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Dissociation of two-dimensional excitons in monolayer WSe$_2$

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Two-dimensional (2D) semiconducting materials are promising building blocks for optoelectronic applications, many of which require efficient dissociation of excitons into free electrons and holes. However, the strongly bound excitons arising from the enhanced Coulomb interaction in these monolayers suppresses the creation of free carriers. Here, we identify the main exciton dissociation mechanism through time and spectrally resolved photocurrent measurements in a monolayer WSe$_2$ $p$-$n$ junction. We find that under static in-plane electric field, excitons dissociate at a rate corresponding to the one predicted for tunnel ionization of 2D Wannier–Mott excitons. This study is essential for understanding the photoresponse of 2D semiconductors and offers design rules for the realization of efficient photodetectors, valley dependent optoelectronics, and novel quantum coherent phases.
Johan Stark first observed in hydrogen atoms, applying an electric field on Coulomb-bound particles shifts their energy levels and eventually leads to their dissociation (Fig. 1a). In condensed matter physics, Wannier–Mott excitons display features analogous to those of hydrogen, but with the crucial difference that they recombine if they are not dissociated. Thermal energy is usually sufficient to ionize excitons in 3D semiconductors owing to their small binding energy $E_B$ (typically a few $\text{meV}$). In contrast, quantum confinement effects and reduced Coulomb screening in low-dimensional materials give rise to large exciton binding energy ($E_B > 100 \text{ meV}$), which prevents thermal or spontaneous dissociation even at elevated temperatures and exciton densities.

In particular, monolayer transition metal dichalcogenides (TMDs) have aroused tremendous interest due to their small binding energy and spin-valley dependent effects. These 2D semiconductors provide an exciting testbed for probing the physics arising from many-body Coulomb interactions. Recently, all-optical experiments have revealed a wealth of physical phenomena such as exciton, trion, and biexciton formation, bandgap renormalization, exciton–exciton annihilation, and optical Stark effect. Exciton dissociation, on the other hand, can in principle be assessed through photocurrent measurements since photocurrent directly stems from the conversion of excitons into free carriers. A large number of studies have investigated photodetection performances of 2D TMDs and demonstrated their potential as photodectors and solar cells. However, it is still unclear which dissociation process can overcome the large exciton binding energy and lead to efficient photocurrent generation in these devices. Theoretical studies suggest that strong electric fields may provide the energy required to dissociate the excitons, but the precise mechanism governing exciton dissociation in 2D TMDs remains to be experimentally investigated.

Here, we address this important issue by monitoring the exciton dissociation and subsequent transport of free carriers in a monolayer TMD p–n junction through spectrally and temporally resolved photocurrent measurements. Combining these two approaches allows us to assess and correlate two essential excitonic properties under static electric field, namely the Stark shift and the dissociation time. Further, we make use of the extreme thinness of 2D materials and their contamination-free assembly into heterostructures to reliably control the potential landscape experienced by the excitons. By placing the monolayer TMD in close proximity to metallic split gates, we can generate high in-plane electric fields and drive a photocurrent (PC). We find that at low field the photosresponse time of our device is limited by the rate at which excitons tunnel into the continuum through the potential barrier created by their binding energy, a process known as tunnel ionization (Fig. 1a). Tuning the electric field inside the p–n junction further allows us to disentangle various dynamical processes of excitons and free carriers and to identify the kinetic bottlenecks that govern the performance of TMD-based optoelectronic devices.

