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A sharp relative isoperimetric inequality for the square

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Abstract. We compute the exact value of the least “relative perimeter” of a shape \(S\), with a given area, contained in a unit square; the relative perimeter of \(S\) being the length of the boundary of \(S\) that does not touch the border of the square.

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1. Introduction

Let \(Q\) denote the unit cube in \(\mathbb{R}^N, N \geq 2\). Given a measurable set \(S \subset Q\) (\(S\) stands for shape) we denote by \(1_S\) the characteristic function of \(S\), by \(|S| = \|1_S\|_{L^1}\) the volume of \(S\) (i.e., the area of \(S\) when \(N = 2\)), and by \(P(S, Q)\), or simply \(P(S)\), the relative perimeter of \(S\), i.e., taking into account only the part of the boundary of \(S\) inside \(Q\); in other words \(P(S)\) is the total mass of the measure \(\nabla 1_S\) (possibly infinite if \(S\) is not rectifiable).

Our goal is to give an explicit formula when \(N = 2\), for the function \(f_N(t)\) defined for \(0 \leq t \leq 1\) by

\[
f_N(t) = \inf \{P(S); S \text{ is a measurable subset of } Q \text{ such that } |S| = t\}.
\]

Clearly

\[
f_N(t) = f_N(1 - t) \quad \forall \ t \in [0, 1];
\]

just replace \(S\) by \(Q \setminus S\), and thus we will often assume that \(0 \leq t \leq 1/2\).

The main result of this note is the following:

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Theorem 1. Assume $N = 2$, then

\[
f_2(t) = \begin{cases} 
(\pi t)^{\frac{1}{2}} & \text{if } 0 \leq t \leq \frac{1}{\pi} \\
1 & \text{if } \frac{1}{\pi} \leq t \leq \frac{1}{2}
\end{cases}
\]

(3)

Moreover the infimum in (1) is achieved by explicit shapes whose boundary consists or arcs of circles or line segments.

Remark 2. We do not know any similar result for $f_N(t)$ when $N \geq 3$. In particular, it is not known whether $f_N(t) \equiv 1$ in a neighborhood of $t = \frac{1}{2}$. There is however a simple lower bound for $f_N(t)$ valid for all $N \geq 2$. More precisely

\[
f_N(t) \geq 4t(1-t) \quad \forall \, N \geq 2, \, \forall \, t \in \left[0, \frac{1}{2}\right],
\]

(4)

and the constant 4 in (4) is sharp. This inequality is originally due to H. Hadwiger [7] when the infimum in (1) is restricted to polyhedral subsets $S$ of the cube $Q$. Far-reaching variants appeared subsequently in the literature (see e.g. S. G. Bobkov [5, 6], D. Bakry and M. Ledoux [3], F. Barthe and B. Maurey [4], and their references). The version stated as (4) (i.e., for measurable sets $S$) was proved in its full generality by L. Ambrosio, J. Bourgain, H. Brezis and A. Figalli in [2, Appendix], where it plays an essential role. Note that when $N = 2$ inequality (4) is consistent with the explicit formula (3) since

\[
(\pi t)^{\frac{1}{2}} \geq 4t(1-t) \quad \forall \, t \in \left(0, \frac{1}{\pi}\right),
\]

(5)

or equivalently

\[
\frac{\pi^{\frac{1}{2}}}{4} \geq s(1-s^2) \quad \forall \, s \in \left(0, \frac{1}{\pi^{\frac{1}{2}}}\right).
\]

(6)

Indeed the function $s(1-s^2)$ is increasing on the interval $(0, \frac{1}{\pi^{\frac{1}{2}}})$ and thus (5) reduces to

\[
\frac{\pi^{\frac{1}{2}}}{4} \geq \frac{1}{\pi^{\frac{1}{2}}} \left(1 - \frac{1}{\pi}\right),
\]

which is obvious.

Remark 3. Y. Altshuler and A. Bruckstein [1] established earlier a version of Theorem 1 where the infimum in (1) is restricted to “nice” connected sets $S$. Their strategy of proof enters as an ingredient in this note.

Remark 4. The conclusion of Theorem 1 is probably known to the experts even though we could not find a reference in the literature. E. Milman suggested an alternative approach by considering the result of H. Howards cited in [8, Section 7], and concerning the isoperimetric problem on a flat 2D torus.

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2. Some simple facts

The proof of Theorem 1 relies on three simple facts.

