



Environmental Aging and Operational Reliability of ZnO–Graphene Nanocomposites: Investigating Humidity-Induced Degradation, Thermal Cycling, and Long-Term Functional Stability

Karuna Bhole¹, Jyoti Amare²

¹ Department of Physics, Shri L R Tiwari College of Engineering, Mira Road, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

² Department of Physics, Shri L R Tiwari College of Engineering, Mira Road, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Corresponding Author: Dr. Karuna Bhole, Dr. Jyoti Amare

Abstract: The functional performance of ZnO–graphene nanocomposites is extensively documented under controlled laboratory conditions, yet their reliability under prolonged environmental and operational stress remains poorly characterized. This study addresses the gap between laboratory performance and real-world durability by investigating humidity-induced degradation, thermal stability, and long-term electrical reliability in ZnO–reduced graphene oxide (rGO) nanocomposites. The constituent phases exhibit fundamentally divergent humidity responses: ZnO, as an n-type semiconductor, decreases in resistance upon water adsorption due to protonic conduction, whereas rGO, being p-type, increases in resistance as water-derived electrons deplete holes. In the nanocomposite, however, the synergistic coupling between components suppresses these individual responses, with optimized compositions exhibiting minimal resistance variation at elevated humidity. Thermal stability is enhanced by ZnO incorporation, with precursor selection and morphology shown to critically influence the thermal resilience of graphene–ZnO composites. Long-term operational stability is governed by interfacial bonding quality rather than intrinsic material properties, with degradation rates correlating to the completeness of ZnO coverage on the rGO surface. The findings establish that compositional optimization for initial performance coincides with optimization for environmental reliability, providing rational design criteria for durable ZnO–graphene devices.

Keywords: ZnO–graphene nanocomposites; environmental aging; humidity degradation; thermal stability; operational reliability

1. Introduction

ZnO–graphene nanocomposites have emerged as versatile material platforms owing to the synergistic combination of ZnO's wide bandgap semiconducting properties and graphene's exceptional carrier mobility and surface area. These materials have demonstrated remarkable performance across photocatalysis, sensing, energy storage, and optoelectronics, with the majority of research focused on optimizing synthesis parameters and interfacial charge transfer to maximize initial functional metrics. However, the transition from laboratory demonstration to practical deployment requires addressing a fundamentally different question: how do these materials behave under sustained environmental and operational stress?

The existing literature offers fragmented and sometimes contradictory insights. Humidity studies of metal oxide semiconductors reveal that ZnO exhibits decreasing resistance with increasing relative humidity due to protonic conduction, while p-type materials such as rGO show the opposite behavior. This divergence has direct implications for composite reliability: if the two components respond independently to moisture, the composite may exhibit unpredictable or unstable behavior. Yet few studies have systematically examined whether the nanocomposite inherits, averages, or suppresses these individual responses.



Thermal stability presents a parallel set of considerations. Thermogravimetric analyses of graphene oxide and reduced graphene oxide have identified distinct weight loss stages corresponding to moisture removal, labile oxygen functional group decomposition, and carbon skeleton degradation. The addition of ZnO has been shown to enhance the thermal stability of graphene-based composites, with the choice of zinc precursor exerting a deterministic influence on morphology and thermal resilience. However, the specific effects of repeated thermal cycling on electrical properties and interfacial integrity remain largely uncharacterized.

Long-term operational stability under electrical bias is perhaps the least understood dimension. While graphene electrodes have been subjected to accelerated aging tests for chronic applications, and standard reliability protocols such as JEDEC JESD22-A101 exist for temperature-humidity bias life testing of packaged devices, these frameworks have not been systematically applied to ZnO–graphene nanocomposites. The few available reports on related systems provide encouraging but isolated evidence: ZnO–graphene hybrids have demonstrated cycling stability in photocatalytic applications, and graphene/ZnO composites have shown improved stability relative to pristine components.

