International Journal of Science and Research Archive
eISSN: 2582-8185
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/ijsra
Journal homepage: https://ijsra.net/

(Review Article)

Next-Generation Photovoltaics: A Comparative Analysis of Perovskite, Quantum Dot, and Organic Solar Cell Efficiencies and Commercialization Prospects

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2025, 17(01), 1215-1227

Publication history: Received on 17 September 2025; revised on 25 October 2025; accepted on 27 October 2025

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/ijsra.2025.17.1.2902

Abstract

The global imperative to transition towards renewable energy sources has catalyzed intensive research into photovoltaic (PV) technologies beyond traditional crystalline silicon. This article presents a comparative analysis of three leading next-generation photovoltaic technologies: perovskite solar cells (PSCs), quantum dot solar cells (QDSCs), and organic solar cells (OPVs). While silicon-based PVs dominate the market, their rigidity, high manufacturing energy costs, and plateauing efficiency have opened avenues for alternative materials. This paper reviews the fundamental operating principles, recent efficiency milestones, and inherent advantages of PSCs, QDSCs, and OPVs. We critically compare their performance metrics, including power conversion efficiency (PCE), stability, manufacturing scalability, and material costs. Perovskites exhibit remarkable, silicon-rivaling efficiencies but face significant stability and toxicity challenges. Quantum dots offer unique advantages through tunable bandgaps and the potential for multiple exciton generation, though they grapple with surface chemistry and scalability. Organic photovoltaics provide unparalleled flexibility and low-cost manufacturing potential but have historically lagged in efficiency and operational lifetime, a limitation now being overcome. The analysis concludes that while no single technology has emerged as a universal replacement for silicon, each holds immense promise for specific applications, from utility-scale power generation to flexible electronics and building-integrated photovoltaics. Future research directions, including hybrid tandem structures and advanced encapsulation techniques, are discussed as pathways toward commercial viability, suggesting a future defined by a synergistic portfolio of PV technologies rather than a single incumbent.

Keywords: Perovskite; Quantum Dot; Organic Photovoltaics; Power Conversion Efficiency; Next-Generation Solar Cells; Renewable Energy; Stability; Tandem Solar Cells

1. Introduction the post-silicon photovoltaic landscape

1.1. The Imperative for Advanced Photovoltaics

The confluence of escalating global energy demand and the urgent mandate to mitigate climate change has firmly established solar energy as a foundational pillar of a sustainable future. For decades, crystalline silicon (c-Si) photovoltaics have been the undisputed workhorse of the solar industry, driving a remarkable trajectory of cost reduction and exponential growth in global deployment. This technology has been instrumental in making solar power competitive with conventional energy sources in many parts of the world. However, the very success and maturity of c-Si technology have brought its fundamental limitations into sharp focus. As the industry pushes the boundaries of performance, it confronts scientific and economic barriers that necessitate the exploration of alternative photovoltaic platforms. The development of "next-generation" PV technologies is therefore not merely an academic exercise but a

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strategic necessity to unlock new applications, further reduce costs, and continue the rapid expansion of solar power required to meet global climate targets.

1.2. Limitations of Crystalline Silicon and the Shockley-Queisser Limit

The performance of any single-junction solar cell is fundamentally constrained by the Shockley-Queisser (SQ) limit, a detailed balance calculation that establishes the maximum theoretical efficiency for a given semiconductor material under standard solar illumination. This limit arises from two primary loss mechanisms. First, photons with energy less than the semiconductor's bandgap (E_g) pass through the material without being absorbed, contributing nothing to the photocurrent. Second, photons with energy significantly greater than the bandgap are absorbed, but the excess energy ($h\nu - E_g$) is rapidly dissipated as heat through lattice vibrations (phonons) within picoseconds, a process known as thermalization or hot-carrier cooling. This means the voltage generated from each photon is limited by the bandgap, regardless of the photon's initial energy.

For an ideal single-junction semiconductor, the SQ limit dictates a maximum power conversion efficiency (PCE) of approximately 33% at a bandgap of around 1.34 eV. Crystalline silicon, with its bandgap of ~1.1 eV, has a theoretical maximum efficiency of about 30% and a practical limit closer to 29.4%, with commercial modules achieving efficiencies in the low-to-mid 20% range. After decades of optimization, c-Si technology is now operating near this fundamental ceiling. Further gains are incremental and often come at a significant cost. Beyond this performance plateau, c-Si manufacturing is an energy-intensive process requiring high-temperature vacuum deposition, which contributes to a longer energy payback time and higher capital expenditure for production facilities. Furthermore, the rigid, brittle nature of silicon wafers inherently limits their use in a growing number of applications that demand flexibility, low weight, or transparency, such as wearable electronics, portable power, and building-integrated photovoltaics (BIPV). These limitations collectively create a compelling technological and economic impetus for the development of alternative PV materials that can offer novel functionalities, lower manufacturing costs, and pathways to efficiencies beyond the SQ limit.

