# On almost-equidistant sets II

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#### Abstract

A set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  is called almost-equidistant if for any three distinct points in the set, some two are at unit distance apart. First, we give a short proof of the result of Bezdek and Lángi claiming that an almost-equidistant set lying on a (d-1)-dimensional sphere of radius r, where  $r < 1/\sqrt{2}$ , has at most 2d+2 points. Second, we prove that an almost-equidistant set V in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  has O(d) points in two cases: if the diameter of V is at most 1 or if V is a subset of a d-dimensional ball of radius at most  $1/\sqrt{2} + cd^{-2/3}$ , where c < 1/2. Also, we present a new proof of the result of Kupavskii, Mustafa and Swanepoel that an almost-equidistant set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  has  $O(d^{4/3})$  elements.

Mathematics Subject Classifications: 05C55, 52C99, 51K99

### 1 Introduction

A set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  is called *almost-equidistant* if among any three points in the set, some two are at unit distance apart. The natural conjecture [12, Conjecture 12] claims that an almost-equidistant set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  has O(d) points.

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Using an elegant linear algebraic argument, Rosenfeld [13] proved that an almost-equidistant set on a (d-1)-dimensional sphere of radius  $1/\sqrt{2}$  has at most 2d points. Note that the set of the vertices of two unit (d-1)-simplices lying on the same (d-1)-dimensional sphere of radius  $1/\sqrt{2}$  is almost-equidistant. Bezdek and Lángi [2, Theorem 1] generalized Rosenfeld's approach and showed that an almost-equidistant set on a (d-1)-dimensional sphere of radius at most  $1/\sqrt{2}$  has at most 2d+2 points; this bound is tight because the vertices of two unit d-simplices inscribed in the same sphere form an almost-equidistant set.

Balko, Pór, Scheucher, Swanepoel and Valtr [1, Theorem 6] showed that an almost equidistant set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  has  $O(d^{3/2})$  points. This bound was improved by the author [12, Theorem 1] to  $O(d^{13/9})$ . Recently, Kupavskii, Mustafa, Swanepoel [8] further improved to  $O(d^{4/3})$ . For more references we refer interested readers to [1, Section 1].

The first goal of this paper is to give a short proof of the result of Bezdek–Lángi [2] using a lifting argument and the fact that an almost-equidistant set on a (d-1)-dimensional sphere has at most 2d points. The second aim is to confirm the conjecture in two cases: for almost-equidistant sets of diameter 1 (see Section 4) and for almost-equidistant sets lying in a d-dimensional ball of radius  $1/\sqrt{2} + cd^{-2/3}$ , where c < 1/2 (see Section 5). The third goal is to give a new proof of the upper bound  $O(d^{4/3})$  for the size of an almost-equidistant set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  (see Section 6). Also, we discuss several open problems related to almost-equidistant sets (see Section 7).

### 2 Preliminaries

Let  $\{\mathbf{v}_1,\ldots,\mathbf{v}_n\}\subset\mathbb{R}^d$  be an almost-equidistant set. Consider the matrix

$$\mathbf{U} := \|\mathbf{v}_i - \mathbf{v}_j\|^2 + \mathbf{I}_n - \mathbf{J}_n, \tag{1}$$

where  $\mathbf{J}_n$  is the *n*-by-*n* matrix of ones and  $\mathbf{I}_n$  is the identity matrix of size *n*. We need two simple facts proved in [12, Corollary 4 and Lemma 5]. We join them in the following lemma.

**Lemma 1.** The matrix U satisfies the following two properties.

- 1. The equalities  $tr(\mathbf{U}) = tr(\mathbf{U}^3) = 0$  hold.
- 2. The matrix  $\mathbf{U}$  has at most one eigenvalue larger than 1 and at least n-d-2 eigenvalues equal to 1.

We use Lemma 1 combined with the following lemma several times.

