High efficiency perovskite solar cells with tailorable surface wettability by surfactant

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HIGHLIGHTS
- High PCE of 20.15% is achieved from SDBS-treated perovskite solar cells.
- Surface wettability of NiO$_x$ films can be regulated by adjusting SDBS concentration.
- SDBS boosts perovskite crystallization and reduces interfacial defects.

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ABSTRACT
Perovskite solar cells based on nickel oxide (NiO$_x$) attract tremendous attention and develop rapidly. Nevertheless, they are plagued by charge recombination and extraction loss at interfaces between the perovskite absorber and the charge transport layers. Herein, an ultrathin sodium dodecyl benzene sulfonate (SDBS) film is introduced between the perovskite absorber and the NiO$_x$ hole transport layer (HTL) to reduce interfacial and extraction losses. The modification on the NiO$_x$ HTL by SDBS surfactant can effectively tailor the quality of the perovskite film with larger grain size and better crystallinity by regulating the wettability of the NiO$_x$ surface with varied concentration of SDBS solution. Moreover, the charge separation and extraction in the perovskite/HTL interface are enhanced after SDBS treatment on NiO$_x$ HTL characterized by electrochemical impedance characterization. As a consequence, these benefits contribute to high power conversion efficiency (PCE) of 20.15%, in comparison with PCE of 16.26% for the reference device. It is hoped that this work will provide new perspectives for preparing perovskite solar cells with an unprecedented performance and the opportunity for commercialization.

1. Introduction
Hybrid organic-inorganic perovskite materials have attracted extensive attention in recent years due to a series of advantages, such as high light absorption coefficient [1], large carrier mobility and diffusion length [2,3], and adjustable bandgap [4], making it possible to commercially applied in photovoltaic field as a leading contender. According to the previous publications, the photovoltaic parameters of solar cells are extremely related to the recombination of defects in the bulk or on the surface of the perovskite layer [12]. Benefiting from the enlarging grains and improving crystallinity of the perovskite films with recent rapid progress in morphology regulation, the carrier diffusion length can be much longer than the light penetration length in single crystals or even in polycrystalline perovskite thin films prepared by solution-derived process, which leads to negligible charge recombination in the grain...
interior [13]. Therefore, suppression of defects and minimizing charge recombination at the interfaces are critical for further enhancing the performance of PSCs towards their photovoltaic limits.

Typically, interfacial passivation is one of the most important and effective approaches to inhibit charge recombination in defects, yielding both improved $V_{OC}$ and device stability [14]. For example, appropriate chlorine atoms on the surface of perovskite layer can suppress charge recombination by strong binding at the perovskite/charge transport layer interface [15]. Besides, excess PbI$_2$ in the perovskite layer, on the surface or between grain boundaries can effectively reducing the possibility of recombination by forming appropriate matching energy levels and suppressing non-radiative losses [16,17]. Recently, insulating polymers such as polystyrene (PS), poly(methyl methacrylate) (PMMA) and Teflon have been extensively researched as tunneling passivation layer either before or after the perovskite film deposition [15,16]. The inserted passivation layer has contributed to improved crystallinity and morphology of perovskite film, filling of pinholes and grain boundaries, and unspecified passivation of surface traps [19,20]. Similarly, Jem et al. used a series of benzoic acid assembled monolayers to passivate the surface defects [21]. However, these materials need to be dissolved in toxic organic solvents such as chlorobenzene or dimethyl formamide to prepare the precursor solution and then spin-coated on substrate in a glovebox filled with nitrogen, which is environmentally harmful and costly. Even though a greener way of modification via 5-AVA aqueous solution for improving efficiency of PSCs has been proposed by Chen et al. [22], the time-consuming treatment (~12 h) is not a good option for real application.

