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Z. Liu

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In Situ Investigation of Methane Dry Reforming on Metal/Ceria(111) Surfaces: Metal-Support Interactions and C-H Bond Activation at Low Temperature

Zongyuan Liu,^[a] Pablo Lustemberg,^[b] Ramón A. Gutiérrez,^[c] John J. Carey,^[d] Robert M. Palomino,^[a] Mykhailo Vorokhta,^[e] David C. Grinter,^[a] Pedro J. Ramírez,^[c] Vladimir Matolin,^[e] Michael Nolan,^[d] M. Verónica Ganduglia-Pirovano,^{*[f]} Sanjaya D. Senanayake,^{*[a]} and José A. Rodríguez^{*[a]}

Abstract: Studies with a series of M-CeO₂(111) {M= Co, Ni, Cu} surfaces indicate that metal-oxide interactions can play a very important role for the activation of methane and its reforming with CO₂ at relatively low temperatures (600-700 K). Among the systems examined, Co-CeO₂(111) exhibits the best performance and Cu-CeO₂(111) has negligible activity. Experiments using ambient pressure XPS indicate that methane dissociates on Co-CeO₂(111), at temperatures as low as 300 K, generating CH_x and CO_x species on the catalyst surface. The results of density-functional calculations show a reduction in the methane activation barrier from 1.07 eV on Co(0001) to 0.87 eV on Co²⁺/CeO₂(111), and to only 0.05 eV on Co⁰/CeO_{2-x}(111). At 700 K, under methane dry reforming conditions, CO₂ dissociates on the oxide surface and a catalytic cycle is established without coke deposition. A significant part of the CH_x formed on the Co⁰/CeO_{2-x}(111) catalyst recombines to yield ethane or ethylene.

Natural gas can transform the energy landscape of the world since it is a cheap and abundant fuel stock and a good source of carbon for the chemical industry. CH₄ is the primary component of natural gas but is difficult to convert it to upgraded fuels or chemicals due to the strength of the C-H bonds in the molecule (104 kcal/mol) and its non-polar nature.^[1] Enabling low-

In recent studies, we found that a Ni²⁺/CeO₂(111) system activates CH₄ at room temperature as a consequence of metal-support interactions.^[5,6] The methane reforming with CO₂ (DRM; CH₄ + CO₂ → 2CO + 2H₂) then takes place at a moderate temperature of about 700 K. Over this surface, Ni and O sites of ceria work in a cooperative way during the dissociation of the first C-H bond in methane. Can this useful phenomenon be seen with other admetal-ceria combinations? In this article we compare the behavior of Co, Ni and Cu on CeO₂(111) using ambient-pressure X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (AP-XPS), kinetic testing, and theoretical calculations based on density-functional theory.

The deposition of small amounts of Co (< 0.3 ML) on a CeO₂(111) film at 300 K produced a partial reduction of the oxide surface and adsorbed Co/CoO_x species (Figure S1 in Supporting Information). Upon annealing from 300 to 700 K, most of the Co⁰ transformed into Co²⁺ (Figure S2). This particular type of metal-oxide surface was exposed to methane at 300, 500 and 700 K. Figure 1 shows C 1s XPS spectra collected before and after exposing a Co/CeO₂(111) surface to 1 Torr of methane at 300 K for 5 minutes. The strong peak near 285 eV can be attributed to CH_x groups formed by the partial

- [a] Dr Z. Liu, Dr R. Palomino, Dr D. Grinter, Dr S.D. Senanayake, Dr J.A. Rodríguez
Chemistry Department, Brookhaven National Laboratory
Upton, NY 11973 (USA)
E-mail: ssenanay@bnl.gov
E-Mail: rodriguez@bnl.gov
- [b] Dr P. Lustemberg
Instituto de Física Rosario (IFIR), CONICET (Argentina)
- [c] MSc R.A. Gutierrez, Prof P.J. Ramírez
Facultad de Ciencias, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas 1020-A (Venezuela)
- [d] Dr. J.J. Carey, Dr. M. Nolan
Tyndall National Institute, University College Cork, Lee Maltings, Cork (Ireland)
- [e] Dr M. Vorokhta, Prof V. Matolin
Department of Surface and Plasma Science, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Charles University, Prague, (Czech Republic)
- [f] Dr M.V. Ganduglia-Pirovano
Instituto de Catálisis y Petroleoquímica, CSIC
C/Marie Curie 2, 28049 Madrid (Spain)
E-mail: vgp@icp.csic.es

