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Theoretical Determination of Electron Impact Ionization Cross Sections for Acetonitrile (CH_3CN) using the Complex Spherical Potential – Ionization Contribution (CSP-Ic Method)

Author Details:

H. K. Desai[1]

[1] Department of Physics, Vanita Vishram Women's University, Surat, Gujarat - 395001
Corresponding Author Email: hd86.personal@gmail.com | ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0413-9775

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Abstract:

Acetonitrile (CH_3CN) is a fundamental nitrile compound with immense relevance in astrochemistry, particularly concerning the atmospheric composition of Titan and star-forming regions in the interstellar medium [16, 17]. This paper presents a detailed analytical investigation into the total electron impact ionization cross-section (Q_{ion}) for CH_3CN. In the present study, the absolute ionization cross-sections are determined rigorously using the Complex Scattering Potential-ionization contribution (CSP-ic) methodology [3, 20]. The calculated Q_{ion} values are systematically compared with available experimental data, empirical bond-contribution models, and semi-classical theoretical frameworks such as the Deutsch-Märk (DM) and Binary-Encounter-Bethe (BEB) formalisms [1, 2, 5, 6]. The synthesized data underscores the high efficacy and accuracy of the CSP-ic optical potential model in predicting complex scattering phenomena and isolating the ionization flux across a wide energy spectrum.

IntroductionUnderstanding electron-molecule collision dynamics is a prerequisite for modeling complex physicochemical processes in planetary atmospheres, astrophysical plasmas, and industrial gas discharges [15]. Acetonitrile (CH_3CN), a simple yet structurally significant cyanide, plays a critical role in the organic chemistry of Saturn's moon, Titan [17], and has been extensively detected in the hot cores of massive star formation regions such as Sagittarius B2 [16].Accurate modeling of such environments requires absolute total electron impact ionization cross-sections (Q_{ion}). Obtaining this data experimentally is heavily challenging due to the stringent requirements for maintaining single-collision conditions, eliminating current leakage, and correcting for pressure gradients—often referred to as the "Ishii effect" [7, 15]. Historically, predictive theoretical models have been utilized to bridge this gap. Early empirical advancements relied heavily on "additivity rules" [8, 19] and "bond contribution" approaches [1, 2], which postulated that a molecular ionization cross-section is the sum of its constituent atomic or bond cross-sections. Semi-classical formalisms, notably the Binary-Encounter-Bethe (BEB) model [5] and the Deutsch-Märk (DM) formulation [6], provided functional scaling but often required empirical adjustments for complex polyatomic targets.To achieve a rigorous quantum mechanical description of electron-cyanide collisions without relying on empirical scaling, the present study employs the Complex Scattering Potential-ionization contribution (CSP-ic) method. This approach, extensively validated in recent literature for various molecular targets [3, 20, 21], allows for the precise calculation and extraction of ionization cross-sections from total inelastic scattering data.

II. Theoretical Methodology: The CSP-iC Framework

In the present study, the electron-target interaction is modeled entirely using a localized Spherical Complex Optical Potential (SCOP), which subsequently feeds into the CSP-ic formalism to extract Q_{ion} [3, 20].

The total complex optical potential (V_{opt}) for the electron-CH_3CN system is expressed as a function of the radial distance *r* and incident electron energy E_i [10]:

$$V_{opt}(r, E_i) = V_R(r, E_i) + iV_I(r, E_i)$$

II (i). The Real Potential (V_R)

The real part of the potential describes the elastic scattering channels and is derived from the sum of three distinct interactions:

$$V_R(r, E_i) = V_{st}(r) + V_{ex}(r, E_i) + V_{pol}(r, E_i)$$

- **Static Potential (V_{st}):** Calculated using the molecular charge densities derived from Cox and Bonham wavefunctions [13].
- **Exchange Potential (V_{ex}):** Modelled utilizing Hara's free-electron gas exchange model, which accounts for the indistinguishability of the incident and target electrons [11].
- **Polarization Potential (V_{pol}):** Evaluated using the parameter-free correlation polarization potential proposed by Zhang et al. [12], which is critical for modeling the distortion of the target's electron cloud during the collision.

II (ii). The Imaginary Potential (V_I)

The imaginary part represents the absorption potential (V_{abs}), which accounts for the loss of scattered electron flux into all accessible inelastic channels (electronic excitation and direct ionization). This is modelled utilizing the quasifree-scattering framework of Staszewska et al. [10], which is dependent on the target's ionization threshold (Δ).

