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Using plasmonics and nanoparticles to enhance the efficiency of solar cells: review of latest technologies

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Abstract

Solar energy is a critical renewable energy source, and enhancing the efficiency of solar cells is paramount for their widespread adoption and competitiveness with traditional energy sources. Recent advancements in nanotechnology, particularly in the application of plasmonics and nanoparticles, offer promising avenues to significantly boost the performance of various types of solar cells. This article reviews the latest technologies employing plasmonics and nanoparticles to improve solar cell efficiency. Plasmonics, the study of surface plasmons (collective oscillations of electrons at the interface between a metal and a dielectric), provides unique ways to manipulate light at the nanoscale. When applied to solar cells, plasmonic nanostructures, typically made of noble metals like gold (Au) or silver (Ag), can enhance light absorption through several mechanisms. Metallic nanoparticles exhibit Localized Surface Plasmon Resonance (LSPR) when the frequency of incident light matches the natural frequency of oscillation of their surface electrons. This resonance leads to a strong enhancement of the electromagnetic field in the vicinity of the nanoparticles, resulting in increased light absorption in the active layer of the solar cell. The resonant wavelength can be tuned by adjusting the size, shape, and material of the nanoparticles, allowing for targeted enhancement across different parts of the solar spectrum. For instance, plasmonic nanoparticles can be designed to enhance absorption in the near-infrared region, where silicon, a common solar cell material, has weaker absorption.

Keywords:

Plasmonics, Nanoparticles, Efficiency, Solar, cells

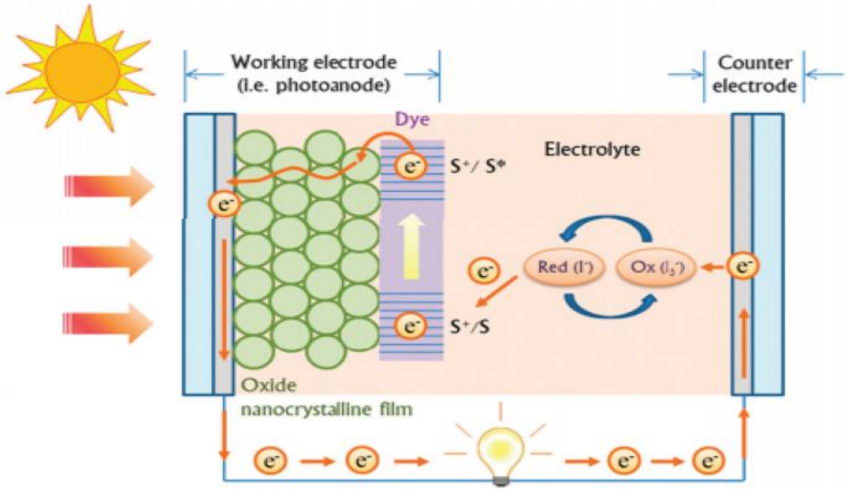
Introduction

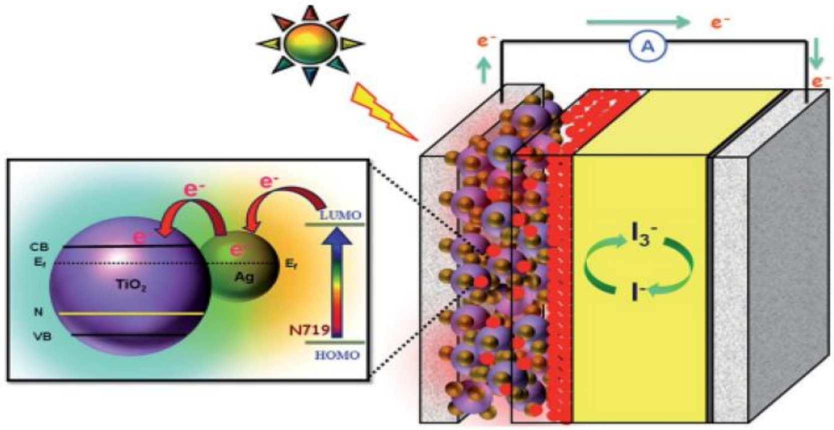
Plasmonic nanoparticles can act as efficient scatterers of light. When incorporated into a solar cell, these nanoparticles scatter incident light at oblique angles, increasing the optical path length within the active layer. This increased path length enhances the probability of photon absorption and thus improves the cell's efficiency, especially in thin-film solar cells where the active layer thickness is limited. The scattering properties can be tailored by controlling the size and morphology of the nanoparticles. (Baran, 2021)

Even when the nanoparticles are not in direct contact with the active material, the powerful electromagnetic fields produced by LSPR can improve light absorption in the substance. Plasmonic nanoparticles positioned close to or incorporated in the active layer of thin-film solar cells can greatly increase absorption without thickening the film, making this near-field effect very advantageous in these cells. Within the structure of the solar cell, plasmonic nanostructures have the ability to link incident light into waveguide modes. These guided modes improve absorption by lengthening the duration that light interacts with the active material.

