Polarization of Λ ($\bar{\Lambda}$) Hyperons along the Beam Direction in Au + Au Collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 200$ GeV

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The Λ ($\bar{\Lambda}$) hyperon polarization along the beam direction has been measured in Au + Au collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 200$ GeV, for the first time in heavy-ion collisions. The polarization dependence on the hyperons' emission angle relative to the elliptic flow plane exhibits a second harmonic sine modulation, indicating a quadrupole pattern of the vorticity component along the beam direction, expected due to elliptic flow. The polarization is found to increase in more peripheral collisions, and shows no strong transverse momentum (p_T) dependence at p_T greater than 1 GeV/c. The magnitude of the signal is about 5 times smaller than those predicted by hydrodynamic and multiphase transport models; the observed phase of the emission angle dependence is also opposite to these model predictions. In contrast, the kinematic vorticity calculations in the blast-wave model tuned to reproduce particle spectra, elliptic flow, and the azimuthal dependence of the Gaussian source radii measured with the Hanbury Brown–Twiss intensity interferometry technique reproduce well the modulation phase measured in the data and capture the centrality and transverse momentum dependence of the polarization signal.

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The properties of deconfined partonic matter, the quark-gluon plasma, have been explored in heavy-ion collisions at the Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider (RHIC) [1–4] and the Large Hadron Collider [5–7]. The matter created in non-central heavy-ion collisions should exhibit rotational motion in order to conserve the initial angular momentum carried by the two colliding nuclei. The direction of the angular momentum is perpendicular to the reaction plane, as defined by the incoming beam and the impact parameter vector. It was predicted [8,9] that such a spinning motion of the matter would lead to a net spin polarization of particles produced in the collisions due to spin-orbit coupling. Hyperons are natural candidates to explore this phenomenon since in the parity violating weak decays of the hyperons the momentum vector of the decay baryon is highly correlated with the hyperon spin. In such decays the angular distribution of the daughter baryons is given by

$$\frac{dN}{d\cos\theta^*} \propto 1 + \alpha_H P_H \cos\theta^*, \tag{1}$$

where α_H is the hyperon decay parameter ($\alpha_\Lambda = -\alpha_{\bar{\Lambda}} = 0.642 \pm 0.013$ for Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$) [10,11], P_H is the hyperon polarization, and θ^* is the angle between the polarization vector and the direction of the daughter baryon momentum in the hyperon rest frame.

The Solenoidal Tracker at RHIC (STAR) Collaboration has observed positive polarizations of Λ hyperons along the orbital angular momentum in Au + Au collisions for collision energies of $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 7.7$–200 GeV [14,15]. This polarization is evidence for the creation of the most vortical fluid ever observed, with vorticities of the order of $\omega \sim 10^{22}$ s^{-1}. These results open new opportunities for a better understanding of the dynamics and properties of the matter created in heavy-ion collisions.

The spin polarization of hyperons along the orbital angular momentum of the entire system is referred to as the global polarization, meaning a net spin alignment along a specific direction uniquely determined in a collision. However, the vorticity and, consequently, the particle polarization may vary for different regions of the fluid due to anisotropic flow, energy deposits from jet quenching, density fluctuations, etc. The detailed structure of the vorticity fields may be complicated and the resulting particle polarization can depend on the particle transverse momentum and the azimuthal angle relative to the reaction plane, or even exhibit toroidal structures [16–19].

Anisotropic flow, characterized by the Fourier coefficients of the particle azimuthal distribution in the transverse plane, has been extensively studied in heavy-ion collisions and was found to be well described by hydrodynamic calculations [20,21]. Nontrivial velocity fields describing transverse anisotropic flow should lead to a vorticity component along the beam direction dependent on the azimuthal angle relative to the reaction plane [17,18]. The observation of the large second-order coefficients, also known as elliptic flow, in midcentral collisions indicates significantly stronger expansion in the reaction plane direction compared to that out of plane, which might lead to a quadrupole structure in the z component of vorticity, as illustrated in Fig. 1. Experimental measurements of such a component are the main goal of this analysis.

