Cooperative orbital ordering and Peierls instability in the checkerboard lattice with doubly degenerate orbitals

R.T. Clay, 1 H. Li, 2 S. Sarkar, 3 S. Mazumdar, 2 and T. Saha-Dasgupta 3

1Department of Physics and Astronomy and HPC 2 Center for Computational Sciences, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State MS 39762
2Department of Physics, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721
3S. N. Bose National Centre for Basic Sciences, Kolkata, India

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It has been suggested that the metal-insulator transitions in a number of spinel materials with partially-filled t_{2g} d-orbitals can be explained as orbitally-driven Peierls instabilities. Motivated by these suggestions, we examine theoretically the possibility of formation of such orbitally-driven states within a simplified theoretical model, a two-dimensional checkerboard lattice with two directional metal orbitals per atomic site. We include orbital ordering and inter-electron electron-phonon interactions actions consistently within a semi-classical approximation, and onsite intra- and inter-orbital electron-electron interactions at the Hartree-Fock level. We find a stable, orbitally-induced Peierls bond-dimerized state for carrier concentration of one electron per atom. The Peierls bond distortion pattern continues to be period 2 bond-dimerization even when the charge density in the orbitals forming the one-dimensional band is significantly smaller than 1. In contrast, for carrier density of half an electron per atom the Peierls instability is absent within one-electron theory as well as mean-field theory of electron-electron interactions, even for nearly complete orbital ordering. We discuss the implications of our results in relation to complex charge, bond, and orbital-ordering found in spinels.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Transition-metal spinel compounds AB_2X_4, where X is S or O, have been for many years the subject of intense experimental and theoretical activity. The B sublattice of the spinel structure forms corner-sharing tetrahedra, giving rise to a geometrically frustrated pyrochlore lattice. In general, oxides and chalcogenides of transition metal ions with alternate short and long bonds is observed in CuIr_xS_4 10, 11. This unusual charge-ordering pattern has been explained within the context of an effective one-dimensionalization and Peierls instability driven by orbital ordering (OO). The spinel structure of CuIr_xS_4 consists of criss-cross chains of Ir-ions with strong overlaps between orbitals of the same kind (i.e., d_{xy} with d_{yz}, d_{yz} with d_{xy}). Within the proposed mechanism, OO in Ir^{3+} ions leads to completely filled degenerate d_{xy} and d_{yz} orbitals and effective one-dimensional (1D) quarter-filled d_{xy} bands. The latter now undergoes a Peierls instability that is accompanied by period 4 charge-ordering \ldots \text{Ir}^{3+}/\text{Ir}^{3+}/\text{Ir}^{4+}/\text{Ir}^{4+} \ldots and long-intermediate-short-intermediate bonds, as seen experimentally 12, 13. The OO and Peierls instability are thought to be coupled, as opposed to independent. Closely related phenomenologies have been proposed to explain the metal-insulators transitions in MgTi_xO_4 14 and LiRh_xO_4 15.

While the proposed scenario 12 does provide qualitative explanations, it raises many interesting questions. For example, the bond or charge periodicities that result from Peierls distortion in real quasi-1D systems depend strongly on the bandfilling. Naively then, one might be led to believe that unless the OO is complete and leads to integer occupations of the individual t_{2g} orbitals, exactly commensurate distortion periodicities, as supposedly observed in CuIr_xS_4 10 and MgTi_xO_4 16, are not expected. The exactly period 4 distortion in CuIr_xS_4 and MgTi_xO_4 is therefore a puzzle. Secondly, the role of electron-electron (e-e) interactions, which can have important consequences on these transitions, is not clear.
For example, it has been suggested that the bond distortion in MgTi$_2$O$_4$ causes nearest-neighbor Ti$^{3+}$ pairs to form a spin-singlet state, giving a drop in the magnetic susceptibility at low temperature$^{14}$. Furthermore, e-e interactions can strongly affect the distortion periodicities in 1D chains with fillings different from 1 electron per atom$^{15}$. Addressing these issues requires explicit calculations based on Hamiltonians containing all the necessary components, that to the best of our knowledge do not exist currently.

