Limits on the Weak Equivalence Principle and Photon Mass with FRB 121102 Subpulses

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Abstract

Fast radio bursts (FRBs) are short-duration (~millisecond) radio transients with cosmological origin. The simple sharp features of the FRB signal have been utilized to probe two fundamental laws of physics, namely, testing Einstein’s weak equivalence principle and constraining the rest mass of the photon. Recently, Hessels et al. found that after correcting for dispersive delay, some of the bursts in FRB 121102 have complex time–frequency structures that include subpulses with a time–frequency downward drifting property. Using the delay time between subpulses in FRB 121102, here we show that the parameterized post-Newtonian parameter $\gamma$ is the same for photons with different energies to the level of $|\gamma_{1} - \gamma_{2}| < 2.5 \times 10^{-16}$, which is 1000 times better than previous constraints from FRBs using similar methods. We also obtain a stringent constraint on the photon mass, $m_{\gamma} < 5.1 \times 10^{-48}$ g, which is 10 times smaller than previous best limits on the photon mass derived through the velocity dispersion method.

Unified Astronomy Thesaurus concepts: Radio transient sources (2008)

1. Introduction

Fast radio bursts (FRBs) are short-duration radio transients with anomalously high dispersion measure in excess of the Galactic value ($DM \gtrsim 200$ pc cm$^{-3}$; Lorimer et al. 2007; Keane et al. 2012; Thornton et al. 2013; Petroff et al. 2016). The first repeating burst FRB 121102 was localized in a star-forming dwarf galaxy at $z = 0.193$, which has confirmed the cosmological origin of FRBs (Scholz et al. 2016; Spitler et al. 2016; Chatterjee et al. 2017; Marcote et al. 2017; Tendulkar et al. 2017). Recently, two nonrepeating FRBs were precisely localized. The first one is FRB 180924, which was localized in a luminous and massive galaxy at redshift 0.3214 by the Australia Square Kilometre Array Pathfinder (Bannister et al. 2019). The other one is FRB 190523, which was localized with the Deep Synoptic Array 10-antenna prototype to a massive galaxy at redshift 0.66 (Ravi et al. 2019).

Although the progenitors and radiation mechanism are still debated, FRBs have been proposed to be promising tools for cosmological and astrophysical studies, such as locating the “missing” baryons (McQuinn 2014), constraining the cosmological parameters (Gao et al. 2014; Zhou et al. 2014; Yang & Zhang 2016a; Walters et al. 2018), directly measuring $\Omega_{b}$ of the universe (Deng & Zhang 2014; Keane et al. 2016), probing the reionization history of the universe (Deng & Zhang 2014; Zheng et al. 2014; Caleb et al. 2019; Li et al. 2019), probing compact dark matter or precisely measuring the Lemaître–Hubble–Humason constant and the cosmic curvature through gravitationally lensed FRBs (Muñoz et al. 2016; Laha 2018a; Li et al. 2018; Wang & Wang 2018), measuring cosmic proper distances (Yu & Wang 2017), testing Einstein’s weak equivalence principle (WEP; Wei et al. 2015; Nusser 2016; Tingay & Kaplan 2016; Wu et al. 2017; Yu et al. 2018), and constraining the rest mass of the photon (Bonetti et al. 2016, 2017; Wu et al. 2016b; Shao & Zhang 2017).

FRB emission arrives later at lower radio frequencies. In principle, the observed time delay for a cosmic transient between two different energy bands should include various terms (Gao et al. 2015; Wei et al. 2015), such as the intrinsic (astrophysical) time delay $\Delta t_{\text{int}}$, which means photons with different energies were emitted sequentially due to the dynamical process or radiation mechanism, the time delay contribution from the dispersion by the line-of-sight free electron content $\Delta t_{\text{DM}}$, the potential time delay caused by special relativistic effects ($\Delta t_{\text{spe}}$) in the case where the photons have a rest mass that is nonzero, and the potential time delay caused by the violation of Einstein’s WEP ($\Delta t_{\text{WEP}}$) where photons with different energies follow different trajectories while traveling in the same gravitational potential.9

In FRB observations, the arrival time delay $\Delta t_{\text{obs}}$ is around 1 s and at a given frequency $\nu$ follows a $\nu^{-2}$ law (Lorimer et al. 2007; Keane et al. 2012; Thornton et al. 2013; Petroff et al. 2016). This is compatible with both plasma and massive photon dispersion (de Broglie 1940). The time delay is routinely attributed to plasma, but there is not an independent, that is, by other means, confirmation that such an attribution is entirely correct.

