



## Research Article

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# Absence of Lavrentiev gap for non-autonomous functionals with $(p, q)$ -growth

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**Abstract:** We consider non-autonomous functionals of the form  $\mathcal{F}(u, \Omega) = \int_{\Omega} f(x, Du(x)) dx$ , where  $u: \Omega \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^N$ ,  $\Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^n$ . We assume that  $f(x, z)$  grows at least as  $|z|^p$  and at most as  $|z|^q$ . Moreover,  $f(x, z)$  is Hölder continuous with respect to  $x$  and convex with respect to  $z$ . In this setting, we give a sufficient condition on the density  $f(x, z)$  that ensures the absence of a Lavrentiev gap.

**Keywords:** Variational integrals, non-standard growth, regularity, Lavrentiev gap

**MSC 2010:** 49N60

## 1 Introduction

We consider variational integrals of the form

$$\mathcal{F}(u, \Omega) = \int_{\Omega} f(x, Du(x)) dx \quad (1.1)$$

where  $u: \Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^N$ ,  $n \geq 2$ ,  $N \geq 1$ ,  $f: \Omega \times \mathbb{R}^{nN} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  is a Caratheodory function, and  $\Omega$  is bounded and open. Moreover, we assume that, for exponents  $1 < p \leq q$  and constants  $\nu, L \in (0, +\infty)$ ,  $c \in [0, +\infty)$ , we have

$$\nu|z|^p - c \leq f(x, z) \leq L(1 + |z|^q). \quad (1.2)$$

In the scalar case  $N = 1$ , when  $p = q$ , the local minimizers  $u \in W^{1,p}(\Omega)$  of (1.1) are locally Hölder continuous, see [13] and [19, p. 361]. If  $p < q$  and  $q$  is far from  $p$ , then the local minimizers might be unbounded, see [12, 15, 17, 18] and [19, Section 5]. We are concerned with higher integrability for the gradient of minimizers. More precisely, assume that  $u: \Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^n \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^N$  makes the energy (1.1) finite. Then the left-hand side of (1.2) implies that  $Du \in L^p$ . In addition to finite energy, we assume that  $u$  is a minimizer of (1.1) and we ask: Does the minimality of  $u$  boost the integrability of the gradient  $Du$  from  $L^p$  to  $L^q$ ? The answer is given in [9]: We assume that (1.2) holds with  $\nu = 1$ ,  $c = 0$ , we require that  $z \rightarrow f(x, z) \in C^1(\mathbb{R}^{nN})$  and, for constants  $\mu \in [0, 1]$  and  $\alpha \in (0, 1]$ , we assume that the following hold:

$$L^{-1}(\mu^2 + |z_1|^2 + |z_2|^2)^{\frac{p-2}{2}} |z_1 - z_2|^2 \leq \left\langle \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}(x, z_1) - \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}(x, z_2); z_1 - z_2 \right\rangle, \quad (1.3)$$

$$\left| \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}(x, z) - \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}(y, z) \right| \leq L|x - y|^{\alpha}(1 + |z|^{q-1}). \quad (1.4)$$

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The exponents  $p$  and  $q$  must be close enough, i.e.,

$$1 < p \leq q < p\left(\frac{n + \alpha}{n}\right). \quad (1.5)$$

We recall that  $n$  is the dimension of the space where  $x$  lives, i.e.,  $x \in \Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^n$ . Let us remark that (1.5) asserts that the smaller  $\alpha$  is, the closer  $p$  and  $q$  must be. In addition, we assume that the Lavrentiev gap on  $u$  is zero:

$$\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0 \quad (1.6)$$

for every ball  $B_R \subset\subset \Omega$ . Such a Lavrentiev gap will be defined in the next section. Under (1.2)–(1.6), the local minimizers  $u$  of (1.1) enjoy higher integrability, i.e.,  $Du \in L_{\text{loc}}^q(\Omega)$ . Checking (1.6) is not easy for non-autonomous densities  $f(x, z)$ ; it has been done in [9] for some model functionals using some arguments due to [22]. The aim of the present paper is to give a sufficient condition on the density  $f(x, z)$  that ensures the vanishing of the Lavrentiev gap (1.6), see Theorem 3.1 (4).

