

First-principles calculation of lattice thermal conductivities of α -, β -, and γ - Si_3N_4

Kazuyoshi Tatsumi,^{1,2,*} Atsushi Togo,² and Isao Tanaka^{2,3,4}

¹*Institute of Materials and Systems for Sustainability,
Nagoya University, Chikusa, Nagoya 464-8603, Japan*

²*Center for Elements Strategy Initiative for Structural Materials,
Kyoto University, Sakyo, Kyoto 606-8501, Japan*

³*Department of Materials Science and Engineering,
Kyoto University, Sakyo, Kyoto 606-8501, Japan*

⁴*Nanostructures Research Laboratory, Japan Fine Ceramics Center, Atsuta, Nagoya 456-8587, Japan*

The lattice thermal conductivities of α -, β - and γ - Si_3N_4 phases are investigated from *ab-initio* anharmonic lattice dynamics, within the single-mode relaxation-time approximation of the linearized phonon Boltzmann transport equation. At 300 K, the lattice thermal conductivity of β - Si_3N_4 is calculated as $\kappa_{xx} = 73$ and $\kappa_{zz} = 199$ (in units of $\text{W m}^{-1} \text{K}^{-1}$), which is consistent with the reported experimental values of 69 and 180, respectively. For α - Si_3N_4 , $\kappa_{xx} = 68$ and $\kappa_{zz} = 100$ are obtained. The difference in anisotropy between these phases originates from the characteristic differences in their phonon band structures, which is closely related to the crystal structures. In α - Si_3N_4 , acoustic-mode phonons below 6 THz are the main heat carriers, while in β - Si_3N_4 , the phonon modes up to 12 THz contribute to the lattice thermal conductivity. In γ - Si_3N_4 , $\kappa = 77$ is obtained. The distribution of phonon mode contributions to the lattice thermal conductivity with respect to phonon frequency closely resembles that for κ_{xx} of β - Si_3N_4 , although the phonon lifetimes for γ - Si_3N_4 are twice as short as those for β - Si_3N_4 .

I. INTRODUCTION

Several nitride insulators are known to exhibit high thermal conductivity, which is important for heat transfer materials at elevated temperatures. For example, Slack *et al.*¹ reported that wurtzite-type AlN has thermal conductivity that exceeds $100 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$. Si_3N_4 has become another promising thermal conductive insulator because its thermal conductivity has been improved up to $177 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ through the use of advanced ceramic technologies related to densification and microstructure control.^{2–5} The Si_3N_4 ceramics also exhibit high mechanical strength at elevated temperatures; therefore, they are regarded as ideal materials for use in various applications, such as engine components, gas turbines, and heat sink substrates of power semiconductor devices.

At atmospheric pressure, Si_3N_4 has two phases, α and β , which are generally considered as low- and high-temperature phases, respectively.^{2,6,7} Their crystal structures belong to the $P31c$ and $P6_3/m$ space groups, respectively.^{8,9} These structures have different manners of stacking equivalent basal layer structures composed of SiN_4 tetrahedra.¹⁰ Fig. 1 depicts these layer structures from the principal axis direction. They are denoted as A, B, C, and D in the α phase, and A and B in the β phase. The stacking manners are thus ABCDABCD... and ABAB..., respectively. The α phase has additional two layer structures of C and D, which are related to A and B by the c glide operation.¹⁰ Along this direction, the lattice constant of the α phase is approximately twice as long as that of the β phase.

The experimental thermal conductivities^{2–5,12} of the Si_3N_4 polymorphs were measured for bulk polycrystalline samples. These values were significantly affected by the lattice defects, impurities, shapes and orientations of the

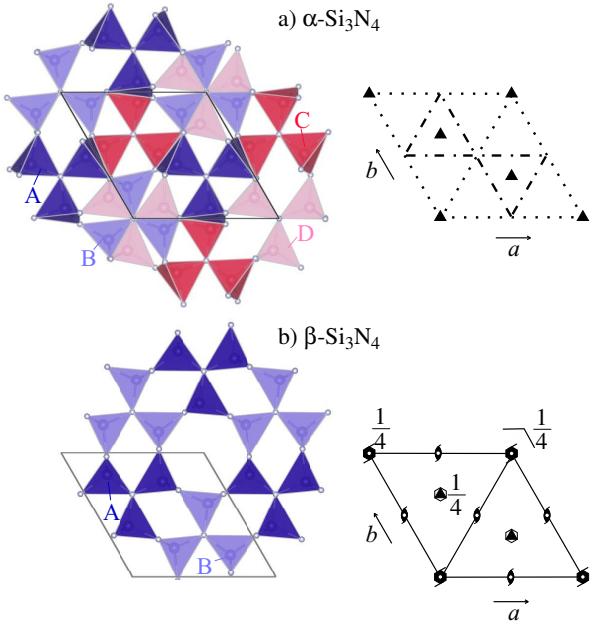


FIG. 1. (color online) Crystal structures of α - and β - Si_3N_4 . Stacking of SiN_4 tetrahedron layers are shown at the left. (a) ABCDABCD... for α - Si_3N_4 . (b) ABAB... for β - Si_3N_4 . Space group diagrams¹¹ for $P31c$ (α - Si_3N_4) and $P6_3/m$ (β - Si_3N_4) are shown at the right.

constituent crystal grains;⁶ the intrinsic thermal conductivity of defect-free Si_3N_4 has not been established. As an experimental approach to determine this, Li *et al.*¹³ applied the high-resolution thermoreflectance microscopy to single β - Si_3N_4 grains in a ceramic sample. The thermal conductivity was analyzed as 69 and $180 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ along the a and c axes, respectively. These val-

ues respectively correspond to the xx and zz elements of the lattice thermal conductivity tensor, κ . We consider the anisotropy of $\kappa_{zz}/\kappa_{xx} \sim 3$ is relatively large. Hirosaki *et al.*⁶ theoretically estimated κ by application of the Green-Kubo formulation to the molecular dynamics (MD) method with the interatomic potentials proposed by Vashishta *et al.*¹⁴. They calculated κ_{xx} and κ_{zz} of $\alpha\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$ to be 105 and 225 W m⁻¹ K⁻¹, and those of $\beta\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$ as 170 and 450 W m⁻¹ K⁻¹, respectively. The ratio κ_{zz}/κ_{xx} in $\beta\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$ agreed well with the experimental ratio; κ_{xx} and κ_{zz} were overestimated by more than two times those of the corresponding experimental κ values.

