The metallicity properties of zCOSMOS galaxies at 0.2 < z < 0.8

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ABSTRACT
We study the metallicity properties of galaxies in the zCOSMOS sample in the range 0.2 < z < 0.8. At z < 0.46, where Hα and [N II] are detected, we find the same dependence of metallicity on stellar mass and star formation rate, the fundamental metallicity relation (FMR), found by Mannucci et al. in Sloan Digital Sky Survey galaxies on a similar redshift range. We extend this relation to higher redshift, 0.49 < z < 0.8, where the R23 metallicity index can be measured in our data, finding no evidence for evolution, and a metallicity scatter around the relation of about 0.16 dex. This result confirms, with a much higher level of significance with respect to previous works, the absence of evolution of the FMR during the last-half of cosmic history.

Key words: galaxies: abundances – galaxies: formation – galaxies: high-redshift.

1 INTRODUCTION

The fundamental metallicity relation (FMR) is a tight relation between stellar mass, star formation rate (SFR) and metallicity, discovered by Mannucci et al. (2010, hereafter M10) using local Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS) galaxies. The gas phase metallicity of ∼140,000 galaxies with redshift between 0.07 and 0.3 is found to depend not only on stellar mass, in the well-known mass–metallicity relation (Tremonti et al. 2004), but also on SFR, with more active galaxies showing lower metallicities. After considering this relation, the residual metallicity scatter is limited to ∼0.05 dex, which is compatible with the effect of the uncertainties on mass, SFR and metallicity.

The role of specific SFR (SSFR = SFR/mass) in relation with metallicity was first suggested by Ellison et al. (2008), who presented a mild (∼0.1 dex) dependence of metallicity on SSFR when binning galaxies according to their stellar mass. After M10, Lara-López et al. (2010) discussed a plane in the same 3D space, and proposed to use it to derive the stellar mass of galaxies once their SFR and metallicity are known. The exact shape of the relation, especially at the high-mass end, depends on the choice of the metallicity calibrations, on the assumptions about dust extinction and SFR and on the extent of the aperture corrections allowed, as reported in Yates, Kauffmann & Guo (2011).

Although the presence of the FMR is well established at low z, regardless of the metallicity calibration used, only a limited amount of distant galaxies have been used for the study of the FMR at high redshifts. The data available show that no evolution is present up to z = 2.5 (see fig. 4 of M10), i.e. galaxies of any mass and SFR follow the same FMR defined by local galaxies. The observed evolution of the mass–metallicity relation (e.g. Maiolino et al. 2008; Mannucci et al. 2009) is therefore due to a prospective effect, as high-redshift galaxies usually have higher SFR and, as a consequence, lower metallicities. Some evolution is observed at even higher redshifts, z > 3, as discussed in M10 and Troncoso et al. (in preparation).

This result has been later confirmed by several groups. For example, Richard et al. (2011) studied a sample of lensed galaxies at 1.4 < z < 5, which have SFR smaller than the other samples of unlensed galaxies at these redshifts (Erb et al. 2006; Maiolino et al. 2008; Mannucci et al. 2009). These galaxies show higher metallicity with respect to the mass–metallicity relation, exactly as expected by the FMR. Similarly, Nakajima et al. (2011) presented the metallicities of stacked Lyα emitter at z ~ 2.2, which have smaller SFR than other galaxies at similar redshift, but also higher metallicities according to the FMR. On the other hand, various highly star-forming galaxies at high redshift are presented in the literature as very metal poor for their stellar mass. However, they result to be consistent with the FMR once their high SFR is considered (e.g. Erb et al. 2010; Kassin et al. 2011). Finally, the use of the FMR allowed Mannucci, Salvaterra & Campisi (2011) to show that, when considering their high SFRs, the host galaxies of long gamma-ray bursts (GRBs) have the same metallicity distribution as of field galaxies.

