The role of spin-lattice coupling for ultrafast changes of the magnetic order in rare earth metals

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(Dated: 25 October 2021)

By comparing femtosecond laser-pulse-induced spin dynamics in the surface state of the rare earth metals Gd and Tb we show that the spin polarization of the valence states in both materials decays with significantly different time constants of 15 ps and 400 fs, respectively. The distinct spin polarization dynamics in Gd and Tb are opposed by similar exchange splitting dynamics in the two materials. The different time scales observed in our experiment can be attributed to weak and strong 4f spin to lattice coupling in Gd and Tb suggesting an intimate coupling of spin polarization and 4f magnetic moment. While in Gd the lattice mainly acts as a heat sink, it contributes significantly to ultrafast demagnetization of Tb. This helps explain why all optical switching is observed in FeGd- but rarely in FeTb-based compounds.

PACS numbers: 78.47.-p, 71.45.Gm, 73.20.At

The rare earth metals gadolinium and terbium are important components for materials that show single-shot all optical switching (AOS). For this purpose they are combined with transition metals either in ferrimagnetic alloys or as multilayers in artificial ferrimagnets. In fact, alloys and multilayers of a wide variety of magnetic materials could be switched but only by applying multiple and circularly polarized laser pulses. The only prerequisites are the right range of composition and the concomitantly adjusted magnetic compensation temperature of the alloy. In contrast to the wealth of publications on Gd, there are only few studies reporting AOS in Tb-based samples.

In transition-metal/rare-earth compounds angular momentum exchange between 3d and 5d spins of the itinerant valence electrons occurs via inter-atomic exchange and optically excited (superdiffusive) spin currents, while 5d and 4f spins of the rare earth couple via intra-atomic exchange. Various theories have been developed to model AOS, for example in Refs. 8, 12, 14 which all involve the exchange of angular momentum between the antiferromagnetically coupled sublattices (layers) via exchange scattering, spin-polarized currents or magnons. Here 5d and 4f spins of the rare earth are considered as a single spin system that couples to the 3d spins of the transition metal. However, for Gd disparate dynamics of 5d exchange splitting and 4f magnetic moments was demonstrated, which challenges strong coupling between optically excited 5d spins and not primarily excited 4f spins.

This raises the question, how 5d and 4f spins of rare earth metals couple. Building on recent results, we compare the spin dynamics in pure Gd and Tb metal grown as epitaxial thin films on W(110). Specifically, we follow our study on Gd and investigate the response of the Tamm-like d_{z^2} surface state of Tb on optical excitation. While the spin polarization of the Gd surface state decreases with a slow time constant \( \tau \) of 15 ps (Ref. 19), the spin polarization shows an ultrafast drop with \( \tau = 0.4 \) ps on Tb. Since these time constants are almost identical to those of the decay of the 4f spin order, the difference between both rare earth metals can be attributed to very weak and very strong 4f spin to lattice coupling in Gd and Tb, respectively. Furthermore, our results demonstrate that the spin polarization of the valence states and the 4f magnetic moment are intimately linked and show the same ultrafast dynamics. In contrast, the exchange splitting of the valence states can show disparate dynamics. This suggests that changing the spin polarization of the rare earth valence states is the route to 4f spin reversal. In Tb this process is hampered by strong 4f spin-lattice coupling and efficient ultrafast transfer of angular momentum into the lattice sink.

The experiments were performed with the exchange-scattering spin-detector described in Ref. 18 in combination with a cylindrical sector analyzer (CSA 300, Focus) with an angular resolution of \( \pm 2.5^\circ \). The spin detector uses an oxygen-passivated 6 ML-thick Fe/W(001) film as scattering target at a backscattering angle of 15\(^\circ\). To achieve spin resolution, the magnetization of the Fe target is reversed. This allows us to measure the spin polarization in Tb without the need of a strong magnetic field to reverse its magnetization at liquid nitrogen temperatures.

The Tb and Gd samples (for Gd see also Ref. 16) were grown in situ on a W(110) substrate, that was cleaned beforehand by oxygen treatment. Both lanthanides (purity 99.99) were deposited at a rate of 5 Å per minute from a tungsten crucible in a home-built evaporator at a base pressure of \( 6 \times 10^{-10} \) mbar. During evaporation, the substrate was kept at room temperature. Subsequent
annealing of the 10 nm-thick rare earth films was done for 1 minute at 780 K for Gd and 850 K for Tb. While cooling down, Tb was magnetized by field pulses of 20 mT through an air-wound coil. Gd was magnetized at liquid nitrogen temperatures. The magnetization direction was in plane along the [1100] direction.

