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Role of surface modification in enhancing electrochemical properties of nanomaterials for battery applications

Dr. Shishir kumar[1], Akhand Pratap Singh[2], Vipin Kumar Singh[3], Priyanka Singh[1], R B Singh[3]
[1] Department of Chemistry, Maharishi University of Information Technology, Sitapur Road, IIM Byepass, Bhitauli Tiraha, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India
[3] Professor, Department of Chemistry, Agra College, Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India
[5] Professor, Scientist 'C' UGC, School of Life Sciences, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Khandari Campus, Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

Nanomaterials have emerged as promising electrode materials for high performance batteries due to their unique physico-chemical properties. However, the high surface area and surface reactivity of nanomaterials can lead to undesired side reactions and poor cycling stability. Surface modification has proven to be an effective strategy to address these challenges and enhance the electrochemical properties of nanomaterials for battery applications. This manuscript provides a comprehensive overview of the recent progress in surface modification of nanomaterials for battery electrodes. Various surface modification techniques, including coating, doping, functionalization and core shell structuring are discussed in detail. The impact of surface modification on the electrochemical performance, including capacity, rate capability and cycling stability is systematically analyzed. The underlying mechanisms of surface modification in improving the electrochemical properties are elucidated. Further more, the challenges and future perspectives of surface modified nanomaterials for advanced battery systems are highlighted. This paper aims to provide valuable insights into the design and optimization of high performance battery electrodes based on surface modified nanomaterials.

Keywords: Nanomaterials, surface modification, batteries, electrochemical properties, electrode materials

Introduction

The development of high performance rechargeable batteries is crucial for the widespread adoption of electric vehicles and renewable energy storage systems [1]. Lithium ion batteries (LIBs) have been the dominant technology for portable electronics and electric vehicles due to their high energy density, long cycle life and low self-discharge [2]. However, the increasing demand for higher energy density, faster charging and longer lifespan has driven the search for advanced electrode materials beyond the conventional graphite anode and lithium metal oxide cathode [3]. Nanomaterials have attracted significant attention as promising electrode materials for next generation batteries due to their unique physico-chemical properties, such as high surface area, short diffusion paths and enhanced reactivity [4]. Various nanostructured materials, including nanoparticles, nanowires, nanotubes and nanosheets, have been extensively investigated for battery applications [5]. These nanomaterials exhibit improved electrochemical performance compared to their bulk counterparts, owing to their increased surface area and reduced diffusion distance for Lithium ions and electrons [6].

However, the high surface area and surface reactivity of nanomaterials also pose several challenges. The large surface area can lead to increased side reactions with the electrolyte, resulting in the formation of a solid electrolyte interphase (SEI) layer and irreversible capacity loss. Moreover, the high surface energy and aggregation tendency of nanomaterials can cause structural instability and capacity fading during long term cycling [6]. Therefore, surface modification has emerged as a crucial strategy to address these issues and enhance the electrochemical properties of nanomaterials for battery applications. Surface modification involves the intentional alteration of the surface properties of nanomaterials through various techniques, such as coating, doping, functionalization and core shell structuring. These modifications aim to improve the surface stability, conductivity and selectivity of nanomaterials, thereby enhancing their electrochemical performance in battery electrodes. Surface modification can provide a protective layer to prevent direct contact between the nanomaterial and the electrolyte, reducing side reactions and improving cycling stability [7]. It can also facilitate charge transfer, increase the electronic conductivity and enhance the structural stability of the nanomaterials [8]. This manuscript aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the recent progress in surface modification of nanomaterials for battery applications. The various surface modification techniques and their impact on the electrochemical properties of nanomaterials will be discussed in detail. The underlying mechanisms of surface modification in improving battery performance will be elucidated. Furthermore, the challenges and future perspectives of surface-modified nanomaterials for advanced battery systems will be highlighted.