Herein, to address these drawbacks, we propose to passivate perovskite film by inserting ultrathin sodium dodecyl benzene sulfonate (SDBS) film between perovskite and hole transport layer (HTL). As an anionic surfactant, SDBS solution (dissolved in deionized water) can be used as a convenient and effective interface passivation approach to improve the performance of PSCs, but also provides new physical insights that surfactant could play a unique promoting role in device performance.

2. Experimental section

2.1. Device fabrication

The etched fluoride-doped SnO$_2$ (FTO) glass substrates were sequentially cleaned by acetone, isopropanol (IPA), ethanol and deionized water with the assistance of ultrasonic cleaner for 15 min, respectively. After being dried by nitrogen flow, the substrates were treated by ultraviolet/ozone for 20 min to remove the organic residues. The nickel oxide film as a hole transport layer was deposited on the FTO substrate by electrochemical deposition method and then annealed at 300 °C for 2 h, which can be found in our previous work [23]. After that, sodium dodecyl benzene sulfonate (SDBS) solution (dissolved in deionized water) was spin-coated on the NiO$_2$ HTL. Consequently, this work not only demonstrates a green, convenient and effective interface passivation approach to improve the performance of PSCs, but also provides new physical insights that surfactant could play a unique promoting role in device performance.

The contact angle of the SDBS-treated NiO$_2$ film was measured by a contact angle analyzer (DSA100, KRUS, Germany). The surface morphology of the samples has been characterized by scanning electron microscope (SEM, Carl Zeiss, Germany) and atomic force microscope (AFM, Nanoscope Illa Multimode, USA). The crystallinity of the perovskite films has been characterized by X-ray diffraction (XRD, D8 ADVANCE, Germany). The steady-state photoluminescence (PL) and time-resolved photoluminescence (TRPL) spectra of the samples have been tested by Steady-State & Time-Resolved Fluorescence Spectrofluorometer (QM(TM)/IM/PTI, USA) with an excitation laser of 460 nm. The electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) has been carried out at potentials of 0.8 V in the dark with frequencies sweeping from 1 MHz to 10 Hz by an electrochemical workstation (CS350H, Corrtest, China) and the oscillation potential amplitude was 10 mV. The photocurrent density-voltage ($J-V$) curves of the prepared solar cells have been measured under standard 1 sun AM 1.5G with a solar simulator (Newport, 2612A) calibrated with a Newport 91150 V reference silicon cell in ambient air (at ~22 °C and relative humidity of ~60%). $J-V$ curves were recorded by means of reverse (from 1.2 to ~0.2 V) or forward (from ~0.2 to 1.2 V) scanning with scan rate of 0.1 V s$^{-1}$. The external quantum efficiency (EQE) spectra of PSCs have been measured using a quantum efficiency measurement system (QEX10, PV measurements, USA).

3. Results and discussion

The mesoporous NiO$_2$ film was firstly deposited on the cleaned FTO substrate through electrochemical deposition process, the detailed information can be found in our previous works [23,24]. Then SDBS solution with different concentrations ($C_{SDBS} = 0.05, 0.20, 1$ and $10$ mg mL$^{-1}$) were spin-coated on the NiO$_2$ film in ambient air. The presence of the SDBS film was almost imperceptible on the NiO$_2$ film according to the scanning electron microscope (SEM) images (Fig. S1 in supporting information), but the surface wettability of the NiO$_2$ film was significantly regulated by the concentration of SDBS solution spin-coated on the NiO$_2$ HTL. Consequently, this work not only demonstrates a green, convenient and effective interface passivation approach to improve the performance of PSCs, but also provides new physical insights that surfactant could play a unique promoting role in device performance.

