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Michael E. A. Warwick, Giorgio Carraro, Elisa Toniato, Alberto Gasparotto, Chiara Maccato, and Davide Barreca

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XPS analysis of Fe₂O₃-TiO₂-Au nanocomposites prepared by a plasma-assisted route

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Fe₂O₃ nanodeposits have been grown on fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) substrates by plasma enhanced-chemical vapor deposition (PE-CVD). Subsequently, the obtained systems have been functionalized through the sequential introduction of TiO₂ and Au nanoparticles (NPs) by means of radio frequency (RF)-sputtering. The target nanocomposites have been specifically optimized in view of their ultimate functional application in solar-driven H₂ generation. In the present study, our attention is focused on a detailed X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) characterization of the surface composition for a representative Fe₂O₃-TiO₂-Au specimen. In particular, this report provides a detailed discussion of the analyzed C 1s, O 1s, Fe 2p, Ti 2p, and Au 4f regions. The obtained results point to the formation of pure Fe₂O₃-TiO₂-Au composites, with gold present only in its metallic state and each of the constituents maintaining its chemical identity. © 2016 American Vacuum Society. [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1116/1.4954387>]

Keywords: PE-CVD; RF-Sputtering; Fe₂O₃; TiO₂; Au; nanocomposites

INTRODUCTION

Fe₂O₃ has been widely used in sunlight-assisted H₂ generation, mainly via photoelectrochemical (PEC) water splitting, thanks to its advantageous chemico-physical characteristics, such as ample abundance, good photochemical stability in aqueous media and favorable band gap (2.2 eV), allowing the absorption of visible light (Refs. 1–3). Nevertheless, to date some drawbacks are still limiting the efficient exploitation of Fe₂O₃ for PEC applications, such as the poor charge transport and fast recombination of photogenerated carriers (Refs. 4–7). A strategic solution to overcome the above limitations is offered by the functionalization of iron oxide with suitable agents. In this context, in spite of its wide band gap (3.3 eV) enabling the harvesting of the sole UV light, TiO₂ is an amenable candidate (Refs. 8 and 9). Indeed, the deposition of TiO₂ overlayers on Fe₂O₃ has recently drawn a great deal of attention as an appealing route to improve charge carrier separation and transport (Refs. 3 and 9–15). In addition, the introduction of metal nanoparticles, such as Au ones, can further promote radiation harvesting thanks to the surface plasmon resonance (SPR) phenomenon (Refs. 8 and 16–20), resulting thus in an additional improvement of the composite functional properties.

In the framework of our ongoing research activities, we have recently developed and implemented a plasma-assisted route to Fe₂O₃-TiO₂-Au nanocomposites. In this strategy, iron(III) oxide systems have been synthesized by PE-CVD on FTO substrates under optimized processing conditions, and subsequently functionalized by sequential RF-sputtering of TiO₂ and Au. In particular, in the present contribution a detailed XPS investigation of a representative Fe₂O₃-TiO₂-Au nanocomposite specimen is reported, providing a detailed insight into the surface chemical

states of the main elements by the analysis of the principal core level spectra (C 1s, O 1s, Fe 2p, Ti 2p, Au 4f).

SPECIMEN DESCRIPTION (ACCESSION #01373)

Host Material: Fe₂O₃-TiO₂-Au

CAS Registry #: unknown

Host Material Characteristics: homogeneous; solid; polycrystalline; semiconductor; composite; thin film

Chemical Name: iron (III) oxide - titanium (IV) oxide - gold

Host Composition: Fe, Ti, Au, O

Form: supported nanocomposite

Structure: X-ray diffraction (XRD) analyses revealed the presence of peaks at 24.1, 35.6, 40.9, 49.5°, corresponding to the (012), (110), (113), and (024) reflections of rhombohedral α -Fe₂O₃ (hematite) (Ref. 21), the most thermodynamically stable iron(III) oxide polymorph. No XRD signals related to titania or gold could be detected, likely due to the relatively low amount and high dispersion of the deposited TiO₂ and Au (Ref. 22). High resolution-transmission electron microscopy (HR-TEM) investigation revealed the occurrence of rod-shaped dendritic Fe₂O₃, conformally covered by a TiO₂ overlayer (thickness <5 nm). The functionalization with gold resulted in the dispersion of Au nanoparticles (diameter ~50 nm) uniformly decorating the system outermost region.

