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Following Coupled Electronic-Nuclear Motion through Conical Intersections in the Ultrafast Relaxation of β -apo-8'-carotenal

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Abstract

Ultrafast transient electronic absorption, one- and two- dimensional electronic-vibrational spectroscopies were used to study the non-radiative relaxation dynamics of β -apo-8'-carotenal (bapo), a model aldehyde containing carotenoid, in cyclohexane and acetonitrile solutions. 2D electronic-vibrational (2DEV) spectroscopy allows for a direct correlation between the intrinsically coupled electronic and vibrational degrees of freedom, which are thought to play an important role in driving relaxation of bapo from the bright S_2 and lower-lying dark S_1 state. Line shapes of features in the 2DEV spectra allow us to make more definitive assignments of excited state vibrations of bapo in acetonitrile. Anisotropy studies definitively demonstrate that the excited state dynamics of bapo do not involve a *trans-cis* isomerization, counter to prior hypotheses. For specific vibrational modes, the electronic and vibrational line shapes remain correlated beyond the decay of the S_2 excited state, indicating that the transfer of molecules to the S_1 state is impulsive and involves a conical intersection in the vertical Franck-Condon region.

1. Introduction

Carotenoids play a dual role in the photosynthetic machinery,¹ acting as efficient light harvesters^{2,3} and photo-protective radical quenchers,⁴ however, the non-radiative molecular mechanisms that underlie their functionality remain nebulous.^{5,6} The linear polyene chain of carotenoids is responsible for their strong visible absorption, and consensus has established the electronic transitions can be described in the C_{2h} point group.⁵ The precise number of ultrafast relaxation pathways from the optically bright S_2 ($1^1B_u^+$) state to the dark S_1 ($2^1A_g^-$) state is unclear: whether intermediate dark states of unknown electronic character participate (*e.g.* S^* , S_x , S^\dagger),^{5,7,8} or if ground state conformers give rise to a separate manifold of states^{9,10} remains widely debated.^{2,3,6} Carbonyl containing carotenoids, carotenals, form the most abundant sub-set of the polyenes in natural photosynthetic organisms. In environments such as polar solution or inside proteins, carotenals are able to access an intramolecular charge-transfer (ICT) state thought to be associated with the C=O group that is conjugated with the polyene chain. A large number of studies have explored the nature of the charge-transfer state and whether it is connected to the S_1 manifold, or a completely independent electronic state.¹¹⁻¹⁸

The role of nuclear motions mediating the S_2 - S_1 coupling has been explored in several experimental and theoretical studies for β -carotene, and many groups have proposed that the crossing is driven by a conical intersection (CI) that links the S_2 and S_1 states.¹⁹⁻²¹ CIs provide an ultrafast funnel for non-radiative transfer between the two states, and are formed when two electronic potential energy surfaces (PESs) intersect. CIs are constructed from two key coordinates: the tuning and coupling co-ordinates (the so called *g*- and *h*- planes).^{22,23} Motion along the tuning co-ordinate, first brings the states into degeneracy at the point of intersection. Continued movement in the same direction, subsequently breaks this degeneracy. Typically these modes are in-plane nuclear motions, as dictated by symmetry. The coupling mode(s) are out-of-plane nuclear motions that break the degeneracy of the states at every point on the intersection, and provide the off-diagonal coupling mediating surface crossing. Experimental and theoretical studies for smaller polyenes (up to decapentaene) have shown that the C=C and C-C bond lengths are different for the minima on the S_0 , S_1 and S_2 states. At the S_2 minimum, the C=C and C-C bond lengths become more even compared to S_0 , *i.e.* the π -conjugation is more delocalized, whereas in the S_1 state, the bond orders are inverted compared to the ground state.²⁴ Pioneering

ab initio studies by Garavelli, Olivucci, Robb and co-workers for *trans*-hexatriene, identified the two key co-ordinates at the CI between the bright S_2 and dark S_1 states; slight displacement along a co-ordinate that lengthened the C=C and shortened the C–C back-bone bonds brought the S_2 and S_1 states into degeneracy, and out-of-plane back bone vibrations formed the coupling co-ordinate at the S_2/S_1 conical intersection.^{25,26} *Ab initio* calculations for polyenes with longer chain lengths become progressively more computationally expensive and unreliable due to an increased density of electronic states. The lack of high level *ab initio* calculations that can capture the photo-physically relevant parts of the ground and excited PESs for carotenoids with chain lengths equal to β -carotene is a long-standing problem, and would greatly assist interpreting time resolved spectroscopies such as transient absorption^{7,11} or multidimensional electronic spectroscopy of carotenoids.^{8,13,27,28}

The non-radiative relaxation pathways of β -apo-8'-carotenal, a model carotenal (see Fig. 1(a)), have received a great deal of attention in the last 5 years, and have been probed with transient absorption, transient infrared, transient-2D-infrared (*t*-2DIR) and femtosecond stimulated Raman spectroscopy (FSRS) techniques.^{16,29-35} In this study, we investigate the coupled electronic-vibrational relaxation from the S_2 state of β -apo-8'-carotenal (bapo), in cyclohexane and acetonitrile solutions using several different optical spectroscopies; transient absorption and broadband visible-pump, mid-infrared probe experiments, the latter we employ with far greater time-resolution than previous studies.^{16,32-34} We also utilize two-dimensional electronic-vibrational spectroscopy (2DEV),³⁶ a technique that is uniquely placed to directly correlate the electronic and vibrational degrees of freedom, which are expected to be strongly coupled in carotenoids.^{20,37,38} From our combined studies, we are able to monitor the decay of bapo from the S_2 state and explore the role of CIs in the non-radiative decay in cyclohexane and acetonitrile solutions. Using polarization anisotropy measurements, we demonstrate that bapo does not undergo any immediate *trans-cis* isomerization along the polyene backbone on the excited potential energy surface, counter to previous studies of bapo,^{31,32} and other carotenoids.^{39,40} We observe correlated and anti-correlated electronic and vibrational transition frequencies line in 2DEV spectra,^{41,42} for different vibrational modes on the excited states. From these different correlations, we are able to make far more rigorous assignments of the excited state vibrational frequencies in acetonitrile. For the C=C anti-symmetric stretching vibrational mode in

acetonitrile, the timescale for loss of correlation between the electronic and vibrational degrees of freedom persists longer than the S_2 lifetimes determined in our transient absorption measurements, and therefore provides direct evidence for the involvement of a conical intersection linking the S_2 and S_1 states of β -apo-8'-carotenal.

2. Experimental Methods

(a) Electronic-Vibrational Spectroscopy

Our one- and two- dimensional electronic-vibrational spectroscopy apparatus have been detailed previously.³⁶ Briefly, a Ti:Sapphire oscillator (Micra, Coherent) seeded a commercial regenerative amplifier (Legend, Coherent, 1 W, 1 kHz, 40 fs) that was used to pump a homebuilt mid-IR optical parametric amplifier (OPA) and a visible non co-linear optical parametric amplifier (NOPA). The output of the NOPA (centered at 515 nm, 37 nm FWHM, see Fig. 1(b)) was compressed to 20 fs using an acousto-optic dispersive programmable filter (AODPF, Dazzler, Fastlite)⁴³ and characterized by cross-wave polarized generation (Fastlite, Wizzler).⁴⁴ The AODPF pulse shaper was used to create a co-linear pair of pump pulses, \mathbf{k}_1 and \mathbf{k}_2 , with time delay t_1 , and control the relative carrier-envelope phase, ϕ . The pair of pump pulses were focused into the sample with an $f = 25$ cm protected silver off-axis parabolic mirror (Optiforms). At the sample position, the pump pulses had a combined energy of 400 nJ and a spot size of 275 μm (16.8 GW/cm^2 per beam). The probe mid-IR laser output (centered between 5.8 and 6.5 μm) was split into roughly two equal parts using a ZnSe beamsplitter, creating probe (\mathbf{k}_3) and reference mid-IR pulses. Both mid-IR reference and probe pulses were focused into the sample using an $f = 15$ cm protected gold off-axis parabolic mirror (Edmund Optics), but only the probe pulse was overlapped with the visible pump laser beam in the sample. The mid-IR pulses were compressed by addition of Germanium plates into the mid-IR beam path, to add negative group velocity dispersion.⁴⁵ The mid-IR pulse-duration was determined by cross-correlation with the visible pump beam in a thin Germanium plate, returning pulse durations of ~ 60 – 100 fs. The mid-IR probe spot size was measured to be ~ 250 μm and ~ 100 nJ at the sample (~ 3.3 GW/cm^2). The third-order non-linear signal (\mathbf{k}_{sig}) is emitted co-linear with the probe pulse from the sample. The mid-IR probe, signal and reference pulses were collimated and imaged into a spectrograph (Horiba Triax) coupled to two 64-element HgCdTe detectors (Infrared Systems Associates).

Normalization of signals with respect to the reference allowed for correction of shot-to-shot noise that is inherent to mid-IR laser pulse generation, and detection.

2DEV spectra were acquired for specific t_2 waiting times, and the t_2 delay was controlled by a motorized delay stage. Each 2DEV spectrum was collected by recording the normalized probe infrared spectral intensity (ω_3), modulated by k_{sig} , as a function of the incremented t_1 time delays between k_1 and k_2 (0–100 fs in 1.19 fs steps), for four values of $\phi = 0, \pi/2, \pi, 3\pi/4$. Each combination of t_1 and ϕ was integrated for 50 laser shots, and averaged ten times for each 2DEV surface. Every 2DEV surface was averaged for 5 scans. The frame of the pump pulses was fully rotated, and the 2DEV spectra obtained by applying a $4 \times 1 \times 1$ phase cycling routine to the t_1 – ω_3 surfaces. Fourier transform over the t_1 axis generated the resulting ω_1 – ω_3 2DEV correlation spectra.

