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# Photo-electrochemical hydrogen production from neutral phosphate buffer and seawater using micro-structured p-Si photo-electrodes functionalized by solution-based methods†

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Solar fuels such as H<sub>2</sub> generated from sunlight and seawater using earth-abundant materials are expected to be a crucial component of a next generation renewable energy mix. We herein report a systematic analysis of the photo-electrochemical performance of TiO<sub>2</sub> coated, microstructured p-Si photo-electrodes (p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>) that were functionalized with CoO<sub>x</sub> and NiO<sub>x</sub> for H<sub>2</sub> generation. These photocathodes were synthesized from commercial p-Si wafers employing wet chemical methods. In neutral phosphate buffer and standard 1 sun illumination, the p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> photoelectrode showed a photocurrent density of  $-1.48 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  at zero bias (0 V<sub>RHE</sub>), which was three times and 15 times better than the photocurrent densities of p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/CoO<sub>x</sub> and p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>, respectively. No decline in activity was observed over a five hour test period, yielding a Faradaic efficiency of 96% for H<sub>2</sub> production. Based on the electrochemical characterizations and the high energy resolution fluorescence detected X-ray absorption near edge structure (HERFD-XANES) and emission spectroscopy measurements performed at the Ti K $\alpha_1$  fluorescence line, the superior performance of the p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> photoelectrode was attributed to improved charge transfer properties induced by the NiO<sub>x</sub> coating on the protective TiO<sub>2</sub> layer, in combination with a higher catalytic activity of NiO<sub>x</sub> for H<sub>2</sub>-evolution. Moreover, we report here an excellent photo-electrochemical performance of p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> photoelectrode in corrosive artificial seawater (pH 8.4) with an unprecedented photocurrent density of  $10 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  at an applied potential of  $-0.7 \text{ V}_{\text{RHE}}$ , and of  $20 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  at  $-0.9 \text{ V}_{\text{RHE}}$ . The applied bias photon-to-current conversion efficiency (ABPE) at  $-0.7 \text{ V}_{\text{RHE}}$  and  $10 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  was found to be 5.1%.

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## Introduction

The CO<sub>2</sub> released by burning fossil fuels for transportation, production of electricity and heating is a major contributor to global warming.<sup>1–3</sup> In order to limit the greenhouse effect, it is necessary to replace fossil fuels with renewable and carbon-neutral or ‘green’ fuels.<sup>1</sup> On Earth’s surface, sunlight is the most abundant source of free energy, and seawater can provide a plentiful supply of electrons and protons as ingredients for

making solar fuels.<sup>4–8</sup> Natural photosynthesis and recent lab-scale artificial photosynthesis devices have demonstrated high efficiencies in solar-driven water splitting into molecular hydrogen and oxygen.<sup>9–12</sup> However, enabling global-scale solar-fuel generation requires the fabrication of devices, in particular of photoelectrodes, from earth-abundant materials. To obtain the maximal device performance, the interplay between light-harvesting, charge separation and electron/proton transport, as well as water oxidation and reduction catalysis needs to be carefully optimized.<sup>2,3,12–20</sup>

The intrinsic band gap (1.1 eV) of silicon photo-electrodes make them capable of absorbing a broad spectrum of the solar light. Over the past decades, they have thus gathered much attention towards photo-electrochemical (PEC) water splitting.<sup>21–26</sup> The band structure of n-type Si promotes the photo-anodic oxygen evolution reaction (OER),<sup>27,28</sup> while p-type Si facilitates the photo-cathodic hydrogen evolution reaction (HER).<sup>22</sup> However, the difference between the potentials of the valence band edge of p-Si and that of the H<sup>+</sup>/H<sub>2</sub> redox couple is

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relatively small which limits the photo-voltage and leads to slow HER kinetics.<sup>29</sup> The surface area of the Si photo-electrodes can be significantly increased *via* nano or micro structuring.<sup>30</sup> This not only increases light absorption of Si but also improves HER kinetics by shortening charge carrier transport pathways.<sup>24,31</sup>

When Si is placed in an aqueous environment, it forms an insulating oxide layer, which significantly reduces its HER efficiency.<sup>32</sup> In addition, Si is only stable at strongly acidic<sup>33</sup> and alkaline<sup>34</sup> pH if protected. Both processes can be suppressed highly efficiently by applying a thin TiO<sub>2</sub> over coating.<sup>35–37</sup> In most studies the fabrication of the TiO<sub>2</sub> protective layer involves the use of relatively expensive high vacuum technology such as atomic layer deposition (ALD).<sup>34,38–40</sup> While ALD is used industrially for applying thin metal layers during the production of electronic components for computers and other electronic devices, it may still be useful to explore cheap and scalable wet-chemical methods for producing large areas of coatings of 20–50 nm thickness.<sup>41,42</sup> The performance of Si/TiO<sub>2</sub> photo-electrodes can be improved by decoration with suitable co-catalysts.<sup>38,43</sup> Decoration with NiO<sub>x</sub> has been studied for improving OER catalysis,<sup>27,44,45</sup> but there are only a few studies on the application of NiO<sub>x</sub> as HER catalysts at neutral (or near neutral) pH.<sup>46–49</sup> To the best of our knowledge, NiO<sub>x</sub> has not yet been studied as HER co-catalyst on the surface of p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub> for photoelectrochemical seawater reduction to H<sub>2</sub>.

