

## Article

# Multi-Walled Carbon Nanotubes Modified NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> for the Efficient Photocatalytic Reduction of Hexavalent Chromium

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**Abstract:** Hexavalent chromium (Cr(VI)) compounds are considered to be occupational carcinogens, which can be transferred from the environment to the human body and pose a significant threat to human health. It is particularly urgent to explore a more efficient catalyst for removing Cr(VI) to comply with discharge standards. The addition of CNTs enables the separation and transfer of photogenerated charges. Thus, we synthesized a range of NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> hybrid materials with different multi-walled carbon nanotube (MWCNTs) contents using a two-step hydrothermal method. The composites had significant advantages compared to pure NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>, such as an enhanced visible light absorption, increased specific surface area, high electron–hole pair separation, and fast electron transport. Thus, MWCNT addition enabled efficient photocatalytic performances in terms of reducing hexavalent chromium (Cr(VI)). Among all the composite samples, the MWCNT/NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> with 0.050 g of MWCNTs achieved the highest efficiency in reducing Cr(VI) under light irradiation, which showed a removal rate close to 100% within 40 min. Such CNT-based composite photocatalysts could be used to reduce the highly toxic Cr(VI) in environmental applications.

**Keywords:** photocatalysis; hexavalent chromium; NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>; CNT; reduction



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## 1. Introduction

In the past decades, water resource pollution has become more and more severe with industrialization development [1]. Heavy metal pollution due to the massive application of heavy metals in industry is gaining widespread attention [2,3]. Among them, hexavalent chromium (Cr(VI)) is often used as an essential raw material in electroplating, pigment processing, leather making, photographic, textile, and other applications. Chromium is usually present in two different oxidation states, hexavalent chromium (Cr(VI)) and trivalent chromium (Cr(III)) [4,5]. Cr(III) is less toxic in the environment and plays a vital role in metabolic processes as a trace metal essential to human nutrition [6,7]. In addition, it can be readily precipitated out of wastewater as Cr(OH)<sub>3</sub> in an alkaline or neutral solution and removed as solid waste. Unfortunately, Cr(VI) is 100 times more toxic than Cr(III), which the US has classified as a top-rated toxic pollutant. This was by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) due to its dangerous persistence and extremely low degradability in water and soil. Thus, the reduction of Cr(VI) to Cr(III) is considered to be a critical step in the treatment of wastewater containing Cr(VI) [8–10]. In addition, Cr(VI) can quickly enter food chains and destroy human enzyme systems through ingestion, inhalation, or skin contact, which poses a considerable threat to human health [11,12]. Studies have shown that releasing potentially carcinogenic, highly toxic, and non-degradable Cr(VI) into the environment can cause health problems such as pulmonary gland obstruction, epidermal irritation, hepatitis, and cancer [11,13,14]. Therefore, the conversion of Cr(VI) into Cr(III) is a desirable method for strictly controlling the concentration of Cr(VI) in industrial wastewater so that the wastewater can be safely discharged.

Various conventional methods have been adopted to remove Cr(VI) from water environments, including ion exchange, adsorption, chemical reduction, bioremediation, physical reverse osmosis, and membrane separation [15–20]. However, traditional methods often result in ancillary contaminants, a high energy intake, and a low efficacy, which are relatively expensive and environmentally unfriendly [21,22]. Actual industrial wastewater is often treated using the chemical reduction method, which reduces Cr(VI) to Cr(III) by adding reducing agents (such as NaHSO<sub>3</sub>, Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>3</sub>, and iron powder, etc.) to the wastewater, and then adding lime or sodium hydroxide for precipitation and separation [23,24]. The reducing agent needs to be added in an acidic environment, and the amount of reducing agent added must be more significant than the theoretical amount, but a large amount would cause the wastewater chemical oxygen demand to rise [25]. The main advantages of this method are its relatively mature technology, simple operation, low investment, and good results in engineering applications. However, it has a large amount of sludge and will produce secondary pollution, which is not in line with the development concept of green environmental protection.

Photocatalysis is a promising technology for achieving the one-step removal of Cr(VI) using sunlight due to its efficient, simple, and environmentally friendly features [26–29]. It has been extensively studied in environmental and energy fields [30–33]. More and more semiconductor photocatalysts [34] are being investigated and applied for Cr(VI) reduction, hydrogen production, carbon dioxide reduction, and the degradation of organic pollutants such as TiO<sub>2</sub> [35–38], g-C<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> [39–41], ZnIn<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> [42,43], NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> [43], CuS [44], and BiVO<sub>4</sub> [39,45]. Unmodified photocatalysts tend to have a short photogenerated carrier lifetime and low specific surface area, leading to inefficient photocatalysis, which limits their development and practical application [46]. As an ideal additive phase for composite materials, carbon nanotubes (CNTs) have excellent electrical and mechanical properties, and their suitable pore size distribution allows for a better dispersion of metal components [43,47–50]. Moreover, their unique and stable structure and morphology, especially their surface properties, can be modified in different ways according to the needs of people, making them an ideal new catalyst carrier material [51]. The research on CNTs as catalyst carrier materials has mainly focused on loading active components onto CNTs [52–54]. In the photocatalysis of a single semiconductor, the photogenerated electrons migrate to the conduction band (CB) and then tend to return to the valence band (VB) again, which significantly reduces the photocatalytic efficiency. The addition of CNTs enables the separation and transfer of photogenerated charges [25,55]. In this study, CNTs were hybridized with NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>. CNTs as a carrier not only inhibited the aggregation of NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> and increased the specific surface area of the catalysts, but also effectively inhibited the recombination of photogenerated carriers through charge transfer. The research content of this paper is instructive for the preparation and application of CNTs in photocatalysts.