**Results**

**Device structure and characterization.** Figure 1b, c presents a schematic and optical micrograph of our lateral p–n junction device structure and characterization. Figure 1d presents the PC $(nA)$ as a function of $V_{G1}$ and $V_{G2}$. Two graphite flakes (colored in black) are placed on both sides of the WS$_2$ layer (orange) and encapsulated between two hBN flakes (blue and green). The $V_{G1}$ and $V_{G2}$ are fixed at $-10$ $\text{V}$ and $0$ $\text{V}$, with a laser power $P = 1 \mu$W and a photon energy $\nu_0 = 1.65$ $\text{eV}$. The scale bar is 4 $\mu$m. The PC is measured at $V_{sym} = V_{G1} = V_{G2} = -10$ $\text{V}$ and $V_{B} = 0$ $\text{V}$. The color bar above indicates the magnitude of IQE $\%$. The in-plane electric field $E(x)$ inside the WS$_2$ is shown by the solid black line (right axis). The resulting free carriers drift out of the junction (dotted black arrows) and generate a photocurrent. F PC measured at the junction as a function of $V_{sym}$ and $V_{B}$, with a laser power $P = 0.5 \mu$W and a photon energy $\nu_0 = 1.65$ $\text{eV}$. The color bar between c and f displays the magnitude of the PC as well as the internal quantum efficiency, IQE = $\frac{PC}{A \cdot NP}$, where $A = 5\%$ is the absorption coefficient.
device made by assembling exfoliated flakes on metallic split gates ($V_{G1}$ and $V_{G2}$) separated by 200 nm (see “Methods”). Few-layer graphite flakes placed on both ends of a monolayer WSe$_2$ flake serve as ambipolar electrical contacts that we use to apply a bias voltage $V_B$ and collect the photogenerated charges. The lateral graphite-WSe$_2$-graphite assembly is fully encapsulated in hexagonal boron nitride, typically 20 nm thick, which provides a clean and flat substrate. Three devices were measured (see Supplementary Note 1 and Supplementary Figs. 1–3), but unless otherwise specified, all measurements presented in the main text are obtained at room temperature from the device shown in Fig. 1c. Tuning of bias and gate voltages allows us to finely control the in-plane electric field $F$. Finite-element and analytical calculations of the electric field distribution in our device (see Supplementary Note 2 and Supplementary Figs. 4–7) provide us with a precise estimate of $F$ and the electrostatic doping inside the WSe$_2$ (Fig. 1d). Applying gate voltages of opposite polarity ($V_{\text{asym}} = V_{G1} = -V_{G2} = -10 \text{ V}$) leads to the formation of a sharp $p$–$n$ junction (Fig. 1e) with an in-plane electric field reaching 21 V $\mu$m$^{-1}$ (Fig. 1d). The photoreponswe that we observed at the junction (Fig. 1c) follows a photodiode-like behavior: PC is only generated in the $p$–$n$ or $n$–$p$ configuration (see Supplementary Fig. 1c) and can be increased by applying a reverse bias voltage (Fig. 1f).

**Spectral response.** We probe the absorption spectrum in the photoactive region by measuring the PC as a function of photon energy $h\nu$ at a constant laser power $P$ and in-plane electric field $F$. Figure 2a shows the responsivity (PC/P) spectra of a device similar to the one presented in Fig. 1c, measured at various $V_B$ and at low temperature ($T = 30 \text{ K}$) in order to reduce thermal broadening. We observe a pronounced peak at a photon energy $h\nu = 1.73 \text{ eV}$, corresponding to the A exciton, and a step-like increase around 1.78 eV. For increasing electric field, this step-like feature broadens and an additional shoulder appears at 1.83 eV. To identify the various spectral features, we compare the experimental spectra with first-principles calculations for a monolayer WSe$_2$ embedded in hBN (see Supplementary Note 3 and Supplementary Fig. 8). By including the electronic screening from the hBN layers in the many-body G$_0$W$_0$ and Bethe–Salpeter Equation (BSE) frameworks we obtain a bandgap of 1.85 eV and a low bound exciton at 1.67 eV in good agreement with the experimental spectra. To account for the effect of a constant in-plane electric field we use a model based on the 2D Wannier equation (see Supplementary Note 4 and Supplementary Fig. 9). In these model calculations, screening by the TMD itself as well as the surrounding dielectric materials is described via the Keldysh potential for the electron–hole interaction. Figure 2b shows calculated absorption spectra for different in-plane fields $F$. Excellent agreement between experiment and calculations is found assuming a bandgap of 1.9 eV, which yields a binding energy of $E_B = 170 \text{ meV}$ for the A excitons consistent with the first-principles calculations. The unbrodened spectrum calculated at zero field (Fig. 2b, solid black line) confirms the presence of multiple overlapping excited excitonic peaks below the...
bandgap. The calculated spectra for higher field reproduce remarkably well the field-induced increase of the sub-bandgap absorption observed experimentally. This is a manifestation of the Franz–Keldysh effect, which results from the leakage of the free electron and hole wave functions into the bandgap (inset of Fig. 2b). We note that our experimental value of $E_L$ agrees well with the one estimated from the diamagnetic shift of a monolayer WSe$_2$ encapsulated between silica and hBN$^{35}$. Larger $E_L$ has been observed in SiO$_2$-supported WSe$_2$ samples$^{36–38}$, underlining the role of the dielectric environment on the excitonic properties$^{39}$.

