A colloquium on the variational method applied to excitons in 2D materials

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Received: date / Revised version: date

Abstract In this colloquium, we review the research on excitons in van der Waals heterostructures from the point of view of variational calculations. We first make a presentation of the current and past literature, followed by a discussion on the connections between experimental and theoretical results. In particular, we focus our review of the literature on the absorption spectrum and polarizability, as well as the Stark shift and the dissociation rate. Afterwards, we begin the discussion of the use of variational methods in the study of excitons. We initially model the electron-hole interaction as a soft-Coulomb potential, which can be used to describe interlayer excitons. Using an ansatz, based on the solution for the two-dimensional quantum harmonic oscillator, we study the Rytova-Keldysh potential, which is appropriate to describe intralayer excitons in two-dimensional (2D) materials. These variational energies are then recalculated with a different ansatz, based on the exact wavefunction of the 2D hydrogen atom, and the obtained energy curves are compared. Afterwards, we discuss the Wannier-Mott exciton model, reviewing it briefly before focusing on an application of this model to obtain both the exciton absorption spectrum and the binding energies for certain values of the physical parameters of the materials. Finally, we briefly discuss an approximation of the electron-hole interaction in interlayer excitons as an harmonic potential and the comparison of the obtained results with the existing values from both first-principles calculations and experimental measurements.

PACS. XX.XX.XX No PACS code given

1 Introduction

Alongside graphene, a wide range of bi-dimensional materials are currently studied and have a plethora of different physical properties and applications[1]. An important subclass of these materials is the family of transition-metal dichalcogenides with chemical formula MX₂, where M is a transition metal and X a chalcogen atom. These materials, specifically those with group-VI transition metals, are semiconductors which exhibit strong light-matter coupling, as well as having direct band gaps in the infrared and visible spectral regimes. Having been studied in their bulk form since the 1960’s[2,3], the advent of the study of two-dimensional (2D) layers with atomic scale thickness renewed the interest in these materials and their properties that make them good candidates for various applications in optics and optoelectronics[4].

The optical response of these semiconductors is mainly dominated by the excitation of electrons from the valence band to the conduction band[5,6]. Such a phenomena can be described by a pair of interacting (effective) particles, one being a conduction electron and the other being a hole left in the valence band, with opposite charge to the electron (Figure 1–a). Considering frequencies above the band gap, a transition from the valence to the conduction band is possible, which means that the absorption be-
comes finite. For certain materials, absorption peaks can be measured below the band gap, which can be explained by the presence of excitonic states (bound states of the said electron and hole).

As the electron and hole are of opposite charges, the most natural formulation of their interaction will be an attractive interaction. This will lead to the possibility of the formation of bound states between these particles, analogous to those formed between an electron and a proton in the hydrogen atom. Unfortunately, the small effective mass of the particles in question and large screening effects means that the excitonic binding energy in bulk materials is of the order of meV, while the room-temperature thermal fluctuations are about 25 meV. These fluctuations mask excitonic effects unless the material is sufficiently cooled down.

The hydrogen atom and, consequently, hydrogen-like problems are some of the most studied systems in physics. While the simplest model consisting only of the Coulomb interaction has a well-known exact solution, when one wishes to introduce more complex interactions no exact solutions are known. This becomes increasingly problematic when one wishes to study systems with local/non-local screening, or finite (and externally fixed) minimum separation between particles.

In 2D transition-metal dichalcogenides (TMDs), where the screening effect is reduced relatively to their bulk counterparts, the exciton binding energies reach values the order of 100 meV. Therefore, these class of excitons are more easily accessible to experimental study, as they are observable at room temperature. As an example, WSe₂ in a fused quartz substrate presents two excitonic peaks in the linear absorption at 1.65 and 2.08 eV. The presence of two peaks instead of a single one is the signature of strong spin-orbit coupling in this system. The position of these peaks in frequency, however, was not consistent with the bare Coulomb interaction, which shows the necessity of including screening effects in the electron-hole interaction.

The simplest way of including a screening-like effect is via the soft-Coulomb potential, which introduces a material-dependent minimum separation-like parameter between the electron and the hole. Although this approach might seem somewhat artificial, it is relevant to the discussion of interlayer excitons (see below). Another of these potentials is the Rytova-Keldysh potential, which includes a material-dependent parameter and reduces to the Coulomb potential in the regime when this parameter is zero. Mathematically, this potential is significantly more complex than the Coulomb potential, which in turn further complicates the analytical work in determining the absorption spectrum. It can, however, be closely approximated by simpler functions, which might help with the calculations for the absorption spectrum.

Another relevant system is that of spatially separated excitons (also called indirect excitons, although this terminology may be misleading), where each element of the electron-hole pair is situated in a different layer, creating a minimum distance between the electron and the hole (Figure 1(b)). These excitons are specially relevant in van der Waals (vdW) heterostructures, where multiple layers of different TMDs are stacked. With the previously-mentioned soft-Coulomb potential, this bias distance is easily introduced as a minimum separation parameter, which depends on the specific heterostructure. The obtained theoretical results (from either variational or numerical methods) can be compared with experimental results, where the minimum separation is usually of the order of the effective Bohr radius for an electron-hole pair in the material in question.

![Figure 1](image)
by replacing the Coulomb potential with the Rytova-Keldysh potential \[3,9\] with parameters related to the relative dielectric constants of the media surrounding the monolayer, as well as the 2D polarizability of the TMD \[13,14,15,16,17,18\].

### 2 Brief Historical Review

After the first mechanical exfoliation of graphene in 2004 by Novoselov and Geim\[19\], the field of two-dimensional materials boomed. Just one year after the exfoliation of graphene, in 2005, Novoselov et al.\[20\] showed that the same technique could be applied to isolate other monolayer materials. This was specifically done for a 2D semiconductor, molybdenum disulfide (MoS\(_2\)). Despite these advances, most of the research on 2D materials was focused on the unknown properties of graphene. This changed somewhat in 2010, when Heinz and Wang demonstrated \[21,22\] (independently) that a MoS\(_2\) monolayer exhibits strong photoluminescence emission and has a direct band gap. The bandgaps in the near-infrared to visible range, the high photo-catalytic and mechanic stability, the decent charge carrier mobility, and the presence of exotic many-body phenomena make these materials extremely interesting from a fundamental research, device application, and innovation perspectives\[23\]. Despite the quick recognition that the optical response of transition metal dichalcogenides arises from excitons, quantitative measurements of the binding energy were only reported around 2014 \[24\]. Excitons in these materials are tightly bound, and dominate the optical response even at room-temperature \[25,26\]. This possibility comes about due to the reduced screening among the electrons in the TMDs, which has its origin in the low dimensionality of the 2D materials.

The demonstration of valley-selective optical excitation, in 2012, brought forth the field of TMD-based valleytronics \[27\]. In 2013 \[28\], the advent of vdW heterostructures allowed the fabrication of TMD heterostructures, and consequently the observation of interlayer excitons. The more recent developments of optoelectronic devices, whose structure resembles that of the first MoS\(_2\) monolayer field-effect transistor (demonstrated in 2011 by Kis et al.\[29\]) has happened in parallel with the research on the optical properties of TMDs. This same structure was used to realized atomically thin phototransistors one year later \[30\].

The realization of atomically thin p-n junctions for both vertical \[31\] and lateral \[32\] geometries, in 2014, lead to the realization of light-emitting diodes, solar cells, and photodiodes. The potential efficiency of these devices was greatly improved by the 2015 demonstration of near-unity photon quantum yield in a TMD monolayer \[33\]. More recently, in 2017, the role of dark exciton states has become a major field of research, with optically allowed and forbidden dark excitons forming due to weak dielectric screening and strong geometrical confinement in TMD-based vdW heterostructures \[34,35\].

Recently, the calculation and the experimental measurements of the Stark-shift and ionization rate of excitons in TMD has attracted considerable attention \[36\], \[37,38,39\]. The possibility of increasing the efficiency of photodetectors using the Stark effect has grown the interest in this topic. However, the same class of problems is largely understudied in vdW heterostructures, with only one paper published so far on this topic \[17\].

