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Native defects in tetradymite Bi$_2$(Te$_x$Se$_{3-x}$) topological insulators

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Formation energies of native defects in Bi$_2$(Te$_x$Se$_{3-x}$), with comparison to ideal Bi$_2$Te$_2$S, are calculated in density-functional theory to assess transport properties. Bi$_2$Se$_2$ is found to be $n$ type for both Bi- and Se-rich growth conditions, while Bi$_2$Te$_2$ changes from $n$ to $p$ type going from Te- to Bi-rich conditions, as observed. Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se and Bi$_2$Te$_2$S are generally $n$ type, explaining observed heavily doped $n$-type behavior in most samples. A (0/−) transition level at 16 meV above valence-band maximum for Bi on Te antisites in Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se is related to the observed thermally active transport gap causing a $p$-to-$n$ transition at low temperature. Bi$_2$(Te$_x$Se$_{3-x}$) with $x > 2$ are predicted to have high bulk resistivity due to effective carrier compensation when approaching the $n$-to-$p$ crossover. Predicted behaviors are confirmed from characterization of our grown single crystals.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Binary tetradymites, Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and Bi$_2$Te$_3$, have been regarded as prototype three-dimensional (3D) topological insulators (TIs). 1, 2 Tetradymites have a quintuple-layer structure ($Rar{3}$m) formed by group V and VI elements, i.e., VI$^\frac{I}{2}$-V-VI$^\frac{II}{2}$-V-VI$^\frac{I}{2}$, with van der Waals interaction between the quintuple layers, making the VI$^\frac{I}{2}$ layer the cleavage plane with the operative surface band structure. 3 Reflecting Hume-Rothery’s size and electronegative rules, Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and Bi$_2$Te$_2$ form a continuous solid solution at the two nonequivalent group-VI sites, with the smaller (more electronegative) Se preferring the inner VI$^\frac{I}{2}$ site and the larger (more electropositive) Te preferring the outer VI$^\frac{I}{2}$ site. 4, 6 In such materials, due to spin-orbit coupling, a metallic surface state forms a Dirac cone in the bulk band gap and is protected by time-reversal symmetry against backscattering from nonmagnetic impurities. Ternary tetradymites Bi$_2$(Te$_x$Se$_{3-x}$) and Bi$_2$Te$_2$S are also 3D TIs and their band structures have been studied showing that the Dirac cone can be tuned by layer chemistry. 5–7

While offering tremendous opportunities for controllable, low-resistance spintronics devices, the transport properties of tetradymites are critical and are affected by layer chemistry, which controls the location of the Dirac cone and alters the stability of native/intrinsic defects. Here, we detail the operative native defects in tetradymites and show how chemistry impacts their behavior with a direct comparison to experiments, including our as-grown ternary samples.

Native defects of low formation energy, such as, doubly charged Se vacancies, V$_{Se}^{2+}$, act as donors, whereas singly charged Bi antisites Bi$_{Te}^{+}$ act as acceptors. Thus, Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and Bi$_2$Te$_2$ easily become heavily doped, exhibiting large metallic conductivity, 11, 12 and bulk conductance overwhelms the surface contribution. However, the local defect concentration is hard to control and depends sensitively on growth method and condition. To find a semiconducting sample, one often needs to peel off many samples from as-grown crystals. 13, 14

Recently, groups have explored Bi$_2$(Te$_x$Se$_{3-x}$) attempting to grow 3D TIs with high bulk resistivity needed for device operation. Ren et al. 15 have grown Bi$_2$Te$_1$Se$_{0.05}$Se$_{1.05}$ crystals at 850 °C that show a bulk resistivity above 1 Ω cm, and observed a $p$-to-$n$ type transition at ~100 K; these results were interpreted as a shallow acceptor level at 30 meV above valence-band maximum (VBM). In another study, Ren et al. 16 also found that a sample grown at $x = 2.1$ also shows high bulk resistivity. Xiong et al. 17 have shown that the bulk resistivity of Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se can reach as high as 6 Ω cm. Using different growth methods, Jia et al. 18 observed that most Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se samples have low resistivity and a heavily doped $n$-type (not $p$-type) behavior. Only some samples grown at $2:2:1$ (1−$x$) give high resistivity and also show a $p$-to-$n$ type transition at low temperature ($T$). Luo et al. 19 found that this transport gap is sensitive to hydrostatic pressure and measured a 50-meV activation energy. But the origin of such an acceptor level is still unknown.

