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Photo-induced phase transitions in ferroelectrics

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Ferroic materials naturally exhibit a rich number of functionalities, which often arise from thermally, chemically or mechanically induced symmetry breakings or phase transitions. Based on Density Functional Calculations, we demonstrate here that light can drive phase transitions as well in ferroelectric materials such as the perovskite oxides lead titanate and barium titanate. Phonon analysis and total energy calculations reveal that the polarization tends to vanish under illumination, to favor the emergence of non-polar phases, potentially antiferroelectric, and exhibiting a tilt of the oxygen octahedra. Strategies to tailor photo-induced phases based on phonon instabilities in the electronic ground state are also discussed.

Ferroelectric materials possess a spontaneous electric polarization that is switchable by electric fields. Active research in bandgap engineering [1] and unconventional photovoltaic mechanisms [2–4] have prompted perovskite oxide ferroelectrics as potential light absorbers to convert light into electric [5], mechanical [6–8] or chemical energy [9], or for optical memory writing [10] and non-destructive reading [11]. Numerous works focused on the photo-induced deformation of the unit cell without apparent symmetry breaking [8]. However, a recent experimental work hinted at possible structural phase transitions occurring in ferroelectric BaTiO₃ nanowires under illumination [12]. Using first-principles calculations, we show that photo-induced phase transitions are indeed possible in ferroelectrics such as barium and lead titanates. In both cases, transitions to non-polar phases are predicted. Furthermore, material engineering strategies based on competing lattice instabilities are suggested to tailor the critical concentration of photo-induced carriers at which the transition occurs, thus opening the way to a rational design of materials exhibiting specific properties under illumination.

ABO₃ perovskite oxides are versatile materials exhibiting a wide range of properties (magnetism, polar distortions, etc.). Their high symmetry reference structure (see Fig. 1) is cubic with the *B* cation enclosed in an octahedral cage of oxygens at the center, and the *A* cation at the edges of the cube. Simple atomic displacement patterns – e.g. as the octahedra tilts or electric dipoles sketched in Fig. 1 – make it possible to obtain various symmetry breakings and control the materials properties. For convenience, here we denote the most relevant of such distortions using a generalized and simplified Glazer notation [13] $\alpha\beta\gamma/u^\alpha v^\beta w^\gamma$, which is introduced in the caption of Fig. 1.

Among perovskite oxides, barium titanate (BTO) and lead titanate (PTO) are prototypical ferroelectric materials. They exhibit a number of phases [14, 15] associated with lattice instabilities of the reference cubic phase [16]. The transitions between phases are commonly driven by temperature [14, 15], pressure [17–19] or static electric fields [20]. Here, we demonstrate that light can also act as a knob to control the crystal symmetry. Optical manipulation of ferroic materials has mainly focused on the transient manipulation of the ferroic order parameter, relying on non-thermalized photoexcited carriers [21] or strong anharmonic phonon couplings [22]. In contrast, we presently describe the emergence of new phases caused by modified lattice instabilities in the presence of thermalized photo-excited carriers, *i.e.* the electrons lying at the bottom of the conduction band (CB) and the equal number of holes sitting at the top of the valence band (VB) of a semiconductor during illumination. To this end, we used *ab-initio* calculations, detailed in the next section, before examining the cases of barium and lead titanate respectively. Finally, we discuss the origin of this phenomenon and test design strategies for the engineering of photo-induced phase transitions in ferroelectrics.

We performed Density Functional Theory (DFT) calculations using the Abinit package software [23], with the Projector Augmented Wave (PAW) method [24, 25]. We employ a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ supercell (with respect to the 5-atom pseudo-cubic perovskite cell) containing 40 atoms. The *k*-point mesh used was a Γ -centered $8 \times 8 \times 8$ grid; the plane-wave cut-off was 35 Ha. A Fermi-Dirac distribution with 0.1 eV smearing was used to populate the electronic states. The electronic density was considered converged when the difference in the calculated forces between two Self-Consistent Field (SCF) steps was smaller than 10^{-8} Ha.Bohr⁻¹. The structural relaxation was

