

Electron Localization and Mobility in Monolayer Fullerene Networks

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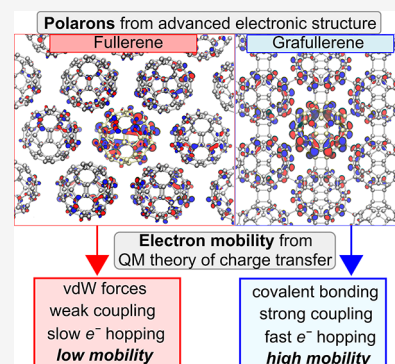
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ABSTRACT: The novel 2D quasi-hexagonal phase of covalently bonded fullerene molecules (qHP C_{60}), the so-called graphullerene, has displayed far superior electron mobilities, if compared to the parent van der Waals three-dimensional crystal (vdW C_{60}). Herein, we present a comparative study of the electronic properties of vdW and qHP C_{60} using state-of-the-art electronic-structure calculations and a full quantum-mechanical treatment of electron transfer. We show that both materials entail polaronic localization of electrons with similar binding energies (≈ 0.1 eV) and, therefore, they share the same charge transport via polaron hopping. In fact, we quantitatively reproduce the sizable increment of the electron mobility measured for qHP C_{60} and identify its origin in the increased electronic coupling between C_{60} units.

KEYWORDS: density functional theory calculations, monolayer fullerene networks, polarons in semiconductors, electron mobility



Synthetic carbon allotropes bearing extended sp^2 hybridization possess unique optoelectronic properties, which mainly derive from quantum confinement.^{1,2} For this reason, they have attracted broad interest from the scientific community for a plethora of technological applications, e.g. microelectronics, photovoltaics, and photocatalysis.^{3–6}

On the one side, we have buckminsterfullerene, C_{60} , the first synthetic carbon allotrope, which forms a highly stable molecular solid held together by van der Waals (vdW) interactions, cf. Figure 1, indicated in the following as vdW C_{60} .^{7,8} Its electronic properties, essentially stemming from those of the isolated molecule, feature narrow bands and a band gap of ~ 1.9 – 2.1 eV,^{9,10} suitable for optoelectronics^{11–15} and photocatalysis.^{16,17} However, together with its morphological instability,¹⁸ the modest electron mobility of vdW C_{60} represents the Achilles heel of the material, as it favors charge recombination and hence limits the final efficiency attainable by the associated devices.^{19–21}

On the other side, the pioneering work of Novoselov et al. on graphene^{22,23} laid the foundations for the field of two-dimensional (2D) materials, whose peculiar features, deriving from electron confinement in the monolayer limit, can be exploited for a diverse set of applications.^{24–29} While acting on the topology of the periodic carbon network has enabled the modulation of the desired electronic properties to a certain extent,^{22,23,30} such studies have long been limited to periodic 2D networks whose building blocks are single carbon atoms.

In this context, decades after seminal studies on polymeric C_{60} phases,^{31–34} a superatomic equivalent of graphene has been recently synthesized.^{35–37} This novel 2D material, named graphullerene,³⁵ displays C_{60} molecules as vertices of the honeycomb lattice, forming a quasi-hexagonal phase (qHP), cf.

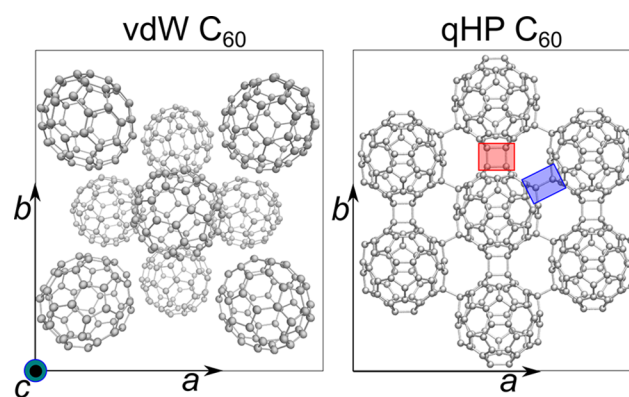


Figure 1. Stick-and-ball representation of the face-centered cubic crystal structure of vdW C_{60} (a shading has been added to emphasize the depth of the cell) and qHP C_{60} in which each unit is covalently bonded with six (nearest) neighbors, four of them connected via a CC single bond and two via collinear $[2 + 2]$ cycloaddition bonds. (blue and red shaded boxes highlight the single and cycloaddition bonds, respectively).