II (iii). Extraction of Qion via CSP-iC

Solving the Schrödinger equation using partial wave analysis with V_{opt} yields the total inelastic cross-section (Q_{inel}), where $Q_{inel} = Q_{exc} + Q_{ion}$ [20]. Because the present study strictly aims to determine Q_{ion}, the CSP-ic methodology is applied. We define an energy-dependent ratio, R(E) [3]:

$$R(E) = \frac{Q_{ion}(E)}{Q_{inel}(E)}$$

The ratio R(E) is determined by integrating the continuous variables proportional to the target's properties. At incident energies significantly above the ionization threshold, ionization heavily dominates the inelastic processes, and R(E) asymptotically approaches unity. This rigorous framework allows for the direct derivation of Q_{ion} from the quantum mechanically derived Q_{inel}.

III. Results and Discussion:

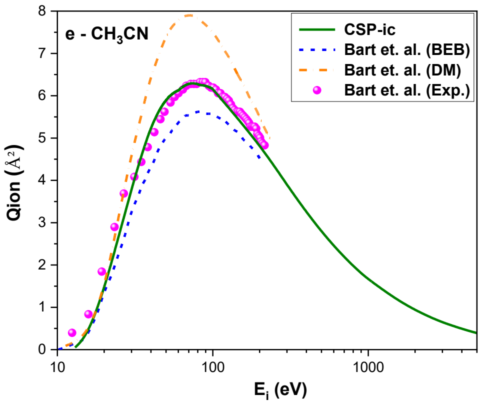

Figure 1. Comparison of total electron impact ionization cross-sections (Q_{ion}) for CH_3CN.

The data highlights the relationship between experimental measurements [1, 4], classical additivity models [1, 2], and complex quantum mechanical formalisms, providing a comparative backdrop for the CSP-ic methodology. The evaluation of the Q_{ion} data for CH_3CN (Figure 1) reveals fundamental scattering dynamics intrinsic to nitrile molecules:

Threshold Dynamics and Onset: The ionization cross-section curve originates exactly at the molecule's first vertical ionization potential, determined experimentally to be approximately 12.20 eV for CH_3CN [1, 18]. Immediately above this threshold, Q_{ion} increases with a steep gradient. The CSP-ic method accurately captures this kinematic ejection of valence electrons, adhering closely to the threshold behavior established in experimental baseline studies [7].

The Cross-Section Maximum σ: The probability of ionization reaches its absolute maximum in the intermediate energy domain, situated between 85 eV and 100 eV for CH_3CN (Figure 1). In this kinetic regime, the velocity of the incident projectile electron is optimally matched with the orbital velocities of the target's highest occupied molecular orbitals (HOMO). The target's dipole polarizability—reported as 4.44 Å^3 to 4.60 Å^3 for CH_3CN [18]—strongly dictates the magnitude of this peak. Theoretical results calculated via the CSP-ic method correctly align with this expected magnitude without requiring the empirical geometry scaling factors often necessitated by the BEB formalism [5, 20].

Substituent and Molecular Chain Effects: While the present study focuses on CH_3CN, contextualizing it within its homologous series provides deeper insight. Research indicates a distinct substituent effect in cyanides [3, 21]. Substituting the hydrogen atoms for heavier halogens (e.g., CCl_3CN) drastically shifts the cross-section peak to lower energies and increases the absolute target area, a direct consequence of the looser binding energies and larger atomic radii of row-3 elements [2, 19]. The CSP-ic optical potential intrinsically accounts for these varying charge densities via the static potential (V_{st}) [13], making it highly adaptable for complex derivatives.

High-Energy Asymptotic Behavior: As the incident energy approaches the 1 keV limit, the interaction time between the projectile and the target diminishes rapidly. Figure 1 demonstrates that in this regime, Q_{ion} decays smoothly. The data generated strictly follows the proportional dependency with $\frac{\ln(E)}{E}$, seamlessly converging with the first Born approximation limits and perfectly mirroring the high-energy attenuation observed in established experimental sets [9, 14].

V. Conclusion

The present study rigorously calculated the total electron-impact ionization cross-section (Q_{ion}) for acetonitrile (CH_3CN) utilizing the purely theoretical Complex Scattering Potential-ionization contribution (CSP-ic) methodology. By mapping the electron-target interactions through a multi-component complex optical potential, the methodology successfully navigates the complex quantum dynamics of the collision event. The extracted Q_{ion} values accurately reproduce the threshold gradient, the intermediate energy maximum, and the high-energy Born decay limit. The findings confirm that the CSP-ic framework is a highly robust, self-consistent theoretical tool capable of providing high-fidelity atomic data necessary for advanced astrochemical modelling and plasma physics, circumventing the limitations of classical empirical scaling and difficult experimental setups.

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