MANTECH Publications

Journal of Research in Physics and Applied Sciences
Volume 3, Issue 1, January-June 2020

2D Materials and Van der Waals Heterostructures

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Abstract

Two-dimensional (2D) materials have emerged as a transformative class of materials in condensed matter physics and applied nanoscience due to their exceptional electrical, optical, mechanical, and thermal properties. Since the isolation of graphene, a wide variety of atomically thin materials including transition metal dichalcogenides, hexagonal boron nitride, black phosphorus, and MXenes have been extensively studied. An important advancement in this field is the concept of van der Waals heterostructures, where different 2D layers are vertically stacked without the constraints of lattice matching. Such heterostructures enable the design of artificial materials with tailored properties that are not available in the individual layers. This review provides a comprehensive overview of the fundamental properties of 2D materials, fabrication and characterization techniques, and the physics of van der Waals heterostructures. Key applications in electronics, optoelectronics, sensing, and energy technologies are discussed, along with current challenges and future prospects. While significant progress has been achieved, issues related to large-scale synthesis, stability, and interface control remain open and require further research.

Keywords: *Two-dimensional materials; Graphene; Transition metal dichalcogenides; Van der Waals heterostructures; Nanoelectronics; Optoelectronics*

1. Introduction

The discovery of graphene in 2004 marked a turning point in materials science and condensed matter physics. Contrary to earlier beliefs that strictly two-dimensional crystals could not exist in free-standing form, graphene demonstrated remarkable stability and extraordinary physical properties. This breakthrough led to intense interest in other layered materials that can be exfoliated down to a single or few atomic layers. These materials, collectively known as two-dimensional (2D) materials, exhibit properties that differ significantly from their bulk counterparts due to reduced dimensionality and strong quantum confinement effects.

2D materials offer a unique platform to explore fundamental physics as well as to develop next-generation electronic and photonic devices. Their atomically thin nature allows excellent electrostatic control, high surface-to-volume ratio, and mechanical flexibility. However, no single 2D material possesses all desirable properties for device applications. For example, graphene has extremely high carrier mobility but lacks a bandgap, limiting its use in digital electronics. On the other hand, transition metal dichalcogenides (TMDs) have sizable bandgaps but comparatively lower mobility.

To overcome such limitations, the concept of van der Waals (vdW) heterostructures was proposed. In these structures, different 2D materials are stacked layer by layer, held together by weak van der Waals forces rather than strong covalent bonds. This approach allows the creation of designer materials with customized electronic and optical properties. The present review aims to summarize the current state of research on 2D materials and vdW heterostructures, focusing on their properties, fabrication, and applications.

2. Overview of Two-Dimensional Materials

Two-dimensional materials are crystalline solids composed of a single or few atomic layers, where charge carriers are confined within a plane. The reduction in dimensionality leads to electronic band structures and physical properties that are fundamentally different from those of bulk materials. Since the experimental isolation of graphene, a rapidly growing family of 2D materials has been discovered, each offering distinct electronic, optical, and mechanical characteristics. This section summarizes the most widely studied classes of 2D materials and highlights their key features.

2.1 Graphene

Graphene consists of a single layer of carbon atoms arranged in a two-dimensional hexagonal honeycomb lattice. Each carbon atom is sp^2-hybridized and bonded to three neighboring atoms, resulting in a highly stable and flexible structure. Graphene exhibits exceptional properties, including ultra-high carrier mobility exceeding 10^4 $cm^2V^{-1}s^{-1}$ at room temperature, extremely high thermal conductivity, outstanding mechanical strength, and optical transparency of about 97.7%. One of the most remarkable features of graphene is its electronic band structure. The conduction and valence bands meet at discrete points known as Dirac points, where the energy dispersion is linear. As a result, charge carriers in graphene behave as massless Dirac fermions, leading to unusual transport phenomena such as anomalous quantum Hall effects and Klein tunneling. These properties make graphene an ideal platform for studying relativistic quantum effects in condensed matter systems.