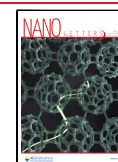
Figure 1. qHP C_{60} is a semiconductor possessing a fundamental band gap of ~ 1.6 eV and it exhibits an electron mobility up to 2 orders of magnitude higher than that of vdW

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C_{60} .^{35,37} These properties, coupled with stability up to 600 K and good environmental endurance,^{37–39} have steadily prompted experimental and theoretical efforts aimed at assessing the feasibility of plentiful technological applications.^{40–48}

Unveiling the physics beyond the sizable increase in electron mobility when fullerenes form a covalently bonded network is of undoubted interest for the bottom-up approach in the synthesis of novel materials, based on the use of clusters or "superatoms" as constituents.⁴⁹ While it is tempting to address this issue considering band-like transport,^{40,45} it should be noted that organic semiconductors, such as vdW C_{60} , may display polaronic localization of charge carriers,^{50–55} whose extent, in conjunction with the electronic coupling, is closely linked with the transport mechanism within the material.^{56–59}

In particular, for vdW C_{60} , the occurrence of electron polarons has been subject of discussion in the literature. Results based on model Hamiltonians indicated polaronic localization in C_{60} , depending upon π conjugation between molecules.⁵⁰ Similar considerations were made in early studies on polymeric chains.⁶⁰ More recently, a small barrier for charge transport has been predicted⁵⁹ and polaron-mediated transport for qHP C_{60} has been proposed by Cassiano et al.⁶¹ In contrast, a more spread charge carrier is predicted by coarse-grained simulations coupled with a tight-binding model, in which, however, the effect of the added charge is only included indirectly.⁶²

In qHP C_{60} , the formation of the 2D polymer comes at the expense of sp^2 hybridization, which is found to be interspersed by sp^3 carbons, forming C_{60} – C_{60} single bonds. These sp^3 carbons are known to hinder electron transfer channels, e.g. in light-harvesting molecules for dye-sensitized solar cells.^{63,64} Hence, the enhanced charge mobility of graphullerene may not be a consequence of a change in transport regime but simply stem from shorter interfullerene distances. Overall, within the ongoing debate on the optimal models to predict charge mobility in organic semiconductors and molecular crystals,^{56,65,66} graphullerene represents an intriguing model system to gain further understanding of the effects influencing transport mechanisms.

In this Letter, we assess the localization and mobility of extra electrons in qHP C_{60} , by combining advanced electronic-structure calculations with a full quantum mechanical theoretical framework for the calculation of electron transfer rates. Our approach, which is found to excellently reproduce the measured electronic properties of both fullerene and graphullerene, allows us to observe that polaronic localization of electrons, envisaged for the crystalline vdW C_{60} solid, still holds in the covalently bonded network of qHP C_{60} , because of the antibonding nature of its conduction band minimum. Therefore, the transport of both materials can be described by polaron hopping. In fact, the substantial raise in electron mobility measured in experiments for qHP C_{60} with respect to vdW C_{60} is correctly reproduced by our theoretical modeling of charge mobility and it is found to mainly derive from the enhanced electronic coupling between C_{60} units, held together in the honeycomb lattice at closer distances with respect to vdW C_{60} .

We model vdW C_{60} and qHP C_{60} employing supercells, corresponding to the experimental structures at room temperature,^{37,69} and including 32 and 16 molecules, respectively (cf. Figure S1). These large supercells are necessary to avoid a charged molecular unit having its periodic replica as a first

neighbor. To neutralize the self-interaction error of density functional theory (DFT),^{70,71} we employ the Koopmans' compliant class of hybrid functionals⁷² based on the PBE0^{73,74} family. Nonlocal electron correlation is included in the functional via the rVV10 scheme^{75,76} to ensure a correct description of structural properties, cf. Table S2. We refer to the Supporting Information (SI) for details of the calculations and for auxiliary tests of the accuracy of the employed methodology.

