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Study of filamentation instability on the divergence of ultraintense laser-driven electrons

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Generation of relativistic electron (RE) beams during ultraintense laser pulse interaction with plasma targets is studied by collisional particle-in-cell (PIC) simulations. Strong magnetic field with transverse scale length of several local plasma skin depths, associated with RE currents propagation in the target, is generated by filamentation instability (FI) in collisional plasmas, inducing a great enhancement of the divergence of REs compared to that of collisionless cases. Such effect is increased with laser intensity and target charge state, suggesting that the RE divergence might be improved by using low-Z materials under appropriate laser intensities in future fast ignition experiments and in other applications of laser-driven electron beams.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ultraintense laser-driven REs have attracted great recent attention1–12 due to their potential application in the areas of fast ignition laser fusion13–15, ion acceleration by laser-plasma interaction16–20, and production of ultrashort bright radiations21. It is essential to characterize accurately the RE divergence for these applications.

Both the cause and characterization of the RE divergence are still not understood well, which are critically important to determine the RE energy deposition in targets. The divergence measured in the experiments usually increases with laser intensity16, though some discrepancy exists among the different diagnostic techniques because each one is dependent on different parameters17. However, recent PIC simulations show that the RE divergence is approximately linearly proportional to the preplasma scale length for a fixed laser intensity, but is weakly dependent on the laser intensity for a fixed preplasma12. For a normally incident laser, the electron injection angle \( \theta_i = \tan^{-1} \sqrt{2/(\gamma - 1)} \) is obtained from the electron’s trajectory in an intense electromagnetic wave, where \( \gamma \) is the electron relativistic factor. However, the scaling predicts a decrease of RE divergence as the laser intensity increases, which disaccords with both experimental and numerical results. Adam et al.14 found that the RE divergence is mainly induced by the large static magnetic fields generated in the laser-plasma interaction layer, arisen from the Weibel instability driven by a thermal anisotropy of the electrons. Furthermore, the full divergence of REs including a regular radial beam deviation and a random angular dispersion is reported recently15, which are determined by the transverse component of the laser ponderomotive force and collisionless Weibel instability induced micro-magnetic fields, respectively. The Weibel/filamentation instability induced magnetic field will be saturated after a rapid linear growth due to magnetic trapping16–18. In addition, magnetic field of 10^4 T magnitude generated by the reflected laser in preplasma can also deflect the laser-driven REs19.

It is found that transverse temperature of beams can suppress the FI under certain conditions as it propagates in cold plasmas both in theoretical analysis and numerical simulations, but for a collisional plasma, the growth rate of instability will increase with plasma collision rate20,21 or plasma resistivity (that is proportional to the collision rate)22, which can only be inhibited by external magnetic field20,23. In addition, collisional effects tend to attenuate the current FI for symmetric (where \( n_h = n_b \), \( n_h \) and \( n_b \) are the relativistic and background electron density, respectively) or quasisymmetric counterstreaming while enhance it for extremely asymmetric counterstreaming (where \( n_h \ll n_b \))24, which is in the context of laser-driven REs propagating in solid or compressed targets. Note that only the influence of magnetic field generated around the laser-plasma interaction region on the RE divergence and usually collisionless plasmas are considered in the previous studies. However, since the collision frequency of background plasma can be comparable to the local plasma frequency in solid targets, the collisions of plasmas have to be considered properly as the RE propagates in it25. Strong magnetic fields are ubiquitous during the RE beams propagating in dense target due to growth of FI induced by plasma

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Such magnetic fields can significantly enhance or suppress the RE divergence, which is not yet fully understood and needs to be investigated in detail.

In this paper, angular distribution of laser-driven REs with laser intensity varying from $10^{18}$ W/cm$^2$ up to $5 \times 10^{20}$ W/cm$^2$ and target materials of copper (Cu), aluminium (Al), and polymer (CH$_2$) are studied by collisional PIC simulations. It is found that strong magnetic field is generated by the collisional FI during the REs propagating in collisional plasmas, inducing a great enhancement of the divergence of REs compared to that of collisionless cases. The divergence of REs increases with laser intensity and target charge state. This finding would be helpful for future fast ignition experiments and in other applications of laser-driven electron beams.

