TM(TM=Fe, Co, Ni)/N/O tri-doped Graphene Heterogeneous Electrocatalysts for Oxygen Reduction Reaction: A Theoretical Insight

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Density functional theory (DFT) is utilized to compute the thermodynamic free energy changes of the elementary reaction steps of the oxygen reduction reaction (ORR) on TMO_{3}N_{4-x} (TM=Fe, Co and Ni; x= 1-3) single atom catalysts (TMO_{3}N_{4-x}-SACs). Based on thermodynamic stability and catalytic ORR activity, it is found that CoO_{2}N_{2}-SACs show relatively good stability and activity. Furthermore, the final reduction reaction step (OH* + H^+ + e^- → H_2O + *) with the largest ∆G value towards five different CoO_{2}N_{2}-SACs is the potential-determining step (PDS). All calculated results suggest that the theoretical overpotential of CoO_{2}N_{2}-opp is much close to that of Pt (111), implying the optimal electrocatalytic ORR activity among TMO_{3}N_{4-x}-SACs. Furthermore, electronic structure analysis reveals that the d-band center of Co for CoO_{2}N_{2}-opp is located rather far away from the Fermi level (set as zero) and binding states of adsorbed are reduced and the antibinding states of adsorbed OH* fragments are increased, compared with that of other CoO_{2}N_{4-x}-SACs. In conclusion, the introduction of N and O can effectively modify d-band of active metal center and adsorption of oxygen-contained intermediates, thus tune ORR activity.

Keywords: density functional theory, oxygen reduction reaction, single atom catalysts

1. INTRODUCTION

The massive depletion of fossil fuel has generated global energy consumption and serious environmental damage[1, 2]. Taking advantage of sustainable and renewable energy sources for fossil fuel grasps the crux to disposing of these related issues but desires highly efficient energy transformation and storage devices, particularly proton exchange membrane fuel cells (PEMFC), which depend heavily on oxygen reduction reaction (ORR) electrocatalysts to a great extent as they are the core of such energy
devices[3, 4]. Precious metal-based materials (e.g. platinum and its alloys) have been developed rapidly and are the most advanced ORR catalysts[5, 6]; however, their scarcity and consequent huge cost and poor long-term durability have greatly imposed restrictions on their extensive mercantile exhibition[7, 8]. Hence, developing cost effective electrocatalysts with outstanding performance is of great urgency on superseding expensive precious metal-based materials for ORR.

Single-atom catalysts (SACs), the most active frontiers in field of diversified catalysis, especially have been thought to be one of the most prospective substitutes for ORR, which have been ascribe to the maximum atomic utilization efficiency and adjustable electronic properties[9, 10]. The coordination configurations between active metal atoms and non-metal heteroatoms in the carbon-based materials, especially these TMNₙ architectures (TM = Mn, Fe, Co, Ni, etc.), can effectively regulate the electronic structure of transition metal hosts and thereby optimize the binding affinity to oxygenated intermediates, contributing to a superior activity[7, 9]. Consequently, by means of modifying the local electronic properties of active centers, corresponding electrocatalytic performances can be considerably modulated. Numerous studies have demonstrated that such catalysts with single metallic cofactors can be further enhanced by introducing alien atoms (e.g. B, P, S) in the active architectures to form new atomistic coordination structures[11-14]. For instance, Wang et al. reported that constructed the B, N co-coordinated Zn-B/N-C catalysts can render adequate delocalized electrons to originate moderate binding strength for oxygenated reaction fragments and afterwards demonstrate remarkable capacity for catalyzing ORR[11]. Yuan’s group studied how N and P atoms dual-coordinated Fe (named as Fe-N/P-C) prepared via high-temperature pyrolysis method act as actives motifs for catalyzing ORR in acidic media[12]. Besides, Zhang and co-workers successfully synthesized three different single metal (Fe, Co and Ni) elements embedded in porous N, S-codoped carbon (NSC) based materials and surveyed the effect of sulfuration on ORR activity of these samples[13]. The aforementioned researches show that the catalysts with various bindings between the B, P or S elements and the TMNₙ centers present fairly good ORR performance, deriving from the different electronegativity and atomic radius from B, P or S element to N element.

