

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Synergistic Atomic-Vacancy Engineering in S-Scheme Heterojunction for Selective H₂O₂ Photosynthesis

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ABSTRACT

Solar-driven H₂O₂ production presents a sustainable alternative to the energy-intensive anthraquinone process, yet remains limited by inefficient charge transfer and poor selectivity. Herein, a synergistic strategy combining the atomic defect engineering and interfacial microenvironment modulation is established, which involves the in-situ mechanical growth of β -ketoenamine-linked covalent organic framework (TpBTD-COF) onto Zn single-atom-anchored sulfur-vacancy (S_v)-rich Sb₂S₃ nanorods (Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD) to overcome the above limitations. The optimal Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 photocatalyst achieves a remarkable non-sacrificial H₂O₂ production rate of 2692 $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ with 90% selectivity in pure water, significantly outperforming most single-atom photocatalysts. Advanced characterizations and theoretical calculations indicate that the S_v-synergistic unsaturated Zn atomic sites as electron mediator under the internal electric field of S-scheme heterojunction optimizes the interfacial electron transfer and promotes O₂ adsorption, significantly improving activity and selectivity for H₂O₂ photosynthesis. This work offers an innovative perspective on the synergistic integration of defect engineering, single-atom catalysis, and heterojunction design for modulating the interfacial charge dynamics, enabling scalable solar-to-chemical energy conversion applications.

1 | Introduction

Hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) is a vital industrial chemical with diverse applications in chemical and medical industries [1, 2]. The conventional anthraquinone process currently dominates industrial H₂O₂ production but is plagued by intensive energy demands, hazardous emissions and safety risks [3–5]. Consequently, the mismatch between rising demand and unsustainable anthraquinone process has driven urgent efforts to exploit efficient alternatives for H₂O₂ production. Recent advances in solar-driven H₂O₂ production from naturally abundant H₂O and

O₂ offer a promising route to achieve sustainable H₂O₂ production [6–10]. Nevertheless, the rational design of efficient photocatalysts featuring tailored active sites that simultaneously optimize charge dynamics and selectivity toward H₂O₂ production remains a critical challenge.

Single-atom catalysts (SACs) offer the potential for atomic-level tuning of oxygen reduction reaction (ORR) pathway via coordination and defect engineering [11–15]. Specifically, defect engineering modulates the local electronic structure to enhance O₂ activation, facilitate charge separation, and generate

low-coordination metal centers that stabilize O_2 adsorption and facilitate electron transfer [16, 17]. However, most studies overlook the critical role of semiconductor support in governing the electron structure of SACs during photocatalysis, leading to unsatisfactory H_2O_2 production activity in pure water and severely impeding the rational design of high-performance photocatalysts [18, 19]. To overcome these limitations, various strategies such as constructing heterojunctions and post-modifying structure have been employed to further improve the charge separation efficiency of SACs for boosting H_2O_2 photosynthesis [20]. Among potential semiconductor supports, antimony sulfide (Sb_2S_3) has attracted significant attention due to the suitable bandgap (~ 1.7 eV) and excellent optoelectronic properties, which makes it a promising platform for SACs [21–24]. The unique structure provides abundant anchoring sites that are crucial for stabilizing the single-atom metal centers and preventing their aggregation. The synergy between Sb_2S_3 and metal atomic sites may optimize interfacial electron transfer kinetics, thereby facilitating rapid charge separation and surface redox reactions. Unfortunately, few studies have explored the H_2O_2 photosynthesis of SACs-based Sb_2S_3 , and the practical application is severely limited by severe charge carrier recombination, insufficient active sites and pronounced photocorrosion [25]. Constructing single-atom mediated heterojunctions utilizing Sb_2S_3 combined with ideal photocatalytic material such as COFs [26–28], may overcome aforementioned challenges, supporting optimized interfacial charge dynamics.

Herein, we propose an S-scheme heterojunction by in situ mechanical growth of β -ketoenamine-linked TpBTD-COF onto Zn single-atom-anchored S_v -rich Sb_2S_3 nanorods ($Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3@TpBTD$) for efficient H_2O_2 photosynthesis. The optimal $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3@TpBTD-3$ exhibits a superior H_2O_2 production rate of $2692 \mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ with 90% selectivity in pure water without any sacrificial agents, surpassing most of the previously reported SACs-based photocatalysts. Advanced characterizations combined with theoretical calculations reveal that the S_v -synergistic unsaturated Zn atomic sites as electron mediator under the internal electric field of S-scheme heterojunction optimizes the interfacial electron transfer and facilitate O_2 adsorption, significantly improving selectivity and efficiency for H_2O_2 photosynthesis. This work presents an innovative perspective on the synergistic integration of defect engineering, single-atom catalysis and heterojunction design, resolving charge dynamics and interfacial kinetics challenge.

2 | Results and Discussion

2.1 | Morphological and Structural Characterization

The $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3@TpBTD$ heterostructure was synthesized through following fabrication steps (Figure 1a). First, Sb_2S_3 nanorods were synthesized by hydrothermal method and impregnated with zinc acetylacetonate, followed by calcination under N_2 to drive the anchoring of Zn single-atoms and S_v on the Sb_2S_3 . Second, the TpBTD was in-situ grown on the $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3$ nanorods via mechanochemical synthesis to form the $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3@TpBTD$ heterostructure. The composites with

different proportions were obtained by adjusting the amount of $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3$ and denoted as $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3@TpBTD-x$ ($x = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5$). Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectra provide clear evidence for the β -ketoenamine structure of TpBTD, with the characteristic stretching vibrations observed for $C=O$ (1624 cm^{-1}) and $C-N$ (1283 cm^{-1}) bonds, indicating the successful assembly of TpBTD (Figures S1 and S2) [29, 30]. The experimental x-ray diffraction (XRD) pattern of TpBTD matched well with the simulated pattern obtained using eclipsed ABC stacking model, indicating the TpBTD adopts a uniquely staggered ABC stacking mode (Figure S3) [31, 32]. Further XRD analysis reveals the identical diffraction patterns for $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3$ and pristine Sb_2S_3 , demonstrating the absence of Zn aggregation. Raman spectra exhibit the asymmetric and symmetric stretching vibration at 276 and 301 cm^{-1} corresponding to the $S-Sb$ bond, indicating that Zn single-atoms doping distorts the local $S-Sb$ coordination environment that broadens the $S-Sb$ Raman peak (Figure S4).

