Hölder regularity and convergence for a non-local model
def nematic liquid crystals in the large-domain limit

Giacomo Canevari∗ and Jamie M. Taylor†

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Abstract

We consider a non-local free energy functional, modelling a competition between
entropy and pairwise interactions reminiscent of the second order virial expansion, with
applications to nematic liquid crystals as a particular case. We build on previous work
on understanding the behaviour of such models within the large-domain limit, where
minimisers converge to minimisers of a quadratic elastic energy with manifold-valued
constraint, analogous to harmonic maps. We extend this work to establish Hölder
bounds for (almost-)minimisers on bounded domains, and demonstrate stronger con-
vergence of (almost)-minimisers away from the singular set of the limit solution. The
proof techniques bear analogy with recent work of singularly perturbed energy func-
tionals, in particular in the context of the Ginzburg-Landau and Landau-de Gennes
models.

1 Introduction

1.1 Variational models of liquid crystals

Liquid crystalline systems are those which sit outside of the classical solid-liquid-gas tri-
chotomy. While there are a plethora of different systems classified as liquid crystals, they
can be broadly described as fluid systems where molecules admit a long range order of
certain degrees of freedom. This is in contrast to classical fluids, which lack long range
correlations between molecules. The fluidity of the systems makes them “soft”, that is,
easily susceptible to influence by external influences such as fields or stresses, whilst the
long range ordering permits anisotropic electrostatic and optical behaviour. These two
properties combined make them ideal for a variety of technological applications, as their
anisotropy is exploitable whilst their softness makes them easy to manipulate.

∗Dipartimento di Informatica — Università di Verona, Strada le Grazie 15, 37134 Verona, Italy.
E-mail address: giacomo.canevari@univr.it
†BCAM — Basque Center for Applied Mathematics, Alameda de Mazarredo 14, 48009 Bilbao, Spain.
E-mail address: jtaylor@bcamath.org
The simplest liquid crystalline system is that of a nematic liquid crystal. These are systems of elongated molecules, often idealised as having axial symmetry, which form phases with no long range positional order, but where the long axes of molecules is generally well aligned over larger length scales. Even in the well studied case of nematics there are a variety of models that one may use to study their theoretical behaviour, where the choice of model is usually dependent on the length scales considered and the type of defects one wishes to observe.

One of the earliest and most studied free energy functionals one may consider in continuum modelling is the Oseen-Frank model \[18\]. In the simplest formulation, we consider a prescribed domain \( \Omega \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3 \) and a unit vector field as our continuum variable \( n: \Omega \to \mathbb{S}^2 \), interpreted as the local alignment axis of molecules. As molecules are assumed to be (statistically) head-to-tail symmetric, we interpret the configurations \( n, -n \) as physically equivalent, that is, they are two mathematically distinct representations of the same physical state. In the simplified one-constant approximation, we look for minimisers of the free energy

\[
\int_{\Omega} \frac{K}{2} |\nabla n(x)|^2 \, dx,
\]

subject to certain boundary conditions, although more general formulations are possible. The problem has attracted interest not only from the liquid crystal community, but also from the mathematical community as the prototypical harmonic map problem. If a prescribed Dirichlet boundary condition admits non-zero degree, then by necessity any \( n \) satisfying it must admit discontinuities, meaning that defects/singularities are an unavoidable part of the model’s study.

More generally, one may consider an Oseen-Frank energy where different modes of deformation are penalised to different extents. Neglecting the saddle-splay null-Lagrangian term, this gives a free energy of the form

\[
\int_{\Omega} \frac{K_1}{2} (\nabla \cdot n(x))^2 + \frac{K_2}{2} (n(x) \cdot \nabla \times n(x))^2 + \frac{K_3}{2} |n(x) \times \nabla \times n(x)|^2 \, dx.
\]

The constants \( K_1, K_2, K_3 \) are known as the Frank constants, and represent the penalisations of splay, twist, and bend deformations respectively. In the case where \( K_1 = K_2 = K_3 = K \), we reclaim the one-constant approximation \(1.1\).

It is natural to ask if such a free energy can be justified. While the original formulation was more phenomenological in nature and based solely on symmetry arguments and a small-deformation assumption, attempts have been made to identify the Oseen-Frank model as a large-domain limit of a more fundamental model, the Landau-de Gennes model \[14, 41\]. In the Landau-de Gennes model, the continuum variable is the \( Q \)-tensor, corresponding to the normalised second moment of a one-particle distribution function. Explicitly, if the distribution of the long axes of molecules in a small neighbourhood of a point \( x \in \Omega \) are described by a probability distribution \( f(x, \cdot): \mathbb{S}^2 \to [0, +\infty) \), we define the \( Q \)-tensor at the point \( x \) as

\[
Q(x) = \int_{\mathbb{S}^2} f(x, p) \left( p \otimes p - \frac{1}{3} I \right) \, dp.
\]
As molecules are assumed to be head-to-tail symmetric, a molecule is as likely to have orientation \( p \in S^2 \) as \(-p\), so that \( f(x, p) = f(x, -p) \). For this reason the first moment of \( f(x, \cdot) \) will always vanish, making the Q-tensor the first non-trivial moment, containing information on molecular alignment. Q-tensors are, following their definition, traceless, symmetric, \( 3 \times 3 \) matrices. We denote this set as

\[
\text{Sym}_0(3) = \left\{ Q \in \mathbb{R}^3: Q = Q^T, \ \text{Trace}(Q) = 0 \right\}.
\]

The Q-tensor contains more information than the director field, namely that it does not force the interpretation of axially symmetric ordering about an axis (less symmetric configurations are permitted), and the degree of orientational ordering is permitted to vary. Depending on their eigenvalues, they come in one of three varieties.

- If all eigenvalues are equal, \( Q = 0 \), and we say that \( Q \) is isotropic, and representative of a disordered system. In particular, if \( f \) is a uniform distribution on \( S^2 \), \( Q = 0 \).

- If two eigenvalues are equal and the third is distinct, we say \( Q \) is uniaxial. A uniaxial Q-tensor can be written as \( Q = s \left( n \otimes n - \frac{1}{3} I \right) \), for a scalar \( s \) and unit vector \( n \). We interpret \( n \) as the favoured direction of alignment, and \( s \) as a measure of the degree of ordering molecules about \( n \).

- If all three eigenvalues are distinct, we say that \( Q \) is biaxial.

The corresponding free energy to be minimised is

\[
\int_{\Omega} \psi_b(Q(x)) + W(Q(x), \nabla Q(x)) \, dx.
\]

The function \( \psi_b: \text{Sym}_0(3) \to \mathbb{R} \cup \{+\infty\} \) is a frame indifferent bulk potential, which may be taken as a polynomial or the Ball-Majumdar singular potential ([2], and further discussion in (H_1)–(H_6)). Its main characteristic is that, in the cases considered, it is minimised on the set

\[
\mathcal{N} = \left\{ Q \in \text{Sym}_0(3): \text{there exists } n \in S^2 \text{ such that } Q = s_0 \left( n \otimes n - \frac{1}{3} I \right) \right\},
\]

with \( s_0 \) a temperature, concentration and material dependent constant. The elastic energy \( W \) is minimised when \( \nabla Q = 0 \). While many forms are possible, by symmetry the only frame-indifferent, quadratic energy that only depends on the gradient of \( Q \) is of the form

\[
W(\nabla Q) = \frac{L_1}{2} Q_{ij,k} Q_{ij,k} + \frac{L_2}{2} Q_{ij,k} Q_{ik,j} + \frac{L_3}{2} Q_{ij,j} Q_{ik,k},
\]

where Einstein summation notation is used. While Oseen-Frank represents nematic defects as discontinuities in the continuum variables, the Landau de-Gennes approach admits a different description, where nematic defects point defects are typically described as a
melting of nematic order, that is \( Q = 0 \). This permits smooth configurations to describe defects.

In an appropriate large-domain limit of a rescaled problem, the contributions of the bulk energy become overwhelming, and we expect the minimisers to converge to minimisers of a constrained problem, where we minimise the elastic energy

\[
(1.8) \quad \int_{\Omega} W(\nabla Q) \, dx,
\]

subject to the constraint that \( Q(x) \in \mathcal{N} \) almost everywhere. In the case where \( Q = s_0 \left( n \otimes n - \frac{1}{3} I \right) \) almost everywhere for some \( n \in W^{1,2}(\Omega, S^2) \), we say that \( Q \) is orientable, and the problem in the presence of Dirichlet boundary conditions that are \( \mathcal{N} \)-valued almost everywhere becomes equivalent to that of the minimising the energy \((1.2)\) for \( n \).

The constants \( L_i \) and \( K_i \) are related in the case of Dirichlet boundary conditions where null-Lagrangian terms may be neglected as

\[
(1.9) \quad \frac{1}{8} K_1 = 2L_1 + L_2 + L_3,
\]

\[
\frac{1}{8} K_2 = 2L_1,
\]

\[
\frac{1}{8} K_3 = 2L_1.
\]

An energy purely quadratic in \( \nabla Q \) cannot give rise to three independent elastic constants in the Oseen-Frank model, with the so-called “cubic term” \( Q_{ij} Q_{kl,i} Q_{kl,j} \) often being used to fill the degeneracy. Such a term does not arise from the model we will consider, although a more complex variant taking into account molecular length scales has been proposed to avoid this issue \([13]\).

Studying the convergence of minimisers of Landau-de Gennes towards the Oseen-Frank limit has attracted interest, with Majumdar and Zarnescu showing global \( W^{1,2} \) convergence and uniform convergence away from singular sets in the one-constant case \([39]\), Nguyen and Zarnescu proving convergence results in stronger topologies \([42]\), Contreras, Lamy and Rodiac generalising the approach to other harmonic-map problems \([12]\), and further extensions by Contreras and Lamy \([11]\) and Canevari, Majumdar and Stroffolini \([9]\) to more general elastic energies. In other settings, the \( W^{1,2} \)-convergence does not hold globally but only locally, away from the singular sets, due to topological obstructions carried by the boundary data and/or the domain (see e.g. \([3, 22, 5, 27]\)). Recently, Di Fratta, Robbins, Slastikov and Zarnescu found higher-order Landau-de Gennes corrections to the Oseen-Frank functional, in two dimensional domains, by studying the \( \Gamma \)-expansion of the Landau-de Gennes functional in the large-domain limit \([16]\). The problem holds many parallels to the now-classical Ginzburg-Landau problem \([5]\). Other singular limits and qualitative features of Landau-de Gennes solutions have been studied too; see, for instance, \([10, 13, 26, 29, 33, 28, 30, 31]\) and the references therein.

While Landau-de Gennes has proven an effective model in many situations, there are still open questions as to how one may justify the model in a rigorous way. While one
may use Landau-de Gennes, in appropriate situations, to justify Oseen-Frank, a rigor- 
ous justification of Landau-de Gennes itself is lacking. Historically it was justified on 
a phenomenological basis, but other work has been able to provide Landau-de Gennes 
as a gradient expansion of a non-local mean field model \cite{19,23}. Justification by for-
mal gradient expansions leaves open the question as to the consistency of minimisers of 
the original free energy with minimisers of its approximation, that is, are minimisers of 
the approximate model necessarily good approximations of the minimisers of the original 
problem? To this end, recent work has been focused on rigorous asymptotic analysis of 
non-local free energies, which similarly produce the Oseen-Frank model in a large-domain 
limit \cite{35,36,48,49}. These approaches “bypass” the intermediate and non-rigorous deriva-
tion of Landau-de Gennes. This is analogous to recent investigations into peridynamics, 
a formulation of elasticity based on non-local interactions. These formulations of elastic-
ity bear mathematical similarity with the mean-field theory approach, where stress-strain 
relations are described in terms of non-local operators on the deformation map, rather 
than derivatives as in the more classical formulations of elasticity \cite{4,45}. The classical 
density functional theory we will consider in this work is based on a simplified competition etweent an entropic contribution to the energy, favouring disorder, and an interaction en-
vouring order. The models themselves are justified as a second order truncation of 
the virial expansion in the dilute regime based on long-range attractive interactions in the 
style of Maier and Saupe \cite{38} and with mathematical similarity to the model of Onsager 
\cite{43}. Explicitly, given the one-particle distribution function \(f(x,\cdot)\) in a neighbourhood of 
x, we define a free energy functional

\[
\mathcal{E}(u) = \frac{1}{2} k_B T \int_{\Omega \times S^2} \int_{\Omega \times S^2} K(x-y, p, q) \, dx \, dp \, dy \, dq.
\]

\(\rho_0 > 0\) is the number density of particles in space, \(k_B\) the Boltzmann constant, \(T > 0\) temperature and \(K(z, p, q)\) denotes the interaction energy of particles with orientations 
p, q and with centres of mass separated by a vector \(z\). The entropic term on the left is 
convex and readily shown to be minimised at a uniform distribution, that is, an isotropic 
disordered system. The nature of the pairwise interaction energy on the right is that 
only nearby particles will prefer to be aligned with each other. We see that temperature and 
concentration mediate the competition between these opposing mechanisms. Recent work 
has established the Oseen-Frank energy \(\mathcal{E}(u)\) in terms of a large-domain limit of the 
energy \(\mathcal{E}(u)\) under certain assumptions, in which the elastic constants \(K_i\) can be related to 
second moments of the interaction kernel. Previous work has established weaker modes 
of convergence, while in this work we will establish stronger convergence of minimisers 
away from defect sets, analogous to the approach taken by Majumdar and Zarnescu for 
the Landau-de Gennes model \cite{39}. The results however will require stronger assumptions 
on the regularity and decay of the interaction kernel than those of \cite{45}, owing to the need 
for more precise control on the decay of various integral quantities.
1.2 Simplification of the model and non-dimensionalisation

Here and throughout the sequel, we consider the more general case where molecules admit an internal degree of freedom $p$ in a manifold $\mathcal{M}$. We will employ a macroscopic order parameter $u \in \mathbb{R}^m$ to emphasise the analysis is not limited to the concrete case of nematic liquid crystals.

Through most of the paper, we consider the case where $f$ is prescribed on $(\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \frac{1}{\varepsilon} \Omega) \times \mathcal{M}$, where $\Omega$ is a non-dimensional reference domain and $\varepsilon > 0$ is a small parameter, representative of the inverse of a large length scale of the domain. In Section 5, we relax this assumption and study a minimisation problem where $f$ is prescribed only in a neighbourhood of the domain, of suitable thickness. We consider the free energy

$$\tilde{G}_\varepsilon(f) = k_B T \rho_0 \int_{\frac{1}{\varepsilon} \Omega \times \mathcal{M}} f(x, p) \ln f(x, p) \, dx \, dp$$

$$- \frac{\rho_0^2}{2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \times \mathcal{M}} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \times \mathcal{M}} f(x, p) f(y, q) \mathcal{K}(x - y, p, q) \, dx \, dp \, dy \, dq. \quad (1.11)$$

For simplification of the problem, we take the interaction energy to be of the form

$$\mathcal{K}(z, p, q) = K(z) \sigma(p) \cdot \sigma(q), \quad (1.12)$$

where $\sigma \in L^\infty(\mathcal{M}, \mathbb{R}^m)$ is some “microscopic order parameter”, and $K: \mathbb{R}^3 \to \mathbb{R}^{m \times m}$ is a symmetric tensor field, which will satisfy certain technical conditions (see (K1)–(K6) in Section 2). By applying Fubini we may then introduce a “macroscopic order parameter”, $u \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathbb{R}^m)$ by

$$u(x) = \int_{\mathcal{M}} f(x, p) \sigma(p) \, dp, \quad (1.13)$$

and re-write the interaction energy as

$$- \frac{\rho_0^2}{2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \times \mathcal{M}} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \times \mathcal{M}} f(x, p) f(y, q) \mathcal{K}(x - y, p, q) \, dx \, dp \, dy \, dq$$

$$= - \frac{\rho_0^2}{2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K(x - y) u(x) \cdot u(y) \, dx \, dy. \quad (1.14)$$

While it is not possible to write the entropic term explicitly in terms of $u$, we may provide a lower bound by means of the singular Ball-Majumdar/Katriel potential and its extensions [2, 32, 47] by

$$\int_{\frac{1}{\varepsilon} \Omega \times \mathcal{M}} f(x, p) \ln f(x, p) \, dx \, dp \geq \int_{\frac{1}{\varepsilon} \Omega} \psi_s(u(x)) \, dx, \quad (1.15)$$

where the function $\psi_s: \mathbb{R}^m \to \mathbb{R} \cup \{+\infty\}$ is defined by

$$\psi_s(u) = \min \left\{ \int_{\mathcal{M}} f(p) \ln f(p) \, dp : f \geq 0 \text{ a.e., } \int_{\mathcal{M}} f(p) \, dp = 1, \int_{\mathcal{M}} f(p) \sigma(p) \, dp = u \right\}, \quad (1.16)$$
where by convention \( \psi_\epsilon(u) = +\infty \) when the constraint set is empty. Note that the minimisation problem (1.16) is strictly convex, thus solutions are necessarily unique, and we may define \( f_u \) to be the corresponding minimiser for \( u \in Q = \{ u : \psi_\epsilon(u) < +\infty \} \). That is,

\[
f_u = \arg \min \left\{ \int_M f(p) \ln f(p) \, dp : f \geq 0 \text{ a.e., } \int_M f(p) \, dp = 1, \int_M f(p)\sigma(p) \, dp = u \right\}.
\]

The precise definition of \( \psi_\epsilon \) will be unimportant in this work, and we employ any function \( \psi_\epsilon \) satisfying certain technical assumptions in the sequel (see \( \text{(H}_1 \rangle \text{--(H}_6 \rangle \) in Section 2).

In the sequel we omit the primes and consider (1.19) as our free energy functional to be minimised at scale \( \epsilon > 0 \), with \( \psi \) satisfying certain technical assumptions in the sequel (see \( \text{(H}_1 \rangle \text{--(H}_6 \rangle \) in Section 2).

We in fact have the result that \( f^* \) is a minimiser of \( \tilde{G}_\epsilon \) if and only if, for \( u^*(x) = \int_{R^3} f^*(x, p)\sigma(p) \, dp \), \( u^* \) is a minimiser of

\[
(1.18) \quad \tilde{F}_\epsilon(u) = k_B T \rho_0 \int_{\frac{1}{\epsilon} \Omega} \psi_\epsilon(u(x)) \, dx - \frac{\rho_0^2}{2} \int_{R^3} \int_{R^3} K(x - y)u(x) \cdot u(y) \, dx \, dy,
\]

with \( f^* = f_u^* \). This is readily seen by writing the minimisation as a two-step process, first minimising over all \( f \) such that \( f_u = f \), and later minimising over \( u \) and noting that the first minimisation may be performed pointwise almost-everywhere in \( R^3 \), as in \[48\]. That is to say, we have a simpler, macroscopic energy with equivalent minimisers. By introducing a change of variables,

\[
x = \frac{x'}{\epsilon}, \quad y = \frac{y'}{\epsilon}, \quad u'(x') = u(x), \quad \epsilon' := \frac{\epsilon}{\rho_0^{1/3}}, \quad K'(x') = \frac{1}{k_B T} K(\epsilon' x),
\]

and a (non-dimensional) constant \( C_{\epsilon'} \) to be specified later, we rescale the domain and obtain the free energy we will consider for the remainder of this work, so that

\[
(1.19) \quad E_{\epsilon'}(u') := \frac{\epsilon}{k_B T \rho_0^{1/3}} \tilde{F}_\epsilon(u) + C_{\epsilon'}
\]

\[= \frac{1}{\epsilon'^2} \int_{\frac{1}{\epsilon} \Omega} \psi_\epsilon(u'(x')) \, dx' - \frac{1}{2\epsilon'^3} \int_{R^3} \int_{R^3} K'(\frac{x' - y'}{\epsilon'}) \, u'(x') \cdot u'(y') \, dx' \, dy' + C_{\epsilon'}.
\]

The additive constant \( C_{\epsilon'} \) is irrelevant for the purpose of minimisation; however, we will make a specific choice of \( C_{\epsilon'} \) (see Equation (2.6) below) for analytical convenience. We will consider the regime as \( \epsilon' \to 0 \) in this work. From the definition of \( \epsilon' \), this may be interpreted in two forms, one in which the characteristic length scale of the domain, \( \frac{1}{\epsilon'} \), becomes large, and one in which the density \( \rho_0 \) becomes large. However, as the energy we consider is based on the second order virial expansion which is explicitly a model for dilute regimes, we interpret the limit \( \epsilon' \to 0 \) as the former, that is, a large-domain limit. In the sequel we omit the primes and consider (1.19) as our free energy functional to be minimised at scale \( \epsilon > 0 \).

2 Technical assumptions and main results

Let \( \text{Sym}(m) \) be the space of \( (m \times m) \)-symmetric matrices, with real coefficients. Given an interaction kernel \( K : R^3 \to \text{Sym}(m) \) and \( \epsilon > 0 \), we define \( K_\epsilon(z) := \epsilon^{-3} K(\epsilon^{-1} z) \) for
any $z \in \mathbb{R}^3$. Then, we may rewrite the functional (1.19) as

$$E_\varepsilon(u) := -\frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \times \mathbb{R}^3} K(x - y)u(x) \cdot u(y) \, dx \, dy + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_\Omega \psi_s(u(x)) \, dx + C_\varepsilon,$$

where $u : \mathbb{R}^3 \to \mathbb{R}^m$ is the macroscopic order parameter, $\Omega \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3$ is a bounded, smooth domain, and $\psi_s : \mathbb{R}^m \to [0, +\infty]$ is any convex potential that satisfies the assumptions (H1)–(H6) below (for instance, the Ball-Majumdar/Katriel potential defined by (1.16)).

