

# Adsorption and Activation of CO<sub>2</sub> on the Surface of Ni<sub>n</sub> Clusters (n=2 to 6, 8): An Insight from DFT study

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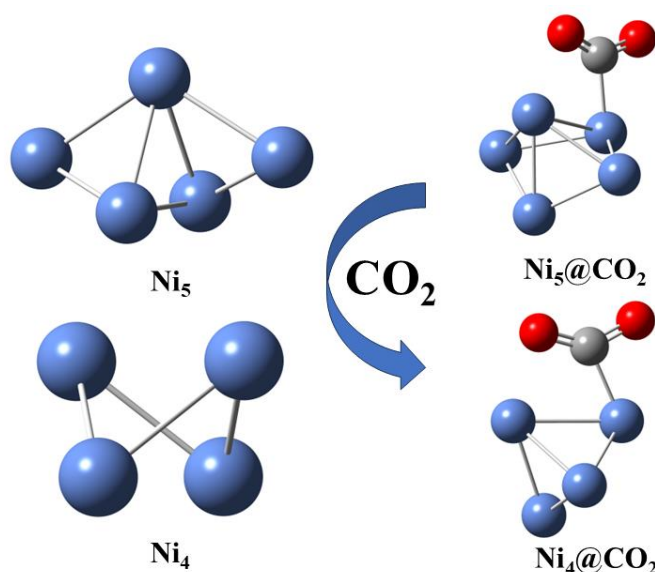
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## Abstract:

Here, we have conducted a thorough investigation of the CO<sub>2</sub> activation process on Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters (n=2 to 6, 8) using density functional theory. The activation processes and CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption energies are significantly influenced by the clusters that are selected. The number of Ni clusters, the HOMO–LUMO gap, and the charge transfer from cluster to CO<sub>2</sub> molecule all affect the CO<sub>2</sub> activation efficiency. According to our findings, the Ni<sub>4</sub> cluster has a high adsorption energy and, by transferring the charge that can be identified by Mulliken charge analysis, it also considerably alters the bond length and bond angle of the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule. Therefore, Ni<sub>4</sub> and Ni<sub>5</sub> in particular may be useful catalysts for the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule's activation.

**Keywords:** DFT, CO<sub>2</sub> activation & reduction, Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters (n=2 to 6, 8).

## Graphical Abstract:



## Introduction:

The rapid increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), primarily resulting from the combustion of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas, as well as large-scale deforestation, has emerged as one of the most critical challenges of our time [1]. This escalation in CO<sub>2</sub> concentration is a principal driver of climate change and environmental instability, thereby demanding urgent mitigation strategies [2]. One of the most promising approaches lies in the capture, storage, and catalytic conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> into value-added fuels and chemicals. Such a strategy not only addresses greenhouse gas accumulation but also establishes CO<sub>2</sub> as a renewable carbon feedstock for the chemical industry [3, 4].

In this regard, adsorption-based technologies have been extensively explored, employing materials such as metal oxides, zeolites, carbon nanotubes (CNTs), and graphene as adsorbent systems [5]. Both experimental and theoretical studies have demonstrated their potential in efficiently binding CO<sub>2</sub>, thereby facilitating subsequent transformation steps. Beyond capture, the catalytic conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> to hydrocarbons is an attractive pathway, with the Sabatier reaction ( $\text{CO}_2 + 4\text{H}_2 \rightarrow \text{CH}_4 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ,  $\Delta H = -252 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$ ) serving as a classical example [6]. This route provides not only a sustainable approach to mitigate greenhouse gases but also a practical solution to the global energy crisis, as methane can be directly used as a fuel or feedstock [7]. A crucial step in this conversion process is the adsorption and activation of CO<sub>2</sub>. However, the chemical inertness and thermodynamic stability of the linear CO<sub>2</sub> molecule make its activation highly challenging, necessitating the design of efficient catalytic systems [8]. Activation typically requires altering the linear geometry of CO<sub>2</sub> into a bent structure, which substantially lowers the activation energy barrier. It is widely accepted that CO<sub>2</sub> activation on transition metal surfaces is structure-sensitive, with distinct surface geometries influencing reactivity to different extents [9].