Herein, we report the fabrication of efficient HER photo-electrodes consisting of CoO<sub>x</sub> or NiO<sub>x</sub> decorated p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>. The photo-electrodes were prepared by micro-structuring commercial p-Si wafers using a well-documented electroless wet etching technique.<sup>50,51</sup> The resulting microwire surface was coated with a protective TiO<sub>2</sub> layer and subsequently functionalized with CoO<sub>x</sub> or NiO<sub>x</sub> co-catalysts using simple solution-based techniques. The electrodes obtained by the

various fabrication steps were systematically studied, and the photo-electrochemical responses of the final p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> and p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/CoO<sub>x</sub> electrodes were measured in neutral pH phosphate buffer and in artificial seawater at pH 8.4. The PEC performance of functionalized p-Si photoelectrodes were also studied without a TiO<sub>2</sub> layer to establish the effect of TiO<sub>2</sub> as efficient charge separation layer between p-Si and the co-catalysts. Detailed electrochemical and X-ray spectroscopic studies were performed to elucidate the origin of the significantly better performance of p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> as compared to p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/CoO<sub>x</sub>.

## Results and discussion

### Preparation and structural characterization of HER photo-electrodes

The experimental steps involved in the synthesis of our p-Si photo-electrodes are summarized schematically in Fig. 1 (see ESI† for experimental methods). After a reductive cleaning of the commercial p-Si wafers to remove the surface SiO<sub>2</sub>, wet etching was employed to obtain high-aspect ratio micro-structured p-Si electrodes.<sup>50,51</sup> These ‘as-synthesized’ p-Si photo-electrodes (Fig. 2(a) and (b)) were subsequently spin-coated in two steps, first with a TiO<sub>2</sub> sol and subsequently with either a NiO<sub>x</sub> or CoO<sub>x</sub> sol. Each spin-coating step was followed by drying at room temperature and calcination at 380 °C. The scanning electron microscopy (SEM) top and side views of the as-synthesized p-Si (Fig. 2(a) and (b)) show the microstructure morphology. Fig. 2(c)–(f) show that the sol-gel method in combination with spin coating resulted in the formation of a protective TiO<sub>2</sub> overcoating and a co-catalysts film that fully covers the p-Si. The energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX) cross-sections of the functionalized p-Si photo-electrodes are

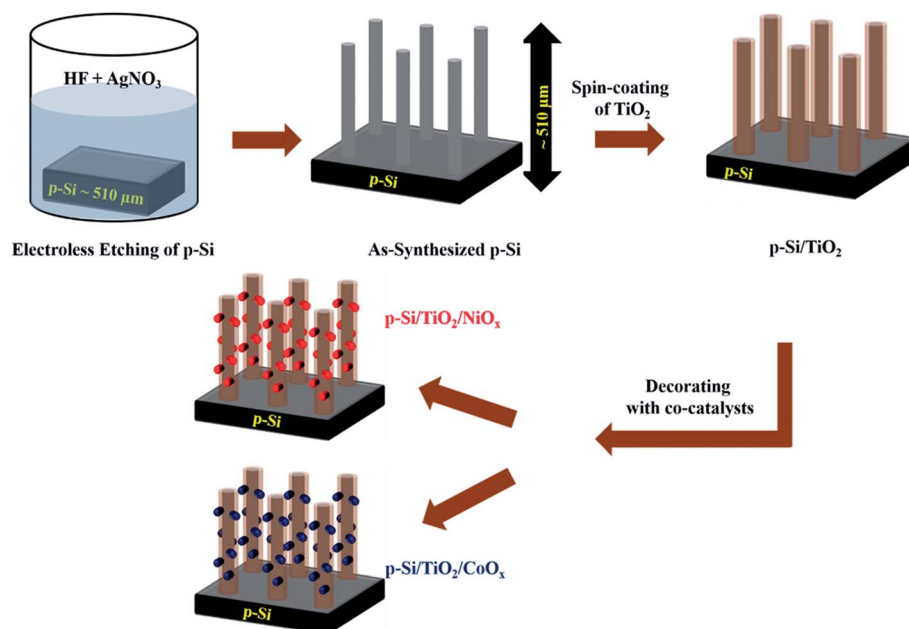


Fig. 1 Schematic representation (not to scale) of the preparation steps of p-Si micro-wires by wet-etching, their coating with TiO<sub>2</sub> and subsequent functionalization with NiO<sub>x</sub> or CoO<sub>x</sub> *via* spin coating and sintering. The procedure is described in detail in the ESI.†



