

# On $\ell$ -distance balanced product graphs

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## Abstract

A graph  $G$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced if for each pair of vertices  $x$  and  $y$  at distance  $\ell$  in  $G$ , the number of vertices closer to  $x$  than to  $y$  is equal to the number of vertices closer to  $y$  than to  $x$ . A complete characterization of  $\ell$ -distance-balanced corona products is given and a characterization of lexicographic products for  $\ell \geq 3$ , thus complementing known results for  $\ell \in \{1, 2\}$  and correcting an earlier related assertion. A sufficient condition on  $H$  which guarantees that  $K_n \square H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced is given and it is proved that if  $K_n \square H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced, then  $H$  is an  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graph. A known characterization of 1-distance-balanced graphs is extended to  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graphs, again correcting an earlier claimed assertion.

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## 1 Introduction

The investigation of distance-balanced graphs was initiated over twenty years ago in [12], an explicit definition of the concept was however given only a decade later in [14]. Distance-balanced graphs have since then been extensively studied by many authors from various points of view. On one side they were considered from the pure graph theoretical point of view [2, 4, 17, 20, 22]. On the other hand they found significant applications in other areas, such as mathematical chemistry, communication networks, game theory, strategic interaction models, and elsewhere, see [1, 13, 14, 15, 16]. We also refer to [6] for a nice description of some of these applications as well as for connections between distance-balanced graphs and wreath products. Among many appealing

results on distance-balanced graphs we point out that the class of distance-balanced graphs coincides with self-median graphs [2] and that they can also be characterized as the graphs whose opportunity index is zero [1]. Moreover, in mathematical chemistry the so-called Mostar index was introduced in [8] as a measure of how far a given graph is from being distance-balanced, see also [7, 24].

Considerable effort has been devoted to explore different generalizations of distance-balanced graphs, where one still focuses just on pairs of adjacent vertices [2, 5, 18, 19]. In addition, there is a very natural generalization of distance-balancedness to pairs of nonadjacent vertices. This idea can be traced back to the thesis of Freluh [10], where  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graphs are introduced such that 1-distance-balanced graphs coincide with distance-balanced graphs.

Properties and general results on  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graphs have been discussed in several recently published papers. In particular, connected 2-distance-balanced graphs which are not 2-connected, and 2-distance-balanced graphs that can be represented as the Cartesian or the lexicographic product of two graphs were characterized in [11]. In [21] infinitely many examples of  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graphs were presented, and  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graphs of diameter at most 3 investigated in detail. Moreover,  $\ell$ -distance-balancedness of generalized Petersen graphs was analyzed. Now, the following [21, Problem 6.4] intrigued our attention: study  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graphs with respect to various graph products. In this paper we focus on the lexicographic, corona and Cartesian product which were already in the center of earlier investigations of  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graphs with respect to graph products.

Distance-balanced lexicographic product graphs were characterized in [14, Theorem 4.2], while one of the main objectives of [9] was to characterize  $\ell$ -distance-balanced lexicographic products for every positive integer  $\ell$ . But [9, Theorem 3.4] is not correct for  $\ell \geq 2$ . For  $\ell = 2$ , the result was corrected in [11, Theorem 5.4]. Here, in Section 3, we do the same for every  $\ell \geq 3$ . Corona product graphs in association with distance-balanced property have been (according to our knowledge) studied only in [23]. It is known that the corona product of nontrivial, connected graphs is never distance-balanced. In Section 4 we characterize  $\ell$ -distance-balanced corona product graphs for every  $\ell \geq 2$ . Next, 1-distance-balanced and 2-distance-balanced Cartesian product graphs were characterized in [14, Proposition 4.1] and [11, Theorem 4.4], respectively. The difficulty of going from the first to the second result indicates that it might be very difficult to characterize  $\ell$ -distance-balanced Cartesian products for arbitrary  $\ell$ . In Section 5 we hence restrict ourselves to the case when one factor is complete. We give a sufficient condition on  $H$  which guarantees that  $K_n \square H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced and prove that if  $K_n \square H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced, then  $H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graph. In Section 6 we give a characterization of  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graphs which extends the case  $\ell = 1$  from [14, Proposition 2.1] and corrects the general case from [9, Proposition 2.2]. Before giving our results, basic concepts used in this paper are introduced in the next section.

