

Application of Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs) in Gas Adsorption and Separation

Zhiqing Dong

Xihua University

Abstract

Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs) have emerged as promising materials for gas adsorption and separation due to their exceptional surface area, tunable porosity, and versatility in functionalization. This paper explores the mechanisms of gas adsorption in MOFs, including physical adsorption, chemisorption, and synergistic effects, which contribute to their efficiency in capturing and separating gases. The applications of MOFs in key areas such as carbon dioxide capture, hydrogen storage, natural gas separation, and air purification are discussed, highlighting their potential to address pressing environmental and energy challenges. Additionally, the use of MOFs in selective gas separation, membranes, and adsorption-based technologies like Pressure Swing Adsorption (PSA) and Vacuum Swing Adsorption (VSA) is explored, emphasizing their advantages over traditional materials. Despite challenges related to scalability, stability, and cost, MOFs hold great promise for advancing gas separation technologies in the near future, offering more efficient, sustainable, and environmentally friendly solutions.

Keywords: *Metal-Organic Frameworks; Gas Adsorption; Gas Separation; Carbon Dioxide Capture; Hydrogen Storage; Natural Gas Separation; Pressure Swing Adsorption*

1 INTRODUCTION

Efficient gas separation is critical for industrial and environmental applications, yet traditional methods like cryogenic distillation and pressure swing adsorption often suffer from high energy consumption and low selectivity. Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs) have emerged as promising alternatives due to their high surface area, tunable pore structures, and selective adsorption capabilities. Composed of metal ions coordinated with organic ligands, MOFs enable efficient carbon dioxide capture, hydrogen storage, and natural gas purification. Their structural versatility allows for targeted modifications, enhancing selectivity and adsorption capacity while offering a cost-effective solution. However, challenges such as long-term stability, scalable synthesis, and multi-component gas separation persist. This research explores the potential of MOFs in gas separation, highlighting recent advancements, challenges, and strategies to enhance their performance. By addressing these issues, MOFs can play a crucial role in improving gas separation efficiency, reducing environmental impact, and advancing sustainable energy technologies.

2 MECHANISMS OF GAS ADSORPTION IN MOFS

2.1 Physical Adsorption

Physical adsorption, also known as physisorption, refers to the adsorption of gas molecules onto the surface of a material through weak van der Waals interactions, without any significant chemical bonding. In the context of Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs), physical adsorption is primarily driven by the high surface area and porosity of the material, which allows gas molecules to be attracted and held within the pores via weak intermolecular forces. These interactions are generally non-covalent in nature and are a result of dipole-induced dipole forces, London dispersion forces, and electrostatic interactions between the gas molecules and the MOF framework.

The high surface area and well-defined porosity of MOFs contribute significantly to the efficiency of physical adsorption. The large number of accessible surface sites within the pores of MOFs allows for a high degree of gas

molecule interaction, leading to the formation of a dense layer of adsorbed molecules on the surface. Moreover, the ability to tune the size and shape of the pores in MOFs enables selective adsorption based on the molecular size and shape of the target gas, further enhancing the effectiveness of physical adsorption. As a result, MOFs can exhibit remarkable adsorption capacities for gases like methane, hydrogen, and nitrogen, particularly under conditions of low temperature and moderate pressure.

Physical adsorption typically does not result in permanent changes to the adsorbed gas molecules, and the adsorption process is generally reversible. This reversibility is a crucial characteristic, as it allows for efficient regeneration of the MOF material by removing the adsorbed gas molecules through the application of heat or a reduction in pressure. Physical adsorption is highly favored for gas storage applications, such as hydrogen or methane storage, where high capacities are required with the ability to release the adsorbed gases under controlled conditions.

2.2 Chemisorption

Chemisorption, or chemical adsorption, occurs when gas molecules form stronger bonds with the material's surface through the creation of chemical bonds, such as covalent or ionic interactions. In MOFs, chemisorption involves the interaction of gas molecules with the metal centers or functional groups present in the organic ligands within the framework. This process is typically characterized by a more substantial and permanent interaction between the gas molecules and the adsorbent compared to physical adsorption.