We report here the results of explicit calculations based on a simplified model system that displays cooperative OO and Peierls instability. Our model system is a two-dimensional projection of the pyrochlore lattice, a checkerboard lattice with two degenerate directional orbitals per atom. As we discuss in the next Section, the model captures the effective one-dimensionalization that occurs in the spinel lattice. There exist also subtle differences between the our model and the theoretical picture that has been employed for the spinels$^{13}$ that we discuss in Section IV. We have considered two different electron densities, 1 electron per atom and $\frac{1}{2}$ electron per atom. We find that a stable Peierls state with 1D order occurs for an electron density of 1 electron per atom. Importantly, even for significant deviations of orbital occupancies from integer values, the Peierls distortion is purely bond dimerization, as would be true in the precisely filled 1D band. We speculate that this is a consequence of interactions between the effective 1D chains of our model, which are not entirely independent. For the case of $\frac{1}{2}$ electron per atom we did not observe an orbitally-driven Peierls state even for integer orbital occupancies in the absence of e-e interactions. For the same model in the limit of infinite e-e interactions, however, a stable bond dimerization occurs. This suggests the second main result of our paper, namely that e-e interactions are important in stabilizing orbitally-induced Peierls states for the case of $\frac{1}{2}$ electron per atom within the orbitally-degenerate checkerboard lattice. We will discuss possible implications of this result for the spinel lattice.

The paper is divided in following subsections: in Section II we introduce our model Hamiltonian; in Sections III A and III B we present numerical results for 1 and $\frac{1}{2}$ electron per atom respectively; and in Section IV we conclude and further discuss the relationship of our theory to spinels and related materials.

II. THEORETICAL MODEL

As discussed above, no quantitative calculations exist of coexisting orbital and Peierls order in spinel lattices. This is due to the huge complexity of these systems, which include three dimensionality, triply degenerate $t_{2g}$ metal atom orbitals, possible JT distortions and frustration, in addition to e-e interactions. We therefore construct a simpler model based on a checkerboard lattice that is easier to handle, but that is expected to bear similarities with the spinel problem. Note that although there exists a large body of literature on the consequences of frustration within the checkerboard lattice with a single atomic orbital per site$^{16-23}$, we are unaware of similar calculations on the present model which deals with doubly degenerate orbitals at each site. An important property of orbitally-driven Peierls order in these materials is that the OO leads to Peierls order in several different crystal lattice direction$^{14}$. In order to incorporate orbital degeneracy, frustration, and the possibility of Peierls order in multiple directions we consider the following Hamiltonian for a checkerboard lattice with doubly degenerate...
metal orbitals at each lattice site.

\[
H = H_{SSH} + H_{OO} + H_{ee}
\]

\[
H_{SSH} = \sum_{i,a,\gamma,\gamma'} t_{\gamma\gamma'}^a (1 + \alpha_a \Delta_{i,i+a})(d_{\gamma,i}^a d_{\gamma',i+a})^\dagger
\]

\[
+ \text{h.c.} + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{ia} K_{SSH} \Delta_{i,i+a}^2
\]  

(1)

\[
H_{OO} = \frac{g}{2} \sum_{i,\gamma,\gamma' \neq \gamma} (n_{\gamma'}) - n_{\gamma} + \frac{1}{2} K_{OO} \sum n_{\gamma}^2
\]  

(2)

\[
H_{ee} = U \sum_{i,\gamma} n_{\gamma,i} n_{\gamma,i+\hat{a}} + \frac{U'}{2} \sum_{i,\gamma,\gamma' \neq \gamma} n_{\gamma,i} n_{\gamma',i+\hat{a}}
\]  

(3)

The Hamiltonian in Eq. (1) consists of, (i) \( H_{SSH} \) that contains the kinetic energy and the inter-ion electron-phonon (e-p) coupling (Eq. (2), (ii) an OO term \( H_{OO} \) (Eq. (3)), and (iii) e-e interaction \( H_{ee} \) (Eq. (4)) that includes short-range e-e interactions within each site. We describe each of these terms separately below.