To understand bulk transport behavior of Bi$_2$(Te$_x$Se$_{3-x}$), we use density-functional theory 20, 21 (DFT) to study the thermodynamics of native defects in these materials. 22 DFT studies of the neutral defects in Bi$_2$Te$_2$ found that antisites Bi$_{Te}^{+}$ and Te$_{Bi}^{-}$ dominate in Bi- and Te-rich conditions, respectively. 23 Native defects in Sb$_2$Te$_3$ were calculated without considering the effect of chemical conditions. 24 Recently Scanlon et al. 10 studied the native defects in tetradymites and showed that by changing Te content, the Fermi level can be tuned into the band gap. But the formation energy of donor V$_{Se}^{2+}$ for Bi$_2$Se$_3$ was found to be as high as 1 eV near conduction-band minimum (CBM). Here, from the formation energies of native defects in Bi$_2$(Te$_x$Se$_{3-x}$) and Bi$_2$Te$_2$S, besides calculating defect concentrations, we identify the majority carrier type to compare with experimental characterization and also study the behaviors in bulk transport properties.

II. COMPUTATIONAL AND EXPERIMENTAL METHODS

To calculate formation energy of native defects, we use the orthorhombic unit cell of tetradymite and construct a ($5 \times 3 \times 1$) supercell of 450 atoms and use VASP 25, 26 with...
The valence- and conduction-band edges affect the pinning of gaps and contributions from native defects. Because details of defect formation energy is calculated as the total-energy difference between two large supercells always having the same energy cutoff, error cancellation ensures good accuracy of the results. Separate calculations with 400-eV cutoff only show a 2-meV difference in defect formation energy. For the crystal phases that determine the atomic chemical potentials, the energies are calculated with 400-eV energy cutoff to ensure good convergence. The defect formation energies are all calculated in theoretical lattice parameters without spin-orbital coupling.

We apply charge neutrality conditions to find the Fermi level \((\varepsilon_f)\) pinned from DOS (with “scissor operation” to improve gaps) and contributions from native defects. Because details of the valence- and conduction-band edges affect the pinning of \(\varepsilon_f\), bulk density of states (DOS) are calculated in experimental lattice parameters with spin-orbit coupling on a dense \(k\)-point mesh of \((18 \times 18 \times 18)\). The calculated (experimental) band gaps from DOS are \(0.320 \pm 0.050\), \(0.165\), \(0.247\), and \(0.274\) eV for \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Se}_3\), \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Te}_3\), \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Te}_2\text{Se}\), and \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Te}_2\text{S}\), respectively. With no experimental band gap for \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Te}_2\text{S}\), we take the same value as \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Te}_2\text{Se}\).

In experiment, proper ratio of high purity metals of \(\text{Bi (99.999\%)}\), \(\text{Se (99.999\%)}\), and \(\text{Te (99.999\%)}\) were sealed in a quartz tube and melted into an ingot in an induction furnace to homogenize the composition. The ingot was then sealed in a quartz tube with a larger diameter and loaded into a Bridgman furnace. Crystal was obtained by withdrawing the quartz tube at \(1 \text{ mm}/\text{h}\) after being heated to and kept at \(800^\circ\text{C}\). The concentration profile along the ingot was obtained by using electron probe microanalysis. These gradients in the as-grown ingot result from liquid convection during crystal growth and are associated with the solid solution nature of the phase equilibria in the quasibinary system \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Te}_3\)-\(\text{Bi}_2\text{Se}_3\). These gradients can be fitted using a fully mixed convective model.