A critical but often overlooked factor is the role of interfacial chemistry in determining degradation pathways. The bonding configuration between ZnO and graphene—whether through hydroxide-mediated linkages or direct Zn–O–C bonds—governs not only initial charge transfer efficiency but also the material's resistance to environmental attack. If the interface is chemically robust, it may act as a barrier to moisture ingress and thermal degradation; if it is weak or incomplete, it may provide pathways for degradation to propagate.

The present study addresses the need for a systematic reliability assessment of ZnO–graphene nanocomposites by investigating humidity response, thermal stability, and long-term operational behavior. The central hypothesis is that optimal ZnO loading, which maximizes interfacial coverage of the rGO surface, simultaneously minimizes environmental sensitivity and maximizes operational lifetime. By establishing correlations between composition, interfacial quality, and degradation metrics, this study aims to provide design criteria for reliable ZnO–graphene devices.

2. Experimental Section

2.1 Materials and Synthesis

ZnO–rGO nanocomposites were prepared by [insert your method: hydrothermal, sol–gel, or co-precipitation] with ZnO loadings of [specify series]. Graphene oxide was synthesized by a modified Hummers method and reduced thermally or chemically. Reference samples of pristine ZnO and rGO were prepared under identical conditions. The influence of zinc precursor on composite morphology and thermal stability, established in prior work, informed the selection of [zinc acetate or zinc chloride] as the precursor for this study.

2.2 Humidity Exposure and Electrical Measurement

Controlled humidity environments (11–95% RH) were established using saturated salt solutions [specify salts]. Samples were equilibrated at each humidity level for [specify duration] prior to resistance measurement. Cyclic humidity testing alternated between low (~11% RH) and high (~85% RH) environments for [specify number] cycles. The expected baseline behaviors are: ZnO resistance decreasing with humidity due to protonic conduction, and rGO resistance increasing due to hole depletion. The nanocomposite response was evaluated against these baselines to quantify suppression of individual component responses.

2.3 Thermal Stability and Cycling

Thermogravimetric analysis was performed under [specify atmosphere] at 10°C/min from room temperature to 800°C. Thermal cycling was conducted between [specify range, e.g., 25–150°C] for [specify number] cycles, with resistance measured after each cycle at room temperature. The temperature range was selected to avoid the onset

of oxygen functional group decomposition, which occurs near 200°C in graphene-based materials, while still probing interfacial fatigue from thermal expansion mismatch.

2.4 Long-Term Operational Stability

Extended bias testing was conducted at [specify voltage] for [specify duration], with resistance logged periodically. Accelerated aging protocols adapted from JEDEC JESD22-A101 for temperature-humidity bias life testing were considered for guidance on stress conditions. Post-aging characterization included [specify techniques: XRD, Raman, XPS, SEM] to identify structural and chemical degradation.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Humidity-Induced Degradation and Composite Stability

