

Hot Carrier Dynamics in Perovskite Nanocrystal Solids: Role of the cold carriers, nanoconfinement and the surface

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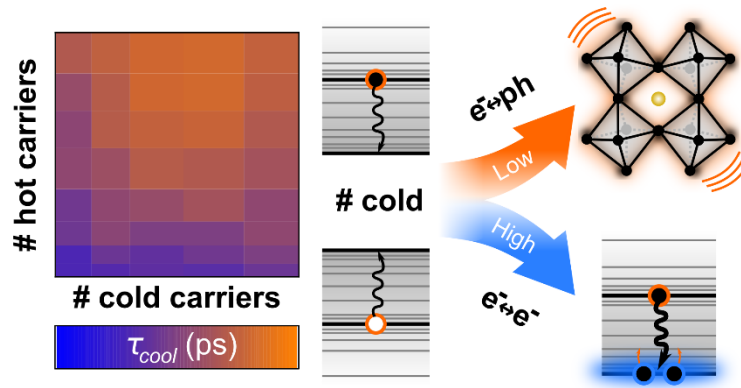
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Carrier cooling is of widespread interest in the field of semiconductor science. It is linked to carrier-carrier and carrier-phonon coupling, and has profound implications for the photovoltaic performance of materials. Recent transient optical studies have shown that a high carrier density in lead-halide perovskites (LHPs) can reduce the cooling rate through a “phonon bottleneck”. However, the role of carrier-carrier interactions, and the material properties that control cooling in LHPs, are still disputed. To address these factors, we utilize ultrafast “pump-push-probe” spectroscopy on LHP nanocrystal (NC) films. We find that the addition of cold carriers to LHP NCs increases the cooling rate, competing with the phonon bottleneck. By comparing different NCs and bulk samples, we deduce that the cooling behavior is intrinsic to the LHP composition, and independent of the NC size or surface. This can be contrasted with other colloidal nanomaterials, where confinement and trapping considerably influence the cooling dynamics.



Lead-halide perovskite (LHP) nanocrystals (NCs) have recently emerged as highly encouraging materials for energy and photonic applications.¹ Their facile synthesis,² size-, shape- and composition-tunable optical properties,³ high-performance emission characteristics^{4–6} and purported “defect tolerance”^{7,8} have prompted numerous studies into their fundamental photophysics. In particular, there is a concerted interest in two key types of interaction which govern the dynamics of charge carriers in these materials; (i) the interaction between carriers (e.g. carrier-carrier scattering^{9–11} electron-hole correlation,^{12,13} many-body recombination,^{14–16} dielectric screening^{17–19}) and (ii) the interactions between the carriers and the surrounding lattice (e.g. electron-phonon coupling,^{20–23} polaron formation,^{24–27} phase transitions,^{28,29} anharmonicity^{30–32}).

Both carrier-carrier and carrier-phonon interactions are known to mediate the relaxation of high-energy “hot” carriers in semiconductors.³³ A long-standing and ongoing aspiration of the photovoltaic community is to utilize these hot carriers prior to relaxation as a means to overcome the Shockley-Queisser limit for single-junction solar cells.³⁴ The main conceptual strategies for achieving this include either the direct extraction of hot carriers, or carrier multiplication.³⁵ For the hot carriers to be utilized efficiently, a slowed rate of carrier relaxation is desirable. Consequently, the majority of work in this area has focused on confined semiconductor quantum dots (QDs), where the quantization of states is predicted to impede carrier relaxation.³⁶ Both concepts were first demonstrated in small PbSe QDs,^{37,38} and have recently been demonstrated as a proof-of-principle in LHP NC systems.^{39–42} These studies have been accompanied by investigations into the relaxation dynamics of hot carriers. Although the reported lifetimes somewhat vary, the slowed cooling of hot carriers at high excitation conditions has been widely observed in LHP-based materials through transient absorption and photoluminescence (PL)

methods.^{15,43–49} Early reports by Price et al.⁴³ and Yang et al.⁴⁴ connected this phenomenon to the “hot phonon bottleneck” mechanism that has been previously outlined for other traditional semiconductors.^{50,51} Frost et al. explain this mechanism by considering the shared phonon subpopulation of optical phonons between spatially overlapping hot polaron states.⁵² Following this work, we recently identified the cation as the key material parameter which controls this behavior in LHPs, as evidenced by our observation of more pronounced hot carrier density-dependent cooling in CsPbBr₃ with respect to the hybrid systems containing organic cations.⁵³ These findings are supported by other experimental and theoretical reports of cation-dependent carrier cooling in LHPs.^{26,47,48,54}

