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PHANGS-JWST: the largest extragalactic molecular cloud catalog traced by polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon emission

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ABSTRACT

High-resolution JWST images of nearby spiral galaxies reveal polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon (PAH) structures that potentially trace molecular clouds, even CO-dark regions. In this paper, we identify ISM cloud structures in PHANGS-JWST 7.7 μm polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon (PAH) emission maps for 66 galaxies smoothed to a common physical resolution of 30 pc and at native resolution. We extracted 108,466 cloud structures in the 30 pc sample and 146,040 clouds in the native resolution sample. We then calculated their molecular properties following a linear conversion from PAH to CO. Given the tendency for clouds in galaxy centers to overlap in velocity space, we opted to flag these and omit them from the analysis in this work. The remaining clouds correspond to giant molecular clouds (GMCs), such as those detected in CO(2–1) emission by ALMA, or lower surface density clouds that either fall below the ALMA detection limits of existing maps or genuinely have no molecular counterpart. We specifically used the homogenized sample for our analysis. Upon cross-matching the PAH clouds to ALMA CO clouds at a homogenized resolution of 90 pc in 27 galaxies, we find that 41 % of the PAH clouds are associated with a CO counterpart. We also show that the converted molecular cloud properties of the PAH clouds do not differ much when compared in different galactic environments. However, outside the central environment, the highest molecular mass surface density clouds are preferentially found in spiral arms. We further apply a lognormal fit to the mass spectra to an unprecedented extragalactic completeness limit of $2 \times 10^3 M_\odot$, and find that spiral arms contain the most massive clouds compared to other galactic environments. Our findings support the idea that spiral arm gravitational potentials foster the formation of high surface density clouds, and lower surface density clouds form in the interarm regions. The cloud Σ_{mol} values show a decline of a factor of ~ 1.5 –2 towards the outer $2-3 R_e$. However, the trend largely varies in individual galaxies, with flat, decreasing, and even no trend as a function of R_{gal} . Factors like large-scale processes, galaxy types, and morphologies might influence the observed trends. We note that combining homogenized molecular properties of individual galaxies leads to the loss of information about the physical processes that are driving deviations in trends of those properties across different galactic environments. We publish two catalogs online, one at the common resolution of 30 pc and another at the native resolution. We expect them to have broad utility for future PAH clouds, molecular clouds, and star formation studies.

Key words. ISM: molecules – Galaxies: structure – Galaxies: ISM – Galaxies: Molecular Clouds – Galaxies: dust

1. Introduction

Giant molecular clouds (GMCs) and the stars they produce are fundamental components in the formation and evolution of galaxies. The physical characteristics and development of GMCs are closely intertwined with the larger-scale processes that shape galaxies. The conditions within the interstellar medium (ISM) significantly influence how GMCs emerge and evolve, with clear correlations observed between galactic properties and those of the clouds themselves, including gas pressure, surface density, and volume density (e.g., Colombo et al. 2014; Sun et al. 2018; Chevance et al. 2020). Since star formation predominantly takes place within the cold, dense molecular phase of the ISM, characterizing GMCs is crucial for understanding the mechanisms that set those properties and ultimately for understanding the mechanisms that drive stellar birth, and by extension, galaxy evolution (Bigiel et al. 2008; Schruba et al. 2011).

Over the past few decades, radio/mm/infrared telescopes have advanced to achieve increasingly higher resolution in the Milky Way and nearby galaxies, allowing us to resolve molecular clouds. With the successful launch of the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), parsec-scale near/mid-infrared imaging is

now possible in nearby (e.g., distances < 20 Mpc) galaxies. The Physics at High Angular Resolution in Nearby Galaxies (PHANGS) survey (Leroy et al. 2021; Lee et al. 2023; Williams et al. 2024) has taken advantage of these advances in resolution to probe dust emission, specifically polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), in galaxies at unprecedented sub-GMC scales of $5 - 30$ pc.

Several techniques are available to uncover the structures and properties of molecular clouds (e.g., gas mass, surface densities, velocity dispersion, radius). The CO emission, particularly from low-J transitions like CO(1–0) and CO(2–1), is the most traditional tracer of molecular hydrogen, benefiting from extensive calibration such as metallicity, gas surface density, and others (e.g., Solomon et al. 1987; Fukui et al. 2001; Bolatto et al. 2008; Bolatto et al. 2013; Heyer et al. 2009; Fukui & Kawamura 2010; Sun et al. 2020a; Schinnerer & Leroy 2024). Cloud properties are often extracted from CO data using algorithms such as CPROPS (Rosolowsky & Leroy 2006; Rosolowsky et al. 2021), CLUMPFIND (Williams et al. 1994; Rosolowsky & Blitz 2005), and Spectral Clustering for Molecular Emission Segmentation (SCIMES; Colombo et al. 2015), enabling the identifica-

tion and characterization of GMCs across nearby galaxies, especially with high-resolution CO observations from the Atacama Large Millimeter Array (ALMA), specifically PHANGS-ALMA (e.g., Leroy et al. 2021; Rosolowsky et al. 2021; Sun et al. 2022). Other methods include characterizing the intensity field of CO at fixed resolution (e.g., Hughes et al. 2013; Leroy et al. 2016; Sun et al. 2022), which recovers similar information to object-finding decomposition approaches. Dust has also long been used to trace gas, starting from star count methods and extinction mapping (e.g., Savage et al. 1977; Bohlin et al. 1978; Savage & Mathis 1979), offering an independent avenue to infer gas column densities. Recent advances using high-resolution optical imaging, such as Hubble Space Telescope (HST) observations, have enabled the derivation of sub-GMC high-resolution dust extinction maps across nearby galaxies, assuming a constant dust-to-gas ratio (e.g., Faustino Vieira et al. 2023, 2024, 2025).

Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons have emerged as a promising gas tracer thanks to the Spitzer Space telescope (Houck et al. 2004) and the wide sky coverage provided by WISE (Wright et al. 2010). Studies using Spitzer have shown that, in nearby galaxies, PAH emission correlates with molecular gas on spatial scales ranging from several hundred parsecs to kiloparsecs (e.g., Regan et al. 2006; Cortzen et al. 2018; Gao et al. 2019; Chown et al. 2020; Gao et al. 2022). Fortunately, the recent deployment of JWST opens a promising path forward. Its high-resolution and high-sensitivity imaging of mid-infrared PAH emission, which shows a strong correlation with CO emission (e.g., Leroy et al. 2023b; Sandstrom et al. 2023; Chown et al. 2025), provides valuable insight into this topic. This offers the prospect to use the PAH emission to measure the structure of the cold ISM at high resolution and sensitivity (e.g., Leroy et al. 2023b; Sandstrom et al. 2023; Meidt et al. 2023; Thilker et al. 2023; Whitcomb et al. 2023; Chown et al. 2025). Beyond the nearby Universe, JWST has also shown that the PAH-CO correspondence remains strong at intermediate to high redshift galaxies (e.g., Shivaeei & Boogaard 2024).

Recent observations using JWST show that PAH emission can be decomposed into a first component tracing the molecular gas, where gas/dust column density variations dominate, and the second component tracing star formation, where interstellar radiation field intensity variations dominate (Leroy et al. 2023b). This result further offers new insights into the gas and dust structure at sub-GMC scales. Chown et al. (2025) expanded this study to all PHANGS-JWST galaxies and further showed an excellent correspondence between the different JWST MIRI filters, specifically the F770W, and CO emission. They further suggested that PAH emission maps could be effectively converted to CO maps to obtain a more sensitive version than the already existing ALMA maps. However, JWST observations have further highlighted how PAH emission behaves differently in different environments. For instance, in AGN environments, PAHs can be partially destroyed or their emission suppressed due to strong radiation fields and shocks, whereas in star-forming galaxies without AGN activity, they remain a robust tracer of molecular material (e.g., García-Bernete et al. 2022, 2024).

An important advantage of PAH emission is its ability to trace low-density regions where CO is faint or absent. Unlike CO, which requires sufficient shielding to avoid photodissociation (e.g., Bolatto et al. 2013; Saintonge & Catinella 2022), PAHs can emit in diffuse, UV-irradiated environments. This allows PAH emission to probe the full extent of molecular cloud complexes, including CO-dark molecular gas components (e.g., Leroy et al. 2023a; Sandstrom et al. 2023). It is important to note, however, that the F770W filter also traces emission from

hot dust continuum, stellar continuum, and weak ionic/molecular lines (e.g., Draine & Li 2007; Whitcomb et al. 2023).

Sun et al. (2022) (see also Sun et al. 2018, 2020a,b; Rosolowsky et al. 2021) analyzed the PHANGS-ALMA galaxy sample, examining molecular gas properties across different galactic environments at a fixed physical resolution of 60-150 pc. Their results suggest that kiloparsec-scale environmental conditions largely drive variations in cloud populations from galaxy to galaxy. They also find that cloud-scale surface densities, velocity dispersions, and turbulent pressures increase toward galactic centers, reaching exceptionally high values in the centers of barred galaxies, where the gas also appears to be less gravitationally bound, and are moderately elevated in spiral arms compared to interarm regions. However, the homogenized resolution for the full PHANGS-ALMA sample is 150 pc. Fortunately, with PHANGS-JWST, images resemble sharper, more sensitive versions of ALMA CO maps for the same galaxies. The resolution is also enhanced by a factor of five (homogenized resolution of 30 pc) for the F770W band. This means that fainter and smaller structures can now be investigated and might be associated with either molecular clouds or the atomic phase of the ISM (see Sandstrom et al. 2023; Leroy et al. 2023b).

Several other observations investigated such properties of clouds in the Milky Way (e.g., Roman-Duval et al. 2010; Eden et al. 2012; Duarte-Cabral et al. 2020) and nearby galaxies (e.g., Hirota et al. 2011; Rebolledo et al. 2012, 2015; Colombo et al. 2014; Usero et al. 2015; Rosolowsky et al. 2021). Some suggest that their star formation rates/efficiencies (e.g., Rebolledo et al. 2012, 2015) and mass distributions (e.g., Colombo et al. 2014) differ, for instance, due to their crossing through spiral arms (e.g., Duarte-Cabral & Dobbs 2017) and that the most massive clouds are mostly found in the spiral arms (e.g., Rebolledo et al. 2012; Faustino Vieira et al. 2024). This difference could be due to self gravity in the spiral arms, agglomeration of pre-existing molecular clouds (e.g., Field & Saslaw 1965; Taff & Savedoff 1972; Scoville & Hersch 1979; Casoli & Combes 1982; Dobbs 2008), shock compression driven by spiral structures (e.g., Meidt et al. 2013), or due to low shear effects (e.g., Elmegreen 2011) or other factors. Other authors have measured cloud mass spectra that are uniform and independent of the physical conditions in their surroundings (e.g., Eden et al. 2012; Meyer et al. 2013).

Simulations have also investigated GMCs and their evolution across different environments (e.g., Dobbs et al. 2006; Nimori et al. 2012; Fujimoto et al. 2014; Dobbs 2015; Duarte-Cabral & Dobbs 2016; Grand et al. 2017; Hopkins et al. 2018; Treß et al. 2021; Smith et al. 2020; Colman et al. 2024). Duarte-Cabral & Dobbs (2016, 2017) found that most clouds exhibit properties largely independent of their location within the galaxy. However, some tails of the distributions do, indicating that more extreme clouds favor specific environments. Also, Pettitt et al. (2020) investigated different spiral arm models and saw differences in the interarm/arm mass spectra. Furthermore, analytical and numerical approaches suggest that the GMC lifecycle varies with the galactic environment (e.g., Dobbs & Pringle 2013; Fujimoto et al. 2014; Dobbs et al. 2014; Jeffreson & Kruijsen 2018; Meidt et al. 2018).

In this paper, we identify PAH clouds in 66 homogenized 7.7 μm emission PHANGS-JWST Cycle 1 (Lee et al. 2023; Williams et al. 2024) and Cycle 2 (Chown et al. 2025) galaxy maps at a fixed resolution of 30 pc. We then use a linear conversion fit to convert the dust to CO emission maps using the prescription of Chown et al. (2025). This method provides insights into molecular clouds with higher resolution than current CO surveys and offers improved sensitivity for detecting

smaller and fainter structures in the ISM. We also analyze systematic environmental effects for a statistically significant sample of nearby galaxies, and present the molecular properties of PAH-to-CO converted structure down to an unprecedented extragalactic completeness limit of $\sim 2 \times 10^3$ M which is 2.4 dex better than previous ALMA-based CO approach (e.g., Rosolowsky et al. 2021).

The layout of the paper is as follows: Sect. 2 goes over the data used in the study, Sect. 3 briefly explains the cloud extraction algorithm, SCIMES, and its input parameters, Sect. 4 details the different cloud properties and how we derived them, Sect. 5 showcases the distribution of identified structures and their properties as a function of different galactic environments while highlighting the caveats of our approach, and finally Sect. 6 summarizes and concludes our findings.

2. Data and galaxy sample

We use a subset of 66 galaxies with high-resolution PHANGS-ALMA CO(2–1) and JWST imaging tracing the PAH emission (see Table B.1). The galaxies are star-forming and have specific star formation rates ($\text{SFR}/M_\star \gtrsim 10^{-11} \text{ yr}^{-1}$, stellar masses ($M_\star \gtrsim 10^{9.5} M_\odot$) and CO luminosities ($L_{\text{CO}} 6.60 < \log_{10}(L_{\text{CO}}[\text{K km s}^{-1}]) < 9.50$, have moderate inclination ($i \lesssim 70^\circ$), and are at distances ($D \lesssim 20$ Mpc (Leroy et al. 2021).

2.1. JWST mid-IR data

JWST MIRI filters provide high angular resolution and sensitivity imaging of dust emission maps, achieving sub-GMC scales in nearby galaxies. The full-width half maximum (FWHM) is 0.269", 0.328", 0.375", and 0.674" for the F770W, F1000W, F1130W, and F2100W bands, respectively. Generally, those wavelengths capture stochastic emission from dust grains, including PAHs. Strong PAH features can be traced using the 7.7 μm band (C–C stretching modes of PAHs) which are mainly due to ionized PAHs for a range of sizes, and 11.3 μm band (C–H out-of-plane bending modes of PAHs) due to mostly larger and neutral PAHs. The 10 μm band captures a mix of PAH and continuum emission, in addition to silicate features and prominent emission lines, while the 21 μm band traces only continuum emission (Draine & Li 2007; Spoon et al. 2006; Smith et al. 2007; Tielens 2008).

We use JWST MIRI and NIRCAM imaging of all 19 galaxies from the PHANGS-JWST Cycle 1 Treasury (GO 2107, PI: J. Lee; Lee et al. 2023) and 47 galaxies (available at the time of analysis, out of the full set of 51) from the PHANGS-JWST Cycle 2 Treasury (GO 3707, PI: A. Leroy; see Chown et al. 2025). Observations, data reduction, and processing using the different JWST-MIRI bands are represented in Lee et al. (2023), Williams et al. (2024), and Chown et al. (2025).

For the analysis presented in this paper, we use the F770W band to take advantage of the highest resolution MIRI band that captures PAH emission. The median physical resolution is ~ 20 pc for the full sample with a 16–84% range of 15–25 pc. Given that the Rayleigh-Jeans tail of the stellar distribution contributes to the F770W band, it needs to be subtracted from the total surface brightness to obtain the emission from PAHs alone. In our analysis, we used stellar-continuum-subtracted F770W images obtained by subtracting the F200W (Cycle 1) or F300M (Cycle 2) times a scaling factor from the F770W filter following Sutter et al. (2024). The F770W stellar continuum correction ($F770W_\star$) = $0.22 \times F300M$ for Cycle 2, or $0.12 \times F200W$ for

Cycle 1. Additionally, we leverage empirical scaling relations that relate CO emission to the continuum-subtracted F770W maps. The dust continuum contribution might have a significant contribution to the F770W band. Whitcomb et al. (2023) and Dale et al. (2025) applied a method based on Spitzer Space Telescope mid-infrared spectra of nearby star-forming galaxies coupled with synthetic F770W/F1000W/F1130W photometry (see Whitcomb et al. 2023 and Hands et al. in prep). They find that the continuum-free PAH emission is $\sim 83\%$. We further apply this method and find that across the Cycle 1 targets, the continuum-free PAH contribution is $\sim 81\%$. However, there are regions within the galaxies, particularly around HII regions and toward the centers, where the PAH contribution decreases further, consistent with the known suppression of PAHs in these environments. In the central regions, the contribution can reach values of roughly $\sim 20\%$ or lower on average (for more details, see Hands et al., in prep.).

To be able to inter-compare the sample of 66 galaxies at the same physical resolution, we smooth our data to a common physical resolution of ~ 30 pc. This corresponds to the MIRI F770W resolution for the furthest galaxy in our sample (NGC 3507). We use webbpsf¹-generated JWST point spread functions (PSFs). We then create a convolution kernel per galaxy per filter using jwst_kernels² to achieve the required physical resolution. Finally, following Williams et al. (2024), we convolve our data and error maps using our corresponding convolution kernel. For our analysis, we use this common resolution sample. We also provide a catalog constructed at the native angular resolution of each map.

2.2. Converting 7.7 micron to CO

The emission from PAHs shows a close link with CO emission in kpc and pc scales, revealing a strong correlation between both emissions over three orders of magnitude of intensity (Regan et al. 2004; Gao et al. 2019; Chown et al. 2020; Leroy et al. 2021, 2023a,b; Whitcomb et al. 2023; Chown et al. 2025). Following Chown et al. (2025), to first order, we expect

$$I_{\text{PAH}} \propto \text{DGR} \times q_{\text{PAH}} \times N_{\text{H}_2} \times U \quad (1)$$

$$\propto (\text{DGR} \times q_{\text{PAH}} \times X_{\text{CO}} \times U) I_{\text{CO}},$$

where I_{PAH} and I_{CO} are the observed intensities of PAH and CO emission in MJy sr^{−1} and K km s^{−1}, respectively. The dust-to-gas mass ratio is DGR, q_{PAH} is the PAH-to-dust mass fraction, U is the strength of the interstellar radiation field relative to that in the Solar neighborhood (q_{PAH} and U are defined in Draine & Li 2007), and X_{CO} is the CO-to-H₂ conversion factor.

