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Discretized Evolution of Solitons in the Achiral Stripe Phase of a Fe/Gd Thin-Film

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Understanding magnetic phase transitions from stripe to skyrmion textures provide fundamental scientific insights into the details of the intermediate topologies through which the system evolves. The solitonic nature of spin texture in both stripe and skyrmion phases has been observed in materials with Dzyaloshinskii-Moriya interaction. Here we show that the field evolution in a dipolar interaction mediated Fe/Gd multilayer that exhibits achiral stripe textures behaves similar to a finite-sized chiral soliton lattice. As a function of magnetic field, the stripes exhibit discrete jumps in periodicity indicative of intermediate topologies as the stripes get wound into skyrmions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Solitons appear in diverse areas like hydrodynamics, optical communications, biological molecules and magnetism, are solutions to non-linear or coupled field equations and lead to stable particles like kinks, wave-forms, or envelopes in various dimensions. A characteristic feature of those particle-like solitons is their topological structure [1-5], which has recently become an interesting topic for magnetic materials. In magnetic systems domain wall, spin kinks, vortices that separate two different magnetic states, or incommensurate structures are among such examples of solitons [6-12]. Mathematically, soliton states can be described and quantified by the sine-Gordon equation, which is a common solution to physical processes involving periodic potentials with a complex order parameter. In cases, where the system crosses different topological sectors the order parameter can show discrete jumps [13-16].

The solitonic nature of spin textures has been studied extensively in chiral magnetic systems, for example, in CrNb₃S₃ [6, 14], where the chiral structure originates from the anti-symmetric exchange interaction, i.e., the Dzyaloshinskii-Moriya interaction (DMI). This type of chiral magnetic order shows a higher level of coherence and stability. In contrast to the symmetric exchange interaction, which is expressed by the scalar product between two neighboring spins \mathbf{S}_i and \mathbf{S}_j and leads to a parallel or anti-parallel alignment in the energetic ground state, the DMI is expressed as $\mathbf{D} \cdot \mathbf{S}_i \times \mathbf{S}_j$ that results in a twist between the i^{th} and j^{th} spins. The directionality of the chirality comes from the DM-vector \mathbf{D} [17].

We have shown here that soliton physics [6, 7], which has been successfully used to describe evolution of stripe phase in single crystals exhibiting DM interaction, can also explain variation of intensity and periodicity of magnetic Bragg peaks measured by X-ray scattering as a function of temperature and magnetic field in non-DMI amorphous thin films having dominant dipole interactions [6, 16]. The presented results clearly show the existence of one-dimensional chiral soliton lattice (1D-CSL) of finite-size in a dipolar mediated amorphous thin film. As theoretically predicted discrete jumps in stripe periodicity and intensity variation of first and second order stripe diffraction peaks is observed. Such variation has been observed earlier in DMI systems that form chiral helimagnet having fixed boundary conditions with magnetic field applied perpendicular to the chiral axis [6, 7, 14, 16]. The spatial mixing of these local chiralities get averaged out to generate achiral nature in dipolar films. Interestingly by tuning the field and temperature we show that stripe-to-skyrmion phase transition has profound effects on the magnetic Bragg peaks as the system evolves from 1D-CSL to the two-dimensional skyrmion lattice (2D-SkL).

II. METHODS

We have used here an achiral dipolar mediated amorphous Fe/Gd multilayer film ([Gd(0.4 nm)/Fe (0.34 nm)] \times 80 multilayers) which exhibits aligned stripe, disordered stripe, skyrmion, and skyrmion bound-pair structures [18-21]. The sample is grown by DC magnetron sputtering at room temperature at a 3 mTorr

