Nonlinear spin Hall effect in GaAs (110) quantum wells

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We consider stationary spin current in a (110)-oriented GaAs-based symmetric quantum well due to a nonlinear response to an external periodic electric field. The model assumed includes the Dresselhaus spin-orbit interaction and the random Rashba spin-orbit coupling. The Dresselhaus term is uniform in the quantum well plane and gives rise to spin splitting of the electron band. The external electric field of frequency \( \omega \) in the presence of random Rashba coupling leads to virtual spin-flip transitions between spin subbands, generating stationary pure spin current proportional to the square of the field amplitude.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Spin-orbit (SO) interactions in semiconductors reveal a variety of fundamental spin related phenomena. Formation of stable spin helices with nontrivial temporal and spatial dynamics, spin optics, and spin-dependent sound radiation represent only some of these effects. Spin currents, solely attributed to the spin-orbit coupling, provide a possibility of inducing and controlling spin motion by electrical and optical fields, and therefore became one of the key elements of the modern spintronics oriented at new device applications of semiconductors. Thorough investigations of realistic systems enlarge the variety of both fundamental phenomena and possible applications. As an example we mention that disorder – always present in real systems – plays a crucial role in the spin-Hall effect, as the spin Hall conductivity can be totally suppressed by any finite concentration of impurities.

Recently, symmetric GaAs (110) quantum wells (QWs) became the subject of extensive experimental and theoretical investigations. This is related to the expectation of the longest spin relaxation times in these structures, which in turn can lead to interesting spin dynamics. A stationary pure spin current accompanying an electric current in (110) QWs was observed as reported in Ref. 19. SO interaction in these systems, described by the Dresselhaus term in the corresponding Hamiltonian, conserves the electron spin along the axis normal to the QW plane for any electron momentum \( \mathbf{k} \). As a result, random motion of an electron does not lead to a random direction of the spin-orbit field and therefore does not lead to spin relaxation. In reality, however, this spin component relaxes very slowly, and its analysis provides a test for the rapidly developing low-frequency spin-noise spectroscopy, suitable for the measurements of the long spin evolutions.

In the case of perfect \( z \to -z \) symmetry (the axis \( z \) is perpendicular to the QW plane), the Rashba SO interaction is zero. In real structures, however, the Rashba coupling still exists in the form of a spatially fluctuating SO field (though being zero on average) and can be also responsible for generation of a nonequilibrium spin density due to the absorption of an external electromagnetic field. Recently, it was proposed that this random SO coupling can result in the spin orientation by an external current and also can play a role in the formation of the stripe structure of spin current distribution.

In this paper we propose a new possibility of exciting a steady pure spin current by a periodic external filed, extending thus the abilities of spin manipulation in real situations. In contrast to the conventional spin Hall effect, which is linear in the external electric field, the proposed spin current is quadratic in the external periodic field. The effect is a result of the interplay of constant Dresselhaus and spatially random Rashba terms, and is not related to the spin currents produced by gate manipulation of the Rashba coupling or adiabatic pumping in graphene. Exact mechanism of the effect does not necessarily involve real spin-flip transitions of electrons between the spin-split subbands in (110)-oriented GaAs QW, but relies on virtual spin-flip processes which renormalize the wave functions of electrons in a nonequilibrium state. This makes such a nonlinear current a physically new phenomenon, which appears if one accounts for more realistic effects than those described by the conventional Rashba and Dresselhaus models.

