Oxygen vacancies at titanianate interfaces: two-dimensional magnetism and orbital reconstruction

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We show that oxygen vacancies at titanianate interfaces induce a complex multiorbital reconstruction which involves a lowering of the local symmetry and an inversion of $t_{2g}$ and $e_g$ orbitals resulting in the occupation of the $e_g$ orbitals of Ti atoms neighboring the O vacancy. The orbital reconstruction depends strongly on the clustering of O vacancies and can be accompanied by a magnetic splitting between the local $e_g$ orbitals with lobes directed towards the vacancy and interface $d_{xy}$ orbitals. The reconstruction generates a two-dimensional interface magnetic state not observed in bulk SrTiO$_3$. Using generalized gradient approximation (LSDA) with intra-atomic Coulomb repulsion (GGA+U), we find that this magnetic state is common for titanianate surfaces and interfaces.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Charged impurities can change the electronic properties of insulating materials qualitatively. For example, doping of SrTiO$_3$ with Nb leads to semiconducting properties and eventually to a superconducting transition below 0.3 K. The recent discovery of the metallic, superconducting and magnetic states at the interface between the bulk insulators SrTiO$_3$(STO) and LaAlO$_3$(LAO) triggered an intense exploration of electronic reconstruction and the role of impurities in the formation of a conducting and sometimes magnetic state at these interfaces.

Two distinct doping mechanisms, controlled by the growth conditions of the samples, appear to be responsible for the formation of interface electron carriers. The intrinsic polar charge doping in the heterostructures prepared at high oxygen pressures ($10^{-4}$ mbar) suggests doping with an upper carrier density limit of $3 \cdot 10^{14}$ cm$^{-2}$ which corresponds to 0.5 electrons per interface unit cell (uc) and compensates the interface polar discontinuity. The resulting two-dimensional electron liquid forms in a nm-thick interface layer and can be a possible source for superconducting properties tuned by gate electrostatic fields. The extrinsic mechanism of charge doping due to oxygen vacancies dominates in the LAO/STO samples grown at lower oxygen pressures ($10^{-6}$ mbar) reported in Refs. 2 and 4. Remarkably, the oxygen reduced heterostructures are characterized by higher charge densities of $10^{16} - 10^{17}$ cm$^{-2}$ with the charge spatially extended into the $\mu$m-thick interfacial layer inside the STO. Recent cathode and photoluminescence experiments provide direct evidence for oxygen vacancies in the STO-substrate. The oxygen vacancies can diffuse in STO with activation energy of 0.75 eV, which is comparable to the activation energy 1 eV of the vacancy migration through the LAO layers. At each oxygen vacancy in the TiO$_2$ layer, two electrons are weakly bound to retain charge neutrality of a configuration in which the two titanium ions in the dimer share two electrons. Due to these moderately bound electrons, the oxygen vacancies act as n-type dopants. We note though that in STO, these O-vacancy induced, weakly bound electrons do not contribute to resolve the polar discontinuity problem since they simply are there to produce charge neutrality upon removing the oxygens. The O-vacancy induced electrons are bound to the effective 2+ charge of the vacancy. Below we argue that these electrons enhance the interface conductivity considerably.

A critical issue related to the electron concentration is the electric conductivity of LAO/STO heterointerfaces. The experimental measurements show that the conductivity of n-type LAO/STO bilayers increases with lowering the oxygen partial pressure $p_{O_2}$ and exhibits an abrupt jump from $10^{-2}$ to $10^2 \Omega^{-1} / \square$ when $p_{O_2}$ changes from $10^{-5}$ to $10^{-4} \text{ mbar}$.

The local electronic state of the vacancy-containing transition metal oxides can exhibit extraordinary properties not observed in chemically stoichiometric materials. Recent first principle studies demonstrate a vacancy-related magnetic exchange splitting in nonmagnetic materials like CaO or LAO/STO. Calculations of the vacancy formation energies suggest a predominant positioning of O-vacancies in the top AlO$_2$ surfaces. The energy barrier for transport of O-vacancy from the interface TiO$_2$ to the surface AlO$_2$ layer strongly depends on the vacancy concentration.
Recent STM, cathode luminescence studies and conductivity measurements provide strong support for clustering of the oxygen vacancies in STO\cite{113}. Moreover, the STM experiments and DFT+U studies suggest the possibility that oxygen vacancies form pieces of linear chains, which appear to be more energetically favourable\cite{35-37} as compared to the isolated vacancies.

