Probing dark matter couplings to top and bottom at the LHC

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Monojet searches are a powerful way to place model-independent constraints on effective operators coupling dark matter to the standard model. For operators generated by the exchange of a scalar mediator, however, couplings to light quarks are suppressed and the prospect of probing such interactions through the inclusive monojet channel at the LHC is limited. We propose dedicated searches, focusing on bottom and top quark final states, to constrain this class of operators. We show that a search in mono $b$-jets can significantly improve current limits. The mono-$b$ signal arises partly from direct production of $b$-quarks in association with dark matter, but the dominant component is from top quark pair production in the kinematic regime where one top is boosted. A search for tops plus missing energy can strengthen the bounds even more; in this case signal and background have very different missing energy distributions. We find an overall improvement by several orders of magnitude in the bound on the direct detection cross section for scalar or pseudoscalar couplings.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Production and detection of dark matter is one of the most exciting new physics opportunities at the Large Hadron Collider (LHC). The strategy to search for dark matter (DM) depends on the physics in the yet-to-be fully explored energy range of the LHC. In the maverick scenario [1], the DM is the only new particle produced and all other new particles are beyond the scale of the LHC. Then the interaction of the DM with standard model (SM) particles at these energies can be described in terms of an effective field theory (EFT).

In this case the DM signal at the LHC is missing transverse energy ($E_T$) signals such as monojets [1–6] or monophotons [4, 7]. With an EFT description, one can classify all relevant interactions at the LHC in a straightforward way. This scenario also has the advantage that the connection between DM annihilation, direct detection, and collider signals is simple.

The ATLAS [8, 9] and CMS [10, 11] collaborations have published monojet constraints on the scale of new interactions in the EFT, which are then used to place constraints on the DM-nucleon scattering cross section. These constraints are most effective for DM masses below 100 GeV. Meanwhile, there has been rapid progress in the direct detection of dark matter [12, 13], with the strongest bounds on DM-nucleon scattering at DM mass of around 50 GeV and for spin-independent scattering. These two approaches are complementary, and connecting them has been the focus of many recent studies [14, 15].

A. Scalar Operator

While the monojet search is extremely effective for many of the possible operators, it is not necessarily the optimal way to study all of them. In particular, it is challenging to constrain the scalar operator, where interactions between dark matter and quarks are mediated by a heavy scalar mediator:

$$O = \frac{m_q^2}{M^2} \bar{q}q\bar{X}X,$$

summing over all quarks.$^1$ The form of the interaction is fixed by minimal flavor violation (MFV) [16]. Scalar interactions with SM quarks are typically strongly constrained by flavor changing neutral current measurements, but in MFV these dangerous flavor violating effects are automatically suppressed.

Because the interactions are proportional to quark mass, however, the monojet+$E_T$ signal rate appears to be suppressed by the light quark masses. The ATLAS monojet search based on $4.7 \, fb^{-1}$ at 7 TeV sets a limit of $M_\chi > 30$ GeV [8], including only couplings to charm and lighter quarks. This bound is much weaker than constraints on operators mediated by vector or axial interactions.

In this paper, we point out that the direct search for production of dark matter in association with third generation quarks can enhance the reach of the LHC for dark matter coupled to quarks through a scalar interaction. Direct $b$ production gives rise to a mono $b$-jet signal. We also show that the kinematics of top quark pairs plus dark matter is such that boosted tops may form the dominant contribution to the mono-$b$ signal. However, monojet searches veto on more than 2 hard jets, so a

$^1$ There are closely related operators, for example the pseudoscalar operator $\frac{m_q^2}{M^2} \bar{q}q\gamma^5X$, which will have almost identical collider constraints. The direct detection cross section for these operators is velocity suppressed, however, so the best limits will come from the LHC. It should be understood that our limits apply to both scalar and pseudoscalar operators.
better strategy to probe the couplings to top quarks is the study of $t\bar{t} + E_T$ final states.

The scalar interaction has also been studied recently in Ref. [17], which showed that heavy quarks in loops can significantly enhance inclusive monojet production. We focus instead on direct identification of the heavy quarks in the final state. Mono-$b$ final states from dark matter have also been studied in Refs. [18, 19], although not in the context of MFV, so the top quark contribution to the mono-$b$ signal was not considered.

