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<tr>
<td><strong>Citation</strong></td>
<td>Applied Physics Letters, 2011, v. 99 n. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issued Date</strong></td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>URL</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10722/137495">http://hdl.handle.net/10722/137495</a></td>
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Superlattices of Bi$_2$Se$_3$/In$_2$Se$_3$: Growth characteristics and structural properties

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(Received 2 June 2011; accepted 25 June 2011; published online 15 July 2011)

Superlattices (SLs) consisted of alternating Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and In$_2$Se$_3$ layers are grown on Si(111) by molecular-beam epitaxy. Bi$_2$Se$_3$, a three-dimensional topological insulator (TI), showed good chemical and structural compatibility with In$_2$Se$_3$, a normal band insulator with large energy bandgap. The individual layers in the SLs are very uniform, and the hetero-interfaces are sharp. Therefore, such SL structures are potential candidates for explorations of the quantum size effects of TIs. © 2011 American Institute of Physics. [doi:10.1063/1.3610971]

Along with the extensive researches of materials and properties of three-dimensional (3D) topological insulators (TIs), attention has increasingly been paid on ultrathin films and nanostructures of such materials for enhanced effects and properties associated with the topological states of electrons. In the same line of thoughts, multi-layered structures constituted of TIs and normal band insulators, such as superlattices (SLs) or multiple quantum wells (MQWs) of...
adherence to the substrate for easier device processing. A comparison of Bi$_2$Se$_3$ grown on different buffers and substrates is summarized in a different publication, and in the following, we focus on the heteroepitaxy of In$_2$Se$_3$ on Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and of Bi$_2$Se$_3$ on In$_2$Se$_3$ for growth of superlattice structures.

Depositions of In$_2$Se$_3$ on Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and Bi$_2$Se$_3$ on In$_2$Se$_3$ are readily achieved by switching In and Bi fluxes while keeping the flux of Se unchanged. For the purpose of In$_2$Se$_3$ growth, the In source has been set at a similar flux to Bi, i.e., In:Se ~ Bi:Se ~ 1:10. Fig. 2(a) depicts the RHEED specular-beam intensity variation during deposition of the SL structure of alternating Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and In$_2$Se$_3$, while typical RHEED patterns of the respective surfaces are shown in the insets. Note that during the first Bi$_2$Se$_3$ layer deposition on In$_2$Se$_3$ buffer, the RHEED intensity oscillates as mentioned earlier, but such oscillations disappear later due to a change of the growth mode from island nucleation to step-flow. It is also seen that at the start of In$_2$Se$_3$ deposition on Bi$_2$Se$_3$, the RHEED intensity drops suddenly, which may reflect a roughening of the surface. Indeed, a slightly rougher surface of In$_2$Se$_3$ than that of Bi$_2$Se$_3$ may be inferred from a thickening and elongation of the diffraction streaks in inset (ii) than (i) of Fig. 2, which are RHEED patterns taken from In$_2$Se$_3$ and Bi$_2$Se$_3$ layers, respectively. However, we also wish to point out that the specular part of the RHEED is in the vicinity of the (009) Bragg spot of bulk Bi$_2$Se$_3$; therefore a lattice parameter change upon In$_2$Se$_3$ deposition makes the specular-beam off the Bragg spot, contributing further to the intensity drop. Similarly, upon the commencement of Bi$_2$Se$_3$ growth on In$_2$Se$_3$, there is a sharp intensity rise, part of which is due to the smoothening of the surface and another part is due to a shift of the Bragg spot relative to the specular beam. Regardless of the intensity variations, the RHEED pattern remains streaky showing an unstructured (1 x 1) pattern throughout the deposition process. Therefore, 2D layer-by-layer growth is maintained. This contrasts to the case of Bi$_2$Se$_3$/ZnSe growth, where there is a tendency of 3D islanding of ZnSe surface when deposited on Bi$_2$Se$_3$. This fact reflects the very nature of van der Waals bonding at the Bi$_2$Se$_3$/In$_2$Se$_3$ hetero-interfaces. They are of low surface energy, and the lattice misfit strains are easily relieved without breaking chemical bonds.