Based on first principles calculations and Boltzmann transport theory¹⁵, Togo *et al.* recently calculated κ of many polymorphs of the zincblende- and wurtzite-type structures. Their crystal structures have stacking manners of the densest atom planes as ABCABC... and ABAB..., respectively. The different stacking manners merely altered κ , the phonon linewidths and the phonon density of states (DOS).¹⁵ On the other hand, the previous MD results indicated that the different stacking manners between the α and β phases altered κ significantly. This has not been explained with respect to their phonon properties. Therefore, it is of interest to investigate this based on the first principles anharmonic phonon calculation.

In addition to the α and β phases, a cubic spinel phase ($\gamma\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$) is known to form upon compression and *in situ* heating.^{16,17} The reported transition pressures are scattered from 10 to 36 GPa, depending on the experimental conditions.¹⁸ The γ phase is experimentally quenched to atmospheric pressure and room temperature. The thermal conductivity of the γ phase has not been experimentally reported, although it has been estimated by the Slack model.¹⁹

The present study aims to qualitatively elucidate the lattice thermal conductivity tensors among the three Si_3N_4 phases by a first principles approach. We calculate κ of the γ phase as well, for systematic understanding. After the methodology is described, we examine the validity of the present results; through comparison of the calculated thermal properties with the available experimental and theoretical references.

The characteristic behaviors of κ are then investigated in detail on the basis of the phonon band structures and phonon linewidths.

II. COMPUTATIONAL PROCEDURES

A. Lattice thermal conductivity calculation

The lattice thermal conductivities were calculated by solving the linearized Boltzmann transport equation (LBTE) within the single-mode relaxation time approximation (single-mode RTA). The harmonic phonon states and lattice thermal conductivities were calculated with

the phonopy²⁰ and phono3py¹⁵ software packages, respectively. We also attempted the direct-solution of LBTE²¹ and give the calculated κ values in the following section. The difference between κ calculated by the single-mode RTA and that by the direct solution was minor for our discussion. Therefore, this research was limited to use the single-mode RTA to take advantage of the closed form of κ , which can be intuitively understood in terms of mode-specific phonon properties.

In the following sections, we denote the phonon mode by $\lambda = (\mathbf{q}, p)$ with the set of the phonon wave vector \mathbf{q} and band index p and $-\lambda \equiv (-\mathbf{q}, p)$. The relaxation time due to phonon-phonon scattering was obtained as half the reciprocal of linewidth, $\tau_{\lambda, \text{ph-ph}} = (2\Gamma_{\lambda}(\omega_{\lambda}))^{-1}$,

$$\Gamma_{\lambda}(\omega) = \frac{18\pi}{\hbar^2} \sum_{\lambda' \lambda''} |\Phi_{-\lambda \lambda' \lambda''}|^2 N_2(\mathbf{q}, \omega) \quad (1)$$

Here, ω_{λ} is the harmonic phonon frequency of the phonon mode λ , $n_{\lambda} = [\exp(\hbar\omega_{\lambda}/k_{\text{B}}T) - 1]^{-1}$ is the Bose-Einstein distribution at temperature T , and $\Phi_{\lambda \lambda' \lambda''}$ denotes the three-phonon-scattering strength. $\Phi_{\lambda \lambda' \lambda''}$ was obtained by the usual coordinate transformation of third-order force constants from direct space to phonon space.¹⁵ The second- and third-order real-space force constants were obtained by *ab initio* calculation, of which the details are given in the next section. $N_2(\mathbf{q}, \omega)$ is a weighted joint DOS (WJDOS)¹⁵,

$$N_2(\mathbf{q}, \omega) = N_2^{(1)}(\mathbf{q}, \omega) + N_2^{(2)}(\mathbf{q}, \omega) \quad (2)$$

where

$$\begin{aligned} N_2^{(1)} &= \frac{1}{N_{\mathbf{q}}} \sum_{\lambda' \lambda''} (n_{\lambda'} - n_{\lambda''}) \Delta(-\mathbf{q} + \mathbf{q}' + \mathbf{q}'') \\ &\quad \times [\delta(\omega + \omega_{\lambda'} - \omega_{\lambda''}) - \delta(\omega - \omega_{\lambda'} + \omega_{\lambda''})], \\ N_2^{(2)} &= \frac{1}{N_{\mathbf{q}}} \sum_{\lambda' \lambda''} (n_{\lambda'} + n_{\lambda''} + 1) \Delta(-\mathbf{q} + \mathbf{q}' + \mathbf{q}'') \\ &\quad \times \delta(\omega - \omega_{\lambda'} - \omega_{\lambda''}), \end{aligned}$$

with $\Delta(\mathbf{x})$ giving 1 if \mathbf{x} is a reciprocal lattice vector, and otherwise zero. This constraint comes from the lattice translational invariance that appears inside $\Phi_{\lambda \lambda' \lambda''}$,¹⁵ however, it is included in N_2 in Eq. (1) for the analysis given below.

