

# Synthesis of Zinc-Nitrogen-Codoped Zirconia-Titania Composite (Zn-N-Codoped ZT) as a Photocatalyst for Photodegradation of Phenol Under Visible Light Irradiation

Nadya Putri Utami<sup>1</sup>, Rian Kurniawan<sup>1,2</sup>, Mokhammad Fajar Pradipta<sup>1</sup>, and Akhmad Syoufian<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Chemistry, Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Sekip Utara, Yogyakarta 55281, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Chemical Technology, Universität Leipzig, Linnéstr. 3, Leipzig 04103, Germany

\* Corresponding author:

email: akhmadasyoufian@ugm.ac.id

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**Abstract:** Zinc (Zn) and nitrogen (N) were introduced as codopants in zirconia-titania (Zn-N-codoped ZT) composite photocatalyst. This research primarily aimed to investigate the codoping effect of Zn and N in ZT composite for the photodegradation of phenol under visible light irradiation. The composite was prepared through the sol-gel method, where a suspension of ZrO<sub>2</sub> mixed with Zn dopant ( $w_{Zn}/w_{Ti} = 1-9\%$ ) and N dopant ( $w_N/w_{Ti} = 10\%$ ) was added dropwise to TTIP in ethanol solution. Calcination was conducted at the temperature of 500, 700, and 900 °C. FTIR shows an increasing absorbance at 1095 cm<sup>-1</sup> as the increasing Zn up to 5%. XRD reveals that Zn-N codoping influences anatase and rutile crystallization above 700 °C. SEM-EDX of 5Zn-N-ZT-500 displays a spherical and homogeneous morphology. Photodegradation of 10 mg L<sup>-1</sup> phenol solution under visible light irradiation was conducted to evaluate the photocatalytic activity. The composite with 5% Zn and 10% N calcined at 900 °C achieved the lowest band gap of 2.90 eV. The highest phenol degradation percentage after 120 min irradiation, 51.96%, was attained by the composite containing 5% Ni and 10% N calcined at 500 °C ( $k_{obs} = 8.4 \times 10^{-3} \text{ min}^{-1}$ ).

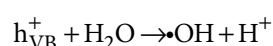
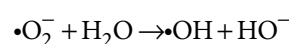
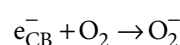
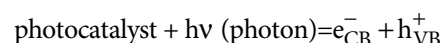
**Keywords:** codoping; phenol; photodegradation; Zn-N-codoped ZT

## ■ INTRODUCTION

Industrial waste, such as phenol, contributes to water pollution and has adverse environmental effects [1]. Phenol, a harmful organic compound, is produced by industries involved in coal gasification, paper manufacturing, petroleum, paint, and textiles [2]. It is known for its toxicity and potential to cause teratogenic and carcinogenic effects in living organisms [3]. Phenol levels can be reduced through physical methods (like activated carbon adsorption), chemical methods (such as solvent extraction), and biological methods (including aerobic and anaerobic processes) [1]. However, these techniques often involve lengthy processes, high costs, low efficiency, and generating secondary waste [2].

The photocatalytic approach is recognized for its effectiveness in breaking down pollutants without generating additional waste that could damage the environment [4]. This method offers benefits such as

rapid processing, low cost, and efficient removal of toxicity [5]. Light energy is necessary to excite the photocatalyst during photocatalysis, producing charged carriers essential for the degradation process. Electrons or holes trigger the formation of radical species like superoxide radicals ( $\bullet\text{O}_2^-$ ). These radicals react with water to form hydroxyl ions ( $\text{OH}^-$ ), which then interact with holes ( $h^+$ ) to generate hydroxyl radicals ( $\bullet\text{OH}$ ). The hydroxyl radicals decompose phenol compounds into simpler substances, such as CO<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>O [6-8]. The mechanism of photodegradation of organic compounds by a photocatalyst (not balanced) can be explained as follows [9-11].



phenol compound +  $\cdot\text{OH} \rightarrow \text{CO}_2 + \text{H}_2\text{O}$

A photocatalyst is a photoactive substance that utilizes photons to drive a chemical reaction [12]. Materials like  $\text{TiO}_2$  serve as photocatalysts due to their properties as non-toxic, inert, thermally and chemically stable, affordable semiconductors that enhance the oxidation of various organic compounds and demonstrate high photocatalytic efficiency [13-16].  $\text{TiO}_2$  exists in three structural forms: rutile, anatase, and brookite. The rutile and anatase phases have a band gap of 3.0 and 3.2 eV, respectively [15]. Among these, the anatase phase exhibits superior photocatalytic performance compared to rutile [17]. The anatase phase has a superior ability to trap holes and a lower recombination rate than the rutile phase [18].  $\text{TiO}_2$  primarily absorbs UV light ( $< 400 \text{ nm}$ ) [19], while UV radiation constitutes only 5–7% of sunlight, and visible light accounts for 46% [6]. To extend the photocatalytic activity of  $\text{TiO}_2$  into the visible range,  $\text{TiO}_2$  can be doped with metals and nonmetals [20], broadening its absorption spectrum to include visible light [21-22].

