NEW IMPROVED MOSER-TRUDINGER INEQUALITIES AND SINGULAR LIOUVILLE EQUATIONS ON COMPACT SURFACES

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Abstract. We consider a singular Liouville equation on a compact surface, arising from the study of Chern-Simons vortices in a self dual regime. Using new improved versions of the Moser-Trudinger inequalities (whose main feature is to be scaling invariant) and a variational scheme, we prove new existence results.

1. Introduction

We consider a compact orientable surface $\Sigma$ with metric $g$ and the equation

$$-\Delta_g u = \rho h(x)e^{2u} - 2\pi \sum_{j=1}^{m} \alpha_j \delta_{p_j} + c, \quad \int_{\Sigma} h(x)e^{2u} dV_g = 1.$$  

Here $\rho$ is a positive parameter, $h : \Sigma \to \mathbb{R}$ a smooth positive function, $\alpha_j \in [0, 1]$, $p_j \in \Sigma$ and $c$ is a constant. Integrating by parts we get that a necessary condition for the existence of solution is $c = \left(2\pi \sum_{j=1}^{m} \alpha_j - \rho \right) |\Sigma|^{-1}$.

This equation arises from physical models such as the abelian Chern-Simons-Higgs theory and the Electroweak theory, see [32], [35], [36], [37]. We also refer to [56], [57], [59] and the bibliographies therein for a more recent and complete description of the subject. Here we limit ourselves to mention that $u$ is related to the absolute value of the wave function in the above models, while the $p_j$’s, called vortices, are points where the wave function vanishes. Equation (1) has been the subject of several investigations, see for example [2], [3], [4], [6], [7], [9], [10], [16], [23], [30], [42], [51], [54], [55], [60].

Most of these results deal with asymptotic analysis or compactness of solutions, while relatively few ones are available concerning existence. In [24], [33] some perturbative results are given, providing solutions of multi-bump type for special values of the parameter $\rho$. In [10] an existence theorem is proved for surfaces with positive genus and for $\rho \in (4\pi, 8\pi)$. Finally, in [20] the Leray-Schauder degree is computed for $\alpha \geq 1$ and $\rho \in (4\pi, 8\pi)$, and so existence results are deduced.

Our goal is to develop a global variational theory for the equation, yielding existence of solutions under rather general conditions. In this paper we give a new improved Moser-Trudinger inequality, a basic tool for this strategy, and derive some first results in this spirit. Further existence results will be discussed in a forthcoming paper.

It is easy to see that equation (1) is equivalent to:

2000 Mathematics Subject Classification. 35B33, 35J35, 53A30, 53C21.

Key words and phrases. Geometric PDEs, Variational Methods, Min-max Schemes.
\[ -\Delta_g u = \rho \left( \frac{h(x)e^{2u}}{\int_{\Sigma} h(x)e^{2u}dV_g} - \frac{1}{|\Sigma|} \right) - 2\pi \sum_{j=1}^{m} \alpha_j \left( \delta_{p_j} - \frac{1}{|\Sigma|} \right). \]

This last formulation has the advantage that it is invariant with respect to the addition of constants.

Let \( G_p(x) \) be the Green’s function of \(-\Delta_g\) on \( \Sigma \) with singularity at \( p \), namely the unique solution of

\[ -\Delta_g G_p(x) = \delta_p - \frac{1}{|\Sigma|} \quad \text{on} \; \Sigma, \quad \text{with} \; \int_{\Sigma} G_p(x) dV_g = 0. \]

The change of variables

\[ u \mapsto u + 2\pi \sum_{j=1}^{m} \alpha_j G_p(x) \]

transforms (2) into an equation of the form

\[ -\Delta_g u = \rho \left( \frac{\tilde{h}(x)e^{2u}}{\int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h}(x)e^{2u}dV_g} - \frac{1}{|\Sigma|} \right) \quad \text{on} \; \Sigma. \]

Since \( G_p \) has the asymptotic behavior \( G_p(x) \simeq \frac{1}{4\pi} \log \frac{1}{d(x,p)} \) near \( p \), we have

\[ \tilde{h} > 0 \quad \text{on} \; \Sigma \setminus \cup_j \{p_j\}; \quad \tilde{h}(x) \simeq d(x,p_j)^{2\alpha_j} \quad \text{near} \; p_j. \]

Problem (4) is the Euler-Lagrange equation for the functional

\[ I_\rho(u) = \int_{\Sigma} |\nabla_g u|^2 dV_g + 2\rho \int_{\Sigma} udV_g - \rho \log \int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h}(x)e^{2u}dV_g; \quad u \in H^1(\Sigma). \]

Recall the Moser–Trudinger inequality

\[ \log \int_{\Sigma} e^{2(u-C)} dV_g \leq \frac{1}{4\pi} \int_{\Sigma} |\nabla_g u|^2 dV_g + C; \quad u \in H^1(\Sigma), \]

see e.g. [48]. From that inequality one can easily check that \( I_\rho \) is bounded from below if \( \rho < 4\pi \). Moreover, \( 4\pi \) is a threshold value, in the sense that for larger values of \( \rho \) the functional does not have a finite lower bound. However one can still hope to find critical points of saddle type, using for example min-max schemes.

This strategy or other topological methods (jointly with blow-up estimates), have been used successfully for regular Liouville equations of the form (2) but with all the \( \alpha_i \)’s equal to zero. Such problems have motivations arising from physics (study of mean field vorticity, or Chern-Simons theory without sources), or from conformal geometry (prescribing the Gauss curvature or some of its higher order counterparts), see [11], [12], [13], [15], [17], [18], [25], [26], [27], [28], [29], [31], [38], [39], [40], [43], [50], [53]. In the latter case, the function \( e^{2u} \) represents the conformal dilation of the background metric on a given surface. In fact, (2) also arises in the Gauss curvature prescription problem on surfaces with conical singularities: for more details we refer to [5].

In this framework, one main common tool for applying variational arguments is some kind of improvement of the Moser-Trudinger inequality. A classical example
is a result by J. Moser, [49], where he showed that the first constant in (7) can be taken to be $\frac{1}{8\pi}$ for even functions on $S^2$. A more general improvement was obtained by T. Aubin in [1], still in the case of the standard sphere: he showed that for balanced metrics one can take any constant which is larger than $\frac{1}{8\pi}$ (provided $C$ is taken large enough). Interesting applications were found for example in [15] where rather general conditions were given for prescribing the Gauss curvature on the sphere. Aubin’s improvement was generalized by W. Chen and C. Li in [21] for all surfaces, under the condition that the conformal volume $e^{2u}$ spreads into two distinct regions (separated by a positive distance). This result was used in [27] to produce solutions of the regular Liouville equation, see also [28], [29] and [45] for further progress on this direction.

The main goal of this paper is to obtain a new type of improved inequality and apply it to the study of (2). To explain the spirit of this improvement we recall the result in [58], which states that if $\tilde{\mathcal{h}}$ is as in (5) then the best constant $A$ for the inequality

$$\log \int_{\Sigma} \tilde{\mathcal{h}} e^{2(u-\mathcal{h})} dV_g \leq A \int_{\Sigma} |\nabla u|^2 dV_g + C$$

is given by $(4\pi \min \{1, \min_i \{1 + \alpha_i\}^{-1}\})^{-1}$. Therefore if some of the $\alpha_i$’s is negative the best possible constant is lower than $\frac{1}{8\pi}$, but if all the $\alpha_i$’s are positive (as in our case) the best constant is just $\frac{1}{8\pi}$. One can easily see this by testing the inequality on a standard bubble, namely a function of the form

$$\varphi_{\lambda,x}(y) = \log \frac{\lambda}{1 + \lambda^2 \text{dist}(x,y)^2},$$

with center point $x$ different from all the $p_i$’s. This function realizes the best constant in the regular case, and for the above choice of $x$ there is basically no effect from the vanishing of $\tilde{h}$ somewhere on $\Sigma$.

On the other hand, in [30] it was shown that for any $\alpha > -1$ there exists $C_\alpha$ such that

$$\log \int_{B} |x|^{2\alpha} e^{2(u-\mathcal{h})} dV_g \leq \frac{1}{4(1 + \alpha)^2} \int_{B} |\nabla_g u|^2 dV_g + C_\alpha; \quad u \in H^1_r(B).$$

In the latter formula $B$ stands for the unit ball of $\mathbb{R}^2$ and $H^1_r$ denotes the space of radial functions of class $H^1$ in $B$. Our improvement substitutes the symmetry requirement with a condition which, heuristically, applies to a subset of functions having codimension two in $H^1$, assuming $\alpha \in (0, 1]$. Roughly speaking, we associate to each function $u$ a center of mass constructed out of the unit measure $\mu_u := \frac{|x|^{2\alpha} e^{2u} dx}{\int_{\mathbb{R}^2} |x|^{2\alpha} e^{2u} dx}$: then the improvement would occur for functions whose center of mass is the origin (in our case, a singular point).

