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NEMATICONS

Spatial Optical Solitons in Nematic Liquid Crystals

GAETANO ASSANTO

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Nematicons

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Nematicons

Spatial Optical Solitons in Nematic Liquid Crystals

Edited by

GAETANO ASSANTO



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To my parents

Contents

Preface	xv
Acknowledgments	xvii
Contributors	xix
Chapter 1. Nematicons	1
<i>Gaetano Assanto, Alessandro Alberucci, and Armando Piccardi</i>	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.1.1 Nematic Liquid Crystals	1
1.1.2 Nonlinear Optics and Solitons	3
1.1.3 Initial Results on Light Self-Focusing in Liquid Crystals	3
1.2 Models	4
1.2.1 Scalar Perturbative Model	5
1.2.2 Anisotropic Perturbative Model	9
1.3 Numerical Simulations	13
1.3.1 Nematicon Profile	13
1.3.2 Gaussian Input	14
1.4 Experimental Observations	17
1.4.1 Nematicon–Nematicon Interactions	22
1.4.2 Modulational Instability	26
1.5 Conclusions	31
References	33
Chapter 2. Features of Strongly Nonlocal Spatial Solitons	37
<i>Qi Guo, Wei Hu, Dongmei Deng, Daquan Lu, and Shigen Ouyang</i>	
2.1 Introduction	37
2.2 Phenomenological Theory of Strongly Nonlocal Spatial Solitons	38
2.2.1 The Nonlinearly Induced Refractive Index Change of Materials	38
2.2.2 From the Nonlocal Nonlinear Schrödinger Equation to the Snyder–Mitchell Model	39
2.2.3 An Accessible Soliton of the Snyder–Mitchell Model	42
2.2.4 Breather and Soliton Clusters of the Snyder–Mitchell Model	45
2.2.5 Complex-Variable-Function Gaussian Breathers and Solitons	46

2.2.6	Self-Induced Fractional Fourier Transform	47
2.3	Nonlocal Spatial Solitons in Nematic Liquid Crystals	49
2.3.1	Voltage-Controllable Characteristic Length of NLC	50
2.3.2	Nematicons as Strongly Nonlocal Spatial Solitons	52
2.3.3	Nematicon–Nematicon Interactions	54
2.4	Conclusion	61
	Appendix 2.A: Proof of the Equivalence of the Snyder–Mitchell Model (Eq. 2.16) and the Strongly Nonlocal Model (Eq. 2.11)	61
	Appendix 2.B: Perturbative Solution for a Single Soliton of the NNLSE (Eq. 2.4) in NLC	62
	References	66
Chapter 3.	Theoretical Approaches to Nonlinear Wave Evolution in Higher Dimensions	71
	<i>Antonmaria A. Minzoni and Noel F. Smyth</i>	
3.1	Simple Example of Multiple Scales Analysis	71
3.2	Survey of Perturbation Methods for Solitary Waves	77
3.3	Linearized Perturbation Theory for Nonlinear Schrödinger Equation	81
3.4	Modulation Theory: Nonlinear Schrödinger Equation	83
3.5	Radiation Loss	88
3.6	Solitary Waves in Nematic Liquid Crystals: Nematicons	91
3.7	Radiation Loss for The Nematicon Equations	96
3.8	Choice of Trial Function	101
3.9	Conclusions	105
	Appendix 3.A: Integrals	106
	Appendix 3.B: Shelf Radius	107
	References	108
Chapter 4.	Soliton Families in Strongly Nonlocal Media	111
	<i>Wei-Ping Zhong and Milivoj R. Belić</i>	
4.1	Introduction	111
4.2	Mathematical Models	112
4.2.1	General	112
4.2.2	Nonlocality Through Response Function	113
4.3	Soliton Families in Strongly Nonlocal Nonlinear Media	115
4.3.1	One-Dimensional Hermite–Gaussian Spatial Solitons	115
4.3.2	Two-Dimensional Laguerre–Gaussian Soliton Families	116
4.3.3	Accessible Solitons in the General Model of Beam Propagation in NLC	118
4.3.4	Two-Dimensional Self-Similar Hermite–Gaussian Spatial Solitons	125
4.3.5	Two-Dimensional Whittaker Solitons	126

