

# A Bioinspired Strategy for Directional Charge Propagation in Photoelectrochemical Devices Using Supramolecular Machinery

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## Article

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# Abstract

Molecular photoelectrochemical (PEC) devices are hampered by electron–hole recombination after photoinduced electron transfer (PET), causing losses in power conversion efficiency (PCE). Inspired by natural photosynthesis, we demonstrate the use of molecular machinery as a strategy to inhibit recombination, through organization of molecular components and unbinding of the final electron acceptor after reduction. We show that preorganization of the macrocyclic **3-NDI-ring** electron acceptor to the  $P_{\text{STATION}}$  dye forming the  $P_{\text{STATION}}\cdot\mathbf{3-NDI-ring}$  pseudorotaxane, enables a “ring launching” event, upon PET from  $P_{\text{STATION}}$  to **3-NDI-ring** releasing  $\mathbf{3-NDI-ring}^{\cdot-}$ . Implementing  $P_{\text{STATION}}\cdot\mathbf{3-NDI-ring}$  into *p*-type dye-sensitized solar cells (*p*-DSSCs) revealed a fivefold increase in PCE compared to benchmark dye **P1**, unable to facilitate pseudorotaxane formation. This active repulsion of anionic  $\mathbf{3-NDI-ring}^{\cdot-}$  with concomitant reformation  $P_{\text{STATION}}\cdot\mathbf{3-NDI-ring}$  circumvents recombination at semiconductor–dye interface, affording a twofold enhancement in hole lifetime. We envision this concept of supramolecular-directed charge-propagation will encourage further integration of molecular machinery into PEC devices.

## Introduction

Artificial photosynthesis aims to create photoelectrochemical (PEC) devices for the conversion of solar energy into fuels, using the natural photosynthetic process as a blueprint.<sup>1</sup> One of the challenges in PEC devices is efficient charge separation with concomitant suppression of competing charge recombination,<sup>2</sup> required for the generation of both photocurrent and redox potential to drive energetically uphill, fuel-forming reactions. The natural photosynthetic apparatus promotes effective charge separation through the organization of pigments and electron acceptors in specific geometries via supramolecular interactions (Fig. 1a). Photosystem II (PSII) uses the plastoquinone/hydroquinone ( $Q_B/QH_2$ , Fig. 1a) redox couple to spatially remove electrons after photoinduced charge separation at the reaction center. The terminal electron accepting  $Q_B$  is hydrogen bound within the PSII protein, close to the plastoquinone A ( $Q_A$ , Fig. 1a).<sup>3,4</sup> After two consecutive proton coupled electron transfer events,  $Q_B$  is reduced to hydroquinone  $QH_2$ , and the affinity for the binding pocket of PSII is lost.<sup>5</sup> The liberated  $QH_2$  diffuses away to participate in subsequent redox chemistry (at Cytochrome  $b_6f$ , Fig. 1a), and the PSII binding pocket is occupied by another  $Q_B$  for the subsequent photocycle. Mimicking this photoinduced supramolecular control of docking-and-release events of a redox mediator may represent a viable strategy for reducing charge recombination improving power conversion efficiencies (PCEs) in PEC devices.

Dye-sensitized solar cells (DSSCs) are PEC devices with operational principles that parallel natural photosynthesis; a) light absorption is achieved by molecular components (Fig. 1c), b) photocurrent generation is initiated by a photoinduced electron transfer and c) electron transport is accomplished by means of a molecular redox couple, e.g.  $I^-/I_3^-$  instead of the  $Q_B/QH_2$  employed by PSII. While the  $TiO_2$ -based *n*-type DSSCs (*n*-DSSC) exhibit PCE up to 14.3%,<sup>6</sup> those of the complementary, NiO-based *p*-type

DSSC (*p*-DSSC) are typically 1–2 orders of magnitude lower. This disparity precludes efficiency improvements in tandem DSSCs and artificial photosynthetic PEC devices. The origins of PCE differences between *n*- and *p*-DSSCs is attributed to the charge carrier characteristics of the semiconductor, with very slow ( $4 \times 10^{-8} \text{ cm}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$ )<sup>7</sup> charge (hole) diffusion in NiO compared to that in TiO<sub>2</sub> (electron diffusion  $10^{-4} \text{ cm}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$ ).<sup>8</sup> As a result of this slow hole transport, charge recombination at the semiconductor–electrolyte interface is a much larger issue in NiO-based *p*-DSSC (Fig. 1c, Pathway 5 & 6).<sup>9,10</sup> The natural photosystem circumvents undesirable recombination pathways by preorganizing the redox mediator Q<sub>B</sub> at the electron-accepting docking site, followed by unbinding of the reduction product QH<sub>2</sub>, effectively separating the charges spatially. In contrast, the DSSC relies on collisional electron transfer under diffusional control, making the restrictive process mass transfer of the reduced redox mediator species away from the semiconductor surface to the counter electrode for regeneration. Former studies imply that dye–mediator interactions between dye and redox mediator could have a favorable effect for the overall PCE of both *n*- and *p*-DSSC.<sup>11–14</sup>

