

Combined metal-assisted chemical etching and anisotropic wet etching for anti-reflection inverted pyramidal cavities on dendrite-like textured substrates

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Metal-assisted chemical etching
Anisotropic wet etching
Textured substrate
Anti-reflection

ABSTRACT

A simple and low-cost method using the combination of metal-assisted chemical etching (MacEtch) and anisotropic wet etching was performed to fabricate anti-reflection inverted pyramidal cavities on dendrite-like textured silicon substrates. To achieve this, a thin Ag film was deposited on an n-type (100) silicon substrate to form agglomerated Ag particles and MacEtch was performed to obtain vertically aligned etching holes on Si substrate. Subsequently, anisotropic wet etching was conducted and the etchant would penetrate the porous structure to form inverted pyramidal cavities on the dendrite-like structure. Using this two-step etching, excellent anti-reflection behavior was obtained for our textured substrates.

Introduction

Textured silicon substrate has attracted much attention since 1980s due to its appealing properties including excellent mechanical and electronic performances, enhanced light-harvesting, high surface-to-volume ratios, good biocompatibility and surface adjustability which make it a promising candidate for devices in the fields of biomedical and chemical sensors [1–7], chromatography [8], electronics [9–11], optoelectronics [12–14], energy conversion [15–18] and storage [19–21], thermal power conversion [22] and biomimetic super-hydrophobicity [23–26], etc. Fabrication of textured silicon substrates can be classified into two categories: (i) dry etching including reactive ion etching (RIE), inductively coupled plasma (ICP)-RIE, reactive ion beam etching (RIBE) and chemical assisted ion beam etching (CAIBE) [27,28], and (ii) wet etching with chemical etchants; e.g., alkaline [29,30] and acidic [31,32] etchants. For anisotropic wet etching of silicon wafers in alkaline solution, {111} crystal planes with perfectly smooth lateral side-walls could be achieved [33]. Compared to dry etching, wet etching provides a relatively simple and low-cost approach that allows fabrication of different textured silicon structures with the capability of controlling various parameters, such as shape and diameter of porosity, etching length and orientation, and doping type and level [31].

In this work, we reported an approach to fabricate the anti-reflective structures on n-type (100) silicon wafers using two-step wet etching. To achieve this, the silicon substrates were first treated by

metal-assisted chemical etching (MacEtch) to obtain vertically aligned etching holes [31,34,35], and sequentially treated in an alkaline solution for anisotropic wet etching to obtain inverted pyramidal cavities on dendrite-like structures. The morphologies of the obtained structures were investigated using scanning electron microscopy (SEM), and the reflectance of the textured substrates was measured using UV–VIS–NIR spectrophotometer.

Materials and methods

Materials

N-type (100)-oriented Czochralski (Cz) Si wafers (phosphorus doped, $2\text{--}5\ \Omega \times \text{cm}$) with a thickness of $500\ \mu\text{m}$ purchased from The Summit-Tech Company were used in this work. Double side polished wafers were cut into $1 \times 1\ \text{cm}^2$ pieces for use. Deionized (DI) water ($10\text{--}15\ \text{M}\Omega \times \text{cm}$) used to prepare aqueous solutions and for rinsing was produced from an Elix® Essential Water Purification System (Millipore). All chemicals used were of analytical grade and were directly used as received without any further purification. Acetone (CH_3COCH_3 , 100%) and ethanol (EtOH , $\text{C}_2\text{H}_5\text{OH}$, 95%) were purchased from UNI-ONWARD Corporation. Sulfuric acid (H_2SO_4 , 95.0–97.0%, for analysis, Reag. ISO, Reag. Ph. Eur) and hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2 , 30%, Reag. ISO, Reag. Ph. Eur.) were purchased from Honeywell Fluka™. Ag slug ($3 \times 6\ \text{mm}$, 99.99%) was purchased from Gredmann. Hydrofluoric acid (HF, 49%) and isopropyl alcohol (IPA,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rinp.2018.11.051>