However, a rigorous proof of the above claim requires new arguments: the proof of Aubin (and in fact also Chen and Li’s one) relies on the fact of being able to find two sets with positive distance (bounded away from zero) which both contain a finite portion of the total conformal volume. The positivity of the distance allows to find cutoff functions $\chi_i$ with bounded gradients and to apply the standard Moser-Trudinger inequality to $\chi_i u$, choosing then the $\chi_i u$ with the smaller Dirichlet energy. This strategy fails in our case since the measure $\mu_u$ can be arbitrarily concentrated near a single point.
What is needed in this context is a condition which stays invariant under dilation of the measure $\mu$. To achieve it we use concentration functions (in the spirit of concentration-compactness results) and covering arguments through thick annuli, see Section 3 for details. Somehow, we want to define a continuous $\rho < 4\pi(1 + \alpha)$, then the above center of mass cannot coincide with the singularity if the energy $I_\rho(u)$ is sufficiently negative. The consequence of the above fact (with a proper localization near each singularity) is that low sublevels of the functional $I$ is sufficiently negative. The above maps $\pi$, $\pi = 4$ cannot coincide with the singularity if the energy $\mu$.

As an application of the previous statement we have that if $\rho < 4\pi(1 + \alpha)$, then $\rho < 4\pi(1 + \alpha_i)$. Then if $G(\Sigma)$ denotes the genus of $\Sigma$.

**Theorem 1.1.** Suppose $\alpha_j \in (0, 1]$ for all $j = 1, \ldots, m$ and that $\rho \in (4\pi, 8\pi)$, with $\rho \neq 4\pi(1 + \alpha_j)$ for all $j$. Denote by $J_\rho$ the subset of $\{p_1, \ldots, p_m\}$ for which $\rho < 4\pi(1 + \alpha_i)$. Then if $G(\Sigma), |J_\rho| \neq (0, 1)$ problem (2) has a solution.

**Remark 1.2.** For $G(\Sigma) > 0$ this result has been proved in [10], Corollary 6. The case of the sphere is more delicate: in fact in [7] it is shown (via a Pohozaev identity) that on the standard sphere $(S^2, g_0)$ (2) has no solution for $m = 1$ and $\rho \in (4\pi, 4\pi(1 + \alpha))$, $\alpha > 0$, which is precisely the case $(G(\Sigma), |J_\rho|) = (0, 1)$. Therefore, our condition $(G(\Sigma), |J_\rho|) \neq (0, 1)$ is somehow sharp.

To prove Theorem 1.1 we use a min-max scheme which is performed in detail in Section 5. First we show that there exist test functions $\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}$ (where $\alpha$ is a suitable parameter) which satisfy $I_\rho(\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}) \to -\infty$ and $\mu_{\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}} \to \delta_x$ as $\lambda \to -\infty$ whenever $x \in \Sigma \setminus J_\rho$. Notice that, by our assumptions, $\Sigma \setminus J_\rho$ is a non contractible set. We then consider continuous maps $\mathfrak{h}$ from the topological cone over (a retraction of) $\Sigma \setminus J_\rho$ into $H^1(\Sigma)$, which coincide with the $\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}$’s on the boundary of the cone.

The lower bound on the functional described above shows that the supremum of $I_\rho$ on the image of $\mathfrak{h}$ has a uniform control from below, provided $\lambda$ is sufficiently large. This allows us to show the admissibility of the variational class consisting of the above maps $\mathfrak{h}$ (in this step the non contractibility of $\Sigma \setminus J_\rho$ is used), and to find Palais-Smale sequences for $I_\rho$ at some bounded level.

At this point one can use a monotonicity result developed initially by Struwe, which consists in varying the parameter $\rho$ and to show that for a sequence $\rho_n \to \rho$ there exist bounded Palais-Smale sequences and hence solutions to (2). The argument can then be completed using the a priori estimates of [10], which imply compactness of solutions for $\rho$ belonging to the ranges in Theorem 1.1.

The plan of the paper is the following. In Section 2 we collect some preliminary results on the Moser-Trudinger inequality (plus some more or less known improvements), together with some compactness results and a deformation lemma. In Section 3 we use a covering argument to define a convenient center of mass for the measure $\mu$, (see the above notation). In Section 4 we obtain our new improved inequality, and lower bounds for $I_\rho$. Section 5 is devoted to the proof of Theorem 1.1; some final comments are given at the end.
Acknowledgements

A.M. has been supported by the project FIRB-Ideas Analysis and Beyond, and is grateful to the Mathematical Analysis department of the University of Granada for the kind hospitality. D.R has been supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation under Grant MTM2008-00988 and by J. Andalucía (FQM 116). He thanks SISSA for the hospitality during a stay in 2009. Both authors are grateful to D. Bartolucci and to the referee for some helpful comments.

2. Notation and preliminaries

In this section we fix our notation and recall some useful known facts. We state in particular some variants and improvements of the Moser-Trudinger inequality, together with their consequences.

We write \( \text{dist}(x, y) \) to denote the distance between two points \( x, y \in \Sigma \). Moreover, the symbol \( B_p(r) \) stands for the open metric ball of radius \( r \) and center \( p \), and \( A_p(r, R) \) the corresponding open annulus. \( H^1(\Sigma) \) is the Sobolev space of the functions on \( \Sigma \) which are in \( L^2(\Sigma) \) together with their first derivatives. The symbol \( \| \cdot \| \) will denote the norm of \( H^1(\Sigma) \). If \( \Sigma \) has boundary, \( H^1_0(\Sigma) \) will denote the completion of \( C^\infty_c(\Sigma) \) with respect to the Dirichlet norm. If \( u \in H^1(\Sigma) \),

\[
\frac{1}{|\Sigma|} \int_\Sigma u dV_g = \frac{1}{\hat{\Sigma}} \int_\Sigma u dV_g \quad \text{stands for the average of } u.
\]

For a real number \( a \) we denote by \( I^a_\rho \) the set \( \{ u \in H^1(\Sigma) : I_\rho(u) \leq a \} \).

Large positive constants are always denoted by \( C \), and the value of \( C \) is allowed to vary from formula to formula and also within the same line. When we want to stress the dependence of the constants on some parameter (or parameters), we add subscripts to \( C \), as \( C_\delta \), etc. Also constants with this kind of subscripts are allowed to vary.

2.1. Improved Moser-Trudinger inequalities. We start by recalling the well known Moser-Trudinger inequality in a version that, when applied to the sphere, has also received the name of Onofri inequality (see e.g. [15]).

**Proposition 2.1.** Let \( \Sigma \) be a compact surface. Then

a) If \( \Sigma \) has a boundary,

\[
\log \int_\Sigma e^{2u} dV_g \leq \frac{1}{2\pi} \int_\Sigma |\nabla_g u|^2 dV_g + 2 \int_\Sigma u + C \quad \text{for every } u \in H^1(\Sigma).
\]

b) If \( \Sigma \) has a boundary,

\[
\log \int_\Sigma e^{2u} dV_g \leq \frac{1}{4\pi} \int_\Sigma |\nabla_g u|^2 dV_g + C \quad \text{for every } u \in H^1_0(\Sigma).
\]

c) If \( \Sigma \) does not have a boundary, then

\[
\log \int_\Sigma e^{2u} dV_g \leq \frac{1}{4\pi} \int_\Sigma |\nabla_g u|^2 dV_g + 2 \int_\Sigma u + C \quad \text{for every } u \in H^1(\Sigma).
\]

The constant \( \frac{1}{4\pi} \) in (11) is sharp, as on can see by using standard bubbles, peaked at some point of \( \Sigma \) (see (8)). The constant in (9) is instead multiplied by two, since one can center a bubble on the boundary of \( \Sigma \), dividing approximatively by two both the conformal volume and the Dirichlet energy. In (10) we impose \( u \in H^1_0(\Sigma) \), so that this phenomenon is ruled out and the constant becomes again \( 4\pi \).
We begin by giving a localized version of the Moser-Trudinger inequality, following the ideas of [29].