\( H_{SSH} \) includes electron hopping between same as well as different orbitals. In Eq. (2) \( d_{\gamma,i}^a \) creates an electron of spin \( \sigma \) in the orbital \( \gamma \) of atom \( i \). \( \gamma \) and \( \gamma' \) correspond to \( d_{xz} \) and \( d_{yz} \) orbitals, which have lobes that are oriented perpendicular to each other at each site as shown in Fig. 1. The inter- and intra-orbital hopping matrix elements \( t_{\gamma\gamma'}^a \) are based on Slater-Koster parametrization of hopping integrals connecting \( t_{2g} \) orbitals. \( a \) denotes a unit vector along the \( x \), \( y \), \( z \), and \( \hat{a} \) directions. Each bond indicated in Fig. 1 connects two orbitals at each metal ion site with two orbitals at another site, and is hence written as a \( 2 \times 2 \) matrix:

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
  t_{xz,xz} & t_{xz,yz} \\
  t_{yz,xz} & t_{yz,yz}
\end{pmatrix}
\]

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
  y-x \\
  y+x
\end{pmatrix}
\]

\[
= \begin{pmatrix}
  -\frac{1}{2} & -\frac{1}{2} \\
  \frac{1}{2} & \frac{1}{2}
\end{pmatrix}
\]  

(5)

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
  t_{xz,xz} & t_{xz,yz} \\
  t_{yz,xz} & t_{yz,yz}
\end{pmatrix}
\]

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
  x+y \\
  x-y
\end{pmatrix}
\]

\[
= \begin{pmatrix}
  -\frac{1}{2} & \frac{1}{2} \\
  \frac{1}{2} & -\frac{1}{2}
\end{pmatrix}
\]  

(6)

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
  t_{xz,xz} & t_{xz,yz} \\
  t_{yz,xz} & t_{yz,yz}
\end{pmatrix}
\]

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
  x \\
  y
\end{pmatrix}
\]

\[
= \begin{pmatrix}
  -1 & 0 \\
  0 & 0
\end{pmatrix}
\]  

(7)

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
  t_{xz,xz} & t_{xz,yz} \\
  t_{yz,xz} & t_{yz,yz}
\end{pmatrix}
\]

\[
\begin{pmatrix}
  y \\
  x
\end{pmatrix}
\]

\[
= \begin{pmatrix}
  0 & 0 \\
  0 & -1
\end{pmatrix}
\]  

(8)

All hopping integrals are in units of the \((dd\pi)\) matrix element (set to -1) involving the two \( d \)-orbitals of the metal atoms and mediated by the \( p \)-orbital of the anion (not shown explicitly in the figure) in between. In the above, the small \( dd\delta \) hoppings have been neglected. Note that electron hoppings along the \( x \) (\( y \)) direction involve only the \( d_{xz} \) (\( d_{yz} \)) orbitals. Thus the \( \pi \)-bonding among the orbitals, as opposed to the \( \sigma \)-bonding in spinels, does not preclude the orbitally-induced effective one-dimensionalization.

The inter-ion e-p coupling in \( H_{SSH} \) is written in the usual Su-Schrieffer-Heeger (SSH) form. Here \( \alpha_a \) is the e-p coupling constant corresponding to the bond between atoms at \( i \) and \( i+a \), \( \Delta_{i,i+a} \) the deviation of this bond from its equilibrium length, and \( K_{SSH} \) the corresponding spring constant. We include nonzero e-p couplings only along the \( x \) and \( y \)-directions, in keeping with the Peierls distortions in CuIr2Si2 and MgTi2O4 involving only orbitals of the same kind, and assume e-p couplings of equal strength \( \alpha_x = \alpha_y = \alpha \). We take all spring constants \( K_{SSH} = 1 \).

