



Direct mechanistic connection between acoustic signals and melt pool morphology during laser powder bed fusion

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ABSTRACT

Various nondestructive diagnostic techniques have been proposed for *in situ* process monitoring of laser powder bed fusion (LPBF), including melt pool pyrometry, whole-layer optical imaging, acoustic emission, atomic emission spectroscopy, high speed melt pool imaging, and thermionic emission. Correlations between these *in situ* monitoring signals and defect formation have been demonstrated with acoustic signals having been shown to predict pore formation with especially high confidence in recent machine learning studies. In this work, time-resolved acoustic data are collected in both the conduction and keyhole welding regimes of LPBF-processed Ti-6Al-4V alloy. A non-dimensionalized Strouhal number analysis, used in whistle aeroacoustics, is applied to demonstrate that the acoustic signals recorded in the keyhole regimes can be directly associated with the vapor depression morphology. This mechanistic understanding developed from whistle aeroacoustics shows that acoustic monitoring during the LPBF process can provide a direct probe into the vapor depression dynamics and defect occurrence, especially in the keyhole regimes relevant to printing and defect formation.

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Laser powder bed fusion (LPBF), previously called selective laser melting (SLM), is an additive manufacturing (AM) approach for metal components that has proven to be an exceptionally useful fabrication technique in many commercial and industrial applications.¹ LPBF AM provides various advantages compared to conventional manufacturing approaches, such as geometric flexibility, low production lead time, and inexpensive tooling. Alongside the increasing adoption of this additive manufacturing method, significant effort has also been made to control, predict, and understand the phenomena governing the process. While their overall behavior is predictable based on laser printing parameters,^{2,3} specific defect formation events are often stochastic and unpredictable, especially when considering the varying thermal boundary conditions driven by the high degree of geometric flexibility that additive approaches permit and the tremendous number of competing physical properties of the material, including laser absorptivity, melting temperature, and thermal conductivity.^{4–6} As a result, part qualification often requires extensive destructive testing in addition to inspection through computed tomography (CT). While reliable, this can be

time consuming, financially costly, and not always well suited for the small defects and complex geometries associated with AM-printed parts. As such, *in situ* characterization techniques are well suited as a preliminary “failure” test criteria with remarkably low time and cost requirements.

Many different modalities have been proposed for *in situ* process monitoring during LPBF, including melt pool pyrometry,^{7–9} whole-layer optical imaging,^{10,11} acoustic emission,^{12–16} high-speed melt pool imaging,^{17,18} and thermionic emission.¹⁹ A correlation between these *in situ* monitoring signals with defect formation has been demonstrated in various systems.^{20–24} Furthermore, machine learning studies have shown qualitative correlation between acoustic signals and feature formation as it varies with print parameters.^{25–31} Recent work with machine learning models has shown high probability for pore detection by combining photodiode with acoustic monitoring data in single-track prints.³² Acoustic monitoring offers complementary information to optical methods and permits greater flexibility by not requiring optical line-of-sight to the build. However, broader adoption of

acoustic methods has suffered from a lack of mechanistic understanding compared to, for example, pyrometry where the physics of black-body radiation is well understood. In pursuit of strengthening confidence in acoustic monitoring, a more mechanistic understanding of acoustic signal generation in LPBF is necessary. This work aims to develop a mechanistic connection between the acoustic signal and melt pool behavior during LPBF through analysis of single-track prints using a whistle aeroacoustic model.