In this case, a conservative constraint on the WEP can be obtained under the assumption that $\Delta t_{\text{obs}}$ is mainly contributed by $\Delta t_{\text{WEP}}$. Using FRB 110220 and two possible FRB/gamma-ray burst (GRB) association systems (FRB/GRB 101011A and FRB/GRB 121102), we find a lower limit of $\gamma < 4.0 \times 10^{-17}$, which is a factor of 100 better than previous limits (Wei et al. 2015; Wei et al. 2016b; Wu et al. 2016b; Shao & Zhang 2017).
100704A), Wei et al. (2015) obtained a strict upper limit on the differences of the parameterized post-Newtonian (PPN) parameter $\gamma$ values, e.g., $|\gamma(1.23 \text{ GHz}) - \gamma(1.45 \text{ GHz})| < 4.36 \times 10^{-9}$.

Keane et al. (2016) reported the connection between a fading radio transient with FRB 150418, so that a putative host galaxy with redshift 0.492 $\pm$ 0.008 was identified (see counter opinions in Williams & Berger 2016, where the counterpart radio transient is claimed to be active galactic nucleus variability instead of an afterglow of FRB 150418). Assuming that 0.492 is the redshift of FRB 150418, Tingay & Kaplan (2016) and Nusser (2016) obtained more stringent upper limits on the differences of $\gamma$ values as $(1-2) \times 10^{-59}$ and $10^{-12} - 10^{-13}$ by considering the Milky Way (MW) and the large-scale structure gravitational potential, respectively.

On the other hand, if one assumes that $\Delta t_{\text{obs}}$ of an FRB is mainly contributed by $\Delta t_{\text{disp}}$, a conservative limit on the rest mass of the photon could be placed. For instance, taking $z = 0.492$ as the redshift of FRB 150418, a conservative upper limit for the rest mass of the photon was placed as $m_{\text{ph}} \leq 5.2 \times 10^{-47}$ g, which is $10^{30}$ times smaller than the rest mass of the electron (Bonetti et al. 2016; Wu et al. 2016b). Later, Bonetti et al. (2017) applied a similar method to FRB 121102, and they obtained a similar result as $m_{\text{ph}} \leq 3.6 \times 10^{-47}$ g.

Most recently, Hessels et al. (2019) found that some bursts in FRB 121102 have complex time–frequency structures that include subbursts with finite bandwidths. After correcting for dispersive delay, the subbursts still show an interesting subpulse time–frequency downward drifting pattern, namely, the characteristic frequencies for subpulses drift lower at later times in the total burst envelope. The same features are also found in the second discovered repeating FRB source, FRB 180814.J0422+73 (CHIME/FRB Collaboration et al. 2019). Such features could be intrinsic (e.g., related to the burst emission mechanism; Wang et al. 2019), or they could also be imparted by propagation effects (Cordes et al. 2017; Hessels et al. 2019). Plasma lensing may cause upward and downward subpulse drifts, but only downward drifting is observed so far in the repeating FRBs. In the 1.1–1.7 GHz band, the typical time spans for subpulses are $\sim$0.5–1 ms, with a characteristic drift rate of $\sim$200 MHz ms$^{-1}$ toward lower frequencies.\footnote{With 3.5 yr of weekly observations of PSR J2219+4754, Donner et al. (2019) present the first detection of frequency-dependent, time-variable dispersion measures. It is worth noticing that the typical timescale for the time variability proposed by Donner et al. (2019) is several days, much longer than the FRB duration, so that it cannot be used to explain the observed subpulse structures of FRBs.}

Considering that FRB 121102 is the only FRB with confirmed redshift observations, and the time delay between subpulses is almost $10^4$ times smaller than the dispersive delay, it is of great interest to place limits on the WEP and the photon mass with the FRB 121102 subbursts.

