

Pseudo electric field and pumping valley current in graphene nanobubbles

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The extremely high pseudo magnetic field emerging in strained graphene suggests that an oscillating nanodeformation will induce a very high current even without electric bias. In this paper, we demonstrate the subterahertz (THz) dynamics of a valley current and the corresponding charge pumping with a periodically excited nanobubble. We discuss the amplitude of the pseudo electric field and investigate the dependence of the pumped valley current on the different parameters of the system. Finally, we report the signature of extra-harmonics generation in the valley current that might lead to potential modern device development operating in the nonlinear regime.

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I. INTRODUCTION

An interesting and powerful property of graphene is its ability to be stretched elastically up to 25%, and to control the induced strains in different ways [1,2]. In addition, the unique coupling between mechanical deformation and electronic structure along with the possibility of deformation make graphene attract considerable attention [3,4]. This interplay was examined by observing the Landau levels that can form in graphene due to an induced strain [4]. Indeed, deformed graphene (Fig. 1) can generate an effective gauge field $\vec{A}$ [4], to which one can associate a pseudo magnetic field (PMF), $\vec{B} = \vec{\nabla} \times \vec{A}$. This stimulated pseudo magnetic field would allow electrons to behave as if they were subjected to a strong real magnetic field with strength a few orders of magnitude higher than the one generated by superconducting magnets [5].

Currently, there is great interest in generating and controlling the valley degree of freedom of electrons in semiconductors. Indeed, the ability to manipulate valley electrons can potentially enable advanced valley-resolved electronic devices. In particular, this valley controllability opens up the possibility of using the momentum state of electrons, holes, or excitons as a completely new paradigm in information processing [6]. Moreover, pure valley currents are interestingly nondissipative currents with no accompanying net charge flow, akin to pure spin currents [7]. This property is very useful in seeking ultralow-power devices. Different routes have been proposed for generating valley currents such as using

quantum pumps with a Dirac gap [8], and using an electrically induced Berry curvature in bilayer graphene [7].

In the quantum pumping technique, a cyclic change of the ac voltage of the gates leads to the variation in the scattering matrix of the device and the generation of a dc current [8]. This method of generating a charge dc current without bias voltage between two electrodes [8,9] can be generalized to account for the spin or even the valley degree of freedom. In this paper, a time-dependent nanobubble in graphene, that can be created by a time-dependent voltage of an atomic force microscopy (AFM) tip, capacitively coupled to the device [10], will be utilized as a quantum pumping device to examine the possibilities of generating a nonzero valley current with a zero net charge current. The deformation itself can be initially created by different techniques such as corrugated substrate engineering [11,12] or gas inflation [13].

The pseudo magnetic field associated with the deformation in graphene is valley dependent and changes its sign between the two valley points K and K' . This feature allows the PMF to preserve time-reversal symmetry unlike a real external magnetic field. Consequently, a time manipulation of the PMF will induce different behavior for the K and K' electrons and thus a valley-resolved study of the current is necessary [14]. It is worth mentioning that different studies have looked at the effect of other dynamical strains on the electronic transport. Reference [15], for example, considered in-plane strain in a gapped graphene to induce a topological current, Ref. [16] looked at the symmetry requirements for pumping valley current, while Ref. [17] investigated the pseudo quantum Hall regime due to strain. Other shapes or mechanisms to get the valley filtering were also investigated [18,19].

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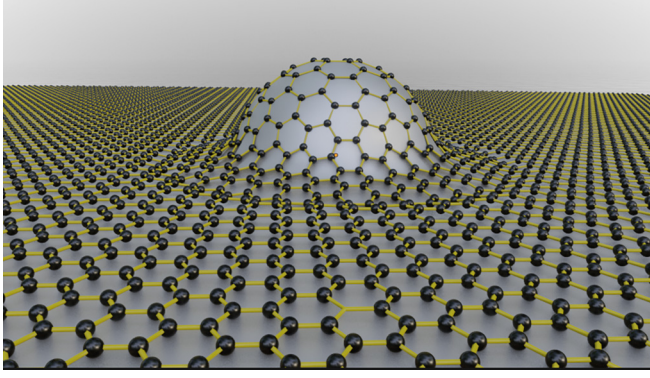


FIG. 1. A mechanical deformation of a graphene sheet. The bump which can have different shapes (spherical, Gaussian, etc.) induces an out-of-plane stretching of the hoppings between neighboring atoms.

