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Hard x-ray photoelectron spectroscopy study of the buried Si/ZnO thin-film solar cell interface: Direct evidence for the formation of Si–O at the expense of Zn–O bonds

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The chemical structure of the interface between silicon thin films and the transparent conductive oxide ZnO:Al has been investigated by hard x-ray photoelectron spectroscopy. By varying the excitation energy between 2010 and 8040 eV, we were able to probe the Si/ZnO interface buried below 12 nm Si. This allowed for the identification of changes induced by solid phase crystallization (SPC). Based on in-situ SPC annealing experiments, we find clear indications that the formation of Si–O bonds takes place at the expense of Zn–O bonds. Hence, the ZnO:Al acts as the oxygen source for the interfacial Si oxidation. © 2011 American Institute of Physics. [doi:10.1063/1.3644084]

State-of-the-art thin-film solar cells are complex multilayer devices. Hence, their power conversion efficiencies not only depend on the material quality of each deposited film but also on the proper design of the interfaces.1 By depositing amorphous silicon (a-Si), which is solid-phase crystallized also on the proper design of the interfaces.1 By depositing only depend on the material quality of each deposited film but suggests that either the Si(n+))+/ZnO:Al/glass device structure3 yields lower efficiencies than the standard device without ZnO:Al. This was confirmed by the 6030 eV Si 1s spectrum of a single-crystalline Si wafer reference shown in Fig. 1 (blue line). Note that the narrowing can in particular be observed for the measurements in the high-resolution energy range of the

For our experiments, phosphorous-doped a-Si:H(n+) layers of approximately 12 nm thickness were deposited by plasma-enhanced chemical vapor deposition (PECVD) at 190 °C on 800 nm ZnO:Al, which was previously deposited on Corning Eagle XG® glass substrates by rf-magnetron sputtering. After the deposition, one sample was SPC-treated, i.e., heated in a furnace under continuous N2 flow for 24 h at 650 °C (annealed “ex-situ”). Another sample remained untreated (“as-deposited”) to serve as reference for the chemical interface structure before SPC. A third sample was used for our in-situ study. Here, the as-deposited layer stack was investigated before and after in-situ annealing in the analyzer chamber for 24 h at about 650 °C under ultrahigh vacuum (UHV) conditions (base pressure <3 × 10−9 mbar). Hereafter, this sample is referred to as heated “in-situ”. An oxidized phosphorous-doped single-crystalline Si wafer was investigated as reference. The HAXPES measurements were conducted at the KMC-1 beamline8 of the BESSY II synchrotron facility using the HIKE endstation.9 By varying the excitation energy (hν) between 2010 and 8040 eV, the electron inelastic mean free path (IMFP) was varied between 0.7 and 10.6 nm (Ref. 10) enabling the characterization of the buried Si/ZnO interface.

Fig. 1 shows the Si 1s photoemission spectra of the as-deposited and ex-situ annealed Si/ZnO samples for different hν. The Si 1s spectra are dominated by two main contributions, which we attribute to Si–Si (“Si 1sSi–Si”) and Si–Ox (“Si 1sSi–Ox”) bonds.11 For an easier comparison, the presented photoemission spectra are normalized to the maximum intensity and aligned to the energetic position of the Si 1sSi–Si feature. After annealing, a slight narrowing of the Si 1sSi–Si signal can be observed. This can be explained by the SPC-induced conversion of a-Si into poly-Si. This is confirmed by the 6030 eV Si 1s spectrum of a single-crystalline Si wafer reference shown in Fig. 1 (blue line). Note that the narrowing can in particular be observed for the measurements in the high-resolution energy range of the

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The fact that the normalized SIRs agree for low IMFP, but significantly deviate for high IMFP, may indicate a silicon oxidation mechanism that is not covered by the here considered surface oxidation bi-layer model.