2. Testing the Einstein Weak Equivalence Principle

The Einstein WEP is an important foundation of many metric theories of gravity, including general relativity. One statement of the WEP is that test particles traveling in the same gravitational potential will follow the same trajectory, regardless of their internal structure and composition (Will 2006). Therefore, it has long been proposed that the accuracy of the WEP can be constrained with the time delay for different types of messenger particles (e.g., photons, neutrinos, or gravitational waves), or the same types of particles but with different energies or different polarization states, which are simultaneously radiated from the same astronomical sources.

According to the Shapiro time delay effect (Shapiro 1964), the time interval required for test particles to traverse a given distance would be longer by

$$t_{\text{gra}} = -\frac{1 + \gamma}{c^3} \int_{r_0}^r U(r) \, dr,$$

in the presence of a gravitational potential $U(r)$, where the test particles are emitted at $r_e$ and received at $r_i$. Here $\gamma$ is one of the PPN parameters, which reflects how much space curvature is produced by unit rest mass. When the WEP is invalid, different particles might correspond to different $\gamma$ values. In this case, two particles emitted simultaneously from the source will arrive at the Earth with a time delay difference

$$\Delta t_{\text{gra}} = \frac{\gamma_1 - \gamma_2}{c^3} \int_{r_0}^r U(r) \, dr,$$

where $\gamma_1$ and $\gamma_2$ correspond to two different test particles. For a cosmic source, in principle, $U(r)$ has contributions from the host galaxy potential $U_{\text{host}}(r)$, the intergalactic potential $U_{\text{IG}}(r)$, and the local gravitational potential $U_{\text{local}}(r)$. Since the potential models for $U_{\text{IG}}(r)$ and $U_{\text{host}}(r)$ are poorly known, for the purposes of obtaining a lower limit, it is reasonable to extend the local potential out to cosmic scales to bracket from below the potential function of $U_{\text{IG}}(r)$ and $U_{\text{host}}(r)$. In the previous works, the gravitational potential of the MW or the Laniakea supercluster (Tully et al. 2014) has been used as the local potential, which could be expressed as a Keplerian potential\footnote{Although the potential models for the Laniakea supercluster are still not well known, it has been tested that the adoption of the Keplerian potential model, compared with other widely used potential model, i.e., the isothermal potential would not have a strong influence on the results for testing the WEP (Krauss & Tremaine 1988).}

$$U(r) = -\frac{GM}{r},$$

in this case, we have

$$\Delta t_{\text{gra}} = \int \left\{ \frac{[d^2 - (d^2 - b^2)\gamma/2][r_L + s_n (r_L^2 - b^2)\gamma/2]}{b^2} \right\},$$

where $d$ is the distance from the transient to the MW/Laniakea center and $b$ is the impact parameter of the light rays relative to the center. Here we use $s_n = 1$ or $s_n = -1$ to denote the cases where the transient is located along the direction of the MW/Laniakea or anti-MW/Laniakea center. For a cosmic source, $d$ is approximated as the distance from the source to the Earth. The impact parameter can be estimated as

$$b = r_L \sqrt{1 - (\sin \delta_L \sin \delta_L + \cos \delta_L \cos \delta_L (\beta_L - \beta_L))},$$

where $\delta_L$ and $\delta_L$ are the source coordinates, $\beta_L$ and $\beta_L$ represent the coordinates of the local (MW/Laniakea) center, and $r_L$ is the distance from the Earth to the center.