The morphology of as-prepared samples was confirmed by transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and scanning electron microscopy (SEM). The Sb_2S_3 exhibits uniform rod-like morphology, with the lattice spacing of 0.3 nm corresponding to the (211) facet (Figure 1b and Figure S5) [33]. Remarkably, the main lattice spacing of 0.8 nm corresponds to the (110) facet in $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3$, which has low-coordinated surface atoms and makes it easier to leave the lattice and form S_v (Figure 1c) [34, 35]. The absence of Zn particles/clusters in TEM image further supports the atomic dispersion of Zn in $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3$. Inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) reveals that the content of Zn element in $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3@TpBTD-3$ catalyst is $0.71 \text{ wt.}\%$. The $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3@TpBTD-3$ composite exhibits tight interface contact between $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3$ and TpBTD, confirming the formation of heterostructure (Figure 1d,e). Furthermore, Brunauer-Emmett-Teller (BET) tests indicate that the specific surface area of $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3$ is slightly higher than that of bulk Sb_2S_3 , and $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3@TpBTD-3$ composite has further increased with the introduction of TpBTD, which provides abundant active sites and facilitates mass transfer (Figure S6). Aberration-corrected high-angle annular dark-field scanning transmission electron microscopy (AC-HAADF-STEM) was employed to confirm the atomic dispersion of Zn on Sb_2S_3 surface (Figure 1f,g). The marked spots in Sb_2S_3 lattice correspond to S_v , and the isolated low-contrast bright spots within well-ordered atomic lattice, corroborating the uniform distribution of Zn single-atoms (Figure 1h,i). Additionally, the electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR) spectroscopy indicates that $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3$ exhibits a distinct peak characteristic of S_v at $g = 2.003$ compared with Sb_2S_3 , validating the successful introduction of S_v (Figure S7) [36]. Energy-dispersive x-ray spectroscopy (EDX) mapping reveals the uniform distribution of C, N, O, S, Sb, and Zn elements throughout the $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3@TpBTD-3$, confirming the uniform atomic dispersion of Zn (Figure 1j).

X-ray absorption near-edge spectroscopy (XANES) and extended x-ray absorption fine structure (EXAFS) spectra were conducted to investigate the atomic structure and coordination environment for Zn single-atoms in $Zn-S_v/Sb_2S_3@TpBTD-3$. The absorption edge position reveals that the valence state of Zn species is close to $+2$, consistent with the x-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) analysis (Figure 1k and Figure S8). EXAFS spectrum exhibits a prominent peak at $1.84 \text{ \AA}$ attributed to $Zn-S$ bond, confirming

