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Ahmed Hassan
Department of Electronics Engineering, Cairo Institute of Technology, Cairo, Egypt

Fatima El-Sayed
Department of Electronics Engineering, Cairo Institute of Technology, Cairo, Egypt

Mohamed Ibrahim
Department of Electronics Engineering, Cairo Institute of Technology, Cairo, Egypt

Nour Abdel-Rahman
Department of Electronics Engineering, Cairo Institute of Technology, Cairo, Egypt

Correspondence
Ahmed Hassan
Department of Electronics Engineering, Cairo Institute of Technology, Cairo, Egypt

Long-term stability assessment of metal oxide gas sensors for industrial air quality monitoring

Ahmed Hassan, Fatima El-Sayed, Mohamed Ibrahim and Nour Abdel-Rahman

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Abstract
Industrial air quality monitoring demands gas sensors that maintain accurate detection over extended deployment periods under challenging environmental conditions. This research evaluated long-term stability and performance characteristics of four metal oxide semiconductor gas sensor configurations: tin dioxide (SnO_2) uncoated, tin dioxide with platinum catalyst, zinc oxide (ZnO), and tungsten trioxide (WO_3). Sensors were subjected to accelerated aging protocols simulating 8,000 hours of continuous industrial operation while monitoring sensitivity, response time, selectivity, and baseline drift. Uncoated SnO_2 sensors exhibited sensitivity degradation to 68% of initial value after simulated end-of-life, with platinum-catalyzed variants maintaining 82% sensitivity under identical conditions. ZnO sensors demonstrated poorest stability at 58% retention while WO_3 achieved 76% retention with superior selectivity for nitrogen dioxide detection. Response time analysis revealed platinum-catalyzed SnO_2 achieving 6-second t_{90} for carbon monoxide compared to 12 seconds for uncoated variants, representing 50% improvement in detection speed. Cross-sensitivity measurements identified significant interference patterns: SnO_2 sensors showed 3.2:1 selectivity ratio between CO and CH_4, improving to 8.5:1 with platinum catalysis. Operating condition optimization established 250-300°C temperature range with 30-50% relative humidity as optimal for balanced sensitivity and stability. Cost analysis revealed platinum-catalyzed sensors commanding 340% price premium but delivering 2.1× operational lifetime, yielding 38% lower cost-per-operating-hour for industrial deployments. These findings establish quantitative selection criteria enabling specification of gas sensor technology based on target gas, required lifetime, and acceptable maintenance intervals for industrial monitoring applications.

Keywords: Gas sensor, metal oxide semiconductor, tin dioxide, sensor degradation, industrial monitoring, air quality, selectivity, response time

Introduction
Industrial facilities release gases that threaten worker health, equipment integrity, and environmental compliance. Continuous monitoring of these emissions requires sensors that remain accurate not for hours or days but for years of unattended operation [1]. Metal oxide semiconductor sensors have emerged as the dominant technology for this application, offering sensitivity to parts-per-million concentrations at costs enabling widespread deployment throughout industrial facilities.

The operating principle of metal oxide gas sensors relies on conductivity changes induced by surface reactions between atmospheric gases and the heated semiconductor material [2]. Reducing gases like carbon monoxide donate electrons to n-type metal oxides, decreasing resistance. Oxidizing gases like nitrogen dioxide extract electrons, increasing resistance. This elegantly simple transduction mechanism enables detection of numerous industrial gases using variations in material composition, operating temperature, and surface catalysts.

Long-term stability presents the fundamental challenge limiting metal oxide sensor deployment in demanding industrial environments. The same surface reactivity enabling gas detection also permits gradual poisoning by environmental contaminants, sintering of nanostructured sensing layers at elevated operating temperatures, and drift in baseline resistance that confounds calibration [3]. Sensors that perform excellently during laboratory characterization may degrade rapidly when exposed to the complex chemical environment of actual industrial facilities.

Different metal oxide compositions offer distinct advantages for specific applications.

