Enhanced low field magnetoresistance of Al$_2$O$_3$-La$_{0.7}$Sr$_{0.3}$MnO$_3$ composite thin films via a pulsed laser deposition

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Al$_2$O$_3$-doped La$_{0.7}$Sr$_{0.3}$MnO$_3$ (Al$_{2}$O$_3$-LSMO) thin films were deposited on Si(111) substrate via a pulsed laser deposition. The deposited Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO composite thin films were characterized by x-ray diffraction, scanning electron microscopy, and electro- and magneto-transport measurements. The main phase in the Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO composite films was the perovskite phase. Texturlike microstructure was observed in the Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO composite films while the average grain size remained almost unchanged compared to the pure samples. The metal-insulator transition temperature decreased as a result of the addition of Al$_2$O$_3$ and further reduced with increasing Al$_2$O$_3$ content. A maximum low field mangetoresistance of $\sim$15% was achieved in the 2/20 Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO thin films, which could be well explained in terms of the grain boundary tunneling effect. The composition of the composite thin films can be easily tuned by adjusting the target composition. This method is believed to be applicable to exploring the combinations of other manganites and insulators. © 2004 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.1763237]

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the discovery of “colossal magnetoresistance” (CMR) in perovskite based rare-earth manganites of the type Ln$_{1-x}$A$_x$MnO$_3$ (Ln is rare earth, A is divalent cation), intense research activities have been focused on these materials over the last few years. However, the intrinsic CMR effect in the perovskite manganites is only triggered at high magnetic fields of several tesla, which restrains its use for practical applications. Therefore, it is desired to explore materials with low field magnetoresistance (LFMR). The fact that a low external magnetic field of the order of the coercive field $H_c$ can yield large variations in the resistance at low temperatures in polycrystalline manganites is due to the presence of the high values of spin polarization and most likely pinning of domain walls at the grain boundaries. In this respect, LFMR is an extrinsic property of manganites and has been mainly attributed to the grain boundary magnetoresistance (GBMR). The GBMR is usually thought to be a result of the spin polarized tunnelling through electronic barriers at the grain boundaries. Hence, artificial grain boundary effect can be realized by proper incorporation of dopant into manganites.

Various attempts have been made to increase the LFMR effect of perovskite manganites by doping. For instance, Gupta et al. reported enhanced magnetoresistance in La$_{0.7}$Sr$_{0.3}$MnO$_3$-glass composites. They attributed the enhanced MR to the presence of a glass layer at the grain boundaries separating the manganite grains and thus enhancing the LFMR. Similar results were also observed in other systems of manganite-insulator composites. They include La$_{2/3}$Ca$_{1/3}$MnO$_3$-Al$_2$O$_3$,$^9$ La$_{1-x}$Ca$_x$MnO$_2$-ZrO$_2$,$^{10}$ La$_{2/3}$Sr$_{1/3}$MnO$_3$-CeO$_2$,$^{11,12}$ La$_{0.67}$Ca$_{0.33}$MnO$_3$-SrTiO$_3$,,$^{13,14}$ and La$_{0.65}$Ba$_{0.35}$MnO$_3$-YSZ.$^{15}$ However, these strategies have been mostly applied to bulk ceramics or screen-printed thick films. Thin films are more favorable for electronic applications. To date, very few examples of thin films have been reported in the literatures regarding the enhanced LFMR effect in manganite thin films. Moshyaga et al.$^{16,17}$ reported La$_{0.7}$Ca$_{0.3}$MnO$_3$-MgO composite thin films deposited via a sol-gel process. Liu et al.$^{18}$ found enhanced LFMR in partially crystallized La$_{0.5}$Sr$_{0.5}$MnO$_3$ thin films by laser ablation deposition at an optimized deposition temperature, where amorphous LSMO served as an insulating matrix separating the crystallized magnetic LSMO crystal grains. Exploring other ways to increase the LFMR effect will always be of both technological and scientific significances.

In this paper, we report an alternative way to produce LFMR La$_{0.7}$Sr$_{0.3}$MnO$_3$ (LSMO) thin films with the addition

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of Al$_2$O$_3$ as an insulator component. It is an extension of our previous work on barium strontium titanate ferroelectric thin films, in which Al$_2$O$_3$ was incorporated in order to reduce the dielectric loss tangent of the ferroelectric films for microwave device applications.\textsuperscript{19} Our Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO composite thin films showed a maximum LFMR of \( \sim 15\% \) at an external magnetic field of 0.3 T.

