The change in optical and electrical characteristics of tin oxide films under the action of argon ion beam

O Asainov[1], S Umnov[1] and V Temenkov[1]
[1]Physical Technical Institute,
Tomsk Polytechnic University,
634050, Lenina 2, bdg. 11, Tomsk, Russia

E-mail: usp@tpu.ru

Abstract. Thin films of tin oxide (TO) were deposited on the glass substrates at room temperature using reactive magnetron sputtering at various oxygen partial pressures. After the deposition the filmswere irradiated with argon ions beam. The change of the optical and electrical properties of the films depending on the irradiation time was studied. Films optical properties in the range of 300-1100 nm were investigated by photometry as well as their structural properties were studied using X-ray diffraction. Diffractometric research showed that the films, deposited on a substrate,have a crystal structure, and after argon ions irradiation they become quasi-crystalline (amorphous). It was found that the transmission increases proportionally with the irradiation time, but the surface resistance -disproportionally.

1. Introduction

The transparent conductive oxide (TCO) films are widely used in various industries. These optically transparent electrodes are for displays, solar panels, photoelectric devices, touch panels, etc. Currently, one of the most widely used TCO substances is indium tin oxide (ITO) because it has high electrical conductivity and optical transparency.
Recently, because of the high cost of indium, the research is conducted to find ITO alternative replacement. This is, in particular, the compounds based on tin oxide (dopant-Sb, F, As, Nb, Ta), zinc (dopant- Sn, Ge, Mo, F, Ti, Zr, Hf, Nb, W, Te), and others. Although, SnO2 and ZnO impurities increase their conductivity, but it does not reach the values obtained for the ITO films. However, it is not necessary in some practical applications (very large conductivity). So, in the paper [1] pure oxide films (SnO2) prepared by electron beam evaporation had transmittance of 90% and a surface resistance of 200 KOhm / □ (substrate temperature is 100oC). Originally, pure SnO2 films are the conductors if they are deposited in a shortage of oxygen, so they are non-stoichiometric.
For the deposition of thin TCO films various methods are applied, including thermal, electron- beam, laser vaporization, cathode, a high-frequency or magnetron sputtering and others. We would like to focus on the film deposition by magnetron sputtering with additional useof ion beam.The use of ion beams in the film coatings deposition leads to almost all films properties change [2-3].

[1] E-mail address: usp@tpu.ru .

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The papers [4-8] present data showing that the use of ion assisting leads to the changes in the optical and electrical properties of the deposited ITO thin films. It means that ion beams allow achieving the optimum relationship of the metal and the oxygen components in the film. So, the transmission of the films treated in that wayis at 90%, and the surface resistance of the best samples is 20 Ohms/□. According to the authors, this is due to such factors as the changes in the mobility of the adatoms and crystal lattice damage.
In their works, the authors have used different types of ion sources that had been used at different deposition conditions (the ion beam parameters, the temperature of the substrate). In the papers mentioned above ,assisting ion beams were used in the deposition of the doped TCO oxides.
Whereas, the energy formation of oxygen vacancies and tin interstitials in SnO_2 is very low and, thus, these defects form readily, explaining oftenly observed high conductivity of pure, but non-stoichiometric, SnO_2 [9], so the ion beams could be a good tool to stimulate this process.
In this paper, we studied the influence of the irradiation of the pure tin oxide (without dopant) films with argon ions after its deposition on the optical and electrical properties.