Fact 1 (The classical planar isoperimetric inequality). Given any shape $S$ in the plane we have

\[
P(S) = P(S, \mathbb{R}^2) \geq 2\sqrt{\pi} \sqrt{|S|}.
\]

C. R. Mathématique — 2021, 359, n°9, 1191-1199
Fact 2 (The half-plane isoperimetric inequality). Given any shape $S$ in the half-plane denoted $\frac{1}{2} \mathbb{R}^2$ we have

$$P(S) = P\left(S, \frac{1}{2} \mathbb{R}^2\right) \geq \sqrt{2\pi} \sqrt{|S|}.$$ 

**Proof.** If $S$ touches the boundary of the half-plane, we reflect it across the boundary, thereby generating a (symmetric) shape $S'$ of area $2|S|$ and such that

$$P\left(S', \mathbb{R}^2\right) = 2P\left(S, \frac{1}{2} \mathbb{R}^2\right).$$

Applying 1 to $S'$ we obtain

$$P\left(S', \mathbb{R}^2\right) \geq 2\sqrt{\pi} \sqrt{|S'|},$$

which yields

$$P\left(S, \frac{1}{2} \mathbb{R}^2\right) \geq \sqrt{2\pi} \sqrt{2|S|}. \quad \square$$

Fact 3 (The quarter-plane isoperimetric inequality). Given any shape $S$ in a quarter-plane denoted $\frac{1}{4} \mathbb{R}^2$ we have

$$P\left(S, \frac{1}{4} \mathbb{R}^2\right) \geq \sqrt{\pi} \sqrt{|S|}.$$ 

**Proof.** If $S$ touches the two orthogonal boundaries of the quarter-plane we reflect it symmetrically into the three quarters plane, generating a shape $S'$ of area $4|S|$ and such that

$$P\left(S', \mathbb{R}^2\right) = 4P\left(S, \frac{1}{4} \mathbb{R}^2\right).$$

Applying 1 to $S'$ we obtain

$$P\left(S', \mathbb{R}^2\right) \geq 2\sqrt{\pi} \sqrt{|S'|},$$

which yields

$$P\left(S, \frac{1}{4} \mathbb{R}^2\right) \geq \sqrt{\pi} \sqrt{4|S|}. \quad \square$$

3. Proof of Theorem 1

Since we consider only the case $N = 2$, we will write simply $f(t)$ instead of $f_2(t)$. Set

$$g(t) = \begin{cases} (\pi t)^{\frac{1}{2}} & \text{if } 0 \leq t \leq \frac{1}{\pi} \\ 1 & \text{if } \frac{1}{\pi} \leq t \leq \frac{1}{2} \end{cases}. \quad (7)$$

The goal is to prove that $f(t) = g(t) \forall t \in [0, \frac{1}{2}]$. The proof is divided into 7 steps.

**Step 1.** We have

$$f(t) \leq g(t) \quad \forall \ t \in \left[0, \frac{1}{2}\right]. \quad (8)$$

Assume first that $t \leq \frac{1}{\pi}$ and consider the set $S$ as in Figure 1, where $R = 2\sqrt{\frac{1}{\pi}} \leq 1$, so that $|S| = \frac{\pi R^2}{4} = t$ and $P(S) = \frac{2\pi R}{4} = (\pi t)^{\frac{1}{2}}$. Therefore (by definition of $f(t)$), $f(t) \leq (\pi t)^{\frac{1}{2}} = g(t)$.

Assume now that $\frac{1}{\pi} \leq t \leq \frac{1}{2}$ and consider the set $S$ as in Figure 2, so that $|S| = t$. On the other hand $P(S) = 1$. Therefore, (by definition of $f(t)$), $f(t) \leq 1 = g(t). \quad \square$

In what follows we concentrate on the lower bound

$$f(t) \geq g(t) \quad \forall \ t \in \left[0, \frac{1}{2}\right]. \quad (9)$$

Let $S$ be a minimizer in (1). We know from abstract theory (see A. Ros [12, Theorem 1] and the references therein) that $\partial S$ is smooth and consists of arcs of circle - possibly straight lines;
moreover if \( \partial Q \cap \partial S \neq \emptyset \), then \( \partial Q \) meets \( \partial S \) orthogonally. In view of this fundamental result it suffices to establish the lower bound

\[
P(S) \geq g(|S|)
\]

when \( S \) is restricted to the above class i.e., \( \partial S \) is smooth, \( \partial S \) consists of arcs of circle (or straight lines) and \( \partial S \) meets \( \partial Q \) orthogonally; but \( S \) need not be connected. Our next step allows to assume that \( S \) is also connected.

