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*Published in:*
Physical Review B

*DOI:*
10.1103/PhysRevB.93.024201

Published: 11/01/2016

*Document Version*
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Please cite the original version:*
Reduction in thermal conductivity and tunable heat capacity of inorganic/organic hybrid superlattices

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(Received 28 August 2015; revised manuscript received 14 December 2015; published 11 January 2016)

We study the influence of molecular monolayers on the thermal conductivities and heat capacities of hybrid inorganic/organic superlattice thin films fabricated via atomic/molecular layer deposition. We measure the cross plane thermal conductivities and volumetric heat capacities of TiO2- and ZnO-based superlattices with periodic inclusion of hydroquinone layers via time domain thermoreflectance. In comparison to their homogeneous counterparts, the thermal conductivities in these superlattices films are considerably reduced. We attribute this reduction in the thermal conductivity mainly due to incoherent phonon boundary scattering at the inorganic/organic interface. Increasing the inorganic/organic interface density reduces the thermal conductivity and heat capacity of these films. High-temperature annealing treatment of the superlattices results in a change in the orientation of the hydroquinone molecules to a 2D graphitic layer along with a change in the overall density of the hybrid superlattice. The thermal conductivity of the hybrid superlattice increases after annealing, which we attribute to an increase in crystallinity.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevB.93.024201

I. INTRODUCTION

A new class of hybrid inorganic/organic materials grown via a combination of atomic layer deposition (ALD) and molecular layer deposition (MLD) have recently garnered much attention due to their ultralow thermal conductivities [1–3]. Integrated with their enhanced electrical, optical, magnetic, and mechanical properties in comparison to their conventional organic or inorganic counterparts, these novel nanomaterials make for attractive candidates for a wide array of applications in nanotechnology [4–7]. For example, stemming from the low thermal conductivities of hybrid superlattice (SL) films have been shown to be ideal candidates for energy conversion and mechanical properties in comparison to their conventional counterparts.

Although plenty of interest has been shown towards understanding thermal transport in organic-based nanocomposites [9–18], there has been limited studies focusing on heat capacity measurements of ALD/MLD grown nanomaterials. Understanding the energy storage potential (quantified by the heat capacity, $C$) along with thermal transport efficiency (quantified by the thermal conductivity, $\kappa$) is necessary for a complete understanding of energetic processes in hybrid materials.

We report on the thermal conductivities and heat capacities of TiO2- and ZnO-based SLs with periodic introduction of organic layers in-between thicker inorganic constituents. The thermal conductivities of the hybrid structures are shown to decrease with increasing number of organic layers in the SL structure, which is attributed to incoherent phonon boundary scattering at the inorganic/organic/inorganic interfaces. The inclusion of the periodic organic layers are also shown to decrease the overall heat capacities of these SLs. The effect of high-temperature annealing treatment increases the thermal conductivities and heat capacities of the TiO2-based superlattices. This increase in the thermal conductivities is mainly attributed to enhanced crystallinity of the inorganic constituents after annealing, whereas, the increase in the heat capacities is mainly due to the increase in the density of the SLs due to the transition in orientation of the organic layers as a result of high-temperature annealing. This demonstrates the ability to control the thermal conductivities and heat capacities of hybrid SLs based on different atomic-scale structural mechanisms.

II. EXPERIMENTAL DETAILS

A. Sample fabrication and characterization

Hybrid SLs of \([(TiO_2)_m(Ti-O-C_6H_4-O-)_k=1]_n\) with $m = 40$ and $4$ were fabricated on MgO substrates at 210°C via the ALD/MLD technique [19] from TiCl4, H2O and hydroquinone (HQ) precursors (Picosun R-100 ALD reactor) as described in detail in our previous reports [2,20]. An illustration of a hybrid SL is shown in Fig. 1(a). Additionally, \([(ZnO)_m(Zn-O-C_6H_4-O-)_k=1]_n\) with $m = 9$ and $4$ were also fabricated on Al2O3 substrates to complement our previous experiments, reported in Ref. [3]. Along with the SL films, control samples of purely ALD grown inorganic TiO2 and ZnO films were fabricated.