Received 15 November 2018; Accepted 16 November 2018

Available online 27 November 2018

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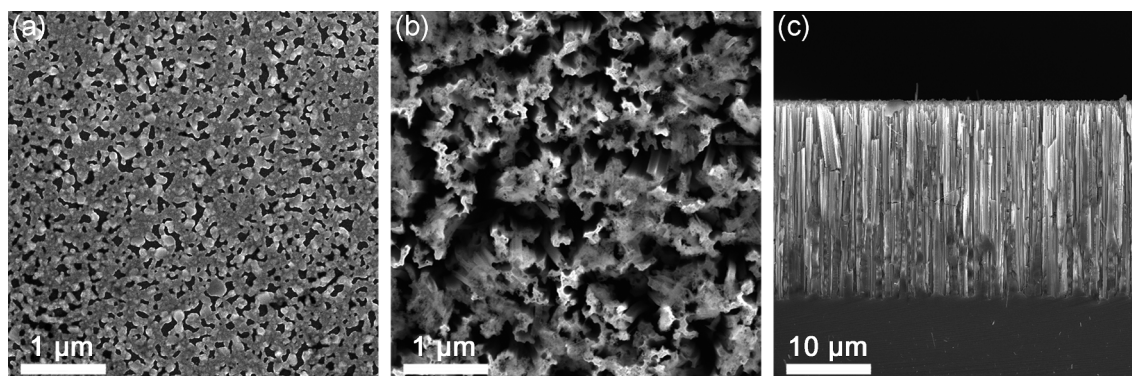


Fig. 1. SEM images showing (a) top-view of agglomerated Ag nanoparticles on Si substrate resulting from deposition of 20 nm-thick Ag film, (b) top-view and (c) side-view of silicon with Ag agglomerates after MacEtch treatment.

(CH₃)₂CHOH, 100%) were purchased from Taiwan Maxwave Co. Nitric acid (HNO₃, 65%, Reag. ISO) and Sodium hydroxide (NaOH, ACS Reagent) were purchased, respectively, from PanReac AppliChem and Fisher Scientific.

MacEtch process

The Si substrate was first processed using MacEtch. As-cut silicon was cleaned by ultrasonication with acetone, EtOH and DI water sequentially for 30 min each, immersed in an acidic piranha solution (3:1 mixture of H₂SO₄ and H₂O₂) for 30 min, and thoroughly rinsed with DI water before Ag deposition. To produce island-like Ag agglomerates for MacEtch, 20 nm Ag film was deposited on as-cut silicon using E-beam evaporator under a background pressure of 5×10^{-5} torr. Ag agglomerates would act as a catalyst to catalyze the holes generation underneath from the localized reaction with the oxidant in an acidic solution. Specifically, the substrate with agglomerated Ag was immersed in the etching solution of HF/H₂O₂/H₂O (with the molar ratio defined by $[\text{HF}]/([\text{HF}] + [\text{H}_2\text{O}_2]) = 0.904$ and $[\text{H}_2\text{O}] = 40.1 \text{ M}$) at ambient temperature for the desired time. After the MacEtch process, Ag was then removed by dipping the etched silicon into the nitric acid solution ($[\text{HNO}_3] = 7 \text{ M}$) for more than 10 min.

Anisotropic wet etching process

After the MacEtch process and removal of Ag, the textured silicon was then treated in an alkaline etching solution containing DI water, NaOH (1.5 wt%) solution, and IPA (6.5 wt%) at 90 °C for desired time [36,37]. The anisotropic etching would lead to the formation of pyramidal structure exposing crystal planes of {1 1 1} on the (100) flat silicon. The nomenclature of the sample in the present study was determined by the etching time of the two etching processes. For example, the sample 10 + 3 was treated in the etching solution containing HF for 10 min in the first-step etching (MacEtch) and sequentially treated in the alkaline solution for 3 min in the second-step etching (anisotropic wet etching). After the second-step etching, both the microstructure and the reflectance of the textured silicon were characterized.

Microstructure and reflectance measurements

The morphologies of Ag and the microstructure of textured silicon

were observed using field-emission SEM (Nova Nano SEM 450 and Jeol JSM-7800F Prime). The reflectance spectra recorded from 300 to 1200 nm were measured by UV–VIS–NIR spectrophotometer (JASCO, V-670) equipped with an integrating sphere with 2.0 nm spectral bandwidth.

Results and discussion

Ag-assisted chemical etching

Fig. 1a shows the SEM image of island-like Ag agglomerates formed on the cleaned silicon after Ag film deposition. Fig. 1b shows the top-view SEM image of silicon with Ag agglomerates after 30 min of MacEtch treatment. Porosities were randomly distributed on silicon and the etched silicon was interconnected. From the side-view SEM image of silicon etched for 30 min shown in Fig. 1c, it could be seen that etching holes were vertical to the surface of the silicon substrate with an average depth of $\sim 22.8 \mu\text{m}$.

