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Probing long-lived plasmonic-generated charges in TiO₂ / Au by high resolution x-ray absorption spectroscopy

Lucia Amidani,^{[a],[b]*} Alberto Naldoni,^{[c]*} Marco Malvestuto,^[d] Marcello Marelli,^[c] Pieter Glatzel,^[b] Vladimiro Dal Santo,^[c] and Federico Boscherini^[a]

Abstract: Exploiting plasmonic Au nanoparticles to sensitize TiO₂ to visible light is a widely employed route to produce efficient photocatalysts. However, a description of the atomic and electronic structure of the semiconductor sites in which charges are injected, of great importance to understand the underlying physical mechanisms and to improve the design of catalysts with enhanced photoactivity, is still not available. We investigated changes in Ti local electronic structure of pure and N-doped nanostructured TiO₂ loaded with Au nanoparticles during continuous selective excitation of the Au localized surface plasmon resonance with X-ray Absorption Spectroscopy (XAS) and Resonant Inelastic X-ray Scattering (RIXS). Spectral variations strongly support the presence of long-lived charges localized on Ti 3d-states atoms at the semiconductor surface, giving rise to new laser-induced low-coordinated Ti sites.

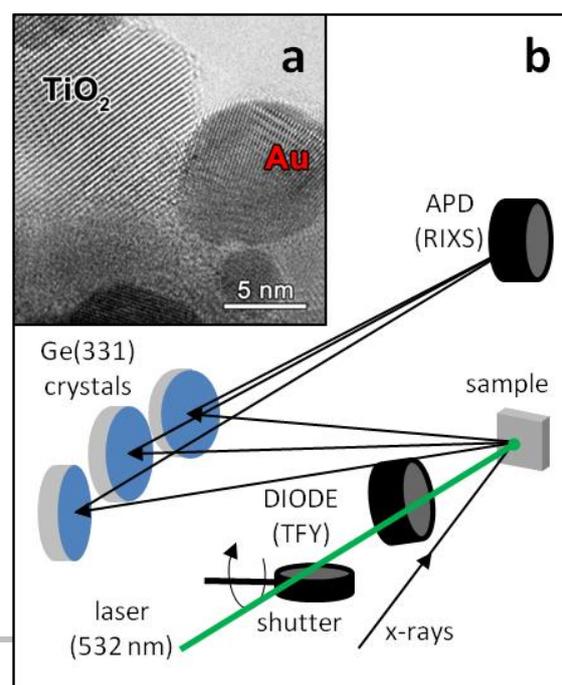
The search for innovative and efficient schemes for the use of solar energy is motivated by the increasing demand for clean energy. Materials used in artificial photosynthesis, e.g. in water splitting/CO₂ reduction,^[1,2] also find application in important chemical processes such as wastewater treatment, pollutant removal, and production of fine chemicals.^[3,4]

Wide bandgap semiconductors, i.e. TiO₂, have low conversion efficiency due to their poor absorption of solar light. Among the new concepts introduced to increase light harvesting, the use of plasmonics is particularly promising.^[3] Plasmonic metal nanoparticles (NPs), indeed, have extremely high absorption cross-sections at in correspondence of the Localized Surface Plasmon Resonance (LSPR) wavelength, which is easily tailored across the solar spectrum acting on NPs shape and size. Upon illumination of LSPR band, plasmonic NPs can

sensitize semiconductors to below bandgap light and create charge-separated states with prolonged lifetime.^[4] The main interaction mechanism leading to sensitization is the generation of "hot electrons (e⁻)" having sufficient energy to overcome the Schottky barrier at the metal/TiO₂ interface and be injected into the TiO₂ conduction band (CB). In parallel, the unique ability of plasmonic NPs to concentrate electromagnetic fields in nanoscale volumes can induce a secondary process where plasmon oscillation resonate with the semiconductor band gap, i.e. plasmonic resonant energy transfer (PRET).^[4] Recently, plasmonic driven processes (whether charge or energy transfer) have been the focus of intense research.^[3,4] For example, Mubeen *et al.* reported an efficient, water splitting device based on Au nanorods array/TiO₂ where all charge carriers involved in the reaction steps were hot e⁻ excited by Au LSPR excitation.^[2] Tailored composite materials and bimetallic plasmonic NPs have also shown high efficiency in driving extensive number of selective chemical reactions.^[3,4]