**Assumptions on the kernel $K$.** Our assumptions on the kernel $K$ are reminiscent of [38]. We define $g(z) := \lambda_{\min}(K(z))$ for any $z \in \mathbb{R}^3$, where $\lambda_{\min}(K)$ denotes the minimum eigenvalue of $K$.

(K1) $K \in W^{1,1}(\mathbb{R}^3, \text{Sym}(m))$.

(K2) $K$ is even, that is $K(z) = K(-z)$ for a.e. $z \in \mathbb{R}^m$.

(K3) $g \geq 0$ a.e. on $\mathbb{R}^3$, and there exist positive numbers $\rho_1 < \rho_2, k_*$ such that $g \geq k_*$ a.e. on $B_{\rho_2} \setminus B_{\rho_1}$.

(K4) $g \in L^1(\mathbb{R}^3)$ and there exists $q > 7/2$ such that $\int_{\mathbb{R}^3} g(z) |z|^q \, dz < +\infty$.

(K5) There exists a positive constant $C$ such that $\lambda_{\max}(K(z)) \leq C g(z)$ for a.e. $z \in \mathbb{R}^3$ (where $\lambda_{\max}(K)$ denotes the maximum eigenvalue of $K$).

(K6) There exists $\nu > 1$ such that

$$\int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \|\nabla K(z)\| \, |z|^\nu \, dz < +\infty,$$

where $\|\nabla K(z)\|^2 := \partial_a K_{ij}(z) \partial_b K_{ij}(z)$.

In the case of physically meaningful systems the tensor $K$ will have to respect frame invariance. In the case of nematic liquid crystals, where the order parameter is a traceless symmetric matrix $Q$, frame indifference implies that the bilinear form must necessarily be of the form

$$K(z)Q_1 \cdot Q_2 = f_1(|z|)Q_1 \cdot Q_2 + f_2(|z|)Q_1z \cdot Q_2z + f_3(|z|)(Q_1z \cdot z)(Q_2z \cdot z),$$

for all $Q_1, Q_2 \in \text{Sym}_0(3)$, where $f_1, f_2, f_3$ are real-valued functions defined on $[0, +\infty)$ [38]. It is clear that by appropriate choices of $f_1, f_2, f_3$ which are $C^1$ and with sufficient decay at infinity the previous assumptions can be satisfied. This family of bilinear forms includes the simplified interaction energy

$$K(z)Q_1 \cdot Q_2 = \varphi(|z|)Q_1 \cdot Q_2$$

for a suitable function $\varphi$, which includes the results of [35, 36], where $\varphi$ is taken to be rapidly decaying and $C^\infty$, which are stronger assumptions than we shall consider.
Furthermore, [7, Equation (3.43)] considers $K$ to have the same structure, albeit with a slower decay of $\varphi$ than our analysis would permit.

We remark that the integrability requirements in (K4) and (K6) and regularity requirement in (K1), although weaker than the assumptions in the earlier work [33], are stronger than that of [38], and permit more delicate control of integral estimates needed to show convergence of minimisers in a stronger sense. (See also Remark 2.4 below.)

Assumptions on the singular potential $\psi_s$.

(H1) $\psi_s : \mathbb{R}^m \to (-\infty, +\infty]$ is a convex function.

(H2) The domain of $\psi_s$, $Q := \psi_s^{-1}(\mathbb{R}) \subseteq \mathbb{R}^m$, is a non-empty, bounded open set that contains 0 and $\psi_s \in C^2(Q)$.

(H3) There exists a constant $c > 0$ such that $\nabla^2 \psi_s(y) \chi \cdot \chi \geq c |\chi|^2$ for any $y \in Q$ and any $\chi \in \mathbb{R}^m$.

(H4) There holds $\psi_s(y) \to +\infty$ as $\text{dist}(y, \partial Q) \to 0$.

We define the “bulk potential” $\psi_b : Q \to \mathbb{R}$ in terms of $K$ and $\psi_s$, as

$$\psi_b(y) := \psi_s(y) - \frac{1}{2} \left( \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K(z) \, dz \right) y \cdot y + c_0 \quad \text{for any } y \in Q,$$

where $c_0 \in \mathbb{R}$ is a constant, uniquely determined by imposing that $\inf \psi_b = 0$. We make the following assumptions on $\psi_b$:

(H5) The set $N := \psi_b^{-1}(0) \subseteq Q$ is a compact, smooth, connected manifold without boundary.

(H6) For any $y \in N$ and any unit vector $\xi \in S^{m-1}$ that is orthogonal to $N$ at $y$, we have $\nabla^2 \psi_b(y) \xi \cdot \xi > 0$.

Remark 2.1. If the norm of $\int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K(z) \, dz$ is smaller than the constant $c$ given by (H3), then the function $\psi_b$ is strictly convex and hence, its zero-set $N$ reduces to a point. This happens, for example, in the sufficiently high temperature regime, independently of the precise form of $K$. Nevertheless, our arguments remain valid in this case, too.

Remark 2.2. The Ball-Majumdar/Katriel potential, defined by (1.16), satisfies the conditions (H1), (H3), (H4), (H5), and (H6) follow from [2], apart from the $C^2$ smoothness of $\psi_s$ which is implicitly proven in [32] via an inverse function theorem argument, although not stated. (H3) is proven in [47]. With this choice of the potential, the set $N := \psi_b^{-1}(0)$ is either a point or the manifold given by (1.6) (see [2, Section 4]). In both cases, (H6) is satisfied (see [34, Proposition 4.2]).
The admissible class and an equivalent expression for the free energy. We complement the minimisation of the functional (2.1) by prescribing \( u \) on \( \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega \). We take a map \( u_{bd} \in H^1(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathbb{R}^m) \) such that

\[
(\text{BD}) \quad u_{bd}(x) \in \mathcal{Q} \quad \text{for a.e. } x \in \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega, \quad u_{bd}(x) \in \mathcal{N} \quad \text{for a.e. } x \in \Omega,
\]

and we define the admissible class

\[
(2.5) \quad \mathcal{A} := \left\{ u \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathcal{Q}): \psi_a(u) \in L^1(\Omega), \ u = u_{bd} \ a.e. \ on \ \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega \right\}.
\]

Remark 2.3. In order for the assumption \( \text{(BD)} \) to be satisfied, it is necessary that the trace of \( u_{bd} \) on \( \partial\Omega \) takes its values in the manifold \( \mathcal{N} \). If \( \mathcal{N} \) is simply connected, then any boundary value that belongs to \( H^{1/2}(\partial\Omega, \mathcal{N}) \) admits an extension in \( H^1(\Omega, \mathcal{N}) \); this follows from [25, Theorem 6.2]. However, when \( \mathcal{N} \) is multiply connected (for instance, when \( \mathcal{N} \) is the real projective plane, as in the applications to liquid crystals) there exist boundary values in \( H^{1/2}(\partial\Omega, \mathcal{N}) \) that do not have any extension in \( H^1(\Omega, \mathcal{N}) \). (See e.g. [6, 40] for results on the extension problem for manifold-valued Sobolev maps.) On the other hand, \( \mathcal{Q} \) is a convex set that contains \( \mathcal{N} \) and 0, so any boundary value in \( H^{1/2}(\partial\Omega, \mathcal{N}) \) has an extension in \( H^1(\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega, \mathcal{Q}) \).

In the class \( \mathcal{A} \), the functional \( E_\varepsilon \) has an alternative expression. For any \( y \in \mathbb{R}^m \), we use the abbreviated notation \( y \otimes y := y \otimes y \). We choose

\[
(2.6) \quad C_\varepsilon := \frac{c_0}{\varepsilon^2} |\Omega| + \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega} \left( \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K(z) \, dz \right) \cdot u_{bd}(x) \otimes u_{bd}(x) \, dx,
\]

where \( |\Omega| \) denotes the volume of \( \Omega \) and \( c_0 \in \mathbb{R} \) is the same number as in (2.4). The constant \( C_\varepsilon \) only depends on \( \varepsilon, \Omega, K \) and \( u_{bd} \), so it is does not affect minimisers of the functional. By applying the algebraic identity

\[-2K(x - y)u(x) \cdot u(y) = K(x - y) \cdot (u(x) - u(y)) \otimes u(x) - K(x - y) \cdot u(x) \otimes u(y) - K(x - y) \cdot u(y) \otimes u(y) \]

and using (2.4), (2.6), we re-write (2.1) as

\[
(2.7) \quad E_\varepsilon(u) = \frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \times \mathbb{R}^3} K_\varepsilon(x - y) \cdot (u(x) - u(y)) \otimes (u(x) - u(y)) \, dx \, dy + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega} \psi_b(u(x)) \, dx
\]

for any \( u \in \mathcal{A} \). We note that the free energy admits parallels to the Landau-de Gennes energy, with the right-hand term being a corresponding bulk energy and the left-hand term acting as a non-local analogue of the elastic energy, which we shall see is reclaimed in a precise way in the asymptotic limit as \( \varepsilon \to 0 \). Let \( L \) be the unique symmetric fourth-order tensor that satisfies

\[
(2.8) \quad L\xi \cdot \xi := \frac{1}{4} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K(z) \cdot (\xi(z)) \otimes (\xi(z)) \, dz \quad \text{for any } \xi \in \mathbb{R}^{m \times 3}.
\]

The right-hand side of (2.8) is well-defined and finite for any \( \xi \in \mathbb{R}^{m \times 3} \) because \( K \) has finite second moment, thanks to the assumption (K). Coordinate-wise, \( L \) is defined by

\[
L_{ij\alpha\beta} = \frac{1}{4} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K_{\alpha\beta}(z) \, z_i \, z_j \, dz
\]
for any $i, j \in \{1, 2, 3\}$ and $\alpha, \beta \in \{1, 2, \ldots, m\}$. Let $E_0 : \mathcal{A} \to [0, +\infty]$ be given as

$$E_0(u) := \begin{cases} \int_{\Omega} L\nabla u \cdot \nabla u & \text{if } u \in H^1(\Omega, \mathcal{N}) \cap \mathcal{A} \\ +\infty & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases}$$

(2.9)

By assumption (BD), the set $H^1(\Omega, \mathcal{N}) \cap \mathcal{A}$ is non-empty and hence, the functional $E_0$ is not identically equal to $+\infty$. Taylor [48] proved that, as $\varepsilon \to 0$, the functional $E_\varepsilon$ $\Gamma$-converges to $E_0$ with respect to the $L^2$-topology. In particular, up to subsequences, minimisers $u_\varepsilon$ of $E_\varepsilon$ in the class $\mathcal{A}$ converge $L^2$-strongly to a minimiser $u_0$ of $E_0$ in $\mathcal{A}$.

Our aim is to prove a convergence result for minimisers, in a stronger topology.

**Main results.** Given a Borel set $G \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3$ and $u \in L^\infty(G, \mathcal{Q})$, we define

$$F_\varepsilon(u, G) := \frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{G \times G} K_\varepsilon(x - y) \cdot (u(x) - u(y)) \otimes^2 \, dx \, dy + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{G} \psi_b(u(x)) \, dx.$$  

(2.10)

For any $\mu \in (0, 1)$, we denote the $\mu$-Hölder semi-norm of $u$ on $G$ as

$$[u]_{C^\mu(G)} := \sup_{x, y \in G, x \neq y} \frac{|u(x) - u(y)|}{|x - y|^{\mu}}.$$

**Theorem A** (Uniform $\eta$-regularity). Assume that $(K_1)$–$(K_6)$, $(H_1)$–$(H_6)$ and (BD) are satisfied. Then, there exist positive numbers $\eta, \varepsilon_*, M$ and $\mu \in (0, 1)$ such that for any ball $B_\rho(x_0) \subseteq \Omega$, any $\varepsilon \in (0, \varepsilon_*\rho_0)$, and any minimiser $u_\varepsilon$ of $E_\varepsilon$ in $\mathcal{A}$ such that

$$r_0^{-1} F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_\rho(x_0)) \leq \eta^2$$

there holds

$$r_0^{\mu} [u_\varepsilon]_{C^\mu(B_{\rho_0/2}(x_0))} \leq M.$$

As a corollary, we deduce a convergence result for minimisers of $E_\varepsilon$, in the locally uniform topology. We recall that any minimiser $u_0$ for the limit functional (2.9) in $\mathcal{A}$ is smooth in $\Omega \setminus S[u_0]$, where

$$S[u_0] := \left\{ x \in \Omega : \liminf_{\rho \to 0} \rho^{-1} \int_{B_\rho(x)} |\nabla u_0|^2 > 0 \right\}.$$

(2.11)

Moreover, $S[u_0]$ is a closed set of zero total length (see e.g. [24, 37]).

**Theorem B.** Assume that the conditions $(K_1)$–$(K_6)$, $(H_1)$–$(H_6)$ and (BD) are satisfied. Let $u_\varepsilon$ be a minimiser of $E_\varepsilon$ in $\mathcal{A}$. Then, up to extraction of a (non-relabelled) subsequence, we have

$$u_\varepsilon \to u_0 \quad \text{locally uniformly in } \Omega \setminus S[u_0],$$

where $u_0$ is a minimiser of the functional (2.9) in $\mathcal{A}$.
The strategy of the proof for Theorem A is inspired by [11]. Under the assumption $F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_1) \leq \eta$, we obtain an algebraic decay for the mean oscillation of $u_\varepsilon$, that is

$$\int_{B_\rho} |u_\varepsilon - \int_{B_\rho} u_\varepsilon|^2 \leq C \rho^{2\mu}$$

for any $\rho \in (0, 1)$ and some positive constants $C$, $\mu$ that do not depend on $\rho$, $\varepsilon$. If the radius $\rho$ is large enough, i.e. $\rho \geq \varepsilon^\gamma$ for some suitable $\gamma \in (0, 1)$, we obtain an algebraic decay for $F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_\rho)$ as a function of $\rho$ by adapting analogous arguments for the limit functional $E_0$ (cf. Luckhaus’ partial regularity results in [37]); then, we deduce (2.12) via a suitable Poincaré inequality (Proposition 3.4). On the other hand, if $\rho \leq \varepsilon^\gamma$ we obtain (2.12) from the Euler-Lagrange equations for $E_\varepsilon$ (Proposition 3.1). The inequality (2.12) immediately implies the desired bound on the Hölder norm of $u_\varepsilon$, by Campanato embedding. Once Theorem A is proven, Theorem B follows, via the Ascoli-Arzelà theorem.

Remark 2.4. As we observed before, if we are interested in weaker modes of convergence for the minimisers (e.g., $L^2$-convergence), then we may replace (K4) and (K6) with the weaker condition that $g \in L^1(\mathbb{R}^3)$ and $g$ has finite second moment, as in [48]. However, (K4) and (K6) play a very important rôle for us; both of them are used in the proof of the estimate (2.12) for small radii, $\rho \leq \varepsilon^\gamma$. We do not know whether Theorems A and B remain true under weaker assumptions.

3 Preliminary results

3.1 The Euler-Lagrange equations

Throughout the paper, we denote by $C$ several constants that depend only on $\Omega$, $K$, $m$, $\psi_s$ and $u_{bd}$. We write $A \lesssim B$ as a short-hand for $A \leq CB$. We also define $g_\varepsilon(z) := \varepsilon^{-3} g(\varepsilon^{-1} z)$ for $z \in \mathbb{R}^3$ (where, we recall, $g(z)$ is the minimum eigenvalue of $K(z)$) and

$$(3.1) \quad \Lambda := \nabla \psi_s : \mathbb{Q} \to \mathbb{R}^m.$$ 

Proposition 3.1. Consider the free energy $E_\varepsilon$, given by (2.1), with $u = u_{bd}$ on $\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega$. Then there exists a minimiser $u_\varepsilon \in L^\infty(\Omega, \mathbb{Q})$ (identified with its extension by $u_{bd}$ to $\mathbb{R}^3$), and it satisfies the Euler-Lagrange equation,

$$(3.2) \quad \Lambda(u_\varepsilon(x)) = \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K_\varepsilon(x - y) u_\varepsilon(y) \, dy$$

for a.e. $x \in \Omega$.

Proof. By neglecting the additive constant in (2.1), and multiplying by $\varepsilon^2$, without loss of generality we may consider the functional

$$\mathcal{F}(u) := \int_{\Omega} \psi_s(u(x)) \, dx - \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K_\varepsilon(x - y) u(x) \cdot u(y) \, dx \, dy$$

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instead of $E_\epsilon$. To show existence, we use a direct method argument. First we show that the bilinear form admits a global lower bound. As $u_{bd} \in L^2(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathcal{Q})$ and $u$ admits uniform $L^\infty$-bounds on $\Omega$, we have that $u \in L^2(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathcal{Q})$, $\|u\|_{L^2(\mathbb{R}^3)}$ is bounded uniformly. We thus have the estimate that

$$
\int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} |K_\epsilon(x-y)u(x) \cdot u(y)| \, dx \, dy \\
\lesssim \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} |g_\epsilon(x-y)||u(x)||u(y)| \, dx \, dy \\
= \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \left( \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} |g_\epsilon(x-y)|^2 \, dx \right)^{\frac{1}{2}} \left( \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} |u(x)|^2 \, dx \right)^{\frac{1}{2}} \left( \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} |u(y)|^2 \, dy \right)^{\frac{1}{2}} \\
= \|g_\epsilon\|_{L^1(\mathbb{R}^3)} \|u\|_{L^2(\mathbb{R}^3)}^2 = \|g\|_{L^1(\mathbb{R}^3)} \|u\|_{L^2(\mathbb{R}^3)}^2
$$

(3.3)

The singular function $\psi_\epsilon$ admits a lower bound pointwise, hence the functional $\mathcal{F}$ admits a global lower bound. To show the admissible set is non empty, simply take $u(x) = u_0 \in \mathcal{Q}$ for all $x \in \Omega$, so that $\psi_\epsilon(u(x))$ is a non-infinite constant.

The uniform $L^\infty$ bounds on $u$ imply that we have $L^\infty$ weak-* compactness of a minimising sequence. As $\psi_\epsilon$ is strictly convex, we have weak-* lower semicontinuity of the entropic term. It suffices to show weak-* lower semicontinuity of the bilinear term. First we split the bilinear term into the “boundary” and “bulk” contributions. That is, we write $u = u_{bd} \chi_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega} + u \chi_\Omega$, where $\chi_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega}$ and $\chi_\Omega$ are the characteristic functions of $\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega$ and $\Omega$ respectively. As $K_\epsilon * (u_{bd} \chi_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega}) \in L^1(\Omega)$, if $u_j \rightharpoonup u$,

$$
\int_\Omega u_j(x) K_\epsilon * (u_{bd} \chi_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega})(x) \, dx \to \int_\Omega u(x) K_\epsilon * (u_{bd} \chi_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega})(x) \, dx.
$$

(3.4)

The second term requires a little more care. Following [17, Corollary 4.1], the map $L^\infty(\Omega) \ni u \mapsto K_\epsilon * (u \chi_\Omega)$ is $L^\infty$-to-$L^1$ compact if and only if the set $\{K_\epsilon(x - y) \chi_\Omega : x \in \Omega\}$ is relatively $L^1$-compact. This is immediate however as $\Omega$ is a bounded set and $K_\epsilon$ is integrable. Therefore the map

$$
u \mapsto \int_\Omega \int_\Omega K_\epsilon(x-y)u(x) \cdot u(y) \, dx \, dy
$$

is in fact continuous with the weak-* $L^\infty$ topology, and therefore the entire bilinear term is continuous also. Therefore the energy functional is lower semicontinuous and minimisers exist by the direct method.

To show that minimisers satisfy the Euler-Lagrange equation, we note that if $u$ has finite energy, then the measure of the set $\{x \in \Omega : u(x) \in \partial \mathcal{Q}\}$ is zero. In particular, we may define $U_\delta = \{x \in \Omega : \psi_\epsilon(u(x)) < 1/\delta\}$, and we have that

$$\Omega = \Gamma \cup \bigcup_{\delta > 0} U_\delta,$$

(3.6)
where $\Gamma$ is a null set. By Assumption (H4), for every $\delta > 0$, there exists some $\gamma > 0$ so that if $\psi_s(\tilde{u}) < 1/\delta$, then $\text{dist}(\tilde{u}, \partial Q) > \gamma$. In particular, for $\phi \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathbb{R}^m)$ supported on $U_{\delta}$ and $\eta$ sufficiently small, $u + \eta \psi_s$ is bounded away from $\partial Q$ on $U_{\delta}$. Therefore we may take variations without issue, as

$$
\frac{1}{\eta} (\mathcal{F}(u + \eta \phi) - \mathcal{F}(u)) = \int_{U_{\delta}} \frac{1}{\eta} (\psi_s(u(x) + \eta \phi(x)) - \psi_s(u(x))) \, dx
$$

$$
- \frac{1}{2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K_c(x-y) \cdot (2 \phi(x) \otimes u(y) + \eta \phi(x) \otimes \phi(y)) \, dx \, dy.
$$

Now we have no issue taking the limit as $\eta \to 0$, as $\psi_s$ is $C^2$ away from $\partial Q$, to give

$$
\lim_{\eta \to 0} \frac{1}{\eta} (\mathcal{F}(u + \eta \phi) - \mathcal{F}(u)) = \int_{U_{\delta}} \Lambda(u(x)) \cdot \phi(x) \, dx - \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K_c(x-y) u(y) \, dy \cdot \phi(x) \, dx
$$

$$
= \int_{U_{\delta}} \left( \Lambda(u(x)) - \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K_c(x-y) u(y) \, dy \right) \cdot \phi(x) \, dx,
$$

recalling that $\phi(x) = 0$ outside of $U_{\delta}$. As $\phi$ was arbitrary, this implies that $u$ satisfies

$$
\Lambda(u(x)) = \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K_c(x-y) u(y) \, dy
$$

on $U_{\delta}$, and since $\delta$ was arbitrary, this implies that $u$ satisfies the Euler-Lagrange equation outside of $\Gamma$, which is of measure zero.

