



New LHC bound on low-mass diphoton resonances

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ABSTRACT

We derive a new bound on diphoton resonances using inclusive diphoton cross section measurements at the LHC, in the so-far poorly constrained mass range between the Υ and the SM Higgs. This bound sets the current best limit on axion-like particles that couple to gluons and photons, for masses between 10 and 65 GeV. We also estimate indicative sensitivities of a dedicated diphoton LHC search in the same mass region, at 7, 8 and 14 TeV. As a byproduct of our analysis, we comment on the axion-like particle interpretation of the CMS excesses in low-mass dijet and diphoton searches.

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1. Introduction

Searches for two body decays of heavy resonances led to fundamental discoveries in the history of particle physics such as the J/ψ [1,2], the Υ [3] and the Z boson [4]. An extensive program is currently looking for higher mass resonances at the LHC in various final states (see [5] for a complete list).

Despite the high background rates, advances in data-driven background estimates guarantee good sensitivities to discover/exclude such peak signals. A marvelous proof of the high performance of resonance searches at the LHC is the recent discovery of the Standard Model (SM) Higgs boson in the diphoton channel [6,7].

As a matter of fact, the current LHC search program is mostly tailored to probe new resonances of mass higher than roughly 100 GeV. This is the result of a general theoretical bias towards heavy new physics (NP) and of the common belief that either previous collider experiments (UA1, UA2, LEP and Tevatron) and/or Higgs coupling fits (through the decay of the Higgs into two new particles) put constraints on lighter resonances that are stronger than the LHC capabilities. On the experimental side, going to low masses poses the challenge of looking for resonances with a mass below the sum of the cuts on the transverse momentum (p_T) of the decay products.

The aim of this letter is to go beyond these common beliefs and to motivate the LHC collaborations to look for resonances down to the smallest possible mass. We first derive a new bound (of 10–100 pb) on the diphoton signal strength of a new resonance in the mass range between the Υ and the SM Higgs. This new bound comes from inclusive diphoton cross section measurements at ATLAS [8,9] and CMS [10]. Assuming zero knowledge about the background, we simply impose that the NP events are less than the total measured events plus twice their uncertainty.

We show how this conservative procedure sets already the strongest existing constraint on axion-like particles (ALPs) with mass between 10 and 65 GeV. We finally estimate the indicative reaches on the diphoton signal strengths that could be attainable by proper searches at the LHC, up to its high luminosity (HL) phase, and interpret their impact on the ALP parameter space.

2. Axion-like particles in diphotons

When a $U(1)$ global symmetry (which can be the subgroup of some larger global symmetry \mathcal{G}) is spontaneously broken in the vacuum, then a massless Nambu–Goldstone boson (NGB) arises in the low energy spectrum. If the $U(1)$ symmetry is only approximate, the NGB gets a mass m_a and it becomes a pseudo-Nambu–Goldstone boson (pNGB), often called axion-like particle (ALP). The mass m_a of the pNGB is a technically natural parameter which depends on the explicit breaking of the $U(1)$ global symmetry, and is smaller than the associated NP scale $M_{NP} \sim 4\pi f_a$, where f_a is

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the scale of spontaneous breaking. In particular m_a can be smaller than the SM Higgs mass without any fine-tuning price.

The axial couplings of the pNGB to SM gauge bosons can be written as

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{int}} = \frac{a}{4\pi f_a} \left[\alpha_s c_3 G\tilde{G} + \alpha_2 c_2 W\tilde{W} + \alpha_1 c_1 B\tilde{B} \right], \quad (1)$$

where $\alpha_1 = 5/3\alpha'$ is the GUT normalized $U(1)_Y$ coupling constant, a is the canonically normalized pNGB field, and the coefficients c_i encode the Adler–Bell–Jackiw (ABJ) anomalies of the global $U(1)$ with $SU(3)$ and $SU(2) \times U(1)_Y$. Further couplings of the pNGB with the SM Higgs and/or with the SM fermions can be set to zero if these fields are not charged (or very weakly charged) under the global $U(1)$.