We first calculate the fundamental band gap of the two materials at room temperature, $E_g(T)$, combining electronic-structure calculations with molecular dynamics simulations, cf. SI, to account for thermal renormalization, which is often relevant in organic semiconductors (Table S4).^{58,77,78} Furthermore, by modeling the relevant semiconductor-vacuum interface (see SI), we also estimate the ionization potential (IP) and electron affinity (EA) of the two carbon allotropes (Table 1). When compared with the 3D crystal, graphullerene

Table 1. Calculated Values of the Electronic Band Gap at Room Temperature $E_g(T)$, the Ionization Potential (IP), and the Electron Affinity (EA) for vdW and qHP C_{60} ^a

Theory	$E_g(T)$	IP	EA
vdW	1.93	6.09	4.16
qHP	1.72	5.86	4.14
Expt.	E_g	IP	EA
vdW	1.9–2.1 ^{9,10}	6.17 ⁶⁷	3.5 ± 0.9 ⁶⁸
qHP	1.6 ³⁷		

^aExperimental estimates, where available, are also reported. All quantities are given in eV.

features an IP = 5.86 eV, shifted by 0.23 eV toward the vacuum level, while the EA (4.14 eV) remains almost unaltered. This suggests that the formation of the honeycomb lattice may have a larger impact on the valence rather than the conduction band edge.

To better understand the correlation between structure and electronic properties, we now focus on qHP C_{60} which is here predicted to be a direct band gap semiconductor at Γ [cf. Figure 2 (a)], in line with a recent study.⁴⁵ Its valence and conduction band edges, see Figure 2 (b–c), are akin to those of the parent vdW crystal (cf. Figure S4); However, the electron density of the valence band maximum (VBM) is sizable on both single and cycloaddition of C–C bonds, i.e. it is a bonding orbital; in stark contrast, the conduction band minimum (CBM) displays an antibonding character, with the electron density being confined to the individual C_{60} units, in closer resemblance of vdW C_{60} . Inspection of the electronic density of states, see Figure 2 (d), reveals that both band edges are mainly constituted by p states. When compared to vdW C_{60} (cf. SI), the 2D phase displays a broader and less structured DOS distribution, as the I_h symmetry of the fullerene molecule is here lost. Moreover, the s character of the CBM, while still exiguous is found to be noticeably larger in qHP C_{60} .

We next investigate polaron formation in these materials. First, we calculate the polaron binding energy, defined as

$$\lambda^\pm(\text{crys}) = E_{\text{vert}}^\pm - E_{\text{opt}}^\pm \quad (1)$$

i.e. the difference between the total energy of the relaxed supercell bearing an extra positive or negative charge, E_{opt}^\pm , and that of the supercell upon vertical charge injection on the

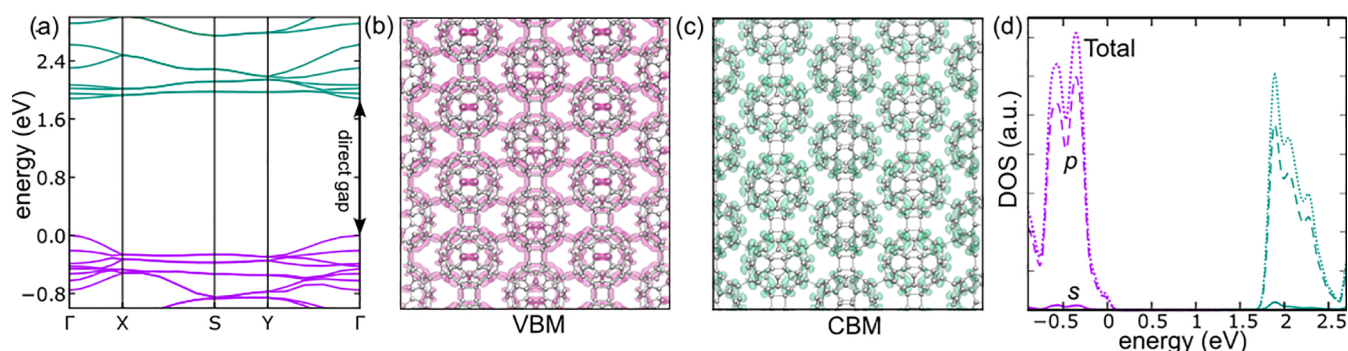


Figure 2. (a) Band structure of qHP C_{60} calculated using the PBE0(α)+rVV10 functional. Valence band are given in purple and conduction bands in teal. Isodensity representation of (b) the valence band maximum and (c) the conduction band minimum. (d) Total and projected electronic density of states of the valence (purple) and conduction band edges (teal) of qHP C_{60} .

