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Topological Insulators by Topology Optimization

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An acoustic topological insulator (TI) is synthesized using topology optimization, a free material inverse
design method. The TI appears spontaneously from the optimization process without imposing explicit
requirements on the existence of pseudospin-1/2 states at the TI interface edge, or the Chern number of the
topological phases. The resulting TI is passive, consisting of acoustically hard members placed in an air
background and has an operational bandwidth of ≈12.5% showing high transmission. Further analysis
demonstrates confinement of more than 99% of the total field intensity in the TI within at most six lattice
constants from the TI interface. The proposed design hereby outperforms a reference from recent literature
regarding energy transmission, field confinement, and operational bandwidth.

The concept of the topological insulator (TI) stems from
condensed matter physics and the quantum spin Hall effect
[1,2]. Following these seminal works, a growing effort has
been dedicated to understanding and designing TIs [3,4],
with works demonstrating the engineering of TIs within the
fields of photonics [5–12], solid mechanics [13–15], and
acoustics [16–20]. This surge in interest is partly fuelled by
the incredible promise that TIs can provide backscattering
protected, edge-state confined, one-way energy transport,
robust under a class of structural defects. Such properties
are obviously of broad interest, with numerous applications able
to benefit from backscattering protected energy transport,
e.g., lasing [21]. Three fundamentally different TI systems
are known: time-reversal breaking, time-reversal invariant,
and Floquet topological systems, each providing different
modes of operation [22]. This Letter considers the time-
reversal invariant setting in acoustics, allowing for back-
scattering protected directional energy transport, previously
realized by spin-dependent directionally propagating
modes, robust towards defects, as illustrated in Fig. 1(a).

Acoustic systems intrinsically possess spin 0; thus, no
Kramers doublets exist, hindering the manifestation of the
acoustic quantum spin Hall effect. This barrier can be
overcome by constructing artificial acoustic spin-1/2
states, e.g., by creating circulating acoustic waves, actively
[17] utilizing airflow, or passively [18] by engineering an
accidental double Dirac cone through changing the filling
factor of cylindrical metallic rods in a honeycomb lattice. In
Ref. [18] a time-reversal invariant acoustic TI is engineered,
shown to support topologically protected edge states in a ≈1.5 kHz wide bulk band gap, demonstrated
to largely suppress backscattering, with measured trans-
mission dropping at most 5 dB, and to perform robustly
under geometric defects, showing a maximum transmission
drop of 4 dB.

As outlined above, significant effort has been invested in
the design of TIs, leading to excellent results and new
discoveries. The design procedures have, however, hitherto
mainly been based on intuition and the bottom-up approach
of band-structure engineering. Such approaches do not
consider the finite size of the physical structure, dis-
regarding the coupling into and out of the TI. Further,
approaches based on intuition are unlikely to lead to
optimal designs, possibly leaving a large performance
potential untapped.

Inspired by Ref. [18], this Letter proposes a fundamen-
tally different, optimization-based approach capable of
designing topological insulators: a top-down approach
based on inverse design where the backscattering protected
energy transport is targeted directly, with no explicit
requirements on the underlying mechanisms. Hence, the
approach does not impose explicit requirements on the
preexistence of pseudospin-1/2 edge states, nor on the
Chern numbers of the topological phases, nor on band
symmetry inversion in reciprocal space. These properties
appear spontaneously during the design process. A TI
designed using the proposed approach is analyzed and
demonstrated to suppress backscattering from geometric
defects while facilitating spin-dependent, directional
energy transport and strong field confinement.

The proposed approach considers a carefully configured
finite material slab, illuminated by an acoustic source,
placed in a homogeneous background medium. It utilizes
density-based topology optimization [23] to solve the
inverse design problem starting from an initial guess
provided by the user and is inspired by Ref. [24]. It is
noted that while the topology optimization method and the
topological insulator share the word “topology,” the two
uses are not directly related. In topology optimization the
word refers to the ultimate spatial design freedom that
allows the algorithm to choose the structural topology which optimizes the objective function. Several recent works have demonstrated the benefit of using topology optimization in the design of exotic metamaterials and crystals, such as multifunctional optical metagratings [25], elastic metamaterials with negative effective material parameters [26], and self-collimating phononic crystals [27]. Further, two review papers [28,29] of inverse design works have demonstrated the benefit of using topology optimization. A spatial design field allows the algorithm to choose the structural topology which optimizes the objective function.