**Lemma 2.** Let  $\lambda_0, 1, \ldots, 1, \lambda_1, \ldots, \lambda_k$  be the eigenvalues of an Hermitian matrix  $\mathbf{A}$  of size n, indexed in nondecreasing order. Assume  $\operatorname{tr}(\mathbf{A}) = \operatorname{tr}(\mathbf{A}^3) = 0$ .

- 1. If  $\lambda_0 = 1$ , then  $n \leq 2k$ .
- 2. If  $\lambda_0 + \lambda_k \leq 0$ , then  $n \leq 2k$ .
- 3. If  $n \ge 2k$  and  $\lambda_0 > 1$ , then

$$\lambda_0^3 > \frac{(n-k)^3}{k^2} - (n-k-1).$$

*Proof.* 1. Suppose to the contrary that n > 2k. Introducing the notation l := n - 2k, we can rewrite the equations  $tr(\mathbf{A}) = tr(\mathbf{A}^3) = 0$  as

$$\sum_{i=1}^{k} (-\lambda_i) = \sum_{i=1}^{k} (-\lambda_i)^3 = k + l.$$

To finish the proof, we need Lemma 1 in [2]. For the sake of completeness we provide its proof here.

**Lemma 3.** Let  $x_1, \ldots, x_m$  be real numbers such that  $x_i \ge -2$  for  $i = 1, \ldots, m$ . If  $\sum_{i=1}^m x_i = (m+l)$ , where  $l \ge 0$ , then

$$\sum_{i=1}^{m} x_i^3 \geqslant \frac{(m+l)^3}{m^2}.$$

Here the equality is possible if and only if the  $x_i$  are equal to 1 + l/m.

Remark 4. Also, note that  $(m+l)^3/m^2 \ge m+3l$ .

*Proof.* Consider functions  $f, g: [-2, +\infty) \to \mathbb{R}$  such that

$$f(x) = x^3$$
 for any  $x \ge -2$ ,  $g(x) = \begin{cases} 3x - 2, & \text{for any } -2 \le x \le 1, \\ x^3, & \text{for any } 1 \le x. \end{cases}$ 

For  $-2 \le x \le 1$  we have  $g(x) \le f(x)$  because in this range g(x) has the value of a tangent line to f(x) at x = 1 and the second point of the intersection of that tangent line and f(x) is at x = -2. Further, g(x) is a convex function in the range  $-2 \le x$ . By Jensen's Inequality, we obtain

$$\sum_{i=1}^{m} x_i^3 = \sum_{i=1}^{m} f(x_i) \geqslant \sum_{i=1}^{m} g(x_i) \geqslant mg\left(\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{m} x_i}{m}\right)$$
$$= m\left(\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{m} x_i}{m}\right)^3 = \frac{(m+l)^3}{m^2} \geqslant m+3l.$$

The equality case we leave as an exercise.

Clearly, Lemma 3 implies that

$$\sum_{i=1}^{k} (-\lambda_i)^3 \geqslant k + 3l,$$

and this is a contradiction with the inequality l > 0.

2. Suppose to the contrary that  $n \ge 2k+1$ . Introducing the notation l := n-2k-1, we can rewrite the equalities  $\operatorname{tr}(\mathbf{A}) = \operatorname{tr}(\mathbf{A}^3) = 0$  as

$$\sum_{i=1}^{k-1} (-\lambda_i) + (-\lambda_0 - \lambda_k) = \sum_{i=1}^{k-1} (-\lambda_i)^3 - \lambda_0^3 - \lambda_k^3 = k + l.$$
 (2)

By Lemma 3, we obtain

$$\sum_{i=1}^{k-1} (-\lambda_i)^3 + (-\lambda_0 - \lambda_k)^3 \geqslant k + 3l.$$
 (3)

The second equality in (2) implies

$$k + l + (-\lambda_0 - \lambda_k)^3 + \lambda_0^3 + \lambda_k^3 \ge k + 3l$$

and so

$$-3\lambda_0\lambda_k(\lambda_0+\lambda_k)\geqslant 2l. \tag{4}$$

Since  $\lambda_0 > 0$ ,  $\lambda_k < 0$ ,  $\lambda_0 + \lambda_k \le 0$  and  $l \ge 0$ , we get  $\lambda_0 + \lambda_k = 0$  and l = 0. By Lemma 3, if  $\lambda_1 + \lambda_k = 0$  then we have a strict inequality in (3), and thus we get a strict inequality in (4). This implies a contradiction with the equality l = 0.