Although there have been numerous studies on the dynamics of hot carriers in LHP-based materials, the explicit role of the cold carriers (band-edge states) on this process has been largely neglected. Advanced ultrafast two-dimensional electronic spectroscopy experiments have reported rapid carrier-carrier scattering and equilibration processes on sub-100 fs timescales after photoexcitation,^{9,10} comparable to other semiconductors.⁵⁵ For high intensity photoexcitation, interactions between the cold and hot carriers are understood to occur in the process of Auger recombination, where the interband recombination of one (cold) electron-hole pair can re-excite an adjacent carrier.⁵⁶ These two scenarios present opposing effects of the cold carriers on the hot carrier dynamics in LHP materials, and serve to portray a complicated picture of energy redistribution following the generation of these states by the same excitation event. Similarly, the effects of electronic confinement and carrier trapping on carrier relaxation in LHPs are still under debate, not least because of the elaborate photophysics which occur in these materials and inhibit the contributions of specific effects toward carrier cooling from being studied in a controlled and isolated fashion.^{26,57–59}

In this work, we evaluate the impact of the hot and cold carriers, as well as surface and confinement effects, on the hot carrier relaxation dynamics in LHP NC solids. For this we apply a three-pulse “pump-push-probe” (PPP) experiment, where the density of the hot and cold carrier subensembles are individually controlled. The results show that at low pump intensity (low cold carrier concentration), the hot carrier cooling dynamics exhibit a strong dependence on the number of optically re-excited carriers, which we ascribe to a phonon bottleneck mechanism in accordance with our previous findings.⁵³ Raising the pump intensity (cold carrier concentration) diminishes the dependence of the cooling dynamics on the number of hot states, pointing to a parallel relaxation process connected to the cold carriers. The identical density dependence of cooling rates for NCs with different ligands, and the similarity between the bulk and NC samples appear to preclude the effect of trap states and material interfaces, as well as weak electronic confinement on the hot carrier relaxation. These findings highlight the unique electronic properties of these materials systems and their tolerance towards defects with respect to conventional semiconductor materials.

Figure 1(a) shows the linear absorption and steady-state PL spectra for films of ~8 nm edge length CsPbBr₃ NCs following an established synthesis procedure incorporating the long chain zwitterion 3-N,N (dimethyloctadecylammonio)propansulfonate, referred to hereafter as “ZI”, as the capping ligand.⁶⁰ The absorption onset and PL maxima of the NCs are both blueshifted with respect to bulk CsPbBr₃ (and indeed larger CsPbBr₃ NCs, as shown in Figure S1), which can be attributed to weak quantum confinement of the electronic states (for reference, the Bohr diameter of CsPbBr₃ is ~7 nm).² These dropcast NCs are moderately emissive (PL quantum yield ~60%) and monodisperse (PL linewidth ~26 nm), and share almost identical PL properties to the NCs suspended in solution (Figure S2). The size (average edge length ~8±2 nm)

and cuboid shape of these NCs was confirmed by transmission electron microscopy (TEM), shown in Figure 1(b).

