CuTi₂S₄/rGO and pure (C, D) CuTi₂S₄ materials.

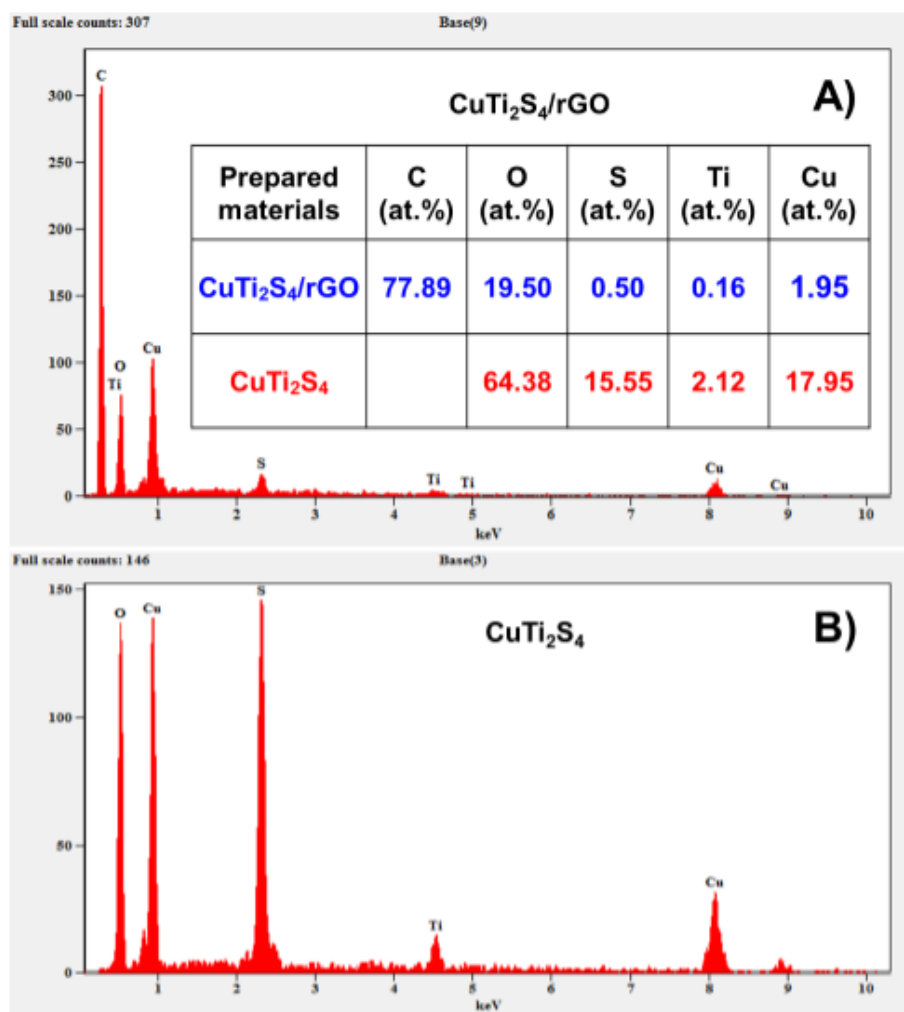


Figure 3. SEM EDX spectra of prepared (A) CuTi₂S₄/rGO, (B) CuTi₂S₄

In addition, the morphology of prepared CuTi₂S₄/rGO and CuTi₂S₄ pure samples was further examined by FESEM and HRTEM analyses. The FESEM images of CuTi₂S₄/rGO showed the ellipsoid-shaped morphology and its average diameter and thicknesses of 21 and 6 μm, respectively (**Figure 2**). These results pointed out that the CuTi₂S₄ particles are successfully dispersed on reduced graphene oxide sheets. Such a combination effectively contributed to the photocatalytic performance. Subsequently, the pure CuTi₂S₄ material showed an entirely different structure: a sponge with porous morphology due to the absence of rGO, which was further confirmed by EDX analysis [37]. The EDX analysis of both samples has been shown in **Figure 3**.

where the Cu, Ti, and S are uniformly distributed and bound in rGO sheet-like structure. Their corresponding observed HRTEM images are shown in **Figure 4**. As shown in **Figure 4A-C**, cubic-shaped surfaces are occupied on the graphite sheet surface. Particularly **Figures 4B and 4C** presented high uniform cubic morphologies, and their sizes are labelled inside the figure. These results suggest that the CuTi₂S₄ effectively anchored over the graphene sheet structure develops the stable morphology and its respective SAED pattern given in **Figure 4D** [38,39]. The SAED pattern proposed that the highly uniform rings with various spots, imply the polycrystalline nature of CuTi₂S₄/rGO material [40].