The as-grown ingot now has a much higher formation energy than the other two defects, among which \(\text{V}^{2+}_{\text{Se}'}\) has the lowest throughout the gap, about \(0.4\) eV at CBM. As the growth condition changes from Se rich to Bi rich [Fig. 1(a) top panel], the chemical potential of Bi decreases to that of Bi crystal and the chemical potential of Se increases. Although the preferred charge state of each defect does not change, the relative stability of the defects changes. Under Bi-rich conditions, Bi is more favorable than Se to enter the compound and similarly Se is more favorable to be pushed out of the compound. Thus, the \(\text{Se}^{2+}_{\text{Bi}}\) antisite now has a much higher formation energy than the other two defects, among which \(\text{V}^{2+}_{\text{Se}'}\) has the lowest throughout the gap, about \(0.4\) eV at CBM, less than half of what was found by Scanlon et al.\(^{10}\) The main difference is due to that the experimental lattice constants were used in their supercell calculations, which causes the undesirable effect of long-range elastic energy.\(^{22}\) Although \(\text{Bi}^{3+}_{\text{Se}'}\) has a low formation energy, close to \(\text{V}^{2+}_{\text{Se}'}\), it does not contribute to the \(n\)-type carrier because it is a deep donor. So, under Bi-rich conditions, \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Se}_3\) remains \(n\) type because the dominant defect \(\text{V}^{2+}_{\text{Se}'}\) is a double donor.

Our calculations reveal that \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Se}_3\) stays as \(n\) type regardless of chemical conditions, agreeing well with observation that as-grown \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Se}_3\) is always \(n\) type.\(^{11}\) The reason is that (rumpling), showing a strong negative-U behavior, thus \(\text{Bi}^{3+}_{\text{Se}'}\) is a deep donor. In \((-\)\), there is much less relaxation and \(\text{Bi}^{2+}_{\text{Se}'}\) acts as a shallow acceptor. Under Se-rich condition, \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Se}_3\) behaves as \(n\) type because the shallow donor \(\text{Se}^{2+}_{\text{Bi}}\) is dominant throughout the band gap.

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Our calculations reveal that \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Se}_3\) stays as \(n\) type regardless of chemical conditions, agreeing well with observation that as-grown \(\text{Bi}_2\text{Se}_3\) is always \(n\) type.\(^{11}\) The reason is that
the formation energy of $V_{Se}^{2+}$ is very low, especially under Bi-rich conditions, a common scenario when the compound is synthesized at high $T$, where Se is prone to form Se dimers and leave as vapor. The low formation energy corresponds to observed high concentration of $V_{Se}^{2+}$.

For Bi$_2$Te$_3$ under Te-rich conditions [Fig. 1(b) bottom panel], Te$_{Bi}^{n-}$ antisite like Se$_{Bi}^{n-}$ in Bi$_2$Se$_3$, has the lowest formation energy and acts as a shallow donor. The other two native defects, $V_{Te}^{2+}$ and Bi$_{Te}^{+}$, have higher formation energy. Unlike Bi$_{Se}^{n+}$ in Bi$_2$Se$_3$, Bi$_{Te}^{+}$ in Bi$_2$Te$_3$ acts as a shallow acceptor in ($-$), because it costs a much higher energy to empty the three electrons in the Bi$_{Te}^{+}$-derived levels than Se$_{Bi}^{n+}$ due to the less ionic bonding. Because of the low formation energy of Te$_{Bi}^{n-}$ for Te-rich conditions, Bi$_2$Te$_3$ behaves as $n$ type. For Bi$_2$Se$_3$ under Bi-rich conditions [Fig. 1(b) top panel], Te$_{Bi}^{n-}$ is pushed higher in energy due to the changes in chemical potential and it becomes irrelevant in determining carrier type, while Bi$_{Te}^{+}$ becomes much more stable with a large drop in the formation energy, bringing it even lower than $V_{Te}^{2+}$. As a result, Bi$_{Te}^{+}$, a singly charged acceptor, becomes the dominant defect, with a formation energy of 0.42 eV at VBM. Thus, under Bi-rich conditions, Bi$_2$Te$_3$ behaves as $p$ type instead of $n$ type.