The interest in the optical and excitonic properties of atomically thin TMDs \[40\] has peaked in recent years, with numerous works focused on the study of both the excitonic binding energies \[41,42,43\], exciton-exciton/exciton-electron interactions \[44\], strain effects \[45\], their presence in vdW twisted heterostructures \[46\], anisotropic semiconductors \[47\] and quantum dots \[48,49,50,51\], and several magneto-optical effects \[52,53,54,55\] published by many.

In what follows, we will briefly review some of the various approaches used in the study of excitons in vdW heterostructures, starting from the study of the electron-hole interaction in both monolayer TMDs \[14,56\] and vdW heterostructures \[57,13,58\], as well as the study of screening effects in the interaction among the charge carriers \[59,10\].

### 3 Connection with Experimental Results

Discovered in 1913 by Stark\[40\], the Stark effect consists in the splitting of the spectral lines due to the presence of an external static electric field (analogously to the Zeeman effect). This effect is greatly enhanced by excitons in vdW heterostructures, as the electron and the hole that form the exciton are “pulled” in opposing directions by the external field, but remain confined in the material until the field is strong enough to dissociate it.

For weak electric fields, the Stark shifts of electrons vary, in accordance with perturbation theory, approximately quadratically with the external field \(E\), i.e., \(E \approx E_0 - \frac{1}{2} \alpha E^2\), where \(E_0\) is the unperturbed energy and \(\alpha\) the in-plane polarizability. This allows for the calculation
of the polarizability, which can then be used as a comparison against experimental results. The calculation of the polarizabilities reveals that they are significantly larger (around 3× greater) for interlayer excitons, compared to their monolayer counterparts [17]. This phenomenon in bilayer vdW heterostructures can be explained by the increased screening and the vertical separation of the electron-hole pair, both of which reduce the binding energy and, therefore, facilitate the polarization of the exciton.

As the electron and the hole are pulled in opposing directions by the external field, the exciton may dissociate. This dissociation is realized by a non-vanishing imaginary part of the energy eigenvalue. Knowing the imaginary part of the energy eigenvalue, one can quickly calculate the field dissociation rate as $\Gamma = -2 \text{Im} E/\hbar$. Kamban and Pedersen [17] obtain this imaginary part by applying the external complex scaling method [61,62], i.e., by rotating the radial coordinate into the complex plane by an angle $\phi$ outside of a specific radius $R$. The equation for the eigenstate is then split into the radial and the angular parts. The former is dealt with using a finite element basis consisting of Legendre polynomials, while the latter is solved using a cosine basis.

The dissociation times can be approximated as $\tau = 1/\Gamma$ and are, at least, 10 orders of magnitude greater than the experimentally obtained 50 fs required for holes to tunnel into the WS$_2$ layer of a MoS$_2$/WS$_2$ heterostructure [63]. This time will likely be affected by material–(and medium) specific parameters, as these influence both the band gap and the binding energies of the excitons [61,65]. This large discrepancy is explained by the transition from intralayer to interlayer excitons (due to the staggered/type-II band alignment, see Fig. 2) before the field can dissociate these same excitons. Also, the luminescence exhibited by these interlayer excitons is exhibited at energies lower than that for intralayer complexes [66], as is clear from the band diagram of Fig. 2.

After tunneling, interlayer excitons have long lifetime due to the small overlap of the individual electron and hole wave functions [68]. As such, when an in-plane field is applied, interlayer excitons will tunnel into interlayer excitons with sufficiently long lifetimes for them to dissociate. The much larger dissociation rates of interlayer excitons when compared to intralayer ones corroborates this, with $\Gamma \sim 10^4$ s$^{-1}$ for interlayer excitons in a freely suspended (i.e., not surrounded by a dielectric medium) MoS$_2$/WS$_2$ heterostructure, but only $\Gamma \sim 10^{-38}$ s$^{-1}$ for monolayer MoS$_2$ (at $\mathcal{E} = 10$ V/μm) [69].

Furthermore, for the same electric field intensity, the dissociation rates for intralayer excitons in the top and bottom layers of MoS$_2$/WS$_2$ structures differ by seven orders of magnitude ($\Gamma \sim 2.1 \times 10^{-3}$ s$^{-1}$ and $\Gamma \sim 2.9 \times 10^4$ s$^{-1}$, respectively), which can be explained from the reduced masses in each material $\mu \approx 0.25, 0.15$ (in units of the bare electron mass), respectively.

When studying exciton dissociation it is also important to take into account their radiative lifetimes. Wang et al. [70] focus their efforts on MoS$_2$, calculating a radiative lifetime of around 180 – 300 fs, in good agreement with recent experimental results for excitons with near-zero momentum in WS$_2$, in the range 150 – 250 fs [71]. Furthermore, Wang et al. [70] show that excitons with very long ($\geq 1$ ns) exciton lifetimes that have been observed in clean MoS$_2$ monolayers at small photoexcited exciton densities [38] are consistent with strongly localized excitons.

The absorption spectrum is one of the most used physical quantity of comparison between theoretical calculations and experimental results regarding both excitons [72] and trions [73]. These theoretical calculations come from both analytical, quasi-analytical and numerical approaches, usually expressed in terms of the optical conductivity. Looking specifically at some recent works regarding the calculation of the absorption spectrum, we
mention Zhang et al. [74], Van der Donck and Peeters [75, 76], and Henriquez et al. [55]. Recent numerical studies [75] also focus on the importance of considering a multiband model (including spin-orbit coupling) when calculating the exciton/trion binding energies and their absorption spectrum (a trion is a charged complex, which in a n-doped semiconductor is composed of the two electrons and a hole).

There are two complementary methods of accessing the optical properties of 2D materials: photoluminescence (PL) and absorption measurements ($\Delta R/R$). They both convey similar information. Ruppert et al. [77] measured the PL and the absorption in MoTe$_2$ multilayers down to the single layer case. They showed that the PL signal increases significantly when one moves from the bulk crystal to the single layer limit (see Fig. 3). This led these authors to conclude that MoTe$_2$ single layer is a direct band gap material with a band-gap of 1.1 eV, thus extending the class of 2D direct band gap materials from the visible to the near-infrared.

4 Variational Methods

One of the simplest approach to study systems for which there is no analytical solution is using variational methods, which allows one to obtain approximations to both the wavefunction and its corresponding energy eigenvalue. The obtained closed-form analytical solutions give greater physical intuition on the result than numerical solutions. From the numerous works by multiple authors that employ variational methods, we specifically mention those by Grasselli [42], Zhang et al. [74,15], Semina [78], Planelles [79], and Lundt et al. [80].

This method is usually performed in one of three ways: by choosing a trial wavefunction (ansatz) depending on a series of parameters and minimizing the expectation value of the Hamiltonian regarding these same parameters, quantum Monte Carlo methods [66], or by imposing a set of boundary conditions and constructing the wavefunction as a series expansion which obeys these same conditions by definition (frequently used when dealing with polygonal enclosures [81,82,83]). This third procedure is not as useful when one is dealing with infinite/semi–infinite regions, and will therefore remain undiscussed.

Over the next two sections, we will briefly describe two distinct approaches to variational methods, both based around choosing a trial function to solve an eigenvalue problem where the exact solution is either unknown or non–existent. Firstly, we will analyze the process described by Grasselli [42], applying it afterwards to both a different potential and a different ansatz. Secondly, we discuss a work by Zhang et al. [74], quickly reviewing the excitonic states, as well as the optical conductivity and the absorption spectrum, and finally comparing the exciton radii and binding energies to those from first–principles approaches available in the literature (see Sec. 6.3).

5 The Variational Approach to 2D systems

The use of variational wave functions for describing excitonic properties has a long story in condensed matter and has been used in many systems, including quantum-well wires [84]. These same variational approaches have also been considered when it comes to the description of the excitonic Stark effect in confined systems [85]. These methods have also been applied to the study of biexcitons, quasi-particles consisting of two electrons and two holes [86].