Figure 1(b) shows the characteristic grazing incidence x-ray diffraction (GIXRD) patterns for the films tested in this study. The fact that the intensity of the peaks for the as-deposited TiO2-based SLs are reduced compared to the purely ALD grown TiO2 with anatase phase, suggests that the crystallinity in those samples is hindered due to the inclusion of the HQ layers. In contrast, for the ZnO-based SLs, inclusion of HQ layers for the $m = 9$ sample does not drastically hinder the peaks in the XRD patterns (that fit the typical ZnO hexagonal wurzite structure). Also, there is negligible change in the
The small differences in the XRR patterns seen for the as-deposited and annealed samples reveal a reduction in the film thickness and consequent increase in the film densities. The arrows in Fig. 1(c) highlight the reduction in the film thickness after annealing that underline the shifts in the critical angle ($\theta_c$) values. The density reduction is expected to mainly stem from the contraction of the organic layers. We estimate the densities from the critical angle values of the XRR patterns [21]. First, the mean electron density values were estimated from $\rho_e = (\theta_c^2 \pi)/(\lambda^2 r_e)$, where $\lambda$ is the x-ray wavelength and $r_e$ is the classical electron radius. Then, assuming elemental compositions to follow the stoichiometry of [(TiO$_2$)$_m$(Ti–O–C$_6$H$_4$–O–)$_n$]$_l$ or [(ZnO)$_m$(Zn–O–C$_6$H$_4$–O–)$_n$]$_l$, the mean mass densities were obtained from $\rho_m = (\rho_e A)/(N_A Z)$, where $A$ is the average molar mass, $N_A$ is the Avogadro constant, and $Z$ the average atomic number. The estimated densities along with the measured thicknesses for the thin films are shown in Table I.

### B. Time-domain thermoreflectance

We measure the thermal properties of the samples with the time domain thermoreflectance (TDTR) technique. The details of the experimental procedure as well as the analysis process have been discussed in Refs. [22–24]. For this study, we modulate the pump beam at different frequencies and monitor the in-phase ($V_{in}$) and out-of-phase ($V_{out}$) signals of the reflected probe beam with a lock-in amplifier. Prior to TDTR measurements, we metallize the samples with $\sim$80 nm 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Thickness (nm)</th>
<th>Density (g cm$^{-3}$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALD-grown TiO$_2$</td>
<td>98.3</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[(TiO$<em>2$)$</em>{m=( Ti–O–C$_6$H$<em>4$–O–)$</em>{l=1}$}]$_n$ (as-deposited)</td>
<td>110.8</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[TiO$<em>2$]$</em>{m=( Ti–O–C$_6$H$<em>4$–O–)$</em>{l=2}$}]$_n$ (annealed)</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[TiO$<em>2$]$</em>{m=( Ti–O–C$_6$H$<em>4$–O–)$</em>{l=3}$}]$_n$ (as-deposited)</td>
<td>123.7</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[TiO$<em>2$]$</em>{m=( Ti–O–C$_6$H$<em>4$–O–)$</em>{l=2}$}]$_n$ (annealed)</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALD-grown ZnO</td>
<td>154.0</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ZnO]$_{m=( Zn–O–C$_6$H$<em>4$–O–)$</em>{l=1}$}]$_n$</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ZnO]$_{m=( Zn–O–C$_6$H$<em>4$–O–)$</em>{l=1}$}]$_n$</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of Al transducer, the thickness of which is determined via picosecond acoustics [25,26].

We analyze the TDTR data with a three-layer thermal model (layer 1: Al, layer 2: ALD/MLD SL, layer 3: semi-infinite substrate) and simultaneously measure the heat capacities and thermal conductivities of the hybrid SLs. The thermal boundary conductances at the Al/SL film and SL film/substrate interfaces have to be separated from the measurements to correctly predict the intrinsic thermophysical properties of the SL films. To this end, we analyze the sensitivity of the measurements to the various parameters in the thermal model. The sensitivity of the ratio \(-V_{in}/V_{out}\) to a thermophysical quantity is defined by [27]

\[
S_x = \frac{\partial \ln(-V_{in}/V_{out})}{\partial \ln(x)},
\]