Up-conversion nanoparticles (UCNPs) are a type of nanoparticle that can absorb low-energy photons, like infrared ones, and release higher-energy photons, like visible ones, which the solar cell can absorb more effectively. Conversely, Within the absorption range of the solar cell, down-conversion nanoparticles can emit a number of lower-energy photons while absorbing high-energy photons, such as ultraviolet. By incorporating these nanoparticles, the Shockley-Queisser limit—which limits the greatest theoretical efficiency of single-junction solar cells—may be bypassed and the solar spectrum can be effectively utilized. According to recent studies, the efficiency increase seen with nanoparticles may possibly be due to improved light scattering as opposed to just the up-conversion process. Generosi (2022)

Quantum dots (QDs) or semiconductor nanoparticles can be employed as interfacial modifiers or in functional layers of solar cells, such as electron or hole transport layers. These nanoparticles can decrease charge recombination, promote better energy level alignment at interfaces, and increase charge carrier mobility, all of which increase stability and power conversion efficiency.





Perovskite solar cells, a rapidly developing photovoltaic technology, have also benefited from the incorporation of nanoparticles. Plasmonic nanoparticles embedded within the perovskite layer or at its interfaces can enhance light absorption and improve charge extraction. Metal oxide nanoparticles are also used to modify the interfaces and improve the stability and efficiency of perovskite devices. (Kakavelakis, 2021)

Like plasmonic nanoparticles, non-plasmonic nanoparticles can efficiently scatter light inside the solar cell by extending the optical path length and improving absorption if they have the right refractive index contrast with the surrounding medium. It is possible to tune these dielectric nanoparticles' size, shape, and distribution for broadband light trapping. More complex control over light absorption and propagation within solar cells is possible by combining plasmonic nanostructures with photonic crystals or other periodic dielectric structures. Significant efficiency gains can result from the robust and broadband light trapping that these hybrid structures can display.

Plasmonics and nanoparticles have great promise for improving the performance of thin-film solar cells, such as perovskite, organic, and amorphous silicon solar cells. Enhancing light absorption in thin active layers without thickening them is essential for lowering material costs and increasing performance. Researchers are looking into multifunctional nanoparticles that can improve charge transport characteristics and increase light absorption using plasmonics. Designs for solar cells that are more compact and efficient may result from this integrated approach. Gold nanoparticles, for instance, have been found to enhance light absorption and charge collection when embedded in TiO2 electron transport layers in perovskite solar cells.

Cost-effective and scalable production techniques are necessary for the real-world application of nanoparticle-enhanced solar cells. Large-scale integration of plasmonic and other nanoparticles into solar cell devices is being developed using techniques such as solution-based processing, nanosphere lithography, and nanoimprint lithography. (Alkaisi, 2022)

Review of Literature

Shumkov et al. (2023): Optimizing the size, shape, composition, and arrangement of nanoparticles to optimize their impact on solar cell performance is the subject of extensive research. The intricate relationships between light and nanoparticles in various solar cell layouts are understood through experimental research and numerical models. For example, research has demonstrated that the plasmonic resonance and scattering characteristics of metallic nanoparticles (such as nanospheres, nanorods, and nanorings) are greatly influenced by their shape, with the ideal shape varying according to the particular application and wavelength range of interest.

Wilson et al. (2020): Additionally, plasmonics and nanoparticles are being researched for application in tandem solar cells, which gather a wider spectrum of sunlight by combining multiple absorber layers with varying band gaps. By adding these nanostructures to particular sub-cells, the tandem device's overall efficiency as well as each sub-cell's performance can be improved. Plasmonic nanoparticles, for instance, can be utilized to improve light absorption in a tandem structure's bottom cell, which absorbs longer wavelengths.