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temperature activation of methane is a major technological objective. It is known that enzymes such as the methane monooxygenase and some copper- and zinc-based inorganic compounds can activate C-H bonds near room temperature.^[2-4]

Figure 1. C 1s XPS spectra collected before and after exposing a CeO₂(111) surface containing 0.2 ML of Co to 1 Torr of methane at 300 K for 5 minutes.

dissociation of methane on the metal/oxide interface.^[5,6] This peak was not seen when a pure CeO₂(111) substrate was exposed to CH₄ at 300 K. In Figure 1 there is a second strong peak near 289.5 eV. This likely corresponds to a CO_x species.^[5,6] Some of the CH₄ molecules fully dissociated producing C atoms that eventually reacted with oxygen atoms of

the ceria to yield CO_x species. The intensity of the C 1s peak for the CH_x species increased with Co coverage up to 0.15-0.2 ML, and then decreased at higher admetal coverages. Thus, small clusters of Co on ceria are the best for C-H bond activation. The dissociative adsorption of methane on the $\text{Co}^{2+}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ surface at room temperature did not induce a change in the oxidation state of Co^{2+} or Ce^{4+} . Such changes were only seen when the dosing of methane was done at temperatures of 500 and 700 K.

Figure 2 displays Ce 3d and Co 2p AP-XPS spectra recorded while exposing a $\text{CeO}_2(111)$ surface with 0.2 ML of Co to 50 mTorr of CH_4 at different temperatures. Both ceria and Co^{2+} species undergo reduction at 500-700 K as indicated by the emergence of Ce^{3+} and Co^0 features. Once the first hydrogen is removed from the reactant molecule, a quick $\text{CH}_3 \rightarrow \text{CH}_2 \rightarrow \text{CH} \rightarrow \text{C}$ transformation occurs on the surface and oxygen atoms from the sample react to form CO and H_2O gas.

Figure 2. Ce 3d + Co 2p spectra for a $\text{Co}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ ($\Theta_{\text{Co}} \approx 0.2$ ML) surface under 50 mTorr of CH_4 at 300, 500 and 700 K.

Similar experiments to those shown in Figures 1 and 2 were performed for $\text{Cu}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$. The results of XPS and Auger spectroscopy indicate that the interaction of Cu with $\text{CeO}_2(111)$, Figures S3 and S4, is not as strong as that seen for Co. The dissociation of methane on $\text{Cu}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ surfaces was negligible at temperatures between 300 and 700 K (Figure S5). In this aspect, the behavior of these surfaces is very similar to that found for clean $\text{CeO}_2(111)$.^[5,6] In Figure 3, we compare the reduction of ceria (i.e. formation of Ce^{3+}) after dosing methane to $\text{Co}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$, $\text{Cu}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ and a $\text{Ni}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ system examined in a previous study.^[5] In the temperature range of 500-700 K, $\text{Co}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ reacts better with methane than $\text{Ni}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ or $\text{Cu}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$. As we will see below, the partial reduction of ceria is important for the activation of CO_2 and closing the catalytic cycle for methane dry reforming.

In the case of $\text{Co}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$, catalytic activity for methane dry reforming and C2 (ethane/ethylene) production was seen at 650 K (Figure 4). Clean $\text{CeO}_2(111)$ did not display significant catalytic activity. However, the catalytic activity substantially increased when Co was added, reaching a maximum for the generation of CO/H_2 at a coverage of ~ 0.15 ML. A maximum for the production of ethane/ethylene was seen at a Co coverage of 0.1 ML. At these small Co coverages, the $\text{Co}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ system had no problem dissociating CH_4 (Figures 1-3). The CH_3 groups generated on the surface underwent full decomposition to yield syngas or formed carbon-carbon bonds to produce ethane or ethylene. In Figure 4, the hydrogen is produced by methane dry

Figure 3. Ce^{3+} concentration measured in XPS as a function of temperature under reaction conditions (i.e. exposure to 50 mTorr of methane) on ceria pre-covered with ~ 0.2 ML of Co, Ni or Cu.

