

Preparation and Evaluation of Optical Properties of MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ Nanocomposite

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ABSTRACT

Degradation of organic pollutants such as synthetic dyes, which have a deleterious effect on the lives of humans, has extensively become the aim of researches in today's scientific world. Advanced oxidation processes (AOPs) such as photocatalysis has carried out, as useful methods for mineralizing organic pollutants in aqueous media via irradiating the nanocomposite by UV. In present work, MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ nanocomposite was prepared via impregnation technique and characterized by using XRD, FT-IR and SEM. The photocatalytic activity of the supported MnFe₂O₄ was examined via degradation of different dyes (Methylene Blue and Methyl Orange), then some parameters such as pH, the amount of photocatalyst, irradiation time, temperature and oxygen flow were optimized in order to improve the reaction yield of destruction of different dyes. The obtained results confirmed that the prepared composite had a great photocatalytic and sonocatalytic activity against different dyes in aqueous media.

Keywords: MnFe₂O₄, ZrO₂, impregnation, photocatalytic, nanocomposite, organic pollutants

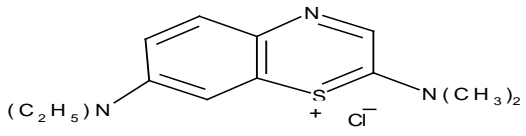
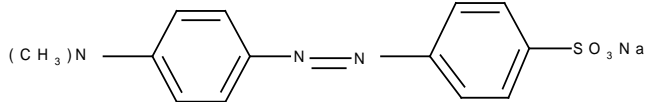
INTRODUCTION

In today's life, environmental pollution has far-reaching negative consequences in the lives of humans. Heterogeneous photocatalytic destruction of organic pollutants in wastewater by using UV light as the excitation energy is an appealing field (Chen, 2000; Dressellhaus, 2002; Salavati & Kohestani, 2013; Sepelak, Heitjans, & Becker, 2007; Verma, 2004). To meet the need of this, it is important to design and prepare efficient photocatalytic materials, which may then appear to be a challenge to the chemists, at the same time, it also provides some opportunities for them. ZrO₂ is the most widely investigated heterogeneous semiconductor photocatalyst (Li, Chen, & Harris, 2018; Liu, Li, & Cui, 2007; Salavati et al., 2011, 2012; Zheng, 2018). Both of ZrO₂ and Spinel share the very similar photocatalytic processes owing to their similar electronic attribute. Although Spinel exhibit UV-light photocatalytic activity in homogenous system, the main disadvantages of them as photocatalysts lie in their low surface area and difficulty of separation from the reaction mixture. Therefore, development of novel solid catalysts with advanced characteristics such as surface area and porosity has been a challenge for a long time. In addition, for the purpose of practical application of this technique, immobilization of soluble spinel into some matrixes to prepare solid or supported spinel photocatalysts is essential. These insoluble MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ Nanocomposites exhibited much higher UV-photocatalytic activity than that of the corresponding pure or homogeneous spinel. Moreover, it is easy to separate and recover them for recycling purpose. In order to improve the photo efficiency of either MnFe₂O₄ or ZrO₂, and immobilization of soluble spinel, we here prepared nanocomposites MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ via combining the methods of sol-gel and hydrothermal treatment. That is, MnFe₂O₄ has empty d orbitals and can be used as

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Table 1. Structure of dyes used in this study

Dye	Chemical formula	MW (g/mol)	λ_{\max}
Methylene Blue (MB)		373.88	663
Methyl Orange (MO)		327.34	462

good electron acceptors. After the addition of spinel into ZrO_2 photocatalytic systems, the fast charge-pair (h^+ e^-) recombination on ZrO_2 can be retarded effectively. That is, Spinel has the ability to enhance the rate of conduction band (CB) electron transfer by accepting e^- (photogenerated electrons) to its empty d orbitals. Recent studies have showed that reactive dyes can be decolorized by advanced oxidation process (Levec & Pintar, 2007) involving the generation of powerful oxidizing agent like hydroxyl radicals (OH^\bullet), which destroy the pollutants in wastewater. The hydroxyl radicals are capable of mineralizing all organic compounds almost to carbon dioxide (CO_2) and water (H_2O) as well as other simple inorganic ions. Heterogeneous photocatalysis through illumination of UV (Sepelak, Baabe, Mienert, & Litterst, 2003) or solar light (Gateshki, Petkov, & Pardhan, 2005) on a semiconductor surface is an attractive advanced oxidation process. Here, we report the efficient UV light induced photocatalytic different dyes by in aqueous solutions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Synthesis of ZrO_2 Nanoparticles Hydrothermal Method

