Packing chromatic vertex-critical graphs

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received 2018-10-10, revised 2019-1-31, accepted 2019-2-7.

The packing chromatic number \( \chi_\rho(G) \) of a graph \( G \) is the smallest integer \( k \) such that the vertex set of \( G \) can be partitioned into sets \( V_i, i \in [k] \), where vertices in \( V_i \) are pairwise at distance at least \( i+1 \). Packing chromatic vertex-critical graphs, \( \chi_\rho \)-critical for short, are introduced as the graphs \( G \) for which \( \chi_\rho(G - x) < \chi_\rho(G) \) holds for every vertex \( x \) of \( G \). If \( \chi_\rho(G) = k \), then \( G \) is \( k \)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical. It is shown that if \( G \) is \( \chi_\rho \)-critical, then the set \( \{ \chi_\rho(G) - \chi_\rho(G - x) : x \in V(G) \} \) can be almost arbitrary. The \( 3 \)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical graphs are characterized, and \( 4 \)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical graphs are characterized in the case when they contain a cycle of length at least 5 which is not congruent to 0 modulo 4. It is shown that for every integer \( k \geq 2 \) there exists a \( k \)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical tree and that a \( k \)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical caterpillar exists if and only if \( k \leq 7 \). Cartesian products are also considered and in particular it is proved that if \( G \) and \( H \) are vertex-transitive graphs and \( \text{diam}(G) + \text{diam}(H) \leq \chi_\rho(G) \), then \( G \square H \) is \( \chi_\rho \)-critical.

Keywords: packing chromatic number; packing chromatic vertex-critical graph; tree; caterpillar; Cartesian product of graphs, vertex-transitive graph

1 Introduction

Given a graph \( G \) and a positive integer \( i \), an \( i \)-packing in \( G \) is a subset \( W \) of the vertex set of \( G \) such that the distance between any two distinct vertices from \( W \) is greater than \( i \). Note that in this terminology independent sets are precisely 1-packings. The packing chromatic number of \( G \) is the smallest integer \( k \) such that the vertex set of \( G \) can be partitioned into subsets \( V_1, \ldots, V_k \), where \( V_i \) is an \( i \)-packing for each \( i \in [k] = \{ 1, \ldots, k \} \). This invariant is well defined on any graph \( G \) and is denoted \( \chi_\rho(G) \). More generally, for a nondecreasing sequence \( S = (s_1, \ldots, s_k) \) of positive integers, the mapping \( c : V(G) \rightarrow [k] \) is an \( S \)-packing coloring if for any \( i \in [k] \) the set \( c^{-1}(i) \) is an \( s_i \)-packing, see Goddard and Xu (2012).

The packing chromatic number was introduced in Goddard et al. (2008) under the name broadcast chromatic number; the present name is used since Brešar et al. (2007). Among the many developments on the packing chromatic number we point out the very exciting development on the class of subcubic graphs.

*The financial support of the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P1-0297, bilateral grant BI-US/18-19-011, project J1-9109) and of the Wylie Enrichment Fund of Furman University is acknowledged.
†The financial support of the Slovenian Research Agency (bilateral grant BI-US/18-19-011) and of the Wylie Enrichment Fund of Furman University is acknowledged.
graphs. The question whether in subcubic graphs the packing chromatic number is bounded by an absolute constant was asked in the seminal paper Goddard et al. (2008). Gastineau and Togni (2016) were the first to find an explicit cubic graph \( G \) with large packing chromatic number, more precisely \( \chi_p(G) = 13 \), and asked whether 13 is an actual upper bound for \( \chi_p \) in the class of cubic graphs. That this is not the case was first demonstrated in Brešar et al. (2017). Then, in a breakthrough result, Balogh et al. (2018) proved that almost every \( n \)-vertex cubic graph of girth at least \( g \) has the packing chromatic number greater than \( k \). Brešar and Ferme (2018) complemented the result with an explicit infinite family of subcubic graphs with unbounded packing chromatic number. The packing chromatic number of subcubic outerplanar graphs has been thoroughly investigated in Brešar et al. and in Gastineau et al. (2018), while for the packing chromatic number of some additional classes of cubic graphs see Laïche and Sopena (2018). From the other investigations on the packing chromatic number we emphasize that the decision version of the packing chromatic number is NP-complete on trees Fiala and Golovach (2010) and that the packing chromatic number of the infinite square lattice is from the set \( \{13, 14, 15\} \) Martin et al. (2017). For further results on the packing chromatic number see the recent paper Korže and Vesel (2019) and references therein.

An important consideration when investigating a graph invariant is to understand critical graphs with respect to the invariant. The most prominent example is probably the concept of vertex-critical graphs with respect to the chromatic number; that is, graphs \( G \) such that \( \chi(G - x) < \chi(G) \) for every vertex \( x \) of \( G \), cf. Jensen (2002). In this paper we study vertex-critical graphs with respect to the packing chromatic number. The importance of this idea arose during the study of the relationship between the packing chromatic number, chromatic number, and clique number in Brešar et al. (2018). We say that a graph \( G \) is packing chromatic vertex-critical, \( \chi_p \)-critical for short, if \( \chi_p(G - x) < \chi_p(G) \) holds for every vertex \( x \) of \( G \). If \( \chi_p(G) = k \), then we also say that \( G \) is \( k \)-\( \chi_p \)-critical (or more simply \( k \)-critical). To further simplify the terminology we will typically say a critical graph when considering a packing chromatic vertex-critical graph.

We proceed as follows. In the next section some definitions are given, known results recalled, and new preliminary results proved. In Section 3 we demonstrate that if \( G \) is a \( \chi_p \)-critical graph, then the set \( \{\chi_p(G) - \chi_p(G - x) : x \in V(G)\} \) can be almost arbitrary. In the subsequent section we characterize 3-critical graphs and do the same for 4-critical graphs that contain a cycle of length at least 5 and not congruent to 0 modulo 4. In the case that graphs contain cycles congruent to 0 modulo 4, a partial characterization of 4-critical graphs is given along with some infinite families of such graphs. In Section 5 we concentrate on critical trees and first show that for every integer \( k \geq 2 \) there exists a \( k \)-\( \chi_p \)-critical tree. In the main result of the section we prove that a \( k \)-\( \chi_p \)-critical caterpillar exists if and only if \( k \leq 7 \). We follow with a section on Cartesian products which turned out to yield many critical graphs. For instance, \( K_{1,3} \square P_3 \) is 6-\( \chi_p \)-critical even though neither \( K_{1,3} \) nor \( P_3 \) is critical. In the main result of the section we prove that if \( G \) and \( H \) are vertex-transitive graphs and \( \text{diam}(G) + \text{diam}(H) \leq \chi_p(G) \), then \( G \square H \) is \( \chi_p \)-critical. We conclude the paper with several open problems and directions for future investigation.