reforming or by the generation of hydrocarbons ($2\text{CH}_4 \rightarrow \text{C}_2\text{H}_6/\text{C}_2\text{H}_4 + \text{nH}_2$).^[7,8] CO and C_2H_4 also can be obtained through the reaction: $2\text{CH}_4 + 2\text{CO}_2 \rightarrow 2\text{CO} + \text{C}_2\text{H}_4 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$. At the maximum of catalytic activity in Figure 4, one can estimate a turnover frequency (TOF) of 6-7 molecules/Co atom $\cdot$ sec for methane dry reforming. At Co coverages above 0.2 ML, there

Figure 4. Catalytic activity for methane dry reforming and ethane production on Co-ceria catalysts as a function of Co coverage. The figure reports the amount of CO/H_2 and ethane/ethylene formed after exposing the Co-ceria surfaces to 1 Torr of CH_4 and 1 Torr of CO_2 at 650 K for 5 minutes.

was a steady decline in the catalytic activity. At the same time, postreaction characterization of the catalysts with XPS showed an increase in the amount of atomic carbon present in the surface (Figure S6). This carbon could eventually lead to the formation of coke and catalyst deactivation. Thus, the optimum Co coverage is below 0.2 ML, when the interactions with the oxide support are important and the strength and number of the Co-Co interactions is limited.

AP-XPS was used to study the chemical changes in the best Co/CeO₂(111) catalyst under reaction conditions. Figure 5 shows Ce 3d and Co 2p spectra collected while the catalyst is exposed to CH₄ or a mixture of CH₄/CO₂ at 700 K. Under pure methane one sees a surface with Co⁰ and strong peaks for Ce³⁺. The addition of CO₂ to the reactant gas leads to a weak reoxidation of Co and a substantial Ce³⁺ → Ce⁴⁺ conversion. Two reaction paths are possible for the re-oxidation of the Ce³⁺ in the support: CO₂(g) + Vac → CO(g) + O-oxide, or CO₂(g) + H(a) + Vac → HOCO(a) → HO-Vac + CO(g) and HO-Vac → O-oxide + H(a). Both of them could close the catalytic cycle for methane dry reforming after the process: CH₄(g) → C(a) + 4H(a); C(a) + O-oxide → CO(g) + Vac.

Figure 5. Ce 3d + Co 2p XPS spectra of the surface at 700 K under 50 mTorr of methane w/o the addition of 50 mTorr CO₂. The scale of the Co 2p region has been multiplied by a factor of 3 ($\theta_{\text{Co}} \sim 0.2$ ML).

Figure 6 compares the catalytic activity for methane dry reforming of Co-, Cu- and Ni-CeO₂(111)^[6]. The surface with Co is clearly the best catalyst, in agreement with the trends seen in Figure 3 for the activation of pure methane. Among these systems, Co-CeO₂(111) is the only one able to catalyze the $2\text{CH}_4 \rightarrow \text{C}_2\text{H}_x + \{(8-x)/2\}\text{H}_2$ reaction ($x=4,6$). The negligible catalytic activity of Cu/CeO₂(111) results from a very poor reaction with CH₄ without the generation of the Ce³⁺ sites necessary for the activation of CO₂, as indicated in Figure 3, which shows that reducibility increases in the order Cu < Ni < Co. In a set of experiments, we deposited small Co coverages (5-10 wt%) on a ceria powder and tested the catalyst activity for DRM in a flow reactor at temperatures between 700 and 975 K. The powder system did not show signs for deactivation and the conversion of methane through dry reforming was always close to that determined by equilibrium thermodynamics.^[8b] These results are in agreement with the behaviour seen for Co/CeO₂(111) at 700 K.

Methane decomposition is frequently cited as the most difficult step for the DRM process.^[7,8] Here, we apply the spin-polarized DFT+U approach to investigate the dissociative adsorption of CH₄ on Co and Cu nanoparticles deposited on stoichiometric and reduced cerium oxide surfaces, plus the extended Co(0001), Co(111) and Cu(111) surfaces. Results will be compared to those recently obtained for Ni-ceria systems.^[5,6] The metal-ceria surfaces used for the experiments are quite complex. Co/CeO₂(111) displays high activity for methane dissociation at low metal coverages with Co atoms in close contact with the ceria support in a 2+ oxidation state, whereas Cu/CeO₂(111) is not active, with Cu¹⁺ atoms aggregating to form larger metallic nanoparticles. Thus, we model these systems using single Co atoms and small tetrahedral Cu₄

