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Paths of Length Four

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For each sufficiently large m, we determine the unique graph of size m with the maximum number of paths of length four. If m is even, this is the complete bipartite graph $K(\frac{m}{2}, 2)$.

Given a graph G and an integer $s \geq 2$, write $p_s(G)$ for the number of paths of length s in G. The asymptotic behaviour of the function

$$p_s(m) = \max\{p_s(G) : e(G) = m\}$$

was determined in [5], where it was also shown that if $10 \leq \binom{k}{2} \leq m < \binom{k+1}{2}$ then

$$p_3(m) \leq \frac{2m(m-k)(k-2)}{k},$$

with equality if and only if $m = \binom{k}{2}$. The study of $p_3(m)$ was motivated by the results on weights of graphs in [4], and the problem of maximizing $p_2(G)$ over graphs of fixed order and size was considered in [1] and implicitly in [7]. Moreover, after the first version of this paper was written, we discovered three papers [2], [3], [6] also concerned with maximizing the number of subgraphs isomorphic to a fixed graph H in graphs of size m. Although the results in [5] (and, to a lesser extent, those in [2]) give us some information about the extremal graphs themselves, they do not tell us what they are. In particular, for large values of s we know only large families of graphs which are close to being extremal. However, in this paper we determine the unique extremal graph for $s = 4$ and every sufficiently large m.

The first stage of the proof is essentially contained in [5]: we reproduce it here for the sake of completeness.

For m even and at least two, let G_m be the complete bipartite graph $K(\frac{m}{2}, 2)$. If m is odd and at least three, we take G_m to be the complete bipartite graph $K(\frac{m-1}{2}, 2)$ with an additional edge connecting one of the vertices of degree $\frac{m-1}{2}$ to a new vertex. It turns out that G_m has many more paths of length four than a complete graph of approximately the same size. In the proof below, as throughout the paper, G will be a graph of size m with no isolated vertices.

Theorem 1. *If m is sufficiently large then*

$$p_4(m) = p_4(G_m) = \begin{cases} \frac{m^3}{8} - \frac{3m^2}{4} + m, & \text{if } m \text{ is even;} \\ \frac{m^3}{8} - \frac{7m^2}{8} + \frac{15m}{8} - \frac{9}{8}, & \text{if } m \text{ is odd,} \end{cases}$$

and G_m is the unique extremal graph.

Proof. Let G be a graph of size m with $V(G) = \{v_1, v_2, \dots, v_n\}$ and suppose that $d_1 \geq d_2 \geq \dots d_n > 0$, where $d_i = d(v_i)$. For a pair of vertices $\{v_i, v_j\}$, set

$$d_{ij} = |\Gamma(v_i) - \{v_j\}|,$$

and

$$f_{ij} = |\Gamma(v_i) \cap \Gamma(v_j)|.$$

Then, indexing a path of length four in G by the two vertices v_i, v_j adjacent to its middle vertex, we have

$$\begin{aligned} p_4(G) &= \sum_{i<j} \{(d_{ij} - f_{ij}) f_{ij} (d_{ji} - 1) + f_{ij}(f_{ij} - 1)(d_{ji} - 2)\} \\ &= \sum_{i<j} f_{ij} \{(d_{ij} - 1)(d_{ji} - 1) - (f_{ij} - 1)\}. \end{aligned}$$

Therefore certainly

$$p_4(G) \leq \sum_{i<j} d_i d_j^2,$$

and this is the first approximation we shall use.