ZrO_2 nanoparticles were synthesized by hydrothermal method; as summarized by flow charts in **Figure 1**, In hydrothermal method, 0.01 mole zirconium nitrate hydrate (3g) was dissolved in 40cc double-distilled water and 30cc 1,4-butandiol as dispersing agent (Kirchberg, 2017). Then, the solution was stirred for 30 min at $T = 40^\circ\text{C}$ with $\text{pH} = 5.8$. Ammonia (25 wt %) was added drop by drop to the solution to achieve a final $\text{pH} = 10$ at room temperature. After formation of white slurry-like colloidal sol, it was further slowly heated at $T = 80^\circ\text{C}$ for 10h in an open bath until a light-brown wet solid precipitation was obtained by evaporation of the solvents. In this hydrothermal process, essential chemical reactions take place between In^{3+} ions and ammonia (as mineralizer), for preparation of the ZrO_2 powders (Mahato & Banerjee, 2004). In the final stage, the wet precipitation was fully dried by direct heating on the hot plate at $T = 150^\circ\text{C}$ for 8h. A white-grey powder was the final product.

Post-annealing of the ZrO_2 Nanocomposite

The precursor powders obtained by hydrothermal method were grounded in the glassy mortar to be turned into fine powders. Then, powders were heated in a Pyrex crucible to $T = 450^\circ\text{C}$ and calcined for 8h, in an electric box furnace, and finally cooled down to room temperature. By post-annealing of the powders, all of the organic compounds were completely decomposed and ZrO_2 nanoparticles obtained (**Figure 1**).

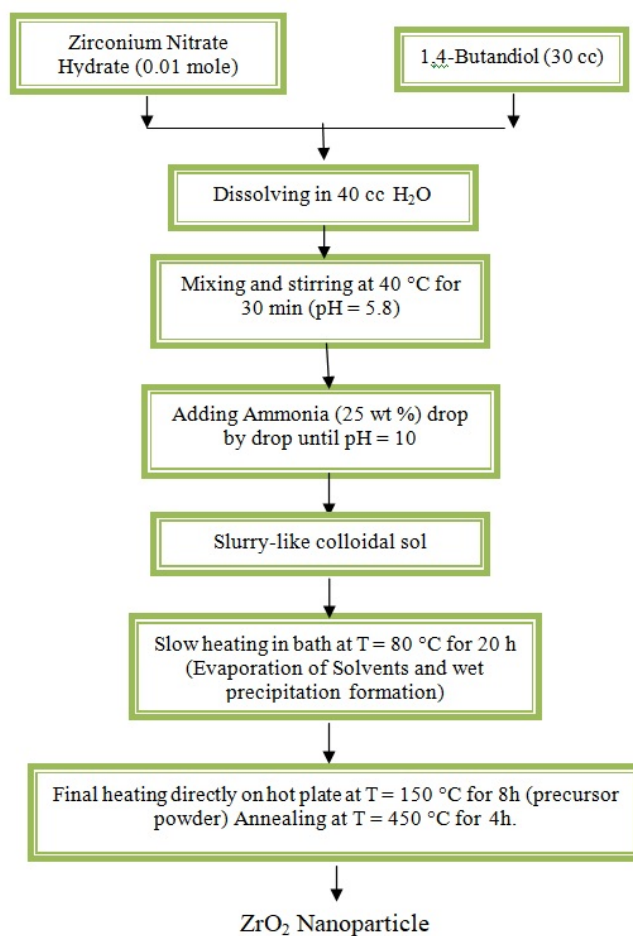


Figure 1. The flow chart for preparation of ZrO₂ nanoparticles

Synthesis of Mn₂Fe₂O₄/ZrO₂ Nanocomposite by Sol-gel Method

A solution of ZrO₂ in ethanol (25 mL) was stirred at 80 °C, and then the mixture was slowly cooled to ambient temperature. Afterward, the acidity of the mixture was adjusted to pH=2 by using hydrochloric acid. To the resulting mixture was dropwise added MnFe₂O₄ (3.08 g) dissolved in the mixed solution of 25 mL ethanol and 10 mL of water, which was maintained under constant stirring for 3 h until gelling. After gelation, the solid was filtered and dried in air at 100 °C for 24 h. The dried gel was calcined in a vacuum at 350 °C for 4 h to fasten the ZrO₂ network and washed with hot water (80 °C) three times (**Figure 2**).