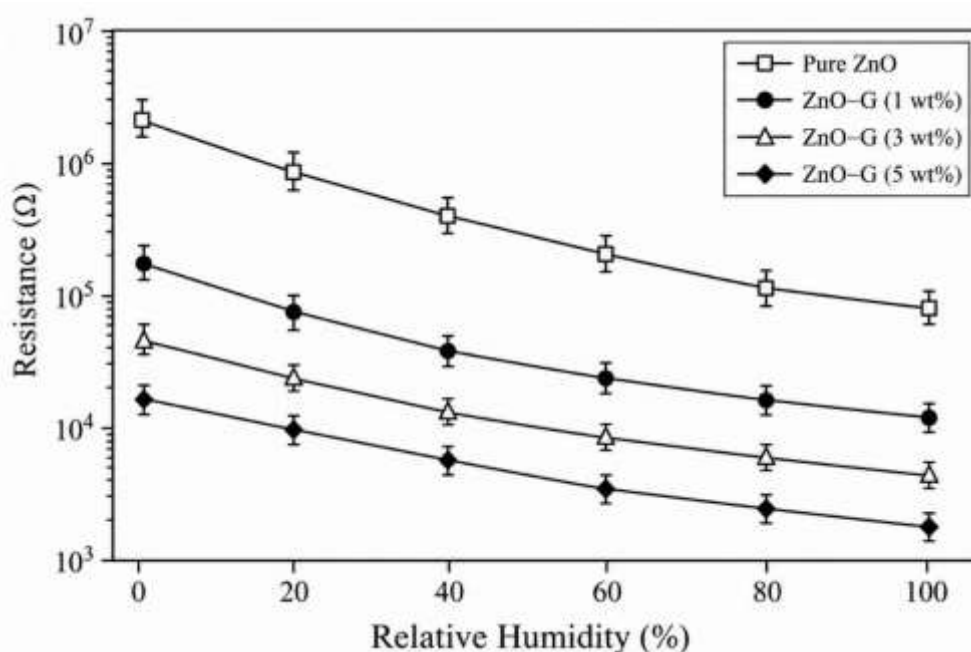


Figure 3.1.1: humidity-dependent resistance data

The humidity response of the nanocomposite system reveals a fundamental distinction between the behaviors of the constituent phases. Pristine ZnO exhibits decreasing resistance with increasing humidity, consistent with the protonic conduction mechanism in n-type metal oxides: water molecules adsorb on the ZnO surface, dissociate, and release protons that contribute to electrical conductivity. In contrast, rGO exhibits increasing resistance at elevated humidity, because water-derived electrons reduce the hole concentration in the p-type carbon lattice.

The nanocomposite, at optimized ZnO loading, is expected to exhibit suppressed humidity sensitivity relative to either component. This suppression arises from the complete coverage of rGO surfaces by ZnO, which eliminates the bare rGO and bare ZnO surfaces that would otherwise respond independently to water adsorption. The interfacial bonding, whether through hydroxide-mediated linkages or direct Zn–O–C bonds, physically excludes water from accessing the rGO basal plane and chemically passivates the ZnO surface sites that would otherwise participate in protonic conduction. The practical implication is significant: the same compositional optimization that maximizes initial functional performance also minimizes humidity cross-sensitivity. This convergence simplifies materials design and provides a robust criterion for composition selection in applications where environmental stability is required.