As one can see from Eq. (1), the strength of the couplings of the pNGB is controlled by its decay constant f_a . As we will show, the phenomenology of the pNGB becomes of interest for this study, and more in general for present colliders, for $f_a \sim 0.1$ –10 TeV. Decay constants in this range are ubiquitous in popular theoretical frameworks addressing the naturalness of the EW scale, like low-scale Supersymmetry (SUSY) and Compositeness.¹ Note that generically we expect that other fields associated to the $U(1)$ spontaneous breaking (e.g. the radial mode) should have a mass $\lesssim 4\pi f_a$. Hence in the lower extreme of the range for f_a other signatures associated to the BSM theory could be accessible at the LHC.

Supersymmetry (SUSY) and its breaking predict on general grounds the existence of an R -axion [20], pNGB of the $U(1)_R$ symmetry, potentially accessible at the LHC if the SUSY scale is sufficiently low [21]. In this context the couplings to gauge bosons of Eq. (1) are realized naturally from ABJ anomalies between $U(1)_R$ and the SM gauge group, while the couplings to SM fermions and Higgses can be set to zero with a well-defined R -charge assignment ($R_H = 0$ in the notation of [21]). In composite Higgs models, attempts of fermionic UV completions point to the need of non-minimal cosets (see e.g. [22–24]), which in turn imply the existence of pNGBs lighter than the new confinement scale. See [25] for recent work about these pNGBs, and [26] for a systematic classification of the cosets structures that give rise to pNGBs that couple to both gluons and EW gauge bosons.

A common feature of both SUSY and Composite Higgs models is that the QCD anomaly receives an irreducible contribution from loops of colored states, like gluinos and/or tops, which are generically chiral under the spontaneously broken $U(1)$. As a consequence one typically expects $c_3 \neq 0$, unless model dependent cancellations occur. In conclusion, $f_a \sim 0.1$ –10 TeV and $c_3 \neq 0$ in a broad class of SUSY and Composite Higgs models, so that a is copiously produced in pp collisions at the LHC. For this reason we believe that our study applies to a wide range of theoretically motivated ALP models.

From a phenomenological point of view, ALPs of interest for this study have received much attention as mediators of simplified Dark Matter models (see for example the recent [27]). Finally, ALPs can exist if Strong Dynamics is present at some scale [28]. In such a case, having $f_a \sim 0.1$ –10 TeV would be a phenomenological assumption not motivated by any naturalness consideration.

For $m_a \lesssim m_h$, the relevant two body decays of a are in diphotons and dijets, with widths

$$\Gamma_{gg} = K_g \frac{\alpha_s^2 c_3^2 m_a^3}{8\pi^3 f_a^2}, \quad \Gamma_{\gamma\gamma} = \frac{\alpha_{\text{em}}^2 c_\gamma^2 m_a^3}{64\pi^3 f_a^2}, \quad (2)$$

where $c_\gamma = c_2 + 5c_1/3$, and where both α_s and α_{em} are computed at the mass of m_a . We encode the higher-order QCD corrections in $K_g = 2.1$ [29]. Unless $c_{1,2} \gtrsim 10^2 c_3$, the width into gluons is the dominant one. The total width Γ_{tot} is typically very narrow, for example for $f_a \gtrsim 100$ GeV and $c_i \sim O(1)$ one obtains $\Gamma_{\text{tot}}/m_a \lesssim 10^{-3}$.

For simplicity, we do not study the phenomenology associated to the $Z\gamma$ decay channel, which is anyhow open only for $m_a > m_Z$, and phenomenologically more relevant than $\gamma\gamma$ only for specific values of c_1 and c_2 .

3. Current searches

A new resonance decaying in two jets or two photons is probed at colliders by looking at the related invariant mass distributions, possibly in addition with extra objects, either SM or BSM (see e.g. [30,31]) depending on the production mechanism. We summarize and discuss here the most relevant searches for light resonances at the LHC, and refer to the supplementary material for a more complete list and a discussion of the existing searches and of diphoton cross section measurements, at the LHC, Tevatron, LEP and SpS.