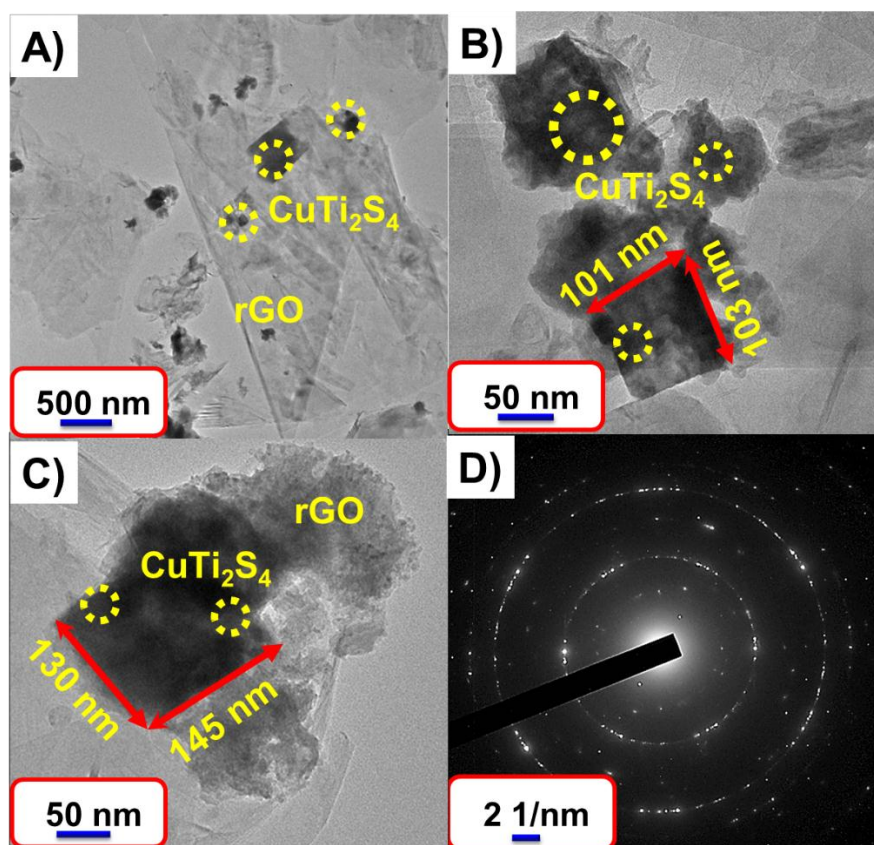


Figure 4. (A-C) Low and higher magnifications of **HRTEM** images of **CuTi₂S₄/rGO** and (D) their respected **SAED** pattern.

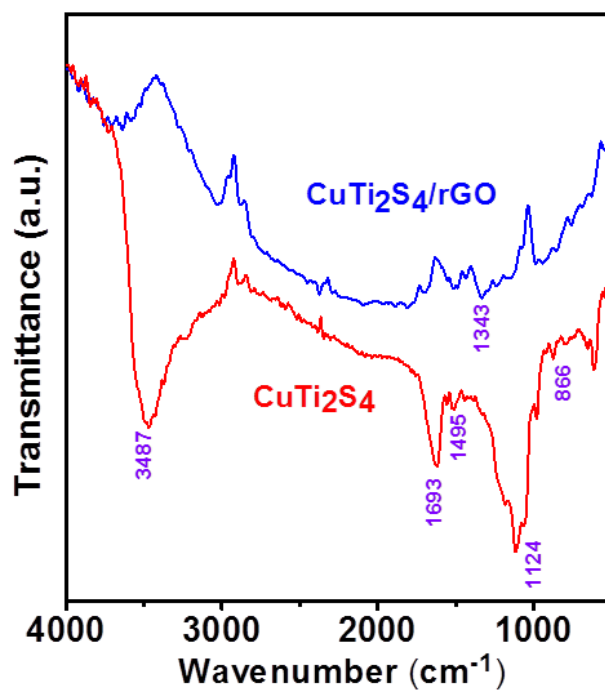


Figure 5. FTIR image of **CuTi₂S₄/rGO** and pure **CuTi₂S₄** materials.