History & Significance: Fe₂O₃ was deposited using a two-electrode custom-built PE-CVD apparatus equipped with a RF (frequency = 13.56 MHz) generator (Refs. 23 and 24). Experiments were performed using Ar/O₂ plasmas under previously optimized operating conditions (RF-power = 10 W, total pressure = 1.0 mbar, duration = 1 h). The iron precursor, Fe(dpm)₃ (Hdpm = 2,2,6,6-tetramethyl-3,5-heptanedione), synthesized according to a previously

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reported procedure (Ref. 25), was vaporized in an external glass vessel maintained at 130° C by means of an oil bath, and transported into the reaction chamber by an electronic grade Ar flow (purity = 5.0; flow rate = 60 sccm). Two additional gas lines were used to introduce Ar (flow rate = 15 sccm) and electronic grade O₂ (flow rate = 20 sccm) directly into the reactor chamber. Growth experiments were carried out at a temperature of 100° C on FTO-coated glass substrates (Aldrich®; lateral dimensions = 2.0 cm × 1.0 cm; FTO thickness = 600 nm), fixed on the grounded electrode by means of metallic clips. Prior to each deposition, FTO substrates were cleaned by means of an established procedure (Ref. 24), aimed at minimizing the presence of surface contamination.

Subsequently, TiO₂ dispersion was carried out by RF-sputtering from Ar plasma in the same reactor used for PE-CVD experiments. A Ti target (Alfa Aesar®; thickness = 0.3 mm; purity = 99.95%) was fixed on the RF-electrode, whereas FTO-supported Fe₂O₃ deposits were mounted on the grounded electrode. After preliminary experiments, depositions were performed under the following conditions: substrate temperature = 60° C; Ar flow rate = 10 sccm; total pressure = 0.3 mbar; RF-power = 20 W; sputtering time = 3 h. Subsequently, Au NPs were sputtered starting from an Au target (BALTEC AG; thickness = 0.1 mm; purity = 99.99%), adopting the following experimental parameters: substrate temperature = 60° C; Ar flow rate = 10 sccm; total pressure = 0.3 mbar; RF-power = 5 W; sputtering time = 20 min.

Finally, the obtained specimen was annealed ex-situ in air using a Carbolite HST 12/200 tubular oven for 1 h at 650° C.

As Received Condition: as-grown

Analyzed Region: same as host material

Ex Situ Preparation/Mounting: Specimen mounted as received with a metallic clip on a grounded sample holder and introduced into the analysis chamber through a fast entry lock system.

In Situ Preparation: none

Pre-Analysis Beam Exposure: The analyzed region was exposed to X-ray irradiation for alignment for a period no longer than 5 min.

Charge Control: No flood gun was used. For further details, see Data Analysis Method, Energy Scale Correction.

Temp. During Analysis: 298 K

Pressure During Analysis: < 10⁻⁸ Pa

INSTRUMENT DESCRIPTION

Manufacturer and Model: Perkin-Elmer Physical Electronics, Inc. 5600ci

Analyzer Type: spherical sector

Detector: multi-channel detector, part number 619103

Number of Detector Elements: 16

INSTRUMENT PARAMETERS COMMON TO ALL SPECTRA

■ Spectrometer

Analyzer Mode: constant pass energy

Throughput ($T = E^M$): N = 0

Excitation Source Window: 1.5 μ Al window

Excitation Source: Al K_α

Source Energy: 1486.6 eV

Source Strength: 200 W

Source Beam Size: >25000 μm × >25000 μm

Signal Mode: multichannel direct

■ Geometry

Incident Angle: 9°

Source to Analyzer Angle: 53.8°

Emission Angle: 45°

Specimen Azimuthal Angle: 0°

Acceptance Angle from Analyzer Axis: 0°

Analyzer Angular Acceptance Width: 14° × 14°

■ Ion Gun

Manufacturer and Model: PHI 04-303A

Energy: 3000 eV

Current: 0.4 mA/cm²

Current Measurement Method: Faraday Cup

Sputtering Species: Ar⁺

Spot Size (unrastered): 250 μm

Raster Size: 2000 μm × 2000 μm

Incident Angle: 40°

Polar Angle: 45°

Azimuthal Angle: 111°

Comment: differentially pumped ion gun

DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

Energy Scale Correction: The reported BEs were corrected for charging phenomena by assigning a BE of 284.8 eV to the adventitious C 1s photopeak (Ref. 36).

