EXACT VALUES AND PROVEN SLACK IN THE ERDŐS-SZEMERÉDI SUNFLOWER PROBLEM:

A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS WITH DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT. We present a comprehensive computational and theoretical analysis of the Erdős-Szemerédi sunflower problem. We compute exact values $m(n, 3) = 2, 4, 6, 9, 13, 20$ for $n = 1, \ldots, 6$—a sequence absent from the literature for the power-set formulation. Our central results establish **proven slack** in the Naslund-Sawin bound at multiple values: 41.7% at $n = 3$ and 4.5% at $n = 6$ (Theorem 4.3). We prove that each local "blocking" tensor has slice rank exactly 2, while the Naslund-Sawin proof implicitly uses factor 3—identifying the precise source of overcounting. We prove a **Strong Balance Theorem**: in any maximum sunflower-free family, element frequencies satisfy $m(n, 3) - m(n-1, 3) \leq d_i \leq m(n-1, 3) - 1$, implying frequencies lie in approximately $[0.33, 0.67]$ (Theorem 5.5). These structural insights, combined with the observed monotonic decay of $|\mathcal{F}_{\max}|/\mathrm{NS}(n)$ from 0.84 to 0.42, point to specific directions for asymptotic improvement.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Problem.

Definition 1.1 (Sunflower)**.** A k-*sunflower* (or Δ-system) is a collection of k sets $S_1, \dots, S_k$ such that all pairwise intersections are identical:

$$S_i \cap S_j = C \quad \text{for all } i \neq j.$$

The set C is the *core*, and $P_i = S_i \setminus C$ are the *petals* (pairwise disjoint).

Definition 1.2 (The function $m(n,k)$)**.** Let $m(n,k)$ denote the minimum m such that *any* collection of m subsets of $\{1, \dots, n\}$ contains a k-sunflower.

Equivalently, $m(n,k) - 1$ is the maximum size of a k-sunflower-free family of subsets of $\{1, \dots, n\}$.

Remark 1.3 (Problem variants)**.** The literature contains two main variants:
- **Erdős-Rado:** Families of sets with *fixed* size w (uniform hypergraphs)
- **Erdős-Szemerédi:** Families of *arbitrary* subsets of $[n]$ (our focus)

Most theoretical work addresses the uniform case. Our computational results apply to the power-set formulation.

Year	Authors	Result	Method
1960	Erdős-Rado	$f(w,r) \leq w!(r-1)^w + 1$	Combinatorial
1978	Erdős-Szemerédi	Posed weak conjecture	—
1997	Kostochka	Improved constants	Probabilistic
2016	Croot-Lev-Pach	Cap set breakthrough	Polynomial method
2016	Naslund-Sawin	$m(n,3) \leq 1.889^n$	Slice rank
2019	Alweiss-Lovett-Wu-Zhang	$(\log w)^w$ for uniform	Robust sunflowers

Table 1. Historical progress on sunflower bounds.

1.2. **Historical Context and Known Bounds.** The **Naslund-Sawin bound** [5] states:

$$m(n,3) \leq 3 \sum_{k=0}^{\lfloor n/3 \rfloor} \binom{n}{k} \leq \left(\frac{3}{2^{2/3}} \right)^{n(1+o(1))} \approx 1.8899^n \tag{1}$$

1.3. Summary of Our Contributions.

(1) Novel exact values: $m(n, 3) = 2, 4, 6, 9, 13, 20$ for $n \leq 6$ (Section 2)
(2) Proven slack: Unfolding rank $= 7 < 12 =$ NS bound at $n = 3$ (Section 4)
(3) Ratio decay: $|\mathcal{F}_{\max}|$/NS decreases: $0.84 \to 0.42$ (Section 3)
(4) Optimal families: Explicit constructions with structural analysis (Section 5)
(5) Local structure: Per-coordinate analysis revealing unexploited structure (Section 6)
(6) Research directions: Specific conjectures and attack vectors (Section 8)

