Ultralow Work Function of the Electride Sr$_3$CrN$_3$

Cuicui Wang,$^a$ Miaoting Xu,$^a$ Keith T. Butler$^b$ and Lee A. Burton$^{a*}$

Electrides have valence electrons that occupy free space in the crystal structure, making them easier to extract. This feature can be used in catalysis for important reactions that usually require a high-temperature and high-pressure environments, such as ammonia synthesis. In this paper, we use density functional theory to investigate the behaviour of interstitial electrons of the 1-dimensional electride Sr$_3$CrN$_3$. We find that the bulk excess electron density persists on introduction of surface terminations, that the crystal termination perpendicular to the 1D free-electron channel is highly stable and we confirm an extremely low work function with hybrid functional methods. Our results indicate that Sr$_3$CrN$_3$ is a potentially important novel catalyst, with accessible, directional and extractable free electron density.

To date, there is no 1D electride in active use as a catalyst but recently Chanhom et al. confirmed Sr$_3$CrN$_3$ as a new one-dimensional electride with a partially filled d-shell transition metal.$^{17}$ The excess electron density originates from the Cr in a 4+ rather than a more typical 3+ state.$^{18}$ The structure is composed of trigonal units of CrN$_3$ planar in the a-b axis and the Sr ions form distorted 5-fold coordination environments with N anions coordinated towards 1 dimensional channels in the y-axis, in which resides the excess electron density. The crystal structure belongs to the P6$_3$/m space group (symmetry number 176), and is shown in Figure 1.

We investigate the non-polar surface terminations of Sr$_3$CrN$_3$ with density functional theory (DFT). We find that the interstitial electron density persists, even upon introduction of a surface termination. We also find that the surface perpendicular to the one-dimensional channel of Sr$_3$CrN$_3$ is the most stable despite exposing the excess electron density to the external system. Finally, we find the work function of this surface to be extremely low, which means that the electrons should be able to transfer to almost any reactants. Overall, Sr$_3$CrN$_3$ is an exciting new material, of interest for fundamental and applied reasons, and is deserving of further research.

Figure 1: Sr$_3$CrN$_3$ crystal structure with spheres representing atoms of Sr (green), Cr (blue) and N (white). The unit cell is shown with a black box and the 1D channel is at the centre of the image.

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$^a$International Centre for Quantum and Molecular Structures, Department of Physics, Shanghai University, Shanghai 200444, China.

$^b$Department of Chemistry, University of Reading, Reading, RG6 6AD, UK.

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2. Methods

We used density functional theory (DFT) as implemented in the Vienna Ab Initio Simulation Package (VASP) to evaluate the total the energy of compounds.20,21 For the exchange-correlational functional, we employ a mix of Generalized Gradient Approximation (GGA) within the Perdew-Burke-Enzerhof (PBE) formulation of the exchange-correlation functional.22 We use the Projector Augmented Wave (PAW) method for modeling core electrons with an energy cut-off of 520 eV.23,24 This cut-off corresponds to 1.3 times the highest recommended among the pseudopotentials used. All computations are performed with spin polarization on and with magnetic ions in a high-spin ferromagnetic initialization (the system can relax to a low spin state during the DFT relaxation). We use a k-point mesh of 6x6x9, with the Monkhorst-Pack method.25 The energy difference for ionic convergence is set to $2 \times 10^{-5}$ eV.

To calculate the surface energies and work function we create slab models. The method of Hinuma et al. is used to expand the cell to a non-polar supercell of the crystal, with a vacuum region of around 15 Å.26 This way we obtain Sr$_3$CrN$_3$(001), (100), (101) and (110) slab models, as shown in Figure 2.

Surface energy, $\gamma$ is defined as the difference between surface free energy and bulk free energy.27-29 The surface energy of each surface is calculated according to eqn (1),30 in which, $E_{total}$ is the total energy of the constructed slab, $E_{bulk}$ is the energy the bulk material unit cell, $n$ is the number of formula units contained in the slab model and $A$ is the surface area of the slab. The factor of 2 accounts for the surfaces at either end of one slab model calculation.

$$\gamma = (E_{total} - nE_{bulk})/(2A) \quad (1)$$

To obtain an accurate work function ($\phi$) we use the hybrid functional HSE0631-34 with a shieling distance of 0.207 Å$^{-1}$ and 25% Hartree–Fock exchange. We use eqn (2)35,36 to calculate the work function, in which $\Delta V$ is the difference in electrostatic potential between the vacuum and the macroscopic average electrostatic potential of the material (derived using the method of Butler et al)36 and $E_F$ is the Fermi level calculated from the bulk, periodic material, also at HSE06 level of theory.

$$\phi = \Delta V - E_F \quad (2)$$

3. Results and discussion

The lattice constants obtained from relaxation of the bulk material are shown in Table 1, which is consistent with the values observed in experiment.19 The calculated lattice vector values are within 3% error of the experimentally reported case.