Dopants used in photocatalysts include nonmetals such as N [23], C [24], and S [25], as well as transition metals like Fe [17], Co [26], Cr [27], Cu [28], Mo [29], Zn [30], and Ta [15]. These dopants are effective in reducing the rate of electron-hole recombination and decreasing the band gap energy [15]. Codoping has a synergistic effect on enhancing the performance of  $\text{TiO}_2$  under visible light by creating new energy levels from the dopants, which can narrow the band gap of  $\text{TiO}_2$  [31]. Nonmetal dopants create mid-energy levels above the valence band (VB), whereas metal dopants establish energy levels below the conduction band (CB) [32].  $\text{TiO}_2$  photocatalysts doped with Zn and N may experience a phase transformation from the anatase to the rutile phase at a temperature of  $550 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  [33-35]. This phase transformation can be mitigated by combining  $\text{TiO}_2$  with other semiconductors such as  $\text{SnO}_2$ ,  $\text{WO}_2$ ,  $\text{ZrO}_2$ ,  $\text{CeO}_2$ ,  $\text{CdS}$ , and  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  [36-38].

$\text{ZrO}_2$  exists in three polymorphic crystal phases: cubic phase is stable above  $2370 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , tetragonal is stable between  $1170\text{--}2370 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , and monoclinic is stable below  $1170 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  [39].  $\text{ZrO}_2$  is selected for its role as a support material and active host that helps prevent the phase

transition of  $\text{TiO}_2$  from anatase to rutile. The resulting  $\text{ZrO}_2\text{-TiO}_2$  (ZT) composite benefits from high thermal stability, reduced electron-hole recombination, increased surface area, and improved photocatalytic activity under visible light [30,40-41]. Moreover, the ZT composite can create a heterojunction, where a junction develops between  $\text{TiO}_2$  and  $\text{ZrO}_2$ , which helps lower the recombination rate [42] since electrons and holes from  $\text{ZrO}_2$  can be transferred to the CB and VB of  $\text{TiO}_2$ . The movement of electrons from trap states or the CB of  $\text{ZrO}_2$  to the CB of  $\text{TiO}_2$  enhances the availability of free electrons for the reduction process [33,42]. Meanwhile, holes move from the VB of  $\text{ZrO}_2$  to the VB of  $\text{TiO}_2$ , where they can initiate the oxidation reaction [33].

The photocatalytic degradation of phenol solution under visible light was conducted using a Zn-N-codoped ZT composite (Zn-N-ZT).  $\text{TiO}_2$  codoped with Zn and N was grown on the surface of  $\text{ZrO}_2$  through a sol-gel process. The concentration of the Zn dopant was varied while keeping the concentration of the nitrogen dopant constant, resulting in different Zn levels in the Zn-N-ZT composites. The calcination temperature was varied to assess its impact on the crystal phase and size. Additionally, the irradiation time was varied to evaluate its effect on the extent of phenol degradation. Consequently, the Zn-N-ZT material is anticipated to respond well to visible light and efficiently degrade the phenol solution.

## ■ EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

### Materials

Titanium(IV) tetraisopropoxide (TTIP, 97%) as  $\text{TiO}_2$  precursor was obtained from Sigma-Aldrich and zirconia ( $\text{ZrO}_2$ ) powder was obtained from Jiaozuo Huasu. Urea ( $\text{CO}(\text{NH}_2)_2$ , Merck) and zinc nitrate hexahydrate ( $\text{Zn}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ , 99%, Merck) were both selected as the sources of dopant. Ethanol (99%, Merck) and distilled water (Jaya Sentosa) were used as solvents. Phenol as the target compound was obtained from Merck.

### Instrumentation

The vibrational spectra of the composite's functional groups were identified using a Fourier-

transform infrared (FTIR) Thermo Nicolet iS10, covering a range of 400 to 4000  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ . The crystalline structure of the materials was analyzed with an X-ray diffractometer (XRD) PANalytical X'Pert PRO MRD, utilizing Cu K $\alpha$  radiation ( $\lambda = 1.54 \text{ \AA}$ , 40 kV, 30 mA). Crystal size (L) was determined using the Scherrer equation (Eq. (1)) [43];

$$L = \frac{0.9\lambda}{B\cos\theta} \quad (1)$$

where  $\lambda$  is the X-ray wavelength,  $\theta$  is the Bragg angle, and B is half the full width of the maximum intensity of the peak in radians. The morphology and elemental composition of the photocatalyst were characterized by a scanning electron microscope energy dispersive X-ray spectrometer (SEM-EDX) JEOL-JSM 6510 LA series with an accelerating voltage of 20 kV. Specular reflectance UV-vis spectrometer UV 1700 Pharmaspec (SR-UV) was used to measure the absorption spectra in the wavelength range of 200–800 nm and to determine the composite's band gap energy using the absorption edge shift method (Eq. (2)) [44];

$$E_g = \frac{1240}{\lambda_g} \quad (2)$$

where  $E_g$  is the band gap energy (eV) and  $\lambda_g$  represents the absorbance edge value obtained from the intersection point between two linear equations at which the absorbance increases. Photocatalytic activity tests for phenol solution degradation were conducted under visible light from a LIFE MAX 30W/765 PHILIPS TLD lamp. The phenol concentration after degradation was measured at a maximum wavelength of 269 nm using a UV-1800 Shimadzu UV-vis spectrophotometer.