It is worth noting that the presence of oxygen function groups (e.g. hydroxyl, ketone, ester) in the graphene are inevitable, even after high-temperature annealing or chemical reduction[15]. Moreover, the introduction of oxygen elements could also be conducted through manufacturing holes via utilizing electrons or ions[15]. Consequently, doping O atom has also been used to adjust the electronic properties of electrocatalysts and alter corresponding electrocatalytic activity and selectivity of reactions. In this respect, Dong et al. determined that the synergistic effect of O and N dopants promote the activation of oxygen-containing intermediates and thus enhance electrocatalytic activity of the single-doped samples[16]. Supporting this in the different systems, Yang et al. successfully prepared catalysts that O and N elements co-coordinated Mn active centers atomically dispersed in the graphene framework and these samples exhibit superior performance for ORR[17]. Similarly, Tang et al. found that as-synthesized Co/N/O tri-doped graphene catalysts via defect engineering strategy effectively accelerate oxygen electrocatalysis kinetics[18]. However, current cutting edge characterization techniques cannot characterize these corresponding unique structures. On the other hand, the investigation of the formation mechanism for the different coordination structures and the conclusive correlation between the single metallic center affected by introducing O and N atoms and catalytic performances are also challenging.
Fortunately, the crown ether configuration is manually incorporated into graphene, which provide a simple coordination environment for theoretical stimulation[15]. Inspired by aforementioned information, it is necessary to construct a series of relevant dual-N,O coordinated single metal atoms catalysts and systematically investigate the relationship between the orientation of the doping O and N elements for the SACs and corresponding ORR activity.

In this manuscript, three kinds of TMO$_{x}$N$_{4-x}$-SACs (TM = Fe, Co, Ni; x = 1-3) are constructed via altering the doping content as well as coordination configurations of O and N atoms. The spin-polarized density functional theory (DFT) calculations are used to systematically investigate the geometric structure and further examine ORR electrocatalysis. The TMO$_{x}$N$_{4-x}$ (x = 1-3) represents the TM atom bonded with N and O atoms and the atomic configurations are schematically shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. The optimal geometry structures of (a) TMO$_1$N$_3$, (b) TMO$_2$N$_2$-pen, (c) TMO$_2$N$_2$-hex, (d) TMO$_2$N$_2$-opp, (e) TMO$_3$N$_1$ embedded graphene (TM = Fe, Co, Ni).](image-url)

Among them, three TMN$_2$O$_2$ structures are specifically defined according to the relative positions of O atoms, where the O atoms in pen or hex configuration are located in the same pentatomic or hexatomic ring (named as TMN$_2$O$_2$-pen and TMN$_2$O$_2$-hex, respectively) while in the opp model
(TMN$_2$O$_2$-opp), they are located on a diagonal line in opposite directions with reference to the position of the metal atom. Based on the constructed models, our results indicate that CoO$_2$N$_2$-opp exhibit remarkable electrocatalytic activity, in line with previous experimental results.

2. COMPUTATIONAL METHOD

The spin-polarized total energy calculations are performed using the Dmol$^3$ in Materials Studio software package[15]. The generalized-gradient approximation (GGA) in the form of the Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof (PBE) functional is adopted to deal with the exchange-correlation energy[19]. The weak interactions between the intermediates and catalysts are is described by the DFT-D2 in Grimme’s scheme[20]. The spin-unrestricted method is used for all calculations[15]. The density functional theory (DFT) Semi-core Pseudopotentials (DSPP) are employed to replace the core electrons for reducing the computational cost and the double numerical atomic orbital augmented by a polarization function (DNP) is chosen as the basis set[21]. A smearing value of 0.005 Ha (1 Ha = 27.21 eV) is specified for the orbit occupation to speed up convergence. During the structural geometry optimization, the convergence criteria are set as $1 \times 10^{-5}$ Ha for energy, 0.002 Ha/Å for maximum force, and 0.005 Å for displacement. The conductor-like screening model (COSMO) was used to simulate a H$_2$O solvent environment for all calculations. The dielectric constant is set as 78.54 for H$_2$O. The (5×4) supercell is adopted with 15 Å vacuum to avoid the artificial interactions between the catalyst and its images. During the geometrical optimization, the systems are free to relax.