In contrast to Bi$_2$Se$_3$, which is $n$ type under both Se- and Bi-rich conditions, Bi$_2$Te$_3$ changes from $n$ type to $p$ type from Te- to Bi-rich conditions. This agrees well with a recent molecular-beam epitaxy experiment on Bi$_2$Te$_3$, where a $n$- to $p$-type transition was observed by increasing the substrate’s temperature. As the growth temperature increases, Te atoms are more likely to form Te-dimer vapor, leaving the system Bi rich and favoring the formation of Bi$_{Te}^{+}$, which changes the majority carrier from $n$ to $p$ type.

For ternaries under Te-rich conditions, see bottom panels of Figs. 1(c) and 1(d), the trend in stability of defects in Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se and Bi$_2$Te$_2$S is similar to those in Bi$_2$Te$_3$, with the Te$_{Bi}^{n-}$, lowest, followed by $V_{Te}^{2+}$ donor, and the Bi$_{Te}^{+}$ acceptor highest. Again, for Te-rich conditions, Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se and Bi$_2$Te$_2$S should behave as $n$ type because of the dominant Te$_{Bi}^{n-}$ shallow donor. Compared to Bi$_2$Te$_3$, the formation energies of $V_{Te}^{2+}$ and Te$_{Bi}^{+}$ decrease in Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se and Bi$_2$Te$_2$S, while that of the Bi$_{Te}^{+}$ increases, as seen under Bi-rich conditions [Figs. 1(c) and 1(d) top panels]. In contrast to no crossing of defect levels in Bi$_2$Te$_3$, $V_{Te}^{2+}$ and Bi$_{Te}^{+}$ do cross in the gap for Bi-rich Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se and Bi$_2$Te$_2$S (due to the increase of formation energy for Bi$_{Te}^{+}$ and the decrease for $V_{Te}^{2+}$). Particularly, for Bi$_{Te}^{+}$ in Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se, there is a transition level of (0/−) at VBM + 16 meV.

DOS projected on Bi antisite are plotted in Fig. 2(a). Compared to the most ionic compound Bi$_2$Se$_3$, where Bi induces a sharp peak as the impurity level at the top of the valence band, the same peak is more broadened and shifts toward lower energy in the least ionic compound Bi$_2$Te$_3$. Those for Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se and Bi$_2$Te$_2$S are in between, explaining why the formation energy for Bi antisite is the lowest in Bi$_2$Te$_3$ and highest in Bi$_2$Se$_3$. Between the two nonequivalent group-VI sites, Vi$^0$ is more ionically and strongly bonded than Vi$^1$. So, the vacancy and antisite on the Vi$^1$ site have lower formation energy than those on the Vi$^0$ site. Even for Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se, we find that $V_{Te}^{2+}$ has a lower formation energy than $V_{Te}^{2+}$.

Total DOS determines the chemical stability and defect formation energy. However, transport properties and the intrinsic Fermi level ($\varepsilon_f$) are more directly related to the DOS around band edges [Fig. 2(b)]. Whether a material has $n$- or $p$-type majority carriers is determined by the position of the defect-pinned Fermi level ($\varepsilon_f^D$) relative to $\varepsilon_f$, established solely by DOS. Both Fermi levels are calculated from charge neutral conditions and are shown in Fig. 3 as a function of temperature.

For Bi$_2$Se$_3$, because the valence-band edge (VBE) has more DOS and rises faster than the conduction-band edge (CBE), see Fig. 3(a), $\varepsilon_f$ must be in the upper half of the band gap to have an equal concentration of electrons and holes. The $\varepsilon_f$ reflects directly the shapes of the band edges; see Fig. 3(a). For Bi$_2$Te$_3$, VBE has slightly less DOS from 0.1 to 0.15 eV then rises faster than CBE. So, $\varepsilon_f$ first decreases, levels off, and then increases beyond 400 K. For ternaries, the band edges of Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se are like Bi$_2$Te$_2$ and Bi$_2$Te$_2$S is like Bi$_2$Se$_3$; see Fig. 2(b). So, $\varepsilon_f$ in Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se first decreases then increases as $T$ increases. For Bi$_2$Te$_2$S, $\varepsilon_f$ increases as $T$ increases, but slower than Bi$_2$Se$_3$.

