Correlation between Structural and Photoelectrochemical Properties of GaN Porous Nanostructures Formed by Photo-Assisted Electrochemical Etching

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We investigated the correlation between structural and photoelectrochemical properties of GaN porous nanostructures formed by photo-assisted electrochemical etching. The porous nanostructures were formed during light irradiation of the top-surface of homo-epitaxial layers grown on freestanding GaN substrates. The pore depth, wall thickness, and surface morphology of porous nanostructures were strongly influenced by the way holes were generated by the light irradiation were supplied. Such structural features influenced the optical properties of GaN porous nanostructures. The photoluminescence peaks measured on GaN porous nanostructures were shifted to higher energies because of the quantum confinement in the thin GaN walls between pores. Formation of porous nanostructure decreased the photoreflectance of the GaN surface, and the smallest reflectance was obtained from the porous sample having large pores on its surface after the ultrathin layer with small pores had been removed by surface-etching. The photoelectrochemical response measured on GaN porous nanostructures in a NaCl electrolyte were drastically enhanced by the unique features of those structures, such as low photoreflectance and large surface area. The largest photocurrents were obtained from the sample from which H3PO4 treatment had removed the ultrathin layer without thinning the pore walls.

As shown schematically in Fig. 1a, n-type GaN epitaxial layers (N_D = 2 × 10^{16} cm^{-3}) grown on freestanding GaN substrates (N_D > 1 × 10^{18} cm^{-3}) were used for the electrochemical formation of GaN porous nanostructures. The threading dislocation density (TDD) of GaN substrates is approximately 2.2 × 10^6 cm^{-2}, which is two or three orders of magnitude less than that of hetero-epitaxial layers grown on sapphire substrates. The threading dislocation density (TDD) of GaN substrates is approximately 2.2 × 10^6 cm^{-2}, which is two or three orders of magnitude less than that of hetero-epitaxial layers grown on sapphire substrates. The threading dislocation density (TDD) of GaN substrates is approximately 2.2 × 10^6 cm^{-2}, which is two or three orders of magnitude less than that of hetero-epitaxial layers grown on sapphire substrates.

The electrochemical conditions including applied bias and electrolyte solutions have been investigated with regard to the formation of GaN porous nanostructures, but most of the previous studies targeted structural properties and only a few reported on the correlation between the conditions and the resultant optical properties. This partly because the mechanism of the formation of GaN porous nanostructures has not been clarified because of sample-dependent inhomogeneity and insufficient material quality. It is well known that GaN epitaxial layer grown on sapphire substrates always have a high density of dislocations caused by strain at the lattice-mismatched interface between GaN and sapphire substrates. In such a situation, the current supply for electrochemical reactions would be strongly affected by the dislocation density and dislocation distribution of the substrates.

It is also difficult to judge whether the optical response obtained on sample structures is due to the intrinsic properties of GaN porous nanostructures or to photo-active dislocations in the GaN epitaxial layer.

In the work reported in this paper, we first investigated the structural properties of GaN porous nanostructures formed on n-GaN homo-epitaxial layer grown on a freestanding GaN substrate, which typically has a low dislocation density. We then investigated the correlation between the structural properties and the optical properties. Optical properties of GaN porous samples were characterized by photoluminescence (PL) and photoreflectance measurements. In view of possible photoelectrode applications, the photoelectrochemical characteristics of GaN porous nanostructures were investigated using a NaCl electrolyte and comparing various samples formed under different electrochemical conditions.

Experimental

As shown schematically in Fig. 1a, n-type GaN epitaxial layers (N_D = 2 × 10^{16} cm^{-3}) grown on freestanding GaN substrates (N_D > 1 × 10^{18} cm^{-3}) were used for the electrochemical formation of GaN porous nanostructures. The threading dislocation density (TDD) of GaN substrates is approximately 2.2 × 10^6 cm^{-2}, which is two or three orders of magnitude less than that of hetero-epitaxial layers grown on sapphire substrates. The threading dislocation density (TDD) of GaN substrates is approximately 2.2 × 10^6 cm^{-2}, which is two or three orders of magnitude less than that of hetero-epitaxial layers grown on sapphire substrates. The threading dislocation density (TDD) of GaN substrates is approximately 2.2 × 10^6 cm^{-2}, which is two or three orders of magnitude less than that of hetero-epitaxial layers grown on sapphire substrates.

