

1 Acoustic phonon spectrum engineering in bulk crystals via incorporation 2 of dopant atoms

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12 We report results of Brillouin—Mandelstam spectroscopy of transparent Al₂O₃ crystals with Nd
13 dopants. The ionic radius and atomic mass of Nd atoms are distinctively different from those of the
14 host Al atoms. Our results show that even a small concentration of Nd atoms incorporated into
15 the Al₂O₃ samples produces a profound change in the acoustic phonon spectrum. The velocity of the
16 transverse acoustic phonons decreases by ~600 m/s at the Nd density of only ~0.1%. Interestingly,
17 the decrease in the phonon frequency and velocity with the doping concentration is non-monotonic.
18 The obtained results, demonstrating that modification of the acoustic phonon spectrum can be
19 achieved not only by nanostructuring but also by doping, have important implications for thermal
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21 Acoustic phonons make a dominant contribution to
22 thermal transport in electrical insulators and semiconduc-
23 tors and, at the same time, scatter electrons and holes, limit-
24 ing the mobility of the charge carriers.¹ Recent years have
25 witnessed a strong increase of interest to the methods of
26 controlling acoustic phonon transport and scattering by tun-
27 ing the phonon spectrum, i.e., dispersion relation, $\omega(q)$
28 (here, ω is the phonon frequency and q is the phonon wave
29 vector).^{2,3} A possibility of engineering the phonon spec-
30 trum provides an additional tuning capability for changing
31 thermal conductivity over the conventional approach,
32 which involves phonon-boundary scattering.^{4–7} It also
33 allows one to affect the way phonons interact with electrons
34 and light. Until now, the *phonon engineering* approach has
35 been associated with the nanostructured materials, where
36 the phonon dispersion undergoes modification due to the
37 periodic or stationary boundary conditions imposed in addi-
38 tion to the periodicity of the atomic crystal structure.^{4–11} In
39 this method, nanometer scale dimensions are essential in
40 order to reveal the wave nature of the phonons and induce
41 modification in their spectrum via boundaries.^{12–14} The
42 average “gray” phonon mean free path (MFP), Λ , deter-
43 mined from the expression $\Lambda = 3K/C_p v$ is on the order of
44 10 nm–100 nm at room temperature (RT) for many materi-
45 als¹⁵ (here, K is the phonon thermal conductivity, C_p is the
46 specific heat, and v is the phonon group velocity). The latter
47 estimates explain the need for structuring the material and
48 nanometer scale. A strong modification of the acoustic pho-
49 non dispersion has been demonstrated in numerous periodic
50 phononic crystals^{8–11} and even in individual semiconductor
51 nanowires.¹⁶

In this letter, we describe a drastically different
approach for changing the acoustic phonon spectrum of the
materials, which does not rely on nanostructuring. Our
results show that one can engineer the phonon spectrum in
bulk crystals via the introduction of a small concentration of
dopant atoms that have a substantially different size and
mass from those of the host atoms. The importance of the
obtained data goes beyond the development of the traditional
phonon engineering approaches. A noticeable decrease in the
phonon velocity with even an extremely small concentration
of foreign atoms (~0.1%) means that the theoretical descrip-
tion of thermal conductivity, at least in certain cases, e.g.,
large size or mass difference of dopant atoms, should be
adjusted accordingly. Indeed, in the Callaway–Klemens
method and other Boltzmann transport equation approaches,
the effects of doping are accounted for by the introduction of
the phonon-point defect scattering term proportional to the
defect density concentration or fraction of the foreign
atoms.^{17,18} This treatment always assumes that the velocity
of acoustic phonons itself does not change with the doping.
Our results demonstrate that the latter is not always the case.

