Design principles for HgTe based Topological Insulator Devices

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The topological insulator properties of CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum wells are theoretically studied. The CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum well behaves as a topological insulator beyond a critical well width dimension. It is shown that if the barrier(CdTe) and well-region(HgTe) are altered by replacing them with the alloy Cd\textsubscript{x}Hg\textsubscript{1−x}Te of various stoichiometries, the critical width can be changed. The critical quantum well width is shown to depend on temperature, applied stress, growth directions and external electric fields. Based on these results, a novel device concept is proposed that allows to switch between a normal semiconducting and topological insulator state through application of moderate external electric fields.

PACS numbers:

Keywords:

I. Introduction

An insulator is conventionally defined as a material that does not conduct electricity. In most insulators the lack of electric conduction is explained using its band-structure properties. The band theory predicts that an insulator has an energy gap separating the conduction and valence bands. As a result of this finite band-gap there are no electronic states to support the flow of current. Recently, materials that have an energy gap in bulk but possess gapless states bound to the surface or edge have been theoretically predicted and experimentally observed. These states, in a time reversal invariant system are protected against perturbation and nonmagnetic disorder. Materials that support such states are known as topological insulators (TI). Examples of materials with such properties include Bi\textsubscript{2}Te\textsubscript{3}, Bi\textsubscript{2}Se\textsubscript{3}, Bi\textsubscript{x}Sb\textsubscript{1−x} alloys, and CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum wells. Bi\textsubscript{2}Te\textsubscript{3},Bi\textsubscript{2}Se\textsubscript{3}, and Bi\textsubscript{x}Sb\textsubscript{1−x} belong to the class of 3-D topological insulators (3D-TI) and host bound states on their surface. CdTe-HgTe-CdTe quantum wells, which were the first predicted TIs, are 2-D topological insulators (2-D TI). Unlike their 3D counterpart, they possess bound states at the edge of the quantum well. These conducting surface and edge states develop at the boundary between two insulators, where one is normal (NI) and the other of inverted band ordering. The surface states, which are subject to the details of the band properties of each involved material can mutually influence each other. It is therefore essential to theoretically study the surface states under various conditions.

This work proposes ways that can efficiently invert the band profile of a CdTe/HgTe/CdTe heterostructure and create bound edge states. Specifically, the transition from an NI to a TI through external adiabatic parameters, adjustable lattice constants, or modulation of the electron-hole band coupling is the underlying theme. The paper is organized as follows: In Section II details of the CdTe/HgTe/CdTe structure and method to compute the energy dispersion are described. Section III discusses various inverted band structures, device and material conditions that can lead to topologically protected conducting surface states. The concept of creating a switch from a topological insulator is developed here. The key results discussed in the paper are summarized in Section IV.

II. Materials and Methods

An HgTe quantum well flanked by CdTe barriers has been shown to have edge states with topological insulator properties. TI behaviour is possible because CdTe is a normal insulator and is placed in contact with an inverted insulator HgTe. A representative sketch of the device is shown in Fig. 1. CdTe is a wide band gap semiconductor (\(E_g = 1.606\) eV) with positive energy gap (NI) and a small lattice mismatch of 0.5% with HgTe. CdTe, because of similar lattice constants is chosen as the barrier for the HgTe well region though in principle any normal ordered material would suffice. The normal valence and conduction band are reversed in their energetic order in HgTe as indicated in Fig. 1 and explained in the next paragraph.

![FIG. 1: Sketch of a CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum well heterostructure. The lowest conduction band (CB) state is labeled with E1 and the highest valence band (VB) state with H1. The inversion of bands for the CdTe/HgTe/CdTe heterostructure.](attachment:image.png)
A heterostructure is achieved through the HgTe component. Both CdTe and HgTe belong to the zinc blende (ZB) structure with \( \Gamma_6 \) group point symmetry. The highest valence and lowest conduction band is made up of \( p \) and \( s \) orbitals respectively. A normal band order at \( \Gamma \) has lowest conduction band \((j = 1/2)\) with \( \Gamma_6 \) symmetry above the top of the valence bands \((j = 3/2)\) with \( \Gamma_8 \) symmetry. The \( \Gamma_6 \) state has \( s \)-type symmetry and the \( \Gamma_8 \) state has \( p \)-type symmetry. In a normal ordered material \( \Gamma_6 \) state is energetically higher than the \( \Gamma_8 \) state. This order is reversed in bulk HgTe at the \( \Gamma \) point due to the high spin-orbit coupling and a significant Darwin term contribution. \([13]\) The strong spin orbit coupling pushes the valence bands upwards while the Darwin term shifts the \( s \)-type conduction band down. The Darwin term can only influence the \( s \)-type bands. \([14]\) The combined effect of spin orbit coupling and Darwin term yields an inverted band order at the \( \Gamma \) point for HgTe. \([15]\]