FT-IR spectra proves the bonding sites of synthesized materials, as presented in **Figure 5**. Remarkably, compared with the CuTi₂S₄ samples, in the CuTi₂S₄-doped CuTi₂S₄/rGO sample, most of the peaks were shifted and intensity was also altered due to the attaching effect of CuTi₂S₄ in reduced graphene oxide. In the case of CuTi₂S₄/rGO sample, a wide and strong peak at 3487 cm⁻¹ attributed to the O-H stretching vibration of CuTi₂S₄ samples [41–45]. The CuTi₂S₄/rGO sample showed low intensity peaks at 1693 and 1490 cm⁻¹, which confirmed the presence of carbonyl compounds and C=C in the graphene oxide sample [41]. In addition, the low-intensity

peak appeared at 1343 cm⁻¹, indicating the C-OH groups of CuTi₂S₄/rGO. This peak disappeared in the CuTi₂S₄ sample. It is one piece of evidence for CuTi₂S₄ effectively bound to the rGO and the formation of CuTi₂S₄/rGO. The other peak observed at 1124 cm⁻¹ was attributed to C-O in the sample. The dual metals are combined in the rGO, which is supported by the peak at 866 cm⁻¹, which relates to the M-OH vibration of CuTi₂S₄/rGO composite [46]. These may significantly influence the photocatalytic activity.

3.2 Evaluation of photocatalytic activity

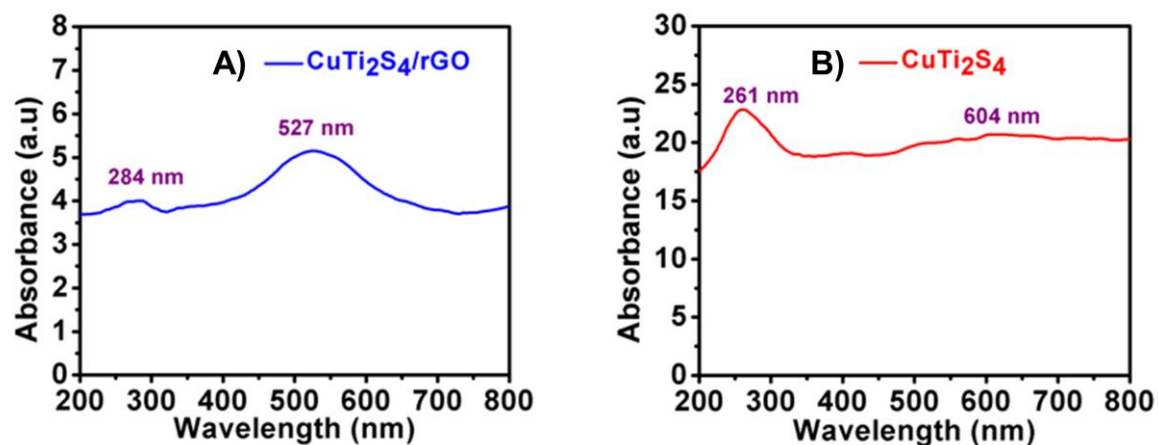


Figure 6. UV-Vis diffuse reflectance spectra of (A) CuTi₂S₄/rGO and (B) pure CuTi₂S₄ materials.

The optical properties of the CuTi₂S₄/rGO composite and pure materials were revealed by DRS. UV-Vis diffuse reflectance spectra can be employed to investigate the absorption edge information and the width of the forbidden band of prepared materials, as presented in **Figure 6**. It is noted from the results that the enhanced absorbance of the visible light region has been observed in rGO-introduced CuTi₂S₄/rGO than the pure CuTi₂S₄ material. This may be attributed to the incorporation of rGO in the CuTi₂S₄ sample, which in turn

influences the optical properties of visible light absorption. Their corresponding band gap spectra are presented in **Figure 7**, which is derived from the Tauc plot of UV-Vis spectra. The calculated band gap values of CuTi₂S₄/rGO and CuTi₂S₄ are 1.80 and 2.1 eV, respectively, which facilitate better photocatalytic activity. These results are one of the evidence for a considerable alteration in the photocatalytic activity. These values are in good agreement with previous reports [16,22,26,47,48].

