Single picojoule pulse switching of magnetization in ferromagnetic (Ga,Mn)As

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The recently demonstrated photoinduced reduction of the coercive field in (Ga,Mn)As is shown to display a pronounced increase in efficiency when triggered by short laser pulses. This is due to the relaxation timescale of the effect that is measured to be about 1.5 ns. In addition, a single 100-fs-pulse with only 80 pJ of energy is found to be sufficient to write a magnetic domain. © 2010 American Institute of Physics. [doi:10.1063/1.3524525]

Optical methods for writing magnetic information have recently gathered a considerable interest. Perhaps the two most heralded are heat assisted magnetic recording1 and all-optical switching.2 These rely on modifying the magnetic layers switching characteristics via a heat pulse, and then reversing via an external or an optically generated magnetic field.3 A third method has been demonstrated in ferromagnetic (Ga,Mn)As; this is the photoinduced depinning of magnetic domains.4 Here, the exposure to light in the visible region of the spectrum, strongly reduces their coercive field, which is the magnetic field required to switch magnetization. Unlike other optical methods, this photocoercivity effect (PCE)4,5 occurs at low optical intensities that are easily realizable by commercial laser diodes and do not lead to excessive thermal stress on the sample. This stands in contrast to nonlinear mechanisms where high electric fields are required, thus necessitating high optical intensities, which give rise to substantial increase in temperature.5–8

At low temperatures, magnetization reversal is primarily governed by domain wall propagation as nucleation events are rare.9,10 The PCE arises from the photomodification of the domain wall pinning site energies, most likely from the photogenerated holes enhancing the local exchange anisotropy. It is further noted that the layer shows a sharp increase in resistivity below 5 K. In the measurement, (Ga,Mn)As sample is mounted in a helium bath cryostat with optical access, with the measured temperature in the range of 1.5–1.6 K. A magnetic field could be applied perpendicular to the sample surface using a split-pair superconducting magnet.

Measurements are made of the magneto-optical Kerr effect (MOKE) in a confocal polar geometry (see Fig. 1). A high numerical aperture lens (NA=0.68) is mounted inside the cryostat to improve the focusing (spot diameter ≈10 μm). The laser source used in the experiment is a Ti:sapphire oscillator, which produced 9 nJ pulses of 100 fs at a repetition rate of 80 MHz. To reduce the number of pulses incident on the sample a “pulse picker” is employed; this is a commercially available electronic shutter that consists of a Pockels’ cell placed between crossed polarizers.

Due to the imperfect extinction of the pulse picker, a small double-pulse interferometer is used to measure the effects described above. At low temperatures, the effects are still observable, although they are reduced compared to room temperature.

FIG. 1. (Color online) A scheme of the experimental setup.

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amount of light (90 μW) is transmitted through in the “closed” position. This is employed as a quasicontinuous beam and used to measure the static MOKE signal from the sample. The Kerr rotation is detected using a balanced diode detector.

Measurements are made of static MOKE hysteresis cycles with and without incident pulses from the pulse picker. With the pulse picker switched off, a square hysteresis curve is recorded with a coercive field $H_c$ which is proportional to $J_s$, the pulse energy $J$. While the average power incident on the sample only increases by $<1\%$, the drop in the coercive field, almost to zero, far exceeds that observed with a continuous beam 50 times more intense. Further measurements show that the coercive field is entirely determined by the peak intensity of the incident pulse.

Figure 2(b) shows the coercive field $H_c$ as a function of the pulse energy $J$. The dependence $H_c(J)$ is found to be nonlinear with a strongest decrease for $J<20$ pJ. Such a behavior is in agreement with previous static measurements. For pulse energies between 20 pJ and 70 pJ, the reduction of $H_c$ is proportional to $J$, $H_c(J) = H_{c0} + (H_{c2} - H_{c0})J/J_s$, with $H_{c0} = 27$ mT and $H_{c2} = 6$ mT and $J_s = 70$ pJ.