Over the years, the catalytic activity of CO<sub>2</sub> on transition metals such as Co, Ni, Cu, Pt, Pd, Fe, and CeO<sub>2</sub> has been extensively studied [10-12]. Results consistently highlight that activation is facilitated through elongation of the C–O bond and increased bending of the O–C–O angle, processes driven by significant electron transfer from the metal surface to the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule [13]. Among these, nickel (Ni) has emerged as one of the most effective catalysts, owing to its ability to stabilize a bent CO<sub>2</sub> intermediate, thereby significantly lowering the reaction barrier [14]. Consequently, Ni-based catalysts have been widely adopted as model systems for unraveling the mechanistic pathways of CO<sub>2</sub> activation and reduction. In this regard, transition metal clusters have attracted considerable attention due to their unique size-dependent electronic, structural, and catalytic properties [15]. Among them, nickel (Ni) clusters are of particular interest because of their moderate cost, abundance, and established role in heterogeneous catalysis, especially in CO<sub>2</sub> hydrogenation and reforming reactions [16]. Unlike bulk Ni surfaces, small Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters exhibit distinct geometrical arrangements and discrete energy levels, which often result in enhanced reactivity and tunable catalytic behavior [17].

Density Functional Theory (DFT) has emerged as a powerful computational tool to unravel the adsorption, activation, and conversion mechanisms of CO<sub>2</sub> on metal clusters at the atomic scale [18]. Systematic studies on Ni clusters of varying nuclearity can provide valuable insights into the structure–reactivity relationship, the preferred adsorption geometries, the degree of CO<sub>2</sub> activation, and the underlying electronic factors controlling the process [13].

In this work, we present a comprehensive DFT investigation of CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption and activation on Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters ( $n = 2-6, 8$ ). The chosen cluster sizes represent both small and medium-sized aggregates which exhibits enhanced stability. By analyzing adsorption energies, charge transfer processes, geometrical distortions, and frontier orbital characteristics, this study aims to uncover the role of cluster size in

governing the efficiency of CO<sub>2</sub> activation. The findings provide a fundamental understanding of Ni-based nano-catalysts and may guide the rational design of cluster-supported catalytic systems for CO<sub>2</sub> conversion to value-added products.

## 2. Methodology:

By using PBEPBE functional analysis, the geometry optimisation of Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters (n=2 to 6, 8) and the adsorption of CO<sub>2</sub> molecules on these clusters have been calculated [19]. The Gaussian 09 software suite uses a DFT-based approach [20]. Both metals and non-metals were analysed using the lan2dz basis set [21]. The following formula was used to calculate the adsorption energies (E<sub>ads</sub>) of CO<sub>2</sub>@Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters [22].

$$E_{ads} = E_{CO_2@Ni} - E_{Ni} - E_{CO_2} \dots\dots\dots(1)$$

Where E<sub>CO<sub>2</sub>@Ni</sub> represents the total energy of the CO<sub>2</sub> adsorbed on the Ni<sub>n</sub> and E<sub>Ni</sub>, respectively, and E<sub>CO<sub>2</sub></sub> represents the total energy of the Ni<sub>n</sub> and free CO<sub>2</sub>. HOMO-LUMO and adsorption energy were among the electro-chemical properties that were evaluated using the same theoretical framework. Furthermore, to understand the magnitude of electron transfer from the Ni<sub>n</sub> cluster to CO<sub>2</sub>, Mulliken charge & the dipole moment was determined.

## Result and Discussion:

### 1. Geometry and electronic structure of Ni<sub>n</sub> (n = 2 to 6, 8) bare clusters

In figure 1, we optimized the structure of Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters (n=2 to 6, 8) with the help of PBEPBE functional and lan2dz basis set. Our present work and the previous work are correlated and in table 1, we found that there are similar properties in bond length, bond angle, binding energy and HOMO LUMO band gap [23].

