Non-Hermitian skin effect in magnetic systems

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Far from being limited to a trivial generalization of their Hermitian counterparts, non-Hermitian topological phases have gained widespread interest due to their unique properties. One of the most striking non-Hermitian phenomena is the skin effect, i.e., the localization of a macroscopic fraction of bulk eigenstates at a boundary, which underlies the breakdown of the bulk-edge correspondence. Here we develop a generic phenomenological approach to describing magnetic dissipation within a lattice model and we introduce an “effective area law” to investigate the emergence of the skin effect in magnetic systems. As a testbed of our approach, we focus on a spin-orbit-coupled van der Waals (vdW) ferromagnet with spin-nonconserving magnon-phonon interactions, finding that the magnetic skin effect emerges in an appropriate temperature regime. Our results suggest that the interference between Dzyaloshinskii-Moriya interaction (DMI) and nonlocal magnetic dissipation plays a key role in the accumulation of bulk states at the boundaries.

Introduction. For decades the application of topology in condensed matter has relied on the principle of the bulk-edge correspondence, according to which the edge states of a system, which appear under open boundary conditions, can be characterized by a topological invariant calculated on a Brillouin zone defined under periodic boundary conditions. In some non-Hermitian systems, however, this fundamental correspondence has been found to be broken. As a result, bulk modes can no longer be described by Bloch’s theorem as delocalized plane waves. Instead, a macroscopic number of bulk states localize at a boundary of the system, i.e., a phenomenon dubbed as the non-Hermitian skin effect.

The skin effect has been extensively investigated in one-dimensional (1d) asymmetric Su-Schrieffer-Heeger (SSH) models, in which the pile-up of bulk modes at one system’s edge can be understood in terms of the imbalance hopping in the left and right directions. Experimentally, the skin effect has been uncovered in photonic systems and metamaterials with judiciously engineered non-Hermitian interactions, while its observation in a naturally occurring solid-state system has not yet been reported.

Magnons, i.e., the collective excitations of magnetic systems, are bosonic quasiparticles whose number is not conserved and whose dynamics is intrinsically non-Hermitian. Their fundamental properties, including their lifetime, can be easily tuned via external fields and drives, making them promising solid-state candidates for the exploration of non-Hermitian topological phenomena. In this Letter, we investigate the emergence of the skin effect in insulating two-dimensional (2d) magnetic systems, in which non-Hermitian terms that violate the bulk-edge correspondence arise from intrinsic spin non-conserving interactions.

The physics of dissipative interactions in magnetic systems are very complex and the effective magnon lifetime stems from a variety of spin-wave decay mechanisms, e.g., magnon-magnon, magnon-electron, and magnon-phonon interactions, and magnon scattering on extrinsic impurities. Several theoretical works have addressed the dissipation due to one of the aforementioned mechanisms and have provided approximate expressions for the magnon relaxation time. These expressions are, however, often given in the continuum limit and can not be readily incorporated in a lattice model, which is an essential starting point for the investigation of the skin effect. Since a comprehensive microscopic description of the magnetic dissipative dynamics within a lattice model is a particularly challenging (and yet untackled) task, here we propose a generic phenomenological approach that can be tested against ab initio or experimental data. Our approach serves as a general recipe of constructing an effective non-Hermitian Hamiltonian from bands broadening data. Inspired by the area law proposed by Ref. here we introduce an “effective area law” that is complimentary to our phenomenological approach to magnetic dissipation and can serve as a criteria for the emergence of the skin effect in any 2d magnetic system.

As a concrete example of our approach, we focus on a ferromagnetic spin-orbit-coupled insulating vdW monolayer. Recent ab initio studies have addressed the phonon-driven dissipation of the eigenmodes of a vdW magnetic system and calculated its behavior over a large portion of the first Brillouin zone. Here, we develop a phenomenological model for the dissipative terms that is consistent with the aforementioned ab initio results, while respecting the symmetries of the honeycomb lattice. We find that, away from the long-wavelength limit (but below the magnetic ordering temperature), the magnetic skin effect appears, i.e., a macroscopic number of the bulk spin-wave modes accumulate at the armchair terminations of a nanoribbon. Our results show that the localization of the bulk states relies on the interference between the Dzyaloshinskii-Moriya interactions and non-local dissipative terms.

