

Photoinduced modulation of the excitonic resonance via coupling with coherent phonons in a layered semiconductor

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(Received 18 May 2021; accepted 3 November 2021; published 13 December 2021)

The coupling of excitons with atomic vibrations plays a pivotal role on the nonequilibrium optical properties of layered semiconductors. However, how exciton-phonon coupling manifests in the time and energy domains is still an open debate between experiment and theory. By means of time-resolved broadband optical reflectivity combined with *ab initio* calculations of a bismuth tri-iodide single crystal, we set the spectral fingerprints for the optical detection of exciton-phonon coupling in layered semiconductors. Our joint experimental and theoretical effort allows us to unravel the impact of exciton-phonon coupling by microscopically relating the photoinduced coherent energy modulation of the excitonic resonance to coherent optical phonons. This enables us to track the extent of the photoinduced atomic displacement in real space. Our findings represent a step forward on the road to coherent manipulation of the excitonic properties on ultrafast timescales.

DOI: [10.1103/PhysRevResearch.3.043175](https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevResearch.3.043175)

I. INTRODUCTION

Electron-phonon coupling is among the fundamental interactions in condensed matter which govern the nonequilibrium optoelectronic properties of materials by, for instance, guiding the relaxation dynamics of quasiparticles [1–4] and assisting nonthermally driven electronic phase transitions [5–7]. In semiconductors, the electron-hole Coulomb interaction also plays a crucial role in allowing the formation of bound states (excitons) upon photoabsorption. The binding energy of excitons is usually of a few meV, making them unstable at room temperature and difficult to be detected. However, in layered semiconductors, the reduced dielectric screening strongly enhances the exciton binding energy up to several hundreds of meV [8]. This fact, together with the technological relevance of layered materials, is triggering enormous research efforts in capturing exciton dynamics on the femto- to picosecond timescale [9–15]. Recently, exciton-phonon coupling has been proposed to impact on not only the incoherent carrier-cooling dynamics, but also the homogeneous linewidth of the

excitonic luminescence, and even the diffusion and the coherence length of excitons [14,16]. However, the microscopic mechanism by which a lattice vibration interacts with the excitons has not found a description yet, which is corroborated by both experiment and theory [10–12,14,17].

While access to exciton-phonon coupling is a great challenge both experimentally and theoretically, discerning and controlling its effects on the nonequilibrium optical response are of paramount interest from a fundamental viewpoint, as well as for the technological progress. Experimentally, resonant Raman scattering spectroscopy is among the most common techniques to address exciton-phonon coupling [17,18]. However, the exciton dynamics remain out of reach due to the lack of temporal resolution. Time-resolved optical spectroscopy is the most suitable tool to investigate the interaction between excitons and phonons in the ultrafast time domain [11,15,19,20]. By measuring transient changes in the optical polarization, the technique provides macroscopic snapshots of the nonequilibrium behavior of the system. On the theoretical side, *ab initio* calculations of exciton-phonon coupling combine density-functional-perturbation theory for the electron-phonon matrix elements [21], with the Bethe-Salpeter equation (BSE), which correctly describes the excitonic physics [22]. Such scheme has been recently developed and applied to two-dimensional materials to compute exciton-phonon lifetimes [14,23]. An alternative approach computes the excitonic properties solving the BSE within the

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GW approximation both at equilibrium and with the atoms displaced along specific phonon modes [11]. This method further enables an estimate of atomic displacements with exceptionally high spatial resolution on the subpicometer scale [24].

In this Article, by combining time-resolved broadband optical reflectivity measurements with state-of-the-art spinorial *ab initio* BSE calculations [25], we unveil the spectral fingerprints of exciton-phonon coupling in a representative van-der-Waals layered semiconductor, the bismuth tri-iodide (BiI_3) single crystal. Recently, BiI_3 has come into focus as an efficient nontoxic replacement of lead-based perovskites in optoelectronic applications [26,27]. The absorption spectrum is dominated by a direct excitonic resonance at 620 nm (2.00 eV) with lifetime of nanoseconds and binding energy of hundreds of meV [28]. Such large binding energy in a bulk semiconductor is a rather unique feature. Resonant Raman scattering combined with luminescence have identified an interaction between excitons and the main A_g vibrational mode at 3.4 THz (113 cm^{-1}) [29–32]. More recently, transient absorption of spin-coated thin films of BiI_3 observed a combined dynamics of coherent optical phonons and excitons upon ultrafast photoexcitation [33]. All these aspects make BiI_3 an ideal platform for exploring experimentally and theoretically the photophysics of exciton-phonon coupling in a rather straightforward manner compared to more complex systems [15,20]. However, both the spectral fingerprint of the coupling and its impact on the exciton and phonon dynamics have remained elusive until now, likely due to the difficulty in providing univocal proof both experimentally and theoretically.

