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### ► To cite this version:

Aleksandra Lilić, Luis Cardenas, Adel Mesbah, Erik Bonjour, Patrick Jame, et al.. Guidelines for the synthesis of molybdenum nitride: Understanding the mechanism and the control of crystallographic phase and nitrogen content. *Journal of Alloys and Compounds*, 2022, 924, pp.166576. 10.1016/j.jallcom.2022.166576 . hal-03821941

**HAL Id: hal-03821941**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03821941>**

Submitted on 20 Oct 2022

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# Guidelines for the synthesis of molybdenum nitride: understanding the mechanism and the control of crystallographic phase and nitrogen content

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## Abstract

Bulk ( $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$ ) and supported molybdenum nitride ( $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}/\text{TiO}_2$ ,  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}/\text{CeO}_2$ ) were synthesized by reduction-nitridation of bulk and supported  $\text{MoO}_3$  under a mixture of  $\text{N}_2/\text{H}_2$ . We investigated the mechanism of formation of molybdenum nitrides by coupling elemental analysis, *in situ* and *ex situ* XRD, Raman spectroscopy, *in situ* XPS/UPS spectroscopy and DFT calculation. We showed that it is possible to control the crystallographic phase and degree of nitridation (i.e. nitrogen vacancies) by adjusting the parameters of the synthesis, including the heating rate and final temperature, the nature, composition and flow of gas during reduction/nitridation and cooling. We demonstrated that  $\beta$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$  and  $\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$  go through the same intermediates: molybdenum bronze,  $\text{MoO}_2$  and Mo. The final crystallographic phase of the nitride depends mainly on the temperature rate and gas hourly space velocity employed during the synthesis, as they impact the crystallite size of the intermediates and the kinetics of reduction and nitridation. Molybdenum nitride clusters ( $< 0.5$  nm) are formed on  $\text{TiO}_2$ .

## Keywords

Nitride materials. Interstitial alloys. Clusters. Gas-solid reactions. Vacancy formation. Photoelectron spectroscopies.

## 1. Introduction

Molybdenum nitrides are obtained by interstitial incorporation of nitrogen into the lattice of metallic Mo resulting in modification of electron density and d-band contraction [1,2]. These materials display interesting properties such as good thermal and chemical stability, high hardness, high wear resistance, high melting points, low compressibility, magnetic and superconducting properties [3–6]. Therefore, they find application as superconductors [3,7], functional coatings [4,5], electrocatalyst in batteries and fuel cells [8–10] and heterogeneous catalysts [1,11,12].

Molybdenum nitride catalysts can exhibit similar catalytic activity and distinct selectivity response when compared with conventional metal catalysts. The nature of the active sites is still under debate, depending on the reaction. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that the active sites are associated with Mo atoms and/or nitrogen deficient sites [13–16]. The nitrogen vacancies are favorable for the adsorption and dissociation of substrates. The catalytic property is linked in particular to the crystallographic phase [13,16–18], the size [19–22], Mo oxidation states [23,24], the degree of nitridation [14,25–27] and the passivation [28]. A fine control of these parameters would allow to tune the activity of the materials.

This work focuses on the two main allotropic forms of molybdenum nitride: tetragonal  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N with N atoms in the tetrahedral interstitial sites and face center cubic  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N with N atoms occupying randomly half of the octahedral interstitial sites. The latter structure has been more widely studied by experimental and theoretical studies. A well-known method for their preparations is the temperature programmed reduction-nitridation (TPN) by gas-solid reaction of MoO<sub>3</sub> (or other Mo-containing precursor) with a mixture of N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> or NH<sub>3</sub>, under a thermal treatment.

Syntheses with NH<sub>3</sub> have been extensively studied; they generate  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N where some heat transfer problems have been reported due to the endothermic decomposition of NH<sub>3</sub> [29]. In 1994, it was shown for the first time [30] that  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N could be obtained by employing a mixture of N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> instead of NH<sub>3</sub>. A few years later, the formation of  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N was also reported with this mixture [31]. TPN with N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> gas mixture is advantageous because molybdenum nitride with varied crystallographic phase ( $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ ) and textural properties can be synthesized by adjusting the reaction parameters such as the gas composition (i.e. N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> ratio), heating rate ( $T_{\text{rate}} = 0.1\text{-}10\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C min}^{-1}$ ), final nitridation temperature ( $T_{\text{max}} = 500\text{-}800\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ ), isothermal hold at final temperature, gas hourly space velocity (GHSV), and cooling gas choice (Ar, N<sub>2</sub>, N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>) [13,17,30–32].

It was shown that the synthesis of the  $\beta$ -phase with N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> goes through formation of MoO<sub>2</sub> and Mo metallic as intermediates [31,33–35]. The formation of a molybdenum bronze H<sub>x</sub>MoO<sub>3</sub> intermediate was reported when some amount of Pd is added during the synthesis [36]. The mechanism of  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N

is hardly documented. Wise and Markel reported MoO<sub>2</sub> and an unidentified phase as intermediate [30]. They also proposed the formation of metallic Mo based on thermodynamic calculation, but without formal observation. It was also suggested [13] that  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N should follow the path MoO<sub>3</sub> > MoO<sub>y</sub>N<sub>1-y</sub> >  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N based on the literature employing NH<sub>3</sub> [37].

Part of the discrepancies observed so far is due to the fact that Mo<sub>2</sub>N materials are often characterized after air exposure (*ex situ*) [38]. In this context, the investigation of the materials properties requires an in-depth characterization under *in situ* conditions. This paper introduces a new methodology to determine the structural, textural and electronic properties of the material during each stage of Mo<sub>2</sub>N synthesis, passing through the oxidation of ammonium heptamolybdate tetrahydrate (AHM) (NH<sub>4</sub>)<sub>6</sub>Mo<sub>7</sub>O<sub>24</sub> precursor and its subsequent oxidation followed by reduction/nitridation.

To increase the number of exposed sites, supporting small particles of Mo<sub>2</sub>N appears as an appealing strategy. However, the literature dealing with the synthesis of supported nitrides is limited. These studies focus mainly on the catalytic application of the nitride systems and little work has been done on the optimization of the synthesis routes. This is partially due to the fact that the characterization of supported nanoparticles (e.g. crystallographic structure) is often more challenging than for bulk materials. Until now the synthesis of molybdenum nitride by impregnation with AHM followed by TPN with N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> has been conducted on Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> [18,39,40], SBA-15 [18] and activated carbon [20]. In this study, we explore the use of TiO<sub>2</sub> and CeO<sub>2</sub>.

Understanding the elementary steps occurring during the synthesis of Mo<sub>2</sub>N is a fundamental challenge for determining the final composition and crystallographic phase of the materials. Clarification of the synthesis mechanisms is needed to identify the important factors that controls the synthesis of the  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ -phase for TPN with N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>. This mechanistic understanding needs to be based on solid experimental proofs of intermediate phases coupling *ex situ* and *in situ* characterizations. In this paper, we set out to examine how some critical properties, such as the quantity of N-deficient sites, can be tuned for  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N, depending on the synthesis conditions. Therefore, we are reporting the influence of heating rate ( $T_{\text{rate}}$ ), final nitridation temperature ( $T_{\text{max}}$ ), N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> feed composition, GHSV and choice of the cooling gas on the formation of  $\beta$  or  $\gamma$ -phase. Mechanism of synthesis is revealed using Raman spectroscopy, *in situ* and *ex situ* X-ray, and *in situ* XPS/UPS. Finally, the syntheses of Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub> and Mo<sub>2</sub>N/CeO<sub>2</sub> are investigated and optimized.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Sample preparation

#### 2.1.1. Bulk samples

Calcination of ammonium heptamolybdate tetrahydrate (AHM:  $(\text{NH}_4)_6\text{Mo}_7\text{O}_{24}\cdot 4\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ; Sigma-Aldrich, 99.98% trace metal basis, XRD diffractogram shown in Supplementary material, Figure A.1a) in air flow ( $60 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ) at  $350 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  ( $5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ; hold for 2 h) gave  $\text{MoO}_3$ -AHM-350. This material was further used as  $\text{MoO}_3$  precursor for the synthesis of bulk molybdenum nitrides by temperature programmed reduction-nitridation (TPN). Between 1.1 g and 3.0 g of  $\text{MoO}_3$ -AHM-350 was packed onto a glass frit in a quartz synthesis reactor and placed in a vertical tube furnace. TPN was conducted under  $\text{N}_2/\text{H}_2$  mixture (15%/85% or 85%/15% v/v) or  $\text{NH}_3$  with a GHSV value of  $87 \text{ min}^{-1}$ ,  $109 \text{ min}^{-1}$  or  $230 \text{ min}^{-1}$ . The temperature was increased by applying temperature rate ( $T_{\text{rate}}$ ) of  $5$  or  $0.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$  until reaching the final nitridation temperature ( $T_{\text{max}} = 350\text{--}700 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ) and held for 2 h. Samples were cooled down to room temperature under nitrogen or argon flow ( $60 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ). Finally, the materials were passivated at room temperature during 4 h in 1% v/v  $\text{O}_2/\text{N}_2$  flow ( $60 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ).

In standard condition ( $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-5}$ ,  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5}$ ), TPN was conducted under 15% v/v  $\text{N}_2/\text{H}_2$  mixture with a GHSV value of  $230 \text{ min}^{-1}$  until  $700 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , and cooled down under nitrogen. The samples (Table 1) are labelled  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-5-X}$  when  $T_{\text{rate}} = 5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$  and  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-X}$  when  $T_{\text{rate}} = 0.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ . X refers to the main parameter varied during the synthesis:  $X = \text{NH}_3$  or  $85\%\text{N}_2$  when TPN was conducted under  $\text{NH}_3$  or  $\text{N}_2/\text{H}_2$  mixture with high nitrogen content (85% v/v  $\text{N}_2/\text{H}_2$ );  $X = \text{T650}$  when the final temperature of TPN was  $650 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ;  $X = \text{GHSV-87}$  or  $\text{GHSV-109}$  when a GHSV value of  $87 \text{ min}^{-1}$  or  $109 \text{ min}^{-1}$  was employed;  $X = \text{Cool-Ar}$  when the cooling down was conducted in Ar. The samples obtained are labelled with  $X = 63\mu$ ,  $80\mu$  or  $315\mu$  (Table 2), when  $\text{MoO}_3$ -AHM-350 was sieved and divided in 3 batches ( $40\text{--}63 \mu\text{m}$ ,  $63\text{--}80 \mu\text{m}$  and  $100\text{--}315 \mu\text{m}$ ) before TPN in standard condition.

Calcination of AHM in air flow ( $60 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ) at  $700 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  ( $5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ; hold for 2 h) gave  $\text{MoO}_3$ -AHM-700. This material was used for the synthesis of molybdenum nitride employing the standard condition of TPN (Table 3).

$\text{MoO}_3\text{-5-T350-H}_2$  and  $\text{MoO}_3\text{-0.5-T350-H}_2$  were synthesized from  $\text{MoO}_3$ -AHM-350. The reductions were conducted under  $\text{H}_2$  with a GHSV  $230 \text{ min}^{-1}$ . The temperature was increased at  $T_{\text{rate}}$  ( $5$  or  $0.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ) until  $350 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  and held for 2 h. the samples were cooled down under Ar.

$\text{Mo-5}$  and  $\text{Mo-0.5}$  (Table A.1) were synthesized from  $\text{MoO}_3$ -AHM-350. The reductions were conducted under  $\text{H}_2$  with a GHSV  $230 \text{ min}^{-1}$ . The temperature was increased at  $T_{\text{rate}}$  ( $5$  or  $0.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ) until  $700 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  and held for 2 h. Samples were cooled down to room temperature under argon flow ( $60 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ). The samples were either passivated at room temperature for *ex situ* analyses, or re-used

directly *in situ* for the syntheses of Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5-Mo and Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-Mo (Table A.1). In the latter case, TPN were conducted in standard condition under N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> mixture (15% v/v) with a GHSV of 230 min<sup>-1</sup>. The temperature was increased by applying T<sub>rate</sub> of 5 or 0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup> until 700 °C and held for 2 h. Samples were cooled down to room temperature under nitrogen flow and passivated, as previously.

### 2.1.2. Supported samples

Supported samples were prepared by impregnation of AHM followed by temperature programmed reduction-nitridation. The supports used were commercial powders of DT51D TiO<sub>2</sub> (Tronox), and HSA 5 CeO<sub>2</sub> (Solvay Rhodia). First, the supports were calcined under Ar at 700 °C for 2 h (5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>). Their specific surface areas diminished after calcination: from 91 to 48 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup> for TiO<sub>2</sub> and from 289 to 109 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup> for CeO<sub>2</sub>. The precursors, AHM/TiO<sub>2</sub> and AHM/CeO<sub>2</sub>, were synthesized by aqueous wet impregnation of AHM (1 g in 60 mL of H<sub>2</sub>O; corresponding to 9.8 wt% Mo) on support (5 g) followed by stirring at room temperature for 2 h, water evaporation using rotavapor evaporator and by drying in an oven at 80 °C under N<sub>2</sub> flow overnight. MoO<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub>, and MoO<sub>3</sub>/CeO<sub>2</sub> were obtained by calcination of the precursors under air at 350 °C for 2 h (5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>). About 1.1 g of MoO<sub>3</sub>/support was packed onto a glass frit in a quartz synthesis reactor and placed in a vertical tube furnace. TPN was conducted under 15% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> (GHSV 230 min<sup>-1</sup>). The temperature was increased by applying temperature rate (T<sub>rate</sub> of 5 or 0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>) until reaching the final temperature (T<sub>max</sub> = 500 °C, 600 °C, or 700 °C) and held at T<sub>max</sub> for a specific time (iso = 2 or 24 h). Samples were cooled down to room temperature under nitrogen flow and passivated, as previously. The samples are labeled Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub> (T<sub>rate</sub>-T<sub>max</sub>-iso) and Mo<sub>2</sub>N/CeO<sub>2</sub> (T<sub>rate</sub>-T<sub>max</sub>-iso).

## 2.2. Characterization

A Bruker D8 Advance 25 X-ray diffractometer equipped with a Cu K $\alpha$  radiation source ( $\lambda = 1.54184 \text{ \AA}$ ) was used to record X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns in the range  $2\theta = 5\text{--}100^\circ$  at  $0.04^\circ \text{ s}^{-1}$ . Phase identification was performed using the DiffracSuite Eva software (Bruker) and the JCPDS-ICDD-PDF4+ database. Lattice parameters, mean crystallite sizes ( $d=4/3 * LVol\text{-}IB$ ; with LVol-IB the volume averaged column height) and phases quantification (wt%) were obtained by performing Rietveld refinements using either Topas 5 or FullProf programs. *In situ* XRD analysis on bulk MoO<sub>3</sub>-AHM-350 under 15% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> (5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>) was performed from 25 to 700 °C using a D8-Advance BRUKER X-ray diffractometer with Bragg-Brentano Theta-Theta geometry equipped with an Anton Paar XRK-900 reactor chamber.

Brunauer–Emmett–Teller specific surface areas (S<sub>BET</sub>) were determined by low temperature nitrogen physisorption performed at -196 °C, on a Micromeritics ASAP 2020 apparatus, after a 3 h

pretreatment under vacuum ( $10^{-7}$  bar) at 350 °C. The values are reported with an absolute accuracy of  $\pm 5 \text{ m}^2 \text{ g}^{-1}$ .