At high $T$, the contribution from native defects becomes significant in pinning $\varepsilon_f$. For Bi-rich Bi$_2$Se$_3$ with dominant Se$_{Bi}^{n-}$, a donor with a low formation energy, $\varepsilon_f^D$ is pinned well above $\varepsilon_f$, confirming that Bi-rich Bi$_2$Se$_3$ is $n$ type. In contrast, for Bi-rich Bi$_2$Te$_3$, the dominant Bi$_{Te}^{+}$ acceptor pins $\varepsilon_f^D$ nearer VBM even though DOS contribution favors nearer CBM beyond 600 K. The overall effect is that $\varepsilon_f^D$ is always
pinned below $\varepsilon_f^I$ and Bi$_2$Te$_3$ behaves as $p$ type under Bi-rich conditions. For Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se, the combined effects of the native defects of V$_{Te}^{2+}$ and Bi$_{Te}^-$ pin $\varepsilon_f^D$ above $\varepsilon_f^I$ and thus intrinsically Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se is $n$ type, not $p$ type. At 800 K, $\varepsilon_f^D$ is pinned at VBM + 0.21 eV, very close to the crossing point of the formation energies of V$_{Te}^{2+}$ and Bi$_{Te}^-$ at VBM + 0.22 eV. For Bi$_2$Te$_2$S, $\varepsilon_f^D$ follows closely with and only slightly above $\varepsilon_f^I$. At 800 K, $\varepsilon_f^D$ is at VBM + 0.18 eV, reflecting that the formation energies of V$_{Te}^{2+}$ and Bi$_{Te}^-$ cross at the middle of the band gap. So Bi$_2$Te$_2$S is only a weak $n$ type.

With charge neutrality conditions, defect and carrier concentrations can also be calculated. Table I lists the concentrations of the two native defects with lowest formation energies at 700 K under Bi-rich conditions. For the two binaries, the experimental estimates are also included in parentheses. For Bi$_2$Se$_3$, the defects of V$_{Se}^{2+}$ and Bi$_{Se}^-$ have the concentration of 6.1 and 0.5 $\times$ 10$^{18}$ cm$^{-3}$, respectively, versus 13.0 and 1.1 $\times$ 10$^{18}$ cm$^{-3}$ from experimental estimates.$^{32}$ For Bi$_2$Te$_3$, the concentrations are 3.2 and 24.5 $\times$ 10$^{18}$ cm$^{-3}$ versus experimental estimates$^{32}$ of 4.6 and 17 $\times$ 10$^{18}$ cm$^{-3}$. Our DFT estimates compare reasonably with those from experiment, especially given the idealized theory scenario used.

Compared to Bi$_2$Se$_3$, the drop in donor defect concentration for Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se corresponds to the drop in electron carrier concentration. The dominant defect in Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se is still V$_{Te}^{2+}$, but the concentration is lowered because of the increased formation energy. For Bi$_2$Te$_2$S, the donor defect V$_{Te}^{2+}$ formation energy is increased further and results in an even smaller concentration of donor defects, and it becomes comparable to that of the acceptor Bi$_{Te}^-$. This corresponds to the pinning of $\varepsilon_f^I$ right in the middle of the band gap as seen in Fig. 3(d). So the ternaries should have larger resistivity than binary end points Bi$_2$Se$_3$ and Bi$_2$Te$_3$. We also predict that ideal Bi$_2$Te$_2$S has a higher bulk resistivity than Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se.