Here, we provide evidence that exciton phonon coupling sets in at the photoexcitation time and triggers a coherent modulation of the excitonic resonance of BiI_3 resulting from a combination of a single-particle band gap renormalization and a counteracting change in the exciton binding energy. The dispersive photoexcitation of coherent optical phonons produces oscillations of the transient reflectivity which are enhanced by almost one order of magnitude at wavelengths close to the excitonic resonance. Moreover, the exciton energy varies periodically within a few picoseconds, in phase with the coherently generated atomic vibrations. This is captured by retrieving the initial phase of the coherent phonon amplitude across the exciton wavelength and monitoring the energy shift of the excitonic peak. The *ab initio* calculations corroborate that all observations are univocal fingerprints, which could be used to reveal and study exciton-phonon coupling also in other materials. Moreover, our joint experimental and theoretical approach provides a unique tool to address exciton-phonon coupling in real space by retrieving the extent of the atomic displacement responsible for the coherent modulation of the excitonic resonance.

II. TRANSIENT REFLECTIVITY DATA AND AB INITIO SIMULATIONS

The photoinduced transient reflectivity change, $(\Delta R/R_0)(t)$, is shown as color scale in Fig. 1(a) as a function of probe wavelength (left axis), probe photon energy (right axis), and pump-probe time delay (top axis).

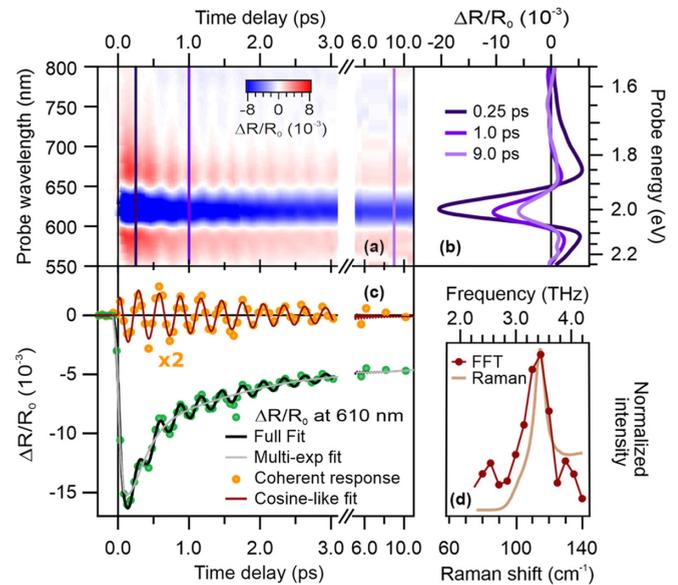


FIG. 1. (a) Measured $\Delta R/R_0$ as a function of probe wavelength and pump-probe time delay. (b) Vertical line cuts of (a) at selected time delays of 0.25, 1.0, and 9.0 ps. (c) Horizontal line cut of (a) at 610 nm (green circles) superimposed by its full-fit curve (black line). The multiexponential fit contribution (gray line) is subtracted from the data to obtain the bare coherent optical response (orange circles) shown together with the relevant fit (red line). (d) FFT of the coherent optical response at 610 nm (red circles) and Raman scattering spectrum (light brown line).

The measurement is carried out at room temperature and the pump photon energy is 2.78 eV (445 nm), well above the band gap of BiI_3 . This enables the excitation of $n_c = 2 \times 10^{19} \text{ el/cm}^3$ quasifree carriers into the conduction bands (see [34] for the calculation). At positive time delays, i.e., after photoexcitation, a pronounced negative (blue) signal with minimum at 620 nm (2.00 eV) indicates a transient decrease of reflectivity [$(\Delta R/R_0)(t) < 0$] in the spectral range of the excitonic resonance. Above and below this spectral region, the signal is positive (red), as the transient reflectivity increases [$(\Delta R/R_0)(t) > 0$]. The temporal evolution of both the negative and positive spectral features is emphasized by the spectra reported in Fig. 1(b) for selected time delays. At all probe wavelengths, this incoherent optical response is superimposed by a periodic intensity modulation [see, e.g., the coherent response at 610 nm in Fig. 1(c)] resulting from the generation of coherent optical phonons by the pump pulse.

