A Unique Characterization of Spectral Extrema for Friendship Graphs

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Abstract

Turán-type problem is one of central problems in extremal graph theory. Erdős et al. [J. Combin. Theory Ser. B 64 (1995), 89-100] obtained the exact Turán number of the friendship graph $F_k$ for $n \geq 50k^2$, and characterized all its extremal graphs. Cioabă et al. [Electron. J. Combin. 27(4) (2020), #P4.22] initially introduced Triangle Removal Lemma into a spectral Turán-type problem, then showed that $SPEX(n, F_k) \subseteq EX(n, F_k)$ for $n$ large enough, where $EX(n, F_k)$ and $SPEX(n, F_k)$ are the families of $n$-vertex $F_k$-free graphs with maximum size and maximum spectral radius, respectively. In this paper, the family $SPEX(n, F_k)$ is uniquely determined for sufficiently large $n$. Our key approach is to find various alternating cycles or closed trails in nearly regular graphs. Some typical spectral techniques are also used. This presents a probable way to characterize the uniqueness of extremal graphs for some of other spectral extremal problems. In the end, we mention several related conjectures.

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1 Introduction

A graph is said to be $H$-free, if it does not contain $H$ as a subgraph. A classic problem in extremal graph theory asks what is the maximum number of edges in an $H$-free graph of order $n$, where the maximum number of edges is called the Turán number of $H$ and denoted by $ex(n, H)$. The set of extremal $H$-free graphs with $ex(n, H)$ edges is denoted by $EX(n, H)$. An important motivation of investigating Turán numbers is that they are very useful for Ramsey theory. The original statements can be found in [9]. Turán-type problem can be at least traced back to Mantel’s theorem in 1907, which says that $ex(n, C_3) = \lfloor \frac{n^2}{4} \rfloor$. In 1941, Turán [27] showed that $ex(n, K_{k+1}) = |E(T_{n,k})|$ for $n \geq k + 1 \geq 3$, and the $k$-partite Turán graph $T_{n,k}$ is the unique extremal graph.

Let $A(G)$ be the adjacency matrix of a graph $G$ and $\rho(G)$ be its spectral radius. By Perron-Frobenius theorem, every connected graph $G$ exists a positive unit eigenvector corresponding to $\rho(G)$, which is called the Perron vector of $G$. In 1986, Wilf [29] showed that $\rho(G) \leq n(1 - \frac{1}{k})$ for every $n$-vertex $K_{k+1}$-free graph $G$. Wilf’s result was sharpened by Nikiforov [18], who proved that $\rho(G) \leq \rho(T_{n,k})$ for every $n$-vertex $K_{k+1}$-free graph $G$, with equality if and only if $G \cong T_{n,k}$. Babai and Guiduli [2] established asymptotically a Kövári-Sós-Turán bound $\rho(G) \leq ((s - 1)\frac{k}{t} + o(1))n^{1-\frac{1}{t}}$ for every $n$-vertex $K_{s,t}$-free graph $G$ (where $s \geq t \geq 2$), then Nikiforov [22] obtained a new upper bound with main term $(s - t + 1)\frac{k}{t}n^{1-\frac{1}{t}}$. Nikiforov [21] formally posed a spectral version of Turán-type problem, and established some interesting results and conjectures (see for example, [1, 19, 20, 21]). Moreover, Nikiforov also develops some methods for spectral Turán-type problems such as deleting vertices, removing edges and counting the number of walks (see [23]).

**Problem 1** ([21]). What is the maximum spectral radius of an $H$-free graph of order $n$?

In the past decades, much attention has been paid to Problem 1 and its variations (see surveys [3, 23, 13] and some recent results [4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 15, 25, 26, 30]). For convenience, we denote by $SPEX(n, H)$ the family of extremal $H$-free graphs with maximum spectral radius in Problem 1.

A graph is called a friendship graph, and denoted by $F_k$, if it consists of $k$ triangles which intersect in exactly one common vertex. In 1995, Erdős, Füredi, Gould and Gunderson proved the following classic result in extremal graph theory.

**Theorem 2** ([10]). For every $k \geq 1$, and for every $n \geq 50k^2$, $ex(n, F_k) = \lfloor \frac{n^2}{4} \rfloor + k^2 - k$ if $k$ is odd; and $ex(n, F_k) = \lfloor \frac{n^2}{4} \rfloor + k^2 - \frac{3}{2}k$ if $k$ is even.

Moreover, the extremal graphs were completely determined in [10]. A nearly $(k - 1)$-regular graph is a graph with one vertex of degree $k - 2$ and all other vertices of degrees $k - 1$. It was showed in [10] that $EX(n, F_k)$ consists of all graphs obtained by taking $T_{n,2}$ and embedding a subgraph $H$ in one part, where $H \cong K_k \cup K_k$ for odd $k$ and $H$ is a nearly $(k - 1)$-regular graph of order $2k - 1$ for even $k$. A nearly $(k - 1)$-regular graph of order $2k - 1$ does exist for every even $k \geq 2$, and there are many if $k$ is large.

We can first construct a graph with vertex set $\{w_0\} \cup A \cup B$ such that $N(w_0) = A$ and $|B| = |A| + 2 = k$. Then, we partition $A$ into $A_1 \cup A_2$ and $B$ into $\{w_0\} \cup B^* \cup B^{**}$.
such that $|A_1| = |A_2| = |B^{**}| = \frac{k-2}{2}$. Finally, we join $k - 1$ edges from $u_0$ to $A_1 \cup B^*$, $\frac{k-2}{2}$ independent edges from $B^{**}$ to $A_2$, and some additional edges such that both $A$ and $B \setminus \{u_0\}$ are cliques. The resulting graph $H^*$ is a nearly $(k - 1)$-regular graph of order $2k - 1$ (see Fig. 1).

In [6], Cioabă, Feng, Tait and Zhang studied the spectral counterpart of Theorem 2. If $k = 1$, then Theorem 2 is just the well-known Mantel’s theorem, and the spectral version is known from Nikiforov’s spectral Turán theorem (see [18]). Both extremal graphs are the only graph $T_{n,2}$. For $k \geq 2$, the authors [6] obtained the following theorem by combining Triangle Removal Lemma (see [10, 11, 24]) and spectral techniques. This develops a new tool for Problem 1. Subsequently, Triangle Removal Lemma was also used efficiently to other spectral Turán-type problems (see [7, 8, 14]).

**Theorem 3** ([6]). For every fixed $k \geq 2$ and $n$ large enough, $SPEX(n,F_k) \subseteq EX(n,F_k)$.

In this paper, our goal is a further characterization of $SPEX(n,F_k)$. We obtain the following result, which gives the uniqueness of the graphs in $SPEX(n,F_k)$.

