

Article Optical textures and orientational structures in cholesteric droplets with conical boundary conditions

Anna P. Gardymova ^{1,*}, Mikhail N. Krakhalev ^{1,2,} and Victor Ya. Zyryanov ²

- ¹ Institute of Engineering Physics and Radio Electronics, Siberian Federal University, Krasnoyarsk, 660041, Russia
- ² Kirensky Institute of Physics, Federal Research Center KSC SB RAS, Krasnoyarsk 660036, Russia; kmn@iph.krasn.ru (K.M.N.); zyr@iph.krasn.ru (V.Y.Z.)
- * Correspondence: gard@iph.krasn.ru; Tel.: +7-391-249-4510 (G.A.P.)

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- Abstract: Cholesteric droplets dispersed in polymer with conical boundary conditions have been
- ² studied. The director configurations are identified by the polarising microscopy technique. The
- axisymmetric twisted axial-bipolar configuration with the surface circular defect at the droplet's
- equator is formed at the relative chirality parameter $N_0 \leq 2.9$. The intermediate director configuration
- ⁵ with the deformed circular defect is realised at $2.9 < N_0 < 3.95$, and the layer-like structure with the
- twisted surface defect loop is observed at $N_0 \ge 3.95$. The cholesteric layers in the layer-like structure

are slightly distorted although the cholesteric helix is untwisted.

- 8 Keywords: cholesteric liquid crystal; droplet; optical texture; orientational structure; conical surface
- anchoring; topological defect.

10 1. Introduction

Recently, the droplet dispersions of liquid crystals (LCs) in a solid or liquid matrix attract more 11 interest of researchers [1-9]. The optical properties of such materials depend on the orientational 12 structures (director configurations) formed in LC droplets [6]. The configuration of director \mathbf{n} (a 13 unit vector oriented along the preferred orientation of the long axes of molecules), in turn, depends 14 on the LC elastic constants, boundary conditions (preferred director orientation on the interface, 15 LC anchoring energy), droplet's size and shape, applied electric (magnetic) field [1,10-12]. The 16 orientational structure and, consequently, the optical properties of such liquid crystal materials can 17 be changed by modifying the boundary conditions [13–17], varying LC parameters or applying an 18 electric field [1]. It makes possible to use them in the electrically controlled shutters [18,19], sensors 19

²⁰ [20,21], lasers [22,23], polarizers [24,25], etc.

Cholesteric liquid crystals (CLCs) in a free state are characterised by a helical structure of the 21 director field with an intrinsic helix pitch p_0 (the distance at which the director turns by 2π angle). 22 The orientational structure of cholesteric in the droplets depends on the ratio of droplet diameter 23 *d* to p_0 [26–30]. The relative chirality parameter $N_0 = 2d/p_0$ indicating the number of π turns on 24 the droplet diameter is usually applied to analyse this dependence. For instance, at the tangential 25 boundary conditions (the director **n** is oriented parallel to the interface) the twisted bipolar structure 26 is formed at $N_0 < 2$ [26–28,31,32] and the structure with diametrical or radial dislocations is realised 27 at $N_0 > 5$ [8,31–33]. A number of possible metastable configurations were theoretically examined in 28 Ref. [29]. Influence of the electric field on the CLC orientational structures in the droplets with the 29 tangential boundary conditions was studied in detail in Ref. [34,35]. 30 In the cholesteric droplets with homeotropic boundary conditions (the director \mathbf{n} is oriented 31

¹perpendicular to the interface), the helical ordering of the director is frustrated, that leads to the

- ³³ formation of various orientational structures [33,35–40]. Thus, structures with point defect (hedgehog)
- in the bulk or near the droplet surface are observed at small $N_0 < 2.5$ [36,37]. The layer-like structure
- with the double twisted defect loop [33,35,38–40] or structures with several points defects [36,37] are
- formed at large $N_0 > 2.5$. When 2.9 < $N_0 < 5.8$, the axisymmetric structure with the surface circular defect at the droplet's equator is formed [41,42].
- Currently, the cholesteric droplets with conical boundary conditions (director \mathbf{n} is tilted to the 38 interface by the angle $0^{\circ} < \theta_0 < 90^{\circ}$) have not been sufficiently studied. It is known that a weak conical 39 anchoring appears at the interface of LC and own isotropic phase. In this case, the axisymmetric 40 (C_{∞}) double twisted structure $(N_0 < 2)$ or the defect-free structure with the uniform helix axis 41 distribution ($N_0 > 2$) have been observed in cholesteric droplets [43–46]. Recently, we have obtained 42 and investigated the nematic droplets dispersed in polymer with the conical boundary conditions [47]. 43 Several orientational structures differing by the type and relative arrangement of surface and bulk 44 topological defects are formed in such droplets [12]. 45
- In the present paper the orientational structures of the cholesteric droplets dispersed in polymer with conical boundary conditions have been studied.