In this work, we explore the electronic structure of the first titanate surface/interface layers considering different configurations and concentrations of oxygen vacancies. In bulk SrTiO$_3$, the octahedral crystal ligand field, covalency and Coulomb repulsion result in higher energies of Ti $e_g$ states as compared to $t_{2g}$ states with a splitting of about 2.5 eV\cite{38,39}. Here we find that in contrast to the bulk stoichiometric SrTiO$_3$, each Ti-O$_x$-Ti dimer contains missing hybridization links which strongly lower the energy of the $d$ orbitals with lobes pointing to the vacancy. As a result, we obtain a splitting of the doubly degenerate $e_g$ orbitals and the triply degenerate $t_{2g}$ orbitals into orbital doublets and singlets. In the pure material, these $e_g$-like antibonding orbitals are strongly pushed up due to the strong hybridization with the lower-energy O 2p orbitals. In the oxygen-reduced LAO/STO, the missing local covalent bonding and the local symmetry lowering results in a new kind of orbital reconstruction at titanate interfaces: a shift and partial occupation of the vacancy-directed Ti $e_g$-orbitals accompanied by their magnetic splitting and mixing with the 3$d_{xy}$ states. Our calculations of SrTiO$_3$-surfaces and LAO/STO interfaces demonstrate the universal character of the orbital reconstruction of the titanates due to surface/interface oxygen vacancies.

In the linear clusters of vacancy stripes, in which each Ti is accompanied by two O-vacancies the $e_g$ orbital state pointing along the Ti vacancy direction, is further strongly lowered. In these $e_g$ states, both spin states are occupied, although a small amount of spin polarization is also present. The high spin polarization occurs predominantly in the $t_{2g}$ states.

We also show that the electronic states of the oxygen-reduced STO and LAO layers are physically different. The vacancies in TiO$_2$ layers release extra 3$d$ electrons which are confined to the quasi-two-dimensional layer of the electron liquid at the LAO/STO interface. In contrast, the oxygen vacancies in the LAO overlayer produce local electronic states of a mixed $sp$ character which are redistributed between the surface AlO$_2$ and interface TiO$_2$ layers resulting in the confinement of electrons in the parallel, surface and interface 2D layers with different effective masses, a concept which has been recently discussed in Refs. \cite{114} and \cite{115}. We find that for small concentrations of oxygen vacancies $c_V \leq 1/8$ at the AlO$_2$ surface, the vacancy released electrons are transferred to the LAO/STO interface and compensate the interface polarization, which also leads to an insulating surface state.

II. OXYGEN VACANCIES AT LAO/STO INTERFACES

We use supercells in density functional theory to explore the charge and spin state around oxygen vacancies at LAO/STO heterointerfaces. The supercells contain a 4 uc thick LAO overlayer deposited on a STO layer of a thickness between 1 uc and 6 uc. The LAO-STO-LAO structures are separated by a 13 Å thick vacuum sheet. In the supercell, oxygen vacancies can be located in the interface TiO$_2$ layer or in one of the AlO$_2$-planes of LAO.

Cells with three types of oxygen vacancy configurations in MO$_2$ (M=Ti, Al) are sketched in Fig. \ref{fig:1a}, (b) and (c). Configuration (a) contains oxygen vacancies in Ti-O$_x$-Ti dimers, with each vacancy located between two Ti atoms in a ($\sqrt{2} \times \sqrt{2}$) uc so that each Ti in the TiO$_2$ has exactly one nearest vacancy. We refer to this as a Ti dimer structure. In contrast, the configuration (b) is introduced by removing the oxygen atom O(a/2, b/2) in the center of the (2x1) M$_2$O$_4$-plaquette, a configuration which results in stripes of vacancies in the y-direction. The doping level of O-vacancies in configurations (a) and (b) corresponds to $c_V = 1/4$ (25%) of vacancies per each four oxygen atomic sites. The lowest density of O-vacancies (one vacancy per 8 oxygen sites) is represented by the configuration (c) in Fig. \ref{fig:1} which as in configuration (a) has Ti-O$_x$-Ti dimers but the density of vacancies is a factor of two smaller.

The density functional calculations were performed using the Generalized Gradient Approximation (GGA) in the Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof pseudopotential implementation\cite{43} in the Quantum Espresso (QE) package\cite{44}. We use a kinetic energy cutoff of 640 eV, and the Brillouin zone of the 106- to 166-atom supercells is sampled with 5x5x1 to 9x9x1 k-point grids. An increase of the k-point mesh from (5x5x1) to (7x7x1) leads to a negligibly small change of the total energy by 0.005 Ry and to an increase of the Ti magnetic moments by small values of about 0.05 $\mu_B$ for the case that O-vacancies are present. In our calculations we account for a local Coulomb repulsion of Ti 3$d$ electrons by employing a GGA+$U$ approach with $U_{Ti} = 2$ eV\cite{45}. The supercells have been structurally relaxed by a combination of the optimization procedures of the full potential WIEN2k-package and the pseudopotential QE package\cite{44,46}. The in-plane lattice constants have been fixed to their room-temperature bulk-STO cubic values ($a_{STO} = b_{STO} = 3.905$ Å). Although low-temperature SrTiO$_3$ is tetragonal with the lattice parameters $a = 3.896$ Å and $c = 3.899$ Å, in our studies we assume that the small difference between the lattice constants should not seriously affect the state of oxygen vacancies.

