

Ultrafast modulation of electronic structure by coherent phonon excitations

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Femtosecond x-ray absorption spectroscopy with a laser-driven high-harmonic source is used to map ultrafast changes of x-ray absorption by femtometer-scale coherent phonon displacements. In LiBH₄, displacements along an A_g phonon mode at 10 THz are induced by impulsive Raman excitation and give rise to oscillatory changes of x-ray absorption at the Li K-edge. Electron density maps from femtosecond x-ray diffraction data show that the electric field of the pump pulse induces a charge transfer from the BH₄⁻ to neighboring Li⁺ ions, resulting in a differential Coulomb force that drives lattice vibrations in this virtual transition state.

The complex line shape of x-ray absorption above an edge, the so-called x-ray near-edge absorption structure (XANES), has been described in a multiple scattering picture [1, 2] where the photoexcited electron probes the nearest neighbors of the excited atom and quantum interference of the different scattering pathways leads to resonances in the spectral envelope. Changes of interatomic distances result in phase changes of the multiple possible quantum pathways that an excited electron can follow [3, 4]. This allows for deriving local atomic structure from the x-ray absorption spectrum. Under stationary conditions this also gives element-specific insight into equilibrium geometries, electronic structure, and chemical binding of crystalline and non-crystalline materials [5–9]. An equally valid picture in the near-edge region connects the absorption spectrum with the core-hole-perturbed, dipole-transition-accessible local density of states [10, 11].

Transient x-ray absorption spectra have been recorded with atto- to picosecond time resolution and provide insight into electronic excitations and/or chemical processes in atoms, molecular systems, and solids [12–23]. Much less explored is the interplay in real time of atomic displacements and x-ray absorption [22]. In crystalline solids, phonon excitations are characterized by energies below 500 meV, femtosecond vibrational periods and spatial elongations of typically less than a few percent of the interatomic distances. The latter are much too small to be extracted from steady-state x-ray absorption spectra. In the transient regime, optical pulses of a duration shorter than the vibrational period allow for the impulsive excitation of phonon wavepackets, i.e., non-stationary superpositions of phonon states which manifest themselves in coherent oscillations along one or several vibrational coordinates. Here, we demonstrate that such coherent motions modulate the electronic structure, and hence the x-ray absorption in the XANES region, even though the displacements are on the femtometer scale. With the help of transient electron density maps determined by femtosecond x-ray diffraction [24], we identify the role of electronic charge rearrangement in the nonresonant Raman excitation process of coherent phonons. Detailed information on the Coulomb force field in the ‘virtual electronic state’ of the Raman scattering process is derived in this way.

The experiments presented in the following are based on a femtosecond pump-probe scheme wherein a femtosecond table-top laser system provides excitation pulses around 800 nm and generates synchronized soft x-ray probe pulses [25], allowing for transient x-ray absorption spectroscopy with a sub-50 fs time resolution. The experiments are complemented by a theoretical model for the transient x-ray absorption which is based on the Bethe-Salpeter-Equation (BSE) approach. Both experimental and theoretical details are given in the supplementary information (SI). Finally, we combine information from recent femtosecond x-ray diffraction experiments [24] with that from the present experiment to draw a complete microscopic picture of the Raman process.

Crystalline LiBH₄ represents a most interesting component for a combined femtosecond x-ray absorption and diffraction study since it contains only light elements and, thus, makes the quasi-instantaneous response of valence electrons accessible in experiment. In the femtosecond x-ray diffraction experiment, the intensity changes $\Delta I_{hkl}/I_{hkl}^0$ of Bragg peaks are dominated by changes of the valence electron density. Moreover, Li shows its K-edge in a spectral range of high harmonic generation conveniently accessible with high repetition laser drivers. From a more general point of view, LiBH₄ is a potential hydrogen storage material with high Li-ion conductivity and has been extensively studied for that reason [26].