48 2. Results and Discussion

49 2.1. Twisted axial-bipolar structure

At the conical boundary conditions the axial-bipolar configuration is the most frequently realised within the droplets of LN-396 nematic [12]. This structure is characterised by two surface point defects (boojums) located at the diametrically opposite poles of the droplet and the surface circular defect at the droplet's equator (Fig. 1). The specific feature of the axial-bipolar configuration is a random orientation of the bipolar axis relative to the short axis of oblate droplets (the normal to the composite film plane) formed in the sample. For this reason, the various optical textures of nematic droplets with the axial-bipolar structure are observed [47,48].



Figure 1. The nematic LN-396 droplets with the axial-bipolar configuration. Scheme of the director field in the droplet central section passing through the bipolar axis (a). POM photos of the droplets with the bipolar axis oriented parallel (b), at approximately 60° angle (c) and perpendicular (d) to the sample plane taken in the crossed polarisers (top row) and without analyser (bottom row). Scheme of the director field in the central section perpendicular to the bipolar axis (e). Violet semicircles indicate the surface point defects, the orange rectangles indicate the sections of circular defect in (a), and the orange dashed line indicates the circular defect in (e). Hereinafter, the orientation of polarisers is indicated by the double arrows.

The axisymmetric twisted axial-bipolar configuration is formed in the cholesteric droplets at $N_0 \le 2.9$ under conical surface anchoring (Fig. 2, Fig. 3). The director twist angle on the droplet

diameter in the equator plane (the plane of the circular defect) depends on N_0 and can be measured by

- the method of rotating polariser and analyser [49]. For instance, the twist angle is $130^{\circ} \pm 5^{\circ}$ for droplets
- with $N_0 = 2.2$, $160^\circ \pm 5^\circ$ at $N_0 = 2.5$, and $180^\circ \pm 5^\circ$ at $N_0 = 2.9$. Like in nematic droplets, the symmetry
- ⁶² axis of the twisted axial-bipolar droplets is oriented differently relative to the sample plane (Fig. 2, 3).
- ⁶³ Figure 3b shows the droplet in which the circular defect is situated in the film plane and Figures 3c,d
- demonstrate the droplet with the symmetry axis tilted to the film plane by an angle approximately
- ⁶⁵ 50°. In the last case, the circular surface defect and two boojums located above and below the central
- cross-section of droplet can be clearly observed by changing a position of the microscope focus [47].



Figure 2. POM photos of the cholesteric droplets at $N_0 = 2.9$ taken in the crossed polarisers (top row) and without analyser (bottom row). The circular defect plane is perpendicular to the film plane. The polariser is oriented parallel (a), at angle 45° (b) and perpendicular (c) to the circular defect plane. Scheme of the director orientation in the central droplet section (d).



Figure 3. The cholesteric droplets at $N_0 = 2.9$. Scheme of the director orientation in the central cross section of droplet with the plane of circular defect parallel to film plane (a). POM photos of CLC droplets with the circular defect plane oriented parallel (b), at approximately 50° angle (c), (d) to the film plane taken in the crossed polarisers (top row) and without analyser (bottom row). The microscope is focused on the upper (c) and lower (d) part of the circular defect. Single arrows indicate a position of the linear defect.

67 2.2. Layer-like structure

The layer-like structure is formed in the cholesteric droplets under both tangential and 68 homeotropic boundary conditions at sufficiently high N_0 [38,39]. In CLC droplets under conical 69 boundary conditions the layer-like structure is observed at $N_0 \ge 3.95$ (Fig. 4). The sharp isoclinic lines 70 are revealed when the cholesteric layers are orthogonal to the film plane in the central cross-section 71 of CLC droplet (Fig. 4). These lines correspond to the areas in the cross-section of droplet where the 72 director is oriented parallel to the microscope axis [38]. The layer-like structure is characterised by 73 minor deformation of cholesteric layers (isoclinic lines are slightly curved), and the number N of π 74 director turns on the droplet diameter is less than N_0 (the effect of cholesteric helix untwisting [50]). 75 In this case, the discrepancy between N and N_0 decreases as the droplet's diameter increases. The 76 values of N and N_0 for different sizes of CLC droplets are presented in Table 1. The droplets with 77 characteristic optical texture at N close to the integer value were chosen for measurement [50]. It is 78 seen that N_0 is approximately twice value of N for the droplet of $d = 19.2 \ \mu m$, and the ratio of N_0 to the 79 corresponding N = 6 ($d = 43.3 \ \mu m$) is 1.49. Thus, as the droplet's diameter increases the ratio N_0/N 80 decreases more slowly than in the droplets under the strong homeotropic anchoring [50]. Apparently, 81

⁸² this effect is due to not strong polar anchoring strength of LC with polymer [47].



Figure 4. POM photos of cholesteric droplets at $N_0 = 5.2$ taken in the crossed polarisers (top row) and without analyser (bottom row). The microscope is focused on the linear defect above the droplet centre (a), on the droplet centre (b) and on the linear defect below the droplet centre (c). Schemes of the director orientation in the central section of the droplet (d) and the twisted defect loop on the droplet surface (e). Single arrows indicate a position of the linear defect.