In Section 2 we describe the model and Hamiltonian of the system. Spin current is calculated in Section 3. Summary and final conclusions are presented in Section...
II. MODEL

Hamiltonian of a two-dimensional electron gas with the constant Dresselhaus term $H_D$ and spatially fluctuating Rashba spin-orbit interaction $H_R$, subjected to external electromagnetic field described by the vector potential $\mathbf{A}(\mathbf{r}, t)$, takes the following form (we use units with $\hbar = 1$)

$$\begin{align*}
H = H_0 + H_D + H_R,
\end{align*}$$

where the first two terms are

$$\begin{align*}
H_0 &= -\frac{1}{2m} (\nabla - ie\mathbf{A}/c)^2, \\
H_D &= -i\alpha \sigma_z \left( \nabla_x - ieA_x/c \right).
\end{align*}$$

The Dresselhaus constant $\alpha = \gamma \pi^2/2w^2$, where $\gamma$ is the corresponding bulk Dresselhaus coupling parameter, is inversely proportional to the square of the QW width $w$. The other components of the Dresselhaus interaction vanish due to the specific symmetry of the (110) orientation.\textsuperscript{16,21}

The last term in Eq. (1) stands for the effects of the spatially nonuniform Rashba SO interaction, which can be written as $H_R = H_R^0 + V$, where $H_R^0$ is the Rashba term for $\mathbf{A}(\mathbf{r}, t) = 0$,

$$H_R^0 = -\frac{i}{2} \sigma_x \{\nabla_y, \lambda(\mathbf{r})\} + \frac{i}{2} \sigma_y \{\nabla_x, \lambda(\mathbf{r})\},$$

with $\{,\}$ denoting the anticommutator and $\lambda(\mathbf{r})$ being the random Rashba SO interaction. The term $V$, in turn, describes coupling of the electron spin to the external field $\mathbf{A}(\mathbf{r}, t)$ via the Rashba field,

$$V = -\frac{e}{c} \lambda(\mathbf{r}) (\sigma_z A_y - \sigma_y A_x).$$

Due to the assumed symmetry with respect to $z$-inversion, the spatially averaged Rashba interaction vanishes, $\langle \lambda(\mathbf{r}) \rangle = 0$. We assume that the random Rashba field can be described by the correlation function related to fluctuating density of impurities near the QW.\textsuperscript{24,26}

$$C_{\lambda \lambda} (\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}') \equiv \langle \lambda(\mathbf{r}) \lambda(\mathbf{r}')\rangle = \langle \lambda^2 \rangle F (\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}'),$$

where the range function $F (\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}')$ depends on the type of disorder. We assume the correlator of random Rashba interaction in the momentum space in the form\textsuperscript{26,31}

$$|\lambda|_q^2 = 2\pi \langle \lambda^2 \rangle R^2 e^{-qR},$$

where $R$ is the spatial scale of the fluctuations.

In the absence of external field and random Rashba SO interaction, the Hamiltonian $H_0 + H_D$ describes the spectrum of spin-polarized electrons, $\varepsilon_{k\sigma} = (k_x^2 + k_y^2)/2m + \sigma \alpha k_z$. The energy bands of spin up and spin down electrons are thus shifted in opposite directions along the $k_z$ axis. The corresponding Green function is then diagonal in the spin subspace,

$$G_{k\sigma}^{(0)} = \begin{pmatrix} G_{k\sigma}^+ & 0 \\ 0 & G_{k\sigma}^- \end{pmatrix},$$

where $\sigma = \pm$ for spin up ($\uparrow$) electrons and $\sigma = -$ for spin down ($\downarrow$) electrons, whereas $\delta_{k\sigma}$ is the momentum and spin dependent relaxation rate.

III. NONLINEAR SECOND-ORDER SPIN CURRENT

In the following we consider the $z$-component of a pure spin current flowing along the $x$ axis, that is the only component allowed by symmetry of the system under consideration. The operators of the electron velocity $\hat{v}_x$ and the corresponding spin current tensor component $\hat{j}_x$ are

$$\begin{align*}
\hat{v}_x &= i[H_0 + H_D, x] = \frac{k_x}{m} + \alpha \sigma_z - \lambda \sigma_y, \\
\hat{j}_x &= \frac{1}{2} \{\hat{v}_x, \sigma_z\} = \frac{k_x}{m} \sigma_z + \alpha,
\end{align*}$$

where the $\alpha$-related terms correspond to the anomalous contribution to the velocity. The macroscopic spin current density is then given by

$$\hat{j}_x = i \text{Tr} \sum_k \int \frac{d\varepsilon}{2\pi} \hat{j}_x \mathbf{G}_{k\sigma},$$

where $\mathbf{G}_{k\sigma}$ is the Green’s function of the system interacting with the external electromagnetic field.

