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Mechanism of surface conduction in the vicinity of Schottky gates on AlGaN/GaN heterostructures

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Lateral surface leakage current (I_s) on an AlGaN/GaN heterostructure was systematically investigated by using a two-parallel gate structure with a gap distance (L_{GG}) of 200 nm–5 μm . The surface current I_s systematically increased as L_{GG} decreased. A simple resistive layer conduction that should show $1/L_{GG}$ dependence failed to account for the drastic increase in I_s when L_{GG} was reduced to less than 1 μm . However, no dependence on L_{GG} was seen in vertical current that flows in the Schottky interface. The I_s showed a clear temperature dependence proportional to $\exp(-T^{-1/3})$, indicating two-dimensional variable-range hopping through high-density surface electronic states in AlGaN. A pronounced reduction in surface current of almost four orders of magnitude was observed in a sample with SiN_x passivation. © 2007 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.2775834]

Schottky gates on AlGaN/GaN high-electron-mobility transistors (HEMTs) are being reduced to the nanometer-scale level to enable operation at higher frequency.^{1–3} Source-gate and gate-drain spacings, as well as gate scaling, are being made narrower to reduce access resistance in AlGaN/GaN HEMTs. A level below 1 μm has been achieved.^{2,3} In these devices, the gate leakage current includes not only one-dimensional transport vertical to the Schottky interface but also lateral electron injection to the AlGaN surface from the gate edge.⁴ Here, we have to pay attention to laterally injected charges to surface electronic states because they can cause instability in device operation. The first trial to investigate the surface leakage current on an AlGaN/GaN heterostructure was conducted by Tan *et al.*⁵ However, the electrode spacing used in their study was much longer than the actual source-gate and gate-drain distances of new AlGaN/GaN HEMTs, and the electrode configuration was also quite different from AlGaN/GaN HEMTs. The surface leakage transport of 1 μm from the Schottky gates has not been investigated so far in spite of its importance. We must control the surface in the vicinity of Schottky gates to fully exploit the excellent potential of AlGaN/GaN HEMTs.

This letter describes our systematic characterization of surface leakage current in the vicinity of Schottky gates on the AlGaN/GaN heterostructure, separating it from the vertical leakage current through the Schottky interface.

The $\text{Al}_{0.27}\text{Ga}_{0.73}\text{N}/\text{GaN}$ heterostructure used for this study was grown by metal organic vapor phase epitaxy on a sapphire substrate. A 25-nm-thick AlGaN barrier layer consists of *i*-AlGaN (5 nm)/Si-doped ($2 \times 10^{18} \text{ cm}^{-3}$) *n*-AlGaN (15 nm)/*i*-AlGaN (5 nm). Typical values of the electron concentration and mobility of two-dimensional electron gas (2DEG) at room temperature were $1.0 \times 10^{13} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ and 1380 $\text{cm}^2/\text{V s}$, respectively.

Figure 1(a) shows the dual-gate structure for characterizing the surface current. We fabricated an additional Schottky gate, G2, near the main Schottky gate, G1, with an

L_{GG} distance of 200 nm–5 μm , as shown in Fig. 1(a), to detect the lateral surface current (I_s) separated from the vertical current (I_v). The gate length L_G was set to 1 μm in all of the devices. Isolation was carried out as part of fabricating the dual-gate structure by using electron cyclotron resonance-assisted reactive ion beam etching with a mixture of $\text{CH}_4/\text{H}_2/\text{Ar}/\text{N}_2$ [5/15/3/3 SCCM (SCCM denotes cubic centimeter per minute at STP)] gases.⁶ The Ti/Al/Ti/Au Ohmic electrodes were deposited, followed by annealing at 800 °C for 1 min in N_2 ambient. Two-parallel Schottky gates were formed using electron-beam lithography.