Anisotropic wet etching

The morphologies of silicon after MacEtch treatment and anisotropic wet etching were examined using SEM. Fig. 2a–e shows the top-view SEM images of silicon treated by MacEtch for 30 min and sequentially treated in the alkaline etching solution for 0.5, 1, 2, 3 and 5 min, respectively. The corresponding side-view SEM images are shown in Fig. 2f–j. During anisotropic wet etching, the etchant would penetrate the porous structure to form dendrite-like structure and inverted pyramidal cavities simultaneously because of anisotropic etching of (100)-oriented Si (see Fig. 2a and f). With the increasing etching time, the inverted pyramidal cavities would grow larger, new inverted pyramidal cavities would form and overlap, and the dendrite-like structure would be etched away starting from the top (see Fig. 2b and g). After 2 min of wet etching (see Fig. 2c and h), the dendrite-like structure was almost consumed, pyramidal structure appeared and grew with etching time, and inverted pyramidal cavities became less. After 5 min of wet etching, the dendrite-like structure was totally consumed and the surface of Si was covered by both the pyramidal and inverted pyramidal structure (see Fig. 2e and j).

Based on Fig. 2f–j, the depth of the textured structure as a function of the anisotropic wet etching time is shown in Fig. 3. The depth of the textured structure was determined by the length of the dendrite-like

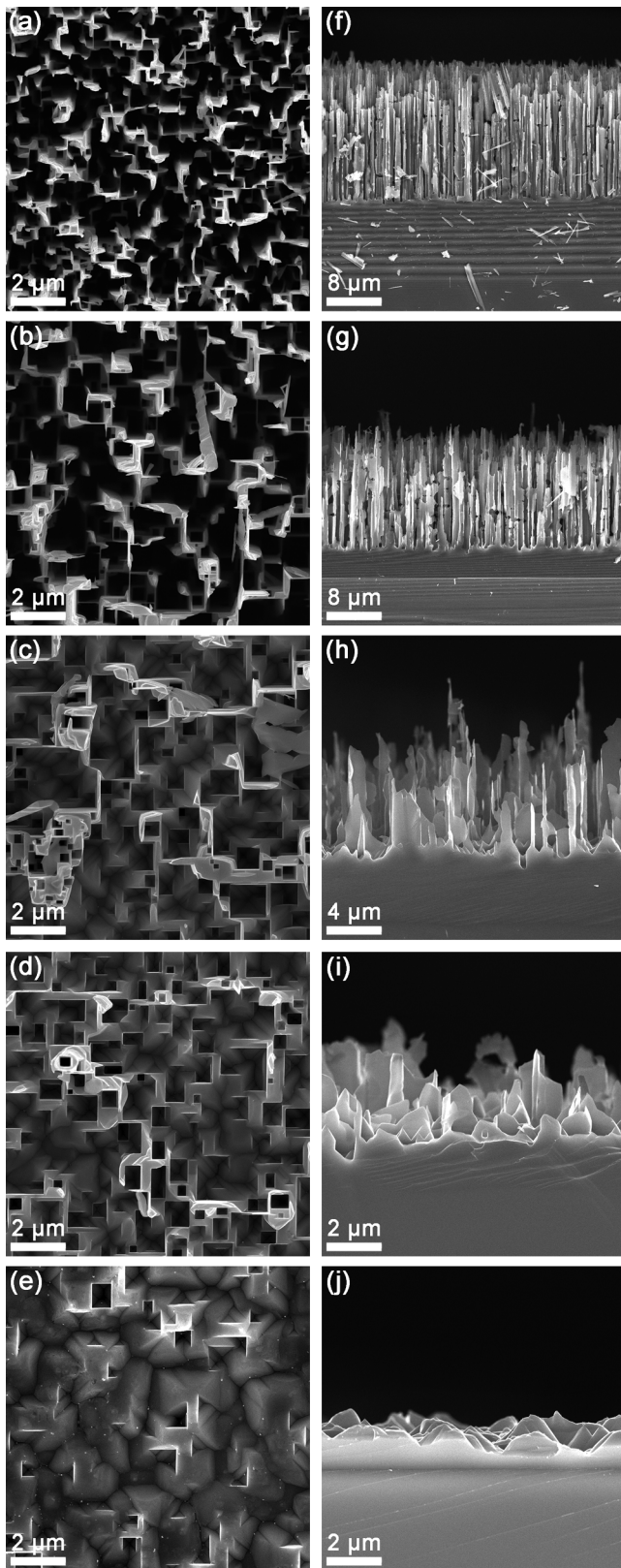


Fig. 2. Top-view SEM images of samples (a) 30 + 0.5, (b) 30 + 1, (c) 30 + 2, (d) 30 + 3 and (e) 30 + 5, and the corresponding side-view SEM images of samples (f) 30 + 0.5, (g) 30 + 1, (h) 30 + 2, (i) 30 + 3 and (j) 30 + 5.

