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# Copper-manganese oxide catalysts prepared by solution combustion synthesis for total oxidation of VOCs

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## ABSTRACT

A set of Cu-Mn oxides was prepared through the simple and effective solution combustion synthesis method by varying the relative amount of copper and manganese. The physico-chemical properties of the samples were investigated through complementary techniques such as N<sub>2</sub> physisorption at – 196 °C, XRD, HR-TEM, Raman spectroscopy, temperature programmed analyses (H<sub>2</sub>-TPR, O<sub>2</sub>-TPD, and NH<sub>3</sub>-TPD), and XPS. The prepared catalysts were tested for the total oxidation of volatile organic compounds (ethylene, propylene, and toluene). The best performances, in terms of total VOC oxidation, were achieved with a copper content ranging from 15 at% to 45 at%. The catalytic test outcomes demonstrate the beneficial effect of acidic sites, oxygen mobility, and redox ability. In particular, ethylene oxidation is mainly favored by oxygen vacancies and redox properties, while propylene and toluene oxidation is mostly enhanced by acidic sites. All the catalysts prepared can totally oxidize the examined pollutants examined below 310 °C. Moreover, the binary oxides exhibit good catalytic stability over a time-on-stream of 7 h and low water vapor inhibition (5 vol% H<sub>2</sub>O in the gas stream).

## 1. Introduction

Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are organic molecules of low molecular weight. They are pollutants emitted from variable sources, for instance, transport, industrial processes, and household chores [1]. Exposure to VOCs is a hazard for humans because they are carcinogenic, teratogenic, toxic, and mutagenic [2]. Moreover, VOCs also negatively affect the environment because they are considered one of the main factors responsible for photochemical smog, the formation of tropospheric ozone, and stratospheric ozone depletion [3]. The most suitable technique for the abatement of these organic molecules is oxidizing them to carbon dioxide and water. Among the procedures based on oxidation, the conventional strategy is thermal incineration. However, it is an expensive operation due to the elevated temperature necessary for the complete oxidation of VOCs, typically 800–1200 °C, and additional fuel is required to achieve these temperatures. To achieve efficient abatement, VOCs must be completely oxidized, because partial or poorly controlled thermal oxidation can produce toxic byproducts such as dioxins and carbon monoxide [4]. Catalytic oxidation is a more thermally effective and environmentally friendly technique because it requires lower temperatures to achieve the complete destruction of VOCs; in

addition, catalytic oxidation limits the formation of dioxins and harmful byproducts, such as NO<sub>x</sub>, which are produced during thermal incineration at high temperatures [1,5].

Previous research has established that noble metals are the most active catalysts that can be employed for the catalytic oxidation of VOCs. In fact, they completely oxidize these pollutants at very low temperature [6]. In fact, studies such as conducted by Liotta (2010) have shown that in presence of Pt the complete oxidation of propene is achieved at 170 °C and the complete oxidation of toluene at 250 °C [7]. Despite their high activity, they are very expensive and subject to deactivation by sintering or poisoning. Transition metal oxides have recently been considered a promising alternative to noble metals because, despite their lower activity, they are less expensive and more resistant to deactivation [8,9].

The main aim of this study is to investigate the catalytic oxidation efficiency of manganese and copper mixed oxides. In this work, a series of Cu-Mn oxide catalysts (with different Mn/Cu atomic ratios) were synthesized and compared with the pure oxides Mn<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and CuO. As it has previously been observed the binary systems should have more elevated oxygen mobility than the pure oxides of Mn and Cu, and consequently a higher activity [10]. Manganese oxides are promising catalysts due to their low cost and high efficiency in the oxidation of

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**Table 1**

Textural and structural properties of samples, derived from N<sub>2</sub> physisorption at – 196 °C, XRD, and EDS analyses.

Catalyst	$S_{BET}^a$ (m <sup>2</sup> /g)	$V_p^b$ (cm <sup>3</sup> /g)	Mn at % <sup>c</sup>	Cu at % <sup>c</sup>	Phase	Crystallite-size (nm) <sup>d</sup>
Mn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	21.9	0.15	-	-	Mn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	57
Mn <sub>85</sub> Cu <sub>15</sub>	14.7	0.14	86	14	Mn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub> CuMn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>4</sub> *	100 65
Mn <sub>70</sub> Cu <sub>30</sub>	11.0	0.07	69	31	CuMn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>4</sub> Mn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	75 96
Mn <sub>55</sub> Cu <sub>45</sub>	8.4	0.04	54	46	CuMn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>4</sub>	71
Mn <sub>40</sub> Cu <sub>60</sub>	8.0	0.04	43	57	CuMn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>4</sub> CuO	59 44
Mn <sub>25</sub> Cu <sub>75</sub>	5.5	0.03	22	78	CuO CuMn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>4</sub>	43 63
CuO	2.6	0.01	-	-	CuO	65

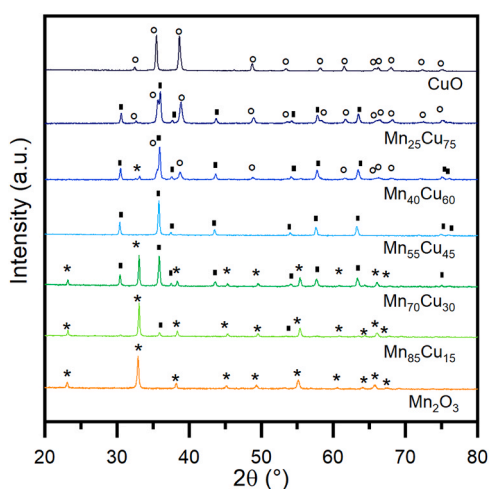
a → Specific surface area calculated by applying BET method.

b → Total pore volume according to the BJH method, approximating the pores to cylindrical ones.

c → Atomic concentration relative to the metals present in the oxides, derived from EDS analysis on at least two different areas.

d → Crystallite size calculated through the Scherrer formula.

\* → The crystallite size was calculated on the two main peaks.



**Fig. 1.** Powder XRD patterns of the synthesized catalysts. \* → Mn<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> ref. 00-041, □ → CuMn<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> ref. 01-074, O → CuO ref. 01-089.

**Table 2**

Relative amounts of crystalline phases, XRD peak intensity ratio, and semi-quantitative amounts of 110 face.

Catalyst	Crystalline phase (%)		XRD intensity ratio		(110) face (%)
	Mn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	CuMn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>4</sub>	$\frac{(440)_{Mn_2O_3}}{(222)}$	$\frac{(220)_{CuMn_2O_4}}{(311)}$	
Mn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	100	-	0.28	-	28
Mn <sub>85</sub> Cu <sub>15</sub>	81	19	0.26	0.26	26
Mn <sub>70</sub> Cu <sub>30</sub>	30	70	0.29	0.36	34
Mn <sub>55</sub> Cu <sub>45</sub>	-	100	-	0.37	37
Mn <sub>40</sub> Cu <sub>60</sub>	3	69	-	0.35	24
Mn <sub>25</sub> Cu <sub>75</sub>	-	42	-	0.32	13
CuO	-	-	-	-	0

VOCs, thanks to the coexistence of various valence states that allow the presence of ionic couples (Mn<sup>(n+1)+</sup>/Mn<sup>n+</sup>) on the surface that facilitate redox cycles [11]. Moreover, the catalytic activity can be improved by doping MnO<sub>x</sub> with transition metals, which increases the presence of defect sites, enhancing reducibility and oxygen mobility [12]. The catalytic properties can also be enhanced by the copresence of different

oxide phases interacting with each other, because this phenomenon will induce the formation of oxygen vacancies [2]. Among the possible transition metals, copper was chosen to realize mixed oxides because Mn-Cu oxides are reported to be active for VOC abatements [13].

Among the possible synthesis techniques, the solution combustion synthesis (SCS) method was adopted to prepare the Cu-Mn oxides studied in this research. This procedure is based on a highly exothermic redox reaction occurring in the solution of precursors. The SCS technique is very interesting because it is easy to implement and allows to obtain nanostructured oxides with the desired composition [14]. The starting solution contains metal precursors and an organic fuel compound that improves the properties of the oxides, such as higher surface area and better oxygen mobility [15].

