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DOI:

[10.1922/EJPRD_2440Darvell19](https://doi.org/10.1922/EJPRD_2440Darvell19)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Darvell, B & Dias, AP 2023, 'Force-Distance Relation for Dental Magnets – Fitted Equation', *The European journal of prosthodontics and restorative dentistry*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 126-144.
https://doi.org/10.1922/EJPRD_2440Darvell19

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Force-distance relation for dental magnets – fitted equation

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Abstract

Objective. Despite much effort, the force-distance power law for dental magnets had been unresolved until a theoretical study found that only even inverse powers were allowed, and that for simple magnets inverse fourth power was the only possibility. It remained to demonstrate that this indeed did apply to real magnets, which demonstration is the present purpose.

Methods. The force exerted by a series of real dental magnets to a large steel plate, and in a few cases to dental magnet keepers, as a function of distance was recorded. Curve-fitting of that data was explored, based on the form of the equation previously used for long dipoles in which the power law index was 2, initially allowing that to be a free parameter. Following the conclusion that an index of 4 was the only feasible value, corresponding fitted parameter values were examined in relation to magnet design and each other.

Results. The power law index was confirmed to be 4, in keeping with the theoretical expectation. For a satisfactory fit, a 'polar offset' and a 'stretch power' were again required to better approximate the experimental results. Polar offset appears to be a function of apparent pole strength; stretch power less clearly so.

Significance. The motivating question is settled. The physical meaning of the polar offset and stretch power remains to be determined, but modification of the theoretical model of a static polar distribution may be required.

Key words: dental magnets; force-distance equation; power law; breakaway force

1. Introduction

As has been previously discussed, [1,2] miniature magnets are used in dentistry for denture retention and orthodontic treatment, and understanding the relationship between the force exerted on a keeper and its separation from a magnet would be of value for design and application. However, for various reasons, there has been no consensus as to the nature of that relationship, with imprecise and contradictory experimental determinations.

From the earliest work, [3] the inverse square law has been said to apply, although this can only be true for the interaction between a single pair of point-like poles. Elliot (1988) [4] cited Gillings (in a personal communication) as remarking that the field strength drops as the inverse cube of distance, although no publication regarding this has been traced and thus no grounds are known for the assertion.

To begin to address the problem of the force-distance relationship for dental magnets, and as a simplification, the behaviour of long, thin cylindrical magnets against a magnetizable stainless steel disc was studied as an approximation of a ‘pole’ and its image in a permeable plane (that is, with the other end of the unavoidable dipole sufficiently distant as to be non-contributory), [1] when it was found that the inverse-square (Coloumb) law did not apply as such. This was attributed to the fact that a polar disc – rather than a point – might be a better approximation, but even the rigorous mathematical solution to this model failed to match behaviour. [2] Instead, by inspection and exploration, a simple function was found:

$$F = \frac{a}{(d^c + h)^2} \quad (1)$$

that, allowing for minor zeroing errors in force, F , and separation, d , gave a satisfactory fit. Here, a is a general scale factor representing the effect of the magnet strength and h was taken to be a polar-disc offset (that is, of its location inside the face of the magnet), while c is a curvature adjustment (equivalent in effect to the ‘stretched exponential’ previously applied.[1] This was shown to be the most parsimonious expression feasible.

The question remains as to the behaviour of real dental magnets, as opposed to the simplified system studied before.[1,2] Here, it is not just a case of the summation of effects for a simple point dipole and its image, but it is apparent that the ‘polar patch’ equivalent must be used in any mathematical treatment. The situation becomes even more difficult when more complicated magnet designs are involved. The mathematical problem was solved for any arbitrary arrangement of magnetic poles, [5] using as a basis the established physical Coulomb law for the interaction of pairs of point-like poles, and thus for the integration of the effects over surfaces and volumes: only inverse power laws with even integer powers are permissible at large separations. Nevertheless, it was found that the real, physical data for the long thin dipoles [1,2], did not fit that solution at small d , even though the asymptotic behaviour at large d was as expected – inverse square. For a dipole and its image, inverse fourth power is expected at large d , with which previous results [6, 7] appear, at least, to be consistent. Thus, given the success of the curve-fitting for the long, thin dipole magnets,[2] the behaviour of dental magnets was re-examined.