Hermitian spin model. We consider a vdW ferromagnetic monolayer whose Hermitian spin dynamics is de-
scribed by the Hamiltonian

\[ \mathcal{H} = -J \sum_{\langle i,j \rangle} \mathbf{S}_i \cdot \mathbf{S}_j - J_2 \sum_{\langle \langle i,j \rangle \rangle} \mathbf{S}_i \cdot \mathbf{S}_j - B \sum_i S_i^z + D \sum_{\langle \langle i,j \rangle \rangle} \nu_{ij} \hat{z} \cdot (\mathbf{S}_i \times \mathbf{S}_j), \]

where \( J > 0 \) is the nearest-neighbor (NN) Heisenberg exchange, \( J_2 > 0 \) the next-to-nearest-neighbor (NNN) exchange coupling, \( B \geq 0 \) the out-of-plane magnetic field, \( D \) the NNN DMI strength and \( \nu_{ij} = -\nu_{ji} = \pm 1 \) reflects the non-reciprocity of the DM interactions. Far below the magnetic ordering temperature \( T_c \), i.e., for \( T \ll T_c \), and for \( D \leq (J + 4J_2)/\sqrt{3} \), we can access the magnon spectrum by introducing the linearized Holstein-Primakoff transformation with respect to an uniform ground state, i.e.,

\[ S_i^+ = S_i^x + iS_i^y \approx \sqrt{2S}d_i, \quad S_i^- = S - d_i^\dagger d_i, \]

where \( S \) is the classical spin (in units of \( \hbar \)) and \( d_i^\dagger \) (\( d_i \)) the magnon annihilation (creation) operator at the \( i \)th site, which obeys the bosonic commutation relation \([d_i, d_j^\dagger] = \delta_{ij}\). Plugging Eq. (2) into Eq. (1) and truncating the Hamiltonian beyond quadratic terms in the Holstein-Primakoff bosons, we find

\[ \mathcal{H} = (3JS + 6J_2S + B) \sum_i d_i^\dagger d_i - JS \sum_{\langle i,j \rangle} (d_i^\dagger d_j + \text{h.c.}) - J_2S \sum_{\langle \langle i,j \rangle \rangle} (d_i^\dagger d_j + \text{h.c.}) - DS \sum_{\langle \langle i,j \rangle \rangle} (i\nu_{ij}d_i^\dagger d_j + \text{h.c.}). \]

Performing a Fourier transformation while introducing the spinor \( \Psi_k = (a_k, b_k) \), where \( a_k \) (\( b_k \)) is the Fourier transform of the magnon annihilation operator on the \( A \) (B) sublattice, Eq. (3) becomes

\[ \mathcal{H} = \sum_{i=0,x,y,z} \sum_k \Psi_k^* (h_i \sigma_i) \Psi_k, \]

with

\[ h_0 = 3JS + 6J_2S + B - 4J_2S \sum_n \cos k \cdot \alpha_n, \]

\[ h_x = -JS \sum_n \cos k \cdot \alpha_n, \]

\[ h_y = JS \sum_n \sin k \cdot \alpha_n, \quad h_z = 2DS \sum_n \sin k \cdot \beta_n, \]

where the \( \alpha_n \) and \( \beta_n \) (with \( n = 1, 2, 3 \)) are, respectively, the NN and NNN bond vectors depicted in Fig. 1(a). Here and in what follows, we omit the explicit dependence of the function \( h_i \) (for \( i = x, y, z \)) on the wavevector \( k \).

