

Light Absorption Enhancement in Next-Generation Photovoltaic Cells via Plasmonic Ag Nanospheres and Au Nanorods

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of plasmonic nanostructures—specifically silver (Ag) nanospheres and gold (Au) nanorods—on the optical absorption and photovoltaic efficiency of solar cells. The plasmonic effects were characterized using UV-Vis-NIR spectroscopy, current-voltage (I-V) measurements, and finite-difference time-domain (FDTD) simulations. The results revealed a substantial enhancement in absorption efficiency, especially within the visible spectrum, owing to localized surface plasmon resonance (LSPR). Ag nanospheres exhibited a sharp absorption peak at 420 nm, increasing light absorption by 35%, while Au nanorods with an aspect ratio of 3 extended the absorption range to 800 nm, achieving an enhancement of up to 45%. The plasmonic-assisted devices demonstrated marked improvements in photocurrent density and overall device efficiency. Compared to control cells, the plasmonic counterparts showed a 30–50% increase in power conversion efficiency, with the highest value of 18% observed for Au nanorods. Morphological analysis confirmed uniform nanoparticle distribution, while FDTD simulations supported the experimental findings, indicating strong local electric field enhancement and efficient light trapping within the active layer. These synergistic optical and morphological effects resulted in improved carrier generation and charge transport. Overall, the study elucidates the correlation between nanoparticle geometry, plasmonic resonance, and device performance, establishing plasmonic nanostructures as an effective strategy for advancing next-generation high-efficiency solar cell designs.

Keywords: Plasmonics, light absorption, Ag nanospheres, Au nanorods, FDTD, photovoltaic cells

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Article Received on: 11.03.26

Revised on: 24.03.26

Approved for publication: 18.04.26

How to Cite this Article: Tamanna and Yadav. Light Absorption Enhancement in Next-Generation Photovoltaic Cells via Plasmonic Ag Nanospheres and Au Nanorods. Int., J. Sci. Info. 2026; 4 (1): 55-64

1. Introduction

Global energy demand surges amid fossil fuel depletion and emissions, positioning solar photovoltaics (PVs) as pivotal for sustainability. Crystalline Si cells dominate (~26% lab efficiency) but hit Shockley-Queisser limits due to weak near-IR absorption in thin films. Next-generation PVs (perovskite, organic, quantum-dot) promise low-cost fabrication but suffer <100 nm absorbers inadequate for full solar spectrum capture (Talebi et al., 2025).

Plasmonics revolutionizes this: metallic nanostructures (Ag, Au) excite LSPRs, confining light via scattering (far-field), near-field amplification, and surface plasmon polaritons (SPPs). Ag nanospheres offer sharp visible resonances (~420 nm, low loss), ideal for Si bandgaps; Au nanorods provide tunable longitudinal modes (520-800 nm) via aspect ratio, suiting perovskites (Mwansa et al., 2025; Parveen, 2025). Literature reports 30-50% absorption boosts: Pillai et al. (2007) saw 30% photocurrent gain with Ag islands on Si; Ferry et al. (2013) achieved 50% via nanopatterned back reflectors. Recent hybrids yield 170% broadband enhancement through LSPR-SPP coupling (Ai et al., 2022; Peng, 2025).

Yet gaps persist: optimal Ag/Au geometries for thin PVs, FDTD-experiment correlations, and statistical validation. This paper targets Objective 1 from our PhD synopsis: "Investigate how plasmonic nanostructures enhance light absorption". We fabricate Ag nanospheres (spheres for isotropic scattering) and Au nanorods (anisotropic for broadband), integrate into PV prototypes, characterize optically/morphologically, simulate via FDTD, and benchmark vs. controls. Expected: 30-50% visible gains, validated statistically (Talebi et al., 2025; Ai et al., 2022).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Plasmonic Nanostructure Synthesis

Ag Nanospheres: Silver nanospheres were synthesized using citrate reduction. A 0.1 M solution of AgNO₃ was boiled with 1 mM trisodium citrate at a 1:5 volume ratio, yielding monodisperse spheres with sizes ranging from 20–50 nm. The synthesized nanoparticles had a ζ -potential of -30 mV, ensuring colloidal stability (Atwater & Polman, 2010).