2. Experimental details

Tin oxide films with thickness of about 30 nm were deposited by reactive magnetron sputtering of the target made of tin (99,5 wt.%) on the glass substrates at a room temperature. The glass substrates before the film deposition were purified by a chalk suspension in isopropyl alcohol.
The substrates were placed on a carrier that was able to carry out a reciprocating motion under the magnetron and the ion source in a vacuum chamber. The speed of carrier moving was 3.62 cm / second. The working gas was a mixture of oxygen and argon (partial pressure ratio is O_2 – 60%, Ar – 40%). The pressure in the vacuum chamber during sputtering was 0.3 Pa. The gas flow was controlled by an electronic meter and the gas pressure was measured by an ionization and thermocouple gauge. After the deposition, tin oxide films were irradiated with argon ions .
The ions were generated by the ion source with a closed electron drift with 2800 V voltage and a 0.28 a discharge current. The greatest number of argon ions in the beam has an energy of 400-600 eV. The chamber pressure in such case was 0.166 Pa. For measuring the surface electrical resistance Rsq. the samples were deposited with aluminum strips, which provided a reliable contact with the film. The thickness of the deposited films was measured using profilometer MicroMeasure 3D Station. To measure the transmission spectrum in the range of 300-1100 nm the spectrophotometer SF-256was used. The structure and morphology of the films was studied using the X-ray diffractometer XRD6000 and atomic-force microscope NT-MDT.

3. Results and discussion

All freshly prepared tin oxide films were transparent dielectrics. This is due to the deposition by reactive magnetron sputtering that was performed in an atmosphere with excess oxygen content. Under these conditions, there was enough oxygen to have all the metal oxidised to a state of complete oxide, so all the oxygen vacancies, creating conductivity, are busy and SnO_2 semiconductor film is deposited as a dielectric. After the tin oxide films deposition the samples were irradiated with argon ions. Figure 1 shows the results of measurement of the films transmittance both the non-irradiated and irradiated samples. As it seen from the figure the transmission is strongly dependent on exposure time. So, when the exposure time is less than ~ 4.5 sec. the transmission slightly improves. For longer times ($\geq$ 8,8 sec.) the transmission is increased to 100% in almost the entire range of the wavelengths. It should be said, when the irradiation time is 13 - 22 seconds, there is the increase in transmittance at wavelengths less than 360 nm and a slight increase in the infrared region. The increase in transmission, especially in the short-wavelengths region, of the irradiated films is related to the change of the plasma frequency [10-12]. This change is a consequence of the electrons concentration increasing.

