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A Theoretical Overview of Nanomaterial Based Catalysts for Energy and Environmental Applications: A Three-Dimensional Operating Space Framework

Batacha BU*[1]

Abstract: This theoretical research article proposes an original conceptual framework the Three-Dimensional Operating Space (3DOS) model to interpret and predict the behaviour of nanomaterial-based catalysts in energy conversion and environmental remediation processes. Unlike conventional theoretical approaches that treat nanoscale effects as isolated phenomena, this study synthesizes spatial confinement, temporal dynamics, and energetic coupling into a unified analytical space, enabling the systematic mapping of catalyst performance drivers. The framework introduces novel theoretical constructs, including the "Dynamic Active Site Potential" and "Interdomain Synergy Coefficients," derived through logical conceptual synthesis and systems-level analysis. The central finding is that catalytic efficacy emerges non-linearly from the interaction between these three domains, generating performance regimes inaccessible to bulk materials. This conceptual research identifies predictive design principles, classifies nanocatalyst archetypes based on their 3DOS coordinates, and exposes critical gaps in current theoretical treatment of operando evolution. The manuscript contributes a new mental model for early-career researchers, bridging condensed matter physics, interfacial chemistry, and reaction engineering without mathematical formalism. The study is intentionally theoretical, analytical, and focused on conceptual advancement rather than literature compilation.

Keywords: *nanocatalysis, three-dimensional operating space, dynamic active sites, interdomain synergy, energy conversion, environmental catalysis*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

The integration of nanotechnology into catalytic science has catalyzed unprecedented advancements in renewable energy generation and environmental pollutant mitigation. Materials engineered at the nanoscale demonstrate efficiencies that defy extrapolation from bulk counterparts, particularly in reactions such as photoelectrochemical water splitting, electrocatalytic carbon dioxide valorization, and heterogeneous oxidation of atmospheric contaminants. These performance leaps are frequently attributed often in isolation to high surface-to-volume ratios, quantum confinement effects, or interfacial charge separation. While empirically valid, such fragmentary explanations obscure the systemic interactions that fundamentally distinguish nanocatalysis from conventional catalysis.

Contemporary theoretical discourse remains partitioned along disciplinary lines. Condensed matter physicists emphasize electronic structure perturbations arising from spatial confinement, yet seldom connect these quantum-scale shifts to macroscopic turnover

Corresponding Author: Batacha BU

rates. Chemists specializing in surface science meticulously map adsorption energies on idealized nanofacets, but typically neglect how these surfaces reconstruct under reactive flux. Chemical engineers optimize reactor-scale mass transport, treating the nanocatalyst as a static black box with intrinsic kinetic parameters. This intellectual fragmentation has yielded a collection of parallel narratives rather than a cohesive predictive theory. Consequently, rational design of nanocatalysts proceeds largely through iterative synthesis and testing, a paradigm that slows discovery and limits transferability across reaction classes.

1.2 Limitations of Existing Theoretical Approaches

Current theoretical models suffer from three conceptual constraints. First, they adopt a static viewpoint, describing nanocatalysts as frozen architectures whose properties can be characterized ex situ and extrapolated to operating conditions. This assumption contradicts mounting spectroscopic evidence that nanomaterials undergo continuous structural flux facet restructuring, oxidation state cycling, and transient defect formation during catalytic turnover. Theoretical frameworks that ignore this temporal dimension cannot capture performance-enhancing metastable states.

Second, existing theories apply reductionist decomposition, isolating individual enhancement mechanisms (e.g., plasmonic heating, quantum size effects) and assuming additive contributions to net activity. Such linear thinking fails to account for emergent behaviours that arise from non-linear coupling between electronic, geometric, and dynamic factors. For instance, the synergy between a plasmonic metal and a semiconductor support cannot be decomposed into separate light absorption and charge transport components; the interface itself generates hybrid electronic states with unique catalytic personality.

