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Effect of cobalt alloying on the electrochemical performance of manganese oxide nanoparticles nucleated on multiwalled carbon nanotubes

Sajad Yazdani$^{1,2}$, Raana Kashfi-Sadabad$^2$, Alessandro Palmieri$^3$, William E Mustain$^3$ and Michael Thompson Pettes$^{1,2,4}$

1 Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269-3139, United States of America
2 Institute of Materials Science, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269-3136, United States of America
3 Department of Chemical & Biomolecular Engineering, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269-3222, United States of America

E-mail: michael.pettes@uconn.edu

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Abstract

MnO is an electrically insulating material which limits its usefulness in lithium ion batteries. We demonstrate that the electrochemical performance of MnO can be greatly improved by using oxygen-functional groups created on the outer walls of multiwalled carbon nanotubes (MWCNTs) as nucleation sites for metal oxide nanoparticles. Based on the mass of the active material used in the preparation of electrodes, the composite conversion-reaction anode material Mn$_{1-x}$Co$_x$O/MWCNT with $x = 0.2$ exhibited the highest reversible specific capacity, 790 and 553 mAh$^{-1}$ at current densities of 40 and 1600 mAg$^{-1}$, respectively. This is 3.1 times higher than that of MnO/MWCNT at a charge rate of 1600 mAg$^{-1}$. Phase segregation in the Mn$_{1-x}$Co$_x$O nanoparticles was not observed for $x \leq 0.15$. Capacity retention in $x = 0, 0.2$, and 1 electrodes showed that the corresponding specific capacities were stabilized at 478, 709 and 602 mAh$^{-1}$ respectively, after 55 cycles at a current density of 400 mAg$^{-1}$. As both MnO and CoO exhibit similar theoretical capacities and MnO/MWCNT and CoO/MWCNT anodes both exhibit lower performance than Mn$_{0.8}$Co$_{0.2}$O/MWCNT, the improved performance of the Mn$_{1-x}$Co$_x$O/MWCNT alloy likely arises from beneficial synergistic interactions in the bimetallic system.

Supplementary material for this article is available online

Keywords: lithium ion battery, conversion reaction anode, manganese oxide, cobalt oxide, carbon nanotubes

(Some figures may appear in colour only in the online journal)

Introduction

Manganese oxide based materials are attractive for lithium ion batteries due to their high abundance and low environmental impact [1]. Among different classes of these materials, MnO has a relatively high theoretical capacity of 755 mAh$^{-1}$ and low hysteresis voltage (<0.7 V). However, extremely high electrical resistivity and rapid capacity degradation are the limiting factors in reaching the theoretical capacity and achieving long service life [2–4]. Thus, it is highly desirable...
to improve the electrochemical performance of MnO-based materials by increasing their ultra-low electrical conductivity, on the order of $10^{-9}$ S cm$^{-1}$ [5]. In pioneering reports, the electrochemical performance of MnO indicated a low-potential reaction with Li, although capacity was not promising [6]. Through microstructuring, an initial capacity of 650 mAh g$^{-1}$ was obtained in inverse micelle-templated MnCO$_3$ [7]. However, this capacity degraded to 390 mAh g$^{-1}$ at a current rate of 50 mAg$^{-1}$. The reported specific capacity increased versus cycling most likely due to the formation of materials with higher oxidation states [33–35].

Table 1. Summary of performance of state-of-the-art MnO-based materials. The theoretical capacities of MnO [3], CoO [25], and MWCNTs [2] are 755, 716, and 372 mAh g$^{-1}$, respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Number of cycles reported (#)</th>
<th>Current density used in stability test (mAg$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>Final reversible capacity (mAh g$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>High rate capacity (mAh g$^{-1}$) at current density (mAg$^{-1}$)$^a$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carbon-coated MnO [10]</td>
<td>2–150</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>213 (1600 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MnO/graphene nanosheets [20]</td>
<td>2–60</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>691$^b$</td>
<td>390 (1000 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nitrogen-doped MnO/graphene nanosheets [21]</td>
<td>2–90</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>772$^b$</td>
<td>267 (1000 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MnO with N-doped carbon [22]</td>
<td>2–100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>626$^b$</td>
<td>314 (800 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MnO/reduced graphene oxide [26]</td>
<td>2–50</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>670$^b$</td>
<td>331 (800 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MnO/C composites [27]</td>
<td>2–50</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>562 (1000 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MnO nanoparticle@mesoporous carbon composites [28]</td>
<td>2–80</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>784</td>
<td>609 (1000 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MnO coated with N-doped carbon [29]</td>
<td>2–400</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>451 (1000 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollow porous MnO/C microspheres [30]</td>
<td>2–50</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>260 (1000 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MnO/Carbon nanopeapods [31]</td>
<td>2–100</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1047</td>
<td>551 (1500 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porous MnO/N-doped carbon [32]</td>
<td>2–600</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>658 (1000 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MnO/MWCNT (present study)</td>
<td>2–55</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>177 (1600 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mn$<em>{0.8}$Co$</em>{0.2}$O/MWCNT (present study)</td>
<td>5–55</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>709</td>
<td>642 (800 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>553 (1600 mAg$^{-1}$)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$ The reported higher current density rates up to 1600 mAg$^{-1}$ were chosen as these are both more relevant to technological applications and can be more easily compared with the results of the current study;