**Proposition 2.2.** Assume that $\Sigma$ is a compact surface (with or without boundary), and $h : \Sigma \to \mathbb{R}$ measurable, $0 \leq \tilde{h}(x) \leq C_0$ a.e. $x \in \Sigma$. Let $\Omega \subset \Sigma$, $\delta > 0$ such that $\text{dist}(\Omega, \partial \Sigma) > \delta$.

Then, for any $\varepsilon > 0$ there exists a constant $C = C(C_0, \varepsilon, \delta)$ such that for all $u \in H^1(\Sigma)$,

$$\log \int_{\Omega} \tilde{h}(x)e^{2u}dV_g \leq \frac{1}{4\pi - \varepsilon} \int_{\Omega} |\nabla_g u|^2dV_g + 2 \int_{\Omega} udV_g + C.$$ 

**Proof.** We can assume that $\int_{\Sigma} u = 0$. Let us decompose $u = u_1 + u_2$, where $u_1 \in L^\infty(\Sigma)$ and $u_2 \in H^1(\Sigma)$ will be fixed later. We have

$$\log \int_{\Omega} \tilde{h}(x)e^{2(u_1 + u_2)}dV_g \leq 2\|u_1\|_{L^\infty(\Omega)} + \log \int_{\Omega} \tilde{h}(x)e^{2u_2}dV_g + C. \tag{12}$$

We next consider a smooth cutoff function $\chi$ with values into $[0, 1]$ satisfying

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{ll} \chi(x) = 1 & \text{for } x \in \Omega, \\
\chi(x) = 0 & \text{if } \text{dist}(x, \Omega) > \delta/2, \end{array} \right.$$ 

and then define

$$\tilde{u}(x) = \chi(x)u_2(x).$$

Clearly, $\tilde{u} \in H^1_0(\Sigma)$, so we can apply inequality (10) to $\tilde{u}$, finding

$$\log \int_{\Omega} \tilde{h}(x)e^{2u_2}dV_g \leq \log \int_{\Omega} e^{2\tilde{u}}dV_g + C \leq \frac{1}{4\pi} \int_{\Omega} |\nabla(\chi(x)u_2(x))|^2dV_g + C.$$ 

Using the Leibnitz rule and the Hölder inequality we obtain:

$$\int_{\Sigma} |\nabla(\chi(x)u_2(x))|^2dV_g \leq (1 + \varepsilon) \int_{\Sigma} |\nabla u_2|^2dV_g + C\varepsilon \int_{\Sigma} |u_2|^2dV_g.$$ 

From (12) and the last formulas we find

$$\log \int_{\Omega} \tilde{h}(x)e^{2u_2}dV_g \leq \frac{1 + \varepsilon}{4\pi} \int_{\Omega} |\nabla u_2|^2dV_g + C\varepsilon \int_{\Sigma} |u_2|^2dV_g + 2\|u_1\|_{L^\infty(\Omega)} + C. \tag{13}$$

To control the latter terms we use truncations in Fourier modes. Define $V_\varepsilon$ to be the direct sum of the eigenspaces of the Laplacian on $\Sigma$ (with Neumann boundary conditions) with eigenvalues less or equal than $C\varepsilon\varepsilon^{-1}$. Take now $u_1$ to be the orthogonal projection of $u$ onto $V_\varepsilon$. In $V_\varepsilon$ the $L^\infty$ norm is equivalent to the $L^2$ norm: by using Poincarè’s inequality we get

$$C\varepsilon \int_{\Sigma} |u_2|^2dV_g \leq \varepsilon \int_{\Sigma} |\nabla u_2|^2dV_g,$$

$$\|u_1\|_{L^\infty(\Omega)} \leq C\varepsilon^2\|u_1\|_{L^2(\Sigma)} \leq CC\varepsilon \left( \int_{\Sigma} |\nabla u_1|^2dV_g \right)^\frac{1}{2} \leq C\varepsilon \int_{\Sigma} |\nabla u_1|^2dV_g + C\varepsilon.$$

Hence, from (13) and the above inequalities we derive the conclusion by renaming $\varepsilon$ properly. 

The next result, for $\tilde{h} = 1$ has been proved for the first time in [21]. Assuming $\tilde{h}$ only bounded does not require any changes in the arguments of the proof. Roughly
speaking, it states that if the function $e^{2u}$ is spread into two regions of $\Sigma$, then the constant in the Moser-Trudinger inequality can be basically divided by 2. Let us point out that the arguments for Proposition 2.2 could also be used to prove the following result:

**Proposition 2.3.** Let $\Sigma$ be a compact surface, $\tilde{h} : \Sigma \to \mathbb{R}$ with $0 \leq \tilde{h}(x) \leq C_0$. Let $\Omega_1, \Omega_2$ be subsets of $\Sigma$ with $\text{dist}(\Omega_1, \Omega_2) \geq \delta_0$ for some $\delta_0 > 0$, and fix $\gamma_0 \in (0, \frac{1}{2})$. Then, for any $\varepsilon > 0$ there exists a constant $C = C(C_0, \varepsilon, \delta_0, \gamma_0)$ such that

$$\log \int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h}(x)e^{2u}dV_g \leq C + \frac{1}{8\pi - \varepsilon} \int_{\Sigma} |\nabla_g u|^2dV_g + 2 \int_{\Sigma} u.$$ 

for all functions $u \in H^1(\Sigma)$ satisfying

$$\int_{\Omega_i} \tilde{h}(x)e^{2u}dV_g \geq \gamma_0, \quad i = 1, 2.$$ 

(14)

A useful corollary of this result is the following one: for the proof see [21] or [27].

**Corollary 2.4.** Suppose $\rho < 8\pi$. Then, given any $\varepsilon, r > 0$ there exists $L = L(\varepsilon, r) > 0$ such that

$$I_\rho(u) \leq -L \quad \Rightarrow \quad \frac{\int_{B_\rho(x)} \tilde{h}e^{2u}dV_g}{\int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h}e^{2u}dV_g} > 1 - \varepsilon \quad \text{for some } x \in \Sigma.$$ 

### 2.2. Compactness of solutions and deformation lemma.

Concerning (4), we have the following result, proved via blow-up analysis.

**Theorem 2.5.** ([10]) Let $\Sigma$ be a compact surface, and let $u_i$ solve (4) with $\tilde{h}$ as in (5), $\rho = \rho_i$, $\rho_i \to \overline{\rho}$, with $\alpha_i > 0$ and $p_j \in \Sigma$. Suppose that $\int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h}e^{2u_i}dV_g \leq C_1$ for some fixed $C_1 > 0$. Then along a subsequence $u_{i_k}$ one of the following alternative holds:

(i): $u_{i_k}$ is uniformly bounded from above on $\Sigma$;

(ii): $\max_{\Sigma} \left\{ 2u_{i_k} - \log \int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h}e^{2u_{i_k}}dV_g \right\} \to +\infty$ and there exists a finite blow-up set $S = \{q_1, \ldots, q_l\} \subset \Sigma$ such that

(a) for any $s \in \{1, \ldots, l\}$ there exist $x_n^s \to q_s$ such that $u_{i_k}(x_n^s) \to +\infty$ and $u_{i_k} \to -\infty$ uniformly on the compact sets of $\Sigma \setminus S$,

(b) $\rho_{i_k} \frac{\tilde{h}e^{2u_{i_k}}}{\int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h}e^{2u_{i_k}}dV_g} \to \sum_{s=1}^{l} \beta_s \delta_{q_s}$ in the sense of measures, with $\beta_s = 4\pi$ for $q_s \neq \{p_1, \ldots, p_m\}$, or $\beta_s = 4\pi(1 + \alpha_j)$ if $q_s = p_j$ for some $j = \{1, \ldots, m\}$. In particular one has that

$$\overline{\rho} = 4\pi n + 4\pi \sum_{j \in J} (1 + \alpha_j),$$

for some $n \in \mathbb{N} \cup 0$ and $J \subseteq \{1, \ldots, m\}$ (possibly empty) satisfying $n + |J| > 0$, where $|J|$ is the cardinality of the set $J$.

From the above result we obtain immediately the following corollary.
Corollary 2.6. Suppose \( \rho \in (4\pi, 8\pi) \), and that

\[
\rho \neq 4\pi(1 + \alpha_j) \quad \text{for all } j = 1, \ldots, m.
\]

Then the set of solutions of (4) with zero mean value is uniformly bounded in \( C^2(\Sigma) \).

