

Reducing orbital occupancy in VO₂ suppresses Mott physics while Peierls distortions persist

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The characteristics of the cooperative Mott-Peierls metal-insulator transition (MIT) of VO₂ can be altered by employing epitaxial strain. While the most commonly used substrate for this purpose is isostructural rutile TiO₂, thin films often suffer from interdiffusion of Ti ions near the interface. Exploiting this phenomena, we investigate the nature of interfacial V⁴⁺/Ti⁴⁺ cation intermixing and its effects on the MIT using scanning transmission electron microscopy with electron energy loss spectroscopy (STEM-EELS), soft x-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS), and hard x-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (HAXPES), along with supporting density functional theory (DFT) calculations. We find that the reduced orbital occupancy in highly Ti incorporated VO₂ is responsible for suppressing the MIT. Interdiffused films are found to be metallic at all measured temperatures, despite a resolute dimerization inferred from x-ray absorption data at lower temperatures. Our results demonstrate that the Mott physics can be suppressed in doped VO₂, while a lattice dimerization remains thermodynamically favorable.

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Correlated oxides that undergo abrupt phase transitions, such as vanadium dioxide (VO₂), show great promise for use in advanced oxide electronics. VO₂ exhibits a cooperative Mott-Peierls metal-insulator transition (MIT) that is accompanied by a structural phase transition (SPT) from the tetragonal rutile structure to the lower symmetry monoclinic M1 structure [1–3]. The collective interactions that govern this MIT lead to ultrafast bulk switching, offering some key advantages over traditional oxide semiconductors [4]. For example, employing VO₂ as the active layer in a three terminal field effect transistor (FET) circumvents conventional restrictions such as ‘Thomas-Fermi screening’ and the ‘Boltzmann limit’, enabling ultrathin and high-efficiency FETs [5,6]. More broadly, this MIT can be triggered by thermal, electrical, or optical means, which makes it practical for a wide range of switching devices [7–9].

A promising route toward tuning the functionality of VO₂ is modifying the exact orbital occupancy within the valence V 3d band [10]. Recent progress in this effort has shown that the occupation of the so-called $d_{||}$ ($d_{x^2-y^2}$) orbital can be preferentially increased to foster a more purely Mott transition via strain [11]. In the other direction, decreasing the orbital occupancy of this $d_{||}$ orbital could potentially be achieved by the introduction of certain dopants. For example, from a purely chemical standpoint, substituting a portion of V⁴⁺ (d^1) ions with Ti⁴⁺ (d^0) ions should introduce holes and thus reduce the overall orbital occupancy in the V 3d band. In

fact, interdiffusion of Ti ions from commonly used rutile TiO₂ substrates has been known to occur during growth of VO₂ films, but has thus far only been considered as a detriment to the MIT and the intrinsic properties have not been thoroughly studied [12–17].

Starting with VO₂/TiO₂ films with near atomically sharp interfaces, in this Rapid Communication we controllably introduce Ti interdiffusion to study its effect on the orbital occupancy of VO₂. We determine Ti-incorporated VO₂ films to display no evidence of an electronic MIT, exhibiting the low resistivity characteristic of metallic VO₂ at all temperatures. However, these films maintain a Peierls-like structural distortion, exhibiting a room temperature metallic phase with V-V dimerization. This suppression of the MIT, despite the persistent structural change, is explained within a hole doping model using density functional theory (DFT) for both rutile and monoclinic VO₂. These results offer valuable insight into the longstanding issue of determining the precise relationship between the electronic MIT and accompanying SPT in VO₂.

