

# RESEARCH ARTICLE

# On Boltyanski and Gohberg's partition conjecture

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## Abstract

In 1965, Boltyanski and Gohberg made the following conjecture: Every bounded set in an  $n$ -dimensional normed space can be divided into  $2^n$  subsets of smaller diameters. In this paper, we prove the following result: Every bounded set in an  $n$ -dimensional normed space can be divided into  $2^{(1+o(1))n}$  subsets of smaller diameters.

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# 1 | INTRODUCTION

Let  $\mathbb{E}^n$  be the  $n$ -dimensional Euclidean space. For any bounded set  $S \subseteq \mathbb{E}^n$ , we call

$$d(S) = \sup\{\|x, y\| : x, y \in S\}$$

the *diameter* of  $S$ , where  $\|\cdot\|$  is the *Euclidean norm*. Let  $b(S)$  be the smallest number such that  $S$  can be divided into  $b(S)$  subsets with diameters strictly smaller than  $d(S)$ . In 1933, Borsuk [9]

proved that an  $n$ -dimensional ball  $B^n$  in  $\mathbb{E}^n$  cannot be partitioned into  $n$  parts of smaller diameters, which was announced in his ICM–Zurich talk (see [8]). Meanwhile, he proved that every bounded set in  $\mathbb{E}^2$  can be divided into three subsets of smaller diameters. Based on this fact, he proposed the following problem. (Usually, the positive assertion of the problem is known as *Borsuk's partition conjecture*.)

**Borsuk's problem.** *Is it true that*

$$b(S) \leq n + 1$$

*holds for every bounded set  $S$  in  $\mathbb{E}^n$ ?*

In 1934, Bonnesen and Fenchel [7] proved that every bounded set  $S$  of  $\mathbb{E}^2$  can be divided into three subsets  $S_1$ ,  $S_2$  and  $S_3$  satisfying

$$d(S_i) \leq \frac{\sqrt{3}}{2} \cdot d(S), \quad i = 1, 2, 3.$$

In fact, the upper bound  $\sqrt{3}/2$  can be attained at circular domains.

In 1947, Perkal [30] sketched a proof for a positive answer to the three-dimensional partition problem. Afterward, different proofs for this case were discovered by Eggleston [12], Grünbaum [14], Heppes [17], and others (see [15, 35]). In particular, Grünbaum proved that every bounded set  $S$  in  $\mathbb{E}^3$  can be divided into four parts  $S_1$ ,  $S_2$ ,  $S_3$ , and  $S_4$  satisfying

$$d(S_i) \leq 0.9887 \cdot d(S), \quad i = 1, 2, 3, 4.$$

In 1993, Kahn and Kalai [22] surprised the mathematical community by discovering counterexamples to Borsuk's conjecture in high dimensions. They proved that there exist sets  $S$  in  $\mathbb{E}^n$  satisfying

$$b(S) \geq 1.07\sqrt{n}.$$

Therefore, the first counterexample to Borsuk's conjecture occurs in  $\mathbb{E}^{21801}$ . Afterward, Kahn and Kalai's breakthrough was simplified by Alon [1] and improved by many authors, in particular by Hinrichs and Richter [18] to  $n \geq 298$  in 2003. In 2014, Bondarenko [6] presented a 65-dimensional counterexample to Borsuk's conjecture. Soon after, Jenrich and Brouwer [21] discovered a 64-dimensional one. Up to now, Borsuk's problem is still open for  $4 \leq n \leq 63$ . Recently, Zong [38] proposed a computer proof program to this problem.

As Borsuk's conjecture is not true in high dimensions, obtaining upper bounds for the partition number is an interesting problem. In 1955, Lenz [25] proved that

$$b(S) \leq (\sqrt{n} + 1)^n$$

holds for every bounded set  $S$  in  $\mathbb{E}^n$ . This bound was successively improved by Danzer [11], Lassak [24], and Schramm [32]. The best-known upper bound is

$$b(S) \leq 5n^{\frac{3}{2}}(4 + \log n)\left(\frac{3}{2}\right)^{\frac{n}{2}},$$

which was discovered by Schramm in 1988.