General Procedure for Photocatalytic Degradation of Dyes

The catalytic activity of the nanocomposite was tested using Methyl Orange and Methylene Blue as the targets. A general photocatalytic method was carried out as following: 20 mg of MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ nanocomposite was suspended in 10 mL of fresh aqueous dye solution (the dyes concentration is shown in **Table 2**). The lamp was inserted around the suspension after its intensity became stable. Photodegradation of dye was carried out in an open vessel using oxygen as oxidant. After the reaction finished, the suspensions were centrifuged and filtered, the photolyte was analyzed by UV-Vis.

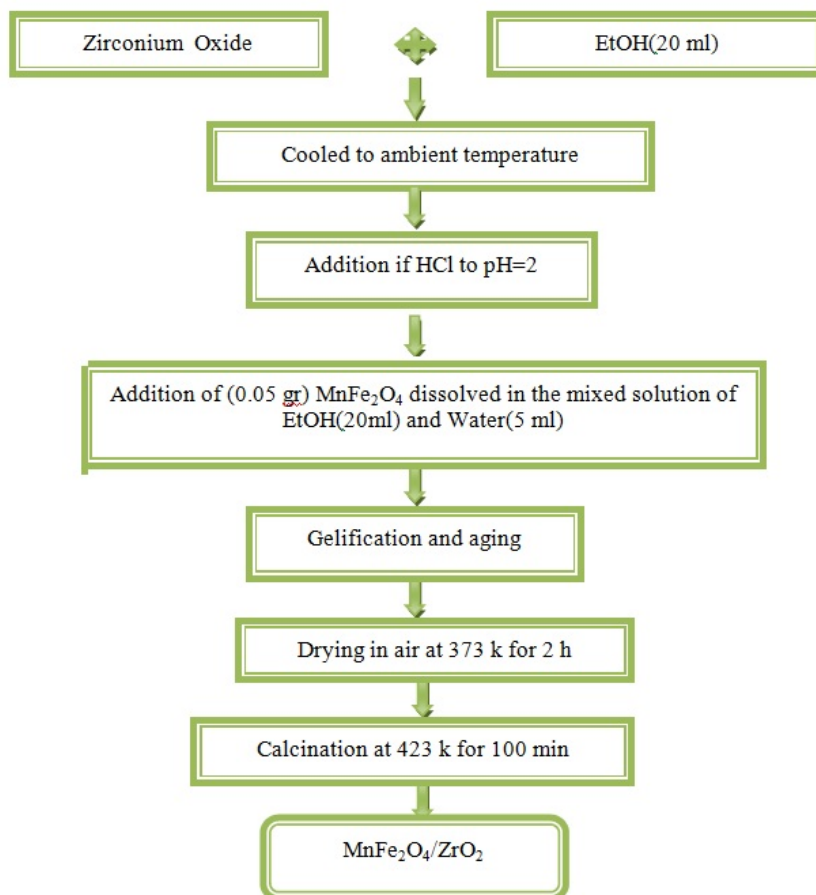


Figure 2. The flow chart for preparation of MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ nanocomposite

Table 2. Photocatalytic, sonocatalytic and sonophotocatalytic degradation of dyes catalyzed by MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂.^a

Dye	ZrO ₂ (Photocatalytic)			Mn ₂ Fe ₂ O ₄ /ZrO ₂ (Photocatalytic)			Mn ₂ Fe ₂ O ₄ /ZrO ₂ (Photocatalytic)			Mn ₂ Fe ₂ O ₄ /ZrO ₂ (Photocatalytic)			Mn ₂ Fe ₂ O ₄ (Photocatalytic)		Conc. (ppm)	
	Yield (%)	Time (min)	k (min ⁻¹)	Yield (%)	Time (min)	k (min ⁻¹)	Yield (%)	Time (min)	k (min ⁻¹)	Yield (%)	Time (min)	k (min ⁻¹)	Yield (%)	Time (min)		k (min ⁻¹)
Methylene Blue	21.5 ± 1.6	15	0.33	8.5 ± 1.2	15	0.14	90 ± 1.4	5	0.6	98 ± 1.3	5	0.92	48 ± 1.4	15	0.042	10
Methyl Orange	8.1 ± 1.3	15	0.005	26 ± 1.4	15	0.049	30 ± 1.4	5	0.17	78 ± 1.2	5	0.25	20 ± 1.5	15	0.011	20

