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DOI:
10.1088/1361-6641/aac3c4

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer

Citation for published version (APA):

Published in:
Semiconductor Science and Technology

Citing this paper
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Organic and Inorganic Passivation of p-type SnO Thin-Film Transistors with Different Active Layer Thicknesses

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Abstract

Bottom gated thin-film transistors (TFTs) with various sputtered SnO active layer thicknesses ranging from 10 to 30 nm and different passivation layers have been investigated. The device with 20 nm SnO showed the highest on/off ratio of $1.7 \times 10^4$ and the smallest subthreshold swing of 8.43 V/dec, and the mobility (0.76 cm²/Vs) was only slightly lower than in TFTs with a thicker SnO layer. However, both the mobility and the on/off ratio of the 15 nm SnO TFT dropped significantly by one order of magnitude. This indicated a strong influence of the top surface on the carrier transport, and we thus applied an organic or an inorganic encapsulation material to passivate the top surface. In the 20 nm TFT, the on/off ratio was doubled after passivation. The performance of the 15 nm TFT was improved even more dramatically with the on/off ratio increased by one order of magnitude and the mobility increased also significantly. Our experiment shows that polymethyl methacrylate passivation is more effective to reduce the shallow trap states, and Al₂O₃ is more effective in reducing the deep traps in the SnO channel.

Keywords: SnO, thin-film transistors, top surface, passivation
Introduction

Oxide semiconductors have recently received significant attention especially in the perspective of fast growing flexible and/or transparent electronics, such as flexible displays and wearable electronics, because of their low processing temperature compatible with plastic substrates, high carrier mobility (~1-100 cm$^2$V$^{-1}$s$^{-1}$), high optical transparency in visible light region, and low cost in comparison to amorphous silicon [1-3]. However, one major challenge for oxide semiconductors is that most of them are n-type, and only a very limited number of oxides show p-type conductivity. The reported thin-film transistors (TFTs) based on p-type oxides usually show lower mobilities and much lower on/off ratios than their n-type counterparts [4]. Such unbalanced development of n- and p-type oxides strongly hampers the implement of p-n oxide junction based electronics and complementary metal oxide semiconductor integrated circuits with low-power consumption.

Among the reported p-type oxide semiconductors, SnO is considered as one of the most promising due to its native p-type conductivity, high mobility, good stability and reproducibility [4-10]. The valence band maximum of SnO is composed by the hybridization of O 2$p$ and delocalized spherical Sn 5$s$ orbitals, thus leading to a small hole effective mass and relatively high mobility [5,11]. The first-principle calculations suggested that the p-type conductivity of SnO could be enhanced by tin vacancies which have lower formation energy comparing with other defects, for example, oxygen vacancies [12]. The two main problems hindering the industrialization progress of p-type SnO TFTs are the low on/off ratio and large subthreshold swing (SS). The gap state density in a SnO TFT channel is typically quite high, and such a high density usually leads to a large SS value and high off current because it is difficult to raise the Fermi level by gate voltage [13]. Recent studies showed that SnO thickness may play an important role on such gap state density [10,14-16]. The gap state density in SnO TFTs can be reduced and ambipolar behavior can be achieved by selecting the appropriate channel thickness [14-16]. It is known that the gap state density in oxide semiconductor TFTs can be affected by the ambient moisture and oxygen adsorption on the top channel surface [17-19]. Moisture adsorbents can donate electrons and act as hole traps, and oxygen adsorbents can capture electrons [20]. Recently, it was found that top surface passivation on bottom-gated SnO TFTs could suppress the surface states and shield the channel layer from the ambient atmosphere [7,10,21]. SnO TFTs with SU-8 passivation showed much improved long-term durability and bias stress stability under ambient air compared to those unpassivated [21]. It has been demonstrated that Al$_2$O$_3$ encapsulation on SnO TFTs not only improved electrical performance but also enabled ambipolar behavior by reducing the gap states [7].