2 Materials & Methods

Twelve types of dental magnet were tested (Table 1). The same equipment and approach as before was used, [1] with all due care being taken to ensure a stable result after each cross-head movement, generally requiring a few minutes to settle, also correcting displacement for load-cell compliance. The sequence of tests was more or less random, collected over a long period of time, such that long term systematic effects are unlikely.

Because the theoretical mathematics of the force-distance relationship is extremely complicated [5] it is not possible to use those results to analyse the experimental results. Hence, in the manner previously used, [2] a wide array of equation forms was explored through curve-fitting in software (TableCurve 2D v5.0, SPSS, Chicago, IL, USA), checking both by visual inspection of plots and the physical sense of the fitted parameter estimates. The most parsimonious, general, and effective function, following the structure of equation (1) in [2] was:

$$F = \frac{a}{\left[(d + \varepsilon_d)^c + h \right]^4} + \varepsilon_F \quad (1)$$

where now the fitted ‘zeroing’ error terms for force and displacement are shown (as used previously).

Given the large range of force values involved – a few newtons down to millinewtons, better stability was obtained using fitting $\log(F)$ to the log of the right-hand side, because of which it was found convenient to treat the breakaway force (*i.e.* the peak value) as occurring at 0.1 μm , to avoid singularities in the various function explorations. In addition, better stability and easy of graphical inspection was obtained by scaling the separation d and using the log value as input. Thus the data transforms were:

$$X \rightarrow \log(X/1000), \quad Y \rightarrow \log(Y) \quad (2)$$

and the fitted function:

$$Y = \text{LOG}(\#A/(\#B + ((10^{(X)} + \#E)^{\#D})^4 + \#C)) \quad (3)$$

where $\#A = a$; $\#B =$ ‘polar’ offset, h ; $\#C =$ zeroing error in F , ε_F ; $\#D =$ stretch power, c ; $\#E =$ zeroing error in d , ε_d . The order of the constants is as they were found necessary to be included for a satisfactory fit across the data set.

The denominator exponent was initially allowed to be a free parameter for the fitting. It was found that in several instances the model was thereby effectively overspecified and unusable results obtained. Otherwise, the value tended to lie in the region of 4, which conformed with the prediction.[5] To be sure, fixed values of 2 and 6 were also checked but failed to provide even a suggestion of a satisfactory fit.

The procedure was necessarily somewhat recursive. By inspection, obviously errant values of force (being clearly outside the noise envelope), possibly attributable to transcription error or system glitch, were deleted. Less than 1% were thus affected. More problematic was that at values less 10 mN system drift became obvious, bearing in mind that a run could take several hours, despite air-conditioning

and allowing the test machine to stabilize overnight (> 16 h). This necessitated the trimming of that late data when there was a sequence of three or more points deviating appreciably from the trend of the previous.

3 Results

The cleaned raw data are shown in Fig. 1, where two examples of that kind of deviation requiring trimming are also shown. Subsequently, inspection of the fitted curve might show an occasional obviously errant point or deviating trend; these were removed and the fit recalculated. Generally, the standard errors would be improved without the parameter estimates being affected materially.

In the majority of instances, the value of the estimate of the zeroing error in distance was found to be insignificantly different from zero and this led to an overfitted function with consequent larger standard errors in the other parameter estimates (which were then insignificant). Dropping that parameter then gave a much better fit with no insignificant values. In 20 instances, this was also true of the estimated zeroing error in force, after the distance error had been dropped because that was the most destabilizing, when a similar procedure was followed.