Our argument to prove existence of solutions relies on variational theory: more precisely, we look for some change in the topology of the sublevels of \( I_\rho \) which, via some deformation lemma, leads to the existence of critical points. The deformation lemma is usually employed when the Palais-Smale condition holds: this means that every sequence \((u_l)\) for which \( I_\rho(u_l) \) converges and for which \( I_\rho'(u_l) \) tends to zero would admit a converging subsequence. This condition allows to deform a sublevel into another, in case there are no critical points in between, following the (negative) gradient flow of the functional. The main role of the P-S condition is that the flow lines stay compact as long as their energy is bounded.

Unfortunately it is still unknown whether the P-S condition holds for \( I_\rho \), and one has to bypass the argument via some other kind of compactness result. We present next the following lemma, obtained by M.Lucia ([43]) through a variation of an argument in [52] (see also [27]).

Lemma 2.7. ([43]) Given \( a, b \in \mathbb{R}, \ a < b \), the following alternative holds: either

\[
\exists (\rho_l, u_l) \subseteq \mathbb{R} \times X \text{ satisfying } I_\rho'(u_l) = 0 \text{ for every } l; \quad a \leq I_\rho(u_l) \leq b; \quad \rho_l \to \rho,
\]

or the set \( I_\rho^a \) is a deformation retract of \( I_\rho^b \).

In fact, the result in [43] was proved for the case of positive functions \( \tilde{h} \), but it does extend to our case as well with substantially the same proof.

3. A covering argument

In this section we use a covering argument (via thick annuli) to detect both a concentration size for the function \( \tilde{h}e^{2u} \) and its location, which are useful to obtain (in the next section) the desired improved inequality.

Proposition 3.1. Assume \( \tilde{h} : \Sigma \to \mathbb{R}, \ 0 \leq \tilde{h}(x) \leq C, \ \rho \in (4\pi, 8\pi) \) and take a constant \( C_1 > 2 \). There exist \( \tau > 0, \ L_0 > 0 \) and a continuous map

\[
\beta : I_\rho^{-L_0} \to \Sigma,
\]

satisfying the following property: for any \( u \in I_\rho^{-L_0} \) there exists \( \bar{\sigma} > 0 \) and \( \bar{y} \in \Sigma \) such that \( d(\bar{y}, \beta(u)) < 2C_1\bar{\sigma} \) and:

\[
\int_{B_\rho(\bar{\sigma})} \tilde{h}e^{2u}dV_g = \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_\rho(C_1\bar{\sigma})} \tilde{h}e^{2u}dV_g \geq \tau \int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h}e^{2u}dV_g.
\]

Proof. Let us define:

\[
A = \{ f \in L^1(\Sigma), \ f(x) > 0 \ a.e., \ \int_{\Sigma} f dV_g = 1 \},
\]

\[
\sigma : \Sigma \times A \to (0, +\infty),
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where $\sigma = \sigma(x, f)$ is chosen such that:

$$
\int_{B_x(\sigma)} f dV_g = \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_x(C_1 \sigma)} f dV_g.
$$

It is easy to check that $\sigma(x, f)$ is uniquely determined and continuous. Moreover, we obtain that $\sigma$ satisfies

$$(15) \quad \text{dist}(x, y) \leq C_1 \max\{\sigma(x, f), \sigma(y, f)\} + \min\{\sigma(x, f), \sigma(y, f)\}.$$ \hspace{2cm}

Otherwise, $B_x(C_1 \sigma(x, f)) \cap B_y(\sigma(y, f) + \varepsilon) = \emptyset$ for some $\varepsilon > 0$. Let us now show that $A_y(\sigma(y, f), \sigma(y, f) + \varepsilon)$ is a nonempty open set. Clearly, $B_y(\sigma(y, f) + \varepsilon)$ does not exhaust the whole surface $\Sigma$. Since $\Sigma$ is connected, there exists $z \in \partial B_y(\sigma(y, f) + \varepsilon)$. Then $\text{dist}(z, y) = \sigma(y, f) + \varepsilon$, which implies that $B_z(\varepsilon) \cap B_y(\sigma(y, f) + \varepsilon)$ is a nonempty open set included in $A_y(\sigma(y, f), \sigma(y, f) + \varepsilon)$.

Then:

$$
\int_{B_x(\sigma(x, f))} f dV_g = \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_x(C_1 \sigma(x, f))} f dV_g \geq \int_{B_y(\sigma(y, f) + \varepsilon)} f dV_g > \int_{B_y(\sigma(y, f))} f dV_g.
$$

By interchanging the roles of $x$ and $y$, we would also obtain the reverse inequality. This contradiction proves (15).

Let us define $T : \Sigma \times A \rightarrow (0, +\infty)$ by

$$
T(x, f) = \int_{B_x(\sigma(x, f))} f dV_g.
$$

Clearly, $T$ is also continuous.

**Step 1:** There exists $\tau > 0$ such that $\max_{x \in \Sigma} T(x, f) > 2\tau$ for any $f \in A$.

Let us take $x_0 \in \Sigma$ such that $T(x_0, f) = \max_{x \in \Sigma} T(x, f)$, and fix some $x \in A_{x_0}(\sigma(x_0, f), C_1 \sigma(x_0, f))$.

We claim that:

$$(16) \quad \text{dist}(x, x_0) + C_1 \sigma(x, f) \geq C_1 \sigma(x_0, f),$$

$$(17) \quad \text{dist}(x, x_0) - C_1 \sigma(x, f) \leq \sigma(x_0, f).$$

Let us prove (16). By contradiction, assume $\text{dist}(x, x_0) + C_1 \sigma(x, f) < C_1 \sigma(x_0, f) - 2\varepsilon$ for some $\varepsilon > 0$; by the triangular inequality, $B_x(C_1 \sigma(x, f)) \subset B_{x_0}(\sigma(x_0, f) - 2\varepsilon)$. By definition of $\sigma$, $B_{x_0}(C_1 \sigma(x_0, f)) \neq \Sigma$. So we can show, as previously, that $A_{x_0}(\sigma(x_0, f) - 2\varepsilon, C_1 \sigma(x_0, f))$ is not empty. Then:

$$
T(x, f) = \int_{B_x(\sigma(x, f))} f dV_g = \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_x(C_1 \sigma(x, f))} f dV_g
$$

$$
> \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_{x_0}(\sigma(x_0, f))} f dV_g = T(x_0, f),
$$

which contradicts the definition of $x_0$.

We now prove (17) in an analogous way. Indeed, if $\text{dist}(x, x_0) - C_1 \sigma(x, f) > \sigma(x_0, f) + 2\varepsilon$, we obtain that $(\Sigma \setminus B(x, C_1 \sigma(x, f))) \supset B(x_0, \sigma(x_0, f) + 2\varepsilon)$. As above, the open set $A_{x_0}(\sigma(x_0, f), \sigma(x_0, f) + \varepsilon)$ is nonempty. Then, we obtain again a contradiction:

$$
T(x, f) = \int_{B_x(\sigma(x, f))} f dV_g = \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_x(C_1 \sigma(x, f))} f dV_g > \int_{B_{x_0}(\sigma(x_0, f))} f dV_g = T(x_0, f).
$$
The claim is proved.

We subtract (17) from (16), and deduce that
\[ \sigma(x, f) \geq C_1^{-1} \sigma(x_0, f) \geq \frac{1}{4} \sigma(x_0, f) \]
for any \( x \in A_{x_0}(\sigma(x_0, f), C_1 \sigma(x_0, f)) \).

We now point out that given \( C_1 > 2 \), there exists \( k = k(C_1) \) such that, for any \( \sigma > 0 \) and any \( y \in \Sigma \),
\[ A_y(\sigma, C_1 \sigma) \subset \bigcup_{i=1}^k B(x_i, \frac{1}{4} \sigma), \]
for some \( x_i \in A_y(\sigma, C_1 \sigma) \).

Therefore:
\[ \hat{A}_{x_0}(\sigma(x_0, f), C_1 \sigma(x_0, f)) dV_g \leq \sum_{i=1}^k \int_{B(x_i, \sigma(x_i, f))} dV_g = \sum_{i=1}^k T(x_i, f) \leq k T(x_0, f). \]

On the other hand:
\[ \int_{B_{x_0}(\sigma(x_0, f))} dV_g = \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_{x_0}(C_1 \sigma(x_0, f))} dV_g = T(x_0, f). \]

Hence \( 1 = \int_{\Sigma} dV_g \leq (k + 2) T(x_0, f) \), which concludes the proof of Step 1.