In this work, we have systematically explored the influence of different active layer thicknesses and passivation layers on the performance of SnO TFTs. The effect of SnO layer thickness on the hole mobility is found not remarkable for TFTs with SnO thickness in a range of 20～30 nm, but the mobility in the 15 nm device drops by one order of magnitude. In order to
study the effect of different passivation layers on SnO TFTs with different active layer thicknesses, organic polymethyl methacrylate (PMMA) and inorganic Al₂O₃ are used to encapsulate the devices. Bias stress stabilities in SnO TFTs with and without encapsulation are also studied.

Experiments

The SnO TFTs were fabricated on thermally-oxidized SiO₂ (~100 nm)/P⁺-Si substrates. SnO thin-films were deposited at room temperature by radio-frequency magnetron sputtering using a Sn target. The sputtering power, working pressure, and oxygen partial pressure (O₂/(O₂+Ar)) were 50 W, 3.5 mTorr, and 3.1 %, respectively. The as-deposited SnO films were annealed at 225 °C in ambient air for 2 hours to achieve polycrystalline phase for high performance p-type conductivity. 50-nm-Ti was deposited as the source and drain electrodes with a shadow mask by an electron-beam evaporator. The active channel length and width were 60 and 2000 μm, respectively. To study the effect of passivation, some of the SnO TFTs were passivated with either Al₂O₃ (50 nm) or PMMA (250 nm) layer. The Al₂O₃ films were grown by atomic-layer deposition using trimethylaluminium and deionized water as the oxidizer and nitrogen as the carrier gas, at a chamber temperature of 150 °C. The PMMA passivation layers were deposited by spincoating, and the PMMA passivated devices were annealed in air at 150 °C for 1 hour. The current-voltage characteristics of these TFTs were measured in dark using a source/measure unit (Aglient B2902A).

Results and discussion

Figures 1(a)-(b) illustrate the transfer and output characteristics of SnO TFTs with different channel thicknesses in a range of 10-30 nm. P-type behavior is obtained when the SnO thickness is 15, 20, 25 or 30 nm. The output characteristics of the p-type TFTs exhibit clear pinch-off and saturated regions, and the typical one with 20-nm SnO is shown in Fig. 1(b). Electrical properties of all devices, including linear field effect mobility (µ_lin), threshold voltage (V_th), SS, and on/off current ratio (I_on/I_off), are summarized in Table 1. The device with a 20 nm SnO active layer shows the best performance with the highest on/off ratio of 1.7×10⁴ and the lowest SS of 8.43 V/dec.
FIG. 1. (a) Transfer characteristics of TFTs with SnO of various thicknesses; (b) Output characteristics of TFT with a 20 nm SnO active layer.

TABLE 1. Performance parameters of TFTs with various SnO thicknesses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thickness (nm)</th>
<th>$V_{th}$ (V)</th>
<th>$\mu_{lin}$ (cm$^2$/Vs)</th>
<th>$SS$ (V/dec)</th>
<th>$I_{on}/I_{off}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>-31.0</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>1.0×10^3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>-26.5</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>8.43</td>
<td>1.7×10^4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>-21.1</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>9.16</td>
<td>1.2×10^3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>-13.3</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>9.55</td>
<td>1.5×10^3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the SnO thickness decreases, the TFT shows a clear decrease in on current, and the $V_{th}$ shifts towards negative direction. In the case of the 10 nm SnO, the channel current becomes very low, around $10^{-10}$ A, and no gate modulation is observed. First of all, decreasing the channel thickness will mean fewer free carriers in the channel. The other key reason is the influence of the top channel surface. Moisture adsorbents and native tin dioxide on the top channel surface can act as electron donors which may complement the holes and act as hole traps [16,22]. The TFTs with thinner SnO channels have lower mobility, as shown in Table 1, indicating that there are a large number of shallow traps [23,24]. It’s worth noting that the hole mobility of the TFT with 15 nm SnO, 0.07 cm$^2$/Vs, is one order of magnitude lower than that of the TFT with 20 nm SnO layer, 0.76 cm$^2$/Vs. This indicates that the shallow traps on the top channel surface largely limits the hole transportation in very thin SnO channels ($\leq$ 15 nm).