Quantification of hydrogen present in the solids was performed using a homemade carbon-hydrogen micro-analyser (CNRS ISA, Villeurbanne, France). Sample weighted from 3 to 5 mg in silver capsules were dropped into a unit combustion hold at 1050 °C in a flow of 50 mL min<sup>-1</sup> of O<sub>2</sub> followed by a second oven filled with copper oxide. Hydrogen was converted into H<sub>2</sub>O quantified using a non-dispersive H<sub>2</sub>O infra-red detector Rosemount NGA 2000. Nitrogen was analyzed using a similar homemade micro-analyzer (CNRS ISA, Villeurbanne, France) according to the Dumas method. Sample weighted in the same silver cup were dropped in the same unit combustion system in a flow of He (40 mL min<sup>-1</sup>) added with O<sub>2</sub> (2 mL min<sup>-1</sup>). The carbon, hydrogen and nitrogen elements were converted into carbon dioxide, water and nitrogen oxides. The later ones were reduced in nitrogen on copper maintained at 450 °C and the excess of oxygen was also trapped. Carbon dioxide and water were retained using an ascarite (sodium hydroxide-coated silica)-magnesium perchlorate trap. Nitrogen was quantified using a Thermo Conductibility Detector. Hydrogen and nitrogen percentages were calculated via linear calibrations prepared with high purity standards. Potassium biphtalate (%H: 2.47, Leco corp), Uracil (%H: 3.60) Phtalic acid (%H: 3.64) Acetanilide (%N: 10.36) O-phospho-DL-serine (%N: 4.56) all Sigma Aldrich and 502-308 (%N: 0.20) and 502-309 (%N: 1.03) both Leco corp. The uncertainty of hydrogen and nitrogen elements are  $\pm 0.10\%$  in the range (0-3%) and  $\pm 0.20\%$  for nitrogen values in the range from 3 to 7%. The stoichiometry  $x$  of Mo<sub>2</sub>N <sub>$x$</sub>  is given with an uncertainty  $\pm 0.02$ .

Carbon contents were determined using Inductar Carbon Sulfur Cube (Elementar GmbH, Langensfeld, Germany) elemental analyzer. About 15 mg of sample weighted in nickel capsules (Lüdiswiss, Flawil, Switzerland) was placed in ceramic crucibles added with W/Sn as accelerators of combustion. Afterward the ceramic crucible was introduced in the induction furnace in a flow of 190 mL min<sup>-1</sup> of O<sub>2</sub>. The carbon contained in the sample was transformed into CO<sub>2</sub> at temperature close to 2000 °C and quantified using a CO<sub>2</sub> non-dispersive infrared detector. Molybdenum carbide Mo<sub>2</sub>C (5.89%) Sigma Aldrich was regularly measured as internal standard in the aim to verify a non-drift of the CS Cube Inductar calibration. Carbon uncertainty was evaluated to  $\pm 0.10\%$ .

The Mo content of the solid was determined by inductively coupled plasma optical emission spectroscopy (ICP-OES) by using an ACTIVA instrument (HORIBA Jobin Yvon). Before analysis, the samples were mineralized in a mixture of H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> + HNO<sub>3</sub> + HF followed by evaporation and soaking in HNO<sub>3</sub>. Mo uncertainty was evaluated to  $\pm 0.10\%$ .

Raman spectra were recorded at room temperature using a LabRam HR (Jobin Yvon–Horiba) spectrometer equipped with a CCD detector cooled at -76 °C. Measurements were carried out at room

temperature under a microscope with a 50x objective that focuses the laser beam on the sample surface and collects the scattered light. The exciting line at 514.53 nm of Ar<sup>+</sup> laser was used with a power limited at 100 microW. It was previously checked that the samples laser heating was negligible with such power. A 300 or 1800 grooves mm<sup>-1</sup> grating was used to disperse light leading to band position accuracy within 4 or 0.5 cm<sup>-1</sup>, respectively.

The thermogravimetric analyses (TGA) were performed on a SETARAM LABSYS instrument in the 25-700 °C temperature range, on 20-40 mg of sample, with a heating rate of 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>, under argon or air flow (50 mL min<sup>-1</sup>). This technique was used to determine the optimal temperature of calcination and reduction, and to verify their thermal stability. Simultaneous thermogravimetric and differential thermal analyses (TG-DTA) of the samples were conducted on a SETARAM SETSYS Evolution 12 thermo-analyzer coupled via a heated (*ca.* 150 °C) capillary with a Pfeiffer OmniStar quadrupole mass spectrometer (MS). For TG-DTA-MS studies, *ca.* 20 mg of samples were heated from room temperature to 750 °C at a constant rate of 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup> under 3% v/v H<sub>2</sub>/Ar (50 mL min<sup>-1</sup>).

In order to reveal morphology of the materials SEM images were obtained using ThermoFisher QUATTRO-S microscope with LVD (low-vacuum detector (SE)) and acceleration voltage of 20 kV. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and scanning TEM–high angle annular dark field (STEM-HAADF) images were obtained using an image-aberration-corrected FEI Titan ETEM G2 instrument operated at 300 kV, equipped with an XMAX SDD EDX detector from Oxford Instruments. Samples were prepared by dispersing the solids in ethanol and then depositing them onto carbon-coated copper grids.

Ultraviolet photoelectron spectroscopy (UPS) analysis was used to determine the electronic structure of the valence band of Mo polymorphs. Prior to measurements, Ag foil was cleaned by several cycles of 2 KeV Ar<sup>+</sup> sputtering at room temperature (RT). An aqueous solution of 4 mmol L<sup>-1</sup> of AHM in water was used as a precursor. It was ultrasonically dispersed and subsequently injected at RT under vacuum conditions using the atomic liquid injection system (ALI). The ALI system was charged with the colloidal solution of AHM. The pressure of the load-lock chamber where ALI is installed has a vacuum > 10<sup>-6</sup> Torr. The coating's quality and homogeneity are assured by tuning the spray injection conditions, such as injection pressure and obturator aperture pulses time. The ALI shutter time (required time for full valve open) was 40 ms, and the pressure reached after each aperture was 3x10<sup>-4</sup> Torr. A pressure of 800 mbar of carrier gas (argon) was applied to inject the AHM into the chamber. Several injections of AHM were carried out on the conducting Ag foil previously cleaned. After each injection, the coating was analyzed by XPS.

UPS/XPS measurements were achieved in a commercial AXIS-ULTRA DLD spectrometer using an Al K $\alpha$  (1486.6 eV) XPS source and a discharge UV lamp delivering photons at 21.2 eV,



corresponding to the He I $\alpha$  line typically used in UPS. Under these conditions, the intrinsic spectral resolution was measured at the Fermi edge of the Ag foil at room temperature, and it was estimated to be 0.15 eV. For comparison, the intrinsic resolution of a lab-based XPS setup using a monochromatized source is more than 0.55 eV. The UPS spectral background was corrected using a mathematical function developed by Li *et al.* [41] for UPS analysis and implemented later by Maheu *et al.* on TiO<sub>2</sub> nanopowders [42].

XPS analysis on Mo polymorphs revealed well-resolved core levels corresponding to Mo 3d, Mo 3p, N 1s, C 1s, and Ag 3d. Mo 3p and Mo 3d core levels were fitted using a combination of Voigt line shapes. For this study, AHM was systematically subjected to oxidative and nitriding treatments using a catalytic reactor cell connected *in situ* to the UPS/XPS analysis chamber under UHV, providing a direct sample transfer without contact with the air. AHM was exposed under 40 mL min<sup>-1</sup> O<sub>2</sub> flow during 2 h at 250 °C and subsequently analyzed by UPS/XPS. The reduction-nitridation process was carried out on AHM previously oxidized (in order to form MoO<sub>3</sub>) under 15% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> flow (40 mL min<sup>-1</sup>) at 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup> up to 700 °C and hold for 3 h.

### 2.3. Computational details

Calculations were performed by applying the density functional theory (DFT) within the generalized gradient approximation (GGA) using the Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof functional (GGA-PBE) [43] as implemented in the Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP) [44,45]. The electron–ion interaction was described by the projector augmented wave (PAW) method [46,47]. The valence electron configurations of Mo, N and O atom were defined as (4s<sup>2</sup> 4p<sup>6</sup> 5s<sup>1</sup> 4d<sup>5</sup>), (2s<sup>2</sup> 2p<sup>3</sup>) and (2s<sup>2</sup> 2p<sup>4</sup>), respectively. All calculations were performed with the plane-wave cutoff energy of 600 eV and a gaussian smearing with a 0.05 eV width. The Brillouin-zone integrations used Monkhorst–Pack grids [48] with a mesh of 12 x 8 x 12 (for MoO<sub>3</sub>), 11 x 11 x 11 (for Mo, and  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N), and 11 x 11 x 5 (for  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N). Bulk geometries were optimized using a 10<sup>-5</sup> eV convergence criterium on the electronic energy and 0.05 eV Å<sup>-1</sup> on the forces exerted on the atoms and the cell vectors (cell volume and shape are both optimized).

Density of states (DOS) were calculated for MoO<sub>3</sub>,  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N, and  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N. Our results agree with previously published works for  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N, and  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N [49,50]. For MoO<sub>3</sub> good agreement is also obtained, but the value of the band gap on our DOS is inferior to experimental value of band gap (around 3 eV), as expected while using a GGA functional.<sup>64,65,74,75</sup> In order to compare spectra obtained by UPS with calculated DOS, cross-section ( $\sigma$ ) weighting for corresponding UPS source (He I=21.2 eV) and Gaussian convolution (FWHM=0.2 eV) were applied to calculated DOS of MoO<sub>3</sub>,  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N, and  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N [51–54]. First, the intensities of O 2p, N 2p, Mo 5s, and Mo 4d partial DOSs are weighted

to the one-electron ionization cross-sections ( $\sigma$ ) of 10.67 Mb, 9.699 Mb, 0.04 Mb, and 26.27 Mb, respectively, as found in tables reported by Yeh and Lindau [54] for 21.2 eV. Then, for each cross-section weighted total DOS, a Gaussian fitting by using FWHM=0.2 eV was performed.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Molybdenum nitride

##### 3.1.1. Effect of synthesis parameters on nitride phase and nitrogen content

**Table 1.** Influence of gas composition, GHSV, heating rate ( $T_{rate}$ ), temperature maximal ( $T_{max}$ ) and cooling gas on Mo nitride structural properties.

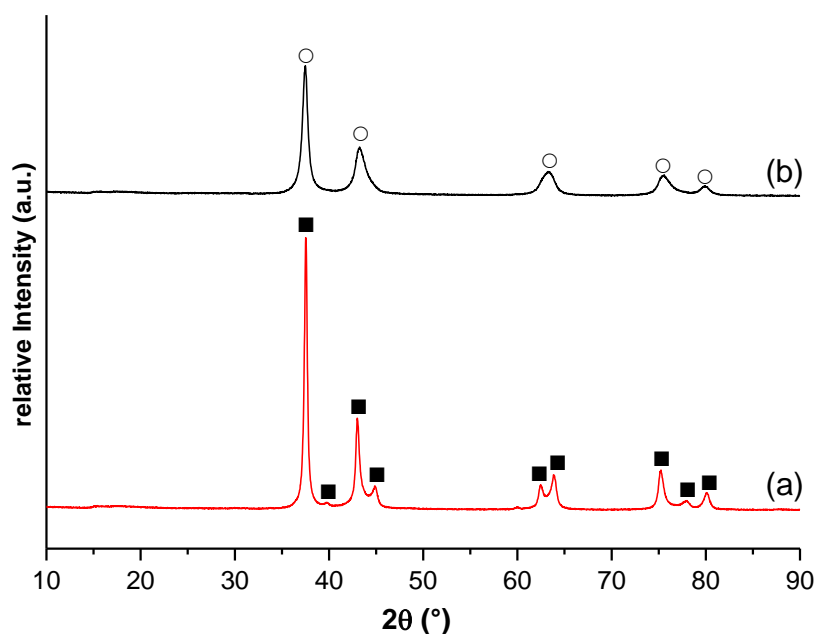
Sample name	$N_2/H_2$ % v/v	GHSV ( $min^{-1}$ )	$T_{rate}$ ( $^{\circ}C\ min^{-1}$ )	$T_{max}$ ( $^{\circ}C$ ) <sup>a</sup>	Cooling gas	Phases obtained (XRD)	$S_{BET}$ ( $m^2\ g^{-1}$ )	$N$ (wt%) <sup>b</sup>	$Mo_2N_x$ (x) <sup>b</sup>
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5	15	230	5	700	N <sub>2</sub>	$\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	16	6.5	0.95
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-0.5	15	230	0.5	700	N <sub>2</sub>	$\gamma$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	41	6.6	0.97
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-0.5-NH <sub>3</sub>	NH <sub>3</sub>	230	0.5	700	N <sub>2</sub>	$\gamma$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	125	9.5	1.44
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-T650	15	230	5	650	N <sub>2</sub>	$\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	17	6.6	0.98
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-0.5-T650	15	230	0.5	650	N <sub>2</sub>	$\gamma$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	55	6.2	0.91
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-Cool-Ar	15	230	5	700	Ar	Mo + $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	16	-	-
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-0.5-Cool-Ar	15	230	0.5	700	Ar	Mo, $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N + $\gamma$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	33	-	-
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-GHSV-109	15	109	5	700	N <sub>2</sub>	$\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	16	6.4	0.92
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-GHSV-87	15	87	5	700	N <sub>2</sub>	$\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	15	6.4	0.92
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-0.5-GHSV-87	15	87	0.5	700	N <sub>2</sub>	$\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N + $\gamma$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	16	-	-
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-85%N <sub>2</sub>	85	230	5	700	N <sub>2</sub>	MoO <sub>3</sub> + Mo + $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	19	-	-
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-0.5-85%N <sub>2</sub>	85	230	0.5	700	N <sub>2</sub>	$\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N + $\gamma$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	22	-	-

<sup>a</sup>  $T_{max}$  is dwelled for 2 h, <sup>b</sup> based on elemental analysis ( $N \pm 0.2\%$ ;  $x \pm 0.02$ ).

First, some of the synthesis parameters of bulk molybdenum nitride were varied in order to elaborate Mo<sub>2</sub>N with different crystallographic phases and nitrogen contents. For this purpose, a range of samples were synthesized by temperature programmed reduction-nitridation (TPN) of solid MoO<sub>3</sub> under a flow of N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> followed by cooling under inert gas and passivation. MoO<sub>3</sub> was obtained by calcination of AHM under air at 350 °C (MoO<sub>3</sub>-AHM-350). This solid exhibit an orthorhombic structure MoO<sub>3</sub> (XRD in Figure A.1b) and a specific surface area ( $S_{BET}$ ) of 15 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>.

During the reduction/nitridation reaction of MoO<sub>3</sub> with N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> gas mixture, the gas composition (15 or 85% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>), the GHSV value (87-230 min<sup>-1</sup>), the heating rate  $T_{rate}$  (5 or 0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>), the final temperature of nitridation ( $T_{max}$  = 650 or 700 °C), and the cooling gas (N<sub>2</sub> or Ar) were varied. Table 1 summarizes the crucial parameters of the syntheses, the crystallographic phases observed by XRD, the

specific surface areas, the nitrogen contents (N wt%) and stoichiometries of the synthesized samples. The XRD diffractograms associated with the samples are presented in Figure 1 and Figure A.2.