## 2 Preliminaries

In the following  $\Omega$  will be an open, bounded subset of  $\mathbb{R}^n$ ,  $n \geq 2$ , and we will denote

$$B_R \equiv B_R(x_0) := \{x \in \mathbb{R}^n : |x - x_0| < R\},$$

where, unless differently specified, all the balls considered will have the same center. We assume that  $f: \Omega \times \mathbb{R}^{nN} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  is a Caratheodory function verifying the  $(p, q)$ -growth (1.2) with  $v = 1$  and  $c = 0$ . Moreover, we assume that  $z \rightarrow f(x, z)$  is convex. Due to the non-standard growth behavior of  $f$ , we shall adopt the following notion of local minimizer.

**Definition 2.1.** A function  $u \in W_{\text{loc}}^{1,1}(\Omega; \mathbb{R}^N)$  is a local minimizer of  $\mathcal{F}$  if and only if  $x \mapsto f(x, Du(x)) \in L_{\text{loc}}^1(\Omega)$  and

$$\int_{\text{supp } \phi} f(x, Du(x)) \, dx \leq \int_{\text{supp } \phi} f(x, Du(x) + D\phi(x)) \, dx,$$

for any  $\phi \in W^{1,1}(\Omega; \mathbb{R}^N)$  with  $\text{supp } \phi \subset\subset \Omega$ .

Let us now explain the Lavrentiev gap. We adopt the viewpoint of [4], see also [3]. Let us set

$$X = W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N), \quad Y = W_{\text{loc}}^{1,q}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N) \cap W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N).$$

We consider functionals  $\mathcal{G}: X \rightarrow [0, +\infty]$  that are sequentially weakly lower semicontinuous (s.w.l.s.c.) on  $X$ , and we set

$$\begin{aligned} \overline{\mathcal{F}}_X &= \sup\{\mathcal{G}: X \rightarrow [0, +\infty] \mid \mathcal{G} \text{ s.w.l.s.c.}, \mathcal{G} \leq \mathcal{F} \text{ on } X\}, \\ \overline{\mathcal{F}}_Y &= \sup\{\mathcal{G}: X \rightarrow [0, +\infty] \mid \mathcal{G} \text{ s.w.l.s.c.}, \mathcal{G} \leq \mathcal{F} \text{ on } Y\}. \end{aligned}$$

We have  $\overline{\mathcal{F}}_X \leq \overline{\mathcal{F}}_Y$ , and we define the Lavrentiev gap as follows:

$$\mathcal{L}(v, B_R) = \overline{\mathcal{F}}_Y(v) - \overline{\mathcal{F}}_X(v) \quad \text{for every } v \in X,$$

when  $\overline{\mathcal{F}}_X(v) < +\infty$  and  $\mathcal{L}(v, B_R) = 0$  if  $\overline{\mathcal{F}}_X(v) = +\infty$ . Since  $f(x, z)$  is convex with respect to  $z$ , standard weak lower semicontinuity results give  $\overline{\mathcal{F}}_X = \mathcal{F}$  (see, for instance, [14, Chapter 4]).

The following lemma will be used in the proof of the main theorem (see [4]).

**Lemma 2.2.** *Let  $u \in W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$  be a function such that  $\mathcal{F}(u, B_R) < +\infty$ . Then  $\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0$  if and only if there exists a sequence  $\{u_m\}_{m \in \mathbb{N}} \subset W_{\text{loc}}^{1,q}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N) \cap W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$  such that*

$$u_m \rightharpoonup u \quad \text{weakly in } W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$$

and

$$\mathcal{F}(u_m, B_R) \rightarrow \mathcal{F}(u, B_R).$$

### 3 Main section

**Theorem 3.1.** Let  $f : \Omega \times \mathbb{R}^{nN} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  be a function satisfying the following conditions:

- (1)  $|z|^p \leq f(x, z) \leq L(1 + |z|^q)$ ,  $1 < p < q < +\infty$ ,
- (2)  $|f(x, z) - f(\tilde{x}, z)| \leq H|x - \tilde{x}|^\alpha(1 + |z|^q)$ ,  $0 < \alpha \leq 1$ ,
- (3)  $z \mapsto f(x, z)$  is convex for all  $x$ ,
- (4) for  $B_R \subset\subset \Omega$ ,  $\varepsilon_0 \in (0, 1]$  such that  $B_{R+2\varepsilon_0} \subset\subset \Omega$ ,  $x \in B_R$  and  $\varepsilon \in (0, \varepsilon_0)$ , there exists  $\tilde{y} = \tilde{y}(x, \varepsilon) \in \overline{B(x, \varepsilon)}$  such that for  $z \in \mathbb{R}^{nN}$  and  $y \in \overline{B(x, \varepsilon)}$ , we have  $f(\tilde{y}, z) \leq f(y, z)$ .

