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Realizing gapped surface states in magnetic topological insulator $\text{MnBi}_{2-x}\text{Sb}_x\text{Te}_4$

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ABSTRACT

The interplay between magnetism and non-trivial topology in magnetic topological insulators (MTI) is expected to give rise to exotic topological quantum phenomena like the quantum anomalous Hall effect and the topological axion states. A key to assessing these novel properties is to realize gapped topological surface states. MnBi_2Te_4 possesses non-trivial band topology with intrinsic antiferromagnetic state. However, highly electron-doped nature of the MnBi_2Te_4

crystals obstructs the exhibition of the surface band gap. Here, we tailor the material through Sb-substitution to reveal the gapped surface states in $\text{MnBi}_{2-x}\text{Sb}_x\text{Te}_4$. By shifting the Fermi level into the bulk band gap, we access the surface states and show a band gap of 50 meV at the Dirac point from quasi-particle interference measured by scanning tunneling microscopy (STM). Surface-dominant conduction is confirmed through transport spectroscopy measured by multiprobe STM below the Néel temperature. The surface band gap is robust against the out-of-plane magnetic field despite the promotion of field-induced ferromagnetism. The realization of bulk-insulating MTIs with the large exchange gap offers a promising platform for exploring emergent topological phenomena.

I. INTRODUCTION

Magnetic topological insulators (MTI) possessing naturally gapped surface states provide a central platform for various topological quantum phenomena [1,2]. MnBi_2Te_4 is an MTI with inverted band structure from large spin-orbit coupling and intrinsic magnetism from Mn magnetic moments [3-5]. The crystal has layered structure with septuple layers (SL) of Te-Bi-Te-Mn-Te-Bi-Te [inset of Fig 1(a)]. Below the Néel temperature, magnetic moments of Mn atoms form A-type antiferromagnetic (AFM) ordering where they align ferromagnetically in the same layer and antiferromagnetically between adjacent layers [6,7]. The topological nature of the compound was confirmed by observing the topological surface states with angle-resolved photoemission spectroscopy (ARPES) [4,8-13]. However, the abundant bulk carriers and their spatial fluctuations in the highly electron-doped MnBi_2Te_4 crystals hinder the realization of predicted topological phenomena. For example, previous ARPES studies reported both the existence [4,9,10] and the absence of an exchange gap [11-13] in the topological surface states.

Thus, to resolve the fine structures of the band around the Dirac point, it is necessary to control the carrier density and use local spectroscopic techniques like scanning tunneling microscopy/spectroscopy (STM/STS) [14-16].

To compensate the electron carriers in the bulk, thin films of MnBi_2Te_4 were adapted to reduce bulk carriers and back gating was used to shift Fermi level inside the gap. Based on this approach, the transport measurements indeed demonstrated some characteristics of MTI such as QAH effect [17] and axion insulator states [18]. However, geometrical effects like interaction between the top and bottom surfaces can alter the topology of the system [19], and impurities and defects introduced during the exfoliation or the epitaxial growth limit the film quality [20]. On the other hand, an approach based on bulk single crystals and *in situ* characterization can overcome these issues to offer a system with higher quality. In particular, substituting Bi with Sb provides means to introduce hole-doping [8,21], and the change in the composition of $\text{MnBi}_{2-x}\text{Sb}_x\text{Te}_4$ (MBST) enables to alter the topological phases as well [Fig. 1(a)]. For example, topological phase transitions are expected in increasing Sb composition x , where the topologically non-trivial band of MnBi_2Te_4 becomes topologically trivial like MnSb_2Te_4 [8]. In addition, magnetic structure of MBST can change with composition [22]. Topological phase transitions are predicted for different magnetic structures such as topological insulator (TI) or AFM TI for AFM structure and ferromagnetic (FM) insulator or Weyl semimetal (WSM) for FM structure [3,5]. Therefore, shifting the Fermi level into the exchange gap through tailoring the MBST composition offers a key not just to accessing the surface band structures but also to unlocking emergent quantum properties of intrinsic MTIs.