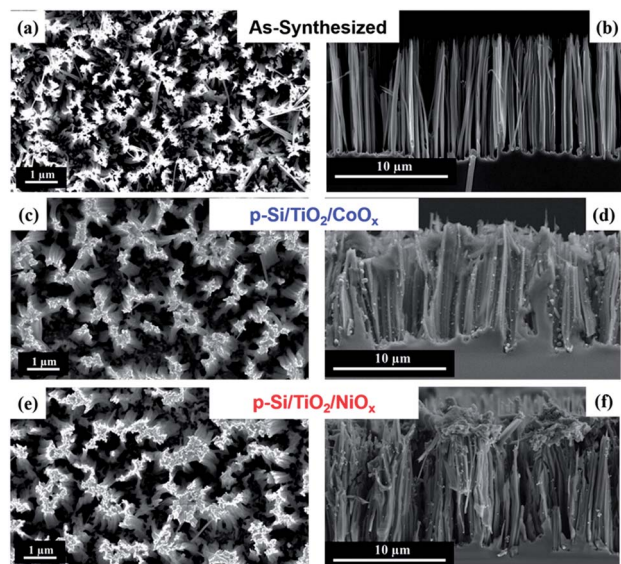


Fig. 2 SEM Images showing the planar top views (a), (c) and (e) and the cross-sectional view (b), (d) and (f), of as-synthesized and functionalized p-Si.

shown in ESI Fig. S1–S3.† On the basis of the SEM and TEM data shown in ESI Fig. S4† we conservatively estimate that the  $\text{TiO}_2$  layer has a thickness ranging between 20–50 nm. The elemental composition and the presence of  $\text{CoO}_x$  and  $\text{NiO}_x$  were confirmed using XPS, for details see ESI Fig. S5.†

### Photo-electrochemical characterization of the HER electrodes in neutral phosphate buffer

The photo-electrochemical performances of the p-Si photo-electrodes obtained after each preparation step were carefully studied at 1 sun illumination in neutral phosphate buffer. The linear sweep voltammogram (LSV) traces in Fig. 3a show that the photocurrent density of untreated planar p-Si stays negligible over the entire potential range studied (dark currents are shown in ESI Fig. S6†). The slightly higher photocurrent performance of the as-synthesized, micro-structured p-Si photo-electrode (purple trace, Fig. 3a) as compared to planar p-Si (green trace, Fig. 3a) is in line with an earlier report<sup>34</sup> and can be explained by the better light absorption and charge transport owing to the one dimensional morphology and improved surface area. This advantage of micro-structuring<sup>52</sup> is even more obvious for the fully functionalized photo-electrodes as shown in Fig. 3b (LSVs for planar Si and planar Si/ $\text{TiO}_2$  are shown in Fig. S7†). Coverage of microstructured p-Si with a protective  $\text{TiO}_2$  layer leads to a further minor increase in the photocurrent (black trace in Fig. 3a), likely due to the absence of an insulating Si-oxide surface layer and/or the better catalytic HER performance of  $\text{TiO}_2$  vs. p-Si. The nearly 6-fold increase in photocurrent after functionalization with  $\text{CoO}_x$  ( $j = -0.50 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  @ 0  $V_{\text{RHE}}$ ) and the 15-fold increase in case of  $\text{NiO}_x$  ( $j = -1.40 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  @ 0  $V_{\text{RHE}}$ ) shows that the photo-charge carriers of our control sample ( $j = -0.09 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  @ 0  $V_{\text{RHE}}$ ) can be used much more efficiently for proton reduction if suitable co-catalysts are provided (blue and red traces in Fig. 3a). Interestingly, Fig. 3c