3. Clearly, we can rewrite the equalities  $tr(\mathbf{A}) = tr(\mathbf{A}^3) = 0$  as

$$\sum_{i=1}^{k} (-\lambda_i) = \lambda_0 + n - k - 1 > n - k$$

and

$$\lambda_0^3 = \sum_{i=1}^k (-\lambda_i)^3 - (n-k-1).$$

Since  $n \ge 2k$ , Lemma 3 implies that

$$\lambda_0^3 > \frac{(n-k)^3}{k^2} - (n-k-1).$$

Corollary 5. If the matrix U does not have an eigenvalue larger than 1, then  $n \leq 2d+4$ .

*Proof.* The proof easily follows from Lemmas 1 and 2 (case 1). 
$$\Box$$

We need the following technical lemma only in the proof of the fact that an almost-equidistant set has  $O(d^{4/3})$  points; see Theorem 14.

**Lemma 6.** If  $\{\mathbf{w}_0, \mathbf{w}_1, \dots, \mathbf{w}_k\}$  is an almost-equidistant set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  such that

$$\left| \left\| \mathbf{w}_i \right\|^2 - 1/2 \right| \leqslant x \tag{5}$$

for  $0 \le i \le k$  and a positive x, then

$$\left| \sum_{1 \le i \le k} (\|\mathbf{w}_0 - \mathbf{w}_i\|^2 - 1) \right| \le c \left( d^{1/2} + dx^{1/2} + dx \right)$$

for some positive constant c independent of d and x.

*Proof.* We may assume without loss of generality that  $\|\mathbf{w}_0 - \mathbf{w}_i\| \neq 1$  for  $1 \leq i \leq k$ . Since the set is almost-equidistant, the points  $\mathbf{w}_1, \ldots, \mathbf{w}_k$  form a regular unit (k-1)-simplex, and so  $k \leq d+1 \leq 2d$ .

We use the following theorem (see [4, Theorem 1]) several times.

**Theorem 7.** Let  $X = \{\mathbf{x}_1, \dots, \mathbf{x}_n\}$  and  $Y = \{\mathbf{y}_1, \dots, \mathbf{y}_n\}$  be two point-sets in  $\mathbb{R}^d$ . Then

$$\sum_{1\leqslant i,j\leqslant n}\|\mathbf{x}_i-\mathbf{y}_j\|^2=\sum_{1\leqslant i< j\leqslant n}\|\mathbf{x}_i-\mathbf{x}_j\|^2+\sum_{1\leqslant i< j\leqslant n}\|\mathbf{y}_i-\mathbf{y}_j\|^2+n^2\|\mathbf{x}-\mathbf{y}\|^2,$$

where  $\mathbf{x}$  and  $\mathbf{y}$  are the barycenters of X and Y, respectively, that is,

$$\mathbf{x} = (\mathbf{x}_1 + \dots + \mathbf{x}_n)/n, \ \mathbf{y} = (\mathbf{y}_1 + \dots + \mathbf{y}_n)/n.$$

