

Molecular Engineering of Potent Sensitizers for Very Efficient Light Harvesting in Thin-Film Solid-State Dye-Sensitized Solar Cells

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Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Dye-sensitized solar cells (DSSCs) have shown significant potential for indoor and building-integrated photovoltaic applications. Herein we present three new D–A– π –A organic sensitizers, XY1, XY2, and XY3, that exhibit high molar extinction coefficients and a broad absorption range. Molecular modifications of these dyes, featuring a benzothiadiazole (BTZ) auxiliary acceptor, were achieved by introducing a thiophene heterocycle as well as by shifting the position of BTZ on the conjugated bridge. The ensuing high molar absorption coefficients enabled the fabrication of highly efficient thin-film solid-state DSSCs with only 1.3 μm mesoporous TiO_2 layer. XY2 with a molar extinction coefficient of $6.66 \times 10^4 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$ at 578 nm led to the best photovoltaic performance of 7.51%.

After 25 years of thorough study and development, dye-sensitized solar cells (DSSCs) are nowadays moving toward industrial production, aided by their simple and low-cost fabrication process, large range of colors, transparency, and high photovoltaic conversion efficiency (PCE), particularly under low-illumination conditions.^{1,2} Solid-state DSSCs (ssDSSCs) employing hole-transporting materials (HTMs) have attracted significant interest as a practical solution for the problems posed by traditional liquid electrolytes.^{3–5} In 1998, 2,2',7,7'-tetrakis(*N,N*-di-*p*-methoxyphenylamine)-9,9'-spirobifluorene (spiro-OMeTAD) was reported as the first HTM for ssDSSCs. This material has since been widely used not only in ssDSSCs but also in perovskite solar cells.^{4,6–8} A challenge for ssDSSC applications, however, remains the fact that spiro-OMeTAD only insufficiently infiltrates into thick mesoporous TiO_2 films. These films are therefore limited to a thickness of about 2–5 μm .^{9,10} Thus, dyes with high extinction coefficients and broad absorption ranges are of great importance in order to achieve high solar-to-electricity conversion efficiencies on thin TiO_2 layers in ssDSSCs. Also, highly performing ssDSSCs, exhibiting thin TiO_2 layers and strongly absorbing dyes, do not require scattering layers for optimal light harvesting. It is for this reason that they are very promising candidates for future applications in building-integrated photovoltaic (BIPV) win-

dows and other areas, where aesthetics play an important role. Organic sensitizers are ideal candidates for thin-film cells because of their significantly higher molar extinction coefficients and lower cost compared to ruthenium-based sensitizers. Furthermore, their structural flexibility allows access to a larger parameter space for fine-tuning of dye properties.^{11–13} This is particularly important in the case of dye regeneration and charge recombination processes at the TiO_2 /dye/HTM interface, where molecular-level modifications of organic sensitizers are employed as an effective approach to impede undesirable charge recombination processes.^{13–15} This is exemplified in the case of Y123 (Figure 1) and LEG4, which feature bulky donors and

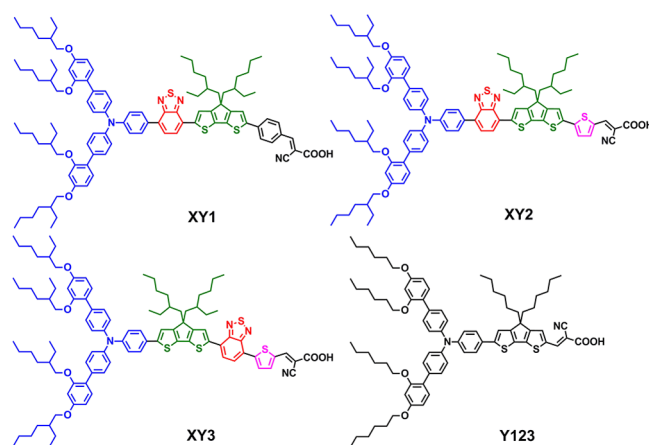


Figure 1. Molecular structures of XY1, XY2, XY3, and Y123.