In our experiments, we study a polycrystalline film of lithium borohydride (LiBH₄) [Fig. 1(a)]. The film has a thickness of approximately 1 μ m and is deposited on a 50 nm thick diamond substrate. Steady-state and transient x-ray absorption spectra are recorded in transmission around the Li K-edge at 60 eV. The stationary x-ray absorption spectrum [Fig. 2(a)] was measured with the femtosecond two-color high-harmonic (HH) source driven by 800 nm and 1300 nm pulses (black line, spectral resolution 200 meV). In contrast to single color HHG, the use of a two-color driving field for the HHG process allows us to generate a continuous soft x-ray spectrum near the Li K-edge [25]. The x-ray absorption spectrum displays a pronounced excitonic feature at the Li K-edge near 60 eV which is due to the mutual attraction of the excited electron and the core hole, and a slightly modulated plateau-like XANES region above the K-edge. The theoretical spectrum (blue line)

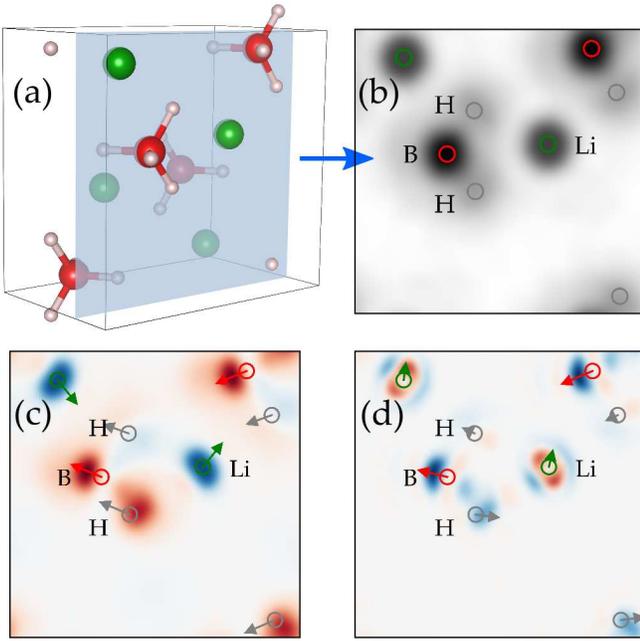


FIG. 1 (a) Unit cell of lithium borohydride with the Li^+ (green) and BH_4^- ions (B: red, H: grey). The shaded area marks the $y = 1/4$ plane. (b) Equilibrium electron density $\rho_0(\mathbf{r})$ in the $y = 1/4$ plane. (c) Transient differential electronic charge density $\Delta\rho(\mathbf{r}, t = 0)$ reported in Ref. [24]. Red and blue coloration indicate negative and positive changes in the local electron density. The arrows indicate the impulsively excited 10 THz A_g Raman mode. (d) Differential Coulomb potential $V_{\text{diff}}(\mathbf{r}, 0)$ generated from the transient differential electron density in (c). The arrows indicate the electric field $\nabla V_{\text{diff}}(\mathbf{r}, 0)$. The boron nuclei are strongly accelerated by the impulsive force of the induced electronic polarization due to the strong overlap between the A_g mode's elongations and the impulsive force.

calculated from the BSE formalism (see SI) reproduces the main features of the measured spectrum.

LiBH_4 exhibits a rich phonon spectrum due to the large unit cell comprised of 24 atoms [Fig. 1(a)]. In the pump-probe experiments, a 50 fs laser pulse centered at 800 nm (photon energy 1.5 eV) excites coherent phonons via a non-resonant impulsive Raman process [27]. In this scheme, Raman-active modes at frequencies within the bandwidth of the femtosecond pulse are excited, in particular the A_g mode at $\nu = 10$ THz (300 cm^{-1}). The pump pulse at 1.5 eV is far below the ≈ 7 eV band gap of LiBH_4 . Multiphoton absorption of pump light is negligible for the present peak intensity of $I_{\text{pump}} \approx 10^{11} \text{ W/cm}^2$, which corresponds to an electric field amplitude of about 10^7 V/cm . The electric field, however, induces a relocation of electronic charge from the electron-rich BH_4^- ion to the neighboring Li^+ ion in a lithium borohydride ion pair [cf. Fig. 1(a)], as previously observed in femtosecond x-ray diffraction experiments performed with similar pump pulses [24].