The stimulated binding and unbinding events found in the natural photosystem are of central importance in the field of artificial molecular machines. These include extraordinary examples of functional architectures including molecular pumps<sup>15,16</sup>, propellers,<sup>17,18</sup> robotic arms<sup>19</sup>, molecular muscles<sup>20,21</sup> and a nanocar.<sup>22</sup> Essential for the function of these molecular machines is the reversible bond, whose dynamic nature allows for molecular motion upon a chemical, electrochemical or photochemical stimulus.<sup>23,24</sup> An example relevant to the work at hand is the photoelectrochemical trigger that leads to the reduced affinity of a macrocycle for a binding site in (pseudo)rotaxane structures, resulting in molecular ring launching or shuttling events.<sup>25,26</sup>

The question that we address in this paper is if pseudorotaxane motifs can be used as molecular machinery, engendering the preorganization and launching of redox mediators in a *p*-DSSC, effectively emulating the docking and active replacement of the electron carrying Q<sub>B</sub>/QH<sub>2</sub> redox couple in PSII. For this we utilize macrocyclic redox mediator (**3-NDI-ring**) that threads onto the dye P<sub>STATION</sub> to form the P<sub>STATION</sub>:**3-NDI-ring** pseudorotaxane (Fig. 1b). Directional electron transport in the PEC device is established by the inbuilt free-energy impetus that actively shuttles reduced redox mediator **3-NDI-ring**<sup>•-</sup> away from the thread, promoting movement away from the semiconductor–dye interface. Finally, the thread favorably binds the next neutral **3-NDI-ring** molecule to reform the pseudorotaxane. Application of this concept in a *p*-DSSC results in PCE increases by a factor 5, attributable to reduced interfacial charge recombination phenomena (Fig. 1b–c).

## Results And Discussion

**Design and synthesis.** The *p*-DSSCs in this study are based on the well documented **P1** dye (Fig. 1e), and as such, the design of the molecular machinery started with this molecular scaffold. The dye P<sub>STATION</sub> is an analogue of **P1** where the terminal (dicyano)vinyl electron acceptors are replaced with cyanoacrylate esters to facilitate introduction of a glycol-tethered 1,5-dioxynaphthalene (**DNP**). The **DNP** unit acts as

binding station for electron-deficient molecular rings through the formation of pseudorotaxane suprastructures. The naphthalene diimide-based macrocycle **3-NDI-ring** (Fig. 1e) binds to the **DNP** recognition sites of **P<sub>STATION</sub>**, and was designed in an analogous fashion to NDI-based macrocycles previously reported to form pseudorotaxanes with **DNP** recognition sites at the surface–liquid interface.<sup>27,28</sup> As the **3-NDI-ring** functions as redox mediator in the envisioned *p*-DSSC, its redox properties are of key importance, and these compare favorable to those of the typically used  $I^-/I_3^-$  (*vide infra*). Thus the proposed **3-NDI-ring:P<sub>STATION</sub>** pseudorotaxane photosensitizer (Fig. 1e) is anticipated to improve the PCE of the DSSC device in two ways.<sup>14</sup> Firstly, the **3-NDI-ring** as redox mediator is preorganized close to the dye by the **DNP** recognition sites of **P<sub>STATION</sub>** at the surface–electrolyte interface, favoring charge propagation (Fig. 1b, Step 3) over recombination (Fig. 1c, Pathway 6). Secondly, upon photoexcitation (Fig. 1b, Step 1) and subsequent hole injection into NiO (Fig. 1b, Step 2), the resulting **P<sub>STATION</sub><sup>\*-</sup>:3-NDI-ring** species transfers an electron to the **3-NDI-ring** within the pseudorotaxane (Fig. 1b, Step 3), yielding **P<sub>STATION</sub>:3-NDI-ring<sup>-</sup>**. Upon reduction the **3-NDI-ring<sup>-</sup>** loses its affinity for the thread of **P<sub>STATION</sub>** and is replaced by a neutral **3-NDI-ring** from the bulk electrolyte. The reduced **3-NDI-ring<sup>-</sup>** is thus actively repelled from the NiO–dye interface (launching effect (2), Fig. 1b, Step 4), preventing charge recombination (Fig. 1c, Pathway 5). The launched **3-NDI-ring<sup>•-</sup>** is regenerated at counter electrode leading to photocurrent (Fig. 1b, Step 5–6). It is therefore anticipated that the creation of unidirectional charge propagation at a molecular level should translate to macroscopic charge rectification in the device, which should inhibit both recombination pathways (Fig. 1c, Pathway 5–6) resulting in enhanced  $V_{OC}$ ,  $J_{SC}$  and therefore improve PCE.