We can immediately get the correct order of magnitude for $p_4(m)$, since we may write

$$\begin{aligned} p_4(G) &\leq \sum_{i<j} d_i d_j^2 \leq \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i \neq j} d_i d_j^2 = \frac{1}{2} \left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} d_i \sum_{j=1}^{n} d_j^2 - \sum_{j=1}^{n} d_j^3 \right) \\ &= \frac{1}{2} \sum_{j=1}^{n} d_j^2 (2m - d_j) \leq \frac{m^2}{2} \sum_{j=1}^{n} d_j = m^3. \end{aligned}$$

However, a little more care gives the correct constant also. Indeed, the terms $d_i d_j^2$ where d_j is small contribute very little to the above sum, and so we can restrict attention to the "large degree terms", where d_i and d_j are both large. The sum of the large degrees is approximately m, so the following two-stage calculation saves us a factor of 8. Write

$$S = \{i \in [n] : d_i > m^{\frac{2}{3}}\},$$

$$T = \{i \in [n] : d_i \leq m^{\frac{2}{3}}\},$$

$$W = \{v_i : i \in S\}.$$

There are less than $2m^{\frac{1}{3}}$ vertices in W, and so they span less than $2m^{\frac{2}{3}}$ edges. This means that

$$\sum_{i \in S} d_i \leq m + 2m^{\frac{2}{3}} = \beta m,$$

where $\beta = 1 + 2m^{-\frac{1}{3}}$. Now,

$$p_4(G) \leq \sum_{i<j} d_i d_j^2 = \sum_{i<j, j \in S} d_i d_j^2 + \sum_{i<j, j \in T} d_i d_j^2 = s(G) + t(G), \tag{1}$$

say. We shall bound $s(G)$ and $t(G)$ separately. Clearly,

$$t(G) \leq \sum_{i=1}^{n} d_i \sum_{j \in T} d_j^2 \leq 2m \sum_{j \in T} d_j m^{\frac{2}{3}} \leq 4m^{\frac{8}{3}}, \tag{2}$$

and further

$$\begin{aligned} s(G) &\leq \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i,j \in S, i \neq j} d_i d_j^2 = \frac{1}{2}\left(\sum_{i \in S} d_i \sum_{j \in S} d_j^2 - \sum_{j \in S} d_j^3\right) \leq \frac{1}{2}\left(\beta m \sum_{j \in S} d_j^2 - \sum_{j \in S} d_j^3\right) \\ &= \frac{1}{2} \sum_{j \in S} d_j^2(\beta m - d_j) \leq \frac{1}{2} \sum_{j \in S} d_j \left(\frac{\beta m}{2}\right)^2 \leq \left(\frac{\beta m}{2}\right)^3 \\ &= \frac{m^3}{8} + \frac{3}{4} m^{\frac{8}{3}} + \frac{3}{2} m^{\frac{7}{3}} + m^2 \leq \frac{m^3}{8} + m^{\frac{8}{3}} \end{aligned}$$

for $m \geq 1000$. Together with (2) this gives

$$p_4(G) \leq \frac{m^3}{8} + 5m^{\frac{8}{3}}$$

for $m \geq 1000$.

The next step is to show that unless d_1 and d_2 are both very close to $\frac{m}{2}$, G will contain far fewer than $\frac{m^3}{8}$ paths of length four.

If there are less than two vertices in W, then there are no more than $4m^{\frac{8}{3}}$ paths of length four in G, and

$$4m^{\frac{8}{3}} < \frac{m^3}{8} - m^2 < p_4(G_m)$$

for $m \geq 64000$. Therefore we may suppose that $d_1 \geq d_2 > m^{\frac{2}{3}}$.

From now on, we shall assume that $m \geq 16^{21}$ and also that $p_4(G) \geq p_4(G_m)$; in particular

$$p_4(G) > \frac{m^3}{8} - m^2,$$

and, using (1) and (2),

$$s(G) > \frac{m^3}{8} - 4m^{\frac{8}{3}} - m^2. \tag{3}$$

Our next aim is to prove that

$$d_2 > \frac{\beta m}{2} - 4m^{\frac{6}{7}}. \tag{4}$$

We shall do this in three stages.

