

# Negative Capacitance Dual-Gated ISFETs as Ultra-Sensitive pH Sensors

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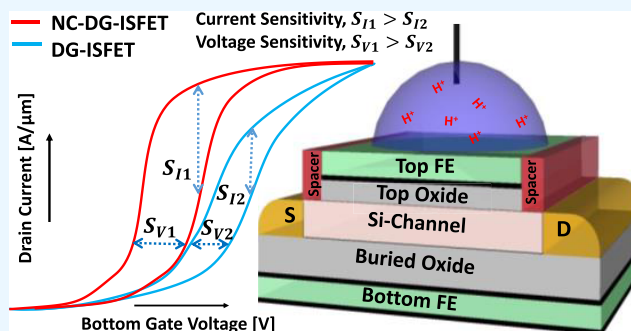
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**ABSTRACT:** Ion-sensitive field-effect transistors (ISFETs) are promising candidates for next-generation pH sensors, enabling highly sensitive and label-free biomolecular and chemical detection. Emerging FETs based on the negative capacitance (NC) effect offer steep-subthreshold switching and higher drive current simply by integrating a ferroelectric (FE) material into the gate stack. Here, we propose a novel NC dual-gated ISFET (NC-DG-ISFET)-based pH sensor, with FE layers integrated into both the top and the bottom gate stacks. The current and voltage sensitivities of the proposed device are extracted from its transfer characteristics, obtained by combining the numerical solutions of the one-dimensional (1D) Landau-Khalatnikov (L-K) equation with three-dimensional (3D) technology computer-aided design (TCAD) simulations. Results show that the NC-DG-ISFET can surpass the sensitivity of some of the state-of-the-art DG-ISFET pH sensors. The inclusion of the FE layers into the gate stacks of a baseline DG-ISFET leads to 51% reduction in subthreshold swing (SS), causing a 5× increase in current sensitivity ( $S_I$ ) in the subthreshold region of operation and a 2× increase in voltage sensitivity ( $S_V$ ). The influence of channel thickness and channel length on the sensor performance is also investigated. The findings presented here provide a new pathway to leverage the steep-switching behavior of NCFETs for the next generation of highly sensitive and label-free DG-ISFET pH sensors.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Measurement of hydrogen ion concentration or pH plays a vital role in disease diagnostics, environmental monitoring, food processing, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, and other relevant industrial applications.<sup>1,2</sup> Electrochemical reactions involving pH changes were traditionally monitored via optical or electrochemical (potentiometric and voltammetric) measurement systems. However, despite offering high sensitivity, optical setups are bulky and require sophisticated and expensive instrumentation, while the three-electrode systems, in most cases, are not suitable for mass production and system integration.<sup>3,4</sup> In recent times, pH sensors based on ion-sensitive field-effect transistors (ISFETs) have attracted a great deal of interest due to their compact size, high sensitivity, fast response time, low cost, and compatibility with existing complementary metal-oxide semiconductor (CMOS) processes.<sup>5,6</sup> Moreover, ISFETs can be functionalized to detect a wide variety of biomolecules, making them useful for numerous biochemical applications. Unlike conventional metal-oxide semiconductor field-effect transistors (MOSFETs), the metal gate in ISFETs is replaced by a reference electrode, also known as the floating or fluid gate, dipped into an electrolyte solution. A fixed electrostatic potential is applied to the electrolytic solution by the reference electrode, which also enables the application of a fluid-gate bias ( $V_{FG}$ ) to the

ISFET. Changes in pH in the electrolyte solution modulate the surface potential ( $\Psi$ ) at the interface of the electrolyte and the oxide, causing a shift in the threshold voltage and a corresponding change in drain current.<sup>7</sup>

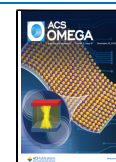
The performance of ISFETs is characterized by their voltage and current sensitivities. In the constant current mode, the voltage sensitivity ( $S_V$ ) of an ISFET is defined as the change in gate voltage ( $\Delta V_G$ ) that is needed to restore the drain current to its original value, following a change in pH ( $\Delta \text{pH}$ ), i.e.,  $S_V = (\Delta V_G)/(\Delta \text{pH})$ . At room temperature,  $S_V$  for single-gated ISFETs is fundamentally limited to the Nernstian value of  $[\ln(10) kT/q]$  per unit pH change or 59 mV/pH.<sup>8</sup> Over the past few decades, many research efforts have been directed toward enhancing the  $S_V$  of ISFETs beyond the Nernst limit. These include the use of new channel materials and sensing films, bias conditions, device geometries, and gate topologies of ISFETs.<sup>9–12</sup> One of the most widely used techniques to