In this Letter, we employ Sb-substitution to shift the Fermi level of MBST into the bulk band gap and utilize STM-based spectroscopy to demonstrate the gapped surface states. A

surface band gap of 50 meV is revealed by quasi-particle interference (QPI) measurement in the bulk-insulating MBST. Density functional theory (DFT) calculations reproduce the gapped surface states and confirm the MBST as an AFM TI. The surface nature of the QPI-revealed bands is further corroborated by *in situ* transport spectroscopy with multiprobe STM. Both the bulk and surface band structures are found robust against out-of-plane magnetic field, even though the simultaneous magnetostriction measurement with STM displays a field-induced AFM to FM transition. DFT simulations indicate that the MBST has a ferrimagnetic structure and is a topological axion insulator with $Z_4 = 2$.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. STM/STS on MBST

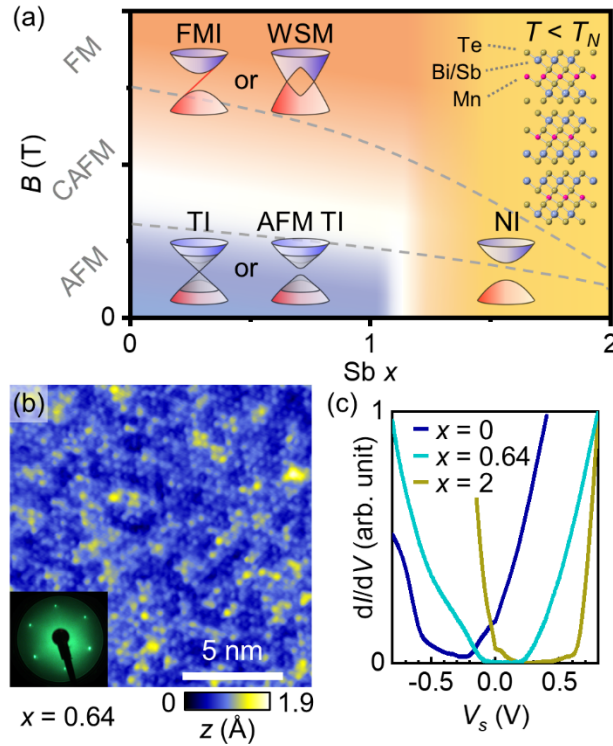


FIG. 1. (a) Schematic phase diagram of MBST with respect to Sb composition x and magnetic field B . Inset on the right shows the MBST lattice structure. (b) STM image of MBST with $x = 0.64$ ($V_s = -0.15$ V, $I = 100$ pA). Inset shows the LEED image at 60 eV. (c) dI/dV spectra for MBST crystals with different compositions. Each curve represents the average of about 1000 spectra taken over the area of 30×30 nm² (set point $V_s = -1$ V, $I = 500$ pA for $x = 0$; $V_s = 1.5$ V, $I = 100$ pA for $x = 0.64$; $V_s = -0.2$ V, $I = 500$ pA for $x = 2$).

To study different topological phases, we chose three MBST compositions of $x = 0, 0.64$, and 2. Here, $x = 0$ and 2 represent the exemplary cases of topological and trivial compounds, respectively [Fig. 1(a)], and $x = 0.64$ represents the bulk-insulating case, whose insulating behavior was confirmed by transport measurements (Fig. S1 in [23]) [8,21]. Figure 1(b) shows a typical topographic image of the cleaved surface of MBST, which displays triangular lattice of the topmost Te layer. Surface corrugation of ± 1 Å indicates the existence of defects, probably vacancies, interstitials, and antisites typically observed in Bi-based topological insulators [24-26]. The long-range crystallinity of the surface is confirmed by low energy electron diffraction (LEED) displaying hexagonal patterns [inset of Fig. 1(b)]. The effect of Sb substitution is examined by taking dI/dV spectra at $T = 4.6$ K [Fig. 1(c)], which is well below the Néel temperature $T_N \approx 20$ K [6,7,21]. As expected, hole-doping from Sb shifts the spectra toward the higher bias with increasing x . The spectrum for $x = 0$ shows V-shape curves of typical TIs [27-29], while the spectrum for $x = 2$ shows U-shape curves with a flat zero amplitude region which is typical for trivial normal insulators (NIs) [30]. For the $x = 0$ compound, however, the surface band gap cannot be determined because the whole spectrum is elevated to non-zero value due to carriers from the highly n-doped bulk. In contrast, for the $x = 0.64$ compound, spectrum displays

a flat bottom with nearly zero dI/dV conductance around the Fermi level, enabling assessment of the surface band gap. The qualitatively different shapes of spectra are not from the difference in set point bias voltages and currents, as examined with different set points for all three compounds in Fig. S2.