- ◊ Dijet resonances down to 50 GeV have been recently looked for by CMS [32]. In order to overcome the trigger on the jet p_T 's, CMS has a strong cut on the total hadronic activity H_T . Recoiling against the hard jet, the resonance is boosted and its decay products collimated. For this reason advanced jet substructure techniques were essential to reconstruct the dijet resonance inside a single “fat” jet [33,34]. The CMS low-mass dijet limits are given on the inclusive dijet signal strength of a $q\bar{q}$ -initiated resonance $\sigma_{q\bar{q}}^{\text{CMS}}$. We recast them for a gluon initiated resonance as

$$\sigma_{gg}^{\text{our}} = \sigma_{q\bar{q}}^{\text{CMS}} \cdot \frac{\epsilon_{H_T}^{q\bar{q}}}{\epsilon_{H_T}^{gg}}, \quad (3)$$

where $\epsilon_{H_T}^{q\bar{q}}$ and $\epsilon_{H_T}^{gg}$ are the efficiencies of the cut in hadronic activity $H_T > 650$ GeV.² These are estimated from simulations³ of a gg and a $q\bar{q}$ initiated scalar signals (including matching up to 2 jets and detector simulation). We take the efficiency ratio in Eq. (3) to be constant and equal to 0.08, which is the value that we find at $m_a = 80$ GeV. Accounting for the m_a dependence introduces variations up to 20% within the mass range 50–125 GeV. The fact that the efficiency ratio is roughly constant in m_a can be understood observing that \sqrt{s} is always dominated by the cut of $H_T > 650$ GeV, which is much larger than any of the values of m_a of our interest.

- ◊ Existing diphoton searches are inclusive and extend to a lower invariant mass of 65 GeV [43–46], where the two photons satisfy standard isolation and identification requirements. The ATLAS diphoton search at 8 TeV [43] is the one extending down to 65 GeV. The bound is given in term of the diphoton “fiducial” cross-section $\sigma^{\text{fid}} = \sigma^{\text{th}} \cdot \epsilon_S / C_X$. C_X is a model independent number that we take from [43] and encodes the

¹ String theory constructions could provide an extra motivation for ALPs. However, the expected values of f_a in string models like [11–13] are order of magnitudes too high for being phenomenologically interesting at colliders. Similarly, solutions of the strong CP problem based on a QCD axion [14–17] with a decay constant f_a at the TeV scale are hard to conceive (see however [18,19]).

² We thank Phil Harris for private communications on [32].

³ Throughout this paper we use FeynRules 2.0 [35], MadGraph 5 v2 LO [36,37] with the default pdf set, Pythia 8.1 [38,39], DELPHES 3 [40] and MadAnalysis 5 [41]. The MLM matching [42] is performed to include matrix element correction to ISR's.

Table 1

Signal efficiencies for the 7 TeV and 8 TeV cross-section measurements at the LHC [8–10] and at the Tevatron [8,9] for a resonance produced in gluon fusion.

m_a in GeV	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	110	120
ϵ_S for σ_7 TeV ATLAS [8]	0	0.008	0.022	0.040	0.137	0.293	0.409	0.465	0.486	0.533	0.619	0.637
ϵ_S for σ_7 TeV CMS [10]	0	0.002	0.010	0.020	0.030	0.058	0.156	0.319	0.424	0.499	0.532	0.570
ϵ_S for σ_8 TeV ATLAS [9]	0	0.0007	0.008	0.014	0.024	0.037	0.071	0.233	0.347	0.419	0.452	0.484
ϵ_S for σ_2 TeV CDF [48,49]	0.001	0.007	0.026	0.143	0.212	0.241	0.276	0.275	0.283	0.3	0.319	0.327
ϵ_S for σ_2 TeV D0 [50]	0	0.002	0.008	0.018	0.114	0.169	0.208	0.21	0.217	0.234	0.244	0.252

detector acceptance once the kinematical cuts are already imposed ($C_X \simeq 0.6$ in the mass range of our interest).⁴ To extract the efficiency ϵ_S we simulated the signal for the ALP model in Eq. (1) accounting for all the cuts of [43].

The CMS searches at 8 and 13 TeV [44,46] provide the bound on the theoretical signal strength for a resonance with the same couplings of the SM Higgs but lighter mass. Since gluon fusion is the dominant production mechanism for a SM Higgs in the low mass range [47], we take the CMS result as a bound on the theoretical diphoton signal strength of our ALP.

4. New bound and LHC sensitivities from $\gamma\gamma$ cross-section measurements

Here we extract a new bound on diphoton resonances from inclusive diphoton measurements at the LHC and at Tevatron, and we present the projected LHC sensitivities.