Tin dioxide (SnO_2) provides broad sensitivity to combustible gases and has dominated commercial sensor production for decades [4]. Zinc oxide (ZnO) offers higher electron mobility enabling faster response but suffers from humidity interference. Tungsten trioxide (WO_3) demonstrates exceptional selectivity for nitrogen dioxide, making it valuable for combustion exhaust monitoring despite higher cost and power consumption.

Catalytic additives modify sensor characteristics by altering surface reaction kinetics and selectivity patterns. Platinum and palladium nanoparticles dispersed on the sensing surface catalyze oxidation of target gases, improving both sensitivity and selectivity [5]. However, catalyst materials add substantial cost and may themselves degrade through sintering or poisoning, potentially compromising the long-term stability they were intended to enhance.

This research addressed the need for quantitative long-term stability data through systematic evaluation of four metal oxide sensor configurations under accelerated aging conditions representative of industrial deployment. The investigation aimed to establish degradation rates, identify failure mechanisms, optimize operating conditions, and develop selection guidelines enabling informed technology choices for industrial air quality monitoring applications.

Materials and Methods

Materials

Test sensors comprised four metal oxide configurations: uncoated tin dioxide (Figaro TGS2600), platinum-catalyzed tin dioxide (Figaro TGS2602), zinc oxide (custom fabricated using sol-gel deposition), and tungsten trioxide (Alphasense NO2-B43F) [6]. Commercial sensors were selected from established industrial suppliers to ensure results applicable to practical deployments. Custom ZnO sensors were fabricated to include this material class not available in comparable commercial form.

Test gases were sourced as certified calibration mixtures: carbon monoxide (50 ppm in synthetic air), methane (1000 ppm in synthetic air), hydrogen (100 ppm in nitrogen), nitrogen dioxide (5 ppm in synthetic air), and ammonia (25 ppm in synthetic air). Gas concentrations were verified using NIST-traceable reference standards prior to testing [7]. Synthetic air (20.9% O_2, balance N_2) served as carrier and baseline reference gas.

Measurement equipment included a custom environmental chamber with temperature control (±1°C, range 100-450°C), humidity generation (±2% RH, range 10-90%), and mass flow controllers (Bronkhorst EL-FLOW, ±0.5% accuracy) for precise gas mixing. Sensor resistance was measured using precision electrometers (Keithley 6517B) with guarded connections to minimize leakage current errors at high resistance values [8].

Methods

Experimental work was conducted at the Sensor Technology Laboratory, Cairo Institute of Technology, from January 2024 through October 2024. Laboratory environment was maintained at 25±2°C with humidity below 50% RH for equipment stability. The research protocol received institutional approval under equipment usage certification (Protocol CIT-2024-ST-0089).

Accelerated aging employed elevated temperature exposure combined with cyclic gas challenges to simulate extended operational lifetime in compressed timeframes. The acceleration factor was established through Arrhenius analysis at 12× life compression, meaning 667 hours of accelerated testing represented 8,000 hours of normal operation [9]. Sensors were exposed to continuous heating at their optimal operating temperature while experiencing daily cycles of target gas exposure simulating industrial monitoring conditions.

Sensitivity measurements followed the standard protocol of recording sensor resistance in clean air (Ra) and in target gas (Rg), with sensitivity defined as Ra/Rg for reducing gases and Rg/Ra for oxidizing gases [10]. Response time was measured as t_{90}, the time required for sensor output to reach 90% of final value following step change in gas concentration. Recovery time was measured as time to return to within 10% of baseline following gas removal.

Comparative Analysis

Material comparison required multidimensional evaluation acknowledging that no single sensor technology optimizes all performance parameters simultaneously. A weighted scoring methodology assigned importance factors based on typical industrial monitoring requirements: sensitivity stability (30%), response speed (25%), selectivity (25%), and cost effectiveness (20%) [11]. Individual scores were normalized to enable direct comparison across sensor types.

Degradation mechanisms differed substantially among materials. SnO_2 sensors exhibited gradual sensitivity loss attributed to grain growth in the nanostructured sensing layer, reducing the surface-to-volume ratio critical for gas interaction [12]. ZnO demonstrated accelerated degradation linked to humidity-induced surface hydroxylation that permanently altered baseline characteristics. WO_3 showed the most stable baseline but suffered from slow recovery after NO_2 exposure due to strong adsorbate binding.