The electrochemical current was supplied through the Au-ohmic contact on the back side of the substrate, and the electrochemical process was performed using a standard cell with three electrodes: an n-type GaN working electrode, a Pt counter electrode, and a Ag/AgCl reference electrode (see Fig. 1b). We used a mixture of 1 mol/L H_2SO_4 and 1 mol/L H_3PO_4 (pH = 2.5) as an electrolyte to remove resulting oxides and expose the raw GaN surface for further etching. Xe lamp was the light source in the photo-assisted electrochemical etching forming GaN porous nanostructures.

Typical cyclic voltammograms of an n-GaN epitaxial layer that were obtained at light intensities P_D between 0 and 40 mW/cm^2 by
sweeping the potential $V_a$ between 0 and 4.0 V are shown in Fig. 2. Little or no current was measured in the dark because of the absence of holes in the n-GaN layer. Under light irradiation, on the other hand, current started to flow at about 1.0 V. Higher currents were measured with smaller pores. Furthermore, as shown in Fig. 4, the $d_p$ in sample C was smaller than that in samples formed at shorter $t_a$, and smaller $Q$, as described by Faraday’s law, the decreased slope of the experimental curve decreased gradually. This gradual decrease indicates that the rate of pore formation in the depth direction decreased with increasing $Q$. Considering the proportional relationship between the amount of electrochemical reaction and $Q$, as described by Faraday’s law, the decreased slope shown in Fig. 4 indicates that lateral etching of pore walls occurred in addition to the vertical etching in the depth direction.

As shown in Fig. 3c, on the other hand, the structural features of sample C, formed at $t_a = 1800$ s, differ from those of samples A and B. In the top view, we can clearly see pores over 30 nm in diameter, and in the cross-sectional view, we can see ultrathin porous layers having smaller-diameter pores formed on top of a thick porous layer having larger-diameter pores. These results suggest that surface etching as well as vertical etching in the depth direction occurred. We considered the mechanism of GaN porous nanostructure formation by referring to the “Beale model” proposed for porous Si.
Figure 4. Pore depth as a function of charge density $Q$.

Figure 5 shows the formation flow for GaN porous nanostructures schematically. At the initial stage, photo-generated holes transferred preferentially to the pore tips at which electric field lines concentrated, leading to the formation of porous nanostructures ((a) $\rightarrow$ (b)). Since the holes generated near the surface also transferred to the pore walls, etching of pore walls and the top-surface occurred in addition to the vertical etching at the pore tips ((b) $\rightarrow$ (c)). After reaching a critical depth, etching proceeded preferentially at the top-surface removing the ultrathin porous layer with smaller size pore ((c) $\rightarrow$ (d)), resulting in larger pores observed in sample C. There are two possible reasons for this phenomenon. One is due to the reduced diffusion of ions to pore tips in deeper pores, and another is due to the decreased hole-supply to pore tips. A similar preferential top-surface etching is also observed on InP porous nanostructures under irradiation. This formation model can compatibly explain both the SEM results in Figs. 3a–3c and the correlation between pore depth and $Q$ shown in Fig. 4.

The correlation with the crystal quality such as a dislocation density has been frequently reported in the chemical and electrochemical etching. A previous study found that photo-assisted electrochemical etching of GaN layers occurred only at dislocation-free areas because the dislocations acted as recombination centers for the photo-generated carries. Another study found that the etching using a HF solution proceeds thorough the dislocations and grain boundaries, whereas the etching using a KOH solution takes place at crystal grains. These reports showed that the etching profile was strongly affected by the dislocation density and distribution in GaN layers. However, that was not the case with this study. The TDD of the GaN epitaxial layer used in this study is $2.2 \times 10^6$ cm$^{-2}$, which means approximately 1 dislocation in $5 \mu$m$^2$. The pore density of the present GaN porous nanostructures, however, is estimated to be over 5000 pores per $5 \mu$m$^2$. This fact indicates that the formation model proposed here is acceptable for the present study free of influence from the dislocations in GaN layers.