**Figure 1.** XRD diffractograms of (a)  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-5}$  corresponding to  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$ , and (b)  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5}$  corresponding to  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$ . XRD peak assignments based on ICDD files: (■)  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  (PDF 01-075-1150) and (○)  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  (PDF 00-025-1366).

The first two samples were synthesized by TPN of  $\text{MoO}_3$  with a flow of 15% v/v  $\text{N}_2/\text{H}_2$  at a GHSV of  $230 \text{ min}^{-1}$  up to  $700 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ . When the heating rate was  $5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ , pure tetragonal  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  was obtained ( $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-5}$ , Table 1, Figure 1) with a mean crystallite size of 20 nm and a specific surface area of  $16 \text{ m}^2 \text{ g}^{-1}$ . Based on the N wt% determined by elemental analysis, stoichiometric formula of this sample is  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}_{0.96}$ . Pure fcc  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  with an average crystallite size of 10 nm and a Mo:N stoichiometry of 2:0.98 was formed using a heating rate of  $0.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$  ( $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5}$ , Table 1, Figure 1). The diffractogram associated with  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  (Figure 1-a) presents a tetragonal structure (space group I41/amd) with 9 main peaks at  $37.7^\circ$  (100%),  $39.9^\circ$  (3%),  $43.0^\circ$  (33%),  $45.1^\circ$  (9%),  $62.5^\circ$  (10%),  $64.0^\circ$  (13%),  $75.3^\circ$  (15%),  $78.0^\circ$  (4%) and  $80.2^\circ$  (7%).  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  presents a distinct diffractogram (Figure 1-b) with 5 main peaks at  $37.4^\circ$  (100%),  $43.4^\circ$  (36%),  $63.1^\circ$  (19%),  $75.7^\circ$  (15%) and  $79.7^\circ$  (8%) consistent with a cubic structure (space group Pm-3m). No additional peaks associated with other Mo phases such as oxides ( $\text{MoO}_3$ ,  $\text{MoO}_2$ ), Mo metal, or oxynitrides, were observed in the two diffractograms. Raman spectrum of  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  and  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  are presented in Figure A.3. Since materials with metallic character are not active for Raman analysis, the flat signals confirm the absence of amorphous oxide phases and full nitridation. It is well accepted that passivation of molybdenum

nitrides with a flow of diluted O<sub>2</sub> (1%) in inert gas results in the formation of one or two chemisorbed oxygen layers [33]. Our results confirmed that the passivation step does not impair the results obtained by XRD and Raman spectroscopy, the analyses of crystallographic structures are therefore reliable. The carbon contents were determined by elemental analysis (< 0.1 wt% for all the samples presented in this manuscript) to exclude any possible contamination.

So, when employing the same gas flow and composition,  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N is formed at high ramp ( $T_{\text{rate}} = 5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ), while a slow ramp ( $T_{\text{rate}} = 0.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ) generates  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N. This result agrees with the recent work of Cárdenas-Lizana *et al.* [13] who reported that heating rate is one of the principal parameters determining formation of  $\beta$ -phase ( $T_{\text{rate}} > 2 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ) or  $\gamma$ -phase ( $T_{\text{rate}} \leq 0.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ). Specific surface area ( $S_{\text{BET}}$ ) of  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N ( $16 \text{ m}^2 \text{ g}^{-1}$ ) is one of the highest reported for this phase ( $2\text{-}17 \text{ m}^2 \text{ g}^{-1}$ ) [13,25,32–34] while the one of  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N ( $41 \text{ m}^2 \text{ g}^{-1}$ ) falls within the range reported in the literature ( $14\text{-}151 \text{ m}^2 \text{ g}^{-1}$ ) [13,30]. It is interesting to note that few studies report the nitrogen contents (or Mo/N experimental bulk ratio) and when they do, a wide range of values have been reported for  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N<sub>x</sub> ( $5.0 \leq \text{N (wt\%)} \leq 6.6$  and  $0.72 \leq x \leq 0.98$ ) [17,25,36]. It is unclear if this represents a true variation in stoichiometry and degree of nitridation depending on the synthesis condition or if it is due to some differences in experimental data, such as the presence of varying quantities of molybdenum metal between key studies [60]. Regarding the cubic  $\gamma$  phase, a nitrogen content around 6% is usually obtained for syntheses with N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> (6.0-6.1%) [17,56] while 9.6% [25] has been reported with NH<sub>3</sub>. Due to the uncertainty of the analyses, Mo<sub>2</sub>N<sub>x</sub> is considered completely nitrided for  $0.95 \leq x \leq 1.00$  and  $6.5 \leq \text{N (wt\%)} \leq 6.8$ . Therefore, we report in this study a method allowing the synthesis of tetragonal and cubic molybdenum nitride with full nitridation. For comparisons, a synthesis was conducted with NH<sub>3</sub> where a nitrogen content of 9.5% was obtained (Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-NH<sub>3</sub>, Table 1, Figure A.2), in agreement with the literature. This excess of nitrogen can be due to NH<sub>x</sub> adsorbed on the surface [57] or N present in grain boundaries [18]. TGA analyses under Ar were conducted on these 3 samples (Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5, Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5, Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-NH<sub>3</sub>). The results (Figure A.4) show that the stability of the nitrogen in these structures follow the order  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N >  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N >  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N-NH<sub>3</sub>. The sample synthesized under NH<sub>3</sub> release nitrogen (ca. 5 wt%) at low temperature (400 °C) which confirms that the excess of nitrogen is weakly adsorbed.

In an attempt to control the nitrogen content without affecting the crystallographic phase, samples Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5-T650 and Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-T650 (Table 1, Figure A.2) were synthesized with a final TPN temperature of 650 °C. For  $T_{\text{rate}} = 5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$  pure and fully nitrided  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N is still obtained. On the other hand, for  $T_{\text{rate}} = 0.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ , the nitridation was not complete and a nitrogen deficit  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N<sub>0,91</sub> was observed. As expected the lower temperature prevents sintering; molybdenum nitride crystallite

sizes are lower ( $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N: 13 vs 20 nm;  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N: 7 vs 10 nm) and surface areas are higher (17 and 55 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>) in comparison with samples synthesized at 700 °C.

In the literature, it was proposed that the choice of the gas for cooling down (He or N<sub>2</sub>) can promote transformation from  $\gamma$  to  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N [57,58]. In order to assess this phenomenon, Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5-Cool-Ar and Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-Cool-Ar were synthesized similarly to Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5 (i.e.  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N) and Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5 (i.e.  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N), but Ar was used instead of N<sub>2</sub> in the cooling step (Table 1, Figure A.2). When cooling with Ar (Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5-Cool-Ar),  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N is formed however some metallic Mo is present. Indeed, desorption of nitrogen takes place under argon at high temperature (0.6 wt% at 700 °C, Figure A.4) during the few hours required for cooling down, as reported elsewhere [57]. It is interesting to note that Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-Cool-Ar consists of 5% Mo + 68%  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N + 27%  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N, which confirms the transformation of  $\gamma$  to  $\beta$ -phase and the higher stability of the latter one. The simultaneous existence of  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ -phase at same temperature prove that formation of  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N by TPN with N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> is a kinetically controlled process [6,34]. From the phase diagram of molybdenum nitride as a function of temperature, pressure and nitrogen concentration,  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N is more stable at higher temperatures, while  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N is more stable at lower temperatures [59]. At atmospheric pressure, the transition occurs in the range ca. 480 to 800 °C, with increasing stoichiometry [6,59]. Also, theoretical calculations of enthalpy of formation ( $\Delta E_f$ ) for the two phases revealed that  $\beta$ -phase is slightly more thermodynamically stable than  $\gamma$  ( $\Delta E_f(\beta) = -1.8836$  eV vs.  $\Delta E_f(\gamma) = -1.8049$  eV) [49].

It was stated that gas hourly space velocity (GHSV) can impact specific surface area of  $\gamma$ -phase [30,60], while it does not seem to influence the textural structure of  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N [13]. In agreement with the literature, a decrease in GHSV for the synthesis of  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N (samples Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5-GHSV87 and Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5-GHSV109, Table 1, Figure A.2) did not impact specific surface area (15-16 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>). It is worth noting that the samples were associated with a lower amount of nitrogen (6.4 wt%) corresponding to the formation of Mo<sub>2</sub>N<sub>0.92</sub>. The synthesis of pure  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N employing a low GHSV is not possible (Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-GHSV87, Table 1, Figure A.2). Indeed, the sample consists of a mixture of 57%  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N + 43%  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N revealing that  $\gamma$ -phase is sensitive to the quantity of reactive gas. High space velocities are known to increase the degree of reduction of MoO<sub>3</sub> [61] and facilitate the removal of water from the solid [30,62], reducing hydrothermal sintering. Therefore, the crystallite size of the intermediates might play a crucial role on the crystallographic phase of the nitride.

The reduction/nitridation of MoO<sub>3</sub> was then done with a flow of 85% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> with a temperature program up to 700 °C (Table 1). No matter which T<sub>rate</sub> was applied we could not obtain unique  $\beta$  or unique  $\gamma$ -phase (Figure A.2). Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5-85%N<sub>2</sub> (T<sub>rate</sub> = 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>) sample consists of 27% MoO<sub>2</sub> + 28% Mo + 45%  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N indicating that these conditions do not provide complete reduction/nitridation process. This result show that when the hydrogen content is too low, molybdenum oxide is not well

reduced and MoO<sub>2</sub> is still present. Indeed, the temperatures of reduction of the oxides increase with a decrease in H<sub>2</sub> partial pressure or flow rate [30,61]. Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-85%N<sub>2</sub> (T<sub>rate</sub>= 0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>) consists of mixture of β and γ-phase. Therefore, the formation of Mo<sub>2</sub>N requires high hydrogen gas space velocity.

Only one study reports the effect of particle size of MoO<sub>3</sub> on the synthesis of γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N [22]. They attributed the increase in surface area of γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N to the easier diffusion of NH<sub>3</sub> in small MoO<sub>3</sub> particles. The influence of MoO<sub>3</sub> particle size was investigated for the first time for β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N. After calcination of AHM under air at 350 °C, MoO<sub>3</sub> was sieved and divided in three batches, 40-63 μm, 63-80 μm and 100-315 μm. The BET surface areas, N contents, crystallite sizes and lattice parameters associated with molybdenum nitride are included in Table 2. While for γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N the MoO<sub>3</sub> particle size does not seem to affect the materials (Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5; Figure A.5 and Table 2), there is a strong effect on β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N (Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5; Figure A.6 and Table 2). Indeed, a decrease in MoO<sub>3</sub> particle size generates a decrease in the lattice *c* (tetragonal structure) in line with the lower nitrogen content.

**Table 2.** Influence of MoO<sub>3</sub> particle size (*d*<sub>MoO3</sub>) on the structural properties of Mo<sub>2</sub>N.

Sample name	<i>T</i> <sub>rate</sub> (°C min <sup>-1</sup> )	<i>d</i> <sub>MoO3</sub> (μm)	<i>S</i> <sub>BET</sub> (m <sup>2</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	<i>N</i> (wt%) <sup>a</sup>	Mo <sub>2</sub> N <sub><i>x</i></sub> ( <i>x</i> ) <sup>a</sup>	<i>d</i> <sub>Mo2Nx</sub> (nm) <sup>b</sup>	<i>a</i> (Å)	<i>c</i> (Å)
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-63μ	5	40-63	19	6.2	0.91	23	4.199 <sup>c</sup>	8.043 <sup>c</sup>
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-80μ	5	63-80	17	6.3	0.93	20	4.199 <sup>c</sup>	8.082 <sup>c</sup>
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-315μ	5	100-315	22	6.7	0.99	21	4.197 <sup>c</sup>	8.092 <sup>c</sup>
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-0.5-63μ	0.5	40-63	40	6.6	0.96	9	4.160 <sup>d</sup>	-
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-0.5-80μ	0.5	63-80	45	6.6	0.98	9	4.163 <sup>d</sup>	-
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-0.5-315μ	0.5	100-315	41	6.6	0.97	9	4.163 <sup>d</sup>	-

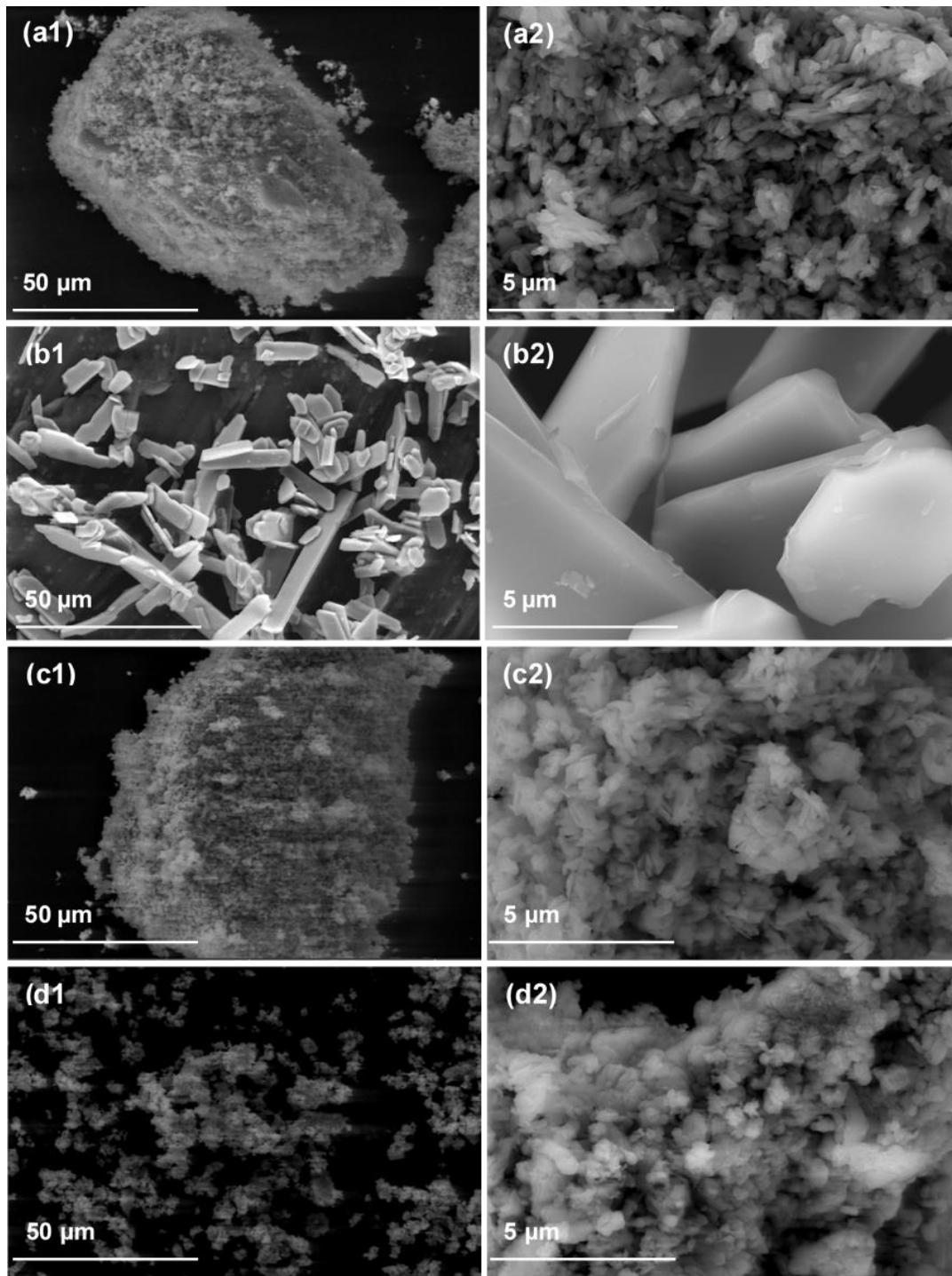
<sup>a</sup> based on elemental analyses

<sup>b</sup> crystallite size based on XRD analyses

<sup>c</sup> cell parameters corresponding to tetragonal I41/amd structure (β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N)

<sup>d</sup> cell parameters corresponding to fcc Pm-3m structure (γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N)

The SEM pictures associated with MoO<sub>3</sub> show agglomerates of small flake-like particles after calcination at 350 °C (Figure 2a) and platelet-like structure at 700 °C (Figure 2b); the later morphology being similar to the ones reported for commercial MoO<sub>3</sub>. Indeed, the morphology of MoO<sub>3</sub> depends primarily on the temperature of calcination of AHM [63]. Tetragonal and cubic molybdenum nitrides were synthesized from these two precursors. In agreement with the literature, β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N consists of non-homogeneous small flake-like particles (Figure 2c and Figure A.7a), whatever the morphology of the precursor [32,34].



