

## REVIEW

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## Electrochemical ammonia synthesis: fundamental practices and recent developments in transition metal boride, carbide and nitride-class of catalysts

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Ammonia, a value-added chemical, major fertilizer and future transportation fuel, is conventionally and synthetically produced by the energy intensive Haber–Bosch process. For the conversion of nitrogen to ammonia, more energy efficient and environmentally friendly approach is required which can be fulfilled by the electrochemical nitrogen reduction reaction (NRR). Because of its sluggish kinetics and poor selectivity, the progress of NH<sub>3</sub> production is far beyond the industrial periphery. So, to meet the current energy demands, here we have summarized the bottlenecks of the NRR and have discussed briefly how to overcome these issues in terms of competitive HER, N<sub>2</sub> solubility in the electrolyte, and material specificity. Among the various categories of catalysts explored for NRR, we are here interested in transition metal borides (Mbenes), carbides (TMCs) and nitrides (TMNs) because of their respective benefits in selective N<sub>2</sub> adsorption and its subsequent reduction. We have widely covered the DFT studies concerning these catalysts and their experimental implementations towards NRR. Along with that, we believe that this review with detailed fundamentals of N<sub>2</sub> reduction will act as a tutorial for new-comers in this field. Finally, with the focus on the current challenges in this field, potential opportunities and future prospective have been provided.

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# 1. Introduction

Ammonia ( $\text{NH}_3$ ) is an important industrial chemical, useful fertilizer as well as a next generation renewable energy source for fuel cell technology.<sup>1</sup> But its synthesis uses up to 3 to 5% of the world's natural gas. Therefore, a lot of research is being done all over the world for the electrocatalytic  $\text{NH}_3$  synthesis by nitrogen reduction reaction (NRR) under ambient conditions, which is a promising alternative to the famous century-old Haber–Bosch process.<sup>2</sup> The major obstacles to this electrochemical process are the solubility issue of  $\text{N}_2$  in the electrolyte medium, competitive hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) occurring at the same voltage window as that of NRR, selectivity of most of the metals towards  $\text{H}_2$  adsorption than  $\text{N}_2$  and the sluggish counter-oxidation reaction at the anode.<sup>3</sup> These are indeed major concerns as these factors directly affect the yield, production rate and faradaic efficiency (F.E.) of  $\text{NH}_3$  synthesis. A detrimental NRR kinetics makes way for the facile HER process.<sup>4,5</sup> Moreover, a false positive  $\text{NH}_3$  production is often encountered if there is any nitrogenous source other than the feeding gas.<sup>6</sup> Thus, several precautionary measures are a must to adopt during the NRR process. This approach had been initiated in the late 1960s; however, the field has started its development recently. With an attempt to gain industrial scale  $\text{NH}_3$  production, several new avenues got opened in the process of catalyst designing and electrolyte improvisation. While some researchers started working on membranes to capture protons and help easy diffusion of  $\text{N}_2$ , so that there is less interference of  $\text{H}^+$  ions and restricted HER, others were more interested in investigating the reaction mechanisms being followed during NRR.

Thus, this field has enormously widened with enough room for further exploration and development.<sup>7</sup>

Ren *et al.* have clearly demonstrated that about 90% of the research works on NRR are concerned with catalyst designing.<sup>4</sup> The catalyst should be such that either it should be selective to  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption rather than protons or it should be engineered to have HER suppression ability by blocking the HER active sites. Considering the latter, several approaches have been adopted by researchers which include defect engineering, interface engineering, phase specific material designing and induced strained effects to gain dominance of NRR over HER.<sup>8–14</sup> However, it is desirable to have a simpler catalyst system but with efficacy to meet the current demands for high  $\text{NH}_3$  production with improved current density and faradaic efficiency (F.E.) because a rather complicated system would only add to the constraints of NRR.

Transition metal borides, carbides and nitrides have drawn immense attention in this field for their advantages over other classes of catalysts. Transition metal borides take the advantages of dual active edges (from the metal end as well as the boride end).<sup>15</sup> It is known that transition metals have  $\sigma$ -donation and  $\pi$ -back donation interactions with the adsorbed  $\text{N}_2$ .<sup>16</sup> However, it is noteworthy to mention that, borides can have energy as well as symmetry matched 2p orbital overlap with  $\text{N}_2$ , which favours  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption on the B-active edges.<sup>17</sup> In the case of transition metal carbides, owing to the bonding interactions of 2s and 2p orbitals of the C atoms with the d orbital of the transition metals, their electronic structures resemble those of noble metals near the Fermi edge.<sup>18</sup> This reinforces the intrinsic electronic properties of these catalysts



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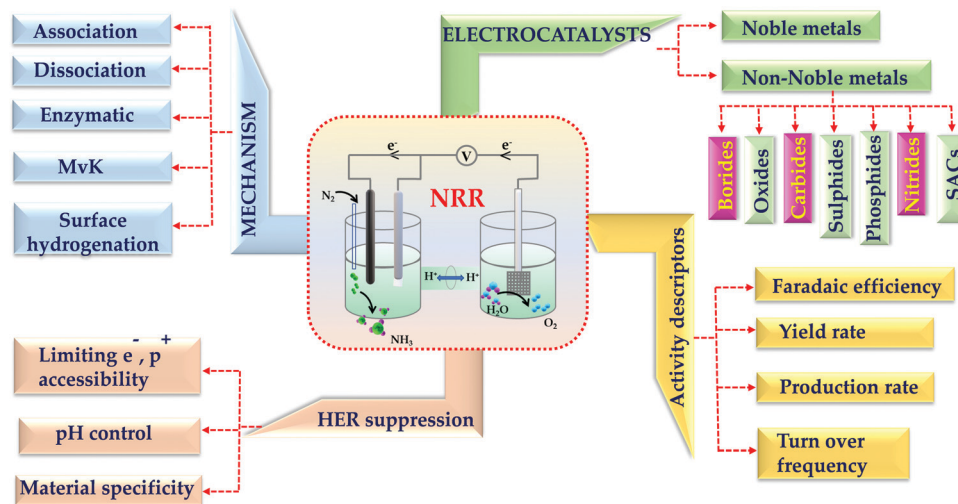


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**Fig. 1** A systematic summary of electrochemical nitrogen reduction reaction.

and helps to promote electron transfer from the catalyst surface to the reactants during NRR, enabling better charge transfer rates and NRR kinetics. Different from these two classes, the transition metal nitrides have inherent N-atoms, which act as the commencer of the NRR process on these catalysts.<sup>19</sup> Basically, the competition of NRR with HER arises because of the competition between proton and N<sub>2</sub> adsorption selectivity on the catalyst surface. But in this case, because of the special Mars-van Krevelen mechanism, NRR dominates over HER.<sup>20</sup> Considering all these key points, in this review firstly we have briefed the fundamentals of NRR followed by all the important experimental conditions like electrolytes favouring N<sub>2</sub> solubility in the medium, pH of the medium, proton and electron accessibility limiting HER kinetics and the choice of metals favouring NRR. Further, we have elaborated the gradual progress of the transition metal borides, carbides and nitrides for NRR and also reviewed the limitations and scopes with these classes of catalysts. Fig. 1 demonstrates the scope of this review. We believe that, this review will be helpful enough for the newcomers in this field to design transition metal borides, carbides and nitrides preferably for NRR with high yield, production rate and faradaic efficiency for NH<sub>3</sub> synthesis.

## 2. Fundamental basis of NRR

## 2.1 Thermodynamics of NRR

Dinitrogen ( $\text{N}_2$ ) molecules are extremely inert owing to the high bond dissociation energy ( $941 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$ ) of the triple bond, which accounts for just a portion of their inertness. The greater triple bond energy ( $962 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$ ) in acetylene ( $\text{C}_2\text{H}_2$ ), although  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_2$  is significantly highly reactive than  $\text{N}_2$ , is an obvious cause for the reactivity discrepancy. The first H-atom addition to  $\text{N}_2$  is endothermic ( $+37.6 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$ ), while the reaction with  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_2$  is exothermic ( $-171 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$ ). Apparently direct protonation is generally allowed for  $\text{C}_2\text{H}_2$ , but not for  $\text{N}_2$ .<sup>21</sup>  $\text{N}_2$  has a low electron affinity ( $1.9 \text{ eV}$ ) and a high ionization potential ( $15.8 \text{ eV}$ ). The wide energy gap ( $10.82 \text{ eV}$ ) between the highest

occupied (HOMO) and the lowest vacant molecular orbitals (LUMO) of N<sub>2</sub> discourages electron transport reactions.<sup>22,23</sup>

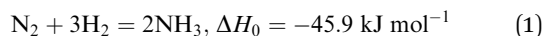
The thermodynamic limitations imposed by the reaction intermediates explain the key bottlenecks in the reduction reaction of  $\text{N}_2$  to  $\text{NH}_3$ . The electrocatalytic reduction of  $\text{N}_2$  to  $\text{NH}_3$  has similar equilibrium potentials to that of the contending HER. Among aqueous electrolytes,  $\text{H}_2$  is the primary NRR side product. Regardless, the NRR involves numerous proton-electron transfer pathways with intermediates. Although the redox potentials for the production of the  $\text{N}_2\text{H}$  intermediate are quite negative, this indicates that the initial H-atom addition is extremely challenging. When applied to multistep catalytic processes comprising various intermediates, the thermodynamic methodology has highlighted significant shortcomings. The relative adsorption energy levels of several NRR intermediates could be scaled up in terms of Gibbs' energy requirement for each step.<sup>24</sup> It is challenging to find an ideal catalyst with all reaction stages being thermodynamically neutral or favorable. There are no independent binding energies for the  $\text{NH}_2$  or  $\text{N}_2\text{H}$  intermediate in NRR, resulting in a minimal overpotential of 0.4 V.<sup>25</sup> Fortunately, subsequent theoretical calculations have revealed potential innovative ways to decrease overpotential which may be employed to break or avoid the scaling relations of NRR.

## 2.2 Different mechanistic approaches

In nature, plants can reduce nitrogen through numerous proton and electron transfer processes, which are catalyzed by iron-molybdenum nitrogenase enzymes under environmental conditions.<sup>26–28</sup> The nitrogenase enzymes having Fe–Fe, Fe–Mo and Fe–V active moieties are believed to go through the reduction process by the enzymatic pathway where  $N_2$  undergoes side-on adsorption on the catalyst surface followed by alternative hydrogenation of each of the N atoms. This results in the release of two  $NH_3$  molecules subsequently. Nevertheless, analyzing and understanding the nitrogen fixation mechanism continues to be a difficult endeavor in the living organisms.



