

# SUMMER RESEARCH PROJECT



**Metal-ligand Single-atom Catalysts at Surfaces** 

# **FINAL REPORT**

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# **Abstract**

This Project investigates the development of single-atom catalysts (SACs) using cobalt on  $Al_2O_3$  supports through an on-surface metal-ligand coordination strategy.

We conducted ultra-high vacuum experiments for precise surface analysis using photoelectron spectroscopy. SACs were also synthesised under ambient conditions and their activity was evaluated in reactors. Characterisation involved X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS), DRIFTS and inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS).

My work aims to prepare Cobalt-Ligand Coordinated SACs for higher selectivity to propene in the propane dehydrogenation (PDH) reaction.

# **Acknowledgments**

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## 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Problem Statement

Develop cost-effective **metal-ligand coordinated single-atom catalysts** on metal oxide supports to replace expensive noble metals for efficient and economically viable propane dehydrogenation.

## 1.2 Single Atom Catalyst (SAC)

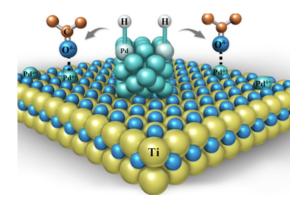


Fig 1:Single Atom Catalyst

A single-atom catalyst (SAC) features individual metal atoms dispersed on a support material at the atomic scale. This unique arrangement maximizes metal atom utilization, enhancing catalytic activity, selectivity, and stability. SACs are crucial in various chemical reactions.

## 1.3 Advantages of using Single Atom Catalysts (SACs)

- High Atom Utilization: Every atom acts as a catalytic site, maximizing efficiency and reducing costs.
- Superior Catalytic Activity: Offers high turnover frequencies due to isolated active sites.
- Enhanced Selectivity: Uniform atomic dispersion leads to precise control over reaction pathways.
- Stability and Longevity: Resists sintering and remains stable under harsh conditions, extending lifespan.
- Environmental Benefits: Lowers metal usage and supports green chemistry by operating under milder conditions.
- Versatility: Suitable for a wide range of reactions, from hydrogenation to oxidation.
- Improved Electronic Properties: Unique electronic interactions enhance reaction mechanisms.

## 2. Preparation of Single Atom Catalysts(SACs)

## 2.1 Chemicals and Reagents

## 2.1.1 **Ligands**

1) 2,2'-Bipyridine: C<sub>10</sub>H<sub>8</sub>N<sub>2</sub>

2) 2,2'-Bipyridine-5,5'-dicarboxylic acid :  $C_{12}H_8N_2O_4$ 

3) 1,10-phenanthroline:  $C_{12}H_8N_2$ 

4)Bis(trimethylsilyl)amine :- HN(Si(CH<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>

$$CH_3$$
 $H_3C$ 
 $Si$ 
 $CH_3$ 
 $H_3C$ 
 $NH$ 
 $H_3C$ 
 $CH_3$ 

## 2.1.2 **Support**

 $AI_2O_3$ 



## 2.1.3 Cobalt Salt

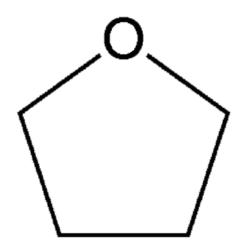
CoCl<sub>2</sub>.6H<sub>2</sub>O



## 2.1.4 **Solvent**

**THF** 

**Tetrahydrofuran** 



## 2.2 Chemical Reactions

## Reaction 1: Preparation of [Co(HN(Si(CH<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>)Cl]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> Ligand: Bis(trimethylsilyl)amine

I. HN(Si(CH<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> + excess Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> 
$$\xrightarrow{\text{THF}}$$
 HN(Si(CH<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>

## Reaction 2: Preparation of [Co(C<sub>12</sub>H<sub>8</sub>N<sub>2</sub>)Cl]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>8</sub> Ligand: 1,10-phenanthroline