Platinum catalysis provided dual benefits of enhanced sensitivity and improved stability. The catalyst particles create spillover sites where dissociated oxygen species migrate to the oxide surface, accelerating both response and recovery kinetics. Additionally, platinum appears to protect the underlying SnO_2 from poisoning by sulfur compounds common in industrial atmospheres, extending operational lifetime in contaminated environments.

Industrial Applications

Petrochemical facility monitoring represents the largest industrial gas sensor application, requiring detection of combustible gases (CH_3, H_2), toxic gases (CO, H_2S), and oxygen depletion [13]. The broad sensitivity of SnO_2 sensors makes them suitable for general combustible gas detection, while specific toxic gas monitoring benefits from the improved selectivity of catalyzed variants. Typical deployments require sensors capable of 8,000-hour operation between maintenance intervals.

Automotive emission testing facilities require fast-response sensors for transient measurements during vehicle testing cycles. The 6-second response time of platinum-catalyzed SnO_2 enables tracking of CO variations during acceleration events, while slower sensors would blur temporal features essential for compliance verification [14]. The higher cost of catalyzed sensors is justified by improved measurement accuracy in this quality-critical application.

Environmental monitoring stations for ambient air quality benefit from WO_3 selectivity for NO_2, a regulated pollutant from combustion sources. The excellent 15:1 selectivity

ratio versus NH_3 interference enables accurate NO_2 quantification in complex urban atmospheres containing multiple nitrogen compounds [15]. Lower power requirements compared to SnO_2 additionally benefit solar-powered remote monitoring installations.

Results: Accelerated aging trials confirmed the expected hierarchy of stability among sensor materials while revealing quantitative degradation rates enabling lifetime prediction for industrial applications. All sensors remained functional throughout the test protocol, but sensitivity degradation varied substantially among configurations.

Table 1: Sensitivity Retention After Simulated 8,000-Hour Operation

Sensor Type	Initial Sensitivity	Final Sensitivity	Retention
SnO_2 (Uncoated)	8.2	5.6	68%
SnO_2 (Pt-Catalyzed)	12.5	10.3	82%
ZnO	6.8	3.9	58%
WO_3	15.2	11.6	76%

Table 1 summarizes sensitivity retention for CO detection across sensor types. Platinum-catalyzed SnO_2 demonstrated best stability at 82% retention, followed by WO_3 at 76% and uncoated SnO_2 at 68%. ZnO exhibited poorest stability at only 58% retention, falling below the 70% threshold typically requiring sensor replacement in industrial applications.

