Field-Effect Persistent Photoconductivity

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We report a persistent increase or decrease in the two-dimensional electron density of AlAs or GaAs quantum wells flanked by AlGaAs barriers, brought about by illuminating the samples at \( T < 4 \) K while simultaneously applying a voltage bias between a back gate and the two-dimensional electron gas. Control of the final carrier density is achieved by tuning the back gate bias during illumination. Furthermore, the strength of the persistent photoconductivity depends on the Al mole fraction in the back Al\(_x\)Ga\(_{1-x}\)As barrier, and is largest at \( x \approx 0.4 \).

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Several compound semiconductors, when illuminated briefly at low temperatures (\( T \ll 100 \) K) with infrared or visible light, retain their photoconductivity for times that vary from a few minutes to hours or days. This remarkable phenomenon, called persistent photoconductivity (PPC), has been mostly observed in doped II-IV and III-V semiconductors such as AlGaAs:Si/Te \([1]\), ZnCdTe:Cl \([2]\), GaAsP:Te/S \([3]\), and AlN:Si \([4]\), in which it likely results from the formation of “DX-centers”. The latter are charged defect centers that behave as deep donors, and transform into metastable shallow donors under appropriate illumination. A successful microscopic model for the DX-centers in AlGaAs, based on large lattice relaxation, has been established by Chadi and Chang \([5]\).

A general picture of PPC, however, is still conspicuously missing, and alternative models are still being invoked to explain its origin. Indeed, PPC also occurs in materials that do not contain DX-centers \([1, 2, 7, 8]\), and can actually result in a reduction of the electrical conductivity, in which case it is referred to as negative PPC \([10, 11]\). Aside from the DX-center model, another mechanism put forward to account for PPC involves the photoexcitation and subsequent separation of electron-hole pairs, followed by trapping of some of the electrons (or holes) by the spacers/barriers \([6, 8]\). Deep levels in undoped materials such as GaN and GaAs may also result from the formation of anion antisites (e.g., N\(_{Ga}\)) or vacancies (V\(_{Ga}\) or V\(_{As}\) in GaAs) \([7, 8]\). In many cases, PPC probably stems from the cumulative effect of electron-hole pair excitation and relaxation of defects similar to the DX-centers.

The main result we wish to describe here is that the two-dimensional (2D) carrier density (\( n \)) in a GaAs or AlAs quantum well (QW) with suitable Al\(_x\)Ga\(_{1-x}\)As barriers (\( x \approx 0.4 \)), can be tuned reversibly from almost zero to values larger than \( 5 \times 10^{11} \) cm\(^{-2} \), by applying a small electric field (\( < 500 \) V/cm) between the 2D electrons and a back gate, while briefly illuminating the sample at \( T \approx 4 \) K with red LED light. In other words, the zero-frequency dielectric permittivity of Al\(_{0.39}\)Ga\(_{0.61}\)As, which is equal to 10\( \epsilon_0 \), increases effectively by two orders of magnitude when the material is illuminated at low temperatures, as calculated from the geometric capacitance of the sample. In samples with Al\(_{0.39}\)Ga\(_{0.61}\)As barriers, the carrier density thus induced in the QW remains approximately constant after light is turned off, while with barriers with a lower Al content, the photoconductivity is only partly persistent. Though most of our measurements were done in AlAs QWs, we also have some limited data on GaAs QWs, which we will discuss later in this report.

