Optical Negative Refraction in Ferrofluids with Magnetocontrollability

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We numerically demonstrate optical negative refraction in ferrofluids containing isotropic Fe3O4 nanoparticles, each having an isotropic Ag shell, in the presence of an external dc magnetic field \( H \). The all-angle broadband optical negative refraction with magnetocontrollability arises from \( H \)-induced chains or columns. They result in hyperbolic equifrequency contour for transverse magnetic waves propagating in the system. The finite element simulations verify the analyses using the effective medium approximation. Experimental demonstration and potential applications are suggested and discussed.

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In 1968, Veselago [1] theoretically investigated the electrodynamic consequences of a medium with simultaneously negative permittivity and permeability. He predicted that such a medium possesses a negative (phase) index, which can result in a reversed Snell’s law, i.e., negative refraction. People have realized negative refraction of optical waves or microwaves in different systems, including metamaterials [2,3], photonic crystals [4], plasmonic waveguides [5], chiral media [6], and superconductor-ferromagnet superlattices [7]. The significant application of negative refraction is the concept of a perfect lens, which can lead to subwavelength imaging beyond the diffraction limit [8].

However, almost all the existing methods for achieving negative refraction were proposed or established in the realm of solid materials, in contrast to soft materials with the specific characteristic “softness”. Literally softness might offer an extra freedom of tailoring physical properties; hence, it encourages us to investigate optical refraction in certain soft materials. As a result, we reveal, for the first time, a new class of all-angle broadband optical negative refraction in ferrofluids with magnetocontrollability. Its underlying mechanism arises from assembly metallic chain or column structures induced by an external dc magnetic field \( H \). This work paves a new way for designing tunable, active metamaterials.

In general, ferrofluids are colloidal suspensions composed of ferromagnetic or ferrimagnetic nanoparticles of about 10 nm diameter dispersed in a carrier fluid, usually water or kerosene [9]. Two typical kinds of materials for fabricating such nanoparticles are Co and Fe3O4 [9]. In this work we shall consider an aqueous ferrofluid system which contains spherical isotropic Fe3O4 nanoparticles, each coated with a spherical isotropic Ag shell, in the presence of \( H \) in \( z \) axis. The reason why we choose Fe3O4 rather than Co is due to its lower optical absorption. In principle, the Ag used for making shells may be replaced by other metallic materials having a permittivity with a big negative real part and small positive imaginary part. If water is replaced with kerosene, the qualitative results as to be revealed would remain unchanged. Both experiments [10–12] and computer simulations [13,14] have shown that nanoparticle chains can be formed in ferrofluids as the magnetic dipolar interaction overwhelms the thermal energy. For ferrofluids, the field-induced columnar phase with equal spacing was experimentally reported [11,12] in confined ferrofluid films subjected to an in-plane \( H \), and the dipolar interaction between the chains (which are locally displaced in a hexagonal fashion) gives rise to their arrangement in columns. In other words, nanoparticles in ferrofluids can exist in the form of both (either) chains and (or) columns. In our work, the word “chain” denotes a single-particle-width \( z \)-directed array of touching Fe3O4 nanoparticles with an Ag shell, and “column” represents the aggregation of such chains, namely, the chains aggregate together to form \( z \)-directed thick columns. Incidentally, throughout this work both permittivities and permeabilities denote relative ones.

An effective medium approximation and a 2D finite element method.—Let us start by considering the ferrofluid system containing Fe3O4 nanoparticles coated by an Ag shell, in the presence of \( z \)-directed \( H \). The chains, each having the same number \( n \) of nanoparticles [15], are induced to appear by \( H \). They are all directed along \( z \) axis, and are assumed to be randomly suspended in the system. In the quasistatic approximation, we can utilize the anisotropic form of the effective medium approximation (EMA) [16] to calculate the effective permittivity tensor with three nonzero diagonal components \( e_{xx}, e_{yy} (= e_{xx}), \) and \( e_{zz} \) given by...
where $p$ is the volume fraction of the coated nanoparticles, and $e_2$ the permittivity of water. Except for the EMA, some other theories which appear to be more complex can also be adopted, e.g., the spectral representation approach [16,17]. For Eq. (1) we have modeled an individual chain as a spheroid with $g_z$ (shape factor perpendicular to $H$) and $g_x$ (shape factor along $H$) [18]. They satisfy a geometrical sum rule $g_z + 2g_x = 1$ [19]. It is important to note that the result calculated by the isotropic counterpart of the EMA, namely, Eq. (1) with $g_{x,z} = 1/3$, was demonstrated to reasonably lie in the Hashin-Shrikman bounds which provide the tightest constraints for the effective permittivity of a composite comprising an isotropic mixture of two isotropic dielectric materials [20]. Thus in view of the physical reasonability and formal compactness, we prefer to use the EMA [Eq. (1)] for treating the ferrofluid system. In Eq. (1) $e_1$ denotes the equivalent permittivity of the coated nanoparticle. It can be given by solving Laplace’s equation of electrostatics together with appropriate boundary conditions [21], which is valid in our quasistatic system where the incident wavelength $\lambda$ is much larger than the size of the coated nanoparticles. After some straightforward derivations, we obtain