As we can see in Figure 2, all oxygen-contained intermediates for ORR are described as proton/electron ($\text{H}^+ + e^-$) transfers. In this work, the ORR is assumed to proceed by $4e^-$ reduction process[22], which compared of the following basic reaction steps:
OOH formation: $O_2(g) + * + (H^+ + e^-) \rightarrow OOH^*$  
(1)

O formation: $OOH^* + (H^+ + e^-) \rightarrow O^* + H_2O(l)$  
(2)

OH formation: $O^* + H_2O(l) + (H^+ + e^-) \rightarrow OH^* + H_2O(l)$  
(3)

$H_2O$ formation: $OH^* + H_2O(l) + (H^+ + e^-) \rightarrow 2H_2O(l) + *$  
(4)

where * denotes as an adsorption site on the catalytic surface, (g) and (l) refer to gas and liquid phase, respectively.

The binding energy ($E_b$), cohesive energy ($E_{coh}$) and formation energy ($E_f$) of TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$ embedded graphene are calculated by using following formulae:

$$E_b = E_{TMoxN4-x} - (E_{support} + E_{TM})$$  
(5)

$$E_{coh} = E_{bulk}/n - E_{TM}$$  
(6)

$$E_f = E_{TMoxN4-x} + 6 \times E_C - (E_{graphene} + E_O + xE_O + (4-x) \times E_N)$$  
(7)

where $E_{TMoxN4-x}$, $E_{support}$, $E_{graphene}$, $E_{coh}$ and $E_{TM}$ denote the total energies of TMN$_3$O$_{4-x}$ embedded graphene, catalyst monolayer without TM decoration, perfect graphene, bulk TM metal and the corresponding atomic TM, respectively. $E_C$, $E_N$ and $E_O$ are the average total energies of a single C atom in perfect graphene, a single N atom in N$_2$ and a single O atom in O$_2$, respectively. $n$ is the number of TM atoms in the corresponding cell. $x (= 1-3)$ is the number of substituted N atoms or doped O atoms when generating the TM$_x$N$_{4-x}$ embedded graphene from the TMN$_4$ embedded graphene.

The adsorption energies $E_{ad}$ of the ORR intermediates are calculated by:

$$E_{ad} = E_{system} - (E_{catalyst} + E_M)$$  
(8)

where $E_{system}$ and $E_M$ stand for the total energy of adsorbed catalysts and ORR O-contained intermediates, respectively.

The computational hydrogen electrode (CHE) model proposed by Nørskov et al. is used to compute the Gibbs free energy change ($\Delta G$) of each elementary step of the ORR[23]. In this model, the chemical potential of $H^+ + e^- \rightarrow 1/2H_2$ under standard conditions is set to be at equilibrium with 0 V relative to the standard hydrogen electrode (SHE). The $\Delta G$ of each elementary step is determined by:

$$\Delta G = \Delta E + \Delta ZPE - T\Delta S + \Delta G_U + \Delta G_{ph}$$  
(9)

where $\Delta E$ is the electronic energy difference directly obtained from DFT calculation, $\Delta ZPE$ represents the change of zero-point energy (ZPE), and $T\Delta S$ is the change in entropy at 298.15 K. The ZPE and entropies of ORR intermediates are calculated based on the vibrational frequencies. $\Delta G_U = -eU$, wherein $U$ is the potential related to the standard hydrogen electrode, and $\Delta G_{ph} = -k_BT\ln10 \times pH$. In this work, the pH of the solution is assumed to be zero for an acid medium and the free energy contribution caused by changing the H concentration is neglected. Since the DFT method failed to accurately describe the high-spin ground state of O$_2$ molecule, the Gibbs free energy of O$_2$ ($G_{O2}$) is obtained by $G_{O2}(g) = 4.92 + 2G_{H2O(l)} - 2G_{H2(g)}$ by utilizing OER equilibrium under standard conditions[24]. The thermodynamic activity of the ORR can be visualized by investigating the overpotential($\eta$), which is determined by:

$$\eta = 1.23 + \max \{\Delta G_1, \Delta G_2, \Delta G_3, \Delta G_4\}/e$$  
(9)

where $\Delta G_n$ (n = 1-4) denotes as the free energy changes of corresponding electrochemical ORR steps. Noteworthy, the negative $\Delta G$ value corresponds to an exothermic adsorption process, indicating the spontaneity characteristic. On the basis of this definition, the lower the value of overpotential, the better the catalytic performance of the corresponding electrocatalysts.
3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

![Figure 3. The optimal adsorption structure of O\textsubscript{2} molecule on all TMO\textsubscript{x}N\textsubscript{4-x}-SACs.](image)

Before exploring the whole ORR catalytic processes, we firstly research the geometry structure and thermodynamic stability of TMO\textsubscript{x}N\textsubscript{4-x}-SACs. The calculated of binding energies \(E_b\) and formation energies \(E_f\) are shown as in Figure 4(a). It is well-known that the value of \(E_b\) is less than that of \(E_{coh}\), meaning that the binding of metal atoms on O, N-codoped graphene is energetically more favorable than the metal aggregation\[25\]. Therefore, the smaller \(E_b\) values of TMO\textsubscript{1}N\textsubscript{3}, TMO\textsubscript{2}N\textsubscript{2} display good capacity of resisting against the atomic aggregation, compared with the bulk cohesive energy\[21\]. The exception of TMO\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{1} are ascribe to the faint TM-N bonds. Therefore, the increasing in the number of TM-O bonds would decrease the binding strength between the TM atom and its supports. Moreover, the formation energies \(E_f\) are calculated to evaluate the difficulty for synthesis of these TMO\textsubscript{x}N\textsubscript{4-x}-SACs. As displayed in Figure 4(a), TMO\textsubscript{x}N\textsubscript{4-x}-SACs present rather the negative formation energies, indicating the possibility to readily fabricate them. Therefore, these catalysts are promising to be synthesized in the laboratory without much energy cost. Overall, TMO\textsubscript{1}N\textsubscript{3} and TMO\textsubscript{2}N\textsubscript{2} samples can offer good thermodynamic stability, compared to TMO\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{1} samples.
Figure 4. Thermodynamic analysis. (a) The thermodynamic stability (for $E_b$) and experimental feasibility (for $E_f$) and three dash lines represent corresponding TM cohesive energy. (b) The adsorption energy $E_{ad}$ of oxygen-contained intermediates as a function of $E_{ad}$(O$_2$). (c-g) The ORR free energy diagram under 0 and 1.23 V. The $G$ for the reaction species is labeled in the profiles, and the potential-determined steps (PDS) of the elementary reaction is highlighted in dotted line. (h) Calculated theoretical ORR overpotential on highly active systems and corresponding theoretical model related to PDS.
With regard to the reaction process is originated from the protonation of oxygen molecules (O$_2$) in the first step, we firstly study the adsorption ability of TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs towards O$_2$. In this regard, we chiefly focus on the adsorption strength of O$_2$ on the TM active sites of TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs. By comparing the corresponding adsorption energy of O$_2$ (see in Table 1), we find that TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$ configurations can effectively promote the activation of O$_2$ except for the case of NiO$_3$.