I. 
$$C_{12}H_8N_2$$
 + excess  $Al_2O_3 \xrightarrow{THF} C_{12}H_8N_2@Al_2O_3$ 

II. 
$$C_{12}H_8N_2@AI_2O_3 + CoCI_2 \xrightarrow{THF} [Co(C_{12}H_8N_2)CI]@AI_2O_3$$

## Reaction 3: Preparation of [Co(C<sub>12</sub>H<sub>8</sub>N<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>)Cl]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> Ligand: 2,2'-Bipyridine-5,5'-dicarboxylic acid

I. 
$$C_{12}H_8N_2O_4$$
 + excess  $Al_2O_3 \xrightarrow{THF} C_{12}H_8N_2O_4@Al_2O_3$ 

II. 
$$C_{12}H_8N_2O_4$$
@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> + CoCl<sub>2</sub>  $\xrightarrow{THF}$  [Co( $C_{12}H_8N_2O_4$ )Cl]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>

## Reaction 4: Preparation of [Co(C<sub>10</sub>H<sub>8</sub>N<sub>2</sub>)Cl]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> Ligand: 2,2'-Bipyridine

I. 
$$C_{10}H_8N_2$$
 + excess  $Al_2O_3 \xrightarrow{THF} C_{10}H_8N_2@Al_2O_3$ 

II. 
$$C_{10}H_8N_2@AI_2O_3 + CoCI_2 \xrightarrow{THF} [Co(C_{10}H_8N_2)CI]@AI_2O_3$$

#### 2.3 Procedure

### STEP 1

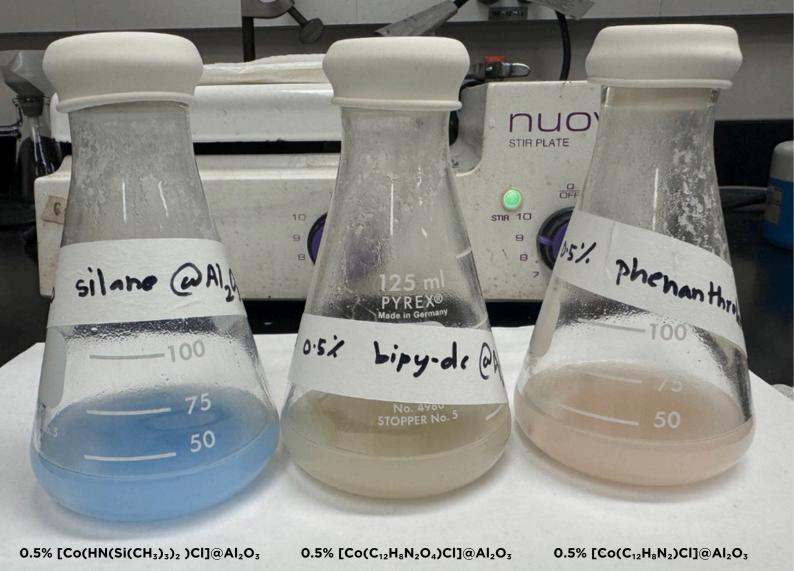
Initially, select one of the 4 ligands, Bis(trimethylsilyl)amine, 1,10-phenanthroline, 2,2'-Bipyridyl and 2,2'-Bipyridine-5,5'-dicarboxylic acid. Dissolve the ligand in 30.0 mL of THF solvent in a 125 mL reactor flasks. The mass of ligand is calculated for a 1:4 metal to ligand ratio for 0.5 and 1.0 wt% catalyst or a 1:1 ratio for 4 wt%.