Acoustic signals were recorded during laser irradiation of 3 mm long single laser tracks on Ti-6Al-4V bare plate performed using a 1070 nm continuous wave Yb-fiber laser (YLR-500-AC-Y14, IPG Photonics) focused to a D4r diameter of 73 μ m, laser scan speeds of 250 and 500 mm/s, and laser powers between 100 and 400 W. The experimental platform used in the present work has been described previously.³³ Laser direction and scan speed were controlled by a SCANLAB intelliSCAN scan head, which consists of a two-axis galvanometer scanning mirror system. A 1/4th free-field, prepolarized microphone and preamplifier package (frequency range: 4–100 000 Hz (p2/ 3 dB), dynamic range: 165 dB, 378C01, PCB Piezotronics, Inc.) was installed with direct line-of-sight to the laser-sample coincident plane at 44° offset angle and a working distance of 140 mm. *In situ* x-ray imaging was performed at SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory's Stanford Synchrotron Radiation Lightsources (SSRL) beamline 2-2 using white-beam x-ray spectrum transmission x-ray images of the LPBF process captured using a scintillator-based optical system,³² operating at 20 kfps with an effective pixel size of 2 μ m per pixel. The vacuum chamber containing the sample was evacuated to 5 $\times 10^{-2}$ Torr prior to being filled with 730 Torr argon inert gas environment for processing. Argon was constantly flowed through the vacuum chamber during experiments using a high-efficiency air knife (Super Air Knife, Aluminum, 3 in., EXAIR) located above the substrate surface. During processing, the laser was scanned across a Ti-6Al-4V substrate (TMS Titanium, Poway, CA, USA) as a 2.5 mm long single line. Each substrate was approximately 500- μ m thick in the x-ray probe direction.

The acoustic data are presented in the frequency domain in time-independent and time-dependent plots, generated by Fourier transforms and wavelet transforms, respectively (Fig. 1). Plots are shown for three prints performed with a scan speed of 500 mm/s and laser powers of 100, 200, and 400 W, corresponding to the conduction, stable keyhole, and unstable keyhole regimes, respectively. The conduction regime is comprised of scans throughout which the depth-to-width ratio of the vapor depression remains below 1, while for the keyhole regimes, the ratio is greater than 1. Prints where pores are identified are further classified under the unstable regime.

The 100 W case shows a narrow band of tone frequencies centered around 70 kHz, which is consistent with stable melt pool geometry observed in x-ray videos. Despite the consistency in frequency, fluctuations in the acoustic signal are observed with occasional short-lived peaks arising and fading. The stochasticity in acoustic signals notably increases with scan power, with tone frequency ranges of 40–60 kHz at 200 W and 30–80 kHz at 400 W. Distinctly, at 400 W, these ranges are not only constituted of narrowband peaks (~ 10 kHz wide) scattered across the wider range but also a handful of broadband peaks that span nearly the entire 30–80 kHz range. Interestingly, there are also cases where peaks are long-lived enough in time (>200 μ s) to experience a shift in frequency between when they first appear and

when they fade. Although this overall stochastic acoustic behavior is easily correlated with high normalized enthalpy, unstable keyhole morphology, and defect formation,^{34–36} a deeper interpretation of the specific features we observe requires mechanistic understanding of the acoustic phenomena.

Interpretation of the acoustic signals first requires consideration of the various acoustic sources present in the LPBF process, including melt pool waves, solidification phenomena, and events deeper in the material. Examination of the signal magnitude prior to the start of the print shows that ambient experimental signals are negligible, including the Ar gas recirculation system, vacuum pumps, galvo motion, and other periphery systems. The low residual stress build-up in single-track Ti-6Al-4V prints makes solidification cracking rare. The acoustic impedance mismatch between solid Ti and gaseous Ar hinders subsurface acoustic signals reaching the airborne microphone; calculations suggest that $<1\%$ of acoustic energy generated within solid or liquid metal would be transmitted to a surrounding gas environment.^{37,38} As such, the airborne microphone effectively couples to gas flow associated with the vapor depression and reduces signal from potential subsurface sources, like cracking and bubble collapse. We are confident the acoustic signals recorded and analyzed are metal vapor aeroacoustics directly coupled to the vapor depression. To interpret these metal-vapor aeroacoustics and extract some mechanistic insight into vapor depression dynamics, we analyze through the perspective of whistle aeroacoustics.