II. MODEL

Graphene consists of carbon atoms, that are arranged in a hexagonal honeycomb structure. This arrangement is a triangular lattice with a basis of two atoms per unit cell where the lattice vectors for this structure are $a_1 = \frac{a}{2}(3, \sqrt{3})$ and $a_2 = \frac{a}{2}(3, -\sqrt{3})$ (Fig. 2) and the constant a is the carbon-carbon distance with value $d_0 \sim 1.42$ Å [21]. The electronic structure of strained graphene is studied by utilizing a first nearest-neighbor tight-binding model approximation, $H = -\sum_{\langle ij \rangle} t_{ij} c_i^\dagger c_j$, where the sum runs over the nearest-neighboring atoms. Figure 2 shows the semi-infinite graphene system, where the plane waves are coming along the zigzag direction from the left and right leads. Experimentally, the deformation can be created in a graphene sheet by using an

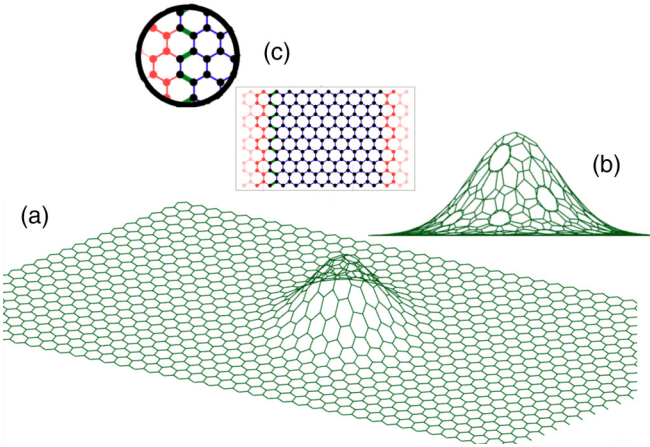


FIG. 2. Tight-binding model for a quasi-one-dimensional (1D) graphene system with zigzag edges. (a) shows the local deformation as a local bump in the center of the graphene sheet, altering the translational invariance of the quasi-1D waveguide. (b) shows a face side of the Gaussian strain bump which is centered in the middle of the system. The green links in the zoom of (c) represent the interface through which the pumped current is calculated. The red parts in (c) are the leads (reservoirs) that indicate that the system is infinite in that direction. An animation sketching the system can be found in the Supplemental Material [20].

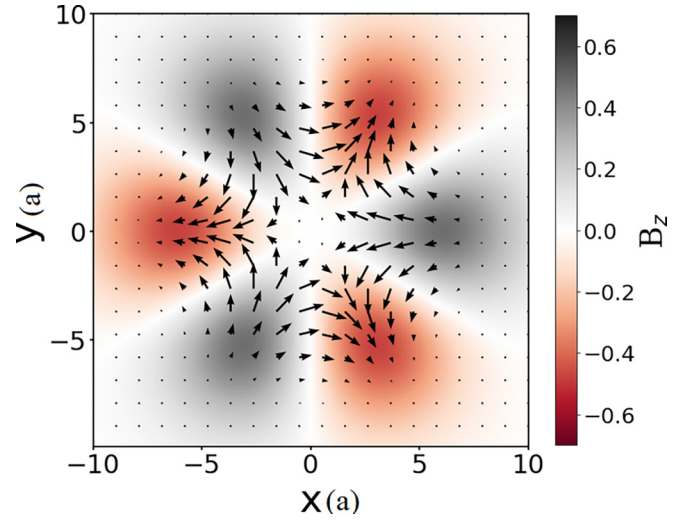


FIG. 3. The color map indicates the threefold symmetric pseudo magnetic field caused by the circularly symmetric Gaussian deformation. The vector field illustrates the stimulated electric field by the time-dependent pseudo-magnetic field. a is the lattice constant.

atomic force microscope's tip [10,22,23]. In the presence of a nanobubble the nearest-neighbor hopping parameters all become different. Thus, the strain can be included in the system by altering the hopping parameter to the strained bond length. The adjustment of the hopping in the presence of the strain can be described by

$$t_{ij} = t_0 e^{-\beta(\frac{d_{ij}}{d_0} - 1)}, \quad (1)$$

where $t_0 = 2.7$ eV, and $\beta = 3.37$ for the graphene structure [24]. d_{ij} represents the length of the strained lattice bonds whereas d_0 is the lattice constant in the absence of strain.