**Table 1.** The adsorption energy ($E_{ad}$) of O$_2$ on TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs and the O=O bond length ($L_{O-O}$) of the adsorbed O$_2$. ($E_{ad(O2)}$ in eV, $L_{O-O}$ in Å)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>$E_{ad(O2)}$</th>
<th>$L_{O-O}$</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>$E_{ad(O2)}$</th>
<th>$L_{O-O}$</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>$E_{ad(O2)}$</th>
<th>$L_{O-O}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FeO$_3$N$_3$</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-1.56</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>CoO$_2$N$_3$</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-1.11</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>NiO$_3$N$_3$</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FeO$_2$N$_2$- pen</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-1.57</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>CoO$_2$N$_2$- pen</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-0.94</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>NiO$_2$N$_2$- pen</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-0.61</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FeO$_2$N$_2$- hex</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-1.57</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>CoO$_2$N$_2$- hex</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-1.08</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>NiO$_2$N$_2$- hex</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-0.64</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FeO$_2$N$_2$- opp</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-1.53</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>CoO$_2$N$_2$- opp</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-0.90</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>NiO$_2$N$_2$- opp</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-0.87</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FeO$_3$N$_1$</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-1.80</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>CoO$_3$N$_1$</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-1.04</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>NiO$_3$N$_1$</td>
<td>end-on side-on</td>
<td>-2.47</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For compensation, the adsorbed O$_2$ shows a stretched O=O bond length compared to that of the free O$_2$ ($L_{O-O} = 1.22\text{Å}$)[6] on account of the strong binding strength between the oxygen atoms and the transition metal hosts. All optimized adsorption configurations of O$_2$ on TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs are displayed in Figure 3. Combined with the corresponding adsorption energy (see in Table 1), it is clearly observed that the O$_2$ is adsorbed on TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$ with end-on except for NiO$_3$N$_3$, while NiO$_3$N$_1$ incline to adsorb the O$_2$ with side-on model. It is well-known that the O$_2$ is firstly protonated by assimilating an electron and hydron transferred, then forming orderly O-contained reaction intermediates adsorbed on top site of the metal atom (as illustrated in Figure 2). Here, their adsorption energies (see Table 2) are plotted as a function of O$_2$ adsorption energy, as presented in Figure 4(b).

**Table 2.** The adsorption energies of O$_2$, OOH, O, OH on TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs ($E_{ad}$ in eV).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$E_{ad(O2)}$</th>
<th>$E_{ad(OOH)}$</th>
<th>$E_{ad(O)}$</th>
<th>$E_{ad(OH)}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FeO$_3$N$_3$</td>
<td>-1.56</td>
<td>-2.22</td>
<td>-4.28</td>
<td>-3.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FeO$_2$N$_2$-pen</td>
<td>-1.57</td>
<td>-2.37</td>
<td>-4.32</td>
<td>-3.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The calculated results suggest that their adsorption energies decrease in a certain range: $O^* > OH^* > OOH^* > O_2^*$ on these TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs. Moreover, the universal linear relationships between the ORR intermediates are clearly observed, which is ascribed to the similar TM-O binding[21, 26]. Therefore, a relatively stronger (or weaker) adsorption energy of $O_2$ can reveal that the other three oxygen-containing fragments also show the stronger (or weaker) binding capacity on the same active site, suggesting that $O_2$ adsorption energy could be used as an activity parameter to roughly forecast the activity of these TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs with same active sites. According to Sabatier’s principle[19, 27, 28], the adsorption affinity of oxygen-contained intermediate products on any one of ORR catalysts should be neither too strong nor too weak, because a weak binding effect of oxygen with active sites is incapable of guaranteeing an adequate protonation of the $O_2$, whereas a strong binding strength between oxygen and catalysts could give rise to the difficulty to dissociation of a water molecule. In these two special situations, the associated overpotential is unavoidably very high. By comparison, the $O_2$ is mildly activated on CoO$_2$N$_2$-pen ($E_{ad}(O_2) = -0.94$ eV), CoO$_2$N$_2$-opp ($E_{ad}(O_2) = -0.9$ eV), NiO$_2$N$_2$-pen ($E_{ad}(O_2) = -0.61$ eV) NiO$_2$N$_2$-hex ($E_{ad}(O_2) = -0.64$ eV) and NiO$_2$N$_2$-opp ($E_{ad}(O_2) = -0.84$ eV) SACs, which could promote the subsequent reduction of $O_2$ molecules.