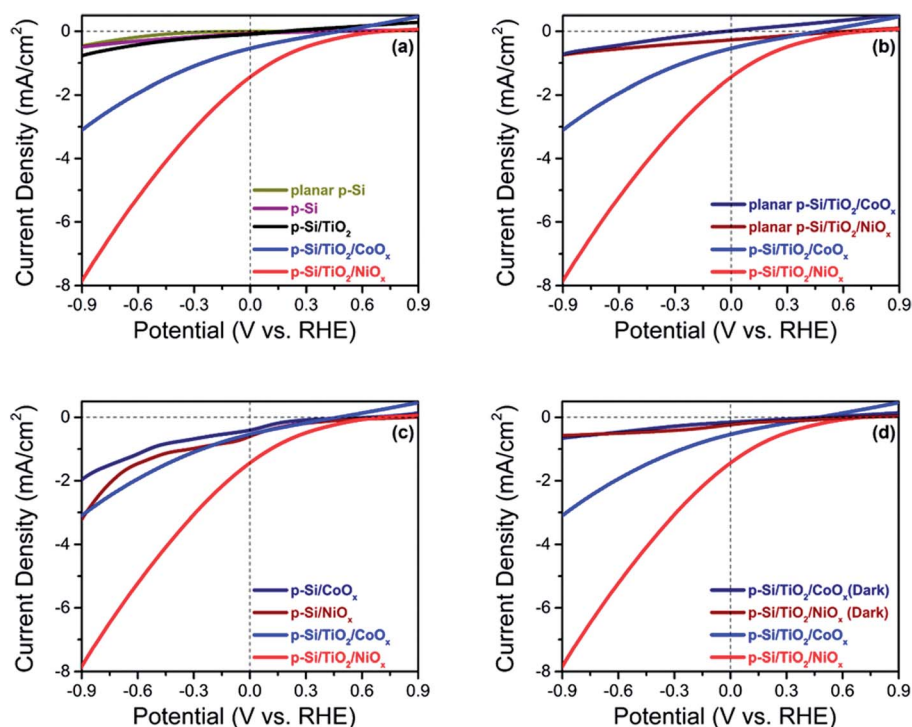


Fig. 3 Linear sweep voltammograms recorded under 1 sun illumination in potassium phosphate buffer (0.2 M; pH 7.00) (a) planar p-Si, a surface etched p-Si with microwires (p-Si), and functionalized p-Si photo-electrodes (b) fully functionalized planar Si and functionalized p-Si (c) functionalized p-Si with and without the intermittent  $\text{TiO}_2$  layer (d) functionalized p-Si in dark and in illumination.





shows that the current densities obtained are much smaller in absence of the intermittent  $\text{TiO}_2$  layer, indicating that function of the  $\text{TiO}_2$  layer goes far beyond a simple protective function. The magnitude of the photo current is illustrated for the fully assembled photo-electrodes in Fig. 3d by comparing the corresponding light and dark traces.

The same trends as for the photo currents are also seen in the respective onset potentials ( $V_{\text{onset}}$ ) for  $\text{H}_2$ -evolution, here defined as the potential needed for reaching a net photocurrent density of  $-0.1 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$ .<sup>53</sup> A positive (anodic) shift of the onset potential ( $V_{\text{onset}}$ ) was observed for the co-catalyst functionalized electrodes as compared to as-synthesized and p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2$ : the  $V_{\text{onset}}$  of the control p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2$  sample was observed at  $-0.66 V_{\text{RHE}}$ , whereas those for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$  and p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$  were shifted to  $+0.27 V_{\text{RHE}}$  and  $+0.42 V_{\text{RHE}}$ , respectively (ESI Table S1†). The  $V_{\text{onset}}$  value for our p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$  photoelectrode is remarkable when compared to a recent report by Zhang and coworkers,<sup>33</sup> where a  $V_{\text{onset}} = +0.25 V_{\text{RHE}}$  ( $j = -0.1 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$ ) was obtained for p-Si/ $\text{NiCoSe}_x$  nanopillars in  $0.5 \text{ M H}_2\text{SO}_4$  where the concentration of protons is  $10^6$  times higher as compared to the neutral pH electrolyte employed here.<sup>33,43</sup> The excellent performance of  $\text{NiO}_x$  at neutral pH condition, which is further manifested by the detailed comparison to further co-catalysts functionalized p-Si based photo-electrodes reported in the literature (ESI Table S1†), may be attributed either to an intrinsically better HER performance of  $\text{NiO}_x$  compared to  $\text{CoO}_x$ , and/or to a superior charge transfer between p-Si and the  $\text{NiO}_x$  via the protective  $\text{TiO}_2$  underlayer. This will be analysed in subsequent sections.

### Photochemical $\text{H}_2$ generation in neutral phosphate buffer

The photo-generation of  $\text{H}_2$  was measured using gas chromatography (GC) at a constant potential of  $0 V_{\text{RHE}}$ . Fig. 4a shows the results for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$  (blue) and p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$  (red). Over a period of 5 hours of continuous illumination, a near linear production of  $\text{H}_2$  was observed yielding  $\sim 128 \mu\text{mol cm}^{-2}$  and  $\sim 44 \mu\text{mol cm}^{-2}$  of  $\text{H}_2$  for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$  and p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$  respectively. The simultaneously recorded photocurrent density (Fig. 4b) was essentially stable at  $-1.48 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  (p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$ ) and  $-0.48 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  (p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$ ) over the five hours of the measurements, indicating a total lifetime extending by far the chosen duration of this experiment. XES scans taken after these experiments demonstrate that Pt from the counter electrode was not deposited onto our working electrodes during these experiments (ESI Fig. S8†). This results in a Faradaic efficiency of 96% (p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$ ) and 93% (p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$ ) and in applied bias photon to current conversion efficiencies (ABPE) of 1.74% for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$  and 0.54% for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$  at  $0 V_{\text{RHE}}$ . The excellent performance of  $\text{NiO}_x$  may in part also be attributed to its conversion into  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2$  upon contact with water.<sup>48,49,54</sup>  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2$  formation is in agreement with the XPS spectra taken after the 5 hour performance test (ESI Fig. S5†). While we cannot exclude that a transient light-induced formation of  $\text{NiOOH}$  contributes to the excellent performance of  $\text{NiO}_x$ , as suggested recently for  $\text{NiO}_x$  nanoparticles,<sup>54</sup> we do not observe a stable  $\text{NiOOH}$  formation in the above mentioned XPS spectra, as expected under negative bias.