Upon impulsive phonon excitation, oscillatory absorption changes are observed in the plateau-like XANES region. In Fig. 3(a)-(b), the change of absorption $\Delta A = -\ln(T/T_0)$ at

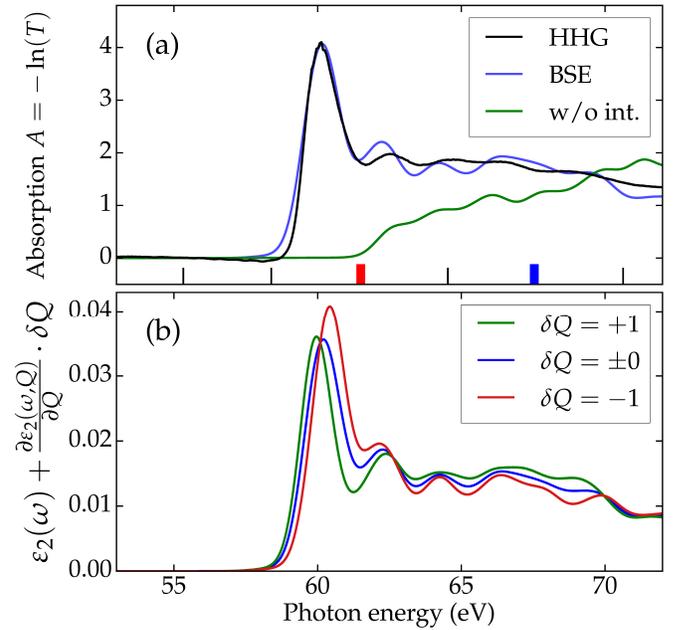


FIG. 2 (a) Black: linear absorption spectrum of LiBH_4 at the Li K-edge as measured with a two-color high harmonic (HHG) source. Blue: theoretical spectrum calculated using a Bethe Salpeter approach. A transition into a bound excitonic state is observed at 60 eV, followed by transitions into free conduction band states at higher energies. The oscillations above 62 eV are due to band structure effects. A calculation without electron-hole interaction (green line) does not account for the experimental spectrum but does show the dipole-matrix-element-allowed density of states. Tic marks indicate the positions of high harmonics generated using an 800 nm laser used in transient absorption measurements shown in Fig. 3(a)-(c). (b) Theoretical x-ray absorption spectra calculated for strongly exaggerated elongation amplitudes of the 10 THz A_g phonon mode in units of $[\delta Q] = \text{\AA}\sqrt{\text{amu}}$. Pronounced absorption changes occur both in the excitonic and plateau regions of the spectral envelope.

photon energies of (a) 61.5 and (b) 67 eV is plotted as a function of pump-probe delay (T, T_0 being the sample transmission with and without excitation). The transients were measured on individual high harmonics [cf. red and blue sticks at the bottom of Fig. 2(a)] generated with the 800 nm laser pulses.

At both spectral positions, the absorption change shows a maximum amplitude of approximately $\Delta A = 2 \times 10^{-4}$ and an oscillatory time evolution with a period of 100 fs. There is no detectable nonlinear signal below the Li K-edge. The Fourier spectrum of the oscillations in Fig. 3(c) (bottom) consists of a predominant feature around 10 THz, the frequency of the A_g phonon of LiBH_4 . For comparison, we plot a high-resolution Raman spectrum of LiBH_4 in the upper part of Fig. 3(c) (cf. SI).

