Field-Theory Representation of Gauge-Gravity Symmetry-Protected Topological Invariants, Group Cohomology, and Beyond

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Field-Theory Representation of Gauge-Gravity Symmetry-Protected Topological Invariants, Group Cohomology, and Beyond

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The challenge of identifying symmetry-protected topological states (SPTs) is due to their lack of symmetry-breaking order parameters and intrinsic topological orders. For this reason, it is impossible to formulate SPTs under Ginzburg-Landau theory or probe SPTs via fractionalized bulk excitations and topology-dependent ground state degeneracy. However, the partition functions from path integrals with various symmetry twists are universal SPT invariants, fully characterizing SPTs. In this work, we use gauge fields to represent those symmetry twists in closed spacetimes of any dimensionality and arbitrary topology. This allows us to express the SPT invariants in terms of continuum field theory. We show that SPT invariants of pure gauge actions describe the SPTs predicted by group cohomology, while the mixed gauge-gravity actions describe the beyond-group-cohomology SPTs. We find new examples of mixed gauge-gravity actions for U(1) SPTs in (4 + 1)D via the gravitational Chern-Simons term. Field theory representations of SPT invariants not only serve as tools for classifying SPTs, but also guide us in designing physical probes for them. In addition, our field theory representations are independently powerful for studying group cohomology within the mathematical context.

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Gapped systems without symmetry breaking [1,2] can have intrinsic topological order [3–5]. However, even without symmetry breaking and without topological order, gapped systems can still be nontrivial if there is certain global symmetry protection, known as symmetry-protected topological states (SPTs) [6–9]. Their nontrivialness can be found in the gapless-topological boundary modes protected by a global symmetry, which shows gauge or gravitational anomalies [10–30]. More precisely, they are short-range entangled states which can be deformed to a trivial product state by local unitary transformation [31–33] if the deformation breaks the global symmetry. Examples of SPTs are Haldane spin-1 chains protected by spin rotational symmetry [34,35] and the topological insulators [36–38] protected by fermion number conservation and time reversal symmetry.

While some classes of topological orders can be described by topological quantum field theories (TQFT) [39–42], it is less clear how to systematically construct field theory with a global symmetry to classify or characterize SPTs for any dimension. This challenge originates from the fact that SPTs are naturally defined on a discretized spatial lattice or on a discretized spacetime path integral by a group cohomology construction [6,43] instead of continuous fields. Group cohomology construction of SPTs also reveals a duality between some SPTs and the Dijkgraaf-Witten topological gauge theory [43,44].

Some important progress has been recently made to tackle the above question. For example, there are the (2 + 1)D Chern-Simons theory [45] and nonlinear sigma models [51,52], and an orbifolding approach implementing modular invariance on 1D edge modes [25,28]. The above approaches have their own benefits, but they may be either limited to certain dimensions, or be limited to some special cases. Thus, the previous works may not fulfill all SPTs predicted from group cohomology classifications.

In this work, we will provide a more systematic way to tackle this problem by constructing topological response field theory and topological invariants for SPTs (SPT invariants) in any dimension protected by a symmetry group $G$. The new ingredient of our work suggests a one-to-one correspondence between the continuous semiclassical probe-field partition function and the discretized cocycle of cohomology group $H^{d+1}(G, \mathbb{R}/\mathbb{Z})$, predicted to classify $(d+1)$D SPTs with a symmetry group $G$ [53]. Moreover, our formalism can even attain SPTs beyond group cohomology classifications [16–18,20–22].