Herein, a series of MWCNT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> (C-NCS) composites with different MWCNT contents were prepared using a relatively facile two-step hydrothermal process. The synthesized composites were utilized for the photocatalytic reduction of Cr(VI) under UV-Visible radiation to evaluate their photocatalytic activity. The materials were characterized in detail using XRD, SEM, TEM, XPS, and BET, etc. The selective removal performance of the composites for Cr(VI) was also explored. Compared to the pure NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>, the composites with added MWCNTs showed a better photocatalytic activity. Among them, 0.050MWCNT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> had the best performance in the photocatalytic reduction of Cr(VI).

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Synthesis of Composite Photocatalysts

Firstly, 0.4 g of PVP (K30) was added to 50 mL of ultrapure water and ultrasonically dispersed well. In total, 0.050 g of multi-walled carbon nanotubes (MWCNTs) was added to the above solution, followed by 30 min of treatment using an ultrasonic reactor (SONICS VCX1500, SONICS & MATERIALS INC, 53 CHURCH HILL RD. NEWTOWN, CT, USA). The dispersion was stirred until it was cooled, then 0.1783 g of nickel chloride hexahydrate,

0.3568 g of cobalt chloride hexahydrate, 0.45 g of urea, and 10 mL of ultrapure water were added and stirred for 30 min. It was added to the hydrothermal kettle and reacted at 130 °C for 12 h. The obtained sample (precursor of 0.050C-NCS) was washed with ultrapure water and 75% alcohol and finally dried in an oven at 70 °C. In the second hydrothermal reaction step, 0.2 g of as-obtained product, 0.6 g of sodium sulfide nonahydrate, and 60 mL of ultrapure water were added to the hydrothermal kettle, sonicated for 2 min, stirred for 30 min, and then reacted hydrothermally at a temperature of 180 °C for 12 h. Similarly, various amounts of MWCNTs (0 g, 0.005 g, 0.020 g, 0.035 g, 0.050 g, 0.075 g, and 0.100 g) were added in the first step of the hydrothermal process to synthesize the MWNCT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> composite samples. The obtained composite samples were named NCS, 0.005C-NCS, 0.020C-NCS, 0.035C-NCS, 0.050C-NCS, 0.075C-NCS, and 0.100C-NCS, respectively.

## 2.2. Photocatalytic Performance Measurements

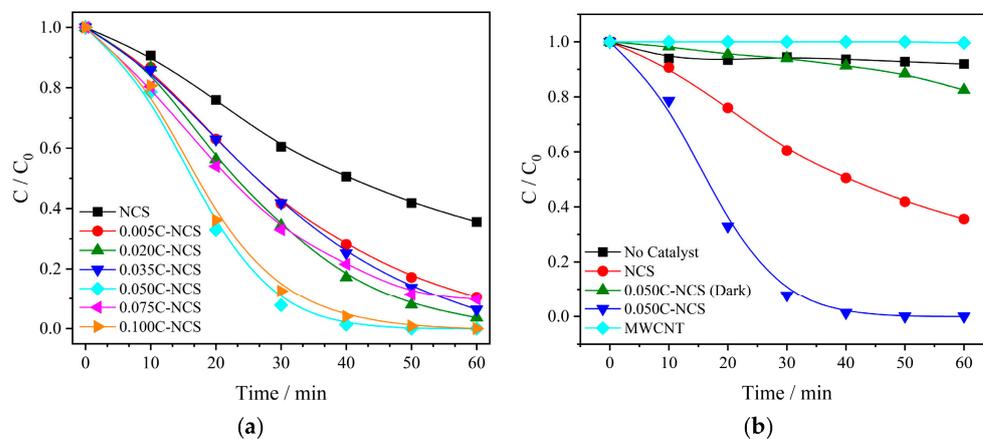
The photocatalytic activity of the samples was evaluated by reducing Cr(VI) (K<sub>2</sub>Cr<sub>2</sub>O<sub>7</sub> solution). In this reaction, 15 mg catalysts were dispersed into 30 mL of 50 ppm Cr(VI) solution and then stirred in the dark for 30 min to reach the absorption–desorption equilibrium. Next, the suspension was irradiated with a 300 W Xenon lamp (CEL-HXF300-T3, Beijing China Education Au-Light Co., Ltd, Beijing, China) with a VisREF filter (350~780 nm). A total of 1 mL of sample was, intermittently and in specific time intervals, filtered through a 0.22 µm pore-sized PTFE syringe filter to determine the removal rate of Cr(VI). The concentration of Cr(VI) was determined with a UV-Vis spectrophotometer (Shimadzu UV2600, Shimadzu corporation, Nishinokyo Kuwabara-cho, Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto, Japan) using a diphenylcarbonyldihydrazide colorimetric method.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Photocatalytic Performances