The Euler-Lagrange equations are particularly useful when used in combination with the following property.

**Lemma 3.2.** The map $\Lambda: Q \to \mathbb{R}^m$ is invertible and its inverse is of class $C^1$. Moreover,

$$
\sup_{z \in \mathbb{R}^m} \| \nabla (\Lambda^{-1})(z) \| \leq c^{-1},
$$

where $c$ is the constant given by (H3), and

$$
|\Lambda(y)| \to +\infty \quad \text{as} \quad \text{dist}(y, \partial Q) \to 0.
$$

**Proof.** To prove (3.9), it suffices to note that as $\psi_s$ is a closed proper convex function which is $C^1$ on an open domain, so by applying classical results from convex analysis [44, Theorem 25.1, Theorem 26.1], we see that $\psi_s$ satisfies the property of essential smoothness, which implies (3.9). More so, as $\psi_s$ is also strictly convex on a bounded domain, this implies $\psi_s$ is a Legendre-type function which provides the results that $\Lambda(Q) = \mathbb{R}^m$ [44, Corollary 13.3.1], and that $\Lambda$ is a $C^0$ bijection from $Q \to \Lambda(Q)$ [44, Theorem 26.5]. The $C^1$ regularity of $\Lambda^{-1}$ follows immediately from the inverse function theorem, as $\psi_s$ is strongly convex.

The Euler-Lagrange equation (3.2) and Lemma 3.2 have important consequences in terms of regularity and “strict physicality” of minimisers — that is, the image of $u_\epsilon$ does not touch the boundary of the physically admissible set $Q$. 

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Proposition 3.3. Minimisers $u_\varepsilon$ of the functional $E_\varepsilon$ in the class $C^1$ are Lipschitz-continuous on $\Omega$, with $\|\nabla u_\varepsilon\|_{L^\infty(\Omega)} \lesssim \varepsilon^{-1}$. Moreover, there exists a number $\delta > 0$ such that for any $\varepsilon > 0$ and any $x \in \Omega$,\[(3.10) \quad \text{dist}(u_\varepsilon(x), \partial \Omega) \geq \delta.\]

Proof. The minimiser $u_\varepsilon$ takes values in the bounded set $\mathcal{Q}$ and hence, $\|u_\varepsilon\|_{L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3)} \leq C$, where the constant $C$ does not depend on $\varepsilon$. Moreover, $\|K_\varepsilon\|_{L^1(\mathbb{R}^3)} = \|K\|_{L^1(\mathbb{R}^3)} < +\infty$. Then, by applying Young’s inequality to (3.2), we obtain\[
\|\Lambda(u_\varepsilon)\|_{L^\infty(\Omega)} \leq \|K_\varepsilon\|_{L^1(\mathbb{R}^3)} \|u_\varepsilon\|_{L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3)} \leq C.
\]

On the other hand, we have $|\Lambda(z)| \to +\infty$ as $z \to \partial \Omega$ by (3.9) and hence, (3.10) follows. Since we have assumed that $K \in W^{1,1}(\mathbb{R}^3, \text{Sym}(m))$, from the Euler-Lagrange equation (3.2) we deduce\[
\|\nabla(\Lambda \circ u_\varepsilon)\|_{L^\infty(\Omega)} = \|\nabla K_\varepsilon * u_\varepsilon\|_{L^\infty(\Omega)} \leq \varepsilon^{-1} \|\nabla K\|_{L^1(\Omega)} \|u_\varepsilon\|_{L^\infty(\Omega)} < +\infty.
\]

By Lemma 3.2 we conclude that $\|\nabla u_\varepsilon\|_{L^\infty(\Omega)} \lesssim \varepsilon^{-1}$. \qed

3.2 A Poincaré-type inequality for $F_\varepsilon$

The goal of this section is to prove the following inequality on $F_\varepsilon$. We recall that the functional $F_\varepsilon$ is defined in (2.10).

Proposition 3.4. There exists $\varepsilon_1 > 0$ such that, for any $u \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathbb{R}^m)$, any $\rho > 0$, any $x_0 \in \mathbb{R}^3$ and any $\varepsilon \in (0, \varepsilon_1\rho)$, there holds\[
\int_{B_{\rho/2}(x_0)} \left| u - \int_{B_{\rho/2}(x_0)} u \right|^2 \lesssim \rho^{-1} F_\varepsilon(u, B_\rho(x_0)).
\]

To simplify the proof of Proposition 3.4 we will take advantage of the scaling properties of $F_\varepsilon$: if $u_\rho : B_1 \to \mathbb{R}^m$ is defined by $u_\rho(x) := u(\rho x + x_0)$ for $x \in B_1$, then a change of variables gives\[(3.11) \quad \rho^{-1} F_\varepsilon(u, B_\rho(x_0)) = F_{\varepsilon/\rho}(u_\rho, B_1).
\]

In the proof of Proposition 3.4 we will adapt arguments from [38]. By assumption (K), there exist positive numbers $\rho_1 < \rho_2$, $k$ such that $g \geq k$ a.e. on $B_{\rho_2} \setminus B_{\rho_1}$. Let $\varphi \in C^\infty_c(B_{\rho_2} \setminus B_{\rho_1})$ be a non-negative, radial function (i.e. $\varphi(z) = \tilde{\varphi}(|z|)$ for $z \in \mathbb{R}^3$) such that $\int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \varphi(z) \, dz = 1$. Since $g$ is bounded away from zero on the support of $\varphi$, there holds\[
\varphi + |\nabla \varphi| \leq C g \quad \text{pointwise a.e. on } \mathbb{R}^3,
\]

for some constant $C$ that depends on $g$ and $\varphi$; however, $\varphi$ is fixed once and for all, and so is $C$. We define $\varphi_\varepsilon(z) := \varepsilon^{-3} \varphi(\varepsilon^{-1} z)$ for any $z \in \mathbb{R}^3$ and $\varepsilon > 0$. Then, $\varphi_\varepsilon \in C^\infty_c(\mathbb{R}^3)$ is non-negative, even, satisfies $\int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \varphi_\varepsilon(z) \, dz = 1$ and\[(3.12) \quad \varphi_\varepsilon + \varepsilon |\nabla \varphi_\varepsilon| \leq C g_\varepsilon \quad \text{pointwise a.e. on } \mathbb{R}^3.
\]
Lemma 3.5. There exists \( \varepsilon_2 > 0 \) such that, for any \( u \in L^\infty(B_1, \mathbb{R}^m) \) and any \( \varepsilon \in (0, \varepsilon_2] \), there holds

\[
\int_{B_{1/2}} |\nabla (\varphi_\varepsilon * u)|^2 \lesssim \varepsilon^{-2} \int_{B_1 \times B_1} K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot (u(x) - u(y)) \otimes (u(x) - u(y)) \, dx \, dy.
\]

Proof. We adapt the arguments from [48, Lemma 2.1 and Proposition 2.1]. We define

\[
I(y, z) := \int_{B_{1/2}} \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(x-z) \, dx \quad \text{for } y, z \in \mathbb{R}^3.
\]

We express the gradient of \( \varphi_\varepsilon * u \) as \( \nabla (\varphi_\varepsilon * u) = (\nabla \varphi_\varepsilon) * u \). By applying the identity \( 2a \cdot b = -|a - b|^2 + |a|^2 + |b|^2 \), we obtain

\[
\int_{B_{1/2}} |\nabla (\varphi_\varepsilon * u)(x)|^2 \, dx = -\frac{1}{2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \times \mathbb{R}^3} |u(y) - u(z)|^2 I(y, z) \, dy \, dz =: I_1.
\]

We first consider the term \( I_2 \). Since \( \varphi_\varepsilon \) is compactly supported, we have \( \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(z) \, dz = 0 \). Therefore,

\[
I_2 = \frac{1}{2} \int_{B_{1/2} \times \mathbb{R}^3} |u(y)|^2 \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot \left( \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(x-z) \, dz \right) \, dx \, dy = 0,
\]

and likewise \( I_3 = 0 \). Now, we consider \( I_1 \). The gradient \( \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon \) is supported in a ball of radius \( C\varepsilon \), where \( C \) is an \( \varepsilon \)-independent constant. This implies

\[
I_1 = \frac{1}{2} \int_{B_{1/2} \times B_{1/2}} |u(y) - u(z)|^2 \left( \int_{B_{1/2}} \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(x-z) \, dx \right) \, dy \, dz \\
\leq \int_{B_{1/2} \times B_{1/2}} |u(y) - u(x)|^2 \left| \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(x-y) \right| \left| \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(x-z) \right| \, dx \, dy \, dz \\
+ \int_{B_{1/2} \times B_{1/2}} |u(x) - u(z)|^2 \left| \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(x-y) \right| \left| \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(x-z) \right| \, dx \, dy \, dz \\
\leq 2 \| \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon \|_{L^1(\mathbb{R}^3)} \int_{B_{1/2} \times B_{1/2}} |u(y) - u(x)|^2 \left| \nabla \varphi_\varepsilon(y-x) \right| \, dx \, dy.
\]

Thanks to \( (3.12) \), we obtain

\[
I_1 \lesssim \varepsilon^{-2} \| g \|_{L^1(\mathbb{R}^3)} \int_{B_{1/2} \times B_{1/2}} |u(y) - u(x)|^2 g_\varepsilon(y-x) \, dx \, dy.
\]

For \( \varepsilon \) sufficiently small we have \( 1/2 + C\varepsilon < 1 \), and the lemma follows. \( \square \)
Given two sets \( A \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3, A' \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3 \), we write \( A \subset \subset A' \) when the closure of \( A \) is contained in \( A' \).

**Lemma 3.6.** Let \( A, A' \) be open sets such that \( A \subset \subset A' \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3 \). Then, there exists \( \varepsilon_3 = \varepsilon_3(A, A') \) such that, for any \( u \in L^\infty(A', \mathbb{R}^m) \) and any \( \varepsilon \in (0, \varepsilon_3] \), there holds

\[
\int_A |u - \varphi_\varepsilon * u|^2 \leq \int_{A' \times A'} K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot (u(x) - u(y))^2 \, dx \, dy.
\]

**Proof.** Since \( \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \varphi_\varepsilon(z) \, dz = 1 \), we have

\[
I := \int_A |u(x) - (\varphi_\varepsilon * u)(x)|^2 \, dx = \int_A \left( \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \varphi_\varepsilon(x-y) (u(x) - u(y)) \, dy \right)^2 \, dx.
\]

We apply Jensen inequality with respect to the probability measure \( \varphi_\varepsilon(x-y) \, dy \):

\[
I \leq \int_A \left( \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \varphi_\varepsilon(x-y) |u(x) - u(y)|^2 \, dy \right) \, dx.
\]

Because the support of \( \varphi_\varepsilon \) is contained in a ball of radius \( C\varepsilon \), where \( C \) is an \( \varepsilon \)-independent constant, the integrand is equal to zero if \( x \in A, \, \text{dist}(x, A) > C\varepsilon \). By applying (3.12), we obtain

\[
I \leq \int_{A \times \{ y \in \mathbb{R}^3 : \text{dist}(y, A) \leq C\varepsilon \}} g_\varepsilon(x-y) |u(x) - u(y)|^2 \, dx \, dy
\]

and, if \( \varepsilon \leq C^{-1} \text{dist}(A, \partial A') \), the lemma follows. \( \square \)

**Proof of Proposition 3.4.** Due to the scaling property (3.11), it suffices to prove that

\[
(3.13) \quad \int_{B_{1/2}} |u - \bar{u}_{B_{1/2}}|^2 \leq F_{\varepsilon/\rho}(u, B_1)
\]

for any \( u \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathbb{R}^m) \) and any \( \varepsilon, \rho \) with \( \varepsilon/\rho \) sufficiently small. The triangle inequality and the elementary inequality \((a+b+c)^2 \leq 3(a^2 + b^2 + c^2)\) imply

\[
\int_{B_{1/2}} |u - \bar{u}_{B_{1/2}}|^2 \leq 6 \int_{B_{1/2}} |u - \varphi_{\varepsilon/\rho} * u|^2 + 3 \int_{B_{1/2}} |\varphi_{\varepsilon/\rho} * u - \bar{u}_{B_{1/2}}|^2 + \int_{B_{1/2}} |\nabla(\varphi_{\varepsilon/\rho} * u)|^2.
\]

Thanks to the Poincaré inequality, we obtain

\[
\int_{B_{1/2}} |u - \bar{u}_{B_{1/2}}|^2 \leq C \int_{B_{1/2}} (|u - \varphi_{\varepsilon/\rho} * u|^2 + |(\varepsilon/\rho)^2 + 1 \rangle |F_{\varepsilon/\rho}(u, B_1),
\]

so (3.13) follows. \( \square \)
3.3 Localised $\Gamma$-convergence for the non-local term

The $\Gamma$-convergence of the functional $E_\varepsilon$, as $\varepsilon \to 0$, was studied in [48]. In this section, we adapt the arguments of [48] to prove a localised $\Gamma$-convergence result. We focus on the interaction part of the free energy only, since this is all we need in the proof of Theorem A. We denote by $F^\text{nl}_\varepsilon$ the non-local interaction part of $F_\varepsilon$, given by

\[
F^\text{nl}_\varepsilon(u, G) := E_\varepsilon(u, G) - \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_G \psi_b(u(x)) \, dx
\]

\[
= \frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{G \times G} K_\varepsilon(x - y) \cdot (u(x) - u(y)) \otimes^2 \, dx \, dy
\]

for any $u \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q)$ and any Borel set $G \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3$.

**Proposition 3.7.** Let $\rho > 0$, $x_0 \in \mathbb{R}^3$, and let $v_\varepsilon \in L^2(B_\rho(x_0), \mathbb{R}^m)$, $v_0 \in H^1(B_\rho(x_0), \mathbb{R}^m)$ be such that $v_\varepsilon \to v_0$ strongly in $L^2(B_\rho(x_0))$ as $\varepsilon \to 0$. Then, for any open set $G \subseteq B_\rho(x_0)$ we have

\[
\int_G L\nabla v_0 \cdot \nabla v_0 \leq \liminf_{\varepsilon \to 0} F^\text{nl}_\varepsilon(v_\varepsilon, G)
\]

**Proposition 3.8.** Let $\rho > 0$, $x_0 \in \mathbb{R}^3$. Let $v_\varepsilon \in H^1(B_\rho(x_0), \mathbb{R}^m)$, $v_0 \in H^1(B_\rho(x_0), \mathbb{R}^m)$ be such that $v_\varepsilon \to v_0$ strongly in $H^1(B_\rho(x_0))$ as $\varepsilon \to 0$. Then

\[
\limsup_{\varepsilon \to 0} F^\text{nl}_\varepsilon(v_\varepsilon, B_\rho(x_0)) \leq \int_{B_\rho(x_0)} L\nabla v_0 \cdot \nabla v_0
\]

In the proofs of Proposition 3.7 and 3.8, we will use the following notation. Given a vector $w \in \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \{0\}$ and a function $u$ defined on a subset of $\mathbb{R}^3$, we define the difference quotient

\[
D_w u(x) := \frac{u(x + w) - u(x)}{|w|}
\]

for any $x$ in the domain of $u$ such that $x + w$ belongs to the domain of $u$. If $|w| \leq h$, $u \in H^1(B_{\rho + h})$, and $| \cdot |_*$ is any seminorm on $\mathbb{R}^m$, then

\[
\int_{B_{\rho}} |D_w u(x)|_*^2 \, dx \leq \int_{B_{\rho + h}} |(\hat{w} \cdot \nabla)u(x)|_*^2 \, dx
\]

where $\hat{w} := w/|w|$. This follows from the same technique as, e.g., [21] Lemma 7.23, for the case in which we have the standard Euclidean norm. However, we realise the proof only relies on the convexity of the seminorm, and no further structure. For convenience, we give the proof of Proposition 3.8 first.

**Proof of Proposition 3.8.** We assume that $x_0 = 0$. Using a reflection across the boundary of $B_\rho$ and a cut-off function, we define $v_\varepsilon$ and $v_0$ on $\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_\rho$, in such a way that $v_\varepsilon$
$H^1(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathbb{R}^m)$, $v_0 \in H^1(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathbb{R}^m)$ and $v_\varepsilon \to v_0$ strongly in $H^1(\mathbb{R}^3)$. Let $t > 0$ be a parameter. We have

$$
\frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{B_{\rho}} \int_{B_{\rho}} K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot (v_\varepsilon(x) - v_\varepsilon(y)) \otimes^2 \, dx \, dy
\leq \frac{1}{4} \int_{B_{\rho}} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} |z|^2 K(z) \cdot (D_{\varepsilon z} v_\varepsilon(x)) \otimes^2 \, dz \, dx
= \frac{1}{4} \int_{B_{\rho}} \int_{B_{\rho}^\perp} |z|^2 K(z) \cdot (D_{\varepsilon z} v_\varepsilon(x)) \otimes^2 \, dz \, dx + \frac{1}{4} \int_{B_{\rho}} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{\rho}^\perp} |z|^2 K(z) \cdot (D_{\varepsilon z} v_\varepsilon(x)) \otimes^2 \, dz \, dx.
$$

To estimate the first integral at the right-hand side, we exchange the order of integration and, for any $z$, we apply (3.16) to the seminorm $|\xi|^2 := |z|^2 K(z) : \xi \otimes \xi$; for the second integral, we apply (3.15):

$$
(3.17)
\frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{B_{\rho}} \int_{B_{\rho}} K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot (v_\varepsilon(x) - v_\varepsilon(y)) \otimes^2 \, dx \, dy
\leq \frac{1}{4} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \int_{B_{\rho+t}} K(z) \cdot ((z \cdot \nabla) v_\varepsilon(x)) \otimes^2 \, dz \, dx + C \int_{B_{\rho}} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{\rho}^\perp} g(z)|z|^2 |D_{\varepsilon z} v_\varepsilon(x)|^2 \, dz \, dx
\leq \int_{B_{\rho+t}} L\nabla v_\varepsilon(x) \cdot \nabla v_\varepsilon(x) \, dx + C \int_{B_{\rho}} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{\rho}^\perp} g(z)|z|^2 |D_{\varepsilon z} v_\varepsilon(x)|^2 \, dz \, dx.
$$

We now estimate the latter summand independently. For $z \in \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B^\perp_{\rho}, |\varepsilon z|^2 > t^2$, so

$$
|D_{\varepsilon z} v_\varepsilon(x)|^2 \leq \frac{1}{t^2} |v_\varepsilon(x + \varepsilon z) - v_\varepsilon(x)|^2 \leq \frac{2}{t^2} \left(|v_\varepsilon(x + \varepsilon z)|^2 + |v_\varepsilon(x)|^2\right)
$$

Therefore, by applying Fubini’s theorem, we may estimate

$$
(3.18)
\int_{B_{\rho}} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{\rho}^\perp} g(z)|z|^2 |D_{\varepsilon z} v_\varepsilon(x)|^2 \, dz \, dx \leq \frac{4 \|v_\varepsilon\|^2_{L^2(\mathbb{R}^3)}}{t^2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{\rho}^\perp} g(z)|z|^2 \, dz
$$

As $g$ has finite second moment and $\|v_\varepsilon\|_{L^2(\mathbb{R}^3)} \leq C$, for fixed $t$ we must have that

$$
(3.19)
\lim_{\varepsilon \to 0} \frac{2 \|v_\varepsilon\|^2_{L^2(\mathbb{R}^3)}}{t^2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{\rho}^\perp} g(z)|z|^2 \, dz = 0.
$$

Combining (3.17), (3.18) and (3.19) gives

$$
\limsup_{\varepsilon \to 0} \frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{B_{\rho}} \int_{B_{\rho}} K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot (v_\varepsilon(x) - v_\varepsilon(y)) \otimes^2 \, dy \, dx \leq \limsup_{\varepsilon \to 0} \int_{B_{\rho+t}} L\nabla v_\varepsilon(x) \cdot \nabla v_\varepsilon(x) \, dx.
$$

As $v_\varepsilon \to v_0$ in $H^1(\mathbb{R}^3)$, this implies

$$
\lim_{\varepsilon \to 0} \int_{B_{\rho+t}} L\nabla v_\varepsilon(x) \cdot \nabla v_\varepsilon(x) \, dx = \int_{B_{\rho+t}} L\nabla v_0(x) \cdot \nabla v_0(x) \, dx.
$$
Therefore we have
\[
\limsup_{\varepsilon \to 0} \frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{B_{\rho}} \int_{B_{\rho}} K_{\varepsilon}(x-y) \cdot (v_{\varepsilon}(x) - v_{\varepsilon}(y)) \, dy \, dx \leq \int_{B_{\rho+t}} L \nabla v_0(x) \cdot \nabla v_0(x) \, dx,
\]
and passing to the limit as \( t \to 0 \) in the right-hand side gives the desired result. \( \square \)