4.4	Conclusions	133
	References	135
Chapter 5.	External Control of Nematicon Paths	139
	<i>Armando Piccardi, Alessandro Alberucci, and Gaetano Assanto</i>	
5.1	Introduction	139
5.2	Basic Equations	140
5.3	Nematicon Control with External Light Beams	142
	5.3.1 Interaction with Circular Spots	143
	5.3.2 Dielectric Interfaces	145
	5.3.3 Comments	146
5.4	Voltage Control of Nematicon Walk-Off	147
	5.4.1 Out-of-Plane Steering of Nematicons	147
	5.4.2 In-Plane Steering of Nematicon	149
5.5	Voltage-Defined Interfaces	152
5.6	Conclusions	156
	References	156
Chapter 6.	Dynamics of Optical Solitons in Bias-Free Nematic Liquid Crystals	159
	<i>Yana V. Izdebskaya, Anton S. Desyatnikov, and Yuri S. Kivshar</i>	
6.1	Summary	159
6.2	Introduction	159
6.3	From One to Two Nematicons	160
6.4	Counter-Propagating Nematicons	162
6.5	Interaction of Nematicons with Curved Surfaces	165
6.6	Multimode Nematicon-Induced Waveguides	167
6.7	Dipole Azimuthons and Charge-Flipping	170
6.8	Conclusions	172
	References	173
Chapter 7.	Interaction of Nematicons and Nematicon Clusters	177
	<i>Catherine García-Reimbert, Antonmaria A. Minzoni, and Noel F. Smyth</i>	
7.1	Introduction	177
7.2	Gravitation of Nematicons	179
7.3	In-Plane Interaction of Two-Color Nematicons	184
7.4	Multidimensional Clusters	190
7.5	Vortex Cluster Interactions	199
7.6	Conclusions	205
	Appendix: Integrals	206
	References	206

Chapter 8. Nematicons in Light Valves	209
<i>Stefania Residori, Umberto Bortolozzo, Armando Piccardi, Alessandro Alberucci, and Gaetano Assanto</i>	
8.1 Introduction	209
8.2 Reorientational Kerr Effect and Soliton Formation in Nematic Liquid Crystals	210
8.2.1 Optically Induced Reorientational Nonlinearity	211
8.2.2 Spatial Solitons in Nematic Liquid Crystals	211
8.3 Liquid Crystal Light Valves	212
8.3.1 Cell Structure and Working Principle	213
8.3.2 Optical Addressing in Transverse Configurations	215
8.4 Spatial Solitons in Light Valves	216
8.4.1 Stable Nematicons: Self-Guided Propagation in the Longitudinal Direction	216
8.4.2 Tuning the Soliton Walk-Off	218
8.5 Soliton Propagation in 3D Anisotropic Media: Model and Experiment	220
8.5.1 Optical Control of Nematicon Trajectories	224
8.6 Soliton Gating and Switching by External Beams	224
8.7 Conclusions and Perspectives	227
References	229
Chapter 9. Propagation of Light Confined via Thermo-Optical Effect in Nematic Liquid Crystals	233
<i>Marc Warenahem, Jean-Francois Blach, and Jean-Francois Henninot</i>	
9.1 Introduction	233
9.2 First Observation in NLC	235
9.3 Characterization and Nonlocality Measurement	240
9.4 Thermal Versus Orientational Self-Waveguides	246
9.5 Applications	248
9.5.1 Bent Waveguide	248
9.5.2 Fluorescence Recovery	249
9.6 Conclusions	250
References	252
Chapter 10. Discrete Light Propagation in Arrays of Liquid Crystalline Waveguides	255
<i>Katarzyna A. Rutkowska, Gaetano Assanto, and Miroslaw A. Karpierz</i>	
10.1 Introduction	255
10.2 Discrete Systems	256
10.3 Waveguide Arrays in Nematic Liquid Crystals	258

10.4	Discrete Diffraction and Discrete Solitons	263
10.5	Optical Multiband Vector Breathers	265
10.6	Nonlinear Angular Steering	267
10.7	Landau–Zener Tunneling	268
10.8	Bloch Oscillations	270
10.9	Conclusions	272
	References	273
Chapter 11. Power-Dependent Nematicon Self-Routing		279
<i>Alessandro Alberucci, Armando Piccardi, and Gaetano Assanto</i>		
11.1	Introduction	279
11.2	Nematicons: Governing Equations	280
11.2.1	Perturbative Regime	282
11.2.2	Highly Nonlinear Regime	284
11.2.3	Simplified (1 + 1)D Model in a Planar Cell	285
11.3	Single-Hump Nematicon Profiles	287
11.3.1	(2 + 1)D Complete Model	288
11.3.2	(1 + 1)D Simplified Model	289
11.4	Actual Experiments: Role of Losses	290
11.4.1	BPM (1 + 1)D Simulations	291
11.4.2	Experiments	292
11.5	Nematicon Self-Steering in Dye-Doped NLC	293
11.6	Boundary Effects	298
11.7	Nematicon Self-Steering Through Interaction with Linear Inhomogeneities	302
11.7.1	Interfaces: Goos-Hänchen Shift	303
11.7.2	Finite-Size Defects: Nematicon Self-Escape	304
11.8	Conclusions	305
	References	306
Chapter 12. Twisted and Chiral Nematicons		309
<i>Urszula A. Laudyn and Mirosław A. Karpierz</i>		
12.1	Introduction	309
12.2	Chiral and Twisted Nematics	310
12.3	Theoretical Model	312
12.4	Experimental Results	314
12.4.1	Nematicons in a Single Layer	314
12.4.2	Asymmetric Configuration	315
12.4.3	Multilayer Propagation	317
12.4.4	Influence of an External Electric Field	317
12.4.5	Guiding Light by Light	319
12.4.6	Nematicon Interaction	319