Recommended Energy Scale Shift: -0.5 eV

Peak Shape and Background Method: After having performed a Shirley-type background subtraction (Ref. 37), peak position and widths were obtained by means of a least-square fitting procedure, using Gaussian/Lorentzian functions.

Quantitation Method: Atomic concentrations were determined using sensitivity factors from standard PHI V5.4A software (Ref. 38). The peak areas were measured above an integrated background.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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SPECTRAL FEATURES TABLE

Spectrum ID #	Element/ Transition	Peak Energy (eV)	Peak Width FWHM (eV)	Peak Area (eV × cts/s)	Sensitivity Factor	Concentration (at. %)	Peak Assignment
01373-02	C 1s	284.8	2.2	9531	0.296	20.7	Adventitious surface contamination
01373-03 ^a	O 1s	530.2	1.7	37391	0.711	33.8	Lattice oxygen in Fe ₂ O ₃ and TiO ₂
01373-03 ^a	O 1s	531.5	2.7	8483	0.711	7.6	Adsorbed surface -OH and carbonate groups
01373-04	Fe 2p	...	...	125070	2.957	27.2	Fe(III) in Fe ₂ O ₃
01373-04	Fe 2p _{3/2}	711.3	4.0	...	...	...	...
01373-04	Fe 2p _{1/2}	724.7	4.6	...	...	...	...
01373-05	Ti 2p	...	...	8953	2.001	2.9	Ti(IV) in TiO ₂
01373-05	Ti 2p _{3/2}	458.5	2.0	...	...	...	...
01373-05	Ti 2p _{1/2}	464.2	2.7	...	...	...	...
01373-06	Au 4f	...	...	75582	5.240	7.8	Au(0)
01373-06	Au 4f _{7/2}	84.3	1.6	...	...	...	...
01373-06	Au 4f _{5/2}	87.9	1.6	...	...	...	...

^aThe sensitivity factor is referred to the whole O 1s signal.

Footnote to Spectrum 01373-02: The C 1s peak can be traced back to the occurrence of adventitious carbon contamination. The slight tailing at higher binding energy can be traced back to the presence of carbonate species arising from atmospheric exposure (Refs. 26 and 27).

Footnote to Spectrum 01373-03: The O 1s region could be fitted by two contributing bands. The dominant one located at BE = 530.2 eV (82% of the total oxygen), is attributed to lattice oxygen in TiO₂ and Fe₂O₃ (Refs. 26–28). The second component, centered at BE = 531.5 eV (18% of the total oxygen), is attributed to surface adsorbed -OH groups and carbonate species due to air exposure (Refs. 26 and 27).

Footnote to Spectrum 01373-04: The Fe 2p spectral shape, along with the positions of the two spin-orbit components [BE (Fe 2p_{3/2}) = 711.3 eV; Spin Orbit Separation (SOS) = 13.4 eV], were in good agreement with literature values for Fe(III) in Fe₂O₃ (Refs. 26, 27, 29, and 30).

Footnote to Spectrum 01373-05: The main Ti 2p spin-orbit component, Ti 2p_{3/2}, was centered at BE = 458.5 eV (SOS = 5.7 eV). These values were in line with the presence of Ti(IV) in an oxide environment (Refs. 8, 26, 28, 31, and 32).

Footnote to Spectrum 01373-06: The spectral data for the Au 4f region [BE (Au 4f_{7/2}) = 84.3 eV; SOS = 3.6 eV] indicated the presence of the sole Au(0) (Refs. 17, 19, 26, and 32–34). The shift in BE value of +0.2 eV compared to that of bulk materials could suggest the occurrence of core level shifts (Refs. 34 and 35).

ANALYZER CALIBRATION TABLE

Spectrum ID #	Element/ Transition	Peak Energy (eV)	Peak Width FWHM (eV)	Peak Area (eV × cts/s)	Sensitivity Factor	Concentration (at. %)	Peak Assignment
01374-01 ^a	Au 4f _{7/2}	84.0	1.4	186403	...	...	Au(0)
01375-01 ^a	Cu 2p _{3/2}	932.7	1.6	86973	...	...	Cu(0)

^aThe signal was acquired after Ar⁺ erosion.