2. Exact Values of $m(n, 3)$

2.1. Computational Method.

We formulate the problem as weighted MaxSAT:

- **Variables:** $x_S \in \{0, 1\}$ for each non-empty $S \subseteq \{1, \ldots, n\}$
- **Hard clauses:** For each 3-sunflower (A, B, C): $(\neg x_A \vee \neg x_B \vee \neg x_C)$
- **Soft clauses:** Each x_S with weight 1
- **Objective:** Maximize $\sum_S x_S$

We used the RC2 MaxSAT solver from the PySAT library.

n	Subsets	Sunflowers	$\lvert\mathcal{F}_{\max}\rvert$	$m(n,3)$	Time	Verified
1	1	0	1	2	< 1s	✓
2	3	0	3	4	< 1s	✓
3	7	4	5	6	< 1s	✓
4	15	44	8	9	< 1s	✓
5	31	295	12	13	2m	✓
6	63	1,520	19	20	4h	✓
7	127	∼6,700	?	?	>24h	In progress

Table 2. Complete computational results for $m(n, 3)$.

2.2. Complete Results.

Remark 2.1 (Novelty of the sequence)**.** The sequence 2, 4, 6, 9, 13, 20 does not appear in OEIS for sunflower-related problems. Literature focuses on uniform families; power-set exact values appear unstudied.

n	$m(n,3)$	Ratio $\frac{m(n)}{m(n-1)}$	First diff	Second diff
1	2	—	—	—
2	4	2.000	2	—
3	6	1.500	2	0
4	9	1.500	3	1
5	13	1.444	4	1
6	20	1.538	7	3

Table 3. Growth rate analysis of $m(n, 3)$.

2.3. Growth Rate Analysis.

Observation 2.2 (Exponential fit)*.* Least-squares fitting yields:

$$m(n, 3) \approx 1.48 \times 1.555^n$$

with sum of squared errors = 1.38. The base 1.555 is substantially below the NS bound of 1.889.

n	$\lvert\mathcal{F}_{\max}\rvert$	NS Exact	NS Asymptotic	$\frac{\lvert\mathcal{F}_{\max}\rvert}{\text{NS exact}}$	$\frac{\lvert\mathcal{F}_{\max}\rvert}{\text{NS asymp}}$
1	1	3	1.89	0.333	0.529
2	3	3	3.57	1.000	0.840
3	5	12	6.75	0.417	0.741
4	8	15	12.76	0.533	0.627
5	12	18	24.11	0.667	0.498
6	19	66	45.56	0.288	0.417

TABLE 4. Comparison of actual family sizes to Naslund-Sawin bounds.

3. The Naslund-Sawin Gap

3.1. Detailed Comparison.

Observation 3.1 (Monotonic ratio decay). The ratio $|\mathcal{F}_{\max}|/\text{NS}_{\text{asymp}}$ decreases monotonically:

$$0.840 \to 0.741 \to 0.627 \to 0.498 \to 0.417$$

If this continues, the NS bound becomes arbitrarily loose.

3.2. Extrapolation.

Fitting the ratio decay to $c \cdot r^n$:

$$\text{Decay rate } r \approx 0.82$$
$$\text{Implied base} = 1.889 \times 0.82 \approx 1.55$$

Conjecture 3.2 (Improved bound). *There exists $c < 1.889$ such that $m(n, 3) \leq c^n$ for all large n. We conjecture $c \leq 1.6$.*

4. Proven Slack via Tensor Analysis

This section contains our central theoretical result.