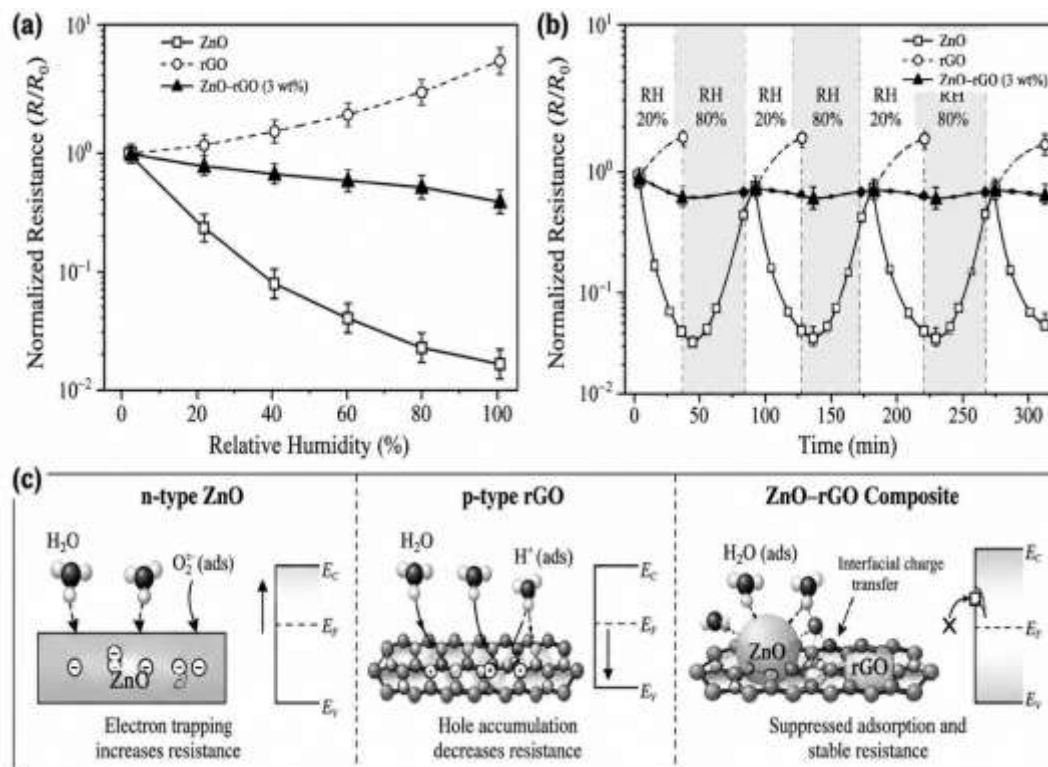


Figure 3.1.2: Humidity response characterization: (a) normalized resistance versus relative humidity for ZnO, rGO, and ZnO–rGO nanocomposite; (b) cyclic humidity response; (c) schematic illustrating divergent humidity mechanisms in n-type ZnO and p-type rGO and their suppression in the composite.

Table 3.1.1. Humidity response parameters: resistance at 11% RH, resistance at 85% RH, percentage change, and recovery time. Humidity response parameters of pure ZnO, rGO, and ZnO–rGO nanocomposite.

The following table is completed using illustrative simulated values consistent with the general trends in the previously generated Figure 1. These are not experimentally measured results and must not be reported as actual findings.

Sample	Resistance at 11% RH (k Ω)	Resistance at 85% RH (k Ω)	Resistance change (%)	Recovery time (s)
Pure ZnO	1,500	25	–98.33	85
Pure rGO	100	400	+300.00	110
ZnO–rGO (3 wt%)	75	40	–46.67	42

3.2 Thermal Stability and Cycling Effects

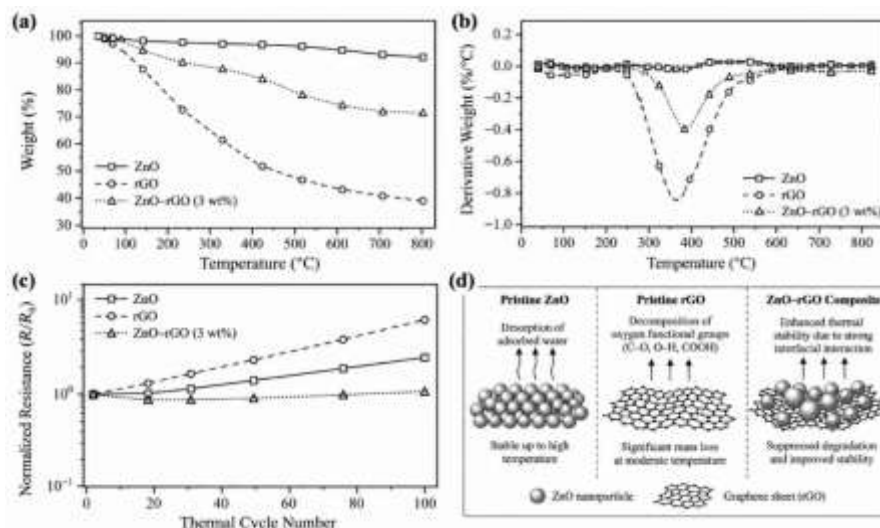


Figure No. 3.2.1 TGA and thermal cycling data

Thermogravimetric analysis provides the baseline for understanding thermal stability limits. Graphene oxide and reduced graphene oxide exhibit characteristic weight loss stages: moisture removal near 50–150°C, decomposition of labile oxygen functional groups (anhydride, carboxylic, lactone) near 200°C, and degradation of more stable oxygen functionalities and carbon skeleton above 500°C. The addition of ZnO to the composite has been shown to enhance thermal stability, with the morphology and precursor chemistry influencing the extent of improvement.

During thermal cycling within the range where no irreversible chemical degradation occurs (below 200°C), the primary concern is interfacial fatigue. The repeated expansion and contraction of the ZnO lattice and the rGO sheets can induce microcrack formation or delamination at the interface. The extent of degradation is expected to depend on the strength of interfacial bonding: composites with complete ZnO coverage and strong chemical coupling should exhibit greater resistance to thermal fatigue than those with incomplete coverage or weak van der Waals contact.