The synthesized Cu-Mn oxides were tested for the catalytic oxidation of ethylene, propylene, and toluene, chosen as representative molecules of a wide range of VOCs. The most active catalysts were also tested in the presence of water vapor to simulate real conditions. This study was set out to evaluate how effective are the prepared Cu-Mn oxides prepared for the catalytic oxidation of VOCs, in the perspective of using them in stationary implants.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Catalyst preparation

A series of Cu-Mn oxide catalysts with different Mn/Cu atomic ratios (hereafter referred to as Mn<sub>x</sub>Cu<sub>100-x</sub>, where x means Mn/(Mn+Cu)\* 100) were prepared via the SCS method as previously mentioned. Suitable amounts of the metal precursors Mn(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> • 4 H<sub>2</sub>O (Sigma—Aldrich) and Cu(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub> • 3 H<sub>2</sub>O (Emsure) were dissolved in 50 mL of deionized water to obtain a solution of 0.2 M. Citric acid monohydrate (Sigma—Aldrich) was added to the solution at the same concentrations as the metal precursors. The solution was then energetically stirred at room temperature for 10 min. Subsequently, the solution was heated to 650 °C in an oven (heating ramp 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>) and kept at this temperature for 30 min.

### 2.2. Catalyst characterization

The physico-chemical properties of the synthesized samples were investigated by complementary techniques. N<sub>2</sub> physisorption analysis was performed at – 196 °C (Micromeritics Tristar II 3020) on oxide powders previously outgassed at 200 °C for 2 h to remove the substances absorbed on surfaces, such as moisture and other atmospheric pollutants. Through N<sub>2</sub> physisorption analysis, the specific surface area (S<sub>BET</sub>) and total pore volume (V<sub>p</sub>) were determined, and the former was calculated according to the Brunauer, Emmet, and Teller method.

The X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns, obtained on an X'Pert Philips PW3040 diffractometer adopting Cu Kα radiation (range of 2θ: 20–80°, step: 0.05° 2θ, time per step: 0.2 s), were examined using the Powder Data File Databases (PDF-2 Release 2004, COD\_Mar10). Scherrer's formula was used to estimate the average crystallite sizes of the Cu-Mn oxides using a shape factor of 0.9.

The morphology of the samples was studied through transmission electron microscopy (TEM, Jeol JEM 3010 UHR, LaB<sub>6</sub> gun, operating at 200 kV). EDS analyses (Oxford X-stream) were performed to determine the chemical compositions of the prepared catalysts.

Raman spectra were acquired at room temperature using a Renishaw InVia Reflex micro-Raman spectrometer. The excitation was provided by a solid-state laser emitting at 514.5 nm, whose power was set to 1 mW to avoid overheating of the sample during the measurement. Three spectra were collected in different regions of each material to verify its homogeneity using a 20x objective and a total acquisition time of 225 s.

The reducibility and the oxygen desorption analyses were performed in the ThermoQuest TPD/R/O 1100 instrument using the thermal conductivity detector with which it is provided. The reducibility of the

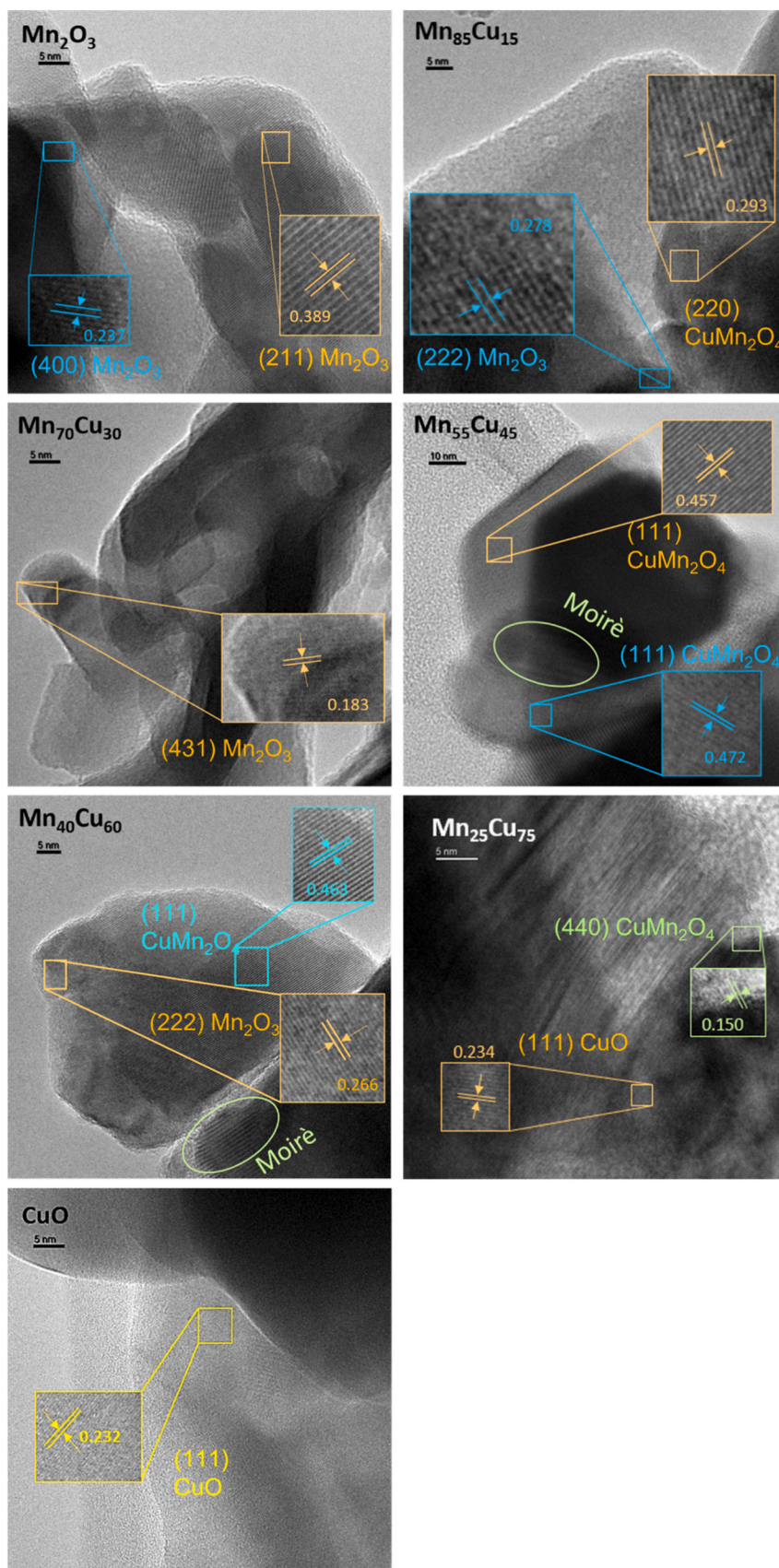


Fig. 2. HR-TEM images highlighting the fringes identified on the samples.

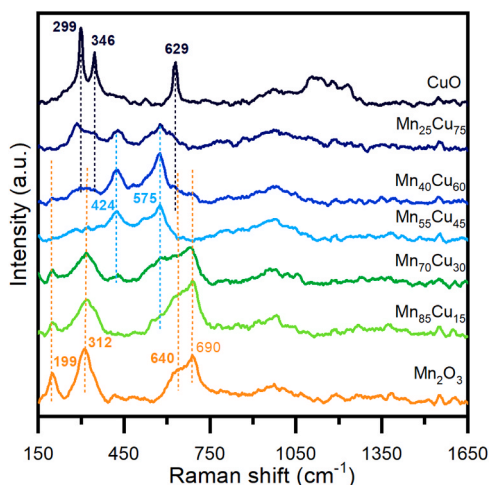


Fig. 3. Raman spectra of the synthesized samples collected at room temperature.