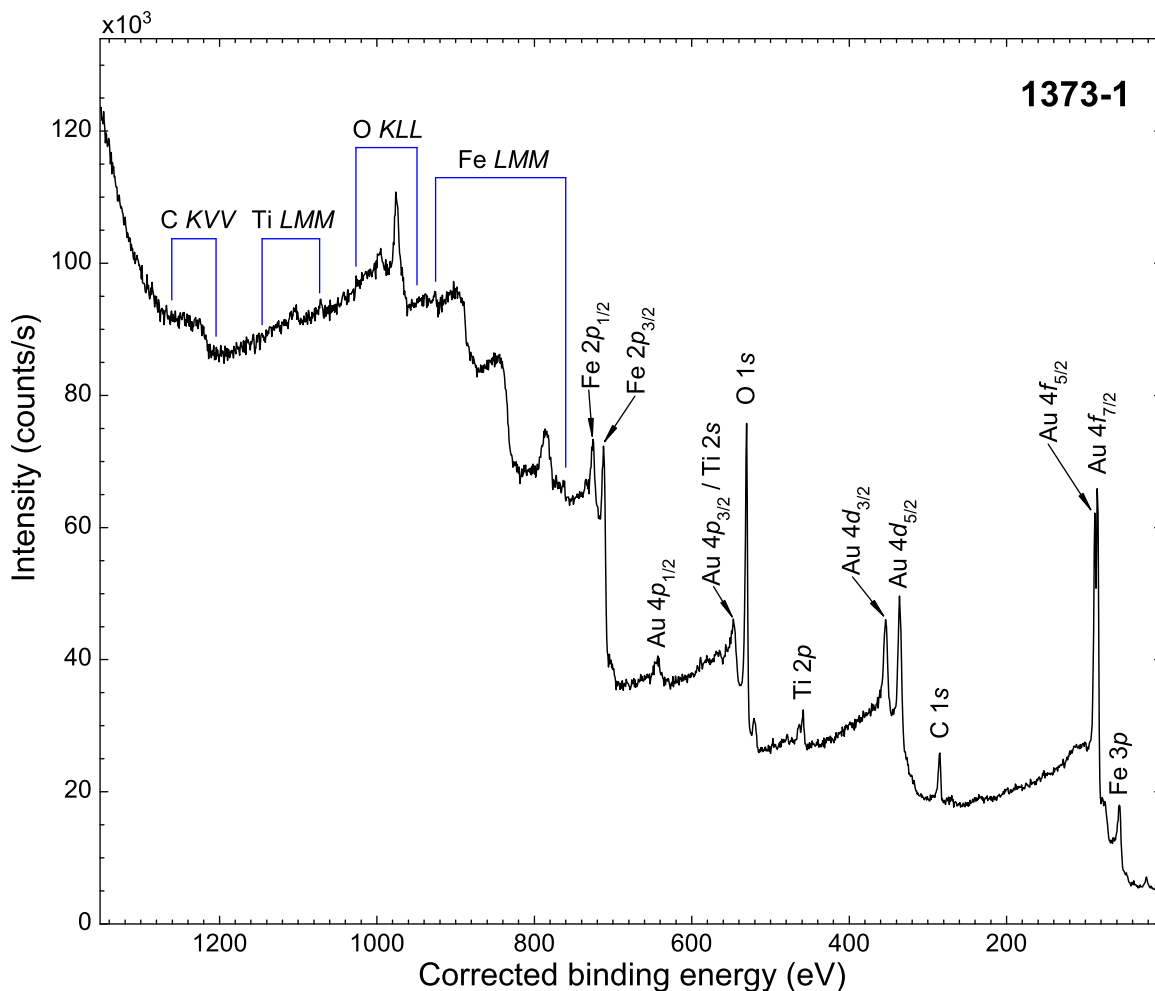
GUIDE TO FIGURES

Spectrum (Accession) #	Spectral Region	Voltage Shift*	Multiplier	Baseline	Comment #
1373-01	survey	0.5	1	0	1
1373-02	C 1s	0.5	1	0	1
1373-03	O 1s	0.5	1	0	1
1373-04	Fe 2p	0.5	1	0	1
1373-05	Ti 2p	0.5	1	0	1
1373-06	Au 4f	0.5	1	0	1
1374-01 [NP]**	Au 4f _{7/2}	0.5	1	0	2
1375-01 [NP]	Cu 2p _{3/2}	0.5	1	0	3

* Voltage shift of the archived (as-measured) spectrum relative to the printed figure. The figure reflects the recommended energy scale correction due to a calibration correction, sample charging, flood gun, or other phenomenon.