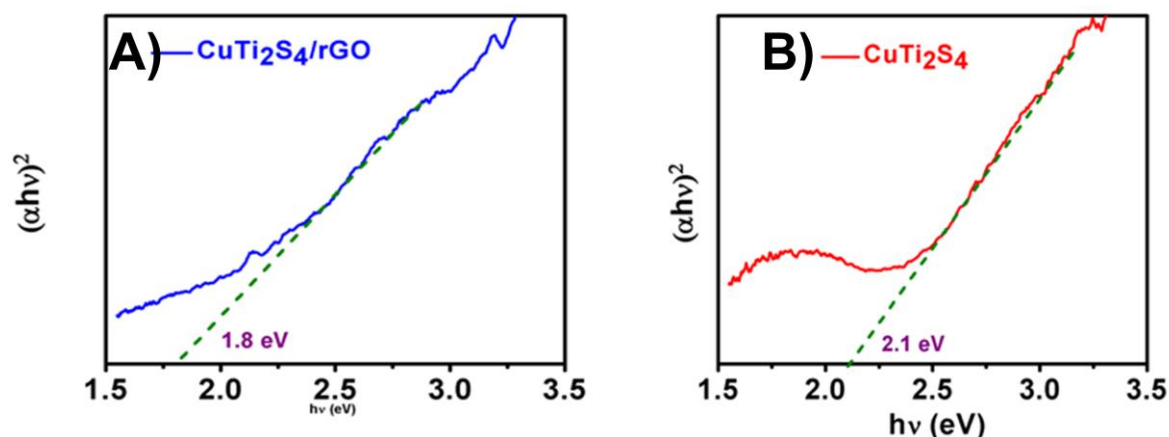


Figure 7. Band gap spectra of (A) CuTi₂S₄/rGO and pure (B) CuTi₂S₄ materials.

3.3 Photodegradability of reactive black-5 (RB-5)

The photocatalytic activities of prepared materials of rGO, CuTi₂S₄, and CuTi₂S₄/rGO composites were studied by degradation of reactive black-5 under solar light radiation. Here, the aromatic compound of RB-5 has highly effective candidates for light absorption

in the UV-Visible region; thereby we have selected this material for the analysis. The resulted time profiles of C/C₀ are given in **Figure 8A**, where C is the concentration of RB-5 with irradiation time and C₀ is the concentration of adsorption or desorption equilibrium before the radiation [49,50].

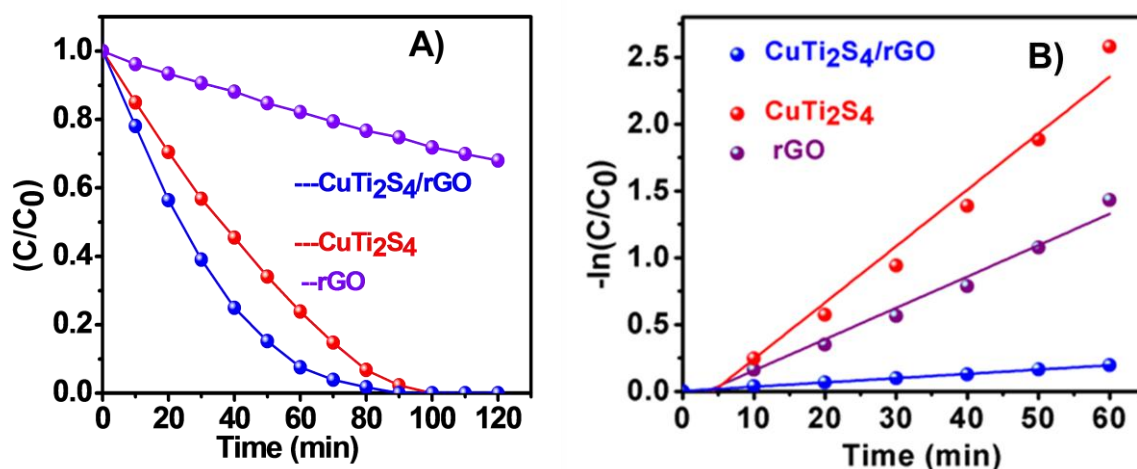


Figure 8. Photocatalytic activity of CuTi₂S₄/rGO, pure CuTi₂S₄ and rGO materials.