1.3. An Overview of Perovskite, Quantum Dot, and Organic Solar Cells

In response to the limitations of c-Si, a vibrant research landscape has emerged around three leading next-generation PV technologies: perovskite solar cells (PSCs), quantum dot solar cells (QDSCs), and organic photovoltaics (OPVs). These technologies are based on distinct material platforms and operating principles, each presenting a unique profile of advantages and challenges. Their progress over the past two decades, as tracked by the U.S. National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), reveals profoundly different innovation pathways, as illustrated in Figure 1.

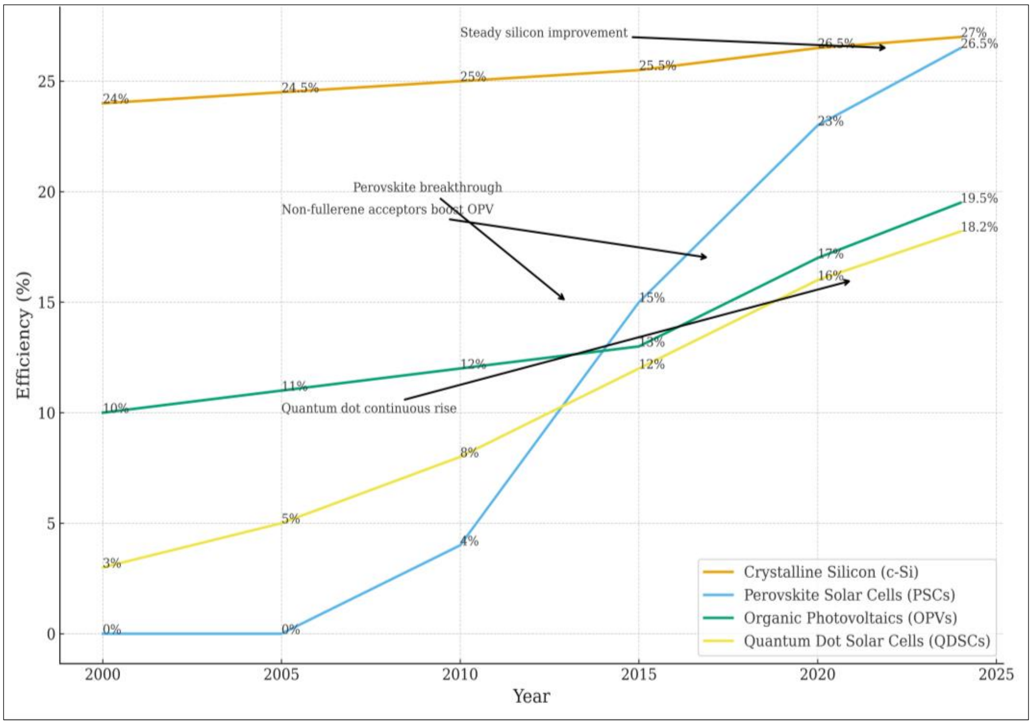

Figure 1 Evolution of Best Research-Cell Efficiencies for Next-Generation Photovoltaics

The trajectories depicted in Figure 1 are revealing. Perovskite solar cells exhibit an unprecedented rate of improvement, soaring from a PCE of 3.8% in 2009 to over 26% in little more than a decade a pace of development unmatched by any other PV technology in history. This suggests a disruptive breakthrough rooted in the intrinsically superior optoelectronic properties of the perovskite crystal structure itself. The primary research challenge for PSCs has thus been less about discovering a good material and more about taming an almost ideal one by addressing its inherent instabilities.

In contrast, the progress of OPVs and QDSCs has been more measured and stepwise. OPVs, for instance, saw years of incremental gains before a distinct inflection point around 2015, catalyzed by the shift from fullerene derivatives to rationally designed non-fullerene acceptors (NFAs). Similarly, QDSC advancement has been a steady march, driven by gradual improvements in nanocrystal synthesis, surface chemistry, and device architecture. This "grind-it-out" progression is characteristic of technologies where performance is advanced through cumulative materials engineering rather than a single foundational discovery.

This divergence in innovation pathways hints at a broader paradigm shift. The future of photovoltaics is unlikely to be a monolithic, "one-size-fits-all" market dominated by a single material, as has been the case with silicon. Instead, a diversified, application-specific landscape is emerging. The unique attributes of each next-generation technology—the extreme efficiency potential of PSCs, the spectral tunability of QDSCs, and the unparalleled flexibility of OPVs—are not merely positioning them as direct replacements for silicon but are enabling entirely new product categories and markets that silicon cannot address. From utility-scale tandem farms to transparent solar windows and power-generating textiles, these technologies are poised to create a multifaceted solar future, where the optimal material is chosen based on the specific demands of the application.

2. Perovskite Solar Cells (PSCS): A Paradigm Shift in Photovoltaic Performance

2.1. Fundamental Principles and Device Architectures

Perovskite solar cells are defined by their use of a light-absorbing material with the ABX$_3$ crystal structure, analogous to the mineral perovskite (CaTiO$_3$). In the context of photovoltaics, this structure typically comprises an organic or inorganic cation at the A-site (e.g., methylammonium (MA), formamidinium (FA), or cesium (Cs)), a metal cation at the B-site (usually lead (Pb) or tin (Sn)), and a halide anion at the X-site (iodide (I), bromide (Br), or chloride (Cl)).