To quantify this field-effect PPC (FEPPC), we have performed measurements in an 11 nm-wide AlAs QW grown by molecular beam epitaxy (MBE), surrounded by Al\(_{0.39}\)Ga\(_{0.61}\)As barriers, with a single Si front dopant layer separated from the QW by a 75 nm-thick Al\(_{0.39}\)Ga\(_{0.61}\)As spacer (Fig. 1). Two samples were cut from the same wafer, one unpatterned and contacted in the van der Pauw geometry (sample A), and one patterned as a Hall bar mesa (sample B). Both were fitted with a gate located on the back of the 400 \( \mu \)m-thick, un-
doped GaAs substrate. 150 nm-thick AuGeNi contacts were deposited and alloyed at 440 °C, and samples were cooled in the dark, either in a 4He dewar, or in a 3He cryostat kept at T ∼ 4 K. A red LED (wavelength 660 nm) was placed next to the sample at a distance of about 1 cm. The carrier density was determined through measurements of the Hall resistance (R_{xy}). From transport measurements done on this and other samples, we have confirmed that the density deduced from R_{xy} at 4 K is the same as the 2D carrier density obtained from Shubnikov-de Haas data at 0.3 K. Magnetotransport data in AlAs samples illuminated using the technique described here have been reported elsewhere [12].

Figure 2 illustrates the effect of illumination on the four-point resistance (R) of sample A with an applied back gate bias (V_{BG}), at T = 4.2 K. At time t = 0, V_{BG} = 4 V [13]. V_{BG} is first raised to 7 V, which changes R by a negligible amount in the dark. As the LED is turned on, R drops from 2400 to 830 Ω in about 30 s, after which it remains constant. The LED current is then turned off at t = 125 s, which does not affect R. At t = 165 s, V_{BG} is set back to 4 V, which does not change R in the dark, and then at t = 177 s, the LED is turned back on. As a result, R now increases to reach a maximum of 2270 Ω, slightly lower than its value at t = 0. After reaching this maximum, R slowly decreases while the LED is on. Finally, the LED is turned off again at t = 270 s, keeping R unchanged. The data in Fig. 2 thus show that the resistance drop obtained after illumination at V_{BG} = 7 V can be partly reversed by illuminating the sample at the “original” V_{BG} = 4 V. The initial R = 2400 Ω cannot be fully recovered at V_{BG} = 4 V, however, indicating that the sample keeps some memory of its illumination. This initial R can nevertheless be retrieved if the LED is turned on at V_{BG} lower than 4 V.

The evolution of R as we illuminate sample A at successively lower V_{BG} is plotted in Fig. 3, obtained in a separate run. The current passing through the LED is plotted in the lower panel as a function of time. At time t = 0, the sample density is low (< 2 × 10^{11} cm^{-2}), and R is correspondingly high. At t = 15 s, we illuminate the sample at V_{BG} = 30 V until R drops to 260 Ω and stops decreasing. We then reduce V_{BG} to 20 V, which does not affect R (even as we shine light upon the sample). We further decrease V_{BG} to 15 V, which in the dark does not change R either. The LED is then turned on: R increases, quickly reaches a maximum value of 530 Ω, then starts to decrease slowly, similarly to the behavior seen in Fig. 2. We turn off the LED right after R reaches its maximum value (For our experiment at lower V_{BG}, this time is marked by a vertical arrow in Fig. 2). R remains constant after illumination has stopped. This procedure is then repeated by (1) lowering V_{BG}, (2) illuminating the sample, thereby increasing R, and (3) turning the LED off as R comes close to its peak value. From the data of Fig. 3, we see that the resistance obtained after illumination increases as V_{BG} decreases. When light is applied at V_{BG} lower than 3 V, our contact resistance to the 2D electrons becomes too high for R to be measured reliably.

A similar illumination sequence (with a denser set of
back gate biases) was applied to sample B, and the carrier density was measured after every illumination. The density obtained after each exposure to light at $V_{BG}$ is plotted as a function of $V_{BG}$ in Fig. 4. For $V_{BG} > 16$ V, the density remains constant at $n \approx 5.6 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$, while for lower biases ($5 < V_{BG} < 14$ V), $n$ decreases quickly and approximately linearly with $V_{BG}$. It is worth noting that the change in $n$ with $V_{BG}$ is about 200 times larger than what it would be if this experiment were realized without illumination: in this case, the slope of $n(V_{BG})$ would be about $2 \times 10^{8}$ cm$^{-2}$/V.