III. RESULTS

A. Pseudo magnetic field

In our model, the graphene out-of-plane deformation is local with a characteristic width $\sigma = 5$ nm, a maximum height $h_0 = 3.5$ nm [3,4,25], and an overall Gaussian shape modeled by $z = h_0 e^{-\frac{x^2+y^2}{2\sigma^2}}$. In the limit of low-energy carriers, the deformation is equivalent to an induced effective vector potential given by [1] $\vec{A} = -\frac{\hbar\beta}{2ea_0}[(\epsilon_{xx} - \epsilon_{yy})\mathbf{x} - 2\epsilon_{xy}\mathbf{y}]$, where the stress tensors ϵ_{ij} can be calculated by $\epsilon_{ij} = \frac{1}{2}[(\partial_i z)(\partial_j z)]$. A straightforward calculation leads to the following form of the vector potential,

$$\vec{A}_0 = \frac{-\hbar\beta}{ea_0\sigma^4} z^2 [(x^2 - y^2)\hat{x} - 2xy\hat{y}]. \quad (2)$$

The corresponding pseudo magnetic field can be obtained by $\vec{B}_0 = \vec{\nabla} \times \vec{A}_0$:

$$\vec{B}_0 = \frac{4\hbar\beta}{ea_0\sigma^6} z^2 (y^3 - 3x^2y)\mathbf{z}. \quad (3)$$

The pseudo magnetic field shows alternating positive and negative regions in the deformation position as shown in Fig. 3. This magnetic field is valley dependent and changes its sign

between the high-symmetry points K and K' and is responsible for the valley filtering in graphene nanobubbles [3].

Using Eq. (1), we can demonstrate that the maximum relative change in the hopping parameter is proportional to $\beta h_0^2/\sigma^2$. This implies that for a small deformation width σ , it becomes necessary to reduce the maximum height to remain within the constraints of stretchable graphene [1,2]. In our particular case, a numerical examination of $\max(\Delta t_{ij}/t_{ij})$ confirms that we are indeed within this specified limit.

B. Induced pseudo electric field

The dynamics of the charge carriers in graphene under a dynamical external mechanical strain is a challenging problem. The generated frequencies of the perturbation project into the sub-THz domain with reported frequencies up to 200 GHz [26]. We note in passing that such frequencies are much smaller than the bandwidth of graphene. Therefore, standard techniques such as Floquet theory [27–33] are hard to apply, which makes a full numerical treatment necessary and which will be the subject of our work. More interesting is when the strain is a nanobubble exhibiting a few hundred teslas pseudo magnetic field. Indeed, an oscillating bump with a height $h = h_0 + \delta h(t)$ will change the vector potential to a new form $\vec{A} = (1 + \frac{\delta h(t)}{h_0})^2 \vec{A}_0$. In the Weyl gauge, the Maxwell equations show an induced pseudo electric field in the limit $\frac{\delta h(t)}{h_0} \ll 1$, to the lowest order,

$$\vec{E}(x, y) = -2 \frac{\delta \dot{h}(t)}{h_0} \vec{A}_0, \quad (4)$$

where the dot represents the time derivative. This result accounts for the small perturbations due to a small amplitude in the out-of-plane vibration of the nanobubble which allows us to keep our interpretation within the linear response theory. It is worth noting that although the pseudo magnetic field is strong (hundreds of teslas), the induced electric field is only a few kV/cm. This is mainly explained by the fact that these large values of B_0 are rather due to the large gradient of $\vec{A}_0$ (variation on very short scales) than to its magnitude. The pseudo electric field map is depicted in Fig. 3 where a three-fold symmetry emerges and the system alternates between an inward and outward pseudo electric field for the K and K' valleys.

C. Charge and valley currents

As in the case of charge pumping by the dynamics of a skyrmion deformation [9,34] and spin pumping by the precession of magnetic textures [35,36], an oscillating nanobubble is expected to alter the charge density and induce a charge/valley current through the interface between the system and the lead [37]. To investigate this property, we adopt a nanobubble oscillating at hundreds GHz with $\delta h(t) = \delta h_0 \sin(\omega_0 t + \phi)$ with a height modulation strength $h_0 = 3.5$ nm, a characteristic width $\sigma = 5$ nm, and a perturbation magnitude $\delta h_0 = 0.35$ nm. The way to generate these oscillations is unimportant at this stage but can be initiated by a capacitively coupled atomic force microscope's tip or a laser on top of the strained part. The first step towards the calculation of the charge current is to solve the time-dependent