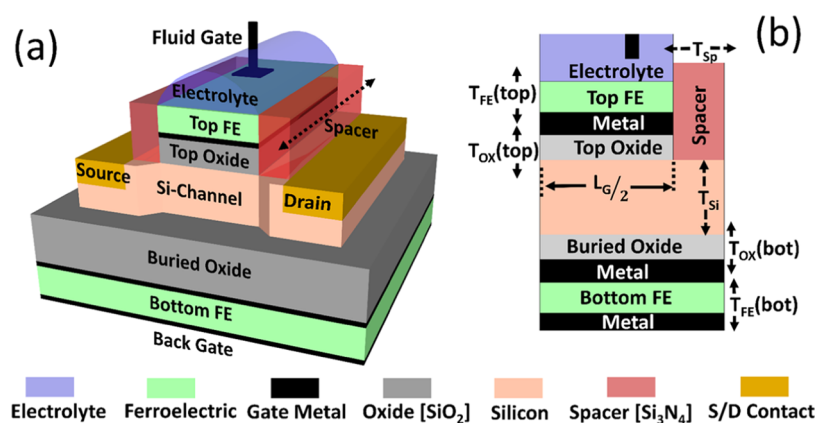
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**Figure 1.** (a) Three-dimensional (3D) schematic (b) cross-sectional view of the proposed NC-DG-ISFET pH sensor showing the top and bottom gate stacks.

enhance  $S_V$  beyond the Nernst limit is to use a double-gated ISFET (DG-ISFET).<sup>13–16</sup> DG-ISFETs take advantage of the capacitive coupling between the top (fluid) and the bottom gates, allowing small changes in  $\Psi$  to be amplified without the need for additional amplifier circuits or extended gates.<sup>17</sup>

The current sensitivity ( $S_I$ ) of an ISFET, at a fixed gate voltage, is defined as the relative change in drain current ( $\Delta I_D/I_D$ ) caused by a change in pH ( $\Delta\text{pH}$ ). In practice, the maximum  $S_I$  in FET-based biosensors is limited by the transistor's subthreshold swing (SS), which at room temperature has a minimum value of 60 mV/dec. Enhancing  $S_I$  requires ISFETs with steep-slope transfer characteristics. Previous studies have demonstrated highly sensitive biosensors and pH sensors by exploiting the steep-switching characteristics of tunnel FETs.<sup>18–20</sup> More recently, researchers have focused on leveraging the steep-subthreshold swing in negative capacitance FETs (NCFETs) to boost the  $S_I$  of ISFETs in the weak inversion region.<sup>21</sup> The ultralow power application of NCFETs, attributed to the reduced SS, has been demonstrated in practical inverter ring oscillator circuits.<sup>22</sup> Following the same principle, the proposed NC-ISFETs can offer excellent noise performance and a higher overdrive of the sensor, also leading to low power consumption.<sup>23</sup> In our previous study, we used technology computer-aided design (TCAD) simulations to demonstrate a negative capacitance gate-all-around tunnel FET (NC-GAA-TFET)-based biosensor.<sup>24</sup> The proposed device combined the benefits of the NC effect and quantum mechanical band-to-band-tunneling to achieve  $S_I$  as high as  $10^5$ , with excellent noise performance. However, despite the improvements in  $S_I$ , enhancing  $S_V$  beyond the Nernst limit, in NC-ISFETs, remained a challenge.

In this work, we propose a negative capacitance dual-gated ISFET (NC-DG-ISFET) where a thin layer of ferroelectric (FE) material is inserted into the top (fluid) and bottom gate stacks. The capacitive coupling between the two gates enhances the voltage sensitivity, while the current sensitivity increases due to the NC effect introduced by the FE layers. To the best of our knowledge, this work is the first use of the NC effect to simultaneously achieve high voltage and current sensitivities in DG-ISFET devices. The remainder of the review is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the proposed device structure followed by the simulation approach and the calibration of the TCAD model. Section 3 presents an evaluation of the sensing performance of NC-DG-ISFET

under different biasing modes. Finally, the key findings are summarized in Section 4.