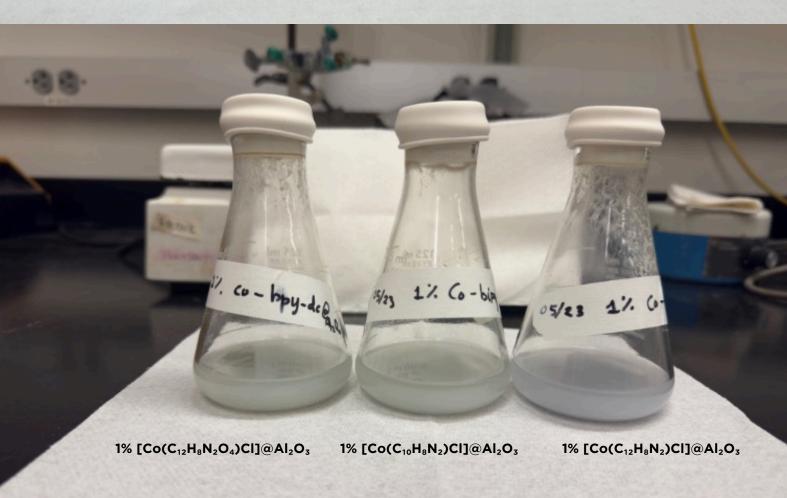
## STEP 2

Next, add 300 mg of Al2O3 to each ligand solution and stir the mixture for 1.5 hours at 25 °C. Subsequently, slowly(30-40 seconds) add required amount of cobalt dichloride(salt crystals) to each solution to complex with the ligands, and continue stirring the mixture for 4 hours(shorter and longer times were also tested) at 25 °C. Immediately after adding the cobalt salt to the solution, the colour changes from white to the final colour of the solution within a few minutes.

## STEP 3

After the stirring, the mixture is centrifuged, and the solid residue is separated, rinsed three times with THF, and then dried in the oven at 55 °C for 24 hours. Finally, we obtain powdered catalysts.





## 3. Characterisation of Single Atom Catalysts(SACs)

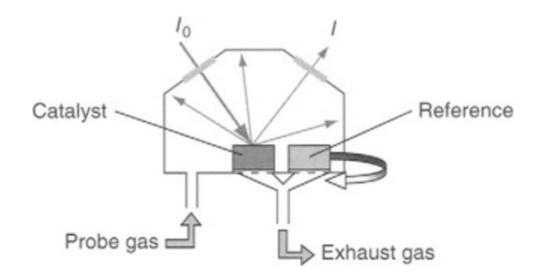
## 3.1 Diffuse reflectance infrared Fourier transform spectroscopy (DRIFTS)

#### 3.1.1 Introduction

Diffuse Reflectance Infrared Fourier Transform Spectroscopy (DRIFTS) is a technique used to study the surface of solid materials by analyzing how they absorb infrared light.

#### 3.1.2 Working Principle

- Infrared light is directed at a sample.
- The sample reflects some of this light diffusely (in all directions).
- The reflected light is collected and analysed to determine which wavelengths were absorbed by the sample.

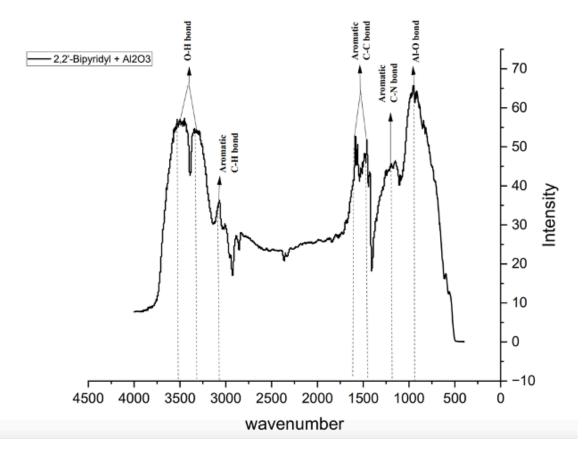


#### 3.1.3 Inference

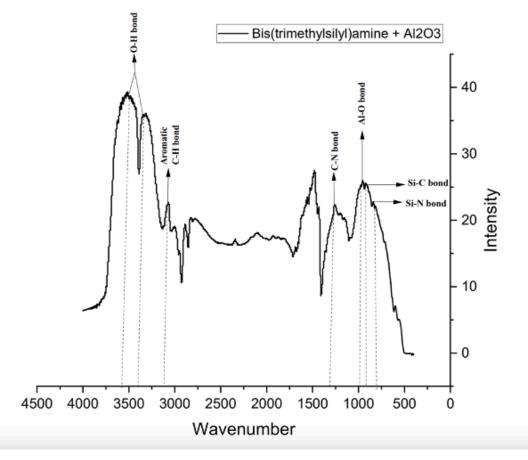
- Molecular Information: Helps identify different molecules on the sample's surface.
- Surface Chemistry: Provides insights into the chemical composition and interactions on the material's surface.