Table 1. The values of N and N_0 for the different droplet diameters d.

<i>d, µ</i> m	19.2	24.7	30.1	36.8	43.3
N	2.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	6.0
N ₀	3.96	5.09	6.21	7.59	8.93

A formation of the layer-like structure leads to either a local disturbance of the boundary conditions, as in the case of weak surface anchoring [45] or an appearance of the linear surface defect as in the case of strong homeotropic anchoring [38]. The double twisted defect loop is formed near the droplets surface under study (Fig. 4, 5). The linear surface defect transverse the central droplet section at the points located at the isoclinic lines, therefore the director is parallel to the interface

- ^{**} near the linear defect. If the cholesteric axis is oriented mainly perpendicular to the film plane, the
- ⁸⁹ cholesteric layers are practically invisible (Fig. 5b). When changing the microscope focus it can be seen
- ⁹⁰ the double twisted defect loop (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. POM photos of cholesteric droplets at $N_0 = 5.2$ taken in the crossed polarisers (top row) and without analyser (bottom row). The microscope is focused on the linear defect above the droplet centre (a), on the droplet centre (b) and on the linear defect below the droplet centre (c). Scheme of the twisted defect loop on the droplet surface (d). Single arrows indicate the position of the linear defect.

The twisted bipolar structure ($N_0 < 2.9$) has the C_{∞} symmetry axis, and the layer-like configuration ($N_0 > 3.96$) has the C_2 symmetry axis. A transition from one configuration to another one proceeds smoothly as N_0 increases. The intermediate structures with the defect line deformed around the droplet's equator are observed at $2.9 < N_0 < 3.96$. At that, the deformation degree of this line increases as N_0 rises up to 3.96 (Fig. 6).

96 3. Materials and Methods

The nematic mixture LN-396 (Belarusian State Technological University) doped with the 97 left-handed chiral additive cholesteryl acetate (Sigma Aldrich) was used as a cholesteric. The 98 concentration of cholesteryl acetate was 1.5%, that corresponds to $p_0 = 9.7 \ \mu m$ [51]. The cholesteric 99 was dispersed in poly(isobutyl methacrylate) (PiBMA) (Sigma Aldrich) by the solvent-induced phase 100 separation technique [1]. PiBMA specifies for the nematic mixture LN-396 the conical boundary 101 conditions with the director tilt angle at the interface $\theta_0 = 50^{\circ}$ [47]. The weight ratio of the components 102 was CLC : PiBMA = 50 : 50. The droplet size d was varied in the range of 7–45 μ m. The average film 103 thickness was 40 μ m. The CLC droplets were studied by means of the polarising optical microscope 104 (POM) Axio Imager.A1m (Carl Zeiss) at the temperature $t = 25 \degree C$. 105

4. Conclusions

The orientational structures in cholesteric droplets with the unique conical boundary conditions 107 with the director tilt angle $\theta_0 = 50^\circ$ have been studied. In such droplets, various combinations of 108 topological features were revealed that are inherent to both nematic droplets with conical anchoring 109 [47] and cholesteric droplets with homeotropic boundary conditions [42]. The axisymmetric twisted 110 axial-bipolar configuration characterised by two boojums and the surface circular defect at the droplet's 111 equator is formed at $N_0 \leq 2.9$. It has been shown that the orientational structure intermediate 112 between axisymmetric and layer-like is realised at $2.9 < N_0 < 3.95$. In such structure, the defect 113 ring is deformed around the droplet's equator. The layer-like structure with a minor deformation 114 of cholesteric layers and the twisted defect loop on droplet's surface is formed at $N_0 \ge 3.95$. The 115



Figure 6. POM photos of cholesteric droplets at $N_0 = 3.05$ (a), $N_0 = 3.25$ (b), $N_0 = 3.60$ (c), $N_0 = 3.71$ (d), $N_0 = 3.92$ (e), and $N_0 = 3.98$ (f) taken in the crossed polarisers (first row) and without analyser when the microscope is focused on the centre (second row) and above the droplet centre (third row). Schemes of the twisted defect loops on the droplet surface (fourth row).

untwisting of the cholesteric helix is observed in the layer-like structure, at that the discrepancy 116 between N and N_0 decreases as the droplet diameter increases more slowly than in the droplets with 117 the strong homeotropic anchoring [50]. Apparently, the effect is due to the weak polar energy of 118 conical anchoring. As a result, both the value of N_0 and the size of the droplet should affect the formed 119 structure similar to the case of CLC in the flat layer with tangential-conical boundary conditions, where 120 the orientational structure depends not only on the ratio of layer thickness to the intrinsic helix pitch 121 but and the CLC layer thickness [51]. The composite material under study can be interesting for the 122 development of CLC dispersed systems in which the layer structure uniformity is an important factor, 123

for instance, for optical lasing [52].

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