## Procedure

### Preparation of Zn-N-codoped ZT composites

The Zn-N-ZT composite was synthesized using a sol-gel method. Initially, 2.5 mL of TTIP was dissolved in 25 mL of absolute ethanol. Separately, 1.0 g of  $\text{ZrO}_2$  powder and 86.8 mg of urea ( $w_{\text{N}}/w_{\text{Ti}} = 10\%$ ) were dispersed in 10 mL of demineralized water, along with various amounts of  $\text{Zn}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$  aimed to be 1.0, 3.0, 5.0, 7.0, and 9.0% ( $w_{\text{Zn}}/w_{\text{Ti}}$ ). This suspension was added dropwise to the TTIP solution and stirred for 30 min. The resulting mixture was centrifuged for 30 min at 2000 rpm

to separate the solid. Afterwards, the solid was filtered, air-dried for 24 h, and then oven-dried at 80 °C for another 24 h. The solid was calcined at 500, 700, and 900 °C for 4 h. The composites were designated as  $\alpha\text{Zn-N-ZT-}\beta$ , where  $\alpha$  represents the percentage of Zn as a dopant and  $\beta$  denotes the calcination temperature (°C). All samples were characterized using XRD, FTIR, SR-UV, and SEM-EDX.

### Photodegradation test of phenol using Zn-N-codoped ZT composites

The Zn-N-ZT composite photocatalyst (100 mg) was introduced into 100 mL of a 10  $\text{mg L}^{-1}$  phenol (Ph) solution. The mixture was stirred for 15 min before being exposed to visible light, allowing the adsorption of Ph to reach equilibrium. It was then continuously stirred and irradiated for 15, 30, 45, 60, 75, 90, 105, and 120 min using a LIFE MAX 30W/765 PHILIPS TLD lamp. After irradiation, the photocatalyst was separated from the solution by centrifugation at 3000 rpm for 30 min. The Ph concentration following photodegradation was assessed by measuring the absorbance at 269 nm. To obtain a reliable result, the photodegradation experiments were repeated three times for each material. The photodegradation kinetics of the Ph solution were analyzed using a pseudo-first-order Langmuir-Hinshelwood model (Eq. (3) and (4));

$$-\frac{dC}{dT} = k_{\text{obs}}C \quad (3)$$

$$\ln C = -k_{\text{obs}}t + \ln C_0 \quad (4)$$

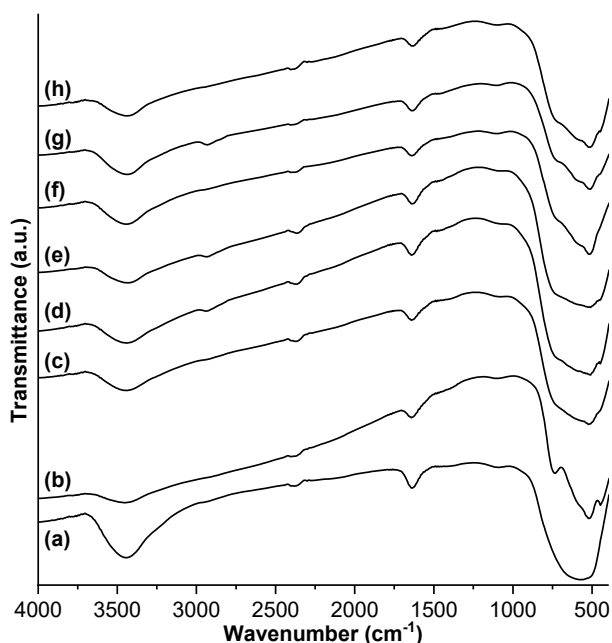
where C represents the phenol concentration at time t,  $C_0$  is the initial concentration, t is the irradiation time, and  $k_{\text{obs}}$  is the observed rate constant. The percentage of Ph degradation was determined using Eq. (5);

$$\% \text{pH degradation} = \frac{C_i - C_f}{C_i} \times 100\% \quad (5)$$

where  $C_i$  and  $C_f$  denote the initial and final concentrations of Ph, respectively.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The FTIR spectra for the Zn-N-ZT-500 composite with different Zn concentrations, along with  $\text{TiO}_2$ ,  $\text{ZrO}_2$ , and N-ZT-500, are presented in Fig. 1(a–h). Absorption in the 400–700  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  range corresponds to the stretching