Figure 6. Catalytic activity for methane dry reforming on Cu-, Ni-, Co-ceria catalysts ($\theta_{\text{Admetal}} \sim 0.15$ ML). The figure reports the amount of CO/H₂ formed after exposing the catalysts to 1 Torr of CH₄ and 1 Torr of CO₂ at 650 K for 5 minutes.

clusters on CeO₂(111), Figure S7. We found that Co²⁺ species (3d⁷) adsorb most favorably at O-hollow sites in CeO₂(111), with the transfer of two electrons to the reducible support. Cu atoms transfer only one electron, yielding Cu¹⁺ species (3d¹⁰). The Cu₄ species also reduce the support, with the formation of two Ce³⁺. The CeO₂(111) supported Co₁ and Cu₄ species behave similarly to the corresponding Ni₁ and Ni₄ ones.^[5,6,9] Moreover, low-loaded Co/CeO_{2-x}(111) with metallic cobalt, is the active phase for methane dry reforming, which will be modeled using single metal Co atoms on Ce₂O₃(0001) (Figure S7). Hence, these M-ceria {M=Co, Cu} model surfaces mimic the essential features of the experimental catalysts as seen in the XPS data shown in Figures 3 and 5.

The molecular binding of methane to Co or Cu surfaces is very weak and dissociation, CH₄(a) → CH₃(a) + H(a), is difficult due to large energy barriers.^[10,11] Our calculated barriers are 1.07 and 1.64 eV (Figure S8), respectively, in agreement with previous studies.^[10,11] This is similar to Ni(111) with a barrier of about 0.9–1.1 eV.^[5,12] The molecular binding of CH₄ to Co²⁺ and Cu₄ species on CeO₂(111) lies within the 0.1–0.2 eV range (Figures 7a and S9). On the Cu₄/CeO₂(111) surface, similar to Cu(111), methane dissociation is hindered by a large energy barrier of 1.45 eV. This is consistent with the negligible methane dissociation observed for Cu-ceria systems at room temperature. However, on Co₁/CeO₂(111), the barrier is reduced from 1.07 to 0.87 eV, as compared to Co(0001) (and from 1.02 eV if fcc Co(111) is considered, Figure S8). Therefore, the energy barrier for ceria supported small Co nanoparticles is accessible at lower temperatures than on the extended metal surface and methane dissociation is expected to occur, in agreement with the experiments shown in Figure 1. Here, metal and support work in a cooperative way in the dissociation of the C–H bond. Note that the final states shown in Figure 7a do not necessarily correspond to the lowest energy structures of the dissociated methane (Figure S9), but to local minima geometrically close to the transition state structures.

Upon increasing oxygen removal from the ceria support by reaction with methane, the Co²⁺ species gradually recover their metallic state. Chemisorbed methane molecules on both M⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001) {M=Co, Ni} model systems are more stable than on the corresponding M²⁺/CeO₂(111) model systems (Figure 7), and thus the probability of reaction is expected to increase on the actual active dry reforming metal-CeO_{2-x} catalysts. We observe that the distances between methane and the M⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001) {M=Co, Ni} surfaces, as measured by the C–M distances, are reduced by approx. 0.6 (Co) to 1.0 (Ni) Å with respect to the same distances in the M²⁺/CeO₂(111) systems (Figures S9 and S10). Moreover, CH₄ adsorption on the M⁰/

Ce₂O₃(0001) surfaces is aided by substantial hydrogen-metal interactions that are more pronounced compared to the M²⁺/CeO₂(111) systems;

Figure 7. Reaction energy profile for the CH₄ → CH₃ + H reaction on: a) Cu₄, Co₁ and Ni₁ on CeO₂(111) and b) Co₁ and Ni₁ on Ce₂O₃(0001). The activation barriers are hardly affected by inclusion of vdW interactions (Figure S14). The structures shown on the left, middle and right of the reaction pathways, correspond to the side views of the molecularly adsorbed, transition and dissociated states, respectively (Supporting information Figures S9 and S10). All energies are referenced to the total energy of CH₄(g) and the M/ceria {M=Co, Ni, Cu} surfaces. Atoms color scheme: Ni in blue, Cu in brown, Co in violet, Ce⁴⁺ in grey, Ce³⁺ in white, surface/subsurface oxygen atoms in red/green. The CH₄-Ni⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001) structure is by 0.15 eV more stable than the corresponding one in Ref. 5.