To more realistically compare the calculated κ with the measured thermal conductivities, the isotopic scattering effect due to the natural isotope distribution was taken into account according to the second-order perturbation theory.²² Using the relaxation times for the phonon-phonon scattering and isotopic scattering, $\tau_{\lambda, \text{ph-ph}}$ and $\tau_{\lambda, \text{iso}}$, respectively, the total relaxation time for a phonon mode, τ_{λ} , was calculated by assuming Matthiessen's rule, $1/\tau_{\lambda} = 1/\tau_{\lambda, \text{ph-ph}} + 1/\tau_{\lambda, \text{iso}}$.

The closed form of κ within the RTA was obtained via

$$\kappa = \frac{1}{N_{\mathbf{q}} \Omega} \sum_{\lambda} \tau_{\lambda} \mathbf{v}_{\lambda} \otimes \mathbf{v}_{\lambda} c_{\lambda}, \quad (3)$$

where $N_{\mathbf{q}}$ is the number of \mathbf{q} -points, Ω is the unit cell volume, and c_λ is the mode heat capacity. To analyze κ in detail, the cumulative thermal conductivity:

$$\kappa^c(\omega) = \frac{1}{N_{\mathbf{q}}\Omega} \int_0^\omega \sum_\lambda \tau_\lambda \mathbf{v}_\lambda \otimes \mathbf{v}_\lambda c_\lambda \delta(\omega' - \omega_\lambda) d\omega', \quad (4)$$

and its derivative $\frac{d\kappa^c(\omega)}{d\omega}$:

$$\frac{d\kappa^c(\omega)}{d\omega} = \frac{1}{N_{\mathbf{q}}\Omega} \sum_\lambda \tau_\lambda \mathbf{v}_\lambda \otimes \mathbf{v}_\lambda c_\lambda \delta(\omega - \omega_\lambda), \quad (5)$$

were calculated to determine the phonon mode contributions to κ .

B. Computational details

The force constants required for the lattice dynamics were calculated using the first-principles projector augmented wave method²³ (VASP code^{24–26}). The generalized gradient approximation (GGA) parameterized by Perdew, Burke, and Ernzerhof²⁷ was used for the exchange correlation potential. A plane wave energy cutoff of 500 eV was employed. The crystal structures were optimized for 0 K and 0 GPa until the residual forces acting on the constituent atoms were less than 10^{-6} eV Å⁻¹. Here, the temperature and pressure were considered only for the electronic system and the zero point lattice vibration was not considered. The calculated lattice parameters were $a = 7.808$ Å and $c = 5.659$ Å for the α phase, $a = 7.660$ Å and $c = 2.925$ Å for the β phase, and $a = 7.787$ Å for the γ phase, which are in agreement with the experimental data^{8,9,28} within +0.7 % error. The lattice volume optimized with the local density approximation (LDA)²⁹ for the exchange correlation potential was, for β -Si₃N₄, 3 % smaller than the volume optimized with GGA, which is a typical volume contraction of LDA. κ_{xx} and κ_{zz} calculated with LDA were larger by 0.3 and 2.6 % than those calculated with GGA. For our discussion, these differences are sufficiently small; therefore, the impact of the choice of exchange correlation potential is considered to be minor in this study.

The force constants were calculated by the finite difference approach³⁰. For this calculation, the following supercells were adopted: $1 \times 1 \times 2$, $1 \times 1 \times 3$, and $1 \times 1 \times 1$ supercells of the conventional unit cells for the calculations of the third-order force constants of α , β , and γ -Si₃N₄, respectively, and $3 \times 3 \times 4$, $3 \times 3 \times 8$ and $2 \times 2 \times 2$ for those of the second-order force constants. The length of the induced atomic displacements was set to 0.03 Å. Table I shows κ calculated with several different sets of the supercells, which indicates that the calculated κ has reasonable convergence with respect to the size of the supercells.

Uniform \mathbf{k} -point sampling meshes of $4 \times 4 \times 2$, $4 \times 4 \times 3$, and $3 \times 3 \times 3$ were employed for calculations of the third-order force constants of the α , β , and γ phases. For

TABLE I. Calculated lattice thermal conductivities of α -, β -, and γ -Si₃N₄ (W K⁻¹ m⁻¹) at 300 K with respect to several combinations of supercell sizes.

Phase	Supercell (# of atoms)		LTC	
	3 rd force constants	2 nd force constants	xx	zz
α	1 \times 1 \times 1 (28)	1 \times 1 \times 1 (28)	37	57
	1 \times 1 \times 2 (56)	1 \times 1 \times 2 (56)	41	79
	1 \times 1 \times 1 (28)	2 \times 2 \times 2 (224)	55	81
	1 \times 1 \times 2 (56)	2 \times 2 \times 2 (224)	67	95
	1 \times 1 \times 2 (56)	2 \times 2 \times 3 (336)	68	97
	1 \times 1 \times 2 (56)	3 \times 3 \times 4 (1008)	68	100
β	1 \times 1 \times 2 (28)	1 \times 1 \times 2 (28)	44	173
	1 \times 1 \times 2 (28)	2 \times 2 \times 4 (224)	76	208
	1 \times 1 \times 3 (42)	2 \times 2 \times 4 (224)	71	194
	1 \times 1 \times 3 (42)	2 \times 2 \times 5 (280)	72	196
	1 \times 1 \times 3 (42)	3 \times 3 \times 8 (1008)	73	199
γ	1 \times 1 \times 1 (56)	1 \times 1 \times 1 (56)	72	
	1 \times 1 \times 1 (56)	2 \times 2 \times 2 (448)	77	
	1 \times 1 \times 1 (56)	3 \times 3 \times 3 (56)	79	

the α and β phases, the center of the a^*b^* plane was sampled, while the center on the c^* -axis was not. For the γ phase, a non- Γ center mesh was used. For the calculations of the second-order force constants, the Γ -point was only sampled for the α and β phases, and the only one $\mathbf{k} = (0.5, 0.5, 0.5)$ point was sampled for the γ phase. The \mathbf{q} -point sampling meshes of $10 \times 10 \times 14$, $10 \times 10 \times 26$, and $12 \times 12 \times 12$ were employed to calculate κ in Eq. (3) for the α , β , and γ phases, respectively.