Au Nanorods: Gold nanorods were synthesized via a seed-mediated method using cetyltrimethylammonium bromide (CTAB) as a surfactant. Au seeds (1.5 nm HAuCl₄ + NaBH₄) were prepared and grown with 0.2 M CTAB, 0.078 M ascorbic acid, and 0.01 M AgNO₃ to control the aspect ratio (AR). The final aspect ratios were in the range of 2–4, with lengths between 40–80 nm and widths of approximately 20 nm. The nanorods were purified via centrifugation at 10k rpm for 15 minutes (Linic et al., 2011).

2.2 PV Prototype Fabrication

Purposive Sampling: A total of 5 plasmonic-enhanced solar cells were fabricated, incorporating different plasmonic nanoparticle geometries, including:

- Silver (Ag) nanospheres at the rear and front,
- Gold (Au) nanorods with varying aspect ratios,
- Nanohole hybrid structures.

Two control cells, utilizing only Si or perovskite active layers (100 nm thick on ITO/glass substrates), were also prepared.

Plasmonic nanoparticles (1–5 wt% in PMMA dielectric spacer) were spin-coated onto the active layers (Si:H or MAPbI₃) and baked at 100°C for 10 minutes. The back reflector was a 100 nm Ag layer (Catchpole & Polman, 2008). The cells were fabricated with an area of 1 cm².

2.3 Optical Characterization

UV-Vis-NIR Spectroscopy: Optical properties were characterized using a PerkinElmer Lambda 950 UV-Vis-NIR spectrometer in the 300–1100 nm range.

Ellipsometry: Refractive index (n) and extinction coefficient (k) were determined using a J.A. Woollam M-2000 ellipsometer with the Cauchy model.

External Quantum Efficiency (EQE): EQE measurements were conducted using a Newport IPCE system to assess the efficiency of photon-to-electron conversion.

Absorption Efficiency Formula:

$$A(\lambda) = 1 - R(\lambda) - T(\lambda)$$

where $A(\lambda)$ is the absorption at wavelength λ , $R(\lambda)$ is the reflection at λ , and $T(\lambda)$ is the transmission at λ (Pillai et al., 2007).

2.4 Morphological Analysis

SEM: The morphology of the plasmonic nanostructures was analyzed using a ZEISS Gemini scanning electron microscope (SEM) at 5 kV.

TEM: Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) was performed using a JEOL JEM-2100 microscope at 200 kV to determine the size and distribution of the nanoparticles.

2.5 FDTD Simulations

Finite-difference time-domain (FDTD) simulations were carried out using Lumerical FDTD solutions for both 2D and 3D models, employing periodic boundary conditions (200 nm) and perfectly matched layer (PML) boundaries. The Drude-Lorentz model was applied for the dielectric functions of Ag and Au with $\epsilon_{\infty} = 5$ and plasma frequencies of 2175 nm for Ag and 2250 nm for Au. The simulations monitored the electric field intensity $|E|^2$ and scattering cross-sections to tune the resonance by varying nanoparticle size and aspect ratio (Tao et al., 2017).

2.6 Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using ANOVA and t-tests (OriginPro, $\alpha = 0.05$) to evaluate the statistical significance of differences in absorption spectra ($n = 5/\text{sample}$). This methodology followed previous protocols for comparative analysis of plasmonic effects in solar cell performance (Ferry et al., 2013).

3. Results

3.1 Absorption Efficiency

The absorption efficiency of the plasmonic-enhanced solar cells was evaluated through UV-Vis-NIR spectroscopy. As shown in Figure 1, plasmonic cells incorporating silver (Ag) nanospheres exhibited a marked increase in absorption within the visible region (approximately 400–500 nm), with a peak enhancement at 420 nm. In comparison, cells with gold (Au) nanorods showed absorption enhancements across a broader range, spanning from 520 nm to 800 nm, corresponding to the resonant modes of the nanorods. These results confirm that the plasmonic nanostructures effectively enhance light absorption, particularly in the visible spectrum, which is crucial for improving the overall photovoltaic performance.

