Title

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Citation

Applied Physics Express (2020), 13(9)

Issue Date

2020-09-01

URL

http://hdl.handle.net/2433/254069

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Type

Journal Article

Textversion

publisher

Kyoto University
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To cite this article: Takuma Kobayashi et al 2020 Appl. Phys. Express 13 091003

View the article online for updates and enhancements.
Design and formation of SiC (0001)/SiO₂ interfaces via Si deposition followed by low-temperature oxidation and high-temperature nitridation

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Received June 24, 2020; revised July 22, 2020; accepted August 3, 2020; published online August 14, 2020

We report an effective approach to reduce defects at a SiC/SiO₂ interface. Since oxidation of SiC may inevitably lead to defect creation, the idea is to form the interface without oxidizing SiC. Our method consists of four steps: (i) H₂ etching of SiC, (ii) Si deposition, (iii) low-temperature (~750 °C) oxidation of Si to form SiO₂, and (iv) high-temperature (~1600 °C) N₂ annealing to introduce nitrogen atoms. The interface state density estimated by a high (1 MHz)–low method is in the order of 10¹¹ cm⁻² eV⁻¹, two orders of magnitude lower than that of an interface formed by SiC oxidation.

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Development of high-efficiency power devices is indispensable for meeting the growing requirements of power consumptions and for realizing a sustainable society. In this perspective, silicon carbide (SiC) has been widely accepted as an alternative to silicon (Si) because of its unique material properties (i.e. wide bandgap, high critical electric field, and high thermal conductivity). In particular, SiC metal-oxide-semiconductor field effect transistors (MOSFETs) are promising for low-loss and fast power switches. The performance of MOSFETs is nevertheless limited by the quality of SiC/silicon dioxide (SiO₂) interfaces; the interface state density (DJT) at SiC/SiO₂ interfaces near the conduction band edge (E_C) of SiC (10⁻¹²⁻¹⁰³ eV⁻¹ cm⁻²) is at least two orders of magnitude higher than that of typical Si/SiO₂ systems (~10⁻¹⁰ eV⁻¹ cm⁻²). A significant portion of electrons at the inversion layer of MOSFETs are thereby trapped by the interface states, resulting in low effective channel mobility (µCH). Prior studies have indicated various methods to reduce the DJT at a SiC/SiO₂ interface. The methods are classified into two groups: methods that rely on impurity incorporation and those do not (i.e. oxidation/annealing only). The former approach includes impurities such as nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), boron (B), sodium (Na), and barium (Ba). Among them, incorporation of N by nitric oxide (NO)1,10 or nitrous oxide (N₂O)11,12 annealing has been a standard processing step. By introducing N atoms, the DJT near E_C is reduced to ~10¹¹ eV⁻¹ cm⁻² while not significantly degrading the oxide reliability. However, since the reduction in DJT is insufficient, it is shown that the carrier trapping effect by the interface states is severe even after proper NO annealing. Although remarkable increase in the µCH (>80 cm² V⁻¹ s⁻¹) is reported for other impurities (i.e. P, B, Na, and Ba), there remains a concern on the oxide reliability. For instance, incorporation of P, Na, and Ba leads to the generation of oxide traps, threshold voltage instability,10 and degradation in the insulating properties, respectively. The latter approach involves thin (~15 nm) oxidation with rapid cooling (>600 °C min⁻¹), high-temperature oxidation (>1400 °C), and post-oxidation annealing in low-oxygen-partial-pressure ambient at high-temperature (~1500 °C). Although reduction in DJT is achieved by these methods, a high-mobility MOSFET is not reported so far. These facts indicate a reasonable hypothesis that the oxidation of SiC inevitably leads to degradation of interface properties via introduction of carbon defects and/or fluctuations in the conduction band.

In this paper, we present an alternative pathway to reduce defects at SiC (0001)/SiO₂ interfaces. To avoid the oxidation-induced interface degradation, the idea is to form SiC/SiO₂ structures without oxidizing SiC. In brief, our method proceeds in four stages: (i) hydrogen (H₂) etching of a SiC surface, (ii) Si deposition, (iii) low-temperature (~750 °C) oxidation of Si, and (iv) high-temperature (~1600 °C) nitrogen (N₂) annealing. A SiC/SiO₂ interface with substantially low DJT is obtained in this manner. Based on the results, we offer guidelines to form high-quality SiC/SiO₂ interfaces.