The high-redshift galaxy samples used by M10 show a much larger spread in metallicity (∼0.25 dex) around the FMR than local SDSS galaxies (∼0.05 dex). The spread is comparable with the much larger uncertainties in SFR and metallicity due to the generally lower signal-to-noise ratio (S/N) of the detected emission lines. This large spread could hide systematic trends, therefore, it is important to test this result using larger samples of galaxies. In this paper we use data from the zCOSMOS survey to study the evolution of the FMR up to z ~ 0.8 with higher precision. This is fundamental
to understand if the same long lasting equilibrium between star formation, infall of pristine gas and outflow of enriched material that seems to be responsible for the FMR in local galaxies (see e.g. Davé, Finlator & Oppenheimer 2011; Torrey et al. 2011) is also driving galaxy evolution at higher redshift, where infalls (Erb 2008; Mannucci et al. 2009; Cresci et al. 2010) and outflows (e.g. Steidel et al. 2010) are expected to be even more relevant.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we briefly introduce the sample used, in Section 3 we present the method used to derive the stellar masses and in Section 4 we described how the line fluxes and the final sample selection were obtained. The measures of SFRs and extinctions are discussed in Section 5, while those of metallicities in Section 6. Our results are discussed in Section 8, while our conclusions follow in Section 9.

2 THE zCOSMOS SAMPLE

zCOSMOS (Lilly et al. 2007) is a redshift survey in the COSMOS field using the Visible Multi-Object Spectrograph (VIMOS) on European Southern Observatory (ESO)/Very Large Telescope (VLT). It consists of two parts: the first, zCOSMOS-bright, is a redshift survey of ~20 000 I-band-selected galaxies at redshifts z < 1.2, covering the approximately 1.7 deg$^2$ of the COSMOS field; the second part, zCOSMOS-deep, is observing ~10 000 galaxies selected through well-defined colour selection criteria and at B < 25 to be in the redshift range 1.5 < z < 3.0. These observations are restricted to the central 1 deg$^2$ of the COSMOS field. Here we have used the spectra of the Data Release 2 of the zCOSMOS-bright survey, the so-called ‘10k-bright’, available on the project website since 2008 October. 1 These consist of ~10 000 spectra, obtained with 1-arcsec-wide slits and the MR grism (R ~ 600) with a wavelength range of approximately 5550–9650 Å, sampled at roughly 2.5 Å pixel$^{-1}$. The details about the object selection, observations and data reduction can be found in Lilly et al. (2009).

In order to measure gas phase metallicity for our galaxies using strong optical emission lines, we need either [N II] 6584 and Hz or [O III] 5007 and Hβ visible in the wavelength range of the VIMOS spectrum. We therefore divided the obtained sample in two subsample at different redshifts: 2825 galaxies at z < 0.47 have accessible Hz emission and 3691 galaxies at z > 0.49 are in the right redshift range to observe [O III] emission. [O III] 5007 and Hβ are observable for all these galaxies.

3 MASS AND CONTINUUM SPECTRA FROM SED FITTING

To estimate the stellar masses we used 12 photometric bands: Canada–France–Hawaii Telescope (CFHT) u and Ks; Subaru B$^\prime$, V$^\prime$, g$^\prime$, r$^\prime$, i$^\prime$ and z$^\prime$; United Kingdom Infrared Telescope (UKIRT) J (Capak et al. 2007; I Bert et al. 2009) and Spitzer Infrared Array Camera (IRAC) at 3.6, 4.5 and 5.8 μm (Frayer et al. 2009).

The photometry for all the optical and near-infrared (IR) bands was measured over an aperture of 3-arcsec diameter to minimize the effect of point spread function variation from band to band. The fluxes measured in 3-arcsec diameter are corrected to total using the so-called ‘auto-offsets’, i.e. a correction factor based on the comparison between the I-band 3 arcsec magnitude with the total one as derived by SExtractor (see Capak et al. 2007). The IRAC fluxes were measured in a circular aperture of radius 1.9 arcsec, converted to total fluxes using the correction factors derived by Surace et al. (2004). We also used Galaxy Evolution Explorer (GALEX) far-ultraviolet (FUV) and near-ultraviolet (NUV) photometry from Zamojski et al. (2007), when available. A few galaxies show problematic values of the magnitude (Bolzonella et al., private communication), therefore, GALEX photometry was only used when the reduced χ$^2$ of spectral energy distribution (SED) fitting is below 2, for a total of 64 galaxies.

The stellar masses were obtained with a SED fitting analysis, using the HyperZmass code (Pozzetti et al. 2007, 2009), a modified version of the HyperZ code (Bolzonella, Miralles & Pelli 2000): the observed photometric SEDs are compared to those obtained from a set of reference synthetic spectra from stellar population models, and the best-fitting SED is obtained using a χ$^2$ minimization. The best-fitting spectrum and its normalization provide estimates of the SFR, extinction, stellar population age and galaxy stellar mass (as the integral of the SFR over the obtained age, correcting for mass losses during stellar evolution; see Pozzetti et al. 2007). In addition, the code makes available in output the best-fitting synthetic stellar continuum for each galaxy that has been used to correct for the Balmer absorptions (see Section 4).