A set of epitaxial VO₂ films that display abrupt changes in resistivity of a few orders of magnitude were grown on TiO₂(100) substrates to thicknesses of 1–7.5 nm by reactive molecular beam epitaxy (MBE) [17–19]. To achieve high quality interfaces, substrates were prepared by etching and annealing to have clean and well-defined atomic step and terrace microstructured surfaces [20]. After the initial growth, samples were thermally stressed to promote V/Ti cation intermixing. The onset of significant diffusion at the interface was found at a relatively mild temperature of 350 °C. We focus on a 7.5 nm film annealed in vacuum to 350 °C for two hours

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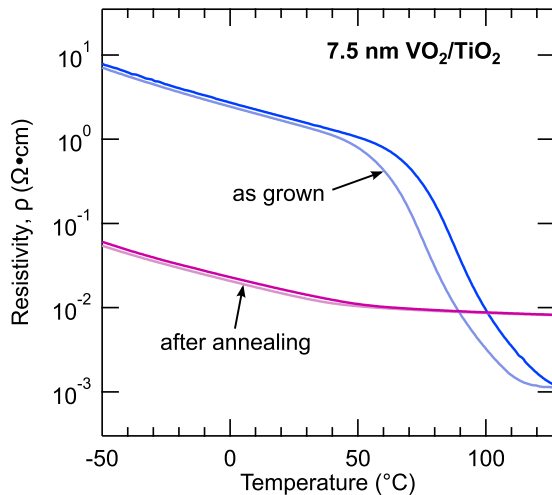


FIG. 1. The temperature-dependent resistivity of the same 7.5 nm VO_2/TiO_2 film before and after interfacial diffusion has occurred.

where an O_2 partial pressure of 1.3×10^{-6} mbar was used to suppress the formation of oxygen vacancies and reduction of vanadium to a 3^+ oxidation state.

The temperature-dependent resistivity measurements of the film before and after interfacial diffusion was induced is shown in Fig. 1. The as-grown VO_2/TiO_2 film displays a transition with T_{MIT} centered at 84.8°C , a change in resistivity of $\Delta R/R = 10^{3.0}$, and a hysteresis of 11.8°C . Post-annealing, the film displays no sharp discontinuity in resistivity. The MIT is entirely suppressed leaving the film in a low resistivity state at all measured temperatures. We note that the resistivity of the interdiffused film is higher than the original metallic state, as seen in Fig. 1, which is likely a consequence of the inhomogeneous concentration of Ti ions and resulting charge distribution.

Scanning transmission electron microscopy with electron energy loss spectroscopy (STEM-EELS) was employed to investigate the extent of interdiffusion in the region of the interface. Figures 2(a) and 2(f) show cross-sectional annular dark field (ADF) STEM images collected from the 7.5 nm VO_2/TiO_2 film before and after annealing, respectively. Uniform structure is observed in the as-grown film with no obvious sign of defects. The undamaged thickness of the film is 6.9–7.0 nm, while the top surface layer shows damage from ion milling during sample preparation. After annealing, the film appeared to have additional roughening of the surface and small regions of a possible second phase (indicated by the yellow arrow), although the majority of the film retained its structure.

The close proximity in atomic number of vanadium and titanium results in poor contrast between the VO_2 film and TiO_2 substrate in ADF imaging, however the spectroscopic images of vanadium and titanium reveal a sharp well-ordered interface before annealing [Figs. 2(b)–2(d)] and an extremely diffuse interface afterwards [Figs. 2(g)–2(i)]. Before annealing, the vanadium has a uniform intensity throughout the film and the titanium is confined to the substrate and has not diffused into the film. After annealing, the titanium is present throughout the 7.5 nm film and appears in Fig. 2(i) to be

sitting substitutionally on the vanadium sites. In the annealed film in Fig. 2(h), the vanadium appears blurrier than in the as-grown case due to imperfect background subtraction from the titanium in the film and does not indicate disorder of the vanadium atoms.

Vertical line profiles of the vanadium and titanium concentrations are shown in Figs. 2(e) and 2(j). Before annealing the line profiles show a sharp interface between titanium and vanadium with less than 1 nm of interdiffusion. After annealing, the titanium had a decaying concentration in the film, with significant quantities of titanium extending to the top of the film.