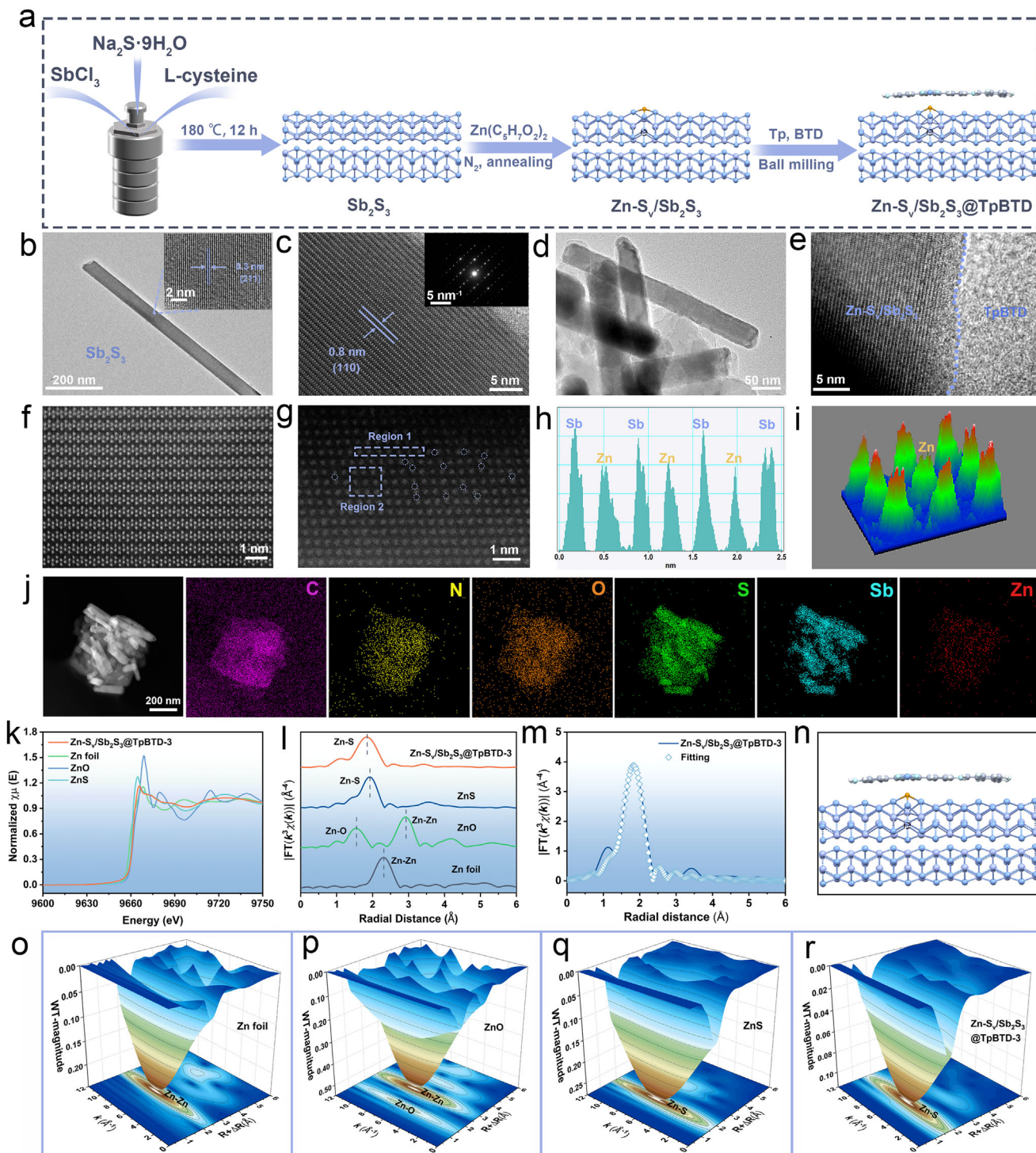


FIGURE 1 | (a) Schematic diagram of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 synthesis. TEM images of (b) Sb₂S₃, (c) Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃, (d,e) Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3. (f,g) AC-HAADF-STEM images of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3. (h) Linear atomic intensity profiles of region 1. (i) 3D atomic resolution map of region 2. (j) EDX mappings of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3. (k) XANES and (l) EXAFS spectra of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 and reference. (m,n) EXAFS fitting curves and the possible structure of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3. (o-r) WT-EXAFS spectra of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 and reference.

that the Zn species are stabilized by Zn–S coordination (Figure 1l) [37]. The comparison with Zn foil and ZnO references reveals the absence of Zn–Zn or Zn–O bond in Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3, excluding the presence of Zn particles/clusters and confirming the atomic dispersion of Zn. EXAFS fitting further demonstrates the coordination numbers of Zn–S is approximate 3, implying an

unsaturated coordination of Zn sites (Figure 1m,n). Wavelet transformed (WT) EXAFS spectra indicate that Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 exhibits a dominant peak at 5.94 Å⁻¹, corresponding to the Zn–S bond (Figure 1o–r). The signal of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 displays an apparent deviation from that of ZnS, demonstrating an unsaturated coordination of Zn sites [38]. These results reveal

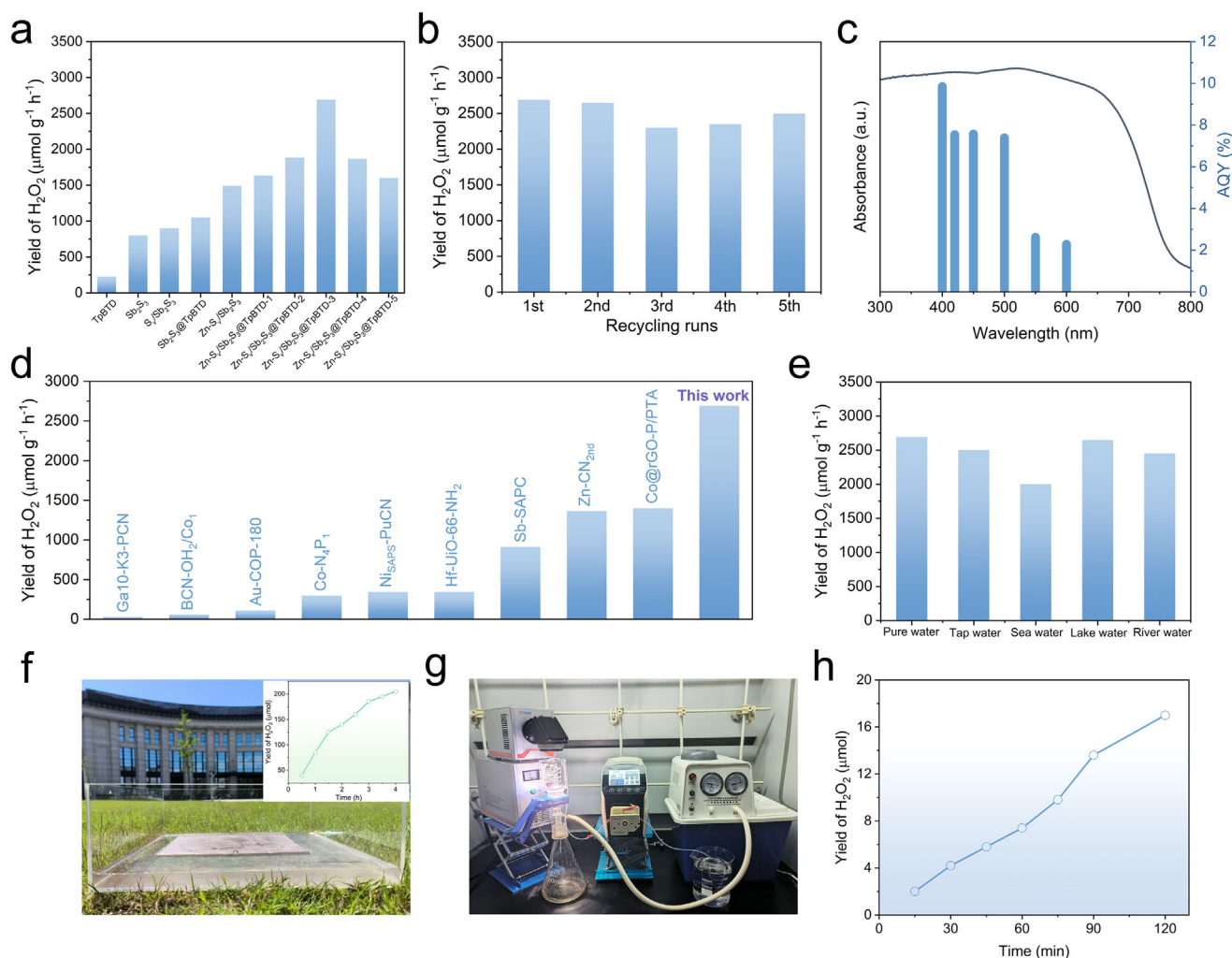


FIGURE 2 | (a) Photocatalytic performance of prepared catalysts. (b) Cyclic test of $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$. (c) AQY of H_2O_2 photosynthesis over $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$. (d) Comparison of previously reported single-atom photocatalysts. (e) H_2O_2 production in various types of real water sources. (f) H_2O_2 photoproduction under natural sunlight in Shanghai, Fudan University Jiangwan campus, July 1, 2025, sunny with abundant sunlight, temperature 37°C , using $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$ loaded nonwoven fabric with 0.3 m^2 , reactor containing 1 L pure water. (g,h) The continuous flow device and dynamic H_2O_2 production.

