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CHEMICAL VAPOUR DEPOSITION (CVD) AND PHYSICAL VAPOUR DEPOSITION (PVD) TECHNIQUES: ADVANCES IN THIN FILM SOLAR CELLS

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Abstract

Thin film solar cells are gaining popularity as an affordable, efficient, and flexible substitute for traditional silicon solar cells . This success is closely tied to the deposition techniques used to fabricate their layers. This review explores and analyzes the advances in the major deposition techniques for solar cell applications, offering insights into their underlying principles, associated advantages, drawbacks, and suitability for diverse materials and device architectures. The two primary deposition for thin film solar cells are PVD and CVD. In PVC materials are physically ejecting from a target, and depositing it onto a substrate. While, CVD entails the reaction of gases or vapour precursors to creating film on a substrate. The ability to achieve high purity, control over film properties, scalability, and compatibility with flexible substrates are notable advantages. However, challenges such as high costs and complexity can impact the commercial viability of certain techniques. Recent advancements in the technology of thin film deposition for solar cells include the discovery of novel materials with enhanced light absorption and electronic charge transport capabilities, emerging deposition processes such as pulsed laser deposition, and atomic layer deposition scalable and low-cost processes like roll-to-roll processing, and integration with other technologies like perovskite solar cells and tandem devices. Understanding these techniques and staying informed about recent advancements and future directions empowers researchers and engineers to innovate and create improved thin film solar cells, contributing significantly to a more sustainable future through enhanced solar energy harvesting technologies.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Solar energy stands as a beacon of hope for the development of sustainable and renewable power sources. With its abundance and cleanliness, solar energy holds the potential to meet the escalating global demand for electricity [1-3]. However, the widespread adoption of solar power has encountered a formidable barrier in the form of the high cost associated with traditional silicon solar cells. In response to this challenge, thin film solar cells have become a compelling alternative, offering the promise of reduced costs, increased efficiency, and enhanced flexibility. The sun, an infinite source of energy, radiates an astonishing amount of power to Earth. Capturing and converting this energy into electricity has been a long-standing goal in the pursuit of sustainable energy solutions. Solar energy presents a clean, abundant, and environmentally friendly alternative to conventional fossil fuels, offering the

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potential to lessen the negative consequences of climate change while addressing the escalating demand for power worldwide [4-7].

While the benefits of solar energy are undeniable, the adoption of solar power has been hampered by the prohibitive costs associated with traditional silicon solar cells [8]. Silicon, the primary material used in these cells, is expensive to produce and process. The manufacturing processes involved in creating silicon solar cells are resource-intensive, requiring advanced technology and meticulous handling. Consequently, the high production costs are passed on to consumers, hindering the widespread acceptance of solar energy as a mainstream energy source. Thin film solar cells have emerged as a revolutionary solution to the challenges posed by traditional silicon solar cells. These cells are characterized by the depositing ultra-thin layers of materials, typically less than 1 micrometer thick, onto a substrate. This departure from the thicker layers used in silicon cells represents a paradigm shift in solar cell technology, promising several key advantages.

The possibility of substantially cheaper production cost for thin-film solar cells compared to regular silicon cells is one of their main benefits. The materials used in thin-film technology are often more abundant and less expensive than silicon. Additionally, the manufacturing processes for thin film cells can be more streamlined, resulting in reduced energy and resource consumption during production [9, 10]. These cost savings hold the potential to make solar energy more accessible and financially viable on a larger scale. Despite the dominance of traditional silicon solar cells in market, thin film technology has demonstrated the potential for higher efficiency in converting sunlight into electricity. The thin layers of materials used in these cells can be engineered to optimize light absorption and electron transport, leading to improved overall performance. This higher efficiency not only enhances the energy output but also contributes to a quicker return on investment for consumers. Thin film solar cells offer a level of flexibility that is unparalleled in traditional solar cell technology. The lightweight and pliable characteristics of thin film materials allow for diverse applications, including integration into unconventional surfaces and deployment in a variety of settings [9].