Commercially available Al₂O₃ (99.99% purity, Taimei
Chemicals, Japan) was processed using current activated
pressure assisted densification (CAPAD)¹⁹ using a similar
method described in Ref. 20. Briefly, the as received (un-
doped) and Nd₂O₃ doped (99.99% purity, Alfa Aesar, USA)
powders were mixed to achieve a doping level (Nd³⁺:
Al³⁺) of 0.1–0.5 at. %. using water and low energy ball
milling, followed by planetary ball milling before densifica-
tion in CAPAD. X-ray diffraction was conducted on a
Phillips instrument (X’Pert Model: DY1145), operating in
the point source mode, 45 kV potential, and 40 mA current
with a 0.002 step size and 4 s integration time. The experi-
mental data were fitted using Gaussian profiles, with the K-
 α_2 contribution removed numerically.

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87 Figure 1(a) is an SEM (Zeiss Sigma 500) micrograph of
 88 a fracture surface of the polycrystalline 0.25 Nd: Al₂O₃
 89 revealing an ~300 nm equiaxed grain structure. The inset in
 90 Fig. 1(a) shows a picture of a representative sample on top of
 91 the printed text. Our samples are transparent because samples
 92 with <0.4 at. % Nd do not have second phases and they
 93 have low Nd segregation to grain boundaries and grain triple
 94 points. Other phases and segregation or both would scatter
 95 light because of refractive index mismatch, significantly
 96 reducing transparency. Figure 1(b) shows XRD patterns near
 97 the (113) plane of the Al₂O₃ and Nd: Al₂O₃ samples. Also
 98 plotted is an ICSD standard (No. 63647) for comparison.
 99 The pure Al₂O₃ shows a peak at the same 2θ location as the
 100 standard confirming the crystal structure, while the doped
 101 samples show a clear peak shift to lower angles, indicating
 102 an expansion of the lattice which is expected from the Nd
 103 doping since the radius of Nd atoms is significantly larger
 104 than that of Al.

105 The structure of the samples was also confirmed by
 106 Raman spectroscopy (Renishaw InVia). The measurements
 107 have been conducted in the backscattering configuration
 108 under 488 nm excitation. Figure 2 shows the Raman spectra
 109 of pristine Al₂O₃ and samples with 0.1% and 0.25% of Nd
 110 dopants. We resolved seven distinct optical phonon peaks at

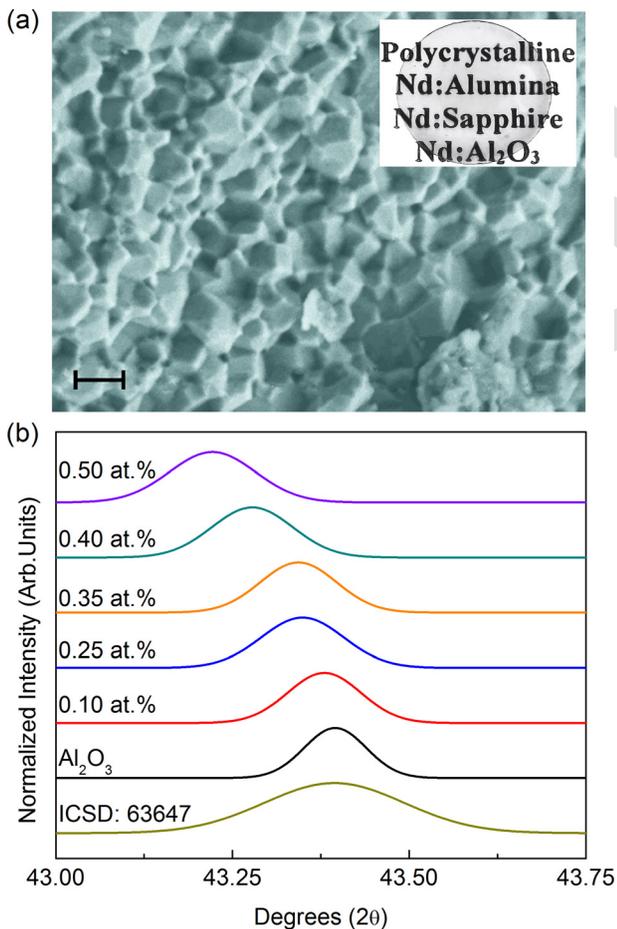


FIG. 1. (a) SEM micrograph of a fracture surface of the polycrystalline 0.25 at. % Nd: Al₂O₃ revealing an ~300 nm equiaxed grain structure. The scale bar is 200 nm. The inset shows a picture of a representative sample on top of the printed text, revealing optical transparency. (b) XRD patterns near the (113) plane of the Al₂O₃ and Nd: Al₂O₃ samples. Also plotted is an ICSD standard (#63647) for comparison.