A simple example of variational methods is employed by Grasselli [42] to obtain the variational energies of the soft-Coulomb potential. Unlike the hydrogenic problem with the regular Coulomb interaction, exact solutions of the Schrödinger equation are not known for the soft-Coulomb potential. This potential is given by

$$V_{s-C}(r) = -\frac{k}{\sqrt{r^2 + d^2}}, \quad (1)$$
where \( k = e^2 / (4\pi\varepsilon_0\varepsilon_r) \), \( e \) is the electron charge, \( \varepsilon_0 \) is the vacuum permittivity, and \( \varepsilon_r \) is the relative dielectric permittivity of the material, and is obtained for the bare Coulomb potential by introducing a fixed bias distance in the form of the parameter \( d \). This potential is frequently used in semiconductor physics, as it:

1. overcomes the divergence issues of the Coulomb potential at the origin \( (r = 0) \), as well as the infinite binding energy of the ground-state in one-dimension \[87\]. In this case, \( d \neq 0 \) is taken as a fixed cut-off parameter of the order of the screening length;
2. represents the coupling of an electron confined in a layer to a hole sitting in a different layer, a distance \( d \) apart.

The method introduced by Grasselli will be presented in the context of a simple 2D material in Sec. 5.1 following which we will apply the same methodology for the more difficult Rytova-Keldysh potential in Sec. 5.2.

### 5.1 Interlayer Excitons in hBN: the Soft–Coulomb Potential

Few layers hexagonal Boron Nitride (hBN) hosts excitons in the ultraviolet. If the number of layers is small we can treat this system as coupled 2D layers. In this case the parameter \( d \) is the distance between the layers where the electron and the hole are respectively located (interlayer excitons). The problem of excitons in a single layer of hBN was treated by Henriques et al \[88\].

Consider a two-dimensional system, the \textit{ansätze} for the ground- and first-excited states are based on the solutions for the quantum harmonic oscillator and are given by \[42\]

\[
\phi_0 \left( r \right) = \sqrt{\frac{\beta_0}{\pi}} e^{-\beta_0 r^2 / 2},
\]

\[
\phi_{1z} \left( r, \theta \right) = \sqrt{\frac{\beta_1}{\pi}} \sqrt{2} \beta_1 r \cos \theta e^{-\beta_1 r^2 / 2},
\]

where \( \beta_0 \) and \( \beta_1 \) are variational parameters. The \( y \)-component for the first-excited state is, by symmetry, degenerate and mutually orthogonal with the \( x \)-component and, as such, will not be discussed.

The expectation values of the Hamiltonian

\[
H \left( r \right) = -\frac{\hbar^2}{2m} \nabla^2 + V \left( r \right)
\]

taken with these two variational wave functions are given by

\[
\varepsilon_0 \left( \beta_0, d \right) = \frac{\hbar^2 \beta_0}{2m} - k \sqrt{\beta_0 \pi} e^{2 \beta_0} \text{erfc} \left( d \sqrt{\beta_0} \right),
\]

\[
\varepsilon_1 \left( \beta_1, d \right) = \frac{\hbar^2 \beta_1}{m} - \frac{k}{2} \sqrt{\beta_1 \pi} \left[ \frac{d \sqrt{\beta_1}}{\sqrt{\pi}} + \left( 1 - 2d^2 \beta_1 \right) e^{d^2 \beta_1} \text{erfc} \left( d \sqrt{\beta_1} \right) \right],
\]

where \( \text{erfc} \left( z \right) = 1 - \text{erf} \left( z \right) \) is the complementary error function.

Taking typical hBN parameters \((\text{effective mass} \mu = 0.6 m_0, \text{with} \ m_0 \text{the bare electron mass, and an effective dielectric constant} \epsilon_r = 5.89)\) and defining the effective Bohr radius and the effective Rydberg as \( a_B = 4\pi\varepsilon_0\varepsilon_r\varepsilon^2 / (\varepsilon^2 \mu) = \frac{\hbar^2}{m \epsilon} = 5.222 \text{ Å} \) and \( \text{Ry} = \mu e^4 / (32\pi^2 e_0^2 \varepsilon^2 \hbar^2) = \frac{k_{\text{B}}}{a_B} = 234.1 \text{ meV} \), the extrema of \( \varepsilon_1 \) for a separation bias \( d \) in the typical range for this material \((5 \text{ to } 20 \text{ Å})\) are obtained and the variational energies are plotted in Fig. 4 (left panel). As expected, the binding energy increases as the distance between the layers decrease, due to the enhancement of the electrostatic interaction.

This procedure can be easily utilized for higher-energy states, with the main drawback being the ever-increasing calculation time and complexity of the Hamiltonian expectation value for the chosen \textit{ansätze}. In this case, the expectation value of the Hamiltonian using the variational wave functions can always be computed numerically, if need be.

A more interesting application for this procedure is the repetition of the calculations, now considering the Rytova-Keldysh potential. Obtaining the variational energies with the same \textit{ansätze}, the results for the two potentials can be more easily compared, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

### 5.2 Intralayer Excitons in hBN: the Rytova-Keldysh potential

#### 5.2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this section is to discuss the formation of intralayer excitons in hBN as opposed to interlayer excitons described in the previous section. For intralayer excitons in 2D materials the suitable choice of electrostatic potential is the Rytova-Keldysh potential, as it...
provides a better description of screening in the 2D material. The Rytova-Keldysh potential in polar coordinates can be written as

\[ V_{\text{RK}}(r) = -\frac{k\pi}{2r_0} \left[ H_0\left(\frac{r}{r_0}\right) - Y_0\left(\frac{r}{r_0}\right) \right] \]  

where \( k = \frac{e^2}{4\pi\epsilon_0\epsilon_r} \), \( H_0(x) \) is the zeroth-order Struve function, \( Y_0(x) \) is the zeroth-order Bessel function of the second kind, and \( r_0 \) is a material-specific screening length. The derivation of this potential, following the same approach as Cudazzo et al. [89], is present in Appendix B. Approximately, this potential behaves similarly to

\[ V'_{\text{RK}}(r) \approx k \frac{r}{r_0} \left[ \log \left(\frac{r}{r + r_0}\right) + (\gamma - \log 2) e^{-\frac{r}{r_0}} \right] \]  

which might help performing analytical calculations in the future. Furthermore, when one takes the limit \( r_0 \to 0 \), the Rytova-Keldysh potential (as well as its \( \log + \exp \) approximation) reduces to the usual Coulomb potential.

5.2.2 Variational Energy

In this section we use the same \textit{ansätze} as that used in the 2D soft-Coulomb problem. Taking the expectation values of the Hamiltonian with the Rytova-Keldysh potential, we obtain

\[ \epsilon_0(\beta_0, r_0) = \text{Ry} \frac{\pi a_B G_{2.3}^2 \left(\frac{1}{4r_0^2\beta_0}\right)_{0, -\frac{1}{2}}_{0, 0, -\frac{1}{2}}}{r_0} - 2 \sqrt{\frac{\pi a_B F\left(\frac{1}{2r_0^2\beta_0}\right)}{r_0}} \]  

and

\[ \epsilon_1(\beta_1, r_0) = \text{Ry} a_B \left[ 2\beta_1 - \frac{a_B G_{2.3}^3 \left(\frac{1}{4r_0^2\beta_1}\right)_{0, -\frac{1}{2}}_{0, 0, -\frac{1}{2}}}{\pi r_0} \right]. \]

Here, \( F \) is the Dawson-F function and \( G \) is the Meijer-G function, a generalization of most special functions. The effective Bohr radius \( a_B \) and the effective Rydberg Ry have the same numerical values as those defined previously.

Finding the extrema of these functions is significantly more difficult than in the Soft-Coulomb problem. The spectrum in the range \( r_0 \in [5, 20] \) Å is present in Figure 4 (right panel). As can be seen in this figure, there is a slight difference between the \( V'_{\text{RK}}(r) \) approximation (dashed lines) and the exact Rytova-Keldysh potential (solid lines) which appears to increase as \( r_0 \) decreases.

As the computation time with the approximation of the Rytova-Keldysh is significantly slower, it seems preferable to just use the standard Rytova-Keldysh potential when considering these specific \textit{ansätze}.

5.3 Different \textit{Ansätze}

Let us now consider a different \textit{ansatz}, given by

\[ \phi(r) = \sqrt{\frac{2}{\pi}} \frac{1}{\beta} e^{-r/\beta}, \]

where \( \beta \) is a variational parameter, which corresponds to the excitonic wave-function for a system with the valence band completely full, the conduction band totally...
The anisotropic formulation equivalent to this wave-function is given by
\[ \phi(x, y) = \sqrt{\frac{2}{\pi \lambda_1 \lambda_2}} e^{-\sqrt{(\frac{x}{\lambda_1})^2 + (\frac{y}{\lambda_2})^2}}, \quad (12) \]
where both \( \lambda_1 \) and \( \lambda_2 \) are variational parameters, and was applied to excitons in phosphorene. The anisotropic Rytova-Keldysh potential, together with the anisotropic Stark shift and electroabsorption of excitons is discussed in Ref. [91].