Excitonic Stark effect. Turning our attention to the A exciton phototransient peak, we observe a pronounced red-shift as $V_B$ (Fig. 2c) and $V_{ asym}$ increase. We attribute this to the DC Stark effect. In first approximation, the Stark shift of a 1s exciton (without dipole moment) is given by $\Delta E = -\frac{1}{2} \alpha F^2$, where $\alpha$ is the in-plane polarizability. As shown in Fig. 2d, the A exciton energy shows a quadratic dependence with the maximum in-plane electric field $F_M$ calculated for different values of $V_{ asym}$ and $V_B$ (Fig. 2e), yielding a polarizability of $\alpha = (1 \pm 0.2) \times 10^{-6}$ Dm/V. This shift matches well with the predicted polarizability of $\alpha = 9.4 \times 10^{-7}$ Dm/V for $E_B = 170$ meV, thus supporting our previous spectral analysis. Interestingly, we note that the measured in-plane polarizability is two order of magnitude larger than the out-of-plane value recently obtained in PL experiment$^{40}$. This strong anisotropy confirms the 2D nature of the A exciton and demonstrates the advantage of using in-plane electric fields for controlling the optical properties of TMDs$^{31}$.

Photoresponse dynamics. Along with the Stark shift, the application of a large in-plane electric field shortens the lifetime of excitons, which eventually decay into free electrons and holes (Fig. 1a). We probe these decay dynamics by assessing the photoresponse time $\tau$ of the device with time-resolved photocurrent measurements (TRPC), banking on the nonlinear photoresponse of the WSe$_2$. Figure 3a, b shows the strong sublinear power dependence of the photocurrent (and the corresponding responsivity) under resonant pulsed optical excitation ($h\nu = 1.65$ eV, see "Methods"). Many physical processes may be responsible for or contribute to the observed sublinearity, including phase space filling$^{41}$ and dynamic screening effects (e.g., bandgap renormalization$^{18}$). These many-body effects become intricate as the exciton gas approaches the Mott transition$^{42}$. However, recent time-resolved spectroscopy$^{19,22}$ and photoluminescence$^{20,23}$ experiments indicate that in this exciton density regime ($10^{11} \leq N \leq 10^{13}$ cm$^{-2}$), exciton–exciton annihilation (EEA, or exciton Auger recombination) is the dominant decay process for excitons in TMDs$^{24}$. To account for EEA in the rate equation governing the photocurrent we add a loss term that scales quadratically with the photocurrent we add a loss term that scales quadratically with

$$PC = \frac{P \gamma}{1 + \frac{P}{PC_{th}}} - \frac{N_0}{\gamma \tau} + \frac{N_0}{\gamma \tau} \ln \left(1 + \frac{P}{PC_{th}}\right),$$

where $\gamma$ is the EEA rate of $y = 0.05$ cm$^3$ s$^{-1}$. The error bars correspond to the standard deviations obtained from the fits. $\Delta$ PC as a function of time delay $\Delta t$ between two pulses (illustrated above the plot) at various value of $V_{ asym}$, with time-averaged $P = 100$ $\mu$W and $V_B = 0$ V. Same data as in d but plotted with the normalized $\Delta$ PC = $\frac{PC\left(V_{ asym} = 10 \mathrm{~V}\right)}{PC\left(V_{ asym} = 0 \mathrm{~V}\right)} - \frac{PC\left(V_{ asym} = 0 \mathrm{~V}\right)}{PC\left(V_{ asym} = 10 \mathrm{~V}\right)}$. The solid black lines in d and e are fits to the data using the model described in the Supplementary Note 5.