A. Vacancy stripe configurations

We start with the configuration with the largest degree of clustering of O-vacancies in our models which is the
FIG. 1. Schematic view of the SrTiO$_3$/LaAlO$_3$ heterostructure. The supercell contains a 4 uc thick LaAlO$_3$ layer deposited on a 2.5 uc thick SrTiO$_3$ slab. The full supercell consists of two symmetric parts of the depicted structure and a vacuum layer of 13 Å. The structures on the right side show $M_nO_{2n}$ ($M=$Ti, Al)-plaquettes (a) with one eliminated O(2a,a) atom (dimerized vacancy), (b) with eliminated O(0.5a,0.5a) (chained vacancy) and (c) with eliminated O(0.5a, 0.25a), generated for the study of the systems with O-vacancies. The position of an O-vacancy is identified by a red dashed circle.

vacancy stripes of type (b). Fig. 2 presents the spin polarized projected densities of 3$d$ states for the Ti(0.5a,0) atom nearest to the O-vacancies of type (b) and for the Ti(0,0) at the corners of the Ti$_2$O$_4$ plaquette in Fig. 1(b) located still in the interface layer but furthest away from the O vacancy stripe. For the Ti(0.5a,0) atom (Fig. 2(a)), we find a strong “splitting” of the 3$d_{3y^2-r^2}$ and 3$d_{z^2-x^2}$ states with the 3$d_{3y^2-r^2}$ being almost completely occupied with close to 2 electrons and the 3$d_{z^2-x^2}$ almost completely empty and at very high energies above $E_F$. The extremely narrow $e_g$ DOS peaks are located in the energy window ($E_F - 2.3$ eV; $E_F + 0.5$ eV) relative to the Fermi level. This is in contrast to the DOS of the Ti(0,0) which is more distant to the oxygen vacancy (Fig. 2(c)). At Ti(0,0) the empty $e_g$ states are located about 3.5 eV above $E_F$ and 2 eV above the $t_{2g}$ states, the latter being partially occupied by the electrons generated due to the polar interface.

To better understand the nature of the sharp $e_g$ peaks, we plot in Fig. 2(b) the 3$d_{3y^2-r^2}$ density of states and see that actually the DOS in the sharp peaks is almost solely in an $e_g$ 3$d_{3y^2-r^2}$ orbital with the lobes pointing along the Ti-O$_v$ direction, which implies a strong confinement of the vacancy-released electrons between the nearest Ti atoms. This strong preference of the 3$d_{3y^2-r^2}$ orbital occupation is clearly seen also in the spatial charge density distribution in Fig. 3(b). The very sharp peaks in the $e_g$
density of states is a result of the quasi-one-dimensional character of the band structure of these mainly $3d_{3g^2-r^2}$ composed bands. For charge neutrality we need to accommodate two electrons per Ti in the dimerized chain which aside from the polar induced charge indicates that the Ti ions in the chains are formally divalent with nearly two electrons each. We see indeed from Fig. 2(b) that both the spin up and down $3d_{3g^2-r^2}$ states are nearly fully occupied. These states are therefore rather magnetically favorable.

The extreme splitting of the $e_g$ states $3d_{3g^2-r^2}$ directed along the Ti-vacancy direction reflects the interface orbital reconstruction, a phenomenon recently observed at the interfaces between (Y,Ca)Ba$_2$Cu$_3$O$_7$ and La$_{0.67}$Ca$_{0.33}$MnO$_3$ and predicted for interfaces between YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_6$ and STO. For the oxygen deficient LAO/STO interfaces, the interface orbital reconstruction results in the change of the chemical valence state of the Ti atoms close to the O-vacancies. For high enough vacancy concentrations this strong valence change might be visible in experiments like those of Ref. 8. Moreover, the conclusion of Ref. 8 about the in-plane mixed $3d_{xy}/3d_{x^2-y^2}$ character of the interface Ti electrons strongly supports the notion of the splitting of $e_g$ states and partial occupation of the in-plane vacancy-directed $e_g$ orbital found in our calculations.

![Graph](image-url)  
**FIG. 3.** Orbital-projected charge density profiles along the [001] direction. Here the O-vacancy of type (b) is located in the TiO$_2$ interfacial layer in the supercell containing 4 uc thick LaAlO$_3$ layers and a 4 uc thick SrTiO$_3$ layer. Note the large scale change between the upper and lower panels.

To estimate the chemical valence of the Ti atoms, we have calculated the 2D electron charge density in two different energy windows below the Fermi level corresponding to occupied $e_g$ and $t_{2g}$ orbitals, and performed the integration in $(x,y)$ planes across the interface. The results are presented in Fig. 3. The integration of the $e_g$ charge profile along the $z$-axis gives a total of about 1.9 electrons, which implies that the excess vacancy-produced charge is almost fully transferred to the $e_g$ orbitals and induces a change of the chemical valence of the nearest Ti atoms by $-1.9$. In contrast to the stoichiometric STO, the local $e_g$-states originating from the vacancies in the interface TiO$_2$ layers of the STO are placed well below the Fermi level. The clustering of the vacancies into stripes at the TiO$_2$/LaO interface leads to a strong concentration of the vacancy-released electrons due to the shift of the filled $e_g$ subbands by more than 1 eV below the Fermi level. Integration of the conducting ($t_{2g}$) charge profile shown in Fig. 3 reveals that the charge of the 0.3 $t_{2g}$ electrons in the TiO$_2$ layers near the interface is compensated by the charge of the holes present at the AIO$_2$ surface of the LAO film.