When used to convert solar light into chemical energy, metal oxides undergo small changes in the electronic and structural properties that drive the catalytic process. Photogenerated charges can in fact induce transient modifications like variation of metal oxidation state and/or the local reconstruction of catalytic sites. Pump-probe, time resolved and *in-operando* x-ray spectroscopies^[5] can detect such modifications by probing the local electronic and structural properties of a selected atomic species and shed light on key steps of the catalytic process, a fundamental achievement to design efficient and cheap photocatalysts.

Figure 1. (a) HRTEM images showing the sharp interface formed after Au NPs deposition on TiO₂ samples. (b) Scheme of the experimental set-up.



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Despite the fact that many approaches that couple plasmonic NPs to semiconductors have been reported so far, the details on structure and electronic nature of trapping sites are still unknown. Tracing the modifications that LSPR excited carriers induce on the density of states of the metal oxide can potentially provide atomistic description of charge localization sites giving important details to improve catalysts design.

Long lifetimes, in the order of μs to ms , and proximity to the surface are essential requirements for photogenerated carriers to efficiently participate to chemical reactions. Light induced variations in atomic and electronic structure due the presence of long-lived charges can be detected by acquiring spectra during continuous Au LSPR excitation. A spectrum acquired under this condition will be the average of characteristic lineshapes of all intermediate states, each weighted by the lifetime. Spectral variations relative to long-lived charges are then amplified with respect to carriers that rapidly recombine.

Herein we report a XANES/RIXS investigation of TiO_2/Au powders during laser excitation of Au NPs LSPR. The spectral variations observed were significant and strongly support a laser-induced reduction of a small percentage of Ti atoms due to long-lived hot electrons that remain trapped in Ti sites at the semiconductor surface after being injected from the Au NPs.

We measured powders of pure and N-doped TiO_2 (anatase) of 15 nm average size loaded with 10 wt. % Au NPs of 5 nm mean diameter. Both UV-vis absorption spectra (Figure S1) show the Au LSPR band centered at about 550 nm. However, the absorption of N- TiO_2 extends to the visible spectrum reflecting its reduced band gap and yellow color. In Figure 1a a representative HRTEM image of TiO_2/Au shows the sharp interface between TiO_2 and Au NPs, a crucial morphological feature to assure an efficient Au – TiO_2 interaction.

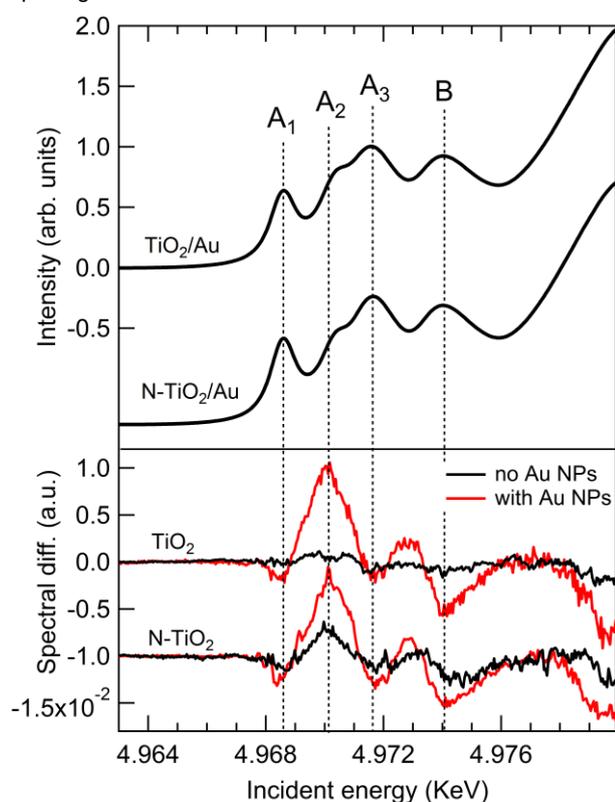


Figure 2. The upper panel shows the pre-edge region of TiO_2/Au and $\text{N-TiO}_2/\text{Au}$ measured in TFY obtained by averaging fifty laser off scans. The