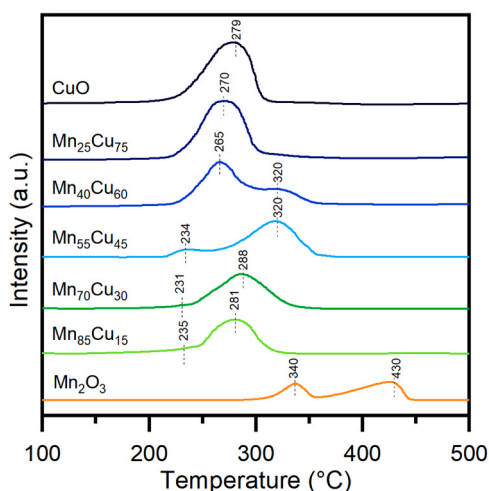


Fig. 4. H<sub>2</sub>-TPR profiles of the synthesized samples.

Table 3

H<sub>2</sub>-uptake (mmol g<sub>cat</sub><sup>-1</sup>) obtained by H<sub>2</sub>-TPR analysis, and O<sub>2</sub> desorbed (μmol g<sub>cat</sub><sup>-1</sup>) acquired by O<sub>2</sub>-TPD analysis.

Catalyst	Total H <sub>2</sub> consumption	H <sub>2</sub> -uptake 200–299 °C	H <sub>2</sub> -uptake 300–399 °C	H <sub>2</sub> -uptake T > 400 °C	Total O <sub>2</sub> desorbed
Mn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	7.12	-	2.13 <sup>a</sup>	4.98 <sup>b</sup>	6.55
Mn <sub>85</sub> Cu <sub>15</sub>	8.70	8.70 <sup>c</sup>	-	-	2.82
Mn <sub>70</sub> Cu <sub>30</sub>	10.41	10.41 <sup>c</sup>	-	-	6.57
Mn <sub>55</sub> Cu <sub>45</sub>	11.32	1.34 <sup>d</sup>	9.98 <sup>c</sup>	-	9.11
Mn <sub>40</sub> Cu <sub>60</sub>	11.92	7.46 <sup>d</sup>	4.46 <sup>c</sup>	-	6.79
Mn <sub>25</sub> Cu <sub>75</sub>	13.20	13.20 <sup>d</sup>	-	-	1.45
CuO	14.70	14.70 <sup>d</sup>	-	-	0.93

a: Mn<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> → Mn<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>.

b: Mn<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> → MnO.

c: Mn<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> → MnO.

d: CuO → Cu<sup>0</sup>.

catalysts was investigated by subjecting the samples to a flow of hydrogen, simultaneously increasing the temperature in a controlled way. Before the H<sub>2</sub>-TPR analysis, the sample powder must undergo a pre-treatment: 30 mg of sample powder was placed in a tubular quartz reactor and treated with helium (30 mL min<sup>-1</sup>) at 550 °C for 60 min (heating ramp equal to 10 °C min<sup>-1</sup>), then it was cooled down fluxing

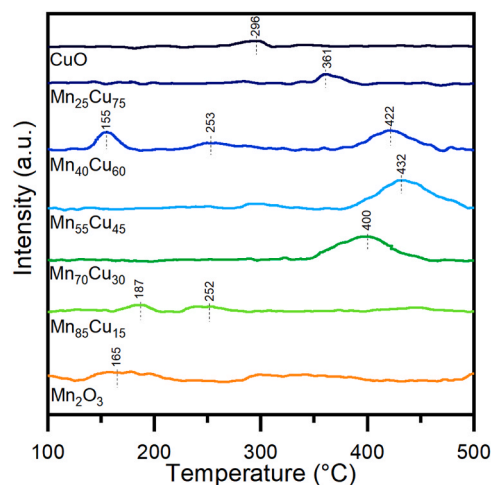


Fig. 5. O<sub>2</sub>-TPD profiles of the synthesized samples.

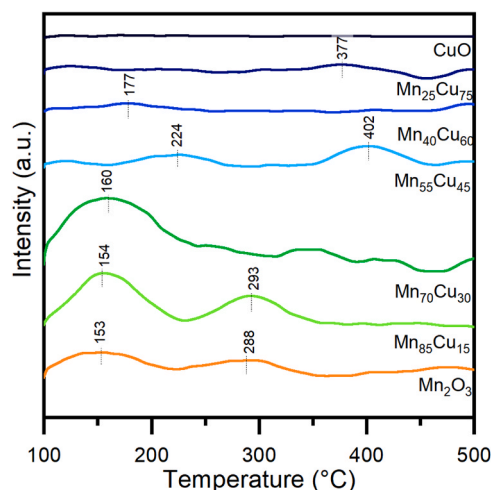


Fig. 6. NH<sub>3</sub>-TPD profiles of the synthesized samples.

Table 4

NH<sub>3</sub> desorbed (μmol g<sub>cat</sub><sup>-1</sup>) obtained by NH<sub>3</sub>-TPD analysis.

Catalyst	Total NH <sub>3</sub> desorption	NH <sub>3</sub> -desorbed 100–250 °C	NH <sub>3</sub> -desorbed 250–410 °C
Mn <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	0.09	0.06	3.6 10 <sup>-2</sup>
Mn <sub>85</sub> Cu <sub>15</sub>	0.17	0.12	5.2 10 <sup>-2</sup>
Mn <sub>70</sub> Cu <sub>30</sub>	0.15	0.15	0.0
Mn <sub>55</sub> Cu <sub>45</sub>	0.07	0.02	4.5 10 <sup>-2</sup>
Mn <sub>40</sub> Cu <sub>60</sub>	0.02	0.01	0.9 10 <sup>-2</sup>
Mn <sub>25</sub> Cu <sub>75</sub>	0.01	0.0	0.9 10 <sup>-2</sup>
CuO	0.0	0.0	0.0

He. The analysis was conducted with programmed heating (from 50 °C to 700 °C, heating ramp 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>, the final temperature was held for 10 min) exposing the powder to a reducing gas flow (5 vol% of H<sub>2</sub> in Ar, 20 mL min<sup>-1</sup>). To analyze the oxygen desorption, 250 mg of Cu-Mn oxide powder was first pre-treated with a flow of pure oxygen (20 mL min<sup>-1</sup>) at 600 °C for 60 min; the samples were then cooled down in O<sub>2</sub>. The test was performed by flowing He (10 mL min<sup>-1</sup>) and heating the sample to 550 °C (heating ramp equal to 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>).

The ammonia desorption analyses were performed in the ALTAMIRA AMI300 Lite TPD/R/O instrument, the signal was acquired using a thermal conductivity detector, and the sample temperature was monitored with a thermocouple placed near the catalytic bed. The sample

