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Measurement of D^0 meson photoproduction in ultraperipheral heavy ion collisions

The CMS Collaboration*

Abstract

This Letter reports the first measurement of photonuclear D^0 meson production in ultraperipheral heavy ion collisions. The study is performed using lead-lead collision data, with an integrated luminosity of 1.34 nb^{-1} , collected by the CMS experiment at a nucleon-nucleon center-of-mass energy of 5.36 TeV. Photonuclear events, where one of the colliding nuclei breaks up and the other remains intact, are selected based on breakup neutron emissions and by requiring no particle activity in a large rapidity interval in the direction of the photon-emitting nucleus. The D^0 mesons are reconstructed via the $D^0 \rightarrow K^- \pi^+$ decay channel, with the cross section measured as a function of D^0 meson transverse momentum and rapidity. The results are compared with next-to-leading-order perturbative QCD calculations that employ recent parametrizations of the lead nuclear parton distribution functions, as well as with predictions based on the color glass condensate framework. This measurement is the first photonuclear collision study characterizing parton distribution functions of lead nuclei for parton fractional momenta x (relative to the nucleon) ranging approximately from a few 10^{-4} to 10^{-2} for different hard energy scale Q^2 selections.

This work is dedicated to the memory of our colleague and friend, Michele Arneodo. Michele was a generous mentor, a passionate physicist, and a kind soul who inspired both students and collaborators with his wisdom, warmth, and dedication to science. His contributions to diffractive physics and his support for young scientists leave a lasting legacy. He will be deeply missed

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Ultrapерipheral collisions (UPCs) of heavy ions serve as a powerful experimental tool for studying the gluonic structure of nuclei and for probing the evolution equations of quantum chromodynamics (QCD) for partons carrying a small fraction of the nucleon momentum, x [1, 2]. The UPCs occur when the impact parameter of the collision exceeds the sum of the radii of the two nuclei. At ultrarelativistic energies, the Lorentz-contracted electromagnetic fields surrounding the heavy ions act as sources of high-energy quasireal photons, leading to abundant photonuclear interactions. An overview of recent UPC results from CMS can be found in Ref. [3].

For LHC energies in particular, the large flux of high-energy photons results in sizeable cross sections for the production of heavy quarks [4, 5]. Charm photoproduction in UPCs occurs when a quasireal photon emitted from one nucleus interacts with a gluon from the other nucleus, forming a charm quark-antiquark pair ($c\bar{c}$). Measurements of the production yields of charmed hadrons, which result from the hadronization of c quarks, are sensitive to the gluon distribution in the target nucleus [6]. Because of their large masses relative to Λ_{QCD} , the energy scale below which strong coupling becomes large, the production of heavy quarks can be described by perturbative QCD (pQCD) calculations down to zero transverse momentum p_T . In photonuclear events, the energy scale of the interaction (Q^2) and the x value of the scattered partons in the nucleus can be inferred from the transverse momenta and rapidities of the final-state c quarks. Consequently, by measuring charmed meson yields as functions of p_T and rapidity (y) the properties of gluons in the nucleus can be constrained across different x and Q^2 regions. Similarly, jets produced in UPCs have been used to probe the properties of partons in the nucleus [7]. The low particle multiplicities and negligible backgrounds from strong interactions that characterize such events ensure that the fragmentation and hadronization of c quarks in UPCs occur in a vacuum-like environment, without significant modifications caused by the presence of a large number of color-carrying partons [8–12]. Calculations of heavy-quark production in UPCs have so far been performed at leading order in perturbation theory either within the collinear factorization approach [4, 13–15] or using the color glass condensate (CGC) framework [14, 16]. More recently, G γ A-FONLL [5] has extended these studies to next-to-leading-order accuracy within collinear factorization.

In this Letter, we present the first measurement of the photonuclear production cross section of inclusive D^0 mesons (including beauty-hadron decays) in UPCs. The data presented here probe, for the first time in photonuclear collisions, the parton distribution functions of lead nuclei for x ranging from about 3×10^{-4} to 3×10^{-2} and Q^2 from about 18 to 600 GeV². Tabulated results are provided in the HEPDATA record for this analysis [17].

The central feature of the CMS apparatus is a superconducting solenoid of 6 m internal diameter, providing a magnetic field of 3.8 T. Within the solenoid volume are a silicon pixel and strip tracker, a lead tungstate crystal electromagnetic calorimeter, and a brass and scintillator hadron calorimeter, each composed of a barrel and two endcap sections. Forward calorimeters (HF) extend the pseudorapidity (η) coverage provided by the barrel and endcap detectors. The zero degree calorimeters (ZDCs) are used to measure the energy of very forward neutrons produced from nuclear breakup [18, 19]. The ZDCs are located in front of the neutral particle absorber, roughly ± 140 m away from the CMS interaction point, between the two beampipes. They measure neutral particles at $|\eta| > 8.5$. Particles are reconstructed using the CMS particle-flow algorithm [20] which combines the information of the different subdetectors to determine the kinematics of each event. The CMS experiment uses a two-tiered trigger system [21]. The first level (Level-1 or L1) comprises custom hardware processors and uses fast information from the calorimeters and the muon system to achieve the first significant data rate reduction. The second level, i.e., the high-level trigger, implements a simplified version of the CMS offline reconstruction software running on a computer farm and can perform more refined selections.

A more detailed description of the CMS detector, together with a definition of the coordinate system used and the relevant kinematic variables, can be found in Ref. [22]. Details of the CMS detector configuration at the time of this measurement can be found in Ref. [23].

The analysis uses the lead-lead (PbPb) data set, corresponding to a recorded integrated luminosity of about 1.34 nb^{-1} , collected in 2023 at a nucleon-nucleon center-of-mass energy of 5.36 TeV. The photonuclear production of D^0 mesons in the p_T range 2–5 GeV is measured using a sample of events triggered by a signal in at least one of the ZDCs that is greater than or equal to the 1-neutron (1n) threshold (inclusively referred to as Xn). A dedicated L1 trigger algorithm requiring an Xn signal in one ZDC and the absence of signal in the other (0n), in coincidence with an L1 jet with energy above 8 GeV, was used to enrich the sample of D^0 mesons with $p_T > 5 \text{ GeV}$. In this Letter, the notation Xn0n (0nXn) indicates that the outgoing lead-ion at negative (positive) rapidities breaks up. Offline, events are required to have one primary vertex, formed by at least two tracks and located within 15 cm of the nominal interaction region along the beamline. Events must additionally fulfill selection criteria intended to reject beam-gas interactions and accelerator-induced backgrounds [24]. To suppress residual contamination from hadronic events, a large rapidity gap is required on the side of the outgoing intact nucleus which emitted the photon, following previous analyses [7, 25, 26]. This condition is satisfied if no particle-flow candidate with energy above the noise threshold is detected in the η range of the HF calorimeter ($3.0 < |\eta| < 5.2$). An energy threshold of 9.2 (8.6) GeV is applied to the HF detector at positive (negative) η , with values optimized according to each detector's performance. Monte Carlo (MC) simulations are used to estimate signal efficiency, detector acceptance, and some background sources. Photonuclear events are generated with PYTHIA version 8.309 [27], with default photon flux settings for Pb ions acting as a source of quasireal photons in the equivalent photon approximation [28]. The events include direct and resolved photoproduction processes, with the photon PDF modeled using the Cornet-Jankowski-Krawczyk-Lorca, or CJKL, parametrization [29], and the lead nuclear PDF (nPDF) parametrized by EPPS21 [30]. Both promptly ($c \rightarrow D^0$) and nonpromptly ($b \rightarrow D^0$) produced D^0 mesons are included in the simulation. The events are propagated through the CMS detector with GEANT4 [31], with D^0 meson decays simulated using EVTGEN 2.0.0 [32], and final-state photon radiation modeled by PHOTOS 2.0 [33].

The D^0 mesons and their charge conjugates ($\bar{D}^0$ mesons) are reconstructed via the hadronic decay channel $D^0 \rightarrow K^- \pi^+$, following a strategy similar to that discussed in Ref. [34]. Only D^0 candidates with daughter tracks satisfying high-purity selection criteria [35], along with the conditions $p_T > 1 \text{ GeV}$ and $|\eta| < 2.4$ are considered. The D^0 candidates are then reconstructed by combining pairs of oppositely charged tracks with an invariant mass within 185 MeV of the world-average D^0 meson mass of 1868.48 MeV [36]. This range provides a handle to constrain the modeling of the backgrounds described later in this Letter. For each track pair, two D^0 candidates are created by assigning pion and kaon masses to the tracks in both possible combinations. To reduce the combinatorial background, the D^0 meson candidates are selected based on the value of four topological variables (where the selection value used depends on the p_T and y of the candidate): the three-dimensional decay length normalized to its uncertainty (required to be larger than 2.5–3.5), the pointing angle defined as the angle between the total momentum vector of the tracks and the vector connecting the primary and the secondary vertices (required to be smaller than 0.25–0.50 rad), the opening angle between the two daughter tracks (required to be smaller than 0.3–0.5 rad), and the χ^2 probability of the D^0 vertex fit [37] (p-value required to be larger than 0.1). The selection is optimized in each p_T bin to maximize the expected statistical significance of the D^0 meson signal. The D^0 meson yields are extracted in three different p_T intervals (2–5, 5–8, and 8–12 GeV). Four rapidity intervals ($-2 < y < -1$,

$-1 < y < 0$, $0 < y < 1$, and $1 < y < 2$) are used for D^0 mesons in bins with $p_T > 5$ GeV, whereas a single rapidity interval ($-1 < y < 1$) is used for p_T interval 2–5 GeV. The D^0 yields are extracted using an unbinned maximum likelihood fit to the invariant mass distributions in the range $1.68 < m_{K\pi} < 2.05$ GeV. The yields are determined separately for the Xn0n and 0nXn event categories. In Xn0n events, the incoming photon-emitting nucleus originates from negative rapidities (γN), whereas in 0nXn events it comes from positive rapidities ($N\gamma$). An example of the D^0 invariant mass distribution is shown in Fig. 1.

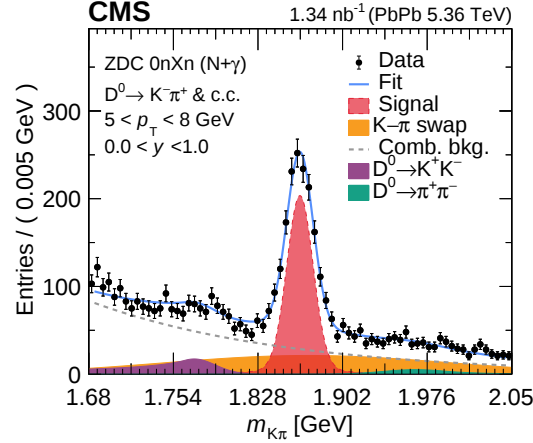


Figure 1: Invariant mass distribution of D^0 mesons with $5 < p_T < 8$ GeV and $0.0 < y < 1.0$. The description of the fit template is provided in the text.

The combinatorial background, arising from track pairs unrelated to genuine D^0 meson decays, is modeled with an exponential function whose slope and normalization are determined from the fit. The signal shape consists of a superposition of two Gaussian functions sharing the same mean but differing in width, a choice made in earlier CMS publications that models the mass peak well [34]. An additional Gaussian function models the invariant mass of D^0 candidates with incorrect mass assignment, for which the mass hypothesis for the pion and kaon are interchanged. The widths of the Gaussian functions for both the D^0 signal and the swapped mass candidates are constrained using MC simulation. A floating multiplicative scaling factor for the width of the distribution is included in the fit to account for potential discrepancies in the signal resolution between data and MC. The ratio of the signal yield to the yield of D^0 candidates with swapped mass assignments is fixed based on MC simulation. A Crystal Ball function is used to describe the peaking backgrounds from the decays $D^0 \rightarrow K^+ K^-$ and $D^0 \rightarrow \pi^+ \pi^-$ [36], with its parameters and the ratio of its integral to the $D^0 \rightarrow K^-\pi^+$ yield also fixed according to MC simulations. Of the eighteen fits for each D^0 p_T and y bin in Xn0n and 0nXn events, seventeen result in p-values greater than 0.05, and one has p-value of ~ 0.01 . This distribution of p-values is consistent with statistical expectations.