For systems that realize topological orders, we can adiabatically deform the ground state $|\Psi_{g,s}(g)\rangle$ of parameters $g$ via

$$|\Psi_{g,s}(g + \delta g)|_{\Psi_{g,s}(g)} = \ldots \mathbf{Z}_0\ldots$$

(1)

to detect the volume-independent universal piece of partition function $\mathbf{Z}_0$, which reveals the non-Abelian geometric phase of ground states [5,30,54–59]. For systems that realize SPTs, however, their fixed-point partition functions $\mathbf{Z}_0$ always equal to 1 due to its unique ground state on any closed topology. We cannot distinguish SPTs via $\mathbf{Z}_0$. However, due to the existence of a global symmetry,
we can use $Z_0$ with the symmetry twist [60–62] to probe the SPTs. To define the symmetry twist, we note that the Hamiltonian $H = \sum H_s$ is invariant under the global symmetry transformation $U = \prod U_s$, namely, $H = UHU^{-1}$. If we perform the symmetry transformation $U' = \prod U_{s(0)} U_{s(1)}$ only near the boundary of a region $R$ (say on one side of $\partial R$), the local term $H_1$ of $H$ will be modified $H_s \rightarrow H'_s \downarrow_{\text{near} \partial R}$. Such a change along a codimension-1 surface is called a symmetry twist, see Figs. 1(a) and 1(d), which modifies $Z_0$ to $Z_0(\text{sym twist})$. Just like the geometric phases of the degenerate ground states characterize topological orders [30], we believe that $Z_0(\text{sym twist})$, on different spacetime manifolds and for different symmetry twists, fully characterizes SPTs [60,61].

The symmetry twist is similar to gauging the on-site symmetry [44,69] except that the symmetry twist is non-dynamical. We can use the gauge connection 1-form $A$ to describe the corresponding symmetry twists, with probe-fields $A$ coupling to the matter fields of the system. So we can write [53]

$$Z_0(\text{sym twist}) = e^{S_0(\text{sym twist})} = e^{S_0(A)}. \quad (2)$$

Here, $S_0(A)$ is the SPT invariant that we search for. Equation (2) is a partition function of classical probe fields, or a topological response theory, obtained by integrating out the matter fields of SPTs path integral. Below we would like to construct possible forms of $S_0(A)$ based on the following principles [53]: (i) $S_0(A)$ is independent of spacetime metrics (i.e., topological), (ii) $S_0(A)$ is gauge invariant (for both large and small gauge transformations), and (iii) the “almost flat” connection for probe fields.

Let us start with a simple example of SPTs with a single global $U(1)$ symmetry. We can probe the system by coupling the charge fields to an external probe 1-form field $A$ [with a $U(1)$ gauge symmetry], and integrate out the matter fields. In $(1+1)$D, we can write down a partition function by dimensional counting: $Z_0(\text{sym twist}) = \exp[i(\theta/2\pi) \int F]$ with $F = da$, this is the only term allowed by $U(1)$ gauge symmetry $U'(A-id)U = A + df$ with $U = e^{if}$. More generally, for an even $(d+1)$D spacetime, $Z_0(\text{sym twist}) = \exp[i(\theta/((d+1)/2)!)(2\pi)^{(d+1)/2} \int F \wedge F \wedge \ldots]$. Note that $\theta$ in such an action has no level quantization ($\theta$ can be an arbitrary real number). Thus, this theory does not really correspond to any nontrivial class, because any $\theta$ is smoothly connected to $\theta = 0$, which represents a trivial SPT.

In an odd dimensional spacetime, such as $(2+1)$D, we have Chern-Simons coupling for the probe field action $Z_0(\text{sym twist}) = \exp[i(k/4\pi) \int A \wedge da]$. More generally, for an odd $(d+1)$D, $Z_0(\text{sym twist}) = \exp[i(2\pi k/(d+2)/2)(2\pi)^{(d+2)/2} \int F \wedge F \wedge \ldots]$, which is known to have level quantization $k = 2p$, with $p \in \mathbb{Z}$ for bosons, since $U(1)$ is compact. We see that only quantized topological terms correspond to nontrivial SPTs, the allowed responses $S_0(A)$ reproduce the group cohomology description of the $(1+1)$D SPTs; an even dimensional spacetime has no nontrivial class, while an odd dimension has a $\mathbb{Z}$ class.