A classic and elegant example of the whistle model is the steam kettle whistle, which can be defined as a cylinder with two similarly sized holes axially aligned on opposing chamber faces [Fig. 2(a)]. The upstream hole connects the whistle body to a large chamber of higher pressure relative to ambient where the gas flow originates, and the downstream hole connects the whistle body with an ambient atmosphere; as gas flows through the whistle, a tone is generated. The specific mechanisms by which tones are generated can be classified into three classes³⁹ and—for a given system—may vary based on the Reynolds number $Re \propto U d/\nu$, where U is the gas velocity, d is the opening diameter, and ν is kinematic viscosity.^{40,41} Analysis of steam kettle whistles has shown that as the Reynolds number changes, there are two regimes of whistle behavior; these regimes can be identified by the Strouhal number $St \propto f d/U$, where f is the tone frequency, d is the opening diameter, and U is the gas velocity.⁴² At low Reynolds number (i.e., low air velocity, large hole diameter), the emitted acoustic frequency is constant, corresponding to a Helmholtz resonator condition where the Helmholtz cavity is defined as the whistle cylinder and the effective neck length is the sum of the plate thicknesses. At high Reynolds number (i.e., high air velocity, small hole diameter), the Strouhal number is constant, corresponding to a class III whistle, which entails vortex shedding at the end of a resonating duct, similar to a flute or organ pipe.⁴¹

Figure 2(b) is a radiograph of a vapor depression resulting from a single-track print at 500 mm/s and 300 W. Contrast enhancement, binarization, and median filtering are performed on the radiograph to generate Fig. 2(c). We analogize the keyhole-regime vapor depression as a whistle such that the whistle body is the larger chamber of height h and diameter D , as shown in Fig. 2(d). The gas flow source associated with the upstream hole is the vapor jet with velocity U generated by evaporation near the incident point of the laser beam at the bottom of the vapor depression,⁴³ and the downstream hole would be the