that S atoms within the $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$ heterojunction serve as strong anchoring sites for Zn single-atoms, and the coordination structure of Zn is S_v -synergistic Zn-S_3 model.

2.2 | Performance of H_2O_2 Photosynthesis

H_2O_2 photosynthesis was conducted in O_2 -saturated pure water without sacrificial agent under simulated sunlight, and quantified by iodometry (Figure S9). The photocatalytic activity of Sb_2S_3 with various Zn content indicates that Zn single-atoms play a positive role in H_2O_2 photosynthesis, which significantly enhances the production rate of H_2O_2 (Figure S10). The integration of $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3$ with TpBTD further promotes catalytic performance, with the optimized $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$ photocatalyst achieving superior H_2O_2 production rate up to $2692 \mu\text{mol g}^{-1} \text{h}^{-1}$ (Figure 2a). Moreover, the H_2O_2 production rate of $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$ remains nearly unchanged over 5 consecutive catalytic cycles, and the TEM, XRD, FTIR, and XPS patterns of the used catalyst remain almost unchanged,

highlighting the exceptional operational and structural stability for $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$ (Figure 2b and Figures S11–S14). The ICP analysis of the recovered catalyst reveals that the metal content remains nearly identical to that of the fresh sample, confirming the absence of significant metal leaching and the operational stability of $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$ during the photocatalytic process (Table S1). In addition, the apparent quantum yield (AQY) and solar-to-chemical conversion (SCC) efficiency of $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$ for photocatalytic H_2O_2 production illustrate that the AQY and SCC reached 9.85% at 400 nm and 0.26%, respectively (Figure 2c). The photocatalytic performance of $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$ surpasses that of previously reported single-atom photocatalysts, further confirming the superiority (Figure 2d and Table S2). Meanwhile, the $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$ maintains exceptional performance in various types of real water sources, suggesting the excellent potential for practical applications (Figure 2e). Benefiting from the high activity and flexibility, the $\text{Zn-S}_x/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3/\text{TpBTD-3}$ was engineered into membrane architecture for large-scale and continuous H_2O_2 production. The photocatalytic device was elaborately fabricated

by loading Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 catalyst onto polypropylene nonwoven fabric, confirming the feasibility of practical application potential. The Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 loaded nonwoven fabric photocatalyst effectively produces H₂O₂ up to 205 μmol in natural sunlight experiment, demonstrating the practical value for large-scale H₂O₂ photoproduction (Figure 2f). The continuous flow device also achieves excellent photocatalytic H₂O₂ production (Figure 2g,h).

2.3 | Charge Transfer and Separation Kinetics

To gain in-depth insight into the photocatalytic mechanism, the photogenerated carrier separation and transfer dynamics of catalysts was investigated by steady-state photoluminescence (PL) spectroscopy and time-resolved photoluminescence (TRPL) spectroscopy. The Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ exhibits the lowest PL emission intensity, and further assembly with TpBTD obtained Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 composite with lower PL emission intensity, indicating the enhanced charge separation (Figure 3a) [39, 40]. The average fluorescence lifetimes of TpBTD, Sb₂S₃, Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ and Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 were determined by TRPL spectroscopy to be 1.13, 1.91, 2.05, and 2.18 ns, respectively, indicating the efficient separation of photogenerated carriers in Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 heterostructure (Figure 3b) [41]. The above results confirm that the incorporation of S_v-synergistic unsaturated Zn single-atoms, combined with heterojunction engineering can effectively optimize the electronic structure and significantly improve the separation and transfer efficiency of photogenerated carriers. The improved carrier dynamics was further investigated through photoelectrochemical measurements. Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) and transient photocurrent response indicate that the Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 exhibits the lowest impedance and highest transient photocurrent density, implying the incorporation of S_v-synergistic unsaturated Zn single-atoms, combined with heterojunction engineering can effectively facilitate intrinsic electron transfer (Figure 3c,d) [42]. The direction of electron transfer in Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 heterojunction was further investigated using in situ irradiated XPS (ISI-XPS). The peak of N 1s shift by 0.1 eV toward lower binding energy when the Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ and TpBTD is contacted, indicating a significant increase in electron density within the TpBTD. The S 2p, Sb 3d, and Zn 2p peaks of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 exhibit a positive shift of 0.1 eV compared to those of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃, attributed to the strong interfacial interaction between Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ and TpBTD (Figure S15). The observed positive shift in the N 1s binding energy under illumination reflects electron depletion in TpBTD, while the contrastive negative shift in the S 2p and Sb 3d peaks of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ suggests electron accumulation, providing the photoinduced interfacial charge transfer from TpBTD to Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃. The negative shift in Zn 2p binding energy indicates enhanced electron density, establishing the role of Zn single-atom sites as the final electron acceptor and further modulating interfacial electron dynamics (Figure 3e–h) [43]. The charge transfer mechanism within Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 heterojunction was further investigated by ISI-XPS with tunable single-wavelength illumination (375, 405, 450, 520, and 589 nm) (Figure 3i). The analysis reveals that the binding energy of Zn 2p under 375 nm illumination exhibits a negative shift of 0.34 eV compared with dark condition, as illumination shifted from low-energy (589 nm) to high-energy (375 nm) radiation with charge compensation [44].

