



## Crystalline WO<sub>3</sub> nanoparticles for NO<sub>2</sub> sensing

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### Abstract

*This study shows excellent NO<sub>2</sub>-sensing properties of tungsten oxide nanoparticles, prepared using a facile procedure which includes dissolution of metallic tungsten in hydrogen peroxide with subsequent low-temperature (400 °C) heating. We also conducted a thorough literature survey on sensor properties of tungsten oxide prepared by various means and found that the sensor response towards NO<sub>2</sub> registered in this work achieved the highest level. The most intriguing feature of the material obtained was a highly reproducible sensor signal at room temperature which was more than 100 times higher than any reported previously for WO<sub>3</sub>. The probable reason for such high sensor response was the presence of two WO<sub>3</sub> polymorphs ( $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub> and  $h$ -WO<sub>3</sub>) in the material synthesized using a peroxide-assisted route. In order to further investigate synthesized WO<sub>3</sub> materials, sophisticated experimental (XRD, SEM, TEM, BET) and theoretical (B3LYP, HSE) methods have been used, as well as resistance and sensor response measurements at various temperatures.*

**Keywords:** tungsten oxide, polymorph, sensor properties, NO<sub>2</sub>, *ab initio*

### I. Introduction

Tungsten oxide (WO<sub>3</sub>) is a wide band gap semiconductor with a bandgap varying from 2.7 to 3.15 eV, depending on the oxygen vacancy concentration [1]. Tungsten oxide is widely used in solar cells [2], supercapacitors [3] and photochromic [4], gas chromic [1] and electrochromic [5] devices, humidity sensors [6], and as a photocatalyst for enhanced water splitting [7] and water purification [8–10]. Special attention is currently paid to the sensing properties of WO<sub>3</sub>. Pure WO<sub>3</sub>, as well as loaded/doped WO<sub>3</sub> [11], is used for the detection of both organic (trimethylamine [12], ethanol [13], methanol and formaldehyde [14], and acetone [15]) and inorganic (H<sub>2</sub> [16], H<sub>2</sub>S [17], NH<sub>3</sub> [18], NO [19]) gases. WO<sub>3</sub> demonstrates the highest sensitivity and selectivity towards NO<sub>2</sub>, over a wide range of temperatures [20,21]. It has been repeatedly shown that the sensing properties of WO<sub>3</sub> are affected

by several key parameters, including phase composition [22], microstructure [23–25], temperature of annealing [26] and visible light illumination [27]. Functional characteristics of tungsten oxide are largely determined by synthesis method, therefore, new approaches to WO<sub>3</sub> synthesis, or significant modification of existing ones, still remain the most crucial task. The most often methods used for WO<sub>3</sub> synthesis are hydrothermal [3,4,10,11,13,23,28–32] and solvothermal [19,22,24,25,33] methods, sol-gel technique [27,34–37] and spray pyrolysis method [21,38,39]. There are also a few reports concerning WO<sub>3</sub>-based NO<sub>2</sub> sensors prepared by precipitation [12,40–42], gas transport [20], thermal decomposition [18], thermal oxidation [43] or high temperature anodization of metallic tungsten [16], electrospinning [44] and low frequency electrophoretic deposition [45]. Most of these methods are multistage and time-consuming.

A great deal of attention is currently paid to the design of sensor materials with good sensor properties by engineering various composites [46,47]. The enhance-

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ment of sensor properties in the composites is achieved by creating a junction of several phases with different conduction band levels. Generally, the synthesis of such composites is a much more complex task than the synthesis of individual compounds, requiring additional stages. Tungsten(VI)-oxide is a unique substance, which can exist in numerous polymorphs (having a  $\text{ReO}_3$ -type or hexagonal bronze structure) with different electronic properties [48,49]. By varying synthesis conditions within a single synthesis approach, one can easily obtain two-phase composite materials containing several  $\text{WO}_3$  polymorphs as reported in the literature [50], thus achieving good sensor properties inherent to traditional composites. To the best of our knowledge, this idea in regard to the design of the sensor materials has not previously been discussed in the literature. In this paper, we report on  $\text{WO}_3$  synthesis by a facile hydrogen peroxide-assisted procedure that we have described earlier [51], for highly sensitive  $\text{NO}_2$  detection. This synthetic route gives a material with a highly reproducible sensor signal at room temperature, which is more than 100 times higher than any reported previously for a single-phase  $\text{WO}_3$ .

## II. Experimental

### 2.1. Synthesis

Metallic tungsten (Koch-Light Laboratories, LTD, purity 99.9%, average grain size of  $1\ \mu\text{m}$ , according to the manufacturer's specification), hydrogen peroxide (Sigma-Aldrich) and 2-propanol (Sigma-Aldrich) were starting materials for the synthesis of  $\text{WO}_3$  powder. All chemicals were used without further purification.