The curve fitting results are shown in Fig. 2, where the raw data have been transformed as indicated: $F \rightarrow F - \epsilon_F$ and $d \rightarrow (d + \epsilon_d)^c + h$. The linearization is notable with the exception of a few deviations at low d . Rescaling the ordinate by dividing by a (Fig. 3) shows that the outcome is consistent and that the inverse fourth power is the applicable limiting form for all magnets.

The principal measure fitted was the ‘strength’, a (equation 1), and this was rescaled to yield the apparent pole strength Q from the relevant relationships using:

$$Q = \sqrt{\frac{a}{10^{-7}} \left(\frac{\mu_r - 1}{\mu_r + 1} \right)} \quad (4)$$

taking the permeability of free space as $4\pi \times 10^{-7} \text{ Hm}^{-1}$, and the relative permeability of stainless steel (the opposing permeable plane) as 200.[1] The results are shown in Fig. 4 by product. The fitted values for ‘offset’, h , are likewise plotted in Fig. 5, and the ‘stretch’ power in Fig. 6.

For comparison and exploration, plots of the breakaway force, F_{max} by product (Fig. 7), as well as pairwise plots of each fitted parameter (Figs. 8 - 13) and a 3D view of power *vs.* pole strength and offset (Fig. 14) are also given. The full fitted data set is given in Supplementary Table 1.

4 Discussion

There were several challenges in obtaining the raw data. Given that both force and separation ranged over four orders of magnitude, and the long duration required for any run, thermal and electronic drift frequently became problematic at large separations, despite all precautions. Also, the machine resolution of just $1 \mu\text{m}$ (the limit of the encoder) would appear to be inadequate for the present purpose at small separations; an optical (non-contact) displacement sensor (*e.g.* as used here [8]) might be of value if capable of higher resolution. Thus, both ends of the range have experimental difficulties. In addition, it became apparent that breakaway force reproducibility was sometimes poor, despite ensuring cleanliness for good contact and frequent degaussing of the stainless steel. This then showed in the scatter in estimated parameter values for replicate runs (see identified replicates in Supplementary Table 1). It is apparent that further measures would need to be taken to improve on the data quality, underlining the comments made earlier,[1,2] if this kind of work is to be contemplated. Nevertheless, it is clear that now we have a much better idea of the behaviour of dental magnets than hitherto, in particular the limiting power law at large separations is now established unambiguously.

As noted above, the fitting process necessitated the use of error terms for force and distance in many instances. The distribution of these fitted error values for force is shown in Fig. 15. Clearly this represents a mixed distribution in that the tails are unexpectedly long, given the central slope. However,

while removing those tails leads to a closer approach to a normal distribution a proper dissection is not possible because it cannot be known what values in the central region belong to the broader distribution (which therefore cannot be analysed), but also these are censored data. That is, there are some 20 values missing because the fitted parameter was insignificant and dropped (due to spurious correlation between the fitted values). It is not possible now to identify the nature or source of the broader distribution, although the narrow distribution would appear to be on a reasonable scale to attribute it to simple random setting errors, although slightly biased ($-0.0025 \text{ N} \pm 0.0032 \text{ N}$, manual estimate), at close to the resolution of the system. However, inspection of the error values by Group (supplementary Fig. xx) shows that the large errors were not randomly distributed but associated with particular instances in certain groups. The wholesale removal of data for individual magnet types from that error plot therefore was not appropriate as that kind of systematic effect was not in evidence.

The story for the distance error is rather different. These estimates were all positive, meaning that the fitted distance in these instances was always larger than that calculated as input (*i.e.* from the load cell relaxation correction), but distributed near normally as log values (Fig. 16). Again, there is some censoring as the estimated values approach zero, non-significant values having to be dropped, that is there are missing values in the lower tail. The (geometric) mean would appear to be about 0.013 mm, and the effective standard deviation of the log of d about 0.608, or a factor of about 4 on d itself (from the regression, estimated s.d. = $1/\text{slope}$, estimated mean = $-\text{intercept}/\text{slope}$).