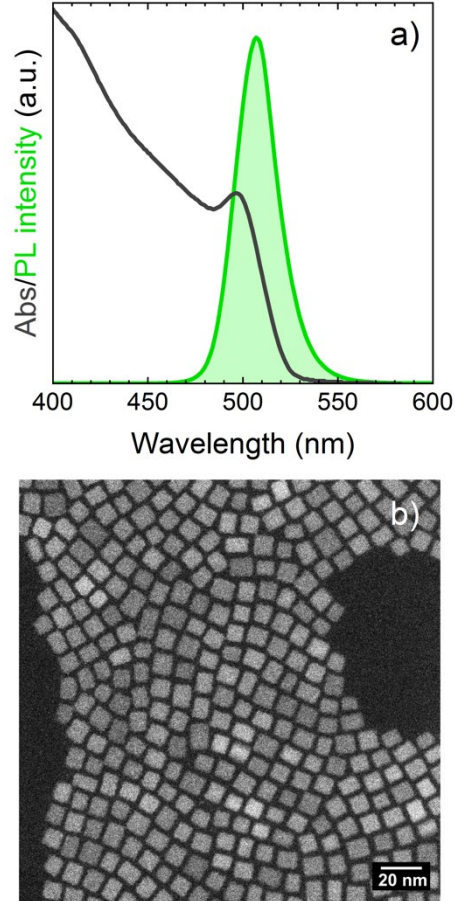


Figure 1. (a) Thin-film UV-Vis absorption and steady-state PL spectra of the dropcast ZI-capped CsPbBr_3 NCs. $\text{FWHM} = 26 \text{ nm}$. The PL excitation was at 400 nm. (b) High-angle annular dark field scanning transmission electron micrograph (HAADF-STEM) of the ZI-capped CsPbBr_3 NCs with an average edge length of $8 \pm 2 \text{ nm}$ collected at 77 K.

In order to measure the carrier cooling in the samples, we employ a three-pulse differential transmission measurement, which we term “pump-push-probe” (PPP). Variants of this method have been used over the years to study a wide range of photophysical phenomena,

including photoionization dynamics in water,⁶¹ charge delocalization in organic photovoltaic blends,⁶² and indeed, carrier cooling in NCs.^{63–65} The reader is directed to our recent work on bulk LHPs for the full details of the experiment used herein.⁵³ Briefly, a colinear visible (500 nm) “pump” and near-IR (2.1 μm) “probe” are focused onto the sample in order to generate carriers and subsequently monitor their photoinduced absorption.⁶⁶ After a 12 ps delay, the cold (band-edge) carriers are optically re-excited by an intense 2.1 μm “push” pulse, thereby bleaching the intraband absorption of the probe. The recovery of the pump-probe (PP) signal is interpreted as the cooling of the hot carriers, which we fit with a monoexponential function, with lifetime “ τ_{cool} ”. Figure 2(a) depicts the action of the pulses on the differential probe transmission through a thin film of the dropcast CsPbBr₃ NCs.

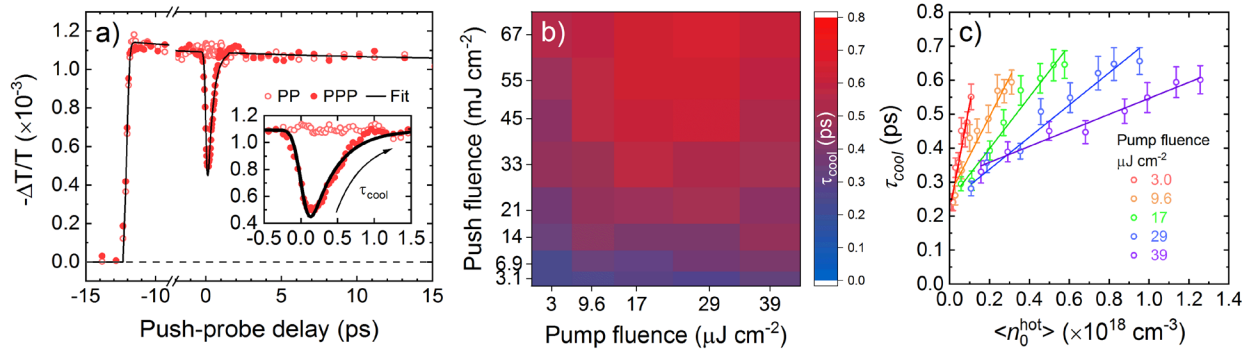


Figure 2. (a) Pump-probe (PP) and pump-push-probe (PPP) differential transmission transients for the dropcast 8 nm diameter ZI-capped CsPbBr₃ NCs. Pump: 500 nm, (3 $\mu\text{J cm}^{-2}$); push: 2.1 μm (45 mJ cm^{-2}); probe: 2.1 μm . The inset depicts the extracted intraband cooling time, τ_{cool} . The solid line is a Gaussian-convoluted monoexponential fit. (b) Pseudo-color map describing the dependence of τ_{cool} on the pump and push fluence. (c) τ_{cool} as a function of the average initial hot carrier density, $\langle n_0^{hot} \rangle$, plotted for different pump fluences. The solid lines are linear fits as a guide to the eye.