The extraordinary performance of these materials stems from a unique combination of optoelectronic properties. They possess a direct and tunable bandgap, typically in the ideal range for solar absorption, and an exceptionally high optical absorption coefficient (\approx 10^5 cm^{-1}), allowing an ultrathin film of only a few hundred nanometers to absorb most of the incident sunlight. Furthermore, halide perovskites exhibit remarkably long charge-carrier diffusion lengths (often exceeding 1 micrometer) and high charge-carrier mobilities, meaning that photogenerated electrons and holes can travel far through the material before recombining. Compounding these advantages is a high tolerance to defects; unlike conventional semiconductors where even minor crystal imperfections can severely hamper performance by acting as recombination centers, perovskites appear to be more resilient to such flaws.

A typical PSC device consists of a stack of thin layers. The central perovskite absorber layer is sandwiched between an electron transport layer (ETL), such as titanium dioxide (TiO$_2$), and a hole transport layer (HTL), such as Spiro-OMeTAD or Cu$_2$O. These layers selectively extract the photogenerated electrons and holes, respectively, and transport them to the device electrodes. The overall architecture can be either "regular" (n-i-p), where electrons are extracted through the bottom transparent electrode, or "inverted" (p-i-n), where holes are extracted first.

2.2. The Meteoric Rise in Power Conversion Efficiency

The rapid ascent of PSC efficiency is arguably the most dramatic story in modern materials science. Beginning with a PCE of just 3.8% in 2009 for a liquid-electrolyte-based cell, the field has witnessed a relentless series of breakthroughs. By transitioning to solid-state device architectures and through intense research into compositional engineering, defect passivation, and interface management, certified lab-scale efficiencies for single-junction PSCs have now surpassed 26%. This places them on par with, and in some cases exceeding, the performance of multicrystalline silicon and other established thin-film technologies, achieved in a fraction of the development time.

Even more compelling is the performance of PSCs in tandem configurations, where they are stacked with another solar cell material to capture a broader portion of the solar spectrum. The most promising of these is the perovskite-on-silicon tandem cell. In this design, a semi-transparent, wide-bandgap perovskite top cell absorbs high-energy (blue and green) photons efficiently, while allowing lower-energy (red and infrared) photons to pass through to a conventional silicon bottom cell. This synergistic pairing overcomes the thermalization losses inherent in a single-junction silicon cell, enabling efficiencies that surpass what either material could achieve alone. As of mid-2024, perovskite-on-silicon tandem cells have achieved certified efficiencies as high as 34.6% (LONGi) and 33.1% (KAUST), decisively breaking silicon's single-junction performance ceiling and charting a clear path toward next-generation utility-scale modules. Other tandem architectures, such as all-perovskite and perovskite-on-CIGS, have also demonstrated high efficiencies of 29.7% and 26.3%, respectively, showcasing the versatility of the perovskite platform.

2.3. The Achilles' Heel: Deconstructing Stability and Degradation Pathways

Despite their record-setting performance, the widespread commercialization of PSCs is fundamentally hindered by their poor long-term operational stability. The perovskite crystal structure is inherently vulnerable to a host of degradation mechanisms, which can be broadly categorized as intrinsic and extrinsic.

Intrinsic instability relates to the material's own chemical and structural fragility, including phase transitions and ion migration within the crystal lattice under thermal stress or electrical bias. Extrinsic degradation is driven by environmental factors. The organic-inorganic hybrid perovskites are notoriously susceptible to decomposition upon exposure to moisture and oxygen, which can break down the crystal structure. Furthermore, prolonged exposure to heat and ultraviolet (UV) light can accelerate these degradation pathways, leading to a rapid decline in device performance.

To quantify and compare device longevity, the field has adopted standardized testing protocols, largely derived from those established for organic PV at the International Summit on Organic PV Stability (ISOS). A key metric is the T80 lifetime, defined as the time required for a cell's PCE to drop to 80% of its initial value under continuous operation. While silicon modules are expected to last 25-30 years, early PSCs often failed within hours or days. However, significant progress has been made. Researchers have reported devices retaining 87% of their initial efficiency after 2,400 hours of continuous illumination under laboratory conditions and minimodules maintaining 78% of their performance after a full year of outdoor testing in a real-world environment. One study demonstrated an impressive T80 lifetime of 1,530 hours under ISOS dark-storage conditions at elevated temperature.

These improvements are the result of intensive research into stabilization strategies. Key approaches include:

- **Compositional Engineering:** Incorporating more stable inorganic cations like cesium and rubidium alongside organic cations (e.g., "triple cation" perovskites) has been shown to improve both thermal stability and phase purity.
- **Dimensionality Engineering:** Introducing bulky organic ligands to form layered 2D/3D perovskite structures can create a protective barrier against moisture ingress.
- **Additive Engineering:** The use of additives in the perovskite precursor solution, such as methylammonium chloride (MACl), can modulate the crystallization process, leading to higher-quality films with larger grains and fewer performance-limiting defects at the grain boundaries.
- **Interface Passivation:** Applying passivating molecules at the interfaces between the perovskite and the transport layers can heal surface defects and suppress non-radiative recombination, a major source of efficiency loss and degradation initiation.
- **Advanced Encapsulation:** Developing robust, impermeable encapsulation layers is critical to protect the device from ambient moisture and oxygen, mirroring the approach used for all commercial solar technologies.