The wavelength-dependent shift indicates that photon energy directly influences photoexcited electron migration, modulating the local electron density of Zn single-atom sites and enhancing the redox capability of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 heterostructure. The photoreduction deposition of Au nanoparticles was further performed using HAuCl₄ as the precursor. TEM images reveal that the Au nanoparticles are selectively deposited on the Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ component, indicating that it serves as the primary reduction site, and supports the S-scheme mechanism (Figure S16). The above analyses clearly demonstrate the electron transfer from Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ to TpBTD within Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 heterojunction, and photogenerated electron flow in the opposite direction under illumination, consistent well with the S-scheme mechanism.

To explore the mechanism underlying superior photocatalytic performance, ultraviolet photoelectron spectroscopy (UPS) was performed using He I as the excitation source. As depicted in Figure 3j–l, the work function of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ (3.76 eV) is lower than that of TpBTD (4.05 eV), while Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 (3.89 eV) intermediates between the two components, indicating the interfacial band bending within heterojunction. The band structure diagram is obtained by optical bandgap and Mott–Schottky diagram, further demonstrating that the TpBTD and Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ satisfy thermodynamics potential for 2e[−] ORR (Figure 3m and Figures S17–S22) [45–49]. The charge transfer mechanism of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 S-scheme heterojunction indicates that the electrons tend to transfer from Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ to TpBTD upon contact, until the Fermi levels reach equilibrium (Figure 3n). Due to the electron depletion and accumulation on Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ and TpBTD surface, respectively, an internal electric field (IEF) is formed that causes the band edge of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃ and TpBTD to bend upward and downward, respectively. Under simulated sunlight irradiation, the IEF and band edge bending drive the recombination of photogenerated electrons in the conduction band (CB) of TpBTD with holes in the valence band (VB) of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃, and through S_v-synergistic unsaturated Zn single-atoms as electron mediator under the IEF, optimizing interfacial electron transfer. The S-scheme charge transfer pathway in Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 heterojunction simultaneously enhances the charge separation efficiency and redox capacity.

The charge transfer dynamics was further elucidated by femtosecond transient absorption spectroscopy (fs-TAS). The TpBTD exhibits a pronounced negative signal, which is characteristic of ground-state bleaching (GSB), attributing to the generation and subsequent quenching of photogenerated electrons. Notably, the Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 heterojunction exhibits an excited-state absorption (ESA), attributed to the excited-state arising from the strong electronic interaction at interface, and offers direct spectral evidence for interfacial charge transfer (Figure 4a–d) [50]. Based on the decay kinetics and fitted average lifetimes, the Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 possesses a longer average carrier lifetime (τ_{avg}) compared to that of pristine TpBTD (Figure 4e,f). The decay curve of the original TpBTD is fitted using double-exponential model, including a fast lifetime ($\tau_1 = 0.50$ ps) for the electron transfer process from the CB to trapping state (TS) and a slow lifetime ($\tau_2 = 141$ ps) for radiative recombination process [51]. For Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3, the decay curves can be fitted by three-exponential model that the shortest lifetime ($\tau_1 = 0.16$ ps) assigned to electron transfer from the TpBTD to Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃,