12.5	Discrete Diffraction	321
12.6	Conclusions	323
	References	323
Chapter 13. Time Dependence of Spatial Solitons in Nematic Liquid Crystals		327
<i>Jeroen Beeckman and Kristiaan Neyts</i>		
13.1	Introduction	327
13.2	Temporal Behavior of Different Nonlinearities and Governing Equations	328
	13.2.1 Reorientational Nonlinearity	328
	13.2.2 Thermal Nonlinearity	331
	13.2.3 Other Nonlinearities	333
13.3	Formation of Reorientational Solitons	333
	13.3.1 Bias Voltage Switching Time	334
	13.3.2 Soliton Formation Time	336
	13.3.3 Experimental Observation of Soliton Formation	337
	13.3.4 Influence of Flow Effects	341
13.4	Conclusions	344
	References	344
Chapter 14. Spatiotemporal Dynamics and Light Bullets in Nematic Liquid Crystals		347
<i>Marco Peccianti</i>		
14.1	Introduction	347
	14.1.1 $(2 + 1 + 1)$ D Nonlinear Wave Propagation in Kerr Media	348
14.2	Optical Propagation Under Multiple Nonlinear Contributions	349
	14.2.1 Multiple Nonlinearities and Space–Time Decoupling of the Nonlinear Dynamics	349
	14.2.2 Suitable Excitation Conditions	350
14.3	Accessible Light Bullets	351
	14.3.1 From Nematicons to Spatiotemporal Solitons	351
	14.3.2 Experimental Conditions for Accessible Bullets Observation	353
14.4	Temporal Modulation Instability in Nematicons	355
14.5	Soliton-Enhanced Frequency Conversion	355
14.6	Conclusions	357
	References	358
Chapter 15. Vortices in Nematic Liquid Crystals		361
<i>Antonmaria A. Minzoni, Luke W. Sciberras, Noel F. Smyth, and Annette L. Worthy</i>		
15.1	Introduction	361

15.2	Stabilization of Vortices in Nonlocal, Nonlinear Media	364
15.3	Vortex in a Bounded Cell	373
15.4	Stabilization of Vortices by Vortex–Beam Interaction	378
15.5	Azimuthally Dependent Vortices	382
15.6	Conclusions	387
	References	389
 Chapter 16. Dispersive Shock Waves in Reorientational and Other Optical Media		391
	<i>Tim R. Marchant</i>	
16.1	Introduction	391
16.2	Governing Equations and Modulational Instability	392
16.3	Existing Experimental and Numerical Results	394
16.4	Analytical Solutions for Defocusing Equations	396
16.5	Analytical Solutions for Focusing Equations	398
	16.5.1 The 1 + 1 Dimensional Semianalytical Soliton	400
	16.5.2 Uniform Soliton Theory	402
	16.5.3 Comparisons with Numerical Solutions	403
16.6	Conclusions	406
	References	407
 Index		411

Preface

Solitons in physics and solitons in optics are well-established contemporary topics, addressed in a large number of scientific papers and several books. Spatial optical solitons form a specific class, as optics in space is characterized by diffraction rather than dispersion, beam size rather than pulse duration, one or two transverse dimensions rather than one in the temporal domain. For a long time, the available experimental observations of optical solitons in space were limited by the magnitude of the material nonlinearities, until molecular and photorefractive media allowed investigating them at low power and with continuous-wave sources, including incoherent ones. Among the well-known molecular dielectrics exhibiting a large optically nonlinear response were liquid crystals, typically employed in thin samples. It was realized in the early days of both nonlinear optics and liquid crystals that the reorientational response of nematic liquid crystals could lead to quite impressive effects, both in the electro-optic and all-optical domains. Later on, beam propagation over extended distances in nematic liquid crystals was exploited to demonstrate self-focusing and related phenomena, until it became clear that optical spatial solitons could be supported by such a response at the molecular level. I came across light self-localization in nematic liquid crystals during international meetings, where I attended the inspiring presentations by Prof. M. Karpierz (Poland) and Prof. M. Warengem (France) on light self-confinement in nematic liquid crystals, and decided to get involved in research on nematicons. The discussions with Prof. I. C. Khoo were enlightening and the collaboration with Prof. C. Umeton allowed the program to get started on the right foot. The term “nematicon” was actually coined during a car trip in Poland as I was having a conversation on the topic with M. Karpierz and G. I. Stegeman. The Greek root *νεματικός* means “filament-like” or “spaghetti-like,” appropriate to both the topic and the culinary culture of someone like me, of Italian birth and upbringing.