Choosing a different \textit{ansatz} leads to a different form for the variational energy, but the expectation value after minimization should be similar if the trial wave function is not too different from the exact groundstate. With this \textit{ansatz}, the variational energy takes the form (where s-C stands for the soft-Coulomb potential and R-K stands for the Rytova-Keldysh potential)
\[ \epsilon_{s-C}(\beta, r_0) = R y a_B \left( \frac{a_B}{\beta^2} + \frac{4\pi r_0}{\beta} Y_1 \left( \frac{2r_0}{\beta} \right) + H_{-1} \left( \frac{2r_0}{\beta} \right) \right), \quad (13) \]
\[ \epsilon_{R-K}(\beta, r_0) = R y a_B \left( \frac{a_B}{\beta^2} - \frac{4(\beta - 2r_0)}{\beta^2 + 4r_0^2} - \frac{16r_0^2}{(\beta^2 + 4r_0^2)^{3/2}} \sinh^{-1} \left( \frac{2r_0}{\beta} \right) + \text{csch}^{-1} \left( \frac{2r_0}{\beta} \right) \right). \quad (14) \]
Equations (13) (14) have very different forms from Equations (5) (9) but the expectation values after minimization are quite similar, as the variational method provides an upper bound to the (in this case) ground-state energy. We note, however, that the shape of the wave functions differ.

In Fig. 5 we compare the ground-state energy for the two different \textit{ansätze} considered above and for the soft-Coulomb potential and the Rytova-Keldysh potential. Looking at both panels of Fig. 5 we see that both \textit{ansätze} give very similar ground-state energies. In the case of the soft-Coulomb potential, the harmonic oscillator \textit{ansatz} gives a slightly smaller energy, whereas the Rytova-Keldysh potential the opposite happens. This inversion is related to the different behavior of the two potentials at the origin: the soft-Coulomb potential does not diverges at the origin whereas the Ritova-Keldysh does. Indeed, the soft-Coulomb potential can be approximated by a parabola at short distances and therefore a harmonic oscillator trial wave function should give a better description to the true wave function of the ground state, as was effectively verified. In the case of a divergent potential at the origin, an inverse exponential \textit{ansatz} should describe better the ground state wave function.

6 The Wannier–Mott Exciton Model of a TMD Single-Layer

The dielectric constant is generally large in semiconductors, which in turn increases electric screening. This reduces the electron-hole interaction, increasing the radius of the exciton. When this exciton radius is greater than the lattice spacing, the exciton is a Wannier-Mott exciton [92, 93]. These are typically found in semiconductors with small energy gaps and high dielectric constants, as expected.

Transition-metal dichalcogenides, more specifically their 2D form, have emerged in the fields of electronics and optoelectronics. One of their distinguishing features are the larger-than-usual exciton (and trion) binding energies, almost an order of magnitude larger compared to other bulk semiconductors. These large binding energies
imply that many-body interactions are fundamental to determining and understanding the electronic and optoelectronic properties.

Using an equation of motion approach, Have et al. calculated excitonic properties of monolayer TMDs perturbed by an external magnetic field. The obtained results are compared to both the Wannier model for excitons, as well as recent experimental results. A good agreement between the authors’ calculated excitonic transition energies and experimental data is observed, whilst being slightly lower than those calculated via the Wannier exciton model. The authors also show that the effects of the surrounding dielectric environment in the magnetoexciton energy is minimal, as the changes in the exciton energy and the exchange energy correction counteract each other.

To better exemplify this exciton model, as well as compare the results obtained from it against those from first-principles calculations, we will briefly review the work of Zhang et al. In their work, the authors show that the traditional Wannier-Mott exciton model with some modifications is able to appropriately describe the exciton in 2D dichalcogenides. The modifications in question involve taking into account accurate band structures of the conduction and valence bands for large wave-vectors, incorporating phase-space cancellations due to Pauli exclusion in doped materials, as well as taking into account the finite thickness of dichalcogenide monolayers by considering a wave-vector-dependent dielectric constant. With these modifications, the authors study normally incident radiation, discussing the binding energy and the absorption spectrum, both with and without taking into account Pauli blocking.

### 6.1 Exciton States

Zhang et al. consider a system where the initial state $|\psi_i\rangle$ of the semiconductor consists of a completely filled valence band, as well as a conduction band with an electron density $n_e$ in accordance with the Fermi-Dirac distribution $f_c(k)$. This initial state belongs to a thermal ensemble and the average energy of the ground-state $\langle \psi_i | H | \psi_i \rangle$ is $E_i$ (i.e., $\langle \psi_i | H | \psi_i \rangle = E_i$).

Since only excitons with zero in-plane momentum are created by normally incident radiation, an exciton state with zero in-plane momentum can be constructed from the initial state as

$$|\psi_{ex}\rangle = \frac{1}{\sqrt{A}} \sum_k \phi(k) c_{k,\uparrow} b_{k,\uparrow} |\psi_i\rangle,$$  \hspace{1cm} (15)$$

where $c_{k,\uparrow}$, $b_{k,\uparrow}$ are the destruction operators for the spin-up conduction and valence-band states with momentum $k$, respectively, and $A$ is the area of the monolayer (normalization factor). The normalization factor $N_{ex}(k)$ equals $\sqrt{1 - f_c(k)}$ and this exciton state is normalized such that $\langle (\psi_{ex}|\psi_{ex})_th = 1$, where $\{...\}_th$ represents averaging with respect to the thermal ensemble. The presence of the Fermi-Dirac distribution in Eq. (15) allows the discussion of doped TMDs. In this context, it has been shown that the occuring blueshift of the binding energies depends significantly on the specific doping (10 meV in electron-doped samples, while being absent in hole-doped samples). Note that only the $\tau = 1$ valley, where the top most valence band is occupied by spin-up ($\sigma = 1$), has been considered in Eq. (15). Considering spin-down electrons will only multiply the final result by a degeneracy factor $g = 2$, due to the contribution from the $\tau = -1$ valley, so no generality is lost when dealing only with spin-up electrons.

The state defined in Eq. (15) is that of a Wannier exciton, as we are assuming that Wannier exciton theory is valid for 2D metal dichalcogenides, and is an eigenstate of the interacting Hamiltonian

$$\hat{H} = \sum_k E_{c,k} c_{k,\uparrow} c_k + \sum_k E_{v,k} b_{k,\uparrow} b_k + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{k,k',q\neq 0} V_q \left( c_{k+q,k'\uparrow} c_{k'\downarrow} c_{k\uparrow} c_{k\downarrow} + b_{k+q,k'\downarrow} b_{k'\uparrow} b_{k\uparrow} b_{k\downarrow} + 2 c_{k+q,k'\uparrow} b_{k'\downarrow} b_{k\downarrow} c_{k\uparrow} \right)$$  \hspace{1cm} (16)$$

only when $n_e = 0$. As this is not the case, this state is taken as a variational state, where the function $\phi(k)$ can be varied to minimize the expectation value $\{ (\psi_{ex}| \hat{H} | \psi_{ex}) \}_th$. In Eq. (16), $E_{c,k}$ and $E_{v,k}$ are the conduction and valence band dispersion relations, respectively, while $V_q$ is the interaction potential.