Non-Hermitian dissipative terms. The magnon number is not conserved due to ubiquitous spin nonconserving interactions of magnons with the crystalline lattice. Several \textit{ab initio} studies have investigated the dissipation of magnetic eigenmodes driven by magnon-phonon interactions, modeled via finite-temperature random phonon fluctuations that modify the distance between neighboring spins. The linewidth broadening of the acoustic, \( \Delta E_{ac} \), and optical, \( \Delta E_{op} \), eigenmodes of a magnetic honeycomb lattice have been found to scale, respectively, as \( \Delta E_{ac} \propto k^2 \) (with \( k = |k| \)) and \( \Delta E_{op} \propto \) constant over a large portion of the first Brillouin zone. While the broadening of the optical eigenmode is a constant that can be readily incorporated in the lattice Hamiltonian, we cannot include the relaxation associated with the acoustic mode in the present form \( \propto k^2 \) as it explicitly breaks the translational symmetry of our model.

In order to construct an effective non-Hermitian Hamiltonian that reproduces the observed band broadening, here we adopt a phenomenological approach, i.e., we include non-Hermitian terms allowed by symmetry. Specifically, we use a Fourier series (i.e., a complete basis) to describe a generic non-Hermitian contribution \( \Delta E \) to the energy, i.e.,

\[ \Delta E = -i \sum_{\nu \in \mathbb{Z}} \sum_{n_1} (\zeta_1 \cos |k| \cdot \alpha_n + \zeta_2 \sin |k| \cdot \alpha_n) + \sum_{n_2} (\zeta_3 \cos |k| \cdot \beta_n + \zeta_4 \sin |k| \cdot \beta_n) + \ldots, \]

where “…” represents longer crystalline vectors in higher orders. Here \( n_1/n_2 \) is the number of the crystalline vectors of the nearest (next-to-nearest) neighbors and \( \zeta^{(2)} \) is the phenomenological coefficient of each term for cosine (sine) functions in unit of energy. For purely dissipative processes, i.e., in the absence of gain, we require \( \text{Im}(\Delta E) \leq 0 \). For consistency, we retain terms of the same order in reciprocal vectors as the Hermitian Hamiltonian. Thus, in order to reproduce the observed broadening of the eigenmodes, our ansatz for the imaginary part of the acoustic and optical mode eigenenergies reads as

\[ \Delta E_{ac} = -i \chi_1 (3 - \sum_n \cos k \cdot \alpha_n), \]

\[ -i \chi_2 (3 - \sum_n \cos k \cdot \beta_n), \]

\[ \Delta E_{op} = -i \chi_2. \]

We extract the values of the parameters \( \chi_1, \chi_2 \) by fitting Eqs. (6) and (7) to the \textit{ab initio} results of Ref. 11. The band spectra and corresponding broadenings are shown in Fig. 1(b) for \( \chi_1 = 1.41 \text{ meV}, \chi_2 = 0.415 \text{ meV}, \rho_3 = 3 \text{ meV}, J = 1.2 \text{ meV}, J_2 = 0.02J, S = 3/2, B = 0.04JS = 0.93 \text{ T} \) and \( D = 0.8J/\sqrt{3} \). At the \( \Gamma \) point, the acoustic mode displays no broadening, in disagreement with ferromagnetic resonance measurements of common magnetic materials. This discrepancy most likely occurs because the analysis of Ref. 11 neglects magnon-magnon relaxation. However, we have verified that incorporating a
constant dissipation term according to long-wavelength Landau–Lifshitz–Gilbert (LLG) phenomenology [49–52] does not affect qualitatively our results.