In contrast to the strong spin polarization of the $t_{2g}$ states observed in Fig. 2, the occupied $e_g$ states are almost unpolarized. The integration of the sharp $e_g$ peaks below the Fermi level gives a negligibly small value of the spin polarization of about 0.001 $\mu_B$, which implies the existence of the orbital separation of the spin and charge degrees of freedom in the vacancy stripe configurations: the vacancy-released charge is localized in the spin-nonpolar $e_g$-orbitals, whereas only the $t_{2g}$ polarity-induced intrinsic charge contributes to the magnetization. The contribution from different orbitals to the magnetization of various vacancy configurations is presented in Table I.

**B. Ti dimer-type O-vacancies in ($\sqrt{2} \times \sqrt{2}$)-plaquettes**

The strong localization of the excess electrons is already noted in the oxygen-reduced bulk STO, where the tendency for the formation of local Ti states is connected to the degree of clustering of the oxygen vacancies. Similar to bulk STO, a weaker clustering in LAO/STO heterointerfaces reduces the energy gap between the filled and empty Ti $e_g$ states to less than 1 eV, which is demon-
FIG. 4. Electron density maps for vacancy stripes as shown in Fig. 1(b). (a) $t_{2g}$ and (b) $e_g$ electron states for the interface TiO$_2$ layer with the O(0.5a,0.5b)-vacancy in the supercell containing 4 uc thick LaAlO$_3$ layers and a 4 uc thick SrTiO$_3$ layer. The contour lines in (a) indicate the pd-hybridization of the polar interface-induced electrons in TiO$_2$ layer.

strated in Fig. 5 for the interface TiO$_2$ with Ti dimer-type O-vacancy configurations (a).

In Fig. 5, the filled midgap $e_g$ states in the energy window ($E_F - 1.2$ eV; $E_F - 0.1$ eV) are strongly confined on Ti $e_g$ orbitals centered around the vacancies although the occupied $e_g$ subband is broad as compared to the extremely narrow $e_g$ DOS-peaks in the striped configurations. The relaxation of the atomic positions leads to an elongation of the dimer Ti-O$_4$-Ti by 0.1 Å due to the shifts of the Ti atoms by about 0.05 Å outward from the O-vacancy. The resulting DOS for the relaxed structure is presented in Fig. 5. The comparison with the DOS for the unrelaxed structure (top panel) shows a crucial effect of the structural relaxation of atoms around the O-vacancy. The relaxation leads to an additional magnetic splitting of the Ti $e_g$ states and to a decrease of the gap between the electronically occupied and the empty spin-up (majority) $e_g$ states. The occupied $e_g$ states are located in the energy window ($E_F - 1.5$ eV; $E_F$) and hybridize with the $t_{2g}$ states. As a consequence, the electronic state of the Ti-O$_4$-Ti dimer is half-metallic with conducting electrons of mixed $e_g$-$t_{2g}$ character released in part by the O-vacancy and from the polar induced electronic reconstruction involving mainly $t_{2g}$ states. The mixed $e_g$-$d_{xy}$ character of the electrons in the Ti-O$_4$-Ti dimer reflects itself in the interface charge-density plot in Fig. 6. Due to the additional magnetic splitting of the $e_g$ states, the magnetic moment of Ti in the relaxed struc-
FIG. 6. Charge density plot for an interface TiO$_2$ layer with one O-vacancy at (0.75a, 0.75a) ($a = 5.523$ Å) for each four O in the Ti$_2$O$_4$ plaquette in the supercell that contains two 4 uc thick LaAlO$_3$ layers and one 4 uc thick SrTiO$_3$ layer. The plot has been obtained by calculating the electron densities in the energy window ($E_F - 1.5$ eV; $E_F$) which corresponds to the mixed $e_g+t_{2g}$ states of Ti.

The magnetic moment is strongly enhanced to $M^{rel}_{Ti} = 0.475 \mu_B$, as compared to the unrelaxed structure with $M^{unrel}_{Ti} = 0.15 \mu_B$ (see Table I).