II. EXPERIMENT

The Al$_2$O$_3$-PLD thin films were deposited on Si (111) substrate, via a pulsed laser deposition (PLD) with a KrF excimer laser at 5 Hz repetition frequency, with an energy density of 270 mJ/pulse. The deposition was conducted for 35 min, at a substrate temperature of 600°C and a chamber oxygen pressure of 0.2 mbar. The distance between the substrate and target was 4.5 cm. A LSMO target, with a piece of Al$_2$O$_3$ on its surface, was used to deposit the Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO thin films. The films with different Al$_2$O$_3$ concentrations were deposited from combined targets with different area ratio of Al$_2$O$_3$ to LSMO ceramics. A representative target with a certain ratio of Al$_2$O$_3$ and BST ceramics is shown in Fig. 1. The area ratio of Al$_2$O$_3$ to LSMO was selected to be 1/20, 2/20, and 3/20 in the present study. We also deposited thin films with targets of Al$_2$O$_3$ area of 4/20 and more, which led to highly resistive samples and will not be included in the present paper. For comparison, pure LSMO films were also deposited under the same processing condition as the doped ones. LSMO target with a diameter of about 3 cm was prepared via the conventional ceramic processing method, using commercial La$_2$O$_3$, SrCO$_3$, and MnO$_2$ powders as the starting materials. The Al$_2$O$_3$ target was a commercially available alumina plate.

The Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO thin films were characterized by x-ray diffraction (XRD) using a Philips PW 1729 type x-ray diffractometer with Cu $K\alpha$ radiation. The element compositions of the Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO thin films were characterized by Rutherford backscattering (RBS) combined with proton induced x-ray emission (PIXE). In the RBS and PIXE measurement, 2 MeV He$^+$ particles beam and 2 MeV proton beam were used, respectively. Samples were placed at a scattering angle 150° in IBM geometry. After measuring RBS and PIXE, simulations code RUMP and Dan32 were used to analyses the measuring spectra. The surface microstructure of the deposited Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO samples was examined using a JEOL JSM-6340F type field emission scanning electronic microscope (FESEM). For electrical measurement, four Au dots with a diameter of \( \sim 0.3 \) mm were deposited on the surface of the films as electrodes, using a JOEL magnetic sputtering equipment. The electro-transport and magneto-transport properties were measured using a standard four-probe method with data collected by a personal computer. A maximum ac magnetic field of \( \sim 0.3 \) T was used in the present study.

TABLE I. Summary of RBS and PIXE measurement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Al$_2$O$_3$ in target</th>
<th>1/20</th>
<th>2/20</th>
<th>3/20</th>
<th>4/20</th>
<th>5/20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al/(Al+Mn) in film (%)</td>
<td>0.46±0.26</td>
<td>1.06±0.16</td>
<td>2.18±0.39</td>
<td>3.09±0.21</td>
<td>4.33±0.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 2 shows the XRD patterns of pure LSMO and the Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO thin films deposited using the targets with different area ratios of Al$_2$O$_3$ to LSMO. It is noted that LSMO thin film consists of a single phase of perovskite structure. Its polycrystalline characteristic is evidenced by the strongest diffraction peak of (110). The XRD patterns of the 2/20 and 3/20 Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO are very similar to that of the pure LSMO, except that there is a small peak observed at 2\( \theta \) = 38°. This peak has not been identified, which is most likely to be related to the presence of Al$_2$O$_3$ in the manganite films. No Al$_2$O$_3$ diffraction peak is observed in the XRD patterns, even for the 3/20 Al$_2$O$_3$-LSMO sample. This observation could be attributed to the fact that the crystallization temperature of Al$_2$O$_3$ is higher than the deposition temperature used in the present study. The exact concentrations of Al$_2$O$_3$ in the Al$_2$O$_3$-doped LSMO thin films have been determined by RBS, which are listed in Table I. The aluminium concentration is almost linearly proportion to the area ratio of Al$_2$O$_3$ in the target, indicating the effectiveness of the combined target deposition.\textsuperscript{19}

This has been confirmed
by the electro-transport and magneto-transport properties of the Al₂O₃-LSMO composite films, as will be seen later.

Representative surface SEM images of the Al₂O₃-LSMO thin films are shown in Fig. 3. The pure LSMO thin film is characterized by almost round grains, with an average grain size of less than 100 nm. The microstructures of the 1/20 and 3/20 Al₂O₃-LSMO samples are very similar to that of the pure one. The only difference is that a texture-like microstructure in some areas is observed in the two doped samples, which is probably related to the presence of the Al₂O₃ in the composite films. In addition, the thicknesses of the Al₂O₃-LSMO films were estimated from their cross-sectional SEM images to be ~0.5 μm (not shown here).