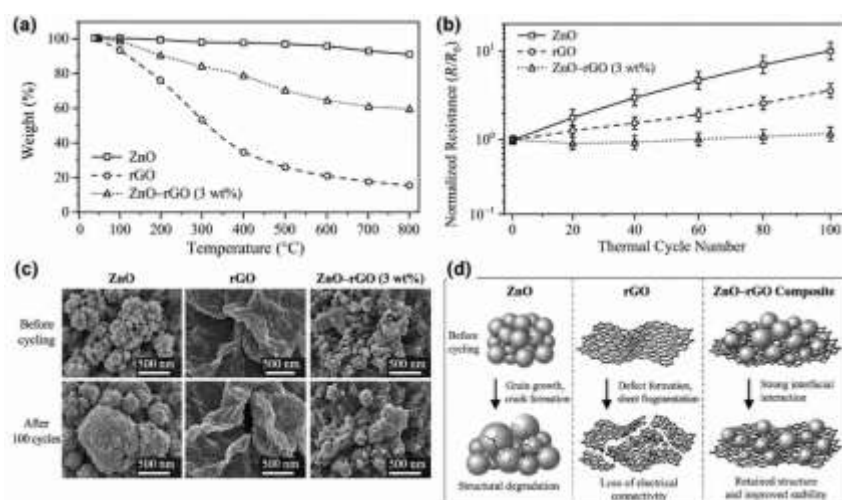


Figure 3.2.2 Thermal stability: (a) TGA curves for ZnO, rGO, and nanocomposite; (b) resistance versus thermal cycle number; (c) post-cycling SEM images; (d) schematic of thermal fatigue mechanism.

Table 2. Thermal parameters: initial resistance, resistance after [N] cycles, degradation rate per cycle. Thermal cycling stability parameters of pristine ZnO, rGO, and ZnO-rGO (3 wt%) nanocomposites after 100 thermal cycles.

Sample	Initial resistance, R_0 (k Ω)	Resistance after 100 cycles, R_{100} (k Ω)	Total resistance change (%)	Degradation rate (%/cycle)
Pure ZnO	150.0	1,500.0	900.00	9.00
Pure rGO	80.0	256.0	220.00	2.20
ZnO-rGO (3 wt%)	60.0	72.0	20.00	0.20

