Unsupervised Exploration of MoS_2 Nanoclusters Configurations : Structures, Energetics, and Electronic Properties

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Abstract

We propose an efficient method to explore the configuration space of nanoclusters by combining together ab initio molecular dynamics, metadynamics and data clustering algorithms. On one side, we employ collective variables sensitive to topological changes in the network of interatomic connections to map the configuration space; on the other, we introduce an automatic approach to select, in such space, representative structures to be optimized. In this way, we show that it is possible to sample thoroughly the set of relevant nanocluster geometries, at a limited computational cost. We apply our method to explore MoS_2 clusters, that recently raised a sizable interest due to their remarkable electronic and catalytic properties. We demonstrate that the unsupervised algorithm is able to find a large number of low-energy structures at different cluster sizes, including both bulk-like geometries and very different topologies. We are thus able to recapitulate, in a single computational study on technologically-relevant MoS_2 clusters, the results of all previous works that employed distinct techniques like genetic algorithms or heuristic hypotheses. Furthermore, we found several new structures not previously reported. The ensemble of MoS_2 cluster structures is deposited in a publicly accessible database.

Introduction

In recent years, molybdenum-sulfur materials have been intensely studied by the scientific community for a range of applications,[1] from hydrodesulfurization catalysts to transistors.[2–4] Interesting forms of this material go from the bulk to monolayers to nanostructures such as inorganic fullerenes[5] and nanoplatelets,[6–9] either recently synthesized or sought after.

For all these reasons, it is desirable to understand the formation mechanisms of Mo_nS_m nanostructures as well as their relationship with extended forms in terms of structure and properties. Consequently, this has been the focus of a number of experimental[10,11] and theoretical studies.[12–24,24,25] In some cases, W_nS_m and W_nO_m clusters have been studied in

parallel with Mo_nS_m [12,14] due to the chemical similarity between the corresponding metals and chalcogens. Investigating different stoichiometries and cluster sizes provided indeed useful information: so called "magic clusters" seem to indicate a tendency to favor over-saturation in sulfur and monolayer-like structures with growing size, rather than 3D arrangements. [6]

In most of the previous studies, the search for the possible structures of stable clusters was based on the enumeration of chemically-intuitive geometries, using heuristic arguments or starting from the bulk material as reference. This approach clearly is at high risk of missing important structures as hinted at by the typically large energy gap between the most stable candidate found and the others. Moreover it lacks objectivity and transferability to other systems. In fact, the importance of efficient and unbiased structural search algorithms in condensed matter in general and in nanostructures in particular is well appreciated. [26–28] In this respect, two recent studies used evolutionary algorithms to explore the configuration space of MoS_2 [25] (although the search was supplemented in this case by arbitrary human-provided structures *ex post*) and WS_2 clusters. [24]

In this work we propose an alternative sampling strategy, based on ab-initio MD simulations, accelerated with metadynamics. [29] Finite-temperature enhanced sampling approaches have become widespread as they allow to explore generic transformation mechanisms in chemistry, physics and biology, irrespective of the height of free-energy barriers. [30,31] However, their application to nanostructures is still sporadic, albeit successful. [32–36] A problem related to the exploration of configuration space with enhanced sampling consists in finding suitable unsupervised procedures to select a limited number of representative geometries from finite-T trajectories, which are further relaxed to identify local energy minima, thus providing candidates for stable clusters. Here we address this task exploiting a density clustering procedure initially introduced for protein structure classification, [37] obtaining in this way an automated protocol. Both for metadynamics and for classification, the atomic struc-

ture is described by topological collective variables ("social permutation invariant" SPRINT coordinates)[32] that are able to track the changes of interatomic bond networks in a range of condensed-matter systems. These variables have been effectively employed in the literature both for exploration[33,38–41] and classification of structure.[42–44]

Overall, our methodology has several advantages. It requires a very limited number of parameters: essentially the typical interatomic distances required to define SPRINT coordinates, the shape of the metadynamics repulsive Gaussians, and the granularity of the density clustering (see Methods section for details). For this reason, we expect this protocol to be readily transferable to many other types of nanostructures. In addition it also provides an identification of transition pathways, which can be of great interest for experimental synthesis, between different metastable structures, a "by-product" inherent to the use of MD trajectories. Finally this method has a limited computational cost on nowadays hardware. We showcase the efficiency of our method by applying it to three different cluster sizes: Mo_2S_4, Mo_3S_6 and Mo_4S_8.