As pump pulses, we used the infrared (IR) fundamental (1.58 eV) of a 300-kHz Ti:sapphire regenerative amplifier (RegA, Coherent). For probe, the ultraviolet (UV) fourth harmonic (6.3 eV) was created in one frequency-doubling and two sum-frequency-generation steps. IR pump pulses were s-polarized to suppress multi-photon photoemission, probe pulses were p-polarized. Beams were collinear and the angle of incidence was 45° off normal along the Gd/Tb[1000] direction. The experiments were performed in two campaigns. For Gd we achieved a temporal resolution (cross correlation of IR pump and UV probe pulses) of 70 fs while for Tb 160 fs, as derived from the increase of the hot electron temperature. The IR pump pulses had the same pulse duration of 46 fs.

The majority-spin surface state on Gd and Tb is shown in the spin-resolved spectra of Figure 1. Apart from a ∼ 100 meV lower binding energy on Tb, the surface states are identical on both materials. The lower binding energy results in a cutting of the peak by the Fermi function, giving rise to a steeper decreasing flank on the high-energy side of the peak. With the majority-spin state close below $E_F$, the exchange-split minority-spin partner is unoccupied lying above $E_F$ and thus barely measurable in photoemission.

The majority-spin part shows a spin polarization of 70% (Gd) and 50% (Tb) at 90 K and thus has a remaining minority-spin population. The difference in spin polarization is ascribed to the different Curie temperatures of 293 K and 220 K for Gd and Tb, respectively. The temporal behavior of the spin polarization after the pump pulse excites the sample is visualized by the spectra evolving towards the back. The front spectrum was measured at negative pump-probe delay (-0.5 ps) and is thus unchanged by the pump pulse. The spectra to rear have been measured shortly after the pump at 1 ps and later at 50 ps. Comparing the three spectra for Gd in Fig. 1(a), the spin polarization, i.e., the ratio between the majority- and minority-spin intensities stays at a high value. This is indicated by the dashed horizontal lines, which represent the maximum intensity for each peak. Contrasting this, for Tb (Fig. 1(b)) the spin polarization decreases rapidly after pumping and is still low at 50 ps delay.

The complete time evolution of the spin polarization $P$ is presented in Figure 2. We calculate $P$ as

$$P = \frac{I^\uparrow - I^\downarrow}{I^\uparrow + I^\downarrow}$$

(1)

with $I^\uparrow/\downarrow$ being either the full area covered by the majority-/minority-spin peak in an energy scan or the corresponding intensity measured at a certain kinetic energy in a delay scan. To follow the spin evolution more detailed, we performed delay scans with the CSA set to both the binding energy, the surface state had initially – before pumping –, and the energy, to which the peak finally shifts during the demagnetization process. These scans are represented by the open symbols in Fig. 2 (circles for Gd, squares for Tb). The data is completed by the spin polarization evaluated from the energy scans of the full peak (filled circles and squares in Fig. 2), some of which were shown in Fig. 1 (see Supplementary Material, SM).

In Figure 2 it is clearly visible that the spin polarization of the Tb surface state decreases quickly after pumping contrasting the spin dynamics in the Gd surface state. In Gd, we find a very slow decrease on a timescale at which the spin polarization in Tb already recovers. We fitted the temporal behavior of the spin polarization using the following function:

$$P_{Tb}(t) = P_0 \cdot (1 - A \cdot \int S(t)dt \cdot (1 - e^{-t/\tau_{TB}}) \cdot e^{-t/\tau_f}),$$

(2)

in which $P_0$ is the initial spin polarization, $A$ is the amplitude of demagnetization and $\tau_{TB}$($\tau_f$) are the demagneti-
The initial value at large pump-probe delays (while in Gd the spin polarization decreases to only 80% of the Tb case by the dotted and dashed horizontal lines in Fig. 3). While in Gd the spin polarization decreases to only 80% of the initial value at large pump-probe delays ($\tau_{Gd} = 15 \pm 8$ ps), Tb shows a much faster response decreasing to 65% with a time constant $\tau_{Tb} = 0.4 \pm 0.1$ ps.