From Eqs. (1), (3), (6) and (7), the acoustic, \( E_{\text{ac}} \), and optical, \( E_{\text{op}} \), complex eigenenergies can be written as

\[
E_{\text{ac}}(\text{op}) = h_0 \pm \sqrt{h_0^2 + h_0^2 + h_0^2 + \Delta E_{\text{ac}}(\text{op})}.
\] (8)

The diagonal Hamiltonian \( H_d = \text{diag}(E_{\text{ac}}, E_{\text{op}}) \) can be related to a non-Hermitian Hamiltonian \( H_{\text{th}} \) in the basis of the lattice operators \( a_k \) and \( b_k \) via the unitary transformation \( UH_dU^{-1} = H_{\text{th}} \), where \( U \) is a matrix composed of the eigenvectors of \( H \), i.e., the optical and acoustic eigenmodes of the Hermitian honeycomb lattice [53]. The Hamiltonian \( H_{\text{th}} \) can be written explicitly as

\[
H_{\text{th}} = \sum_{i=x,y,z} \sum_k \Psi_k^\dagger \tilde{h}_i(\sigma_i) \Psi_k,
\] (9)

where \( \tilde{h}_0 = h_0 + B_0 \) and \( \tilde{h}_i = h_i(1 + A_0) \) for \( i = x, y, z \), with

\[
A_0 = \frac{\Delta E_{\text{op}} - \Delta E_{\text{ac}}}{2\sqrt{h_0^2 + h_0^2 + h_0^2}}, \quad B_0 = \frac{\Delta E_{\text{op}} + \Delta E_{\text{ac}}}{2}.
\] (10)

An inverse Fourier transformation yields the real-space non-Hermitian Hamiltonian as [54]

\[
H_{\text{th}} = \left[3JS + 6J_2S + B - \frac{i}{2}(\chi_2 + 3\chi_{11} + 3\chi_{12})\right] \times \sum_i (a_i^\dagger a_i + b_i^\dagger b_i) + \left(-J_2S + \frac{i\chi_{12}}{4}\right) \sum_{\langle i,j \rangle} (a_i^\dagger a_j + a_j^\dagger a_i + b_i^\dagger b_j + b_j^\dagger b_i) \\
- JS \sum_{\langle i,j \rangle} \left[1 - \frac{i(\chi_2 - 3\chi_{11} - 2\chi_{12})}{2S\sqrt{3(J_2^2 + 2D^2)}}\right] (a_i^\dagger b_j + b_i^\dagger a_j) \\
- DS \sum_{\langle\langle i,j \rangle\rangle} \nu_{ij} \left[i + \frac{\chi_2 - 3\chi_{11} - 2\chi_{12}}{2S\sqrt{3(J_2^2 + 2D^2)}}\right] \times (a_i^\dagger a_j - a_j^\dagger a_i + b_i^\dagger b_j - b_j^\dagger b_i) + ... \tag{11}
\]

where \( +... \) indicates purely dissipative higher-order-nearest-neighbor terms. By setting \( \chi_{11,12,2} = 0 \) in Eq. (11), one can recover the Hermitian Hamiltonian [5]. As shown by Eq. (11), the non-Hermitian terms take the form of onsite dissipation terms and of nonlocal dissipative couplings, which resemble the well-known dissipative nonlocal coupling terms due to electron-mediated spin pumping [55, 56]. Here we retain only dissipative terms that have a non-dissipative counterpart; however, accounting for purely dissipative higher-order-nearest-neighbor terms does not affect qualitatively our results [57].

Skin effect. To investigate the breakdown of the bulk-edge correspondence and the emergence of the magnetic skin effect, we diagonalize the Hamiltonian (11) numerically under the open boundary conditions (OBC). We consider a nanoribbon with zigzag and chair terminations along, respectively, the \( x \)- and \( y \)-direction. Fig. 2(a) and 2(b) show the discrepancy between the open and periodic boundary condition (PBC) effective spectra [58], which is symptomatic of a breakdown of the bulk-edge correspondence. From the PBC effective spectra, it is easy to see that the complex acoustic (blue) and optical (orange) bands do not cross a reference line in the complex-energy plane: thus, the system has a line gap [59, 60]. It is worth mentioning that, while in 1d systems the emergence of the skin effect is ascribed to a point-gap topology [10], this relation does not necessarily hold in higher-dimensional systems, in which a macroscopic accumulation of states at the boundary has been observed in the presence of a line gap as well [61].