New bound from measurements The papers [8–10,49] provide tables of the measured differential diphoton cross sections per invariant mass bin, $d\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}/dm_{\gamma\gamma}$, together with their relative statistical (Δ_{stat}) and systematical (Δ_{sys}) uncertainties. We derive a conservative bound on the theoretical signal strength $\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{th}}$ of a diphoton resonance by imposing

$$\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{th}}(m_a) \lesssim \left[m_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{Bin}} \cdot \frac{d\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}}{dm_{\gamma\gamma}} (1 + 2\Delta_{\text{tot}}) \right] \cdot \frac{1}{\epsilon_S(m_a)}, \quad (4)$$

where $\Delta_{\text{tot}} = \sqrt{\Delta_{\text{sys}}^2 + \Delta_{\text{stat}}^2}$, $m_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{Bin}}$ is the size of the bin containing m_a , and ϵ_S is the signal efficiency accounting for the kinematical and the isolation cuts of the photons.

At a given center of mass energy s , we derive ϵ_S as

$$\epsilon_S(m_a) = \frac{\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{MCcuts}}(m_a, s)}{C_s \sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{LO}}(m_a, s)}. \quad (5)$$

$\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{LO}}(m_a, s)$ is the LO gluon fusion cross section, derived using the gluon pdf from [51], multiplied by the LO branching ratio into $\gamma\gamma$ computed from Eq. (1). We also compute a total “simulated” diphoton signal strength $\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{MCtot}}$, which includes matching up to 2 jets, by a Monte Carlo (MC) simulation of the signal for the ALP model in Eq. (1). We find that $\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{LO}}$ reproduces up to a constant factor C_s the shape of $\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{MCtot}}$ for $m_{\gamma\gamma} \gtrsim 60$ GeV (i.e. sufficiently far from the sum of the minimal detector p_T cuts on the photons). A constant factor $C_s \equiv \sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{MCtot}}(s)/\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{LO}}(s)$ is hence included in Eq. (5) and we obtain $C_{7 \text{ TeV}} \simeq C_{8 \text{ TeV}} \simeq 0.85$ while $C_{2 \text{ TeV}} \simeq 1$ at the Tevatron center of mass energy. The signal strength after cuts $\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{MCcuts}}$ is obtained by the MC simulations imposing on the events samples the relevant cuts for each of the experimental search.

To validate our procedure with a measured quantity, we simulate the SM diphoton background and verify that it reproduces well the experimental diphoton cross section measurements of [8,9].

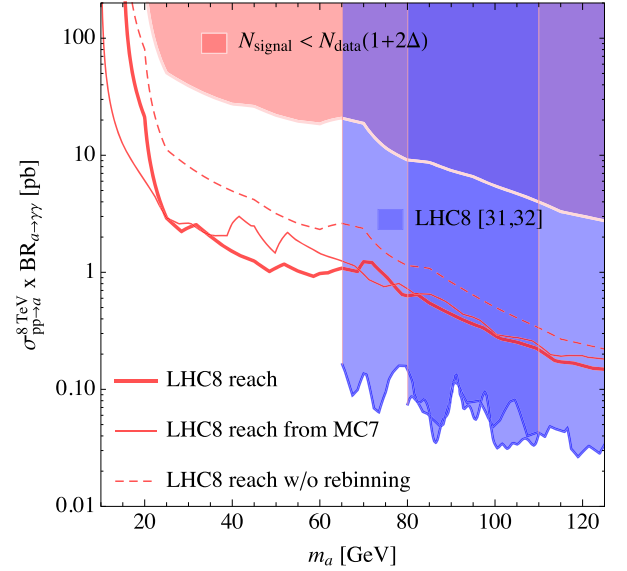


Fig. 1. Bounds (shaded) and expected sensitivities (lines) on the diphoton signal strength of a resonance produced in gluon fusion, at 8 TeV. More details in the text.

We refer the reader to the supplementary material for more details on our derivation of $\epsilon_S(m_a)$, including validations. We list in Table 1 the efficiencies as a function of m_a for the various cross section measurements.

We stress that, for very light mass values, a NP resonance can pass the cuts on the photon p_T 's by recoiling against a jet, which is not vetoed since the cross section measurements are inclusive. This is reflected in the efficiencies of the signal which are non vanishing (thought small) also in the region of very low resonance mass.

Our final results are shown in Fig. 1, where the conservative bound extracted from 8 TeV ATLAS data [9] using Eq. (4) is compared against the existing 8 TeV searches at ATLAS [43] and CMS [44].