Chown et al. (2025) also analyzed the resolved correlation between CO and the different PAH emission bands in 70 PHANGS galaxies, of which 66 are used here. They found the following relation

$$\log_{10} I_{\text{CO}(2-1)} = (0.88 \pm 0.06)(x - 1.44) + (1.36 \pm 0.06), \quad (2)$$

$$x \equiv \log_{10}(I_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}}) - \log_{10}(C_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}}),$$

$$I_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}} = I_{\text{F770W}} - I_{\text{F770W}_\star},$$

with scatter $\sigma = 0.43$ dex. I_{F770W} is the non-stellar continuum subtracted intensity and I_{F770W_\star} is the stellar continuum correction which comes from NIRCAM, following the relations presented in Section 2.1, and $C_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}}$ is the normalization of the

¹ <https://webbpsf.readthedocs.io/en/latest/>

² https://github.com/francbelf/jwst_kernels

best-fit CO(2_1) versus F770W_{PAH} power law for each galaxy (see Equation 4 in Chown et al. 2025). This normalization aims to remove the galaxy-to-galaxy scatter in the relationship. We relied on the $C_{\text{PAH}}^{\text{F770W}}$ values provided by Table 3 in Chown et al. (2025). We note that this PAH-to-CO fit underestimates the CO emission in some galaxies (see Chown et al. 2025), and the place where it most prominently breaks is in galaxy centers, which show an offset relation. Equation 2 also does not correct for dust continuum emission, which might also have more prominent contributions toward central regions. However, since we directly use the galaxy intensity maps that the equation was calibrated for, we do not particularly care if the emission is due to PAHs or small dust grains. Thus, we do not do any dust continuum corrections and acknowledge that toward the central regions, we are tracing emission of PAHs with a significant contribution from the dust continuum.

The emission from PAHs could also emerge from dust mixed with atomic gas (Sandstrom et al. 2023). Hence, the relation between CO and PAHs is only used in regions where the inclination-corrected $I_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}} \geq 1 \text{ MJy sr}^{-1}$ and where the molecular mass surface density ($\Sigma_{\text{mol}} \gtrsim 4 \text{ M pc}^{-2}$) (see Leroy et al. 2023a; Chown et al. 2025, for further explanation).

Dust also exists in regions where CO is “dark”, typically the outer layers of molecular clouds where CO is photodissociated by ultraviolet radiation into ionized carbon (C ii) (e.g., Wolfire et al. 2010; Glover & Smith 2016). These regions still contain H₂, which survives due to effective self-shielding and the presence of dust (van Dishoeck & Black 1988). Dust is also present in low-metallicity environments, where the reduced dust-to-gas ratio and lower carbon abundance limit the formation and survival of CO, causing it to trace only a small fraction of the total H₂ mass (Leroy et al. 2011; Bolatto et al. 2008; Smith et al. 2014). Since the conversion from PAH to CO is applied to regions regardless of whether CO exists, the converted intensity might also trace CO-dark regions.

2.3. Environmental masks

A key part of this work involves studying the properties of the (giant) molecular clouds with respect to the galactic environment. To categorize the galactic environment of each GMC, we employed the PHANGS environmental masks developed by Querejeta et al. (2021). These masks were created using the 3.6 μm Spitzer Survey of Stellar Structures in Galaxies (S⁴G; Sheth et al. 2010) along with other Near Infrared (NIR) observations. This approach produced detailed morphological masks of sub-galactic environments for galaxies within the PHANGS survey. Notably, these masks are purely morphological and do not include kinematic information, which might lead to alternative definitions of the environments.

For our study, we employ those simple masks to categorize the galactic environments into the following regions: center, which denotes the small bulge or nucleus; bar, encompassing the bar feature along with its ends (and any overlap with spiral arms); spiral arm, extending from the interbar region to the full

extent of the spiral structure; interarm, covering the space between the bar and the spiral arms as well as in-between spiral arms, and the outer disc in galaxies lacking distinct spiral features or masks; and disc, which includes the region outside the bar.

3. SCIMES cloud extraction

To identify GMCs, we adopted a machine learning algorithm called SCIMES (Colombo et al. 2015, hereafter C15, see also Colombo et al. 2019). This method considers the dendrogram of the emission in the framework of graph theory and utilizes spectral clustering to find regions with similar emission properties. Various other segmentation methods exist, from simple brightness thresholding (Sanders & Mirabel 1985; Solomon et al. 1987; Dame et al. 2001) to more sophisticated approaches that identify characteristic geometries (GAUSSCLUMPS, Stutzki & Giesten 1990), or associate neighboring voxels by their values (Clumpfind and CPROPS, Williams et al. 1994; Rosolowsky & Leroy 2006; Rosolowsky et al. 2021).

As described in C15, SCIMES classifies molecular clouds by first identifying dendrogram structures and then constructing a similarity (or affinity) matrix based on selected properties, which in this study are M_{mol} and radius. Next, SCIMES computes the spectral embedding, applies the k -means algorithm, and determines the optimal clustering configuration for each galaxy. The parameters used to build the dendrograms using the $I_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}}$ maps of 66 galaxies and run SCIMES on this galaxy sample are described below.

3.1. Dendrogram structures

Dendrograms represent hierarchical structures within intensity maps, where emission regions are nested at different intensity levels. In this context, they provide a tree-like representation of cloud substructures based on spatial (position-position) information in two-dimensional data or spatial and spectral (position-position-velocity) information in three-dimensional data cubes. They are tree-like structures composed of leaves, branches, and trunks. Following the definition of Houllahan & Scalo (1992), the leaves are the local maxima in the data; they are on top of the dendrogram and have no sub-structure. On the other hand, the branches can contain multiple sub-structures and split into other branches and leaves. A third structure, the trunk, is the largest structure with no parent structure, and represents the base of the dendrogram where all the branches and leaves eventually merge (i.e., the lowest contour level).

The local maxima in this publication refer to the position-position (PP) maxima in $I_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}}$ maps at a homogenized resolution of 30 pc. The structures that are due to noise are suppressed by ensuring that only emission above a given threshold (min_value, typically taken to be a multiple of the noise rms) is considered in constructing the dendrogram, and that local maxima are eliminated if they cover an area lower than a certain number of pixels (min_npix, usually limited by the spatial resolution), or if its local maximum value is lower than a certain flux difference (min_delta, also refers to the step size for the intensity levels, usually set as a multiple of the noise) above the level at which that maximum merges with another local maximum. SCIMES uses the dendrogram implementations from Rosolowsky et al. (2008). The dendrogram and catalog of the structures within SCIMES are constructed using the Python package Astrodendro⁴. It requires four parameters as input: data, which is the data cube or in our case the $I_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}}$ map; min_value

, in our case this is set to be the three times the worst sensitivity level of the data, σ_{rms} , to make sure that our structures are significant; min_delta, also set to be three times the sensi-

³ <https://github.com/Astroua/SCIMES>

⁴ <https://dendrograms.readthedocs.io/en/stable/>

tivity level; `min_npix`, set to be the number of pixels per beam ($\Omega_{\text{beam}}/\Omega_{\text{pix}}$, where Ω_{beam} and Ω_{pix} are the solid angles of the resolution element and the pixel, respectively). We use a common σ_{rms} input for all 66 galaxies, which refers to the maximum σ_{rms} value of our sample ($3\sigma_{\text{rms}} \sim 0.19 \text{ MJy sr}^{-1} \sim 0.21 \text{ K km s}^{-1}$ as per Eq. 2).

3.2. SCIMES

The SCIMES algorithm deploys spectral embedding and clustering techniques to enhance the identification of molecular clouds within a dendrogram. This approach leverages the properties of the graph Laplacian to map data into a space where clustering properties are more pronounced, followed by clustering in this transformed space using the k -means algorithm.

We used the `SpectralCloudstering` class in SCIMES, which deals with embedding, clustering, and choosing the best clustering configuration. This class takes different input parameters, some crucial ones are `dendrogram`, which is the dendrogram structure of the data generated by `AstroDendro`; `catalog`, the catalog that contains property (flux, radius, etc.) information of each structure created by the dendrogram; `header`, corresponding to the header of the data FITS file; `criteria`, that specifies which affinity matrix criteria to be used and can use multiple criteria (e.g., flux, radius, volume, etc.); `user_scalpars`, which is an optional scaling parameter that can be used to Gaussian smooth the affinity matrix. It should be noted that each affinity criterion has an associated scaling parameter that can be set. We also set `save_all = True`, which retains discarded structures, including both isolated leaves and intra-clustered leaves that are typically removed as noise. This ensures that small PAH cloud structures, which may still hold physical significance, are preserved in the final catalog. Additionally, this setting retains unassigned branches within clusters, allowing a more complete representation of the cloud hierarchy.

For our study, we use the molecular mass (see Sect. 4.2) and radius of the structures as the clustering affinity criteria, and the `pp_catalog` function from `AstroDendro` to create the catalog. We also manually set the scaling parameters to 100 pc for the radius (roughly the sizes of large GMCs; e.g., Rosolowsky et al. 2021; Demachi et al. 2024), and consistent with Faustino Vieira et al. (2025). We also set the molecular mass scaling parameter to $5 \times 10^6 \text{ M}_{\odot}$ (within the upper limit of a GMC; e.g., Demachi et al. 2024). Manually setting the scaling parameters is crucial in spectral clustering, as this scaling parameter essentially determines the weighting of radius and mass when computing similarities between clouds, and removes structures that show affinity connections on scales larger than typical GMC scales (see Appendix D.6 for details on our choice of scaling parameters).

4. Molecular cloud properties

In this section, we present the different methods used to calculate the sizes and fluxes of the clouds identified by SCIMES. We directly infer the radius based on the exact footprint area of the cloud (e.g., Williams et al. 1994; Heyer et al. 2001), and following Rosolowsky & Leroy (2006) (hereafter R06), we also use moment measurements to compare our findings to results from CO-based GMC catalogs for the same PHANGS galaxies (Hughes et al. in prep).

4.1. Directly measured properties

One direct way of finding the radius of a structure is by directly inferring it from the area (e.g., Williams et al. 1994; Heyer et al. 2001). Consider a cloud with N pixels; then the area of the cloud is simply

$$A_{\text{cloud}} = \sum_i A_{\text{pix}}, \quad (3)$$

where A_{pix} represents the pixel area. Subsequently, the deconvolved equivalent radius of the cloud can be found as

$$R_{\text{eq}} = \frac{\sqrt{A_{\text{cloud}} - A_{\text{beam}}}}{\pi}, \quad (4)$$

where $A_{\text{beam}}[\text{pc}^2] = 1.18^2 \sigma_{\text{b,maj}}[\text{deg}] \sigma_{\text{b,min}}[\text{deg}] \left(\frac{\pi \times D[\text{pc}]}{180}\right)^2$ is the beam area of the observation, and $\sigma_{\text{b,maj}}$ and $\sigma_{\text{b,min}}$ are the beam major and minor axes expressed in degrees (see Appendix D.7 for more information).

Following R06, the radius of the cloud can also be assessed by intensity-weighted moment-based measurements

$$R = \frac{\eta \sigma_r}{\sqrt{\sigma_{\text{maj}} \sigma_{\text{min}}}}, \quad (5)$$

where η depends on the light distribution within the cloud (see R06). In this paper, we use a value of $\eta = \frac{1}{2 \ln 2} = 1.18$ corresponding to the half-width at half-maximum of a Gaussian distribution (e.g., Rosolowsky et al. 2021). The size of the cloud is σ_r , and σ_{maj} and σ_{min} are the second spatial moments (see R06 for further information).

We converted the $L_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}}$ to $I_{\text{CO}(2-1)}$ (see Sect. 2.2) and obtained the converted luminosity in CO of a cloud, which can then be defined as

$$L_{\text{CO}} = \sum_i A_{\text{pix}} F_i. \quad (6)$$

F_i represents here the flux in units of K km s^{-1} of an element in the cloud obtained from Eq. 2, and it is summed over all cloud pixels. A_{pix} is the projected physical area of the pixel in pc^2 .

4.2. Derived physical properties

In this section, we present the physical properties that we derived from either the moments method or the direct estimation of the radius from the beam-deconvolved area of the cloud. The radii of the clouds are converted from arcsec to parsec using D measurements from Table 3 in Leroy et al. (2021).

After converting $L_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}}$ to $I_{\text{CO}(2-1)}$ following Eq. 2, the molecular mass of CO can be derived from the luminosity (Eq. 6) as

$$M_{\text{mol}} [\text{M}_{\odot}] = \alpha_{\text{CO}} [\text{M}_{\odot} (\text{K km s}^{-1} \text{ pc}^2)^{-1}] \times L_{\text{CO}} [\text{K km s}^{-1} \text{ pc}^2], \quad (7)$$

where α_{CO} (and previously defined X_{CO}) refer to the CO-to- H_2 conversion factor (see Bolatto et al. 2013 for detailed definition).

For each identified cloud, we take a median α_{CO} value within its boundary, and then multiply it by the L_{CO} of the cloud to obtain M_{mol} .

In the case of PHANGS-ALMA, the CO transition observed is CO(2 \rightarrow 1), thus, we refer to the conversion factor as $\alpha_{\text{CO}(2\rightarrow 1)}$. We also rely on an updated version of the PHANGS-ALMA $\alpha_{\text{CO}(2\rightarrow 1)}$ estimates presented by Sun et al. (in prep) (see also Sun et al. 2022, 2023), based on the recommended α_{CO} from Schinnerer & Leroy (2024), which incorporates corrections for excitation, CO-dark gas, and emissivity variations. Following Schinnerer & Leroy (2024), we define $\alpha_{\text{CO}(2\rightarrow 1)}$ as:

$$\alpha_{\text{CO}(2\rightarrow 1)} \approx 4.35 \times f(Z) \times g(\Sigma_\star) \times R_{21}(\Sigma_{\text{SFR}})^{-1}, \quad (8)$$

$$R_{21}(\Sigma_{\text{SFR}}) = 0.65(\Sigma_{\text{SFR}}/0.018)^{0.125},$$

where $f(Z) = (Z/Z_{\text{solar}})^{-1.5}$ is the CO-dark factor that depends on the metallicity (Z) for $0.2 < Z/Z_{\text{solar}} < 2$ (see Schinnerer & Leroy 2024 for further information), where Z_{solar} is the solar metallicity ($12 + \log(\text{O}/\text{H}) = 8.69$ as per Asplund et al. 2009). This prescription complements observations of dust and C ii, where a higher α_{CO} is needed in regions of low-mass and low-metallicity (e.g., Leroy et al. 2011; Jameson et al. 2016). It is also an accompaniment to simulations which reveal a strong dependence of α_{CO} on metallicity, with significantly suppressed CO emission at low metallicity and low extinction (e.g., Glover & Low 2011; Hu et al. 2022). However, $f(Z)$ does not take into consideration additional factors like the dust-to-metals ratio, interstellar radiation field, cosmic ray ionization rate, and the structure of the clouds themselves, which all play an important role, and further add to the uncertainty of the M_{mol} estimation. The starburst emissivity factor is $g(\Sigma_\star) = \max(\Sigma_\star/100, 1)^{-0.25}$, where Σ_\star is the stellar mass surface density in units of $M_\odot \text{pc}^{-2}$. Additionally, $R_{21}(\Sigma_{\text{SFR}})$ is the line ratio between CO(2 \rightarrow 1) and CO(1 \rightarrow 0), and Σ_{SFR} is the star formation rate surface density (see Leroy et al. 2022 and Schinnerer & Leroy 2024 for more information). The metallicity is approximated as a function of galactocentric radius based on the global mass-metallicity relation of Sánchez et al. (2019), adopting the PP04 O3N2 calibration (Pettini & Pagel 2004) and extrapolating the predictions to the whole PHANGS-ALMA footprint using a metallicity gradient as per Sánchez et al. (2014) (see Sun et al. in prep for more information).

We then calculate the molecular mass surface density as follows

$$\Sigma_{\text{mol}} [M_\odot \text{pc}^{-2}] = \frac{M_{\text{mol}}}{\pi R^2}, \quad (9)$$

$$\Sigma_{\text{mol,R}} [M_\odot \text{pc}^{-2}] = \frac{M_{\text{mol}}^{\text{eq}}}{2\pi R^2}. \quad (10)$$

The model in Eq. 9 follows that the molecular mass surface density (Σ_{mol}) is directly inferred from the area of the cloud. Meanwhile, the model in Eq. 10 follows the two-dimensional Gaussian cloud model in which half the mass is contained inside the FWHM. We used the first model throughout the paper and the second model only to compare PAH and CO clouds in Sect. 5.1.

4.3. Error estimation

We applied morphological alterations to the shapes of individual clouds to estimate the errors in their properties, given that many of their properties depend on the exact cloud footprint, and thus

the number of pixels assigned in the cloud segmentation process. The SCIMES-defined structures exhibit only slight variations depending on the input parameters of the dendrograms, except for min_value, where more variations are observed (Colombo et al. 2015). Varying the scaling parameters by a small fraction ($\sim 20\%$) also leads to slight variations in the properties of the clouds. Therefore, to quantify the potential uncertainties in the cloud properties due to the choice of assignment mask, we used the binary_erosion and binary_dilation functions of the scipy.ndimage⁵ Python package. We applied a dilation and erosion with one-third the number of pixels per beam (~ 10 pc) and calculated the cloud properties of both as upper and lower limits, respectively.

Following R06, we also estimate the errors for the properties of the clouds by bootstrapping. This involves generating several trial clouds from the original data by randomly sampling the data points within the cloud, with some points being repeated. A cloud in this case is considered to be a collection of data $\{x_i, y_i, T_i\}$, for $i = 1, \dots, N$, where N is the number of points in the cloud. We measured the properties of each trial cloud and estimated the uncertainty as the 84th–50th and 50th–16th percentiles of the distributions. This bootstrapping considers the errors from D , D_{PAH} , and the fit error (including the scatter) in Eq. 2.

To assess the bias in the cloud M_{mol} according to α_{CO} , we use five different α_{CO} prescriptions. The first prescription is represented in Eq. 8, and it is our preferred prescription used in the analysis. The second one is a constant Galactic $\alpha_{\text{CO}(2\rightarrow 1)} = \frac{4.35}{0.65} = 6.69 M_\odot \text{pc}^{-2} (\text{K km s}^{-1})^{-1}$, where $R_{21} = 0.65$ is based on Leroy et al. (2013) and den Brok et al. (2020), measured at kpc scales, and $\alpha_{\text{CO}(1\rightarrow 0)} = 4.35 M_\odot \text{pc}^{-2} (\text{K km s}^{-1})^{-1}$ is the standard Galactic value at solar metallicity (i.e., Bolatto et al. 2013). The third description is according to a varying metallicity and gas surface density α_{CO} based on Eq. 31 in Bolatto et al. (2013). The fourth one also varies according to Eq. 2 in Teng et al. (2024), which relies on the intensity-weighted mean molecular gas velocity dispersion measured at 150 pc scale. The last prescription depends only on the metallicity (see Sun et al. 2020a). The exact creation of each α_{CO} map is further described in Sun et al. (in prep).

We calculate luminosity-weighted averages of both the cloud properties and their uncertainties within the FOV of all galaxies. This method is motivated by Leroy et al. (2016) (see also Sun et al. 2022), where they calculated the intensity-weighted average for clouds within an aperture encompassing several GMCs. Our bootstrapping technique yields a luminosity-weighted uncertainty average of the cloud mass measurement of $\sim 20\%$ and that of the radius measurement is $\sim 7\%$. However, erosion and dilation yield a luminosity-weighted uncertainty average of $\sim 54\%$ and $\sim 58\%$ for the mass and radius measurements, respectively. To assess the α_{CO} bias of our prescription (see Eq. 8), we compare the luminosity-weighted Σ_{mol} average value using our adopted α_{CO} with the other prescriptions. In spiral arms, interarms, and discs, the Σ_{mol} variation due to adopting another α_{CO} prescription is on average $\sim 23\%$. Meanwhile, in bars, the variation is $\sim 49\%$, and in centers $\sim 125\%$. This highlights the uncertainty of the measurements toward the central regions of the galaxy. For the final error on the cloud properties, we apply Gaussian error propagation on the bootstrapping and morphological alteration methods, and provide the M_{mol} calculated using the different α_{CO} prescriptions in our cloud catalog.