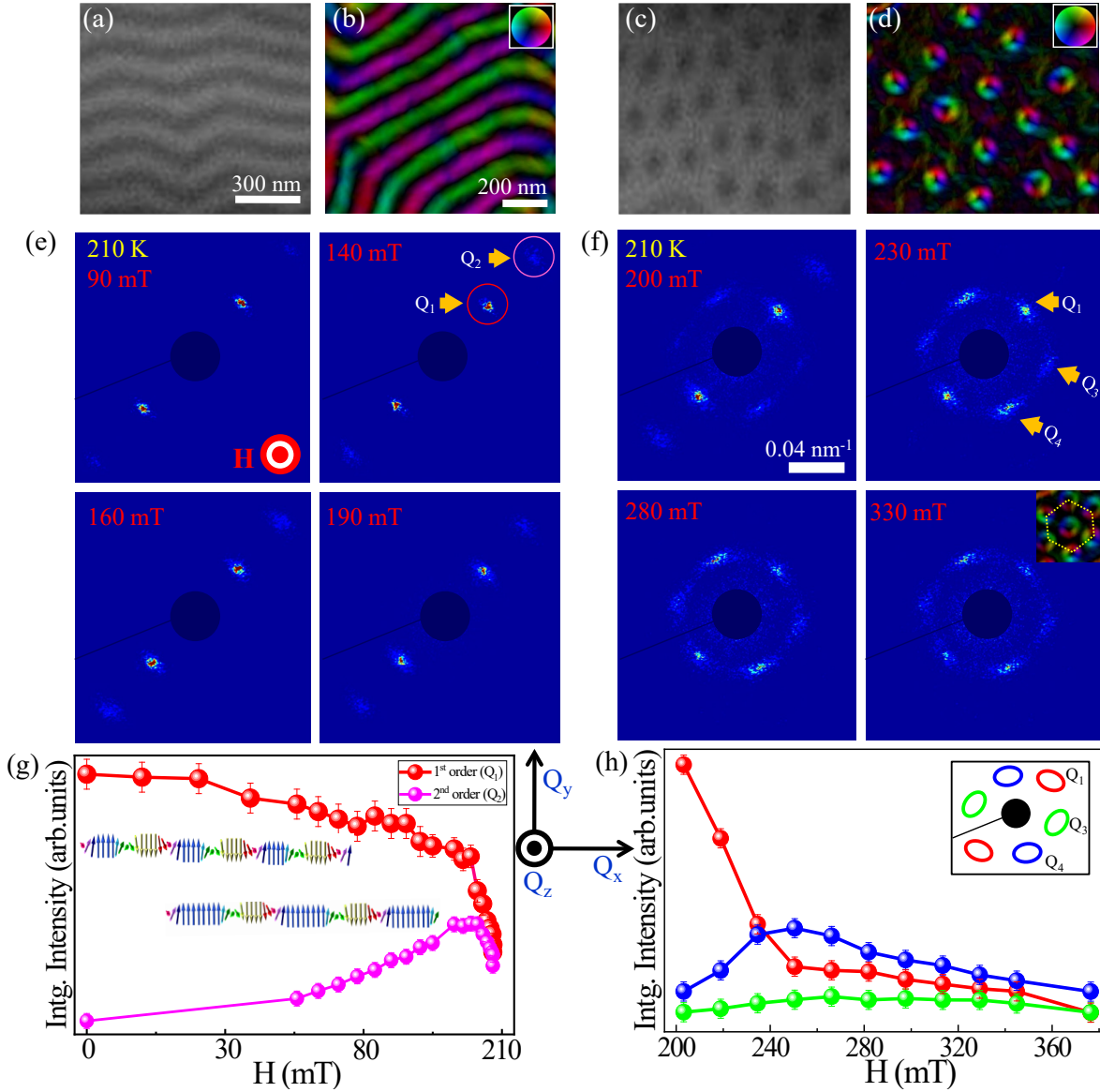


FIG. 1. Real space data of magnetic spin-strips and skyrmions in Fe/Gd multilayer using (a, c) MTXM and (b, d) LTEM techniques. Reciprocal space images measured by CRXMS technique show the field dependent evolution of the magnetic diffraction peaks corresponding to (e) stripe phase and (f) skyrmion phase at $T=210$ K. Integrated intensity measured as a function of field of the (g) 1st order and 2nd order diffraction spots in the stripe phase and (h) 1st order diffraction spots in the skyrmion phase. Schematics in (g) show transformation of the 1D-CSL from zero-field to higher field.