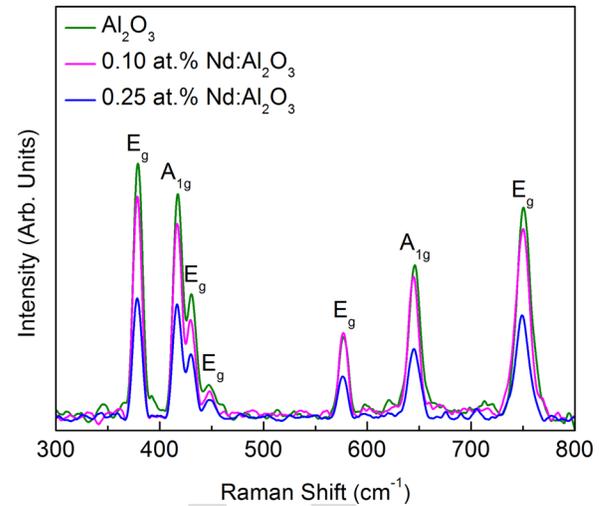


FIG. 2. Raman spectrum of the Al₂O₃, 0.10 at. % Nd: Al₂O₃ and 0.25 at. % Nd: Al₂O₃. As the level of Nd density increases, the Raman peaks except the one at ~430 cm⁻¹ shift to the lower wave numbers. The relative intensity as well as peak position of the Raman peaks confirms the composition, quality, and polycrystalline structure of the samples.

379.0, 418.6, 430.7, 447.1, 576.9, 645.8, and 751.0 cm⁻¹.
 The Raman spectrum is in excellent agreement with the
 previously reported studies.^{21–23} The peaks at 418.6 cm⁻¹ and
 645.8 cm⁻¹ belong to A_{1g} vibrational modes, while the
 others are associated with E_g vibrational bands. The relative
 intensity of these phonon modes varies in accordance with
 the crystallographic directions. It is important to note that all
 optical phonon modes, with the exception of one at
 430.7 cm⁻¹, show some softening with the introduction of
 Nd doping atoms. This is in line with the XRD measure-
 ments, which indicated the shift of the ~43.4° peak to
 smaller angles, suggesting some distortion in the lattice due
 to Nd incorporation. The implications of this observation
 from the Raman and XRD studies will be discussed below.

The Brillouin-Mandelstam light scattering spectroscopy
 (BMS) allows one to directly probe the acoustic phonon fre-
 quencies close to the Brillouin zone (BZ) center.^{24–26} We
 conducted BMS studies in the backscattering configuration.
 In this geometry, the *p*-polarized (the electric field direction
 of the light parallel to the scattering plane) laser light is
 focused on the sample by a lens with a numerical aperture of
 1.4. The scattered light was collected using the same lens
 and directed to a high contrast six pass tandem Fabry-Perot
 interferometer. The spectra were excited with a solid-state
 diode-pumped laser (Coherent) operating at λ = 532 nm.^{27,28}
 In all experiments, the power on the sample was adjusted to
 be 70 mW in order to avoid self-heating effects. The incident
 angle of the laser light with respect to the normal to the sam-
 ple was fixed at 30°. The in-plane rotation did not affect the
 BMS results due to the polycrystalline structure of the sam-
 ples. For each sample, the BMS measurements were repeated
 several times (>5) by focusing light on different spots, in
 order to exclude a possibility of material parameter varia-
 tions over the sample volume. In transparent bulk Al₂O₃
 samples, the volumetric elasto-optic effect is the dominant
 light scattering mechanism by acoustic phonons.^{24–26} For
 this reason, interpretation of BMS data requires a knowledge
 of the refractive index, *n*, of the material. The refractive

index was measured by the “prism coupling” method (Metricon).²⁹ The measurements revealed $n=1.767$ (at $\lambda=532$ nm) in all directions confirming the optically isotropic nature of all the samples. Since the concentration of the Nd dopants is very low (<0.5 wt. %), the Maxwell–Garnett approximation, $n = ((1 - \phi)n_m^2 + \phi n_o^2)^{1/2}$ (n_m and n_o are the refractive indices of Al_2O_3 and Nd , respectively) described the trivial variation in n with high accuracy. The probe phonon wave vector, $q = 4\pi n/\lambda$, for the elasto-optic scattering mechanism was determined to be $q=0.0417$ nm⁻¹ in our samples.