$$ e_1 = e_f (1 + 2p) + 2e_a (1 - p) e_x (1 - p) + e_a (2 + p) $$

(2)

with $p = r^3/(r + d)^3$, where $r$ is the radius of the core (Fe$_3$O$_4$) with permittivity $e_f$, and $d$ is the thickness of the shell (Ag) with permittivity $e_a$. Equation (2) is an exact solution for an isolated Fe$_3$O$_4$ nanoparticle with an Ag shell, but it serves as the result of the first-order approximation for such a nanoparticle in our ferrofluid system by neglecting local field effects caused by all the other nanoparticles. In Eq. (1), $g_x$ is given by a simple approximation $g_x = 1/(1 - n^2) + n \ln(n + \sqrt{n^2 - 1})/(n^2 - 1)^{3/2}$ [22], where $n \geq 2$. In reality, $n$ is proportional to the ratio of magnetic energy to thermal energy (a lowest-order assumption). Thus, without loss of generality, $n$ will be used to equivalently represent the strength of $H$. This correlation corresponds to the fact that higher $H$ yields larger $n$ [13]. Apparently $H = 0$ causes $n = 1$ or $g_z = 1/3$. In this case, the nanoparticles are randomly suspended in the ferrofluid system, resulting in an isotropic effective permittivity. It is worth noting that the EMA [Eq. (1)] has included energy dissipation related to absorption. On the other hand, the effect of scattering is assumed to be neglected due to the small scattering cross section of a chain with respect to an incident wavelength.

We use the software COMSOL Multiphysics 3.5 to perform finite element simulations of optical refraction in ferrofluids, see Fig. 1. A transverse magnetic (TM) Gaussian beam with a width of 1.6 $\mu$m in $xz$ plane with a $y$-directed magnetic field component is incident to the ferrofluid system at an angle $\phi = 30^\circ$ with respect to $z$ axis. Here $\phi$ just denotes the angle of incidence. Using Eq. (1), we obtain $e_{xx} = 4.43 + 0.15i$ and $e_{zz} = -3.29 + 0.19i$ according to the parameters: $e_1 = -21.4 + 0.9i$, $e_2 = 1.77$, $p = 0.22$, $n = 50$, and the length of each chain is 1 $\mu$m. Here $e_1$ has been calculated according to Eq. (2) with the parameters: $r = 5$ nm, $d = 5$ nm, $e_f = 4.8 + 2.2i$ (as experimentally measured at $\lambda = 758$ nm for magnetite, a ferrimagnet and crystallites with the inverse cubic spinel structure [23]), and $e_a = -20.61 + 1.27i$ (which was measured for a Ag thin film at $\lambda = 758$ nm [24]). Note we already take into account the conductivity property of the materials by using the complex permittivity values since the conductivity and permittivity are related [25]. Figure 1 plots the distribution of the absolute value of electric field components, and it clearly demonstrates the appearance of negative refraction.

To understand the finite element simulation results depicted in Fig. 1, we resort to a theoretical approach for the system with $\text{Re}(e_{zz}) < 0$ and $\text{Re}(e_{xx,yy}) > 0$. Here $\text{Re}(\cdots)$ means the real part of $\cdots$. On the basis of Maxwell’s equations, for the TM waves with the magnetic field component polarized in the $y$ axis and the electric field component located in the $xz$ plane, the dispersion relation for the wave propagating in a general anisotropic medium is

$$ (k_z^2/e_{zz}) + (k_x^2/e_{xx}) = \mu_n k_0^2 $$

(3)

where $k_x$ (or $k_z$) is the $x$ (or $z$) component of wave vector $k$, and $k_0 = 2\pi/\lambda$ the wave number in free space. Clearly, the
perturbative permittivity tensor terms ($e_{xx}$ and $e_{zz}$) and the permeability tensor term ($\mu_{yy}$) are involved due to the TM polarization. At optical frequencies, the permeability of natural materials can be taken to unity [19], and therefore the effective permeability of the ferrofluid system is about unity. So the value of $\mu_{yy}$ is taken as unity in Eq. (3) and the following analyses. Negative refraction can be realized in the ferrofluid system because of the hyperbolic equifrequency surface and the boundary condition for electromagnetic waves at the interface between a uniaxial medium and an isotropic medium [26]. One might resort to Maxwell’s equations to calculate the Poynting vector directly. The $x$ and $z$ components of the time-averaged Poynting vector $S$ are, respectively, given by [27]

$$S_x = \frac{k_x}{e_{zz}} \frac{H_y^2}{2\omega e_0} \quad \text{and} \quad S_z = \frac{k_z}{e_{xx}} \frac{H_y^2}{2\omega e_0}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (4)