The measurement circuit for the surface current is schematically shown in Fig. 1(b). When a negative gate voltage of V_G is applied to G1, the leakage current flows in two different ways, which causes the vertical current I_v and surface current I_s , as shown in Fig. 1(b). The I_v indicates one-dimensional current transport, vertical to the Schottky interface, and I_s indicates surface current laterally injected from the gate edge. The arrows for I_v and I_s in Fig. 1(b) represent the direction of electron flow. The I_s and I_v are detected by the G2 electrode and Ohmic electrode via a 2DEG channel, respectively.

Figures 2(a) and 2(b) show the I_v - V_G and I_s - V_G characteristics for various values of L_{GG} , respectively. The I_v was mostly independent of L_{GG} , while the I_s systematically increased as L_{GG} decreased. No dependence on L_{GG} was observed in I_v , indicating that the vertical leakage current through Schottky interfaces is decided only by the vertical

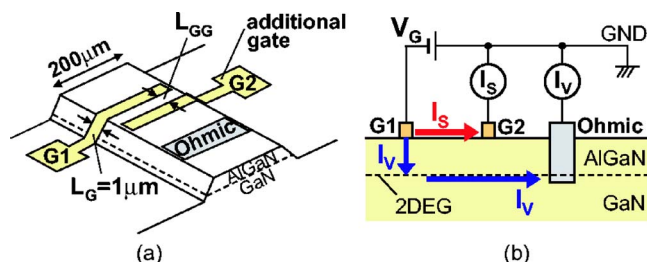


FIG. 1. (Color online) Schematic illustration of (a) dual-gate structure and (b) measurement circuit for surface current.

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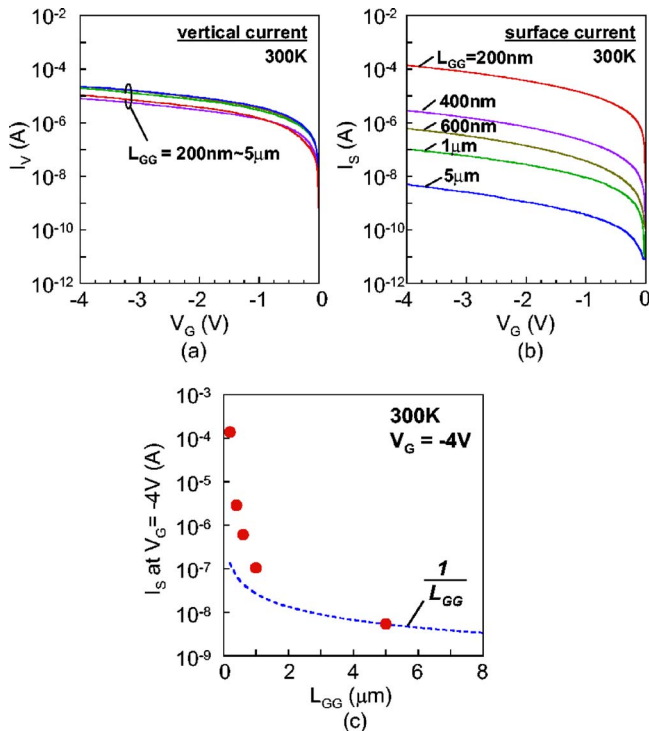


FIG. 2. (Color online) Measured (a) I_v - V_G and (b) I_s - V_G characteristics with various L_{GG} . (c) Dependence on L_{GG} of I_s at $V_G = -4$ V.

electric field between G1 and 2DEG. The surface leakage current at $V_G = -4$ V is plotted in Fig. 2(c) as a function of L_{GG} . The I_s drastically increases when L_{GG} drops to less than $1 \mu\text{m}$. Assuming that electrical conduction occurs in a thin resistive layer, the current between two electrodes should have $1/L_{GG}$ dependence, which is indicated by the broken line in Fig. 2(c). The experimentally observed dependence on L_{GG} implies that some other current transport plays an important role for I_s , especially when L_{GG} is less than $1 \mu\text{m}$.