^a Reaction conditions: Catalyst (20 mg); Optimum pH; Oxygen flow rate=5 mL/min (N=4)

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Catalyst Characterization

It is well-known that the catalytic activity of nanocomposites is strongly dependent on the shape, size and size distribution of the particles. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to characterize the microstructure of the nanocomposite. **Figure 3** shows the SEM images of the ZrO₂ nanoparticles and MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ nanocomposite. SEM image reveals that powder is composed of aggregated extremely fine particles. From this image, it is evident that particles have a homogeneous shape. The particles sizes of the ZrO₂ and MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ nanocomposite are prepared by a Sol-gel method.

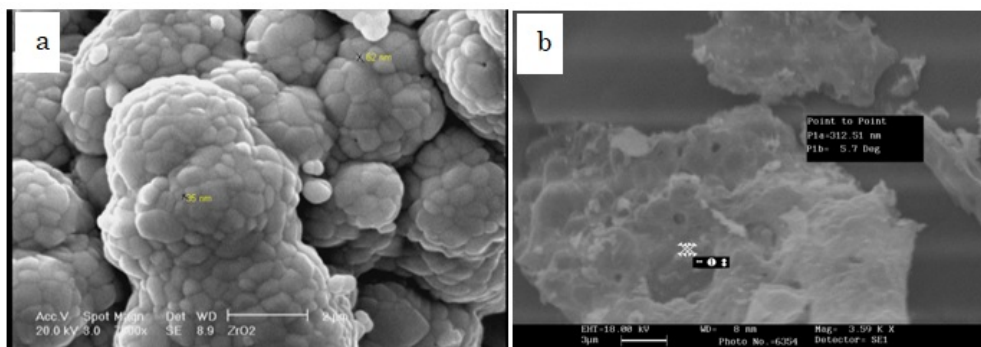


Figure 3. The SEM image of (a) ZrO₂ nanoparticles ;(b) MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂

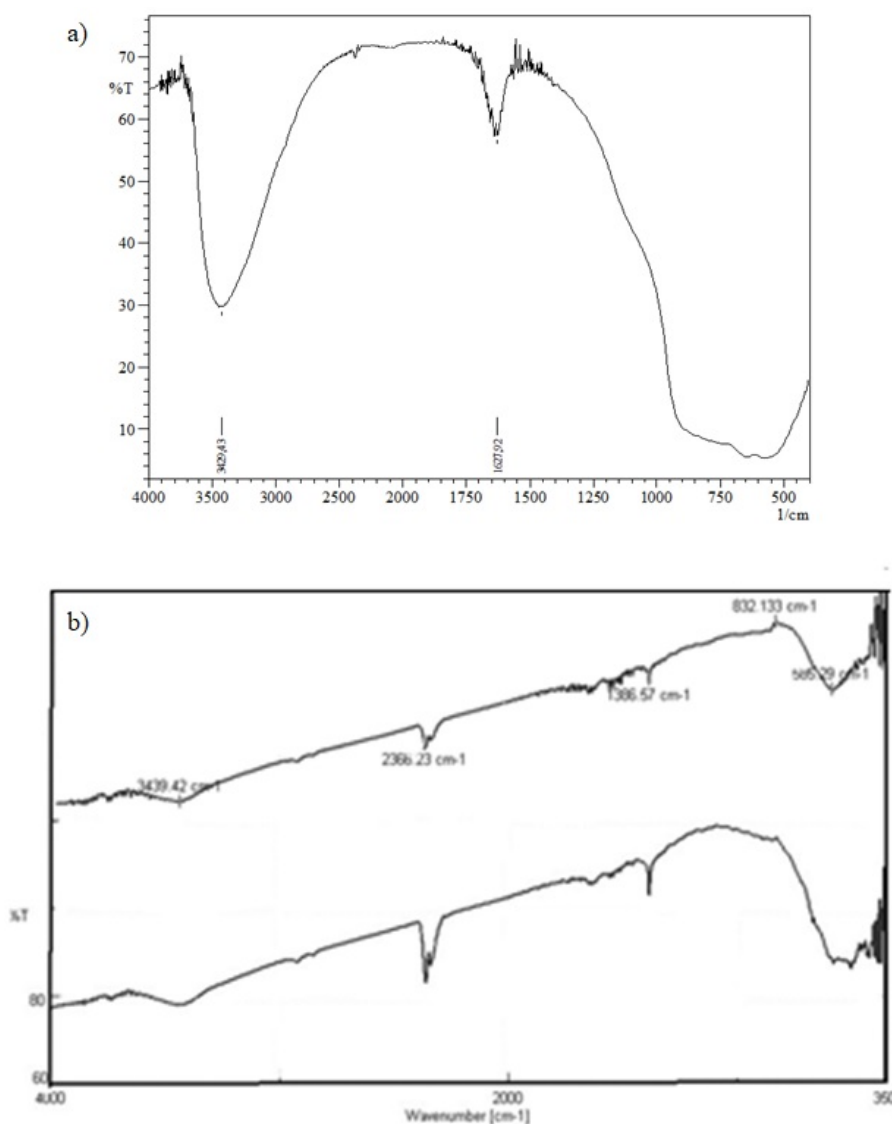


Figure 4. The FT-IR patterns of the MnFe₂O₄ ;(b) MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ nanocomposite

Figure 4 shows the FT-IR spectrum of the MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ nanocomposite, The IR characteristic bands of MnFe₂O₄ in the MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ nanocomposite have some red shifts compared with those for the pure MnFe₂O₄ (Mornet, Vasseir, Grasset, & Duguet, 2004; Candeia, Souza, & Bernard, 2006). Therefore, it is confirmed that a strong chemical interaction, not simple physical absorption, exists between the polyoxometalate and ZrO₂ surface.

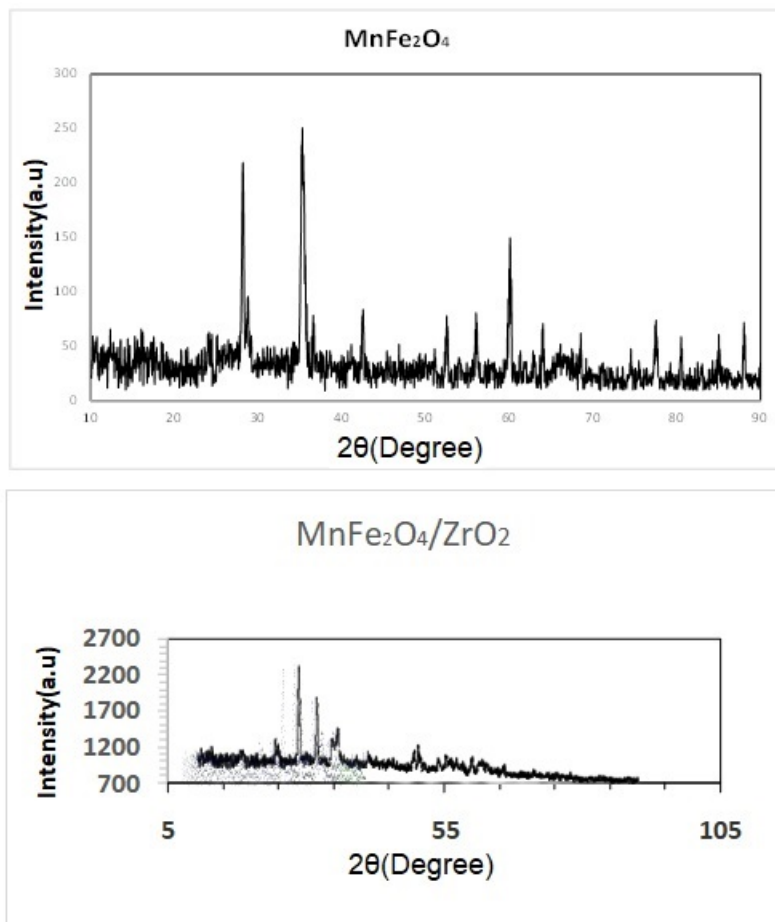


Figure 5. The XRD patterns of the MnFe₂O₄ ;(b) MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ nanocomposite

