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On the relation between X-ray absorption and optical extinction in AGN

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ABSTRACT

According to the Unified Model of Active Galactic Nuclei (AGN), an X-ray unabsorbed AGN should appear as unobscured in the optical band (the so called type-1 AGN). However, there is an important fraction (10-30%) of AGN whose optical and X-ray classifications do not match. To provide insight into the origin of such apparent discrepancies, we have conducted two types of analysis: 1) a detailed study of the UV-to-near-IR emission of two X-ray low absorbed AGN with high optical extinction drawn from the Bright Ultra-Hard XMM-Newton Survey (BUXS); 2) a statistical analysis of the optical obscuration and X-ray absorption properties of 159 type-1 AGN drawn from BUXS to determine the distribution of dust-to-gas ratios in AGN over a broad range of luminosities and redshifts. We have determined the impact of contamination from the AGN hosts in their optical classification (detection or lack of detection of rest-frame UV-optical broad emission lines). This is an on-going project, but our preliminary results, reported below, are very promising.

THE BRIGHT ULTRA-HARD XMM-NEWTON SURVEY (BUXS)

The AGN analyzed in this work were selected from the **Bright Ultra-hard XMM-Newton Survey (BUXS)**; Mateos et al. 2012). This is a flux-limited sample of 258 AGN detected at 4.5-10 keV energies with the XMM-Newton observatory. It is based on 381 high Galactic latitude ($|b|>20^\circ$) observations. The objects have large X-ray fluxes $f_{4.5-10 \text{ keV}} > 6 \times 10^{-14} \text{ erg/s/cm}^2$, and were detected in a total sky area of **44.43 deg²**.

The **optical spectroscopic completeness is > 98 percent**. We have **good quality XMM-Newton X-ray spectra (> 100 counts) in the observed energy range from 0.25 to 10 keV**. The selection of sources in the 4.5–10 keV band allows to reduce the strong bias against heavily absorbed AGN affecting surveys conducted at softer energies. The selected AGN are sensitive to N_H columns up to the Compton-thick limit ($\log(N_H) \sim 24 \text{ cm}^{-2}$).



Low X-ray absorption in 2 AGN



Object	$\log(L_X \text{ (2-10 keV)})$ erg/s	Redshift	Counts (MOS+pn)	$N_H \text{ (cm}^{-2}\text{)}$	Optical classification
J000441.24+000711.3	42.76	0.1067	2312	$< 6.7 \times 10^{20}$	Type-1.9 (SDSS)
J025218.60-011746.3	41.25	0.026	1534	$1.7_{-1.4}^{+2.0} \times 10^{21}$	Type-2 (6dF Survey)

Table 1: X-ray information about the selected objects and optical classification of the sources from public surveys.

We have good quality XMM-Newton X-ray spectra in the observed energy range from 0.25 to 10 keV for the two objects. The X-ray spectroscopic analysis was conducted with the XSPEC package. The best fit models are a power law plus black body emission for J000441.24+000711.3 and an absorbed power law for J025218.60-011746.3. We present UV-to-NIR high resolution spectra for both objects from VLT/XSHOOTER (Vernet et al. 2011). The observations were reduced using the public XSHOOTER pipeline version 2.3.0.