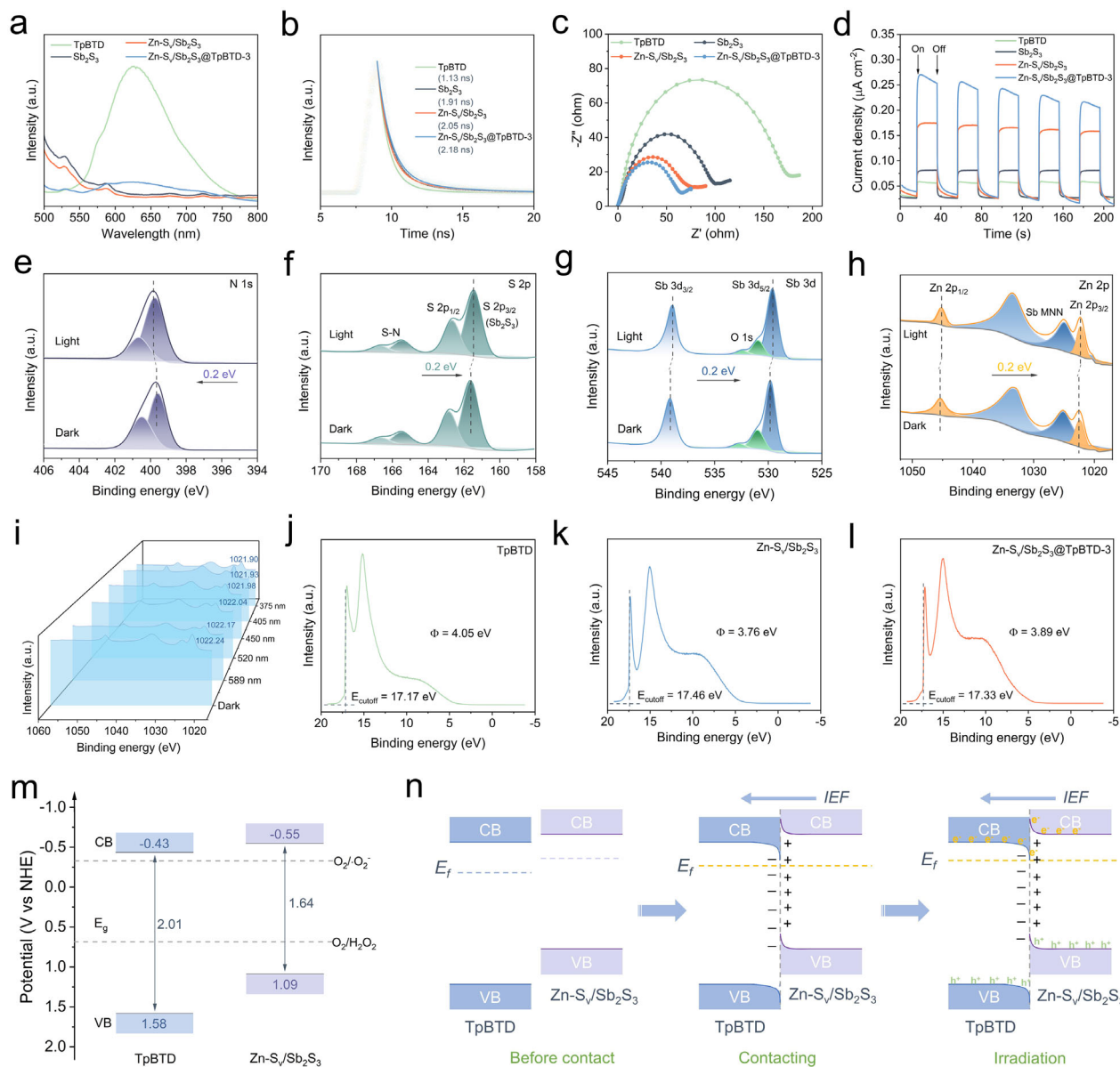


FIGURE 3 | (a,b) PL and TRPL spectra, (c,d) EIS Nyquist plots and transient photocurrent response curves of TpBTD, Sb_2S_3 , $\text{Zn-S}_\text{v}/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3$, $\text{Zn-S}_\text{v}/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3@\text{TpBTD-3}$. (e–h) ISI-XPS spectra of $\text{Zn-S}_\text{v}/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3@\text{TpBTD-3}$. (i) ISI-XPS spectra of Zn 2p under different wavelength light irradiation. (j–l) UPS spectra of TpBTD, $\text{Zn-S}_\text{v}/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3$ and $\text{Zn-S}_\text{v}/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3@\text{TpBTD-3}$. (m) The diagram of the band structure. (n) Schematic illustration of IEF formation.

owing to the presence of strong IEF in the heterojunction. As compared with TpBTD, the $\text{Zn-S}_\text{v}/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3@\text{TpBTD-3}$ possesses much faster electron transfer ($\tau_2 = 4.58$ ps) from CB to TS, which is ascribed to the presence of abundant S_v -synergistic unsaturated Zn single-atoms, providing a stronger driving force to accelerate charge migration [52, 53]. In addition, the $\text{Zn-S}_\text{v}/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3@\text{TpBTD-3}$ possesses much longer lifetime ($\tau_3 = 856$ ps) for direct charge recombination than TpBTD, confirming the prolonged lifetime and inhibited recombination of the photogenerated charge carriers, which will facilitate optimized charge transfer within the S-scheme heterojunction through precisely engineered interface.

To further investigate the reaction pathway over $\text{Zn-S}_\text{v}/\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3@\text{TpBTD-3}$ heterostructure, H_2O_2 production was evaluated under different atmospheric conditions and scavengers

(Figure 4g). The H_2O_2 evolution rate is significantly inhibited under Ar atmosphere, confirming that H_2O_2 is generated exclusively through the ORR process. Moreover, H_2O_2 production rate decreases after the addition of benzoquinone (BQ) for superoxide radical ($\bullet\text{O}_2^-$) scavenger, indicating that the 2e^- ORR is predominant pathway with $\bullet\text{O}_2^-$ serving as key intermediate [54–56]. The EPR measurement was conducted to probe reactive intermediates, revealing the existence of $\text{DMPO}\cdot\bullet\text{O}_2^-$ signals under light irradiation (Figure 4h). To further illustrate the reaction process accurately, in-situ diffuse reflectance infrared Fourier transform spectroscopy (DRIFTS) was applied to identify the real-time intermediates during H_2O_2 photoproduction (Figure 4i). The signals of $\bullet\text{O}_2^-$ (1184 cm^{-1}) and $\bullet\text{OOH}$ (1278 cm^{-1}) gradually intensified with extended light exposure, accompanied by the emergence of characteristic peak for adsorbed H_2O_2 (1373 cm^{-1}), confirming that O_2 is reduced via 2e^- ORR pathway