The **P1** dye<sup>29</sup> and the **P<sub>STATION</sub>** dye<sup>14</sup> were synthesized according to literature. The absorption maximum of the **P<sub>STATION</sub>** ( $\lambda_{max} = 455$  nm) experiences a blue shift compared to **P1** ( $\lambda_{max} = 472$  nm) (Fig. 2a). This particular absorption, derived from an intramolecular charge transfer (ICT) in the dyes highlights the decrease in respective acceptor strength (i.e., cyanoacrylate in **P<sub>STATION</sub>** vs (dicyano)vinyl in **P1**) between molecules. The **3-NDI-ring** was synthesized in two steps, employing Mitsunobu coupling to effect ring closure between pyromellitic diimide and the **3-NDI** fragment in 31% isolated yield (Supplementary Sect. 1.2).

Binding of **3-NDI-ring** to the **DNP** recognition site within **P<sub>STATION</sub>** were prohibited by limited solubility of the dye, therefore the recognition site moiety **DNP-thread** (Fig. 2d) was used to analyze pseudorotaxane formation by <sup>1</sup>H NMR titration. A typical upfield shift (0.5 ppm) in the <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectra for the aromatic protons of the **3-NDI-ring** in CD<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub> was observed (Supplementary Fig. 6).<sup>27</sup> Fitting the titration curve to a model for 1:1 binding revealed an association constant ( $K_a$ ) of 210 M<sup>-1</sup>. Pseudorotaxane formation between the electron rich and deficient components typically leads to charge transfer (CT) band at visible wavelengths. UV–Vis spectrophotometry in a valeronitrile/MeCN (15:85) solution of **DNP-thread:3-NDI-ring** (10:1) indeed revealed the characteristic CT band evolving at 460 nm in line with pseudorotaxane formation (Fig. 2b).<sup>30</sup> The  $K_a$  ascertained from <sup>1</sup>H NMR was complemented by spectrophotometry by

probing the formation of the **DNP-thread:3-NDI-ring** complex by UV–Vis titration (Fig. 2d). The spectral overlap of the **P<sub>STATION</sub>** ICT absorption ( $\lambda = 455$  nm) precluded observation of the CT evolving from pseudorotaxane formation ( $\lambda = 460$  nm) over the course of the titration.

Monitoring the absorption at  $\lambda = 460$  nm UV–vis at 460 nm and fitting to a 1:1 binding model afforded a  $K_a = 160 \text{ M}^{-1}$  for the **DNP-thread:3-NDI-ring** pseudorotaxane (Fig. 2c, Table 1). The differences between  $K_a$  derived from NMR and UV–Vis were rationalized by the difference in solvent polarity ( $\text{CD}_2\text{Cl}_2$  vs. valeronitrile/MeCN (15:85) respectively). Immobilization of **P<sub>STATION</sub>** onto NiO electrodes (*vide infra*, Supplementary Fig. 13) and immersion into a **3-NDI-ring** solution (20  $\mu\text{M}$  in MeCN) led to a decrease in **3-NDI-ring** absorption intensity at  $\lambda = 378$  nm. Given that the control experiment with **P1** in place of **P<sub>STATION</sub>** (Supplementary Fig. 14) experienced no absorption drop at 378 nm, we could ascribe the absorption decreases to the binding of **3-NDI-ring** to the **DNP** recognition sites of the **P<sub>STATION</sub>-NiO**.

Cyclic voltammetry (CV, Supplementary Fig. 8) of **3-NDI-ring** revealed four reductions, attributed to two independent reduction events at the NDI and two at the pyromellitic moieties of the **3-NDI-ring**. The redox events were fully reversible, demonstrating electrochemical stability, which is an important requirement for redox mediators in DSSCs. The first reduction potential of the **3-NDI-ring** (-0.35 V vs. NHE) is 0.55 V lower than that of **P<sub>STATION</sub><sup>\*-</sup>** (Fig. 1d), facilitating exergonic electron transfer from **P<sub>STATION</sub><sup>\*-</sup>** to **3-NDI-ring**. CV of the **DNP-thread:3-NDI-ring** complex shows that binding of the **DNP-thread** to the **3-NDI-ring** has a small effect on the reduction potential (40 mV). Importantly, scan rate dependent CV experiments demonstrate that reduction of **3-NDI-ring** in the model **DNP-thread:3-NDI-ring** prompts a loss of affinity and unbinding from the **DNP-thread** (Supplementary Fig. 9).<sup>31</sup> This “ring launching” effect reflected by the 40 mV reduction potential decrease, is only observed for the first reduction event of the **3-NDI-ring** when bound to the **DNP-thread** (-0.39 V vs. NHE compared to -0.35 V vs. NHE for the free **3-NDI-ring** (Supplementary Table 2). The absence of this typical shift in the three subsequent reduction events show that the mono-reduced ring **3-NDI-ring<sup>-</sup>** unbinds **DNP-thread** after the first reduction.