To obtain better insight into the transport mechanism of the vertical current and surface current, we measured the temperature dependence of I_v and I_s . Figure 3(a) shows the I_s and I_v of the device with L_{GG} of 600 nm at $V_G = -2$ V measured at various temperatures. Extremely weak temperature dependence was observed in I_v , which is the same behavior as the leakage current in large area AlGaIn/GaN Schottky diodes.⁷ We investigated the leakage current transport of large area Schottky diodes with a diameter of

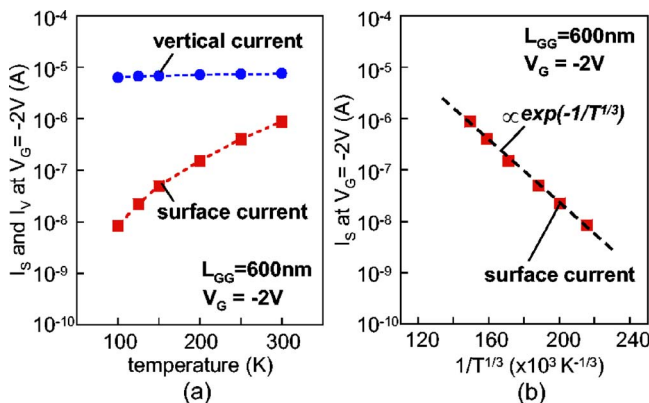


FIG. 3. (Color online) (a) Temperature dependences of I_s and I_v at $V_G = -2$ V and (b) I_s at $V_G = -2$ V as a function of $1/T^{1/3}$ showing a straight line, consistent with 2D-VRH conduction.

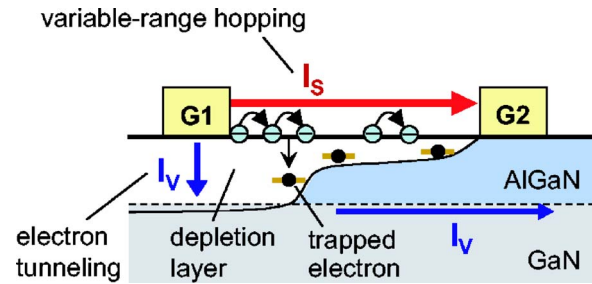


FIG. 4. (Color online) Two-dimensional variable-range hopping along AlGaIn surface in the vicinity of Schottky gate.

$200 \mu\text{m} - 600 \mu\text{m}$ and proposed a model based on surface donor.^{8,9} Here, the width of the Schottky barrier was assumed to be reduced due to the presence of unintentionally introduced surface donors, such as nitrogen vacancy defects or oxygen impurities.^{10,11} This results in temperature independent large tunneling current. Thus, weak temperature dependence observed in I_v indicates that the leakage current transport for large area Schottky contacts is still working even in $1 \mu\text{m}$ Schottky gates for I_v .

However, a clear temperature dependence appeared in I_s , indicating not a tunneling mechanism but some other thermally activated conduction mechanism. One of the possible mechanisms for surface current is two-dimensional variable-range hopping¹² (2D-VRH) assisted by a high-density surface electronic state in AlGaIn. The temperature dependence of conductivity based on 2D-VRH is theoretically given by the following simple expression:¹²

$$\sigma(T) \propto \exp[-(1/T)^{1/3}]. \quad (1)$$

Figure 3(b) shows the temperature dependence of the surface current at $V_G = -2$ V as a function of $1/T^{1/3}$. The I_s plotted in Fig. 3(b) gives a straight line for temperatures from 100 to 300 K, showing the characteristic temperature dependence of 2D-VRH proportional to $\exp(-1/T^{1/3})$. Other devices with different L_{GG} of 200 nm and $1 \mu\text{m}$ also showed the same temperature dependence of I_s . These results confirm that 2D-VRH governs surface current transport in the vicinity of Schottky gates.