The OO term \( H_{OO} \) breaks the orbital degeneracy between the two orbitals at each individual site. \( n_{\gamma,i} = d_{\gamma,i}^\dagger d_{\gamma,i} \) is the number of electrons of spin \( \sigma \) on orbital \( \gamma \) of site \( i \), and \( n_{\gamma} = n_{\gamma,i} + n_{\gamma,i+\hat{a}} \). The coordinate \( Q_i \) couples to the charge density difference between the two orbitals on the site, with a corresponding coupling constant \( g \) and spring constant \( K_{OO} \). We fix \( K_{OO} \) to the value 1. As written in Eq. 3 the relative phase of the \( Q_i \) at each site is unrestricted. Within the model of reference the one-dimensionalization is a consequence of OO alone and in principle will occur even in the absence of Peierls distortion. We have used this to determine the preferred \( Q_i \) mode for both 1 and \( \frac{1}{2} \) electron per site by calculating the orbital occupations in several large lattices with open boundary condition (OBC). In a large OBC lattice, the charge densities and bond orders far from the lattice edges spontaneously assume the pattern that would occur in the infinite lattice for \( 0^+ \) coupling limit. An alternate approach to determine the dominant OO mode is to calculate in a periodic lattice the energies corresponding to each mode for fixed distortion amplitude; the dominant mode is simply the one with the lowest total energy. In the present case we have performed both sets of calculations for both 1 and \( \frac{1}{2} \) electron per site and have determined that the preferred OO mode in both cases is the “checkerboard” pattern of Fig. 1(a), which can be parametrized in terms of a single amplitude \( |Q| \) with \( Q_i = (-1)^{i_x+i_y} |Q| \), where \( i_x \) and \( i_y \) are the \( x \) and \( y \) coordinates of the \( i \)th atom.

The third term in the Hamiltonian, \( H_{ee} \) (Eq. 4), includes short-range Coulomb repulsions. \( U (U') \) is the

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FIG. 2: (color online) Pattern of the orbital-ordering and bond-order modulation for one electron per atom. Squares (circles) represent atoms with predominant \( xz \) (\( yz \)) orbital occupation. Bonds alternate in strength along diagonal directions, with solid (dashed) lines indicating strong (weak) bonds.
on-atom Coulomb repulsion for electrons in same (different) orbitals. While exact diagonalization has been used successfully for many 1D, quasi-1D, and two-dimensional (2D) lattices involving both e-e and e-p interactions, in the present model with two orbitals per metal site the Hilbert space is too large to treat any meaningful size cluster within exact diagonalization. We will therefore consider first the non-interacting ($U = U' = 0$) system, and then consider the effect of $U$ and $U'$ within the unrestricted Hartree-Fock (UHF) approximation, with no assumption of the periodicity of the UHF wavefunction. Specifically, we replace the interaction terms in $H_{ee}$ (Eq. 1) by

$$U \sum_{i,\gamma,\sigma,\sigma'} n_{i\gamma\sigma} \langle n_{i\gamma'\sigma'} \rangle - U \sum_{i,\gamma} \langle n_{i\gamma\downarrow} \rangle \langle n_{i\gamma\uparrow} \rangle + \frac{U'}{2} \sum_{i,\gamma \neq \gamma',\sigma,\sigma'} \left( \langle n_{i\gamma\sigma} \rangle \langle n_{i\gamma'\sigma'} \rangle + \langle n_{i\gamma'\sigma} \rangle \langle n_{i\gamma\sigma'} \rangle \right) - (d_{i\gamma\sigma}^\dagger d_{i\gamma\sigma} + H.c.) \langle d_{i\gamma\sigma}^\dagger d_{i\gamma\sigma} + H.c. \rangle - \langle n_{i\gamma\sigma} \rangle \langle n_{i\gamma'\sigma} \rangle - \langle n_{i\gamma'\sigma} \rangle \langle n_{i\gamma\sigma'} \rangle + (d_{i\gamma\sigma}^\dagger d_{i\gamma\sigma} + H.c.)^2 \right]$$

$\langle n_{i\gamma\sigma} \rangle$ and $\langle d_{i\gamma\sigma}^\dagger d_{i\gamma\sigma} + H.c. \rangle$ are obtained using a combination of self-consistency and simulated annealing for finding their ground state values. The UHF approximation often gives unphysical results for large interaction strengths and we will primarily focus on small $U$ and $U'$.