One-dimensional visible pump, mid-IR probe data were acquired using the same apparatus and experimental conditions as detailed above, but the AODPF was used to chop pump pulses.

The polarization of the visible pump pulses was controlled by a precision achromatic half-wave plate (Meadowlark). Anisotropy measurements were performed by sequential data acquisition with the relative polarization of pump and probe laser pulses set to 0 and 90°. The anisotropy, $R(t_2)$, was calculated as: $(S_{||} - S_{\perp}) / (2S_{\perp} + S_{||})$. All other data in this study were acquired in a parallel polarization configuration.

(b) Transient Absorption

Degenerate broadband visible pump-probe experiments, henceforth referred to as transient absorption (TA), were performed using a slightly red shifted NOPA laser spectrum (524 nm center, 32 nm FWHM, 25 fs, see Fig. 1(b) for the laser spectrum). The NOPA was again compressed using the AOPDF pulse shaper, and split into pump and probe pulses with an achromatic beam splitter. For TA experiments, the pump and probe powers were set to 200 and 65 nJ, respectively, and focused to a 120 μm spot, with a combined power of 93 GW/cm² at the sample. The relative polarization of the pump and probe pulses was set to 0°. For these

experiments, a mechanical chopper was used to block alternate pump pulses. The co-linear probe and emitted signal were collimated and imaged into a spectrometer (SpectraPro 2300i, Acton Research Corporation) and frequency dispersed onto a CCD camera (Spec-10, Princeton instruments). Non-resonant Raman scattering signals were removed by subtracting solvent only TA data.

(c) Sample Preparation

β -apo-8'-carotenal ($\geq 96.0\%$, Sigma Aldrich) was kept at $-19\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ in the dark prior to experiments and used without further purification. Bapo was dissolved in acetonitrile (Sigma Aldrich), acetonitrile- d_3 (D 99.96%, Cambridge Isotopes) and cyclohexane (Sigma Aldrich) to create samples with optical densities of ~ 0.4 and ~ 0.3 at the central pump laser frequencies for mid-IR probe and visible probe experiments, respectively, in a $250\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ path length cell (2 mm thick CaF_2 windows, Harrick). See Figs. 1(b-c) for the respective visible and mid-infrared absorption spectra. Samples were sealed and continuously circulated throughout data acquisition. All data were acquired at room temperature.

(c) Density Functional Theory Calculations

The minimum energy geometries of the all *trans*- and *cis*-8' ground state conformations of β -apo-8'-carotenal were optimized using density functional theory (DFT) with the B3LYP exchange-correlation functional and a 6-311+G** basis set with an appropriate polarizable solvent continuum for cyclohexane and acetonitrile in the QChem4.1 computational suite.^{46,47} For the all-*trans* conformer, the vibrational normal modes and associated frequencies were also calculated. Time-dependent DFT (TD-DFT) with the same basis set and functional were used to calculate the S_2 - S_0 transition dipole moment (TDM).

3. Results and Discussion

(a) Density Functional Theory Calculations

DFT calculations were used to investigate the ground potential energy surface for two different conformations of bapo: *cis*-8'-apo-8'-carotenal and *trans*- β -apo-8'-carotenal. The latter is displayed in Fig. 1(a), and the former conformer is formed by a 180° rotation of the C-C bond adjacent to the aldehyde group of the all *trans*-conformer. At the B3LYP/6-311+G* level of

theory in a polarized acetonitrile solvent continuum, the *cis*-8' conformer was calculated to be 1074 cm^{-1} ($\sim 5 \times kT$ at room temperature) higher in energy than the all-*trans* form. Previous studies have calculated the energies and transition states between several *cis*-isomers of bapo²⁹ along the middle of the polyene chain, and found that the barriers to inter-conversion are very high compared to kT ($\sim 8400\text{ cm}^{-1}$). Studies have also demonstrated this for *cis*-isomers of β -carotene.^{10,48-50} Using these calculations as a guide, we are confident that the vast majority of bapo molecules will exist in the all-*trans* form at room temperature, and therefore only consider the all *trans*- form throughout the rest of this study.

The ground state FTIR spectrum of β -apo-8'-carotenal in cyclohexane and acetonitrile- d_3 are displayed in Fig. 1(c), and the respective calculated DFT vibrational normal modes (multiplied by 0.97 to correct for any anharmonicity) are displayed in Fig. 1(d). The calculated frequencies and intensities are in good agreement with the experimental FTIR spectrum (Fig. 1(c)), allowing for all the major peaks to be assigned. In cyclohexane, the peak at 1680 cm^{-1} corresponds to the C=O stretch of the aldehyde group, and the band at 1530 cm^{-1} to the C=C polyene backbone symmetric stretch. The modes at 1610 , 1560 and 1570 cm^{-1} correspond to mixed C=C anti-symmetric stretches coupled with $-\text{CH}_3$ umbrella and C-H wag motions. In acetonitrile- d_3 (dashed line in Fig. 1(c)), the vibrational linewidths are broader, and the C=O stretch is shifted to a lower frequency, presumably due to stronger interactions with the more polar solvent. There is an additional band present in cyclohexane (at 1650 cm^{-1}) that has a significantly larger intensity in acetonitrile at 1630 cm^{-1} . Our DFT calculations predict a very low infrared oscillator strength for an isolated C=C stretch on the β -ionone ring at this frequency. The ground state assignments in our study are in general agreement with prior literature.³¹⁻³³

Overlaid on the skeletal structure of bapo in Fig. 1(a) are the S_2 - S_0 electronic TDM returned from TD-DFT calculations, and the ground state $\nu_{\text{C=C}}$ symmetric and anti-symmetric vibrational TDMs. The directions of these the transition dipole moments are essential to understand correlations in 2DEV spectra presented in Section 3(c).

(b) Transient Absorption

Figures 2(a,b) display transient absorption spectra for bapo in cyclohexane and acetonitrile solutions. The spectra are dominated by two features of opposite signs, that are well characterized for carotenoids and carotenals⁵: positive signals at $\omega_{\text{VIS}} > 19200 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ correspond to ground state bleach recovery (GSB) and/or stimulated emission from the S_2 state. For $\omega_{\text{VIS}} < 19200 \text{ cm}^{-1}$, a broad negative transient dominates, attributed to $S_n \leftarrow S_1$ excited state absorptions (ESAs). Our degenerate electronic pump-probe experiments offer a superior instrument response (27 fs) than previous TA studies of β -apo-8'-carotenal,^{16,33} however, they do not stretch below $\omega_{\text{VIS}} = 18200 \text{ cm}^{-1}$, where in polar solutions the ESAs from the ICT state are expected to peak at $\sim 15400 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ($\sim 650 \text{ nm}$).^{11,14,16}

The broadband degenerate TA data could not be analyzed in a self-consistent manner by fitting the decay of individual probe frequencies— the ground state absorption stretches almost the entire probe window, and overlaps with the very broad $S_n \leftarrow S_1$ ESAs. To decompose these components, a global analysis based on singular value decomposition was performed in the Glotaran software package.⁵¹ The kinetics for both data sets in the two solvents were fit to the same model, which assumes a sequential rather than a branched kinetic scheme. Our efforts to model these data are slightly different compared to a recent study; we only required two decay components to model the data, rather than three,³³ and the error associated with these fits returned a RMS lower than 0.005 for both datasets. The spectrally resolved decay associated spectra (DAS) are shown in Figs. 2(c) and (d) for bapo in cyclohexane and acetonitrile, respectively. The DAS component with an associated hundreds of femtoseconds time constant corresponds to a broad positive feature, assigned to stimulated emission from the S_2 state, or a direct branching to S_0 from S_2 , and therefore constituting a partial recovery of the ground state bleach. The second DAS component, decays on a tens of picoseconds timescale and is pre-dominantly a negative feature corresponding to $S_n \leftarrow S_1$ ESAs. We note that at higher probe frequencies a positive component is present, and we attribute this to ground state bleach recovery from the decay of the S_1 manifold. The specific lifetimes for the different decay components are given in Table 1, and are in agreement with previous literature values of the S_2 and S_1 lifetimes.^{29,32,33}

(c) Electronic-Vibrational Spectroscopy

(i) Cyclohexane

Figure 3 displays the one-dimensional broadband visible pump, mid-IR probe spectra for two probe regions of β -apo-8'-carotenal in cyclohexane (a,c). Contour maps comprising the entire 2D data sets are given in the supporting information (SI). The spectra are almost exclusively dominated by negative bands, which correspond to excited state vibrations of bapo. The assignment of these different bands has been controversial,^{31,32} and the debate has centered on whether the central frequency of the vibrations associated with C=C and C=O bonds are shifted on the excited state compared to S_0 . Previous theoretical studies of smaller linear polyenes predict the frequencies of the backbone vibrations are significantly different on the excited states.⁵² The ground state frequencies are readily assignable with DFT calculations, however as the excited PESs of carotenoids and carotenals still present a challenge to even cutting edge *ab initio* methods,^{53,54} and cannot be relied upon to quantitatively assign excited state vibrational frequencies. Pang *et al.*, favored small shifts between S_0 and S_2/S_1 states of bapo; the vibrations are merely transposed from ground to excited state, with slight shifts in frequency due to changes in force constants or anharmonicities on excited potential energy surfaces.³¹ Di Donato *et al.*, favored a large blue shift for the C=C stretch ($\sim 100\text{ cm}^{-1}$) and red shift for C=O vibration ($\sim 60\text{ cm}^{-1}$) *cf.* S_0 , based on complete active space self consistent field (CASSCF) calculations of a smaller chain apo-carotenal.³² CASSCF does not treat dynamic electron correlation, and therefore is expected to poorly describe the electronic structure of the S_1 , and perhaps S_2 , states. More recent studies by the Righini group used FSRS³⁵ and 2D transient exchange IR³⁴ techniques. The FSRS measurement allows for a reliable identification of the excited state C=C stretch vibrational bands on the S_2 and S_1 states of bapo in cyclohexane. As we will show, visible pump mid-IR probe and 2DEV experiments bring into question the reliability of some of assignments extracted from 2D transient IR exchange measurements in polar solutions.³³