The yields extracted from the fit are corrected for the average trigger prescale factor (applied to reduce the data rate resulting from the high instantaneous luminosity of the LHC), the trigger efficiency, and the efficiency of the offline event selection. The jet trigger efficiency correction is evaluated in intervals of D^0 p_T and rapidity with a two-step procedure. First, the efficiency of the L1 jet selection is evaluated as a function of the leading-track p_T and η with a sample of inclusive photonuclear events. The efficiency map is then used to reweight, on an event-by-event basis, the uncorrected distributions of D^0 meson candidates obtained via the triggered sample in intervals of D^0 p_T and y . The resulting jet trigger efficiency ranges from 21 to 28%, depending on the rapidity, for D^0 mesons in the transverse momentum range $5 < p_T < 8$ GeV, to 46–54% in the $8 < p_T < 12$ GeV range (no jet trigger is used for $2 < p_T < 5$ GeV). The event

selection efficiency, which includes the effect of losses from the rapidity gap and primary vertex requirements, exceeds 98% across all rapidity and p_T intervals, with comparable values for direct and resolved photoproduction. An additional correction accounts for soft electromagnetic interactions from independent PbPb collisions within the same bunch crossing (electromagnetic pileup), which may cause neutron emission from the photon-emitting nucleus, thereby reducing the ZDC Xn0n (or 0nXn) selection efficiency. The correction factor (about 0.96) is estimated from the average amount of pileup interactions in PbPb collisions and the cross section for single and double electromagnetic dissociation (EMD) [7, 38]. The acceptance and reconstruction efficiency of D^0 candidates is evaluated as a function of the D^0 p_T and y , and ranges from 5% for $2 < p_T < 5$ GeV to 25% for $8 < p_T < 12$ GeV.

The measured cross section is subject to several systematic uncertainties arising from the signal extraction, acceptance and reconstruction efficiency, offline selection, trigger selection, branching fraction of the $D^0 \rightarrow K^- \pi^+$ decay channel, and integrated luminosity determination. The uncertainty in the rapidity-gap selection efficiency is evaluated by varying the energy threshold for the particle-flow candidates used to determine the presence of a gap between 5 and 15 GeV, resulting in an uncertainty of 7–23%. The correction for the inefficiency induced by electromagnetic pileup is found to have an uncertainty of 4%. The uncertainty due to the background modeling in the fit is estimated by repeating the fit with different functions for the background. The signal shape is also varied by forcing the means and widths (each separately) of the Gaussian functions that describe the signal to be equal to the values extracted in simulations; these three fit variations result in an uncertainty of 3–20% depending on the D^0 p_T and y . In the background variation study, a second-order Chebyshev polynomial function is used. The uncertainty in the signal yield coming from the modeling of the $D^0 \rightarrow K^+ K^-$ and $\pi^+ \pi^-$ peaks is estimated from MC to be about 13%. The final uncertainty in the extracted yield is evaluated as the quadratic sum of all the individual uncertainties.

Dedicated studies are conducted to estimate the effects of the differences in the properties of signal events in data and simulation. Specifically, to evaluate the impact of the discrepancies in the distributions of the D^0 meson selection variables, the corrected yields obtained by varying each topological selection are studied. Topological selections are relaxed in a range such that signal events can still be extracted with good statistical significance. The final uncertainty is evaluated as the quadratic sum of the differences between the cross sections obtained when varying each selection and the nominal one (2–15%). The difference between the D^0 meson reconstruction and selection efficiencies evaluated in direct- and resolved-photon events is taken to account for the differences in the relative abundance of the two classes of signal events in simulation and data; the resulting effect is 1–5%. An analogous systematic uncertainty is included to account for differences in the fraction of prompt D^0 mesons (f_{prompt}) between data and simulation. This uncertainty is evaluated by reweighting the MC-based efficiency for prompt and nonprompt D^0 mesons according to the f_{prompt} value extracted from the data. The extraction relies on the difference between prompt and nonprompt events in the distribution of the D^0 meson candidate's distance of closest approach, defined as the decay length multiplied by the sine of the pointing angle. The associated uncertainty is approximately 5% across all p_T and y intervals.

The D^0 selection and reconstruction efficiency also depends on the distribution of the D^0 mesons in p_T and y , as well as on the event multiplicity; this is because the single-track reconstruction efficiency decreases in events with more tracks. The MC samples are reweighted to two alternative distributions, one based on fixed-order-next-to-leading logarithmic (FONLL) calculations and the other on data after accounting for EMD. The charged-hadron multiplicity is also reweighted to match that in data. These variations of the D^0 meson reconstruction and iden-

tification efficiency result in a systematic uncertainty of 7% or less. The uncertainty due to the D^0 trigger efficiency is found to be about 20% in the p_T bins where the jet trigger is used. The systematic uncertainty in the hadron tracking efficiency (2.3% per track) is taken from the analysis of the proton-proton collision samples collected in 2022–2023 with comparable detector conditions to those of the current data set [39]. The systematic uncertainty associated with the branching fraction is 0.76% [36], and the uncertainty in the integrated luminosity is 6.4% [40].

All systematic uncertainties are treated as symmetric. The total systematic uncertainty in the cross section measurement is computed as the sum in quadrature of the different contributions mentioned above, and is found to range from ~ 26 –48%, depending on the D^0 meson y and p_T . The dominant source of systematic uncertainties in the 2–5 GeV bin is associated with the modeling of $D^0 \rightarrow K^+K^-$ and $\pi^+\pi^-$ decays, the change to a Chebyshev polynomial in modeling the background, and the variation of the pointing angle selection. For 5–8 and 8–12 GeV, the systematic uncertainties are dominated by the trigger and rapidity gap thresholds uncertainties, in addition to the modeling of the $D^0 \rightarrow K^+K^-$ and $\pi^+\pi^-$ decays. Each source of systematic uncertainty is assumed to be fully correlated across bins, whereas the statistical uncertainties are treated as uncorrelated.

In Fig. 2, the D^0 meson production cross section in $Xn0n$ and rapidity-reflected $0nXn$ events is shown (black markers) as a function of the D^0 rapidity in p_T intervals. The cross section is divided by a factor of two to average the contributions of D^0 and $\bar{D}^0$ mesons. Vertical bars indicate the statistical uncertainties, while brackets represent the systematic ones. Forward (positive) rapidities probe smaller values of x , whereas backward (negative) rapidities are sensitive to larger x . Likewise, low- p_T D^0 mesons correspond to lower Q^2 values, whereas high- p_T hadrons probe the nPDFs at higher Q^2 . A qualitative estimate of the kinematic region probed in each D^0 meson p_T and y interval can be obtained by approximating Q^2 as $p_{T,c}^2 + m_c^2$, and the parton longitudinal momentum fraction in the nucleus as $x \approx e^{-y} \sqrt{Q^2/s_{NN}}$, where $\sqrt{s_{NN}}$ is the nucleon-nucleon center-of-mass energy. Assuming the heavy-flavor hadron carries about half of the parent charm-quark momentum, a D^0 meson produced with $p_T = 2$ GeV at $y = 1$ probes partons with $x \approx 3 \times 10^{-4}$ at a hard scale $Q^2 \approx 18 \text{ GeV}^2$. Conversely, a D^0 meson produced with $p_T = 12$ GeV at $y = -2$ probes partons with $x \approx 0.03$ at $Q^2 \approx 600 \text{ GeV}^2$. Further details on the x and Q^2 coverage of this measurement are given in Ref. [5].

The measurements are compared with recent pQCD calculations from $G\gamma$ A-FONLL [5], a framework that builds on FONLL [41–43] to model heavy-quark production in photonuclear collisions and employs photon-flux reweighting to reproduce the flux properties expected in UPCs. The predictions include corrections for the EMD survival probability of the photon-emitting nucleus [44]. The subpanels of Fig. 2 display the theory-to-data ratios obtained with lead nPDFs from EPPS21 [30] (middle) and proton PDFs from CT18NLO [45] (bottom). The light blue and red bands represent the uncertainties associated with variations of the FONLL factorization and renormalization scales, while the hatched bands represent the nPDF-parametrization uncertainties. For D^0 mesons with $2 < p_T < 5$ GeV, the theory-to-data ratios obtained with EPPS21 lie slightly above unity (about 1.4). Although still compatible within the combined experimental and theoretical uncertainties, this trend may indicate a stronger nuclear suppression for low- x gluons than predicted. In the highest- p_T interval, $8 < p_T < 12$ GeV, the theory-to-data ratio obtained with EPPS21 remains consistently below unity, at about 0.8–0.9, across the probed D^0 meson rapidity range, indicating that the data slightly exceed the nPDF-based predictions. In the same subpanel, the data are also compared with recent theoretical predictions [16] based on the CGC framework, which relies on nonlinear QCD evolution to model the properties of gluons at low x . The CGC theory-to-data ratio is about 1.2 for D^0 mesons with $2 < p_T < 5$ GeV and $-1 < y < 1$, lying at the upper edge of the measurement.

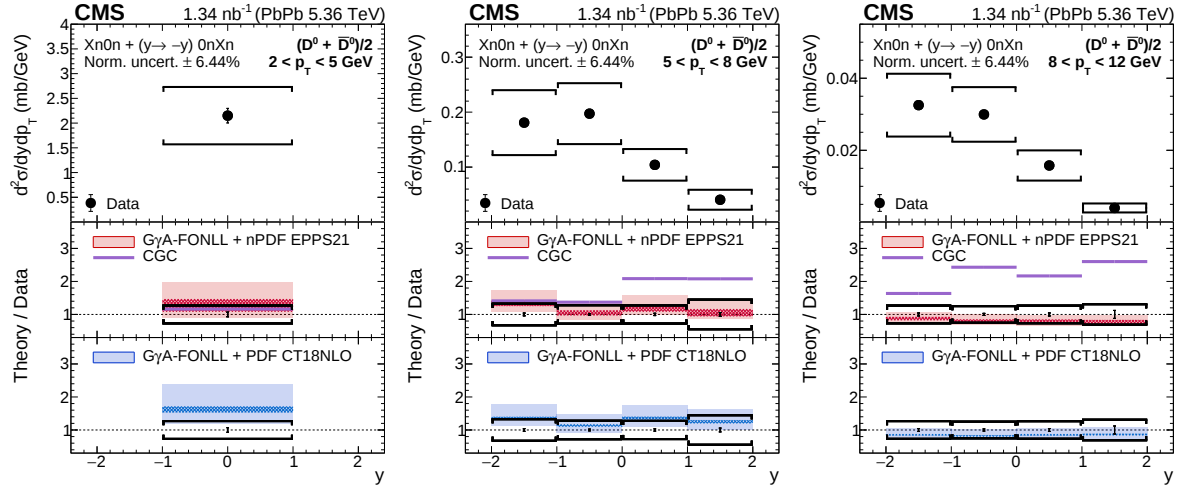


Figure 2: Cross sections for D^0 production in γN events ($Xn0n + 0nXn$) in three p_T intervals. Vertical bars (brackets) indicate statistical (systematic) uncertainties. Sub-panels show theory-over-data ratios: the middle panel compares $G\gamma A$ -FONLL with EPPS21 lead nPDFs and a CGC calculation [16], while the bottom panel shows $G\gamma A$ -FONLL with CT18NLO proton PDFs. Light-shaded bands reflect scale variations, hatched bands represent PDF and nPDF uncertainties. Vertical bars (brackets) represent statistical (systematic) uncertainties on data.