To probe the titanium environment within the VO_2 film, we use x-ray spectroscopy. Figure 3 shows the soft x-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS) of the Ti L and V L edges measured at room temperature. The XAS was measured in total electron yield (TEY) mode and is therefore only sensitive to within the top few nanometers of the film [19]. For comparison, a reference 5-nm-thick VO_2/TiO_2 film shows no Ti L-edge signal at all from the underlying substrate [Fig. 3(a)]. This demonstrates that the lineshapes observed for the 7.5 nm interdiffused film is exclusively probing the Ti ions that have migrated into the film. The Ti L edge is sensitive to oxidation state, local coordination, and symmetry around the Ti atom. Comparing this Ti L-edge spectrum to that of a TiO_2 single crystal, the lineshapes are nearly identical. This indicates the diffused Ti ions retain their 4^+ oxidation state and similar coordination environments within the VO_2 film. There is however a subtle modification of the feature at ~ 460 eV, which can be attributed to differences in the next nearest Ti environments between the interdiffused and reference films.

Figure 3(b) shows the V L edge, sampling the same depth of the two films. The XAS was measured with the linear polarization (E) of the incident x-ray beam aligned either parallel or perpendicular to the c_R axis of the VO_2 film. The similar lineshapes indicate no vanadium reduction or oxidation from its 4^+ valence has occurred. The reference film displays a strong dichroism, commonly observed as a signature of the highly directional monoclinic phase of VO_2 [21]. The interdiffused film displays a similar slightly weaker dichroism, suggesting that the local structure around the vanadium has not significantly changed from the monoclinic structure, despite the incorporation of titanium ions. Additionally, further confirmation of both the Ti^{4+} and V^{4+} oxidation states was provided by our EELS and core level hard x-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (HAXPES) measurements (see Supplemental Material [22]).

The temperature dependent behavior of the interdiffused film was investigated by valence band HAXPES and O K-edge XAS. Figure 4(a) shows the topmost valence states measured at 23°C (below T_{MIT}) and 120°C (above T_{MIT}) for both the interdiffused film and reference film using a photon energy of 4 keV. The topmost states are mainly V 3d in character and display a large transfer of spectral weight near the Fermi level due to the MIT, clearly observed for the reference film. The interdiffused film shows no such dramatic changes and retains a Fermi edge, indicating the absence of a band gap, even at low temperature. This reaffirms the evidence of a suppressed MIT and is consistent with the measured low-resistivity state.

The corresponding O K-edge measurements with x-ray polarization $E_{\parallel c_R}$ are shown in Fig. 4(b). The spectrum