II. SIMULATION MODEL

To investigate the FI induced magnetic field on RE divergence in collisional plasmas, numerical simulations are performed using the relativistic collisional 2D3V PIC code EPOCH$^{29}$, which includes the binary collision model of charged particles proposed by Sentoku et al.$^{31}$. The target consists of an initially neutral mixture of electrons and Cu ions with mass $m_{Cu} = 63.5\text{m}_p$, where $m_p = 1836\text{m}_e$ is the proton mass. The charge state and maximum density of the ions are set to 15 and 28$n_c$, where $n_c = 9.92 \times 10^{30}\text{cm}^{-3}$ is the critical density, corresponding to the laser wavelength $\lambda_L = 100\mu\text{m}$. The plasma has an exponentially increasing density profile $n_e = 5n_e\exp((x-10\mu\text{m})/1\mu\text{m})$ between $x = 6 - 10\mu\text{m}$ and then keeps the maximum electron density of 420$n_c$ between $x = 10 - 25\mu\text{m}$. Note that $\sim 33\%$ of the solid density of Cu ions is used in the simulations, in order to lower the computational costs of PIC simulations at the required resolution for full solid density. The initial temperature of the electrons and Cu$^{15+}$ is 100 eV. The simulation box is 30$\mu\text{m} \times 20\mu\text{m}$ with 3000 \times 2000 cells. Each cell contains 50 numerical macroparticles per species in the simulations. A $p$-polarized laser pulse with a peak intensity of $I_L = 10^{20}\text{W/cm}^2$ is incident normally from the left boundary, corresponding to $a_L = eE_L/m_e\omega_L = 9.06$ for the dimensionless maximum amplitude of the laser electric field, where $e$ and $m_e$ are the electron charge and mass, $c$ is the light speed, $E_L$ and $\omega_L$ are the electric field and frequency of the laser pulse, respectively. The spatial profiles of the laser is Gaussian, with spot radius 4$\mu\text{m}$. The laser pulse rises up with a Gaussian profile over the first 15 fs to the peak intensity, stays at constant intensity for 105 fs. In order to suppress the numerical heating, fifth-order interpolation scheme is employed to evaluate the currents. Periodic and absorbing boundary conditions are used for the transverse and longitudinal boundaries, respectively.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows the self-generated magnetic field and the electron kinetic energy density distributions for the case of a collisional Cu target. It can be seen that two types of large scale magnetic fields having distinct polarities are generated in the preplasma and around the solid target interface (i.e., $x = 10\mu\text{m}$). The magnetic field generated in the preplasma is mainly arisen from $\nabla n_e \times \nabla T_e$ due to the gradients of electron density and temperature, whose magnitude can be estimated as$^{30} B \sim 200\frac{L_L}{a_L}(\frac{T_e}{T_{keV}})(\frac{n_e}{n_{cm}^3})^{-1}(\frac{\mu_0}{\text{m}})^{-1}\text{T}$, where $T_e$ is the electron temperature, $\tau$ is the pulse duration, $L_T$ and $L_n$ are the (transverse) temperature and (longitudinal) density gradient, respectively. $L_T$ and $L_n$ can be estimated from the electron temperature and density distributions, which are around 5.5$\mu\text{m}$ and 1.4$\mu\text{m}$, respectively, and the electron temperature is 3.03 MeV (see Fig. 5(a)) in the preplasma. Thus the magnitude of $B$ is $9.4 \times 10^3\text{T}$, which is very close to the simulation results. The field around the solid target interface is driven by temporal variations in the ponderomotive force and can be estimated by $\nabla^2 B \sim \nabla n_e \times \nabla^2 T$, where $I$ is the laser intensity. In addition to the large scale magnetic fields, microscale magnetic field with periodical distribution is also observed in the dense target, whose magnitude can reach $1.5 \times 10^4\text{T}$. The fields is associated with the RE propagation in the target, as shown in Fig. 1(c) and (d), in which the REs are beamed into the target and heat the target rapidly. The kinetic energy density of the electrons can be greater than $10^{16}\text{J/m}^3$.

The profile of $B_z$ along $y$ direction at $x = 11\mu\text{m}$ and corresponding frequency spectrum $|B_k|$ of $B_z$ are presented in Fig. 2(a) and (b). It is shown that peak of
The wave number of the magnetic field is \( \sim 5k_0 \), where \( k_0 = 2\pi/\lambda_L \), \( \lambda_L \) is the wavelength of laser pulse. The plasma skin depth \( \lambda_p = 2\pi\rho_e/\omega_p = 0.049\lambda_L \), where \( \omega_p = (4\pi n_e e^2/m_e)^{1/2} \) and \( n_e \) are the local electron frequency and density. Thus, the transverse scale length of the magnetic field is \( \sim 4\lambda_p \). The growth rates of modes whose wavelength is comparable to the plasma frequency and density. Thus, the transverse scale length of the plasma skin depth are suppressed and the spectral peak of the modes is \( \sim \lambda_F \). The growth rate of the REs propagating into the target during \( t \sim 5k_0 \) is attributed to the fact that \( k \) becomes of the order of the modulation wavelength, i.e., \( r_L \sim \lambda_F \), namely magnetic trapping. Thus, the saturated magnetic field can be estimated to be \( B_s = 2.25 \times 10^6 \text{T} \), which has the same order with that observed in the PIC simulation.