We synthesized NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> nanoparticles with different MWCNT contents using a two-step hydrothermal method, adding 0 g, 0.005 g, 0.020 g, 0.035 g, 0.050 g, 0.075 g, and 0.100 g. The products obtained were defined as NCS, 0.005C-NCS, 0.020C-NCS, 0.035C-NCS, 0.050C-NCS, 0.075C-NCS, and 0.100C-NCS, respectively. The photocatalytic performances of the samples were evaluated using a 60 min reduction experiment of Cr(VI) with a controlled amount of photocatalyst under visible light irradiation, as shown in Figure 1a. A concentration of 30 mL of 50 ppm Cr(VI) was chosen for the photoreduction experiments. A schematic diagram of this reactor is demonstrated in Figure S1. The results showed that, when using pure NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> as the photocatalyst, Cr(VI) could only be reduced by 64.4% in 60 min. However, all composites containing MWCNTs exhibited an excellent photocatalytic activity. In particular, 0.050C-NCS could reduce Cr(VI) entirely within 40 min, which exhibited the best photocatalytic performance. Figure 1b shows the results of the control experiment for the reduction of Cr(VI) by 0.050C-NCS, and it can be seen that the concentration of Cr(VI) was almost constant under light conditions only. At the same time, only 17.5% of Cr(VI) was adsorbed under dark conditions, and the MWCNT had almost no photocatalytic effect on Cr(VI), which further demonstrates the essential role of this composite in the photocatalytic reduction process of Cr(VI). Furthermore, the electron spin resonance (ESR) detection results (Figure S2) also indicated that a distinct ·O<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> the characteristic signal peak was detected at 0.050C-NCS. In contrast, the detection of pristine NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> indicated that the intensity of the O<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> signal was significantly lower than that of 0.050C-NCS. This result also demonstrated an improvement in the photocatalytic performance when a certain amount of MWCNT was added. By verifying the effect of scavengers on photocatalytic efficiency, the active species with contributing roles in the photocatalytic process can be elucidated [56]. As shown in Figure S3, potassium bromate (10 mM) hindered the photocatalytic reduction process, which demonstrates that the photoelectrons were mainly responsible for the Cr(VI) photocatalytic reduction enhancement of the 0.050C-NCS. Furthermore, we compared the reaction conditions and reduction activity of different photocatalysts reported in the recent literature with the present work, and

the results are listed in Table S1. Compared to previous studies, 0.050C-NCS exhibited an excellent photocatalytic reduction of Cr(VI).

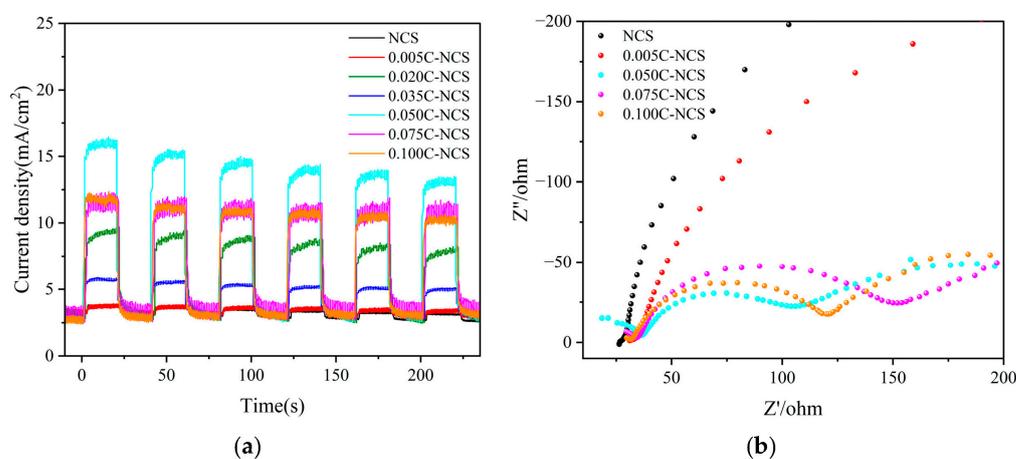


**Figure 1.** (a) Photocatalytic reduction curves of Cr(VI) in the presence of as-prepared samples with different amounts of MWCNTs (15 mg photocatalyst, 30 mL 50 ppm Cr(VI)); and (b) control experiment of photocatalytic reduction of Cr(VI) for 0.050C-NCS.

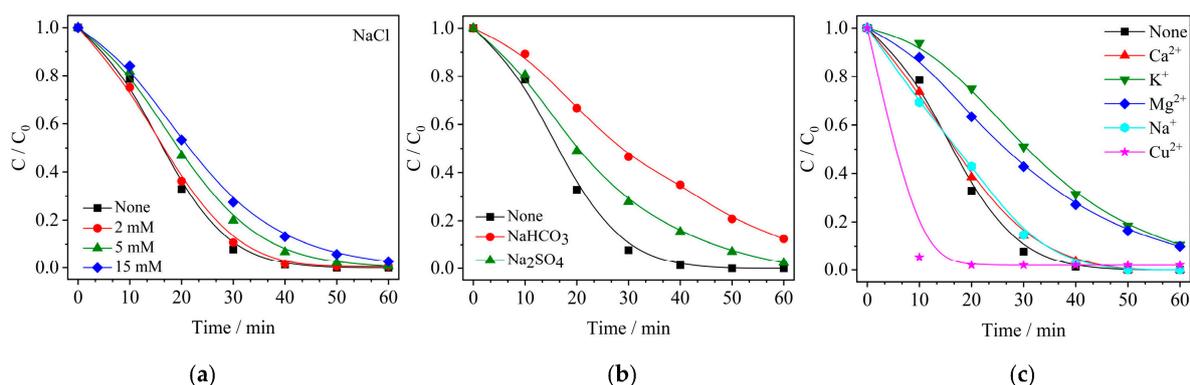
The separation rate of photogenerated electron–hole pairs is an essential factor affecting the photocatalytic activity of a photocatalyst. A higher separation efficiency of the photogenerated electron–hole pairs will result in a higher photocatalytic activity of the photocatalyst. To evaluate photocatalysts' charge carrier separation and transport efficiency, photocurrent and Electrochemical Impedance Spectroscopy (EIS) analyses were conducted. The photocurrent response in Figure 2a indicates that 0.050 CNT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> showed the highest photocurrent density because of a much lower charge carrier recombination in 0.050C-NCS. The improved separation efficiency and lowest recombination rate of the photogenerated electron–hole pairs facilitated efficient photocatalytic reactions [57,58]. The photoreaction and separation of carriers are effective when the arc-radius of the EIS plot is less [59,60]. The EIS of the fabricated photocatalysts was analyzed to investigate the charge carriers' interface transfer/recombination efficiency. As can be seen from Figure 2b, 0.050C-NCS presented a much smaller arc size than the pure NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>, demonstrating that 0.050C-NCS had a lower electron transfer resistance and a positive effect on photo-induced carrier transfer. The Nyquist data of 0.050C-NCS were fitted with an equivalent circuit via Zview software (2.1.0.0) to determine the exact values of the  $R_{ESR}$  and  $R_{ct}$  resistances [61,62]. Figure S4 presents the fitted model of 0.050C-NCS with the most suitable modified Randle circuit model in the inset image. The value of the  $R_{ESR}$  and  $R_{ct}$  of the 0.050C-NCS sample electrode came to be 36.77 and 66.31  $\Omega$ , respectively. All of the above results demonstrate the excellent photocatalytic performance of 0.050C-NCS, consistent with the trend of the photocatalytic reduction results.

