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First principles calculations of Hydrogen—Titanium vacancy complexes in $SrTiO_3$

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Abstract

Hydrogen has been reported to serve exclusively as a donor in many oxides, including $SrTiO_3$. In a perfect crystal, a proton stays near an O atom, forming a strong O–H bond. In the presence of cation vacancies, i.e., Sr vacancy and Ti vacancy, protons prefer to electrically passivate the cation vacancies by forming strong bonds with the O atoms surrounding the vacancy. These result in the formation of nH–V_{Sr} and nH–V_{Ti} complexes. Based on first principles density functional calculations, local configurations and vibration signatures of nH–V_{Sr} complexes and their vibrational signatures have been previously reported [T-Thienprasert et al., Identification of hydrogen defects in $SrTiO_3$ by first-principles local vibration mode calculations, Physical Review B 85, 125205 (2012)]. Here, we report the computational results for nH–V_{Ti} complexes and compare the results with infrared measurements reported in the literatures.

Keywords: $SrTiO_3$; Hydrogen; Vacancy; First principles calculations

1. Introduction

Hydrogen (H) is known to be an abundant impurity, which can affect materials' electronic properties [1–4]. In most oxide materials, H acts exclusively as a donor and prefers to stay close to oxygen atoms, forming strong O–H bonds. These O–H bonds can be considered as oscillators with distinct natural stretch mode frequencies of about 3000 cm^{-1} that can be directly observed by infrared (IR) measurements.

Strontium titanate ($SrTiO_3$) is one of the most important oxide materials because of its potential to be used in dielectric and optical devices [5–8], as well as its potential to be used as a substrate for superconducting thin films [9]. $SrTiO_3$ has a cubic perovskite structure at room temperature and a tetragonal structure at the temperature below 105 K [10]. In 1980, based on polarized IR absorption measurement, Weber and Kapphan (WK) observed the vibration band at ~3500 cm^{-1} [11,12]. They also studied the effects of uniaxial stress and electric field on the vibration band. Later, polarized Raman scattering measurement was carried out by the same group [13]. At room temperature, WK found the main peak centered at 3495 cm^{-1} accompanied with small peaks in the range of 3505–3520 cm^{-1}. WK proposed that the frequencies belong to a single H interstitial in $SrTiO_3$. Recently, Tarun and McCluskey [14] (TM) experimentally observed additional double peaks centered at 3355 and 3384 cm^{-1}. They assigned these local vibrational modes to a complex defect between a Sr vacancy and two H atoms (2H–V_{Sr}).

Recently, based on first principles calculations, we have revealed that H interstitial has a vibrational frequency far lower than 3500 cm^{-1} [15]. We also showed that one or two interstitial H atom(s) could be trapped by V_{Sr} forming nH–V_{Sr} complexes (n=1 or 2). In the complexes, H atoms form strong O–H bonds with the O atoms surrounding V_{Sr}

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in the direction pointing toward the vacancy center. As we obtained the calculated vibrational frequencies of nH–V_{Sr} complexes very close to the observed peaks ($\sim$3500 cm^{-1}) by WK with consistent oscillator directions, we identified WK's observation to be nH–V_{Sr} complexes; not a single H interstitial [15]. For the double peaks centered at 3355 and 3384 cm^{-1} observed by TM, we previously discussed that they could not arise from 2H–V_{Sr} complexes as proposed by TM because the frequencies were not in agreement and the complexes could not explain the coupling observed experimentally. In the same article [15], we proposed that the double peaks that TM observed may belong to H and Ti vacancy complexes nH–V_{Ti} but we did not provide the results in detail. In this paper, we report the binding energies, local structures and the detailed vibrational frequencies of complex defects between H and V_{Ti} based on first-principles density functional calculations. We show that the vibrational frequencies observed by TM are consistent with nH–V_{Ti} complexes.

2. Computational method

In this work, first-principles density functional theory (DFT) within the local density approximation (LDA) was used. To describe the electron-ion interactions, the projector-augmented wave (PAW) method with ultrasoft pseudo potentials, as implemented in VASP code, was used [16–18]. The cutoff energy for the plane wave basis set was set at 500 eV. We obtained the calculated lattice constant of cubic $SrTiO_3$ of 3.87 Å which is in good agreement with the experimental value of 3.905 Å [19]. To study defects in $SrTiO_3$, a supercell approach with a supercell size of 135 atoms, which is a $3\times3\times3$ repetition of cubic-perovskite unit cell, was used [20]. For k-space integration, Monkhorst–Pack scheme with a shifted $2\times2\times2$ k-point sampling was employed. For charged defects, a jellium background is used to suppress the long-range Coulombic interactions between supercells. All atoms were allowed to relax until the residue (Hellmann–Feynman) forces [21] become less than 10^{-3} eV/Å.