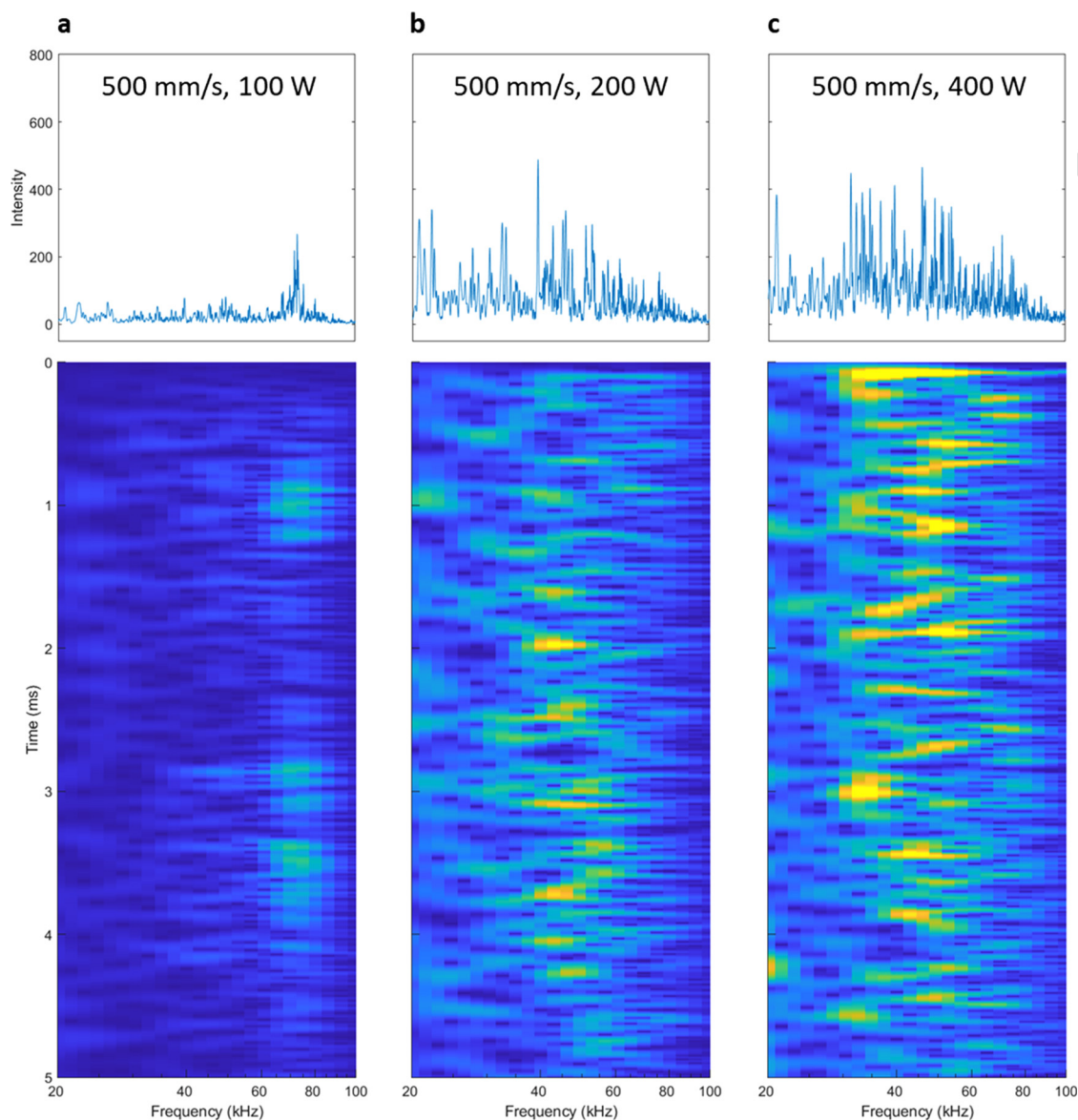


FIG. 1. Time-independent Fourier transforms (top) and time-dependent wavelet transforms (bottom) of acoustic data recorded during single-track irradiations on Ti-6Al-4V bare plate with laser scan speed 500 mm/s and laser powers of (a) 100, (b) 200, and (c) 400 W. These powers correspond to the conduction, stable keyhole, and unstable keyhole regimes of print behavior, respectively.

narrower neck of the vapor depression defined by diameter d . While not all depressions will fit this model, we hypothesize that the system will generate acoustic signal via a whistle mechanism when the vapor depression dynamics align with the whistle model—i.e., tones occur when gas flows through a larger chamber followed by a narrower opening.

We proceed to demonstrate that vapor depressions can exhibit whistle behavior through a non-dimensionalized analysis of the melt pool aeroacoustic behavior. Precise calculation of the Reynolds number requires kinematic viscosity of the flowing gas. This is difficult to estimate from literature values due to the mixing of gaseous metal with

argon at the extreme temperatures present. However, the Reynolds number has been calculated using the density of the background gas and surface temperature at the location of the laser spot.⁴⁴ With constant background gas pressure and surface temperature in the laser spot increasing monotonically with laser power, the Reynolds number is expected to also increase monotonically with laser power. To permit incorporation of data from a wide range of experimental and material parameters, normalized enthalpy can be used in place of laser power.^{45,46} Since our current scope focuses on changes in laser power at two scan speeds, we use a reduced form of normalized enthalpy $P/u^{1/2}$, with laser power P and scan speed u . From these relations,

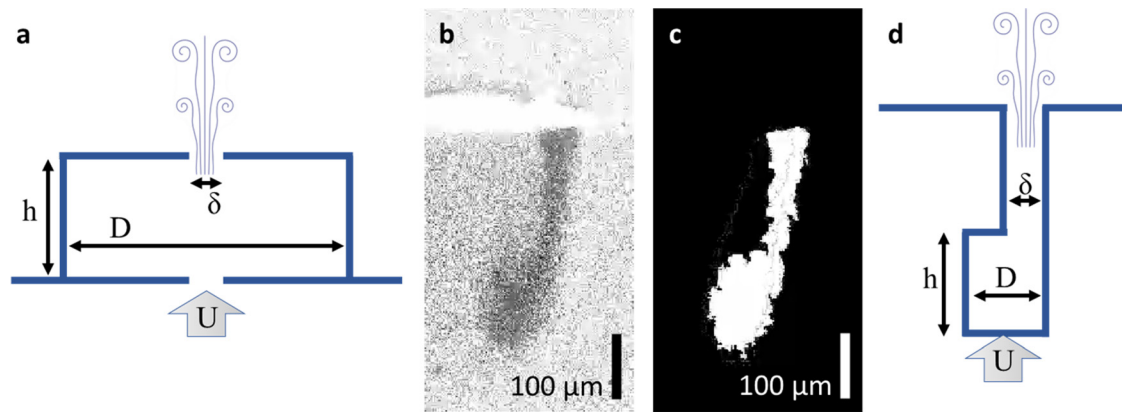


FIG. 2. (a) Schematic representation of a steam kettle whistle recreated from Ref. 25 with the parameters for air velocity U , whistle diameter D , whistle height h , and opening diameter d . (b) X-ray radiograph of a vapor depression from a laser powder bed fusion scan at 500 mm/s and 300 W. (c) X-ray radiograph of the vapor depression after binarization. (d) Schematic representation of the vapor depression with the same parameters as defined for the steam kettle whistle.