After more than 150 years of research, F. Haber was able to effectively develop an artificial nitrogen-fixing industrial process<sup>29</sup> in order to meet the demands of the manufacturing sector. Eqn (1) describes how an ammonium-containing combination of nitrogen and hydrogen is utilized to create ammonia under extreme conditions of high temperature and pressure while engaging a catalyst:



In contrast to the HER and ORR, where the reaction pathway has been well known using metal (Pt) model catalytic systems, the NRR lacks an appropriate catalyst to examine the mechanism, as standard noble metal catalysts, which work well in the HER and ORR, do not operate well in the NRR. The NRR reaction mechanism is still not clear, although the three main reaction mechanisms currently acknowledged are the dissociative mechanism, the associative pathway (alternating and distal), and the enzymatic pathway.<sup>29,30</sup> In the dissociative mechanism, the N–N bond is broken first and then the two N atoms are adsorbed on

to the catalyst, indicating the catalytic hydrogenation reaction, which is most prevalent in the Haber–Bosch technique because the kinetic parameters can provide enough power to impede the  $\text{N}\equiv\text{N}$  bond which is illustrated in Fig. 1.<sup>26</sup> The hydrogenation reaction is initiated before the breakdown of the N–N bond in the associative pathway.<sup>31</sup> Almost all the catalysts lean towards the associative mechanism of ammonia synthesis, which is further categorized into alternating and distal pathways. The alternating pathway is the same as the enzymatic pathway except for the fact that here,  $\text{N}_2$  undergoes end-on adsorption on the catalyst surface. This end-on adsorption is possible when the catalysts have free unsaturated sites (axially) for  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption. For the distal pathway, the farthest N atom is first protonated and released as  $\text{NH}_3$ , followed by the protonation of the next N ad-atom. Au/ $\text{TiO}_2$ ,<sup>32</sup> B-induced O vacant  $\text{MnO}_2$ ,<sup>33</sup> and the S-vacant amorphous  $\text{MoS}_3$  catalyst<sup>34</sup> follow the distal associative pathway, while the N-vacant polymeric carbon nitride<sup>35</sup> follows an alternating associative pathway, where the two N-atoms alternately hydrogenate even before the N–N bond breaks, resulting in the

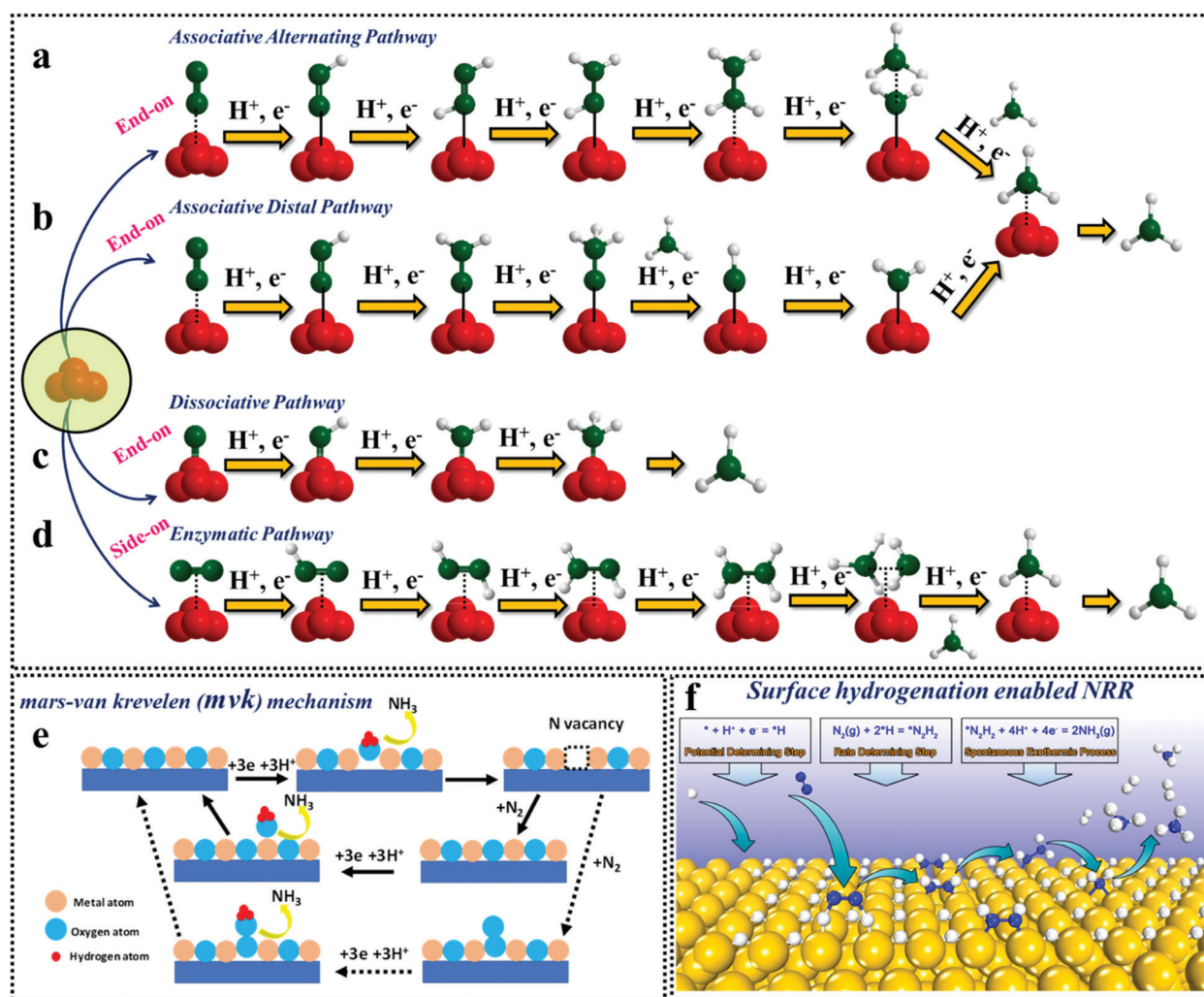


Fig. 2 Different mechanistic approaches of NRR. (a) Associative alternating pathway; (b) associative distal pathway; (c) dissociative pathway; (d) enzymatic pathway; (e) Mars–van Krevelen pathway and (f) surface hydrogenation driven NRR. Reproduced with permission from Ling *et al.*,<sup>41</sup> Copyright 2019, American Chemical Society.





cathode compartment (mL),  $M$  is the relative molar mass of  $\text{NH}_3$  ( $M = 17 \text{ g mol}^{-1}$ ), and  $Q$  is the total charge passed through the electrodes (C).

The surface-area-normalized production rate of  $\text{NH}_3$  ( $\text{mol s}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ ) was calculated by eqn (4) as below:

$$\text{Production rate}_{\text{ECSA}} = \frac{C \times V}{M \times t \times A_{\text{ECSA}}} \quad (4)$$

The mass-normalized production rate of  $\text{NH}_3$  ( $\text{mmol h}^{-1} \text{g}_{\text{cat}}^{-1}$ ) was calculated as below (eqn (5)):

where  $n$  is the number of electrons required for producing one  $\text{NH}_3$  molecule ( $n = 3$ ),  $F$  is the Faraday constant ( $F = 96\,485.33$ ),  $M$  is the relative molecular mass of  $\text{NH}_3$  ( $M = 17.03$ ), and  $Q$  is the overall charge that passes *via* the electrodes.

Likewise, another important parameter is the turn-over frequency (TOF) of the electrocatalyst, which is a measure of the instantaneous efficiency of a catalyst, calculated as the derivative of the number of turnovers of the catalytic cycle with respect to the time per active site of the catalyst. It is given by the following equation:<sup>42</sup>

where TOF is the turnover frequency (in  $\text{h}^{-1}$ ),  $r_{\text{N}}$  is the ammonia-producing rate (in  $\text{mmol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ ),  $N_{\text{A}}$  is the Avogadro constant ( $6.023 \times 10^{23} \text{ mol}^{-1}$ ) and  $N_{\text{sas}}$  is the number of surface sites (in  $\text{g}^{-1}$ ).

### 3.1 N<sub>2</sub> solubility in the electrolyte

Ionic liquids are the most efficient in this respect to solvate N<sub>2</sub> gases in the medium. Gomes and co-workers worked with room temperature ionic liquid 1-butyl-3-methylimidazolium tetrafluoroborate, [bmim][BF<sub>4</sub>],<sup>44</sup> and calculated the solubility of N<sub>2</sub> in terms of mole fractions of solute and Henry's law

### 2.3 Activity descriptors for NRR

$$R = \frac{C \times V}{t \times \text{mg}_{\text{scat}}} \quad (2)$$

Another measurement of the selectivity of an electrochemical process for  $\text{NH}_3$  production in comparison to competing reactions such as HER is the fraction of faradaic current used for nitrogen reduction in relation to the total current passed through the circuit. The following equation (eqn (3)) can be used to calculate the FE, where  $n$  is the number of electrons required for producing one  $\text{NH}_3$  molecule ( $n = 3$ ),  $F$  is the Faraday constant ( $F = 96\,485 \text{ C mol}^{-1}$ ),  $C$  is the measured  $\text{NH}_3$  concentration ( $\mu\text{g mL}^{-1}$ ),  $V$  is the volume of the electrolyte in the

$$x_2 = n_2^{\text{liq}} / (n_1^{\text{liq}} + n_2^{\text{liq}}) \quad (7)$$

where  $n_2^{\text{liq}}$  is the amount of solute dissolved in the ionic liquid and  $n_1^{\text{liq}}$  is the total amount of ionic liquid.

$$K_H = \lim_{x_2 \rightarrow 0} \frac{f_2(p, T, x_2)}{x_2} \cong \phi_2(p_{\text{eq}}, T_{\text{eq}}) p_{\text{eq}} / x_2 \quad (8)$$

where  $K_{\text{H}}$  is Henry's law constant,  $f_2$  is the fugacity of the solute and  $\phi_2$  is the fugacity coefficient of the solute calculated in the usual way,  $p$  and  $T$  are the pressure and temperature of gaseous solute present in the gas bulb and  $p_{\text{eq}}$  and  $T_{\text{eq}}$  are the equilibrium pressure and temperature respectively.

This study showed that this ionic liquid electrolyte was able to solvate  $N_2$  with  $x_2 = 6.076$  and  $K_H = 1646$  at room temperature. [bmim][BF<sub>4</sub>] and 1-butyl-3-methylimidazolium hexafluorophosphate [bmim][PF<sub>6</sub>]<sup>45</sup> are widely used for this solubility study. The same group further worked on 1-alkyl-3-methylimidazolium (C<sub>n</sub>mim,  $n = 2, 4, 6$ ) tris(pentafluoroethyl)-trifluorophosphate ionic liquids (eFAP) and confirmed that the improved solubility of gases is due to the interaction of the solute (N<sub>2</sub>) with the polar part of the ionic liquids as proved by the enthalpies of solvation and the site-site solute-solvent radial distribution functions using molecular simulation.<sup>46</sup> They further extended their finding to arrive at a point that ionic liquids with partial fluorination on the cation were found to increase CO<sub>2</sub> and nitrogen mole fraction solubility up to 50% compared to their hydrogenated counterparts.<sup>47</sup> Basically, perfluorinated organic liquids have a backbone of strong C-F bonds that cause a loss in molecular flexibility and a decrease in polarity, which in turn help to solvate the gas molecules facilely.<sup>48</sup> While Gomes *et al.* explored the anionic effect and showed a 30% increase in N<sub>2</sub> solubility from [C<sub>8</sub>mim][NTf<sub>2</sub>] ([NTf<sub>2</sub>] is the bis(trifluoromethanesulfonyl)imide ion) to [C<sub>8</sub>mim][BETI] ([BETI] is the bis(pentafluoroethanesulfonyl)imide), Noble *et al.* examined the influence of the imidazolium cation and found that the N<sub>2</sub> solubility decreased by approximately 36% due to the polar nature of the nitrile group.<sup>49</sup> To implement this strategy into the field of NRR, MacFarlane and group worked on [C<sub>4</sub>mpyr][eFAP] and [P<sub>6,6,6,14</sub>][eFAP] ionic liquids for NRR,<sup>50</sup> having a N<sub>2</sub> solubility of 0.20 mg g<sup>-1</sup> and 0.28 mg g<sup>-1</sup> respectively. The current density and yield were found to be more with the [C<sub>4</sub>mpyr][eFAP] IL due to its lower viscosity, which supports higher mass transport while the F.E. was better for [P<sub>6,6,6,14</sub>][eFAP] (60%). From theoretical calculations it was derived that N<sub>2</sub> was likely to interact with the F-atoms and greater the charge delocalization over the anionic and cationic part of the ionic liquids, better will be the interaction of the F-ends with N<sub>2</sub> and higher will be the N<sub>2</sub> solubility. Keeping this issue in mind, they further synthesized a series of phosphonium-based ILs with highly fluorinated anions, which displayed high N<sub>2</sub> solubility and all were found to be promising towards NRR.<sup>51</sup> This is a wide research field on its own and there is much scope to implement these ionic liquids in NRR in a better optimized way so that along with high F.E., the yield and production rate of NH<sub>3</sub> could be simultaneously improved.