It is clearly seen that $SS$ decreases with SnO thickness decreases from 30 to 20 nm. $SS$ value is associated with the total trap density ($D_{total}$) [25], consisting of the interface trap density ($D_{it}$) at the SnO/gate insulator interface, the trap density of bulk SnO film ($D_{b}$) and the trap density of SnO top surface ($D_{top}$):

$$SS=\ln 10 \frac{k_B T}{q} \left(1+\frac{q^2 D_{total}}{C_G}\right) \tag{1}$$

where $q$ is the electron charge, $k_B$ is the Boltzmann constant, $T$ is the absolute temperature, and $C_G$ is the gate capacitance per unit area. As all the SnO layers with different thicknesses were deposited with the same processing parameters, a uniform bulk trap density $D_b$ can be assumed, and $D_{total}$ can be expressed as,

$$D_{total}=D_{it}+\tau D_{b}+D_{top}\tag{2}$$

where $\tau$ is the thickness of the SnO layer. For TFTs with SnO thickness from 30 to 20 nm, the decrease of $SS$ can be explained...
by the reduction of $t$. It should be noticed that $SS$ of the TFT with 15 nm thick SnO layer was obviously larger than the TFTs with thicker SnO. This suggests that the top surface starts to become quite dominant as the SnO decreases to less than ~15 nm.

To suppress the influence of $D_{top}$, we have passivated the SnO top surface by PMMA or Al$_2$O$_3$. Figures 2 (a)-(b) and (c)-(d) illustrate the transfer and output curves for the unpassivated, PMMA or Al$_2$O$_3$ passivated TFTs with 20 nm SnO and 15 nm SnO, respectively. The results clearly show that the TFTs with passivation layers show improved performance in contrast to those unpassivated. In the 20 nm thick SnO TFTs, $SS$ reduces from 8.43 to 6.65 and 6.78 V/decade, and mobility increases from to 0.76 to 0.81 and 1.00 cm$^2$/Vs, after Al$_2$O$_3$ and PMMA passivation, respectively. A notable increase of on-current and on/off ratio is also observed. In the 15 nm thick SnO TFTs, the passivations are more effective as $SS$ reduces from 12.5 to 8.77 and 10.00 V/decade, and mobility increases from 0.07 to 0.16 and 0.24 cm$^2$/Vs, after Al$_2$O$_3$ and PMMA passivation, respectively. Detailed device performance parameters are shown in Table 2. These results confirm that the passivation of top SnO surface can lead to an improvement of the TFT performance by attenuation of the ambient adsorption effect and reducing the trap density [10].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thickness (nm)</th>
<th>Passivation</th>
<th>$V_{th}$ (V)</th>
<th>$\mu_{lin}$ (cm$^2$/Vs)</th>
<th>$SS$ (V/dec)</th>
<th>$I_{on}/I_{off}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>without</td>
<td>-31.0</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>1.0×10^3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>with Al$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>-22.9</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>8.77</td>
<td>1.0×10^4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>with PMMA</td>
<td>-23.5</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>9.6×10^3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>without</td>
<td>-26.5</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>8.43</td>
<td>1.7×10^4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>with Al$_2$O$_3$</td>
<td>-12.0</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>6.65</td>
<td>3.8×10^4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>with PMMA</td>
<td>-9.10</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>6.78</td>
<td>3.3×10^4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In TFTs, the carrier mobility is related to the density of the tailing states near the conduction/valence band (shallow traps) and $SS$ is determined by the density of both deep and shallow traps [14,23,24,26]. It is interesting to note that the $Al_2O_3$ passivation leads to better on/off ratios and lower $SS$ values in both 15 nm and 20 nm SnO TFTs, whereas the PMMA passivation enables higher mobility. The experiment therefore suggests that the PMMA passivation is more effective than $Al_2O_3$ to reduce shallow trap states on the SnO top surface, while $Al_2O_3$ is more effective than PMMA in reducing the deep traps on the top surface of the SnO film.
FIG. 3. Time evolution of the transfer curves under a negative gate bias stress of $V_{GS} = -30$ V of SnO TFTs without passivation (a), with Al$_2$O$_3$ passivation (b), with PMMA passivation (c), and $V_{th}$ as a function of the negative gate-bias stress time (d). Time evolution of the transfer curves under a positive gate bias stress of $V_{GS} = +30$ V of SnO TFTs without passivation (e), with Al$_2$O$_3$ passivation (f), and with PMMA passivation (g), and $V_{th}$ as a function of the positive gate-bias stress time (h).
Figures 3(a)-(d) show $V_{th}$ instability of SnO TFTs with or without passivation layer under -30 V negative gate bias stress with various stress time. The transfer characteristic is negatively shifted as the stress time increases, and $V_{th}$ shift is more pronounced for unpassivated TFTs. Because all the TFTs without or with passivation have the identical gate dielectric and SnO layer, the charge trapping at the channel-dielectric interface would be expected to be very similar. Thus the different $V_{th}$ shifts can be attributed to the ambient adsorption effect. For the unpassivated sample, when a negative gate bias was applied, the vertical electric field would enhance the adsorption of moisture on the top channel surface because water molecules can be positively charged by donating electrons [22]. Meanwhile, the applied negative gate bias can also enhance the desorption of oxygen molecules because they can be negatively charged by capturing electrons [19,20]. Thus, with the increase of negative bias stress time, more negative $V_{th}$ shift occurs due to the increased hole traps and decreased hole carrier density [20]. Such $V_{th}$ shift is reduced when Al$_2$O$_3$ or PMMA passivation reduces the adsorption of moisture and desorption of oxygen. Figures 3(e)-(h) show the time evolution of the transfer curves and $V_{th}$ as a function of gate-bias stress time under a positive gate bias stress of $V_{GS} = +30$ V. In all devices, transfer curves shift towards the positive direction as the stress time increases, which is due to the increased hole carrier density caused by the positive gate bias induced desorption of moisture and adsorption of oxygen. Similarly, the TFTs with Al$_2$O$_3$ or PMMA encapsulation also significantly improve the electrical stability by reducing the ambient adsorption effect.