Sensitivities from measurements An expected sensitivity $\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{sens}}$ can be derived by assuming the measured cross section to be dominated by the SM diphoton background, and requiring the signal to be within the $2\Delta_{\text{tot}}$ variation of the background:

$$\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{sens}}(m_a) = \left[m_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{Bin}} \cdot \frac{d\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}}{dm_{\gamma\gamma}} \cdot 2\Delta_{\text{tot}} \right] \cdot \frac{1}{\epsilon_S(m_a)}. \quad (6)$$

The sensitivities we present in Fig. 1 as thick continuous and dashed lines correspond to two different choices of $m_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{Bin}}$, and both correspond to 8 TeV data with integrated luminosity 20.2 fb^{-1} [9].

The most conservative sensitivity between the two corresponds to the binning given directly in the ATLAS 8 TeV cross section measurement [9], where the mass bins have a size of 30 to 10 GeV in the region of our interest. A better sensitivity is obtained by reducing the bin size $m_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{Bin}}$ down to the invariant mass resolution obtained from the ATLAS and CMS ECAL energy resolution on a single photon, that we extract from [52] and [40], and which leads

⁴ We thank Liron Barak for private communications on [43].

to mass bins of size $\simeq 3$ GeV for values of m_a below the sum of the minimal p_T cuts of the photons (see the supplementary material for more details). Since the signal is narrow, the number of signal events in the bin is not affected. The number of background N_{bkg} events is instead reduced and the sensitivity increased assuming that the errors scale as $\sqrt{N_{\text{bkg}}}$.⁵ This scaling holds for statistical errors and we assume the same scaling for systematical ones. The assumption is motivated by the scaling of some of the systematics (e.g. those associated to poor statistics in control regions) and by the fact that the CMS cross section measurements [10] do not separate statistical from systematical uncertainties.

Sensitivities adding MC input, up to 14 TeV Now we discuss how to rescale the sensitivities from lower energies \sqrt{s}_{low} to higher energies \sqrt{s}_{high} . To rescale the diphoton background we first obtain, from MC simulations, $\sigma_{\text{low}}^{\text{MC}}$ and $\sigma_{\text{high}}^{\text{MC}}$. These are the SM diphoton cross sections at \sqrt{s}_{low} and \sqrt{s}_{high} after the cuts of the cross section measurements at \sqrt{s}_{low} are imposed. We then take $\sigma_{\gamma\gamma,\text{high}}^{\text{bkg}} = \sigma_{\gamma\gamma,\text{low}}^{\text{bkg}} \sigma_{\text{high}}^{\text{MC}} / \sigma_{\text{low}}^{\text{MC}}$, where $\sigma_{\gamma\gamma,\text{low}}^{\text{bkg}}$ is extracted from the experimental measurements. The total relative uncertainties for the background are rescaled as the squared root of the total number of events so that $\Delta_{\text{high}} = \sqrt{L_{\text{low}}/L_{\text{high}}} \sqrt{\sigma_{\text{low}}^{\text{MC}}/\sigma_{\text{high}}^{\text{MC}}} \Delta_{\text{low}}$. Finally we also account for the different efficiencies for the signal going from \sqrt{s}_{low} to \sqrt{s}_{high} . All in all, starting from Eq. (6) we get

$$\sigma_{\gamma\gamma,\text{high}}^{\text{sens}}(m_a) = \sqrt{\frac{L_{\text{low}}}{L_{\text{high}}}} \cdot \frac{\sigma_{\text{high}}^{\text{MC}}}{\sigma_{\text{low}}^{\text{MC}}} \cdot \frac{\epsilon_s^{\text{low}}}{\epsilon_s^{\text{high}}} \cdot \sigma_{\gamma\gamma,\text{low}}^{\text{sens}}(m_a). \quad (7)$$

We show it in Fig. 1 for the extrapolation of the ATLAS reach from $\sqrt{s}_{\text{low}} = 7$ TeV and 4.9 fb^{-1} of data to $\sqrt{s}_{\text{high}} = 8$ TeV and 20.2 fb^{-1} of data (thus with the cuts of the ATLAS7 measurement [8]). The overlap (in the region where the difference in the cuts matters less) between the 8 TeV sensitivities and the rescaled ones from 7 TeV is a nice consistency check of our procedure. We find an analogous agreement between the two 14 TeV sensitivities derived from 7 and 8 TeV data, as shown in the supplementary material.