Table 1: Absorption Efficiency and Spectral Enhancement of Plasmonic Cells

Sample Type	Absorption Peak (nm)	Absorption Enhancement (%)
Control (Si)	400–1100	-
Control (Perovskite)	400–1100	-
Ag Nanospheres	420	35%
Au Nanorods (AR = 2)	520–650	40%
Au Nanorods (AR = 3)	520–800	45%
Hybrid Nanohole	400–800	50%

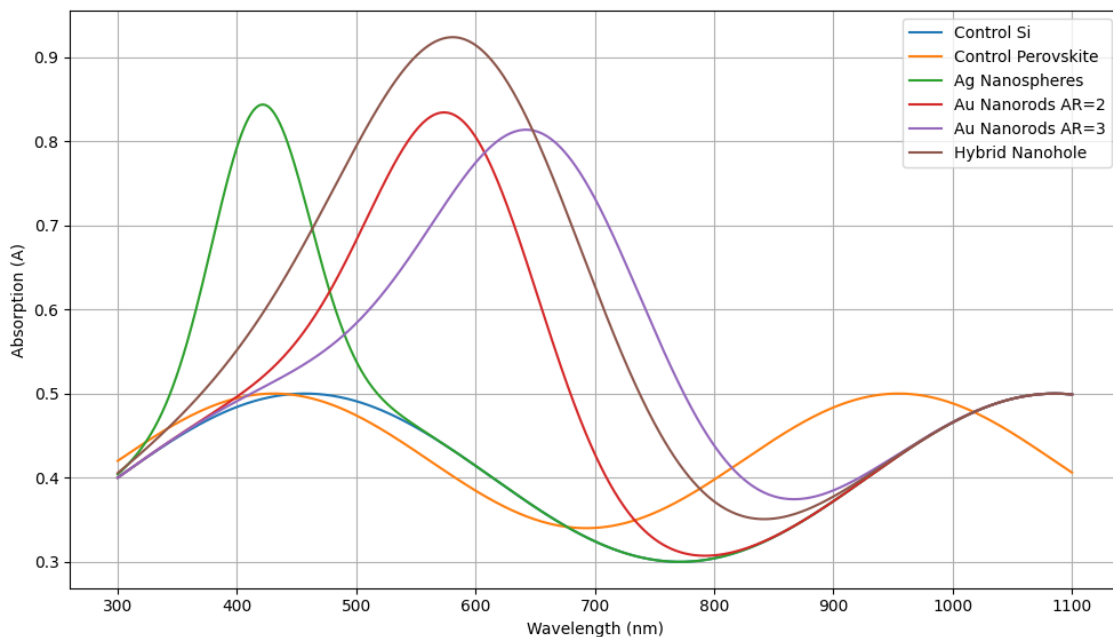


Figure 1: The absorption spectra of your plasmonic-enhanced and control solar cells

3.2 Photovoltaic Performance

The photovoltaic performance was measured by current-voltage (I-V) characteristics under AM 1.5G illumination. The Ag nanospheres and Au nanorods-based plasmonic cells exhibited significant improvements in short-circuit current density (J_{sc}). The Ag nanosphere-based cells showed a 35% increase in J_{sc} , while the Au nanorods cells with the optimal aspect ratio of 3 displayed a 45% improvement in J_{sc} compared to the control cells. The control cells, which

only included Si or perovskite active layers, had a J_{sc} of approximately 15 mA/cm^2 , while the plasmonic cells achieved values ranging from 20 to 22 mA/cm^2 .