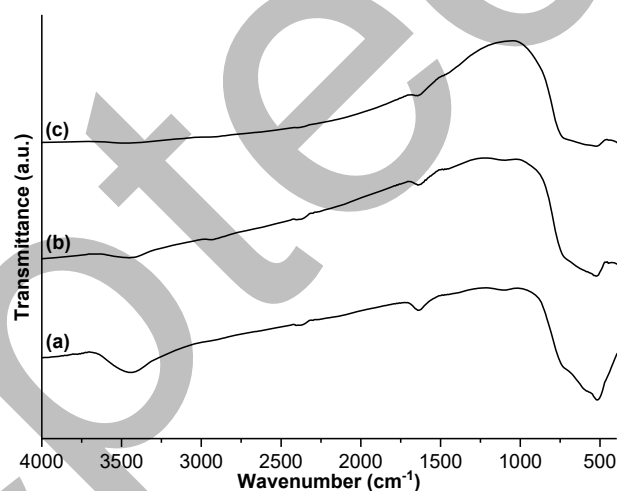
**Fig 1.** FTIR spectra of (a)  $\text{TiO}_2$ , (b)  $\text{ZrO}_2$ , (c) N-ZT-500, (d) 1Zn-, (e) 3Zn-, (f) 5Zn-, (g) 7Zn-, and (h) 9Zn-N-ZT-500

vibrations of Zr–O and Ti–O bonds [42]. The monoclinic phase of  $\text{ZrO}_2$  is identified in the 450–650  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  range [45]. The absorption at 1095  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  is attributed to the vibrations of Zn–O–Zr [46] or Zn–O–Ti bonds or both [30,47]. The intensity of this peak sharpens as the Zn dopant concentration increases up to 5% Zn, likely due to the incorporation of excess Zn into interstitial sites or its agglomeration [48]. Peaks at 1600 and 3400–3500  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  are associated with the bending vibration of the H–O–H group and the stretching vibration of the O–H group, indicating the presence of remaining water molecules in the composite surface during synthesis [46,49].

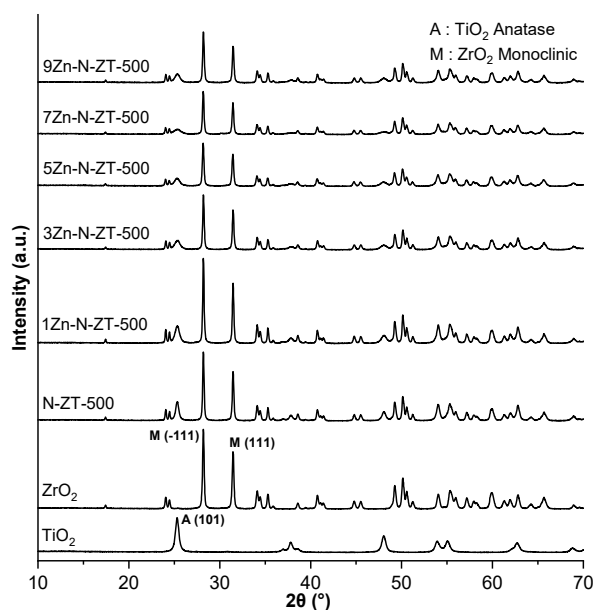
Fig. 2(a–c) displays the FTIR spectra of 5Zn-N-ZT with varying calcination temperatures. As the calcination temperature rises from 500 to 900 °C, the intensity at 1600 and 3400–3500  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  decreases, reflecting the reduction of water molecules on the composite surface [20]. Additionally, the intensity at 1095  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  diminishes as higher temperatures cause dopants to agglomerate [50]. At the wavenumber around 500  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , the absorption peak becomes flatter with increasing calcination temperature due to the phase transition of  $\text{TiO}_2$  from anatase to rutile.

This transition alters the Ti–O–Ti bond length, affecting the vibrational absorption energy [40].

Fig. 3 displays the XRD results for the Zn-N-ZT-500 composites with varying concentrations of Zn dopant alongside the diffraction patterns of  $\text{TiO}_2$ ,  $\text{ZrO}_2$ , and N-ZT materials for comparison. The diffraction patterns indicate that pure  $\text{ZrO}_2$  shows peaks at  $2\theta$  of 28° ( $d_{-111}$ ) and 31° ( $d_{111}$ ), which correspond to the monoclinic phase (00-036-0420) [26]. In contrast, pure