Methods

We started by running long exploratory *ab initio* Born-Oppenheimer MD simulations using the CPMD[45] code accelerated by metadynamics[29] as implemented in the PLUMED plugin.[46] We used DFT in the Perdew-Burke-Ernzerhof approximation,[47] employing Goedecker-Teter-Hutter pseudopotentials to describe core electrons,[48,49] a 1 fs timestep and a kinetic energy cut-off of 120 Ry with a convergence of 10^{-5} Ry.

The metadynamics trajectories were stored every 5 fs. For each cluster size, several independent trajectories were generated, starting from random initial atomic positions in a cubic periodically-repeated box of 12 Å side with the objective which launched until they

failed or reached at least 100ps, in order to explore the space from different conditions. In all we launched 4 simulations for Mo_2S_4, 8 for Mo_3S_6 and 18 for Mo_4S_8 (in this case several simulations stopped under 20ps being trapped in high energy states). By adding together all trajectories of the same cluster sizes, their total lengths reached 250 ps for Mo_2S_4, 900 ps for Mo_3S_6 and 1200 ps for Mo_4S_8 adding up to a overall length of 2.35ns.

In metadynamics the exploration of configuration space is accelerated by means of a history-dependent potential built as a sum of Gaussian repulsive functions deposited along the trajectory projected on collective variables (CV). The efficiency of the algorithm is therefore highly dependent on the choice of CV, that must be able to track all possible structural transformations of interest. In this work we used SPRINT collective variable,[32] based on graph-theory and able to capture the "social" behavior of atoms, in terms of the topology of the network of interatomic bonds. Starting from the interatomic distance matrix of the system, a sigmoid function decaying from 1 to 0 is applied to each distance d_{ij} between atoms i and j:

$$\delta(d_{ij}) = \frac{1 - (\frac{d_{ij}}{d_0})^m}{1 - (\frac{d_{ij}}{d_0})^n} \tag{1}$$

with the parameters set to $d_0 = 4.5$ Å, $m = 8$ and $n = 24$ based on the pair correlation function of an unbiased molecular dynamics simulation of a cluster, computed using a short (2ps) and unbiased molecular dynamics simulations, in order to include up to the second nearest neighbor.

The resulting adjacency matrix is diagonalized, and SPRINT CVs are defined based on the largest eigenvalue and the corresponding eigenvector as:

$$S_i = \sqrt{N}\lambda^{max}\nu_i^{max,sorted} \tag{2}$$

where N = number or atoms.

The resulting positive values, one per atom, are sorted (keeping Mo and S separated) in order to enforce invariance by permutation of atoms of the same type. We applied N-dimensional Gaussian-shaped repulsive potentials of height 0.04 kJ.mol^{-1} and width $\sigma = 0.7$, added every 10 fs. Those parameters were chosen after some short (less than 2ps) molecular dynamics test simulations, in which that we did manage both to fill the initial potential wells and we saw drops in bias potential, indicating exploration of new wells corresponding to potential stable structures.

The atomic trajectory projected in the N-dimensional SPRINT space is then classified using the algorithm proposed by Daura et al.[37] as implemented in the piv_clustering code.[50] The algorithm depends on a single parameter, a cut-off distance (d_c) in SPRINT space defining whether two points are neighbor, and thus determining the granularity of the clustering. We adopted d_c=0.3 for Mo_2S_4, 0.6 for Mo_3S_6 and 1.2 for Mo_4S_8. Those parameters were chosen in order to generate a manageable number of candidate structures, and were scaled with the dimension of the SPRINT collective variables. The classification resulted in 254 Mo_2S_4 clusters, 130 Mo_3S_6 and 178 Mo_4S_8 clusters.

The resulting candidate structures were then first partly optimized with a kinetic energy cutoff of 60 Ry for the wavefunction and 720 Ry for the density and a convergence criterion on the forces of 10^{-3} a.u. Next, duplicates and structures failing to relax were deleted. The remaining structures were further relaxed with a kinetic energy cutoff of 120 Ry for the wavefunction and 1440 Ry for the density, with convergence criterion of 10^{-3} a.u. on the forces in order to obtain the final geometries, binding energies, HOMO-LUMO gaps and magnetizations. The relaxations were run with quantum espresso[51] with the PBE[47] functional and Rappe-Rabe-Kaxiras-Joannopoulos ultrasoft pseudopotentials[52] in a cubic

periodically-repeated box of 15 Å side. Spin polarization effects were taken into account in the final relaxation, in order to compute the magnetization .