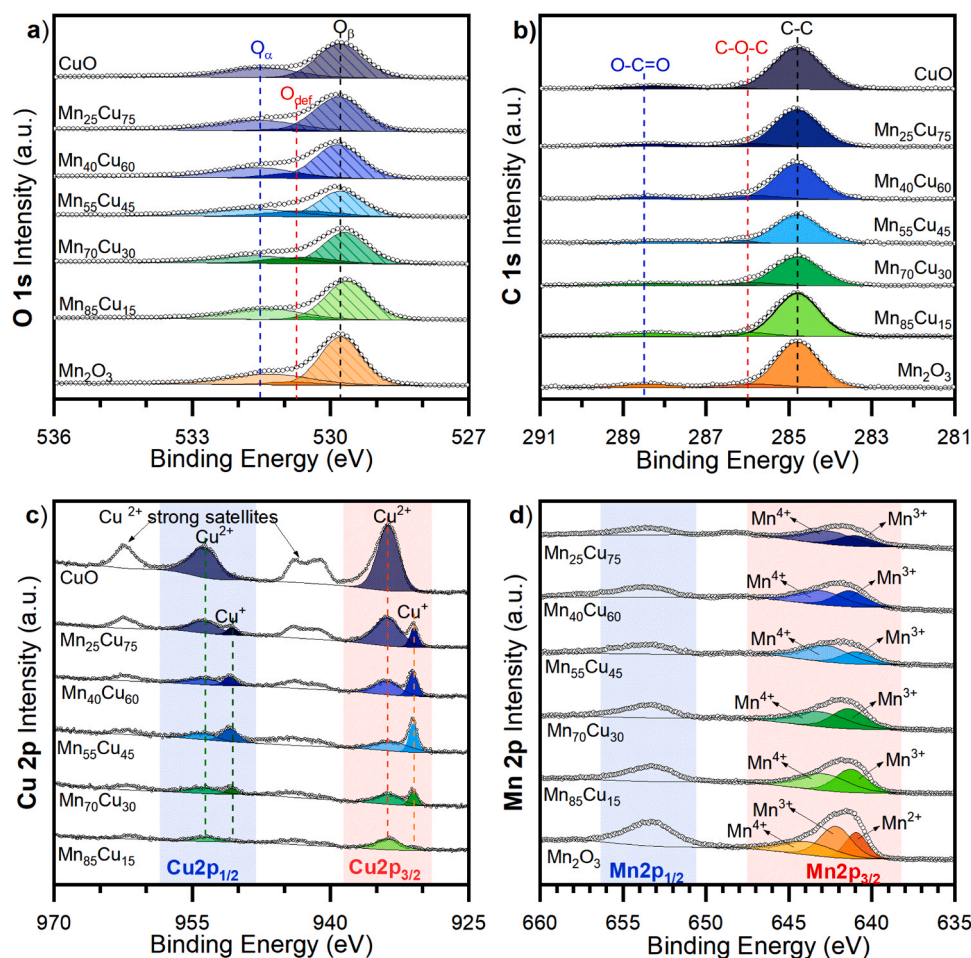


Fig. 7. XPS spectra of the synthesized samples in the a) O 1s b) C 1s c) Cu 2p d) Mn 2p core level regions.

Table 5

Redox couple ratios,  $Mn^{4+}$  and  $Cu^+$  relative abundance, and oxygen ratios derived from deconvoluted XPS spectra.

Catalyst	$O_a/O_b$	$O_{def}$ (%)	$Mn^{3+}/Mn^{2+}$	$Mn^{4+}/Mn^{3+}$	$Mn^{4+}$ (%)	$Cu^{2+}/Cu^+$	$Cu^+$ (%)
$Mn_2O_3$	0.05	7.4	1.74	0.71	31.0	-	-
$Mn_{85}Cu_{15}$	0.47	3.6	-	1.14	53.4	-	-
$Mn_{70}Cu_{30}$	0.46	18.1	-	1.15	53.4	2.69	27.1
$Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$	0.58	19.8	-	1.97	66.4	1.25	44.3
$Mn_{40}Cu_{60}$	0.53	10.1	-	1.31	56.8	1.72	36.8
$Mn_{25}Cu_{75}$	0.52	4.1	-	1.84	64.7	4.54	18.0
CuO	0.48	0	-	-	-	-	-

(50 mg) was inserted into a quartz U-tube reactor in a fixed-bed configuration. The sample was pretreated with helium ( $25 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ) at  $600 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  for 30 min (heating ramp equal to  $10 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ) and then cooled to  $100 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ . A flow of 2500 ppm  $NH_3$  in He ( $35 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ) was kept for 2 h at  $100 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , and finally, helium ( $35 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ) was flowed for 30 min. The  $NH_3$ -TPD analysis was performed by flowing  $20 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$  He in the temperature range of  $100$ – $500 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ .

XPS (X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy) spectra were acquired using the XPS PHI 5000 Versa probe apparatus. The conditions adopted were a bandpass energy of  $187.85 \text{ eV}$ , a  $45^\circ$  take-off angle, and a  $100.0 \text{ }\mu\text{m}$  diameter X-ray spot size.

### 2.3. Catalytic activity test

To evaluate the catalytic performance of VOC oxidation,  $0.1 \text{ g}$  of

oxide powder in pellet form (size of  $212$ – $300 \text{ }\mu\text{m}$ ) was introduced into a quartz U-tube reactor ( $ID=4 \text{ mm}$ ) in a fixed-bed configuration. The reactor was heated by an electric furnace, and the temperature of the catalytic bed was measured using a thermocouple placed in its proximity. Before the test, the sample was pre-treated at  $150 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  for 60 min flowing  $N_2$  with the same flow rate adopted for the test.

The test was started at  $70 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , and once chemical equilibrium was reached, the temperature was increased by  $30 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  until complete oxidation of the pollutant. The gas reactive mixture flowing in the reactor contains  $10 \text{ vol}\%$   $O_2$ , a VOC at different concentrations as a function of the tested molecule ( $500 \text{ ppm}$  ethylene,  $500 \text{ ppm}$  propylene, and  $250 \text{ ppm}$  toluene) and  $N_2$  to balance. During the test, the parameter  $W/F=0.044 \text{ g h L}^{-1}$  corresponding approximately to a GHSV of  $20,000 \text{ h}^{-1}$  was maintained.

The VOCs conversion was estimated by the reactor outlet concen-

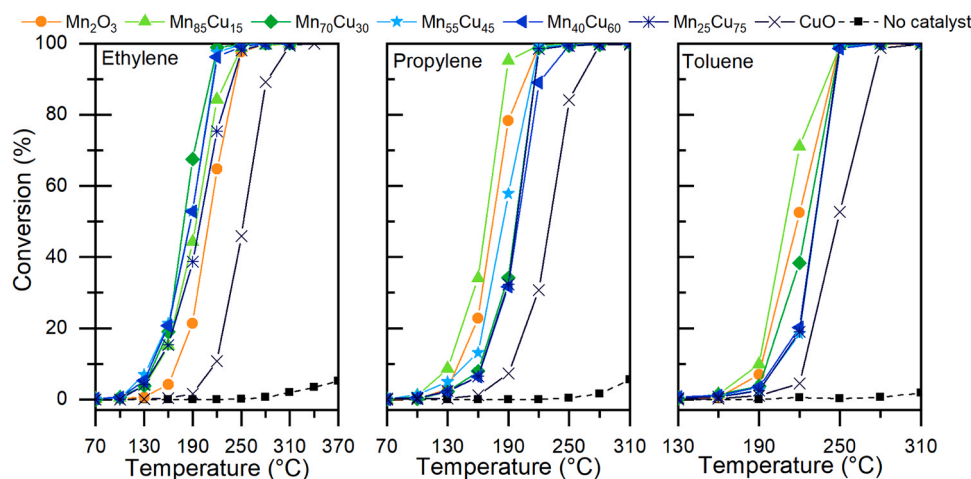


Fig. 8. Catalytic oxidation of ethylene (500 ppm), propylene (500 ppm), and toluene (250 ppm) over the mixed oxides prepared. Gas feed conditions:  $W/F = 0.044 \text{ g h L}^{-1}$ , 10 vol%  $\text{O}_2$ , and  $\text{N}_2$  to balance.

Table 6

Results from catalytic oxidation of ethylene, propylene, and toluene tests.

Catalyst	Ethylene rate <sup>a</sup> ( $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1} \text{m}^{-2}$ )	Propylene rate <sup>a</sup> ( $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1} \text{m}^{-2}$ )	Toluene rate <sup>b</sup> ( $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1} \text{m}^{-2}$ )
$\text{Mn}_2\text{O}_3$	0.3	0.7	0.8
$\text{Mn}_{85}\text{Cu}_{15}$	1.6	5.4	1.6
$\text{Mn}_{70}\text{Cu}_{30}$	2.3	1.0	0.9
$\text{Mn}_{55}\text{Cu}_{45}$	5.9	3.2	0.8
$\text{Mn}_{40}\text{Cu}_{60}$	3.7	1.4	1.1
$\text{Mn}_{25}\text{Cu}_{75}$	5.4	2.3	1.1
$\text{CuO}$	0.8	0.6	0.9

a → Rates evaluated at 130 °C.

b → Rates evaluated at 190 °C.

tration of  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{CO}$ , measured by a non-dispersive infrared (NDIR) analyzer (ABB Uras 14), using Eq. (1):

$$\text{conv}_{\text{VOC}} = \left[ 1 - \left( \frac{c_{\text{VOC}} - \frac{c_{\text{CO}_2}}{x} - \frac{c_{\text{CO}}}{x}}{c_{\text{VOC}}} \right) \right] \times 100 \quad (1)$$

where  $\text{conv}_{\text{VOC}}$  is the achieved conversion of the VOC present in the input flow (%),  $c_{\text{VOC}}$  is the inlet VOC concentration (ppm),  $c_{\text{CO}_2}$  and  $c_{\text{CO}}$  are the outlet  $\text{CO}_2$  and  $\text{CO}$  concentrations respectively (ppm), and  $x$  is the number of carbon atoms in the VOC molecule,  $\text{C}_x\text{H}_y$ .