lower panel reports differences between laser on – laser off average spectra acquired on bare powders (black line) and plasmonic TiO_2/Au powders (red line).

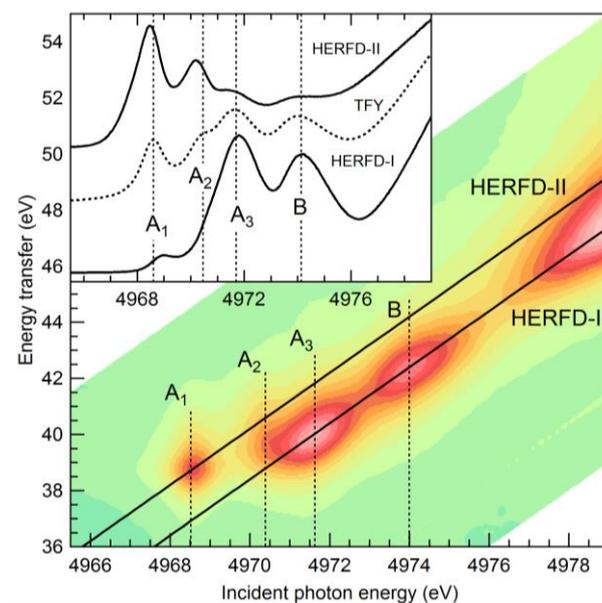


Figure 3. $1s3p$ RIXS plane of the pre-edge region of Ti K-edge spectrum for N- TiO_2 . $1s3p$ RIXS plane is obtained by collecting Ti K_{β} fluorescence while scanning Ti K-edge with the incident x-ray beam. Incident energies of A_{1-3} and B transitions are indicated by dotted black lines, while HERFD-I and HERFD-II cuts are shown with solid black lines. The inset shows the pre-edge region of Ti K-edge spectrum for N- TiO_2 measured in TFY, HERFD-I and HERFD-II.

The experiment was performed on the ID26 beamline at the ESRF^[66] with the set-up shown schematically in Figure 1b. We recorded RIXS, High Energy Resolution Fluorescence Detected (HERFD) and Total Fluorescence Yield (TFY) XANES (see SI for details). Au NPs were excited with a 532 nm 200 mW continuous wave laser and a shutter was used to alternately record laser on/laser off spectra.

Figure 2 reports laser effects on bare and Au-loaded powders in the pre-edge region measured in TFY. Average of laser off scans, the non-excited spectra, are in the top panel and show the typical lineshape of anatase, with four features labeled A_{1-3} and B related to Ti 3d states.^[67] Laser on/laser off spectral differences are reported in the bottom panel for bare and Au loaded powders. Laser irradiation on bare powders leaves unchanged pure TiO_2 while inducing weak variations in N- TiO_2 . As soon as Au NPs are added to oxides, large changes appear in the whole pre-edge region of pure TiO_2 and the ones in N- TiO_2 are strongly enhanced. We recall that N- TiO_2 slightly absorbs 532 nm green light because of the reduced band gap due to N doping. The amplitude and shape of the differential signal is similar for the two powders, hence it can not be related to PRET, which is energetically allowed only in N- TiO_2 and not in pure TiO_2 .^[46] The laser induces a strong increase of A_2 (roughly 1.4%) and modulates the whole pre-edge region as seen by the oscillatory behavior of both differential signals. The lineshape of Ti pre-edge might be also affected by T variations.^[78] We estimated the T increase expected in our experimental conditions and found it negligible, thus excluding also a contribution from sample heating (see calculation in SI).^[69] Therefore, we believe that the variations observed on the

data and generated difference is excellent, both shape and amplitude of variations induced by hot e^- transfer are well reproduced over the whole XANES range. The agreement is very good also for TFY XANES, but the mismatch in correspondence of peaks A_1 and A_2 points out the need to separately investigate laser effects on HERFD-II.