For $p_T > 5$ GeV, the ratio indicates that predictions exceed the data by a factor of 1.5–3. The measurement therefore provides scale-dependent constraints on calculations of charm quark production incorporating nonlinear QCD evolution.

To summarize, this Letter presented the first measurement of the inclusive, prompt and non-prompt, photonuclear D^0 meson cross section as a function of transverse momentum and rapidity in ultraperipheral heavy-ion collisions. Exploiting the clean environment of photonuclear interactions, where final state and hadronization effects are largely reduced compared to hadronic production, this measurement provides novel constraints on nuclear matter over a wide range of parton momentum fraction x and interaction energy scale Q^2 . Comparisons with theory provide discrimination among parton distribution function parametrizations and challenge calculations based on nonlinear quantum chromodynamics evolution at high Q^2 . By demonstrating both its experimental feasibility and theoretical relevance, this study establishes open heavy-flavor production in ultraperipheral LHC collisions as a powerful probe of parton dynamics in nuclei.

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A The CMS Collaboration

Yerevan Physics Institute, Yerevan, Armenia

V. Chekhovsky, A. Hayrapetyan, V. Makarenko , A. Tumasyan¹ 

Institut für Hochenergiephysik, Vienna, Austria

W. Adam , J.W. Andrejkovic, L. Benato , T. Bergauer , K. Damanakis , M. Dragicevic , C. Giordano, P.S. Hussain , M. Jeitler² , N. Krammer , A. Li , D. Liko , I. Mikulec , J. Schieck² , R. Schöfbeck² , D. Schwarz , M. Shooshtari, M. Sonawane , W. Waltenberger , C.-E. Wulz² 

Universiteit Antwerpen, Antwerpen, Belgium

T. Janssen , H. Kwon , T. Van Laer , P. Van Mechelen 

Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussel, Belgium

J. Bierkens , N. Breugelmans, J. D'Hondt , S. Dansana , A. De Moor , M. Delcourt , F. Heyen, Y. Hong , S. Lowette , I. Makarenko , D. Müller , J. Song , S. Tavernier , M. Tytgat³ , G.P. Van Onsem , S. Van Putte , D. Vannerom 

Université Libre de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, Belgium

B. Bilin , B. Clerbaux , A.K. Das, I. De Bruyn , G. De Lentdecker , H. Evard , L. Favart , P. Gianneios , A. Khalilzadeh, F.A. Khan , A. Malara , M.A. Shahzad, L. Thomas , M. Vanden Bemden , C. Vander Velde , P. Vanlaer , F. Zhang 

Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

M. De Coen , D. Dobur , G. Gokbulut , J. Knolle , L. Lambrecht , D. Marckx , K. Skovpen , N. Van Den Bossche , J. van der Linden , J. Vandenbroeck , L. Wezenbeek 

Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

S. Bein , A. Benecke , A. Bethani , G. Bruno , A. Cappati , J. De Favereau De Jeneret , C. Delaere , A. Giammanco , A.O. Guzel , Sa. Jain , V. Lemaitre, J. Lidrych , P. Mastrapasqua , S. Turkcapar 

Centro Brasileiro de Pesquisas Fisicas, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

G.A. Alves , E. Coelho , G. Correia Silva , C. Hensel , T. Menezes De Oliveira , C. Mora Herrera⁴ , P. Rebello Teles , M. Soeiro , E.J. Tonelli Manganote⁵ , A. Vilela Pereira⁴ 

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

W.L. Aldá Júnior , M. Barroso Ferreira Filho , H. Brandao Malbouisson , W. Carvalho , J. Chinellato⁶ , M. Costa Reis , E.M. Da Costa , G.G. Da Silveira⁷ , D. De Jesus Damiao , S. Fonseca De Souza , R. Gomes De Souza , S. S. Jesus , T. Laux Kuhn⁷ , M. Macedo , K. Mota Amarilo , L. Mundim , H. Nogima , J.P. Pinheiro , A. Santoro , A. Sznajder , M. Thiel 

Universidade Estadual Paulista, Universidade Federal do ABC, São Paulo, Brazil

C.A. Bernardes⁷ , L. Calligaris , T.R. Fernandez Perez Tomei , E.M. Gregores , B. Lopes Da Costa , I. Maietto Silverio , P.G. Mercadante , S.F. Novaes , B. Orzari , Sandra S. Padula , V. Scheurer

Institute for Nuclear Research and Nuclear Energy, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria

A. Aleksandrov , G. Antchev , R. Hadjiiska , P. Iaydjiev , M. Misheva , M. Shopova , G. Sultanov 

University of Sofia, Sofia, Bulgaria

A. Dimitrov , L. Litov , B. Pavlov , P. Petkov , A. Petrov , E. Shumka 

Instituto De Alta Investigación, Universidad de Tarapacá, Casilla 7 D, Arica, Chile

S. Keshri , D. Laroze , S. Thakur 

Beihang University, Beijing, China

T. Cheng , T. Javaid , L. Yuan 

Department of Physics, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

Z. Hu , Z. Liang, J. Liu

Institute of High Energy Physics, Beijing, China

G.M. Chen⁸ , H.S. Chen⁸ , M. Chen⁸ , Q. Hou , F. Iemmi , C.H. Jiang, A. Kapoor⁹ , H. Liao , Z.-A. Liu¹⁰ , R. Sharma¹¹ , J.N. Song¹⁰, J. Tao , C. Wang⁸, J. Wang , H. Zhang , J. Zhao 

State Key Laboratory of Nuclear Physics and Technology, Peking University, Beijing, China

A. Agapitos , Y. Ban , A. Carvalho Antunes De Oliveira , S. Deng , B. Guo, Q. Guo, C. Jiang , A. Levin , C. Li , Q. Li , Y. Mao, S. Qian, S.J. Qian , X. Qin, X. Sun , D. Wang , H. Yang, Y. Zhao, C. Zhou 

State Key Laboratory of Nuclear Physics and Technology, Institute of Quantum Matter, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China

S. Yang 

Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China

Z. You 

University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei, China

K. Jaffel , N. Lu 

Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

G. Bauer¹², B. Li¹³, H. Wang , K. Yi¹⁴ , J. Zhang 

Institute of Modern Physics and Key Laboratory of Nuclear Physics and Ion-beam Application (MOE) - Fudan University, Shanghai, China

Y. Li

Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China

Z. Lin , C. Lu , M. Xiao¹⁵ 

Universidad de Los Andes, Bogota, Colombia

C. Avila , D.A. Barbosa Trujillo , A. Cabrera , C. Florez , J. Fraga , J.A. Reyes Vega

Universidad de Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia

J. Jaramillo , C. Rendón , M. Rodriguez , A.A. Ruales Barbosa , J.D. Ruiz Alvarez 

University of Split, Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture, Split, Croatia

N. Godinovic , D. Lelas , A. Sculac 

University of Split, Faculty of Science, Split, Croatia

M. Kovac , A. Petkovic , T. Sculac 

Institute Rudjer Boskovic, Zagreb, Croatia

P. Bargassa , V. Brigljevic , B.K. Chitroda , D. Ferencek , K. Jakovcic, A. Starodumov 

T. Susa 

University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus

A. Attikis , K. Christoforou , A. Hadjiagapiou, C. Leonidou , J. Mousa , C. Nicolaou, L. Paizanos , F. Ptochos , P.A. Razis , H. Rykaczewski, H. Saka , A. Stepennov 

Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

M. Finger , M. Finger Jr. , A. Kveton 

Escuela Politecnica Nacional, Quito, Ecuador

E. Ayala 

Universidad San Francisco de Quito, Quito, Ecuador

E. Carrera Jarrin 

Academy of Scientific Research and Technology of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Egyptian Network of High Energy Physics, Cairo, Egypt

A.A. Abdelalim^{16,17} , S. Elgammal¹⁸, A. Ellithi Kamel¹⁹ 

Center for High Energy Physics (CHEP-FU), Fayoum University, El-Fayoum, Egypt

M. Abdullah Al-Mashad , A. Hussein, M.A. Mahmoud 

National Institute of Chemical Physics and Biophysics, Tallinn, Estonia

K. Ehataht , M. Kadastik, T. Lange , C. Nielsen , J. Pata , M. Raidal , L. Tani , C. Veelken 

Department of Physics, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

K. Osterberg , M. Voutilainen 

Helsinki Institute of Physics, Helsinki, Finland

N. Bin Norjoharuddeen , E. Brücken , F. Garcia , P. Inkaew , K.T.S. Kallonen , T. Lampén , K. Lassila-Perini , S. Lehti , T. Lindén , N.R. Mancilla Xinto , M. Myllymäki , M.m. Rantanen , S. Saariokari , J. Tuominiemi 

Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology, Lappeenranta, Finland

H. Kirschenmann , P. Luukka , H. Petrow 

IRFU, CEA, Université Paris-Saclay, Gif-sur-Yvette, France

M. Besancon , F. Couderc , M. Dejardin , D. Denegri, J.L. Faure , F. Ferri , S. Ganjour , P. Gras , G. Hamel de Monchenault , M. Kumar , V. Lohezic , J. Malcles , F. Orlandi , L. Portales , S. Ronchi , A. Rosowsky , M.Ö. Sahin , A. Savoy-Navarro²⁰ , P. Simkina , M. Titov , M. Tornago 

Laboratoire Leprince-Ringuet, CNRS/IN2P3, Ecole Polytechnique, Institut Polytechnique de Paris, Palaiseau, France

F. Beaudette , G. Boldrini , P. Busson , C. Charlot , M. Chiusi , T.D. Cuisset , F. Damas , O. Davignon , A. De Wit , I.T. Ehle , B.A. Fontana Santos Alves , S. Ghosh , A. Gilbert , R. Granier de Cassagnac , L. Kalipoliti , G. Liu , M. Manoni , M. Nguyen , S. Obraztsov , C. Ochando , R. Salerno , J.B. Sauvan , Y. Sirois , G. Sokmen, L. Urda Gómez , A. Zabi , A. Zghiche 

Université de Strasbourg, CNRS, IPHC UMR 7178, Strasbourg, France

J.-L. Agram²¹ , J. Andrea , D. Bloch , J.-M. Brom , E.C. Chabert , C. Collard , S. Falke , U. Goerlach , R. Haeberle , A.-C. Le Bihan , M. Meena , O. Poncet , G. Saha , M.A. Sessini , P. Vaucelle 

Centre de Calcul de l'Institut National de Physique Nucleaire et de Physique des Particules, CNRS/IN2P3, Villeurbanne, France

A. Di Florio 

Institut de Physique des 2 Infinis de Lyon (IP2I), Villeurbanne, France

D. Amram , S. Beauceron , B. Blancon , G. Boudoul , N. Chanon , D. Contardo , P. Depasse , C. Dozen²² , H. El Mamouni , J. Fay , S. Gascon , M. Gouzevitch , C. Greenberg , G. Grenier , B. Ille , E. Jourdhuy , I.B. Laktineh , M. Lethuillier , L. Mirabito , S. Perries , A. Purohit , M. Vander Donckt , J. Xiao 

Georgian Technical University, Tbilisi, Georgia

D. Chokheli , I. Lomidze , Z. Tsamalaidze²³ 

RWTH Aachen University, I. Physikalisches Institut, Aachen, Germany

V. Botta , S. Consuegra Rodríguez , L. Feld , K. Klein , M. Lipinski , D. Meuser , V. Oppenländer , A. Pauls , D. Pérez Adán , N. Röwert , M. Teroerde 