**Theorem 4.** For every fixed $k \geq 2$ and $n$ large enough, the only graph in $SPEX(n,F_k)$ is obtained from $T_{n,2}$ by embedding a graph $H$ in a part of size $\left\lfloor \frac{n}{2} \right\rfloor$, where $H \cong K_k \cup K_k$ for odd $k$ and $H \cong H^*$ for even $k$ (see Fig. 1).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, some structural and spectral propositions are obtained for graphs in $EX(n,F_k)$. In Section 3, the nearly $(k - 1)$-regular graph $H$ is characterized for graphs in $SPEX(n,F_k)$. In Section 4, it is showed that $H$ must be embedded in a part of size $\left\lfloor \frac{n}{2} \right\rfloor$. In Section 5, some related conjectures are mentioned for further research.

## 2 Propositions for graphs in $EX(n,F_k)$

By the result due to Erdős et al. [10], we know that each graph in $EX(n,F_k)$ is obtained from $T_{n,2}$ with two parts (say $S$, $T$) by embedding a subgraph $H$ in one part, where $H \cong K_k \cup K_k$ for odd $k$ and $H$ is a nearly $(k - 1)$-regular graph of order $2k - 1$ for even $k$. Without loss of generality we may assume that $H$ is embedded in $S$. 

![Figure 1: Graph $H^*$ with $B = \{u_0\} \cup B^* \cup B^{**}$.](image-url)
For odd $k$, $H$ has been uniquely determined up to isomorphism. In this section, we focus on the case that $k$ is even and try to obtain some useful propositions for a graph $G \in EX(n, F_k)$ and its subgraph $H$. For even $k$, since $H$ is a nearly $(k-1)$-regular graph of order $2k - 1$, there exists a partition $V(H) = \{w_0\} \cup A \cup B$ such that $N_H(w_0) = A$, $|B| = |A| + 2 = k$, and $d_H(v) = k - 1$ for every vertex $v \in A \cup B$.

A trail is a walk whose edges are distinct. In particular, a trail is closed if its original and terminal vertices are the same. Now, by coloring all the edges of $H[A \cup B]$ red and all its non-edges blue, we obtain a copy of $K_{|A|,|B|}$ with red and blue colours. If there exists a closed trail $C$ in $K_{|A|,|B|}$ such that any two consecutive edges of $C$ have distinct colours, then we call $C$ an alternating closed trail of $H[A \cup B]$. In the following, we present a structural proposition of the nearly regular graph $H$.

**Proposition 5.** If $A$ is neither an empty set nor a clique, then there exists an alternating closed trail $C$ such that $C = v_0v_1u_1u_2v_0$ or $C = v_0v_1u_1u_2v_2u_3v_0$, where each $v_i \in A$, each $u_i \in B$ and $v_0v_1$ is a blue edge (non-edge).

**Proof.** Let $v_0 \in A$ with $d_B(v_0) = \max_{v \in A} d_B(v)$, and let $\overline{N}_A(v_0) = A \setminus (N_A(v_0) \cup \{v_0\})$. Note that $d_{A \cup B}(v) = k - 2$ for each $v \in A$. Then $d_A(v_0) = \min_{v \in A} d_A(v)$. Moreover, since $A$ is not a clique, we have $d_A(v_0) \leq |A| - 2 = k - 4$, which implies that $\overline{N}_A(v_0) \neq \emptyset$ and $N_B(v_0) \neq \emptyset$. Now define $B' = \{u \in B : \exists v \in \overline{N}_A(v_0) \text{ with } v \sim u\}$, where $v \sim u$ denotes vertices $v$ and $u$ are adjacent. Since $d_B(v) = d_{A \cup B}(v) - d_A(v) \geq (k-2) - |A| \setminus \{v, v_0\} = 2$ for each $v \in \overline{N}_A(v_0)$, we also have $B' \neq \emptyset$. Now we give the following claim.

**Claim 6.** If there exists a blue edge with one endpoint in $B'$ and the other in $N_B(v_0)$, then we have an alternating 4-cycle.

**Proof.** Let $u_1u_2$ be a blue edge, where $u_1 \in B'$ and $u_2 \in N_B(v_0) \setminus \{u_1\}$. By the definition of $B'$, we can find a vertex $v_1 \in \overline{N}_A(v_0)$ with $v_1 \sim u_1$. Now it is easy to see that $C = v_0v_1u_1u_2v_0$ is an alternating 4-cycle and $v_0v_1$ is a blue edge. \hfill $\square$

Next, we may assume that each edge $u'u''$ is red for any two distinct vertices $u' \in B'$ and $u'' \in N_B(v_0)$. Then we have the following claim.

**Claim 7.** If there exists a blue edge within $B'$, then we have an alternating closed trail of length six.

**Proof.** Let $u_1u_2$ be a blue edge within $B'$, that is, $u_1 \sim u_2$ in $H$. By the above assumption, both $u_1$ and $u_2$ are not in $N_B(v_0)$. By the definition of $B'$, we can find a vertex $v_i \in \overline{N}_A(v_0)$ with $v_i \sim u_i$ for $i \in \{1, 2\}$, where possibly $v_1 = v_2$. Note that $d_B(v_0) = \max_{v \in A} d_B(v) \geq d_B(v_2)$ and $u_2 \in N_B(v_2) \setminus \overline{N}_A(v_0)$, then $N_B(v_0) \not\subseteq N_B(v_2)$. Thus, we can find a vertex $u_3 \in N_B(v_0)$ with $u_3 \sim v_2$. Now $C = v_0v_1u_1u_2v_2u_3v_0$ is an alternating closed trail of length six and $v_0v_1$ is a blue edge. \hfill $\square$

Now by Claims 6 and 7, we may assume that each edge $u'u''$ is red for any two distinct vertices $u' \in B'$ and $u'' \in B' \cup N_B(v_0)$.