## 3.1.4 **Applications**

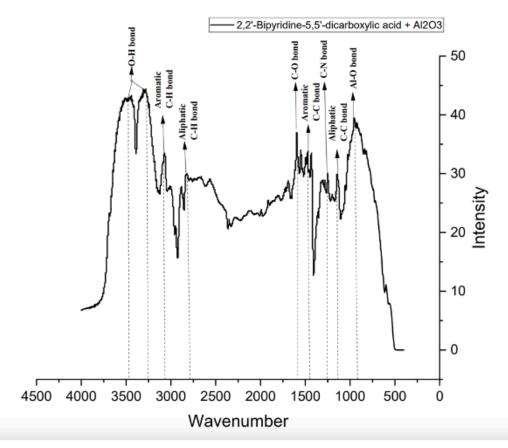
Used in catalyst research, material science, and surface chemistry to understand reactions and interactions at the molecular level.



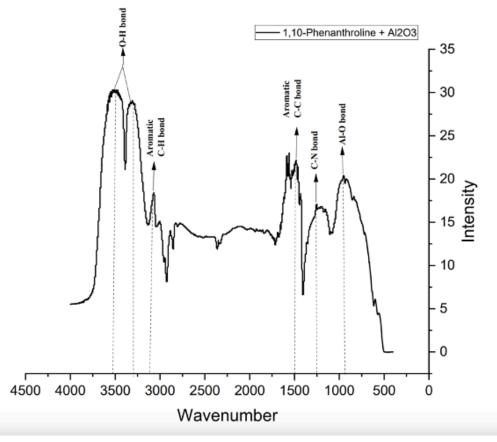
**Figure 1.** DRIFTS spectra collected for 2,2'-Bipyridine on  $Al_2O_3$  support.



**Figure 2.** DRIFTS spectra collected for Bis(trimethylsilyl)amine on  $Al_2O_3$  support.



**Figure 3.** DRIFTS spectra collected for 2,2′-Bipyridine-5,5′-dicarboxylic acid on  $Al_2O_3$  support.



**Figure 4.** DRIFTS spectra collected for 1,10-phenanthroline on  $Al_2O_3$  support.

## 3.2 CO-Adsorption DRIFTS Technique

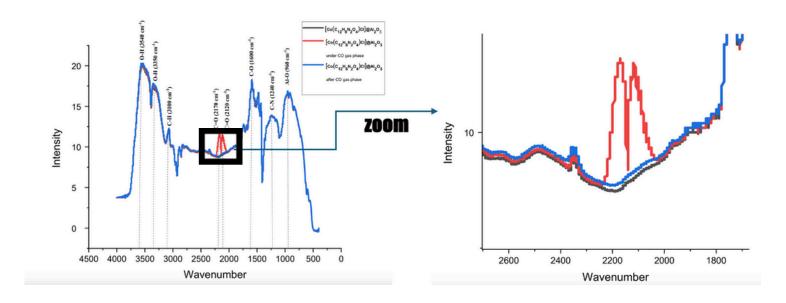
#### 3.2.1 Introduction

The CO-adsorption test is used to analyse the surface properties and active sites of catalysts by measuring how carbon monoxide interacts with the surface. It is particularly useful for **detecting single-atom catalysts** by identifying unique adsorption patterns indicative of isolated metal atoms.

## 3.2.2 Working Principle

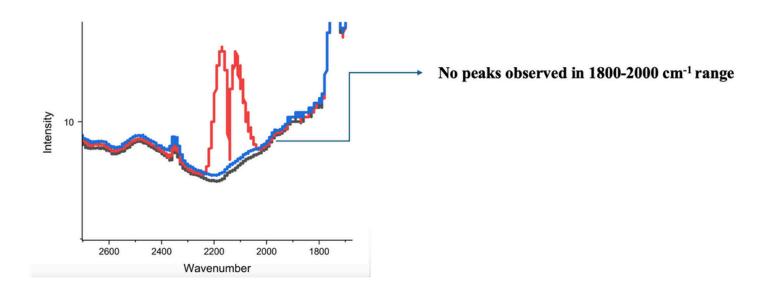
- The CO adsorption test detects single-atom catalysts by exposing them to CO gas and analysing adsorption using infrared spectroscopy or temperature-programmed desorption.
- Single atoms show distinct adsorption behaviour, with unique binding energies and spectral features.
- This test differentiates single atoms from clusters and bulk metal, confirming the catalyst's structure and ensuring its functionality.