This is the first book specifically dealing with spatial optical solitons in nematic liquid crystals. It is a multiauthor contribution to the field and contains review as well as original (previously unpublished) material, from theoretical models to advanced numerical simulations and from experimental observations to applications. The various contributors and chapters have been selected and invited in order to cover most of the relevant activities in this field over the past 12 years.

G. ASSANTO

Italy
February 2012

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Prof. Glenn Boreman and his wife, Maggie, friends since my PhD studies at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona, encouraged me to consider preparing a Wiley book on nematicons. George Telecki soon joined them in keeping up the necessary pressure. Thanks a lot. I hope you were right and that readers will enjoy this book.

I thank all the authors who kindly accepted my invitation to contribute one or more chapters, and to subject themselves to a number of requests concerning contents, style, mode of presentation, and deadlines. I express my gratitude to all the students and colleagues who do not appear as book contributors but are coauthors of papers and precious actors inspiring various portions of the scientific activities. They include R. Asquini, R. Barboza, I. Burgess, O. Buchnev, G. Coschignano, D. Christodoulides, A. d'Alessandro, A. de Luca, R. Dabrowski, A. Dyadyusha, A. Fratalocchi, M. Kaczmarek, I. C. Khoo, M. Kwasny, L. Lucchetti, R. Morandotti, E. Nowinowski-Kruszelnicki, A. Pasquazi, K. A. Rutkowska, S. V. Serak, F. Simoni, G. I. Stegeman, N. Tabiryan, M. Trotta, and C. Umeton.

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GA

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1

Nematicons

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

The term *nematicon* was coined to denote the material, nematic liquid crystals (NLC), supporting the existence of optical spatial solitons via a molecular response to light, a *reorientational* nonlinearity. *Nematicons* was first used in the title of Reference 1, after three years since the first publication on reorientational spatial optical solitons in NLC [2]. Since then, a large number of results, including experimental, theoretical, and numerical, have been presented in papers and conferences and formed a body of literature on the subject. In this chapter we attempt to summarize the most important among them, leaving the details to the specific articles but trying to provide a feeling of the amount of work carried out in slightly more than a decade.

1.1.1 Nematic Liquid Crystals

Liquid crystals are organic mesophases featuring various degrees of spatial order while retaining the basic properties of a fluid. In the absence of absorbing dopants, they are excellent dielectrics, transparent from the ultraviolet to the mid-infrared, with highly damaged thresholds, relatively low electronic susceptibilities, and significant birefringence at the molecular level and in the nematic phase. In the latter phase, their elongated molecules have the same average angular orientation, although their individual location is randomly distributed as they are free to move (Fig. 1.1a). NLC exhibit a molecular nonlinearity; when an electric field is present, the electrons in the molecular orbitals tend to oscillate with it and give rise to dipoles which, in turn, react to and tend to align with the field in order to minimize the resulting Coulombian torque [3–5] (Fig. 1.1b–c). This torque is

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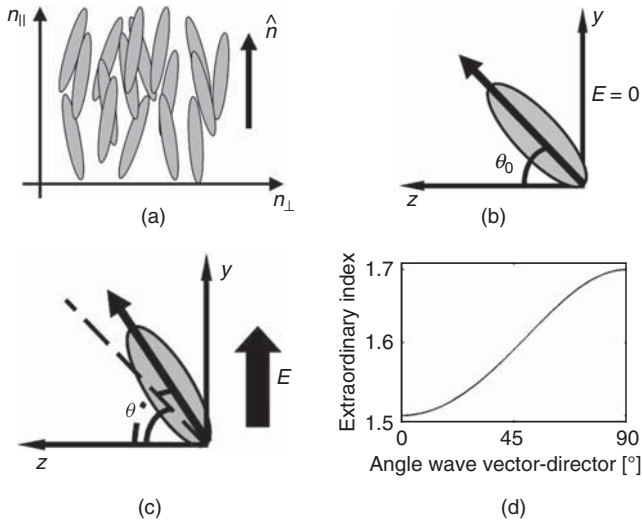


FIGURE 1.1 (a) Sketch of molecular distribution in the nematic phase and definition of director \hat{n} ; the ellipses represent NLC molecules. (b) Director orientation in the absence of electric field: the angle θ_0 is determined by anchoring at the boundaries. (c) In a positive uniaxial NLC, a linearly polarized electric field can induce dipoles and rotate the molecular director towards its vector; the resulting stationary angle θ is determined by the equilibrium between the electric torque and the elastic intermolecular links. (d) Extraordinary refractive index versus angle between wave vector and director for a positive uniaxial NLC with $n_{\parallel} = 1.7$ and $n_{\perp} = 1.5$.