Finally, in order to provide an estimate of the cost of the method, we computed the average computational cost of a 100 ps metadynamics simulation (figure 1) as a function of the cluster size. Indeed, we expect that the cost of the metadynamics outweigh the cost of the relaxations, and therefore is the determining factor. From figure 1, it is clear that the cost of the method steeply increases with the size of the clusters, and is in general too expensive for local workstation but largely accessible for current supercomputers. Note that the cost of a single step varies significantly over a 100 ps simulation, notably because metadynamics forces the system to visit states of progressively higher energy, therefore figure 1 gives a rough idea of the cost of those simulation.

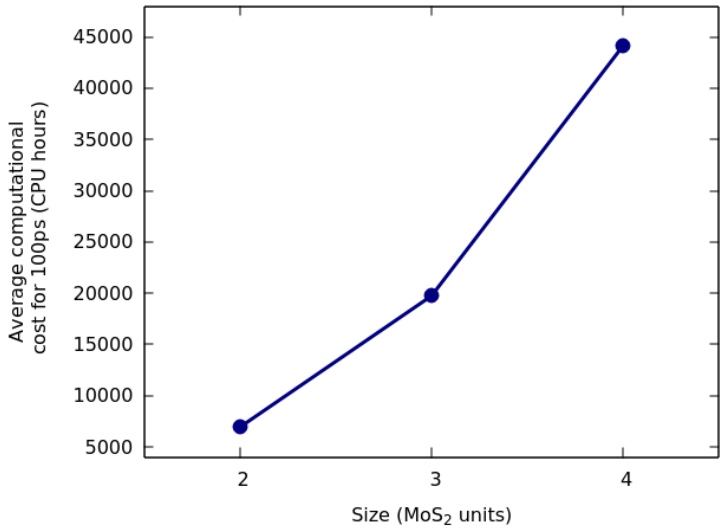


Figure 1: Average computational cost of 100ps (in CPU hours) of simulation as a function of the size of the cluster .

Results

Following the procedure outlined in the methods section, we singled-out more than 109 stable forms: 14 clusters for Mo_2S_4 , 27 for Mo_3S_6 and 68 for Mo_4S_8. In order to sort the structures in terms of stability, we computed the binding energy using:

$$BE = \frac{nE(Mo) + mE(S) - E(Mo_nS_m)}{n+m} \tag{3}$$

where $E(Mo)$ and $E(S)$ are the energies of a molybdenum and sulfur atom, respectively, computed in the same conditions as the cluster and $E(Mo_nS_m)$ is the energy of the Mo_nS_m cluster. This definition has the advantage to allow energetic comparison of clusters with different number of atoms. For each n we rank the structures in increasing BE, as $n.BE_rank$; for example, the 5^{th} most stable structure of the Mo_3S_6 family will be referred to as *3.5*.

The eight most stable structures and their binding energy relative to the most stable candidate are shown at the top of figure 2-4, while the binding energy, HOMO-LUMO gap and total magnetization for each stable structure is presented in the lower part of the same figure.

The observations of the most stable structures confirms what has been found elsewhere:[25] for n=3 and n=4 the most stable candidate has the form of the monolayer 1T phase of MoS_2. We observe a clear tendency for clusters to form platelet-like structures instead of core-shell ones. It is also noteworthy that we find several structures predicted using an evolutionary algorithm on WS_2.[24]

In addition we found several motifs (figure 6) shared by many of the stable structures (indicated by colored squares in figures 2-5) : a Mo-centered tetrahedron with S atoms on the edges; a "core" of 3 or 4 Mo atoms bonded to each other and capped with sulfur atoms and finally a S-capped 5-members rings composed of two non-bonded S atoms and three Mo atoms.

