A curious identity and its applications to partitions with bounded part differences

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Abstract. In this note, we present a curious \( q \)-series identity with applications to certain partitions with bounded part differences.

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1. Introduction

A partition of a positive integer \( n \) is a non-increasing sequence of positive integers whose sum is \( n \). Recently, motivated by the work of Andrews, Beck and Robbins [2], Breuer and Kronholm [3] obtained the generating function of partitions where the difference between largest and smallest parts is at most a fixed positive integer \( t \),

\[
\sum_{n \geq 1} p_t(n) q^n = \frac{1}{1 - q^t} \left( \frac{1}{(q; q)_t} - 1 \right),
\]

where \( p_t(n) \) denotes the number of such partitions of \( n \). Here and in what follows, we use the standard \( q \)-series notation

\[
(a; q)_n := \prod_{k=0}^{n-1} (1 - aq^k), \quad \text{for } |q| < 1.
\]

Subsequently, the author and Yee [4, 5] considered an overpartition analogue of Breuer and Kronholm’s result. Here an overpartition of \( n \) is a partition of \( n \) where the first occurrence of each distinct part may be overlined. Let \( g_t(m, n) \) count the number of overpartitions of \( n \) in which there are exactly \( m \) overlined parts, the difference between largest and smallest parts is at most \( t \), and if the difference between largest and smallest parts is exactly \( t \), then the largest parts cannot be overlined. The author and Yee proved

\[
\sum_{n \geq 1} \sum_{m \geq 0} g_t(m, n) z^m q^n = \frac{1}{1 - q^t} \left( \frac{(-zq; q)_t}{(q; q)_t} - 1 \right).
\]

Suggested by George E. Andrews, it is also natural to study other types of partitions with bounded part differences. Let \( pd_t(n) \) (resp. \( po_t(n) \)) count the number of partitions of \( n \) in which all parts are distinct (resp. odd) and the difference between largest and smallest parts is at most \( t \).

Theorem 1.1. We have

\[
\sum_{n \geq 1} pd_t(n) q^n = \frac{1}{1 - q^{t+1}} ( (-q; q)_{t+1} - 1 ),
\]
and
\[
\sum_{n \geq 1} p_{2n}(n) q^n = \frac{1}{1 - q^{2n}} \left( \frac{1}{(q; q^2)_r} - 1 \right).
\]  
(1.4)

Noting that (1.1)–(1.4) have the same flavor, we therefore want to seek for a unified proof of these generating function identities.

Let \( t \) be a fixed positive integer. Assume that \( \alpha, \beta, q \) are complex variables with \( |q| < 1, q \neq 0, \alpha \neq \beta q \) and \( (\beta q; q)_t \neq 0 \). We define the following sum
\[
S(\alpha, \beta; q; t) := \sum_{r \geq 1} \frac{(1 - \alpha q^r)(1 - \alpha q^{r+1}) \cdots (1 - \alpha q^{r+t-2})}{(1 - \beta q^r)(1 - \beta q^{r+1}) \cdots (1 - \beta q^{r+t})} q^r.
\]  
(1.5)

The following curious identity provides such a unified approach.

**Theorem 1.2.** We have
\[
S(\alpha, \beta; q; t) = \frac{q}{(\beta q - \alpha)(1 - q^t)} \left( \frac{(\alpha; q)_t}{(\beta q; q)_t} - 1 \right).
\]  
(1.6)

2. **Proof of Theorem 1.2**

Let
\[
r + 1 \phi_r \left( a_0, a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_r ; q, z \right) := \sum_{n \geq 0} \frac{(a_0; q)_n (a_1; q)_n \cdots (a_r; q)_n}{(q; q)_n (b_1; q)_n \cdots (b_r; q)_n} z^n.
\]

The following two lemmas are useful in our proof.