Ar pressure with a base pressure of $<3 \times 10^{-8}$ Torr. Fe and Gd layers were alternatively deposited on a 100 nm thick X-ray transparent Si₃N₄ membrane substrate with 20 nm Ta seed and capping layers [19]. Field dependent fluctuations that manifest as domain cascades have been observed in those systems, along with the presence of critical points and scaling behavior as well as thermally induced spontaneous fluctuations near phase boundaries [18]. These phases are nearly degenerate, and as a result different parts of the phase diagram can be accessed through temperature and applied magnetic fields. The present work primarily deals with the evolution of the

stripe phase as a function of the field at several temperatures. However, our results presented here clearly show that the onset of the dipolar skyrmion phase [20] that changes the dimensionality of the spin-system does not exhibit discrete variation of the periodicity in 2D-SkL. It is to be noted here that depending on the initial field protocol the topology of the spin texture can be changed. That is, the stripe phase can either evolve to a 2D-SkL or to a bubble phase [20, 22]. We have used the same [19] field protocol to generate the skyrmion phase in our present study [refer Fig. S2(c) Ref. S2 in Supplemental Material].

Lorentz TEM images were collected at the University of Oregon using an FEI Titan. Transmission soft X-ray measurements were collected at Beamline 6.1.2 of Advanced Light Source at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, along the Fe L3 (707 eV) absorption edge. Coherent X-ray diffraction measurements were performed also at the Fe L3 edge in Beamline 12.0.2 at the Advanced Light Source as a function of a variable magnetic field applied perpendicular to the sample surface [22]. A small in-plane field (estimated to be 1 mT) comes in our experimental set-up due to some trapped field and unavoidable misalignment of the sample-normal with the direction of the applied magnetic field. All measurements were carried out with a linearly polarized X-ray beam. We start our measurement at the zero-field condition and precede to measure diffraction data as a function of applied magnetic field at a constant field rate of 1.575mT/s. A CCD camera placed 0.5 m downstream of the sample was used to record the scattered intensity patterns, which were acquired as a function of magnetic field over multiple field cycles and repeated at different temperatures.

III. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

In Fig 1(a-d), we show the real space microscopy images of the stripe and skyrmion phases in a Fe/Gd multilayer film which were obtained using magnetic full-field transmission X-ray microscopy (MTXM) and Lorentz-TEM techniques [21]. The LTEM image shows the skyrmion phase of mixed chirality [19, 21]. To ascertain if the one-dimensional stripe lattice (1D-SL) in a dipolar system with vanishing DMI does indeed show solitonic behavior we have employed the reciprocal space technique of coherent resonant X-ray magnetic scattering (CRXMS) [18]. Fig. 1(e) and (f) shows the corresponding diffraction pattern observed due to the stripe and skyrmion lattices which enable the determination of domain periodicity as a function of applied magnetic field in the amorphous Fe/Gd multi-layer [18, 19]. In Fig. 1(e) we show representative CRXMS images of the stripe phase measured at T=210 K temperature exhibiting two symmetric first order diffraction spots ($Q_1 = \tau$) near zero fields. The intensity of the second order peak ($Q_2 = 2\tau$) becomes stronger (Fig 1(e) and 1(g)) with increase in field and then reduces considerably as the skyrmion phase appears above H=200 mT. The 2D-SkL exhibit six-fold symmetry (refer Fig. 1(f)) of unequal intensity initially [19] but all the six peaks become almost equal in intensity as H is increased (refer Fig 1(h)).