**Conclusions**

In summary, we have studied the separate effects of active layer thickness and passivation on the performance of p-type SnO TFTs. For unpassivated TFTs with SnO thickness in range of 20 ~ 30 nm, the field effect mobility, on current, and $SS$ are mainly limited by the amount of bulk film traps, and thus thinner SnO with less amount of bulk traps shows better performance. However, for unpassivated TFTs with SnO thickness $\leq$ 15 nm, the performance is mainly limited by the top channel surface trap states caused by the ambient adsorption effect. SnO top surface passivation can effectively reduce the trap density on the top interface, and thus improve the TFT performance including mobility, on/off ratios, bias stability, and $SS$. The Al$_2$O$_3$ passivation is found to enable better on/off ratios and lower $SS$ values than the PMMA passivation. The PMMA passivation results in better mobility enhancement than the Al$_2$O$_3$ passivation. The results suggest that PMMA passivation is more effective to reduce the shallow trap states, and Al$_2$O$_3$ is more effective in reducing the deep traps in the SnO channel. By applying a SnO thickness of 20 nm and Al$_2$O$_3$ passivation, the optimized TFT achieves a high on/off ratio of $\sim 3.8 \times 10^4$, high mobility of 0.81 cm$^2$/Vs, and small $SS$ of 6.65 V/dec.

**Acknowledgments**
This work was supported by the National Key Research and Development Program of China (Grant No. 2016YFA0301200 and 2016YFA0201800), the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 11374185 and 11304180), Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) (Grant No. EP/N021258/1), China Postdoctoral Science Foundation funded project (2016M590634), the Key Research and Development Program of Shandong Province (2017GGX10111 and 2017GGX10121), the Natural Science Foundation of Jiangsu Province (BK20151255), Suzhou Planning Projects of Science and Technology (SYG201527 and SYG201616), and the Fundamental Research Fund of Shandong University (2016WLJH44).

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