5. Discussion

Our sensitivities assume the uncertainties from MC modeling to be subdominant with respect to the ones associated to the measurement. However, this might not be the case in the entire mass range (see e.g. [8–10]) and a better control on the MC modeling might be necessary. The current MC uncertainty can be read off e.g. [9], and can be as large as 40% for $m_{\gamma\gamma}$ below the minimal p_T cuts of the photons (see also [53] for a discussion of the challenges of background modeling in the context of high mass diphoton resonances). While the relatively good agreement of the MC modeling with the observed data would in principle make a discovery possible for large enough signal cross sections, the large MC uncertainties are a limiting factor to the discovery potential of a resonance search below the minimal p_T cuts for the photons.

On the theory side this motivates an improvement in the diphoton MC's, while on the analysis side it pushes to extend the data-driven estimates of the background to lower $m_{\gamma\gamma}$, reducing further

the associated uncertainties and thus improving the limits. Data-driven estimates of the SM background were indeed used in the ATLAS 8 TeV analysis [43], and we believe their effectiveness is at the origin of the discrepancy between our 8 TeV sensitivities and the actual ATLAS limits. As shown in Fig. (1) the discrepancy amounts to a factor of ~ 5 .⁶

The experimental challenge of going to lower invariant masses is ultimately related to lowering the minimal cuts $p_{T1,2}^{\text{min}}$ on the two photon p_T 's and/or relax the photon isolation requirement $\Delta R \gtrsim 0.4$, where $\Delta R \equiv \sqrt{\Delta\phi^2 + \Delta\eta^2}$ is the photon separation. Indeed by simple kinematics we get the strict lower bound on $m_{\gamma\gamma}$

$$m_{\gamma\gamma} > \Delta R \cdot \sqrt{p_{T1}^{\text{min}} p_{T2}^{\text{min}}}, \quad (8)$$

where we used $m_{\gamma\gamma}^2 = 2p_{T1}p_{T2}(\cosh\Delta\eta - \cos\Delta\phi)$ that for small $\Delta\phi$ and $\Delta\eta$ is $m_{\gamma\gamma}^2 \simeq \Delta R^2 \cdot p_{T1}p_{T2}$. This absolute lower bound on $m_{\gamma\gamma}$ explains why in Fig. 1 the 8 TeV reach derived from ATLAS7, which has the lowest $p_{T1,2}^{\text{min}}$, can reach lower $m_{\gamma\gamma}$ than the ones derived from ATLAS8 measurements.

From Eq. (8) we conclude that in order to extend the diphoton resonant searches to lower invariant masses one would have to lower either $p_{T1,2}^{\text{min}}$ or ΔR . Both these possibilities deserve further experimental study.

A first possible strategy would be to require a hard ISR jet in the diphoton analysis, along the way of what was done in the recent CMS search for low-mass dijet resonances [32]. The hard jet requirement would raise the p_T of the resonance recoiling against it, collimating the two photons and hence posing the challenge of going to smaller ΔR . In this kinematical regime, the two photons would look like a single photon-jet [54,55] and it would be interesting to study if substructure techniques similar to those used in [32] for dijet resonances can be applied to such an object.

A second strategy would be to lower the photon $p_{T1,2}^{\text{min}}$. This, however, poses well-known problems with the SM background, like the larger backgrounds from QCD processes (see e.g. [56]) and the challenge of recording, storing, and processing so many events.⁷ One might handle the high data-rate and long-term storage challenge with the data scouting/Trigger-object Level Analysis methods [57–61] where, rather than storing the full detector data for a given event, one stores only a necessary subset. Alternatively, one could accommodate lower trigger thresholds by recording full events for only a fixed fraction of the data [61,62], with *prescaled* triggers, and/or setting aside these data for processing and analysis later [57,63] (data parking/delayed stream). Such techniques have already been used in searches for dijet signals [58–60,63], where one is similarly interested in localized deviations from smooth, data-driven background estimates.

The quantitative comparison of the reach of these different possibilities for low-mass diphoton resonances goes beyond the scope of this paper, but we do encourage the ATLAS and CMS collaborations to take steps in these directions.

6. Impact on ALP parameter space

To determine the diphoton signal strength $\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{th}}$ that enters the bound in Eq. (4) and that should be compared with the sensitivities in Eqs. (6) and (7), we multiply the tree level pp cross section by a constant K -factor $K_\sigma = 3.7$ (see the supplementary material for more details) and we use the widths of Eq. (2).