Next we consider SPTs with $\prod_{s} \mathbb{Z}_{N_s}$ symmetry. Previously the evaluation of the $(1+1)$ field on a closed loop (Wilson loop) $\oint A_s$ can be arbitrary values, whether the loop is contractable or not, since $U(1)$ has continuous value. For finite Abelian group symmetry $G = \prod_{s} \mathbb{Z}_{N_s}$, SPTs, (i) the large gauge transformation $\delta A_s$ is identified by $2\pi$ [this also applies to $U(1)$ SPTs], (ii) probe fields have discrete $\mathbb{Z}_{N_s}$ gauge symmetry,

$$\oint \delta A_s = 0(\text{mod } 2\pi), \quad \oint A_s = \frac{2\pi n_s}{N_s} \text{ (mod } 2\pi) . \quad (3)$$

For a noncontractable loop (such as an $S^1$ circle of a torus), $n_s$ can be a quantized integer which thus allows large gauge transformation. For a contractable loop, due to the fact that a small loop has small $\oint A_s$ but $n_s$ is discrete, $\oint A_s = 0$ and $n_s = 0$, which imply the curvature $da = 0$; thus, $A$ is a flat connection locally.

For $(1+1)$D, the only quantized topological term is $Z_0(\text{sym twist}) = \exp[i k_i \oint A_i A_j]$. Here and below we omit the wedge product $\wedge$ between gauge fields as a conventional notation. Such a term is gauge invariant under
This rule implies the level quantization. (the Poincaré dual of) the codimension-1 sheet assigning a $\mathbb{Z}_N$ dimensional counting, $\exp(i\pi N_1 A_1)$, requires us to use the insert flux of $A_1$, named as type III SPTs with a quantized level $[53]$. This implies the level quantization.

The invariance of $Z_0$ under the allowed large gauge transformation via Eq. (3) implies that the volume-integration of $\delta(A_1 A_2)$ must be invariant mod $2\pi$, namely, $[(2\pi)^2 k_{III}/N_1] = [(2\pi)^2 k_{III}/N_2] = 0(\text{mod } 2\pi)$. This rule implies the level quantization.

On the other hand, when the $Z_{N_3}$ flux from $A_1$, and $Z_{N_2}$ flux from $A_2$ are inserted as $n_1$, and $n_2$ multiple units of $2\pi/N_1$, and $2\pi/N_2$, we have $k_{III} \int A_1 A_2 = k_{III}((2\pi)^2/N_1 N_2)n_1 n_2$. We see that $k_{III}$ and $k'_{III} = k_{III} + (N_1 N_2/2\pi)$ give rise to the same partition function $Z_0$. Thus they must be identified $(2\pi)k_{III} = (2\pi)k_{III} + N_1 N_2$, as the rule of flux identification. These two rules impose

$$Z_0(\text{sym twist}) = \exp\left[\frac{i}{2\pi} \int_{M^4} A_1 dA_2\right].$$

1 with $k_{III} = p_{III}(N_1 N_2)/[(2\pi)N_1]$, $p_{III} \in Z_{N_3}$. We abbreviate the greatest common divisor (gcd) $N_1^2 \cdots = \gcd(N_1, N_2, \ldots, N_n)$. Amazingly, we have independently recovered the formal group cohomology classification predicted as $H^2(\prod_z Z_{N_z}, \mathbb{R}/\mathbb{Z}) = \prod_{u < v} Z_{N_{uv}}$.