Let  $(\mathbb{R}^n, \|\cdot\|)$  be an  $n$ -dimensional *normed space*, that is, an  $n$ -dimensional real linear space  $\mathbb{R}^n$  with norm  $\|\cdot\|$ . It is well-known that  $B^* = \{\mathbf{x} \in \mathbb{R}^n : \|\mathbf{x}\| \leq 1\}$  is a centrally symmetric convex body centered at the origin. Usually, a convex body means a convex compact set with nonempty interior and  $B^*$  is called the unit ball of  $(\mathbb{R}^n, \|\cdot\|)$ . On the other hand, if  $C$  is a centrally symmetric convex body centered at the origin and  $\mathbf{v}$  is a vector in  $\mathbb{R}^n$ , then

$$\|\mathbf{v}\|_C = \min\{r : r \geq 0, \mathbf{v} \in rC\}$$

defines a norm on  $\mathbb{R}^n$  and produces an  $n$ -dimensional normed space. Therefore, there is a one-to-one correspondence between  $n$ -dimensional normed spaces and  $n$ -dimensional centrally symmetric convex bodies centered at the origin. So, for convenience, we use  $M_C = \{\mathbb{R}^n, \|\cdot\|_C\}$  to denote an  $n$ -dimensional normed space that takes  $C$  as the unit ball. In  $M_C$ , the distance between two points  $\mathbf{x}$  and  $\mathbf{y}$  is defined by

$$\|\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}\|_C = \|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y}\|_C.$$

For basic concepts and results in normed spaces, we refer to [28, 29].

Let  $S$  be a bounded set in  $M_C$ . We define

$$d_C(S) = \sup\{\|\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}\|_C : \mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y} \in S\}$$

to be the diameter of  $S$  and define  $b_C(S)$  to be the smallest number such that  $S$  can be divided into  $b_C(S)$  subsets, all of them having diameters strictly smaller than  $d_C(S)$ .

It is natural to study the analogies of Borsuk's problem in normed spaces. For convenience, let  $S$  be a bounded set in a normed space  $M_C$  and let  $\bar{S}$  denote the closure of the *convex hull* of  $S$ . In 1957, Grünbaum [13] studied Borsuk's partition problem in normed planes. He showed that, for every bounded set  $S$  in a normed plane  $M_C$ ,

$$b_C(S) \leq 4,$$

where the equality holds if and only if  $\bar{S}$  and  $C$  are homothetic parallelograms. In 1965, Boltyanski and Gohberg [3, pp. 75, 92] made the following conjecture:

**Boltyanski and Gohberg's conjecture.** *For every bounded set  $S$  in an  $n$ -dimensional normed space  $M_C$ , we have*

$$b_C(S) \leq 2^n,$$

where the equality holds if and only if  $\bar{S}$  and  $C$  are homothetic parallelotopes.

**Remark 1.1.** When  $C$  is an  $n$ -dimensional cube, it is well-known and easy to see that

$$b_C(C) = 2^n.$$

Let  $K$  denote a *convex body*, a compact and convex set with nonempty interior  $\text{int}(K)$ , in  $\mathbb{E}^n$ . Let  $h(K)$  denote the smallest number of translates of  $\lambda K$  ( $0 < \lambda < 1$ ) (or  $\text{int}(K)$ ) such that their union contains  $K$ . In 1957, Hadwiger [16] proposed the following conjecture, which has a close relation with the Boltyanski–Gohberg conjecture.

**Hadwiger's covering conjecture.** *For every  $n$ -dimensional convex body  $K$ , we have*

$$h(K) \leq 2^n,$$

where the equality holds if and only if  $K$  is a parallelotope.

This conjecture has been studied by many authors, including Bezdek, Boltjanski, Lassak, Levi, Martini, Rogers, Soltan, Wu, and Zong. The two-dimensional case was solved by Levi [26] in 1954. However, the conjecture is still open for all  $n \geq 3$ . As the target of this paper is the Boltjanski–Gohberg conjecture, we will not go to the details of Hadwiger's conjecture. We refer the interested readers to the references of [2, 4, 10, 19, 37]. Here we only list two results that will be useful in this paper.

**Lemma 1.1** (Boltjanski and Gohberg [3]). *For every bounded set  $S$  in a normed space  $M_C = \{\mathbb{R}^n, \|\cdot\|_C\}$ , we have*

$$b_C(S) \leq h(\bar{S}).$$

This lemma is simple, one can take it as an exercise.