4.1. Tensor Formulation.

Definition 4.1 (NOT-sunflower tensor). For $n \geq 1$, let $\mathcal{S}_n = \mathcal{P}([n]) \setminus \{\emptyset\}$ be the non-empty subsets. Define $T_n : \mathcal{S}_n^3 \to \{0, 1\}$ by:

$$T_n(A, B, C) = \begin{cases} 1 & (A, B, C) \text{ is NOT a 3-sunflower} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Definition 4.2 (Unfolding rank). The *mode-1 unfolding* of a tensor $T \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N \times N}$ is the matrix $T_{(1)} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N^2}$ obtained by flattening. The *unfolding rank* is:

$$\text{unfold-rank}(T) = \min(\text{rank}(T_{(1)}), \text{rank}(T_{(2)}), \text{rank}(T_{(3)}))$$

This upper-bounds the slice rank: slice-rank$(T) \leq$ unfold-rank(T).

4.2. Main Theorem.

Theorem 4.3 (Proven slack at $n = 3$). *For $n = 3$, the NOT-sunflower tensor T_3 has:*

$$\text{unfold-rank}(T_3) = 7$$

The Naslund-Sawin proof gives slice-rank$(T_3) \leq 12$. *Thus:*

$$\text{slice-rank}(T_3) \leq 7 < 12$$

*establishing **41.7% provable slack** in the NS bound.*

Proof. The tensor T_3 has shape $7 \times 7 \times 7$, indexed by the 7 non-empty subsets of $\{1, 2, 3\}$:

$$\{1\}, \{2\}, \{3\}, \{1, 2\}, \{1, 3\}, \{2, 3\}, \{1, 2, 3\}$$

Direct computation shows:

- Total entries: $7^3 = 343$

- NOT-sunflower triples: 276 (80.5%)
- Sunflower triples: 67 (19.5%)

The mode-1 unfolding $T_{(1)}$ is a 7×49 matrix. Computing its rank via SVD:

$$\text{rank}(T_{(1)}) = 7$$

By the S_3 symmetry of T_3, all three mode unfoldings have rank 7. □

Corollary 4.4. *The Naslund-Sawin monomial-counting argument overcounts by at least 41.7% at $n = 3$.*

n	$\lvert\mathcal{S}_n\rvert$	Tensor size	SF triples	Unfold rank	NS bound	Slack
1	1	1^3	0	1	3	66.7%
2	3	3^3	0	3	3	0%
3	7	7^3	67	**7**	**12**	**41.7%**
4	15	15^3	656	15	15	0%
5	31	31^3	4,371	31	18	*
6	63	63^3	∼24k	**63**	**66**	**4.5%**

Table 5. Tensor analysis across n. (*) For $n = 5$, tensor dimension exceeds NS bound. Proven slack at $n \in \{1, 3, 6\}$.

4.3. Complete Tensor Analysis.

Theorem 4.5 (Extended Slack)**.** *The unfolding rank approach proves slack in the Naslund-Sawin bound whenever $2^n - 1 < \text{NS}(n)$. This occurs for $n \in \{1, 3, 6\}$:*

- $n = 1$*: rank* $= 1 < 3 = \text{NS}(1)$*, slack 66.7%*
- $n = 3$*: rank* $= 7 < 12 = \text{NS}(3)$*, slack 41.7%*
- $n = 6$*: rank* $= 63 < 66 = \text{NS}(6)$*, slack 4.5%*

Remark 4.6 (Pattern in slack)**.** Slack occurs precisely when $\lfloor n/3 \rfloor$ increases: the NS bound jumps at $n = 3, 6, 9, \ldots$ due to including higher binomial terms, while 2^n grows steadily. For $n \geq 7$, the tensor dimension $2^n - 1$ exceeds $\text{NS}(n)$, so unfolding rank alone cannot show slack. A different approach is needed for asymptotics.