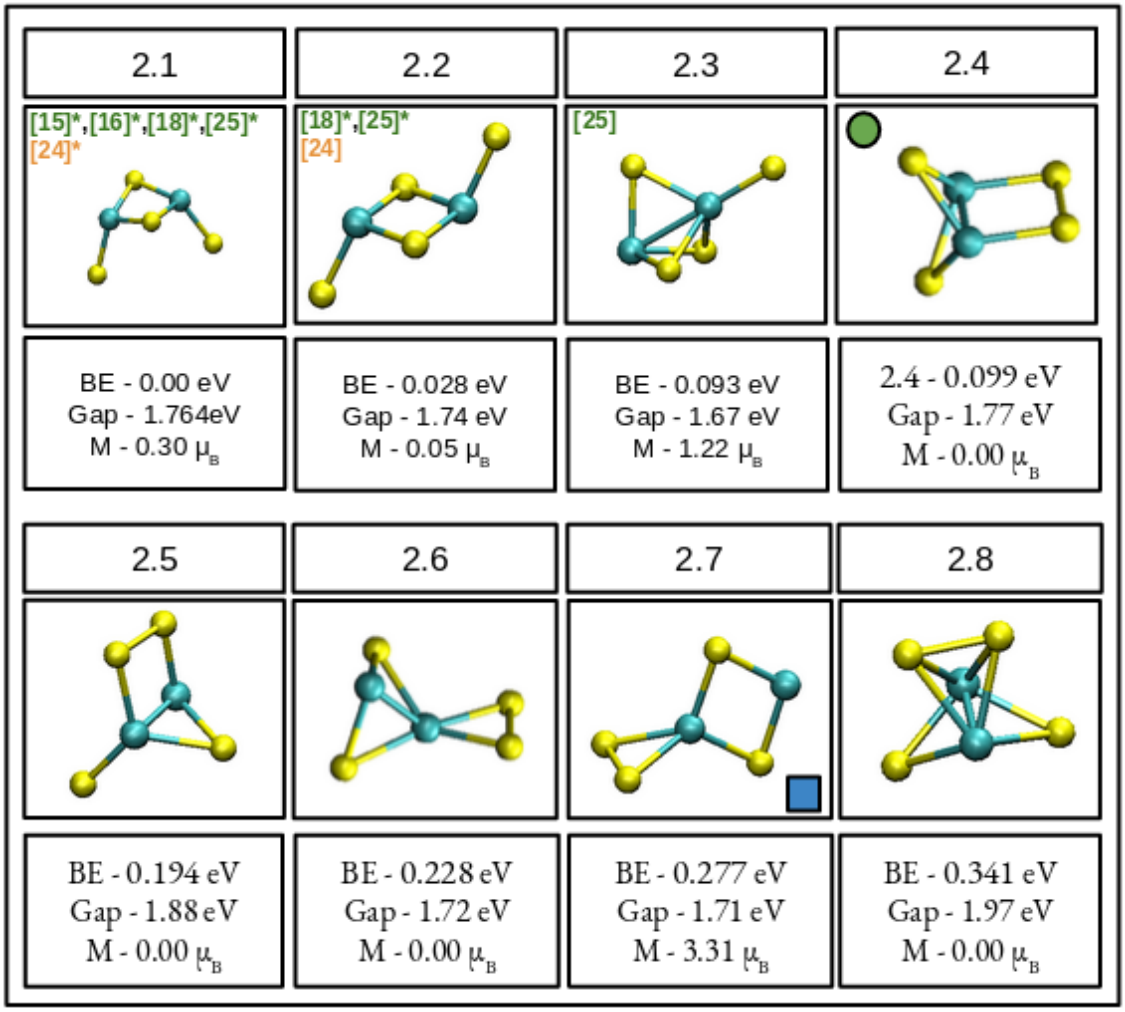


Figure 2: Most stable configurations for Mo_2S_4 clusters. Green and orange numbers refers to the references where the configurations were found, in MoS_2 (green) or WS_2 (orange) clusters, and asterix indicate the structure identified as the most stable in the respective papers. Blue dots indicate a bulk-like structure. Blue, violet and green squares refer to the motif in figure 6.