Figure 8A represents the improved photocatalytic activity shown in CuTi₂S₄/rGO compared with pure materials owing to the assessment of rGO and CuTi₂S₄. After 60 min, the solar light illumination of CuTi₂S₄/rGO with RB-5 degrades by only 20%. Overall, it showed a growth rate of 98%, indicating higher performance. In the case of pure CuTi₂S₄ and rGO exhibited 80 and 85% photocatalytic activity which are significantly lower than CuTi₂S₄/rGO composite. It is interesting to note that CuTi₂S₄/rGO

demonstrated remarkable photo efficiency. This superior performance can be attributed to the following reasons such as the presence of the rGO effect, which could involve the transition of electrons to the CuTi₂S₄/rGO surface and lead to inhibition of the photogenerated charge recombination. Hence, the presence of rGO is significantly involved in the transition of valence band to conduction band electrons, which leads to the formation of new levels of energy via E_g of CuTi₂S₄. These

reduce the required energy for this transfer process [22,51].

In addition, above mentioned graphs showed good fitting, indicating first-order kinetics (**Figure 8B**). It is worth mentioning

that conduction band electrons can be converted into adsorbed oxygen molecules to develop superoxide anions. Consequently, it can be transformed to OH* and promote the degradation of reactive black-5.

3.4 The reusability analysis of CuTi₂S₄/rGO composites

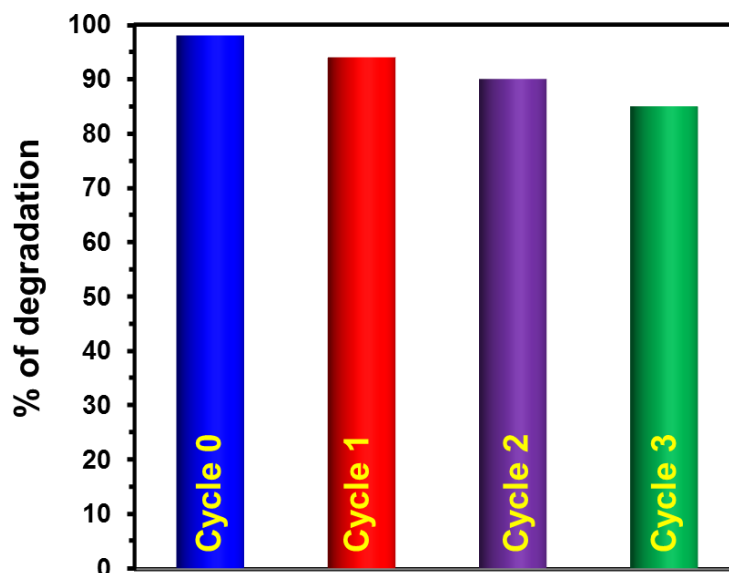
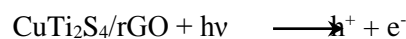


Figure 9. Reusability analysis of CuTi₂S₄/rGO materials with various cycles.

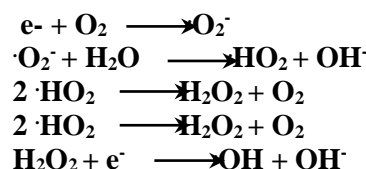
Further, we performed the photocatalytic reusability analysis of the best CuTi₂S₄/rGO composite for 0 to 3 cycles. During this experiment, the RB-5 solutions were replaced every 120 min and the degradation percentages were measured, as demonstrated in **Figure 9**. Hence, after every cycle, the CuTi₂S₄/rGO composite exhibited degradation rates for RB-5 of 98 (0 cycle), 94 (1 cycle), 90 (2 cycles) and 85% (3 cycles). It is worth noting that the degradation efficiency of the CuTi₂S₄/rGO composite gradually decreases with respect to cycles. Such an observation is recommended that due to the accumulation of intermediates during the degradation of RB-5 dye [52].

Proposed Mechanism

Based on UV-Vis DRS results the following mechanism was proposed. The mechanism has been presented in **Figure 10**.