In the literature, many investigations have been done to achieve stringent limits on $\gamma$ differences between particles emitted from the same astrophysical sources, such as supernovae 1987A (Krauss & Tremaine 1988; Longo 1988), GRBs (Gao et al. 2015; Wei et al. 2016b; Wu et al. 2017; Yang et al. 2017; Wei & Wu 2019), FRBs
Here we considered the time–frequency structure of FRB 121102. As shown in Hessels et al. (2019), after correcting for dispersive delay, several subpulses still exist in some of the FRB 121102 repeated bursts. Each subpulse corresponds to its own characteristic frequency, and subpulses with higher frequencies arrive earlier. Assuming that these subpulses are emitted simultaneously and the observed time delay is mainly caused by the WEP effect, a stringent limit on the WEP can be placed by using the time delay between any two subpulses. In order to get more stringent constraints, here we consider the closest neighboring subpulses in AO-05, where the time delay between $f_1 = 1374.16$ MHz and $f_2 = 1343.69$ MHz is 0.4 ms. With the inferred coordinates and redshifts for FRB 121102 (here we adopt R.A. = $\beta_2 = 05^h32^m$, decl. = $\delta_2 = +33^\circ08'$ and $\varepsilon = 0.193$; Spitler et al. 2016), we obtain

$$|\gamma_1 - \gamma_2| < 2.5 \times 10^{-16},$$

(5)

where we consider the gravitational potential of the Laniakea supercluster as the local potential, the Great Attractor ($\beta_L = 10^h32^m$, $\delta_L = -46^\circ00'$) is adopted as the gravitational center of Laniakea (Lynden-Bell et al. 1988), $M_L \approx 10^{17} M_\odot$ is the Laniakea mass, and $r_L = 79$ Mpc is the distance from the Earth to the center of Laniakea (Tully et al. 2014). The result is 1000 times better than previous constraints from FRBs and 4 times better than previous best constraints for the case when the test particles are of the same species but with different energies. It is worth noticing that the uncertainty of the adopted gravitational potential would affect the constraints. Conservatively, we can consider the Keplerian potential for the MW, where the impact parameter can be estimated as $b = r_G \sqrt{1 - \sin \delta_G \sin \delta_L + \cos \delta_G \cos \delta_L \cos (\beta_2 - \beta_L)^2}$, where $r_G = 8.3$ kpc is the distance from the Earth to the Galactic center, and $(\beta_G = 17^h45^m40^s, \delta_G = -29^\circ00' 28^\prime 1)$ are the coordinates of the Galactic center in the equatorial coordinate system (J2000; Gillessen et al. 2009). In this case, we have

$$|\gamma_1 - \gamma_2| < 9.6 \times 10^{-12},$$

(6)

where the Galaxy mass is adopted as $M = 6 \times 10^{11} M_\odot$ (Kafle et al. 2012).

3. Constraints on the Photon Mass

The postulate that all electromagnetic radiation propagates in vacuum at the constant speed $c$, namely, that the photons should have a zero rest mass, is one of the most important foundations of Einstein’s theory of special relativity. If the photon mass is nonzero, a mass term should be added to the Lagrangian density for the electromagnetic field to describe the effective range of the electromagnetic interaction (de Broglie 1923, 1940; Proca 1936). In this case, some abnormal phenomena will appear for the electromagnetic potentials and their derivatives, for instance, the speed of light is no longer constant but depends on the frequency of the photons, magnetic dipole fields would decrease with distance very rapidly due to the addition of a Yukawa component, longitudinal electromagnetic waves could exist, and so on. Such effects could be applied to make restrictive constraints on the photon rest mass (Goldhaber & Nieto 1971, 2010; Tu et al. 2005; Pani et al. 2012). The current limit on the photon mass accepted by the Particle Data Group (PDG) is from the solar wind observation (Tanabashi et al. 2018), which is set to $m_\gamma \leq 1.5 \times 10^{-5}$ g (but see Retiò et al. 2016 for comments and an experiment in the solar wind referring to the PDG upper limit).