Table 1

Summary of the optical and electrochemical properties of **P1** and **P<sub>STATION</sub>** (0.5 mM) in MeCN.<sup>14</sup> The redox potentials (vs. NHE) are determined in 0.1 M TBAPF<sub>6</sub> with a glassy carbon working electrode, a leakless Ag/AgCl reference electrode and a Pt wire counter electrode.

Molecule	$\lambda_{\text{max}}$ (nm)	$\epsilon$ ( $\times 10^4 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$ )	$E_{0-0}$ (eV)	$E_{\text{D}^*/\text{D}}$	$E_{\text{D}/\text{D}^-}$	$\Delta G^\circ$
<b>P1</b>	472	5.8	2.27	1.30	-0.77	-0.42
<b>P<sub>STATION</sub></b>	455	6.4	3.30	1.32	-0.98	-0.63

**Photovoltaic performance.** To explore if the pseudorotaxane strategy leads to increased photovoltaic performance, *p*-DSSCs were prepared using NiO photocathodes (3.5  $\mu\text{m}$ , active area 0.196  $\text{cm}^{-2}$ )

functionalized with **P1** or **P<sub>STATION</sub>** by sensitizing in MeCN solution for 16 hours. Measurement of dye loading by uptake experiments revealed that the surface coverage of **P1** ( $\Gamma=7.03 \times 10^{-8} \text{ mol cm}^{-2}$ ) is approximately 50% higher than that of **P<sub>STATION</sub>** ( $\Gamma= \text{P}_{\text{STATION}} 4.50 \times 10^{-8} \text{ mol cm}^{-2}$ ), rationalized by the larger molecular size of **P<sub>STATION</sub>** as it is equipped with the **DNP** recognition site ( $r_{\text{H}} = 0.68 \text{ nm}$  for **P<sub>STATION</sub>** versus  $r_{\text{H}} = 0.39 \text{ nm}$  for **P1**, Supplementary Table 1). The devices were assembled with poly(3,4-ethylenedioxythiophene) (PEDOT) counter electrodes using a 60  $\mu\text{m}$  thermoplast frame (Meltonix polymer 1170-60) and loaded with the **3-NDI-ring** electrolyte (25 mM **3-NDI-ring/3-NDI-ring<sup>-</sup>**, 1:1 in 1 M LiTFSI valeronitrile/MeCN (15:85)) inside a nitrogen filled glovebox. The photovoltaic performances of DSSCs based on **P<sub>STATION</sub>** and **P1** were evaluated under AM1.5G illumination ( $100 \text{ mW cm}^{-2}$ ) and are represented in Fig. 3 and summarized in Table 2. The DSSCs based on the pseudorotaxane strategy, the **P<sub>STATION</sub>:3-NDI-ring** system outperforms the **P1** reference system, in all photovoltaic parameters, with 123 mV enhancement in open circuit voltage ( $V_{\text{OC}}$ ) (208 mV in **P1** vs. 331 mV in **P<sub>STATION</sub>**) and a tripling of short circuit current density ( $J_{\text{SC}}$ ) ( $0.143 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  in **P1** vs.  $0.388 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  in **P<sub>STATION</sub>**), leading to a fivefold increase in PCE (0.009% in **P1** vs. 0.048% in **P<sub>STATION</sub>**). The photocurrent action spectrum of **P<sub>STATION</sub>** reveals a higher incident photon-to-current conversion efficiency (IPCE) across the spectrum (Fig. 3b) with a maximum of 5.3% at 475 nm versus the **P1** system ( $\text{IPCE}_{\text{max}} = 2.6\%$  at 500 nm). The improved fill factor (FF) in the **P<sub>STATION</sub>:3-NDI-ring** based cells compared to the **P1** reference system in combination with the higher  $V_{\text{OC}}$ , suggests reduced charge recombination as a result of preorganization of the redox mediator to the dye via pseudorotaxane formation.