Third, theoretical treatments exhibit scale decoupling, severing the causal chain linking atomic-scale electronic structure to mesoscale particle assembly and ultimately to reactor-scale performance metrics. Without a multi-scale conceptual bridge, insights from density functional theory calculations cannot inform chemical reactor design, stifling translational impact.

1.3 Identification of Research Gap

The critical theoretical gap is the absence of an integrative conceptual architecture that simultaneously accommodates nanoscale quantum phenomena, dynamic structural evolution, and interfacial coupling as interacting variables within a unified design space. No existing framework provides researchers with a mental model for navigating trade-offs between, for example, maximizing quantum confinement benefits and preserving interfacial coherence, or between promoting dynamic site turnover and maintaining structural integrity. This conceptual vacuum prevents the formulation of generalized design heuristics and hinders cross-pollination between energy and environmental application domains, which face distinct but theoretically related challenges.

1.4 Research Objectives and Contribution

This theoretical research article addresses this gap by developing and presenting the Three-Dimensional Operating Space (3DOS) Framework for nanomaterial-based catalysts. The primary objectives are:

1. To conceptualize a new theoretical model that integrates spatial, temporal, and energetic dimensions into a unified analytical space for mapping nanocatalyst behaviour.
2. To derive novel theoretical constructs including Dynamic Active Site Potential (DASP) and Interdomain Synergy Coefficients (ISC) through

logical synthesis and conceptual analysis.

3. To classify nanocatalyst systems based on their coordinates within the 3DOS space, revealing archetypical performance regimes.
4. To identify predictive design principles that guide rational material engineering without recourse to experimental iteration.

The contribution of this study is fundamentally conceptual: it provides an original mental model that restructures how researchers theoretically approach nanocatalyst design, shifting from material-specific description to domain-general analysis. This theoretical research is intentionally non-experimental and non-mathematical, prioritizing analytical clarity and accessibility for multidisciplinary scientists.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Approach

2.1 Analytical Methodology

This study employs **conceptual synthesis** as its primary analytical method. The approach involves deconstructing established theories from condensed matter physics, surface chemistry, and reaction engineering into fundamental principles, then reassembling them within a novel topological structure (the 3DOS Framework). The methodology proceeds through four stages:

1. **Domain Identification**: Distilling the infinite complexity of nanocatalytic systems into three essential, orthogonal conceptual domains—spatial, temporal, and energetic—through logical reduction.
2. **Parameter Mapping**: Assigning measurable physical and chemical descriptors to each domain axis, ensuring the framework remains tethered to physical reality despite its conceptual nature.
3. **Interaction Analysis**: Using systems thinking to deduce how variables within and across domains amplify or attenuate one another, identifying non-linear coupling mechanisms.
4. **Construct Derivation**: Formulating novel theoretical constructs (DASP, ISC) as emergent properties of the 3DOS topology, derived through deductive reasoning rather than phenomenological fitting.

This method is intentionally qualitative and analytical, focusing on logical derivation and conceptual coherence rather than quantitative prediction. The approach mirrors theoretical physics paradigms where conceptual models (e.g., Feynman diagrams) precede and guide mathematical formalism.

2.2 The 3DOS Framework Architecture

The framework postulates that any nanocatalyst system can be represented as a point within a three-dimensional conceptual space defined by:

- **Spatial Domain (X-axis)**: Encompasses geometric confinement effects, dimensionality (0D, 1D, 2D), surface-to-volume ratio, and active site density. The axis runs from "Bulk-like Extension" to "Extreme Confinement."
- **Temporal Domain (Y-axis)**: Captures the dynamic evolution of active sites, including surface reconstruction rates, oxidation state cycling frequency, and lifetime of metastable configurations. The axis spans from "Static Equilibrium" to "Dynamic Flux."
- **Energetic Domain (Z-axis)**: Represents interfacial and intra-particle coupling strength, including charge transfer efficiency, plasmonic coupling, strain-mediated electronic modulation, and defect-induced state formation. The axis extends from

"Isolated Components" to "Strongly Coupled Architectures."

The origin (0,0,0) represents an idealized bulk catalyst with no confinement, static sites, and isolated components. Real nanocatalysts occupy positions within this space, with their coordinates determining their catalytic "operating regime."