### 3.2 Restriction of HER toward improved F.E. for NRR

Most of the times, the performance of the catalysts towards NRR is receded by an alarming issue which is the competitive hydrogen evolution process (HER).<sup>52</sup> The multiphase proton-coupled-electron process (NRR) not only involves a number of intermediates that are difficult to trace but also requires six electrons and six protons to completely get reduced to ammonia. This is unlike the case of HER, which involves a much faster kinetics with only two electrons and two protons.<sup>53</sup> Again, from thermodynamics point of view, the dissociation of the  $\text{N}\equiv\text{N}$  bond is an energy intensive process. Therefore, although NRR and HER have the same working window, NRR suffers from a huge overpotential while HER becomes predominant. It is noteworthy that, at a low negative potential window, NRR becomes operative but with a lower current density. With the increase in the negative applied potential, the current density increases significantly, but the faradaic efficiency for NRR is drastically hampered by the rapid  $\text{H}_2$  evolution.<sup>1,54-56</sup> Thus, with respect to the medium, accessible electrons and protons and material choice, it is crucial to maintain a proper balance so that either the working potential window for NRR could be increased or the achievable current could be more at a low negative potential. A detailed discussion regarding the above-mentioned points is provided below.

**3.2.1 Influence of pH of electrolyte.** For NRR, the pH of the electrolyte has an important role to play as it is directly linked to the concentration of the proton donor participating in the reduction process which consequently is related to the selectivity of NRR (Fig. 3a).<sup>55</sup> Usually, aqueous electrolytes include acidic electrolytes such as 0.1 M HCl and 0.05 M H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>, neutral electrolytes such as 0.1 M phosphate buffer solution (PBS), 0.5 M LiClO<sub>4</sub> and 0.1 M Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>, and alkaline electrolytes such as 0.1 M NaOH and 0.1 M KOH.<sup>6,57-59</sup>

Centi *et al.* studied the effect of pH of electrolytes on ammonia selectivity using Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>-CNTs under different pH of 0.6 (0.25 M KHSO<sub>4</sub>), 7 (0.25 M K<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>), 9.4 (0.5 M KHCO<sub>3</sub>), and 13.7 (0.5 M KOH).<sup>60</sup> It was found that with the rise in the pH value the NRR FE increased and the maximum FE was obtained in the case of 0.5 M KOH (0.164%) which was almost two times more than that for 0.25 M KHSO<sub>4</sub> (0.075%). Likewise, for Mo<sub>2</sub>C nanodots anchored on carbon cloth in a proton rich electrolyte (pH = 2), a low FE of 1.6% was obtained as compared to that in a proton suppressed electrolyte with FE = 7.8% (pH = 3).<sup>61</sup> In addition to this, Wu *et al.* revealed in their study that the nanoporous N-doped carbon catalyst showed better selectivity for NRR in the case of 0.1 M KOH than in 0.1 M HCl.<sup>62</sup> These studies conclude that high pH electrolytes with less proton availability lead to superior NRR selectivity due to the sluggish HER process.

The neutral PBS electrolyte with limited proton availability may be favourable in hindering the  $\text{H}_2$  generation. Recently, Feng *et al.* demonstrated that the Pd/C catalyst in the neutral PBS electrolyte was more selective towards NRR than in acidic or basic media due to restricted HER.<sup>63</sup> Also in the case of the Fe/Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> catalyst the same trend is followed.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, the pH of the medium determines whether H<sub>2</sub>O (basic medium) or

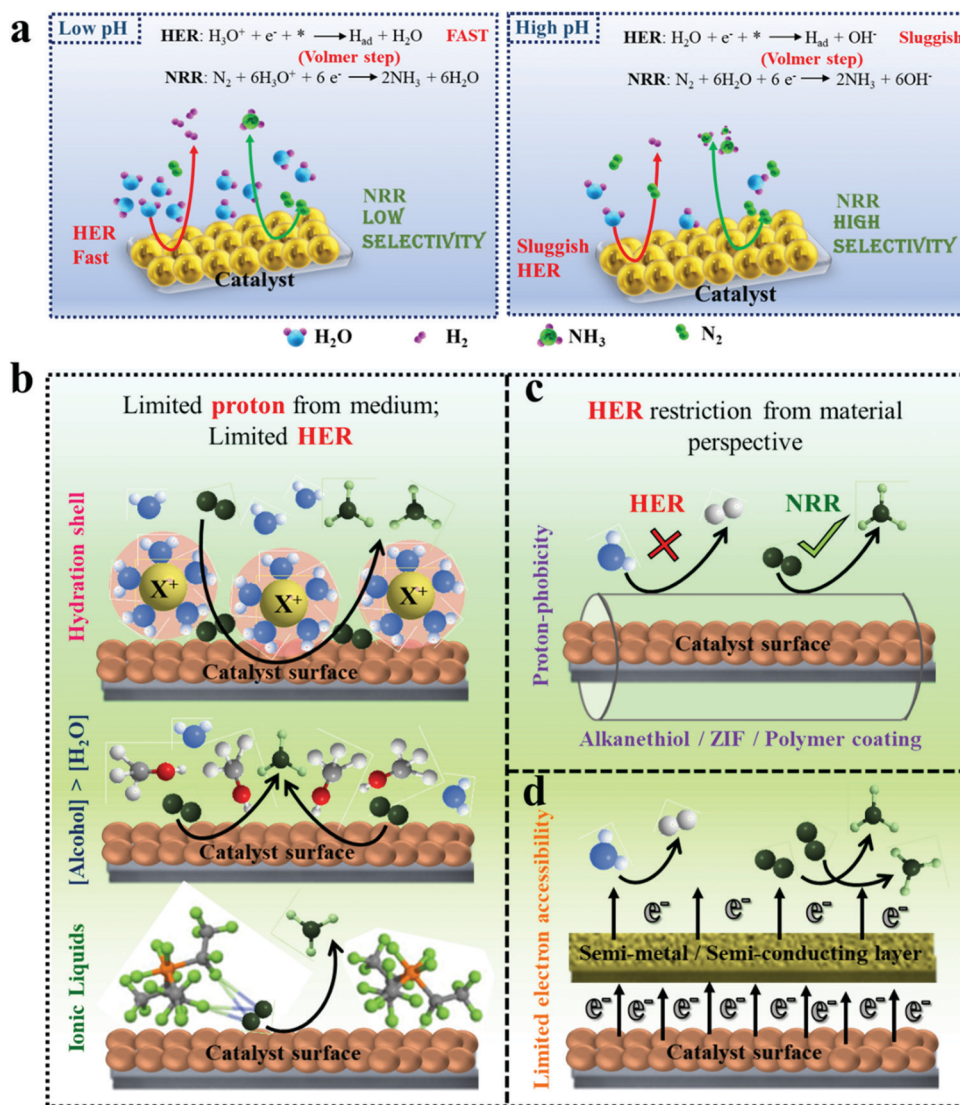


Fig. 3 Schematic representation of HER suppression. (a) Effect of pH on dominant NRR over HER. (b) Limiting proton source in the medium, restricting HER. The image of the ionic liquid has been reproduced with permission from Zhou et al.,<sup>50</sup> Copyright 2017, Royal Society of Chemistry. (c) Hydrophobic coating over the material to prevent HER. (d) Surface/semi-metal or surface/semi-conductor heterostructure inhibiting HER kinetics.

$\text{H}_3\text{O}^+$  (acidic medium) would act as proton donor during NRR (Fig. 3a). The Volmer step in the HER mechanism involves a high energy barrier for water dissociation in neutral and basic pH which is not the case in acidic medium.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the HER process in alkaline and neutral electrolytes is more sluggish than in acidic electrolytes because of the restricted Volmer step. It is also to be noted that the pH of the electrolyte and selectivity towards NRR may be limited due to the cell configuration and catalyst.<sup>66</sup> Still there is a need to explore the effect of pH of the electrolyte and the local pH gradient around the catalyst for deep understanding of NRR selectivity.

**3.2.2 Control over electron and proton accessibility.** As already mentioned above, the kinetics of NRR is limited due to the faster HER kinetics. Nørskov and co-workers have confirmed that while HER is dependent on the proton and electron concentration by first-order, NRR is independent of the same as shown in eqn (1) and (2).<sup>67</sup> Naturally, if the electron and proton

accessibility could be limited either from the medium or from the material respectively, NRR could be facilitated over HER.

$$\text{HER} \propto [\text{H}^+]^1 [\text{e}^-]^1 \quad (9)$$

$$\text{NRR} \propto [\text{H}^+]^0 [\text{e}^-]^0 \quad (10)$$

**3.2.2.1 Control over proton accessibility from medium.** One of the vital components of any electrocatalytic process is the working electrolyte, which provides the platform for the reactions to occur. Generally, aqueous electrolytes are used for an ambient NRR process. However, in the case of acids like HCl,  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ ,  $\text{HClO}_4$  and  $\text{H}_3\text{PO}_4$ , the proton sufficiency cannot be controlled in the medium and that is why it is more favourable to use the corresponding salts. The presence of alkali metal cations like  $\text{Li}^+$ ,  $\text{Na}^+$  and  $\text{K}^+$  favours the NRR process owing to their tendency to form solvation shells, and hence steric effects.





Several groups have investigated the role of cations in reinforcing the NRR kinetics<sup>68, 42</sup>. It has been found both theoretically and experimentally that, the smaller is the size of the cations, such as in the case of  $\text{Li}^+$ , the affinity to form a hydration shell is maximum, which thereby increases the transfer barrier for the  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  molecules close to the catalyst surface restricting the water splitting process. After a systematic investigation, Rondinone and co-workers confirmed that  $\text{Li}^+$  in the medium outperformed  $\text{Na}^+$  and  $\text{K}^+$  with respect to NRR F.E. at different applied potentials like  $-0.8\text{ V}$ ,  $-1.0\text{ V}$  and  $-1.2\text{ V}$  (vs. RHE) over an N-doped carbon nanospire (CNS) catalyst.<sup>69</sup> They also showed that the F.E. dropped remarkably as the size of the alkali metal ion increased from  $\text{Li}^+$  to  $\text{Na}^+$  to  $\text{K}^+$ . Not only the size of the cation, the concentration of the cation was also found to play a role in NRR F.E. – Yan *et al.* found that with the increase in the cation ( $\text{K}^+$ ) concentration in the electrolyte from  $0.2$  to  $1.0\text{ mol L}^{-1}$ , higher degree of the solvation layer over the surface of a bismuth nanocrystal (BiNC) catalyst could be achieved, which significantly retarded the migration of the protons in the electrical double layer (EDL). This led to an increase in the current density and thus F.E. for the NRR from  $9.8$  to  $67\%$ .<sup>42</sup> This trend and activity of alkali metal cations were irrespective of the catalysts and besides suppressing HER,  $\text{K}^+$  was also able to promote  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption on the catalyst surface.<sup>70</sup>

Besides this, another approach to limit the proton access in aqueous electrolytes is by using an optimum concentration of methanol/2-propanol in water.<sup>71, 72</sup> While Kim *et al.* showed that 2-propanol/water ( $9:1\text{ v/v}$ ) brought about effective NRR than the all-aqueous electrolyte, Ren *et al.* showed that, at  $0.16\%$  water volumetric content in the water-methanol medium, the availability and dissociation process of water got substantially restricted, accompanied by an expanded electrochemical window and inhibited HER. In this work by Ren *et al.*, at  $-1.2\text{ V}$  vs.  $\text{Ag/AgCl}$ , the methanol-enabled electrolyte recorded a high NRR F.E. of  $75.9 \pm 4.1\%$  and an ammonia yield rate of  $262.5 \pm 7.3\text{ }\mu\text{g h}^{-1}\text{ mg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1}$  ( $\text{FeOOH/CNTs}$ ),  $\sim 8$ -fold enhancement than that obtained in a  $0.1\text{ M KOH}$  aqueous electrolyte. The reason is that, at an optimum methanol content, methanol is able to initiate intermolecular H-bonding with the water molecules, which in turn makes it difficult to dissociate the O–H bond of water molecules (suppressed Volmer step of HER). They also showed that, methanol could surpass other organic electrolytes like ethanol, propanol, butanol and dimethyl sulfoxide with water. Tsuneto *et al.* tried to completely ignore water molecules yet achieve remarkable  $\text{NH}_3$  formation efficiency by incorporating  $\text{Li}^+$  ( $0.2\text{ M LiClO}_4$ ) into the organic electrolyte (tetrahydrofuran/ethanol ( $99:1\text{ v/v}$ )) on some metal electrodes. Lithium was found to act as a mediator to produce ammonia with a higher current efficiency ( $48.7\%$ ) when the electrolysis was conducted under a high pressure of  $\text{N}_2$  ( $50\text{ atm}$ ).<sup>73</sup> Contrary to this, ionic liquid (IL) electrolytes serve as a special candidate in solvating  $\text{N}_2$  and achieving high F.E. for NRR up to  $60\%$ .<sup>50, 74, 75</sup> The control one could have in terms of electrolyte medium to limit the proton accessibility is schematically shown in Fig. 3b.