⁵ <https://docs.scipy.org/doc/scipy/reference/ndimage.html>

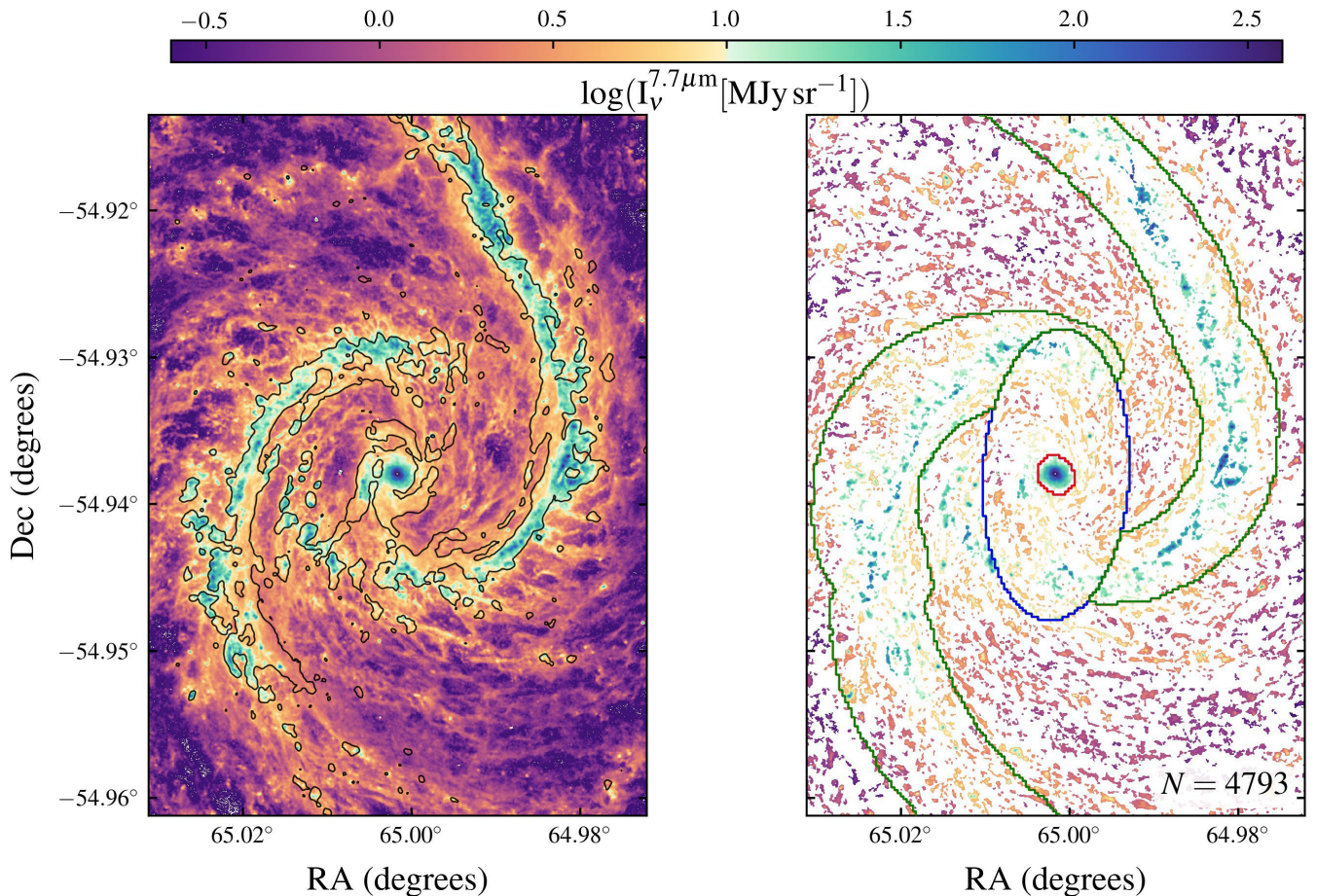


Fig. 1. A zoomed-in view of NGC1566, one of the 66 galaxies. *Left:* continuum-subtracted intensity image of the galaxy in the F770W MIRI band. The 2σ CO intensity contours from PHANGS-ALMA are represented in black. *Right:* The PAH cloud structures identified by SCIMES are color-coded by their F770W intensities. The green, blue, and red contours indicate the spiral arm, bar, and central region masks, respectively. The interarm region, in this case, consists of the remaining clouds that are not enclosed by the contours. The number of PAH clouds identified in this galaxy is represented in the bottom right. The color bar on top of the image shows the $7.7\mu\text{m}$ intensity range of the identified clouds.

4.4. Cloud population

Figure 1 shows an example of the PAH clouds extracted with SCIMES for one of our galaxies (NGC 1566). In this figure, we showcase this cloud segmentation at 30 pc resolution to show the performance of SCIMES in recognizing structures. We further provide both a common-resolution (30 pc) and sensitivity (0.19 MJy sr^{-1}) cloud catalog, and a native resolution and sensitivity catalog.

We selected 77,884 clouds for analysis that meet our selection criteria. Initially, a total of 108,466 clouds were identified across the 66 galaxies, and all of them are included in the final cloud catalog (see information about native resolution in Appendix C). However, since we do not have velocity information, clouds with different velocities might overlap if they are along the same line of sight. For that, we used assignment cubes of GMCs identified in CO(2–1) from the PHANGS-ALMA survey using CPROPS (Rosolowsky et al. 2021; Hughes et al. in prep) to check, flag, and exclude overlapping $7.7\mu\text{m}$ -identified clouds in velocity space from our analysis. Also, we flagged and excluded clouds on the edge of the maps ($f_{\text{edge}} = 0$ to exclude in the final catalog). To ensure that most of the chosen PAH clouds are tracing the molecular phase, we only included in our analysis clouds that have an average $I_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}} > 1 \text{ MJy sr}^{-1}$ (twice the threshold suggested by Chown et al. 2025 since the 0.5 MJy sr^{-1}

threshold still includes a significant amount of $\Sigma_{\text{mol}} < 4 \text{ M}_{\odot} \text{ pc}^{-2}$ clouds) or $\Sigma_{\text{mol}} > 4 \text{ M}_{\odot} \text{ pc}^{-2}$. We set a flag, $f_{\text{mol}} = 1$, to include the latter from the final catalog.

We projected the native-resolution CPROPS GMC assignment cubes onto the same grid space as the SCIMES assignment maps to exclude overlapping clouds in velocity space. Then, after applying a 2D projection of the clouds, we checked how many CO overlapping cloud pixels exist in a specific SCIMES-identified cloud. Finally, we flagged clouds that have more than 30% contribution from multiple CO clouds. In the final catalog, we include f_{overlap} as a binary flag, where a value of one corresponds to overlapping structure, and zero to non-overlapping ones. We also include overlap_ratio to check the ratio of overlap (e.g., a value of 0.3 corresponds to 30% overlap). Once we match those clouds with our clouds, we find that $\sim 12\%$ of the full cloud sample comprises overlapping clouds. This poses a challenge in central regions as multiple velocity elements and a high-velocity dispersion exist in those regions (Rosolowsky et al. 2021); we report that $\sim 65\%$ of clouds in the central regions, $\sim 24\%$ bar clouds, $\sim 13\%$ spiral arm clouds, $\sim 5\%$ interarm clouds, and $\sim 12\%$ disc clouds contain overlapping counterparts that are flagged out in the analysis.

The summary of the flagging is represented in Table 1. Also, galaxy centers have well-connected leaf structures and high branch weights in the dendrograms (i.e., extremely bright). As

Table 1. The number of clouds excluded from our analysis using each flagging method.

N_{edge}	N_{mol}	N_{overlap}	N_{beam}	N_{center}	N_{flag}	N_{tot}
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
3633	10 237	12 844	6641	1303	30 278	77 884

Notes. (1) Number of clouds overlapping the edge of our field of view. (2) Number of clouds with mean $P_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}} < 1 \text{ MJy sr}^{-1}$ and $\Sigma_{\text{mol}} < 4 \text{ M}_{\odot} \text{ pc}^{-2}$. (3) Number of overlapping clouds in velocity space. (4) Number of clouds with sizes comparable to the beam size. (5) Number of clouds in galaxy centers. (6) Total number of flagged clouds. (7) Final number of clouds used in the analysis.

mentioned before, those structures are large and massive, and the central regions mainly comprise overlapping clouds in velocity. Therefore, we flag out all central clouds (1303 clouds) as explained in this section, but show them in Fig. 3 to emphasize the bias of including them.

In Table B.1, we show that the full cloud sample covers a median of $40^{+8}_{-11}\%$, and the filtered subsample covers a median of $26^{+10}_{-11}\%$ of the emission from the I_{F770W} maps. This highlights that most of the flagged clouds are high Σ_{mol} clouds ($> 100 \text{ M}_{\odot} \text{ pc}^{-2}$) and poses a bias in our analysis towards lower Σ_{mol} clouds.

5. Results and discussion

In this section, we investigate how well PAH-identified clouds using the F770W JWST band (see Appendix D.8 for a comparison between cloud properties extracted using the F770W and F1130W bands) could resemble CO-identified GMCs. We further rely on the common-resolution data to compare the molecular cloud (MC) properties in different galactic environments according to the Querejeta et al. (2021) environmental masks. This was previously done on the PHANGS-ALMA sample (e.g., Rosolowsky et al. 2021; Sun et al. 2022). We then present the cloud mass-radius scaling relation and mass spectrum per environment. Finally, we discuss how the cloud properties vary with respect to galactocentric radius and highlight the caveats.

5.1. $P_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}}$ and CO cloud property comparison

We compare the properties of the PAH clouds identified by SCIMES at 30 pc resolution to cross-matched CO clouds identified by CPROPS at 90 pc resolution in 27 PHANGS galaxies. The galaxies in CO have a common sensitivity of 0.15 K (Rosolowsky et al. 2021, Hughes et al. in prep). We note that CO clouds were identified using position-position-velocity (PPV) data. We find that 41 % of the PAH clouds in the 27 galaxies could be associated with CO counterparts in the same FOV as JWST. We note that the completeness limit of PHANGS-ALMA is $4.7 \times 10^5 \text{ M}_{\odot}$, which is 2.4 dex higher than our lowest M_{mol} clouds.

For comparison, we use M_{mol} measurements from the GMC catalog provided by Hughes et al. (in prep) and based on the Schinnerer & Leroy (2024) α_{CO} prescription (see Equation 8).

⁶ The upper limit is the difference between the 84th and 50th percentiles, and the lower limit is between the 50th and 16th percentiles of the fraction of flux within the clouds in the 66 galaxies.

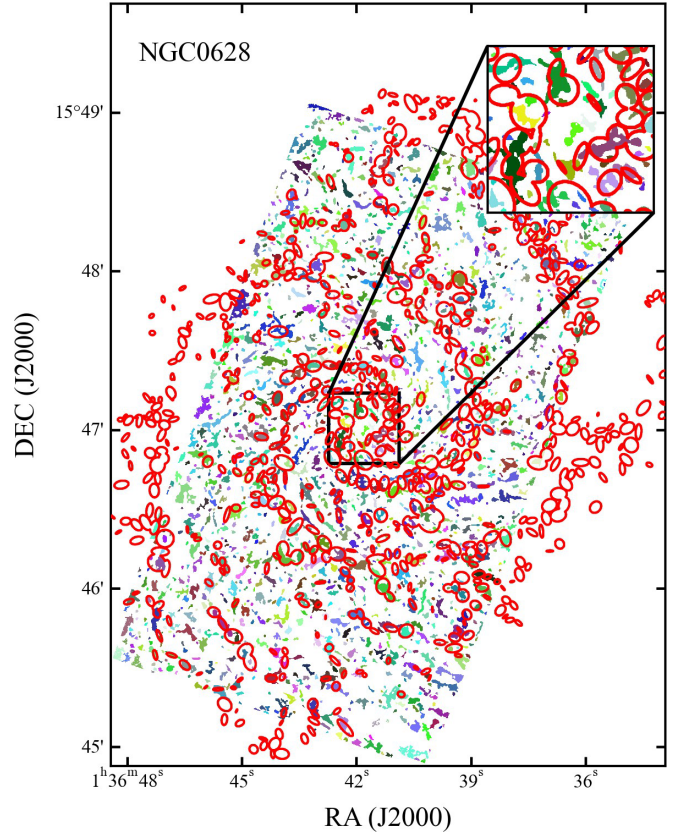


Fig. 2. The GMCs in NGC0628. CO-identified GMCs using CPROPS are in red ellipses (Hughes et al. in prep), and the $7.7\mu\text{m}$ identified PAH clouds using SCIMES are shown in the background with different colors. A zoomed-in view of the central region is shown in the upper right region of the image, focusing on the structures identified by both PAH and CO. This image highlights both the resolution advantage of PAH clouds and better sensitivity compared to CO, allowing for the detection of fainter and smaller clouds where CO is not detected.

We also use second-moment measurements for the radii (as described in Sect. 4.1) for both PAH and CO clouds to maintain consistency.

The median M_{mol} is $8.3(\pm 0.2) \times 10^4 \text{ M}_{\odot}$ in the PAH-cloud sample; this value is one dex lower than the completeness limit of PHANGS CO-identified GMCs (Rosolowsky et al. 2021). Also, the median cloud radius is 34.7 pc. This highlights the better sensitivity and physical resolution of JWST that allows the detection of fainter and smaller clouds than CO-identified GMCs as seen in Fig. 2 and 3. However, this does not test how well PAH clouds recover CO-traced clouds. Instead, we use $\Sigma_{\text{mol,R}}$ (see Eq. 10) to compare the two cloud samples, reducing the effect of the different resolutions between the studies. We therefore compare the $\Sigma_{\text{mol,R}}$ distributions of the matched CO and PAH clouds represented in Fig. 3. The median $\Sigma_{\text{mol,R}}$ of the PAH clouds is $28.7 \text{ M}_{\odot} \text{ pc}^{-2}$, which is the same as that of the CO cloud sample. Also, no differences are observed in the $\Sigma_{\text{mol,R}}$ distributions of both matched PAH and CO clouds in the different environments, except in the central regions. There, we notice a decrease of 0.3 dex in PAH-cloud $\Sigma_{\text{mol,R}}$, which introduces a caveat in our cloud identification in the central regions. This is due to the removal of overlapping clouds in velocity space from our analysis, and because the PAH-to-CO relationship most prominently breaks in galaxy centers (see Chown et al. 2025).

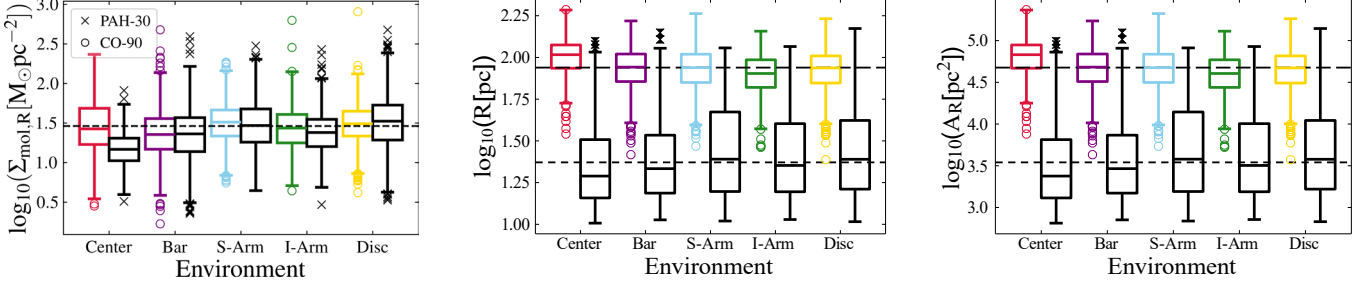


Fig. 3. Box plots with quantiles and outliers comparing the $\Sigma_{\text{mol},R}$ (left), cloud radius (middle), and cloud area (A_R ; right) distributions of cross-matched PAH at 30 pc physical resolution and CO clouds at 90 pc in a subsample of 27 galaxies. The colored boxes represent the PAH cloud property distributions without overlapping clouds. The black boxes represent the property distributions of the cross-matched CO clouds. The dashed and dotted horizontal lines represent the median property of the full sample of CO clouds and PAH clouds, respectively.

Table 2. Summary of PAH cloud properties in various galactic environments. Each property is shown with its median, mean, and luminosity-weighted mean values. Medians with the 84th - 50th percentile and 50th - 16th percentile displayed in superscript and subscript, respectively.

Property	Statistic	Global	Bar	Spiral Arm	Interarm	Disc
N_{tot}	-	77 884	7298	14 902	27 120	28 564
N_{tot}/A [kpc^{-2}]	-	8.3	8.6	13.4	7.4	7.6
M_{mol} [$10^4 M_{\odot}$]	Median	$6.6^{+24.6}_{-4.6}$	$4.6^{+16.2}_{-3.2}$	$7.1^{+30.7}_{-4.8}$	$5.9^{+21.2}_{-6.7}$	$7.7^{+27.0}_{-5.6}$
	Mean	20.8	14.2	25.9	17.6	22.8
	Weighted	137.6	75.7	196.9	111.7	131.8
R_{eq} [pc]	Median	$37.4^{+46.3}_{-20.0}$	$34.9^{+41.8}_{-18.4}$	$34.7^{+44.2}_{-18.6}$	$38.2^{+47.0}_{-20.2}$	$38.9^{+47.5}_{-21.1}$
	Mean	48.3	45.1	45.5	49.4	49.69
	Weighted	92.2	85.2	92.7	95.2	91.2
Σ_{mol} [$M_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$]	Median	$15.3^{+28.7}_{-8.7}$	$12.7^{+21.5}_{-7.5}$	$21.3^{+38.7}_{-12.8}$	$13.0^{+20.8}_{-6.7}$	$16.3^{+32.0}_{-9.6}$
	Mean	30.0	23.3	39.3	24.2	32.4
	Weighted	48.4	33.0	62.0	40.3	49.1

Notes. Here, N_{tot}/A refers to the total number of clouds within an environment divided by the total galaxy-by-galaxy summed area of a specific environment.

5.2. Masses, radii, and surface densities

The properties of the clouds, such as R_{eq} , M_{mol} and Σ_{mol} analyzed in this paper are presented in Table 2. We highlight that various methods exist for calculating the properties, as outlined in Sect. 4, and these methods can produce differing results, which may impact comparisons. Therefore, caution should be taken when calculating and comparing properties with other cloud catalogs. A summary of the cloud properties listed in our catalogs can be found in Table C.1.