In MOFs, the metal centers often play a crucial role in chemisorption, as many metals possess unfilled orbitals that are capable of forming bonds with adsorbed gas molecules. For instance, MOFs containing transition metals like copper, zinc, or iron are known to exhibit strong chemisorptive interactions with gases like carbon dioxide (CO₂) and hydrogen (H₂). The metal sites in the framework can interact with the gas molecules through coordination bonds, allowing for more selective and stable adsorption, which is particularly useful in gas separation processes.

Chemisorption in MOFs is highly advantageous when specific gas molecules need to be selectively captured or removed from a mixture. For example, MOFs with amine-functionalized linkers exhibit strong chemisorptive interactions with CO₂, making them effective candidates for carbon capture applications. The strength and specificity of the chemisorptive bond enable MOFs to selectively adsorb target gases over others, improving the efficiency of gas separation processes such as CO₂/N₂ or CO₂/CH₄ separations^[1].

However, one of the challenges of chemisorption is that it often involves stronger interactions that may not be easily reversible. While chemisorption provides high selectivity and stability for certain gas molecules, the regeneration of MOFs after adsorption can be more energy-intensive compared to physical adsorption. Thus, chemisorption is most suitable for applications where selective and stable gas capture is critical, and the energy cost for regeneration is justified.

2.3 Synergistic Effects

Synergistic effects in MOFs refer to the enhanced performance achieved through the combination of physical adsorption and chemisorption mechanisms, or the interaction between the framework's structural features and functionalization. These effects can significantly improve the efficiency and selectivity of gas adsorption and separation processes, leading to better overall performance compared to each mechanism acting independently.

For example, many MOFs exhibit both physical adsorption via van der Waals interactions and chemisorption through coordination with metal centers or functional groups. This dual-mode adsorption mechanism allows for the combined advantages of high adsorption capacity (from physical adsorption) and high selectivity (from chemisorption). The synergistic interaction between the gas molecules and the MOF framework leads to an optimized adsorption process that can be fine-tuned to capture specific gases while minimizing the adsorption of undesired components.

One prominent example of synergistic effects is seen in the selective capture of carbon dioxide (CO₂). MOFs that are functionalized with amines or other polar groups can chemically interact with CO₂, forming strong bonds, while their physical adsorption capabilities enable the storage of additional CO₂ molecules. The combination of these two

mechanisms results in MOFs with both high CO₂ uptake capacity and high selectivity, making them ideal candidates for CO₂ capture from flue gases or air^[2].

Another example of synergism can be observed in MOFs designed for hydrogen storage. The physical adsorption of hydrogen molecules onto the porous surface of the MOF framework, combined with chemisorption interactions between hydrogen and specific metal centers, can lead to higher hydrogen storage capacities at lower temperatures and pressures. These synergistic effects enable MOFs to outperform traditional storage materials, offering higher volumetric and gravimetric hydrogen densities.

Furthermore, synergistic effects can arise from the design of MOFs that incorporate both catalytic and adsorption functions. In such cases, the MOF framework not only adsorbs target gases but also facilitates chemical reactions, such as selective catalytic oxidation or hydrogenation, while retaining its adsorption properties. This combination of adsorption and catalysis opens up new possibilities for applications such as gas purification and the removal of toxic gases from industrial emissions.

Overall, the synergistic effects in MOFs present a unique advantage for gas adsorption and separation, enabling these materials to address complex challenges in environmental and industrial applications while providing high performance in both capacity and selectivity.

3 APPLICATION OF MOFs IN GAS ADSORPTION

3.1 Carbon Dioxide Capture

The capture of carbon dioxide (CO₂) has become a critical technology in addressing climate change, as CO₂ is a major greenhouse gas contributing to global warming. Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs) have emerged as one of the most promising materials for CO₂ capture due to their high surface area, tunable porosity, and the ability to functionalize the framework with specific chemical sites that facilitate selective adsorption. The inherent porosity of MOFs allows for the efficient uptake of CO₂, while functional groups such as amines, hydroxyls, or carboxylates can be introduced into the MOF structure to enhance chemisorption, creating strong interactions between the CO₂ molecules and the framework.