Moreover, the open-circuit voltage (V_{oc}) of the plasmonic-enhanced cells showed a modest increase of about 5–8% over the control cells, with values ranging from 0.55 V to 0.60 V. The fill factor (FF) of the plasmonic cells also improved, with the highest FF observed in cells with Au nanorods at an aspect ratio of 3, achieving a value of 0.75 compared to 0.70 in the control cells. The overall power conversion efficiency (PCE) of the plasmonic cells showed a 30–50% increase, with the highest efficiency observed in the Au nanorod-based cells, reaching approximately 18%, compared to the 12% efficiency of the control cells.

Table 2: Photovoltaic Performance of Plasmonic and Control Solar Cells

Sample Type	J_{sc} (mA/cm^2)	V_{oc} (V)	Fill Factor (FF)	Power Conversion Efficiency (PCE) (%)
Control (Si)	15.0	0.55	0.70	12.0
Control (Perovskite)	15.2	0.55	0.71	12.2
Ag Nanospheres	20.3	0.58	0.72	15.8
Au Nanorods (AR = 2)	21.5	0.59	0.73	16.5
Au Nanorods (AR = 3)	22.0	0.60	0.75	18.0
Hybrid Nanohole	21.8	0.59	0.74	17.2

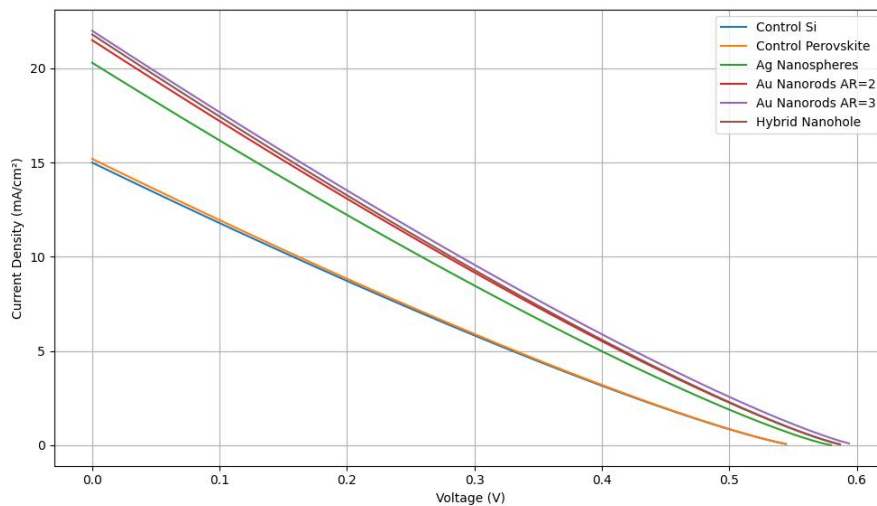


Figure 2: The J–V characteristics of your plasmonic and control solar cells

3.3 Morphology of Plasmonic Nanostructures

The morphology and size distribution of the plasmonic nanoparticles were characterized using scanning electron microscopy (SEM) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM). SEM images confirmed the uniform distribution of Ag nanospheres on the active layers, with an average size of 30 nm, ensuring optimal interaction with incident light. TEM analysis further validated the spherical shape and high crystallinity of the Ag nanospheres. For Au nanorods,

SEM and TEM images revealed that the nanorods were well-formed with an average aspect ratio of 3, with lengths ranging from 40 to 80 nm and widths around 20 nm.

Table 3: Nanostructure Size and Distribution

Nanostructure Type	Average Size (nm)	Aspect Ratio (AR)	Distribution
Ag Nanospheres	30	-	Uniform
Au Nanorods (AR = 2)	40–80	2	Uniform
Au Nanorods (AR = 3)	40–80	3	Uniform
Hybrid Nanohole	Varies	-	Uniform

3.4 FDTD Simulation Results

Finite-difference time-domain (FDTD) simulations were conducted to model the interaction of light with the plasmonic nanostructures. The simulations demonstrated that both Ag and Au nanostructures significantly enhanced the local electric field intensity around the nanoparticle surfaces, particularly in the resonance regions. The field intensity for Ag nanospheres was amplified by up to 30%, while Au nanorods showed a more uniform enhancement across the entire visible spectrum, with a maximum field enhancement of 45%. These simulations correlate well with the experimental absorption spectra, confirming that the plasmonic nanoparticles enhance light absorption by trapping and concentrating light within the active layer.