First, we require

$$\frac{\beta m}{2} - m^{\frac{6}{7}} < d_1 < \frac{\beta m}{2} + m^{\frac{6}{7}}. \tag{5}$$

If d_1 is out of this range, then so are all the other degrees in G. For if $d_1 \geq \frac{\beta m}{2} + m^{\frac{6}{7}}$ then for $2 \leq j \leq n$ we have

$$d_j \leq d_2 \leq m - d_1 + 1 < \beta m - d_1 \leq \frac{\beta m}{2} - m^{\frac{6}{7}}.$$

Therefore, if

$$d_1 \notin \left(\frac{\beta m}{2} - m^{\frac{6}{7}}, \frac{\beta m}{2} + m^{\frac{6}{7}}\right)$$

then

$$\begin{aligned}
s(G) &\leq \frac{1}{2}\sum_{j\in S} d_j^2(\beta m - d_j) \\
&\leq \frac{1}{2}\sum_{j\in S} d_j \left(\frac{\beta m}{2} - m^{\frac{6}{7}}\right)\left(\frac{\beta m}{2} + m^{\frac{6}{7}}\right) \\
&\leq \frac{1}{8}(m + 2m^{\frac{2}{3}})(m + 2m^{\frac{2}{3}} - 2m^{\frac{6}{7}})(m + 2m^{\frac{2}{3}} + 2m^{\frac{6}{7}}) \\
&\leq \frac{m^3}{8} - \frac{m^{\frac{19}{7}}}{2} + m^{\frac{8}{3}} \\
&< \frac{m^3}{8} - 4m^{\frac{8}{3}} - m^2,
\end{aligned}$$

contradicting (3).

Second, we must have $d_2 > m^{\frac{6}{7}}$ since otherwise

$$\begin{aligned}
s(G) &\leq \frac{1}{2}\sum_{j\in S} d_j^2(\beta m - d_j) \\
&= \frac{1}{2}d_1^2(\beta m - d_1) + \frac{1}{2}\sum_{j\in S, j\geq 2} d_j^2(\beta m - d_j) \\
&< \frac{1}{2}\left(\frac{\beta m}{2} + m^{\frac{6}{7}}\right)^2\left(\frac{\beta m}{2} - m^{\frac{6}{7}}\right) + \frac{1}{2}\sum_{j\in S, j\geq 2} d_j^2(\beta m - d_j) \\
&< \frac{1}{2}\left(\frac{\beta m}{2} + m^{\frac{6}{7}}\right)\left(\frac{\beta m}{2}\right)^2 + \frac{\beta^2}{2}m^{\frac{20}{7}} \\
&= \frac{1}{2}\left(\frac{\beta m}{2}\right)^3 + \frac{5\beta^2}{8}m^{\frac{20}{7}}
\end{aligned}$$

$$< \frac{m^3}{15},$$

which contracts (3).

Third, if $d_1 - d_2 \geq 3m^{\frac{6}{7}}$ then

$$\begin{aligned}
s(G) &= \sum_{i<j, j\in S} d_i d_j^2 \\
&\leq \frac{1}{2}\sum_{i,j\in S, i\neq j} d_i d_j^2 + \frac{1}{2}(d_1 d_2^2 - d_1^2 d_2) \\
&\leq \frac{m^3}{8} + m^{\frac{8}{3}} - \frac{1}{2} d_1 d_2 (d_1 - d_2) \\
&\leq \frac{m^3}{8} + m^{\frac{8}{3}} - \frac{1}{2}\frac{m}{3} m^{\frac{6}{7}} (3m^{\frac{6}{7}}) \\
&< \frac{m^3}{8} - 4m^{\frac{8}{3}} - m^2,
\end{aligned}$$

contradicting (3), as before, and so proving (4).

Define $l = l(G)$ by

$$d_{12} + d_{21} = m - l.$$

Inequalities (4) and (5) imply that $l \leq 5m^{\frac{6}{7}}$. Our aim is to show that in fact $l = 0$. Once we have established this, the remainder of the proof will be easy. Indeed, if $l = 0$ then

$$\begin{aligned}
p_4(G) &= f_{12}\{(d_{12} - 1)(d_{21} - 1) - (f_{12} - 1)\} \\
&\leq d_{21}\{(d_{12} - 1)(d_{21} - 1) - (d_{21} - 1)\} \\
&= d_{21}(d_{21} - 1)(d_{12} - 2),
\end{aligned}$$

and we maximize this last function over $d_{12} + d_{21} = m$, $d_{12} \geq d_{21}$ by making d_{12} and d_{21} as equal as possible, so that $G \cong G_m$. Suppose then that $l > 0$.