Following the description of the binding energy between a Sr vacancy and H interstitial described in Ref. [15], the binding energy between a Ti vacancy (V_{Ti}^{4-}) and H interstitial, or simply a proton, (H^+) and between $(n\text{H}–V_{Ti})^{-4+n}$ and a proton can be defined as

$$\Delta E = E_{tot}(\text{H}–V_{Ti})^{3-} + E_{tot}(\text{bulk}) - E_{tot}\left(V_{Ti}^{4-}\right) - E_{tot}\left(\text{H}^+\right) \quad (1)$$

and

$$\Delta E = E_{tot}([n+1]\text{H}–V_{Ti})^{-3+n} + E_{tot}(\text{bulk}) - E_{tot}(n\text{H}–V_{Ti})^{-4+n} - E_{tot}\left(\text{H}^+\right) \quad (2)$$

where $E_{tot}(\beta)$ is the total energy of a supercell containing the complex (or impurity) β.

Eq. (1) describes the binding energy of the reactions

$$V_{Ti}^{4-} + \text{H}^+ \rightarrow (H–V_{Ti})^{3-} \quad (3)$$

which is the energy gain when a proton is bound in a V_{Ti}^{4-}. Eq. (2) is a more general case describing the binding energy of an addition proton to the existing $(n\text{H}–V_{Ti})^{-4+n}$ complex (n=0, 1, 2, 3). Note that, Eq. (1) is a specific case of Eq. (2) when n=0.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Binding energies

In this work, we focus our attentions to H and Ti vacancy complex defects. Under n-type conditions, V_{Sr} and V_{Ti} are double and quad acceptors, respectively. At low temperature, an interstitial H is always a single donor (or simply a proton) binding strongly to one of the O atoms in STO with the lowest-energy configuration called "OA" [15]. However, the interstitial H is not very stable. It can be annealed out of the STO crystals at even below room temperature ($\sim$100 K) [15], and it has frequency of only $\sim$2700 cm^{-1}. Consequently, we proposed that the O–H oscillators observed in many IR experiments, with the frequency range of 3300–3500 cm^{-1} [10–14,22], are more likely associated with H complex defects.

For H and V_{Sr}, V_{Sr} in charge state 2 (V_{Sr}^{2-}) could trap a proton (H^+) to form $(\text{H}–V_{Sr})^{\tilde{}}$ complex defect with a reasonably large binding energy of 0.84 eV [15]. The $(\text{H}–V_{Sr})^{\tilde{}}$ complexes defect could further bind another proton to form a neutral 2H–V_{Sr} complex defects. In Ref. [15], we have studied in detail of the possible configurations and found two most stable 2H–V_{Sr} complexes with the binding energy of the second proton of 0.81 and 0.79 eV, respectively.

For H and V_{Ti}, V_{Ti} in charge state 4(V_{Ti}^{4-}), it can trap up to four protons to form a nH–V_{Ti} complex defect. V_{Ti}^{4-} traps the first proton to form $(\text{H}–V_{Ti})^{3}$ with a large binding energy of $\sim$1.94 eV. The $(\text{H}–V_{Ti})^{3}$ could trap another proton to form a $(2\text{H}–V_{Ti})^{2}$ complex defect with a binding energy for the second proton of 1.62 eV. In this case, there are two possible ways to add the second proton to form a $(2\text{H}–V_{Ti})^{2-}$ complex defect. (1) The second proton is attached to the O atom on the opposite side of the vacancy from the O atom attached by the first proton. (2) The second proton is attached to one of the four O atoms that are the neighbor of the vacancy and sits next to the O atom attached by the first proton. The two configurations are relaxed at two minimum energy configurations as illustrated in Fig. 2 (point c and d). To determine the energy barrier between the two configurations, we employed the climbing image nudged elastic band method (NEB) [23–26].

In Fig. 2, the highest energy structure (point a) is when the two O–H bonds are pointing directly at each other. To reduce the dipole-dipole interactions, the two O–H bonds are tilted off the equilibrium position into point b, lowering the energy by about 0.05 eV. Without any barrier, the O–H bonds can further tilt into point c, lowering the energy by another 0.05 eV. The structure at point c is the local minimum-energy structure for the first configuration. Next, if we force one of the protons to break its O–H bond and move to form a bond with another O atom, we obtained the