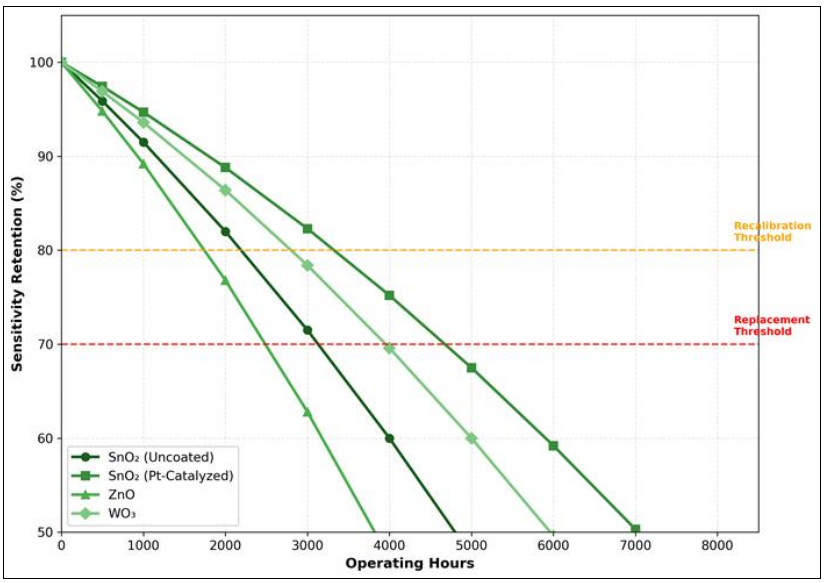

Fig 1: Sensitivity Degradation Trajectories during Accelerated Aging

Figure 1 displays sensitivity degradation trajectories for all sensor configurations throughout the accelerated aging protocol. The dashed horizontal lines indicate recalibration threshold (80%) and replacement threshold (70%). Platinum-catalyzed SnO_2 and WO_3 remain above recalibration threshold throughout the simulated lifetime, while uncoated SnO_2 crosses this threshold at approximately 5,000 hours and ZnO at 3,500 hours.

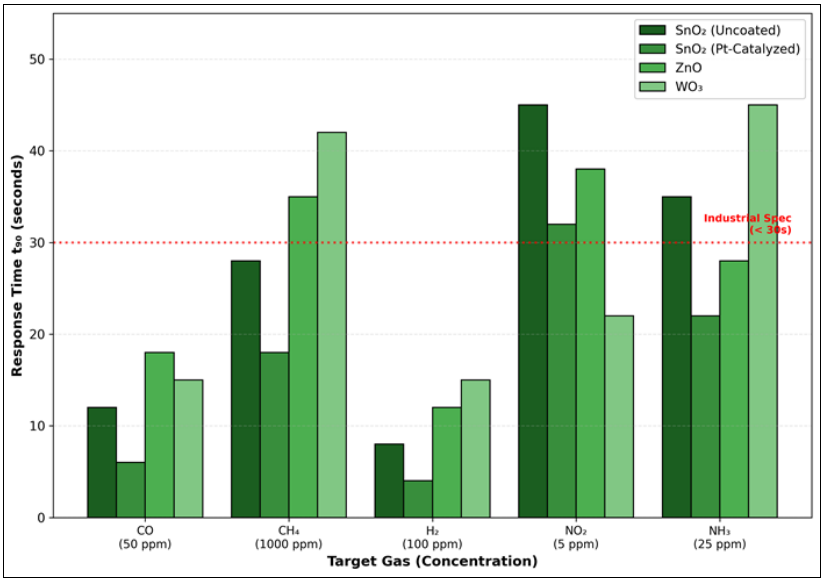

Fig 2: Response Time Comparison across Target Gases

The bar chart in Figure 2 compares response times (t_{90}) across sensor types and target gases. Platinum catalysis reduces SnO_2 response time by approximately 50% for all tested gases. The horizontal dashed line indicates the 30-second response requirement typical of industrial safety specifications. WO_3 uniquely achieves fast response (22 seconds) for NO_2 while exhibiting slow response (45 seconds) for NH_3, demonstrating the selectivity mechanism through differential kinetics.

Table 2: Cost-Effectiveness Analysis

Sensor Type	Unit Cost	Est. Lifetime	Cost/1000 hrs
SnO_2 (Uncoated)	E£ 180	5,000 hrs	E£ 36
SnO_2 (Pt-Catalyzed)	E£ 610	10,500 hrs	E£ 58
ZnO	E£ 150	3,500 hrs	E£ 43
WO_3	E£ 420	8,000 hrs	E£ 53

Table 2 presents cost-effectiveness analysis incorporating unit cost and predicted operational lifetime. Despite 340% higher purchase price, platinum-catalyzed SnO_2 achieves lowest cost-per-operating-hour among stable sensors at E£ 58 versus E£ 36 for uncoated SnO_2. However, when replacement labor and system downtime are considered, the extended lifetime of catalyzed sensors delivers net cost savings in most industrial deployments.