The result of a cycle of laser on – laser off scans of HERFD-II are summarized in Figure 5 and compared with HERFD-I results: the top panel reports laser off spectra and their shifted counterpart for N-TiO₂/Au. The bottom panel displays experimental differences between laser on and laser off scans compared with 0.74% generated differences. The experimental results on HERFD-II are clearly not consistent with a red-shift, here Au LSPR – TiO₂ interaction induces rather an increase of A_2 coupled with a slight decrease of A_1 .

The red-shift of HERFD-II is consistent with the presence of extra-charge in $3d$ states in the vicinity of a small percentage of Ti atoms, since the main parameter affecting transitions to states with p character (edge and dipolar pre-edge peaks) is the change in the valence electron distribution around metal atoms.^[14] On the other hand, in HERFD-II the presence of extra charge does not shift A_1 and A_2 , whose energy position is determined by the effect of the core-hole potential. However it affects their intensities and the pronounced increase of A_2 points out the increase of recalls the effect on the pre-edge of low-coordinated Ti sites at the surface, characterized by extra-charge due to dangling bonds or structural distortions.^[13b-c] The twofold behavior observed in our data is therefore the signature of long-lived electrons that after injection are remain trapped in $3d-p^{10}$ states of Ti atoms at the surface and appear as new laser-induced low-coordinated Ti sites. Based on our result, the conversion efficiency of photons absorbed into surface trapped electrons is ~0.1% (see SI for details).

Interactions between molecules and the TiO₂ surface play a key role in photocatalytic processes like water splitting, environmental remediation, and synthesis of fine chemicals. Anatase TiO₂ surface shows both fully coordinated (6c) and low-coordinated (5c) Ti atoms, as well as threefold (3c) and twofold (2c) coordinated oxygens.^[15] Defective sites, because of the absence of some chemical bonds, present local extra charge and partial structural rearrangement which favor the adsorption of small molecules in their vicinity if compared to stoichiometric surface regions. In addition, considering metal NPs supported on oxides, the interface clearly plays a critical role providing enhanced reactivity.^[16] Similarly, we suggest that in plasmonic TiO₂ / Au, hot e^- remain trapped near the composite interface in Ti $3d-p$ states and generate sites with a similar electronic and structural nature of the already existing low-coordinated ones therefore acting as additional sites for molecules adsorption and providing photogenerated charges to start the catalytic reaction.

In conclusion, with synchrotron-based XAS and RIXS we provided atomistic insights into the electronic and structural localization of plasmonic generated charges. Our investigation indicates that part of the injected electrons survive longer, being captured at $3d$ Ti sites concentrated nearby the surface. These trapped charges have all the characteristics required to be the active sites in plasmonic photocatalysis.

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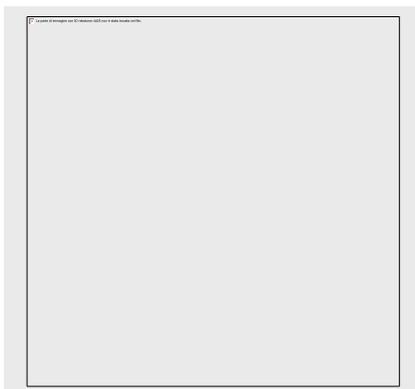
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COMMUNICATION

The atomistic description of TiO₂ electronic and structural changes due to the injection of hot electrons is reported. Plasmonic charges are trapped on Ti 3d states atoms at the semiconductor surface, giving rise to transient low-coordinated Ti sites having sufficient lifetime to play a major role in catalytic processes.



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Page No. – Page No.

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