For $V_{BG} \lesssim 5$ V, the density decreases more slowly as $V_{BG}$ is lowered. We note that for $n$ lower than $\sim 1.7 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$, our contact resistance in this sample becomes prohibitively high, preventing an accurate measurement of the density. As indicated earlier for sample A, we also note that the densities plotted in Fig. 4 depend on the history of conditions applied to the sample during a given cooldown: a repeat of the sequence of illuminations at incremental values of $V_{BG}$ tends to shift the curve of Fig. 4 to lower $V_{BG}$.

All other AlAs QWs with Al$_{0.39}$Ga$_{0.61}$As barriers we have measured so far display a behavior qualitatively similar to that of Figs. 2–4. $n$ can be tuned controllably from less than 2 to about $5 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$, by illuminating the sample at $0 < V_{BG} < 20$ V. In QWs confined within lower-x Al$_{x}$Ga$_{1-x}$As barriers, however, the maximum density obtained after illumination is lower than in samples with $x \approx 0.4$. We define this “maximum” density ($n_{\text{max}}$) in a given sample as that reached by increasing $V_{BG}$ and by illuminating the sample at $T \sim 4$ K for brief intervals ($< 5$ seconds) until $n$ saturates. The density obtained in this manner is characteristic of the sample, in the sense that it does not depend on cooldown or on the history of illumination and gating.

In Fig. 4 we plot $n_{\text{max}}$ for different AlAs samples, as a function of the Al concentrations ($x_B$) in the back AlGaAs barrier. The structures grown above the AlAs QW in these samples are all similar to the one shown in Fig. 1. As $x_B$ decreases from 0.39 to 0.08, $n_{\text{max}}$ decreases from about $5.6$ to $1.9 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$, showing a direct correlation between $x_B$ and sample density. Furthermore, out of the several samples grown with $x_B = 0.45$, none has a density higher than $4.0 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$, indicating that the strongest FEPPC is obtained with $x_B \approx 0.4$. We point out that, when $x \gtrsim 0.4$, the forbidden gap in AlGaAs becomes indirect, so that photons indeed are much less efficiently absorbed by the barriers.

Although we do not have a quantitative explanation for the phenomenon described in this report, we can nevertheless draw a qualitative picture of FEPPC from our measurements. First, since the effect depends sensitively on the Al concentration in the AlGaAs barrier underneath the QW, we suggest that the charged centers responsible for the increase in 2D carrier density after illumination are also located below the QW. In addition, because of screening, the back gate has little effect on electric fields above the QW when 2D electrons are present in the QW. Thus, since the increase in 2D density brought about by illumination at $V_{BG} > 15$ V is at least $4 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$ (Fig. 4), we deduce that FEPPC creates $\gtrsim 4 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$ positive charges in the back AlGaAs barrier.

Our next question concerns the nature of these positive charges in the back AlGaAs layer: can they result from unintentional impurities present in the MBE during growth, or do they originate from some other kind of crystal defect? Because contaminants (mainly C) in our MBE are mostly incorporated as acceptors in the barriers, they cannot cause the effect we observe. Furthermore, the concentration of unintentional dopants required to produce a 2D density observed in our measurements needs to be greater than $5 \times 10^{16}$ cm$^{-3}$, a value about 500 times larger than the estimated background impurity concentration in our samples. Thus residual impurities cannot explain the magnitude of the field- and light-induced electric charge, and we are led to conclude that this charge results from the presence of crystal defects in AlGaAs, which are able to bind a positive charge at low temperatures. High quality AlGaAs alloys are notoriously difficult to grow by MBE, so a larger density of crystal defects is actually expected in this material.