The specific oxidation rates at a temperature  $T$  ( $\text{rate}_T$ ) can be calculated adopting Eq. (2) and Eq. (3):

$$n_{\text{VOC},T} = \text{conv}_{\text{VOC},T} \times n_{\text{TOT}} \quad (2)$$

$$\text{rate}_T = \frac{n_{\text{VOC},T}}{m_{\text{cat}} \times S_{\text{BET}}} \quad (3)$$

where,  $n_{\text{VOC},T}$  is the oxidized VOC molar flow at temperature  $T$  ( $\text{mol h}^{-1}$ ),  $n_{\text{TOT}}$  is the total inlet molar flow of VOC ( $\text{mol h}^{-1}$ ),  $\text{conv}_{\text{VOC},T}$  is the VOC conversion at temperature  $T$  (%), as expressed in Eq. (1),  $m_{\text{cat}}$  is the amount of catalyst present in the reactor (0.1 g),  $S_{\text{BET}}$  is the specific surface area of the catalyst estimated from  $\text{N}_2$  physisorption at  $-196 \text{ °C}$  ( $\text{m}^2 \text{g}^{-1}$ ) and  $\text{rate}_T$  is the VOC specific oxidation rate at temperature  $T$  ( $\text{mol h}^{-1} \text{m}^{-2}$ ).

To measure the stability of the catalytic performance, additional tests were conducted on the best performing Cu-Mn oxide for each VOC considered. To evaluate the stability of the catalysts, oxidation of the pollutant molecule for three consecutive runs, and time-on-stream tests at alternating temperatures and at a fixed temperature, oxidation in wet conditions (water vapor 5 vol%) were carried out.

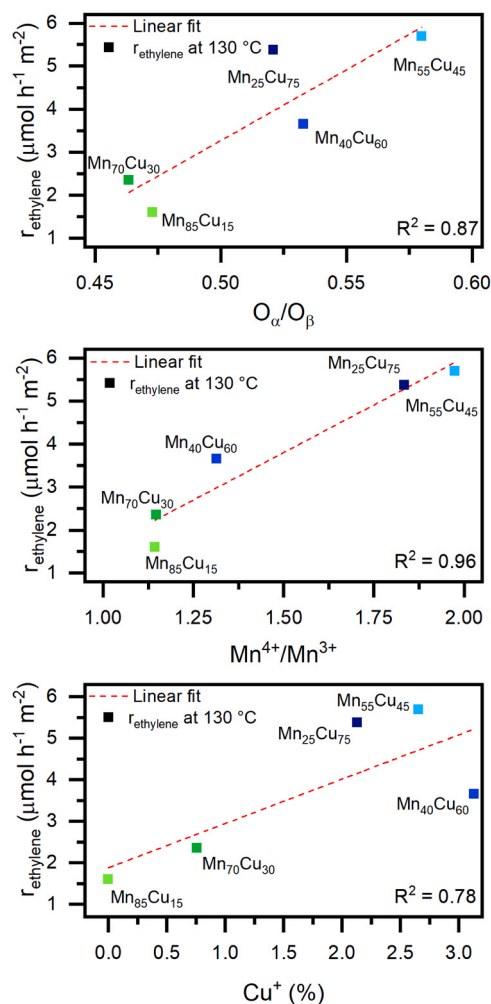


Fig. 9. Correlation between  $\text{O}_\alpha/\text{O}_\beta$  ratio,  $\text{Mn}^{4+}/\text{Mn}^{3+}$  ratio, and  $\text{Cu}^+$  (%) and ethylene oxidation rate for the binary oxides.

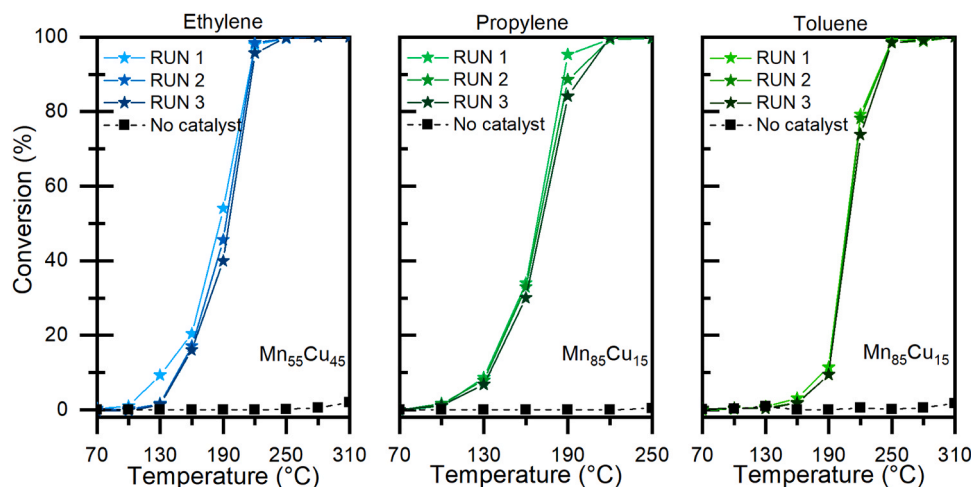


Fig. 10. Stability study of  $Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$  for the catalytic oxidation of ethylene (500 ppm) and  $Mn_{85}Cu_{15}$  for the catalytic oxidation of propylene (500 ppm) and toluene (250 ppm), for three successive oxidation runs. Gas feed conditions:  $W/F = 0.044 \text{ g h L}^{-1}$ , 10 vol%  $O_2$ , and  $N_2$  to balance.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Characterization of samples

Table 1 reports the main textural properties of the oxides studied in this work, obtained with  $N_2$  physisorption, XRD, and EDS analyses.

As a whole, the prepared samples have similar values of specific surface area and total pore volume, which enables a reliable comparison of the catalysts prepared in the catalytic tests [1].

The peaks of the XRD diffraction patterns are shown in Fig. 1, and they can be related to manganese oxide (III) (ref. 00-041), copper oxide (II) (ref. 01-089), and spinel  $CuMn_2O_4$  (ref. 01-074).

The narrow and sharp peaks show a high level of crystallization [16]. Increasing the copper content progressively increases the intensity of the diffraction peaks ascribed to the  $CuMn_2O_4$  phase; in particular, the peak located at  $35.85^\circ$  corresponds to the (311) lattice plane, the most intense reflection peak of the spinel [17]. For sample  $Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$ , the only phase present is spinel  $CuMn_2O_4$ . Upon increasing the copper content, diffraction peaks related to the  $CuO$  phase appear with increasing intensity. The  $Mn_{40}Cu_{60}$  sample presents a peak of low intensity at  $32.95^\circ$  that could be due to the (222) lattice plane of  $Mn_2O_3$ , the most intense reflection peak for manganese oxide [18]. Most likely, due to the formation of  $CuO$ , manganese is in excess to form solely  $CuMn_2O_4$ , and a small amount of the  $Mn_2O_3$  phase appears. On the other hand, for the  $Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$  sample, despite the Cu content being superior to that necessary for obtaining  $CuMn_2O_4$ , there is no presence of diffraction peaks corresponding to the  $CuO$  phase. It is possible that  $CuO$  nanocrystallites are very well dispersed and for this reason not detectable by the diffractometer or the Cu in excess can be present in the amorphous form (vide infra).

The relative amount of each crystalline phase was calculated by the HighScore Plus software. The values are reported in Table 2. It is important noticing that  $Mn_2O_3$  and  $CuMn_2O_4$  present {110} crystal planes, in particular  $Mn_2O_3$  presents (440) crystal planes and  $CuMn_2O_4$  presents (220) and (440) crystal planes. As previously reported, by Dosa et al. by evaluating the ratio between the intensity of the most representative peak related to 110 and the intensity of the highest peak for each phase it is possible to estimate the relative abundance of {110} crystal faces [19]. By multiplying the relative of the crystalline phases by the ratio of the peaks' intensity, it is possible to obtain a semi-quantitative amount of 110 crystal faces present in each sample. The {110} crystal planes provide a high catalytic activity for VOC oxidation due to the high amount of oxygen vacancies [20].

