



Quantifying Energy Use and Emissions in Advanced Porous Material Manufacturing: A Case Study of Silica Beads and Zeolites

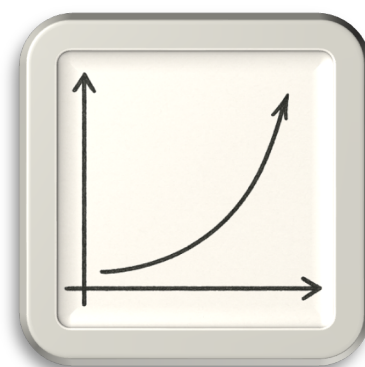
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May 2025

Introduction

Advanced porous materials such as silica gel beads and synthetic zeolites are enabling technologies in catalysis, adsorption, and gas separation. However, manufacturing these materials can be energy-intensive and carbon-intensive. This project aims to quantify the energy consumption and CO₂ emissions associated with producing silica beads and zeolite, from raw material preparation through processing, and to compare their impacts with a conventional material (soda-lime glass). The objective is to identify key energy/emission hotspots and opportunities for more sustainable manufacturing.



Methodology

A process-based analysis was conducted by breaking production into stages and compiling data from literature and industry sources for each stage. Energy use (in kWh per ton of product) and equivalent CO₂ emissions (kg CO₂ per ton) were quantified for: precursor chemical production, material synthesis (sol-gel mixing for silica; hydrothermal crystallization for zeolite), drying, and calcination (high-temperature treatment). A similar breakdown was gathered for soda-lime glass (raw material prep, melting furnace, forming/annealing) as a baseline. Data were aggregated using spreadsheet tools, and the cumulative energy and emissions per ton were calculated for each material. This allowed direct comparison of the energy/CO₂ intensity of advanced porous materials versus traditional glass manufacturing.

Key Findings

- **High Energy & CO₂ Intensity:** Producing 1 ton of silica gel beads requires roughly 12,000 kWh of energy and emits about 2.7 tons CO₂. Zeolite synthesis is of the same order (~9,800 kWh and 2.8 t CO₂ per ton). By contrast, manufacturing 1 ton of soda-lime glass uses only about 1,920 kWh and 0.85 t CO₂. In other words, the porous materials studied have around 3–4× higher energy use and carbon emissions per unit mass than conventional glass.
- **Thermal Processing Dominates:** For both silica and zeolite, the high-temperature drying and calcination stages are the largest energy drivers, together accounting for approximately 70–80% of total energy input. Evaporating water from gels and burning out organics consume thousands of kWh per ton.



- Upstream Materials Matter: Upstream precursor production is also a significant contributor. In zeolite manufacturing, producing sodium silicate and caustic soda (NaOH) for the synthesis gel requires substantial energy and adds roughly 20–25% of the total CO₂ footprint. For silica, using a sodium silicate route keeps precursor energy moderate (~5.4 GJ/ton silica) compared to alternate routes.

Conclusion and Implications

This case study reveals that advanced porous materials like silica beads and zeolites carry a much higher manufacturing energy and carbon cost per kilogram than a common material such as glass. The drying and calcination stages emerge as critical hotspots for intervention: improving efficiency in these steps (e.g., via heat recovery, electric or solar-driven heating, or eliminating the need for calcination by using template-free syntheses) could dramatically reduce the environmental footprint. Similarly, decarbonizing the precursor chemical supply (e.g., greener production of NaOH) would lower upstream emissions. Quantifying the energy use and emissions across each stage provides insight into where sustainable innovations are most needed. By targeting the dominant energy-intensive steps, manufacturers and researchers can drive more sustainable production of porous materials without compromising their advanced functionality.