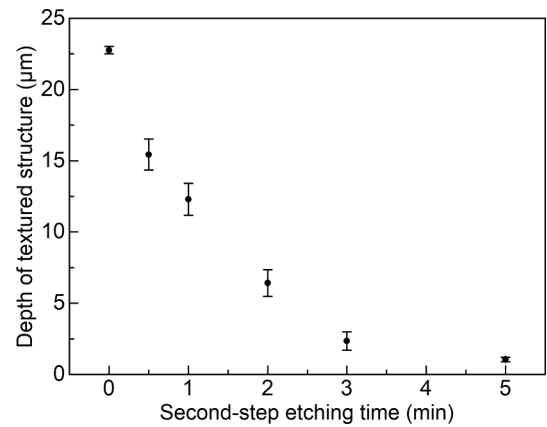


Fig. 3. The depth of the textured structure as a function of anisotropic wet etching time.

structure initially, and the dendrite-like structure was consumed and became shorter with the etching time. The consumption of the dendrite-like structure was accompanied by the appearance and growth of the inverted pyramidal cavities during the anisotropic wet etching process. As the etching depth approached the root of dendrite-like structure, the pyramidal structure started to appear and determined the depth of the textured structure.

The effects of first-step etching; i.e., MacEtch, time were also examined. Fig. 4a–d show the top-view SEM images of silicon treated by MacEtch for 5 min and subsequently treated in the alkaline etching solution for 0.5, 1, 2 and 3 min, respectively. Replacing 5 min by 10 min for MacEtch, the corresponding top-view SEM images of silicon are shown in Fig. 4e–h. While longer MacEtch time would result in deeper etching holes on the substrate, the corresponding textured structures would last longer and the pyramidal structure would appear later in the alkaline etching solution during the second-step etching process.

It is worth noting that MacEtch of Si substrate in a solution containing HF and H₂O₂ followed by anisotropic wet etching in various solutions (e.g., KOH and TMAH) has been performed elsewhere [38,39]. However, anisotropic wet etching was performed at a relatively low temperature (20 °C) previously to separate each Si nanowire from the bunched nanowire obtained from the MacEtch process, and the morphology of the textured substrate was tapered nanowires [38,39]. On the other hand, we applied anisotropic wet etching at a relatively high temperature (90 °C) to enhance the effects of anisotropic etching. As a result, the morphology of our textured substrate was inverted pyramidal cavities on the dendrite-like textured structure that was significantly different from the previous work.

It is also worth noting that the same two-step etching has been performed elsewhere in the reverse order (i.e., anisotropic wet etching followed by MacEtch) [36,40]. However, depending upon the order of the two-step etching process, the morphologies and thus the reflectance spectra would be different. The morphology obtained from previous studies using the same two-step process in the reverse order was the micro-scaled pyramid with nanoporous surface layer textured structure [36,40] and was significantly different from the morphology of our textured substrates. Nevertheless, using MacEtch followed by anisotropic wet etching would consume the MacEtch-generated nanostructures with the increasing anisotropic etching time in our work. On the other hand, using the same two-step procedure performed in the reverse order would reduce surface reflectance instead of consuming the MacEtch-generated nanostructures.