Analogously to its Hermitian counterpart, the inversion-symmetry-breaking DM interactions break the time-reversal symmetry of the magnon Hamiltonian, yielding a \( Z \) topological order (i.e., both the Hermitian and non-Hermitian Hamiltonian belong to symmetry class A). Using Fukui’s algorithm [62], we find \( c_{\text{ac(opt)}}^\text{A} = \pm 1 \), where \( c_{\text{B}}^\text{B} \) is non-Bloch Chern number introduced by Ref. [63]. The corresponding topologi-
FIG. 2. (a,b) PBC spectra of the acoustic (blue) and optical (orange) modes. The OBC eigenenergies of a nanoribbon with $60 \times 60$ lattice sites are shown in light gray dots. (a) For $D = 0.8J/\sqrt{3}$. (b) For $D = 0$. (c-e) Spatial distribution of the density of the first $N$ right eigenstates \( \phi_n(\mathbf{r}) \) of the OBC Hamiltonian \( H \), i.e. \[ |\psi(\mathbf{r})|^2 = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{n=1}^{N} |\phi_n(\mathbf{r})|^2. \] (12) Fig. 2(c) displays the spatial distribution Eq. (12) of the eigenstates with energies up to $E = 0.247$ meV (corresponding to $T \sim 2$ K with $N = 79$) [64], which is delocalized throughout the bulk. At higher energies, i.e., $E = 2.655$ meV ($T \sim 30$ K with $N = 2771$), Fig. 2(d) shows that a macroscopic number of bulk eigenstates localizes at the corners and edges the ribbon. Thus, at high enough temperature (but below the magnetic ordering temperature $T_c$), the skin effect appears.

The observed temperature dependence can be understood via the relation between the skin effect and spectral shape of the PBC spectra [43]. In correspondence of arc or line (finite effective spectral area) in complex energy space, the mapping from momenta to energy is $2d$ to $1d$ (2d); for a wave impinging at the boundary there are infinite (finite) reflection channels, and an open boundary eigenstate can (can not) be described as superposition of Bloch waves, as discussed in details in Ref. [43]. The red and green dashed lines in Fig. 2(a) show the energies at which Fig. 2(c) and (d) are plotted, respectively. Up to $T \sim 2$ K (red line), the acoustic spectrum is (approximately) a line. Thus, the skin effect is not observable and bulk states behave as Bloch waves. This result is an agreement with the conventional long-wavelength LLG treatment of magnetic dissipation [51]. Instead, at higher energies (green line), the spectrum acquires a finite effective area and the skin effect appears.

In the absence of the DM interactions, the real and imaginary part of the energy are dependent, leading to the arc-like spectrum for both OBC and PBC displayed in Fig. 2(b). In agreement with the area law proposed by Ref. [43], the skin effect does not appear even at high temperatures, as shown in Fig. 2(c). Furthermore, in the absence of DMI, the Hamiltonian (4) becomes gapless and enters into a topologically trivial phase. The skin effect in Fig. 2(d) appears to be of the first-order-type [43, 65], i.e., a macroscopic number of modes localizes at arbitrary edges due to the non-Hermitian topological properties of the Hamiltonian. As shown by Fig. 2(d), the skin modes
localized at left and right (armchair) edges, rather than at top and bottom (zigzag) terminations. This phenomenon can be understood by calculating the point-gap winding number \([10, 43]\) while setting periodic boundary conditions only along one direction, i.e., effectively reducing the dimensionality of the system to 1d. We find that the point-gap winding number is vanishing for PBC along the \(y\) direction, while it is non-zero for PBC along \(x\) direction, which implies a localization of skin modes along the left and right edges, in agreement with Fig. 2(d) \([66]\).