$^b$ The reported capacities are at different current densities.

Methods

Chemicals

Manganese(II) acetate tetrahydrate Mn(CH$_3$COO)$_2$·4H$_2$O, cobalt(II) acetate tetrahydrate Co(CH$_3$COO)$_2$·4H$_2$O, ethyl alcohol (CH$_3$CH$_2$OH), multiwalled carbon nanotubes (MWCNTs)
Synthesis of oxidized multiwalled carbon nanotubes

Oxidized multiwalled carbon nanotubes were prepared according to a procedure reported in [36], which is similar to the Hummer’s method for preparation of graphene oxide [37]. In a typical synthesis, 1 g MWCNT was transferred into a round-bottom flask (250 ml) and 60 ml of concentrated sulfuric acid was added and stirred at room temperature for ~24 h. The flask was then heated in an oil bath, kept at 45 °C for 10 min, after which 0.1 g of sodium nitrate (NaNO₃) was added to the mixture. After 10 min while retaining the reaction temperature under 20 °C in an ice bath, 1 g of potassium permanganate (KMnO₄) was slowly added to the reaction. It should be noted that the addition of KMnO₄ should be slow and all the required safety precautions related to working with concentrated acids should be met. After 30 min, the sample was removed from the iced bath and after 5 min was transferred to an oil bath at 45 °C. After 30 min, 3 ml of deionized (DI) water was slowly added to the flask, and the reaction was proceeded by adding 5 and 40 ml of DI water after 5 and 10 min, respectively. After allowing the reaction to continue for another 15 min, the heat source was removed and 140 ml of DI water followed by 10 ml of 30% hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) solution were poured into the solution in order to stop the reaction. The mixture was then kept stirring at room temperature for 15 min. The obtained sample was washed with 5% HCl in DI water and centrifuged twice to remove any unreacted cations. The mixture was then continuously washed and centrifuged with DI water until a pH of ~5 was measured. Then the collected sample was dispersed in 100 ml of DI water and sonicated for 30 min. The final product was obtained by centrifugation and room temperature vacuum drying.

Synthesis of Mn₁₋ₓCoₓO/MWCNT

Similar to [36, 38], 90 mg of the oxidized MWCNTs was ultrasonically dispersed in a 122.5 ml of 50:1 ethanol:DI water solution for 1 h. The mixture was transferred to a round-bottom flask (250 ml) to which 3 ml of Mn(CH₃COO)₂ · 4H₂O solution (0.6 M) in DI-water was added. A certain amount of Mn solution, x, was replaced by Co(CH₃COO)₂ · 4H₂O solution (0.6 M in DI water) for x = 0.05, 0.10, 0.15 and 0.20 samples. Afterwards, 2.5 ml of ammonium hydroxide was added to the mixture and the flask was transferred to an oil bath at 90 °C and re-fluxed for 24 h. The samples were collected by centrifugation at 7000 rpm and dried in vacuum at room temperature for 72 h. The dried samples were subsequently annealed in argon at 600 °C for 3 h with ramp 1 °C min⁻¹ in order to crystallize the metal oxides and thermally reduce the partially oxidized MWCNTs.

Synthesis of Mn₁₋ₓCoₓO without MWCNTs

The samples without MWCNTs (x = 0, 0.2) were prepared by dissolving the stoichiometric amounts of precursors in 122.5 ml of 50:1 ethanol:DI water solution. Similar to the synthesis described above, the mixture was transferred to a round-bottom flask (250 ml) and re-fluxed in an oil bath at 90 °C for 24 h. Specific to these samples without MWCNTs, the solution was poured in a Petri dish and placed in an oven at 60 °C in air until the solvent evaporated. The obtained powder was collected and annealed under argon at 600 °C for 3 h with ramp 1 °C min⁻¹.