This flexibility opens up new possibilities for solar energy utilization in areas where traditional solar cells would be impractical, expanding the reach of solar power to novel environments and applications. The foundation of the advantages associated with thin film solar cells lies in their unique composition. These cells consist of multiple layers, each serving a specific function in the energy conversion process.

A thin film solar cell’s light absorber layer is its core component. This layer is responsible for capturing sunlight and initiating the process of converting photons into electrical current [11]. The materials chosen for this layer are critical in determining the efficiency of light absorption and subsequent energy conversion. Adjacent to the light-absorbing layer are the layers that transport electrons and holes. These layers facilitate the movement of charge carriers generated by the absorption of light. Efficient transport of electrons and holes is essential for maintaining a steady flow of current within the solar cell. Completing the structure are the electrodes, which collect and transfer the generated electrical current for external use. The electrodes play a vital role in optimizing the efficiency of the solar cell by effectively capturing and transmitting the converted energy [12, 13]. The success of thin film solar cell hinges on the careful selection of materials for each layer and the precision of the deposition techniques employed. Researchers and engineers must consider a myriad of factors, including the optical and electrical characteristics, their compatibility with the chosen deposition method, and the overall cost-effectiveness of the manufacturing process.

This comprehensive review aims to delve into the intricacies of thin film solar cell technology. By exploring the principles, advantages, and disadvantages of various deposition techniques, we seek to provide a holistic understanding of how these methods contribute to the performance and cost-effectiveness of thin film solar cells. Additionally, we will examine recent advancements in the field and explore potential future directions that may further improve the capabilities of thin film solar cells. Setting the stage by highlighting the promise of solar energy, identifying the barriers posed by traditional silicon solar cells, and showcasing the potential of thin film solar cells as a transformative solution. Delving into the composition of thin film solar cells, exploring their advantages in terms of cost, efficiency, and flexibility, and elucidating the roles of different layers in the energy conversion process. Investigating the critical role that materials play in thin film solar cells and exploring the various deposition techniques employed in their fabrication. This paper will provide an in-depth analysis of PVD and CVD methods. Examining the strengths and limitations of different thin film deposition techniques, considering factors such as scalability, cost, and complexity.

Summarizing key findings, emphasizing the importance of thin film solar cell technology in shaping the future of solar energy, and suggesting avenues for further research and innovation [14]. In conclusion, this comprehensive review seeks to provide a thorough examination of thin-film solar cell technology, offering insights into its potential to revolutionize the solar energy landscape. Through an in-depth exploration of materials, deposition techniques, advantages, and recent advancements, this review aims to contribute to the collective understanding of how thin-film solar cells can play a pivotal role in the transition to a more affordable and sustainable energy future.

2.0 THIN FILM DEPOSITION METHODS

Thin film preparation technique form the bedrock of solar cell manufacturing, dictating the efficiency, cost, and applicability of solar cells. Broadly classified into; PVC and CVD These techniques are instrumental in shaping the characteristics of thin-film solar cells.

2.1 Physical Vapour Deposition (PVD)

PVD techniques involve the physical ejection of material from a target, leading to its subsequent deposition onto a substrate. This category encompasses methods crucial to the fabrication of thin film solar cells, each offering unique advantages and applications. Sputtering stands out as a versatile and widely employed PVD technique in the realm of thin film solar cells [15, 16].