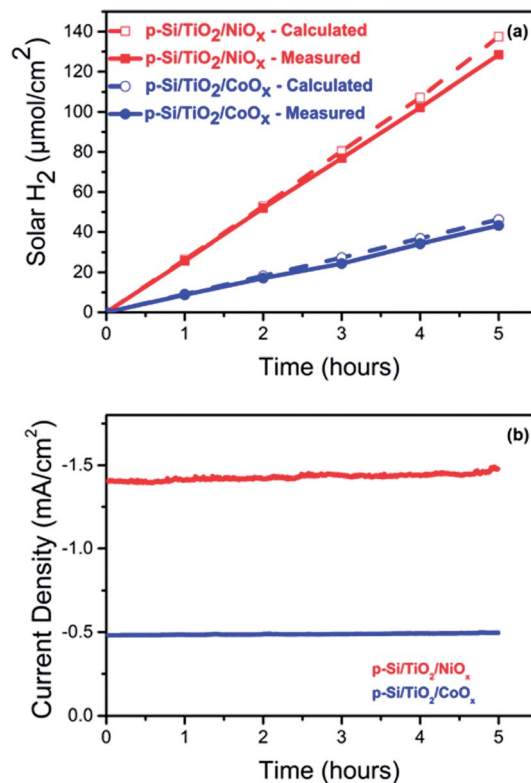


Fig. 4 Comparison of (a) the calculated and measured solar hydrogen production per geometric surface area of the photoelectrode and (b) of the current density of  $\text{NiO}_x$  (red) and  $\text{CoO}_x$  (blue) functionalized p-Si photo-electrodes over 5 hours of continuous operation. The data displayed in (a) and (b) were obtained simultaneously at  $0.0 V_{\text{RHE}}$  and 1 sun illumination.

### Charge transport kinetics

To understand the differences between the photo-electrochemical performance of non-functionalized and  $\text{NiO}_x$ - or  $\text{CoO}_x$ -functionalized p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2$  photo-electrodes, the transport of photoelectrons generated in p-Si to the surface and further to the protons in the phosphate buffer (pH 7.0) were studied by using electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS). The Nyquist plots of the EIS data measured at 1 sun illumination are shown in Fig. 5 along with the equivalent circuit diagram employed for their analysis. The smaller semi-circle (high frequency region) corresponds to the resistance for the charge transfer from p-Si through  $\text{TiO}_2$  to the surface ( $R_{\text{CT1}}$ ,  $\text{CPE}_1$ ), whereas the larger semicircle (low frequency region) corresponds to the photoelectrode/electrolyte interfacial charge transfer resistance described by  $R_{\text{CT2}}$  and  $\text{CPE}_2$ . The data in Fig. 5 and ESI Table S2† show that the charge transport resistance for both processes is smallest for  $\text{NiO}_x$ , and increases for p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{CoO}_x$  and is largest for the non-functionalized p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2$ .  $R_{\text{CT1}}$  increases from  $807 \Omega$  to  $1672 \Omega$  and  $1763 \Omega$ , while  $R_{\text{CT2}}$  from  $2519 \Omega$  to  $6646 \Omega$  and  $29\,840 \Omega$ . The effective  $R_s$  also increases in the same order, indicating that p-Si/ $\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiO}_x$  has the best charge transfer kinetics.<sup>55</sup>

To further investigate the electronic and interfacial properties, the flat band potential ( $V_{\text{FB}}$ ) and the carrier concentration



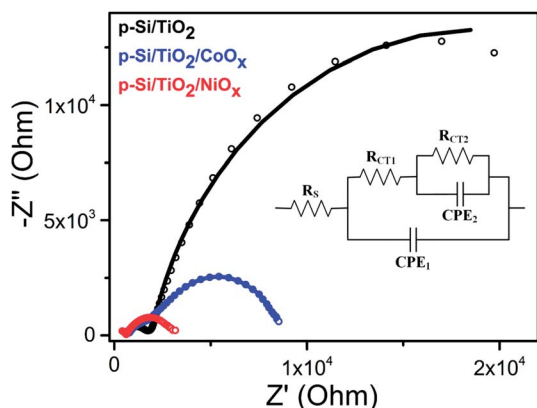


Fig. 5 Nyquist plots of p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub> (black), p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/CoO<sub>x</sub> (blue), p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> (red) measured at 0.0 V<sub>RHE</sub> under 1 sun illumination. The inset shows the equivalent circuit employed for analyzing the Nyquist plots. The fit data are provided in ESI Table S2.†

( $N_D$ ) were studied by Mott–Schottky measurements. Fig. 6(a–c) show that all photo-electrodes display a negative slope in the Mott–Schottky plots, consistent with the p-type doping of the Si substrate. The carrier concentrations ( $N_D$ ) of the photo-electrodes were calculated from the slopes of Mott–Schottky plots, yielding values of  $1.52 \times 10^{14} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ ,  $1.98 \times 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-3}$  and  $3.73 \times 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-3}$  for p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub> and CoO<sub>x</sub> or NiO<sub>x</sub> functionalized photo-electrodes, respectively. Thus, both CoO<sub>x</sub> and NiO<sub>x</sub> functionalized photo-electrodes show one-order higher donor densities compared to the p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub> control sample. This is in line with the observed H<sub>2</sub> generation rates at neutral pH, as well as with the order of the current densities and the charge transfer properties described above.