The contact angle of the pristine NiO$_2$ film is 41.1°, while that of the NiO$_2$/SDBS sample is as high as 127.1° at $C_{SDBS} = 0.2$ mg mL$^{-1}$ and it rapidly decreases with the increasing concentration of SDBS solution. The increasing contact angle versus SDBS concentration in low concentration range (<0.2 mg mL$^{-1}$) should be ascribed to the interaction between polar benzenesulfonyl groups in SDBS anions and NiO$_2$ mesoporous film via electrostatic force, leaving the hydrophobic long dodecyl groups pointing away from the substrate (Fig. S2 in supporting information) [25]. But this situation could be reversed that the hydrophobic groups will turn to face the NiO$_2$ surface through a hydrophobic interaction at even higher SDBS concentration [26], leaving the polar groups exposed outside and therefore reducing the contact angle. The perovskite absorber was then grown on the SDBS-treated NiO$_2$ film by one-step method in a glovebox. Fig. 1f-j show the top-view SEM images of CH$_3$NH$_3$PbI$_3$ (MAPbI$_3$) films deposited on NiO$_2$ treated by SDBS solution with different concentrations (0.05, 0.2, 1 and 10 mg mL$^{-1}$). It is...
clear that the perovskite grain size can be significantly affected by the concentration of SDBS solution. The average grain size of the reference perovskite film deposited on the pristine NiO\(_x\) film is only about 290 nm, it is dramatically increased to as large as 600 nm when the concentration of the SDBS solution is 0.2 mg mL\(^{-1}\). However, further increasing the SDBS concentration leads to smaller perovskite grain size. This may be caused by the abnormally improved surface wettability of the NiO\(_x\) film. According to previous literatures [27], the enhanced non-wetting property can significantly reduce the surface tension dragging force applying on the perovskite film, thus resulting in higher grain boundary mobility and larger grain size. The perovskite films with large grain size and invisible pinholes are crucial for suppressing charge recombination at interface and grain boundaries, which can guarantee the effective extraction and transport for photoinduced carriers form the perovskite absorber to the corresponding charge transport layer [28].

Moreover, the atomic force microscope (AFM) was also utilized to observe the surface morphologies of the perovskite films (Fig. 1k-o). Fig. 1p summarizes the statistics of the grain size and surface roughness of the representative perovskite films grown under different concentrations. The root-mean-square (RMS) values of roughness were slightly affected by the varying concentration of SDBS solution and the perovskite film deposited on the NiO\(_x\)/SDBS-0.2 film exhibits the smallest roughness of 9.7 nm. The smoother surface will induce less defects and trap states at the perovskite/electron transport layer interface and thus cause less trap-assisted carrier recombination [29]. As illustrated in the cross-sectional SEM images in Fig. 1q-r, the uniform perovskite films with closely packed grain boundaries are stacked on the pristine NiO\(_x\) (Fig. 1q) and SDBS-treated NiO\(_x\) film (Fig. 1r). Unlike the reference perovskite film, the perovskite film grown on the SDBS-treated NiO\(_x\) HTL is consisted of a monolithic MAPbI\(_3\) layer, leading to lower density of grain boundaries and defects [30].

The light-harvesting capacity of the perovskite film has been considered to be related to the \(J_{SC}\) of the devices [31], therefore, ultraviolet–visible (UV–Vis) absorption spectra were characterized to evaluate the optical absorption property of the perovskite films grown on the NiO\(_x\) film treated by SDBS surfactant. As can be seen from Fig. 2a, all the samples exhibit similar absorption curves in shape. The inset shows the enlarged absorption spectra at the wavelength range from 450 nm to 480 nm, indicating that the absorption of perovskite grown on SDBS-treated NiO\(_x\) film has been enhanced compared to the reference sample that directly deposited on NiO\(_x\) film, though not significantly. It’s worth noting that the sample with 0.2 mg mL\(^{-1}\) of SDBS represents the most obvious absorption enhancement, this could be attributed to the significantly increased perovskite grain size [32].