**Fig. 3** Determination of the photoresponse time $\tau$ by nonlinear and time-resolved photocurrent measurements. a PC vs. laser power $P$ for various $V_B$ at $V_{ asym} = 10$ V and $h\nu = 1.65$ eV. b Responsivity (PC/$P$) in the same conditions as a. The solid black lines in a and b are fits to the data of $P \propto \ln(1 + \gamma t N_0)$. c Photoresponse rate $\Gamma = \frac{1}{\tau}$ (filled circles, left axis) obtained from the TRPC measurements (shown in d, e and Supplementary Fig. 10d) and $1 - \frac{1}{\tau}$ (open circles, right axis) obtained from the power dependence measurements (shown in a, b and Supplementary Fig. 10a) as a function of $V_{ asym}$ at $V_B = 0$ V (orange, lower axis) and $V_B = 10$ V (blue, top axis). Good agreement between TPRC and nonlinear PC measurements is found for an EEA rate of $\gamma = 0.05$ cm$^3$ s$^{-1}$. The error bars correspond to the standard deviations obtained from the fits. d PC as a function of time delay $\Delta t$ between two pulses (illustrated above the plot) at various value of $V_{ asym}$, with time-averaged $P = 100$ $\mu$W and $V_B = 0$ V. e Same data as in d but plotted with the normalized $\Delta$ PC = $\frac{PC\left(V_{ asym} = 10 \mathrm{~V}\right)}{PC\left(V_{ asym} = 0 \mathrm{~V}\right)} - \frac{PC\left(V_{ asym} = 0 \mathrm{~V}\right)}{PC\left(V_{ asym} = 10 \mathrm{~V}\right)}$. The solid black lines in d and e are fits to the data using the model described in the Supplementary Note 5.
Fig. 4 Dynamic processes governing the photoresponse of monolayer WSe$_2$ p-n junctions. a) Photoresponse rate $\Gamma$ = 1 measured by TRPC (same data as Fig. 3c) vs. maximum in-plane electric field $F_M$, calculated for various values of $V_{\text{asym}}$ (with $V_B$ = 0 V, orange points) and $V_B$ (with $V_{\text{asym}}$ = 10 V, blue points). At low field ($F_M < 15$ V/μm$^2$), the photoresponse is well described by the total exciton rate $\Gamma = \frac{1}{\tau} = \Gamma_{diss} + \Gamma_{r,N}$, where $\tau_{r,N} = 1/\Gamma_{r,N}$ is the exciton lifetime at zero field ($\tau_{r,N} \sim 1$ ns) and $\Gamma_{diss}$ is the exciton dissociation rate predicted by the 2D Wannier-Mott exciton (see Supplementary Note 4) with a binding energy between $E_B = 153$ and 190 meV (gray shaded curves) and $E_B = 170$ meV (dotted black line). At high field ($F_M > 20$ V/μm$^2$), the photoresponse is governed by the total free carrier rate $\Gamma = \frac{1}{\tau} = \Gamma_{\text{drift}}(F_M) + \Gamma_{r,N}$ (dotted black line), where $\tau_{r,N} = 1/\Gamma_{r,N}$ is the free carrier lifetime at zero field ($\tau_{r,N} \sim 30$ ps) and $\Gamma_{\text{drift}}$ is the rate at which carriers (with a mobility $\mu = 4$ cm$^2$/V·s$^{-1}$) drift out of the junction (see Supplementary Note 6). Since exciton dissociation and free carrier drift are competitive processes, the total photoresponse rate of the device is $\Gamma \approx \frac{1}{\tau_d}$ (black solid line). Inset: IQE vs. $V_B$ measured at $V_{\text{asym}} = 10$ V extracted from Fig. 1f (left axis, blue data points). Extraction efficiency, $\eta_{\text{extract}} = \frac{\eta_{\text{ref}}}{\gamma \tau_d}$ calculated with our model vs. $V_B$ (right axis, black solid line). b) Schematic of the processes contributing to the photoresponse of the device. Excitons are generated by resonant optical excitation and approximatively 30% ($\eta_{\text{init}}$) of them reach the p-n junction by diffusion during their lifetime $\tau_{r,N}$. Excitons entering the p-n junctions (black dotted box) may either recombine with a time constant $\tau_{r,N}$ or dissociate by tunnel ionization at a rate $\Gamma_{diss}$. The resultant free carriers generate a photocurrent as they drift out of the junction at a rate $\Gamma_{\text{drift}}$, but a fraction is also lost due to their finite lifetime $\tau_{r,n}$. Holes and electrons are represented by red and blue spheres.