counteracted by the elastic forces stemming from intermolecular links: equilibrium is established when the free energy of the system is minimized, as modeled by a set of Euler–Lagrange equations. Because the polarizability of the molecules is higher along their major axes, their reorientation toward the field will increase the optical density, both at the microscopic and macroscopic levels. It is noteworthy that an initial orthogonality between the field and the induced molecular dipoles corresponds to a threshold effect known as *Fredericksz transition* [3]. For static or low frequency fields, reorientation leads to a large electro-optic response with a positive refractive index variation for light polarized in the same plane of the field lines and the long molecular axes [3]. For fields at optical frequencies, the average angular orientation or molecular director in the nematic phase corresponds to the optic axis of the equivalent uniaxial crystal; hence, the refractive index for extraordinarily polarized electric fields (i.e., with field vector coplanar with both optic axis and wave-vector) will increase with the orientation angle θ (Fig. 1.1c–d for wave-vectors along z).

The reorientational mechanism described above is neither instantaneous nor fast (see Chapter 13), but can be very large, with effective Kerr coefficients n_2 of about 10^{-4} cm/W^2 [6], that is, eight to twelve orders of magnitude larger than that in CS_2 and in electronic media, respectively [7]. Therefore, nonlinear effects can be observed in NLC even with continuous wave lasers, at variance with many other nonlinear dielectrics often requiring pulsed excitations.

Nevertheless, the reorientational response is not the only available response in NLC. Owing to their fluidic nature, a high electric field can change the portion of molecules aligned to the director, that is, can affect the order parameter [8], particularly in the presence of dye dopants [9]. Doped NLC also features an enhanced reorientational nonlinearity because of the Janossy effect [10]. As a result of thermo-optic effect, a nonlinear response also stems from temperature changes, modifying the refractive indices mainly via the order parameter in phase transitions [6] (see Chapter 9). Moreover, NLC can show the photorefractive effect [4] and fast electronic nonlinearities (see Chapter 14).

1.1.2 Nonlinear Optics and Solitons

In nonlinear optics, the basic example of an intensity-dependent refractive index is the Kerr response $n(I) = n_0 + n_2 I$. When n_2 is positive, the index increases with the light intensity and, in the case of a finite beam, it gives rise to a lens-like refractive distribution, which is capable of self-focusing the excitation. Such a mechanism can actually compensate for the natural diffraction of the beam, resulting (in the simplest case) in a size/profile-invariant spatial soliton. Otherwise stated, the excitation beam deforms the refractive index distribution of the nonlinear (initially uniform) dielectric, generating a transverse graded-index profile that acts as a waveguide, that is, confines the field into a guided mode. The fundamental soliton in space is the lowest order mode guided by the self-induced dielectric waveguide. Spatial solitons of a Kerr nonlinearity, the so-called Townes solitons [11], tend to be unstable in two transverse dimensions because the exact balance of diffraction and self-focusing is achieved at a critical power [12, 13]. They are stable in one dimension (e.g., in planar waveguides [14]) or in the presence of higher order effects as compared to the Kerr law, such as saturation of the nonlinear change in index [15, 16], multiphoton absorption [17], discreteness [18, 19], and nonlocality [20]. In most cases they are observable in actual media although, being no longer exact solutions of an integrable differential system, they should be rigorously referred to as *spatial solitary waves* [21]. The terms soliton and solitary wave are interchangeably used throughout this chapter.

1.1.3 Initial Results on Light Self-Focusing in Liquid Crystals

As discussed in Section 1.1.1, several terms can contribute to the nonlinear response of NLC. Experiments conducted in the early 1980s demonstrated that, in undoped NLC, the dominant contribution is the reorientational nonlinearity [6, 22, 23]. An equivalent Kerr response was measured with light beams passing through the thickness of a planar cell, the latter behaving as a lens, the focus of which is dependent on the input power. For Rayleigh distances much smaller than the NLC layer thickness, rings could be observed in the diffraction pattern [24].

