

Integrative network-based approaches for modeling human disease

Citation for published version (APA):

Ali, M. (2019). *Integrative network-based approaches for modeling human disease*. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. Maastricht University. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20190830ma>

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2019

DOI:

[10.26481/dis.20190830ma](https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20190830ma)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

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UNIVERSITÉ DU
LUXEMBOURG

PhD-FSTC-2019-42
The Faculty of Sciences, Technology and
Communication



The Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life
Sciences

DISSERTATION

Defence held on 30/08/2019 in Maastricht, Netherlands

to obtain the degree of

DOCTEUR DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DU LUXEMBOURG

EN *BIOLOGIE*

AND

DOCTOR AT MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

by

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INTEGRATIVE NETWORK-BASED APPROACHES
FOR MODELING HUMAN DISEASE

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**INTEGRATIVE NETWORK-BASED APPROACHES FOR MODELING
HUMAN DISEASE**

Dissertation

to obtain the degree of Doctor at Maastricht University,
on the authority of the Rector Magnificus Prof. dr. Rianne M. Letschert,
in accordance with the decision of the Board of Deans,
to be defended in public on:
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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation has been written only by the undersigned and without any assistance from third parties. Furthermore, I confirm that no sources have been used in the preparation of this thesis other than those indicated herein.

Muhammad Ali,

Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg

22 August 2019

Acknowledgements

Without the support of a number of people and institutions, it would not have been possible to write this dissertation. It is my pleasure to have the opportunity to express my gratitude to some of them here.

For my academic achievements, I would like to acknowledge my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Antonio del Sol for the opportunity to join his team and his constant support and guidance. I can say with certainty that four years of regular brain storming and critical scientific discussions constituted an invaluable training period. I would also like to acknowledge the help and support of my co-supervisor Prof. Dr. Jos Kleinjans. Their suggestions have helped to define my training as a Ph.D. student and the resulting Ph.D. thesis.

Especially, I am thankful to Prof. Dr. Daniel L.A. van den Hove for his constant and indispensable support as an advisor for my thesis work. His encouragement has been the biggest contribution towards the success in the execution of this thesis work.

I am grateful to Dr. Sascha Jung and Dr. Ehsan Pishva for their intellectual guidance and extending all the support despite their busy schedule. Few would have been possible without their scientific and moral support.

I would like to thank Prof. Jens C. Schwamborn and Prof. Jorge Goncalves for agreeing to take part in my CET and thesis review committees. Their valuable comments and suggestions have helped me a lot in shaping up my thesis and critically viewing my own research work.

I am especially grateful to the paranymphs Ghazi Al Jowf, Kyonghwan Choe, and Martin Bustelo, as well as the former and current members of the Computational Biology Group at LCSB and MHeNS at Maastricht University, for their enthusiasm, support, and making this an unforgettable journey.

I would also like to thank FNR Luxembourg, and JPND Maastricht, for funding and hosting me for four years. Furthermore, the help and support offered by the EPIAD consortium and the secretaries Ms. Nicole Senden and Ms. Christine Marszalek also deserves to be acknowledged.

On a social note, I would like to thank my family and friends, for their emotional support. Without their constant support, I would not have been able to achieve this milestone in my life.

Preface

Before you lies the dissertation “Integrative Network-Based Approaches For Modeling Human Disease”, the basis of which is a research work conducted throughout the duration of Ph.D. It has been written to fulfill the graduation requirements of Doctor of Biology at the University of Luxembourg and Maastricht University. I was engaged in researching and writing this dissertation from January to April 2019.

The conducted projects were undertaken under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Antonio del sol and Prof. Dr. Jos Kleinjans together with Dr. Daniel L.A. van den Hove. The addressed research questions were formulated together with my supervisor and co-supervisor. Different projects had different level of difficulties, but conducting extensive literature-review and thorough analyses have allowed me to answer the important biological questions described in this thesis. Fortunately, both of my supervisors, were always available and willing to answer my queries.

I would like to thank my supervisors for their excellent guidance and support during this process. I also wish to thank all of the advisers, without whose cooperation I would not have been able to conduct these analyses.

To my other colleagues at Computational Biology Group at Luxembourg University and Department of Psychiatry and Neuropsychology at Maastricht University: I would like to thank you for your wonderful cooperation as well. It was always helpful to bat ideas about my research around with you. I also benefitted from debating issues with my friends and family. If I ever lost interest, you kept me motivated. My family (especially my mother) and friends (Rehan, Raza, Adnan) deserve a particular note of thanks: your wise counsel and kind words have, as always, served me well.

I hope you enjoy your reading.

Abstract

The large-scale development of high-throughput sequencing technologies has allowed the generation of reliable omics data related to various regulatory levels. Moreover, integrative computational modeling has enabled the disentangling of a complex interplay between these interconnected levels of regulation by interpreting concomitant large quantities of biomedical information ('big data') in a systematic way. In the context of human disorders, network modeling of complex gene-gene interactions has been successfully used for understanding disease-related dysregulation and for predicting novel drug targets to revert the diseased phenotype.

Recent evidence suggests that changes at multiple levels of genomic regulation are responsible for the development and course of multifactorial diseases. Although existing computational approaches have been able to explain cell-type-specific and disease-associated transcriptional regulation, they so far have been unable to utilize available epigenetic data for systematically dissecting underlying disease mechanisms.

In this thesis, we first provided an overview of recent advances in the field of computational modeling of cellular systems, its major strengths and limitations. Next, we highlighted various computational approaches that integrate information from different regulatory levels to understand mechanisms behind the onset and progression of multifactorial disorders. For example, we presented INTREGNET, a computational method for systematically identifying minimal sets of transcription factors (TFs) that can induce desired cellular transitions with increased efficiency. As such, INTREGNET can guide experimental attempts for achieving effective *in vivo* cellular transitions by overcoming epigenetic barriers restricting the cellular differentiation potential. Furthermore, we introduced an integrative network-based approach for ranking Alzheimer's disease (AD)-associated functional genetic and epigenetic variation. The proposed approach explains how genetic and epigenetic variation can induce expression changes via gene-gene interactions, thus allowing for a systematic dissection of mechanisms underlying the onset and progression of multifactorial diseases like AD at a multi-omics level. We also showed that particular pathways, such as sphingolipids (SL) function, are significantly dysregulated in AD. In-depth integrative analysis of these SL-related genes reveals their potential as biomarkers and for SL-targeted drug development for AD. Similarly, in order to understand the functional consequences of *CLN3* gene mutation in

Batten disease (BD), we conducted a differential gene regulatory network (GRN)-based analysis of transcriptomic data obtained from an *in vitro* BD model and revealed key regulators maintaining the disease phenotype.

We believe that the work conducted in this thesis provides the scientific community with a valuable resource to understand the underlying mechanism of multifactorial diseases from an integrative point of view, helping in their early diagnosis as well as in designing potential therapeutic treatments.

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Chapter 1

General Introduction

The remarkable development of high-throughput sequencing technologies has enabled the collection of a variety of “omic” modalities for various human diseases, generated at the whole genome-level, including genomic, epigenomic, transcriptomic, proteomic and metabolomic data. Computational analysis of such datasets has provided compelling evidence for various genetic, epigenetic and transcriptional changes to be associated with the onset and progression of various human disorders [102, 306]. Owing to the multifactorial nature of most of these disorders, recent advancements in computational disease modeling, by integrating regulatory information from different levels, provide a new framework for understanding the complex nature of human health and disease. For example, modelling of complex gene interaction networks has been very useful for disease modelling [143, 13, 182] and for disentangling the interplay between different regulatory layers [193, 93, 195]. These regulatory network models constitute the starting point for the identification of key regulatory circuits and motifs within large-scale interaction datasets built from genome-wide gene expression profiling, corresponding to the most influential interactions determining network stability, or triggering disease progression or differentiation [143, 13, 303, 197]. However, integrative network modelling approaches –i.e. linking different regulatory layers– [193, 93, 195, 104] are still scarce, which hampers the possibility of studying the crosstalk established among regulatory layers for determining a given phenotype or mediating phenotypic transitions [73]. As such, developing tailor-made computational models is a crucial step in understanding the contributions of genomic, epigenomic, and transcriptomic landscapes in cellular circuitry, lineage specification, and the onset and progression of human disease.

1.1 *In vitro* applications of computational disease modeling

The startling breakthrough of obtaining induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) from differentiated fibroblasts by over-expressing a set of transcription factors (TFs) –usually referred to as cellular reprogramming– laid the foundation of *in vitro* human disease modeling and downstream applications [70]. iPSCs-based disease models have allowed the generation of patient-specific differentiated cell types, overcoming the gap between studies using animal-based disease models and pre-clinical therapeutic research [268, 256]. This disease-in-a-dish technology has provided new avenues for understanding functional dysregulation associated with diseases, discovering disease-related genes and promoting personalized medicine [140, 48]. Beside understanding disease mechanisms, these iPSCs-based disease models can be used for drug screening, in order to mitigate disease phenotypes by targeting particular pathological molecular mechanisms identified by analysing these models [268]. Owing to the complications in obtaining specialized cell types and tissue samples for experimental studies [97], researchers are relying on using iPSCs to generate more representative models for studying human disease. For example, a schematic illustration of generating an iPSCs-based neurological disease model is shown in Figure 1, where patient-specific differentiated cell types are obtained from somatic cells of a patient.

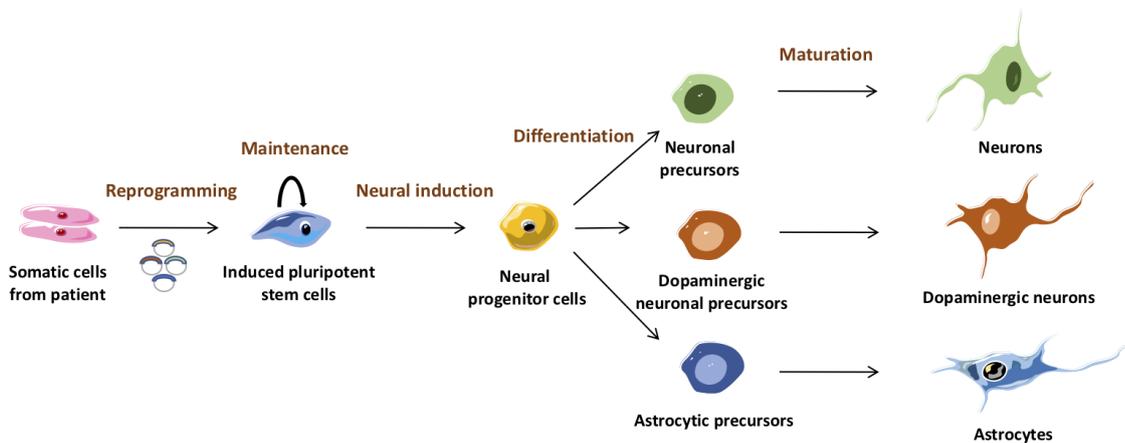


Figure 1: **Workflow of *in vitro* iPSCs-based disease modeling**

The traditional workflow of generating iPSCs-based disease models by reprogramming patient-specific somatic cells poses significant challenges in terms of time and resources [210, 305]. Similar to reprogramming, where one wants to differentiate iPSCs into a particular lineage and a specific mature cell type, trans-differentiation aims at obtaining the same cell type of interest

without undergoing an intermediate pluripotent state. For example, researchers have been able to successfully achieve a directed conversion of human dermal fibroblasts into cardiac progenitors by over-expressing the TFs *ETS2* and *MESPI* [118], contributing to the paradigm of regenerative medicine for treating cardiovascular diseases. Although directed cellular conversions dramatically reduced the time required for obtaining a specific cellular disease model, the identification of efficient TFs, i.e. to achieve a successful conversion, remained a trial-and-error experimental process, limiting its utility and applicability. To this end, various computational methods have been developed to speed up this process by utilizing transcriptomic data sets and systematically predicting candidate TFs that can convert one fully differentiated cell type into another [59, 232, 198]. However, despite these developments, limited cellular conversion efficiency still represents a major problem that has not yet been solved by these methods, limiting the application of this technique in regenerative medicine.

Experimental evidence suggests that only including information on transcription, i.e. expression profiles, is insufficient for identifying a suitable set of TFs that can produce efficient cellular conversion, as it is the interplay of epigenetic and transcriptional regulation that mediates cellular conversion [191, 137, 244]. Dysregulation at these regulatory levels has been found to disrupt physiological cellular differentiation and lies at the core of many disorders [161, 295], requiring an *ex vivo* or *in vitro* application for the development of novel treatment strategies. For example, mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs) represent a rare stem cell type whose *in vitro* expansion is vital for obtaining sufficient amounts of cells for treating various heart- [5, 174, 226, 123], brain- [122, 178, 162] and wound healing- [300, 301] related disorders. However, progressive spontaneous differentiation and aging of MSCs may occur during expansion, both of which can be modulated by extrinsic epigenetic signals such as histone H3 acetylation, playing a key role in regulating these intricate processes [161]. Similarly, epigenetic mechanisms have been found to be crucial for regulating B-cell maturation and their dysregulation has been associated to the initiation and acceleration of multiple autoimmune diseases such as systemic lupus erythematosus [296, 297, 298] and rheumatoid arthritis [184, 95, 184]. Taken together, this evidence suggests that epigenetic mechanisms, along with other regulatory layers, play a crucial role in normal cellular differentiation processes. As such, generating computational disease models by integrating epigenetic and transcriptomic information can provide deeper insights into the underlying mechanisms,

allowing us to predict specific external stimuli (e.g. TF over-expression or compound-based induction) that can overcome the epigenetic barriers restricting the differentiation potential of cells in different disorders.

1.2 Reconstruction of integrative cell-type-specific network models

Modeling human diseases by network-based approaches demands the reconstruction of reliable network models that are context-specific and explain the regulation of gene expression program. It has become increasingly clear that it is the cross-talk between transcriptomic and epigenetic layers that regulates gene expression programs across various human cell types [53, 274, 41]. In addition, epigenetic mechanisms, such as CpG DNA methylation [238, 164], histone modifications [67, 44] and chromatin accessibility [203, 68] have been shown to be an important factor in controlling and predicting the variability of gene expression signatures across different cell and tissue types. A few methods that acknowledge the importance of these different, but interconnected layers of regulation in controlling gene expression programs exist, all suggesting that integrating information from both layers to generate more precise network models of human cell and tissue types is the way forward [204, 245, 113, 175, 64]. Most of these methods rely on the integration of active enhancer information with transcriptomic profiles and position weight matrix (PWM)-based TF-binding predictions to link regulators with their target genes.

Although existing integrative methods for reconstructing network models for different cell and tissue types provide meaningful insights for understanding the underlying mechanisms of gene regulation, these approaches suffer from some important limitations. Foremost, these methodologies usually rely on histone modification marks for active enhancer identification (H3K27ac) to predict active enhancer regions and associate them to their target genes based on ad hoc criteria, such as the nearest gene or all genes within a defined range. Such enhancer annotations might lead to the inference of false-positive (and -negative) interactions as it has been widely known and also experimentally verified that enhancers do not necessarily act on the closest promoter, but may also bypass neighbouring genes to act on more distant genes along the same as well as a different chromosome [100, 109]. Secondly, these approaches rely on PWM-based predictions of TF bindings in regulatory regions to associate regulator TFs with their respective target genes.

Such PWM-based predictions might lead to the inference of many false-positive interactions due to the detection of false-positive motifs, as indicated by existing studies [313, 163]. Lastly, these methods lack systematic benchmarking of predictive network models against experimental cell-type-specific TF chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP) sequencing (Seq) data. These limitations suggest that there is still a need for a more sophisticated integrative computational method that relies only on experimental data from different regulatory levels to reconstruct reliable context-specific networks. Furthermore, systematic benchmarking of these reconstructed networks should be carried out to prove their context-specificity. Moreover, the application of such tailor-made integrative network models is yet to be explored in the context of predicting combinations of TFs that could produce highly efficient cellular conversions between two cell types of interest.

1.3 Network-based modeling in Alzheimer’s disease

Variations at multiple levels of genomic regulation, including genetic aberrations (e.g. single nucleotide polymorphisms [SNPs]), epigenetic (e.g. DNA methylation) and gene expression changes, are known to be associated with various human diseases, including Alzheimer’s disease (AD). Many studies exist that use information from an individual regulatory level to identify causal genes and understand the mechanisms underlying the pathogenesis of AD. For example, genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have successfully identified numerous susceptibility genes for AD [89, 286]. Similarly, a crucial role for changes in DNA methylation [290, 61] and gene expression levels [286, 121] has been observed in AD patients. Nevertheless, the heterogeneous and multifactorial nature of AD demands the integration of regulatory information from different omic levels in order to adequately capture the mechanisms underlying the onset and progression of this disease. Yet again, systematic analytical approaches for identifying multi-omics AD biomarkers to prioritize key genes are still scarce.

Apart from genome-wide hypothesis-generating approaches assessing different layers of regulation in an integrative fashion, similar multi-omics approaches might also be useful in studying existing hypothesis on the pathogenesis of AD, e.g. those on sphingolipid [190] and the tryptophan-kynurenine pathways [293, 98]. As such, an in-depth integrative analysis of genes involved in such pathways can help identifying causal genes, as well as generate testable hypotheses from

analysed changes in associated gene expression and DNA methylation signatures. Such analyses have the potential to provide novel biomarkers and druggable targets in AD, and propose new disease modifying agents that can help in slowing down the progression or reverting the disease phenotype.

Taken together, recent evidence have suggested that changes at multiple levels of genomic regulation are responsible for the development and course of multifactorial diseases. Although existing computational approaches have been able to explain cell-type-specific and disease-associated transcriptional regulation, they so far have been unable to utilize available epigenetic and transcriptomic data for systematically dissecting underlying disease mechanisms. In order to bridge this gap in the literature, we have presented various computational approaches in this thesis that integrate information from different regulatory levels to understand mechanisms behind the onset and progression of multifactorial disorders. Thus, helping in their early diagnosis as well as providing avenues for designing more effective therapeutic treatment strategies.

1.4 Thesis outline

The research conducted in this thesis can be divided into five parts. CHAPTER 2 constitutes a concise overview of existing computational methods in the field of systems biology. Particular attention is paid to state-of-the-art gene regulatory network (GRN) based methods for instructive factors determination and human disease modeling. Along with the strengths, the limitations of these methods are highlighted, thereby providing avenues for the research conducted and described in the following chapters.

Owing to the limited cellular conversion efficiency and lack of integrative methods for predicting more efficient sets of instructive factors, CHAPTER 3 describes INTREGNET, an integrative computational method for systematically identifying reliable minimal sets of TFs that can induce desired cellular conversions with increased efficiency. The application of this method is demonstrated in an *in vitro* setting, where limited conversion efficiency is a crucial barrier for its application in regenerative medicine.

As explained above, the heterogeneous and multifactorial nature of AD requires the integration of regulatory information from different -omics levels in order to capture the underlying mechanisms

behind the onset and progression of this disease. In CHAPTER 4, global multi-omics alterations in AD patients are identified by comparing genomic (gene aberration), epigenomic (DNA methylation) and transcriptomic data sets of 46 diseased patients with 32 age-matched controls.

CHAPTER 5 features an integrative exploration of specific neurobiological pathways known to be impaired in AD. A comprehensive analysis of gene expression and DNA methylation levels is performed for genes known to be associated with sphingolipid function. The identified key genes and their particular methylation signatures offer mechanistic insights into AD pathology and may act as potential biomarkers.

In vitro modeling of human diseases allows us to gain crucial insights into mechanisms underlying disorders, hence devising and optimizing new strategies for therapeutic intervention. CHAPTER 6 features the differential network-based analysis of transcriptomic data sets obtained from brain organoids that served as an *in vitro* model of Batten disease. This study focuses on identifying key genes and pathways that are disrupted during the course of this disease.

Chapter 2

Modeling of Cellular Systems: Application in Stem Cell Research and Computational Disease Modeling

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Ali M., del Sol A. (2018) Modeling of Cellular Systems: Application in Stem Cell Research and Computational Disease Modeling. In: Alves Barbosa da Silva F., Carels N., Paes Silva Junior F. (eds) Theoretical and Applied Aspects of Systems Biology. *Computational Biology*, vol 27. Springer, Cham.

2.1 Abstract

The large-scale development of high-throughput sequencing technologies has allowed the generation of reliable omics data at different regulatory levels. Integrative computational models enable the disentangling of a complex interplay between these interconnected levels of regulation by interpreting these large quantities of biomedical information in a systematic way. In the context of human diseases, network modeling of complex gene-gene interactions has been successfully used for understanding disease-related dysregulation and for predicting novel drug targets to revert the diseased phenotype. Furthermore, these computational network models have emerged as a promising tool to dissect the mechanisms of developmental processes such as cellular differentiation, trans-differentiation, and reprogramming. In this chapter, we provide an overview of recent advances in the field of computational modeling of cellular systems, its major strengths and limitations. Particularly, attention is paid to highlight the impact of computational modeling in our understanding of stem cell biology and the complex multifactorial nature of human disorders and their treatment.

2.2 Introduction to Systems Biology

Systems biology is the integration of computational and experimental research to study the mechanisms underlying complex biological processes as integrated systems of many interacting components. Systems biology offers a holistic rather than reductionistic approach for understanding and controlling biological complexity, which arises due to the interconnected components working together in a synchronized fashion to maintain the phenotype of an organism. Systems biology-based approaches help us in exploring these systems at the level of a cell, tissue, organ, organism, as well as a population and an ecosystem. Characterization of these systems in their full complexity allows us to better understand the properties of the components involved and their static as well as the dynamic behaviour.