In Section III we study the mono $b$-jet signal where the leading jet is $b$-tagged. This search can improve constraints on the DM-nucleon cross section, $\sigma_n$, by several orders of magnitude compared to current ATLAS limits. In Section III we show an even stronger limit can be obtained from a search for dark matter in association with top quarks, $t\bar{t} + E_T$. This is also the final state studied in searches for stops, supersymmetric partners to tops, and we use published results to derive limits. We find that the limit on $\sigma_n$ is stronger by another factor of approximately 2 compared to the mono $b$-jet search.

II. MONO $b$-JET SEARCH

The scalar operator gives rise to $b$-jets plus $E_T$ via direct $b$ production, as well as from production of top quarks which then decay. Direct $b$ production occurs through $b$ and gluon-initiated processes, such as $bg \to XX + b$; several example diagrams are shown in Fig. 1. In comparison to the light quark initial states, these processes are suppressed by the $b$-quark parton density. However, the enhancement due to the MFV form for the coupling is more than enough to compensate this.

Furthermore, $gg \to XX + tt$ turns out to be the dominant contribution to the monojet signal. Thus, the final states are highly $b$-enriched. At the same time, focusing on exclusive $b$-tagged final state reduces the SM backgrounds significantly. Therefore, we expect an improvement in the LHC reach for the scalar operator by requiring a $b$-tagged monojet.

Before presenting our results, we summarize our event simulation methods. We use MadGraph 5 [20] for parton-level cross sections, interfaced to Pythia 6 [21] for showering and hadronization, and Delphes 2 [22] for detector simulation. For Delphes, we set a 60% tagging efficiency for $b$, 10% mistag for $c$, and 0.2% mistag rate for light quarks and gluons [23]. Jets are clustered into $R = 0.4$ anti-$k_T$ jets.

Up to two hard jets are allowed in the monojet and mono-$b$ searches, so we must consider Next-to-Leading-Order (NLO) corrections in our simulation of the signal. We generate matched samples with $k_T$-jet MLM matching. For SM backgrounds, we generate $W/Z\nu$ and $t\bar{t}$ with up to 2 jets. For the signal, we generate $XX+$jets, including up to 2 jets, for all flavors other than tops. We separately include $XX + tt$ at leading order. Finally, we normalize all matched samples with NLO cross sections computed using MCFM [24].

For the signal region we require $E_T > 350$ GeV, a leading $b$-tagged jet with $p_T > 100$ GeV, $|\eta| < 2.5$, and no isolated leptons. We also allow an additional softer jet, but no more than two jets with $p_T > 50$ GeV. There is a cut on the azimuthal separation between $E_T$ and the second jet, $\Delta\phi(E_T, p_T^2) > 0.4$, in order to suppress the mismeasured dijet background. This signal region overlaps well with those used in previous studies, and furthermore the dependence on the cut values appears to be mild.

The resulting cross sections at 8 TeV are given in Table II. We have split the signal into three contributions: coupling to charm and light quarks, direct $b$ and $bb$ production from coupling to $b$, and $tt$ production.

Associated production of DM with $tt$ constitutes the dominant signal for both monojet and mono-$b$ signals because of the enhancement from the top mass and because of the production of boosted tops which can be tagged as $b$-jets. Events where only one top is boosted, and where the other top gives rise to low $p_T$ jets, can pass the mono-$b$ cuts. Of the events that pass the $E_T$ requirement and lepton veto, 17% of events survive the veto based on the $p_T$ of the third jet. In comparison, 80% of events from direct $b$ production survive the jet veto. In both $b$ and top production, about 50% of those events then have a leading jet which is $b$-tagged. Note that this assumes the same $b$-tagging efficiencies for the $b$-jets inside the boosted tops. Without dedicated study by the experimental collaborations, this is an idealized approximation.
TABLE I: Monojet and mono-$b$ search at 8 TeV: Cross sections for dominant backgrounds and signal with cuts of $E_T > 350$ GeV, $p_T^b > 100$ GeV as described in the text. For the signal we take $M_* = 50$ GeV and $m_X = 10$ GeV. The row $XX +$ jets includes only DM coupling to charm and lighter quarks. Note that $XX + b+$ jets includes single $b$-jet and $bb$ production. In the column labeled $b$-tag, a $b$-tag on any jet with $p_T > 50$ GeV is required, while in the last column the leading jet must be $b$-tagged; this choice does not lead to significantly different results in setting limits.