The reference spectral library was built with the Bruzual & Charlot (2003) code for spectral synthesis models, using the low-resolution version with the Padova 1994 tracks. The models were produced assuming a Chabrier initial mass function (IMF; Chabrier 2003) with an upper mass limit of 100 M$_\odot$, the Calzetti et al. (2000) extinction law with A$_V$ varying between 0 and 4 mag and fixing the redshift to the spectroscopic value. We used smooth exponentially decreasing star formation histories, with time-scale τ in the range 0.1–∞ and age t between 0.1 and 20 Gyr. An example of SED fitting for one of the galaxies of our sample is shown in Fig. 1.

The stellar masses computed by Kauffmann et al. (2003a) for the SDSS sample used by M10 to derive the FMR in the local Universe were instead computed using random secondary bursts in addition to the single one used here. Previous studies (e.g. Fontana et al. 2003) pointed out that Starburstatus galaxies have a much lower probability of driving the observed FMR as they are already in a later stage of their evolution. The FMR for less evolved galaxies, however, may be strongly affected by the properties of the ISM that seems to be responsible for the FMR in local galaxies (see e.g. Davé, Finlator & Oppenheimer 2011; Torrey et al. 2011) is also driving galaxy evolution at higher redshift, where infalls (Erb 2008; Mannucci et al. 2009; Cresci et al. 2010) and outflows (e.g. Steidel et al. 2010) are expected to be even more relevant.
2004; Pozzetti et al. 2007) have shown that random secondary bursts may produce systematically larger masses up to about 0.2 dex. We therefore run several tests adding random secondary burst to our synthetic spectra to check if this systematic difference in the stellar mass due to the use of a single exponential star formation history in our data is present and comparable to previous studies. In agreement to what is found in the literature, we found that the stellar masses obtained with random secondary burst are $\sim$0.15–0.2 dex larger than the ones obtained with a single burst. We therefore added 0.2 dex to the stellar masses obtained with a single burst for consistency with the SDSS stellar masses.

The stellar masses derived were also compared with the results obtained using the Maraston (2005) spectral library, which include a more detailed treatment of the thermally pulsing asymptotic giant branch stars. These stars contribute significantly to the total luminosity in the $\sim$0.2–2 Gyr stellar population age. We found that the stellar masses obtained using the Maraston (2005) library are lower on average by a factor of $\sim$0.1, as already mentioned in Bolzonella et al. (2010). To allow an easy comparison with the previous study in M10 for SDSS galaxies, we use in the following the results obtained with the Bruzual & Charlot (2003) library.

4 LINE FLUXES

The extracted 1D spectra provided by the zCOSMOS release were used to measure emission-line fluxes. For each spectrum we fitted several emission lines, $[\text{O} \text{II}]$ 3727, [Ne II] 3869, H$\gamma$, H$\beta$, [O II] 5007, [O III] 4959, [N II] 6548, H$\alpha$, [N II] 6584, [S II] 6716, [S II] 6730, when available in the accessible spectral range (see Section 2). The fit was performed using a custom IDL code, which automatically fits with a $\chi^2$ minimization a suitable stellar continuum and a Gaussian to each emission line.

To measure reliable fluxes, it is important to properly account for the stellar Balmer absorption, which in some galaxies can reach equivalent widths of $\sim$5 Å. The best-fitting synthetic stellar continuum derived from the SED fitting analysis of each galaxy (see Section 3) is used to reproduce the absorption line profile and the continuum shape. The synthetic stellar continuum is providing a very good representation of the observed continuum in all the inspected spectra, providing a good estimate of the absorption underlying the Balmer emission lines: an example is shown in Fig. 2.

The continuum is fitted in a region of $\pm$300 Å around the expected position of each emission line. During the minimization, pixels in the data that consistently deviated more than $3\sigma$ from the average were rejected, and were not used in the analysis. The uncertainties on the measured centroid position, velocity dispersion and flux are evaluated through Monte Carlo realizations, perturbing the input data assuming Gaussian uncertainties.