During the last decade, various experimental techniques have enabled the large-scale generation of high-throughput (HT) biological data across different levels of regulation. Among them, the ones which have been extensively used for modeling biological systems are, mutation detection

by single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) genotyping [273], gene expression quantification by messenger ribonucleic acid sequencing (RNA-seq) [11], identification of protein interactions with deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) via chromatin immunoprecipitation sequencing (ChIP-Seq) [7], and quantification of different metabolite levels in the organism by HT metabolic screening [264]. The associated plethora of data has spurred the development of computational models, allowing the dissection of the complex mechanisms underlying different biological processes at different regulatory levels. This vast amount of data across different levels of a biological system has also opened a new gateway to integrate data from these different but interconnected layers to gain a deeper system-level understanding.

2.3 Computational Modeling of Cellular Systems

The complexity of biological systems can be broken down to an individual molecule or atom, but to study their overall effect on the system, we need to understand their interactions with each other and with other ongoing processes or pathways in the system. This is even crucial for understanding their role in the onset or progression of diseases such as cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Mathematical models of biological systems, which use efficient algorithms and data structures, enable researchers to investigate how complex regulatory processes are intertwined and how any perturbation in these processes can lead to the development of disease. Recent advancements in computational resources and large-scale generation of so-called "omics" data sets has led to model, visualize, and rationally perturb systems at different levels such as modeling and designing from an atomic resolution to cellular pathways and the analysis of guided alterations in systems and their propagation.

A computational model of a complex system can help us in understanding the behavior of that system by simulating its dynamics. Numerous computational models have been developed to address different kinds of processes – for example, flight simulator models [152], protein folding models [2], and artificial neural network models [1]. Moreover, computational modeling has emerged as a powerful and promising approach to investigate and manipulate biological systems. In particular, different categories of cellular processes have been modelled by using the computational models, such as gene regulation, signaling pathways, and metabolic processes [29]. However, modeling

the biological system at a cellular level is a convoluted problem involving the challenging task of understanding the cellular dynamics and characterizing the underlying biological principles. Gaining a systems-level understanding of these intertwined cellular processes and their complex interconnections may serve as a critical foundation for developing therapeutic fronts where we anticipate that computational cellular modeling approaches will make a profound impact.

2.3.1 Gene Regulatory Networks

It is increasingly recognized that complex biological systems cannot be described in a reductionistic view. To understand the behavior of such a complex system, a deeper understanding of the different components of this system and their interactions with each other is required. This knowledge can help us in viewing the system under study as a network of components, which has a certain topology. This topological information is fundamental in constructing a realistic model to unlock the functions of the network. There are various types of biological networks, which have been extensively studied by researchers, such as gene regulatory networks (GRNs), protein-protein interaction (PPI) networks, signal transduction networks, and metabolic networks. In particular, GRNs are the on-off switches of a cell operating at the transcriptional level where two genes are connected to each other if the expression of one gene modulates the expression of another one by either activation or inhibition. A GRN can be represented by a directed graph where nodes represent the genes and directed edges among these nodes represent gene-gene interactions. As a simple example of a GRN, Figure 2 depicts the schematic illustration of core pluripotency transcription factors (TFs) that maintain the pluripotency potential of stem cells. *POU5F1*, *SOX2*, and *NANOG* have a positive self-regulation, while they also positively regulate each other.

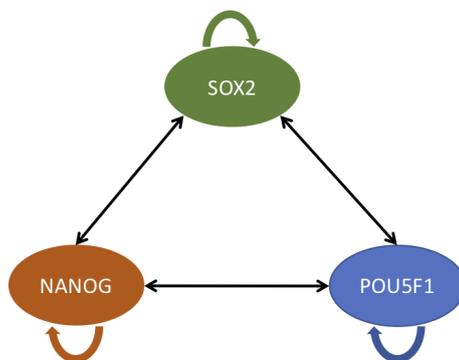


Figure 2: **Transcriptional core of pluripotency factors.** Schematic representation of the transcriptional regulation of core pluripotency factors.

Genes in a GRN are not independent from each other; rather they regulate each other and act collectively. This collective behavior can be observed by mRNA quantification obtained from a microarray or mRNA-Seq experiment where some genes are significantly upregulated, while others are downregulated, suggesting that upregulated genes might be the one inhibiting the downregulated genes. The connections among all the genes in a GRN cannot be inferred correctly by just relying on their mRNA levels or simple gene expression correlation-based methods but by integrating literature-based information stored in relevant repositories. These repositories, such as the MetaCore database from Clarivate Analytics and gene pathway studio [206], contain experimental evidence of gene-gene interactions where one gene regulates the expression of its target genes.

The topological analysis of a GRN can help in identifying some important genes in the network, such as those involved in network motifs. Network motifs are topological patterns that occur in real networks significantly more often than in randomized networks [192]. These patterns have been preserved over evolution on the expense of mutations that randomly change edges. Similarly, the detection of elementary circuits, which is the path starting from and ending in the same gene visiting each intermediate gene only once, has been associated with the stability of GRNs [262, 227]. These circuits can either have an even number of inhibitions hence called positive circuits (positive feedback loops) or an odd number of inhibitions, therefore called negative circuits. Moreover, the genes in the strongly connected components (SCCs) of a network – a subnetwork in which every gene is reachable from every other genes in that subnetwork through a direct path – are interconnected positive and negative circuits and usually considered to be the pivotal genes, maintaining the network phenotype.

GRNs play an important role in unravelling the molecular mechanisms underlying a particular biological process, such as cell cycle, apoptosis, and cellular differentiation. A paramount problem in modeling a GRN is to understand the dynamical interactions among the genes in the GRN, which collectively govern the behavior of the cell. Several methods have been proposed to date to infer GRNs from gene expression and epigenetic data [58, 211, 314, 175]. Although the goal is same, i.e. to model biological processes, available methods rely on different modeling formalisms, for example, logical models have been used to infer Boolean networks, probabilistic Boolean networks, and Petri nets. Furthermore, continuous models have also been introduced for the same

purpose; prominent examples include continuous linear models and models of TF activity [26]. Computational methods for modeling GRNs have proved to be a promising bioinformatics application. In this chapter, we tried to explore the applications of GRN models in stem cell research and disease modeling.

2.4 Systems Biology of Stem Cells

A human body comprises different kinds of cells that are distinct in their structure as well as in function. These trillions of cells are largely containing the same genomic material and contain only a limited number of - approximately 400 [288] - distinct cell types. The different types of cells in the body and their structure perfectly suit the role they perform. For instance, kidney cells (hepatocytes) are completely different in structure and function from skin cells (fibroblasts). Interestingly, all these different kind of cell types in an adult organism actually originate from the same kind of precursor cells, called pluripotent stem cells. Pluripotent stem cells have the potential to give rise to any kind of fetal or adult cell type. Whereas stem cells have the potential to give rise to any kind of lineage at the embryonic developmental stage, this plasticity, i.e. pluripotency, is lost upon differentiation into a certain somatic cell type. Cell identity specification is considered to be determined by cell-specific gene expression programs, which represent highly complex processes tightly controlled at the transcriptional and epigenetic regulatory levels. In order for a cell-specific gene to be expressed during differentiation, the DNA corresponding to this gene and its distal regulatory elements must be in an accessible and active state. In this context, the cell-specific epigenetic landscape is hypothesized to account for the differences between heterogeneous cell fates.

2.4.1 The Generation of iPSCs

Recent advancements in molecular biology have enabled researchers to obtain induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) from somatic cells by following a reliable cell conversion methodology – usually referred as cellular reprogramming. By following established protocols of applying a particular recipe of TFs into the medium of an *in vitro* somatic cells culture, iPSCs can be grown in culture and will have the same plasticity potential as those of stem cells found in embryos. The

very first and a well-known example of cellular reprogramming is the conversion of mouse fibroblasts into iPSCs by introducing four TFs (*POU5F1*, *SOX2*, *MYC*, and *KLF4*) [270]. iPSCs provide a new framework to obtain a renewable source of healthy cells which can help in treating a wide spectrum of diseases, such as neurodegenerative and cardiovascular disorders. Nevertheless, a bottleneck in cellular reprogramming is the identification of effective reprogramming determinants, i.e specific TFs, that can trigger a transition between cellular phenotypes with high conversion efficiency and fidelity.

2.4.2 Transdifferentiation

Similar to reprogramming, where we want iPSCs to differentiate into a particular lineage and cell type, another approach to obtain the same cell type of interest without undergoing an intermediate pluripotent state is transdifferentiation. Transdifferentiation is the direct and irreversible conversion of one somatic cell type to another. Various examples of transdifferentiation have been reported in the literature where a defined TF recipe or a combination of TFs and microRNA (miRNA) or other small molecules was introduced in a somatic cell type culture and the desired mature cell type was obtained within days. For example, the TF *MYOD1* has been used to transdifferentiate mouse embryonic fibroblasts into myoblasts [46]. Since this first case reported in literature in 1990, there have been numerous examples of successful somatic cell conversions with defined factors and small molecules [34, 289, 218].

Interestingly, various computational methods have been reported to systematically predict the candidate TFs that can help in converting one fully differentiated cell type to another, and their predictions have been experimentally validated in a laboratory setting [198, 232, 129]. Transdifferentiation is emerging as a promising approach to directly transdifferentiate cells while avoiding the use of iPSCs to derive patient-specific cells. This remarkable potential of transdifferentiation is proving to be the most promising source of regenerative medicine for tissue regeneration and disease therapy. Nevertheless, an important roadblock to efficient transdifferentiation is the limited number of successful cellular conversions obtained so far, with low to intermediate efficiency. Furthermore, the role of changes in the epigenetic landscape for achieving an efficient transdifferentiation has not yet systematically explored.

2.5 Modeling Cellular Phenotypes and Conversions

In some modeling approaches, a cellular phenotype is modelled as a network of genes with a particular gene expression pattern and a unique stable steady state (attractor). Phenotypic transitions in such models are introduced by identifying the genes in the network that can destabilize this attractor and lead the system into another attractor. This concept has been applied to model diseases as a transition from a healthy phenotype to a diseased state, caused by a mutation or a chemical compound [62]. Moreover, it has also been applied in modeling cellular conversion [232] (reprogramming, differentiation, and transdifferentiation), where researchers first identify the attractors of two phenotypes (starting and destination cell types) and then pinpoint a minimal set of genes in the network's elementary circuits whose perturbation (up- or downregulation) led the attractor of the starting cell type to the attractor of the destination cell type [58, 211].

Modeling the cellular phenotype requires the inference of condition-specific GRNs. Literature suggests a number of different GRN inference methods, which rely on different underlying rationales, such as modeling formalism (Boolean and Bayesian) and different updating schemes (synchronous and asynchronous). Furthermore, there have been methods introducing the concept of contextualization, which is the removal of non-specific edges that are not compatible with the gene expression program of the cell type under consideration [58, 314]. Most of these methods rely only on gene expression data, but more recently, approaches using gene expression as well as epigenetic information have also been introduced [175]. Nevertheless, a bottleneck in the GRN inference problem is the benchmarking of inferred networks. Most of these methods rely on the interactions of a set of specific TFs in a particular cell type diagnosed by experimental ChIP-seq to validate the networks. Unfortunately, this benchmarking approach can only validate a part of the network as the complete benchmarking information, ChIP-seq for all the TFs in one cell type, is not available for even a single cell type. Moreover, ChIP-seq cannot be a perfect gold standard as some TF-DNA interactions might be incorrectly labeled as positives because TF binding does not necessarily indicate a functional interaction. Besides ChIP-seq, SNP data as well as random network inference has been used as a reference for the benchmarking of inferred networks [175], but none of these approaches offer a complete and systematic network inference validation. However, due to the consistent release of new TF ChIP-seq experiments by collaborating labs in the ENCODE consortium [52], the amount of available TF binding site profiles is steadily increasing,

which might eventually mitigate the problem of missing data in the future. Furthermore, increasing number of genes and TFs perturbation experiments in the Gene Expression Omnibus database [50] may serve as an alternative approach for network validation as the gene expression profiling after gene over-expression or knock-down can provide authentic information about the functional gene-gene interactions.

2.6 Computational Disease Modeling

The advances in molecular biology have resulted in the establishment of fast and efficient protocols for generating iPSCs cells *in vitro*. This –cells-in-a-petri-dish– approach has allowed for sophisticated modeling of human disorders and uncovering the molecular basis of disease-related dysregulation. Moreover, the generation of patient-specific iPSCs-derived cell types possessing specific disease-related mutations provides an extremely viable *in vitro* system for the investigation of disease-associated perturbations and to apply drug screening. However, the complex nature of various human disorders, which often involve multiple dysregulated genes acting together, hinders our understanding of disease-specific impairments [205]. As such, dysregulated genes, in conjunction, initiate a cascade of failures, which causes malfunctioning at the systems level, resulting in specific disease phenotypes. Therefore, instead of investigating individual genes in a system, we may rather focus on their interactions as a channel to propagate disease-related perturbations. In this context, healthy and disease states can be represented as cellular network phenotypes with stable steady states, where a disease-specific perturbation shifts the steady state of a healthy network into the steady states of a disease network. Thus, the construction of complex regulatory interaction networks offers a new method for gaining a system-level understanding of disease pathology. These network-based models have proved to be a promising framework for identifying disease-related genes based on network topology [143]. For example, disease-gene-drug associations have already been predicted based on differential network analysis [314]. Furthermore, disease-gene relationships have also been reported based on the identification of disease-related subnetworks and prediction of network neighbours of disease-associated genes [83, 13].

2.6.1 Differential Network Analysis and Disease Models

There has been an increasing number of approaches exploring the associations between genes, drugs, and diseases. Some of them include the construction of data repositories where different compounds have been tested experimentally to associate drugs with genes and diseases, including the connectivity map [144] and gene perturbation atlas [302]. These approaches have provided immense help in linking drugs to their target genes, which has also benefited in drug repositioning based on particular gene expression signatures produced after drug perturbation. However, these approaches neglect the mechanisms underlying gene regulation and avoid the indirect targets of drugs. Moreover, only a limited set of drugs and cell types have been used to carry out these experiments, which implicitly means that these approaches cannot cover the entire spectrum of human diseases. In this regard, approaches relying on network pharmacology have proved to be promising in identifying candidate genes whose perturbation might lead to a desired therapeutic phenotype. Recently, there have been few reports relying on unique and differential network topologies to identify the differential regulatory mechanisms leading to a given pathology [314, 116, 195]. These approaches allow the building of condition-specific networks by collecting gene-gene interaction information from literature-curated resources and to predict target genes and drugs that could maximize the reversion from a disease phenotype to a healthy one. For example, by using the differential network-based approach, cyclosporine was predicted as a candidate drug to treat systemic lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. Surprisingly, this blindfold prediction was in agreement with existing literature, as cyclosporine has been successfully applied to treat these diseases [32, 294].

These findings suggest that network-based approaches hold a great potential to identify new disease-related genes and biomarkers for complex diseases. These approaches can uncover the regulatory mechanisms underlying disease pathologies by analysing the differences in gene regulatory interactions of condition-specific networks. Furthermore, *in silico* simulations to mimic the network response upon drug application can boost the quest of identifying a putative drug for therapeutic intervention. Nevertheless, a prominent limitation of cell reprogramming approaches is the availability of good-quality interactome maps. For only a limited number of human diseases, we are able to gather enough omics data to construct a reliable interactome, which can help in exploring the underlying disease mechanisms. In order to overcome this information

gap, research teams throughout the world are profiling next-generation sequencing experiments to obtain high-quality interaction maps of specific human disorders [74, 165, 128], while other consortiums like Roadmap Epigenomics [23] and ENCODE [52] are striving to create reference human epigenomes and large-scale ChIP-seq profiling for different TFs across different cell types, respectively. Nonetheless, this information is still far from being complete and will require extensive future efforts to develop complete, high-quality, and noise-free interaction maps for all well-studied human diseases. We strongly believe that bridging this information gap will play a crucial role in the future of biomedical research.

Chapter 3

INTREGNET: Integrating epigenetic and transcriptional landscapes in a network-based model for increasing cellular conversion efficiency

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Ali M., Jung S., del Sol A. (2019) INTREGNET: Integrating epigenetic and transcriptional landscapes in a network-based model for increasing cellular conversion efficiency. *In preparation*.

3.1 Abstract

The design of novel strategies for cellular conversion by using a defined set of transcription factors (TFs) has shown promising applications in regenerative medicine. Nevertheless, the identification of TFs that can induce a desired transition with high conversion efficiency remains a significant challenge. Although computational approaches have been developed to guide cellular conversion experiments, they do not tackle the problem of conversion efficiency. In particular, these approaches do not take into account epigenetic regulatory effects when modeling cellular conversion, which is important for addressing the aforementioned problem. Here, we present INTREGNET, a computational method for systematically identifying minimal sets of TFs that can induce desired cellular transitions with increased efficiency. This method relies on the integration of transcriptomic and epigenetic information for reconstructing cell-type-specific core transcriptional regulatory networks (TRNs). Specifically, when applied to the induction of pluripotent stem cells (PSCs) from different somatic cells, INTREGNET was able to distinguish between more- and less-efficient TF combinations. Thus, INTREGNET can guide experimental attempts for achieving effective *in vivo* cellular transitions, where limited conversion efficiency is a crucial barrier for its application in regenerative medicine.

3.2 Introduction

Cell identity specification in multi-cellular organisms gives rise to hundreds of different cell types sharing the same genetic information through a complex process, which is tightly controlled at different regulatory levels. Established cell-type-specific gene expression programs are orchestrated by intricate and interconnected regulatory networks at the epigenetic and transcriptional level controlling homeostasis of differentiated or pluripotent cells [10, 76, 135, 253]. Epigenetic mechanisms, such as DNA methylation [124, 260] and histone modifications [265, 139], regulate chromatin accessibility [235] and constitute a epigenetic code that is recognized by transcriptional and epigenetic regulators, such as transcription factors (TFs), chromatin modifiers and remodelers [42, 106]. However, in order to specify cell identity, it has been shown that a small set of transcription factors, known as core TFs, is sufficient [31, 96, 199, 247]. Following this rationale, current strategies for inducing desired cellular conversions are based on the over-expression of a combi-

nation of exogenous TFs and have been used as a qualitative measure for evaluating the ability of core TFs to induce and enhance cellular transitions.

Over the past years, several computational methods have been developed to guide cellular conversion experiments. Early approaches relied on the identification of significant differences in transcriptomic or epigenetic profiles [59, 85, 60, 111], while more recent ones acknowledged the importance of gene regulatory networks (GRNs) to identify TFs that can induce desired cellular transitions, termed as instructive factors (IFs) [232, 198]. However, these methods are still unable to identify optimal combinations of IFs that more efficiently trigger such transitions. Experimental evidence suggests that gene expression is insufficient for determining efficient IFs, as it is the interplay of epigenetic and transcriptional regulation that mediates cellular conversions [191, 137, 244]. As such, cell-type-specificity is determined not only by the transcriptional, but also epigenetic program, characterized by accessible chromatin regions, active enhancers, and differential binding of regulators [204, 113, 245], which highlights the epigenetic reorganization required when converting one cell type into another. Altogether, this demonstrates the need for an integrative approach to create tailor-made computational models that are essential for predicting more efficient sets of IFs.

Epigenetic and/or transcriptomic dysregulation that disrupt the normal cellular differentiation process lies at the core of many diseases [161, 295], requiring an *ex vivo* or *in vitro* cell application for the development of novel treatment strategies. For example, mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs) represent a rare stem cell type whose *in vitro* expansion is vital for obtaining sufficient amounts of cells for treating various heart [5, 174, 226, 123], brain [122, 178, 162] and wound-healing [300, 301] related disorders. However, progressive spontaneous differentiation and aging of MSCs may occur during expansion, which can be modulated by extrinsic epigenetic signals such as histone H3 acetylation, playing a key role in regulating these intricate processes [161]. Similarly, an increasing amount of literature suggests epigenetic mechanisms to be crucial for regulating B-cell maturation and its dysregulation has been associated to the initiation and acceleration of multiple autoimmune diseases such as systemic lupus erythematosus [296, 298, 297] and rheumatoid arthritis [184, 95, 134]. Taken together, this evidence suggests that epigenetic mechanisms, along with other regulatory layers, play a crucial role in normal cellular differentiation. Therefore, reconstructing cell-type-specific network models by integrating epigenetic and transcriptomic in-

formation can provide deeper insights into underlying mechanisms, allowing us to predict specific external stimuli (e.g. TF over-expression) that can overcome the epigenetic barriers restricting the differentiation potential of cells in different disorders.

In the present work, we developed a novel computational method to predict efficient IFs for desired cellular conversions by reconstructing INtegrative Transcriptional REGulatory NETworks (INTREGNET) based on cell-type-specific transcriptomic and epigenetic data sets. We analyzed more than 7600 publicly available gene expression profiles to identify a set of core TFs across different human cell types and cell lines. Based on the integration of i) a set of candidate core TFs, ii) histone modifications, iii) chromatin accessibility, and iv) experimentally validated TF binding sites, we are able to reconstruct core transcriptional regulatory networks (TRNs) for 48 different human cell types and - lines. Furthermore, molecular interactions between TFs have been inferred by integrating protein-protein interaction (PPI) data. The reconstructed networks are cell-type-specific, encompassing interactions that are compatible with the corresponding epigenetic and transcriptomic state. Benchmarking against experimentally validated gold standard networks [209, 27, 82] verifies the cell-type-specificity of the reconstructed networks, preserving more than 95% of the gold-standard interactions. Further, these cell-type-specific networks were employed to build a Boolean-based model for predicting sets of instructive factors that induce desired cellular conversions. Results show that INTREGNET outperforms other state-of-the-art methods by predicting significantly more experimentally validated IFs. More importantly, INTREGNET is able to predict specific sets of IFs inducing cellular conversion events with increased efficiency. Thus, INTREGNET can provide a guidance to stem cell researchers to improve the efficiency of cellular conversion, which constitutes a long-standing problem in regenerative medicine and beyond.

