

Speedy, durable, retentive GaN non-volatile memory

Researchers use a bipolar junction barrier to reduce degradation stresses.

Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) reports on a gallium nitride (GaN) non-volatile memory (NVM) with good speed, retention and endurance at the same time [Tao Chen et al, IEEE Electron Device Letters, volume 43, issue 5 (May 2022), p697]. In silicon-based NVMs there tends to be a trade-off in these characteristics, creating a manufacturing 'trilemma' due to the use of Fowler-Nordheim tunneling across a tunnel oxide (TO) to change the memory state.

The researchers comment: "This work shows that the mainstream GaN-on-Si platform can also accommodate high-performance non-volatile memory devices in addition to the power and radio frequency (RF) devices, to enable highly intelligent electronic systems."

The device integrated a p-channel field-effect transistor (p-FET) with p-i-n heterojunction diode. The p-FET consisted of aluminium oxide (Al_2O_3) gate insulator on p-GaN.

The charge storage for the memory function occurred at the Al_2O_3 /p-GaN interface. While in normal transistors one doesn't want interfacial trap states, for the memory function they are specifically created.

A depletion region forms at the Al_2O_3 /p-GaN junction (J1) isolating the charge storage layer (CSL) from the holes in the p-channel of the FET structure.

The memory state can be changed by hole injection from the p-channel or electron injection from the diode (J2), consisting of aluminium gallium nitride between GaN layers (p-GaN/AlGaN/GaN). In particular, a