Furthermore, the crystallization of perovskite films has been confirmed by X-ray diffraction (XRD) analysis and the characteristic patterns of the perovskite films with different concentrations of SDBS are shown in Fig. 2b. The three distinct peaks at 14.2°, 28.5° and 31.9° indicated by stars can be assigned to (110), (220) and (310) lattices planes of MAPbI\(_3\), respectively [33]. The intensity ratio between perovskite and FTO (14.2° and 37.8°, respectively) has been significantly strengthened from 4.13 to 5.37 after SDBS-0.2 treatment on NiO\(_x\).
film, together with the decreasing full width at half maximum (FWHM) of perovskite (110) peak from 0.27° to 0.19° (details can be seen in Fig. S3b), which demonstrates better crystallinity of the perovskite film grown on the SDBS-treated NiOx. Then we successively deposited PCBM, BCP and silver layers on the perovskite film as electron transport layer (ETL), hole blocking layer and top electrodes, respectively. The fabricated PSCs exhibit an inverted heterojunction structure of FTO/NiOx/SDBS/CH3NH3PbI3/PCBM/BCP/Ag (Fig. 2c). The cross-sectional SEM image of a typical PSC device shown in Fig. 2d reveals that the perovskite layer is compactly composed of one grain and no pinholes exist at the interfaces between perovskite and charge transport layer, which effectively restricts charge recombination by preventing direct contact between the HTL and ETL, thus leading to lower shunt-current leakage in devices. The energy band diagram of our device is depicted in Fig. 2e. The ultrathin SDBS film could suppress electronic transmission channel and ensure effective hole transport because of charge tunneling effect [29].

Considering the influenced crystallization of perovskite grown on SDBS-treated NiOx film, the thickness of the SDBS film could affect the hole-extraction property and thus the PCE. Fig. 3a shows the
photocurrent density-voltage (J-V) curves of PSCs by inserting a thin SDBS layer with different thicknesses, which can be well regulated by varying the concentration of SDBS solution in the spin-coating process. The corresponding photovoltaic parameters are listed in the inset. It is observed that the reference device without SDBS treatment on NiOx film has a quite ordinary PCE of 16.26% (with a VOC of 1.060 V, a JSC of 21.06 mA cm⁻² and a fill factor (FF) of 72.84%), which represent a typical performance of NiOx-based perovskite devices [34, 35]. In a striking contrast, the devices with SDBS layer exhibit significantly enhanced photovoltaic parameters. With the concentration of the SDBS precursor solution varying from 0.05 to 0.2, 1 and 10 mg mL⁻¹, the devices showed higher VOC of 1.090, 1.124, 1.111, 1.077 V and higher JSC of 22.71, 22.94, 22.55, 21.39 mA cm⁻², respectively. At the meantime, the corresponding FF values of the devices were increased to 75.67%, 78.19%, 77.24% and 73.83%, respectively. As a result, the champion device with SDBS-0.2 exhibits the highest PCE of 20.15%.

Fig. 3b presents the external quantum efficiency (EQE) spectra of the corresponding solar cells. The EQE values of the SDBS-treated devices are much higher than that of the reference sample in the wavelengths from 350 to 450 nm and 600-750 nm. This could be attributed to the enhanced optical absorption of perovskite and reduced charge recombination at the HTL/perovskite interface because of enlarged perovskite crystal size and improved crystallization [36, 37]. The integrated JSC values from the EQE spectra are 20.73, 22.26, 22.65, 21.80 and 21.05 mA cm⁻² for SDBS-treated NiOx film with the concentration of 0, 0.05, 0.2, 1 and 10 mg mL⁻¹, respectively, which are highly agreement with the measured JSC.

We also examined the hysteresis effect of our devices under forward and reverse scanning conditions. As shown in Fig. 3c, the overlapping J-V curves indicate negligible hysteresis for the both champion devices with or without SDBS treatment. Moreover, the corresponding photovoltaic parameters listed in Table 1 shows that the hysteresis of the SDBS-incorporated PSCs is slightly smaller than that of the reference PSCs. This may be attributed to the reduced overall bulk defect density and suppressed charge trapping after introducing the SDBS layer which can effectively enlarge the perovskite crystal size and improve the crystallization as shown in Figs. 1 and 2 [38]. As shown in Fig. 3d, the steady-state current density and PCE of the champion devices were recorded using maximum power point (MPP) tracking under simulated AM 1.5G sunlight of 100 mW cm⁻². The devices exhibit stable PCE outputs of 20.09% and 16.21% for the SDBS-treated and reference PSCs measured at bias potential 0.93 and 0.82 V, respectively.