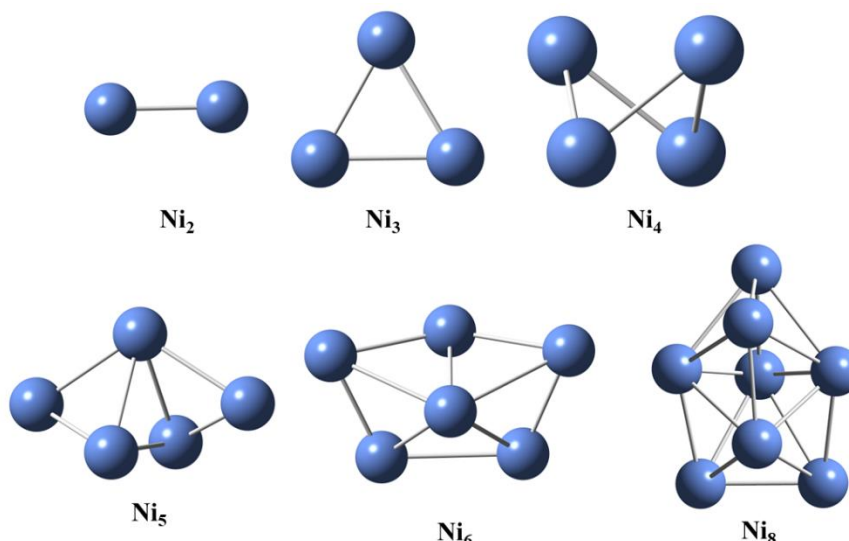
**Table 1:** Electronic properties of Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters

Structure	Ni-Ni bond length (Å°)	Binding energy per atom (eV)	HOMO	LUMO	Band gap (eV)	Dipole Moment (D)	Symmetry
Ni <sub>2</sub>	Ni1-Ni2= 2.06257	-1.500	-0.177	-0.098	- 2.529	0.000	DH
Ni <sub>3</sub>	Ni1-Ni2= 2.217 Ni2-Ni3=2.216 Ni1-Ni3=2.216	-2.108	-0.170	-0.069	- 2.750	0.0004	CS
Ni <sub>4</sub>	Ni1-Ni3=2.249 Ni1-Ni4=2.249 Ni2-Ni4=2.249	-2.268	-0.145	-0.068	- 2.099	0.0002	C1

	Ni2- Ni3=2.490						
Ni <sub>5</sub>	Ni1- Ni2=2.309 Ni1- Ni3=2.252 Ni2- Ni3=2.302 Ni2- Ni4=2.304 Ni2- Ni5=2.310 Ni4- Ni5=2.252	-2.418	-0.162	-0.089	- 1.962	0.442	C1
Ni <sub>6</sub>	Ni1- Ni2=2.308 Ni1- Ni3=2.197 Ni2- Ni5=2.235 Ni2- Ni4=2.306 Ni3- Ni5=2.315	-2.531	-0.170	-0.093	- 2.100	0.438	C1
Ni <sub>8</sub>	Ni1- Ni2=2.397 Ni1- Ni5=2.388 Ni1- Ni3=2.167 Ni1- Ni6=2.410 Ni2- Ni7=2.317 Ni4- Ni5=2.393 Ni5- Ni7=2.408 Ni5- Ni8=2.169 Ni3- Ni6=2.388	-2.761	-0.171	-0.103	- 1.867	0.006	C1

	Ni3- Ni8=2.389						
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The geometrical parameters of nickel clusters (Ni<sub>2</sub> to Ni<sub>8</sub>) reveal interesting size-dependent features. For the dimer Ni<sub>2</sub>, the Ni–Ni bond length is found to be 2.06 Å, which is close to reported experimental values. With the growth of cluster size, the Ni–Ni distances increase slightly, lying in the range of 2.21 Å in Ni<sub>3</sub> to around 2.39–2.41 Å in Ni<sub>8</sub>, showing structural expansion and relaxation effects in larger aggregates. Particularly, Ni<sub>4</sub> and Ni<sub>5</sub> show bond variations from 2.25 Å to 2.49 Å, highlighting distorted geometries in intermediate sizes.



**Figure 1.** Optimized structures of Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters (n=2 to 6, 8) with DFT

Furthermore, to investigate the thermodynamic stability we calculated the binding energy per atom ( $\Delta E_b$ ) by using Equation (2).