⁵ The CMS sensitivities using different binning in Fig. 1 are very close in the 75–100 GeV range. This is because in this mass range CMS reports its measurement in 5 GeV bins, comparable to the ECAL mass resolution of ~ 2.5 GeV, while in other mass ranges (and in the ATLAS measurements) the bin sizes vary between 10 and 40 GeV.

⁶ We checked further differences between Ref. [43] and the procedure used here, such as a finer categorisation of the diphoton final states as in [6], and a fully unbinned analysis. We find that they can affect the sensitivity at most by 20–40%.

⁷ We thank Antonio Boveia and Caterina Doglioni for many clarifications on these matters.

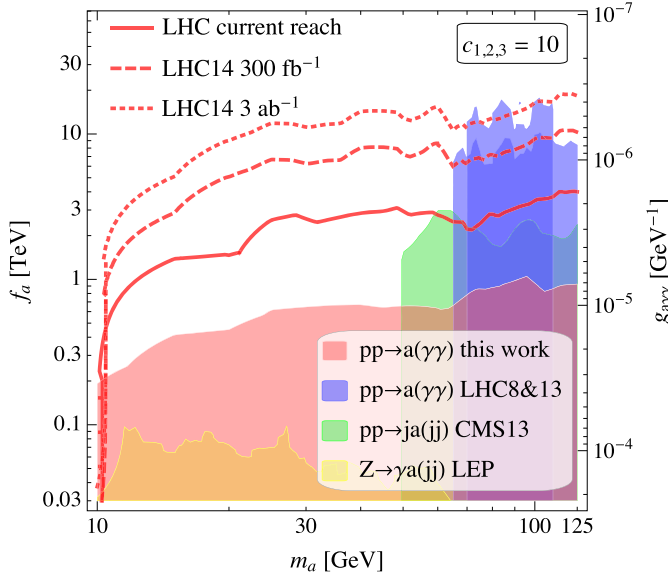


Fig. 2. Shaded: constraints on the ALP parameter space from existing collider searches at LEP [64] and the LHC [32,43,44,46] (see text for our rescaling of the CMS dijet bound [32]), and from the bound derived in this work using the data in [8–10]. Lines: our LHC sensitivities at 8 and 14 TeV.

In Fig. 2 we show how the different searches at the LHC, at Tevatron and at LEP constrain the ALP decay constant f_a for a given value of the ALP mass m_a . We fix for reference the anomalies to their GUT inspired value $c_1 = c_2 = c_3 = 10$. On the right y-axes, we write the pNGB coupling to photons in a notation inspired by the QCD axion, as $g_{a\gamma\gamma} = \frac{\alpha_{em}}{\pi f_a} \frac{c_\gamma}{c_3}$.

Our conservative bound extracted from Eq. (4) by combining 8 TeV and 7 TeV LHC data together with Tevatron data sets the strongest existing limit on ALPs between 10 and 50 GeV: $f_a \gtrsim 500$ GeV, corresponding to $g_{a\gamma\gamma} \lesssim 10^{-5}$ GeV. This is a major improvement with respect to the strongest existing bound in that range, which comes from measurements of $Z \rightarrow \gamma a(jj)$ at LEP I [64] giving $\text{BR}(Z \rightarrow \gamma + jj) < 1 - 5 \cdot 10^{-4}$. We checked that the other LEP limits in [65–67] are not relevant for our choice of the anomalies. The limit from the boosted dijet search of CMS [32] is the strongest one between 50 and 65 GeV, while above 65 GeV the ATLAS [43] and CMS [46] diphoton searches take over.

The LHC has the potential to probe values of f_a much larger than 1 TeV, as shown by the sensitivities lines in Fig. 2. The solid line is obtained from Eq. (6) combining both 8 TeV and 7 TeV data with the finer possible binning. The dashed and dotted lines are the projected sensitivities respectively at LHC14 and HL-LHC, from 8 TeV and 7 TeV data, based on Eq. (7). Notice that the HL-LHC projection is stronger than the future ILC [68] and FCC-ee [69] reaches. The latter is expected to probe $\text{BR}(Z \rightarrow \gamma + jj) \lesssim 1 - 5 \cdot 10^{-7}$, which correspond to $f_a \sim 1 - 3$ TeV if $\mathcal{O}(10^{12})$ Z's will be produced.