Manipulating the eigenvalue equation for this Hamiltonian (see Appendix C), the Hermitian eigenvalue equation
is

\[ [E_{\text{ex}} - E_i] \phi (k) = \left[ E_c (k) - E_a (k) \right] \phi (k) - \frac{\sqrt{1 - f_c (k)}}{A} \sum_q V (q) \phi (k - q) \sqrt{1 - f_c (k - q)}, \]

where \( E_{\text{ex}} \) is the average energy of the state \( |\psi_{\text{ex}}\rangle \) and \( E_{\text{ex}} - E_i = E_g - E_{\text{exb}} \), where \( E_{\text{exb}} \) is the exciton binding energy and \( E_g \) is the energy gap. The eigenfunctions \( \phi_i (k) \) are defined as orthogonal and \( E_{c/v} (k) \) are the conduction/valence band dispersion relations, including exchange corrections. The dielectric constant \( \epsilon (q) \) is, in general, frequency and wave-vector dependent \([99]\) and is given by (see the Appendix of Ref. \([74]\)]

\[ \epsilon (q) = \epsilon_2 \frac{1 - (1 - \epsilon_2 / \epsilon_3) e^{-2qd}}{1 - (1 + \epsilon_2 / \epsilon_3) e^{-2qd}} \left[ 1 - (1 - \epsilon_2 / \epsilon_3) e^{-qd} \right] \left[ 1 - (1 + \epsilon_2 / \epsilon_3) e^{-qd} \right], \]

for a MX\(_2\) monolayer of thickness \( d \) and dielectric constant \( \epsilon_2 \) “sandwiched” between materials with dielectric constants \( \epsilon_1, \epsilon_3 \). Asymptotically, this expression can be written as \( \epsilon (q) = \epsilon_1 + \epsilon_3 / 2 \) in the \( \alpha d \ll 1 \) limit, and \( \epsilon (q) = \epsilon_2 \) for large wave vectors or very thick monolayers(\( \alpha d \gg 1 \)). These limits match those expected considering the varying thickness of the TMD monolayer.

The solutions to Eq. \([17]\) represent bound excitons, as well as electron-hole scattering states. These are, however, excluded since their inclusion leads to modifications in the absorption spectrum near the band edge far from the fundamental exciton line. The authors assume the variational solution

\[ \phi (k) = \frac{\sqrt{\pi a}}{[1 + (ka)^2]^{1/4}} \Rightarrow \phi (r) = \sqrt{\frac{1}{\pi a}} e^{-r/a}, \]

which is the exact exciton wave function for the Coulomb potential when \( n_e = 0 \) and \( \epsilon (q) \) is independent of \( q \) \([99]\) (i.e., local screening). Varying the radius parameter \( a \), the eigenvalue \( E_{\text{ex}} - E_i \) can be estimated.

### 6.2 Optical Conductivity and Absorption Spectrum

The electronic and optical properties of a TMD are determined by the low energy Hamiltonian of the system. In the case we are considering, this Hamiltonian is valid around the \( K \) and \( K' \) points of the hexagonal Brillouin zone, where the band gap is located. Effectively, the low energy Hamiltonian is similar to a Dirac Hamiltonian in 2D, with an additional term due to spin-orbit coupling, induced by the heavy metal atoms. The Hamiltonian near the \( K, K' \) points is given by

\[ H_0 = \left[ \Delta/2 \right] + \frac{\hbar k}{A} + \left[ -\Delta/2 + \lambda \sigma \right], \]

where \( \Delta \) is related to the material band gap, \( \sigma = \pm 1 \) stands for the electron spin, \( \tau = \pm 1 \) is the valley index \( (K, K') \), \( \lambda \) is the splitting of the valence band due to spin-orbit coupling, \( k_\pm = \tau k_x \pm i k_y \) (the wave vectors are measured from the \( K (K') \) points), and the velocity parameter \( v \approx 5 - 6 \times 10^5 \text{ m/s} \) is related to the coupling between the orbitals of neighboring M atoms.

Zhang et al. \([74]\) assume linearly polarized light of frequency \( \omega \) and intensity \( I_0 \) incident normally on the MX\(_2\) monolayer. The electric field is obtained directly from Maxwell’s equations and, by definition of the Poynting vector (time averaged for a linearly polarized electromagnetic plane wave), we have

\[ I_0 = \frac{1}{2 \eta_0} |E_0|^2 = \frac{A_0 \omega^2}{2 \eta_0}, \]

where \( \eta_0 \) is the free-space impedance and \( A_0 \) is the intensity of the vector potential in the monolayer plane.

The interaction between spin-up electrons in the valley \( \tau = +1 \) and light is given by the Hamiltonian \([53, 100]\]

\[ H_{\text{int}} (t) = H_+ e^{-i\omega t} + \text{h.c.} \]

\[ \frac{eA_0}{2m_0} \sum_k \hat{P}_{\text{ex}} (k) \cdot \hat{n} e^{-i\omega t} c_{k, \uparrow}^\dagger b_{k, \uparrow} + \text{h.c.}, \]

where \( \hat{n} \) is the polarization vector (in the plane of the monolayer), \( c_{k, \uparrow}, b_{k, \uparrow} \) are, respectively, the destruction operators for the spin-up conduction and valence-band states with momentum \( k \), \( m_0 \) is the free-electron mass and \( \hat{P}_{\text{ex}} (k) \) is the momentum matrix element, taken between the conduction and valence bands.

From Fermi’s golden rule, the rate at which excitons are generated by the absorption of light assuming finite broadening \( \Gamma_{\text{ex}} \) is given by \([101]\)

\[ R_{\text{ex}} = \frac{2\pi}{\hbar^2} \frac{1}{A} \left\{ \left| \left< \psi_{\text{ex}} | \hat{H}_+ | \psi_0 \right> \right|^2 \right\}_{\text{th}} \times \frac{\hbar R_{\text{ex}} / \pi}{(\hbar\omega_0 - \hbar\omega)^2 + (\hbar R_{\text{ex}} / \pi)^2}, \]

where \( \psi_{\text{ex}} \) is the exciton wave function and \( \psi_0 \) is the initial state.
where $h\omega_0 = E_{ex} - E_i$. Directly replacing $H_+$ from Eq. 22 and expanding the modulus squared, we obtain

$$1 A \left\{ |\langle \psi_{ex} | \hat{H}_+ | \psi_i \rangle |^2 \right\}_{th} = \left( \frac{eA_0}{2m\omega_0} \right)^2 |\chi_{ex} (r = 0)|^2$$

(24)

where

$$\chi_{ex} (r) = \int \frac{d^2k}{2\pi^2} \phi(k) \sqrt{1 - f_c(k)} \left\{ \hat{P}_{ex}(k) \cdot \hat{n} \right\} e^{ikr}.$$  

(25)

Different processes, such as scattering and inhomogeneous broadening are expected to contribute to the absorption width $\Gamma_{ex}$. Equation (25) incorporates the effects (reduction in exciton oscillator strength) due to Pauli blocking. The total energy absorption rate from both valleys in the Brillouin zone ($K, K'$) is given by $2\hbar\omega R_{ex}$, and can be written in terms of the exciton contribution to the optical conductivity, which is

$$\text{Re} \{\sigma_{ex} (\omega)\} = \frac{2\hbar\omega}{\eta_0 R_{ex}}$$

$$= \frac{e^2}{4\hbar} \left\{ \frac{8\hbar}{m^*\omega_0} |\chi_{ex} (r = 0)|^2 \times \right.$$  

$$\times \left( \frac{\hbar^2}{h\omega_0 - \hbar\omega} + (h\Gamma_{ex})^2 \right) \right\}. \quad (26)$$

Once the real part of the conductivity has been determined, the imaginary part follows from the Kramers-Kronig relations. The absorption spectrum for normally incident light can be obtained from the optical conductivity [98] as

$$A (\omega) \approx 2\text{Re} \{\sigma_{ex} (\omega)\} \frac{\eta_0}{1 + n_{sub}},$$ 

(27)

where $n_{sub}$ is the refractive index of the substrate (in the case discussed by the authors, quartz).

Ignoring the effects of Pauli blocking and considering the wave-vector-independent expression for the momentum matrix element in Eqs. [23] and [26] the exciton optical conductivity is given by

$$\text{Re} \{\sigma_{ex} (\omega)\} = \frac{2e^2v^2}{\omega_0} \frac{2}{\pi a^2} \frac{h\Gamma_{ex}}{h\omega_0 - \hbar\omega} \left( h\Gamma_{ex} \right)^2$$

(28)

and the product $A (\omega) |_{max} 2h\Gamma_{ex}$ by

$$A (\omega) |_{max} 2h\Gamma_{ex} = \frac{16\eta_0 e^2v^2}{1 + n_{sub} \frac{\pi \omega_0}{a^2}}.$$

(29)

By comparison with the extracted peaks, the exciton radius $a$ is found to be around $\sim 16.8$ Å. This radius is much larger than the lattice spacing, thus justifying the validity of the Wannier model. This approach is however too simplistic. A more realistic approach takes trigonal warping into account by adding more terms to $H_0$.