**3.2.2.2 Control over proton migration at the material–medium interface.** From a material perspective, in order to prevent the  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  migration on the material surface, several researchers have sought the help of hydrophobic coatings over the active sites.<sup>58</sup> The use of alkanethiols over the catalysts like  $\text{MoS}_2$  or  $\text{Cu}$  served as a hydrophobic layer inhibiting HER and promoting different electrolytic processes like NRR and  $\text{CO}_2$  reduction.<sup>76</sup> Besides this, hydrophobic coatings around Au surfaces were also proved to have a benign effect on the energy efficiency of NRR.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Ling *et al.* used a zeolitic imidazolate framework (ZIF) coating on the surface of a  $\text{Ag-Au}$  catalyst to suppress the HER activity of the catalyst with a 4-fold improvement for the NRR F.E.<sup>78</sup> As the ZIF layer is porous, to further prevent  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  diffusion through the pores, they coated the ZIF with an oleylamine layer, which further inhibited the HER process.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, Wang and co-workers designed highly dispersed Au nanoparticles (active species) coated with a porous poly(tetrafluoroethylene) (PTFE) framework (hydrophobic layer).<sup>80</sup> The PTFE modified surface of the Au catalyst enabled  $\text{N}_2$  diffusion to have sufficient  $\text{N}_2$  molecules at the surface of Au nanoparticles for their subsequent reduction. Owing to the hindered  $\text{H}_2$  evolution, the catalyst presented a considerably increased NRR F.E. in contrast to the original Au nanoparticles. More recently, Liu *et al.* reported a three-layered unique catalyst where the active interlayer of vacancy-rich  $\text{ReSe}_2$  was sandwiched between two layers of hydrophobic carbon fibres.<sup>81</sup> In all these cases, the hydrophobic coating efficiently lowered the coverage of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  molecules on the surface of the active site to impede the HER kinetics, rendering superior NRR selectivity (Fig. 3c).

**3.2.2.3 Control over electron accessibility by catalyst engineering.** As already mentioned above, HER is dependent on the available electrons, while NRR and its corresponding  $\text{NH}_3$  production efficiency are not affected by this. Keeping this issue in mind, upon limiting the electron sufficiency from the material surface, HER could be sufficiently suppressed (Fig. 3d) as shown by Qiao *et al.* They adopted an interface engineering strategy on 2D mosaic Bi nanosheets that featured a relatively large charge-transfer resistance of  $\sim 300\text{ }\Omega$ , indicating a restricted electron transfer rate. As a result, HER was retarded delivering a high NRR F.E. of  $10.46\%$  at  $-0.8\text{ V}$  (vs. RHE).<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Sn-based catalysts were explored by Biswas *et al.* where they experimentally as well as theoretically demonstrated a suppressed HER on the Sn site of  $\text{SnS}_2$  at the  $\text{NPG@SnS}_2$  interface, promoting selective NRR with  $49.3\%$  F.E.<sup>83, 84</sup> Röpke *et al.* fabricated their catalyst surface with conductive polyaniline (PAN) where they tuned the thickness of the PAN coating and thus controlled the electron accessibility and hence the kinetics of the NRR process.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, PAN could also accelerate the adsorption of  $\text{N}_2$  molecules and their intermediates.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, other conductive polymers like polyimide and polypyrrole could also be used to drive forward NRR by slowing down the transfer rate of the electron flux from the catalyst surface to the adsorbed reactants.<sup>4</sup>

**3.2.3 Material specificity.** During NRR in aqueous medium, a parasitic reaction HER can go sideways. This is because H atoms get easily adsorbed on the catalyst surfaces in contrast



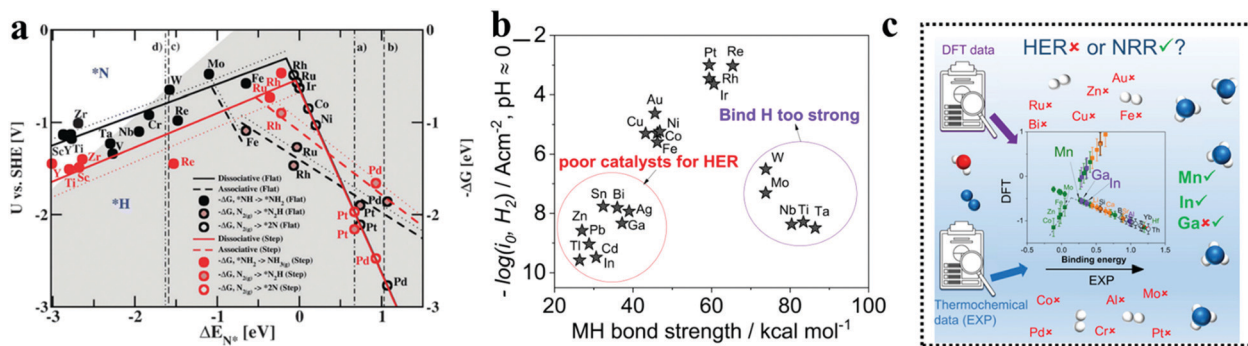


Fig. 4 (a) Volcano plot for the NRR on metal surfaces with specific mechanistic assumptions. A shaded area in the plot represents the overlaid volcano diagram for the HER counterpart. Reproduced with permission from ref. 189, Copyright 2012, Royal Society of Chemistry. (b) NRR over HER selectivity plot at pH 0, 4, and 14; volcano plot of HER. Experimental exchange currents of HER versus MH bond strengths (heat of adsorption of  $H_2$  gas) for different metals (M), where the data are taken from Trasatti (1972). (c) Overview of selectivity of metals for NRR over HER from DFT as well as experimental point of view. Reproduced with permission from ref. 190, Copyright 2020, Elsevier B. V.

to  $N_2$  molecules leading to evolution of  $H_2$  eventually, lowering the selectivity of NRR.<sup>87,88</sup> So, the catalysts must be designed with the strategy of suppressing HER by decreasing the probability of adsorption of H atoms. Norskov *et al.* did a theoretical study to calculate the free energy of adsorption and reduction of N and H atoms on the surfaces of extensive metals in acidic medium.<sup>89</sup> It was observed that transition metals (Fe, Mo, W, Rh) showed high activity for NRR but they also had a tendency to adsorb H atoms (Fig. 4a). There are a few early transition metals (Sc, Ti, Zr, Y) that exhibited stronger binding of N atoms than H atoms. Following this, these metals and their corresponding complexes like  $TiO_2$  nanosheets on Ti foil,<sup>90</sup>  $Ti_3C_2T_x$  MXene nanosheets,<sup>91</sup>  $Y_2O_3$  nanosheets,  $ZrO_2$  nanoparticles,<sup>92</sup> *etc.* were obtained as they are electrochemically active for NRR. Although Sc-, Y-, Zr-, and Ti-based electrocatalysts have less binding ability for H atoms, their intrinsic NRR activity ( $FE \leq 5\%$ ) is poor. Therefore, huge efforts are being made to improve their intrinsic NRR activity. Recent studies on single atom catalysts (SACs) are getting wide attention due to maximum atom-utilization and unsaturated coordination configuration in NRR due to suppression of HER (Fig. 4b and c).<sup>93,94</sup>

## 4. Transition metal borides (TMBs)

Transition metal borides or simply MBenes are an emerging class of catalysts, still in infancy in the field of NRR. Owing to the strong M-B and B-B covalent bonds, these catalysts offer high chemical and thermal durability and provide a high active surface area as compared to metal nitrides and carbides. As the composition of metal borides can vary over a wide range, they can act as metals/semiconductors/insulators in terms of electrical conductivity as per the requirement.<sup>95–97</sup> Several computational studies have been done for different groups of MBenes to shed light on the choice of T.M with best NRR performance and to deduce an estimation regarding the NRR mechanism being followed (Fig. 5a and b). The TMBs used for NRR have been summarized in Table 1. A study by Li *et al.* showed that among the T.M (Sc, Ti, V, Cr, Mo and W) boride monolayers, VB, CrB, and

MoB with the onset potentials of  $-0.396$ ,  $-0.277$ , and  $-0.403$  V, respectively, were screened out to be more effective for NRR (Fig. 5c). The VB monolayer was ascertained to follow the alternating pathway with the end-on configuration while CrB and MoB were more compatible to follow the mixed I pathway with the end-on and side-on configurations respectively (Fig. 5d and e).<sup>98</sup> However, there is no particularity in terms of mechanism for different MBenes as shown in Fig. 5f and g. In addition to CrB and MoB, Guo *et al.* also suggested that WB,  $Mo_2B$ ,  $V_3B_4$  and a few mixed metal borides like  $CrMnB_2$  and  $CrFeB_2$  act as a HER suppressant and have intrinsic basal plane activity for NRR with limiting potentials ranging from  $-0.22$  to  $-0.82$  V.<sup>99</sup> Zhao's group also included TiB in the preference list for NRR, which was later experimentally proved by Luo and co-authors using a sputtered  $TiB_2$  film to enable superb electrochemical  $N_2$  reduction.<sup>100</sup> It is noteworthy to mention that Ma and co-workers worked on ternary metal borides like molybdenum aluminum boride ( $MoAlB$ ) single crystals experimentally, which afforded an  $NH_3$  yield of  $9.2 \mu g h^{-1} cm^{-2} mg^{-1}_{cat}$  and a faradaic efficiency of 30.1% at a low overpotential of  $-0.05$  V *versus* RHE in alkaline solutions. The 3p/2p bands of Al/B were considered to interact with the N-orbitals and with the synergism of Mo, this catalyst successfully suppressed HER on its surface to give a reasonably fair faradaic efficiency for NRR.<sup>101</sup>

The beauty with this material is that one can have precise control over the choice of metal to involve the metal site as well as the boride counterpart in the activity during NRR. The interaction between boron and nitrogen is a well-known concept and has been illustrated in Fig. 1a. The strong coupling between the 2p orbitals of boron and nitrogen makes boron a favorable site for  $N_2$  adsorption<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 6a–c). In the work by Cheng *et al.*,<sup>102</sup> they have theoretically computed that the boron site for TaB is the active center for NRR, while the Fe site for FeB is more likely to carry out  $N_2$  reduction, but have a tendency to undergo  $H_2$  poisoning, affecting NRR kinetics. It is however considered that the B site is more active towards NRR than the metal sites for most of the M-benes.<sup>103</sup> With respect to metal diborides, Yang *et al.* explored the electrocatalytic activity of  $FeB_2$ ,  $RuB_2$  and  $OsB_2$  for the  $N_2$  reduction reaction (NRR) by first principles