RWTH Aachen University, III. Physikalisches Institut A, Aachen, Germany

C. Daumann , S. Diekmann , A. Dodonova , N. Eich , D. Eliseev , F. Engelke , J. Erdmann , M. Erdmann , B. Fischer , T. Hebbeker , K. Hoepfner , F. Ivone , A. Jung , N. Kumar , M.y. Lee , F. Mausolf , M. Merschmeyer , A. Meyer , F. Nowotny , A. Pozdnyakov , Y. Rath , W. Redjeb , F. Rehm , H. Reithler , V. Sarkisovi , A. Schmidt , C. Seth , A. Sharma , J.L. Spah , F. Torres Da Silva De Araujo²⁴ , S. Wiedenbeck , S. Zaleski 

RWTH Aachen University, III. Physikalisches Institut B, Aachen, Germany

C. Dziwok , G. Flügge , T. Kress , A. Nowack , O. Pooth , A. Stahl , T. Ziemons , A. Zotz 

Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron, Hamburg, Germany

H. Aarup Petersen , M. Aldaya Martin , J. Alimena , S. Amoroso , Y. An , J. Bach , S. Baxter , M. Bayatmakou , H. Becerril Gonzalez , O. Behnke , A. Belvedere , F. Blekman²⁵ , K. Borras²⁶ , A. Campbell , S. Chatterjee , F. Colombina , M. De Silva , G. Eckerlin , D. Eckstein , E. Gallo²⁵ , A. Geiser , V. Guglielmi , M. Guthoff , A. Hinzmann , L. Jeppe , B. Kaeck , M. Kasemann , C. Kleinwort , R. Kogler , M. Komm , D. Krücker , W. Lange , D. Leyva Pernia , K. Lipka²⁷ , W. Lohmann²⁸ , F. Lorkowski , R. Mankel , I.-A. Melzer-Pellmann , M. Mendizabal Morentin , A.B. Meyer , G. Milella , K. Moral Figueroa , A. Mussgiller , L.P. Nair , J. Niedziela , A. Nürnberg , J. Park , E. Ranken , A. Raspereza , D. Rastorguev , L. Rygaard , M. Scham^{29,26} , S. Schnake²⁶ , P. Schütze , C. Schwanenberger²⁵ , D. Selivanova , K. Sharko , M. Shchedrolosiev , D. Stafford , F. Vazzoler , A. Ventura Barroso , R. Walsh , D. Wang , Q. Wang , K. Wichmann , L. Wiens²⁶ , C. Wissing , Y. Yang , S. Zakharov , A. Zimmermann Castro Santos 

University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

A. Albrecht , M. Antonello , S. Bollweg , M. Bonanomi , K. El Morabit , Y. Fischer , M. Frahm , E. Garutti , A. Grohsjean , J. Haller , D. Hundhausen , H.R. Jabusch , G. Kasieczka , P. Keicher , R. Klanner , W. Korcari , T. Kramer , C.c. Kuo , V. Kutzner , F. Labe , J. Lange , A. Lobanov , C. Matthies , L. Moureaux , M. Mrowietz , A. Nigamova , K. Nikolopoulos , Y. Nissan , A. Paasch , K.J. Pena Rodriguez , T. Quadfasel , B. Raciti , M. Rieger , D. Savoie , J. Schindler , P. Schleper , M. Schröder , J. Schwandt , M. Sommerhalder , H. Stadie , G. Steinbrück , A. Tews , R. Ward , B. Wiederspan , M. Wolf 

Karlsruher Institut fuer Technologie, Karlsruhe, Germany

S. Brommer , E. Butz , Y.M. Chen , T. Chwalek , A. Dierlamm , G.G. Dincer , U. Elicabuk, N. Faltermann , M. Giffels , A. Gottmann , F. Hartmann³⁰ , R. Hofsaess , M. Horzela , U. Husemann , J. Kieseler , M. Klute , O. Lavoryk , J.M. Lawhorn , M. Link, A. Lintuluoto , S. Maier , M. Mormile , Th. Müller , M. Neukum, M. Oh , E. Pfeffer , M. Presilla , G. Quast , K. Rabbertz , B. Regnery , R. Schmieder, N. Shadskiy , I. Shvetsov , H.J. Simonis , L. Sowa , L. Stockmeier, K. Tauqeer, M. Toms , B. Topko , N. Trevisani , T. Voigtländer , R.F. Von Cube , J. Von Den Driesch, M. Wassmer , S. Wieland , F. Wittig, R. Wolf , W.D. Zeuner , X. Zuo 

Institute of Nuclear and Particle Physics (INPP), NCSR Demokritos, Aghia Paraskevi, Greece

G. Anagnostou , G. Daskalakis , A. Kyriakis , A. Papadopoulos³⁰ , A. Stakia 

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

G. Melachroinos, Z. Painesis , I. Paraskevas , N. Saoulidou , K. Theofilatos , E. Tziaferi , K. Vellidis , I. Zisopoulos 

National Technical University of Athens, Athens, Greece

T. Chatzistavrou, G. Karapostoli , K. Kousouris , E. Siamarkou, G. Tsiopolitis 

University of Ioánnina, Ioánnina, Greece

I. Bestintzanos, I. Evangelou , C. Foudas, C. Kamtsikis, P. Katsoulis, P. Kokkas , P.G. Kosmoglou Kioseoglou , N. Manthos , I. Papadopoulos , J. Strologas 

HUN-REN Wigner Research Centre for Physics, Budapest, Hungary

D. Druzhkin , C. Hajdu , D. Horvath^{31,32} , K. Márton, A.J. RádI³³ , F. Sikler , V. Veszpremi 

MTA-ELTE Lendület CMS Particle and Nuclear Physics Group, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

M. Csanád , K. Farkas , A. Fehérkúti³⁴ , M.M.A. Gadallah³⁵ , Á. Kadlecsek , B. Cs. Kovács, G. Pásztor , G.I. Veres 

Faculty of Informatics, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary

B. Ujvari , G. Zilizi 

HUN-REN ATOMKI - Institute of Nuclear Research, Debrecen, Hungary

G. Bencze, S. Czellar, J. Molnar, Z. Szillasi

Karoly Robert Campus, MATE Institute of Technology, Gyongyos, Hungary

T. Csorgo³⁴ , F. Nemes³⁴ , T. Novak 

Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

S. Bansal , S.B. Beri, V. Bhatnagar , G. Chaudhary , S. Chauhan , N. Dhingra³⁶ , A. Kaur , A. Kaur , H. Kaur , M. Kaur , S. Kumar , T. Sheokand, J.B. Singh , A. Singla 

University of Delhi, Delhi, India

A. Bhardwaj , A. Chhetri , B.C. Choudhary , A. Kumar , A. Kumar , M. Naimuddin , K. Ranjan , M.K. Saini, S. Saumya 

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, Kanpur, India

S. Mukherjee 

Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, HBNI, Kolkata, India

S. Baradia , S. Barman³⁷ , S. Bhattacharya , S. Das Gupta, S. Dutta , S. Dutta, S. Sarkar

Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Madras, India

M.M. Ameen , P.K. Behera , S.C. Behera , S. Chatterjee , G. Dash , A. Dattamunsi, P. Jana , P. Kalbhor , S. Kamble , J.R. Komaragiri³⁸ , D. Kumar³⁸ , T. Mishra , B. Parida³⁹ , P.R. Pujahari , N.R. Saha , A.K. Sikdar , R.K. Singh , P. Verma , S. Verma , A. Vijay 

Tata Institute of Fundamental Research-A, Mumbai, India

L. Bhatt, S. Dugad , G.B. Mohanty , M. Shelake , P. Suryadevara

Tata Institute of Fundamental Research-B, Mumbai, India

A. Bala , S. Banerjee , S. Bhowmik⁴⁰ , R.M. Chatterjee, M. Guchait , Sh. Jain , A. Jaiswal, B.M. Joshi , S. Kumar , G. Majumder , K. Mazumdar , S. Parolia , A. Thachayath 

National Institute of Science Education and Research, An OCC of Homi Bhabha National Institute, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

S. Bahinipati⁴¹ , D. Maity⁴² , P. Mal , K. Naskar⁴² , A. Nayak⁴² , S. Nayak, K. Pal , R. Raturi, P. Sadangi, S.K. Swain , S. Varghese⁴² , D. Vats⁴² 

Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Pune, India

S. Acharya⁴³ , A. Alpana , S. Dube , B. Gomber⁴³ , P. Hazarika , B. Kansal , A. Laha , B. Sahu⁴³ , R. Sharma , S. Sharma , K.Y. Vaish 

Isfahan University of Technology, Isfahan, Iran

H. Bakhshiansohi⁴⁴ , A. Jafari⁴⁵ , M. Zeinali⁴⁶ 

Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IPM), Tehran, Iran

S. Bashiri , S. Chenarani⁴⁷ , S.M. Etesami , Y. Hosseini , M. Khakzad , E. Khazaie , M. Mohammadi Najafabadi , S. Tizchang⁴⁸ 

University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

M. Felcini , M. Grunewald 

INFN Sezione di Bari^a, Università di Bari^b, Politecnico di Bari^c, Bari, Italy

M. Abbrescia^{a,b} , M. Barbieri^{a,b}, M. Buonsante^{a,b} , A. Colaleo^{a,b} , D. Creanza^{a,c} , B. D'Anzi^{a,b} , N. De Filippis^{a,c} , M. De Palma^{a,b} , W. Elmetenawee^{a,b,16} , N. Ferrara^{a,b} , L. Fiore^a , G. Iaselli^{a,c} , L. Longo^a , M. Louka^{a,b} , G. Maggi^{a,c} , M. Maggi^a , I. Margjeka^a , V. Mastrapasqua^{a,b} , S. My^{a,b} , S. Nuzzo^{a,b} , A. Pellecchia^{a,b} , A. Pompili^{a,b} , G. Pugliese^{a,c} , R. Radogna^{a,b} , D. Ramos^a , A. Ranieri^a , L. Silvestris^a , F.M. Simone^{a,c} , Ü. Sözbilir^a , A. Stamerra^{a,b} , D. Troiano^{a,b} , R. Venditti^{a,b} , P. Verwilligen^a , A. Zaza^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Bologna^a, Università di Bologna^b, Bologna, Italy

G. Abbiendi^a , C. Battilana^{a,b} , D. Bonacorsi^{a,b} , P. Capiluppi^{a,b} , A. Castro^{+a,b} , F.R. Cavallo^a , M. Cuffiani^{a,b} , G.M. Dallavalle^a , T. Diotallevi^{a,b} , F. Fabbri^a , A. Fanfani^{a,b} , D. Fasanella^a , P. Giacomelli^a , L. Giommi^{a,b} , C. Grandi^a , L. Guiducci^{a,b} , S. Lo Meo^{a,49} , M. Lorusso^{a,b} , L. Lunerti^a , S. Marcellini^a , G. Masetti^a , F.L. Navarria^{a,b} , G. Paggi^{a,b} , A. Perrotta^a , F. Primavera^{a,b} , A.M. Rossi^{a,b} , S. Rossi Tisbeni^{a,b} , T. Rovelli^{a,b} , G.P. Siroli^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Catania^a, Università di Catania^b, Catania, Italy

S. Costa^{a,b,50} , A. Di Mattia^a , A. Lapertosa^a , R. Potenza^{a,b}, A. Tricomi^{a,b,50} 

INFN Sezione di Firenze^a, Università di Firenze^b, Firenze, Italy

J. Altork^{a,b} , P. Assiouras^a , G. Barbagli^a , G. Bardelli^a , M. Bartolini^{a,b} ,
A. Calandri^{a,b} , B. Camaiani^{a,b} , A. Cassese^a , R. Ceccarelli^a , V. Ciulli^{a,b} ,
C. Civinini^a , R. D'Alessandro^{a,b} , L. Damenti^{a,b} , E. Focardi^{a,b} , T. Kello^a ,
G. Latino^{a,b} , P. Lenzi^{a,b} , M. Lizzo^a , M. Meschini^a , S. Paoletti^a ,
A. Papanastassiou^{a,b} , G. Sguazzoni^a , L. Viliani^a 