Theorem 7 applied to  $\{\mathbf{w}_0, \dots, \mathbf{w}_0\}$  and  $\{\mathbf{w}_1, \dots, \mathbf{w}_k\}$  implies

$$\sum_{1 \le i \le k} \|\mathbf{w}_0 - \mathbf{w}_i\|^2 = \frac{k-1}{2} + k \|\mathbf{w}_0 - \mathbf{o}'\|^2 = \frac{k-1}{2} + k \|\mathbf{w}_0\|^2 + k \|\mathbf{o}'\|^2 + O(1) \cdot k \|\mathbf{w}_0\| \|\mathbf{o}'\|,$$
(6)

where  $\mathbf{o}'$  is the center of the simplex  $\mathbf{w}_1 \dots \mathbf{w}_k$ . Theorem 7 applied to  $\{\mathbf{o}, \dots, \mathbf{o}\}$  and  $\{\mathbf{w}_1, \dots, \mathbf{w}_k\}$ , where  $\mathbf{o}$  is the origin, and combined with (5) yields

$$k\|\mathbf{o}'\|^2 = \sum_{1 \le i \le k} \|\mathbf{w}_i\|^2 - \frac{k-1}{2} = \frac{k}{2} - \frac{k-1}{2} + O(1) \cdot kx = \frac{1}{2} + O(1) \cdot kx. \tag{7}$$

By (5) and (7), we obtain

$$(6) = \frac{k-1}{2} + \frac{k}{2} + \frac{1}{2} + O(1) \cdot kx + O(1) \cdot k(1+x^{1/2})(k^{-1/2} + x^{1/2})$$
$$= k + O(1) \cdot (k^{1/2} + kx^{1/2} + kx).$$

The fact  $k \leq 2d$  finishes the proof of the lemma.

# 3 A simple proof of the result of Bezdek and Lángi

**Theorem 8** (Bezdek, Lángi, 1999). For  $r \leq 1/\sqrt{2}$ , an almost-equidistant set lying on a (d-1)-dimensional sphere S of radius r contains at most 2d+2 points.

*Proof.* Assume that S is embedded in  $\mathbb{R}^{d+1}$  and its center  $\mathbf{o}$  and a point  $\mathbf{o}' \in \mathbb{R}^{d+1}$  are such that the line  $\mathbf{o}'\mathbf{o}$  is orthogonal to the affine hull of S and  $|\mathbf{o}' - \mathbf{o}|^2 = 1/2 - r$ . Now, we get that the almost-equidistant set lies on the d-dimensional sphere of radius  $1/\sqrt{2}$  with center  $\mathbf{o}'$ . By Rosenfeld's theorem [13], the size of the almost-equidistant sets is at most 2(d+1).

## 4 Almost-equidistant diameter sets

A subset of  $\mathbb{R}^d$  is called an almost-equidistant diameter set if it is almost-equidistant and has diameter 1; see [12, Proposition 13 and Problem 14]. The next theorem is about the maximal size of such sets.

**Theorem 9.** An almost-equidistant diameter set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  has at most 2d + 4 points.

*Proof.* Clearly, the matrix  $\mathbf{U}$  (see (1)) for an almost-equidistant diameter set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  has non-positive entries. Lemma 1 and Corollary 5 imply that we can assume without loss of generality that  $\mathbf{U}$  has exactly one eigenvalue  $\lambda$  larger than 1.

We need the following week form of the Perron–Frobenius Theorem; see [11, 5].

**Theorem 10** (Perron–Frobenius Theorem). If an n-by-n matrix has non-negative entries, then it has a non-negative real eigenvalue, which has maximum absolute value among all eigenvalues.

By the Perron–Frobenius Theorem, the matrix **U** has a negative eigenvalue  $\lambda'$  such that  $|\lambda'| \ge \lambda$ . Therefore, Lemmas 1 and 2 (case 2) imply that the almost-equidistant diameter set has at most 2d + 2 points.

## 5 Almost-equidistant sets in small balls

**Theorem 11.** Let  $0 \le c_0 < 1/2$  be a fixed constant. If an almost-equidistant set lies in a d-dimensional ball of radius  $\sqrt{1/2 + c_0/(d+1)^{2/3}}$ , then its cardinality is  $O(d)/(1-2c_0)$ .