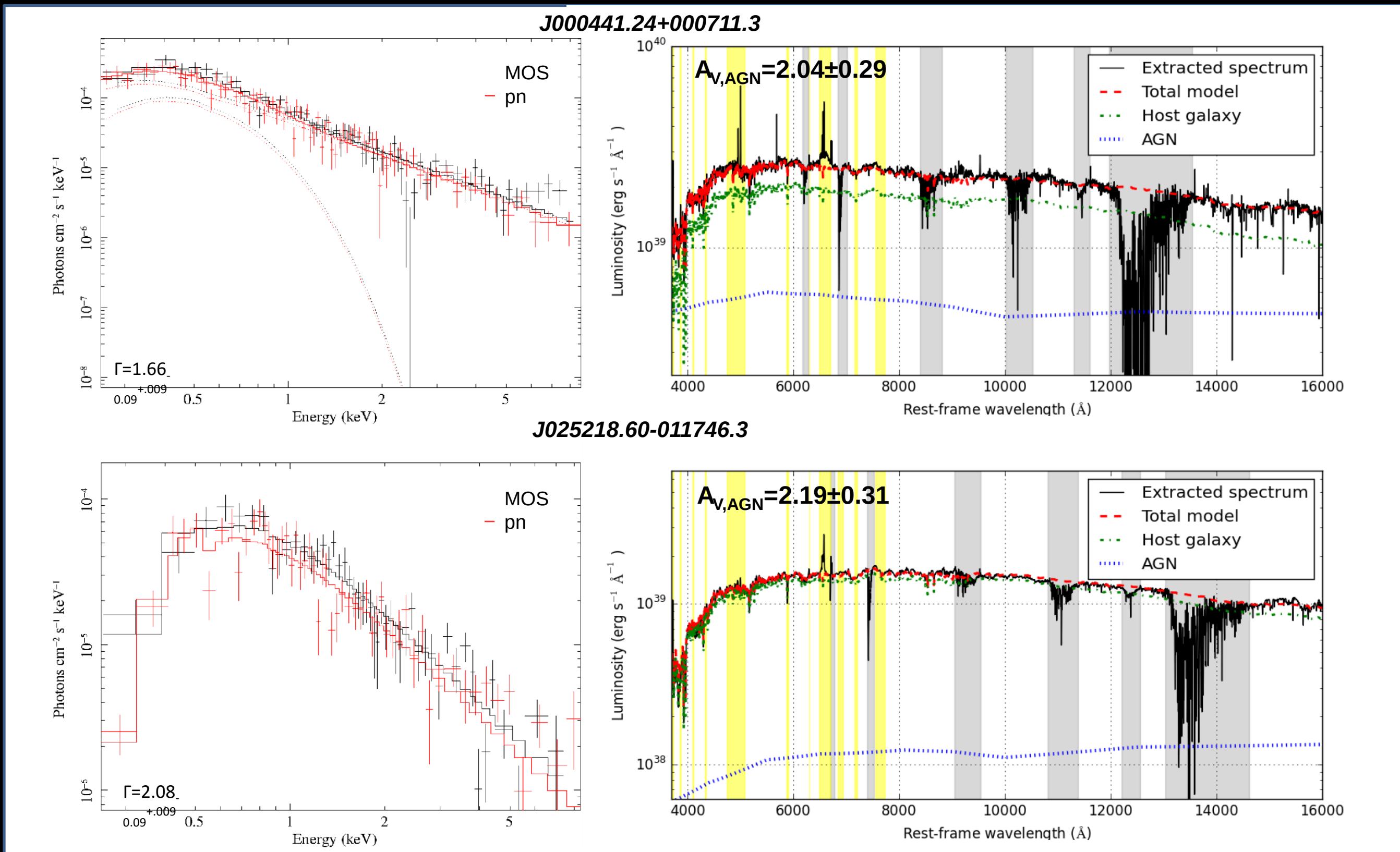


Figure 1: X-ray spectra (left) and UV-to-NIR spectra (right) for J000441.24+000711.3 (top) and J025218.60-011746.3 (bottom). In the X-ray spectra we plot the best-fit model with solid lines and the components with dotted lines. In the UV-to-NIR spectrum we plot the telluric absorption bands in gray and we plot zones removed from the fit due to AGN emission lines in yellow. Errors and upper limits are 68 per cent confidence.

To decompose the extracted spectra into AGN and host galaxy emission we used STARLIGHT (Cid Fernandes et al. 2005). We model the extracted spectrum with host galaxy emission, using SSP models from the Bruzual & Charlot library (Bruzual & Charlot 2003), and AGN emission modeled with a broken power law affected by nuclear extinction using the SMC model of Gordon (Gordon et al. 2003). We also added an additional extinction associated with the AGN hosts.