**Fig 2.** FTIR spectra of 5Zn-N-ZT at (a) 500, (b) 700, and (c) 900 °C



**Fig 3.** XRD patterns of Zn-N-ZT-500 composite with various Zn concentrations

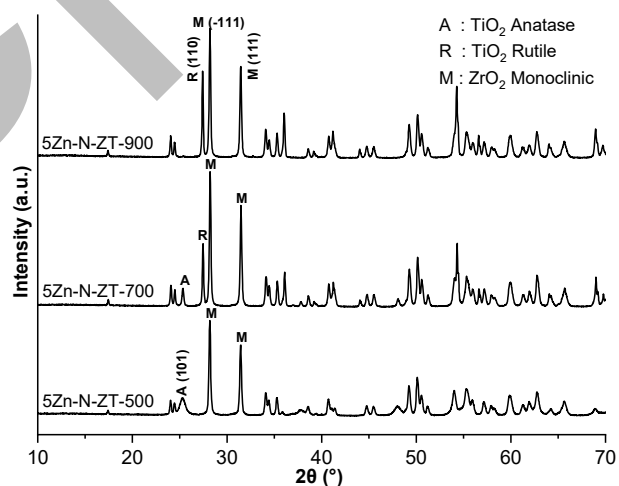
TiO<sub>2</sub> exhibits major peaks at  $2\theta$  of 25° ( $d_{101}$ ), indicative of the anatase phase (00-021-1272) [17]. The Debye-Scherrer equation [43] was used to calculate the average crystallite size of Zn-N-ZT, with results summarized in Table 1. Peaks for anatase at  $2\theta = 25^\circ$  ( $d_{101}$ ) and monoclinic at  $2\theta = 28^\circ$  ( $d_{-111}$ ) were used to determine these sizes.

The monoclinic intensity decreases up to a Zn concentration of 5% and then increases again at 7% Zn. The anatase intensity decreases with increasing Zn concentration up to 5% (the optimum concentration). Zn dopant acts as an impurity and causes crystal defects during calcination because Zn enters the crystal structure of ZT composites during the rearrangement process [51]. The Zn-N-ZT composite has a smaller crystallite size for anatase and monoclinic phases compared to its parent materials (ZrO<sub>2</sub> and TiO<sub>2</sub>) because Zn and N dopants were successfully doped into the composite lattice surface [43]. The crystallite size of Zn-N-ZT (anatase and monoclinic) decreases from 1 to 5% Zn concentration and increases again after the addition of 7% Zn. The reduction in crystallite size is due to crystal defects originating from the Zn<sup>2+</sup> dopant added to the Zr-O-Zr or Ti-O-Ti network, where Zr<sup>4+</sup> or Ti<sup>4+</sup> positions are replaced by Zn<sup>2+</sup> ions [21,52]. This substitution occurs due to the difference in ionic size and valence between Zn cations and Zr or Ti cations, where the ionic radius of Zn<sup>2+</sup> is smaller than that of Zr<sup>4+</sup> or Ti<sup>4+</sup> [53]. Crystal defects may occur due to oxygen vacancies in the crystal structure [22]. The increase in crystallite size of anatase and monoclinic phases at 7% Zn is because the amount of dopant exceeds the optimum limit, leading to dopant agglomeration on the crystal surface [23].

The XRD patterns of the 5Zn-N-ZT composite at different calcination temperatures are shown in Fig. 4. After calcination at 700 °C, 5Zn-N-ZT reveals a rutile phase diffraction pattern (ICDD: 00-021-1276) at 27° ( $d_{110}$ ) [41]. The anatase phase is still visible at calcination temperatures of 700 °C but with lower intensity compared to the 500 °C calcination temperature. This indicates ZrO<sub>2</sub> acting as a supporting material that can inhibit the phase transformation of anatase to rutile in TiO<sub>2</sub> [54]. The crystallinity of the 5Zn-N-ZT composite increases with the

**Table 1.** The average crystallite size of various Zn-N-ZT composite

Material	Crystal phase	L (nm)
TiO <sub>2</sub>	Anatase	59
ZrO <sub>2</sub>	Monoclinic	46
N-ZT-500	Anatase	30
	Monoclinic	46
1Zn-N-ZT-500	Anatase	41
	Monoclinic	52
3Zn-N-ZT-500	Anatase	17
	Monoclinic	52
5Zn-N-ZT-500	Anatase	19
	Monoclinic	46
5Zn-N-ZT-700	Anatase	41
	Rutile	59
	Monoclinic	52
5Zn-N-ZT-900	Rutile	59
	Monoclinic	52
7Zn-N-ZT-500	Anatase	26
	Monoclinic	46
9Zn-N-ZT-500	Anatase	15
	Monoclinic	46



**Fig 4.** XRD patterns of 5Zn-N-ZT composite calcined at various temperatures

rise in calcination temperature because of the improved atomic order in the crystal as the calcination temperature increases [55–57]. According to the analysis, the crystallite size of the anatase phase increased as the calcination temperature rose from 500 to 700 °C [58] and was undetectable at 900 °C [59]. The rutile phase began to emerge at 700 °C [34,60], while the

crystallite size of the rutile phase remained unchanged at calcination temperatures of 700 and 900 °C. The crystallite size of the monoclinic phase in 5Zn-N-ZT increased from 500 to 700 °C [61] due to the more stable growth of ZT crystals [20]. However, from 700 to 900 °C, there was no change in the monoclinic crystallite size. This stagnation in crystallite size is attributed to particle agglomeration at elevated calcination temperatures [62-63]. Agglomeration inhibits the optimal integration of the dopant into the crystal lattice [64].