*Proof.* Let  $\{\mathbf{v}_1, \dots, \mathbf{v}_n\}$  be an almost-equidistant set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  such that  $n \geq 2d+2$  and  $\|\mathbf{v}_i\|^2 = 1/2 + c_i$  for  $1 \leq i \leq n$ , where  $c_i \leq c_0/(d+1)^{2/3} = r$ .

By Corollary 5 and Lemma 1, without loss of generality we can assume that the matrix U (see (1)) for this set has exactly one eigenvalue  $\lambda$  larger than 1. Hence Lemmas 1 and 2 (case 3) for U yield

$$\lambda^3 > \frac{(n-d-1)^3}{(d+1)^2} - (n-d-2).$$

To finish the proof, we need the following special case of Weyl's Inequality [14, Theorem 1].

**Theorem 12** (Weyl's Inequality). If  $\alpha, \beta$  and  $\gamma$  are the largest eigenvalues of Hermitian matrices  $\mathbf{A}, \mathbf{B}$  and  $\mathbf{A} + \mathbf{B}$  respectively, then  $\gamma \leqslant \alpha + \beta$ .

Clearly, by (1), we have

$$\mathbf{U} = (c^t j + j^t c) - 2\langle \mathbf{v}_i, \mathbf{v}_j \rangle + \mathbf{I},$$

where  $c = (c_1, \ldots, c_n)$  and  $j = (1, \ldots, 1)$ . Obviously, the largest eigenvalues of the matrices  $c^t j$  and  $j^t c$  do not exceed nr. Therefore, from Weyl's Inequality and positivity of the Gram matrix  $\langle \mathbf{v}_i, \mathbf{v}_j \rangle$ , we conclude that  $\lambda \leq 2nr + 1$ . This forces

$$(2nr+1)^3 \geqslant \lambda^3 > \frac{(n-d-1)^3}{(d+1)^2} - (n-d-2),\tag{8}$$

and so

$$(2c_0x + o(1))^3 \ge (x-1)^3 - (x-1-o(1)),$$

where x = n/(d+1). Hence we get  $x = O(1)/(1-2c_0)$ , and thus  $n = O(d)/(1-2c_0)$ .

Remark 13. Interestingly, an almost-equidistant set lying in a d-dimensional ball of radius  $1/\sqrt{2}$  has at most 2d+4 points. Indeed, in that case r is equal to 0, and hence (8) yields n<2d+2 if **U** has an eigenvalue larger than 1. Therefore, by Corollary 5, we get  $n\leqslant 2d+4$ .

# 6 Almost-equidistant sets: general case

**Theorem 14** (Kupavskii, Mustafa, Swanepoel, 2018). The size of an almost-equidistant set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  is  $O(d^{4/3})$ .

*Proof.* Assume that  $\{\mathbf{v}_1,\ldots,\mathbf{v}_n\}$  is an almost-equidistant set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$ . Let

$$f := \max_{i=1,\dots,n} \left\{ \left| \sum_{j=1}^{n} \left( \|\mathbf{v}_i - \mathbf{v}_j\|^2 - 1 \right) \right| \right\}.$$
 (9)

Assuming that  $\sum_{i=1}^{n} \mathbf{v}_{i}$  is the origin  $\mathbf{o}$ , we easily get

$$-f \leqslant n \|\mathbf{v}_i\|^2 + \sum_{j=1}^n \|\mathbf{v}_j\|^2 - n \leqslant f$$

for  $1 \leqslant i \leqslant n$ . Summing up these inequalities for  $1 \leqslant i \leqslant n$ , we obtain

$$-f/2 \leqslant \sum_{i=1}^{n} \|\mathbf{v}_i\|^2 - n/2 \leqslant f/2.$$

The last two inequalities implies

$$-3f/(2n) \le ||\mathbf{v}_i||^2 - 1/2 \le 3f/(2n) \tag{10}$$

for  $1 \leq i \leq n$ . By (9), (10) and Lemma 6, we have

$$f \leqslant O(1) \cdot \left( d^{1/2} + d(f/n)^{1/2} + d(f/n) \right)$$
.