cyclopentadithiophene (CPDT)-based π -bridges protected by alkoxy and alkyl chains, respectively. These bulky side chains shield the dye from the oxidized HTM and thereby inhibit recombination at the TiO_2 /dye/HTM interface, leading to highly efficient ssDSSCs with spiro-OMeTAD.^{16–18} For example, Burschka et al.¹⁶ achieved a PCE of 7.2% from Y123-sensitized ssDSSCs using tris(2-(1*H*-pyrazol-1-yl)pyridine)-cobalt(III) (FK102) as a p-type HTM dopant (film thickness:

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2.5 μm). Similarly, LEG4-sensitized ssDSSCs obtained PCEs of 7.7% with 1,1,2,2-tetrachloroethane-doped spiro-OMeTAD (film thickness: $\sim 2.5 \mu\text{m}$)¹⁸ and 8.2% with copper phenanthroline as the hole conductor (film: $\sim 6 \mu\text{m}$ transparent + 3 μm scattering layer).¹⁹

Previous work on DSSCs by our group as well as Zhu's group demonstrated that organic sensitizers with D–A– π –A structures outperform their D– π –A analogues because the introduction of an auxiliary acceptor (A) between the donor (D) and the π -bridge facilitates fine-tuning of the molecular energy levels. This leads to increased absorption and to an extension of the spectral response toward longer wavelengths.^{13,20,21} From these works, benzothiadiazole (BTZ) emerged as a promising acceptor functionality.^{20,22} Following these results, we here investigated three novel BTZ-based D–A– π –A sensitizers, XY1, XY2, and XY3 (Figure 1). XY1 showed a high molar extinction coefficient, which was further increased in XY2 by introducing a heterocyclic thiophene unit onto the conjugated chain, also leading to an extension of the absorption toward the red. This effect was further enhanced upon exchanging the positions of BTZ and CPDT to obtain XY3, yielding a dye that absorbed up to the near-infrared region. The high molar extinction coefficients obtained from XY1 and XY2 enabled the fabrication of devices using very thin mesoporous TiO₂ layers ($\sim 1.3 \mu\text{m}$) without compromising device performance.

The absorption spectra of XY1, XY2, XY3, and the reference dye Y123 in CH₂Cl₂ are shown in Figure 2, and the parameters of

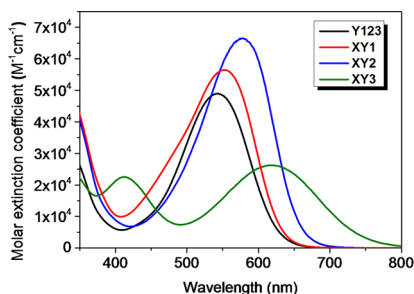


Figure 2. Absorption spectra of Y123 (black), XY1 (red), XY2 (blue), and XY3 (green) in CH₂Cl₂.

their optical and electrochemical properties are displayed in Table 1. The main absorption band can be assigned to intramolecular charge transfer (ICT) between the bulky donor

Table 1. Optical and Electrochemical Properties of XY1, XY2, XY3, and Y123

dye	λ_{max}^a /nm ($\epsilon/10^4 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$)	E_{HOMO}^b / V vs NHE	E_{0-0}^c /eV	E_{LUMO}^d / V vs NHE
Y123	543 (4.90)	0.92	2.01	−1.09
XY1	552 (5.65)	0.99	1.97	−0.98
XY2	578 (6.66)	0.91	1.92	−1.01
XY3	618 (2.62)	0.75	1.80	−1.05

^aAbsorption maximum in CH₂Cl₂ solution. ^bMeasured in CH₂Cl₂ with 0.1 M tetra-*n*-butylammonium hexafluorophosphate as the electrolyte (working electrode, Pt; counter electrode, Pt wire; reference electrode, SCE; calibrated with ferrocene/ferrocenium as an external reference). ^c E_{0-0} was estimated from the absorption onset wavelength in the UV–vis absorption spectra of the dyes. ^d E_{LUMO} was estimated by subtracting E_{0-0} from E_{HOMO} .