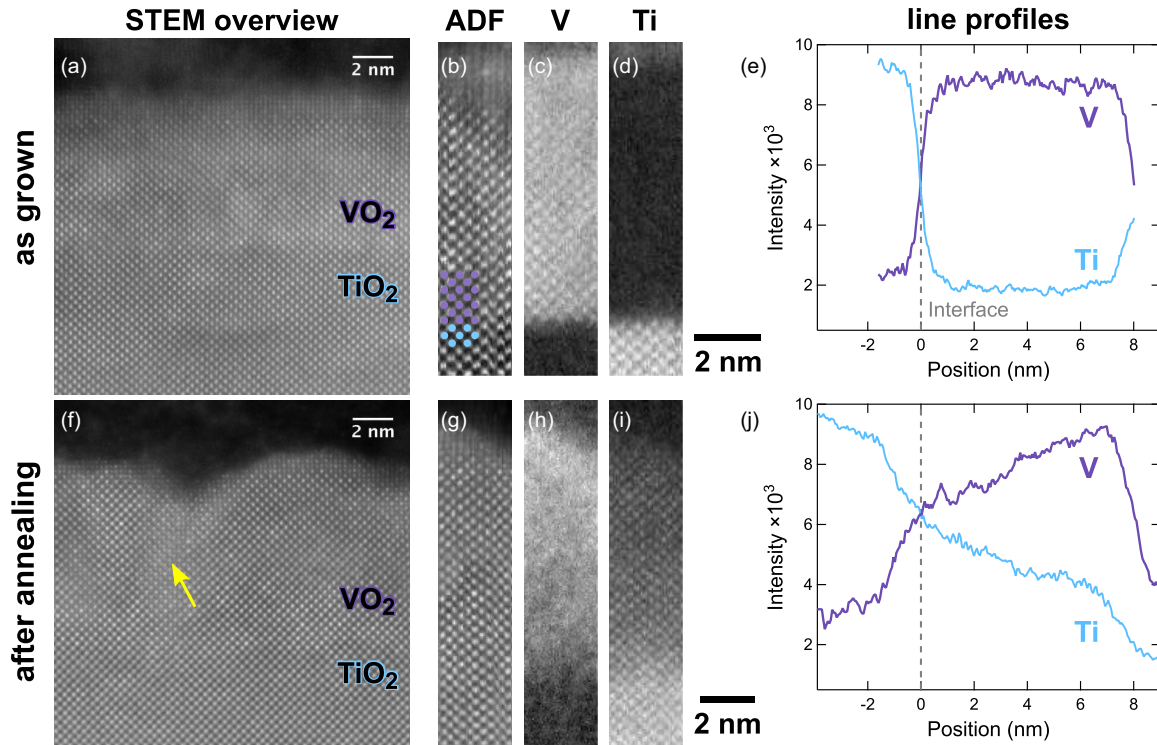


FIG. 2. Scanning transmission electron microscopy and electron energy-loss spectroscopy of VO₂/TiO₂(100) films before and after annealing. (a) Overview image of the as-grown film. Simultaneous (b) annular dark field image, (c) vanadium, and (d) titanium spectroscopic images of the as-grown film. (e) Line profile of the vanadium and titanium concentrations showing a sharp interface for the as-grown film. (f) Overview image of the annealed film. Simultaneous (g) annular dark field image, (h) vanadium, and (i) titanium spectroscopic images of the annealed film. (j) Line profile of the vanadium and titanium concentrations showing a diffuse interface for the annealed film. All data is recorded in projection along the [001] axis.

collected at room temperature for the reference film displays the expected three features for VO₂; the π^* (~ 529.5 eV), d_{\parallel}^* (~ 530.5 eV), and σ^* (~ 532 eV) bands [29]. The d_{\parallel}^* band arises from the V $3d_{xy}$ orbital, which points directly to the next nearest vanadium site. The presence of this feature indicates the splitting of the d_{\parallel} band due to V-V dimerization in the monoclinic structure. This feature is seen to vanish upon the transition to the metallic rutile (R)-phase VO₂, with evenly spaced vanadium ions [18,19,29].

The spectra from the interdiffused film show overall similar structure, although there is some additional weight near 531 and 533.5 eV just above the π^* and σ^* bands. This additional weight is associated with π^* and σ^* states resulting from Ti-O bonding (see Supplemental Material [22]). By taking the difference between the low and high temperature spectra, the temperature-dependent behavior of the d_{\parallel}^* feature for the interdiffused film is revealed to exhibit a nearly identical lineshape to that of the reference. This indicates that there persists a thermally induced SPT in the interdiffused film, in which direct V-V bonding occurs, resulting in a monoclinic phase.

A simplified schematic of the near Fermi level (E_F) electronic states is shown in Fig. 4(c). Photoelectron spectroscopy is sensitive to the occupied electronic states while x-ray absorption at the O K edge measures dipole allowed transitions from the O $1s$ to unoccupied O $2p$ states. In the interdiffused case, the distortion of the lattice at lower temperatures causes the d_{\parallel} band to split, as it does in pure VO₂, however there is no

temperature dependence of the total occupied states. This can be rectified by considering the strict V⁴⁺ and Ti⁴⁺ oxidation states. The reduced electron count results in E_F lying within the d_{\parallel} band and the system remains metallic.