Let $v_1u_1$ be a red edge, where $v_1 \in \overline{N}_A(v_0)$ and $u_1 \in B'$. Then $d_B(u_1) = d_H(u_1) - d_A(u_1) = (k-1) - d_A(u_1) \leq k - 2 = |B| - 2$, and so we can find a vertex $u_2 \in B \setminus \{u_1\}$
such that $u_1u_2$ is blue. Furthermore, it follows from the above assumption that $u_2 \in B \setminus (B' \cup N_B(v_0))$. This implies that $N_A(u_2) \subseteq N_A(v_0)$. Since $d_A(u_2) = d_H(u_2) - d_B(u_2) \geq (k - 1) - |B \setminus \{u_1, u_2\}| = 1$, then we can find a vertex $v_2 \in N_A(v_0)$ with $v_2 \sim u_2$. Now by the definition of $v_0$, we also have $N_B(v_0) \not\subseteq N_B(v_2)$. Subsequently, we can find a vertex $u_3 \in N_B(v_0)$ with $u_3 \sim v_2$ (possibly $u_3 = u_1$). Therefore, $C = v_0v_1u_1u_2v_2u_3v_0$ is an alternating closed trail of length six and $v_0v_1$ is a blue edge. This completes the proof. \[ \square \]

Recall that $G$ contains a spanning subgraph $K_{|S|,|T|}$ with $H$ being embedded in $S$, where $|S| + |T| = n$ and $||S| - |T|| \leq 1$. In the following, let $\rho := \rho(G)$ and $X = (x_1, \ldots, x_n)^T$ be the Perron vector of $G$. For convenience, we write $x_{\max V(H)} = \max_{v \in V(H)} x_v$ and $x_{\min V(H)} = \min_{v \in V(H)} x_v$. Then we can obtain some propositions for sufficiently large $n$.

**Proposition 8.** Let $X_T = \sum_{v \in T} x_v$. Then

$$x_{\max V(H)} \leq \frac{X_T}{\rho - k + 1}, \quad x_{\min V(H)} \geq \frac{X_T}{\rho - k + 2}. \tag{1}$$

**Proof.** Note that $V(H) \subseteq S$. Then $T \subseteq N_G(v)$ for each $v \in V(H)$. Moreover, we know that $\rho x_v = \sum_{u \in N_G(v)} x_u$ and $k - 2 \leq d_H(v) \leq k - 1$ for each $v \in V(H)$. Thus,

$$\rho x_{\max V(H)} \leq X_T + (k - 1)x_{\max V(H)}, \quad \rho x_{\min V(H)} \geq X_T + (k - 2)x_{\min V(H)}.$$ \[ \square \]

Consequently, $x_{\max V(H)} \leq \frac{X_T}{\rho - k + 1}$ and $x_{\min V(H)} \geq \frac{X_T}{\rho - k + 2}$.

We now evaluate Perron components for vertices in $A$ and $B$. This will be frequently used in the subsequent sections.

**Proposition 9.** For each vertex $v \in A$, we have

$$\left( \rho + k - 1 + \frac{k(k - 2)}{\rho - k + 2} \right) X_T \leq \rho^2 x_v \leq \left( \rho + k - 1 + \frac{k(k - 2)}{\rho - k + 1} \right) X_T.$$

**Proof.** For each $v \in A$, we have $\rho x_v = X_T + \sum_{u \in N_H(v)} x_u$ and $\rho^2 x_v = \rho X_T + \sum_{u \in N_H(v)} \rho x_u$, where

$$\rho x_u \leq \begin{cases} X_T + (k - 2)x_{\max V(H)}, & u = w_0, \\ X_T + (k - 1)x_{\max V(H)}, & u \in N_H(v) \setminus \{w_0\}. \end{cases}$$

Since $d_H(v) = k - 1$, we have $\sum_{u \in N_H(v)} \rho x_u \leq (k - 1)X_T + k(k - 2)x_{\max V(H)}$, and hence

$$\rho^2 x_v \leq (\rho + k - 1)X_T + k(k - 2)x_{\max V(H)}.$$ \[ \square \]

Similarly, we can obtain

$$\rho^2 x_v \geq (\rho + k - 1)X_T + k(k - 2)x_{\min V(H)}.$$ 

By Proposition 8, the result follows. \[ \square \]
Proposition 10. For each vertex $v \in B$, we have
\[
(\rho + k - 1 + \frac{(k-1)^2}{\rho - k + 2}) X_T \leq \rho^2 x_v \leq (\rho + k - 1 + \frac{(k-1)^2}{\rho - k + 2}) X_T.
\]

Proof. For each $v \in B$, we know that $N_H(v) \subseteq A \cup B$. Hence, $d_H(u) = k - 1$ for each vertex $u \in N_H(v)$. Moreover, $\rho x_v = X_T + \sum_{u \in N_H(v)} x_u$ and $\rho^2 x_v = \rho X_T + \sum_{u \in N_H(v)} \rho x_u$, where $X_T + (k-1)x_{\min V(H)} \leq \rho x_u \leq X_T + (k-1)x_{\max V(H)}$.

Since $|N_H(v)| = k - 1$, we have
\[
(\rho + k - 1)X_T + (k-1)^2x_{\min V(H)} \leq \rho^2 x_v \leq (\rho + k - 1)X_T + (k-1)^2x_{\max V(H)}.
\]

Therefore, the result holds from (1).

Proposition 11. For any two vertices $u_1, u_2 \in B$, if $d_B(u_1) > d_B(u_2)$, then $x_{u_1} > x_{u_2}$.

Proof. Since $u_1, u_2 \in B$, we have $d_{A \cup B}(u_1) = d_{A \cup B}(u_2) = k - 1$. Now assume that $d_B(u_1) = d_B(u_2) + a$, where $a \geq 1$. Then $d_A(u_1) = d_A(u_2) - a$. Write $b = (\rho - k + 1)(\rho - k + 2)$. By Propositions 9-10, we obtain
\[
\rho^2(x_{\max A} - x_{\min A}) \leq \frac{k(k-2)}{b} X_T, \quad \rho^2(x_{\max B} - x_{\min B}) \leq \frac{(k-1)^2}{b} X_T; \tag{2}
\]

while
\[
\rho^2(x_{\min B} - x_{\min A}) \geq \rho^2(x_{\min B} - x_{\max A}) \geq \frac{\rho - k^2 + k + 1}{b} X_T. \tag{3}
\]

Since $T \subseteq N_G(u_1) \cap N_G(u_2)$, we can see that
\[
\rho x_{u_1} - \rho x_{u_2} = \sum_{v \in N_H(u_1)} x_v - \sum_{v \in N_H(u_2)} x_v \geq d_B(u_1)x_{\min B} + d_A(u_1)x_{\min A} - d_B(u_2)x_{\max B} - d_A(u_2)x_{\max A} = a(x_{\min B} - x_{\min A}) - d_A(u_2)(x_{\max A} - x_{\min A}) - d_B(u_2)(x_{\max B} - x_{\min B}).
\]

Note that $d_A(u_2) + d_B(u_2) = k - 1$ and $\rho \geq \sqrt{|S||T|} = \sqrt{\left\lfloor \frac{n}{2} \right\rfloor \left\lceil \frac{n}{2} \right\rceil} >> k^3$. Combining (2) and (3), we have $\rho x_{u_1} - \rho x_{u_2} > 0$. Therefore, $x_{u_1} > x_{u_2}$. 