In order to understand better the filamentation instability observed here, we show the Fast Fourier transform of the magnetic field at \( t = 100 \text{fs} \) and \( 160 \text{fs} \) in Fig. 2. It is seen that, large scale magnetic fields having distinct polarities are generated in the preplasma and around the solid target interface, which is similar to that in the collisional case. However, periodic magnetic field is not obvious in the collisionless plasma, indicating that the plasma only experiences very weak instability growth, which is consistent with the results reported in Ref.\(^{21} \). The instability stabilized by the magnetic oblique modes can be enhanced by collisional effects and FI is the dominant mode for a beam propagating in dense plasmas. Note that the peak around \( k = 0 \) is attributed to the fact that \( k \) becomes 0 as the laser pulse arrives at the critical point of the target.

For comparison, ultraintense laser interaction with a collisionless Cu target is also investigated, as shown in Fig. 4. It is seen that, large scale magnetic fields having distinct polarities are generated in the preplasma and around the solid target interface, which is similar to that in the collisional case. However, periodic magnetic field is not obvious in the collisionless plasma, indicating that the plasma only experiences very weak instability growth, which is consistent with the results reported in Ref.\(^{21} \). The instability stabilized by the magnetic oblique modes can be enhanced by collisional effects and FI is the dominant mode for a beam propagating in dense plasmas. Note that the peak around \( k = 0 \) is attributed to the fact that \( k \) becomes 0 as the laser pulse arrives at the critical point of the target.

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REs should have smaller divergence in the former case comparing to that of the latter. It is noted that the RE distribution is more diffuse than that in Fig. 1, which could be due to the absence of confinement of the FI induced magnetic fields that scatter the REs but can also confine the latter due to its very high intensity and wide spread.

Figure 5(a) shows the energy spectra of the electrons both for the collisional and collisionless Cu targets. It is shown that the spectra have similar profiles in these cases. The RE temperature is 3.03 MeV for the collisional target and is identical with that of the collisionless case. The laser absorption efficiency for the colloidal target and is identical with that of the collisionless Cu targets. The RE temperature is 3.03 MeV for the collisional case is a bit lower than that of the collisionless case is nearly identical to that of collisional case

FIG. 3. Fast Fourier transform of $B_z$ at t=100 fs (a) and 160 fs (b), respectively.

FIG. 4. The same as that in Fig. 1, but for a collisionless Cu target.

FIG. 5. Energy spectra of the electrons for collisional and collisionless Cu targets (a). Angular distribution of REs ($E_k \geq 50$ keV) for the collisional and collisionless Cu targets at t=100 fs (b), respectively, in which the electrons are extracted from the region of $x = 11 - 24 \mu m$ and $y = 4 - 16 \mu m$ (same as in Fig. 6(c) and Fig. 7(c)).

here is lower than that given by ponderomotive scaling
temperature, respectively. It is shown that the full width at half max (FWHM) of the RE divergence reaches 66.9$^\circ$ for the collisional case, which is significantly greater than that of the collisionless case (43.4$^\circ$). This increase is attributed to the fact that the collisional FI induced magnetic field effectively scatters the REs. In the presence of such microscale magnetic field, the mean transverse velocity of the electrons is zero, but the mean square velocity is not, which determines the mean square angular of the electrons and leads to a large electron divergence.

Angular distribution of REs ($E_k \geq 50$ keV) is shown in Fig. 5(b). The electron momentum angle here is determined by $\theta = \tan^{-1}(p_y/p_x)$, where $p_y$ and $p_x$ are the electron momentum in the $y$ and $x$ directions, respectively. Since the relatively short length for target employed in the simulations, we mainly focus on the RE divergence at $t = 100$ fs to avoid refluxing of REs from rear side of the target. The electron angular distribution can be fitted by a Gaussian function

$$f_F(\theta) = f_0 + \frac{A}{\sigma \sqrt{2\pi}} e^{-2(\theta - \theta_0)^2/\sigma^2}. \quad (3)$$

where $f_0$ and $A$ are constant, $\theta_0$, and $\sigma$ are electron mean propagation angle and dispersion angle, which are related to the beam transverse velocity and the electron transverse temperature, respectively. It is shown that the full width at half max (FWHM) of the RE divergence reaches 66.9$^\circ$ for the collisional case, which is significantly greater than that of the collisionless case (43.4$^\circ$). This increase is attributed to the fact that the collisional FI induced magnetic field effectively scatters the REs. In the presence of such microscale magnetic field, the mean transverse velocity of the electrons is zero, but the mean square velocity is not, which determines the mean square angular of the electrons and leads to a large electron divergence.