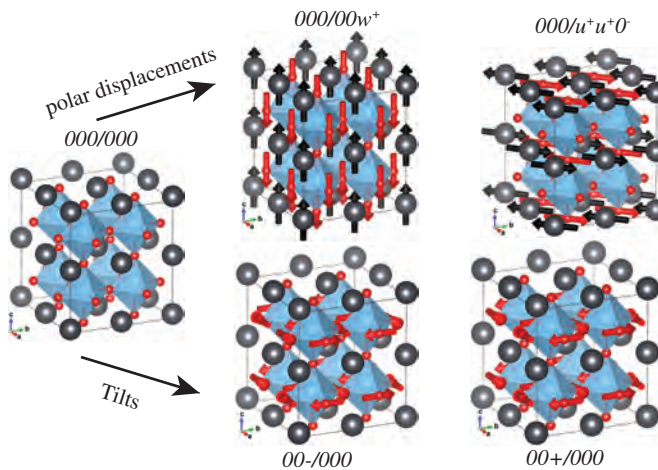


FIG. 1. Sketch of a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ supercell in the paraelectric cubic reference structure 000/000. A and B cations are in black and blue, oxygens in red. The symmetry of a phase is denoted by (i) its oxygen octahedra tilt pattern $\alpha\beta\gamma$, where α , β and γ are either 0 (no tilt), "+" (in-phase tilt) or "-" (antiphase tilt) and represent whether the oxygen octahedra tilts around the first, second and third pseudocubic axis, respectively. Similarly, we denote the electric dipole pattern using a Glazer-like notation $u^\alpha v^{\beta'} w^{\gamma'}$, in which u, v, w represent the magnitude of the dipole inside the perovskite 5-atom cell, and α', β' and γ' describes whether dipole vectors $[uvw]$ are aligned parallel ("+") or antiparallel ("-") when moving by one perovskite 5-atom cell along the first, second and third pseudocubic direction. Typical polar (000/00 w^+), antipolar (000/ $u^+u^+0^-$), in-phase (00 c^+ /000) and antiphase tilt (00 c^- /000) displacement patterns are depicted using arrows.

82 stopped when all the forces on the atoms were smaller
83 than 5×10^{-7} Ha.Bohr $^{-1}$ and all components of the
84 stress tensor smaller than 0.1 MPa. BTO was described
85 using the PBESol [26] exchange-correlation functional,
86 while the Local Density Approximation [27, 28] was em-
87 ployed to treat PTO. Photo-excited thermalized carriers
88 are mimicked using Fermi-Dirac distribution with two
89 quasi-Fermi levels μ_e and μ_h , as commonly used to de-
90 scribe photovoltaic effects in, for instance, $p-n$ junc-
91 tions [29]. As a result, during our DFT calculations, the
92 density is self-consistently converged under the constraint
93 of having $n_e = n_{ph}$ (and $n_h = n_{ph}$) electrons (holes) in
94 the CB (VB). In other words, at each Self-Consistent
95 Field (SCF) iteration, the following system of equations

$$n_h = \sum_{i \leq N_v} \sum_{\mathbf{k}, \sigma} w_{\mathbf{k}} [1 - f(\varepsilon_{i\mathbf{k}, \sigma}, \mu_h)], \quad (1)$$

$$n_e = \sum_{i > N_v} \sum_{\mathbf{k}, \sigma} w_{\mathbf{k}} f(\varepsilon_{i\mathbf{k}, \sigma}, \mu_e), \quad (2)$$

96 is solved for μ_e and μ_h using a bisection algorithm.
97 In the above equation, $w_{\mathbf{k}}$ is the weight of k -point \mathbf{k} ,
98 $f(\varepsilon_{i\mathbf{k}}, \mu)$ is the occupation number (Fermi-Dirac distri-
99 bution) of state with eigenvalue $\varepsilon_{i\mathbf{k}}$; σ denotes the spin.

100 N_v is the index of the highest valence band. We assume
101 that there is no closing of the gap during our constrained
102 DFT calculations, which is in practice observed for the
103 concentrations of photo-excited carrier pairs n_{ph} consid-
104 ered in this work.