Tungsten(VI)-oxide was prepared by dissolving 5 g of elementary tungsten in a previously prepared mixture of 50 ml of 30 wt.%  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  solution, 5 ml of 2-propanol and 10 ml of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ . The reaction was very rapid; it took less than a couple of minutes, at room temperature, for dark-grey tungsten powder to turn into white powder formed in the reaction mixture. After decanting a liquid, and drying the residue overnight at  $80\ ^\circ\text{C}$  in the air, a yellowish  $\text{WO}_3$  powder was obtained. This method for the synthesis of  $\text{WO}_3$  nanoparticles for tungsten carbide (WC) composite preparation was described by Hepel and Hazelton [52]. In-depth investigations of the properties of tungsten(VI) oxide thus prepared were not conducted. The additional annealing of  $\text{WO}_3$  powder was carried out in a muffle furnace at  $400\ ^\circ\text{C}$  in the air in an alundum crucible for 2 h.

### 2.2. Characterization

Powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) analysis of the samples was performed on a Bruker D8 Advance diffractometer (Bragg–Brentano geometry) with Ni-filtered  $\text{CuK}\alpha$  radiation and a LYNXEYE detector. Diffraction patterns were recorded in the  $10\text{--}70^\circ$   $2\theta$  range, with a step of  $0.02^\circ$  and collection time of 0.3 s/step. Phase identification was carried out with reference to the

JCPDS PDF2 database using Crystallographica Search-Match software [53].

The microstructure of the samples was investigated using a Carl Zeiss NVision 40 high resolution scanning electron microscope at 1–7 kV acceleration voltage and a Leo912 AB Omega transmission electron microscope at 100 kV accelerating voltage.

The values of specific surface area were determined by low-temperature nitrogen adsorption on a Katakon ATX-06 analyser, using the 5-point Brunauer-Emmett-Teller model (BET) in the range of partial nitrogen pressures of 0.05–0.25. Before the measurements, samples were degassed in a dry helium flow at  $200\ ^\circ\text{C}$  for 30 min.

Sensing properties of the synthesized  $\text{WO}_3$  powder towards  $\text{NO}_2$  gas were determined by *in situ* measurements of the electrical conductivity of thick films.  $\text{WO}_3$  powder was mixed with a binder ( $\alpha$ -terpeniol in ethanol) and deposited as a paste onto a microelectronic chip with a platinum heater and electrodes. The films were annealed at  $300\ ^\circ\text{C}$  for 3 h, to remove the binder. Electrical conductivity was measured *in situ* in a flow cell (100 ml) under the conditions of a controlled gas flow of  $100 \pm 0.1$  ml/min. The gas mixtures containing 0.1–2.0 ppm  $\text{NO}_2$  in the air were prepared by diluting the certified gas mixture (20 ppm  $\text{NO}_2$  in nitrogen) with a dry synthetic air using electronic Bronkhorst gas flow controllers. The measurements (15 min in the presence of  $\text{NO}_2$  and 30 min in a pure dry air) were carried out at a constant current in the stabilized voltage mode ( $U = 1$  V). The heaters were powered using an Agilent 6448 precision power source.

### 2.3. Computational details

The *ab initio* calculations were performed with the CRYSTAL17 code, a well-established computational tool for solid state chemistry and physics based on local Gaussian type orbitals [54]. Structure optimizations, band structure and density of states (DOS) calculations were performed using hybrid HSE (Heyd-Scuseria-Ernzerhof) and B3LYP (Becke's three parameter functional in combination with the correlation functional of Lee, Yang and Parr) functional, in order to describe electronic exchange and correlations [55,56]. For the *ab initio* calculations, a [4s3p] all-electron basis set was used for oxygen as in Refs [57–59]. For tungsten, the [4s4p2d] effective core pseudopotential was used as in Refs [60,61], and it was especially important to obtain the proper band structure and band gap of  $\text{WO}_3$  [62–65] (further details are presented in the Supporting Information<sup>8</sup>). The tolerances for the convergence on energy were set to  $1.0 \times 10^{-7}$  eV per atom. *k*-point meshes of  $8 \times 8 \times 8$  Monkhorst-Pack schemes were used.

## III. Results and discussion

The phase composition and crystallinity of the  $\text{WO}_3$  sample prepared through a hydrogen peroxide-assisted route was evaluated by XRD analysis. The as-prepared