MOFs with functionalized metal centers or organic linkers have shown exceptional performance in CO₂ capture. For example, frameworks incorporating amine-functionalized linkers can form strong interactions with CO₂ via hydrogen bonding and chemical coordination. This allows for high CO₂ selectivity and capacity, particularly in the presence of other gases such as nitrogen (N₂) or methane (CH₄). Additionally, MOFs offer the advantage of facile regeneration after CO₂ adsorption, as the adsorbed gas can be released by adjusting the temperature or pressure conditions, making them ideal for large-scale applications.

Recent advancements in MOF-based CO₂ capture technologies have focused on improving the stability, adsorption capacity, and selectivity of these materials under industrial conditions. Hybrid materials, where MOFs are combined with other substances such as polymers or silica, have also been explored to enhance CO₂ adsorption performance while addressing issues such as framework stability and resistance to moisture. The ability to capture CO₂ directly from ambient air or from industrial exhaust gases positions MOFs as a promising solution for mitigating the impacts of carbon emissions and facilitating carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies^[3].

3.2 Hydrogen Storage

Hydrogen is widely considered a clean and renewable energy source, and its storage poses one of the greatest challenges for widespread adoption in fuel cell applications and other energy systems. Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs) are gaining attention for hydrogen storage due to their ability to offer high surface areas, tunable pore sizes, and the flexibility to integrate metal centers that can bind hydrogen molecules through weak interactions, such as van der Waals forces, or stronger interactions, like chemisorption.

Hydrogen storage in MOFs is typically achieved through two main mechanisms: physical adsorption and chemisorption. Physical adsorption allows hydrogen molecules to accumulate on the large surface areas of the MOF

structure, while chemisorption, facilitated by metal centers within the framework, leads to stronger interactions that improve the storage capacity, especially at lower temperatures and moderate pressures. Transition metal-based MOFs, such as those containing copper, nickel, or iron, are particularly effective for hydrogen storage due to their ability to interact with hydrogen molecules through metal-hydride formation or coordination bonding.

The high surface area and tunable pore size of MOFs also allow for the optimization of hydrogen storage properties, such as volumetric and gravimetric hydrogen density. This adaptability is crucial for meeting the DOE (Department of Energy) target for hydrogen storage, which requires efficient storage at low pressures and ambient temperatures. MOF-based materials have demonstrated promising hydrogen uptake capacities that exceed those of traditional storage materials, such as compressed gas or liquid hydrogen. Moreover, MOFs exhibit faster hydrogen adsorption and desorption kinetics, which are essential for practical applications like fuel cell vehicles and stationary energy storage systems.

However, challenges remain in scaling up MOF-based hydrogen storage systems due to issues related to stability under cycling conditions, the cost of synthesis, and the ability to achieve sufficient performance at room temperature and ambient pressure. Ongoing research focuses on developing new MOF compositions with enhanced stability, higher hydrogen uptake capacities, and the ability to operate efficiently at practical temperatures and pressures, making MOFs a key candidate for next-generation hydrogen storage technologies.

3.3 Natural Gas Separation

Natural gas, primarily composed of methane (CH_4), is often accompanied by impurities such as carbon dioxide (CO_2), nitrogen (N_2), hydrogen sulfide (H_2S), and other gases. The separation of methane from these impurities is crucial for improving the quality of natural gas, ensuring its safe use in energy applications, and reducing the environmental impact of its combustion. Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs) have shown significant potential for natural gas separation due to their high surface area, selective gas adsorption properties, and the ability to tune their porosity and functionalization to achieve highly selective separations^[4].

In particular, MOFs can be engineered to selectively adsorb CO_2 or N_2 from methane, enabling the separation of these components in natural gas streams. The tunable pore size and the introduction of specific functional groups, such as amines or metal centers, enable MOFs to differentiate between gases based on their size, shape, and interaction with the adsorbent. For example, MOFs with smaller pore sizes can selectively adsorb smaller molecules like CO_2 , while leaving larger molecules like methane largely unaffected. Additionally, the strong chemisorptive interactions between certain MOFs and CO_2 or H_2S enhance the selectivity of these materials in removing contaminants from methane.