where \(x\) is the thermophysical parameter of interest. Figures 2(a) and 2(b) show the calculations of Eq. (1) for the sensitivity of the ratio to the various parameters in our three-layer thermal model for the TiO2-based SL with \(m = 40\) at two different pump modulation frequencies [(a) 8.8 MHz and (b) 3.72 MHz]. The most sensitive parameters are the heat capacity \((C_{TiO2:HQ})\) and thermal conductivity \((\kappa_{TiO2:HQ})\) of the hybrid SLs. The fact that the sensitivities are different and dynamic in nature allows us to simultaneously measure \(C_{TiO2:HQ}\) and \(\kappa_{TiO2:HQ}\) as discussed in detail below. The front side interface conductance, \(h_{K,Al/TiO2}\), and the back side interface conductance \(h_{K,TiO2:MgO}\) are measured from separate measurements on the control sample (Al/TiO2/MgO). As shown in Figs. 2(a) and 2(b), the measurements are insensitive to \(h_{K,Al/TiO2}\); however, a 10\% uncertainty in \(h_{K,TiO2:MgO}\) leads to a \(\sim 1.2\%\) and \(\sim 2.4\%\) uncertainty in \(\kappa_{TiO2:HQ}\) and \(C_{TiO2:HQ}\) at room temperature for 8.8 MHz frequency, respectively, which quantifies this insensitivity.

We confirm the measurements for \(h_{K,Al/TiO2}\) and \(h_{K,TiO2:MgO}\) by analyzing the thermoreflectance data for the control sample using two different approaches. The first approach analyzes the \(V_m\) as well as \(-V_{in}/V_{out}\) separately, as we outline in detail elsewhere [28]. The second method utilizes two frequencies to effectively separate the interfacial conductances. At 3.72-MHz modulation frequency, we estimate an effective thermal conductivity that considers the front side conductance and the thermal conductivity of the hybrid structure as a lumped conductance. We fit the data to the model with this effective conductivity and the back side conductance as free parameters. For the higher modulation frequency (8.8 MHz), we fit the data with the free parameters as the thermal conductivity of the SL and front side conductance and assume the back side conductance as an input parameter determined from the lower modulation frequency. It should be noted that this approach to measuring the front side and back side conductances gives agreeable values to the first method outlined in Ref. [28]. Uncertainties in the measured thermal conductivities and heat capacities of the hybrid SLs are derived from the uncertainties in the input parameters and the sensitivity of the three-layer thermal model to those parameters. We measure a value of \(\kappa \approx 5.2 \pm 0.3\) W m\(^{-1}\) K\(^{-1}\) for the purely ALD grown TiO2 film, which is in good agreement with the literature value of \(\sim 5.7\) W m\(^{-1}\) K\(^{-1}\) for an anatase thin film [29].

For a given frequency, the best fit to our TDTR signal (for hybrid SLs with high interfacial densities) can be produced with multiple combinations of the heat capacities and thermal conductivities, as shown in the sensitivity contour plots in Fig. 2(c) for a \(k:m = 1:4\), as-deposited TiO2-based SL. The contour plots represent the mean square deviation of the model to the TDTR data with the various combinations of \(C\) and \(\kappa\) as input parameters in our three-layer model [30]. Note, our best fits to the TDTR data are usually \(\lesssim 0.02\). As is clear from the sensitivity contour plot, a wide range of values for \(C\) can produce the best fit in the least squares sense for a given frequency. Therefore, to accurately determine \(C\) and \(\kappa\), we use 3.72- and 8.8-MHz pump modulation frequencies that give different sensitivity contour maps for the thermophysical properties [see Fig. 2(c)]. The common set of values for \(C\) and \(\kappa\) at these two frequencies shown by the overlap of the best fit values represent our measurements for the hybrid multilayers.

III. THERMAL CONDUCTIVITY

Figure 3 shows the measured thermal conductivities for the as-deposited and annealed TiO2-based samples with \(m = 40\) as a function of temperature. Two aspects of the results shown
shown. The calculated minimum in thermal conductivity for TiO$_2$ is the inorganic/organic interfaces [2]. The results for the hybrid conductivities is attributed to incoherent boundary scattering at 17-nm grain size (Ref. [32]) and anatase thin film (Ref. [29]) are also shown. The calculated minimum in thermal conductivity for TiO$_2$ is also shown for comparison.