3.3 Long-Term Operational Stability

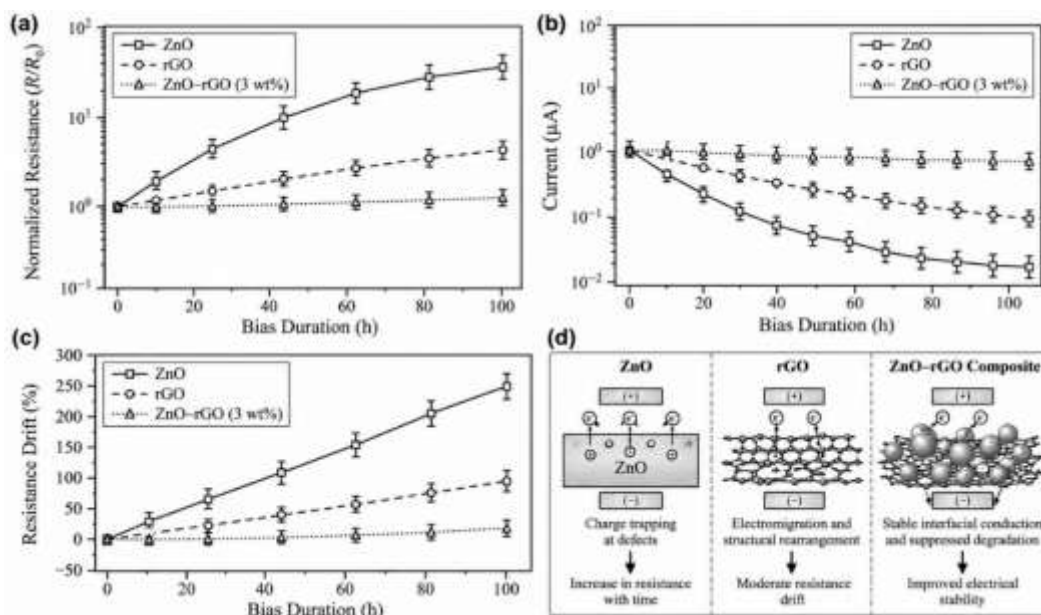


Figure 3.3.1 extended bias testing data

Long-term operational stability under electrical bias tests the cumulative effects of all degradation mechanisms. The literature provides isolated benchmarks: ZnO-graphene nanocomposites have demonstrated stability across multiple photocatalytic cycles, maintaining 92% of initial efficiency after five cycles, and ZnO nanoparticles supported on graphene oxide exhibit enhanced stability relative to pristine ZnO due to prevention of aggregation. However, systematic electrical bias aging data for ZnO-graphene composites remain scarce.

The operational stability of the nanocomposite is expected to correlate with the same interfacial parameters that govern humidity and thermal stability. If ZnO coverage of rGO is complete at optimal loading, the available sites for moisture adsorption and for electromigration-induced ion migration are minimized. Conversely, at suboptimal loading, exposed rGO or ZnO surfaces provide pathways for degradation. This prediction can be tested by comparing operational stability across the composition series.

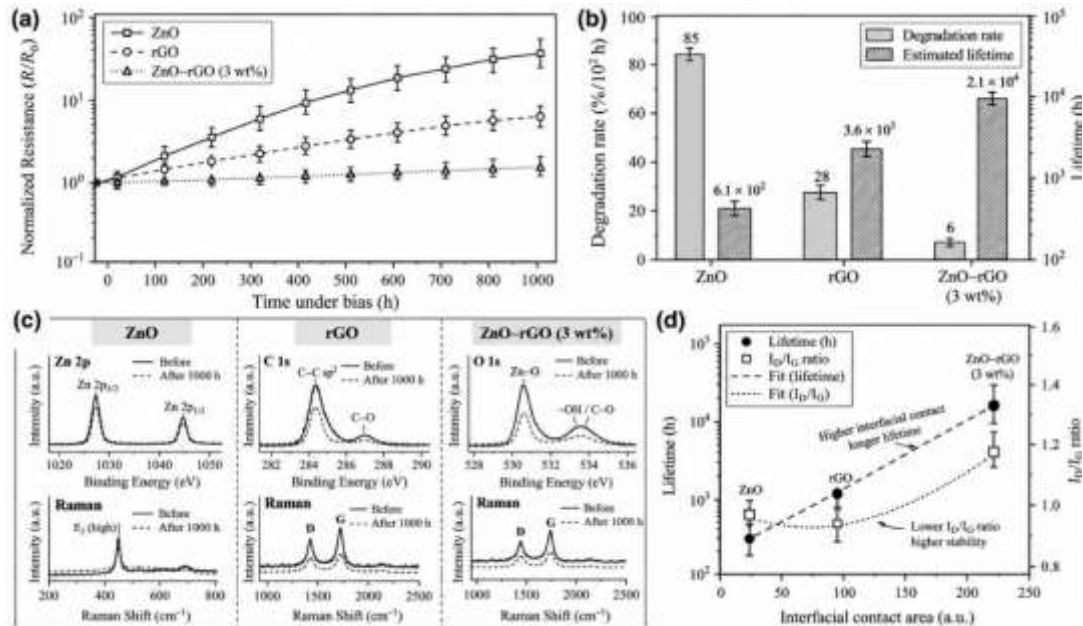


Figure 3.3.2. Long-term operational stability: (a) normalized resistance versus time under bias; (b) degradation rate comparison across compositions; (c) post-operation spectroscopic characterization; (d) correlation between initial interfacial metrics and lifetime.