**Figure 2.** SEM images of  $\text{MoO}_3$  obtained after calcination of AHM at (a1, a2) 350 °C ( $\text{MoO}_3\text{-AHM-350}$ ) and (b1, b2) 700 °C ( $\text{MoO}_3\text{-AHM-700}$ ); (c1, c2)  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  and (d1, d2)  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  obtained from  $\text{MoO}_3\text{-AHM-350}$ .

In contrary, the morphology of  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  usually correspond to the one of the precursors. Syntheses using commercial  $\text{MoO}_3$  [30,62] generates cubic molybdenum nitride with platelet-like morphology while non-homogeneous small particles are obtained from AHM [64]. As revealed by SEM images,  $\gamma\text{-}$

Mo<sub>2</sub>N exhibit agglomerates of small flake-like particles in both cases (Figure 2d and Figure A.7b), i.e. we did not observe any changes in morphology. However, the precursor affects the degree of nitridation as the nitrogen contents are lower when starting with MoO<sub>3</sub> calcined at 700 °C (Table 3, Figure A.8). The diffusion and incorporation of nitrogen into the structure might be easier in MoO<sub>3</sub>-AHM-350 due to the distinct structural properties. Indeed, the XRD associated with MoO<sub>3</sub>-AHM-350 and MoO<sub>3</sub>-AHM-700 (Figure A.1c) show orthorhombic structure in the Pnma space group. As expected the sample AHM-700 shows better crystallinity than the MoO<sub>3</sub>-AHM-350. The refined crystallite size was found to be 176 ± 50 nm and 34 ± 14 nm, respectively. In addition, the refinement of the crystallite shape shows high anisotropy in agreement with the SEM images.

**Table 3.** Effect of temperature of calcination of MoO<sub>3</sub> on the textural properties of Mo<sub>2</sub>N.

Phase	precursor	N (wt%) <sup>a</sup>	Mo <sub>2</sub> N <sub>x</sub> (x) <sup>a</sup>	a (Å)	c (Å)	d <sub>Mo<sub>2</sub>N<sub>x</sub></sub> (nm) <sup>b</sup>	S <sub>BET</sub> (m <sup>2</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )
β-Mo <sub>2</sub> N	MoO <sub>3</sub> -AHM-350	6.5	0.96	4.199 <sup>c</sup>	8.084 <sup>c</sup>	20	15
β-Mo <sub>2</sub> N	MoO <sub>3</sub> -AHM-700	6.1	0.89	4.198 <sup>c</sup>	8.069 <sup>c</sup>	21	9
γ-Mo <sub>2</sub> N	MoO <sub>3</sub> -AHM-350	6.6	0.98	4.164 <sup>d</sup>	-	10	41
γ-Mo <sub>2</sub> N	MoO <sub>3</sub> -AHM-700	6.1	0.90	4.160 <sup>d</sup>	-	9	52

<sup>a</sup> based on elemental analyses

<sup>b</sup> crystallite size based on XRD analyses

<sup>c</sup> cell parameters corresponding to tetragonal I41/amd structure (β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N)

<sup>d</sup> cell parameters corresponding to fcc Pm-3m structure (γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N)

It is worth to mention that previously reported TPN reactions of MoO<sub>3</sub> with N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> or NH<sub>3</sub> include multiple steps with different temperature rates and gases [25,33,39,65,66]. We propose here a simple synthesis method by TPN of MoO<sub>3</sub> and 15% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> (GHSV = 230 min<sup>-1</sup>) at 700 °C, followed by cooling under nitrogen flow. The choice of the temperature rate (0.5 or 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>) allow the formation of pure and fully nitrided tetragonal β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N or fcc γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N. Moreover, it is possible to tune the degree of nitridation and N vacancies by varying the precursor (the particle size or temperature of calcination), the final temperature or the GHSV.

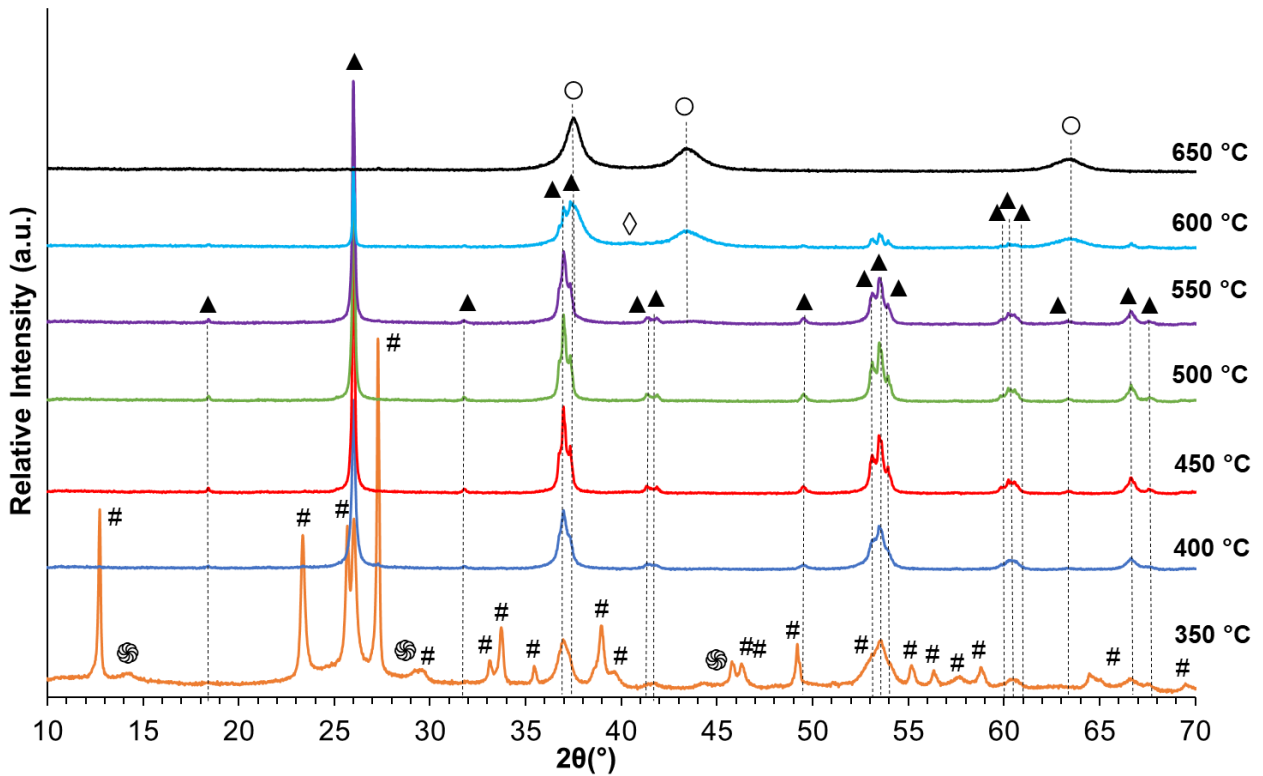
### 3.1.2. Formation mechanisms of γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N

As previously reported in section 3.1.1., γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N can be obtained by TPN of MoO<sub>3</sub>-AHM-350 under 15% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> gas mixture, at 0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup> up to 700 °C, followed by cooling under N<sub>2</sub> and a passivation step. In order to investigate the formation of γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N, other samples were synthesized following the same procedure but reaching the final temperature of 350, 400, 450, 500, 550, 600 and 650 °C. These samples were characterized *ex situ* by XRD (Figure 3), Raman spectroscopy (Figure 4) and elemental analysis (Table 4).



**Table 4.** Characterization of the intermediates during the synthesis of  $\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$ .

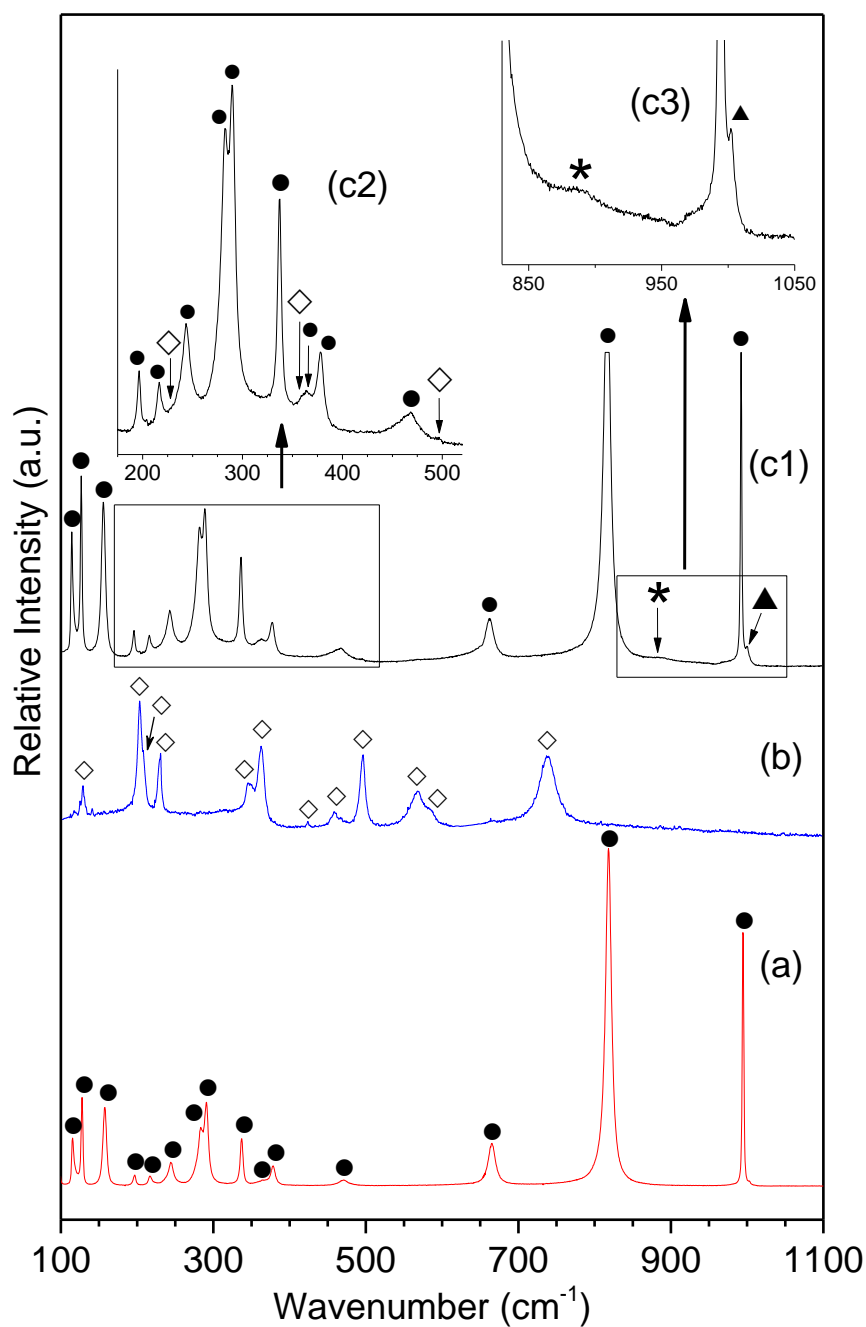
Sample name	$T_{\max}$ (°C)	N (wt%) <sup>a</sup>	H (wt%) <sup>a</sup>	Phases observed by XRD (wt%)	Crystallite size associated with each phase (nm) <sup>b</sup>
	25	< 0.1	< 0.1	$\text{MoO}_3$	$\text{MoO}_3$ (34)
$\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T350}$	350	< 0.1	0.2	62% $\text{MoO}_3$ + 32% $\text{MoO}_2$ + 6% $\text{H}_x\text{MoO}_3$	-
$\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T400}$	400	< 0.1	0.2	$\text{MoO}_2$	$\text{MoO}_2$ (33)
$\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T450}$	450	< 0.1	0.1	$\text{MoO}_2$	$\text{MoO}_2$ (64)
$\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T500}$	500	0.5	0.1	$\text{MoO}_2$	$\text{MoO}_2$ (71)
$\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T550}$	550	1.4	-	86% $\text{MoO}_2$ + 14% $\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$	$\text{MoO}_2$ (72), $\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$ (4)
$\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T600}$	600	4.5	-	20% $\text{MoO}_2$ + 3% Mo + 77% $\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$	$\text{MoO}_2$ (129), Mo (6), $\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$ (6)
$\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T650}$	650	6.2	-	$\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$	$\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$ (7)
$\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T700}$	700	6.6	-	$\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$	$\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$ (10)

<sup>a</sup> based on elemental analyses<sup>b</sup> crystallite size based on XRD analyses**Figure 3.** XRD patterns of  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T350}$  (350 °C),  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T400}$  (400 °C),  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T450}$  (450 °C),  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T500}$  (500 °C),  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T550}$  (550 °C),  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T600}$  (600 °C) and  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T650}$  (650 °C). Peak assignments based on ICDD files: (#)  $\text{MoO}_3$  (PDF 00-035-0609), (▲)  $\text{MoO}_2$  (PDF 00-005-0452), (⊕)  $\text{H}_x\text{MoO}_3$ , (◇) Mo (PDF 42-1120), and (○)  $\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$  (PDF 00-025-1366).