neutral system, E_{vert}^{\pm} the latter acting as a reference for the delocalized conduction band edge. In molecular crystals, we can further disentangle the individual contributions to the total binding energy, in analogy with internal and external reorganization energies defined in Marcus theory for electron transfer in solution.⁷⁹ In particular, we can define the molecular reorganization energy as⁵⁸

$$\lambda^{\pm}(\text{loc}) = E_{\text{vert}}^{\pm} - E_{\text{loc}}^{\pm} \quad (2)$$

In eq 2, E_{loc}^{\pm} is the total energy of a charged system in which only a single molecule of the supercell is allowed to relax, while the coordinates of all other atoms are fixed. It follows that the environment response to molecular charge localization is given by

$$\lambda^{\pm}(\text{env}) = \lambda^{\pm}(\text{crys}) - \lambda^{\pm}(\text{loc}) \quad (3)$$

The overall scheme is reported in Figure 3(a) for electron polarons.

The calculated binding energies are reported in Table 2. We here estimate $\lambda^{+}(\text{crys}) = 0.18$ and $\lambda^{-}(\text{crys}) = 0.13$ eV for vdW C_{60} , these values originating from relaxation of a single C_{60} molecule, as the external reorganization is found to be negligible, in accordance with the apolar nature of the material. We note that the computed $\lambda^{\pm}(\text{loc})$ are in line with those reported in the literature^{80–83} for the isolated molecule. At variance with this, no hole localization is predicted for qHP C_{60} , as $\lambda^{+}(\text{crys})$ is vanishingly small, a result that can be associated with the more dispersive nature of the VBM. As far as the electron is concerned, qHP C_{60} displays a slightly lower value of $\lambda^{-}(\text{crys}) = 0.10$ eV and different distribution of total binding energy. In fact, $\lambda^{-}(\text{loc})$ is found to be only 0.07 eV, ca. half of the vdW C_{60} value, a consequence of the more constrained and rigid structure of the C_{60} molecule within the covalently bonded network. However, the contribution to the polaron stabilization induced by the surrounding molecules is more significant, as we calculate $\lambda^{-}(\text{env}) = 0.03$ eV. In particular, upon relaxation with an extra electron, the single bonds connecting four C_{60} units to that bearing most of the charge are found to be elongated by ≈ 0.02 Å, while the distances between the centers of mass of the central fullerene molecule and its first neighbors is increased by at most 0.005 Å. This is again in accord with the antibonding nature of the CBM, i.e. weakening of the bond upon addition of an electron. Overall, this weak but collective response partly compensates for the reduced internal reorganization.