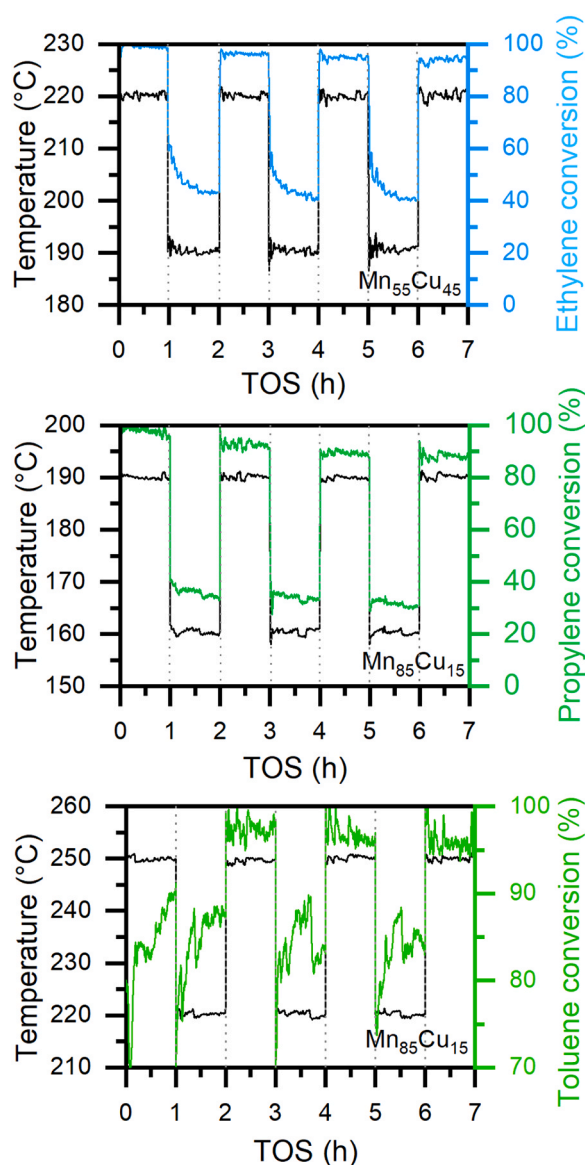
The general appearance of the Cu-Mn oxides is shown in HR-TEM

images in Fig. S1. Sample aggregates present a heterogeneous morphology with bubble-shaped concavities, probably due to the gases released during the synthesis process [21]. The images of the prepared catalysts display elongated structures rich in manganese and pebble-like structures rich in copper. The  $Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$  sample exhibits polyhedral structures (Mn 69 at% and Cu 31 at%) that can be reconducted to the spinel  $CuMn_2O_4$ . According to Fig. S1, the oxides with higher amount of manganese ( $Mn_2O_3$ ,  $Mn_{85}Cu_{15}$ , and  $Mn_{70}Cu_{30}$ ) seem to have a more accessible 3-D structure.

Fig. 2 shows the HR-TEM images of the synthesized samples obtained at higher magnification. Except for  $Mn_2O_3$ ,  $Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$ , and  $CuO$ , the catalysts have a polyphasic structure, in agreement with the XRD patterns. As a result of different crystalline planes overlapping, Moiré-fringes can be detected on different samples [22]. In addition, amorphous domains can be recognized on the edges of the particles; the missing amount of Cu in  $Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$ , according to the XRD pattern, may be present in these amorphous areas.

Raman spectroscopy was performed on all the synthesized samples, and the resulting spectra are shown in Fig. 3. The acquisition parameters were optimized to avoid excessive localized heating that would cause a phase transition of manganese species [23]. Except for  $Mn_2O_3$ ,  $Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$ , and  $CuO$ , which display only signals related to  $Mn_2O_3$ ,  $CuMn_2O_4$ , and  $CuO$ , respectively, the samples studied are constituted by a combination of these three crystalline phases. In particular, the peaks at  $199$ ,  $312$ ,  $640$ , and  $690 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  can be assigned to  $Mn_2O_3$  [24,25]; the signals at  $299$ ,  $346$ , and  $629 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  are characteristic of  $CuO$  [25,26]; and the peaks at  $424$  and  $575 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  can be ascribed to  $CuMn_2O_4$  [25]. Hence, the Raman spectroscopy results fully support and agree with the XRD outcomes and TEM analysis.

To investigate the reactivity of the oxygen species in the samples,  $H_2$ -TPR analysis was performed on Cu-Mn oxides and the pure oxides  $Mn_2O_3$  and  $CuO$ . The reduction profiles obtained are reported in Fig. 4. The pure  $CuO$  profile presents a single reduction peak at approximately  $279^\circ\text{C}$ , ascribed to  $Cu^{2+} \rightarrow Cu^0$  according to the literature [2,27]. The  $Mn_2O_3$  profile is characterized by two peaks at  $340^\circ\text{C}$  and  $430^\circ\text{C}$ : the former can be related to the reduction step  $Mn_2O_3 \rightarrow Mn_3O_4$ , while the second is correlated to the final reduction step  $Mn_3O_4 \rightarrow MnO$  [1,2,28]. As demonstrated by XRD and Raman analyses,  $Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$  is only composed of  $CuMn_2O_4$  spinel: the two characteristic peaks at  $234^\circ\text{C}$  and  $320^\circ\text{C}$  in its reduction profile can therefore be associated with  $Cu^{2+} \rightarrow Cu^0$  and  $Mn_2O_3 \rightarrow MnO$ , respectively [29].  $Mn_{85}Cu_{15}$  and  $Mn_{70}Cu_{30}$  present the main reduction peaks at  $281^\circ\text{C}$  and  $288^\circ\text{C}$  and shoulders at  $235^\circ\text{C}$  and  $231^\circ\text{C}$ , respectively; the main peak can be ascribed to  $Mn_2O_3 \rightarrow MnO$  phase reduction, while the shoulder can be related to the



**Fig. 11.** Progression of ethylene (500 ppm), propylene (500 ppm), and toluene (250 ppm) conversion in the time-on-stream configuration under alternating temperatures. Gas feed conditions:  $W/F=0.044\text{ g h L}^{-1}$ , 10 vol%  $O_2$ , and  $N_2$  to balance.

reduction of the small amount of copper present ( $Cu^{2+} \rightarrow Cu^0$ ).  $Mn_{40}Cu_{60}$  exhibits a reduction profile very similar to  $CuMn_2O_4$ , with two peaks centered at 265 °C and 320 °C, but the higher intensity of the first peak suggests a larger amount of  $Cu^{2+}$  species present with respect to  $Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$ , in line with XRD analysis. The profile reduction of  $Mn_{25}Cu_{75}$  is characterized by a singular peak centered at 270 °C ascribed to  $Cu^{2+} \rightarrow Cu^0$  reduction. The total  $H_2$  consumption obtained for each sample is reported in Table 3. The  $H_2$  uptake increases with increasing copper content. Cu-Mn oxides generally present lower reduction temperatures and consequently more reactive oxygen species than pure oxides. This fact is a confirmation of the positive effect of the copresence of multiple phases.

Fig. 5 shows the  $O_2$ -TPD profiles obtained for all the prepared samples. To obtain information related to the oxygen species of Cu-Mn oxides involved in the catalytic oxidation of VOCs, the analyses were carried out in the temperature range of 100 – 550 °C, which is the region characteristic of chemisorbed oxygen species ( $O^-$ ,  $O_2^-$ ) [1,30].

The  $Mn_2O_3$  and  $Mn_{85}Cu_{15}$  samples display only low-temperature

peaks of small intensity. The  $Mn_{70}Cu_{30}$ ,  $Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$ , and  $Mn_{25}Cu_{75}$  samples exhibit a peak at higher temperatures, while the  $Mn_{40}Cu_{60}$  sample shows peaks at both low and high temperatures. In general, all the prepared catalysts release oxygen (even if in a small amount) in the temperature range analyzed; the estimated quantities of oxygen produced are reported in Table 3.