As revealed by XRD (Figure 3) the sample at 350 °C consists of a mixture of MoO<sub>3</sub>, MoO<sub>2</sub> and an additional phase with peaks at 14°, 29° and 44 °. It is interesting to note that the samples Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-T350 and Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-T400 contain some hydrogen (0.2 wt%) contrarily to samples treated at higher temperature (Table 4). As the temperature increases, MoO<sub>3</sub> is converted to MoO<sub>2</sub> which was the only phase identified at 450 °C. The main crystallite size of MoO<sub>2</sub> is consistently increasing with temperature, from 33 to 129 nm. Peaks associated with Mo and  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N are observed at 600 °C. According to XRD analysis, the sample synthesized at 650 °C consists of pure  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N. There is no nitrogen below 450 °C, then the nitrogen content increases with the temperature from 0.5 wt% (500 °C) to 6.6 wt% (700 °C, Table 4). It is worth noting that some nitrogen is already in the structure at 500 °C (Table 4) while the XRD diffractogram indicates the only presence of crystalline MoO<sub>2</sub>. This suggest the presence of an amorphous nitride or oxynitride phase.

Different mechanisms of formation of  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N from MoO<sub>3</sub> using NH<sub>3</sub> have been proposed in the literature. The transformations usually include MoO<sub>2</sub>, Mo and molybdenum oxynitride (MoO<sub>x</sub>N<sub>1-x</sub>) as intermediates. One could think that the additional peaks observed on the XRD diffractogram of Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-T350 are connected with an oxynitride phase. However, these XRD peaks do not correlate with XRD patterns of oxynitrides found in JCPDS-ICDD database (PDF 19-8788 and PDF 19-9978) nor with XRD patterns of oxynitrides presented elsewhere [67,68]. Li *et al.* [31] reported an unknown phase with two peaks at 14° and 29 ° that they associated with an oxynitride phase based on the well-accepted mechanism reported [37,64] when using NH<sub>3</sub>: MoO<sub>3</sub> → MoO<sub>x</sub>N<sub>1-x</sub> →  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N. However, Delporte and co-authors [69], who worked on the synthesis of molybdenum carbide, reported X-ray powder diffraction patterns of MoO<sub>3</sub> after H<sub>2</sub> treatment at 350 °C. They observed diffraction peaks at around 14°, 29°, 38° and 44 ° that they attributed to molybdenum oxyhydride with fcc structure. Finally, one study suggests the presence of hydrogen molybdenum bronze (H<sub>x</sub>MoO<sub>3</sub>) after treatment of MoO<sub>3</sub> with NH<sub>3</sub> at 500 °C, but without evidence [62]. Taking in account that the sample prepared at 350 °C did not contain any nitrogen but 0.2 wt% of hydrogen, the peaks observed at 14, 29 and 44 ° must be related to a molybdenum bronze. To verify this, an additional sample was prepared at 350 °C (0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>) using only H<sub>2</sub> as reductive agent and Ar for cooling (MoO<sub>3</sub>-0.5-T350-H<sub>2</sub>). As presented in Figure A.9b this sample exhibit a similar diffractogram as Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-T350 (Figure A.9a) with the presence of the additional peaks (14, 29 and 44 °) which were attributed to H<sub>x</sub>MoO<sub>3</sub> elsewhere [69]. There are five types of bronzes (H<sub>x</sub>MoO<sub>3</sub>) known and structurally characterized in literature. Neither of these reported structures in the ICSD allowed the indexation of the observed peaks. The qualitative analysis of the collected PXRD data showed a possible indexation of the bronze structure in the Fd-3m space group of the cubic system, in the pyrochlore Cs<sub>x</sub>Mo<sub>2</sub>O<sub>6</sub> structure type [70,71]. The observed

additional peaks were successfully refined in the latter structure type with  $a = 10.632 \text{ \AA}$ ,  $V = 1201.8 \text{ \AA}^3$ .



**Figure 4.** Raman spectra of (a)  $\text{MoO}_3\text{-AHM-350}$  ( $\text{MoO}_3$ ), (b)  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T550}$  ( $\text{MoO}_2$ ) and (c)  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T350}$ ; with attributed bands,  $\text{MoO}_3$  (●),  $\text{MoO}_2$  (◇),  $\text{Mo}_5\text{O}_{14}$  (\*),  $\text{H}_x\text{MoO}_3$  (▲).

Figure 4 shows Raman spectra of  $\text{MoO}_3\text{-AHM-350}$ ,  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T350}$  and  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T550}$ . In Figure 4a, the bands at 116, 128, 158, 197, 217, 244, 283, 291, 338, 364, 378, 471, 666, 819 and  $995 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ , coincide with previously reported data for orthorhombic  $\text{MoO}_3$  [72,73]. Sample  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-0.5-T550}$

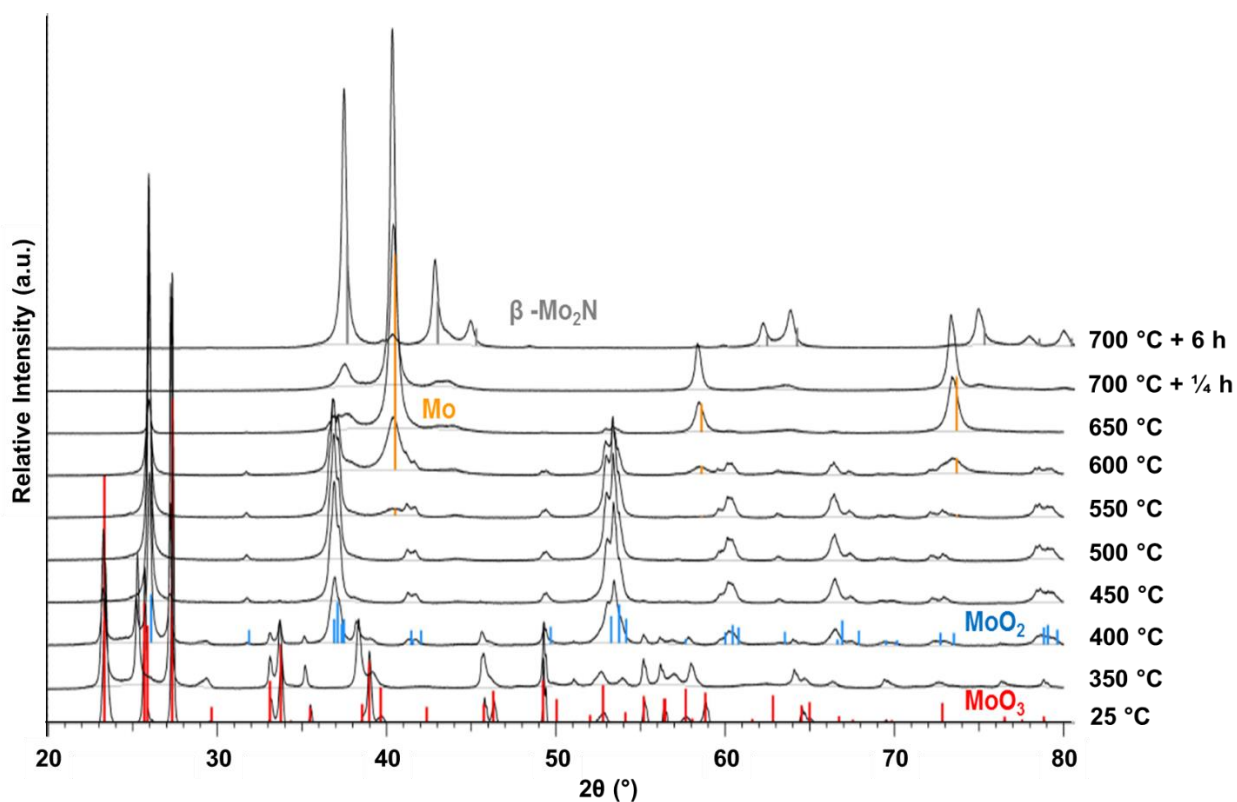
(Figure 4b) presents characteristic Raman shifts of MoO<sub>2</sub> at 127, 201, 206, 229, 344, 361, 423, 457, 496, 567, 582 and 738 cm<sup>-1</sup> [74]. The small amount of Mo and Mo<sub>2</sub>N in Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-T550 (Table 4) do not contribute to the spectrum as there are not active for Raman analysis. Considering the sample Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-T350 (Figure 4c1, 4c2, 4c3), the bands associated mainly with MoO<sub>3</sub> and in small proportion with MoO<sub>2</sub>, were present, and some additional bands were observed at 893 and 1003 cm<sup>-1</sup>. The small band at 893 cm<sup>-1</sup> might be due to a Mo<sub>5</sub>O<sub>14</sub> type oxide [75]. It was reported in the literature [72] that Raman spectrum of type I bronze (H<sub>0,30</sub>MoO<sub>3</sub>) is very similar to that of MoO<sub>3</sub> with some additional bands at 452, 670, 750 and 1011 cm<sup>-1</sup>. This is consistent with our spectrum, as a band at 1003 cm<sup>-1</sup> is clearly visible while the other three bands overlap with bands associated with MoO<sub>3</sub> and MoO<sub>2</sub>. Ou *et al.* [76] also attributed a band at 1005 cm<sup>-1</sup> to molybdenum bronze. Finally, the Raman spectra of MoO<sub>3</sub>-0.5-T350-H<sub>2</sub> (Figure A.10) is similar to the one of Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-T350.

Based on our results, we can propose for the first time a mechanism for the formation of  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N employing a mixture of N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>: MoO<sub>3</sub> → H<sub>x</sub>MoO<sub>3</sub> → MoO<sub>2</sub> → Mo →  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N.

### 3.1.3. Formation mechanisms of $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N

**Table 5.** Characterization by XRD of the intermediates during in-situ synthesis of  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N.

Sample name	$T_{analysis}$ (°C)	Phases observed (wt%)	Crystallite size associated with each phase (nm)
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-25	25	MoO <sub>3</sub>	-
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-350	350	75% MoO <sub>3</sub> + 21% MoO <sub>2</sub> + 4% H <sub>x</sub> MoO <sub>3</sub>	-
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-400	400	41% MoO <sub>3</sub> + 59% MoO <sub>2</sub>	MoO <sub>3</sub> (47), MoO <sub>2</sub> (36)
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-450	450	3% MoO <sub>3</sub> + 97% MoO <sub>2</sub>	MoO <sub>3</sub> (44), MoO <sub>2</sub> (43)
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-500	500	98% MoO <sub>2</sub> + 2% $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	MoO <sub>2</sub> (44), $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N (11)
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-550	550	91% MoO <sub>2</sub> + 6% Mo + 3% $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	MoO <sub>2</sub> (47), Mo (6), $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N (7)
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-600	600	52% MoO <sub>2</sub> + 31% Mo + 17% $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	MoO <sub>2</sub> (57), Mo (9), $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N (4)
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-650	650	9% MoO <sub>2</sub> + 70% Mo + 21% $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	MoO <sub>2</sub> (55), Mo (17), $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N (6)
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-700	700 + ¼ h	75% Mo + 25% $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	Mo (30), $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N (8)
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-700b	700 + 3 h	15% Mo + 85% $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	Mo (20), $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N (19)
Mo <sub>2</sub> N-5-700c	700 + 6 h	4% Mo + 96% $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N	Mo (14), $\beta$ -Mo <sub>2</sub> N (21)



**Figure 5.** *In situ* XRD performed until 700 °C ( $T_{\text{rate}} = 5 \text{ } ^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ) under 15% v/v  $\text{N}_2/\text{H}_2$  ( $35 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ,  $\text{GHSV}=109 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ).

As previously reported in section 3.1.1.,  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  can be obtained when using a temperature ramp of  $5 \text{ } ^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ . This rapid ramp can be used with the heating chamber for XRD allowing to monitor *in situ* the formation mechanism of  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$ . Experiment was conducted under 15% v/v  $\text{N}_2/\text{H}_2$  flow until 700 °C ( $T_{\text{rate}} = 5 \text{ } ^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ) and diffractograms were recorded every 50 °C in the temperature range of 350-700 °C (Table 5, Figure 5). The results indicate that intermediates in the formation mechanism of  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  include  $\text{MoO}_2$  and Mo metallic, as previously reported in the literature [31,33–35]. However, there is still some metallic Mo present at 700 °C, which is converted to  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  with time (only 4% of Mo left after 6 h). It is possible to obtain pure  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  by running the experiment over a longer time (12 h at 700 °C). This is in different from the sample  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N-5-GHSV109}$  (Table 1) where only pure  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  was obtained using an identical GHSV of  $109 \text{ min}^{-1}$ . The main differences between these two syntheses rely on the design of the reactor: in the XRD chamber ca. 0.3 g of powder was placed under a flow ( $35 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ) through a licked bed, i.e. swept on the surface, while in the reduction/nitridation cell ca. 2 g of powder was placed in a flow ( $253 \text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ) through a cross-bed vertical quartz cell. These results show that the configuration of the reactor can affect the formation of the molybdenum nitride due to differences in diffusion of the gases into the material.

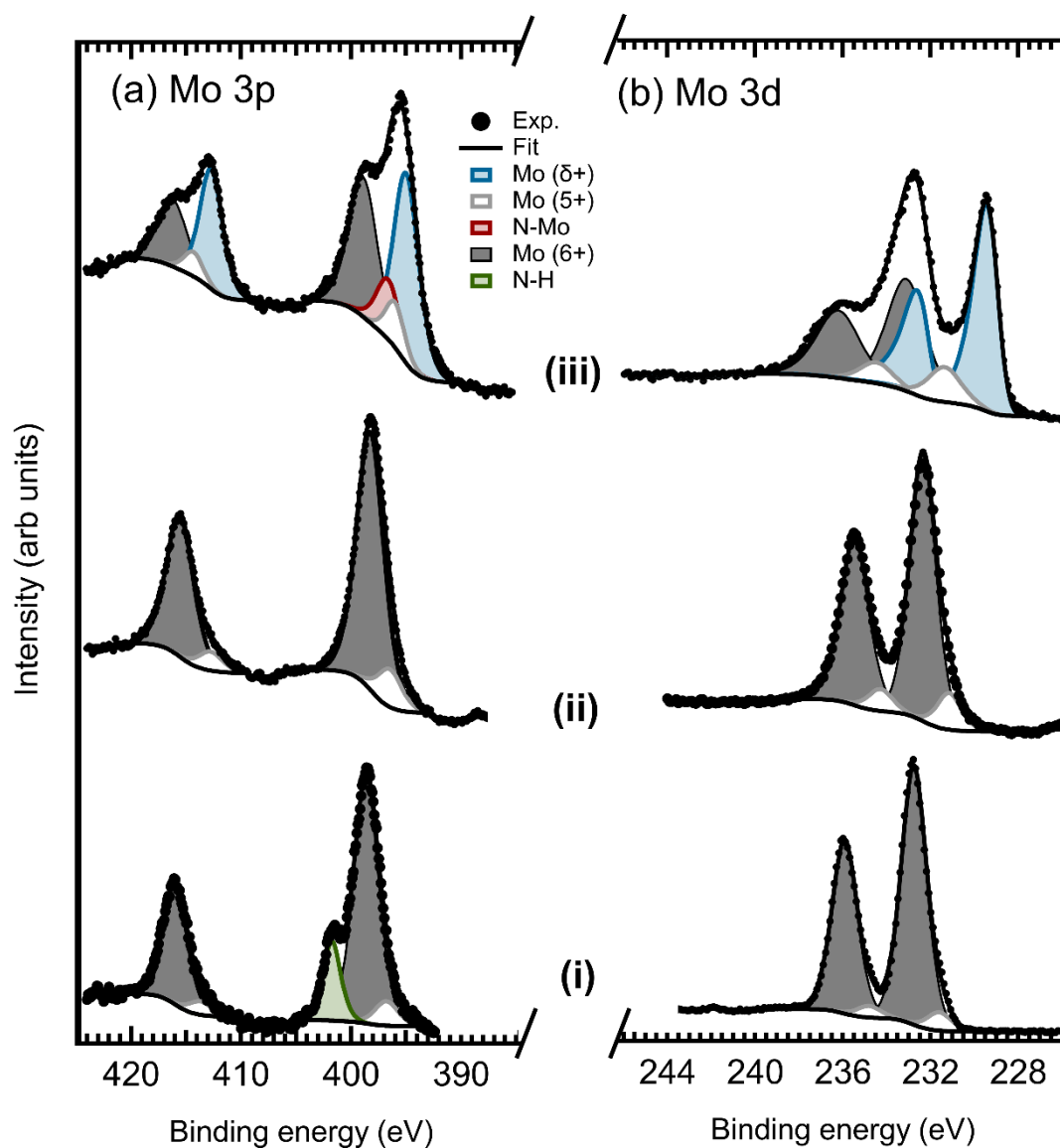
Additionally, at 350 and 400 °C, a broad peak can be observed at around 29°. Despite the quality of the data, the additional peaks could be associated with a new  $H_xMoO_3$  bronze structure crystallizing in the pyrochlore  $CsMo_2O_6$  structure type. To clarify this,  $Mo_2N$ -5-T350 and  $MoO_3$ -5-T350- $H_2$  were synthesized in the reduction/nitridation cell at 350 °C with either a flow of  $N_2/H_2$  or  $H_2$ . Elemental analysis for both samples confirmed the absence of nitrogen and the presence of hydrogen (0.2 wt%). As shown by XRD (Figure A.9) and Raman (Figure A.10) analyses, these two samples are similar to  $Mo_2N$ -0.5-T350 and  $MoO_3$ -0.5-T350- $H_2$  and consist of  $MoO_3$ ,  $MoO_2$  and  $H_xMoO_3$ . The phase quantification (wt%) by the Rietveld method led to the presence of  $MoO_3$  (75%),  $MoO_2$  (21%),  $H_xMoO_3$  (4%). Therefore, we can propose a new mechanism for the formation of  $\beta$ - $Mo_2N$ :  $MoO_3 \rightarrow H_xMoO_3 \rightarrow MoO_2 \rightarrow Mo \rightarrow \beta$ - $Mo_2N$ .