Inspection of the data for the runs where the d error term was required shows that it was restricted to products from Preat, Aichi and Technovent (Groups 3, 5 and 6) with the exception of a single instance for an Igloo magnet (Group 1c). From the details known (Table 1), there is no evident commonality of design to distinguish this subset. While genuine experimental error would not be unreasonable and might have been expected (and indeed anticipated for the curve fitting), the brand coincidence suggests that another as yet unrecognized factor is operating, underlined by the fact that no negative values emerged, as would be expected for random setting errors.

The equation fitted (equation 1) was found by analogy with that for long thin dipoles,[2] merely changing the power law index from 2 to 4 after having excluded other possibilities. Strictly, the physically expected boundary condition at large separation of pure inverse 4th power is not satisfied, given that for many magnets a stretch power less than 1 is required for the fit. This might be attributed to real magnets having a behaviour differing from that assumed in [5], specifically that the ‘polar’ patch is effectively movable, as previously discussed.[1,2] Indeed, the spatial distribution of the fictional magnetic poles may be responsive in some sense to the image interaction, as well as the location of the nominal polar disc relaxing, or being ‘elastic’, as previously suggested.[1] Nevertheless, the model does seem to be sufficient for general purposes (Fig. 3).

Turning to the principal fitted parameters, pole strength, Q , varied considerably between products (Fig. 4). Other than that the dipole magnets (1a, 1b, 8) had clearly higher values than the rest, and that physically larger magnets tended to show larger values, some more clearly than others, no clear pattern emerges. The use of commercial keepers (g, s, d) seem to show a tendency to slightly lower values, but given the general scatter in replicates (Supplementary Table 1) this cannot be said with any certainty. In one instance (7b), removing the cladding resulted in an appreciable increase in Q , but not in the other that was attempted (8). This might be related to the assembly design, circular as opposed to dipole.

The distinction between the dipole types (1a, 1b, 8) and the others was much more marked in respect of the polar offset (Fig. 5), the only exception being for the unclad 7b group. It is noted that this fitted value for the dipoles is a substantial fraction of the depth of the magnet ($\sim 0.55 - 0.83$) (Supplementary Fig. 1), but for the others it ranged between ~ 0.04 and ~ 0.4 . This underlines perhaps that the concept of a pole in such devices remains a ‘convenient fiction’,[1] but also that this is essentially from an arbitrary function fit. Even so, it does suggest a fundamental difference in behaviour when the polar axis is parallel as opposed to perpendicular to the permeable plane. It is necessary to note at this point that the working face of Group 4 magnets is spherically concave (the supplied keeper is correspondingly convex). This means that full contact was not obtained on the flat permeable plane. This

does not appear to have affect the data fitting as such, but it suggest that the ‘distance’ is ambiguous and thus that the offset value is perhaps larger than otherwise would be the case; the effect however was not dramatic.

There is no clear pattern for the stretch power (Fig. 6). Groups 1, 2b, 7 and 8 are centred on a value of ~ 1.0 , Groups 1c, 4, and 6 are clustered in the vicinity of 0.85, while Groups 3 and 5 are centred on ~ 0.73 . The others are not clear in this respect.

Where there is a clearer outcome is in respect of the breakaway force, F_{max} (Fig. 7). The dipole types (1a, 1b, 8) gave much more widely scattered but generally appreciably lower values than the others which, somewhat surprisingly, show very little variation around a mean of about 5 N. However, while there is a clear size effect for Groups 2, 3, 4 and 5, this does not show for Group 7. It may be noted that closed-field magnets were developed as a result of the debate about the possibility of biological effects arising from the magnetic field of dental dipole magnets, albeit small and static.[7] It would seem that there is a clear advantage in terms of F_{max} in the use of closed-field designs.