**Proof of Proposition 3.27** Again, we assume that \( x_0 = 0 \). Without loss of generality, we may assume that
\[
\liminf_{\varepsilon \to 0} \frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{G} K_{\varepsilon}(x-y) \cdot (v_{\varepsilon}(x) - v_{\varepsilon}(y)) \, dy \, dx < +\infty,
\]
otherwise there is nothing to prove. Up to extraction of a (non-relabelled) subsequence, we may also assume that the left-hand side of (3.20) is actually a limit. Let \( G \subseteq B_{\rho} \) be open and \( G' \subset \subset G \). Then we may write that
\[
\frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{G} K_{\varepsilon}(x-y) \cdot (v_{\varepsilon}(x) - v_{\varepsilon}(y)) \, dy \, dx
\geq \frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{G'} \int_{G} K_{\varepsilon}(x-y) \cdot (v_{\varepsilon}(x) - v_{\varepsilon}(y)) \, dy \, dx
= \frac{1}{4} \int_{G'} \int_{G} |z|^2 K(z) \cdot (D_{\varepsilon z} v_{\varepsilon}(x)) \, dy \, dz.
\]

Let \( G^c := \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus G \) and \( \delta := \text{dist}(G', G^c) > 0 \). We note that
\[
\left| \int_{G'} \int_{G} |z|^2 K(z) \cdot (D_{\varepsilon z} v_{\varepsilon}(x)) \, dy \, dz \right| \lesssim \int_{G'} \int_{B_{\delta}^c} g(z)|z|^2 |D_{\varepsilon z} v_{\varepsilon}(x)| \, dz \, dx,
\]
which by previous estimates (see (3.18), (3.19)) we have seen converges to zero as \( \varepsilon \to 0 \). This means
\[
\liminf_{\varepsilon \to 0} \int_{G'} \int_{G} |z|^2 K(z) \cdot (D_{\varepsilon z} v_{\varepsilon}(x)) \, dy \, dz
= \liminf_{\varepsilon \to 0} \int_{G'} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} |z|^2 K(z) \cdot (D_{\varepsilon z} v_{\varepsilon}(x)) \, dy \, dz
\]
Furthermore, we note this can be written as an \( L^2 \) norm, by defining \( w_{\varepsilon} : G' \times \mathbb{R}^3 \to \mathbb{R}^m \)
by \( w_{\varepsilon}(z, x) := |z| K_{\varepsilon}(z) D_{\varepsilon z} v_{\varepsilon}(x) \). Thanks to (3.20), we immediately see that \( w_{\varepsilon} \) is \( L^2 \)
bounded, so must admit an \( L^2 \)-weakly converging subsequence \( w_j := w_{\varepsilon_j} \) with \( \varepsilon_j \to 0 \) and \( w_j \) has weak-\( L^2 \) limit \( w_0 \). Furthermore, we take
\[
\liminf_{\varepsilon \to 0} \int_{G'} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} |z|^2 K(z) \cdot (D_{\varepsilon z} v_{\varepsilon}(x)) \, dy \, dz = \liminf_{j \to \infty} \|w_{j}\|_{L^2(G' \times \mathbb{R}^3)}^2 \geq \|w_0\|_{L^2(G' \times \mathbb{R}^3)}^2.
\]
It remains to identify the limit \( w_0 \). We may do this by integrating against test functions.

Let \( \phi \in C_c^\infty(G' \times \mathbb{R}^3) \). There exists some \( R_0 > 0 \) such that, for any \((y, z) \in \mathbb{R}^3 \times \mathbb{R}^3\)
with $|z| > R_0$, $\phi(y, z) = 0$. Furthermore, there exists some $\delta > 0$ so that if $\text{dist}(y, (G')^c) < \delta$, then $\phi(y, z) = 0$. In particular, if $\varepsilon_j < \frac{\delta}{R_0}$ and $(x - \varepsilon_j z, z) \in \text{supp}(\phi)$, then $x \in G'$. Therefore
\[
\langle w_j, \phi \rangle = \int_{G'} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \phi(x, z) |z| K^\frac{1}{2}(z) D_{\varepsilon_j} v_{\varepsilon_j}(x) \, dz \, dx \\
= \frac{1}{\varepsilon_j} \int_{G'} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \left( \phi(x - \varepsilon_j z, z) - \phi(x, z) \right) K^\frac{1}{2}(z) v_{\varepsilon_j}(x) \, dz \, dx,
\]
and we may exploit the fact that
\[
\frac{1}{\varepsilon_j} \left( \phi(x - \varepsilon_j z, z) - \phi(x, z) \right) \to (-z \cdot \nabla_x) \phi(x, z) \quad \text{uniformly on } G' \times \mathbb{R}^3 \text{ as } j \to +\infty,
\]
with the assumed $L^2$ convergence of $v_{\varepsilon_j} \to v_0$, to give that
\[
\lim_{j \to \infty} \langle w_j, \phi \rangle = \lim_{j \to \infty} \frac{1}{\varepsilon_j} \int_{G'} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \left( \phi(x - \varepsilon_j z, z) - \phi(x, z) \right) K^\frac{1}{2}(z) v_{\varepsilon_j}(x) \, dz \, dx, \\
= \int_{G'} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} (-z \cdot \nabla_x) \phi(x, z) K^\frac{1}{2}(z) v_0(x) \, dz \, dx \\
= \int_{G'} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \phi(x, z) K^\frac{1}{2}(z) (z \cdot \nabla) v_0(x) \, dz \, dx = \langle w_0, \phi \rangle.
\]
Therefore $w_0(x, z) = K^\frac{1}{2}(z) (z \cdot \nabla) v_0(x)$, and by (3.21), (3.22), (3.23) we have
\[
\liminf_{\varepsilon \to 0} \frac{1}{4 \varepsilon^2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \int_{G'} K_\varepsilon(x - y) \cdot (v_\varepsilon(x) - v_\varepsilon(y)) \otimes 2 \, dy \, dx \\
\geq \frac{1}{4} \liminf_{j \to \infty} \|w_j\|_{L^2(G' \times \mathbb{R}^3)}^2 \\
\geq \frac{1}{4} \|w_0\|_{L^2(G' \times \mathbb{R}^3)}^2 \\
= \frac{1}{4} \int_{G'} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K(z) \cdot \left( (z \cdot \nabla) v_0(x) \right) \otimes 2 \, dz \, dx \\
= \frac{1}{4} \int_{G'} L \nabla v_0(x) \cdot \nabla v_0(x) \, dx.
\]
As the set $G' \subset G$ was arbitrary, by monotonicity the lower bound (3.15) holds. 

3.4 Other auxiliary results

In this section, we collect some auxiliary results that will be useful in the proof of Theorem A. Our first result is a remark on the kernel $K$, which will be used repeatedly. We will use the notation $a_\varepsilon = o(b_\varepsilon)$ if there exists a positive sequence $c_\varepsilon$, depending on $K$ and $Q$ only, such that $|a_\varepsilon| \leq c_\varepsilon |b_\varepsilon|$ and $c_\varepsilon \to 0$ as $\varepsilon \to 0$. 

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Lemma 3.9. For any $\sigma > 0$, there holds
\[
\sup_{x \in \mathbb{R}^3} \left( \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{\{y \in \mathbb{R}^3: |x-y| \geq \sigma\}} g_\varepsilon(x-y) \, dy \right) = o\left(\frac{\varepsilon^{q-2}}{\sigma^2}\right)
\]
where $q > 7/2$ is the number given by Assumption (K4).

Proof. By the change of variable $y = x + \varepsilon z$, we obtain
\[
\frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{\{y \in \mathbb{R}^3: |x-y| \geq \sigma\}} g_\varepsilon(x-y) \, dy = 1 \int_{\{|z| \geq \sigma/\varepsilon\}} g(z) \, |z|^q \, dz \leq \frac{\varepsilon^{q-2}}{\sigma^q} \int_{\{|z| \geq \sigma/\varepsilon\}} g(z) \, |z|^q \, dz
\]
By assumption (K4), $g$ has finite moment of order $q$, so the lemma follows. \hfill \Box

Given a function $u \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q)$ and Borel sets $G \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3, G' \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3$, we define
\[
(3.24) \quad \Gamma_\varepsilon(u, G, G') := \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{G \times G'} K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot (u(x) - u(y)) \otimes^2 \, dx \, dy
\]
In the terminology introduced by Alberti and Bellettini [1], $\Gamma_\varepsilon$ is called the ‘locality defect’. Indeed, if $G$ and $G'$ are disjoint and $F_{nl}^\varepsilon$ is defined as in (3.14), then
\[
(3.25) \quad F_{nl}^\varepsilon(u, G \cup G') = F_{nl}^\varepsilon(u, G) + F_{nl}^\varepsilon(u, G') + \Gamma_\varepsilon(u, G, G')
\]
because $K$ is assumed to be an even function (by (K2)). Moreover, for any $G \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3, G' \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3$ we have $\Gamma_\varepsilon(u, G, G') = \Gamma_\varepsilon(u, G', G)$. Given a set $G \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3$ and a number $\sigma > 0$, we define
\[
(3.26) \quad \partial_\sigma G := \{x \in \Omega: \text{dist}(x, \partial G) < \sigma\}.
\]
Our next result is an estimate for the ‘locality defect’ $\Gamma_\varepsilon$.

Lemma 3.10. Let $u \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q)$, let $G \subseteq G' \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3$ be bounded Borel sets, and let $\sigma > 0$. Then,
\[
\Gamma_\varepsilon(u, G, G' \setminus G) \lesssim F_{nl}^\varepsilon(u, \partial_\sigma G) + o\left(\frac{\varepsilon^{q-2}}{\sigma^q}\right) \inf_{\zeta \in \mathbb{R}^m} \|u - \zeta\|^2_{L^2(G')}
\]
where $q > 7/2$ is given by (K4).

Proof. If two points $x \in G, y \in G' \setminus G$ satisfy $|x-y| \leq \sigma$, then necessarily $x \in \partial_\sigma G, y \in \partial_\sigma G$. Then,
\[
\Gamma_\varepsilon(u, G, G' \setminus G) \leq 2F_{nl}^\varepsilon(u, \partial_\sigma G)
\]
\[
+ \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\{x \in G', y \in G': |x-y| \geq \sigma\}} K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot (u(x) - u(y)) \otimes^2 \, dx \, dy
\]
\[
=: I
\]
We need to estimate the term $I$. Let $\zeta \in \mathbb{R}^m$ be a constant. The inequality $|u(x) - u(y)|^2 \leq 2|u(x) - \zeta|^2 + 2|u(y) - \zeta|^2$, and the assumption that $K$ is even (see (K2)), imply

\begin{equation}
I \lesssim \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\{x \in G', y \in G' : |x-y| \geq \sigma\}} g_\varepsilon(x-y) |u(x) - u(y)|^2 \, dx \, dy \label{3.27}
\end{equation}

Then, by Lemma 3.9, we obtain

$$I \lesssim \frac{\varepsilon^{q-2}}{\sigma^q} \inf_{\zeta \in \mathbb{R}^m} \|u - \zeta\|^2_{L^2(G')}$$

and the lemma follows.

\textbf{Lemma 3.11.} Let $u \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q)$, $\xi \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q)$, let $G \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3$ be a bounded Borel set such that $u = \xi$ a.e. in $\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus G$, and let $\sigma > 0$. Then,

$$\Gamma_\varepsilon(\xi, G, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus G) - \Gamma_\varepsilon(u, G, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus G) \lesssim F^{nl}_\varepsilon(\xi, \partial_\sigma G) + o\left(\frac{\varepsilon^{q-2}}{\sigma^q}\right) |G|^{1/2} \|\xi - u\|_{L^2(G)}$$

where $q > 7/2$ is given by (K4).

\textbf{Remark 3.1.} The right-hand side of Lemma 3.11 contains the $L^2$-norm of $\xi - u$, not the $L^2$-norm squared. This loss of a power will be responsible for additional technicalities later on in the proof (see Lemma 4.3 below).

\textbf{Proof of Lemma 3.11.} Let $H_\sigma := \{(x, y) \in G \times (\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus G) : |x-y| \geq \sigma\}$. We have

$$G \times (\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus G) \subseteq (\partial_\sigma G \times \partial_\sigma G) \cup H_\sigma$$

and hence,

$$\Gamma_\varepsilon(\xi, G, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus G) - \Gamma_\varepsilon(u, G, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus G) \leq 2F^{nl}_\varepsilon(\xi, \partial_\sigma G) + \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{H_\sigma} K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot ((\xi(x) - u(y)) \otimes 2 - (u(x) - u(y)) \otimes 2) \, dx \, dy \quad \overset{=I}{=}$$

Using the identity $K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot (a \otimes 2 - b \otimes 2) = K_\varepsilon(x-y)(a-b) \cdot (a+b)$, we obtain

$$I = \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{H_\sigma} K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot ((\xi(x) - u(x)) \cdot (\xi(x) + u(x) - 2u(y)) \, dx \, dy$$

Since $u, \xi$ take their values in the bounded set $Q$, we deduce

$$I \lesssim \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{H_\sigma} g_\varepsilon(x-y) |\xi(x) - u(x)| \, dx \, dy \lesssim \sup_{x \in G} \left(\frac{1}{\varepsilon} \int_{\{y \in \mathbb{R}^3 : |x-y| \geq \sigma\}} g_\varepsilon(x-y) \, dy\right) \|\xi - u\|_{L^1(G)}$$

By applying Lemma 3.9 and the Hölder inequality at the right-hand side, the result follows.
Lemma 3.12. Let $G \subset \mathbb{R}^3$ be a Borel set. Let $u_1 \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q), u_2 \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q)$. Then,

$$F_{n\varepsilon}^{\text{nl}}(u_2, G) \lesssim F_{n\varepsilon}^{\text{nl}}(u_1, G) + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \| u_2 - u_1 \|^2_{L^2(G)}$$

Proof. By writing $u_2(x) - u_2(y) = (u_2(x) - u_1(x)) + (u_2(x) - u_1(y)) + (u_1(y) - u_2(y))$, and using that $K$ is even (by assumption (K2)), we obtain

$$F_{n\varepsilon}^{\text{nl}}(u_2, G) \lesssim F_{n\varepsilon}^{\text{nl}}(u_1, G) + \frac{2}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{G \times G} K_{\varepsilon}(x - y) \cdot (u_2(x) - u_1(x))^\otimes_2 \, dx \, dy$$

and the lemma follows. \[\square\]

Lemma 3.13. Let $G \subset\subset G' \subset\subset \mathbb{R}^3$ be open sets and $\sigma \in (0, \text{dist}(G, \partial G'))$. Then, for any $u \in H^1(G', Q)$, we have

$$F_{n\varepsilon}^{\text{nl}}(u, G) \lesssim \int_{G \cup \partial_x G} |\nabla u|^2 + o\left(\frac{\varepsilon^{q-2}}{\sigma^q}\right) \inf_{\zeta \in \mathbb{R}^m} \| u - \zeta \|^2_{L^2(G)}$$

where $q > 7/2$ is the number given by (K4).

Proof. This lemma is a variant of Proposition 3.8. We have

$$F_{n\varepsilon}^{\text{nl}}(u, G) = \frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{\{x \in G, y \in G : |x - y| \leq \sigma\}} K_{\varepsilon}(x - y) \cdot (u(x) - u(y))^\otimes_2 \, dx \, dy$$

$$+ \frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{\{x \in G, y \in G : |x - y| > \sigma\}} K_{\varepsilon}(x - y) \cdot (u(x) - u(y))^\otimes_2 \, dx \, dy =: I_1 + I_2$$

For the first term $I_1$, we may repeat the very same argument from the proof of Proposition 3.8 which gives

$$I_1 \lesssim \frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{G \cup \partial_x G} |\nabla u|^2$$

On the other hand, the estimate (3.27) in the proof of Lemma 3.10 shows that

$$I_2 \lesssim o\left(\frac{\varepsilon^{q-2}}{\sigma^q}\right) \inf_{\zeta \in \mathbb{R}^m} \| u - \zeta \|^2_{L^2(G)}$$

The next lemma is an estimate on the potential $\psi_{\delta}$.

Lemma 3.14. For any $\delta > 0$, there exists a constant $C_\delta > 0$ such that, for any $y_1 \in Q, y_2 \in Q$ with $\text{dist}(y_2, \partial Q) \geq \delta$, we have

$$\psi_{\delta}(y_2) \leq C_\delta \left(\psi_{\delta}(y_1) + |y_1 - y_2|^2\right), \quad (3.28)$$

Proof. The assumption (H6) implies, via a Taylor expansion and a compactness argument, that there exist $\gamma > 0, \kappa_1 > 0, \kappa_2 > 0$ so that if $\text{dist}(y, \mathcal{N}) < \gamma$, then

$$\kappa_1 \text{dist}^2(y, \mathcal{N}) \leq \psi_{\delta}(y) \leq \kappa_2 \text{dist}^2(y, \mathcal{N}), \quad (3.29)$$

To prove the result we exhaust three cases,
Then, there exists a map crucially depends on the non-degeneracy assumption \( H \in \mathbb{R} \) and smooth, and the arguments of \([12]\) carry over. Identically, Lemma 3.15

In the case of (1), we have that such \( y_1 \) satisfy \( \psi_b(y_1) > c_1 \) for a constant \( c_1 > 0 \) (that depends on \( \gamma \)), as \( y_1 \) is bounded away from the minimising manifold. We furthermore have that \( \psi_b(y_2) \leq c_2 \) because \( \text{dist}(y_2, \partial Q) > \delta \) (and the constant \( c_2 \) will depend on \( \delta \)). Therefore the inequality (3.28) holds trivially with \( C_\delta = \frac{c_2}{\delta^2} \).

In the case of (2), since \( \text{dist}(y_1, \mathcal{M}) < \frac{1}{2} \gamma \), \( \text{dist}(y_2, \mathcal{M}) \geq \gamma \), we must have \( |y_1 - y_2|^2 \geq \frac{1}{4} \gamma^2 \), then we use the upper bound on \( \psi_b(y_2) \) as before.

In the case of (3), we note that since \( y_1, y_2 \) are both sufficiently close to \( \mathcal{M} \),

\[
\psi_b(y_2) \lesssim \text{dist}^2(y_2, \mathcal{M}) \lesssim \text{dist}^2(y_1, \mathcal{M}) + |y_1 - y_2|^2 \lesssim \psi_b(y_1) + |y_1 - y_2|^2.
\]

Finally, we conclude this section with interpolation (or extension) results. The first one is a classical interpolation result for \( H^1 \)-maps; it constructs a suitable map in an annulus, with prescribed values on the boundary.

**Lemma 3.15** ([37] [12]). For any \( M > 0 \), there exists \( \eta = \eta(M) > 0 \) such that the following statement holds. Let \( Q_0 \subset Q \) be a convex, open set that contains \( \mathcal{M} \). Let \( \rho, \lambda \) be positive numbers with \( \lambda < \rho \), and let \( u \in H^1(\partial B_\rho, Q_0) \), \( v \in H^1(\partial B_\rho, \mathcal{M}) \) be such that

\[
\int_{\partial B_\rho} (|\nabla u|^2 + |\nabla v|^2) \, d\mathcal{H}^2 \leq M, \quad \int_{\partial B_\rho} |u - v|^2 \, d\mathcal{H}^2 \leq \eta \lambda^2.
\]

Then, there exists a map \( w \in H^1(B_\rho \setminus B_{\rho - \lambda}, Q_0) \) such that \( w(x) = u(x) \) for \( \mathcal{H}^2 \)-a.e. \( x \in \partial B_\rho \), \( w(x) = v(x/(\rho - \lambda)) \) for \( \mathcal{H}^2 \)-a.e. \( x \in \partial B_{\rho - \lambda} \), and

\[
\int_{B_\rho \setminus B_{\rho - \lambda}} |\nabla w|^2 \lesssim \lambda \int_{\partial B_\rho} \left( |\nabla u|^2 + |\nabla v|^2 + \frac{|u - v|^2}{\lambda^2} \right) \, d\mathcal{H}^2
\]

\[
\int_{B_\rho \setminus B_{\rho - \lambda}} \psi_b(w) \lesssim \lambda \int_{\partial B_\rho} \psi_b(u) \, d\mathcal{H}^2.
\]

**Remark 3.2.** Lemma 3.15 in case \( \psi_b = 0 \), was first proven by Luckhaus [37, Lemma 1]. Up to a scaling, the statement given here is essentially the same as [12, Lemma B.2]. However, in [12] the potential is assumed to be finite and smooth on the whole of \( \mathbb{R}^m \), while our potential \( \psi_b \) is singular out of \( Q \). Nevertheless, the proof carries over to our setting. Indeed, the map \( w \) constructed in [12] takes values in a neighbourhood of \( \mathcal{M} \), whose thickness can be made arbitrarily small by choosing \( \eta \) small (see also [37, Lemma 1]). In particular, we can make sure that the image of \( w \) is contained in the set \( Q_0 \), where the function \( \psi_b \) is finite and smooth, and the arguments of [12] carry over. Incidentally, Lemma 3.15 crucially depends on the non-degeneracy assumption \([11]\) for the bulk potential \( \psi_b \).