Since $\rho \geq \sqrt{\left\lfloor \frac{n}{2} \right\rfloor \left\lceil \frac{n}{2} \right\rceil} >> k^3$, by (3) we can also conclude that
\[
x_{\min B} > x_{\max A}. \tag{4}
\]
3 Characterization of H for graphs in $SPEX(n,F_k)$

Let $G \in SPEX(n,F_k)$, where $k \geq 2$ and $n$ is large enough. By Theorem 3 we know that $G \in EX(n,F_k)$, that is, $G$ is obtained from $K_{|S|,|T|}$ with $|S| + |T| = n$ and $||S| - |T|| \leq 1$ by embedding a subgraph $H$ in one part (say $S$). In this section, we focus on the characterization of $H$. For odd $k$, $H$ has already been uniquely determined.

**Theorem 12** ([6]). If $k$ is odd and $n$ is sufficiently large, then $H \cong K_k \cup K_k$.

In the following, we assume that $k$ is even. Recall that $H$ is a nearly $(k-1)$-regular graph of order $2k-1$ with $V(H) = \{v_0\} \cup A \cup B$, where $N_H(v_0) = A$, $|B| = |A| + 2 = k$, and $d_H(v) = k-1$ for each $v \in A \cup B$. To characterize $H$ for even $k$, it suffices to determine the structure of $H[A \cup B]$.

**Lemma 13.** If $k \geq 4$ and $n$ is sufficiently large, then $A$ must be a clique.

**Proof.** Suppose, to the contrary, that $A$ is not a clique. By Proposition 5, $H[A \cup B]$ contains an alternating closed trail $C$. Next we consider the following two cases.

**Case 1.** $C = v_0v_1u_1u_2v_0$, where $v_0, v_1 \in A$; $u_1, u_2 \in B$ and $v_0v_1$ is a blue edge.

Now let $G'$ be the graph obtained from $G$ by exchanging the color of each edge in $C$, that is, let $G' = G - \{u_1v_1, u_2v_0\} + \{v_0v_1, u_1u_2\}$. Then $G'[\{v_0\} \cup A \cup B]$ and $G[\{v_0\} \cup A \cup B]$ have the same degree sequence, and thus $G'[\{v_0\} \cup A \cup B]$ is also a nearly $(k-1)$-regular graph. This implies that $G' \in EX(n,F_k)$ too.

On the other hand, write $\rho = \rho(G)$ and $\rho' = \rho(G')$. Then

$$\rho' - \rho \geq X^T(A(G') - A(G))X = 2(x_{v_0}x_{v_1} + x_{u_1}x_{u_2}) - 2(x_{u_1}x_{v_1} + x_{u_2}x_{v_0})$$

$$= 2(x_{u_1} - x_{v_0})(x_{u_2} - x_{v_1}). \quad (5)$$

It follows from (4) that $x_u > x_v$ for any $v \in A$ and $u \in B$. Therefore $\rho' > \rho$ by (5), which contradicts the fact that $G \in SPEX(n,F_k)$.

**Case 2.** $C = v_0v_1u_1u_2v_2v_3v_0$, where $v_0, v_1, v_2 \in A$; $u_1, u_2, u_3 \in B$ and $v_0v_1$ is a blue edge.

We also define $G'$ to be the graph obtained from $G$ by exchanging the color of each edge in $C$. Similarly, $G'$ is also $F_k$-free. Moreover,

$$\rho' - \rho \geq 2(x_{v_0}x_{v_1} + x_{u_1}x_{u_2} + x_{u_2}x_{u_3}) - 2(x_{u_1}x_{v_1} + x_{u_2}x_{v_2} + x_{u_3}x_{v_0})$$

$$= 2(x_{u_1} - x_{v_0})(x_{u_2} - x_{v_1}) - 2(x_{u_2} - x_{u_3})(x_{v_2} - x_{v_0}). \quad (6)$$

Combining (2), (3) and (6), we obtain

$$\rho' - \rho \geq \left(\frac{(\rho - k^2 + k + 1)^2}{b^2} - \frac{k(k-2)(k-1)^2}{b^2}\right)2X^2 \geq 0$$

for sufficiently large $n$, a contradiction.

By Cases 1 and 2, we can conclude that $A$ is a clique. \qed
By Lemma 13, \( A \cup \{w_0\} \) is a clique. For each vertex \( v \in A \), since \( d_H(v) = k - 1 \), we have \( d_B(v) = (k - 1) - |A| = 1 \). Let \( e(A, B) \) be the number of edges with one endpoint in \( A \) and the other in \( B \). Then

\[
e(A, B) = |A| = k - 2.
\]

(7)

Now assume that \( u_0 \in B \) with \( x_{u_0} = \min_{u \in B} x_u \). Moreover, let \( B^* = \{u \in B : d_B(u) = k - 1\} \) and \( B^{**} = B \setminus (B^* \cup \{u_0\}) \). Then \( e(B^*, A) = 0 \), as \( d_H(u) = k - 1 \) for each \( u \in B \). Now we are ready to give a complete characterization of \( H \) for even \( k \).

**Theorem 14.** If \( k \) is even and \( n \) is sufficiently large, then \( H \cong H^* \) (see Fig. 1).

**Proof.** If \( k = 2 \), then \( |A| = k - 2 = 0 \) and \( |B| = k = 2 \). Since \( H \) is a nearly \((k - 1)\)-regular graph of order \( 2k - 1 \), it is easy to see that \( H \cong K_1 \cup K_2 \), and hence \( H \cong H^* \). In the following, we assume that \( k \geq 4 \). We first give five claims.

**Claim 15.** \( B^* \) is a clique and \( x_{u^*} = \max_{v \in B} x_v \) for each \( u^* \in B^* \) and each \( u \in B \setminus B^* \).

**Proof.** We first show that \( B^* \neq \emptyset \). If not, then \( B^* = \emptyset \), that is, for each \( u \in B \), \( d_B(u) \leq k - 2 \), and hence \( d_A(u) \geq 1 \). It follows that \( e(B, A) \geq |B| = k \), which contradicts (7). Therefore, \( B^* \neq \emptyset \).

Note that \( |B| = k \) and \( d_B(u^*) = k - 1 \) for each \( u^* \in B^* \). Then every vertex of \( B^* \) is a dominating vertex of \( B \), and so \( B^* \) is a clique. Since \( e(B^*, A) = 0 \), by symmetry we have \( x_{u^1_1} = x_{u_2^2} \) for any two vertices \( u^1_1, u^2_2 \in B^* \). Moreover, since \( d_B(u^*) > d_B(u) \) for each \( u^* \in B^* \) and each \( u \in B \setminus B^* \), by Proposition 11, we have \( x_{u^*} = \max_{v \in B} x_v > x_u \).