Materials and methods

Surface Modification Techniques

Coating: Coating is a widely used surface modification technique that involves depositing a thin layer of another material on the surface of the nanomaterial. The coating layer can be composed of various materials, such as carbon, polymers, metal oxides, and metal sulfides [9]. The choice of coating material depends on the desired properties and the specific application of the nanomaterial. Carbon coating is one of the most common coating techniques for improving the electrochemical performance of nanomaterials in battery electrodes. Carbon coating can enhance the electronic conductivity, prevent direct contact with the electrolyte and provide a protective layer against side reactions. Various carbon sources, such as glucose, sucrose and polymers, can be used for carbon coating [10]. The thickness and uniformity of the carbon coating play a crucial role in determining the electrochemical properties of the nanomaterial. Table-1 summarizes some representative studies on carbon coated nanomaterials for battery applications [11].

Table 1: Carbon coated nanomaterials for battery applications.

Nanomaterial	Coating Materials	Electrochemical Performance
$LiFePO_4$	Glucose-derived carbon	Specific capacity: 160 mAh g-1 at 0.1C
Si nanoparticles	Sucrose-derived carbon	Specific capacity: 1500 mAh g-1 at 0.2C
SnO_2 nanowires	Polyaniline-derived carbon	Specific capacity: 800 mAh g-1 at 0.5C

Polymer coating is another effective approach for surface modification of nanomaterials. Conductive polymers, such as polypyrole and polyaniline, can be coated on the surface of nanomaterials to improve their electronic conductivity and cycling stability. Polymer coating can also provide a flexible buffer layer to accommodate the volume changes of the nanomaterial during lithiation / delithiation processes [12]. Metal oxide and metal sulfide coatings have also been explored for enhancing the electrochemical properties of nanomaterials. These coatings can provide a protective layer against side reactions, improve the structural stability and enhance the lithium storage capacity. For example, Al_2O_3 coating on $LiCoO_2$ cathode material has been shown to improve the cycling stability and thermal stability. TiO_2 coating on $Li_4Ti_5O_{12}$ anode material has demonstrated enhanced rate capability and cycling performance [13].

Doping: Doping is a surface modification technique that involves the intentional introduction of impurities or foreign elements into the crystal structure of the nanomaterial. Doping can modulate the electronic, optical and electrochemical properties of the nanomaterial by altering its band structure, conductivity and surface chemistry [14]. Cation doping is commonly employed to enhance the electrochemical properties of cathode materials. The incorporation of divalent cations, such as Mg_{2+}, Ni_{2+}, and $Co_{2+,}$into $LiFePO_4$ cathode material has been shown to improve its electronic conductivity and lithium-ion diffusivity [15]. Cation doping can also stabilize the crystal structure and suppress the phase transition during cycling, leading to improved cycling stability.

Anion doping, particularly with fluorine (F) and sulfur (S), has been explored to enhance the electrochemical performance of anode materials. F-doping in SnO_2 anode material has been reported to increase the electronic conductivity and reduce the charge transfer resistance. S-doping in TiO_2 anode material has been shown to improve the rate capability and cycling stability by creating surface defects and enhancing the electronic conductivity [16]. Some representative studies on doped nanomaterials for battery applications [16] are given in Table – 2

Table 2: Doped nanomaterials for battery applications.

Nanomaterial	Dopant	Electrochemical Performance
$LiFePO_4$	Mg	Specific capacity: 165 mAh g-1 at 1C
LiMn2O4	Ni	Specific capacity: 120 mAh g-1 at 10C
SnO_2	F	Specific capacity: 1200 mAh g-1 at 0.2C
TiO_2	S	Specific capacity: 200 mAh g-1 at 10C

FunctionalizationFunctionalization involves the attachment of functional groups or molecules on the surface of the nanomaterial. Surface functionalization can improve the dispensability, stability, and reactivity of the nanomaterial, as well as introduce additional functionalities [18]. Organic functionalization is a common approach for surface modification of nanomaterials. The attachment of organic molecules, such as carboxylic acids, amines, and polymers, on the surface of the nanomaterial can enhance its compatibility with the electrolyte and improve the cycling stability. For example, the functionalization of grapheme with carboxylic acid groups has been shown to increase its dispersibility in aqueous electrolytes and enhance its capacitive performance [19]. Inorganic functionalization involves the attachment of inorganic species, such as metal nanoparticles or metal oxides, on the surface of the nanomaterial. This functionalization can introduce catalytic properties, improve the electronic conductivity and enhance the lithium storage capacity. For instance, the functionalization of carbon nanotubes with SnO_2 nanoparticles has been reported to improve the specific capacity and cycling stability of the anode material [20]. Table-3 summarizes some representative studies on functionalized nanomaterials for battery applications [21].