**Step 2. Reduction to the case where \( S \) is also connected**

Assume we have established (10) under the additional assumption that the shape is connected. Consider now some \( S \) which is not connected, and write \( S = \bigcup_i S_i \) where here \((S_i)\) are the connected components of \( S \). Then

\[
|S| = \sum_i |S_i|
\]

and

\[
P(S) = \sum_i P(S_i).
\]

Assume first that \(|S| \leq \frac{1}{\pi}\); then \(|S_i| \leq \frac{1}{\pi} \ \forall \ i \) and by (10) applied to \( S_i \) we have

\[
P(S_i) \geq \sqrt{\pi |S_i|} \ \forall \ i
\]

Thus

\[
P(S) \geq \sum_i \sqrt{\pi |S_i|} \geq \sqrt{\pi \sum_i |S_i|} = \sqrt{\pi |S|}
\]

i.e., (10) holds for \( S \).

Assume next that \( \frac{1}{\pi} \leq |S| \leq \frac{1}{2} \). We distinguish two cases:
Case 1. $|S_i| \leq \frac{1}{\pi} \forall i$.

Then, as above,

$$P(S) \geq \sqrt{\pi|S|} \geq 1 = g(|S|),$$
i.e., (10) holds for $S$.

Case 2. $|S_i| > \frac{1}{\pi}$ for some $i = i_0$.

By (10) applied to $S_{i_0}$ we have $P(S_{i_0}) \geq 1$, and thus $P(S) \geq P(S_{i_0}) \geq 1$, i.e., (10) also holds for $S$.

We are therefore reduced to the situation investigated by Altshuler and Bruckstein [1], even under the additional assumption that $\partial S$ consists of arcs of circle (or straight lines) meeting $\partial Q$ orthogonally. We follow the strategy of their argument.

Step 3. $S$ touches 0 side of $Q$.

In this case the classical isoperimetric inequality (1 in Section 2) yields

$$P(S) \geq 2\sqrt{\pi|S|} \geq g(|S|) \forall S,$$with $|S| \leq \frac{1}{2}$. □

A typical example is as in Figure 3:

Figure 3.

Step 4. $S$ touches 1 side of $Q$.

A typical example is as in Figure 4:

Figure 4.

In this case, the half-plane isoperimetric inequality (see 2 in Section 2) yields

$$P(S) \geq \sqrt{2\pi|S|} \geq g(|S|) \forall S,$$with $|S| \leq \frac{1}{2}$. □
Step 5. \( S \) touches 2 sides of \( Q \).

In this case we have either \( S \) touches two opposite sides of \( Q \) or two adjacent sides of \( Q \). The two opposite sides correspond to Figure 5.

(Here we use the assumption that \( S \) is connected.) In this configuration

\[
P(S) \geq 2 \geq g(|S|) \quad \forall \ S,
\]

for all such \( S \).

The two adjacent sides correspond to Figure 6.

Step 6. \( S \) touches 3 sides of \( Q \).

A typical example is as in Figure 7, where a portion of the boundary of \( S \) has to join two opposite sides of \( Q \).

In this case

\[
P(S) \geq 1 \geq g(|S|) \quad \forall \ S, \quad \text{with} \quad |S| \leq \frac{1}{2},
\]

Figure 5.

Figure 6.

In this configuration the quarter plane isoperimetric inequality (see 3 in Section 2) yields

\[
P(S) \geq \sqrt{\pi |S|} \geq g(|S|) \quad \forall \ S, \quad \text{with} \quad |S| \leq \frac{1}{2}.
\]

Figure 7.

In this case

\[
P(S) \geq 1 \geq g(|S|) \quad \forall \ S, \quad \text{with} \quad |S| \leq \frac{1}{2}
\]
Step 7. *S touches the 4 sides of Q.*
A typical example is as in Figure 8.

Figure 8.

Let $T = Q \setminus S$ and denote by $(T_i)$ the connected components of $T$.

Lemma 5. Each $T_i$ touches 0, 1, or 2 adjacent sides of $Q$.

The proof of Lemma 5 relies on the following assertion which appears without proof in a paper by H. Poincaré [11, p. 67].

Lemma 6. Let $A_1$, $B_1$ be points of $\partial Q$ belonging to opposite sides of $Q$, and let $\mathcal{C}_1$ be a curve in $Q$ connecting $A_1$ to $B_1$. Let $A_2$, $B_2$ be points of $\partial Q$ belonging to a distinct pair of opposite sides of $Q$, and let $\mathcal{C}_2$ be a curve in $Q$ connecting $A_2$ to $B_2$. Then

$$\mathcal{C}_1 \cap \mathcal{C}_2 \neq \emptyset.$$ (13)

(see Figure 9)

Figure 9.