A significant challenge that remains is the disconnect between laboratory testing protocols and real-world degradation. The standard International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) tests developed for silicon PV, such as damp heat and thermal cycling, do not always capture the unique, light- and bias-induced degradation pathways specific to perovskites. The perovskite community's adoption of the more tailored ISOS protocols is a step forward, but establishing a universally accepted set of standards for validating lifetime claims is a critical, non-technical bottleneck. Without a robust and trusted framework for assessing bankability, investor confidence will remain tentative, regardless of laboratory efficiency records.

2.4. Addressing Lead Toxicity: The Pursuit of Viable Lead-Free Alternatives

A second major barrier to the widespread adoption of PSCs is the presence of lead in the highest-performing material compositions. Lead and its water-soluble salts are potent neurotoxins, raising significant environmental and public health concerns regarding manufacturing safety, potential leakage during operation, and end-of-life disposal. This "lead problem" represents a substantial regulatory risk that could impede market entry, particularly in regions with stringent environmental laws.

Consequently, a significant research effort is underway to develop efficient and stable lead-free perovskite alternatives. The most promising substitute for lead (Pb^{2+}) is tin (Sn^{2+}), which shares a similar electron configuration and ionic radius, allowing it to form the same perovskite crystal structure. Tin-based PSCs have demonstrated excellent optoelectronic properties and have seen their efficiencies rise rapidly.

However, tin-based perovskites face a critical stability challenge of their own: the Sn^{2+} cation is highly susceptible to oxidation to the Sn^{4+} state, especially in the presence of ambient air. This oxidation process disrupts the crystal lattice, creates a high density of defects, and severely degrades device performance. Despite this challenge, progress has been substantial, with researchers employing strategies like reductive additives (e.g., SnF_2) and careful processing in inert environments to suppress oxidation. As a result, the record efficiency for tin-based PSCs has reached 15.7%. Other lead-free candidates, such as those based on bismuth (Bi), antimony (Sb), and germanium (Ge), are also being explored, but they generally suffer from either unsuitable bandgaps or even lower efficiencies and stabilities. The current landscape thus presents a stark trade-off: while lead-based cells offer efficiencies exceeding 26%, the most viable non-toxic alternative lags by a considerable margin. Closing this performance gap remains a primary objective for ensuring the long-term environmental sustainability of perovskite technology.

2.5. Manufacturing and Scalability

One of the most attractive features of PSCs is their potential for low-cost, high-throughput manufacturing. Unlike the high-temperature (>1000 °C), energy-intensive processes required to produce crystalline silicon wafers, perovskite thin films can be fabricated using simple, low-temperature (<150 °C) solution-based methods. Techniques such as spin coating, blade coating, slot-die coating, and inkjet printing are all compatible with perovskite precursor "inks," which opens the door to roll-to-roll processing on flexible substrates. This dramatically reduces the embodied energy and capital cost of manufacturing compared to silicon.

However, translating high-efficiency lab-scale devices (typically <1 cm^2) to large-area commercial modules presents significant challenges. The primary difficulty lies in achieving highly uniform, pinhole-free perovskite films over large areas. The crystallization dynamics are extremely sensitive to processing conditions, and minor variations can lead to defects that create shunt pathways and reduce module efficiency. While spin coating is effective in the lab, it is not scalable for industrial production. Therefore, research is focused on optimizing scalable deposition techniques like slot-die coating and developing vapor-phase deposition methods to ensure the batch-to-batch consistency and high quality required for commercial manufacturing. Companies are making progress, with reports of module efficiencies reaching 18.1% on a 0.72 m^2 area, demonstrating that the path to scalable production is viable, though still under development.

3. Quantum Dot Solar Cells (QDSCS): Engineering the Solar Spectrum at the Nanoscale

3.1. Quantum Confinement and Bandgap Tunability

Quantum dot solar cells harness semiconductor nanocrystals, or quantum dots (QDs), as the light-absorbing medium. These particles are typically 2-10 nanometers in diameter, a size regime where quantum mechanical effects govern their electronic and optical properties. The defining characteristic of QDs is the quantum confinement effect. When the physical size of a semiconductor crystal is reduced to be smaller than its natural exciton Bohr radius (the average distance between an electron and the hole it leaves behind), the charge carriers become spatially confined. This confinement discretizes the continuous energy bands of the bulk material into distinct, atom-like energy levels.

The practical consequence of this effect is profound: the bandgap of the semiconductor is no longer a fixed material property but becomes a direct function of the nanocrystal's size. As the QD's diameter decreases, the degree of confinement increases, pushing the energy levels further apart and thus increasing the effective bandgap. This allows researchers to precisely tune the optical absorption and emission properties of the material across a wide spectral range simply by controlling the size of the nanocrystals during synthesis. This size-dependent bandgap tunability is the central advantage of QDSCs, offering an unprecedented level of control over the solar spectrum compared to bulk materials with fixed bandgaps.