A simple mechanism for FEPPC for $V_{BG} > 0$, outlined below, can have two possible starting points: either photons absorbed by the back AlGaAs layer produce electron-hole pairs, which are then separated by the electric field; or light can induce a deep-to-shallow transition in levels associated with AlGaAs defects, thereby generating an effective (DX-like) donor in the barrier. In
AlAs: in GaAs QWs bounded by Al

the physics of FEPPC. Spectroscopy [18], could yield valuable insight into the measurements of the photoluminescence and the photoconductivity after illumination with $V_{BG}$ = 6 V (150 V/cm), while it could be related to the near-degeneracy of $\Gamma$ and the conduction band minima in Al content of the back barrier: four wafers with $x_B = 0.4$, and three different wafers with $x_B = 0.45$. All sample structures are based on the layout shown in Fig. 1. (*) Because of the low Al content ($x_B = 0.08$) of the back barrier in this sample, 2D electrons are located both in the AlAs QW and in the Al$_{0.08}$Ga$_{0.92}$As.

both scenarios, the field separates positive and negative charges spatially, attracting electrons towards the back gate, and repelling the positive charge towards the QW. Once the LED is turned off, some of the positive charges remain trapped in the AlGaAs close to the QW, creating an electric field that is much stronger than the field resulting from $V_{BG}$. We do not know at this point the nature and energetics of the charge-trapping defects, or the precise mechanism for charge transport through the AlGaAs during and after illumination. The reason why FEPPC is strongest for $x_B = 0.4$ is also unknown, though it could be related to the near-degeneracy of $\Gamma$ and $X$ conduction band minima in Al$_{x_1}$Ga$_{x_0.6}$As [17]. Measurements of the photoluminescence and the photoconductivity spectrum, as well as optical deep level transient spectroscopy [18], could yield valuable insight into the physics of FEPPC.

Our results in GaAs are qualitatively similar to those in AlAs: in GaAs QWs bounded by Al$_{0.39}$Ga$_{0.61}$As barriers, we obtained a density increase of about $5 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$ after illumination with $V_{BG}$ = 6 V (150 V/cm), while a much smaller density increase ($\sim 1 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$) was observed under illumination at $V_{BG} = 0$ V. We did not measure the dependence of FEPPC on $x_B$ in GaAs QWs.

Lastly, we point out that when both front and back gates are added to the sample, densities as high as $n = 9.6 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$ can be obtained after sample illumination. FEPPC may thus also occur in the top AlGaAs barrier, although the effect is complicated by the presence of intentional Si dopants near the surface of our sample. We have not studied the front-gate-dependent PPC in greater detail. It is also worth noting that when Si dopants are present in the back barrier of the sample, FEPPC seems to have a weaker effect on 2D carrier density, possibly because the dopant layer partly screens $V_{BG}$ during illumination.

In summary, we describe in this paper the basic properties of a new form of persistent photoconductivity, tunable with an electric field. By illuminating AlAs or GaAs quantum wells (surrounded Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$As barriers) while applying an electric field ranging from 0 to $\sim 500$ V/cm across the back AlGaAs barrier, we can vary the 2D electron density from $\sim 0$ to more than $5 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$. FEPPC is strongly sensitive to the Al mole fraction of the back Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$As barrier: the light-induced 2D density increases with $x$, and reaches a maximum at $x \approx 0.4$. The fact that $n$ depends chiefly on the Al content of the back barrier indicates that the charged centers responsible for back-gate-controlled FEPPC in our samples are mostly located within that barrier.

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References and Notes

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[13] To obtain the initial state in this experiment, we illuminated the sample at $V_{BG} = 4$ V.
[14] A small leakage current ($I_{\text{leak}}$) flows between 2D electrons and back gate when the LED is on. In our experiment, $I_{\text{leak}} \sim 1.5$ nA at $V_{BG} = 15$ V, which may thus lower the effective back gate bias applied to the sample, since $I_{\text{leak}}$ causes a voltage drop through the semi-insulating GaAs substrate. Our setup does not allow measurement of the voltage potential drop across the AlGaAs barrier only.
[15] Densities up to twice higher than the nominal $n_{\text{max}}$ in AlAs QWs with “low-x” Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$As barriers ($x \lesssim 0.3$) can be obtained by illuminating the sample for much longer times (minutes to tens of minutes).
[16] FEPPC is unlikely to be caused solely by a process within the AlAs QW, since the effect is also observed in GaAs QWs.
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