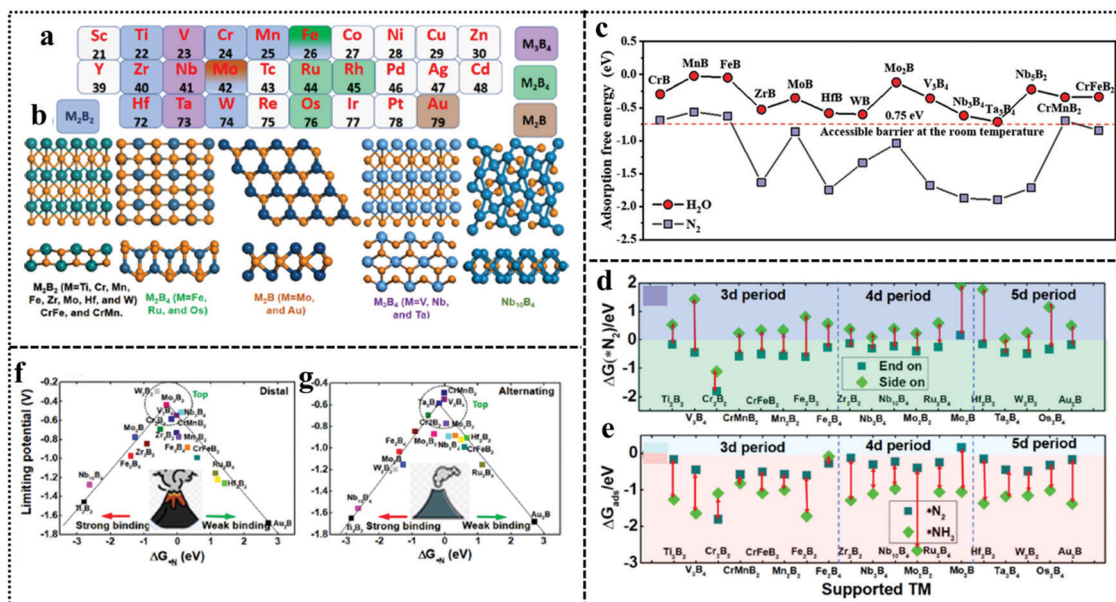


Fig. 5 (a) All MBenes for which both experimental and theoretical studies have been proposed are listed in the periodic table of elements. The stable structural prototypes of MBenes are indicated in different colors. (b) Top and side views of calculation models for different MBene structural prototypes that were built. Reproduced with permission from Long *et al.*,<sup>191</sup> Copyright 2021, American Chemical Society. (c) Computed free energy of adsorption of H<sub>2</sub>O and N<sub>2</sub> on different MBenes. Reproduced with permission from Guo *et al.*,<sup>192</sup> Copyright 2020, Wiley-VCH Verlag GmbH. (d) Adsorption energy of end-on and side-on binding configurations of N<sub>2</sub> on the MBene surfaces. (e) Adsorption energies of N<sub>2</sub> and NH<sub>3</sub> on the surfaces of MBenes considered. (f) NRR volcano plot of MBenes with a descriptor of  $\Delta G^*N$  via the distal path. (g) NRR volcano plot of MBenes with a descriptor of  $\Delta G^*N$  via the alternating path; the data points that stand near the top of the volcano plot are highlighted. The arrows to the left represent strong adsorption of  $*N$ , and the arrows to the right mean weak adsorption of  $*N$ . Reproduced with permission from Long *et al.*,<sup>191</sup> Copyright 2021, American Chemical Society.

Table 1 A brief summary of transition metal borides used for NRR

Catalyst	Electrolyte	F.E. (%)	NH <sub>3</sub> yield rate	Potential (vs. RHE)	Ref.
MoAlB SCs	0.1 M KOH	30.1	9.2 $\mu\text{g h}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-2} \text{mg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1}$	−0.05 V	101
a-FeB <sub>2</sub> PNSS	0.5 M LiClO <sub>4</sub>	16.7	39.8 $\mu\text{g h}^{-1} \text{mg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1}$	−0.2 V, −0.3 V	104
TiB <sub>2</sub>	0.1 M HCl	11.37	1.75 $\times 10^{-10} \text{ mol s}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-2}$	−0.3 V	100

calculations and found that these M-benes with surface B atoms as the active sites exhibited superior activity (with low onset potentials in the range of −0.03 to −0.26 V) for the NRR than those with metal active sites. Being a newly emerging field, there is a lot of controversy concerning the active sites of this material. For example, in contrast to the work by Yang *et al.*, Chu *et al.* for the first time experimentally demonstrated the synthesis and NRR with amorphous FeB<sub>2</sub> porous nanosheets and with the help of theoretical studies confirmed the active site to be Fe (Fig. 6d) and further revealed that amorphization lifted up the d-band center of the metal centre in FeB<sub>2</sub> to boost d-2π\* coupling between the active Fe site and the  $*N_2H$  intermediate, resulting in enhanced  $*N_2H$  stabilization and reduced reaction barrier. This resulted in an NH<sub>3</sub> yield of 39.8  $\mu\text{g h}^{-1} \text{mg}^{-1}$  (−0.3 V) and a faradaic efficiency of 16.7% (−0.2 V), significantly outperforming their crystalline counterpart, as can be seen from their NRR performance (Fig. 6e and f) and the full free energy reaction pathway (distal pathway in Fig. 6g). They also showed that, for the amorphous FeB<sub>2</sub>, the desorption of the first NH<sub>3</sub> is the rate determining step.<sup>104</sup> Another theoretical report by Wang *et al.*

followed this trend for Mo<sub>2</sub>B<sub>2</sub>, where Mo was identified as the active site and its 4d-orbital electrons were particularly held responsible for the NRR process on the material surface. The good electrical conductivity of the material initiated faster NRR charge-transfer kinetics.<sup>105</sup> The potential determining step being  $*NH^+ + H^+ + e^- \rightarrow *NH_3$ , this catalyst followed the alternating pathway for NRR at the cost of a low energy barrier. However, an elaborate study by Li *et al.* on Fe-based borides suggested that, Fe and B can synergistically act as active sites for NRR. Not only that, M–M and B–B interactions can optimize the catalyst performance towards NRR mostly from the bulk than single atom sites. Thus, mass loading plays a very important role in tuning the activity of M-benes, with higher mass loading resulting in more improved performance. They also demonstrated that different phases of the catalysts exhibit different NRR mechanism pathways like the most favorable NRR paths for FeB and FeB<sub>2</sub> are the alternating and dissociative paths, respectively.<sup>106</sup> Mostly, for the M-benes where B serves as the active site, over a series of transition metals, mostly the enzymatic and consecutive reaction mechanisms are followed, while with the metal active



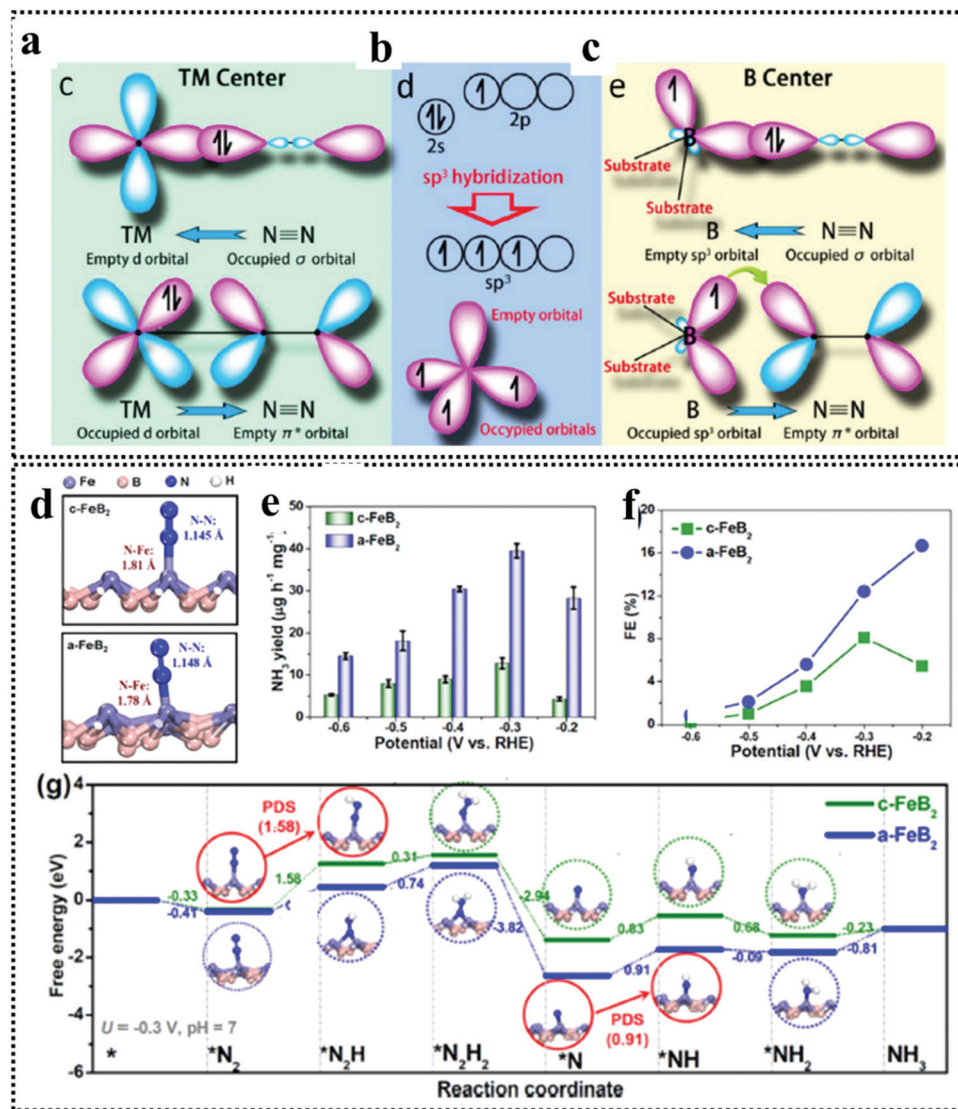


Fig. 6 (a) Simplified schematic of N<sub>2</sub> bonding to TMs. (b) Electronic configuration of the pure B atom and B atom with sp<sup>3</sup> hybridization. (c) N<sub>2</sub> binding motifs to the B atom on the substrate. Reproduced with permission from ref. 193, Copyright 2018, American Chemical Society. (d) Optimized structures of c-FeB<sub>2</sub> and a-FeB<sub>2</sub> after N<sub>2</sub> adsorption. Comparison of (e) NH<sub>3</sub> yields and (f) FEs of c-FeB<sub>2</sub> and a-FeB<sub>2</sub> PNSs at various potentials. (g) Free energy diagrams of NRR reaction pathways on c-FeB<sub>2</sub> and a-FeB<sub>2</sub> at U = 0.3 V and pH = 7. Reproduced with permission from ref. 104, Copyright 2021, Elsevier B. V.

sites, alternating, distal and enzymatic pathways are more preferred to achieve NRR overpotential ( $\eta_{\text{NRR}}$ ) < 1 as shown in Fig. 1b.