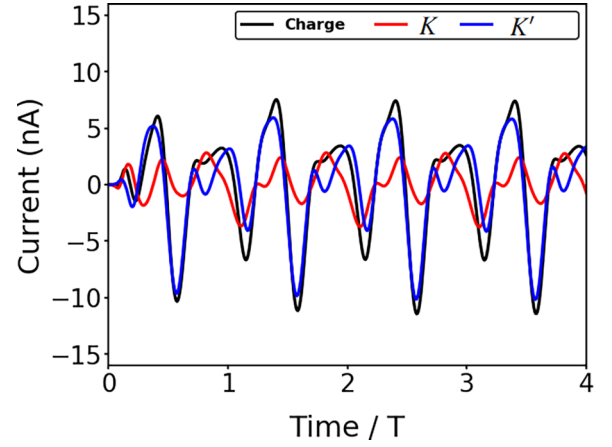


FIG. 4. The generated currents through the interface shown in Fig. 2. The two types of currents at K and K' are in phase and average to zero. The charge current is obtained for $h_0 = 3.5$ nm and $\delta h = 0.35$ nm. $E_F = 0.28t_0$. T is the period of oscillation of the bubble.

Schrödinger equation to obtain the wave functions at different times and then calculate the different currents in the system in one-body formalism [38,39]. It is important to mention that a more accurate procedure involves an integration over the different contributions from all energies in the Fermi sea. This was safely avoided due to the small driving frequencies (compared to the Fermi level $E_F = 270$ meV) and the small excitations considered in this study ($\hbar\omega/E_F \ll 1$). This reduces the needed numerical resources and keeps the problem at the Fermi surface (similar to the case of the spin-pumping theory). Figure 4 shows the result of the pumped charge current $I_{\text{charge}} = I_K + I_{K'}$, which expectedly averages to zero as explained by the scattering approach to parametric pumping. Indeed, varying one parameter is not enough to generate a sustainable charge current [9].

The frequency of the signal is the same as that of the oscillating nanobubble. So far, these results look the same as for the spin pumping of I_x , I_y , and I_{charge} in ferromagnets (precessing around the z axis): zero average and the same frequency as the driving perturbation. Since the pseudo electric field is valley dependent, the contribution coming from each K point to the charge current is investigated and plotted in Fig. 4. The two currents, I_K and $I_{K'}$, have amplitudes of the same order of magnitude and both oscillate at the same angular frequency ω_0 . The two currents are not exactly the same, because for a Fermi energy slightly higher than zero, the modes in the two different valleys are nonsymmetric and have slightly different wave numbers. The valley current, which is defined as $I_{\text{valley}} = I_K - I_{K'}$, is of huge interest in low-energy consumption devices. The reason behind it is that the net charge transferred can be zero whereas at the same time the valley current is not vanishing. This eliminates the dissipation of energy as heat while transporting information through the valleys' degrees of freedom. The valley current is well defined in the interface region (away from the bubble), because the lead is uniform and the conducting modes (incoming wave functions from the lead) do not mix. One has to compute the time-dependent wave function for each mode, using the TKWANT package [38,39], and identify the different modes

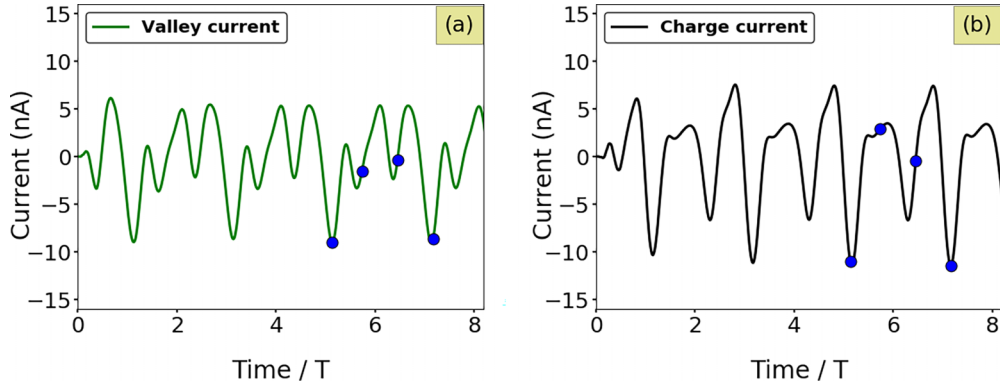


FIG. 5. The valley current (a) and the charge current (b) pumped through an interface with the lead (see Fig. 2). The average of each of them is zero. The charge oscillates at the same frequency as the nanobubble, whereas the pumped valley current shows higher-order harmonics. The blue dots here represent the times at which the current maps were plotted in Fig. 7. T is the period of oscillation of the nanobubble.