2 Preliminaries

A support vertex of a graph is a vertex adjacent to a vertex of degree 1, that is, to a leaf. By the distance between two vertices of a graph we mean the usual shortest-path distance. The diameter, \( \text{diam}(G) \), of a graph \( G \) is the maximum distance between all pairs of vertices of \( G \). If \( H \) is a subgraph of a graph \( G \), then for distinct vertices \( u \) and \( v \) in \( H \), the distance between \( u \) and \( v \) in \( H \) is at least the distance between
Observation 2.2 Suppose one vertex. The following is a direct consequence of this fact.

Proof: Clearly, Lemma 2.4 If \( n \) is large, see Brešar et al. (2017). The situation is different for leafs as the next observation asserts.

Lemma 2.5 If \( x \) is a leaf of a graph \( G \), then the difference between \( \chi_p(G) - \chi_p(G - x) \) can be made arbitrary large, see Brešar et al. (2017). The situation is different for leafs as the next observation asserts.

Proof: Clearly, \( \chi_p(G - x) \leq \chi_p(G) \). Suppose now that \( \chi_p(G - x) = k \). Then using an optimal packing coloring of \( G - x \) and using color \( k + 1 \) for the vertex \( x \) in \( G \) we infer that \( \chi_p(G) \leq k + 1 \). Hence \( \chi_p(G) \leq k + 1 = \chi_p(G - x) + 1 \).

We next list some general properties of critical graphs.

Lemma 2.5 If \( G \) is a \( \chi_p \)-critical graph, then \( G \) is connected.

Proof: Suppose \( G \) has components \( A_1, \ldots, A_r \). Since \( \chi_p(G) = \max \{ \chi_p(A_i) \} \), there exists a component, say \( A_j \), that has packing chromatic number \( \chi_p(G) \). If \( r \geq 2 \) and \( x \) is a vertex in \( G - A_j \), then it is clear that \( \chi_p(G - x) = \chi_p(A_j) = \chi_p(G) \), which contradicts the assumption that \( G \) is \( \chi_p \)-critical. Therefore, \( r = 1 \) and hence \( G \) is connected.

Finally, knowing the packing chromatic number of paths and cycles, we get that \( C_n \) is critical if and only if \( n \in \{ 3, 4 \} \), or \( n \geq 5 \) and \( n \neq 0 \ (\text{mod} \ 4) \). It is also easy to verify that if \( n \geq 2 \), then \( K_{n,n} \) is an \( (n + 1) \)-\( \chi_p \)-critical graph.
3 Vertex-deleted subgraphs of $\chi_{\rho}$-critical graphs

In this section we show that the condition $\chi_{\rho}(G-x) < \chi_{\rho}(G)$ for $G$ to be $\chi_{\rho}$-critical cannot be replaced with $\chi_{\rho}(G-x) = \chi_{\rho}(G) - 1$ (as it is the case with the chromatic critical graphs). Moreover, we show that if $G$ is a $\chi_{\rho}$-critical graph, then the set of differences

$$\Delta_{\chi_{\rho}}(G) = \{ \chi_{\rho}(G) - \chi_{\rho}(G-x) : x \in V(G) \}$$

can be almost arbitrary. Before stating the main result, we consider three particular examples.

Proof: Suppose first that $c$ is a $\chi_{\rho}$-$K_r$-critical coloring of $P - x$. For any other vertex $x$ in $G$, we have $\chi_{\rho}(G-x) = r + s - 3$. Hence $\Delta_{\chi_{\rho}}(G) = \{1, r-1\}$.

Next, let $2 \leq r \leq s$, and let $G$ be the graph constructed from identifying a vertex from $K_r$ with a vertex from $K_s$. The packing chromatic number of $G$ is $r + s - 2$. If $w$ is the vertex shared by the two complete graphs, then $\chi_{\rho}(G-w) = s - 1$. For any other vertex $x$ in $G$, we have $\chi_{\rho}(G-x) = r + s - 3$. Hence $\Delta_{\chi_{\rho}}(G) = \{1, r-1\}$.

Theorem 3.1 Let $S = \{1, s_1, \ldots, s_r\}$ be a set of positive integers, where $r \geq 1$. If for every $i \in [r]$ we have $\sum_{j=1, j \neq i}^{r} s_j \geq s_i - 1$, then there exists a $\chi_{\rho}$-critical graph $G$ such that $\Delta_{\chi_{\rho}}(G) = S$.

Proof: Suppose first that $r \geq 2$. Let $V(K_r) = \{x_1, \ldots, x_r\}$. Let $G(s_1, \ldots, s_r)$ be the graph obtained from $K_r$ such that for every $i \in [r]$, a vertex of a complete graph $X_i$ of order $s_i + 2$ is identified with $x_i$. See Fig. 1 for an example of this construction.

![Fig. 1: The graph $G(1, 2, 4)$.](image)

To simplify the notation, set $G = G(s_1, \ldots, s_r)$ in the sequel. Note first that

$$|V(G)| = \sum_{i=1}^{r} |V(X_i)| = \sum_{i=1}^{r} (s_i + 2) = \sum_{i=1}^{r} s_i + 2r.$$

If $c$ is a $\chi_{\rho}$-$K_r$-coloring of $G$, then the vertices of $X_i, i \in [r]$, receive different colors. In particular, $|c^{-1}(1)| \leq r$ and $|c^{-1}(2)| \leq r$. Moreover, since $\text{diam}(G) = 3$, $|c^{-1}(\ell)| \leq 1$ for any $\ell \geq 3$. Since $s_i \geq 2$ and so
Packing chromatic vertex-critical graphs

\[ s_i + 2 \geq 4, \ i \in [r], \] in each \( X_i \) colors 1 and 2 can be used. It follows that

\[ \chi_{\rho}(G) = 2 + (|V(G)| - 2r) = 2 + \sum_{i=1}^{r} s_i. \]  

(1)

Since \( r \geq 2 \), for at least one \( s_i \) we have \( s_i \geq 3 \). Assume without loss of generality that \( s_1 \geq 3 \). Let \( u \in X_1 \) be an arbitrary vertex different from \( x_1 \). Then \( G - u \) is isomorphic to \( G(s_1 - 1, s_2, \ldots, s_r) \) (where it is possible that \( s_1 - 1 = s_i \) for some \( i \geq 2 \)). Then by (1) we get \( \chi_{\rho}(G - u) = 2 + (s_1 - 1) + \sum_{i=2}^{r} s_i = \sum_{i=1}^{r} s_i + 1 = \chi_{\rho}(G) - 1 \). This shows that \( 1 \in \Delta_{\chi_{\rho}}(G) \).

Consider next the vertex deleted subgraph \( G - x_i, \ i \in [r] \). Since \( x_i \) is a cut vertex, we infer, having in mind (1), that

\[ \chi_{\rho}(G - x_i) \leq \max \{ \chi_{\rho}(K_{s_i+1}), \chi_{\rho}(G(s_1, \ldots, s_i-1, s_{i+1}, \ldots, s_r)) \} \]

\[ = \max \{ s_i + 1, 2 + \sum_{j=1, j \neq i}^{r} s_j \} \]

\[ = 2 + \sum_{j=1, j \neq i}^{r} s_j, \]

where the last equality follows since we have assumed that \( \sum_{j=1, j \neq i}^{r} s_j \geq s_i - 1 \). From here and (1) we get that \( \chi_{\rho}(G) - \chi_{\rho}(G - x_i) = s_i \) if \( i \in \Delta_{\chi_{\rho}}(G) \) for \( i \in [r] \). This proves the theorem for \( r \geq 2 \).