In Fig. 3, the thermal conductivities measured for the as-deposited and annealed SLs show a large reduction as compared to the sputtered TiO$_2$ thin films [32]; at room temperature, $\kappa$ for the as-deposited SL is almost 30% lower than the measured $\kappa$ for an anatase thin film (Fig. 3; sold triangle) [29]. For comparison, we have also included the thermal conductivity of bulk, single crystal TiO$_2$ (Ref. [31]), a polycrystalline sputtered film with 17-nm grain size (Ref. [32]) and anatase thin film (Ref. [29]) are also shown. The reason for the decrease in the thermal conductivities is attributed to incoherent boundary scattering at the inorganic/organic interfaces [2]. The results for the hybrid SLs agree well with the model for the minimum limit to thermal conductivity of TiO$_2$ (solid black line in Fig. 3) [32,33]. For comparison, Fig. 3 also shows the measured $\kappa$ for an as-deposited amorphous TiO$_2$ film. Even with the enhancement in crystallinity of the annealed sample, boundary scattering at the inorganic/organic/inorganic interfaces results in the low values for thermal conductivities. In Fig. 3, we have also added the predictions from a minimum thermal conductivity model for a homogeneous amorphous TiO$_2$ sample. This model assumes that the “mean free paths” of vibrations in the amorphous state are limited to the spacing between the atoms. Therefore, following Ref. [33], the thermal conductivity as a result from a random walk between localized oscillators is

$$\kappa_{\text{min}} = \left(\frac{\pi}{6}\right)^{1/3} k_B n^{2/3} \sum_i T_i \left(\frac{T}{\Theta_i}\right)^2 \int_0^{\Theta_i/T} \frac{x^3 e^x}{(e^x - 1)^2} dx, \quad (2)$$

where the sum is taken over the three sound speeds ($v_i$), $n$ is the atomic density, and $\Theta_i = v_i(\hbar/k_B)(6\pi^2 n)^{1/3}$ is the cutoff frequency for each polarization expressed in degrees [33]. For the calculations shown in Fig. 3 (for a homogeneous TiO$_2$), the longitudinal and transverse sound speeds are taken from Ref. [34]. As is clear from Fig. 3, the predicted minimum in thermal conductivity for TiO$_2$ agrees very well with our measured values for a homogeneous amorphous TiO$_2$ thin film and the thermal conductivity can be further lowered below this minimum limit by the inclusion of periodic monolayers of HQ.

The second aspect to note in Fig. 3 is the increase in the thermal conductivities of the hybrid SLs after annealing at 600 °C for 6 hours. This can be understood as a consequence of enhanced crystallinity of the inorganic constituents due to the high annealing temperatures. However, the role of the different organic constituents (2D graphitic carbon layers in the annealed samples as compared to the HQ monolayers in the as-deposited samples) might affect the vibrational scattering mechanisms differently at these molecular interfaces. To understand the relative contributions of these two competing effects on thermal conductivity, we compare the results for the annealed and as-deposited samples with $m = 4$ as reported in our previous work [2]. We measure $\kappa = 0.62 \pm 0.04$ and $0.66 \pm 0.04$ W m$^{-1}$ K$^{-1}$ for the as-deposited and annealed samples, respectively. For these samples, even with the high annealing treatments, the inorganic constituents are mostly amorphous in nature, as demonstrated by the GIXRD patterns in Fig. 1. Consequently, the values for the measured thermal conductivities are agreeable within uncertainties, suggesting that the role of the organic layers (in these two samples with the same number of organic interfaces) in thermal transport are similar; in other words, the orientation of the HQ layer does not affect scattering at the inorganic/organic boundary and the resulting vibrational thermal conductivity. Contrary to the $m = 4$ sample, the crystallinity of the $m = 40$ sample is enhanced after annealing as demonstrated by the increase in the 101 peak [see Fig. 1(b)] and, therefore, the increase in $\kappa$ is a consequence of enhanced crystallinity and not due to the intrinsic scattering mechanisms in the organic layers.