C. Ti dimer-type O-vacancies in (2 × 2)-plaquettes

To analyze lower concentrations of oxygen vacancies, we studied larger supercells which contain (2 × 2) MiO$_8$ plaquettes in the (x,y) planes (Fig. 1(c)). The elimination of one oxygen atom in the interface (TiO$_2$)$_4$-plaquette corresponds to $eV = 1/8$-concentration or $1.5 \cdot 10^{14}$ cm$^{-2}$ density of vacancies homogeneously distributed in the interface TiO$_2$ layer. The orbital projected Ti 3$d$ DOS for the vacancy configuration of type (c) is displayed in Fig. 7(a). As shown, even the smaller concentration of oxygen vacancies still causes a splitting of the $e_g$ orbitals of Ti atoms in the close proximity of the vacancy. Similar to the other dimerized configurations, the occupied $e_g$ and $t_{2g}$ states are located in the same energy window ($E_F - 1.5$ eV; $E_F$) which implies a mixed $e_g$-$t_{2g}$ character of the vacancy-generated electron states. Fig. 8(a) presents the conducting electron den-

| $n-(i)$ | character of polarization | $m_{Ti} (\mu_B)$ |
|---------|--------------------------|------------------|
| 0-(a) (STO)-relaxed | $t_{2g} + e_g$ | 0.475 |
| 0-(a) (STO)-unrelaxed | $t_{2g}$ | 0.15 |
| 0-(b) (STO) | $t_{2g}$ | 0.34 |
| 0-(c) (STO) | $t_{2g} + e_g$ | 0.47 |
| 1-(b) (STO) | $t_{2g}$ | 0.12 |
| 2-(b) (STO) | $t_{2g}$ | 0.07 |
| 3-(b) (STO) | $t_{2g}$ | 0.006 |
| 0-(b) (LAO) | $t_{2g}$ | 0.22 |
| 0-(c) (LAO) | $t_{2g} + e_g$ | 0.56 |

FIG. 7. Spin-polarized orbital-projected densities of states for the interface Ti in the interface TiO$_2$ 2 × 2-plaquette configuration with 1/8-concentration of oxygen vacancies of type (c). The positions of Ti, Al and O atoms have been fully relaxed in the (x,y)-planes and in the z-direction. The top (a) and bottom (b) plots represent the DOS for the Ti atoms nearest to the O-vacancy and the more distant corner Ti atom of the Ti$_2$O$_8$-plaquette.
The reason for this at first glance surprising effect is due to the polarity-induced interface electrons and a suppression by the oxygen vacancy, which implies the absence of two electronic charges, in accordance with the charge redistribution across the interface. Integration of the charge profile in Fig. 8 gives exactly the planar charge density generated in the energy range of the LAO/STO supercell, respectively.

In Fig. 8, the density plots are restricted to the interface structure with the O-vacancy in the TiO$_2$ layer. Moreover, the location of the oxygen vacancies is determined by the maximal average potential in the LaO layers due to O-vacancies in the TiO$_2$ layer. The prevention of the electronic reconstruction and intrinsic doping by enhanced distortions in the LAO-layer implies a vacancy-driven enhancement of the LAO critical thickness below which the polar problem can be solved by atomic displacements in the LAO layer.

An examination of the atomic positions in the structures with interface O-vacancies reveals a considerable increase of the atomic distortions near the vacancy in both the interface TiO$_2$ and in the LaO layers, presented in Table III. These distortions originate from the repulsion between La ionic charges and the nearest positive charged O-vacancy. Table III demonstrates a drastic increase of the La-O and Ti-O buckling which is related to an elongation of the LAO layers. These distortions in the LaO-layers have an extended character along the [001] direction and are significant at the interface as well as in the surface LAO-layers, which induces additional dipole moments antiparallel to the LaO layer polarization. The dipole moments contribute to the compensation of the polarization field and, as a result, prevent the electronic reconstruction on account of a compensating polar charge. In the structure with $c_V = 1/8$ vacancy concentration in the interface TiO$_2$, the additional vacancy-induced dipole polarization is $\Delta P_{\text{TiO}_2} \approx 0.9$ e$\text{A}$ in the interface TiO$_2$ layer and $\Delta P_{\text{LaO}} = 0.86$ e$\text{A}$ in the subsurface LaO layer. This leads to the compensation of $P_{\text{LAO}}$ by the sum of antiparallel contributions (1) $\Delta P_{\text{LaO(stoich)}}$ originating from the distortions in the stoichiometric structure and (2) $\Delta P_{\text{LaO, vac}}$ caused by the enhanced distortions in the LAO layers due to O-vacancies in the TiO$_2$ layer. The prevention of the electronic reconstruction and intrinsic doping due to enhanced distortions in the LAO-layer implies a vacancy-driven enhancement of the LAO critical thickness below which the polar problem can be solved by atomic displacements in the LAO layer.