Let now \( S = \{1, s\} \), where \( s \geq 2 \). Let \( G \) be the graph obtained from two disjoint copies of \( K_{s+1} \) by identifying a vertex from one copy with a vertex from the other copy. Let \( x \) be the identified vertex. Then \( |V(G)| = 2s + 1 \) and \( \chi_{\rho}(G) = 1 + (2s + 1 - 2) = 2s \). If \( u \) is a vertex of \( G \) different from \( x \), then \( \chi_{\rho}(G - u) = 1 + (2s - 2) = 2s - 1 \), so that \( \chi_{\rho}(G) - \chi_{\rho}(G - u) = 1 \). Finally \( \chi_{\rho}(G - x) = \chi_{\rho}(K_s) = s \), so that \( \chi_{\rho}(G) - \chi_{\rho}(G - x) = s \) and we are done. \( \square \)

4 On 3-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical and 4-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical graphs

Clearly, \( K_2 \) is the unique 2-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical graph. To characterize the 3-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical graphs we recall from (Goddard et al., 2008, Proposition 3.1) that if \( G \) is a connected graph, then \( \chi_{\rho}(G) = 2 \) if and only if \( G \) is a nontrivial star.

Proposition 4.1 A graph \( G \) is 3-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical if and only if \( G \in \{ C_3, P_4, C_4 \} \).

Proof: Let \( G \) be a 3-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical graph. Then \( G \) is connected by Lemma 2.5. Clearly, \( |V(G)| \geq 3 \). If \( |V(G)| = 3 \), then \( G \in \{ C_3, P_3 \} \), giving us the 3-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical graph \( C_3 \). Assume in the rest that \( |V(G)| \geq 4 \) and let \( u \) be an arbitrary vertex of \( G \). Then \( \chi_{\rho}(G - u) = 2 \) and hence by the above remark, \( G - u \) is a disjoint union of stars. If at least two of these stars contain an edge, then \( G \) contains a \( P_5 \) and hence cannot be 3-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical. On the other hand, at least one of the stars, say \( S_1 \), must contain an edge, for otherwise \( G \), being connected, would itself be a star. Then \( G - u \) contains at most one isolated vertex, for otherwise removing one such vertex from \( G \) would yield a graph with \( \chi_{\rho} = 3 \). To summarize thus far, \( G - u \) contains the star \( S_1 \) with at least one edge and contains at most one isolated vertex.
Suppose first that \( G - u = S_1 \). As \( |V(G)| \geq 4 \), \( S_1 \) has at least two leaves. If \( u \) is adjacent to the center of \( S_1 \), then since \( G \) is a not a star, \( u \) must be adjacent to at least one leaf of \( S_1 \). Removing in \( G \) another leaf of \( S_1 \) leaves a graph with \( \chi_\rho = 3 \) (it contains a \( C_3 \)). So \( u \) is not adjacent to the center of \( S_1 \) and is hence adjacent to at least one leaf in \( S_1 \). If \( S_1 \) has at least three leaves, then \( G \) again cannot be \( 3\)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical. In conclusion, \( S_1 \) has exactly two leaves. If \( u \) is adjacent to exactly one of them, we get \( P_4 \), and if it is adjacent to both, we get \( C_4 \).

Suppose next that \( G - u \) is the disjoint union of \( S_1 \) and an isolated vertex, say \( w \). If \( S_1 \) has at least two leaves, then similarly as in the first case we infer that \( G \) is not \( 3\)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical. And if \( S_1 = K_2 \), then we either find the \( 3\)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical \( P_4 \) or the triangle with a pendant edge which is not \( 3\)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical.

Since it is clear that each of \( C_3 \), \( P_4 \), and \( C_4 \) is \( 3\)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical, the proof is complete.

We next turn our attention to \( 4 \)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical graphs.

**Lemma 4.2** If a graph \( G \) contains a cycle \( C \) whose order is larger than \( 3 \) and is not divisible by \( 4 \) such that \( V(G) - V(C) \neq \emptyset \), then \( G \) is not \( 4 \)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical.

**Proof:** Suppose that \( \chi_\rho(G) = 4 \), for otherwise there is nothing to be proved. Let \( C \) be a cycle in \( G \) of order \( n > 3 \) such that \( n \not\equiv 0 \pmod{4} \) and \( V(G) \neq V(C) \). For any \( x \in V(G - C) \), the cycle \( C \) is a subgraph of \( G - x \) and thus by Lemma 2.1, \( 4 = \chi_\rho(G) \geq \chi_\rho(G - x) \geq \chi_\rho(C) = 4 \). Therefore, \( G \) is not \( 4 \)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical.

For the sake of simplicity we call a cycle in a graph \( G \) that does not contain all the vertices of \( G \) a proper cycle. We are now able to characterize the \( 4\)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical graphs that contain a cycle of order at least 5 that is not divisible by 4.

**Theorem 4.3** If \( G \) is a graph that contains a cycle of length \( n \geq 5 \), where \( n \not\equiv 0 \pmod{4} \), then \( G \) is \( 4 \)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical if and only if one of the following holds.

- \( n = 5 \) and \( G \) is one of the graphs in Fig. 2,
- \( n = 6 \) and \( G \) is one of four bipartite graphs obtained by adding some subset of chords to the 6-cycle,
- \( n \geq 7 \) and \( G \) is isomorphic to \( C_n \).

**Proof:** Let \( n \) be an integer, \( n \geq 5 \), such that \( n \not\equiv 0 \pmod{4} \). Note first that \( \chi_\rho(C_n) = 4 \) and each vertex-deleted subgraph of \( C_n \) is the path \( P_{n-1} \), which has packing chromatic number 3. Thus \( C_n \) is \( 4\)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical. Let \( G \) be a \( 4\)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical graph that contains a cycle \( C \) of order \( n \). By Lemma 4.2 it follows that \( C \) is not a proper cycle; that is, \( C \) is a Hamiltonian cycle. We let \( C \) have vertices \( v_0, v_1, \ldots, v_{n-1} \) and edges \( v_i v_{i+1} \) for \( 0 \leq i \leq n - 1 \), where the subscripts are computed modulo \( n \). A chord \( v_i v_j \) of \( C \) is called an \( r \)-chord if the shortest distance between \( v_i \) and \( v_j \) on \( C \) is \( r \). Note that \( C \) has \( r \)-chords for \( 2 \leq r \leq \lfloor \frac{n}{2} \rfloor \).

First we let \( n = 5 \). All the chords of the 5-cycle are 2-chords. One can easily check that the five graphs of Fig. 2 are 4-critical and that if chords are added in any other way, the resulting graph is not 4-critical.