Table 3: Functionalized nanomaterials for battery applications.

Nanomaterial	Functional Group/Species	Electrochemical Performance
Graphene	Carboxylic acid	Specific capacitance: 200 F g-1 at 1 A g-1
Carbon nanotubes	SnO_2 nanoparticles	Specific capacity: 800 mAh g-1 at 0.2C
Si nanowires	Polyaniline	Specific capacity: 2000 mAh g-1 at 0.5C

Core Shell Structuring: Core shell structuring is a surface modification technique that involves the synthesis of a nanomaterial with a core-shell architecture. The core material is encapsulated by a shell material, which can be a different composition or structure. Core-shell structuring can combine the advantages of both the core and shell materials, leading to enhanced electrochemical properties. The shell material in core-shell structured nanomaterials can serve various functions, such as providing a protective layer, enhancing the electronic conductivity, or introducing additional lithium storage sites. For example, a carbon shell on a silicon nanoparticle core can accommodate the volume changes during lithiation/delithiation, prevent direct contact with the electrolyte, and improve the electronic conductivity. A TiO_2 shell on a SnO_2 nanoparticle core can provide a stable SEI layer, suppress the aggregation of

SnO_2, and enhance the cycling stability [22]. Table-4 presents some representative studies on core shell structured nanomaterials for battery applications [23].

Table 4: Core shell structured nanomaterials for battery applications.

Core Material	Shell Material	Electrochemical Performance
Si nanoparticles	Carbon	Specific capacity: 1800 mAh g-1 at 0.5C
SnO_2 nanoparticles	TiO_2	Specific capacity: 600 mAh g-1 at 1C
$LiMn_2O_4$	$LiNi0.5Mn1.5O_4$	Specific capacity: 130 mAh g-1 at 5C

Impact of Surface Modification on Electrochemical Properties:

Capacity Enhancement: Surface modification of nanomaterials can significantly enhance their specific capacity and energy density. The capacity enhancement can be attributed to several factors, such as increased surface area, improved electronic conductivity and additional lithium storage sites introduced by the surface modification. Carbon coating is an effective approach to enhance the specific capacity of nanomaterials. The carbon coating can improve the electronic conductivity of the nanomaterial, facilitating faster charge transfer and enabling higher utilization of the active material. For example, carbon-coated $LiFePO_4$ cathode material has demonstrated a specific capacity of 160 mAh g-1 at 0.1C, which is close to its theoretical capacity.

Doping is another strategy to enhance the specific capacity of nanomaterials. The incorporation of dopants can create lattice defects, increase the electronic conductivity, and provide additional lithium storage sites [24]. For instance, Mg-doped $LiFePO_4$ cathode material has shown a specific capacity of 165 mAh g-1 at 1C, which is higher than that of undoped $LiFePO_4$. Functionalization of nanomaterials with high-capacity materials, such as metal oxides or metal sulfides, can also enhance their specific capacity. The functionalized species can contribute to the lithium storage capacity through conversion or alloying reactions. For example, SnO_2-functionalized carbon nanotubes have demonstrated a specific capacity of 800 mAh g-1 at 0.2C, which is significantly higher than that of pure carbon nanotubes.

Rate Capability Improvement: Rate capability refers to the ability of a battery electrode to deliver high specific capacity at high charge/discharge rates. Surface modification of nanomaterials can significantly improve their rate capability by enhancing the electronic conductivity, reducing the charge transfer resistance and facilitating faster lithium-ion diffusion. Carbon coating is an effective approach to improve the rate capability of nanomaterials. The conductive carbon coating can provide a continuous electron transport pathway, reducing the charge transfer resistance and enabling faster charge/discharge rates. For example, carbon-coated Si nanoparticles have demonstrated a specific capacity of 1500 mAh g-1 at 0.2C, which is significantly higher than that of bare Si nanoparticles.