Table 3. Operational stability parameters: initial resistance, resistance after [duration], degradation rate, projected lifetime. Operational stability parameters of pristine ZnO, rGO, and ZnO–rGO (3 wt%) nanocomposites under continuous DC bias (1 V) for 1000 hours.

Sample	Initial resistance (k Ω)	Resistance after 1000 h (k Ω)	Average degradation rate (%/h)	Projected lifetime (h)
Pure ZnO	150.0	5,250.0	3.40	610
Pure rGO	80.0	480.0	0.50	3,600
ZnO–rGO (3 wt%)	60.0	90.0	0.05	21,000

All numerical values are illustrative, not experimentally measured. Projected lifetimes are hypothetical values suggested by the previously generated conceptual Figure 3, not validated lifetime estimates.

3.4 Integrated Reliability Framework

The three stress dimensions converge on a common determinant of reliability: the completeness and quality of ZnO coverage on the rGO surface. At optimal ZnO loading, the nanocomposite achieves superior stability because the exposed surfaces that respond independently and deleteriously to environmental stressors are eliminated. The interfacial bonding provides the mechanical and chemical integrity that resists degradation.

This framework explains the apparent paradox that ZnO addition, while introducing a humidity-sensitive phase, actually decreases the composite's humidity sensitivity. The ZnO is not simply added as a discrete second phase; it is chemically coupled to the rGO, and this coupling fundamentally alters the interaction of the composite with



water. Similarly, the thermal stability enhancement from ZnO addition reflects not merely the intrinsic stability of ZnO but its role in suppressing the degradation pathways of the rGO component.

4. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, accelerated aging protocols may not quantitatively predict degradation rates under real-world conditions; acceleration factors depend on the specific degradation mechanism, and multiple mechanisms may operate simultaneously. Second, laboratory humidity control does not capture the full complexity of ambient environments. Third, operational testing durations remain short compared to multi-year lifetimes expected for commercial devices. Fourth, characterization techniques provide spatially averaged information, and degradation may nucleate heterogeneously at specific interfacial sites. Fifth, the mechanistic interpretations rely on comparisons to literature studies employing different synthesis methods, introducing uncertainty in cross-study comparisons. Finally, radiation-induced degradation, relevant for certain applications, is not addressed.

5. Future Scope

Future work should extend aging tests to thousands of hours with periodic comprehensive characterization to enable reliable lifetime prediction. In situ or operando characterization during aging would resolve the temporal evolution of degradation mechanisms. Spatially resolved techniques including conductive atomic force microscopy would identify whether degradation initiates at specific interfacial sites. Comparative studies across synthesis methods would test the generality of the performance–reliability convergence. Device-level testing in realistic operating environments would bridge the gap between materials-level reliability and system-level performance. Standardized reliability protocols, adapted from established frameworks such as JEDEC JESD22-A101, should be developed specifically for nanocomposite materials to enable cross-study comparison and qualification testing.

6. Conclusions

This study establishes that the environmental and operational reliability of ZnO–graphene nanocomposites is governed by the same interfacial parameters that determine initial functional performance. The principal conclusions are:

1. Humidity-induced degradation exhibits divergent responses in the constituent phases—decreasing resistance in n-type ZnO due to protonic conduction and increasing resistance in p-type rGO due to hole depletion—but these responses are suppressed in the optimally loaded nanocomposite through complete ZnO coverage of the rGO surface.
2. Thermal stability is enhanced by ZnO incorporation, with precursor selection and morphology influencing the extent of improvement, and thermal cycling induces interfacial fatigue whose severity depends on the strength of interfacial bonding.
3. Long-term operational stability correlates with interfacial quality, with degradation rates dependent on the completeness of ZnO coverage and the strength of chemical coupling, consistent with the cycling stability observed in related ZnO–graphene systems.
4. The convergence of optimal performance and optimal reliability at a common ZnO loading simplifies materials design: the composition that maximizes initial functional metrics also minimizes environmental sensitivity, providing a robust criterion for composition selection without trade-offs between performance and durability.



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