Upon substituting (10) into Eq. (11) one can note that the second term describes the current caused only by the electron density,

$$n = i \text{Tr} \sum_k \int \frac{d\varepsilon}{2\pi} \mathbf{G}_{k\sigma},$$

conserved under any external perturbation. This conservation is achieved in calculations by an appropriate shift of the chemical potential $\mu$. In equilibrium, however, there is no spin current in the system (expected, e.g., for QWs with other crystallographic orientations) since the integrated contributions from $k_x/m$ and $\alpha$ terms in Eq. (10) exactly cancel each other. As a result, this type of structures does not demonstrate the Rashba paradox of the non-zero equilibrium pure spin current.\textsuperscript{22} This can be seen directly by calculating spin current using Eq. (11) with the equilibrium Green function in Eq. (8), or by taking into account the fact that Hamiltonian in Eq. (3) can be transformed by the $SU(2)$ rotation to the form that does not have spin dependent terms.\textsuperscript{23}
However, a nonzero pure spin current, which is the subject of interest here, can be generated by an external field in the presence of random Rashba coupling, as presented schematically by the Feynman graph in Fig. 1. In this graph we introduced the following notations:

\[
V_{kk'} = \lambda_{kk'} (\sigma_x A_y(\omega) - \sigma_y A_x(\omega)),
\]

\[
V_{k'k} = \lambda_{k'k} (\sigma_x A_y(-\omega) - \sigma_y A_x(-\omega)),
\]  

(13)  

(14)

for the transition matrix elements due to the external field and spin-orbit coupling.

With the Feynman graph shown in Fig. 1 we find the spin current density omitting the \( \alpha \) term in the velocity operator since its contribution is conserved if no additional electrons are injected to the system. The resulting expression for the contribution of a single spin component to the total spin current becomes

\[
j_{x,\sigma} = \frac{i A^2}{m} \sum_{kk'} \frac{d\varepsilon}{2\pi} k_x |\lambda_{kk'}|^2 G_{kk'} G_{kk'+\omega,\sigma} G_{kk'},
\]

(15)

where \( A \) is the vector potential amplitude, making the injected current independent on the external field orientation. The total spin current is given by \( j_x^\sigma = j_{x,\sigma=1} - j_{x,\sigma=-1} \) with \( j_{x,\sigma=1} = -j_{x,\sigma=-1} \).

Using Eqs. (8) and (15), after rather tedious integration of the product of the three Greens functions in the complex \( \varepsilon \) plane, one obtains

\[
j_{x,\sigma} = \frac{A^2}{m} \sum_{kk'} |\lambda| \left[ \begin{array}{c}
\frac{f(\varepsilon_{k\sigma})}{(\varepsilon_{k\sigma} - \varepsilon_{k'\sigma'} + \omega + i\delta_{k\sigma} + i\delta_{k'\sigma'} \text{sign}(\varepsilon_{k\sigma} + \omega - \mu))^2} \\
+ \frac{f(\varepsilon_{k'\sigma'})}{(-\varepsilon_{k\sigma} + \varepsilon_{k'\sigma'} - \omega + i\delta_{k\sigma} + i\delta_{k'\sigma'} \text{sign}(\varepsilon_{k'\sigma'} - \omega - \mu))^2}
\end{array} \right]
\]

\[
= \frac{A^2}{m} \sum_{kk'} |\lambda| \left[ \begin{array}{c}
\frac{k_x [f(\varepsilon_{k\sigma}) - f(\varepsilon_{k+q\sigma})]}{(\varepsilon_{k\sigma} - \varepsilon_{k-q\sigma} + \omega + i\delta_+)^2} - \frac{(k_x + q_x) f(\varepsilon_{k\sigma})}{(\varepsilon_{k+q\sigma} - \varepsilon_{k\sigma} + \omega + i\delta_-)^2} \\
+ \frac{k_x f(\varepsilon_{k\sigma} + \omega)}{(\varepsilon_{k\sigma} - \varepsilon_{k-q\sigma} + \omega + i\delta_-)^2}
\end{array} \right].
\]