## 2. DEVICE STRUCTURE AND SIMULATION APPROACH

Figure 1(a) shows the three-dimensional (3D) schematic of the simulated NC-DG-ISFET with its cross-section presented in Figure 1(b). Despite the promise of improved sensing performance, the experimental studies on NC-DG-ISFETs are yet to be conducted, due to the difficult fabrication process of a double gate structure,<sup>25</sup> as well as finding suitable gate dielectric and FE materials with excellent CMOS compatibility and immunity against chemical solutions. Moreover, thick body DG FETs can degrade device performance by making the coupling ratio unstable and producing leakage currents.<sup>17</sup> To overcome some of these challenges, the proposed NC-DG-ISFET can be fabricated on a silicon-on-insulator (SOI) substrate, following the process reported by Jang et al.<sup>26</sup> and Park et al.<sup>27</sup> with additional steps to incorporate the FE layer in both the top and the bottom gate stacks. Al-doped hafnium oxide (Al:HfO<sub>2</sub>) is used as the FE material due to its considerable ferroelectric nature and high compatibility to existing CMOS processes.<sup>28</sup> The thin film of Al:HfO<sub>2</sub> can be grown using standard deposition techniques like atomic layer deposition (ALD) as described in detail by Nourbakhsh et al.<sup>29</sup> The top gate FE layer (Al:HfO<sub>2</sub>) is in contact with the electrolyte solution, where a change in pH is modeled as a change in the surface potential at the FE/electrolyte interface. This is in line with previous studies that have reported highly sensitive ISFET<sup>30</sup> and NC-ISFET<sup>21</sup> with HfO<sub>2</sub> and Si:HfO<sub>2</sub> as the sensing membrane, respectively. The nominal device parameters used in the simulations are listed in Table 1.

In accordance with the previous reports<sup>21,24</sup> on NCFET-based biosensors, a ferroelectric-metal–insulator–semiconductor (FMIS) structure has been considered in this study. When a metal layer is introduced between the FE and the dielectric, gate leakage through the FE degrades the stability and reliability of the device by causing the polarization of the FE material to slip outside the stable negative slope region in the polarization vs electric field plot of the FE material.<sup>31</sup> Although gate leakage current can practically make the FMIS NCFETs unstable,<sup>32</sup> by discharging the polarization charges of the FE layer, the effect can be ignored for thicker gate oxides.<sup>33,34</sup> Moreover, Khan et al.<sup>35</sup> showed that stability concern due to gate leakage in FMIS structure can be resolved by appropriate

**Table 1. Input Device Parameters Used in the TCAD Simulation**

symbol	parameter	value
$L_G$	channel length	300 nm
$T_{si}$	channel thickness	20 nm
$N_{ch}$	channel doping	$10^{16} \text{ cm}^{-3}$
$N_{S/D}$	source/drain doping	$10^{20} \text{ cm}^{-3}$
$T_{ox}(\text{top})$	top oxide thickness	10 nm
$T_{ox}(\text{bot})$	bottom oxide thickness	100 nm
$T_{FE}(\text{top})$	top FE thickness	60 nm
$T_{FE}(\text{bot})$	bottom FE thickness	80 nm
$T_{stern}$	stern layer thickness	0.3 nm
$L_{spacer}$	spacer thickness	20 nm

work function engineering of metals used in the external electrode and the intermediate layer. Employing pulsed measurements to substantiate NC effects in FMIS configurations has also been reported, as fast pulsed biasing allows investigation of the device response before leakage can discharge the capacitors.<sup>36,37</sup> In addition, the internal metal layer between the FE and the gate oxide ensures uniform polarization in the FE material despite changes in drain bias and simplifies TCAD simulations by allowing the FE layer to be treated as a capacitor added in series with the underlying FET.<sup>38</sup>

The simulation of transport and electrostatic characteristics of the baseline ISFET was carried out with the help of ATLAS (SILVACO) TCAD. Previous studies have reported commercial TCAD-based models with accurate characterization of ISFETs.<sup>39–41</sup> In this method, the electrolyte is modeled by exploiting the similarity between the equations for mobile ions in the electrolyte and those for charge carriers in semiconductors. Thus, an intrinsic semiconductor with zero bandgap and a constant permittivity of water ( $\epsilon \approx 80$ , water) is used to represent a monovalent symmetric (1:1) electrolyte within the TCAD framework. The relation between the effective density of states in the conduction ( $N_C$  in  $\text{cm}^{-3}$ ) and valence bands ( $N_V$  in  $\text{cm}^{-3}$ ) of the semiconductor and the molar ion concentration ( $c_0$  in mol/L) of the bulk electrolyte is given by