The pump fluence controls the initial number of cold carriers. In Figure 2(a), a low fluence was used ($3 \mu\text{J cm}^{-2}$, corresponding to an average of ~ 0.1 excitons per NC, assuming a Poisson distribution). Since we are working with densely-packed films rather than colloidal solutions, we cannot rule out the interactions between carriers and phonons in adjacent NCs. Compared to other NC systems, carriers in films of surface passivated ~ 11 nm CsPbBr₃ NCs have been shown to exhibit a high mobility and diffusion length by optical pump-terahertz probe studies.⁶⁷ We therefore treat the system in the same way as a bulk material film composed of nanocrystalline domains, and quantify the number of excited states using a continuous distribution model. This gives an average initial cold carrier density, $\langle n_0^{cold} \rangle$, of $1.1 \times 10^{17} \text{ cm}^{-3}$. As shown below, the accurate description of the material photophysics by this model corroborates the presence of interactions between excited states localized on different NCs. The many-body dynamics following higher fluence excitation can be seen in Figure S3.

The push fluence controls the number of hot carriers that are re-excited from the band-edge. Without state-resolved methods, we cannot unambiguously assign the push (and probe) transition to the valence or conduction band,^{68,69} but we expect that the push interacts with electrons and holes in the same way due to their similar effective masses in LHP NCs.² As shown in Figure S4, the extent of bleaching scales linearly with the push fluence, which indicates that no more than one $2.1 \mu\text{m}$ photon is needed to excite a single cold carrier and bleach the probe transition.

Figure 2(b) presents the dependence of τ_{cool} on the pump and push intensities in a pseudo-color map. It is evident that there is a non-trivial connection between the dynamics of intraband relaxation and the relative number of cold and hot carriers. Figure 2(c) shows the dependence of τ_{cool} on both the pump fluence and the average initial density of hot carriers, $\langle n_0^{hot} \rangle$ (related to

the pump fluence, see supporting notes for details). For all the data sets, regardless of the pump fluence (number of initial cold carriers), τ_{cool} is observed to increase with $\langle n_0^{hot} \rangle$. Using the PPP technique, we previously attributed this underlying behavior to a hot phonon bottleneck mechanism; as the density of hot carriers increases, so does the competition for a finite number of phonon modes involved in cooling.⁵³ This phenomenon was also reported in other works employing more traditional PP methods.^{15,43–49} To the best of our knowledge, no techniques to date have explicitly demonstrated the change in τ_{cool} upon the addition of cold carriers to the system. Figure 2(c) shows that as the pump intensity increases, the dependence of τ_{cool} on $\langle n_0^{hot} \rangle$ is reduced, which can be observed as a flattening of the slope. This indicates the emergence of an additional mechanism, connected to the relative number of cold states, which accelerates the rate of carrier cooling in the NCs.

To explain the interplay between the phonon and cold-carrier mediated relaxation processes, we invoke the dual pathway model depicted in Figure 3. In order to reconcile the observation of weak confinement with the assumption of moderate electronic coupling, the electronic structure of the NCs is represented as a band composed of an inhomogenous density of states. Similar pictures have been used elsewhere for assembled QD solids.^{70,71} Hot carriers in the LHP NCs can relax via two processes; (1) via scattering with longitudinal optical (LO) phonons, or; (2) via energy deposition into the cold carriers. While the detailed discussion of the model, approximations and the equations describing the spectroscopic data can be found elsewhere,⁷² the equation describing the population of hot carriers as a function of time $n_H(t)$ can be written in a concise and intuitive way:

$$\frac{dn_H}{dt} = -\alpha N_c n_H - \rho \gamma \exp(-\gamma N_H) n_H$$

Here N_C represents the cold carrier density immediately before the arrival of push pulse, and N_H represents the hot carrier density after the push pulse. α , ρ and γ are constants reflecting carrier-carrier coupling, carrier-phonon coupling and the polaron volume, respectively. In the case where the carrier-carrier interactions (first term) are neglected and γN_H is small, the cooling time is given by:⁷²