The lowest and highest cloud Σ_{mol} medians are 5.8 and 49 $M_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$ corresponding to NGC 4941 and NGC 4781, respectively. This shows that the sensitivity of the $I_{\text{F770W}}^{\text{PAH}}$ images allows us to locate faint structures ($< 10 M_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$; see also Sandstrom et al. 2023; Leroy et al. 2023b; Chown et al. 2025) that could be associated with atomic or molecular clouds and are not detected by ALMA observations (e.g., Rosolowsky et al. 2021).

We speculate that those structures could be associated with faint clouds that CO does not detect. Notably, 51 % of those clouds are located in the disc, and the rest are equally spread in the other galactic environments.

To investigate whether clouds in spiral galaxies have distinctive properties, we split our sample into *spiral* and *disc* galaxies (i.e., with and without strong spiral arms present, respectively) according to the environmental classification of Querejeta et al. (2021). We associate 30,362 clouds with 40 *disc* galaxies and 47,522 clouds with 26 *spiral* galaxies. As seen in Table 2, clouds in the spiral arm have the highest Σ_{mol} compared to other environments, followed by disc clouds, and the least dense clouds are in the interarm and bar regions (see also Fig. 4). While the PAH cloud Σ_{mol} values in bars appear similar to those of CO clouds (e.g., Fig. 3), CO emission might be systematically underestimated in bar ends across the full PHANGS-JWST sample.

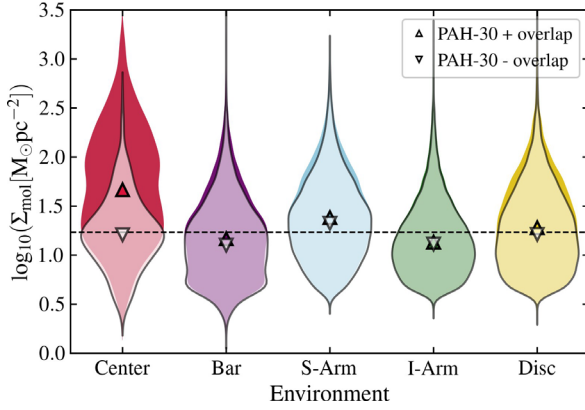


Fig. 4. Violin plots showing the distribution and medians of Σ_{mol} in each galactic environment for the full sample of PAH clouds (colored) and the 77,844 clouds without overlap (transparent) in the 66 galaxies. The dashed line represents the median Σ_{mol} for the full PAH cloud sample.

When we look at the Σ_{mol} probability distribution function (PDF) of the interarm clouds in Fig. 5 and 6, we see fewer clouds with densities $> 10 M_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$ compared to spiral-arm clouds. This indicates that spiral arms favor denser clouds, which agrees with the picture proposed by Koda et al. (2009), where the potential well of the spiral arm assists in the formation of massive, dense structures. The contrast in surface densities between spiral arms and interarm is seen in the PHANGS-ALMA galaxies (e.g., Sun et al. 2020b, 2022; Meidt et al. 2021; Querejeta, Miguel et al. 2024). This picture is also backed by other observations (Ragan et al. 2014) and simulations (Duarte-Cabral & Dobbs 2016, 2017; Treß et al. 2021), where they report an abundance of long filamentary objects in the inter-arms, and massive clouds in the spiral arms (Dobbs et al. 2011; Colombo et al. 2014).

Figures 5 and 6 reveal differences in the molecular gas distribution across galactic environments. In spiral galaxies, the number density of PAH clouds with $\Sigma_{\text{mol}} < 10 M_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$ is similar in spiral arm and interarm regions, and 1.2 times lower than in spiral arm compared to bar regions. In disc galaxies, cloud number densities in the disc are also 1.4 times lower than those in the bar for the same Σ_{mol} threshold. For clouds with $\Sigma_{\text{mol}} > 10 M_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$, spiral arms show 1.6 times higher number densities than bar regions, and 2.3 times higher than interarm regions. In this higher Σ_{mol} regime, the disc exhibits 2.1 times higher cloud number densities than bar regions. Overall, spiral arm clouds exhibit the highest number density across all Σ_{mol} values when compared to clouds in other environments (0.2 dex higher; see Table 2), and the other environments have similar cloud number densities. Additionally, disc galaxies are, on average, ~ 0.5 dex less massive than spiral galaxies. Since bars tend to have a more pronounced impact on the ISM in more massive systems (e.g., Verwilghen et al. submitted), this may explain the observed similarity in the cloud Σ_{mol} distribution between bars and discs (e.g., Fig. 5) in the disc galaxies. On the other hand, Fig. 6 illustrates that the shape of the Σ_{mol} distribution is generally similar across all environments, with the exception that spiral arms host a slightly greater number of high- Σ_{mol} clouds compared to disc clouds for $\Sigma_{\text{mol}} < 10^3 M_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$, and relatively more than bar and interarm regions.

In the PHANGS-ALMA sample, Querejeta et al. (2021) report that, on kpc-scales, and using the Sun et al. (2020a) α_{CO} prescription, Σ_{mol} values of interarm regions are comparable

to those in disc regions, with interarm properties resembling those of discs in non-spiral galaxies (see also, Meidt et al. 2021; Querejeta, Miguel et al. 2024). Expanding on this, we find that on scales of tens of parsecs, molecular clouds in the disc regions show distributions and median values of R_{eq} , M_{mol} , and Σ_{mol} that resemble a combination of those found in both interarm and spiral arm regions (e.g., Fig. 3 and 4). Also, using CO maps for the same galaxies presented here, previous studies (e.g., Sun et al. 2018, 2020b, 2022; Leroy et al. 2021; Querejeta et al. 2021; Leroy et al. 2025) report higher Σ_{mol} toward the central regions of galaxies, with a more pronounced increase in barred galaxies. They attribute this to bar-driven gas inflows. Here, we see a decline of Σ_{mol} in bars compared to discs. We note that toward central regions (i.e., in bars and centers), the CO emission is underestimated because the CO-to-PAH relationship is ~ 0.2 dex higher there than in galactic disks (e.g., Chown et al. 2025). Also, the stellar continuum is too bright, and subtracting it becomes more difficult (e.g., Sutter et al. 2024; Baron et al. 2024). Finally, the α_{CO} conversion factor choice does affect the measurements, especially toward central regions. The usage of an α_{CO} that depends on Σ_{\star} , Σ_{SFR} and the metallicity does lower the Σ_{mol} in bars and centers more than using one that does not account for all. Adopting a different α_{CO} measurement does not affect our analysis or conclusions when comparing Σ_{mol} of clouds in spiral arms, interarms, and discs. However, when adopting another prescription, Σ_{mol} values in bars become comparable to or higher than those of galactic discs. It is worth noting that in low-metallicity regions ($12 + \log(\text{O}/\text{H}) < 8.2$), the PAH abundance, traced by the F770W/F2100W ratio drops sharply meanwhile at higher-metallicities, the ratio reaches a plateau (Egorov et al. submitted). This highlights that PAHs could be more efficiently destroyed in the low-metallicity HII regions due to the higher UV hardness.

Finally, we divided the galaxies into active and non-active following Véron-Cetty & Véron (2010), where active galaxies are defined as quasars (starlike nuclei with broad emission lines and absolute magnitude $M_B < -22.25$), BL Lac objects, and Seyfert galaxies (types 1–2, including LINERs), while normal galaxies are considered non-active. In our sample, 15 galaxies are classified as active. The trends in Σ_{mol} , M_{mol} , and R_{eq} across galactic environments are consistent between active and non-active galaxies, differing by only ~ 0.1 dex. Therefore, the impact of the AGNs in our sample might be small.

5.3. Cloud mass spectrum

In this section, we focus on the cloud mass spectrum, providing a more comprehensive view of the mass distribution of clouds by quantifying the fraction of clouds above or below a given threshold. This approach is motivated by previous works, such as Rosolowsky (2005) (see also Blitz et al. 2007; Fukui & Kawamura 2010; Hughes et al. 2013; Colombo et al. 2014; Mok et al. 2020). For example, Colombo et al. (2014) used mass spectra to highlight environmental differences in M51, showing steeper distributions in inter-arm regions than spiral arms. Similarly, cumulative and differential techniques have been used to explore the effects of feedback and dynamical processes on the molecular cloud population (Mazumdar et al. 2021) and in simulations (e.g., Colman et al. 2024). Following these methods, we employ the cloud mass spectrum to investigate the cloud population and formation. The fit itself is an important result to be matched by theories of cloud formation and evolution. By doing so, we aim to uncover how environmental factors influence the entire molecular cloud population.

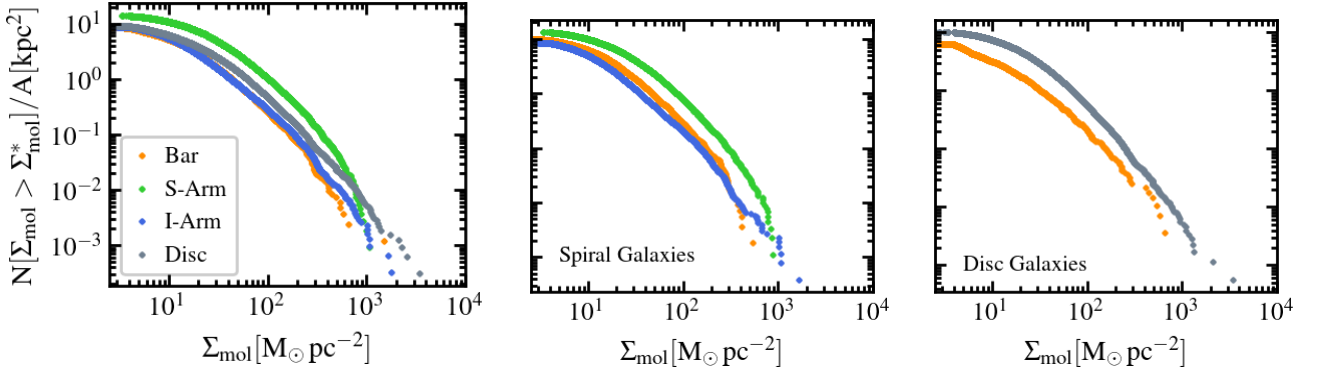


Fig. 5. *Left:* Cumulative distributions of the molecular mass surface densities from the full cloud sample. The different colors represent the different environments. The y-axis is the fraction of clouds with a surface density greater than a given value. All distributions are normalized by the total area of their specific environment, A . *Middle:* The same as the left plot but only considering barred spiral galaxies and excluding disks. *Right:* The same as the left plot, but only considering barred disc galaxies and excluding spirals. We remove the central region from the PDFs due to overlapping cloud bias.

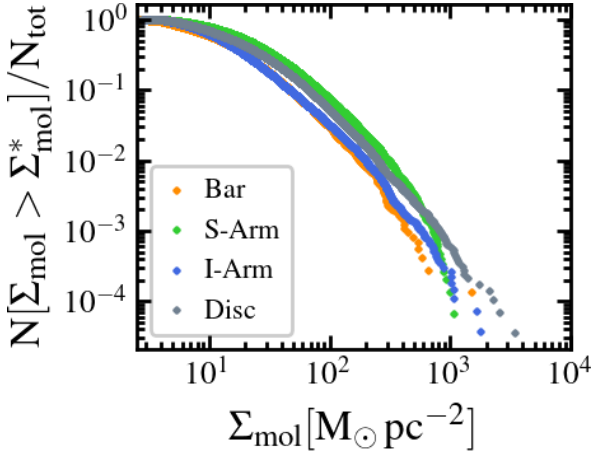


Fig. 6. Cumulative distributions of the molecular mass surface densities from the full cloud sample. The different colors represent the different environments. The y-axis is the fraction of clouds with a surface density greater than a given value. All distributions are normalized by the total number of clouds in their corresponding environment, N_{tot} . We remove the central region from the PDFs due to overlapping cloud bias.

Previous work has often used a single truncated or normal power law to identify the shape, steepness, or shallowness of the cloud mass spectrum (Rosolowsky 2005; Colombo et al. 2014; Mok et al. 2020). However, when analyzing a large sample of clouds, we find that they fail to catch the full distribution of clouds, especially the tail of the distribution, since it departs from a power law. Pathak et al. (2024) show that two components could represent the PDF of mid-infrared intensities in individual PHANGS-JWST Cycle 1 galaxies. A diffuse lognormal part that peaks at low intensities and strongly correlates with SFR and gas surface density, and a power law tail at high intensities that traces HII regions. The lognormal component dominates the $7.7\mu\text{m}$ emission. Therefore, we test whether a survival function of a lognormal distribution can be used to define the mass spectra of clouds inferred from the same maps.

The lognormal distribution can be represented as:

$$f(M; \sigma, s) = \frac{1}{M\sigma\sqrt{2\pi}} \exp\left(-\frac{(\ln M - \ln s)^2}{2\sigma^2}\right), \quad M > 0, \quad \sigma > 0, \quad (11)$$

where M (or M_{mol}) is the mass of the cloud. Two important parameters are the shape parameter, which refers to the standard deviation (σ), and the scale parameter (s), which refers to the e^μ , where μ is the mean of the lognormal distribution.

The cumulative distribution function is:

$$F(M; \sigma, s) = \Phi\left(\frac{\ln M - \ln s}{\sigma}\right), \quad (12)$$

where $\Phi(M)$ is the standard normal CDF:

$$\Phi(M) = \frac{1}{2} \left[1 + \text{erf}\left(\frac{M}{\sqrt{2}}\right) \right], \quad (13)$$

where erf is the standard error function defined as $\text{erf}(M) = \frac{2}{\sqrt{\pi}} \int_0^M e^{-t^2} dt$, and t is the mass element.

Therefore, the complementary cumulative distribution function (CCDF) or survival function is:

$$S(M; \sigma, s) = 1 - F(x) = 1 - \Phi\left(\frac{\ln M - \ln s}{\sigma}\right), \quad (14)$$

where $S(M; \sigma, s)$ is the normalized form of the survival function. It should be multiplied by the total number of clouds to replicate the CCDFs shown in Fig. 7.

We rely on the CCDF description of SCIPY `lognorm.sf`⁷ package. For that, we optimize the lognormal parameters by minimizing the negative log-likelihood⁸ function in SCIPY. We apply a bootstrap of 100 iterations on the minimization to find the fit error. We fit the survival function for the full sample of clouds and per

⁷ <https://docs.scipy.org/doc/scipy/reference/generated/scipy.stats.lognorm.html>

⁸ <https://docs.scipy.org/doc/scipy/reference/generated/scipy.optimize.minimize.html>

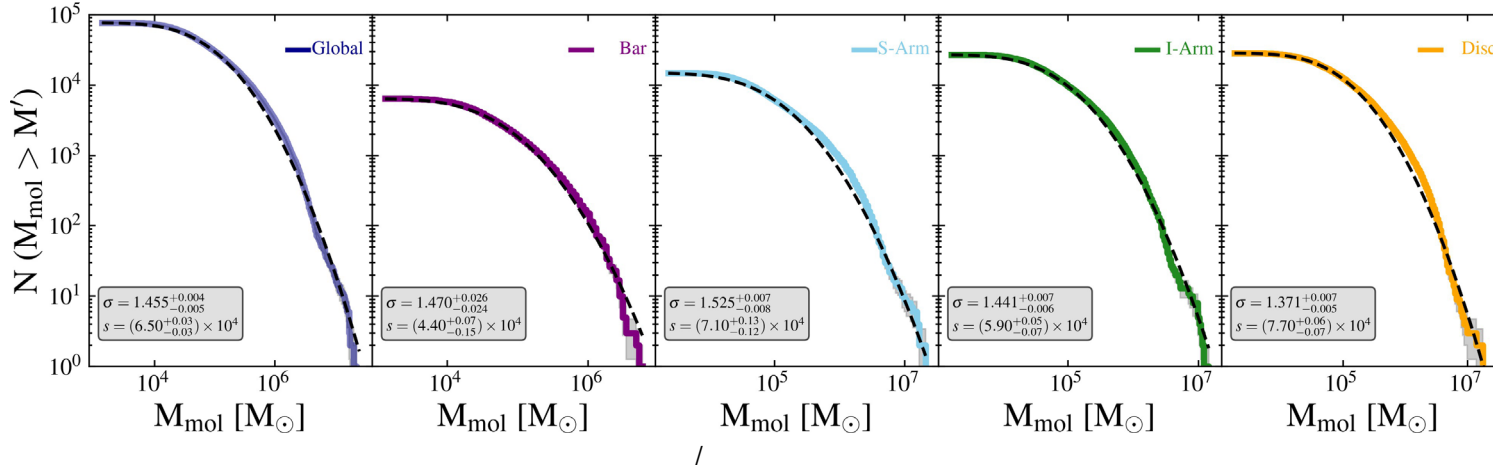


Fig. 7. Mass spectra for the PAH clouds in different environments, as labeled in each plot. The dashed black curves show the survival function fits. The fit parameters are displayed in the bottom-left corner of each figure, where σ is the shape parameter and s is the scale parameter. The grey region represents the Poisson errors on the counts (\sqrt{N}).

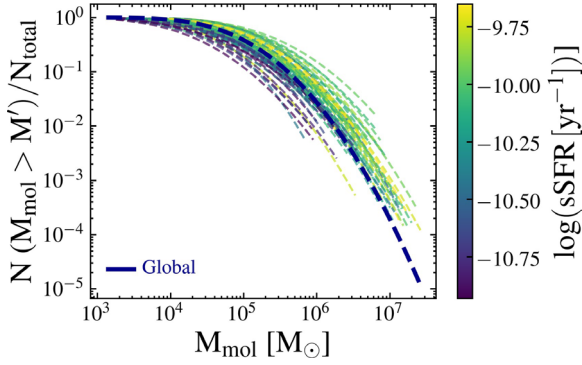


Fig. 8. Normalized survival function fits for PAH clouds per galaxy. The dark blue dashed line represents the global fit to the entire sample, while the background, color-coded by specific star formation rate (sSFR), thin dashed lines show the global fits to each galaxy.

galactic environment for a completeness limit of $\sim 2 \times 10^3 M_\odot$ as seen in Fig. 7. This means we only consider M_{mol} values corresponding to more than 8 times the $3 \sigma_{\text{rms}}$ level.

We present the fit parameters in Table 3. Overall, the spiral arm and disc environments have the highest s values. The shape parameter indicates that a larger σ corresponds to a shallower distribution slope, implying the presence of more massive structures. This parameter is the highest in the spiral arm region, which, alongside the highest s value, suggests that higher-mass clouds are more prevalent in spiral arms. This trend is also evident in Fig. D.4, where the fits of individual environments closely follow each other, but spiral arm clouds have a shallower slope, appearing more prominent at higher masses.