The SEM images of  $ZrO_2$  and 5Zn-N-ZT-500 composite are shown in Fig. 5(a-c), alongside the elemental mapping of 5Zn-N-ZT-500. The  $ZrO_2$  and 5Zn-N-ZT-500 composite exhibit a spherical and homogeneous

morphology. The surface of  $ZrO_2$  is smoother than the 5Zn-N-ZT-500 composite because the dopants undergo agglomeration due to the calcination temperature [65]. The elemental mapping of 5Zn-N-ZT-500 shows the evenly distributed Zr and Ti on the surface of the observed particles and confirms the formation of a composite instead of a mixture. Moreover, the presence of Zn appears to be homogeneous on the surface of composites, which also confirms the doping of Zn. The elemental mass percentage of  $ZrO_2$  and 5Zn-N-ZT-500 measured by EDX analysis are displayed in Table 2. The small mass percentages of Zn and N indicate that both dopants were successfully doped into the 5Zn-N-ZT-500 composite. Dopants with a low mass percentage can prevent the

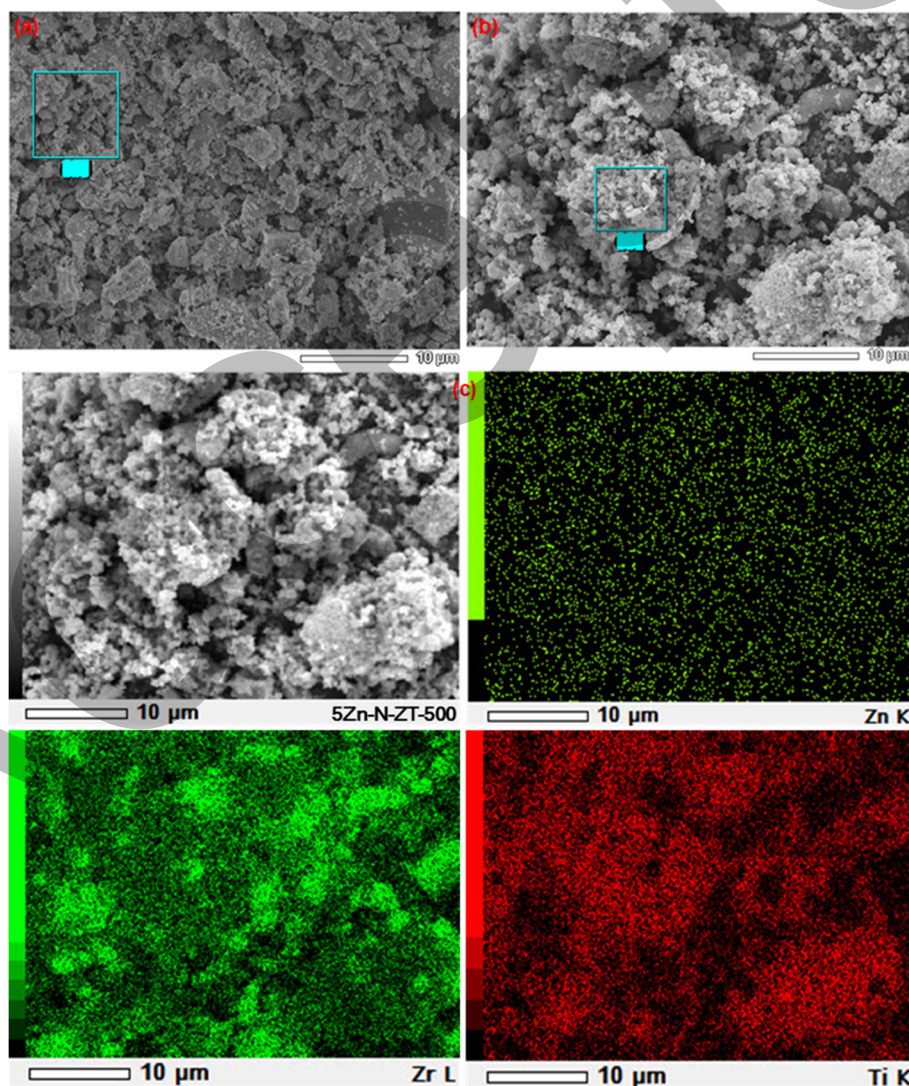


Fig 5. SEM images of (a)  $ZrO_2$  and (b) 5Zn-N-ZT-500, and (c) elemental mapping of 5Zn-N-ZT-500