Our mid-IR pump-probe studies have a superior time resolution compared to previous studies,³¹⁻³³ and that has the benefit of fewer experimental artifacts around $t_2 = 0$ fs, such as cross-phase modulation. Figure 3(a) displays time traces for several t_2 time delays for the probe region where the S_0 C=C anti-symmetric stretches vibrations are present in cyclohexane, and are dominated by an excited state feature centered at $\omega_{\text{IR}} = 1621\text{ cm}^{-1}$. Bleaching from the ground state C=C anti-symmetric stretch vibration (1610 cm^{-1}), is expected in this region and can reconcile the

slight dip on the red edge of this band. The 1621 cm^{-1} excited state vibration does not shift in frequency with increasing t_2 delays, or show evidence of narrowing. The kinetics of the central frequency of the feature are displayed in Fig. 3(b), and show that the peak is present within the instrument response, and therefore immediately projected onto the S_2 state. We favor assigning this peak to the C=C anti-symmetric stretch, based on its decay profile and proximity to its respective ground state bleach. The decay kinetics of this vibration, and all mid-IR features, are determined by the convolution of several factors. Negative t_2 dynamics, where infrared pulses precede the visible electronic excitation create vibrational coherences that are launched onto the excited (or ground) state, subsequently emitting an IR signal (see beating at $t_2 < 0$ fs in the 2D data plots shown in the SI,^{55,56} the instrument response function (70 fs for this IR probe frequency), and the relaxation dynamics of bapo in solution. To extract the latter, the data was fitted to a convolution of a Gaussian, to describe our IRF and the pre-time zero IR signals, and a sum of two exponential decays. The returned time constants and amplitudes are given in Table 2, the fit is overlaid with the respective data, and returned 235 fs and 24.5 ps decay components. The bi-exponential decay is somewhat counter-intuitive; if the dominant relaxation channel is to transfer molecules from S_2 to S_1 , no decay would be observed. The initial ultrafast component may indicate a conical intersection in the vertical Franck-Condon region, directly funneling molecules back to S_0 , or to a lower lying dark state. An alternative explanation is the infrared transition dipole moments are weaker on the S_1 state than the S_2 state; the hundreds of femtoseconds time constant is similar to the lifetime of the S_2 state determined by TA experiments. The second decay constant is in good agreement with our TA DAS, assigned to the decay from S_1 . There is a weak but broad transient that decays with the similar time constants (see Table 2), centered roughly at 1590 cm^{-1} , and from transient 2DIR exchange spectroscopy measurements in cyclohexane,³⁴ we can assign this to the excited state C=O symmetric stretch. The large change in fundamental frequency associated with the C=O bond on the excited state (the frequency is reduced by $\sim 70\text{ cm}^{-1}$), likely reflects a weaker C–O bond on the excited state. The bond order with respect to the carbon backbone is thought to reverse on the S_1 state *cf.* S_0 ,²⁵ and the carbonyl group is conjugated with the polyene π system, and therefore the CO double bond may also acquire more single bond character. Notably, no excited state feature was observed near to 1530 cm^{-1} , which corresponds to the S_0 frequency associated with the C=C symmetric stretch.³¹⁻³³

Figure 3(c) displays data for mid-IR probe measurements centered at 1750 cm^{-1} . At early time delays ($t_2 < 500\text{ fs}$) there is a broad negative feature (contaminated by bleaching at 1680 cm^{-1} by the S_0 carbonyl stretch) that spans $1660\text{--}1760\text{ cm}^{-1}$ and rapidly decays. At $t_2 > 500\text{ fs}$, a narrower transient at $\sim 1750\text{ cm}^{-1}$ rises. Both features in these data are very similar to transients observed in FSRS experiments of bapo in cyclohexane upon 400 nm excitation.³⁵ The transients in the FSRS study were assigned, by analogy to β -carotene,²⁰ to C=C symmetric stretches initially on the S_2 state, which are transferred to the S_1 manifold. Our fits to an exponential rise and decay of the 1750 cm^{-1} vibration (see Fig. 3(d)) yield a hundreds of femtosecond time constant, 500 fs , attributed to $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$ transfer, and a picosecond decay component, 30.1 ps , that we ascribe to relaxation back to S_0 . These decay constants are longer than those obtained from TA measurements (see Section 3(b)). This might be reconciled by overlapping ground and excited state features, the latter dominates the infrared probe spectra. The respective transient electronic absorption spectra, by comparison are far easier to decompose due to far less spectral congestion.

The width of the S_1 peak narrows between 500 fs and 10 ps (see Fig. 3(c)), presumably due to vibrational cooling on the S_1 state. Analysis of FSRS spectra that excited bapo at 400 nm ,³⁵ explained the change in line shape in terms of vibrational relaxation of multiple (up to 4) quanta of the C=C symmetric stretch in an anharmonic potential on the S_1 state. In our study, our pump excitation energy is far lower, near to the S_2 absorption threshold and therefore the probability of directly exciting high vibrational levels of the C=C symmetric stretch vibration in S_2 , is lower. This difference in S_2 preparation can help reconcile the narrower line shapes in our spectra compared to the FSRS spectra.³⁵

Visible pump, mid-IR probe anisotropy measurements were used to investigate the time-dependent orientation of the excited C=C anti-symmetric and C=C symmetric stretch vibrations, relative to the $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$ electric transition dipole moment of bapo, in cyclohexane solution. These data are shown in Figure 4. For both vibrations probed, $R(t_2)$ is positive and does not decay in the first 15 ps within the given signal-to-noise ratio. The different static values of $R(t_2)$ reflect the two backbone vibrations lie at slightly different angles pseudo-parallel to the $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$ electronic transition dipole moment, as predicted by our TD-DFT calculated TDMs shown in Fig. 1(a).

The bright electronic TDM lies along the C_{2h} symmetry axis, in line with previous calculations for other polyenes.⁵⁷ The lack of time-dependency in $R(t_2)$ is an important observation; conclusions from prior studies would predict that $R(t_2)$ should decay due to molecular reorganization, such as excited state *trans-cis* isomerization along the carbon backbone,^{30,39,40} but our data can definitively rule this out, demonstrating the polyene chain remains rigid on the excited state, not undergoing any permanent isomerization. One might expect rotational relaxation to induce a decay in $R(t_2)$ within the first 15 ps, however, the electronic and vibrational transition dipoles investigated lie close to the C_{2h} axis of bapo, see Fig. 1(a). Bapo is an extreme prolate symmetric top, and rotational relaxation around the C_{2h} axis is therefore expected to be slow compared to the excited state lifetime.⁵⁸

We now turn to the two-dimensional electronic-vibrational spectroscopy measurements for the same probe regions investigated in the pump-probe studies. The main advantage of this technique over its one-dimensional counterpart, is that it allows for a direct correlation between the initial electronic (visible) excitation energies and the subsequent vibrational (mid-IR) emission, forming a $\omega_{\text{vis}}-\omega_{\text{IR}}$ correlation spectra.³⁶ 2DEV spectroscopy is uniquely placed to explore the coupled electronic-vibrational dynamics that underlie the decay from the S_2 state of bapo and investigate the influence of conical intersections in the ensuing non-radiative processes.

Figure 5 displays real total 2DEV spectra for the 1621 cm^{-1} C=C anti-symmetric stretch excited state vibration of β -apo-8'-carotenal in cyclohexane for four different waiting times. The main feature in these data is elliptical with no correlation between the electronic and vibrational frequency distributions, and displays little evolution for larger values of t_2 .

Figure 6 shows the same data as Fig. 5, but probing the S_1 excited state C=C symmetric stretch at 1750 cm^{-1} . As per our pump-probe spectra, the feature at $\sim 1750\text{ cm}^{-1}$ rises in the first few hundred femtoseconds, however, 2DEV spectra reveal a negative correlation between electronic and vibrational degrees of freedom, *i.e.* higher electronic excitation is correlated with lower vibrational frequencies.⁴¹ The line shape evolution can be characterized by the center line slope, which is directly proportional to the pump and probe frequency-frequency correlation function.

^{59,61} In 2DEV spectroscopy, the pump and probe pulses are non-degenerate and thus the slope is

different with respect to the ω_{VIS} and ω_{IR} axes. We define the two center line slopes (CLSs) for the excited state vibration as: $k_e = d\omega_{\text{IR}}/d\omega_{\text{VIS}}$ and $k'_e, d\omega_{\text{VIS}}/d\omega_{\text{IR}}$.⁴² For this dataset, we fitted the horizontal center line slope, k_e , for each 2DEV spectra at different t_2 delays. The respective fits are superimposed on 2DEV spectra in Fig. 6. The vertical CLS, k'_e was found to very close to zero.