The variation of offset with Q is striking in a log-log plot (Fig. 8). Firstly, the dipole magnets (1a, 1b, 8) fall clearly on a separate trajectory from the others, with a significant regression (solid black line): $r^2 = 0.4665$, $n = 37$, $F = 30.6$, $P \sim 3 \times 10^{-6}$; $b_1 = 0.146 \pm 0.027$. The results for the other types also fall clearly on a line although there are a few points that have discrepant low values (circled, marked off by the dashed line). One of those points lies very close to that dashed line but was included because of the observation in respect of Fig. 9 that lay in that subset there (see below). The regression on the remaining points (solid red line) is also highly significant: $r^2 = 0.9450$, $n = 105$, $F = 17770$, $P \sim 1 \times 10^{-66}$; $b_1 = 0.561 \pm 0.013$. These results are taken to mean that there is some physical sense in the concept of offset, and dependent on Q, although of course quite what is not apparent. It may be noted that the difficulty with Group 4 noted above, with respect to the concavity, has not resulted in any great effect here.

The relationship of the fitted stretch power to pole strength, Q , is less clear (Fig. 9). It is here, as before, an arbitrary means of adjusting the curvature, given that it is now understood that the near-field prediction of force is a complicated matter.[5] That said, it was noticed that 7 of the suspect points in Fig. 8 were clustered together, but with a third member of Group 5a (asterisk) included in the region – hence the exclusion in Fig. 8. On this view, then, there is still a trend from a low of about 0.7 to around 1.0, from low to high Q , but on this basis four data points for Group 7b seem to lie away from the others (dotted symbols). To examine whether these points are associated with any other effects they are similarly identified in Figs. 4 - 8, and 10 - 13, but nothing more obvious emerges.

If there is indeed a true relationship between these fitted parameters of offset and power on Q , the implication is for the purpose of this curve-fitting exercise would be that they are essentially functions of Q and thus correlated with it. Ordinarily, such correlation causes problems in regression because it amounts to an overspecification, usually manifest by large significance probability values for the each of the variables so related. In each case here, however, after dropping the error terms on that basis, no non-significant inclusions were made in the final table of results. However, this does not eliminate co-dependence of the fitted parameters, meaning that it is feasible for odd values, such as now seen, to emerge in the course of the residuals minimization. Care is always required to avoid false imputations, hence the caution here.

The relationship of Q to the breakaway force, F_{max} , is more complicated (Fig. 10). Firstly, with the exception of a few obvious outliers (see previous remarks), the dipole data (1a, 1b, 8) fall on a clear straight line through the origin (black) ($r^2 = 0.9914$, $n = 23$, $F = 2536$, $P \sim 3 \times 10^{-24}$; $b_1 = 7.74 \pm 0.15$). Likewise, the data for Group 5 fall on a clear line through the origin (blue) ($r^2 = 0.9817$, $n = 26$, $F = 1343$, $P \sim 3 \times 10^{-23}$; $b_1 = 0.283 \pm 0.008$). But while the data for Group 3 mostly fall fairly close to this latter line, the rest do not appear to have any systematic pattern, indeed they are very scattered. Thus while it might appear reasonable and expected for a direct relationship to exist, there are clearly other factors in play, including but probably not only experimental error.

While there is some clustering according to type, there is a general tendency to lower values of offset with increasing breakaway force (Fig. 11) (a log scale for offset is used because it is considered infeasible for a negative value to arise at larger values of F_{max}). In the plot of power vs. breakaway force (Fig. 12), there is a rather more obvious grouping into the sets mentioned for Fig. 4, *i.e.* around 1.0, 0.85 and 0.73. With hindsight, this clustering can also be seen in Fig. 9. If this effect is real it suggests that it may reflect the underlying physics, noticing that the dipoles and split-pole design (1a, 1b, 8) values lie around 1.0, the two split-pole designs have a value ~ 0.85 , and that the values at ~ 0.73 are both sandwich types – but the others confound this simplicity. Little of interest emerges in the plot of power vs. offset (Fig. 13).

The 3-D view of power vs. offset and Q again shows that identifying the outlier points above was justified, but it does seem to point towards a structural relationship between these fitted parameters in what remains, of course, an approximating function.

Other possible relationships were explored – magnet dimensions, cross-section and volume, but most especially the fitted values against the actual contact area as this was postulated to be of some importance. However, apart from a vague general size effect, no new insight was gained.