5 STAR FORMATION RATE AND EXTINCTION

SFR can be derived from the H$\alpha$ and H$\beta$ lines, which provide a direct probe of the young massive stellar population. Similar to what has been done in M10 and many other authors, we have used the classical conversion factor by Kennicutt (1998), scaling down the results by a factor of 1.7 (Pozzetti et al. 2007) to convert them to the Chabrier (2003) IMF. The conversion factor is based on the H$\alpha$ or H$\beta$ flux corrected for dust extinction, and therefore requires a good knowledge of the amount of extinction $A_V$ suffered by the emission lines.

For galaxies at $z < 0.47$, where both H$\alpha$ and H$\beta$ are visible, the extinction can be derived directly from the Balmer decrement H$\alpha$/H$\beta$, assuming a Calzetti et al. (2000) extinction law, and the SFR from the H$\alpha$ extinction-corrected flux. At $z > 0.49$, where H$\alpha$ is not visible anymore in our data, we used the Balmer decrement of the fainter H$\gamma$/H$\beta$ for all the galaxies where S/N(H$\gamma$) $\geq$ 5, while the extinction $A_{V,SED}$ derived for the continuum by the SED fitting (see Section 3) for the other galaxies.

Calzetti et al. (2000) found evidence that the extinction derived from emission lines $A_{V,\text{neb}}$ in actively star-forming galaxies is not equal but proportional to that measured from the continuum, with $A_{V,\text{neb}} = A_{V,SED}/0.44$ (see also e.g. Förster Schreiber et al. 2009). We have compared $A_{V,\text{neb}}$ and $A_{V,SED}$ for all the galaxies where a Balmer decrement extinction measurement is available (either H$\alpha$/H$\beta$ or H$\gamma$/H$\beta$), finding that the extra attenuation of the emission lines is confirmed by our data: our best-fitting relation is $A_{V,SED} = (0.42 \pm 0.01)A_{V,\text{neb}}$. Given the small differences, we adopt the relation $A_{V,\text{neb}} = A_{V,SED}/0.44$ of Calzetti et al. (2000) to all the objects in the higher redshift bin with no H$\gamma$ flux, in order to ensure a direct comparison of our results with previous works.

6 METALLICITY

Given the large variety of different strong line metallicity calibrations used in the literature (see e.g. Pagel et al. 1979; Kewley & Dopita 2002, hereafter KD02; Pettini & Pagel 2004; Tremonti et al. 2004; Dopita et al. 2006; Nagao, Maiolino & Marconi 2006), which give very different results for a given line ratio, it is mandatory to study the evolution of the FMR using the same calibration used in M10. Consistently with that work, gas phase metallicities were computed using the calibrations obtained by Nagao et al. (2006) and Maiolino et al. (2008), to allow a proper comparison with local SDSS galaxies. These ratios have been empirically calibrated at low metallicities (12 + log(O/H) $< 8.4$) using direct $T_e$ measurements in local metal-poor galaxies and H II regions, and are based on the photoionization models by KD02 at high metallicity. The metallicity is therefore provided on the KD02 scale, while a conversion to other metallicity systems can be found in Kewley & Ellison (2008). The calibration proposed in KD02 is dependent on...
the [N\textsc{ii}]/[O\textsc{ii}] ratio, but the use of a secondary element as nitrogen is of some concern. This issue will be addressed in detail by Maiolino et al. (in preparation, see also Pérez-Montero & Contini 2009; Torres-Papaqui, Coziol & Ortega-Minakata 2011).

Two different measurements of metallicity are available for the two redshift ranges. At $z < 0.47$, where $H\alpha$ is still visible, the [N\textsc{ii}]/$H\alpha$ ratio is used. At $z > 0.49$, where [O\textsc{ii}] emission is in the accessible wavelength range, the measurement is instead based on the $R_{23}$ quantity, defined as $R_{23} = ([O\textsc{ii}] \lambda 3727 + [O\textsc{iii}] \lambda 4959 + [O\textsc{iii}] \lambda 5007)/H\beta$. In this latter case, as the lines involved are significantly separated in wavelength, the extinction correction discussed is Section 5 has to be applied to the observed line fluxes. Moreover, as $R_{23}$ has two possible metallicity solutions for a given line ratio, other diagnostics have to be used to remove the degeneracy and distinguish between the two branches at low and high metallicity.