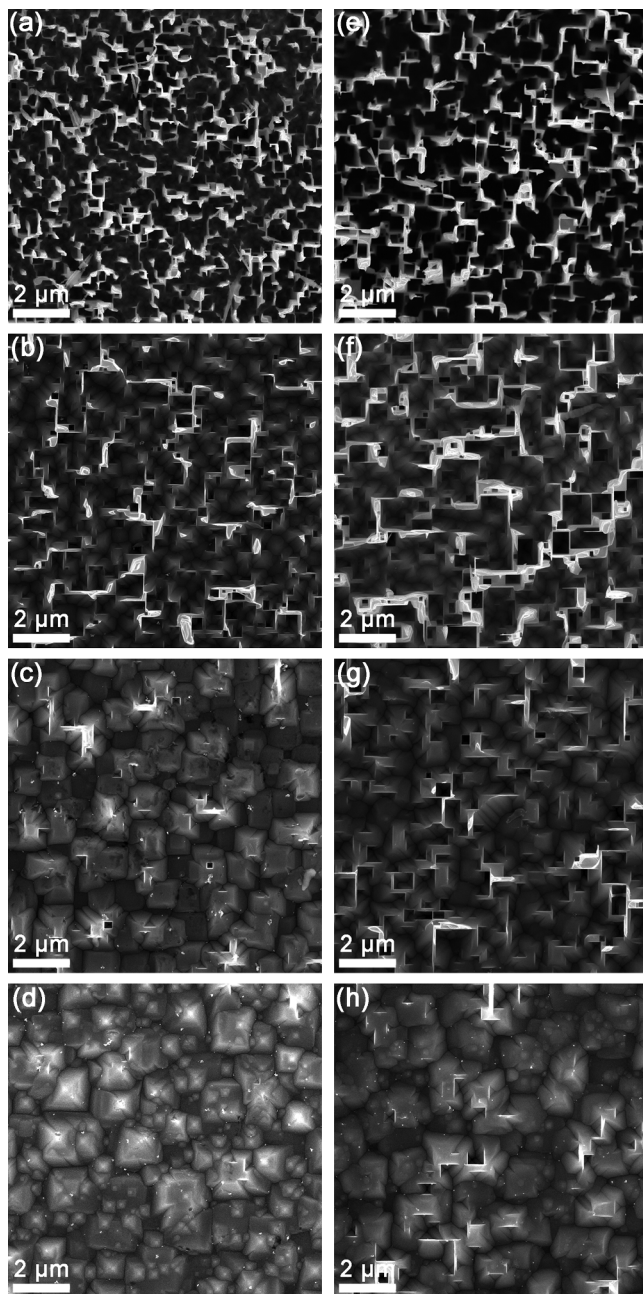


Fig. 4. Top-view SEM images of samples (a) 5 + 0.5, (b) 5 + 1, (c) 5 + 2, (d) 5 + 3, (e) 10 + 0.5, (f) 10 + 1, (g) 10 + 2 and (h) 10 + 3.

Reflectance of textured silicon

The reflectance spectra of the textured substrates in the wavelength range of 300 to 1200 nm were measured using UV–Vis–NIR spectrophotometer and are shown in Fig. 5a–c, respectively, for the MacEtch time of 5, 10 and 30 min at different second-step etching time. In Fig. 5a, the reflectance spectra for samples treated by 5 min

of the MacEtch process and then different durations (0, 0.5, 1, 2 and 3 min) of second-step etching were measured. The reflectance of the sample increased in general when the second-step etching was involved, and the second-step etching was not beneficial in reducing the reflectance of the sample. Only the sample 5 + 0.5 exhibited a lower reflectance in the wavelength range of 370 to 527 nm than the sample 5 + 0. Replacing 5 min by 10 min for the MacEtch, the corresponding results of Fig. 5a are shown in Fig. 5b. During the second-step etching, the reflectance at ~500 nm (the peak emission of the sun determined by Wien's law [41]) showed an initial decrease (see sample 10 + 0.5) and it then increased when the second-step etching time increased above 0.5 min. Fig. 5c shows the reflectance spectra of samples treated by MacEtch for 30 min at different durations of second-step etching. In the absence of the second-step etching, the reflectance of the sample 30 + 0 was relatively high compared with samples 5 + 0 and 10 + 0. During the second-step etching, the reflectance at ~500 nm decreased drastically for 0.5 and 1 min of etching time; however, it then displayed a rise as the second-step etching increased above 1 min. Overall, the sample 30 + 1 exhibited the lowest reflectance in the wavelength range of 362–571 nm among all samples in this work.

To examine the general trend of the dependence of reflectance on the first- and the second-step etching time, the reflectance at the wavelength 500 nm for the samples studied in Fig. 5a–c is shown in Fig. 5d. It is worth noting that the samples 5 + 0.5, 10 + 0.5, 30 + 0.5 and 30 + 1 containing both the micro-scaled dendrite-like structure and nano to micro-scaled inverted pyramidal cavities had relatively low reflectance at this wavelength. With prolonged second-step etching time, the dendrite-like structure would be largely consumed and thus the reflectance increased monotonically. Also, although the presence of micro-scaled inverted pyramidal cavities could reduce the reflectance in the spectral range near the peak emission of the sun of 500 nm as shown in Fig. 5d, it is not beneficial outside this spectral range as shown in Fig. 5a–c. Hence, depending on the intended application, judicious choice of etching treatments of the substrate should be made.