Second, let \( n = 6 \). By Proposition 2.3, \( \chi_\rho(K_{3,3}) = 4 \) and since each vertex-deleted subgraph of \( K_{3,3} \) is isomorphic to \( K_{2,3} \), Proposition 2.3 implies that \( \chi_\rho(K_{2,3}) = 3 \). Therefore, \( K_{3,3} \) is \( 4\)-\( \chi_\rho \)-critical. Since \( C_6 \) is also 4-critical, it follows from Proposition 2.6 that the two subgraphs of \( K_{3,3} \) obtained by deleting one or two independent edges from \( K_{3,3} \) are all 4-critical. On the other hand, if any 2-chord is added to a 6-cycle, the resulting graph contains a proper cycle of order 5 and is therefore not 4-critical.
Now, let $n \geq 7$. Let $G_r$ be the graph formed by adding the $r$-chord $v_0v_r$ to $C$. We claim that for each $2 \leq r \leq \lfloor \frac{n}{2} \rfloor$, the graph $G_r$ is not 4-critical. It will then follow by Corollary 2.7 that no supergraph of $G_r$ is 4-critical. This will show that $G$ is isomorphic to the $n$-cycle.

We consider first the case $r = 2$. The graph $G_2$ contains proper cycles of order 3 and $n - 1$. If $n - 1 \not\equiv 0 \pmod{4}$, then by Lemma 4.2 we conclude that $G_2$ is not 4-critical. Therefore, we assume that $n \equiv 1 \pmod{4}$. In this case $n \geq 9$ and we infer that $G_r$ contains a vertex $x$ such that $G_r - x$ has a subgraph isomorphic to the graph $H$ in Fig. 3. We claim that $\chi_p(H) \geq 4$. Let $c: V(H) \to \{k\}$ be a $k$-packing coloring. If $c(v_0) = 1$, then $c(v_1), c(v_2)$ and $c(v_{n-1})$ are three distinct colors, which implies $k \geq 4$. Similarly, $c(v_2) = 1$ implies $k \geq 4$. Hence, $k \geq 4$ unless $\{c(v_0), c(v_2)\} = \{2, 3\}$. However, if $\{c(v_0), c(v_2)\} = \{2, 3\}$, then it is easy to see that one of $c(v_1), c(v_3), c(v_4), c(v_{n-1})$ or $c(v_{n-2})$ is at least 4. Therefore, $\chi_p(H) \geq 4$ and by Lemma 2.1 it follows that $G_2$ is not 4-critical.

Now assume that $r \geq 3$. Recall that $n \geq 7$. The graph $G_r$ has proper cycles of orders $r + 1$ and $n - r + 1$. Note that $r + 1 > 3$ and $n - r + 1 > 3$. A straightforward computation shows that either $r + 1 \not\equiv 0 \pmod{4}$ or $n - r + 1 \not\equiv 0 \pmod{4}$ except when $n \equiv 2 \pmod{4}$ and $r \equiv 3 \pmod{4}$. Therefore, if $n \not\equiv 2 \pmod{4}$ or $r \not\equiv 3 \pmod{4}$, then it follows by Lemma 4.2 that $G_r$ is not 4-critical. Thus we assume that $n \equiv 2 \pmod{4}$ and $r \equiv 3 \pmod{4}$. Suppose that $G_r$ is 4-critical and let $c: V(G_r - v_{r+2}) \to \{3\}$ be a 3-packing coloring of $G_r - v_{r+2}$. Let $L$ be the subgraph of $G_r - v_{r+2}$ shown in Fig. 3. If $c(v_0) = 1$, then $c(v_1), c(v_{n-1})$ and $c(v_r)$ must all be different, which is a contradiction. Therefore, $c(v_0) \neq 1$, and similarly $c(v_r) \neq 1$. Without loss of generality we assume that $c(v_0) = 3$ and $c(v_r) = 2$. This implies that $c(v_1) = 1$ and $c(v_{r-1}) = 1$. If $r = 3$, we arrive at a contradiction since then $v_1$ and $v_{r-1}$ are adjacent. For $r > 3$ the vertex $v_{r-2}$ is distance 2 from $v_r$ and distance 3 from $v_0$, which is again a contradiction. This implies that $\chi_p(G_r - v_{r+2}) \geq 4$ and hence $G_r$ is not 4-critical.

Therefore, for $n \geq 7$ such that $n \not\equiv 0 \pmod{4}$ we have shown that if a $4-\chi_p$-critical graph $G$ contains a cycle of order $n$, then $G = C_n$. This completes the proof of the theorem.

There remains the case when the longest cycle of a 4-packing chromatic graph has order $n$ congruent to 0 modulo 4. If such a graph is 4-critical and $n \geq 8$, then none of its cycles of order eight or more can
have chords since any such chord creates a proper cycle whose order is at least 5 and is not congruent to 0 modulo 4. For a partial characterization of 4-critical graphs all of whose cycles have order congruent to 0 modulo 4 we first prove the following.

**Lemma 4.4** Let $G_{2k}$, $k \geq 3$, be the graph obtained from the path $P_{2k}$ by attaching a leaf to each of the vertices at distance 2 from an endvertex. Then $\chi_\rho(G_{2k}) = 4$.

**Proof:** Let the vertices of $P_{2k}$ be $v_1, \ldots, v_{2k}$, and let $v'_3$ and $v''_{2k-2}$ be the leaves attached to $v_3$ and $v_{2k-2}$, respectively. Coloring the vertices of $P_{2k}$ with the pattern $1, 2, 1, 3, 1, 2, 1, 3, \ldots$, and the vertices $v'_3$ and $v''_{2k-2}$ with 4 and 1, respectively, we get $\chi_\rho(G_{2k}) \leq 4$. For the rest of the proof we first state the following observation.

**Fact.** In any 3-$\chi_\rho$-coloring of a path, if $x$ and $y$ are adjacent vertices both of which have a distance at least 2 from the ends of the path, then at least one of $x$ and $y$ must be colored 1.

Suppose now that $G_{2k}$ admits a 3-packing coloring $c$. Then $c(v_3) \neq 1$ and $c(v_{2k-2}) \neq 1$. Suppose that $c(v_3) = 2$. By the above Fact $c(v_4) \neq 3$, that is, $c(v_4) = 1$. If $k = 3$, this is a contradiction, so let $k > 3$. Then $c(v_5) = 3$. Repeatedly using the Fact we deduce that $c(v_{2k-2}) = 1$ must hold, a contradiction again. Therefore $c(v_3) = 3$. Then we first infer that either $c(v_2) = 2$ and $c(v_1) = 1$, or $c(v_2) = 1$ and $c(v_1) = 2$. In the first case $c(v_4) = 1$ clearly holds. In the second case, assuming that $c(v_4) = 2$, we get that $v_6$ cannot be properly colored. Hence in either case, $c(v_4) = 1$. But then, using the Fact as many times as required it follows again that $c(v_{2k-2}) = 1$. Hence $c$ does not exist and so $\chi_\rho(G_{2k}) \geq 4$. \hfill $\square$

Let $C$ be the class of graphs that contain exactly one cycle and have an arbitrary number of attached leaves to each of the vertices of the cycle. Recall that the net graph is the graph formed by attaching a single leaf to each vertex of a $K_3$. Then the announced partial characterization of 4-critical graphs reads as follows.