An experiment on self-focusing in the bulk of a dye-doped NLC layer was carried out in 1993 by Braun et al. [25], who imaged the scattered light from a beam propagating in a cylindrical geometry with NLC subject to Fredericksz

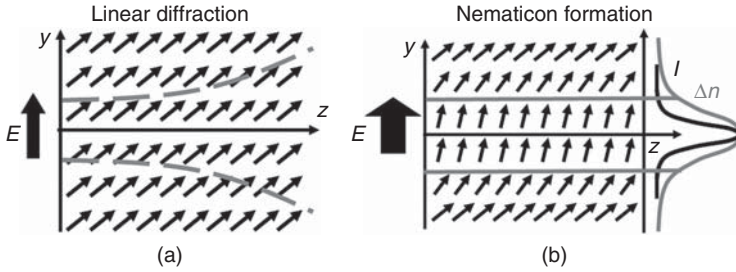


FIGURE 1.2 Basic physics of nematicons. An extraordinarily polarized bell-shaped beam with wave-vector along \hat{z} is launched in an NLC layer with director lying in the plane yz . The major axes of the molecules are at an angle $\neq 90^\circ$ with the wave-vector, thanks to a pretilt (the arrows indicate the molecular director). (a) In the linear regime light does not affect the angular distribution of the director: the beam diffracts as in homogeneous media. (b) Conversely, at high powers the director is perturbed and reorients toward \hat{y} , increasing θ and thus the refractive index (Fig. 1.1d). The perturbation is stronger where the intensity I is higher; hence, an index well is created by the light beam itself, leading to the formation of a waveguide and a self-trapped nematicon. Noticeably, the perturbation extends far beyond the beam profile owing to the elastic links between molecules. For the sake of simplicity, in this illustration the role of walk-off is ignored (Section 1.2.1).

threshold. Various phenomena were observed, including undulation, filamentation, and nonstationary evolution along the capillary; they were interpreted and modeled with joint reorientational and nonlinear Schrödinger equations [26–27]. After such a pioneering work, self-localization of light as a consequence of thermo-optic effects in capillaries was reported by Derrien et al. [28]; the interplay between thermal and reorientational responses was addressed by Warengem et al. [29] (see Chapter 9). The use of suitably built planar cells with the director tilted by an external bias to avoid the Freedericksz threshold allowed Peccianti et al. to observe the profile-invariant spatial solitons at a few milliWatts [2]. Unbiased planar cells with pretilt determined by rubbing permitted the detailed study of walk-off [30] (see Chapter 6). Figure 1.2 sketches the basic mechanism of nematicon formation via a purely reorientational response.

Finally, nematicons were also reported in slab waveguides with homeotropically aligned NLC [31], in one-dimensional arrays of coupled waveguides [18, 32] (see Chapter 10) and in twisted/chiral NLC [33, 34] (see Chapter 12).

1.2 MODELS

In this section, we review the main theoretical results concerning nonlinear light propagation in NLC cells, with specific reference to a reorientational response supporting optical spatial solitons as well as modulational instability. We first discuss scalar geometries (voltage-biased cells), that is, those in which the role of birefringent walk-off can be left aside. Afterward, we consider the most general case of cells where the walk-off has a substantial effect.

The director distribution can be described by the two polar angles ξ (tilt from the plane yz) and ζ (in the plane yz) (Fig. 1.3a). In addition, θ is the angle

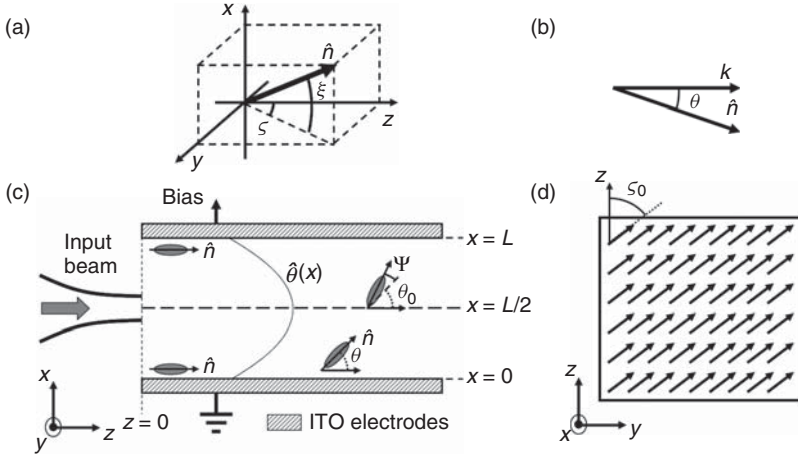


FIGURE 1.3 (a) Definition of polar angles describing the director in the xyz space. (b) Definition of the angle θ between the wave-vector \mathbf{k} and the director \hat{n} . (c) Side view sketch of a biased planar NLC cell with anchoring condition at the interfaces such that $\hat{n} \parallel \hat{z}$ (i.e., $\theta = \xi$) and a focused light beam launched along z . The structure is assumed to be infinitely extended along y . (d) Top view of a planar cell showing the rubbing angle ζ_0 in the plane yz ; the arrows represent the director distribution in the absence of external excitations (neither bias nor illumination).

between the beam wave-vector \mathbf{k} and the molecular director \hat{n} (Fig. 1.3b). In scalar geometries $\zeta = 0$, the latter implying $\theta = \xi$ (Fig. 1.3c). In general, $\zeta \neq 0$ owing to the anchoring at the (glass/NLC) interfaces parallel to the plane yz ; at rest the director \hat{n} lies in the plane yz at an angle ζ_0 with z (Fig. 1.4d).