The closer approach to the M⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001) surfaces facilitates charge transfer to methane, e.g., the increase in the Bader charge for the C atom upon CH₄ adsorption is 0.03 and 0.16 electrons for Co²⁺/CeO₂(111) and Co⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001), respectively, with respect to the gas-phase CH₄ molecule (Table S1). Furthermore, the energy barrier for the dissociative adsorption of methane on Co⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001) is substantially reduced compared to Co²⁺/CeO₂(111), becoming almost negligible – E^a = 0.05 eV. This is not the case for the corresponding Ni-ceria systems for which the barrier remains unchanged (~0.8 eV). We interpret this unique Co behavior by inspecting the transition state structures for the M⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001) {M=Co, Ni} surfaces (Figure 7b): the marked differences in activation barriers relate to the ability of the metals to form strong M–H bonds. Figure 7b shows that on Co⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001), the Co sites work alone during the dissociation of the first C–H bond. By contrast, on Ni⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001), Ni and O sites work cooperatively. This is also consistent with the calculated adsorption energy for hydrogen atoms on the M⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001) {M=Co, Ni} surfaces, which is

larger by about 0.7 eV on Co than on Ni (Figure S12). Thus, both Co- and Ni-ceria systems are able to cleave C–H bonds at room temperature. However, it is only for Co-ceria that as the temperature increases, and methane decomposes and reacts with the CeO₂ support, accompanied by the Co²⁺/CeO₂ → Co⁰/CeO_{2-x} transformation, that C–H bonds are more easily cleaved. Therefore, more vacant sites and more Ce³⁺ ions are expected to form on Co-ceria catalysts as compared to Ni-ceria, in agreement with the experimental observations (Figure 3).

Our results on M-ceria {M=Co, Ni, Cu} model catalysts show that not only the nature of the metal is crucial for DRM activity and system stability, as recently pointed out for Ni, Co and Co-Ni nanoparticles,^{13,14} but also the oxide support can play an essential role. An oxide support can modify the electronic properties of an admetal in substantial ways making its chemical properties very different from those of the corresponding bulk metal.^{15,16} Single Co and Ni atoms on CeO₂ interact strongly with the reducible support while adopting a +2 oxidation state, and exhibit room temperature activity for C–H bond dissociation. Moreover, reducing the ceria support stabilizes metallic Co and Ni atoms and the systems are active for methane activation and dry reforming, *with Co-CeO_{2-x} being much more active than Ni-CeO_{2-x}*. It is also seen that a low metal loading, below 0.2 ML, is crucial for the catalyst activity and stability since deactivation due to carbon deposition is observed at higher loading. This is consistent with the calculated trend in the adsorption energy of C atoms on the supported metal clusters of varying size (Figure S13), for example, Co₁/Ni₁-CeO₂ (-4.98/-4.12) < Co₄/Ni₄-CeO₂ (-6.86/-6.54 eV). Here, we show that by choosing the "right" metal-oxide combination and manipulating metal-oxide interactions, as well as controlling the effects of metal loading, an improved catalytic activity can be obtained. Our findings should be useful in the rational design of catalysts for reactions involving C–H bond dissociation. Cobalt-ceria can be added to the short list of oxide-based systems that can activate methane at room temperature,^{6,16} opening the possibility for new and exciting chemistry.

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Text for Table of Contents:

Low-loaded Co-CeO₂ is a highly efficient, stable and non-expensive catalyst for methane activation at RT and dry reforming at relative low temperatures (700 K), as revealed by experiments of ambient pressure XPS in combination with DFT calculations. Ethane/ethylene formation is also observed. Upon temperature increase the Co²⁺/CeO₂ → Co⁰/CeO_{2-x} transformation occurs, making the latter extremely active. The DRM activity strongly depends on the metal-ceria combination, with Co-ceria > Ni-ceria, and Cu-ceria being inactive.