### 3.1.4. Monitoring the nitridation process of $\beta$ - $Mo_2N$ using *in situ* XPS and UPS

Understanding the elementary steps occurring during the synthesis of  $\beta$ - $Mo_2N$  is a fundamental challenge to determine its active phase. While air exposure after passivation does not impact the bulk structure (assessed by Raman spectroscopy and X-Ray diffraction analysis), it has a strong impact on the degree of oxidation of the metal species at the surface. In this context, the identification of the chemical state and electronic structure of  $Mo_2N$  requires an in-depth characterization under *in situ* conditions. For the first time, X-ray/UV Photoelectron Spectroscopy (XPS/UPS) were conducted during each stage of the synthesis, passing through the oxidation of heptamolybdate precursor and its subsequent nitriding phase, all carried out under relevant synthesis conditions.

*In situ* preparation of the sample was carried out using an atomic liquid injection system (ALI) connected to the vacuum XPS/UPS setup. A solution of AHM ( $(NH_4)_6Mo_7O_{24} \cdot 4H_2O$ ) was injected at high pressure under vacuum conditions ( $<10^{-6}$  Torr) on a piece of Ag foil previously prepared. Subsequently, the chemical states at the surface of the coating were followed by XPS (Figure 6), highlighting the presence of Mo 3d, Mo 3p, and N 1s core levels. In particular, N 1s exhibit NH groups [77] at  $\approx 401$  eV corresponding to NH in AHM precursor.  $Mo^{6+}$  state and reminiscent  $Mo^{5+}$  are present in Mo 3p and Mo 3d core levels (Figure 6(i)).  $Mo^{6+}$  and NH chemical states confirmed the injection and growing of AHM onto the Ag support. The presence of  $Mo^{5+}$  is attributable to X-ray photoreduction [78]. Then, the AHM coating was oxidized under  $O_2$  flow during 2 h at 250 °C *in situ* in order to decompose and transform the precursor into  $MoO_3$ . This transformation is confirmed by Mo 3p, N 1s, and Mo 3d core levels (Figure 6(ii)) through the disappearance of NH state. The formation of  $MoO_3$  was confirmed by UPS (Figure 7a), which exhibits a large band mainly constituted by O 2p orbitals center at  $\approx 6.9$  eV with a bandwidth between 6 and 8 eV associated with  $MoO_3$  [79]. This UPS

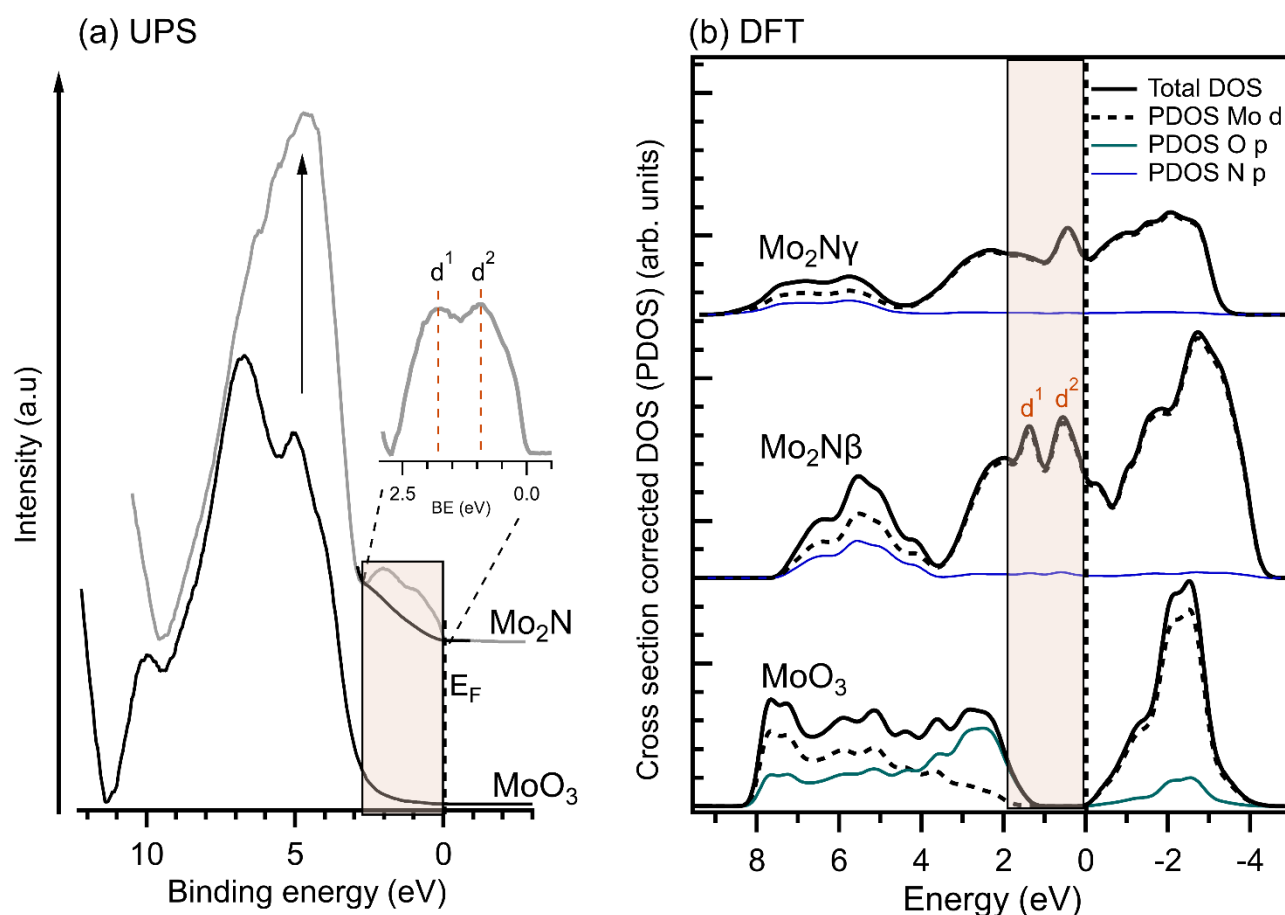
analysis allows to discard the presence of MoO<sub>2</sub> after *in situ* oxidation, as this spectrum does not reveal *intra*-gap states, which are usually located between 0 eV and 2 eV [79].



**Figure 6.** (a) Mo 3p, N 1s and (b) Mo 3d core levels (XPS) of AHM (i) coated on Ag foil, (ii) after *in situ* oxidative treatment and (iii) after TPN under 15% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> flow at 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup> up to 700 °C.

Afterward, the nitridation was carried out under 15% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> flow (40 mL min<sup>-1</sup>) at 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup> up to 700 °C and hold for 3 h. This treatment was executed under *in situ* conditions without exposing the sample to air. Those conditions are analogous to the ones that yielded to β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N (Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5), but they differ in term of reactor and GHSV. In Figure 6(a)-(iii), the Mo 3p core level reveals seven components containing six Mo 3p<sub>3/2</sub> - Mo 3p<sub>1/2</sub> spin-orbit split doubles and one contribution corresponding to the N 1s core level. The fit results of Mo 3d (Figure 6(b)) and Mo 3p (Figure 6(a)) corroborate each other.

The presence of N and Mo $\delta^+$  state confirmed the formation of Mo nitride [38]. Mo ( $3d_{5/2} \delta^+$ ) in Mo 3d core level appears at 229.4 eV; this position should not be confused with 230 eV associated with Mo ( $3d_{5/2} 4^+$ ) and is located higher than Mo ( $3d_{5/2} 0$ ) at 227.8 eV. Therefore, Mo ( $\delta^+$ ) is attributable to an intermediate state between  $0 < \delta < 4$ . The presence of this *quasi*-metallic state is confirmed by the *intra*-gap states visible in the valence band between 0 and 2 eV (Figure 7(a)). Both spectral features highlight a strong metallic character [49].



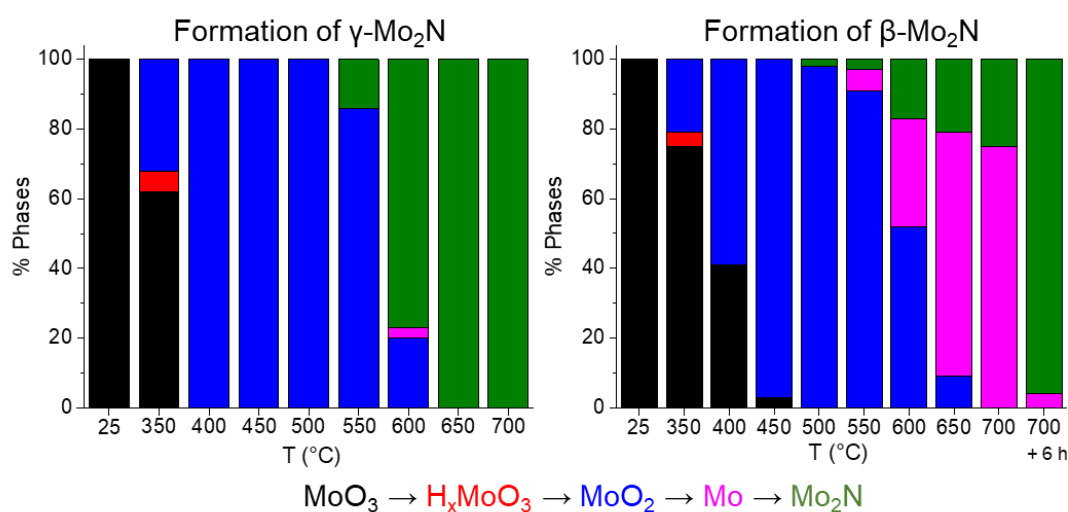
**Figure 7.** (a) Valence band (UPS) of AHM after oxidative treatment (bottom, MoO<sub>3</sub>), and subsequent nitridation/reduction treatment (Top: Mo<sub>2</sub>N). Insert: zoom of the 0 – 2.5eV region with subtraction of the Li background [41], (b) Projected density of states (PDOS) calculated using DFT for MoO<sub>3</sub> (bottom), Mo<sub>2</sub>Nβ (middle) and Mo<sub>2</sub>Nγ (top). All PDOS were normalized by PICS [53].

Although theoretical studies have been used to predict the electronic structure of molybdenum nitrides [49,50,80], none of these were corroborated by an experimental analysis of the valence band by UPS. The UPS spectra were analyzed following an analytical procedure developed to precisely determine quantitative parameters, such as position and relative intensity [42]. Figure 7(a) shows a clear spectral evolution during the nitridation/reduction treatment. First, the O 2p region is substantially modified with a strong component located at 4.6 eV (see arrow-Figure 7(a)), which could be related to N 2p state from DFT calculations. Second, *intra*-gap states appear, with two bands at 0.85



eV ( $d^2$ ) and 1.65 eV ( $d^1$ ) [79]. The projected density of states (PDOS) of  $\text{MoO}_3$ ,  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  and  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  were computed using DFT and then normalized by photo-ionization cross-sections (PICS) (see experimental details) and shown in Figure 7b. Two peaks are clearly visible below the Fermi level of  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  while only one peak appears in the case of  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$ . Furthermore, for  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  the relative splitting energy between the two peaks is 0.84 eV, which coincides with the experimentally observed value. This confirms that here also using a temperature ramp of  $5^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ , the  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  phase is obtained during this *in situ* synthesis.

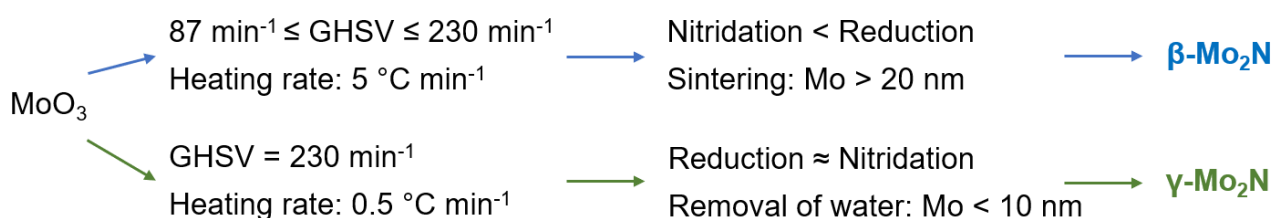
### 3.1.5. Discussion related to the mechanisms: $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$ vs $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$



**Figure 8.** Percentage of the different crystallographic phases in the samples as a function of temperature:  $\text{MoO}_3$  (black),  $\text{H}_x\text{MoO}_3$  (red),  $\text{MoO}_2$  (blue),  $\text{Mo}$  (magenta) and molybdenum nitride (green). Results based on Table 4 ( $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$ :  $T_{\text{rate}} = 0.5^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ,  $\text{GHSV}=230\text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ) and Table 5 ( $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$ :  $T_{\text{rate}} = 5^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ,  $\text{GHSV}=109\text{ mL min}^{-1}$ ).