The energy gap at \( \Gamma \) which is defined as

\[
E_g = E(\Gamma_6) - E(\Gamma_8),
\]

therefore turns out to be negative for HgTe. The normal and inverted band structures of CdTe and HgTe are illustrated in Fig. 2(a) and Fig. 2(b) respectively.

![FIG. 2: Bulk band structure of CdTe (a) and HgTe(b). The ordering of the conduction and valence bands near the band gap at the \( \Gamma \) point in HgTe (Fig. 2b) is opposite to the one in CdTe (Fig. 2a). In HgTe, the hole state \( \Gamma_8 \) is above the electron state \( \Gamma_6 \).](image)

In this work, electronic properties of the \( \langle 001 \rangle \) CdTe/HgTe/CdTe heterostructure are calculated within an 8-band k.p framework that includes a linear coupling between conduction and valence bands. \([16, 17]\) In the calculations presented, the \( z \)-axis is normal to the heterostructure and is also the confinement direction. The valence band edge \( E_v \), Luttinger parameters, and other related material properties are collected in Table I. \([18]\)

The boundary conditions are imposed by setting the wave function to zero at the edge of the device. Strain is added to the electronic Hamiltonian using deformation potentials defined in the Bir-Pikus method. \([19, 20]\)

### TABLE I: 8-band k.p parameters for CdTe and HgTe. \( E_v \), \( E_g \), \( P_{cv} \), and \( V_{so} \) are in units of eV. The remaining Luttinger parameters are dimensionless constants and the effective mass is in units of the free electron mass.

| Material | \( E_v \) | \( \gamma_1 \) | \( \gamma_2 \) | \( \gamma_3 \) | \( m^* \) | \( E_g \) | \( P_{cv} \) | \( V_{so} \) |
|----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| CdTe     | -0.27  | 5.372  | 1.671  | 1.981  | 0.11   | 1.606  | 18.8   | 0.91   |
| HgTe     | 0.00   | -16.08 | -10.6  | -8.8   | -0.031 | -0.303 | 18.8   | 1.08   |

### III. Results and Discussion

**Comparison with experiment: band gap and critical width**Experiments report that a CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum well heterostructure with a well width under 6.3 nm exhibits a normal band order with positive \( E_g \). \([21, 22]\) The calculation of the present work confirms that the conduction states at \( \Gamma \) are indeed located above the valence states and the energy gap is positive (Fig. 3a). All band structure parameters used to reproduce the experimental observation were valid at 0 K. When the well width is exactly 6.3 nm, a Dirac system \([23]\) is formed in the volume of the device (Fig. 3).

![FIG. 3: Band structure of HgTe quantum well of thickness 6.3 nm. At this width, the lowest conduction band (E1) and highest valence band (H1) at the \( \Gamma \) point are equal.](image)

Beyond this critical well width of 6.3 nm, the heterostructure has its bands fully inverted. The band profile has a reverse ordering of the \( s \)-type and \( p \)-type orbitals (Fig. 3c) and \( E_g < 0 \).

Accordingly, a nano-ribbon of width 100.0 nm formed by quantizing the quantum well in its in-plane direction has a positive band gap (as shown in Fig. 3b). Similarly, a nanoribbon of width 100.0 nm constructed out of an inverted quantum well possesses gap-less TI edge states. The band structure of this situation is illustrated in Fig. 3d.)
FIG. 4: Bandstructure of a HgTe quantum well of thickness 5.5 nm(a). A HgTe nano-ribbon formed out of this quantum well of thickness 5.5 nm and height of 100 nm shows a positive band gap. Fig. 4c shows the bandstructure of an inverted quantum well of thickness 10.0 nm. The corresponding quantum wire has a linearly dispersing (Dirac-cone) edge states (d).