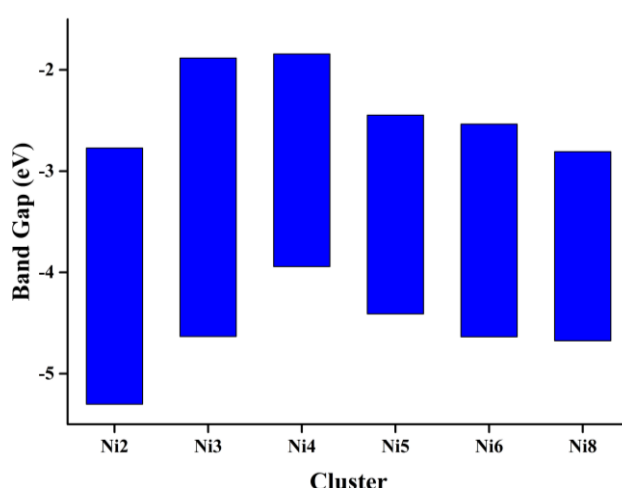
$$\Delta E_b = \frac{[E_{(Ni_n)} - n E_{Ni}]}{n} \dots \dots \dots (2)$$

where, n is the number of Ni atoms;  $E_{(Ni_n)}$  is the total energy of Ni clusters and  $E_{Ni}$  is the energy of an isolated Ni atom, respectively [24]. The negative binding energy estimates show that the Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters are thermally stable. The binding energy per atom increases steadily with cluster size, reflecting enhanced stability. Ni<sub>2</sub> has the least stable configuration with a binding energy of –1.500 eV, while stability improves significantly for larger clusters, reaching –2.761 eV for Ni<sub>8</sub>. This trend suggests that nickel clusters become thermodynamically more stable as the nuclearity increases, in line with the general trend observed for transition metal clusters.

In figure 2, the energies of the highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) and lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO) indicate the electronic properties of the clusters. Ni<sub>2</sub> shows a HOMO energy

of  $-0.177$  eV and a LUMO energy of  $-0.098$  eV. As cluster size increases, the LUMO shifts gradually, while HOMO values remain in a narrow energy window. These changes reflect the redistribution of electronic density with increasing cluster size. The HOMO–LUMO gap exhibits notable variations across the clusters. For  $\text{Ni}_2$ , the gap is  $-2.529$  eV, which slightly increases to  $-2.750$  eV in  $\text{Ni}_3$ , indicating greater electronic stability. However, from  $\text{Ni}_4$  onwards, the band gap decreases, reaching as low as  $-1.867$  eV in  $\text{Ni}_8$ . This reduction points to increasing metallic character and improved electronic conductivity with higher cluster sizes, which is crucial for catalytic applications.

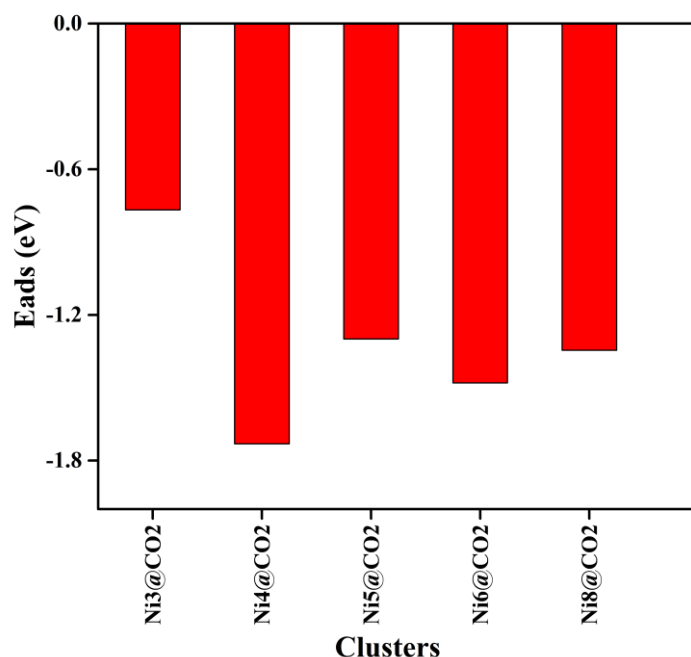
The dipole moment provides further insight into the polarity and charge distribution of the clusters.  $\text{Ni}_2$  and  $\text{Ni}_3$ , with higher symmetry (DH and CS), show negligible dipole values ( $\sim 0.000$  D). In contrast, distorted geometries such as  $\text{Ni}_5$  and  $\text{Ni}_6$  exhibit significant dipole moments around  $0.44$  D, signifying asymmetric charge distributions. Interestingly,  $\text{Ni}_8$  returns to near-zero dipole values, consistent with its more compact and stable structure. Cluster symmetry evolves as the size increases.  $\text{Ni}_2$  shows DH symmetry, while  $\text{Ni}_3$  exhibits CS symmetry, both representing relatively ordered structures. From  $\text{Ni}_4$  onwards, clusters primarily adopt  $\text{C}_1$  symmetry, which is associated with distortions and asymmetry, reflecting the structural flexibility required to minimize overall energy. This reduction in symmetry often correlates with increased reactivity.