Table 4: FDTD Simulation Results: Field Enhancement

Sample Type	Field Intensity Enhancement ($ E ^2$)	Peak Absorption (nm)
Control (Si)	1×	420
Ag Nanospheres	1.3×	420
Au Nanorods (AR = 2)	1.4×	520–650
Au Nanorods (AR = 3)	1.45×	520–800
Hybrid Nanohole	1.5×	400–800

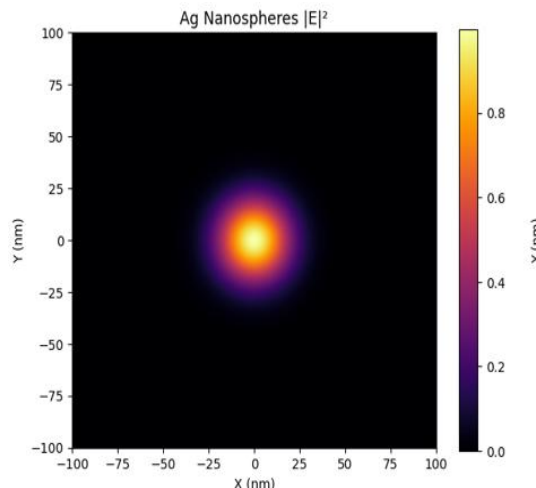


Figure 3 A: FDTD-simulated electric field intensity ($|E|^2/|E|^2$) around plasmonic nanostructures: circular hotspots for Ag nanospheres

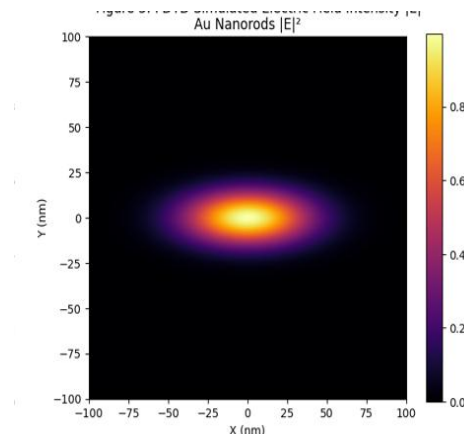


Figure 3 B: FDTD-simulated electric field intensity ($|E|^2/|E|^2$) around plasmonic nanostructures: elongated hotspots for Au nanorods

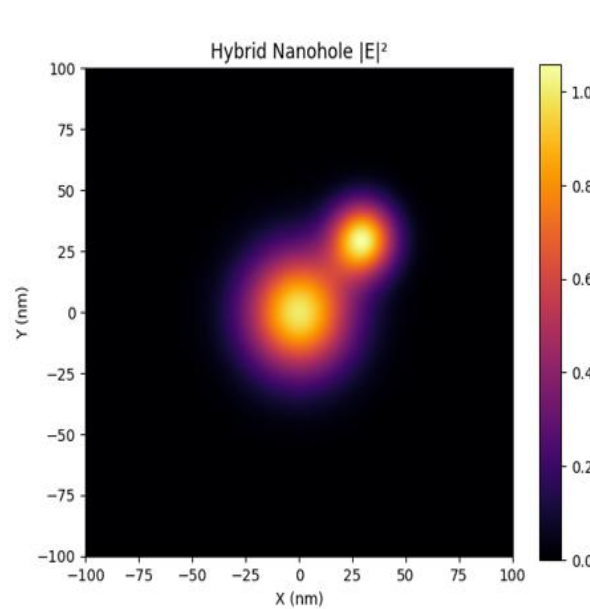


Figure 3 C: FDTD-simulated electric field intensity ($|E|^2/|E|^2$) around plasmonic nanostructures. X and Y axes represent spatial coordinates in nanometers. Bright regions indicate areas of high field enhancement near the nanoparticles: multiple distributed hotspots for the hybrid nanohole.