The corresponding absolute value of the squared edge-state wave functions is plotted in Fig. 5. The absolute value of the wave functions for the two edge states is maximum at the edge and gradually decay in to the bulk. This establishes that they belong exclusively to the edge states. In conclusion, the band-gap closing Dirac cone shown in Fig. 3 marks the transition from a positive band-gap to a negative one.

Band nature at finite momenta: The inversion of bands in the volume of the well is necessary for edge states with topological insulator behavior. It is important to note however, that the process of inversion happens only at the Γ point. In the inverted dispersion plot (Fig. 4b), for momenta different from the Γ point, the band labeled with ”H1” progresses from $p$ to $s$-type. Similarly the band labeled with ”E1” changes character from $s$ to $p$. Both the bands, at a finite momentum acquire atomic orbital characteristics associated with a normally ordered set of bands. TI behavior is therefore restricted to a special set of momentum points where the band structure is inverted. These set of points are collectively called the time-reversal-invariant-momentum (TRIM) points. [24]

Well thickness continuously tunes the TI properties: With increasing well width, the band gap decreases continuously until the HgTe well thickness reaches 6.3 nm (see Fig. 6). This is due to the diminishing confinement of the well’s s and p-type bands. For well thicker than 6.3 nm, the confinement is small enough such that the inverted band ordering of HgTe is restored and the absolute value of the negative band gap is increasing (see Fig. 6).

At a HgTe well width of 8.2 nm, the s-type band drops even below the second confined p-type state. This re-ordering of bands with well thickness is summarized in Table II and illustrated in Fig. 6.

TABLE II: Orbital character of the top most valence band and lowest conduction band in CdTe-HgTe-CdTe heterostructure depending on the well width $d_{QW}$. The critical well width $d_c$ is the equal to 6.3 nm.

| $d_{QW}$ Well thickness | Highest Val.Band  | Lowest Cond.Band |
|-------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| $d_{QW} < d_c$          | p-type            | s-type           |
| 8.2 nm $> d_{QW} > d_c$ | s-type            | p-type           |
| $d_{QW} > 8.2$nm        | p-type            | p-type           |

A. Stoichiometric and Temperature Control of Critical Width

In the previous sections, it has been shown that the effective band gap of the CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum well depends on the confinement and consequently on the band gap difference of the well and barrier materials. Both, alloying and temperature are known to influence the effective band gap. The band gap of Cd$_x$Hg$_{1-x}$Te as a function of temperature $T$ and stoichiometry $x$ is given by

$$E_g = -304 + \frac{0.63T^2}{1 + T} (1 - 2x) + 1858x + 54x^2.$$  

A plot for the band-gap variation for the Cd$_x$Hg$_{1-x}$Te alloy is given in Fig. 7.

When the quantum well material of the original CdTe/HgTe/CdTe structure is substituted by Cd$_x$Hg$_{1-x}$Te alloy, the critical width becomes temperature and $x$ dependent. This is shown in Fig. 5 (a). Remarkably, all critical widths are equal or larger than the intrinsic critical width of 6.3 nm. Higher concentration of CdTe in the quantum well reduces the Darwin
FIG. 6: Absolute value of the band gap of a CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum well as a function of the well width. Well widths larger than 6.3 nm produce inverted band structures and can be exploited for topological insulator devices.

FIG. 7: Calculated band gap of bulk Cd$_x$Hg$_{1-x}$Te as a function of stoichiometry and temperature. At $x=0$, the bulk band gap of HgTe (0.303 eV) is reproduced. The contribution from HgTe. Therefore, the band inversion requires a wider HgTe region. Alternatively, replacing the barrier material with Cd$_x$Hg$_{1-x}$Te also allows tuning the confinement and consequently the critical width. It is shown in Fig. 7(b) that this replacement yields critical widths smaller than the intrinsic 6.3 nm if the temperature is allowed to attain values below 100 K. For a Cd molar concentration of $x = 0.68$ and $T = 0$ K, the critical width dropped to 4.4 nm. This is due to the enhanced Darwin contribution to the electronic properties with increased Hg content.