This hole-doping model is tested for both the monoclinic (M1) and rutile (R) structural phases of VO₂ within the DFT+ U formalism (see Supplemental Material [22] for details). V⁴⁺/Ti⁴⁺ cation exchange can be approximated by partially removing the d^1 electron from VO₂ without disturbing the structure. At maximum, one can remove 1 electron/atom, which corresponds to the electronic configuration of Ti⁴⁺. DFT+ U for undoped R VO₂ yields metallic character while M1 VO₂ displays insulating character with a band gap of 0.3 eV (underestimating the real band gap of 0.7 eV) [30]. As R VO₂ is hole doped, it remains metallic except for a very large unphysical hole concentration $x_h = 1$. The behavior of hole-doped M1 VO₂ is more complicated and undergoes several transitions. At small doping $0 \leq x_h \leq 0.05$ there is an insulator to doped semiconductor transition. As x_h increases, the band gap then gradually decreases. At $0.25 \leq x_h \leq 0.50$ the band gap vanishes and thus a transition to a band metal takes place. Finally, at maximum (unphysical) doping the M1 phase is insulating again. We estimate from our STEM-EELS analysis that the majority of the interdiffused 7.5 nm film is in a heavily doped range of Ti _{x} V _{$1-x$} O₂ where $0.25 \leq x \leq 0.75$. Both M1 and R phase VO₂ are expected to be metallic throughout this entire doping range.

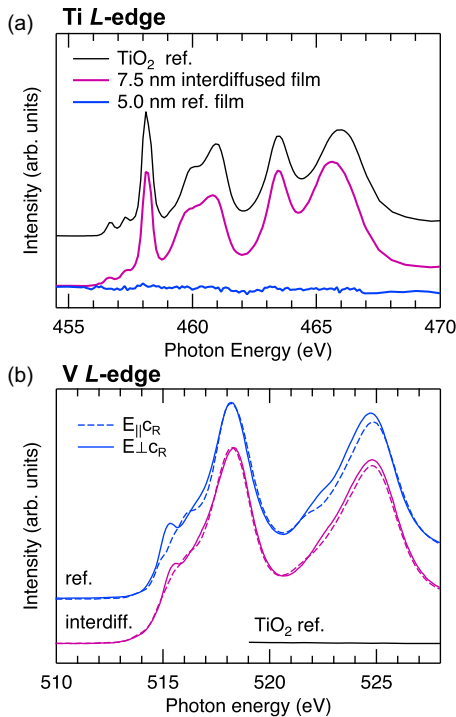


FIG. 3. (a) Ti L-edge XAS of the diffuse 7.5 nm $\text{VO}_2/\text{TiO}_2(100)$ film as well as a 5 nm film with a sharp interface and a bare TiO_2 substrate for reference and (b) polarization dependent V L-edge XAS of both the interdiffused film and reference film.

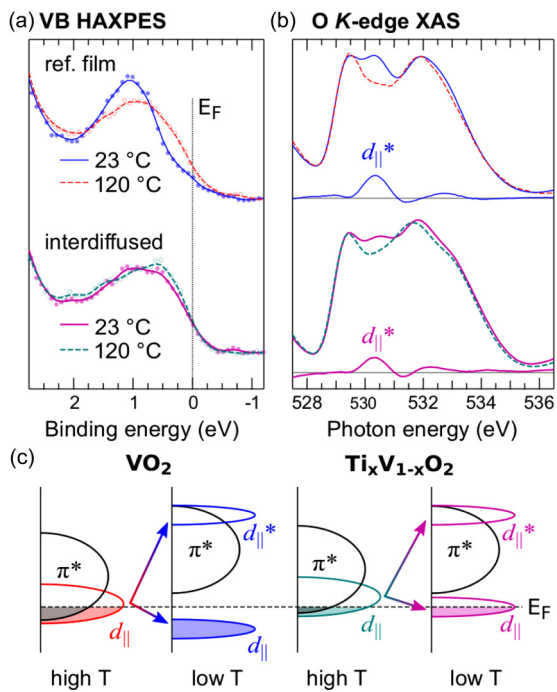


FIG. 4. (a) Valence band HAXPES and (b) O K -edge XAS of a reference VO_2/TiO_2 film measured above and below T_{MIT} as compared to the interdiffused film measured at the same temperatures. The difference spectra highlight the temperature dependence of the d_{\parallel}^* feature. (c) Schematic summary of the near E_F electronic states of VO_2 and $\text{Ti}_x\text{V}_{1-x}\text{O}_2$.