## 3.2.3 CO-Adsorption Test on [Co(C<sub>12</sub>H<sub>8</sub>N<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>)Cl]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>



**Figure:** CO adsorption DRIFTS measurement was conducted after heat treatment at 120oC under Ar. For CO adsorption the sample was exposed to 10% CO with Ar flow gas for 15 minutes at 30oC, and data was collected during and after CO exposure.

#### 3.2.4 Observations



- Linear and Bridge CO adsorption peak expected 1900-2000 cm-1 and 1800-1900 cm-1 respectively.
- Adsorbed CO as linear or bridged on Cobalt is not observed, this maybe due to Co being not accessed or blocked by the ligands.

## 3.3 Inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS)

#### 3.3.1 Introduction

ICP-MS (Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometry) is a highly sensitive and precise analytical technique for detecting and quantifying trace elements and isotopes in various samples. It ionizes the sample with plasma and measures the mass-to-charge ratio of ions.

## 3.3.2 Working Principle

- Sample Introduction: The sample is introduced into the instrument, often in liquid form, via a nebulizer which creates a fine aerosol.
- Ionization: The aerosol is introduced into an inductively coupled plasma (ICP) torch, where it is ionized at high temperatures (6000-10000 K).
- Ion Extraction: The ions produced in the plasma are extracted into the mass spectrometer through a series of cones (sampler and skimmer).
- Mass Analysis: The extracted ions are separated based on their mass-tocharge ratio using a mass analyzer, typically a quadrupole or time-offlight (TOF) system.
- Detection: The ions are detected by an ion detector, usually a dynode or Faraday cup, which converts the ions into an electrical signal.
- Data Processing: The signals are processed to quantify the concentrations of the elements and isotopes present in the sample.

## 3.3.3 Experimental Results

No.	Catalysts	Co Wt.% prepared	ICP-MS Data (%)
1	$[Co(C_{12}H_8N_2)Cl]@Al_2O_3$	0.5	0.34
2	$[Co(HN(Si(CH_3)_3)_2)Cl]@Al_2O_3$	0.5	0.42
3	$[Co(C_{12}H_8N_2O_4)Cl]@CeO_2$	0.5	0.13
4	[Co(HN(Si(CH <sub>3</sub> ) <sub>3</sub> ) <sub>2</sub> )Cl]@CeO <sub>2</sub>	0.5	0.10
5	$[Co(C_{10}H_8N_2)Cl]@Al_2O_3$	1.0	0.47
6	$[Co(C_{12}H_8N_2)Cl]@Al_2O_3$	1.0	0.56
7	$[Co(C_{12}H_8N_2O_4)Cl]@Al_2O_3$	1.0	0.61

#### 3.3.4 Observations

- 0.5 wt% Co SACs prepared on  $Al_2O_3$  support has more Co-Ligand complex coordinated to it as compared to  $CeO_2$  support.
- 0.5 wt% Co SACs prepared on Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> support has retained more Cobalt as compared to 1 wt% Co SACs prepared on Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>.

## 3.3.5 Conclusion

- $Al_2O_3$  is a better support as compared to  $CeO_2$  due to its higher surface area, which provides more anchoring sites for the Co-ligand complexes.
- 0.5 wt% Co SACs on  $Al_2O_3$  retain more cobalt than 1 wt% Co SACs due to better dispersion, stronger metal-support interactions, and reduced sintering. Higher loadings lead to site saturation, cobalt agglomeration, and weaker stability, resulting in less effective cobalt retention and performance..