We use for this task both the $[\text{O}\textsc{iii}]/\text{[O}\textsc{ii}]$ and $[\text{Ne}\textsc{iii}]/\text{[O}\textsc{ii}]$ line ratios, which have a monotonic dependence on metallicity, but are also affected by a larger dispersion due to their additional dependence on the ionization parameter (see Nagao et al. 2006). In spite of their larger scatter, low- and high-metallicity galaxies are reasonably well separated in both diagrams (see e.g. fig. 5 in Maiolino et al. 2008).

We therefore assigned all galaxies with $\log([\text{O}\textsc{iii}]/\text{[O}\textsc{ii}]) < 0.45$ and $\log([\text{Ne}\textsc{iii}]/\text{[O}\textsc{ii}]) < -0.6$ to the high-metallicity $R_{23}$ branch, while all the others to the low-metallicity one. The two independent branch indicators used agree for all the galaxies in our sample, supporting our method to discriminate between branches.

To further check the reliability of the branch selection done, we add to the galaxies used in Nagao et al. (2006) and Maiolino et al. (2008), the sample of $\sim 600$ SDSS with direct $T_e$ measurement of Kniazev et al. (2004). We find that their galaxies with $S/N > 5$ on the $[\text{O}\textsc{iii}] \lambda 4363$ line (used for $T_e$ measurement; see e.g. Izotov et al. 2006) follow our criteria on $[\text{O}\textsc{iii}]/\text{[O}\textsc{ii}]$ to discriminate between the two branches. This is also confirmed by a larger sample of galaxies with $T_e$ measurement that will be presented in a forthcoming paper (Maiolino et al., in preparation).

The uncertainties on the gas phase metallicities are of the order of 0.1–0.2 dex, and are dominated by the spread in the calibrations themselves. The uncertainties in the higher redshift bin tend to be larger when the metallicity has values 12 + log(O/H) $\sim 8$, where $R_{23}$ has a maximum and a small uncertainty in the line ratio produces a large uncertainty in metallicity. In any case, we note that just very few galaxies in our sample are in the low-metallicity region where $R_{23}$ is flat (between 12 + log(O/H) $\sim 7.7$–8.4; see Fig. 4).

7 SAMPLE SELECTION

The results of the SED and emission-line fitting described in Sections 3 and 4 were combined and used to define the two final subsamples (galaxies at $z < 0.47$ with accessible $H\alpha$ emission and galaxies at $z > 0.49$ with [O\textsc{ii}] emission). We applied to the initial sample discussed in Section 2 the following selections.

(i) Each zCOSMOS spectrum is assigned to a confidence class according to the reliability of the final redshift. We selected all the objects with confidence classes 3 and 4 (respectively, ‘secure’ and ‘very secure’ redshifts), and class 2.5 (redshift with reliability larger than 85 per cent and photometric redshift in good agreement with the spectroscopic redshift). We also added all the objects in classes 23 and 24, i.e. secondary targets detected in a slit positioned on another target, but with secure and very secure redshifts. We further excluded from our sample duplicate objects. Galaxies classified as broad-line active galactic nucleus (AGN) in the zCOSMOS catalogue (class >10) or stars (class *4) are automatically excluded from our selection.

(ii) As our two subsamples may be still contaminated by type 2 narrow-line AGN, or with by AGN with nuclear emission diluted in the host galaxy light, we applied two additional filterings. First, we excluded objects associated with X-rays-selected AGN from the XMM–COSMOS catalogue with rest-frame hard X-rays luminosity in excess $> 2 \times 10^{43}$ erg s$^{-1}$, typical of AGN (see Brusa et al. 2010 for more details). Secondly, to further exclude Compton thick and low-luminosity AGN below the XMM–COSMOS sensitivity, we used standard Baldwin–Phillips–Terlevich (BPT) selections based on emission-line ratios. Following Bongiorno et al. (2010), we used the $[O\textsc{iii}]/H\beta$ versus $[N\textsc{ii}]/H\alpha$ diagnostic diagram (Kauffmann et al. 2003b) for galaxies at $z < 0.46$, and the $[O\textsc{iii}]/H\beta$ versus $[O\textsc{ii}]/H\beta$ diagram (Lamareille et al. 2004) for galaxies at $z > 0.49$.