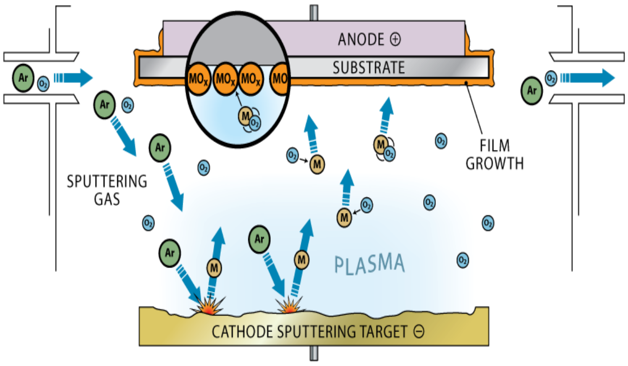

Figure 1: Sputtering Deposition Mechanism

As depicted in Figure 1, the process begins with a plasma bombardment of a material target, inducing the ejection of atoms. These ejected atoms travel to the substrate, and condense as a thin layer. The versatility of sputtering lies in its capability to deposit various materials, including metals, semiconductors, and insulators. This adaptability makes sputtering a preferred choice for creating different layers within thin film solar cells, allowing for tailored designs to optimize performance. Evaporation, another pivotal PVD method, involves heating the target material to a high temperature until it vaporizes. The resulting Vapour then condenses to form a thin layer on the substrate [17, 18]. While evaporation is a straightforward and cost-effective technique, it is constrained by its applicability to materials with high Vapour pressures. This limitation makes it particularly suitable for certain materials, and its simplicity is often an advantage, especially in the production of specific layers in thin film solar cells.

2.2 Chemical Vapour Deposition (CVD)

CVD techniques differ from PVD in that they involve the chemical reaction of precursor gases or vapors to form the desired thin film on the substrate. It enables precise control over film composition and structure, making it suitable for various semiconductor manufacturing, coatings, and thin film solar cells. In the context of solar cells, CVD methods offer unique advantages and present their own set of applications. CVD techniques include, Atmospheric Pressure CVD (APCVD), Low-Pressure CVD (LPCVD), Plasma Enhanced CVD (PECVD) and Metalorganic CVD (MOCVD). These variants enable deposition of high-performance material essential for advancing technology in various fields [19, 20, 21].

Chemical Bath Deposition (CBD) is a CVD technique that immerses the substrate in a solution containing dissolved precursors [22].

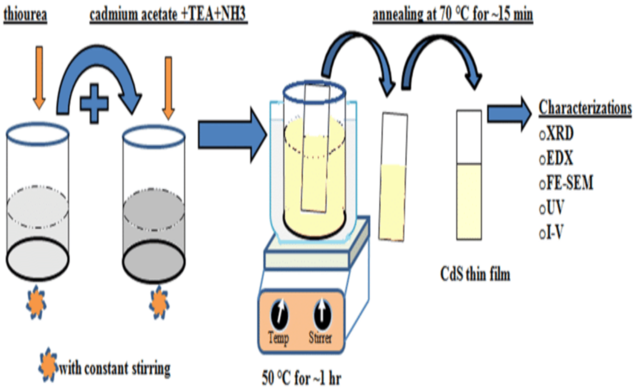

Figure 2: Diagram illustrating of the CBD technique of CdS thin film [23].

As shown in Figure 2, through chemical reactions with the substrate, these precursors form the desired thin film. CBD is recognized for its simplicity and cost-effectiveness, making it an attractive choice for specific thin-film solar cell applications [24, 25]. However, its drawback lies in its limitation to materials that can be effectively formed from a

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solution [26]. As a result, CBD is most suitable for certain layers within thin film solar cells where its strengths can be maximized. MOCVD represents a sophisticated and versatile CVD technique that plays a pivotal role in the thin film solar cell landscape.
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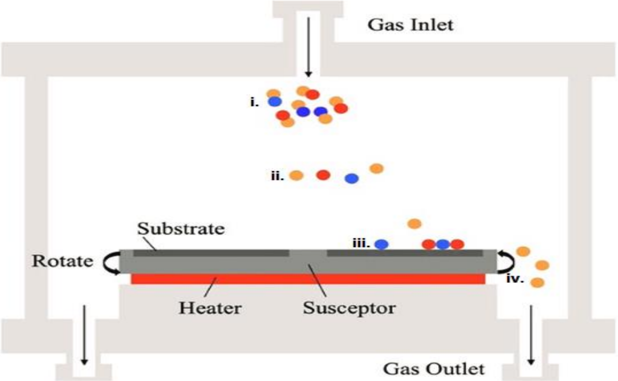

Figure 3: Basic layout and operation of the MOCVD reactor: i. Precursor, ii. Cracking, iii. Deposition and iv.exhaust Gases [27].