For (2 + 1)D, we can propose a naive $Z_0(\text{sym twist})$ by dimensional counting, $\exp[i k_{III} \int A_1 A_2 A_3]$, which is gauge invariant under the flat connection condition. By the large gauge transformation and the flux identification, we find that the level $k_{III}$ is quantized $[53]$; thus

$$Z_0(\text{sym twist}) = \exp\left[\frac{i}{2\pi} \int_{M^4} A_1 A_2 A_3\right].$$

named as type III SPTs with a quantized level $p_{III} \in Z_{N_3}$. The terminology “type” is introduced and used in Refs. [70] and [67]. As shown in Fig. 1, the geometric way to understand the 1-form probe field can be regarded as (the Poincaré dual of) the codimension-1 sheet assigning a group element $g \in G$ by crossing the sheet as a branch cut. These sheets can be regarded as symmetry twists $[60, 61]$ in the SPT Hamiltonian formulation. When three sheets [yt, xt, xy planes in Fig. 1(c)] with nontrivial elements $g_{ij} \in Z_N$, intersect at a single point of a spacetime $T^3$ torus, it produces a nontrivial topological invariant in Eq. (2) for Type III SPTs.

There are also other types of partition functions, which require us to use the insert flux $A_1 \neq 0$ only at the monodromy defect [i.e., at the end of the branch cut, see Fig. 1(b)] to probe them $[11, 48–50, 70, 71]$:

$$Z_0(\text{sym twist}) = \exp\left[\frac{i}{2\pi} \int_{M^4} A_1 dA_2 A_3 dA_4\right].$$

where $u, v$ can be either the same or different gauge fields. They are type I, and II actions: $p_{I1} \int A_1 dA_1$, $p_{II1} \int A_1 dA_2$, etc. In order to have $\exp(i\pi N_1 A_1)$ invariant under the large gauge transformation, $p_{III}$ must be integer. In order to have $\exp(i\pi N_1 A_1)$ well defined, we separate $A_1 = \tilde{A}_1 + A_1^F$ to the nonflat part $A_1$ and the flat part $A_1^F$. Its partition function becomes $\exp(i\pi N_1 A_1^F) [53]$. The invariance under the large gauge transformation of $A_1^F$ requires $p_{III}$ to be quantized as integers. We can further derive their level classification via Eq. (3) and two more conditions:

$$dfA_1 = 0(\text{mod } 2\pi), \quad df\delta A_1 = 0.$$  

The first means that the net sum of all monodromy-defect fluxes on the spacetime manifold must have integer units of $2\pi$. Physically, a $2\pi$ flux configuration is trivial for a discrete symmetry group $Z_N$. Therefore, two SPT invariants differ by a $2\pi$ flux configuration on their monodromy defect should be regarded as the same one. The second condition means that the variation of the total flux is zero. From the above two conditions for flux identification, we find the SPT invariant $Z_0$ describes the $Z_N$ SPTs $p_1 \in Z_{N_1} = H^0(Z_{N_1}, \mathbb{R}/\mathbb{Z})$ and the $Z_{N_2} \times Z_{N_3}$ SPTs $p_{III} \in Z_{N_3}$.

For (3 + 1)D, we derive the top type IV partition function that is independent of spacetime metrics:

$$Z_0(\text{sym twist}) = \exp\left[\frac{i}{2\pi} \int_{M^4} A_1 A_2 A_3 A_4\right].$$

where $dA_i = 0$ to ensure gauge invariance. The large gauge transformation $\delta A_1$ of Eq. (3), and flux identification recover $p_{IV} \in Z_{N_4} \subset H^4(\prod_{z=1}^4 Z_{N_z}, \mathbb{R}/\mathbb{Z})$. Here the 3D SPT invariant is analogous to two dimensions, when the four codimension-1 sheets [ytz, xzt, yzt, and xyz-branes in Fig. 1(f)] with flat $A_1$ of nontrivial element $g_{ij} \in Z_N$, intersect at a single point on spacetime $T^4$ torus; it renders a nontrivial partition function for the type IV SPTs.

Another response is for type III (3 + 1)D SPTs:

$$Z_0(\text{sym twist}) = \exp\left[\int_{M^4} \frac{dP_{III} N_1 N_2}{(2\pi)^2 N_1} A_1 A_2 dA_3\right].$$

which is gauge invariant only if $dA_1 = dA_2 = 0$. Based on Eqs. (3) and (7), the invariance under the large gauge transformations requires $p_{III} \in Z_{N_3}$. Equation (9) describes type III SPTs: $p_{III} \in Z_{N_3} \subset H^4(\prod_{z=1}^4 Z_{N_z}, \mathbb{R}/\mathbb{Z})$ [53].