Figure 7 plots the extracted values of k_e as a function of increasing waiting time, for the S_1 C=C symmetric stretch. The decay of k_e as a function of t_2 , was fit to an exponential decay plus an offset, and returned $\tau = 300$ fs, similar to the S_2 lifetime determined by our TA studies (see Table 1). As the S_1 vibration rises, it remains initially correlated with the initial S_2 excitation energy, meaning that the excited state $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$ surface crossing cannot involve any significant vibrational redistribution on the S_2 state and surface crossing must be ballistic; as expected for a mechanism involving a conical intersection. The S_2 - S_1 energy gap is estimated to be on the order of 7000 cm^{-1} ,⁶² and therefore equilibration on the S_1 state involves a large re-organization energy that, as evidenced via the decay of the CLS, destroys the electronic-vibrational correlation. We note that the center line slope for this feature, within our signal to noise ratio, does not reach zero and has a long-time offset, that may arise from a small static inhomogeneous broadening component.

Our recent study of center line slopes in 2DEV spectra for a model two electronic level system, demonstrated that the main factor determining the loss of correlation between electronic and vibrational degrees of freedom was vibrational dephasing (typically on the order of several picoseconds).⁴² This allowed us to extract the relative coupling strengths of specific vibrational modes to the bath. Unfortunately that is not possible here, as the S_2 lifetime of bapo is far shorter than the known vibrational dephasing timescale associated with the high frequency carbon backbone (or C=O) vibrations, and therefore the model is unable to extract these coupling constants from k_e or k'_e . Physical insights can, however, be gained from the correlated (positive slope) or anti-correlated (negative slope) nature of the CLS, and the associated decay timescale.

2DEV spectra probe the cross-peak between electronic and vibrational transition frequencies. Diagonal peaks in degenerate 2DES and 2DIR spectra are initially positively correlated in the absence of significant homogeneous broadening. Cross-peaks between diagonal features,

however, can be positively or negatively correlated, and theory has shown this to arise from correlated or anti-correlated bath fluctuations, respectively.^{63,64}

The electronic and vibrational transition frequencies are initially anti-correlated for the C=C symmetric of bapo in cyclohexane (see Fig. 6), as extracted from the CLS (see Fig. 7). The anti-correlation can be rationalized on similar grounds to previous 2DES and 2DIR studies. The physics that underlies the anti-correlated baths can be understood by considering the direction of the electronic S_2-S_0 TDM and the respective vibrational TDMs (see Fig. 1(a)). The S_2-S_0 electronic, and $\nu_{C=C}$ symmetric vibrational stretch TDMs are anti-parallel with respect to one another and will polarize their respective baths in opposing directions. The cross-peak between these two transitions therefore yields an anti-correlated peak line shape.

(ii) Acetonitrile- d_3

Our measurements for the same probe vibrations in the polar acetonitrile- d_3 solvent are remarkably different to those observed for cyclohexane. Figure 8(a) displays data for $1480 \leq \omega_{IR} \leq 1620 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. The major peak in the pump-probe spectrum centered at 1593 cm^{-1} , has been assigned to the C=O excited state stretching mode in chloroform,³⁴ however, due to spectral congestion, the assignments are not as definitive as in cyclohexane. The kinetics of the 1593 cm^{-1} vibration are displayed in Fig. 8(b) and, like in cyclohexane, the feature is immediately present on the excited state within the instrument response. The constants and amplitudes extracted from the decay of the feature are tabulated in Table 2. Our data display no sign of an ultrafast frequency shift for this mode in contrast to previous pump-probe data.³³ We observe, however, a slight blue-shift of the central frequency associated with this vibration on a picosecond time scale. By analogy with our cyclohexane assignment, and from line shapes in 2DEV data (see below), we assign this feature to the excited state C=C anti-symmetric stretch vibration.

Data for $1635 \leq \omega_{IR} \leq 1765 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ are given in Fig. 8(c), and the region is dominated by two broad peaks, consistent with prior mid-IR probe studies,^{5,31,33} the kinetics for the peak of the feature at 1721 cm^{-1} are displayed in Fig. 8(d). The pre-time zero signals for this feature are intense and omitted from fits. The peak of the feature was fitted to a convolution of a Gaussian IRF with a single exponential decay, but unlike the respective signals for cyclohexane, no rise component

was observed. The feature centered at 1721 cm^{-1} narrows for larger t_2 values (compare traces at $t_2 = 0$ fs with 5 ps). The width of the features are far broader than in cyclohexane, and acetonitrile has a large dielectric constant (37.5), and is able to significantly interact with the polar aldehyde group and accommodate an intramolecular charge-transfer state.^{5,11} A recent theoretical study of line shapes in electronic-vibrational spectroscopy predicted that the infrared line shape will be significantly broadened on electronic states with significant CT character, as the vibration acquires more dispersive character of the electronic state.⁶⁵ Guided by this theoretical prediction, and from the line shapes in the 2DEV spectra (see later), we assign the 1675 cm^{-1} vibration to the C=C symmetric stretch vibration, and the smaller feature centered at 1721 cm^{-1} to the carbonyl stretching mode.

We note that both the C=O and C=C symmetric stretch vibrations are broad. The structure in Fig. 1(a) suggests the C=C and C=O bonds are likely conjugated, and we postulate that the vibrational line shapes associated with these two modes are ~~very~~ broad because the ICT state involves moving charge from the polyene backbone to the carbonyl group. The C=C anti-symmetric stretch vibration is far narrower (see Fig. 7), because the anti-symmetric stretching vibration breaks the aromatic character of the π network. The time dependence is revealing also: the transients in Fig. 8 are immediately broad, indicating that CT character is immediate with respect to these vibrational normal modes on the S_1 and (perhaps even S_2) electronic state(s), lending support to the hypothesis that the S_1 and ICT states are not two independent electronic states with a barrier to crossing, but a single potential surface with mixed valence/charge-transfer character in polar solvents.^{5,12}

Figure 9 displays pump-probe anisotropy data for bapo in acetonitrile- d_3 , and are reminiscent of the corresponding data in cyclohexane solution (see Fig. 4). The $R(t_2)$ traces do not decay with increasing t_2 delays, but have slightly smaller static values. This reflects the influence of the solvent on the $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$ electronic transition dipole moment and/or backbone vibrational TDMS compared to cyclohexane (see Fig. 4). Further, the lack of any decay in $R(t_2)$ demonstrates, like in cyclohexane, bapo does not *trans-cis* isomerize on the excited state. This is counter to the claims of prior studies that have proposed $20\text{--}30^\circ$ distortion/twist of the polyene of bapo and other carotenoids in polar solutions.^{32,33,39,40}

Real total 2DEV spectra for the peak at 1593 cm^{-1} , assigned to the excited state C=C anti-symmetric stretch, are shown in Fig. 10 for the displayed t_2 waiting times. The 2D line shape shows a dramatic evolution with increasing waiting times; the central IR frequency blue-shifts, as observed in the one-dimensional pump-probe data (see Fig. 8(a)), but the 2DEV spectra reveal that the linewidth along the electronic excitation axis also blue-shifts and narrows. We have illustrated this for three different waiting times in Fig. 11(a) by plotting the normalized electronic line shape at $\omega_{\text{IR}} = 1583\text{ cm}^{-1}$. Cuts for $\omega_{\text{IR}} = 1600$ and 1595 cm^{-1} returned almost identical traces. To track the time evolution of the electronic axis, we fit the slices at $\omega_{\text{IR}} = 1583\text{ cm}^{-1}$ to a Gaussian line shape. The full-width half-maximum (FWHM) and central frequencies returned from the analysis are plotted in Figs. 11(b,c), respectively. The decay of these traces were fitted to an exponential decay plus an offset (solid overlaid lines), and revealed the FWHM of the feature along the electronic axis narrows by $\sim 150\text{ cm}^{-1}$ on a 740 fs timescale, and the central frequency blue-shifts by $\sim 80\text{ cm}^{-1}$ with an associated 400 fs time constant.

Fits to the center line slope along the vertical axis returned a positive correlation between electronic and vibrational degrees of freedom (see overlaid dashed lines on the spectra). Analysis of the CLS, revealed a commensurate decay for k_e' (cf. narrowing along the electronic axis) and an associated 750 fs time constant. The positive correlation between electronic and vibrational transition frequencies distributions can be rationalized in terms of correlated baths between the two degrees of freedom; the S_2 - S_0 electronic and $\nu_{\text{C=C}}$ anti-symmetric TDMs, displayed in Fig. 1(a), are parallel, re-enforcing our assignment of this excited state vibration.

The timescale for loss of correlation between electronic and vibrational degrees of freedom is longer than the S_2 lifetime (200 fs) is worth note. The long-lived correlation implies that the S_2 - S_1 relaxation is ballistic, and the bath must be frozen in the wake of the change in electronic state and associated nuclear configuration. This strongly indicates the action of a conical intersection in, or very close to, the vertical Franck-Condon region.