$$\tau \approx \frac{1}{\rho\gamma} + \frac{N_H}{\rho}$$

This rationalizes the underlying positive linear trend observed for all the data sets in Figure 2(c). This linear trend can also be explained phenomenologically, as τ_{cool} should be proportional to the overlapping volume of polarons associated with the hot carriers. As more hot polarons are added, their overlapping volume is expected to increase linearly (at least until overlaps of ≥ 3 polarons become dominant). When these hot polarons are generated in an environment containing many cold carriers, there is a greater probability for hot and cold carriers (polarons) to encounter one another. In this circumstance, cooling can occur via an Auger-type energy exchange, where the excess energy from an initial hot carrier is transferred to other cold carriers. This energy transfer mechanism should not be confused with a different Auger-type process that is known to occur in II-VI NCs such as CdSe QDs, where a dense manifold states close to the valence band maxima engenders an efficient transfer of excess electron energy into a hole.⁷³ The electronic properties of the LHP NCs are not conducive towards this relaxation pathway, since electrons and holes in these materials have small and almost equal effective masses.²

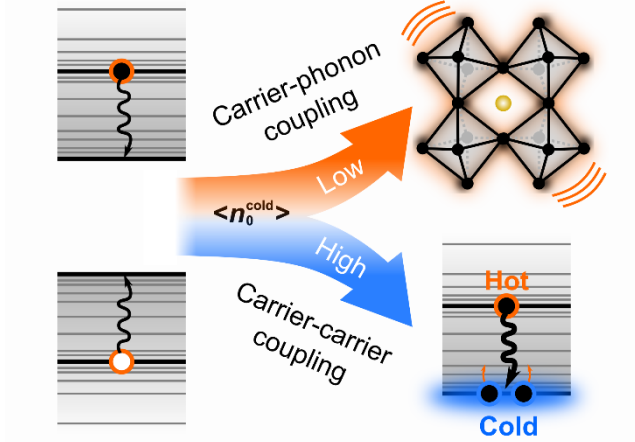


Figure 3. Schematic model to show the key cooling pathways available to the hot carriers in the LHP NCs. When the relative number of cold carriers is low, hot carriers cool via coupling to lattice vibrations. At higher cold carrier concentration, the exchange of energy between the hot and cold carrier ensembles via carrier-carrier coupling is dominant.

So far, we have identified the overall role of carrier-phonon and carrier-carrier interactions on carrier cooling in the LHP NCs. However, in NCs, there are many material-specific relaxation channels which can compete with one another.⁶⁹ To check for other parameters that may be neglected by our proposed model, we studied carrier cooling in LHP NCs of different composition, size and surface treatment. To enhance the contrast between the studied systems, we performed the measurements at a low cold carrier density, where the effect of the carrier-phonon interaction is maximized. Figure 4(a) clearly demonstrates that, in comparison to CsPbBr₃ NCs, the dependence of τ_{cool} on the relative number of hot carriers is weaker in FAPbBr₃ NCs of a similar size (~ 10 nm, see Figure S1 for optical spectra and TEM images) and under similar pump conditions ($\sim 3 \mu\text{J cm}^{-2}$, see Figure S3 for fluence-dependent PP kinetics). The observation of faster overall cooling in the hybrid LHP system with respect to the all-inorganic CsPbBr₃ NCs is congruent with our recent findings,⁵³ as well as other experimental^{26,47,48} and theoretical works.⁵⁴ We attribute the faster cooling behavior in the hybrid

LHP NCs to the higher density of phonon modes associated with the symmetry-breaking organic cation.⁵³