Unlike the MXenes where surface oxidation is a major concern to block the active sites, once oxidized, these MBenes can catalyze NRR *via* the self-activating process, reducing O\*/OH\* into H<sub>2</sub>O\* under reaction conditions, and favoring the N<sub>2</sub> electroreduction. As a result, the exceptional activity and selectivity, high active area ( $\approx 10^{19} \text{ m}^{-2}$ ) and antioxidation nature render these MBenes pH-universal catalysts for NH<sub>3</sub> production without introducing any dopants and defects. However, vacancy engineering is also explored in the M-bene materials. Both cationic and anionic vacancies are rendered by Li's group and Chen's group respectively and assembled with single atom crystals to bring about more efficiency in the NRR performance by the combined advantages of SACs and M-benes

with defects. Re and Os implanted into Mo vacancies of Mo<sub>2</sub>B<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> nanosheets (Fig. 7a–c) were found to possess remarkable catalytic activity with relatively low barrier values of the potential-determining step (PDS) of 0.29 and 0.32 eV, which are lower than that of the single Ru atom decorated on Mo<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>2</sub> (0.46 eV).<sup>107</sup> Chen's group predicted that Ti single atom doped B-vacant VB<sub>2</sub> (Ti@VB<sub>2</sub>) having a limiting potential of −0.61 V for NRR is the most effective among all the other single atom doped 2D-TMBs with a B vacancy.<sup>108</sup>

However, there is no parity in the mechanistic performance of the different M-benes. It is absolutely dependent on the metal being used and the phase of the boride being formed. It is however easy to simulate metal as well as mixed-metal borides but for practical experimentation, it is very crucial to maintain appropriate conditions in order to obtain the phase-specific M-benes. Like for example, CoB and Co<sub>2</sub>B are the most

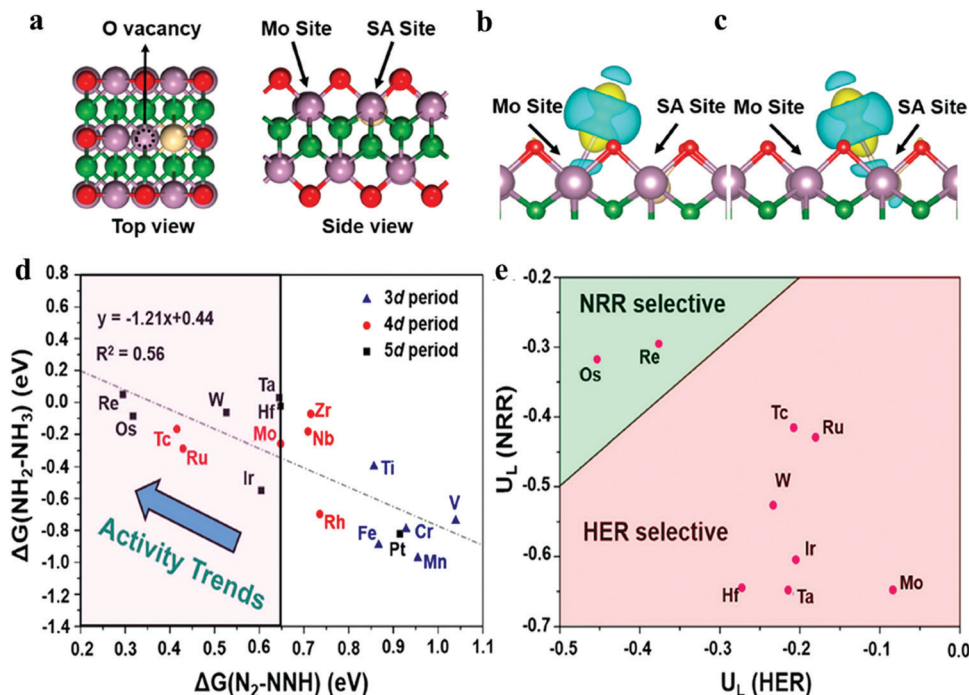


Fig. 7 (a) Top and side views of the structure of SA-doped  $\text{Mo}_2\text{B}_2\text{O}_2$ , where red, purple, green, and white balls represent O, Mo, B, and doped SA, respectively. The charge density difference of  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption geometries in the O vacancy of SA-doped  $\text{Mo}_2\text{B}_2\text{O}_2$ : (b) Mo site and (c) SA site. (b) Reactivity screening of  $\text{Mo}_2\text{B}_2\text{O}_2$ -SA systems for NRR, according to the linear distribution with regard to the free energy changes of the first and the last hydrogenation steps ( $\Delta G(\text{N}_2\text{-NNH})$  and  $\Delta G(\text{NH}_2\text{-NH}_3)$ ), with  $\text{Mo}_2\text{B}_2\text{O}_2\text{-Mo}$  (the pure  $\text{Mo}_2\text{B}_2\text{O}_2$  with O vacancy) as the boundary line. (c) Calculated potential vs. SHE for HER ( $U_{\text{H}}$ ) and NRR ( $U_{\text{NNH}}$ ) for selectivity screening. The dashed line represents  $U_{\text{H}} = U_{\text{NNH}}$ . Reproduced with permission from ref. 107, Copyright 2020, American Chemical Society.

widely synthesized M-benes, applied for different energy applications other than NRR.<sup>109</sup> But the synthesis strategy used there may not work accurately for other metal borides, requiring different experimental conditions. Thus, it is indeed important to optimize the conditions and properly characterize the material before going deep into the electrochemical performance for NRR. However, there is enough room for exploration of this category of catalysts as only three to four experimental reports are available on NRR with  $\text{FeB}_2$ ,  $\text{MoAlB}$ ,  $\text{TiB}_2$  and  $\text{Ti@VB}_2$ .

## 5. Transition metal carbides (TMCs)

Transition metal carbides (TMCs) have been shown to be effective catalysts for the NRR, in addition to transition metal oxides (TMOs) and transition metal nitrides (TMNs).<sup>110–115</sup> According to recent studies,<sup>116</sup> adsorption capacity for  $\text{N}_2$  is greatly influenced by elemental electronic properties, since only atoms that have partially filled d-orbitals with correct symmetry can synergistically acquire electrons from  $\text{N}_2$  and donate back to  $\text{N}_2$ . Notably, the p-back-donation method has the capability of effectively weakening N–N bonds while concurrently strengthening metal–N bonds.<sup>117</sup> To activate the N–N bond, it is necessary to fabricate electron-donating electrocatalysts that include an abundance of catalytic activation sites. In accordance with the well-known d-orbital hypothesis,<sup>118</sup> transition metal carbides (TMCs) display an electronically favorable architecture

and adsorption<sup>119</sup> exhibiting intrinsic noble-metal-like behavior because of the dense d-orbitals of the transition metal, which allows for much more p-back donation possibilities for the adsorbates.<sup>120</sup> The capacity to donate electrons to the  $\text{N}_2$  p\* antibonding orbitals and cleave the N–N bonds is further enhanced by creating anion vacancies with localized electrons. Moreover, vacant d-orbitals of transition metal carbides have excellent adsorption capacity.<sup>121</sup> The sp-hybridized state of the transition metal, which exists in the carbides, is delocalized on the surface, where it will interact with the d-state of the transition metal as well as the s-state of carbon. To effectively activate the N–N triple bond with NRR catalytic activity, a highly occupied orbital affords more possibilities for reverse donation to the p orbital of  $\text{N}_2$ .

Moreover, the two-dimensional transition metal carbides are a novel class of 2D materials that have sparked current interest.<sup>122</sup> Metal carbide research began in 2011 with the discovery of the first  $\text{Ti}_3\text{C}_2$  compound, which has grown to a family of over 30 members.<sup>123</sup> In the report by Sang *et al.*,<sup>124</sup> the authors have grown a TiC single layer on a  $\text{Ti}_3\text{C}_2$  substrate to introduce a 2D  $\text{Ti}_5\text{C}_4$  material in the field of electrocatalysis. But the prospect of 2D transition metal oxides/nitrides/carbides as possible electrocatalysts toward NRR has only been briefly considered from a theoretical standpoint.

It is believed that Mo carbides (MoC) would be useful for a wide range of electrochemical energy conversion applications, including NRR, because of their comparable d-band electrical

The electrocatalytic performance of Mo<sub>2</sub>C nanodots embedded in ultra-thin carbon nanosheets (Mo<sub>2</sub>C/C) was reported by Wang *et al.* to be remarkable for NRR.<sup>130</sup> Inside a 0.5 M Li<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> solution, NH<sub>3</sub> yield was 11.3 mg h<sup>-1</sup> (pH = 2). The NRR technique utilizes Mo<sub>2</sub>C nanodots as active center sites, as indicated by DFT and electronic state density calculations. The results showed that severe HER inhibition did not promote

However, TMC-based catalysts have limited NRR activity because their HER-active edges favor H-ad atoms over N-ad atoms. To address this issue, structural or component adjustments are required to improve NRR. To achieve effective NRR catalysis under high hydrogen evolution conditions, researchers synthesized molybdenum carbide nanodots embedded in ultrathin carbon nanosheets ( $\text{Mo}_2\text{C}/\text{C}$ ). This unique inlaid arrangement reduces hydrogen overflow on the catalyst surface, allowing for increased  $\text{N}_2$  diffusion. Using density functional theory, Li *et al.* discovered that the surface of molybdenum carbide may be terminated by hydrogen through the Volmer process.<sup>127</sup> Due to its moderate HER overpotential, huge  $\text{DG}_{\text{max}}$  (1.4 eV), and kinetic barrier (20.0 eV), H-covered  $\text{Mo}_2\text{C}$  was not an effective NRR catalyst. Consequently, molybdenum carbide has been reported hardly for NRR. In 2018, Cheng *et al.* examined the electrocatalytic activity of  $\text{Mo}_2\text{C}$  nanodots incorporated in carbon nanosheets (Fig. 8a).<sup>130</sup> They had a high  $\text{NH}_3$  yield ( $11.3 \text{ mg h}^{-1} \text{ mg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1}$ ) and faradaic efficiency (7.8%). To achieve actual NRR activity, the authors applied a hydrophobic carbon cloth instead of a hydrophilic one, and increased the pH from 2 to 3. When compared to the findings obtained under proton-rich circumstances, the faradaic efficiency obtained under proton-suppressed conditions was approximately five times higher (Fig. 8b), but the  $\text{NH}_3$  yield was much lower (Fig. 8c), showing that an optimal proton donor is required for NRR to produce a large  $\text{NH}_3$  yield. The extremely active surface of  $\text{Mo}_2\text{C}$  nanodots allows them to absorb and activate nitrogen (Fig. 8d). Also, the  $\text{Mo}_2\text{C}$  nanodots were equally enclosed in carbon nanosheets, reducing hydrogen coverage on the catalyst surface and increasing  $\text{N}_2$  diffusion. On the other hand, Fang *et al.*<sup>134</sup> created  $\text{Mo}_2\text{C}$  nanodot coated 3D ultrathin macroporous carbon ( $\text{Mo}_2\text{C}@3\text{DUM-C}$ ).  $\text{Mo}_2\text{C}@3\text{DUM-C}$  showed increased electron and mass transmission due to its three-dimensional ultra-thin macroporous carbon framework. At 0.20 V,  $\text{Mo}_2\text{C}@3\text{DUM-C}$  demonstrated 9.5% NRR efficiency and 30.4 mg per h per  $\text{mg}_{\text{cat}}$   $\text{NH}_3$  yield.  $\text{Mo}_2\text{C}@3\text{DUM-C}$  also had high catalytic stability for NRR due to its geometrical and electrochemical stability. In another study, Qu *et al.* effectively synthesized oxygen-doped MoC nanoparticles encapsulated in N-doped carbon shells with adjustable core-shell nanomaterials ( $\text{OeMoC}@\text{NC-T}$ ) for NRR<sup>135</sup> (Fig. 8e).  $\text{OeMoC}$  produced 22.5 mg per h per  $\text{mg}_{\text{cat}}$   $\text{NH}_3$  and had a faradaic efficiency of 25.1%. On the basis of reaction energies (vs. conventional hydrogen electrode),  $\text{V}_3\text{C}_2$  and  $\text{Nb}_3\text{C}_2$  were identified to be the most promising options. From a kinetic perspective,  $\text{V}_3\text{C}_2$  had lower activation energy barriers (0.64 eV