The correlation between the structural properties and optical properties was investigated in the photoluminescence and photoreflectance measurements conducted on the GaN porous samples shown in Figs. 3a–3d. As for sample B’ shown in Fig. 3d, the ultrathin porous layer with smaller pores was removed by immersing the sample in a heated H$_3$PO$_4$ solution for 1 min after the formation of porous nanostructure with $t_a = 600$ sec. Figure 6a shows PL spectra obtained at room temperature from a non-porous sample and porous sample C formed at $t_a = 1800$ s, and (b) PL peak positions of porous samples and a non-porous sample.

Figure 6. (a) PL spectra obtained at room temperature from a non-porous sample and porous sample C formed at $t_a = 1800$ s, and (b) PL peak positions of porous samples and a non-porous sample.
emission around 3.4 eV with a full width at half maximum (FWHM) of ~50 meV. In the present samples, two additional peaks related to longitudinal optical (LO) phonon replicas were also observed. The position of main peak obtained from sample C is at 3.404 eV which is about 5 meV higher than that of the main peak obtained from the non-porous sample. We believe that the observed blueshift is probably due to the quantum confinement in pore walls, similarly to non-porous sample. The observed blueshift is about 5 meV higher than that of the main peak obtained from the longitudinal optical (LO) phonon replicas were also observed. The quantum confinement energy in GaN walls was calculated by assuming a vacuum/GaN quantum well, whose thickness corresponds to the wall thickness \( t_w \) as follows.

\[
\Delta E = \frac{\hbar^2}{8\pi^2} \left( \frac{1}{m_e^*} + \frac{1}{m_h^*} \right),
\]

where \( \hbar \) is Planck’s constant, \( m_e^* \) and \( m_h^* \) are masses of electron and hall of GaN, respectively. According to Eq. 1, a peak shift of 5 meV would be caused when the thickness of pore walls was about 21 nm. This estimated thickness is very consistent with the thickness measured in SEM observation. The positions of the main peaks obtained from all porous samples are summarized in Fig. 6b. The peak position of sample A was almost same with that of the non-porous sample. The peak positions of samples B and C, on the other hand, shifted higher position with increasing \( t_a \). This result suggests that the effect of the quantum confinement increased in the pore walls being thinner with increase of \( t_a \). It is to be also noted that the peak position of sample B’, whose ultrathin porous layer was removed by a \( \text{H}_3\text{PO}_4 \) treatment, is the same as that of sample B formed with \( t_a = 600 \) s. As shown in Fig. 3 pores over 30 nm in diameter were seen in top views of sample B’, whereas there was almost no difference between the features seen in cross-sectional views of samples B and B’. These results show that the \( \text{H}_3\text{PO}_4 \) treatment removed the ultrathin porous layer with smaller pores without thinning the pore walls.

Figure 7 shows diffuse reflectance spectra of porous samples and a non-porous sample measured as a reference. As expected, the photoreflectance \( R \) of all porous samples was lower than that of the non-porous sample. The porous samples could be separated into two groups according to reflectance value: a higher-\( R \) group comprising samples like A and B, and a lower-\( R \) group comprising samples like C and B’. \( R \) measurements of the porous samples shown in Figs. 3a–3d revealed that the photoreflectance depends more on surface morphology than pore depth. Comparing sample B’ with sample B, one sees the reflectance surface etching using a chemical treatment decreased reflectance even though the photoelectrochemical conditions forming porous nanostructure were the same for both samples. This phenomenon is very similar to the case of InP porous nanostructures. In samples C and B’, pores with enlarged openings appeared on the surface, where air holes are closely aligned between the thin GaN walls. This kind of air-dielectric composite has a refractive index close to unity, leading to low reflectance at the air interface.

![Figure 7](https://example.com/figure7.png)

**Figure 7**. Diffuse reflectance spectra of non-porous and porous GaN: sample A formed at \( t_a = 300 \) s, sample B formed at \( t_a = 600 \) s, sample C formed at \( t_a = 1800 \) s, and sample B’ formed at \( t_a = 600 \) s after \( \text{H}_3\text{PO}_4 \) treatment.