The dynamical changes of this feature can be explained by considering the following. We recognize that our laser bandwidth (2000 cm^{-1} wing to wing) has sufficient bandwidth to excite

one quantum of the probed vibration in the $S_2 \leftarrow S_0$ excitation step, depending on Franck-Condon activity. Alternatively it may be excited as a consequence of the S_2 - S_1 surface crossing. The 2DEV spectra are able to monitor the probe fundamental vibrational transition (and the $2 \leftarrow 1$ overtone) as it evolves on the excited states. The narrowing along the electronic axis likely arises from vibrational cooling of the probed mode on the S_1 electronic state. The simultaneous blue-shift on the electronic and IR axis can be explained by the associated change in force constant for this vibration: the bond is stronger on the S_1 state compared to S_0 and S_2 , and therefore the fundamental frequency increases, as per previous *ab initio* calculations for smaller polyenes.⁵²

The long-lived correlation as evidenced in the slow decay of the CLS beyond the S_2 lifetime, and enhanced vibrational activity associated with this vibrational mode, provide evidence to suggest that the anti-symmetric C=C mode is (one of) the tuning modes at the conical intersection between the S_2 and S_1 states.

Figure 12 displays the 2DEV spectra for the broad double peaked transient centered around 1700 cm^{-1} at four different t_2 waiting times. The peak at $\omega_{\text{IR}} \sim 1720 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ displays a negative center line slope (anti-correlation) along k_e' and by analogy with the measurements for cyclohexane, we assign this to the excited state C=C symmetric stretching mode.

The feature at 1660 cm^{-1} displays no correlation between electronic and vibration degrees of freedom and is the last of the excited state IR active modes of bapo in the fingerprint region in acetonitrile- d_3 solution to be assigned. The C=O ground state stretch is centered at almost the same frequency, 1665 cm^{-1} (Fig. 1(c)). The strong solute-solvent coupling around the polar C=O group may lead to a very rapid solvent re-organization, thereby eliminating any electronic-vibrational correlation within our time resolution. Considering these hypotheses this thereby allows us to assign this frequency to the excited state C=O stretch mode, counter to the congested transient 2DIR exchange measurements by the Righini group.³⁵

(d) General Discussion

There are several differences observed for the ultrafast dynamics of bapo in non-polar cyclohexane compared to polar acetonitrile solutions, which emerge from either static or dynamic effects. To guide this discussion, we have illustrated our proposed reaction mechanisms in Fig. 13. Starting with cyclohexane (see Fig. 13(a)), we consider the standard model with the three canonical S_0 , S_2 and S_1 states and a high energy ICT state.^{5,12} The double cones in the schematic illustrate conical intersections that link the various electronic states; our CLS for the C=C symmetric stretch indicate in cyclohexane there is a conical intersection close to the vertical Franck-Condon region that mediates the ultrafast (300 fs) transfer from S_2 to S_1 . From our time-resolved ultrafast visible and infrared probe spectra, we see no evidence for an intermediate dark state between S_2 and S_1 states.

Our results in acetonitrile vary compared to cyclohexane and the schematic is displayed in Fig. 13(b). We have depicted the S_1 and ICT state as one electronic manifold in this picture, as our mid-IR probe studies reveal that the S_1 and ICT states (thought to both have A_g^- symmetry) are either completely mixed or constitute a single electronic state, as evidenced by the immediately broad vibrational line shapes associated with the C=C symmetric and C=O excited state stretches. For acetonitrile, we have drawn the CI between the S_2 and S_1 states as being closer to the vertical Franck-Condon region than in cyclohexane based on the shorter (by 100 fs) S_2 lifetime. The slow loss of correlation between electronic and vibrational transition frequencies for the C=C anti-symmetric stretching mode, and enhanced vibrational activity associated with this excited state vibration, point towards this being (one of) the tuning modes at the CI between the S_2 and S_1 states, and therefore the reaction co-ordinate, Q , in our schematic.

The role of conical intersections driving a ballistic $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$ transfer is not a new concept,¹⁹⁻²¹ and studies of β -carotene using broadband impulsive vibrational spectroscopy (BBIVS) by Liebel *et al.* demonstrated wavepackets associated with backbone modes are conserved upon $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$ transfer,²¹ suggesting that activity associated with these nuclear motions might mean that the associated nuclear motions are the tuning modes at the CI. We note that conservation of nuclear wavepackets between two different electronic states does not necessarily indicate the nuclear motions associated with the observed vibrational wavepackets are the tuning modes, and may in fact be created in the S_2 state and act as spectators to the surface crossing, lying in an orthogonal

dimension. The notable advantages that 2DEV has over the other spectroscopies such as BBVIS, is the vibrational frequencies can be determined on the excited state as the reaction proceeds, instead of averaging over the entire t_2 decay. Further, physical insights, as we have demonstrated, can be gained from the sign and timescale for decay of the CLS.

4. Conclusions

We have studied the ultrafast relaxation dynamics of β -apo-8'-carotenal in acetonitrile and cyclohexane solutions with transient absorption, one- and two- dimensional electronic-vibrational spectroscopy. Our one-dimensional TA and mid-IR probe results are in good agreement with previous studies,^{30,32-34} however, with shorter pump pulse durations we are able to capture the earliest time epoch of the model carotenal system, monitoring the decay of molecules from the S_2 electronic state. We observe static and dynamical differences between bapo in cyclohexane and acetonitrile solutions, most notable are the line shapes associated with the C=O symmetric stretch, are influenced greatly by the coupling of the S_1 and intra-molecular charge-transfer state in acetonitrile. From our 2DEV measurements and fits to the center line slopes, we are able to offer more definitive assignments of excited state vibrations in acetonitrile solution. Our polarization anisotropy measurements in both solutions demonstrate that bapo does not undergo any immediate excited state *trans-cis* isomerization in either solvent studied, counter to prior hypotheses.^{32,33,39,40} The 2DEV measurements provide *direct* evidence for ballistic transfer of molecules between the S_2 and S_1 states, mediated via a conical intersection very close to the vertical Franck-Condon region. In acetonitrile, given vibrational excitation and the slow decay of the CLS compared to the S_2 lifetime, we propose that the C=C anti-symmetric stretch is one of the tuning modes at the conical intersection connecting the S_2 and S_1 states.

To further our understanding of the complex non-radiative relaxation dynamics of carotenoids and carotenals of chain lengths relevant to biological systems, we need a fuller (and accurate) description of the excited potential energy surfaces, specifically the character of the electronic states, their energetic ordering and the geometries that interconnect them. The best efforts to date,^{53,66} have only managed to capture the vertical excitation energies, but as this and many other studies have shown, is a very multi-dimensional problem. We hope that our 2DEV

measurements will spur on advances in theoretical calculations, and provide a new benchmark for the detail that experiments can probe in complex non-radiative dynamics. One obvious extension to the 2DEV spectroscopy presented here would be excite the S_1 state directly via two-photon absorption, prior to mid-IR probe, thus allowing for direct electronic-vibrational correlations in the S_1 state. BBVIS as championed by the group of Kukura,^{21,67} has already provided insights into the anharmonic coupling and coherent nuclear motion mediating S_2/S_1 coupling in β -carotene. Applying BBIVS to β -apo-8'-carotenal in solvents of different polarities could potentially provide complimentary information to the 2DEV data presented here, and thus further improve our understanding of the complex non-radiative decay pathways of bapo.

Associated Content

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

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Supporting Information Available Full broadband visible pump, mid-IR probe data sets are given in the supporting information. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

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Table 1

Decay kinetics obtained from global lifetime analysis of transient absorption measurements using pump pulses centered at 524 nm.

Solvent	Lifetime components	
	τ_1 / fs	τ_2 / ps
Assignment	S ₂ lifetime	S ₁ lifetime
Cyclohexane	300	26.7
Acetonitrile	200	9.6

Table 2

Decay kinetics obtained from fitting electronic-vibrational pump-probe spectra with the pump excitation pulse centered at 515 nm. All time constants were determined by fits to exponential decays, apart from the constant marked with an asterisk that was fit to a rise.

Solvent	Band / cm ⁻¹	Assignment	Kinetic Fit Parameters			
			A ₁	τ_1 / fs	A ₂	τ_2 / ps
Cyclohexane	1751	$\nu_{C=C}$ sym.	0.38	500*	0.61	30.1
	1621	$\nu_{C=C}$ anti-sym.	0.28	235	0.71	24.5
	1590	$\nu_{C=O}$ sym.	0.71	201	0.28	22.5
Acetonitrile- <i>d</i> ₃	1721	$\nu_{C=O}$ sym.	–	–	1	8.5
	1675	$\nu_{C=C}$ sym.	–	–	1	9.4
	1593	$\nu_{C=C}$ anti-sym.	0.24	60	0.76	9.2

