Density-of-states distribution in AlGaN obtained from transient photocurrent analysis

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Abstract

Dark conductivity and photoconductivity in AlxGa1-xN (x = 0.025, 0.18) films prepared by MOCVD on a sapphire substrate with a GaN bottom layer have been investigated. In the temperature range 300–500 K, the barrier at the heterostructure interface appears to play an important role in the thermal activation of the photocurrent after pulsed laser excitation, for high aluminium concentrations. Transient photoconductivity measurements on Al0.025GaN films have been made and are interpreted in terms of multiple trapping and release of carriers in localised states. The current transient is characterised by an initial rapid decay in the sub-microsecond regime, followed by a much slower power law decay out to tens of milliseconds. These features, which occur for both sub- and super-gap excitation, are consistent with the presence of a steep exponential tail of states at the band edge, followed by a broad peak centered at approximately 0.4 eV below Ec. © 2001 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: AlGaN; Transient photocurrent; PPC; Deep defects; Density-of-states

1. Introduction

Slow, non-exponential decays of photo-induced currents have been observed in AlGaN films [1], with time constants up to tens of hours. Data are usually phenomenologically fitted in terms of a power law decay [2] or a stretched exponential [3]. Insight into the understanding of this slow response (frequently referred to as persistent photocurrent or PPC) may be obtained in terms of the multiple trapping (MT) model of carrier transport. This model has been applied successfully to the study of localised gap states associated with disordered materials, such as hydrogenated amorphous silicon and its alloys. Transient photocurrent (TPC) spectroscopy is now well-established as a method for investigating the density of states (DOS) distribution in such materials. The analysis of TPC data by Fourier transformation [4] allows the DOS to be deduced to a resolution of order kT without prior assumption of its form. In this work we have applied TPC spectroscopy to investigate the DOS of Al0.025GaN.

2. Experimental and analytical procedures

0.6 micrometer thick AlxGa1-xN films were deposited by MOCVD on a sapphire substrate and a 0.6–1.4 μm thick GaN underlayer (see inset of Fig. 1). The samples exhibited the following Hall-mobile and carrier concentrations [2]: μx = 170 cm2 V-1 s-1, n = 5 × 1018 cm-3 for x = 0.025 and μx = 30–50 cm2 V-1 s-1, n = 7 × 1017 cm-3 for x = 0.18. Current measurements were performed by making two soldered ohmic indium contacts with a distance of ca. 5 mm to each sample. TPC measurements were made by recording the current decay following the application of either 532 nm (2nd harmonic) or 266 nm (4th harmonic) pulses from a Q-switched Nd:YAG laser of 5 ns duration. Pulse energies varied between 0.4 and 4 mJ with a spot size of 5 mm diameter. The current was measured in
terms of the voltage drop across a small series resistance, and data acquisition was performed using a Tektronix 200 MHz bandwidth transient digital oscilloscope. Analysis of the TPC data to yield a relative DOS was carried out using a Fourier transform method [4], assuming energy-independent capture coefficients and an energy scale \( E = E_C - kT \ln(n_t) \) with an attempt-to-escape frequency of \( v = 10^{12} \) Hz. The photocurrent values in Fig. 2 are taken 10 μs after pulsed UV excitation.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Steady-state photocurrent spectroscopy

Fig. 1 shows the as-measured photocurrent spectra of Al\(_{0.18}\)GaN for sub-bandgap illumination. The gradual decrease in photocurrent with decreasing photon energy indicates the presence of tail (Urbach) states extending deep into the bandgap. The absorption coefficient for green light is some 2 orders of magnitude lower than for super-gap illumination.

3.2. Temperature dependence of current

The conductivity of Al\(_{0.025}\)GaN at ambient temperature is approximately 0.5 S cm\(^{-1}\), that of Al\(_{0.18}\)GaN about 400 times lower. Both dark currents show a very weak temperature dependence. For the sample with the higher Al concentration an activation energy of 40 meV can be deduced over the whole temperature range. Between 300 and 400 K the low concentration sample shows a similarly small activation energy, of 30 meV. Above 400 K, the slope gets even less steep and there is no change in the dark current. Curiously, this change in the slope appears at approximately the same temperature at which the photocurrent in the \( x = 0.18 \) sample after pulsed laser excitation shows a minimum in the heating cycle (see Fig. 2). From the cooling cycle, an ‘activation’ energy of 200 meV can be deduced between \( T = 370 \) and 500 K, which we attribute to the interface between the AlGaN and the GaN film. AlGaN and GaN form a heterostructure with an effective barrier height below \( E_G(x = 0.18) - E_G(x = 0) = 0.4 \) eV [5]. The Richardson equation gives a reasonable fit to the cooling cycle part of our data, and we calculate the barrier height as 0.2 eV. We propose that the difference between heating and cooling curves is due to the thermal quenching of the PPC. We also conclude that the \( x = 0.18 \) sample has to be considered as a heterostructure and was therefore not appropriate for TPC spectroscopy. As the Al concentration is small in the \( x = 0.025 \) sample, we assume it to be homogenous.

3.3. Transient photocurrent spectroscopy

Fig. 3 shows the photocurrent decay after sub-bandgap illumination of the sample with \( x = 0.025 \). We observe secondary photocurrent for sub- and supergap illumination. The TPC signal is characterised by an initial rapid decay in the sub-microsecond regime, followed by a much slower decay, which shows a power law behaviour with an exponent of about 0.3. A fast photovoltaic contribution adding to the initial current peak, due either to illumination of the indium contacts or the heterostructure interface, has been subtracted. The slight downturn beginning at approximately 10 ms is due to the low-pass filter which is formed by the series sampling resistor and the input capacitance of the oscilloscope. For times longer than 1 s the data fit the persistent photoconductivity decay [3]. The features presented are consistent with the presence of a steep exponential tail of states (slope 35 meV)
In our interpretation, the exponent reflects the slope of the density-of-states for energies higher than the peak at about 0.4 eV; the higher the value of the exponent, the steeper will be the DOS for the localised state distribution. The origin of the exponential tail may be due to structural disorder, e.g. alloy fluctuations. PL data gives no unambiguous evidence about the peak we found [2]. However, it is known that a number of different deep defects exist in AlGaN between 0.1 and 0.8 eV.

4. Conclusions

TPC signals obtained from Al$_{0.025}$GaN films are characterised by an initial rapid decay in the sub-microsecond regime, followed by a much slower power law decay of index approximately 0.3. Analysis in terms of a multiple trapping model indicates the presence of a steep exponential tail of states (slope 35 meV) at the band edge, followed by a broad peak centred at approximately 0.4 eV below $E_C$. However, this interpretation may be open to question as the Fermi level must lie fairly close to the band edge in order to account for the dark conductivity magnitude, and the TPC analysis is invalid for predominantly occupied states. The dark current activation mechanism could not be understood completely, and further TPC and PPC measurements over a range of temperatures are required to determine whether this behaviour is consistent with the multiple trapping model.

Acknowledgements

M.N. acknowledges support through a stipend from the Foundation of Science and Technology FCT. R.S. acknowledges financial support from the German Academic Exchange Service DAAD. This work is supported by the FCT project PRAXIS/PCEX/P/FIS/7/98.

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