It has long been proposed that the photon rest mass could be constrained by using the frequency-dependent time delays of multiwavelength emissions from astrophysical sources (Lovell et al. 1964; Warner & Nather 1969; Schaefer 1999; Bonetti et al. 2016, 2017; Wu et al. 2016b; Shao & Zhang 2017; Wei et al. 2017b; Wei & Wu 2018). According to Einstein’s special relativity, if the photon has a rest mass $m_\gamma$, the photon energy can be written as

$$E = h \nu = \sqrt{p^2 c^2 + m_\gamma^2 c^4},$$

(7)

where $h$ is the Planck constant. In vacuum, the speed of photons with energy $E$ can be derived as

$$v = c \frac{\partial E}{\partial p}.$$  

(8)

When $m_\gamma = 0$, we have $v = c$. If $m_\gamma \neq 0$, we have

$$v = c \left(1 - \frac{m_\gamma^2 c^4}{E^2} \right)^{1/2} \approx c \left(1 - \frac{m_\gamma^2 c^4}{2 h^2 \nu^2} \right),$$

(9)

where the last approximation is applicable when $m_\gamma \ll \nu / c \approx 7 \times 10^{-30} \frac{\nu}{\text{GHz}}$ g. In this case, two photons with different frequencies, which are emitted simultaneously from the same source, would arrive on the Earth at different times with a time–frequency downward drifting pattern. For a cosmic source, the arrival time difference is given by

$$\Delta t_m = \frac{m_\gamma^2 c^4}{2 h^2 H_0^2} (\nu_1 - \nu_2) \frac{z}{\sqrt{\Omega_m (1 + z)^3 + \Omega_{\Lambda}}},$$

(10)

where $H_0$ is the Lemaître–Hubble–Humason constant (Lemaître 1927; Hubble 1929; Hubble & Humason 1931). Thus, the photon mass can be constrained as (Wu et al. 2016b)

$$m_\gamma = (1.56 \times 10^{-47} \text{g}) \left(\frac{H_0 \Delta t_m}{(\nu_{1,50} - \nu_{1,50}^2)} \frac{z}{\sqrt{\Omega_m (1 + z)^3 + \Omega_{\Lambda}}} \right)^{1/2},$$

(11)

where $\nu_{1,50}$ is the radio frequency in units of $10^9$ Hz and $H_0$ is the Lemaître–Hubble–Humason constant in units of 70 km s$^{-1}$ Mpc$^{-1}$.
Table 1
Upper Limits on the Differences of the $\gamma$ Values through the Shapiro Time Delay Effect