To obtain an underlying comprehending on the catalytic ability of TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs towards ORR, we further examine the thermodynamic performances of ORR by calculating the free energy changes $\Delta G$ of all reaction steps (see Table 3). Calculated results demonstrate that the formation of OOH$^*$ on most TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs is energetically favorable with a negative free energy change at zero potential. Particularly, $O_2$ molecules are excessively activated with rather large values of $\Delta G$ ranged from -2.02 to -1.70 eV in FeO$_2$N$_{4-x}$-SACs systems. In particular, the CoO$_2$N$_2$-opp show a moderate $\Delta G$ of -1.07 eV for the OOH$^*$ fragments as $O_2$ molecules are activated on this sample.

**Table 3.** The Gibbs free energies of OOH, $O$, OH on TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs and the free energy change ($\Delta G$) of the elementary steps along the reaction path at 0 V. ($G$, $\Delta G$ in eV).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$G_{OOH}$</th>
<th>$G_0$</th>
<th>$G_{OH}$</th>
<th>$\Delta G_1$</th>
<th>$\Delta G_2$</th>
<th>$\Delta G_3$</th>
<th>$\Delta G_4$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FeO$_2$N$_3$</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-1.70</td>
<td>-1.65</td>
<td>-1.43</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pen-FeO$_2$N$_2$</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-1.84</td>
<td>-1.56</td>
<td>-1.53</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. The Mulliken charge analysis of CoOxN4-x-SACs (Q in e). The negative and positive values of Q stand for charge the accumulation and depletion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CoO1N3</th>
<th>CoO2N2-pen</th>
<th>CoO2N2-hex</th>
<th>CoO2N2-hex</th>
<th>CoO3N1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q(Co)</td>
<td>0.283</td>
<td>0.269</td>
<td>0.310</td>
<td>0.214</td>
<td>0.385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q(OH*)</td>
<td>-0.338</td>
<td>-0.316</td>
<td>-0.348</td>
<td>-0.313</td>
<td>-0.350</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same phenomenon is also observed in three NiO2N2-SACs systems. In contrast, NiO1N3 show a relatively small value of ΔG (-0.31 eV) to generate OOH* species owing to their relatively inert interactions with O2 molecules. Subsequently, it is found that the formation of O* and H2O is exothermic for all the tested TMOrN4-x-SACs systems with rather large ΔG ranged from -2.07 to -1.32 eV, indicating that they will easily react with second electron/proton pair to form an O* fragment and dissociate a H2O molecule. According to larger negative ΔG of -1.76 to -1.42 eV, it is distinctly observed that the naked O* fragments can be easily hydrogenated to generate OH* fragments. For the last step, all the TMOrN4-x-SACs systems can react to the fourth proton-electron pair to promote the dissociation of the second H2O molecule except for the case of FeO2N2-pen, FeO2N2-hex, FeO3N1 and NiO3N1, which show positive value of ΔG ranged from 0.01 to 0.21 eV. That is because their stronger interactions the OH* fragments, causing the hydrogenation of OH* energetically unfavorable. Ideally, the overall ORR steps should generate 1.23 V per electron to ensure that the free energy change of each elementary step is zero at equilibrium potential of 1.23 V, revealing the existence of potential-determining step (PDS) and overpotential (η). As shown in Figure 4(c-g), the PDS of FeO2N4-x and CoO2N4-x systems is the conversion of OH* to H2O.
NiO$_2$N$_1$ is consistent with that of FeO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs and CoO$_x$N$_{4-x}$ systems. Figure 4(h) displays the $\eta$ of TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs with relatively good ORR activity. As we can see, the $\eta$ of CoO$_2$N$_2$-pen, CoO$_2$N$_2$-opp, NiO$_2$N$_2$-pen, NiO$_2$N$_2$-hex and NiO$_2$N$_2$-opp are 0.56, 0.49, 0.37, 0.58 and 0.55 V, respectively. However, the structures of three NiO$_2$N$_2$-SACs is found to be collapsed after the adsorption of O-contained intermediates, implying that they have poor stability against oxidation. Therefore, these three NiO$_2$N$_2$-SACs are not considered as outstanding electrocatalysts regardless of excellent ORR activity. Remarkably, the $\eta$ (=0.49 V) of CoO$_2$N$_2$-opp is comparable to that of Pt (0.43 V)[27], implying the superior catalytic ORR performance of the CoO$_2$N$_2$-opp sample, which is in perfect agreement with the experimental results[18].