**Lemma 1.2** (Rogers and Zong [31]). *For every  $n$ -dimensional  $K$ , we have*

$$h(K) \leq \binom{2n}{n} n(\log n + \log \log n + 5).$$

For every  $n$ -dimensional centrally symmetric convex body  $C$ , we have

$$h(C) \leq 2^n n(\log n + \log \log n + 5).$$

There are some partial results on the Boltjanski–Gohberg conjecture for particular sets and norms (see [5, 20, 23, 27, 33, 34, 36]). However, it is still open for all  $n \geq 3$  in general. As a consequence of Lemma 1.1 and the first part of Lemma 1.2, we have that

$$b_C(S) \leq \binom{2n}{n} n(\log n + \log \log n + 5)$$

holds for every bounded set  $S$  in an  $n$ -dimensional normed space  $M_C$ . Recently, this upper bound was improved by [10, 19] to

$$b_C(S) \leq \exp\left(-\Omega\left(\frac{n}{(\log n)^8}\right)\right) \cdot 4^n,$$

also by studying Hadwiger's conjecture. In this paper, we will prove the following theorem:

**Theorem 1.1.** *For every bounded set  $S$  in an  $n$ -dimensional normed space  $M_C$ , we have*

$$b_C(S) \leq 2^n(n+1)(\log(n+1) + \log \log(n+1) + 5) = 2^{(1+o(1))n}.$$

*Remark 1.2.* As usual, we write  $f(n) = o(g(n))$  if

$$\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \frac{f(n)}{g(n)} = 0.$$

## 2 | PROOF OF THE THEOREM

First, let us recall a basic concept in convex geometry. For every  $n$ -dimensional convex body  $K$ , we define

$$D(K) = K - K = \{\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y} : \mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y} \in K\}.$$

Usually, it is known as the *difference body* of  $K$ . Clearly,  $D(K)$  is centrally symmetric and convex. In fact the norm  $\|\cdot\|_{D(K)}$  defined by  $D(K)$  plays the key role of our proof.

Furthermore, for convenience, let  $\mathcal{K}^n$  denote the set of all  $n$ -dimensional convex bodies  $K$  and let  $\mathcal{C}^n$  denote the set of all  $n$ -dimensional centrally symmetric convex bodies  $C$ . It is easy to see that

$$d_C(S) = d_C(\bar{S})$$

and

$$b_C(S) \leq b_C(\bar{S}) \quad (2.1)$$

holds for all bounded sets  $S$  in  $M_C$ . Therefore, to study the Boltyanski–Gohberg conjecture, it is sufficient to deal with the convex bodies in  $\mathcal{K}^n$ .

**Lemma 2.1.** *In every  $n$ -dimensional normed space  $M_C$ , we have*

$$\max_{K \in \mathcal{K}^n} b_C(K) \leq \max_{K \in \mathcal{K}^n} b_{D(K)}(K).$$

*Proof.* Without loss of generality, let  $K$  be an  $n$ -dimensional convex body in  $M_C$  with  $d_C(K) = 1$ . Assume that  $\mathbf{x} = \mathbf{x}_1 - \mathbf{x}_2$  and  $\mathbf{y} = \mathbf{y}_1 - \mathbf{y}_2$  are two points in  $D(K)$ , where all  $\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{x}_2, \mathbf{y}_1$  and  $\mathbf{y}_2$  are points in  $K$ . Then, one can deduce that

$$\|\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}\|_C \leq \|\mathbf{x}_1 - \mathbf{x}_2, \mathbf{0}\|_C + \|\mathbf{y}_1 - \mathbf{y}_2, \mathbf{0}\|_C = \|\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{x}_2\|_C + \|\mathbf{y}_1, \mathbf{y}_2\|_C \leq 2$$

and therefore

$$d_C(D(K)) \leq 2 \quad (2.2)$$

(In fact, one has  $d_C(D(K)) = 2$ ). Then, we obtain

$$D(K) \subseteq C$$

and, therefore,

$$d_C(S) \leq d_{D(K)}(S) \quad (2.3)$$

for all sets  $S$  in  $M_C$ .