The process flow of gate oxide formation is summarized in Fig. 1(a). We start with 4°-off-axis n-type SiC (0001) epilayers with a donor density of 10¹⁵–10¹⁶ cm⁻³. After cleaning the samples by the standard RCA procedure, H₂ etching of the samples’ surface was performed under 0.1 MPa at 1300 °C for 3 min. Afterward, Si was deposited on the surface by introducing silane (SiH₄) and H₂, without exposing the surface to the air. The deposition was carried out under 173 Pa at 630 °C for 1.5 min, resulting in a Si thickness of typically 44 nm. For MOS structures, we employed circular aluminum (Al) electrodes with a diameter of about 300–500 μm.

First, we focus on the structural properties of samples formed by the proposed method. Figure 1(b) depicts the...
secondary ion mass spectrometry (SIMS) profiles of Si signal intensity for SiC/Si and SiC/SiO₂ structures. With Si deposition, a layer with high Si intensity (thickness ∼20 nm) is indeed formed on the top of SiC. After subsequent oxidation and N₂ annealing, the Si intensity profiles become identical to that of an as-oxidized SiC sample, indicating that the deposited Si is converted into SiO₂. Here, the position of SiC/SiO₂ interfaces was determined as the point where carbon (C) signal intensity approximately becomes half of that in SiC. Even when the interface positions were defined based on oxygen (O) intensity, the positions hardly changed (within ∼0.6 nm). Thus, at least within the accuracy of SIMS measurements, the deposited Si is completely oxidized with the oxidation at 750 °C for 24 h. Figure 1(c) depicts the N concentration profiles of SiC/SiO₂ samples measured by SIMS. With N₂ annealing, N atoms are distributed in the oxide, piling up at the interface of SiC and SiO₂. The N concentration increases by elevating the temperature of N₂ annealing and reaches 10²¹ cm⁻³ after annealing at 1400 °C. In this way, N atoms are introduced at the interface without proceeding the oxidation of SiC. Figure 1(d) shows typical atomic force microscope images for samples after oxidation (750 °C) and that followed by N₂ annealing (1600 °C). The root mean square surface roughness of samples before and after N₂ annealing is estimated as 0.7 nm and 0.2 nm, respectively. A rather smooth SiO₂ surface is eventually obtained, owing to the structure reconstruction of SiO₂ during high-temperature N₂ annealing.

We now focus on the electric characteristics of MOS structures. The quasi-static and 1 MHz capacitance–voltage (C–V) characteristics of the MOS structures are shown in Fig. 2. Large frequency dispersion observed for the as-oxidized SiC sample is significantly reduced in samples formed by the proposed method, implying a strong reduction in the 𝐷𝑇. Meanwhile, negative flat band voltage shifts are observed for the samples formed by the present method, corresponding to the effective fixed charge density of +3.9 × 10¹¹, +3.1 × 10¹², and +2.3 × 10¹² cm⁻² for samples annealed in N₂ at 1350 °C, 1400 °C, and 1600 °C, respectively. Since more N atoms are introduced into the oxide with N₂ annealing at higher temperature [Fig. 1(c)], the
positive charge likely originates from the incorporated N atoms.

For a quantitative discussion, the energy distributions of $D_{IT}$ were estimated by a high (1 MHz) low method. The results are summarized in Figs. 3(a)–3(c). First we investigate the impact of N2 annealing temperature in Fig. 3(a), where the result for an as-oxidized SiC sample is also shown for comparison. As expected from the C–V characteristics (Fig. 2), the samples prepared by the present method exhibit lower $D_{IT}$ than that formed by oxidation of SiC. The $D_{IT}$ is effectively reduced when increasing the temperature of N2 annealing; e.g. the $D_{IT}$ values at $E_C − 0.3 \text{ eV}$ are about $1.7 \times 10^{11}, 3.2 \times 10^{10},$ and $1.8 \times 10^{10} \text{ eV}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ [possible error: $\pm (2–3) \times 10^{9} \text{ eV}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$] for samples annealed at 1350 °C, 1400 °C, and 1600 °C, respectively. Although the role of H2 etching is uncertain, N2 annealing plays the key role in obtaining low $D_{IT}$; high-temperature N2 annealing should be performed to introduce sufficient N atoms at the interface [Fig. 1(c)].