A few structures, although less energetically favored (figure 5), do stand out from the others, where we can observe: a ring-like structure (*2.13*); the beginning of an MoS_2 1D structure (*3.10*); but also a structure with a S-S-S chain on an otherwise stable structure (*4.20*); and an interesting platelet-like structure that does not match the proposed structure of phase 1H or 1T (*4.21*). We also found some structures such as (*2.10*) or (*3.10*) that presented an interesting tetrahedron motif with two S atoms and two Mo atoms, bonded by their

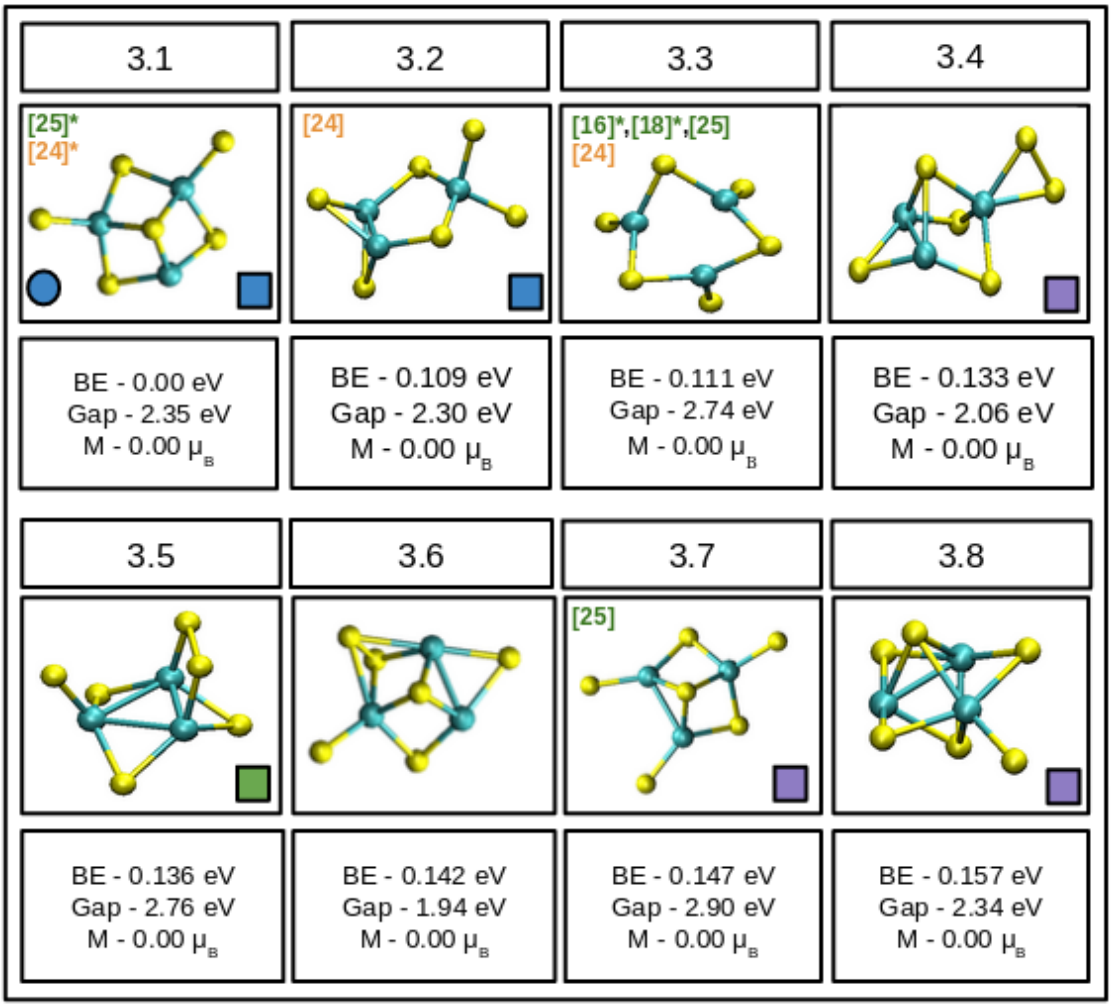


Figure 3: Most stable configurations for Mo_3S_6 clusters. Green and orange numbers and blue dots have the same meaning as the labels in figure 2. Blue, violet and green squares refer to the motifs in figure 6.

Mo-Mo edges, in the case of *2.10* forming an octahedron with Mo atoms at opposite vertices.