(iii) The velocity shift between each fitted emission-line centroid and the zCOSMOS redshift must be below 280 km s$^{-1}$, and the line width must be between 110 and 290 km s$^{-1}$, otherwise the fit is considered unreliable and the galaxy is excluded. For this selection we considered all the main emission lines: $H\beta$ and $[O\textsc{iii}] \lambda 5007$ for all the galaxies; $H\alpha$ and $[N\textsc{ii}]$ for galaxies at low redshift ($z < 0.46$); $[O\textsc{ii}] \lambda 3727$ for galaxies at high redshift ($z > 0.49$).

(iv) The same lines must not correspond to bright sky lines, or to spectral regions badly affected by fringing ($\lambda > 8000$ Å).

(v) The reduced $\chi^2$ of SED fitting must be below 5, and the final 68 per cent uncertainty on mass must be below 0.30 dex.

(vi) A threshold on the S/N of $H\alpha$ and $H\beta$ is also applied to have reliable and unbiased metallicity measurements. As line ratios depend strongly on metallicity (see e.g. Maiolino et al. 2008), applying the same thresholds to all relevant lines or to their ratios would introduce severe biases in metallicity (see M10 for a detailed discussion). To avoid these biases, and following what has been done for M10, we only apply high S/N thresholds to the lines which are diagnostics of SFR-like $H\alpha$ and $H\beta$. The actual threshold values depend on the redshift and stellar mass: at $z < 0.46$ we used $S/N(H\alpha) = 15$ for $\log(M_*/M_\odot) > 9.4$, and $S/N(H\alpha) = 30$ for $\log(M_*/M_\odot) < 9.4$; at $z > 0.49$ we used $S/N(H\beta) = 8$ for $\log(M_*/M_\odot) \leq 9.8$, and $S/N(H\beta) = 20$ for $\log(M_*/M_\odot) > 9.8$. With these choices all the other relevant lines are detected with adequate S/N without additional, metal-dependent selections. Indeed, in our lower redshift bin biases on metallicity are important mainly at low stellar masses: for example, at $\log(M_*/M_\odot) \sim 9$, where metallicities are $12 + \log(O/H) \sim 8.5$, $[N\textsc{ii}]$ is only $\sim 0.1$ H\alpha, while at $\log(M_*/M_\odot) \sim 10.2$, where the metallicity is as high as $12 + \log(O/H) \sim 9$, $[N\textsc{ii}]$ is $\sim 0.4$ H\alpha, and a lower S/N threshold on $H\alpha$ may be applied to maximize the number of galaxies in our sample. In the higher redshift bin, on the other hand, the situation is reversed and $[O\textsc{ii}]$, which is only $\sim 0.4$ H\beta in the high-mass bin, increases to $\sim 3$ H\beta at the lower masses and metallicities. These considerations indicate that our choice of S/N thresholds on $H\alpha$ and $H\beta$ lines that depends on mass in both redshift bins maximize the number of galaxies selected without introducing metallicity biases.

(vii) Following M10, we checked the metallicity derived from $[N\textsc{ii}] \lambda 6548/H\alpha$ for galaxies at $z < 0.46$ using an independent metallicity indicator. As $[O\textsc{ii}]$ is not available in this redshift range, we used $[O\textsc{ii}]/H\beta$, which has properties similar to $R_{23}$ with just a slightly larger scatter: we selected only galaxies where the values of metallicity obtained with the two different indicators differ less that 0.25 dex. At $z > 0.49$, instead, no additional independent
metallicity tracer with low enough scatter is available, and no additional selection is applied.

After applying all these selections, we obtain 169 galaxies at \( z < 0.47 \) (\( \langle z \rangle = 0.25 \)) and 165 galaxies at \( z > 0.49 \) (\( \langle z \rangle = 0.60 \)).

The redshift distribution of the two final subsamples is shown in Fig. 3.

8 RESULTS

The mass–metallicity relations for the two zCOSMOS samples at \( z \sim 0.25 \) and \( \sim 0.60 \) are shown in Fig. 4 (left-hand panels). As expected, the mass–metallicity relation for the \( z \sim 0.25 \) sample is comparable to the relation derived by M10 for SDSS galaxies, as the SDSS sample used by M10 is including galaxies up to \( z \lesssim 0.3 \).