B. QPI of MBST with different compositions

QPI is a powerful technique that can provide momentum information of electronic bands based on maps of dI/dV spectra. It also allows for identification of non-trivial topology of the surface states manifested as the prohibition of backscattering due to the spin-momentum locking [31-34]. Several STM studies confirmed strong suppressions of QPI near the Dirac point where the surface bands have ideal shape of Dirac cone, while the QPI signals reappear when the energy moves far from the Dirac point and the surface bands start to distort [24,27-29,35-37]. Further application of QPI in extrinsic magnetic topological insulators revealed both the topological surface states and the band gap of surface states [37].

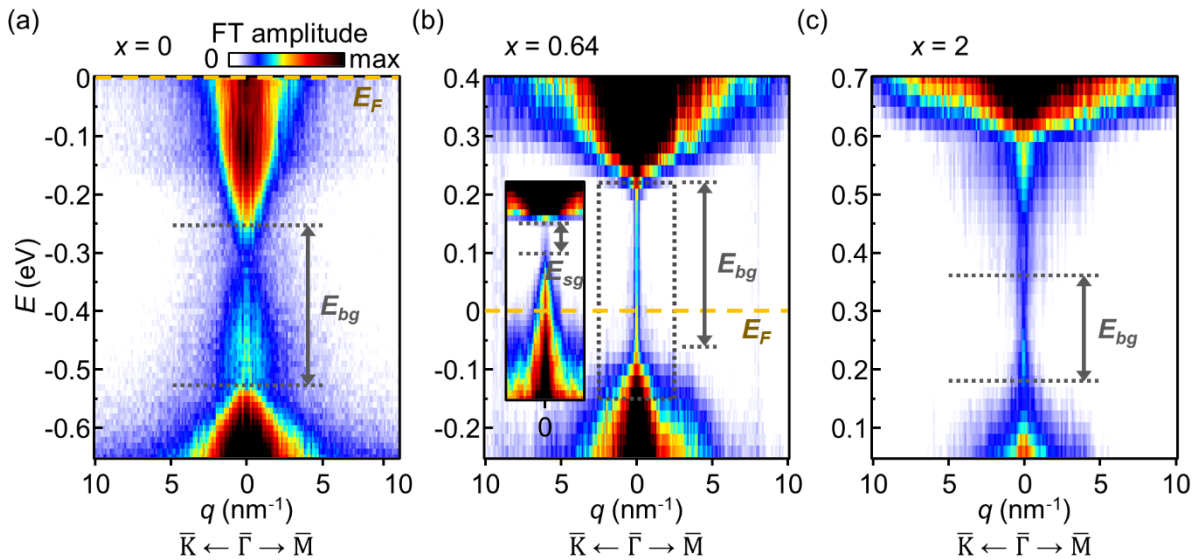


FIG. 2. (a)-(c) Line cuts of QPI along $\bar{\Gamma}$ - \bar{K} and $\bar{\Gamma}$ - \bar{M} directions stacked in energy for MBST with $x = 0, 0.64$, and 2 , respectively (set point $R_T = 0.81, 1.67$, and $0.4 \text{ G}\Omega$, respectively). The energy of states E relative to the Fermi energy E_F is calculated as $E - E_F = eV_s$. Inset in (b) shows the QPI taken with the STM tip closer to the surface (set point $R_T = 1 \text{ G}\Omega$).