Despite its outstanding electrical performance, graphene lacks an intrinsic bandgap, which limits its direct application in digital logic devices that require high on/off current ratios. Considerable efforts have been made to engineer a bandgap in graphene. Approaches such as chemical functionalization, introduction of defects, patterning into nanoribbons, and substrate-induced symmetry breaking have been explored. Bilayer graphene subjected to a perpendicular electric field has shown a tunable bandgap, but maintaining uniformity and device reliability remains challenging. Consequently, graphene is currently more suitable for applications in high-frequency electronics, transparent electrodes, and flexible devices rather than conventional logic circuits.

2.2 Transition Metal Dichalcogenides

Transition metal dichalcogenides (TMDs) represent a large and versatile class of layered materials with the general chemical formula MX_2, where M is a transition metal such as molybdenum or tungsten, and X is a chalcogen atom (sulfur, selenium, or tellurium). In their bulk form, TMDs are typically indirect bandgap semiconductors, but when thinned down to a monolayer, many of them undergo a transition to a direct bandgap.

Monolayer TMDs possess bandgaps in the visible or near-infrared range, making them highly attractive for optoelectronic applications. Among them, molybdenum disulfide (MoS_2) has been extensively studied due to its relatively easy fabrication and chemical stability. MoS_2-based field-effect transistors exhibit high on/off ratios and reasonable carrier mobility, while MoS_2 photodetectors show strong photoresponse and fast switching behavior.

In addition to their electronic and optical properties, TMDs exhibit strong spin–orbit coupling due to the presence of heavy transition metal atoms. This leads to spin splitting of electronic bands and enables valley-dependent physics, where charge carriers can be selectively excited in different energy valleys using circularly polarized light. Such valley polarization effects have opened new research directions in spintronics and valleytronics, where information processing relies on spin or valley degrees of freedom rather than charge alone.

2.3 Hexagonal Boron Nitride

Hexagonal boron nitride (hBN) is a wide-bandgap insulating 2D material with a layered structure similar to graphene. It consists of alternating boron and nitrogen atoms arranged in a hexagonal lattice. Due to its electrical insulation, high thermal conductivity, and chemical inertness, hBN plays a crucial supporting role in 2D material-based devices.

One of the most important applications of hBN is as a substrate and dielectric layer for graphene and other 2D materials. The atomically flat and chemically clean surface of hBN significantly reduces charge impurity scattering and surface roughness, leading to enhanced carrier mobility in

graphene devices. Compared to conventional substrates such as silicon dioxide, hBN minimizes trapped charges and surface phonon interactions.

Furthermore, hBN exhibits strong ultraviolet luminescence and hosts optically active defect centers that can act as single-photon emitters. This has generated growing interest in hBN for applications in quantum photonics and nanoscale light sources.

2.4 Other Emerging 2D Materials

Beyond graphene, TMDs, and hBN, a wide range of emerging 2D materials is being actively investigated. Black phosphorus, also known as phosphorene in its monolayer form, has attracted attention due to its thickness-dependent direct bandgap and high carrier mobility. Its anisotropic crystal structure leads to direction-dependent electrical and optical properties, which can be useful for polarized photodetection. However, phosphorene is chemically unstable in ambient conditions and degrades rapidly when exposed to oxygen and moisture, limiting its practical use.

MXenes are another rapidly growing family of 2D materials, composed of transition metal carbides, nitrides, or carbonitrides. They are typically metallic or semi-metallic and exhibit excellent electrical conductivity and hydrophilic surfaces. These properties make MXenes promising candidates for energy storage devices such as supercapacitors and batteries, as well as for electromagnetic interference shielding and sensing applications.

Other notable 2D materials include silicene, germanene, and stanene, which are graphene-like structures of silicon, germanium, and tin, respectively. Although these materials face stability challenges, they offer intriguing possibilities for integration with existing semiconductor technologies. Collectively, these emerging materials continue to expand the functional landscape of two-dimensional systems.