In the visible light irradiation on CuTi₂S₄/rGO composite material, the electrons are excited in the valance band to conduction band to generate the h⁺ in the valance band. In this case, the produced electrons are collected and transported by rGO. This leads to a significant separation of the electron hole pair, which subsequently boosts the charge carrier's lifetime. Then the photogenerated electrons have been reduced by the adsorbed O₂ on rGO to produce ·HO₂ species along with ·O₂⁻ or OH radicals and their reactions are



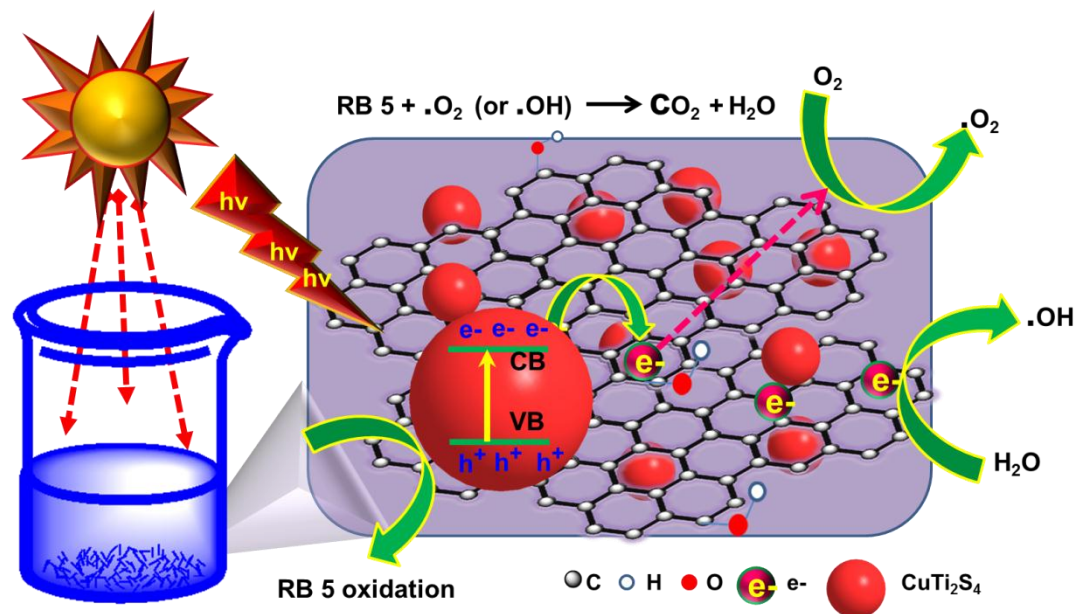
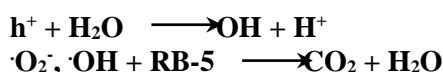


Figure 10. Proposed mechanism for the degradation of RB-5 over the CuTi₂S₄/rGO under visible light irradiation.

Then the RB-5 dye molecules can be degraded by the radicals $\cdot\text{O}_2^-$ and $\cdot\text{OH}$ to CO_2 and H_2O , and other products. In parallel, the photogenerated h^+ effectively react with the OH^- to produce OH . Consequently, it oxidises the absorbed RB-5 on the surface. Hence, RB-5 can be effectively degraded under visible light irradiation and improving performance stability and photocatalytic activity.



4. Conclusions

In summary, we have successfully developed bimetallic copper, titanium, and sulfide (CuTi_2S_4) composite anchored over a reduced graphene oxide material through an effective hydrothermal treatment. The highly active $\text{CuTi}_2\text{S}_4/\text{rGO}$ material was derived from copper nitrate, tetraethoxy titanium, and metallic sulfur precursors and the resulted materials were tested for photocatalytic performance with the help of the reactive black-5 dye. Compared with pure CuTi_2S_4 material, the reduced graphene oxide-combined CuTi_2S_4 material greatly influences the morphology and elemental contents of Cu, Ti, and S, which alter the photocatalytic performance. Remarkably, $\text{CuTi}_2\text{S}_4/\text{rGO}$ demonstrated a notable performance compared

to that of others. The uniform linkages of Cu, Ti, and S contents with the rGO significantly improved the absorption and desorption activity and the excellent charge carrier capability. Also, the synergistic effect between CuTi_2S_4 and rGO played a significant role in improving performance towards the degradation of RB-5 dye.

Author Statement

Priya Perumal: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing –editing original draft.

Lakshmi mahadevan: Conceptualization, supervision, review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest for this work.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest for this work.

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