We treat the OO and e-p interactions using a standard self-consistent approach derived from the equations

$$\frac{\partial \langle H \rangle}{\partial \Delta} = 0 \quad \frac{\partial \langle H \rangle}{\partial \Delta_{i,i+a}} = 0.$$  

(9)

The self-consistency equations derived from Eq. 9 are used iteratively given an initial starting distortion. In the infinite system the OO or the bond distortion would occur for infinitesimally small coupling constants $g$ and $\alpha$. In finite-size clusters, however, due to the finite-size gaps between successive energy levels, nonzero coupling constants are required before the symmetry-broken state appears. In the following we consider $g$ and $\alpha$ close to the minimum values needed for the broken-symmetry state to occur.

We performed calculations for lattices up to 16\times16 (256 atoms with 512 orbitals). The primary difficulty in solving Eq. 9 is that because of the large number of quantities ($Q, \Delta_{i,i+a}$, and UHF average charge densities) to be determined self-consistently, the calculations often became trapped in local minima before reaching the true ground state. In all cases we have taken care that the true ground state was reached. Below we summarize our numerical results. These are divided into two subsections that discuss average charge densities of 1 electron per atom and $\frac{1}{2}$ electrons per atom, respectively.

### III. RESULTS

#### A. 1 electron per atom

The OO term in our model makes the orbital occupancy of the $xz$ and $yz$ orbitals unequal at each site. To measure the degree of OO quantitatively, we calculate the majority charge density $\langle n^+ \rangle$, defined as the charge density in the $xz$ orbitals at $+|Q|$ sites (see Fig. 1(a)). These orbitals form quasi-1D chains in the $x$ direction (sites denoted by squares in Fig. 2). With one electron per site, $\langle n^+ \rangle$ ranges from 0.5 to 1, with $\langle n^+ \rangle = 1$ indicating complete OO, and $\langle n^+ \rangle = 0.5$ implying the absence of OO. Due to the symmetries present in our model, the quasi-1D chains along $x$ and $y$ directions are identical—the charge density in the $yz$ orbitals at $-|Q|$ sites (denoted by circles in Fig. 2) is also $\langle n^+ \rangle$.

As an order parameter for the Peierls distortion, we
measure the modulation of the bond order,

\[
B_{i,i+a,\gamma} = \sum_{\sigma} \langle d_{i+a,\sigma,\gamma}^\dagger d_{i,\sigma,\gamma} + H.c. \rangle.
\]  

(10)

The bond order we are interested in (Eq. [10]) is the expectation value of charge-transfer between orbitals of same symmetry belonging to neighboring atoms. The charge-transfer is directly coupled to the bond distortion \(\Delta_{i,i+a}\) in Eq. [2] and hence for nonzero \(\Delta_{i,i+a}\) the charge transfer across consecutive bonds shows periodic modulation. The extent of modulation of \(B_{i,i+a,\gamma}\) is therefore a direct measure of the SSH distortion strength. As shown in Fig. [2] we find bond order modulation along \(x\) (\(y\)) direction to involve \(xz\) (\(yz\)) orbitals only. The modulation is purely period-2 (dimerization) with alternating strong and weak bonds, and hence we use \(\Delta B\), the difference between the calculated strong and weak bond orders involving orbitals of a particular symmetry, as the order parameter for the SSH distortion. Because of symmetry, the amplitudes of the bond order modulations involving the \(xz\) orbitals along the \(x\)-direction, and the \(yz\) orbitals along the \(y\)-directions are identical.

As discussed above, whether or not a co-operative orbitally-induced Peierls instability occurs for \(\langle n^+ \rangle < 1\), as well as the periodicity of the resultant bond order wave are both important issues. We first consider the non-interacting limit \((U = U' = 0)\). The co-operative nature of the OO and bond dimerization is shown in Fig. [3] where we show the results of our self-consistent calculations for \(16 \times 16\) lattices. As seen in Figs. [3]a) and (b), the orbitally-induced Peierls state appears only for \(\langle n^+ \rangle \geq 0.8\), with the bond distortion a pure bond dimerization regardless of \(\langle n^+ \rangle\). As expected for a co-operative transition, \(\langle n^+ \rangle\) increases with \(g\), as seen in Fig. [3]a). For each \(g\) there exists an \(\alpha_c\) beyond which there occur simultaneous jumps in \(\langle n^+ \rangle\) and \(\Delta B\) (the jump in \(\langle n^+ \rangle\) becomes progressively smaller as \(g\) increases.) The magnitude of \(\alpha_c\) decreases with increasing \(g\) (see Fig. [3]b)).