## 2 Preliminaries

In this section we introduce our notation and basic definitions. Throughout this paper, all graphs are simple, connected, undirected and finite. For a graph  $G$ , let  $V(G)$  denote the set of vertices and  $E(G)$  the set of edges of  $G$ . If  $g_1, g_2 \in V(G)$ , then set

$$\begin{aligned} W_{g_1 g_2} &= \{g \in V(G) : d_G(g, g_1) < d_G(g, g_2)\}, \\ {}_{g_1}W_{g_2} &= \{g \in V(G) : d_G(g, g_1) = d_G(g, g_2)\}, \end{aligned}$$

where  $d_G(g_1, g_2)$  or simply  $d(g_1, g_2)$  denotes the geodesic distance in  $G$ . In other words,  $W_{g_1 g_2}$  is the set of vertices in  $G$  that are closer to  $g_1$  than to  $g_2$ . The *diameter*  $\text{diam}(G)$  of a connected graph  $G$  is the maximum distance between pairs of vertices of  $G$ . If  $\ell$  is a positive integer and  $\text{diam}(G) \geq \ell$ , then we say that  $G$  is  $\ell$ -*distance-balanced* if for any pair of vertices  $g_1, g_2 \in V(G)$  with  $d_G(g_1, g_2) = \ell$  we have  $|W_{g_1 g_2}| = |W_{g_2 g_1}|$ . If the last equality holds for every  $1 \leq \ell \leq \text{diam}(G)$ , we say that  $G$  is *highly distance-balanced*. For instance, cycles and complete graphs are simple examples of such graphs. In addition, every distance-regular graph is highly distance-balanced [3]. For more results on highly distance-balanced graphs see [21].

Let  $G \square H$  and  $G[H]$  respectively denote the *Cartesian product* and the *lexicographic product* of graphs  $G$  and  $H$ . Both these graph products have the vertex set  $V(G) \times V(H)$ . Vertices  $(g_1, h_1)$  and  $(g_2, h_2)$  are adjacent in  $G \square H$  if either  $g_1 = g_2$  and  $h_1 h_2 \in E(H)$ , or  $h_1 = h_2$  and  $g_1 g_2 \in E(G)$ . If  $h \in V(H)$ , then the subgraph of  $G \square H$  induced by the vertices  $(g, h)$ ,  $g \in V(G)$ , is a  $G$ -*layer* and is denoted by  $G^h$ . Analogously  $H$ -layers  ${}^g H$  are defined.  $G$ -layers and  $H$ -layers are isomorphic to  $G$  and to  $H$ , respectively. Recall that

$$d_{G \square H}((g_1, h_1), (g_2, h_2)) = d_G(g_1, g_2) + d_H(h_1, h_2). \quad (1)$$

Vertices  $(g_1, h_1)$  and  $(g_2, h_2)$  are adjacent in  $G[H]$  if  $g_1 g_2 \in E(G)$  or if  $g_1 = g_2$  and  $h_1 h_2 \in E(H)$ . The distance between two different vertices  $(g_1, h_1)$  and  $(g_2, h_2)$  in  $G[H]$  for  $G \neq K_1$  is determined as follows:

$$d_{G[H]}((g_1, h_1), (g_2, h_2)) = \begin{cases} d_G(g_1, g_2); & g_1 \neq g_2, \\ 1; & g_1 = g_2 \text{ and } h_1 h_2 \in E(H), \\ 2; & g_1 = g_2 \text{ and } h_1 h_2 \notin E(H). \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

The *corona product*  $G \circ H$  of graphs  $G$  and  $H$  is a graph obtained by taking one copy of  $G$  and  $|V(G)|$  copies of  $H$  and joining each vertex of the  $i$ -th copy of  $H$  with the  $i$ -th vertex of  $G$ . The vertex set of  $G \circ H$  can therefore be written as  $V(G \circ H) = \{(g, h) : g \in V(G), h \in V(H) \cup \{0\}\}$ , where the vertices  $(g, 0)$ ,  $g \in V(G)$ , correspond to the vertices of a copy of  $G$  in  $G \circ H$ .