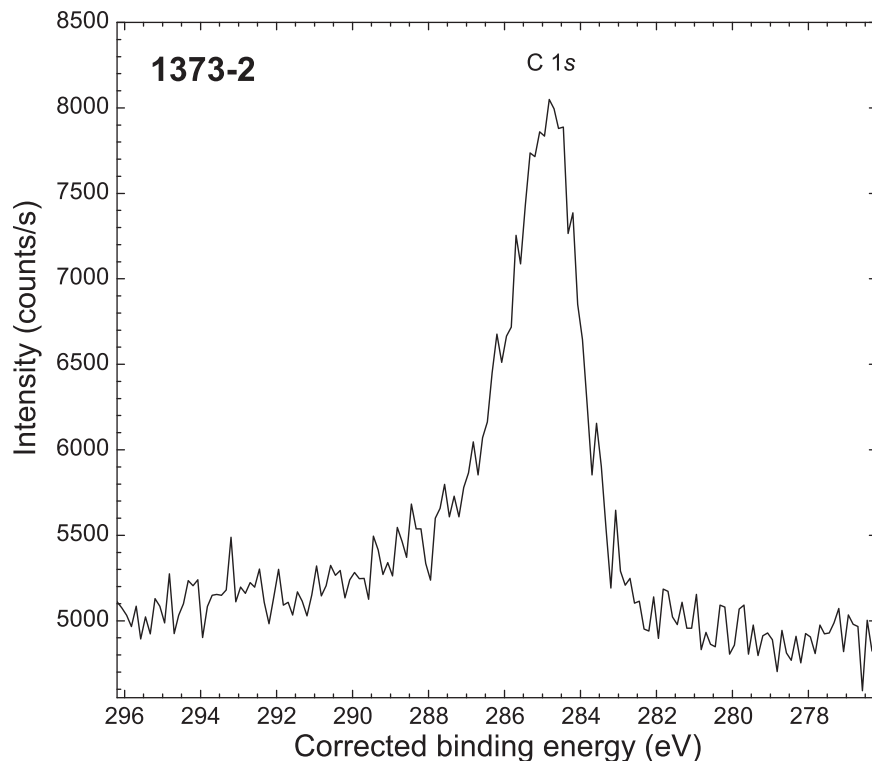
** [NP] signifies not published; digital spectra are archived in SSS database but not reproduced in the printed journal.