We give a variant of Lemma 3.15 which is adapted to our non-local setting.
Lemma 3.16. Let $Q_0 \subset \subset Q$ be an open convex set. Let $u_\varepsilon, u \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q_0)$ and $u^*_\varepsilon, u^* \in H^1(B_{1/2}, \mathcal{N})$ satisfy the following conditions:

\begin{align}
M_\varepsilon &:= \int_{B_{1/2}} |\nabla u^*_\varepsilon|^2 + F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_1) + \|u^*_\varepsilon - u_\varepsilon\|^2_{L^2(B_1)} \text{ is bounded} \\
u_\varepsilon &\to u \text{ strongly in } L^2(B_{1/2}), \quad u^*_\varepsilon \to u^* \text{ strongly in } H^1(B_{1/2}) \text{ as } \varepsilon \to 0 \quad (3.30) \\
u^* = u &\quad \text{ a.e. in } B_1 \setminus B_s \text{ for some } s \in (1/4, 1/2) \quad (3.31) \\

\end{align}

Let $\sigma \in (0, 1/10)$. Then, up to extraction of a (non-relabelled) subsequence, there exist maps $\xi_\varepsilon \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q_0)$ and radii $r, t$ with $s < r < t < 1/2$ that satisfy the following conditions:

(i) $\xi_\varepsilon = u_\varepsilon$ a.e. in $\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t$;
(ii) $\xi_\varepsilon|_{B_r} \in H^1(B_r, Q_0)$ and $\xi_\varepsilon|_{B_r} \to u^*_|_{B_r}$ strongly in $H^1(B_r)$;
(iii) there holds

$$F_\varepsilon(\xi_\varepsilon, B_t) + \Gamma_\varepsilon(\xi_\varepsilon, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t) - \Gamma_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t) \leq F_\varepsilon^\text{nl}(\xi_\varepsilon, B_r) + C \int_{B_r \setminus B_{r-\sigma}} |\nabla \xi_\varepsilon|^2 + C\sigma M_\varepsilon + o\left(\varepsilon^{q-2} M_1/2\right)$$

where $q > 7/2$ is given by (K4).

As we will see in the proof, the maps $\xi_\varepsilon$ agree with $u^*_\varepsilon$ on $B_r$, up to rescaling and interpolation near the boundary of $B_r$.

Proof of Lemma 3.16. We split the proof into several steps.

Step 1 (Construction of $\xi_\varepsilon$). Let $\varphi_\varepsilon \in C^\infty_c(\mathbb{R}^3)$ be a sequence of mollifiers, defined as in (3.12). Lemma 3.5 implies

$$\int_{B_{1/2}} |\nabla (\varphi_\varepsilon * u_\varepsilon)|^2 \lesssim F(u_\varepsilon, B_1) \leq M_\varepsilon$$

for $\varepsilon$ small enough. Let $N \geq 1$ be an integer number such that

$$\frac{1}{18\sigma} \leq N \leq \frac{1}{6\sigma}$$

Such a number exists, because of the assumption that $0 < \sigma < 1/10$. We divide the annulus $B_{1/2} \setminus B_s$ into $N$ concentric sub-annuli:

$$A_i := B_{s+i^{1/2-s}} \setminus B_{s+(i-1)^{1/2-s}} \quad \text{ for } i = 1, 2, \ldots, N.$$ 

We have

$$\sum_{i=1}^N \left( F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, A_i) + \int_{A_i} |\nabla (\varphi_\varepsilon * u_\varepsilon)|^2 + \int_{A_i} |\nabla u^*_\varepsilon|^2 \right) \lesssim M_\varepsilon$$

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As a consequence, for any \( \varepsilon \) we can choose an index \( i(\varepsilon) \) such that

\[
F_{\varepsilon}(u_{\varepsilon}, A_{i(\varepsilon)}) + \int_{A_i} |\nabla (\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon})|^2 + \int_{A_i} |\nabla u_{\varepsilon}^*|^2 \lesssim \frac{M_{\varepsilon}}{N} \lesssim \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\]  

(3.34)

Passing to a subsequence, we may also assume that all the indices \( i(\varepsilon) \) are the same, so from now on, we write \( i \) instead of \( i(\varepsilon) \). We take positive numbers \( a < b \) such that \( A' := B_b \setminus B_a \subset A_i \) and \( b - a > 5\sigma \). Then, Lemma 3.13 gives

\[
\frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{A'} |\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon} - u_{\varepsilon}|^2 \lesssim F_{\varepsilon}(u_{\varepsilon}, A_i) \lesssim \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\]

(3.35)

for \( \varepsilon \) small enough. We have assumed that \( u_{\varepsilon} \) takes its values in the convex set \( Q_0 \subset \subset Q \); it follows that the image of \( \varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon} \) is contained in \( \overline{Q_0} \subset \subset Q \). Thus, we may apply Lemma 3.14 to estimate the integral of \( \psi_b(\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon}) \):

\[
\frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{A'} \psi_b(\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon}) \lesssim \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{A'} \left( \psi_b(u_{\varepsilon}) + |\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon} - u_{\varepsilon}|^2 \right) \lesssim \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\]

(3.36)

Using Fatou’s lemma, we see that

\[
\int_a^b \left( \liminf_{\varepsilon \to 0} \int_{\partial B_r} |\nabla u_{\varepsilon}^*|^2 + |\nabla (\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon})|^2 + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \psi_b(\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon}) \, d\mathcal{H}^2 \right) \, dr \\
\leq \liminf_{\varepsilon \to 0} \int_{A'} \left( |\nabla u_{\varepsilon}^*|^2 + |\nabla (\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon})|^2 + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \psi_b(\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon}) \right) \lesssim \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\]

By Fubini theorem, there exists a radius \( r \in (a + \sigma, b - 3\sigma) \) and a (non-relabelled) subsequence \( \varepsilon \to 0 \) such that

\[
\int_{\partial B_r} \left( |\nabla u_{\varepsilon}^*|^2 + |\nabla (\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon})|^2 + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \psi_b(\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon}) \right) \, d\mathcal{H}^2 \lesssim M_{\varepsilon}
\]

(3.37)

By a similar argument, we may also assume that

\[
\int_{\partial B_r} |\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon} - u_{\varepsilon}|^2 \, d\mathcal{H}^2 \lesssim \varepsilon^2 M_{\varepsilon} + \frac{1}{\sigma} \int_{A'} |u_{\varepsilon}^* - u_{\varepsilon}|^2
\]

(3.38)

Due to (3.32) and (3.31), we have \( u_{\varepsilon}^* - u_{\varepsilon} \to u^* - u \) in \( L^2(A') \) and \( u^* = u \) in \( A' \), so the right-hand side of (3.38) tends to zero. Let

\[
\lambda_{\varepsilon} := \left( \varepsilon^2 M_{\varepsilon} + \frac{1}{\sigma} \int_{A'} |u_{\varepsilon}^* - u_{\varepsilon}|^2 \right)^{1/4} > 0
\]

(3.39)

We have \( \lambda_{\varepsilon} \to 0 \) as \( \varepsilon \to 0 \). Moreover, for this choice of \( \lambda_{\varepsilon} \), the assumptions of Lemma 3.14 are satisfied for \( \varepsilon \) small enough. By applying Lemma 3.13 we construct a map \( w_{\varepsilon} \in H^1(B_r \setminus B_{r-\lambda_{\varepsilon}}, Q_0) \) such that \( w_{\varepsilon}(x) = (\varphi \ast u_{\varepsilon})(x) \) for \( x \in \partial B_r \), \( w_{\varepsilon}(x) = v(rx/(r-\lambda_{\varepsilon})) \) for \( x \in \partial B_{r-\lambda_{\varepsilon}} \), and

\[
\int_{B_r \setminus B_{r-\lambda_{\varepsilon}}} |\nabla w_{\varepsilon}|^2 + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \psi_b(w_{\varepsilon}) \lesssim \lambda_{\varepsilon} M_{\varepsilon} + \frac{1}{\lambda_{\varepsilon}} \left( \varepsilon^2 M_{\varepsilon} + \frac{1}{\sigma} \int_{A'} |u_{\varepsilon}^* - u_{\varepsilon}|^2 \right)
\]

(3.40)
and

\begin{equation}
\frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{B_r \setminus B_{r-\lambda \varepsilon}} \psi_b(w_\varepsilon) \lesssim \frac{\lambda \varepsilon}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{\partial B_r} \psi_b(w_\varepsilon) d\mathcal{H}^2 \lesssim \lambda \varepsilon M_\varepsilon
\end{equation}

The right-hand sides of (3.40), (3.41) converge to zero as \( \varepsilon \to 0 \). Finally, we take \( t \in (r + 2\sigma, b - \sigma) \) and we define

\begin{equation}
\xi_\varepsilon(x) := \begin{cases} 
  u_\varepsilon(x) & \text{if } x \in \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t \\
  (\varphi_\varepsilon * u_\varepsilon)(x) & \text{if } B_t \setminus B_r \\
  w_\varepsilon(x) & \text{if } x \in B_r \setminus B_{r-\lambda \varepsilon} \\
  u_\varepsilon^* \left( \frac{rx}{r - \lambda \varepsilon} \right) & \text{if } x \in B_{r-\lambda \varepsilon}
\end{cases}
\end{equation}

By construction, \( \xi_\varepsilon = u_\varepsilon \) out of \( B_t \). Moreover, a routine computation, based on (3.40), shows that \( \xi_\varepsilon \to u_\varepsilon^* \) strongly in \( H^1(B_r) \).

**Step 2** (Bounds on \( \| \xi_\varepsilon - u_\varepsilon \|_{L^2(B_t)} \)). By construction, we have

\[ \| \xi_\varepsilon - u_\varepsilon \|_{L^2(B_t)} = \| \varphi_\varepsilon * u_\varepsilon - u_\varepsilon \|_{L^2(A')} \lesssim \varepsilon \sigma^{1/2} M_\varepsilon^{1/2} \]

On the other hand,

\[ \| \xi_\varepsilon - u_\varepsilon \|_{L^2(B_r)} \lesssim \| w_\varepsilon - \tau_\varepsilon u_\varepsilon^* \|_{L^2(B_r \setminus B_{r-\lambda \varepsilon})} + \| \tau_\varepsilon u_\varepsilon^* - u_\varepsilon^* \|_{L^2(B_r)} + \| u_\varepsilon^* - u_\varepsilon \|_{L^2(B_r)} \]

where \( \tau_\varepsilon u_\varepsilon^*(x) := u_\varepsilon^*(rx/(r - \lambda \varepsilon)) \). We recall that \( \| u_\varepsilon^* - u_\varepsilon \|_{L^2(B_{1/2})} \leq M_\varepsilon^{1/2} \). The norm of \( w_\varepsilon - \tau_\varepsilon u_\varepsilon^* \) can be estimated using the Poincaré inequality and (3.40), because we know that \( w_\varepsilon = \tau_\varepsilon u_\varepsilon^* \) on \( \partial B_{r-\lambda \varepsilon} \):

\[ \| w_\varepsilon - \tau_\varepsilon u_\varepsilon^* \|_{L^2(B_r \setminus B_{r-\lambda \varepsilon})} \leq \lambda \varepsilon \| \nabla (w_\varepsilon - \tau_\varepsilon u_\varepsilon^*) \|_{L^2(B_r \setminus B_{r-\lambda \varepsilon})} \lesssim \left( \lambda \varepsilon + \frac{\lambda \varepsilon^{1/2}}{\sigma^{1/2}} \right) M_\varepsilon^{1/2} \]

A classical argument (see e.g. [21] Lemma 7.23) for an analogous result gives

\[ \| \tau_\varepsilon u_\varepsilon^* - u_\varepsilon^* \|_{L^2(B_r)} \lesssim \lambda \varepsilon \| \nabla u_\varepsilon^* \|_{L^2(B_r)} \lesssim \lambda \varepsilon M_\varepsilon^{1/2} \]

Combining the inequalities above, and recalling that \( \lambda \varepsilon \to 0 \), we obtain

\begin{equation}
\| \xi_\varepsilon - u_\varepsilon \|_{L^2(B_t)} \lesssim M_\varepsilon^{1/2}
\end{equation}

As a consequence, we deduce

\[ \inf_{\zeta \in \mathbb{R}^m} \| \xi_\varepsilon - \zeta \|_{L^2(B_t)} \leq \| \xi_\varepsilon - u_\varepsilon \|_{L^2(B_t)} + \inf_{\zeta \in \mathbb{R}^m} \| u_\varepsilon - \zeta \|_{L^2(B_t)} \lesssim M_\varepsilon^{1/2} + \inf_{\zeta \in \mathbb{R}^m} \| u_\varepsilon - \zeta \|_{L^2(B_t)} \]

and hence, by Proposition 3.4,

\begin{equation}
\inf_{\zeta \in \mathbb{R}^m} \| \xi_\varepsilon - \zeta \|_{L^2(B_t)} \lesssim M_\varepsilon^{1/2} + F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_1)^{1/2} \lesssim M_\varepsilon^{1/2}
\end{equation}

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Combining (3.45), (3.46), (3.47) and (3.48), we obtain
\begin{equation}
(3.48)
F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}(\xi_{\varepsilon}, B_{t}) \leq \frac{1}{\varepsilon^{2}} \int_{B_{t}} \psi_{\varepsilon}(\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon}) + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^{2}} \int_{B_{t} \setminus B_{t-\lambda}} \psi_{\varepsilon}(w_{\varepsilon}) + \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\end{equation}
where \( \Gamma_{\varepsilon}(\xi_{\varepsilon}, B_{r}, B_{t} \setminus B_{r}) \) is defined as in (3.44). Lemma 3.12 implies
\begin{equation}
(3.46)
F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}(\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon}, A') \lesssim F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}(u_{\varepsilon}, A') + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^{2}} \| \varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon} \|_{L^{2}(A')}^{2} \lesssim \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\end{equation}
Now, we estimate \( \Gamma_{\varepsilon}(\xi_{\varepsilon}, B_{r}, B_{t} \setminus B_{r}) \). By construction, we have \( a + \sigma < r < t < b - \sigma \) and hence \( \partial_{\sigma} B_{r} \subseteq A' \). We apply Lemma 3.11, Lemma 3.13 and (3.44):
\begin{equation}
(3.47)
\Gamma_{\varepsilon}(\xi_{\varepsilon}, B_{r}, B_{t} \setminus B_{r}) \lesssim F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}(\xi_{\varepsilon}, \partial_{\sigma} B_{r}) + \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\end{equation}
The gradient term at the right-hand side can be further estimated by (3.45):
\begin{equation}
(3.48)
\int_{\partial_{\sigma} B_{r}} |\nabla \xi_{\varepsilon}|^{2} \lesssim \int_{B_{r} \setminus B_{r-\sigma}} |\nabla \xi_{\varepsilon}|^{2} + \int_{A'} |\nabla (\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon})|^{2} \lesssim \int_{B_{r} \setminus B_{r-\sigma}} |\nabla \xi_{\varepsilon}|^{2} + \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\end{equation}
Combining (3.45), (3.46), (3.47) and (3.48), we obtain
\begin{equation}
(3.49)
F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}(\xi_{\varepsilon}, B_{t}) \leq F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}(\xi_{\varepsilon}, B_{r}) + \int_{B_{r} \setminus B_{r-\sigma}} |\nabla \xi_{\varepsilon}|^{2} + \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\end{equation}
We estimate the local term of the energy, i.e. the integral of \( \psi_{b}(\xi_{\varepsilon}) \) in \( B_{t} \). By construction, \( \xi_{\varepsilon} \) restricted to \( B_{r-\lambda} \) takes its values in \( \mathcal{N} \). As a consequence,
\begin{equation}
(3.50)
\frac{1}{\varepsilon^{2}} \int_{B_{t}} \psi_{b}(\xi_{\varepsilon}) = \frac{1}{\varepsilon^{2}} \int_{B_{r} \setminus B_{r-\lambda}} \psi_{b}(\varphi_{\varepsilon} \ast u_{\varepsilon}) + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^{2}} \int_{B_{r} \setminus B_{r-\lambda}} \psi_{b}(w_{\varepsilon}) \lesssim \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\end{equation}
Step 4 (Bounds on \( \Gamma_{\varepsilon}(\xi_{\varepsilon}, B_{t}, \mathbb{R}^{3} \setminus B_{t}) \)). By construction, \( \xi_{\varepsilon} = u_{\varepsilon} \) out of \( B_{t} \). Then, Lemma 3.14 implies
\begin{equation}
\Gamma_{\varepsilon}(\xi_{\varepsilon}, B_{t}, \mathbb{R}^{3} \setminus B_{t}) \leq \Gamma_{\varepsilon}(u_{\varepsilon}, B_{t}, \mathbb{R}^{3} \setminus B_{t}) \lesssim F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}(\xi_{\varepsilon}, \partial_{\sigma} B_{t}) + \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\end{equation}
Reasoning as in (3.46), and applying (3.44), we deduce
\begin{equation}
F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}(\xi_{\varepsilon}, \partial_{\sigma} B_{t}) \lesssim \sigma M_{\varepsilon}
\end{equation}
Then, due to (3.43), we conclude that

\[ \Gamma_\varepsilon(\xi, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t) - \Gamma_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t) \lesssim \sigma M_\varepsilon + o \left( \frac{\varepsilon^{-2} M_\varepsilon^{1/2}}{\sigma^q} \right) \]

Combining (3.49), (3.50) and (3.51), we obtain the estimate (iii) in the statement of the lemma, and the proof is complete. \( \square \)

**Remark 3.3.** In addition to (3.30), (3.31) and (3.32), suppose there exist points \( \zeta_\varepsilon \in \mathcal{N} \), a positive sequence \( \eta_\varepsilon \to 0 \) and maps \( v \in H^1(B_{1/2}, \mathbb{R}^m) \), \( v^* \in H^1(B_{1/2}, \mathbb{R}^m) \) such that \( v = v^* \) out of \( B_s \), \( M_\varepsilon \lesssim \eta_\varepsilon^2 \) and

\[ \frac{u_\varepsilon - \zeta_\varepsilon}{\eta_\varepsilon} \to v \text{ strongly in } L^2(B_{1/2}), \quad \frac{u_\varepsilon^* - \zeta_\varepsilon}{\eta_\varepsilon} \to v^* \text{ strongly in } H^1(B_{1/2}) \]

as \( \varepsilon \to 0 \). Then, the same sequence \( \xi_\varepsilon \) constructed above satisfies

\[ \frac{\xi_\varepsilon - \zeta_\varepsilon}{\eta_\varepsilon} \to v^* \quad \text{strongly in } L^2(B_r), \]

so long as we choose \( \lambda_\varepsilon \) in a suitable way (see in particular Equations (3.42) and (3.40)). For instance, instead of (3.39), we may take

\[ \lambda_\varepsilon := \left( \frac{\varepsilon^2 M_\varepsilon}{\eta_\varepsilon^2} + \frac{1}{\sigma \eta_\varepsilon^2} \int_{A^c} |u_\varepsilon^* - u_\varepsilon|^2 \right)^{1/4} \]

### 4 Proof of the main results

#### 4.1 A compactness result for \( \omega \)-minimisers

The goal of this section is to prove a compactness result for minimisers of \( E_\varepsilon \), subject to variable “boundary conditions”, as \( \varepsilon \to 0 \). For later convenience, we state our result in terms of “almost minimisers” — or, more precisely, \( \omega \)-minimisers, as defined below. This will be useful to study variants of our original minimisation problem, as we will do in Section 4.

**Definition 4.1.** Let \( \Omega \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3 \) be a bounded domain. Let \( \omega : [0, +\infty) \to [0, +\infty) \) be an increasing function such that \( \omega(s) \to 0 \) as \( s \to 0 \). We say that a function \( u \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathcal{Q}) \) is an \( \omega \)-minimiser of \( E_\varepsilon \) in \( \Omega \) if, for any ball \( B_\rho(x_0) \subseteq \Omega \) and any \( v \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathcal{Q}) \) such that \( v = u \) a.e. on \( \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_\rho(x_0) \), there holds

\[ E_\varepsilon(u) \leq E_\varepsilon(v) + \omega(\varepsilon) \rho. \]

By definition, a minimiser for \( E_\varepsilon \) in the class \( \mathcal{A} \) defined by (2.5) is also a \( \omega \)-minimiser in \( \Omega \), for any \( \omega \geq 0 \). \( \omega \)-minimisers behave nicely with respect to scaling. Given \( u \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, \mathcal{Q}) \), an increasing function \( \omega : [0, +\infty) \to [0, +\infty) \), \( x_0 \in \mathbb{R}^3 \) and \( \rho > 0 \), we define \( u_\rho : \mathbb{R}^3 \to \mathcal{Q} \) and \( \omega_\rho : [0, +\infty) \to [0, +\infty) \) as \( u_\rho(y) := u(x_0 + \rho y) \) for \( y \in \mathbb{R}^3 \) and \( \omega_\rho(s) := \omega(\rho s) \) for \( s \geq 0 \), respectively. A scaling argument implies
Lemma 4.1. If $u$ is an $\omega$-minimiser for $E_\varepsilon$ in a bounded domain $\Omega \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3$, then $u_\rho$ is an $\omega_\rho$-minimiser for $E_{\varepsilon/\rho}$ in $(\Omega - x_0)/\rho$.