The relative importance of low-mass diphoton bounds and sensitivities with respect to the other existing searches is robust with respect to choosing different values of the anomalies $c_{1,2,3}$, as long as $c_3 \neq 0$. For $c_{1,2} \gtrsim 4c_3$, our conservative low-mass diphoton limit even overcomes the dijet exclusions between 50 and 65 GeV, while still doing largely better than LEP.

Other processes that could be relevant for an ALP with couplings as in Eq. (1) and mass above 10 GeV, like $Z \rightarrow 3\gamma$ at LEP (see e.g. [56,70] for recent studies of this and other signatures), set limits that are too weak to even appear on the parameter space presented in Fig. 2. Analogously, the sensitivity of ALP searches in heavy ion collisions estimated in [71] is sizeably weaker than our conservative bounds. The obvious reason is the generic suppres-

sion of the photon width compared to the gluon one by $(\alpha_{em}/\alpha_s)^2$. If Higgs decays to ALP pairs were allowed by the UV charge assignments, then the related constraints [72–74] would apply. Their relative importance would be model dependent but in any case they would typically not probe f_a values beyond a TeV, see [21] for more details.

As an exercise to conclude this section, we comment on the ALP interpretation of the excesses recently reported (both at 2.9σ local) by CMS in diphoton [46] and dijet [32] searches, at invariant masses of 95 and 115 GeV respectively. The ALP parameters that would fit each of them are

$$\frac{f_a}{c_\gamma} \simeq 470 \text{ GeV} \sqrt{\frac{50 \text{ fb}}{\sigma_{\gamma\gamma}^{\text{sign}}}}, \quad c_3 \lesssim 2 \cdot c_\gamma, \quad (9)$$

for the 95 GeV $\gamma\gamma$ excess, and

$$\frac{f_a}{c_3} \simeq 310 \text{ GeV} \sqrt{\frac{300 \text{ pb}}{\sigma_{gg}^{\text{sign}}}}, \quad c_\gamma \lesssim 0.8 \cdot c_3, \quad (10)$$

for the 115 GeV jj one. $\sigma_{\gamma\gamma,gg}^{\text{sign}}$ are the theoretical signal cross sections of the excesses, whose normalization is chosen as follows. For the 95 GeV $\gamma\gamma$ excess we use the expected sensitivity at that mass as reported in Ref. [46], for the 115 GeV jj we use the analogous sensitivity reported in [32] for a Z' , and rescale it to an ALP produced in gluon fusion using Eq. (3). Dijet bounds [32] on the 95 GeV $\gamma\gamma$ excess [46], and diphoton bounds [43] on the 115 GeV jj excess [32], give the second inequalities in Eqs. (9) and (10) respectively.

Eqs. (9) and (10) allow to conclude that either of the two excesses, if coming from an ALP, could be interpreted in terms of reasonable values of f_a and of the ABJ anomalies. Such an ALP could be the first sign of a NP scale not too far from a TeV, still allowing the rest of the new states to be at $M_{NP} \sim 4\pi f_a$ and hence out of the current LHC reach.

7. Conclusions

Theoretical frameworks such as Supersymmetry and Compositeness predict, on general grounds, the existence of pNGBs (ALPs) with couplings of relevance for colliders. Similar ALPs have also received much attention as mediators of Dark Matter interactions with the SM. The current experimental searches for these particles, however, still contain holes. In particular huge ($> 10^4$ pb) gluon fusion cross sections at the LHC, for ALP masses below 65 GeV, are allowed by all existing constraints.

In this paper, we used public data from inclusive diphoton cross section measurements at the LHC [8–10] to put a new bound on diphoton resonances between 10 and 65 GeV. We showed how this bound sets the by-far strongest existing constraint on the parameter space of ALPs that couple to both gluon and EW boson field strengths, see Fig. 2. We have also derived indicative sensitivities that would be achievable by a proper LHC analysis, both with already existing 8 TeV data and at higher energies.

We hope that this work will motivate the LHC collaborations to extend the mass range of their diphoton resonant searches to lower values. Similar ideas could in principle be applied to probe light resonances decaying into other final states than diphotons. A great example is the current CMS search of boosted dijet resonances [32]. Going to lower invariant masses in dijet—and perhaps in other—final states would certainly deserve further experimental effort.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

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