1. Fe₂O₃-TiO₂-Au
2. Au calibration
3. Cu calibration



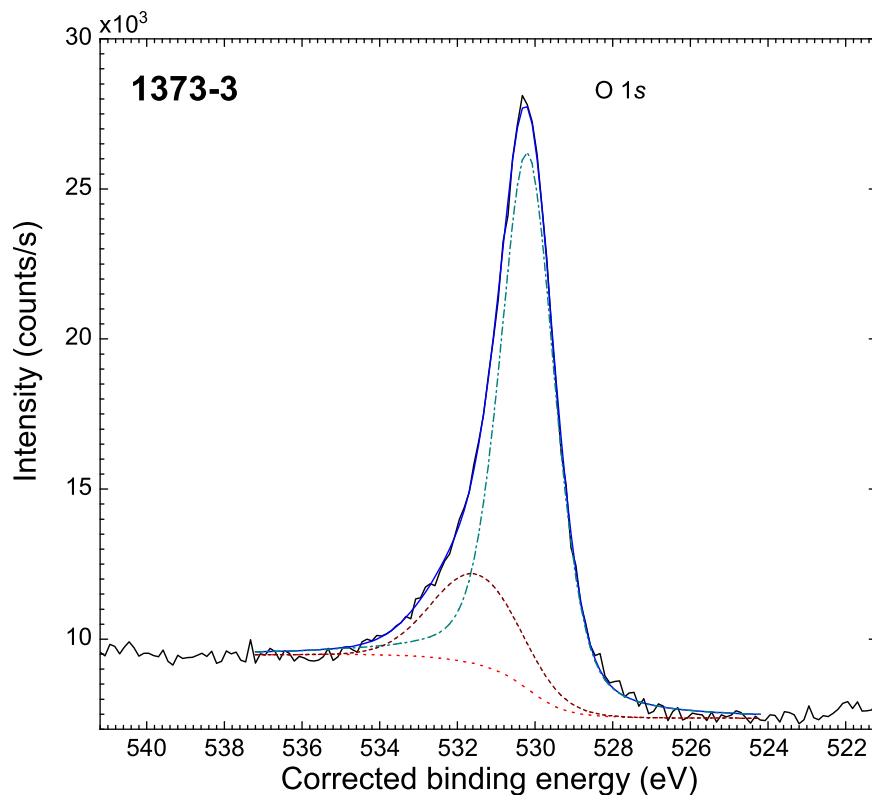
1373-1

Accession #	01373-01
Host Material	Fe ₂ O ₃ -TiO ₂ -Au
Technique	XPS
Spectral Region	survey
Instrument	Perkin-Elmer Physical Electronics, Inc. 5600ci
Excitation Source	Al K _α
Source Energy	1486.6 eV
Source Strength	200 W
Source Size	>25 mm × >25 mm
Analyzer Type	spherical sector
Incident Angle	9°
Emission Angle	45°
Analyzer Pass Energy:	187.85 eV
Analyzer Resolution	1.9 eV
Total Signal Accumulation Time	303.8 s
Total Elapsed Time	334.2 s
Number of Scans	9
Effective Detector Width	1.9 eV



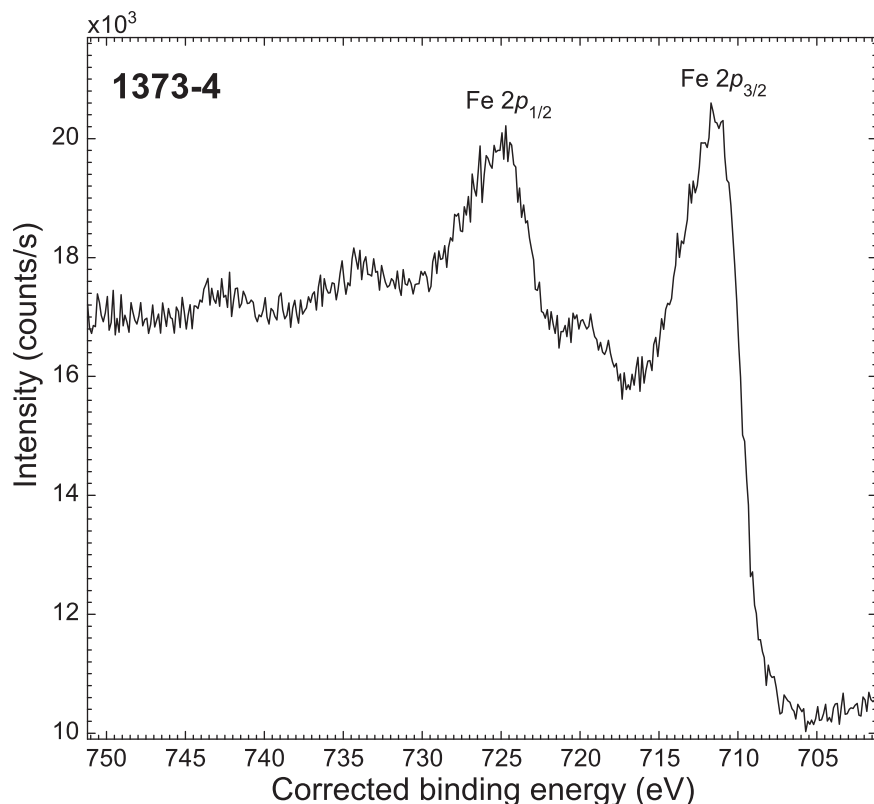
■ Accession #: 01373-02
 ■ Host Material: Fe₂O₃-TiO₂-Au
 ■ Technique: XPS
 ■ Spectral Region: C 1s

Instrument: Perkin-Elmer Physical Electronics, Inc. 5600ci
 Excitation Source: Al K_α
 Source Energy: 1486.6 eV
 Source Strength: 200 W
 Source Size: >25 mm × >25 mm
 Analyzer Type: spherical sector
 Incident Angle: 9°
 Emission Angle: 45°
 Analyzer Pass Energy: 58.7 eV
 Analyzer Resolution: 0.6 eV
 Total Signal Accumulation Time: 56.4 s
 Total Elapsed Time: 62.0 s
 Number of Scans: 7
 Effective Detector Width: 0.6 eV
 Comment: See footnote below the Spectral Features Table.