105 Note that all structures considered in this work were
106 geometrically relaxed under the photo-excitation con-
107 straint mentioned above. The criteria for convergence
108 of the structural degrees of freedom are set to be the
109 same as in electronic ground state calculations.

110 Phonon calculations using the Phonopy package [30]
111 were performed in the dark and under excitation on the
112 cubic perovskite oxides using a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ supercell after
113 the system was structurally relaxed. No analytic cor-
114 rection, and thus no LO-TO splitting was considered, as
115 the required Born effective charges cannot be calculated
116 in photo-excited cases.

117 We first calculated the phonon band structure of cu-
118 bic BTO in Figs. (2.a-d) for different concentrations of
119 photoexcited carriers n_{ph} . In the dark ($n_{ph} = 0$ e/f.u.,
120 Fig. (2.a)), the phonon dispersion exhibits imaginary
121 (negative in the figure) frequency modes characteris-
122 tic of lattice instabilities. The main instability, at Γ ,
123 is responsible for the emergence of the polar order in
124 BTO [16], which goes from a high temperature cubic
125 000/000 structure to a ferroelectric tetragonal 000/00 w^+
126 phase below ~ 393 K, then to an orthorhombic structure
127 000/0 v^+v^+ below ~ 280 -270 K and finally to a rhombo-
128 hedral 000/ $u^+u^+u^+$ phase below ~ 183 K [14]. Upon
129 increasing the number of photo-excited carrier pairs to
130 $n_{ph} = 0.05$ e/f.u. (in Fig. (2.b)), the frequencies of un-
131 stable modes along the $X-M-\Gamma$ path get closer to real
132 (positive) values, the ferroelectric soft optical mode at Γ
133 becoming less unstable. Furthermore, for $n_{ph} \geq 0.1$ e/f.u.
134 (Figs. (2.c-d)) the cubic phase no longer exhibits unstable
135 phonon modes and is *dynamically stable*!

136 We calculated the energy (see Fig. (3.a)) of the four
137 phases naturally occurring in bulk BTO, 000/000 (green
138 squares), 000/00 w^+ (blue diamonds), 000/0 v^+v^+ (vio-
139 let triangles) and 000/ $u^+u^+u^+$ (ground state at 0 K in
140 dark conditions, black dashed baseline). The rhombohe-
141 dral phase has the lowest energy for low concentrations of
142 photo-excited carriers (up to ≈ 0.0375 e/f.u.), while the
143 tetragonal phase is slightly more stable at intermediate
144 concentrations ($n_{ph} \approx 0.0375 - 0.1$ e/f.u.). When the cu-
145 bic phase is dynamically stable ($n_{ph} > 0.1$ e/f.u.), we find
146 accordingly that 000/000 is the lowest-energy structure,
147 which is confirmed by the disappearance of polar atomic
148 displacements and the cell shape distortions of all con-
149 sidered phases (see Supplementary Material [31]). The
150 predicted transition towards the 000/000 phase is con-
151 sistent with the experimental observation, in BTO, of a
152 downward shift of the Curie temperature under illumina-
153 tion [32]. Besides, the flattening of the energy landscape
154 around 0.03 e/f.u. ($\approx 5 \times 10^{20}$ e.cm $^{-3}$) may be accompa-
155 nished by a monoclinic phase transition (see Supplemental