Besides the spin polarization, the demagnetization also resembles the time resolution of our laser pulses. A fit (solid lines) through the delay scans results in very different time constants of $\tau_{Gd} = 15 \pm 8$ ps and $\tau_{Tb} = 0.4 \pm 0.3$ ps. Additionally, the magnitude of the reduction differs by almost a factor of two (reduction by 20% in Gd, but by 35% in Tb). The demagnetization appears to be much more efficient in Tb ($\tau_{Tb} = 0.4 \pm 0.1$ ps) than in Gd ($\tau_{Gd} = 15 \pm 8$ ps), giving rise to a broadening of the Fermi function. The broadening in turn increases the photoemission intensity above $E_F$ and reduces the intensities below $E_F$. This affects the height of the surface state peak in our spectrum (cf. Fig. 1), which is overlayed by a simultaneous broadening of the peak’s linewidth, equally induced by the increasing temperature in the electron system. The surface state peak furthermore shifts towards $E_F$ (long-dashed horizontal lines in Fig. 3). Regarding the typical measures for magnetism, the upward binding-energy shift of the majority-spin component of the surface state equals a reduction of the surface state’s exchange splitting unless the minority-spin component would likewise shifts upwards. From time-resolved photoemissionon on Gd or temperature-dependent static scanning tunneling spectroscopy on Tb and Gd, we infer that the unoccupied minority-spin component stays at constant binding energy or shifts towards $E_F$. The
data in Fig. 3 have been analyzed to deduce the temperature of the hot electron gas and the peak position of the surface state (see Supplementary Material of Ref. [10]). The electronic temperature $T_e$ is derived from the width of the Fermi function. Figure 4 compares $T_e$ for Gd (blue) and Tb (gray) as a function of pump-probe delay. Note the linear and logarithmic scales of the abscissa up to and beyond 5 ps, respectively. The electronic temperature is raised directly within our time resolution of 70 fs (for Gd) and 160 fs (for Tb) through the decay of excited hot electrons via inelastic electron-electron scattering. It decreases through dissipation of heat to the lattice leading to an equilibration of electron and lattice temperature above the $\sim 100\,\text{K}$ starting temperature within about 4 ps and 6 ps at 380 and 220 K for Gd and Tb, respectively. The different IR pump fluences (3.5 versus 1.2 mJ/cm$^2$) are reflected in the maximum and equilibrated temperatures, which are higher for Gd than for Tb. We approximate this equilibration by adding the increasing lattice temperature $T_l$ to $T_e$. This yields the following fitting functions:

$$T_e(t) = \int S(t)dt \cdot \left( A_{el} e^{-t/\tau_{el}} + T_l(t) \right) \quad (4)$$

$$T_l(t) = A_{el} \left( 1 - e^{-t/\tau_{el}} \right) e^{-t/\tau_{l}}, \quad (5)$$

where the amplitudes $A_{el} > A_{le}$ account for the different heat capacities of electrons and lattice $C_e < C_l$. We can fit Eq. (4) to the temperature shown in Fig. 4a after convolving with a Gaussian to account for the time resolution given by the cross correlation of the laser pulses. The sigmoid function resulting from the convolution of step $S(t)$ and Gaussian perfectly resembles the time integral of the Gaussian shaped laser pulse. An additional exponential decay term with time constant $\tau_d$ was included to account for the cooling of the electrons and lattice through thermal diffusion at large pump-probe delays. This is legitimate, since thermal diffusion is about two orders of magnitude slower than the equilibration between electron and lattice ($\tau_d \gg \tau_{el}$). The simple relations in Eq. (4) provide a good modeling of the measured temperatures as demonstrated by the solid lines in Fig. 4a. We find a slightly faster decay of $T_e$ for Gd ($\tau_{el} \approx 0.8\,\text{ps}$) compared to Tb ($\tau_{el} \approx 1.25\,\text{ps}$), as expected from the difference between electron and lattice temperatures according to the two-temperature model.

The temporal evolution of the binding energy of the surface state is shown in Fig. 4b and can be described by Eq. (5) as well. The surface state’s binding energy shifts closer to the Fermi level. Fitting the binding energy and temperature simultaneously, we find that this energy shift occurs in Gd with the same time constant of 0.8 ps as the lattice temperature increases. It is well described by Eq. (5) except for a small but significant discrepancy ($\leq 20\,\text{meV}$) at larger delays $\geq 5\,\text{ps}$ when we observe the decrease of the spin polarization of the surface state. For Tb we can in contrast reproduce the binding energy for delays larger than 5 ps, while we observe a significantly steeper decrease of the binding energy with $\tau = 0.4 \pm 0.2\,\text{ps}$, which mimics the decay of the spin polarization (cf. Fig. 2) and is three times faster than the increase of the lattice temperature. As discussed below, these deviations are the imprint of the dynamics of the spin polarization on the binding energy of the surface state and reflect the difference in 4f spin-lattice coupling.
We find three characteristics in the temporal evolution of the surface state after ultrafast optical excitation.

(i) The first is a very fast increase of the electronic temperature. The observed response time is actually set by the 70 fs (160 fs) time resolution of the Gd (Tb) experiment. The broadening of the Fermi function with increasing $T_e$ goes hand in hand with a depopulation of the occupied surface state and thus a transfer of majority spins between surface and bulk states. This explains the ultrafast drop (within the laser pulse duration) of the magnetic signal in surface-sensitive second harmonic generation at both the Gd and Tb(0001) surface.