Figure 6(a) and (b) shows the profile of $B_z$ along $y$ direction at $x = 11 \mu m$ and corresponding frequency spectrum $|B_k|$ of $B_z$ for the case with a laser intensity of $10^{19}$ W/cm$^2$. It can be seen that the magnetic field here is relatively weaker with an amplitude less than 500T, and there is no obvious wave number peak in its frequency spectrum, meaning that the growth of filamentation instability is very tiny. It is due to the fact that lower RE current density is produced for the lower laser intensity.
compared to that of the high laser intensity. The laser absorption efficiency here is 0.48 that is slightly higher than that of the aforementioned case. The dependence of RE divergence on laser intensity is presented in Fig. 6(c). Since the magnitude of self-generated magnetic field increases with laser intensity due to higher RE current generation, it can scatter the REs more effectively. It is shown that the divergence increases with laser intensity, which is in good agreement with the experimental results. This is different with the results that higher laser intensity leads to smaller RE divergences, where only the divergence of much higher energy electrons is considered. It is also distinct from that in collisionless cases, in which the divergence of REs is weakly dependent on the laser intensity (not shown for brevity). The discrepancy indicates that properties of target should be considered comprehensively for investigating RE characteristics, especially for solid target, in which the collision could have a significant influence on the RE divergence.

![Image](image.png)

**FIG. 6.** The same as that in Fig. 2, but for a laser intensity of $10^{19}$ W/cm$^2$ [(a) and (b)]. FWHM of the RE ($E_\text{R} \geq 50$ keV) angular distribution as a function of laser intensity for a collisional Cu target (c).

For completely, the RE divergence for cases of ultraintense laser interaction with various materials is also studied, as shown in Fig. 7. The charge state and maximum ion density for CH$_2$ and Al targets are set to 2.67, 10, 45$n_e$, and 25$n_e$, respectively. In order to keep an identical target density that generates REs, similar preplasma profiles to that in Cu target are used both for CH$_2$ and Al targets. Note that the energy spectrum profiles of the electrons are very close to each other in these three cases (not shown for brevity), suggesting that the effect of the electron temperature differences for different targets can be neglected in this investigation. This is different with the results reported in Ref. that the RE electron temperature is dependent on the target materials, in which a much lower laser intensity of $10^{16}$ W/cm$^2$ is employed, and the electrons are mainly accelerated by the resonance acceleration or vacuum heating (if the scale length of preplasma is less than the wavelength). In these regimes, the RE temperature is dependent on the scale length of the preplasma, which are different for different material targets because the plasma hydrodynamic expansion from lower-Z targets is faster than that of high-Z targets. From Fig. 7(a) and (b), it is seen that microscale magnetic field similar to that in Fig. 2 is generated in CH$_2$ target, while the magnetic field is relatively weak (5500T). The peak of the wave number is $\sim 3.7k_0$, corresponding to a wave length of 5.5$\lambda_p$, slightly larger than that of Cu target. The RE divergence for CH$_2$ target is only $43.4^\circ$ due to the relatively weak magnetic field in the target, which is equal to that in collisionless Cu target. Figure 7(c) shows that the divergence increases rapidly with target charge state. It is because of that the collision frequency of electron-ion given by

$$\nu_{ei} = \frac{4\sqrt{2\pi}}{3} \frac{n_1 Z_i^2 m_e}{m_i^2 T_e} \ln \Lambda$$

increases with plasma density and charge state, where $n_1$ and $Z_i$ are the ion density and charge state, ln $\Lambda$ is the Coulomb logarithm. That is, the particles would experience higher collisions in high-Z targets compared to that in low-Z targets. Since the growth of FI in case of extremely asymmetric counterstreaming is significantly suppressed only except that plasma collisions are considered, as observation in our simulations, stronger magnetic field generated and larger RE divergence induced in Cu target compared to Al or CH$_2$ target.

![Image](image.png)

**FIG. 7.** The same as that in Fig. 2, but for a collisional CH$_2$ target [(a) and (b)]. FWHM of the RE ($E_\text{R} \geq 50$ keV) angular distribution for the cases of collisional Cu, Al, and CH$_2$ targets (c). The laser intensity is fixed at $10^{20}$ W/cm$^2$.

**IV. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, angular distribution of laser-driven REs with laser intensity varying from $10^{18}$ W/cm$^2$ up to $5 \times 10^{20}$ W/cm$^2$ and target materials of Cu, Al, and CH$_2$ are studied by collisional PIC simulations. Intense microscale magnetic field is generated by the FI during the REs propagating in collisional plasmas, and such instability is almost suppressed by the transverse temperature of REs (also due to the small ratio of beam to plasma density) in collisionless target, leading to a great enhancement of the RE divergence in collisional plasmas compared to that of collisionless cases. The divergence of REs increases with laser intensity and target charge state due to intenser magnetic field generation for higher laser intensities and high-Z targets. The results should
be helpful for applications of laser-driven electron beams.

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