On the other hand, for any pair of points  $\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y} \in K$ , we have

$$\|\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}\|_{D(K)} = \frac{1}{2} \|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y}, \mathbf{y} - \mathbf{x}\|_{D(K)}$$

and therefore

$$d_{D(K)}(K) = 1. \quad (2.4)$$

If  $K$  can be divided into  $b_{D(K)}(K)$  subsets  $X_1, X_2, \dots, X_{b_{D(K)}(K)}$  satisfying

$$d_{D(K)}(X_i) < 1, \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, b_{D(K)}(K),$$

it follows by (2.3) that

$$d_C(X_i) < 1, \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, b_{D(K)}(K)$$

and therefore

$$b_C(K) \leq b_{D(K)}(K).$$

Consequently, we get

$$\max_{K \in \mathcal{K}^n} b_C(K) \leq \max_{K \in \mathcal{K}^n} b_{D(K)}(K).$$

Lemma 2.1 is proved.  $\square$

Assume that  $K$  is a convex body in  $\mathbb{R}^n$ . We embed it into  $\mathbb{R}^{n+1} = \mathbb{R}^n \times \mathbb{R}$  and create a centrally symmetric convex body  $K^*$  in  $\mathbb{R}^{n+1}$ . Setting  $K$  in the  $n$ -dimensional hyperplane

$$H = \{(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_{n+1}) : x_{n+1} = 0\}$$

of  $\mathbb{R}^{n+1}$  and writing  $\mathbf{e} = (0, 0, \dots, 0, 1)$ , then we define

$$K^* = \overline{(K + \mathbf{e}) \cup (-K - \mathbf{e})}.$$

Clearly,  $K^*$  is a centrally symmetric convex body in  $\mathbb{R}^{n+1}$  and, therefore,  $D(K^*) = 2K^*$ .

**Lemma 2.2.**

$$b_{D(K^*)}(K^*) = b_{D(K^*)}(K + \mathbf{e}) + b_{D(K^*)}(-K - \mathbf{e}) = 2b_{D(K^*)}(K + \mathbf{e}).$$

*Proof.* First of all, we note that

$$d_{D(K^*)}(K^*) = 1$$

and

$$\|\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}\|_{D(K^*)} = 1,$$

whenever  $\mathbf{x} \in K + \mathbf{e}$  and  $\mathbf{y} \in -K - \mathbf{e}$ . Thus, if  $X_1, X_2, \dots, X_{b_{D(K^*)}(K^*)}$  is a partition of  $K^*$  such that

$$d_{D(K^*)}(X_i) < 1, \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, b_{D(K^*)}(K^*),$$

none of the parts can contain two points  $\mathbf{x} \in K + \mathbf{e}$  and  $\mathbf{y} \in -K - \mathbf{e}$  simultaneously. Therefore, we have

$$b_{D(K^*)}(K^*) \geq b_{D(K^*)}(K + \mathbf{e}) + b_{D(K^*)}(-K - \mathbf{e}). \quad (2.5)$$

It is easy to see that

$$D(K^*) \cap H = \{\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y} : \mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y} \in K\} = D(K).$$

Therefore, we have

$$d_{D(K^*)}(K + \mathbf{e}) = d_{D(K^*)}(-K - \mathbf{e}) = 1. \quad (2.6)$$

By symmetry, we have

$$b_{D(K^*)}(K + \mathbf{e}) = b_{D(K^*)}(-K - \mathbf{e}). \quad (2.7)$$

Assume that  $b_{D(K^*)}(K + \mathbf{e}) = m$  and  $K_1, K_2, \dots, K_m$  is a partition of  $K + \mathbf{e}$  satisfying

$$d_{D(K^*)}(K_i) < 1, \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, m.$$

Clearly,  $-K_1, -K_2, \dots, -K_m$  is a partition of  $-K - \mathbf{e}$  satisfying

$$d_{D(K^*)}(-K_i) < 1, \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, m.$$