The beam direction component of the polarization arising from vorticity due to elliptic flow is expected to be more sensitive to the later stages of the system evolution following the anisotropic flow development [22] than the global polarization that originates mostly from the initial velocity fields. It might also have different sensitivity to the relaxation time needed for the conversion of the vorticity into particle polarization. Therefore, measurements of the particle polarization along the beam direction in heavy-ion collisions are of great interest for further understanding of the vorticity dynamics in heavy-ion collisions and its relation to the polarization. In this Letter, we report the beam direction component of polarization for Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$ hyperons in Au + Au collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 200$ GeV. The results are presented as functions of the collision centrality and the hyperons' transverse momentum (p_T).

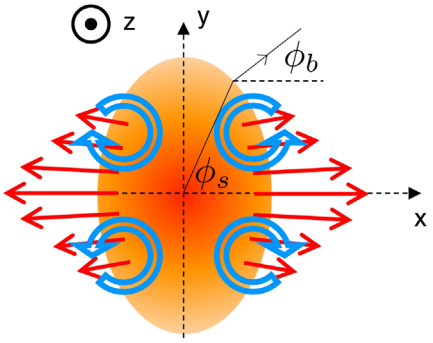

FIG. 1. A sketch illustrating the system created in a noncentral heavy-ion collision viewed in the transverse plane (x-y), showing stronger in-plane expansion (solid arrows) and expected vorticities (open arrows). Here, the colliding beams are oriented along the z axis and the x-z plane defines the reaction plane. See text for explanations of ϕ_s and ϕ_b.

The dataset for this analysis was collected in 2014 by the STAR detector during the period of Au + Au collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 200$ GeV. Charged-particle tracks were measured in the time projection chamber (TPC) [23], which covers the full azimuth and a pseudorapidity range of $-1 < \eta < 1$. The collision vertices were reconstructed using the measured charged-particle tracks. Events were selected to have the collision vertex position within 6 cm of the center of the TPC in the beam direction and within 2 cm in the radial direction with respect to the beam center. In addition, the difference between the vertex positions along the beam direction determined by the TPC and the vertex position detectors (VPD) [24] located at forward and backward rapidities ($4.24 < |\eta| < 5.1$) was required to be less than 3 cm to suppress pileup events. These selection criteria yielded about 1×10^9 minimum bias events, where the minimum bias trigger required hits of both VPDs and the zero-degree calorimeters [25] located at $|\eta| > 6.3$.

The collision centrality was determined from the measured multiplicity of charged particles within $|\eta| < 0.5$ and a Monte Carlo Glauber simulation [26]. The second-order event plane (Ψ_2) as an experimental estimate of the reaction plane was determined by the charged-particle tracks within the transverse momentum range of $0.15 < p_T < 2$ GeV/c and $0.1 < |\eta| < 1$ in the same way as in Ref. [27]. The resolution of the measured plane $\Psi_2^{\rm obs}$ defined as $\mathrm{Res}(\Psi_2) = \langle \cos 2(\Psi_2^{\rm obs} - \Psi_2) \rangle$ was estimated with the two-subevent method [28], where the two subevents correspond to pseudorapidity regions $-1 < \eta < -0.1$ and $0.1 < \eta < 1$. In midcentral collisions the event plane resolution peaks at ~0.76.

Charged particles of good quality TPC tracks (see Ref. [15] for details) with $0.15 < p_T < 10$ GeV/c and $|\eta| < 1$ were used in this analysis. Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$ hyperons were reconstructed via decay channels $\Lambda \to p + \pi^-$ and $\bar{\Lambda} \to \bar{p} + \pi^+$, corresponding to $(63.9 \pm 0.5)\%$ of all decays 10]]. The hyperon identification was based on the invariant mass of the two daughters with cuts on decay topology to reduce the combinatoric background [15].

The component of the polarization along the beam direction P_z can be measured by taking θ_p^* in Eq. (1) as the polar angle of the daughter proton in the Λ ($\bar{\Lambda}$) rest frame and calculating the $\langle \cos\theta_p^* \rangle$. This yields

$$P_z = \frac{\langle \cos\theta_p^* \rangle}{\alpha_H \langle \cos^2\theta_p^* \rangle}. \tag{2}$$

The factor $\langle \cos^2\theta_p^* \rangle$, expected to be $*1/3$ for the case of the perfect detector acceptance, was extracted from the data to account for finite pseudorapidity acceptance. It was found to be close to $1/3$ at all collision centralities, but showed a systematic decrease at low p_T.