To evaluate the surface band gap, we employed the QPI measurement to reveal surface electronic structures [38] for different MBST compositions (see movies in Supplementary Information). Figure 2 displays the line cuts of the QPI maps along $\bar{\Gamma}$ - \bar{K} and $\bar{\Gamma}$ - \bar{M} directions in the Brillouin zone that are stacked vertically in energy. The stacking plot displays dispersions in QPI maps that corresponds to bulk and surface bands with distinct band gaps E_{bg} and E_{sg} , respectively [37]. The QPI map of $x = 0$ compound [Fig. 2(a)] shows strong intensity of dispersing bands at $E < -0.53 \text{ eV}$ and $E > -0.25 \text{ eV}$ which presumably correspond to the bulk valence and conduction bands, respectively. Inside the bulk band gap, there is another dispersing band. We attribute this QPI signal to the topological surface states based on the absence of pronounced intensity spots because of prohibited backscattering [24,27,29,37] and the matching dispersion with the expected backscattering q from ARPES results [11] (see Section 5 in [23]). However, a significant background signal from bulk carriers makes it hard to determine the surface band gap around the Dirac point at $E = -0.31 \text{ eV}$. In contrast, the $x = 2$ compound [Fig. 2(c)] shows an E_{bg} at $0.18 \text{ eV} < E < 0.36 \text{ eV}$ without any dispersing surface bands inside as expected for trivial NIs. Interestingly, the $x = 0.64$ compound [Fig. 2(b)] exhibits the bulk band dispersion at $E < -0.08 \text{ eV}$ and $E > 0.2 \text{ eV}$ with more pronounced bulk band gap due to the large reduction of the bulk carrier density. Still, when the STM tip is brought closer to the surface, dI/dV spectra shows finite signal inside E_{bg} (Fig. S2(a) in [23]), and QPI map reveals additional dispersing bands too

[inset of Fig. 2(b)]. We attribute these bands to the topological surface states which is gapped, because two almost linearly dispersing bands form a Dirac-cone-like structure with strongly reduced intensity at the crossing point. These emerging bands do not originate from external effects, such as the tip-induced band bending of the bulk bands [30,39,40], as verified by various tip height set points (Fig. S3 in [23]). At the Dirac point, the surface band shows a clear gap of $E_{sg} = 50$ meV as a featureless QPI region [inset of Fig. 2(b)] [37]. DFT calculations for $x = 0.64$ compound show the existence of non-trivial topological phase with A-type AFM coupling (Fig. S6 in [23]), and reproduce the surface band gap with size of about 40 meV on the (111)-projected surface (Fig. S7 in [23]). The gap is due to uncompensated magnetic moments on the surface that break both time-reversal and translational symmetries, while the projected surface states on the (110) surface still retain the gapless Dirac dispersion (Fig. S8 in [23]). The good agreement between STM observations and DFT calculations allows us to conclude that the bulk band of the $x = 0.64$ compound is inverted and the topological surface states on the (111) surface are gapped [3-5,41].

B. Differentiation of bulk and surface transport in MBST with four-probe STM

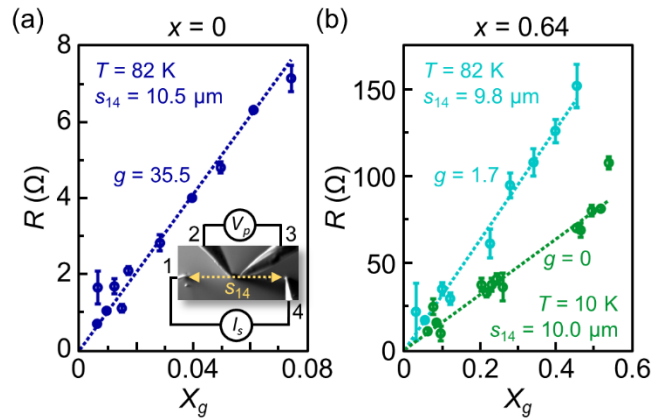


FIG. 3. (a) The $x = 0$ compound shows bulk-dominant conduction. Linear fitting of R - X_g graph taken at $T = 82$ K (dotted line) gives rise to $g = 35.5$ with $\rho_{3D} = 3.04 \text{ m}\Omega\cdot\text{cm}$ and $\rho_{2D} = 102 \text{ }\Omega$. Inset is an SEM image with the schematic of variable probe-spacing four-probe STM measurement (image size $24.5 \times 12 \text{ }\mu\text{m}^2$). (b) The $x = 0.64$ compound shows surface-dominant conduction with a bulk-insulating behavior. Linear fittings of the graphs (dotted lines) give rise to $g = 1.7$, $\rho_{3D} = 182 \text{ m}\Omega\cdot\text{cm}$ and $\rho_{2D} = 318 \text{ }\Omega$ at $T = 82$ K, and $g = 0$, $\rho_{3D} > 1590 \text{ m}\Omega\cdot\text{cm}$ and $\rho_{2D} = 159 \text{ }\Omega$ at $T = 10$ K.