## 3 On $\ell$ -distance-balanced lexicographic products

As already explained in the introduction, 1-distance-balanced lexicographic product graphs and 2-distance-balanced lexicographic product graphs were characterized in [14,

Theorem 4.2] and in [11, Theorem 5.4], respectively. In this section we give a characterization of  $\ell$ -distance-balanced lexicographic products for  $\ell \geq 3$ . This corrects [9, Theorem 3.4] where a redundant condition of local regularity is required for the second factor. We begin with the following lemma needed for the announced characterization.

**Lemma 3.1** *Let  $x = (g_1, h_1)$  and  $y = (g_2, h_2)$  be arbitrary vertices of  $\Gamma = G[H]$  with  $d_G(g_1, g_2) = \ell \geq 3$ . Then*

$$|W_{xy}| = |W_{g_1g_2}| \cdot |V(H)|.$$

**Proof.** It follows from the assumption  $d_G(g_1, g_2) \geq 3$  and from (2) that for any  $h \in V(H)$  we have  $(g_1, h) \in W_{xy}$  and  $(g_2, h) \in W_{yx}$ . Furthermore, if  $g \in V(G) \setminus \{g_1, g_2\}$ , then  $d_\Gamma(x, (g, h)) = d_G(g_1, g)$  and  $d_\Gamma(y, (g, h)) = d_G(g_2, g)$ . Hence,  $(g, h) \in W_{xy}$  if and only if  $g \in W_{g_1g_2}$ .  $\square$

The announced characterization now reads as follows.

**Theorem 3.2** *Let  $\ell \geq 3$  and  $G \neq K_1$ . Then  $G[H]$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced if and only if  $G$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced.*

**Proof.** Suppose  $\Gamma = G[H]$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced and let  $g_1, g_2 \in V(G)$  be vertices with  $d_G(g_1, g_2) = \ell$ . For arbitrary chosen vertices  $h_1, h_2 \in V(H)$  we denote  $x = (g_1, h_1)$  and  $y = (g_2, h_2)$ . Then we have

$$d_\Gamma(x, y) = d_\Gamma((g_1, h_1), (g_2, h_2)) = d_G(g_1, g_2) = \ell,$$

and consequently  $|W_{xy}| = |W_{yx}|$ . Since the vertices  $x$  and  $y$  meet the conditions of Lemma 3.1, we get

$$|W_{g_1g_2}| \cdot |V(H)| = |W_{g_2g_1}| \cdot |V(H)|$$

which implies  $|W_{g_1g_2}| = |W_{g_2g_1}|$  and therefore confirms that  $G$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced.

Conversely, assume  $G$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced and examine any pair of vertices  $x = (g_1, h_1)$  and  $y = (g_2, h_2)$  in  $\Gamma$  with  $d_\Gamma(x, y) = \ell \geq 3$ . Then we have

$$\ell = d_\Gamma(x, y) = d_\Gamma((g_1, h_1), (g_2, h_2)) = d_G(g_1, g_2),$$

where the last equality holds by distance formula (2). Lemma 3.1 then implies

$$|W_{xy}| = |W_{g_1g_2}| \cdot |V(H)| = |W_{g_2g_1}| \cdot |V(H)| = |W_{yx}|.$$

Thus,  $\Gamma = G[H]$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced.  $\square$

## 4 On $\ell$ -distance-balanced corona products

The corona product of two arbitrary, nontrivial and connected graphs is not distance-balanced [23, Theorem 3]. This implies that the corona product of graphs  $G$  and  $H$  is distance-balanced if and only if  $G$  is trivial ( $G \cong K_1$ ) and  $H$  is a complete graph (complete graphs are distance-balanced). In this section we give a characterization of  $\ell$ -distance-balanced corona products for  $\ell \geq 2$ . Note that if  $G$  is a connected graph on at least two vertices, then  $\text{diam}(G \circ H) = \text{diam}(G) + 2$ . Hence we wish to know whether  $G \circ H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced for every  $\ell \in \{2, \dots, \text{diam}(G) + 2\}$ .

We first consider 2-distance-balanced corona products, for which the following concept is useful. A graph  $G$  is *locally regular* if any non-adjacent vertices of  $G$  have the same degree. Note that every regular graph is locally regular and that the converse does not hold. For example, complete bipartite graphs  $K_{m,n}$ ,  $m \neq n$ , and wheel graphs  $W_n$ ,  $n \geq 5$ , are locally regular but not regular.