Louwen et al. (2021): Plasmonic nanoparticles improve the semiconductor's ability to absorb light, but they can also cause parasitic losses because of absorption inside the metal, especially at shorter wavelengths. To reduce these losses, careful material selection and design are required. For real-world applications, it is essential to guarantee the nanoparticles' long-term stability in the solar cell environment and their smooth integration into current device topologies. The efficiency improvements must be weighed against the expense of creating and incorporating nanoparticles to ensure the economic viability of these technologies.

Schäfer et al. (2022): In the fascinating realm where light interacts with matter, a captivating phenomenon emerges at the nanoscale Localized Surface Plasmon Resonance (LSPR). In contrast to its propagating sibling, Surface Plasmon Polaritons (SPPs), LSPR focuses its dynamic dance on the close vicinity of metallic nanostructures, enhancing the electromagnetic field locally and giving these minuscule objects extraordinary optical characteristics. The basic ideas of

LSPR, its reliance on different variables, and the wide range of applications that have emerged from this dynamic interplay will all be covered in this article.

Sanvito et al. (2020): Fundamentally, LSPR results from the collective oscillation of conduction electrons in a metallic nanostructure when exposed to a particular frequency of light. A resonant condition is satisfied when the incident light's frequency coincides with the inherent frequency of these electron oscillations. This resonance leads to a dramatic enhancement of the electromagnetic field in the immediate vicinity of the nanoparticle surface, often several orders of magnitude greater than the incident field. Simultaneously, the nanoparticle exhibits strong absorption and scattering of light at this resonant frequency, giving rise to vivid colors that have captivated scientists and artisans for centuries, albeit unknowingly in their early applications.

Liang et al. (2020): A number of important elements have a significant impact on the properties of LSPR. The resonant frequency and plasmon resonance intensity are significantly influenced by the size and geometry of the metallic nanostructure. Larger nanoparticles tend to move toward the visible and near-infrared spectrum, but smaller ones usually show resonances in the ultraviolet.

Alkaisi et al. (2022): The plasmon resonance is strongly influenced by the shape of the nanoparticle, whether it is spherical, rod-shaped, triangular, or more complex. Nanorods, for example, have two different plasmon modes: a longitudinal mode and a transverse mode. The longitudinal mode is very sensitive to the rod's aspect ratio and provides tunability over a wider spectral range.

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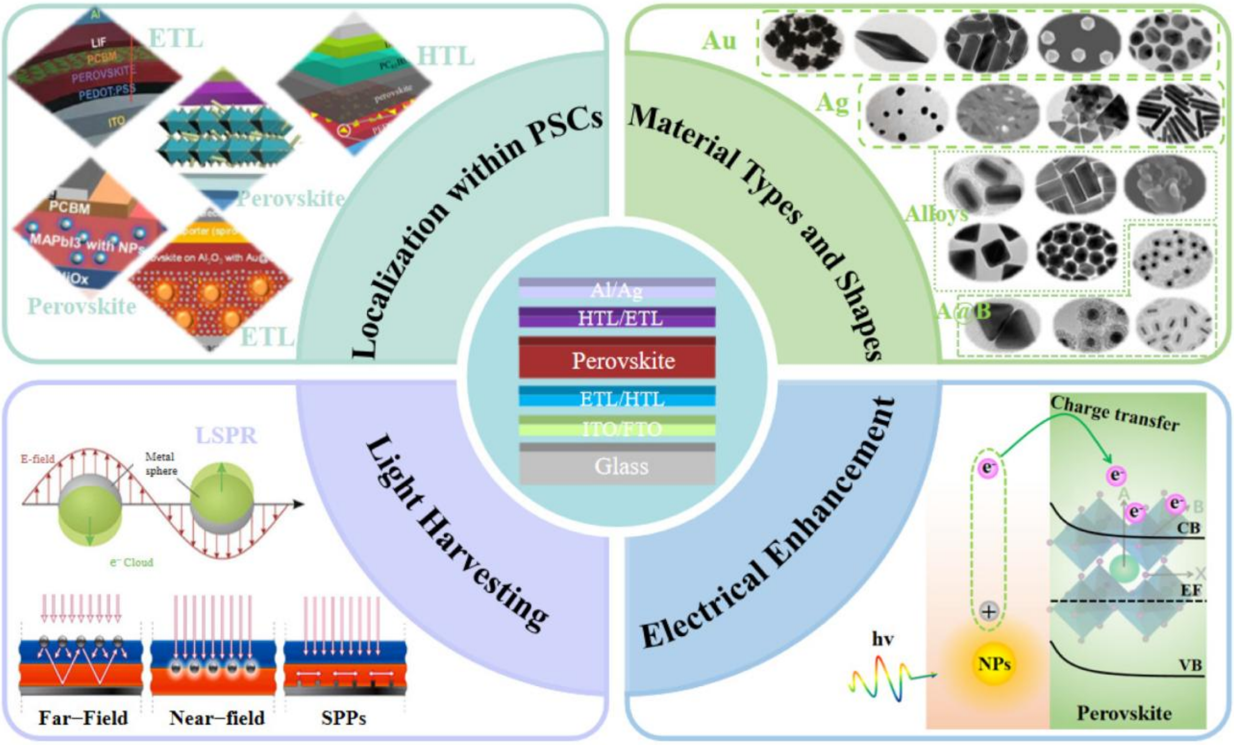
The composition of the metallic nanoparticle is another critical determinant. Noble metals like gold and silver are particularly well-suited for LSPR due to their high density of free electrons and low intrinsic losses in the visible and near-infrared regions. Although their spectral properties and efficiency differ, other metals including copper and aluminum can also display LSPR. Moreover, the plasmon resonance is significantly impacted by the surrounding dielectric environment. Many LSPR-based sensing applications are based on the property that modifies the resonant frequency in response to changes in the refractive index of the medium around the nanoparticle.