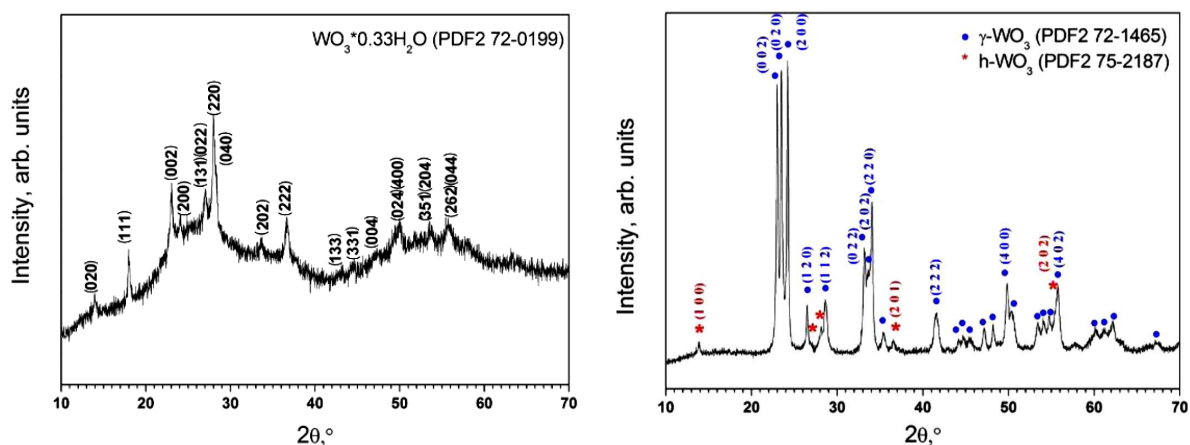


Figure 1. X-ray diffraction patterns of as-prepared sample of tungsten oxide (a) and the sample annealed at 400 °C (b)

product (Fig. 1a) contained both amorphous phase and crystalline hydrous tungsten oxide  $\text{WO}_3 \cdot 0.33\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (PDF2 no. 72-0199), having an average particle size of 25 nm, as calculated using the Scherrer's formula. The dissolution mechanism of metallic tungsten in hydrogen peroxide for the synthesis of  $\text{WO}_3$ -based materials has been extensively discussed earlier [66–68]. Surprisingly, only very few attempts have been made to analyse the solid-state products formed upon ageing of peroxotungstic acid solutions. Wang *et al.* [67] showed that dissolution of metallic tungsten in  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  followed by ageing of the resultant sol at 55 °C yielded crystalline  $\text{WO}_3 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ . Enferadi-Kerenkan *et al.* [68] mentioned the formation of amorphous tungsten oxide upon rapid evaporation of a peroxotungstic acid solution, and the formation of crystalline  $\text{WO}_2(\text{O}_2) \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$  upon its slow evaporation. Amorphous tungsten(VI)-oxide can be decomposed upon heating at relatively low temperatures (120 °C, 4 h), yielding  $\text{WO}_3 \cdot 0.33\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and/or  $\text{WO}_3 \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$  [68]. Thus, the phase composition of our as-prepared product, obtained through the hydrogen peroxide-assisted route, is in line with previously reported data, and corresponds to a mixture of amorphous tungsten oxide (obviously in hydrated form) and  $\text{WO}_3 \cdot 0.33\text{H}_2\text{O}$ .

According to scanning (Fig. 2a) and transmission

(Fig. 3a) electron microscopy data, the as-obtained sample was a glassy monolith with the inclusion of flower-like crystals. The average size of these inclusions was 0.7–1.5  $\mu\text{m}$ . Apparently, such flower-like morphology is typical of hydrous tungsten oxide  $\text{WO}_3 \cdot 0.33\text{H}_2\text{O}$  [69].

The as-prepared semi-crystalline sample was further annealed at 400 °C for 2 h. Upon thermal treatment, a complete dehydration and crystallization occurred, and the resultant powder was found to consist of two  $\text{WO}_3$  polymorphs (Fig. 1b), hexagonal (*h*- $\text{WO}_3$ , sp. gr. *P6/mmm*, PDF2 no. 75-2187) and monoclinic ( $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$ , sp. gr. *P2<sub>1</sub>/n*, PDF2 no. 72-1465). The average crystallite size, as calculated from X-ray line broadening by the Scherrer's method, amounted to 34 nm for the hexagonal  $\text{WO}_3$  phase and 54 nm for the monoclinic  $\text{WO}_3$  phase.

According to scanning and transmission electron microscopy, annealing at 400 °C led to complete crystallization of the powder. The annealed sample consisted of particles with a size of 40–55 nm merged into shapeless agglomerates (Figs. 2b and 3b). All the particles seemed to be uniform in shape and size and did not have any explicit faceting. The electron diffraction data are in a good agreement with XRD results. Low nitrogen adsorption measurements indicated that the annealing of the initial semi-amorphous sample resulted in a fivefold

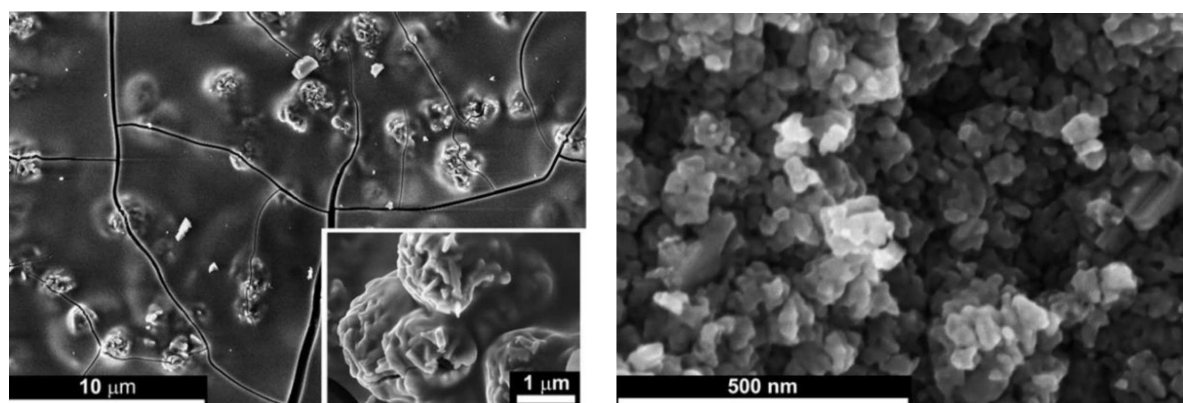


Figure 2. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images of: a) the as-prepared sample of hydrated tungsten oxide and b) the sample annealed at 400 °C ( $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$ /*h*- $\text{WO}_3$ )