Therefore, we obtain either n = O(d) or

$$f = O(1) \cdot (d^{1/2} + d^2/n). \tag{11}$$

Suppose to the contrary that  $n \ge Cd^{4/3}$ , where C is a positive constant. Hence, by (10) and (11), the almost-equidistant set lies in a ball of radius  $1/\sqrt{2} + O(d^{-2/3})/C^2$ . Hence if C is big enough, then we can apply Theorem 11 to the almost-equidistant set, and thus n = O(d), a contradiction.

Remark 15. It is possible to prove Theorem 14 using Lemma 6 combined with the Gershgorin Circle Theorem [6]; see [12, Section 3.2] for a similar argument.

### 7 Discussion

#### 7.1 Almost-equidistant diameter sets

A graph (V, E) is called a diameter graph if its vertex set  $V \subseteq \mathbb{R}^d$  is a set of points of diameter 1 and a pair of vertices forms an edge if they are at unit distance apart. Of course, the set of vertices of two cliques in a diameter graph is an almost-equidistant diameter set. For instance, in [9, the last paragraph of Section 3] there is given an example of diameter graph in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  consisting of two cliques without common vertices such that they have d+1 and  $\lfloor \frac{d+1}{2} \rfloor$  vertices respectively. We believe that the vertex set of this diameter graph has the maximal size among almost-equidistant diameter sets in  $\mathbb{R}^d$ .

Conjecture 16. An almost-equidistant diameter set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  has at most  $\left\lfloor \frac{3(d+1)}{2} \right\rfloor$  points.

There is the following conjecture [7, Conjecture 5.5] that arose in the context of study of cliques in diameter graphs.

Conjecture 17 (Schur). Let  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  be two unit simplices in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  forming a set of diameter 1 such that they have k and m vertices respectively. Then  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  share at least min $\{0, k + 2m - 2d - 2\}$  vertices for  $k \ge m$ .

Clearly, this conjecture is closely related to Conjecture 16. Note that Conjecture 17 was confirmed in two special (but not trivial!) cases: (k, m, d) = (d, d, d), where  $d \ge 2$ , in [9] and (k, m, d) = (5, 3, 4) in [10].

#### 7.2 Two-distant almost-equidistant sets

A subset of  $\mathbb{R}^d$  is called a *two-distant set* if there are only two distances formed by any two distinct points of the set. The following question seems to be interesting.

**Problem 18.** What is the largest cardinality of a set in  $\mathbb{R}^d$  that is two-distant and almost-equidistant at the same time?

Consider a two-distant almost-equidistant set  $V \subseteq \mathbb{R}^d$  with distances 1 and a between points of V, where a > 1; the case a < 1 is not interesting because of Theorem 9. Lemma 1 and Corollary 5 imply that we may assume without loss of generality that  $\mathbf{U}$  for V has exactly one eigenvalue  $\lambda$  larger than 1. Note that the matrix  $\mathbf{U}/(a^2-1)$  is the adjacency matrix of a triangle-free graph. By Lemma 1, Problem 18 is reduced to following question.

**Problem 19.** What is the minimal rank of the matrix  $\mathbf{A} - \lambda_2 \mathbf{I}_n$ , where  $\mathbf{A}$  is the adjacency matrix of a triangle-free graph on n vertices and  $\lambda_2$  is its second largest eigenvalue provided that  $\lambda_2 > 0$ ?

It is worth pointing out that for every positive integer n there are a triangle-free graph on n vertices and an eigenvalue  $\lambda$  of the adjectancy matrix  $\mathbf{A}$  of the graph such that  $\operatorname{rank}(\mathbf{A} - \lambda \mathbf{I}) = O(n^{3/4})$  and  $\lambda > 0$ ; see [3, the proof of Theorem 5, pages 94–95].

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