In MOCVD, volatile metal-organic precursors are introduced into a heated reactor, where they decompose and react on the substrate to form the desired thin film [28, 29] as shown in Figure 3. This method offers a broad range of applications, enabling the deposition of materials with high purity and precise control over film properties. The versatility of MOCVD makes it well-suited for creating diverse layers in thin-film solar cells, providing engineers and researchers with the flexibility to tailor the properties of each layer to optimize overall cell performance.

2.3 Considerations in Deposition Techniques

The choice between PVD and CVD, as well as specific methods within these categories, is influenced by several critical factors. Material compatibility, deposition precision, scalability, and cost-effectiveness are paramount considerations in selecting the most appropriate technique for a given application [30]. The characteristics of the desired thin film, the overall solar cell architecture, and the targeted performance parameters further guide the decision-making process [31]. Different deposition techniques are optimized for specific materials. For instance, sputtering is highly versatile and can accommodate a wide range of materials, while evaporation is more limited by material Vapour pressures. Understanding the compatibility of each technique with the intended materials is crucial for achieving the desired properties in thin film solar cells. The precision with which thin films can be deposited is a critical factor in determining the efficiency and performance of solar cells. Techniques like MOCVD offer high control over film properties, allowing for precise tuning of characteristics such as thickness, composition, and microstructure [32, 33].

This level of control is essential for achieving high-efficiency solar cells. The scalability of deposition techniques is a key consideration for large-scale production of thin-film solar cells. Some methods, such as roll-to-roll processing, are inherently more scalable than others. Scalability is crucial for reducing production costs and making thin-film solar cells economically competitive with traditional solar cell technologies [34]. The economic viability of thin-film solar cells is closely tied to the cost-effectiveness of the deposition techniques employed. While certain methods, like evaporation and CBD, may offer simplicity and lower costs, others, such as MOCVD, may be more expensive but provide unique advantages in terms of precision and versatility. Striking a balance between cost and performance is essential for the commercial success of thin-film solar cell technologies.

2.4 Future Developments in Thin-Film Deposition

The landscape of thin-film deposition techniques for solar cells continues to evolve, driven by ongoing research and development efforts. Future advancements in this field are anticipated to focus on enhancing the efficiency, scalability, and cost-effectiveness of deposition methods. Researchers are actively engaged in the development of new materials with improved properties for thin-film solar cells. Materials that offer enhanced light absorption, charge transport, and stability could contribute to the creation of more efficient and durable solar cells. Novel deposition method, such as pulsed laser deposition and atomic layer deposition (ALD), are emerging as potential game-changers in thin-film deposition [35]. These techniques offer even greater precision and control over film properties, enabling the deposition of complex multi-layer structures. Exploring and refining these emerging methods could open up new possibilities for thin-film solar cell design. Continued research is focused on developing deposition techniques that are not only precise but also scalable and cost-effective. Roll-to-roll processing, in particular, holds promise for large-scale production, with efforts underway to optimize its efficiency and reduce associated costs. The integration of thin-film solar cells with other emerging technologies, such as perovskite solar cells and tandem devices, is a frontier of exploration [36]. Such integrations have the potential to synergize different technologies, leading to enhanced efficiency and reduced overall costs.

