Title	Passivation effect of ultra-thin SiN_x films formed by catalytic chemical vapor deposition for crystalline silicon surface
Author(s)	Song, Hao; Ohdaira, Keisuke
Citation	Japanese Journal of Applied Physics, 57(8S3): 08RB03-1-08RB03-4
Issue Date	2018-06-11
Type	Journal Article
Text version	author
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10119/16132
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Description	

Passivation effect of ultra-thin SiN$_x$ films formed by catalytic chemical vapor deposition for crystalline silicon surface

Hao Song and Keisuke Ohdaira[*]

Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (JAIST),

Nomi, Ishikawa 923-1292, Japan

[*]E-mail: ohdaira@jaist.ac.jp

We propose a way of replacing silicon dioxide (SiO$_2$) films in tunnel oxide passivated contact (TOPCon) solar cells by ultra-thin Si nitride (SiN$_x$) films. We deposit SiN$_x$ films on n-type crystalline Si (c-Si) wafers by catalytic chemical vapor deposition (Cat-CVD), by which we avoid a plasma damage to the surface of c-Si. Thin (<5 nm) SiN$_x$ films can be deposited with good controllability by tuning the deposition conditions. To improve the passivation quality of SiN$_x$ films, hydrogen treatment was performed onto the SiN$_x$-coated c-Si surfaces. Their effective minority carrier lifetime (τ_{eff}) can be improved up to >1 ms by the hydrogen treatment for the samples containing SiN$_x$ with a proper refractive indices and >10-nm-thick n-type amorphous Si (n-a-Si). The ultra-thin SiN$_x$ films have sufficiently high passivation ability and have the required level for the passivation layers of rear-side contact in the TOPCon-like c-Si solar cells.

1. Introduction

Photovoltaic (PV) power generation has been widely popularizing as a major renewable energy resource.[1,2] Crystalline silicon (c-Si) wafer-based solar cells claim a significant share of the PV market at present and in the near future, and are thus the most important PV technology.[3,4] Nowadays, the structure of the c-Si solar cells has been shifting to that with partial rear contract (PRC) for the sake of reducing the area of a direct metal-semiconductor junction, which shows a significant recombination of carriers. However, for the passivated emitter with rear locally diffused (PERL) cells,[5] unpassivated contacting area limits open-circuit voltage (V_{oc}) and conversion efficiency due to its high recombination velocity over 10^5 cm/s, even if the ratio of the contacting area is less than 1%.[6]

Recently, solar cells with a full-area carrier-selective contact passivated by tunneling Si dioxide (SiO_2) have been proposed, which are referred to as tunnel oxide passivated contact (TOPCon) cells.[7–12] The TOPCon cell contains a tunneling SiO_2 with a thickness of ~1.4 nm and a ~20-nm-thick n^+-Si layer formed on the SiO_2 on the rear side of the cell. The tunneling SiO_2 is thin enough to let carriers tunneling through it. The termination of dangling bonds by the ultra-thin SiO_2 and field-effect passivation induced by the n^+-Si layer lead to high V_{oc} and conversion efficiency.[7,10] Wet-chemical treatment is frequently used for the formation of the ultra-thin SiO_2 in the TOPCon structure,[10–12] through which SiO_2 layers are grown on both sides of a Si wafer. The additional process for the removal of the SiO_2 grown on the front side will thus be needed.

To solve this problem, we newly propose to replace the tunneling SiO_2 by silicon nitride (SiN_x) formed by chemical vapor deposition (CVD), by which one-side film formation can be easily realized. Furthermore, SiN_x has a narrower bandgap of ~5 eV[13,14] than that of SiO_2 of ~9 eV,[15] which may lead to more efficient carrier tunneling. This means that a thicker tunneling layer can be utilized for CVD SiN_x, which results in better passivation. As the CVD method for the deposition of the thin SiN_x films, we particularly use catalytic CVD (Cat-CVD).[16,17] Cat-CVD can realize low-damage deposition of passivation films due to its plasma-damage-less nature, and we have thus far demonstrated high-quality passivation films formed by Cat-CVD.[18–24] In this study, we attempt to form ultra-thin SiN_x films aiming at the utilization of the SiN_x as the substitute of tunneling SiO_2 in the TOPCon structure.