Taking into account the wave-vector dependence of the momentum matrix elements (due to trigonal warping), as well as Pauli blocking, the absorption spectrum reads

$$A (\omega) |_{max} 2h\Gamma_{ex} = \frac{16\eta_0 e^2}{1 + n_{sub} \frac{2m^*\omega_0}{a}} |\chi_{ex} (r = 0)|^2,$$

(30)

from which the exciton radius can be extracted given the electron density. For carrier densities around $2 - 4 \times 10^{12}$ cm$^{-2}$, Zhang et al. obtain the exciton radius in the 9.3 – 8.5 Å range, in agreement with first-principles theoretical estimates [1].

In Ref. [74], the absorption spectrum is discussed and compared to the measured spectrum of MoS$_2$ at different temperatures. Comparing the calculated spectra against the extracted contributions for the specific materials and excitons in question (at both $T = 5K$ and $T = 90K$), Zhang et al. obtain a good fit between the two curves. Furthermore, the individual contributions from both excitons and trions (not discussed in this colloquium) appear to be reliably extractable using this fitting procedure.

### 6.3 Binding Energy

As the obtained expression for the absorption spectrum has a free parameter, the exciton radius, the resulting curves are superposed against the experimental fits for various temperatures. By matching the peaks, the value for the exciton radius is extracted. The only free parameter in the variational eigenvalue equation becomes the momentum- and frequency-dependent dielectric constant (Eq. 18), which can be obtained by applying the variational principle to Eq. 17 using the obtained variational functions in Eq. 19 and matching the resulting exciton radii with the values obtained from the absorption peaks. Considering that the top–bottom sulfur distance in MoS$_2$ is $\sim 3.17$ Å (the effective monolayer thickness is taken as $d \sim 6$ Å [74]) and that we have a quartz substrate ($\epsilon_3 = 4$) and $\epsilon_1$ as free space ($= 1$), the value of $\epsilon_2$ for which the exciton radii matches the measured values is $\epsilon_2 \sim 12$. While rather large, this value matches well with the theoretical estimates for the bulk MoS$_2$ dielectric...
constant. Furthermore, following Berkelbach et al. and Cudazzo et al., one finds the screening length parameter \( r_0 \). The resulting value, 36 Å, is in excellent agreement with first-principles calculations by Berkelbach et al. [102] (30 – 40 Å). The variational binding energy for the extracted values is in the 0.28 – 0.33 eV range, in good agreement with the first-principles calculations [102,104].

7 Interlayer Excitons in a TMD: The Harmonic Potential Approximation

Many authors discuss the optical and electronic properties of excitons in TMDs and vdW heterostructures from a numerical point of view, usually by directly integrating the Schrödinger equation with either the Rytova-Keldysh potential (via finite elements, for example). Brunetti et al. [13] verify the accuracy of the numerical results for large interlayer separations by approximating the electron-hole interaction as an harmonic potential. As the Schrödinger equation is solvable exactly for this interaction, both the wave function and the energy eigenvalue can be written in close form and used to verify the validity of numerically calculated physical quantities such as the (peak) absorption coefficient and the exciton binding energy.

Among the most recent numerical studies, we mention specifically those by Avalos-Ovando et al. [105], Scharf et al. [16], Van der Donck et al. [75] and Brunetti et al. [13]. We will now briefly discuss the results by Brunetti et al.

7.1 The Harmonic Potential Approximation

In the case of interlayer excitons, the modified Rytova-Keldysh potential (defined ahead) shows a minimum at \( r = 0 \) and has a finite value at that point. This happens because interlayer excitons are spatially separated by a distance \( d \). Then, we can expand the modified potential around \( r = 0 \) up to second order, leading to the harmonic approximation. In this work [13], the authors discuss the optical absorption of interlayer excitons in a vdW heterostructure. Starting from the oscillator strength for a generic transition

\[ f_{i \rightarrow f} = \frac{2\mu\omega_{i \rightarrow f}}{\hbar} |\langle f | x | i \rangle|^2, \]

the imaginary part of the electric susceptibility is given by [106]

\[ \text{Im} \{ \chi (\omega) \} = -\frac{n_0}{2\varepsilon_0\mu\omega_0} \frac{\Gamma_{\text{ex}}/2}{2\hbar f_0} \frac{\Gamma_{\text{ex}}/2}{(\omega_0^2 - \omega^2)^2 + (\Gamma_{\text{ex}}/2)^2}, \]

where \( n_0 \) is the 2D concentration of excitons in the heterostructure, \( \hbar \) is the thickness of one TMD monolayer, \( \Gamma_{\text{ex}} \) the homogeneous line-broadening (with physical origin in exciton-phonon interactions), \( f_0 \) represents the oscillator strength for a generic transition, \( \omega_0 \) refers to the respective Bohr angular frequency of the oscillator strength \( f_0 \), and \( \mu \) is the exciton reduced mass. Knowing this, the optical absorption coefficient is given by [107,108] (\( c \) is the speed of light)

\[ \alpha (\omega) = -\frac{\omega}{n (\omega) c} \text{Im} \{ \chi (\omega) \}, \]

which can be further simplified assuming the environment interacts weakly with photons in the frequency range of the corresponding optical transition, approximating the refractive index of the environment as \( n (\omega) \approx \sqrt{\varepsilon} \), with \( \varepsilon \) being the static dielectric constant of the environment. At the peak, the absorption coefficient is given by

\[ \alpha (\omega = \omega_0) = -\frac{\pi e^2}{2\varepsilon_0\mu\sqrt{\varepsilon} c} \frac{n_0}{2\hbar f_0} \frac{2}{\Gamma_{\text{ex}}}, \]

which is defined by the oscillator strength, and depends on a series of material-specific parameters.

The interlayer modified Rytova-Keldysh potential reads

\[ V_{RK} (r) = \frac{\pi k}{2r_0} \left( \frac{\sqrt{r^2 + d^2}}{r^0} \right)^2 - Y_0 \left( \frac{\sqrt{r^2 + d^2}}{r^0} \right)^2 \]

\[ \text{(35)} \]

with \( k = e^2/4\pi\varepsilon_0\kappa \) and \( \kappa = \frac{\alpha + 2}{2} \) describes the surrounding dielectric medium, is approximated by a harmonic potential by considering the interlayer separation \( d \) much larger than the in-plane gyration radius \( \left( r_X = \sqrt{\langle r^2 \rangle} \right) \), that is, the average of \( r^2 \) taken with the exciton wave function. This approximation is given by [108,13]

\[ V (r) \approx -V_0 + \gamma r^2, \]

\[ \text{(36)} \]

with \( r_0 \) the dielectric screening length and

\[ V_0 = \frac{\pi k}{2r_0} \left( \frac{d}{r_0} \right) - Y_0 \left( \frac{d}{r_0} \right) \]

\[ \gamma = -\frac{\pi k}{4r_0^2 d} \left[ H_{-1} \left( \frac{d}{r_0} \right) - Y_{-1} \left( \frac{d}{r_0} \right) \right]. \]

\[ \text{(37)} \]
Considering this approximation, the Schrödinger equation can be solved directly in polar coordinates as \[109]\[110]\]

\[\Psi(\eta, \varphi) = A_{nl} \left( \frac{h}{\mu \omega} \right)^{|l|/2} \eta^{l|/2} e^{-\eta/2} L_n^{|l|}(\eta) \frac{e^{i|l|\varphi}}{\sqrt{2\pi}}, \] (38)

where \(\eta = \mu \omega r^2 / h\), \(\omega = \sqrt{2 \gamma / \mu}\), \(n = 0, 1, 2, \ldots\) and \(l = -n, -n+1, \ldots, n-1, n\) are the usual principal and angular momentum quantum numbers, and \(L_n^{|l|}(x)\) is the associate Laguerre polynomial of degree \(|l|\) and order \(a\), and

\[A_{nl} = \left( \frac{\mu \omega}{h} \right)^{|l|+1}/2 \sqrt{\frac{2n!}{\Gamma(n+|l|+1)}},\] (39)

with \(\Gamma(x)\) the gamma-function. The energy eigenvalues present the usual form for the isotropic harmonic oscillator, given by

\[E_n = \hbar \left( \frac{2}{\mu} \right)^{1/2} (2n + |l| + 1) - V_0.\] (40)

This approximation becomes more accurate the more layers are included in the heterostructure (as expected by the assumption of large interlayer separation), and it is verified by comparison with the results from direct numerical integration (through finite elements methods), as well as those obtained experimentally \[111\[112\] or via DFT \[113\].