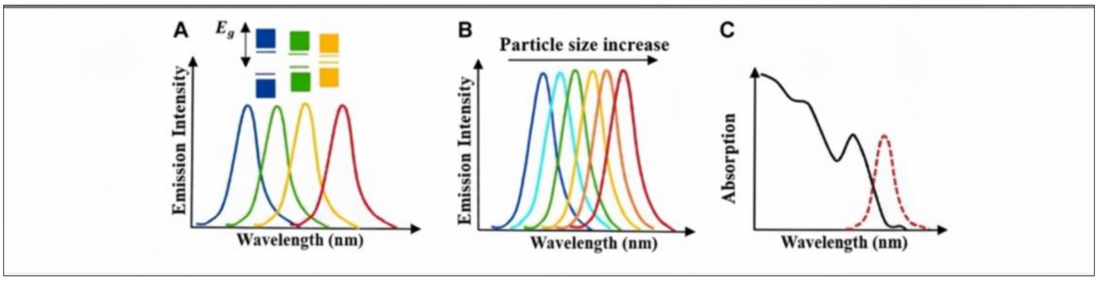

Figure 2 Relationship Between Quantum Dot Size and Bandgap Energy

3.2. Efficiency Trajectories and Material Systems

The development of QDSCs has followed a path of steady, methodical improvement. Certified lab-scale power conversion efficiencies have now surpassed 18%, a significant achievement demonstrating their potential as a high-performance PV technology. This progress has been driven by advancements in several key areas, including the synthesis of higher-quality QDs, improved understanding of surface chemistry, and more sophisticated device architectures.

The choice of material system for the QDs is critical and involves a trade-off between performance and environmental safety

3.2.1. Heavy-Metal Chalcogenide QDs

The highest-performing and most-studied QDSCs to date are based on lead or cadmium chalcogenides, such as lead sulfide (PbS), cadmium selenide (CdSe), and cadmium telluride (CdTe). PbS QDs are particularly attractive because their bandgap can be tuned deep into the near-infrared region, allowing them to absorb a portion of the solar spectrum that is inaccessible to silicon and many other PV materials. However, the use of toxic heavy metals like lead and cadmium poses the same environmental and regulatory challenges as those faced by PSCs, potentially limiting their widespread commercial application.

3.2.2. "Green" QDs (Cadmium- and Lead-Free)

To address toxicity concerns, there is a growing research focus on developing QDSCs from more environmentally benign materials. Prominent candidates include III-V semiconductors like indium phosphide (InP) and I-III-VI$_2$ materials like copper indium sulfide (CIS). While these "green" QDs offer a much safer material profile, they have historically lagged behind their heavy-metal counterparts in performance. This is partly due to more complex surface chemistry and a less mature understanding of their defect physics. Nevertheless, progress is being made. While many heavy-metal QDSCs now exceed 18% efficiency, a record PCE of 7.04% has been reported for a CIS-based "green" QDSC, demonstrating that high performance is achievable without resorting to toxic elements. A recent industry analysis from 2024 highlights that while cadmium-based materials still dominate the market, cadmium-free alternatives like InP are emerging as a growing segment, with advancements in material science steadily narrowing the efficiency gap.

3.3. Beyond the Shockley-Queisser Limit: The Promise and Reality of Multiple Exciton Generation (MEG)

Perhaps the most compelling and unique attribute of QDSCs is their potential to overcome the Shockley-Queisser limit through a process called Multiple Exciton Generation (MEG). In a conventional solar cell, a high-energy photon creates a single "hot" electron-hole pair (an exciton), and the excess kinetic energy is lost as heat. In QDs, however, quantum confinement enhances Coulombic interactions between charge carriers and slows down the hot-carrier cooling process (a phenomenon known as the "phonon bottleneck"). This creates a window of opportunity for an alternative relaxation pathway: the hot carrier can use its excess energy to excite a second electron from the valence band to the conduction band, thus creating two excitons from a single photon.

This carrier multiplication process can occur if the incident photon energy is at least twice the QD's bandgap ($h\nu \geq 2E_g$). If the additional excitons can be efficiently extracted as current, MEG could dramatically increase the photocurrent of a solar cell, pushing the theoretical maximum efficiency for a single-junction device from ~33% to as high as 44%.

Once a theoretical concept, MEG has now been unambiguously demonstrated in working devices. The key experimental signature is an external quantum efficiency (EQE)—the ratio of collected electrons to incident photons—greater than

100% at high photon energies. Several research groups have reported this landmark achievement. One study on a PbS QD photoelectrochemical cell for hydrogen production measured a peak EQE over 100%. Another report on a PbSe QD solar cell demonstrated a peak EQE of 114%, calculating that, on average, 1.3 electrons were produced per incident photon in the high-energy portion of the spectrum. More recently, an EQE exceeding 130% was observed in a device based on a strongly correlated material, providing further confirmation that the MEG effect is real and can be harnessed to generate excess current. While efficiently extracting all the generated excitons before they recombine remains a significant challenge, these experimental proofs-of-concept validate MEG as a credible pathway to ultra-high-efficiency photovoltaics, positioning QDSCs as a technology with a fundamentally higher performance ceiling than their conventional counterparts.