Since all samples desorb oxygen at a temperature below 450 °C, it can be supposed that a superficial mechanism occurs during VOC catalytic oxidation [30].

The temperature-programmed desorption of  $NH_3$  was performed to study the acidic sites of the catalysts, and the profiles obtained are reported in Fig. 6.  $Mn_{85}Cu_{15}$  and  $Mn_{70}Cu_{30}$  display an evident peak at approximately 160 °C and a less intense peak at 294 °C and 347 °C, respectively. In contrast, the sample  $Mn_{55}Cu_{45}$  shows the highest peak at 397 °C. The peaks at a lower temperature can be ascribed to weak Brønsted acidic sites. Above 200 °C, chemisorbed  $NH_3$  desorption occurs, so the peaks at 294 °C, 347 °C, and 397 °C can be correlated to the stronger Lewis acidic sites [31,32]. The absence or very low intensity of desorption peaks in the other catalyst profiles revealed very weak or no acidic sites. Table 4 resumes the estimated quantities of ammonia desorbed.

XPS spectra in the C 1 s, O 1 s, Mn 2p, and Cu 2p core level regions are reported in Fig. 7, the redox couple and oxygen ratios are reported in Table 5, and the peak positions are listed in Table S1.

Fig. 7a shows the O 1 s spectra, in which three different peaks can be identified. The former in the 531.3 – 531.7 eV range is correlated to surface oxygen species  $O_\alpha$  ( $OH^-$ ,  $CO_3^{2-}$ ,  $O_2^-$ ,  $O^-$ ) [33,34]. The second peak in the 530.5 – 531.0 eV range may be ascribed to oxygen defects, particularly oxygen vacancies [35–37]. Finally, the third peak in the 529.6 – 529.8 eV range is attributed to lattice oxygen  $O_\beta$  [14,38]. Except for the  $Mn_2O_3$  and  $CuO$  samples, all the catalysts tested show Cu 2p (Fig. 7c) and Mn 2p (Fig. 7d) spectra characteristic of spinel  $CuMn_2O_4$  [39]. The Cu 2p spectra of Cu-Mn oxides can be deconvoluted into two peaks attributed to  $Cu^{2+}$  (930.9 – 931.1 eV) and  $Cu^+$  (933.2 – 933.9 eV); the  $Cu^{2+}$  peaks can be attributed to copper bound to lattice oxygen anions ( $O^{2-}$ ) [38]. The Mn 2p spectra of Cu-Mn oxides present a peak that can be deconvoluted into two different peaks ascribed to  $Mn^{4+}$  (642.6 – 644.0 eV) and  $Mn^{3+}$  (641.0 – 642.2 eV), while the  $Mn_2O_3$  sample displays an additional peak centered at 640.9 eV assigned to  $Mn^{2+}$  [14]. As previously reported in the literature, a higher  $O_\alpha/O_\beta$  ratio is usually connected to an increase in VOC oxidation activity [40]. Catalyst surfaces rich in  $O_\alpha$  species can promote the oxygen spillover phenomenon due to enhanced electron mobility on the surface [19]. Moreover, it is well known that the amount of oxygen defects ( $O_{def}$ ), particularly oxygen vacancies, is correlated with enhanced catalytic activity; in fact,  $O_V$  of the oxides' lattice can bind to the molecular  $O_2$  present in the gas phase, generating  $O_2^-$  that will more easily react with VOC molecules [41,42]. Other important parameters are the presence of redox couples, such as  $Mn^{4+}/Mn^{3+}$  [40], and the presence of  $Cu^+$  species [38] because they improve the catalyst oxidation efficiency.

### 3.2. Catalytic tests

The catalytic performances of the prepared Cu-Mn oxides toward the oxidation of ethylene, propylene, and toluene were studied in the 70–370 °C temperature range. The conversion curves obtained for the three VOCs are shown in Fig. 8.

For the abatement of ethylene, the catalytic performances achieved with Cu-Mn oxides are very similar and higher than that of pure oxides ( $Mn_2O_3$  and  $CuO$ ); in fair agreement with previous studies which demonstrated the better performance of iron-doped cerium oxides for CO oxidation [43] or the positive effect of ceria-copper domains copresence for the oxidation of CO and ethylene [44]. For example, Piumetti et al. [38] showed the presence of synergies with a set of cerium-copper oxides (with different Cu/Ce values) in the oxidation ethylene and CO. The best overall performance of both oxidation

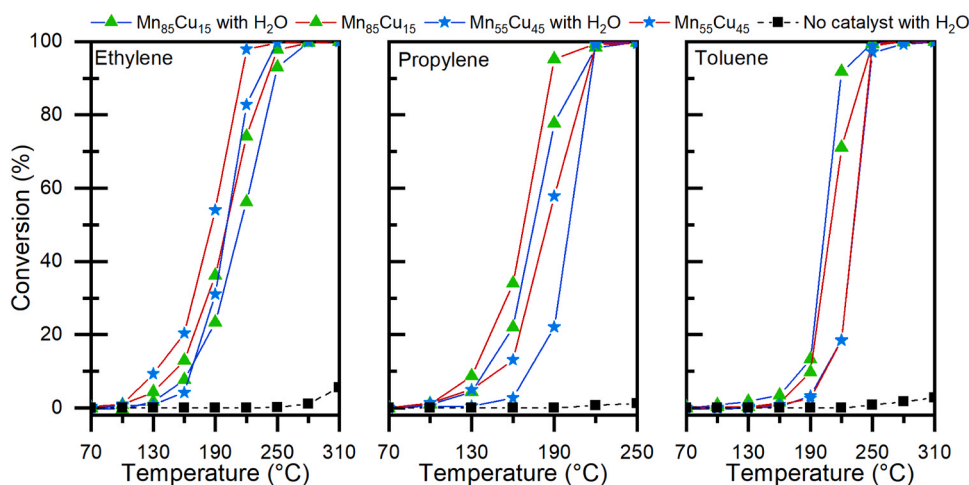


Fig. 12. Catalytic oxidation of ethylene (500 ppm), propylene (500 ppm), and toluene (500 ppm) in presence of 5 vol% content of water in the inlet gas stream: 10 vol% O<sub>2</sub>, and N<sub>2</sub> to balance, W/F = 0.044 g h L<sup>-1</sup>.

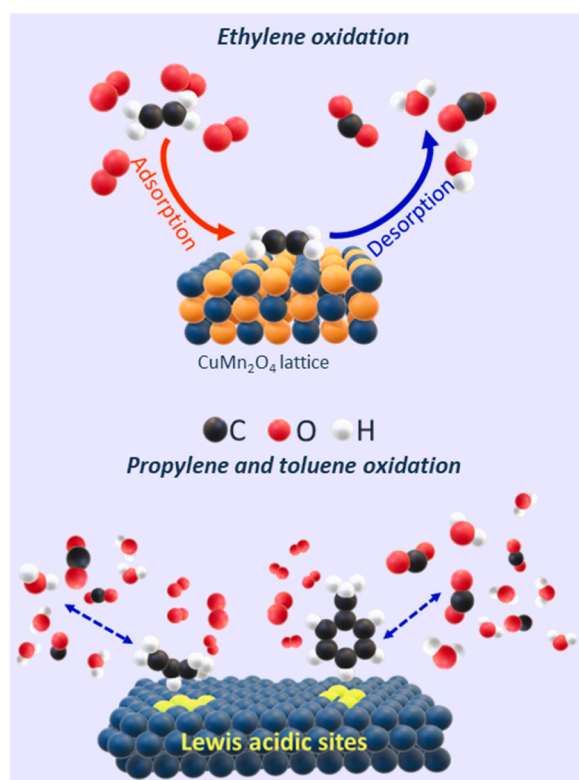


Fig. 13. Qualitative schematization of the catalytic oxidation mechanisms of ethylene, propylene and toluene.

reactions was attributed to the presence of CeO<sub>x</sub> and CuO<sub>x</sub> domains that cooperate synergistically, thereby leading to higher activity because of the easier surface reducibility and more abundant structural defects [45, 46]. As reported in Table 6, Mn<sub>55</sub>Cu<sub>45</sub> is the most active catalyst at 130 °C ( $r = 5.9 \mu\text{mol h}^{-1} \text{m}^{-2}$ ), although Mn<sub>70</sub>Cu<sub>30</sub> performs better at higher temperature (namely, in the diffusive control). This can be likely due to the predominant presence of the crystalline phase CuMn<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>, the same as the best catalyst, together with a morphology more accessible to pollutant molecules than Mn<sub>55</sub>Cu<sub>45</sub>, (vide supra from N<sub>2</sub> physisorption at -196 °C and HR-TEM images). The more accessible 3-D structural topology can ease the diffusion of the oxidation products and consequently the ethylene conversion at higher temperature. On the other

hand, for the catalytic abatement of both propylene and toluene, the most effective catalyst is Mn<sub>85</sub>Cu<sub>15</sub> both in the chemical kinetic region and at higher temperatures. Table 6 reports the specific oxidation rates for the three examined VOCs, calculated by adopting Eq. (3) (vide supra).