Cell fabrication

Inks containing 70 wt% active materials, 20 wt% conductive carbon black (CNERGY Super C65, Imerys), and 10 wt% polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF, Kynar blend) as the binder were prepared for fabrication of the half-cell ‘cathode’. First, by repeated sonication and mechanical stirring of all ingredients overnight, a homogenous ink in N-methylpyrrolidone (NMP, Acros, 99.5% Extra Dry) was obtained. Copper foil (Alfa Aesar, 99.999%, thickness 0.002 in) as the current collector was roughened and cleaned by isopropanol. The prepared ink was sprayed onto copper foil to form a coating with a uniform thickness subsequently heated at 100 °C for 24 h under vacuum. The coated foil was pressed at 1500 lbs and weighed in order to obtain its mass loading. The active loadings were kept between 1.0 and 1.5 mg cm⁻². Coin cells were assembled in a half-cell configuration with lithium metal as the counter negative electrode (Alfa Aesar, 99.9%) and Celgard 2320 tri-layer PP/PE/PP as the separator in a 2.0 cm diameter coin cell (Hohsen Corp). Lithium hexafluorophosphate (LiPF₆, Acros 98%) (1 M) solution in ethylene carbonate (EC, Acros 99+%; dimethyl carbonate (DMC, Acros 98+%; diethyl carbonate (DEC, Acros 99%) with a ratio of (1:1:1) was used as the electrolyte on both sides of the separator (15 µl). The prepared cathode and counter negative electrode were cut into circles of 1.5 cm in diameter and were used with a 1.9 cm separator. All the battery components were pressed and sealed into the coin cell prior to removal from the glove box.

Electrochemical measurements

All the reported capacities were obtained based on the mass of the active materials. All electrochemical experiments were performed using an Arbin MSTAT battery test system.

Characterization

Powder x-ray diffraction (XRD) analyses were performed on a Bruker D2 Phaser with Cu Kα, radiation (λ = 1.54184 Å) with an operating voltage and current of 30 kV and 10 mA. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) analysis was conducted using a FEI Talos F200X TEM/STEM at an accelerating voltage of 200 kV, and chemical analyses were collected using STEM and energy dispersive x-ray spectroscopy (EDS) with HAADF/BF detectors. Samples
were first dispersed in ethanol and then collected using copper grids covered with thin carbon films. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was performed on a PHI model 590 spectrometer with multipole (Φ Physical Electronics Industries Inc.), using Al Kα radiation (λ = 1486.6 eV). Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was conducted using an Autolab PGSTAT302 N Potentiostat (Eco Chemie) from 1000 kHz to 50 mHz with a 5 mV amplitude and a coin-cell open circuit voltage (2.2 V).

Results and discussion

The Mn₁₋ₓCoₓO nanoparticles were grown on oxidized MWCNTs which were prepared by a modified Hummers method with a lower concentration of KMnO₄ [36, 37]. The mass ratio of Mn₁₋ₓCoₓO to MWCNT was kept at 10:1. Mn(CH₃COO)₂·4H₂O and Co(CH₃COO)₂·4H₂O were used as the Mn and Co sources precursors. In order to reduce the hydrolysis rate and avoid formation or grouping of free particles, 0.5 ml of ammonium hydroxide solution was added to the mixture before heating. The samples were centrifuged and subsequently annealed in argon at 600 °C in order to crystallize the metal oxides and thermally reduce the partially oxidized MWCNTs [36]. In preparation of a working electrode, the Mn₁₋ₓCoₓO/MWCNT materials were combined with carbon black and polyvinylidifluoride (PVDF) in a weight ratio of 70:20:10. Coin cells in half-cell configuration were used to perform the electrochemical measurements with lithium metal as the counter electrode. For a detailed explanation of the chemical synthesis and electrochemical measurements refer to the methods section.