Discussion

To directly address the exciton dissociation caused by the in-plane electric field $F_M$, we examine the dependence of the photoresponse rate $\Gamma$ on $F_M$ at the p-n junction (Fig. 4a). Clearly, two regimes can be distinguished. The rapid increase of $\Gamma$ with $F_M$ is attributed to dissociation by tunnel ionization. We verify this by comparing the measured $\Gamma$ to the calculated tunnel ionization rate $\Gamma_{\text{diss}}$, obtained by introducing the complex scaling formalism in the 2D Wannier–Mott exciton model (see Supplementary Note 4 and Supplementary Table 1). According to this model, $\Gamma_{\text{diss}}$ can be evaluated in first approximation by the product of the “attempt frequency”$^{45}$, which scales with $E_B/h$, and the exponential tunneling term $\exp(-E_B/e_0dF_M)$, where $e_0$ is the elementary charge, $d$ is the exciton diameter, and $h$ is the Planck constant. We find that the dependence of $\Gamma$ at low field ($F_M < 15$ V/μm$^2$) coincides well with the calculated dissociation rate of excitons with $E_B = 170$ meV, in agreement with our photocurrent spectroscopy analysis. More importantly, this shows that in the low-field regime the exciton dissociation process is the rate-limiting step governing the generation of photocurrent. We note that in multilayer TMDs, where $E_B > 50$ meV, the ionization rate is two orders of magnitude larger than in the monolayer case$^{46}$, and hence this process was not found to limit the photoresponse rate of multilayer devices$^{44}$.

At high electric field ($F_M > 20$ V/μm$^2$), the photocurrent rate deviates from the dissociation rate-limited model and enters a new regime characterized by a more moderate increase of $\Gamma$ with $F_M$. The observed linear scaling of $\Gamma(F_M)$ suggests that, in this regime, the photoresponse rate is limited by the drift-diffusive transport of free carriers out of the p-n junction. By considering a carrier drift velocity $v_{\text{drift}} = \mu F_M$, we estimate that carriers generated in the center of the junction of length $L = 200$ nm escape the junction at a rate $\Gamma_{\text{drift}} = 2\mu F_M/L$. Comparing this simple expression (dotted line in Fig. 4a) to the measured $\Gamma$ at high field, we find $\mu = 4 \pm 1$ cm$^2$/V·s$^{-1}$, which is very similar to the room temperature field-effect mobility that we measure in our sample ($\mu_{\text{FF}} \sim 3$ cm$^2$/V·s$^{-1}$, see Supplementary Note 1).