Figure 3 shows BMS data for Al_2O_3 with and without Nd dopants. One can see in Fig. 3(a) that three peaks corresponding to one longitudinal (LA) and two transverse (TA_1 and TA_2) acoustic phonon polarization branches are resolved. The peaks have been fitted and deconvoluted, when required, with individual Lorentzian functions (green curves). The red curve in Fig. 3(a) is the cumulative fitting to the experimental data. For alumina, the LA and two TA

peaks were found at 73.0, 45.6, and 41.3 GHz, respectively. Adding the Nd dopants resulted in an unexpected large decrease in the frequency of all three acoustic phonon peaks. Figure 3(b) shows the evolution of the LA and TA phonon polarization branches in Al_2O_3 as the concentration of Nd dopants increases from 0 to 0.50%. Incorporation of Nd dopants results in a pronounced decrease in the intensity of the phonon peaks and reduction in their frequency. The decrease in the intensity, which was also observed in Raman spectra (see Fig. 2), was attributed to the increase in the light absorption (especially at Nd concentration ≥ 0.4) and the corresponding decrease in the interaction volume for BMS. While the intense LA peak was persistent at all Nd concentrations, the TA peaks could not be resolved in the sample with 0.50% of Nd atoms.

Figures 4(a)–4(c) show the variation of the peak position of LA and TA phonons with the Nd concentration. The frequency mean value and standard deviation have been determined from measurements on different spots of each sample. The results show a surprising sharp decrease in the acoustic phonon frequency with the concentration of Nd as low as 0.1%. This was observed consistently for each phonon polarization branch. Adding more dopants, up to 0.4%, leads to a much weaker decrease in the phonon frequency. The frequency of the LA phonon starts to decrease faster again as the Nd concentration reaches 0.5%. Overall, the frequencies of TA branches are affected stronger than that of LA branch. While the frequency difference of LA phonons for pristine alumina and 0.4% $Nd: Al_2O_3$ is ~ 1 GHz, it exceeds ~ 4.5 GHz for TA modes. BMS probes the phonons with wave vector close to the BZ center. Since in this region, the dispersion of the acoustic phonons is linear and $\omega(q=0)=0$, one can determine the phonon group velocity (sound velocity) knowing the frequency at one value of the phonon wave vector. Table I reports the group velocity of different branches as a function of Nd concentration.

Elasticity theory relates the phonon velocity to material properties as $v = (E/\rho)^{1/2}$, where E is the Young’s modulus