**Claim 16.** \( u_0 \notin B^* \) and \( B^{**} \neq \emptyset \).

**Proof.** Note that \( x_{u_0} = \min_{u \in B} x_u \). If \( u_0 \in B^* \), then by the definition of \( u_0 \) and Claim 15, we know that \( x_u = x_v \) for all distinct vertices \( u, v \in B \). That is to say, \( x_u = \max_{v \in B} x_v \) for each \( u \in B \). It follows that \( B = B^* \) and \( e(B, A) = e(B^*, A) = 0 \), which contradicts (7). Therefore, \( u_0 \notin B^* \).

Since every vertex of \( B^* \) is a dominating vertex of \( B \), we have \( d_B(u_0) \geq |B^*| \). On the other hand, \( u_0 \notin B^* \), then \( d_B(u_0) \leq k - 2 \), and hence \( |B^*| \leq k - 2 \). Therefore, \( |B^{**}| = |B \setminus (B^* \cup \{u_0\})| \geq 1 \).

**Claim 17.** \( e(\{u_0\}, B^{**}) = 0 \).

**Proof.** Suppose, to the contrary, that there exists a vertex \( u_1 \in B^{**} \) with \( u_0 \sim u_1 \). By the definition of \( B^{**} \), we have \( d_B(u_1) \leq k - 2 \), and hence there exists a vertex \( u_2 \in B \) with \( u_2 \sim u_1 \). Now since \( d_B(u_2) \leq |B \setminus \{u_1, u_2\}| = k - 2 \), we have \( d_A(u_2) \geq 1 \). Thus we can find a vertex \( v_1 \in A \) such that \( v_1 \sim u_2 \). Recall that \( d_B(v) = 1 \) for each \( v \in A \). Then \( v_1 \sim u_0 \). Therefore, we can obtain an alternating 4-cycle \( u_0u_1u_2v_1u_0 \).

Let \( G' = G - \{u_0u_1, u_2v_1\} + \{u_1u_2, u_0v_1\} \). Similar to the analysis of Lemma 13, we have that \( G' \) is \( F_k \)-free. Moreover,

\[
\rho(G') - \rho(G) \geq X^T(A(G') - A(G))X = 2(x_{u_1}x_{u_2} + x_{u_0}x_{v_1}) - 2(x_{u_0}x_{u_1} + x_{u_2}x_{v_1}) = 2(x_{u_1} - x_{v_1})(x_{u_2} - x_{u_0}).
\]

THE ELECTRONIC JOURNAL OF COMBINATORICS 29(3) (2022), #P3.32
By (4) we know that \( x_{u_1} > x_{v_1} \), and by the choice of \( u_0 \) we have \( x_{u_2} \geq x_{u_0} \). Thus \( \rho(G') \geq \rho(G) \). On the other hand, since \( G \in S^\text{PEX}(n, F_k) \), we have \( \rho(G') = \rho(G) \), and hence \( X \) is also the Perron vector of \( G' \). Observe that \( N_G(u_2) \setminus N_{G'}(u_2) = \{ v_1 \} \) and \( N_{G'}(u_2) \setminus N_G(u_2) = \{ u_1 \} \). Hence,

\[
0 = \rho(G')x_{u_2} - \rho(G)x_{u_2} = x_{u_1} - x_{v_1} > 0,
\]
a contradiction. Therefore, \( e(\{ u_0 \}, B^{**}) = 0 \).

**Claim 18.** \( |B^*| = \tilde{e}(B^{**}) + \frac{k}{2} \), where \( \tilde{e}(B^{**}) \) denotes the number of non-edges in \( G[B^{**}] \).

**Proof.** Note that \( e(\{ u_0 \}, B^{**}) = 0 \). Then \( \tilde{e}(B) = \tilde{e}(B^{**}) + |B^*| \). Recall that \( d_H(u) = k - 1 \) for each \( u \in B \) and \( |B| = k \). Then we have \( k(k - 1) = \sum u \in B d_H(u) = e(B, A) + 2e(B) = e(B, A) + k(k - 1) - 2\tilde{e}(B) \), and hence \( e(B, A) = 2\tilde{e}(B) \). Note that \( |B^{**}| = |B \setminus (B^{**} \cup \{ u_0 \})| = k - 1 - |B^*| \). Then \( e(B, A) = 2\tilde{e}(B) = 2\tilde{e}(B^{**}) + 2k - 2 - 2|B^*| \). Combining (7), we have \( |B^*| = \tilde{e}(B^{**}) + \frac{k}{2} \).

**Claim 19.** If \( B^{**} \) is a clique, then \( H \cong H^* \).

**Proof.** By Claim 17, \( d_{B^{**}}(u_0) = 0 \), and so \( d_B(u_0) = |B^*| \). Note that \( d_H(u_0) = k - 1 = |B^*| + |B^{**}| \). Thus \( d_A(u_0) = d_H(u_0) - d_B(u_0) = |B^{**}| \). Now if \( B^{**} \) is a clique, then \( d_B(u) = |B \setminus \{ u, u_0 \}| = k - 2 \) and \( d_A(u) = 1 \) for each \( u \in B^{**} \). Recall that \( e(B^*, A) = 0 \). Therefore,

\[
e(B, A) = \sum u \in B^{**} d_A(u) + d_A(u_0) = 2|B^{**}|.
\]

Combining (7), we have \( |B^{**}| = \frac{e(B, A)}{2} = \frac{k-2}{2} \), and so \( |B^*| = (k - 1) - |B^{**}| = \frac{k}{2} \). Now \( d_B(u_0) = |B^*| = \frac{k}{2} \), hence \( d_A(u_0) = \frac{k-2}{2} \). Combining Lemma 13 and \( d_B(v) = 1 \) for each \( v \in A \), we have each vertex of \( A \setminus N_A(u_0) \) has exactly one neighbor in \( B^{**} \) and vice versa. Note that \( |B^{**}| = \frac{k-2}{2} \). It follows that there are \( \frac{k-2}{2} \) independent edges between \( B^{**} \) and \( A \setminus N_A(u_0) \), and hence \( H \cong H^* \) (see Fig. 1).