**Figure 2.** Band gap and HOMO LUMO levels of the  $\text{Ni}_n$  clusters

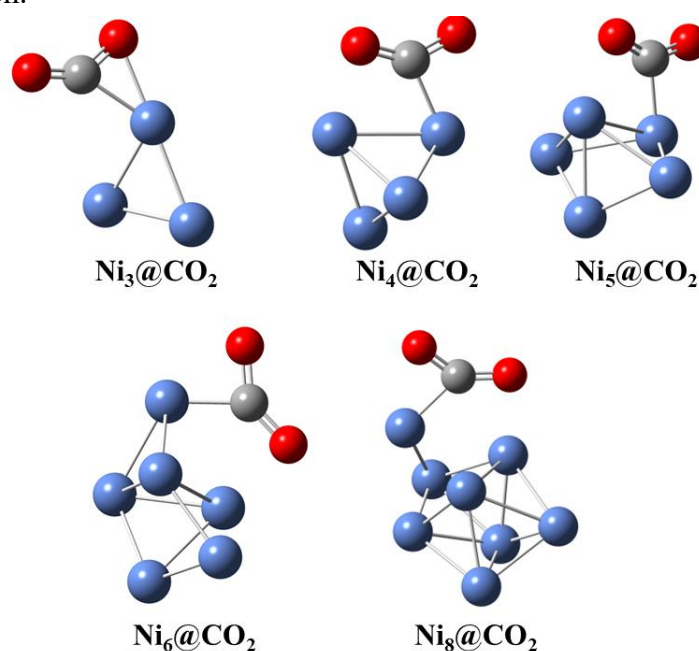
### 3.2. Adsorption and Activation of $\text{CO}_2$ on $\text{Ni}_n$ Clusters ( $n=2$ to $6, 8$ ):

Our main objective is to examine the adsorption and activation of  $\text{CO}_2$  molecules on various sized Ni clusters following the optimisation of  $\text{Ni}_n$  clusters ( $n=2$  to  $6, 8$ ). In order to do this, we consider the lowest energy structure of bare Ni clusters (as illustrated in Figure 1). The adsorption energy ( $E_{\text{ads}}$ ), which measures the interaction between the  $\text{CO}_2$  molecule and the clusters, is found using equation 1. With the exception of  $\text{Ni}_2$ , all systems are deemed acceptable for  $\text{CO}_2$  adsorption based on the negative adsorption energy. Figure 3 depicts the adsorption energy diagram. Remarkably, the majority of the Ni clusters exhibited  $\text{CO}_2$  activation, as seen in figure 4.  $\text{Ni}_4$  has the highest  $E_{\text{ads}}$ , whereas  $\text{Ni}_3$  has the lowest.



**Figure 3.** Variation of adsorption energy ( $E_{ads}$ ) of CO<sub>2</sub> on Ni<sub>n</sub> Clusters (n=2 to 6, 8)

The optimized lowest energy structures of Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters (n = 2–6, 8) interacting with CO<sub>2</sub> molecules, obtained using the PBE/PBE functional, are presented in Figure 4. It can be clearly observed that the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule preferentially adsorbs at the triangular face of these nickel clusters. This adsorption geometry remains consistent across the different cluster sizes studied. The interaction results in the formation of Ni–C bonds, which serve as key indicators of CO<sub>2</sub> activation. Interestingly, the bond lengths of Ni–C vary depending on the cluster size and geometry, reflecting the size-dependent reactivity of the clusters. Thus, the adsorption pattern highlights the unique structural and electronic features of small Ni clusters in promoting CO<sub>2</sub> activation.