constant Strouhal number behavior across increasing Reynolds number—which indicates class III whistle behavior—will appear as constant Strouhal number behavior across increasing reduced normalized enthalpy.

The Strouhal calculation for our vapor depression system requires evaluation of the opening diameter, gas velocity, and tone frequency. The stochasticity of the melt pool and the associated vapor depression dynamics, especially at higher energy densities, requires approximations to complete these calculations. Our Strouhal number analysis is not sensitive to absolute values, rather the relation between gas velocity, frequency, and opening diameter, and how each scales with normalized enthalpy. For gas velocity U , we point to a study that used a Knudsen layer approach to show that gas velocity normal to the powder bed surface scales linearly with normalized enthalpy for stainless steel over ranges of 300–1200 m/s and 50–200 W for scan speed and laser power, respectively.⁴⁷ The present work operates within the same regime of normalized enthalpy when accounting for material and thermal properties as well as processing conditions. As such, we proceed in our Strouhal number analysis with gas velocity scaling linearly with reduced normalized enthalpy from 0.3 to 1.5 km/s over the range explored.

The tone frequency and opening diameter are observed to fluctuate within a single track at higher normalized enthalpies, specifically in the unstable keyhole regimes where the vapor depression itself is known to dramatically fluctuate. Assigning a single value to tone frequency or opening diameter for a given track would be misleading given the fluctuations. To address this, we look at the time dependence of tone frequency and vapor depression geometry to assign an upper and lower bound for both frequency and opening diameter for each given track, with smaller opening diameter corresponding to higher frequency and larger with lower. As such, two Strouhal numbers will be calculated for each given track. Opening diameter, d , is measured from binarized *in situ* x-ray imaging data. For each image frame captured during the print, the minimum width of the vapor depression is identified, and, for each track, these minimum widths are used to determine an upper and lower bound for opening diameter for the track.

Figure 3 shows the plot of Strouhal number vs reduced normalized enthalpy with delineations made to illustrate the conduction,

stable keyhole, and unstable keyhole regimes. The conduction and keyhole regimes are differentiated by the geometric aspect ratio of the vapor depression while the stable and unstable keyhole regimes are differentiated by *ex situ* pore identification. The acoustic data presented in Fig. 1(a) nominally correspond to the conduction regime and exhibit constant frequency behavior—similar to steam kettle whistles at low Reynolds number.⁴² While the stable keyhole regime may act as a transitional regime, the unstable keyhole regime, where substantial frequency fluctuations occur in the acoustic data, exhibits constant Strouhal number behavior. Based on the whistle model, constant Strouhal number behavior observed here at higher laser powers reflects class III whistle acoustics, which corresponds to vortex shedding at the end of a resonating duct. These findings are consistent with recent

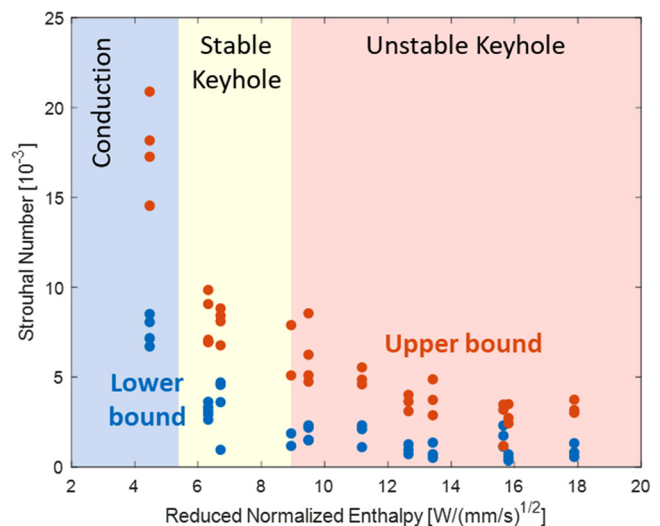


FIG. 3. Plot of the non-dimensionalized Strouhal number as a function of normalized enthalpy for single-track irradiations on Ti-6Al-4V bare plate. Conduction and keyhole regimes are differentiated by the geometric aspect ratio of the vapor depression. Stable and unstable keyhole regimes are differentiated by *ex situ* pore identification.