2.3 Criteria for Theory Integration

The framework incorporates only theories satisfying three criteria: (a) domain relevance, the theory must primarily influence one or more 3DOS axes; (b) conceptual maturity, the principle is widely accepted within its parent discipline; and (c) transformative potential, the principle can be re-interpreted to reveal new insights when positioned within the 3DOS topology. Theories failing these filters (e.g., material-specific synthesis recipes) are excluded to maintain generality.

3. Results and Theoretical Analysis

3.1 Conceptual Derivation of the 3DOS Framework

The central result of this theoretical research is the 3DOS Framework itself, a conceptual structure that re-organizes nanocatalytic knowledge into a navigable design space. By mapping nanocatalysts onto this space, the framework generates three qualitatively distinct performance regimes:

Regime A: Confinement-Dominated (High X, Low Y, Low Z)

Located at high spatial confinement but low temporal and energetic coordinates, this regime characterizes small, isolated nanoparticles (<5 nm) with minimal interfacial coupling and slow surface dynamics. Here, catalytic enhancement derives predominantly from quantum size effects that alter adsorbate binding energies and widen bandgaps in semiconductor systems. However, the static nature of sites limits catalytic turnover, and isolation prevents synergistic effects. This regime explains why ultra-small nanoparticles often show high specific activity but poor stability and low selectivity in multi-electron reactions.

Regime B: Interface-Dominated (Low X, Low Y, High Z)

Systems in this region possess extensive heterojunctions (high Z) but moderate size (low X) and limited dynamics (low Y). Bulk heterostructures and supported catalysts with strong metal-support interaction exemplify this regime. Catalytic performance stems from efficient charge separation and interfacial state formation, but the nanoscale confinement advantage is underutilized, and static sites remain vulnerable to poisoning. This regime captures traditional engineered catalysts where interface engineering dominates.

Regime C: Synergy-Optimized (High X, High Y, High Z)

The apex of the 3DOS space represents the theoretical ideal: extreme confinement, dynamic active sites, and strong interfacial coupling operating in concert. Nanocomposite architectures with sub-5 nm domains, coherent interfaces, and metastable surface structures populate this region. The framework predicts that non-linear synergy emerges here, where the combined effect vastly exceeds the sum of individual contributions. For example, dynamic restructuring (high Y) can expose under-coordinated sites that are electronically stabilized by interfacial charge reservoirs (high Z), while quantum confinement (high X) ensures these sites remain reactive.

3.2 Theoretical Constructs: Dynamic Active Site Potential (DASP)

A novel construct derived from the framework is the Dynamic Active Site Potential (DASP), defined conceptually as the time-averaged reactivity contribution of a catalytic site that cycles through multiple structural and electronic configurations during operation. DASP is not a static descriptor like d-band center; rather, it integrates over the energetic landscape of transient states.

The analytical derivation proceeds as follows: Consider a metal nanoparticle surface atom that alternates between metallic (M^0) and oxidized (M^{n+}) states with a characteristic cycling frequency ν. Each state possesses distinct binding energies for reactant R: $\Delta E\_ads(M^0)$ and $\Delta E\_ads(M^{n+})$. Traditional theories would average these energies linearly. DASP, however, introduces a temporal weighting factor that accounts for the kinetic accessibility of each state:

$$\mathbf{DASP \propto \int [P(t) \bullet S(t) \bullet C(t)]\, dt}$$

where P(t) is the probability density of site configuration, S(t) is the electronic structure factor (e.g., work function modulation), and C(t) is the coupling efficiency to interfacial charge reservoirs. This integral formulation, while conceptual, foregrounds the idea that timing matters a metastable state with superior binding properties contributes negligibly to net catalysis if its lifetime is shorter than the adsorption timescale.

The framework predicts that maximum DASP occurs not at static optimal binding (Sabatier principle) but at a dynamic resonance condition where the cycling frequency matches the catalytic turnover frequency, enabling the surface to continuously regenerate optimal configurations. This theoretical insight reinterprets observed "overpotential reductions" in dynamic nanocatalysts as manifestations of DASP optimization rather than mere electronic structure tuning.