A significant fraction of Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$ are the decay products of heavier baryons such as Σ^* and Ξ. This leads to about ~10% reduction in measured Λ polarization compared to that of primary Λ [29,30]. No correction for feed-down effects are done in the current analysis.

To extract the signal $\langle \cos\theta_p^* \rangle$, two techniques were used: the event plane method and the invariant mass method. In the event plane method, $\langle \cos\theta_p^* \rangle$ was measured as a function of azimuthal angle of Λ ($\bar{\Lambda}$) relative to Ψ_2. The effects due to detector acceptance and inefficiencies are removed by requiring that the azimuthal average to be zero, as expected due to symmetry. Figure 2 shows $\langle \cos\theta_p^* \rangle^{\rm sub}$ of Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$ as a function of azimuthal angle relative to Ψ_2 for the 20%–60% centrality bin. The solid lines indicate the fit results to the function $p_0 + 2p_1 \sin(2\phi - 2\Psi_2)$, where p_0

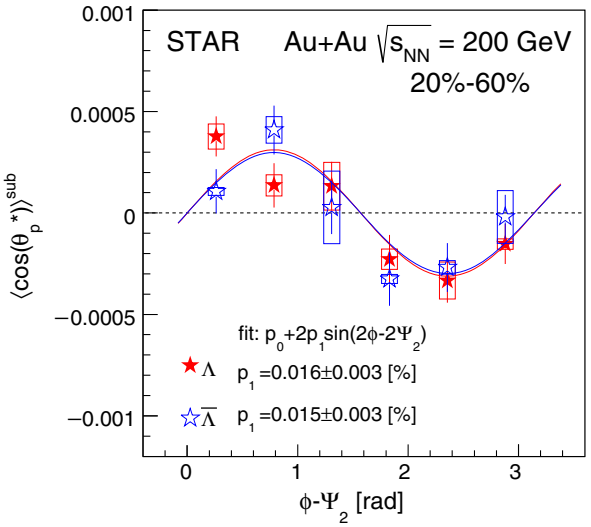

FIG. 2. $\langle \cos\theta_p^* \rangle$ of Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$ hyperons as a function of azimuthal angle ϕ relative to the second-order event plane Ψ_2 for 20%–60% centrality bin in Au + Au collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 200$ GeV. Open boxes show the systematic uncertainties and $\langle \rangle^{\rm sub}$ denotes the subtraction of the acceptance effect (see text). Solid lines show the fit with the sine function shown inside the figure. Note that the data are not corrected for the event plane resolution.

and p_1 are fit parameters. The data are consistent with a sine structure for both Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$, as expected from the elliptic flow.

In the invariant mass method, the second-order Fourier sine coefficient of P_z, $p_1 = \langle P_z \sin(2\phi - 2\Psi_2)\rangle$, was measured as a function of the invariant mass. Following the same procedure as described in Ref. [15], the sine coefficient was directly extracted. The extracted coefficients in both methods were divided by $\mathrm{Res}(\Psi_2)$ to account for the finite event plane resolution. The invariant mass method was used to calculate the sine coefficient of P_z reported below and the event plane method was used to cross-check and provide an estimate of the systematic uncertainty.

The systematic uncertainties were estimated by variation of the topological cuts ($< 2\%$), comparing the results from two methods for signal extraction (5%) as mentioned above, using different subevents ($-1 < \eta < -0.5$ and $0.5 < \eta < 1$) for Ψ_2 determination ($< 11\%$), and estimates of the possible background contribution to the signal (4.3%). The numbers are for midcentral collisions. Also the uncertainty from the decay parameter is accounted for (2% for Λ and 9.6% for $\bar{\Lambda}$; see Ref. [15] for details). We further studied the effect of a possible self-correlation between the particles used for the Λ ($\bar{\Lambda}$) reconstruction and the event plane by explicitly removing the daughter particles from the event plane calculation. There was no significant difference between the results. The Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$ reconstruction efficiencies were estimated using GEANT [31] simulations of the STAR detector [23]. The correction is found to lower mean values of the P_z sine coefficient by $\sim$10% in peripheral collisions and increases up to $\sim$50% in central collisions, although the variations are within statistical uncertainties. No significant difference was observed between Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$ as expected. Therefore, results from both samples were combined to reduce statistical uncertainties.