The effect of inorganic ions on photocatalytic activity has been reported in many studies. Among them, inorganic anions, such as  $\text{NO}_3^-$ ,  $\text{Cl}^-$ ,  $\text{SO}_4^{2-}$ , and  $\text{PO}_4^{3-}$ , may have two inhibitory effects: the first is the competitive adsorption of ions and pollutant molecules to the active sites on the TiO<sub>2</sub> surface, leading to a decrease in the photocatalytic efficiency. The second is that anions can react with the photogenerated holes, thus reducing the amount of oxides that degrade the pollutant molecules [12,63]. We investigated the effect of coexisting ions in the photocatalytic reduction process of Cr(VI). In Figure 3a, it is seen that the inhibition of the Cr(VI) reduction process was enhanced when the concentration of NaCl was gradually increased, which might have been due to the competition between chloride ions and Cr(VI) adsorption. Similarly, the addition of 10 mM of  $\text{HCO}_3^-$  and  $\text{SO}_4^{2-}$  to the solution had a relatively strong inhibitory effect on the reduction process of Cr(VI) (Figure 3b). The effect of cations on the reduction process of Cr(VI) was investigated in Figure 3c, from which it can be seen that the addition of  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  significantly improved the

photocatalytic reduction rate of Cr(VI). This is because the positively charged  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  was more likely to capture the electrons generated by photoexcitation on the catalyst surface than the negatively charged  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_7^{2-}$ , and  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  was preferentially reduced to  $\text{Cu}^+$ . At the same time,  $\text{Cu}^+$  could rapidly undergo redox reactions with  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_7^{2-}$ , with  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_7^{2-}$  being reduced to  $\text{Cr}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Cu}^+$  being oxidized to  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$ . Since  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  could capture the electrons generated on the catalyst surface faster than  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_7^{2-}$ , the recombination rate of the electron-hole pairs on the catalyst surface was significantly reduced, which resulted in a higher utilization of electrons on the catalyst surface. Therefore, a significant enhancement in the photocatalytic reduction rate occurred when a small amount of  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  was added to the reaction system. The above process shows that  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  plays a catalytic role in the photocatalytic reduction process of Cr(VI). As shown in the figure, the presence of cations such as  $\text{Mg}^{2+}$ ,  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ ,  $\text{K}^+$ , and  $\text{Na}^+$  in the solution will reduce the reduction efficiency of Cr(VI). This inhibitory effect is mainly because these ions can quickly get the photoexcited electrons on the semiconductor conduction band, thus competing with Cr(VI) for electrons, inevitably reducing the reduction efficiency.



**Figure 2.** (a) Transient photocurrent responses of the as-prepared samples; and (b) electrochemical impedance spectra (EIS) of the as-prepared samples.



**Figure 3.** Photocatalytic reduction curves of Cr(VI) solution containing different concentrations of NaCl (a); and (b) sodium salts (10 mM) and (c) inorganic salts (10 mM).

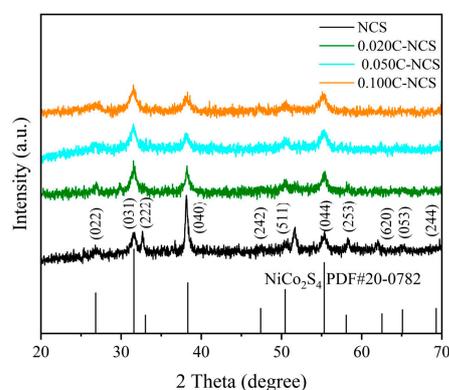
### 3.2. Structural and Morphological Analysis