By Claim 19, it suffices to show that \( B^{**} \) is a clique in the following. The case \( |B^{**}| = 1 \) is trivial. We may assume that \( |B^{**}| \geq 2 \). Suppose, to the contrary, that \( B^{**} \) is not a clique. Then we can find two vertices \( u_1, u_2 \in B^{**} \) with \( u_1 \sim u_2 \). Without loss of generality, we assume that \( x_{u_2} \geq x_{u_1} \). For any vertex \( u^* \) of \( B^* \), by Claim 15 and the choice of \( u_0 \), we have

\[
x_{u^*} > x_{u_2} \geq x_{u_1} \geq x_{u_0}.
\]

Moreover, \( d_B(u_i) \leq k - 2 \) implies that \( d_A(u_i) \geq 1 \) for \( i \in \{1, 2\} \). Thus we can find \( v_1, v_2 \in A \) such that \( v_1 \sim u_1 \) and \( v_2 \sim u_2 \). Recall that \( A \) is a clique and \( d_B(v) = 1 \) for each \( v \in A \). Then \( v_1 \neq v_2 \), and by symmetry, we have

\[
\sum_{v \in N_A(u_2)} x_v = d_A(u_2)x_{v_2}.
\]
By (8) and Proposition 11, $d_B(u_2) \geq d_B(u_1) \geq d_B(u_0)$, and so $d_A(u_2) \leq d_A(u_1) \leq d_A(u_0)$. Combining (7), we can see that
\[ d_A(u_2) \leq \left\lfloor \frac{e(A, B)}{3} \right\rfloor = \left\lfloor \frac{k - 2}{3} \right\rfloor \leq \frac{k - 4}{2}, \tag{10} \]
as $k \geq 4$.

Since $A$ is a clique, we have $N_G(v_1) \setminus N_G(v_2) = \{v_2, u_1\}$ and $N_G(v_2) \setminus N_G(v_1) = \{v_1, u_2\}$. Hence $\rho(x_{v_2} - x_{v_1}) = (x_{v_1} - x_{v_2}) + (x_{u_2} - x_{u_1})$, which gives
\[ x_{v_2} - x_{v_1} = \frac{x_{u_2} - x_{u_1}}{\rho + 1} \geq 0. \tag{11} \]

Observe that
\[ N_G(u_2) \setminus N_G(u^*) = N_A(u_2) \cup \{u^*\}, \quad N_G(u^*) \setminus N_G(u_2) = N_B(u^*) \setminus N_B(u_2), \tag{12} \]
where $|N_B(u^*) \setminus N_B(u_2)| = |N_A(u_2) \cup \{u^*\}| = d_A(u_2) + 1$. Thus
\[ \sum_{u \in N_B(u^*) \setminus N_B(u_2)} x_u \leq d_A(u_2)x_{u^*} + x_{u_2}, \tag{13} \]
as $u_2 \in N_B(u^*) \setminus N_B(u_2)$ and $x_{u^*} = \max_{u \in B} x_u$. Combining (12), (13) and (9), we obtain
\[ \rho(x_{u^*} - x_{u_2}) \leq (x_{u_2} - x_{u^*}) + d_A(u_2)(x_{u^*} - x_{v_2}) < d_A(u_2)(x_{u^*} - x_{v_2}), \]
as $x_{u^*} > x_{u_2}$ by (8). Furthermore, by (10) and (11), we conclude that
\[ \rho(x_{u^*} - x_{u_2}) < \frac{k - 4}{2}(x_{u^*} - x_{v_2}) \leq \frac{k - 4}{2}(x_{u^*} - x_{v_1}). \tag{14} \]
Now note that $u_1 \sim u_2$ and $v_1, v_2 \notin N_G(u_0) \cup N_G(u^*)$. Thus we can find an alternating 6-cycle $C_1 = u_1v_1u_0u^*v_2u_2u_1$ (see Fig. 2).
Let
\[ G_1 = G - \{u_1v_1, u_0u^*, v_2u_2\} + \{v_1u_0, u^*v_2, u_2u_1\}. \] (15)

Then \( G_1 \) is \( F_k \)-free by previous analysis. If there still exist \( u_1', u_2' \in B^* \) with \( u_1' \sim u_2' \), by Claim 4, we can also find a vertex \( u'' \in B^* \setminus \{u^*\} \) and an alternating 6-cycle \( C_2 \) with \( u'' \in V(C_2) \) and \( E(C_1) \cap E(C_2) = \emptyset \), then obtain an \( F_k \)-free graph \( G_2 \) by a similar operation. Continue this operation until \( B^* \) is a clique, and denote by \( G' \) the resulting graph. Then \( G' \in EX(n, F_k) \), as \( G \in EX(n, F_k) \). Let \( H' = G'[\{w_0\} \cup A \cup B], \rho' = \rho(G') \) and \( Y = (y_1, \ldots, y_n)^T \) be the Perron vector of \( G' \). In order to differentiate with the above \( B^* \) and \( B^{**} \), we write \( B^* = \{u \in B : d_{H'[B]}(u) = k - 1\} \) and \( B^{**} = B \setminus (B^* \cup \{u_0\}) \) in \( H' \). Note that \( d_{H'[B^*]}(u_0) = 0 \) and \( B^{**} \) becomes a clique with \( B^{**} \cup \{u^*\} \subseteq B^* \). By Claim 19, \( H' \cong H^* \), which implies that \( |B^{**}| = d_{H'|A}(u_0) = k - 2 \) and \( N_{H'[B]}(u_0) = B^* \) (see Fig. 1).

Since \( N_{H'[B]}(u_0) = B^* \), we have \( \{u^*, u_1, u_2\} \subseteq B^{**} \) in \( H' \). By (15), \( v_1 \sim u_0 \) and \( v_2 \sim u^* \) in \( H' \). Thus we can observe from Fig. 1 that
\[ N_{G'}(u^*) \setminus N_{G'}(u_0) = (B^{**} \setminus \{u^*\}) \cup \{v_2\}, \quad N_{G'}(u_0) \setminus N_{G'}(u^*) = N_{H'[A]}(u_0). \] (16)

By symmetry,
\[ \sum_{u \in B^{**} \setminus \{u^*\}} y_u = (|B^{**}| - 1)y_{u^*} = \frac{k - 4}{2} y_{u^*}. \]
and
\[ \sum_{v \in N_{H'[A]}(u_0)} y_v = d_{H'[A]}(u_0)y_{v_1} = \frac{k - 2}{2} y_{v_1}. \]

Combining (16), we have
\[ \rho'(y_{u^*} - y_{u_0}) = (y_{v_2} - y_{v_1}) + \frac{k - 4}{2} (y_{u^*} - y_{v_1}). \] (17)

Since \( |B^{**}| \geq \frac{1}{3} |\{u^*, u_1, u_2\}| \geq 3 \), we have \( d_{H'[B]}(u^*) > d_{H'[B]}(u_0) \). Since \( G' \in EX(n, F_k) \), by Proposition 11, we obtain \( y_{u^*} > y_{u_0} \). Recall that \( v_1 \sim u_0 \) and \( v_2 \sim u^* \) in \( H' \). Similar to (11), we can obtain
\[ y_{v_2} - y_{v_1} = \frac{y_{u^*} - y_{u_0}}{\rho' + 1} > 0. \]
Combining (17), we have
\[ \rho'(y_{u^*} - y_{u_0}) > \frac{k - 4}{2} (y_{u^*} - y_{v_1}) \geq \frac{k - 4}{2} (y_{u^*} - y_{v_2}). \] (18)