The non-locality of the magnon-phonon driven dissipation \([6]\) plays also a key role. For \(D \neq 0\) and \(\chi_{12} = 0\), the skin effect does not appear even if the PBC spectrum of the acoustic eigenmode has a finite area. When \(\chi_{12} = 0\), the \(k\)-dependent term introducing nonlocal dissipation \([6]\) reduces to

\[
\Delta E_{ac}^{nl} = \chi_{11} \sum_n \cos k \cdot \alpha_n.
\] (13)

By including the nonlocal dissipation \([13]\) in Eq. (4) and performing an inverse Fourier transformation, we find that the non-Hermitian contribution \([13]\) vanishes in real space due to the symmetry of the honeycomb lattice \([67]\). Thus, the resulting real space Hamiltonian is equivalent to one derived by accounting only for the constant term \(\propto -i\chi_{11}\) in Eq. (4), which yields a PBC spectrum with vanishing spectral area (i.e., a line). We have verified that in this scenario the skin effect does not appear even in the high frequency regime. This suggests that the area law proposed by Ref. \([43]\) should be modified in order to take into account only terms that survive upon inverse Fourier transformation and lead to a spectral area that here we call “effective”. The nonlocal contribution \(\propto \chi_{12} \sum_n \cos k \cdot \beta_n\), instead, is not wiped out by lattice symmetry and, in conjunction with the DM interactions, yields the skin effect.

At a given temperature \(T\) \([68]\), the skin effect is maximized by strong DM interactions, whose strength is proportional to the effective area of the PBC acoustic spectrum. A weak exchange coupling \(J\) leads to a reduced real-energy bandwidth of the acoustic magnon spectrum, which results in an amplified skin effect at a given frequency. The parameters \(\chi_{11}\) and \(\chi_2\) lead to a featureless shift of the imaginary part of the acoustic and optical eigenenergies, respectively, while \(\chi_{12}\) contributes to the spectral area. Finally, it is worth to remark that the density of right eigenstates \([12]\) plotted in Fig. 2(c) to 2(e) might be naively interpreted as a magnon local density of states localized at an edge, which could be easily probed experimentally. However, the definition of the physical observables of non-Hermitian systems with broken bulk-edge correspondence, which are yet relatively unexplored in two and higher dimensions, require special care since they have to be defined on a biorthogonal basis and on the real-space lattice \([2, 14, 69, 71]\). We will address this problem in future investigations.

**Discussion and outlook.** In this work, we have explored the emergence of the skin effect in magnetic systems. We have proposed a phenomenological approach to derive non-Hermitian Hamiltonian terms that are allowed by the symmetries of the lattice model and reproduce the band broadening observed in experimental data. We have shown that, while adopting such phenomenological approach, the “area law” proposed by Ref. \([44]\) should be replaced by the “effective area law” as a criteria for the emergence of the skin effect. Our phenomenological approach, combined with the “effective area law”, can be easily applied to a wide class of dissipative magnetic systems to identify a solid-state testbed of the skin effect that does not require ad hoc non-Hermitian engineering and whose properties can be controlled by tuning temperature and external magnetic fields.

As an example of our method, we have focused on a spin-orbit-coupled vdW magnet and we have found that the skin effect appears in at high enough temperatures when both nonlocal dissipative terms \([72]\) and DM interactions are present. Furthermore, we have shown that the overall temperature trend of the skin effect can be understood through spectral shape of the PBC complex energy spectrum of the acoustic magnon mode. The interplay between DMI and the emergence of the skin effect should be further investigated. Future work should investigate the general physical properties that might yield the emergence of the skin effect in magnetic systems, explore experimental protocols to probe the localization of the bulk skin modes, and address the microscopic mechanisms underlying our phenomenological model.

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Here we consider temperatures below the magnetic order-

See the discussion about Fig. S2 of the Supplementary Material.

For more details, see Supplementary Material.

Here we include equally-weighed contributions of magnon states up to a given energy.

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The effective spectral area is obtained by neglecting the contribution proportional $\propto -\chi_1 \sum_j \cos k \cdot \alpha_j$ in Eq. (6). More details on the effective area law we propose are discussed in the following main text and in the Supplementary Material.

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