By fitting the linear regions (minimum range of 200 mV)<sup>56</sup> of the Mott–Schottky plots and extrapolating the line to the X-axis, the flat band potential  $V_{FB}$  can be deduced. Significant differences were observed: the  $V_{FB}$  of the Si/TiO<sub>2</sub> control sample was 0.63 V<sub>RHE</sub>, whereas  $V_{FB}$  of the CoO<sub>x</sub> and NiO<sub>x</sub> modified photo-electrodes were 0.68 V<sub>RHE</sub> and 0.79 V<sub>RHE</sub>, respectively. The anodic shifts of 0.05 V and 0.16 V compared to the control indicate that p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> has the least recombination losses,<sup>57</sup> suggesting that NiO<sub>x</sub> passivates the surface defects more efficiently than CoO<sub>x</sub>. The more positive anodic shifts of the  $V_{FB}$

for the p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> may be attributed to dissipation of potential drop at the Helmholtz layer and space charge region at the p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> – electrolyte interface.<sup>45</sup> An anodically shifted  $V_{FB}$  enhances the HER kinetics by lowering the potential for transporting electrons to the surface.<sup>46,58–62</sup>

### Effects of co-catalysts on the local geometry of TiO<sub>2</sub>

The electrochemical characterization of our photo-electrodes shows that the charge transfer properties of the interfacial TiO<sub>2</sub> layer are improved to various degrees by applying the CoO<sub>x</sub> or NiO<sub>x</sub> co-catalyst layers and sintering at 380 °C for two hours, indicating a modification of the TiO<sub>2</sub> coating by this procedure. In addition, the significant and different performance increases of p-Si/CoO<sub>x</sub> vs. p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/CoO<sub>x</sub> and p-Si/NiO<sub>x</sub> vs. p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> indicate an important role of the TiO<sub>2</sub> layer for the overall performance of the photo-electrodes. Thus, K-edge HERFD-XANES measurements were performed at the Ti K-edge (Fig. 7a and b) to elucidate changes in the atomic and electronic structure of TiO<sub>2</sub> induced by co-catalyst decoration. A schematic view of the optics and the experimental set up is presented elsewhere.<sup>63,64</sup> The pre-edge region of the XAS spectra (4967 to 4976 eV) is particularly sensitive to the symmetry at the Ti sites.<sup>65,66</sup> The pre-edge of crystalline TiO<sub>2</sub> has three characteristic peaks, denoted as A1, A2 and A3.<sup>67</sup> The pre-edge peaks A2 and A3 mainly arise from dipolar transitions from the Ti 1s shell and are thus affected by p–d mixing,<sup>66,68</sup> which in turn depends on the local bonding geometry. In contrast, the quadrupolar 1s to 3d transition gives rise to A1 and the low energy shoulder in A2.<sup>69,70</sup> Thus the number and position of the peaks in the pre-edge region contain information about the local coordination of Ti in TiO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>67</sup> In anatase and amorphous TiO<sub>2</sub>, the intensity of this shoulder is particularly sensitive to the presence of low coordination Ti sites as demonstrated by investigations of TiO<sub>2</sub> nanoparticles.<sup>71,72</sup> Additional structural information can be obtained from the spectral shape of the post-edge region (B and C in Fig. 7a), which derives from the excitation of a 1s electron to one of the unoccupied states with p-symmetry with respect to Ti. Such transitions are highly sensitive to the local structure around the absorber.<sup>67</sup>

Fig. 7a shows the HERFD-XANES spectra of p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>, p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/CoO<sub>x</sub>, and p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub>, while the reference spectra of

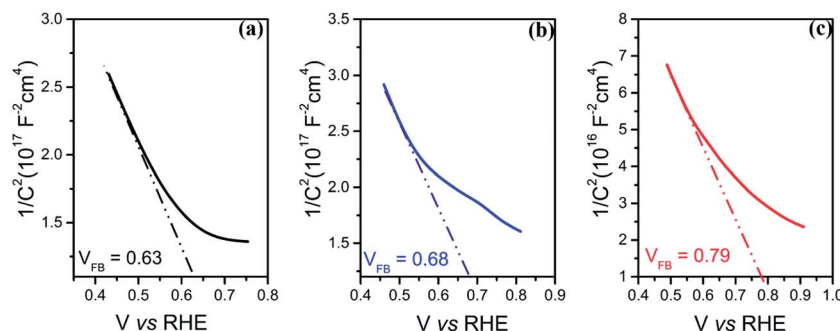


Fig. 6 Mott–Schottky measurements of (a) p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub> (b) p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/CoO<sub>x</sub> and (c) p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub>.