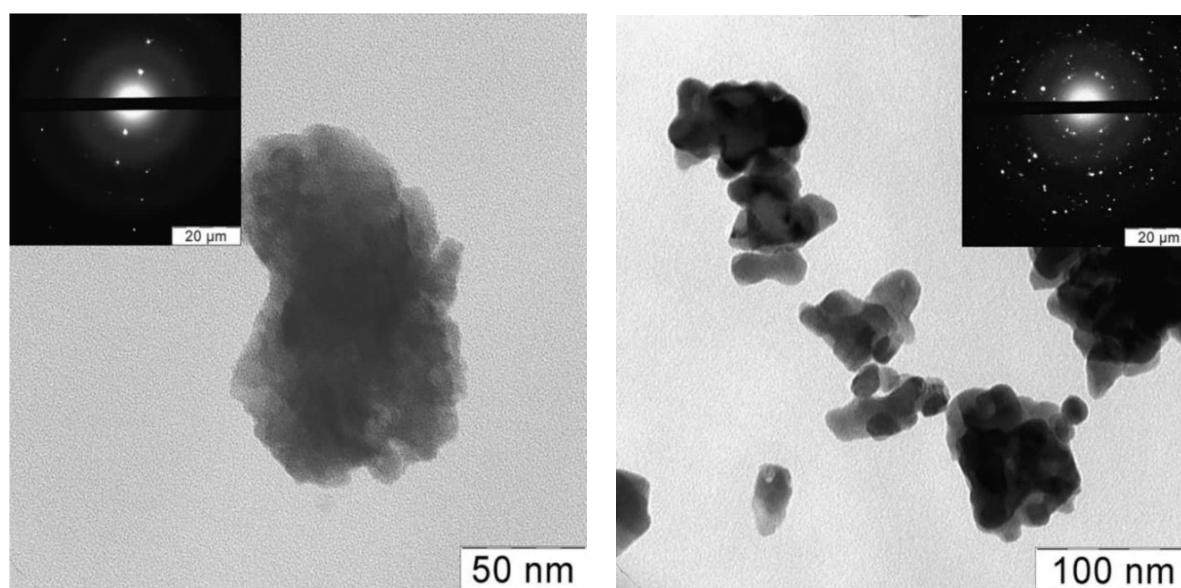


Figure 3. Transmission electron microscopy images and electron diffraction patterns of: a) the as-prepared sample of hydrated tungsten oxide and b) the sample annealed at 400 °C ( $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$ / $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$ )