3.3 Interdomain Synergy Coefficients (ISC)

A second analytical result is the formulation of Interdomain Synergy Coefficients (ISC), qualitative metrics describing how movement along one 3DOS axis amplifies or suppresses the effective contribution of another axis. Three primary ISCs are derived:

- **ISC_X→Y (Spatial-to-Temporal Coupling)**: Increased spatial confinement (high X) reduces the energetic barrier for surface reconstruction, thereby accelerating dynamic site evolution (enhancing Y). Physically, smaller particles possess higher surface energy and more mobile atoms, facilitating rapid cycling. The framework postulates that ISC_X→Y is strongly positive for particle diameters below 10 nm.
- **ISC_Y→Z (Temporal-to-Energetic Coupling)**: Dynamic site flux (high Y) enables transient exposure of configurations that form stronger interfacial bonds with support materials, effectively increasing coupling strength (Z). For instance, a transiently oxidized metal site can couple more coherently to an oxide support than a static metallic site, creating a dynamic interfacial bridge.
- **ISC_Z→X (Energetic-to-Spatial Coupling)**: Strong interfacial coupling (high Z) can induce strain or charge localization that stabilizes smaller particle sizes, thereby enhancing spatial confinement effects (X). This feedback loop explains why strongly interacting supports prevent sintering—an empirical observation that the framework reinterprets as a domain-coupling phenomenon.

These coefficients are not numerical constants but conceptual operators that guide reasoning about design trade-offs. For example, designing a catalyst with high X and high Z requires intentionally engineering a positive ISC_Z→X through coherent epitaxy; otherwise, the two properties may be mutually exclusive.

3.4 Classification of Nanocatalyst Archetypes

Applying the 3DOS coordinates to known systems yields a new classification scheme that transcends material composition:

- **Type I - Static Quantum Dots**: (High X, Low Y, Low Z). Small semiconductor nanocrystals without intentional interfaces. Applications: simple photocatalytic oxidations where stability outweighs dynamic adaptability.
- **Type II - Engineered Heterojunctions**: (Moderate X, Low Y, High Z). Supported metal nanoparticles or semiconductor heterostructures with minimal dynamic behavior. Applications: steady-state electrocatalysis with defined reaction pathways.
- **Type III - Adaptive Nanocomposites**: (High X, High Y, High Z). Multicomponent architectures with deliberate metastability. Applications: multi-electron redox reactions (CO_2 reduction, N_2 fixation) requiring adaptive site behavior.
- **Type IV - Transient Cluster Catalysts**: (Low X, High Y, Moderate Z). Sub-nanometer clusters that undergo rapid structural reorganization. Applications: low-temperature activation of inert molecules.

This classification reveals that material composition is secondary to 3DOS positioning in determining functional suitability, a theoretical insight that redirects design focus from "which element" to "which operating regime."

4. Discussion

4.1 Interpretation of Theoretical Results

The 3DOS Framework and its derived constructs (DASP, ISC) collectively reframe nanocatalysis from a materials selection problem to a systems positioning challenge. The critical theoretical contribution is recognizing that catalytic performance is not stored within a material's static structure but emerges from its trajectory through the 3DOS space during operation. A catalyst that begins in Regime A may drift toward Regime B as it sinters or forms interfacial layers, explaining observed deactivation as a coordinate shift rather than simple site loss.

The DASP concept challenges the Sabatier principle's dominance in catalysis theory. While Sabatier posits an optimal static binding energy, DASP suggests that dynamic binding landscapes can outperform static optima by sequentially offering strong binding for activation and weak binding for desorption across different temporal phases. This theoretical reinterpretation explains why oscillating reaction conditions sometimes surpass steady-state performance: they synchronize the catalytic cycle with the site's natural dynamic frequency, maximizing DASP.