A possible explanation for the different efficiencies of these catalysts for the oxidation of the VOCs examined seems to be related to a different oxidation mechanism of toluene and propylene with respect to ethylene. In fact, the presence of acidic sites is an important factor favoring the catalytic oxidation of propylene [47,48], as well as the abatement of toluene [49,50]. In fact, there is a positive correlation between the propylene and toluene specific oxidation rate and the ammonia desorbed from Lewis acidic sites. Mn<sub>85</sub>Cu<sub>15</sub>, which gives the best results in the catalytic oxidation of propylene and toluene, presents two intense and distinct peaks in the NH<sub>3</sub> desorption profiles, indicating the presence of acidic sites and the highest amount of NH<sub>3</sub> desorbed in the range 250–410 °C. Ethylene oxidation seems to be mostly enhanced by the oxygen mobility, favored by the presence of oxygen defects such as oxygen vacancies, and redox ability (Mn<sup>4+</sup>/Mn<sup>3+</sup>, Cu<sup>+</sup> (%)). In fact, Mn<sub>55</sub>Cu<sub>45</sub>, the most active catalyst in the kinetic region, is the material with the greatest amount of oxygen desorbed, and it has the highest value of O<sub>α</sub>/O<sub>β</sub> ratio, O<sub>def</sub> (%), Mn<sup>4+</sup>/Mn<sup>3+</sup> ratio, and relative abundance of Cu<sup>+</sup> (%) according to O<sub>2</sub>-TPD and XPS analysis. The correlations between the ethylene oxidation rate and O<sub>α</sub>/O<sub>β</sub>, Mn<sup>4+</sup>/Mn<sup>3+</sup>, and Cu<sup>+</sup> (%) are reported in Fig. 9. Moreover, theoretical studies have demonstrated that {110} crystal planes, present in this sample, promote the formation of oxygen vacancies [20] and enhance the catalytic oxidation of ethylene, in particular they are effective in the C-C and C-H bonds cleavage [51,52].

In order to analyze the catalytic stability of the most performing samples (Mn<sub>85</sub>Cu<sub>15</sub> and Mn<sub>55</sub>Cu<sub>45</sub>), further catalytic tests were carried out on these oxides. Fig. 10 displays the catalytic conversion of each VOC as a function of temperature with three consecutive runs. As a whole, Mn<sub>55</sub>Cu<sub>45</sub> shows an initial reduction in the catalytic performance for the oxidation of ethylene, possibly due to the reduction of Cu<sup>2+</sup> to Cu<sup>0</sup>, according to the H<sub>2</sub>-TPR outcomes, that occurs during the first run. Conversely, no meaningful deactivation was observed for the catalytic oxidation of propylene and toluene.

The VOC abatement as a function of time-on-stream (TOS) is shown in Fig. 11. The conversion of ethylene in the presence of Mn<sub>55</sub>Cu<sub>45</sub> at 220 °C slightly decreased after the three cycles ( $\Delta_{\text{conv.}} \sim 5\%$  over 7 h). The conversion of propylene in the presence of Mn<sub>85</sub>Cu<sub>15</sub> at 190 °C is subjected to a slightly greater decrease than the ethylene conversion in the presence of Mn<sub>55</sub>Cu<sub>45</sub> after the complete test ( $\Delta_{\text{conv.}} \sim 10\%$  over 7 h). Toluene conversion at 250 °C is approximately 95 % for all the last

three cycles, and the first cycle has a lower conversion due to adsorption-desorption mechanisms. At 190 °C, the conversion of ethylene is approximately 40 % at the end of each cycle because of a progressive decrease. It is supposed that this behavior could be due to the gradual saturation of the catalyst's active sites until a dynamic equilibrium is achieved. The conversion of propylene at 160 °C, as well as toluene at 220 °C, is more stable than the conversion of ethylene at 190 °C. This fact can be interpreted as a further confirmation of the different oxidation mechanisms of propylene and toluene with respect to ethylene.

Fig. S2 shows the VOCs conversion as a function of time-on-stream (TOS) at a fixed temperature. The VOCs catalytic oxidation present a good stability during the 9 h of test, the outcomes confirm the results of the conversion in the time-on-stream configuration under alternating temperatures tests.

Fig. 12 displays the outcomes of the catalytic tests in dry and wet conditions. Both Mn<sub>85</sub>Cu<sub>15</sub> and Mn<sub>55</sub>Cu<sub>45</sub> were tested for the catalytic oxidation of ethylene, propylene, and toluene. As expected, the best performances for the oxidation of ethylene were achieved under dry conditions. In fact, considering the same temperature in the chemical kinetic region, there is a competitive adsorption of water versus ethylene molecules on the active sites that inhibits the whole activity [53]. In contrast, a weaker inhibition is observed for the oxidation of propylene and toluene in presence of Mn<sub>85</sub>Cu<sub>15</sub>. A similar behavior for propylene oxidation in analogous conditions was previously reported by Marin Figueredo et al. who, below 200 °C, observed a slight inhibition by the presence of water [54]. These findings can be a further indication of the different catalytic oxidation mechanism of propylene and toluene with respect to ethylene.

#### 4. Conclusion

The aim of the present research was to examine a set of Cu-Mn oxide employed as catalysts for the total oxidation of three different representative VOCs (ethylene, propylene, and toluene). The samples were prepared through the SCS route, an efficient and simple synthesis method. All the oxides prepared result effective to achieve the total oxidation of the VOCs examined. The results of this investigation show that propylene and toluene are totally oxidized at 190 °C and 250 °C respectively in the presence of Mn<sub>85</sub>Cu<sub>15</sub>, while the total oxidation of ethylene is achieved at 190 °C in presence of Mn<sub>55</sub>Cu<sub>45</sub>. The catalytic test outcomes suggest that ethylene, propylene, and toluene follow different oxidation mechanisms, schematized in Fig. 13. Propylene and toluene oxidations are mainly favored by the presence of acidic sites, while ethylene oxidation seems to be mostly influenced by oxygen mobility and redox ability (Mn<sup>4+</sup>/Mn<sup>3+</sup> ratio and Cu<sup>+</sup> species). Further analyses carried out on the most performing catalysts (Mn<sub>85</sub>Cu<sub>15</sub> and Mn<sub>55</sub>Cu<sub>45</sub>) revealed good catalytic stability and low deactivation due to the presence of water vapor in the gas stream. These outcomes show that Cu-Mn oxides with the proper composition are suitable catalysts for VOC oxidation that could be further studied for their exploitation in stationary implants. Further research might explore different synthesis techniques to obtain catalysts with the same composition but an optimized morphology that will improve the catalytic activity of these metal oxides.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

Conceptualization: M.P., C.C.; Methodology: M.P., S.B., N.R., C.N.; Investigation: C.C., E.S.; Funding acquisition: N.R., D.F., F.G.; Resources: M.P., S.B., N.R., D.F., C.N., F.G.; Writing and editing: C.C., M.P., E.S.; Supervision: M.P.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial

interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

The authors are unable or have chosen not to specify which data has been used.

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#### Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.cattod.2023.114292.

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