Strain states of the heterostructures during the SL sample growth are monitored by the RHEED as well. The evolution of the measured reciprocal lattice parameter $D$ [defined in the inset (i) of Fig. 2(a)] is shown in Fig. 2(b). First, one observes the lattices of heteroepitaxial Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and In$_2$Se$_3$ approach their strain-free parameters with increasing deposition thicknesses. A closer look at the strain relaxation processes [Fig. 2(c)] reveals that the residual strain defined as $\varepsilon = (a-a_0)/(a_0-D) = (D_0-D)/D$ follows an exponential relation with time or layer thickness, $h$, i.e., $\varepsilon = \varepsilon_0 \exp(-h/\lambda)$, where $a$ and $D$ are, respectively, real- and reciprocal-space lattice parameters of the epilayer, while $a_0$ and $D_0$ are the corresponding parameters for a strain-free layer. $\varepsilon_0$ is the lattice misfit between the epilayer and the substrate, and for Bi$_2$Se$_3$/In$_2$Se$_3$, it is ~3.4% as mentioned earlier. The constant $\lambda$ characterizes the rate at which strain relaxes (i.e., the thickness at which strain is reduced by a factor of $e \approx 2.718$). Least-square fittings of the data in Fig. 2(c) result in $\lambda \sim 16$ Å and $\sim 4$ Å, respectively, for the processes of Bi$_2$Se$_3$ deposition on In$_2$Se$_3$ and Bi$_2$Se$_3$ growth on In$_2$Se$_3$. These are relatively small values (i.e., $\leq 1 \sim 2$ QLs), characterizing a fast rate of strain relaxation process. According to elasticity theory, there would exist a critical film thickness $h_c$, below which a coherent film can be grown without strain-relaxation. If so, for a lattice misfit of ~3.4% as in Bi$_2$Se$_3$/In$_2$Se$_3$, $h_c \sim 20$ Å, assuming the strain-relieving dislocations to have the Burgers vector of ~0.4 nm in magnitude. This is not what is observed by experiments. Instead, one finds the...
strain to relax at the very start of the heteroepitaxy. Together with the small $\lambda$ derived above, it asserts a strain relaxation process occurring at the van der Waals interfaces, where Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and In$_2$Se$_3$ compounds couple very weakly. Strain relaxation invokes no chemical bond breaking. On the other hand, the fact that strain does not fully relax upon the commencement of hetero-growth indicates some extents of constraints of the lattice by that of the substrate at the van der Waals interface. This conforms to the very nature of van der Waals epitaxy.$^6$\textsuperscript{12}

Lastly in Fig. 2, we observe the surfaces and strain states to evolve highly repeatedly during different periods of... In$_2$Se$_3$/Bi$_2$Se$_3$,..., SL growth. It implies high uniformity of the structures. To show this, we present, in Fig. 3(a), a XRD $\theta$-2$\theta$ scan of a 20-period...5 nm-In$_2$Se$_3$/10 nm-Bi$_2$Se$_3$... SL sample. For comparison, result from a single-layered heterostructure of In$_2$Se$_3$/Bi$_2$Se$_3$ is also shown. As is seen, up to five satellite peaks are detected from the SL sample, confirming the integrity of the structure. From the period of the satellite peaks as well as from its FFT result [Fig. 3(b)], we derive the period of the SL structure to be of 15 nm, matching exactly with the designed thickness period of the SL structure. Fig. 4 shows a high-resolution TEM micrograph of a similar sample, i.e., 3 nm-In$_2$Se$_3$/7 nm-Bi$_2$Se$_3$ SL, from which alternating In$_2$Se$_3$/Bi$_2$Se$_3$ layers are clearly resolvable. The hetero-interfaces are sharp. No extended defect is seen. However, there appear some slight contrast variations, particularly in the regions of In$_2$Se$_3$ layers. This may be caused by a residual strain field in the film. The presence of minute amount of residual strain in In$_2$Se$_3$ layers may be inferred from Fig. 2(b), in which we observe the lattice constant of the In$_2$Se$_3$ layer does not reach its strain-free value at the thickness of 3 nm. From the electron diffraction pattern shown in the inset of Fig. 4, we observe only diffraction spots from Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and In$_2$Se$_3$ crystals (overlapped to each other), suggesting high crystallinity of the phases in the materials.

To conclude, Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and In$_2$Se$_3$ form a superior combination for heteroepitaxy of SL and/or MQW structures, where topological insulator is embedded in a normal band insulator for exploration of quantum size and surface-coupling effects. The van der Waals hetero-interface ensures the 2D growth mode of the structure with sharp interfaces. Strain relaxation is realized at the van der Waals gaps without invoking dislocations. The SL of In$_2$Se$_3$/Bi$_2$Se$_3$ fabricated by MBE show high structural quality, which are candidates for future transport and optical studies.

We wish to thank W. K. Ho and S. Y. Chui for their help in the growth and XRD experiments, respectively. The project is financially supported by General Research Funds (Nos. 7061/10P and 7061/11P) and a Collaborative Research Fund (HKU 10/CRF/08) from the Research Grant Council of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

8. Z. Y. Wang, X. Guo, H. D. Li, W. K. Ho, and M. H. Xie, “Growth characteristics of topological insulator Bi$_2$Se$_3$ films on different substrates” (unpublished).