3. Van der Waals Heterostructures

Van der Waals (vdW) heterostructures represent one of the most significant conceptual advances enabled by two-dimensional materials. Unlike conventional semiconductor heterostructures,

which rely on epitaxial growth and strict lattice matching, vdW heterostructures exploit weak interlayer forces to assemble materials with atomic precision. This approach allows unprecedented freedom in materials design and has opened new pathways for exploring emergent physical phenomena and device concepts.

3.1 Concept and Advantages

Van der Waals heterostructures are created by vertically stacking distinct 2D materials, such as graphene, transition metal dichalcogenides, and insulating layers like hexagonal boron nitride. In these systems, individual layers retain their intrinsic crystal structures and properties because they are bonded through weak van der Waals interactions rather than covalent or ionic bonds. As a result, the need for lattice matching—an essential requirement in traditional heterostructures—is largely eliminated.

One major advantage of vdW heterostructures is the formation of atomically sharp and clean interfaces. In conventional semiconductor heterostructures, lattice mismatch often leads to defects, dislocations, and strain, which degrade device performance. In contrast, vdW interfaces are typically free of dangling bonds, significantly reducing interface trap states and charge scattering. This property is particularly beneficial for high-mobility electronic and optoelectronic devices.
Another important feature is the extreme tunability of electronic and optical properties. The behavior of vdW heterostructures can be engineered by varying layer thickness, stacking sequence, relative crystallographic orientation, and external perturbations such as electric fields or pressure. The twist angle between adjacent layers plays a crucial role in determining interlayer coupling. Small twist angles can lead to long-period moiré superlattices, which profoundly modify the electronic band structure.

These moiré patterns have enabled the discovery of exotic quantum phenomena. In twisted bilayer graphene, for example, superconductivity and correlated insulating states emerge at specific “magic angles,” where flat electronic bands enhance electron–electron interactions. Similar effects are being explored in twisted TMD heterostructures, leading to the observation of exciton localization and strongly correlated excitonic states. Such findings demonstrate that vdW

heterostructures are not merely combinations of materials but new artificial solids with properties that can be continuously tuned.

3.2 Fabrication Techniques

Several fabrication strategies have been developed to construct vdW heterostructures, each with its own advantages and limitations. Mechanical exfoliation followed by deterministic transfer is the most widely used laboratory technique. In this method, individual 2D flakes are exfoliated from bulk crystals and transferred layer by layer using polymer stamps or viscoelastic substrates. This approach offers excellent control over layer placement, orientation, and cleanliness, resulting in high-quality heterostructures suitable for fundamental studies.

However, mechanical transfer techniques are labor-intensive and difficult to scale for industrial applications. The small lateral size of exfoliated flakes also limits their use in large-area devices. To address these challenges, chemical vapor deposition (CVD) has emerged as a promising alternative for scalable synthesis. CVD enables the growth of large-area monolayer or few-layer films and allows direct growth of vertical or lateral heterostructures by sequential precursor introduction.

Despite its scalability, CVD-based fabrication faces challenges related to interface quality and layer alignment. Contamination, grain boundaries, and uncontrolled stacking angles can degrade device performance. Precise control over growth parameters is required to achieve uniform and reproducible heterostructures.

Recently, hybrid approaches combining CVD growth with transfer techniques have gained attention. For instance, high-quality monolayers can be grown by CVD and then assembled into heterostructures using controlled transfer methods. Layer-by-layer epitaxial growth strategies are also being explored, where one 2D material is grown directly on top of another under carefully optimized conditions. These approaches aim to balance scalability with interface quality, making vdW heterostructures more viable for practical applications.

3.3 Interface Physics

The physical properties of vdW heterostructures are strongly governed by interlayer coupling and band alignment at the interfaces. When two different 2D materials are brought into contact, charge redistribution occurs to align their Fermi levels, leading to band bending and interfacial electric fields. The resulting band alignment determines carrier transport and optical response.