We define

$$H^+ = \{(x_1, \dots, x_{n+1}) : x_{n+1} \geq 0\},$$

$$H^- = \{(x_1, \dots, x_{n+1}) : x_{n+1} \leq 0\},$$

$$T_i = \overline{(K_i \cup (-K - \mathbf{e}))} \cap H^+$$

for  $i = 1, 2, \dots, m$ , and

$$T_{m+i} = \overline{((-K_i) \cup (K + \mathbf{e}))} \cap H^-$$

for  $i = 1, 2, \dots, m$ . It is obvious that

$$K^* = \bigcup_{i=1}^{2m} T_i. \quad (2.8)$$

Next, we proceed to verify that

$$d_{D(K^*)}(T_i) < 1$$

holds for all  $i = 1, 2, \dots, m$ . For every pair of points  $\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y} \in T_i$ , there exist two numbers  $\lambda, \mu \in [0, \frac{1}{2}]$  and four points  $\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{y}_1 \in K_i, \mathbf{x}_2, \mathbf{y}_2 \in -K - \mathbf{e}$  such that

$$\mathbf{x} = (1 - \lambda)\mathbf{x}_1 + \lambda\mathbf{x}_2$$

and

$$\mathbf{y} = (1 - \mu)\mathbf{y}_1 + \mu\mathbf{y}_2.$$

Hence, we have

$$\|\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{y}_1\|_{D(K^*)} < 1,$$

$$\|\mathbf{y}_1, \mathbf{x}_2\|_{D(K^*)} = 1$$

and

$$\|\mathbf{x}_2, \mathbf{y}_2\|_{D(K^*)} \leq 1.$$

Without loss of generality, we assume that  $\lambda > \mu$ . Then, we get

$$\begin{aligned} \|\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}\|_{D(K^*)} &= \|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{y}\|_{D(K^*)} \\ &= \|(1 - \lambda)(\mathbf{x}_1 - \mathbf{y}_1) + (\mu - \lambda)(\mathbf{y}_1 - \mathbf{x}_2) + \mu(\mathbf{x}_2 - \mathbf{y}_2)\|_{D(K^*)} \\ &\leq (1 - \lambda)\|\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{y}_1\|_{D(K^*)} + (\lambda - \mu)\|\mathbf{y}_1, \mathbf{x}_2\|_{D(K^*)} + \mu\|\mathbf{x}_2, \mathbf{y}_2\|_{D(K^*)} \\ &< 1 - \lambda + \lambda - \mu + \mu = 1 \end{aligned}$$

and therefore

$$d_{D(K^*)}(T_i) < 1, \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, m. \quad (2.9)$$

Similarly, one can deduce that

$$d_{D(K^*)}(T_i) < 1, \quad i = m + 1, m + 2, \dots, 2m. \quad (2.10)$$

As a conclusion of (2.7), (2.8), (2.9), and (2.10), we get

$$b_{D(K^*)}(K^*) \leq 2m = b_{D(K^*)}(K + \mathbf{e}) + b_{D(K^*)}(-K - \mathbf{e}). \quad (2.11)$$

By (2.5) and (2.11), Lemma 2.2 is proved.  $\square$

### Lemma 2.3.

$$b_{D(K^*)}(K + \mathbf{e}) = b_{D(K)}(K).$$

*Proof.* Recalling the equation just below (2.5),

$$D(K^*) \cap H = D(K),$$



when we measure the diameters of subsets of  $K + \mathbf{e}$  by  $\|\cdot\|_{D(K^*)}$ , the real norm is  $\|\cdot\|_{D(K)}$ . Therefore, we get

$$b_{D(K^*)}(K + \mathbf{e}) = b_{D(K)}(K).$$

Lemma 2.3 is proved.

*Proof of Theorem 1.1.* By Lemmas 2.2 and 2.3, we have

$$b_{D(K^*)}(K^*) = 2b_{D(K^*)}(K + \mathbf{e}) = 2b_{D(K)}(K). \quad (2.12)$$

As  $K^* \in \mathcal{C}^{n+1}$ , by Lemma 1.1 and the second part of Lemma 1.2, we get

$$b_{D(K^*)}(K^*) \leq h(K^*) \leq 2^{n+1}(n+1)(\log(n+1) + \log \log(n+1) + 5).$$

Therefore, by (2.12) we have

$$\begin{aligned} b_{D(K)}(K) &= \frac{1}{2} b_{D(K^*)}(K^*) \\ &\leq 2^n(n+1)(\log(n+1) + \log \log(n+1) + 5) \\ &= 2^{(1+o(1))n} \end{aligned}$$

for all  $K \in \mathcal{K}^n$ . Then, Theorem 1.1 follows from (2.1) and Lemma 2.1 □

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