Conclusions

To summarize, fabrication of effective anti-reflection textured silicon substrates by the combination of MacEtch and anisotropic wet etching was presented in this study. This technique is a relatively low-cost and simple silicon etching method which is capable of making structures at the wafer scale. By applying this combined etching technique, a textured structure of nano to micro-scaled inverted pyramidal cavities on the micro-scaled dendrite-like structure was obtained. This unique texture resulted from the porous structure fabricated using MacEtch which provided channels for the alkaline etchant to react with the inner part of the structure during anisotropic wet etching to form inverted pyramidal cavities. In our work, the effect of light-harvesting in the wavelength near the peak emission of the sun was the best when the MacEtch time was 30 min and the anisotropic wet etching time was 1 min. The advantages of this substrate such as low cost, enhanced light-harvesting, adjustability and large surface area make it a promising candidate for further use in the fields of sensors, surface-enhanced Raman scattering substrates, solar cells and energy storage.

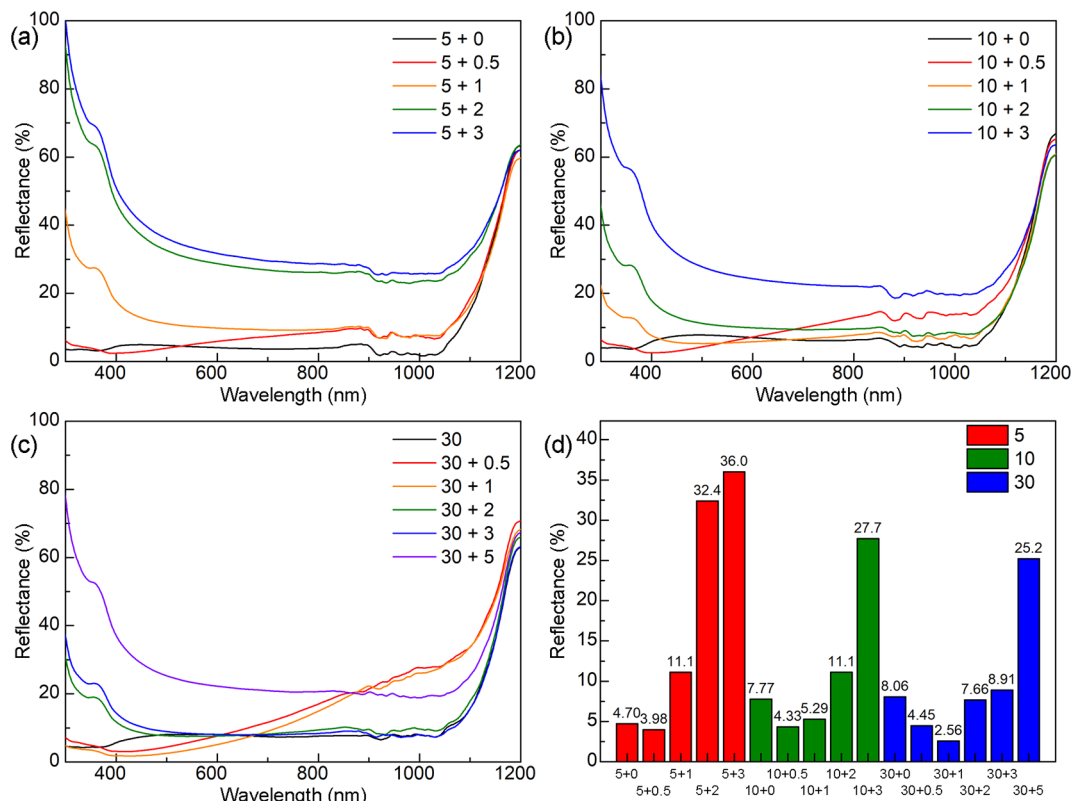


Fig. 5. Reflectance spectra from 300 to 1200 nm for n-type (100) silicon substrates treated by the MacEtch process for (a) 5, (b) 10, and (c) 30 min, and subsequently treated in the alkaline etching solution for different durations. (d) The reflectance at 500 nm for the samples mentioned above.

Declarations of interest

None.

Acknowledgments

The work was supported by the Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan under Contract No. MOST 107-2221-E-002-013. A portion of experiments in this work was performed at the National Taiwan University NEMS Research Center and is gratefully acknowledged.

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