4.2 Comparison with Existing Theoretical Perspectives

Traditional theories such as the d-band model for metals or the bandgap engineering approach for semiconductors are projections onto the spatial domain of the 3DOS Framework. They capture high-X behavior but marginalize Y and Z. Similarly, models of strong metal-support interaction (SMSI) represent limited explorations of the Z-axis without considering how dynamic evolution (Y) modulates SMSI strength over time.

Recent computational studies on operando restructuring represent empirical mappings of the Y-axis but lack a theoretical scaffold linking these dynamics to spatial and energetic parameters. The 3DOS Framework provides this scaffold, positioning dynamics as an equal partner rather than a complication.

Unlike phenomenological models that fit experimental data with adjustable parameters, this framework is deductive and conceptual, derived from logical analysis of domain interactions. Its strength lies not in numerical prediction but in generating qualitative design rules and falsifiable hypotheses (e.g., "Increasing ISC_X→Y should enhance low-temperature activity").

4.3 Practical and Interdisciplinary Implications

For materials engineers, the framework translates into synthesis heuristics: to access Regime C (Synergy-Optimized), one must co-engineer size (X), interface coherence (Z), and metastability (Y) simultaneously. Synthesizing ultra-small particles on a weakly interacting support (high X, low Z) yields incomplete performance; adding a dynamic capping agent that modulates surface mobility (increasing Y) may complete the synergy.

For chemical engineers, the ISC concepts inspire process intensification strategies. If ISC_Y→Z is positive, then imposing periodic potential pulses (enhancing Y) should strengthen metal-support coupling (Z) over time, suggesting that transient operation could build better catalysts in situ. This flips the conventional wisdom that harsh conditions degrade catalysts, proposing instead that controlled dynamic stress reinforces beneficial domain coupling.

For environmental catalysis dealing with dilute pollutants, the DASP construct implies that low-frequency site cycling is advantageous. Since reactant adsorption events are rare, the site must maintain its optimal configuration for extended periods. The framework predicts that Type II catalysts (High Z, Low Y) are preferable for atmospheric cleanup, whereas Type III (High Y) suits concentrated industrial streams.

For energy applications requiring multi-electron transfer, the framework prioritizes high ISC_X→Y and ISC_Y→Z. CO_2 reduction to C_2^+ products demand sequential proton-electron transfers with intermediate stabilization. A catalyst positioned at high X, Y, and Z can dynamically present different active configurations for each transfer step, a theoretical insight that explains why nanocomposite catalysts outperform single-component systems.

4.4 Limitations of the Present Theoretical Framework

The 3DOS Framework, while conceptually powerful, operates under explicit limitations. First, it is qualitative and topological, providing directional guidance rather than quantitative predictions. The axes are conceptual constructs, not calibrated metrics, limiting direct numerical optimization.

Second, the framework assumes continuous domain variables, whereas real systems exhibit discrete jumps (e.g., semiconductor-to-metal transition at critical size). Incorporating phase-transition boundaries would enhance realism but compromise simplicity.

Third, the ISC operators are postulated through logical induction from physical principles but remain unverified through systematic meta-analysis of experimental data. Their functional forms (linear, exponential, threshold-based) are unspecified, requiring future computational validation.

Finally, the framework currently addresses single-particle behaviour, neglecting collective effects in dense catalyst layers (e.g., percolation paths, inter-particle plasmonic coupling). Extending 3DOS to ensemble behaviour represents a necessary theoretical expansion.

5. Limitations of the Study

The scope of this theoretical research is deliberately confined to conceptual model development. The study does not derive mathematical expressions for the 3DOS coordinates nor does it calibrate the framework against empirical databases. The analytical methodology relies on logical synthesis rather than numerical simulation, which, while enhancing accessibility, precludes precise quantitative benchmarking.

Key theoretical assumptions include: (i) that the three domains (spatial, temporal, energetic) are largely independent and orthogonal, which may not hold under extreme conditions where strong coupling collapses the dimensionality; (ii) that dynamic behaviour can be meaningfully averaged into constructs like DASP, potentially masking rare but critical events; and (iii) that interfacial coupling is uniformly beneficial, ignoring parasitic energy transfer or interfacial recombination pathways.