**Lemma 2.1** (First \( q \)-Chu–Vandermonde Sum [1, Eq. (17.6.2)]). We have
\[
2 \phi_1 \left( a, q^{-n} ; q, \frac{cq^n}{a} \right) = \left( \frac{c}{q} \right)_n.
\]  
(2.1)

**Lemma 2.2** (\( q \)-Analogue of the Kummer–Thomae–Whipple Transformation [6, p. 72, Eq. (3.2.7)]). We have
\[
3 \phi_2 \left( a, b, c ; d, e ; q, \frac{de}{abc} \right) = (e/a; q)_\infty (de/bc; q)_\infty (e/c; q)_\infty 3 \phi_2 \left( a, d/b, d/c ; q, \frac{e}{a} \right).
\]  
(2.2)

**Proof of Theorem 1.2.** We have
\[
S(\alpha, \beta; q; t)
\]
\[
= \sum_{r \geq 1} \frac{(1 - \alpha q^r)(1 - \alpha q^{r+1}) \cdots (1 - \alpha q^{r+t-2})}{(1 - \beta q^r)(1 - \beta q^{r+1}) \cdots (1 - \beta q^{r+t})} q^r
\]
\[
= \sum_{r \geq 1} \frac{(\alpha; q)_r (\beta; q)_r}{(q; q)_r (\beta q; q)_r} q^r
\]
\[
= \sum_{r \geq 0} \frac{(\alpha; q)_{r+1} (\beta; q)_{r+1}}{(q; q)_{r+1} (\alpha q; q)_{r+2}} q^r
\]
\[
= \frac{q(1 - \beta)(\alpha; q)_t}{(1 - \alpha)(\beta q; q)_{t+2}} \sum_{r \geq 0} (q; q)_r (\beta q; q)_r (\alpha q; q)_r (\beta q^{t+2}; q)_r q^r
\]
\[
= \frac{q(\alpha; q)_{t-1}}{\beta q; q)_{t+1}} 3 \phi_2 \left( q, \beta q, q^{t+1} ; q, q \right)
\]
\[
= \frac{q(\alpha; q)_{t-1}}{\beta q; q)_{t+1}} 3 \phi_2 \left( \frac{q, \alpha/\beta, q^{1-t}}{\alpha q, q^2, q} ; q, \beta q^{t+1} \right) \quad \text{(by Eq. (2.2))}
\]
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We now show how Theorem 1.2 may prove (1.1)–(1.4).

A curious identity

Hence

It follows by Theorem 1.2 that

We remark that for any positive integer $t$, $po_{2t}(n) = po_{2t+1}(n)$ since only odd parts are allowed in this case. Hence it suffices to consider merely the generating function of $po_{2t}(n)$.

The proofs of (1.1) and (1.2) are similar. We omit the details here.

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3. Applications

We now show how Theorem 1.2 may prove (1.1)–(1.4).

At first, we prove the two new identities (1.3) and (1.4). Note that the generating function for partitions counted by $pd_t(n)$ with smallest part equal to $r$ is

$$q^r(1 + q^{r+1})(1 + q^{r+2})\cdots(1 + q^{r+t})$$

Hence

$$\sum_{n \geq 1} pd_t(n)q^n = \sum_{r \geq 1} (1 + q^{r+1})(1 + q^{r+2})\cdots(1 + q^{r+t})q^r = S(-q, 0; q; t + 1).$$

It follows by Theorem 1.2 that

$$\sum_{n \geq 1} pd_t(n)q^n = S(-q, 0; q; t + 1) = \frac{1}{1 - q^{t+1}}((-q; q)_{t+1} - 1).$$

To see (1.4), one readily verifies that the generating function for partitions counted by $po_{2t}(n)$ with smallest part equal to $2r - 1$ is

$$\frac{q^{2r-1}}{(1 - q^{2r-1})(1 - q^{2r+1})\cdots(1 - q^{2r+2t-1})}.$$ 

Hence

$$\sum_{n \geq 1} po_{2t}(n)q^n = \sum_{r \geq 1} \frac{1}{(1 - q^{2r-1})(1 - q^{2r+1})\cdots(1 - q^{2r+2t-1})}q^{2r-1}$$

$$= q^{-1}S(0, q^{-1}; q^2; t) = \frac{1}{1 - q^{2t}}\left(\frac{1}{(q^2; q^2)_t} - 1\right).$$

Here the last equality follows again from Theorem 1.2. We remark that for any positive integer $t$, $po_{2t}(n) = po_{2t+1}(n)$ since only odd parts are allowed in this case. Hence it suffices to consider merely the generating function of $po_{2t}(n)$.

The proofs of (1.1) and (1.2) are similar. We omit the details here.

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