In the higher redshift bin, consistently with what was observed in other samples at comparable redshift (e.g. Savaglio et al. 2005; Cowie & Barger 2008; Rodrigues et al. 2008; Lamareille et al. 2009; Pérez-Montero et al. 2009b; Zahid, Kewley & Bresolin 2011), we find significant evolution of the mass–metallicity relation, of \( \sim 0.1 \) dex. Moreover, if we plot the single galaxies on the mass–metallicity relation colour coded as a function of their SFR, as shown in Fig. 5 (left-hand panels) for both redshift bins, there is a trend for more star-forming galaxies to have lower metallicity at a given stellar mass, as found by M10 for the SDSS sample.

M10, in fact, defined the FMR adding the SFR of the galaxies as a third parameter in the mass–metallicity relation, showing that SDSS galaxies with lower metallicity also have higher SFR at a given mass, and that roughly half of the scatter in the relation was due to the different individual SFR of the galaxies. They also showed that the metallicity scatter of local galaxies could be minimized plotting them on a particular projection of the FMR, introducing a
The metallicity of galaxies at $0.2 < z < 0.8$

Figure 5. The mass–metallicity relation (left-hand panels) and the $\mu_{0.32}$ projection of the FMR (right-hand panels) for the individual galaxies of the sample. The lower redshift bin ($z < 0.46$) is shown in the upper panels, while the higher redshift bin ($z > 0.49$) in the lower panels. The galaxies are colour coded as a function of their SFR, with decreasing SFR from blue to magenta. While a trend for lower metallicity at higher SFR and fixed mass is present in the mass–metallicity relation at both redshifts, the projection removes such effects, showing that the galaxies up to $z \sim 0.8$ populate a 3D plane defined by mass, metallicity and SFR as local SDSS galaxies.

new quantity $\mu_{0.32}$ defined as

$$\mu_{0.32} = \log(32 M/M_\odot) - 0.32 \log(\text{SFR}).$$

As shown in the right-hand panel of Fig. 4, no evolution is observed even in the higher redshift bin in the $\mu_{0.32}$ plane, once the increased SFR of the zCOSMOS galaxies at high $z$ with respect to the local SDSS galaxies is accounted for. Moreover, the projection clearly removes any dependence of the mass–metallicity scatter from the SFR of the galaxies (see Fig. 5, right-hand panels). This shows that the star-forming galaxies up to $z \sim 0.8$ populate the same tight surface in the 3D space defined by their mass, metallicity and SFR as demonstrated by M10 for local SDSS galaxies.

To better check the presence of any evolution of the FMR with redshift, we compute the expected metallicity of each galaxy, given its stellar mass and SFR, according to the 3D plane defined by mass, metallicity and SFR as local SDSS galaxies. The single points are shown colour coded as a function of their SFR, with decreasing SFR from blue to magenta. The galaxies in both redshift bins are consistent with no differences from the FMR, with an average offset of $9 \times 10^{-3} \pm 0.17$ at $z < 0.46$ and $9 \times 10^{-3} \pm 0.16$ at $z > 0.49$. No residual dependencies from the SSFR are found.

Figure 6. Difference from the FMR surface for the zCOSMOS galaxies at $z < 0.46$ (left-hand panel) and $z > 0.49$ (right-hand panel) as a function of stellar mass. The single points are shown colour coded as a function of their SFR, while their average in each bin along with the $1\sigma$ scatter is shown in black. The galaxies in both redshift bins are consistent with no differences from the FMR, with an average offset of $9 \times 10^{-3} \pm 0.17$ at $z < 0.46$ and $9 \times 10^{-3} \pm 0.16$ at $z > 0.49$. No residual dependencies from the SSFR are found.

scatter is significantly reduced to 0.11 and 0.14 dex, respectively, for the two subsamples. Moreover, the scatter in the local FMR based on SDSS galaxies depends significantly on mass and SFR, increasing at higher SFR and lower stellar mass (see table 1 in M10). Therefore, the scatter derived for the zCOSMOS objects has to be compared with that obtained for SDSS galaxies with comparable stellar mass and SFR only: the $z = 0$ scatter corresponding to the lower redshift zCOSMOS subsample galaxy properties is 0.10 dex, while the one relative to higher redshift one is 0.11 dex, closer to the fringing free scatter observed in our data. The remaining difference in the higher redshift bin is probably due to the single metallicity indicator used for those galaxies, while in M10 the abundances were derived using both $R_{23}$ and Hα for all the galaxies.