**Proposition 4.1** *Let  $G$  be a connected graph and let  $H$  be a graph with  $|V(H)| \geq 2$ . Then  $G \circ H$  is 2-distance-balanced if and only if  $G \cong K_1$  and  $H$  is locally regular.*

**Proof.** Let  $G \cong K_1$  and let  $H$  be a locally regular graph. If  $x, y$  are vertices of  $G \circ H$  with  $d_{G \circ H}(x, y) = 2$ , then  $x = (g, h_1)$  and  $y = (g, h_2)$ , where  $d_H(h_1, h_2) \geq 2$ . Hence,  $W_{xy} = \{x\} \cup \{(g, h) : h \in V(H), h_1h \in E(H), h_2h \notin E(H)\}$  and  $W_{yx} = \{y\} \cup \{(g, h) : h \in V(H), h_2h \in E(H), h_1h \notin E(H)\}$ . The equality  $\deg(h_1) = \deg(h_2)$  then implies  $|W_{xy}| = |W_{yx}|$ .

Suppose now that  $G \circ H$  is 2-distance-balanced and consider the vertices  $x = (g_1, 0)$  and  $y = (g_2, h_2)$  for  $g_1g_2 \in E(G)$  and  $h_2 \in V(H)$ . Note that  $d_{G \circ H}(x, y) = 2$ . Then  $\{(g_1, h) : h \in V(H) \cup \{0\}\} \subseteq W_{xy}$  and hence  $|W_{xy}| \geq |V(H)| + 1$ . On the other hand we have  $|W_{yx}| = |\{(g_2, h) : h \in V(H), d_H(h, h_2) \leq 1\}| \leq |V(H)|$ . As this is not possible, we conclude that  $G \cong K_1$ .

In the sequel, let  $G = K_1$  and  $V(G) = \{g\}$ . Consider now the vertices  $x = (g, h_1)$  and  $y = (g, h_2)$  of  $G \circ H$  for  $h_1, h_2 \in V(H)$  with  $d_H(h_1, h_2) \geq 2$ . Note that  $d_{G \circ H}(x, y) = 2$ . Then  $W_{xy} = \{x\} \cup \{(g, h) : h \in V(H), hh_1 \in E(H), hh_2 \notin E(H)\}$  and similarly  $W_{yx} = \{y\} \cup \{(g, h) : h \in V(H), hh_2 \in E(H), hh_1 \notin E(H)\}$ . Since  $|W_{xy}| = |W_{yx}|$ , we conclude that  $H$  is locally regular.  $\square$

Proposition 4.1 immediately gives the following characterization of 2-distance balanced graphs that contain a universal vertex, where a vertex  $u$  of a graph  $G$  is *universal* if its degree is  $|V(G)| - 1$ .

**Corollary 4.2** *Let  $v$  be a universal vertex of a graph  $G$ . Then  $G$  is 2-distance-balanced if and only if  $G - v$  is locally regular.*

Because of Proposition 4.1 and since  $\text{diam}(K_1 \circ H) \in \{1, 2\}$ , we are next interested only in corona products  $G \circ H$ , where  $G$  is a connected graph of order at least 2.

**Lemma 4.3** *Let  $G$  be a connected graph with at least two vertices,  $H$  a graph, and  $3 \leq \ell \leq \text{diam}(G) + 2$ . Then  $G \circ H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced if and only if the following conditions are fulfilled.*

(i)  $G$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced,

(ii)  $G$  is  $(\ell - 2)$ -distance-balanced, and

(iii)  $|\{g \in V(G) : d_G(g_1, g) + 2 \leq d_G(g_2, g)\}| = |\{g \in V(G) : d_G(g_2, g) \leq d_G(g_1, g)\}|$   
for every  $g_1, g_2 \in V(G)$  with  $d_G(g_1, g_2) = \ell - 1$ .

**Proof.** Suppose that  $G \circ H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced. Consider vertices  $x = (g_1, h_1)$  and  $y = (g_2, h_2)$  of  $G \circ H$  with  $d_{G \circ H}(x, y) = \ell$ . Then there are three cases to be considered.