**Figure 4.** Optimized structures of CO<sub>2</sub>@Ti<sub>n</sub> clusters

Further analysis of Table 2 revealed that all the clusters are able to adsorb and activate the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule strongly with the very large change or elongation of the C-O bond lengths ( $d_{C-O}$ ) in comparison to the corresponding length in a free CO<sub>2</sub> molecule. There is an increase of around 0.08 Å in the C-O bond length for most of the clusters as compared to that of bare CO<sub>2</sub> (1.16 Å). The maximum elongation of C-O bond length of 0.17 Å is observed when the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule gets adsorbed on Ni<sub>8</sub>@CO<sub>2</sub> cluster. During this activation process of CO<sub>2</sub> on the Ni clusters, there is a formation of Ni-C bond with the average bond length of 1.8 Å.

A detailed examination of Table 2 clearly demonstrates that all the investigated nickel clusters exhibit a strong ability to adsorb and activate the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule. This activation is evident from the significant elongation of the C-O bond lengths ( $d_{C-O}$ ) compared to the corresponding values in free CO<sub>2</sub>. In its isolated state, the C-O bond length of CO<sub>2</sub> is about 1.16 Å, serving as the reference for comparison. Upon adsorption onto the Ni clusters, the C-O bonds undergo noticeable changes, confirming the weakening of the intramolecular bonds and the onset of activation. For most of the clusters studied, an elongation of approximately 0.08 Å in the C-O bond length is observed relative to free CO<sub>2</sub>. This elongation highlights the influence of the Ni surface in destabilizing the linear CO<sub>2</sub> structure. The effect becomes even more pronounced for larger clusters, particularly the Ni<sub>8</sub>@CO<sub>2</sub> complex, where the maximum C-O bond elongation of 0.17 Å is recorded. Such a considerable bond extension indicates a stronger interaction between CO<sub>2</sub> and the Ni cluster surface, thereby facilitating the activation process. Alongside this elongation, the adsorption process also induces the formation of a Ni-C bond, further stabilizing the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule on the cluster. The average bond length of this newly formed Ni-C interaction is calculated to be around 1.8 Å. This dual feature of C-O bond elongation and Ni-C bond formation strongly supports the conclusion that nickel clusters can efficiently promote CO<sub>2</sub> activation. Thus, the structural changes observed provide direct evidence of the potential of Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters as effective nanocatalysts for CO<sub>2</sub> activation.

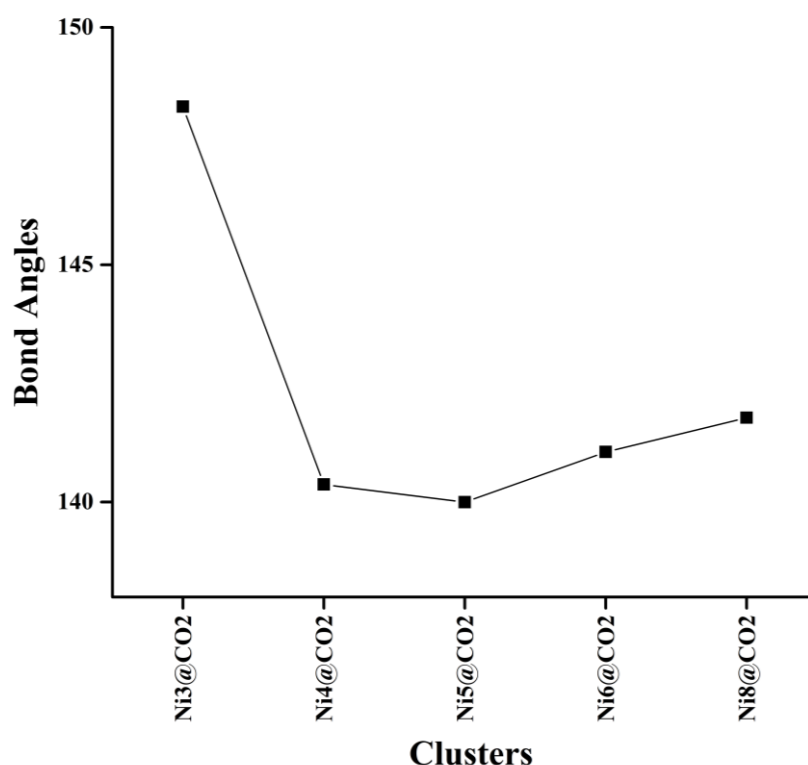
**Table 2:** Calculation of C-O and Ni-C Bond length of CO<sub>2</sub> on Ni<sub>n</sub> Clusters (n=2 to 6, 8) clusters