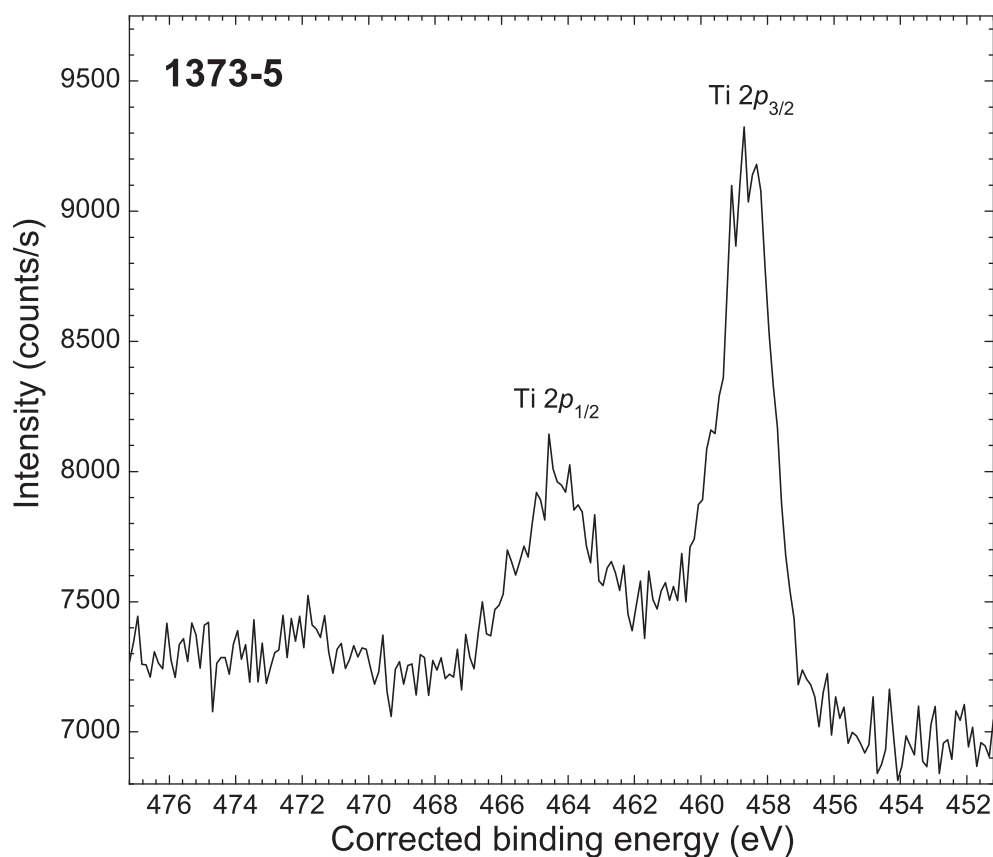
■ Accession #: 01373-03
 ■ Host Material: Fe₂O₃-TiO₂-Au
 ■ Technique: XPS
 ■ Spectral Region: O 1s

Instrument: Perkin-Elmer Physical Electronics, Inc. 5600ci
 Excitation Source: Al K_α
 Source Energy: 1486.6 eV
 Source Strength: 200 W
 Source Size: >25 mm × >25 mm
 Analyzer Type: spherical sector
 Incident Angle: 9°
 Emission Angle: 45°
 Analyzer Pass Energy: 58.7 eV
 Analyzer Resolution: 0.6 eV
 Total Signal Accumulation Time: 56.4 s
 Total Elapsed Time: 62.0 s
 Number of Scans: 7
 Effective Detector Width: 0.6 eV
 Comment: See footnote below the Spectral Features Table.