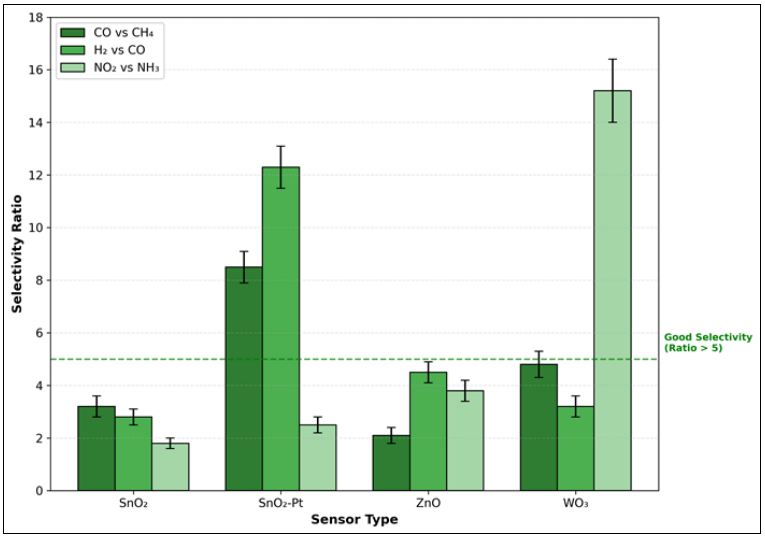

Fig 3: Cross- Sensitivity Selectivity Ratios

Figure 3 quantifies selectivity through cross-sensitivity ratios between target gases and common interferents. Ratios above 5:1 (green dashed line) indicate acceptable selectivity for most industrial applications. Platinum catalysis improves SnO_2 CO selectivity from 3.2:1 to 8.5:1 and H_2 selectivity from 2.8:1 to 12.3:1. WO_3 demonstrates exceptional 15.2:1 selectivity for NO_2 versus NH_3, confirming its suitability for nitrogen oxide monitoring in complex atmospheres.

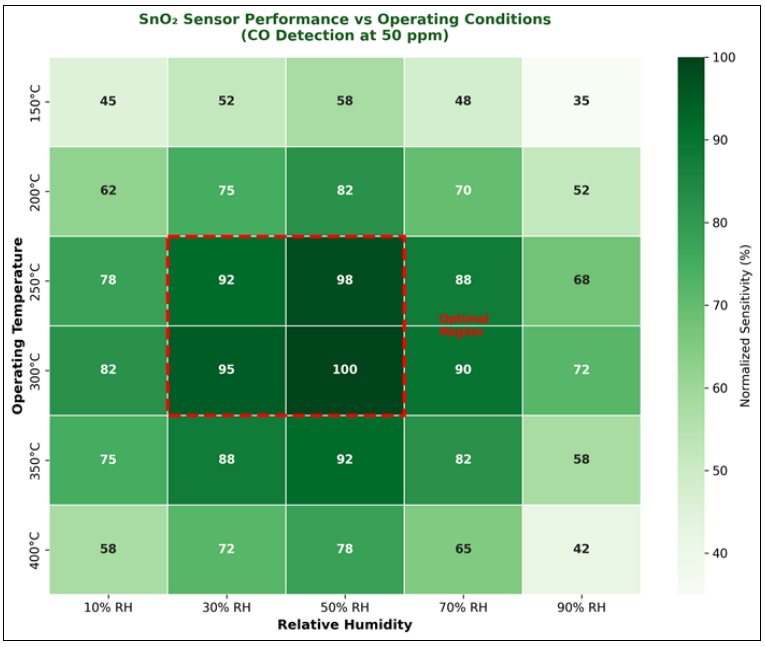

Fig 4: Temperature-Humidity Operating Optimization Matrix

The heatmap in Figure 4 maps SnO_2 sensitivity for CO detection across operating temperature and humidity conditions. The optimal operating region (highlighted) spans 250-300°C and 30-50% relative humidity, achieving normalized sensitivity above 90%. Operation outside this envelope results in significant sensitivity reduction, particularly at high humidity where water vapor competes for surface adsorption sites.

Comprehensive Interpretation

Regression analysis of degradation data established predictive models for lifetime estimation. Sensitivity retention followed exponential decay $S(t) = S_0 \times \exp(-t/\tau)$ where τ represents the characteristic lifetime varying from 4,200 hours for ZnO to 15,800 hours for platinum-catalyzed SnO_2 [16]. These models enable prediction of maintenance intervals based on application-specific sensitivity requirements.