The variation of integrated intensities of different order magnetic peaks provide insight into the phase evolution of the stripe lattice. In Fig. 2, we show the integrated

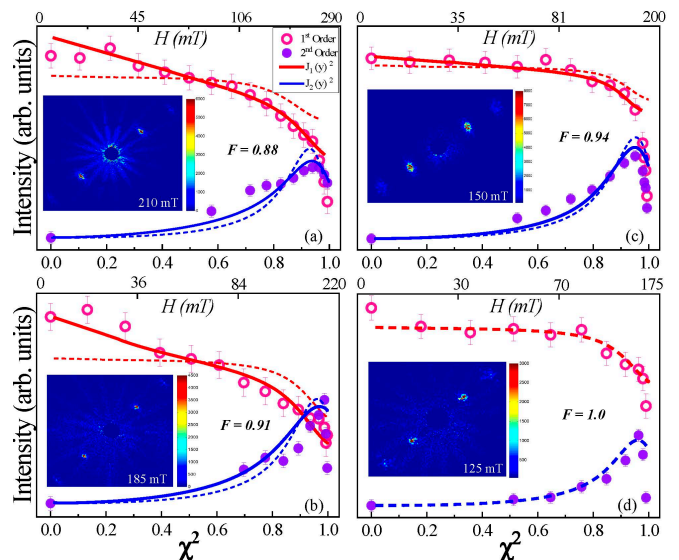


FIG. 2. The field dependence of the integrated intensities for the 1st and 2nd order diffraction spot are shown by pink open circles and violet solid circles, respectively, at (a) T=85 K [$H_c=256\pm 3$ mT], (b) T=183 K [$H_c=200\pm 2$ mT], (c) T=239 K [$H_c=192\pm 2$ mT] and (d) T=300 K [$H_c=145\pm 2$ mT] with the corresponding values of H_c as obtained from fitting the data. Inset shows the corresponding 2D diffraction pattern. The solid lines show the theoretical curve with fitting parameter (F) using eq. 1 and the dotted lines are obtained with F=1.

intensity plots of the 1st and 2nd order stripe diffraction spots for four temperatures, viz, 85K, 183K, 239K and 300K, as a function of the magnetic field. The intensity of the 1st order diffraction spot decreases while that of the 2nd order increases with applied magnetic field. Such a variation of intensities in the two peaks is expected as the stripe width of majority and minority domains changes due to the application of the field. However, in all four representative plots of Fig. 2 intensity of 2nd peak attain a maximum and then start decreasing as the field approaches critical field, H_c , above which stripe phase either becomes skyrmion or uniformly magnetized (refer phase diagram given in Fig. S1(a) of SM). Such intensity variation of 1st and 2nd order peaks with field has been observed in DMI based CSL systems [7, 16, 23, 24] and the soliton model represents the measured data very well with only H_c as fitting parameter. We shall show below while presenting (refer Fig. 3) the change in stripe periodicity $L(H, T)$ with the field and temperature in this dipolar interaction mediated thin-film also follow the same soliton model as observed [7, 14, 16] in CSL systems. In this model the elastic scattering cross section that relates to the scattering intensity of the p^{th} order diffraction peak is given by [24]

$$I \propto \frac{d\sigma}{d\omega} \sim M^2 |J_p^y(\chi)|^2 = \left| \frac{\pi^2}{\chi^2 K^2} \frac{Fp}{\cosh(Fp\pi K'/K)} \right|^2 \quad (1)$$