Let  $u \in W_{loc}^{1,p}(\Omega; \mathbb{R}^N)$  such that  $x \mapsto f(x, Du(x)) \in L_{loc}^1(\Omega)$  and assume that

$$q \leq p\left(\frac{n + \alpha}{n}\right). \tag{3.1}$$

Then  $\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0$  for all  $B_R \subset\subset \Omega$ .

**Remark 3.2.** Let us now explain condition (4). For every fixed  $z$ ,  $y \rightarrow f(y, z)$  is continuous, so the minimization of  $f(y, z)$  when  $y \in \overline{B(x, \varepsilon)}$  gives a minimizer  $y$  depending on  $x, \varepsilon$  and  $z$ . Condition (4) asks for independence on  $z$ , i.e., there exists a minimizer  $\tilde{y}$  that works for every  $z$ . We will first give the proof of Theorem 3.1, and then we will show examples of densities  $f(x, z)$  satisfying condition (4).

**Remark 3.3.** Let us compare (1.5) with (3.1). When proving the absence of the Lavrentiev gap  $\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0$ , the borderline case  $q = p\left(\frac{n + \alpha}{n}\right)$  is allowed but we need strict inequality (1.5) when proving higher integrability of minimizers, see [9, p. 32].

*Proof.* Consider  $0 < \varepsilon < \varepsilon_0 \leq 1$  as in hypothesis (4), then  $u \in W^{1,p}(B_{R+2\varepsilon_0}; \mathbb{R}^N)$  and

$$\mathcal{F}(u, B_{R+2\varepsilon_0}) = \int_{B_{R+2\varepsilon_0}} f(x, Du(x)) dx < +\infty.$$

Let us denote  $u_\varepsilon(x) := (u * \phi_\varepsilon)(x)$ , the usual mollification, where  $x \in B_R$ , and define

$$f_\varepsilon(x, z) = \min_{y \in \overline{B(x, \varepsilon)}} f(y, z). \tag{3.2}$$

By definition, it follows that

$$|Du_\varepsilon(x)| \leq \left( \int_{B_{R+2\varepsilon_0}} |Du(y)|^p dy \right)^{\frac{1}{p}} \left( \int_{\mathbb{R}^n} |\phi_\varepsilon(y)|^{p'} \right)^{\frac{1}{p'}} \leq C\varepsilon^{-\frac{n}{p}},$$

where  $C = C(\|Du\|_{L^p}) > 1$ . Moreover, by the Hölder continuity hypothesis (i.e., hypothesis (2)), we have

$$f_\varepsilon(x, z) \geq f(x, z) - H\varepsilon^\alpha(1 + |z|^q). \tag{3.3}$$

Note that the left-hand side of hypothesis (1) gives

$$|z|^p \leq f_\varepsilon(x, z). \tag{3.4}$$

Now we observe that is possible to find  $K = K(p, q, \|Du\|_{L^p}, H) < +\infty$  such that

$$f(x, z) \leq Kf_\varepsilon(x, z) + H, \quad x \in B_R, |z| \leq C\varepsilon^{-\frac{n}{p}}. \tag{3.5}$$

Indeed, let us fix  $\delta \in (0, 1)$  and observe that, using (3.3), (3.4) and  $|z| \leq C\varepsilon^{-\frac{n}{p}}$ , we get

$$\begin{aligned} f_\varepsilon(x, z) &= \delta f_\varepsilon(x, z) + (1 - \delta)f_\varepsilon(x, z) \\ &\geq \delta f(x, z) - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha(1 + |z|^q) + (1 - \delta)|z|^p \\ &= \delta f(x, z) - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha|z|^q + (1 - \delta)|z|^p - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha \\ &= \delta f(x, z) - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha|z|^p|z|^{q-p} + (1 - \delta)|z|^p - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha \\ &\geq \delta f(x, z) - \delta C^{q-p}H\varepsilon^{\alpha+(\frac{p-q}{p})n}|z|^p + (1 - \delta)|z|^p - \delta H\varepsilon^\alpha \\ &\geq \delta f(x, z) + (1 - \delta - \delta C^{q-p}H)|z|^p - \delta H, \end{aligned}$$