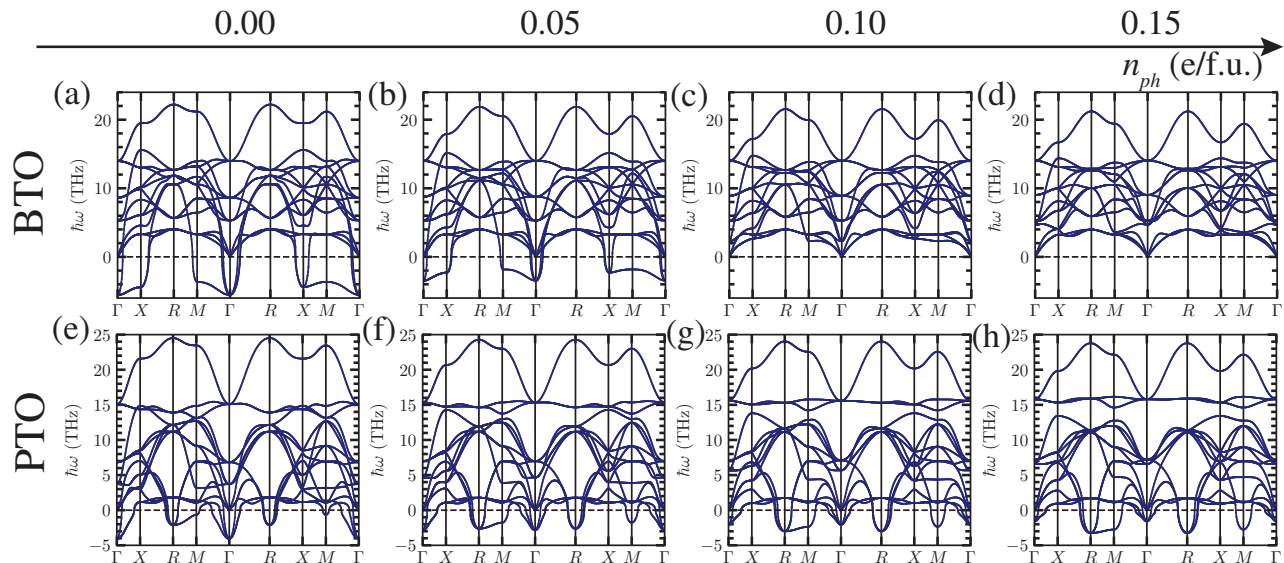


FIG. 2. (a-d) Phonon band structure in paraelectric cubic BTO and (e-h) PTO for different concentrations of photoexcited carrier pairs $n_{ph} = 0.00$ e/f.u. (a & e), $n_{ph} = 0.05$ e/f.u. (b & f), $n_{ph} = 0.10$ e/f.u. (c & g) and $n_{ph} = 0.15$ e/f.u. (d & h). The polar Γ dominant instability in BTO becomes stabilized (*i.e.* positive and real frequency) for $n_{ph} \geq 0.10$ e/f.u., as shown in (c) and (d). In PTO, the polar instability at Γ is replaced by a non-polar tilted instability at M and R .

156 Material [31]). We note that such a critical concentration
 157 would match recent observations of a monoclinic phase
 158 in BTO nanowires under illumination [12, 33].

159 PTO exhibits a single transition from the non-polar
 160 cubic $000/000$ phase to the ferroelectric tetragonal
 161 $000/00w^+$ structure below 765 K [15]. The phonon dis-
 162 persion of the cubic phase for $n_{ph} = 0$ e/f.u. (Fig. (2.e))
 163 exhibits one main polar instability at Γ , but also unstable
 164 modes at the R and M points associated with octahedra
 165 tilting 00^- and 00^+ , respectively. The strength of the po-
 166 lar instability at Γ decreases with increasing the number
 167 of photo-excited carriers (see Figs. (2.e-h)) as in BTO.
 168 However, it never totally disappears, indicating that ferro-
 169 electricity in PTO is more robust against photocarrier
 170 generation. In contrast, the strengths of the tilting in-
 171 stabilities at R and M are slightly enhanced, and they
 172 become dominant for $n_{ph} \geq 0.1$ (Figs. (2.g-h)), suggest-
 173 ing a transition from a polar to a non-polar structure
 174 with oxygen tilts under illumination.