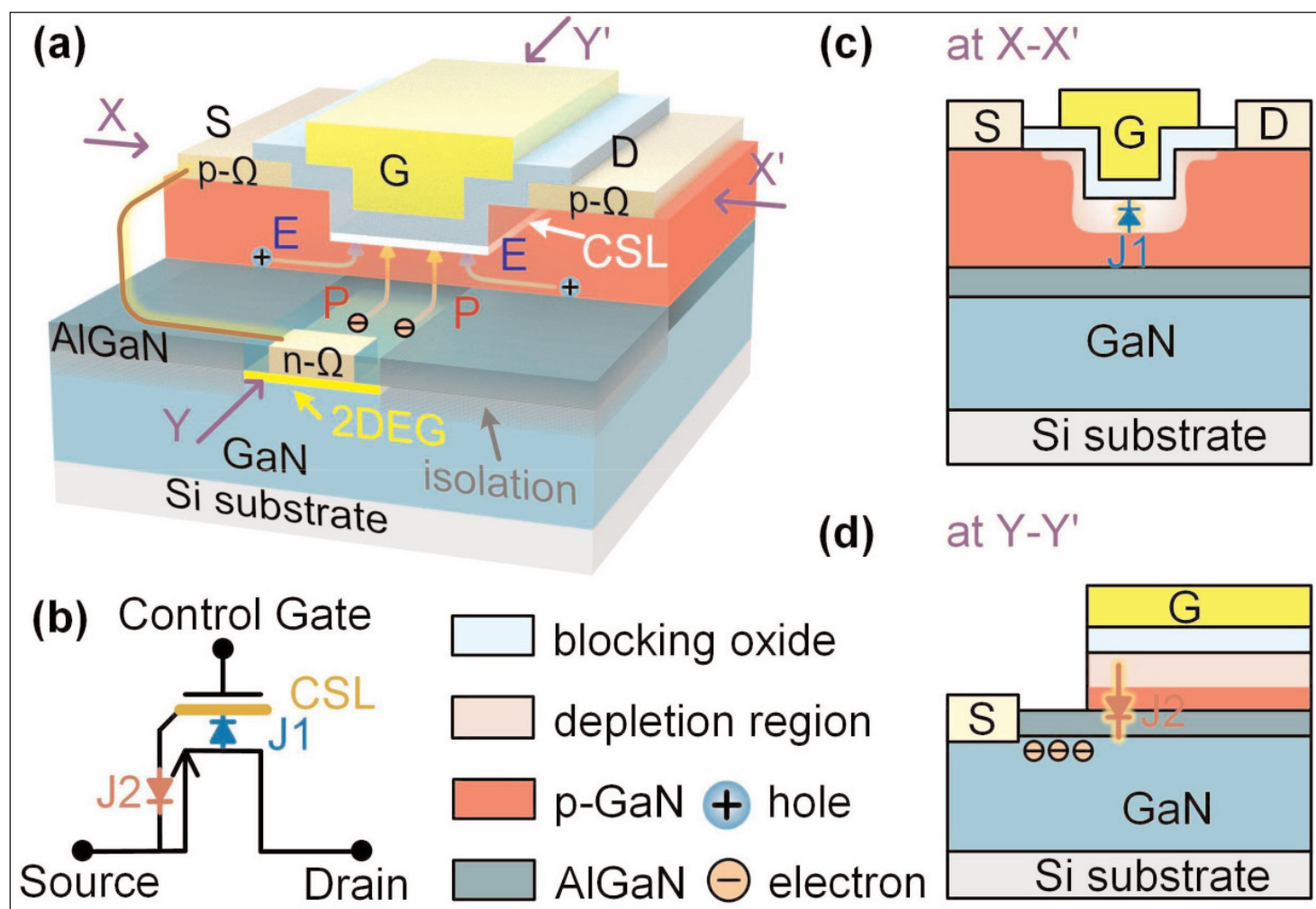


Figure 1. Schematics of GaN-based TO-free BJB memory device: (a) perspective view; (b) circuit symbol; cross-sectional view of (c) cutline X-X' and (d) cutline Y-Y'.

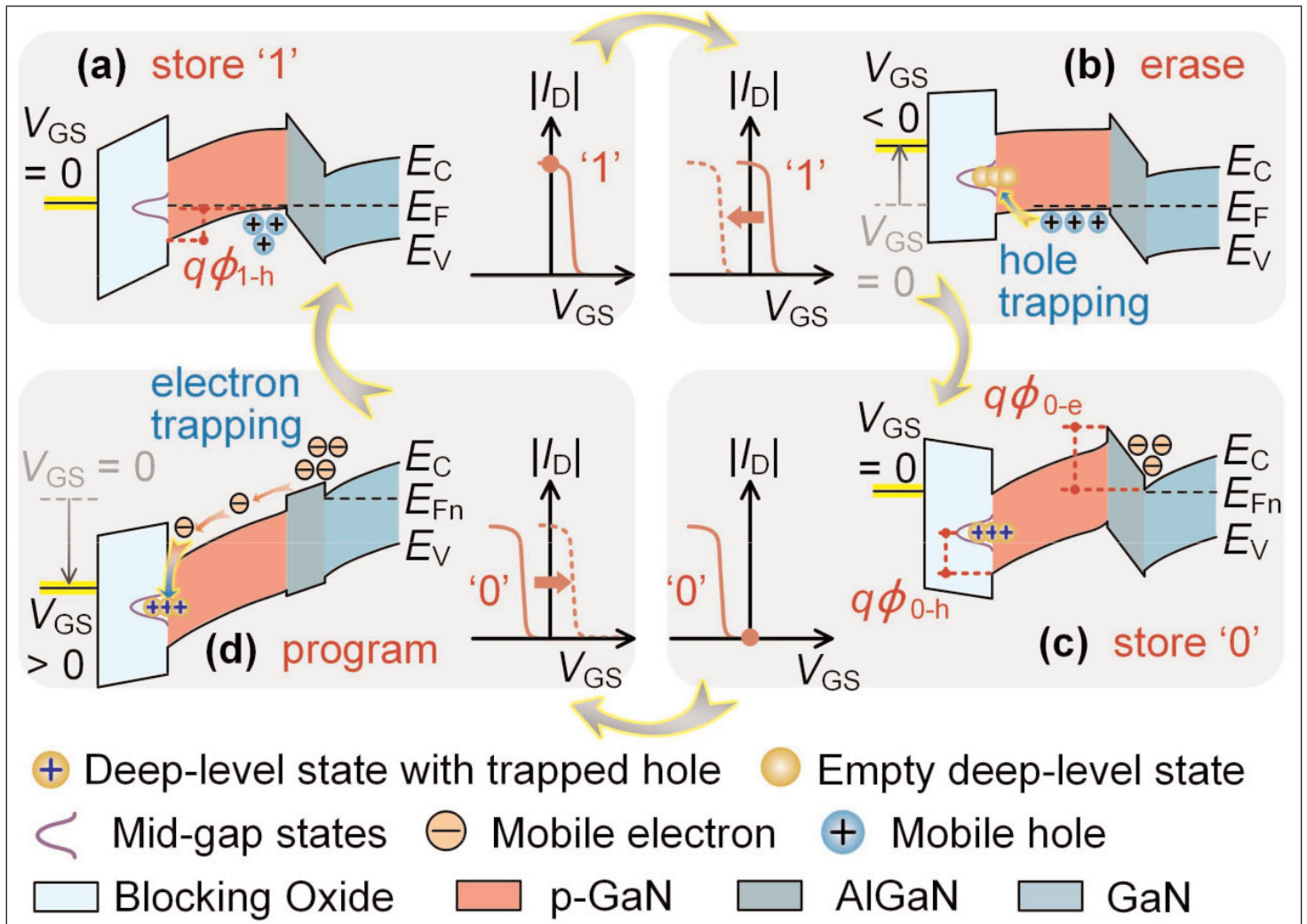


Figure 2. Energy band diagrams and schematic I_D - V_{GS} curves of memory in (a) '1' state, (b) erase stage, (c) '0' state, and (d) program stage. $q\phi_{1-h}$, $q\phi_{0-h}$ and $q\phi_{0-e}$ are hole diffusion/emission and electron injection barriers in states '1' and '0', respectively.

