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Wrinkling of a stiff thin film bonded to a pre-strained, compliant substrate with finite thickness

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A stiff thin film bonded to a pre-strained, compliant substrate wrinkles into a sinusoidal form upon release of the pre-strain. Many analytical models developed for the critical pre-strain for wrinkling assume that the substrate is semi-infinite. This critical pre-strain is actually much smaller than that for a substrate with finite thickness (Ma Y *et al.* 2016 *Adv. Funct. Mater.* (doi:10.1002/adfm.201600713)). An analytical solution of the critical pre-strain for a system of a stiff film bonded to a pre-strained, finite-thickness, compliant substrate is obtained, and it agrees well with the finite-element analysis. The finite-thickness effect is significant when the substrate tensile stiffness cannot overwhelm the film tensile stiffness.

1. Introduction

A stiff film bonded to a pre-strained, compliant substrate wrinkles upon releasing the pre-strain [1,2]. Such a system has many important applications in stretchable

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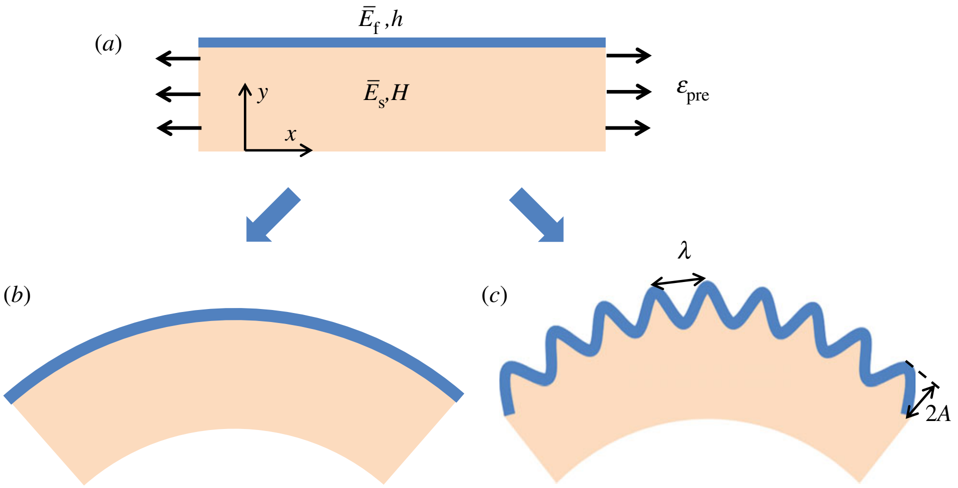

Figure 1. Schematic illustrations. (*a*) A stiff thin film bonded to a pre-strained, compliant substrate with finite thickness; (*b*) bending of the film/substrate system upon release of the small pre-strain; and (*c*) wrinkling of the stiff thin film, along with bending of the film/substrate system, upon release of large pre-strain. (Online version in colour.)

inorganic electronics [3–8], micro/nano pattern formation [9–11], high-precision micro/nano measurement techniques [12], tuneable metamaterials [13], nanocomposites [14], stretchable transistors [15] and biomimetic materials [16]. Analytical models have been developed for wrinkling of a stiff thin film on a pre-strained compliant substrate [17–21]. The results identify the critical pre-strain for wrinkling, below which the film remains flat. However, all of these studies assume that the substrate is semi-infinite such that its tensile stiffness overwhelms that of the film. Consequently, the substrate recovers the initial length after the pre-strain is released and its bottom remains flat.[1]

The critical pre-strain for wrinkling obtained for a semi-infinite substrate, however, is smaller than the numerical and experimental results for a substrate with finite thickness [22], even for substrates that are more than 1000 times thicker than the film. This is because the substrate elastic modulus E_s is often more than five orders of magnitude smaller than the film elastic modulus E_f [1,2], such that the substrate tensile stiffness E_sH cannot overwhelm the film tensile stiffness E_fh, where H and h are the substrate and film thicknesses, respectively (figure 1*a*). Consequently,

1. the substrate cannot shrink back to its initial length after release of the pre-strain; and
2. the film/substrate system may bend after the pre-strain is released (figure 1*b*).

The recent study by Ma *et al.* [22] accounted for (1), while this paper aims to establish an analytic model for both (1) and (2). The resulting critical pre-strain will be useful for many applications such as the strain-limiting design of materials [22] and tuneable optical design of the intensity for diffraction peaks [23].

2. Analytical model

A stiff thin film is bonded onto a pre-strained (ε_{pre}), compliant substrate (figure 1*a*). For small pre-strain, the stiff film does not wrinkle upon release of the pre-strain; instead, the film and substrate bend (figure 1*b*). Let ε denote the membrane strain in the film. The strain in the substrate

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[1] Huang *et al.* [24] studied the finite thickness of a substrate subjected to compression, to be discussed below.

is $\varepsilon_s(y) = \varepsilon_{pre} + \varepsilon - \kappa(H - y)$, where κ is the curvature of the substrate, and the co-ordinate y is shown in figure 1*a*. The potential energy is

$$U_{bend} = \frac{1}{2}\bar{E}_f h\varepsilon^2 + \frac{1}{2}\bar{E}_s \int_0^H [\varepsilon_{pre} + \varepsilon - \kappa(H - y)]^2 dy, \tag{2.1}$$

where $\bar{E}_f = E_f/(1 - v_f^2)$ and $\bar{E}_s = E_s/(1 - v_s^2)$ are the plane-strain moduli of the stiff thin film and compliant substrate, respectively, and v_f and v_s are the Poisson's ratios.