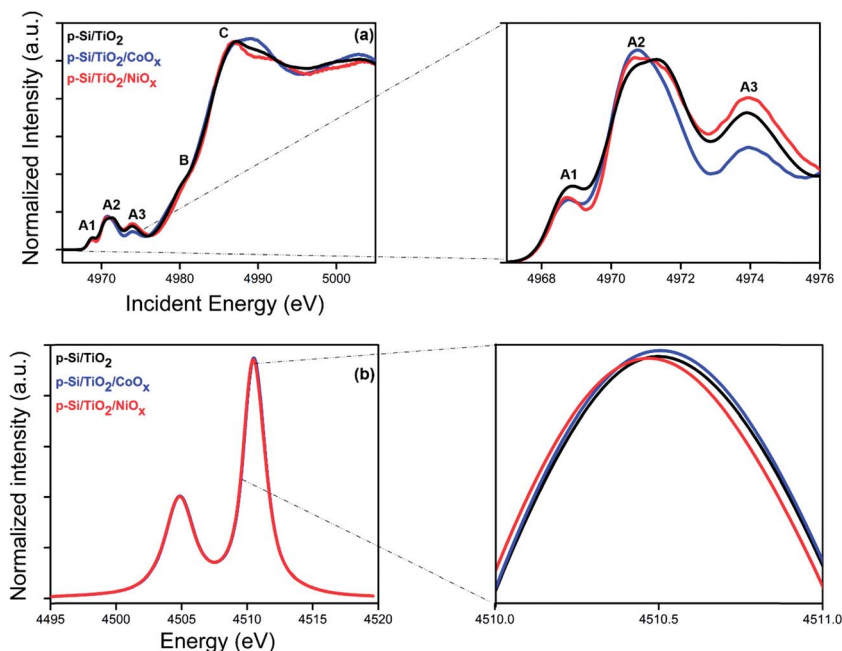


Fig. 7 X-ray spectroscopy characterization of p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub> (black), p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/CoO<sub>x</sub> (blue), p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> (red): (a) HERFD-XANES spectra acquired at the Ti K-edge. The magnified view on the right shows the pre-edge peaks. (b) K $\alpha$  emission lines. The magnified view on the right shows the K $\alpha$  peak maximum.

TiO<sub>2</sub> anatase, TiO<sub>2</sub> rutile, and sol-gel processed protective TiO<sub>2</sub> are displayed in ESI Fig. S9.† The overall spectral shape with three strong pre-edge features is preserved in all three samples. Together with the largely invariant K $\alpha$  lines (Fig. 7b) this finding confirms that the crystallinity of the protective TiO<sub>2</sub> layer remains unchanged, *i.e.* that in all cases Ti is in oxidation state +IV with a six-fold coordination. However, a detailed comparison revealed clear spectral differences between the pre-edge peaks of the three samples that are indicative of variously distorted TiO<sub>2</sub> octahedra. In addition, the absorption peak C is also different for all the samples.<sup>71</sup> The precise nature of these changes could possibly be addressed using computational modeling, which is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the present data demonstrate that an intricate interplay between all components of the photo-electrode, including the TiO<sub>2</sub> layer, exists that contributes to the overall catalytic performance.

### Functional characterisation of HER activity in artificial seawater (pH 8.4)

Because of the vast seawater resources on Earth, we tested also the photo-catalytic performance of our best electrode, p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub>, in artificial seawater. Fig. 8 displays the photo-electrochemical performance of p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> in neutral phosphate electrolyte and artificial seawater (pH 8.4). A shift of  $V_{\text{onset}}$  by  $-0.12 V_{\text{RHE}}$  is observed for artificial seawater compared to neutral phosphate buffer. This cathodic shift is expected due to the lower proton concentration at the higher pH. However, despite the less favourable onset potential, the p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> photoelectrode was highly efficient in H<sub>2</sub>

generation at increasing potentials. A photocurrent density of  $10 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  was achieved at 1 sun illumination and an applied potential of  $-0.7 V_{\text{RHE}}$ , and  $20 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  at about  $-0.9 V_{\text{RHE}}$ .