**Table 2.** EDX analysis of ZrO<sub>2</sub> and 5Zn-N-ZT-500

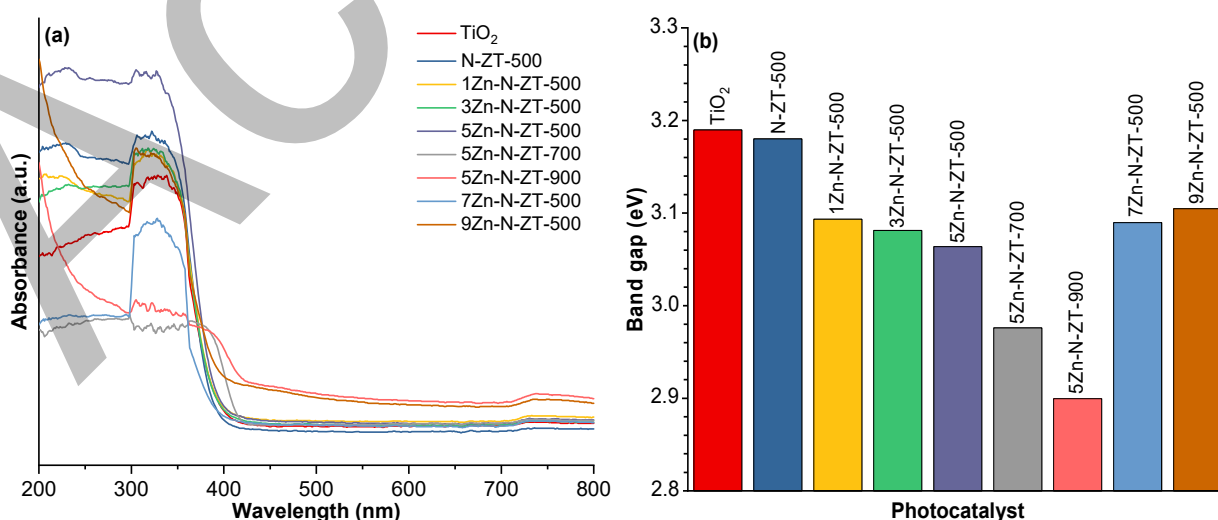
Material	%Mass					Total
	Zr	O	Ti	N	Zn	
ZrO <sub>2</sub>	78.29	21.71	-	-	-	100
5Zn-N-ZT-500	15.44	43.22	35.63	2.68	3.03	100

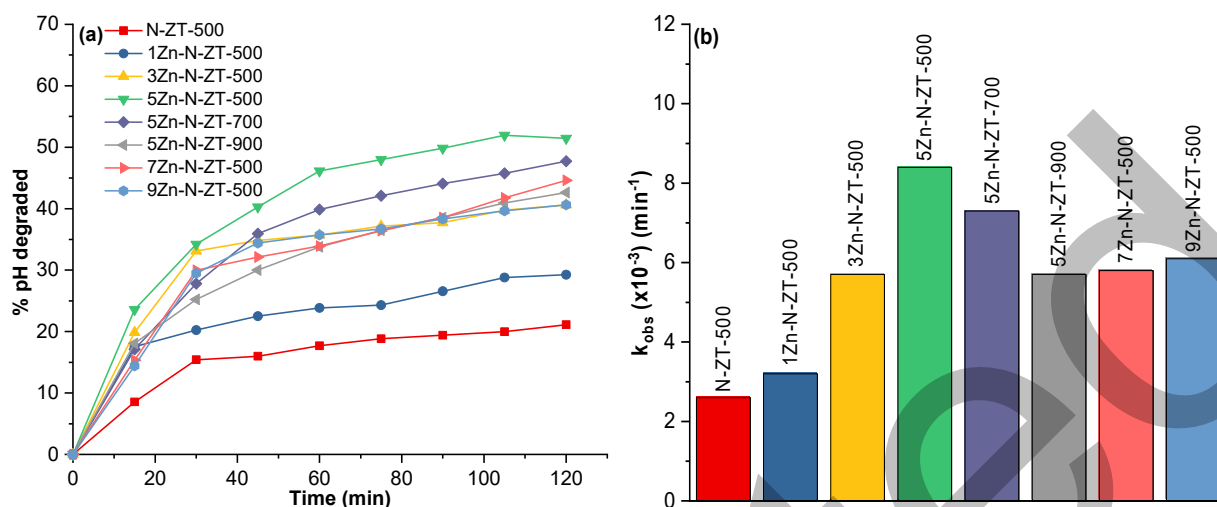
formation of recombination centers and impact the structure and activity of the photocatalyst [66]. If the dopant concentration is excessively high, it can decrease photocatalytic efficiency [67]. Higher levels of dopants lead to the aggregation of dopant ions at specific sites, which causes the surface to accumulate charge [65].

The SRUV spectra of the Zn-N-ZT composite with varying Zn concentrations and calcination temperatures are depicted in Fig. 6(a). The band gap energy ( $E_g$ ) was determined using the absorption edge method [44]. Fig. 6(b) shows the calculated  $E_g$  of the Zn-N-ZT composites. The  $E_g$  of all Zn-N-ZT materials are lower than that of TiO<sub>2</sub> (3.19 eV) and N-ZT-500 (3.18 eV) due to the codoping effect of Zn and N [4]. The presence of Zn and N dopants shifts the absorption edge towards the visible light region [21,68]. The  $E_g$  value of Zn-N-ZT-500 decreases with increasing Zn concentration up to 5%, then increases again at Zn concentrations up to 9% [30]. The increase in  $E_g$  is due to an excess amount of dopant, which leads to dopant agglomeration and weakens the doping effect [17,69]. The 5Zn-10N-ZT-500 composite shows the lowest  $E_g$  value of 3.06 eV with an absorption edge at the wavelength of 405 nm.