Non-analytical term correction³¹ was applied to the second-order force constants to take into account the long range coulombic forces present in ionic crystals. For the correction, static dielectric constants and Born effective charges were calculated using the density functional perturbation theory as implemented in the VASP code^{32,33}.

The effect of lattice thermal expansion on κ was examined by the calculation of κ for several finite temperatures with the crystal structures optimized for the corresponding temperatures within the quasi-harmonic approximation (QHA)³⁴. These κ were different from those calculated for the same temperatures with the structure optimized for 0 K. We consider these differences as the effect of lattice thermal expansion. The differences in κ for $T=300, 600, 900, 1200$, and, 1500 K, for the β phase, were within 1 %. They were similar to those for Si and Ge calculated by Ward *et al.*³⁵. For the present study, these differences are negligible and for finite temperatures κ calculated with the structure optimized for 0 K was adopted.

The volumetric thermal expansion coefficients were also calculated. Comparison with the experimental coefficient is useful to validate the present thermal conductivity calculation because both the thermal expansion and κ originate from the anharmonicity of the interatomic

potential. The calculated coefficients of the α , β , and γ phases were 4.31×10^{-6} , 4.19×10^{-6} , and $1.13 \times 10^{-5} \text{ K}^{-1}$ for 300 K, while the experimental values^{36,37} were 3.75×10^{-6} , 3.55×10^{-6} , and $9.48 \times 10^{-6} \text{ K}^{-1}$. The calculation systematically overestimated the experimental values, but reproduced the experimental tendencies, including that the α phase has a slightly larger thermal expansion coefficient than the β phase. This supports the validity of the present calculation to qualitatively compare the calculated κ among the Si_3N_4 phases.

To compare the microscopic phonon properties among the three phases under the same conditions, the results calculated at 0 GPa are shown and discussed. For the γ phase, this means that we assume the condition of a virtually quenched γ phase at 0 GPa from the high pressure. To examine the analytical continuity of the properties with respect to pressure, κ of the γ phase was calculated at 10, 20, and 40 GPa, as shown in Fig. 7. The phenomenological behavior of the linear dependence of κ with respect to the pressure was reproduced, similar to that in Ref. 38. The slope was $2.89 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1} \text{ GPa}^{-1}$ for the γ phase. From this dependence, we consider that the microscopic values are also varied smoothly with the pressure and those at 0 GPa are valuable for comparison with the corresponding values of the α and β phases.

C. Direct solution of LBTE

The advantage of employing the single-mode RTA for thermal conductivity calculations is the closed form, by which the qualitative character of κ can be intuitively understood in terms of the phonon-mode specific properties. The microscopic understanding of the full solution of LBTE is still under development,³⁹ and the microscopic picture based on collective phonons⁴⁰ will require more complicated investigation.

Single-mode RTA solutions of LBTE often underestimate the full solution.^{35,41} To check this underestimation, κ for the α and β phases were calculated by the direct solution of LBTE²¹, which is one of the methods of LBTE full solutions. κ_{xx} and κ_{zz} without the isotope effect were 69 and $102 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ for the α phase, and 76 and $238 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ for the β phase, respectively, while the corresponding single-mode RTA values were 70 and $102 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ for the α phase, and 76 and $210 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ for the β phase. κ_{zz} for the β phase from the direct solution was 13 % larger than that of the single-mode RTA solution. The differences in κ between the LBTE solutions are not significant; therefore, we expect that the physics of these lattice thermal conductivities can be well understood within the single-mode RTA at the current level of our interest. Therefore, we discuss the lattice thermal conductivities calculated by the single-mode RTA solution.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Lattice thermal conductivities

TABLE II. Calculated thermal conductivities of $\alpha\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$ (trigonal), $\beta\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$ (trigonal), and $\gamma\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$ (cubic) at 300 K in units of $\text{W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$, compared with the experimental and theoretical reference data. Theoretical bulk moduli B (in units of GPa), calculated using the present band method are presented in the fourth column.

	This work			Ref. Theo.		Ref. Expt.	
	κ_{xx}	κ_{zz}	B	κ	κ_{xx}	κ_{zz}	κ_{xx}
$\alpha\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$	68	100	224	70 ^a	105 ^b	225 ^b	-
$\beta\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$	73	199	237	250 ^a	170 ^b	450 ^b	69 ^c 180 ^c
$\gamma\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$	77	-	296	80 ^a	-	-	-

^a Ref. 19, Slack model.

^b Ref. 6, molecular dynamics (Green-Kubo).

^c Ref. 13, single crystalline grains of poly-crystals.

Table II shows the calculated κ for 300 K. $\beta\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$ has a markedly more anisotropic κ than $\alpha\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$. The directional averages $\sum_i \kappa_{ii}/3$ are 79, 115, and $77 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ for the α , β , and γ phases, respectively. The value for the γ phase is similar to that for the α phase, despite the comparatively large difference among the bulk moduli (B) that are also shown in Table II.

Table II also lists the previously reported experimental¹³ and theoretical⁶ κ for reference. The theoretical results¹⁹ of the Slack model, which do not include the anisotropy in κ , are shown as κ in Table II. Compared to the κ from MD⁶, our κ for the β phase has better agreement with the experimental κ . Compared to κ from the Slack model, our directional average $\sum_i \kappa_{ii}/3$ is also much closer to the experimental average.