3.3 Materials and methods

Cell-type-specific core TRNs were reconstructed by integrating transcriptomic and epigenetic profiles. An overview of INTREGNET's workflow is shown in Figure 3, while each individual step, i.e. epigenetic and transcriptomic data processing, network reconstruction, validation, and application, is described in detail in the remainder of this section.

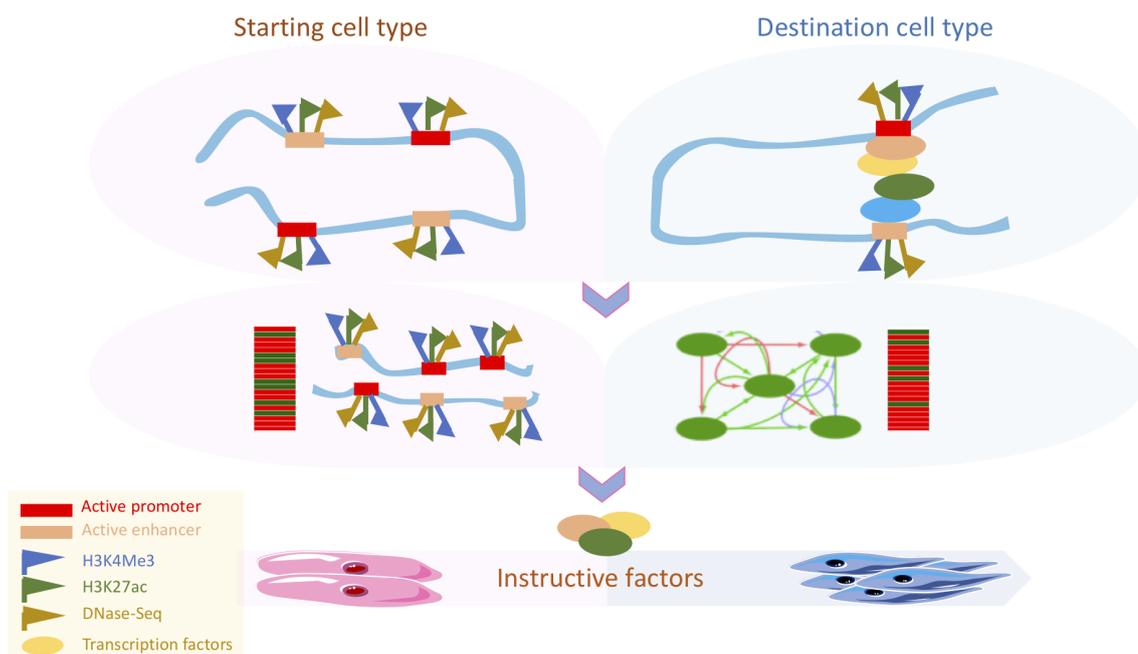


Figure 3: **Schematic workflow of INTREGNET.** INTREGNET utilizes epigenetic and transcriptomic profiles from the initial as well as final cell type. Epigenetic profiles help INTREGNET to characterize active promoter (H3K4me3) regions, active enhancer (H3K27ac) regions, and accessible genomic domains (DNase-seq). Transcriptomic profiles are used to identify uniquely and significantly expressed TFs. To predict a set of instructive factors for a desired cellular transition, first, the epigenetically active domains are characterized in starting and destination cell types. Next, the active regulatory domains in the destination cell type are integrated with TF ChIP-seq data to reconstruct a core regulatory network for the destination cell type. Here, enhancer and promoter regulation (green) is distinguished from enhancer-only (red) and promoter-only regulation (purple). Lastly, the core TRN of the destination cell type is integrated with gene expression signatures and active cis- and trans-regulatory elements from the starting cell type to predict instructive factors required for cellular conversion under consideration.

3.3.1 Identification of core TFs

Individual cell types and transcriptomic samples were characterized by a set of core TFs. Each sample was compared against a background of more than 7600 different samples of various cell types and cell lines included in Recount2 [51], a database of publicly available, uniformly processed RNA-seq data sets. Of note, all samples from The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) and those containing the terms “cancer”, “disease”, and “single cell” in the title or description of their Gene Expression Omnibus [50] (GEO) entry were excluded prior to the analysis. GEO accessions of all considered RNA-seq samples can be found in supplementary Table S17. Transcription factors were then ranked based on the uniqueness of their expression in every individual sample

using a modified version of the method proposed by D’Alessio et al. [59]. Generally, the approach consisted of three steps that were repeated for every transcription factor. First, given a single query sample, all data sets having a Pearson correlation of more than 0.75 with the query were excluded from the background. For this purpose, 30 ESC samples were randomly chosen from the Recount2 data set and their correlation with rest of the samples was computed iteratively. Every unique correlation score obtained was then used as a threshold for creating the confusion matrix, based on the annotation of all the ESC samples in Recount2 data set. This process was repeated for every selected ESC sample and F1 scores were computed against every correlation threshold. By plotting the F1 score against the respective correlation thresholds, we see that highest F1 score is obtained at a 0.75 correlation threshold (supplementary Figure S19). Subsequently, the uniqueness of each TF’s expression in the query was assessed by comparing an idealized probability distribution, which contains 1 in place of the considered query sample and 0 otherwise, to the background distribution containing the expression of the TF in all samples. Finally, the background distribution is normalized by the sum of its elements and compared to the idealized distribution by means of Jensen-Shannon divergence (JSD). The 10 most unique TFs in each sample, i.e. having the highest JSD value, were selected as core TFs.

3.3.2 Reconstruction of cell-type-specific core TRNs

Based on the identified core TFs, transcriptional regulatory networks were reconstructed for various human cell types and cell lines, reflecting the coordinated action of transcription factors on their targets in a cell-specific manner. Regulatory relationships were reconstructed from transcription factor ChIP-seq experiments, the active promoter mark H3K4me3, the active enhancer mark H3K27ac and chromatin accessibility defined by DNase-seq, and are represented in a Boolean modeling framework. For that purpose, INTREGNET performed three steps. First, transcriptomic data was made compatible with the Boolean modeling framework. RefBool [127] was elected for discretizing the expression values in every sample individually, based on a universal transcriptomic reference for each gene. Unlike the proposed use of RefBool [127], a single p-value threshold was used for determining active and inactive genes. More specifically, when testing the null hypothesis that a gene is not expressed, p-values of less than 0.15 are considered to be significant, which leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis. Second, active proximal and distal regulatory regions were

identified for every active TF. Promoters were defined based on the Ensembl promoter annotation file obtained from The Eukaryotic Promoter Database [223] (accessed March 23rd, 2018) and restricted to 1500bp upstream and 500bp downstream of the transcription start site (TSS). In order to assess whether the promoter region of a TF is active in a given cell type, corresponding H3K4me3 peaks were obtained from ENCODE [54] or Cistrome [186] and projected onto the region. A promoter region is considered to be active if it overlaps with at least one H3K4me3 peak. For enhancers, the GeneHancer database [80] (accessed April 6th, 2018) was leveraged to link active TFs to their known enhancer regions. All regions overlapping a cell-type-specific H3K27ac peak were considered to be active while inactive enhancer regions were discarded. More precisely, instead of considering the complete enhancer to be active, the region was truncated to the H3K27ac peak region. Finally, TF binding events were identified in active promoter and enhancer regions. Publicly available and uniformly processed TF ChIP-seq data sets, i.e. called peaks, were obtained from Cistrome [186], pooled and projected onto the active regulatory regions. Every binding event sharing one base pair with an active region constitutes a potential regulatory interaction. These interactions were further filtered by cell-type-specific accessible chromatin profiles (DNase-seq peaks) from ENCODE [54] and GEO [50], such that all remaining interactions overlap with at least one peak.

Following this strategy, a TRN was reconstructed among the set of core and non-core TFs in every sample. The selection of non-core TFs consisted of three steps. First, only those TFs were considered that were expressed in the cell type. Next, these expressed TFs were filtered based on their JSD ranks and only those TFs whose ranks were significantly lower than their average rank across all samples were selected. Finally, only those non-core TFs that were regulating at least one core TF and that were simultaneously being regulated by at least one core TF were kept in the network. The subsequently derived interactome constituted the core TRN of cell type under consideration.

ENCODE and GEO accessions of considered H3K27ac, H3K4me3, and DNase-seq experiments for every individual cell type/line are given in supplementary Table S9. All considered data sets were annotated to genome assembly GRCh38 or converted to GRCh38 by using the CrossMap tool [311].

3.3.3 Validation of reconstructed TRNs

To assess the cell-type-specificity of reconstructed core networks, a comparison with manually curated core networks from the literature, containing TF ChIP-seq validated interactions, was conducted. Here, the set of gold-standard networks was composed of human hepatocytes [209], embryonic stem cells (ESCs) [27] and two cancer cell lines (MCF7 and HepG2) [82], and compared at the level of the subset of TFs that were present in the reconstructed core TRNs.

In addition, we leveraged cell-type-specific TF ChIP-seq data to calculate the enrichment of experimentally validated interactions in the reconstructed TRNs. For this purpose, uniformly processed TF ChIP-seq peaks were gathered from ENCODE [54] and Cistrome [186]. In order to keep the data consistent between these two resources, all peak files were converted to GRCh38 genome assembly by using the CrossMap tool [311], if they were aligned to a different assembly. ENCODE and GEO accessions of all the considered TF ChIP-seq experiments are given in supplementary Table S10. Based on these datasets, two analyses were carried out. First, the fraction of TF interactions in promoter regions that were validated by a peak in the cell-type-specific ChIP-seq experiments was assessed. For that purpose, only those TFs in the networks were considered for which ChIP-seq data was available. Second, the number of false-positive interactions were quantified by counting the fraction of interactions in promoter regions that were not validated by a ChIP-seq peak from an experiment in the same cell type/line, but under different conditions. Of note, true negative and false-negative interactions cannot be reliably assessed and are therefore excluded from the assessment.

3.3.4 Inference of Boolean logic rules

The representation of the reconstructed TRNs in a Boolean modeling framework requires the inference of Boolean expressions that describe the relationship between all regulators of a single TF. Here, TFs can act cooperatively, e.g. by forming a complex, or competitively by sharing parts of their DNA binding motif. INTREGNET infers these connections by identifying all ChIP-seq peaks in the TRN that reciprocally overlap more than 62% using the intersectBed program from bedtools v2.22.1 with parameter `-loj -r -f 0.62`. As a result, an undirected network among TF binding sites is obtained in which the strongly connected components (SCCs) are assumed to

represent the cooperative interactions of TFs. Here, SCCs were detected using the “clusters”-method of the R “igraph”-package (version 1.2.2). For determining the overlap threshold, a positive and negative gold-standard dataset of protein-protein interactions (PPIs) was assembled. The positive set consisted of 33 PPIs included in iRefIndex [237] that fulfill three requirements. First, ChIP-seq data was available in Cistrome [186]. Second, their interaction type has been classified as “direct interaction” (MI:0407) and, third, experimental validation had been conducted in humans. For the negative set, manual annotations in the Negatome 2.0 database [24] were obtained resulting in 72 true-negative PPIs for which ChIP-seq data was available in Cistrome. The percentage of overlap for all peaks of all gold-standard PPIs was assessed to assemble the positive and negative distributions. Two TFs with overlapping ChIP-seq binding sites are said to form a complex, if the probability of belonging to the positive distribution is higher than belonging to the negative distribution. Transcription factors predicted to form a complex were connected by an AND-gate, which represents the necessity of each individual subunit, while TFs with competing and non-overlapping binding sites are connected by an OR-gate. Finally, enhancers and the promoter region of a TF were incorporated into a single regulatory rule by forcing the regulation of the promoter and at least one enhancer, which corresponds to the connection of multiple enhancer regions by OR-gates and of the enhancers with the promoter by an AND-gate.

3.3.5 Prediction of efficient combinations of instructive factors

An algorithm recently developed in our lab (manuscript under preparation) was used for predicting optimal combination of instructive factors (IFs) to efficiently induce desired cellular transitions. In terms of the transcriptional regulatory network of the target cell type, the algorithm searches for the minimum combination of IFs whose perturbation can efficiently restore the gene expression program of the target cell. This corresponds to the state of the network in which all Boolean regulatory rules evaluate to true. By construction, this state is a steady state of the system, regardless of the imposed updating scheme. In order to identify the probability of all network states to reach this desired steady state, the model checker PRISM v4.4 [142] was employed. As PRISM is unable to handle Boolean logic rules, Boolean rules were transformed to equivalent polynomials by the following rules [136]: Given two TFs A and B in the Boolean TRN, the following relations

hold.

$$\neg A \equiv 1 - A \quad (3.1)$$

$$A \vee B \equiv A + B - A \bullet B \quad (3.2)$$

$$A \wedge B \equiv A \bullet B \quad (3.3)$$

While the second rule states a valid transformation of Boolean rules into polynomials, it is impractical in the presence of multiple TFs with competing or non-overlapping binding sites within regulatory regions. By applying De Morgan's law ($A \vee B \equiv \neg(\neg A \wedge \neg B)$), a fourth rule can be derived that is easily adaptable to multiple TFs:

$$A \vee B \equiv \neg(\neg A \wedge \neg B) \equiv 1 - ((1 - A) \bullet (1 - B)) \quad (3.4)$$

With these transformations, a PRISM model of a discrete time markov chain (DTMC) is established in which each TF is a module that can change its state based on the evaluation of the polynomial expressions. During each step of the model, a single TF is selected individually and its state is updated, i.e. the DTMC obeys an asynchronous updating scheme. Finally, the property that has to be checked by PRISM can be stated as “eventually all TFs in the network are active”. In PRISM syntax that corresponds to “ $F(TF_1 + TF_2 + \dots + TF_n = n)$ ”. Invoking PRISM with the option “-v” returns all states with their corresponding probabilities of fulfilling the property.

Finally, candidate IFs are established by selecting TFs of the core TRN that do not have an active promoter or any active enhancer in the initial cell type. As a second step, the algorithm searches for the minimum set of TFs whose perturbation leads to the maximum number of gene expression changes of differentially expressed genes between initial and final cell types, while minimizing the number of epigenetic changes during this process. Like in the construction of core TRNs, promoter regions, defined by The Eukaryotic Promoter Database [223], and enhancer regions, defined by the GeneHancer database [80], are called active if they overlap with a cell-type-specific

H3K4me3 or H3K27ac peak, respectively. A score for each combination of candidate factors is set as the weighted average of all Boolean TRN states able to reach the desired steady state, i.e. in which all TFs are active. Here, the weight for each TF to be in state 0 or 1 is defined as the probability of observing a greater or lower expression value in the background distribution of RefBool [127], respectively. Consequently, the probability of being in a certain network state is defined as the product of the probabilities of being in the individual TF states. Combinations having a higher score are more favorable, and thus predicted to be more efficient, than low scoring combinations.

3.3.6 Validation of cellular conversion algorithm

To assess the predictive power of the proposed method for identifying an efficient combination of instructive factors, an extensive literature review was conducted to gather information about the experimentally confirmed cellular conversions where a particular set of instructive factors has been utilized for achieving a desired cellular transition. Interestingly, for some of the transitions, existing studies reported the conversion of an identical starting cell type to a similar destination cell type but utilized different combinations of instructive factors, thus yielding different cellular conversion efficiencies. For all the cellular transition examples which are in pairs (low and high efficiency) or only a single perturbation is reported (supplementary Table S10), the core TRNs representing the destination cell types were reconstructed. In addition to the destination core TRNs topologies, the epigenetic status of the constituent TFs and their gene expression values in the starting cell type were employed for predicting the sets of instructive factors.

3.3.7 Nomenclature of TFs

Throughout this study, the official HGNC gene symbols (e.g. *MYC* and *POU5F1*) have been used for representing the TFs and their targets.

3.4 Results

3.4.1 Reconstruction of cell-type-specific core TRNs

A small group of core TFs has been reported to predominantly control the gene expression program of embryonic stem cells [27] as well as cell types [209] and cell lines [82]. These sets of core TFs usually auto-regulate themselves and control the regulation of other TFs by making interconnected regulatory loops, hence forming a core network that determines cellular identity and function [209, 27, 82]. Experimental studies suggest that there is a complex interplay between transcriptional and epigenetic landscape that controls cell differentiation and lineage commitment [176]. Thus, it is important to consider the combined regulatory effect of these different but interconnected layers, while modeling the cellular phenotypes and their transitions. The approach we present here, connects both layers of regulation to reconstruct cell-type-specific core TRNs by integrating high throughput transcriptomic (RNA-seq) and epigenetic (DNase-seq, H3K4me3, and H3K27ac) data sets in a systematic way.

In order to obtain a core TRN for a cell type of interest, first a set of 10 core TFs are identified by using a modified version of the statistical measure introduced by D'Alessio et al. [59]. Next, all the neighboring non-core TFs are identified, which are strongly connected to the core TFs. Further, all the candidate TFs are discretized by using a modified version of RefBool [127] and only those TFs are kept in the network that are expressed according to their measured gene expression levels. Finally, regulatory interactions among the selected TFs in the network are obtained by integrating experimental TF ChIP-seq data with cell-type-specific active regulatory regions, which are identified by histone modification marks and chromatin accessibility data sets. Moreover, based on the regulators of every TF in the network, the joint regulatory effect of TFs is inferred for every individual regulatory region and the resulting network is represented in a Boolean modeling framework. The obtained core TRNs are highly cell-type-specific as they comprise only those interactions that are compatible with both epigenetic and transcriptomic layers of regulation. We used INTREGNET to reconstruct directed core TRNs for 48 cell types and cell lines. Every network has up to 33 TFs (on average 18 TFs), while every TF in the network has up to 30 regulators (on average 11 regulators per TF) and 44 active enhancers (on average 9 enhancers per TF).

3.4.2 Validation of the reconstructed core TRNs

A bottleneck in the reconstruction of TRNs is to systematically benchmark them in the presence of incomplete ground truth data. To this extent, the large-scale generation of high throughput ChIP-seq data for various TFs across different cell and tissue types has provided a framework for partial network validation [176]. We have reconstructed cell-type-specific core TRNs for 8 different cell type/lines and validated them by using 1044 TF ChIP-seq experiments obtained from ENCODE [54] and Cistrome [186]. Here, only cell types/lines containing more than 10 profiled TFs were considered for validation in order to cover a significant part of the network.

The proposed networks are benchmarked by assessing the enrichment of cell-type-specific experimentally validated TF ChIP-seq interactions in the core TRNs (see Figure 4). On the one hand, network interactions that have been validated by cell-type-specific TF ChIP-seq data are considered as true positives (TP). On the other hand, interactions that have been validated by TF ChIP-seq data, profiled in cell-types other than the one under consideration, are considered as false positives (FP). The enrichment of ChIP-seq validated TP interactions was on average four times higher in comparison to the FP interactions, which shows that interactions in the reconstructed TRNs are highly cell-type-specific.

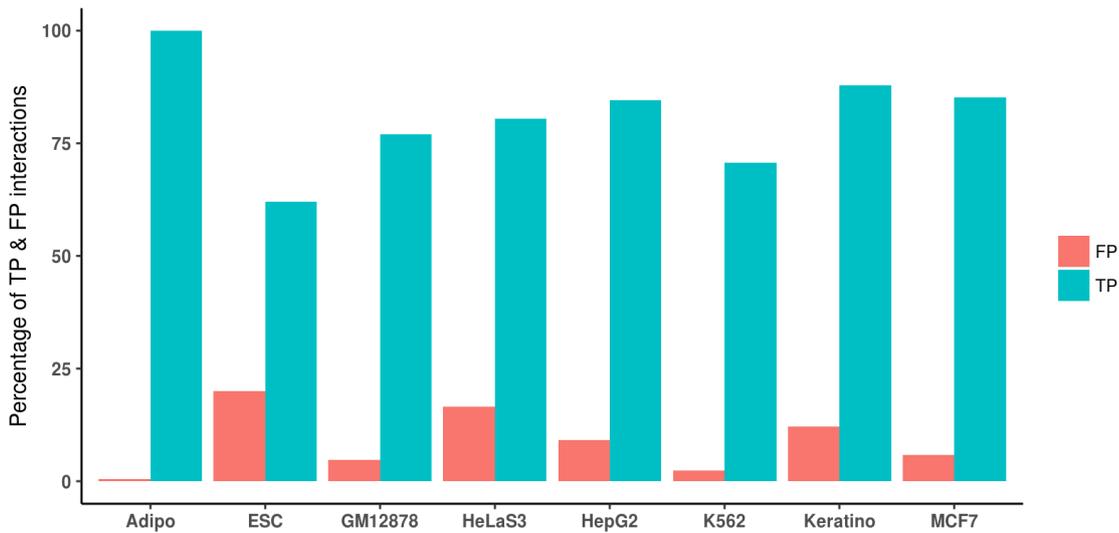


Figure 4: **Enrichment of cell-type-specific TF ChIP-seq data in reconstructed core TRNs.** Core transcriptional regulatory networks (TRNs) for different well-studied human cell types/lines have been benchmarked against cell-type-specific TF ChIP-seq data. True positives (TP) represent the interactions that are present in the reconstructed core TRNs and have been experimentally validated by cell-type-specific TF ChIP-seq data. Alternatively, interactions that have been validated by TF ChIP-seq data, profiled in cell-types other than the one under consideration, are considered as false positives (FP). Benchmarking is carried out for various primary cell types, e.g. adipocytes (Adipo), embryonic stem cells (ESC), keratinocytes (Keratino), and cancerous cell lines, e.g. GM12878, HeLaS3, HepG2, K562 and MCF7

We also validated the specificity of the reconstructed core TRNs by comparing them against experimentally verified gold-standard (GS) core networks. For this purpose, core networks of human embryonic stem cells (ESCs) [27], hepatocytes [209], and HepG2 and MCF7 cell lines [82] were curated from the literature and compared to the core TRNs reconstructed with INTREGNET (see Table 1). Here, an intersecting part of the GS and reconstructed core networks has been considered for the validation. As expected, the reconstructed networks for ESCs, hepatocytes and MCF7 cells are in complete agreement with respective GS networks, whereas only one interaction was missing in the hepatocytes network. Surprisingly, we inferred four new interactions for *HNF1A* and *FOXA2* in the hepatocytes reconstructed network that are missing in the respective GS network. Interestingly, all the newly inferred interactions have been validated by a previous TF knock-down study conducted in human hepatoma cells [276]. Overall, 95% of the interactions in the reconstructed networks are also present in the corresponding GS core networks, with all of the inferred interactions being experimentally validated (Table 1 and supplementary Table S16).