The framework also omits explicit treatment of external variables (temperature, pressure, pH) that undoubtedly influence domain coordinates, though these could be incorporated as space-deforming potentials in future extensions.

6. Future Research Directions

6.1 Computational Validation and Parameterization

The immediate theoretical extension involves computational mapping of known nanocatalyst systems onto the 3DOS space. Density functional theory can quantify spatial confinement (X) through size-dependent electronic structure calculations. Ab initio molecular dynamics can probe dynamic site evolution (Y), providing statistics for DASP estimation. Hybrid functional calculations of interfacial systems can characterize coupling strength (Z). Meta-analyzing these computations across material libraries would validate the ISC postulates and potentially reveal their functional forms.

6.2 Integration with Machine Learning

The 3DOS Framework provides a physically meaningful feature set for machine learning models. Rather than using raw compositional and structural descriptors, training algorithms on X, Y, Z coordinates and ISC values could improve predictive accuracy and interpretability. This fusion offers a path toward inverse design: specifying a target operating regime (e.g., Regime C for CO_2 reduction) and having the model propose material compositions and architectures to realize those coordinates.

6.3 Extension to Ensemble and Reactor Scales

Future theoretical work must scale the 3DOS Framework from single particles to catalyst layers. This involves introducing collective coupling coefficients that capture inter-particle electronic communication and mass transport coupling. The goal is a multi-scale 3DOS model where the reactor operating conditions deform the single-particle space, creating a feedback loop between macroscopic engineering parameters and nanoscale behaviour.

6.4 Experimental Operando Mapping

Conceptually, the framework invites development of operando characterization protocols that track a catalyst's real-time 3DOS coordinates. In situ electron microscopy could map X (size) and Y (reconstruction), while transient absorption spectroscopy monitors Z (charge coupling). Plotting experimental trajectories through 3DOS space during reaction could reveal deactivation mechanisms as coordinate drift, offering diagnostic power.

6.5 Application to Emerging Challenges

The framework should be applied theoretically to nascent challenges: direct methane functionalization, nitrogen fixation under ambient conditions, and plastic upcycling. These reactions involve strong bonds and complex intermediates, likely requiring Regime C operation. Theoretical analysis using 3DOS could identify why current catalysts fail and specify the coordinate adjustments needed for success.

7. Conclusion

This theoretical research article has introduced and analytically developed the Three-Dimensional Operating Space (3DOS) Framework, a novel conceptual model that restructures theoretical understanding of nanomaterial-based catalysts. The framework's core contribution is the integration of spatial confinement, temporal dynamics, and energetic coupling into a unified analytical space, enabling the systematic interpretation of catalytic behavior through domain coordinates and synergy coefficients. Derived constructs such as the Dynamic Active Site Potential and Interdomain Synergy Coefficients provide new theoretical language for discussing how performance emerges from non-linear interactions, moving beyond static descriptors and linear addition of effects.

The analysis demonstrates that nanocatalytic efficacy is not an intrinsic material property but an emergent function of a system's position and trajectory within the 3DOS space. This conceptual shift redirects research focus from searching for "better materials" to engineering "optimal operating coordinates", a transformation with profound implications for design philosophy. The classification of catalyst archetypes (Static Quantum Dots, Engineered Heterojunctions, Adaptive Nanocomposites, Transient Cluster Catalysts) offers a new typology based on functional behaviour rather than chemical composition, facilitating technology transfer across disciplines.

By explicitly framing the study as theoretical and analytical, this manuscript contributes a research article not a review that advances conceptual frontiers in applied catalysis science. The framework is intentionally non-mathematical to ensure accessibility for early-career researchers in applied physics, chemistry, and engineering, yet it remains scientifically rigorous through logical coherence and falsifiability. Future work parameterizing and validating the 3DOS model promises to bridge the gap between quantum-scale insight and reactor-scale implementation, accelerating the development of sustainable energy and environmental technologies.

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