The XRD patterns of MnFe₂O₄ and MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ have been shown in **Figure 5** respectively. The characteristic diffraction peaks at the XRD patterns of MnFe₂O₄ at (29.5), (34.5) & (38.5), are observed in the XRD patterns of MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ with lower intensity, changes in the peak positions and widths happened. It is clear that the changes are for immobilization of MnFe₂O₄ into matrix ZrO₂. The average particle size of MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ powder was calculated from XRD line broadening using the Debye–Scherer equation, $D = (0.89\lambda) / (\beta / 2 \cos\theta)$, where λ is the wavelength for Cu K α radiation, $\beta/2$ is the full width at half maximum (FWHM) and θ is the Bragg angle. The range of the particle size calculated is about 36 -86 nm.

Photocatalytic Degradation of Dyes

The results showed that the degradation percent was 85.0 % after irradiation of UV-Vis for 15 min at 25 ± 1 °C. The effect of pH of solution was also investigated on the degradation rate of MB. The effect of pH on the degradation of dyes in the presence of MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ has been explained on the basis of point of zero charge (pH_{pzc}) of ZrO₂ particles. ZrO₂ is positively charged in acidic solution and negatively charged in alkaline solution. According to this explanation and because of electrostatic interactions, cationic dyes such as MB should be degraded at alkaline solution and anionic dyes such as methyl orange should be degraded effectively in acidic solutions.

Our results showed that positively and negatively charged dyes are degraded efficiently at acidic solutions. One explanation is that produced oxidizing agents such as H₂O₂ molecules are unstable in alkaline solution and therefore, the degradation of dyes decreases in alkaline solution. Despite of this explanation, photodegradation of MB in water by UV irradiated TiO₂ at pH= 3 have been reported (Fabiana, Lucia, Santos, & Cámara, 2001; Geetha & Ramesh, 2017; Sheats, 2004; Vautier, Guillard, & Herrmann, 2001). As Shimizu and coworkers have indicated, it is difficult to explain the main effect of pH (Pimachev, Kolesov, Chen, Wang, & Dahnovsky, 2012). These differences in the optimal pH for degradation rise from this fact that the point of

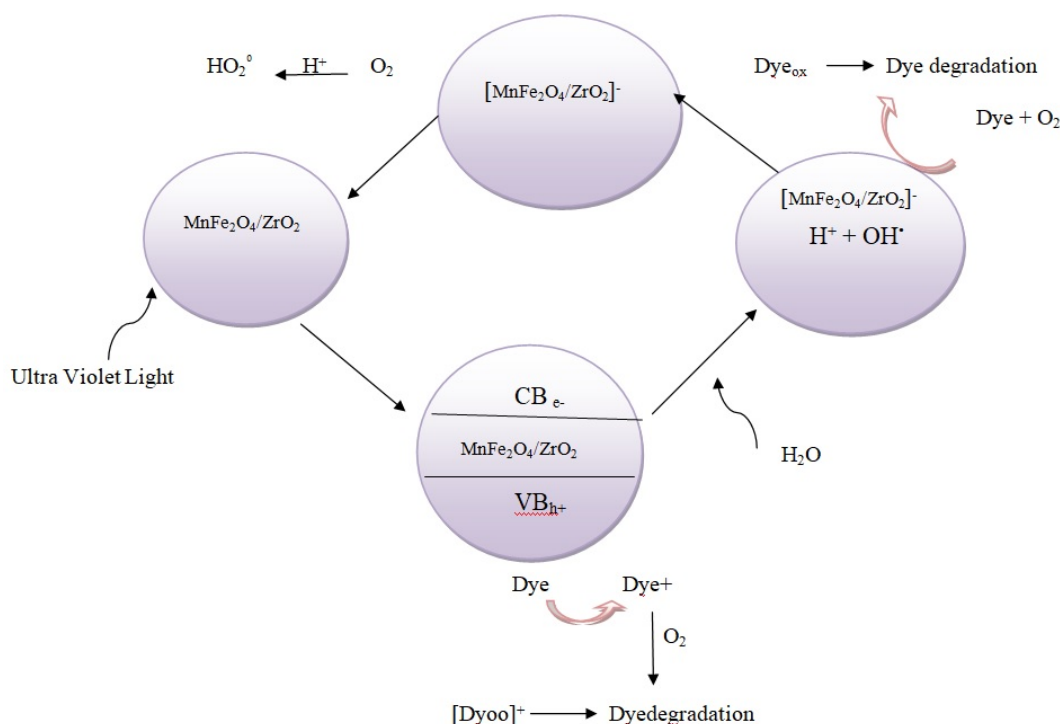


Figure 6. A plausible pathway for degradation of dyes

zero charge depends on the nature of dispersion, the difference of diameter and the type of catalyst. And finally, in the case of $\text{MnFe}_2\text{O}_4/\text{ZrO}_2$, the pH_{zpc} may be changed due to the presence of polyoxometalate and shows characteristics which if different from pure ZrO_2 .