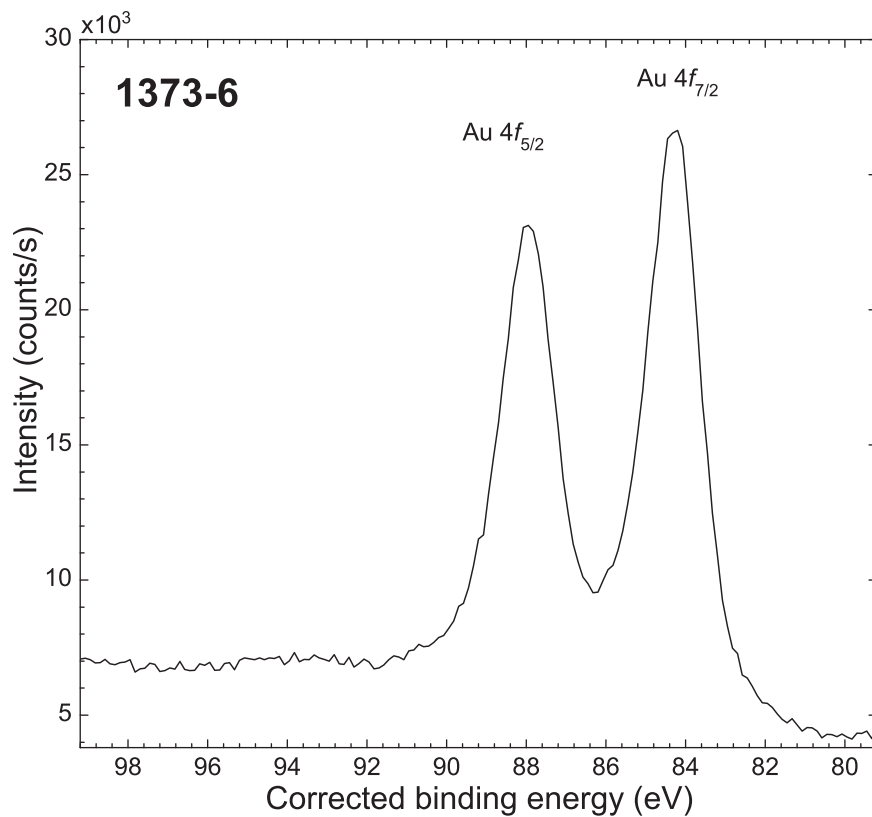
- Accession #: 01373-04
- Host Material: Fe₂O₃-TiO₂-Au
- Technique: XPS
- Spectral Region: Fe 2p

Instrument: Perkin-Elmer Physical Electronics, Inc. 5600ci
 Excitation Source: Al K_α
 Source Energy: 1486.6 eV
 Source Strength: 200 W
 Source Size: >25 mm × >25 mm
 Analyzer Type: spherical sector
 Incident Angle: 9°
 Emission Angle: 45°
 Analyzer Pass Energy: 58.7 eV
 Analyzer Resolution: 0.6 eV
 Total Signal Accumulation Time: 200.5 s
 Total Elapsed Time: 220.6 s
 Number of Scans: 10
 Effective Detector Width: 0.6 eV
 Comment: See footnote below the Spectral Features Table.



- Accession #: 01373-05
- Host Material: Fe₂O₃-TiO₂-Au
- Technique: XPS
- Spectral Region: Ti 2p

Instrument: Perkin-Elmer Physical Electronics, Inc. 5600ci
 Excitation Source: Al K_α
 Source Energy: 1486.6 eV
 Source Strength: 200 W
 Source Size: >25 mm × >25 mm
 Analyzer Type: spherical sector
 Incident Angle: 9°
 Emission Angle: 45°
 Analyzer Pass Energy: 58.7 eV
 Analyzer Resolution: 0.6 eV
 Total Signal Accumulation Time: 210.0 s
 Total Elapsed Time: 231.0 s
 Number of Scans: 20
 Effective Detector Width: 0.6 eV
 Comment: See footnote below the Spectral Features Table.



- Accession #: 01373-06
- Host Material: $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3\text{-TiO}_2\text{-Au}$
- Technique: XPS
- Spectral Region: Au 4f

Instrument: Perkin-Elmer Physical Electronics, Inc. 5600ci
 Excitation Source: Al K_α
 Source Energy: 1486.6 eV
 Source Strength: 200 W
 Source Size: >25 mm \times >25 mm
 Analyzer Type: spherical sector
 Incident Angle: 9°
 Emission Angle: 45°
 Analyzer Pass Energy: 58.7 eV
 Analyzer Resolution: 0.6 eV
 Total Signal Accumulation Time: 80.5 s
 Total Elapsed Time: 88.5 s
 Number of Scans: 10
 Effective Detector Width: 0.6 eV
 Comment: See footnote below the Spectral Features Table.