Furthermore, Fig. 8 shows significant s scatter (~ 1 dex) towards the high masses in the mass spectra. To investigate this, we compare the distributions of the individual galaxies using a Kolmogorov–Smirnov (KS) two-sample test. Of the 66 galaxies, we form 2145 pairs and check if the p -value decreases or increases when comparing the full M_{mol} distribution of the pairs versus the sample excluding the high mass clouds ($> 10^6 M_\odot$). In 78% of the cases, we see an increase in p -value when excluding the high-mass clouds. This indicates that the high-mass clouds are driving differences in the distributions. Fig. D.4 further shows that this deviation is most prominent in the bar and disc regions.

This suggests that molecular cloud formation and evolution differ more significantly between different galactic bars or discs than between different spiral arms or interarm regions.

The Spearman correlation coefficient in Table 4 shows that the s of the lognormal fits reflects the median of the cloud M_{mol} and strongly correlates with the Σ_{mol} median. There is also a positive correlation with the sSFR (see also Fig. 8 and D.4), number density of clouds, inclination, and HI mass of the galaxy. This means that galaxies with a higher value of s tend to have more clouds within their area and more “active” star formation. Also, this reflects the nature of the PAHs tracing heating by star formation (e.g., Peeters et al. 2004; Calzetti et al. 2007; Belfiore et al. 2023; Leroy et al. 2023b). Therefore, s is a metric that mainly relates the cloud properties to their star formation capability. Additionally, the total mass within the clouds per galaxy positively correlates with the HI mass, SFR, sSFR, and the total number of clouds within the galaxy (see Table 4), indicating that star formation is more prominent in galaxies having a higher number and more massive clouds. Also, the correlation between both s and the total mass of clouds with the mass of HI hints that the atomic gas acts as a reservoir for molecular clouds, and the more atomic gas present, the more molecular clouds are forming.

To investigate how both galactic environment and host galaxy influence the variation in molecular cloud mass distributions, we compare the lognormal fit parameters obtained globally per environment (i.e., Fig. 7) with those derived on a galaxy-by-galaxy basis. The results are presented in Table 3. Across environments, the global fit parameters, particularly σ , vary in a relatively narrow range (from ~ 1.37 in the disc to ~ 1.53 in the spiral arms). Also, the distribution of σ values obtained from the galaxy-by-galaxy fits within each environment exhibits a similar spread. It is worth noting that the small range that σ_{gal} varies within galaxies implies that galaxies generally exhibit similar cloud M_{mol} PDF width, which explains why σ shows little to no correlations with the global galactic properties. Additionally, the scale parameter s , where the distribution of values from the galaxy-by-galaxy fits (with 84th to 16th percentile ranges on the order of 2 to $7 \times 10^4 M_\odot$) is wider than the overall shift in s across environments (ranging from ~ 4 to $8 \times 10^4 M_\odot$). These results indicate that the differences in cloud mass distributions are not fully captured by environment-based classification alone. Instead, variation between host galaxies, even within the same environment, contributes significantly to the overall distribution.

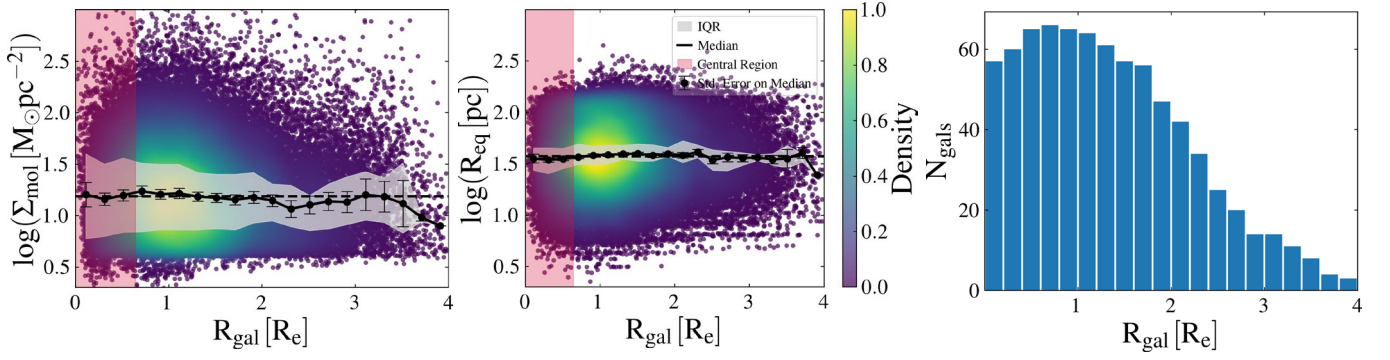


Fig. 9. Properties of the PAH clouds vs galactocentric radius (R_{gal}) for all the clouds in the 66 galaxies: Σ_{mol} of the cloud (*left*), R_{eq} (*middle*), and the total number of galaxies contributing to a specific bin (*right*). The running galaxy median (filled black circles) is plotted for a bin width of $0.2 R_e$. The grey-shaded region represents the interquartile range of the medians per galaxy. The error bars on the median are the standard errors ($1.253\sigma/\sqrt{N}$), where N is the number of galaxies contributing to a specific bin. The background data points represent a scatterplot of the full sample of GMCs colored by the normalized density of clouds. The red-shaded region depicts the maximal extent of the central clouds. The horizontal dashed black line in each plot corresponds to the median of the plotted property.

Table 3. The survival function parameters (σ , s) for the “Global” sample of clouds, per galactic environment, and galaxy-by-galaxy (σ_{gal} , s_{gal}).

Env.	σ	s $10^4 M_{\odot}$	σ_{gal}	s_{gal} $10^4 M_{\odot}$
Global	$1.455^{+0.004}_{-0.005}$	$6.50^{+0.03}_{-0.03}$	$1.553^{+0.144}_{-0.117}$	$5.78^{+5.05}_{-2.41}$
Bar	$1.470^{+0.026}_{-0.024}$	$4.40^{+0.07}_{-0.15}$	$1.594^{+0.204}_{-0.196}$	$4.49^{+2.73}_{-2.06}$
Spiral Arm	$1.525^{+0.007}_{-0.008}$	$7.10^{+0.13}_{-0.12}$	$1.628^{+0.120}_{-0.117}$	$7.11^{+4.32}_{-2.49}$
Interarm	$1.441^{+0.007}_{-0.006}$	$5.90^{+0.05}_{-0.07}$	$1.573^{+0.137}_{-0.124}$	$5.32^{+3.41}_{-1.79}$
Disc	$1.371^{+0.007}_{-0.005}$	$7.70^{+0.06}_{-0.07}$	$1.552^{+0.173}_{-0.176}$	$5.93^{+7.19}_{-2.70}$

Notes. The errors on the first two columns represent bootstrapped 84th - 50th and 50th - 16th percentiles as superscript and subscript respectively. Meanwhile, the values in the last two columns represent the medians of the galaxy-by-galaxy fits, and the errors display the 84th - 50th and 50th - 16th percentiles of the distribution of galaxy-by-galaxy fits.

5.4. Cloud property distributions as a function of galactocentric radius

Examining the distribution of all PAH-identified clouds as a function of galactocentric radius (R_{gal}) provides insight into whether local cloud properties reflect the broader structure of the gas reservoir from which they form. While large-scale processes such as gravitational torques, spiral density waves, and hydrodynamic shocks (e.g., Lin & Shu 1964; Roberts et al. 1979; Sormani & Barnes 2019; Yu et al. 2022) act on longer timescales than the lifetime of individual clouds, they significantly influence the spatial arrangement and surface density of the molecular gas. Over time, these mechanisms facilitate angular momentum loss and drive gas radially inward, giving rise to the well-known exponential decline in molecular gas surface density with radius. If cloud-scale properties such as Σ_{mol} and R_{eq} are coupled to the large-scale galactic processes, we may expect to detect systematic radial variations as a result. In this section, we investigate how Σ_{mol} and R_{eq} vary with R_{gal} across all 66 galaxies in our sample. PAH emission enables us to trace a broader range of cloud masses, including small clouds often missed in CO studies, allowing a more complete census of the Σ_{mol} and R_{eq} variation as a function of R_{gal} .

In Fig. 9, we present the radial profiles of Σ_{mol} and R_{eq} (see Eq. 9 and 4, respectively). We further fit a Gaussian for the distribution at each radial bin and find that the Gaussian σ values are consistent between the bins. This generally indicates that the distributions span similar values in all bins. The scatter around the median is approximately 0.5 – 1 dex, while the individual galaxy scatter is lower, around 0.2 – 0.3 dex. The inner $\sim 0.5 R_e$ (stellar effective radius; obtained from Leroy et al. 2021) is an ambiguous region due to removing high-mass clouds associated with overlapping structures. Beyond $\sim 0.5 R_e$, the radial profile has a near-constant median for R_{eq} . Meanwhile, for Σ_{mol} there is a decline of a factor of 1.5 – 2 towards higher R_e , and a bump at $3 R_e$ due to spiral arm clouds in a few galaxies. We note that 80% of the cloud contribution after $2 R_e$ comes from spiral galaxies, and the number of galaxies contributing per bin starts dropping after $\sim 1.5 R_e$ to reach less than 20 galaxies after $3 R_e$.

In the PHANGS–ALMA sample (e.g., Sun et al. 2020b; Leroy et al. 2025), cloud-scale Σ_{mol} shows little variation with R_{gal} beyond the central regions, in agreement with our results. Also, at fixed R_{gal}/R_e , PAH clouds located in spiral arms exhibit Σ_{mol} values approximately 1.5–2.5 times higher than those in interarm regions (see Fig. D.2), consistent with the spiral arm–interarm contrast observed in PHANGS–ALMA.

We find that the galaxy-by-galaxy Σ_{mol} in Fig. D.1 and D.3 show considerable variation with R_{gal} , with flat, declining, and ambiguous profiles observed across different galaxies. The Σ_{mol} behavior in some CO-based cloud analysis (e.g., Rebolledo et al. 2015; Faesi et al. 2018) show no clear trend with R_{gal} , highlighting that, in some galaxies, the galactic environment might play a bigger role in determining the GMC properties than a radial-based approach. An example of this in our sample would be NGC 0628, NGC 1365, NGC 2090, and NGC 2997 (see Fig. D.1), where the spiral arm–interarm contrast exists, but there is a flat Σ_{mol} trend with R_{gal} . However, in other galaxies, such as NGC 1385, NGC 1546, NGC 1559, and NGC 3059, that lack spiral arm features, we see a ~ 0.5 –1 dex decrease of Σ_{mol} towards the outer regions of the galaxies. Together, these examples highlight that radial trends in cloud Σ_{mol} are not universal, but instead vary strongly with different galaxies.

5.5. Extreme clouds

In this section, we focus on clouds at the extremes of both Σ_{mol} and M_{mol} within our sample. An overabundance of high Σ_{mol}

Table 4. Spearman correlation coefficients (r) and p-values (p) between the scale parameter of the lognormal distribution s_{gal} , the shape parameter σ_{gal} , the total mass within clouds (M_{mol}), and various galactic/cloud parameters across the 66 galaxies.

Parameter	s_{gal}		σ_{gal}		M_{mol}	
	r	p	r	p	r	p
N_{clouds}	0.20	0.10	-0.17	0.18	0.88	7.24×10^{-22}
N_{clouds}/A [kpc^{-2}]	0.38	1.5×10^{-3}	0.08	0.52	0.59	1.56×10^{-7}
Σ_{mol} [$M_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$]	0.78	2.06×10^{-14}	-0.08	0.53	0.52	9.40×10^{-6}
M_{mol} [M_{\odot}]	1.00	1.32×10^{-94}	-0.27	0.03	0.58	3.36×10^{-7}
R_{eq} [pc]	0.31	0.01	-0.16	0.19	0.06	0.63
$\log \text{SFR}$ [$M_{\odot} \text{yr}^{-1}$]	0.24	0.05	-0.31	0.01	0.69	1.68×10^{-10}
$\log M_{\star}$ [M_{\odot}]	-0.28	0.02	-0.28	0.02	0.35	3.68×10^{-3}
$\log \text{sSFR}$ [yr^{-1}]	0.65	4.95×10^{-9}	-0.10	0.44	0.42	4.37×10^{-4}
$\log M_{\text{H}_1}$ [M_{\odot}]	0.37	2.11×10^{-3}	-0.21	0.09	0.56	1.15×10^{-6}
R_e [kpc]	0.04	0.74	-0.25	0.05	0.33	7.44×10^{-3}
i [deg]	0.30	0.01	-0.28	0.02	-0.31	0.01

Notes. Correlations are computed between the scale s_{gal} and shape σ_{gal} of the cloud mass spectra (from lognormal fits), total molecular cloud mass M_{mol} , and various galactic properties across 66 galaxies. N_{clouds} is the total number of clouds within a galaxy, and $N_{\text{clouds}}/A_{\text{env}}$ is the number density of clouds within a galaxy. Σ_{mol} , M_{mol} , and R_{eq} are median cloud values per galaxy. Global galaxy properties (SFR, M_{\star} , atomic hydrogen mass M_{H_1} , sSFR, R_e , i) are taken from [Leroy et al. \(2021\)](#).

and high M_{mol} clouds in specific large-scale galactic environments suggests that localized physical processes in these regions preferentially drive the formation of distinct, dense, and massive cloud populations, potentially enhancing star formation activity. Conversely, the prevalence of low Σ_{mol} and low-mass clouds in certain environments may indicate the presence of mechanisms that inhibit efficient gas compression and cloud growth, such as strong shear, elevated turbulence, or low external pressure. These processes act to suppress the formation of gravitationally bound and massive structures, ultimately limiting star formation efficiency.

We define low-mass Σ_{mol} clouds as clouds with $\Sigma_{\text{mol}} \leq 10 M_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$, representing 32% of our sample size, and extremely low Σ_{mol} clouds are the 1000 least dense clouds. The highest Σ_{mol} clouds are clouds with $\Sigma_{\text{mol}} \geq 100 M_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$, representing $\sim 5\%$ of our sample size, and the extremely highest Σ_{mol} clouds are the 1000 highest dense clouds.

We rely on fractional differences between the full sample and low or high-density clouds per galactic environment to assess where those clouds prevail more. The fractional difference is then defined as

$$\Delta f = \frac{N_{\text{sub}}^{\text{env}}}{N_{\text{sub}}} - \frac{N_{\text{sample}}^{\text{env}}}{N_{\text{sample}}} \times 100, \quad (15)$$

where $N_{\text{sub}}^{\text{env}}$ is the number of extreme clouds in a specific environment from the extreme subsample (N_{sub}), and $N_{\text{sample}}^{\text{env}}$ is the number of clouds in a specific environment in the full sample (N_{sample}).

A positive Δf value would indicate, probabilistically, higher prevalence in a specific environment. The values of Δf_{low} , Δf_{high} , Δf_{low}^e , and Δf_{high}^e are provided in Table 5. Here, Δf_{low} , Δf_{high} are the fractional differences between the full sample and the low or high Σ_{mol} regimes, respectively. The notation ‘e’ is for the extreme samples.

The Δf values presented in Table 5 indicate that the low Σ_{mol} clouds are most frequent in bar and interarm regions and are the

least frequent in spiral arm regions. Also, the highest Σ_{mol} clouds are most and least prevalent in spiral arm and interarm regions, respectively. We note that extremely low Σ_{mol} in bars could be due to the under-approximation of the CO emission in bar ends and the α_{CO} prescription used here, and due to the existence of low Σ_{mol} clouds in bar lanes. Upon using the other α_{CO} prescriptions, we notice that our results are consistent in all the environments except the bar region, where interarm clouds take over as the lowest density structures.

[Sun et al. \(2022\)](#) further demonstrate that in the PHANGS-ALMA sample, CO cloud properties correlate strongly with environmental conditions, particularly Σ_{SFR} and Σ_{mol} . Together with our results, these studies support the picture where spiral arms are key sites for the formation of dense, high Σ_{mol} and high-mass clouds, while the interarm regions are mainly populated by diffuse and lower mass clouds. Again, we emphasize that central regions were excluded from our main analysis due to the removal of overlapping structures. However, when we include the central clouds, they emerge as the primary hosts of the extremely highest density clouds, consistent with both Galactic and extragalactic observations (e.g., [Longmore et al. 2012](#); [Mills 2017](#); [Sun et al. 2018, 2020b](#)), followed by the spiral arms.

Many galactic factors play a role in shaping the clouds across the mass distribution and spectra. The high mass clouds are intrinsically rarer than lower mass clouds ($\sim 4\%$ of our sample size). [Kobayashi et al. \(2017\)](#) (see also [Tasker & Tan 2009](#); [Kobayashi et al. 2018](#)) show that in simulated clouds, cloud-cloud collisions mostly affect the tail of the cloud mass spectra. Those collisions lead to the formation of more massive GMCs ($M_{\text{mol}} \gtrsim 10^6 M_{\odot}$). [Kruijssen \(2014\)](#) suggested that the maximum GMC mass may correspond to the maximum mass that could collapse against centrifugal forces (i.e., Toomre mass; [Toomre 1964](#)). Models that predict the maximum GMC mass (e.g., [Reina-Campos & Kruijssen 2017](#)) explain that those masses change from shear-limited to feedback-limited as galaxies become less gas-rich and evolve toward low shear. The s parameter of the lognormal has a strong positive correlation with the high mass cloud fraction, implying that more massive clouds

Table 5. The Pearson χ^2 and fractional difference statistical tests for the extreme cloud sub-samples.

Env.	Δf_{high}	Δf_{high}^e	Δf_{low}	Δf_{low}^e
(1)	(2) [%]	(3) [%]	(4) [%]	(5) [%]
Bar	-3.84	-4.66	2.87	36.34
Spiral Arm	11.14	12.55	-6.54	-14.05
Interarm	-11.49	-12.21	5.34	-9.01
Disc	4.18	4.32	-1.66	-13.28

Notes. (1) The galactic environment. (2) The fractional difference between the environmental counts in the high Σ_{mol} regime ($\Sigma_{mol} \geq 100 \text{ M}_\odot \text{ pc}^{-2}$) and the full sample of clouds (Δf_{high}). (3) The fractional difference between the environmental counts in the 1000 highest Σ_{mol} subsample and the full sample of clouds (Δf_{high}^e). (4) The fractional difference between the environmental counts in the low Σ_{mol} regime ($\Sigma_{mol} \leq 10 \text{ M}_\odot \text{ pc}^{-2}$) and the full sample of clouds (Δf_{low}). (5) The fractional difference between the environmental counts in the 1000 lowest Σ_{mol} subsample and the full sample of clouds (Δf_{low}^e).

exist at higher s values. At lower masses, cloud self-growth by accumulating surrounding HI gas and destruction by massive star radiative feedback (e.g., due to photo-ionization, photo-dissociation) shape the cloud mass spectra. Upon binning the M_{mol} distribution, we examine the correlation between the total mass in each bin and various global galaxy properties across our sample (see Fig. D.6). We find that only clouds with M_{mol} between 10^4 and 10^6 M_\odot , which make up 90 % of the sample, show a significant positive correlation with both the HI mass and the star formation rate (SFR) of their host galaxies (see Fig. D.6). In

contrast, clouds with M_{mol} below 10^4 M_\odot show no apparent correlation with global SFR or HI mass. This suggests that massive star formation is not prominent in these lower-mass clouds.