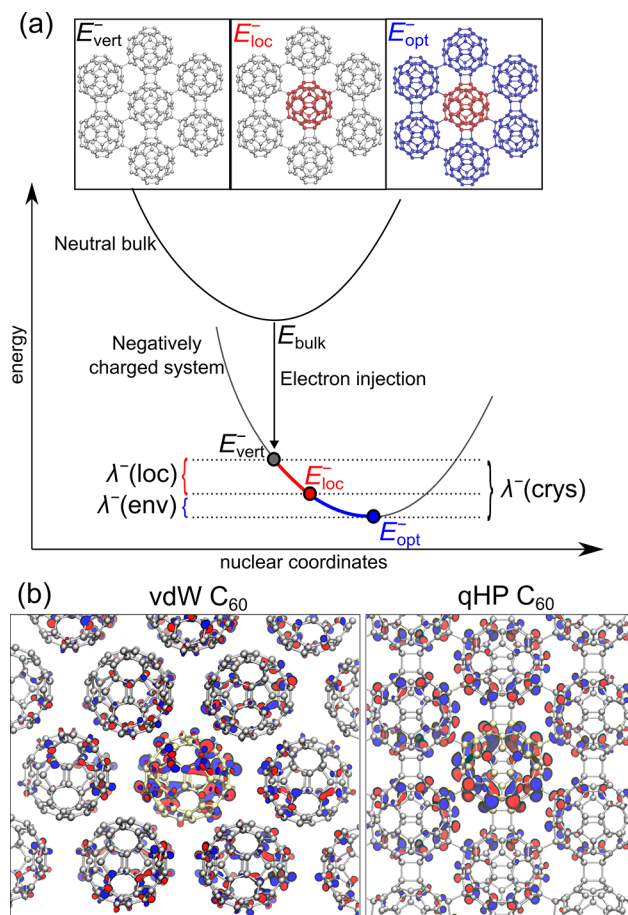


Figure 3. (a) Schematic representation of the calculated binding energies for electron polarons, as defined in the main text. The color code on the structural representation of qHP C_{60} indicates atoms allowed to relax for each calculations: gray (no structural relaxation), red (relaxation of a single molecule) and blue (relaxation of the other molecules). (b) Isodensity representation of the highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) for the negatively charged supercells of vdW C_{60} (left panel, side view along the 110 direction) and qHP C_{60} (right panel, top view). C atoms of the molecule featuring most charge localization are given in yellow.

The highest occupied molecular orbitals (HOMO) for the negatively charged supercells, presented in Figure 3 (b), clearly indicate charge localization for both the vdW solid and the 2D monolayer network: for the former, it is primarily distributed on an equatorial ring of a single C_{60} ,⁸⁴ with the electron

Table 2. Calculated Polaron Binding Energies (cf. Main Text) for vdW and qHP C₆₀^a

	$\lambda^+(\text{loc})$	$\lambda^+(\text{env})$	$\lambda^+(\text{crys})$
vdW	0.18	<0.01	0.18
qHP			<0.01
	$\lambda^-(\text{loc})$	$\lambda^-(\text{env})$	$\lambda^-(\text{crys})$
vdW	0.13	<0.01	0.13
qHP	0.07	0.03	0.10

^aAll quantities are given in eV.

density slightly extending to the first neighbors; similarly, for the latter, the electron density directed toward the intermolecular bonds. Thus, the observed antibonding character of CBM favors the formation of the electron polaron and the residual delocalization of the charge can be attributed to the same π – π interactions occurring in vdW C₆₀. The present analysis is confirmed by estimating the inverse participation ratio (IPR), which allows for a quantification of charge confinement. In fact, for both materials, the IPR of the electron polaron is intermediate to those of an isolated C₆₀ anion and of the vertically anionized supercell (cf. SI). Such a result is in qualitative agreement with the charge densities recently simulated through model Hamiltonians for qHP C₆₀.⁶¹ Overall, our *ab initio* approach supports polaron formation in vdW C₆₀ and unveils that a similar electron localization is preserved in the 2D phase.

We next verify the consistency of this physical picture with the enhanced electron mobility measured for qHP C₆₀, with respect to the vdW crystal. In light of the predicted polaron formation, it is expected that a hopping model should properly describe charge transport in both these materials. Thus, electron hopping rates have been calculated in the framework of Fermi's Golden Rule (FGR), whereby the transition rate between an initial (*i*) and final (*f*) state is expressed as

$$k_{ij} = \frac{2\pi}{\hbar} |J_{fi}|^2 F(\Delta E_{fi}, T) \quad (4)$$

In eq 4, J_{fi} is the electronic coupling element, and $F(\Delta E_{fi}, T)$ is the Franck–Condon weighted density of states (FCWD), *vide infra*, evaluated at temperature *T* and at the energy difference ΔE_{fi} between the states.

The electronic coupling *J* between two neighboring C₆₀ units has been evaluated by using the two-state model,⁸⁵ by extracting dimers from the crystallographic structures (see SI for details). This static approach in the calculation of *J*, generally leads to mobilities in fair agreement with the experiment.⁸⁶ While all dimers are equivalent in the highly symmetric vdW C₆₀ crystal, for qHP C₆₀ we need to calculate *J* for (i) the dimer bound via a single bond (*J_s*) and (ii) that bearing a cycloaddition bond (*J_c*), cf. Figure 1 and Table 3. Furthermore, for dimers extracted from qHP C₆₀, hydrogen atoms are added to saturate the valence, where necessary, to have all the *sp*³ carbon atoms retaining their character.