Surprisingly, the intermediates for the tetragonal and cubic structures are the same and the mechanisms go through the same route. The temperature rate and GHSV are the key parameters affecting the crystallographic phase. The low temperature rate but more importantly the high GHSV necessary for the formation of  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  prevented us to conduct its synthesis *in situ*. Different attempts were made with the XRD chamber employing slow heating rate ( $\leq 1^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ) but GHSV no higher than  $109\text{ h}^{-1}$  could be used. A mixture of  $\beta\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  and  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  was then obtained, in agreement with results obtained in Table 1. During the synthesis of  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  (Figure 8), metallic  $\text{Mo}$  is hardly present as it is quickly transformed to the nitride. Hence, the rate of reduction and nitridation are similar and the phenomena occur simultaneously, in the same range of temperature. The crystallite size of  $\text{Mo}$  and  $\gamma\text{-Mo}_2\text{N}$  remain low ( $< 10\text{ nm}$ , Table 4). In contrary, when higher rate ( $5^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ ) and lower GSHV

are used, the reduction of MoO<sub>2</sub> to Mo occurs first, it is then followed by nitridation to β-phase. The rate of nitridation is slower than the reduction. Therefore, the crystallite sizes of Mo increase with temperature up to 30 nm, before nitridation (Table 5). Formation of water during the reduction causes hydrothermal sintering [30,62]. The slow heating and high GHSV facilitate the removal of water from the solid and prevent sintering of the intermediates while high content of water inhibits the nitridation. Moreover, the larger the particles, the slower the diffusion of N<sub>2</sub> into the Mo structure. It has been reported that the particle size is a crucial parameter on determining molybdenum and tungsten carbides phase [81]. The cubic phases are predominant at small particle sizes while the hexagonal phases are favored at larger sizes. Our results suggest that the same phenomena occur with molybdenum nitride and the crystallite size of Mo plays a crucial role on the final crystallographic phase. Small and large crystallite of Mo favor the formation of γ- and β-phase, respectively. In addition, it seems that crystallites of γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N are stable at small size (5-10 nm) while β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N grows quickly to larger particles (19-21 nm). In order to investigate this theory, additional experiments were conducted. First, Mo metallic was synthesized by heating MoO<sub>3</sub> under H<sub>2</sub> flow to 700 °C, applying different T<sub>rate</sub> (5 and 0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>). In both cases pure Mo was obtained with large crystallite sizes (80 and 119 nm, Table A.1). Then TPN with N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> flow (standard conditions, as for Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5 and Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5) of these two Mo samples was done and, in both cases, only β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N was obtained (Table A.1). This result shows that it is not possible to form γ-phase from large Mo particles. Additionally, large particles inhibit the nitridation as some Mo metal is still present at the end of the syntheses. We can conclude that the formation mechanisms of β and γ-phase include the same intermediates (molybdenum bronze-H<sub>x</sub>MoO<sub>3</sub>, MoO<sub>2</sub> and Mo). The heating rate (T<sub>rate</sub>) and GHSV affect the removal of the water and the diffusion of gases into the structure, and the crystallite sizes, notably of Mo (Scheme 1). These parameters affect the thermodynamic and kinetics of the reduction and nitridation, hence the final crystallographic phase.



**Scheme 1.** Main parameters affecting the final crystallographic phase of molybdenum nitride.

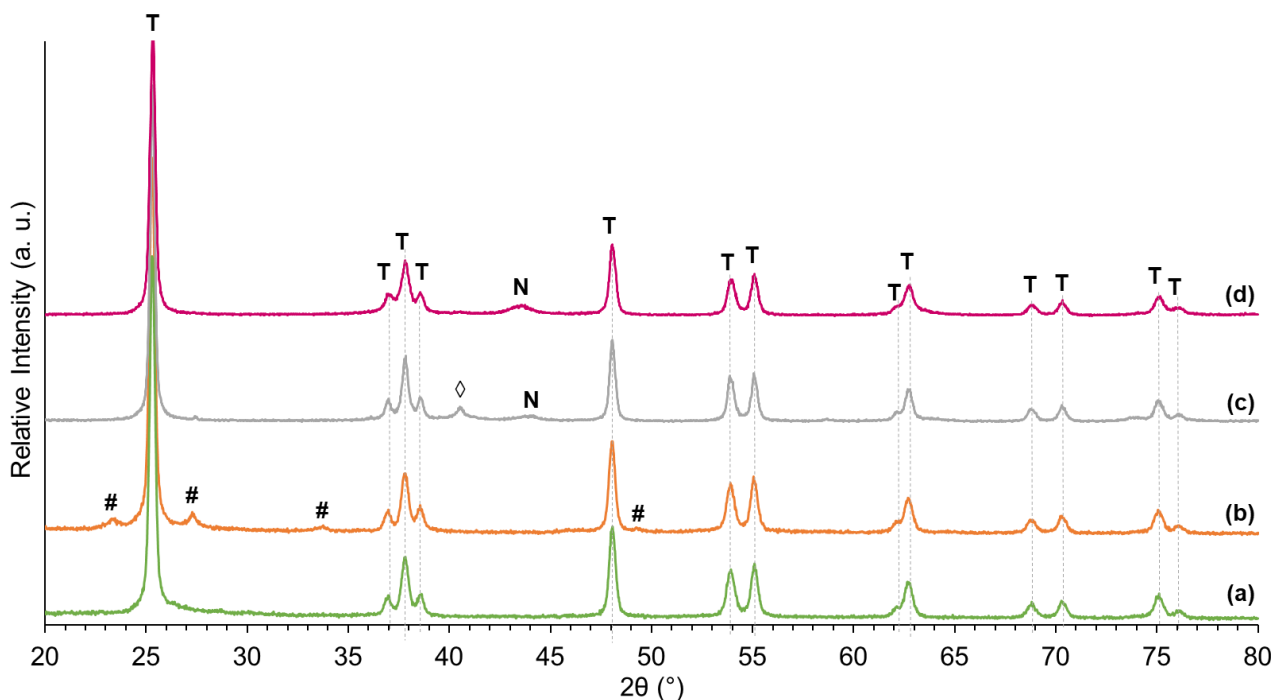
### 3.2. Molybdenum nitride supported on TiO<sub>2</sub> and CeO<sub>2</sub>

Regarding supported molybdenum nitride, there is significantly less information on the effect of the preparation method on their structure. They are usually prepared by standard impregnation of the support with an aqueous solution of Mo precursor, followed by calcination and reduction/nitridation

steps at 700 °C (TPN with NH<sub>3</sub> or N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>). The support can influence the completion of reduction/nitridation process, the nitride dispersion, the crystallographic phase and the nitrogen content [18,19,26,66,82]. A study focused on 12% Mo<sub>2</sub>N-supported on alumina, silica, zirconia and titania synthesized by TPN of MoS<sub>2</sub> with NH<sub>3</sub> [83]. The results showed that the crystallite size of the nitride phase (10-20 nm) depended on the nature support, but it was independent of the surface area of the support as the best dispersion was obtained on ZrO<sub>2</sub>. More recently, another group [82] studied the influence of the supports (Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, TiO<sub>2</sub>, ZrO<sub>2</sub>, silicas and zeolites) on the crystallographic phase obtained by TPN of a complex of ammonium heptamolybdate and hexamethylenetetramine with 20% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>. They observed the formation of β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N on Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, the presence of both β- and γ-phase on TiO<sub>2</sub> and ZrO<sub>2</sub>, while Mo<sub>3</sub>N<sub>2</sub> and Mo<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> were also formed on the more acidic SBA-15 and BEA. Similarly to the bulk material, the source of nitrogen can affect the crystallographic phase where NH<sub>3</sub> and N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> promoted the formation of γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N/SBA-15 and β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N/SBA-15, respectively [18]. Finally, during the synthesis of γ-Mo<sub>2</sub>N/Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> by TPN with NH<sub>3</sub>, it was reported that an increase in temperature rate and in molybdenum content generated an increase in nitride crystallite size [19]. We could not find any methodological study on the synthesis of molybdenum nitride by impregnation of TiO<sub>2</sub> and CeO<sub>2</sub> with an aqueous solution of ammonium molybdate tetrahydrate followed by TPN with N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>.

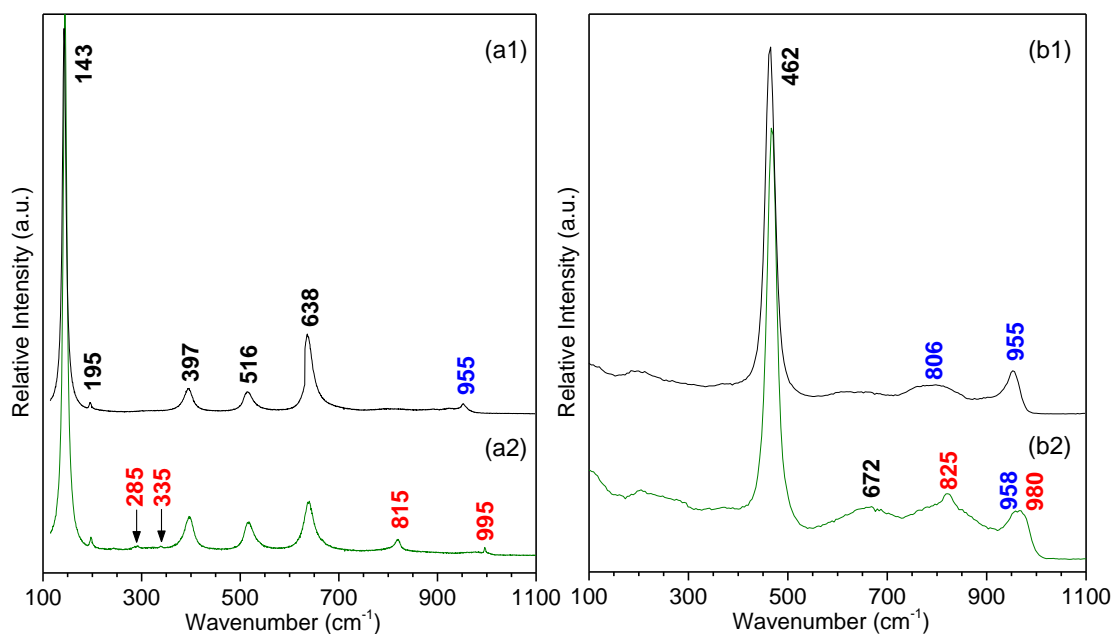
### 3.2.1. Impregnation and calcination

AHM/TiO<sub>2</sub> and AHM/CeO<sub>2</sub> were prepared by wet impregnation of the support with an aqueous solution of AHM (nominal Mo loading: 9.8 wt%). After drying, these materials were calcined in air at 350 °C, and labeled MoO<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> and MoO<sub>3</sub>/CeO<sub>2</sub>. The TGA analyses under air of AHM, AHM/TiO<sub>2</sub> and AHM/CeO<sub>2</sub> are presented in Figure A.11. The successive mass losses during the decomposition of AHM are consistent with the literature [63] and attributed to the weakly bonded and structurally intercalated crystalline water molecules and ammonium ions. The transformation of AHM occurs at lower temperature (below 320 °C) for the supported materials, with a weight loss (ca. 2.6 wt%) consistent with the Mo loading. ICP analyses revealed an exact Mo content of 9.4 wt% on TiO<sub>2</sub>, equivalent to 14 atom<sub>Mo</sub> nm<sup>-2</sup>, which corresponds to roughly 3 monolayers. Nitrides supported on CeO<sub>2</sub> exhibit 6 atom<sub>Mo</sub> nm<sup>-2</sup> (9.0 wt%) which is close to the monolayer.



**Figure 9.** XRD patterns associated with nitride supported on  $\text{TiO}_2$ : (a)  $\text{AHM}/\text{TiO}_2$ , (b)  $\text{MoO}_3/\text{TiO}_2$ , (c)  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}/\text{TiO}_2$  (5-T700-2), (d)  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}/\text{TiO}_2$  (0.5-T700-2). Peak assignments based on ICDD files: (#)  $\text{MoO}_3$  (PDF 00-035-0609), ( $\diamond$ )  $\text{Mo}$  (PDF 42-1120), (**T**)  $\text{TiO}_2$  anatase (PDF 00-021-1272), (**N**)  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$  ( $\beta$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$ : PDF 01-075-1150 and  $\gamma$ - $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$ : PDF 00-025-1366).

The XRD diffractogram (Figure 9) of  $\text{AHM}/\text{TiO}_2$  and  $\text{MoO}_3/\text{TiO}_2$  show the characteristic peaks of  $\text{TiO}_2$  anatase phase. The sample after calcination also presents the main peaks of crystalline orthorhombic  $\text{MoO}_3$ . Raman spectroscopy confirmed the results obtained by XRD for these two samples (Figure 10a). Indeed, Raman spectrum for  $\text{AHM}/\text{TiO}_2$  consists of characteristic  $\text{TiO}_2$  Raman shifts [84] at 143, 195, 397, 516 and  $638\text{ cm}^{-1}$ , and a band at  $955\text{ cm}^{-1}$  associated with AHM [85]. This later band disappear after calcination and new bands at 285, 335, 815 and  $995\text{ cm}^{-1}$  attributed to orthorhombic  $\text{MoO}_3$  appear [72,86]. Considering  $\text{AHM}/\text{CeO}_2$  and  $\text{MoO}_3/\text{CeO}_2$ , we could not detect the presence of crystalline  $\text{MoO}_3$  by XRD (Figure A.12) since Mo surface loading is close to Mo-monolayer ( $6\text{ atom}_{\text{Mo}}\text{ nm}^{-2}$ ). Nevertheless, the presence of Mo species was confirmed by Raman spectroscopy (Figure 10b). Raman spectrum of  $\text{AHM}/\text{CeO}_2$  consists of characteristic dominant bands at around  $462\text{ cm}^{-1}$  typical of  $\text{CeO}_2$  [86,87] and bands associated with amorphous AHM [85]. For  $\text{MoO}_3/\text{CeO}_2$ , we can observe that the bands associated with AHM are still present along with nanocrystalline  $\text{MoO}_3$  ( $825$  and  $980\text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) [88].



**Figure 10.** Raman spectra associated with (a1) AHM/TiO<sub>2</sub>, (a2) MoO<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub>. (b1) AHM/CeO<sub>2</sub> and (b2) MoO<sub>3</sub>/CeO<sub>2</sub>. Bands associated with the supports (black), AHM (blue), MoO<sub>3</sub> (red).

### 3.2.2. Reduction/nitridation

The profiles of the TGA analysis under 3% v/v H<sub>2</sub>/Ar flow coupled to MS analysis of the bulk MoO<sub>3</sub>, TiO<sub>2</sub>, CeO<sub>2</sub>, MoO<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> and MoO<sub>3</sub>/CeO<sub>2</sub> are presented in Figure A.13. The mass spectrum of the evolved gas was recorded and the only signals observed were at  $m/z = 17$  and  $18$ , which correspond to the formation of water caused by reduction. The reduction of MoO<sub>3</sub> starts at 500 °C during the TGA analysis. This temperature is higher than what we observed during the synthesis of bulk nitrides, which is due to a kinetic effect (different apparatuses and GHSV). The reduction profile associated with MoO<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> presents a mean peak around 470 °C which is consistent with the literature, where values in the range of 491 to 558 °C have been reported for MoO<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> depending on Mo loading [89]. The profile associated with CeO<sub>2</sub> does not present any mass loss beside the one around 100 °C which can be ascribed to the moisture desorption. The reduction of bulk CeO<sub>2</sub> typically occur around 830-850 °C [90]. A second peak can be present at lower temperature (500-550 °C) for CeO<sub>2</sub> with high surface area due to the reduction of surface Ce<sup>4+</sup>. The reduction of MoO<sub>3</sub> on CeO<sub>2</sub> occurs over a larger range of temperature than MoO<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> and seems to be the combination of two reduction phenomena (392 and 535 °C). The temperature of reduction depends on the oxide-support interaction which is linked to the structure, morphology and crystallite size of the oxide. It has been reported for MoO<sub>3</sub>/CeO<sub>2</sub> that the first peak is associated with the reduction of surface Ce<sup>4+</sup> or octahedral Mo<sup>6+</sup>, while the peak at higher temperature corresponds to the reduction of crystalline MoO<sub>3</sub> [90].