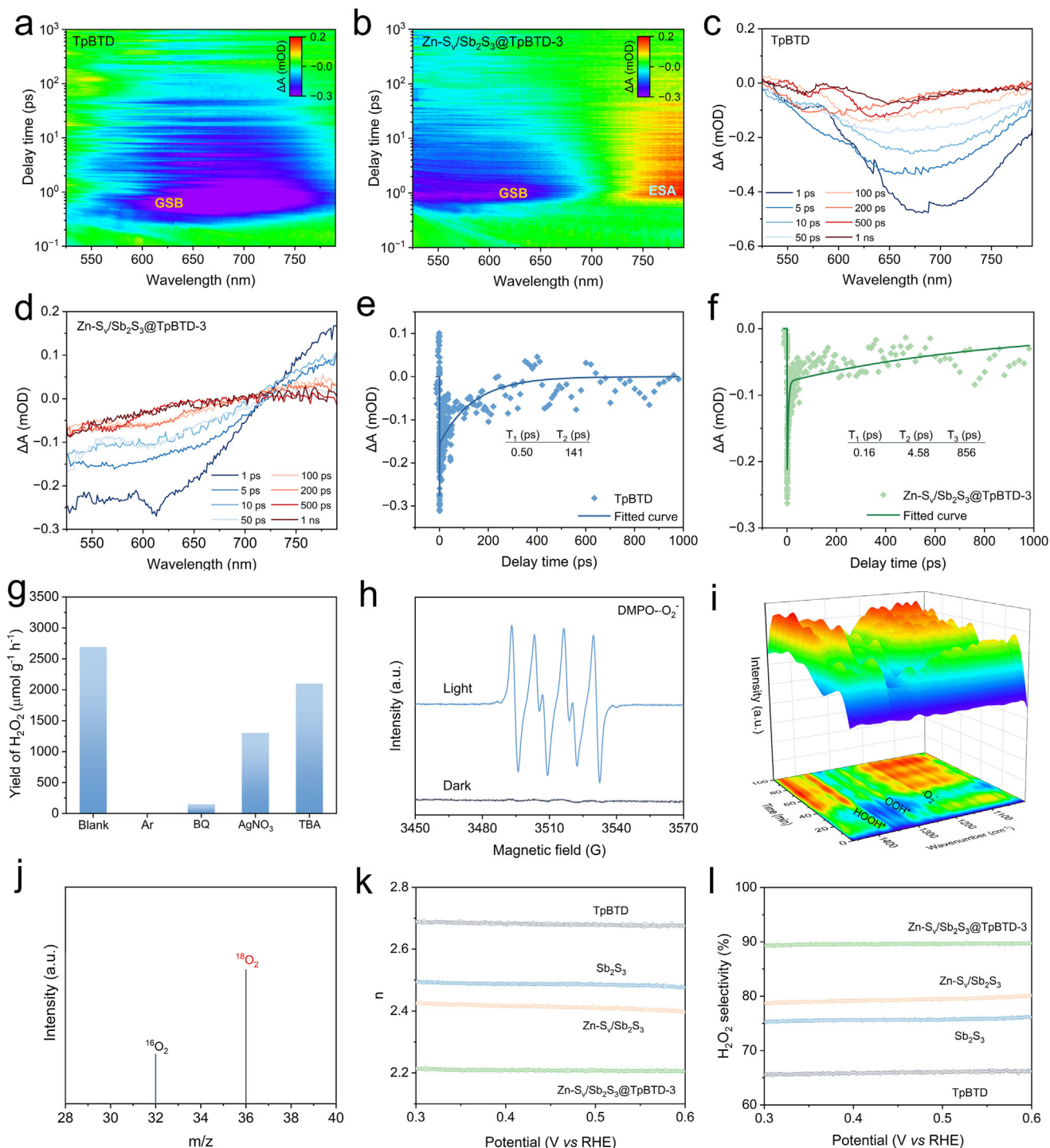


FIGURE 4 | (a,b) Contour maps of fs-TAS spectra for TpBTD and Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3. (c,d) Transient absorption spectra recorded at indicated delay time. (e,f) Normalized decay kinetic curves. (g) H₂O₂ production over Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 with various scavengers. (h) The EPR spectra of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3. (i) In situ DRIFTS spectra of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 under light irradiation. (j) Mass spectrometry of reaction products using isotope-labeled ¹⁸O₂. (k) The electron transfer number and selectivity of H₂O₂ production.

and form *O₂⁻ and *OOH, which is further converted to H₂O₂ [57–59]. The reaction pathway is further investigated by isotope-labeling experiment, in which the detection of ¹⁸O₂ (a small amount of ¹⁶O₂ originates from air) demonstrates that H₂O₂ is produced via the ORR pathway (Figure 4j). The 2e⁻ ORR process is confirmed by the rotating ring-disk electrode

(RRDE) measurements, which suggests the electron transfer number of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 is closer to 2, indicating the superiority in H₂O₂ photosynthesis (Figure 4k). Additionally, the Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 exhibits a remarkable H₂O₂ selectivity up to 90%, further confirming the domination of 2e⁻ ORR pathway (Figure 4l).