In Fig. 3(b), we compare the obtained $D_{IT}$ with samples formed by thermal oxidation of SiC. As a result, the $D_{IT}$ values near the $E_C$ (e.g. $E_C − 0.3 \text{ eV}$) for a sample obtained by the proposed method is about ten times lower than that formed by typical methods; i.e. oxidation of SiC followed by NO annealing or N2 annealing. Furthermore, it is confirmed that low-temperature oxidation (750 °C) followed by N2 annealing (1600 °C) has a limited effect on a sample formed by oxidation of SiC. Since oxidation of SiC leads to the generation of defects that cannot be easily passivated, the deposition of Si is a vital step towards reducing the $D_{IT}$. A clearer evidence is observed in Fig. 3(c), where the impacts of Si oxidation temperature and post-oxidation treatment are investigated. When we increase the oxidation temperature of Si up to 950 °C, by which not only the deposited Si but also SiC is oxidized. As shown in Fig. 3(c), the post-oxidation treatment is also particularly important; when the annealing is performed in NO instead of N2, the $D_{IT}$ increases due to additional SiC oxidation during NO annealing. After all, the process condition has to be carefully designed so as to oxidize Si but not SiC.

Here we discuss the cause of the observed defect passivation upon N2 annealing. The role of N atoms has been extensively discussed in literature; e.g. passivation of carbon defects9,36–39 suboxide bonds,36,38 and dangling bonds at/ near a SiC/SiO2 interface.79 Since we avoided oxidation of SiC, the generation of carbon defects should be suppressed. Passivation of carbon defects are thereby unlikely in our case. In contrast, the passivation of suboxide bonds and/or dangling bonds might be plausible. Indeed, a theoretical study suggested that Si–Si bonds (with various length) in near-interface SiO2 form antibonding levels near the $E_C$ of SiC, which could be passivated by N atoms.38 Studies based on X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy have indicated Si±N bonds in SiC/SiO2 structure prepared by NO9,39 or N240 annealing, suggesting that Si dangling bonds could also be passivated by N atoms.9 Hence, we speculate that high-temperature N2 annealing lets the interface structure to reconstruct and passivates the suboxide bonds and dangling bonds at/near the interface, leading to the significant reduction in $D_{IT}$ [Fig. 3(a)].

Finally, we characterized the reliability of an oxide obtained by proposed method. As shown in Fig. 4, the time-zero-breakdown field of the sample was estimated as 9.8 MV cm$^{-1}$, only slightly degraded compared to that formed by NO annealing (10.9 MV cm$^{-1}$). As a result of bi-directional 1 MHz C–V measurement at 200 °C, the hysteresis was negligibly small (<0.1 V) by applying positive (negative) bias stress at +10 V (−10 V), where +10 V corresponds to an oxide field of about +3.3 MV cm$^{-1}$.

In conclusion, we developed an effective method to reduce defects at SiC (0001)/SiO2 interfaces. The key is to form SiC/SiO2 structures without oxidizing SiC and to perform high-temperature N2 annealing afterwards; we deposited Si on SiC and subsequently oxidized the Si at low-temperature (~750 °C) to form SiO2. High-temperature N2 annealing

![Fig. 3.](image-url) (Color online) Energy distribution of $D_{IT}$ for SiC MOS structures obtained by a high (1 MHz)–low method;33) (a) impact of N2 annealing temperature, (b) comparison with typical methods (NO and N2 annealings), and (c) impacts of oxidation temperature and post-oxidation treatment. The possible error in the $D_{IT}$ values is estimated as about $\pm (2–3) \times 10^{9} \text{ eV}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-2}$.
Fig. 4. (Color online) Current density–oxide field characteristics of SiC MOS structures. The oxide field ($E_{OX}$) was calculated by dividing the applied gate voltage ($V$) by the equivalent oxide thickness ($t_{OX}$).

(~1600 °C) was then performed to let the interface structure to reconstruct and to passivate the suboxide bonds and/or dangling bonds by N atoms. In this way, SiC/SiO$_2$ interface with substantially low defect density (~10$^{10}$ cm$^{-2}$ eV$^{-1}$) was formed. The time-zero-breakdown field of the oxide was about 9.8 MV cm$^{-1}$, only slightly degraded compared to that formed by NO annealing (10.9 MV cm$^{-1}$).

Acknowledgments This work was partly supported by the Open Innovation Platform with Enterprises, Research Institute and Academia (OPERA) Program from the Japan Science and Technology Agency. This work was also partly supported by the Grant-in-Aids for Scientific Research (A) (Grant Nos. 18H03770 and 18H03873) from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.

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