To further show the cooperative effect, in Fig. [3]c) we show the effects of (i) increasing \(\alpha\) at constant \(g\), and (ii) increasing \(g\) at constant \(\alpha\). While it is to be expected that the orbital order parameter \(\langle n^+ \rangle\) increases with \(g\), or that the bond alternation parameter increases with \(\alpha\), we find that either of the coupling constants enhances both \(\langle n^+ \rangle\) and \(\Delta B\).

Next we consider the correlated case with nonzero \(U\) and \(U'\). As for \(U = U' = 0\), the orbitally-driven Peierls state is again bond-dimerized. In Fig. [4] we plot \(\langle n^+ \rangle\) normalized by its value in the uncorrelated system as a function of \(U\) for several values of \(U'\). Within UHF, the combined effect of \(U\) and \(U'\) can be to either weaken or strengthen the distortion: for fixed \(U'\), \(U\) tends to weaken the OO and the bond distortion, while for fixed \(U\), \(U'\) strengthens both order parameters. Within the UHF approximation for one electron per atom, the effects of \(U\) and \(U'\) cancel exactly when \(U' = \frac{1}{2}U\).

From the Hamiltonian, the consequence of \(U'\) is to minimize the intrasite inter-orbital Coulomb repulsion, which is achieved by orbital ordering. It is thus not surprising that \(U'\) has the same effect as \(g\) in Fig. [1]. The effect of \(U\), as seen in Fig. [1] is however an artifact of the UHF approximation. In the case of the strictly 1D \(\frac{1}{2}\) filled band chain with one orbital per site, exact diagonalization and quantum Monte Carlo calculations have shown that the Peierls bond-alternation is enhanced by the Hubbard U[28]. In contrast, the UHF approximation predicts incorrectly that \(U\) destroys the bond alternation in the above case[28]. Had we been able to perform exact diagonalization in the present case, we would have found similar enhancement of the bond dimerization by \(U\). This would have had a profound effect on our overall result, reducing significantly the \(\alpha_c\) or the threshold \(\langle n^+ \rangle\) at which the bond dimerization appears.

The most important conclusion that follows from the above is that an orbitally-induced Peierls instability can occur even for incomplete OO (\(\langle n^+ \rangle \sim 0.8\)), and as long as the instability occurs at all, the bond order wave is period 2 for \(\langle n^+ \rangle\) significantly less than 1. Indeed, it is conceivable that the threshold value of \(\langle n^+ \rangle\) at which the bond dimerization appears can be even smaller than 0.8 for nonzero e-e interactions. We have found no other periodicity or evidence for soliton formation in our calculations. An interesting aspect of the OO driven bond distortion here is the phase relationship between the bond order wave states involving the \(d_{xz}\) and \(d_{yz}\) orbitals in Fig. [2]. The short bonds along the \(x\) and \(y\)-directions occupy the same plaquettes, yielding a structure that is reminiscent of (but different from) the valence bond crystal obtained within the Heisenberg spin-Hamiltonian for the checkerboard lattice[28]. Furthermore, the bond dimerizations along any one direction but on different diagonals of the checkerboard lattice are strictly “in-phase”. Both of these indicate that while the bond dimerizations are consequences of effective one-dimensionalization, there exist strong 2D interactions in between both the criss-cross and parallel chains. We ascribe the persistence of the bond dimerization for \(\langle n^+ \rangle < 1\) to the commensurability effect arising.
very strong α charge distortion in the thermodynamic limit. We obtained similar results after including $U$ and/or $U'$ within the UHF approximation. We conclude that for electron density away from 1 electron per atom, orbitally-driven Peierls ordering does not occur within our model in the non-interacting limit or within the mean-field approach to e-e interactions.