The transient reflectivity signal at each wavelength is fitted by a sum of four exponentially decaying functions (incoherent optical response) and an exponentially decaying cosine function (coherent optical response) convoluted with a Gaussian function (pump-probe cross-correlation) (see [24] for the fit function). Figure 1(c) shows the fit (black line) for the data at 610 nm (green circles). The gray line is the multiexponential fit contribution to the incoherent optical response, only. At all wavelengths, we find that the incoherent optical response decays through multiple relaxation channels with time constants on the order of 200 fs, few picoseconds, hundreds of picoseconds, and 1.5 ns, respectively. These values agree with previous measurements of the

transient absorption of spin-coated BiI₃ thin films [33] and the luminescence of BiI₃ single crystals [35]. Accordingly, we assign the fastest dynamics to carrier-carrier scattering, and the two intermediate dynamics to electron-phonon scattering processes and the beginning of electron-hole recombination. The slowest dynamics exceed the investigated temporal window and its time constant has been held during the fitting procedure to the literature value [35] of the electron-hole radiative recombination process.

After subtraction of the multiexponential fit component [gray line in Fig. 1(c)], the coherent optical response (orange circles) is retrieved. Its fast Fourier transform [FFT, red circles in Fig. 1(d)] reveals an oscillation at 3.41 ± 0.02 THz matching the frequency of the A_g phonon mode (light brown line) [32]. Moreover, the oscillation intensity is damped, on average, within 1.860 ± 0.075 ps, which provides the dephasing time of the coherent phonons.

To shed light on the nature of the transient optical response, we perform numerical analysis of the optical properties of BiI₃ via *ab initio* simulations within the GW+BSE scheme (see [34] for details about the theoretical model). As shown in Fig. 2(a), the imaginary part of the dielectric function is dominated, in the optical region investigated in our measurements, by an excitonic peak with binding energy of 500 meV [36]. Such large binding energy is consistent with the strong in-plane localization of the exciton wave function [37] shown in the real-space representation of Fig. 2(b). The computed reflectivity spectrum, $R^{X_0}(\omega)$ [thin line in inset of Fig. 2(a)] exhibits a resonance at the energy of the excitonic peak. To match $R^{X_0}(\omega)$ with the experimental reflectance spectrum (thick line), the calculated peaks are shifted here by 0.35 eV. Thus, our calculations clearly show that the optical reflectivity is mostly dominated by the imaginary part of the dielectric function, in agreement with previous works [38,39]. We then interpret the incoherent optical response as follows: The negative peak at 620 nm (2.00 eV) is assigned to the pump-induced photobleaching of the excitonic resonance; the positive signal at shorter and longer wavelengths to a combination of photoabsorption between transiently excited states, screening-induced optical gap renormalization [33], and increase of the exciton linewidth.

We now focus on the bare coherent optical response of BiI₃. The frequency-resolved coherent optical phonon spectrum is obtained by FFT at each probe wavelength and plotted in color scale in Fig. 3(a). It exhibits one intense feature centered at 3.41 ± 0.02 THz, i.e., at the frequency of the A_g phonon mode whose calculated real-space representation is depicted in the inset. A closer look at the FFT-spectrum intensity reveals two peculiarities: an enhancement in the exciton-wavelength region and quenchantings at 580 nm (2.14 eV) and 620 nm (2.00 eV). We argue that the enhancement and quenching of the A_g phonon mode intensity point at an interaction between this vibrational mode and the excitonic transition.

The fit parameters of the initial phonon amplitude and phase are plotted on the left axes of Figs. 3(b) and 3(c), respectively. The corresponding *ab initio* quantities are explicitly calculated and reported on the right axis for direct comparison. As a first result, the phonon phase indicates, at all wavelengths, a cosine-like oscillation of the atoms