Proposition 4.2. Let $\Omega \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3$ be a bounded domain. Let $\omega : [0, +\infty) \to [0, +\infty)$ be an increasing function such that $\omega(s) \to 0$ as $s \to 0$. Let $u_\varepsilon$ be a sequence of $\omega$-minimisers of $E_\varepsilon$ in $\Omega$. Suppose that there exists an open, convex set $\mathcal{Q}_0 \subset \subset \mathcal{Q}$ such that $u_\varepsilon(x) \in \mathcal{Q}_0$ for any $\varepsilon > 0$ and a.e. $x \in \Omega$. Let $B_\rho(x_0) \subseteq \Omega$ be a ball such that $\sup_{s>0} F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_\rho(x_0)) < +\infty$. Then, up to extraction of a non-relabelled subsequence, $u_\varepsilon$ converge $L^2(B_\rho/2(x_0))$-strongly to a map $u_0 \in H^1(B_\rho/2(x_0), \mathcal{N})$, which minimises the functional

$$w \in H^1(B_\rho/2(x_0), \mathcal{N}) \mapsto \int_{B_\rho/2(x_0)} L\nabla w \cdot \nabla w$$

subject to its own boundary conditions. Moreover, for any $s \in (0, \rho/2)$ there holds

$$\lim_{\varepsilon \to 0} F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_s(x_0)) = \int_{B_s(x_0)} L\nabla u_0 \cdot \nabla u_0$$

Proposition 4.2 differs from the results in [48] in that no “boundary condition” is prescribed: each $u_\varepsilon$ minimises the functional $E_\varepsilon$ (possibly up to a small error, which is quantified by the function $\omega$) subject to its own “boundary condition”.

Proof of Proposition 4.2. If $u$ is an $\omega$-minimiser of $E_\varepsilon$ in $\Omega$ and $B_\rho(x_0) \subseteq \Omega$, then $u_\rho$ is an $\omega_\rho$-minimiser for $E_{\varepsilon/\rho}$ in $(\Omega - x_0)/\rho$. Since we have assumed that $\Omega$ is bounded, the radius $\rho$ is bounded too — say, $\rho \leq R_0$, where $R_0$ depends only on $\Omega$. The function $\omega$ is increasing, so $\omega_\rho(s) = \omega(\rho s) \leq \omega(R_0 s) =: \omega_0(s)$. As a consequence, $u_\rho$ is also an $\omega_0$-minimiser. Since $\omega_0$ is independent of $\rho$, by a scaling argument (see Equation (3.11)) we may assume without loss of generality that $\rho = 1$ and $x_0 = 0$.

Let $\varphi_\varepsilon \in C_c^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3)$ be defined as in Section 3.2. Lemma 3.5 and Lemma 3.6 imply that

$$\int_{B_{1/2}} |\nabla (\varphi_\varepsilon * u_\varepsilon)|^2 \leq F(u_\varepsilon, B_1), \quad \int_{B_{1/2}} |\varphi_\varepsilon * u_\varepsilon - u_\varepsilon|^2 \leq \varepsilon^2 F(u_\varepsilon, B_1)$$

for $\varepsilon$ small enough. Since $F(u_\varepsilon, B_1)$ is bounded, we can extract a (non-relabelled) subsequence so that $\varphi_\varepsilon * u_\varepsilon \rightharpoonup u_0$ weakly in $H^1(B_{1/2})$, $u_\varepsilon \rightharpoonup u_0$ strongly in $L^2(B_{1/2})$. The map $u_0$ takes its values in $\mathcal{N}$, because

$$\int_{B_{1/2}} \psi_b(u_0) \leq \liminf_{\varepsilon \to 0} \varepsilon^2 \int_{B_{1/2}} \psi_b(u_\varepsilon) = 0$$

by Fatou lemma. We must show that

$$\int_{B_{1/2}} L\nabla u_0 \cdot \nabla u_0 \leq \int_{B_{1/2}} L\nabla v \cdot \nabla v$$

for any $v \in H^1(B_{1/2}, \mathcal{N})$ such that $v = u_0$ on $\partial B_{1/2}$. By an approximation argument, it suffices to prove (4.2) in case $v = u_0$ in a neighbourhood of $\partial B_{1/2}$. Therefore, we
fix \( s \in (0, 1/2) \) and we take a map \( v \in H^1(B_{1/2}, \mathcal{M}) \) such that \( v = u_0 \) on \( B_{1/2} \setminus \bar{B}_s \). The map \( v \) is not an admissible competitor for \( u_\varepsilon \), because in general \( u_0 \neq u_\varepsilon \) on \( \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_1 \). However, we may construct suitable competitors by applying Lemma 3.16. We can indeed do so, because we have assumed that all the \( u_\varepsilon \)'s take their values in an open, convex set \( Q_0 \subsetneq Q \).

Let \( \sigma \in (0, 1/10) \). By applying Lemma 3.16 (with \( u^*_\varepsilon = v \) for any \( \varepsilon \)), we find maps \( \xi_\varepsilon \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q_0) \) and radii \( r, t \) with \( \max(s, 1/4) < r < t < 1/2 \), so that \( \xi_\varepsilon = u_\varepsilon \) a.e. in \( \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t \), \( \xi_\varepsilon \to v \) strongly in \( H^1(B_r) \) and

\[
F_\varepsilon(\xi_\varepsilon, B_t) + \Gamma_\varepsilon(\xi_\varepsilon, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t) - \Gamma_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t) \leq F_\varepsilon(\xi_\varepsilon, B_r) + C \int_{B_r \setminus B_{r-\sigma}} |\nabla \xi_\varepsilon|^2 + C\sigma + o\left(\frac{\varepsilon^{q-2}}{\sigma^q}\right)
\]

(where \( q > 7/2 \) is given by (K4)). Since \( u_\varepsilon \) is an \( \omega \)-minimiser for \( E_\varepsilon \) and \( \xi_\varepsilon = u_\varepsilon \) out of \( B_t \), we have

\[
F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_t) + \Gamma_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t) \leq F_\varepsilon(\xi_\varepsilon, B_t) + \Gamma_\varepsilon(\xi_\varepsilon, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t) + \omega(\varepsilon)
\]

and hence,

\[
F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_t) \leq F_\varepsilon(\xi_\varepsilon, B_r) + C \int_{B_r \setminus B_{r-\sigma}} |\nabla \xi_\varepsilon|^2 + C\sigma + o\left(\frac{\varepsilon^{q-2}}{\sigma^q}\right) + \omega(\varepsilon)
\]

We apply Proposition 3.7 and Proposition 3.8 to pass to the limit in both sides of (4.3), first as \( \varepsilon \to 0 \), then as \( \sigma \to 0 \). We obtain

\[
\int_{B_r} L \nabla u_0 \cdot \nabla u_0 \leq \int_{B_r} L \nabla v \cdot \nabla v
\]

which implies (4.2). In case \( v = u_0 \), the same argument shows that

\[
\limsup_{\varepsilon \to 0} F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_r) \leq \int_{B_r} L \nabla u_0 \cdot \nabla u_0
\]

On the other hand, Proposition 3.7 implies

\[
\int_G L \nabla u_0 \cdot \nabla u_0 \leq \liminf_{\varepsilon \to 0} F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, G) \quad \text{for any open set } G \subseteq B_{1/2}
\]

Combining (4.4) with (4.5), we deduce (4.1).

4.2 A decay lemma for \( F_\varepsilon \)

The aim of this section is to prove a decay property for the localised energy \( F_\varepsilon \):
Lemma 4.3. There exist $\eta > 0$, $\theta \in (0, 1/2)$ and $\varepsilon_* > 0$ such that, for any ball $B_\rho(x_0) \subseteq \Omega$, any $\varepsilon \in (0, \varepsilon_*\rho)$ and any minimiser $u_\varepsilon$ of $E_\varepsilon$ in $\mathcal{A}$ such that

$$F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_\rho(x_0)) \leq \eta^2 \rho,$$

there holds

$$F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_{\theta\rho}(x_0)) \leq \frac{\theta}{2} F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_\rho(x_0)) + (\frac{\varepsilon}{\rho})^{2q-4} \rho. \quad (4.6)$$

Compared with analogous results in the regularity theory for Oseen-Frank minimisers — see, for instance, Proposition 1 in [37] or Theorem 2.4 in [24] — the estimate (4.6) contains an extra term at the right-hand side. This additional term controls the contributions from the ‘locality defect’ $\Gamma_\varepsilon$, defined by (3.24) (cf. Lemma 3.11 and Remark 3.1). However, this term will introduce additional issues in the proof of Theorem A, which we are only able to resolve in case $q > 7/2$.

As a first step towards the proof of Lemma 4.3, we check that the limit tensor $L$ (defined by (2.8)) is elliptic.

Proposition 4.4. There exists a constant $\lambda > 1$ so that

$$\lambda^{-1} |\xi|^2 \leq L \xi \cdot \xi \leq \lambda |\xi|^2$$

for all $\xi \in \mathbb{R}^{m \times 3}$.

Proof. The upper bound comes trivially, as

$$4L \xi \cdot \xi = \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K(z)(\xi z) \cdot (\xi z) \, dz \leq \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} g(z)|\xi z|^2 \, dz \lesssim \left( \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} g(z)|z|^2 \, dz \right) |\xi|^2$$

and the constant at the right-hand side is finite, due to (K4). For the lower bound, recall that $g$ is non-negative and satisfies $g(z) \geq k$ for $\rho_1 < |z| < \rho_2$. Then we have that

$$4L \xi \cdot \xi = \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} K_{ij}(z)z_\alpha z_\beta \xi_i,\alpha \xi_j,\beta \, dz \geq \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} g(z)z_\alpha z_\beta \xi_i,\alpha \xi_j,\beta \, dz \geq k \int_{B_{\rho_2} \setminus B_{\rho_1}} z_\alpha z_\beta \, dz \xi_i,\alpha \xi_j,\beta$$

We may evaluate the inner integral as

$$\int_{B_{\rho_2} \setminus B_{\rho_1}} z_\alpha z_\beta \, dz = \int_{\rho_1}^{\rho_2} \int_{S^2} r^2 p_\alpha p_\beta \, dp \, dr = \int_{\rho_1}^{\rho_2} r^2 \, dr \int_{S^2} p_\alpha p_\beta \, dp = \left( \frac{\rho_2^3 - \rho_1^3}{3} \right) \frac{4\pi}{3} \delta_{\alpha\beta}$$

This gives a lower bound on the bilinear form as

$$L \xi \cdot \xi \geq \frac{k\pi(\rho_2^3 - \rho_1^3)}{9} \delta_{\alpha\beta} \xi_i,\alpha \xi_j,\beta = \frac{k\pi(\rho_2^3 - \rho_1^3)}{9} |\xi|^2$$
We will prove Lemma 4.3 by blow-up, adapting Luckhaus’ arguments from [37]. By a scaling argument (see (3.11)), we may assume without loss of generality that \(x_0 = 0\) and \(\rho = 1\). Suppose, towards a contradiction, that Lemma 4.3 does not hold. Then, for any choice of the parameter \(\theta \in (0, 1/2)\), we find a sequence \(\varepsilon_j \to 0\) and minimisers \(u_j\) such that

\[
\eta_j^2 := F_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_1) \to 0 \quad \text{as } j \to +\infty ,
\]

\[
F_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_\theta) > \frac{\theta \eta_j^2}{2} + \varepsilon_j^{2q-4} \tag{4.8}
\]

We denote by \(T_{\hat{\zeta}}N\) the tangent space to the manifold \(N\) at a point \(\hat{\zeta} \in N\) (regarded as a linear subspace of \(\mathbb{R}^m\), i.e. \(0 \in T_{\hat{\zeta}}N\)). We recall that, for any point \(y \in \mathbb{R}^m\) sufficiently close to the manifold \(N\), there exists a unique point \(\pi(y) \in N\) such that \(\text{dist}(y, N) = |y - \pi(y)|\). Moreover, there exists a constant \(\delta_*(N) > 0\) such that the map \(y \mapsto \pi(y)\) is smooth (with bounded derivatives) in

\[
\mathcal{U} := \{z \in \mathbb{R}^m : \text{dist}(z, N) \leq \delta_*(N)\} \tag{4.9}
\]

(see e.g. [46, Section 2.12.3]).

**Lemma 4.5.** For any \(j \in \mathbb{N}\) large enough, there exists a constant \(\zeta_j \in N\) and a measurable set \(G_j \subseteq B_{1/2}\) such that

\[
\hat{B}_{1/2} \left| u_j(x) - \zeta_j \right|^2 \lesssim \eta_j^2 \tag{4.10}
\]

\[
\eta_j^{-1} \int_{B_{1/2}\setminus G_j} \text{dist}(u_j(x) - \zeta_j, T_{\hat{\zeta}_j}N) \, dx \to 0 \tag{4.11}
\]

and \(|G_j| \to 0\) as \(j \to +\infty\).

**Proof.** Let \(\tilde{\zeta}_j := \int_{B_{1/2}} u_j\). By the Poincaré-type inequality, Proposition 3.3, we have

\[
\int_{B_{1/2}} \left| u_j - \tilde{\zeta}_j \right|^2 \lesssim F_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_1) \tag{4.12} = \eta_j^2 .
\]

On the other hand, Proposition 3.3 and Lemma 3.14 imply

\[
\psi_b(\tilde{\zeta}_j) \lesssim \int_{B_{1/2}} \psi_b(u_j) + \int_{B_{1/2}} \left| u_j - \tilde{\zeta}_j \right|^2 \lesssim (\varepsilon_j^2 + 1) \eta_j^2 \to 0. \tag{4.13}
\]

In particular, the distance between \(\tilde{\zeta}_j\) and \(N\) tends to zero as \(j \to +\infty\). Then, for \(j\) large enough, the projection \(\zeta_j := \pi(\tilde{\zeta}_j) \in N\) is well-defined. Moreover, recalling (3.29), we have

\[
\left| \zeta_j - \tilde{\zeta}_j \right|^2 = \text{dist}^2(\tilde{\zeta}_j, N) \lesssim \psi_b(\tilde{\zeta}_j) \lesssim \eta_j^2. \tag{4.14}
\]
The estimate (4.10) follows from (4.12) and (4.14).

Let us consider the set

\[ G_j := \left\{ x \in B_{1/2} : \text{dist}(u_j(x), \mathcal{N}) \geq \delta_*(\mathcal{N}) \right\} \]

where \( \delta_*(\mathcal{N}) \) is the constant from (4.9). On the set \( G_j \), the function \( \psi_b(u_j) \) is bounded from below by a strictly positive constant, which depends only on \( \delta_*(\mathcal{N}) \) and \( \psi_b \). Then,

\[ |G_j| \lesssim \int_{B_{1/2}} \psi_b(u_j) \lesssim \varepsilon_j^2 F_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_1) = \varepsilon_j^2 \eta_j^2 \to 0. \]

Moreover, the projection \( \pi \circ u_j \) is well-defined on \( B_{1/2} \setminus G_j \) and

\[
\int_{B_{1/2} \setminus G_j} \text{dist}(u_j - \zeta_j, T_{\zeta_j}\mathcal{N}) \leq \int_{B_{1/2} \setminus G_j} \text{dist}(\pi \circ u_j - \zeta_j, T_{\zeta_j}\mathcal{N}) + \int_{B_{1/2} \setminus G_j} |u_j - \pi \circ u_j| \\
\lesssim \int_{B_{1/2} \setminus G_j} \text{dist}(\pi \circ u_j - \zeta_j, T_{\zeta_j}\mathcal{N}) + \int_{B_1} \psi_b^{1/2}(u_j) \\
\lesssim \int_{B_{1/2} \setminus G_j} \text{dist}(\pi \circ u_j - \zeta_j, T_{\zeta_j}\mathcal{N}) + \varepsilon_j \eta_j
\]

Therefore, in order to prove (4.11), it suffices to show that

\[ \eta_j^{-1} \int_{B_{1/2} \setminus G_j} \text{dist}(\pi \circ u_j - \zeta_j, T_{\zeta_j}\mathcal{N}) \to 0 \quad \text{as } j \to +\infty. \]

To this end, we fix a large number \( M > 0 \) and we consider the sets

\[ A_j := \left\{ x \in B_{1/2} \setminus G_j : |(\pi \circ u_j)(x) - \zeta_j| \leq M\eta_j \right\}, \quad B_j := B_{1/2} \setminus (G_j \cup A_j). \]

We first estimate the contribution from the set \( A_j \). Since the manifold \( \mathcal{N} \) is compact and smooth, we have

\[ \text{dist}(y - z, T_z\mathcal{N}) \lesssim |y - z|^2 \quad \text{for any } y \in \mathcal{N}, \ z \in \mathcal{N} \]

(For \( y \) sufficiently close to \( z \), say \( |y - z| \leq \eta_0 = \eta_0(\mathcal{N}) \), the inequality (4.16) can be obtained by writing \( \mathcal{N} \) as the graph of a smooth function, locally around \( z \), and using a Taylor expansion. If \( |y - z| \geq \eta_0 \), we remark that the left-hand side of (4.16) is bounded from above because \( \mathcal{N} \) is compact.) Then,

\[ \eta_j^{-1} \int_{A_j} \text{dist}(\pi \circ u_j - \zeta_j, T_{\zeta_j}\mathcal{N}) \lesssim \eta_j^{-1} \int_{A_j} |\pi \circ u_j - \zeta_j|^2 \leq M^2\eta_j |A_j| \to 0 \]

as \( j \to +\infty \). Now, we estimate the contribution from \( B_j \). By construction, the image \( u_j(B_{1/2} \setminus G_j) \) is contained in the neighbourhood \( \mathcal{U} \) given by (4.13). Moreover, \( \pi \) is Lipschitz-continuous on \( \mathcal{U} \) and \( \pi(\zeta_j) = \zeta_j \), so

\[ |(\pi \circ u_j)(x) - \zeta_j| \lesssim |u_j(x) - \zeta_j| \quad \text{for a.e. } x \in B_{1/2} \setminus G_j \]
By definition, we have \( |\pi \circ u_j - \zeta_j| \geq M\eta_j \) on \( B_j \) and hence,

\[
(4.19) \quad |B_j| \lesssim M^{-2}\eta_j^{-2} \int_{B_{1/2} \setminus G_j} |\pi \circ u_j - \zeta_j|^2 \lesssim M^{-2}\eta_j^{-2} \int_{B_{1/2} \setminus G_j} |u_j - \zeta_j|^2 \lesssim M^{-2}
\]

By applying the inequality \( (4.19) \) and passing to the limit as \( M \), we obtain

\[
\eta_j^{-1} \int_{B_j} \text{dist}(\pi \circ u_j - \zeta_j, T_{\zeta_j}N) \leq \eta_j^{-1} \int_{B_j} |\pi \circ u_j - \zeta_j| \lesssim \eta_j^{-1} \int_{B_j} |u_j - \zeta_j|
\]

and hence,

\[
(4.20) \quad \eta_j^{-1} \int_{B_j} \text{dist}(\pi \circ u_j - \zeta_j, T_{\zeta_j}N) \lesssim \eta_j^{-1} |B_j|^{1/2} \left( \int_{B_{1/2}} |u_j - \zeta_j|^2 \right)^{1/2} \lesssim M^{-1}
\]

By combining \((4.17)\) with \((4.20)\), and passing to the limit as \( M \to +\infty \), we deduce \((4.15)\).

Let \( \zeta_j \in N, G_j \subseteq B_{1/2} \) be as in Lemma 4.5. We consider the maps \( v_j : B_{1/2} \to \mathbb{R}^3 \) given by

\[
v_j := \frac{1}{\eta_j} (u_j - \zeta_j)
\]

Thanks to \((4.10)\), the sequence \( v_j \) is bounded in \( L^2(B_{1/2}) \).

**Lemma 4.6.** There exist a (non-relabelled) subsequence, a point \( \zeta \in N \) and a map \( v \in H^1(B_{1/2}, \mathbb{R}^m) \) such that \( \zeta_j \to \zeta, v_j \to v \) strongly in \( L^2(B_{1/2}) \) and a.e. as \( j \to +\infty \). Moreover,

\[
(4.21) \quad v(x) \in T_{\zeta}N \quad \text{for a.e. } x \in B_{1/2}.
\]

**Proof.** Let \( \varphi_{\epsilon_j} \) be a sequence of mollifiers, as in \((3.12)\). Since \( \zeta_j \) is constant, we have \( \varphi_{\epsilon_j} * \zeta_j = \zeta_j \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \varphi_{\epsilon_j} = \zeta_j \) and hence, by Lemma 3.5

\[
\int_{B_{1/2}} \left| \nabla (\varphi_{\epsilon_j} * v_j) \right|^2 = \frac{1}{\eta_j^2} \int_{B_{1/2}} \left| (\nabla \varphi_{\epsilon_j}) * u_j \right|^2 \lesssim \frac{F_{\epsilon_j}(u_j, B_1)}{\eta_j^2} \lesssim 1
\]

Moreover, by Lemma 3.6

\[
\int_{B_{1/2}} \left| v_j - \varphi_{\epsilon_j} * v_j \right|^2 = \frac{1}{\eta_j^2} \int_{B_{1/2}} \left| u_j - \varphi_{\epsilon_j} * u_j \right|^2 \lesssim \frac{\varepsilon_j^2 F_{\epsilon_j}(u_j, B_1)}{\eta_j^2} \lesssim \varepsilon_j^2 \to 0
\]

Then, we may extract a subsequence in such a way that \( \varphi_{\epsilon_j} * v_j \to v \) weakly in \( H^1(B_{1/2}) \) and \( v_j \to v \) strongly in \( L^2(B_{1/2}) \) and a.e. We may also assume that \( \zeta_j \to \zeta \in N \), because \( N \) is compact.
It remains to prove (4.21). Let \( \delta > 0 \) be a small parameter. By Lemma 4.5 we know that \( |G_j| \to 0 \), so we may extract a subsequence \( j_k \to +\infty \) in such a way that \( \sum_{k \in \mathbb{N}} |G_{jk}| \leq \delta \). Let \( G := \bigcup_{k \in \mathbb{N}} G_{jk} \). The estimate (4.11) implies
\[
\int_{B_{1/2} \setminus G} \text{dist}(v_{jk}, T_{\zeta_{jk}}) \leq \int_{B_{1/2} \setminus G} \text{dist}(v_{jk}, T_{\zeta_{jk}}) \to 0
\]
as \( k \to +\infty \). By Fatou lemma, we deduce that \( v(x) \in T_{\zeta} \) for a.e. \( x \in B_{1/2} \setminus G \). This implies
\[
\left| \left\{ x \in B_{1/2}: v(x) \notin T_{\zeta_{jk}} \right\} \right| \leq |G| \leq \sum_{k \in \mathbb{N}} |G_{jk}| \leq \delta.
\]
Since \( \delta > 0 \) is arbitrary, (4.21) follows. \( \square \)

Next, we show that \( v \) minimises the gradient energy associated with the tensor \( L \), subject to its own boundary conditions.