Yet another response is for type II (3 + 1)DSPTs [72, 73]:
form a projective representation of observables. Namely, the invariance under the large gauge transformations of the 3D space as and (10), we have assumed the monodromy line defect at where becomes for example, dimensionally reducing unit to introduce extra anomalous gapless boundary theories. Now we systematically study the physical probes of SPTs. The SPT invariants can help us to design physical probes for their SPTs. Let us consider the unit symmetry twist of the Z_N, Z_N, ..., Z_N along the S^1 in d directions, respectively, if A_j = 2π/N_j. The SPT invariant implies that such a configuration will carry a Z_N induced charge on the 1D spatial interval I. The 0D boundary of the reduced (1+1)D SPTs has degenerate zero energy modes that form a projective representation of Z_N × Z_N symmetry. For example, dimensionally reducing (3+1)D SPTs to (1+1)D SPT, if we break the Z_N symmetry on the Z_N monodromy defect line, gapless excitations on the defect line will be gapped. A Z_N symmetry-breaking domain wall on the gapless monodromy defect line will carry degenerate zero modes that form a projective representation of Z_N × Z_N symmetry. For Eq. (8) we design the 3D space as S^1 × M^2, and add the unit Z_N symmetry twists along the S^1 circle. Then Eq. (8) reduces to the (2+1)D Z_N × Z_N × Z_N SPT invariant labeled by p_{IV}(N_{123}/N_{1234}) ∈ Z_{N_{123}} ⊂ H^3(Z_N × Z_N × Z_N, R/Z), namely, the Z_N monodromy line defect carries gapless excitations identical to the edge modes of the (2+1)D Z_N × Z_N × Z_N SPTs if the symmetry is not broken. Now let us consider lower type SPTs, take (3+1)D of Eq. (9) as an example [53]. There are at least two ways to design physical probes. First, we can design the 3D space as M^2 × I, where M^2 is punctured with N_3 identical monodromy defects each carrying n_3 unit Z_N flux, namely, if dA_3 = 2πn_3 of Eq. (7). Equation (9) reduces to exp[i p_{IV}(N_{123}/(2πN_{123})] A_1 A_2 A_3], which again describes a (1+1)D Z_N × Z_N, SPTs, labeled by p_{IV} of Eq. (4) in H^2(Z_N × Z_N × R/Z) = Z_{N_{123}}. This again has 0D boundary-degenerate-zero modes. Second, we can design the 3D space as S^1 × M^2 and add a symmetry twist of Z_N along the S^1: f_{3/2} A_j = 2πn_j/N_j, then the SPT invariant Eq. (9) reduces to exp[i p_{IV}(N_{123}/(2πN_{123})] A_1 A_2 A_3], a (2+1)D Z_N × Z_N SPTs labeled by (p_{IV}N_{123}/N_{123}Z_N) of Eq. (6). These SPT types in Eq. (6), can be detected by the nontrivial braiding statistics of monodromy defects, such as the particle or string defects in two or three dimensions. Moreover, a Z_N monodromy defect line carries gapless excitations identical to the edge of the (2+1)D Z_N × Z_N SPTs. If the gapless excitations are gapped by Z_N symmetry breaking, its domain wall will induce fractional quantum numbers of Z_N charge, similar to the Jackiw-Rebbi [75] or Goldstone-Wilczek [76] effect.