$$N_C = N_V = \begin{cases} 10^{-3} \cdot N_{Av} (c_0 + cH_{\text{bulk}}), & \text{for } \text{pH}_{\text{bulk}} \leq 7 \\ 10^{-3} \cdot N_{Av} \left( c_0 + \frac{10^{-14}}{cH_{\text{bulk}}} \right), & \text{for } \text{pH}_{\text{bulk}} > 7 \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

where  $c_0$  is fixed at  $10^{-3}$  mol/L,  $N_{Av}$  is the Avogadro's number, and  $cH_{\text{bulk}} = [H_{\text{bulk}}^+] = 10^{-\text{pH}_{\text{bulk}}}$  is the hydrogen ion

concentration in the bulk electrolyte, normalized to 1 mol/L. The formulation of surface charge density at the FE/electrolyte interface is obtained from the well-known site-binding model.<sup>42</sup> This is implemented in TCAD with the help of user-defined interface acceptor and donor traps, with trap parameters being tuned with site-binding parameters of  $\text{HfO}_2$ .<sup>43</sup> The Stern layer, where the net ionic charge is zero, is represented by a thin semiconductor film with low density of states ( $N_C = N_V$ ).<sup>44</sup> The Shockley–Read–Hall (SRH) and Auger recombination model,<sup>45</sup> Lombardi and field-dependent mobility model,<sup>46</sup> and dopant-dependent bandgap narrowing model<sup>47</sup> were considered in the simulation. Additionally, the Bohm quantum correction model was applied to account for quantum confinement at nanoscale dimensions.<sup>48</sup>

Current ( $I_D$ ) and gate charge ( $Q_G$ ) as a function of the applied gate bias are obtained from the self-consistent solution of Poisson's equations and current continuity equations. Extracted results are used to model the FE capacitor with the help of the single-domain phenomenological Landau-Khalatnikov (L-K) equation. The polarization ( $P$ ) across the FE material is related to the external electric field ( $E_{\text{ext}}$ ) by the equation<sup>49</sup>

$$E_{\text{ext}} = 2\alpha P + 4\beta P^3 + 6\gamma P^5 \quad (2)$$

where  $\alpha = -3 \times 10^9$  m/F,  $\beta = 6 \times 10^{11}$   $\text{m}^5/\text{C}^2\text{F}$ , and  $\gamma = 0$  are the Landau coefficients, representing bulk material parameters of  $\text{Al:HfO}_2$ . The voltage across the FE,  $V_{FE}$ , can be obtained from (eq 2) as

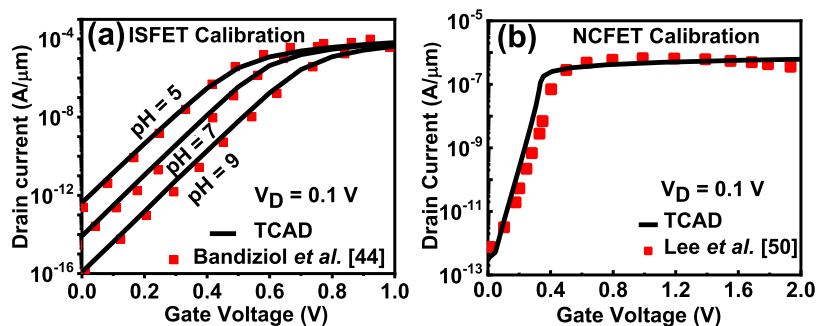
$$V_{FE} = [2\alpha Q_G + 4\beta Q_G^3] T_{FE} \quad (3)$$

with  $T_{FE}$  being the thickness of the FE layer. The effect of the depolarization field and gate leakage has been ignored to exclusively focus on sensing performance.