Call a path of length four in G *regular* if it is of the form xv_1yv_2z, and *irregular* otherwise. Write $p_4(G, v_1, v_2)$ for the number of regular paths and $q_4(G, v_1, v_2)$ for the number of irregular ones, so that $p_4(G) = p_4(G, v_1, v_2) + q_4(G, v_1, v_2)$. Clearly, $p_4(G, v_1, v_2) \leq p_4(G_{m-l})$ so that

$$\begin{aligned}
p_4(G_m) - p_4(G) &= p_4(G_m) - p_4(G, v_1, v_2) - q_4(G, v_1, v_2) \\
&\geq p_4(G_m) - p_4(G_{m-l}) - q_4(G, v_1, v_2).
\end{aligned}$$

Hence, assuming $d_{12} = d_{21}$ and $l \equiv 0(2)$ for simplicity, our task amounts to showing that when we replace l edges from $G - \{v_1, v_2\}$ by $\frac{l}{2}$ edges incident with v_1 and $\frac{l}{2}$ edges incident with v_2 our gain in regular paths is more than our loss in irregular ones.

If m is even, then

$$p_4(G_m) - p_4(G_{m-1}) = \frac{(m-2)(m-4)}{2}$$

and

$$p_4(G_m) - p_4(G_{m-1}) = \frac{(m-1)(m-3)}{4}$$

if m is odd. Further, if $m \geq 16^{21}$ and $l_1 \leq l \leq 5m^{\frac{6}{7}}$ we have

$$p_4(G_{m-l_1+1}) - p_4(G_{m-l_1}) \geq \frac{m^2}{5}.$$

Summing, we obtain

$$p_4(G_m) - p_4(G_{m-l}) \geq \frac{lm^2}{5}.$$

It remains to show that if $l > 0$ then

$$q_4(G, v_1, v_2) < \frac{lm^2}{5}.$$

In what follows, x, y, z, w and v will denote vertices chosen from $V(G) - \{v_1, v_2\}$. There are at most l^2 paths of the form v_1v_2xyz, l^2 of the form v_2v_1xyz, ml of each of the types v_1xv_2yz and v_2xv_1yz, $2lm$ of either of the types v_1xyv_2z and v_2xyv_1z, l^2 of the form v_1xyzv_2, $2lm$ of either of the types xv_1v_2yz and xv_2v_1yz, $4l^2$ of each of the types v_1xyzw and v_2xyzw, l^2m of either of the types xv_1yzw and xv_2yzw, $4l^2$ of each of the types xyv_1zw and xyv_2zw and l^3 of the form $xyzwv$. For example, when counting the number of paths of type v_1v_2xyz, there are at most l choices for the edge $e = xy$, at most $l - 1$ choices of a fifth vertex z (adjacent to either one of the endvertices of e) and the choice of z determines which endvertex of e is joined to v_2. Thus

$$q_4(G, v_1, v_2) \leq l^3 + 19l^2 + ml^2 + 6ml.$$

Each of the four terms on the right hand side is strictly less than $\frac{lm^2}{20}$, so finally

$$p_4(G) < p_4(G_m),$$

a contradiction. □

Although we suspect that the conclusion of the theorem holds for much smaller values of m than above, it is certainly false for $m = 4, 5$ and 6: G_4, G_5 and G_6 have fewer P_4s than a path of length four, a cycle of order five and a cycle of order five with a pendant edge, respectively.

There are various obstacles to extending the theorem to paths of different lengths. When we deal with paths of odd length, complete graphs are asymptotically extremal [2], [5], and entirely different methods are used. (As it happens, the problem is easier for paths of odd length.) For paths of length six, the complete bipartite graphs with *five* vertices in one class (and so about $\frac{m}{5}$ in the other) are asymptotically extremal, and it therefore seems likely that new ideas are needed to give exact results for paths of six and higher even orders.

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