in each valley. The contribution of each mode to the current between sites a and b reads

$$I^{ab} = i[\psi_b^\dagger (H_{ab})^\dagger \psi_a - \psi_a^\dagger H_{ab} \psi_b], \quad (5)$$

where $\psi_{a(b)}$ is the wave function of a given mode at site $a(b)$. H_{ab} is the matrix element between sites a and b (in our case, it represents the hopping parameter between a and b in graphene). The contributions of modes of a given valley are summed together to finally express I_{valley} . Inside the scattering region, this procedure can still be used, but the current is not exactly a pure valley current. Indeed, the scattering between the valleys is possible, yet it remains small (the points K and K' are far apart in the Brillouin zone) [14]. For this reason, the approximation of the local current in the scattering region is still valid [14]. Another approach is to project the wave functions on the valley-resolved ones of pristine graphene [24].

Figure 5 shows the result for the valley current pumped through the same interface. The average is again zero and the amplitude is much smaller than that of the charge current. It is most important to notice that the frequency of the I_{valley} is not exactly the same as that of the nanobubble. As we can see in Fig. 6, the valley current exhibits a main frequency of $3\omega_0$

with small contributions from ω_0 , $2\omega_0$, and $5\omega_0$. The appearance of higher-order harmonics was recently reported for spin pumping in the presence of a spin-orbit interaction [40] or in the presence of a noncollinear magnetic structure [41]. In our case, none of the discussed causes in Refs. [40,41] are present in our system. The charge and valley pumping depend on the parameters of the system. As we can see from the expression of the pseudo electric field, the latter is proportional to the perturbation $\frac{\delta h_0}{h_0}$. Naturally, this is expected to be the same for the charge and valley currents. Figure 6(b) shows the amplitudes of the I_{charge} and I_{valley} which are clearly linearly varying with the change $\frac{\delta h_0}{h_0}$. For stronger perturbations, higher nonlinear effects are expected to manifest. Another way to increase the different pumped currents is to play with the frequency and use a THz spectrum. This is a challenging task, but very promising results suggest that this projection is reachable [26]. The zero average of the valley current makes it very difficult to exploit in devices since no accumulation can be obtained and only oscillating current redistribution of the valleys is achieved. With proper engineering, we still can think of it as the basis for a potentially different field-effect transistor [42].

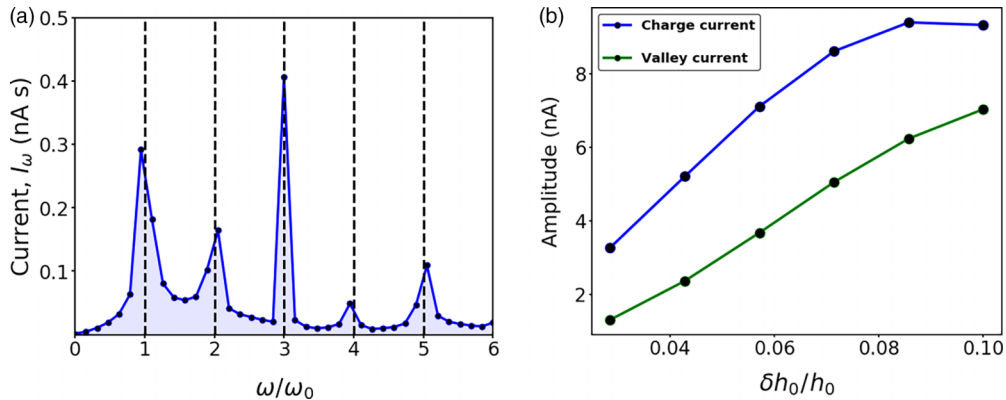


FIG. 6. (a) The Fourier transform of the valley current. The signal exhibits higher-order frequencies (multiple of ω_0). (b) The blue curve shows the amplitude of the pumped electric current vs the amplitude of the bump oscillation. The green curve shows the amplitude of the valley current vs the amplitude of the bump oscillation. $h_0 = 3.5$ nm, $\sigma = 5$ nm, and the Fermi energy is $E_F = 270$ meV. The width of the system is $W = 50$ nm.