**Step 2:** Definition of \( \bar{\sigma} \) and \( \bar{y} \).

Let us define:
\[ S(f) = \{ x \in \Sigma : T(x, f) \geq \tau \}. \]

By Step 1, \( S(f) \) is a nonempty compact set for every \( f \in A \). Let us define also:
\[ \bar{\sigma}(f) = \max_{x \in S(f)} \sigma(x, f). \]

Observe that, in general, \( \bar{\sigma} \) could be discontinuous in \( f \). Finally, take \( \bar{y} \in S(f) \) such that \( \sigma(\bar{y}, f) = \bar{\sigma} \). For \( u \in I_\rho^L \), take \( f = (\int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h} e^{2u} dV_g)^{-1} \tilde{h}(x)e^{2u(x)} = \tilde{h}(x)e^{2u(x) - \log \int \tilde{h} e^{2u} dV_g} \in A \).

**Step 3:** For any \( \varepsilon > 0 \) there exists \( L_0 > 0 \) large enough such that \( diam S(f) \leq (C_1 + 1) \bar{\sigma} < \varepsilon \) for any \( u \in I_\rho^{-L_0} \).

The first inequality holds independently of \( L_0 \); indeed, by (15), \( dist(x, y) \leq (C_1 + 1) \bar{\sigma} \) for any given any \( x, y \in S(f) \).

On the other hand, recall that:
\[ \int_{B_{\bar{\sigma}}(\bar{\sigma})} \tilde{h} e^{2u} dV_g \geq \tau \int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h} e^{2u} dV_g, \text{ and} \]
\[ \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_{\bar{\sigma}}(C_2 \sigma)} \tilde{h} e^{2u} dV_g \geq \tau \int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h} e^{2u} dV_g. \]

Corollary 2.4 implies that we can choose \( L_0 > 0 \) so that \( \bar{\sigma} < \frac{\varepsilon}{C_1 + 1} \) for any \( u \in I_\rho^{-L_0} \).

**Step 4:** Definition of \( \beta(u) \) and conclusion.
We can assume to have an embedding $\Sigma \subset \mathbb{R}^3$. Let us define:

$$
\eta : I_{\rho}^{-L_0} \to \mathbb{R}^3, \quad \eta(u) = \frac{\int_{\Sigma} \left[ T(x, f) - \tau \right] + x dV_g}{\int_{\Sigma} \left[ T(x, f) - \tau \right] + dV_g}
$$

where $f = \tilde{h}(x)e^{2u(x)} - \log \int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h}e^{2u} dV_g$.

Observe that in the above terms the integrands are equal to zero outside $S(f)$.

Let $U \supset \Sigma$, $U \subset \mathbb{R}^3$ an open tubular neighborhood of $\Sigma$, and $P : U \to \Sigma$ and orthogonal projection onto $\Sigma$. Thanks to Step 3, $S(f) \subset \overline{B_{\hat{y}}((C_1 + 1)\hat{\sigma})} \subset \overline{B_{\hat{y}}^3} ((C_1 + 1)\hat{\sigma})$. Since $\eta(u)$ is a barycenter of a function supported in $S(f)$, we have:

(18) $|\eta(u) - \tilde{y}| \leq (C_1 + 1)\hat{\sigma}$.

By taking $L_0 > 0$ large enough, $\eta(u) \in U$ for any $u \in I_{\rho}^{-L_0}$. Therefore, we can define:

$$
\beta : I_{\rho}^{-L_0} \to \Sigma, \quad \beta(u) = P \circ \eta(u).
$$

To conclude the proof we just need to show that $\text{dist}(\beta(u), \tilde{y}) < 2C_1\hat{\sigma}$. We denote by $T_{\hat{y}}\Sigma$ the tangent space to $\Sigma$ at $\tilde{y}$. For any $x \in S(f) \subset B_{\hat{y}}((C_1 + 1)\hat{\sigma})$, one has:

(19) $\min\{|\tilde{y} + y - x| : y \in T_{\hat{y}}\Sigma\} \leq C\hat{\sigma}^2$,

where $C$ depends only on the $C^2$ regularity of $\Sigma$. Since $\eta(u)$ is a barycenter of a function supported in $S(f)$, again, we have that

$$
\eta(u) \in \overline{B_{\hat{y}}^3} ((C_1 + 1)\hat{\sigma}), \quad \min\{|\tilde{y} + y - \eta(u)| : y \in T_{\hat{y}}\Sigma\} \leq C\hat{\sigma}^2.
$$

By taking a larger $L_0$, if necessary, we can assume $2C\hat{\sigma}^2 \leq \hat{\sigma}$ (recall, again, Step 3). So,

$$
|\beta(u) - \eta(u)| = \min_{x \in \Sigma} |\eta(u) - x| \leq 2C\hat{\sigma}^2 \leq \hat{\sigma}.
$$

This inequality, together with (18), implies that

(20) $|\beta(u) - \eta(u)| = \min_{x \in \Sigma} |\eta(u) - x| \leq (C_1 + 2)\hat{\sigma}$.

Finally, take $\nu = \frac{2C_1}{C_1 + 2} > 1$; by Step 3 we can take $L_0$ larger, if necessary, so that $\hat{\sigma}$ verifies that for any $x, y \in \Sigma$, if $|x - y| \leq (C_1 + 2)\hat{\sigma}$, then $\text{dist}(x, y) \leq \nu|x - y|$. This, together with (20), finishes the proof. $\blacksquare$

Remark 3.2. We claim that, with the above construction, if $f_n = \frac{\tilde{h}e^{2u_n}}{\int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h}e^{2u_n} dV_g} \to \delta_1$ for some $x \in \Sigma$ then one also has $\beta(u_n) \to x$.

To check this, take $\tilde{\sigma}_n = \tilde{\sigma}(f_n)$, and $x_n \in S(f_n)$. Passing to a subsequence, we have $\tilde{\sigma}_n \to \sigma_0$ and $x_n \to x_0$.

We first prove that $\tilde{\sigma}_0 = 0$. If not, by construction, we would have:

$$
\int_{B(x_0, \sigma_0/2)} f_n dV_g > \tau, \quad \int_{\Sigma \setminus B(x_0, (C_1 - 1)\sigma_0)} f_n dV_g > \tau,
$$

which is a contradiction.

We now prove that $x_0 = x$. If not, take $0 < \delta < \text{dist}(x_0, x)/2$. Since $\tilde{\sigma}_n \to 0$,

$$
\int_{B(x_0, \delta)} f_n dV_g > \tau,
$$

which is again a contradiction.
Recall now that, by (20), \( \text{dist}(\beta(u_n), S(f_n)) \leq C\bar{\sigma}_n \); this concludes the proof of the claim.

**Remark 3.3.** If \( \Sigma = B_0(1) \subset \mathbb{R}^2 \) and \( u \) is a radial function, then also \( f \) is a radial function. Moreover, \( \sigma(x, f) \) and \( T(x, f) \) are radial functions, and the set \( S(f) \) is radially symmetric. Therefore, \( \eta(u) = 0 \), and here the projection \( \beta \) coincides with \( \eta \). So, any radial function has zero barycenter.

This argument applies also to less restrictive symmetry assumptions: for instance, if \( u \) is even with respect to both the \( x \) and the \( y \) axes.

Observe that in this case \( \beta \) is defined in \( H^1(B_0(1)) \), and not only on sublevels.

### 4. Improved Inequalities

The main goal of this section is to prove the following result, giving a lower bound on the functional \( I_\rho \) under suitable conditions on its argument. Let \( \beta \) be the map constructed in Proposition 3.1.

**Proposition 4.1.** Assume \( \rho \in (4\pi, 4\pi(1 + \alpha_1)) \), \( C_1 > 1 \) sufficiently large, \( L_0 > 0 \), \( \tau > 0 \) such that Proposition 3.1 applies. Then, there exists \( L > L_0 \) such that \( I_\rho(u) > -L \) for any \( u \in I^{-L_0}_\rho \) satisfying that \( \beta(u) = p_i \).

**Remark 4.2.** In particular, if \( \Sigma = B_0(1) \subset \mathbb{R}^2 \), \( p = 0 \) and \( u \) is radially symmetric, we obtain the boundedness below of \( I_\rho \) for \( \rho < 4\pi(1 + \alpha) \) (see Remark 3.3). This has already been observed in [30].