Figures

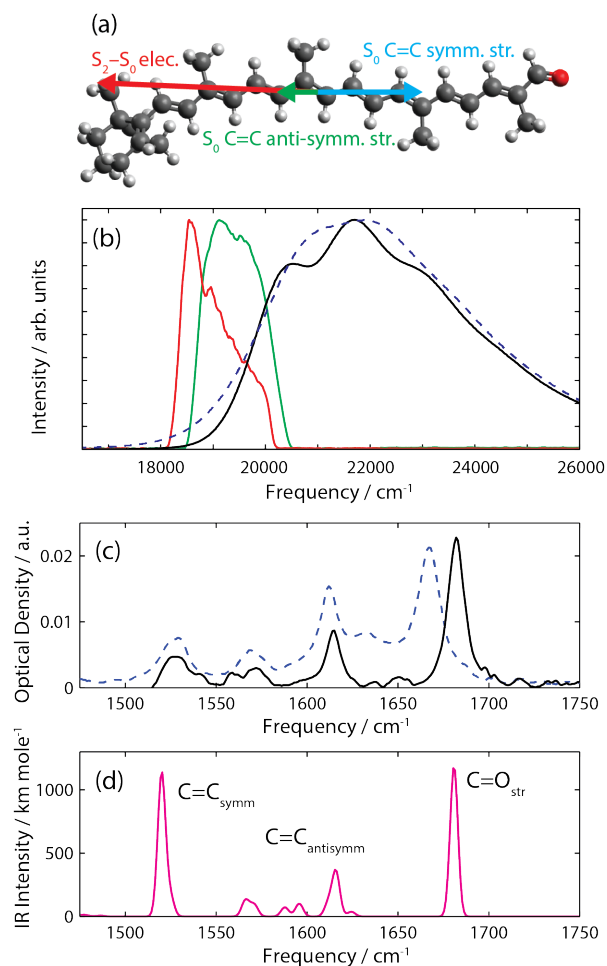


Figure 1. (a) Skeletal structure of *trans*- β -apo-8'-carotenal calculated at the B3LYP/6-311+G* level (see text for details). The overlaid arrows represent the calculated TD-DFT S_2 - S_0 electronic (red) and fundamental ground state vibrational transition dipole moments for the C=C symmetric (blue) and anti-symmetric (green) stretch vibrations; (b) Linear absorption spectrum of bapo dissolved in cyclohexane (solid black line) and acetonitrile- d_3 (dashed blue line). The red and green lines display the pump laser spectra used to photoexcite molecules in visible and infrared probe measurements, respectively; (c) Solvent subtracted linear mid-infrared absorption spectra of β -apo-8'-carotenal in acetonitrile- d_3 (dashed blue line) and cyclohexane solution (solid black line); (d) Calculated B3LYP/6-311+G* linear infrared absorption spectrum in cyclohexane (see text for details).

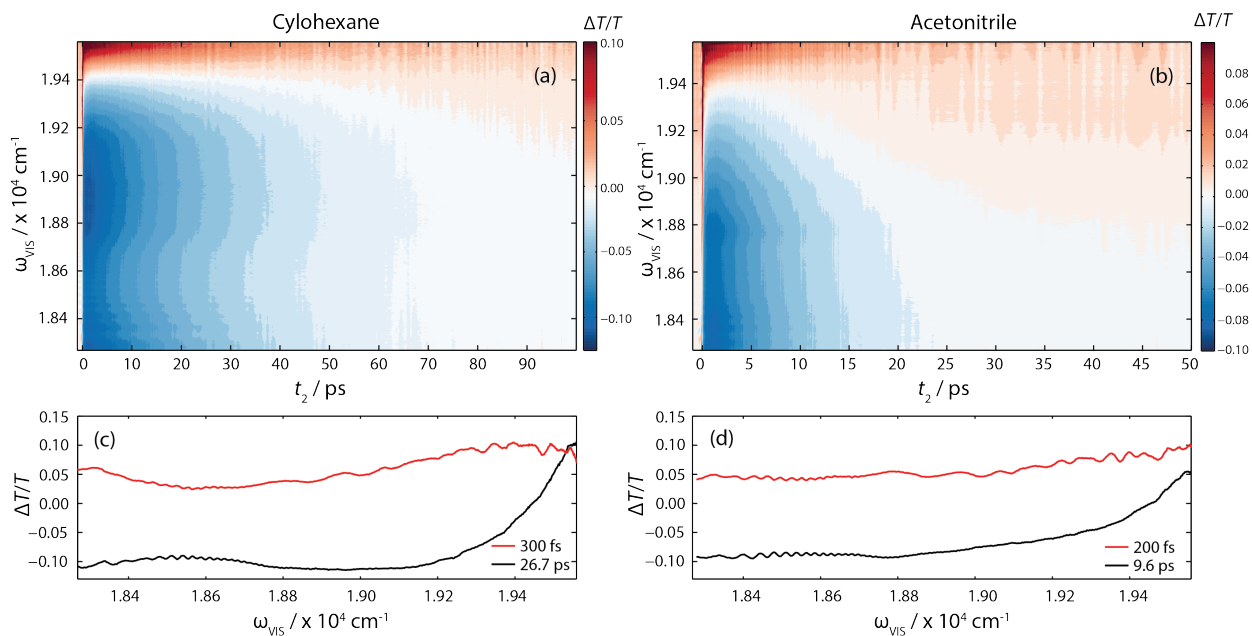


Figure 2 Transient absorption spectrum of β -apo-8'-carotenal in (a) cyclohexane and (b) acetonitrile solutions. Panels (c,d) display the decay associated spectra for the respective solutions.

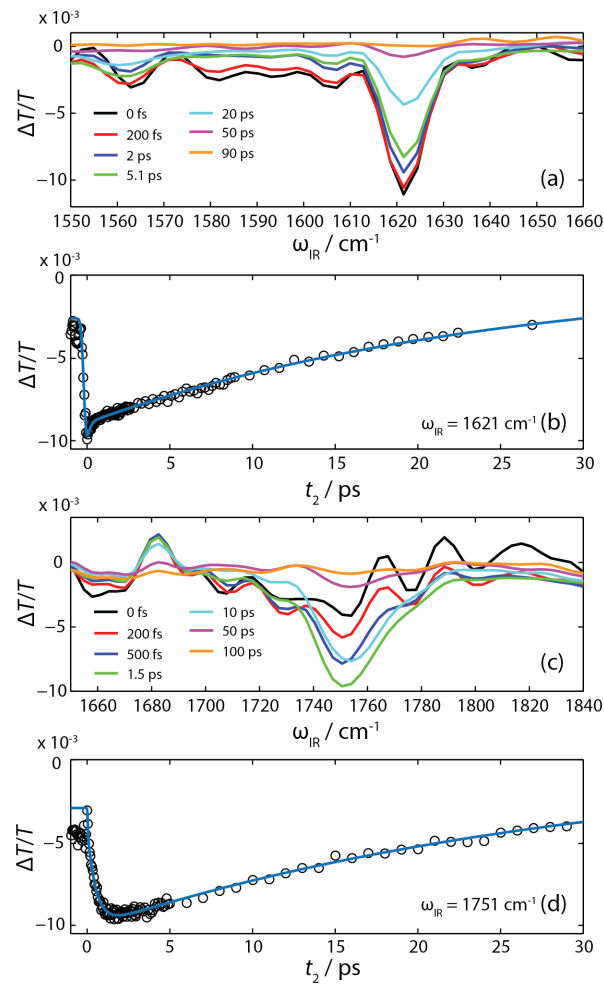


Figure 3. (a,c) Visible pump, mid-IR probe spectra for β -apo-8'-carotenal in cyclohexane at the displayed t_2 delays as a function of IR frequency; (b,d) associated peak intensities and fits to data for selected probe frequencies.

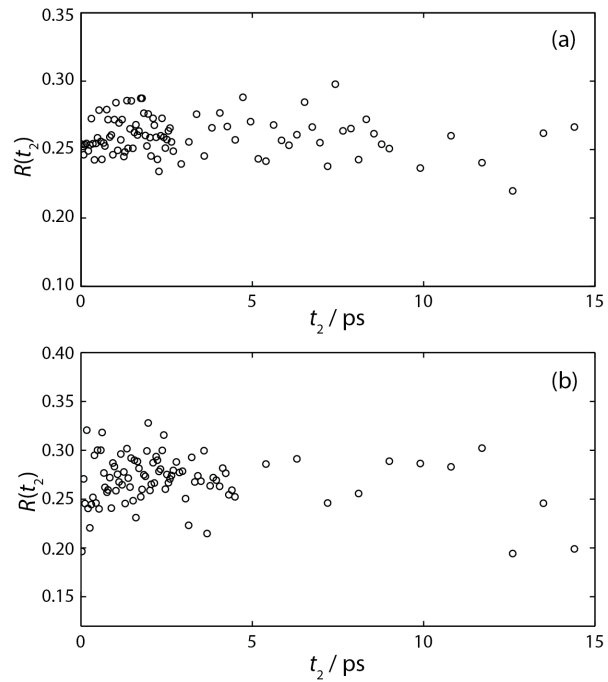


Figure 4 Anisotropy, $R(t_2)$, traces for (a) the C=C anti-symmetric (b) C=C symmetric excited state stretches of bapo in cyclohexane.