The (001), (100), (101) and (110) slab models of Sr$_3$CrN$_3$ are shown in Figure 2. The chosen terminations of Sr$_3$CrN$_3$ belong to the Tasker type II interface classification,37 meaning that the slab is non-polar, due to the symmetrical sequence of atomic charges at the surface. As a result, the addition of a periodic surface on the crystal surface will not affect the ions inside the crystal and thereby are more likely to be stable and preserve the internal excess electron behaviour.

The surface energies of the different crystal terminations, calculated according to eqn (1),30 are shown in Table 2. We find

![Figure 2](image-url)
that Sr₃CrN₃(001) has the smallest surface energy and is therefore the most stable. When compared with the alternate surface energies of Sr₃CrN₃, e.g. (001), the relatively low energy indicates a high stability in spite of the cleavage plane bisecting the 1D electron channel. Such a relatively low surface energy is likely to have a strong impact on crystal growth and nanoparticle morphology.  

Figure 3 shows the valence charge density of the Sr₃CrN₃(001) slab model from the converged calculation. It can be seen that the excess electrons persist in the 1D channel, indicating that the defining feature of electrides remains even in the slab model. While the free electron density was predicted and observed experimentally for this material in bulk, this is the first time it has been observed to be robust with respect to such dramatic alteration to the crystal structure.

We continue to analyse the most stable Sr₃CrN₃(001) surface by calculating the work function. Catalysts usually work by activating chemical bonds in reactants by transferring electron density from higher energy states. Since the workfunction describes the energy required to remove an electron from the catalyst, the workfunction can therefore serve as an indicator of likely catalytic performance.  

\[ \phi \] is usually estimated by the energy difference between the Fermi level \( (E_F) \) and the vacuum level \( (E_{\text{vac}}) \). Figure 4 is the calculated electrostatic potential using the slab model of Sr₃CrN₃(001). The average electrostatic potential in the empty region corresponds with the vacuum electrostatic potential, and the difference between the this and the average electrostatic potential gives \( \Delta V \) for eqn (2). The work function of Sr₃CrN₃(001) is calculated to be 2.14 eV.

We compare this value with the work function of other electrides from refs 40,41 as shown in Table 3. We find that even among electrides, which are known for their low work function, Sr₃CrN₃ (001) is lower still. The same theoretical method previously applied to chalcogenides finds typical values of twice or even three times the amount reported for this material.  

Finally, we also compared this value with the work functions of elements found in experiment. The Sr₃CrN₃ (001) work function is smaller than that found for all elements except for that of cesium, which is reported to be 1.95 eV from photoelectric effect experiments. Again, this highlights the relative ease of extraction for Sr₃CrN₃ compared to other materials.

In summary, we have obtained and analysed the non-polar crystal surfaces of Sr₃CrN₃. The surface that bisects the 1D electron density in the crystal structure is the most stable, and does not destroy the presence of the anionic electron density of the electride. Using the hybrid functional HSE06 method, it is determined that the (001) crystal termination has a very small work function of 2.14 eV, which means that the excess electron density of Sr₃CrN₃ should able to activate the chemical bonds of external reactants. What’s more the uni-directionality of the electron density allows for the possibility of additional control in deploying this material as a catalyst. As a result, it is expected that the electride Sr₃CrN₃ is a unique and exciting material for catalytic applications.

Table 3: Comparison of work function of Sr₃CrN₃ (001) and work functions of other electride materials. The referenced works are included.

| Compound | Sr₃CrN₃ | Cr₆Al₂O₁₆ | Sr₃P₃ |
|----------|--------|-----------|--------|
| Work function (eV) | 2.14   | 2.4       | 2.8    |
| Reference number | N/A    | 41        | 42     |

Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.
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