We stress that the equations and the results shown hereby hold valid in the limit of small optical perturbations; the highly nonlinear case is dealt with in Chapter 11.

1.2.1 Scalar Perturbative Model

We consider the configuration of Fig. 1.3c: a finite light beam is launched in the planar NLC cell with wave-vector along the z axis and the field linearly polarized along the x axis. Two parallel glass plates contain the NLC, with molecular director \hat{n} lying in the plane xz (i.e., $\hat{n} \cdot \hat{y} = 0$) at an angle θ with \hat{z} (i.e., $\hat{n} \cdot \hat{z} = \cos \theta$). A low frequency electric field E_{LF} is applied (via transparent electrodes on the plates) across \hat{x} to overcome the Fréedericksz threshold and pretilt the molecules in the plane xz via the electro-optic response, creating a potential $\hat{\theta}(x)$ in the absence of illumination; $\hat{\theta}$ depends only on x due to the symmetry of the problem.

In this configuration the beam excites only the extraordinary component, generally at the walk-off δ with respect to \hat{x} , owing to birefringence. Hereby, we scalarize the problem and assume the electric field E_{opt} of the beam to be linearly polarized along \hat{x} , leaving the vectorial case to Section 1.2.2. The use of a scalar model also implies neglecting the tilt between Poynting and wave-vectors. Let us define A , the slowly varying envelope of E_{opt} , that is,

$$E_{\text{opt}} = A(x, y, z) \exp [ik_0 n_e(\theta_0) z]$$

with θ_0 the orientation without light and $n_e(\theta) = \left(\frac{\cos^2 \theta}{\epsilon_{\perp}} + \frac{\sin^2 \theta}{\epsilon_{\parallel}} \right)^{-1/2}$ the extraordinary wave refractive index, where ϵ_{\perp} (ϵ_{\parallel}) is the electronic susceptibility perpendicular (along) to \hat{n} . In the paraxial approximation, light propagation is ruled by [2]

$$2ik \frac{\partial A}{\partial z} + \nabla_{xy}^2 A + k_0^2 \epsilon_a \sin(2\theta_0) \Psi A = 0, \quad (1.1)$$

where $k = k_0 n_e(\theta_0)$ and we set $\theta = \theta_0 + \Psi$, with Ψ being the light-induced perturbation on θ .

As we are interested in the reorientational nonlinearity, we need a further equation describing how the angle θ varies under the application of both E_{opt} and E_{LF} . To this extent, minimization of the NLC free energy that assumes a single constant to describe the elastic (intermolecular) forces, yields the Euler–Lagrange equation [3, 35]

$$\begin{aligned} K \frac{\hat{\theta}}{\theta_0} \left[\nabla^2 \Psi + \frac{\cos(2\theta)}{K} \left(\Delta \epsilon_{\text{LF}} E_{\text{LF}}^2 + \frac{\epsilon_0 \epsilon_a |A|^2}{2} \right) \Psi \right] \\ + K \frac{\Psi}{\theta_0} \frac{d^2 \hat{\theta}}{dx^2} + \frac{2K}{\theta_0} \frac{d\Psi}{dx} \frac{d\hat{\theta}}{dx} + \frac{\epsilon_0 \epsilon_a |A|^2}{4} \sin(2\hat{\theta}) = 0, \end{aligned} \quad (1.2)$$

with $\Delta \epsilon_{\text{LF}}$ being the anisotropy and K the Frank elastic constant, and $\theta(x, y, z) = \hat{\theta}(x) + \frac{\theta(x)}{\theta_0} \Psi(x, y, z)$ being $d^2 \hat{\theta}/dx^2 + (\Delta \epsilon_{\text{LF}} E_{\text{LF}}^2/2) \sin(2\hat{\theta}) = 0$ [35]. Equation 1.2 is obtained when $(\hat{\theta}/\theta_0)\Psi \ll \hat{\theta}$, that is, in the perturbative limit.