B. Dispersion curves

Figure 2 shows the phonon band diagrams of the three Si_3N_4 phases. The entire band diagrams are almost identical to those reported earlier^{18,42}. However, here we investigate the gradients of ω_λ , that is, the group velocities projected on the high-symmetry paths. We especially focus on their anisotropy in the α and β phases. This was not investigated by the previous works.

In Fig. 2-b, the acoustic phonon branches in the β phase increase their ω_λ much more from Γ to A than from Γ to K or Γ to M. In Fig. 2-a of the α phase, the corresponding ω_λ increase similarly among these paths. This difference is due to the Γ -A path lengths. The β phase has an approximately twice longer path than the α phase; the lattice constant c of the β phase is nearly half that of the α phase, owing to the different stacking manners of the basal layer structures. The anisotropic increments of ω_λ indicate the anisotropic \mathbf{v}_λ . This will be investigated

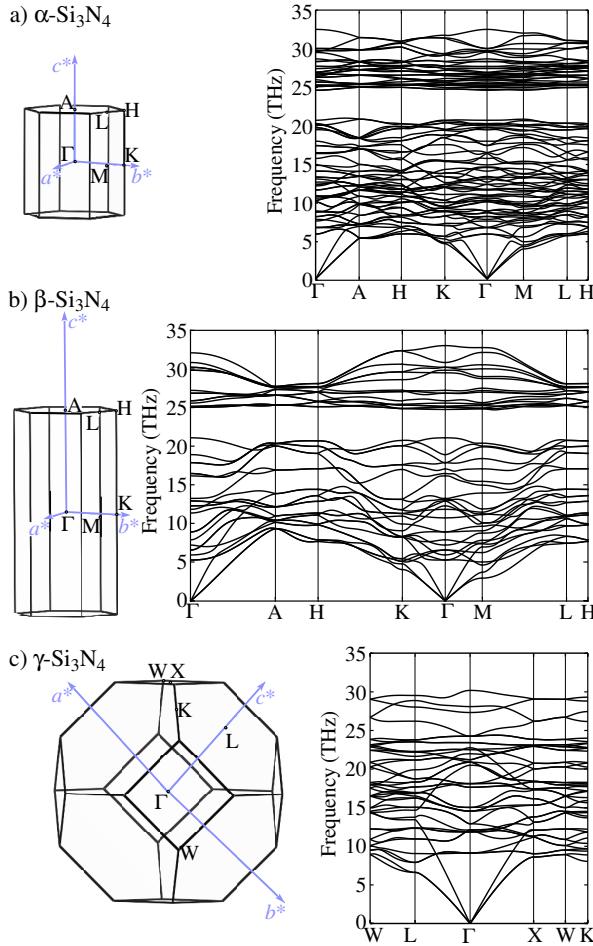


FIG. 2. (color online) Brillouin-zones (left) and calculated phonon band diagrams (right) for three Si_3N_4 phases.

further in the following sections. Normally, dispersion curves of optical phonon branches are flat; however, the β phase shows significantly large gradients for the low frequency optical phonon branches. This indicates that the \mathbf{v}_λ of these phonon modes are large.

In the γ phase, the longitudinal acoustic phonon branches maintain linear dispersion relation at higher frequencies than in the other phases. The gradients of ω_λ for the γ phase are largest among the three phases, as expected by the largest B .

C. ω_λ contour map on the reciprocal plane

We investigate the anisotropy in \mathbf{v}_λ of α - and β - Si_3N_4 phases using another geometry, i.e., a cross-section of the Brillouin-zone. Fig. 3 shows contour maps of ω_λ on the b^*c^* plane. We show the maps for the four lowest-frequency bands because they contribute significantly to κ , which will be confirmed in the next section. There were negligible differences between the distributions on the b^*c^* plane and the other planes containing the c^* axis.

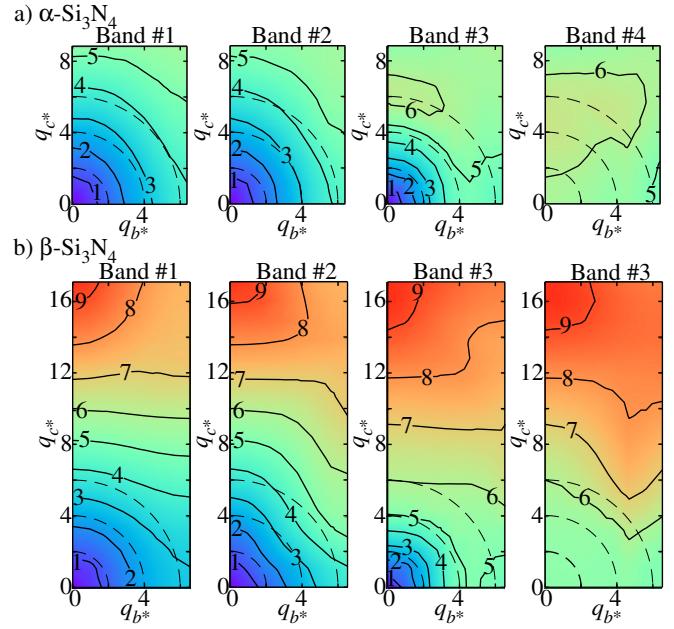


FIG. 3. (color online) Contour maps of phonon frequency (THz) on the b^*c^* planes of Brillouin-zones. The coordinates in the reciprocal plane are in units of 10^{-2} \AA^{-1} . The maps for the four lowest-frequency phonon modes are shown. The frequency landscapes are formed by simply connecting the frequencies of the same band indices, assigned in ascending order of frequency at the respective \mathbf{q} points.

Therefore, the b^*c^* plane was selected as a representative plane.