| Categorization | Author (year) | Source | Messengers | Gravitational Field | $\Delta\gamma$ |
|----------------|--------------|--------|------------|---------------------|---------------|
| This work      |              | FRB 121102 | 1.374–1.344 GHz photons | Laniakea supercluster of galaxies | $2.5 \times 10^{-6}$ |
| Wei et al. (2015) |          | FRB 110220 | 1.2–1.5 GHz photons | Milky Way | $2.5 \times 10^{-8}$ |
|                |              | FRB/GRB 100704A | 1.23–1.45 GHz photons | Milky Way | $4.4 \times 10^{-9}$ |
| Tingay & Kaplan (2016) | | FRB 150418 | 1.2–1.5 GHz photons | Milky Way | $(1–2) \times 10^{-9}$ |
| Nusser (2016) |              | FRB 150418 | 1.2–1.5 GHz photons | Large-scale structure | $10^{-12}–10^{-13}$ |
| Longo (1988) |              | SN 1987A | 7.5–40 MeV neutrinos | Milky Way | $1.6 \times 10^{-6}$ |
| Same particles with different energies | Gao et al. (2015) | GRB 090510 | MeV–GeV photons | Milky Way | $2.0 \times 10^{-8}$ |
|                |              | GRB 080319B | eV–MeV photons | Milky Way | $1.2 \times 10^{-7}$ |
|                | Yang & Zhang (2016b) | Crab pulsar | 8.15–10.35 GHz photons | Milky Way | $(0.6–1.8) \times 10^{-15}$ |
|                | Desai & Kahya (2018) | Crab pulsar | 8.15–10.35 GHz photons | Milky Way | $2.4 \times 10^{-15}$ |
|                | Zhang & Gong (2017) | Crab pulsar | eV–MeV photons | Milky Way | $3.0 \times 10^{-10}$ |
|                | Leung et al. (2018) | Crab pulsar | 1.52–2.12 eV photons | Milky Way | $1.1 \times 10^{-10}$ |
|                | Wei et al. (2016a) | Mrk 421 | keV–TeV photons | Milky Way | $3.9 \times 10^{-10}$ |
|                | PKS 2155-304 | sub TeV–TeV photons | Milky Way | $2.2 \times 10^{-6}$ |
|                | Wu et al. (2016a) | GW150914 | 35–150 Hz GW signals | Milky Way | $\sim 10^{-9}$ |
|                | Kahya & Desai (2016) | GW150914 | 35–250 Hz GW signals | Milky Way | $2.6 \times 10^{-9}$ |
| Different particles | Krauss & Tremaine (1988) | SN 1987A | eV photons and MeV neutrinos | Milky Way | $5.0 \times 10^{-3}$ |
|                | Longo (1988) | SN 1987A | eV photons and MeV neutrinos | Milky Way | $3.4 \times 10^{-3}$ |
|                | Wei et al. (2016b) | GRB 110521B | keV photons and TeV neutrino | Laniakea supercluster of galaxies | $1.3 \times 10^{-13}$ |
|                | Wang et al. (2016) | PKS B1424-418 | MeV photons and PeV neutrino | Virgo Cluster | $3.4 \times 10^{-4}$ |
|                |               | PKS B1424-418 | MeV photons and PeV neutrino | Great Attractor | $7.0 \times 10^{-6}$ |
|                | Boran et al. (2019) | TXS 0506+056 | GeV photons and TeV neutrino | Milky Way | $5.5 \times 10^{-2}$ |
|                | Laha (2018b); Wei et al. (2019) | TXS 0506+056 | GeV photons and TeV neutrino | Laniakea supercluster of galaxies | $10^{-6}–10^{-7}$ |
|                | Wei et al. (2017a) | GW170817 | MeV photons and GW signals | Virgo Cluster | $9.2 \times 10^{-11}$ |
|                |                 | GW170817 | eV photons and GW signals | Virgo Cluster | $2.1 \times 10^{-6}$ |
|                | Abbott et al. (2017) | GW170817 | MeV photons and GW signals | Milky Way | $2.6 \times 10^{-7}–1.2 \times 10^{-6}$ |
|                | Shoemaker & Murase (2018) | GW170817 | MeV photons and GW signals | Milky Way | $7.4 \times 10^{-8}$ |
|                | Boran et al. (2018) | GW170817 | MeV photons and GW signals | Milky Way | $9.8 \times 10^{-8}$ |
| Same particles with different polarization states | Wu et al. (2017) | GRB 120308A | Polarized optical photons | Laniakea supercluster of galaxies | $1.2 \times 10^{-10}$ |
|                |                 | GRB 100826A | Polarized gamma-ray photons | Laniakea supercluster of galaxies | $1.2 \times 10^{-10}$ |
|                |                 | FRB 150808A | Polarized radio photons | Laniakea supercluster of galaxies | $2.2 \times 10^{-16}$ |
|                | Yang et al. (2017) | GRB 110721A | Polarized gamma-ray photons | Milky Way | $1.6 \times 10^{-27}$ |
|                | Wei & Wu (2019) | GRB 061122 | Polarized gamma-ray photons | Laniakea supercluster of galaxies | $0.8 \times 10^{-33}$ |
|                |                 | GRB 110721A | Polarized gamma-ray photons | Laniakea supercluster of galaxies | $1.3 \times 10^{-33}$ |
In the literature, many attempts have been made to obtain constraints on the photon rest mass by considering various astrophysical sources, including flare stars (Lovell et al. 1964), the Crab Nebula pulsar (Warner & Nather 1969), GRB 980703 (Schafer 1999), extragalactic radio pulsars (Wei et al. 2017b), FRB 150418 (Bonetti et al. 2016; Wu et al. 2016b), FRB 121102 (Bonetti et al. 2017), and FRB 121102 subpulses.