Our calculated native defect formation energies agree well with the recent measurement by Jia et al.$^{18}$ that the nominal Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se is $n$ type, not $p$ type. However, the concentrations of native defects are largely affected by growth methods and conditions, where thermodynamic equilibrium is not necessarily reached, causing inhomogeneous defect concentration with a slight off-stoichiometry. Under some conditions, if the formation of V$_{Te}^{2+}$ is inhibited or transformed into Bi$_{Te}^-$, Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se can behave like $p$ type and the calculated thermodynamic transition level of Bi$_{Te}^-$ at VBM + 16 meV correlates well with the transport gap measured in experiments.$^{15,18}$

Bounded by the stoichiometric $n$ type Bi$_2$Te$_2$Se and $p$ type Bi$_2$Te$_3$ on the two ends under Bi-rich conditions,
the \( n \)-to-\( p \) crossover for \( \text{Bi}_2(\text{Te},\text{Se})_{x>2} \) when changing only the Te-Se content must be somewhere between \( x = 2 \) and \( x = 3 \). Among the six samples measured, Fig. 4(a), two (S5 and S6) with high Te content show metallic behavior and are heavily doped \( p \) type as revealed by their positive Hall coefficients, which is in contrast to the heavily doped \( n \) type that Jia et al.\(^{18} \) found around the stoichiometric \( \text{Bi}_2\text{Te}_2\text{Se} \). The other four samples (S1–S4) show semiconducting behavior with surprisingly high resistivity agreeing with previous studies by Ren et al.\(^{16} \) at \( x = 2.1 \) and Scanlon et al.\(^{10} \) at \( x = 2.5 \). Our samples span a wider composition range for Te from \( x = 2 \) to 2.64 (or 40.0 to 52.7 in at. %), also covering the range of the \( n \)-to-\( p \) crossover suggested in Seebeck coefficient measurement.\(^{5} \) The Hall coefficients of S3 and S4 go from positive to negative below 50 K, Fig. 4(b), and can be explained from the calculated thermodynamic transition level of the acceptor \( \text{Bi}^{3+}_{\text{Te}} \) at VBM + 16 meV.

With the assumption of single majority carrier, we get the following results from Hall measurements. For S3 close to 2:2:1 composition, at 10 K, the carrier density is \( 8.4 \times 10^{17} \) cm\(^{-3} \) and the mobility is 8.9 cm\(^2\)/Vs. For S4 more Te rich, at 10 K, the carrier density has dropped to \( 2.4 \times 10^{16} \) cm\(^{-3} \), the mobility increases to 86 cm\(^2\)/Vs, due to lower defect densities for higher defect formation energies. The alloying of Te-Se only happens at the \( \text{Se}^{6+} \) layer, while the valence- and conduction-band edges are mostly contributed from the outer two layers of Te and Bi, explaining the small alloying effect on scattering. The small carrier density indicates that the composition is close to the \( n \)-to-\( p \) crossover, yet the exact crossover point needs further experimental study with careful control of the local defect concentration during sample growth.

**IV. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, DFT formation energies of native defects in \( \text{Bi}_2(\text{Te},\text{Se})_{x>2} \) tetradymites were calculated to study their bulk transport properties. The carrier types were predicted from the identified energetically favored donors and acceptors, explaining the observed (i) heavily doped \( n \) type behavior in \( \text{Bi}_2\text{Te}_2\text{Se} \), (ii) the \( p \)-to-\( n \) type change in \( \text{Bi}_2\text{Te}_3 \) from Bi- to Te-rich conditions, and (iii) identified \( (0/-) \) transition level for \( \text{Bi}^{3+}_{\text{Te}} \) acceptors in \( \text{Bi}_2\text{Te}_2\text{Se} \) that correlates with the observed \( p \)-to-\( n \) transport gap at low temperature. The predicted high bulk resistivity for \( \text{Bi}_2(\text{Te},\text{Se})_{x>2} \) with \( x > 2 \) is confirmed by experiment.

Note added. After completion and submission of this work, we became aware of a related study by West et al.\(^{33} \) on the native defects of the binary tetradymites.

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