Figure 4 shows the measured thermal conductivities for the ZnO-based $m = 9$ SL as a function of temperature. Along with these measurements, we also include the measured thermal conductivities of $m = 99$ and 49 SLs from our previous work [28]. Similar to the results for the TiO$_2$-based SLs, the inclusion of HQ monolayers in-between the thicker inorganic constituents is shown to drastically reduce the thermal conductivities compared to the measurements of a homogeneous thin ZnO film from Ref. [35]. We have attributed the reduction in $\kappa$ for the ZnO-based hybrid SLs as a phonon-boundary scattering limited process (by considering the thermal boundary conductance across ZnO/HQ/ZnO interfaces). The scattered phonon energies almost perfectly transmit across the organic monolayers (depending on the phonon wavelength), and the scattering within the organic layers itself do not contribute significantly to the overall reduction in thermal transport [28].

In comparison to the minimum thermal conductivity calculated for ZnO from the elastic constants reported in Ref. [36], $\kappa$ for the $m = 9$ SL are well below the minimum limit, suggesting that the inclusion of periodic HQ layers can severely limit thermal transport in these hybrid structures.

We plot the measured thermal conductivities as a function of SL period thickness for the ZnO- and TiO$_2$-based SLs in Fig. 5. The results show that as the SL period thickness increases, the thermal conductivities increase monotonically for all the hybrid SLs. The drastic increase in $\kappa$ as a function of
FIG. 4. Thermal conductivities of ZnO-based $m = 9$ SLs along with the thermal conductivities of $m = 99$ and 49 hybrid SLs (Ref. [28]), and a 180-nm ZnO film (Ref. [35]). The calculated minimum in thermal conductivity for ZnO is also shown for comparison.

The reduction in thermal conductivity and tunable...
Annealed, (b) constituent for the TiO₂ SLs, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. How- ever, the volumetric heat capacities of the annealed samples decrease the volumetric heat capacity in general due to the reduction in density with higher MLD cycles. How- ever, the increase in heat capacities is attributed to the enhanced crystallinity (not due to any intrinsic vibrational properties of the organic layer), whereas, the increase in heat capacities is attributed to the increase in the densities of the samples.

Figure 7(b) shows the measured specific heat capacities of the materials calculated by dividing the measured volumetric heat capacities by their respective measured mass densities (hence, we define the specific heat capacity based on mass, where the specific heat capacity, \( c \), is given by \( c = C/\rho \), where \( \rho \) is the mass density). As is expected, the specific heat capacities of the hybrid SLs deviates from the value of the bulk inorganic constituent as the number of organic monolayer increases. At room temperature, the specific heat of the as-deposited TiO₂- and ZnO-based SLs with \( m = 4 \) is closer to the value of the organic counterpart, i.e., poly- phenylene oxide (1.204 J g⁻¹ K⁻¹). Whereas, the specific heat capacities of the SLs with \( m = 40 \) and 9 for the TiO₂- and ZnO-based SLs, respectively, approach the value of their corresponding inorganic constituents. Unlike the change in the volumetric heat capacities after the high annealing treatment, the specific heat of the annealed SLs show good agreement within uncertainties with their as-deposited counterparts (even though the densities increase with annealing). In Fig. 7(b), we have also included the measured specific heat of a \( k: m = 1:1 \) ZnO-based hybrid sample reported in Ref. [1] (with a density of 5 g cm⁻³). Their result matches the decreasing trend in the measured specific heat with increasing mass density as with our hybrid multilayers.

V. SUMMARY

In summary, we have measured the thermal conductivities and heat capacities of TiO₂- and ZnO-based hybrid SLs with periodic organic layers between the inorganic constituents. The inclusion of organic layers is shown to drastically reduce the thermal conductivities of these SLs. Furthermore, the thermal conductivities of these hybrid SLs increases monotonically with increasing period thickness, suggesting that boundary scattering at the inorganic/organic/inorganic interface dominates the heat transfer in these structures. Similarly, the inclusion of organic layers are also shown to decrease the heat capacities. The effect of high-temperature annealing treatment on the TiO₂-based SLs is shown to increase both the thermal conductivities and heat capacities. The increase in thermal conductivities due to annealing is attributed to the enhanced crystallinity (not due to any intrinsic vibrational properties of the organic layer), whereas, the increase in heat capacities is attributed to the increase in the densities of the samples.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


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