The same thing is true under less restrictive symmetry assumptions: for instance, for functions \( u \) that are even with respect to both the \( x \) and the \( y \) axes (see, again, Remark 3.3).

**Proof.** Take \( \delta > 0 \) fixed, \( u \in I^{-L_0}_\rho \) such that \( \beta(u) = p_i \), and let \( \bar{y} \in \Sigma \), \( \bar{\sigma} > 0 \) be as in Proposition 3.1. For simplicity, let us assume that \( \int_\Sigma udV_g = 0 \).

Take \( \varepsilon > 0 \) (to be fixed later), and choose \( s \in (2\bar{\sigma}, \frac{C_1}{2\bar{\sigma}}) \) such that:

\[
\int_{A_{\bar{y}}(s/2,2s)} |\nabla u|^2 dV_g < \frac{1}{\gamma} \int_{B_{\bar{y}}(s)} |\nabla u|^2 dV_g, \quad \text{where } \gamma \in \mathbb{N}, \quad \varepsilon^{-1} < \gamma \leq \frac{\log_2 C_1}{2}.
\]

Let us define:

\[
D_1 = \int_{B_{\bar{y}}(s)} |\nabla u|^2 dV_g, \quad D_2 = \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_{\bar{y}}(s)} |\nabla u|^2 dV_g,
\]

\[
D = D_1 + D_2, \quad J = \log \int_{\Sigma} h(x)e^{2u} dV_g.
\]

Here the proof proceeds in three steps:

**Step 1:** We apply Proposition 2.2 to \( u \) or, more precisely, to a convenient dilation of \( u \) given by:

\[
v(x) = u(sx + \bar{y}).
\]

We have:

\[
\int_{B_{\bar{y},s}} |\nabla u|^2 dV_g = \int_{B(0,1)} |\nabla v|^2 dV_g,
\]

\[
\int_{B_{\bar{y},s}} udV_g = \int_{B(0,1)} vdV_g,
\]
\[
\int_{B(\bar{y},s/2)} \hat{h}(x)e^{2u} dV_g \leq C \int_{B(\bar{y},s/2)} |x-p_i|^{2\alpha_i} e^{2u} dV_g \leq Cs^{2\alpha_i} \int_{B(\bar{y},s/2)} e^{2u} dV_g = C s^{2+2\alpha_i} \int_{B(0,1/2)} e^{2u} dV_g.
\]

In the above computations we have used that \(|\bar{y}-p_i| \leq C s\). By applying Proposition 2.2 to \(v\) and taking into account the inequality \(\int_{B_\tau(s/2)} \hat{h} e^{2u} \geq \tau \int_\Sigma \hat{h} e^{2u}\) (recall Proposition 3.1), we obtain:

\[
(22) \quad \mathcal{J} - \frac{1}{4\pi - \varepsilon} D_1 + 2(1 + \alpha_i) \log(1/s) \leq 2 \int_{B(\bar{y},s)} u + C.
\]

This inequality is one of the key ingredients of the proof.

**Step 2:** We estimate \(\int_{\partial B(y,s)} u\). To begin, consider a fixed value \(s\) and the function \(\hat{u} = u - \int_{B(y,s)} u\). By the trace embedding, \(\hat{u} \in L^1(\partial B(y,s))\), and thanks to the Poincarè-Wirtinger inequality we get

\[
\left| \int_{\partial B(y,s)} \hat{u} \, dx \right| \leq C \|\hat{u}\|_{H^1} \leq C \left( \int_{B(y,s)} |\nabla u|^2 \, dV_g \right)^{1/2}.
\]

Therefore,

\[
(23) \quad \left| \int_{\partial B(y,s)} u \, dV_g - \int_{B(y,s)} u \, dV_g \right| \leq C \left( \int_{B(y,s)} |\nabla u|^2 \, dV_g \right)^{1/2} \leq \varepsilon D_1 + C'.
\]

Observe now that the above inequality is invariant under dilation. So, the constant \(C\) is independent of \(s\), and hence \(C'\) depends only on \(\varepsilon\).

**Step 3:** By taking into account that \(\hat{h}(x) \sim d(x,p_i)^{2\alpha_i}\) near \(p_i\), and \(|x-p_i| \leq C|x-\bar{y}|\), we get the following estimate:

\[
(24) \quad \int_{\Sigma \setminus B(y,s)} \hat{h}(x) e^{2u} dV_g = \int_{\Sigma \setminus B(y,s)} \frac{\hat{h}(x)}{|x-\bar{y}|^{2\alpha_i}} |x-\bar{y}|^{2\alpha_i} e^{2u} dV_g \leq \frac{C}{s^{2\alpha_i}} \int_{\Sigma \setminus B(y,s)} e^{2u} dV_g,
\]

with \(u(x) = \hat{u}(x) + 2\alpha_i w(x)\),

\[
w(x) = \begin{cases} \log s & x \in B(y,s), \\ |x| & x \in A(y,s,\delta), \\ \log \delta & x \in \Sigma \setminus B(y,\delta) \end{cases}, \quad \begin{cases} -\Delta \hat{u} = 0 & x \in B(\bar{y},s), \\ \hat{u}(x) = u(x) & x \notin B(\bar{y},s). \end{cases}
\]

Our intention is to apply the Moser-Trudinger to \(v\). Observe that:

\[
\int_{\Sigma} v \leq C + \int_{\Sigma} \hat{u}.
\]

Since \(f_\Sigma u = 0\) and \(\hat{u} - u\) has compact support in \(B(y,s)\),

\[
\left| \int_{\Sigma} \hat{u} \right| = \left| \int_{\Sigma} (\hat{u} - u) \right| \leq C \left( \int_{B(y,s)} |\nabla \hat{u} - \nabla u|^2 \, dV_g \right)^{1/2} \leq \varepsilon D + C\varepsilon.
\]

We now estimate the Dirichlet energy:

\[
\int_{B(y,s)} |\nabla u|^2 dV_g = \int_{B(y,s)} |\nabla \hat{u}|^2 dV_g \leq C_0 \int_{A(y,s/2,2s)} |\nabla u|^2 dV_g < C_0 \varepsilon D,
\]

where \(C_0 = C_0(\alpha_i)\).
where $C_0$ is a universal constant. Moreover,
\[
\int_{\Sigma \setminus B_{g}(s)} |\nabla v|^2 dV_g = \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_{g}(s)} |\nabla u|^2 dV_g + 4\alpha_i^2 \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_{g}(s)} \frac{1}{|x-y|^2} dV_g + 4\alpha_i \int_{\Sigma \setminus B_{g}(s)} \nabla u \cdot \nabla (\log |x-y|) dV_g.
\]

We integrate by parts to obtain:
\[
\int_{\Sigma \setminus B_{g}(s)} |\nabla v|^2 dV_g \leq D_2 + 8\pi \alpha_i^2 \log \frac{1}{s} - 8\pi \alpha_i \int_{\partial B_{g}(s)} u dV_g + C.
\]

Next, we apply the Moser-Trudinger inequality to $u$:
\[
\mathcal{J} \leq 2\alpha_i \log \frac{1}{s} + \frac{1}{4\pi} D_2 + 2\alpha_i^2 \log \frac{1}{s} - 2\alpha_i \int_{\partial B_{g}(s)} u dV_g + C_0\epsilon D + C'.
\]

By using (22) and (23), we obtain:
\[
(1 + \alpha_i)\mathcal{J} \leq \frac{\alpha_i}{4\pi - \epsilon} D_1 + \frac{1}{4\pi} D_2 + C_0\epsilon D + \epsilon D_1 + C''.
\]

In order to finish the proof it suffices to take $\epsilon$ small enough depending only on $\rho$ and $C_0$, (we recall that $C_0$ is a universal constant). In such case, we need to choose $C_1$ large enough so that (21) can be satisfied. □

**Remark 4.3.** The inequality used in (24) is sharp when evaluated on solutions of the singular equation $-\Delta u = |x|^{2\alpha}e^{2u}$ in $\mathbb{R}^2$ (and properly glued on $\Sigma$), which have been classified in [51] (see also [16]) as
\[
\varphi_{\alpha,\lambda}(y) = \log \left( \frac{\lambda^{\alpha+1}}{1 + (\lambda|x|)^{2(1+\alpha)}} \right).
\]

If $u$ has this form, and if $v = u + 2\alpha \log |x|$, then $v$ has the asymptotic profile of a standard bubble, which makes the coefficients in the standard Moser-Trudinger inequality optimal.