Table 2

Summary of the photovoltaic performance data for DSSC based on **P1** and **P<sub>STATION</sub>** under AM 1.5G illumination ( $100 \text{ mW cm}^{-2}$ ) with the **3-NDI-ring** electrolyte (25 mM) in 1 M LiTFSI valeronitrile/MeCN (15:85). The average performance ( $N = 9$  for **P1** and **P<sub>STATION</sub>**) is provided with the best performing cell in brackets.

Dye	$V_{\text{OC}}$ (mV)	$J_{\text{SC}}$ ( $\text{mA cm}^{-2}$ )	FF	PCE (%)
<b>P1</b>	$208 \pm 23$ (210)	$0.143 \pm 0.044$ (0.146)	$0.311 \pm 0.050$ (0.361)	$0.009 \pm 0.006$ (0.015)
<b>P<sub>STATION</sub></b>	$331 \pm 53$ (385)	$0.388 \pm 0.112$ (0.500)	$0.359 \pm 0.057$ (0.412)	$0.048 \pm 0.013$ (0.060)

Chopped light amperometry experiments were performed, where the light is switched on and off in periods of 10 seconds with an increasing illumination density starting from  $5 \text{ mW cm}^{-2}$  to  $50 \text{ mW cm}^{-2}$  at short current conditions. For both solar cells the  $J_{\text{SC}}$  increases with the light intensity, as expected for these DSSCs (Fig. 3c), and the larger increase of the **P<sub>STATION</sub>:3-NDI-ring** based cell is in line with the better performance. Interestingly, the shape of the photocurrent response for the **P1** shows tailing behavior that

increases with light intensity. This indicates mass transfer limitations of the redox mediator through the mesoporous electrode (Fig. 3c inset), which can be expected for large molecules like **3-NDI-ring** at low concentrations.<sup>32,33</sup> This tailing behavior is not observed for **P<sub>STATION</sub>** based DSSCs in line with preorganization of the redox mediator and efficient replacement of reduced **3-NDI-ring<sup>-</sup>** for neutral **3-NDI-ring<sup>0</sup>**, leading to high local concentrations of **3-NDI-ring** at the dye–electrolyte interface even at very low (25 mM) concentrations of redox mediator.

Differences in solar cell performance originating from pseudorotaxane formation were further probed by electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS). Performing EIS under varying light intensities affords insight into electron–hole recombination at the semiconductor–dye interface through determination of the hole lifetime ( $\tau_h$ ) as a function of  $V_{OC}$  (Fig. 3d).<sup>34</sup> At any given  $V_{OC}$  the hole lifetime for **P<sub>STATION</sub>** (624 ms at 0.1 V) is two times longer than **P1** (324 ms at 0.1 V), implying that less recombination occurs in the pseudorotaxane system. This could either arise from a difference in recombination resistance ( $R_{REC}$ ) or from a change in chemical capacitance ( $C_{\mu}$ ), originating from a valence band shift.<sup>35</sup> The  $C_{\mu}$  (Supplementary Fig. 25) shows no dependency on the applied voltage and a minimal shift between the **P1** and **P<sub>STATION</sub>** DSSCs, expected given the similarity of the systems, thus cannot be the reason for  $V_{OC}$  enhancements in **P<sub>STATION</sub>:3-NDI-ring** *p*-DSSCs. The measured  $R_{REC}$  for the **P<sub>STATION</sub>** system ( $3.20 \times 10^5 \Omega \text{ cm}^{-2}$  at 0.1 V) is higher than for **P1** ( $2.93 \times 10^5 \Omega \text{ cm}^{-2}$  at 0.1 V) meaning that the difference in hole lifetime originates from lower recombination at the semiconductor–electrolyte interface. This effect further supports the active charge rectification bestowed **P<sub>STATION</sub>:3-NDI-ring** *p*-DSSCs by introducing molecular machinery to influence the preorganization and replacement of the redox mediator in the solar cell.

## Conclusion

Charge recombination is one of the key issues to solve in the area of *p*-DSSCs, and inspired by binding/unbinding events of redox mediators in natural photosynthesis, we studied if molecular machinery can be implemented in *p*-DSSC to facilitate directional electron transport to reduce charge recombination. The **P<sub>STATION</sub>** dye based on the **P1** benchmark system is equipped with a docking station for preorganization of ring-shaped redox mediator (**3-NDI-ring**) that form pseudorotaxanes. Reduction of **3-NDI-ring** by electron transfer in **P<sub>STATION</sub><sup>\*</sup>:3-NDI-ring** pseudorotaxane prompts disassembly of the supramolecular complex resulting in ring launching of the reduced mediator, making space for a new neutral redox mediator to bind. The *p*-DSSCs based on **P<sub>STATION</sub>:3-NDI-ring** pseudorotaxanes exhibit enhanced performance across all photovoltaic parameters in comparison to the **P1**, which does not facilitate preorganization of the **3-NDI-ring** mediator. Chopped light amperometry and EIS under varying light intensities showed that both preorganization and ring launching contributes to lowering recombination and a twofold extension to hole lifetimes, leading to a higher  $V_{OC}$  and 5 times increase in PCE in *p*-DSSC. We envision that this bio-inspired approach to integrate artificial molecular machinery in

