Ultrafast dynamics of gallium vacancy charge states in $\beta$-$\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3$

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Point defects in crystalline materials often occur in multiple charge states. Although many experimental methods to study and explore point defects are available, techniques to explore the nonequilibrium dynamics of the charge states of these defects at ultrafast (subnanosecond) timescales are rare. We present results from ultrafast optical-pump supercontinuum-probe spectroscopy measurements on $\beta$-$\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3$. The probe absorption spectra shows defect absorption peaks at two energies, $\sim2.20\text{ eV}$ and $\sim1.63\text{ eV}$, within the 1.3–2.5 eV probe energy bandwidth. The strength of the absorption associated with each peak is time dependent and the spectral weight shifts from the lower energy peak to the higher energy peak with pump-probe delay. Further, maximum defect absorption is seen for probes polarized along the crystal c axis. The time-dependent probe absorption spectra and the observed dynamics for all probe wavelengths at all pump-probe delays can be fit with a set of rate equations for a single multilevel defect. Based on first-principles calculations within hybrid density-functional theory, we attribute the observed absorption features to optical transitions from the valence band to different charge states of Gallium vacancies. Our results demonstrate that broadband ultrafast supercontinuum spectroscopy can be a useful tool to explore charge states of defects and defect dynamics in semiconductors.

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I. INTRODUCTION

$\beta$-$\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3$, an ultrawide band-gap material, is a promising candidate for high-power electronic devices, solar-blind UV photodetectors, and sensors [1–5]. The availability of good quality large-area $\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3$ substrates, the high breakdown electric field of the material, the ability to n dope the material over a wide concentration range, the decent mobility of electrons, and the relatively long recombination times of photoexcited carriers in the material have all contributed to this promise. Most of these properties can be significantly impacted by material defects [6]. $\beta$-$\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3$ can have many intrinsic and extrinsic point defects, including vacancies, interstitials, and impurities [7–9]. The behavior of many of these point defects is not well understood. Developing a better understanding of the properties of these defects is critical in realizing the material’s promise.

First-principles calculations have been instrumental in determining the formation energies, charge states, optical and thermodynamic transition energies, and the corresponding optical cross sections of point defects in $\beta$-$\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3$ [10–19]. Among the intrinsic point defects, Ga and O vacancies and interstitials have been theorized to have small formation energies. Ga vacancies, in particular, have the smallest formation energies in n-doped $\beta$-$\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3$ grown under oxygen-rich conditions [13–17,19]. In n-doped $\beta$-$\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3$, Ga vacancy is a deep compensating acceptor and, depending on the Fermi level, it can be present in various charge states. Many different experimental techniques, including scanning probe and transmission electron microscopy [20], cathode- and photoluminescence spectroscopy [21], electron spin resonance spectroscopy [22,23], and deep level transient spectroscopy [24] have been used to explore point defects in $\beta$-$\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3$. However, none of these techniques have allowed simultaneous probing of different charge states of defects at ultrafast timescales. Since carrier capture by defects in $\beta$-$\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3$ occurs on picosecond to nanosecond timescales [25], it is important to be able to probe defect dynamics on these ultrafast timescales.

In this paper, we present results from ultrafast optical-pump supercontinuum-probe spectroscopy of defects in $\beta$-$\text{Ga}_2\text{O}_3$, combined with first-principles calculations. Pump-probe spectroscopy is especially useful in exploring defects because, first, it allows for synchronized lock-in detection, which enables detection of fractional changes in light intensity as small as $10^{-6}$ [26]. Such a degree of sensitivity is useful given the relatively small optical absorption due to defects. Second, pump-probe spectroscopy allows us to probe materials under nonequilibrium conditions. In n-doped materials, defect states are typically filled with electrons, disallowing optical transitions from the valence band to these defect states. In this paper, we excite electrons out of the defect states using