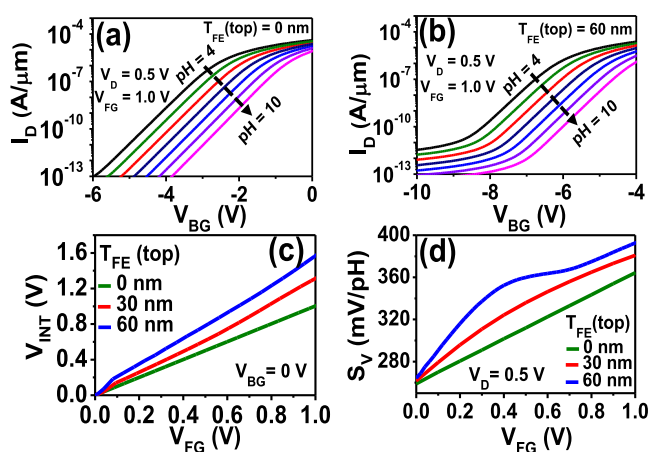
To validate the TCAD models that are used to simulate the proposed NC-DG-ISFET, we calibrate both the ISFET and NCFET models against experimental results reported in the literature. Figure 2(a) shows the calibration of the ISFET model<sup>44</sup> at different pH values, while calibration of the transfer characteristics of a planar NCFET device<sup>50</sup> is presented in Figure 2(b).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The proposed NC-DG-ISFET is operated by sweeping the bottom gate voltage ( $V_{BG}$ ) while holding the fluid gate at a fixed bias ( $V_{FG}$ ). For a range of pH values, Figure 3(a) shows the transfer characteristics ( $I_D - V_{BG}$ ) plot of a baseline DG-ISFET (i.e., a NC-DG-ISFET with  $T_{FE}(\text{top}) = T_{FE}(\text{bot}) = 0$  nm) when  $V_{FG} = 1.0$  V. A change in the pH of the electrolyte



**Figure 2.** Calibration of the TCAD simulation results with experimental data for (a) ISFET and (b) NCFET.



**Figure 3.** Transfer characteristics ( $I_D - V_{BG}$ ) of DG-ISFET extracted at different pH values with top gate ferroelectric thickness,  $T_{FE}$  (top), taken as (a) 0 nm and (b) 60 nm at  $V_D = 0.5$  V and  $V_{FG} = 1.0$  V. (c) Potential drop ( $V_{INT}$ ) across the internal metal gate as a function of fluid-gate voltage ( $V_{FG}$ ) with back-gate bias ( $V_{BG}$ ) set to 0 V and (d) voltage sensitivity ( $S_V$ ) as a function of  $V_{FG}$  at  $V_D = 0.5$  V for different values of  $T_{FE}$  (top). Bottom gate ferroelectric thickness,  $T_{FE}$  (bot), in (a–d) is kept at 0 nm.

solution modulates the surface charge at the interface of the FE and the electrolyte, causing a shift in the  $I_D - V_{BG}$  characteristics. For the same pH range, Figure 3(b) illustrates the  $I_D - V_{BG}$  behavior at  $V_{FG} = 1.0$  V, with  $T_{FE}$  (top) = 60 nm and  $T_{FE}$  (bot) = 0 nm, clearly showing the left shift of the transfer characteristics when compared to the baseline device in Figure 3(a). This shift can be explained in terms of the NC effect brought about by inclusion of the FE layer in the top gate stack.

The use of negative FE capacitance ( $C_{FE} < 0$ ) lowers the subthreshold swing (SS) of the NC-DG-ISFET device by making the total capacitance,  $C_{total} = (C_{FE}^{-1} + C_{ISFET}^{-1})^{-1}$ , larger than the capacitance of the baseline counterpart ( $C_{ISFET}$ ). Here,  $C_{ISFET}$  consists of the electrolyte and the MOS capacitance connected in series and is given by  $C_{ISFET} = (C_{electrolyte}^{-1} + C_{MOS}^{-1})^{-1}$ . SS can be lowered by matching  $C_{FE}$  with  $C_{MOS}$ , which can be done by varying the  $T_{FE}$  since  $C_{FE}$  varies inversely with  $T_{FE}$ . Although a thicker FE enhances the NC effect, increasing  $T_{FE}$  over a critical thickness introduces hysteresis and makes the device unstable. Therefore, capacitance matching was carefully performed by extracting the  $C_{MOS}$  at low drain bias (i.e., the linear region of the transfer characteristics) and  $T_{FE}$  was chosen appropriately to avoid

hysteresis at all biases. As  $V_{FG}$  increases (with  $V_{BG} = 0$  V), the presence of the FE increases the potential drop ( $V_{INT}$ ) across the internal metal gate, as shown in Figure 3(c). The thicker the FE layer, the higher the  $V_{INT}$  at any given  $V_{FG}$ . The voltage sensitivity,  $S_V$ , can be expressed as<sup>8</sup>