| Process                        | Monojet | $b$-tag | $b$-tag on $j_1$ |
|--------------------------------|---------|---------|-----------------|
| Background                     |         |         |                 |
| $Z+$jets(fake)                 | 406 fb  | 11 fb   | 7 fb            |
| $Z+b+$jet                      | 6.7 fb  | 4 fb    | 3 fb            |
| $W+$jets,$W+b$                 | 95 fb   | 3 fb    | 2 fb            |
| $t\bar{t}$+jets               | 16 fb   | 11 fb   | 6 fb            |
| Signal                         |         |         |                 |
| $XX+$jets                     | 11 fb   | 0.9 fb  | 0.7 fb          |
| $XX + b+$jets                  | 65 fb   | 40 fb   | 33 fb           |
| $XX + t\bar{t}$               | 244 fb  | 156 fb  | 113 fb          |

assumption. We note that most of the top jets are from mildly boosted tops, with have $p_T \approx 400$ GeV. Hence, we do not expect the $b$-tagging efficiency to degrade significantly. At the same time, it may be possible to use additional information to tag these jets as coming from boosted tops. We will leave this for a future study.

The dominant SM backgrounds are $Z(\nu\bar{\nu})+$jets and $W+$jets, where a jet fakes a $b$-jet. Although these are suppressed by the mistag rate, they are still a larger contribution than direct $b$ production from $Z + b$ and $t\bar{t}$ backgrounds. Depending on the $b$-tagging algorithms used, however, it may be possible to further reduce the background from $Z/W+$jets.

Kinematic distributions in $E_T$ and leading jet $p_T$ are shown in Fig. 2. The $E_T$ spectrum for $b$ production is very similar to that for $Z+$jets, despite the fact that the signal arises from a contact interaction. This is partly because in the signal case, the initial states include sea quarks, while for the dominant $Z+$jets background roughly 70% of events are initiated by at least one valence quark. Meanwhile, $XX + t\bar{t}$ final states tend to have more $E_T$ because of the requirement of producing massive top quarks.

To estimate the expected bound, we compute the number of signal events such that $\chi^2 < 2.71$ to obtain a 90% CL bound. A systematic uncertainty of 5% is assumed. We also compute bounds for 14 TeV and 100 fb$^{-1}$, keeping the same cuts. A higher $E_T$ cut can improve bounds in the inclusive monojet case; in this case, however, stronger cuts would also require higher $p_T$ $b$-jets, where the $b$-tagging efficiency can degrade.

Fig. 2 shows our constraints on $M_*$ in the left panel and the corresponding limits for direct detection in the right panel. The scalar operator gives rise to spin-independent DM-nucleon scattering, with a cross section of

$$\sigma_n = \frac{(0.38 m_n)^2 \mu_X^2}{\pi M_*^6} \approx 2 \times 10^{-48} \text{cm}^2 \left(\frac{30 \text{ GeV}}{M_*}\right)^6,$$

compared to XENON100 limits of about $10^{-42} \text{cm}^2$ at $m_X = 10$ GeV [12]. We find a factor of 8 improvement in $\sigma_n$ limits with a mono-$b$ search compared to an inclusive monojet search. Overall, we find a factor of 250 improvement compared to an inclusive search where only the coupling to charm quarks and lighter is considered (as in the most recent ATLAS study [8]).
III. TOPS PLUS MISSING ENERGY SEARCH

As shown in the previous section, the process $gg \rightarrow XX + t\bar{t}$ contributes the dominant component of the monojet and the mono-$b$ signals. The monojet and mono-$b$ searches veto on more than two high-$p_T$ jets, however, cutting out a large fraction of $t\bar{t}$ events. A stronger constraint on this coupling can be obtained from dedicated searches.

Models of supersymmetry also have a signature of top pairs plus missing transverse energy. We apply the recent ATLAS 8 TeV search for top-quark superpartners with 1-lepton final states [26] using 13 fb$^{-1}$ of data to these scalar dark-matter couplings. The signal regions require 1 isolated lepton, $E_T > 150$ GeV, transverse mass$^3$ $m_T > 120$ GeV, 4 jets with $p_T > (80, 60, 40, 25)$ GeV and at least 1 $b$-tag.