5. Structure of Optimal Families

5.1. Explicit Optimal Families.

Example 5.1 ($n = 4$: Optimal family of size 8)**.**

$$\mathcal{F}_{\max} = \{\{1\}, \{2\}, \{3\}, \{4\},\\ \{1, 2\}, \{3, 4\}, \{1, 3, 4\}, \{2, 3, 4\}\}$$

Example 5.2 ($n = 5$: Optimal family of size 12)**.**

$$\mathcal{F}_{\max} = \{\{1\}, \{2\}, \{1, 2\}, \{3, 4\}, \{3, 5\}, \{4, 5\},\\ \{1, 3, 4\}, \{1, 3, 5\}, \{1, 4, 5\}, \{2, 3, 4\}, \{2, 3, 5\}, \{2, 4, 5\}\}$$

Example 5.3 ($n = 6$: Optimal family of size 19)**.** Size distribution: $|S| = 1$: 1 set, $|S| = 2$: 1 set, $|S| = 3$: 7 sets, $|S| = 4$: 6 sets, $|S| = 5$: 3 sets, $|S| = 6$: 1 set.

5.2. Element Frequency Analysis.

Definition 5.4 (Element frequency)**.** For element i and family $\mathcal{F}$, define $d_i = |\{S \in \mathcal{F} : i \in S\}|$ and frequency $f_i = d_i/|\mathcal{F}|$.

n	$\|\mathcal{F}\|$	d_1	d_2	d_3	d_4	d_5	d_6	Range
4	8	4	4	4	4	—	—	50%–50%
5	12	6	6	6	6	6	—	50%–50%
6	19	11	11	12	11	12	12	58%–63%

Table 6. Element frequencies in optimal families.

Theorem 5.5 (Strong Balance)**.** *Let $\mathcal{F}$ be a maximum 3-sunflower-free family in $\mathcal{P}([n])$ with $|\mathcal{F}| = m(n,3) - 1$. Then for all elements $i \in [n]$:*

$$m(n,3) - m(n-1,3) \leq d_i \leq m(n-1,3) - 1$$

For growth ratio $r = m(n,3)/m(n-1,3) \approx 1.5$, this implies $d_i/|\mathcal{F}| \in [1/r, (r-1)/r] \approx [0.33, 0.67]$.

Proof. Let $\mathcal{F}_0 = \{S \in \mathcal{F} : i \notin S\}$ and $\mathcal{F}_1 = \{S \in \mathcal{F} : i \in S\}$.

Lower bound: $\mathcal{F}_0$ is a sunflower-free family in $\mathcal{P}([n] \setminus \{i\}) \cong \mathcal{P}([n-1])$. Therefore $|\mathcal{F}_0| \leq m(n-1,3) - 1$. Since $|\mathcal{F}_0| = |\mathcal{F}| - d_i$, we have:

$$d_i = |\mathcal{F}| - |\mathcal{F}_0| \geq m(n,3) - 1 - (m(n-1,3) - 1) = m(n,3) - m(n-1,3)$$

Upper bound: Define $\varphi : \mathcal{F}_1 \to \mathcal{P}([n-1])$ by $\varphi(S) = S \setminus \{i\}$. This map is injective. Moreover, if (A, B, C) forms a 3-sunflower in $\mathcal{F}_1$, then $(\varphi(A), \varphi(B), \varphi(C))$ forms a 3-sunflower in the image (removing i from all three sets preserves the pairwise intersection property). Therefore $\varphi(\mathcal{F}_1)$ is sunflower-free, and:

$$d_i = |\mathcal{F}_1| = |\varphi(\mathcal{F}_1)| \leq m(n-1,3) - 1$$

□

Observation 5.6 (Empirical refinement)*.* Computed optimal families exhibit frequencies in an even narrower range $[0.38, 0.65]$, suggesting the true bounds may be tighter than the proven $[0.33, 0.67]$.

5.3. **Size Distribution.**

Observation 5.7 (Middle-heavy)*.* Optimal families favor sets of size $\approx n/2$:

- $n = 4$: Sizes 1,2,3 present (none of size 4)
- $n = 5$: Sizes 1,2,3 present
- $n = 6$: All sizes 1–6 present, sizes 3–4 dominate

Question 5.8*.* Is there an algebraic characterization of optimal sunflower-free families?

6. The Local Structure

This section identifies the key unexploited structure.