**Lemma 4.7.** Let \( v^* \in H^1(B_{1/2}, T_{\zeta}) \) be such that \( v^* = v \) on \( \partial B_{1/2} \) (in the sense of traces). Then,
\[
(4.22) \quad \int_{B_{1/2}} \nabla v \cdot \nabla v \leq \int_{B_{1/2}} \nabla v^* \cdot \nabla v^*
\]
Moreover, for any \( s \in (0, 1/2) \) there holds
\[
(4.23) \quad \lim_{\varepsilon \to 0} \eta_{j}^{-2} F_{\varepsilon j}(u_j, B_s) = \int_{B_s} \nabla v \cdot \nabla v
\]

**Proof.** By a density argument, it suffices to prove (4.22) in case \( v^* = v \) in a neighbourhood of \( \partial B_{1/2} \). Let us fix \( s \in (0, 1/2) \) and \( v^* \in H^1(B_{1/2}, T_{\zeta}) \) such that \( v^* = v \) a.e. in \( B_{1/2} \setminus \hat{B}_s \). For any \( a > 0 \), we let \( \mathbb{W}_a := \{ y \in \mathbb{R}^m : \text{dist}(y, \mathcal{N}) \leq a \} \). Let \( z \in \mathcal{N}, R > 0 \) and \( w \in T_{z, \mathcal{N}} \) be such such that \( |w| \leq R \). Since \( \nabla \pi(z) \) is the orthogonal projection onto \( T_{z, \mathcal{N}} \) (see e.g. [60, Section 2.12.3]), we have
\[
(4.24) \quad |z + \eta_{j} w - \pi(z - \eta_{j} w)| \leq \eta_{j}^{-1} R^2 \| \nabla^2 \pi \|_{L^\infty(\mathbb{W}_{\eta_{j} R})}
\]
Moreover, for any \( X \in T_{z, \mathcal{N}} \) we have
\[
(4.25) \quad |X - \nabla \pi(z + \eta_{j} w) X| \leq \| \nabla \pi(z - \nabla \pi(z + \eta_{j} w)) \| |X| \leq \eta_{j} R |X| \| \nabla^2 \pi \|_{L^\infty(\mathbb{W}_{\eta_{j} R})}
\]
We choose a positive sequence \( R_j \to +\infty \) such that \( \eta_{j} R_j^2 \to 0 \) and we define
\[
v_j^* := \frac{R_j v_j^*}{\max(R_j, |v^*|)}, \quad u_j^* := \pi(\zeta_j + \eta_{j} v_j^*)
\]
Using (4.24) and (4.25), a routine computation shows that
\[
\frac{u_j^* - \zeta_j}{\eta_{j}} \to v^* \quad \text{strongly in } H^1(B_{1/2})
\]
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Now, we apply Lemma 3.16 (and Remark 3.3). For any $\sigma \in (0, 1/10)$, we find radii $r, t$ with $\max(1/2, s) < r < t < 1/2$ and maps $\xi_j \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q)$ such that $\xi_j = u_j$ a.e. in $\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t$,

(4.26) \[\Xi_j := \frac{\xi_j - \xi_j}{\eta_j} \to v^* \text{ strongly in } H^1(B_r)\]

and

\[F_{\varepsilon_j}(\xi_j, B_t) + \Gamma_{\varepsilon_j}(\xi_j, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t) - \Gamma_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t) \leq F_{\varepsilon_j}(\xi_j, B_r) + C \int_{B_t \setminus B_r} |\nabla \xi_j|^2 + C \sigma \eta_j^2 + o \left( \frac{\varepsilon_j^q - 2 \eta_j}{\sigma^q} \right)\]

Since $u_j$ is a minimiser of $E_{\varepsilon_j}$, we have

\[F_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_t) + \Gamma_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t) \leq F_{\varepsilon_j}(\xi_j, B_t) + \Gamma_{\varepsilon_j}(\xi_j, B_t, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_t)\]

and hence,

\[F_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_t) \leq F_{\varepsilon_j}(\xi_j, B_t) + C \int_{B_t \setminus B_r} |\nabla \xi_j|^2 + C \sigma \eta_j^2 + o \left( \frac{\varepsilon_j^q - 2 \eta_j}{\sigma^q} \right)\]

We divide both sides of this inequality by $\eta_j^2$ and obtain

(4.27) \[F_{\varepsilon_j}(v_j, B_t) \leq \frac{1}{\eta_j^2} F_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_t) \leq F_{\varepsilon_j}(\Xi_j, B_r) + C \int_{B_t \setminus B_r} |\nabla \Xi_j|^2 + C \sigma \eta_j^2 + o \left( \frac{\varepsilon_j^q - 2 \eta_j}{\sigma^q} \right)\]

The assumptions (4.7), (4.8) imply that $\eta_j^2 \geq \varepsilon_j^{2q-4}$, that is $\eta_j \geq \varepsilon_j^{q-2}$. Then, recalling (4.26), Proposition 3.7 and Proposition 3.8 we may pass to the limit in (4.27), first as $j \to +\infty$, then as $\sigma \to 0$. We obtain

\[\int_{B_t} L \nabla v \cdot \nabla v \leq \lim \sup_{j \to +\infty} \frac{1}{\eta_j^2} F_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_t) \leq \int_{B_t} L \nabla v^* \cdot \nabla v^*\]

and (4.22) follows. By choosing $v^* = v$, we also deduce (4.23), exactly as in Proposition 4.2.

Now, we are in position to complete the proof of Lemma 4.3.

Proof of Lemma 4.3 The assumption (4.7), Lemma 1.6 and Proposition 3.7 imply that

(4.28) \[\int_{B_{1/2}} L \nabla v \cdot \nabla v \leq \lim \inf_{j \to +\infty} \frac{1}{\eta_j^2} F_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_{1/2}) \leq 1\]

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By Lemma 4.7, \( v \in H^1(B_{1/2}, T_{\mathcal{C}}\mathcal{M}) \) minimises a quadratic functional among maps with values in the linear space \( T_{\mathcal{C}}\mathcal{M} \). In particular, \( v \) is a solution of the system

\[
-\text{div} (L \nabla v) = 0 \quad \text{in } B_{1/2}
\]

This system has constant coefficients and is (strongly) elliptic, by Proposition 4.4. Then, elliptic regularity theory (see e.g. [20, Section III.2, Theorem 2.1, Remarks 2.2 and 2.3]) implies that \( v \) is smooth and there exists a number \( \theta \in (0, 1) \) (depending only on \( L \)) such that

\[
\hat{B}_{\theta} L \nabla v \cdot \nabla v \leq \frac{\theta}{4}
\]

However, (4.8) and (4.23) imply

\[
\int_{B_\theta} L \nabla v \cdot \nabla v = \lim_{j \to +\infty} \frac{1}{\eta^2_j} F_{\varepsilon_j}(u_j, B_{1/2}) \geq \frac{\theta}{2}
\]

Thus, we have obtained a contradiction, and the lemma follows. \( \square \)

4.3 Proof of Theorem A and Theorem B

Proof of Theorem A. Let \( \eta, \theta \) and \( \varepsilon_\ast \) be given by Lemma 4.3. Let \( B_{r_0}(x_0) \subset \Omega \) be a ball, \( \varepsilon \in (0, \varepsilon_\ast r_0) \), and let \( u_\varepsilon \) be a minimiser of \( E_\varepsilon \) in \( \mathcal{A} \) such that

\[
(4.29) \quad F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_{r_0}(x_0)) \leq \eta^2 r_0.
\]

By a scaling argument, using (3.11), we can assume without loss of generality that \( x_0 = 0 \) and \( r_0 = 1 \). We fix a parameter \( \gamma \in (0, 1) \).

Step 1 (Campanato estimate for radii \( \rho \geq \varepsilon^\gamma \)). In this case, the result follows by Lemma 4.3 combined with a classical iteration argument. Let \( k \geq 1 \) be an integer such that \( \theta^k \geq \varepsilon^\gamma \). Thanks to (4.29), we can apply Lemma 4.3 iteratively, first on the ball \( B_1 \), then on \( B_{\theta^k} \), on \( B_{\theta^{2k}} \), and so on. We obtain

\[
(4.30) \quad F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_{\theta^k}) \leq \frac{\theta^k}{2^k} F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_1) + \varepsilon^2 q - 4 \theta^k \sum_{j=0}^{k-1} 2^{-j} \theta^{(q-2)(k-1-j)}
\]

At each step of the iteration, the assumptions of Lemma 4.3 remain satisfied, so long as \( \theta^k \geq \varepsilon^\gamma \) and \( \varepsilon \) is small enough. Indeed, (1.30) implies

\[
F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_{\theta^k}) \leq \frac{\theta^k}{2^k} F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_1) + \varepsilon^2 q - 4 \theta^{k-1} \sum_{j=0}^{k-1} \left( \frac{\theta^{2q-4}}{2} \right)^j
\]

The series at the right-hand side converges, because \( \theta \leq 1/2 \), and its sum is less than 2. The assumption (4.29) implies

\[
(4.31) \quad F_\varepsilon(u_\varepsilon, B_{\theta^k}) \leq \theta^k \left( \frac{\eta^2}{2^k} + 2 \theta^{2q-5} \left( \frac{\varepsilon}{\theta^k} \right)^{2q-4} \right)
\]
Under the assumption that $\theta^k \geq \epsilon^\gamma$, we can further estimate the right-hand side as

$$F_{\epsilon}(u_\epsilon, B_{\theta^k}) \leq \theta^k \left( \frac{\eta^2}{2^k} + 2\theta^{2q-5} \epsilon^{(2q-4)(1-\gamma)} \right)$$

and we can make sure that $F_{\epsilon}(u_\epsilon, B_{\theta^k}) \leq \eta^2 \theta^k$ by taking $\epsilon$ small enough (depending on $\eta$, $\theta$ and $\gamma$ only). Now, take a radius $\rho$ such that $\epsilon^\gamma \leq \rho < 1$. Let $k = k(\rho) \geq 0$ be the unique integer such that $\theta^{k+1} \leq \rho < \theta^k$. The inequality (4.31) implies

$$F_{\epsilon}(u_\epsilon, B_{\rho}) \leq \rho \theta \left( \frac{\eta^2}{2^k} + 2\theta^{2q-5} \left( \frac{\rho^{1/\gamma}}{\rho} \right)^{2q-4} \right) \leq C \rho \left( \rho^\alpha + \rho^{(2q-4)(1/\gamma-1)} \right)$$

for $\alpha := \log \frac{2}{|\log \theta|} \in (0, 1)$ and some constant $C$ that depends only on $\eta$, $\theta$. We assume that

$$0 < \gamma < \frac{2q - 4}{\alpha + 2q - 4}$$

which implies $\alpha < (2q-4)(1/\gamma - 1)$. By applying Proposition 3.4 and possibly modifying the value of $C$, from (4.32) we deduce

$$\int_{B_{\rho}} \left| u_\epsilon - \int_{B_{\rho}} u_\epsilon \right|^2 \leq C \rho^\alpha \text{ for } \epsilon^\gamma \leq \rho < 1.$$  

**Step 2** (Campanato estimate for radii $\rho \leq \epsilon^\gamma$). We need to show that an estimate similar to (4.34) holds for $\rho < \epsilon^\gamma$ as well. To this end, we consider the number $\nu > 1$ given by Assumption (K6) and we define

$$p := 3 + \alpha - \frac{\alpha}{\nu}, \quad \beta := 1 - \frac{\alpha}{(\alpha + 3)\nu}$$

We have $p > 3$, $0 < \beta < 1$. We claim that we can choose the parameter $\gamma$ so as to satisfy (4.33) and

$$\beta < \gamma$$

Indeed, a straightforward algebraic manipulation shows that

$$1 - \frac{\alpha}{(\alpha + 3)\nu} < \frac{2q - 4}{\alpha + 2q - 4} \iff \nu < \frac{\alpha + 2q - 4}{\alpha + 3}.$$

The assumption that $q > 7/2$ guarantees that $(\alpha + 2q - 4)/(\alpha + 3) > 1$. Moreover, we have assumed that $\nabla K$ is integrable (see (K1)), so there is no loss of generality in taking a smaller value for $\nu$ (so long as $\nu > 1$). Therefore, we may assume that $\nu > 1$ satisfies (4.37) and hence, we can choose $\gamma$ that satisfies (4.33) and (4.36).

Let

$$m_\epsilon := \int_{B_{2\epsilon^\beta}} u_\epsilon$$
and let $\chi_\varepsilon$ be the characteristic function of the ball $B_{\varepsilon^\alpha}$. Since $\nabla K_\varepsilon$ has zero average, from the Euler-Lagrange equation (Proposition 3.1) we obtain

$$\nabla (\Lambda \circ u_\varepsilon) = (\nabla K_\varepsilon) * (u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon)$$

$$= (\chi_\varepsilon \nabla K_\varepsilon) * (u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon) + ((1 - \chi_\varepsilon) \nabla K_\varepsilon) * (u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon).$$

Let $\tilde{\chi}_\varepsilon$ be the characteristic function of the ball $B_{2\varepsilon^\beta}$. Since $\chi_\varepsilon \nabla K_\varepsilon$ is supported on $B_{\varepsilon^\beta}$, we deduce

$$\nabla (\Lambda \circ u_\varepsilon) = (\chi_\varepsilon \nabla K_\varepsilon) * (\tilde{\chi}_\varepsilon (u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon)) + ((1 - \chi_\varepsilon) \nabla K_\varepsilon) * (u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon) \text{ in } B_{\varepsilon^\beta}.$$

We apply Hölder’s inequality, and then Young’s inequality for the convolution:

$$\| \nabla (\Lambda \circ u_\varepsilon) \|_{L^p(B_{\varepsilon^\beta})} \leq \| (\chi_\varepsilon \nabla K_\varepsilon) * (\tilde{\chi}_\varepsilon (u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon)) \|_{L^p(\mathbb{R}^3)}$$

$$+ \varepsilon^{3/2} \| (1 - \chi_\varepsilon) \nabla K_\varepsilon) * (u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon) \|_{L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3)}$$

$$\leq \| \nabla K_\varepsilon \|_{L^1(B_{\varepsilon^\beta})} \| u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon \|_{L^p(B_{\varepsilon^\beta})}$$

$$+ \varepsilon^{3/2} \| \nabla K_\varepsilon \|_{L^1(\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{\varepsilon^\beta})} \| u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon \|_{L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3)}$$

We bound the terms at the right-hand side. We have $\beta < \gamma$, so $2 \varepsilon^\beta \geq \varepsilon^\gamma$ and hence

$$\| u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon \|_{L^2(B_{2\varepsilon^\beta})} \leq \varepsilon^{(3+\alpha)\beta}$$

due to (3.34). Since $\| u_\varepsilon \|_{L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3)} \leq C$, by interpolation we obtain

$$\| u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon \|_{L^p(B_{2\varepsilon^\beta})} \leq \| u_\varepsilon - m_\varepsilon \|_{L^2(B_{2\varepsilon^\beta})}^{2/p} \leq \varepsilon^{(3+\alpha)\beta/p}.$$  

By a change of variable, we have

$$\| \nabla K_\varepsilon \|_{L^1(B_{\varepsilon^\beta})} \leq \varepsilon^{-1} \| \nabla K \|_{L^1(\mathbb{R}^3)}$$

and

$$\| \nabla K_\varepsilon \|_{L^1(\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{\varepsilon^\beta})} = \varepsilon^{-1} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{\varepsilon^\beta-1}} \| \nabla K(z) \| \, dz$$

$$\leq \varepsilon^{-1} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{\varepsilon^\beta-1}} \| \nabla K(z) \| \frac{|z|^{\nu}}{\varepsilon^{\beta-\nu}} \, dz$$

$$\leq \varepsilon^{\nu-\beta-1} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3} \| \nabla K(z) \| |z|^{\nu} \, dz,$$

where the integral at the right-hand side is finite by Assumption (K6). Combining (4.38), (4.39), (4.40) and (4.41), and using that $u_\varepsilon$ is bounded in $L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3)$, we obtain

$$\| \nabla (\Lambda \circ u_\varepsilon) \|_{L^p(B_{\varepsilon^\beta})} \leq \varepsilon^{(3+\alpha)\beta/p-1} + \varepsilon^{3/2\beta+\nu-\beta-1}$$

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By simple algebra, from (4.35) we obtain
\[
\frac{(3 + \alpha)\beta}{p} - 1 = \frac{3\beta}{p} + \nu - \nu\beta - 1 = 0
\]
so \(\|\nabla (\Lambda \circ u_{\varepsilon})\|_{L^p(B_{\varepsilon \beta})}\) is bounded. Thanks to (3.8), we deduce that \(\|\nabla u_{\varepsilon}\|_{L^p(B_{\varepsilon \beta})}\) is bounded too. Since \(p > 3\), we have the Sobolev embedding \(W^{1,p}(B_{\varepsilon \beta}) \hookrightarrow C^\mu(B_{\varepsilon \beta})\), where
\[
\mu := 1 - \frac{3}{p} = \frac{\alpha(\nu - 1)}{\alpha(\nu - 1) + 3\nu}
\]
Moreover, the constant \(C\) in the Sobolev inequality \([u]_{C^\mu(B_r)} \leq C \|\nabla u\|_{L^p(B_r)}\) is independent of \(r > 0\), as demonstrated by a scaling argument. Then, we obtain
\[
[u_{\varepsilon}]_{C^\mu(B_{\varepsilon \beta})} \leq C
\]
and hence,
\[
\int_{B_\rho} \left| u_{\varepsilon} - \int_{B_\rho} u_{\varepsilon} \right|^2 \leq \rho^{2\mu} \quad \text{for any } \rho \in (0, \varepsilon^\beta].
\]

**Step 3 (Conclusion).** By combining (4.34), (4.42) and (4.43), we deduce that
\[
\int_{B_\rho} \left| u_{\varepsilon} - \int_{B_\rho} u_{\varepsilon} \right|^2 \leq C \rho^{\min(\alpha, 2\mu)} = C \rho^{2\mu}
\]
for any radius \(\rho \in (0, 1)\) and for some constant \(C > 0\) that does not depend on \(\varepsilon, \rho\). Then, Campanato embedding gives an \(\varepsilon\)-independent bound on the \(\mu\)-Hölder semi-norm of \(u_{\varepsilon}\) on \(B_{1/2}\). This completes the proof. \(\square\)

**Proof of Theorem B.** Let \(u_{\varepsilon}\) be a minimiser of \(E_{\varepsilon} \in \mathcal{A}\). By the results of [48], there exists a (non-relabelled) subsequence such that \(u_{\varepsilon} \to u_0\) strongly in \(L^2(\Omega)\), where \(u_0\) is a minimiser of the limit functional (2.9). Take a point \(x_0 \in \Omega \setminus S[u_0]\), where \(S[u_0]\) is defined by (2.11). By definition of \(S[u_0]\), there exists a number \(r_0 > 0\) such that
\[
\int_{B_{r_0}(x_0)} L \nabla u_0 \cdot \nabla u_0 \leq \frac{\eta^2}{2},
\]
where \(\eta\) is given by Theorem A. Proposition 4.2 implies
\[
r_0^{-1} E_{\varepsilon}(u_{\varepsilon}, B_{r_0}(x_0)) \leq \eta^2
\]
for any \(\varepsilon\) small enough and hence, by Theorem A \([u_{\varepsilon}]_{C^\mu(B_{r_0}(x_0))}\) is uniformly bounded. Then, Ascoli-Arzelà’s theorem implies that \(u_{\varepsilon} \to u_0\) uniformly in \(B_{r_0}(x_0)\). \(\square\)
5 Generalisation to finite-thickness boundary conditions

In this section, we discuss a variant of the minimisation problem, where we prescribe $u$ in a neighbourhood of $\partial \Omega$ only. Let $\Omega_\varepsilon \supset \Omega$ be a larger domain, possibly depending on $\varepsilon$. We consider the functional

$$\tilde{E}_\varepsilon(u) := -\frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega_\varepsilon \times \Omega_\varepsilon} K_\varepsilon(x-y)u(x) \cdot u(y) \, dx \, dy + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_\Omega \psi_\varepsilon(u(x)) \, dx + \tilde{C}_\varepsilon,$$

where $\tilde{C}_\varepsilon$ is a constant. The value of $\tilde{C}_\varepsilon$ is irrelevant for the purposes of minimisation, but we will make a specific choice of $\tilde{C}_\varepsilon$ (see (5.3) below) for convenience. As before, we take a map $u_{bd} \in H^1(\mathbb{R}^3, Q)$ that satisfies (BD) and define the admissible class

$$\mathcal{A}_\varepsilon := \left\{ u \in L^\infty(\Omega_\varepsilon, Q) : \psi_\varepsilon(u) \in L^1(\Omega), \; u = u_{bd} \text{ a.e. on } \Omega_\varepsilon \setminus \Omega \right\}.$$

The thickness of the boundary layer $\Omega_\varepsilon \setminus \Omega$ must be related to the decay properties of the kernel $K$. More precisely, in addition to $\{K_1, \ldots, K_6\}, \{H_1, \ldots, H_6\}$, we assume that

$$\text{(K')} \quad \text{There exist numbers } q > 7/2, \beta \in \left(0, 1 - \frac{7}{2q}\right) \text{ and } \tau > 0 \text{ such that}$$

$$\int_{\mathbb{R}^3} g(z) \, |z|^q \, dz < +\infty$$

and $\text{dist}(\Omega, \partial \Omega_\varepsilon) \geq \tau \varepsilon^\beta$ for any $\varepsilon > 0$.