Zero-field resistances of the Al₂O₃-LSMO as well as LSMO thin films measured as a function of temperature are shown in Fig. 4. The pure LSMO and 1/20 and 2/120 Al₂O₃-LSMO samples demonstrate a typical metal-insulator transition behavior, while the 3/20 Al₂O₃-LSMO thin film shows an insulator characteristic in the measurement temperature range. The metal-insulator transition temperatures (T_p) of the 1/20 and 2/20 Al₂O₃-LSMO samples are ~229 and ~132 K, respectively, while the T_p value of the pure LSMO is >290 K and that of the 3/20 Al₂O₃-LSMO film is <77 K. It means that the metal-insulator transition temperature of the LSMO thin film decreases as a result of the introduction of Al₂O₃ and further reduces with increasing Al₂O₃ content. In addition to the shift of the T_p value to low temperature, the peak resistance of the Al₂O₃-LSMO composite films also increases with increasing content of Al₂O₃. Similar observations were reported in other insulator-manganite systems as mentioned in the Introduction, which have been well explained in the literatures. In the pure LSMO thin films, the electrical transport is realized through a direct contact between the LSMO grains. This direct contact is diluted/disturbed as a result of the introduction of an insulator. Furthermore, the insulator which is mostly located at the grain boundaries acts as a barrier to the electrical transport. Therefore, insulator doped manganites would possess a higher resistivity and lower metal-insulator transition temperature as compared to the undoped ones. With increasing insulator content, the grain boundary will become thicker and thicker. Once a thoroughly insulating grain boundary network forms the composites are completely insulators, and a percolation threshold is defined. In this respect, the percolation threshold of our Al₂O₃-LSMO composite thin films should be close to that of the 3/20 Al₂O₃-LSMO sample (Al/Al+Mn ~ 2.18%). This value is much less than that observed in bulk ceramic composites.

Magnetoresistances of the thin films as a function of magnetic field at a temperature of ~86 K are shown in Fig. 5. It is demonstrated that the maximum LFMR values at an external magnetic field of ~0.3 T of the pure LSMO, 1/20 and 2/20 Al₂O₃-LSMO samples are 9%, 10%, and 15% respectively. The maximum LFMR of the 2/20 Al₂O₃-LSMO thin film of 15% is comparable with that of (La₀.₇Sr₀.₃MnO₃)₀.₉(MgO)₀.₁ thin film via sol-gel (H =0.4 T, T=4.2 K), partially crystallized La₀.₅Sr₀.₅MnO₃ thin film via PLD(H=0.4 T, T=77 K) and most of the ceramic bulk composites. This enhanced LFMR of our Al₂O₃-LSMO thin films can be similarly interpreted by the mechanism of spin-polarized tunneling through manganite/insulator/manganite junction structures, which has been widely used in the literatures.

As discussed earlier, it has been acknowledged that large variations in the resistance at low temperatures in polycrystalline manganites, as a result of the application of a low
external magnetic field of the order of the coercive field \( H_C \), is an extrinsic property of the manganites, which is due to the presence of the high values of spin polarization\(^6\) and most likely pinning of domain walls at the grain boundaries.\(^7\) Hence, artificial grain boundary effect can be realized by proper incorporation of dopant into manganites. This well explains the experimental observations of our \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\)-LSMO thin films. Introducing \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \) into LSMO created artificial grain boundaries. Therefore, the 1/20 \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\)-LSMO film has a larger LFMR than the pure LSMO sample and the LFMR effect increases with increasing content of \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \) before percolation.

The enhanced LFMR effect, together with the electro-transport properties of the \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\)-LSMO thin films, can be taken as a good support that our combined \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\)-LSMO target configuration is a very effective way to deposit the \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\)-LSMO composite thin films. Moreover, the composition of the \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\)-LSMO thin films can be further tuned by the target arrangement. Similar results were obtained for \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\)-LSMO thin films deposited on Si(100) and LaAlO\(_3\) substrates (not shown). It is believed that this method can be readily extended to the combinations of other manganites and insulators.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Enhanced LFMR effect has been realized in \( \text{La}_{0.7}\text{Sr}_{0.3}\text{MnO}_3 \) (LSMO) thin films by the addition of \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \), via the PLD method. A maximum LFMR of 15% was achieved in the 3/20 \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\)-LSMO composite thin films, where the Al/Al+Mn was \( \sim 2.18\% \). This technique should also be applicable to other manganites and insulators.