Fig. 9 presents the microscopic $xy$-averaged and macroscopically averaged electrostatic potentials calculated in the stoichiometric LAO/STO with 4 u.c. thick LAO layer, and in the structure with $c_V = 1/8$ oxygen vacancies across the interface calculated by integrating the planar charge density generated in the energy range ($E_F - 1.5$ eV; $E_F$). The location of the oxygen vacancies in STO leads to an insulating state of the AlO$_2$-surface. In Fig. 8, the density plots are restricted to the interface region and are zero beyond 3Å from the interface due to insulating character of the top AlO$_2$ layer. Moreover, the integration of the charge profile in Fig. 8(a) gives exactly two electronic charges, in accordance with the charge released by the oxygen vacancy, which implies the absence of the polarity-induced interface electrons and a suppression of the polar character of the LAO/STO interface. The reason for this at first glance surprising effect is discussed in the next section.

### Table II. Atomic displacements (in Å) in the interface TiO$_2$ and different (LaO)$_n$ ($n = 1, \ldots, 4$) planes of STO/LAO with one O-vacancy of type (c) in the interface TiO$_2$ ($c_V = 1/8$).

| (MO$_2$)$_n$ | $\Delta z_{\text{MO}}$ | $\Delta z_{\text{MO, vac}}$ | $\Delta - \Delta_0$ |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| (TiO$_2$)$_1$| 0.21            | -0.1            | 0.31            |
| (LaO)$_1$    | 0.33            | 0.03            | 0.3             |
| (LaO)$_2$    | 0.28            | 0.05            | 0.23            |
| (LaO)$_3$    | 0.28            | 0.07            | 0.21            |
| (LaO)$_4$    | 0.36            | 0.08            | 0.32            |
vacancies in the interface TiO2-layer. The macroscopic potential is calculated from the macroscopic averaging procedure proposed in Ref. [51]. As compared to the stoichiometric system with the macroscopic electric field $E_{sk} = 0.17 \text{ eV/Å}$ screened by the polar charge, the macroscopic electric field in the structure with the interface vacancies is screened by the field $\Delta P_{vac}$ generated by antipolar distortions and approaches the value $E_{uc} = 0.13 \text{ eV/Å}$. For the obtained internal field 0.13 eV/Å, the critical LAX-thickness sufficient for the dielectric breakdown of LAO/STO with the STO band gap 3.2 eV in the structure with the interface O-vacancies is enhanced up to 24.6 Å which corresponds to a 7 u.c. thick LAO layer.

### III. A MODEL FOR THE $e_g$ LEVEL SPLITTING

The vacancy-induced Ti 3d orbital reconstruction can be understood from the analysis of the local bonding for a two-electron state of a Ti-O$_2$-Ti-cluster (Fig. 10).

We focus on the contribution of the covalent Ti3d-O2p bonding to the diagonal and exchange contributions to the electron energy levels which determine the magnetic state (paramagnetic singlet or ferromagnetic triplet) of the two-electron cluster.

In the stoichiometric SrTiO$_3$, the two-electron energy contains a $pd$-hybridization term due to the overlap between the 3d-states of Ti atoms and 2p-states of the central oxygen atom. In a TiO$_6$-octahedron, such a covalent contribution $V_{pd}$ produces shifts of the one-electron 3d energy levels$^{35}$

$$\varepsilon(E) = \frac{1}{2}(\varepsilon_e + \varepsilon_\|) + \frac{1}{2}\sqrt{(\varepsilon_e - \varepsilon_\|)^2 + 8V_{pde}^2\sum_{\alpha}s_{\alpha}^2 \pm s^2}$$

$$\varepsilon(T_2) = \frac{1}{2}(\varepsilon_t + \varepsilon_\perp) + \frac{1}{2}\sqrt{(\varepsilon_t - \varepsilon_\perp)^2 + 16V_{pde}^2\sum_{\alpha=s,y} s_{\alpha}}$$

Here $\varepsilon_e = -6.258 \text{ eV}$ and $\varepsilon_t = -5.638 \text{ eV}$ are the Ti 3d ionization energies plus Madelung potential, renormalized by the electrostatic shifts due to the cubic field.

The corresponding energies for the O 2p states are: $\varepsilon_\| = -10.519 \text{ eV}$ and $\varepsilon_\perp = -10.039 \text{ eV}$. In Eq. (1), $s_\alpha = \cos k_\alpha a$ ($\alpha = x, y, z$) and $s^2 = \sum_{\alpha} s_{\alpha}^4 - \sum_{\alpha \neq 2} s_{\alpha}^2 s_{\beta}^2$.

With the $pd$-covalency parameters $V_{pde} \approx 2.1 \text{ eV}$ and $V_{pdx} \approx 0.8 \text{ eV}$ defined in Refs. [39 and 40], we can estimate the splitting between the anti-bonding $e_g$- and $t_{2g}$-states in the $\Gamma$-point of the Brillouin zone$^{39-40}$:

$$\Delta_{gt} = \varepsilon(E) - \varepsilon(T_2) \approx \frac{V_{pde}^2 - V_{pdx}^2}{\Delta_0} \approx 2.7 \text{ eV},$$

where $V_{pde} = \sqrt{6}V_{pde}$, $V_{pdx} = 2\sqrt{2}V_{pdx}$, and $\Delta_0 \approx 4.5 \text{ eV}$ is the bare gap between the 2p and 3d energy levels, unrenormalized by the covalent overlap.