FIG. 1. (a) Illustration of backscattering protected, pseudospin-dependent directional field propagation through a TI with (green) defects. (b) Left: Design cell showing the (gray) designable region and (dashed lines) mirror symmetry lines. Middle and right: Design example illustrating the symmetry. (c) Model domain $\Omega_A$, PML layer $\Omega_{PML}$, and domains $\Omega_{BR,1}$ and $\Omega_{BR,2}$ containing the topological phases. Monopolar source $P_s$ in the focal point of a reflector with surface $\Gamma_R$. (d) Domains for computing $\Phi_{Total}$ and $\Phi_{BG}$ and port numbering, $P_1$–$P_4$.

Our fundamental goal is to obtain directional and confined energy transport, in turn obtaining compact acoustic waveguides, robust towards defects. We attack this problem using a top-down approach where we only specify confinement (no propagation in bulk phases) and target the transmission characteristics of a structure composed of two geometrically independent periodic bulk domains [Fig 1(c)]. By inserting a field at port $P_1$, maximizing transmission at ports $P_2$ and $P_4$, and minimizing transmission at port $P_3$, we effectively obtain modes that can propagate in directions where medium 1 is on the right-hand side and medium 2 is on the left-hand side, i.e., directional and hence backscattering protected energy transport. By this systematic approach, we directly maximize transmission and minimize backscattering, in turn bypassing the indirect, bottom-up band-engineering approach used previously. Pseudospin-1/2 edge states are solutions to this problem; however, we emphasize partly that spin-state solutions are not preimposed and partly that solutions are not imposed to be associated with specific points in the Brillouin zone. Nevertheless, it turns out that the top-down optimization spontaneously converges to solutions similar, albeit much more efficient and with larger bandwidths, to previously suggested bottom-up solutions. In this work, we consider a single specific design problem; however, the formulation is general and can be used to investigate other macro- and microscale setups and symmetries.

The physics is modeled using a Helmholtz-type equation,

$$\nabla \cdot \left( C_1 \frac{\alpha_0 - i c \alpha}{\alpha_0} \nabla \Psi \right) + C_2 \left( \frac{\alpha_0 - i c \alpha}{\alpha_0} \right)^3 \Psi = -P_S, \tag{1}$$

which $C_1(r)$ and $C_2(r)$ are material-dependent parameters, $i$ is the imaginary unit, $\alpha(r)$ is an attenuation parameter, $\omega_0 = 2\pi f_0$ is the free-space angular frequency, $c$ is the free-space wave speed, $\Psi(r)$ is the state field, and $r$ is the spatial position. For the acoustic case, $\Psi = p$, where $p(r)$ is the sound pressure, and $\{C_1, C_2\} = \{(1/\rho), (1/\kappa)\}$, where $\rho(r)$ and $\kappa(r)$ are the density and bulk modulus, respectively. Material parameters for air and aluminium are used [31]. The impedance contrast between the two ensuring that vibrations exited in the solid are negligible, and thus Eq. (1) accurately captures the physics, as verified in Refs. [32,33].
\(C_i^{-1}(r) = C_{\text{air}}^{-1} + \xi(r)^6(C_{\text{aluminum}}^{-1} - C_{\text{air}}^{-1}), \quad i \in \{1, 2\}. \quad (2)\)

Figure 1(b) shows the base design cells in which the material distribution is manipulated to solve the optimization problem. The content of each base cell is duplicated throughout \(\Omega_{\text{IR},1}\) and \(\Omega_{\text{IR},2}\) to construct the material distribution (topological phases) used when solving Eq. (1). For the example treated in this Letter, \(C3v\) symmetry is imposed on both base cells. The designable region is colored gray and the mirror symmetries are shown using dashed lines. An example of a design for one phase and its symmetry is illustrated.