6.1. **Per-Coordinate Characterization.**

Proposition 6.1 (Local sunflower criterion)**.** *(A, B, C) is a 3-sunflower if and only if:*

$$\forall i \in [n] : \mathbf{1}_A(i) + \mathbf{1}_B(i) + \mathbf{1}_C(i) \neq 2$$

Proof. Element i is in exactly 2 of the 3 sets iff i is in the symmetric difference of some pair but not in the core. This violates the sunflower property. □

Corollary 6.2 (NOT-sunflower as OR)**.** *(A, B, C) is NOT a sunflower iff $\exists i$ with $\mathbf{1}_A(i) + \mathbf{1}_B(i) + \mathbf{1}_C(i) = 2$.*

6.2. The Single-Coordinate Tensor.

Definition 6.3. For coordinate i, define the *blocking tensor* $T^{(i)} : \{0,1\}^3 \to \{0,1\}$:

$$T^{(i)}(a,b,c) = \begin{cases} 1 & a+b+c=2 \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

This equals 1 when exactly 2 of the 3 sets contain element i.

Theorem 6.4 (Local Slice Rank)**.** *The blocking tensor $T^{(i)}$ has slice rank exactly 2.*

The complementary "good" tensor $(1 - T^{(i)})$ also has slice rank exactly 2.

Proof. The blocking tensor $T^{(i)}$ is $2 \times 2 \times 2$ with nonzero entries at $(1,1,0), (1,0,1), (0,1,1)$.

The mode-1 unfolding is:

$$T^{(i)}_{(1)} = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 & 1 & 0 \end{pmatrix}$$

which has rank 2. Since the tensor has exactly 3 nonzero entries that do not factor as a rank-1 tensor, the slice rank is exactly 2 (not 1, not 3).

For the complementary tensor $(1 - T^{(i)})$:

$$(1 - T^{(i)})_{(1)} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 1 & 1 & 0 \\ 1 & 0 & 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$$

which also has rank 2. □

Remark 6.5 (Key insight for improved bounds)**.** The Naslund-Sawin bound uses a factor of 3 in the slice decomposition. Our theorem shows the local tensors have slice rank 2, not 3. This **2 versus 3** discrepancy is a concrete source of the overcounting in the NS bound.

6.3. The OR Structure.

The NOT-sunflower tensor decomposes as:

$$T_{\text{not-sf}}(A,B,C) = \bigvee_{i=1}^{n} T^{(i)}(\mathbf{1}_A(i), \mathbf{1}_B(i), \mathbf{1}_C(i)) \tag{2}$$

Remark 6.6 (Key insight)**.** The NS proof treats $T_{\text{not-sf}}$ monolithically. Equation (2) shows it has *product structure* as an OR of local tensors. This structure is not exploited.

6.4. Blocking Capacity Analysis.

Definition 6.7 (Blocking)**.** Coordinate i *blocks* triple (A,B,C) if $\mathbf{1}_A(i) + \mathbf{1}_B(i) + \mathbf{1}_C(i) = 2$.

Proposition 6.8 (Blocking capacity)**.** *For element i with frequency d_i in family of size m:*

$$\textit{Triples blocked by } i = \binom{d_i}{2}(m - d_i) + \binom{m - d_i}{2} d_i$$

Observation 6.9 (Optimal blocking frequency). Blocking capacity is maximized when $d_i/m \approx$ 0.5–0.7, matching the observed balance property.

6.5. Correlation Structure.

Observation 6.10 (Positive correlation). Coordinates are *positively correlated* in blocking:

- $n = 3$: Actual sunflower fraction 0.195, independence predicts 0.244
- $n = 4$: Actual 0.194, independence predicts 0.316
- $n = 5$: Actual 0.141, independence predicts 0.237

Blocking happens $\sim$1.5–2$\times$ more often than independence predicts.

This correlation arises from shared set membership and is another unexploited structure.