Numerous applications in a wide range of sectors have been made possible by LSPR's special qualities. Because plasmon resonance's extreme sensitivity to the local refractive index makes it possible to detect even the smallest changes in the environment, LSPR-based sensors are perfect for very sensitive and selective environmental contaminants, chemical analyte, and biomolecule identification. The localized nature of the enhanced field also enables label-free detection, simplifying assay procedures.

In biomedicine, LSPR finds applications in diagnostics, therapeutics, and imaging. Gold nanoparticles exhibiting LSPR in the near-infrared region are particularly attractive for photothermal therapy, where absorbed light is converted into heat to selectively destroy cancerous cells. They can also be used as contrast agents for optical imaging and as vehicles for targeted drug delivery.



The enhanced electromagnetic fields associated with LSPR are also exploited in surface-enhanced Raman scattering (SERS), a powerful spectroscopic technique that can dramatically amplify the Raman signals of molecules adsorbed on or near plasmonic nanostructures. This allows for the highly sensitive identification and characterization of trace amounts of analytes.

Furthermore, Plasmonic catalysis, in which the enhanced electromagnetic fields can drive chemical processes with greater efficiency and selectivity, relies heavily on LSPR. Several catalytic processes can also make use of the localized heating produced by plasmon excitation. By enhancing light absorption and emission, LSPR can be used in the field of optoelectronics to increase the efficiency of solar cells and light-emitting diodes.

The fascinating phenomenon known as Localized Surface Plasmon Resonance results from the resonant interaction of light with conduction electrons in metallic nanostructures. Together with the substantial amplification of the electromagnetic field, its sensitivity to the size, shape, composition, and surrounding environment of the nanoparticles has opened up a wealth of possibilities in a variety of domains, from biomedicine and sensing to spectroscopy and catalysis. As nanotechnology continues to advance, our understanding and manipulation of LSPR will undoubtedly lead to even more groundbreaking innovations, further illuminating the vibrant dance between light and matter at the nanoscale.

Novel light-matter interaction platforms have been developed as a result of the unrelenting quest for optoelectronic device downsizing and improved functionality. A fascinating paradigm among them is hybrid plasmonic-photonic structures, which combine the special qualities of photonics and plasmonics in a way that works well together. These designed structures combine the effective light guidance and low propagation losses of photonic waveguides and resonators with the tightly restricted and amplified electromagnetic fields of surface plasmons. This article will examine the basic ideas, many configurations, and exciting uses of these hybrid structures, emphasizing how they could transform a variety of industries, including energy harvesting, quantum optics, sensing, and imaging.

At their core, hybrid plasmonic-photonic structures aim to bridge the gap between the nanoscale confinement of plasmons and the microscale manipulation of photons. Surface plasmons, collective oscillations of free electrons at a metal-dielectric interface, exhibit subwavelength field confinement and strong field enhancement, making them ideal for nanoscale light manipulation and sensing. However, they suffer from inherent ohmic losses, limiting their propagation distance. Conversely, photonic structures, such as waveguides and resonators fabricated from high-refractive-index dielectrics, offer efficient light guidance with low losses but are diffraction-limited in their spatial confinement.