Figure 3 presents the centrality dependence of the second Fourier sine coefficient $\langle P_z \sin(2\phi - 2\Psi_2)\rangle$. The increase of the signal with decreasing centrality is likely due to increasing elliptic flow contributions in peripheral collisions. We note that, unlike elliptic flow, the polarization seems to disappear in the most central collisions, where the elliptic flow is still significant due to initial density fluctuations. Because of large uncertainties in peripheral collisions, it is not clear whether the signal continues to increase or levels off. The results are compared to a multiphase transport (AMPT) model [32]. The AMPT model predicts the opposite phase of the modulations and overestimates the magnitude.

Since the elliptic flow also depends on p_T as well as on the centrality, the polarization may have p_T dependence. Figure 4 shows the sine coefficients of P_z as a function of the hyperon transverse momentum. No significant p_T dependence is observed for $p_T > 1$ GeV/c, and the statistical precision of the single data point for $p_T < 1$ GeV/c is not enough to allow for definitive conclusions about the

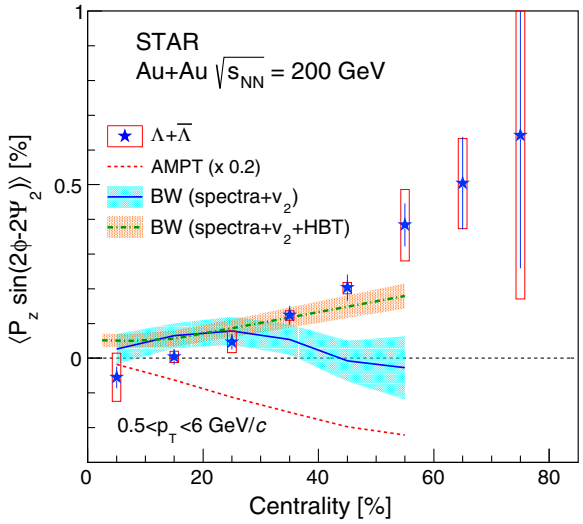

FIG. 3. The second Fourier sine coefficient of the polarization of Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$ along the beam direction as a function of the collision centrality in Au + Au collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 200$ GeV. Open boxes show the systematic uncertainties. Dotted line shows the AMPT calculation [32] scaled by 0.2 (no p_T selection). Solid and dot-dashed lines with the bands show the blast-wave (BW) model calculation for $p_T = 1$ GeV/c with Λ mass (see text for details).

low p_T dependence. In the hydrodynamic model calculation [18], the sine coefficient of P_z increases in magnitude with p_T but shows the opposite sign to the data.

The reason for this sign difference between the data and the model calculations is under discussion [33–35]. It is likely related to the relative contributions to the polarization from the kinematic vorticity originating from the elliptic flow, and from the temporal gradient of temperatures at the time of hadronization [18]. A recent calculation using the chiral kinetic approach predicts the same sign as the data [36]. The model accounts for the transverse component of the vorticity, resulting in the axial charge currents. Both the hydrodynamic and transport models calculate local vorticity at freeze-out and convert it to the polarization assuming local thermal equilibrium of the spin degrees of freedom, while the chiral kinetic approach takes into account nonequilibrium effects but does not consider a contribution from the temperature gradient, which is a main source of P_z in the hydrodynamic model.

Both the hydrodynamic and chiral kinetic models indicate that the contribution from the kinematic vorticity to P_z is negligible or opposite in sign to the naive expectation from the elliptic flow. In order to estimate the contribution from the kinematic vorticity, we employed the boost invariant blast-wave (BW) model [37–39]. Following Ref. [39], the system transverse velocity field at freeze-out can be parametrized with temperature (T) and transverse flow rapidity (ρ) defined as $\rho = \tilde{r}[\rho_0 + \rho_2 \cos(2\phi_b)]$. Here ρ_0 and ρ_2 are the maximal radial expansion rapidity and its azimuthal modulation, $\tilde{r}$ is the relative distance to the edge of the source, and ϕ_b defines the direction of the