Fig. 4 shows the $E_T$ and $m_T$ distributions of the signal and the dominant background, $t\bar{t}$. The DM signal is significantly harder in the $E_T$ spectrum, whereas the background is highly peaked towards low $E_T$ because the primary source of $E_T$ is from the neutrinos in the top decay. Meanwhile, it is unlikely that stronger cuts on $m_T$ above 120 GeV would substantially improve the ratio of signal to background.

We find the best constraints come from the signal region D (SRD) of the ATLAS study, with $E_T > 225$ GeV. Although there is another signal region with $E_T > 275$ GeV, the systematic uncertainties increase significantly. We thus apply the ATLAS SRD cuts to simulated data to derive our 13 fb$^{-1}$ limits. The signal cross section with these cuts is

$$\sigma_{\text{signal}} = 173 \text{ fb}$$

assuming $M_* = 50$ GeV and $m_X = 10$ GeV. We give limits on $M_*$ and $\sigma_n$ in Fig. 5. Because uncertainties are systematics dominated for this signal region, we do not expect a significant improvement of limits with 20 fb$^{-1}$ of data.

Fig. 5 also shows limits for 14 TeV with 100 fb$^{-1}$ of data, keeping the same cuts as above. We simulate $W$+jets in addition to $t\bar{t}$ for our background estimate, and assume the systematic error on the background is the same as in the 8 TeV analysis. We also calculated constraints for a search with an all-hadronic final state [28, 29]; in this case it may be possible to improve the bounds on $M_*$ by 10-20%, depending on the detector acceptances and systematic uncertainties.

IV. DISCUSSION

We have shown that limits on scalar (and pseudoscalar) interactions of dark matter with quarks can be improved significantly by directly searching for final states with $b$-jets and tops. Compared to an analysis including only light quarks, we find a factor of 400 improvement in limits on $\sigma_n$, and compared to an inclusive monojet search

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2 We have also calculated constraints using the CMS 1-lepton final state search [27] and obtain limits that are similar although slightly weaker.

3 The transverse mass is defined as $(m_T)^2 = 2p_T^{lep} E_T (1 - \cos \Delta \phi)$ with $\Delta \phi$ the azimuthal separation between lepton and missing momentum directions.
including couplings to all quarks, we find a factor of 15 improvement. For 8 TeV data, the corresponding constraints on direct detection are below the regions favored for light dark matter interpretations of DAMA [30] and CoGeNT [31].

**FIG. 4:** *(Left)* $\mathcal{E}_T$ distribution after requiring an isolated lepton and $m_T > 120$ GeV. *(Right)* Transverse mass $m_T$ distribution requiring an isolated lepton and $\mathcal{E}_T > 150$ GeV. The dark matter mass is $m_X = 10$ GeV.

**FIG. 5:** *(Left)* Expected 90% CL limits on scalar operator from applying a search for supersymmetric tops with one lepton in the final state. 8 TeV limits are obtained using the results of [26]. Also shown are ATLAS limits from [8]. *(Right)* Corresponding constraints on nucleon scattering cross section, along with XENON100 limits [12], and projected sensitivity for XENON1T [25].

Couplings to heavy quarks can also lead to an enhancement of inclusive monojet production through loops; Ref. [17] found $M_\ast > 148^{+12}_{-11}$ GeV for small DM mass using 7 TeV data. However, these loop corrections assume that the operator is generated by a heavy neutral scalar. Although our constraints are weaker, the searches discussed here directly probe couplings of dark matter to top and bottom. Furthermore, the $E_T$ spectrum for the $t\bar{t}$ final state is strikingly different from the background.

It may be possible to use the difference in shapes to improve limits from the searches discussed here.

Finally, in this paper we have assumed a contact interaction for simplicity. As discussed in Refs. [5, 14], this assumption must be compared to the derived bounds on $M_\ast$. In this case, the best limit we obtain at 8 TeV is $M_\ast > 110$ GeV, and for this value a significant fraction of events (over 50%) violate the criteria in Refs. [5, 14]. A UV completion for this operator is necessary to derive fully consistent constraints. At the same time, the results will be more model-dependent and we reserve this analysis for future work.
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