1. Experimental and Theoretical sections

1.1. Experimental Section

A commercial SPECS AP-XPS chamber equipped with a PHOIBOS 150 EP MCD-9 analyzer was used for the XPS analysis. The AP-XPS chamber can take pressure up to 1 torr with heating capability up to 900 K. The Ce 4d photoemission lines were used for the binding energy calibration based on the 122.8 eV satellite feature. To generate the films used to prepare the $\text{MO}_x/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ $\text{M} = \text{Co, Ni or Cu}$ model catalysts, Ce metal was evaporated onto a Ru single crystal (0001) held at 700 K in the presence of 5×10^{-7} Torr O_2 , and then annealed to 800 K for 10 mins at the same O_2 pressure.[1,2] The ceria films were estimated to be ca. 4 nm thick (10 layers of O-Ce-O) based on the attenuation of the Ru 3d XPS signal. The metals (Co, Ni or Cu) were vapor deposited on the as-prepared ceria film at 300 K under vacuum and then annealed to 700 K for 1 min.[1,2]

The catalytic tests were done in a set-up that combined a chamber for ultra-high vacuum (UHV) studies and a batch reactor.[2] In the studies of methane activation, the sample was transferred to the reactor at ~ 300 K, and then the reactant gas at 1 Torr of pressure was introduced. In experiments testing the activity of the $\text{MO}_2/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ catalysts for the DRM process, the samples were exposed to a mixture of CH_4 (1 Torr) and CO_2 (1 Torr) at 300 K and were rapidly heated to the reaction temperature of 650 K. Product yields were analyzed by mass spectroscopy or chromatography. In our experiments data were collected at intervals of 5 min. The amount of molecules (CO , H_2 , ethane) produced in the catalytic tests was normalized by the active area exposed by the sample and the total reaction time. The kinetic experiments were done in the limit of low conversion ($< 10\%$).

1.2. Theoretical Section

The spin-polarized calculations were performed using the DFT-(PBE)+U approach as implemented in the Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP){vasp site, <http://www.vasp.at>; version vasp.5.3.5}. A value of 4.5 eV was used for the Hubbard U-like term. The projector augmented wave method (PAW) was employed at a plane-wave cutoff of 415 eV to decouple the core from valence electrons. The C (2s, 2p), O (2s, 2p), Ni (3p, 3d, 4s), Co(3p, 3d, 4s), Cu(3p, 3d, 4s) and Ce (4f, 5s, 5p, 5d, 6s) electrons were treated as valence states.

In order to test the effect of long-range dispersion corrections on the methane adsorption and dissociation, we have selectively used the so called DFT-DF2 approach [3] implemented in VASP by Klimeš *et al.* [4,5], using the algorithm of Roman-Perez and Soler [6], see Figure S14 below. The DFT-DF2 functional aims to improve the binding description around energy minima by changing both the exchange and non-local correlation components. Specifically, we report results of DFT+U-DF2 (a Hubbard-like U term added) calculations using the so called optB88-vdW functional [5,6], with the DFT(PBE)+U lattice constant.

The $\text{M}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ and $\text{M}/\text{Ce}_2\text{O}_3(0001)$ $\{\text{M} = \text{Co, Ni or Cu}\}$ surfaces were modeled by (2×2) unit cells, with calculated ceria bulk equilibrium lattice constant (CeO_2 : 5.485 Å ; Ce_2O_3 : 5.537 Å). In the case of $\text{CeO}_2(111)$ we have considered nine atomic layers (three O-Ce-O trilayers) whereas $\text{Ce}_2\text{O}_3(0001)$ was modeled with fifteen atomic layers (six Ce atomic layers).

There are two allotropic modifications of cobalt; a hexagonal close-packed (HCP) form, stable at temperatures below 422°C, and a face-centered-cubic (FCC) form, which is stable between 422 °C and its melting point of 1495°C [7]. We have considered modeling the Co(111) and Co(0001) surfaces because, O’Shea *et al.* and Zhang *et al.* in two different experiments have demonstrated that the stable phases of cobalt are very sensitive to their exposed environment such as pressure, temperature and pretreatment of the catalysts [8,9].

The Co(0001), Co(111) and Cu(111) surfaces were modeled by (3×3) unit cell and five metal layers. The optimized lattice constants for (hcp) Co ($a = b = 2.492$ Å and $c = 4.028$ Å) and (fcc) Co ($a = 3.520$ Å) Cu ($a = 3.635$ Å) agree well with the experimental values (hcp Co: $a = b = 2.507$ Å and $c = 4.061$ Å [10], fcc Co: $a = 3.544$ Å [10] fcc Cu: $a = 3.597$ Å [11]). In all surface models, consecutive slabs were separated by at least 12 Å of vacuum space to avoid interaction with periodic images. Monkhorst-Pack grids with a $(3 \times 3 \times 1)$ and $(5 \times 5 \times 1)$ k-point sampling were used for the ceria-based systems and the extended metal surfaces, respectively. All the atoms in the three bottom layers were fixed at their optimized bulk-truncated positions during geometry optimization, whereas the rest of the atoms were allowed to fully relax.