We also recorded transient x-ray absorption spectra with the continuous two-color high harmonics probe [25] which are presented in Fig. 3(d). Due to the larger fluctuations of the two-color HHG source (for details see SI) we applied a higher pump field in this experiment and investigated a somewhat

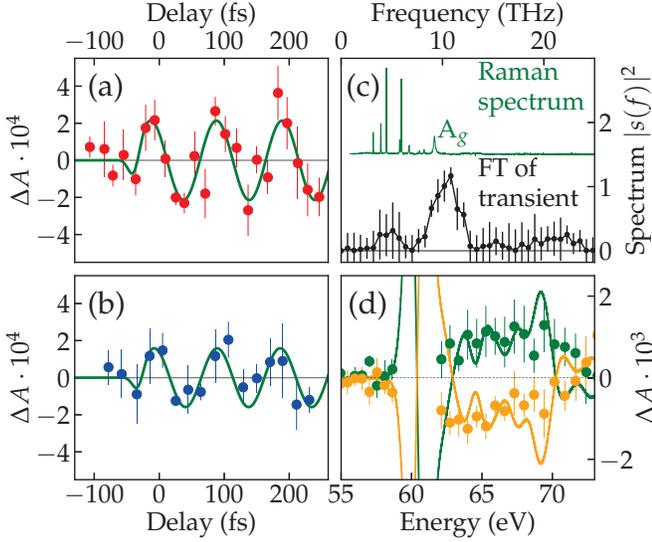


FIG. 3 Transient change of x-ray absorption at (a) 61.5 eV and (b) 67.5 eV, the photon energies of individual harmonics. The change of absorption $\Delta A = -\ln(T/T_0)$ is plotted as a function of pump-probe delay (T and T_0 are the sample transmission with and without excitation) with 1σ error bars. Both transients display strong oscillations due to impulsively excited coherent phonons with a main frequency around 10 THz (solid lines). (c) Bottom: Fourier transform of the oscillations in (a). Top: Spontaneous Raman spectrum of LiBH_4 . (d) Transient absorption spectra measured with the two-color HHG source (symbols, note that the signal is higher than in panels (a),(b) due to different experimental parameters) derived by averaging the absorption changes at the maxima and minima of oscillatory pump-probe traces. The solid lines are derived from the calculated spectra in Fig. 2(b) by rescaling the phonon elongations δQ to the values estimated from the experiments. The high optical density of the film sample did not allow for extending the measurements into the near-edge region of the spectrum, which features the excitonic peak.

thicker sample resulting together in a 5 times larger nonlinear signal compared to Fig. 3(a) and (b). To reduce the error bars, we averaged the intensity changes at the maxima (green symbols) and minima (orange symbols) of the oscillatory pump-probe traces up to a maximum delay time of 500 fs. In the range of the excitonic resonance between 59 eV and 62 eV, the optical density of the LiBH_4 film was too high to measure reliable transients. The solid lines in Fig. 3(d) were calculated using the BSE approach and will be discussed below.

Our experimental results provide direct evidence for a modulation of the x-ray absorption by coherent phonon motions in the LiBH_4 crystallites. We first discuss how such motions are generated, followed by an in-depth analysis of the relevant Raman polarizability in the presence of the strong electric field of the pump pulse. In an impulsive nonresonant Raman excitation process, the optical pump pulse exerts an effective force on a particular phonon mode Q_m which is given by

$$F(Q_m, t) = \frac{1}{8\pi} \mathbf{E}(t) \cdot \frac{\partial \alpha(Q_m)}{\partial Q_m} \cdot \mathbf{E}(t). \quad (1)$$