The optimization problem is written as

\[
\max_{\xi(r) \in [0,1]} \Phi_{\text{Total}}(\xi) = \sum_{i=1}^{3} \Phi_{\text{Max},i}(\xi) - \Phi_{\text{Min},i}(\xi), \quad (3)
\]

s.t. \(\Phi_{\text{BG}}(\xi) \leq \gamma_1, \quad (4)\)

\[
\gamma_2 < \Phi_{\text{Max},1}(\xi)/\Phi_{\text{Max},2}(\xi) < \gamma_3, \quad (5)
\]

where \(\Phi_{\text{Total}}\) is the objective function consisting of a linear combination of the terms \(\Phi_{\text{Max},i}, i \in \{1, 2, 3\}\), and \(\Phi_{\text{Min},i}\) all of which are integrals of the field intensity magnitude over \(\Omega_{\text{Max},i}, i \in \{1, 2, 3\}\), and \(\Omega_{\text{Min}}\), while \(\Phi_{\text{BG}}\) denotes the integral of the field intensity magnitude over \(\Omega_{\text{BG}}\); see Fig. 1(d). The constants \(\gamma_j > 0, j \in \{1, 2, 3\}\) control the constraints Eqs. (4) and (5), and \(\Phi_\star\) is calculated as

\[
\Phi_\star(\xi) = \tau_\star \int_{\Omega_\star} |I(\Psi(\xi))| dr/\int_{\Omega} dr, \quad * \in \{\text{Max}, \text{Min}, \text{BG}\}, \quad i \in \{1, 2, 3\}. \quad (6)
\]

Here \(I(\Psi(\xi))\) denotes the field intensity and \(\tau_\star\) a set of scaling constants. The choice of \(\Phi_{\text{Total}}\) leads to a maximization of the energy transmitted into \(\Omega_{\text{Max},1}\) and \(\Omega_{\text{Max},2}\) along with a simultaneous minimization of the energy transmitted into \(\Omega_{\text{Min}}\). That is, in order to maximize \(\Phi_{\text{Total}}\), any field emitted by \(P_S\), propagating along the interface between \(\Omega_{\text{IR},1}\) and \(\Omega_{\text{IR},2}\), must keep \(\Omega_{\text{IR},1}\) on its right-hand side and \(\Omega_{\text{IR},2}\) on its left-hand side at all times. This in turn promotes backscattering protected transport of energy along the interface. The constraint Eq. (4) ensures that a bulk band gap exists in both topological phases, as energy is prohibited from propagating into \(\Omega_{\text{BG}}\). The constraint Eq. (5) may be used to control the ratio of the intensity transmitted to \(\Phi_{\text{Max},1}\) and \(\Phi_{\text{Max},2}\), respectively.

The design problem, Eqs. (1)–(6), is implemented and solved in COMSOL MULTIPHYSICS 5.3 using the globally convergent method of moving asymptotes [34] to solve Eqs. (3)–(5). The objective function gradients are calculated using adjoint sensitivity analysis [28]. A physically admissible final design, consisting solely of solid and air and free of numerical artifacts, is assured using the projection and filtering procedure outlined in Refs. [24,35,36].

For the TI considered in the following, Eqs. (1)–(6) are solved with \(\{\alpha = 0.01 \text{ m}, f_0 = 20 \text{ kHz}, c = 343 \text{ m/s}, \alpha = 6 \text{ dB}/\lambda \forall \mathbf{r} \in \Omega_A, \alpha = 0 \text{ dB}/\lambda \forall \mathbf{r} \in \Omega_{\text{IR},1} \cup \Omega_{\text{IR},2}, \gamma_1 = 0.04, \gamma_2 = 0.3, \gamma_3 = 1.7, \tau_{\text{Max},1} = 1, \tau_{\text{Max},2} = 1, \tau_{\text{Max},3} = 0.1, \tau_{\text{Min}} = 4, \tau_{\text{BG}} = 1\}\). The initial \(\xi(\mathbf{r})\) layout, shown in Fig. 2(a), is chosen to constitute a crystal with a bulk band gap at \(f_0\) [see the band structure in Fig. 3(a)]. The final material layout obtained from the optimization process is shown in Fig. 2(b), with white (black) representing solid (air).

The max-normalized pressure field at \(f_0 = 20 \text{ kHz}\) along with the initial and optimized material configurations in \(\Omega_{\text{IR},1} \cup \Omega_{\text{IR},2}\) are shown in Figs. 2(c) and 2(d), respectively. The bulk band gap of the initial material configuration is observed. For the optimized TI it is clear that the vast majority of the energy flowing into port \(P1\) is transmitted to either port \(P2\) or port \(P4\). Simultaneously, a bulk band gap is observed for both phases of the TI. Figure 2(e) presents a frequency sweep of the transmission
to $P_2$, $P_3$, and $P_4$, normalized to the power flowing through $P_1$: $10 \log_{10} \left( \frac{|P_x|}{|P_1|} \right)$. It is seen that 99.5% of the acoustic power is transmitted from $P_1$ to $P_2$ and $P_4$ at $f_0 = 20$ kHz. Further, the transmission does not drop below $-0.85$ dB from 18 to 20.4 kHz.