and the cyanoacetic acid acceptor moiety.^{13,23} From Figure 2, we can clearly see that XY1 and XY2 not only show bathochromic shifts of the low-energy absorption band but also increases in molar extinction coefficient compared with Y123. Among the investigated structures, XY2 emerges as the most suitable sensitizer for ssDSSCs because of its high molar extinction coefficient of $6.66 \times 10^4 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$ at its maximum absorption wavelength of 578 nm. Interestingly, by switching the positions of BTZ and CPDT (XY3), the absorption band was largely extended to the near-infrared region, red-shifting the low-energy absorption peak by 40 nm compared with XY2. However, the molar extinction coefficient of XY3 drops to $2.62 \times 10^4 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$. At the same time, the HOMO energy level of XY3 was upshifted to 0.75 V vs NHE, while XY2 has its HOMO energy level at 0.91 V vs NHE, similar to those of Y123 and XY1. Density functional theory (DFT) calculations revealed better overlap of the HOMO and LUMO in XY2, XY1, and Y123 than in XY3 (Figure S1), which provides a likely explanation for the higher molar extinction coefficients of XY2, XY1, and Y123 compared with XY3.²⁴ From these data, it could also be noticed that CPDT contributes to electron donation in XY3 (Figure S1), thereby shifting the HOMO energy level upward.

In order to test the performance of these dyes in an ssDSSC application, devices were prepared using spin-coated thin, transparent mesoporous TiO₂ layers. The resulting XY2-sensitized ssDSSC devices showed a reddish-purple color and substantial transparency of the light-absorbing layer, as shown in Figure 3a. The cross-sectional scanning electron microscopy

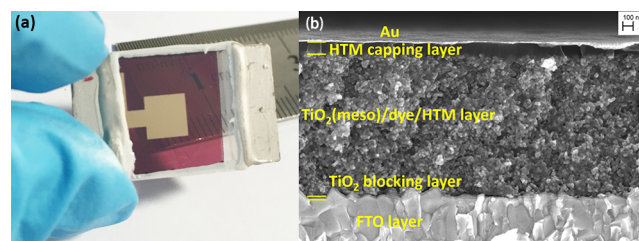


Figure 3. (a) Photograph and (b) cross-sectional SEM image of an ssDSSC device based on XY2 with a $\sim 1.3 \mu\text{m}$ thick transparent mesoporous TiO₂ layer.

(SEM) micrograph of the same device (Figure 3b) shows that spiro-OMeTAD penetrates the entire mesoporous structure while exhibiting a 100 nm capping layer on the surface, isolating the TiO₂ film from the Au counter electrode.

The photovoltaic performances of ssDSSCs based on Y123, XY1, XY2, and XY3 under different light intensities are compiled in Table 2, and their corresponding current density–voltage (J – V) curves, dark-current plots, and incident photon-to-electron conversion efficiency (IPCE) spectra are displayed in Figure 4. The ssDSSCs with 1.3 μm TiO₂ films showed good reproducibility (Figure S3). XY1 and XY2 perform significantly better than Y123 in ssDSSC devices because of their high molar extinction coefficients. The short-circuit current densities (J_{sc}) of ssDSSC devices with XY1 and XY2 reached over 10 mA cm^{-2} , which exceeds the value of 8.45 mA cm^{-2} observed from Y123. For devices based on the green dye XY3, a J_{sc} of 11.06 mA cm^{-2} was obtained but with a considerably lower open-circuit voltage (V_{oc}), losing over 100 mV compared with the other dyes. V_{oc} values of 0.798, 0.929, 0.942, and 0.904 V were obtained with XY3, XY2, XY1 and Y123, respectively. Devices based on XY2 and XY1 led to good PCEs of 6.89% and 6.69%, respectively,

Table 2. Performance Parameters of ssDSSCs Based on XY1, XY2, XY3, and Y123 under Different Light Intensities (I_0)

dye ^a	I_0 /Sun	V_{oc} /V	J_{sc} /mA cm ⁻²	FF	PCE/%
Y123	96.6%	0.904	8.45	0.729	5.77
	49.9%	0.875	4.40	0.760	5.87
	9.3%	0.804	0.80	0.784	5.44
XY1	95.0%	0.942	10.02	0.674	6.69
	49.4%	0.907	5.31	0.717	6.98
	9.2%	0.815	0.95	0.767	6.46
XY2	95.5%	0.929	10.14	0.698	6.89
	50.1%	0.900	5.31	0.736	7.02
	9.2%	0.823	1.00	0.774	6.89
XY3	95.6%	0.798	11.06	0.596	5.50
	49.3%	0.774	5.67	0.656	5.85
	9.3%	0.703	0.98	0.683	5.06

^aThe bath composition is given in the Supporting Information.