Cluster Systems	C-O Bond length (Å) in CO <sub>2</sub>	Ni-C Bond length (Å) in CO <sub>2</sub> @Ni <sub>n</sub>
Ni <sub>3</sub> @CO <sub>2</sub>	1.242	1.880
Ni <sub>4</sub> @CO <sub>2</sub>	1.232	1.779
Ni <sub>5</sub> @CO <sub>2</sub>	1.250	1.790
Ni <sub>6</sub> @CO <sub>2</sub>	1.235	1.780
Ni <sub>8</sub> @CO <sub>2</sub>	1.337	1.792

A crucial observation from the structural analysis is the variation in the O-C-O bond angles of CO<sub>2</sub> upon adsorption onto the Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters, as depicted in Figure 5. In its free state, the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule possesses a linear geometry with a bond angle of 180°. However, once chemisorbed on the nickel clusters, this angle undergoes a substantial reduction, falling within the range of 148° to 139°. Such a distortion corresponds to a decrease of approximately 32° to 41° relative to the bare CO<sub>2</sub> molecule.

This pronounced bending of the O-C-O angle provides direct evidence of strong interaction between CO<sub>2</sub> and the cluster surface, highlighting the ability of Ni clusters to activate the otherwise stable and inert CO<sub>2</sub> molecule. The deviation from linearity is a well-established indicator of activation, as it reflects the weakening of  $\pi$  bonds within the CO<sub>2</sub> framework and enhanced charge transfer from the metal cluster to the antibonding orbitals of CO<sub>2</sub>.

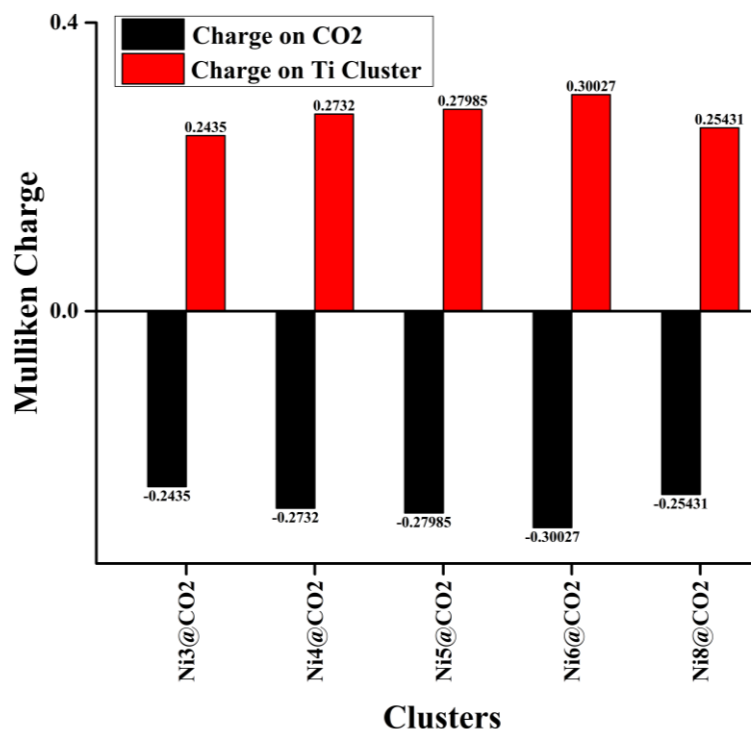
Notably, the most significant changes in bond angle are observed in the  $\text{Ni}_4$  and  $\text{Ni}_5$  clusters, suggesting that medium-sized clusters are particularly effective in facilitating the activation process. These findings, in conjunction with the elongation of the C–O bonds and formation of Ni–C bonds, conclusively demonstrate that  $\text{Ni}_n$  clusters serve as efficient nanostructured platforms for  $\text{CO}_2$  adsorption and activation.