For straight beam trajectories (i.e., homogeneous medium, uniform director distribution, no walk-off) we can set $\hat{\theta} \approx \theta_0$. When $\epsilon_0 \epsilon_a |A|^2 \ll \Delta \epsilon_{\text{LF}} E_{\text{LF}}^2$ and the beam axis is in the cell mid-plane $x = 0$ with $d\hat{\theta}/dx = 0$, the light-induced reorientation is governed by [35]

$$K \nabla^2 \Psi - \frac{\sin(2\theta_0)}{2\theta_0} \left[1 - 2\theta_0 \frac{\cos(2\theta_0)}{\sin(2\theta_0)} \right] \Delta \epsilon_{\text{LF}} E^2 \Psi + \frac{\epsilon_0 \epsilon_a}{4} \sin(2\theta_0) |A|^2 = 0, \quad (1.3)$$

that is, by a Yukawa (or screened Poisson) equation, with forcing term given by the light intensity and screening length l equal to

$$l = \sqrt{\frac{2\theta_0}{\sin(2\theta_0) - 2\theta_0 \cos(2\theta_0)} \frac{K}{\Delta \epsilon_{\text{LF}} E^2}} = c_l(\theta_0) l_{\text{LC}}, \quad (1.4)$$

where we set $c_l(\theta_0) = \sqrt{\frac{2\theta_0}{\sin(2\theta_0) - 2\theta_0 \cos(2\theta_0)}}$ and $l_{\text{LC}} = \sqrt{\frac{K}{\Delta \epsilon_{\text{LF}} E^2}}$. It is straightforward to obtain $\lim_{\theta_0 \rightarrow 0} c_l = \infty$ and $c_l(\theta_0 = \pi/2) = 1$; between these two extrema c_l decreases monotonically. We note that θ_0 depends only on the applied voltage

$V \approx E_{\text{LF}}L$; hence, Equation 1.4 provides $l = c_l[\theta_0(V)]\sqrt{K/\Delta\epsilon_{\text{LF}}}L/V$ and for a given bias V , the spatial width of the nonlinear response is proportional to the cell thickness L .

The system formed by Equations 1.1 and 1.3 governs nonlinear light propagation in biased NLC cells; for any NLC and cell size (i.e., thickness L), the parameters depend on the bias via the applied electric field and θ_0 , that is, on low frequency reorientation bias, including pretilt. Such a feature allows for electrically tuning both nonlinearity and nonlocality of the medium [36].

To quantify the nonlinearity, let us define the material-dependent parameter $\gamma = \epsilon_0\epsilon_a/(4K)$; using Equation 1.3, Ψ can be expressed via the Green formalism as

$$\Psi = \gamma \sin(2\theta_0) \int G(\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}') |A(\mathbf{r}')|^2 d^3\mathbf{r}', \quad (1.5)$$

where $G(\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}')$ is the Green function of the Yukawa equation (Eq. 1.3).

Using Equation 1.5 the *photonic potential* [defined as $V_{\text{ph}} = k_0^2\epsilon_a \sin(2\theta_0)\Psi$ and corresponding to the potential with a change in sign] reads $V_{\text{ph}} = k_0^2\epsilon_a\gamma \sin^2(2\theta_0) \int G(\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}') |A(\mathbf{r}')|^2 d^3\mathbf{r}'$. We can thus write the effective (nonlocal) Kerr coefficient as

$$n_2^{\text{eff}} = \frac{\epsilon_0\epsilon_a^2}{4K} l^2(\theta_0) \sin^2(2\theta_0) = \frac{\epsilon_0\epsilon_a^2}{4K} l_{\text{LC}}^2 c_l^2(\theta_0) \sin^2(2\theta_0). \quad (1.6)$$

The square dependence on the screening length l^2 stems from the integral in Equation 1.5: for intensity distributions maintaining their transverse size with respect to l (i.e., $|A(\mathbf{r}/l)|^2$ invariant), the perturbation Ψ scales with l^2 . Conversely, the magnitude of the nonlocality, that is, the ratio between the widths of the photonic potential and the intensity profile, is determined by l . In fact, in the limit $l \rightarrow \infty$, Equation 1.3 becomes a Poisson equation, with degree of nonlocality fixed by the boundaries (see Chapter 11 and references therein). After setting $|A|^2 = |B|^2/l^2$, for $l \rightarrow 0$ we get $\Psi \propto |B|^2$: in this regime NLC resemble local Kerr media.

1.2.1.1 Solitary Waves Let us define the normalized coordinates $X = \sqrt{2k}x$, $Y = \sqrt{2k}y$, and $Z = z$; we also introduce the normalized quantities $\psi = k_0^2 \sin(2\theta_0)/(2K)\Psi$ and $a = \sqrt{1/(k_0^2 n_2^{\text{eff}})}A$, with $\alpha = 1/(2kl^2)$. The parameter α is inversely proportional to nonlocality, that is, α is equal to zero if the nonlocality range is infinite, whereas it tends to ∞ in the local (Kerr) case. Equations 1.1 and 1.3 now read [35]

$$\frac{1}{2k} \frac{\partial^2 \psi}{\partial Z^2} + \nabla_{XY}^2 \psi - \alpha \psi + |a|^2 = 0, \quad (1.7)$$

$$i \frac{\partial a}{\partial Z} + \nabla_{XY}^2 a + \psi a = 0. \quad (1.8)$$