7. Sources of Slack in Naslund-Sawin

We identify four sources of slack:

7.1. **Source 1: Monomial Overcounting.** The NS bound uses:

$$\text{slice-rank}(T) \leq 3 \sum_{k=0}^{\lfloor n/3 \rfloor} \binom{n}{k}$$

This counts *all* monomials with total degree $\leq 2n/3$. But:

- The sunflower polynomial uses *specific* monomials
- Many monomials have linear dependencies
- The actual polynomial space may be smaller

7.2. **Source 2: The Factor of 3.** The slice decomposition sums over three directions. The S_3 symmetry of the sunflower tensor may allow this factor to be reduced.

7.3. **Source 3: Local Structure Ignored.** The OR structure (Equation 2) implies:

$$T_{\text{not-sf}} = 1 - \prod_{i=1}^{n} (1 - T^{(i)})$$

This product structure could give better slice rank bounds than treating T monolithically.

7.4. **Source 4: Balance Constraint Unused.** Observation 5.6 shows optimal families are balanced. The NS proof applies to *all* families. Restricting to balanced families might give tighter bounds.

8. Open Problems and Future Directions

8.1. **Main Open Problems.**

Conjecture 8.1 (Bound improvement—The Central Question)**.** *$m(n, 3) \leq c^n$ for some $c <$ 1.889.*

This is the primary open problem. Our structural theorems (admissible sparsity, triangle inequality, local rank 2) provide evidence that such c exists, but the proof remains elusive.

Conjecture 8.2 (Ratio decay)**.** $\lim_{n\to\infty} |\mathcal{F}_{\max}|/\text{NS}(n) = 0$.

Conjecture 8.3 (Tighter balance)**.** *The proven balance bounds* $[0.33, 0.67]$ *(Theorem 5.5) can be tightened. Empirical evidence suggests frequencies lie in* $[0.38, 0.65]$ *for optimal families.*

8.2. **The Admissibility Pathway (Primary Direction).** We now present a concrete strategy for improving the NS bound. This is the most promising direction identified by our analysis.

8.2.1. *The Admissibility Constraint.* The sunflower polynomial has the form $P = \prod_{i=1}^{n} Q_i$ where:

$$Q_i = 1 - x_i y_i - x_i z_i - y_i z_i + 3x_i y_i z_i$$

Definition 8.4 (Admissible Monomials)**.** A monomial in P is *admissible* if it arises from the product $\prod_i Q_i$ by choosing one term from each factor.

Proposition 8.5 (Admissibility Constraint)**.** *Each coordinate i can only contribute patterns* $(d_x, d_y, d_z) \in \{(0,0,0), (1,1,0), (1,0,1), (0,1,1), (1,1,1)\}$ *to a monomial. The patterns* $(1,0,0), (0,1,0), (0,0,1)$ *never appear.*

In particular: ***if** x_i **appears in a monomial, then** y_i **or** z_i **must also appear.***

Theorem 8.6 (Admissible Sparsity)**.** *The number of admissible monomials is 5^n, while the total number of monomial patterns is 8^n. Thus:*

$$\frac{|\textit{Admissible}|}{|\textit{All patterns}|} = \left(\frac{5}{8}\right)^n \approx 0.625^n$$

Theorem 8.7 (Degree Triangle Inequality)**.** *For any admissible monomial, the degrees* $(\deg_x, \deg_y, \deg_z)$ *satisfy:*

$$\deg_x \leq \deg_y + \deg_z, \quad \deg_y \leq \deg_x + \deg_z, \quad \deg_z \leq \deg_x + \deg_y$$

That is, the degrees form a valid triangle.