Minimization of the potential energy $\partial U_{bend}/\partial\varepsilon = 0$ and $\partial U_{bend}/\partial\kappa = 0$ gives $\varepsilon = -\bar{E}_s H\varepsilon_{pre}/(4\bar{E}_f h + \bar{E}_s H)$ and $\kappa = -6\bar{E}_f h\varepsilon_{pre}/[H(4\bar{E}_f h + \bar{E}_s H)]$. Equation (2.1) then becomes

$$U_{bend} = \frac{\bar{E}_f h \bar{E}_s H \varepsilon_{pre}^2}{2(4\bar{E}_f h + \bar{E}_s H)}. \tag{2.2}$$

Once the pre-strain exceeds the critical pre-strain (to be determined), the stiff film wrinkles on the top surface of the substrate (figure 1*c*) and the film/substrate bends. In addition to the membrane strain ε, the film is also subjected to wrinkling with amplitude A and period λ to be determined. The strain energy in the film is [24]

$$U_{film} = \frac{1}{2}\bar{E}_f h\varepsilon^2 - \frac{1}{4}\bar{E}_f h|\varepsilon|k^2A^2 + \frac{1}{32}\bar{E}_f hk^4A^4 + \frac{1}{48}\bar{E}_f h^3k^4A^2, \tag{2.3}$$

which degenerates to the first term on the right-hand side of equation (2.1) when the amplitude $A = 0$; here $k = 2\pi/\lambda$. The strain energy in the substrate is

$$U_{substrate} = \frac{1}{2}\bar{E}_s \int_0^H [\varepsilon_{pre} + \varepsilon - \kappa(H - y)]^2 dy + \frac{\bar{E}_s}{4}kA^2 g(kH), \tag{2.4}$$

which degenerates to the last term in equation (2.1) when the amplitude $A = 0$. The last term in the above equation is the strain energy in the substrate due to wrinkling [24], and the function g is

$$g(x) = \frac{\cosh(2x) + 1 + 2x^2}{2\sinh(2x) - 4x}, \tag{2.5}$$

for an incompressible substrate ($v_s = 0.5$), and g approaches 1/2 for a semi-infinite substrate. The potential energy is the sum of U_{film} and $U_{substrate}$,

$$\begin{aligned} U_{bend+wrinkle} = &\frac{1}{2}\bar{E}_f h\varepsilon^2 + \frac{1}{2}\bar{E}_s \int_0^H [\varepsilon_{pre} + \varepsilon - \kappa(H - y)]^2 dy \\ &+ \frac{1}{4}\bar{E}_f h(f - |\varepsilon|)k^2A^2 + \frac{1}{32}\bar{E}_f hk^4A^4, \end{aligned} \tag{2.6}$$

where

$$f = \frac{k^2h^2}{12} + \frac{\bar{E}_s g(kH)}{kh\bar{E}_f}. \tag{2.7}$$

Minimization of the potential energy with respect to k and A, $\partial U_{bend+wrinkle}/\partial k = 0$ and $\partial U_{bend+wrinkle}/\partial A = 0$, gives

$$6\frac{g(kH) - g'(kH)kH}{(kH)^3} = \frac{\bar{E}_f h^3}{\bar{E}_s H^3} \tag{2.8}$$

and

$$k^2A^2 = 4(|\varepsilon| - f), \tag{2.9}$$

where $g'(x) = dg(x)/dx$. Equation (2.8) suggests that the normalized period, $\lambda/[(\bar{E}_f/\bar{E}_s)^{1/3}h]$, or equivalently $kh/(\bar{E}_s/\bar{E}_f)^{1/3}$, depends only on the film/substrate bending stiffness ratio $\bar{E}_f h^3/\bar{E}_s H^3$, as shown in figure 2. The period becomes independent of the substrate thickness H when the bending stiffness ratio $\bar{E}_f h^3/\bar{E}_s H^3$ is less than 0.01, which is consistent with Huang *et al.* [24].