2. Experimental methods

We used 20×20 mm^2-sized, 290-μm-thick, mirror-polished n-type c-Si(100) wafers with a resistivity of 1-5 Ω·cm as substrates. The wafers first received ultrasonic cleaning in acetone, ethanol and water for 5 min, respectively. Then the wafers were dipped in 5% hydrofluoric acid (HF) to remove native oxide layers. SiN$_x$ films were deposited by Cat-CVD on the cleaned Si wafers under the conditions summarized in Table I. A distance between a wafer holder and a tungsten catalyzer was set to 12 cm in the Cat-CVD chamber. For the experiment of the formation of thin SiN$_x$ films, deposition duration was systematically changed.

For the passivation of c-Si surfaces, SiN$_x$ films were deposited for 30 s under the conditions shown in Table II on the both sides of Si wafers, in which H$_2$ flow rate is systematically changed and the refractive index and thickness of SiN$_x$ films were varied as a result. We then deposited ~8-nm-thick n-type amorphous Si (n-a-Si) films by Cat-CVD[25–26] on the SiN$_x$ films. The deposition condition of n-a-Si films is also summarized in Table II. We also fabricated similar passivation structures with n-a-Si films with various thicknesses.

To improve the passivation quality of the thin SiN$_x$ films, atomic hydrogen treatment was performed in the Cat-CVD chamber on the SiN$_x$ films prior to the deposition of n-type a-Si films. The atomic hydrogen treatment was performed at a H$_2$ flow rate of 20 sccm, at a pressure of 0.2 Pa, and at substrate and catalyzer temperatures of 200 and 1800 °C, respectively.

We measured the thickness and refractive index of SiN$_x$ films by analyzing the data of spectroscopic ellipsometry using the Cauchy model. The passivation quality of SiN$_x$ films was characterized by measuring effective minority carrier lifetime (τ_{eff}) by microwave photoconductivity decay (μ-PCD; KOBELCO LTA-1510 EP) using a microwave with a frequency of 10 GHz and a pulse laser with a wavelength of 904 nm and a photon density of 5×10^{13} cm^{-2}.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Passivation quality of SiN$_x$ films with different thickness

Figure 1 shows the thickness of SiN$_x$ films as a function of the duration of SiN$_x$ deposition under the condition shown in Table I. The thickness of SiN$_x$ films increases linearly with

deposition duration, and SiN_x films with thicknesses <10 nm can be obtained if we choose deposition durations of <1 min. Figure 2 shows the τ_{eff} of the samples as a function of SiN_x thickness. We can see high τ_{eff} of $\gtrsim 1$ ms obtained in the samples with >15-nm-thick SiN_x films. The effective tunneling of majority carriers is, however, not expected in such thick SiN_x films, and comparable τ_{eff} should be realized using much thinner SiN_x films for actual solar cells. The c-Si samples passivated with SiN_x films with a thickness of less than 10 nm, on the contrary, show drastically lower τ_{eff}. There may be two possible reasons for the significant difference in τ_{eff} between the thick and thin SiN_x samples. The first one is the difference of the quality of the SiN_x film at the film/c-Si interface. There might be a ~1-2 nm thick SiON film near the interface, which has a fixed charge density on the order of $~10^{11}$ cm^{-2}.[27] This is lower than the value of $~10^{12}$ cm^{-2} for SiN_x,[28] and field-effect passivation may be less effective. The second possible reason is that thicker SiN_x films may be able to keep H atoms more effectively during their deposition, which can enhance the termination of dangling bonds on the c-Si surface.

3.2 Hydrogen treatment towards thin SiN_x films

To improve the passivation quality of thin SiN_x films, atomic hydrogen treatment was performed. Figure 3 shows the τ_{eff} of the c-Si samples with <5-nm-thick SiN_x films deposited at a H_2 flow rate of 40 sccm as a function of atomic hydrogen treatment duration. τ_{eff} can be improved up to >300 μs by the atomic hydrogen treatment for ~3 min. We believe that hydrogen atoms supplied during the treatment may pass through the thin SiN_x films and terminate Si dangling bonds on c-Si surfaces. The thicknesses of SiN_x films measured by spectroscopic ellipsometry were 4.45, 4.65, and 4.68 nm for atomic hydrogen treatment durations of 0, 3, and 5 min, respectively. We confirmed that there is no reduction in the thickness of SiN_x films during the hydrogen treatment, showing that the SiN_x films are resistive against atomic hydrogen etching.