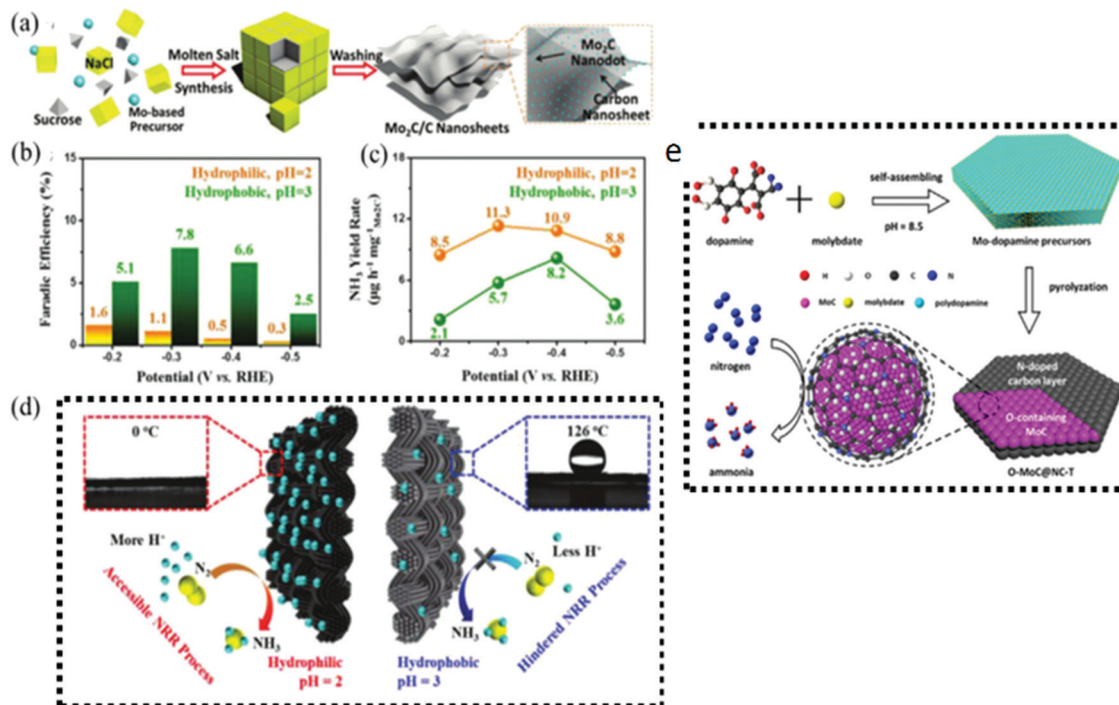


Fig. 8 (a) Schematic representation of the synthetic route for molten salt Mo<sub>2</sub>C/C nanosheets. (b) Faradaic efficiency, (c) yield rate and (d) NRR mechanistic pathway of Mo<sub>2</sub>C/C in proton-suppressed and enriched environments. Reproduced with permission,<sup>130</sup> Copyright 2018, Wiley-VCH Verlag GmbH. (e) Schematic illustration of the fabrication procedure of OeMoC@NC-T. Reproduced with permission,<sup>135</sup> Copyright 2019, American Chemical Society.

than Nb<sub>3</sub>C<sub>2</sub>, and its reaction profile was smoother with lower energy barriers for additional hydrogenation phases.<sup>136</sup> On the other hand, DFT calculations revealed that the central Ti atoms displayed the maximum adsorption of N<sub>2</sub> (1.344 eV) as compared to certain other sites such as O, C, and lateral Ti atoms. Thus, Ti<sub>3</sub>C<sub>2</sub> supported by stainless steel mesh (SSM) obtained a maximum faradaic efficiency of 4.62% (0.1 V versus RHE) and an NH<sub>3</sub> yield rate of 4.72 μg h<sup>-1</sup> cm<sup>-2</sup>.<sup>137</sup>

Using an ultrasonic reduction method, Liu *et al.* created an accordion-like morphology of Au nanoparticle-anchored Ti<sub>3</sub>C<sub>2</sub>. At 0.2 V, Au/Ti<sub>3</sub>C<sub>2</sub> produced 30.6 mg per (h mg) of NH<sub>3</sub> and had a Faraday efficiency of 18.34%.<sup>138</sup> The authors established that the high energy of N<sub>2</sub> adsorption on the interface among high-valence-state gold clusters and Ti<sub>3</sub>C<sub>2</sub> represented the driving force for the breaking of triple N–N bonds, and that the overall activation energy threshold could be decreased by efficiently stabilizing N<sub>2</sub>\* species while destabilizing NH<sub>2</sub>NH<sub>2</sub>\* species *via* an alternate channel instead of the conventional one. As a consequence of the synergistic effect, 1T-MoS<sub>2</sub>/Ti<sub>3</sub>C<sub>2</sub> composites demonstrated excellent stability, excellent durability, and remarkable NRR activity, with a faradaic efficiency of 5.26% and a nitrogen production rate of 36.28 mg h<sup>-1</sup> mg<sub>cat</sub><sup>-1</sup> at 0.35 V vs. RHE.<sup>139</sup>

### 5.1 MXenes and MXene derivative catalysts

MXenes have emerged as one of the foremost intensively explored novel materials. They possess excellent potential as active catalysts for catalytic conversion including environmental

remediation, due to their remarkable layered architecture, relatively high surface area, ample active sites, and superior chemical inertness. MXenes are intriguing catalysts for N<sub>2</sub> absorption as well as reduction, as their effectiveness has indeed been formerly forecast.<sup>140,141</sup> Recent developments illustrate MXenes or their derivatives in adsorbing, stimulating, and reducing nitrogen (N<sub>2</sub>) to ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>) *via* electrocatalytic as well as photoelectrochemical nitrogen reduction reaction (NRR). Despite the conventional Haber–Bosch approach, which directly implements fossil fuels with highly energetic techniques, the electrochemical NRR is regarded as appropriate as well as environmentally acceptable for NH<sub>3</sub> production. Nevertheless, the NH<sub>3</sub> productivity and efficacy of NRR adopting MXene-based catalysts continue to be relatively insufficient to achieve real world applications. Consequently, a basic understanding of NRR pathways with their considerable limitations should be addressed for prospective advancements.

In this regard, several experimental investigations with comprehensive findings suggest that MXenes could function competitively with the reference Pt-, Co-, or Pd-based catalysts in converting N<sub>2</sub> to NH<sub>3</sub>. Furthermore, one most significant benefit of MXenes as a catalyst is that certain chemicals included within seem to be earth-abundant. Owing to their affordability, the catalysis cost can indeed be severely decreased without affecting the effectiveness. Throughout NH<sub>3</sub> electro-synthesis, Ti<sub>3</sub>C<sub>2</sub>/FeOOH displayed an excellent FE of approximately 5.78% at an exceptionally low potential, closer to that of Pt.<sup>142</sup> Ti<sub>3</sub>C<sub>2</sub>T<sub>x</sub> nanosheets besides binding with dimethyl sulfide (DMSO) as well acquired better electrochemical behavior

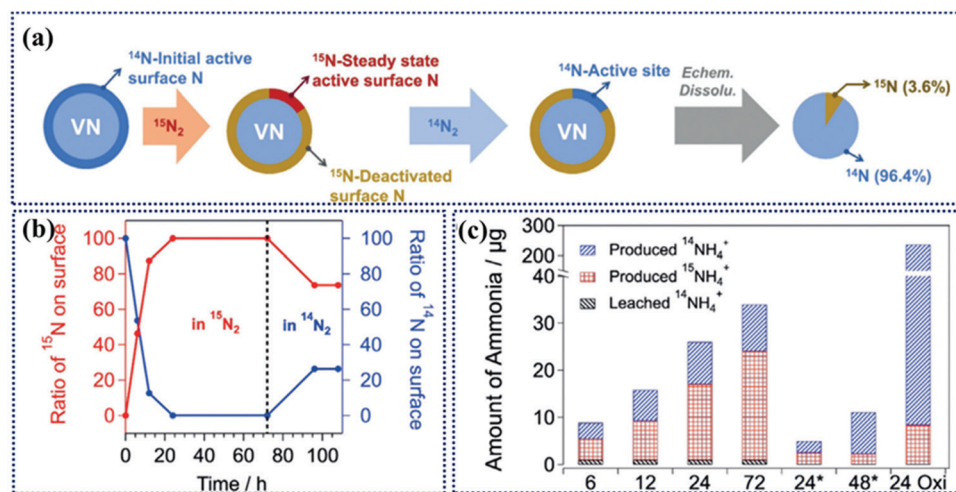
Skulason *et al.* provided deep insights into catalysts especially into TMNs (FeN, CoN, NiN, RuN, RhN, PdN, OsN, IrN, CrN, VN, NbN, CrN) which are active and selective for NRR to ammonia following the MvK mechanism by theoretical investigations. The onset potential for  $\text{NH}_3$  formation was calculated by DFT calculations *via* conventional AM, DM, and combination of these two mechanisms (AM-DM) and compared with the MvK mechanism to determine the lowest onset potential on the clean surface of TMNs.<sup>154</sup> Since adsorption of  $\text{N}_2$  is an endothermic process, therefore, MvK is always favoured on TMNs. Out of the various TMNs, rocksalt VN and ZrN are found to be the most promising candidates due to the requirement of low bias for ammonia production and HER suppression. DFT presented that at the onset potential, the so formed N-vacancies get easily repaired with gaseous nitrogen

For overall development of NRR, along with noble metals like Au, Pd, Rh, Ru, *etc.*, various advanced transition metal

Sun *et al.* demonstrated the non-noble metal electrocatalyst  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$  nanorods for the first time as an efficient electrocatalyst to convert  $\text{N}_2$  to  $\text{NH}_3$  under ambient conditions in 0.1 M HCl and achieved a high FE of 4.5% and a  $\text{NH}_3$  yield of  $78.4 \text{ mg h}^{-1} \text{ mg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1}$  at  $-0.3 \text{ V vs. RHE}$ , which is substantially higher than that of a  $\text{MoO}_2$  precursor.<sup>158</sup> The DFT calculations revealed that after nitrogenation of  $\text{MoO}_2$ , the free energy barrier ( $\Delta G_{\text{H}^+}$ ) of the potential determining step of NRR decreases dramatically. The same group further synthesised the MoN nanosheet array on the carbon cloth (MoN NA/CC) as an efficient catalyst for NRR with a high  $\text{NH}_3$  yield of  $3.01 \times 10^{-10} \text{ mol s}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$  and a FE of 1.15% at  $-0.3 \text{ V vs. RHE}$  in 0.1 M HCl.<sup>159</sup> DFT calculations revealed that MoN NA/CC follow the MvK mechanism for NRR. Further, Wang *et al.* for the first time modified the MoN electrocatalyst with cation vacancies by fabricating MoN nanocrystals with sufficient Mo vacancies in a N-doped hierarchical porous carbon framework (MV-MoN@NC) because engineering cation vacancy in the TMNs is an effective strategy to improve the electrochemical NRR response.<sup>160</sup> The formation of defects within the sample was proved by X-ray diffraction (XRD) and X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) studies. MV-MoN@NC in comparison with non-defective samples MoN, NC, and MoN@NC exhibited best catalytic activity with  $76.9 \text{ } \mu\text{g h}^{-1} \text{ mg}^{-1} \text{ cat. ammonia yield}$  and 6.9% FE at  $-0.2 \text{ V vs. RHE}$  with stability up to 48 h. The cation vacancy decorated MV-MoN@NC has shown a much superior  $\text{NH}_3$  production rate to that of reported electrocatalysts with anion vacancies. The occurrence of NRR *via* MvK was confirmed by the NMR technique which gave the qualitative analysis of the  $^{15}\text{N}$  isotopic experiment by weakening of triplet coupling of  $^{14}\text{NH}_4^+$  in the NMR spectra when  $^{15}\text{N}$  is used as a feed gas. The improvement in the NRR activity was confirmed by computational and experimental results, which revealed that Mo vacancies in the MoN surface regulate the electronic structure of MoN and reduce the barrier height from 1.40 to 0.61 eV for the potential-determining step (PDS). Further, local density of states (LDOS) revealed that Mo vacancies created strong hybridisation between molecular orbitals and Mo d orbitals, which led to the easy release of  $\text{NH}_3$  molecules as the strength between N and Mo atoms got decreased. This work provides a new pathway of synthesizing electrocatalysts with cation defects in nitrides to catalyze  $\text{N}_2$  reduction. Shanmugam *et al.* recently prepared an efficient and cost-effective electrocatalyst: cubic molybdenum nitride ( $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$ ) nanoparticles by an *in situ* nitridation method on two-dimensional hexagonal boron nitride (h-BN) sheets.<sup>161</sup> The interfacial engineering of the  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$ -BN bridge is found to be selective for  $\text{N}_2$  reduction. This way of controlling the