where the last estimate relies on the fact that  $\frac{q}{p} \leq \frac{n+\alpha}{n}$ ,  $0 < \alpha \leq 1$  and  $0 < \varepsilon < 1$ . Then (3.5) follows choosing  $K = \frac{1}{\delta} = 1 + C^{q-p}H$ . Now, using hypothesis (4), Jensen’s inequality and (3.2), we obtain

$$\begin{aligned} f_\varepsilon(x, Du_\varepsilon(x)) &= f(\tilde{y}, Du_\varepsilon(x)) \\ &\leq \int_{B(x,\varepsilon)} f(\tilde{y}, Du(y))\phi_\varepsilon(x-y) dy \\ &\leq \int_{B(x,\varepsilon)} f(y, Du(y))\phi_\varepsilon(x-y) dy \\ &= (f(\cdot, Du(\cdot)) * \phi_\varepsilon)(x) \\ &=: f(\cdot, Du(\cdot))_\varepsilon(x). \end{aligned} \tag{3.6}$$

Therefore, using (3.5), we have

$$f(x, Du_\varepsilon(x)) \leq Kf(\cdot, Du(\cdot))_\varepsilon(x) + H.$$

Finally, since  $f(\cdot, Du(\cdot))_\varepsilon(x) \rightarrow f(x, Du(x))$  strongly in  $L^1(B_R)$ , by recalling that  $u_\varepsilon \rightarrow u$  in  $W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$ , and by using a well-known variant of Lebesgue’s dominated convergence theorem and Lemma 2.2, the proof is completed.  $\square$

**Remark 3.4.** We note that our assumption (4) is very close to [22, assumption (2.3)]. Our proof is inspired by the one of [9, Lemma 13], which, in turn, is based on some arguments used in [22].

**Remark 3.5.** Now we give some examples of functions for which Theorem 3.1 is valid.

(1)  $f(x, z) = b(z) + a(x)c(z)$  with the following conditions:

- (i)  $a \in C^{0,\alpha}(\bar{\Omega})$  and  $a(x) \geq 0$  for all  $x$ ,
- (ii)  $b$  and  $c$  are convex functions such that

$$|z|^p \leq b(z) \leq H(|z|^q + 1) \quad \text{for } H \geq 1, \quad 0 \leq c(z) \leq L(|z|^q + 1) \quad \text{for } L \geq 1.$$

For instance, we can consider the following functions:

- $f(x, z) = b(z)$ , independent of  $x$ .
  - $f(x, z) = |z|^p + a(x)|z|^q$ . This example has been already dealt with in [9]; see also [1, 6–8, 10, 22].
  - $f(x, z) = |z|^p + a(x)|z|^p \ln(e + |z|)$ . This example is taken from [1, 2].
  - $f(x, z) = |z|^2 + a(x)[\max\{z_n, 0\}]^q$ , where  $q > 2$ . This example is inspired by [21].
  - $f(x, z) = |z|^p + a(x)[|z_1 - z_2|^q + |z_1|^q]$ , where  $1 < p < q < +\infty$ . This example is inspired by [5].
- (2)  $f(x, z) = \sum_{i=1}^k [b_i(z) + a_i(x)c_i(z)]$ , where  $k \in \mathbb{N}$  and  $a_i, b_i, c_i$  verify the corresponding conditions of the previous example for all  $i \in \{1, 2, \dots, k\}$ .
- (3)  $f(x, z) = h(\sum_{i=1}^k [b_i(z) + a_i(x)c_i(z)])$ , where, in addition to the previous conditions,  $h$  is increasing, convex, Lipschitz and such that  $s \leq h(s) \leq as + \beta$ .
- (4)  $f(x, z) = h(a(x), z)$  with the following conditions:
- (i)  $t \mapsto h(t, z)$  is increasing,
  - (ii)  $h$  is convex with respect to the second variable,
  - (iii)  $a \in C(\bar{\Omega})$ ,
  - (iv)  $f$  verifies assumptions (1) and (2) of Theorem 3.1.