The question remains, how many pulses are required to achieve a full reduction of the coercive field or a complete switching the magnetization? To explore this, the repetition rate of the pulse picker is reduced well below the sweep rate of the magnetic field (1.4 mT/s). Figure 3 shows a comparison of negative to positive field sweeps taken at pulse repetition rates of 100 and 0.2 Hz. At the 100 Hz pulse repetition rate, magnetic switching occurs at about 2.5 mT. However, at the slower pulse rate, this switching is delayed until 7.5 mT; a point that coincides with the arrival of a pulse. The magnetization is seen to fully reverse to the final state well before the arrival of the next pulse. This demonstrates unambiguously that not only is a single pulse sufficient to obtain the full reduction in the coercive field, but the duration of the reduction is also sufficiently long to obtain full switching of the magnetization.

Confirming that only a single pulse is necessary to excite the effect, we return to the question of why pulses are far more effective at generating the PCE than a continuous excitation of equal energy. This observation indicates that the coercivity reduces, following the laser pulse of energy $J$, to the value $H(J)$ and then recovers to the in-dark value $H_{c0}$ on a timescale $\tau$. The coercive field obtained in the “quasistatic” measurements of Fig. 2 is equal to the minimum value, i.e., $H_{c2}$. By a comparison of the energies required to generate the PCE with pulses to that required during continuous wave illumination, it is possible to estimate that $\tau$ must be in the region of nanoseconds. However, a more direct method is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

To this end, a second experiment has been devised. The idea is to use two almost equally intense pulses, time delayed with respect to each other, to trigger the PCE. If two pulses, of energy $J_{s1}$ and $J_{s2}$, are focused onto the same spot on the sample, with no relative delay, then the PCE generated simply corresponds to the sum of their energies $J_{s1} + J_{s2}$. However, if they are delayed with respect to each other [see Fig. 4(a)] then this need not be the case. The first pulse reaching the sample will generate a PCE associated with its intensity, but if the second pulse arrives after this effect has decayed, it cannot enhance the PCE further, only generate an equal effect. If, however, the delay between pulses $\tau_{d}$ is less than the decay time of the PCE $\tau$, some enhancement above the single-pulse value would be expected due to the second pulse [Fig. 4(b)]. In the linear regime [see Fig. 2(b)], and assuming an exponential decay of the PCE, the minimum value of the coercive field is

$$H_c(t_d) = H_{c1} + (H_{c2} - H_{c1}) \exp(-t_d/\tau).$$

This should be equal to the coercive field obtained in quasi-static experiments of Fig. 2(a).
The double-pulse experiments are performed using a beam splitter at the intersection of two interferometer arms to create pulses of nearly equal intensity with a relative time delay (Fig. 1). Again MOKE hysteresis loops are recorded. Figure 4(c) shows the measured coercive field $H_c$ as a function of the delay between the pulses $t_d$ for fixed pulse energies $J_{s1} = 38$ pJ and $J_{s2} = 31$ pJ. As expected, increasing the delay between the pulses causes an increase in the coercive field toward the level observed with a single pulse. The reduction of the PCE is well fitted to Eq. (1) with a time constant $\tau = 1.48 \pm 0.22$ ns. This time can therefore be taken as characteristic of the decay rate of the PCE.

Summarizing, in this letter, we have demonstrated that the photocoeercivity effect in (Ga,Mn)As is a fast and efficient method for switching the magnetization direction. It has been observed that femtosecond pulses with an energy <100 pJ can reduce the coercive field in a micrometer sized area of the magnetic semiconductor from over 50 mT to less than 1 mT. Further experiments show that a single pulse is sufficient to fully reduce the coercive field, and that this reduction is sufficiently long to allow the magnetization to be switched. Using a double-pulse experiment, the photocoeercivity effect can be shown to decay on a timescale of 1.5 ns.

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FIG. 4. (Color online) (a) Schematic representation of a double-pulse train (100 Hz) with $t_d$ being the delay between two pulses. (b) Temporal behavior of the coercive field. $H_c(t_d)$ corresponds to the coercive field detected in the quasistatic MOKE experiment. (c) The coercive field $H_c$ of the (Ga,Mn)As sample as a function of $t_d$. As the delay is increased, the coercive field is reduced toward the that observed with the individual pulses. Solid line is a fit to Eq. (1) with the time constant $\tau = 1.48 \pm 0.22$ ns.