(ii) The second observation is the shift of both surface state’s binding energy to lower values, i.e. a reduction of the exchange splitting. On Gd it mainly follows the lattice temperature with a time constant $\tau = 0.8 \pm 0.2$ ps. If we observe a comparable response time also in the decay of the exchange splitting of the Gd bulk bands. On Tb the surface state binding energy responds significantly faster with $\tau = 0.4 \pm 0.2$ ps. This time constant is again compatible with the decay of the exchange splitting of the Tb bulk bands.

(iii) With the here presented spin-resolved measurements, the difference between Gd and Tb is easily explained by the third feature, the decay of the surface-state spin-polarization. Please note the difference between population of a state and its spin polarization $P$ (see Eq. 1). While the depopulation of the Gd and Tb surface state occurs in accordance with observation (i) during optical excitation within the pump pulse duration, the spin polarization drops very slowly for Gd with $\tau \sim 15$ ps but decays rapidly for Tb with $\tau = 0.4 \pm 0.2$ ps (Fig. 1). Obviously, in Tb, the ultrafast decrease of the spin polarization of the surface state (Fig. 2) leads to an (within error bars) instantaneous shift of the surface-state binding-energy. This explains the deviation of the binding-energy shift and lattice temperature within the first 3 ps after laser excitation in Tb (Fig. 3). Accordingly the difference in Gd at delays larger than 3 ps (Fig. 3) is attributed to the change in spin polarization starting at around 3 ps (see Fig. 2).

We conclude that the three characteristics observed in this work correspond to three contributions to demagnetization: (i) The ultrafast optical excitation initiates likewise ultrafast spin transport effects. In our measurements, this manifests as a depopulation of the strongly spin-polarized surface state of Gd and Tb. (ii) The dissipation of heat between electrons and the lattice gives rise to spin-flip effects mediated by Elliot-Yafet scattering. This is one contribution to the decreasing exchange splitting observed in form of a peak shift in Gd and Tb in this work. (iii) The very different spin-polarization dynamics, which we observe for Gd and Tb, must be the result of spin-lattice coupling.

Returning to all-optical switching we may ask how the 3d spins of transition metals and the 5d and 4f spins of the rare earth metals couple in ferrimagnetic alloys and artificial ferrimagnets like FeCoGd and Co—Gd multilayers. The comparable response of 4f magnetization and 5d spin polarization suggests that whenever we modify the spin polarization of the valence electrons, we alter the 4f magnetic moment. The former is achieved both by spin flips via local exchange scattering of 3d and 5d electrons, e.g., at the interface of 3d and 4f metals, or by injecting spin currents from the Co layer (or FeCo rich phase) into the Gd layer (or Gd rich phase). This likewise explains more efficient demagnetization of the antiferromagnetic (spin spiral) phase of Dy as compared to its low-temperature ferromagnetic phase.

Why is it easier to switch the magnetization in Gd as compared to Tb compounds? On the ultrafast timescale lattice heating does little affect the 4f spin dynamics in Gd but strongly in Tb. Since the lattice is a sink for angular momentum, ultrafast spin reversal and angular momentum dissipation compete in Tb but not in Gd. However, switching via spin currents or exchange coupling across interfaces helps to reduce lattice heating and may allow for all optical switching of other artificial ferrimagnets, as recently demonstrated for Co/Pt multilayers and Co/Tb stacks. An alternative route may be to reduce dissipation channels, e.g., in ferrimagnetic Heusler alloys.

In summary, the presented data are a further cornerstone to close the puzzle of magnetization dynamics in the rare earth metals. We observe a hierarchy: The 4f magnetization and the spin polarization of the valence bands react conjointly and affect the exchange splitting. Contrary we can change the exchange splitting in Gd by ultrafast optical excitation without affecting the spin polarization of the valence bands and the 4f magnetic moment. Thus different contributions of demagnetization are reflected in the exchange splitting (Figs. 1 and c). On the one hand, Elliot-Yafet scattering changes the exchange splitting on the timescale of electron-lattice temperature equilibration. On the other hand, the demagnetization of the spin polarization induces a further reduction of exchange splitting, giving rise to the deviations from the lattice temperature dynamics on
very different timescales for Gd and Tb.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL
In the Supplementary Material, we show the different spin-resolved scans, which have been performed to obtain the data, for the Tb samples. We relate spin-resolved energy-spectra and delay scans to the temporal evolution of the spin-integrated surface band structure and thereby explain the deduction of the spin-polarization curve in Fig. 2 of the main text.

AUTHOR’S CONTRIBUTION
BA and MW designed the experiment. SEL and BA performed the experiment. BA and MW wrote the paper with input from SEL.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
We acknowledge funding by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft through CRC/TRR 227 Ultrafast spin Dynamics, project A01. The authors like to thank Focus GmbH for their steady support of the CSA analyzer over two decades.

AUTHOR’S DECLARATION
The authors have no conflicts to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY
The data are in the Supplementary Material and available on request from the authors.

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