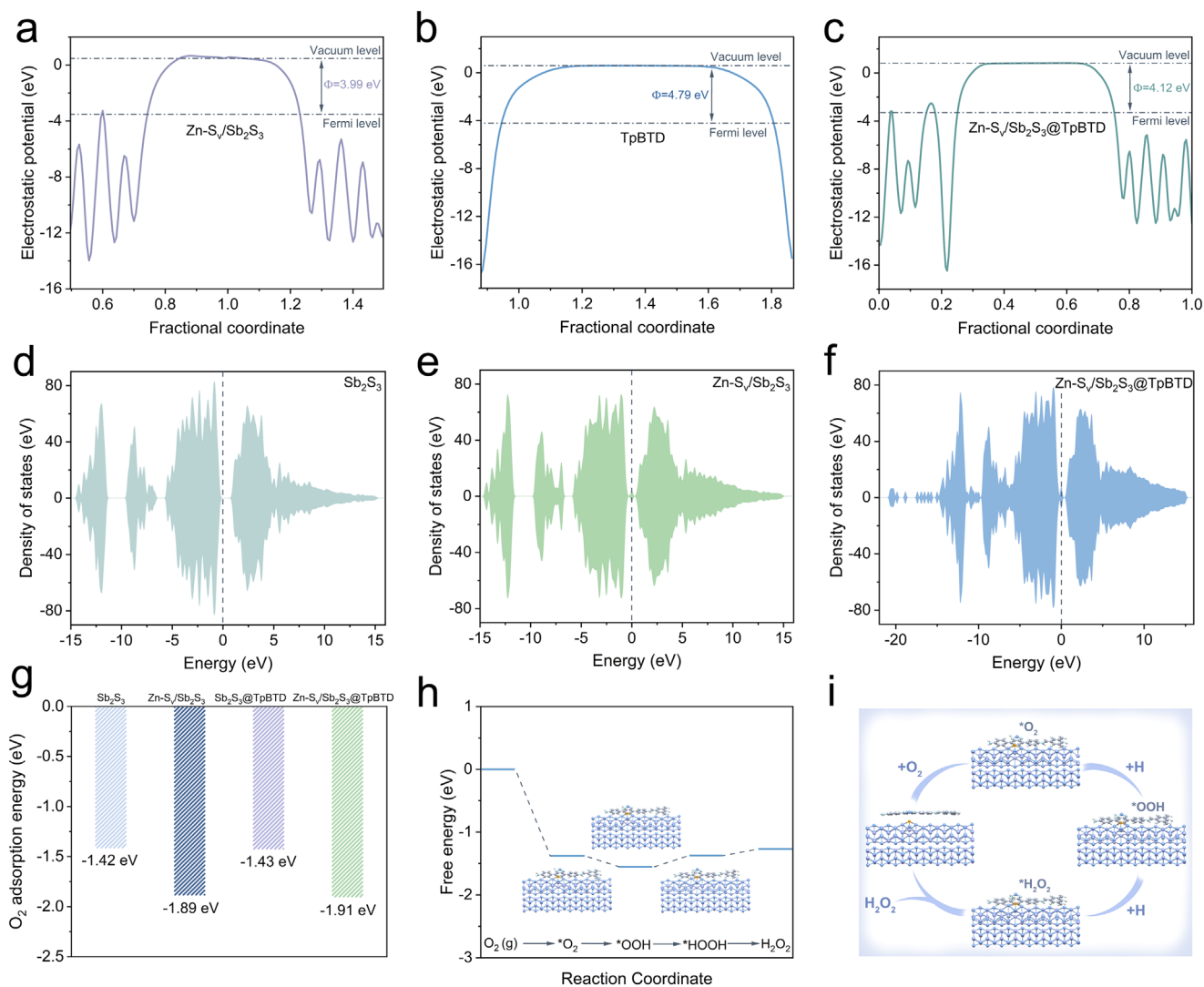


FIGURE 5 | Theoretical work function of (a) $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3$, (b) $TpBTD$, (c) $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$. The DOS of (d) Sb_2S_3 , (e) $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3$, (f) $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$. (g) Optimum O_2 adsorption energy of Sb_2S_3 , $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3$, $\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$ and $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$. (h) The free energy diagram, (i) Schematic illustration for H_2O_2 photosynthesis on $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$.

2.4 | Mechanism Analysis

Density functional theory (DFT) calculations were performed to elucidate the mechanism by which $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$ heterojunction promoted H_2O_2 photoproduction. The work function for $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3$, $TpBTD$ and $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$ are determined to be 3.99, 4.79, and 4.12 eV, respectively (Figure 5a–c). The higher work function of $TpBTD$ indicates that the electrons will transfer from $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3$ to $TpBTD$ when in close contact with each other, consistent with the XPS and UPS results [60, 61]. The differential charge density distribution of $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$ heterostructure indicates that the planar-averaged charge density difference along with Z direction exhibits the change of charge density, revealing the electrons mainly transfer from $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3$ to $TpBTD$ (Figure S23) [62]. Under illumination, the photogenerated electrons on the CB of $TpBTD$ are driven to combine with the holes on the VB of $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3$ through Sv -synergistic unsaturated Zn single-atoms as electron mediator under the internal electric field. Furthermore, the comparison for density of states (DOS) of Sb_2S_3 and the incorporation of Sv -

synergistic unsaturated Zn single-atoms reveals that a significant increase in electron density near the Fermi level in $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3$. The electron density is further increased upon formation of $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$ composite, which promotes charge transfer kinetics, resulting in superior catalytic activity for H_2O_2 production (Figure 5d–f and Figure S24).

DFT calculations were further conducted to achieve a more comprehensive understanding for the fundamental processes of H_2O_2 photoproduction at the atomic scale. The adsorption energy of O_2 on $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$ (−1.91 eV) is more negative compared to that of Sb_2S_3 (−1.42 eV), $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3$ (−1.89 eV) and $\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$ (−1.43 eV), confirming the higher stability of O_2 molecules adsorbed on the $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$ heterostructure (Figure 5g) [63, 64]. The temperature-programmed desorption of O_2 (O_2 -TPD) similarly demonstrates the enhanced O_2 chemisorption ability for $\text{Zn-Sv/Sb}_2\text{S}_3@TpBTD$ composite (Figures S25 and S26). The analysis indicates that the introduction of Sv -synergistic unsaturated Zn single-atoms significantly enhances the adsorption capacity for O_2 molecules and serves as the active site driving

the subsequent ORR process (Figure S27). Therefore, the Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD exhibits prominent advantage for the first step (O₂ adsorption) of 2e[−] ORR process. The free energy changes for photocatalytic 2e[−] ORR on Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD heterostructure are further calculated, and the optimized surface intermediates together with the corresponding free energy changes for each step of H₂O₂ production is shown in Figure 5h. The reaction process includes the following steps: 1) adsorption of O₂ molecules on the active sites to form adsorbed *O₂; 2) transfer of electrons to the adsorbed *O₂ and reduce to *OOH; 3) combination of H⁺ with *OOH to form *HOOH; and 4) hydrogenation of *HOOH to form H₂O₂ (Figure 5i) [65, 66]. The theoretical results are consistent with experimental observations, indicating the outstanding intrinsic activity of Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD S-scheme heterojunction for selective H₂O₂ production.

3 | Conclusion

In summary, an S-scheme heterojunction photocatalyst constructed by in-situ mechanical growth of TpBTD onto Zn single-atom-anchored S_v-rich Sb₂S₃ nanorods (Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD), enables highly selective H₂O₂ photoproduction. The optimal Zn-S_v/Sb₂S₃@TpBTD-3 photocatalyst achieves a remarkable H₂O₂ production rate of 2692 μmol g^{−1} h^{−1} with 90% selectivity in pure water without sacrificial agent, which significantly outperforming most reported single-atom photocatalytic systems. Comprehensive analyses including AC-HAADF-STEM, EXAFS, fs-TAS and DFT calculations, provide in-depth insights into mechanism that the S_v-synergistic unsaturated Zn atomic sites as electron mediator under the internal electric field of S-scheme heterojunction optimize the interfacial electron transfer and promote O₂ adsorption, significantly improving selectivity and efficiency for H₂O₂ photosynthesis. This work presents an innovative perspective on constructing defect engineering and single-atoms mediated heterojunctions, enabling efficient and scalable photocatalytic H₂O₂ production.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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