**Theorem 4.5** A graph $G \in C$ is 4-$\chi_\rho$-critical if and only if $G$ is one of the following graphs:

- $G = C_n$, $n \geq 5$, $n \not\equiv 0 \pmod 4$,
- $G$ is the net graph,
- $G$ is obtained by attaching a single leaf to two adjacent vertices of $C_4$,
- $G$ is obtained by attaching a single leaf to two vertices at distance 3 on $C_8$.

**Proof:** Let $G \in C$, let $C$ be the unique cycle in $G$, and assume $C$ has order $n$. If $n \not\equiv 0 \pmod 4$ and $n \geq 5$, then $G$ is not 4-critical by Lemma 4.2 if $G$ has at least one leaf. On the other hand it is straightforward to see that $C_n$ ($n \not\equiv 0 \pmod 4$ and $n \geq 5$) is 4-critical. If $n = 3$, then it is also equally straightforward to verify that the net graph is the only graph from $C$ that contains a 3-cycle and is 4-critical. Hence we may assume in the rest that $n = 4k$ for some $k \geq 1$.

Suppose that $G$ is 4-$\chi_\rho$-critical. We first claim $G$ has at most one leaf attached to each of the vertices of $C$. Suppose on the contrary that a vertex $u$ of $C$ is adjacent to two leaves $x$ and $y$. Since $G$ is 4-$\chi_\rho$-critical, $\chi_\rho(G - x) = 3$. In a 3-coloring of $G - x$, the vertex $u$ is not colored 1. But then the 3-coloring of $G - x$ can be extended to a 3-coloring of $G$ by coloring $x$ with 1, a contradiction which proves the claim.

Suppose first that each pair of support vertices of $G$ is at even distance. Then we can color $C$ with the pattern $1, 2, 1, 3, 1, 2, 1, 3, \ldots$ such that each support vertex receives color 2 or 3. But then $\chi_\rho(G) = 3$. 

Sandi Klavžar, Douglas F. Rall
Similarly, if $G$ has only one support vertex, then we also have $\chi_{\rho}(G) = 3$. This implies that $G$ is not 4-critical, which is a contradiction.

Therefore $G$ has at least two support vertices at odd distance. Let $u$ and $v$ be two support vertices that are closest possible on $C$ and let $d_G(u, v) = \ell$. Note that $\ell \leq 2k - 1$. Suppose that $k \geq 3$ and let $x$ be a vertex that is not on a $u, v$-shortest path and $d_G(x, u) \geq 3$ and $d_G(x, v) \geq 3$. As $k \geq 3$, such a vertex $x$ exists. Then $G - x$ contains a subgraph isomorphic to the graph $G_{\ell+5}$ from Lemma 4.4 which in turn implies that $G$ is not 4-critical. Assume next that $k = 2$, that is, $C = C_8$. If $\ell = 1$, the same argument implies that $G$ is not 4-critical. If $\ell = 3$, then Lemma 4.4 yields $\chi_{\rho}(G) = 4$. On the other hand it is straightforward to verify that $\chi_{\rho}(G - x) = 3$ for every $x \in V(G)$. Hence $G$ is 4-critical. Finally, if $k = 1$, then we only need to check two graphs. Among them the one that is obtained by attaching a single leaf to two adjacent vertices of $C_4$ is 4-critical.  

To conclude the section we present another infinite family of $4$-$\chi_{\rho}$-critical graphs. Let $H_{2k+1}$, $k \geq 0$, be the graph obtained from the disjoint union of two 4-cycles by connecting a vertex of one 4-cycle with a vertex of the other 4-cycle with a path of length $2k + 1$. Then applying Lemma 4.4 we see that $\chi_{\rho}(H_{2k+1}) = 4$. If $x$ is a diametrical vertex of $H_{2k+1}$, then distinguishing the cases when $2k + 1 \equiv 3 \pmod{4}$ and $2k + 1 \equiv 1 \pmod{4}$ we see that $\chi_{\rho}(H_{2k+1} - x) = 3$, see Fig. 4.

For all the other vertices $y$ of $H_{2k+1}$ it is easy to see that $\chi_{\rho}(H_{2k+1} - y) = 3$. Hence $H_{2k+1}$ is 4-critical for every $k \geq 0$. On the other hand, if in the construction of $H_{2k+1}$ one or both 4-cycles are replaced with some longer cycle of order congruent to 0 modulo 4, then the obtained graph is not 4-critical as can be again deduced from Lemma 4.4.

5 On critical trees

We begin this section with the following interesting fact.

**Proposition 5.1** If $k \geq 2$, then there exists a $k$-$\chi_{\rho}$-critical tree.

**Proof:** Sloper (2004) proved that the infinite 4-regular tree has no finite packing coloring. Hence there exists a finite tree $T$ with $\chi_{\rho}(T) = k$. Indeed, by Sloper’s result there exists a finite tree with packing
chromatic number \( s \geq k \). If \( s > k \), then we repeatedly use Lemma 2.4 to arrive at the desired tree. Now, if \( T \) is critical, we are done. Otherwise there exists a vertex \( x \) of \( T \) such that \( \chi_{\rho}(T - x) = \chi_{\rho}(T) \). It follows that \( T - x \) contains a component \( T' \) with \( \chi_{\rho}(T') = k \). If \( T' \) is critical, we are done, otherwise just continue the process until a \( k \)-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical tree is found. 

In Fig. 5 five \( k \)-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical trees are given, where \( k \in \{3, 4, 5\} \).

\[
\begin{align*}
\chi_{\rho} = 3 & \quad \chi_{\rho} = 4 & \quad \chi_{\rho} = 4 \\
\chi_{\rho} = 4 & \quad \chi_{\rho} = 5
\end{align*}
\]

Fig. 5: Some \( k \)-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical caterpillars.

Note that all the critical trees from Fig. 5 are caterpillars. Hence it is natural to wonder for which \( k \) there exist \( k \)-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical caterpillars.

**Theorem 5.2** A \( k \)-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical caterpillar exists if and only if \( k \leq 7 \).

**Proof:** Let \( P_\infty \) denote the one-way infinite path with vertices \( v_1, v_2, \ldots \) such that \( v_1 \) has degree 1. By repeating the coloring pattern \( 2, 4, 3, 2, 5, 6, 2, 4, 3, 2, 5, 7 \) (mentioned in Sloper (2004)) starting with \( v_1 \) one can see that \( P_\infty \) admits a \((2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)\)-coloring. If \( T \) is a caterpillar, then using the described \((2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)\)-coloring for its spine and color 1 for each of its leaves attached to the spine we infer that \( \chi_{\rho}(T) \leq 7 \) holds for an arbitrary caterpillar \( T \).