The Galactic relation for the dust-to-gas ratio is $A_V/N_H = 5.30 \times 10^{-22} \text{ mag/cm}^2$. For J000441.24+000711.3 $A_V/N_H > 2.6 \times 10^{-21} \text{ mag/cm}^2$ (>5 times the Galactic ratio), meanwhile for J025218.60-011746.3 $A_V/N_H = 1.30_{-1.1}^{+1.8} \times 10^{-22} \text{ mag/cm}^2$ (0-6 times the Galactic ratio).

We compared the host galaxy stellar masses with the SMBH mass derived from the UV-to-NIR spectra. The software STARLIGHT gives the stellar mass of the host galaxy. To calculate the SMBH mass we used both the luminosity and FWHM of the H α broad emission line (Greene et al. 2005). The obtained luminosity of the broad component of the H α line is then corrected for both the nuclear extinction and the host galaxy extinction.

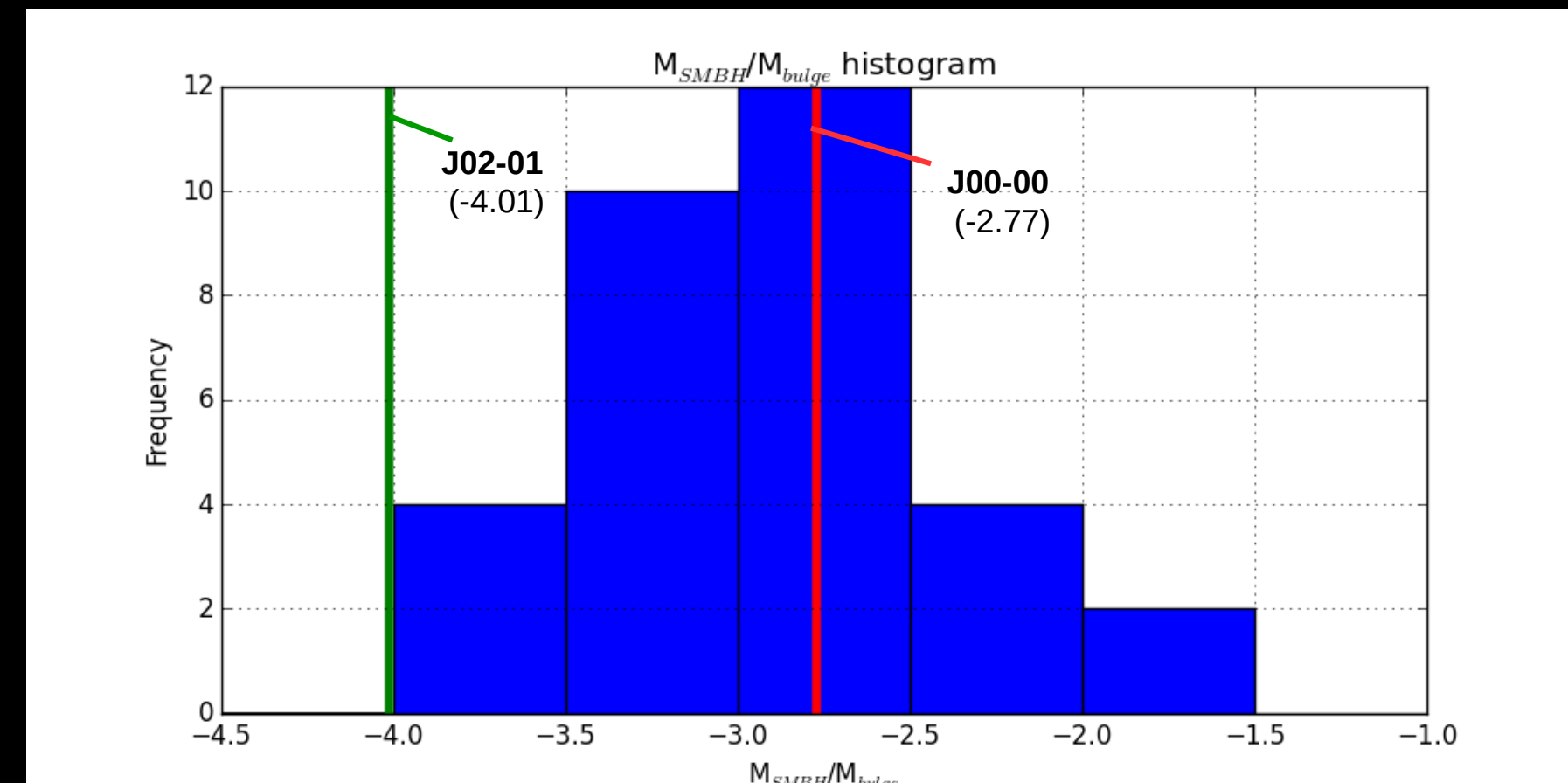


Figure 3: Histogram of $\log(M_{\text{SMBH}}/M_{\text{bulge}})$ from Merritt & Ferrarese 2001). We see that J000441.24+000711.3 (red) falls in the centre of the distribution meanwhile J025218.60-011746.3 (green) deviates significantly from the central value.