6. Summary and conclusion

In this paper, we utilized SCIMES (C15), an unsupervised clustering algorithm, to identify cloud structures in 66 nearby PHANGS-JWST galaxies (Lee et al. 2023; Williams et al. 2024). Using stellar continuum-corrected I_{F770W}^{PAH} maps, we identified 108,466 and 146,040 clouds in the common-resolution and native resolution samples, respectively. This represents the largest extragalactic cloud catalog to date. We used the common resolution sample for our analysis. We also flagged and excluded from our analysis clouds dominated by $I_{F770W}^{PAH} < 1 \text{ MJy sr}^{-1}$, those located at the edges of the maps, and those overlapping in velocity space when cross-matched with CO-identified clouds using CPROPS (Hughes et al., in prep.). After these exclusions, the final sample consists of 77,884 clouds. Those strict measures were taken to avoid any biases. This results in a significant loss of high Σ_{mol} clouds, mostly towards galactic centers, which we therefore excluded from our analysis.

Upon comparing the I_{F770W}^{PAH} identified clouds to CO-identified clouds, we notice an agreement in the Σ_{mol} between both methods in the different environments. We refer to the identified clouds as GMCs; however, regions with $\Sigma_{mol} < 10 \text{ M}_\odot \text{ pc}^{-2}$ may correspond to either diffuse atomic gas or faint molecular clouds that remain undetectable in CO observations. Upon examining these regions, we find that such clouds are predominantly located in the interarm and disc regions, reinforcing our previous assertion.

When investigating the Σ_{mol} CDFs and distributions across different environments, we find that the spiral arms contain the highest number density of clouds (including high Σ_{mol} clouds), and the interarm clouds show a sharper decline in Σ_{mol} values after $10 \text{ M}_\odot \text{ pc}^{-2}$. This observation is further backed by our fractional difference test, which confirms that spiral arms preferentially host the highest Σ_{mol} clouds. Our findings generally align with hydrodynamical simulations (e.g., Duarte-Cabral & Dobbs 2016) where the highest Σ_{mol} GMC complexes are in the spiral arms. This also agrees with the idea that the gravitational potential of spiral arms aids in the formation of high Σ_{mol} clouds, which subsequently fragment into less dense structures as they drift into interarm regions (e.g., Dobbs et al. 2006; Koda et al. 2009).

We also fit a lognormal to the mass spectra with a completeness limit extending down to $2 \times 10^3 \text{ M}_\odot$, well below previously obtained depths with CO observations, and find that it represents a good fit. Spiral arm clouds tend to have more massive clouds than the other environments according to the s and σ of the lognormal distribution fits. Positive correlations exist between both the s_{gal} and σ_{gal} of clouds, sSFR, and the median Σ_{mol} of the galaxies, reflecting that galaxies that host more massive clouds have more star formation with respect to their stellar mass.

The cloud properties show minimal variation as a function of R_{gal} . The R_{eq} of the clouds is consistent towards the outskirts of the galaxies. Meanwhile, the cloud Σ_{mol} values decrease by a factor of $\sim 1.5 - 2$ towards the outer parts of the galaxies. Also, at a fixed R_{gal}/R_e , spiral arms have Σ_{mol} values approximately 1.5 – 2.5 times higher than those in interarm regions. It is worth noting that Σ_{mol} trend varies largely between different galaxies, with flat, decreasing, and even no trend as a function of R_{gal} . Factors like large-scale processes, galaxy types, and morphologies might influence the observed trends.

The cloud mass spectra, radial profiles, and properties vary from galaxy to galaxy depending on their physical conditions and local environments. In contrast, combining all clouds across galaxies averages out this local information, emphasizing only global environmental differences between galaxies.

We list a few key points to summarize our findings:

1. A total of 108,466 PAH clouds were identified across 66 galaxies using SCIMES. Of these, 77,844 clouds met or selection criteria and were included in the analysis, while others were flagged in the catalog (e.g., for velocity overlap, edge effects, low molecular gas content) and excluded from the analysis. This led to a bias toward lower Σ_{mol} clouds, evidenced by a reduced PAH cloud flux recovery (a median of 26% in the flagged sample vs 40% in the full sample).
2. The PAH clouds reveal fainter, smaller structures, especially in the interarm and bar regions, compared to CO-based ALMA clouds (~ 2 dex better completeness limit). Those clouds may correspond to either faint molecular clouds or diffuse atomic gas clouds, or be sensitivity-limited in CO observations.
3. Both PAH and CO identified clouds show consistent $\Sigma_{mol,R}$ distributions across most environments. However, towards central regions, PAH cloud $\Sigma_{mol,R}$ is 0.3 dex lower. This could be due to the PAH-to-CO fit, α_{CO} prescription, and overlapping clouds in velocity pose a challenge in our analysis, making it challenging to derive any conclusions there.
4. The cloud Σ_{mol} varies with galactic environment, with spiral arms hosting the highest Σ_{mol} and M_{mol} clouds, interarms and bars the least, and discs showing intermediate properties of spiral arms and interarms. This supports the view that spiral

- arm potentials favor the formation of massive, dense clouds consistent with both observations and simulations.
- The mass spectra are better described by a lognormal distribution than a single power law, especially when considering a large cloud sample, with lognormal μ and σ indicating that spiral arms host more massive clouds and a shallower mass spectrum compared to other environments.
 - Variations in the cloud mass spectrum are more strongly influenced by differences between galaxies than by intra-galactic environments. This indicates that global galaxy properties such as gas content, star formation activity, and dynamics are the primary factors shaping the distribution of cloud masses.
 - The cloud Σ_{mol} values shows a decline of a factor of 1.5–2 towards the outskirts of the galaxies ($2\text{--}3 R_e$), and at fixed R_{gal}/R_e , PAH clouds located in spiral arms exhibit Σ_{mol} values approximately 1.5–2.5 times higher than those in inter-arm regions.
 - The clouds with $M_{\text{mol}} > 10^4 M_\odot$ show a positive correlation with SFR, indicating that these clouds are key contributors to star formation. Meanwhile, clouds with $M_{\text{mol}} < 10^4 M_\odot$ do not show a correlation, indicating limited involvement in large-scale star-forming activity, or that their star formation is below detection limits.
 - We publish our PAH cloud catalog at a homogenized resolution of 30 pc and native resolution. The catalog includes measurements of M_{mol} , R_{eq} , Σ_{mol} , and other parameters presented in Table C.1.

We emphasize the importance of handling PP intensity images with care when identifying structure. We showed how including overlapping clouds could bias the results, and excluding them could push the analysis towards lower Σ_{mol} and M_{mol} clouds. Our findings provide valuable insights and calibrations for molecular cloud simulations, especially the mass spectra depicted here. Future work could include calibrating the CO to PAH relationship while subtracting the emission from small dust grains. Those grains could play a significant role, especially toward the central regions of the galaxies.

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Appendix A: SCIMES version update

In this study, we implemented a modification to SCIMES to enhance computational efficiency. The primary modification involved implementing parallel processing using the `Parallel`¹⁰ function from the `joblib`¹¹ library in Python. This optimization was applied to the spectral embedding step, where dimensionality reduction is performed.

To make use of the parallel processing feature, an additional parameter was added (`n_jobs = -1`). The `n_jobs` parameter controls the number of concurrent tasks executed in parallel. When set to a positive integer, it specifies the exact number of worker processes or threads used for computation. If `n_jobs = -1`, the system utilizes all available CPU cores, while `n_jobs = 2` reserves one core for other tasks. If `n_jobs = 1`, the code runs sequentially, similar to a standard Python loop. This improvement significantly reduces processing time, particularly when handling large molecular cloud datasets.

This modified version of SCIMES was used throughout this analysis and is available on the following GitHub¹² page.

Appendix B: Tables of properties

Table B.1. The global and cloud properties of 66 galaxies in the PHANGS-JWST sample.

Galaxy	RA	Dec	i	D	$\log M_*$	$\log \text{SFR}/M_*$	f_{all}	f_{flg}	cycle	Σ_{mol}	R_{eq}	M_{mol}
	[deg]	[deg]	[deg]	[Mpc]	$\log[M_\odot]$	$\log[1/\text{yr}]$	[%]	[%]		$[M_\odot \text{ pc}^{-2}]$	[pc]	$\log[M_\odot]$
IC5273	344.86	-37.70	52.00	14.18	9.72	-9.99	44.10	35.06	2	35.09 ^{+34.04} _{-15.04}	41.07 ^{+47.98} _{-22.95}	5.19 ^{+0.77} _{-0.48}
IC5332	353.61	-36.10	26.90	9.01	9.67	-10.05	48.96	29.94	2	5.93 ^{+5.30} _{-1.45}	33.66 ^{+58.04} _{-20.57}	4.33 ^{+0.81} _{-0.61}
NGC0628	24.17	15.78	8.90	9.84	10.34	-10.10	49.24	44.51	1	13.85 ^{+17.57} _{-6.98}	29.70 ^{+43.45} _{-16.30}	4.51 ^{+0.81} _{-0.46}
NGC1087	41.60	-0.50	42.90	15.85	9.94	-9.83	43.38	23.50	1	41.42 ^{+61.91} _{-26.08}	36.28 ^{+41.56} _{-18.92}	5.16 ^{+0.65} _{-0.45}
NGC1097	41.58	-30.28	48.60	13.58	10.76	-10.08	38.20	22.11	2	9.08 ^{+13.11} _{-3.91}	38.15 ^{+47.88} _{-20.34}	4.60 ^{+0.71} _{-0.49}
NGC1300	49.92	-19.41	31.80	18.99	10.62	-10.55	40.65	30.58	1	10.05 ^{+14.46} _{-4.73}	40.74 ^{+45.19} _{-21.02}	4.70 ^{+0.65} _{-0.49}
NGC1365	53.40	-36.14	55.40	19.57	11.00	-9.76	33.11	18.93	1	6.16 ^{+7.88} _{-2.26}	37.22 ^{+48.46} _{-20.27}	4.44 ^{+0.67} _{-0.50}
NGC1385	54.37	-24.50	44.00	17.22	9.98	-9.66	42.30	14.05	1	37.15 ^{+57.66} _{-22.02}	33.41 ^{+35.06} _{-17.18}	5.04 ^{+0.59} _{-0.41}
NGC1433	55.51	-47.22	28.60	18.63	10.87	-10.82	40.85	29.39	1	6.98 ^{+7.53} _{-2.25}	36.94 ^{+52.16} _{-19.98}	4.52 ^{+0.75} _{-0.60}
NGC1511	59.91	-67.64	72.70	15.28	9.91	-9.55	33.69	6.28	2	27.61 ^{+43.60} _{-14.33}	34.61 ^{+31.06} _{-17.14}	5.02 ^{+0.48} _{-0.41}
NGC1512	60.98	-43.35	42.50	18.83	10.72	-10.61	39.53	31.77	1	7.23 ^{+7.66} _{-2.38}	42.17 ^{+49.79} _{-22.93}	4.63 ^{+0.70} _{-0.59}
NGC1546	63.65	-56.06	70.30	17.69	10.35	-10.43	34.75	3.25	2	11.45 ^{+21.89} _{-5.10}	32.18 ^{+39.70} _{-18.45}	4.59 ^{+0.57} _{-0.39}
NGC1559	64.40	-62.78	65.40	19.44	10.36	-9.79	37.85	15.83	2	39.00 ^{+51.84} _{-20.14}	35.46 ^{+38.96} _{-18.78}	5.13 ^{+0.59} _{-0.40}
NGC1566	65.00	-54.94	29.50	17.69	10.79	-10.13	41.41	23.02	1	14.72 ^{+23.01} _{-7.22}	36.34 ^{+42.95} _{-18.83}	4.76 ^{+0.67} _{-0.47}
NGC1637	70.37	-2.86	31.10	11.70	9.95	-10.14	46.20	40.10	2	15.53 ^{+15.76} _{-7.03}	40.74 ^{+47.57} _{-22.86}	4.84 ^{+0.77} _{-0.49}
NGC1672	71.43	-59.25	42.60	19.40	10.73	-9.85	34.40	22.94	1	21.22 ^{+26.80} _{-8.84}	36.33 ^{+38.42} _{-18.51}	4.92 ^{+0.62} _{-0.42}
NGC1792	76.31	-37.98	65.10	16.20	10.61	-10.04	36.03	6.28	2	34.46 ^{+49.02} _{-18.81}	35.79 ^{+43.02} _{-19.68}	5.10 ^{+0.59} _{-0.43}
NGC1809	75.52	-69.57	57.60	19.95	9.77	-9.01	38.02	30.04	2	18.50 ^{+22.66} _{-9.77}	33.81 ^{+52.02} _{-17.30}	4.78 ^{+0.74} _{-0.40}
NGC2090	86.76	-34.25	64.50	11.75	10.04	-10.43	44.24	38.11	2	10.54 ^{+10.65} _{-4.32}	36.90 ^{+39.21} _{-19.69}	4.60 ^{+0.64} _{-0.47}
NGC2283	101.47	-18.21	43.70	13.68	9.89	-10.17	45.01	40.23	2	22.66 ^{+35.73} _{-11.83}	40.10 ^{+45.67} _{-22.60}	4.99 ^{+0.70} _{-0.50}
NGC2566	124.69	-25.50	48.50	23.44	10.71	-9.77	31.02	20.57	2	10.47 ^{+15.14} _{-4.92}	40.93 ^{+45.69} _{-19.76}	4.76 ^{+0.60} _{-0.48}
NGC2775	137.58	7.04	41.20	23.15	11.07	-11.13	40.63	32.35	2	6.16 ^{+3.46} _{-1.59}	43.58 ^{+54.40} _{-22.86}	4.53 ^{+0.72} _{-0.49}
NGC2835	139.47	-22.35	41.30	12.22	10.00	-9.90	47.96	45.65	1	13.57 ^{+15.96} _{-6.32}	36.25 ^{+48.42} _{-18.63}	4.68 ^{+0.74} _{-0.44}
NGC2903	143.04	21.50	66.80	10.00	10.63	-10.15	37.75	21.16	2	16.76 ^{+23.37} _{-8.25}	37.87 ^{+47.25} _{-22.32}	4.82 ^{+0.67} _{-0.51}
NGC2997	146.41	-31.19	33.00	14.06	10.73	-10.09	38.81	30.90	2	17.65 ^{+27.22} _{-8.92}	41.13 ^{+51.03} _{-22.22}	4.93 ^{+0.67} _{-0.45}
NGC3059	147.53	-73.92	29.40	20.23	10.38	-10.00	42.67	27.21	2	22.36 ^{+27.70} _{-12.44}	35.99 ^{+43.62} _{-18.47}	4.91 ^{+0.67} _{-0.47}
NGC3137	152.28	-29.06	70.30	16.37	9.88	-10.19	34.74	28.63	2	8.78 ^{+7.06} _{-2.97}	47.97 ^{+55.26} _{-26.71}	4.81 ^{+0.64} _{-0.55}
NGC3239	156.27	17.16	60.30	10.86	9.17	-9.58	44.55	41.91	2	10.32 ^{+22.08} _{-3.66}	44.07 ^{+51.67} _{-27.87}	4.83 ^{+0.65} _{-0.64}
NGC3351	160.99	11.70	45.10	9.96	10.37	-10.25	45.81	36.52	1	7.18 ^{+6.01} _{-2.27}	42.10 ^{+56.53} _{-24.40}	4.56 ^{+0.80} _{-0.58}

¹⁰ <https://joblib.readthedocs.io/en/latest/generated/joblib.Parallel.html>

¹¹ <https://joblib.readthedocs.io/en/latest/index.html>

¹² https://github.com/AG-Bigiel/SCIMES/tree/new_version

Table B.1. continued.