We ascribe the absence of bond-charge distortion here to the important role played by the interaction among the crisscrossing chains within the checkerboard lattice. We have already pointed out in Section IIIA that the stabilization of the perfect period 2 distortion for the case of 1 electron per atom, even in the absence of complete OO, is a signature of such a 2D interaction. Similar 2D interactions should be relevant also for carrier density 0.5. Since within mean field theory the Peierls instability in 2D is limited to carrier density of 1, the absence of the bond-charge distortion in the present case is to be anticipated. On the other hand, we have recently shown in a series of papers that specifically for this carrier density and one orbital per site, nonzero e-e interactions can strongly stabilize bond-charge ordered states in 2D lattices. In the case of the checkerboard lattice with a single orbital per site, plaquette spin-singlet formation (though without charge-ordering) has similarly been found for the same carrier concentration. It is conceivable that similar effects of e-e interactions persist in the present case with two degenerate orbitals per site.

Unfortunately, performing a realistic calculation with finite $U$ that goes beyond the UHF approximation in the present case is beyond our computational capability. We have therefore investigated our model Hamiltonian Eq. 1 in the limit of $U \to \infty$, where we assume band orbital occupancy corresponding to that for spinless fermions. Fig. 5 shows the same order parameters as in Fig. 3 for the same carrier concentration. While the transition occurs here for a slightly larger value of the coupling constant $\alpha$, it is otherwise identical to the transition with 1 electron per atom, viz., bond dimerization occurs along the diagonal directions, and OO and bond distortion reinforce each other cooperatively.

In summary, we have carried out numerical studies on the 2D checkerboard lattice with two degenerate directional orbitals per site - a model system that like the spinel compounds can in principle exhibit OO-driven Peierls bond distortions and charge ordering in multiple directions. In addition to OO and bond modulation terms, our model Hamiltonian includes both intra- and inter-orbital e-e correlations that were treated within the UHF approximation. Although some of our results have strong implications for the spinels, it is useful to precisely understand the differences between the spinel and checkerboard lattices such that the applicability as well as limitations of our model can both be understood. One difference between the two lattices is that the plaquettes

![Diagram](image_url)

**FIG. 5:** (color online) Co-operative orbital-ordering and Peierls bond-alternation for 0.5 spinless fermions per atom. Calculations are for a 16×16 periodic lattice. (a) Majority charge density in the orbitals forming the 1D chains. Here and in (b) circles, diamonds and squares correspond to $g = 0.6$, 0.8 and 1.0, respectively. (b) $\Delta B$ along the diagonal chain directions (see Fig. 2) as a function of $\alpha$. (c) Bond alternation versus majority charge density. Circles show the effect of increasing $\alpha$ with constant $\alpha=1.3$. Diamonds show effect of increasing $\alpha$ with constant $g=0.8$. Lines are guides to the eye.

from the 2D interactions.

### B. $\frac{1}{2}$ electron per atom

In CuIr$_2$S$_4$ and MgTi$_2$O$_4$, the distortion along the chain directions is not bond dimerization but a period 4 distortion. This is as expected for a Peierls transition in a 1D chain with carrier density 0.5. We have therefore performed self-consistent calculations within our model Hamiltonian also for density 0.5.

Not surprisingly, we do obtain self-consistently an orbitally ordered state here for nonzero $g$ with $\alpha = 0$. Even within an essentially 100% orbitally-ordered state (minority orbital charge density $\lesssim 0.01$), however, and with very strong $\alpha$, we were unable to obtain a stable Peierls-distorted state. In all cases our self-consistent simulations converged to states with disordered bond distortions and charge densities, indicating vanishing bond-charge distortion in the thermodynamic limit. We obtained similar results after including $U$ and/or $U'$ within the UHF approximation. We conclude that for electron density away from 1 electron per atom, orbitally-driven Peierls ordering does not occur within our model in the non-interacting limit or within the mean-field approach to e-e interactions.