The elimination of the oxygens in a ···O-Ti-O··· stripe along the $y$-direction is equivalent to the condition $V_{pdx}y = V_{pde}y = 0$. Consequently, the absence of the local covalency lowers the local symmetry and leads to a splitting of the $e_g$ states with the lower energy state corresponding to a $3d_{3z^2-r^2}$ orbital energy with lobes along the bond direction and the one at an almost unchanged energy of $3d_{x^2-r^2}$ i.e. with lobes in a plane perpendicular to the Ti-O$_v$ direction (see scheme of Ti-O$_v$-Ti cluster in Fig. 10) with the splitting energies

$$\Delta_{gt}^1 \approx \frac{V_{pde}^2 - V_{pdx}^2}{\Delta_0} \approx 3.2 \text{ eV},$$

$$\Delta_{gt}^2 \approx \frac{V_{pde}^2/3 + V_{pdx}^2/2}{\Delta_0} \approx -2 \text{ eV}$$

These estimates are for the stripe configuration which two O-vacancy neighbors for each Ti. The negative splitting $\Delta_{gt}^2$ implies a strong negative shift of the $e_g$-orbital with lobes pointing to the vacancy. The $e_g$-orbital is shifted below the $t_{2g}$ energy levels, the corresponding orbital inversion is observed in the orbital density of states in Fig. 2(b). In the dimerized Ti-O$_2$-Ti configuration (a) shown in Fig. 10 the smaller splitting energy $\Delta_{gt}^2 \approx -1 \text{ eV}$ results from the missing of only half of oxygens in the vacancy stripe configuration.

The vacancy-induced orbital reconstruction is not restricted to the LAO/STO interfaces, but has a generic character for the titanate surfaces and interfaces. It is related to the specific electronic structure of Ti, with the covalence-induced splitting between the high-energy


The structural relaxation of the vacancy surroundings leads to alternating rotations of the \( z \)-directed Ti\(_1\)O and Ti\(_2\)O bonds by \( \Delta \Theta = \pm 8^\circ \) and to a tilting of the reduced TiO\(_2\)-octahedra towards the vacancy center in the \((x,z)\)- and \((y,z)\)-planes (Fig. 11), which increases the overlap. Due to the large \( J > 0 \), the two-electron local state on a Ti-O\(_2\)-Ti forms a triplet with a triplet energy \( E_2 - J \) where \( E_2 \) is the two-electron energy in the Ti-O\(_2\)-Ti cluster. Due to the planar electron transfer between the nearest Ti\(_2\)O\(_4\)-plaquettes, the magnetic triplet state originating from the localized O-vacancies, is spread within the interface TiO\(_2\)-plane and is to be considered as two-dimensional magnetic ordering stabilized by the exchange splitting of the surface 3d bands.

The notion that the magnetic ordering at the interface has a two-dimensional character is confirmed by calculations of the supercells in which the oxygen vacancy is residing in more distant layers from the interface TiO\(_2\)-layer. In spite of the occurrence of the local orbital reconstruction in the vicinity of the O-vacancy (Fig. 13), the local magnetic splitting of 3d states is weak and the magnetic moments of Ti in the layer with the vacancies are strongly reduced to values of 0.06-0.12 \( \mu_B \) in the layer second from the interface TiO\(_2\)-layer, and to 0.006 \( \mu_B \) in the layer fourth from the interface TiO\(_2\). The location of the O-vacancies in the layers distant from the interface leads to an interlayer exchange between the vacancy-containing and interface TiO\(_2\) layers, which induces a weak magnetic moment in the interface layer. This effect is similar to the double-exchange induced ferromagnetism between transition metal ions in different oxidation states\cite{54}. Vacancies in the TiO\(_2\) layer second from the interface reduce the magnitude of the local Ti magnetic moments in the vacancy-free interface layer to 0.16 \( \mu_B \), as compared to the magnetic moments in the range of 0.34–0.5 \( \mu_B \) in

\[
\Delta_{\text{gy}}^2 \approx - \frac{\hat{\mu}^2_{\text{P}} / 2}{\Delta_0} \approx -0.13 \text{ eV},
\]

similarly to \( \Delta_{\text{gy}}^2 \) of Eq. 1 for an interface layer. Our calculations of a one-uc thick STO-slab indeed confirm the formation of a surface 3d\(_{xy} - z^2\) state in the gap shifted by 0.6 eV below the 3d\(_{xz}\) band (see Fig. 11).