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II. EXPERIMENTS AND RESULTS

The samples studied in this paper were bulk Sn-doped (010) β-Ga2O3 substrates obtained from the Tamura Corporation, with an electron density \( n \sim 5 \times 10^{18} \text{ cm}^{-3} \) and a thickness of \( \sim 450 \mu\text{m} \). The samples were grown by the Edge-Defined, Film-Fed Growth (EFG) method [27,28] in oxygen-rich conditions. A 405-nm (\( \sim 3.06 \text{ eV} \)) optical pump pulse was used to excite electrons into the conduction band through two-photon (nonlinear) absorption, partially emptying the valence bands and the midgap defect states. The pump pulse was generated by frequency doubling an 810 nm (\( \sim 1.53 \text{ eV} \)), 66 fs, optical pulse generated by a \( \sim 83 \text{ MHz repetition rate Ti:Sapphire laser} \). Part of the laser pulse was also used to generate a broadband supercontinuum pulse (bandwidth 1.3–2.5 eV) using a photonic crystal fiber (FemtoWhite 800). The supercontinuum pulse was wavelength filtered to obtain the probe pulse with the desired center wavelength. The bandwidth of the probe pulse, defined by the optical filter, was \( \sim 10 \text{ nm} \) for each center wavelength. The time-delayed (with respect to the pump pulse) probe pulse was used to record the transient optical absorption in the sample. The fluence values of the pump and probe pulses were kept fixed at \( \sim 3.4 \text{ mJ/cm}^2 \) and \( \sim 1 \mu\text{J/cm}^2 \), respectively. A schematic of the setup is shown in Fig. 2.

Figure 3 shows the normalized differential transmission \( \Delta T/T \), as a function of the pump-probe delay, of an 800-nm probe pulse polarized along different crystal axes for (010) β-Ga2O3. The observed negative values of \( \Delta T/T \) signify an increase in the optical absorption induced by the photoexcitation of electrons by the pump pulse. As seen in the figure, the measured \( \Delta T/T \) is highly polarization dependent. Much larger peak values of \( |\Delta T|/T \) are observed when the probe is polarized along the c axis, and the peak values steadily decrease as the probe polarization is changed to be along the orthogonal \( a^* \) axis. Very notably, the shape of the \( \Delta T/T \) transient is also polarization dependent suggesting that different loss mechanisms are contributing to the probe absorption when the probe is polarized along the c axis and \( a^* \) axis. In recently reported work [29], we have examined the \( \Delta T/T \) transient for probe polarization along the \( a^* \) axis in detail and shown that, for this polarization, the probe experiences optical loss only due to intraconduction band transitions (a form of free-carrier absorption) characterized by a \( 1/\omega^3 \) frequency dependence, where \( \omega \) is the center frequency of the probe pulse. Optical absorption related to defects is not observed for probe polarized along the \( a^* \) axis. When the probe is polarized away from the \( a^* \) axis, we observe additional absorption (i.e., in addition to free-carrier absorption) that keeps increasing with the pump-probe delay for the first few hundred picoseconds. We attribute this additional absorption to optically active defect states. As can be seen in Fig. 3, defect absorption is maximum for probe polarized along the c-axis.

To better quantify the defect absorption, we measure \( \Delta T/T \) for different probe wavelengths. Since free-carrier (intraconduction band) absorption is expected to be polarization independent [30], we subtract the measured \( \Delta T/T \) along the \( a^* \) axis from that along the c axis to obtain the defect absorption contribution to \( \Delta T/T \). We refer to this
FIG. 2. A schematic of the experimental setup is shown. The optical pump pulse and the supercontinuum-derived probe pulse are both generated from the same Ti:Sapphire laser oscillator.

modified normalized differential transmission as \( \delta(\Delta T/T) \). \( \delta(\Delta T/T) \) as a function of pump-probe delay, for various probe wavelengths is shown in Fig. 4(a). Interestingly, the shapes of the \( \delta(\Delta T/T) \) transients are wavelength-dependent (i.e., \( \delta(\Delta T/T) \) transients for different wavelength are not just scaled versions of each other). The corresponding time-dependent defect absorption spectra for different probe delays are shown in Fig. 4(b). As can be seen in this figure, the defect absorption spectra [proportional to the magnitude of \( \delta(\Delta T/T) \) for all probe delays] can be fit using two Gaussian absorption coefficients, one centered at 1.63 eV (\( \sim 761 \) nm) and the other at 2.20 eV (\( \sim 564 \) nm). The relative weights of these two Gaussian absorption coefficients change with time (but the widths remain constant), resulting in the wavelength-dependent temporal dynamics seen in Fig. 4(a). Note that absorption outside the 1.3–2.5 eV bandwidth of our supercontinuum probe, which could be due to optical transitions from the valence band to the \(-1\) and \(-2\) charge states of Ga(I) vacancies (discussed below), is not detected in this work.