3.3 Hydrogen treatment towards thin SiN_x films with various H_2 flow rates

The atomic hydrogen treatment shows an effective improvement in τ_{eff} for the SiN_x films deposited at H_2 40 sccm and a refractive index of 2.3. The effectiveness of atomic hydrogen treatment is, however, not clear for other SiN_x films with different refractive indices. We thus

performed atomic hydrogen treatment towards SiN_x films deposited at different H_2 flow rates as summarized in Table II.

3.3.1 Variation of the refractive index of SiN_x films depending on H_2 flow rate

Si/N ratio in SiN_x films, to some extent, affects their refractive index.[29,30] We varied H_2 flow rate during the deposition of SiN_x films to change their refractive index. Figure 4 shows the thickness and refractive index of SiN_x films as a function of H_2 flow rate during SiN_x deposition. With increasing H_2 flow rate from 0 to 100 sccm, the thickness changes slightly from ~6 to ~4 nm, while refractive index decrease in a wide range from ~2.9 to ~2.0 at a wavelength of 640 nm. The decrease in SiN_x thickness by increasing H_2 flow rate may be due to decrease in the partial pressures of SiH_4 and NH_3. The reason for the decrease in refractive index is the enhancement of the decomposition of NH_3 molecules through vapor-phase reaction with hydrogen atoms—$NH_3 + H \rightarrow NH_2 + H_2$.[31]

3.3.2 τ_{eff} variation of c-Si with thin SiN_x films after atomic hydrogen treatment

Based on the variation of the refractive index of SiN_x films shown in Fig. 4, we prepared the samples with different SiN_x films deposited at H_2 flow rates from 0 to 80 sccm for τ_{eff} measurement. We obtained SiN_x films with refractive indices of 2.1–2.9. Atomic hydrogen treatment was then performed in the Cat-CVD chamber prior to the deposition of n-type a-Si films.

Figure 5 shows the τ_{eff} of the c-Si samples passivated with ~5-nm-thick SiN_x films with different refractive indices as a function of atomic hydrogen treatment duration. The c-Si samples passivated with highly Si-rich SiN_x films, with a refractive index of ~2.9, do not gain any τ_{eff} improvement by atomic hydrogen treatment. On the contrary, the τ_{eff} of the other samples passivated with SiN_x films with lower refractive indices can be significantly improved, and the τ_{eff} tends to saturate with increase in atomic hydrogen treatment duration. The τ_{eff} of the c-Si samples passivated with SiN_x films with refractive indices of 2.1 and 2.2 is particularly improved up to >400 μs (~800 μs as the maximum values) by atomic hydrogen treatment. The τ_{eff} improvement is saturated at a treatment duration of ~4 min. The samples with SiN_x with a refractive index of 2.3 show lower maximum τ_{eff} and shorter hydrogen treatment duration for the saturation of τ_{eff} (~3 min). These results indicate that the effect of

atomic hydrogen treatment on τ_{eff} improvement strongly depends on the refractive index of SiN$_x$ films. The reason for the different degree of the effect of the atomic hydrogen treatment might be due to the difference of hydrogen desorption depending on the composition of SiN$_x$. SiN$_x$ films with more Si content, in general, releases hydrogen more easily,[32] and hydrogen atoms supplied by the hydrogen treatment may be released more frequently. This might also explain the difference of optimum hydrogen treat duration for τ_{eff} improvement. We have also confirmed no reduction in the thickness of SiN$_x$ films with refractive indices of 2.1 and 2.2 by the hydrogen treatment, meaning that these SiN$_x$ films are resistive against hydrogen etching.