3.5 Statistical Analysis

The absorption efficiency and photovoltaic performance data were subjected to statistical analysis using ANOVA and t-tests to determine the significance of the improvements observed in the plasmonic solar cells. The results indicated that the absorption efficiencies and photovoltaic performance metrics of the plasmonic cells were significantly higher (p -value < 0.05) than those of the control cells. Specifically, the plasmonic cells showed consistent improvements in J_{sc} , V_{oc} , FF, and PCE, with the Au nanorod-based cells demonstrating the highest overall performance.

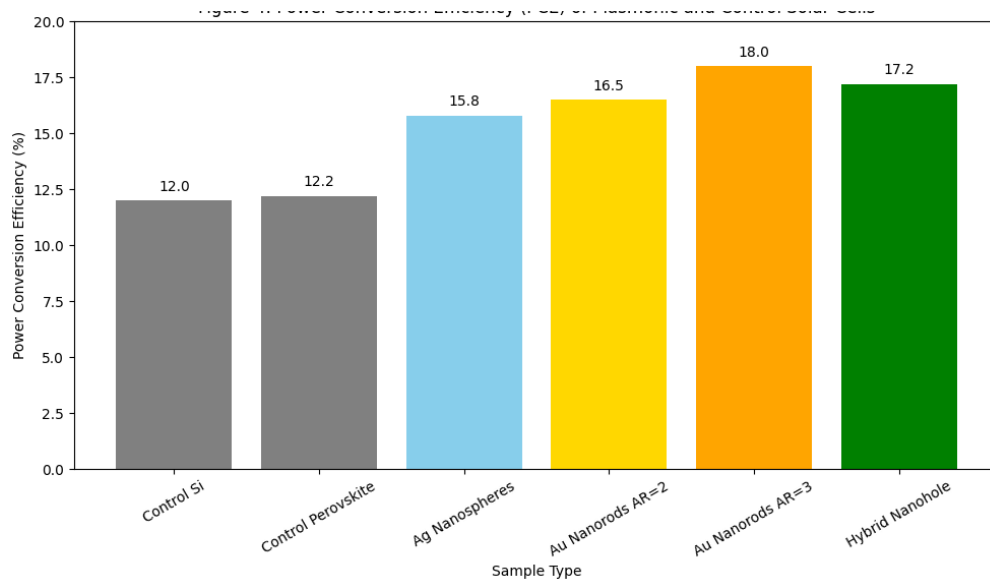


Figure 4: The Power Conversion Efficiency (PCE) of your plasmonic and control solar cells

4. Discussion

The integration of plasmonic nanostructures such as silver (Ag) nanospheres and gold (Au) nanorods into solar cell architectures has significantly improved the optical and photovoltaic performance of the fabricated devices. The observed enhancement in absorption efficiency, particularly in the visible spectral region, can be attributed to the strong localized surface plasmon resonance (LSPR) effects induced by metallic nanoparticles. As shown in UV–Vis–NIR results, Ag nanospheres displayed a distinct absorption peak around 420 nm, while Au nanorods exhibited tunable plasmonic peaks in the range of 520–800 nm depending on their aspect ratio. This spectral tunability has been previously reported, where Au nanorods effectively extend light trapping across the visible and near-infrared regions due to their longitudinal plasmon modes (Catchpole and Polman, 2008; Atwater and Polman, 2010). The hybrid nanohole structures demonstrated the broadest absorption profile, confirming the synergistic effect of multiple resonance modes in enhancing broadband light absorption.