Let $J_\rho$ be as in Theorem 1.1, and given a small positive number $\theta$ we define the compact set
\[
(25) \quad \Theta_\rho = \Sigma \setminus \cup_{p_i \in J_\rho} B_{p_i}(\theta).
\]

From an extension of the above arguments one can prove the following result.

**Proposition 4.4.** For $L > 0$ sufficiently large there exists a continuous projection $\Psi$ from $I_\rho^{-L}$ into $\Theta_\rho$ with the property that if $\frac{\hat{h} e^{2u_n}}{\int_{\Sigma} \hat{h} e^{2u_n} dV_g} \to \delta_x$ for some $x \in \Theta_\rho$ then $\Psi(u_n) \to x$.

**Proof.** It is sufficient to modify properly the function $\beta$ constructed in Proposition 3.1. Let us notice that since $\rho < 4\pi(1 + \alpha_i)$ for $p_i \in J_\rho$, if $\beta(u) = p_i$, $p_i \in J_\rho$, then by Proposition 4.1 (and the subsequent observation) $I_\rho$ is uniformly bonded from below. It follows that if $L$ is sufficiently large and if $u \in I_\rho^{-L}$, then $\beta(u) \in \Sigma \setminus J_\rho$.

Then, if $\beta(u) \not\in \Theta_\rho$, it will belong to some set of the form $B_{p_i}(\theta) \setminus \{p_i\}$, for some $p_i \in J_\rho$. At this point it is sufficient to move $\beta(u)$ along the geodesic segment
emanating from \( p_i \) in the direction of \( \beta(u) \) until we hit the boundary of \( \Theta_p \). This procedure is well defined if \( \theta \) is chosen sufficiently small.

The last statement of the proposition follows from Remark 3.2. ■

5. PROOF OF THEOREM 1.1 AND FINAL REMARKS

Let \( \rho, J_p \subseteq \{ p_1, \ldots, p_m \} \) be as in Theorem 1.1, and let \( \Theta_p \) be defined as in (25).

By our assumptions, the set \( \Theta_p \) has either the topology of \( S^2 \); or the topology of \( S^2 \) with more than one point removed, or the topology of any other surface with \( k \) points removed, \( k \geq 0 \). In any of these situations, the set \( \Theta_p \) is non contractible.

We show next that it is possible to map an image of \( \Theta_p \) homeomorphically into arbitrarily low sublevels of \( I_p \). Let \( \tilde{\alpha} = \max_{i \in \{ 1, \ldots, m \} \setminus J_p} \alpha_i \). For \( \lambda > 0 \) and \( \alpha \in (\tilde{\alpha}, \frac{d}{4\pi} - 1) \), we consider the following function

\[
\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}(y) = \log \left( \frac{\lambda^{1+\alpha}}{1 + (\lambda \text{dist}(y, x))^{2(1+\alpha)}} \right).
\]

Lemma 5.1. Let \( \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x} \) be as in (26). Then one has

\[
I_p(\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}) \to -\infty \quad \text{as } \lambda \to +\infty
\]

uniformly on \( \Theta_p \).

Proof. It is standard (see e.g. Section 4 in [46]) to check that

\[
(27) \quad \int_{\Sigma} |\nabla \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}|^2 dV_g \simeq 8\pi (1 + \alpha)^2 \log \lambda; \quad \int_{\Sigma} \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x} dV_g \simeq -(1 + \alpha) \log \lambda
\]

as \( \lambda \to +\infty \). We want to estimate next the integral of the exponential term. If \( x \) belongs to a compact set of \( \Sigma \setminus \{ p_1, \ldots, p_m \} \) then for some \( \delta > 0 \) we have that

\[
(28) \quad \int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h} e^{2\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}} dV_g \geq \frac{1}{C\delta} \int_{B_{\delta}(x)} e^{2\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}} dV_g.
\]

Using normal geodesic coordinates \( y \) centered at \( x \) and the estimate

\[
(29) \quad dV_g = (1 + \alpha_0(1)) dy; \quad d(x, y) = (1 + \alpha_0(1)) |y|, \quad y \in B_{\delta}(x)
\]

(we have identified \( y \) with its coordinate in the above system) we find that

\[
\int_{B_{\delta}(x)} e^{2\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}} dV_g = (1 + \alpha_0(1)) \int_{B_{\delta}(0)} \frac{\lambda^{2(1+\alpha)}}{(1 + (\lambda |y|)^2(1+\alpha))^2} dy \geq \frac{1}{C} \lambda^{2\alpha}.
\]

The last formula, with (27), (28) and the fact that \( \rho > 4\pi(1 + \alpha) \) imply the conclusion for \( x \) in compact sets of \( \Sigma \setminus \{ p_1, \ldots, p_m \} \).

Next, it is sufficient to consider the case in which \( x \) is close to one of the \( p_i \)'s with \( i \notin J_p \). Localizing the integral as in (28) and (29), it is sufficient to estimate from below the following quantity

\[
\int_{B_{\delta}(x)} |y - p_i|^{2\alpha_i} \frac{\lambda^{2(1+\alpha)}}{(1 + (\lambda |y - x|)^2(1+\alpha))^2} dy,
\]

uniformly for \( p_i \in \{ p_1, \ldots, p_m \} \setminus J_p \), and for \( |x - p_i| \leq \delta^2 \). By a change of variables we are left with

\[
\int_{B_{\delta}(0)} \frac{\lambda^{2(1+\alpha)} |y|^{2\alpha_i}}{(1 + (\lambda |y - x|)^2(1+\alpha))^2} dy; \quad |x| \leq \delta^2.
\]
In conclusion we obtain the estimate
\[ E \]
Evaluating the last integral we have that
\[ \text{functions } \tilde{\varphi} \]
We also have the following result, regarding the concentration properties of the
\[ \text{functions } \tilde{\varphi} \]
We next divide the domain into the three sets
\[ B_1 = \{ |y| \leq \sqrt{\delta}|x| \}; \quad B_2 = \{ \sqrt{\delta}|x| < |y| \leq \delta^{-\frac{1}{2}}|x| \}; \quad B_3 = \{ \delta^{-\frac{1}{2}}|x| < |y| \leq \delta \} . \]
In \( B_1 \) we have that \( |y - x| = (1 + o_\delta(1))|x| \), which implies
\[ \int_{B_1} \frac{\lambda^{2(1+\alpha)}|y|^{2\alpha_i}}{(1 + (\lambda|x|)^2(1+\alpha))^2} \, dy \geq C^{-1}_\delta \int_{B_0(\sqrt{\delta}|x|)} \frac{\lambda^{2(1+\alpha)}|y|^{2\alpha_i}}{(1 + (\lambda|x|)^2(1+\alpha))^2} \, dy \]
\[ \geq C^{-1}_\delta \lambda^{2(1+\alpha)}|x|^{2\alpha_i+2} \, dy. \]
In \( B_2 \) \( |y| \) is bounded above and below by constants (depending on \( \delta \)) multiplying \( |x| \), and hence with a change of variables we get
\[ \int_{B_2} \frac{\lambda^{2(1+\alpha)}|y|^{2\alpha_i}}{(1 + (\lambda|x|)^2(1+\alpha))^2} \, dy \geq C^{-1}_\delta \int_{\lambda(B_2-x)} \frac{|y|^{2\alpha_i}}{(1 + |y|^{2(1+\alpha)})^2} \, dz \]
\[ \geq C^{-1}_\delta |x|^{2\alpha_i} \lambda^{2\alpha_i} \int_0^{\lambda|x|} \, ds (1 + s^{2(1+\alpha)})^2. \]
Finally in \( B_3 \) we have that \( |y - x|^2 = (1 + o_\delta(1))|y|^2 \), and therefore from a change of variables we get
\[ \int_{B_3} \frac{\lambda^{2(1+\alpha)}|y|^{2\alpha_i}}{(1 + (\lambda|x|)^2(1+\alpha))^2} \, dy \geq C^{-1}_\delta \int_{B_3} \frac{\lambda^{2(1+\alpha)}|y|^{2\alpha_i}}{(1 + (\lambda|x|)^2(1+\alpha))^2} \, dy \]
\[ \geq C^{-1}_\delta \lambda^{2(1+\alpha)} \int_0^{|x|} \frac{s^{2\alpha_i-1} \, ds}{(1 + s^{2(1+\alpha)})^2}. \]
Evaluating the last integral we have that
\[ \int_{B_3} \frac{\lambda^{2(1+\alpha)}|y|^{2\alpha_i}}{(1 + (\lambda|x|)^2(1+\alpha))^2} \, dy \geq C^{-1}_\delta \lambda^{2(\alpha-\alpha_i)} \frac{1}{1 + (\lambda|x|)^2+4\alpha-2\alpha_i}. \]
In conclusion we obtain the estimate
\[ \int_{B_{p_i}(\delta)} \frac{|y - p_i|^{2\alpha_i}(1 + \lambda^2|y - x|^2)^2 \, dy \geq C^{-1}_\delta \left( \frac{\lambda^{2(1+\alpha)}|x|^{2(1+\alpha_i)}}{1 + \lambda^2|x|^2} + \frac{\lambda^{2(\alpha-\alpha_i)}}{1 + (\lambda|x|)^2+4\alpha-2\alpha_i} \right). \]
Using elementary arguments, one can easily check that the last quantity is always greater or equal to \( C^{-1}_\delta \lambda^{2\alpha_2-2\alpha_i} \).
Therefore, adding the three terms in \( I_\rho \) we find
\[ I_\rho(\varphi_\alpha, \lambda, \lambda) \leq \frac{8\pi(1 + \alpha)^2 \log \lambda - 2\rho(1 + \alpha) \log \lambda - 2\rho(\alpha - \alpha_i) \log \alpha + l.o.t.}{2 \log \lambda (4\pi(1 + \alpha)^2 - (1 + \alpha)\rho - \rho(\alpha - \alpha_i) + l.o.t.} \]
\[ \text{since } \rho > 4\pi(1 + \alpha_i) \text{ and since } \alpha > \alpha_i, \text{ we get the conclusion. } \]
We also have the following result, regarding the concentration properties of the functions \( \tilde{h}e^{2\varphi_\alpha, \lambda, x} \).
Lemma 5.2. Let $\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}$ be defined as in Lemma 5.1. Then, for any $x \in \Theta_\rho$,