Sloper (2004) also mentioned that no \((2, 3, 4, 5, 6)\)-coloring of \( P_n \) exists if \( n \geq 35 \). (We have independently verified this fact using a backtracking algorithm.) Hence, if \( n \) is such, then attaching to every vertex of \( P_n \) precisely (or more) 6 leaves yields a caterpillar \( T \) with \( \chi_{\rho}(T) = 7 \). Iteratively applying Lemma 2.4 to the leaves of \( T \) we find a \( 7 \)-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical caterpillar. Continuing in this manner we then see that there also exists a \( k \)-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical caterpillar for every \( k \leq 6 \). 

Note that the proof of Theorem 5.2 is not constructive. On the other hand, Fig. 5 shows \( k \)-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical caterpillars for \( k \leq 5 \). In the next result we construct an explicit \( 6 \)-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical caterpillar.

**Theorem 5.3** The caterpillar \( T \) from Fig. 6 is \( 6 \)-\( \chi_{\rho} \)-critical.
To prove Theorem 5.3 we first demonstrate the following two lemmas.

**Lemma 5.4** The path $P_9$ does not admit a $(2, 3, 4, 5)$-coloring.

**Proof:** Let the vertices of $P_9$ be denoted with $r, s, \ldots, z$ in the natural order. In a possible $(2, 3, 4, 5)$-coloring of $P_9$, at most three vertices are colored 2, at most three vertices are colored 3, at most two vertices are colored 4, and at most two vertices are colored 5. Suppose there exists a $(2, 3, 4, 5)$-coloring $c : V(P_9) \to \{2, 3, 4, 5\}$. If $|c^{-1}(3)| = 3$, then $c^{-1}(3) = \{r, v, z\}$. However, this implies that $|c^{-1}(2)| = 2$ and $|c^{-1}(5)| = \{s, y\}$, which means at most one vertex from $\{t, u, w, x\}$ is colored 4. Thus no such $c$ exists with $|c^{-1}(3)| = 3$.

Hence $|c^{-1}(2)| = 3$, $|c^{-1}(3)| = 2$, $|c^{-1}(4)| = 2 = |c^{-1}(5)|$. By symmetry, there are four cases to be considered.

**Case 1.** $c^{-1}(5) = \{r, x\}$.

The subpath $s, t, u, v, w$ has at most one vertex colored 4 by $c$, which leads to a contradiction since the remaining four vertices cannot be colored using only colors 2 and 3.

**Case 2.** $c^{-1}(5) = \{r, y\}$.

In this case $|c^{-1}(2) \cap \{s, \ldots, x\}| \leq 2$, which implies $c(z) = 2$. This in turn forces $c^{-1}(4) = \{s, x\}$. But since $|c^{-1}(3) \cap \{t, u, v, w\}| \leq 1$, we get a contradiction.

**Case 3.** $c^{-1}(5) = \{r, z\}$.

This assumption together with $|c^{-1}(2)| = 3$ implies $c^{-1}(2) = \{s, v, y\}$, which forces $|c^{-1}(4) \cap \{t, u, w, x\}| = 2$, a contradiction.

**Case 4.** $c^{-1}(5) = \{s, y\}$.

Finally, $c^{-1}(5) = \{s, y\}$ implies that $c(r) = 4$ or $c(z) = 4$. Assume without loss of generality that $c(r) = 4$. If also $c(z) = 4$, then since $|c^{-1}(2) \cap \{t, u, v, w, x\}| \leq 2$, we get a contradiction. Hence $c(z) = 2$. Since $|c^{-1}(3)| = 2$, we must also have $c(t) = c(x) = 3$. But then the coloring can clearly not be completed. \qed

**Lemma 5.5** $\chi_{\rho}(T) = 6$.

**Proof:** Let the spine of $T$ be the set $S = \{r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z\}$, see Fig. 6. For any vertex $a$ in the spine $S$, if $a$ is adjacent to $k$ leaves, then for convenience we denote this set of leaves by $\{a_1, \ldots, a_k\}$.

Coloring the vertices of the spine of $T$ with colors $2, 3, 4, 2, 5, 3, 2, 4, 6$, and each of the leaves with 1 demonstrates that $\chi_{\rho}(T) \leq 6$. Thus it remains to prove that $\chi_{\rho}(T) \geq 6$.

Suppose for the sake of contradiction that $\chi_{\rho}(T) \leq 5$ and let $c$ be a 5-packing coloring of $T$. Then, since $P_9$ does not admit a $(2, 3, 4, 5)$-coloring, it is the case that some vertex of $S$ is colored 1. The neighbors of this vertex of $S$ that is colored 1 receive pairwise different colors from $\{2, 3, 4, 5\}$. Consequently, the
only vertices of $S$ that can possibly be colored 1 are $r, s, t, v, x, y$ and $z$. By symmetry we consider four cases, namely $c(r) = 1$, $c(s) = 1$, $c(t) = 1$ and $c(v) = 1$.

**Case 1.** $c(r) = 1$.
Since $c(\{r_1, r_2, r_3, s\}) = \{2, 3, 4, 5\}$ and the neighbors of $t$ are at distance at most 4 from the vertices in $\{v_1, r_2, r_3, s\}$, it follows that $c(t) \neq 1$. This implies that $c(t) = 2$, that some vertex in $\{r_1, r_2, r_3\}$ is colored 2, and also that $c(u) \neq 1$. Considering the distance from $u$ to the set $\{r_1, r_2, r_3, s\}$ we infer that $c(u) = 3$ and also that $3 \in c(\{r_1, r_2, r_3\})$. As a result either $c(v) = 1$ or $c(v) = 4$. If $c(v) = 1$, then $c(\{v_1, v_2, w\}) = \{2, 4, 5\}$, which implies that $5 \in c(\{r_1, r_2, r_3\})$ and thus $c(s) = 4$. However, this is a contradiction since the distance between $s$ and any vertex in $\{v_1, v_2, w\}$ is 4. Therefore, $c(v) = 4$ and $4 \in c(\{r_1, r_2, r_3\})$. It now follows that $c(s) = 5$, $c(w) = 2$ and $c(x) = 1$. This is a contradiction since the distance between $v$ and every vertex in $\{x_1, x_2, y\}$ is 3.

**Case 2.** $c(s) = 1$.
In this case $c(\{r, s_1, s_2, t\}) = \{2, 3, 4, 5\}$. This implies that $c(u) = 2$, which implies $c(v) = 3$ and $c(w) = 4$. (Note that $c(v) \neq 1$ since every neighbor of $v$ is within distance 5 of $\{r, s_1, s_2, t\}$.) Now it follows that $c(t) = 5$ and $c(x) \neq 1$ since the distance between $v$ and any neighbor of $x$ is at most 3. We now infer that $c(x) = 2$, which forces $c(y) = 1$. But this is a contradiction since the distance between $w$ and any vertex in $N(y)$ is at most 3.