175 Hence, we compute the energies of several prototypi-
 176 cal phases upon illumination, as shown in Fig. (3.b). The
 177 ferroelectric $000/00w^+$ phase, which is the ground state
 178 in dark conditions, is the black dashed baseline, while the
 179 cubic phase is plotted as green squares. We also plot a
 180 rhombohedral polar $---/u^+u^+u^+$ structure (navy circles)
 181 and its non-polar counterpart, $---/000$ (navy
 182 diamonds). We consider as well an orthorhombic phase
 183 (violet triangles) with the $---/u^-u^-0^-$ antipolar dis-
 184 placement pattern [34]. A $00c^-/000$ non-polar tetrago-
 185 nal phase is also calculated (gold triangles). According to
 186 Fig. (3.b), the ferroelectric $000/00w^+$ phase is the most

187 stable up to $n_{ph} \approx 0.125$ e/f.u., the non-polar phase with
 188 tilts becoming dominant beyond that point. Overall, the
 189 antipolar $---/u^-u^-0^-$ phase is slightly more favor-
 190 able (by 0.2-0.3 meV/f.u.) than the $---/000$ phase for
 191 $n_{ph} \geq 0.125$ e/f.u. Because of this small energy differ-
 192 ence, it is impossible to predict with certainty the sym-
 193 metry of PTO at large concentrations of photo-excited
 194 carriers, and we can only reckon that this should be a
 195 phase with oxygen tilts.

196 Unlike BTO, the polar atomic distortion in the
 197 $000/00w^+$ phase remains rather large under photo-
 198 excitation (see Supplementary Material [31]). Moreover,
 199 both the antipolar displacement (for the $---/u^-u^-0^-$
 200 phase) and the tilt angle (for $---/000$ and $---/000$
 201 00^-) increase with n_{ph} . In contrast, the polar dis-
 202 placements of the $---/u^+u^+u^+$ phase disappear with
 203 increasing n_{ph} , and it thus collapses into the $---/000$
 204 phase, confirming that tilts and polarization are com-
 205 peting order parameters in PTO [35, 36], illumination
 206 tipping the balance towards the former.

207 Furthermore, calculations of minimum energy tran-
 208 sition paths between phases (see Supplementary Mate-
 209 rial [31]) show that $---/u^-u^-0^-$ and $---/000$ are
 210 unstable in the dark; however, the $000/00w^+$ phase re-
 211 mains metastable under illumination, drawing the pic-
 212 ture of a first-order light-induced transition in PTO.

213 The large concentration of 0.125 e/f.u. needed to
 214 destabilize the $000/00w^+$ phase in PTO is potentially
 215 outside the reach of experiments, and certainly not de-
 216 sirable for applications. We can try to improve this
 217 situation by mixing PTO with an antiferrodistortive