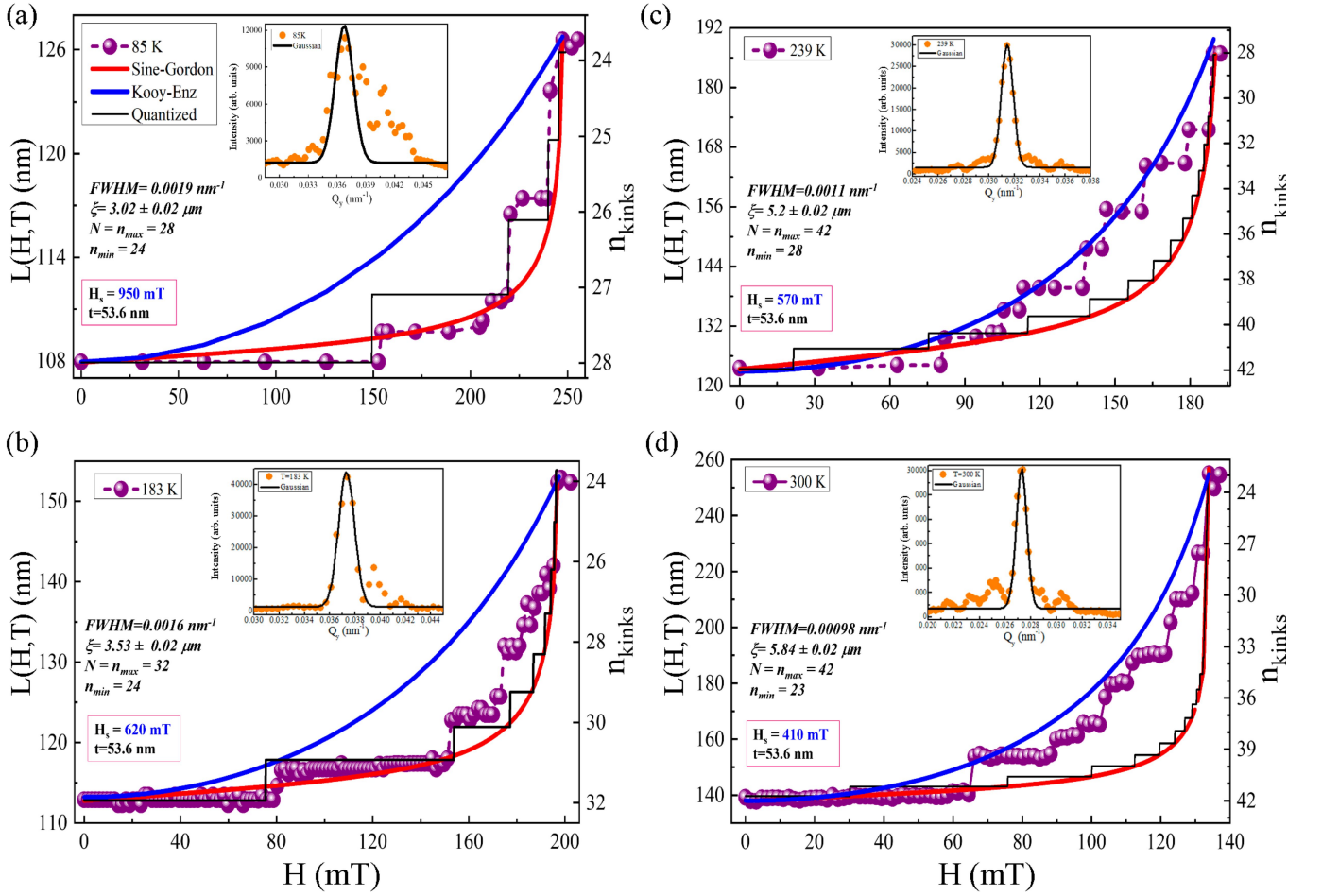


FIG. 3. Experimental plot of the periodicity ($L(H,T)$) at (a) $T=85\text{K}$ [$H_c=249.5\pm 7\text{ mT}$], (b) $T=183\text{K}$ [$H_c=198.5\pm 6\text{ mT}$], (c) $T=239\text{K}$ [$H_c=192\pm 5\text{ mT}$] and (d) $T=300\text{K}$ [$H_c=137\pm 5\text{ mT}$] shown by violet color symbols obtained from diffraction data. Insets displaying plot of intensity vs Q_y shown in orange dots along with their Gaussian fits to extract the FWHM of the magnetic Bragg peaks. The calculated curves shown in red and blue colors are obtained using the eq. 2 and eq. 3 respectively. Values of the saturation magnetic field (H_s) and the film thickness (t) are shown in each plot. The values of the finite-size of the soliton lattice (ξ) having maximum number of soliton-kinks (n_{max}) represented by 'N' and the minimum number of soliton-kinks (n_{min}) at different temperatures are shown inside and right-hand y-axis of each plots.