Then the angles of refraction for the wave vector $k$ and Poynting vector $S$ are, respectively, given by

$$\theta_k = \tan^{-1}(k_x/k_z),$$

$$\theta_s = \tan^{-1}(S_x/S_z) = \tan^{-1}\left[\frac{k_x e_{xx}/(k_x e_{zz})}\right].$$  \hspace{1cm} (6)

For the system with $\text{Re}(e_{zz}) < 0$ and $\text{Re}(e_{xx}) > 0$, there exists positive refraction for $k$, because of the hyperbolic equifrequency contour, the conservation of the tangential electromagnetic responses as the column. This assumption is reasonable, at least to some extent, since the incident wavelength is much larger than the size of coated nanoparticles. We set the cross sections of the cylinders to exist in a hexagonal lattice since equal spacing between columns was experimentally observed [11]. The radius of the cylinder is 30 nm, and the center-to-center separation between two adjacent cylinders is 122 nm.

FIG. 2 (color online). Cross-sectional view of 3D finite element simulations of the distribution of the absolute value of electric field components of an incident TM wave with $\lambda = 758$ nm, in a ferrofluid system of thickness 1 $\mu$m containing columns aggregated by chains of Fe$_3$O$_4$ nanoparticles coated by an Ag shell. For convenience we replace each column with a solid cylinder by assuming the solid cylinder to possess the same electromagnetic responses as the column. This assumption is reasonable, at least to some extent, since the incident wavelength is much larger than the size of coated nanoparticles. We set the cross sections of the cylinders to exist in a hexagonal lattice since equal spacing between columns was experimentally observed [11]. The radius of the cylinder is 30 nm, and the center-to-center separation between two adjacent cylinders is 122 nm.

0.9i. Also, a TM Gaussian beam with a width of 1.6 $\mu$m is incident at $\phi = 30^\circ$. Figure 2 shows the result simulated by the 3D finite element method based on the software COMSOL Multiphysics 3.5. It clearly demonstrates the appearance of optical negative refraction, which echoes with Fig. 1. The excellent agreement is expected, since the EMA is valid considering the size and spacing of nanoparticles are much smaller than the wavelength $\lambda$. The local periodic structures of the chains or columns will not significantly influence the optical property, but can be incorporated as a high-order approximation based on the Ewald-Kornfeld formulation [16].

Numerical results.—The agreement between Fig. 1 and 2 gives us confidence to further investigate the optical properties of the ferrofluid system by using the EMA. Figure 3 shows the real part of $\eta$ as a function of $n$, $p$, and $\phi$ at $\lambda = 758$ nm. It is worth reminding that higher $H$ leads to larger $n$. Evidently high $H$ together with suitable $p$ can lead to negative refraction, $\text{Re}(\eta) < 0$. Namely, one can achieve the transition from positive refraction to negative refraction for the Poynting vector by tuning $H$ and/or $p$. Further the negative refraction $\text{Re}(\eta) < 0$ is shown to exist within the full range of $\phi$ (namely, all-angle negative refraction). Figure 4 displays the imaginary part of $\eta$, namely extinction coefficient (which is proportional to optical absorption). We find it varies with respect to $H$, $p$, and/or $\phi$. In other words, one is allowed to achieve low optical absorption by choosing $H$, $p$, and $\phi$ appropriately.
We also confirmed that (all-angle) broadband negative refraction can be achieved in such a ferrofluid system by investigating two other incident wavelengths $\lambda = 661$ nm and 706 nm at $n = 50$ and $p = 0.22$ (no figures shown herein). For the calculations, we adopted the experimental data: $e_{a} = -20.09 + 0.45i$ [24] and $e_{f} = 4.8 + 2.8i$ [23] at $\lambda = 661$ nm, and $e_{a} = -23.40 + 0.39i$ [24] and $e_{f} = 5.0 + 2.4i$ [23] at $\lambda = 706$ nm. Clearly, the wavelength bandwidth can be wider for the system.

In summary, for the first time, we have demonstrated that magneto controllable all-angle broadband negative refraction at optical frequencies can be realized in aqueous ferrofluids, which are made of Fe$_3$O$_4$ nanoparticles coated with long polymer molecules (sterically) or decorating them with charged groups (electrostatically). The magnetocontrollable negative refraction in ferrofluids presented here promises a new regime and a number of potential applications of metamaterials. The field-induced-assembly system of nanoparticles may realize a large specimen which is difficult to fabricate using top-down techniques. Moreover, we can engineer the spatial dielectric constant by the external magnetic fields for reconfigurable optical devices, such as lenses [27], invisible cloaks [28], and waveguides.

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[15] If the chains have different $n$, a volume average may be adopted for Eq. (1) instead.
[18] The shape factors are the same as depolarization or demagnetization factors for spheroids.