These results suggest that the reconstructed networks are in a good agreement with experimentally validated core networks and, therefore, can be considered as a starting point for the identification of IFs.

Cell type	GS int.	Infer int.	Matching	Non-matching GS	Unique infer	Infer validated	Overall validated
ESC[27]	9	9	9	0	0	0	100%
Hepatocytes[209]	13	12	8	2	4	4	85.71%
HepG2[82]	16	16	16	0	0	0	100%
MCF7[82]	13	4	4	0	0	0	100%

Table 1: **Benchmarking of reconstructed core TRNs** against the experimentally validated core networks. For the four well-characterized human cell types/lines, the reconstructed core networks were compared against their experimentally validated gold-standard core networks. Int. represents interactions (Int.) in gold-standard (GS) networks, whereas Infer Int. represent inferred (Infer.) interactions in the reconstructed networks.

Next, we assessed whether INTREGNET can distinguish cooperative and competitive regulation of TFs in the same regulatory region, represented in the form of a Boolean logic rule. As expected, INTREGNET was able to predict the complexes of TFs that have been experimentally verified in different human cell types. For examples, a complex of *POU5F1* and *SOX2*, along with *NANOG* has been shown to collectively regulate their own expression in ESC [27]. Interestingly, aside from predicting this complex, INTREGNET was also able to highlight its cooperative role in regulating many other TFs in the ESC network, as indicated in existing literature [27, 242]. Similarly, INTREGNET was able to predict a complex of *FLII*, *TALI* and *GATA2* that has been shown to regulate the expression of *FLII* in blood stem cells [225], and a part of this complex (*TALII-GATA2*) has also been experimentally verified using two-hybrid yeast assays [215]. Therefore, these findings suggest that representation of reconstructed TRNs in a Boolean modeling framework and inference of Boolean logic rules can offer a simple, yet powerful, approach to model the dynamics of regulatory networks.

3.4.3 Prediction of instructive factors for cellular conversions

The integration of epigenetic and transcriptional data enabled the reconstruction of cell-type-specific core TRNs, which recapitulate the genome-wide connectivity between core TFs and their cooperative or competitive regulatory effect on the enhancers and promoters of their respective targets. These reconstructed TRNs are able to provide a mechanistic insight into the global functions of these key regulators in controlling cell identity. Therefore, the underlying regulatory network

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information enabled us to prioritize an optimal combination of TFs in the core TRN, which are crucial to establish and maintain its cell-specific gene expression program. Moreover, by considering the epigenetic state and gene expression levels of those TFs in the starting cell type, we were able to faithfully predict a particular set of IFs required for any desired cellular transition among different cell types.

Final cell type	Initial cell type	Combination of IFs	
Hepatocytes	Fibroblast	<i>HNF1A, HNF4A, ONECUT1, CEBPA, ATF5, PROX1, TP53-siRNA, MYC</i>	
		<i>HNF1A, HNF4A, FOXA3</i>	
		<i>FOXA2, HNF4A, CEBPB, MYC</i>	
iPSC	Hematopoietic stem cell	<i>FOXA2, HNF4A, CEBPB</i>	
		<i>POU5F2, SOX2, KLF4</i>	
		<i>POU5F2, SOX2</i>	
Fibroblast	Fibroblast	<i>POU5F2, SOX2 KLF4</i>	
		<i>POU5F1, SOX2</i>	
		<i>POU5F1, SOX2, LIN28A, NANOG</i>	
Keratinocyte	Keratinocyte	<i>POU5F1, SOX2</i>	
		<i>POU5F1, SOX2 KLF4</i>	
		<i>POU5F1, SOX2 KLF4, MYC</i>	
Neural stem cell	Neural stem cell	<i>POU5F1</i>	
		<i>POU5F1, KLF4</i>	
		<i>SOX2</i>	
Neural stem cell	Hematopoietic stem cell	<i>SOX2</i>	
		Foreskin fibroblast	<i>CBX2, HES1, ID1, TFAP2A, ZFP42, ZNF423</i>
			<i>ZNF521</i>
Neuron	Embryonic stem cell	<i>SOX2, PAX6</i>	
		<i>NEUROG2</i>	
		<i>POU3F2, ASCL1, MYT1L</i>	
Fibroblast (NHDF)	Fibroblast	<i>POU3F2, ASCL1, MYT1L</i>	
		<i>POU3F2, ASCL1, MYT1L</i>	
		<i>POU3F2, ASCL1, NEUROD1</i>	
Myoblast	Fibroblast	<i>MYOD1</i>	
		Melanocyte	<i>MITF, PAX3, SOX10</i>
			<i>MITF, LEF1, SOX10, SOX9</i>
Adipocyte	Mesenchymal stem cell	<i>MITF, LEF1, SOX10, SOX9, PAX3, SOX2</i>	
		<i>CEBPB</i>	
		<i>PPARG</i>	
		<i>CEBPB, PPARG</i>	

Table 2: **Enrichment of predicted instructive factors (IFs)** in experimentally validated combinations. Predicted IFs are highlighted in **red** whereas TFs that were replaced by another validated IF are highlighted in **blue**.

Next, we asked whether INTREGNET can distinguish between a more and less efficient set of IFs required to obtain a desired cellular transition. A thorough comparison against different experimentally tested cellular transitions revealed that INTREGNET was able to successfully predict IFs in most cases. We examined a total of 32 cellular conversion experiments with defined factors and compared them with the predictions of INTREGNET and two former approaches, Mogrify [232] and d’Alessio [59]. In particular, we collected examples of cellular conversions to neural stem cells (NSC), hepatocytes, iPSCs, neurons, myoblasts, melanocytes and adipocytes from various initial cell types and assessed the enrichment of predicted IFs in the experimentally validated combina-

tions. In most cases, i.e. for hepatocytes, myoblasts, NSCs and iPSCs, INTREGNET shows an increased enrichment compared to previous approaches (Figure 5A, Table 2). In particular, on average, more than 91% of IFs for inducing pluripotent stem cells were identified by INTREGNET when compared to 74% and 44% with Mogrify and d'Alessio, respectively. Notably, the predictions for iPSCs did not include *KLF4* in most cases but instead contained *PRDM14*, a TF that has been shown to replace *KLF4* while yielding higher conversion efficiency [45]. Most predicted combinations of IFs also contained *MYC*, one of the originally proposed inducers of pluripotency, while at the same time suggesting the over-expression of *MYCN*, another TF of the basic helix-loop-helix family that has been shown to contribute to the induction of pluripotency [202]. This suggests that INTREGNET not only predicts IFs of cellular conversions, but preferentially selects TFs yielding higher conversion efficiency. In contrast to INTREGNET's better performance in four distinct target cell types, almost no validated TFs have been predicted for adipocytes (0%), neurons (0%) and melanocytes (17%). Since INTREGNET only reconstructs core TRNs, we investigated the regulatory relationships of core TFs and known IFs to test the hypothesis that the predictions constituted upstream regulators of these TFs.

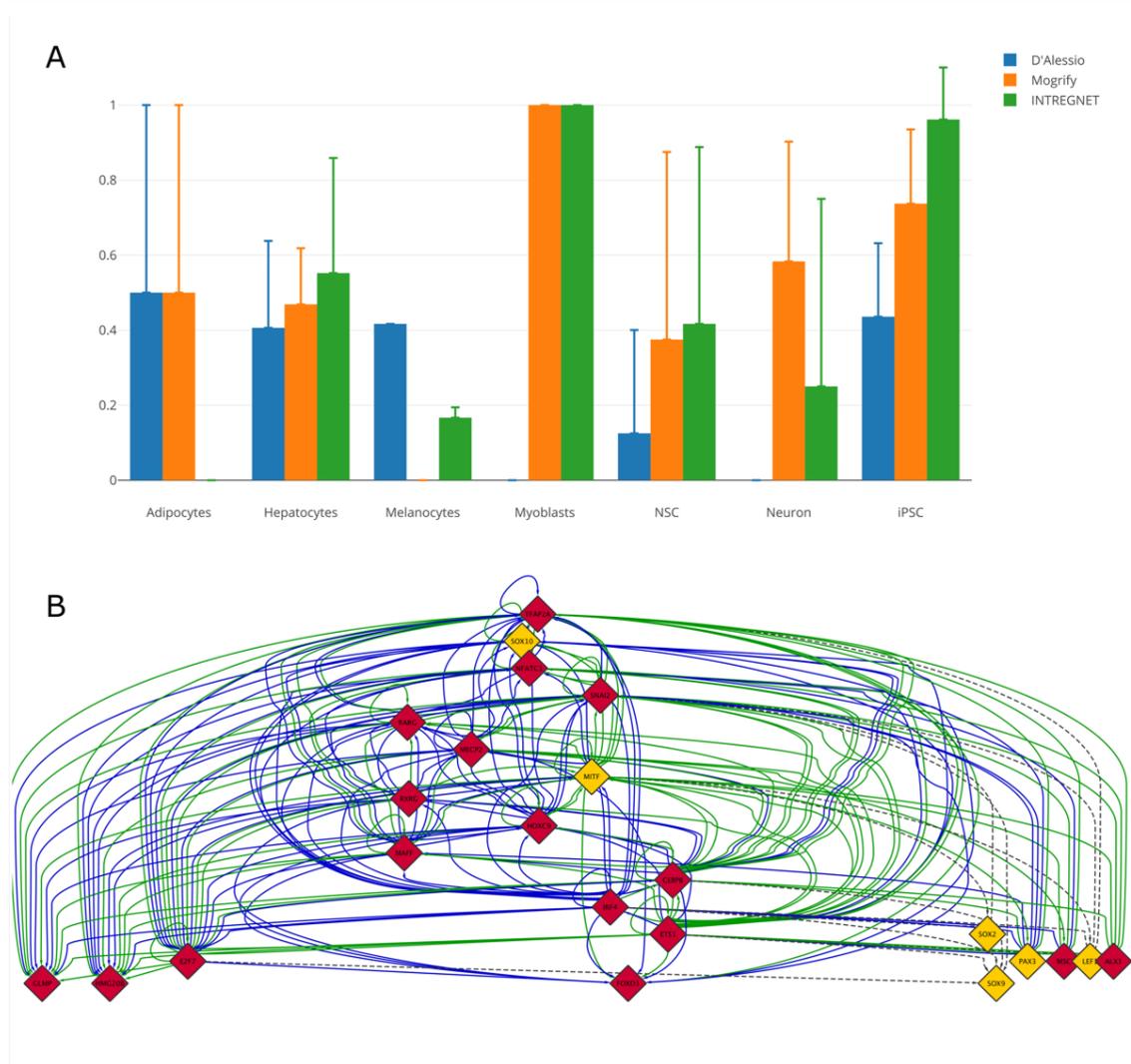


Figure 5: **INTREGNET performance.** A) Recovery of experimentally validated instructive factors (IFs) for seven final cell types. The bar heights corresponds to the average percentage of recovered factors. Error bars represent the standard deviation. B) Melanocyte core TRN including all experimentally validated IFs (yellow). Enhancer and promoter regulation (green) is distinguished from enhancer-only regulation (blue) and inferred promoter-only regulation for the IFs that were not in the reconstructed core TRN (black,dashed).

Indeed, we found that *SOX9*, *PAX3*, *SOX10*, *MITF*, *SOX2*, and *LEF1* were actively regulated in their promoter regions by at least one of the predicted IFs in melanocytes. For the conversion of fibroblasts, only two TFs, *IRF4* and *TFAP2A*, regulated the promoter regions of all known instructive factors and have been shown to co-regulate important loci for melanocyte differentiation [252]. In contrast, these factors have not been predicted when the initiating the conversion from keratinocytes, since they are already expressed. The known instructive factors were, thus, differentially regulated by predicted IFs. Particularly the TFs *SOX9*, *MITF* were regulated by

at least one predicted IF and are able to propagate their effect to all validated conversion factors (Figure 5B). Of all known TFs, only *PAX3* has been predicted to induce the conversion of keratinocytes to melanocytes and is assumed to be an important co-factor of *MITF*, due to their co-localization [252]. Similarly, in adipocytes, we identified the promoter region of *CEBPB* to be actively regulated by the predicted IFs *ATF3*, *SMAD3*, *KLF11*, *E2F1* and *MITF*. In turn, previous studies already demonstrated that *CEBPB*, among other TFs, transcriptionally activates *PPARG* in adipocytes [153]. Unlike in melanocytes and adipocytes, no direct downstream regulatory effects could be identified for *ASCL1*, *POU3F2* and *MYT1L* in neurons. Despite the missing regulatory links of the predicted instructive factors and *ASCL1*, *POU3F2* and *MYT1L*, INTREGNET identifies combinations yielding increased conversion efficiency. Over-expression of *NEUROG2* in embryonic stem cells was reported to produce a nearly pure neuron population [310], while other combinations resulted in substantially lower conversion efficiency [218].

3.4.4 INTREGNET increases the efficiency of iPSC generation

With regard to our finding that INTREGNET identifies factors yielding increased conversion efficiencies, we investigated whether the scores assigned to combinations are prognostic for the efficiency of the cellular transition. Here, especially the ability of TF-based cellular conversions for reprogramming somatic cells into iPSCs has provided an avenue for obtaining patient-specific cell types that can help in modeling human diseases [173]. Taking into consideration the importance of converting somatic cells into iPSCs, and the wealth of data showing different conversion efficiencies depending on the combination of TFs and the initial cell population [88, 114], this classical reprogramming system serves as a suitable system to demonstrate the versatility of INTREGNET.

We leveraged a collection of publicly available experimental datasets measuring the efficiency of iPSC reprogramming with various combinations of factors in four distinct cell types [88, 114, 132, 280] and assessed whether INTREGNET can distinguish more and less efficient combinations, i.e. ranking more efficient conversions higher. For that purpose, a core iPSC network was reconstructed for computing the scores of perturbations as previously described (Figure 6). Before investigating the association between scores and cellular conversion efficiency, we inspected the network more closely to assess its descriptive and dynamic quality. Apparently, apart from

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LIN28A, all known inducers of iPSC induction, i.e. *NANOG*, *MYC*, *POU5F1*, *SOX2*, *KLF4*, *PRDM14* and *MYCN*, are present in the network. Importantly, no perturbation of core TFs can propagate through the complete network, if it does not contain *POU5F1*. Therefore, the network model resembles previous experimental findings emphasizing that *POU5F1* is indispensable for the generation of iPSCs. In addition, the core TRN contains *FOXH1*, *TP53*, *ZNF423* and *MTA3*, which are known to play diverse roles in the conversion to pluripotent stem cells. For example, a previous study revealed that *FOXH1* significantly enhances iPSC conversion efficiency [269], whereas the roles of *ZNF423* and *MTA3* as transcriptional regulators are not yet understood. On the other hand, *TP53* is a known repressor of PSC induction [159, 312], but has been shown to play important roles in the maintenance of embryonic stem cells [159, 277].

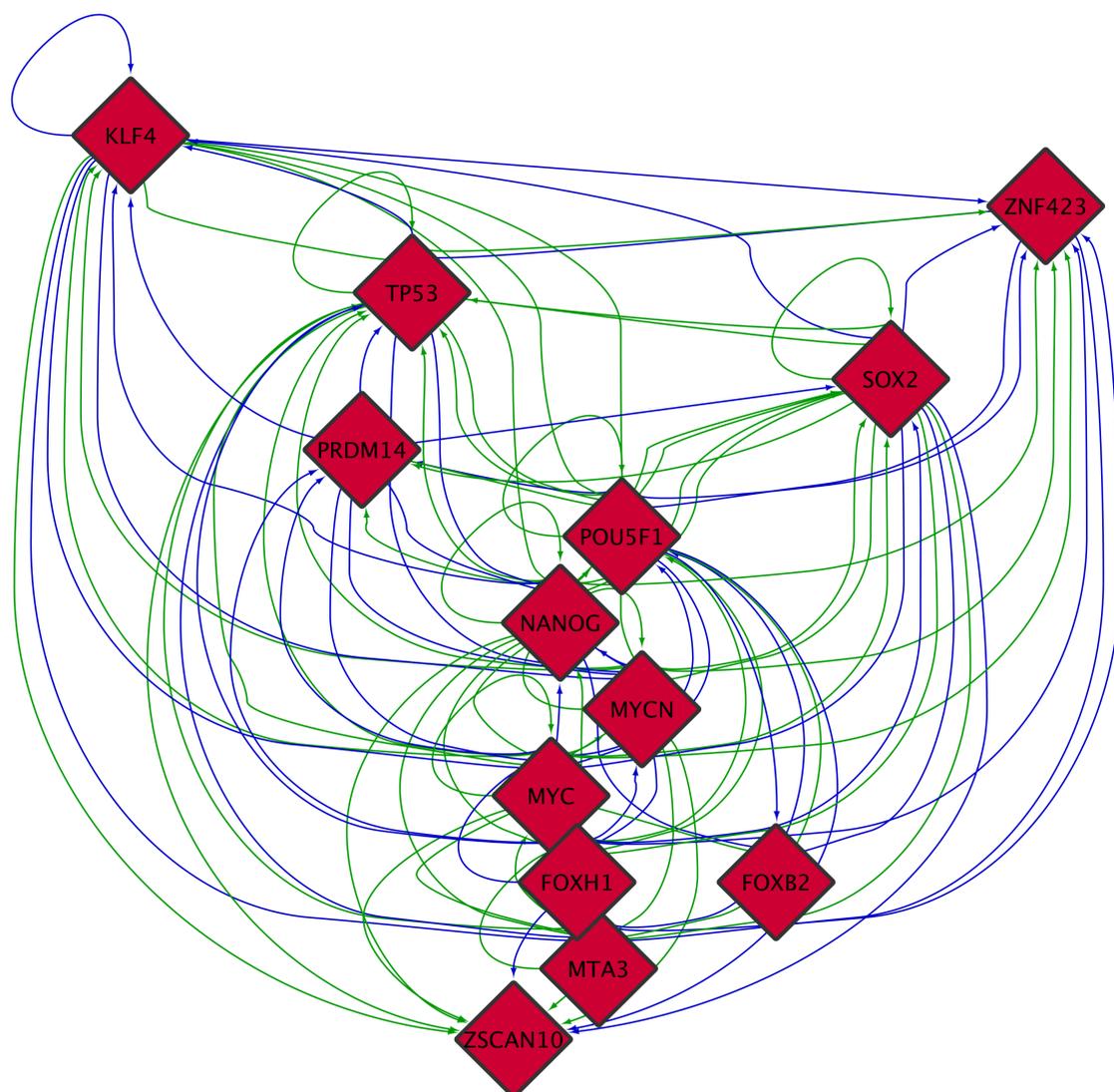


Figure 6: **Reconstructed core TRN of induced pluripotent stem cells.** Enhancer and promoter regulation (green) is distinguished from enhancer-only regulation (blue). No regulatory interaction has been inferred that only regulates the promoter region of a TF.

Due to the dual role of *TP53*, we examined whether the suppression of iPSC conversion is reflected in the dynamics of the network model. In particular, we identified that combinations including *TP53* yield lower scores than those not containing it (Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test, p-value $< 2.2e^{-16}$). Of note, this result is valid regardless of the initial phenotype and, thus, resembles the experimental findings. The support for the qualitative and dynamic validity of the reconstructed iPSC network led us to investigate combinations of IFs yielding high and low conversion efficiency. We collected four conversion examples from different initial cell types, i.e. neural stem cells (NSCs) [132], hematopoietic stem cells (HSCs) [187], and newborn and adult

fibroblasts (Fibroblast, NHDF) [114]. In contrast to the predictions described in the previous section, only known combinations were considered and ranked by their score. Strikingly, each dyad of more efficient combinations was correctly predicted, which provides evidence for INTREGNET's ability to predict more efficient combinations of IFs (Figure 7A). While the differences in scores appear to be negligible, the average number of steps taken until the effect of the perturbation propagated to the complete network model is substantially different. Notably, the scores obtained by INTREGNET are not only consistent within a given initial cell type but also across different initial conditions. *POU5F1*, *SOX2* and *KLF4* have been utilized for inducing PSCs from HSC as well as newborn and adult fibroblasts. Experimental evidence suggests that the reprogramming efficiencies, calculated as the percentage of formed iPSC colonies per 10^5 cells, is rather low for fibroblasts (newborn: 0.05, adult: 0.045) and is significantly elevated in HSCs (0.2). These results are confirmed by the ranking based on the scores obtained by INTREGNET (Figure 7A). Thus, the scores indicate that more plastic cells, such as neural and hematopoietic stem cells, achieve higher conversion efficiencies even though fewer factors are perturbed. Especially neural stem cells show higher epigenetic similarity with PSCs, thus requiring less restructuring of the chromatin for activating the transcriptional core network, which is reflected in a higher overlap of active enhancers specific to induced pluripotency (Figure 7B).