The X-ray diffraction (XRD) results of the  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$  with different MWCNT contents are shown in Figure 4. For the samples, eleven diffraction spikes were recorded at  $26.8^\circ$ ,  $31.6^\circ$ ,  $33.0^\circ$ ,  $38.3^\circ$ ,  $47.4^\circ$ ,  $50.5^\circ$ ,  $55.3^\circ$ ,  $58.1^\circ$ ,  $62.5^\circ$ ,  $65.1^\circ$ , and  $69.3^\circ$ , respectively, indexed as 022, 031, 222, 040, 242, 511, 044, 253, 620, 053, and 244 using JCPDS No. 20-0782 [64]. It can be clearly seen from the image that the diffraction peaks of these as-prepared composites were relatively narrow and independent, indicating that the composites exhibited a better

crystalline state. However, no prominent diffraction peaks of the MWCNTs were observed, indicating that they were highly dispersed in the composites. With the introduction of MWCNTs, the  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$  was relatively dispersed, and the peak intensity decreased. The change in grain size can be reflected in the peak width of the diffraction peak [65]. It can be seen from the graph that the grain size of the pure  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$  was slightly larger. Furthermore, the grain sizes of the  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$ , 0.020C-NCS, 0.050C-NCS, and 0.100C-NCS photocatalysts were further calculated to be 321, 262, 136, and 148 nm, respectively, by using the Debye–Scherrer method [66,67]:

$$D = k\lambda/\beta \cos \theta$$

The photocatalytic activity generally increased with a decrease in the grain size [68]. The larger grain size of  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$  indicated that the photocatalytic reduction reaction of Cr(VI) with the pure  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$  had poor performance. The previous experimental results of photocatalytic reduction also confirmed this conclusion.



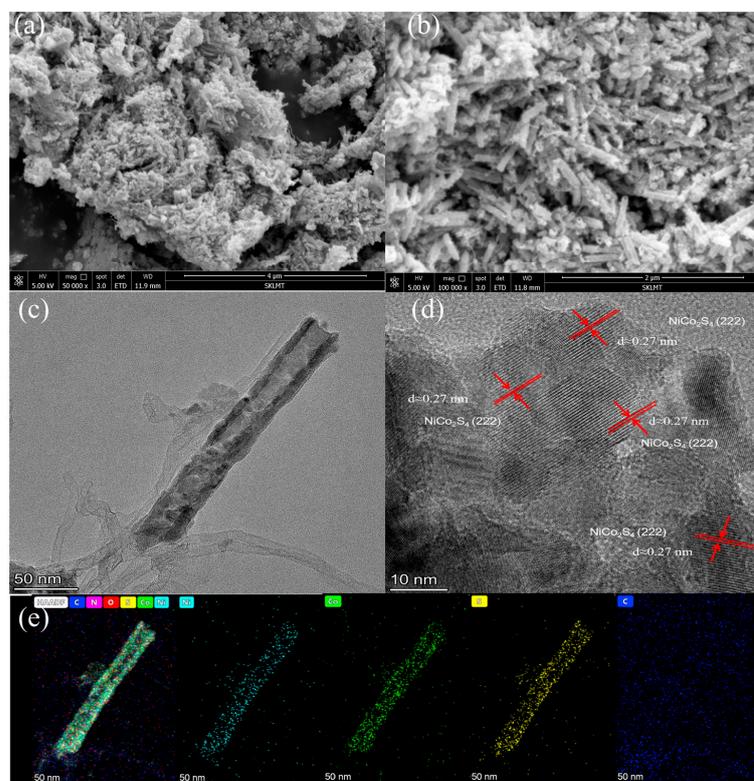
**Figure 4.** XRD pattern of as-prepared samples.

The structure and morphology of 0.050C-NCS were further characterized using SEM and TEM, as shown in Figure 5. From the SEM of 0.050C-NCS (Figure 5a,b), there were a large number of  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$  nanoparticles clustered on the surface of the carbon nanotubes. The appearance of the carrier MWCNTs and nanoparticle shape of  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$  proved that the  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$  nanoparticles were successfully loaded on the MWCNTs via hydrothermal synthesis. The nanostructure of 0.050C-NCS was further characterized using transmission electron microscopy (TEM), as shown in Figure 5c. The results of the TEM further observed that the morphology of 0.050C-NCS showed an apparent hollow tubular structure. In the high-resolution TEM (HR-TEM) image of 0.050C-NCS, it exhibits an ordered lattice structure (Figure 5d). The measured lattice fringe spacing between two adjacent planes was 0.27 nm, which matched well with the (222) lattice plane of  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$ , indicating the successful synthesis of  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$  materials. In addition, the element distribution of 0.050C-NCS (Figure 5e) was tested using SEM-EDS. The result showed that 0.050C-NCS comprised Ni in a light blue color, Co in a green color, S in a yellow color, C in a blue color, and N in red color, indicating the successful synthesis of 0.050C-NCS. Additionally, the Energy dispersive spectroscopy of 0.050 CNT- $\text{NiCo}_2\text{S}_4$  is presented in Figure S5.

### 3.3. Nitrogen Adsorption–Desorption Experiment

The specific surface area of photocatalysts is one of the critical factors affecting the performance of catalysts. The higher the specific surface area, the more reaction sites of the catalyst, which is beneficial to enhancing the photocatalytic performance of the catalyst. We can obtain the type of BET isotherm from the four informative sections of the BET plot: initial steepness, rounded knee, plateau, and final steepness. The prepared photocatalyst's BET isotherm (Figure 6 or Figures S6–S8) was of type II, as it had a low saturation pressure, an extended plateaus, and an almost vertical rise at a higher relative