The redshift evolution of the FMR based on the zCOSMOS data presented in this work and on higher redshift data from the literature compiled by M10 is shown in Fig. 7. All the galaxy samples up to $z = 2.5$ are consistent with no evolution of the FMR defined locally, while metallicities lower by $\sim 0.6$ dex are observed at $z = 3.3$ (see M10). As the data points at $z > 1$ are based on few massive galaxies, the larger samples at high redshift presented here at $z \sim 0.25$ and $\sim 0.63$ provide a stronger evidence for the no evolution of the FMR with redshift.

9 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have studied the gas phase metallicity of a sample of more than 300 star-forming galaxies in the range $0.2 \lesssim z \lesssim 0.8$ from the zCOSMOS survey. We have measured the gas phase metallicity using strong optical line ratios, $[\text{N} \text{II}] \lambda 6584/\text{Hα}$ for galaxies at $z < 0.46$ and $R_{23}$ for galaxies at $z > 0.49$.

We find that the metallicity of the galaxies is tightly related to their stellar mass, as for local galaxies. However, a clear evolution of
the mass–metallicity relation of $\sim 0.1$ dex with respect to the local one is observed for the galaxies with $z > 0.49$. We also found a dependence of the scatter observed around the mass–metallicity of our sample on the SFR, showing that star-forming galaxies up to $z \sim 0.8$ are defining a 3D plane between stellar mass, metallicity and SFR, as local SDSS galaxies. Moreover, we have shown that metallicity lower by $\sim 0.6$ dex are observed at $z = 3.3$. While each black point at $z > 0.7$ is the average of $\sim 20$ galaxies or less, the points at $z \sim 0.25$ and $z \sim 0.60$ comprise $\sim 160$ galaxies each.

Theack of evolution of the FMR at $0.2 < z < 0.8$ is fully confirmed for the zCOSMOS sample, as the expected metallicities computed according to the local FMR using the masses and SFR of the galaxies are consistent with the observed ones: the average offset is $9 \times 10^{-3} \pm 0.17$ at $z < 0.46$ and $9 \times 10^{-3} \pm 0.16$ at $z > 0.49$. The observed scatter is somehow larger than the one measured for SDSS galaxies, although the difference is probably due to VIMOS instrumental effects and to the lower number of independent metallicity indicators available.

The results presented confirm with much higher level of significance that the same physical processes are probably responsible for the SFR, metal enrichment and gas recycling through inflow and outflows in the local and higher redshift Universe, as already suggested by M10. Moreover, they support the idea that the observed evolution of the mass–metallicity relation, at least up to $z \sim 0.8$, is simply due to more severe selection biases at high redshift as well as to the increase of the average SFR, which results in sampling different parts of the same FMR at different cosmic epochs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank the zCOSMOS project for making the data available to the community, and L. Pozzetti and M. Bolzonella for assistance in computing stellar masses. We also wish to thank M. Mignoli for support in understanding zCOSMOS spectra, and C. Maier for the stimulating discussion about metallicity measurements in this sample. GC and FM acknowledge financial support from the Italian Space Agency through ASI-INAF grant I/009/10/0. FM acknowledges additional support from ASI-INAF grant I/016/07/0, and from PRIN-INAF 2008. This work is based on observations made with ESO Telescopes at Paranal Observatories under programme ID 175.A-0839839, and in part on observations obtained with XMM–Newton, an ESA Science Mission with instruments and contributions directly founded by ESA Member States and the USA (NASA).

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Figure 7. Redshift evolution of the FMR plane defined by local SDSS galaxies for zCOSMOS galaxies (this work, red and blue) and other high-$z$ sample in the literature ($0.5 < z < 0.9$: Savaglio et al. 2005; $1.0 < z < 1.6$: Shapley et al. 2005; Liu et al. 2008; Epinat et al. 2009; Wright et al. 2009; $2.0 < z < 2.5$: Förster Schreiber et al. 2009; Law et al. 2009; $z \sim 3.3$: Maiolino et al. 2008; Mannucci et al. 2009). All the galaxy samples up to $z = 2.5$ are consistent with no evolution of the FMR defined locally, while metallicities lower by $\sim 0.6$ dex are observed at $z = 3.3$. While each black point at $z > 0.7$ is the average of $\sim 20$ galaxies or less, the points at $z \sim 0.25$ and $z \sim 0.60$ comprise $\sim 160$ galaxies each.
The metallicity of galaxies at $0.2 < z < 0.8$

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