Figure 4 shows a model for the leakage current transport in the vicinity of Schottky gates. In addition to the occurrence of the vertical tunneling current, the lateral electron injection to the high-density surface electronic states on the AlGaIn surface occurs through electron tunneling at the edge of G1 due to electric field concentration at the gate edge. These laterally injected electrons propagate toward G2, assisted by the 2D-VRH conduction through high-density AlGaIn surface electronic states. Although the reason for the L_{GG} dependence of I_s is not clear yet, we discuss the possible mechanisms to explain the drastic increase in I_s shown in Fig. 2(b).

First, by considering deep levels in AlGaIn, it is likely that some of surface hopping electrons are trapped by the deep levels. Reducing L_{GG} may increase the numbers of electrons which reach to G2 due to less possibility of electron capture by the deep traps, resulting in increase in I_s . Second, a difference in lateral electron injection rate at G1 gate edge may exist among the devices with different L_{GG} . Higher electric field is induced at G1 gate edge in the devices with shorter L_{GG} under the same V_G of -4 V, resulting in larger amount of lateral electron injection to AlGaIn surface. Fur-

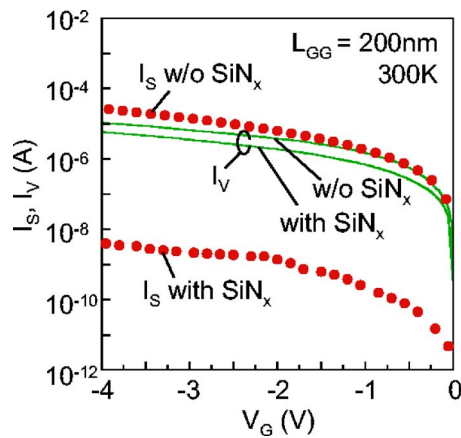


FIG. 5. (Color online) Effect of SiN_x passivation on I_s - V_G and I_v - V_G characteristics.

thermore, the average electric field at AlGaIn surface between G1 and G2 electrodes also increases with decreasing L_{GG} . This may lead to the potential lowering of the hopping states, called Poole-Frenkel effect, thereby enhancing the 2D-VRH process toward G2. This also can increase the surface current at shorter L_{GG} .

Finally, we investigated the SiN_x passivation effect on surface leakage current. The SiN_x layer was chosen because it is most commonly used as a passivation layer for AlGaIn/GaN HEMTs and is very effective in removing current collapse. Prior to depositing SiN_x , we conducted nitrogen plasma treatment for 5 min at a substrate temperature of 260 °C to clean the surface and recover the nitrogen vacancy.^{13,14} A 20-nm-thick SiN_x layer was deposited sequentially by using electron cyclotron resonance-assisted chemical vapor deposition with a mixture of SiH_4/N_2 gas at 260 °C.

Figure 5 shows the I_s - V_G and I_v - V_G characteristics before and after the SiN_x passivation. As shown in Fig. 5, the vertical current remained virtually unchanged before and after the passivation, reflecting that the surface process does not affect the properties of the embedded Schottky interface. However, a pronounced reduction in surface current of al-

most four orders of magnitude was observed after the SiN_x passivation. The passivation effectively reduces the density in surface electronic states on the AlGaIn surface, thereby resulting in suppression of the surface leakage transport.

In conclusion, we systematically investigated the lateral surface leakage current on an AlGaIn/GaN heterostructure by using a two-parallel gate structure with a gap distance (L_{GG}) of 200 nm–5 μm . The surface current I_s drastically increased as L_{GG} decreased when L_{GG} reduced to less than 1 μm . A simple resistive layer conduction, which should have $1/L_{GG}$ dependence, failed to account for this anomalous behavior in I_s . However, no dependence on L_{GG} was seen in vertical current I_v . The I_s showed clear temperature dependence proportional to $\exp(-T^{-1/3})$, indicating two-dimensional variable-range hopping through high-density surface electronic states in AlGaIn. A pronounced reduction in surface current of almost four orders of magnitude was observed in the sample with the SiN_x passivation.

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