To locate the TS structures we employed the climbing image nudged elastic band method (CI-NEB)[12] with nine images for each reaction pathway. For all the TS reported in this work, we have found only one imaginary frequency, and the full geometry optimizations starting from its back and forward nearest configurations (along the reaction path) ended in a non-dissociated and dissociated state, respectively.

2. Results

Figure S1: Ce 3d + Co 2p XPS regions of the as-deposited surfaces with increased Co coverages from 0.1, 0.2 to 0.25 ML.

Figure S1 shows the coverage dependency of Co growth on $\text{CeO}_2(111)$ surface. The spectra were taken at 300 K before annealing. It can be seen that, even at 300 K, a small amount of Co already interacts strongly with the ceria substrate, resulting in the formation of Co^{2+} . (In XPS is hard to distinguish Co^{2+} from Co^{3+} , but Co^{3+} probably will not form under these conditions). As the Co coverage increased, the intensities of Co^{2+} peaks have saturated, and the metallic Co features start to develop, indicating Co particles are growing three dimensionally at this point. At the same time, ceria is slightly reduced as shown by the Ce^{3+} features in the figure.

Figure S2: Ce 3d + Co 2p XPS spectra of the surfaces before/after annealing, $\theta_{\text{Co}} \approx 0.2\text{ML}$.

After depositing Co at 300 K, the surface was annealed to 700 K in UHV to generate a stabilized surface before any surface chemistry was studied. The surfaces before/after annealing are compared in Figure S2. One can see that the metallic Co feature is gone as annealing allows more charge transfer/oxygen spillover from ceria to cobalt. Interestingly, the ceria film was also slightly re-oxidized, probably due to the diffusion of the lattice oxygen from sublayers to the surface by annealing.

Figure S3: Ce 3d + Cu 2p XPS regions of the fresh surface (blue), as-deposited surfaces with 0.2 ML (red) and 0.3 ML Cu (black) coverages, respectively.

XPS data collected at 300 K before annealing the Cu/ceria systems. Ceria is slightly reduced after Cu deposition while most of the Cu is oxidized to Cu^{1+} , as indicated by the Auger spectrum. No changes are seen with increased Cu coverage.

Figure S4: Ce 3d + Cu 2p XPS spectra of the surfaces before/after annealing, $\theta_{\text{Co}} \approx 0.3\text{ML}$

In contrast to the Co deposited surface, annealing the Cu/ $\text{CeO}_2(111)$ surfaces leads to the reduction of Cu^{1+} to Cu^0 , as evident by the Auger spectrum in the inset figure. One possible explanation is that the severe

coalescence of Cu after annealing causes the reduction of Cu, which is a strong indication that the interaction between Cu with $\text{CeO}_2(111)$ is much weaker than in the case of Co.

Figure S5: Ce 3d + Cu 2p XPS spectra of the surface at elevated temperatures under 50 mTorr CH_4 , $\theta_{\text{Co}} \approx 0.2\text{ML}$.

No changes for Cu-ceria surfaces under 50 mTorr of methane.

Figure S6: Effect of Co coverage on the amount of atomic carbon (features in the 284-282 eV window) formed after exposing $\text{Co-CeO}_2(111)$ surfaces to 1 Torr of methane and 1 Torr of CO_2 at 650 K for 5 min.

The C 1s intensity of C_x species was normalized by the coverage of Co on the surface.

Figure S7: Top and side views of the model catalysts used in the calculations: a) Cu(111), b) Co(111) c) Co(0001), d) Cu₄/CeO₂(111), e) Co²⁺/CeO₂(111) and f) Co⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001).

Figure S8: Reaction pathways for CH₄ dissociation on Ni(111), Cu(111), Co(111) and Co(0001) as well as top and side views of the structures of the molecularly adsorbed state, transition state (TS), and dissociated state for the three reaction pathways. Selected interatomic distances (in pm) are indicated. All energies (in eV) are referenced to the total energy of CH₄(g) and the extended metal surfaces.