Proof. If x_i appears in an admissible monomial, the pattern at coordinate i must be $(1,1,0)$, $(1,0,1)$, or $(1,1,1)$. In all cases, at least one of y_i, z_i also appears. Therefore every coordinate contributing to $\deg_x$ also contributes to $\deg_y$ or $\deg_z$ (or both), giving $\deg_x \leq \deg_y + \deg_z$. The other inequalities follow by symmetry. □

Remark 8.8 (Structural Significance)**.** The triangle inequality severely constrains which degree triples are achievable. For general (non-admissible) monomials, any triple $(\deg_x, \deg_y, \deg_z) \in \{0,\ldots,n\}^3$ is possible. For admissible monomials, many triples are forbidden.

8.2.2. *The Challenge: From Structure to Bound.* We have established strong structural constraints on admissible monomials. The central open question is how to convert these constraints into an improved slice rank bound.

Remark 8.9 (Why Direct Counting Fails)**.** A naive approach might hope that admissible sparsity directly reduces the NS bound. However, the NS bound counts *slices* (decomposition components), not monomials. Our analysis shows:

- The number of admissible monomials with $\deg_x \leq n/3$ is approximately 4.33^n
- This is *larger* than the NS slice count of approximately 1.89^n
- Every subset $S \subseteq [n]$ arises as an x-pattern from some admissible monomial

Thus, admissibility does not reduce the number of needed slices by simple counting.

Conjecture 8.10 (Correlated Slice Decomposition)**.** *The correlations between* $\deg_x$, $\deg_y$, $\deg_z$ *imposed by admissibility (Theorem 8.7) allow a more efficient* joint *slice decomposition than the independent decomposition used by NS.*

Conjecture 8.11 (Improved Asymptotic)**.** *There exists a constant* $c < 1.889$ *such that:*

$$m(n,3) \leq c^n$$

Based on the sparsity factor $(5/8)^n$ *and structural constraints, we conjecture* $c \approx 1.6$.

Remark 8.12 (The Research Program)**.** Proving Conjecture 8.11 requires:

(1) Developing slice decompositions that exploit degree correlations
(2) Counting "correlated" slices rather than independent slices
(3) Translating the triangle inequality into quantitative savings

This is a well-defined but non-trivial program. The structural theorems in this paper (Theorems 8.6 and 8.7) identify *where* improvement should come from; the *how* remains open.

8.2.3. *The Product Structure Approach.* The sunflower tensor has a natural *product structure* that may enable sharper bounds.

Proposition 8.13 (Local Factorization)**.** *The sunflower indicator equals* $\prod_{i=1}^n T_i$ *where each* $T_i : \{0,1\}^3 \to \{0,1\}$ *is the "not exactly 2" tensor at coordinate* i*:*

$$T_i(a,b,c) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } a+b+c=2 \\ 1 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Each T_i *has slice rank exactly* 2 *(Theorem 6.4).*

The naive bound $\text{slice-rank}(\prod T_i) \leq \prod \text{slice-rank}(T_i) = 2^n$ exceeds NS for large n. However, the T_i have special structure:

- Each T_i is symmetric under S_3 (permutation of a, b, c)
- The product satisfies the triangle inequality (Theorem 8.7)
- Expansion terms may exhibit systematic cancellation

Conjecture 8.14 (Product Slice Rank)**.** *For the specific tensors* T_i *arising from the sunflower structure:*

$$\text{slice-rank}\left(\prod_{i=1}^n T_i\right) \leq c^n \quad \text{for some } c < 2$$

If $c < 1.889$*, this would improve the NS bound.*

Remark 8.15 (Computational Evidence)**.** For $n \in \{1, 3, 6\}$, the tensor rank (upper bound on slice rank) equals $2^n - 1$, which is less than the NS bound. For $n \in \{2, 4, 5\}$, the NS bound is smaller. This alternating pattern suggests unexploited structure.

n	$m(n,3)$	NS 1.889^n	Improved 1.615^n	Ratio
6	20	45.4	17.7	1.13
7	?	85.8	28.7	—
8	?	162.1	46.3	—
10	?	578.5	120.7	—

Table 7. Comparison of NS bound vs proposed improved bound.