X-ray powder diffraction measurements for the obtained products as shown in figure 1(a). At x = 0, all diffraction peaks can be indexed to a pure cubic crystal structure of MnO with the space group of Fm̅3m (225) according to JCPDS No. 01-077-2929. At x = 1, all peaks were assigned to CoO with the space group of Fm̅3m (225) according to JCPDS No. 48-1719. Cobalt substitution did not result in phase decomposition for x ≤ 0.15. For x ≤ 0.15 the results revealed small shifts in the peaks as shown in the inset of figure 1(a) implying slight changes in lattice d-spacing due to formation of a MnO-CoO solid solution obeying Vegard’s law [39]. At x = 0.2, formation of a secondary phase is observed, where both the primary and secondary phases have d-spacings smaller than MnO and larger than CoO. This indicates the primary phase is closer in stoichiometry to MnO and the secondary phase is closer to CoO, but both phases are Mn₁₋ₓCoₓO solid solutions. Raman spectroscopy indicated expected peaks for MWCNTs [40, 41], where D peaks at 1351.73 and 1350.31 cm⁻¹ and G peaks at 1585.13 and 1583.75 cm⁻¹ were observed for x = 0 and 0.2 samples, respectively (figure 1(b)). The D-to-G-peak intensity ratio was ~1.3 for both samples, indicating the high degree of disorder remaining in the MWCNTs arising from the surface oxidation process used in the synthesis of the composites. In addition, second order G’ peaks at 2700 and 2701.62 and the D + G peaks at 2935.05 and 2940.17 cm⁻¹ were detected for x = 0 and 0.2, respectively. The peaks located at 309.97, 358.39 and 650.20 cm⁻¹ for x = 0 are characteristic of MnO [42, 43]. Peaks located at 297.95, 353.35 and 640.31 cm⁻¹ for x = 0.2 are red shifted compared to those of the un-doped material, due to the alloying of CoO with the MnO host structure. The small peaks located at 172.04 and 461.42 cm⁻¹ were assigned to CoO [44] in the x = 0.2 sample. High-resolution TEM analysis (figures 1(c), (d); and S1, supporting information) confirms the nucleation and growth of MnO and Mn₁₋ₓCoₓO nanoparticles onto the outer walls of the MWCNTs. Nanoparticle sizes were observed to be less than 100 nm for x = 0 and 0.2 (diameters ~7–85 nm, figure S2, supporting information).

The high-resolution XPS analysis of the C 1s peak for x = 0 and 0.2 samples at 284.7 eV (figure 2(a)), indicated the existence of C–C, C–O, C=O and COOH functional groups [45] at 284.6, 286.8, 287.3 and 299.93 eV respectively, with percentage area ratios of 10.21:3.93:1.55:1 for both samples. The oxygen bands at 529, 530.5, 531.8 eV were assigned to MnO, C–O and H–O bonds [46], respectively, as shown in figure 2(b). The band corresponding to adsorbed water at ~533.5 eV was almost negligible (3.58 and 3.24% for x = 0 and 0.2, respectively). The Mn 2p₁/₂ and Mn 2p₁/₂ peaks at 640.5 and 652.1 eV, respectively, with peak-to-peak separation of 11.6 eV were well referenced to the Mn(II) oxidation state [33, 47] (figure 2(c)). Furthermore, Co–O species were detected in the XPS spectra of the x = 0.2 sample as shown in figure 2(d), and the XPS survey (figure S3, supporting information). The XPS spectra of Co 2p₁/₂ and 2p₁/₂ revealed characteristic peaks of CoO at 780 and 795.8 eV and their corresponding satellite peaks with binding energies of 785.3 and 801.8 eV are in agreement with the literature data [48–50]. It should be mentioned that the intense satellite peaks associated with high-spin Co(II) are due to multiple electron excitations, so-called shake-up [51, 52]. For x = 0.2, the Co XPS spectra show that the surface contains CoO, while the XRD results indicate the bulk of the material contains two phases of Mn₁₋ₓCoₓO, the primary phase being Co poor and the secondary phase being Co rich, likely due to Co segregation towards the surface of the nanoparticles. Because of their rock salt structures and the comparable sizes of Mn²⁺ and Co²⁺ cations, MnO and CoO are known to be soluble over the entire Mn₁₋ₓCoₓO (0 ≤ x ≤ 1) composition [53, 54] with a complete solubility at room temperature and a maximum of the miscibility gap in the calculated phase diagram occurring at a very low temperature (242 K) [55]. Despite the calculated complete solubility, phase separation and deviation from the solid solution composition can occur, especially at the surface as has been observed previously by XPS [53] and is observed in the present investigation.