This expression is obtained using sine-Gordon equation, with $K(\chi)$ and $E(\chi)$ respectively, denoting the elliptic integrals of the first and second kinds with the elliptic modulus χ ($0\leq\chi\leq 1$) given by $\chi/E(\chi)=\sqrt{H/H_c}$. Here M is the magnetization and $K'=K(\chi')$ with $\chi'=(1-\chi^2)^{1/2}$. To obtain a better fit to the experimental data, an additional parameter $F=\sqrt{L(0,T)/L(0,300)}$ was used in eq. 1. Further studies are required to assign the theoretical basis of the parameter F which normalises stripe periodicity $L(H,T)$ at zero field ($H=0$) in a given temperature with that obtained at $T=300\text{K}$. F increases continuously from 0.88 to 1.0 with temperature from 85K to 300K (refer solid lines and dashed lines calculated with $F=1.0$ in Fig 2).

The solitonic nature can be further corroborated by studying the stripe periodicity as a function of field.

Most interestingly, we found that the periodicity does not change continuously but in a discrete step-wise manner. In Fig. 3, we show the stripe-periodicity $L(H,T)=2\pi/Q_1=4\pi/Q_2$ of the 1D-SL obtained from the measured values of Q_1 as a function of field H for four representative temperatures. To describe the variation of the stripe-periodicity with field, the same sine-Gordon model [24] that described the field dependent intensity variation (shown in Fig. 2) was used. $L(H,T)$ can be expressed in terms of $K(\chi)$ and $E(\chi)$ as

$$\frac{L(H,T)}{L(0,T)} = \frac{4K(\chi)E(\chi)}{\pi^2} \quad (2)$$

The obtained red color curves from equation (2) are shown in Fig. 3(a-d) with critical field (H_c) as the only fitting parameter. The measured values of $Q_1=2\pi n/\xi(T)$

exhibit discrete jumps (refer inset of Fig. 3(a)), as observed in CSL of DMI materials [14-16]. In analogy to CSL material, we consider $\xi(T)$ to represent the finite length of CSL and it can be estimated from adjacent jumps (ΔQ) of Q_1 corresponding to the integers 'n' and 'n+1' giving $\xi(T)=2\pi/\Delta Q$ at a particular temperature T. The obtained values of $\xi(T)$ is consistent with the value of the full width at half maximum (FWHM) of the measured peak, for example at 183K (refer Fig. 3(b)) $\xi(T) = 0.9 \times 2\pi/\text{FWHM}$ is obtained to be $3.53 \mu\text{m}$, which is almost equal to $2\pi/\Delta Q$ with $\Delta Q \approx 0.0018 \text{ nm}^{-1}$. The maximum value of 'n' is 'N' that represents the number of stripes within the finite size CSL giving $\xi(T)/N=L(0,T)$. With increasing field, the number of magnetic solitons (spin-kinks) represented by 'n' within the finite size, $\xi(T)$, of CSL reduces by integer values [16] and the positions and magnitudes of the quantized jumps could be estimated as $L(H,T)/L(0,T)=N/n$ at all temperatures (refer black lines in Fig. 3). Thus the finite-size $\xi(T)$ which is related to the correlation length of the stripe domains plays a key role for observing this discretized behavior in the stripe periodicity [22]. The number of magnetic solitons (n) at different magnetic fields ranges from n_{max} to n_{min} with decrements of unity (see Fig. 3).

At temperatures above the stripe-to-skyrmion transition temperature (T_c), however, we found that the periodicity $L(H,T)$ changes faster with H than the predicted values of the soliton model. This indicates that the increase in spacing between the solitons results in weaker interaction among solitons which makes the CSL more disordered [6, 14, 22]. It is reported that at higher temperatures the stripes get shortened and hybrid skyrmions form that exhibit a complex 3D spin structure that is Bloch-like near the center of the film and more Neel-like near the top and bottom surfaces [25-27]. We therefore employ a model that uses the film thickness (t) as parameter. This model [28, 29] can be expressed as

$$\frac{L(H,T)}{L(0,T)} = \sec[\sin^{-1}(h/t)] \quad (3)$$

Here $h = H/H_s$, is the reduced field and H_s is the saturation field [20]. A good agreement with the higher temperature data can be obtained as shown in Fig. 3. It is worth noting that the present scattering geometry is insensitive to the in-plane magnetic spins and the Neel configuration of the spin texture and that allows soliton formalism to represent the intensity variation (refer Fig. 2) even above stripe-to-skyrmion transition temperature (T_s) quite well.