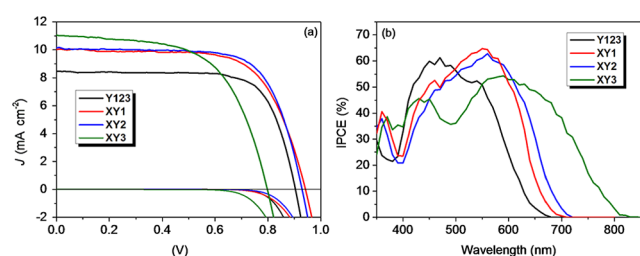


Figure 4. (a) J - V curves and dark currents of ssDSSCs with $\sim 1.3 \mu\text{m}$ thick TiO_2 layers based on Y123 (black), XY1 (red), XY2 (blue), and XY3 (green) and (b) their corresponding IPCE plots under illumination of 10% Sun.

under 95% Sun illumination, which are considerably higher than that of devices based on the reference dye Y123 (5.77%). A PCE of 5.50% was obtained for XY3, which is remarkable since its HOMO energy level is very close to that of spiro-OMeTAD, suggesting that the dye regeneration takes place despite the small driving force between the HOMO levels of the dye and HTM. The lower V_{oc} potentially indicates increased electron recombination at the TiO_2 /dye/HTM interface. This effect will be further investigated below. PCEs under 50% and 10% light intensity were also measured, illustrating excellent potential for BIPV applications. Beyond 500 nm, devices based on XY1 and XY2 showed much higher IPCEs than those based on Y123. The peak IPCEs were found to be 71% at 560 nm with XY1 and 70% at 580 nm with XY2, in contrast to 63% at 480 nm with Y123. In analogy to its absorption spectrum, devices based on XY3 showed two absorption peaks with IPCEs of 60% at 590 nm and 50% at 430 nm, respectively. The photovoltaic performance of ssDSSCs based on these dyes was assessed as a function of film thickness, ranging from 0.25 to 2.0 μm (see sections 8 and 9 in the Supporting Information). Amazingly, with a TiO_2 film as thin as $\sim 250 \text{ nm}$, ssDSSCs based on XY2 and XY1 reached PCEs of 4.34% and 4.01%, respectively.

The XY2-sensitized champion device achieved a PCE of 7.51%. This device also showed excellent PCEs under low light intensities (Table 3 and Figure 5). Under 50% Sun illumination, a high PCE of 7.64% was reached, which still amounted to 7.00% under 10% Sun. Current dynamics measurements of photocurrent versus light intensity are shown in Figure 5b. These measurements demonstrate a significant linearity between the photocurrent and light intensity, suggesting that the photo-

Table 3. Performance Parameters of the Champion ssDSSC Based on XY2 under Different Light Intensities (I_0)

I_0 /Sun	V_{oc} /V	J_{sc} /mA cm ⁻²	FF	PCE/%
100.5%	0.902	10.96	0.764	7.51
51.7%	0.870	5.80	0.785	7.64
9.6%	0.799	1.05	0.803	7.00

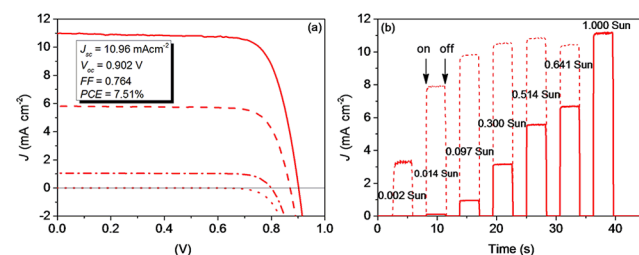


Figure 5. (a) J - V curves of the champion XY2-sensitized ssDSSC device under different light intensities (solid, 1 Sun; dashed, 0.5 Sun; dash-dot, 0.1 Sun; dotted, dark) and (b) the current dynamics (solid, measured data; dotted; integrated results under 1 Sun).

generated charges are efficiently evacuated in the investigated device.