III. DISCUSSION

The experimental observations allow us to conclude the following. First, since the polarization dependent defect absorption in Fig. 3 has been observed previously in both heavily and mildly n-doped \( \beta\)-Ga\(_2\)O\(_3\) samples of different crystal orientations \[25\], the absorption is due to a defect intrinsic to \( \beta\)-Ga\(_2\)O\(_3\), and not due to an extrinsic impurity. Second, the relatively large strength of the absorption [proportional to the maximum magnitude of \( \delta(\Delta T/T) \), which is of the order of \( 10^{-3} \)] signifies a fairly large concentration of the defects. Third, the increase in absorption in the first few hundred picoseconds after the pump pulse points to optical transitions from the valence band to the defect states being
responsible for the defect-related optical absorption. Therefore, in the discussion that follows, optical transition will refer to the process in which an electron transitions from the valence band to a defect state after absorbing light. Fourth, the probe wavelength-dependent transients point to either multiple defects with different absorption spectra but the same polarization selection rule or to a single defect with multiple charge states.

**A. The nature of defect states: first-principles calculations**

The experimental data was analyzed with the help of first-principles calculations. We used density-functional theory as implemented in the VASP code [31], using projector augmented wave potentials [32] with an energy cutoff of 400 eV and a 2 × 2 × 2 k-point grid in a 120-atom 1 × 3 × 2 supercell (based on the conventional unit cell [33]). To obtain accurate structural and electronic properties, we used the HSE06 hybrid functional [34] with a mixing parameter of 32%. We used the defect formation energy formalism as outlined in Ref. [35], with optical transition energies corrected by the scheme of Ref. [36].

Based on reported first-principles calculations, oxygen vacancies (V_{O(i)}, V_{O(ii)}, V_{O(III)}) behave as deep donors with the +2 to 0 thermodynamic transition occurring at Fermi energies larger than 2.5 eV (measured from the valence-band maximum) [14,17,19]. Note that thermodynamic transition energies and optical absorption energies are not the same because the former include the effect of full lattice relaxation, which results in the thermodynamic transition energy being smaller than the optical absorption energy. Optical transitions from +2 to +1 or from +1 to 0 charge states of oxygen vacancies are possible but require larger photon energies than those observed in our experiments [11,14]. This, along with the fact that oxygen vacancies have high formation energies in n-doped β-Ga_{2}O_{3} samples grown in O-rich conditions that we are measuring here, allows us to exclude oxygen vacancies as contributors to our experimental observations. Ga vacancies, on the other hand, have characteristics that match all our experimental observations, starting with the fact that a large concentration of Ga vacancies is expected to be present in our samples because of their very low formation energies in n-doped β-Ga_{2}O_{3} [13–15,19]. In particular, the Ga(I) divacancy-interstitial complex (V\text{IC}_{Ga} in the notation of Ingebrigtsen et al. [19]) has the lowest formation energy of all intrinsic defects.

Ga vacancies can further readily form complexes with other atoms and defects, such as hydrogen [14]. We find that the absorption features seen in Figs. 3 and 4 do not change upon annealing at 1100 °C in 80% O_{2} ambient. We therefore exclude the possibility of hydrogenated Ga vacancies being responsible for these absorption features.

In our Sn-doped samples, Ga vacancies can also form complexes with Sn dopants [20]. The calculated formation energy diagram [Fig. 5(a)] indicates that these Sn-V_{Ga} complexes can readily form and that they have thermodynamic transition levels at energies similar to those of Ga vacancies.

Our first-principles calculations show that optical transitions from +1 to 0 and from 0 to −1 charge states of the V_{Ga}^{+} complex take place at 1.8 eV and 2.5 eV, respectively, both of which are very close to the experimentally observed absorption energies. The corresponding transitions for the Ga(I) vacancy complex with Sn are 1.7 eV (+1 to 0) and 2.7 eV (0 to −1). To further distinguish between these two defects, we calculated the light polarization dependence expected for optical transitions from the valence band to the defect states. For these charge state transitions, the V_{Ga} IC complex shows a strong polarization dependency, with light polarized along the c axis leading to the strongest absorption. This is in agreement with our experiments. In contrast, the absorption for the Sn-V_{Ga} complex does not depend on the polarization with respect to the a, b, and c crystal axes. The difference can be understood by looking at the wave function of the unoccupied defect state (+1 charge state). For the V_{Ga} IC complex [Fig. 5(b)], the wave function is mainly oriented along the c axis, while for the Sn-V_{Ga} complex [Fig. 5(c)] the wave function is not oriented along any of the crystal axes. This polarization dependence allows us to exclude the Sn-V_{Ga} complexes and consider the −1 and 0 charge states of the V_{Ga} IC complex as likely candidates behind our observations.