3.4 Influence of the thickness of n-a-Si layers on τ_{eff}

The passivation quality of the n-a-Si/SiN$_x$ stacks may depend also on the properties of n-a-Si films since the existence of the n-type layer induces downward band bending which leads to a decrease in the density of minority carriers near the SiN$_x$/c-Si interfaces. We thus also investigated the influence of the thickness of n-a-Si films on the quality of the passivation structures. We just change the duration of n-a-Si deposition in Table II. Based on the result shown in Fig. 5, we used SiN$_x$ films with a refractive index of 2.2 receiving atomic Hydrogen treatments for 240 s.

Figure 6 shows the τ_{eff} of the c-Si samples passivated with ~5-nm-thick SiN$_x$ films as a function of n-a-Si thickness. The c-Si samples show τ_{eff} improvement by increasing the thickness of n-a-Si, and τ_{eff} reaches as high as >1 ms in a number of the samples when we use n-a-Si films with thicknesses of ~10 nm. The τ_{eff} of the c-Si samples tends to be saturated with further increase in the thickness of n-a-Si films. The increase in τ_{eff} by using thicker n-a-Si films can be understood as more effective downward band bending. Note that we have observed much lower τ_{eff} (<150 μs) in the structures without SiN$_x$ layers.

In this study, we have clarified the importance of the composition of SiN$_x$ films and the thickness of n-a-Si films to realize sufficiently high passivation ability by using the ultra-thin Cat-CVD SiN$_x$ films for the passivation of c-Si surfaces. The highest τ_{eff} obtained in this study is comparable to that for the TOPCon structures.[33] The ultra-thin SiN$_x$ films with a refractive index of 2.1–2.2 and high passivation ability will be applied to the rear-side passivation layers in the TOPCon-like solar cells.

4. Conclusions

We have demonstrated the effectiveness of the passivation of c-Si surfaces with ultra-thin Cat-CVD SiN_x films with a thickness of <5 nm. Drastic reduction in τ_{eff} occurs by reducing the thickness of SiN_x films. However, the passivation quality of the ultra-thin SiN_x films can be significantly improved by atomic hydrogen treatment after SiN_x deposition. The τ_{eff} of the c-Si samples with SiN_x with refractive indices of 2.1 and 2.2 shows particularly large improvement in τ_{eff} up to ~800 μs by the atomic hydrogen treatment. We also confirmed that there is no hydrogen etching of the SiN_x films during the hydrogen treatment. The τ_{eff} of the c-Si samples reach as high as >1 ms by optimizing the thickness of n-a-Si films. The ultra-thin Cat-CVD SiN_x films are thus applicable to the rear contact passivation for TOPCon-like solar cells.

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Table I. Deposition conditions of SiN$_x$ films for the experiment to obtain thin SiN$_x$ films.

Condition	Value
SiH$_4$ flow rate (sccm)	3
NH$_3$ flow rate (sccm)	50
H$_2$ flow rate (sccm)	40
Gas pressure (Pa)	1
Substrate temperature (ºC)	200
Catalyzer temperature (ºC)	1800
Duration (s)	30–420

Table II. Deposition conditions of SiN$_x$ films for the passivation of c-Si surfaces.

Condition	SiN$_x$	n-a-Si
SiH$_4$ flow rate (sccm)	3	20
NH$_3$ flow rate (sccm)	50	
H$_2$ flow rate (sccm)	0–100	
PH$_3$ (2.25% He-diluted) flow rate (sccm)		10
Gas pressure (Pa)	1	1
Substrate temperature (ºC)	200	250
Catalyzer temperature (ºC)	1800	1800
Duration (s)	30	60

Figure Captions

Fig. 1. (Color online) Thickness of SiN_x films as a function of deposition duration.

Fig. 2. (Color online) τ_{eff} of the samples with SiN_x layers as a function of the thickness of SiN_x layers.

Fig. 3. (Color online) τ_{eff} of the samples with SiN_x layers as a function of the duration of atomic hydrogen treatment.

Fig. 4. (Color online) Thickness and refractive index of SiN_x layers as a function of H_2 flow rate during SiN_x deposition.