To further confirm the surface nature of the electronic states at the Fermi level in the bulk-insulating MBST, we measured surface transport with a multiprobe STM [42]. We employed a variable probe-spacing transport spectroscopy based on the multiprobe STM, which was developed to efficiently differentiate the bulk and surface conductance [43-45]. Briefly, four-probe resistance R is measured while varying probe distances [inset of Fig. 3(a)], and the resulting plot of R versus X_g is fitted to a linear relationship to obtain a fitting parameter $g \equiv s_{14}\rho_{2D}/\rho_{3D}$ which measures the ratio of bulk to surface conductivity (see Section 1 in Supplemental Material [23]) [43]. Figure 3(a) shows the results of variable probe-spacing spectroscopy for the $x = 0$ compound at $T = 82$ K. The fitted $g = 35.5$, indicating that 97% of the conductivity comes from the bulk channel. The bulk dominant conductance and the obtained bulk resistivity $\rho_{3D} = 3.04 \text{ m}\Omega\cdot\text{cm}$ are consistent with bulk behaviors measured by physical property measurement system (PPMS) [7,21]. In contrast, the measurement on $x = 0.64$ compound at $T = 82$ K gives rise to $g = 1.7$, which indicates that the portion of the surface conductivity has increased to 37 % [Fig. 3(b)]. Furthermore, we find $g = 0$ at 10 K, namely 100% of the conduction comes from the surface channel. The decrease in temperature is found to

increase ρ_{3D} and decrease ρ_{2D} (see Fig. 3 caption for their values), which is consistent with the expected behaviors of TIs [45]. The results provide direct confirmation on the bulk-insulating behavior of $x = 0.64$ compound and the existence of the topological surface states, corroborating well with the QPI results.

C. Magnetic field effect on the electronic structure of MBST

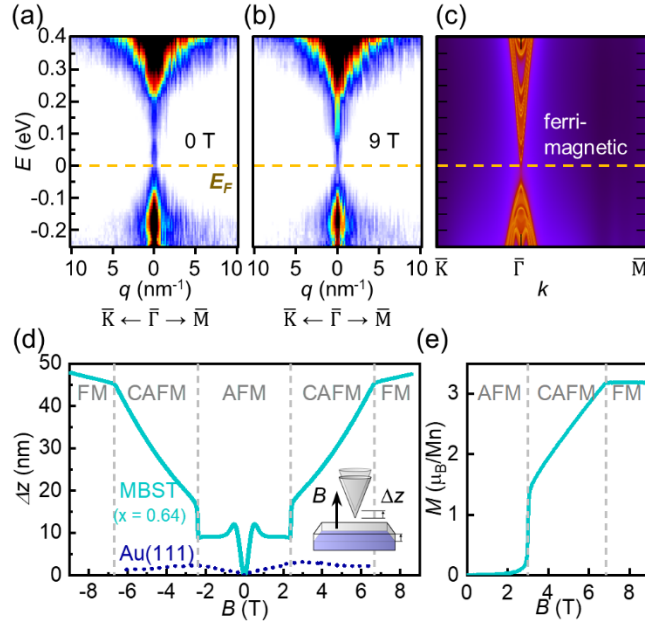


FIG. 4. (a),(b) QPI measured at 0 and 9 T, respectively (set point $R_T = 0.3 \text{ G}\Omega$). (c) DFT calculations of the band structure as projected to (111) surface of $x = 0.64$ compound in the ferrimagnetic state. (d) Magnetostriction measured with STM. Inset shows the scheme of the measurement. (e) The c-axis magnetization measured *ex situ* with PPMS for $x = 0.63$ compound (adapted with permission from the ref. [21]. Copyright 2019 by the American Physical Society).