The beauty of hybrid structures lies in their ability to combine these seemingly disparate properties. By strategically integrating metallic nanostructures with dielectric photonic components, one can achieve enhanced light-matter interactions within a confined volume while maintaining reasonable propagation lengths. This hybridization can take on various forms, each with its own set of advantages and applications.

One common configuration involves placing metallic nanoparticles or thin films in close proximity to dielectric waveguides or resonators. The evanescent field of the guided mode in the photonic structure can excite surface plasmons in the metallic component, leading to strong near-field enhancement in the gap between them. This enhanced field can be exploited for highly sensitive sensing through surface-enhanced Raman scattering (SERS) or fluorescence enhancement. Conversely, the plasmonic resonance can influence the properties of the photonic mode, leading to phenomena like slow light or enhanced nonlinear effects.

Another class of hybrid structures involves the fabrication of metallic gratings or metamaterials on top of or embedded within dielectric waveguides. These periodic metallic structures can couple free-space light into guided plasmon-polariton modes or modify the dispersion relation of photonic modes, enabling the creation of compact and efficient optical components like polarizers, filters, and modulators. Furthermore, the strong interaction between plasmonic and photonic resonances in these structures can lead to Fano-like interference, resulting in sharp spectral features highly sensitive to changes in the surrounding environment.

The potential applications of hybrid plasmonic-photonic structures are vast and continuously expanding. In the realm of sensing, the enhanced near-fields and sharp spectral features offered by these structures enable highly sensitive and label-free detection of biomolecules, chemical analytes, and environmental pollutants. The integration of plasmonic hotspots within photonic microcavities, for instance, can significantly boost the sensitivity of biosensors.

In imaging, hybrid structures can overcome the diffraction limit of conventional optics. By utilizing the subwavelength confinement of plasmons, near-field scanning optical microscopy (NSOM) based on hybrid tips can achieve nanoscale resolution. Furthermore, the enhanced light-matter interaction in these structures can facilitate the development of novel contrast mechanisms for biological imaging.

Energy harvesting is another promising area. Hybrid plasmonic-photonic structures can efficiently absorb sunlight and convert it into electrical energy or chemical fuels. The plasmonic component enhances light absorption and generates hot electrons, while the photonic structure can facilitate efficient charge transport and collection.

In the field of quantum optics, hybrid platforms offer unique opportunities for manipulating single photons and enhancing light-matter interactions at the quantum level. The strong field confinement and enhancement provided by plasmonic nanostructures can be used to enhance the interaction between photons and quantum emitters like quantum dots or molecules integrated within photonic cavities. This can lead to the development of efficient single-photon sources, detectors, and quantum gates.

The field of hybrid plasmonic-photonic structures still faces challenges. The inherent losses associated with plasmons remain a limiting factor for certain applications requiring long propagation distances. Precise fabrication and integration of nanoscale metallic and dielectric components are crucial for achieving desired functionalities and reproducibility. Furthermore, a deeper theoretical understanding of the complex interplay between plasmonic and photonic modes in different hybrid configurations is essential for designing and optimizing these structures for specific applications.

Hybrid plasmonic-photonic structures represent a powerful and versatile platform for manipulating light at the nanoscale. By intelligently combining the unique strengths of plasmonics and photonics, these engineered architectures offer unprecedented control over light-matter interactions, leading to significant advancements in diverse fields. As fabrication techniques become more sophisticated and our understanding of these hybrid systems deepens, we can anticipate a future where these synergistic structures play a pivotal role in shaping the next generation of optoelectronic devices and enabling transformative technologies. The symphony of plasmons and photons, orchestrated within these intricate designs, promises to unlock a wealth of possibilities for scientific discovery and technological innovation.

Conclusion

The field of plasmonics and nanoparticles for solar cell enhancement is expected to continue to grow rapidly. Future research will likely focus on developing more efficient and stable plasmonic and nanoparticle designs, exploring new materials, and developing scalable manufacturing techniques. The integration of these nanotechnology-based approaches holds significant potential to push the boundaries of solar cell efficiency and contribute to a more sustainable energy future. By carefully tailoring the properties of plasmonic and other nanoparticles and strategically incorporating them into solar cell devices, it is possible to harness the unique optical and electronic properties of nanomaterials to achieve substantial improvements in solar energy conversion.

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