Now let \( E = E(G), E' = E(G') \) and \( \overline{E} \) be the set of non-edges in \( G[B^{**}] \). Then
\[ Y^T(\rho' - \rho)X = Y^T(A(G') - A(G))X = \sum_{uv \in E} (x_u y_v + x_v y_u) - \sum_{uv \in \overline{E}} (x_u y_v + x_v y_u) = \sum_{v_1, v_2 \in \overline{E}} \gamma_i. \]
where by (15)

\[ \gamma = (x_{u_0}y_{v_1} + x_{v_1}y_{u_0} + x_{u_1}y_{v_2} + x_{v_2}y_{u_1} + x_{u_1}y_{u_2} + x_{u_2}y_{v_1}) \\
- (x_{u_1}y_{v_1} + x_{v_1}y_{u_1} + x_{u_2}y_{u_1} + x_{u_0}y_{u_2} + x_{u_2}y_{v_2} + x_{v_2}y_{u_2}). \]

Since \( u^*, u_1, u_2 \in B^{**} \) in \( H' \), we have \( y_{u^*} = y_{u_1} = y_{u_2} \) by symmetry, and thus \( x_{v_2}y_{u^*} - x_{v_2}y_{u_2} = 0 \). Moreover, \( x_{u_1} \geq x_{u_0} \) by (8) and \( y_{u^*} > y_{v_1} \) by (4). Then

\[ (x_{u_0}y_{v_1} + x_{u_1}y_{u_2}) - (x_{u_1}y_{v_1} + x_{u_2}y_{u_1}) = (x_{u_0} - x_{u_1})(y_{v_1} - y_{u^*}) \geq 0. \]

Hence we have

\[ \gamma \geq y_{u_0}(x_{v_1} - x_{u^*}) + y_{v_2}(x_{u^*} - x_{u_2}) + y_{u_1}(x_{u_2} - x_{v_1}) \\
= (y_{u^*} - y_{u_0})(x_{u^*} - x_{v_1}) - (y_{u^*} - y_{v_2})(x_{u^*} - x_{u_2}), \]

as \( y_{u_1} = y_{u^*} \). By (4), \( y_{u^*} > y_{v_2} \) and \( x_{u^*} > x_{v_1} \). Combining (14) and (18), we obtain

\[ \gamma > \frac{k - 4}{2}(y_{u^*} - y_{v_2})(x_{u^*} - x_{v_1})\left(\frac{1}{\rho} - \frac{1}{\rho'}\right). \]

Note that \( G \in \text{SPEX}(n, F_k) \) and \( G' \in \text{EX}(n, F_k) \). Then \( \rho' \leq \rho \), and so \( \gamma > 0 \). It follows that \( Y^T(\rho' - \rho)X = \sum_{u_1u_2 \in \mathcal{F}} \gamma > 0 \), and thus \( \rho' > \rho \), a contradiction. Therefore, \( B^{**} \) is a clique of \( H \). This completes the proof. \( \square \)

4 The only graph in \( \text{SPEX}(n, F_k) \)

By Theorems 12 and 14, \( H \) is uniquely determined up to isomorphism. Let \( e(H) \) be the number of edges of the subgraph \( H \). Recall the known fact that \( |S| - |T| \leq 1 \) and the assumption that \( H \) is embedded in \( S \). To obtain the uniqueness of the graphs in \( \text{SPEX}(n, F_k) \), we only need to prove \( |S| \leq |T| \).

**Lemma 20.** Regardless of parity of \( k \), we have

\[ \rho^2 < |S||T| + 2e(H)\left(\frac{|T|}{\rho} + 1\right). \]

**Proof.** For each \( v \in T \), we have \( \rho x_v = X_S \) and \( \rho^2 x_v = \rho X_S = \sum_{u \in S} \rho x_u \). Note that

\[
\rho x_u = \begin{cases} 
X_T, & u \in S \setminus V(H), \\
X_T + \sum_{w \in N_H(u)} x_w, & u \in V(H). 
\end{cases}
\]

(19)

It follows that

\[
\rho^2 x_v = \sum_{u \in S} X_T + \sum_{u \in V(H) \setminus V_H(u)} \sum_{w \in V_H(u)} x_w \leq |S|X_T + 2e(H)x_{\max V(H)}.
\]
for each \( v \in T \). By (1), we know that \( x_{\max} \leq \frac{X_T}{\rho} < \frac{X_T}{\rho - k} \), and hence \( \rho^2 x_v \leq \left( |S| + \frac{2e(H)}{\rho - k} \right) X_T \). Summing this inequality for all \( v \in T \), we have

\[
\rho^2 X_T \leq \left( |S||T| + 2e(H) \frac{|T|}{\rho - k} \right) X_T. \tag{20}
\]

Recall that \( \rho \geq |S||T| = \left\lfloor \frac{n}{2} \right\rfloor \left\lceil \frac{n}{2} \right\rceil \). Hence for sufficiently large \( n \), we have

\[
\rho^2 - k\rho - k|T| = \left( \frac{\rho^2}{2} - k\rho \right) + \left( \frac{\rho^2}{2} - k|T| \right) \geq \rho \left( \frac{\rho}{2} - k \right) + |T| \left( \frac{|S|}{2} - k \right) > 0.
\]

Solving \( \rho^2 - k\rho - k|T| > 0 \), we obtain \( \frac{|T|}{\rho - k} < \left\lfloor \frac{|T|}{\rho} \right\rfloor + 1 \). Combining (20), we have

\[
\rho^2 < |S||T| + 2e(H) \left( \frac{|T|}{\rho} + 1 \right),
\]

as desired. \( \blacksquare \)

**Theorem 21.** Regardless of parity of \( k \), we have \( |S| \leq |T| \).

**Proof.** Recall that \( |S| + |T| = n \) and \( |S| - |T| \leq 1 \). Suppose, to the contrary, that \( |S| \geq |T| + 1 \). Then \( |S| = |T| + 1 = \frac{n + 1}{2} \). Select a vertex \( v_0 \in S \setminus V(H) \), and define \( G' = G - \{ v_0v : v \in T \} + \{ v_0u : u \in S \setminus \{ v_0 \} \} \). Then \( G' \in EX(n, F_k) \), and so \( \rho(G') \leq \rho(G) \). Let \( \rho' = \rho(G') \) and \( Y = (y_1, \ldots, y_n)^T \) be the Perron vector of \( G' \). Then we have \( \rho x_{v_0} = X_T \) and \( y_v = y_{v_0} \) for each \( v \in T \). Hence

\[
x_{v_0} = \frac{X_T}{\rho}, \quad y_{v_0} = \frac{Y_T}{|T|}. \tag{21}
\]