two-dimensional electron gas (2DEG) can form at the AlGaIn/GaN junction when the overlying p-channel is fully depleted by an appropriate gate potential or when removed (Figure 2).

Conventionally, hole-based charge storage would have program/erase (P/E) steps based on gate-potential-controlled hole injection/emission, but here electron injection is also possible in a bipolar junction barrier (BJB) structure. The researchers comment: "Such junction-barrier-controlled bipolar charge injections enable fast P/E processes and facilitate to decouple the enhancement of endurance from that of speed and retention."

The charge state of the CSL was measured through the drain current (I_D) at a drain-source potential (V_{DS}) of $-0.5V$ with $0V$ on the gate (V_{GS}). The low current state was labeled '0' and the high '1'.

The device material was grown on commercial GaN-on-silicon (Si) wafers aimed at enhancement-mode high-electron-mobility transistor manufacturing. The metal-organic chemical vapor deposition growth consisted of $4\mu m$ GaN buffer and unintentionally doped n-channel/2DEG, $12nm$ AlGaIn barrier, and $85nm$ p-GaN.

The NVM structure was fabricated first by patterned plasma etching of the p-GaN to form a 2DEG channel region. Ohmic contacts were made to the 2DEG channel and the source-drain regions of the p-FET. More patterned etching thinned the p-GaN to $35nm$ in the FET gate area. The surface of the p-GaN at the gate stack interface was treated with oxygen plasma, generating high-density deep-level trap states for the CSL. The traps were covered with $20nm$ atomic layer deposition (ALD) Al_2O_3 blocking oxide (BO). The devices were then electrically isolated with fluorine ion implantation. The gate electrode consisted of nickel/gold.

A P/E cycle with $10V/-10V$ gate potential (V_P/E) achieved P/E times of $100\mu s/100ns$. By increasing V_P to $20V$, the P-time could be reduced to $100ns$. The team comments: "The $100ns$ of P/E time is limited by parasitic effects such as the channel resistance, and thus could be further reduced by device down scaling."

Retention of the memory states was extrapolated from measurements made at high temperature, $125-200^\circ C$, to speed up degradation to a $1V$ difference

Table 1. Benchmarks of charge-based NVMs. ^aHSO: silicon-doped HfO₂. ^bExtrapolated value at room temperature.

Channel material	Gate stack	Program/erase speed	Endurance	Retention ^b
Si	SiO ₂ /Nitride/SiO ₂	20V/10μs (P)/-20V/1ms (E)	>10 ³	>10 ⁸ s
Si	SiO ₂ /HSO/SiO ₂ ^a	17V/300ns (P)/-16V/300ns (E)	>10 ⁵	>10 ⁸ s
Si	SiO ₂ /Nitride/SiO ₂	22V/1μs (P)/-16V/10μs (E)	>10 ⁷	>10 ⁵ s
GaN	Al ₂ O ₃ /p-GaN/AlGaN/GaN	10V/100μs (P)/-10V/100ns (E)	>10 ⁸	>10 ⁷ s

in the p-FET threshold potentials for the two memory states. The extrapolated retention came to more than 10⁷s; in fact, retention was estimated at 2.17 years (6.8x10⁷s) at 25°C. The activation energy for the temperature dependence was 0.79eV. The researchers believe this could be increased, giving even longer retention, based on the wider bandgap of GaN relative to silicon.

The endurance under P/E cycling was more than 10⁶ with 20V V_p, and 10⁸ for 10V. The lower V_p puts the barrier oxide under less electric-field stress, reducing degradation from this source. The degradation results

in greater current leakage from the gate into the CSL.

The usual Si-based NVMs (Table 1 shows typical trade-offs relative to HKUST GaN device) use Fowler–Nordheim tunneling across an insulating oxide to charge the CSL, which needs a high electric field to P/E the state. The HKUST team believes that the electric field across the blocking oxide in its NVM “can be reduced by adopting lower doping concentration in the p-GaN or high-κ dielectric materials without sacrificing the speed and retention performance.” ■

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Author: Mike Cooke

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