The above discussion demonstrates that the top-down approach results in the desired macroscopic response. However, this could in principle be attained without having designed a TI. That a TI has indeed appeared spontaneously through the optimization process is revealed in the following analysis.

Figure 3(b) shows the band structure diagram, calculated for the TI supercell shown in Fig. 3(c) using periodic boundary conditions on the top and bottom edges and Neumann conditions on the left and right edges. The bulk band regions are colored gray and the two “crossing” symmetry inverted edge-state bands are colored red and blue corresponding to the positive or negative pseudospin-$1/2$ edge states, shown for $f_0 = 20$ kHz in Figs. 3(d) and 3(e), respectively. From Fig. 3(b) the bulk band gap is seen to stretch from $\approx 18$ to $\approx 20.4$ kHz, i.e., $\approx 12.5\%$. A narrow gap is seen in the two edge-state bands at the $k_{\parallel} = 0$ point. A similar gap was reported in Ref. [18], where it was explained to originate from the imperfect cladding layer. Figure 3(f) shows the band structures for the two crystal phases constituting the TI, revealing degeneracies for bands 2 and 3 and bands 4 and 5 at the $\Gamma$ point for both phases.

To further investigate if a TI supporting geometrically robust backscattering protected transport of acoustic energy has been designed, studies on the effect of introducing defects in the TI are performed. Figure 4 presents four examples, with Fig. 4(a) showing a slab without defects, while Figs. 4(b)–4(d) show a bend, cavity, and disorder defect, respectively. The three defects all preserve the symmetry of the bulk materials and are shown in Fig. 1(a) (highlighted green). The slabs are excited by a point source positioned $0.3a$ from their left edge, at the interface of the two topological phases. The power, transmitted through the TI, is computed at the right-hand side of the slab and the results are reported in Fig. 4(e), max normalized with respect to the nondefect TI.

Figure 4(e) reveals agreement of the transmitted power inside the bulk band gap across the four cases. The largest deviation between the nondefect and defect structures is $2.5$ dB, and intervals showing less than $0.25$ dB deviation are observed supporting that a TI offering backscattering protected propagation has been designed. The differences in transmission seen in Fig. 4(e) are orders of magnitude smaller than the differences observed across the majority of the band of operation for similar defects in a traditional phononic crystal waveguide, with a worst-case value of more than $25$ dB reported in Ref. [18].

An important aspect to consider when designing systems for energy or information transport, such as waveguides, is the footprint of the system. In the present context, the footprint refers to how wide the material slab must be to confine a certain fraction of the transported energy. From Fig. 4(a), the pressure field in the TI appears to be confined (to a 30-dB level) inside approximately $3a$ from the TI interface edge. An investigation of the spatial confinement of the field is performed using the TI from Ref. [18] as a
reference. This is done by calculating the fraction of the total power flowing through the TI within a distance $d$ from the TI interface edge [see the illustration in Fig. 5(c)] as

$$P_f(d) = \frac{\int_{y=0}^{y=d} n(y) I(y) dy}{\int_{y=\infty}^{y=\infty} n(y) I(y) dy}, \quad d > 0.$$

The results for $f_0 = 20 \text{ kHz}$, shown in Fig. 5(a), reveal that more than 99% of the power is contained within $d \approx 3a$ for the TI design proposed in this Letter, while for the reference design $d \approx 9a$ is required. A map showing the distance $d$ within which 99% or more of the power is confined versus frequency for both TIs is provided in Fig. 5(b). The map reveals that at most a distance of 6$a$ is required to contain 99% of the power for the proposed TI.

In summary, this Letter reports on the design of a topological insulator using a top-down approach based on density-based topology optimization. The approach directly targets the desired effect of backscattering protected, directional energy transport. That the effect is achieved by the resulting TI is demonstrated through numerical studies. Experimental validation of the approach may be found in Ref. [33], where a metamaterial exhibiting negative refraction is considered.

The proposed design approach is trivially extendable to photonics, assuming TE or TM polarized light. Further, by introducing additional design constraints and goals it is straightforwardly extendable to, e.g., consider global defects in the TI or to target a maximization of the operational bandwidth in the design process. Hence, the approach has freedom to tailor TIs to operate under alternative conditions.

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