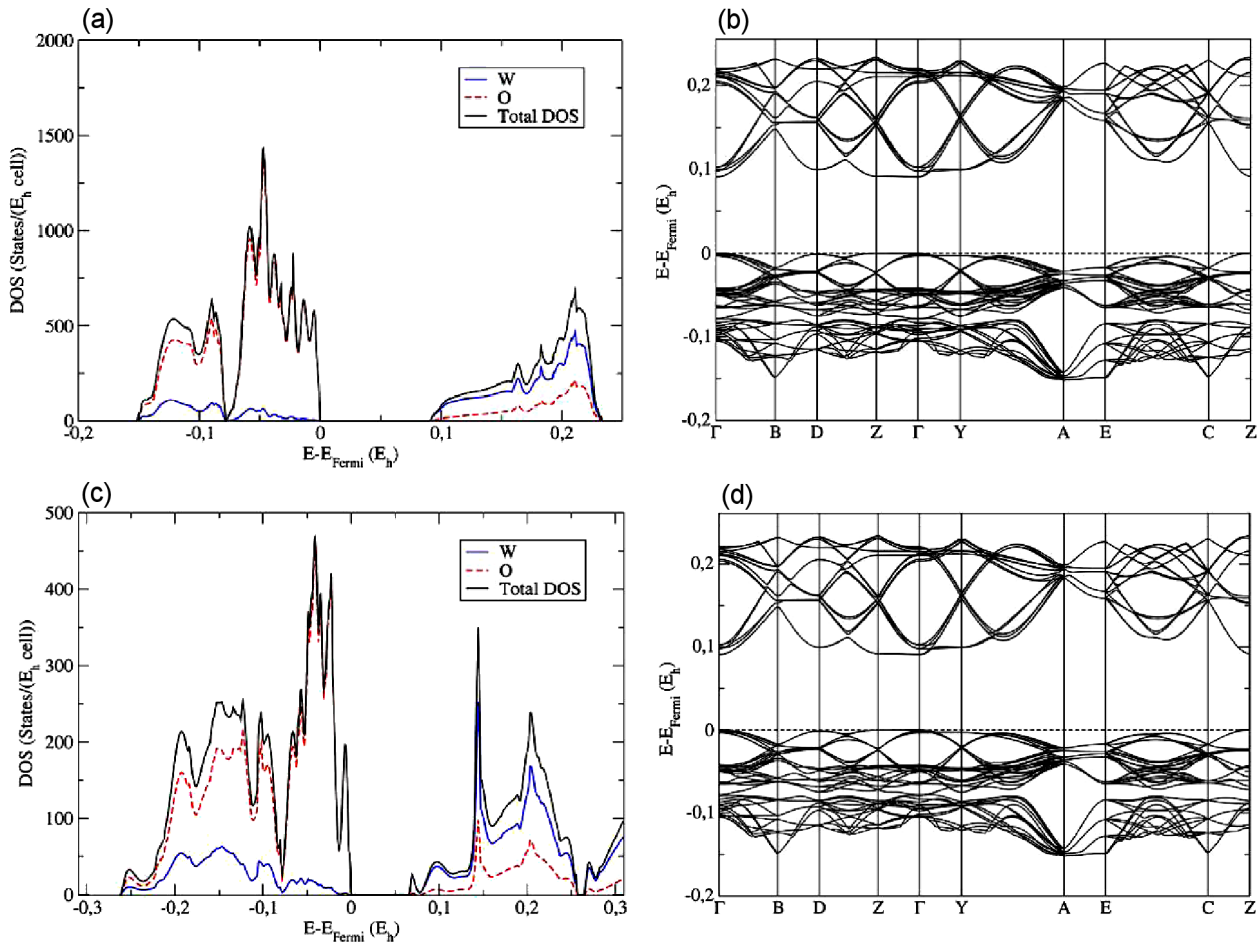
increase in the specific surface area of the material, from 3 to 15 m<sup>2</sup>/g.

Tungsten oxide with almost the same phase composition ( $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$ / $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$ ) was obtained by thermal decomposition of ammonium paratungstate  $(\text{NH}_4)_{10}\text{H}_2\text{W}_{12}\text{O}_{42} \cdot x\text{H}_2\text{O}$  at temperatures above 800 °C [70]. Until now, the factors governing the formation of various  $\text{WO}_3$  polymorphs and their stabilization at ambient conditions have been poorly understood. It is well established that monoclinic  $\text{WO}_3$  ( $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$ ) is thermodynamically stable at room temperature, and that orthorhombic  $\text{WO}_3$  ( $\beta$ - $\text{WO}_3$ ) is stable in the temperature range of 320–720 °C, while at higher temperatures tetragonal  $\alpha$ - $\text{WO}_3$  is stable [71,72]. Comprehensive reports on various  $\text{WO}_3$  polymorphs and their phase transitions have been presented previously [71,73]. High-temperature  $\text{WO}_3$  phases can be stabilized for various reasons, e.g. due to the size effect [74]. Among  $\text{WO}_3$  polymorphs, hexagonal  $\text{WO}_3$  belongs to tungsten oxide bronzes, being a non-stoichiometric phase which always contains various impurities (e.g.  $\text{NH}_4^+$ ,  $\text{Na}^+$ ) located in the channels of its crystal structure [75]. In a hexagonal  $\text{WO}_3$  structure,  $\text{W}^{6+}$ ,  $\text{W}^{5+}$  and even  $\text{W}^{4+}$  ions are also present [75]. As the residual ions in the hexagonal channels are vital for stabilizing  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$ , its synthesis always involves the use of various tungstates. For example, hexagonal  $\text{WO}_3$  phase can be synthesized via thermolysis of ammonium paratungstate [70,75], thermolysis or hydrothermal treatment of tungstic acid precipitated from sodium tungstate [76,77], etc. Upon the complete elimination of impurities from the structure of  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$ , its hexagonal framework collapses in an exothermic reaction, to form monoclinic  $\text{WO}_3$  [75].

In our synthesis, we used only metallic tungsten, water and hydrogen peroxide, thus no cationic impurities such as  $\text{NH}_4^+$  or  $\text{Na}^+$  could stabilize the  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  struc-

ture. The possibility of pure  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  synthesis through a similar peroxide-assisted route was very recently reported by Tsuyumoto [78]; the formation of  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  required the presence of amorphized metal surfaces in the starting W powder, being a topochemical oxidation. Probably, the stability of  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  phase is also encouraged by the presence of water molecules and/or hydroxonium cations in the oxide network. A possible route for the formation of  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  could be the topochemical dehydration of hexagonal  $\text{WO}_3 \cdot 0.33\text{H}_2\text{O}$ , which has very similar diffraction pattern.