Based on the relative positions of conduction and valence bands, vdW heterostructures can exhibit type-I, type-II, or type-III band alignments. In type-I (straddling gap) alignment, both electrons and holes are confined in the same material, which is useful for light-emitting applications. Type-II (staggered gap) alignment separates electrons and holes into different layers, promoting efficient charge separation. This configuration is particularly advantageous for photodetectors, photovoltaics, and photocatalytic devices. Type-III (broken gap) alignment enables tunneling and is relevant for tunnel field-effect transistors and infrared devices.

Interlayer coupling strength also influences excitonic behavior in vdW heterostructures. Due to reduced dielectric screening in 2D systems, excitons have large binding energies. In type-II heterostructures, spatially indirect excitons can form, where electrons and holes reside in different layers. These interlayer excitons exhibit long lifetimes and tunable energies, making them attractive for valleytronics and excitonic devices.

Furthermore, twist-angle-dependent coupling can modify the overlap of electronic wavefunctions across layers, leading to miniband formation and altered density of states. Understanding and controlling interface physics is therefore essential for optimizing device performance and for exploring new correlated and topological phenomena in vdW heterostructures.

4. Characterization Techniques

Characterization of 2D materials and vdW heterostructures requires a combination of structural, optical, and electrical techniques. Raman spectroscopy is widely used to identify layer number, strain, and doping effects. Atomic force microscopy provides information on thickness and surface

morphology. Transmission electron microscopy enables direct visualization of crystal structure and interfaces.

Electrical measurements such as field-effect mobility and Hall measurements are essential to evaluate device performance. Optical techniques including photoluminescence and absorption spectroscopy reveal band structure and excitonic effects.

5. Applications of 2D Materials and vdW Heterostructures

5.1 Electronics

2D materials are promising candidates for next-generation electronics due to their atomic thickness and excellent electrostatic control. TMD-based field-effect transistors have shown high on/off ratios, while graphene is being explored for high-frequency and flexible electronics. vdW heterostructures enable tunneling transistors and vertical devices with novel functionalities.

5.2 Optoelectronics

The strong light–matter interaction in 2D materials makes them suitable for photodetectors, light-emitting diodes, and lasers. Heterostructures combining graphene and TMDs have demonstrated broadband and high-responsivity photodetection.

5.3 Energy and Sensing Applications

2D materials are also being explored for energy storage, catalysis, and sensing. MXenes and graphene-based composites show excellent performance in supercapacitors and batteries. The high surface sensitivity of 2D materials enables detection of gases and biomolecules at very low concentrations.

Table 1. Comparison of Selected 2D Materials

Material	Bandgap	Key Properties	Typical Applications
Graphene	0 eV	High mobility, high conductivity	High-frequency electronics
MoS_2	~1.8 eV (monolayer)	Direct bandgap, strong PL	Transistors, photodetectors
hBN	~6 eV	Insulating, atomically flat	Dielectric, substrate
Black phosphorus	0.3–2.0 eV	High mobility, anisotropic	Optoelectronics