For example,

$$f(x, z) = |z|^p + (e + \tilde{a}(x)|z|)^{a+b \sin(\ln(\ln(e+\tilde{a}(x)|z|)))},$$

where  $\tilde{a} \in C^{0,\alpha}(\bar{\Omega})$ ,  $\tilde{a}(x) \geq 0$  for all  $x$ ,  $a \geq 1 + 2b\sqrt{2}$  and  $b > 0$ . In order to satisfy the non-standard  $(p, q)$ -growth condition, we can consider  $1 < p < a + b \leq q$ . This example is inspired by [11, 20], see also [16].

**Remark 3.6.** Hypothesis (4) was used during the proof of Theorem 3.1 in order to obtain the second increase in (3.6). Now we want to show an example of a function for which hypothesis (4) fails. Let us consider  $\Omega = B(0, 1) \subset \mathbb{R}^2$  and the function  $f: B(0, 1) \times \mathbb{R}^{2N} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  such that

$$f(x, z) = |z|^p + a(x)(|z|^q - 1) + 1,$$

where, for  $x = (x_1, x_2)$ ,

$$a(x) = \begin{cases} x_2 & \text{if } x_2 > 0, \\ 0 & \text{if } x_2 \leq 0. \end{cases}$$

In this case the minimum point of the function changes depending on the choice of  $z$ . Indeed, let us consider  $B_R = B(0, \frac{1}{2})$ ,  $\varepsilon_0 = \frac{1}{8}$ ,  $x = 0$ . Then we deal with the two cases:  $|z| = 0$  and  $|z| = 2$ .

When  $|z| = 0$ , we have

$$f(y, z) = \begin{cases} -y_2 + 1 & \text{if } y_2 > 0, \\ 1 & \text{if } y_2 \leq 0, \end{cases}$$

and then the minimum value in  $\overline{B(0, \varepsilon)}$  is reached for  $\tilde{y} = (0, \varepsilon)$ .

If  $|z| = 2$ , then

$$f(y, z) = \begin{cases} 2^p + y_2(2^q - 1) + 1 & \text{if } y_2 > 0, \\ 2^p + 1 & \text{if } y_2 \leq 0, \end{cases}$$

and therefore, in this situation,  $\tilde{y}$  is any point  $(y_1, y_2)$  such that  $y_2 \leq 0$ .

**Corollary 3.7.** *Let  $h : \Omega \times \mathbb{R}^{nN} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  be a function verifying Theorem 3.1 and let  $f : \Omega \times \mathbb{R}^{nN} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$  be a function such that*

$$h(x, z) - c_1 \leq f(x, z) \leq h(x, z) + c_2,$$

where  $c_1, c_2 \geq 0$ . We consider  $u \in W_{loc}^{1,p}(\Omega; \mathbb{R}^N)$  such that  $x \mapsto f(x, Du(x)) \in L_{loc}^1(\Omega)$  and assume  $q \leq p(\frac{n+\alpha}{n})$ . Then  $\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0$  for all  $B_R \subset\subset \Omega$ .

*Proof.* We follow the proof of [9, Theorem 6]. By the proof of Theorem 3.1, if  $u \in W_{loc}^{1,p}(\Omega; \mathbb{R}^N)$  is such that  $h(x, Du(x)) \in L_{loc}^1(\Omega)$ , then there exists a sequence  $\{u_m\}_{m \in \mathbb{N}} \subset W^{1,q}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$  such that  $u_m \rightarrow u$  strongly in  $W^{1,p}(B_R; \mathbb{R}^N)$ ,  $Du_m(x) \rightarrow Du(x)$  a.e.,  $h(x, Du_m(x)) \rightarrow h(x, Du(x))$  a.e., and  $\int_{B_R} h(x, Du_m(x)) \rightarrow \int_{B_R} h(x, Du(x))$ . Using a well-known variant of Lebesgue’s dominated convergence theorem, we have that

$$\int_{B_R} f(x, Du_m(x)) \rightarrow \int_{B_R} f(x, Du(x)),$$

and then, by Lemma 2.2,  $\mathcal{L}(u, B_R) = 0$ . □

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