Tungsten oxides possess valuable electronic properties with possible applications as efficient photocatalysts and sensor materials. The electronic properties of various tungsten oxide-based semiconducting materials have been extensively discussed in the literature (see e.g. [49,62–65,79]). In this study, band structure and density of states (DOS) calculations were performed on two  $\text{WO}_3$  polymorphs using hybrid (B3LYP and HSE) functionals. Previous experimental investigations of  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$  have found an indirect band gap ranging from 2.6 to 3.2 eV [80–82], while theoretical studies have shown that the band gap obtained with hybrid functionals is the closest to the experiment. In addition, theoreticians have pointed out that the energy difference between direct,  $\Gamma$  to  $\Gamma$  point, and indirect, Z to  $\Gamma$  point, band gaps is very small, giving the possibility for a direct band gap in  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$  phase [62–65]. DOS and band structure calculations for  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$  modification are presented in Fig. 4, showing an indirect band gap size of 2.45 eV, as calculated using B3LYP. Furthermore, special  $k$ -point directions in the Brillouin zone of the space group  $P2_1/n$  (see Supporting Information) have been investigated, showing an in-line band in the  $\Gamma \rightarrow \text{Z}$  direction. In addition, we can observe from the DOS that the valence bands (VB) are dominated by oxygen, and the conduction bands (CB) by tungsten, which is in good agree-



**Figure 4.** DOS (a) and band structure (b) of the  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$  modification; DOS (c) and band structure (d) of the  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  modification (calculation performed using the B3LYP functional)

ment with previous theoretical and experimental work [62–65,83].

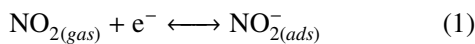
The  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  modification has recently demonstrated possible optical and photoanode applications [49,84], although it has been much less investigated than the room temperature (RT)  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$  phase, especially concerning its electronic properties [85,86]. Figures 4c and 4d represent DOS and band structure calculations for  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  modification, respectively, clearly showing an indirect band gap of 1.79 eV, in agreement with previous theoretical work [85,86], since no direct measurements have yet been performed (see Supporting Information). In order to further investigate the electronic properties of hexagonal phase, special  $k$ -point directions in the Brillouin zone for the space group  $P6/mmm$  were chosen. We notice that the bottom of the CB is located at the  $\Gamma$  point and in-line with the M point, similar to the  $\Gamma \rightarrow Z$  direction of the  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$  phase. The top of the VB is located at the A point, differently from the  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$  structure. However, the A point is in-line with the L point, showing the in-line band character of CB and VB, similar to the RT monoclinic phase. The DOS plots show that the VB are dominated by oxygen, and the CB by tungsten, again similar to the RT  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$  structure, which is in good agreement with previous theoretical

work [85,86]. This shows the great diversity of electronic properties and complex structure-property relationships of  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  and  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$  modifications.

The design of composite materials comprising tungsten oxide has recently attracted special attention due to the possibility of tuning the electronic structure at the interface between two different semiconducting particles. Composites with a phase junction between  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  and monoclinic  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$  were recently reported to be highly efficient photocatalysts for the discoloration of organic dyes [70]. Note that the electronic structure of  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  is advantageous for water splitting applications of this material [49]. The difference in electronic band structure of  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$  and  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  was reported to facilitate the electron transfer through the junction surfaces and restrain the recombination of the charge carriers. Energy band diagrams at the  $\gamma$ - $\text{WO}_3$ / $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  interface were reported very recently, indicating that such a phase junction facilitates redox reactions on the surface of a such phase-conjunct material [70,87]. Interestingly, other tungsten oxide-based composites possess a similar band gap structure at the phase junction interface. Recently, high photocatalytic activity due to the phase-junction effect was reported for the composite containing orthorhombic  $\text{WO}_3 \cdot 0.33\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and  $h$ - $\text{WO}_3$  [88].

Extensive information is available on the synthesis of composite gas sensor materials containing semiconductors with different electronic properties (see e.g. a review paper by Miller *et al.* [46]). It has been established that the phase junction plays a key role in enhancing the sensor response of such materials. Since tungsten oxide is an *n*-type semiconductor with a band gap from 2.6 to 3.2 eV [80–82], the composites containing various WO<sub>3</sub> polymorphs belong to an *n-n* family of sensor materials [46]. In view of sensoric performance, a very important difference between *n-n* and *p-n* junctions is that the latter promote electron-hole recombination resulting in an increased interface resistance [89], while the former only transfer electrons from the oxide having the higher-energy conducting band into the oxide with the lower-energy band, forming an electron-rich layer. Recently, Sen *et al.* [90] reported superior sensor properties of an *n-n* composite comprising a SnO<sub>2</sub>/W<sub>18</sub>O<sub>49</sub> heterojunction.

Figure 5 shows the change in the resistance of the annealed WO<sub>3</sub> sample ( $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub>/*h*-WO<sub>3</sub>) under the conditions of a cyclic change of the gas phase composition “air – 1 ppm NO<sub>2</sub> in air” with a stepwise decrease in the measured temperature from 300 to 25 °C. For each temperature, three measurement cycles were performed. In the presence of NO<sub>2</sub>, the sample resistance increased due to the process:



accompanied by a decrease in the main charge carriers’ concentration in an *n*-type semiconductor. The temperature dependence of the sensor response *S*, calculated as  $S = R_{gas}/R_{air}$  (where  $R_{gas}$  is the sample resistance in the presence of NO<sub>2</sub>,  $R_{air}$  is the resistance in pure air), is presented in the inset of Fig. 5. The maximum sensor response was observed at a measurement temperature of 100 °C. A very special feature of the material is a highly reproducible signal at room temperature (25 °C), which is better than that of any similar data presented elsewhere (Table 1).