When the reaction was carried out in the absence of oxygen, the degradation percent was 62%. While, in a flow of 5 mL/min of oxygen gas, the highest degradation yield was obtained. Therefore, the presence of oxygen gas is necessary for dyes degradation and the degradation of all dyes was carried out in the presence of oxygen gas. But increase oxygen Pressure, has no effect on degradation yield.

As shown in **Table 2**, the $\text{MnFe}_2\text{O}_4/\text{ZrO}_2$ is an efficient photocatalyst for degradation of organic dye pollutants under irradiation of UV-Vis light. However, a plausible pathway for degradation of dyes is shown in **Figure 6** (Li, 2005; Petrier & Suslick, 2000; Yang et al., 2005). The difference in the absorption efficiency between ZrO_2 and $\text{MnFe}_2\text{O}_4/\text{ZrO}_2$ can be explained by mechanism of dyes degradation catalyzed by $\text{MnFe}_2\text{O}_4/\text{ZrO}_2$. According to this mechanism the reactants (dyes and dioxygen) reached the surface and entered into the pores of the composites through diffusion, and then they were adsorbed on the surface and in the pores by a hydrogen bonding interaction between functional groups of dyes and surface hydroxyl groups of ZrO_2 support, where they were accessible to the active sites (Mn–O–Fe) anchored within the pore cavities.

Sonocatalytic Degradation of Dyes

The effect of ultrasonic irradiation on the dyes degradation by $\text{MnFe}_2\text{O}_4/\text{ZrO}_2$ was also investigated. The increase irradiation power has no effect on the dye degradation. The presence of in a $\text{MnFe}_2\text{O}_4/\text{ZrO}_2$ ultrasonic system should result in the formation of OH^\bullet in the irradiated solutions. Increasing in the formation of OH^\bullet can be explained by well-known mechanism of hot spots and sonoluminescence as follows. First, cavitation can be increased due to the heterogeneous nucleation of bubbles, resulting in the induction of hotspots in the solution. Very high temperatures can breach in these hot spots and can cause the pyrolysis of H_2O molecules to form OH^\bullet (Ge & Qu, 2004; Harada, Hosoki, & Kudo, 2001; Okitsu et al., 2005).

Catalyst Reuse

After the reaction was finished, the suspension was centrifuged, and the $\text{MnFe}_2\text{O}_4/\text{ZrO}_2$ catalyst easily recovered by sedimentation, and the recovered catalyst was treated with water and successively. These are too strong coordination interactions between MnFe_2O_4 unit and the zirconia surface. More importantly, the

Table 3. The results of MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ catalyst reuse and Mo leached in the degradation of MB by photocatalytic ^a

Run	MnFe ₂ O ₄ /ZrO ₂ (Photocatalytic)		
	Yield (%)	Time (min)	Mo leached ^b (%)
1	85±1.2	15	1.4
2	83±1.3	15	1
3	83±1.6	15	0.4
4	82±1.7	15	0.2

^aReaction conditions: Catalyst (20 mg); Optimum pH; Oxygen flow rate= 5 mL/ min, ^bDetermined by ICP(N=4)

interaction between MnFe₂O₄ unit and ZrO₂ support is chemical rather than physical. Therefore, the composites can be reused more than four times without finding obvious decreases of their photocatalytic activity (Wang et al., 2007). The results are summarized in **Table 3**.

CONCLUSION

This system introduces a simple and green heterogeneous photocatalytic approach for the degradation of organic pollutants. The prepared composite was successfully used for photocatalytic and sonocatalytic degradation of different dyes in aqueous media. The high catalytic activity of MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ is attributed to the synergistic effect between the MnFe₂O₄ and the ZrO₂. The MnFe₂O₄/ZrO₂ catalyst can be easily separated and recovered.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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