Figure S9: Top and side views of the molecularly adsorbed state, transition state (TS), and dissociated state for the $\text{CH}_4 \rightarrow \text{CH}_3 + \text{H}$ reaction on the $\text{Cu}_4/\text{CeO}_2(111)$, $\text{Co}_1/\text{CeO}_2(111)$, and $\text{Ni}_1/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ model catalysts (Figure 7a in the main text). Selected interatomic distances (in pm) are indicated. All energies (in eV) are referenced to the total energy of $\text{CH}_4(\text{g})$ and the $\text{M}/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ $\{\text{M}=\text{Cu}, \text{Co}, \text{Ni}\}$ surfaces.

Figure S10: Top and side views of the molecularly adsorbed state, transition state (TS), and dissociated state for the CH₄→CH₃+H reaction on the Co₁/Ce₂O₃(0001) and Ni₁/Ce₂O₃(0001) model catalysts (Figure 7b in the main text). Selected interatomic distances (in pm) are indicated. All energies (in eV) are referenced to the total energy of CH₄(g) and the M/Ce₂O₃(0001) {M=Co, Ni} surfaces.

Table S1: Bader charge change for the C atom upon CH₄ adsorption on ceria and metal-ceria surfaces, with respect to the gas-phase molecule (note: a positive change denote a higher electron density).

CeO ₂ (111)	Ni ₁ ²⁺ /CeO ₂ (111)	Co ₁ ²⁺ /CeO ₂ (111)	Ce ₂ O ₃ (0001)	Ni ₁ ⁰ /Ce ₂ O ₃ (0001)	Co ₁ ⁰ /Ce ₂ O ₃ (0001)
-0.03	-0.09	+0.03	-0.01	+0.15	+0.16

Figure S11: Top panel: Top and side views of molecularly adsorbed CH₄ on the Ce₂O₃(0001), Ni⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001), and Co⁰/Ce₂O₃(0001) surfaces. Selected interatomic distances (in pm) are indicated. Adsorption energies (in eV) are referenced to the total energy of CH₄(g) and the M/Ce₂O₃(0001) {M=Ni, Co} surfaces. Lower panel: Charge density isosurfaces corresponding to a charge density difference, namely, that of the chemisorbed system from which both the charge density of the clean surface and that of the isolated methane molecule (both with distances as in the chemisorbed system) have been subtracted. Δq is the associated Bader charge difference (in electrons). The picture displays the induced effect by the adsorption of a CH₄ molecule on the valence charge of its neighboring metal atom on the M/Ce₂O₃(0001) {M=Ni, Co} surfaces, namely, charge is withdrawn from the metal upon CH₄ adsorption.

Figure S12: Top and side views of a hydrogen atom adsorbed on the $M_1/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ and $M_1/\text{Ce}_2\text{O}_3(0001)$ $\{M=\text{Ni, Co}\}$ surfaces. Selected interatomic distances (in pm) are indicated. Adsorption energies (in eV) are referenced to the total energy of $\text{H}_2(\text{g})$ and the $M/\text{Ce}_2\text{O}_3(0001)$ $\{M=\text{Ni, Co}\}$ surfaces.

Figure S13: Top and side views of a carbon atom adsorbed on the $M_i/\text{CeO}_2(111)$ and $M_i/\text{Ce}_2\text{O}_3(0001)$ $\{M=\text{Ni, Co}, i = 1, 4\}$ surfaces. Selected interatomic distances (in pm) are indicated. Adsorption energies (in eV) are referenced to the total energy of $\text{H}_2(\text{g})$ and the $M/\text{Ce}_2\text{O}_3(0001)$ $\{M=\text{Ni, Co}\}$ surfaces.

Figure S14: Reaction energy profile for the $\text{CH}_4 \rightarrow \text{CH}_3 + \text{H}$ reaction on Cu_4 , Co_1 and Ni_1 on $\text{CeO}_2(111)$ with and without van der Waals corrections. The structures shown on the left, middle and right of the reaction pathways, correspond to the side views of the molecular adsorbed, transition and dissociated states, respectively without vdW correction. All energies are referenced to the total energy of $\text{CH}_4(\text{g})$ and the M/ceria $\text{M}=\text{Co}, \text{Ni}, \text{Cu}$ surfaces. Atoms color scheme: Ni in blue, Cu in brown, Co in violet, Ce^{3+} in grey, Ce^{4+} in white, surface/subsurface oxygen atoms in red/green.

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