We have evaluated the above three types of TMO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs from the thermodynamic aspect. It is found that the ORR activity of CoO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs is better than that of FeO$_x$N$_{4-x}$ samples and the stability of CoO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs is far superior to that of NiO$_x$N$_{4-x}$ samples.

For the sake of revealing the synergistic influence of N and O on the activity of metal center, CoO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs are taken as examples to carry out relevant electronic analysis, involving the Mulliken Charge Distribution (Q) listed in Table 4, OH$^*$ adsorption energy, $d$-band center and overpotential shown in Figure 5(a) and the partial density of states (PDOS) of OH$^*$ shown in Figure 5(b). The poisoning phenomenon (OH$^* \rightarrow$ H$_2$O ) of CoO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs and the good liner relationship (see Figure 4(b)) reveal that the adsorption energy of OH$^*$ also can be used as a representative to study the connection between adsorption energy of O-contained intermediates and ORR activity.

![Figure 5](image-url). Electron analysis. (a) The $d$-band center of Co, adsorption energy of OH and overpotential of ORR on the CoO$_x$N$_{4-x}$-SACs. (b) the partial density of states (PDOS) of OH$^*$ fragments.

As shown in Figure 5(a), the lower adsorption energy of OH shows that the $d$-band center of Co is located rather far away from the Fermi level, suggesting that the corresponding electrocatalysts is not conducive to the adsorption of OH and exhibit more outstanding ORR activity with a lower overpotential. In addition, the Mulliken charges display that the OH$^*$ specie adsorbed on the CoO$_2$N$_2$-opp sample has a negatively charged of -0.313 e whereas the metal center is positively charged by 0.214 e, indicating the relatively weak Co-OH binding effect. On CoO$_1$N$_3$, CoO$_2$N$_2$-pen, CoO$_2$N$_2$-hex and CoO$_3$N$_1$, the OH$^*$
species obtains more electrons compared with CoO$_2$N$_2$-opp, leading to the comparatively strong interaction between Co and OH* fragments. Figure 5(b) further unveil the underlying mechanism of the electron-mediated adsorption by the PDOS of OH*, revealing that the binding states are enhanced and the antibinding states are reduced for CoO$_1$N$_3$, CoO$_2$N$_2$-pen, CoO$_2$N$_2$-hex and CoO$_3$N$_1$. Conversely, the binding states are reduced and the antibinding states are increased for CoO$_2$N$_2$-opp. Therefore, the Mulliken Charge Distribution and PDOS clearly explains the different changes of the OH adsorption caused by the synergistic effect of N and O atoms. As a consequence, the activity of metal center for ORR can be effectively tuned by the collaborative effect of N and O doping.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this manuscript, the stability and ORR activities of TMOxN$_4$-x-SACs (TM= Fe, Co and Ni) catalysts are theoretically investigated. It can be concluded that TMO$_1$N$_3$ and TMO$_2$N$_2$ samples can offer good thermodynamic stability compared with TMO$_3$N$_1$ systems. Interestingly, the CoO$_2$N$_2$-pen, CoO$_2$N$_2$-opp, NiO$_2$N$_2$-pen, NiO$_2$N$_2$-hex and NiO$_2$N$_2$-opp show good catalytic ORR activity for ORR. However, the NiO$_2$N$_2$-pen, NiO$_2$N$_2$-hex and NiO$_2$N$_2$-opp catalysts is found to have poor stability against oxidation after the adsorption of O-contained intermediates, implying they are not considered as outstanding electrocatalysts. Remarkably, the theoretical overpotential of CoO$_2$N$_2$-opp is munch close to that of Pt(111), holding the best ORR activity compared of other TMOxN$_4$-x-SACs. Our studies will inspire more theoretical and experimental researches on exploring potential single metal atom electrocatalysts for ORR.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST
There are no conflicts to declare.

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References

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