**Figure 5.** Change of the bond angle of  $\text{CO}_2$  on  $\text{CO}_2@ \text{Ni}_n$  Clusters ( $n=2$  to 6, 8)

### 3.3. Mulliken charge analysis of the $\text{CO}_2$ activated clusters:

It is well established that the activation of  $\text{CO}_2$  is strongly facilitated by the transfer of electronic charge from the transition metal surface to the lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO) of the  $\text{CO}_2$  molecule [25]. Such charge transfer weakens the C–O bonds and bends the linear geometry, thereby enhancing reactivity. In this context, we carried out a systematic investigation of the charge transfer between the selected  $\text{Ni}_n$  clusters and the adsorbed  $\text{CO}_2$  molecule to elucidate the underlying mechanism of activation. To quantify this effect, Mulliken charge analysis was performed on each cluster– $\text{CO}_2$  complex. The results, presented in Figure 6, clearly indicate that the net negative charge accumulated on the chemisorbed  $\text{CO}_2$  molecule lies in the range of  $-0.2435e$  to  $-0.30027e$ . Among the studied systems, the  $\text{Ni}_6@ \text{CO}_2$  complex exhibits the largest degree of charge transfer, with a net charge of  $-0.30027e$  on  $\text{CO}_2$ . This finding is consistent with the significant elongation of the C–O bond observed in  $\text{Ni}_6@ \text{CO}_2$  relative to free  $\text{CO}_2$ , highlighting the strong correlation between charge transfer and bond activation. Furthermore, a general trend is observed across the cluster series: as the net negative charge on the chemisorbed  $\text{CO}_2$  molecule increases, the C–O bonds undergo greater elongation. This direct relationship reinforces the conclusion that charge donation from the Ni clusters into the antibonding orbitals of  $\text{CO}_2$  is the primary driving force behind its activation.



**Figure 6.** Mulliken charge on CO<sub>2</sub> and Ni clusters of Ni<sub>n</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub>@Ni<sub>n</sub> Clusters (n=2 to 6, 8) clusters

#### 4. Conclusion

In the present study, we have carried out a comprehensive investigation of CO<sub>2</sub> adsorption and activation on Ni<sub>n</sub> clusters (n = 2–6, 8) with the ultimate objective of understanding their potential in the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> to value-added fuels such as methane. The interaction of CO<sub>2</sub> with these clusters plays a crucial role in modulating their electronic structures, which in turn governs the adsorption energies and activation mechanisms. Our findings reveal that the efficiency of CO<sub>2</sub> activation is highly dependent on the cluster size, the electronic band gap, and the extent of charge transfer from the metal cluster to the CO<sub>2</sub> molecule. Notably, the Ni<sub>3</sub> cluster displays relatively low adsorption energy, indicating weaker CO<sub>2</sub> binding, whereas the Ni<sub>4</sub> cluster demonstrates significantly higher adsorption energy, accompanied by substantial charge transfer to CO<sub>2</sub>. This enhanced charge transfer not only strengthens the interaction but also results in remarkable modifications in the C–O bond lengths and the O–C–O bond angle of the chemisorbed CO<sub>2</sub> molecule. Among the examined systems, the Ni<sub>4</sub> cluster stands out as the most effective, as it induces pronounced structural distortions in CO<sub>2</sub>, thereby facilitating a high degree of activation. These results clearly demonstrate that the Ni<sub>4</sub> cluster plays a pivotal role in enhancing CO<sub>2</sub> reactivity through efficient charge donation, establishing it as a promising candidate for catalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction.

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#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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#### Author Contributions Statement:

Maksuda Khatuna: Computational Work, Drafting of manuscript, Original Research.

Tanusree Ray: Drafting of manuscript, Original Research.

Debadrita Roy:

Nitish Roy: Supervision, Drafting, Original Research.

Mahendra Nath Roy: Drafting of manuscript, Original Research, Supervision.

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