Doping with aliovalent cations or anions can also enhance the rate capability of nanomaterials. The dopants can increase the electronic conductivity and create lattice defects, facilitating faster lithium-ion diffusion [25]. For instance, Ni-doped $LiMn2O_4$ cathode material has shown a specific capacity of 120 mAh g-1 at 10 ^{0}C, indicating excellent rate capability.

Core-shell structuring is another effective strategy to improve the rate capability of nanomaterials. The shell material can provide a conductive pathway for electron transport, while the core material can offer high specific capacity. For example, $LiMn2O_4/LiNi0.5Mn1.5O_4$ core-shell structured cathode material has demonstrated a specific capacity of 130 mAh g-1 at 5C, which is superior to that of bare $LiMn_2O_4$.

Cycling Stability Enhancement: Cycling stability is a crucial factor for the long-term performance of battery electrodes. Surface modification of nanomaterials can significantly enhance their cycling stability by suppressing side reactions, preventing structural degradation, and accommodating volume changes during repetitive lithiation/delithiation processes. Coating of nanomaterials with a protective layer, such as carbon or metal oxides, can effectively suppress side reactions between the electrode and the electrolyte. The coating layer acts as a physical barrier, preventing direct contact and reducing the formation of unwanted SEI layers. For example, Al_2O_3-coated $LiCoO_2$ cathode material has shown improved cycling stability compared to bare $LiCoO_2$ due to the suppression of electrolyte decomposition and cobalt dissolution.

Functionalization of nanomaterials with conductive polymers or organic molecules can also enhance their cycling stability. The functional groups can provide a flexible buffer layer to accommodate the volume changes of the nanomaterial during lithiation/delithiation, preventing structural degradation [26]. For instance, polyaniline-functionalized Si nanowires have demonstrated excellent cycling stability, retaining a specific capacity of 2000 mAh g-1 after 100 cycles at 0.5C. Core shell structuring is another effective approach to enhance the cycling stability of nanomaterials. The shell material can provide mechanical support and prevent the aggregation of the core material during repeated cycling. For example, SnO_2/TiO_2 core-shell structured anode material has shown improved cycling stability compared to bare SnO_2, retaining a specific capacity of 600 mAh g-1 after 100 cycles at 1C.

Results and discussion

Surface Chemical Modification: Surface chemical modification involves the alteration of the chemical composition and bonding on the surface of the nanomaterial. This can be achieved through various techniques, such as coating, doping, and functionalization. Coating of nanomaterials with a layer of a different material can modify the surface chemical composition and create new chemical bonds. For example, carbon coating on $LiFePO_4$ cathode material introduces C-O and C-C bonds on the surface, which can enhance the electronic conductivity and improve the surface stability [27]. The formation of chemical bonds between the coating layer and the nanomaterial surface can also enhance the adhesion and stability of the coating.

Doping of nanomaterials with foreign elements can alter the surface chemical composition and create lattice defects. The incorporation of dopants can change the electronic structure, create surface states, and modify the surface chemical properties. For instance, F-doping in SnO_2 anode material can create surface oxygen vacancies, which can enhance the electronic conductivity and improve the lithium-ion diffusion. Functionalization of nanomaterials with organic molecules or functional groups can introduce new chemical bonds and modify the surface chemistry. The functional groups can interact with the electrolyte, modify the SEI formation, and enhance the surface stability. For example, the functionalization of graphene with carboxylic acid groups can introduce C-O and C=O bonds on the surface, which can enhance the hydrophilicity and improve the capacitive performance.

Surface Structural Modification: Surface structural modification involves the alteration of the surface morphology, crystallinity, and porosity of the nanomaterial. This can be achieved through techniques such as nanostructuring, surface roughening, and pore creation. Nanostructuring of materials into various morphologies, such as nanoparticles, nanowires, and nanosheets, can significantly increase the surface area and reduce the diffusion distance for lithium ions. The high surface area provides more active sites for lithium storage and enables faster charge transfer. For example, the nanostructuring of Si into nanowires has demonstrated a specific capacity of 3500 mAh g-1, which is close to its theoretical capacity.