In the bulk stoichiometric SrTiO\(_3\), the nonmagnetic 3d-electron state is associated with a small exchange energy splitting of about 0.06 eV separating singlet and triplet states\cite{55}. As follows from the GGA+U electron-density contours (Figs. 11(b) and 6), the oxygen vacancy induces a strong spatial shift of the 3d electron density between Ti atoms of about 0.5 Å towards the center of Ti-O\(_2\)-Ti-dimer, which increases the overlap exchange integrals by about 0.36 eV at the LAO/STO-interfaces of type (b) (Fig. 12). For the dimerized vacancy configuration (a), we obtain from the comparison of the total energy of ferromagnetic and antiferromagnetic configurations the value of the exchange of \( J = 0.28 \text{ eV} \), however we note that the exchange energy is typically overestimated in the DFT calculations.
heterostructures with interface vacancies.

![Graph showing charge densities](image)

**FIG. 13.** Spin-polarized orbital-projected densities of states for the Ti near the O-vacancy(0.5a,0.5a) in the vacancy-stripped configuration (b) in the layer second from the interface TiO$_2$ plane. For this calculation, a supercell LAO(4uc)/STO(4uc) has been considered.

**IV. OXYGEN VACANCIES AT THE LAO SURFACE**

Another possible source of conducting interfacial charge are electrons generated by oxygen vacancies in the LAO. Such vacancies are expected to occur predominantly in the top AlO$_2$ surface layers. To explore the electronic state of the oxygen vacancies in the AlO$_2$ surface, we consider first a vacancy placed in the center of the (2 × 1) AlO$_2$-plaquette with $C_V = 1/4$. In this case, the surface atomic configuration is described as Al$_2$O$_3$, and the charged LAO/STO supercell is expected to be doped by the two excess electrons to preserve the overall electrostatic neutrality. To study the supercell charging, we have determined the two-dimensional charge densities in the energy window ($E_F - 1$ eV; $E_F + 1$ eV) across the interface which corresponds to the charge occupation of the 3$d$-conducting bands.

Fig. 14 presents the charge profile obtained by planar integration of the calculated electron densities. The integration yields two electron charges per interface unit cell, with 1.25 of electron charges distributed in the surface and the remaining 0.75 in the STO/LaO-interface layer. We note the absence of polar charge produced by polar discontinuities in the vacancy-free LAO/STO. Consequently, the surface oxygen vacancies suppress the polar field of LAO due to the supply of the polarity-compensating excess electrons between the surface and interface layers. As a result, the interface charging in LAO/STO with surface vacancies has a self-doping character.

![Graph showing charge profiles](image)

**FIG. 14.** Charge density profiles along [001] direction for an O-vacancy of type (b) located in the AlO$_2$ surface layer in the supercell containing 4 uc thick LaAlO$_3$ layers and a 4 uc thick SrTiO$_3$ layer.
surface oxygen vacancies, a fact supported also by recent calculations reported in Ref. 33. Fig. 18 demonstrates the calculated \(x\)-averaged electrostatic potential along the [001]-direction. In contrast to the biased macroscopic potential in stoichiometric structure (Fig. 9), the macroscopically averaged potential in the structure with the surface vacancies is flat in the LAO-layer, which indeed supports the complete suppression of the LAO-polarity due to the surface oxygen vacancies.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Within DFT-calculations, we considered oxygen vacancies in LAO/STO heterostructures and performed studies of the orbital states at the LAO/STO interface allowing for several types of vacancy arrangements. Using generalized gradient approximation (LSDA) with intratomic Coulomb repulsion (GGA+U), we have shown that the oxygen vacancies at the titanate interfaces produce a complex multiorbital reconstruction which involves a change of the occupancy of the \(e_g\) states rather than of \(t_{2g}\) orbitals of the Ti atoms nearest to the oxygen vacancies.

The orbital reconstruction is accompanied by a magnetic splitting of the local \(e_g\) and interface \(d_{xy}\) orbitals. This reconstruction generates a two-dimensional magnetic state not observed in bulk SrTiO\(_3\). Moreover, oxygen vacancies placed in the TiO\(_2\) layer farther away from the interface induce a sizable magnetic moment only in the TiO\(_2\) interface layer. Also, oxygen vacancies in the AlO\(_2\) surface where they are expected to be in the most stable configuration, generate a magnetic moment only in the interface titanate layer. In this latter case, the electronic reconstruction mechanism due to polar catastrophe is suppressed for a vacancy concentration of \(c_V \geq 1/8\) by the charge introduced by vacancies. The surface is then free of charge carriers which implies the formation of an insulating state at the AlO\(_2\) surface.

In configurations with vacancy stripes, we have found an orbital separation of the charge and spin degrees of freedom with the vacancy-released charge carriers localized in \(e_g\)-orbitals, and the spin polarization occurring predominantly in \(t_{2g}\)-states. Moreover, we have provided evidence for the generic character of the two-dimensional magnetic state at titanate surfaces and interfaces.
FIG. 17. Projected DOS (a) for the surface AlO$_2$ and (b) interface TiO$_2$ layers in LaAlO$_3$(4u.c.)/SrTiO$_3$(1u.c.) with one O-vacancy per eight O-atoms in the AlO$_2$ surface. The positions of Ti, Al, La and O atoms have been fully relaxed in the ($x$, $y$)-planes and in the $z$-direction.

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