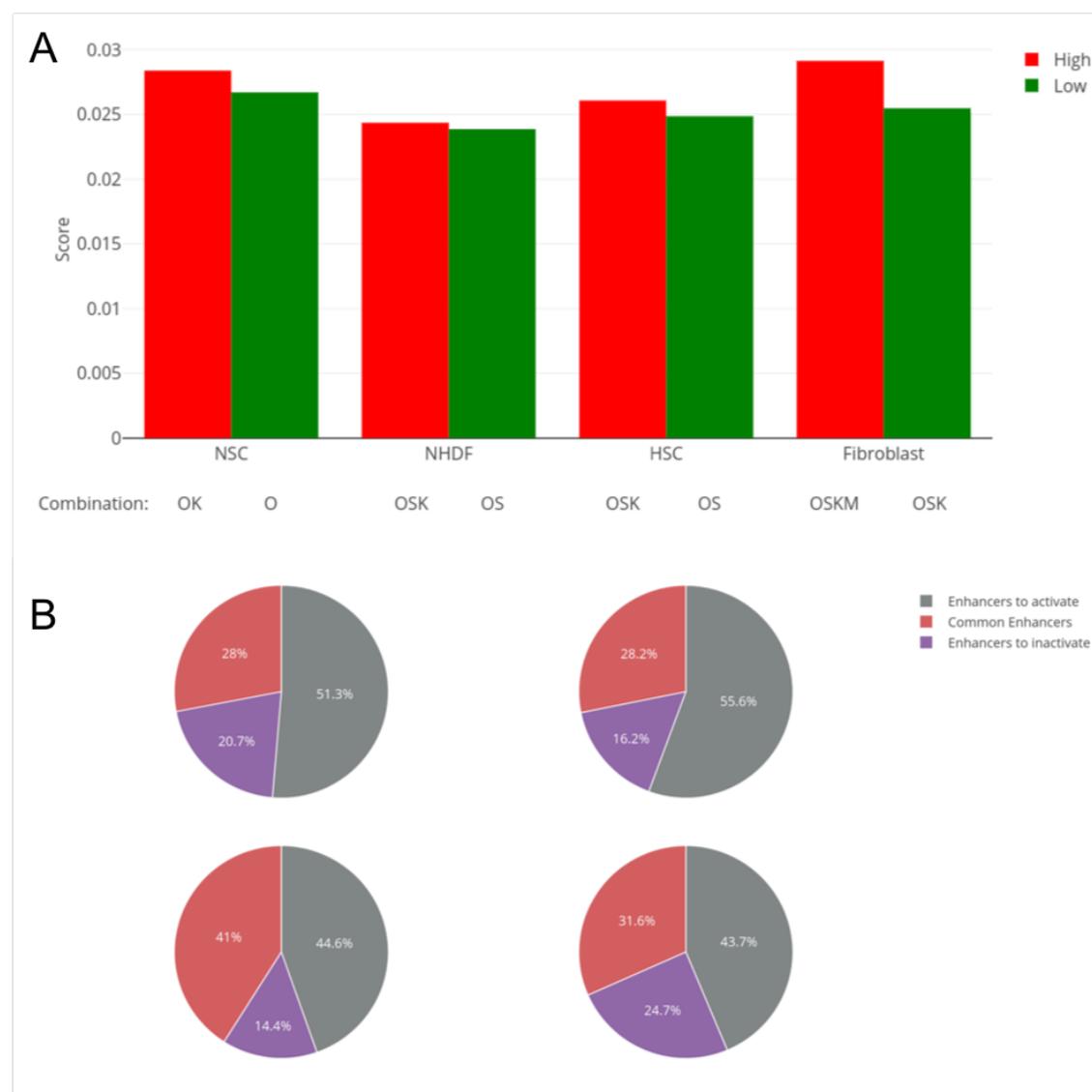


Figure 7: **Reprogramming efficiency for inducing PSCs.** A) Predicted reprogramming efficiency for inducing pluripotent stem cells from different initial cell types using several combinations of IFs ($O = POU5F1$, $S = SOX2$, $K = KLF4$, $M = MYC$). Two cell lines of adult (NHDF) and newborn fibroblasts (Fibroblast (BJ)) were included. Combinations with experimentally validated increased efficiency (red) were compared against low efficiency combinations. B) Distribution of enhancer landscape changes of HSCs (top-left), Fibroblasts (top-right), NSCs (bottom-left) and NHDFs (bottom-right) required for compatibility with iPSCs. Enhancer landscapes were restricted to TFs included in the core TRN and related TFs they regulated by INTREGNET.

3.5 Discussion

A major bottleneck in regenerative medicine is the efficiency of induced cellular conversions, which hampers the translation of therapeutic interventions into clinical applications. While com-

putational methods have been developed to identify IFs of desired cellular conversions [59, 198, 243, 38], none of them is able to systematically prioritize IFs with increasing conversion efficiencies. In view of the interplay between epigenetic and transcriptional regulation to maintain and switch between cellular phenotypes [157, 150, 81], it is important to consider epigenetic information for predicting efficient IFs. Nevertheless, current computational approaches solely rely on transcriptional regulation, which constitutes an important limitation.

In this study, we developed INTREGNET, a computational framework that predicts efficient combinations of IFs for desired cellular conversions. The method is based on the systematic integration of epigenetic and transcriptomic information to reconstruct core TRNs, offering several advantages over current approaches. Firstly, it exclusively relies on experimental data for TRN reconstruction, which increases precision compared to position weight matrix-based methods that are not cell-type-specific. In particular, INTREGNET introduces cell-type-specificity by integrating information on TF ChIP-seq experiments, chromatin accessibility and active cis-regulatory elements to accurately reconstruct networks. Secondly, integration of protein-protein interaction (PPI) data allows for dissecting region-specific cooperative and competitive TF-binding, i.e. the joint effect of multiple TFs on the transcription of target genes. Considering these protein-protein interactions is critical for prioritizing more efficient combinations of IFs, exemplified by the complex formation of *SOX2* and *POU5F1* that is necessary for inducing pluripotent stem cells [242, 27]. Finally, the devised strategy for predicting efficient IFs actively incorporates differences in the epigenetic landscape between the initial and target cell type. Despite the specific combination of IFs, the amount of epigenetic restructuring required during reprogramming is a key determinant of cellular conversion efficiency [219]. INTREGNET accounts for these epigenetic landscape differences by penalizing the calculated efficiency of IFs with the amount of required restructuring.

Despite the advantages of INTREGNET, we acknowledge that it has certain limitations, suggesting potential future improvements. In this regard, a common problem of gene regulatory network reconstruction approaches is missing data. In particular, binding site information of certain TFs is currently unavailable, even though our method leverages a comprehensive compendium of over 11,000 publicly accessible TF ChIP-seq profiles. For example, *LIN28A* was identified as a core TF of iPSCs, but its binding sites have not been profiled. As a consequence, it cannot be contained in the core TRN and predicted as an IF for inducing PSCs. However, the amount of available

TF binding site profiles is steadily increasing, which eventually will mitigate this problem in the future. Moreover, the availability of additional epigenetic profiles, such as multiple histone modifications and chromatin conformation, will become greater in the future, opening the possibility of integrating them into the TRN. Another important limitation is that INTREGNET relies on bulk datasets. Indeed, transcriptomic and epigenetic heterogeneity in cellular populations can influence successful conversion due to the existence of different sub-populations exhibiting distinct conversion efficiencies [31]. In this regard, modeling core TRNs using single-cell data could allow the identification of sub-populations with the highest conversion propensity. Furthermore, single-cell data can help in devising novel experimental strategies for cellular conversion, such as initially priming cell populations and subsequently inducing the desired cell type conversion.

In principal, INTREGNET can be customized for applications for human disease modeling, in view of diseases as network perturbations from healthy to disease phenotype [62]. A core TRN reconstructed from different epigenetic and transcriptional profiles obtained from pathological cells might help in identifying causal TFs that establish or maintain the disease phenotype. Finally, *in silico* network perturbations can guide experimental efforts in pre-selecting a set of putative target TFs, whose perturbation induces the conversion into a healthy phenotype, with vast amounts of potential applications to personalized medicine.

To our knowledge, INTREGNET is one of the first approaches that aims at identifying highly efficient IFs based on the systematic integration of information linked to multiple regulatory levels, and is expected to find diverse applications in the field of regenerative medicine. In particular, considering the success of *in vivo* reprogramming in preclinical models, we believe INTREGNET to be a valuable tool for alleviating the impediment of low efficiency by guiding cellular conversion experiments.

Chapter 4

Identification of causal genes for Alzheimer's disease using a network-based integrative analysis of genomic, epigenomic and transcriptomic data

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Ali M., et al. (2019) Identification of causal genes for Alzheimer's disease using a network-based integrative analysis of genomic, epigenomic and transcriptomic data. *In preparation*.

4.1 Abstract

Recent evidence suggests that changes at multiple levels of genomic regulation, including those linked to genetic variation, DNA methylation, and gene expression, are involved in the development and course of Alzheimer's disease (AD). While the heterogeneous and multifactorial nature of AD requires the integration of regulatory information from different -omics levels in order to accurately capture the mechanisms underlying its pathogenesis, systematic analytical approaches for identifying multi-omics signatures of AD are still lacking. Here, we applied a novel approach for systematically integrating genomic (gene variation), epigenomic (DNA methylation) and transcriptomic data obtained from the middle temporal gyrus (MTG) of AD patients and age-matched controls. This method uses information about AD-associated genetic and epigenetic variation in upstream regulatory genes affecting intermediate (mediator) genes, which, through gene-gene interactions, in turn, affect proximal downstream genes evoking expression changes. In depth analysis of top-ranked genes revealed a strong connectivity between their subnetworks, providing important insights into interconnected dependence of these genes at different regulatory levels. Interestingly, some of the top-ranked genes (*ETSI*, *WT1*, *APP*) are well-known for their implication in the pathogenesis of AD, validating the potential of the proposed approach in recapitulating existing knowledge as well as in predicting novel candidate genes. Thus, the presented approach has the capacity to provide more insight in the underlying mechanisms of complex disorders like AD.

4.2 Introduction

Alzheimer's disease (AD), the most common form of dementia, affects about 30% of those aged over 85 years [79]. AD is classified as a neurodegenerative disease, impacting on a patient's brain integrity and functioning, eventually resulting in a progressive deterioration of cognitive capabilities [30]. Despite decades of research, an effective treatment for AD is still lacking. In recent years, numerous major pharmaceutical companies have terminated their drug development programs on AD, as related clinical drug trials failed, which is primarily attributed to the heterogeneous and yet unclear pathogenesis of AD [4, 279].

The remarkable development of high-throughput sequencing technologies has allowed the generation of great quantities of genomic, epigenomic and transcriptomic data for various human diseases that has allowed us to dissect the mechanisms behind the onset and progression of multifactorial diseases. As such, many studies have used information from an individual regulatory level to identify causal genes and understand the mechanisms underlying the pathophysiology of AD. For example, genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have successfully identified numerous susceptibility genes for AD [89]. Some prominent examples include SNPs associated to *APP* [125], *PSENI* [130], and *PSEN2* [33] that have been implicated in early-onset of AD. Similarly, based on the crucial role of DNA methylation in cellular processes [214], including gene regulation [229], cellular differentiation [131] and genomic imprinting [221], there have been many studies linking changes in DNA methylation status to the pathogenesis of AD [290, 61]. For example, epigenetic alterations in the DNA methylation levels of *ANK1*, *BINI*, and *RHBDF2* genes have been suggested to play a key role in the onset of AD [61]. Furthermore, analysis of genome-wide transcriptomic data sets from post-mortem brain tissue has unveiled various key genes in different biological pathways associated with AD, among which, for example, *TYROBP* and *SP11*, have been implicated in the brain's immune response [286]. These findings highlight that changes associated with AD are not restricted to a particular regulatory layer and can be observed across genetic, epigenetic and transcriptomic levels in both brain and blood samples [147, 61, 179, 100, 109, 170].

Although various levels of genomic regulation, including DNA methylation, chromatin modifications and microRNAs (miRNAs), are known to be highly interconnected at the functional level [63], commonly used analytical approaches are usually restricted to analysing only one or two layers of molecular information in association with AD [61, 286, 107], and, moreover, are mostly restrained to correlations. Therefore, an integrative multi-omics systems biology approach to uncover the relative, interdependent contribution of various molecular layers in the development and course of AD is of utmost importance.

In recent years, several computational tools using network-based approaches have been developed in order to detect cancer-related genes by integrating information from different regulatory levels, i.e. genomic (genetic variation), epigenomic (DNA methylation), transcriptomic (gene expression), and proteomic levels. A few prominent examples include, DriverNet [14], HotNet2 [155],

TieDIE [220], and NetICS [66] that use network diffusion algorithm to identify causative disease genes at epigenomic, transcriptomic and proteomic levels. However, so far, these approaches have not been applied to understand the mechanism underlying AD pathology and prioritize AD-associated genes.

In the present study, we have conducted a network-based integrative analysis of genetic, epigenetic and transcriptomic data sets derived from post-mortem middle temporal gyrus (MTG) tissue from AD patients and age-matched elderly controls (Lardenoije et al., Under Review). We have applied a bidirectional graph diffusion-based technique [66] to prioritize genes based on known AD-associated genetic variations, differential methylation and differential mRNA expression. This method uses a rank-aggregation technique for integrating diverse molecular data types within a directed functional interaction network. Our findings show a strong connection between sub-networks of top-ranked genes (*ETS1*, *TP63*, *ZNF217*, *WT1*, *IL15* and *APP*). The conducted analysis can explain how genetic and epigenetic variation can induce expression changes in other genes via gene-gene interactions. Furthermore, we used connectivity map database [145] to uncover functional connections between predicted top-ranked AD-associated genes and drugs that may revert their gene expression from AD towards the healthy phenotype. The drug enrichment analysis suggested a combination of levcycloserine and apramycin to be the most effective therapeutic treatment for AD in terms of normalizing AD-associated gene expression patterns.

Taken together, the conducted analyses allows a systematic dissection of mechanisms underlying the onset and progression of multifactorial diseases like AD at a multi-omics level, suggesting potential candidate genes and putative drugs that could be employed to target these genes. Thus, we are providing the scientific community with a novel approach that can pave the way for deconvoluting complex and multifactorial human diseases, hence fostering the development of novel treatment strategies.

4.3 Materials and methods

Multi-omics AD signatures within the MTG were identified by the integration of datasets from three different regulatory levels. Firstly, AD-associated SNPs identified by GWAS were retrieved from the International Genomics of Alzheimer's Project (IGAP) [147]. Secondly, methylation

(5-methyl-cytosine; 5mC) data were obtained from post-mortem MTG tissues of 46 AD patients and 32 elderly, non-demented controls. Lastly, for the same individuals, gene expression data within the MTG were obtained using Illumina Beadchip microarrays. An overview of our analysis pipeline is shown in Figure 8, while each individual step, i.e. the identification and annotation of SNPs, DNA methylation and gene expression data processing, gene-gene interaction network curation, and network diffusion analysis is described in detail in the remainder of this section.

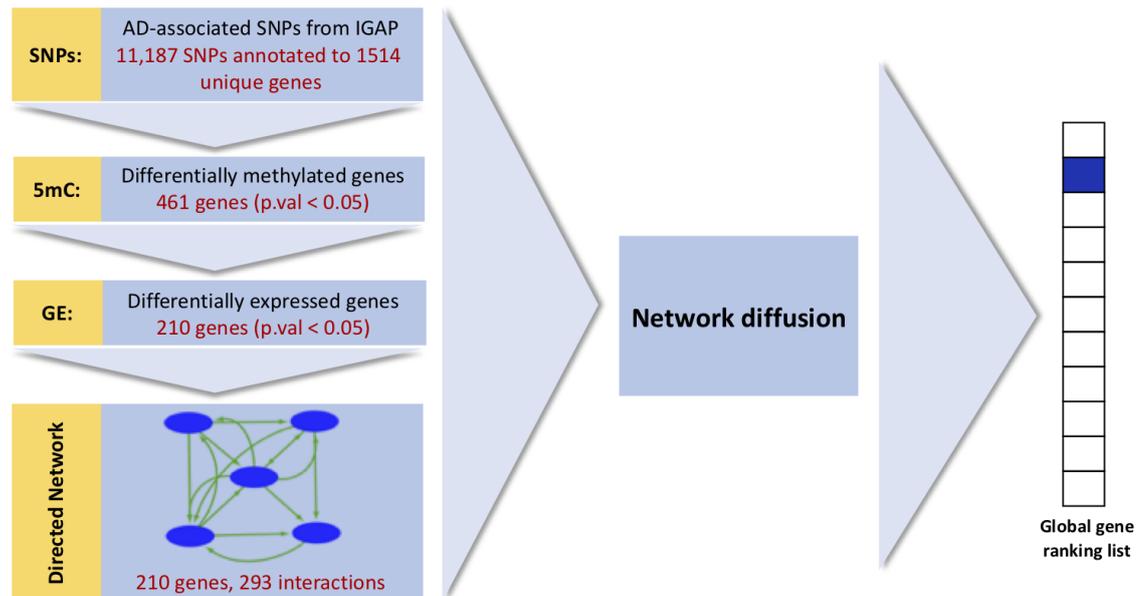


Figure 8: **Schematic pipeline of the multi-omics approach used for ranking AD-associated genes.** AD-associated SNPs were obtained from a large, two-stage meta-analysis conducted in IGAP study. The combined analysis of two stages resulted in 11,187 SNPs showing moderate evidence of association (P-value ≤ 0.05) to AD. Annotating these SNPs to the human genome (hg19) resulted into 1,514 unique genes. Next, filtering significantly differentially methylated (P-value ≤ 0.05) probes for these 1,514 SNPs-associated genes resulted into 837 probes, annotated to 461 unique genes. Further filtering these genes for significant differential expression (P-value ≤ 0.05) resulted into 210 unique genes. Accordingly, we obtained 293 direct gene-gene interactions between these genes from the MetaCore database. By using the obtained network, and p-values of differentially methylated and expressed genes as an input for the network diffusion algorithm, we ranked these 210 genes based on their mediator effect.

4.3.1 Post-mortem tissue samples

The present study included donors from the Brain and Body Donation Program (BBDP) at the Banner Sun Health Research Institute (BHSRI), who signed an informed consent form approved by the institutional review board, including specific consent of using the donated tissue for future research [17, 18].

DNA was obtained from the MTG of 46 AD patients and 32 neurologically normal control BBDP donors stored at the Brain and Tissue Bank of the BSHRI (Sun City, Arizona, USA) [17, 18]. The organization of the BBDP allows for fast tissue recovery after death, resulting in an average post-mortem interval of only 2.8 hours for the included samples. A consensus diagnosis of AD or non-demented control was reached by following National Institutes of Health (NIH) AD Center criteria [18]. Comorbidity with any other type of dementia, cerebrovascular disorders, mild cognitive impairment (MCI), and presence of non-microscopic infarcts were applied as exclusion criteria. Detailed information about the BBDP has been reported elsewhere [17, 18].

4.3.2 SNP identification and annotation

AD-associated SNPs are identified by IGAP in a large, two-stage meta-analysis of GWAS in 25,580 AD and 48,466 control individuals of European ancestry [147]. According to the combined analysis of two stages, 11,632 SNPs showing moderate evidence of association (P -value < 0.001) in stage 1 were followed up for subsequent association analysis in stage 2. We applied a P -value threshold of 0.05 to obtain those SNPs that have been found to be statistically significantly associated with AD in both stages of the IGAP study. Furthermore, we only kept those SNPs for which the direction of association (positive or negative) was the same and with the same “effect allele” in stage 1 and 2. Following these filtration criteria, we obtained 11,187 SNPs and annotated them to the hg19 genome by Homer `annotatePeaks.pl` in order to characterize their genomic annotation [105]. Annotating these SNPs to the nearest gene resulted into 1,514 unique genes.

4.3.3 Differential methylation (5mC) analysis

For differential methylation analysis, the 5mC data were obtained from an unpublished study from our group, where Illumina HM 450K arrays were used for quantifying the methylation status of 485,000 different human CpG sites. In view of the present study, we included those 5mC datasets for which corresponding gene expression profiles (see below) were also available, resulting in data derived from 46 AD patients and 32 age-matched controls. Pre-processing and analysis of the raw data sets was conducted in R (version 3.4.4) [272]. Raw IDAT files corresponding to the selected

individuals were read into R using the `wateRmelon` “`readEpic`” function (version 1.20.3) [224]. The “`pfilter`” function from the `wateRmelon` package (version 1.18.0) [224] was used to filter data sets based on bead count and detection p-values. Background correction and normalization of the remaining probe data was performed by “`preprocessNoob`” function of `minfi` package (version 1.22.1) [9]. We used the `MLML` function within the `MLML2R` package [77] for estimating the proportion of uC, 5mC and 5hmC for each CpG site, based on the combined input signals from the BS and OxBS arrays. All of the cross-hybridizing probes and the probes that contained a SNP in the sequence were removed resulting into 407,922 probes to be considered for the differential methylation analysis [43].