In both of the phases, $\omega_\lambda \lesssim 2$ THz are distributed nearly isotropically; the corresponding contours are nearly parallel to the circular arcs of thin dash lines which are added in all the maps for clear comparison. In the α phase, the ω_λ distributions and thus \mathbf{v}_λ are still almost isotropic up to 5 THz. In the maps of the bands #3 and #4, the slope becomes gentle at $\omega_\lambda \gtrsim 5$ THz, for which modes belong to the optical branches connecting with the transverse acoustic branches at the Brillouin zone boundary of $q_c^* = \frac{1}{2c}$. This is seen from the connection of these branches at A in Fig. 2-a; note that both of the branches are doubly degenerated on the Γ A path.

In the β phase, the contours of $\omega_\lambda \gtrsim 2$ THz are rather parallel to the b^* axis, and thus the \mathbf{v}_λ tends to orient toward the c^* axis direction. This tendency is also true for the large part of the maps of the bands #3 and #4. The most of the corresponding modes belong to the low frequency optical branches, similarly to the case of the α phase. These modes show large gradients along q_c^* , which is clearly different from the gentle slopes in the corresponding bands in the α phase, confirming the large absolute values and anisotropy of \mathbf{v}_λ of the low-frequency optical phonon branches, as well as the acoustic phonon branches, in the β phase.

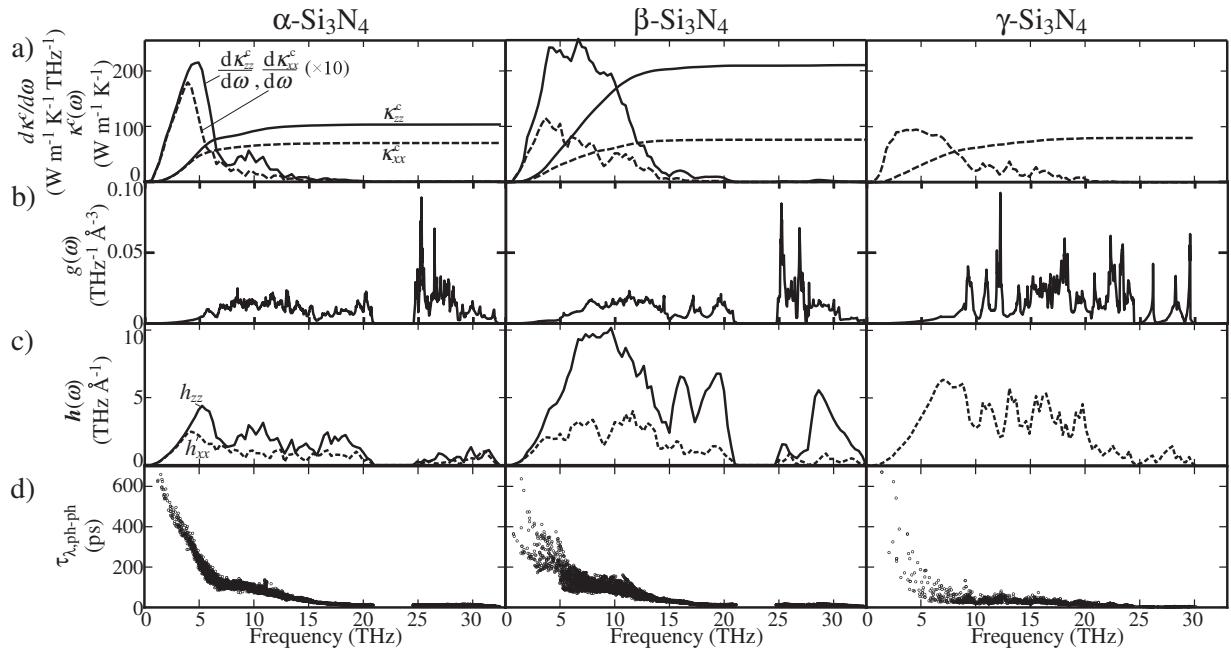


FIG. 4. Microscopic phonon properties of three Si₃N₄ phases. (a) Cumulative thermal conductivity κ^c and its frequency derivative, (b) DOS as $g(\omega)$, (c) DOS weighted with $\mathbf{v}_\lambda \otimes \mathbf{v}_\lambda$ as $\mathbf{h}(\omega)$, and (d) scatter plots of phonon lifetimes and phonon frequencies, $(\tau_\lambda, \omega_\lambda)$.

D. Frequency distributions of phonon properties

In the previous two sections, we have investigated the anisotropy in \mathbf{v}_λ , which may explain the anisotropy in κ . Here we examine which phonon frequencies and which terms in Eq.(3) characterize the behavior of the present κ . In the following, we disregard the term of mode heat capacity because it is approximately constant for the phonon modes that mainly carry heat at 300 K. For simplicity, the effect of isotope scattering is not considered. For the investigation, the cumulative thermal conductivity, $\kappa^c(\omega)$ in Eq.(5), and its derivative $d\kappa^c/d\omega$, are shown at the top of Fig. 4. From this figure, it is evident that in the α , β , and γ phases, the phonon modes with their frequencies up to ~ 6 , 12 and 10 THz largely contribute to each respective κ . The frequencies shown in the contour maps in Fig. 3 are within these frequency ranges, and thus it is confirmed that these bands make a significant contribution to κ .

Assuming that τ_λ and \mathbf{v}_λ are constant, then $d\kappa_{ii}^c/d\omega$ ($ii=xx, zz$) are proportional to the phonon DOS:

$$g(\omega) = \frac{1}{N_q} \sum_\lambda \delta(\omega - \omega_\lambda). \quad (6)$$

In this context, we view $g(\omega)/\Omega$ as frequency distributions of heat carrier density. Alternatively, assuming that only τ_λ is constant, then $d\kappa^c/d\omega$ is proportional to:

$$\mathbf{h}(\omega) = \frac{1}{N_q \Omega} \sum_\lambda \mathbf{v}_\lambda \otimes \mathbf{v}_\lambda \delta(\omega - \omega_\lambda), \quad (7)$$

from which we examine the impacts of both of \mathbf{v}_λ and the heat carrier density. $g(\omega)/\Omega$ and $\mathbf{h}(\omega)$ are shown in Figs. 4(b) and (c). As for the frequency variation of $\tau_{\lambda,\text{ph-ph}}$, the phonon lifetimes are shown as scatter plots of $(\tau_{\lambda,\text{ph-ph}}, \omega_\lambda)$ in Fig. 4(d).