Figure 6 demonstrates the change in the resistance of the WO<sub>3</sub> sample ( $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub>/*h*-WO<sub>3</sub>) with a stepwise increase in the concentration of NO<sub>2</sub> in the air (0.1 – 0.2 – 0.5 – 1.0 ppm) at 100 °C. For each concentration, three measurement cycles were performed. Dependence of the sensor response on NO<sub>2</sub> concentration in double logarithmic coordinates demonstrated an almost linear behaviour, in accordance with power law theory [91].

Similar measurements performed at room temperature showed the absence of a sensor response for NO<sub>2</sub> concentrations of 0.1 and 0.2 ppm. In the presence of 0.5 ppm NO<sub>2</sub>, an increase in WO<sub>3</sub> resistance was observed, while the signal increased very slowly. An increase in the concentration of NO<sub>2</sub> up to 2 ppm led to a growth in the resistance of the sensitive layer to more than  $5 \cdot 10^{11} \Omega$ , which was the upper limit of our measuring setup. The combination of these factors prevented

the full calibration curve from being obtained at room temperature.

The comparison of the sensor response values for biphasic WO<sub>3</sub> ( $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub>/*h*-WO<sub>3</sub>) synthesized by hydrogen peroxide assisted route with the literature data is shown in Fig. 7. It is necessary to take into account that the measurement methods varied in the different literature sources, which inevitably affects the calculated response values. In any case, the sensor response values obtained in this work are among the highest registered to date, even without any specific optimization of synthetic conditions, and despite the relatively low specific surface area of our WO<sub>3</sub> powder.

The literature survey showed that almost all results summarized in Fig. 7 were obtained using single-phased WO<sub>3</sub> sensor materials (mainly *h*-WO<sub>3</sub>,  $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub> and W<sub>18</sub>O<sub>49</sub>). However, in some cases, sensitive material comprised two different WO<sub>3</sub> phases, namely *h*-WO<sub>3</sub>/ $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub> [22,108] or  $\beta$ -WO<sub>3</sub>/ $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub> [104], and the authors

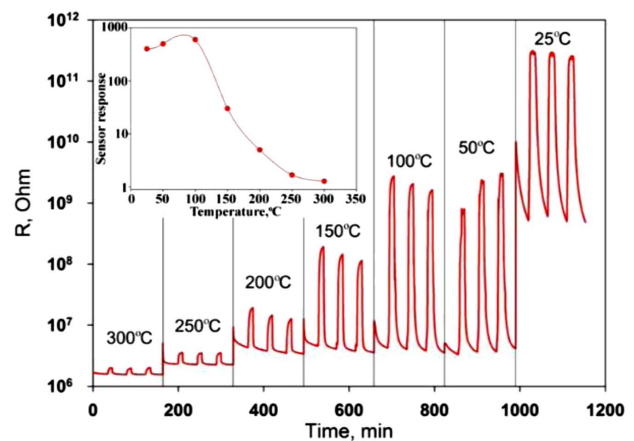


Figure 5. Resistance of WO<sub>3</sub> sample ( $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub>/*h*-WO<sub>3</sub>) in the temperature range 300–25 °C under the periodic change of the gas phase composition (inset: Temperature dependence of the sensor response to 1 ppm NO<sub>2</sub> in the air)

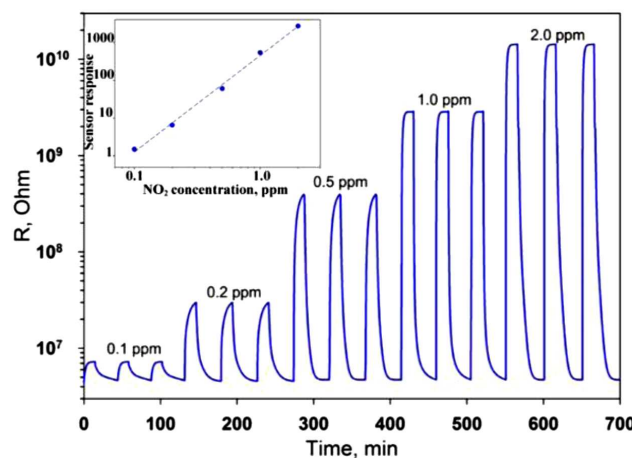


Figure 6. Resistance of WO<sub>3</sub> sample ( $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub>/*h*-WO<sub>3</sub>) at 100 °C under the periodic change of NO<sub>2</sub> concentration in the air. Inset: Dependence of the sensor response at 100 °C on NO<sub>2</sub> concentration in the air (using double logarithmic coordinates)