In considering other charge states of the V_{Ga} IC complex, our calculations show that optical transitions from −1 to −2 and from −2 to −3 charge states of the V_{Ga} IC complex are nearly polarization independent and do not show a preference for light polarization along the c axis. These transitions also occur...
required for a single-photon absorptive transition into the conduction band is \( E_n \), then the strength of the corresponding two-photon transition can be approximately described by a universal function that peaks when the photon energy equals \( \sim 0.71 E_n \) and rapidly approaches zero when the photon energy equals \( \sim 0.5 E_n \) [37]. It follows that the pump used in our experiments is much more likely to cause \(-1\) to \(0\) and \(0\) to \(+1\) charge state transitions than cause the \(+1\) to \(+2\) transition. Furthermore, as discussed below, a minimum model based on probe-induced optical transitions from \(+1\) to \(0\) and from \(0\) to \(-1\) charge states of the \(V_{Ga}^{ic}\) complex can explain our data well. It is therefore safe to conclude that our pump pulse is not likely to put the \(V_{Ga}^{ic}\) complex into the \(+2\) charge state.

Finally, self-trapped holes (STH) are known to be an intrinsic defect occurring in \(\beta\)-Ga\(_2\)O\(_3\), which have been studied theoretically [15] and experimentally using various techniques [24,38,39]. Given that the charge transition energy of the STH has been calculated to be just \(\sim 0.45\) eV above the valence band [15], and that the ultraviolet photoluminescence band seen from \(\beta\)-Ga\(_2\)O\(_3\) is assigned to the STH [38,40], we can safely assume that the STH optical absorption is well outside the energy range of what we measure in our experiments, and thus that it does not play a meaningful role in our results.

This analysis therefore exhaustively rules out all possible defect candidates other than the \(+1\) and \(0\) charge states of the \(V_{Ga}^{ic}\) complex, which uniquely satisfy the polarization and energy dependence of the defect absorption we observe.

B. A rate equation model for the defect state dynamics

Next, we present coupled rate equations for modeling the nonequilibrium dynamics of the charge states of Ga vacancies and show that the computed wavelength-dependent and time-dependent \(\Delta T / T\) transients, assuming that the defect optical absorption is due to the charge states of Ga vacancies, agree very well with our measurements. The probe frequency dependent \(\Delta T / T\) can be written as

\[
\Delta T / T = e^{-\left[\int [n_j(t) - n_0] \sigma_{fc}(\omega) L \lambda - n_d \sigma_d(\omega) f \lambda] dt \right] - 1}
\]

\[
\approx -[n(t) - n_0] \sigma_{fc}(\omega) L \lambda - n_d \sigma_d(\omega) f \lambda, \quad (1)
\]

where \(L\) is the pump-probe interaction length determined by the spatial overlap of the pump and probe beams in the sample (\(\sim 260\) \(\mu\)m in our measurement scheme), \(n_0\) is the equilibrium electron density (\(\sim 5 \times 10^{18}\) \(\text{cm}^{-3}\)), \(n(t)\) is the total electron density in the conduction band at time \(t\), \(\sigma_{fc}(\omega)\) is the absorption cross section associated with free-carrier intraband absorption [29]. As shown recently by the authors [29,30], \(\sigma_{fc}(\omega)\) is proportional to \(\omega^2\), where \(\omega\) is the frequency of the probe. \(n_d\) is the defect density, \(\sigma_d(\omega)\) is the defect absorption cross section. \(f\) equals 1 (or 0) for probe polarization along the \(c\) axis (or \(a^*\) axis). \(\sigma_d(\omega)\) can be written as \(\sigma_d(\omega) = \sum \sigma_j(\omega) P_j(t)\). \(P_j(t)\) is the time-dependent probability of a Gallium vacancy being in the \(j\) charge state. \(\sigma_{+1}(\omega)\) and \(\sigma_0(\omega)\) are the defect absorption cross sections when the defect is in the \(+1\) and \(0\) charge states and are assumed to be Gaussians centered at 1.63 eV and 2.20 eV, respectively. The widths of the Gaussians are chosen to fit the measured defect absorption spectra (see Fig. 4),
and the peak values of the Gaussians are used as fitting parameters. Note that $\delta(\Delta T/T) \approx -n_d \sigma_d(\omega) L_c$. $P_j(\tau)$ is calculated using a defect-assisted carrier recombination rate equation model:

$$
\begin{align*}
\frac{d n}{d \tau} &= - \sum_j D^f_n n_d n_d P_j, \\
\frac{d P_j}{d \tau} &= -\left(D^i_n n_d D^i_p n_d P_j + D^{i+1}_n n_d P_{j+1} + D^{i-1}_p n_d P_{j-1}\right), \\
\frac{d p}{d \tau} &= - \sum_j D^i_p p n_d P_j.
\end{align*}
$$