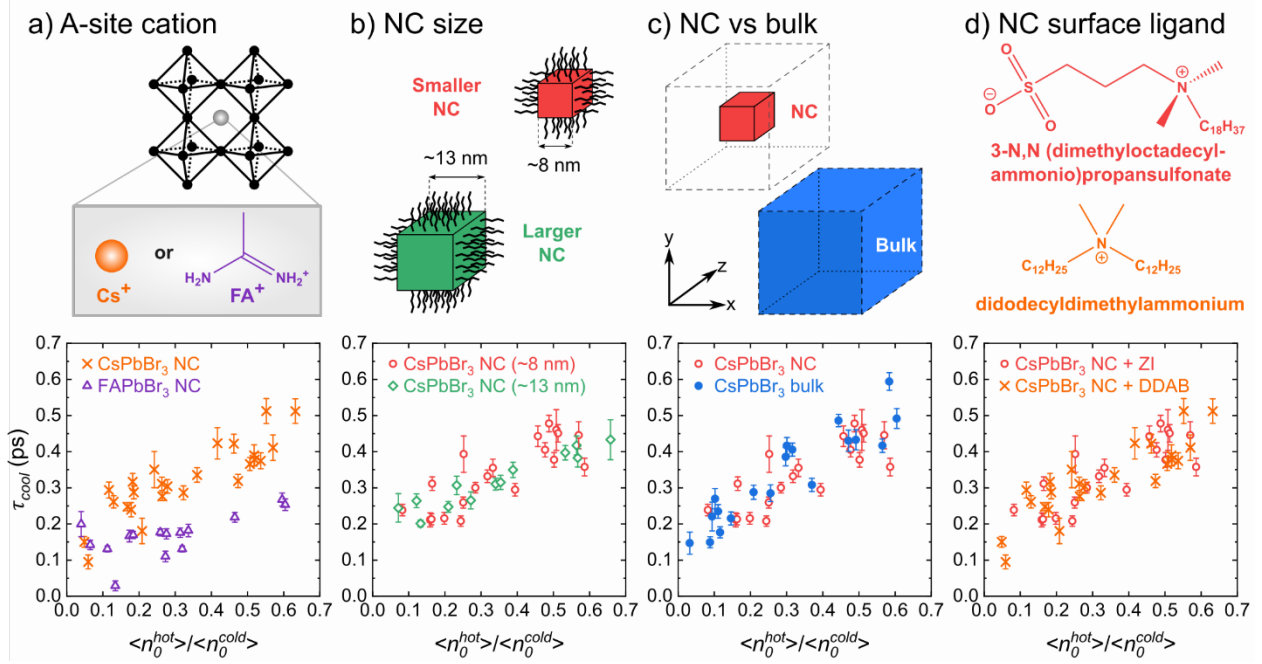


Figure 4. Dependence of carrier cooling lifetime on the density of hot carriers (just after the push), normalized by the density of cold carriers (just before the push), comparing (a) different cation composition for a given NC size (~10 nm) and surface ligand (DDAB), (b) different NC sizes (with the same ZI ligand), (c) bulk vs ~ 8 nm NC, and (d) NC capping ligands.

Figure 4(b) does not show any obvious difference in the density-dependent cooling behavior for differently sized CsPbBr₃ NCs. Although the NCs studied herein are quite large, the optical characteristics of the smaller NCs are noticeably blue-shifted with respect to the larger NCs (Figure S1). While some studies in the literature have alluded to prolonged hot carrier lifetimes in smaller LHP NCs,³⁹ there is growing evidence to suggest that most weakly-confined LHP NCs exhibit only a very modest size dependence on carrier cooling.^{47,74–76} As a side note, it is worth pointing out that the latter studies were performed in the solution phase, which indicates

that the rapid cooling we observe herein is not unique to solid films. With the exception of a few notable cases,⁷⁷ most studies on confined NCs show that the experimental rate of cooling is comparable to, or even faster, than the rate of cooling in the corresponding bulk material,^{63,78,79} despite earlier predictions to the contrary.³⁶ Figure 4(c) shows identical cooling behavior for the CsPbBr₃ NC sample and a bulk CsPbBr₃ film, suggesting the absence of any noticeable confinement effects on carrier cooling in our samples. From this comparison, we can also conclude that any modification of the electron-hole interaction imposed by the NCs⁸⁰ does not significantly influence the cooling dynamics in the LHPs.