INFN Laboratori Nazionali di Frascati, Frascati, Italy

L. Benussi , S. Bianco , S. Meola⁵¹ , D. Piccolo 

INFN Sezione di Genova^a, Università di Genova^b, Genova, Italy

M. Alves Gallo Pereira^a , F. Ferro^a , E. Robutti^a , S. Tosi^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Milano-Bicocca^a, Università di Milano-Bicocca^b, Milano, Italy

A. Benaglia^a , F. Brivio^a , F. Cetorelli^{a,b} , F. De Guio^{a,b} , M.E. Dinardo^{a,b} , P. Dini^a ,
S. Gennai^a , R. Gerosa^{a,b} , A. Ghezzi^{a,b} , P. Govoni^{a,b} , L. Guzzi^a , G. Lavizzari^{a,b} ,
M.T. Lucchini^{a,b} , M. Malberti^a , S. Malvezzi^a , A. Massironi^a , D. Menasce^a ,
L. Moroni^a , M. Paganoni^{a,b} , S. Palluotto^{a,b} , D. Pedrini^a , A. Perego^{a,b} ,
B.S. Pinolini^a , G. Pizzati^{a,b} , S. Ragazzi^{a,b} , T. Tabarelli de Fatis^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Napoli^a, Università di Napoli 'Federico II'^b, Napoli, Italy; Università della Basilicata^c, Potenza, Italy; Scuola Superiore Meridionale (SSM)^d, Napoli, Italy

S. Buontempo^a , A. Cagnotta^{a,b} , F. Carnevali^{a,b} , N. Cavallo^{a,c} , C. Di Fraia^{a,b} ,
F. Fabozzi^{a,c} , L. Favilla^{a,d} , A.O.M. Iorio^{a,b} , L. Lista^{a,b,52} , P. Paolucci^{a,30} ,
B. Rossi^a 

INFN Sezione di Padova^a, Università di Padova^b, Padova, Italy; Università degli Studi di Cagliari^c, Cagliari, Italy

R. Ardino^a , P. Azzi^a , N. Bacchetta^{a,53} , A. Bergnoli^a , D. Bisello^{a,b} , P. Bortignon^a ,
G. Bortolato^{a,b} , A.C.M. Bulla^a , R. Carlin^{a,b} , P. Checchia^a , T. Dorigo^{a,54} ,
F. Gasparini^{a,b} , U. Gasparini^{a,b} , S. Giorgetti^a , E. Lusiani^a , M. Margoni^{a,b} ,
A.T. Meneguzzo^{a,b} , J. Pazzini^{a,b} , P. Ronchese^{a,b} , R. Rossin^{a,b} , F. Simonetto^{a,b} ,
M. Tosi^{a,b} , A. Triossi^{a,b} , S. Ventura^a , P. Zotto^{a,b} , A. Zucchetta^{a,b} , G. Zumerle^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Pavia^a, Università di Pavia^b, Pavia, Italy

A. Braghieri^a , S. Calzaferri^a , D. Fiorina^a , P. Montagna^{a,b} , M. Pelliccioni^a , V. Re^a ,
C. Riccardi^{a,b} , P. Salvini^a , I. Vai^{a,b} , P. Vitulo^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Perugia^a, Università di Perugia^b, Perugia, Italy

S. Ajmal^{a,b} , M.E. Ascioti^{a,b} , G.M. Bilei^a , C. Carrivale^{a,b} , D. Ciangottini^{a,b} ,
L. Della Penna^a , L. Fanò^{a,b} , V. Mariani^{a,b} , M. Menichelli^a , F. Moscatelli^{a,55} ,
A. Rossi^{a,b} , A. Santocchia^{a,b} , D. Spiga^a , T. Tedeschi^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Pisa^a, Università di Pisa^b, Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa^c, Pisa, Italy; Università di Siena^d, Siena, Italy

C. Aimè^{a,b} , C.A. Alexe^{a,c} , P. Asenov^{a,b} , P. Azzurri^a , G. Bagliesi^a ,
R. Bhattacharya^a , L. Bianchini^{a,b} , T. Boccali^a , E. Bossini^a , D. Bruschini^{a,c} ,
R. Castaldi^a , F. Cattafesta^{a,c} , M.A. Ciocci^{a,b} , M. Cipriani^{a,b} , V. D'Amante^{a,d} ,
R. Dell'Orso^a , S. Donato^{a,b} , R. Forti^{a,b} , A. Giassi^a , F. Ligabue^{a,c} ,
A.C. Marini^{a,b} , D. Matos Figueiredo^a , A. Messineo^{a,b} , S. Mishra^a ,
V.K. Muraleedharan Nair Bindhu^{a,b} , M. Musich^{a,b} , S. Nandan^a , F. Palla^a ,
M. Riggirello^{a,c} , A. Rizzi^{a,b} , G. Rolandi^{a,c} , S. Roy Chowdhury^{a,40} , T. Sarkar^a ,
A. Scribano^a , P. Spagnolo^a , F. Tenchini^{a,b} , R. Tenchini^a , G. Tonelli^{a,b} 

N. Turini^{a,d} , F. Vaselli^{a,c} , A. Venturi^a , P.G. Verdini^a 

INFN Sezione di Roma^a, Sapienza Università di Roma^b, Roma, Italy

P. Akrap^{a,b} , C. Basile^{a,b} , F. Cavallari^a , L. Cunqueiro Mendez^{a,b} , F. De Ruggi^{a,b} ,
D. Del Re^{a,b} , E. Di Marco^{a,b} , M. Diemoz^a , F. Errico^{a,b} , L. Frosina^{a,b} ,
R. Gargiulo^{a,b} , B. Harikrishnan^{a,b} , F. Lombardi^{a,b} , E. Longo^{a,b} , L. Martikainen^{a,b} ,
J. Mijuskovic^{a,b} , G. Organtini^{a,b} , N. Palmeri^{a,b} , F. Pandolfi^a , R. Paramatti^{a,b} ,
C. Quaranta^{a,b} , S. Rahatlou^{a,b} , C. Rovelli^a , F. Santanastasio^{a,b} , L. Soffi^a ,
V. Vladimirov^{a,b}

INFN Sezione di Torino^a, Università di Torino^b, Torino, Italy; Università del Piemonte Orientale^c, Novara, Italy

N. Amapane^{a,b} , R. Arcidiacono^{a,c} , S. Argiro^{a,b} , M. Arneodo^{a,c} , N. Bartosik^{a,c} ,
R. Bellan^{a,b} , C. Biino^a , C. Borca^{a,b} , N. Cartiglia^a , M. Costa^{a,b} , R. Covarelli^{a,b} ,
N. Demaria^a , L. Finco^a , M. Grippio^{a,b} , B. Kiani^{a,b} , L. Lanteri^{a,b} , F. Legger^a ,
F. Luongo^{a,b} , C. Mariotti^a , L. Markovic^{a,b} , S. Maselli^a , A. Mecca^{a,b} , L. Menzio^{a,b} ,
P. Meridiani^a , E. Migliore^{a,b} , M. Monteno^a , R. Mulargia^a , M.M. Obertino^{a,b} ,
G. Ortona^a , L. Pacher^{a,b} , N. Pastrone^a , M. Ruspa^{a,c} , F. Siviero^{a,b} , V. Sola^{a,b} ,
A. Solano^{a,b} , A. Staiano^a , C. Tarricone^{a,b} , D. Trocino^a , G. Umoret^{a,b} , R. White^{a,b} 

INFN Sezione di Trieste^a, Università di Trieste^b, Trieste, Italy

J. Babbar^{a,b} , S. Belforte^a , V. Candelise^{a,b} , M. Casarsa^a , F. Cossutti^a , K. De Leo^a ,
G. Della Ricca^{a,b} , R. Delli Gatti^{a,b} 

Kyungpook National University, Daegu, Korea

S. Dogra , J. Hong , J. Kim, D. Lee, H. Lee , J. Lee, S.W. Lee , C.S. Moon , Y.D. Oh ,
M.S. Ryu , S. Sekmen , B. Tae, Y.C. Yang 

Department of Mathematics and Physics - GWNU, Gangneung, Korea

M.S. Kim 

Chonnam National University, Institute for Universe and Elementary Particles, Kwangju, Korea

G. Bak , P. Gwak , H. Kim , D.H. Moon 

Hanyang University, Seoul, Korea

E. Asilar , J. Choi⁵⁶ , D. Kim , T.J. Kim , J.A. Merlin, Y. Ryou

Korea University, Seoul, Korea

S. Choi , S. Han, B. Hong , K. Lee, K.S. Lee , S. Lee , J. Yoo 

Kyung Hee University, Department of Physics, Seoul, Korea

J. Goh , J. Shin , S. Yang 

Sejong University, Seoul, Korea

Y. Kang , H. S. Kim , Y. Kim , S. Lee

Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea

J. Almond, J.H. Bhyun, J. Choi , J. Choi, W. Jun , J. Kim , Y. Kim, Y.W. Kim , S. Ko ,
H. Lee , J. Lee , J. Lee , B.H. Oh , S.B. Oh , H. Seo , J. Shin , U.K. Yang, I. Yoon 

University of Seoul, Seoul, Korea

W. Jang , D.Y. Kang, S. Kim , B. Ko, J.S.H. Lee , Y. Lee , I.C. Park , Y. Roh, I.J. Watson 

Yonsei University, Department of Physics, Seoul, Korea

G. Cho, S. Ha , K. Hwang , B. Kim , S. Kim, K. Lee , H.D. Yoo 

Sungkyunkwan University, Suwon, KoreaM. Choi , M.R. Kim , Y. Lee , I. Yu **College of Engineering and Technology, American University of the Middle East (AUM), Dasman, Kuwait**T. Beyrouthy , Y. Gharbia **Kuwait University - College of Science - Department of Physics, Safat, Kuwait**F. Alazemi **Riga Technical University, Riga, Latvia**K. Dreimanis , O.M. Eberlins , A. Gaile , C. Munoz Diaz , D. Osite , G. Pikurs , A. Potrebko , M. Seidel , D. Sidiropoulos Kontos **University of Latvia (LU), Riga, Latvia**N.R. Strautnieks **Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania**M. Ambrozias , A. Juodagalvis , A. Rinkevicius , G. Tamulaitis **National Centre for Particle Physics, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia**I. Yusuff⁵⁷ , Z. Zolkapli**Universidad de Sonora (UNISON), Hermosillo, Mexico**J.F. Benitez , A. Castaneda Hernandez , L.E. Cuevas Picos, H.A. Encinas Acosta, L.G. Gallegos Maríñez, M. León Coello , J.A. Murillo Quijada , A. Sehwat , L. Valencia Palomo **Centro de Investigacion y de Estudios Avanzados del IPN, Mexico City, Mexico**G. Ayala , H. Castilla-Valdez , H. Crotte Ledesma , E. De La Cruz-Burelo , I. Heredia-De La Cruz⁵⁸ , R. Lopez-Fernandez , J. Mejia Guisao , A. Sánchez Hernández **Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City, Mexico**C. Oropeza Barrera , D.L. Ramirez Guadarrama, M. Ramírez García **Benemerita Universidad Autonoma de Puebla, Puebla, Mexico**I. Bautista , F.E. Neri Huerta , I. Pedraza , H.A. Salazar Ibarguen , C. Uribe Estrada **University of Montenegro, Podgorica, Montenegro**I. Bubanja , N. Raicevic **University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand**P.H. Butler **National Centre for Physics, Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan**A. Ahmad , M.I. Asghar , A. Awais , M.I.M. Awan, W.A. Khan **AGH University of Krakow, Krakow, Poland**V. Avati, A. Bellora⁵⁹ , L. Forthomme , L. Grzanka , M. Malawski , K. Piotrkowski **National Centre for Nuclear Research, Swierk, Poland**M. Bluj , M. Górski , M. Kazana , M. Szleper , P. Zalewski **Institute of Experimental Physics, Faculty of Physics, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland**K. Bunkowski , K. Doroba , A. Kalinowski , M. Konecki , J. Krolikowski , A. Muhammad **Warsaw University of Technology, Warsaw, Poland**