**Case 3.** $c(t) = 1$.
It follows that $c(\{s, t, t_1, u\}) = \{2, 3, 4, 5\}$. By case 1 we may assume that $c(r) \neq 1$, which implies that in fact $c(r) = 2$, for otherwise the color $c(r) \in \{3, 4, 5\}$ could not be used on either of the vertices $s, t_1, t_2, u$. If $c(u) = 2$, then because $c(\{s, t_1, t_2, u\}) = \{2, 3, 4, 5\}$ we must have $c(v) = 1$. But in this case one of $v_1, v_2$ or $w$ is colored 5, which contradicts the fact that some neighbor of vertex $t$ is also colored 5. If $c(u) \neq 2$, then $c(v) \in \{1, 2\}$. Suppose first that $c(v) = 2$. Then $c(w) \in \{1, 3\}$, where the possibility $c(w) = 1$ is impossible because of the degree of $w$. So $c(w) = 3$. Then either $c(s) = 5$ and $c(u) = 4$, or $c(s) = 4$ and $c(u) = 5$. The first case forces $c(x) = 1$, but then one of the neighbors of $x$ should have been colored 4, but this is not possible because $c(u) = 4$. And if $c(s) = 4$ and $c(w) = 5$, then $c(x) \neq 1$ because every neighbor of $x$ is of distance at most 4 from $u$, which is colored 5. Hence $c(x) = 4$. But then $\{c(y), c(z)\} = \{1, 2\}$ which readily leads to a contradiction since by symmetry and Cases 1 and 2 we may assume that $c(y) \neq 1$ and $c(z) \neq 1$. On the other hand, if $c(v) = 1$, then $\max\{c(v_1), c(v_2), c(w)\} \geq 4$, which again is in conflict with the fact that the distance between any of $v_1, v_2$ or $w$ and any vertex in $\{s, t, u\}$ is at most 4.

**Case 4.** $c(v) = 1$.
We have shown in the first three cases that $1 \notin c(\{r, s, t\})$ and by symmetry that $1 \notin c(\{x, y, z\})$. Furthermore, $c(u) \neq 1$ and $c(w) \neq 1$ since they are neighbors of $v$. Hence, $c(\{r, s, t, u, v_1, v_2, w, x, y, z\}) = \{2, 3, 4, 5\}$. Since $c(\{u, w, t_1, t_2\}) = \{2, 3, 4, 5\}$, at most three of the vertices in $\{r, s, t, u, v_1, v_2, w, x, y, z\}$ can be colored 2, at most three can be colored 3, at most three can be colored 4 and at most one can be colored 5. The only way that three of these ten vertices can be colored 4 is if $c(r) = 4 = c(z)$ and one of $v_1, v_2$ is colored 4. But in this case it is easy to see that $|c^{-1}(\{2, 3\})| \leq 5$. This gives the contradiction that $|c^{-1}(\{2, 3, 4, 5\})| \leq 9$. However, if $|c^{-1}(4)| \leq 2$, then again we arrive at $|c^{-1}(\{2, 3, 4, 5\})| \leq 9$. □

To complete the proof of Theorem 5.3 we must show that the removal of any vertex of $T$ leaves a graph with packing chromatic number at most 5. By using the $(2, 3, 4, 5, 6)$-coloring of $P_9$ given above it follows that any caterpillar whose spine has order at most 8 has packing chromatic number at most
Packing chromatic vertex-critical graphs

Fig. 7: 5-packing colorings of $T - r_1$, of $T - s_1$, of $T - t_1$, of $T - u_1$, and of $T - v_1$.

5. Consequently, we only need to show that there is a 5-packing coloring of the caterpillar that remains when one of the leaves of $T$ is deleted. Using the symmetry of $T$, such packing colorings are shown in a sequence of five figures. See Fig. 7. In each case the leaves that are not labeled are colored 1. Theorem 5.3 is thus proved.

6 Critical Cartesian products

The Cartesian product $G \square H$ of graphs $G$ and $H$ has $V(G) \times V(H)$ as the vertex set, vertices $(g, h)$ and $(g', h')$ being adjacent if either $gg' \in E(G)$ and $h = h'$, or $g = g'$ and $hh' \in E(H)$, see Imrich et al. (2008).

Recall that a graph $G$ is vertex-critical for the chromatic number, if $\chi(G - u) = \chi(G) - 1$ holds for every $u \in V(G)$. If the factors of a Cartesian product are both non-trivial, then $G \square H$ is not vertex-critical for the chromatic number. Indeed, recall that $\chi(G \square H) = \max\{\chi(G), \chi(H)\}$, see (Imrich et al., 2008, Theorem 8.1). Hence, since a vertex-deleted subgraph of $G \square H$ contains a subgraph isomorphic to $G$ and a subgraph isomorphic to $H$, the vertex-deleted subgraph has the same chromatic number as $G \square H$. In this section we show that on the other hand the Cartesian product is a very rich source of $\chi_\rho$-critical graphs. For additional investigation of $\chi_\rho$ on Cartesian products see Brešar et al. (2007) and
new lemma that might be of independent interest.

for each vertex \( t \) of non-critical graphs can be critical.

coloring can easily show that

First note that the independence number of \( G \) is 7, namely \( I = \{ u_1, u_2, u_3, v, w_1, w_2, w_3 \} \). Furthermore, \( \text{diam}(G) = 4 \) and so in any packing coloring of \( G \) any color 4 or more can be assigned at most once.

The packing coloring in which each vertex of \( I \) is colored 1 and the five neighbors of \( v \) are assigned distinct colors from the set \( \{2, 3, 4, 5, 6\} \) shows that \( \chi_p(G) \leq 6 \). To prove that \( \chi_p(G) \geq 6 \) we assume that \( c : V(G) \rightarrow [n] \) is a packing coloring with \( n \) as small as possible. If \( c(v) = 1 \), then all of the vertices in \( N(v) \) have distinct values under \( c \), and this implies that \( n \geq 6 \). If \( c(v) = 2 \), then since the eccentricity of \( v \) is 2, it follows that \( c^{-1}(2) = \{ v \} \). This implies that \( |c^{-1}(1)| \leq 6 \). In this case if \( |c^{-1}(3)| \geq 2 \), then \( 3 \in c(I - \{ v \}) \). Consequently, \( |c^{-1}(\{1, 3\})| \leq 7 \) and hence in this case \( n \geq 7 \). Similarly, if \( c(v) = 3 \), then \( c^{-1}(3) = \{ v \} \) and \( |c^{-1}(\{1, 2\})| \leq 7 \), which again means \( n \geq 7 \). Finally, if \( c(v) \in \{4, 5\} \), then one can easily show that \( |c^{-1}(\{1, 2, 3\})| \leq 9 \), which leads to \( n \geq 3 + (12 - 9) = 6 \). (One such partial packing coloring \( c \) with \( |c^{-1}(\{1, 2, 3\})| = 9 \) is shown in Table 1.)

Finally to show that \( G \) is critical, we observe that by symmetry we need to show that \( \chi_p(G - t) < 6 \) for each vertex \( t \in \{ u, v, u_3, v_3 \} \). In the table there is a packing coloring, \( f_t : V(G - t) \rightarrow [5] \) for each such vertex \( t \). This proves that \( G \) is 6-critical.