Changing the size of the NCs not only affects the confinement of the excited states, but also results in a different surface area-to-volume ratio. The fact that we observe similar cooling dynamics for NCs of different size indicates that surface states do not play a key role in the carrier relaxation. To verify this, we performed experiments on CsPbBr₃ NCs passivated with different ligands; ZI and didodecylammonium bromide (DDAB). Both ligands incorporate long hydrophobic chains, but are distinct in that the former can simultaneously coordinate to cationic and anionic sites on the LHP surface, which manifests itself as a higher PLQY of the films (see Figure S1) and reduced sintering of the NCs.^{60,81} In spite of their different emission yields, Figure 4(d) shows that the overall cooling behavior in the ZI- and DDAB-capped CsPbBr₃ NCs is identical. This tentatively suggests that any defects which impinge upon the emission of the samples (particularly in the latter case) do not interfere with the intraband relaxation of the hot carriers. Furthermore, in comparing bulk and NC CsPbBr₃ in Figure 4(c), the additional interfaces (and any associated defects) imparted by the NCs do not seem to accelerate cooling.

We note that while some works have indicated the deleterious role of trap states and poor material quality on the dynamics of cooling in LHPs,^{11,82,83} our method of intraband probing

ought to be sensitive to these effects. Using a similar experimental approach to our own, Guyot-Sionnest et al. demonstrated the direct effect of different surface treatments on the cooling dynamics in CdSe NCs.⁶³ The absence of defect-assisted carrier cooling herein is compatible with the results of other ultrafast experiments on LHP materials,^{23,84–86} and is consistent with the widely-accepted consensus of defect tolerance for LHPs.^{7,8} This may be attributed to the polaronic nature of charge carriers in these materials,^{24–27,52,87} and could also be related to the low curvature and efficient packing of the cuboid LHP NCs which, in combination with the ligands, inhibits surface defect formation. On the subject of ligand effects, Guyot-Sionnest and coworkers have also proposed that direct energy transfer from the NC core to high-frequency ligand vibrations could play a role in intraband relaxation.⁸⁸ Clearly, we do not find evidence for this in comparing the DDAB and ZI-capped LHP NCs here (respective IR spectra can be found elsewhere^{89,90}), and other works on carrier cooling in CsPbBr₃ NCs with more vibrationally distinct ligands have also ruled out this pathway.⁷⁵

In conclusion, using a highly specialized “pump-push-probe” technique, we demonstrate the explicit effect of the hot and cold carriers on the carrier relaxation dynamics in lead-halide perovskite (LHP) nanocrystals (NCs). The hot and cold carrier subensembles affect the cooling dynamics in opposite ways. When the relative number of hot states is high, the time constant for cooling is observed to increase, which we interpret through a hot phonon bottleneck mechanism, where high energy carriers must compete for vibrational modes in order to cool. As the relative number of cold states increases, this density-dependent cooling behavior is observed to decrease. We rationalize this by invoking an additional pathway for cooling, where the excess energy of the hot carriers is preferentially deposited into the band-edge states as opposed to available phonon modes. We observe identical density-dependent cooling behavior when comparing NCs

of different sizes, and NCs with their bulk analogues. These factors portray the lack of electronic confinement effects on the carrier cooling dynamics, and moreover suggest that the additional material interfaces introduced in the nanocrystalline samples do not facilitate the relaxation of hot carriers. On a similar note, we also do not observe any appreciable difference in the cooling kinetics of LHP NCs with different capping ligands, further indicating that the surface of these materials is not essential for mediating hot carrier cooling. Our findings provide extensive insight into the interplay of carrier relaxation mechanisms in LHPs, which may be useful for the prospective development of high-performance technologies that utilize hot carriers. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the unique electronic and phononic properties of LHP NCs with respect to other semiconductor nanomaterials.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge.

Experimental methods. Absorption and PL spectra for the NC films and solutions. Electron micrographs for all NC samples. Fluence-dependent pump-probe data for NC samples. Push fluence-dependent bleach kinetics.

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Author Contributions

T.R.H. and A.A.B. conceived the ultrafast experiments. T.R.H and A.G. built the ultrafast experimental setup. T.R.H., A.G., M.M. and M.C. performed the ultrafast spectroscopy measurements. T.R.H., A.G., A.J., M.M. and A.A.B. performed the analysis of the ultrafast spectroscopy data. F.K., M.I.B., X.H. synthesized and characterized the materials under the supervision of R.L. and M.B. T.R.H., M.C. and T.J.M. prepared the samples for spectroscopy measurements. The manuscript was written by T.R.H. through contributions of all authors. All authors have given approval to the final version of the manuscript.

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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