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In conclusion, thin-film deposition techniques are at the forefront of advancing solar cell technology, offering a versatile toolkit for engineers and researchers. The choice between PVD and CVD, as well as specific methods within these categories, is guided by material considerations, deposition precision, scalability, and cost-effectiveness [37]. Sputtering and evaporation, as PVD methods, bring versatility and simplicity, while CBD and MOCVD, as CVD methods, offer cost-effectiveness and precision [38, 39]. As the field of thin-film solar cell technology continues to evolve, future developments are expected to focus on advanced materials, emerging deposition techniques, scalable and low-cost processes, and the integration with other cutting-edge technologies. These developments hold the promise of pushing the boundaries of efficiency, reducing costs, and expanding the applicability of thin-film solar cells, contributing to the ongoing global transition towards sustainable and renewable energy sources.

3.0 ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THIN-FILM DEPOSITION TECHNIQUES

Thin film deposition techniques are diverse, each has its own set of pros and cons. The suitability of a particular method depends on various factors, including the material to be deposited, desired film properties, substrate material, and considerations related to cost and scalability. Understanding these strengths and limitations is essential to choose the most appropriate technique for specific applications within the realm of thin film solar cell manufacturing.

3.1 Advantages of Thin-Film Deposition Techniques

One of the significant advantages of many thin-film deposition techniques lies in their ability to produce films with high purity and precise control over critical properties such as thickness, composition, and microstructure. This level of control is pivotal for achieving high-efficiency solar cells. In applications where the performance of the solar cell depends on the specific characteristics of each layer, the ability to finely tune these properties ensures optimal functionality. Techniques like MOCVD excel in providing a high level of control, allowing researchers and engineers to tailor each layer for maximum efficiency [40].

Scalability is a crucial advantage for certain thin-film deposition techniques, particularly in the context of large-scale production [41]. Methods like roll-to-roll processing exemplify scalability, enabling the deposition of thin films over extensive areas in a continuous and cost-effective manner. This scalability is essential for reducing the overall cost of solar cells, making them more economically competitive with traditional silicon-based technologies. As the demand for solar energy continues to rise, the ability to scale up production becomes increasingly important for widespread adoption.

Thin-film solar cells distinguish themselves by their compatibility with flexible substrates, such as plastic or metal foils. This flexibility opens up a broader range of applications compared to rigid silicon-based solar cells [42, 43]. The ability to conform to various surfaces makes thin-film solar cells suitable for unconventional installations, such as on curved or irregularly shaped structures. This advantage enhances the versatility of thin-film solar cells, allowing them to be integrated into a variety of environments and devices.

3.2 Disadvantages of Thin-Film Deposition Techniques

Despite their numerous advantages, certain thin-film deposition techniques come with a notable drawback. Techniques like MOCVD, which offer precision and versatility, can be expensive to implement. The high cost of equipment, precursor materials, and operational complexity may limit the commercial viability of these methods. As the solar industry strives for cost-effectiveness to compete with conventional energy sources, addressing the expense associated with certain deposition techniques becomes crucial for the widespread adoption of thin-film solar cells [44].

The complexity of certain thin-film deposition techniques poses a challenge, as they often require specialized equipment and expertise. Techniques like MOCVD demand a sophisticated understanding of the chemical and physical processes involved, making their implementation more intricate compared to simpler methods. The need for highly trained personnel and specialized facilities can contribute to higher operational costs and limit the accessibility of these techniques [45]. Balancing the advantages of precision and control with the challenges of complexity becomes a key consideration for researchers and manufacturers seeking to optimize thin film solar cell production.

The advantages and disadvantages of thin-film deposition techniques highlighted ow crucial it is to carefully choose the appropriate method depending on the needs of the particular application and overall project goals. For instance, in scenarios where high precision and control over film properties are paramount, the advantages of a technique like MOCVD may outweigh its associated costs and complexity. Conversely, for applications where scalability and cost-effectiveness are critical, simpler methods like sputtering or roll-to-roll processing may be more suitable.