For vdW C₆₀, we calculate $|J| = 32$ meV, a value consistent with those usually assessed for molecular crystals.⁸⁷ For qHP C₆₀, we estimate $|J_s| = 75$ meV and $|J_c| = 81$ meV, both larger than that of the vdW solid. We also note that the slight difference in the calculated couplings for the two different hopping pathways is in line with the measured preferential conductivity along the [2 + 2] fullerene bonds³⁷ and can be related with the different chemical bonding.

Table 3. Calculated Electronic Coupling (*J*, eV), Rates (*k*, s^{−1}), Diffusion Coefficients (*D*, cm²s^{−1}), and Mobility (μ , cm² V^{−1} s^{−1}) for qHP C₆₀ and vdW C₆₀^a

path	<i>J</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>D</i>	μ
vdW	0.033	1.3×10^{13}	2.15×10^{-6}	0.84 (0.08–0.3)
qHP	c	9.28×10^{13}	1.85×10^{-5}	7.20 (5)
s	0.075	8.15×10^{13}		

^aExperimental mobilities are given in parentheses.

The difference in coupling between the two materials may be explained in terms of the shorter intermolecular distance between the centers of mass, r_{CM} , within the covalently bonded network (≈ 0.9 Å less than that observed for the fullerene crystal). To substantiate this assumption, we also calculate the coupling between two fullerene molecules at varying r_{CM} : we find *J* values close to those computed for graphullerene at lower distances, cf. Figure 4 (a). Moreover, when r_{CM} reaches

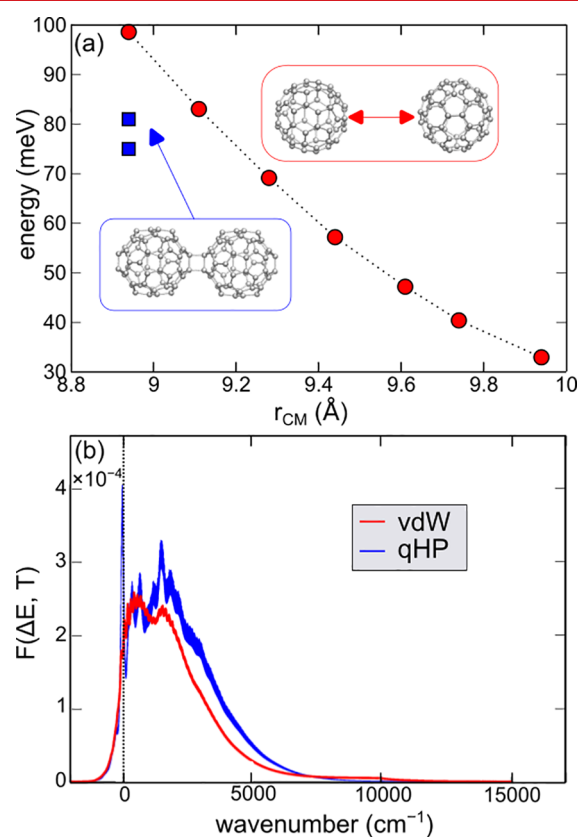


Figure 4. (a) Electronic coupling as a function of the distance between the centers of mass for a nonbonded fullerene dimer (red circles); blue squares indicate the values calculated for covalently bonded dimers (cf. main text). (b) Franck–Condon weighted density of states at *T* = 298 K as a function of the energy calculated for vdW (red) and qHP (blue) C₆₀. Dotted black line indicates the ΔE value corresponding to the electron transfer reaction.

the same value of the graphullerene 2D network, we calculate *J* = 100 meV, > 20% higher than both *J_s* and *J_c*. This clearly indicates that, while shorter distances enhance the interaction strength, the formation of bonds via *sp*³ hybridization and the distortions associated with it weakens the coupling between molecular units, thus further explaining why the electron remains localized also in the covalently bonded lattice.