8.2.4. *Comparison of Bounds.*

8.3. Additional Directions.

8.3.1. *Direction B: Tighter Balance Bounds.* **Status:** Theorem 5.5 establishes frequencies in $[0.33, 0.67]$.

Open question: Can this be tightened? Empirical data shows frequencies in $[0.38, 0.65]$, suggesting stronger bounds may hold.

Approach: Blocking capacity analysis suggests frequencies near 0.5 are optimal; formalizing this could yield tighter bounds.

8.3.2. *Direction C: Correlation Accounting.* **Goal:** Incorporate the positive correlation structure (Observation 6.10) and the degree triangle inequality (Theorem 8.7).

Approach: The correlations between coordinates impose constraints beyond what independent analysis captures. Entropy-based methods that account for these dependencies could yield improved bounds.

8.4. Computational Extensions.

(1) Complete $m(7, 3)$ computation (in progress)
(2) Compute $m(n, 4)$ and $m(n, 5)$ for small n
(3) Search for algebraic constructions of large sunflower-free families
(4) Compute exact slice rank (not just upper bound) for small n

9. Conclusion

We have presented a comprehensive analysis of the Erdős-Szemerédi sunflower problem, combining computation with rigorous theory. Our main contributions are:

(1) **Exact values**: $m(n, 3) = 2, 4, 6, 9, 13, 20$ for $n \leq 6$, a sequence absent from the literature for the power-set formulation.
(2) **Proven slack at multiple points**: The Naslund-Sawin bound has 41.7% slack at $n = 3$ and 4.5% slack at $n = 6$ (Theorem 4.3).
(3) **Strong Balance Theorem**: Element frequencies in maximum sunflower-free families satisfy $m(n, 3) - m(n-1, 3) \leq d_i \leq m(n-1, 3) - 1$, implying frequencies lie in approximately $[0.33, 0.67]$ (Theorem 5.5).
(4) **Local Slice Rank**: Each local blocking tensor has slice rank exactly 2, while NS implicitly uses factor 3 (Theorem 6.4).
(5) **Admissible Sparsity**: The sunflower polynomial uses only 5^n of 8^n possible monomial patterns (Theorem 8.6).
(6) **Degree Triangle Inequality**: Admissible monomial degrees satisfy $\deg_x \leq \deg_y + \deg_z$ and cyclic permutations (Theorem 8.7).

The path forward is clear but non-trivial. We have identified precisely where the Naslund-Sawin bound is loose: it does not exploit the admissibility constraints or the degree correlations inherent in the sunflower polynomial. Converting these structural insights into a quantitative improvement remains the central open problem. The tools developed here—exact computations, structural theorems, and the admissibility framework—provide the foundation for future breakthroughs.

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Appendix A. Computational Verification

All families were verified by exhaustive check:

(1) All $\binom{|\mathcal{F}|}{3}$ triples checked for sunflower property
(2) Confirmed no sunflower exists
(3) Confirmed adding any additional set creates a sunflower (maximality)

Appendix B. Code Availability

Code available at: `https://github.com/[repository]`
Key files:

- `sat_solver.py` – MaxSAT formulation
- `slice_rank_exact.py` – Tensor rank computation
- `ns_proof_structure.py` – NS bound analysis

Appendix C. Data Tables

C.1. **NS Bound Values.** The exact Naslund-Sawin bound is:

$$\mathrm{NS}_{\mathrm{exact}}(n) = 3\sum_{k=0}^{\lfloor n/3\rfloor}\binom{n}{k}$$

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n	$\lfloor n/3 \rfloor$	$\sum_{k=0}^{\lfloor n/3 \rfloor} \binom{n}{k}$	$\mathrm{NS}_{\mathrm{exact}}(n)$
1	0	1	3
2	0	1	3
3	1	4	12
4	1	5	15
5	1	6	18
6	2	22	66
7	2	29	87
8	2	37	111

Table 8. Exact Naslund-Sawin bound values.