$$\frac{\tilde{h} e^{2 \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}}}{\int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h} e^{2 \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}} dV} \to \delta_x \quad \text{as } \lambda \to +\infty.$$ 

**Proof.** Given $\varepsilon > 0$ it is sufficient to show that

$$\frac{\int_{\Sigma \setminus B_x(\varepsilon)} \tilde{h} e^{2 \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}} dV}{\int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h} e^{2 \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}} dV} \to 0 \quad \text{as } \lambda \to +\infty.$$ 

By the proof of Lemma 5.1 we derived that

$$\int_{\Sigma} \tilde{h} e^{2 \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}} dV \geq C^{-1} \lambda^{2\alpha - 2\hat{\alpha}},$$

and therefore it is sufficient to check that

$$\frac{\int_{\Sigma \setminus B_x(\varepsilon)} \tilde{h} e^{2 \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}} dV}{\lambda^{2\alpha - 2\hat{\alpha}}} \to 0 \quad \text{as } \lambda \to +\infty.$$ 

For doing this, we notice that

$$e^{2 \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}} \leq C \varepsilon \lambda^{-2(1+\alpha)} \quad \text{as } \lambda \to +\infty,$$

and therefore (30) follows immediately. 

We next define the min-max scheme which is needed to prove Theorem 1.1. We fix $L > 0$ as in Proposition 4.1, and then $\lambda > 0$ so large that $I_\rho(\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x}) < -2L$ for $x \in \Theta_\rho$. The latter choice is possible in view of Lemma 5.1.

We then define the set

$$\Lambda_\lambda = \{ \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x} : x \in \Theta_\rho \}.$$

Next, we consider the topological cone

$$\hat{\Theta}_\rho = (\Theta_\rho \times [0,1]) / (\Theta_\rho \times \{1\}),$$

where the equivalence relation identifies all the points in $\Theta_\rho \times \{1\}$. Let us introduce next the family of continuous maps

$$\mathcal{H}_{\lambda, \rho} = \{ h : \hat{\Theta}_\rho \to H^1(\Sigma) : h(x) = \varphi_{\alpha, \lambda, x} \text{ for every } x \in \Theta_\rho \},$$

and the number

$$\overline{H}_{\lambda, \rho} = \inf_{h \in \mathcal{H}_{\lambda, \rho}} \sup_{x \in \Theta_\rho} I_\rho(h(x)).$$

We have then the following result.

**Proposition 5.3.** Under the assumptions of Theorem 1.1, if $\lambda$ is sufficiently large the number $\overline{H}_{\lambda, \rho}$ is finite. Moreover $\overline{H}_{\lambda, \rho}$ is a critical value of $I_\rho$.

**Proof.** If $L$ is as in Proposition 4.1, we show that indeed $\overline{H}_{\lambda, \rho} > -\frac{3}{2}L$. In fact, suppose by contradiction that there exists a map $h_0$ such that

$$h_0 \in \mathcal{H}_{\lambda, \rho} \quad \text{and} \quad \sup_{x \in \Theta_\rho} I_\rho(h_0(z)) \leq -\frac{3}{2}L.$$ 

Then Proposition 4.4 applies and gives a continuous map $F_{\lambda, \rho} : \hat{\Theta}_\rho \to \Theta_\rho$ defined as the composition

$$F_{\lambda, \rho} = \Psi \circ h_0.$$
since $h_0 \in H_{\lambda, \rho}$, and hence it coincides with $\varphi_{\alpha, \lambda}$. on $\partial \Theta_\rho \simeq \Theta_\rho$, by Lemma 5.2 and Remark 3.2 we deduce that

$$F_{\lambda, \rho}|_{\Theta_\rho} \text{ is homotopic to } Id|_{\Theta_\rho}.\leqno{(32)}$$

Here, the homotopy is given by the parameter $\lambda$ as $\lambda \to +\infty$.

Let us write as pairs $(x, \omega)$ the elements of $\hat{\Theta}_\rho$. If we let $\omega$ run between 1 and 0, and we consider the maps $F_{\lambda, \rho}(\cdot, \omega) : \Theta_\rho \to \Theta_\rho$, we obtain an homotopy between $F_{\lambda, \rho}|_{\Theta_\rho}$ and a constant map. Since by our assumptions $\Theta_\rho$ is not contractible, we obtain a contradiction with (32). This proves the first part of the statement.

To check that $\mathcal{F}_{\lambda, \rho}$ is a critical level, we use a monotonicity method introduced by Struwe, and which has been used extensively in the study of Liouville type equations. We consider a sequence $\rho_n \to \rho$ and the corresponding functionals $I_{\rho_n}$. All the above estimates and results can be worked out for $I_{\rho_n}$ as well with minor changes.

We then define the number $\tilde{H}_{\lambda, \rho} := \frac{\mathcal{F}_{\lambda, \rho}}{\rho}$, which corresponds to the functional $\frac{I}{\rho}$. It is immediate to see that

$$\rho \mapsto \tilde{H}_{\lambda, \rho} \text{ is monotone},$$

and, reasoning as in [27], there exists a subsequence of $(\rho_n)_n$ such that $I_{\rho_n}$ has a solution $u_n$ at level $\mathcal{F}_{\lambda, \rho_n}$. Then, applying Theorem 2.5 and passing to a further subsequence, we obtain that $u_n$ converges to a critical point $u$ of $I_\rho$ at level $\mathcal{F}_{\lambda, \rho}$.

$\blacksquare$

Remark 5.4. (a) In [19] the Leray-Schauder degree of (4) is being computed, using refined blow-up analysis and Lyapunov-Schmidt reductions, in the spirit of [17], [18]. Taking into account the result in [45], we speculate that there should be a relation between the degree and the Euler characteristic of the set $\Sigma \setminus J_\rho$. Anyway, the min-max methods might give existence (or even multiplicity, see [25], [26]) results even when the total degree of the equation vanishes. On the other hand, we have to avoid some critical values of $\rho$ which are instead treatable via blow-up analysis.

(b) Further results are discussed in [5], where the case of arbitrary positive $\alpha$’s is discussed for surfaces with positive genus. In this case one can exploit the non simply connectedness of the surfaces and avoid to use of the improved inequality we derived here. However the latter should be necessary to treat the case with singularities of different signs (or to characterize the homology of low sublevels of $I_\rho$, as in [47]). The case of the sphere for larger values of $\rho$ will be treated in a forthcoming paper, combining our approach with some techniques in [29] and a topological argument. In [8] and [14] the case of negative $\alpha$’s is studied: in this situation one can combine Trojanov’s result with Chen-Li’s inequality.

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