

# Spectral resolution is not important for modeling galaxy growth

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## ABSTRACT

High resolution spectra are assumed to yield better constraints on galaxy star formation histories (SFHs) than low resolution spectra or photometry. We test this statement by comparing actual  $R \sim 800$  spectroscopy to high-resolution model predictions based on galaxy SFHs inferred from only *ugrizJK<sub>s</sub>* photometry and  $R \sim 25$  rest-optical spectra. From **XXX** galaxies, we find the median difference between predicted and inferred Lick indices to be  $\leq 1\%$  for all indices except the Balmer lines—whose divergences are readily explained by unmodeled emission—and the CN<sub>1</sub> and G4300 features in passive galaxies, which diverge by 2% and 1.5%, respectively.  $\chi^2$  **stuff**. Absent a scientific motivation to measure such features to better precision, we therefore find no utility in adding high resolution spectroscopy as an SFH modeling constraint, at least when the models are capable of capturing the intrinsic diversity of real growth trajectories. Our results cast doubt on the extent to which projects like the *James Webb Space Telescope* will enhance our understanding of core questions in galaxy evolution and suggest that progress requires new tactics as much as new data.

**Key words:** galaxies: surveys — galaxies: spectroscopy — spectroscopy: techniques

## 1 INTRODUCTION

A central ambition of the study of galaxy evolution is understanding stellar mass growth; i.e., galaxy star formation histories (SFHs). Spectral energy distributions (SEDs) are the key data in this work because they can be decomposed into combinations of distinct stellar populations of known ages. The resulting coefficients yield the amount of stellar mass a galaxy is inferred to have formed at the lookback time corresponding to each population’s age.

Stellar populations have different but not orthogonal SEDs. As such, the above decompositions are usually degenerate. Such degeneracies are compounded by age-independent effects like metallicity and dust reddening.

To alleviate those degeneracies, high resolution spectra ( $R \sim 1000$ s) are often used in addition to galaxy broadband colors in the model fitting. The hope is that the details of absorption lines will potentially increase the contrast between stellar subpopulations, constrain metallicity, and so yield more accurate age/mass coefficients. The utility of these data is usually taken as axiomatic, but it is also readily testable.

This paper presents an experiment that shows there is very little information in high resolution spectra that enhance constraints on galaxy SFHs compared to inferences based on a combination of photometry and very low resolution ( $R \lesssim 100$ s) prism spec-

tra.<sup>1</sup> We perform this experiment by using precomputed SFH inferences based on low resolution SEDs for a set of **XXX** systems at  $\langle z \rangle = \mathbf{ZZZ}$  to produce predictions of each galaxy’s high-resolution spectrum, and comparing these predictions to actual high resolution observations taken post-facto. With the exception of the Balmer lines—whose divergence from predictions is readily ascribable to emission line infilling—we find differences to be of order **whatever they are**, suggesting **whatever we say they do**.

Below, Section 2 describes the data on which our experiment is based, Section 3 shows the comparisons between our high resolution spectral predictions and the high resolution data, and Section 4 describes the implications of these results. We use AB magnitudes and assume a Chabrier (2003) stellar initial mass function (IMF) with  $(H_0, \Omega_M, \Omega_\Lambda) = (70 \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ Mpc}^{-1}, 0.3, 0.7)$  throughout.

## 2 DATA

### 2.1 Master sample

This experiment is based on the *Carnegie Spitzer IMACS Survey* (CSI; Kelson et al. 2014). CSI provides Magellan-IMACS Low- and Uniform-Dispersion Prism spectroscopy for objects with  $\text{Spitzer [3.5]} \leq 21$  in **XXX sq. deg.** from **THESE FIELDS**.

<sup>1</sup> A future paper will extend this statement to photometry based inferences alone.

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Combined with supplemental *ugrizJK<sub>s</sub>* photometry from the NEWFIRM archive (**CITE**) and Canada-France-Hawai‘i Telescope Legacy Survey (CFHTLS; **CITE**), these data were used to derive flexible SFHs for each galaxy as part of the redshift estimation process. The sample is complete to  $\log M_* \sim 10.3$  at  $z \sim 0.7$ . The spectral resolution of the prisms varies from  $R \sim \text{XXX}$  to  $R \sim \text{YYY}$  at **wavelengths**, about **THIS MUCH WORSE** than the Sloan Digital Sky Survey (York et al. 2000).

Dressler et al. (2016, 2018) examine the CSI SFHs in detail. Dressler et al. (2018) provides a thorough treatment of SFH inference quality in its Appendix as assessed via simulations and comparisons of objects with repeat observations. We defer the reader to those texts for that information, but briefly review the SFH inference process here. *None of these details are important in the context of the experiment we detail below*, which should be repeated using other approaches.

The CSI spectrophotometry was modeled by assuming 5 blocks SFHs spanned

## 2.2 High-resolution spectroscopy

### 3 CONFRONTING PREDICTIONS WITH HIGH-RESOLUTION DATA

### 4 IMPLICATIONS

### 5 SUMMARY

Foo.

*Facilities:* Magellan/IMACS

*Software:* IDL (Coyote libraries; <http://www.idlcoyote.com/>), python (CarPy).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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