3.4. Overcoming Hurdles: Surface Passivation, Ligand Engineering, and Scalability

The performance of QDSCs is intimately tied to the quality of the nanocrystals' surfaces. Due to their extremely high surface-area-to-volume ratio, a large fraction of a QD's atoms reside at its surface. These surface atoms often have incomplete chemical bonds, creating "dangling bonds" that act as electronic trap states. These traps can capture photogenerated electrons or holes, preventing their extraction and promoting non-radiative recombination, which is a major loss mechanism that reduces both voltage and current.

Therefore, a central focus of QDSC research is surface passivation: the process of chemically treating the QD surface to eliminate these trap states. This is typically achieved by coating the QDs with a layer of organic molecules called ligands or by growing an inorganic semiconductor shell with a wider bandgap around the QD core (forming a core-shell structure). The choice of ligands is critical, as they must not only passivate surface defects but also facilitate efficient electronic coupling between adjacent QDs in the solid film to allow for charge transport. Much of the progress in QDSC efficiency can be attributed to the development of new ligand exchange strategies that replace the long, insulating ligands used during synthesis with short, conductive ones in the final device.

This deep connection between performance and surface chemistry also reveals a more subtle challenge. The decades of research that have led to high-efficiency devices have largely focused on optimizing the surface chemistry of Cd- and Pb-based QDs. The chemical knowledge of how to passivate these materials is highly mature. When moving to "green" alternatives like InP, this knowledge is not directly transferable. The surface chemistry of InP is different and less understood, meaning the entire ecosystem of passivation and ligand engineering strategies must be re-developed. This helps explain the persistent efficiency gap between toxic and non-toxic QD systems; the challenge is not just in the core material's properties but in mastering its complex surface science.

Finally, like PSCs, QDSCs face scalability challenges. The colloidal synthesis methods used to produce high-quality QDs in the lab can be difficult to scale up while maintaining precise control over size distribution and batch-to-batch consistency. Furthermore, depositing uniform, densely packed QD films over large areas required for commercial modules remains a significant engineering hurdle.

4. Organic Photovoltaics (OPVS): The Dawn of Flexible and Ubiquitous Solar Power

4.1. Operating Principles of Bulk Heterojunction Devices

Organic photovoltaics, also known as organic or plastic solar cells, utilize carbon-based organic molecules or polymers as the active materials for light absorption and charge transport. Unlike their inorganic counterparts where photons directly create free electrons and holes, light absorption in organic semiconductors creates a tightly bound electron-hole pair called an exciton, with a binding energy of 0.1-1.4 eV. This strong binding means that a significant energy input is required to separate the exciton into free charge carriers that can generate a current.

To facilitate this separation, the vast majority of modern OPVs employ a bulk heterojunction (BHJ) architecture. In a BHJ, an electron-donating material (typically a conjugated polymer) and an electron-accepting material (a small molecule or fullerene derivative) are blended together in a co-solvent and cast into a thin film. This process creates a complex, interpenetrating nanoscale network of donor and acceptor domains, resulting in a massive distributed interface between the two materials. The operational sequence is as follows:

A photon is absorbed by either the donor or acceptor material, creating an exciton.

This exciton must diffuse through the material to a nearby donor-acceptor interface before it recombines.

At the interface, the difference in the electronic energy levels (specifically, the HOMO and LUMO levels) of the donor and acceptor provides the driving force to split the exciton. The electron is transferred to the acceptor material, and the hole remains on the donor.

These now-separated charges travel through their respective donor or acceptor pathways to the device's electrodes, generating a photocurrent.

The efficiency of this entire process is critically dependent on the morphology of the BHJ blend. The domain sizes must be small enough (typically on the order of the exciton diffusion length, ~10 nm) to ensure most excitons can reach an interface, but the pathways must also be continuous enough to allow for efficient transport of the separated charges to the electrodes. Achieving this optimal nanoscale morphology is a central challenge in OPV device engineering.

4.2. The Non-Fullerene Acceptor (NFA) Revolution

For over two decades, the development of OPVs was dominated by the use of fullerene derivatives, most notably PC${61}BM and PC {70} $BM, as the electron acceptor material. While functional, fullerenes possess several inherent drawbacks that ultimately limited the performance of OPV devices. Their light absorption is weak in the visible part of the spectrum, and their electronic energy levels are difficult to modify, restricting the optimization of the open-circuit voltage (V_{OC}). As a result, the PCE of fullerene-based OPVs plateaued at around 12%.

The field was revolutionized around 2015 with the advent of non-fullerene acceptors (NFAs). These are rationally designed organic small molecules that overcome the limitations of fullerenes. NFAs like the seminal ITIC and the more recent, highly successful Y6 family are engineered to have strong and broad optical absorption that extends well into the near-infrared region, complementing the absorption of modern polymer donors and allowing for much greater light harvesting. Crucially, their energy levels can be precisely tuned through synthetic chemistry, enabling researchers to minimize energy losses during charge separation and maximize the device's output voltage.