![Figure 8](https://example.com/figure8.png)

**Figure 8**. Photoelectrochemical characteristics of non-porous and porous GaN: sample A formed at \( t_a = 300 \) s, sample B formed at \( t_a = 600 \) s, sample C formed at \( t_a = 1800 \) s, and sample B’ formed at \( t_a = 600 \) s after \( \text{H}_3\text{PO}_4 \) treatment.

The photoreflectance surface etching using a chemical treatment decreased reflectance even though the photoelectrochemical conditions forming porous nanostructure were the same for both samples. This phenomenon is very similar to the case of InP porous nanostructures. In samples C and B’, pores with enlarged openings appeared on the surface, where air holes are closely aligned between the thin GaN walls. This kind of air-dielectric composite has a refractive index close to unity, leading to low reflectance at the air interface.

**Table I. Structural and optical properties of porous samples.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Pore depth ( d_p ) (nm)</th>
<th>PL peak shift (meV)</th>
<th>Photoreflectance ( R ) (%)</th>
<th>Photocurrent density ( J_{ph} ) (μA/cm²)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>77.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>71.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B’</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
depth, it would appear that the improved photoelectrochemical characteristics of sample B were due to its increased pore depth increasing the pores’ contribution to the sample’s surface area. On the other hand, the photocurrents of sample C were lower than those of sample B in spite of the pore depths of the two samples being almost the same. One possible reason for this is the thinning of the pore walls in sample C. As described above, the thickness of pore wall decreased during the prolonged process with \( t_a = 1800 \) s. The thinning of the pore walls probably decreased thickness of photoabsorption region in the pore walls, and/or degraded carrier transport properties by increasing resistivity.

The photocurrent of sample B which is the highest among porous samples A–C was furthermore improved by \( \text{H}_3\text{PO}_4 \) treatment as observed in sample B’. SEM observation and photoelectroreflectance measurements revealed that its lower reflectance after the removal of ultrathin porous layer was obtained without thinning the pore walls. The typical relationship between photoelectroreflectance \( \rho \) and photocurrent \( J_{ph} \) is expressed by

\[
J_{ph}(B) = \frac{100 - R(B)}{100 - R(B)}
\]

where \( \rho_B \) is the irradiated photon flux. Assuming that the material properties of sample B and B’ are the same, we have the following equation:

\[
J_{ph} = \phi_{ph} \left( 100 - \rho \right)
\]

Substituting the values obtained in this study to Eq. 4, we obtained almost equal values of 1.06 and 1.07, respectively, for the left hand side and right hand side of the equation. Accordingly, the increase of photocurrent by \( \text{H}_3\text{PO}_4 \) treatment could be explained by the effect of the decrease of photoelectroreflectance in Eq. 4. In such a situation, the number of photons absorbed at pore walls increased, resulting in the improvement of photoelectrochemical conversion efficiency. These results indicate that the control of porous nanostructures features such as surface morphology, thickness of pore walls, and pore depth is crucial to the improvement of the photoelectrochemical characteristics of GaN porous nanostructures.

Conclusions

Porous nanostructures were formed on n-GaN homo-epitaxial layers by using photo-assisted electrochemical etching. From SEM observations, it was found that the way holes were generated by the light irradiation played a key role in determining the pore depth, wall thickness, and surface morphology of GaN porous nanostructures. Under light irradiation of the top-surface, the pore diameter increased with the anodization time \( t_a \) because of the preferential etching of pore walls on the top surface. PL measurements revealed that the wall thickness decreased with increasing \( t_a \), which is very consistent with the results of SEM observation. Formation of porous nanostructure decreased the photoelectroreflectance of the GaN surface, and the smallest reflectance was obtained from the porous sample having large pores on the surface after the ultrathin layer with small pores had been removed by surface-etching. The photoelectrochemical responses measured on GaN porous nanostructures in a NaCl electrolyte were drastically enhanced by the unique features of those structures, such as low photoelectroreflectance and large surface area. From the comparison of various porous samples it was found that the largest photocurrents were obtained on the sample from which \( \text{H}_3\text{PO}_4 \) treatment had removed the ultrathin layer without thinning the pore walls. These results indicate that GaN porous nanostructures formed by the photo-assisted electrochemical etching are very promising for use as the photoelectrochemical electrodes expected to play a role in the next-generation green technologies.

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References


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