P. Fokow , K. Pozniak , W. Zabolotny 

Laboratório de Instrumentação e Física Experimental de Partículas, Lisboa, Portugal

M. Araujo , D. Bastos , C. Beirão Da Cruz E Silva , A. Boletti , M. Bozzo ,
T. Camporesi , G. Da Molin , P. Faccioli , M. Gallinaro , J. Hollar , N. Leonardo ,
G.B. Marozzo , A. Petrilli , M. Pisano , J. Seixas , J. Varela , J.W. Wulff 

Faculty of Physics, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia

P. Adzic , P. Milenovic 

VINCA Institute of Nuclear Sciences, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia

D. Devetak , M. Dordevic , J. Milosevic , L. Nadderd , V. Rekovic, M. Stojanovic 

Centro de Investigaciones Energéticas Medioambientales y Tecnológicas (CIEMAT), Madrid, Spain

J. Alcaraz Maestre , Cristina F. Bedoya , J.A. Brochero Cifuentes , Oliver M. Carretero ,
M. Cepeda , M. Cerrada , N. Colino , B. De La Cruz , A. Delgado Peris ,
A. Escalante Del Valle , D. Fernández Del Val , J.P. Fernández Ramos , J. Flix ,
M.C. Fouz , O. Gonzalez Lopez , S. Goy Lopez , J.M. Hernandez , M.I. Josa ,
J. Llorente Merino , C. Martin Perez , E. Martin Viscasillas , D. Moran , C. M. Mor-
cillo Perez , Á. Navarro Tobar , C. Perez Dengra , A. Pérez-Calero Yzquierdo ,
J. Puerta Pelayo , I. Redondo , J. Sastre , J. Vazquez Escobar 

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, Spain

J.F. de Trocóniz 

Universidad de Oviedo, Instituto Universitario de Ciencias y Tecnologías Espaciales de Asturias (ICTEA), Oviedo, Spain

B. Alvarez Gonzalez , A. Cardini , J. Cuevas , J. Del Riego Badas , J. Fernandez Menen-
dez , S. Folgueras , I. Gonzalez Caballero , P. Leguina , M. Obeso Menendez ,
E. Palencia Cortezon , J. Prado Pico , V. Rodríguez Bouza , A. Soto Rodríguez ,
A. Trapote , C. Vico Villalba , P. Vischia 

Instituto de Física de Cantabria (IFCA), CSIC-Universidad de Cantabria, Santander, Spain

S. Blanco Fernández , I.J. Cabrillo , A. Calderon , J. Duarte Campderros , M. Fer-
nandez , G. Gomez , C. Lasasa García , R. Lopez Ruiz , C. Martinez Rivero ,
P. Martinez Ruiz del Arbol , F. Matorras , P. Matorras Cuevas , E. Navarrete Ramos ,
J. Piedra Gomez , L. Scodellaro , I. Vila , J.M. Vizan Garcia 

University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka

B. Kailasapathy⁶⁰ , D.D.C. Wickramarathna 

University of Ruhuna, Department of Physics, Matara, Sri Lanka

W.G.D. Dharmaratna⁶¹ , K. Liyanage , N. Perera 

CERN, European Organization for Nuclear Research, Geneva, Switzerland

D. Abbaneo , C. Amendola , E. Auffray , J. Baechler, D. Barney ,
A. Bermúdez Martínez , M. Bianco , A.A. Bin Anuar , A. Bocci , L. Borgonovi ,
C. Botta , A. Bragagnolo , E. Brondolin , C.E. Brown , C. Caillol , G. Cerminara ,
N. Chernyavskaya , P. Connor , D. d'Enterria , A. Dabrowski , A. David ,
A. De Roeck , M.M. Defranchis , M. Deile , M. Dobson , W. Funk , S. Giani,
D. Gigi, K. Gill , F. Glege , M. Glowacki, A. Gruber , J. Hegeman , J.K. Heikkilä ,
B. Huber , V. Innocente , T. James , P. Janot , O. Kaluzinska , O. Karacheban²⁸ ,
G. Karathanasis , S. Laurila , P. Lecoq , E. Leutgeb , C. Lourenço , M. Magherini 

L. Malgeri , M. Mannelli , M. Matthewman, A. Mehta , F. Meijers , S. Mersi , E. Meschi , M. Migliorini , V. Milosevic , F. Monti , F. Moortgat , M. Mulders , I. Neutelings , S. Orfanelli, F. Pantaleo , G. Petrucciani , A. Pfeiffer , M. Pierini , M. Pitt , H. Qu , D. Rabadý , B. Ribeiro Lopes , F. Riti , M. Rovere , H. Sakulin , R. Salvatico , S. Sanchez Cruz , S. Scarfi , M. Selvaggi , A. Sharma , K. Shchelina , P. Silva , P. Sphicas⁶² , A.G. Stahl Leiton , A. Steen , S. Summers , D. Treille , P. Tropea , E. Vernazza , J. Wanczyk⁶³ , J. Wang, S. Wuchterl , P. Zehetner , P. Zejdl 

PSI Center for Neutron and Muon Sciences, Villigen, Switzerland

T. Bevilacqua⁶⁴ , L. Caminada⁶⁴ , A. Ebrahimi , W. Erdmann , R. Horisberger , Q. Ingram , H.C. Kaestli , D. Kotlinski , C. Lange , M. Missiroli⁶⁴ , L. Noehte⁶⁴ , T. Rohe , A. Samalan 

ETH Zurich - Institute for Particle Physics and Astrophysics (IPA), Zurich, Switzerland

T.K. Aarrestad , M. Backhaus , G. Bonomelli , C. Cazzaniga , K. Datta , P. De Bryas Dexmiers D'archiac⁶³ , A. De Cosa , G. Dissertori , M. Dittmar, M. Donegà , F. Eble , M. Galli , K. Gedia , F. Glessgen , C. Grab , N. Härringer , T.G. Harte , W. Lustermann , A.-M. Lyon , M. Malucchi , R.A. Manzoni , M. Marchegiani , L. Marchese , A. Mascellani⁶³ , F. Nessi-Tedaldi , F. Pauss , V. Perovic , S. Pigazzini , B. Ristic , R. Seidita , J. Steggemann⁶³ , A. Tarabini , D. Valsecchi , R. Wallny 

Universität Zürich, Zurich, Switzerland

C. Amsler⁶⁵ , P. Bärttschi , M.F. Canelli , G. Celotto , K. Cormier , M. Huwiler , W. Jin , A. Jofrehei , B. Kilminster , S. Leontsinis , S.P. Liechti , A. Macchiolo , P. Meiring , F. Meng , J. Motta , A. Reimers , P. Robmann, M. Senger , E. Shokr , F. Stäger , R. Tramontano 

National Central University, Chung-Li, Taiwan

C. Adloff⁶⁶, D. Bhowmik, C.M. Kuo, W. Lin , P.K. Rout , S. Taj , P.C. Tiwari³⁸ 

National Taiwan University (NTU), Taipei, Taiwan

L. Ceard, K.F. Chen , Z.g. Chen, A. De Iorio , W.-S. Hou , T.h. Hsu, Y.w. Kao, S. Karmakar , G. Kole , Y.y. Li , R.-S. Lu , E. Paganis , X.f. Su , J. Thomas-Wilsker , L.s. Tsai, D. Tsionou, H.y. Wu , E. Yazgan 

High Energy Physics Research Unit, Department of Physics, Faculty of Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

C. Asawatrangkuldee , N. Srimanobhas , V. Wachirapusanand 

Tunis El Manar University, Tunis, Tunisia

Y. Maghrbi 

Çukurova University, Physics Department, Science and Art Faculty, Adana, Turkey

D. Agyel , F. Boran , F. Dolek , I. Dumanoglu⁶⁷ , E. Eskut , Y. Guler⁶⁸ , E. Gurbinar Guler⁶⁸ , C. Isik , O. Kara , A. Kayis Topaksu , Y. Komurcu , G. Onengut , K. Ozdemir⁶⁹ , A. Polatoz , B. Tali⁷⁰ , U.G. Tok , E. Uslan , I.S. Zorbakir 

Middle East Technical University, Physics Department, Ankara, Turkey

M. Yalvac⁷¹ 

Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey

B. Akgun , I.O. Atakisi , E. Gülmez , M. Kaya⁷² , O. Kaya⁷³ , S. Tekten⁷⁴ 

Istanbul Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey

A. Cakir , K. Cankocak^{67,75} , S. Sen⁷⁶ 

Istanbul University, Istanbul, Turkey

O. Aydilek⁷⁷ , B. Haciosahinoglu , I. Hos⁷⁸ , B. Kaynak , S. Ozkorucuklu , O. Potok ,
H. Sert , C. Simsek , C. Zorbilmez 

Yildiz Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey

S. Cerci , B. Isildak⁷⁹ , D. Sunar Cerci , T. Yetkin²² 

Institute for Scintillation Materials of National Academy of Science of Ukraine, Kharkiv, Ukraine

A. Boyaryntsev , B. Grynyov 

National Science Centre, Kharkiv Institute of Physics and Technology, Kharkiv, Ukraine

L. Levchuk 

University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom

D. Anthony , J.J. Brooke , A. Bundock , F. Bury , E. Clement , D. Cussans ,
H. Flacher , J. Goldstein , H.F. Heath , M.-L. Holmberg , L. Kreczko , S. Parames-
varan , L. Robertshaw, J. Segal, V.J. Smith 

Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, Didcot, United Kingdom

A.H. Ball, K.W. Bell , A. Belyaev⁸⁰ , C. Brew , R.M. Brown , D.J.A. Cockerill ,
C. Cooke , A. Elliot , K.V. Ellis, J. Gajownik , K. Harder , S. Harper , J. Linacre ,
K. Manolopoulos, M. Moallemi , D.M. Newbold , E. Olaiya , D. Petyt , T. Reis ,
A.R. Sahasransu , G. Salvi , T. Schuh, C.H. Shepherd-Themistocleous , I.R. Tomalin ,
K.C. Whalen , T. Williams 

Imperial College, London, United Kingdom

I. Andreou , R. Bainbridge , P. Bloch , O. Buchmuller, C.A. Carrillo Montoya ,
D. Colling , J.S. Dancu, I. Das , P. Dauncey , G. Davies , M. Della Negra , S. Fayer,
G. Fedi , G. Hall , H.R. Hoorani , A. Howard, G. Iles , C.R. Knight , P. Krueper ,
J. Langford , K.H. Law , J. León Holgado , L. Lyons , A.-M. Magnan , B. Maier ,
S. Mallios, A. Mastronikolis , M. Mieskolainen , J. Nash⁸¹ , M. Pesaresi , P.B. Pradeep ,
B.C. Radburn-Smith , A. Richards, A. Rose , L. Russell , K. Savva , C. Seez ,
R. Shukla , A. Tapper , K. Uchida , G.P. Uttley , T. Virdee³⁰ , M. Vojinovic ,
N. Wardle , D. Winterbottom 

Brunel University, Uxbridge, United Kingdom

J.E. Cole , A. Khan, P. Kyberd , I.D. Reid 

Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA

S. Abdullin , A. Brinkerhoff , E. Collins , M.R. Darwish , J. Dittmann ,
K. Hatakeyama , V. Hegde , J. Hiltbrand , B. McMaster , J. Samudio , S. Sawant ,
C. Sutantawibul , J. Wilson 

Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, USA

R. Bartek , A. Dominguez , S. Raj , A.E. Simsek , S.S. Yu 

The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA

B. Bam , A. Buchot Perraguin , R. Chudasama , S.I. Cooper , C. Crovella ,
G. Fidalgo , S.V. Gleyzer , A. Khukhunaishvili , K. Matchev , E. Pearson, C.U. Perez ,
P. Rumerio⁸² , E. Usai , R. Yi 

Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

G. De Castro, Z. Demiragli , C. Erice , C. Fangmeier , C. Fernandez Madrazo , E. Fontanesi , D. Gastler , F. Golf , S. Jeon , J. O'cain, I. Reed , J. Rohlf , K. Salyer , D. Sperka , D. Spitzbart , I. Suarez , A. Tsatsos , A.G. Zecchinelli 

Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, USA

G. Barone , G. Benelli , D. Cutts , S. Ellis , L. Gouskos , M. Hadley , U. Heintz , K.W. Ho , J.M. Hogan⁸³ , T. Kwon , G. Landsberg , K.T. Lau , J. Luo , S. Mondal , T. Russell , S. Sagir⁸⁴ , X. Shen , M. Stamenkovic , N. Venkatasubramanian 

University of California, Davis, Davis, California, USA

S. Abbott , B. Barton , C. Brainerd , R. Breedon , H. Cai , M. Calderon De La Barca Sanchez , M. Chertok , M. Citron , J. Conway , P.T. Cox , R. Erbacher , F. Jensen , O. Kukral , G. Mocellin , M. Mulhearn , S. Ostrom , W. Wei , S. Yoo 

University of California, Los Angeles, California, USA

K. Adamidis, M. Bachtis , D. Campos, R. Cousins , A. Datta , G. Flores Avila , J. Hauser , M. Ignatenko , M.A. Iqbal , T. Lam , Y.f. Lo , E. Manca , A. Nunez Del Prado , D. Saltzberg , V. Valuev 

University of California, Riverside, Riverside, California, USA

R. Clare , J.W. Gary , G. Hanson 

University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, California, USA

A. Aportela , A. Arora , J.G. Branson , S. Cittolin , S. Cooperstein , D. Diaz , J. Duarte , L. Giannini , Y. Gu, J. Guiang , R. Kansal , V. Krutelyov , R. Lee , J. Letts , M. Masciovecchio , F. Mokhtar , S. Mukherjee , M. Pieri , D. Primosch, M. Quinnan , V. Sharma , M. Tadel , E. Vourliotis , F. Würthwein , Y. Xiang , A. Yagil 

University of California, Santa Barbara - Department of Physics, Santa Barbara, California, USA

A. Barzdukas , L. Brennan , C. Campagnari , K. Downham , C. Grieco , M.M. Hussain, J. Incandela , J. Kim , A.J. Li , P. Masterson , H. Mei , J. Richman , S.N. Santpur , U. Sarica , R. Schmitz , F. Setti , J. Sheplock , D. Stuart , T.Á. Vámi , X. Yan , D. Zhang 

California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California, USA

A. Albert , S. Bhattacharya , A. Bornheim , O. Cerri, J. Mao , H.B. Newman , G. Reales Gutiérrez, T. Sievert, M. Spiropulu , J.R. Vlimant , R.A. Wynne , S. Xie , R.Y. Zhu 

Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

J. Alison , S. An , P. Bryant , M. Cremonesi, V. Dutta , E.Y. Ertorer , T. Ferguson , T.A. Gómez Espinosa , A. Harilal , A. Kallil Tharayil, M. Kanemura, C. Liu , T. Mudholkar , S. Murthy , P. Palit , K. Park , M. Paulini , A. Roberts , A. Sanchez , W. Terrill 

University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, Colorado, USA

J.P. Cumalat , W.T. Ford , A. Hart , A. Hassani , J. Pearkes , C. Savard , N. Schonbeck , K. Stenson , K.A. Ulmer , S.R. Wagner , N. Zipper , D. Zuolo 

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA

J. Alexander , X. Chen , D.J. Cranshaw , J. Dickinson , J. Fan , X. Fan , J. Grassi 

S. Hogan , P. Kotamnives , J. Monroy , G. Niendorf , M. Oshiro , J.R. Patterson , M. Reid , A. Ryd , J. Thom , P. Wittich , R. Zou 

Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, Batavia, Illinois, USA

M. Albrow , M. Alyari , O. Amram , G. Apollinari , A. Apresyan , L.A.T. Bauerdick , D. Berry , J. Berryhill , P.C. Bhat , K. Burkett , J.N. Butler , A. Canepa , G.B. Cerati , H.W.K. Cheung , F. Chlebana , C. Cosby , G. Cummings , I. Dutta , V.D. Elvira , J. Freeman , A. Gandrakota , Z. Gecse , L. Gray , D. Green, A. Grummer , S. Grünendahl , D. Guerrero , O. Gutsche , R.M. Harris , T.C. Herwig , J. Hirschauer , B. Jayatilaka , S. Jindariani , M. Johnson , U. Joshi , T. Klijnsma , B. Klima , K.H.M. Kwok , S. Lammel , C. Lee , D. Lincoln , R. Lipton , T. Liu , K. Maeshima , D. Mason , P. McBride , P. Merkel , S. Mrenna , S. Nahn , J. Ngadiuba , D. Noonan , S. Norberg, V. Papadimitriou , N. Pastika , K. Pedro , C. Pena⁸⁵ , F. Ravera , A. Reinsvold Hall⁸⁶ , L. Ristori , M. Safdari , E. Sexton-Kennedy , N. Smith , A. Soha , L. Spiegel , S. Stoynev , J. Strait , L. Taylor , S. Tkaczyk , N.V. Tran , L. Uplegger , E.W. Vaandering , C. Wang , I. Zoi 

University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA

C. Aruta , P. Avery , D. Bourilkov , P. Chang , V. Cherepanov , R.D. Field, C. Huh , E. Koenig , M. Kolosova , J. Konigsberg , A. Korytov , N. Menendez , G. Mitselmakher , K. Mohrman , A. Muthirakalayil Madhu , N. Rawal , S. Rosenzweig , V. Sulimov , Y. Takahashi , J. Wang 

Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, USA

T. Adams , A. Al Kadhimi , A. Askew , S. Bower , R. Hashmi , R.S. Kim , S. Kim , T. Kolberg , G. Martinez , H. Prosper , P.R. Prova, M. Wulansatiti , R. Yohay , J. Zhang

Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Florida, USA

B. Alsufyani , S. Butalla , S. Das , T. Elkafrawy⁸⁷ , M. Hohlmann , M. Lavinsky, E. Yanes

University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

M.R. Adams , N. Barnett, A. Baty , C. Bennett , R. Cavanaugh , R. Escobar Franco , O. Evdokimov , C.E. Gerber , H. Gupta , M. Hawksworth, A. Hingrajiya, D.J. Hofman , J.h. Lee , D. S. Lemos , C. Mills , S. Nanda , B. Ozek , T. Phan, D. Pilipovic , R. Pradhan , E. Prifti, P. Roy, T. Roy , N. Singh, M.B. Tonjes , N. Varelas , M.A. Wadud , Z. Ye , J. Yoo 

The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, USA

M. Alhousseini , D. Blend , K. Dilsiz⁸⁸ , L. Emediato , G. Karaman , O.K. Köseyan , J.-P. Merlo, A. Mestvirishvili⁸⁹ , O. Neogi, H. Ogul⁹⁰ , Y. Onel , A. Penzo , C. Snyder, E. Tiras⁹¹ 

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

B. Blumenfeld , J. Davis , A.V. Gritsan , L. Kang , S. Kyriacou , P. Maksimovic , M. Roguljic , J. Roskes , S. Sekhar , M. Swartz 

The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, USA

A. Abreu , L.F. Alcerro Alcerro , J. Anguiano , S. Arteaga Escatel , P. Baringer , A. Bean , Z. Flowers , D. Grove , J. King , G. Krintiras , M. Lazarovits , C. Le Mahieu , J. Marquez , M. Murray , M. Nickel , S. Popescu⁹² , C. Rogan , C. Royon , S. Rudrabhatla , S. Sanders , C. Smith , G. Wilson 

Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, USA

B. Allmond , R. Gujju Gurunadha , A. Ivanov , K. Kaadze , Y. Maravin , J. Natoli , D. Roy , G. Sorrentino 

University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA

A. Baden , A. Belloni , J. Bistany-riebman, S.C. Eno , N.J. Hadley , S. Jabeen , R.G. Kellogg , T. Koeth , B. Kronheim, S. Lascio , P. Major , A.C. Mignerey , S. Nabili , C. Palmer , C. Papageorgakis , M.M. Paranjpe, E. Popova⁹³ , A. Shevelev , L. Wang , L. Zhang 

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

C. Baldenegro Barrera , J. Bendavid , H. Bossi , S. Bright-Thonney , I.A. Cali , Y.C. Chen , P.c. Chou , M. D'Alfonso , J. Eysermans , C. Freer , G. Gomez-Ceballos , M. Goncharov, G. Grosso , P. Harris, D. Hoang , D. Kovalskyi , J. Krupa , J. Lang , L. Lavezzo , Y.-J. Lee , K. Long , C. McGinn , A. Novak , M.I. Park , C. Paus , C. Reissel , C. Roland , G. Roland , S. Rothman , T.A. Sheng , G.S.F. Stephans , D. Walter , Z. Wang , B. Wyslouch , T. J. Yang 

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

B. Crossman , C. Kapsiak , M. Krohn , D. Mahon , J. Mans , B. Marzocchi , M. Revering , R. Rusack , O. Sancar , R. Saradhy , N. Strobbe 

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA

K. Bloom , D.R. Claes , G. Haza , J. Hossain , C. Joo , I. Kravchenko , A. Rohilla , J.E. Siado , W. Tabb , A. Vagnerini , A. Wightman , F. Yan , D. Yu 

State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, New York, USA

H. Bandyopadhyay , L. Hay , H.w. Hsia , I. Iashvili , A. Kalogeropoulos , A. Kharchilava , A. Mandal , M. Morris , D. Nguyen , S. Rappoccio , H. Rejeb Sfar, A. Williams , P. Young 

Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

G. Alverson , E. Barberis , J. Bonilla , B. Bylsma, M. Campana , J. Dervan , Y. Haddad , Y. Han , I. Israr , A. Krishna , P. Levchenko , J. Li , M. Lu , N. Manganeli , R. McCarthy , D.M. Morse , T. Orimoto , A. Parker , L. Skinnari , C.S. Thoreson , E. Tsai , D. Wood 

Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA

S. Dittmer , K.A. Hahn , D. Li , Y. Liu , M. McGinnis , Y. Miao , D.G. Monk , M.H. Schmitt , A. Taliencio , M. Velasco , J. Wang 

University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA

G. Agarwal , R. Band , R. Bucci, S. Castells , A. Das , R. Goldouzian , M. Hildreth , K. Hurtado Anampa , T. Ivanov , C. Jessop , A. Karneyeu , K. Lannon , J. Lawrence , N. Loukas , L. Lutton , J. Mariano , N. Marinelli, I. Mcalister, T. McCauley , C. Mcgrady , C. Moore , Y. Musienko²³ , H. Nelson , M. Osherson , A. Piccinelli , R. Ruchti , A. Townsend , Y. Wan, M. Wayne , H. Yockey, M. Zarucki , L. Zygala 

The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA

A. Basnet , M. Carrigan , R. De Los Santos , L.S. Durkin , C. Hill , M. Joyce , M. Nunez Ornelas , K. Wei, D.A. Wenzl, B.L. Winer , B. R. Yates 

Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, USA

H. Bouchamaoui , K. Coldham, P. Das , G. Dezoort , P. Elmer , P. Fackeldey , A. Frankenthal , B. Greenberg , N. Haubrich , K. Kennedy, G. Kopp , S. Kwan 

Y. Lai , D. Lange , A. Loeliger , D. Marlow , I. Ojalvo , J. Olsen , F. Simpson ,
D. Stickland , C. Tully , L.H. Vage 

University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, USA

S. Malik , R. Sharma 

Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA

A.S. Bakshi , S. Chandra , R. Chawla , A. Gu , L. Gutay, M. Jones , A.W. Jung ,
M. Liu , G. Negro , N. Neumeister , G. Paspalaki , S. Piperov , J.F. Schulte ,
A. K. Viridi , F. Wang , A. Wildridge , W. Xie , Y. Yao , Y. Zhong 

Purdue University Northwest, Hammond, Indiana, USA

J. Dolen , N. Parashar , A. Pathak 

Rice University, Houston, Texas, USA

D. Acosta , A. Agrawal , T. Carnahan , K.M. Ecklund , P.J. Fernández Manteca ,
S. Freed, P. Gardner, F.J.M. Geurts , T. Huang , I. Krommydas , N. Lewis, W. Li , J. Lin ,
O. Miguel Colin , B.P. Padley , R. Redjimi , J. Rotter , E. Yigitbasi , Y. Zhang 

University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, USA

A. Bodek , P. de Barbaro , R. Demina , J.L. Dulemba , A. Garcia-Bellido , H.S. Hare ,
O. Hindrichs , N. Parmar , P. Parygin⁹³ , R. Taus 

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Piscataway, New Jersey, USA

B. Chiarito, J.P. Chou , S.V. Clark , D. Gadkari , Y. Gershtein , E. Halkiadakis ,
M. Heindl , C. Houghton , D. Jaroslawski , S. Konstantinou , I. Laflotte , A. Lath ,
J. Martins , R. Montalvo, K. Nash, B. Rand , J. Reichert , P. Saha , S. Salur , S. Schnetzer,
S. Somalwar , R. Stone , S.A. Thayil , S. Thomas, J. Vora 

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA

D. Ally , A.G. Delannoy , S. Fiorendi , J. Harris, S. Higginbotham , T. Holmes ,
A.R. Kanuganti , N. Karunarathna , J. Lawless, L. Lee , E. Nibigira , S. Spanier 

Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA

D. Aebi , M. Ahmad , T. Akhter , K. Androsov , A. Bolshov, O. Bouhali⁹⁴ , R. Eusebi ,
J. Gilmore , T. Kamon , H. Kim , S. Luo , R. Mueller , A. Safonov 

Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, USA

N. Akchurin , J. Damgov , Y. Feng , N. Gogate , Y. Kazhykarim, K. Lamichhane ,
S.W. Lee , C. Madrid , A. Mankel , T. Peltola , I. Volobouev 

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA

E. Appelt , Y. Chen , S. Greene, A. Gurrola , W. Johns , R. Kunnawalkam Elayavalli ,
A. Melo , D. Rathjens , F. Romeo , P. Sheldon , S. Tuo , J. Velkovska , J. Viinikainen 

University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA

B. Cardwell , H. Chung , B. Cox , J. Hakala , R. Hirosky , M. Jose, A. Ledovskoy ,
C. Mantilla , C. Neu , C. Ramón Álvarez 

Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, USA

S. Bhattacharya , P.E. Karchin 

University of Wisconsin - Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA

A. Aravind , S. Banerjee , K. Black , T. Bose , E. Chavez , S. Dasu , P. Everaerts ,
C. Galloni, H. He , M. Herndon , A. Herve , C.K. Koraka , A. Lanaro, S. Lomte ,
R. Loveless , A. Mallampalli , A. Mohammadi , S. Mondal, G. Parida , L. Pétré 

D. Pinna , A. Savin, V. Shang , V. Sharma , W.H. Smith , D. Teague, H.F. Tsoi , W. Vetens , A. Warden 

Authors affiliated with an international laboratory covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN

S. Afanasiev , V. Alexakhin , Yu. Andreev , T. Aushev , D. Budkouski , R. Chistov⁹⁵ , M. Danilov⁹⁵ , T. Dimova⁹⁵ , A. Ershov⁹⁵ , S. Gninenko , I. Golutvin[†] , I. Gorbunov , A. Gribushin⁹⁵ , V. Karjavine , M. Kirsanov , V. Klyukhin⁹⁵ , O. Kodolova^{96,93} , V. Korenkov , A. Kozyrev⁹⁵ , N. Krasnikov , A. Lanev , A. Malakhov , V. Matveev⁹⁵ , A. Nikitenko^{97,96} , V. Palichik , V. Perelygin , S. Petrushanko⁹⁵ , S. Polikarpov⁹⁵ , O. Radchenko⁹⁵ , M. Savina , V. Shalaev , S. Shmatov , S. Shulha , Y. Skovpen⁹⁵ , V. Smirnov , O. Teryaev , I. Tlisoa⁹⁵ , A. Toropin , N. Voytishin , B.S. Yuldashev^{†98}, A. Zarubin , I. Zhizhin 

†: Deceased

¹Also at Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia

²Also at TU Wien, Vienna, Austria

³Also at Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

⁴Also at Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

⁵Also at FACAMP - Faculdades de Campinas, Sao Paulo, Brazil

⁶Also at Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, Brazil

⁷Also at Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil

⁸Also at University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China

⁹Also at China Center of Advanced Science and Technology, Beijing, China

¹⁰Also at University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China

¹¹Also at China Spallation Neutron Source, Guangdong, China

¹²Now at Henan Normal University, Xinxiang, China

¹³Also at University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

¹⁴Now at The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, USA

¹⁵Also at Center for High Energy Physics, Peking University, Beijing, China

¹⁶Also at Helwan University, Cairo, Egypt

¹⁷Now at Zewail City of Science and Technology, Zewail, Egypt

¹⁸Now at British University in Egypt, Cairo, Egypt

¹⁹Now at Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt

²⁰Also at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA

²¹Also at Université de Haute Alsace, Mulhouse, France

²²Also at Istinye University, Istanbul, Turkey

²³Also at an institute formerly covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN

²⁴Also at The University of the State of Amazonas, Manaus, Brazil

²⁵Also at University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

²⁶Also at RWTH Aachen University, III. Physikalisches Institut A, Aachen, Germany

²⁷Also at Bergische University Wuppertal (BUW), Wuppertal, Germany

²⁸Also at Brandenburg University of Technology, Cottbus, Germany

²⁹Also at Forschungszentrum Jülich, Juelich, Germany

³⁰Also at CERN, European Organization for Nuclear Research, Geneva, Switzerland

³¹Also at HUN-REN ATOMKI - Institute of Nuclear Research, Debrecen, Hungary

³²Now at Universitatea Babes-Bolyai - Facultatea de Fizica, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

³³Also at MTA-ELTE Lendület CMS Particle and Nuclear Physics Group, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

³⁴Also at HUN-REN Wigner Research Centre for Physics, Budapest, Hungary

- ³⁵ Also at Physics Department, Faculty of Science, Assiut University, Assiut, Egypt
- ³⁶ Also at Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, India
- ³⁷ Also at University of Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, India
- ³⁸ Also at Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore, India
- ³⁹ Also at Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Noida, India
- ⁴⁰ Also at UPES - University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Dehradun, India
- ⁴¹ Also at IIT Bhubaneswar, Bhubaneswar, India
- ⁴² Also at Institute of Physics, Bhubaneswar, India
- ⁴³ Also at University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India
- ⁴⁴ Also at Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron, Hamburg, Germany
- ⁴⁵ Also at Isfahan University of Technology, Isfahan, Iran
- ⁴⁶ Also at Sharif University of Technology, Tehran, Iran
- ⁴⁷ Also at Department of Physics, University of Science and Technology of Mazandaran, Behshahr, Iran
- ⁴⁸ Also at Department of Physics, Faculty of Science, Arak University, ARAK, Iran
- ⁴⁹ Also at Italian National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development, Bologna, Italy
- ⁵⁰ Also at Centro Siciliano di Fisica Nucleare e di Struttura Della Materia, Catania, Italy
- ⁵¹ Also at Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi, Roma, Italy
- ⁵² Also at Scuola Superiore Meridionale, Università di Napoli 'Federico II', Napoli, Italy
- ⁵³ Also at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, Batavia, Illinois, USA
- ⁵⁴ Also at Lulea University of Technology, Lulea, Sweden
- ⁵⁵ Also at Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche - Istituto Officina dei Materiali, Perugia, Italy
- ⁵⁶ Also at Institut de Physique des 2 Infinis de Lyon (IP2I), Villeurbanne, France
- ⁵⁷ Also at Department of Applied Physics, Faculty of Science and Technology, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia
- ⁵⁸ Also at Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, Mexico City, Mexico
- ⁵⁹ Also at INFN Sezione di Torino, Università di Torino, Torino, Italy; Università del Piemonte Orientale, Novara, Italy
- ⁶⁰ Also at Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka, Nilaveli, Sri Lanka
- ⁶¹ Also at Saegis Campus, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka
- ⁶² Also at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece
- ⁶³ Also at Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland
- ⁶⁴ Also at Universität Zürich, Zurich, Switzerland
- ⁶⁵ Also at Stefan Meyer Institute for Subatomic Physics, Vienna, Austria
- ⁶⁶ Also at Laboratoire d'Annecy-le-Vieux de Physique des Particules, IN2P3-CNRS, Annecy-le-Vieux, France
- ⁶⁷ Also at Near East University, Research Center of Experimental Health Science, Mersin, Turkey
- ⁶⁸ Also at Konya Technical University, Konya, Turkey
- ⁶⁹ Also at Izmir Bakircay University, Izmir, Turkey
- ⁷⁰ Also at Adiyaman University, Adiyaman, Turkey
- ⁷¹ Also at Bozok Universitetesi Rektörlüğü, Yozgat, Turkey
- ⁷² Also at Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey
- ⁷³ Also at Milli Savunma University, Istanbul, Turkey
- ⁷⁴ Also at Kafkas University, Kars, Turkey
- ⁷⁵ Now at Istanbul Okan University, Istanbul, Turkey
- ⁷⁶ Also at Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey
- ⁷⁷ Also at Erzincan Binali Yildirim University, Erzincan, Turkey

-
- ⁷⁸Also at Istanbul University - Cerrahpasa, Faculty of Engineering, Istanbul, Turkey
- ⁷⁹Also at Yildiz Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey
- ⁸⁰Also at School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom
- ⁸¹Also at Monash University, Faculty of Science, Clayton, Australia
- ⁸²Also at Università di Torino, Torino, Italy
- ⁸³Also at Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA
- ⁸⁴Also at Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University, Karaman, Turkey
- ⁸⁵Also at California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California, USA
- ⁸⁶Also at United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, USA
- ⁸⁷Also at Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt
- ⁸⁸Also at Bingöl University, Bingöl, Turkey
- ⁸⁹Also at Georgian Technical University, Tbilisi, Georgia
- ⁹⁰Also at Sinop University, Sinop, Turkey
- ⁹¹Also at Erciyes University, Kayseri, Turkey
- ⁹²Also at Horia Hulubei National Institute of Physics and Nuclear Engineering (IFIN-HH), Bucharest, Romania
- ⁹³Now at another institute formerly covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN
- ⁹⁴Also at Texas A&M University at Qatar, Doha, Qatar
- ⁹⁵Also at another institute formerly covered by a cooperation agreement with CERN
- ⁹⁶Also at Yerevan Physics Institute, Yerevan, Armenia
- ⁹⁷Also at Imperial College, London, United Kingdom
- ⁹⁸Also at Institute of Nuclear Physics of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences, Tashkent, Uzbekistan