Next, we discuss the FCWD appearing in eq 4 which is defined as

$$F(\Delta E_{fi}, T) = \sum_{\mathbf{v}'} \sum_{\mathbf{v}''} w_{\mathbf{v}'}(T) |\langle \mathbf{v}'' | \mathbf{v}' \rangle|^2 \delta(E_{i\mathbf{v}''} - E_{f\mathbf{v}'} - \Delta E_{fi}) \quad (5)$$

where \mathbf{v}' and \mathbf{v}'' denote the vectors of the vibrational quantum states of the $|i\rangle$ and $|f\rangle$, respectively, and $w_{\mathbf{v}'}$ are the equilibrium (Boltzmann) population of $|i\rangle\mathbf{v}'$. We here calculate the FCWDs, using the generating function approach (cf. SI and refs.^{88–93}) at $T = 298$ K, considering the optimized isolated molecule for vdW C_{60} and the molecule saturated with hydrogen atoms for qHP C_{60} . From Figure 4, we notice that the FCWD for qHP C_{60} is slightly broader than that of vdW C_{60} , again a consequence of the higher distortion induced by the sp^3 character of the C atoms covalently bonded to other fullerene units in graphullerene. Since we are modeling electron transfer as a polaron hopping between equivalent sites, we focus on the FCWD value at $\Delta E_{fi} = 0$ (cf. SI), which is very similar for vdW and qHP C_{60} . This indicates that the difference in the electron transfer rates (and hence transport properties) for the two systems under study mainly derives from the electronic coupling.

Finally, we determine the drift electron mobility μ according to the Einstein–Smoluchowski's relation:

$$\mu = \frac{eD}{k_B T} \quad (6)$$

where e is the elementary charge, k_B the Boltzmann's constant, and D is the diffusion coefficient here defined as⁹⁴

$$D = \frac{1}{2n} \sum_i r_{CM_i}^2 k_i P_i \quad (7)$$

In eq 7, n is the dimensionality of the system, r_{CM_i} is the distance between the centers of mass of the interacting molecules, k_i is the electron transfer rate, and P_i is the probability of the hop along the i -th pathway given by

$$P_i = \frac{k_i}{\sum_j k_j} \quad (8)$$

For qHP C_{60} , the summation runs over the two charge transfer pathways, accounting for the fact that each fullerene molecule in the honeycomb lattice has four neighbors linked through a single bond and two via a cycloaddition bond. From eq 7, we also note that the shorter interfullerene distances in qHP C_{60} influences D both directly (via r_{CM_i}) and indirectly (i.e., modulating the electronic coupling which determines k_i).

In Table 3, we collect the calculated and measured electron mobilities. For vdW C_{60} , we predict $\mu = 0.84 \text{ cm}^2 \text{V}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$, to be confronted with the measured estimates of $0.08\text{--}0.3 \text{ cm}^2 \text{V}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$;^{95–97} for qHP C_{60} , we calculate $\mu = 7.20 \text{ cm}^2 \text{V}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$, in close agreement with the experimental value of $5 \text{ cm}^2 \text{V}^{-1} \text{s}^{-1}$.³⁵ Overall, our model nicely portrays the increase in mobility when passing from vdW to qHP C_{60} and provides results in very good accord with measurements: The order of magnitude, the only thing one can trust for this delicate quantity, is captured and the slight overestimation for both materials is due to the fact that actual devices contains various impurities,^{35–37} which are known to limit mobility.^{89,98} The enhancement in electron mobility by almost 1 order of magnitude for qHP C_{60} with respect to the fullerene 3D solid is

found to mainly stem from the increase of the electronic coupling, which in turn is mainly related to the shortened distances between neighboring C_{60} units. The covalent bonded network, while serving this purpose, is also found to partially hinder electron transfer, due to the sp^3 carbon atoms impairing intermolecular interactions.

In conclusion, we performed advanced electronic-structure calculations which allowed us to demonstrate that, notwithstanding the different nature of the intermolecular interactions, a similar polaronic localization of electrons is envisaged in vdW and qHP C_{60} , a consequence of the antibonding nature of the CBM of the 2D phase. We then showed that electron hopping within the framework of Fermi's Golden Rule permits to calculate electron mobilities in excellent agreement with the experimental trend and to establish a clear connection between the augmented electronic coupling of neighboring molecules and the enhanced mobility displayed by qHP C_{60} .

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Data Availability Statement

Input files, models, and snapshots of MD simulations are available at <https://github.com/fra85uni/graphullerene>.

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.nanolett.4c01695>.

Models of the supercells employed to simulate vdW and qHP C_{60} and computational details of the associated calculations, including details of the probe method employed to define the fraction of Fock exchange α used in the hybrid functional and additional tests on the accuracy of the employed methodology. Computational details of molecular dynamics simulations and calculated band gap and band edges thermal renormalization. Details on the calculation of the FCWD. Additional refs. 99–119 (PDF)

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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