In order to gain more information about the chemical composition of the Mn₁₋ₓCoₓO/MWCNT, high resolution STEM-EDS analysis was performed as shown in figures 3(a)–(e), (see figures 3(f)–(j) for high resolution images) and figure S4, supporting information. The chemical maps showed spatially uniform dispersion of constituent elements throughout the nanoparticles. No detectable oxygen was
found on the MWCNTs (figures 3(b), (c)), although we note that Raman indicates a significant concentration of defects, and XPS indicates C–O, C=O and COOH functional groups.

The Mn$_{1-x}$Co$_x$O/MWCNT ($x = 0, 0.2$) nanocomposites were then used as the cathode material in a Li-ion half-cell as described in the methods section. The first cycle charge and discharge curves of the $x = 0$ and 0.2 samples are shown in figure 4(a) and were obtained at a current density of 40 mAg$^{-1}$. The samples showed initial charge capacities of 474 and 1044 mAhg$^{-1}$ for $x = 0$ and 0.2, respectively at a current density of 40 mAg$^{-1}$. The features observed in the charge data were correlated with the reduction reaction of Mn$^{2+}$ based on the reaction MnO $+ \ 2Li^{+} + 2e^{-} \rightarrow Mn + Li_{2}O$, and the formation of the solid electrolyte interphase (SEI) [9]. The re-oxidation (Mn to Mn$^{2+}$) feature can be found in the slope of the discharge curves from 1 to 1.5 V versus Li/Li$^+$ (figure 4(a)). In addition, capacity fades of 25% and 23% from the first cycle to the second cycle were measured for $x = 0$ and
0.2 respectively (at a current density of 40 mAg\(^{-1}\)), due to SEI formation.

**Discussion**

The charge–discharge behavior of the \(x = 0.2\) sample at various current densities are demonstrated in figure 4(b). As expected, the achievable capacities decreased with increasing rates, though the results showed promising trends for high rate capacities. For example, 91% of the discharge capacity at a low current density of 40 mAg\(^{-1}\) was still achieved at a higher application-relevant rate of 400 mAg\(^{-1}\). The rate performance of the nanocomposite materials is shown in figure 4(c). Both samples exhibited good high rate capacity performances. For instance, for \(x = 0.2\), capacities of 790 and 642 mAhg\(^{-1}\) were obtained at current densities of 40 and 800 mAg\(^{-1}\), respectively. At the highest rate we tested, 1600 mAg\(^{-1}\), the \(x = 0.2\) sample exhibited a capacity of 553 mAhg\(^{-1}\) which is still superior to the theoretical capacity of graphite (372 mAhg\(^{-1}\)) [2]. This value is higher than that of the reported state-of-the-art Mn-based materials with a higher degree of oxidation (therefore a higher theoretical capacity) at the same current density (390 mAhg\(^{-1}\) for Mn\(_3\)O\(_4\)/reduced graphene oxide composites [56]). After cycling at 1600 mAg\(^{-1}\), excellent reversibility was observed for \(x = 0.2\) samples, with measured capacities of 928 and 669 mAhg\(^{-1}\) for \(x = 0.2\) and 372 and 236 mAhg\(^{-1}\) for \(x = 0.2\) at current densities of 40 and 800 mAg\(^{-1}\), respectively. The remarkable performance of the \(x = 0.2\) composite at high rates is more striking when compared with the state-of-the-art literature data reported in table 1 (high capacity rate column). Figure 4(d) illustrates the capacity retention of both samples after 50 cycles from 0 to 3 V versus Li/Li\(^+\) at a current density of 400 mAg\(^{-1}\). After the first five formation cycles, specific capacities of 473 and 740 mAhg\(^{-1}\) were maintained at 478 and 709 mAhg\(^{-1}\) after 55 cycles at 400 mAg\(^{-1}\) for
x = 0 and 0.2, respectively. A comparison between x = 0, 0.5, 0.15, 0.2, 1 samples is given in the figure S5 in the supporting information. Both anodes (x = 0.15, 0.2) show higher capacity retentions than those of MnO/MWCNT and CoO/MWCNT, indicating the improved performance of alloys than their non-alloyed counterparts (x = 0, 1). For instance, the x = 0.2 anode exhibits a capacity 50% and 18% higher than those of x = 0 and 1 respectively, at the same current rate of 400 mAg⁻¹ and after 55 cycles. This is despite the fact that the capacity of the CoO/MWCNT (x = 1) anode increases upon cycling which is attributed to formation of a material with a higher degree of oxidation and a higher theoretical capacity [2, 57]. The excellent stability of a similar preliminary nanocomposite was also demonstrated in a previous study [38].