Note that \( P_3 \) and \( K_{1,3} \) are not critical. Hence the above example shows that even the Cartesian product of non-critical graphs can be critical.

To establish a greater variety of \( \chi_p \)-critical Cartesian products, we recall an earlier result and prove a new lemma that might be of independent interest.
Theorem 6.1 (Brešar et al., 2007, Theorem 1) If $G$ and $H$ are connected graphs on at least two vertices, then

$$\chi_{\rho}(G \square H) \geq (\chi_{\rho}(G) + 1)n(H) - \text{diam}(G \square H)(n(H) - 1) - 1. $$

Lemma 6.2 If $G$ is a vertex-transitive graph with $\text{diam}(G) \leq \chi_{\rho}(G)$, then $G$ is $\chi_{\rho}$-critical.

Proof: Let $x$ be any vertex of $G$. Since $G$ is vertex-transitive, there is a $\chi_{\rho}(G)$-packing coloring $c$ of $G$ such that $c(x) = \chi_{\rho}(G)$. By Observation 2.2, $x$ is the only vertex assigned the color $\chi_{\rho}(G)$ by $c$. The restriction of $c$ to $V(G - x)$ is a packing coloring, which shows that $\chi_{\rho}(G - x) < \chi_{\rho}(G)$.

Consider the hypercubes $Q_n$, $n \geq 1$. Indeed, $\chi_{\rho}(Q_n)$ was determined exactly for $n \leq 5$ in Goddard et al. (2008) and for $6 \leq n \leq 8$ in Torres and Valencia-Pabon (2015). Moreover, $\chi_{\rho}(Q_n)$ asymptotically grows as $(\frac{1}{4} - O(\frac{1}{n}))2^n$. Since $\text{diam}(Q_n) = n$, we conclude from Lemma 6.2 that $Q_n$ is critical for every $n \geq 1$.

The announced result now reads as follows.

Theorem 6.3 If $G$ and $H$ are connected, vertex-transitive graphs on at least two vertices and $\text{diam}(G) + \text{diam}(H) \leq \chi_{\rho}(G)$, then $G \square H$ is $\chi_{\rho}$-critical.

Proof: Since $\text{diam}(G) + \text{diam}(H) \leq \chi_{\rho}(G)$ we have $\chi_{\rho}(G) - \text{diam}(G) - \text{diam}(H) + 1 \geq 1$, from which we get that

$$n(H)(\chi_{\rho}(G) - \text{diam}(G) - \text{diam}(H) + 1) \geq 1. \quad (2)$$

Using Theorem 6.1 and the well-known fact that $\text{diam}(G \square H) = \text{diam}(G) + \text{diam}(H)$ (see (Imrich et al., 2008, p.102)), we can estimate as follows:

$$\chi_{\rho}(G \square H) \geq (\chi_{\rho}(G) + 1)n(H) - \text{diam}(G \square H)(n(H) - 1) - 1$$

$$= n(H)(\chi_{\rho}(G) - \text{diam}(G) - \text{diam}(H) + 1) + \text{diam}(G) + \text{diam}(H) - 1$$

$$\geq \text{diam}(G) + \text{diam}(H),$$

where the last inequality follows by (2).

It is also well-known (see (Hammack et al., 2011, Proposition 6.16)) that a Cartesian product of connected graphs is vertex-transitive if and only if the factors are such. Hence, $G \square H$ is a vertex-transitive graph. Moreover, by the above,

$$\text{diam}(G \square H) = \text{diam}(G) + \text{diam}(H) \leq \chi_{\rho}(G \square H).$$

The result now follows by Lemma 6.2. □

Let $k \geq 3$ and let $H$ be a vertex-transitive graph with $\text{diam}(H) \leq k - 1$. Then Theorem 6.3 implies that $K_k \square H$ is $\chi_{\rho}$-critical. This fact in particular implies that every vertex-transitive graph is an induced (actually convex) subgraph of a $\chi_{\rho}$-critical graph.

For a particular example consider $H = C_{4\ell}$, where $2\ell \leq k - 1$. Then $K_k \square C_{4\ell}$ is $\chi_{\rho}$-critical graph, where one factor, namely $C_{4\ell}$, is not $\chi_{\rho}$-critical.

Although many pairs of vertex-transitive graphs that do not satisfy the diameter condition in Theorem 6.3 still produce a critical Cartesian product, it is not always the case. See Fig. 9 where a coloring of the product $C_{18} \square P_2$ is shown. From Goddard et al., 2008, Proposition 6.1) we know that the $2 \times k$ grid has packing chromatic number 5 for every $k \geq 6$. We infer that $\chi_{\rho}(C_{18} \square P_2) \geq 5$ since $P_{18} \square P_2$ is a
subgraph of $C_{18} \Box P_2$. It is easy to check that the coloring in Fig. 9 is indeed a packing coloring, which in turn shows that $\chi_\rho(C_{18} \Box P_2) = 5$. For any vertex $x$ of $C_{18} \Box P_2$, the $2 \times 17$ grid is a subgraph of $(C_{18} \Box P_2) - x$. Since $C_{18} \Box P_2$ is vertex-transitive, this shows that $C_{18} \Box P_2$ is not $\chi_\rho$-critical.

7 Concluding remarks

In this paper we have investigated $\chi_\rho$-critical graphs. These graphs are vertex critical for the packing chromatic number. An equally legal concept would be edge critical graphs, that is, graphs $G$ for which $\chi_\rho(G - e) < \chi_\rho(G)$ holds for every edge $e$ of $G$. Their investigation seems quite different from the vertex-criticality studied in this paper though.

It would be interesting to classify vertex-transitive, $\chi_\rho$-critical graphs. Examples include cycles (only those whose order is not congruent to 0 modulo 4), complete graphs, complete multipartite graphs with parts of equal size, hypercubes, the Petersen graph $P$, as well as the Cartesian product of those that satisfy the additional condition of Theorem 6.3. A sporadic example from the latter family of graphs is $P \Box P$.

We did not give a complete list of 4-$\chi_\rho$-critical graphs. A different approach to this problem would be to use the structure of graphs $G$ with $\chi_\rho(G) = 3$ as described in Goddard et al. (2008). In particular, for the 2-connected case we have the following characterization.

**Proposition 7.1** (Goddard et al., 2008, Proposition 3.2) **Let $G$ be a 2-connected graph. Then $\chi_\rho(G) = 3$ if and only if $G$ is either the subdivision of a bipartite multigraph or the join of $K_2$ and an independent set.**

Based on this proposition we say that a graph $G$ is join reducible if there exists at least one vertex $x$ of $G$ such that $G - x$ is the join of $K_2$ and an independent set. Then we can prove the following result, the proof of which is a tedious case analysis and hence is omitted.

**Proposition 7.2** If $G$ is a 4-$\chi_\rho$-critical graph, then $G$ is join reducible if and only if $G$ is one of the five graphs in Fig. 10.

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Fig. 10: Some $4-\chi_{ap}$-critical graphs.

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