Comparison of the α and β phases indicates their phonon lifetimes distributions are qualitatively similar, except for a striking difference below ~ 5 THz, which will be examined later. The markedly different $d\kappa_{ii}^c/d\omega$ between the two phases are therefore ascribed to the corresponding h_{ii} . The overall spectral shapes of $g(\omega)/\Omega$ are also similar between the two phases; therefore, \mathbf{v}_λ alone accounts for the different behavior of $d\kappa_{ii}^c/d\omega$. It is thus concluded that the different anisotropy in κ can be qualitatively explained by the different \mathbf{v}_λ . In contrast, for the zincblende and wurtzite structures, the group velocities are suggested to be similar from their band structures¹⁵. This must result in similar κ between these structures, irrespective of the stacking manner.

The γ phase has much different $g(\omega)$, $\mathbf{h}(\omega)$, and $\tau_{\lambda,\text{ph-ph}}$ from the other phases, as expected from the large differences in their crystal structures. The most significant difference is in the phonon linewidths. Below ~ 10 THz, the phonon lifetimes are approximately half as short as those of the other phases. We will examine this in detail later. As a result, $d\kappa_{xx}^c/d\omega$ has relatively low intensities. The longitudinal acoustic phonon branch increases its frequencies much significantly, as we have examined in the band diagram; therefore, $d\kappa_{xx}^c/d\omega$ rather gradually attenuates as the frequency increases, occasionally resembling $d\kappa_{xx}^c/d\omega$ of the β phase.

The similar phonon lifetimes between the α and β phases remains a curiosity, although their group velocities have marked differences. Analogous to the report by Lindsay *et al.*⁴³, we can say that $\tau_{\lambda,\text{ph-ph}}$ in the present form is dependent on the phase space for the available two phonons, $\{\lambda', \lambda''\}$, and is also dependent on $|\Phi_{\lambda\lambda'\lambda''}|^2$. We examine these terms one-by-one. A distribution of two-phonon configurations satisfying the energy and momentum conservation law is represented as WJDOS¹⁵.

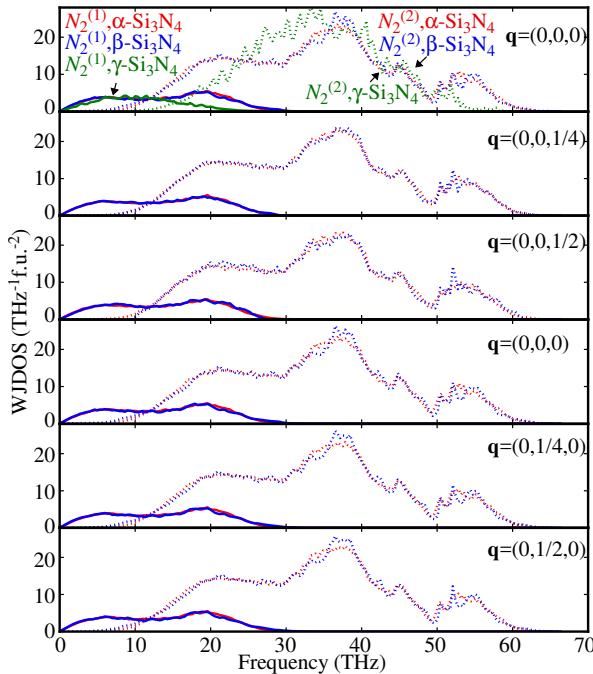


FIG. 5. (color online) WJDOS of α - and β -Si₃N₄ at different \mathbf{q} points and that of γ -Si₃N₄ at the Γ point. The WJDOS for the α and β phases in the first and fourth rows are calculated at the same Γ -point but with the polarization for the non-analytic term correction set along c^* and b^* , respectively.

Fig. 5 shows the WJDOS at several different \mathbf{q} -points. The intensities are scaled with Z^2 where Z is the number of formula units in the primitive unit cell, to compare WJDOS for structures with different Z . They have weak \mathbf{q} -point dependences. For the comparison among the three phases, the frequency distribution for the γ phase is only shown at $\mathbf{q} = (0,0,0)$ because of the different symmetry of the Brillouin zone from those in the α and β phases. We checked that the \mathbf{q} dependence of the WJDOS for the γ phase was as weak as those shown in Fig. 5 for the α and β phases. The total WJDOSs are similar between the α and β phases. The γ phase has slightly small intensities of the total WJDOS below ~ 10 THz.

As for $|\Phi_{\lambda\lambda'\lambda''}|^2$, in Table. III, they are averaged over two frequency ranges of 0–15 or 0–35 THz for ω_λ and all indices in λ' and λ'' . The averages are very similar for the α and β phases. With the similar impact of the WJDOS and $|\Phi_{\lambda\lambda'\lambda''}|^2$, the phonon lifetimes in these phases are also similar. For the γ phase, the large $|\Phi_{\lambda\lambda'\lambda''}|^2$ of the

TABLE III. Averages of $|\Phi_{\lambda\lambda'\lambda''}|^2$ over frequency ranges of ω_λ (0–15 and 0–35 THz) and all (λ', λ') . The values are in units of $10^{-9} \text{ eV}^2 \text{ f.u.}^2$.