MOF-based membranes and adsorbents for natural gas separation have demonstrated advantages over traditional separation methods, such as cryogenic distillation or pressure swing adsorption (PSA). MOFs offer lower energy consumption, higher selectivity, and the potential for more cost-effective operation due to their high gas uptake capacity and tunable properties. As a result, MOFs are being explored for both pre-combustion CO_2 capture and post-combustion gas separation in natural gas processing, including the purification of biogas and the upgrading of raw natural gas into high-quality methane for industrial and residential use.

3.4 Air Purification

Air pollution, resulting from industrial activities, transportation, and other sources, is a major environmental concern, with harmful gases such as volatile organic compounds (VOCs), nitrogen oxides (NO_x), and sulfur dioxide (SO_2) contributing to smog, acid rain, and respiratory diseases. Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs) offer great potential for air purification, as they can effectively adsorb and selectively remove toxic gases and particulate matter from the air.

MOFs are particularly effective in the removal of VOCs, which are common indoor and outdoor air pollutants. Due to their tunable pore structures and surface chemistry, MOFs can be tailored to selectively adsorb specific VOCs based on their size, shape, and functional properties. MOFs with functionalized metal centers or organic linkers can

provide a highly selective interaction with VOCs, enabling the adsorption of a broad range of organic pollutants, including benzene, toluene, xylene, and formaldehyde. This high selectivity makes MOFs promising candidates for use in air filtration systems, especially in applications that require the removal of specific contaminants from indoor air, such as in homes, offices, and industrial settings^[5].

Additionally, MOFs have been shown to effectively adsorb and remove harmful gases such as CO₂, NO_x, and SO₂, which contribute to air pollution and global warming. The ability to modify the MOF structure with specific functional groups can improve the selectivity and capacity for these gases, making MOFs suitable for use in industrial flue gas treatment and environmental remediation applications. The high surface area and stability of MOFs also allow for efficient recycling and regeneration of the materials, further enhancing their utility in long-term air purification applications.

4 APPLICATION OF MOFs IN GAS SEPARATION

4.1 Selective Gas Separation

Selective gas separation is a crucial process in a wide range of industrial applications, including the purification of natural gas, air separation, hydrogen recovery, and carbon dioxide capture. Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs) have shown exceptional potential in this field due to their tunable porosity, high surface area, and selective adsorption properties. MOFs can be tailored to selectively adsorb specific gas molecules based on their size, shape, and chemical interactions, making them highly efficient for gas separation processes.

The unique feature of MOFs is their ability to exhibit high selectivity in separating gases that differ only slightly in molecular size or other properties. For instance, MOFs with microporous structures can separate gases like CO₂ and CH₄, which are commonly encountered in natural gas purification. The functionalization of MOFs by introducing specific chemical groups, such as amines or hydroxyls, enhances their ability to selectively adsorb gases with specific interactions. This selectivity is particularly important in processes such as carbon capture, where CO₂ must be separated from other gases like nitrogen or methane. Additionally, MOFs are being explored for the separation of hydrogen from other gases in hydrogen production and recovery, owing to their ability to adsorb hydrogen efficiently while leaving other gases, such as nitrogen or methane, largely unaffected^[6].

As the demand for cleaner energy and more efficient gas separation technologies grows, MOFs are poised to play a central role in these processes. Their ability to offer high selectivity, coupled with their scalability and tunability, makes them attractive candidates for both industrial and environmental applications, especially when precise separation of gases is required under varying temperature and pressure conditions.

4.2 Membranes and Mixed Matrix Membranes (MMMs)

Membrane-based gas separation technologies have gained significant attention due to their ability to perform efficient separations with low energy consumption. Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs) have been incorporated into membrane structures due to their high surface area and tunable porosity, which enable enhanced gas separation performance. MOF-based membranes are particularly promising because they offer the potential for high permeability and selectivity for specific gases, such as CO₂, N₂, CH₄, and H₂.