It is interesting to note that the synthesis of supported nitride is usually conducted at 700 °C. Only one research group studied the impact of the final nitridation temperature during the synthesis of Mo<sub>2</sub>N/Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> by TPN with NH<sub>3</sub>. The results [16] showed that MoO<sub>2</sub> is present at 500 °C,  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N is formed at 700 °C and converted to Mo at 900 °C. However, the thermogravimetric analyses under H<sub>2</sub> showed that the reduction of MoO<sub>3</sub> starts at lower temperatures for supported samples than for the bulk, which might also impact the temperature of nitridation. Therefore, the effect of the final temperature of reduction/nitridation was studied first on TiO<sub>2</sub>, and then on CeO<sub>2</sub>.

The supported molybdenum nitrides were synthesized by first applying the same procedure as for the bulk materials starting with MoO<sub>3</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub>: the temperature was increase at 5 or 0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup> up to 700 °C and hold for 2 h (samples are labeled 5-T700-2 and 0.5-T700-2, respectively). The identification of molybdenum nitrides on the supports by XRD was more challenging since (i) the peaks of nitrides and supports can overlap, (ii) the nitride peak intensities are now lower due to low amount of molybdenum, and (iii) the nitride phases might be well dispersed. The main properties (XRD, S<sub>BET</sub>, N wt%) obtained for Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub> are presented in Table 6 and Table A.2.

**Table 6.** Influence of heating rate ( $T_{rate}$ ), temperature maximal ( $T_{max}$ ) and time of hold (iso) on Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub> structural properties.

Mo <sub>2</sub> N/TiO <sub>2</sub> Synthesis condition <sup>a</sup> : T <sub>rate</sub> -T <sub>max</sub> -iso	Composition and crystallite size (nm) <sup>b</sup>	S <sub>BET</sub> (m <sup>2</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	N (wt%) <sup>c</sup>	Mo <sub>2</sub> N <sub>x</sub> (x) <sup>c</sup>
5-T700-2	Mo (11), Mo <sub>2</sub> N (5)	34	-	-
5-T700-24	Mo (15), Mo <sub>2</sub> N (6)	-	-	-
5-T500-2	Mo <sub>2</sub> N (9)	-	0.14	0.21
5-T500-24	Mo <sub>2</sub> N (5)	49	0.65	0.96
0.5-T700-2	Mo <sub>2</sub> N (5)	27	1.18	1.73
0.5-T500-24	Mo <sub>2</sub> N (6)	46	0.65	0.96

<sup>a</sup> gas composition: 15% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>

<sup>b</sup> composition and crystallite size based on XRD analyses

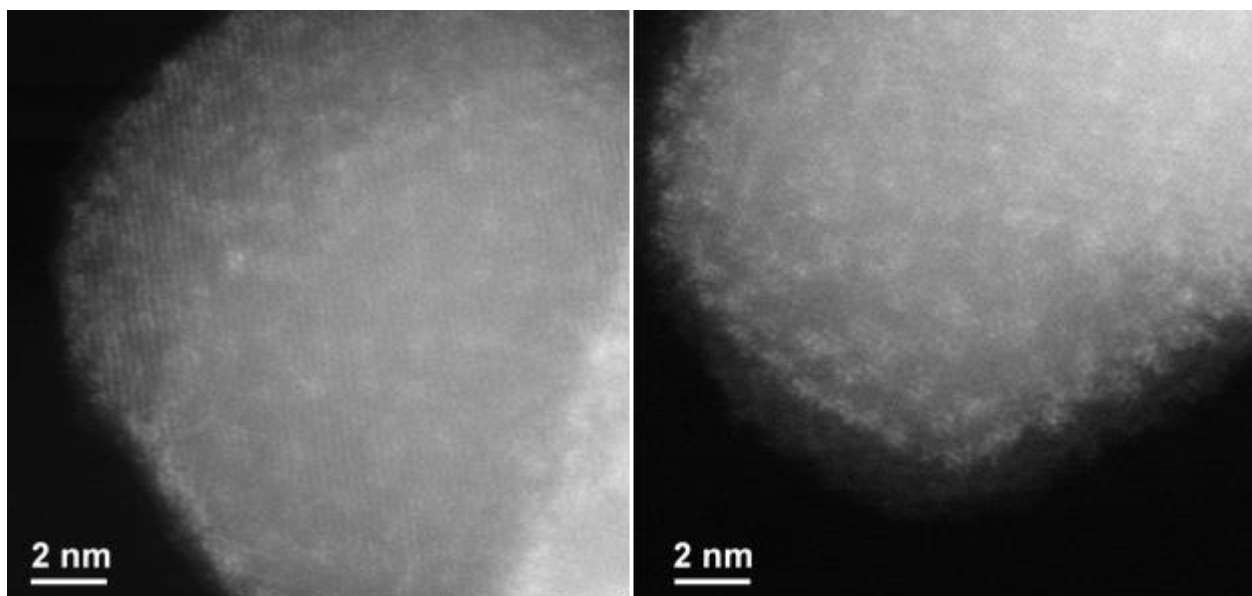
<sup>c</sup> based on elemental analyses

The XRD diffractograms associated with Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub> (5-T700-2) and Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub> (0.5-T700-2) are included in Figure 9. The main peak associated with Mo<sub>2</sub>N phase at ca. 37° is hidden by dominant peaks of TiO<sub>2</sub> between 36° and 39°. Another peak is visible at 44° but it does not allow to determine with certainty the nitride crystallographic phase, even if Rietveld refinement suggest the presence of the tetragonal phase for Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub> (5-T700-2) and the cubic phase for Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub> (0.5-T700-2). These would agree with the results obtained for the bulk nitrides. The co-presence of metallic Mo (main peak at 40.5°) reveals that we did not reach full nitridation when employing a fast heating rate (sample Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub> 5-T700-2). The chemical analysis of Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub> (0.5-T700-2) gave a nitrogen content of 1.18 wt% and Mo content of 9.9 wt%, which corresponds to Mo<sub>2</sub>N<sub>1,73</sub> stoichiometry. (N/Mo ratio much higher than for Mo<sub>2</sub>N). The TiO<sub>2</sub> lattice parameters remain the same before and after reduction/nitridation (Table A.2) and TiN was not observed by XRD. Therefore the excess of N-atoms are adsorbed on the support surface as NH<sub>x</sub> but not incorporated into the structure of the support [18,26,39]. It is worth mentioning that the presence of Mo species prevent the transformation of anatase to rutile which usually occur between 600 °C and 700 °C [91], as previously reported [92]. Despite the calcination of the support at 700 °C under air before impregnation, the reduction/nitridation step generated a slight decrease in specific surface area, from 48 to 27 and 34 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup> (Table 6). To conclude on the reduction/nitridation at 700 °C, for T<sub>rate</sub> = 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup> the nitridation is not complete while in the case of T<sub>rate</sub> = 0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup> complete nitridation was reached but with an excess of N. It is clear that the synthesis parameters could be optimized.

Other syntheses were made by varying the final temperature (500 °C vs 700 °C) and the final isotherm (2 h vs. 24 h). The results are included in Table 6, Table A.2 and Figure A.14. Unfortunately, Mo was still present after holding the final temperature at 700 °C for 24 h (sample 5-T700-24). It is interesting to note that the amount of Mo<sub>2</sub>N increased in detriment to metallic Mo. Moreover, the crystallite size of Mo increased for the sample 5-T700-24 (11 vs. 15 nm). It seems that the growth of Mo particles is a faster process than the nitridation, and could be the reason for incomplete nitridation for these samples synthesized at 700 °C (2 h and 24 h). This is consistent with what was observed during the formation of β-Mo<sub>2</sub>N from Mo (Mo<sub>2</sub>N-5-Mo and Mo<sub>2</sub>N-0.5-Mo; Table A.1) where we could not reach full nitridation due to the growth of Mo particles.

As shown before, the reduction of MoO<sub>3</sub> takes place at lower temperatures for MoO<sub>3</sub> on support than for bulk MoO<sub>3</sub>, therefore different samples were synthesized at 500 °C for 2 h. Despite the absence of Mo on the XRD patterns (Figure A.14), full nitridation was not reached for short isotherm (N = 0.14 wt%; Table 6). By prolonging the isotherm to 24 h, fully nitridated Mo<sub>2</sub>N<sub>0,96</sub> was obtained (sample 5-T500-24; N = 0.65 wt%). Finally, a similar synthesis was conducted with lower temperature rate (sample 0.5-T500-24) and the nitridation was complete (Mo<sub>2</sub>N<sub>0,96</sub>, N = 0.65 wt%). At 500 °C, the

reduction/nitridation step did not affect the specific surface areas of the samples (46-49 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>-1</sup>). Therefore, the presence of TiO<sub>2</sub> allows to lower the temperature of synthesis of Mo<sub>2</sub>N from 700 to 500 °C.



**Figure 11.** Representative STEM-HAADF images of Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub>, sample 0.5-T500-24

The dispersion of the nitride particles on the surface was then assessed by TEM and STEM. For Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub>, sample 5-T500-24 (Figure A.15 and A.16), the pictures present large particles (ca. 8-10 nm). The d-spacing and angles were estimated for some particles. The distances correspond to Mo<sub>2</sub>N ( $d_{(11-1)} = 0.243$  nm and  $d_{(200)} = 0.207$  nm), however it was not possible to distinguish between tetragonal and cubic structures (Table A.3 and Table A.4). The STEM images associated with Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub>, sample 0.5-500°C-24h (Figure 11) present very well dispersed small clusters (< 0.5 nm). The presence of nitrogen was confirmed by EDX for both samples.

To conclude, Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub> was successfully synthesized at 500 °C for 24 h. The heating rate seems to affect the dispersion, where small clusters were observed at 0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the crystallographic phase of Mo<sub>2</sub>N.

**Table 7.** Influence of heating rate ( $T_{rate}$ ), temperature maximal ( $T_{max}$ ) and time of hold on Mo<sub>2</sub>N/CeO<sub>2</sub> structural properties

Mo <sub>2</sub> N/CeO <sub>2</sub> Synthesis condition: $T_{rate}$ - $T_{max}$ -ISO	Composition and crystallite size (nm) <sup>a</sup>	$S_{BET}$ (m <sup>2</sup> g <sup>-1</sup> )	N (wt%) <sup>b</sup>	Mo <sub>2</sub> N <sub>x</sub> (x) <sup>b</sup>
5-T700-2	Mo (14), Mo <sub>2</sub> N (7)	34	-	-
5-T600-24	-	46	0.45	0.66
5-T500-24	-	-	0.24	0.35
0.5-T700-2	Mo <sub>2</sub> N (3)	33	0.63	0.93
0.5-T600-24	-	48	0.37	0.55

<sup>a</sup> composition and crystallite size based on XRD analyses



Finally, the same methodology was applied to MoO<sub>3</sub>/CeO<sub>2</sub>. Figure A.12 shows diffractograms of CeO<sub>2</sub>-supported molybdenum nitrides synthesized at 700 °C. A very small peak at 37.5 ° was observed and associated with the main plan of Mo<sub>2</sub>N for both heating rates (0.5 and 5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>). Other peaks of nitride phase could not be visible since they overlap with those of CeO<sub>2</sub>. The presence of the metallic Mo (peak at 40.5 °) suggests incomplete nitridation when employing fast heating rate (5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>), as in the case of Mo<sub>2</sub>N/TiO<sub>2</sub>. At lower heating rate, the nitrogen content (N = 0.63 wt%, Table 7) corresponds to Mo<sub>2</sub>N<sub>0.93</sub>. Some samples were synthesized at 500 °C and 600 °C, for 24 h (Table 7, Figure A.17). We could not observe any crystalline phase (beside CeO<sub>2</sub>) by XRD, and the nitrogen contents suggest incomplete nitridation (N = 0.24-0.45 wt%).

These results reveal that supported molybdenum nitride can be synthesized at 500 °C on TiO<sub>2</sub>, while 700 °C is required on CeO<sub>2</sub> for full nitridation. Low heating rate (0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>) favor high degree of nitridation and high dispersion.

#### 4. Conclusions

We propose a simple synthesis method of  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N bulk (and supported) materials by TPN of MoO<sub>3</sub> (MoO<sub>3</sub>/support) with 15% v/v N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> at 700 °C. By varying the parameters of synthesis, it is possible to tune the crystallographic phase of the nitride and the amount of nitrogen within the structure. Concentration of N-vacancies in bulk materials can be tuned by varying the GHSV, the final nitridation temperature and MoO<sub>3</sub>-particle size. We have elucidated, for the first time, that formation mechanisms of both,  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ , phases in N<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> systems pass through the same intermediate phases including: molybdenum bronze (H<sub>x</sub>MoO<sub>3</sub>), MoO<sub>2</sub> and Mo. We proved that the determining parameters, temperature rate and GHSV, impact the crystallite size of metallic Mo and the kinetic of the reduction and nitridation. For TiO<sub>2</sub> supported nitrides, pure Mo<sub>2</sub>N phase is obtained at only 500 °C and control of N content can be achieved by adjusting the time of the final isotherm (T<sub>iso</sub> = 2-24 h). Moreover very small clusters (< 0.5 nm) of Mo<sub>2</sub>N are obtained on TiO<sub>2</sub>. In the case of CeO<sub>2</sub> supported molybdenum nitrides complete nitridation is achieved at 700 °C with T<sub>rate</sub> = 0.5 °C min<sup>-1</sup>, while N-deficient materials are synthesized by lowering the T<sub>max</sub>. Molybdenum nitride was synthesized in an XPS apparatus, after atomic liquid injection of the precursor, followed by oxidation and reduction/nitridation. The UPS data, coupled with DFT calculation, confirmed the *in situ* formation of  $\beta$ -Mo<sub>2</sub>N and its metallic character.

#### Author Contributions

Original draft (A. Lilić, N. Perret), writing/review/editing (S. Loridant, C. Michel, L. Cardenas), visualization (A. Lilić, N. Perret, L. Cardenas), conceptualization/supervision (N. Perret, S. Loridant, C. Michel, P. Jame), validation (A. Lilić, E. Bonjour), software (A. Lilić, C. Michel), funding acquisition and resources (N. Perret, S. Loridant, C. Michel, P. Jame), project administration (N. Perret), formal analysis/investigation/methodology (A. Lilić, L. Cardenas, A. Mesbah, E. Bonjour).

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche [project NITAMIN, grant number ANR-17-CE07-0026, 2017]. Scientific services of IRCELYON are greatly acknowledged for their contribution to the research.

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