**Case 1.**  $h_1 = h_2 = 0$ .

In this case we have  $d_G(g_1, g_2) = \ell$ . For  $z = (g_3, h_3) \in W_{xy}$  we have  $d_G(g_1, g_3) < d_G(g_2, g_3)$  and similarly  $z \in W_{yx}$  implies  $d_G(g_1, g_3) > d_G(g_2, g_3)$ . Since  $|W_{xy}| = |W_{yx}|$ , this means that  $|W_{g_1 g_2}| = |W_{g_2 g_1}|$  and therefore  $G$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced.

**Case 2.**  $h_1 \neq 0$  and  $h_2 \neq 0$ .

Now we have  $d_G(g_1, g_2) = \ell - 2$ . If  $z = (g_3, h_3) \in W_{xy}$ , then  $d_G(g_1, g_3) < d_G(g_2, g_3)$ . Similarly, if  $z \in W_{yx}$ , then  $d_G(g_1, g_3) > d_G(g_2, g_3)$ . Since  $|W_{xy}| = |W_{yx}|$ , this means that  $|W_{g_1 g_2}| = |W_{g_2 g_1}|$  and therefore  $G$  is  $(\ell - 2)$ -distance-balanced.

**Case 3.**  $h_1 \neq 0$  and  $h_2 = 0$ .

In this case,  $d_G(g_1, g_2) = \ell - 1$ . Again let  $z = (g_3, h_3)$  be a vertex of  $G \circ H$ . If  $z \in W_{xy}$ , then  $d_G(g_1, g_3) + 1 < d_G(g_2, g_3)$ . On the other hand,  $z \in W_{yx}$  implies that  $d_G(g_1, g_3) \geq d_G(g_2, g_3)$ . Since  $|W_{xy}| = |W_{yx}|$ , it follows that  $|\{g \in V(G) : d_G(g_1, g) + 2 \leq d_G(g_2, g)\}| = |\{g \in V(G) : d_G(g_2, g) \leq d_G(g_1, g)\}|$ .

We have thus proved that if  $G \circ H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced, then (i), (ii), and (iii) hold. The reverse implication is clear.  $\square$

**Theorem 4.4** *If  $G$  is a connected graph with at least two vertices, and  $H$  is a graph, then the following hold.*

(i)  $G \circ H$  is  $(\text{diam}(G) + 2)$ -distance-balanced if and only if  $G$  is  $\text{diam}(G)$ -distance-balanced.

(ii) If  $\ell \in \{3, \dots, \text{diam}(G) + 1\}$ , then  $G \circ H$  is not  $\ell$ -distance-balanced.

**Proof.** (i) If  $x = (g_1, h_1)$  and  $y = (g_2, h_2)$  are vertices of  $G \circ H$  with  $d_{G \circ H}(x, y) = (\text{diam}(G) + 2)$ , then  $h_1 \neq 0$  and  $h_2 \neq 0$ . Hence we only need to consider Case 2 of Lemma 4.3 which implies the assertion (i).

(ii) Let  $\ell \in \{3, \dots, \text{diam}(G) + 1\}$ . To prove that  $G \circ H$  is not  $\ell$ -distance-balanced, in view of Lemma 4.3 it suffices to prove the following:

**Claim:** If  $X$  is a connected graph and  $u, v \in V(X)$  with  $d_X(u, v) = k \geq 2$ , then

$$|\{x \in V(X) : d_X(u, x) + 2 \leq d_X(v, x)\}| \neq |\{x \in V(X) : d_X(v, x) \leq d_X(u, x)\}|.$$

Consider the following sets:

$$\begin{aligned} U_2 &= \{x \in V(X) : d_G(u, x) \leq d_G(v, x) - 2\}, \\ U_1 &= \{x \in V(G) : d_G(u, x) = d_G(v, x) - 1\}, \\ E &= \{x \in V(G) : d_G(u, x) = d_G(v, x)\}, \\ V_1 &= \{x \in V(G) : d_G(u, x) = d_G(v, x) + 1\}, \\ V_2 &= \{x \in V(G) : d_G(u, x) \geq d_G(v, x) + 2\}. \end{aligned}$$