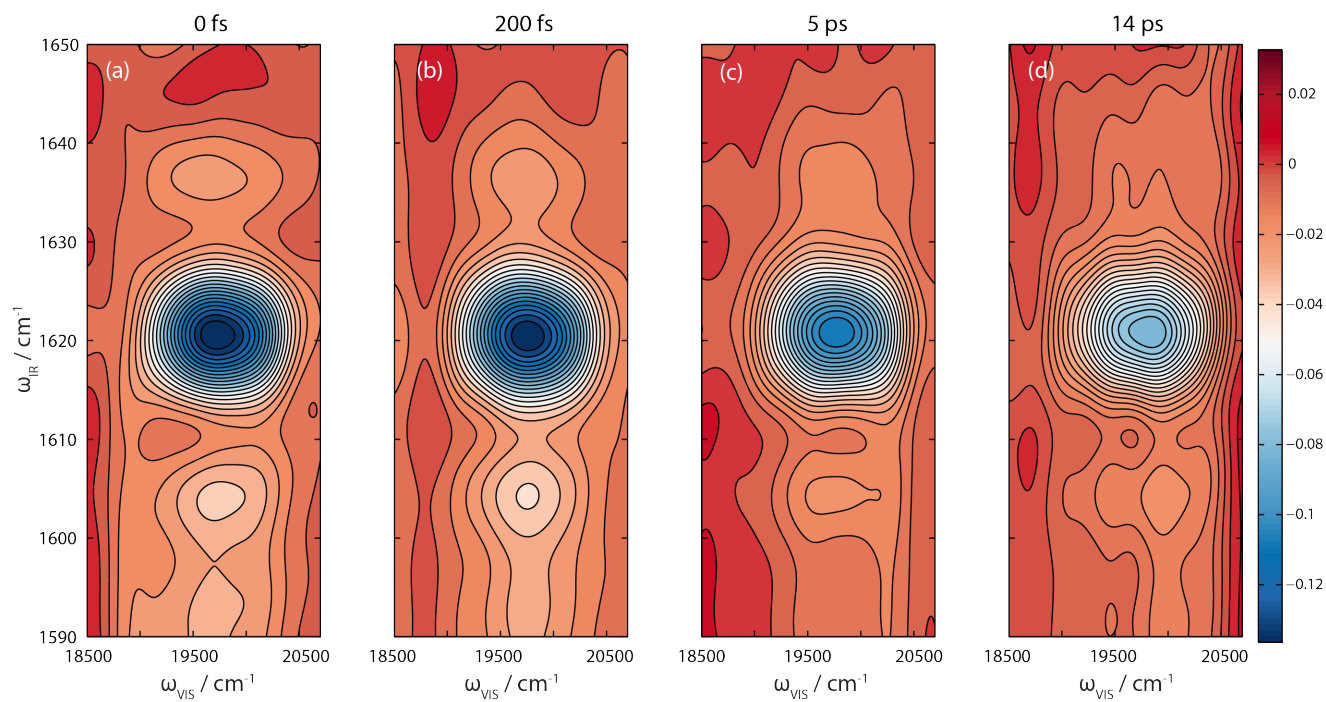


Figure 5 Real total 2D electronic-vibrational spectra for the C=C anti-symmetric stretch of bapo in cyclohexane for the displayed t_2 time delays.

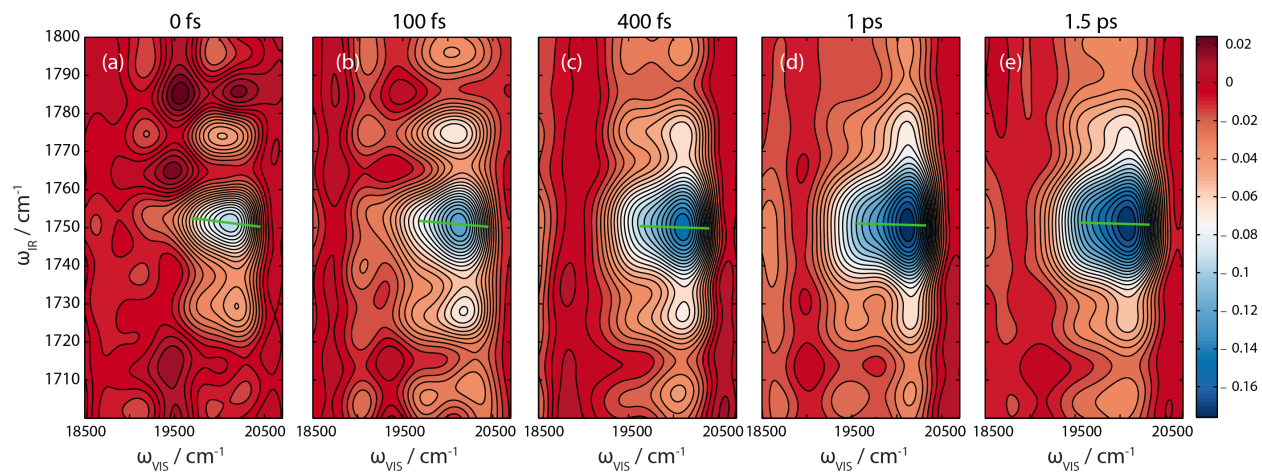


Figure 6 Real total 2D electronic-vibrational spectra for the C=C symmetric stretch of bapo in cyclohexane and displayed t_2 time delays. Green horizontal line shows the fitted center line slope (k_c).

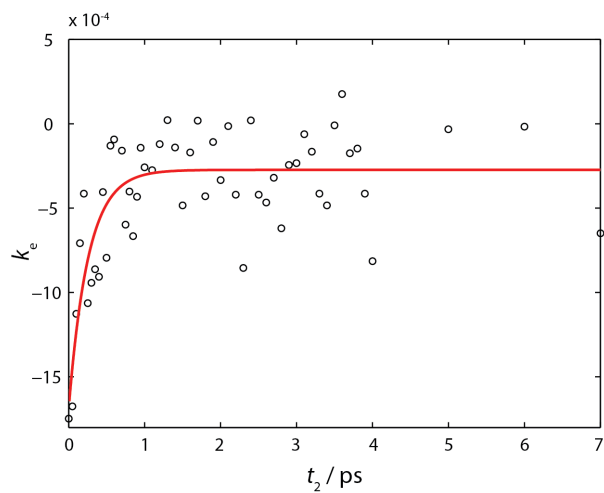


Figure 7 Excited state center line slope (k_e) for the S_1 C=C anti-symmetric in cyclohexane as a function of t_2 .

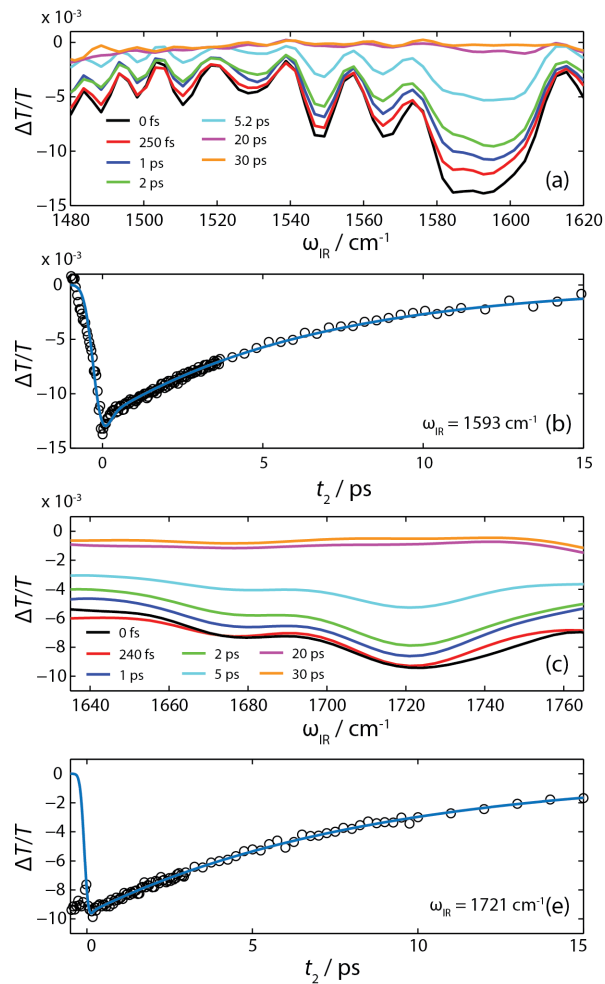


Figure 8. (a,c) Visible pump, mid-IR probe spectra for β -apo-8'-carotenal in acetonitrile- d_3 at the displayed t_2 delays probing the displayed IR frequencies; (b,d) associated peak intensities and fits to data for the 1593 cm^{-1} and 1721 cm^{-1} , respectively.

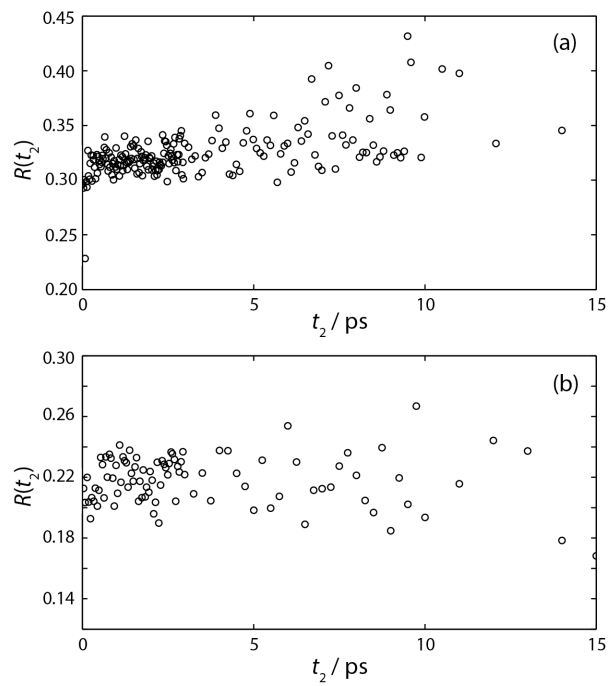


Figure 9 Anisotropy, $R(t_2)$, traces for (a) the C=C anti-symmetric (b) C=O symmetric excited state stretches of bapo in acetonitrile- d_3 .