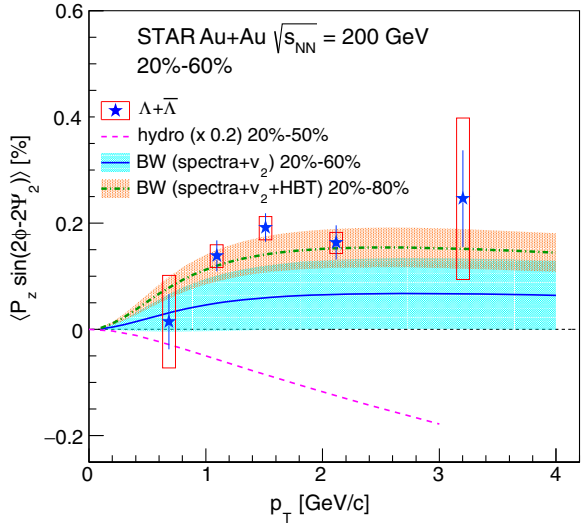

FIG. 4. The second Fourier sine coefficient of the longitudinal polarization of Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$ hyperons as a function of p_T for 20%–60% centrality bin in Au + Au collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 200$ GeV. Open boxes show the systematic uncertainties. Magenta dashed line shows the hydrodynamic model calculation [18] scaled by 0.2. Solid and dot-dashed lines with the bands show the blast-wave model calculations with Λ mass.

local velocity as indicated in Fig. 1. The source shape, assumed to be elliptical in the transverse plane, is parametrized by the R_y and R_x radii. To obtain the BW parameters, two fits are performed: in one only spectra and elliptic flow of π, K, and $p(\bar{p})$ are fit; the second fit also includes azimuthal-angle dependence of the pion Gaussian source radii at freeze-out as measured via Hanbury Brown–Twiss (HBT) intensity interferometry (see Ref. [40]).

The average longitudinal vorticity can be calculated in a similar way to the elliptic flow:

$$\langle \omega_z \sin(2\phi) \rangle = \frac{\int d\phi_s \int r dr I_2(\alpha_t) K_1(\beta_t) \omega_z \sin(2\phi_b)}{\int d\phi_s \int r dr I_0(\alpha_t) K_1(\beta_t)}, \quad (3)$$

$$\omega_z = \frac{1}{2}\left(\frac{\partial u_y}{\partial x} - \frac{\partial u_x}{\partial y}\right), \quad (4)$$

where the integration is over the transverse cross-sectional area of the source, u_μ is a four-vector of the local flow velocity [39], ϕ_s is the azimuth of the production point (see Fig. 1 for the relation to ϕ_b), $\alpha_t = p_T/T \sinh\rho$, $\beta_t = m_T/T \cosh\rho$, and I_n and K_1 are the modified Bessel functions. Assuming a local thermal equilibrium, the longitudinal component of the polarization can be predicted as $P_z \approx \omega_z/(2T)$. The uncertainties shown for the BW model calculations correspond to 1σ variation in the model parameters.

In Figs. 3 and 4 the BW calculations are compared to the data. From central to midcentral collisions both BW calculations show positive sine coefficients which are compatible in both sign and magnitude to the measurement, although the BW model is based on a very simple picture of the freeze-out condition. It was shown in Ref. [17] that the vorticity in the BW model has the effects of the velocity field anisotropy (ρ_2/ρ_0) and the spacial source anisotropy (R_y/R_x) contributing with opposite signs, which can explain a strong sensitivity of the BW model predictions in the peripheral collisions to the inclusions of the HBT radii.

In summary, we have presented the first measurements of the longitudinal component of the polarization for Λ and $\bar{\Lambda}$ hyperons in Au + Au collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 200$ GeV. A quadrupole modulation of the polarization along the beam direction is observed and found to be qualitatively consistent with the expectation from the vorticity component along the beam direction due to the elliptic flow. The results exhibit a strong centrality dependence with increasing magnitude as the collision centrality becomes more peripheral. No significant p_T dependence is observed above $p_T > 1$ GeV/c. A dropoff of the signal is hinted at for $p_T < 1$ GeV/c. Disagreement in the polarization sign between the data and hydrodynamic and AMPT models might indicate incomplete thermal equilibration of the spin degrees of freedom for the beam direction component of the vorticity or polarization, as it develops later in time compared to the global polarization. On the other hand, the blast-wave model calculations are much closer to the data, even more so when the azimuthally sensitive HBT results along with the p_T spectra and v_2 are included in the model fit. The blast-wave model predicts the correct phase of P_z modulation and a similar p_T dependence; the version with HBT radii included in the fit also reasonably describes the centrality dependence. These results together with the results of the global polarization may provide information on the relaxation time needed to convert the vorticity to particle polarization. Further theoretical and experimental studies are needed for better understanding.

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