Raw IDAT files corresponding to the selected individuals were loaded into R using `minfi` “`read.metharray`” function (version 1.22.1) [9] to make an `RGset` for computing the cell type composition of the samples by “`estimateCellCounts`” function of the same package. For estimating the cell composition, we used `FlowSorted.DLPFC.450k` package (version 1.18.0) [120] as the reference data for “`NeuN_pos`” cell composition of frontal cortex. The `limma` package (version 3.32.10) [241] was used to perform linear regression in order to test the relationship between the beta values of the probes and the diagnosis of AD. The used regression model considered beta values as outcome, AD diagnosis as predictor, and age, gender, and neuronal cell proportion as covariates. In order to identify significantly differentially methylated probes (DMPs), probes with unadjusted P-value less than 0.05 were considered for further analysis. Resulting probes were annotated using Illumina human UCSC annotation. We took the most significant probe as a representative of the methylation status of a gene. Filtering the 1,514 SNPs-associated genes for DMPs resulted in 837 probes, annotated to 461 unique genes.

4.3.4 Differential gene expression analysis

For differential gene expression analysis, Illumina HumanHT-12 v4 beadchip arrays were used. The brain tissue sample used for RNA extraction was identical as used for the methylation study. Pre-processing and analysis of the raw data sets was conducted in R (version 3.4.4) [272]. Raw expression data was log-transformed and quantile-quantile normalized. For computing the cell composition, the `NeuN_pos` cell percentage was calculated from the methylation data. The same regression model used for assessing methylation was applied to the expression data where the

effects of age, gender and cell type composition were regressed out using limma. Genes having nominal P-value less than 0.05 were included for further analysis. Filtering the remaining 461 genes for differential expression resulted in 210 genes for downstream analysis.

4.3.5 Gene-gene interaction network

We used MetaCore (Clarivate Analytics) to obtain directed functional interactions between genes both known to be genetically associated with AD, and differentially methylated and expressed according to our differential methylation and expression analyses, respectively. The MetaCore database contains a collection of manually curated and experimentally validated direct gene-gene interactions based on existing literature. This high level of manual curation ensures the creation of highly confident interaction network maps. In order to obtain a set of directed functional interactions among the selected genes, our analysis was restricted to “Functional interactions”, “Binding interactions”, and “Low trust interactions”. The interaction network obtained from MetaCore contains a variety of different interaction types, including (transcriptional) regulation, (de)phosphorylation, binding, and influence on expression. The obtained interactions are directed, i.e. the source and target genes are known. Furthermore, the information about the interaction type (activation or inhibition) is also given where available.

4.3.6 Network-based integration analysis

A network diffusion-based algorithm was employed to understand the functional implications of genetic variations at both epigenomic and transcriptomic levels [66]. Functional gene-gene interaction network, AD-associated genetic variations, as well as the differentially methylated and differentially expressed genes with respective p-values, were provided as inputs to the network-diffusion algorithm. The underlying hypothesis is that genetic variation in upstream genes affect intermediate (mediator) genes, which in turn affect proximal downstream genes evoking significant expression changes. The diffusion of information from upstream aberrant genes towards mediator genes and, eventually, in downstream differentially expressed genes, relies on the directionality of the provided functional network interactions. Accordingly, network diffusion was used to obtain a ranked list of AD-associated genes based on their potential being a mediator gene and

evoke changes in gene expression.

4.3.7 Drug enrichment analysis

Connectivity map [145] was used to check for the enrichment of drug target genes in the subnetworks of top ten ranked mediator genes identified by the network diffusion. For every subnetwork, we obtained a signature of up- and downregulated probes based on the fold changes of the respective genes in the differential expression analysis. The obtained signatures were used as an input for the connectivity map to identify drugs that are known to induce opposite gene expression profiles. As such, Connectivity map gives a ranked list of drugs based on their enrichment in the provided query gene expression signature. The most negatively enriched (correlated) drugs, i.e. those inversely correlating to the diseased (AD) gene expression signature, were chosen as candidate drugs.

4.4 Results

4.4.1 Prediction of AD-associated genes by network diffusion

Existing studies relying on single regulatory levels have been able to identify AD-associated abnormalities at the genomic [89, 125, 130, 33], epigenomic [290, 61] and transcriptomics level [286]. However, a thorough understanding of the cross-talk between these interconnected layers of regulation is still missing which is essential for uncovering the mechanisms underlying the pathogenesis of AD. Therefore, here we used a network diffusion approach that integrates regulatory information from genomic, epigenomic and transcriptomic layers to rank key genes based on their ability to evoke disease-associated transcriptional changes. Based on the input information from different regulatory levels and functional gene-gene interaction networks, the genes are ranked according to their predicted involvement in AD. The top thirty ranked genes that are predicted to be associated with AD are shown in the Table 3.

Rank	Genes	Rank	Genes	Rank	Genes
1	<i>ETS1</i>	11	<i>MTA3</i>	21	<i>MNI</i>
2	<i>TP63</i>	12	<i>CAVI</i>	22	<i>PLAGL1</i>
3	<i>ZNF217</i>	13	<i>OPRM1</i>	23	<i>SATB2</i>
4	<i>WT1</i>	14	<i>NR1H3</i>	24	<i>CLU</i>
5	<i>IL15</i>	15	<i>PRKD1</i>	25	<i>HLX</i>
6	<i>FHL2</i>	16	<i>ACTB</i>	26	<i>WWOX</i>
7	<i>APP</i>	17	<i>ZFPM2</i>	27	<i>HDAC9</i>
8	<i>EPAS1</i>	18	<i>ARHGEF7</i>	28	<i>RGS4</i>
9	<i>SMARCA2</i>	19	<i>CUX2</i>	29	<i>ETV6</i>
10	<i>RXRA</i>	20	<i>OLIG2</i>	30	<i>ABCA1</i>

Table 3: **Top 30 ranked AD-associated genes identified by network diffusion.**

4.4.2 Subnetwork of top-ranked AD-associated genes

With regard to our finding that network diffusion identifies key genes associated to AD pathogenesis, we investigated whether the predicted genes are isolated or densely connected to each other via regulatory interactions. A graphical illustration of the directed functional interactions used as an input for the network diffusion showed that all the top-ranked mediator genes either directly regulate each other or regulate upstream genes that are significantly differentially methylated and regulate other mediator genes. An illustration of gene-gene interactions in the form of a subnetwork of the top-ranked genes is shown in Figure 9.

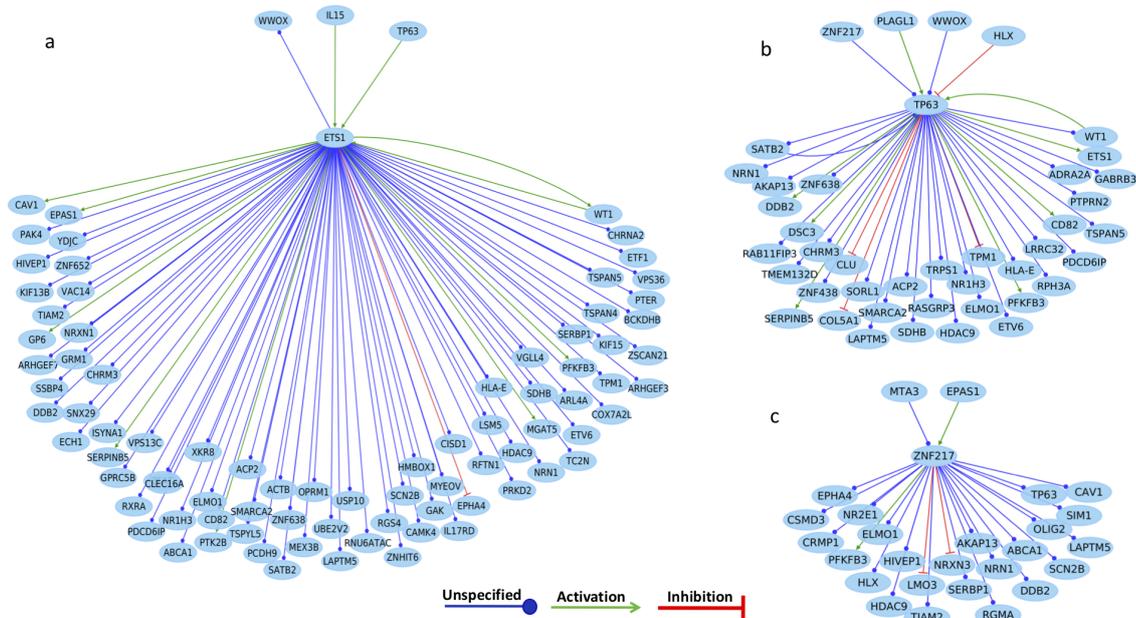
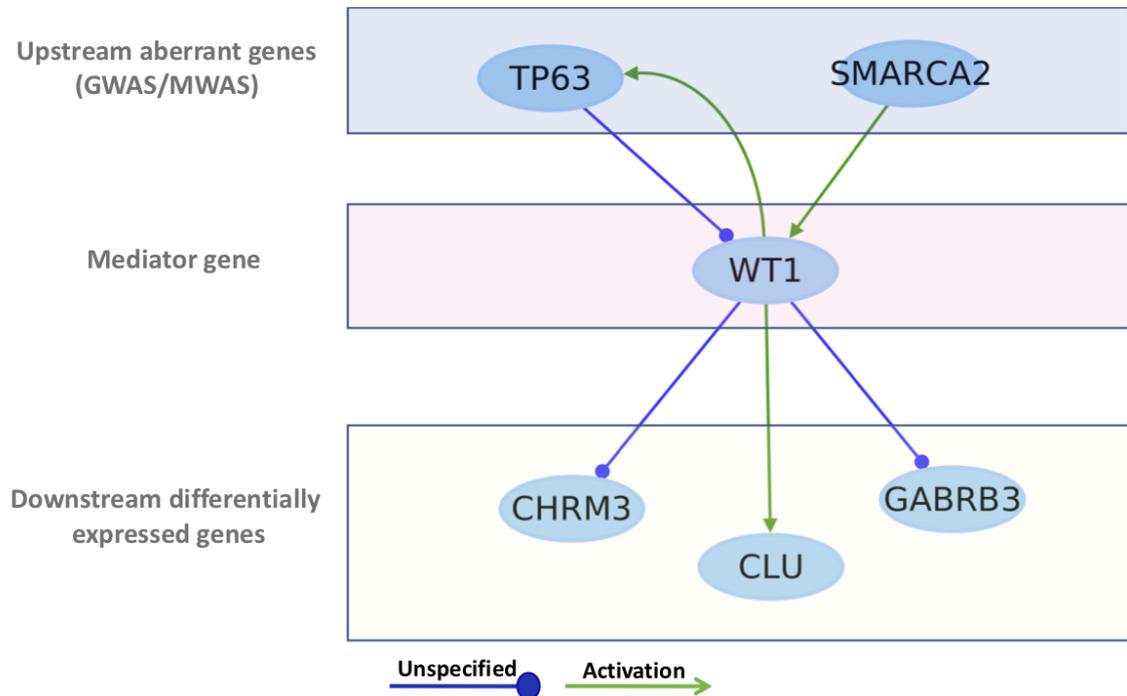


Figure 10: **Top ranked AD-associated genes subnetwork.** a) *ETS1*, b) *TP63*, and c) *ZNF217* subnetworks.

4.4.3 *WT1* as a mediator gene

As a proof of concept, we examined Wilms tumor suppressor (*WT1*), a top-ranked mediator gene that is predicted to be implicated in AD pathogenesis, in more detail. *WT1* has been known to be involved in different cellular processes including proliferation, differentiation, and apoptosis. Laser confocal microscopy and gene expression analysis of cultured hippocampal neurons from a mouse model for AD revealed a strong correlation between *WT1* expression and apoptosis induced by amyloid beta exposure (A β) [169]. In the same study, Lovell and co-workers observed that a reduction in *WT1* expression levels by blocking its transcription using an antisense oligonucleotide was accompanied by a significant decrease of neuronal apoptosis in A β -treated cultures. This study confirms the key role of *WT1* in mediating neuronal degeneration associated with the pathogenesis of AD. These observations are in line with our differential methylation and expression analyses where a significant hypomethylation (logFC: -0.006, P-value: 0.022) has been observed in the gene body, concomitant with significantly increased expression levels of this gene (logFC: 0.026, P-value: 0.033) in AD patients. We further examined this mediator gene in more detail to analyze upstream and downstream genes within its subnetwork and dissected their involvement in the pathogenesis of AD. A graphical illustration of the *WT1* subnetwork is shown in Figure

11.

Figure 11: Subnetwork of the AD-associated mediator gene *WT1*.

The network representation shows that *WT1* has two upstream regulators (*TP63* and *SMARCA2*) known for AD-associated genetic variation and displaying significant differential methylation. Interestingly, *TP63* is also among the five downstream (significantly differentially expressed) genes of *WT1* (*TP63*, *CLU*, *GABRB3*, and *CHRM3*). Our differential methylation and expression analysis of these upstream regulators revealed that *SMARCA2* was downregulated (logFC: -0.18, P-value: 4.73×10^{-5}) and hypermethylated (logFC: 0.051, P-value: 0.0002) in AD patients, while *TP63* was upregulated (logFC: 0.035, P-value: 0.015) and hypomethylated (logFC: -0.18, P-value: 0.025). Experimental evidence that revealed the physical interaction of *TP63* with *WT1* [249] and positive regulation of *TP63* by *WT1* [160] suggests that they are linked by means of a positive feedback loop. Altogether, the activation of *WT1* by *TP63* overexpression could explain the relative high expression levels of *WT1* in AD patients in comparison to the healthy controls. Of note, both of these *WT1* upstream regulators (*TP63* and *SMARCA2*) have been reported to be crucial for normal neuronal cellular processes and perturbations in these genes are associated with various nervous system disorders including AD [36, 188, 156, 250].

Apart from predicting well-studied AD associated genes, network diffusion was able to identify

more novel genes associated with this disease. For example, variants in clusterin (*CLU*), a *WT1* downstream gene, has been associated with AD [146, 100] and high expression levels of this gene have recently been observed in brain regions with plaque pathology [194]. These findings are in line with our analysis, as we observed an increase in expression of this gene (logFC: 0.052, P-value: 0.020) and a representative hypomethylated probe (logFC: -0.001, P-value: 0.034) within 200 bp of the transcription start site (TSS) region. Similarly, the observed lower expression levels (logFC: -0.35, P-value: 0.001) of GABA-Alpha receptor subunit beta-3 (*GABRB3*), concomitant with hypermethylation in the gene body (logFC: 0.028, P-value: 0.017) are in line with an existing study that found lower levels of *GABRB3* mRNA in the AD hippocampus [240, 196], suggesting an altered functional profile of this receptor in AD. Furthermore, we noticed downregulation of the cholinergic receptor *CHRM3* (logFC: -0.48, P-value: 0.0009), accompanied by hypermethylation of this gene (logFC: 0.045, P-value: 0.002) positioned downstream from *WT1*. Although cholinergic neurotransmitter pathway is well-known for its crucial role in the progression of AD [40], it was until recently that the involvement of cholinergic receptors muscarinic (*CHRM*) has been associated to AD [40]. Altogether, these findings suggest that genomic (genetic variation) and epigenomic (differential methylation) changes in upstream regulators disrupt *WT1* activity in such a way that it evokes changes in the expression levels of its downstream genes. Series of synchronized changes at different regulatory levels like these are hypothesized to perturb normal cellular function during the development and course of AD.

4.4.4 Drug targets in mediator gene subnetwork

Connectivity map [145] was used as a reference database for discovering functional connections among predicted top-ranked AD-associated mediator genes and drug actions. The subnetworks of mediator genes were analysed for their enrichment in drug targets based on the similarity of drug-induced gene expression profiles available in the Connectivity map database. The details of this drug enrichment analysis are summarized in Table 4.

As we have used the discretized disease gene expression signatures for querying the Connectivity map, we are interested in drugs that produce the most negative correlated gene expression profile when compared to our query signature. We assume that drugs that are able to produce the exact opposite gene expression profile could be the potential candidates for reverting the diseases (AD-

Gene	Upregulated probes	Downregulated probes	Most enriched drug	Enrichment score	P-value
<i>ETSI</i>	68	73	levcycloserine	-0.894	0.00024
<i>TP63</i>	44	37	isoxicam	-0.828	0.00038
<i>ZNF217</i>	34	14	ginkgolide A	-0.824	0.00185
<i>WT1</i>	23	21	gentamicin	-0.805	0.00280
<i>IL15</i>	3	2	ondansetron	-0.957	0.00001
<i>FHL2</i>	8	6	thioguanosine	-0.883	0.00046
<i>APP</i>	16	18	cefuroxime	-0.934	0.00002
<i>EPASI</i>	15	13	apramycin	-0.861	0.00068
<i>SMARCA2</i>	11	14	CP-944629	-0.851	0.00001
<i>RXRA</i>	12	5	chlorambucil	-0.881	0.00001

Table 4: **Drug enrichment analysis in mediator gene subnetworks from the connectivity map.**

associated) gene expression program towards a healthy phenotype. As such, these compounds may form targets for drug repurposing. Interestingly, the top-ranked drug for the *EPASI* query signature named apramycin also turns out to be ranked third for the *RXRA* signature with an enrichment score of -0.834 and a P-value of 0.00137. As *ETSI* is the top-ranked mediator gene in our analysis and it also contains one-third of the dysregulated genes in its subnetwork, a drug that could revert the gene expression profile for genes in the *ETSI* subnetwork might be very effective in obtaining a transition from an AD-associated towards a healthy phenotype. In fact, the drug enrichment analysis suggests a combination of levcycloserine and apramycin to be the most effective therapeutic treatment for AD in terms of normalizing AD-associated gene expression patterns as it holds the potential to revert the maximal gene expression program by a minimal number of candidate drugs. Notably, cycloserine, which is a partial glycine agonist that exhibits its activity by binding the N-methyl-d-aspartate (NMDA) receptor, has been found to significantly improve implicit memory [251] and cognitive function [279] in AD patients.

4.5 Discussion

In view of the interplay between genomic, epigenomic and transcriptomic dysregulation in AD, in the present study, we applied a novel approach for prioritizing AD-associated genes (i.e. genetic variation) based upon AD-linked variation at the epigenomic and transcriptomic level. To this end, by making use of an integrative graph-diffusion based method [66], we have integrated information from different molecular regulatory levels into a directed functional gene-gene interaction network. This method uses information about AD-associated genetic and epigenetic variation in upstream regulatory genes affecting intermediate (mediator) genes, which, through

gene-gene interactions, in turn, affect proximal downstream genes evoking expression changes. As such, this approach ranks genes within such gene-gene interaction networks, based on their potential to evoke downstream changes. Some of the most prominent candidate genes include *ETSI*, *WT1* and *APP* genes, which are all known to be involved in various neuronal cellular processes, while expression changes of these genes have been implicated in the course of AD [121, 169, 208, 181].

A thorough review of the existing literature suggests that all the top-ranked genes have been associated with AD progression. For example, consistent with our differential expression analysis, *ETSI* has been shown to be upregulated in AD brains and has been associated with reactive microglia and A β deposition [121]. Similarly, *TP63*, a member of p53 family of transcription factors, has been shown to regulate adult neural precursor and newly born neurons [36], and may have a neuroprotective role by regulating synaptic gene expression [188]. Although the role of *ZNF217* is not yet fully understood in view of neurodegenerative diseases like AD, experimental evidence suggests that the miR-200/*ZNF217* axis may represent a regulatory mechanism mediating the development of AD [291]. Moreover, there is compelling evidence suggesting that *WT1*, *IL15*, *APP*, and *EPAS1* play crucial roles in neuronal degeneration and AD [169, 239, 208, 181, 258]. Interestingly, similar evidence is available for the observed changes in the methylation levels [119]. For example, in accordance with our differential methylation analysis, a higher methylation level of the *APP* gene has been reported as an AD-specific phenomenon [119].

In addition to the required multi-omics datasets, the gene-gene interaction information used by network diffusion allows unravelling the dynamics of (dys)regulation in the network. For example, *WT1* has been ranked fourth as an AD-associated mediator gene, controlled by two upstream genes and directly regulating four downstream genes. Interactions within the *WT1* subnetwork suggest its upregulation by a positive feedback loop involving *TP63*, that has been experimentally verified in one direction [249, 160]. This upregulation might be due to genetic variation or hypomethylation in the gene body of *TP63*, or both, thereby promoting *WT1* expression, and, as a result, changes in the expression levels of its downstream genes (*TP63*, *CLU*, *GABRB3*, and *CHRM3*). Interestingly, experimental evidence has linked the upregulation of *WT1* and its downstream targets (*CLU* and *TP63*) with neurodegeneration in nervous system disorders, including AD [169, 36, 194]. Similarly, downregulation of its downstream genes (*GABRB3* and *CHRM3*)

has been implicated in cognitive decline in AD patients [240, 196, 40, 200]. Taken together, this integrative analysis provides insight on how changes in DNA methylation levels and genetic variation can lead to transcriptional changes via gene-gene interactions, hence potentially explaining the diseased state.