*p*-DSSCs for supramolecular charge-transfer rectification is a strategy that could be expanded to other PEC devices for solar energy conversion technologies.

## Declarations

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### Author Contributions

T.B. and J.R. proposed the research. T.B. synthesized and characterized the dyes, the macrocycle and pseudorotaxane assisted by J.H. and M.D. DSSC fabrication and characterization was performed by T.B. EIS measurements were performed by T.B. and analyzed by T.M.B. Experiments were designed by T.B., S.M., T.M.B. and J.R. The manuscript was prepared by T.B. S.M. and J.R. with assistance of T.M.B.

### Competing Interests statement

The authors declare no competing interests.

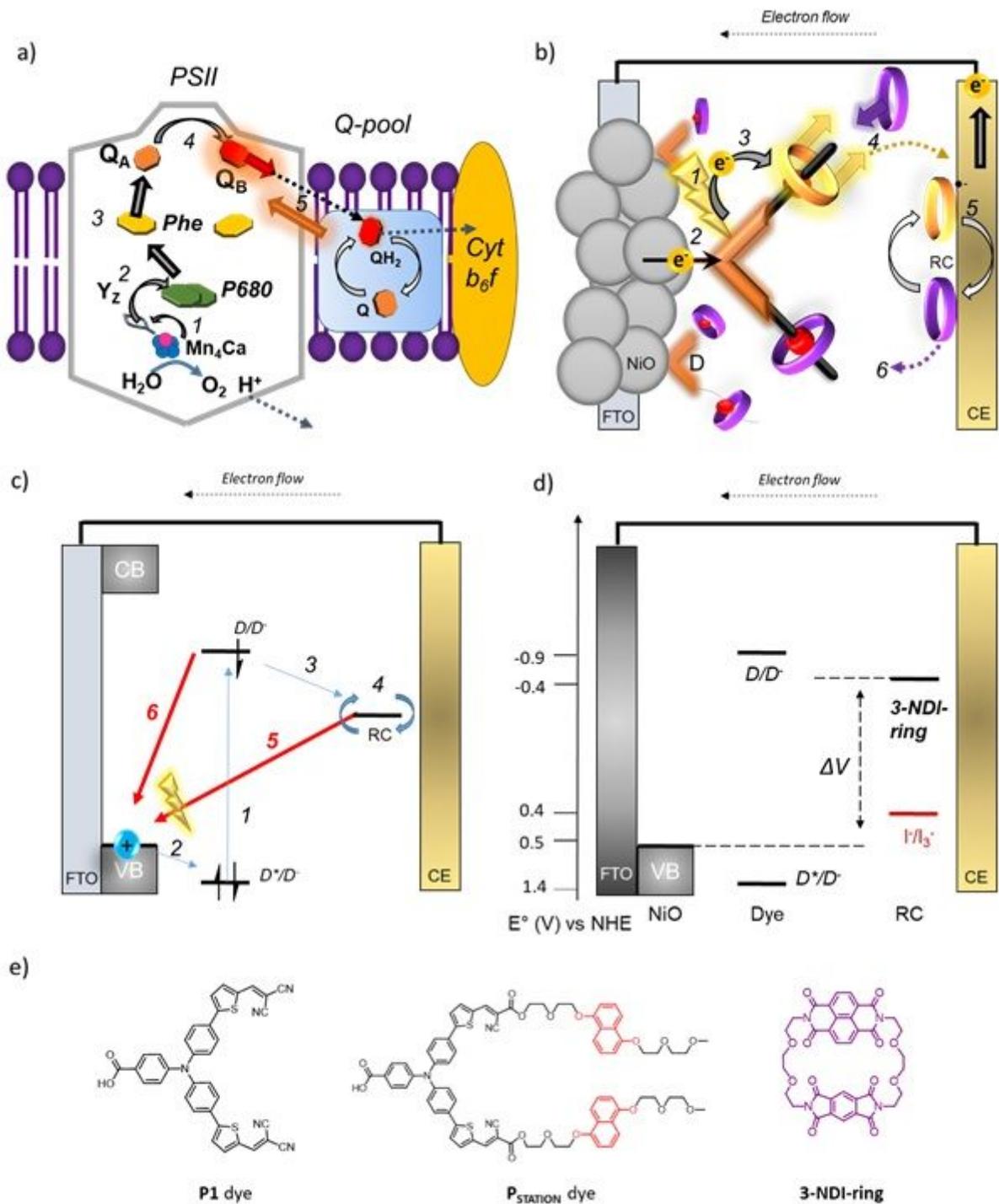
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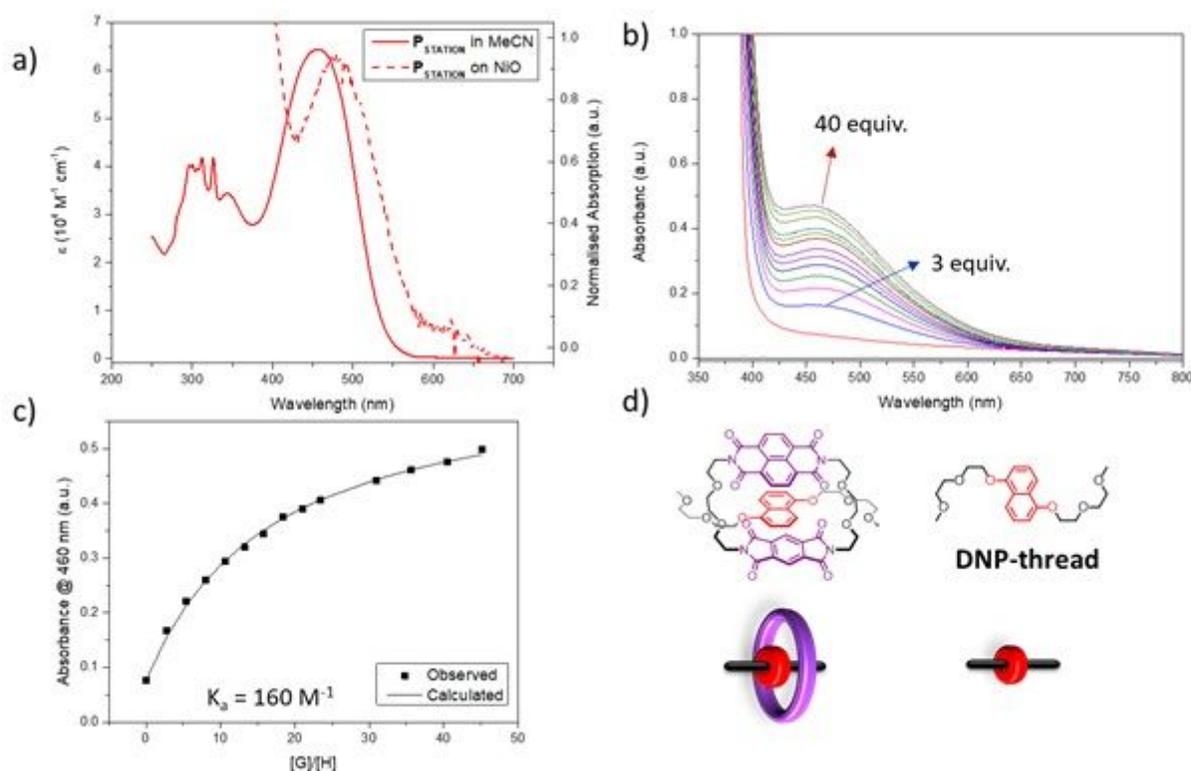
## Figures