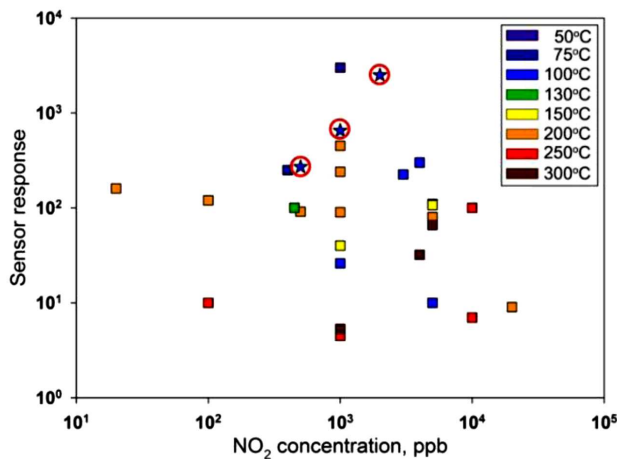
**Table 1. Response of WO<sub>3</sub>-based sensors to NO<sub>2</sub> gas at room temperature**

	Synthesis method	Sensor response $S = R_{NO_2}/R_{air}$	NO <sub>2</sub> concentration [ppm]	Ref.
WO <sub>3</sub> /MWCNT* nanocomposite films	Decomposition of a metal organic compound	4.2	1	[117]
WO <sub>3</sub> nanoparticles/ porous Si	Sol-gel synthesis followed by dip-coating	2.0	1	[118]
WO <sub>3</sub> /RGO** hybrids	CTAB*** assisted chemical precipitation	1.1	1	[119]
WO <sub>3</sub> /RGO hybrids	Decomposition of a metal organic compound	1.8	1	[120]
WO <sub>3</sub> nanorods/porous Si	Hydrothermal synthesis	3.5	1	[121]
WO <sub>3</sub> nanoparticles ( $\gamma$ -WO <sub>3</sub> / $h$ -WO <sub>3</sub> )	Peroxide route	450	1	This paper

\*MWCNT – multi-walled carbon nanotube

\*\*RGO – reduced graphene oxide

\*\*\*CTAB – cetrimonium bromide; cetyltrimethylammonium bromide



**Figure 7. Comparison of the values of the sensor response of the WO<sub>3</sub> sample ( $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub>/ $h$ -WO<sub>3</sub>) synthesized by peroxide-assisted route (circled asterisks) with the literature data [20,24,30,31,92–113] (squares) – the colour of the symbols corresponds to the measurement temperature**

compared the response of these materials with single-phased WO<sub>3</sub> synthesized using a similar approach. In all cases, the sensitivity of the composite materials appeared to be higher than that of the single-phased materials, but this feature has not been discussed at all. Similarly, biphasic material has shown the best sensor response towards NO<sub>2</sub> than other gases, which together with effect of humidity should be investigated in greater detail in future studies.

As follows from Fig. 1b, the main phase in the material synthesized in this work is  $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub>, the content of  $h$ -WO<sub>3</sub> being about 5–10 wt.%. Hexagonal  $h$ -WO<sub>3</sub> has a higher energy conduction band than monoclinic  $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub> [114,115]. Thus, in the junction zone of these two phases, electron transfer from  $h$ -WO<sub>3</sub> to  $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub> occurs. As a result, the concentration of charge carriers increases in the  $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub> phase, which provides the main conduction path through the material. In our previous

studies of gallium doped zinc oxide [116], it has been shown that an increase in electron concentration leads to an increase in the sensor response of  $n$ -type semiconductor oxide in the detection of NO<sub>2</sub>, (this gas is an electron acceptor), due to the shift of equilibrium in Eq. 1 to the right. So, it is reasonable to assume that it is an increase in the concentration of electrons in the  $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub> phase (due to their transfer from  $h$ -WO<sub>3</sub>) that is the cause of the enhanced sensor response of the obtained WO<sub>3</sub>/WO<sub>3</sub>-composite material. Furthermore, we hope that this study will open new fields of investigations (e.g. XPS since the valence state of tungsten was so important in the synthesis and properties) in order to take a look into this mix-phase material, ratio and stability of the phases, and to further investigate and understand the mechanism of the NO<sub>2</sub> sensing.

#### IV. Conclusions

In this work highly crystalline tungsten oxide was synthesized via a facile low-temperature peroxide-mediated route. Afterwards, the synthesized material was experimentally and theoretically characterized and electrical properties investigated using *ab initio* calculations and *in situ* measurements. The synthesized material is the  $h$ -WO<sub>3</sub>/ $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub> composite, which showed excellent sensor response towards NO<sub>2</sub> and had the highest reported level. Room temperature sensor response exceeded recently reported data by more than two orders of magnitude. The possible reason for the enhanced sensor response of the composite is an electron transfer from  $h$ -WO<sub>3</sub> to  $\gamma$ -WO<sub>3</sub> phase.

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§ Supporting Information can be downloaded using following link: <https://bit.ly/3qhTy90>

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