A complete photocurrent model is achieved by introducing competing loss mechanisms caused by the radiative and non-radiative recombination of excitons (see Supplementary Note 6). Good agreement with the experimental data is obtained by considering the finite lifetime of excitons ($\tau_{r,N} = 1/\Gamma_{r,N} \sim 1$ ns$^{20,23}$, see Supplementary Note 1) and free carriers ($\tau_{r,n} = 1/\Gamma_{r,n} \sim 30$ ps$^{41}$) at zero electric field. This comprehensive picture of the dynamical processes (Fig. 4b) offers valuable insights into the internal quantum efficiency (IQE) of the photocurrent generation mechanism in this device. Indeed, the efficiency $\eta$ of each...
A photocurrent step depends on the competition between the PC-generating ($\tau_{\text{drift}, \tau_{\text{diff}}}$) and the loss ($\tau_{\text{diff}}/h$) pathways, such that $\eta_{\text{extract}} = \frac{\tau_{\text{diff}}}{\tau_{\text{diff}} + \tau_{\text{diff}}/h}$. In the inset of Fig. 4a, we compare the IQE measured at low power as a function of $V_B$ with the total extraction efficiency $\eta_{\text{extract}}$ derived from the kinetic model shown in Fig. 4b. We find that $\eta_{\text{extract}}$ captures very well the bias dependence of the IQE, indicating that we correctly identified the relevant PC-generating processes. The field-independent discrepancy of 30% is attributed to the collection efficiency $\eta_{\text{coll}}$, which we define as the ratio between the number of excitons reaching the $p-n$ junction and the number of absorbed photons. This value coincides with our analysis of the measured photocurrent profile and with the prediction of our exciton diffusion model (see Supplementary Note 7 and Supplementary Fig. 11).

In summary, our study offers a global understanding of the fundamental mechanisms governing the exciton dynamics and associated photoreponse in monolayer TMDs under in-plane electric field. We demonstrate that despite their large binding energy, photogenerated excitons can rapidly dissociate into free carriers via tunnel ionization, thereby outcompeting recombination processes. Importantly, this knowledge allows us to identify the main material properties that limit photocurrent generation in TMDs such as carrier mobility, exciton binding energy, and lifetime. This provides guidelines in terms of device design, material quality improvement, and Coulomb engineering of the van der Waals heterostructure to further improve the performances of TMD-based optoelectronics devices and develop their applications in valleytronics. We finally note that the observed Stark and Franz–Keldysh effects open up exciting opportunities for modulating light with 2D materials.

**Methods**

**Device fabrication.** Exfoliated layers are assembled in a van der Waals heterostructure using the same technique as described in ref. 48. The monolayer of WSe$_2$ is identified by photoluminescence measurement (see Supplementary Note 1). The heterostructure is deposited onto metallic split gates (15 nm palladium) defined by electron-beam lithography on a degenerately doped silicon substrate covered with a 285-nm-thick SiO$_2$ layer. The two graphite flakes are electrically connected by one-dimensional contacts made of Ti/Au (2/100 nm).

**Photocurrent measurements.** Photocurrent measurements are performed using a photocurrent scanning microscope setup, where a laser beam is focused by a microscopic objective (Olympus LUCPlFLN x 40) onto the device placed on a piezoelectric stage (Attocube ANC300). Photocurrent is measured with a preamplifier and a lock-in amplifier synchronized with a mechanical chopper. A supercontinuum laser (NKT Photonics SuperK Extreme), with a pulse duration of ~40 ps, repetition rate of 40 MHz and tunable wavelength (from 500 to 1500 nm) is employed to characterize the devices, perform photocurrent spectroscopy, and measure the photocurrent power dependence. Time-resolved photocurrent measurements are performed using a Ti:sapphire laser (Tholabs Octavus) with ~200 fs pulses (at the sample), with a repetition rate of 85 MHz, and centered at $h\nu = 1.65$ eV (FWHM = 0.07 eV), which corresponds to the A exciton absorption peak. The laser beam is split into two arms and recombined using 50/50 beamsplitters. A mechanical chopper modulates the laser beam in one arm (pump), while the other arm (probe) has a motorized translation stage that allows for the generation of a computer-controlled time delay $\Delta t$ between the two pulses.

**Data availability.** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

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Author contributions

M.M. conceived and designed the experiments under the supervision of F.H.L.K., M.M., D.D., and F.V. fabricated the samples. M.M. and F.V. carried out the experiments. M.M. performed the data analysis and discussed the results with F.H.L.K., F.V., and P.S. T.G.P. developed the Wannier–Mott exciton model. T.P.G, M.B.L., M.D., and V.I.F. performed the electrostatic calculations, and S.H., S.L., and K.S.T. performed the ab-initio calculations. K.W. and T.T. provided hBN crystals. M.M., F.V., P.S., and F.H.L.K. co-wrote the manuscript, with the participation of T.G.P. and K.S.T.

Additional information

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