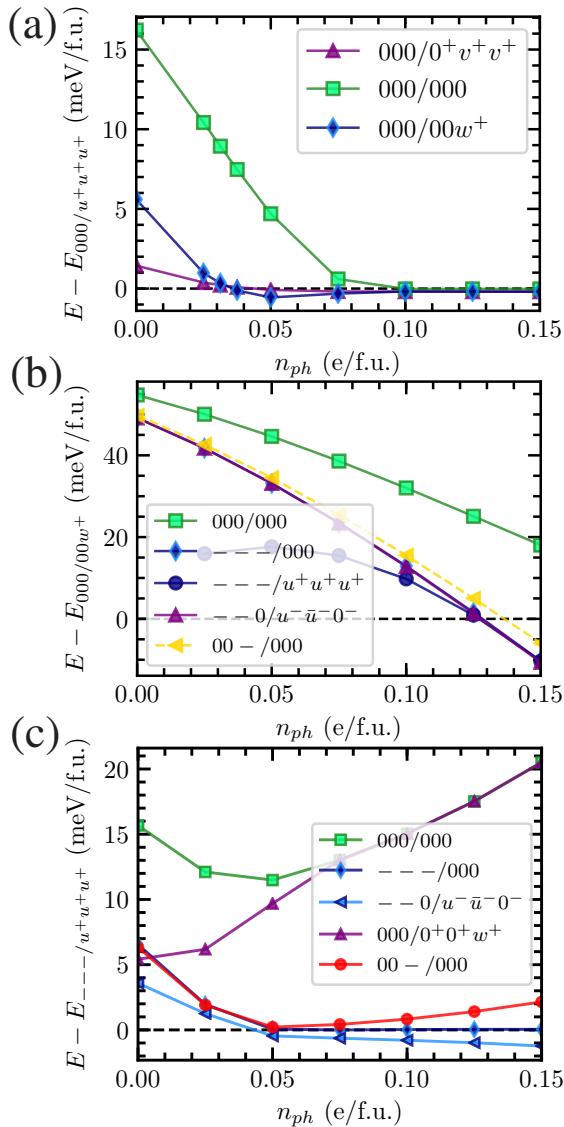


FIG. 3. (a) Energy of different phases in BTO with respect to the $000/u^+u^+u^+$ structure (dashed dark line), which is the ground state in the dark. The tetragonal $000/00w^+$ and then the cubic 000 phase become more energetically favorable. (b) Energy of different phases in PTO with respect to the $000/00w^+$ structure (dashed dark line), which is the ground state in the dark, showing that non-polar antiferrodistortive phases become more stable at large concentration of photo-excited carriers. (c) Energy of different phases in PSTO with respect to the rhombohedral $- - -/u^+u^+u^+$ structure (dashed dark line), which is the lowest energy phase considered when no carriers are excited.

material such as SrTiO_3 , and form the solid solution $(\text{Pb}_{1/2}\text{Sr}_{1/2})\text{TiO}_3$ (PSTO) to favor the tilt instability with respect to the polar one. As a proof of concept, several phases of PSTO with rocksalt order were calculated in Fig. (3.c). In particular, a polar rhombohedral $- - -/u^+u^+u^+$ phase (black dashed line) is the ground state in the dark. The $000/00w^+$ (purple tri-

angles) and the high-symmetry cubic $000/000$ phase (in green squares) have increasing energy with n_{ph} . On the contrary, the antipolar tilted phase $- - 0/u^- \bar{u}^- 0^-$ (light blue triangles) becomes the most stable phase above $n_{ph} = 0.05$ e/f.u., thus supporting the proposed design strategy to reduce the critical concentration for the polar-to-antipolar/antiferrodistortive transition.

From this work, it also becomes apparent that the ferroelectric instability can be hampered by the photogeneration of free carriers. Obviously, free carriers screen the long-range Coulombic interaction responsible for the polar order [37, 41], thus seemingly disfavoring polar phases with respect to non-polar ones. This is consistent with calculations [37, 41] and experiments [42] performed by doping BTO with free electrons. The former predicted the disappearance of the polar order in BTO at a concentration of extra-electrons of ≈ 0.1 e/f.u., which is exactly the concentration of photo-excited carriers that stabilizes the cubic phase in our calculations. We also note that the destruction of the polar order in BTO and the large stability (and metastability) window of the $000/00w^+$ phase in PTO are consistent with the doping calculations performed in Ref. [37]. In addition, photoexcitation tends to move electrons from O $2p$ states to Ti d states, thus destroying the covalent bonding that drives the ferroelectric order [40] and favoring non-polar orders. Looking at the evolution of interatomic force constants (IFCs; see Supplementary Material [31]) under photoexcitation, shows that (i) almost all IFCs are reduced in magnitude under photoexcitation, and (ii) the most affected IFCs corresponds to 4th nearest neighbors interaction, *i.e.* similar atoms (Ti-Ti, O-O, etc.) interacting along the $\langle 100 \rangle$ cubic directions. This parallels the further stabilization of the paraelectric phase under photoexcitation in the incipient ferroelectric PbTe, which results from screening of the long-range Coulomb interactions by the redistributed photoexcited carriers along the $\langle 100 \rangle$ cubic directions [38]. From the evidence presented here, as well as in other works involving doping and photoexcited calculations [37, 38], electrostatic screening by photoexcited carriers appears as a universal mechanism for "dipole-dipole driven" ferroelectric materials such as BTO [39].

In addition, the volume of most phases decreases with increasing concentration of excited carriers in both BTO and PTO, except that of the cubic $000/000$ phase, which increases instead (see Supplementary Material [31]). Interestingly, the decrease of volume of the polar phases is consistent with the disappearance of the polar order, and is reminiscent of the well-known [17–19] effect of hydrostatic compression; yet, the volume increase of the cubic phase under illumination should in principle favor the polar instabilities. Hence, our results suggest that the behavior of the polar distortion upon illumination cannot be understood solely in terms of a photo-induced volume change [43], and that screening effects play a central role.

