Heteroatom Substitutions in Graphene Nanoribbons: One-dimensional Spin Chains with Tuneable Interactions

D Sánchez-Portal[1,2], N Friedrich[3], P Brandimarte[2], J Li[3], S Saito[4], S Yamaguchi[5], I Pozo[6], D Peña[6], T Frederiksen[2,7], A García-Lekue[2,7], JI Pascual[3,7]

[1]Centro de Física de Materiales CSIC-UPV/EHU, 20018 Donostia-San Sebastián, Spain
[2]Donostia International Physics Center (DIPC), 20018 Donostia-San Sebastián, Spain
[3]CIC nanoGUNE BRTA, 20018 Donostia-San Sebastián, Spain
[4]Graduate School of Science, Kyoto University, Kyoto 606-8502, Japan
[5]Graduate School of Science, Nagoya University, Nagoya 464-8602, Japan
[6]Centro de Investigación en Química Biolóxica e Materiais Moleculares (CiQUS) and Dep. de Química Orgánica, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain
[7]Ikerbasque, Basque Foundation for Science, 48013 Bilbao, Spain
daniel.sanchez@ehu.eus

Graphene nanoribbons (GNRs), low-dimensional platforms for carbon-based electronics, show the promising perspective to also incorporate spin polarization in their conjugated electron system. However, these magnetic moments are usually localized around zigzag edges, difficult to fabricate and very reactive. This combined theoretical and experimental study demonstrates that magnetism can also be induced away from physical edges through atomically precise engineering of topological defects in its interior. A pair of substitutional boron atoms inserted in the carbon backbone of the 7-armchairGNR breaks the conjugation of its topological bands and builds two spin-polarized boundary states around them. Therefore, a spin moment of 2 Bohr magnetons localizes around each pair of B atoms in the structure (see Figure 1).

First indications of the presence of magnetism were given by the appearance of characteristic Kondo peaks in electrical transport experiments performed at nanoGUNE. Transport was measured through boron-substituted GNRs suspended between the tip and the sample of a scanning tunneling microscope (STM). These observations were rationalized in terms of the theory and first-principles simulations performed at CFM and DIPC, which predicted for each isolated boron pair a S=1 spin state as well as a strong dependence on the spacing between pairs. The interaction between two of such topological defects was further explored, outlining a route to engineer topological spin chains, with the promising tunability of their magnetism by modifying their spacing [1].

Therefore, the present results demonstrate a route to embed spin chains in graphene nanoribbons, turning them into basic elements of spintronic devices. We are currently examining the effect of B substitution for other GNRs [2].

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References

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