## 4. Propane Dehydrogenation Reaction (PDH)

## 4.1 PDH reaction with CO<sub>2</sub> flow

## Main Reaction Path

$$C_3H_8 + CO_2 \xrightarrow{\text{[Catalyst]}} C_3H_6 + CO + H_2O$$

$$C_3H_8 \xrightarrow{\text{[Catalyst]}} C_3H_6 + H_2$$

$$C_3H_8 \xrightarrow{\text{Heat,}} C_3H_6 + H_2$$

## **Undesired Side Reaction**

$$C_{3}H_{8} \xrightarrow{\text{[Catalyst]}} C_{2}H_{4} + CH_{4} \qquad 2$$

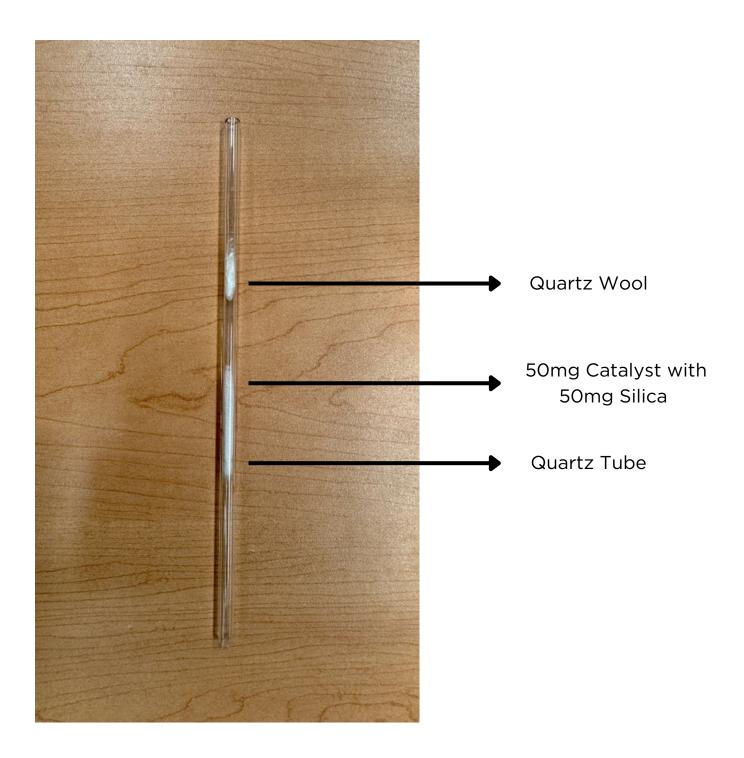
$$C_{3}H_{8} + H_{2} \xrightarrow{\text{[Catalyst]}} C_{2}H_{6} + CH_{4} \qquad 3$$

$$C_{2}H_{4} \xrightarrow{\text{[Catalyst]}} C_{2}H_{2} + H_{2} \qquad 4$$

C3H8 Conversion (%) = 
$$\frac{\text{C3H6} + \text{C2H4} + \text{C2H2} + \text{C2H6} + \text{CH4}}{\text{C3H8} + \text{C3H6} + \text{C2H4} + \text{C2H2} + \text{C2H6} + \text{CH4}} x \ 100\%$$

C3H6 Selectivity (%) = 
$$\frac{\text{C3H6}}{\text{C3H6} + \text{C2H4} + \text{C2H2} + \text{C2H6} + \text{CH4}} x \ 100\%$$

## 4.2 Packing of Catalyst for Activity Test



**Figure:** 50mg of Catalyst is mixed with 50mg of silica gel calcined (mesh 60-200) diluent and packed with quartz wool in a quartz tube