plume imaging works showing plume structure indicative of vortex shedding at higher laser powers⁴⁸ and can be used to better understand and further interpret melt pool morphology.

The present work demonstrates that the aeroacoustic principles present in steam kettles also apply to LPBF melt pools so long as the vapor depression morphology matches the whistle model—i.e., a narrower opening downstream of a larger chamber. This understanding allows a more detailed interpretation of the information-rich acoustic data associated with melt pool behavior in the unstable keyhole regime. For example, Fig. 4 shows the time-dependent acoustic data corresponding to a print at 500 mm/s and 400 W [previously presented in Fig. 1(c)] with binarized images of the vapor depression geometries corresponding to four times during the print. The vapor depression at 1.75 ms exhibits two sequences of a narrow opening downstream of a larger chamber while the vapor depression at 3.05 ms exhibits one such sequence—meeting the geometric requirements of the whistle model. The vapor depressions at 2.50 and 3.30 ms do not meet the requirements because they exhibit constant width and monotonically increasing width, respectively.

Correlation of these geometries and times with the acoustic data shows acoustic signals recorded in the two cases where the whistle model requirements are satisfied and shows an absence of acoustic signals where the requirements are unmet. Additionally, the acoustic peak at 1.75 ms apparently spans >15 kHz in frequency space and

0.2 ms in time. This may be linked to the complex geometry of the vapor depression, which shows two openings with differing diameters. Since this print occurs in the constant Strouhal regime, the opening diameter is inversely related to the frequency of the resulting tone. As such, multiple effective whistles within a single vapor depression would conceivably result in acoustic signals spanning greater frequency ranges and even multi-tone signals. The whistle model provides the foundational framework to mechanistically understand the complex acoustic data commonly found in the stable keyhole regime where many LPBF processes operate.

The present work mechanistically links acoustic generation with melt pool dynamics. While snapshots of vapor depression geometries support the whistle model, capturing vapor depression evolution over time would yield a more complete understanding of the complex