Clearly, every vertex of  $X$  is contained in exactly one of the above sets. By way of contradiction suppose that the equality holds in the displayed formula of the claim. Then  $|U_2| = |E| + |V_1| + |V_2|$  and  $|V_2| = |E| + |U_1| + |U_2|$ . It follows that  $|E| = |U_1| = |V_1| = 0$ . Consider a shortest  $u, v$ -path  $P$ . If  $k$  is even, then  $P$  contains a vertex  $x$  such that  $d_X(u, x) = d_X(v, x)$ . This means that  $x \in E$ , and so  $|E| \neq 0$ . Consequently  $k$  must be odd. But if  $k$  is odd, then there exist vertices  $x$  and  $y$  on  $P$  such that  $d_X(u, x) = d_X(v, x) - 1$  and similarly  $d_X(u, y) = d_X(v, y) + 1$ , which implies that  $x \in U_1$  and  $y \in V_1$ . This contradiction proves the claim which in turn yields (ii).  $\square$

## 5 On $\ell$ -distance-balanced Cartesian products

As already explained, 1-distance-balanced and 2-distance-balanced Cartesian product graphs were characterized in [14] and [11], respectively. As the general case seems difficult, we reduce here our attention to the case where one factor is complete. In the following lemma we first analyze and present the conditions for  $x, y \in V(K_n \square H)$  under which the vertices of  $K_n \square H$  are contained in  $W_{xy}$ .

**Lemma 5.1** *Let  $x = (g_1, h_1)$  and  $y = (g_2, h_2)$  be arbitrary vertices of  $\Gamma = K_n \square H$ ,  $n \geq 2$ . Then the following holds:*

- (i) *If  $x$  and  $y$  are contained in the same  $H$ -layer ( $g_1 = g_2$ ), then the set  $W_{xy}$  contains exactly the vertices  $z = (g, h) \in \Gamma$  for which  $h \in W_{h_1 h_2}$ .*
- (ii) *If  $x$  and  $y$  are not contained in the same  $H$ -layer ( $g_1 \neq g_2$ ) and  $z = (g, h)$  is a vertex of  $\Gamma$  contained in*
  - ${}^{g_1}H$ , then  $z \in W_{xy} \iff h \in (W_{h_1 h_2} \cup {}_{h_1}W_{h_2})$ .
  - ${}^{g_2}H$ , then  $z \in W_{xy} \iff h \in W_{h_1 h_2}$  and  $d_H(h_1, h) \neq d_H(h_2, h) - 1$ .
  - $({}^{g_1}H \cup {}^{g_2}H)^c$ , then  $z \in W_{xy} \iff h \in W_{h_1 h_2}$ .

**Proof.** Note that for a complete graph  $G$  the distance formula (1) can be simplified as  $d_{G \square H}((g_1, h_1), (g_2, h_2)) = \delta_{g_1, g_2} + d_H(h_1, h_2)$ , where  $\delta_{g_1, g_2}$  is 0 or 1 depending on whether  $g_1 = g_2$  or not, respectively.

For a vertex  $z = (g, h)$  of  $\Gamma$  we have

$$z \in W_{xy} \iff \delta_{g_1, g} + d_H(h_1, h) < \delta_{g_2, g} + d_H(h_2, h).$$

If  $x$  and  $y$  are contained in the same  $H$ -layer, we obtain  $z \in W_{xy}$  if and only if  $h \in W_{h_1 h_2}$ . Thus, (i) follows.

Suppose now that  $x$  and  $y$  are not contained in the same  $H$ -layer. For  $z \in ({}^{g_1}H \cup {}^{g_2}H)^c$  we have  $\delta_{g_1, g} = \delta_{g_2, g} = 1$  and therefore  $z \in W_{xy}$  if and only if  $h \in W_{h_1 h_2}$ . For  $z \in {}^{g_1}H$  we have  $\delta_{g_1, g} = 0$  and  $\delta_{g_2, g} = 1$  and hence  $z \in W_{xy}$  if and only if  $h \in (W_{h_1 h_2} \cup {}_{h_1}W_{h_2})$ . Finally, let  $z \in {}^{g_2}H$ . Then  $\delta_{g_1, g} = 1$  and  $\delta_{g_2, g} = 0$  which implies  $z \in W_{xy}$  if and only if  $h \in W_{h_1 h_2}$  and  $d_H(h_1, h) \neq d_H(h_2, h) - 1$ . This completes the proof of (ii).  $\square$

**Theorem 5.2** *Let  $n \geq 2$ ,  $\ell \geq 2$ , and let  $H$  be  $\ell$ -distance-balanced and  $(\ell - 1)$ -distance-balanced graph. Then  $K_n \square H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced if and only if*

$$|\{h \in W_{h_1 h_2} : d(h_1, h) = d(h_2, h) - 1\}| = |\{h \in W_{h_2 h_1} : d(h_2, h) = d(h_1, h) - 1\}| \quad (3)$$

for every  $h_1, h_2 \in V(H)$  with  $d_H(h_1, h_2) = \ell - 1$ .