Minimization of the potential energy with respect to ε and κ, $\partial U_{bend+wrinkle}/\partial\varepsilon = 0$ and $\partial U_{bend+wrinkle}/\partial\kappa = 0$, gives $\varepsilon = 4\bar{E}_f hf/(\bar{E}_s H) - \varepsilon_{pre}$, and $\kappa = 6\bar{E}_f hf/(\bar{E}_s H^2)$, where f is obtained

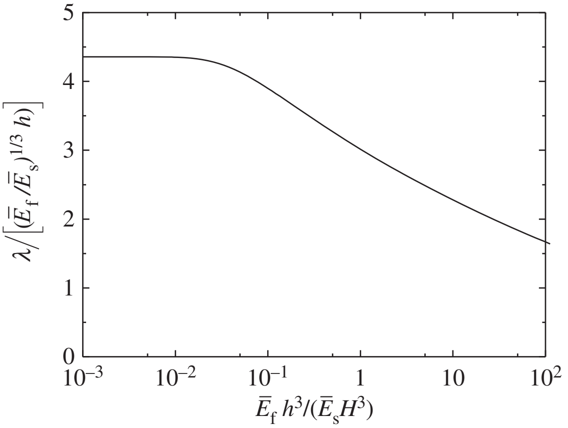

Figure 2. The normalized wrinkle period $\lambda/[(\bar{E}_f/\bar{E}_s)^{1/3}h]$ versus the film-to-substrate bending stiffness ratio $[\bar{E}_fh^3/(\bar{E}_sH^3)]$.

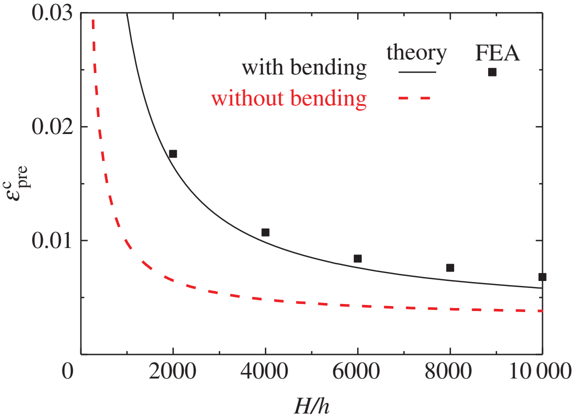

Figure 3. The critical pre-strain $\varepsilon_{\mathrm{pre}}^{\mathrm{c}}$ versus the substrate-to-film thickness ratio (H/h) for a polyimide film on a PDMS substrate. FEA, finite-element analysis; PDMS, polydimethylsiloxane. (Online version in colour.)

from equation (2.7). The potential energy then becomes

$$U_{\mathrm{bend+wrinkle}} = \bar{E}_fhf\left[\varepsilon_{\mathrm{pre}} - \frac{1}{2}\left(\frac{4\bar{E}_fh}{\bar{E}_sH}+1\right)f\right]. \tag{2.10}$$

Comparison of the potential energy in equations (2.2) and (2.10) suggests that wrinkling occurs when $U_{\mathrm{bend}} > U_{\mathrm{bend+wrinkle}}$, which gives

$$\varepsilon_{\mathrm{pre}} > \left(\frac{4\bar{E}_fh}{\bar{E}_sH}+1\right)f = \left(\frac{4\bar{E}_fh}{\bar{E}_sH}+1\right)\left[\frac{k^2h^2}{12} + \frac{\bar{E}_sg(kH)}{kh\bar{E}_f}\right], \tag{2.11}$$

where k, f and g are obtained from equations (2.5), (2.7) and (2.8), respectively. It should be pointed out that equation (2.11) also ensures that the right-hand side of equation (2.9) is positive such that there is a solution for the amplitude A.

3. Discussion

When the bending stiffness of the substrate overwhelms that of the film, i.e. $\bar{E}_{\mathrm{f}}h^3/(\bar{E}_{\mathrm{s}}H^3) <\sim 0.01$, equation (2.11) can be further simplified as

$$\varepsilon_{\mathrm{pre}} > \varepsilon_{\mathrm{pre}}^{\mathrm{c}} = \frac{1}{4}\left(\frac{4\bar{E}_{\mathrm{f}}h}{\bar{E}_{\mathrm{s}}H}+1\right)\left(\frac{3\bar{E}_{\mathrm{s}}}{\bar{E}_{\mathrm{f}}}\right)^{2/3}. \tag{3.1}$$

For $H \to \infty$, the above equation degenerates to that for a semi-infinite substrate [1,2]. The critical pre-strain $\varepsilon_{\mathrm{pre}}^{\mathrm{c}}$ in equation (3.1) is larger than $\frac{1}{4}((\bar{E}_{\mathrm{f}}h/\bar{E}_{\mathrm{s}}H)+1)(3\bar{E}_{\mathrm{s}}/\bar{E}_{\mathrm{f}})^{2/3}$ [22], which neglects the effect of film/substrate bending. Figure 3 shows the critical pre-strain $\varepsilon_{\mathrm{pre}}^{\mathrm{c}}$ versus the thickness ratio H/h for a polyimide film ($E_{\mathrm{f}} = 2.5\,\mathrm{GPa}$, $v_{\mathrm{f}} = 0.34$) on a polydimethylsiloxane substrate ($E_{\mathrm{s}} = 1\,\mathrm{MPa}$, $v_{\mathrm{s}} = 0.5$). The results obtained from finite-element analysis agree well with the critical pre-strain in equation (3.1).

Competing interests. We declare we have no competing interests.

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