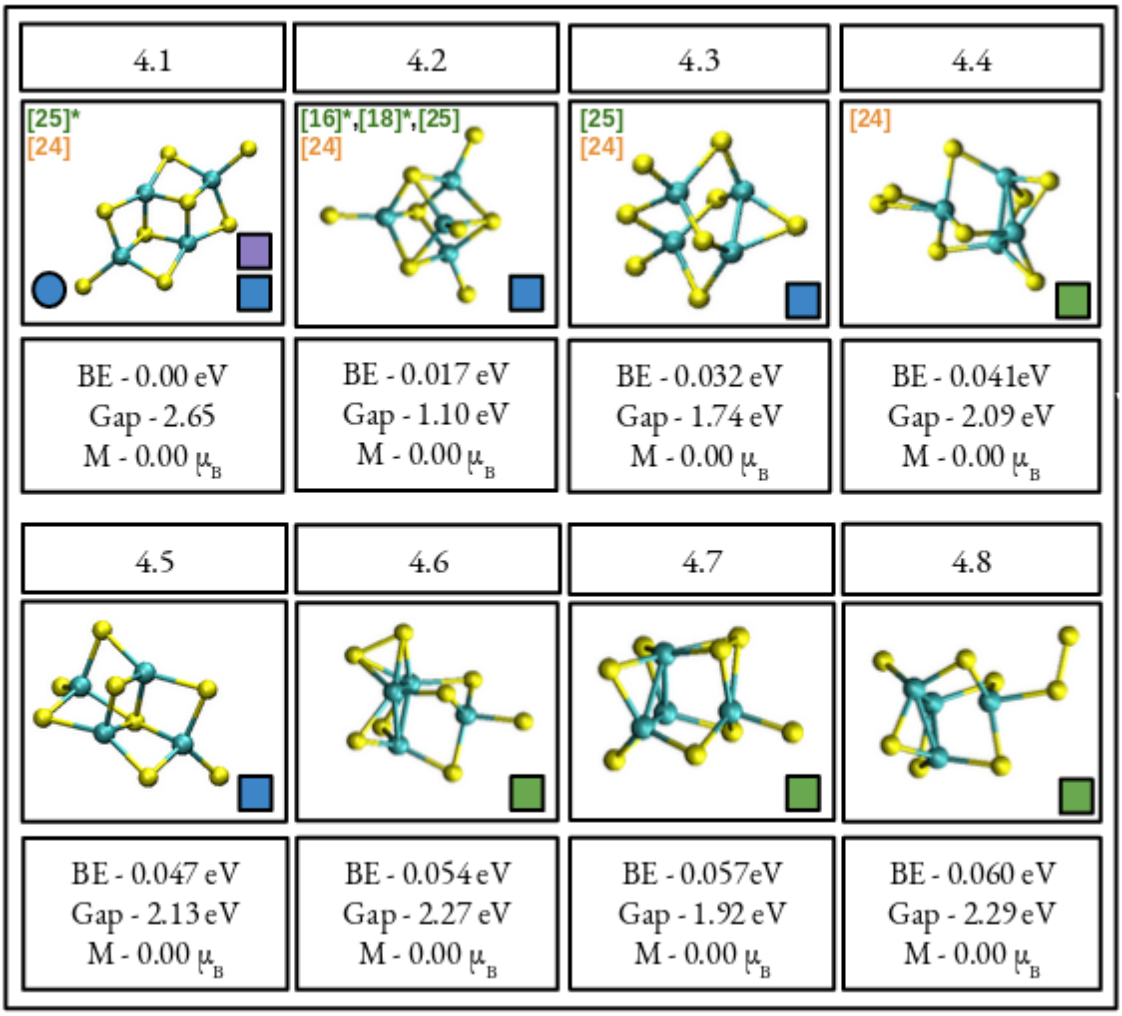


Figure 4: Most stable configurations for Mo_4S_8 clusters. Green and orange numbers and blue dots have the same meaning as the labels in figure 2. Blue, violet and green squares refer to the motifs in figure 6.