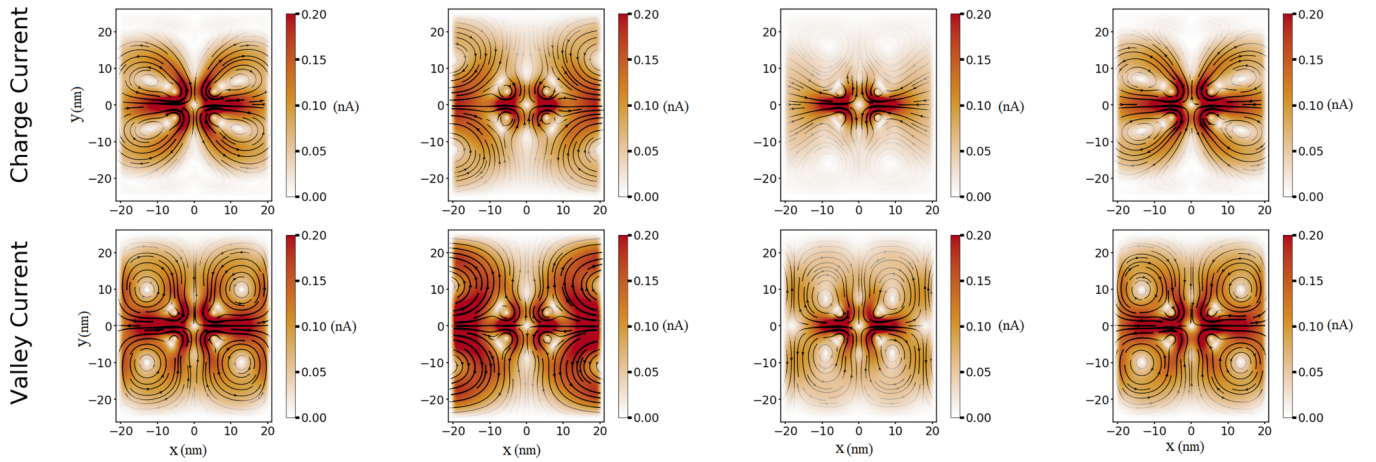


FIG. 7. The current map of the pumped charge current (top) and the valley pumped current at different times for six modes with $E_F = 0.07t_0$. The nanobubble size is $\sigma = 5$ nm and the height $\delta h_0 = 0.1h_0$. The position is expressed in nm. The times at which the maps are plotted are inside one period of oscillation and increase from left to right (the four different phases of an oscillation). The blue dots in Fig. 5 show the time where the maps are plotted. (For these figures, the time increases from left to right.)

D. Local currents

Since the pseudo electric field is local and mainly appears in the central system, investigating the current at different regions than the interface with the lead might be of great interest. The plot of the current map will show how the regions of the maximum pseudo magnetic field influence the current direction and generation. The wave functions are calculated at all sites of the systems which allows us to express the local currents. Figure 7 illustrates the map obtained at different times during one period. The current lines for the charge and the valley are symmetric, which is just the reflection of the symmetry of the Gaussian bump considered in this work. This will be different if a triaxial strain was adopted. In fact, it is known that a Gaussian deformation filters the valleys whereas the triaxial one splits them [3]. The Fermi energy is chosen low to reduce the number of modes due to the limited computing resources in this kind of 2D maps (current is calculated between each of two links, at each time) and this does not change the general conclusions. The maps for the valley current and the charge current are intrinsically different: For the charge current, it is hard to see the positions of the valley-dependent maxima of the pseudo magnetic field. The situation is different for the valley current. We clearly notice loops of different orientations showing the dependence of the pseudo magnetic field on the valley of the carriers. The size of the current's loops can be changed via the parameter σ , i.e., creating very peaked bumps or smoothly varying ones over a larger region. The number of modes for the chosen Fermi energy is very small. In order to increase the current, one needs to increase it either by changing the width of the system or by increasing the Fermi energy.

It is worth mentioning that we did investigate deformations with elliptical symmetry, deliberately tilting them to disrupt left-right symmetry. Unfortunately, this approach did not lead to a sustained average valley current.

IV. CONCLUSION

The pseudo magnetic field generated by a strained graphene sheet was analyzed. In the presence of a time-dependent oscillating strain, a corresponding pseudo electric field is stimulated, giving rise to a redistribution of the quantum states in momentum space, leading to charge and valley pumping. We demonstrated that the valley current exhibits extra harmonics and that, on average, the pseudo electric field did not sustain a direct current, but rather a zero average was obtained. This work opens the door to further interesting studies such as a pseudo electric field generated by the propagation of mechanical waves in graphene or the distribution of local electric currents due to phonons and temperature effects on graphene.

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