There are, however, potential limitations of this work,

since DFT is known to underestimate the quasi-particle bandgap. Furthermore, excitonic effects are described within a mean-field approximation using constrained DFT to mimic excited states occupations. First, we performed G_0W_0 [44] calculations with the Yambo [45] package - using DFT input from Quantum Espresso [46, 47] - in order to accurately describe the conduction and valence bands (see Supplementary Material [31]). The corrected band structure is overall not altered, except for an almost rigid upshift of the conduction bands. This shift slightly depends on the studied phase (with differences smaller than 100 meV between phases). The shift is smaller for non-polar phases, therefore facilitating further the light-induced transitions towards such latter states.

For BTO, we checked the robustness of our conclusions by performing calculations of zone center phonons of the cubic phase with hybrid DFT. We compare calculations performed with the semi-local PBEsol functional and the hybrid HSEsol [48] functional. Both functionals give similar lattice constants and similar frequency for the imaginary frequency of the soft ferroelectric mode, even though the band gaps are quite different (1.8 eV for PBEsol and 3.4 eV, close to the GW value, for HSEsol). Despite the very different band gaps, the phonon frequencies as a function of the excited charge density evolve similarly: we observe a stabilization of the soft mode at an excited charge density of 0.09 electron per formula unit (see Supplementary Material [31]). Hence, although our DFT-based description may slightly alter the critical concentrations at which transitions occur, the present qualitative behavior should be correct, especially given our results in Fig. 2 for the dynamical lattice instabilities of the *paraelectric cubic state*.

At last, let us discuss the possibility of having photo-induced phase transitions to (small self-trapped, or ST) polaronic states. Recent (doping) calculations have shown that ST holes were unlikely in PTO [49, 50], but could potentially be stabilized in cubic BTO [49]. In order to check the appearance of polaronic states, we ran calculations in BaTiO₃ under photoexcitation with $n_{ph} = 0.075$ e/f.u. and $n_{ph} = 0.150$ e/f.u (with no symmetry). No trace of polaronic states was found.

In conclusion, we have shown that light absorption is a viable route to switch on/off specific lattice instabilities in complex materials such as ferroelectric perovskite oxides. Via first-principles calculations we have demonstrated the microscopic mechanism leading to a light-controlled stabilization of the cubic phase in BTO but not in PTO. The calculations are a promising tool to engineer and optimize such light-triggered transformations, suggesting strategies for their practical realization in suitably chosen materials. The results presented in this work could offer a route to design light-controlled memory, by accessing light-induced metastable states (see Fig. 4 in the Supplemental Material [31] and related discussion).

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- 413 includes Refs. [12, 14, 17–19, 37, 42, 43, 45–48, 51?
- 414 ? –58]. We detail the symmetry and atomic displacement
- 415 evolution under excitation of carriers; Nudge Elastic
- 416 Band calculations show that the transition is likely
- 417 to be first order and that the non-polar phase are not
- 418 metastable, but rather unstable; we discuss the occurrence
- 419 of a monoclinic phase in BaTiO₃; Volume changes
- 420 under illumination are compared with hydrostatic pressure
- 421 results from the literature. The evolution of Interatomic
- 422 Force Constants is also depicted. Finally, via the GW-
- 423 approximation and hybrid DFT calculations, we discuss
- 424 the relevance of many-body effects for the photo-
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- 431 phase in BaTiO₃ nanowires) fluences ranging up to
- 432 $600 \mu\text{J.cm}^{-2}$ are used, which would correspond to a carrier
- 433 concentration of $\sim \frac{600}{50} .5 \times 10^{19} \approx 6 \times 10^{20} \text{e cm}^{-3}$.
- 434 This order of magnitude matches the region where we
- 435 observed flattening of the energy landscape in Fig. 3a
- 436 (around the $000/u^+u^+u^+$ to $000/00w^+$ transition) which
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