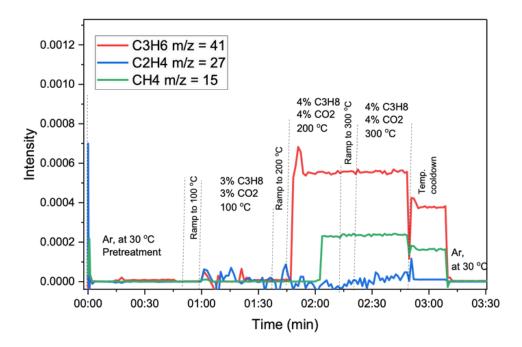
#### 4.3 Activity Test for Cobalt SACs

The propane cracking ion and PDH products ions peak during the propane dehydrogenation reaction and overlapping the mass fragment of each production, and quantitative analysis was challenging using the mass spec technique. The profile spectrum of each compound measured in our mass spec is compared with the NIST data. Hence, the abundant ion peaks of each compound were selected for the product identification and quantitative analysis of the data. The products detected from PDH that are directly driven from  $^{29}C_3H_8$  propane are  $^{41}C_3H_6$ ,  $^{27}C_2H_4$ ,  $^{15}CH_4$ ,  $^{26}C_2H_2$ , and  $^{30}C_2H_6$ . Therefore, the propane dehydrogenation products were quantitatively determined by correcting each compound ion peak, multiplying the experimental intensity by the relative abundance %, and subtracting the contributor.

The PDH reaction setup was prepared by purging residual gases using the empty cell for 30 minutes and confirming that the gas lines were clean from the previous reaction. In the reactor quartz tube, 50 mg of catalyst powder was mixed with 15 mg of SBA-15 silica diluent packed using quartz wool. Reaction data collection began with baseline data collection using only Ar gas flow at 30 °C for 15 minutes, followed by pretreatment at 4% H<sub>2</sub> with Ar at 30 °C for 30 minutes. For comparison, baseline data were collected at the end of the reaction with only Ar gas flow at 30 °C for 15 minutes.

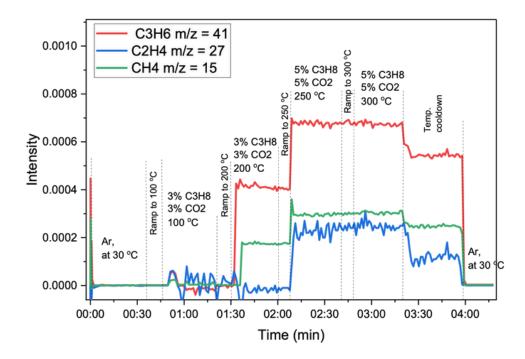
The PDH reactivity of the Co-ligand SACs catalyst was tested under different reactant concentrations and reaction conditions The performance of the catalyst was evaluated at 3% and 4/5%  $C_3H_6$  and 3% and 4/5%  $CO_2$  at 100 °C, 200 °C and 300 °C. The performance of the [Co(bipy)(Cl)]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and [Co(Phen)(Cl)]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> catalyst is presented in Figures 1 and 2. The experimental data for each compound were normalized by dividing the intensity of the compound by the Ar intensity. Propane conversion and selectivity to propylene were calculated using the formula. Each compound's m/z experimental reading was corrected by considering the ratio of cracking ions and contributions from other compounds identified from the NIST database.

#### 4.3.1 Activity Test for [Co(C<sub>10</sub>H<sub>8</sub>N<sub>2</sub>)Cl]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>



**Figure 1:** PDH reaction major products of  $C_3H_6$ ,  $C_2H_4$ , and  $CH_4$  were obtained using  $[Co(bipy)(CI)]@Al_2O_3$  catalyst in different reaction conditions. Reaction conditions: 3% and 4%  $C_3H_8$  (1.2 & 1.6 sccm), 3% and 4%  $CO_2$  (1.2 & 1.6 sccm) under Ar balance up to 40 sccm at 100, 200 and 300  $^{\circ}$ C using the catalyst for 3.5 h. In the reactor cell, 50 mg of catalyst powder was mixed with 15 mg SBA-15 silica diluent packed using quartz wool.

#### 4.3.2 Activity Test for [Co(C<sub>12</sub>H<sub>8</sub>N<sub>2</sub>)Cl]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>



**Figure 2:** PDH reaction major products of  $C_3H_6$ ,  $C_2H_4$ , and  $CH_4$  were obtained using [Co(Phen)(Cl)]@Al $_2O_3$  catalyst in different reaction conditions. Reaction conditions: 3% and 5%  $C_3H_8$  (1.2 & 2.0 sccm), 3% and 5%  $CO_2$  (1.2 & 2.0 sccm) under Ar balance up to 40 sccm at 100, 200, 250, and 300 °C using the catalyst for 4.0 h. In the reactor cell, 50 mg of catalyst powder was mixed with 15 mg SBA-15 silica diluent packed using quartz wool.