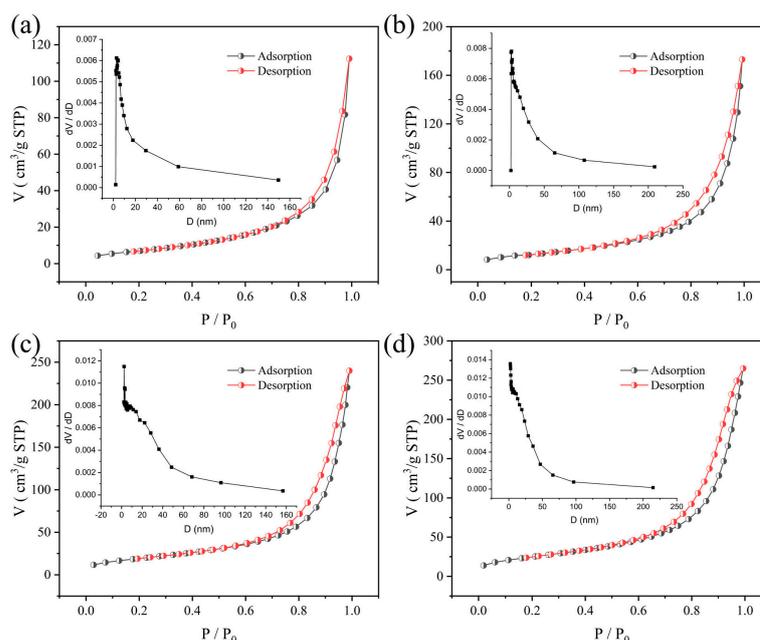
pressure, which expresses the presence of a macro-sized pore. The higher the relative pressure, the more adsorption occurs, so the interaction between the adsorbent and the adsorbate is relatively weak. The photocatalyst's hysteresis was H3 type (slit-type pores) that almost diffused or overlapped with the adsorption curve, expressing the simple adsorption on and desorption from the surface [69]. The H3 hysteresis loops and III-type isotherms proved the mesoporous nature of the catalysts, and the pore size ranges counted in Table 1 were all within the mesoporous range. The specific surface area ( $S_{BET}$ ), pore volume, and pore size of the prepared samples are presented in Table 1. The  $S_{BET}$  of the samples gradually increased with an increase in the MWCNT addition. Among them, the  $S_{BET}$  and pore volume of 0.050C-NCS increased to some extent compared to the pure  $NiCo_2S_4$ , which might have been due to the doping of MWCNTs inhibiting the crystallinity of  $NiCo_2S_4$ , resulting in a decrease in the grain size, thus increasing the  $S_{BET}$  and pore volume. Increasing the pore volume and  $S_{BET}$  of photocatalysts could provide more reaction sites for reducing Cr(VI). However, too much MWCNT addition will lead to the encapsulation of  $NiCo_2S_4$  by the MWCNTs, reducing the photocatalytic performance.



**Figure 5.** (a,b) SEM images, (c) TEM images, and (d) HRTEM images of 0.050C-NCS. (e) Elemental mapping of 0.050C-NCS.

**Table 1.** The BET parameters of the samples.

Sample	$S_{BET}$ ( $m^2/g$ )	Pore Size (nm)	Pore Volume ( $cm^3/g$ )
NCS	16	34	0.133
0.005C-NCS	22	27	0.145
0.020C-NCS	51	22	0.290
0.035C-NCS	71	18	0.328
0.050C-NCS	91	20	0.460
0.075C-NCS	100	18	0.439
0.100C-NCS	125	15	0.467



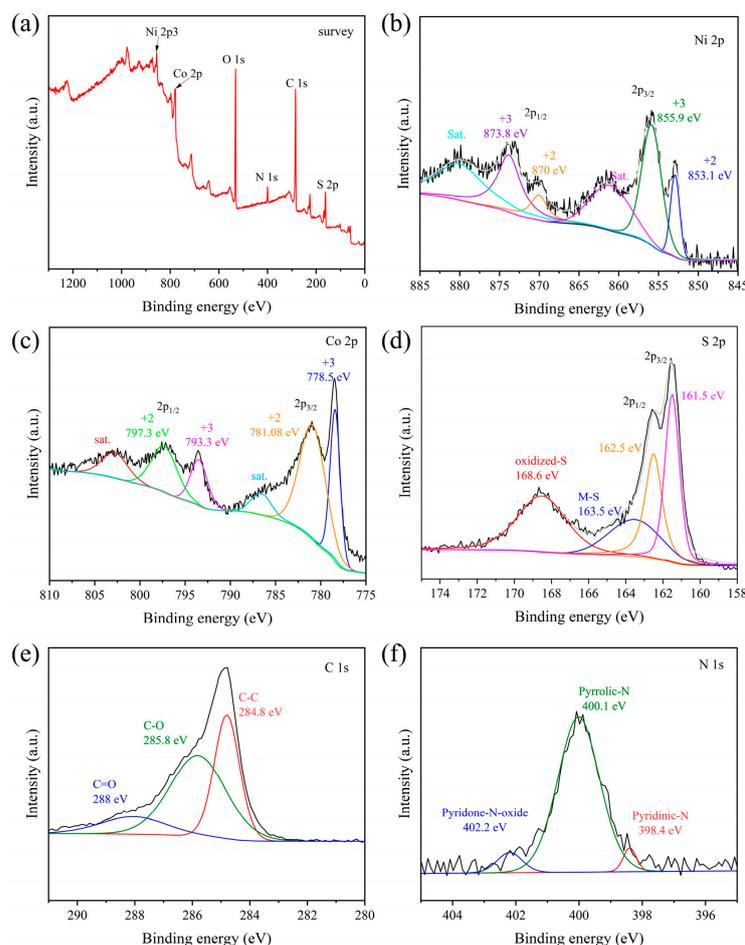
**Figure 6.**  $N_2$  adsorption and desorption isotherms and corresponding pore-size distribution curves (inset) for (a) C-NCS; (b) 0.020C-NCS; (c) 0.050C-NCS; and (d) 0.100C-NCS.