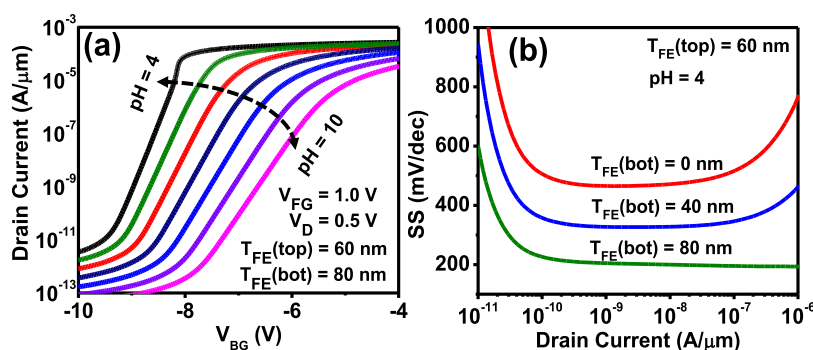
$$S_V = \frac{\Delta V_{BG}}{\Delta pH} = \frac{\Delta V_{FG}}{\Delta pH} \times \left( \frac{C_{top}}{C_{bot}} \right) \quad (4)$$

where  $\Delta V_{BG}/\Delta pH$  and  $\Delta V_{FG}/\Delta pH$  represent the changes in bottom and fluid-gate bias with changes in pH, and  $C_{bot}$  and  $C_{top}$  denote the capacitive coupling of the Si channel with the bottom and top gates, respectively. At low  $V_{FG}$ , the top channel is under depletion and the bottom channel is under inversion such that the Si body capacitance contributes to  $C_{top}$ , lowering the value of  $C_{top}$  and  $S_V$ . Higher  $V_{FG}$  (thicker  $T_{FE}$  (top)) drives the top channel to inversion, eliminating the effect of the Si body capacitance and increasing the  $S_V$ , as shown in Figure 3(d) for different values of  $T_{FE}$ . The highest value of  $T_{FE}$  (top) is fixed at 60 nm because beyond this value the device shows hysteresis and becomes unstable. It is obvious from Figure 3(d) that the inclusion of the FE layer in the top gate stack significantly boosts the  $S_V$  of a baseline DG-ISFET at a higher fluid-gate bias.

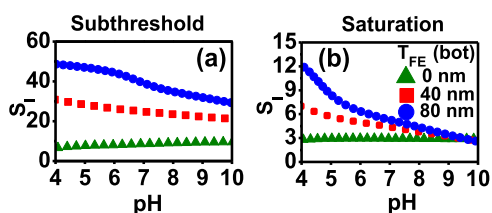
Next, we investigate the effect of adding FE layers in both the bottom and top gate stacks. Figure 4(a) shows the transfer characteristics ( $I_D - V_{BG}$  at  $V_{FG} = 1.0$  V) of the NC-DG-ISFET with  $T_{FE}$  (top) = 60 nm and  $T_{FE}$  (bot) = 80 nm. With  $T_{FE}$  (top) fixed at 60 nm, the thickness of the bottom FE,  $T_{FE}$  (bot), is varied to obtain the lowest SS, without causing any hysteresis. Figure 4(b) illustrates how the SS changes with  $T_{FE}$  (bot) when  $T_{FE}$  (top) = 60 nm. Results show that, in comparison to  $T_{FE}$  (bot) = 0 nm, the SS of the NC-DG-ISFET device is reduced by approximately 30 and 51% when  $T_{FE}$  (bot) = 40 and 80 nm, respectively.

The reduction in SS, due to the NC effect, leads to enhanced current sensitivity ( $S_i$ ) in the subthreshold regime, which is consistent with our recent study on NC-based gate-all-around tunnel FET biosensors.<sup>24</sup> Figure 5(a,b) summarizes the current sensitivities obtained from the subthreshold and the saturation region of the transfer characteristics, respectively. Compared to the baseline device, which has  $T_{FE}$  (top) =  $T_{FE}$  (bot) = 0 nm, there is a 3× and 5× enhancement in  $S_i$  in the subthreshold region, when  $T_{FE}$  (bot) = 40 and 80 nm, respectively. In both cases,  $T_{FE}$  (top) was fixed at 60 nm.