Here, Q_m represents the phonon (normal) coordinate, $\alpha(Q_m)$

the polarizability tensor of the material, and $\mathbf{E}(t)$ the pump field at the wavevector $\mathbf{q} = 0$ as described in Ref. [27]. The force is proportional to the square of the electric field, reflecting the fact that Raman scattering is second order in the external field. In impulsive Raman scattering, all modes with frequencies within the spectral bandwidth of the driving field are excited. The displacement along the mode Q_m is given by

$$\delta Q = \frac{1}{8\pi\omega_m} \sum_{i,j} \frac{\partial \alpha_{ij}}{\partial Q_m} \left| \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} E_i(\tau) E_j(\tau) e^{i\omega_m \tau} d\tau \right|, \quad (2)$$

ω_m is the vibrational frequency. The individual atomic displacements $\Delta \mathbf{r}$ are derived from δQ by $\Delta \mathbf{r} = \delta Q \mathbf{M}^{-\frac{1}{2}} \cdot \mathbf{Q}_m/Q_m$ with the Raman mode eigenvector \mathbf{Q}_m/Q_m and the mass matrix \mathbf{M} . We performed a measurement of the absolute Raman polarizability for the 10 THz A_g mode to estimate the actual displacements under our excitation conditions (cf. SI). For the electric field in the femtosecond experiment of 10^7 V/cm, one estimates $\delta Q \approx 3 \times 10^{-4}$ Å amu^{0.5} and a displacement of the Li atoms of 3×10^{-5} Å. It is important to note that the atomic displacements induced by impulsive Raman excitation are much smaller than for displacively excited phonons and far below the detection limit of time-resolved x-ray diffraction [28].

The thin LiBH_4 film studied here is a macroscopic disordered ensemble of crystallites. This results in spatial averaging of the (nonlinear) x-ray absorption spectrum over polarization direction with respect to local crystallographic axes. The Raman polarizability tensor can be expressed as a Taylor series with respect to Q_m :

$$\alpha_{ij}(\omega, Q_m) = \alpha_{ij}^0(\omega) + \frac{\partial \alpha_{ij}}{\partial Q_m} Q_m + \frac{1}{2} \frac{\partial^2 \alpha_{ij}}{\partial Q_m^2} Q_m^2 \quad (3)$$

In general, all terms are tensors with symmetry properties depending on the space group of the material and the symmetry of the phonon mode. Considering an individual crystallite, the entire process, i.e., coherent Raman excitation followed by x-ray probing allows for signal contributions from all Raman active modes. In the averaging process over all crystallites in the macroscopic sample, Raman modes with A_g symmetry play a dominant role because the first-order effects of $\partial \alpha_{ij}/\partial Q_m$ are observable at the fundamental vibrational frequency. Second order Raman modes only appear at even harmonics. For the present small vibrational displacements, these contributions are negligible.

The femtometer-scale atomic displacements modify the x-ray absorption. Our analysis is based on the detailed band structure of the periodic crystalline solid, in contrast to an electron scattering picture. Beyond that, our solution of the BSE accounts for many correlation effects and the screened Coulomb interaction between electrons and holes, unlike an independent-particle picture. X-ray absorption spectra are calculated by solving the BSE equation accounting for electric-dipole transitions into all unoccupied band states. For x-ray

absorption due to excitation of core electrons, the core states exhibit negligible band dispersion. As a result, a rearrangement of the nuclei within the unit cell (of constant shape and size) by coherent phonon excitations leaves the core states essentially unchanged but modifies the excited electronic band states and the associated dipole-transition matrix elements, so that nuclear motions are evident in x-ray absorption. Beyond such single-particle properties, the electron-core hole attraction also has a strong influence on the x-ray absorption spectrum at the K-edge. For a quantitative description, we consider the imaginary part of the dielectric tensor of LiBH_4 , $\Im \epsilon_{ij}(\omega_{\text{XUV}}, Q_m)$, which depends on the (soft) x-ray photon energy $\hbar\omega_{\text{XUV}}$. This tensor and its expansion with respect to Q_m have the same symmetry properties as $\alpha_{ij}(Q_m)$ [cf. Eq. (3)]. In section IX.B.4 of the SI we discuss the relation between the theoretically calculated $\epsilon_2(\omega_{\text{XUV}}, Q_m)$ [Fig. 2(b)] and the experimentally observed absorption $A(\omega_{\text{XUV}}, Q_m)$ [Fig. 2(a)].