Galaxy	RA	Dec	i	D	$\log M_*$	$\log \text{SFR}/M_*$	f_{all}	f_{flg}	cycle	Σ_{mol}	R_{eq}	M_{mol}
	[deg]	[deg]	[deg]	[Mpc]	$\log[M_\odot]$	$\log[1/\text{yr}]$	[%]	[%]		$[M_\odot \text{ pc}^{-2}]$	[pc]	$\log[M_\odot]$
NGC3507	165.86	18.14	21.70	23.55	10.40	-10.40	43.13	39.70	2	$10.10^{+11.16}_{-4.44}$	$37.51^{+47.30}_{-18.48}$	$4.62^{+0.73}_{-0.48}$
NGC3511	165.85	-23.09	75.10	13.94	10.03	-10.12	38.13	17.62	2	$22.54^{+18.27}_{-10.04}$	$48.07^{+48.32}_{-25.45}$	$5.14^{+0.64}_{-0.49}$
NGC3521	166.45	-0.03	68.80	13.24	11.02	-10.45	37.83	13.25	2	$34.04^{+46.42}_{-19.58}$	$37.55^{+46.81}_{-21.47}$	$5.11^{+0.62}_{-0.44}$
NGC3596	168.78	14.79	25.10	11.30	9.66	-10.18	47.76	41.95	2	$16.55^{+17.15}_{-7.88}$	$38.93^{+37.03}_{-22.58}$	$4.77^{+0.69}_{-0.50}$
NGC3621	169.57	-32.81	65.80	7.06	10.06	-10.06	44.10	30.34	2	$45.31^{+62.52}_{-24.74}$	$35.19^{+45.35}_{-19.62}$	$5.14^{+0.69}_{-0.39}$
NGC3626	170.02	18.36	46.60	20.05	10.46	-11.13	32.00	18.98	2	$8.92^{+8.23}_{-3.96}$	$30.00^{+36.90}_{-14.36}$	$4.33^{+0.70}_{-0.32}$
NGC3627	170.06	12.99	57.30	11.32	10.84	-10.25	41.68	11.95	1	$24.73^{+38.33}_{-12.36}$	$28.30^{+33.24}_{-15.23}$	$4.75^{+0.57}_{-0.38}$
NGC4254	184.71	14.42	34.40	13.10	10.42	-9.93	43.56	17.81	1	$48.20^{+67.27}_{-25.61}$	$30.63^{+34.84}_{-16.07}$	$5.07^{+0.66}_{-0.41}$
NGC4298	185.39	14.61	59.20	14.92	10.02	-10.36	40.42	18.23	2	$13.87^{+12.43}_{-5.31}$	$41.37^{+42.98}_{-21.91}$	$4.81^{+0.65}_{-0.45}$
NGC4303	185.48	4.47	23.50	16.99	10.51	-9.78	42.06	24.39	1	$26.55^{+44.62}_{-16.26}$	$31.69^{+39.42}_{-16.51}$	$4.86^{+0.66}_{-0.46}$
NGC4321	185.73	15.82	38.50	15.21	10.75	-10.20	43.28	30.23	1	$13.69^{+16.42}_{-6.34}$	$35.20^{+45.54}_{-18.96}$	$4.66^{+0.76}_{-0.45}$
NGC4424	186.80	9.42	58.20	16.20	9.91	-10.43	30.47	5.39	2	$11.47^{+31.44}_{-5.19}$	$26.07^{+24.99}_{-12.71}$	$4.52^{+0.40}_{-0.53}$
NGC4457	187.25	3.57	17.40	15.10	10.42	-10.93	38.03	22.90	2	$6.70^{+24.07}_{-3.15}$	$21.59^{+38.89}_{-10.20}$	$4.17^{+0.66}_{-0.49}$
NGC4496A	187.91	3.94	53.80	14.86	9.53	-9.74	45.60	43.93	2	$13.42^{+28.66}_{-6.36}$	$43.38^{+48.53}_{-23.57}$	$4.92^{+0.69}_{-0.54}$
NGC4535	188.58	8.20	44.70	15.77	10.54	-10.20	44.42	25.84	1	$10.16^{+15.37}_{-4.36}$	$39.34^{+48.02}_{-20.93}$	$4.69^{+0.63}_{-0.46}$
NGC4536	188.61	2.19	66.00	16.25	10.40	-9.86	25.31	17.55	2	$11.22^{+13.89}_{-4.54}$	$52.24^{+54.49}_{-30.30}$	$4.94^{+0.63}_{-0.50}$
NGC4540	188.71	15.55	28.70	15.76	9.79	-10.56	41.38	28.57	2	$13.90^{+14.69}_{-7.23}$	$33.15^{+45.51}_{-17.52}$	$4.65^{+0.73}_{-0.48}$
NGC4548	188.86	14.50	38.30	16.22	10.69	-10.97	39.96	25.24	2	$6.78^{+7.18}_{-2.08}$	$46.58^{+58.90}_{-25.84}$	$4.67^{+0.70}_{-0.51}$
NGC4569	189.21	13.16	70.00	15.76	10.81	-10.68	29.04	4.39	2	$6.62^{+7.26}_{-1.79}$	$28.06^{+28.44}_{-12.40}$	$4.27^{+0.67}_{-0.49}$
NGC4571	189.23	14.22	32.70	14.90	10.09	-10.63	47.16	40.20	2	$6.61^{+5.19}_{-1.89}$	$48.69^{+52.52}_{-27.23}$	$4.68^{+0.64}_{-0.58}$
NGC4579	189.43	11.82	40.20	21.00	11.15	-10.81	41.47	21.33	2	$7.01^{+6.28}_{-2.31}$	$34.79^{+48.22}_{-18.12}$	$4.40^{+0.75}_{-0.50}$
NGC4654	190.99	13.13	55.60	21.98	10.57	-9.99	38.93	12.82	2	$15.39^{+17.60}_{-7.44}$	$41.55^{+43.96}_{-20.99}$	$4.86^{+0.62}_{-0.42}$
NGC4689	191.94	13.76	38.70	15.00	10.22	-10.61	44.43	39.62	2	$9.34^{+8.61}_{-3.60}$	$40.21^{+55.75}_{-22.89}$	$4.63^{+0.78}_{-0.52}$
NGC4694	192.06	10.98	60.70	15.76	9.86	-10.66	36.91	7.00	2	$11.22^{+19.92}_{-5.35}$	$27.54^{+34.68}_{-15.00}$	$4.41^{+0.64}_{-0.37}$
NGC4731	192.76	-6.39	64.00	13.28	9.48	-9.70	35.02	22.12	2	$19.81^{+33.59}_{-9.68}$	$43.55^{+48.54}_{-26.72}$	$5.01^{+0.67}_{-0.41}$
NGC4781	193.60	-10.54	59.00	11.31	9.64	-9.96	40.82	29.42	2	$48.89^{+52.62}_{-25.69}$	$38.76^{+36.97}_{-20.93}$	$5.27^{+0.64}_{-0.49}$
NGC4826	194.18	21.68	59.10	4.41	10.24	-10.93	32.90	5.89	2	$32.82^{+28.26}_{-23.74}$	$16.76^{+30.58}_{-11.76}$	$4.40^{+0.76}_{-0.87}$
NGC4941	196.05	-5.55	53.40	15.00	10.17	-10.53	38.22	25.92	2	$5.83^{+3.55}_{-1.34}$	$53.40^{+52.25}_{-28.85}$	$4.71^{+0.61}_{-0.58}$
NGC4951	196.28	-6.49	70.20	15.00	9.79	-10.24	34.74	23.28	2	$16.61^{+15.02}_{-7.28}$	$44.39^{+45.12}_{-24.80}$	$4.94^{+0.56}_{-0.49}$
NGC5042	198.88	-23.98	49.40	16.78	9.90	-10.12	38.56	35.86	2	$10.62^{+11.23}_{-4.67}$	$46.55^{+53.74}_{-26.12}$	$4.78^{+0.74}_{-0.50}$
NGC5068	199.73	-21.04	35.70	5.20	9.41	-9.97	52.12	48.66	1	$16.82^{+27.90}_{-8.48}$	$31.84^{+47.06}_{-17.81}$	$4.69^{+0.85}_{-0.51}$
NGC5134	201.33	-21.13	22.70	19.92	10.41	-10.75	39.91	35.33	2	$10.26^{+13.21}_{-4.65}$	$35.85^{+44.62}_{-18.38}$	$4.59^{+0.77}_{-0.51}$
NGC5248	204.38	8.89	47.40	14.87	10.41	-10.05	39.72	24.09	2	$17.23^{+20.92}_{-8.56}$	$39.05^{+43.44}_{-21.28}$	$4.85^{+0.66}_{-0.45}$
NGC5643	218.17	-44.17	29.90	12.68	10.34	-9.92	45.26	39.21	2	$21.51^{+32.02}_{-11.57}$	$34.45^{+46.73}_{-19.12}$	$4.83^{+0.78}_{-0.49}$
NGC6300	259.25	-62.82	49.60	11.58	10.47	-10.19	45.77	36.80	2	$15.31^{+19.55}_{-7.92}$	$36.28^{+46.67}_{-20.70}$	$4.75^{+0.66}_{-0.53}$
NGC7456	345.54	-39.57	67.30	15.70	9.64	-10.08	33.11	29.65	2	$7.62^{+6.09}_{-2.69}$	$51.98^{+52.75}_{-28.99}$	$4.76^{+0.62}_{-0.54}$
NGC7496	347.45	-43.43	35.90	18.72	10.00	-9.65	37.34	28.87	1	$19.43^{+25.74}_{-8.90}$	$41.81^{+46.65}_{-22.04}$	$5.00^{+0.65}_{-0.48}$

Notes. *Global properties of the galaxies:* Right Ascension (RA), Declination (Dec), inclination (i), distance (D), stellar mass (M_*), specific star formation rate (SFR/M_*), and the PHANGS-JWST cycle of the galaxy. *Cloud properties:* the fraction of flux in all the clouds with respect to the total flux of the galaxy f_{all} , the fraction of flux in the clouds after flagging and used in the analysis f_{flg} , median cloud surface density (Σ_{mol}), equivalent radius of the cloud (R_{eq}), and molecular mass (M_{mol}). The 84 - 50 and 50 - 16 percentiles are shown in superscript and subscript, respectively.

Appendix C: Catalog information

Table C.1. The PAH cloud catalog columns and their descriptions.

Catalogue Column	Variable	Description
<i>ID</i>		ID of the cloud in a specific galaxy
<i>galaxy</i>		The galaxy of a specific cloud
<i>pos_ra</i>		Right Ascension of the cloud (degrees)
<i>pos_dec</i>		Declination of the cloud (degrees)
<i>pos_x</i>		x position of the cloud (pixels)
<i>pos_y</i>		y position of the cloud (pixels)
<i>SD_sl</i>	Σ_{mol}	Molecular mass surface density of the cloud using the Schinnerer & Leroy (2024) α_{CO} prescription ($\text{M}_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$)
<i>SD_b</i>	Σ_{mol}	Molecular mass surface density of the cloud using the Bolatto et al. (2013) α_{CO} prescription ($\text{M}_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$)
<i>SD_s</i>	Σ_{mol}	Molecular mass surface density of the cloud using the Sun et al. (2020a) α_{CO} prescription ($\text{M}_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$)
<i>SD_t</i>	Σ_{mol}	Molecular mass surface density of the cloud using the Teng et al. (2024) α_{CO} prescription ($\text{M}_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$)
<i>SD_cst</i>	Σ_{mol}	Molecular mass surface density of the cloud using a constant MW α_{CO} prescription ($\text{M}_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$)
<i>mass_sl</i>	M_{mol}	Molecular mass of the cloud using Schinnerer & Leroy (2024) α_{CO} prescription (M_{\odot})
<i>mass_b</i>	M_{mol}	Molecular mass of the cloud using Bolatto et al. (2013) α_{CO} prescription (M_{\odot})
<i>mass_s</i>	M_{mol}	Molecular mass of the cloud using Sun et al. (2020a) α_{CO} prescription (M_{\odot})
<i>mass_t</i>	M_{mol}	Molecular mass of the cloud using Teng et al. (2024) α_{CO} prescription (M_{\odot})
<i>mass_cst</i>	M_{mol}	Molecular mass of the cloud using a constant MW α_{CO} prescription (M_{\odot})
<i>Lpah</i>		PAH luminosity of the cloud ($\text{MJy sr}^{-1} \text{pc}^2$)
<i>Lco</i>		PAH-to-CO converted luminosity of the cloud ($\text{K km s}^{-1} \text{pc}^2$)
<i>err_Lpah</i>		Error on the PAH luminosity of the cloud ($\text{MJy sr}^{-1} \text{pc}^2$)
<i>err_Lco</i>		Error on the PAH-to-CO converted luminosity of the cloud ($\text{K km s}^{-1} \text{pc}^2$)
<i>rad</i>	R	Radius of the cloud using a HWHM factor of 1.18 (pc)
<i>rad_eq</i>		Radius of the cloud using the area of the cloud (pc)
<i>rad_eq_dec</i>	R_{eq}	Beam-deconvolved radius of the cloud using the area of the cloud (pc)
<i>rad_err_fin</i>		Error on the radius of the cloud using the area of the cloud (pc)
<i>rad_dec_err_fin</i>	R_{eq}	Error on the Beam-deconvolved radius of the cloud using the area of the cloud (pc)
<i>mass_err_fin</i>		Error on the mass of the cloud. Add <i>_sl</i> in the end or the other α_{CO} prescription notations (e.g., s, b, t, cst) to specify the error on the corresponding α_{CO} prescription mass (M_{\odot})
<i>SD_err_fin</i>		Error on the molecular mass surface density of the cloud. Add <i>_sl</i> in the end or the other α_{CO} prescription notations (e.g., s, b, t, cst) to specify the error on the corresponding α_{CO} prescription mass ($\text{M}_{\odot} \text{pc}^{-2}$)
<i>Distance</i>	R_{gal}	Distance from the cloud to the center of the galaxy (kpc)
<i>Distance_Re</i>	R_{gal}	Distance from the cloud to the center of the galaxy (R_e)
<i>Env</i>		Galactic environment of the cloud (1 = Center, 2 + 3 = Bar, 5 + 6 = Spiral Arm, 9 + 10 = Disc, 4 + 7 + 8 = Interarm)
<i>overlap_ratio_all</i>		The percentage overlap of the cloud in velocity space
<i>edge_clouds</i>		Flag to check if the cloud is on the edge of the FOV (1 = edge, 0 = non-edge)
<i>f_all</i>	f_{all}	Flag to remove clouds according to our flagging method (set = True to remove)

We publish two catalogs, one at the native resolution and sensitivity of each galaxy and another at the homogenized resolution of 30 pc and a common sensitivity of 0.19 MJy sr^{-1} . The M_{mol} estimates using the different prescriptions are calculated for all the clouds in the different galaxies, except for two galaxies (NGC 4424 and NGC 4694) using the [Teng et al. \(2024\)](#) prescription.

The native resolution sample comprises 146,040 PAH clouds, and 108,019 clouds after flagging using f_{all} . The min_npix is set to be $3 \times \Omega_{\text{beam}}/\Omega_{\text{pix}}$, instead of $1 \times \Omega_{\text{beam}}/\Omega_{\text{pix}}$ for this sample. This measure was taken to decrease the segmentation error on the smallest structures. Additionally, the scaling parameter implementation is similar to the homogenized sample.

Appendix D: Additional Plots

Appendix D.1: Galaxy-by-galaxy property plots

Fig. D.1. Summary of galaxy-by-galaxy properties. The plots will be presented with an attached link: [Temp Link](#). *Top left:* The continuum-subtracted images of the galaxy. *Top right:* The identified PAH clouds using SCIMES. The flagged clouds are in grey, non-flagged in green, and PAH clouds with CO cloud counterparts in red. *Middle left:* Σ_{mol} violin plots per galactic environment for the specific galaxy (transparent), and the full sample (colored). The median values and number of PAH clouds per environment are also represented in the plot. *Middle center:* $\log(M_{\text{mol}})$ - $\log(R_{\text{eq}})$ scaling relation for the PAH clouds in the galaxy (blue), clouds per galactic environment in the galaxy (see colors in plot), and for the full sample (black). The median values are also represented in the plot per galactic environment. *Middle right:* The global mass spectra (black), galaxy-specific mass spectra (blue), and per galactic environment in the galaxy. The fit values for the galaxy-specific mass spectra are displayed in the plot. *Bottom:* The Σ_{mol} (left), M_{mol} (center), and R_{eq} (right) as a function of R_{gal} . A scatterplot of the PAH clouds, colored by the density of clouds, is also represented in the plots. The running galaxy median (filled blue circles) is plotted for a bin width of $0.1 R_e$. The grey-shaded region represents the interquartile range of the medians per galaxy. The error bars on the median are the standard errors ($1.253\sigma/\sqrt{N}$), where N is the number of clouds contributing to a specific bin. The blue and black dashed lines represent the median property of the galaxy and the full sample, respectively.

Appendix D.2: Galaxy-by-galaxy cloud property distribution as a function of galactocentric radius

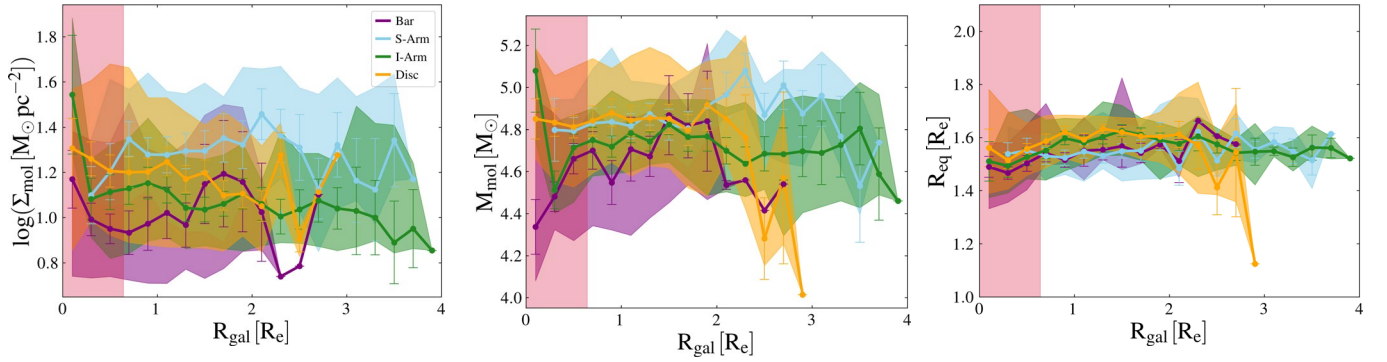


Fig. D.2. Properties of the PAH clouds vs galactocentric radius per environment for all the clouds in the 66 galaxies: Σ_{mol} (left), M_{mol} (middle), and R_{eq} (right). The running median property per galaxy median (dashed line) is plotted for a bin width of $0.2 R_e$. The shaded region represents the 84-50 and 50-16th percentiles of the medians per galaxy. The error bars on the median are the standard errors ($1.253\sigma/\sqrt{N}$), where N is the number of galaxies contributing to a specific bin.

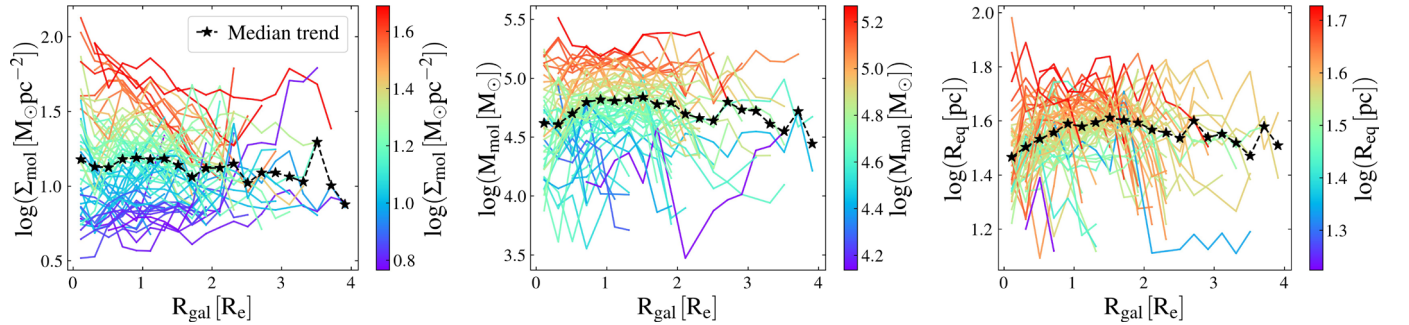


Fig. D.3. Properties of the PAH clouds vs galactocentric radius per environment for all the clouds in the 66 galaxies: Σ_{mol} (left), M_{mol} (middle), and R_{eq} (right). The running median property per galaxy median (dashed line) is plotted for a bin width of $0.2 R_e$. In each plot, we color-code the individual galaxy trends by the median of the property.

Here, we present the radial profiles per environment. In Sect. 5.4, we presented the global trends and showed that R_{eq} shows a flat profile and the Σ_{mol} radial profile is slightly decreasing. Fig. D.2 further shows that R_{eq} is also flat per environment with a slight decrease after $2 R_e$ for interarm clouds. The M_{mol} and Σ_{mol} profiles generally show a decreasing trend per environment after $0.5 R_e$.

The individual-galaxy radial profiles are shown in Fig. D.3. The trends largely vary per galaxy. However, the consensus is a decreasing M_{mol} and Σ_{mol} profile after $0.5 R_e$. Upon adding the flagged clouds or adopting another α_{CO} prescription (e.g., only metallicity dependent, or a constant α_{CO}), we notice a bump in the M_{mol} and Σ_{mol} profiles toward central regions due to higher α_{CO} values and the addition of overlapping structure, which mostly affects central regions. This confirms a general declining M_{mol} and Σ_{mol} radial profiles.