For any given pH value, the back-gate voltage ( $V_{BG}$ ), at a fixed drain current (in this case,  $10^{-9}$  A), is defined as the

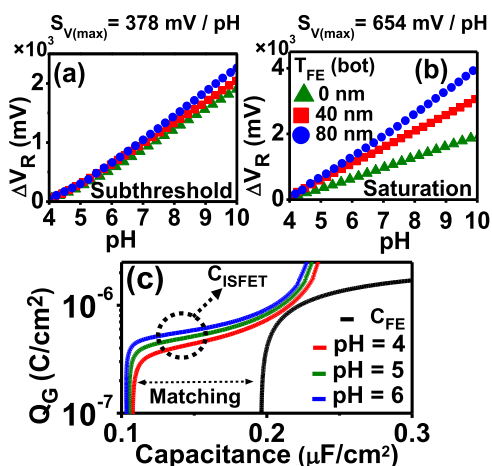


**Figure 4.** (a) Transfer characteristics ( $I_D - V_{BG}$ ) of NC-DG-ISFET for different pH values with  $T_{FE}$  (bot) = 80 nm and  $T_{FE}$  (top) = 60 nm; (b) SS vs  $I_D$  of NC-DG-ISFET for varying  $T_{FE}$  (bot), at pH = 4, with  $T_{FE}$  (top) fixed at 60 nm.



**Figure 5.** Current sensitivity ( $S_I$ ) of NC-DG-ISFET measured in (a) subthreshold and (b) saturation region of operation, as a function of pH at  $T_{FE}$  (bot) = 0, 40, and 80 nm. In each case,  $T_{FE}$  (top) = 60 nm.

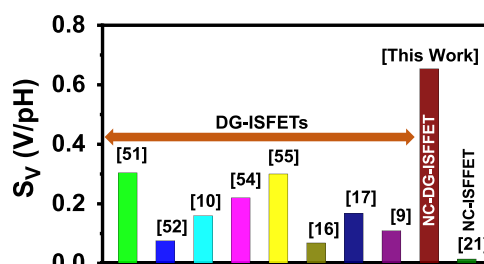
responsive voltage ( $V_R$ ).<sup>12</sup> Figure 6(a,b) shows  $\Delta V_R$  vs  $\Delta pH$  plots in the subthreshold and saturation regions, respectively.



**Figure 6.** (a) Voltage sensitivity ( $S_V$ ) measured in the (a) subthreshold and (b) saturation region; (c) capacitance matching between  $C_{ISFET}$  and  $C_{FE}$  for different pH values at  $V_D = 0.05$  V.

$S_V$ , which is obtained from the slope, increases with increasing  $T_{FE}$  (bot), especially in the saturation region. Any change in  $V_R$  (i.e.,  $\Delta V_R$ ), due to a change in pH (i.e.,  $\Delta pH$ ), is proportional to the shift in internal voltage (i.e.,  $\Delta \Psi$ ) where  $\Delta \Psi = 2.303(k_B T/q)\Delta pH$ .  $\Delta \Psi$  is identical for the baseline and NC device. However, the dynamic balance between the capacitive coupling of the two gates of DG-ISFET and the capacitance matching between  $C_{FE}$  and  $C_{ISFET}$  governs the voltage sensitivity of the NC-DG-ISFET pH sensor. Figure 6(c) shows the capacitance matching between  $C_{FE}$  and  $C_{ISFET}$  for different pH values.  $C_{ISFET}$  varies with changes in pH, which, in turn, determines the internal voltage amplification and therefore affects the shifts between curves for different pH values in the NC-DG-ISFET. Hence, changes in pH induce variation in both the surface charge density at the oxide-electrolyte interface and in the potential in the internal node, leading to a 2× increase in  $S_V$  (with respect to the baseline device) in the saturation region when  $T_{FE}$  (bot) = 80 nm and  $T_{FE}$  (top) = 60 nm.

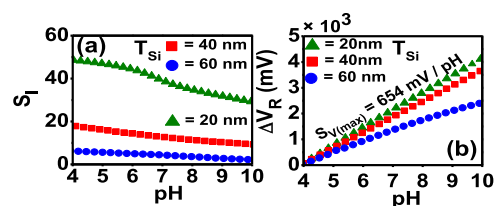
For realistic performance benchmarking,  $S_V$  is taken as the figure-of-merit and maximum  $S_V$  of the proposed NC-DG-ISFET device is compared with the voltage sensitivities obtained from fabricated baseline dual-gated ISFETs<sup>9,10,16,26,51–55</sup> and a fabricated NC-ISFET<sup>21</sup> reported in the literature. Some of these results are summarized in the bar plot in Figure 7. Until now, only Bellando et al.<sup>21</sup> experimentally demonstrated a practical NC-ISFET device and reported a  $S_V$  of 14 mV/pH, which is also included in the