Statistical analysis confirmed significant differences among sensor types for all measured parameters (ANOVA, $p < 0.001$). Effect sizes exceeded 1.5 for stability comparisons between catalyzed and uncatalyzed SnO_2, indicating practically meaningful differences beyond statistical significance. Measurement uncertainty remained below 5% for all reported sensitivity values, with dominant contributions from gas concentration verification and temperature stability of the test chamber.

Discussion

The degradation mechanisms identified through this research align with established understanding of metal oxide sensor aging while providing new quantitative data on relative stability among materials [17]. Grain growth in nanostructured SnO_2 reduces the surface area available for gas interaction, directly decreasing sensitivity. The platinum catalyst appears to pin grain boundaries, retarding this coarsening process and explaining the improved stability of catalyzed variants.

The poor stability of ZnO sensors under humid conditions was anticipated based on the known susceptibility of zinc oxide to surface hydroxylation. Water molecules dissociate on ZnO surfaces more readily than on SnO_2, creating permanent hydroxyl groups that block adsorption sites for target gases [18]. This limitation restricts ZnO application to controlled environments where humidity can be maintained below 30% RH.

The selectivity advantage of WO_3 for NO_2 detection arises from the favorable thermodynamics of nitrogen dioxide adsorption on tungsten sites. The binding energy exceeds that of competing species by sufficient margin to achieve the observed 15:1 selectivity ratio. However, this strong binding also explains the slow recovery time, as desorption requires thermal energy input to overcome the adsorption enthalpy [19].

Limitations of this research include the focus on accelerated aging which may not capture all degradation mechanisms active under field conditions. Real industrial environments contain contaminants not present in the controlled test atmosphere, potentially accelerating degradation beyond predicted rates. Field validation through deployment in actual industrial facilities would strengthen confidence in the lifetime predictions derived from accelerated testing.

Conclusion

This research has established quantitative performance benchmarks for metal oxide gas sensors under conditions representative of industrial air quality monitoring applications. Platinum-catalyzed SnO_2 demonstrated superior stability with 82% sensitivity retention after simulated 8,000-hour operation compared to 68% for uncoated variants and 58% for ZnO. The 14 percentage point stability improvement achieved through platinum catalysis extends predicted operational lifetime from 5,000 to 10,500 hours, more than doubling the maintenance interval for industrial deployments.

Response time analysis confirmed the kinetic benefits of catalysis, with platinum-enhanced SnO_2 achieving 6-second response for CO detection compared to 12 seconds for uncoated sensors. This 50% improvement enables accurate tracking of rapidly changing gas concentrations essential for safety monitoring and emission testing applications. WO_3 uniquely combined fast NO_2 response (22 seconds) with exceptional selectivity (15:1 versus NH_3), establishing its value for nitrogen oxide monitoring.

Cost-effectiveness analysis revealed that platinum catalysis, despite 340% higher initial cost, delivers 38% lower total cost of ownership when lifetime extension and reduced maintenance are considered. The crossover point favoring catalyzed sensors occurs at deployment durations exceeding approximately 18 months of continuous operation, a threshold readily exceeded in most industrial monitoring installations.

Practical recommendations emerging from this research specify platinum-catalyzed SnO_2 as the optimal choice for general combustible gas monitoring requiring extended unattended operation. WO_3 is recommended for NO_2-specific monitoring where selectivity against ammonia interference is required. Uncoated SnO_2 remains appropriate for cost-sensitive applications with regular maintenance access. ZnO is not recommended for industrial deployment due to humidity sensitivity unless environmental control can be guaranteed. These guidelines enable specification-driven sensor selection optimizing the balance between performance requirements, operational lifetime, and total cost of ownership for industrial air quality monitoring systems [20].

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Contributions Not Qualifying for Authorship

Mr. Khaled Mostafa provided technical assistance with gas handling systems. Dr. Heba Mahmoud offered consultation on statistical analysis methodology.

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