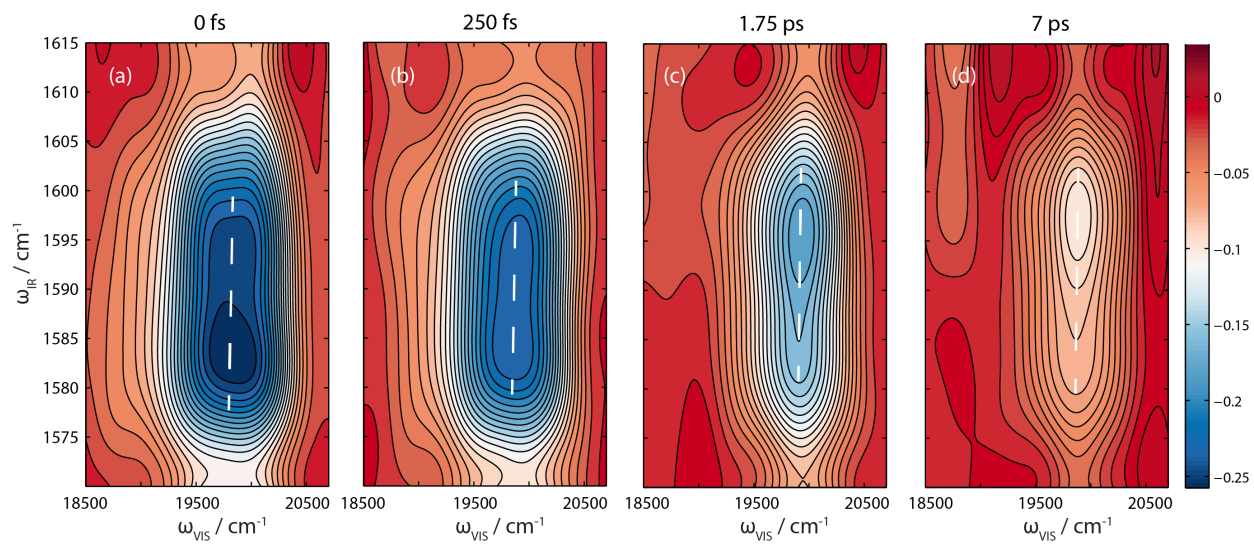


Figure 10 Real total 2DEV spectra for the C=C anti-symmetric stretch of bapo in acetonitrile- d_3 for the displayed t_2 waiting times. Dashed lines indicate the center line slope.

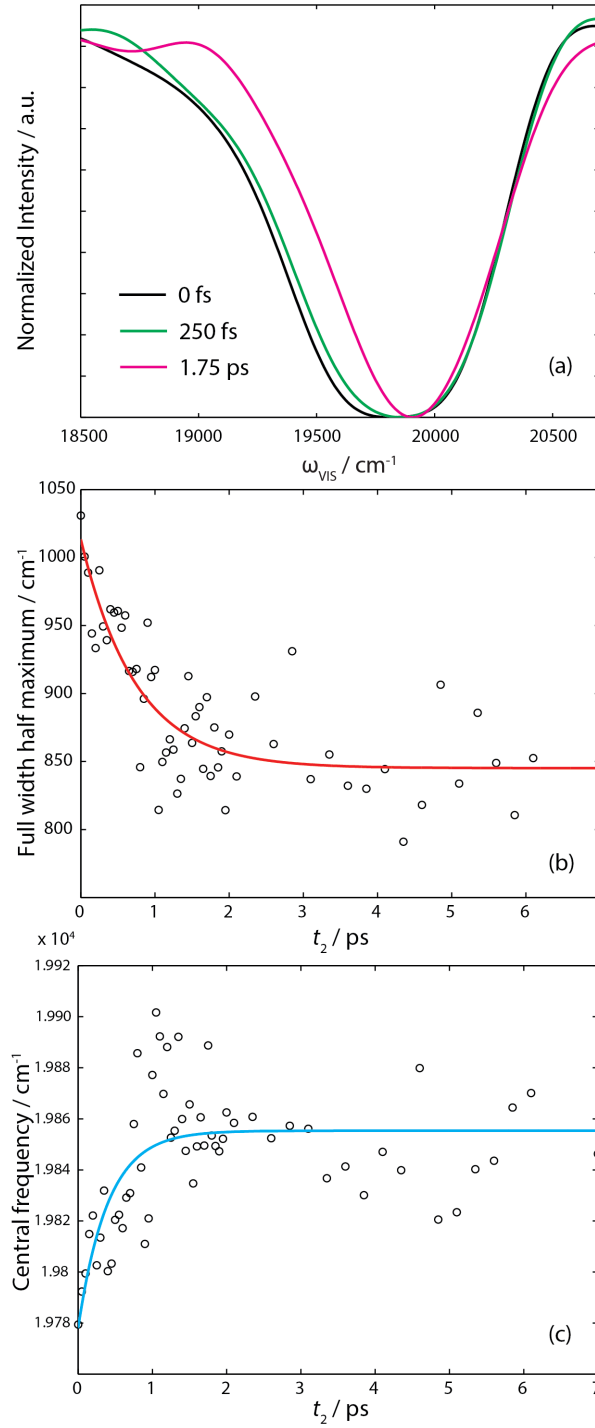


Figure 11 (a) Normalized cut along visible axis for $\omega_{\text{IR}} = 1585 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ for three t_2 delays. Decay of the (b) FWHM and (c) central frequency from fits to the visible line shape.

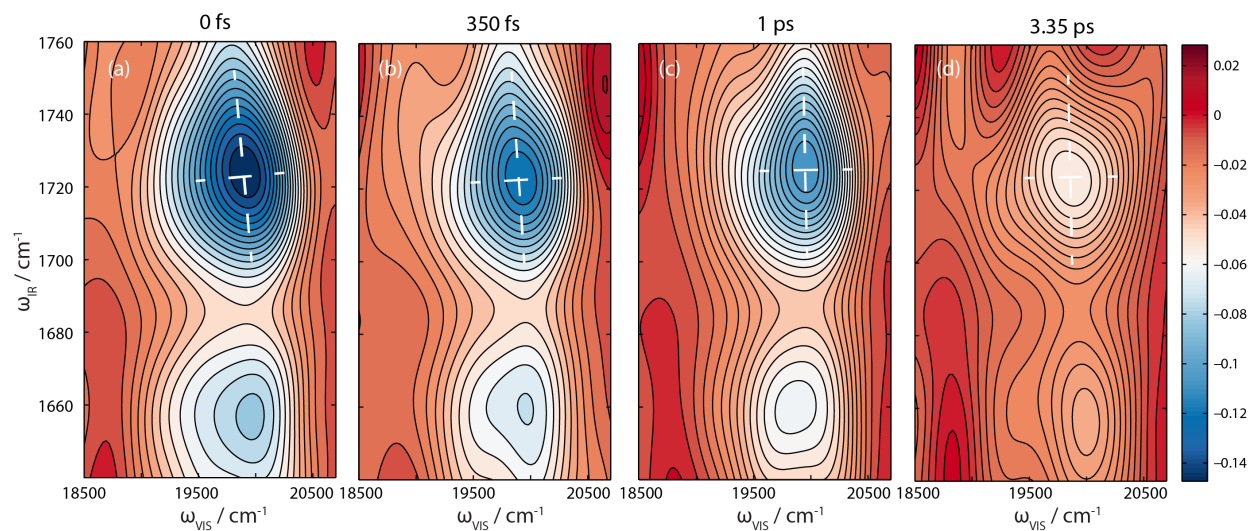


Figure 12 2DEV spectra for bapo in acetonitrile- d_3 . The feature centered at 1725 cm^{-1} is assigned to the C=C symmetric stretch, and that at 1660 cm^{-1} to the C=O stretch vibrations.

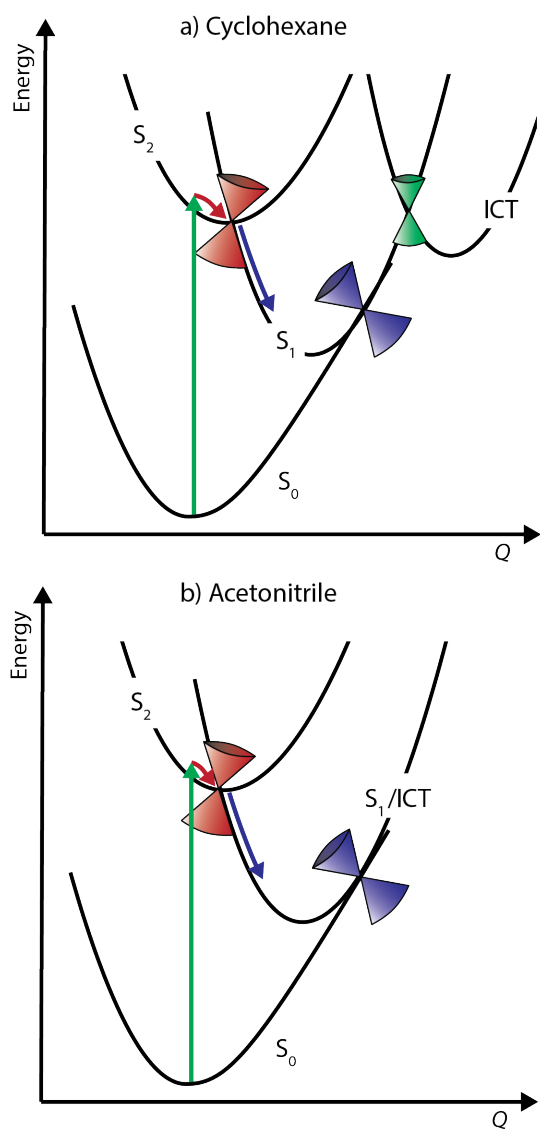


Figure 13 Proposed schematic potential surfaces as a function of reaction co-ordinate, Q , for the ultrafast dynamics of β -apo-8'-carotenal in (a) cyclohexane and (b) acetonitrile solutions.

Table of Contents Graphic