**Proof.** Assume first that  $H$  meets the condition (3) of the theorem and let  $x = (g_1, h_1)$  and  $y = (g_2, h_2)$  be arbitrary vertices of  $\Gamma = K_n \square H$  with  $d_\Gamma(x, y) = \ell$ . Note that for  $g_1 = g_2$  we have  $\ell = d_\Gamma(x, y) = d_H(h_1, h_2)$ . Moreover, Lemma 5.1 implies that  $|W_{xy}| = n \cdot |W_{h_1 h_2}|$  and  $|W_{yx}| = n \cdot |W_{h_2 h_1}|$ . Considering that  $H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced, we can conclude, that  $|W_{xy}| = |W_{yx}|$ . Suppose now that  $g_1 \neq g_2$ . Then  $\ell = d_\Gamma(x, y) = 1 + d_H(h_1, h_2)$  and hence  $d_H(h_1, h_2) = \ell - 1$ . Since  $H$  is  $(\ell - 1)$ -distance-balanced and satisfies the condition (3), Lemma 5.1 implies that

$$\begin{aligned} |W_{xy}| &= n \cdot |W_{h_1 h_2}| + |{}_{h_1}W_{h_2}| - |\{h \in W_{h_1 h_2} : d_H(h_1, h) = d_H(h_2, h) - 1\}| \\ &= n \cdot |W_{h_2 h_1}| + |{}_{h_1}W_{h_2}| - |\{h \in W_{h_2 h_1} : d_H(h_2, h) = d_H(h_1, h) - 1\}| \\ &= |W_{yx}|. \end{aligned}$$

Therefore,  $\Gamma$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced.

For the converse let  $h_1, h_2$  be any vertices of  $V(H)$  with  $d_H(h_1, h_2) = \ell - 1$ . Consider now the vertices  $x = (g_1, h_1)$  and  $y = (g_2, h_2)$  of  $K_n \square H$  with  $g_1 \neq g_2$ . Then by Lemma 5.1 the equality (3) holds.  $\square$

We next show a necessary condition for  $K_n \square H$  to be  $\ell$ -distance-balanced.

**Proposition 5.3** *Let  $H$  be a graph of diameter at least  $\ell \geq 2$  and let  $n \geq 1$ . If the Cartesian product  $K_n \square H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced, then  $H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced.*



**Proof.** Suppose  $\Gamma = K_n \square H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced. Let  $h_1$  and  $h_2$  be arbitrary vertices of  $H$  with  $d_H(h_1, h_2) = \ell$  and let  $g$  be any vertex of  $K_n$ . Then  $\ell = d_H(h_1, h_2) = d_\Gamma((g, h_1), (g, h_2))$ . Since  $\Gamma$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced we have  $|W_{(g, h_1)(g, h_2)}| = |W_{(g, h_2)(g, h_1)}|$ . Using Lemma 5.1 we derive that  $n \cdot |W_{h_1 h_2}| = n \cdot |W_{h_2 h_1}|$  whence it follows that  $|W_{h_1 h_2}| = |W_{h_2 h_1}|$ . Therefore,  $H$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graph.  $\square$

From Lemma 5.1, Theorem 5.2, and Proposition 5.3 we can deduce:

**Corollary 5.4** *Let  $H$  be a graph and let  $n \geq 2$ . Then  $K_n \square H$  is 2-distance-balanced if and only if  $H$  is a 2-distance-balanced and 1-distance-balanced graph.*

**Proof.** Assume first that  $H$  is 2-distance-balanced and 1-distance-balanced graph. Let  $h_1$  and  $h_2$  be any adjacent vertices of  $H$ . Then the condition (3) of Theorem 5.2 coincides with 1-distance-balancedness of  $H$  which implies that  $K_n \square H$  is 2-distance-balanced.