In summary, the key finding now is that the predicted inverse fourth power for force vs. distance has been verified to apply to a variety of real dental magnets. Secondly, a usefully parsimonious function can be fitted to the data over a wide range, even if the form fails to meet the theoretical boundary condition. The calculated offset appears to be a direct function of effective pole strength, and of different form for dipoles as opposed to the other designs, which appear to have a common behaviour. Surprisingly, with the exception of dipoles (Groups 1, 8) and Groups 3 and 5, there is no clear relationship between apparent pole strength and the breakaway force (Fig. 10).

Despite a great deal of attention being given to the form of the force-distance relationship for dental magnets, as documented before,[1,2] it remains unclear what practical benefit there might be for dentistry as such, beyond the value of general understanding. It would appear that the only relevant property is the breakaway force, F_{max} , and this value in fact varies very little between the dental products examined here for all designs except simple open-field dipoles (low) and the example of a rather large Co-Sm device (Group 2a) (high) (Fig. 7). There is therefore little to choose between them on that basis except that closed-field designs are to be preferred on the basis of attainable breakaway force. Of course, this value is constrained by a minimum for a usefully functional retentive device, and a practical maximum for removal when required. Size may be more limiting in terms of prosthesis design.

5 Conclusion

The question of the power law applying to real dental magnets has been settled unambiguously, being inverse 4th power as predicted theoretically. However, the approximating function used again uses two parameters – offset and stretch power – which may suggest that the theoretically-assumed static magnetic pole distribution is in need of reconsideration, and thus whether they are functionally-related to pole strength or design. Clearly, the experimental difficulties discussed above need attention, if better resolution and reproducibility can be attained, for further study of the physics.

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(table legend)

Table 1 Characteristics of magnets tested, showing design icon used in Figs 4 - 7 and Supplementary Fig 1, and the symbol colour for all plots.

(figure captions)

Fig. 1 Raw data for all magnets after trimming deviating points at very small and very large separations (see text). Two examples of drift at large separation have been left to indicate the nature of the problem: from a) Group 6, b) Group 3a. The dashed line is of slope -4. (Breakaway values not shown.)

Fig. 2 Data of Fig. 1 rescaled according to the fitted parameters. (The untrimmed examples are now trimmed.)

Fig. 3 Data of Fig. 2 rescaled by the force scale factor a . There is a good approach to the expected straight line over 5 orders of magnitude.

Fig. 4 Calculated apparent 'pole strength', Q , by magnet type from fitted values of a . The icon on the upper border represents the magnet design (see Table 1). Key labels have been inserted where useful to distinguish products. Points where commercial keepers were tested indicated by letters: d - Dyna, g - GDP, s - Shiner. Unclad magnets : u.

Fig. 5 Fitted values of the apparent polar offset, h , by magnet type. Key as for Fig. 4.

Fig. 6 Fitted values of the apparent stretch power, c , by magnet type. Key as for Fig. 4.

Fig. 7 Breakaway force, F_{max} , by magnet type. Key as for Fig. 4.

Fig. 8 Offset h vs. Q . Separate regression lines shown for dipoles and the rest, the latter excluding those points below the dashed line, circled (see text). Group 2a and 4 magnets are labelled.

Fig. 9 Stretch power, c , vs. Q . Group 2a and 4 magnets are labelled. Points excluded from regression Fig. 8 circled, additionally identified aberrant instance with an asterisk.

Fig. 10 Q vs. F_{max} . Regression lines (constrained to the origin) for eye guidance for dipoles (excluding odd values to the right) and Group 5.

Fig. 11 Offset h vs. F_{max} . Labelled as for Fig. 9; Group 5 types also marked.

Fig. 12 Stretch power, c vs. F_{max} . Labelled as for Fig. 11.

Fig. 13 Stretch power, c vs. offset h . Labelled as for Fig. 11.

Fig. 14 Stretch power, c vs. Q and offset, h .