Surface roughening can increase the surface area and create a hierarchical structure on the nanomaterial surface. The rough surface can provide more sites for lithium-ion adsorption and enhance the contact area with the electrolyte. Surface roughening can be achieved through chemical etching, plasma treatment, or mechanical grinding. For instance, the surface roughening of $LiCoO_2$ cathode material through chemical etching has shown improved cycling stability and rate capability.

Pore creation on the surface of nanomaterials can increase the surface area, facilitate electrolyte penetration, and provide additional sites for lithium storage. Porous structures can be created through template-assisted synthesis, self-assembly, or selective etching. For example, the creation of mesopores on the surface of TiO_2 anode material has demonstrated improved specific capacity and rate capability due to the enhanced lithium-ion diffusion and increased surface area [28].

Interface Engineering: Interface engineering focuses on the modification and control of the interface between the nanomaterial and the electrolyte. The interface plays a crucial role in determining the electrochemical performance, stability, and safety of the battery. SEI layer formation is a critical aspect of interface engineering. The SEI layer is a passivation film that forms on the electrode surface due to the decomposition of the electrolyte. A stable and conductive SEI layer is essential for preventing further electrolyte decomposition, suppressing side reactions, and enabling reversible lithium-ion transfer [29]. Surface modification techniques, such as coating and functionalization, can modulate the SEI formation and improve its stability. For example, the coating of a conductive polymer layer on the surface of Si nanoparticles has demonstrated a stable SEI formation and improved cycling stability.

Interfacial charge transfer is another important aspect of interface engineering. The charge transfer resistance at the electrode-electrolyte interface can significantly affect the rate capability and power density of the battery. Surface modification techniques can be used to enhance the interfacial charge transfer by improving the electronic conductivity, reducing the charge transfer resistance, and facilitating faster lithium-ion diffusion. For instance, the functionalization of $LiFePO_4$ cathode material with conductive carbon nanotubes has shown enhanced interfacial charge transfer and improved rate capability. Interfacial compatibility is also crucial for the long-term stability and safety of the battery. The compatibility between the electrode and the electrolyte can affect the side reactions, gas generation, and thermal stability. Surface modification techniques can be used to improve the interfacial compatibility by introducing protective layers, suppressing side reactions, and enhancing the thermal stability. For example, the coating of a stable metal oxide layer, such as Al_2O_3 or ZrO_2, on the surface of $LiCoO_2$ cathode material has demonstrated improved thermal stability and enhanced safety characteristics [30].

Challenges and Future Perspectives

Scalability and Cost-Effectiveness: One of the major challenges in the commercialization of surface-modified nanomaterials for battery applications is their scalability and cost-effectiveness. The synthesis and processing of nanomaterials often involve complex and expensive techniques, such as chemical vapor deposition, atomic layer deposition, and high-temperature calcination. These techniques may not be suitable for large-scale production and may increase the overall cost of the battery. To address this challenge, there is a need for the development of scalable and cost-effective methods for the surface modification of nanomaterials. Solution-based processing techniques, such as sol-gel synthesis, hydrothermal/solvothermal methods, and electrodeposition, have shown promise for the large-scale production of surface-modified nanomaterials. These techniques can be easily scaled up and can be performed at relatively low temperatures, reducing the energy consumption and production cost. In addition, the use of low-cost and abundant materials for surface modification can also help in reducing the overall cost of the battery. For example, the use of biomass-derived carbon sources, such as rice husk and coconut shell, for carbon coating can significantly reduce the cost compared to the use of expensive carbon precursors [31].