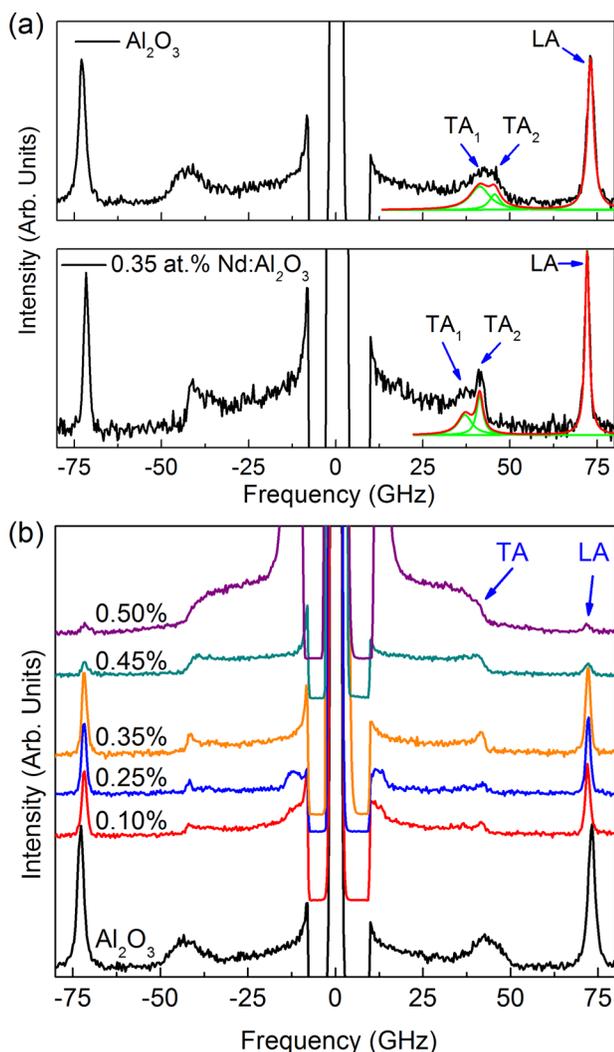


FIG. 3. (a) Brillouin-Mandelstam scattering spectra for the pure Al_2O_3 and 0.35 at. % $Nd: Al_2O_3$. The experimental data (black curve) have been fitted using individual (green curve) and cumulative (red curve) Lorentzian fittings. The regular longitudinal (LA) and transverse (TA) acoustic phonons are present in both spectra. (b) Evolution of the spectrum with the increasing Nd doping level. Note the decrease in frequency of LA and TA phonons of pure Al_2O_3 upon increasing the Nd density to 0.1% and more.

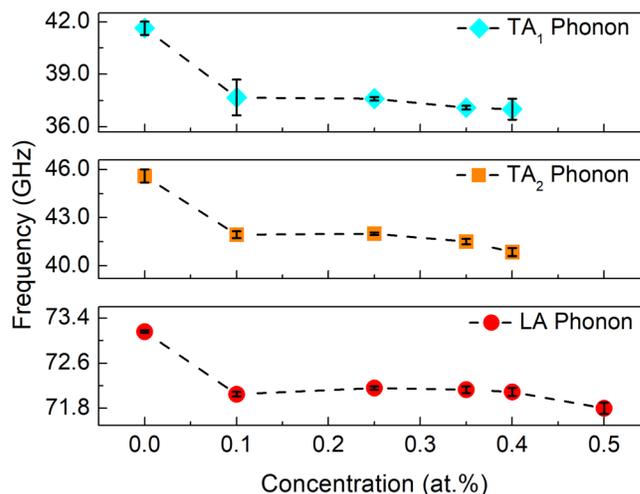


FIG. 4. Peak position of LA and TA phonon polarization branches in Brillouin spectra versus Nd density. The frequency of LA and both TA phonon branches decreases with the increasing Nd concentration non-monotonically. Note that even the smallest 0.1 at. % concentration of Nd results in a noticeable decrease in the phonon frequency, and, correspondingly, group velocity.

TABLE I. Phonon group velocity in Al₂O₃ for different *Nd* doping concentrations.

Sample	TA group velocity (m/s)	TA group velocity (m/s)	LA group velocity (m/s)
Al ₂ O ₃	6269.0	6864.8	11012.7
0.10 at% <i>Nd</i> :Al ₂ O ₃	5670.0	6311.7	10845.6
0.25 at% <i>Nd</i> :Al ₂ O ₃	5660.8	6320.5	10862.8
0.35 at% <i>Nd</i> :Al ₂ O ₃	5583.1	6247.9	10858.3
0.40 at% <i>Nd</i> :Al ₂ O ₃	5539.8	6178.1	10861.3
0.50 at% <i>Nd</i> :Al ₂ O ₃	10802.6