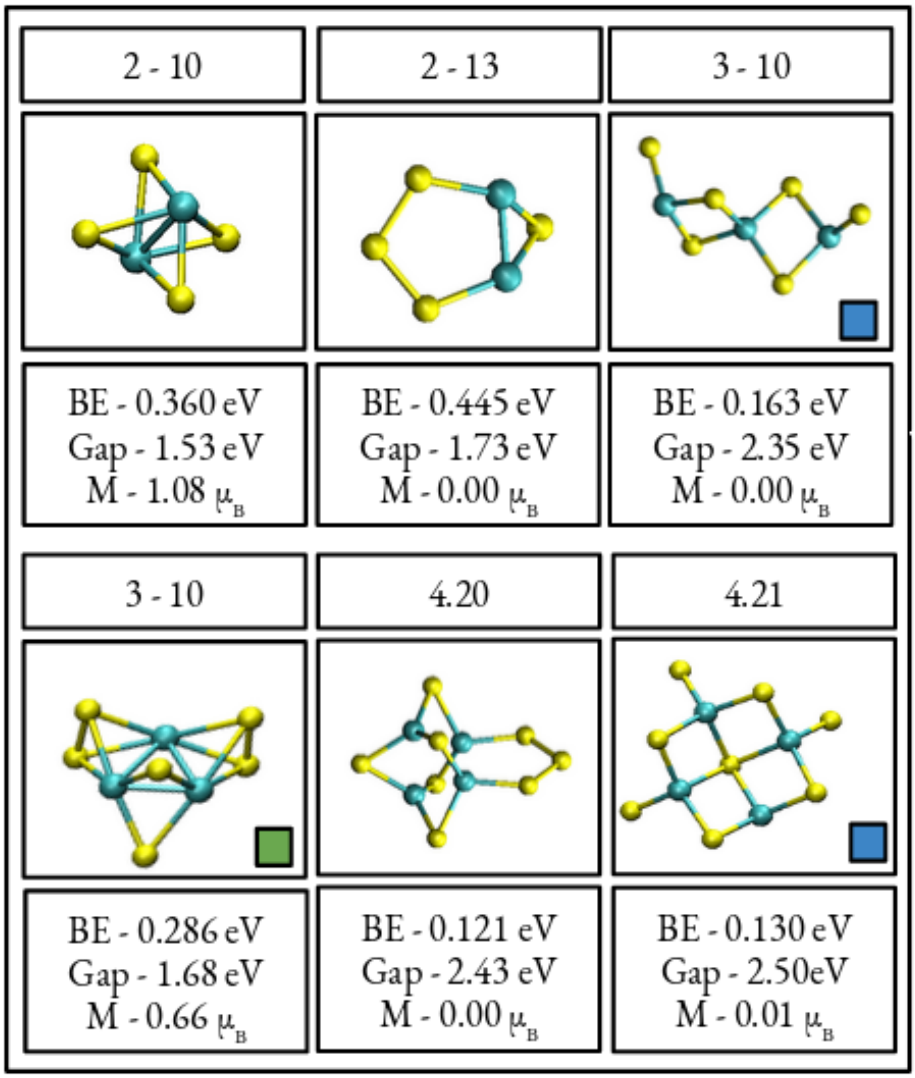


Figure 5: Interesting structures that are not amongst the eight most stable structures of each family n. Green and orange numbers and blue dots have the same meaning as the labels in figure 2. Blue, violet and green squares refer to the motifs in figure 6.

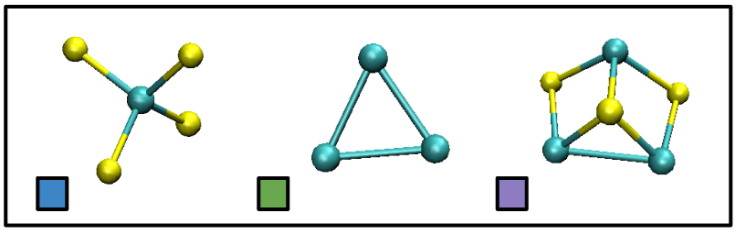


Figure 6: Geometric units appearing in several of the stables MoS_2 structures: the Mo-centered tetrahedron (left), the Mo-core (center) and the S-capped 5 members ring (right)

Discussion

From an energetic point of view, although the difference in methodology makes it difficult to make straightforward comparison with other works, we do find the same general trend with growing size[15,16,18] (figure 7): larger structures are favored and the binding energy of the clusters as a function of their size seems to be increasing toward that of the bulk (figure 7).

We find (figure 7) that the structures of the smaller clusters are generally more spaced out than those of the larger clusters in binding energy, which also shows when computing the number of structures within 2 eV (in absolute energy) of the most stable structure for each cluster size: we find 6 structures for Mo_2S_4, 15 for Mo_3S_6 and 35 for Mo_4S_8. However we do note a very large absolute energy difference (0.97 eV) between the most stable and second most stable configurations of Mo_3S_6 clusters, as opposed to 0.17 eV for Mo_2S_4 and 0.20 eV for Mo_4S_8.

We observe, in general, the same energy ranking as in previous works,[25] with one exception where structure 4.3 is found to be more stable than 4.2.[25] However, in this case, the differences in energy are small: 0.22 on the one hand[25] and 0.27 eV in our case and can be attributed to either small differences to the use of different DFT functionals.