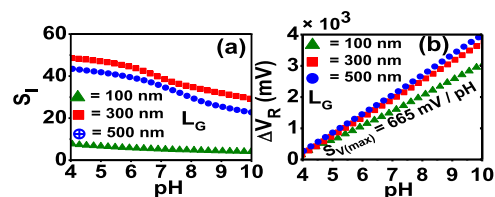
**Figure 7.** Voltage sensitivity ( $S_V$ ) of the proposed NC-DG-ISFET with respect to other DG-ISFETs and a NC-ISFET reported in the literature.

bar plot to provide a clearer perspective on the superiority of the proposed design. From Figure 7, it is obvious that the NC-DG-ISFET in this study shows significantly higher  $S_V$  values compared to some of the existing dual-gated ISFETs and NC-ISFET pH sensors.

Figures 8 and 9 illustrate the influence of critical device parameters such as channel thickness ( $T_{si}$ ) and channel length



**Figure 8.** Variation of (a)  $S_I$  and (b)  $S_V$  of the proposed NC-DG-ISFET as a function of pH for varying silicon channel thickness ( $T_{si}$ ).



**Figure 9.** Variation of (a)  $S_I$  and (b)  $\Delta V_R$  as a function of pH for varying channel length ( $L_G$ ).

( $L_G$ ) on the current and voltage sensitivities of the NC-DG-ISFET sensor. This is obtained by examining how the transfer characteristics in the subthreshold region of operation change with varying  $T_{si}$  and  $L_G$ . For instance, a lower value of  $T_{si}$  improves the control of the gates and reduces SS, which accounts for enhanced  $S_I$  in devices with thinner channels. As illustrated in Figure 8(a), approximately 8× increase in  $S_I$  is achieved when  $T_{si}$  is reduced from 60 to 20 nm. Moreover, decreasing  $T_{si}$  results in partial to full depletion of the channel, which ensures better capacitive coupling, leading to increased  $S_V$  of the device, as shown in Figure 8(b).

Decreasing  $L_G$ , on the other hand, results in an increase in leakage current and degradation of SS, which leads to a 6× increase in  $S_V$  when  $L_G$  increases from 100 to 300 nm, as shown in Figure 9(a). Figure 9(b) shows the shift in responsive voltage ( $\Delta V_R$ ) due to the pH change, calculated with respect to pH = 4. The slope of the graph in Figure 9(b), which gives  $S_V$ , increases with decreasing  $L_G$ , reaching its maximum value of 665 mV/pH at  $L_G = 100$  nm.

It is well established that the variation of operating temperature significantly influences the performance of

ISFETs.<sup>56</sup> A recent study has demonstrated changes in output and transfer characteristics of ISFETs, with changes in temperature such that the drain current decreases when temperature is increased.<sup>57</sup> This is due to the change in the mobility and the corresponding shift in threshold voltage at high temperatures. Consequently, both the voltage and current sensitivities increase with an increase in temperature in baseline DG-ISFETs. The inclusion of NC effect, however, results in an opposite trend where  $S_V$  decreases with increase in temperature. This is because, compared to baseline devices, the SS in NCFETs increases more rapidly with the increase in temperature leading to a faster degradation of device performance.<sup>58</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we have used TCAD simulations to demonstrate a novel dual-gated pH-sensing NC-DG-ISFET that can achieve enhanced current and voltage sensitivities by simply incorporating an FE layer in the gate stacks of conventional DG-ISFETs. Compared to baseline DG-ISFETs, a maximum of 5× improvement in  $S_I$  was achieved when the thicknesses of the FE layer in the top and bottom gates were 60 and 80 nm, respectively. Under the same conditions,  $S_V$  is enhanced by a factor of 2, with respect to the baseline device. Although a thicker FE may introduce a stronger NC effect, a further increase in FE thickness causes hysteresis and makes the device unstable. When benchmarked against other ISFETs, reported in the literature, the proposed NC-DG-ISFET shows superior performance in terms of  $S_V$ . However, an increase in operating temperature can degrade SS and lower the  $S_V$  of NC-DG-ISFETs. Device parameters, like  $T_{si}$  and  $L_G$ , can be optimized to further tune the  $S_I$  and  $S_V$  for maximum sensitivity. We believe that the results presented in this work will aid in the development of the next generation of highly sensitive ISFETs that exploit the sub-60 mV/decade switching behavior of NCFETs.

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#### Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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