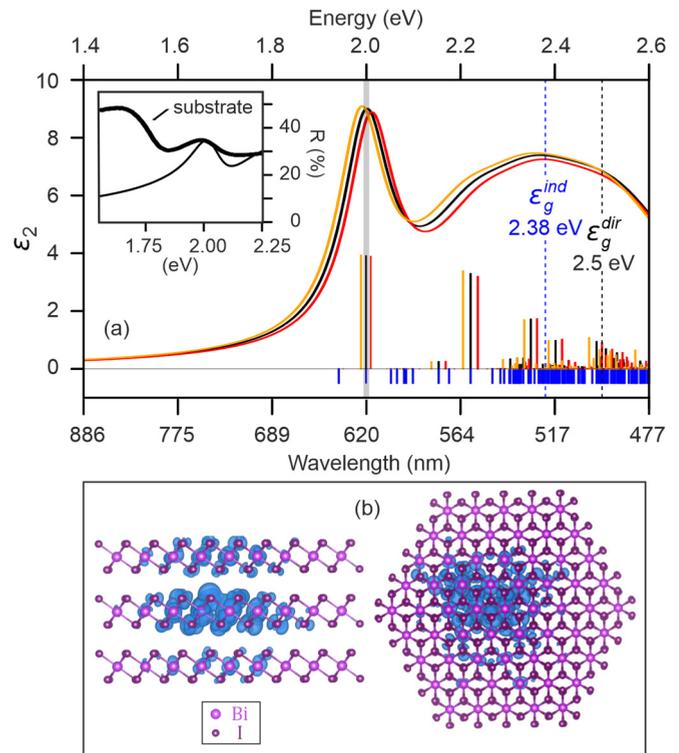


FIG. 2. (a) BSE absorption spectrum of BiI₃ computed at equilibrium (black line) and with the atoms displaced along the A_g phonon mode with $\pm\Delta_0 = 0.05$ Bohr ≈ 2.6 pm (red and orange line). The corresponding equilibrium reflectivity is shown in the inset (thin line) and compared with the experimental measurement (thick line). At low energy, the two differ by the back reflection of the sample holder. The blue vertical lines represent the excitonic energies at equilibrium, while the black, red, and orange bars are the same poles weighted by the oscillator strengths. The blue and black dashed lines mark the position of the indirect ϵ_g^{ind} and direct ϵ_g^{dir} electronic gap. (b) Real-space representation of the exciton wave function. In the side view, three layers of the bulk are shown, with the hole fixed in the central layer.

around their equilibrium position. We deduce that coherent optical phonons are generated via a displacive excitation mechanism, consistent with the full symmetry of the A_g vibrational mode and the absorptive excitation regime of our experiment [40–43].

The calculated amplitude and phase are obtained as follows. First, the GW+BSE reflectivity is recomputed with the atoms displaced by an amount $\Delta X_{A_g} = \Delta_0 u_{A_g}$ along the direction of the eigenvector u_{A_g} of the A_g phonon mode [green arrows, inset of Fig. 3(a)]. Assuming that the atoms oscillate according to $X(t) = X_0 + \Delta X_{A_g} \cos(\omega_{A_g} t)$, we obtain the reflectivity, $R^X(\omega)$, and thus the reflectivity variation, $F(\omega) = (R^X - R^{X_0})/R^{X_0}$, for distinct positions of the displaced atoms. We find that the atomic displacement induces a change in the band gap, ΔE_{gap} . This affects the dielectric function, and thus, the exciton binding energy which responds to the modified Coulomb screening with a change ΔE_{be} in the opposite direction. The resulting shift of the excitonic peak is $\Delta E = \Delta E_{\text{gap}} + \Delta E_{be}$. The overall picture is of an excitonic