Here, $n$ (or $p$) is the density of electrons in the conduction band (or of holes in the valence band), $D^f_n$ (or $D^i_p$) is the electron (or hole) capture rate constant for the defect in the $j$ charge state. Given that we don’t see the experimentally measured absorption peak (centered at 2.20 eV) corresponding to the 0 charge state decrease with the pump-probe delay, we assume that charge states $-2$ and $-3$ have negligibly small probabilities within the maximum pump-probe delay ($\sim 1$ ns) possible in our experiments. Therefore, we adjust the parameters in the equation for $P_{-2}$ such that $P_{-2}$ remains zero in the first $\sim 1$ ns. The various processes corresponding to the above rate equations are depicted in Fig. 1. The electron and hole capture rate constants, the defect density $n_d$, the initial values $P_j(\tau = 0)$ ($j = +1, 0, -1$), and the peak values of the defect absorption cross sections $\sigma_j(\omega)$ ($j = +1, 0$) are the fitting parameters in the model and their values are chosen to fit the measured $\Delta T/T$ transients for both probe polarizations, for all probe wavelengths, and for all probe delays. The free-carrier absorption cross-section $\sigma_{fc}(\omega)$ is determined as discussed in our earlier work [29].

| Parameter | Value | Unit |
|-----------|-------|------|
| $n_d$ | $(1.6 \pm 1) \times 10^{15}$ | cm$^{-3}$ |
| $D^f_{+1}$ | $(2.2 \pm 0.5) \times 10^{-9}$ | cm$^3$/s |
| $D^i_0$ | $(1.1 \pm 0.5) \times 10^{-10}$ | cm$^3$/s |
| $D^f_0$ | $(2.8 \pm 0.5) \times 10^{-7}$ | cm$^3$/s |
| $D^{i-1}_{-1}$ | $(2.8 \pm 0.5) \times 10^{-7}$ | cm$^3$/s |
| $\sigma_{+1,\text{peak}}$ | $(7.9 \pm 1) \times 10^{-17}$ | cm$^2$ |
| $\sigma_{0,\text{peak}}$ | $(5.3 \pm 1) \times 10^{-17}$ | cm$^2$ |
Figure 6(a) shows the measured and the computed $\Delta T/T$ transients for probe polarized along the $a^*$ axis, the case in which only free-carrier absorption contributes to $\Delta T/T$, for different probe wavelengths. Figure 6(b) shows the measured and the computed $\delta(\Delta T/T)$ transients, to which only the defect absorption contributes. As mentioned earlier, $\delta(\Delta T/T)$ is obtained by subtracting the measured $\Delta T/T$ along the $a^*$ axis from that along the $c$ axis. The parameter values used to fit the data are given in Table I. Figure 6 shows that the model fits the data very well for all probe wavelengths and polarizations and at all probe delays. From the fits, the defect density was found to be $\sim 1.6 \times 10^{15}$ cm$^{-3}$. The hole capture rate constants are found to be larger than the electron capture rate constants. This is why the maximum magnitude of $\delta(\Delta T/T)$ occurs at $\tau > 0$, long after the pump has passed. The parameter values in Table I are similar in magnitude to the ones determined by Koksal et al. for defect states in Sn-doped 201 $\beta$-Ga$_2$O$_3$ using a much simpler model [25].

Figure 7(a) shows the computed values of $P_{+1}$, $P_{0}$, and $P_{-1}$ plotted as a function of the probe delay, $\tau$. The values of the products $n_{2}(\sigma_{+1})_{\text{peak}}P_{+1}(\tau)$ and $n_{2}(\sigma_{0})_{\text{peak}}P_{0}(\tau)$, which are the peak absorption coefficients for charge states $+1$ and $0$, respectively, can also be extracted directly from the data plots shown in Fig. 4. Figure 7(b) plots these extracted values (solid squares) along with those computed using the rate equations (solid lines). The agreement between the data and the model is again very good.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we reported experimental results from ultrafast optical-pump supercontinuum-probe spectroscopy of nonequilibrium defect absorption in $\beta$-Ga$_2$O$_3$. Our experimental and theoretical results show that the measured absorption features are due to optical transitions from the valence band to different charge states of Ga(I) vacancies. Good agreement between our first-principles calculations and the experimental data, and the ability of our rate equations to model the measured transients for different probe wavelengths and polarizations at all probe delays, show that our model captures the underlying physics well. Our results also demonstrate that broadband ultrafast supercontinuum spectroscopy can be a valuable tool to explore defect states and defect dynamics in semiconductors.

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