In Fig. 4, we show the formation process of hexagonal 2D-SkL as a function of field at three different temperatures. All the six spots of 2D-SkL have been

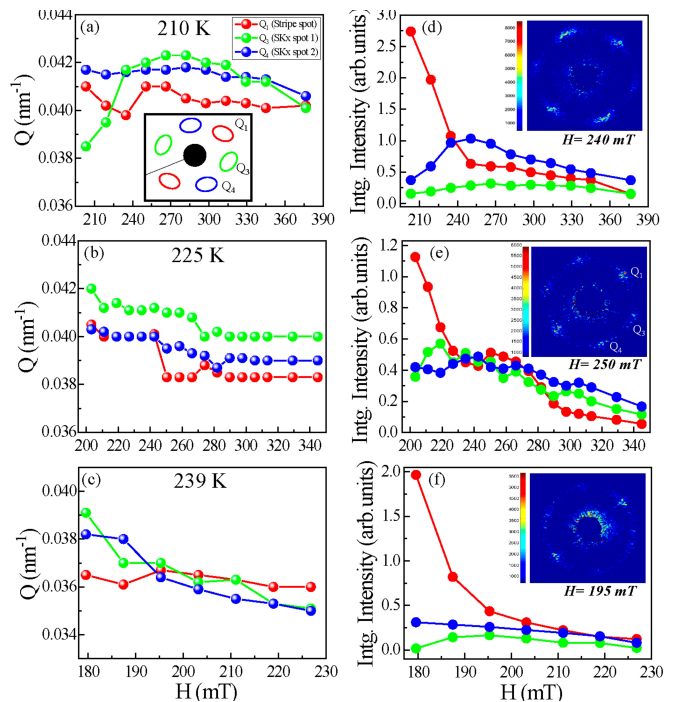


FIG. 4. Evolution of the Q-values and the integrated intensities of the 1st order diffraction spots in the skyrmion phase at (a, d) 210K, (b, e) 225K and (c, f) 239K with magnetic field.

marked as red, green, and blue in the inset of Fig. 4(a). At low fields the intensities of the spots are different, however, intensities of Q_1 , Q_3 and Q_4 tend to become equal, as expected for ideal 2D-SkL, with increasing field (refer Fig. 4(a-f)). At fields between $H=H_c$ and $H=300 \text{ mT}$, the positions of the diffraction spots Q_1 , Q_3 and Q_4 (see inset of Fig. 4(a)) remain unequal [19, 21]. Interestingly, we do not observe any discrete jump in Q-values of the diffraction spots after skyrmion phase formation (See Figs. 4(a), (b), (c)).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the coherent X-ray magnetic scattering results presented here clearly show that one-dimensional stripe lattice (1D-SL) in the dipolar-interaction mediated Fe/Gd multilayer behaves like a finite-sized chiral soliton lattice, as observed in single-crystals of dominant DMI [7, 30]. Discrete jumps in stripe-periodicity and intensity variation of 1st and 2nd order satellite diffraction peaks of the stripe lattice follow soliton sine-Gordon model [24] even though the stripe phase in the Fe/Gd multilayer exhibits an equal population of coexisting and opposite helicity spin-strips. Our results will promote further theoretical and experimental studies to understand the role of local/global chirality and topology in magnetic systems.

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Author contributions

M.K.S, S.R. conceived the experiment. A.S, J.C.T.L and S.R performed X-ray experiments. A.S, M.K.S, S.R, M.K.M, P.F and S.D.K analyzed the data. S.M and E.E.F synthesized samples and performed magnetic characterization. J.J.C and B.J.M did LTEM measurements. All authors contributed to discussion and writing of the manuscript.

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