Efforts are underway within the scientific and industrial communities to address the disadvantages associated with certain thin-film deposition techniques. Research is focused on developing more cost-effective alternatives, improving the scalability of advanced methods, and simplifying complex processes to make them more accessible. Innovations in materials and engineering are contributing to the ongoing evolution of thin-film deposition technologies, with the aim of enhancing their overall efficiency and reducing barriers to adoption.

As the field of thin-film solar cell technology continues to advance, ongoing research and development will play a pivotal role in addressing the challenges posed by high costs and complexity. The integration of emerging deposition techniques, materials, and process optimizations will likely contribute to mitigating these disadvantages. Additionally, advancements in automation and standardization may streamline complex processes, making them more accessible to a broader range of manufacturers. In conclusion, the advantages and disadvantages of thin-film deposition techniques underscore the nuanced decision-making process involved in selecting the most appropriate method for solar cell manufacturing.

4.0 RECENT ADVANCEMENTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN THIN-FILM DEPOSITION TECHNOLOGY

The field of thin-film deposition technology for solar cells is experiencing rapid advancements, driven by the pursuit of higher efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and versatility. Recent breakthroughs and innovative approaches are shaping the landscape of thin-film solar cell technology, while future directions hold the promise of even greater advancements.

One of the key areas of advancement in thin-film solar cell technology is the continuous development of new materials. Researchers are actively engaged in the exploration and synthesis of materials with enhanced light absorption and charge transport properties. These novel materials aim to address limitations and further optimize the efficiency of thin-film solar cells. By tailoring the properties of these materials, researchers seek to improve the overall performance and durability of solar cells, contributing to the ongoing quest for higher efficiency and reliability in solar energy conversion [46]. The development of materials with superior light absorption characteristics is particularly crucial for maximizing energy conversion efficiency. Innovations in this area aim to broaden the spectrum of light that can be effectively captured and converted into electrical energy, increasing the overall performance of thin-film solar cells across different environmental conditions.

Recent advancements in thin-film deposition technology have introduced novel techniques that offer unparalleled control over film properties. Two such techniques, pulsed laser deposition and atomic layer deposition (ALD), have garnered significant attention for their potential to revolutionize the fabrication of thin-film solar cells [47]. Pulsed laser deposition involves the use of laser pulses to ablate material from a target, creating a plasma plume. It enables precise deposition of films, ensuring desired composition in micro or nano size [48]. This plume is then directed toward a substrate, where it condenses to form a thin film. The precise control afforded by pulsed laser deposition allows for the deposition of complex multi-layer structures with exceptional accuracy [49]. This technique opens up new possibilities for engineering thin-film solar cells with tailored properties, including enhanced light absorption, charge transport, and structural integrity. Atomic Layer Deposition (ALD) is a method that involves the sequential exposure of a substrate to precursor gases in a cyclical fashion. This results in the controlled deposition of thin layers of material, one atomic layer at a time. ALD provides unmatched precision in film thickness and composition, offering a level of control crucial for optimizing the performance of thin-film solar cells. The ability to create uniform and defect-free films makes ALD an attractive option for applications where high precision is paramount, contributing to the advancement of solar cell technologies.

A critical focus of ongoing research in thin-film deposition technology is the development of scalable and cost-effective processes. Traditional methods, while effective, may face challenges in achieving large-scale production without incurring prohibitively high costs. Roll-to-roll processing has emerged as a promising solution in this regard, enabling continuous and high-throughput fabrication of thin-film solar cells. Roll-to-roll processing involves the deposition of thin films on a flexible substrate that is continuously unwound from a roll, processed, and then rewound [50, 51]. This continuous and scalable approach holds significant potential for reducing production costs by streamlining the manufacturing process. The high throughput of roll-to-roll processing makes it well-suited for large-area production, addressing the scalability challenges associated with certain deposition techniques. As research progresses, optimizing the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of roll-to-roll processing remains a key objective in making thin-film solar cells more economically competitive.