We have shown that the conducted analysis not only identifies disease-related multi-omics signatures and key genes, but also has the ability to predict putative drugs that could revert the disease phenotype. Connectivity map [145] was used as a reference database for linking subnetworks of mediator genes to drugs that have been shown to produce opposite gene expression profiles. A systematic drug enrichment analysis led to the prediction of levycycloserine and apramycin as the most promising existing drugs for reverting the observed AD-associated gene expression profiles. Interestingly, cycloserine treatment has been found to significantly improve implicit memory [251] and cognitive function [279] in AD patients, suggesting the potential of the proposed approach in recapitulating previously-known drugs as well as predicting novel candidates.

Despite being able to prioritize AD-associated causal genes by systematically integrating multi-omics data onto a functional gene-gene interaction network, we acknowledge that the utilized approach has certain limitations, providing avenues for future improvements. For example, network diffusion can investigate the mediator effects of only those genes that are present in the gene interaction network. This highlights the problem of missing data in the literature, as currently, the well-curated and experimentally proven gene-gene interaction maps are not covering the whole spectrum of human genes, rather they are more enriched towards well-studied transcription factors and genes. As such, these results may be biased towards such well-studied, hence highly connected, genes in the network. This bias might arise due to their high connectivity, which contributes to higher chances of finding various differentially methylated or differentially expressed gene in their network neighbourhood. Furthermore, as the reference database used for drug enrichment analysis is comprised of a selected number of drugs profiled on only a few cell lines, most of which are cancerous, this may limit the possibility of finding an optimal drug for reverting the disease-related gene expression pattern. However, decreasing expression profiling costs and an increasing number of such resources [117, 201], will eventually mitigate this problem in the future.

In conclusion, the conducted analysis offers a novel approach for integrating information from

different levels of regulation in order to detect and rank AD-associated genetic variation based on its functional significance and gene-gene interaction capability at the transcriptional regulatory level. Such analysis will find its applications in predicting potentially causal genes for other human pathologies where individual datasets are available from different -omics levels. Thus, we are providing the scientific community with a novel approach that can pave the way for deconvoluting complex and multifactorial human diseases, hence fostering the development of novel treatment strategies.

Chapter 5

The role of altered sphingolipid function in Alzheimer's disease; a gene regulatory network-based approach

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Ali M., et al. (2019) The role of altered sphingolipid function in Alzheimer's disease; a gene regulatory network-based approach. *In preparation*.

5.1 Abstract

Sphingolipids (SLs) are bioactive lipids involved in many physiological pathways. They show an altered metabolism in several central nervous system (CNS) disorders such as Alzheimer's disease (AD). The pathophysiology of AD is still not fully understood. Recent evidence suggests that epigenetic dysregulation plays a crucial role in the disease. In the present study, we examined if genes associated with SL signaling present transcriptional and epigenetic variation in the AD brain. Combining transcriptomic and epigenetic data of SL-related genes from 46 AD and 32 healthy individuals, among 252 SL-related genes assessed, we found 103 genes to be significantly differentially expressed in AD, i.e. indicating a profound enrichment of SL-related gene expression in AD. Additionally, analysis of methylation data revealed *PTGIS*, *GBA*, and *ITGB2* to be differentially hydroxymethylated and *PLA2G6* to display differential levels of unmodified cytosine in AD. In order to evaluate how SLs influence the disease, we performed a Gene Regulatory Network (GRN) analysis, by reconstructing phenotype-specific, i.e. AD and healthy control, networks. Subsequently, the reconstructed disease network was employed to identify novel perturbation candidates whose alterations hold the potential to revert the gene expression program from an AD towards a healthy state. In particular, we identified *CAVI*, *TNF* and *IL4* to be the most influential gene combination in the AD network, as a perturbation of these three genes has the potential to revert the expression levels of 41 SL-related genes in the network. This multifactorial epigenetic-transcriptional approach highlights the importance of changes in SL function and related molecules in AD. Moreover, although the genes highlighted are not necessarily responsible for the development and course of the disease, identifying specific dysregulated SL-related genes and their downstream effects will provide a starting point to characterize possible AD biomarkers and guiding the development of new therapeutic approaches.

5.2 Introduction

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is the most common age-related neurodegenerative disorder representing one of the main causes of dementia worldwide [133]. Nowadays, the increasing prevalence of individuals affected by AD and the lack of an effective therapy makes AD to be one of the most challenging diseases in the world [16]. This progressive disease is characterized, amongst others,

by initial short-term memory loss and subsequent, language problems, changes in personality, and apathy [16]. The pathogenesis of AD is still not fully understood, but likely involves both genetic and environmental factors [281]. AD is histologically characterized by the progressive over-production and accumulation of amyloid β ($A\beta$) peptide and hyperphosphorylated tau that lead to the formation of extracellular senile plaques and intracellular neurofibrillary tangles, respectively [65]. The concomitant neurotoxicity causes e.g. activation of inflammatory pathways, region-specific synaptic and neuronal degeneration, with huge downstream effects on the physiology of the central nervous system (CNS). Inflammation, metabolic dysfunction, and dysregulation in cell cycle control are just a few of the molecular pathophysiological signs of AD that have been discovered so far and identified as the main etiological causes of neurodegeneration [236].

Increasing evidence suggests that a combination of genetic, epigenetic and environmental factors is contributing to AD progression and associated cognitive impairment. Recently, the role of sphingolipids (SL) garnered more attention in this respect [110]. A clear link between lipids and AD was first reported in 1993 when researchers demonstrated the binding between apolipoprotein E (*APOE4*) and $A\beta$, concomitant with the increased frequency of the APOE type 4 allele observed in AD patients [56, 266]. More recent evidence has further strengthened the notion of altered SL metabolism in AD [101, 56]. Sphingolipids are complex molecules composed of a backbone of sphingoid bases and a set of aliphatic amino alcohols. A very common SL with an R group consisting of a hydrogen atom only is a ceramide. Ceramide undergoes post-transcriptional modification to form more complex SLs highly abundant in the CNS. Besides their role in building up the cell membrane, they have a variety of bioactive functions regulating different physiological processes such as the cell cycle, differentiation, and regulating synapse structure and function [285].

Multiple factors such as early development, but also environmental stimuli, including nutritional factors and drugs are known to affect SL homeostasis through epigenetic mechanisms regulating the expression levels of SL-associated genes [65]. In the brain, the delicate balance of SL species is absolutely necessary for normal neuronal function, as several brain disorders are known to be caused by dysregulation in e.g. SL metabolism [212]. Interestingly, different metabolic and lipidomic analyses have shown an altered SL metabolism in early AD that contributes to the progression of pathology, by impacting upon $A\beta$ production and tau phosphorylation [189]. In particular, there is evidence that gangliosides, a class of glycosylated SLs, contribute to the ini-

tiation and progression of AD by facilitating plaque formation [66]. These studies underscore the importance of SLs in AD onset and progression as well as the need to understand their dysregulation from an integrative point of view [189, 292]. Therefore, a better understanding of the relationship between epigenetic and transcriptomic processes in regulating SL function is of utmost importance for elucidating the underlying role of SLs in AD pathology and the potential development of novel SL-targeted AD therapeutics.

In the present study, we examined SL-related genes from an epigenetic-transcriptional point of view, to further understand the involvement of downstream SL (dys)function in AD. The overarching hypothesis was to identify if, and if so, to which extent SL genes are disrupted at the methylomic and transcriptomic level in AD. To explore this hypothesis, we first identified a set of 252 SL-associated genes based on manually selected Gene Ontology (GO) terms. Transcriptomic analyses showed a profound enrichment of SL-related differentially expressed genes in AD. The conducted epigenetic data analyses revealed *PTGIS*, *GBA*, and *ITGB2* to be differentially hydroxymethylated and *PLA2G6* to display differential levels of unmodified cytosine in AD. Furthermore, to evaluate how SLs influence the disease, we performed a Gene Regulatory Network (GRN) analysis. The reconstructed networks were employed for *in silico* perturbation analysis and identified *CAVI*, *TNF* and *IL4* to be the most influential gene combination in the AD network. Taken together, these findings confirmed the initial hypothesis that SL metabolism is significantly altered in AD. Furthermore, the identification of dysregulated SL-related genes and systematic dissection of their downstream effects by *in silico* network perturbation analysis, revealed the potential of this approach to predict diagnostic biomarkers as well as aid in the development of novel SL-targeted AD therapeutics.

5.3 Materials and methods

5.3.1 Identification of sphingolipid pathway associated genes

A gene set involved in sphingolipid function was created by extracting the genes annotated with a list of relevant manually selected Gene Ontology (GO) terms (see supplementary Table 12) [55]. The genes connected to these terms were extracted by using the WikiPathways plugin for

PathVisio, which allowed to save all elements connected to a GO term of interest in an xml type file format (gpml format) [257, 141]. This plugin requires the GO ontology file ('go.obo' from geneontology.org; downloaded Nov. 17th, 2018) and a bridgeDb file with gene identifier mappings ('Hs_Derby_Ensembl_91.bridge' from www.pathvisio.org in this case) [283]. Thereafter, an R script was used to extract all contributing genes (as identified by their HGNC symbols) from the gpml files for each term. Subsequently, all information per gene was combined, by merging all GO terms from the selection by which the gene is annotated. Furthermore, a basic 'tree-like' textual display of the terms in the selection was generated, to support interpretation (Supplementary Table 13, 14, 15). In the end, this procedure resulted in a gene set consisting of 252 SL-related genes that were assessed in downstream applications.

5.3.2 Post-mortem tissue samples

This study makes use of brain tissue from donors of the Brain and Body Donation Program (BBDP) at the Banner Sun Health Research Institute (BHSRI), who signed an informed consent form approved by the institutional review board, including specific consent of using the donated tissue for future research [17, 18].

DNA was obtained from the middle temporal gyrus (MTG) of 46 AD patients and 32 neurologically normal control BBDP donors stored at the Brain and Tissue Bank of the BSHRI (Sun City, Arizona, USA) [17, 18]. The organization of the BBDP allows for fast tissue recovery after death, resulting in an average post-mortem interval of only 2.8 hours for the included samples. A consensus diagnosis of AD or non-demented control was reached by following National Institutes of Health (NIH) AD Center criteria [18]. Comorbidity with any other type of dementia, cerebrovascular disorders, mild cognitive impairment (MCI), and presence of non-microscopic infarcts was applied as exclusion criteria. Detailed information about the BBDP has been reported elsewhere [17, 18].

5.3.3 Differential (hydroxy)methylation analysis

For differential DNA methylation (5-methylcytosine, 5mC), hydroxymethylation (5-hydroxymethyl cytosine, 5hmC) and unmethylation (unmethylatedcytosine, uC) analysis, data was obtained from

an unpublished study from our group, where Illumina HM 450K arrays were used for quantifying methylation status of 485,000 different human CpG sites. We only considered 5mC, 5hmC, and uC datasets related to 46 AD patients and 32 controls for which the corresponding gene expression profiles were also available. Preprocessing and analysis of the raw datasets was conducted in R (version 3.4.4) [272]. Raw IDAT files corresponding to the selected individuals were read into R using the `wateRmelon` “`readEpic`” function (version 1.20.3) [224]. The “`pfilter`” function from the `wateRmelon` package (version 1.18.0) [224] was used to filter datasets based on bead count and detection of p-values. Background correction and normalization of the remaining probe data was performed by using the “`preprocessNoob`” function of `minfi` package (version 1.22.1) [9]. Beta values for the probes were obtained by the “`getBeta`” function of the `minfi` package. We used the `MLML` function within the `MLML2R` package [77] for estimating the proportion of uC, 5mC and 5hmC for each CpG, based on the combined input signals from the bisulfite (BS) and oxidative BS (oxBS) arrays. All of the cross-hybridizing probes and the probes that contained a SNP in the sequence were removed resulting into 407,922 probes to be considered for the differential methylation analysis [43].

Raw IDAT files corresponding to the selected individuals were loaded into R using the `minfi` “`read.metharray`” function (version 1.22.1) [9] to generate an `RGset` for computing the cell type composition of the samples by using the “`estimateCellCounts`” function of the same package. For estimating the cell composition, we used the `FlowSorted.DLPFC.450k` package (version 1.18.0) [120] as the reference data for “`NeuN_pos`” cell composition within the frontal cortex. The `limma` package (version 3.32.10) [241] was used to perform linear regression in order to test the relationship between the beta values of the probes and the diagnosis of AD. The used regression model considered beta values as outcome, AD diagnosis as predictor, and age, gender, and neuronal cell proportion as covariates. In order to identify significantly differentially methylated probes (DMPs), false discovery rate (FDR) correction for multiple testing was applied where unadjusted *P*-values were corrected for those 252 genes belonging to the sphingolipid pathway. Accordingly, all probes with *P*-value less than 0.0002 were considered as statistically significant in terms of displaying differential levels of methylated, hydroxymethylated or non-methylated cytosine, and considered for further analysis. Resulting probes were annotated using Illumina human UCSC annotation. In order to identify differentially methylated genes, we took the most significant probe

as a representative of the methylation status of a gene.

5.3.4 Differential gene expression analysis

For differential gene expression analysis, Illumina HumanHT-12 v4 beadchip expression array data for the same MTG samples was obtained from another unpublished study. Preprocessing and analysis of the raw datasets was conducted in R (version 3.4.4) [272]. Raw expression data was log-transformed and quantile-quantile normalized. For computing the cell type composition, the Neun_pos cell percentage was calculated from the methylation data. The same regression model used for assessing methylation was applied to the expression data where the effects of age, gender and cell type composition were regressed out using limma. The unadjusted P -value obtained from limma were FDR-adjusted for only the set of 252 genes in the sphingolipid pathway and only the genes with adj. P .value <0.05 were considered as statistically significantly differentially expressed.

5.3.5 Gene-gene interaction network

We used Pathway Studio [206] to obtain directed functional interactions between the genes belonging to sphingolipid associated pathway. The Pathway Studio database contains a collection of literature-curated and experimentally validated direct gene-gene interactions. The high level of literature curation ensures the creation of highly confident interaction network maps. In order to obtain a set of directed functional regulatory interactions among the selected genes, our analysis was restricted to interactions belonging to categories of “Expression”, “Regulation”, “Direct Regulation”, “Promoter Binding”, and “Binding”. The obtained interactions are directed, i.e. the source and target genes are known. Furthermore, the information about the interaction type (activation or inhibition) is also given where available.

5.3.6 *In silico* network simulation analysis for phenotypic reversion

The differential network topology allowed us to identify common and phenotype-specific positive and negative elementary circuits, i.e. a network path which starts and ends at the same node with all the intermediate nodes being traversed only once. These circuits have been shown to play a

significant role in maintaining network stability [94] and the existence of these circuits is considered to be a necessary condition for having stable steady states [275]. Considering the importance of these circuits, it has been shown that perturbation of genes in positive circuits induces a phenotypic transition [58]. Furthermore, the differential network topology also aids in identifying differential regulators of the genes common to both phenotype-specific networks. Altogether, the differential regulators and genes in the elementary circuits constitute an optimal set of candidate genes for network perturbation as they are able to revert most of the gene expression program upon perturbation. Identification of network perturbation candidates was carried out by using the Java implementation proposed by Zickenrott and colleagues [314]. The same Java implementation was used to perform a network simulation analysis by perturbing multi-target combinations of up to three network perturbation candidate genes. The used algorithm provided a ranked list of single- and multi-genes combinations (maximally 3 genes) and their scores, which represent the number of other genes within the network whose expression is predicted to be reverted upon the chosen perturbation. Generally, a single- or multi-gene perturbation combination obtaining a high score is indicative of its ability to regulate the expression of a large subset of downstream genes, hence playing a crucial role in the maintenance and stability of the phenotype under consideration.

5.4 Results

5.4.1 Transcriptome analysis of sphingolipid genes

In order to identify SL-associated genes, we used the gene ontology (GO) terms and WikiPathways plugin [257] for PathVisio [141] to convert each GO terms of interest into a tree-like pathway diagram. By removing the genes belonging to irrelevant families and keeping only the ones related to sphingolipid GO terms, we identified 252 genes to be involved in this pathway. Next, information on the expression of these 252 genes within the MTG was extracted from available microarray data performed on brain tissue derived from AD patients and age-match elderly controls. The genome-wide differential expression analysis (DEA) of the transcriptomic data resulted in 7,776 genes to be significantly (FDR corrected P -value <0.05) differentially expressed (up- and down-regulated) when comparing AD patients and age-matched controls. By applying multiple correction for the number of SL-associated genes, we found 103 out of a total of 252 genes to be significantly dif-

ferentially expressed (up- and downregulated) (see Table 5 for the top 30 differentially expressed genes and supplementary Table 11 for a complete overview).

GeneName	logFC	FDR_adj_Pval	GeneName	logFC	FDR_adj_Pval
STS	-0.221	0.000001	PPM1L	-0.139	0.000538
ARSG	-0.148	0.000011	SMO	0.331	0.000538
EZR	0.631	0.000017	VAPA	-0.279	0.000538
ALOX12B	-0.195	0.000033	ST8SIA2	-0.11	0.000538
ST6GALNAC5	-0.921	0.000033	ELOVL4	-0.633	0.000538
B3GALNT1	-0.387	0.000033	CDH13	-0.654	0.000571
GLTP	0.484	0.000111	RFTN1	-0.382	0.000624
CLN8	0.269	0.000163	EHD2	0.327	0.00075
CD8A	-0.122	0.000179	ST8SIA5	-0.319	0.000784
MAL2	-0.994	0.000196	PRKD1	0.301	0.000784
TFPI	0.241	0.000226	AGK	-0.43	0.000784
CSNK1G2	0.347	0.000272	ATP1A1	-0.553	0.000932
RFTN2	0.529	0.000333	ANXA2	0.369	0.000932
KDSR	0.372	0.000388	GBA	-0.206	0.001177
P2RX7	0.466	0.000528	CLIP3	-0.256	0.001177

Table 5: **Differentially expressed genes in sphingolipid metabolism pathway.** A list of top significantly differentially expressed genes (FDR adjusted P -value <0.05) when comparing AD and control samples.

5.4.2 The SL pathway is significantly dysregulated in AD

At the very outset, we sought to determine whether SL-function-associated genes were differentially expressed in AD patients in comparison to healthy controls. The genome-wide differential gene expression analysis revealed 24.5% (7,776 out of 31,726 genes) of the genes to be significantly differentially expressed ($\text{adj.}p.\text{val} < 0.05$) between AD and control samples. However, out of the 252 pre-identified SL pathway-associated genes, 103 were found to be significantly differentially expressed, i.e. 40,87%, indicating a profound enrichment of dysregulated genes linked to SL. In line with existing literature [103, 172], this confirms our initial hypothesis that dysregulated SL function represents a key feature affected during the development and course of AD.

5.4.3 Differentially methylated genes are shared across different methylation levels

Overall, 109, 129, and 170 probes displayed nominally significant (unadjusted P -value <0.05) levels of 5-mC, 5-hmC, and uC, respectively. These CpG sites were associated to 78, 90, and 112 unique genes, respectively. Interestingly, we see a higher overlap between (h)mC and uC (a Venn diagram representing the overlap of genes across different level is shown in Figure 12a). Similarly, the overlap of particular probes across different epigenetic levels is depicted in Figure 12b. Notably, there were 28 genes that were both significantly differentially methylated, hydroxymethylated as well as displaying different levels of unmodified cytosine (Figure 12a), representing consistent nominal differences observed across all levels of methylation. This highlights the robust and multifaceted interconnection between AD and SLs.

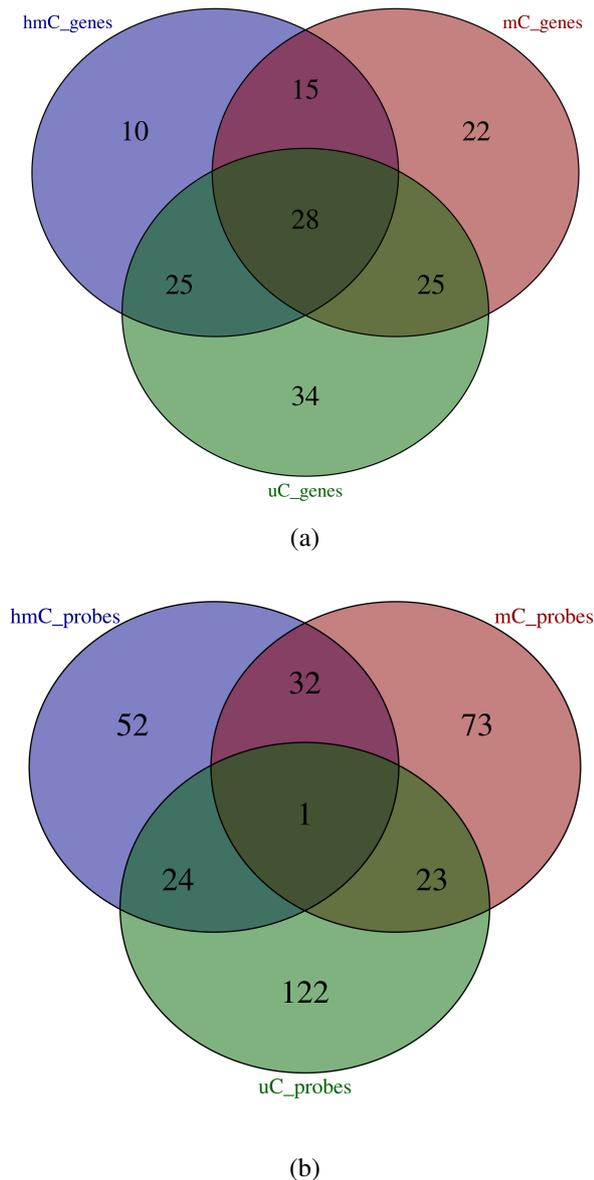


Figure 12: **Venn diagram of differentially (hydroxy)methylated SL genes and probes.** a) Overlap between genes across different levels (hmC, mC, uC) that are nominally significant (unadjusted P -value <0.05). b) Overlap between nominally significant probes across all three levels.