In order to better understand the relationship between the molecular structure of the dye and the resulting device performance, we performed charge extraction and transient optoelectronic analyses. Two devices were measured for each dye. The voltage versus charge plot (Figure 6a) showed a weak

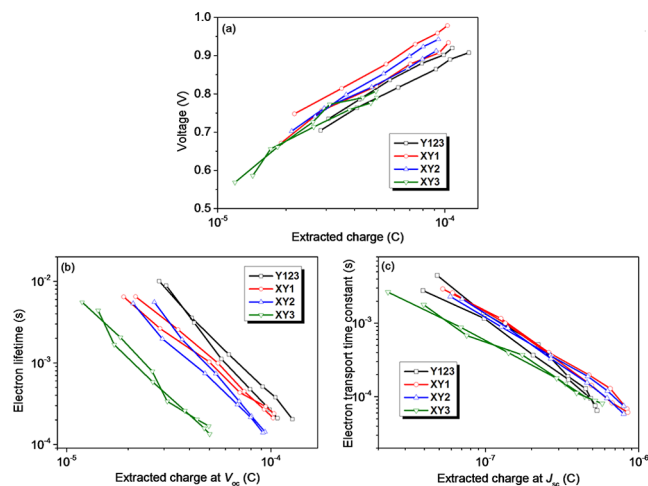


Figure 6. (a) Voltage and (b) electron lifetime vs extracted charge at V_{oc} and (c) electron transport time constant vs extracted charge at J_{sc} in ssDSSCs based on Y123 (black), XY1 (red), XY2 (blue), and XY3 (green).

upward shift of the electron quasi-Fermi level in TiO_2 for XY1 and XY2 compared with Y123. No shift was found for XY3. The higher V_{oc} of the devices employing XY1 and XY2 compared with Y123 is in good agreement with these charge extraction measurements. The higher voltage is likely related to the more efficient photoconversion of the dyes with higher molar extinction coefficients. Moreover, the energetics of the TiO_2 conduction band are affected by the dipole generated by the surface-adsorbed dye, and a downward shift of the conduction band is expected to be directly proportional to the number of dye molecules covering the surface.²⁵ An increase in the molecular

size should result in a decreased dye loading on the TiO₂ surface,²⁶ which in turn would expose more bare TiO₂ surface to the spiro-OMeTAD, thus increasing the recombination rate. This reasoning is in agreement with the data on electron lifetimes shown in Figure 6b. For XY1 and XY2 the electron lifetime was found to be 3 to 2 times lower than for Y123, depending on the illumination conditions.

The lower V_{oc} of the devices employing XY3 is directly related to the electron lifetime. From Figure 6b it becomes clear that the recombination is 10 times faster for XY3 than for Y123. The higher recombination rate is thus responsible for the 100 mV difference in V_{oc} for these dyes. We suggest that the presence of an auxiliary acceptor close to the TiO₂ surface could play a role in accelerating the recombination rate in concomitance with its lower driving force for regeneration.²⁷ Interestingly, we observed slightly longer electron transport time constants for XY1 and XY2 compared with Y123 and XY3, as shown in Figure 6c.

In conclusion, through rational molecular structure modifications, we designed and investigated three novel organic sensitizers, XY1, XY2, and XY3, among which XY1 and XY2 exhibit very high molar extinction coefficients and XY3 shows a broad absorption range reaching the near-infrared region. By these modifications, we were able to achieve the best efficiency reported to date for D–A– π –A sensitizers in a ssDSSC application. With a TiO₂ film thickness of $\sim 1.3 \mu\text{m}$, ssDSSCs based on XY1 and XY2 reached impressively high PCEs of 6.69% and 6.89%, which are much higher than for Y123. The champion device based on XY2 achieved a PCE of 7.51%. Despite the small offset between the HOMO energy levels of XY3 and spiro-OMeTAD, a PCE of 5.50% was achieved in the ssDSSC using this dye. However, XY3 led to more charge recombination, which was attributed to the short electron lifetime and low driving force for dye regeneration, thus resulting in a low device V_{oc} .

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/jacs.6b05281.

Details of reagents, materials, instruments, and characterization; synthetic routes, procedures, and characterization data for all new compounds; methodology and results of DFT calculations; details of fabrication of ssDSSCs and photovoltaic and phototransient measurements; results of the reproducibility test; and photovoltaic performance of ssDSSCs with different film thicknesses (PDF)

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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