This shift from the serendipitously discovered fullerene to rationally designed NFAs marks a significant maturation of the field, moving from exploratory science to predictive molecular engineering. Chemists can now deliberately design molecules with specific properties—planarity to enhance charge transport, specific energy levels to optimize voltage, and strong absorption to boost current. This new paradigm has unleashed a torrent of progress. In the years since the introduction of NFAs, the certified record efficiency for single-junction OPVs has surged from ~12% to over 19%, with recent laboratory reports demonstrating devices exceeding the 20% milestone.

4.3. Stability and Operational Lifetime: From Hours to Decades

Historically, the most significant weakness of OPVs, and a major barrier to their commercialization, has been their poor operational lifetime. The organic materials are inherently susceptible to photochemical degradation, particularly when exposed to oxygen and moisture in the presence of light. This vulnerability meant that early OPV devices often had lifetimes measured in hours or days, relegating them to niche applications where longevity was not a primary concern.

However, recent advancements in materials design, device architecture, and encapsulation have led to a dramatic and game-changing improvement in OPV stability. The development of more intrinsically stable NFA materials has played a role, but a key breakthrough has been the optimization of the "inverted" (n-i-p) device structure. In this configuration, the more stable electrode materials can be used as the top contact, better protecting the sensitive underlying organic layers from the environment.

The results have been transformative. Recent studies have demonstrated excellent operational stability, with one device retaining 83% of its initial efficiency after 1,200 hours of continuous aging. Even more remarkably, a 2025 study on an inverted OPV device reported a measured lifetime of 24,700 hours under continuous illumination, which corresponds to a predicted operational life of more than 16 years in real-world conditions. This level of durability fundamentally alters the value proposition of OPV technology. It refutes the old paradigm that OPVs are inherently short-lived and demonstrates that they can be a viable technology for long-term applications, approaching the durability expected of conventional solar panels. This breakthrough in longevity, perhaps even more so than the recent efficiency gains, opens the door for OPVs to compete in high-value, long-lifetime markets such as BIPV and automotive integration.

4.4. Unique Advantages and Manufacturing Pathways

While efficiency and stability are critical, the most compelling advantages of OPVs lie in their unique physical properties and manufacturing potential.

4.4.1. Mechanical Properties

Because they are composed of thin layers of polymer-based "inks," OPVs are inherently lightweight, mechanically flexible, and can even be made semi-transparent or in a variety of colors. This allows for a design freedom that is impossible with rigid silicon wafers. OPVs can be conformed to curved surfaces, integrated into textiles, or used as power-generating windows.

4.4.2. Low-Cost, Low-Energy Manufacturing

OPVs can be manufactured using low-temperature ($<$150 °C), solution-based deposition techniques such as inkjet printing, screen printing, or slot-die coating. These methods are highly compatible with high-throughput, roll-to-roll (R2R) processing, similar to printing a newspaper. R2R manufacturing promises extremely low production costs, high material utilization, and a very short energy payback time, potentially making OPVs the most inexpensive photovoltaic technology on a per-watt or per-area basis once scaled. This combination of unique form factors and low-cost production makes OPVs ideally suited to create and dominate markets inaccessible to traditional rigid solar technologies.

5. Critical Comparative Analysis and Application-Specific Potential

5.1. A Multi-Parameter Benchmarking of Next-Generation Technologies

The decision to pursue PSCs, QDSCs, or OPVs for a given application involves a complex series of trade-offs across multiple performance and manufacturing metrics. While power conversion efficiency often dominates headlines, factors such as stability, cost, toxicity, and physical form factor are equally critical for commercial viability. Table 1 provides a comprehensive, side-by-side comparison of these three emerging technologies against the benchmark of incumbent crystalline silicon.