In order to investigate the oxidation mechanism further, Eq. (1)—which is based on the suggested bi-layer model—has been used to calculate the expected normalized SIR vs. IMFP characteristic for different surface oxide layer thicknesses “d” shown as grey dotted lines in Fig. 2 for 0.2 ≤ d ≤ 1.9 nm.

\[
\text{SIR}_{\text{sample}} \propto \exp \left( \frac{d}{\text{IMFP}} \right) - 1
\]

Direct comparison of the expected with the experimental data reveals a disagreement in all cases. Thus, the hv-dependent behavior of the SIR cannot solely be explained by surface oxidation and thus is indicative for an additional silicon oxidation. The fact that the SIR increases with increasing IMFP points to oxidation at the Si/ZnO interface. Note that the slight increase of the normalized SIR with IMFP for the as-deposited samples may be indicative of a slight interface oxidation already during deposition or is caused by the finite Si layer thickness [see supplemental material (C)12]. The much more pronounced SIR increase after SPC, however, clearly indicates a SPC-induced interface oxidation. These findings are in good agreement with results of our earlier studies.7

In order to shed more light on the chemical structure of the Si/ZnO interface and how it changes upon SPC annealing, we analyze the Si 1s and O 1s spectra at hv = 6030 eV in more detail (Fig. 3). Comparing the high-binding energy contribution of the 6030 eV Si 1s photoemission line for the Si/ZnO samples of the ex-situ and in-situ experiment, it can be observed that this increase is more pronounced after heating. The fact that the normalized SIRs agree for low IMFP, but significantly deviate for high IMFP, may indicate a silicon oxidation bi-layer model.
indicative for SiO$_2$. Since Si 1s binding energy reference positions for different Si species are scarce in literature, we transferred the respective well-known Si 2p positions of silicon oxides$^{11}$ to the Si 1s binding energy region for speciation [see supplemental material (D)$^{12}$]. In Fig. 3(a), the respective reference positions for different Si species are shown as hatched boxes. Comparison of the experimental data with the energetic reference positions reveals that the degree of oxidation is increased as a result of the SPC treatment. Note that the Si 1s binding energy of Zn$_2$SiO$_4$ would also agree with the position of the observed high-binding energy Si 1s contribution (in particular of the as-deposited Si/ZnO samples) and hence its presence can also not be excluded$^{13,14}$. Interestingly, this more complete oxidation can also be observed for the in-situ annealed samples. In order to identify the source of oxygen, we focus on the O 1s photoemission spectra of the as-deposited and in-situ annealed Si/ZnO sample (Fig. 3(b)) in the following analysis. We find that the O 1s signal is a superposition of (at least) two contributions. While the contribution at lower binding energies can be attributed to ZnO, the contribution at higher binding energies is ascribed to Si–O$_x$ bonds. Again Zn$_2$SiO$_4$ can also not be excluded. Close inspection reveals that the high-binding energy shoulder becomes more pronounced after heating. The respective difference spectrum (“diff.” = “heated” – “as-deposited” in Fig. 3(b)) indicates an SPC-induced increase of Si–O$_X$ bonds (“+”) at the expense of Zn–O bonds (“−”). While the first observation agrees with our interpretation of the increase and shift of the high-binding energy Si 1s contribution, the latter may point to a reduction of ZnO by the SPC annealing step. Thus, ZnO may act as an oxygen source for the observed oxidation of Si at the Si/ZnO interface. The extent to which the identified SPC-induced interface oxidation is related to the increase of the charge carrier concentration which is often observed for SPC heated silicon-capped ZnO:Al films$^{4,15}$ has to be investigated in more detail in the future. However, we speculate that removing oxygen from the ZnO:Al could very well have an impact on the concentration of intrinsic defects (e.g., oxygen vacancies) or the activation of extrinsic dopants.

In summary, we have employed hard x-rays to be able to probe the chemical structure of relevant buried Si/ZnO interfaces and their change upon SPC annealing using photoemission. Eliminating the obscuring influence of additional surface oxidation by performing in-situ experiments and using a sophisticated analysis approach for the HAXPES data, we find evidence for SPC-induced silicon oxidation at the Si/ZnO interface. Furthermore, it is revealed that the increase of Si–O$_X$ bonds takes place at the expense of Zn–O bonds, which points to ZnO:Al as the oxygen source for the interface oxidation. Whenever a ZnO:Al TCO window layer is introduced into a poly-Si thin-film solar cell based on SPC, both findings have to be considered for device optimization.


$^{12}$See supplemental material at http://dx.doi.org/10.1063/1.3644084 for details on spectra quantification (A), surface oxidation analysis (B), limits of the bi-layer model (C), and chemical speciation (D).