Within the defect engineering, heteroatom dopants are important participants as they can modulate the surface electronic structure and can reduce the overpotential for the electrocatalytic process to fasten up the NRR process.<sup>164</sup> For non-metal heteroatom doping in pristine catalysts, S, O, B and P are selected. However, in the case of TMNs oxygen doping has shown positive effects on NRR.<sup>162,165</sup> Yang's group presented that partially oxidised VN ( $\text{VN}_{0.7}\text{O}_{0.45}$ ) is an active and stable



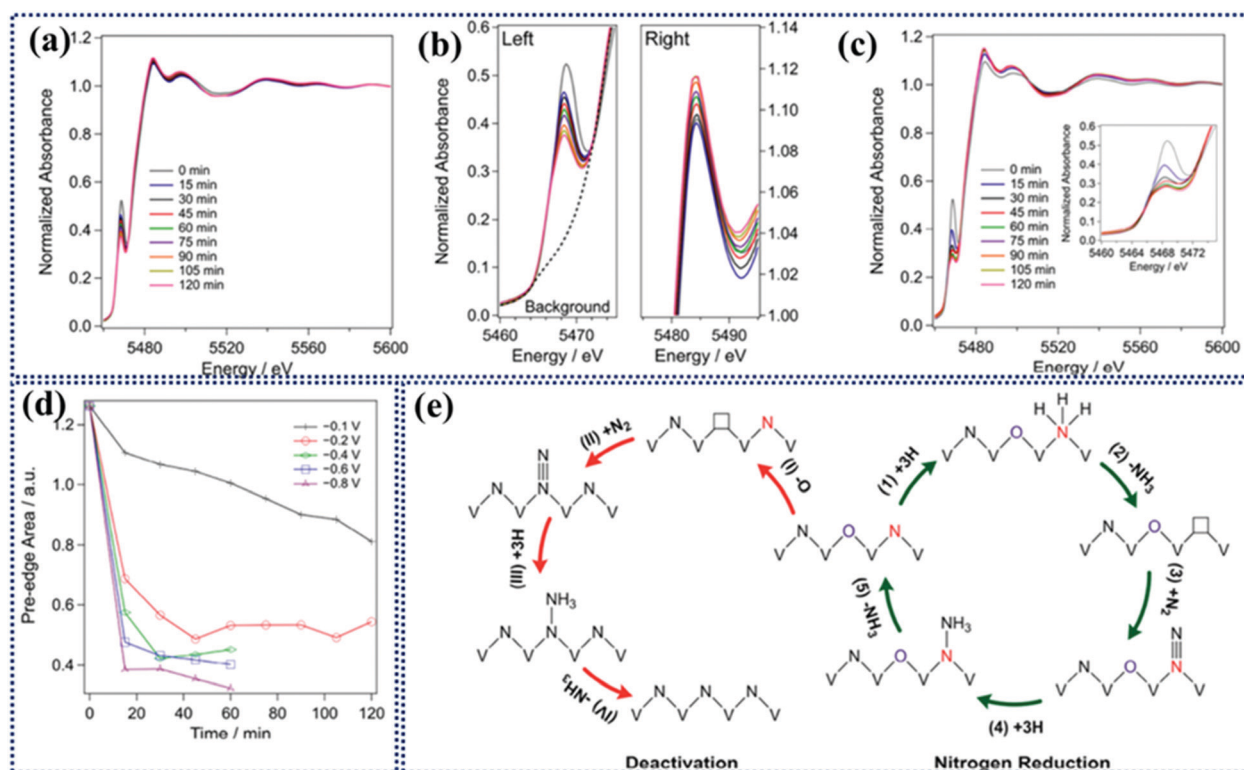


**Fig. 9** (a) Schematic illustration representing the isotopic exchange experiments on  $\text{V}_{14}\text{NO}$  to determine the density of active sites of the initial and steady-state in the NRR. (b) Isotopic composition of active surface N sites as a function of time in the NRR. (c) Amounts of  $^{14}\text{NH}_4^+$  and  $^{15}\text{NH}_4^+$  produced during the isotopic exchange experiments at various time points during NRR. Reproduced with permission from ref. 36, Copyright 2019, Wiley-VCH Verlag GmbH.

electrocatalyst for NRR that follows the MvK mechanism as confirmed by  $^{15}\text{N}_2$  experiment.<sup>166</sup>

To study the evolution of the catalyst during the reaction, operando X-ray absorption near edge spectroscopic (XANES) analysis was conducted (Fig. 10a–c). As shown in the figure the

position of the corresponding white lines remains the same with time indicating no detectable leaching of V during NRR. The interesting point is that during NRR there occurs conversion of  $\text{VN}_{0.7}\text{O}_{0.45}$  to VN which is responsible for deactivation of the catalyst. The conversion rate increases as the potential



**Fig. 10** Operando K-edge XANES spectra of VN at different potentials of (a) 0.1 V and (c) 0.2 V versus RHE as a function of time. The inset in (c) shows the corresponding pre-edge peak. (b) The left and right panels show the pre-edge and the white line peaks at 0.1 V vs. RHE as a function of time, respectively. (d) Time-dependent pre-edge area at different potentials. (e) Proposed reaction mechanism for NRR on the surface of  $\text{VN}_{0.7}\text{O}_{0.45}$  via the MvK and catalyst deactivation mechanism. Reproduced with permission from ref. 166, Copyright 2018, American Chemical Society.

between Bi SAs and TiN simultaneously promotes the hydrogenation of  $N_2$  and eases the desorption of  $NH_3$ . Therefore, NC/Bi SAs/TiN/CC attained a superior FE of 24.60% at  $-0.5$  V vs. RHE and a high  $NH_3$  yield rate of  $76.15 \mu g \text{ mg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1} \text{ h}^{-1}$ . This study enforces to work in future on 3D self-supported SACs by rational designing of the structure and electronic configuration for improved catalysis. The TMNs used for NRR have been summarized in Table 3.

## 7. Conclusion and future perspective

In this work, we have systematically investigated the fundamental practices of the nitrogen reduction process. The kinetics of NRR is governed by a number of factors, which include nitrogen solubility in electrolytes, competitive HER and choice of materials that facilitate NRR over HER. Here for the first time, we have provided a detailed understanding of the solubility of  $N_2$  in different ionic liquid electrolytes, being worked upon to date, which can be further implemented experimentally during NRR. Thereafter, all the factors including choice of electrolyte medium, control of pH and material engineering have been generalized that provide a brief overview of which factors should be kept in mind while performing NRR so that HER could be substantially suppressed. Finally, we have highlighted three categories of catalysts like transition metal borides, carbides and nitrides and discussed their importance in NRR, developments over the ages as well as scopes that could be extended further. These materials could be improvised in a better way considering all the factors and choice of metals highlighted in the review in order to achieve significant NRR in terms of yield, production rate and faradaic efficiency.

• Being an emerging field, there is extensive room for exploration in terms of experimentation in the case of TMBs. The theoretically predicted structures of the TMBs and the presumed conditions of material performance do not often hold true and conventional during their experimental counterpart and naturally discrepancies arise to establish the actual active structure and its mechanistic role in NRR. This would be easier if experiments and theory go hand in hand at this infancy of the TMBs in the field of NRR.

- Recently, mixed metal borides are coming into limelight due to the electronic configuration and orbital overlap between the mixed metals and obviously the synergistic role played by the metals and the boron centre benefitting NRR. Only one

Catalyst	Electrolyte	FE (%)	NH <sub>3</sub> yield rate	Potential	Ref.
MoN NA/CC	0.1 M HCl	1.15	$3.01 \times 10^{-10} \text{ mol s}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$	−0.3 V vs. RHE	159
W <sub>2</sub> N <sub>3</sub>	0.1 M KOH	11.67 ± 0.93	$11.66 \pm 0.98 \mu\text{g h}^{-1} \text{ mg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1}$	−0.2 V vs. RHE	37
NC/Bi SAs/TiN/CC	0.1 M Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub>	24.60 @ −0.5 V vs. RHE	$76.15 \mu\text{g mg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1} \text{ h}^{-1}$ @ −0.8 V RHE	—	188
Mo <sub>2</sub> N nanorods	0.1 M HCl	4.5	$78.4 \mu\text{g h}^{-1} \text{ mg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1}$	−0.3 V vs. RHE	158
VN/CC	0.1 M HCl	3.58	$2.48 \times 10^{-10} \text{ mol s}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$	−0.3 V vs. RHE	163
VN	0.05 M H <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub>	6.0	$3.3 \times 10^{-10} \text{ mol s}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$	−0.1 V vs. RHE	166
TiN-PE	0.1 M Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub>	9.1%	$3.32 \times 10^{-10} \text{ mol s}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$	−0.6 V vs. RHE	165
MV-MoN@NC	0.1 M HCl	6.9%	$76.9 \mu\text{g h}^{-1} \text{ mg}_{\text{cat}}^{-1}$ @ −0.2 V vs. RHE	—	160
CrO <sub>0.66</sub> N <sub>0.56</sub>		6.9% @ 1.8 V	$8.9 \times 10^{-11} \text{ mol s}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ @ 2.0 V	—	162

experimental report provides information about mixed metal borides, so there is still a lot of opportunity to tune the choice of metals preferably, which would favour the NRR kinetics.

- Since there are still single reports for several metal borides for NRR, more experimental works and optimizations are desired to verify the reproducibility of the reaction conditions for various metals.

- To leverage high-performance, TMC electrocatalysts are also viable in the upcoming years, the respective major topic areas necessitate a broad focus. Presently, several unique concepts for scalable and reliable fabrication of effectively tailored TMCs need to be suggested for addressing functional electrocatalysts. Integrating numerous modification techniques, notably nanosizing, hybridization, or heteroatom doping, with a convenient fabrication technique throughout one phase or less phases is anticipated.

- Theoretical results might reveal valuable insight regarding the energy transmission pathway of chemical intermediates, which might encourage the development of the desired TMC architecture at the atomic level.

- For further improvement in TMNs as NRR catalysts, the synthesis methods should be understood deeply. Djire *et al.*<sup>172,173</sup> synthesized  $Ti_2NT_x$  and  $Ti_4N_3T_x$  nitride MXenes and presented their usage in storage and HER. So, nitride MXenes would be an interesting topic to work on their material characterization, MvK mechanism and performance evaluation in NRR.

- *In situ* high-edge experimental tools are required to gain deeper insight into the mechanistic pathways followed by all the categories of catalysts for NRR.

Recently there has been growing interest for the interdisciplinary compounds like TM-boro-carbides and boro-nitrides because of the superconductivity and synergistic effect of the material constituents towards NRR.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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