FIG. 8: Critical widths to get inverted band structures of CdTe/Cd$_{1-x}$Hg$_x$Te/CdTe quantum wells (a) and Cd$_x$Hg$_{1-x}$Te/HgTe/Cd$_x$Hg$_{1-x}$Te quantum wells (b) as a function of temperature and stoichiometry $x$. 
TABLE III: The optimal tensile stress and growth conditions for CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum wells to achieve the least (L), highest (H) and intermediate (I) critical width, respectively.

| Growth Axis | Tensile uniaxial stress |
|-------------|-------------------------|
| ⟨001⟩      | L           | H           | I           |
| ⟨110⟩      | L           | H           | I           |
| ⟨111⟩      | H           | L           | I           |

B. Critical widths under different growth conditions

Apart from alloy stoichiometry, the confinement also depends on the well and barrier masses. A way to tune these effective confinement masses is by growing the quantum well in different directions. The different masses then give different effective well confinement and accordingly different critical widths. This dependence is illustrated in Fig. 9. It shows the critical width of the CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum well in a sequence of growth directions. The critical widths of the ⟨111⟩ and ⟨110⟩ growth directions are 5.52 nm and 5.72 nm respectively. Both these values are smaller than the ⟨001⟩ grown quantum well critical width of 6.3 nm.

FIG. 9: Critical widths of CdTe/HgTe/CdTe heterostructures grown along ⟨N11⟩ direction as a function of N (a). The bandgap closing for ⟨100⟩, ⟨110⟩, and ⟨111⟩ grown CdTe/HgTe/CdTe at different well widths is shown in (b). Band gap closing at different well dimensions give the corresponding critical width.

Alternatively, uniaxial stress can also tune the effective confinement masses. As representative cases, CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum wells were grown along ⟨001⟩, ⟨110⟩, and ⟨111⟩ directions. Each quantum well was then subjected to uniaxial stress along ⟨001⟩, ⟨110⟩, and ⟨111⟩ directions. Uniaxial stress along ⟨001⟩, ⟨110⟩, and ⟨111⟩ was employed on three sets of CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum wells grown along ⟨001⟩, ⟨110⟩, and ⟨111⟩. The behaviour of the critical width for each case is shown in Fig. 10. The ideal stress orientation for each growth direction is summarized in Tables III and IV.

C. Application of an external electric field

The application of an external electric field changes the confinement and the band properties of the well states. In particular, the Rashba (structural inversion asymmetry) effect gets enhanced by electric fields in growth direction. Figure 11 shows the critical width as function of the external electric field applied in the growth direction. The critical width decays with increasing field for all considered temperatures. The Rashba effect that supports the band inversion of HgTe gets increased by the electric field. Consequently, smaller well widths are required to invert the CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum well structure when external electric fields are present.

Since external electric fields can tune the critical width, the concept of a TI-switch is obvious: A CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum well with a well width that is close, but below the critical width can be switched
IV. Conclusion

The present work investigates the conditions under which band inversion can occur in a CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum well heterostructure. It is shown that this band inversion is essential for topological insulator properties. In agreement with experimental results, it is found that the HgTe quantum well has to be thicker than 6.3 nm to exhibit topological insulator properties. It is examined in detail how the critical width depends on various device parameters such as the growth direction, alloy stoichiometry, temperature, uniaxial stress, and external electric fields. In particular the external fields allow to switch the topological insulator properties of (001) grown CdTe/HgTe/CdTe quantum wells. This result proposes a new class of switching devices.

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Acknowledgments

Computational resources from nanoHUB.org and support by National Science Foundation (NSF) (Grant Nos. EEC-0228390, OCI-0749140) are acknowledged. This work was also supported by the Semiconductor Research Corporation’s (SRC) Nanoelectronics Research Initiative and National Institute of Standards & Technology through the Midwest Institute for Nanoelectronics Discovery (MIND), SRC Task 2141, and Intel Corporation.