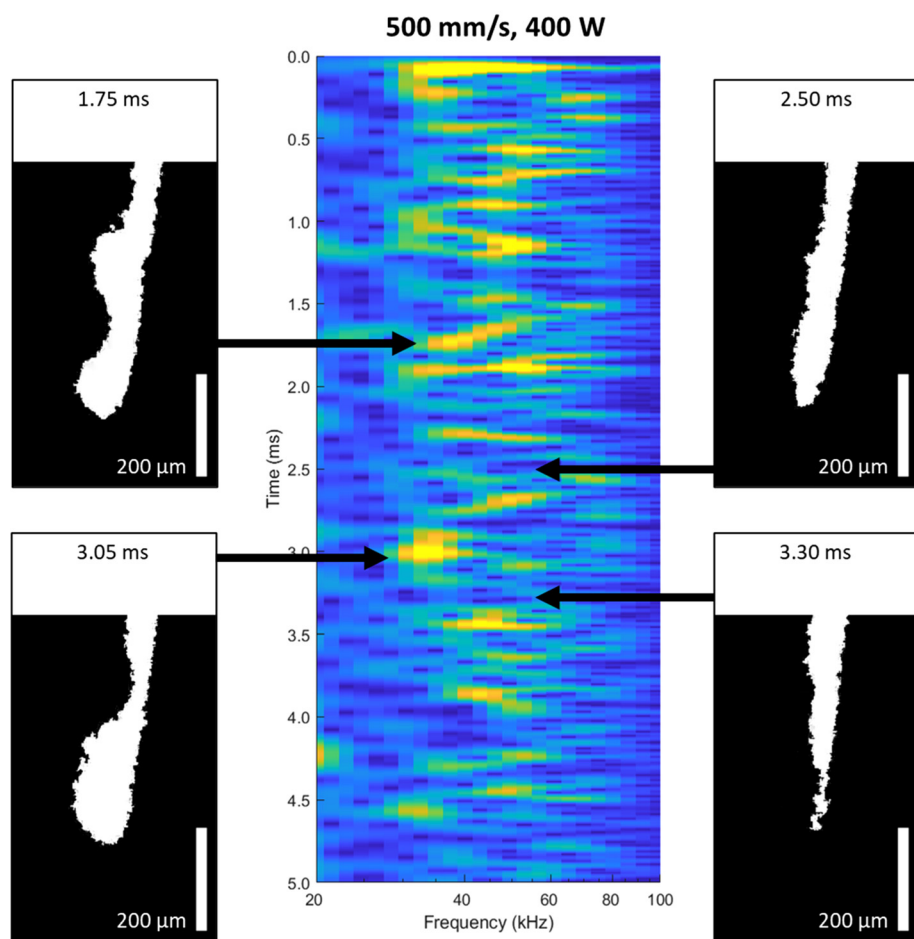


FIG. 4. Time-dependent acoustic data corresponding to a print at 500 mm/s and 400 W previously presented in Fig. 1(c) with binarized images of the vapor depression chosen at four times during the print. The vapor depressions at 1.75 and 3.05 ms (left) fit the geometric requirements of the whistle model whereas the images taken at 2.50 and 3.30 ms (right) do not. Correlation of these times with the time-dependent acoustic data shows acoustic signals at 1.75 and 3.05 ms and shows a lack of signal at 2.50 and 3.30 ms.

acoustic signatures. This is especially true for cases where the acoustic signal appears to persist and shift in frequency over some time—as identified in Fig. 4 and as is characteristic of unstable keyhole behavior. Additionally, extension of this work to better reflect industry-relevant conditions is vital for wider applicability of the present model. This includes powder experiments to investigate the wider validity of the whistle model and full-scale, multi-layer prints to determine the scalability. Further development of the whistle model for vapor depressions will increase the melt pool information extracted from acoustic monitoring and strengthen the overall effectiveness of *in situ* monitoring techniques.

The whistle model presented offers a direct connection between the acoustic signals captured during the LPBF process and the physical attributes of the melt pool, especially in the keyhole regimes relevant to printing. This model enables interpretation of complex acoustic data to a greater extent than previously available by providing an empirical connection between acoustic frequency and vapor depression geometry via the Strouhal number. The mechanistic understanding of vapor depression aeroacoustics detailed in this work suggests that process monitoring techniques based on acoustic methods will be broadly transferrable to different materials and machine architectures. These findings hope to bridge the gap in physical understanding between acoustic and optical techniques to promote more widespread adoption of acoustic monitoring approaches. By offering insight into the sub-surface morphology of the vapor depression, this model hopes to present acoustic monitoring as a complementary technique to existing optical approaches. With further development of this model, *in situ* acoustic monitoring can be an accessible and reliable method of probing melt pool dynamics, melt pool depth, and the onset of pore detection in many materials and industrial-scale builds.

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AUTHOR DECLARATIONS

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts to disclose.

Author Contributions

Yuchen Sun: Conceptualization (lead); Data curation (lead); Formal analysis (lead); Investigation (lead); Validation (lead); Visualization (lead); Writing – original draft (lead); Writing – review & editing (lead). **Sanam Gorgannejad:** Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal). **Aiden Martin:** Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal). **Jenny Nicolino:** Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal). **Maria Strantz:** Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal).

Jean-Baptiste Forien: Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal). **Vivek Thampy:** Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal). **Sen Liu:** Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal). **Peiyu Quan:** Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal). **Christopher J. Tassone:** Investigation (equal); Methodology (equal). **Manyalibo J. Matthews:** Funding acquisition (equal); Supervision (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal). **Nicholas P. Calta:** Conceptualization (equal); Funding acquisition (lead); Investigation (lead); Methodology (lead); Project administration (lead); Supervision (lead); Writing – review & editing (equal).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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