Appendix D.3: Galaxy-by-galaxy mass spectra

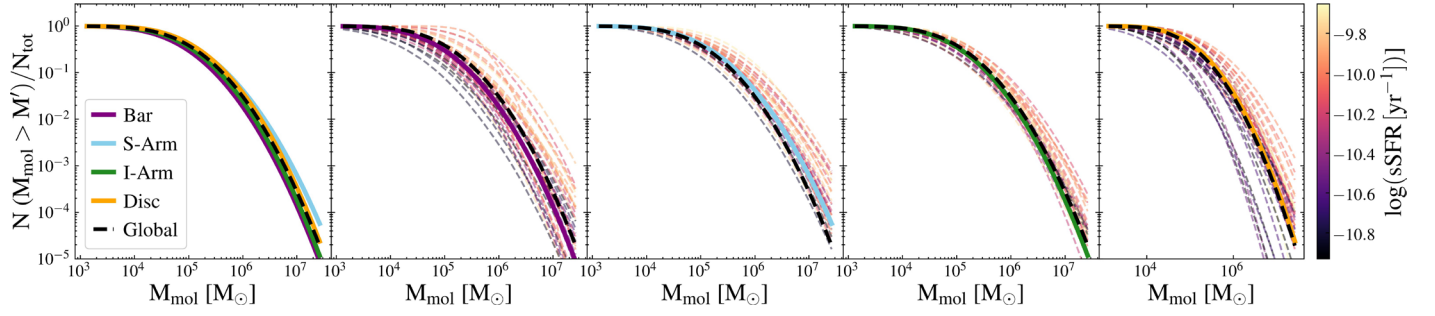


Fig. D.4. Normalized survival function fits for PAH clouds in different environments. The block dashed black curve represents the fit for all the clouds, and the other block curves are for all clouds in a specific environment, as labeled (i.e., Bar in Purple, Spiral arm in light blue, Inter-arm in green, and Disc in yellow). The color-coded by sSFR dashed curves are the galaxy-by-galaxy per environment (depending on the block curves) fits.

Appendix D.4: Mass-radius relationship

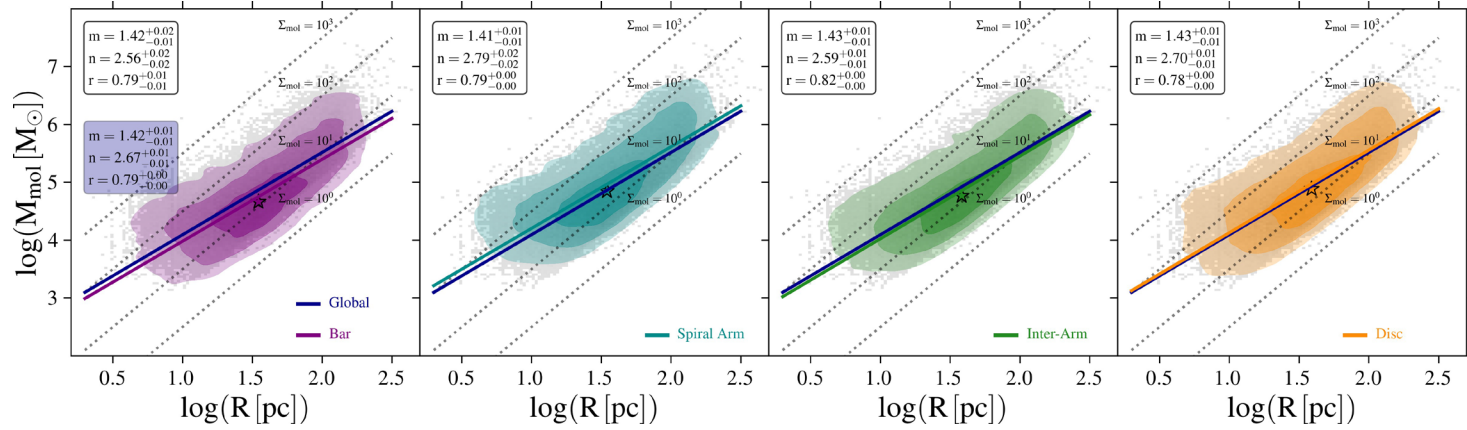


Fig. D.5. $\log(M_{\text{mol}})$ - $\log(R_{\text{eq}})$ scaling relation for the clouds in the different environments. Colored density contours represent 1, 2, and 3 sigma contours in their corresponding galactic environments, and the stars show the median values. The slope and intercept are given by “m” and “n”, respectively, and the correlation coefficient is given by “r”. The 2D histogram of the full sample is shown in grey. The blue line represents the linear regression for the clouds regardless of environment, and its fit parameters are represented in the blue box in the leftmost plot. The diagonal dotted lines represent constant Σ_{mol} lines at 10^0 , 10^1 , 10^2 and $10^3 \text{ M}_{\odot} \text{ pc}^{-2}$.

The mass-radius relationship is shown in Fig. D.5 for the full “Global” cloud sample and the clouds per galactic environment. We compare the distribution to constant Σ_{mol} lines plotted and notice that a significant number of clouds exist at the typical observed $\Sigma_{\text{mol}} \sim 10 \text{ M}_{\odot} \text{ pc}^{-2}$, which corresponds to the peak of the lognormal column density distribution in the F770W band ($\sim 10^{21} \text{ cm}^{-2}$; Pathak et al. 2024). However, these clouds appear to span over all R_{eq} , similar to the clouds in regions above $10 \text{ M}_{\odot} \text{ pc}^{-2}$.

We fit a linear regression using *linmix*¹³ and take the median values of the fit parameters with errors as 84th - 50th and 50th - 16th percentiles. Generally, the slopes are similar in each galactic environment, and the spiral arm clouds are located at higher M_{mol} and Σ_{mol} values compared to the other environments (see Fig. D.5).

¹³ <https://linmix.readthedocs.io/en/latest/>

Appendix D.5: Correlations

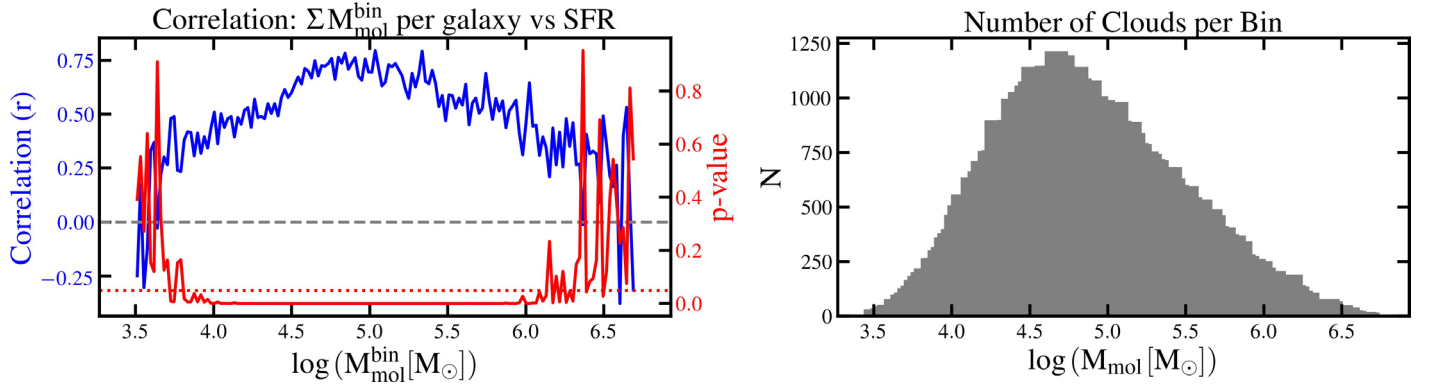


Fig. D.6. *Left:* Spearman correlation coefficient (solid blue) and the corresponding probability values (solid red) between the sum of the binned cloud M_{mol} ($M_{\text{mol}}^{\text{bin}}$) and global SFR per galaxy. The red dotted line indicates a probability value of 0.05, while the gray dashed line marks a correlation coefficient of zero. *Right:* the number of clouds per bin.

Appendix D.6: The scaling parameter

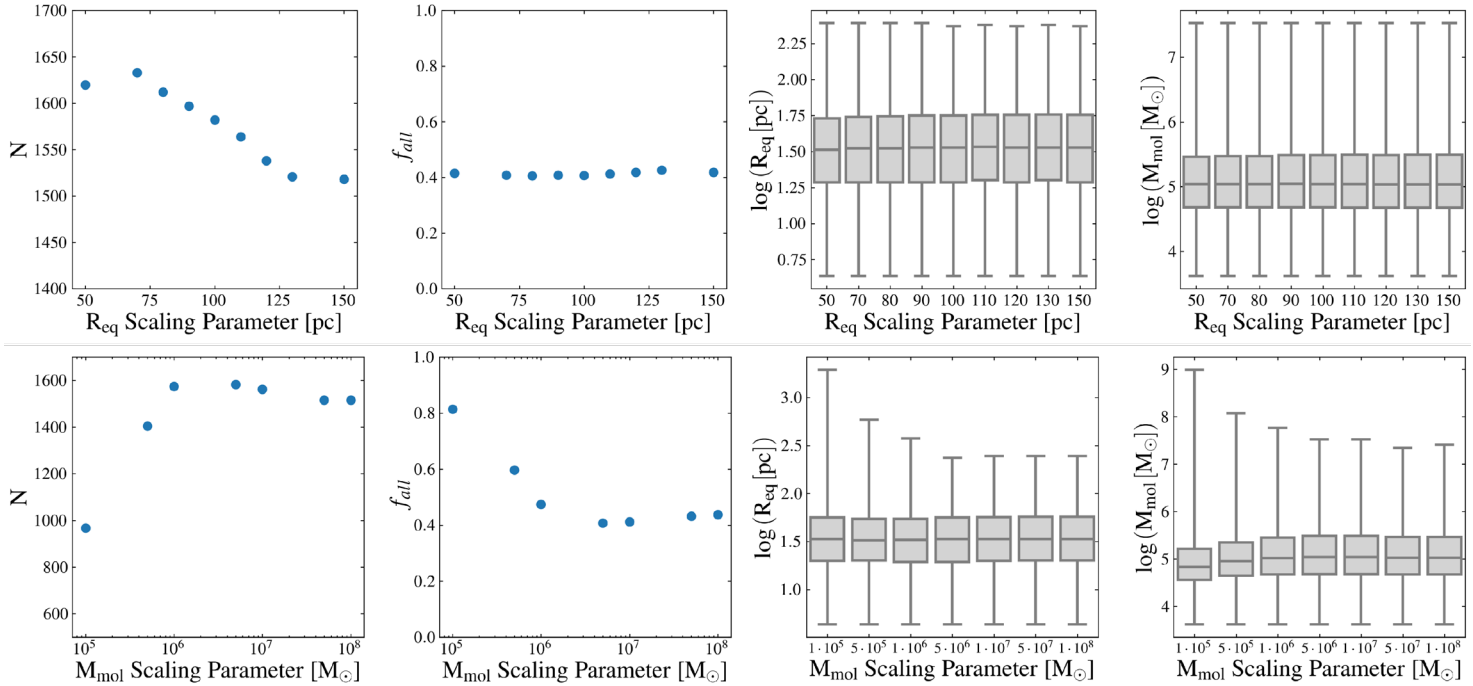


Fig. D.7. *Top row:* Variation of the total number of clouds (N), the flux within the clouds relative to the total flux (f_{all}), the equivalent radius of the clouds (R_{eq}), and the molecular mass of the clouds (M_{mol}) as a function of a varying radius scaling parameter from 50 to 150 pc, assuming a constant M_{mol} scaling parameter of $5 \times 10^6 M_{\odot}$. *Bottom row:* Same as the top row but with a varying M_{mol} scaling parameter between 10^5 and $10^8 M_{\odot}$, assuming a constant R_{eq} scaling parameter of 100 pc. Box plots represent the median and the interquartile range of their distributions, and the whiskers cover the rest of the distribution. All results are shown for NGC 1385.

We tested how changing the scaling parameters in SCIMES for both R_{eq} and M_{mol} affects the way clouds are grouped, as well as how it impacts the size and mass distributions of the clouds. Figure D.7 shows that when we keep the M_{mol} scaling parameter at $5 \times 10^6 M_{\odot}$ and adjust the R_{eq} parameter between 50 and 150 pc, the total number of identified clouds changes by only about 3 % compared to our default setup, where R_{eq} is set at 100 pc and M_{mol} at $5 \times 10^6 M_{\odot}$. Even with this slight change in cloud numbers, the recovered flux and the distributions of R_{eq} and M_{mol} remain steady and follow the same general pattern.

When we keep R_{eq} fixed at 100 pc and instead vary the M_{mol} scaling parameter, the results stay consistent for clouds with masses above $10^6 M_{\odot}$, similar to what we saw when adjusting R_{eq} . However, setting the M_{mol} parameter too low (below $10^5 M_{\odot}$) or too high (over $10^8 M_{\odot}$) causes clustering problems. In these cases, the algorithm either picks up too few clusters, leaving behind massive structures that stretch across large regions like spiral arms (as seen with the $10^5 M_{\odot}$ case), or it allows these large regions to stay grouped because of the high scaling parameter.

Appendix D.7: Cloud radius prescription

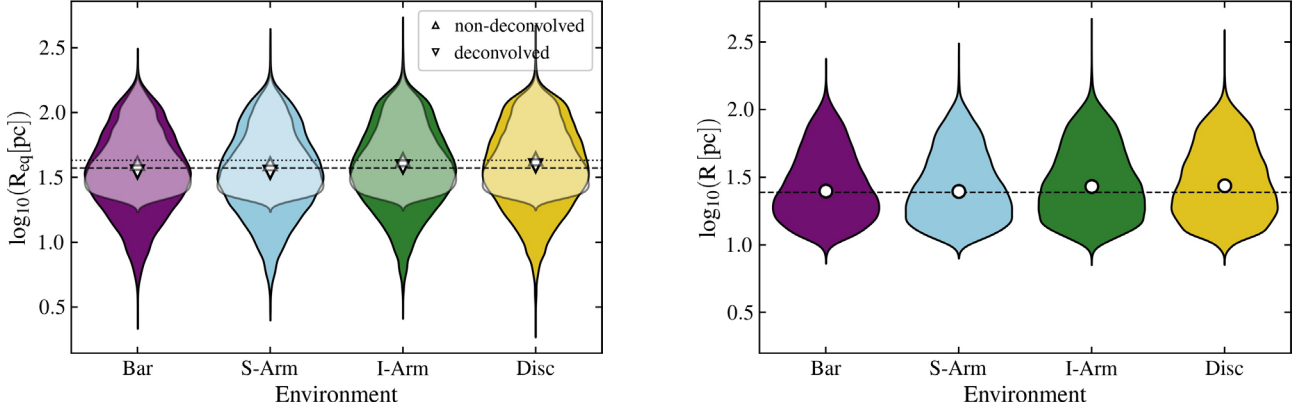


Fig. D.8. *Left:* The PAH cloud radius using the area of the cloud across different galactic environments. The beam-deconvolved radii are represented in the colored violins, and the non-deconvolved radii are shown in the transparent violins. The dashed and dotted lines are the medians of the deconvolved and non-deconvolved radii, respectively. *Right:* The radii of the clouds using second-moment measurements across different galactic environments. The dashed line is the second-moment radius median.

The radius of the clouds can be assessed by two different measurements (see Fig. D.8 and Sect. 4). In this paper, we recommend the usage of R_{eq} as it could be directly inferred from the number of pixels within the clouds. We applied the beam deconvolution using a Gaussian beam, which led to some inaccuracies in the measurement of R_{eq} . However, this is an effort to remove the beam contribution. The median R_{eq} across the sample is $37.4^{+46.3}_{-20.0}$ pc (medians with the 84th - 50th percentile and 50th - 16th percentile displayed in superscript and subscript for the full cloud distribution). For comparison, the median non-deconvolved radius is $42.6^{+43.5}_{-15.8}$ pc, and the median radius based on the second spatial moment is $24.3^{+31.1}_{-11.5}$ pc. We emphasize that our main results are robust to the choice of radius definition, and adopting any of these estimates does not alter the conclusions of our analysis.

Appendix D.8: F1130W and F770W comparison

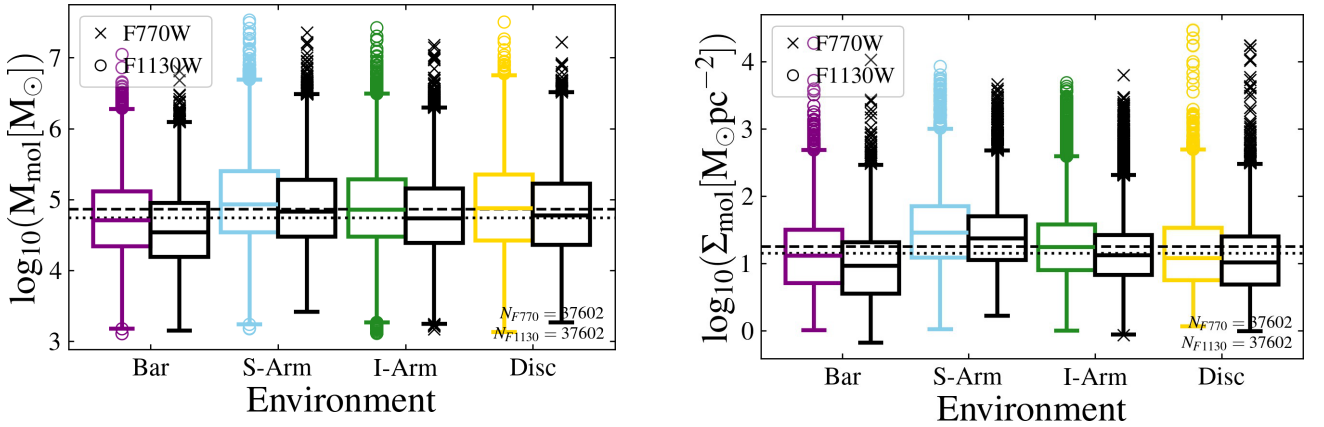


Fig. D.9. M_{mol} and Σ_{mol} of the PAH clouds according to the F1130W (colored) and F770W (black) in 20 galaxies. The dotted line is the median property for the F770W band, and the dashed line is the median property for the F1130W band. The total number of clouds is displayed in the lower right of the plots.

The results presented in our analysis are consistent when considering another band. In this section, we compare cloud properties using both F770W and F1130W bands at homogenized physical resolutions for the 20 galaxies that have F1130W observations in the PHANGS-JWST sample. The difference between the molecular properties of the clouds extracted using Chown et al. (2025) prescriptions between the F770W and F1130W (Eq. C2 in Chown et al. 2025) bands is only ~ 0.1 dex as seen in Fig. D.9. This minimal effect discrepancy between both bands could be due to stellar continuum emission that plays a minimal role in the F1130W hence it is not subtracted. It is worth noting however that the F1130W band also traces more neutral PAHs than the F770W band that traces ionized PAHs mainly. This could create further differences toward central regions of the galaxies.