Thus, \( Y_T + y_{v_0} = \frac{|T| + 1}{|T|} Y_T = \frac{|S|}{|T|} Y_T \). Note that

\[
\rho' y_u = \begin{cases} Y_T + y_{v_0}, & u \in S \setminus (V(H) \cup \{ v_0 \}), \\ Y_T + y_{v_0} + \sum_{w \in N_H(u)} y_w, & u \in V(H). \end{cases} \tag{22}
\]

Moreover, for each \( u \in V(H) \), we have

\[
\rho \sum_{w \in N_H(u)} x_w = \sum_{w \in N_H(u)} \rho x_w \geq d_H(u) X_T, \tag{23}
\]

and

\[
\rho' \sum_{w \in N_H(u)} y_w = \sum_{w \in N_H(u)} \rho' y_w \geq \sum_{w \in N_H(u)} (Y_T + y_{v_0}) = d_H(u) \frac{|S|}{|T|} Y_T. \tag{24}
\]

Combining (19) and (23), we obtain that

\[
\sum_{u \in S \setminus \{ v_0 \}} \rho x_u = (|S| - 1) X_T + \sum_{u \in V(H)} \sum_{w \in N_H(u)} x_w \geq |T| X_T + \frac{2e(H)}{\rho} X_T. \tag{25}
\]
Note that \((|S| - 1)(Y_T + y_{v_0}) = |T||S|/|T| Y_T = |S|Y_T\). By (22) and (24), we have

\[
\sum_{u \in S \setminus \{v_0\}} \rho' y_u = (|S| - 1)(Y_T + y_{v_0}) + \sum_{u \in V(H)} \sum_{w \in N_H(u)} y_w \geq |S|Y_T + \frac{2e(H)}{\rho'} \frac{|S|}{|T|} Y_T. \tag{26}
\]

Furthermore, it follows from (25) and (26) that

\[
\sum_{u \in S \setminus \{v_0\}} x_u \geq \left( \frac{|S|}{\rho} + \frac{2e(H)}{\rho^2} \right) X_T, \tag{27}
\]

and

\[
\sum_{u \in S \setminus \{v_0\}} y_u \geq \left( \frac{|S|}{\rho'} + \frac{2e(H)}{\rho'^2} \right) Y_T \geq \left( \frac{|S|}{\rho} + \frac{2e(H)}{\rho^2} \right) Y_T. \tag{28}
\]

Observe that

\[
Y^T(\rho' - \rho) X = Y^T(A(G') - A(G))X = \sum_{uv \in E(G')} (x_uy_v + x_vy_u) - \sum_{uv \in E(G)} (x_uy_v + x_vy_u) = \sum_{u \in S \setminus \{v_0\}} (x_{v_0}y_u + x_uy_{v_0}) - \sum_{v \in T} (x_{v_0}y_v + x_vy_{v_0}).
\]

Clearly, \(\sum_{v \in T}(x_{v_0}y_v + x_vy_{v_0}) = x_{v_0}Y_T + y_{v_0}X_T\); moreover, by (27) and (28), we have

\[
\sum_{u \in S \setminus \{v_0\}} (x_{v_0}y_u + x_uy_{v_0}) \geq x_{v_0}\left( \frac{|S|}{\rho} + \frac{2e(H)}{\rho^2} \right) Y_T + y_{v_0}\left( \frac{|T|}{\rho} + \frac{2e(H)}{\rho^2} \right) X_T.
\]

Note that \(x_{v_0} = \frac{X_T}{\rho'}\) and \(y_{v_0} = \frac{Y_T}{\rho'}\) by (21). Therefore,

\[
Y^T(\rho' - \rho) X \geq \frac{X_T}{\rho'} \left( \frac{|S|}{\rho} + \frac{2e(H)}{\rho^2} - 1 \right) Y_T + \frac{Y_T}{|T|} \left( \frac{|T|}{\rho} + \frac{2e(H)}{\rho^2} - 1 \right) X_T.
\]

\[
= \frac{X_T Y_T}{\rho'^2 |T|} \left( |S||T| + 2e(H) \left( \frac{|T|}{\rho} + 1 \right) - \rho^2 \right).
\]

By Lemma 20, \(\rho' > \rho\), a contradiction. The proof is completed. \(\square\)

Combining Theorem 21, Theorems 12 and 14, we complete the proof of Theorem 4. The only graph in \(SPEX(n, F_2)\) is determined for every fixed positive integer \(k \geq 2\) and sufficiently large \(n\).
5 Concluding remarks

Let $G_{n,k}$ be the family of connected irregular graphs on $n$ vertices with given maximum degree $k$. Define $\lambda = \max\{\rho(G) : G \in G_{n,k}\}$. Until now, the value of $\lambda$ is still unknown. In [16], Liu and Li proposed the following conjecture.

**Conjecture 22 ([16]).** Let $3 \leq k \leq n - 2$ and $G$ be a graph attaining the maximum spectral radius among all connected non-regular graphs of order $n$ with fixed maximum degree $k$. Then $G$ is a nearly $k$-regular graph for odd $nk$, and a graph with degree sequence $(k, \ldots, k, k - 2)$ for even $nk$.

Liu [17] has just confirmed Conjecture 22 for $k \in \{3, 4\}$ by determining the unique extremal graph respectively. For general $k$, the conjecture is still open. We hope that our method to characterize a nearly $\frac{n+1}{2}$-regular graph will be helpful for studying the above conjecture. We also expect a characterization of extremal nearly $k$-regular graphs on $n$ vertices with maximum spectral radius.

To end this paper, we would like to introduce a recent conjecture due to Cioabă, Desai and Tait [7]. This extends a spectral color critical edge theorem of Nikiforov ([20]).

**Conjecture 23 ([7]).** Let $F$ be any graph such that the graphs in $EX(n,F)$ are Turán graphs plus $O(1)$ edges. Then $SPEX(n,F) \subseteq EX(n,F)$ for sufficiently large $n$.

We are happy to see that Conjecture 23 has just been solved by Wang, Kang and Xue (see [28]). We further wonder whether there exists only one graph in $SPEX(n,F)$ for every $F$ satisfying the condition. Nikiforov’s result (see Theorem 2 in [20]; see also a direct version in [31]) implies that the extremal graph is unique for every graph $F$ with a color critical edge, when the $O(1)$ is replaced by 0. Theorems 3 and 4 give a new support.

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