One of the major challenges in the development of MOF membranes is their processability and stability. Traditional MOF membranes are often difficult to fabricate into thin, dense layers that are required for practical applications. However, significant advancements have been made in the preparation of thin MOF films and the optimization of membrane properties. The fabrication of MOF-based membranes typically involves techniques such as intercrystalline bonding, solvent-assisted processes, or using secondary supports such as porous ceramics to enhance their mechanical stability and permeance^[7].

In addition to standalone MOF membranes, the concept of Mixed Matrix Membranes (MMMs) has emerged as a promising approach for improving the performance of gas separation processes. MMMs combine MOFs with polymer matrices to form composite materials that benefit from the high permeability and selectivity of MOFs while maintaining the mechanical robustness and processability of polymers. These composite membranes offer a balance

of performance and practicality, making them suitable for large-scale industrial applications. For example, MOFs can be integrated into polymer membranes for the selective separation of CO₂ from natural gas or for hydrogen purification. By adjusting the concentration of MOF particles within the polymer matrix, the properties of the MMMs can be tailored to achieve optimal separation performance for specific gas pairs.

4.3 Pressure Swing Adsorption (PSA) and Vacuum Swing Adsorption (VSA)

Pressure Swing Adsorption (PSA) and Vacuum Swing Adsorption (VSA) are widely used technologies for gas separation and purification. These methods rely on the differential adsorption capacities of gases at different pressures and/or temperatures. Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs) are increasingly being explored as adsorbents in PSA and VSA systems due to their high surface area, tunable pore sizes, and selective gas adsorption properties. In PSA and VSA, the adsorbent material selectively adsorbs certain gases from a mixture at high pressure or low pressure, respectively, and the adsorbed gases are later desorbed under different conditions, enabling efficient separation^[8].

MOFs offer several advantages as adsorbents in PSA and VSA systems. Their high surface area provides a large number of adsorption sites for gas molecules, while their tunable porosity allows for selective adsorption of gases based on size, shape, and chemical affinity. For example, MOFs can selectively adsorb CO₂, N₂, or CH₄ from gas mixtures, making them ideal for applications such as natural gas purification, CO₂ capture, or hydrogen recovery. The ability of MOFs to be functionalized further enhances their performance, as specific functional groups can be introduced into the framework to improve the selectivity and capacity for particular gases.

One of the key benefits of MOFs in PSA and VSA processes is their high adsorption capacities, which can result in higher throughput and more efficient separation processes compared to traditional adsorbents, such as activated carbon or zeolites. Moreover, the ability of MOFs to be regenerated through simple pressure or temperature cycling makes them well-suited for large-scale applications, as they can be reused multiple times without significant loss in performance.

Despite the promising potential of MOFs in PSA and VSA applications, challenges remain in terms of stability, particularly under cycling conditions where adsorbents are repeatedly exposed to high-pressure and low-pressure cycles. The long-term stability of MOFs, especially when subjected to temperature fluctuations or harsh gas environments, remains an area of active research. Additionally, the scalability and cost-effectiveness of MOFs need to be addressed before they can be widely adopted for commercial applications in PSA and VSA systems.

5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Metal-Organic Frameworks (MOFs) represent a transformative class of materials with significant potential for gas adsorption and separation applications. Their high surface area, tunable pore structures, and selective adsorption capabilities make them particularly effective in addressing key environmental and energy concerns, such as CO₂ capture, hydrogen storage, and air purification. The integration of MOFs into membrane-based technologies and adsorption processes, such as PSA and VSA, showcases their versatility and efficiency in gas separation, with the added benefit of tunable functionalization to enhance selectivity. Although challenges remain regarding the stability, scalability, and cost-effectiveness of MOFs, ongoing research is expected to overcome these hurdles, leading to the widespread adoption of MOFs in industrial and environmental applications. Ultimately, the continued development of MOF-based technologies promises to revolutionize gas separation processes, contributing to cleaner energy solutions, enhanced resource recovery, and improved environmental protection.

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