Remark 5.1. In case the kernel $K$ is compactly supported, we can allow for a boundary layer of thickness proportional to $\varepsilon$. More precisely, we can replace the assumption $\{K_1\}$ with the following: there exists $R_0 > 0$ such that $\text{supp}(K) \subseteq B_{R_0}$ and $\text{dist}(\Omega, \partial \Omega_\varepsilon) \geq R_0 \varepsilon$ for any $\varepsilon > 0$. The proofs in this case remain essentially unchanged.

Under these assumptions, we can prove the analogues of Theorems A and B.

Theorem 5.1. Assume that the conditions $\{K_1, \ldots, K_6\}, \{H_1, \ldots, H_6\}, \{\text{BD}\}$ and $\{K\}$ are satisfied. Then, there exist positive numbers $\eta, \varepsilon_s, M$ and $\mu \in (0, 1)$ such that, for any ball $B_{r_0}(x_0) \subseteq \Omega$, any $\varepsilon \in (0, \varepsilon_s r_0)$, and any minimiser $\tilde{u}_\varepsilon$ of $\tilde{E}_\varepsilon$ in $\mathcal{A}_\varepsilon$, there holds

$$r_0^{-1} F_\varepsilon(\tilde{u}_\varepsilon, B_{r_0}(x_0)) \leq \eta \quad \Rightarrow \quad r_0^{\mu} [\tilde{u}_\varepsilon]_{C^0(B_{r_0/2}(x_0))} \leq M.$$

Theorem 5.2. Assume that the conditions $\{K_1, \ldots, K_6\}, \{H_1, \ldots, H_6\}, \{\text{BD}\}$ and $\{K\}$ are satisfied. Let $\tilde{u}_\varepsilon$ be a minimiser of $\tilde{E}_\varepsilon$ in $\mathcal{A}_\varepsilon$. Then, up to extraction of a (non-relabelled) subsequence, we have

$$\tilde{u}_\varepsilon \to u_0 \quad \text{locally uniformly in } \Omega \setminus S[u_0],$$

where $u_0$ is a minimiser of the functional $\{2.9\} in \mathcal{A}$ and $S[u_0]$ is defined by $\{2.11\}$. 

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We define
\[ \tilde{C}_\varepsilon := \frac{c_0}{\varepsilon^2} |\Omega| + \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega \setminus \Omega_\varepsilon} \left( \int_{(\Omega_\varepsilon-x)/\varepsilon} K(z) \, dz \right) \cdot u_{bd}(x)^\otimes \, dx, \]
where \( c_0 \) is the same number as in (2.4), and
\[ H_\varepsilon(x) := \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus (\Omega_\varepsilon-x)/\varepsilon} K(z) \, dz \quad \text{for any } x \in \mathbb{R}^3. \]

**Lemma 5.3.** For any \( u \in \mathcal{A}_\varepsilon \), we have
\[ \tilde{E}_\varepsilon(u) = \frac{1}{4\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega_\varepsilon \times \Omega_\varepsilon} K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot (u(x)-u(y))^\otimes \, dx \, dy + \int_{\Omega} H_\varepsilon(x) \cdot u(x)^\otimes \, dx + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega} \psi_s(u(x)) \, dx. \]

**Proof.** We inject the algebraic identity
\[-2K(x-y)u(x) \cdot u(y) = K(x-y) \cdot (u(x)-u(y))^\otimes - K(x-y) \cdot u(x)^\otimes - K(x-y) \cdot u(y)^\otimes \]
in the expression for \( \tilde{E}_\varepsilon \). Since \( K \) is even, we obtain
\[ \tilde{E}_\varepsilon(u) = F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}(u, \Omega_\varepsilon) - \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega_\varepsilon \times \Omega_\varepsilon} K_\varepsilon(x-y) \cdot u(x)^\otimes \, dx \, dy + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega} \psi_s(u(x)) \, dx + \tilde{C}_\varepsilon \\
= F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}(u, \Omega_\varepsilon) - \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega} \left( \int_{(\Omega_\varepsilon-x)/\varepsilon} K(z) \, dz \right) \cdot u(x)^\otimes \, dx \\
- \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega \setminus \Omega_\varepsilon} \left( \int_{(\Omega_\varepsilon-x)/\varepsilon} K(z) \, dz \right) \cdot u_{bd}(x)^\otimes \, dx + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega} \psi_s(u(x)) \, dx + \tilde{C}_\varepsilon \]
where \( F_{\varepsilon}^{nl} \) is defined by (3.14). Due to (5.3), we deduce
\[ \tilde{E}_\varepsilon(u) = F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}(u, \Omega_\varepsilon) - \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega} \left( \int_{(\Omega_\varepsilon-x)/\varepsilon} K(z) \, dz \right) \cdot u(x)^\otimes \, dx + \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega} \psi_s(u(x)) \, dx + c_0 \, dx \]
and, thanks to (2.4) and (5.4), the lemma follows. \( \square \)

**Lemma 5.4.** For any \( \varepsilon \), there exists a minimiser \( \tilde{u}_\varepsilon \) for \( \tilde{E}_\varepsilon \) in \( \mathcal{A}_\varepsilon \) and it satisfies the Euler-Lagrange equation,
\[ \Lambda(\tilde{u}_\varepsilon(x)) = \int_{\Omega_\varepsilon} K_\varepsilon(x-y)\tilde{u}_\varepsilon(y) \, dy \]
for a.e. \( x \in \Omega \).
The proof of Lemma 5.4 is identical to that of Proposition 3.1, so we skip it for brevity. We remark that the equation (5.5) can be written as
\[ \Lambda(\hat{u}_\varepsilon) = K_{\varepsilon} * (\hat{u}_\varepsilon \chi_{\varepsilon}) \quad \text{a.e. on } \Omega, \]
where \( \chi_{\varepsilon} \) is the characteristic function of \( \Omega \). In particular, the uniform strict physicality of \( \hat{u}_\varepsilon \) follows from (5.5), exactly as in Proposition 3.3.

**Lemma 5.5.** Under the assumption \( [K] \), the tensor field \( H_\varepsilon \) defined by (5.4) satisfies
\[ \sup_{x \in \Omega} \| H_\varepsilon(x) \| = o(\varepsilon^{q-\beta q-2}) \]
as \( \varepsilon \to 0 \).

Under the assumption \( [K] \), we have \( \beta < 1 - 7/(2q) \), which implies \( q - \beta q - 2 > 3/2 \). In particular, \( H_\varepsilon \) converges to zero uniformly in \( \Omega \) as \( \varepsilon \to 0 \).

**Proof of Lemma 5.5.** For any \( x \in \Omega \), we have \( B_{r_{x,\beta}}(x) \subseteq \Omega_\varepsilon \) by \( [K] \), and hence \( B_{r_{x,\beta-1}} \subseteq (\Omega_\varepsilon - x)/\varepsilon, \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus (\Omega_\varepsilon - x)/\varepsilon \subseteq \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{r_{x,\beta-1}} \). Then, the definition (5.4) of \( H_\varepsilon \) gives
\[ \| H_\varepsilon(x) \| \leq \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus (\Omega_\varepsilon - x)/\varepsilon} \| K(z) \| \, dz \]
\[ \leq \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{r_{x,\beta-1}}} \| K(z) \| \, dz \]
\[ \leq \frac{\varepsilon^{q-\beta q-2}}{\tau^q} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B_{r_{x,\beta-1}}} \| K(z) \| |z|^q \, dz \]
and the lemma follows, due to \( [K] \). \( \square \)

**Lemma 5.6.** Let \( \tilde{u}_\varepsilon \) be a minimiser for \( \tilde{E}_\varepsilon \) in \( \mathcal{A}_\varepsilon \), identified with its extension by \( u_{\text{bd}} \) to \( \mathbb{R}^3 \). Then, \( \tilde{u}_\varepsilon \) is an \( \omega \)-minimiser for \( E_\varepsilon \) in \( \Omega_\varepsilon \), where \( \omega(s) := C \varepsilon^{q-\beta q-2}, C > 0 \) is a constant that depends only on \( \Omega, K, Q \) and \( q, \beta \) are given by \( [K] \).

Lemma 5.6 guarantees that our compactness result, Proposition 4.2, applies to minimisers of \( E_\varepsilon \).

**Proof of Lemma 5.6.** We write \( \Omega_\varepsilon := \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \Omega_\varepsilon \). Let \( \tilde{u}_\varepsilon \) be a minimiser for \( \tilde{E}_\varepsilon \) in \( \mathcal{A}_\varepsilon \). Let \( B := B_{\rho}(x_0) \subseteq \Omega \) be a ball, and let \( v \in L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3, Q) \) be such that \( v = \tilde{u}_\varepsilon \) a.e. on \( \mathbb{R}^3 \setminus B \). By comparing (2.1) with (5.1), and using \( [K_\alpha] \), we obtain
\begin{align*}
(5.6) \quad E_\varepsilon(v) - \tilde{E}_\varepsilon(v) - C_\varepsilon + \tilde{C}_\varepsilon \\
= -\frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega_\varepsilon \times \Omega_\varepsilon} K_\varepsilon(x - y)v(x) \cdot v(y) \, dx \, dy - \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega_\varepsilon \times \Omega_\varepsilon} K_\varepsilon(x - y)v(x) \cdot v(y) \, dx \, dy \\
= -\frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{B \times \Omega_\varepsilon} K_\varepsilon(x - y)v(x) \cdot u_{\text{bd}}(y) \, dx \, dy - \frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \int_{(\Omega \setminus B) \times \Omega_\varepsilon} K_\varepsilon(x - y)\tilde{u}_\varepsilon(x) \cdot u_{\text{bd}}(y) \, dx \, dy \\
- \frac{1}{2\varepsilon^2} \int_{\Omega_\varepsilon \times \Omega_\varepsilon} K_\varepsilon(x - y)u_{\text{bd}}(x) \cdot u_{\text{bd}}(y) \, dx \, dy
\end{align*}
The second and third integral at the right-hand side are independent of $v$. We bound the first integral by making the change of variable $y = x + \varepsilon z$ and applying Fubini theorem:

$$\frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \left| \int_{B \times \Omega^c} K_{\varepsilon}(x - y) v(x) \cdot u_{\text{bd}}(y) \, dx \, dy \right| \leq \|u_{\text{bd}}\|_{L^\infty(\mathbb{R}^3)} \int_B \|H_{\varepsilon}(x)\| \, |v(x)| \, dx$$

where $H_{\varepsilon}$ is defined by (5.4). Since $u_{\text{bd}}$ and $v$ both take values in the bounded set $\mathcal{Q}$, and since $|B| \lesssim \rho^3 \lesssim \rho$, by Lemma 5.5 we have

$$\frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \left| \int_{B \times \Omega^c} K_{\varepsilon}(x - y) v(x) \cdot u_{\text{bd}}(y) \, dx \, dy \right| \lesssim \varepsilon^{q - \beta - 2}\rho \quad (5.7)$$

From (5.6) and (5.7), we deduce

$$\frac{1}{\varepsilon^2} \left| \int_{B \times \Omega^c} K_{\varepsilon}(x - y) \varepsilon \cdot u_{\text{bd}}(y) \, dx \, dy \right| \lesssim \varepsilon^{q - \beta - 2}\rho \quad (5.8)$$

On the other hand,

$$\tilde{E}_{\varepsilon}(\tilde{u}_\varepsilon) \leq \tilde{E}_{\varepsilon}(\tilde{u}_\varepsilon) \leq \tilde{E}(\tilde{u}_\varepsilon) \leq E(\tilde{u}_\varepsilon) \leq E(\tilde{v}) + C\varepsilon^{q - \beta - 2}\rho \quad (5.9)$$

because $\tilde{u}_\varepsilon$ is a minimiser for $\tilde{E}_{\varepsilon}$ and $v \in \mathcal{A}_{\varepsilon}$. Combining (5.8) and (5.9), the lemma follows.

Finally, we prove the analogue of the decay lemma, Lemma 4.3.

**Lemma 5.7.** There exist $\eta > 0$, $\theta \in (0, 1/2)$ and $\varepsilon_* > 0$ such that, for any ball $B_{\rho}(x_0) \subseteq \Omega$, any $\varepsilon \in (0, \varepsilon_* \rho)$ and any minimiser $\tilde{u}_\varepsilon$ of $\tilde{E}_{\varepsilon}$ in $\mathcal{A}_{\varepsilon}$ such that

$$E(\tilde{u}_\varepsilon, B_{\rho}(x_0)) \leq \eta^2 \rho,$$

there holds

$$E(\tilde{u}_\varepsilon, B_{\rho}(x_0)) \leq \frac{\theta}{2} E(\tilde{u}_\varepsilon, B_{\rho}(x_0)) + \left( \frac{\varepsilon}{\rho} \right)^{2q - 2\beta - 4} \rho. \quad (5.10)$$

The estimate (5.10) is slightly worse than the corresponding estimate from Lemma 4.3 i.e. Equation (4.6), because the exponent of $\varepsilon/\rho$ at the right-hand side is strictly less than $2q - 4$. Nevertheless, (5.10) is still enough for our purposes. Indeed, the assumption $\beta < 1 - 7/(2q)$ implies that $\bar{q} := q - \beta q > 7/2$. Then, the proofs of Theorem A and Theorem B carry over; it suffices to replace all the occurrences of $q$ with $\bar{q}$. In particular, once Lemma 5.7 is proved, Theorem 5.1 and Theorem 5.2 follow.

**Proof of Lemma 5.7.** Suppose that $B_{\rho}(x_0)$ is a ball contained in $\Omega$ and that $u : \Omega_{\varepsilon} \to \mathcal{Q}$. We consider $U_{\rho} := (\Omega - x_0)/\rho$, $U_{\varepsilon, \rho} := (\Omega_{\varepsilon} - x_0)/\rho$ and define $u_{\rho} : U_{\rho} \to \mathcal{Q}$ as $u_{\rho}(y) := u(x_0 + \rho y)$. Then,

$$\rho^{-1} \tilde{E}(u) = F_{\varepsilon}(u_{\rho}, U_{\varepsilon, \rho}) + \frac{1}{(\varepsilon/\rho)^2} \int_{U_{\rho}} \psi_b(u_{\rho}(x)) \, dx + \int_{U_{\rho}} H_{\varepsilon, \rho}(x) \cdot u_{\rho}(x)^{\otimes 2} \, dx$$

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where $F_{\varepsilon}^{nl}$ is defined by (3.14) and
\[
H^{\rho, x_0}_{\varepsilon/\rho}(x) := \frac{1}{(\varepsilon/\rho)^2} \int_{\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus (\Omega_{x_0 - \rho x}/\varepsilon)} K(z) \, dz = \rho^2 H_{\varepsilon}(x_0 + \rho x)
\]

Lemma 3.5 implies that
\[
\sup_{x \in U_\rho} \|H^{\rho, x_0}_{\varepsilon/\rho}(x)\| = o(\rho^2 \varepsilon^{q-\beta q-2}) = o\left((\varepsilon/\rho)^{q-\beta q-2}\right)
\]

As a consequence, if we prove the lemma in case $x_0 = 0, \rho = 1$, then the general statement will follow, by a scaling argument.

Suppose the lemma does not hold. Then, for any $\theta \in (0, 1/2)$, there exist a sequence $\varepsilon_j \to 0$ and minimisers $\tilde{u}_j$ of $\tilde{E}_{\varepsilon_j}$ such that
\[
\eta_j^2 := F_{\varepsilon_j}(\tilde{u}_j, B_1) \to 0 \quad \text{as} \quad j \to +\infty,
\]
\[
F_{\varepsilon_j}(\tilde{u}_j, B_\theta) > \frac{\theta \eta_j^2}{2} + \varepsilon_j^{2q-2\beta q-4} \geq \frac{\theta \eta_j^2}{2} + \varepsilon_j^{2q-4}
\]

Lemma 4.5 and Lemma 4.6 carry over, so there exists a sequence of points $\zeta_j \in \mathcal{N}$ such that, up to a non-relabelled subsequence, $\zeta_j \to \zeta$ and
\[
v_j := \frac{\tilde{u}_j - \zeta_j}{\eta_j} \to \tilde{v} \quad \text{strongly in} \ L^2(B_{1/2}) \text{ and a.e.}
\]

Moreover, the limit map $\tilde{v}$ belongs to $H^1(B_{1/2}, \mathbb{T}_{\zeta-N})$. Let $s \in (0, 1/2)$ and let $\tilde{v}^* \in H^1(B_{1/2}, \mathbb{T}_{\zeta-N})$ be such that $\tilde{v}^* = \tilde{v}$ a.e. in $B_{1/2} \setminus B_s$. We construct admissible competitors $\tilde{\xi}_j \in L^\infty(\Omega_{x_j}, Q)$ exactly as before, by applying Lemma 4.6. We recall that there exist radii $\tau, t$ with $\max(1/2, s) < \tau < t < 1/2$ such that $\tilde{\xi}_j = \tilde{u}_j$ out of $B_t$ and
\[
\tilde{\xi}_j - \zeta_j \to \tilde{v}^* \quad \text{strongly in} \ H^1(B_\tau)
\]

However, $\tilde{u}_j$ is now a minimiser of $\tilde{E}_{\varepsilon_j}$, not of $E_{\varepsilon_j}$. As a result, we have the inequality
\[
F_{\varepsilon_j}(\tilde{u}_j, B_1) + \Gamma_{\varepsilon_j}(\tilde{u}_j, B_1, \Omega_{x_j} \setminus B_1) \leq F_{\varepsilon_j}(\tilde{\xi}_j, B_1) + \Gamma_{\varepsilon_j}(\tilde{\xi}_j, B_1, \Omega_{x_j} \setminus B_1) + \int_{B_1} H_{\varepsilon_j}(x) \cdot \left(\tilde{\xi}_j(x)^{\otimes 2} - \tilde{u}_j(x)^{\otimes 2}\right) \, dx,
\]

with an additional term at the right-hand side. (We recall that $\Gamma_{\varepsilon}$ is defined by (3.24).) We claim that
\[
I_j := \frac{1}{\eta_j^2} \int_{B_1} H_{\varepsilon_j}(x) \cdot \left(\tilde{\xi}_j(x)^{\otimes 2} - \tilde{u}_j(x)^{\otimes 2}\right) \, dx \to 0
\]
as $j \to +\infty$. Once (5.15) is proved, the rest of the arguments carry over.
Equation (5.4) implies that the matrix $H_\varepsilon(x)$ is symmetric, for any $x \in B_1$. Then,

$$I_j = \frac{1}{\eta_j^2} \int_{B_1} H_\varepsilon(x) \left( \tilde{\xi}_j(x) - \tilde{u}_j(x) \right) \cdot \left( \tilde{\xi}_j(x) + \tilde{u}_j(x) \right) \, dx$$

As both $\tilde{\xi}_j$ and $\tilde{u}_j$ take their values in the bounded set $Q$, the Hölder inequality gives

$$I_j \lesssim \eta_j^{-2} \| H_\varepsilon \|_{L^\infty(B_1)} \left( \| \tilde{\xi}_j - \zeta_j \|_{L^2(B_{1/2})} + \| \tilde{u}_j - \zeta_j \|_{L^2(B_{1/2})} \right)$$

We can further estimate the right-hand side by applying (5.13), (5.14) and Lemma 5.5

$$I_j = o \left( \frac{\varepsilon_j^{q-2\beta q - 2}}{\eta_j} \right)$$

However, (5.11) and (5.12) imply that $\eta_j^2 \geq \varepsilon^{2q-2\beta q - 4}$, so $\eta_j \geq \varepsilon^{q-\beta q - 2}$ and (5.15) follows.

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