To the best of our knowledge, there are only a small number of studies describing the photo-electrochemical hydrogen generation by seawater splitting.<sup>4,6-8</sup> In a recent study, Mase *et al.*<sup>73</sup> reported the photocatalytic production of hydrogen peroxide (H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>) from seawater at pH 1.3 with a solar-to-electricity efficiency of 0.28%, and a photocatalytic production efficiency of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> of 0.55%. Ji *et al.*<sup>6</sup> found that their NiO/Ni/La<sub>2</sub>Ti<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub> photo catalysts were suitable for solar hydrogen generation from both natural and artificial seawater, but that Mg<sup>2+</sup> and Ca<sup>2+</sup> reduce the rate of H<sub>2</sub>-evolution. Fig. 8(b) and (c) show that our photoelectrode when operated in artificial seawater at an applied potential of  $-0.3 V_{\text{RHE}}$  and 1 sun illumination, produces H<sub>2</sub> at a nearly constant rate of about  $-1.5 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  over 8 hours. The possibility of photo-oxidation of Cl<sup>-</sup> to Cl<sub>2</sub> has been discussed for the photo-electrochemical seawater splitting<sup>4,7</sup> however, we did not detect chlorine gas formation employing gas chromatography. The ABPE in the seawater splitting was calculated to be 1.26% at  $-0.3 V_{\text{RHE}}$ , which corresponds to a current density of  $-1.5 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$ , after 8 hours of illumination with a Faradaic efficiency close to 91%, further indicating that Cl<sup>-</sup> oxidation and Mg<sup>2+</sup>/Ca<sup>2+</sup> deposition are at best minor side reactions. Importantly, an ABPE of 5.1% was observed at  $-0.7 V_{\text{RHE}}$ . These surprisingly good results highlight the importance of the TiO<sub>2</sub> layer in combination with NiO<sub>x</sub> as an efficient HER catalysts, which can likely be further optimized in future for even more efficient solar seawater splitting.



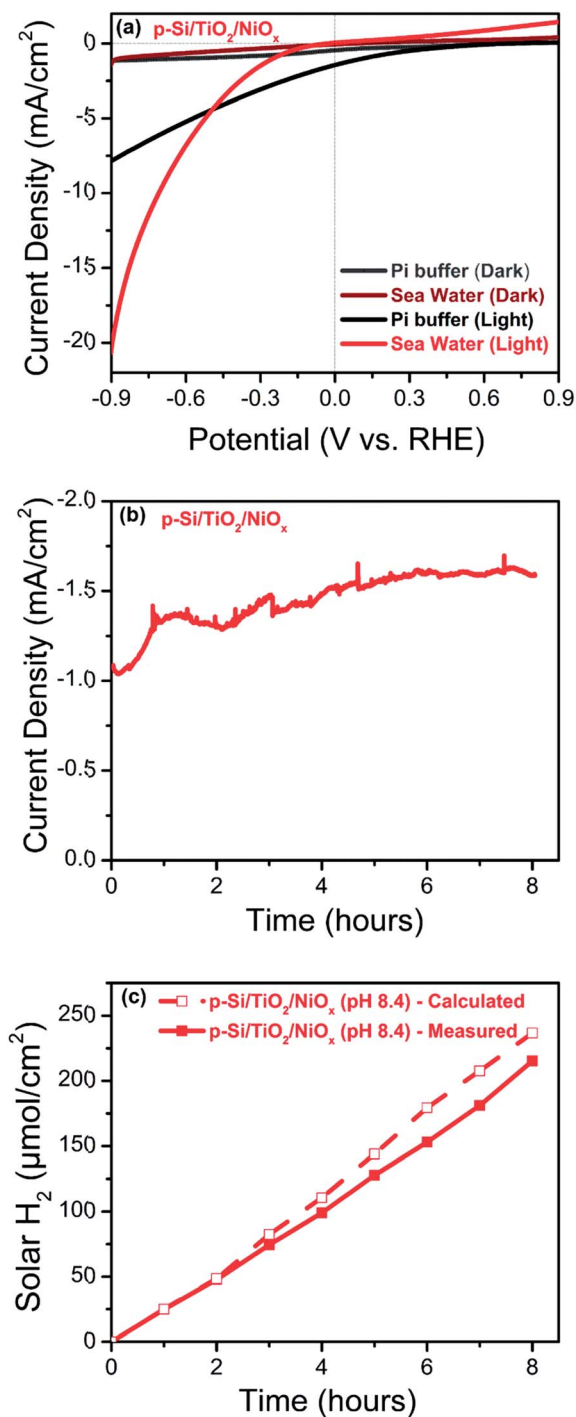


Fig. 8 Photo-electrochemical performance of the p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> photoelectrode recorded under 1 sun illumination in artificial seawater at pH 8.4 (red) or pH 7.0 (black; 0.2 M phosphate buffer): (a) linear sweep voltammograms, (b) photo-current density measured at  $-0.3 V_{RHE}$  and (c) comparison of calculated (open squares) and measured (closed squares) photo generated hydrogen per geometric surface area of the photo-electrode at  $-0.3 V_{RHE}$  and 1 sun.

## Conclusions

We demonstrate here a simple solution-based approach for the synthesis of photo-electrodes with earth abundant materials.

The photo-electrodes presented in this study can harvest solar energy and utilize it for splitting corrosive seawater, making it an attractive system for large-scale application. Our finding of sustained H<sub>2</sub> evolution with  $>1.2\%$  ABPE in artificial seawater using a p-Si/TiO<sub>2</sub>/NiO<sub>x</sub> at a bias of  $-0.3 V_{RHE}$  is highly encouraging, but further significant improvements to optimize the presented photo-electrodes are needed before practical applications become feasible. Importantly, the dual effect of NiO<sub>x</sub> on the charge transfer through the protective TiO<sub>2</sub> layer and for HER catalysis, points towards new ways for photoelectrode manufacturing.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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