The spectra reveal a shift of the absorption edge towards longer wavelengths as the calcination temperature increases, indicating a decrease in  $E_g$  [43]. The lowest  $E_g$  value was observed at 5Zn-N-ZT-900, with a  $E_g$  of 2.90 eV and an absorption edge at 428 nm. The reduction of  $E_g$  is attributed to the transformation of anatase to rutile, with the rutile phase being more dominant in 5Zn-N-ZT-900 compared to the 5Zn-N-ZT-500 and 5Zn-N-ZT-700 composites. This observation aligns with the fact that the rutile phase has a smaller  $E_g$  compared to the anatase phase and that rutile has longer Ti-O-Ti bonds than anatase [48].

The photocatalytic performance of the Zn-N-ZT composite was assessed by testing its ability to degrade a Ph solution under visible light. The study varied the irradiation time and Zn concentration within the composite to identify the optimal conditions for Ph degradation. Ph concentration in the photodegraded samples was measured by absorbance at 269 nm. Fig. 7(a) illustrates the impact of irradiation time on Ph photodegradation using the Zn-N-ZT composite, while Fig. 7(b) presents the rate constant for Ph degradation. The 5Zn-N-ZT-500 composite demonstrated optimal

**Fig 6.** (a) SR-UV spectra and (b) band gap of various Zn-N-ZT composites



**Fig 7.** (a) Photodegradation of Ph over irradiation time and (b) observed rate constant  $k_{\text{obs}}$  of Ph photodegradation by various Zn-N-ZT composite

Ph degradation, achieving 51.96% degradation with an irradiation time of 105 min and  $k_{\text{obs}}$  of  $8.4 \times 10^{-3} \text{ min}^{-1}$ , highlighting the enhancement of ZT's photocatalytic activity through Zn and N codoping.

The photocatalytic performance of a photocatalyst is closely tied to its electronic band structure, as a reduced band gap often diminishes redox power by either lowering the conduction band level, raising the valence band level, or both, which adversely affects photocatalytic efficiency [41]. Among the composites calcined at 500 °C with varying Zn concentrations, the 5Zn-N-ZT-500 material exhibits the highest photocatalytic activity and has the lowest band gap. XRD and SR-UV data suggest that even small amounts of dopants can significantly impact on the material photocatalytic performance. The decline in photocatalytic activity at Zn concentrations above 5% is likely due to the diminished effect of Zn codoping, as reflected in a higher band gap energy, which reduces the light absorption range, and the smaller average crystallite size of anatase, the active crystalline phase [70].

The percentage of photodegradation diminishes as the calcination temperature rises, with values of 51.96, 47.73, and 42.63% at temperatures of 500, 700, and 900 °C, respectively. This reduction is attributed to the phase transition of  $\text{TiO}_2$  from anatase to rutile occurring at 700 and 900 °C [34]. However, the rutile phase has lower photocatalytic activity than the anatase phase [18].

When the photocatalyst is exposed to high-energy light, it forms  $h^+$  in VB, a strong oxidant. The  $h^+$  generates  $\bullet\text{OH}$  radicals that break down phenol into simpler compounds [34]. Extended irradiation times allow the photocatalyst to absorb more photon energy, resulting in the generation of more  $\bullet\text{OH}$  radicals [71], thereby enhancing the Ph degradation process.

## CONCLUSION

The Zn-N-codoped zirco-titania composite photocatalyst was synthesized using the sol-gel method. FTIR analysis indicated that the Zn-O-Zr or Zn-O-Ti bonds or both vibrations at a wavenumber of  $1095 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  increased in intensity by adding up to 5% Zn dopant. Codoping with N and Zn, as well as coupling with  $\text{ZrO}_2$ , affects the crystallization of anatase and rutile at higher temperatures and inhibits the growth of  $\text{TiO}_2$  crystals. Codoping with N and Zn reduces the  $E_g$  of the ZT composite to 2.90 eV (with 5% Zn, 10% N, and calcination at 900 °C). The Zn-N-codoped ZT photocatalyst with 5% Zn and 10% N calcined at 500 °C was able to degrade a  $10 \text{ mg L}^{-1}$  phenol solution by up to 51.96% after 105 min of visible light irradiation, with observed  $k_{\text{obs}}$  of  $8.4 \times 10^{-3} \text{ min}^{-1}$ . Codoping of Zn and N enhances the photocatalytic performance of ZT under visible irradiation, and it becomes a highly potential photocatalyst to utilize sunlight for environmental remediation.



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## ■ CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

## ■ AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nadya Putri Utami served as the first author, collecting data, writing the initial draft, and performing revisions. Rian Kurniawan and Mokhammad Fajar Pradipta, served as co-authors, checked revision results, and provided suggestion for improvements to the written report. Akhmad Syoufian served as corresponding author, research supervisor, checked revision results, provided suggestion for improvements, and conducted final assessments of the data and the written report.

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