To evaluate the reproducibility of our devices, we then fabricated and measured 25 devices in each case and their statistical performance is summarized in Fig. 4. The reference devices have an average VOC of 1.056 V, a JSC of 20.85 mA cm⁻², an FF of 71.50%, and a PCE of 15.73%. It is clear that the PSCs with SDBS film show higher average PCE than that of the reference samples, with the improvement from VOC, JSC and FF. The enhancement of VOC and JSC should be related to the effective charge transfer and the trap-state passivation by SDBS ultrathin film. High FF value (~75%) usually means the absence of large carrier extraction/injection barrier at the interface between the perovskite and HTL/ETL [39]. The best-performing cells modified with SDBS-0.2 achieve the highest average PCE of 19.41%, with remarkably enhanced average VOC of 1.118 V, JSC of 22.65 mA cm⁻² and FF of 76.69%.

To understand the charge transfer efficiency from the perovskite absorber to the HTL, steady-state photoluminescence (PL) and time-resolved PL (TRPL) spectra were successively characterized. As shown in Fig. 5a, the PL intensity of perovskite deposited on the NiOx/SDBS film is remarkably quenched compared to that of the reference sample (the perovskite was directly grown on the NiOx film). The strong PL quenching demonstrates the efficient charge transfer form perovskite absorber to NiOx HTL [40]. Fig. 5b shows the normalized TRPL for perovskite films deposited on the NiOx HTL with or without SDBS treatment. The TRPL spectra have been typically used to evaluate the charge recombination at the perovskite/HTL interface and they can be fitted with a biexponential decay function 1 = A₁ exp(-(t-t₁)/τ₁)+ A₂ exp(-(t-t₂)/τ₂)+I₀, where τ₁ and τ₂ represent the first and second order decay times, and A₁ and A₂ are the weighing coefficients of each decay channel [41]. The fitted parameters are summarized in Table S1. Generally, the non-radiative fast-decay lifetime (τ₁) and radiative slow-decay lifetime (τ₂) are attributed to the quenching and the radiative recombination of free charge carriers at the HTL/perovskite interface, respectively [42]. The pristine perovskite film has an average lifetime (τ₂) of 11.4 ns. After introducing the SDBS film between perovskite and NiOx HTL, the average decay time was decreased to 5.5 ns, suggesting that photoinduced carriers are more efficiently extracted from the perovskite absorber to NiOx HTL [43].

The charge carrier transport and recombination properties of our solar cells were further examined using electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS). Fig. 5c shows the Nyquist plots of the devices with or without SDBS layer in the frequency sweeping from 1 MHz to 10 Hz. The EIS plots can be well fitted using an equivalent circuit shown in the inset. The circuit includes a series resistance (Rₛ), and a contact resistance (Rₑ) and a recombination resistance (Rₓ). Typically, the right end of the semicircle relates the recombination resistance in the device [44]. The SDBS-based deice shows a higher recombination resistance (2093 Ω) as compared to that of the reference device (297 Ω), indicating a lower recombination rate in the SDBS-treated solar cells. These observations reveal SDBS surfactant indeed exhibiting positive passivation effect on the HTL/perovskite interface, which will be expected to yield higher short current density and fill factor [45].

To further understand the effect of the SDBS treatment on the NiOx HTL, the capacitance-voltage (C-V) characteristics were obtained from Mott-Schottky measurement. As shown in Fig. 5d, the built-in potential (Vₛ) can be derived from the x-intercept of the fitting line in the Mott-Schottky plot. The Vₛ of the SDBS-based device is 0.1 V higher than that of the reference sample, which will be beneficial for accelerating charge dissociation and avoid charge accumulation at HTL/perovskite interface, thereby attributing to higher VOC [46].