## 5. Effects of Ligands and Supports on Catalytic Activity

## 5.1 Effects of Ligands on Catalytic Activity

#### 5.1.1 Experiment

- 1% Co-Ligand coordinated SACs were prepared using 2,2′-Bipyridine-5,5′-dicarboxylic acid :  $C_{12}H_8N_2O_4$  (strongly electron withdrawing group) and Bis(trimethylsilyl)amine :-  $HN(Si(CH_3)_3)_2$  (strongly electron donating group) and their activity was tested under similar conditions.
- In the reactor quartz tube, 50 mg of catalyst powder was mixed with 15 mg of SBA-15 silica diluent packed using quartz wool. Reaction data collection began with baseline data collection using only Ar gas flow at 30 °C for 15 minutes, followed by pretreatment at 4% H<sub>2</sub> with Ar at 30 °C for 30 minutes.

#### 5.1.2 Observations

- The catalytic performance of 1% [Co(bpy-dc)Cl]@Al $_2$ O $_3$  resulted in a 27% (average) conversion, whereas 1% [Co(silane)Cl]@Al $_2$ O $_3$  achieved a higher conversion of 38% (average). The propane conversion for the 1% [Co(bipy) (Cl)@Al $_2$ O $_3$  and 1% [Co(Phen)(Cl)]@Al $_2$ O $_3$  catalysts are 29% and 31% respectively.
- The propene selectivity of 1% [Co(bipy)(Cl)]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and 1% [Co(Phen) (Cl)]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> was greater than 50% on average, 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 (figures 1 & 2). However, 1% [Co(bpy-dc)Cl]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> was 30% (average), while 1% [Co(silane)Cl]@Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> had a propene selectivity of 23% (average).

#### 5.1.3 Conclusion

- EDGs are generally more favourable for enhancing catalytic activity and stabilizing
  the catalyst, this is because EDGs generally increase the electron density around the
  metal centre, which can facilitate the adsorption of propane and improve the
  activation of C-H bonds.
- EWGs are beneficial for increasing selectivity and controlling reactivity, this is because EWGs can decrease the electron density around the metal centre, which helps in controlling the reactivity and improving the selectivity towards the desired product, propylene

### 5.2 Effects of Support on Catalytic Activity

#### 5.2.1 Experiment

- 0.5% Co-Ligand coordinated SACs were prepared on Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and CeO<sub>2</sub> supports.
- Using ICP-MS technique, the Co wt% loaded on each support after the preparation was measured and compared to the theoretical value.

#### 5.2.2 Observations

- 0.5 wt% Co SACs prepared on  $Al_2O_3$  support have more Co-ligand complexes coordinated to them compared to those on  $CeO_2$  support.
- $Al_2O_3$  support enhances the coordination of Co-ligand complexes more effectively than  $CeO_2$  support.

#### 5.2.3 Conclusion

- The higher coordination of Co-ligand complexes in 0.5 wt% Co SACs on Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> compared to CeO<sub>2</sub> can be attributed to several factors. Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> provides a higher surface area and more suitable anchoring sites, promoting better dispersion and stability of the Co-ligand complexes.
- Additionally, the surface chemistry of Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> fosters stronger metal-support interactions, enhancing the retention and coordination of single-atom cobalt species.
- In contrast, CeO<sub>2</sub> may have fewer available sites and weaker interactions, leading to lower Co-ligand complex coordination.
- These factors collectively make Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> a superior support for stabilizing single-atom cobalt catalysts.

# **Conclusions**

In this project, Co-ligand coordinated single-atom catalysts were developed for the propane dehydrogenation (PDH) reaction. Different characterisation techniques confirmed the formation of stable Co-ligand SACs.

Activity tests demonstrated promising selectivity to propene. It was found that  $Al_2O_3$  support enhances the loading of Co-ligand complex coordination compared to  $CeO_2$ .

The effects of various ligands and supports on catalytic activity were systematically studied.

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