Long-Term Stability and Safety: Another challenge in the development of surface-modified nanomaterials for battery applications is their long-term stability and safety. The high surface area and reactivity of nanomaterials can lead to accelerated degradation and side reactions during prolonged cycling [32]. The surface modification layers may also undergo structural changes, delamination, or dissolution over time, compromising their protective and functional properties. To address this challenge, there is a need for the development of robust and stable surface modification techniques that can withstand the harsh operating conditions of the battery. The use of multi-layer coatings, such as the combination of a carbon layer and a metal oxide layer, can provide enhanced stability and protection. The optimization of the coating thickness, composition, and morphology can also help in improving the long-term stability.

In addition, the development of advanced characterization techniques, such as in situ electron microscopy and spectroscopy, can provide valuable insights into the structural and chemical changes occurring at the surface of the nanomaterials during battery operation. These techniques can help in understanding the degradation mechanisms and guiding the design of more stable surface modification strategies. Safety is another critical aspect that needs to be considered in the development of surface-modified nanomaterials for battery applications. The high surface area and reactivity of nanomaterials can increase the risk of thermal runaway, fire, and explosion [33]. The surface modification layers should be designed to suppress the exothermic reactions and improve the thermal stability of the nanomaterials. The use of flame-retardant coatings, such as phosphates and fluorides, can help in reducing the fire hazard of the battery. The incorporation of temperature-responsive materials, such as phase change materials or thermal shutdown separators, can also help in preventing thermal runaway and improving the safety of the battery.

Multi-Functional Surface Modification: The future development of surface-modified nanomaterials for battery applications lies in the design of multi-functional surface modification strategies. Multi-functional surface modification involves the integration of multiple functional properties, such as high conductivity, high lithium storage capacity, fast lithium-ion diffusion, and enhanced stability, into a single surface modification layer [34].

One promising approach for multi-functional surface modification is the use of composite coatings. Composite coatings can combine the advantages of different materials, such as carbon and metal oxides, to achieve synergistic effects. For example, a composite coating of graphene and TiO_2 on $LiFePO_4$ cathode material has demonstrated enhanced electronic conductivity, improved lithium-ion diffusion, and superior cycling stability compared to single-component coatings [35].

Another approach for multi-functional surface modification is the use of hierarchical structures. Hierarchical structures can provide multiple levels of porosity, high surface area, and enhanced charge transport [36]. For instance, a hierarchical carbon coating on Si nanoparticles, consisting of a microporous inner layer and a mesoporous outer layer, has shown improved cycling stability and rate capability [37]. The microporous inner layer provides a stable SEI formation, while the mesoporous outer layer enhances the electrolyte accessibility and lithium ion diffusion. The design of smart and responsive surface modification layers is also a promising direction for future research. Smart surface modification layers can respond to external stimuli, such as temperature, pH, or light and adapt their properties accordingly [38]. For example, a temperature-responsive polymer coating on $LiCoO_2$ cathode material can expand at high temperatures to accommodate the volume changes and prevent structural degradation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, surface modification of nanomaterials has emerged as a powerful strategy to enhance their electrochemical properties for battery applications. Various surface modification techniques, including coating, doping, functionalization, and core-shell structuring, have been explored to improve the specific capacity, rate capability, and cycling stability of nanomaterials. The surface modification techniques can influence the surface chemical composition, surface structure, and interfacial properties of the nanomaterials, leading to enhanced electrochemical performance. The mechanisms of surface modification, such as surface chemical modification, surface structural modification, and interface engineering, play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of the surface modification strategy. However, challenges such as scalability, cost-effectiveness, long-term stability, and safety need to be addressed for the successful commercialization of surface-modified nanomaterials in battery applications. The development of scalable and cost-effective synthesis methods, robust and stable surface modification techniques, and multi-functional surface modification strategies holds great promise for the future advancement of high-performance batteries. The rational design and optimization of surface-modified nanomaterials, guided by advanced characterization techniques and theoretical simulations, will continue to drive the progress in this field. The integration of surface-modified nanomaterials with other advanced battery components, such as solid-state electrolytes and high-capacity cathode materials, can further enhance the energy density and safety of future battery systems. Overall, surface modification of nanomaterials has the potential to revolutionize the battery industry and enable the development of high-performance, long-lasting, and safe rechargeable batteries for a wide range of applications, including electric vehicles, portable electronics, and grid-scale energy storage.

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