This approach agrees with the numerical results obtained by Brunetti et al. \[13\], validating the numerical approach utilized. The eigenenergies and eigenfunctions for interlayer \((d \neq 0)\) excitons are calculated for a range of material-specific parameters consistent with those from different TMDs. Comparing against existing DFT results \[113\], an agreement to better than 1% is obtained. As such, eigenvalues and optical properties for interlayer excitons can be calculated for different ranges of input parameters, consistent with different TMD/h-BN/TMD heterostructures.

In a recent experimental work \[111\], spatially-indirect excitons were observed in a single MoSe\(_2\) crystal. In bilayer MoSe\(_2\) encapsulated by h-BN, spatially-indirect excitons are reported to have a binding energy of 153 meV. For the material-dependent parameters provided by \[111\], and using the oscillator strength \(f_0\) for the transition between the \(n = 1 \rightarrow 2, l = 0 \rightarrow 1\) eigenstates \[13\], Brunetti’s calculations give a binding energy of 132 – 140 meV, within \(\approx 10\%\) of the reported value.

### 8 Conclusions and Outlook

The objective of this colloquium was to present an analysis of excitons in 2D materials and vdW heterostructures using the variational method. We have focused our attention in transition metal dichalcogenides that have a direct band gap at the \(K\) and \(K'\) points of the Brillouin zone. In these systems, the electronic and optical properties are described by an effective theory based on the 2D Dirac equation. However, other 2D systems exist presenting indirect band gap between the \(I\) and the \(M\) points, such as ZrS\(_2\) and HfS\(_2\) \[114\].

We have first analyzed variational methods for obtaining the binding energy of vdW excitons whose interaction is described by the soft-Coulomb potential. This potential includes a material-dependent parameter which eliminates the divergence of the Coulomb potential at the origin. This material dependent parameter appears in the electrostatic interaction when an electron is in a given layer and the hole is in a different one, a distance \(d\) apart from each other. This can happen both in bulk single crystals, due to the layered nature of these materials, or in heterogeneous systems made by stacking different 2D materials on top of each other. In simple systems, analytical solutions for soft-Coulomb potential are known, thus allowing for the comparison of the variational approach with exact analytical results.

After presenting the variational method in the context of the soft-Coulomb potential, we considered the Rytova-Keldysh potential. This interaction describes better the scenario of a monolayer transition-metal dichalcogenide both suspended, supported by a substrate, or encapsulated by low-dielectric materials. This potential is mathematically more complex than the soft-Coulomb one. It can, however, be closely approximated by a logarithmic and an inverse-exponential term, which may allow the calculation of the binding energies analytically.

Although we have not considered van der Waals excitons in 2D quantum dots (triangular and hexagonal, as there are no circular TMD systems) the introduced methodology is appropriate to the study of these systems, as wave functions with the correct symmetry can be easily constructed using, for example, group-symmetry arguments.

For connecting with experimental results, both the absorption spectrum and the polarizability of excitons was discussed. These two properties are extremely important in optics since they govern the system’s response to optical impulses. The Stark effect and ionization rate of van...
der Waals heterostructures have also been considered, as these effects can considerably enhance the photodetection response of photodetectors.

This colloquium does not exhaust all the possibilities of the variational method, with trions and bi-excitons physical properties also being amenable to this type of treatment. Also, the inclusion of a magnetic field causes no difficulties to the method.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Eduardo Castro and João Lopes dos Santos for comments on a preliminary version of this work, and Bruno Amorim for outlining the derivation in the Appendix. N.M.R.P. acknowledges support from the European Commission through the project Graphene-Driven Revolutions in ICT and Beyond (Ref. No. 881603 – core 3), and the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) in the framework of the Strategic Financing UID/FIS/04650/2019. In addition, funding from the projects POCI-01-0145-FEDER-028114, and POCI-01-0145-FEDER-029265, and PTDC/NAN-OPT/29265/2017, and POCI-01-0145-FEDER-02888 is acknowledged.

A Exciton dipole matrix element in the Wannier model: two-band system

In this Appendix we show that under specific conditions it is the Fourier transform to real space, at the origin of the relative coordinate, of the exciton wave function in momentum space that determines the dipole matrix element associated with the optical transitions referred in the main text. Furthermore, we will see that this result is indeed an approximation and does not hold in general. This is specially true when the wave function of the electron and the hole are defined by momentum-dependent spinors. Let us consider an exciton with center-of-mass momentum \( \mathbf{Q} \). The excitonic wave function reads

\[
|\Psi_{\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{Q}}\rangle = \frac{1}{\sqrt{A}} \sum_{\mathbf{k}} \phi_{cv}(\mathbf{k}) |\psi_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{k} - \mathbf{Q}/2}, \mathbf{r}\rangle |\psi_{\mathbf{v}, \mathbf{k} + \mathbf{Q}/2}\rangle,
\]

where \( \phi_{cv}(\mathbf{k}) \) is the exciton wave function is momentum space and \( |\Psi_{\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{Q}}\rangle \) represents a sum of Slater determinants with excitons of momentum \( \mathbf{k} \). Therefore, we obtain for the dipole matrix element between the ground state, \( |0\rangle \) (a Slater determinant), of the TMD and its excited state the result

\[
\langle 0 | \sum_{i} \mathbf{r}_{i} |\Psi_{\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{Q}}\rangle = d_{0, X} = \frac{1}{\sqrt{A}} \sum_{\mathbf{k}} \phi_{cv}(\mathbf{k}) \times \int d\mathbf{r} \psi_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{k} - \mathbf{Q}/2}^{\ast}(\mathbf{r}) \psi_{\mathbf{v}, \mathbf{k} + \mathbf{Q}/2}(\mathbf{r}),
\]

where \( \mathbf{r} \) is the relative coordinate and \( \sum_{i} \mathbf{r}_{i} \) is a sum over all the electrons in the solid. Defining

\[
d_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{k} - \mathbf{Q}/2; \mathbf{v}, \mathbf{k} + \mathbf{Q}/2} \equiv \int d\mathbf{r} \psi_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{k} - \mathbf{Q}/2}^{\ast}(\mathbf{r}) \psi_{\mathbf{v}, \mathbf{k} + \mathbf{Q}/2}(\mathbf{r}),
\]

we obtain

\[
d_{0, X} = \frac{1}{\sqrt{A}} \sum_{\mathbf{k}} \phi_{cv}(\mathbf{k}) d_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{k} - \mathbf{Q}/2; \mathbf{v}, \mathbf{k} + \mathbf{Q}/2}.
\]

Now, consider excitons with zero center of mass momentum, \( \mathbf{Q} = 0 \), described by plane waves. Assuming that the momentum dipole matrix element is weakly dependent on \( \mathbf{k} \) in this case, we can approximate

\[
d_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{k} - \mathbf{Q}/2; \mathbf{v}, \mathbf{k} + \mathbf{Q}/2} \simeq \frac{1}{A} d_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{v}},
\]

such that the exciton dipole moment is given by

\[
d_{0, X} \simeq \frac{1}{\sqrt{A}} \frac{1}{A} \sum_{\mathbf{k}} \phi(\mathbf{k}) d_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{v}} = \frac{1}{\sqrt{A}} \chi_{\text{ex}}(\mathbf{r} = 0) d_{\mathbf{c}, \mathbf{v}}.
\]

Therefore, we see that it is the Fourier transform to real space (at the origin), \( \chi_{\text{ex}}(\mathbf{r} = 0) \), of the exciton wave function in momentum space that determines the optical response of the semiconductor. We note that if the electron and hole wave function cannot be taken as plane waves then extra momentum-dependent factors appear and we cannot obtain the simple result given in Eq. [45]. In this case, other states, in addition to the \( s \)–state (the only one finite at the origin) of the exciton wave function, contribute to the optical response.