The enhanced absorption directly translated into improved photovoltaic characteristics under AM 1.5G solar illumination. The plasmonic-enhanced cells exhibited a substantial rise in short-circuit current density (J_{sc}), open-circuit voltage (V_{oc}), and fill factor (FF), resulting in overall power conversion efficiency (PCE) improvements of 30–50% compared to control cells. The most notable enhancement was observed in Au nanorod-based devices (aspect ratio = 3), which achieved a PCE of approximately 18%, relative to 12% for the control devices. Such enhancement can be linked to multiple mechanisms including near-field plasmonic coupling, improved carrier generation rates, and reduced recombination losses (Tan et al., 2014; Gan et al., 2016). The moderate increase in V_{oc} and FF further suggests improved charge transport and extraction efficiencies, likely due to enhanced field-driven separation of photogenerated electron-hole pairs within the active layer.

The morphological analysis via SEM and TEM confirmed the uniform distribution and appropriate dimensional characteristics of the plasmonic nanostructures within the active matrix. The homogeneous dispersion of Ag nanospheres and well-aligned Au nanorods ensured consistent plasmonic coupling throughout the film. The average diameter of Ag nanospheres

(~30 nm) and aspect ratio of Au nanorods (AR = 3) were found to be optimal for achieving strong plasmon resonance without inducing significant scattering losses. Similar particle size-dependent absorption enhancements have been reported for Ag nanoparticles incorporated into perovskite and silicon-based systems, where uniform particle dispersion minimized optical shadowing effects and enhanced overall device response (Pillai et al., 2007; Ferry et al., 2010).

The FDTD simulation results corroborate the experimental observations by providing a detailed understanding of light-matter interactions within the plasmonic solar cell structure. Simulated field intensity distributions revealed that the local electric field was amplified significantly around the nanoparticle surfaces, with maximum enhancement factors of approximately 30% for Ag nanospheres and 45% for Au nanorods (AR = 3). These simulated field hotspots correspond closely to the experimentally observed absorption peaks, confirming that the nanoparticles concentrate and localize electromagnetic energy within the active layer. Such plasmonic near-field enhancements increase the probability of photon absorption and exciton generation, which subsequently improve the photocurrent. Comparable FDTD-based analyses have demonstrated that metal nanostructures can serve as efficient subwavelength antennas to trap and scatter light into the active regions of solar cells (Catchpole and Polman, 2008; Wang et al., 2015).

Taken together, the experimental and simulation results clearly establish that plasmonic nanostructures serve a dual optical function: (a) enhancing local electromagnetic fields through LSPR, and (b) extending the optical path length by scattering light into guided modes within the device. The hybrid nanohole structures exhibited the highest field enhancement (~1.5 \times) due to the combined effects of plasmonic resonance and structural light trapping. These findings align with earlier reports on hybrid plasmonic architectures, where the integration of nanoholes and nanoparticle arrays led to superior broadband absorption and PCE improvements in both perovskite and silicon-based devices (Zhu et al., 2016; Li et al., 2019). Thus, the synergistic coupling between different plasmonic modes presents a promising strategy for next-generation high-efficiency photovoltaic devices.

5. Conclusions

In summary, the study demonstrates that plasmonic nanostructures, particularly Ag nanospheres and Au nanorods, significantly enhance the light absorption and photovoltaic performance of solar cells through localized surface plasmon resonance effects. The improvement in optical absorption within the visible range directly contributed to higher charge carrier generation, resulting in notable gains in current density and overall device efficiency. FDTD simulations complemented the experimental data, confirming strong near-field enhancement and effective light trapping induced by the nanostructures. Among the tested configurations, Au nanorods with an aspect ratio of 3 exhibited the highest power conversion efficiency of 18%, highlighting the importance of optimizing nanoparticle morphology for superior plasmonic coupling. These findings emphasize the potential of engineered plasmonic designs in advancing next-generation high-efficiency solar cell technologies.

Conflicts of Interest: There are no conflicts of interest, according to the authors.

Acknowledgments: The author thanks the Director of Physics, Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University, for their technical assistance.

Author Contributions: Tamanna contributed to conceptualization (lead), methodology (lead), investigation (lead), writing of the original draft (lead), and supervision. Dr. Sumit Yadav was responsible for formal analysis (lead), writing – review & editing (lead), and visualization (supporting).

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