Suppose now that  $\Gamma = K_n \square H$  is 2-distance-balanced graph. According to Proposition 5.3 then also  $H$  is 2-distance-balanced. It remains to show that in addition  $H$  is 1-distance-balanced. Let  $h_1, h_2 \in V(H)$  be adjacent vertices, and let  $g_1$  and  $g_2$  be different vertices of  $K_n$ . Consider now the vertices  $x = (g_1, h_1)$  and  $y = (g_2, h_2)$  of  $\Gamma$ . By Lemma 5.1 we obtain

$$|W_{xy}| = (n-1)|W_{h_1 h_2}| + |_{h_1}W_{h_2}|$$

and

$$|W_{yx}| = (n-1)|W_{h_2 h_1}| + |_{h_1}W_{h_2}|.$$

Since  $d_\Gamma(x, y) = 2$  and  $\Gamma$  is 2-distance-balanced we have  $|W_{xy}| = |W_{yx}|$  which completes the proof.  $\square$

Corollary 5.4 can alternatively be deduced also from [11, Theorem 4.4].

## 6 A characterization of $\ell$ -distance-balanced graphs

If  $G$  is a graph and  $k$  a non-negative integer, then let  $N_k(x) = \{y : d(x, y) = k\}$  and  $N_k[x] = \{y : d(x, y) \leq k\}$ . (Recall that  $|N_1(x)|$  is the *degree*  $\deg(x)$  of the vertex  $x$ .) In [14, Proposition 2.1] it was proved that a graph  $G$  of diameter  $d$  is distance-balanced if and only if

$$|N_1[a] \setminus N_1[b]| + \sum_{k=2}^{d-1} |N_k(a) \setminus N_{k-1}(b)| = |N_1[b] \setminus N_1[a]| + \sum_{k=2}^{d-1} |N_k(b) \setminus N_{k-1}(a)|$$

holds for every edge  $ab \in E(G)$ . An attempt to generalize this result to  $\ell$ -distance-balanced graphs was given in [9, Proposition 2.2]. However, counterexamples were presented in [21, Remark 4.3]. We now give an accordingly modified version of the result.

**Proposition 6.1** *A graph  $G$  of diameter  $d$  is  $\ell$ -distance-balanced ( $1 \leq \ell \leq d$ ) if and only if*

$$\sum_{k=1}^{d-1} |N_k(a) \setminus N_{k-1}[b]| = \sum_{k=1}^{d-1} |N_k(b) \setminus N_{k-1}[a]|$$

*holds for all  $a, b \in V(G)$  with  $d(a, b) = \ell$ .*

**Proof.** Let  $a$  and  $b$  be arbitrary vertices of  $G$  with  $d(a, b) = \ell$ . Then  $W_{ab}$  and  $W_{ba}$  can be written as

$$W_{ab} = \{a\} \cup \bigcup_{k=1}^{d-1} (N_k(a) \setminus N_k[b]) = \{a\} \cup \bigcup_{k=1}^{d-1} \left( (N_k(a) \setminus N_{k-1}[b]) \setminus (N_k(a) \cap N_k(b)) \right)$$

and

$$W_{ba} = \{b\} \cup \bigcup_{k=1}^{d-1} (N_k(b) \setminus N_k[a]) = \{b\} \cup \bigcup_{k=1}^{d-1} \left( (N_k(b) \setminus N_{k-1}[a]) \setminus (N_k(b) \cap N_k(a)) \right)$$

Since  $N_k(a) \cap N_k(b)$  is a subset of both  $N_k(a)$  and  $N_k(b)$ , the result follows.  $\square$

**Corollary 6.2** *If  $G$  is a graph of diameter 2, then the following statements are equivalent.*

- (i)  $G$  is 2-distance-balanced.
- (ii)  $\deg_G(a) = \deg_G(b)$  for every  $a, b \in V(G)$  with  $d(a, b) = 2$ .
- (iii)  $G$  is a regular graph, or a nonregular join of at least two regular graphs.

**Proof.** The equivalence (i)  $\Leftrightarrow$  (ii) easily follows from Proposition 6.1, while the equivalence (i)  $\Leftrightarrow$  (iii) was proved in [21, Theorem 4.2].  $\square$

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