### 3.4. Composition and Band Structure Analysis

To further determine the chemical compositions of the elements in the samples, 0.050C-NCS was characterized using X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS), and the results are shown in Figure 7. The peak positions of C, Ni, Co, S, N, and O can be observed in the survey spectra of Figure 7a, and the distribution of each element was relatively uniform. Specifically, the element N was present at a binding energy of 400 eV, and its content was relatively low. The absorption of some oxygen-containing substances in the air by the material might have caused the presence of the O 1s characteristic peak. As shown in Figure 7b, 0.050C-NCS showed two satellite peaks and two spin-orbit double peaks. The two spin-orbit double peaks were about 853.1 eV and 870 eV, corresponding to  $Ni^{2+}$ , and the peaks were about 855.9 eV and 873.8 eV, corresponding to  $Ni^{3+}$ , which proved the presence of  $Ni^{2+}$  and  $Ni^{3+}$  in 0.050C-NCS [58]. As shown in Figure 7c, in 0.050C-NCS, there were two spin-orbit double peaks at about 778.5 eV and 793.3 eV, corresponding to  $Co^{3+}$ , and at about 797.3 eV and 781.08 eV, corresponding to  $Co^{2+}$ . As shown in Figure 7d, the S 2p spectrum showed two peaks at 162.5 eV and 161.5 eV, attributed to S 2p<sub>1/2</sub> and S 2p<sub>3/2</sub>, which showed the valence state of  $S^{2-}$  [58]. The fractional peak at 163.5 eV was attributed to the metallic sulfur (M-S) in 0.050C-NCS, demonstrating the presence of the Ni-Co-S phase [63]. The other peak with a binding energy of 168.6 eV represented the oxidized S bond, meaning that some surface sulfide ions were oxidized during the XPS test. The C 1s spectrum was decomposed into three characteristic peaks at 288, 285.8, and 284.8 eV (Figure 7e), which could be attributed to the C=O/C=N, C-O/C-N, and C=C/C-C bonds, respectively [70,71]. From the N 1s spectra, the nitrogen atoms contained different oxidation states, including pyridine-N (398.4 eV), pyrrole-N (400.1 eV), and pyridine-N-oxide (402.2 eV) (Figure 7f) [72].

To investigate the band structure alignment of 0.050C-NCS, UV-Vis Diffuse Reflectance Absorption Spectra (DRS) were obtained, as shown in Figure 8. As shown in Figure 8a, 0.050C-NCS presented a clear absorption edge at around 485.2 nm. The optical energy gap was calculated by using the given equation:  $\alpha h\nu = A(h\nu - E_g)^n$ , where  $h$ ,  $\alpha$ ,  $\nu$ ,  $A$ , and  $E_g$  are the equation parameters [73]. The bandgap energy of 0.050C-NCS was 2.56 eV (Figure 8b). Figure S9 shows that the absorption edge of the pure  $NiCo_2S_4$  was at 417.2 nm. The light absorption of 0.050C-NCS showed a light red shift compared to the pure  $NiCo_2S_4$ , indicating that introducing MWCNTs enhanced the light absorption performance.

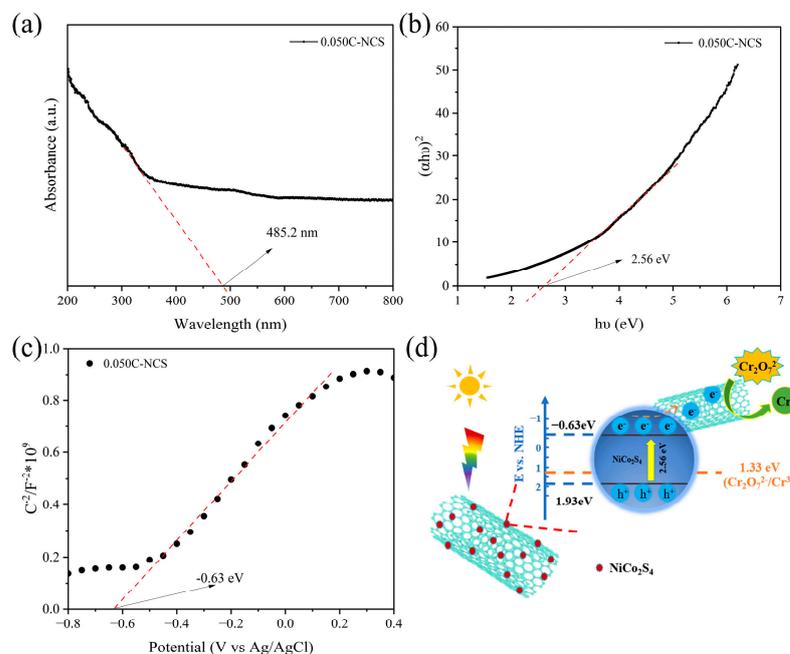
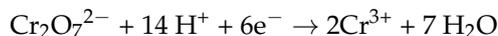
As shown in Figure 8c, the slope of the Mott–Schottky plot is positive, so 0.050C-NCS belonged to the n-type semiconductor. Generally, the flat band potential was close to the bottom of the conduction band of the n-type semiconductor. The flat band potential calculated from the x-intercept of the linear regions of this plot was  $-0.63$  eV (vs. Ag/AgCl) for 0.050C-NCS ( $-0.43$  eV, vs. NHE). The conduction band was smaller than the flat band by  $0.2$  eV. Thus, the conduction band of 0.050C-NCS was  $-0.63$  eV (vs. NHE). According to the equation  $E_{VB} = E_{CB} + E_g$  [74], the valence band position ( $E_{VB}$ ) of 0.050C-NCS could be calculated as  $1.93$  eV. The relative band structure alignment of 0.050C-NCS is illustrated in Figure 8d. Also, the potential of  $E_{Cr^{6+}(Cr_2O_7^{2-}/Cr^{3+})}$  could be calculated as  $1.33$  eV when the solution was acidic. Therefore, Cr(VI) can be easily reduced by the 0.050C-NCS photocatalyst system. Adding MWCNTs accelerated the charge transfer, which was more conducive to the reaction.