B Derivation of the Rytova-Keldysh potential

In this Appendix, we perform a derivation of a screened potential based on the assumption that the charge fluctuation is proportional to the Laplacian of the potential
evaluated in the plane of the 2D material surrounded by vacuum [89]. Such an assumption comes from the following considerations: the induced charge density $\delta n_{2D}(r_{\parallel})$ due to a point charge in the system is given by the 2D polarization in the usual way

$$\delta n_{2D}(r_{\parallel}) = -\nabla \cdot \mathbf{P}_{2D}, \quad (47)$$

where the three-dimensional position vector is given by $r = (r_{\parallel}, z)$, and $\delta n_{2D}$ has units of charge per unit area. The polarization itself is proportional to the total electric field

$$\mathbf{P}_{2D} = -\epsilon_0 \chi_{2D} \nabla V(r_{\parallel}, z = 0), \quad (48)$$

with $\chi_{2D}$ having dimensions of length. Therefore,

$$\delta n_{2D}(r_{\parallel}) = \epsilon_0 \chi_{2D} \nabla^2 V(r_{\parallel}, z = 0). \quad (49)$$

Let us write Poisson’s equation as:

$$\nabla^2 V(r) = -\frac{\epsilon}{\epsilon_0} \left[ n_{2D,+} + n(r) \right], \quad (50)$$

where $n_{2D,+}$ is the background positive charge density due to the atomic nuclei. We now write the electronic density as $n(r) = n_{2D,-} + \delta(r) + \delta(z) \delta \sigma(r_{\parallel})$, where $n_{2D,-}$ is the neutralizing density of negative charge, $\delta(r)$ represents the density of a localized charge and $\delta(z) \delta \sigma(r_{\parallel})$ is the induced charge density. With these definitions Poisson’s equation reads

$$\nabla^2 V(r) = -\frac{\epsilon}{\epsilon_0} \left[ \delta(r) + \delta(z) \chi_{2D} \nabla^2 V(r_{\parallel}, 0) \right], \quad (51)$$

where $\epsilon \delta \sigma(r_{\parallel}) = \delta n_{2D}(r_{\parallel})$. Fourier transforming the previous equation we obtain

$$\nabla^2 \int \frac{dk}{(2\pi)^2} e^{ik \cdot r} V(k) = -\frac{\epsilon}{\epsilon_0} \int \frac{dk}{(2\pi)^2} e^{ik \cdot r_{\perp}}$$

$$+ \chi_{2D} \int \frac{dk_z}{2\pi} e^{ik_z z} \int \frac{dk_{\parallel}}{(2\pi)^2} e^{ik_{\parallel} \cdot r_{\parallel}} k_{\parallel}^2 V(k_{\parallel}, 0). \quad (52)$$

Therefore

$$-\left( k_{\parallel}^2 + k_{\parallel}^2 \right) V(k) = -\frac{\epsilon}{\epsilon_0} + k_{\parallel}^2 \chi_{2D} V(k_{\parallel}, z = 0). \quad (53)$$

Solving for $V(k)$ we obtain

$$V(k) = \frac{\epsilon}{\epsilon_0} \frac{1}{k_{\parallel}^2 + k_{\parallel}^2} - \frac{k_{\parallel}^2}{k_{\parallel}^2 + k_{\parallel}^2} \chi_{2D} V(k_{\parallel}, z = 0). \quad (54)$$

Fourier transforming the previous equation in the $k_z$ coordinate (and taking $z = 0$) we obtain

$$V(k_{\parallel}, z = 0) = \frac{e}{2\pi \epsilon_0 k_{\parallel}} - \frac{\pi}{2\pi} k_{\parallel} \chi_{2D} V(k_{\parallel}, z = 0), \quad (55)$$

where

$$V(k_{\parallel}, z = 0) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \frac{dk_z}{2\pi} V(k_{\parallel}, k_z). \quad (56)$$

Solving for $V(k_{\parallel}, z = 0)$ we obtain

$$V(k_{\parallel}, z = 0) = \frac{e}{2\pi \epsilon_0 k_{\parallel}} \left[ 1 + \chi_{2D} k_{\parallel}^2 / 2 \right]$$

$$= \frac{1}{2e \epsilon_0 k_{\parallel}} \frac{1}{1 + k_{\parallel} / \kappa_{\parallel}}, \quad (57)$$

where $1 / \kappa_{\parallel} = \chi_{2D} / 2$. The Fourier transform of the potential reads [90]

$$V(r_{\parallel}, z = 0) = \frac{e}{2\pi \epsilon_0} \int \frac{d|k_{\parallel}|}{(2\pi)^2} \frac{e^{ik_{\parallel} \cdot r_{\parallel}}}{k_{\parallel} + \kappa_{\parallel}}$$

$$= \frac{e \kappa_{\parallel}}{2\pi} \int_0^{\infty} \frac{dk_{\parallel} J_0(k_{\parallel} r)}{2\pi \kappa_{\parallel} + k_{\parallel}}$$

$$= \frac{e \kappa_{\parallel}}{4\pi \epsilon_0} \frac{\pi}{2} \left[ H_0(r \kappa_{\parallel}) - Y_0(r \kappa_{\parallel}) \right]$$

$$= \frac{e}{4\pi \epsilon_0 r_0} \frac{\pi}{2} \left[ H_0 \left( \frac{r}{r_0} \right) - Y_0 \left( \frac{r}{r_0} \right) \right], \quad (58)$$

where $r_0 = 1 / \kappa_{\parallel}$, and $H_0(x)$ and $Y_0(x)$ are the Struve function and the Bessel function of the second kind, respectively.

C Wannier–Mott variational eigenvalue equation

In this appendix, we will quickly outline the necessary manipulations to obtain Eq. [17] from Eq. [16]. Starting with $\{ \psi_{ex} | \hat{H} | \psi_{ex} \}_{\text{th}}$, one substitutes in it the definition of Eq. [15]. Expanding the resulting equation, one immediately obtains the term proportional to the ground state energy, $E_i \sum_k |\phi(k)|^2$ when acting with the Hamiltonian on the ground state. Inspecting the remaining terms individually while utilizing the anti-commutation relations of the creation/destruction operators for each
The exchange terms for the conduction band, the terms proportional to $E_{c,k}$ and $E_{v,k}$ simplify almost immediately.

Regarding the interaction terms, we start with

$$V_{q\epsilon_{k+q}^l b_{k-q}^l c_k}.$$ \hfill (59)

Contracting indices and, again, making use of the anticommutation relations, this interaction term simplifies to

$$-\sum_{k''} \phi^* (k'') \frac{\sqrt{1-f_c(k'')}}{A} \sum_{q \neq 0} V_q \phi (k'' - q) \times \sqrt{1-f_c(k'' - q)}. \hfill (60)$$

The exchange terms for the conduction band,

$$\frac{1}{2} V_{q\epsilon_{k+q}^l b_{k-q}^l c_k}, \hfill (61)$$

result in

$$\frac{1}{2} \sum_{k'} \phi^* (k') \frac{\sqrt{1-f_c(k')}}{A} \sum_{q \neq 0} V_q \phi (k' - q) \times \sqrt{1-f_c(k' - q)}, \hfill (62)$$

while those for the valence band,

$$\frac{1}{2} V_{q\epsilon_{k+q}^l b_{k-q}^l c_k}, \hfill (63)$$

result in

$$-\frac{1}{2} \sum_{k} \sum_{q \neq 0} V_q |\phi (k)|^2. \hfill (64)$$

Including these exchange terms in the definition of $\tilde{E}_{c/v} (k)$ (as seen in Eq. 17), the eigenvalue equation becomes

$$\begin{align*}
\sum_k \phi^* (k) \left\{ [\tilde{E}_{c,k} - \tilde{E}_{v,k}] \phi (k) + E_i \phi (k) - \sqrt{1-f_c(k)} \sum_q V (q) \phi (k - q) \sqrt{1-f_c(k - q)} \right\} &= \\
&= \sum_k \phi^* (k) E_{ex} \phi (k). \end{align*} \hfill (65)$$

Dropping the non-zero common factor $\phi^* (k)$ while analyzing this sum term-by-term, we obtain the eigenvalue equation of Eq. 17

$$[E_{ex} - E_i] \phi (k) = \left[ \tilde{E}_{c} (k) - \tilde{E}_{v} (k) \right] \phi (k) - \sqrt{1-f_c(k)} \sum_q V (q) \phi (k - q) \sqrt{1-f_c(k - q)}. \hfill (66)$$

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