It is straightforward to apply the above results to SPTs with U(1)^m symmetry. Again, we find only trivial classes for even (d+1)D. For odd (d+1)D, we can define the lower type action: Z_0(sym twist) = exp[i(2πk/((d+2)/2)](2π)^{(d+2)/2} A_1 ∧ F_1 ∧ ...]. Meanwhile, we emphasize that the top type action with k A_1 A_2 ... A_{d+1} form will be trivial for the U(1)^m case since its coefficient k is no longer well defined at N → ∞ of (Z_N)^m SPT states. For physically relevant (2+1)D, k ∈ Z for bosonic SPTs. Thus, we will have a Z^m × Z^{m(m−1)/2} classification for U(1)^m symmetry [53].

We have discussed the allowed action S_0(sym twist) that is described by pure gauge fields A_j. We find that its allowed SPTs coincide with group cohomology results. For a curved spacetime, we have more general topological responses that contain both gauge fields for symmetry twists and gravitational connections Γ for spacetime geometry. Such mixed gauge-gravity topological responses will attain SPTs beyond group cohomology. The possibility was recently discussed in Refs. [17,18]. Here we will propose some additional new examples for SPTs with U(1) symmetry.

In (4+1)D, the following SPT response exists:

\[ Z_0 symmetric\] = \exp \left[ i \frac{k}{2} \int_{M^4} F \wedge CS_3(\Gamma) \right] = \exp \left[ i \frac{k}{2} \int_{M^4} F \wedge p_1 \right], \quad k ∈ Z, \quad (11) \]

where CS_3(\Gamma) is the gravitational Chern-Simons 3-form and d(CS_3) = p_1 is the first Pontryagin class. This SPT response is a Wess-Zumino-Witten form with a surface ∂N^6 = M^5. This renders an extra Z class of (4+1)D U(1) SPTs beyond group cohomology. They have the
following physical property: If we choose the 4D space to be $S^3 \times M^2$ and put a U(1) monopole at the center of $S^3$: $\int_{S^3} F = 2\pi$, in the large $M^2$ limit, the effective $(2+1)$D theory on $M^2$ space is $k$ copies of the $E_8$ bosonic quantum Hall states. A U(1) monopole in 4D space is a 1D loop. By cutting $M^2$ into two separated manifolds, each with a 1D-loop boundary, we see the U(1) monopole and antimonopole as these two 1D loops, each loop carries $k$ copies of the $E_8$ bosonic quantum Hall edge modes [77]. Their gravitational response can be detected by thermal transport with a thermal Hall conductance [78], $\kappa_{xy} = 8k(\pi^2 k_f^2/3h)T$.

To conclude, the recently found SPTs, described by group cohomology, have SPT invariants in terms of pure gauge actions (whose boundaries have pure gauge anomalies [11,13–15,26]). We have derived the formal group cohomology results from an easily accessible field theory setup. For beyond-group-cohomology SPT invariants, while ours of bulk-on-site-unitary symmetry are mixed gauge-gravity actions, those of other symmetries (e.g., antiunitary-symmetry time-reversal $Z_2^T$) may be pure gravity actions [18]. SPT invariants can also be obtained via cobordism theory [17–19], or via gauge-gravity actions whose boundaries realizing gauge-gravitational anomalies. We have incorporated this idea into a field theoretic framework, which should be applicable for both bosonic and fermionic SPTs and for more exotic states awaiting future explorations.

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See Supplemental Material at http://link.aps.org/supplemental/10.1103/PhysRevLett.114.031601 for a systematic step-by-step derivation and many more examples. In Appendix A, we provide more details on the derivation of SPTs’ partition functions of fields with level quantization. In Appendix B, we provide the correspondence between SPTs’ “partition functions of fields” to “cocycles of group cohomology.” Appendix C, we systematically organize SPT invariants and their physical observables by dimensional reduction.

Here the geometric phase or Berry phase has a gauge structure. Note that the non-Abelian gauge structure of degenerate ground states can appear even for Abelian topological order with Abelian braiding statistics.

This term has also been noticed by M. Levin, Proceedings of the Princeton PCTS on Braiding Statistics and Symmetry-Protected Topological Phases, 2014.