(16)

Here we introduced the notation: \( \delta_+ \equiv \delta_{k\sigma} + \delta_{k'\sigma'} \) and \( \delta_- \equiv \delta_{k\sigma} - \delta_{k'\sigma'} \). Equation (16) shows that the injection of spin current is a coherent effect arising due to the change in electron wave function under the resonant electromagnetic radiation rather than the injection due to the two-photon absorption typical in nonlinear semiconductor optics.

Since the single electron energy \( \varepsilon_{k\sigma} \) can be written as \( [(k_x + \sigma \alpha m)^2 + k_y^2]/2m - m \alpha^2/2, \) one can shift the chemical potential, \( \mu \rightarrow \mu + \alpha \sigma m^2/2. \) Then one can write \( j_{x,\sigma} \) in the form,

\[
j_{x,\sigma} = \frac{A^2}{m} \sum_{kk'} |\lambda| \left[ \begin{array}{c}
\frac{(k_x - \sigma \alpha m)}{(k \cdot q/m - q^2/2m + 2\sigma \alpha (k_x - q_x) - 2m \alpha^2 + \omega + i\delta_+)^2} f(\varepsilon_{k\sigma}) - f(\varepsilon_{k+q\sigma}) \\
+ \frac{(k_x - \sigma \alpha m)}{(k \cdot q/m - q^2/2m + 2\sigma \alpha (k_x - q_x) - 2m \alpha^2 + \omega - i\delta_-)^2} f(\varepsilon_{k\sigma} + \omega) \\
-(k_x + q_x + \sigma \alpha m) \frac{f(\varepsilon_{k\sigma} + \omega)}{(k \cdot q/m + q^2/2m + 2\sigma \alpha (k_x + q_x) + 2m \alpha^2 + \omega - i\delta_-)^2}
\end{array} \right].
\]

(17)
We emphasize here that the calculated spin current is a stationary coherent nonlinear effect proportional to the intensity of incident radiation, in contrast to the spin current generated by pulse excitations, where the result is proportional to the total fluence in the pulse.

The transition processes produce real holes in the initially occupied subbands and electrons in those initially empty, changing the real occupation of the spin-up and spin-down states. The calculated current is also not related to the Drude-like linear response at frequency $\omega$, suppressed by the factor of the order of $(\delta_{\omega}/\omega)^2$.

The results of numerical calculation of the spin current (taking part of Eq. (17)) are presented in Fig. 2 for different values of the parameter $k_F R$. The parameters typical for the (110) quantum wells are: $2\alpha m/k_F = 0.1$ and $\delta_+/\mu = 0.1$. For the momentum-dependent $\delta_-$, we assume a typical value, $\delta_-/\mu = 0.05$. Furthermore, we used for GaAs: $m = 0.067 m_0$, where $m_0$ is the free electron mass. Fermi momentum $k_F = 1.8 \times 10^6$ cm$^{-1}$ (corresponding to electron concentration $5.2 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$) and $\mu = 18.5$ meV. The spin current in Fig. 2 is presented in the units of $j_0$, with $j_0$ defined as

$$j_0 = \frac{2m^2\alpha_e^2 \langle \lambda^2 \rangle k_F^2}{c^2 \pi^3}.$$  \hfill (18)

Taking into account the relation $A^2 = (c/\omega)^2 E^2$, where $E$ is the electric field amplitude, we obtain $j_0 = 2m^2\alpha (\lambda^2) E^2/\pi k_F^2$, with $cE/\omega$ being the amplitude of the momentum oscillation of a classical electron in a periodic electric field. It is interesting to mention that the maximum value of $E$, which still can be considered as a perturbation, is determined by $cE/\omega \sim k_F$, and, therefore, the maximum of $j_0$ is of the order of $m^2\alpha (\lambda^2)$, having the physical meaning of the equilibrium spin current induced by the random Rashba spin-orbit coupling.