**Figure 1**

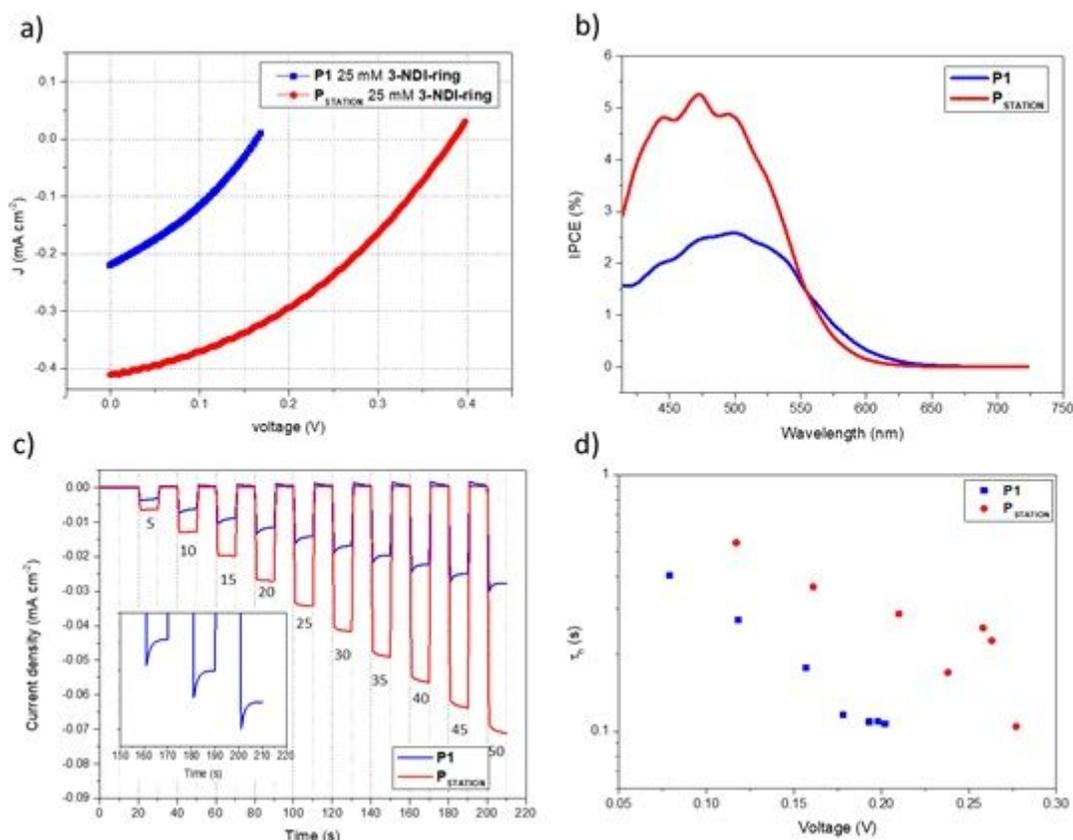
Similarities between the electron propagation in PSII and the pseudorotaxane based DSSC. a) Electrons are extracted from water (1) after photoexcitation of the pigment P680 and pheophytin (Phe) (2) leading to electron transfer to QA and terminal quinone QB (4). Conversion of QB to hydroquinone leads to its replacement by a new quinone (5). The hydroquinone is regenerated by the cytochrome b6f complex. b) Schematic representation of the pseudorotaxane based DSSC. The pigment in this artificial system is the

PSTATION dye with docking stations for the redox mediator, the macrocycle (3-NDI-ring). Upon photoexcitation of the dye (1) and hole injection into NiO (2), the electron is transferred reducing 3-NDI-ring (3), which is subsequently replaced by a neutral ring (purple), effectively removing the charged ring from the NiO–dye interface, thereby preventing charge recombination. (4) The regeneration of the electron acceptor occurs at the counter electrode of the device (5,6). c) Schematic representation of the forward electron propagation (1–4) and the recombination pathways 5 and 6. d) Schematic energy diagram for the p-DSSC based on the PSTATION pseudorotaxane dye. Energy levels are represented in V (vs. NHE). FTO = fluorine doped tin oxide; VB = valence band; CB = conduction band; D = dye; RC = redox couple; CE= counter electrode. e) Chemical structures of molecular dyes P1 and PSTATION, the latter featuring binding sites to facilitate pseudorotaxane formation with the macrocycle 3-NDI-ring.



**Figure 2**

a) UV–Vis spectra of PSTATION in solution (solid line) and adsorbed onto NiO (dashed line). b) Emergence of CT band upon addition of DNP recognition site to 3-NDI-ring (49.5  $\mu\text{M}$ ) indicating pseudorotaxane formation in valeronitrile/MeCN (15:85). c) The titration curve was used to determine the  $K_a$ . d) Structure of the DNP-thread and the DNP-thread:3-NDI-ring pseudorotaxane.



**Figure 3**

a) Photovoltaic performances of the devices based on the P1 (blue squares) and the PSTATION dye (red dots) with the 3-NDI-ring as redox mediator (25 mM in 1 M LiTFSI) which can only form pseudorotaxanes with the PSTATION dye. b) A photocurrent action spectrum of the PSTATION based system (red) and the P1 based system (blue). c) Chopped light amperometry at different light flux varying from 5–50 mW cm<sup>-2</sup> with on/off cycles of 10 seconds. The insert graph displays the decay effect (tailing behavior) observed in the P1 based system for the photocurrent at 40, 45 and 50 mW cm<sup>-2</sup>. d) Hole lifetime  $\tau_h$  as function of VOC obtained through EIS measurements under varying light intensities measured on the P1 system (blue) and the PSTATION system (red).

## Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- [Reeketal3NDIringDSSCSUppinfo.pdf](#)