The integration of thin-film solar cells with complementary technologies is a frontier of exploration that holds the promise of further improving efficiency and reducing costs. Perovskite solar cells have gained attention for their exceptional light-absorbing properties and potential for low-cost fabrication [52]. Integrating perovskite solar cells with thin-film technologies opens up new possibilities for achieving higher overall efficiency [53, 54]. Researchers are exploring methods to combine the strengths of both technologies, creating tandem devices that harness the advantages of each component. This integration has the potential to enhance the efficiency of thin-film solar cells and contribute to the development of cost-effective, high-performance solar energy systems. Tandem devices involve the integration of multiple solar cell technologies to capture a broader spectrum of sunlight and improve overall efficiency. Combining thin-film solar cells with other technologies, such as perovskite or traditional silicon-based cells, creates synergies that can lead to enhanced energy conversion [55, 56]. Tandem devices represent an exciting avenue for pushing the efficiency boundaries of thin-film solar cells and addressing the challenges posed by varying environmental conditions.

The recent advancements in thin-film deposition technology, coupled with ongoing research directions, paint a promising picture for the future of solar energy. The development of new materials, exploration of innovative deposition techniques, emphasis on scalable and cost-effective processes, and integration with other cutting-edge technologies collectively contribute to the evolution of thin-film solar cells. As research and development efforts continue to unfold, the trajectory of thin-film deposition technology for solar cells is likely to be characterized by increased efficiency, reduced costs, and expanded applications. The integration of emerging technologies and the optimization of fabrication processes are expected to make thin-film solar cells more accessible and competitive in the global energy landscape.

The field of thin film deposition technology for solar cells is witnessing a dynamic interplay of recent advancements and future directions. The development of novel materials with enhanced qualities, the exploration of emerging deposition techniques, the emphasis on scalable and cost-effective processes, and the integration with other technologies collectively contribute to the ongoing technological progress of thin film solar cell. As the world pursues sustainable and efficient energy solutions, advances in thin film deposition technology play a vital role in shaping the future of solar energy. The ongoing commitment to research, coupled with the joint efforts of scientists, engineers, and industry stakeholders, holds the potential to unlock new frontiers in thin-film solar cell efficiency, affordability, and applicability.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The field of thin-film deposition for solar cells combines innovative technology with sustainability, reflecting an ongoing journey toward more efficient and cost-effective solar energy solutions. The synergy among different technologies and the evolution of materials and methods are pivotal in realizing the full potential of thin film solar cells. Itemised below are the summary of the key points:

1. **Techniques and Application:**
    - Thin film deposition methods like PVD and CVD are central to developing advanced solar cells.
    - These methods allow precise deposition of material layers on substrates, essential for optimizing the performance and cost-effectiveness of thin-film solar cells.

2. **Advantages:**
    - **High Purity and Control**: Offers high purity of materials and precise control over film properties.
    - **Scalability and Flexibility**: Techniques are scalable and adaptable to flexible substrates, making them ideal for large-scale manufacturing.
    - **Promising Alternative**: Positioned as a prospective replacement to conventional silicon based solar technologies due to adaptability and efficiency potential.

3. **Challenges:**
    - **Cost and Complexity**: Some deposition techniques are marked by high operational costs and procedural complexity.
    - **Continuous Improvement Needed**: There is a constant need for innovation to make these

technologies more cost-effective and accessible.

4. **Ongoing Developments:**
    - **Exploration of New Materials**: Research is focused on finding new materials with better light absorption and charge transport properties to enhance efficiency.
    - **Novel Deposition Techniques**: Emerging techniques like pulsed laser deposition and atomic layer deposition (ALD) offer new possibilities for precision in creating thin films.

5. **Technological Integration:**
    - Integration with technologies like perovskite solar cells and tandem devices is being explored to boost efficiency and reduce costs.
    - These integrations could lead to significant advancements in solar technology.

6. **Field Dynamics:**
    - The field is dynamic, with continuous advancements and innovations.

Stakeholders including researchers, engineers, and industry players must stay updated and collaborate to drive progress.

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