**Figure 7.** XPS survey spectra (a) and high-resolution XPS spectrum of 0.050C-NCS ((b) Ni 2p; (c) Co 2p; (d) S 2p; (e) C 1s; and (f) N 1s).

The results indicated that MWCNTs incorporated into  $NiCo_2S_4$  nanoparticles improved the efficiency of visible light absorption and excitation separation. The high activity of 0.050C-NCS was attributed to the high charge transfer and low photoexcited electron–hole recombination properties. The good chemical and thermal stability, large surface area, and excellent mechanical properties of MWCNTs make them ideal as support materials for hybridization with photocatalysts for applications in modifying photocatalysts. When MWCNTs were hybridized with  $NiCo_2S_4$ , they not only exerted the advantage of inhibiting photocatalyst aggregation. Moreover, they also acted as a sink in the transfer of photogenerated electrons. In this photocatalyst system, MWCNTs acted as “electron sinks” to receive the photogenerated electrons from  $NiCo_2S_4$ , effectively separating the electron–hole pairs.

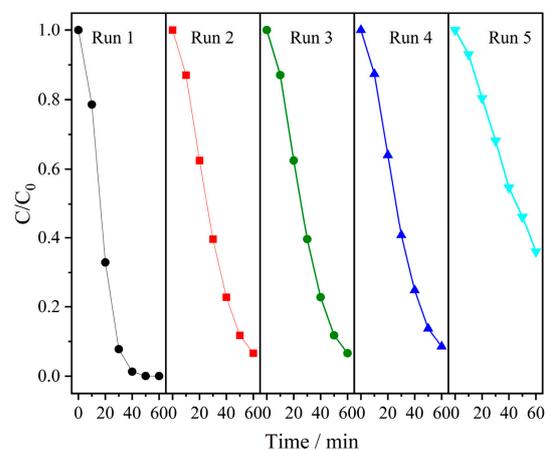
Thus, the recombination of photogenerated carriers was effectively suppressed. Moreover, the photogenerated electrons on MWCNT could participate in the photocatalytic reaction and effectively photocatalytically reduce Cr(VI) to Cr(III). In addition, the reaction equation for the photocatalytic reduction of Cr(VI) to Cr(III) is as follows [45]:



**Figure 8.** (a) UV-Vis Diffuse Reflectance Absorption Spectra (DRS); (b) direct band gap energy; (c) Mott–Schottky plots, and (d) schematic illustration of 0.050C-NCS.

### 3.5. Stability of the Catalyst

In addition, as a photocatalyst with an excellent performance, it should remain stable under repeated cycles. Cyclic photocatalytic experiments confirmed the stability of 0.050C-NCS. As shown in Figure 9, the results showed that 0.050C-NCS maintained a high reduction rate after being used five times. It maintained a 91.4% reduction rate in the fourth photocatalytic Cr(VI) reduction, while a sharp decrease occurred in the fifth cycle. In general, 0.050CNT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> had a relatively good application for reducing Cr(VI) in the first four cycles.



**Figure 9.** Stability of 0.050C-NCS within five consecutive cycles.

#### 4. Conclusions

In summary, a facile two-step hydrothermal method was used to prepare CNT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> composites with different MWCNT contents. The composite samples showed excellent photocatalytic activities with a good reduced Cr(VI) stability. The 0.050C-NCS sample could reduce Cr(VI) within 40 min, attributed to the large specific surface area, enhanced visible light absorption, and efficient separation and transport of photogenerated electron–hole pairs resulting from the MWCNT introduction. MWCNTs could receive photogenerated electrons from NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> and effectively separate the photogenerated electron–hole pairs. Therefore, the recombination of photogenerated carriers was effectively suppressed. After the addition of MWCNTs, an improvement in the visible light absorption and carrier separation efficiency of NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> was realized, and the photogenerated electrons on the MWCNTs could effectively photocatalytic reduce Cr(VI) to Cr(III). Therefore, the MWCNT-based composite photocatalyst could effectively reduce Cr(VI). This work's strategy for building a CNT-based photocatalyst provides a promising method for completely removing high-valence heavy metal ions.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/c9040099/s1>. Figure S1: The schematic diagram of the reactor; Figure S2: ESR spectrum of the •O<sub>2</sub><sup>−</sup> produced by NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> and 0.050 CNT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub> under visible-light irradiation; Figure S3: Effect of scavengers on photocatalytic degradation of Cr(VI) during the trapping experiments of the 0.050 CNT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>; Figure S4: Circuit fitted Nyquist plot of the 0.050C-NCS with a suitable modified Randle circuit (inset); Figure S5: Energy dispersive spectroscopy of 0.050 CNT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>; Figure S6: N<sub>2</sub> adsorption and desorption isotherms and corresponding pore-size distribution curves (inset) for 0.005 CNT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>; Figure S7: N<sub>2</sub> adsorption and desorption isotherms and corresponding pore-size distribution curves (inset) for 0.035 CNT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>; Figure S8: N<sub>2</sub> adsorption and desorption isotherms and corresponding pore-size distribution curves (inset) for 0.075 CNT-NiCo<sub>2</sub>S<sub>4</sub>; Figure S9: UV-Vis Diffuse Reflectance Absorption Spectra (DRS) of as-prepared samples with different amounts of CNT; Table S1: Comparison of photocatalytic efficiency for photocatalytic reduction of Cr(VI) between previously reported literature and the present work.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Data will be made available on request.

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