To gain insight into the effect of magnetic structure on the topological phases of MBST, we performed QPI measurements in magnetic field. Applying 9 T out-of-plane magnetic field is expected to change the interlayer AFM order to FM and suppress the anisotropic fluctuations of the local magnetic moments [21]. QPI maps taken at both 0 and 9 T at the same surface location of the $x = 0.64$ compound are comparatively shown in Fig. 4(a) and (b), respectively. The dispersion relations for both the bulk conduction band at $E > 0.2$ eV and valence band at $E < -0.05$ eV are almost identical for both cases, which shows the robustness of the band structure against the magnetic field. The size of the bulk band gap remains unchanged in magnetic field, indicating that the field-induced FM state is an insulator rather than a WSM [3,5]. We note that both Figs. 4(a) and (b) show QPI signal minimal at 0~0.05 eV, consistent with the measured 50 meV surface band gap, although the weak QPI signal of the surface states makes it hard to resolve the fine structures around the Dirac point at high magnetic field. In addition, the surface states do not show any change in dI/dV spectra as the magnetic field increases from 0 to 8.5 T for $x = 0$ compound (Fig. S5 in [23]) [15]. Therefore, both the bulk and surface states are robust against the out-of-plane magnetic field.

The field-induced AFM to FM transition in MBST is further examined in a magnetostriction effect detected by STM. Magnetostriction comes from magnetoelastic coupling that causes a change in dimensions in response to varying net magnetization in magnetic materials [46]. To detect the magnetostriction, the STM tip was held in the constant current mode, and the change in tip height Δz was recorded while ramping the out-of-plane magnetic field B [inset of Fig.4(d)]. With the increase of B , Δz shows large jumps at ± 2.4 T and clear kinks at ± 6.7 T. These transition points match well the behaviors measured with PPMS as shown in Fig. 4(e), where magnetic transitions occur sequentially from AFM to CAFM and then to FM

states [21]. The change of Δz is mainly due to the magnetoelastic coupling in MBST since much smaller variations in Δz are observed by repeating the measurement on a non-magnetic Au(111). An additional drop in Δz of MBST at 0 T may come from mechanical distortion of the STM stage in response to the magnetic field, since the similar drop, though with smaller magnitude, also occurs to the Au(111).

To understand the topological phases of the MBST in the field-induced FM state, we employed DFT calculations and considered the two different magnetic configurations: FM and ferrimagnetic. Because the measured magnetic moment of Mn in Fig. 4(e) is less than the theoretical prediction of $4\sim 5\mu_B/\text{Mn}$ for Mn^{2+} [4,5,21], we considered the ferrimagnetic case where 1/3 of Mn ions couple antiferromagnetically with the majority of Mn (Fig. S15 in [23]). For the FM case, the $x = 0.64$ compound with bulk experimental lattice parameters is a normal semimetal with zero Chern number (Fig. S9 in [23]). However, in the ferrimagnetic configuration, the $x = 0.64$ compound contains a clear gap [Fig. 4(c)]. The finite bulk band gap is similar to the AFM configuration but the Chern number is a zero (Fig. S10 in [23]) and the corresponding (111) surface shows a surface band gap.

We further investigated the topologies of the FM and ferrimagnetic configurations. Both FM and ferrimagnetic MnBi_2Te_4 have band inversion between Bi-p and Te-p states at the Γ point, but their Chern numbers equal zero (Figs. S11, S12 in [23]). Since the band inversion indicates non-trivial topology, we further calculated the Z_4 value and found $Z_4 = 2$ (Tables S1, S2 in [23]) [47], which indicates that both FM and ferrimagnetic MnBi_2Te_4 are a topological axion insulator with gapped surfaces on both (111) and (110) surfaces (Figs S13, S14 in [23]). The results suggest that $x = 0.64$ compound in magnetic field is also most likely an axion insulator since our alloy model from virtual crystal approximation preserves inversion symmetry in

MnBi₂Te₄. As a result, a transition between two non-trivial topological phases of AFM and ferrimagnetic states would not require a closing of bulk or surface band gap [48].

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by tuning the Fermi level of MBST into the bulk band gap we reveal a surface band gap of 50 meV in the QPI measurement, which is corroborated by multiprobe STM transport spectroscopy and DFT calculations. The good agreement between STM and DFT analyses suggests that the surface magnetic structure remains as A-type AFM [12,49]. Both the surface and bulk band gaps remain unchanged in both AFM and FM states, excluding a possible transition to WSM and suggesting a topological axion insulator in the field-induced FM state. The results provide understanding on the recent demonstration of QAH and axion states which require gapped topological surface states [17,18], and the absence of chiral anomaly that should exist in WSM [10]. The large topological surface band gap of MBST would facilitate the applications for quantum information sciences, such as topological quantum computation with the Majorana bound states at the interface between QAH states and superconductors [50,51].

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Competing Interests statement

The authors declare no competing interests.

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