Frequency range (THz)	Phase		
	α	β	γ
0–15	1.1	1.1	2.3
0–35	5.2	5.2	4.6

low frequency region is attributed to the short phonon lifetimes. The frequency ranges for ω_λ were set so that the narrower frequency range approximately corresponds to the range where the phonon modes largely contribute to κ . A small change in the frequency range by a few terahertz did not change the qualitative characteristics of the averages.

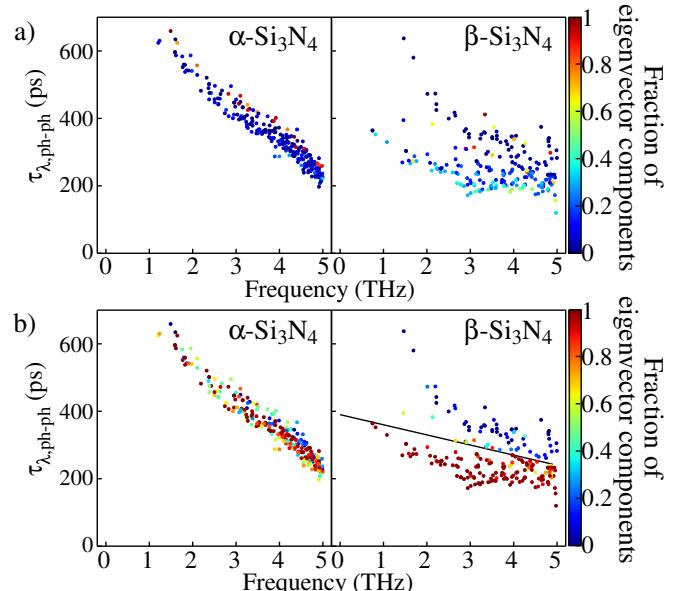


FIG. 6. (color online) Distribution of phonon lifetimes for $\omega_\lambda \leq 5$ THz shown in color with respect to the strengths of the eigenvector components along (a) \mathbf{q} and (b) on the ab plane (b).

Finally, we examine the exceptional, but striking difference in the phonon lifetimes distributions between the α and β phases. In the α phase, $\tau_{\lambda,\text{ph-ph}}$ below ~ 5 THz are aligned on a single smooth line, while in the β phase, they are scattered roughly on two branches. This difference was investigated by an attempt to relate the phonon lifetimes to the directions of the atomic vibrations of the phonon modes. Fig. 6 enlarges the $(\tau_{\lambda,\text{ph-ph}}, \omega_\lambda)$ plots in this frequency range. In Fig. 6(a), $\tau_{\lambda,\text{ph-ph}}$ are classified using colors according to the sums of the squares of the eigenvector components along the \mathbf{q} ; the sum is 1 for a perfectly longitudinal wave. However, these sums show no clear contrast between the two branches in the β phase. Fig. 6(b) shows the same plot as Fig. 6(a), but

with colors according to the sums of the squares of the eigenvector components along the ab plane, which is 1 when the eigenvector lies in the ab plane. There is a tendency in the β phase that $\tau_{\lambda,\text{ph-ph}}$ are short for atomic vibrations along the ab plane; therefore, the vibration modes along the ab plane that belong to the acoustic phonon branches are more easily scattered in the β phase, regardless of whether they are longitudinal or transverse. For the panel of $\beta\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$ in Fig. 6(b), a straight line splits the phonon modes into two groups. The numbers of the phonon modes assigned to the shorter and longer $\tau_{\lambda,\text{ph-ph}}$ groups are 145 and 67, of which the ratio is confirmed to be close to the population ratio of the vibration modes along and out of the ab plane.

IV. SUMMARY

In the present study, the lattice thermal conductivities of the three Si_3N_4 phases were investigated using lattice dynamics based on the first-principles interatomic force constants. The main remarks are as follows:

1) In α - and $\beta\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$, of which the crystal structures are characterized by the stacking manner of the basal layer structures, κ is largely altered due to the differences in the harmonic band structures induced by the different stacking manners. This is in contrast with the zincblende and wurtzite structures in the previous study¹⁵. κ for

$\alpha\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$ is rather isotropic, while κ_{zz} for the β phase is twice or more larger than the other κ_{ii} of the three phases.

2) In the α phase, the acoustic mode phonons below 6 THz are the main heat carriers, while in the β phase, the phonons below 12 THz contribute to κ . Their group velocities are confirmed to characterize the behavior of κ .

3) In the γ phase, the frequency distribution of the phonon mode contributions to κ is similar to that for κ_{xx} of $\beta\text{-Si}_3\text{N}_4$, which is attributed to its large phonon-phonon scattering strength and steep longitudinal acoustic branches.

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Appendix A: Dependence of the lattice thermal conductivity of γ -phase on pressure

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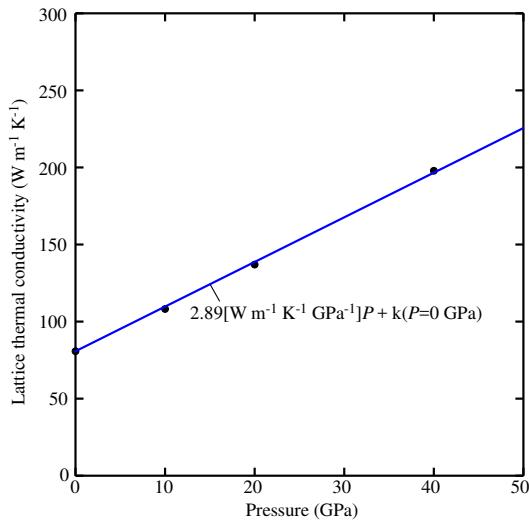


FIG. 7. (color online) Lattice thermal conductivity of γ -Si₃N₄ as a function of pressure.

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