and ρ is the mass density. Since the concentration of *Nd* is extremely small, one would expect equally small changes due to the mass density variation. The probable scenario is that the introduction of *Nd* dopants changes the elastic properties of the lattice. The atomic mass difference, although large between *Al* and *Nd* (factor of $\times 5$), is unlikely to change the frequency of vibrations, again due to the small concentration of dopants. A possible mechanism can be related to the lattice distortion created by larger *Nd* atoms (factor of $\times 2$ bigger than *Al*), which is accompanied by increased atomic plane separation, in line with Raman and XRD data. This can also account for the observed abrupt decrease at the smallest concentration of *Nd* (0.1%) followed by a weaker dependence at higher *Nd* concentrations. The smaller further reduction, as the concentration continues to increase, could be due to various effects, e.g., dopant clustering in the crystal volume or at grain boundaries. At substantially higher densities of the dopant atoms, one can expect the modification in the phonon spectrum due to the changes in the atomic mass and interaction constants between the atoms. Complete understanding of the mechanism of the phonon frequency change requires detailed microscopic studies and *ab initio* theory, which goes beyond the scope of this work.

It is interesting to assess implications of the phonon velocity reduction for thermal transport and phonon interaction with other elemental excitations. The phonon thermal conductivity can be written as $K = (1/3)Cv\Lambda = (1/3)Cv^2\tau$, where the phonon life-time, τ , can be expressed through the phonon scattering rates in two main relaxation mechanisms: anharmonic phonon Umklapp scattering and phonon-point defect scattering so that $\tau^{-1} = \tau_U^{-1} + \tau_P^{-1}$, where τ_U^{-1} and τ_P^{-1} are the scattering rates in the Umklapp and point defect processes, respectively. The phonon scattering rate on point defects $1/\tau_P \propto V_0(\omega^4/v^3)\Gamma$, where V_0 is the volume per atom in the crystal lattice, ω is the phonon frequency, and Γ is the strength of the phonon-point defect scattering, which depends on the fraction of the foreign atoms. In the perturbation theory, Γ is written as^{17,18}

$$\Gamma = \sum f_i \left[(1 - M_i/\bar{M})^2 + \varepsilon(\gamma(1 - R_i/\bar{R}))^2 \right]. \quad (1)$$

Here, f_i is the fractional concentration of the substitutional foreign atoms, M_i is the mass of the *i*th substitutional atom, $\bar{M} = \sum f_i M_i$ is the average atomic mass, R_i is the Pauling ionic radius of the *i*th foreign atom, $\bar{R} = \sum f_i R_i$ is the average radius, γ is the Grüneisen parameter, and ε is a phenomenological parameter. One can see from these formulas that

the effect of dopants on thermal conductivity is accounted via the τ_P^{-1} term: it is proportional to the concentration, and it grows with the increasing difference in the atomic radius and mass between the host and the foreign atoms. Conventional theory does not consider any variation in the phonon velocity and assumes that v remains unchanged after the doping.^{17,18,30,31} Our results show that in alumina, and presumably in other rather common materials, and at very small concentrations of dopants, the assumption of the constant phonon velocity is not strictly valid. The effect of the dopant introduction can be amplified via the velocity change and affect the thermal conductivity values, particularly at low temperature where Umklapp scattering is minimal. The effects of the phonon velocity reduction are not limited to heat conduction. They can also reveal themselves in electron–acoustic phonon scattering, electron–photon interaction, which involve phonons, and electron–hole non-radiative recombination. Examples of the latter include phonon-assisted non-radiative recombination in the Auger processes, where electron–acoustic phonon coupling is inversely proportional to the phonon group velocity.^{32,33} We should emphasize again that the observed effect is different from the phonon spectrum modification in materials with the large concentration of defects, or isotope engineered bulk crystals or two-dimensional materials, where the entire vibrational spectrum changes due to the replacement of atoms with different masses.^{34–40} It is also different from the lattice softening observed in some alloys.⁴¹ In our case, the changes are related to the host lattice distortion induced by the introduction of a small concentration of dopants with substantially different sizes or masses.

In summary, we observed that the velocity of acoustic phonons can be changed by even a small concentration of dopants with distinctively different atomic sizes and masses. The obtained results, demonstrating a possibility of phonon engineering in bulk crystals, have important implications for thermal management as well as thermoelectric and optoelectronic devices.

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