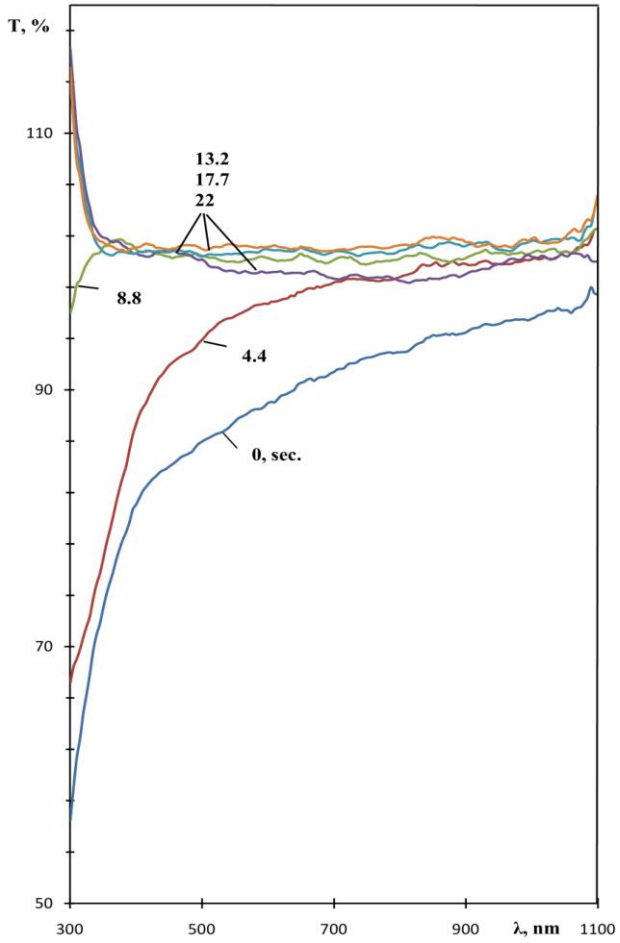


Figure 1. Dependence of the transmission on the irradiation time

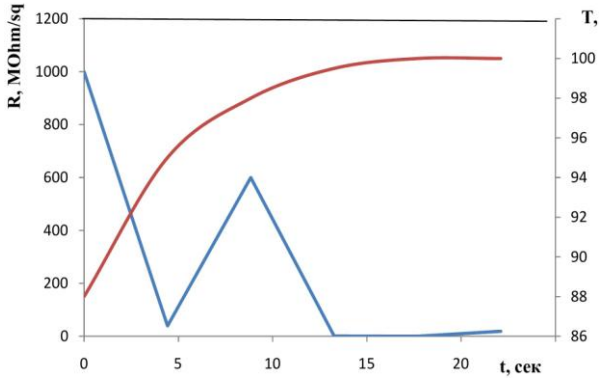


Figure 2. Dependence of the transmission on the irradiation time

However, the nature of the transmission is defined by the frequency of the incident light wave and the plasma frequency.

Figure 2 shows the results of the surface resistance measurements, an average transmittance value at various irradiation times. The table shows that the film surface resistance is disproportionately dependent on the exposure time. With exposure time increasing, it initially decreases and, then, increases. The film transmittance almost uniformly increases and quickly reaches 100%.

As the deposition was carried out at an excess oxygen content, the films were deposited in the SnO_2 stoichiometric form which is a good insulator.

During the Ar ions irradiation there is their collision with the film surface and the power transfer o in the local area to the neighbouring atoms of the crystal lattice, imbedded and adsorbed on the grains boundary. As a result, there are physical and chemical processes that lead to the break or reduction of chemical bonds, causing desorption or chemical reaction that alters the structure of the coating.

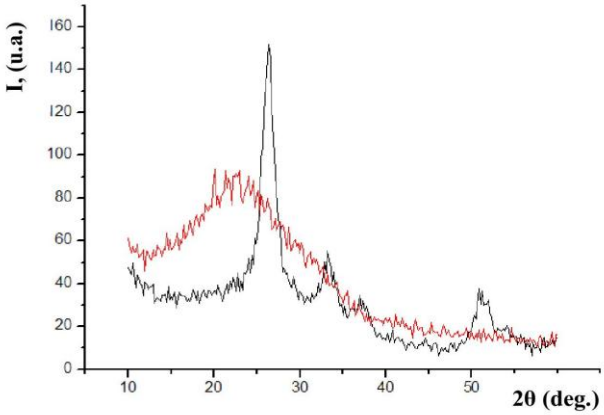


Figure 3. XRD diagram samples SnO_2

The concentration of the electrons increasing is connected both with the break of the Sn-O chemical bonds and desorption of oxygen, which leads to the formation of non-stoichiometric tin oxide. Thus, the film exposure leads to increase in the number of oxygen vacancies, which, in its turn, leads to reduce in the films electric resistance. However, the further irradiation time increase leads to the film

resistance increase. This is, possibly, connected with the formation of Sn self-point defects [11-12]. Whereas, the point defects interact with all conductive electrons, so the electrons, located near the defects, are "bound" and do not participate in conductivity. As a result, the film resistance increases.
Figure 3 shows the results of the study of the deposited films structure. The figures show that the deposited tin oxide films have a crystal structure (tetragonal) with the grain size bottom of ~ 9.8 nm. After argon ions irradiation the structure becomes quasi-crystalline (amorphous - the red curve). This is due to the opening of the crystal lattice chemical bonds and forming new ones, which lead to formation of quasi-crystalline structure.

4. Conclusions

Pure SnO_2 films were deposited at room temperature with reactive magnetron sputtering, followed by Ar ions beam irradiation with energy of 400-600 eV. It allows obtaining the films with 100% transmittance and satisfactory surface resistance of 100 KOhm/ □. The surface resistance value can be reduced by optimizing the deposition conditions and ion beam parameters. Thereby, transmission increases proportionally with irradiation time increasing, while the surface resistance - disproportionately. The crystal structure of SnO_2 film after ion irradiation is transformed into a quasi-crystalline.

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