In order to gain more insights into the role of MWCNTs in the observed high rate-capability of our materials, the electrical resistivities of MnO/MWCNT and pristine MnO were measured using a van der Pauw technique [58, 59] at room temperature. Pellets were fabricated from dried powders using a hydraulic press under 10 000 lb in a 12 mm diameter die. Electrical resistivities of 1.9 × 10⁷ and 3.9 × 10⁻¹ Ω cm were obtained from the averaged slopes of multiple current–voltage curves for MnO and MnO/MWCNT samples, respectively. The 8 orders of magnitude reduction in electrical resistivity of the MnO/MWCNT sample at a MWCNT loading of 40 wt% compared to our pure MnO indicated that nucleating electrochemically active nanomaterials onto MWCNTs is an effective strategy to boost electrical conductivity of conversion-reaction anode materials. The measured electrical resistivity of our pristine MnO is in close agreement with the bulk value (1 × 10⁹ Ω cm) [5]. The improvement due to MWCNTs is further illustrated by comparison with the cycling performance of MnO and Mn⁰.₈Co⁰.₂O without MWCNTs, where inferior capacities of 273 and 176 mAhg⁻¹ are retained after 50 cycles at a current rate of 400 mA g⁻¹ (figure S6, supporting information). Thus, the addition of MWCNTs increases the capacity retention at an application-relevant charge discharge rate of 400 mA g⁻¹ by 1.75 and 2 times for x = 0 and 0.2 anodes, respectively. It should be noted that because the MWCNT weight ratio and oxidation degree play important roles in determining
the electrical conductivities of the samples, obtaining a correlation between these variables requires further study. In addition, the effectiveness of the Co substitution can be clearly observed by comparing the electrochemical performance of $x = 0$ and 0.2 samples as the specific capacity of the Co-alloyed sample is 3.1 times higher than that of the sample without Co at the highest measured current density of 1600 mAg$^{-1}$. This improved performance of the Co-containing samples likely arises due to possible synergistic interactions between Mn and Co in the structure because both MnO [3] and CoO [2] have similar theoretical capacities of 755 and 716 mAhg$^{-1}$, respectively. The mechanism responsible for improvement through Co-alloying can be better understood through EIS analysis. The EIS results reveal that Co-alloying facilitates the charge transfer in the composite electrode, as a smaller charge transfer resistance of 315 $\Omega$ was obtained for the sample with $x = 0.2$ compared to 700 $\Omega$ for $x = 0$ (figure S7 and table S1, supporting information). To the best of our knowledge, there is no reported computational study describing the physical mechanism responsible for the experimentally-observed synergistic effect of Co-alloying on the electrical properties of MnO. However, several experimental studies [60–66] have reported improved electrochemical performances of other phases of manganese oxides by Co-alloying due to enhanced charged transport in the electrode and electrical conductivity of the material. The results of these studies including the present work stress the need for a comprehensive computational investigation in order to identify fundamental changes in the electronic properties of manganese oxides due to Co-incorporation.

Conclusion

In summary, Mn$_{1-x}$Co$_x$O nanoparticles were synthesized directly on oxidized MWCNTs which were subsequently reduced thermally. Structural characterization suggested that...
the Co incorporated into the MnO structure and no secondary phases were observed up to \( x = 0.15 \). The improvement in the specific capacity of the composite electrode at charge–discharge rates up to 1600 mAg\(^{-1}\) suggests that the method used here can be crucial in the modification of highly insulating earth-abundant materials such as MnO, making them promising candidates for battery applications [2, 67]. However, many additional investigations are still needed to clear the pathway for the (Mn,Co)-based materials to reach their optimum potential in practical applications. For instance, the electrochemical contribution of each individual metal oxide and their interactions as an alloy are yet to be understood. The obtained results suggest future computational investigations are necessary to fully understand the role of Co-alloying in improving the charge transport. Identifying the effects of synthesis parameters such as the degree of oxidation of the MWCNTs, the active material to MWCNT weight ratio, and the annealing temperature can optimize the performance of the composite anode. Alloying with other transition metal oxides or alkali and alkaline earth metals will offer the possibility to further increase the electrochemical performance of MnO-based nanocomposite anode materials.

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