We propose to use the observed time delay between subpulses in FRB 121102 to obtain more stringent constraints on the photon mass, by assuming that the time delay between subpulses is mainly due to the massive photon effect, which is reasonable since the subpulses with lower frequencies arrive later. We adopt the closest neighboring subpulses in AO-05 ($\Delta t_{\text{obs}} = 0.4$ ms between $f_1 = 1374.16$ MHz and $f_2 = 1343.69$ MHz) and obtain a stringent limit on the photon mass as $m_\gamma < 5.1 \times 10^{-48}$ g, when $z = 0.193$ is adopted for FRB 121102, and the Planck results are adopted for cosmological parameters, e.g., $H_0 = 67.8$ km s$^{-1}$ Mpc$^{-1}$, $\Omega_m = 0.308$, and $\Omega_\Lambda = 0.692$ (Planck Collaboration et al. 2018). Note that since the redshift of FRB 121102 is relatively small, the uncertainty of cosmological parameters would not affect the constraints too much. For instance, when $H_0$ varies from 67.8 to 73.2 km s$^{-1}$ Mpc$^{-1}$ (Riess et al. 2016), the limit on the photon mass varies from $m_\gamma < 5.1 \times 10^{-48}$ g to $m_\gamma < 5.3 \times 10^{-48}$ g. When the value of $\Omega_m$ varies from 0.2 to 0.4 ($\Omega_\Lambda$ thus varies from 0.8 to 0.6), the limit on the photon mass varies from $m_\gamma < 5.0 \times 10^{-48}$ g to $m_\gamma < 5.1 \times 10^{-48}$ g.

As shown in Figure 1, our result is 10 times better than that obtained using other FRB sources, and ~10$^4$ times better than that obtained by pulsars in the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds, ~10$^5$ times better than flare stars, and ~10$^7$ times better than the Crab Nebula pulsar.

4. Discussion

Using the time–frequency structure of subpulses in some bursts of FRB 121102, here we have obtained a stringent limit on the $\gamma$ differences between photons with different energies of $|\gamma_1 - \gamma_2| < 2.5 \times 10^{-16}$, which is 1000 times better than previous constraints from FRBs through similar methods. In addition, we also obtained a stringent constraint on the photon mass of $m_\gamma < 5.1 \times 10^{-48}$ g, which is 10 times better than the previous best limits on the photon mass using the velocity dispersion method.

It is worth stressing the advantages of the method for placing limits on the WEP and the photon mass using the time–frequency structure of the subpulses of, e.g., FRB 121102. In previous works, the time delay between the whole observational bandwidth of FRBs (on the order of 1 s) were applied to make constraints on the WEP or the photon mass. Such a time delay at a given frequency $\nu$ follows a $\nu^{-2}$ law, which is compatible with both plasma and massive photon dispersion. Considering that the column density of free electrons inferred from the time delay is roughly consistent with the theoretical predictions (accumulated contributions from MK, IGM, and host galaxy; Chatterjee et al. 2017), the time delay is routinely attributed to plasma, although without an independent confirmation that such attribution is entirely correct. The time–frequency structure of the FRB 121102 subpulses, however, emerges after correcting for dispersive delays. Therefore, the time delay between subpulses is largely reduced to the order of milliseconds or even submilliseconds, which is very advantageous for further improving the accuracy of a basic physical analysis. Moreover, it has been proposed that the observed downward drifting of the subpulse frequency is more likely intrinsic, namely, a generic geometrical effect within the framework of coherent curvature radiation by bunches of electron–positron pairs in the magnetosphere of a neutron star (Wang et al. 2019). If this is the case, the constraints on the WEP and the photon mass would become even tighter.

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