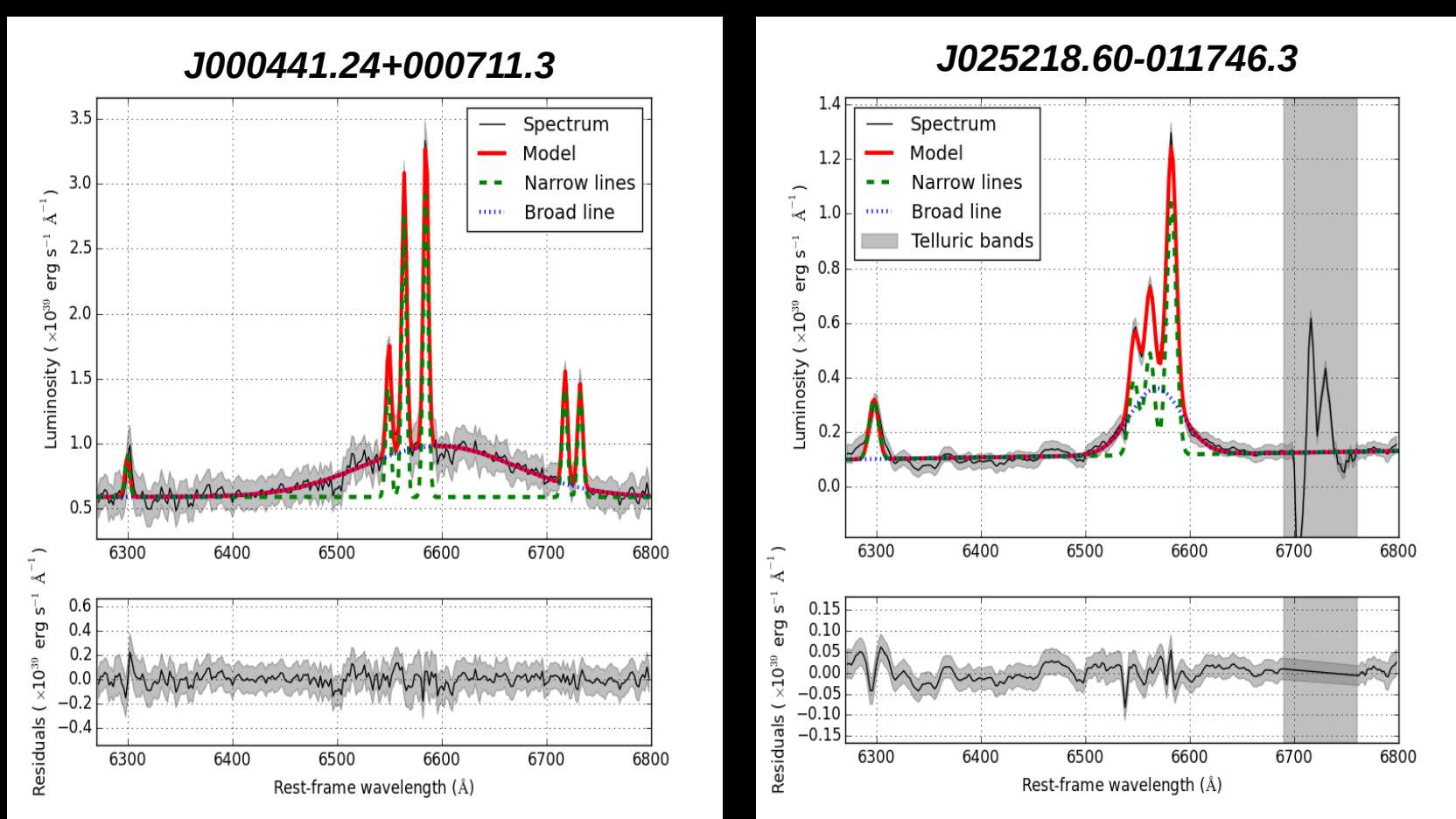


Figure 4: Spectrum of the nucleus of J000441.24+000711.3 (left) and J025218.60-011746.3 (right) Top: H α region and its decomposition in narrow and broad lines. The emission lines are fitted with gaussian functions and the local continuum with a power law Bottom: Residuals of the fits. Errors are 68 per cent confidence.

Object	A_V/N_H (mag/cm ²)	$\log(M_{\text{SMBH}}/M_{\text{bulge}})$
J000441.24+000711.3	$> 2.61 \times 10^{-21}$	-2.77
J025218.60-011746.3	$1.30_{-1.1}^{+1.8} \times 10^{-21}$	-4.01
Standard values	5.30×10^{-22}	-2.90 $\pm$ 0.45

Table 2: Results for the dust-to-gas and $\log(M_{\text{SMBH}}/M_{\text{bulge}})$ ratios

An intrinsically different A_V/N_H explains better the discordant classification for J000441.24+000711.3, making the X-ray emission to be less obscured than in the optical range. The black hole in J025218.60-011746.3 is smaller than expected in comparison with its host galaxy, between 2 and 3 times the rms below the relation from Merritt & Ferrarese (2001). This may explain why the AGN emission is outshined by the host galaxy star light. In conclusion, for J000441.24+000711.3 the discordance is explained by a different dust-to-gas ratio. For J025218.60-011746.3 the massive host makes the AGN signatures to be diluted by the host galaxy starlight.

CONCLUSIONS

The ~10-20% of AGN with discordant optical and X-ray classification are still an important challenge to the Unified Model of AGN. This is why we conducted this study with an unbiased sample like BUXS. From the detailed study of two low X-ray absorbed AGN with high optical extinction we can conclude that AGN with a discordant X-ray/optical classification do not represent an homogeneous class, as the cause of the observed discordance can be different. For J000441.24+000711.3 an intrinsically high dust-to-gas ratio is the most likely explanation for the observed properties. A change in the gas-to-dust ratio can misclassify an AGN, specially if it is in the range of intermediate AGN ($\log(N_H) \sim 22 \text{ cm}^{-2}$). The optical spectrum of J025218.60-011746.3 is significantly diluted by the host galaxy light making the optical classification unreliable. The effect of dilution seems to be particularly important in this source due to the very low SMBH/host bulge mass ratio. The statistical study shows that in the majority of the objects in our sample, the dust-to-gas ratio is compatible with the Galactic or lower. In comparison with the Maiolino et al. (2001) sample, whose AGN show values normally between 3 and 100 times below the Galactic relation, we obtain a wider range of ratios. Dust-to-gas ratios of AGN are not well known to date and play an important role in understanding AGN.

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