Moreover, the hole-only perovskite devices with FTO/NiOx(SDBS)/perovskite/Ag were fabricated to evaluate the charge trap state density at the HTL/perovskite interface by space-charge-limited current (SCLC) method. The J-V curves of the devices were measured under dark condition and the results are shown in Fig. 6a. The defect density (ntrap) can be calculated from the equation ntrap = 2εε₀ε₁[ε₁/ε₂]²/ε₂, where ε is the relative dielectric constant of CH₃NH₂PbI₃ and ε₀ is the vacuum permittivity, VTrap represents the trap-filled limit voltage and can be derived from the intersection of the two fitting lines in ohmic and trap-filled limit regions, ε₁ and ε₂ are the electronic charge and the thickness of the perovskite layer [29]. The perovskite film deposited on NiOx/SDBS exhibits a defect density of ~4.29 • 10¹⁵ cm⁻³, which is lower than that of the reference perovskite film directly grown on the NiOx HTL (~5.23 • 10¹⁵ cm⁻³). The reduced defect density is mainly due to the enlarged grain size and the decreased boundaries and is well consistent with our 5 V measurement results [47]. The lower defect density is beneficial to increase the mean carrier diffusion length [48], which could ensure the charge transportation through the perovskite layer without too much obstacles and it also confirms that SDBS passivation is an effective procedure to improve the photovoltaic performance of PSCs.

Finally, we compared long-term stability of the PSCs based on SDBS and reference devices. The unencapsulated solar cells were stored in a drying cabinet with the relatively humidity of ~2% and temperature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Scan direction</th>
<th>VOC (V)</th>
<th>JSC (mA cm⁻²)</th>
<th>FF (%)</th>
<th>PCE (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Reverse</td>
<td>1.036</td>
<td>21.06</td>
<td>72.84</td>
<td>16.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forward</td>
<td>1.057</td>
<td>21.06</td>
<td>72.44</td>
<td>16.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDBS</td>
<td>Reverse</td>
<td>1.124</td>
<td>22.94</td>
<td>78.19</td>
<td>20.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forward</td>
<td>1.122</td>
<td>22.90</td>
<td>78.41</td>
<td>20.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The performance of the cells after different storage times is shown in Fig. 6b. Both devices exhibit similar stability patterns without obvious degradation in the first 3 weeks. After that, the PCE values slowly decrease, which is correlated to the degradation of the perovskite film [49]. The SDBS-based devices remained 96% of its initial value after 42 days storage, while the reference PSCs degraded to 92%. The output efficiency of the solar cells by tracking the maximum power point under AM 1.5 simulated light also shows similar stability after 42 days storage (Fig. S4). Compared to our previous work on the UV-ozone treated NiOx solar cells with 84% of its original efficiency after 40 days storage [24], the SDBS-based solar cells exhibit much higher stability, which can be attributed to the improved perovskite film quality with larger grain size and less defects because of the passivation effect, which reduces the probability of water penetration and degradation of perovskite layer.
Our devices show comparable long-term stability with other reported NiO₂-based PSCs without encapsulation [50, 51], the details are listed in Table S2.

4. Conclusions

In summary, we have developed a strategy to improve the photovoltaic efficiency and stability of PSCs by introducing SDBS surfactant between perovskite absorber and NiO₂ HTL. The SDBS surfactant can adjust the surface wettability of NiO₂ HTL, which results in fully covered perovskite films with improved crystallization and enhanced grain size through a single-step spin coating method. Furthermore, the ultrathin SDBS film can significantly suppress the charge recombination, and efficient extraction of holes to the NiO₂ HTL. The SDBS surfactant could show a invertible strategy for controlling surface wettability from hydrophobic to hydrophilic, while this work shows a new path for improving the performance of PSCs.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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