Fig. 5. (Color online) τ_{eff} of the samples passivated with SiN_x layers with different refractive index as a function of the duration of atomic hydrogen treatment.
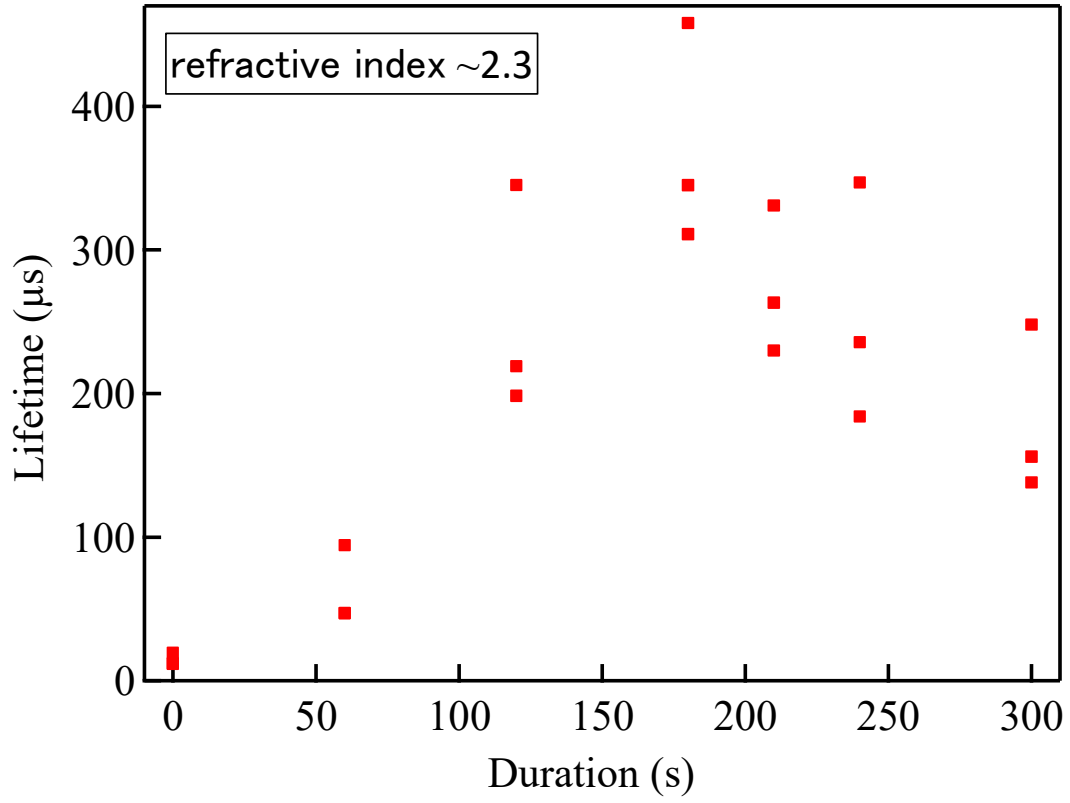
Fig. 6. (Color online) τ_{eff} of the samples passivated with SiN_x layers receiving atomic hydrogen treatment for 240 s as a function of the thickness of n-a-Si layers.