Table 1 Comparative Benchmarking of Next-Generation Photovoltaic Technologies

Feature	**Perovskite Solar Cells (PSCs)**	**Quantum Dot Solar Cells (QDSCs)**	**Organic Solar Cells (OPVs)**	**Crystalline Silicon (c-Si)**
Record Lab PCE (Single-Junction)	> 26.3%	> 18.3%	> 19.2%	\approx 27.0%
Record Lab PCE (Tandem/Multi-Junction)	> 34.6% (on Silicon)	N/A (as primary technology)	> 19.1% (Tandem OPV)	> 36% (with III-V)
Theoretical PCE Limit (Single-Junction)	\approx 33% (Shockley-Queisser)	> 44% (with MEG)	\approx 33% (Shockley-Queisser)	\approx 30% (Shockley-Queisser)
Key Scientific Advantage	Exceptional optoelectronic properties (e.g., long diffusion lengths)	Tunable bandgap; Multiple Exciton Generation (MEG)	Solution-processable; rationally designable molecules	Mature, reliable technology; high purity material
Primary Commercialization Hurdle	Poor operational stability; lead toxicity	Surface defects; heavy metal use in top performers; scalability	Historically poor lifetime (now improving); lower efficiency	High manufacturing energy cost; rigidity; approaching efficiency limit
Reported T80 Lifetime (Lab)	1,500 - 2,400+ hours	Data less standardized	24,700+ hours (projected >16 years)	25-30 years (field warranty)
Key Material Compositions	Hybrid organic-inorganic lead halides (e.g., (MA,FA,Cs) Pb(I,Br)_3)	Lead/Cadmium chalcogenides (PbS, CdSe); InP, CIS	Conjugated polymers (donors) and Non-fullerene small molecules (acceptors)	High-purity monocrystalline or polycrystalline silicon
Primary Toxicity Concern	Water-soluble lead (Pb)	Lead (Pb) and Cadmium (Cd) in high-PCE cells	Primarily related to processing solvents (e.g., halogenated)	None in final product; concerns in manufacturing supply chain
Bandgap Tunability	Limited (compositional tuning)	Excellent (size and composition tuning)	Good (molecular design)	Fixed (1.1 eV)
Mechanical Flexibility	Limited (can be made on flexible substrates but material is brittle)	Moderate (can be printed but films are inorganic)	Excellent (inherently flexible materials)	None (rigid wafers)
Manufacturing Process / Temp.	Low-temp solution or vapor processing ($<$150 °C)	Low-temp colloidal synthesis and solution processing	Low-temp solution processing (e.g., roll-to-roll printing)	High-temp wafering and vacuum deposition ($>$1000 °C)

This detailed comparison illuminates a clear "Efficiency-Stability-Flexibility" trade-off. PSCs stand out for their unparalleled efficiency, particularly in tandem configurations, but this performance comes at the cost of significant stability and toxicity challenges. OPVs occupy the opposite corner, offering supreme mechanical flexibility and the promise of ultra-low-cost manufacturing, but with efficiencies that, while rapidly improving, still trail PSCs. QDSCs are positioned in the middle, with respectable efficiency and moderate challenges, but their defining features are the unique scientific pathways they offer precise spectral engineering via bandgap tuning and the potential to shatter conventional efficiency limits through MEG. No single technology is currently superior across all metrics, indicating that the choice of technology will be heavily dependent on the specific requirements of the target application.

5.2. Mapping Technologies to Applications

The distinct profiles of these technologies naturally lend themselves to different market segments, fostering a future PV landscape characterized by specialization rather than monolithic dominance.

5.2.1. Perovskite Solar Cells (PSCs)

The primary application space for PSCs is in high-efficiency domains where performance per unit area is the most critical factor. Their most immediate and impactful commercial entry point is as the top cell in perovskite-on-silicon tandem modules. This approach allows manufacturers to leverage the vast existing silicon infrastructure while boosting the efficiency of standard solar panels by several absolute percentage points, making them ideal for space-constrained residential rooftops and large-scale utility solar farms where maximizing energy yield is paramount. Once stability issues are resolved, single-junction PSCs could also become a competitive standalone technology for these markets.

5.2.2. Quantum Dot Solar Cells (QDSCs)

The unique properties of QDSCs position them for high-value, specialized applications. Their tunable bandgap is perfectly suited for creating semi-transparent solar windows, where the QDs can be engineered to absorb only invisible ultraviolet and infrared light while allowing visible light to pass through, enabling power generation without compromising transparency. The potential for ultra-high efficiency via MEG makes them a long-term candidate for applications where power-to-weight ratio is critical, such as aerospace and satellite power or for powering off-grid, high-demand devices.

5.2.3. Organic Photovoltaics (OPVs)

OPVs are poised to dominate markets where flexibility, low weight, aesthetic integration, and disposability are the key drivers. The recent breakthroughs in operational lifetime now make them a serious contender for building-integrated photovoltaics (BIPV), where they can be seamlessly incorporated into facades, roofing materials, and curved architectural elements. Other prime applications include automotive integration (e.g., sunroofs), wearable technology (powering sensors in clothing), portable power for consumer electronics, and low-cost power sources for the Internet of Things (IoT) and disposable medical devices.

6. Conclusion

This comparative analysis reveals that the leading next-generation photovoltaic technologies are defined by a distinct efficiency-stability-flexibility trade-off. Perovskite solar cells (PSCs) demonstrate unrivaled, silicon-rivaling efficiencies , but their commercialization is hindered by significant stability and lead toxicity challenges. Conversely, organic photovoltaics (OPVs) now offer breakthrough operational lifetimes and supreme mechanical flexibility suitable for roll-to-roll manufacturing , while quantum dot solar cells (QDSCs) present unique, long-term pathways to ultra-high efficiency via spectral tuning and multiple exciton generation. The analysis concludes that no single material will universally replace silicon ; instead, this study will benefit society by guiding the development of a diversified, application-specific solar landscape where the optimal technology is chosen for a specific need, from utility-scale tandems to flexible electronics. The way forward lies in addressing the unique material challenges of each platform, particularly through hybrid tandem structures and advanced encapsulation, to translate this promising portfolio of technologies into commercially viable products.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues at the Department of Physics, College of Commerce Arts and Sciences, Patna, for their insightful discussions and support during the preparation of this manuscript. I also thank the anonymous reviewers whose feedback helped to improve the quality of this article.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

I, Anita Sagar, declare that I have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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