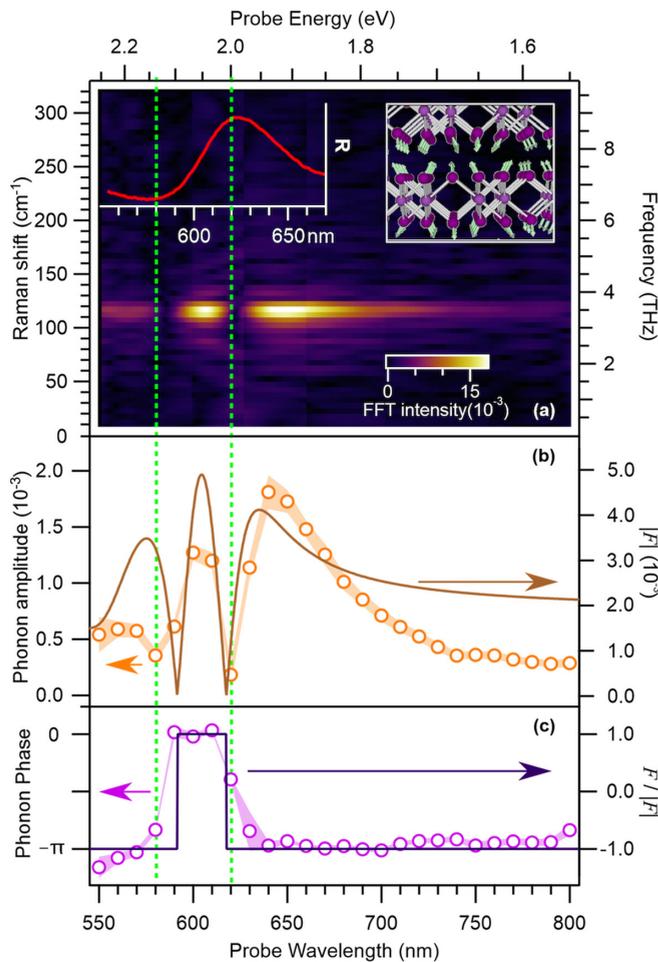


FIG. 3. (a) FFT of the coherent optical response at all probed wavelengths. Left inset: the measured equilibrium reflectance (same as in inset of Fig. 2(a) and in Fig. S8 [34]). Right inset: the real-space representation of the A_g phonon mode. (b) Experimental fit parameters of the initial amplitude and (c) phase of the coherent optical phonon as function of the probe wavelength (left axis) and corresponding calculated quantities (right axis).

resonance that oscillates back and forth in energy as shown in Fig. 2(a) (yellow and red spectra).

III. TRACKING THE PHONON-MEDIATED MODULATION OF THE EXCITONIC RESONANCE

We now compare the calculated $|F(\omega)|$ and $F(\omega)/|F(\omega)|$ with the measured initial amplitude and phase of the coherent optical response, respectively. Clearly, both quantities confirm the amplitude enhancement as well as the two nodes at the wavelengths of the π -phase shift (for further details, see also Fig. S7 in Ref. [34]). The node at the exciton wavelength (620 nm) is due to the opposite sign of the reflectivity variation generated by the shift of the excitonic peak. Concerning the other node, a bunch of excitons with strong exciton-phonon coupling is found to produce a broad peak centered at 525 nm (2.35 eV). Thus, the second node at 580 nm results from the combination of the displacements of the two excitonic peaks. The concomitant observation

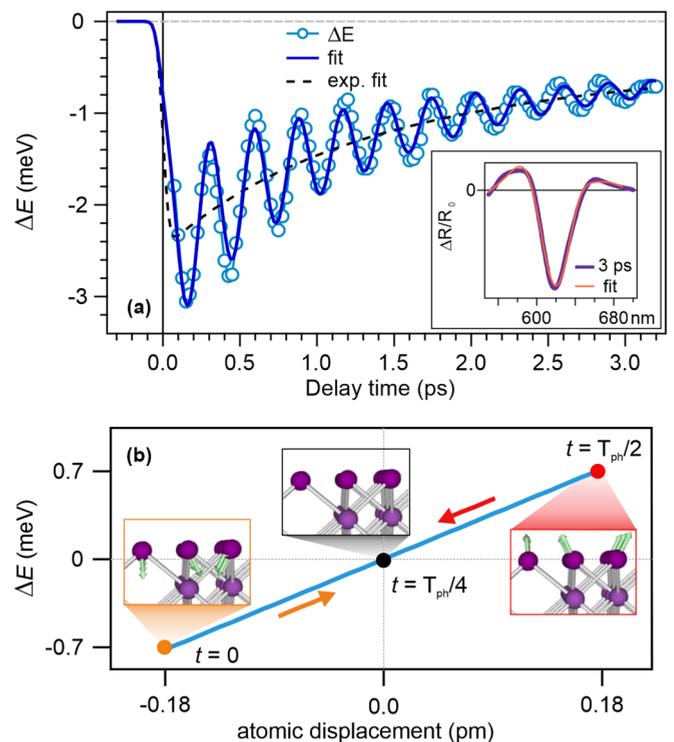


FIG. 4. (a) Energy shift of the excitonic peak (blue circles). The ΔE fit curve (solid line) is given by a single-exponential decay function (dashed line) multiplied by an exponentially damped cosine function. In inset, spectrum at 3 ps (purple line) and relative differential fit (orange line). (b) The microscopic effect of exciton-phonon coupling: periodic renormalization of the excitonic peak position by the atomic displacement. T_{ph} refers to the phonon period.

of the predicted amplitude enhancement and π -phase shift [11] provides unambiguous proof of coupling between coherently activated A_g phonons and excitons. Furthermore, by exploiting the excellent agreement between theory and experiment, we provide a quantitative estimate of the photoinduced atomic displacement and the associated energy shifts. An intensity variation of the coherent optical response on the order of $F(\omega) \approx 10^{-3}$ is obtained in the simulations upon atomic displacement in the range of $\Delta_0 \approx 10^{-1}$ pm. We find that for $\Delta_0 = 0.05$ pm the excitonic peak is predicted to shift by $\Delta E = 0.2$ meV as a result of an upshift of the band gap by $\Delta E_{gap} = 0.3$ meV and an opposite shift of the binding energy of $\Delta E_{be} = 0.1$ meV.