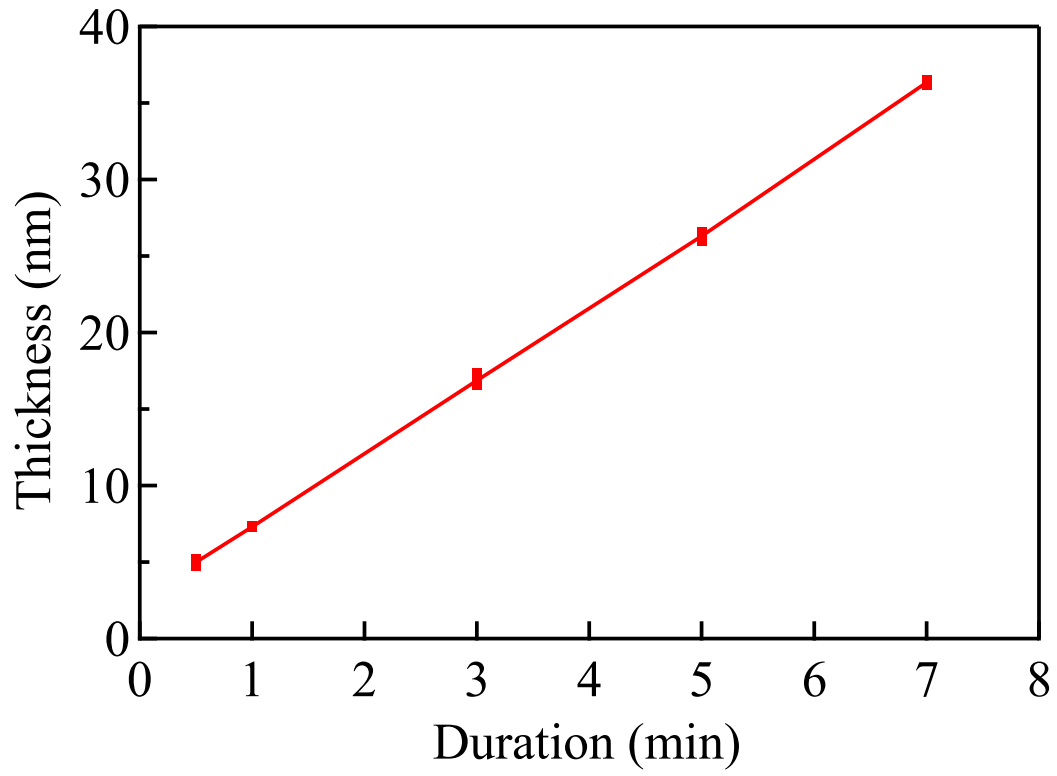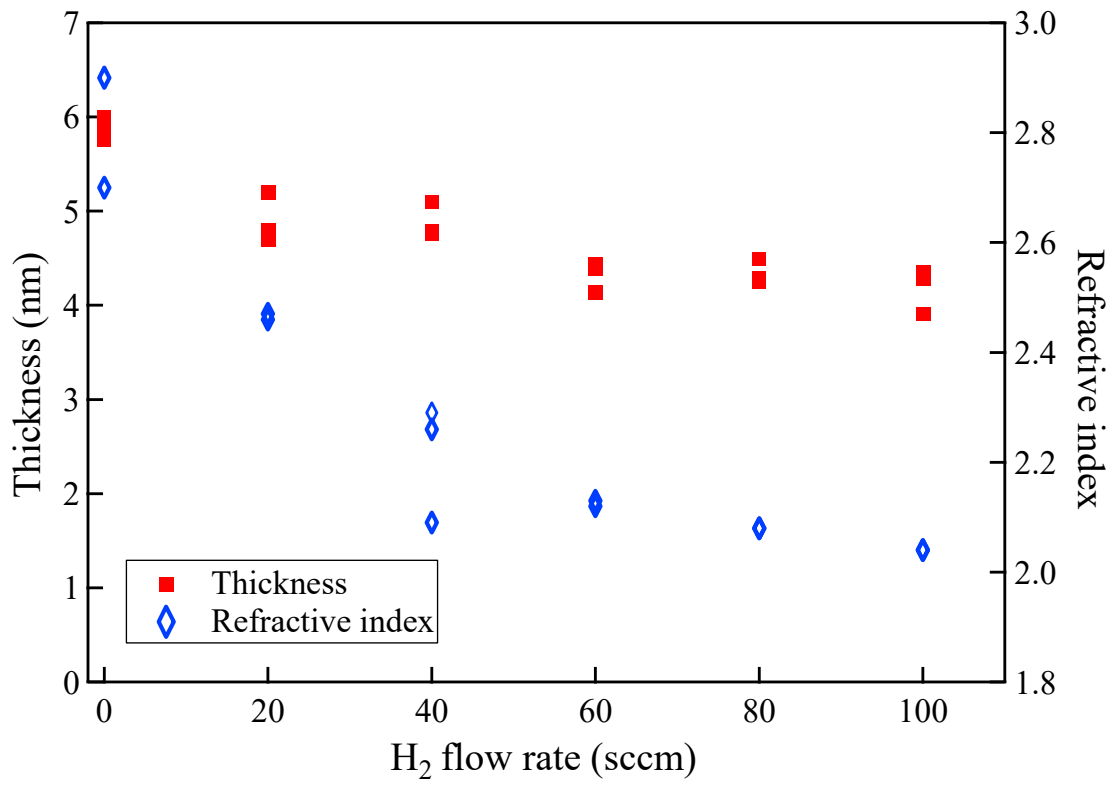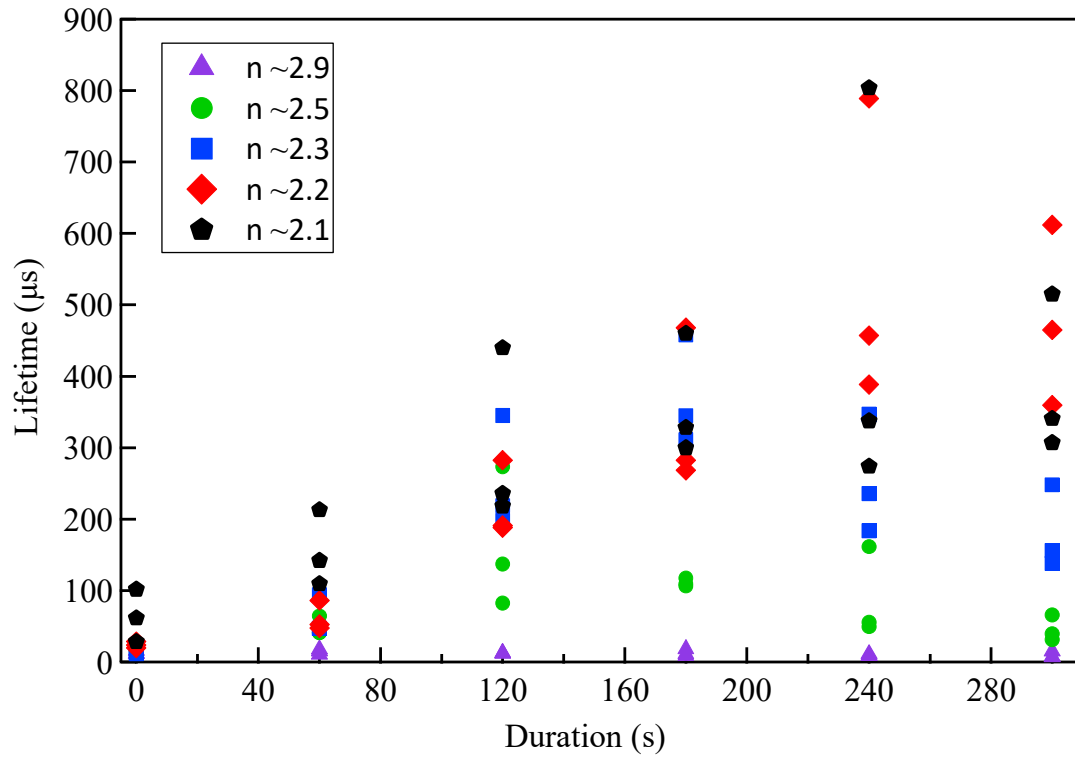
(Color online) Figure 1.