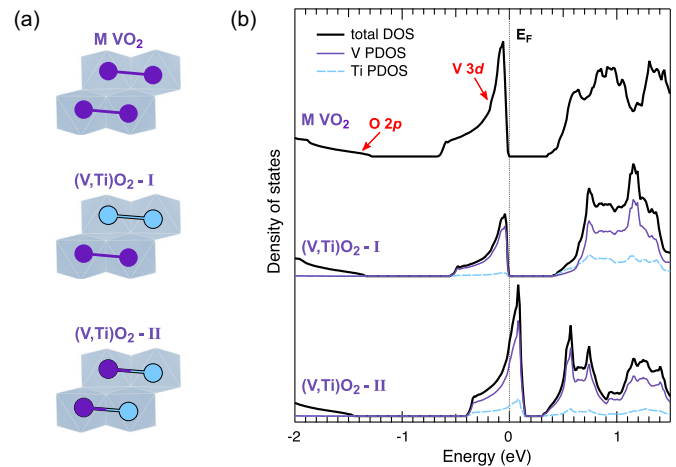


FIG. 5. Projected densities of states from DFT+ U for (top) stoichiometric M1-phase VO_2 , and M1-phase VO_2 with 50% of the vanadium atoms replaced by titanium atoms forming either (middle) one Ti-Ti and one V-V dimer or (bottom) two V-Ti dimers.

Given this high concentration of Ti observed in the film, a deeper understanding can be gained by considering M1 VO_2 where Ti atoms are explicitly included by replacing half the V atoms. The unit cell of the M1 structure contains four VO_2 formula units and hence two pairs of dimerized metal atoms. To effectively illustrate the different possible atomic arrangements we consider two representative cases illustrated in Fig. 5(a). The first case, denoted $(\text{V},\text{Ti})\text{O}_2\text{-I}$, is a unit cell comprised of one Ti-Ti and one V-V dimer, while the second case, denoted $(\text{V},\text{Ti})\text{O}_2\text{-II}$, contains two dimerized V-Ti pairs.

The predicted densities of states are shown in Fig. 5(b). Only in the $(\text{V},\text{Ti})\text{O}_2\text{-II}$ case do we obtain a metallic DOS, where the Fermi level is well within the V 3d band. Hence the model suggests that strict V^{4+} and Ti^{4+} oxidation states without V-Ti dimer formation results in an insulating monoclinic phase. The origin of the metallic behavior in the Ti interdiffused film is therefore a result of a significant concentration of these V-Ti pairs.

We have shown that the high solubility of the Ti ions in VO_2 can result in $\text{V}^{4+}/\text{Ti}^{4+}$ interfacial cation exchange extending over several nanometers via relatively low temperature annealing. This titanium interdiffusion has considerable effects on the properties of ultrathin VO_2/TiO_2 films and can result in an entirely suppressed metal-insulator transition. The presence of V-Ti dimers in interdiffused films is responsible for a metalliclike state at lower temperature. This emphasizes the importance of maintaining abrupt interfaces at the nanometer scale in VO_2/TiO_2 thin films.

Furthermore, we have isolated the charge doping effects of titanium incorporation into ultrathin VO_2 . The replacement of V^{4+} ions with Ti^{4+} ions reduces the V 3d electron count, thus tailors the system further away from the Mott criterion. Because of this, the electrons do not become localized into an insulating state even after a Peierls-like distortion. Moreover, the fact that the lattice distortion is still thermodynamically favored at lower temperatures indicates that strong electron correlations are not necessarily a prerequisite for the rutile to monoclinic structural phase transition of VO_2 .

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