To unravel the impact of exciton-phonon coupling on the dynamics of the excitonic resonance, we follow the transient energy position of the excitonic peak. This is obtained by differential fitting of the transient reflectivity spectra [inset of Fig. 4(a)] after parametrization of the equilibrium reflectance (see Ref. [34] for details about the fitting procedure). Figure 4(a) reports the energy shift, ΔE , from the equilibrium position of the Gaussian peak accounting for the excitonic resonance (blue circles). The evaluated temporal window spans up to a few picoseconds to cover the phonon dephasing time. Upon photoexcitation, the excitonic resonance undergoes an instantaneous red shift (within the pump-probe cross correlation) followed by a blue shift toward the equilibrium

position. The latter evolves on a fast timescale of 1.110 ± 0.075 ps (dashed line), and a slower one that exceeds the evaluated temporal window and is accounted in the fit by an additional offset. The blue shift is superimposed by a periodic energy modulation at the exact frequency of the A_g -phonon mode, damped on a timescale of 1.420 ± 0.075 ps. Both the red and blue shifts are rather common in photoexcited semiconductors and typically relate to band-gap renormalization [44–47] and exciton-binding-energy changes [48,49] induced by dynamical screening, and conduction-band filling by photoexcited carriers [50–52]. Conversely, the coherent modulation of the excitonic resonance has been rarely observed in the photoinduced dynamics of semiconductors with strong exciton-phonon coupling [11,15,53]. We explain this fact by noting that a suitable intensity ratio of the coherent and incoherent optical response is required in order to avoid the exciton energy modulation to be buried underneath the photobleaching spectral intensity, as reported, for instance, in Ref. [11]. Our measurements indicate that such ratio is on the order of 1:10 and is achieved by off-resonance photoexcitation with energy above the optical band gap in order to retain from too intense photobleaching of the excitonic resonance.

The periodic modulation of the excitonic peak exhibits an initial amplitude of ≈ 0.7 meV [54] reproduced by the simulation with an atomic displacement of 0.18 pm [see Fig. 4(b)]. The corresponding reflectivity variation is on the expected order of 10^{-3} , differing only by a factor of ≈ 3 from the measured phonon amplitude at the respective probe wavelengths [see Fig. 3(b)]. All these findings demonstrate that tracking the energy modulation of the excitonic resonance induced by coherent phonons enables to trace atomic displacements along the direction of the phonon mode. Effectively, our combined experimental and theoretical approach successfully addresses the coherent phonon dynamics coupled to the exciton in real space with subpicometer resolution.

IV. CONCLUSION

The amplitude enhancement and phase shift of the coherent phonon are established as univocal spectral fingerprints of exciton-phonon coupling. We prove that the excitonic resonance of the layered semiconductor BiI_3 can be optically modulated via coupling of coherent atomic vibrations of which we are able to estimate the spatial extent with subpicometer resolution. Note that the present results can be extended to any photoexcited semiconductor with the exciton strongly coupled to a lattice deformation. As a step forward, we propose that ultrafast modulation of excitonic resonances could be experimentally controlled by varying the laser fluence or tuning the pump photon energy across the exciton transition, paving the way toward optical control of the nonequilibrium optoelectronic properties of low-dimensional semiconductors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

S.P., L.S., and C.G. acknowledge partial support from D.1 and D.2.2 grants of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. C.G. and P.F. acknowledge financial support from MIUR through the project CENTRAL (MIUR (IT), 20172H2SC4_005) within the PRIN 2017 program. D.S. acknowledges the funding received from MIUR PRIN BIOX (MIUR (IT), 20173B72NB), and from the European Union projects: MaX Materials design at the eXascale H2020-INFRAEDI-2018-2020, (European Union, 824143); and Nanoscience Foundries and Fine Analysis–Europe H2020-INFRAIA-2014-2015, (Nanoscience Foundries and Fine Analysis Europe, 654360). A. M.-S. acknowledges the Ramon y Cajal programme (Grant RYC2018-024024-I; MINECO, Spain).

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