Proof of Lemma 6. Let $(p_1(t), q_1(t))$ (resp. $(p_2(t), q_2(t))$), $0 \leq t \leq 1$, be a parametrization of $\mathcal{C}_1$ (resp. $\mathcal{C}_2$) such that $(p_1(0), q_1(0)) = A_1$, $(p_1(1), q_1(1)) = B_1$, (resp. $(p_2(0), q_2(0)) = A_2$, $(p_2(1), q_2(1)) = B_2$). Consider the map $F: \overline{Q} \to \mathbb{R}^2$ defined by

$$F(t, s) = (F_1(t, s), F_2(t, s)) = (p_1(t) - p_2(s), q_1(t) - q_2(s)).$$
We have to show that there exists some \((t, s) \in Q\) such that \(F(t, s) = 0\). Note that
\[
F_1(t, 0) = p_1(t) - p_2(0) = p_1(t) > 0, \quad \forall \ t \in [0, 1],
\]
\[
F_1(t, 1) = p_1(t) - p_2(1) = p_1(t) - 1 < 0, \quad \forall \ t \in [0, 1],
\]
\[
F_2(0, s) = q_1(0) - q_2(s) = 1 - q_2(s) > 0, \quad \forall \ s \in [0, 1],
\]
and
\[
F_2(1, s) = q_1(1) - q_2(s) = -q_2(s) < 0, \quad \forall \ s \in [0, 1].
\]

We deduce from the Poincaré–Miranda theorem (see W. Kulpa [9], J. Mawhin [10], and the references therein) that there exists \((t, s) \in \overline{Q}\) (and in fact \((t, s) \in Q\)) such that \(F(t, s) = 0\). 

**Proof of Lemma 5.** Assume by contradiction that \(T_i\) touches (at least) 2 opposite sides of \(Q\). Fix a path \(\mathcal{C}_1\) connecting these 2 opposite sides within \(T_i\) (this is possible because \(T_i\) is connected). Consider the remaining 2 opposite sides of \(Q\) and fix a path \(\mathcal{C}_2\) connecting them within \(S\); this is possible because \(S\) touches (by assumption) the 4 sides of \(Q\) and \(S\) is connected. From Lemma 6 we know that \(\mathcal{C}_1 \cap \mathcal{C}_2 \neq \emptyset\). But this is impossible since \(\mathcal{C}_1 \subseteq T_i\), \(\mathcal{C}_2 \subseteq S\) and \(T_i \cap S = \emptyset\). 

**Proof of Step 7.** We now complete the proof of Step 7. By 1, 2 and 3 in Section 2, we have for every \(i\)
\[
P(T_i) \geq \min\left\{\pi, 2\pi, 2\pi \right\} \sqrt{|T_i|} = \pi \sqrt{|T_i|}.
\]
Thus
\[
P(S) = P(T) = \sum_i P(T_i) \geq \pi \sum_i \sqrt{|T_i|}.
\]
From the obvious inequality
\[
\sum_i \sqrt{|T_i|} \geq \sqrt{\sum_i |T_i|},
\]
we deduce that
\[
P(S) \geq \pi \sqrt{\sum_i |T_i|} = \pi \sqrt{|T|} = \pi \sqrt{1 - |S|}.
\]
On the other hand \(\sqrt{|T - |S||} \geq \sqrt{|S|}\) since \(|S| \leq \frac{1}{2}\), and therefore
\[
P(S) \geq \pi \sqrt{|S|} \geq g(|S|) \quad \forall \ S, \quad \text{with} \quad |S| \leq \frac{1}{2}
\]

**Remark 7.** The same argument as above applies to the case where \(Q\) is replaced by a rectangle \(D(X, Y)\) of dimensions \(X\) and \(Y\) such that \(X \leq Y\). By analogy with the above we define for \(0 \leq t \leq XY\),
\[
f(t) = \inf \{P(S); \ S \text{ is a measurable subset of } D(X, Y) \text{ such that } |S| = t \}.
\]
Clearly
\[
f(t) = f(XY - t) \quad \forall \ t \in [0, XY].
\]

The analogue of Theorem 1 is:

**Theorem 8.** We have
\[
f(t) = \begin{cases} 
(\pi t)^{\frac{1}{2}} & \text{if } 0 \leq t \leq \frac{X^2}{\pi} \\
X & \text{if } \frac{X^2}{\pi} \leq t \leq \frac{1}{2} XY.
\end{cases}
\]
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