To understand better the physical mechanism of the nonlinear spin-current generation we consider a schematic picture presenting the electron energy bands as a function of $k_x$ without Rashba random SO interaction and without external field, see Fig. 3. As we have already mentioned above, the Dresselhaus SO interaction leads to spin splitting of the electron states of a free electron gas, which results in the energy bands $\varepsilon_{k\sigma}$ shown in Fig. 3(a) as a function of $k_x$, for $k_y = 0$. Even though the states $|k\sigma\rangle$ of these bands are spin polarized, the spin current in equilibrium is exactly zero. This is related to the zero current associated with each of the subbands, $j_{\uparrow,\downarrow}$, calculated as the flux of electrons in each subband. Obviously, vanishing current $j_\sigma$ in the subband $\sigma$ means that the spin current $j_\sigma^s$ is also zero. Distortions of the energy subbands either due to the random Rashba interaction in Eq. (4) or due to the external field in Eq. (2) do not break the condition $j = 0$.

Our calculations, however, showed that nonzero matrix elements of field-induced spin-flip intersubband transitions appear in the presence of random Rashba coupling. Accordingly, in the nonequilibrium situation the electron states in each subband are a superposition of spin up and down states, so that the resulting state $|k\sigma\rangle$ (Fig. 3b) has a smaller effective spin. Such mixing of $|k\sigma\rangle$ and $|k'\sigma'\rangle$ states effectively depends on $|k-k'|$ and on $|\varepsilon_{k\sigma} - \varepsilon_{k'\sigma'} \pm \omega|$, so that the above-mentioned spin mixing is different at different parts of the dispersion curves $\varepsilon_{k\sigma}$. This is shown schematically in Fig. 3(b) for different spin subbands.

Thus, even though in nonequilibrium the current in each subband $\varepsilon_{k\sigma}$ is zero, the associated spin current is not zero anymore. For example, in the $\varepsilon_{k_x}$ band more up spins flow in $+x$ than $-x$ direction. Correspondingly, in the $\varepsilon_{k_y}$ band more down spins flow in $-x$ direction. This results in the net spin-up current in $+x$ direction. Obviously, the direction of spin current is related to the sign of Dresselhaus coupling constant $\alpha$. A remarkable change of the wave function by a strong electric field causes the injected pure spin current of the order of the equilibrium spin currents arising as a result of the Rashba effect.

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**FIG. 2:** Total spin current, calculated by using Eq. (17) for indicated values of $k_F R$. The parameters used in numerical calculations are given in the main text.

**FIG. 3:** Schematic presentation of the light-induced resonant formation of spin holes in the energy bands occupied with electrons: (a) spin-split energy bands in GaAs (110) quantum well; (b) due to the coupling $V_{kk'}^\sigma$ (cf. Eq. (13)) of the spin-up and spin-down states, the effective spin $\langle S_z \rangle$ in each subband decreases.
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IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, we have proposed a new effect of the coherent nonlinear generation of a steady pure spin currents in GaAs (110) quantum wells by electromagnetic wave. The injected spin current is proportional to the intensity of the external radiation, strongly depends on the frequency, and can be injected in the frequency range up to the Fermi energy of the two-dimensional electron gas. Physical mechanism of the effect is related to the virtual spin reorientation of electrons filling the spin subbands split by the Dresselhaus interaction in the presence of a randomly varying Rashba coupling. The latter may be introduced, e.g., by random doping of the quantum well. As a result, a 'spin hole' virtually appears in the subband, leading to the light-induced spin current.

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