Despite of differences in computational approaches, we find a general agreement with other studies on the magnetic nature of a cluster (magnetic vs non-magnetic), although we find some important differences in the values of the reported magnetization. Comparing our results for the most common structures in the literature for the three sizes (structures *2.1*, *3.3* and *4.2*) we find an agreement with all other works for the two largest structures (*3.3* and *4.2*) which are reported as non-magnetic[16,18,25] while for the smallest cluster we find magnetization of $2\mu_B$[16,18,25] while we report $0.3\mu_B$. It is quite likely that this discrepancy is due to the difference of methods used to take into account spin polarization.

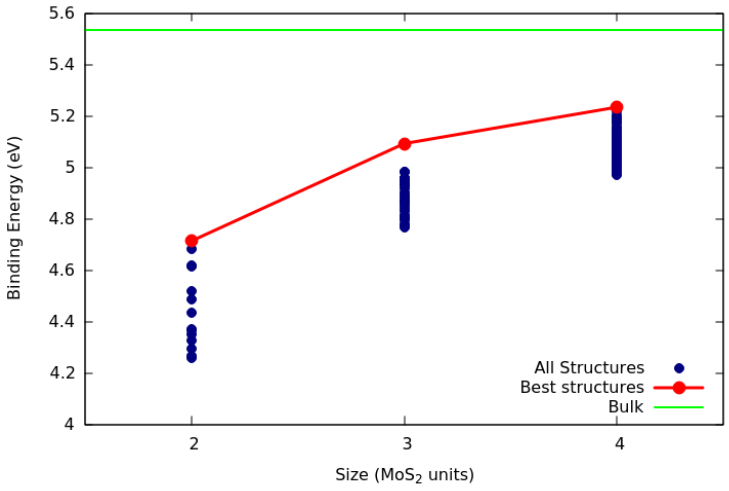


Figure 7: Evolution of the binding energy (eV) of the most stable configuration with increasing size (in MoS_2 units), with the binding energy of the bulk for comparison.

For the HOMO-LUMO gap we find a general agreement on the order of magnitude of the gap, although some discrepancies are also observed here: for cluster *2.1* the reported value of the HOMO-LUMO gap are 1.64 eV,[15] 0.35 eV,[16,18]1.66 eV,[25] while our reported value is 1.74 eV; for structure *3.3*, reported values are 0.7 eV[18] 2.11 eV[25] against our reported 2.7 eV. Finally in Mo_4S_8, for structure *4.2* we find a HOMO-LUMO gap of 2.10 eV, while the literature contains values of 0.38[16,18] and 1.54 eV.

We note that the approximation level of electronic structure description employed in this study (DFT-PBE) is a good compromise between energetic accuracy and computational cost, given our approach based on long molecular dynamics trajectories.In this respect, our study is focused on the prejudice-free exploration of a large number of cluster structures (we provide the geometries in Supporting Information as a reference for the scientific community), whereas a very accurate evaluation of energetics and electronic properties demands expensive, higher-level quantum chemistry approaches, that go beyond the scope of this work.

Conclusion

In summary, we demonstrates that *ab initio* molecular dynamics in combination with enhanced sampling, data clustering and graph theory-inspired coordinates (SPRINT) capturing the topology of the interatomic network are a powerful approach for the unsupervised exploration of the configuration space of small clusters.

Indeed, in the case of Mo_nS_{2n} clusters we recapitulated most the existing literature and discovered more than 50 new stable structures, without making any guess about their geometry nor any assumption about their symmetry. We remark the excellent agreement of the structural forms found in this study with those observed in a previous study[24] using a very different exploration approach based on evolutionary algorithms.

In perspective, the unsupervised exploration of the configuration space of larger structures and/or different stoichiometries of Mo_nS_m clusters will constitute a very interesting field of research. Moreover, our proposed method could be seamlessly applied to other types of nanostructures and chemical compositions.

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Supporting Information Available

All structures related to this papers are provided in *xyz* format (one per cluster size), along with the computed binding energies, absolute and total magnetization and HOMO-LUMO gap which are given in a *dat* file (per cluster size).

All files are grouped inside *supp_info.zip*.

This material is available free of charge via the Internet at `http://pubs.acs.org/`.

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Graphical TOC Entry