We ascribe the absence of bond-charge distortion here to the important role played by the interaction among the crisscrossing chains within the checkerboard lattice. We have already pointed out in Section IIIA that the stabilization of the perfect period 2 distortion for the case of 1 electron per atom, even in the absence of complete OO, is a signature of such a 2D interaction. Similar 2D interactions should be relevant also for carrier density 0.5. Since within mean field theory the Peierls instability in 2D is limited to carrier density of 1, the absence of the bond-charge distortion in the present case is to be anticipated. On the other hand, we have recently shown in a series of papers that specifically for this carrier density and one orbital per site, nonzero e-e interactions can strongly stabilize bond-charge ordered states in 2D lattices. In the case of the checkerboard lattice with a single orbital per site, plaquette spin-singlet formation (though without charge-ordering) has similarly been found for the same carrier concentration. It is conceivable that similar effects of e-e interactions persist in the present case with two degenerate orbitals per site.

Unfortunately, performing a realistic calculation with finite $U$ that goes beyond the UHF approximation in the present case is beyond our computational capability. We have therefore investigated our model Hamiltonian Eq. 1 in the limit of $U \to \infty$, where we assume band orbital occupancy corresponding to that for spinless fermions. Fig. 5 shows the same order parameters as in Fig. 3 for the spinless fermion case. While the transition occurs here for a slightly larger value of the coupling constant $\alpha$, it is otherwise identical to the transition with 1 electron per atom, viz., bond dimerization occurs along the diagonal directions, and OO and bond distortion reinforce each other cooperatively.

In summary, we have carried out numerical studies on the 2D checkerboard lattice with two degenerate directional orbitals per site - a model system that like the spinel compounds can in principle exhibit OO-driven Peierls bond distortions and charge ordering in multiple directions. In addition to OO and bond modulation terms, our model Hamiltonian includes both intra- and inter-orbital e-e correlations that were treated within the UHF approximation. Although some of our results have strong implications for the spinels, it is useful to precisely understand the differences between the spinel and checkerboard lattices such that the applicability as well as limitations of our model can both be understood. One difference between the two lattices is that the plaquettes
in the 2D checkerboard lattice do not correspond to the tetrahedra in the spinel lattice because of the difference between horizontal and vertical bonds in Fig. 1(a) on the one hand and the diagonal bonds on the other. What is more important in the present context is that the OO in our model is not driven by a JT transition that destroys the degeneracies of the atomic orbitals in the model of Ref. 13. Within our model the two orbitals of different symmetries on a given atom are both potentially active orbitals.

We believe that our demonstration of the co-operative interaction between OO and the Peierls instability in Section III A, where each broken symmetry enhances the interaction between OO and the Peierls instability in Sec-

ducible contribution of e-e interaction to the metal-insulator transitions in CuIr$_2$S$_4$ and LiRh$_2$O$_4$. Further theoretical work based on the 3D pyrochlore lattice as well as experimental work that determines the extent of OO in the real systems will both be necessary to completely clarify this issue.

Finally, assuming that e-e interactions play a role, which is subject to further investigations as discussed above, this raises an interesting question, viz., what ultimately is the driving force behind the metal-insulator transitions in CuIr$_2$S$_4$ and LiRh$_2$O$_4$? Three of us have argued elsewhere that for carrier concentration precisely 0.5, there is a strong tendency to form a paired-electron crystal (PEC), in which there occur pairs of spin-singlet bonded sites separated by pairs of vacancies. This tendency to spin pairing is driven by nearest neighbor antiferromagnetic (AFM) correlations (as would exist in a large Hubbard-U system) and is enhanced in the presence of lattice frustration. Although the original calculations are for the anisotropic triangular lattice with a single orbital per site, the same tendency to spin-singlet formation can persist also in the spinel lattice. If the insulating state in the spinels CuIr$_2$S$_4$ and LiRh$_2$O$_4$ can be understood as a PEC with spin-singlet pairing driven by AFM correlations, it may further indicate that e-e interactions play an important role in superconductivity found in several structurally-related spinels. Whether or not e-e interactions play a role in the observed superconductivity in the spinels Li$_2$O$_4$, CuRh$_2$S$_4$, CuRh$_2$Se$_4$ has remained a lingering question. If the insulating state in this class of materials is indeed a PEC, the superconducting spinels should perhaps be included among the systems in which superconductivity is driven not entirely by BCS electron-phonon coupling.

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