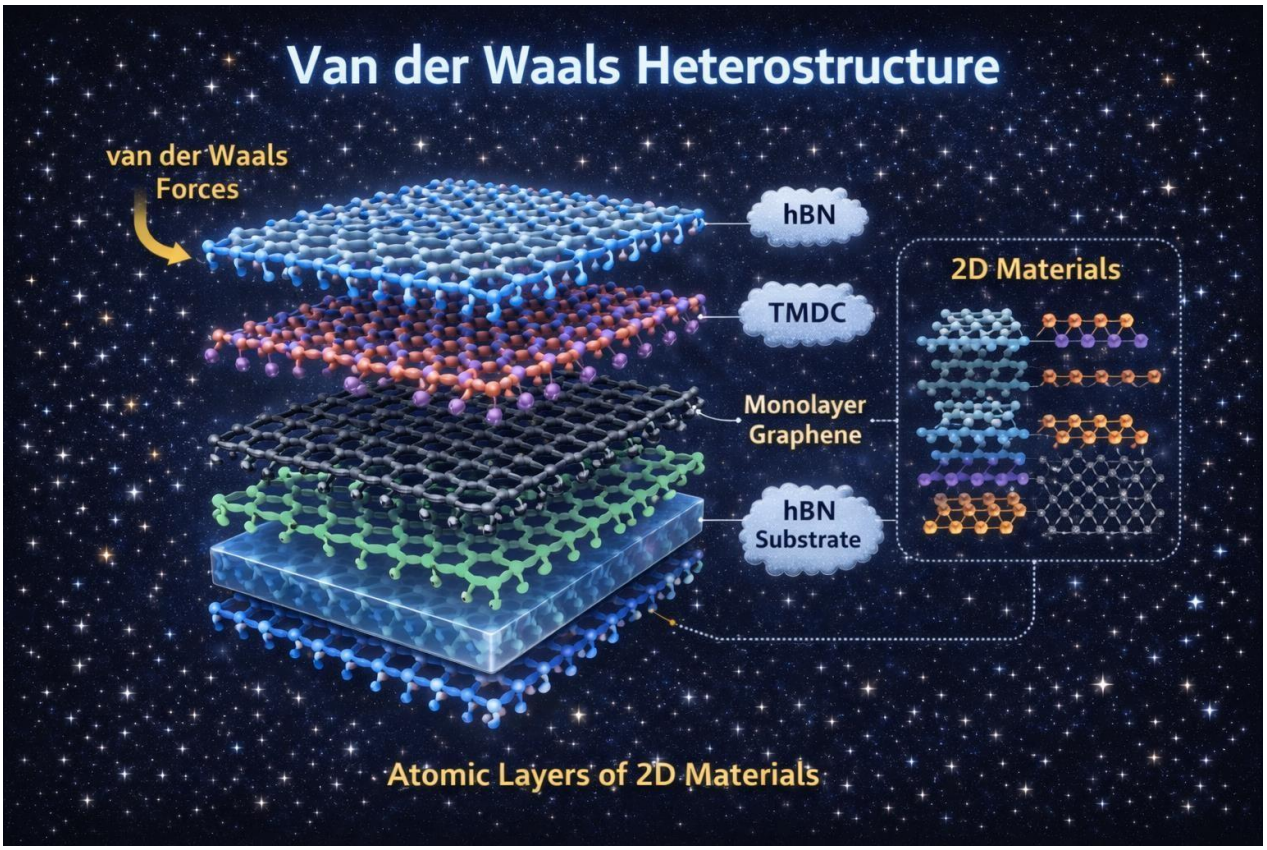

Figure 1. Schematic Representation of a Van der Waals Heterostructure

6. Challenges and Future Perspectives

Despite rapid progress, several challenges hinder the widespread application of 2D materials and vdW heterostructures. Large-area synthesis with uniform quality remains difficult. Environmental stability, especially for materials like black phosphorus, is another major issue. Interface contamination and reproducibility also affect device performance.

Future research is expected to focus on scalable fabrication techniques, better interface engineering, and integration with existing semiconductor technologies. The exploration of twist-angle engineering and strongly correlated states opens exciting opportunities for fundamental physics and quantum devices.

7. Conclusion

Two-dimensional materials and van der Waals heterostructures represent a rapidly evolving field with immense potential for both fundamental research and technological applications. The ability to isolate atomically thin layers and stack them in arbitrary sequences has enabled unprecedented control over material properties. While challenges related to synthesis, stability, and integration persist, ongoing advances in fabrication and characterization are steadily addressing these issues. With continued interdisciplinary efforts, 2D materials and vdW heterostructures are expected to play a significant role in future electronic, photonic, and energy technologies.

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