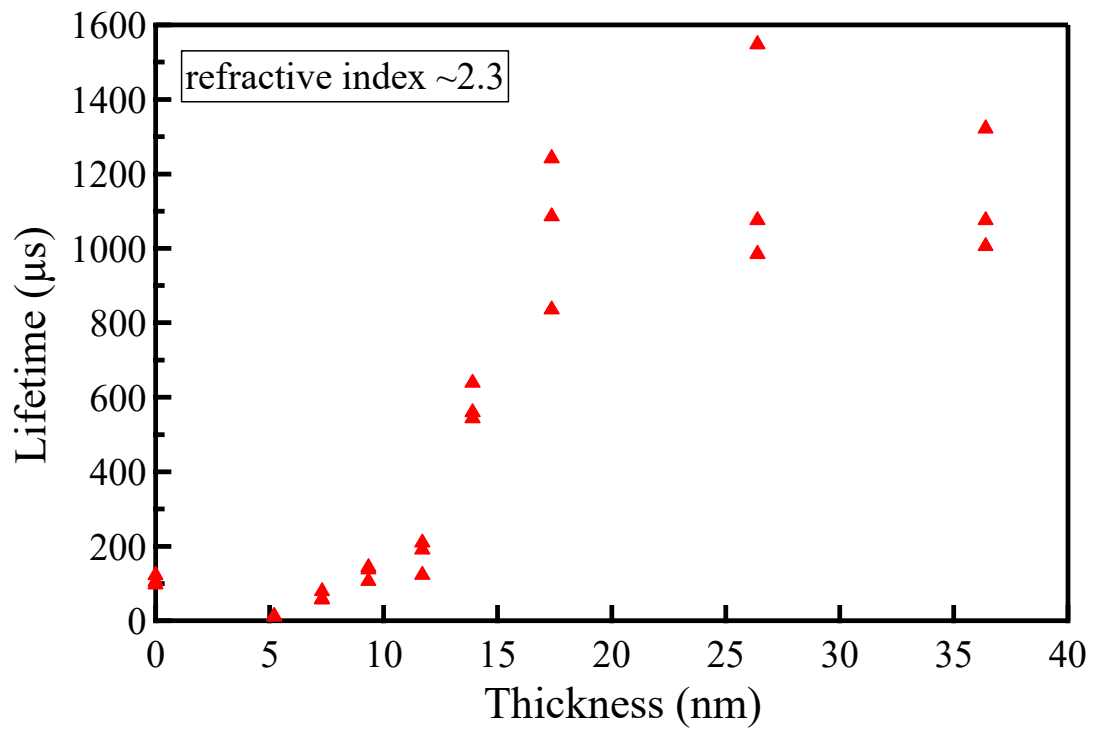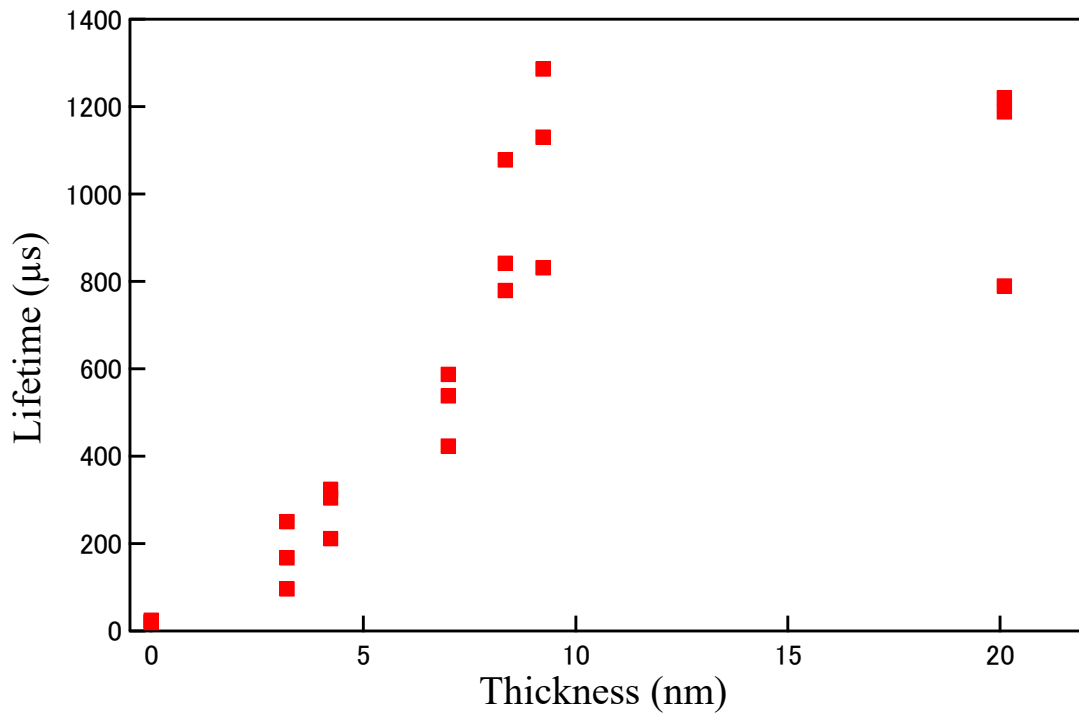
(Color online) Figure 2.

(Color online) Figure 3.

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