In Fig. 2(b), we present x-ray absorption spectra calculated from the BSE treatment (cf. SI) for different amplitudes of the 10 THz A_g mode. This result reveals pronounced changes of the absorption line shape in both the excitonic and the XANES region. For a direct comparison of the theory results with the measured transient spectra in Fig. 3(d), we use a sample thickness of $L \approx 1 \mu\text{m}$ and derive an absolute value of $\delta Q = 3 \times 10^{-4} \text{ \AA amu}^{0.5}$, i.e., much smaller than the values used to prepare Fig. 2(b) in agreement with the phonon displacements estimated from the measured absolute Raman polarizability [cf. eq. (2) and SI]. The calculated spectra [solid lines in Fig. 3(d)] are in good agreement with the experiment (symbols), supporting the conclusion that the impulsively excited oscillations of the A_g phonon at 10 THz underlie the observed modulation of x-ray absorption, and demonstrating the high sensitivity of x-ray absorption spectra to small atomic displacements.

We now develop a microscopic picture of the impulsive Raman excitation process. The electric field of the pump pulse of approximately 10^7 V/cm modifies the local intra- and interionic potentials. As a result, the electron wave functions become superpositions of electronic states in the valence and conduction band manifolds of LiBH_4 . The equilibrium spatial distribution of electronic charge $\rho_0(\mathbf{r})$ which is shown for the $y=1/4$ plane in Fig. 1(b) is strongly modified by this field-induced coupling of states. Recent femtosecond x-ray diffraction experiments have provided transient differential electron density maps $\Delta\rho(\mathbf{r}, t)$ [24], giving evidence of a laser-induced shift of electronic charge from the electron-rich BH_4^- ions to neighboring Li^+ ions [Fig. 1(c)]. This charge transfer is connected with a transient change of the vibrational potentials and results in an effective force displacing the nuclei from their equilibrium positions. In Fig. 1(d), we plot the differential Coulomb potential $V_{\text{diff}}(\mathbf{r}, t = 0)$ originating from the electron transfer which characterizes the virtual intermediate state of the Raman process.

The gradient of this potential $\nabla V_{\text{diff}}(\mathbf{r}, 0)$ defines the forces acting on the BH_4^- and Li^+ ions [arrows in Fig. 1(d)]. The boron nuclei are strongly accelerated by the impulsive force

of the induced electronic polarization. The large overlap between force vectors [panel (d)] and the normal mode [panel (c)] favors a strong coherent excitation of the 10 THz A_g Raman mode, which is observed in the time-resolved x-ray absorption experiment. Combining the femtosecond diffraction study [24] with the present x-ray absorption experiment gives a complete picture of the Raman process. On the one hand time-resolved x-ray diffraction uncovers the electronic response to a non-resonant driving field in a spatially resolved way and, in turn, the resulting forces on the ions corresponding to the virtual state in the Raman scattering language. On the other hand femtosecond x-ray absorption spectroscopy provides information on the motion and displacements of specific nuclei via their transiently modified K-edge absorption spectra with a sensitivity down to $\Delta A = 10^{-4}$.

In conclusion, ultrafast oscillatory changes of x-ray absorption in LiBH_4 have been observed by ultrafast x-ray absorption spectroscopy, based on femtosecond optical pump pulses and synchronized soft x-ray pulses from a laser-driven high-harmonic source. The modulation of the x-ray absorption in the range of the Li K-edge is due to impulsive excitation of coherent motions of the 10 THz A_g phonon, favored by the relocation of electronic charge in the presence of the pump field. Our results establish ultrafast transient x-ray absorption as a very sensitive probe of phonon quantum coherences and their impact on electronic structure, phenomena relevant for a broad range of functional materials and soft matter samples.

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