In order to highlight the most relevant (hydroxy)methylation changes, we subsequently corrected the obtained hits for multiple testing. As such, after correction, four CpG sites still displayed differential levels of methylated or unmodified cytosine (P -value <0.0002) when comparing AD and control samples. More specifically, three probes, associated to *PTGIS*, *GBA*, and *ITGB2*, were differentially hydroxymethylated whereas, one probe, associated to *PLA2G6*, showed different levels of unmodified cytosine (see Table 6).

Gene Name	Probe Name	mC	hmC	uC	P-value	logFC
<i>PLA2G6</i>	cg22326681			x	0.000724	-0.027
<i>PTGIS</i>	cg07612655		x		0.00008	0.037
<i>GBA</i>	cg19257864		x		0.00017	0.036
<i>ITGB2</i>	cg18012089		x		0.000472	0.061

Table 6: **Differentially (hydroxy)methylated genes in SL metabolism pathway.** Significantly differentially methylated (mC), hydroxymethylated (hmC) and unmodified cytosine (uC) probes between AD and controls.

5.4.4 Gene regulatory network analysis

In order to gain a deeper understanding of SL-associated dysregulations at a systems-level, we conducted a differential gene regulatory network (GRN) based analysis to reconstruct two context-specific networks, representing the AD and healthy phenotypes. The employed GRN inference approach [314] relies on Booleanized differential gene expression data and a prior knowledge network (PKN) of gene-gene interactions to reconstruct context-specific networks. The reconstructed AD network comprised 110 genes and 307 interactions (Figure 13a), whereas the healthy phenotype network consisted of 119 genes and 280 interactions (Figure 13b). Although the number of initially identified SL-associated genes was much higher when compared to the number of genes present in the networks, the dependence on experimentally validated manually curated interactions from Pathway Studio [206] suggests that not all of these genes necessarily interact with each other. Interestingly, the enrichment of significantly differentially expressed genes in SL-associated genes was even higher for the genes present in the networks, as 59 out of these 124 genes (47.58%) were significantly differentially expressed (adjusted FDR <0.05). This verifies the reliability of the applied network reconstruction approach such that most of the significantly differentially expressed genes are kept in the networks during the filtration of interactions that were not context-specific. The differential network analysis of AD and healthy phenotypes highlighted important SL-associated genes (e.g. *EZR*, *ITGB2*, *NOS1*, *NOS3*, *SRC*, *S1PR3*, *SPHK1*, *TGFBR2*) that seem to have a prominent role in the development and course of AD [267, 309].

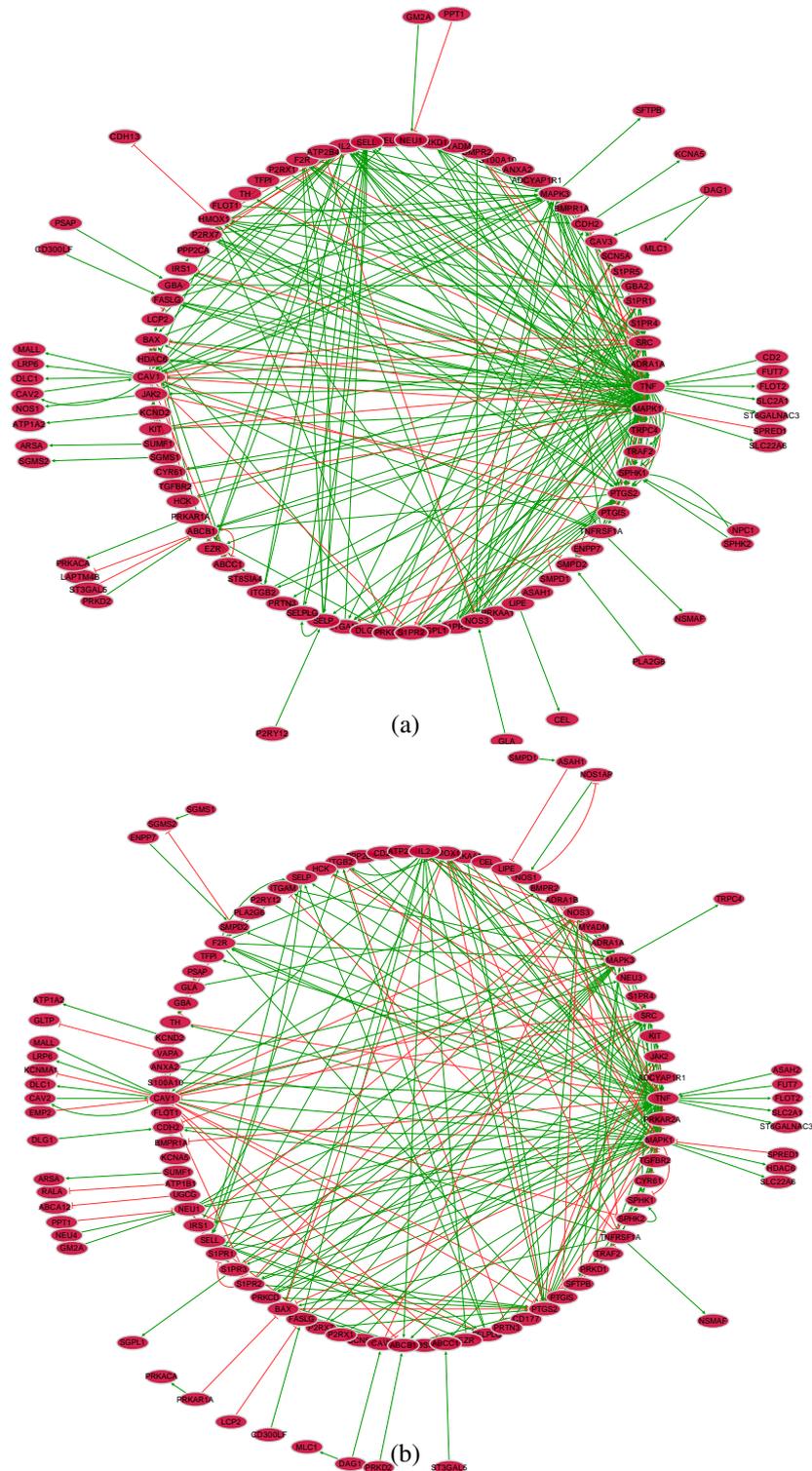


Figure 13: **GRN of SL metabolism diseased and control phenotypes.** a) Gene regulatory network representing the diseased phenotype containing 110 nodes (transcription factors and genes) and 307 interactions; b) network representing the healthy phenotype containing 119 nodes and 280 interactions. Green arrowhead lines in the network represent positive interactions, i.e. activation (253 and 205 in the disease and control phenotype networks, respectively), while the red ones represent negative interactions, i.e. inhibition (54 and 75 in the respective phenotypes).

5.4.5 *In silico* network perturbation analysis

In light of viewing diseases as network perturbations [62, 3], we performed *in silico* network perturbations to identify the most influential combination of genes in the GRN representing the AD phenotype. The network perturbation analysis highlighted the governing role of the perturbation candidates in the GRN and revealed that a three-genes perturbation combination, consisting of *TNF*, *IL2*, and *MAPK3*, has the potential to revert the expression levels of 41 genes in the network from a diseased towards a healthy phenotype (see Table 7). Similarly, *CAVI*, *SIPR2*, and *TNF* represented another strong combination, which comprised of two significantly differentially expressed genes (*CAVI* and *SIPR2*) and was found to revert the expression level of 38 other genes in the network, making it an ideal candidate for experimental validation. Importantly, caveolin 1 (*CAVI*), which seems to be one of the most important perturbation candidates, is found to be up-regulated in AD patients, consistent with existing studies that associated its elevated expression level to cerebral amyloid angiopathy in AD [282, 87]. As caveolin is a cholesterol-binding membrane protein, its upregulation in AD patients might cause alterations of cholesterol distribution in the plasma membrane, in line with existing studies that validated the notion of dysregulated cholesterol homeostasis in AD [87]. Similarly, *SIPR1* and *SIPR2*, encoding for sphingolipid receptors, also constitute a potent perturbation combination, as these receptors are known to critically regulate many physiological and pathophysiological processes [171]. In addition, they have been reported to modulate the activity of β -site APP cleaving enzyme-1 (*BACE1*) in neurons [271], which is known as a rate limiting enzyme for amyloid- β peptide ($A\beta$) production, suggesting its therapeutic potential in AD.

Although the genes signatures identified are not necessarily responsible for disease onset and progression, they are able to revert most of the diseased gene expression program upon perturbation, suggesting a prominent role of predicted genes in the establishment of the disease phenotype. Taken together, the *in silico* network perturbation analysis highlights novel candidates that could serve as potential targets for therapeutic intervention in AD.

Rank	Pert score	Gene combo	Signif.	Rank	Pert score	Gene combo	Signif.
1	41	<i>TNF,IL2,MAPK3</i>	0	16	36	<i>CAVI,S1PR1,TNF</i>	1
2	39	<i>CAVI,F2R,TNF</i>	1	17	36	<i>CAVI,FLOT1,TNF</i>	1
3	38	<i>F2R,S1PR2,TNF</i>	1	18	35	<i>SPHK1,F2R,TNF</i>	1
4	38	<i>F2R,JAK2,TNF</i>	0	19	35	<i>SPHK1,CAVI,TNF</i>	2
5	38	<i>CAV2,TNF,MAPK3</i>	0	20	35	<i>PRKARIA,F2R,TNF</i>	1
6	38	<i>CAVI,TNF,MAPK3</i>	1	21	35	<i>PRKARIA,CAVI,TNF</i>	2
7	38	<i>CAVI,S1PR2,TNF</i>	2	22	35	<i>JAK2,TNF,TNFRSF1A</i>	1
8	38	<i>CAVI,JAK2,TNF</i>	1	23	35	<i>FLOT1,JAK2,TNF</i>	0
9	37	<i>TH,CAVI,TNF</i>	1	24	35	<i>F2R,TNF,TNFRSF1A</i>	1
10	37	<i>JAK2,TNF,MAPK3</i>	0	25	35	<i>CDH2,CAVI,TNF</i>	1
11	37	<i>CAV2,TNF,IL2</i>	0	26	35	<i>CAVI,TNF,TNFRSF1A</i>	2
12	37	<i>CAVI,TNF,IL2</i>	1	27	34	<i>TH,TNF,MAPK3</i>	0
13	36	<i>TH,JAK2,TNF</i>	0	28	34	<i>SPHK2,F2R,TNF</i>	1
14	36	<i>F2R,TNF,MAPK3</i>	0	29	34	<i>SPHK2,CAVI,TNF</i>	2
15	36	<i>F2R,S1PR1,TNF</i>	0	30	34	<i>SPHK1,TNF,MAPK3</i>	1

Table 7: **SL metabolism network perturbation analysis.** Top 30 key candidate genes combinations identified by *in silico* network perturbation analysis. Rank represents the importance of a given combination of genes. Perturbation score (pert score) represents the total number of genes whose gene expression is reverted upon inducing a perturbation of a given gene combination (gene combo). The number of perturbation candidates that are significantly differentially expressed in the gene combinations are represented in the significance (signif.) column.

5.5 Discussion

In-depth integrative analyses of particular pathways, as performed for the SL pathway in the present study, could aid in obtaining more insight in the yet unclear pathogenesis of AD. Although developments in high-throughput sequencing technologies and computational analysis of obtained datasets have enhanced our knowledge about genes causal to AD, the mechanisms underlying dysregulation of such specific pathways are yet to be explored. A comprehensive characterization of these pathways demands the integrative analysis of various interconnected layers of regulation that have been overlooked and/or understudied so far. Such an explorative study holds the potential to provide more insight into the mechanisms behind dysregulation of specific pathways as seen in AD, thus providing avenues for e.g. designing more effective therapeutic treatment strategies.

Our results reveal an alteration of SL gene function at different levels of DNA methylation. Methylation data showing that the integrin subunit beta 2 (*ITGB2*) gene was significantly hydroxymethylated and upregulated in AD patients are in line with an existing study reporting the high expression level of this gene in mouse models of AD [53]. Furthermore, *PLA2G6*, displaying differential

levels of unmodified cytosine, is well known for its implication in neurodegenerative disorders, including AD [55]. Similarly, genetic variation in the gene encoding glucosylceramidase beta (*GBA*) has been suggested to influence the risk of dementia in Parkinson's disease [52]. Interestingly, *de novo* genetic variation in the prostaglandin 2 synthase (*PTGIS*) gene has been suggested to contribute to neurodevelopmental disorders, such as childhood onset schizophrenia [62], whereas there is no supporting literature on the influence of this gene to neurodegeneration to date.

Owing to the alterations in the levels of expression and methylation of SL-associated genes in AD, and the possibility of using them as biomarkers for AD [190], we aimed at bridging the gap in the literature by conducting an integrative analysis of genes involved in SL function. To this end, by systematically identifying significantly differentially expressed genes in post-mortem MTG tissue derived from AD patients and age-matched elderly controls, we reconstructed phenotype-specific, i.e. AD and healthy control, networks. Subsequently, the reconstructed disease network was employed to identify novel perturbation candidates whose alterations hold the potential to revert the gene expression program from an AD towards a healthy state. Further, overlaying the differential methylation data allowed us to explain the observed changes in the expression levels of these genes during the onset of AD. Some of the most prominent predicted candidate genes include *CAVI*, *SIPRI/2* and *SPHK1*, which are all known to be involved in various neuronal processes, while expression changes of these genes have been implicated in the progression of AD [282, 87, 171, 267, 154].

Notably, *ARSG*, coding for arylsulfatase G, is the most significantly differentially expressed SL-associated gene in AD. *ARSG*, a member of the family of the sulfatases, is involved in hormone biosynthesis, in the modulation of different cellular pathways, including the degradation of macromolecules. The loss of sulfatase activity has been linked to various pathological conditions such as lysosomal storage disorders, cancer and neurodevelopmental dysfunction [84]. Here, for the first time, we are able to link the dysregulation of *ARSG* to AD. In line with previous analysis, *EZR*, which encodes for the membrane protein Ezrin, is profoundly increased in AD [309]. Moreover, genes like *ALOX12B*, *P2RX7* and *ST6GALNAC5* have already been implicated in AD or other neurodegenerative disorders [180, 177, 284]. Interestingly, other genes, such as *CLN8*, *ARSG*, and *B3GALNT1*, although associated to neurological dysfunction, had not yet been directly linked to AD [168].

Although our analyses identified novel and pre-identified AD candidate genes, the moderate sample size might have limited the detectable changes in AD samples. This limitation can be seen as an opportunity for conducting more diverse studies including wide-range of analyses in other brain regions to further investigate the role of SL function in AD. Nevertheless, our results provide a clear evidence about the involvement of SLs and related molecules in AD, highlighting the diagnostic and SL-targeted drug-development potential of predicted genes. Even though the reported genes and epigenetic modifications are not predictive signs of the disease progression, our data can serve as a starting point to fill the wide gap of knowledge concerning the role of SLs in AD. Thus, SL function and associated molecules dysregulated in AD could aid in the development of new therapeutic approaches.

Chapter 6

A network-based approach for the identification of Batten disease-specific dysregulation using induced pluripotent stem cell (iPSC)-derived cerebral organoids

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6.1 Abstract

Mutations in the *CLN3* gene have been associated with juvenile neuronal ceroid lipofuscinoses (JNCL), the most prevalent form of Batten disease, a lysosomal disease that causes neurodegeneration in children. The early onset of JNCL is characterized by vision loss, followed by progressive deterioration of motor skills and seizures, eventually leading to death at adult age. The limited knowledge of *CLN3* function and scarcity of an adequate disease model has significantly hampered our understanding of disease-specific dysregulation at e.g. the gene expression level. In particular, the reconstruction and analysis of molecular networks that explain transcriptional dysregulation are yet to be explored. In order to understand the functional consequences of a particular mutation in the *CLN3* gene and to identify genes and pathways compromised, we have generated an early human neurodevelopmental model of Batten disease, using isogenic human induced pluripotent stem cell (iPSC)-derived cerebral organoids. The functional characterization of this *in vitro* model showed the presence of disease-specific lipofuscin storage material and lysosomal enzyme dysregulation, highlighting the potential of iPSC-derived *CLN3* mutant organoids to recapitulate disease-specific features. Moreover, differential gene regulatory network (GRN)-based analysis of transcriptomic data obtained from control and disease organoids revealed key regulators maintaining the disease phenotype. Furthermore, pathway enrichment analysis conducted on the disease network showed that genes significantly dysregulated in the network are associated with molecular pathways related to development, validating the potential of this systems-level approach to identify key genes and associated molecular mechanism implicated in Batten disease.

6.2 Introduction

Juvenile neuronal ceroid lipofuscinoses (JNCL), the most prevalent form of Batten disease, is a rare and fatal lysosomal storage disorder (LSD), mostly affecting children and young adults [248]. JNCL typically begins with progressive loss of sight between four and eight years of age, due to retinal degeneration. The clinical course progresses around the age of 10-12 years, with loss of motor coordination and mental decline, often worsened by seizure episodes. These symptoms might be accompanied by behavioural abnormalities such as anxiety and aggression [138]. Moreover, there is also evidence of pathology outside the central nervous system (CNS), more specifically in

the cardiovascular [216] and immune system [39]. The disease inexorably leads to death during the second or third decade of life and there are unfortunately no established treatments to date that can stop, reverse, or prevent this disease.

JNCL is caused by recessively inherited mutations in the *CLN3* gene (NG_008654.2), which is located on chromosome 16p12.1 (NC_000016.10). The *CLN3* gene encodes a predicted 438 amino acid protein with a molecular mass of 48kDa. The CLN3 protein (Q13286) is predicted to be a transmembrane protein in the lysosome [57]. Low expression levels and the unavailability of specific antibodies for the CLN3 protein make it difficult to elucidate its precise cellular function. Over the years, *CLN3* has been linked to a vast number of cellular processes, including lysosomal pH regulation, autophagy, endocytosis, trans-Golgi protein transport, cell migration, morphology, proliferation, and apoptosis. In neurons, *CLN3* seems to reside in synaptic vesicles, suggesting a role in synaptic transmission [37]. The CLN3 protein does not share fundamental homology with other proteins and yet it is highly conserved across species. Therefore, animal models have constituted the first and most important source to gain more insight into the exact function of this protein. However, the recent advancements in iPSC-based disease modeling, such as *in vitro* development of human brain organoids, provide us an opportunity to study neurodevelopmental and neurodegenerative diseases in more detail.

Organoids are three-dimensional (3D) structures originating from stem cells and relying on their intrinsic ability to self-organize and form complex structures, when provided with a support matrix and in the presence of suitable exogenous factors. These structures are capable of forming heterogeneous tissue-specific cells, of maintaining gene-gene, cell-cell and cell-matrix interactions, and of recapitulating a large number of physiological functions of the organ they model [49].

A gene regulatory networks (GRNs)-based approach can be employed to gain a deeper understanding of Batten disease-associated dysregulation from a systems point of view. GRNs have been extensively studied for gaining a systems-level understanding of disease-related dysregulation and its underlying mechanisms. These network-based diseased models have been used to predict disease-associated genes and sub-networks [35, 231], while different network topological properties, such as neighbourhood connectivity [234] and Betweenness centrality [126], have been used to predict gene-disease associations.

In the present study, we made use of transcriptomic data from an early human neurodevelopmental model of Batten disease, using isogenic human induced pluripotent stem cell (iPSC)-derived cerebral organoids, in order to study the contribution of the $c.1054C>T$ mutation in the *CLN3* gene to brain formation and to the pathophysiology of Batten disease in general. The functional characterization of this *in vitro* disease model [90] showed the presence of disease-specific storage material in iPSC-derived *CLN3* mutant organoids, thus recapitulating disease features by introducing a disease-causing mutation in the *CLN3* gene. In order to gain a deeper understanding of Batten disease-related dysregulation at a systems-level, we utilized a differential GRN inference approach presented by Zickenrott et al. [314], to reconstruct phenotype-specific networks representing the diseased (mutant) and healthy (wild-type) phenotypes. By employing an *in silico* network perturbation analysis on the reconstructed phenotype-specific network, we predicted novel candidate genes that maintain the disease phenotype. Interestingly, pathway enrichment analysis conducted on the network showed that the genes in the network are significantly dysregulated in molecular pathways related to development, a hallmark of Batten disease. Altogether, our data suggest that the mutation in the *CLN3* gene causes the accumulation of pathological storage material and lysosomal enzyme dysregulation at the early stages of brain development, reflected by changes at the transcriptomic level.

6.3 Materials and methods

This chapter is based on a joint work conducted in collaboration with Prof. Schwamborn's lab at the University of Luxembourg. The development of *in vitro* Batten disease model, its functional characterization, and RNA-seq data sampling were done by our collaborators [90] while computational analyses including *in silico* disease modeling, network perturbation, and pathway enrichment were carried out by us.

6.3.1 Insertion of *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutation in iPSCs

The characterized Gibco (Cat no. A13777) episomal human iPSC line was established as a control line to conduct the genome editing. By using the CRISPR/Cas9 genome editing technology, a $c.1054C>T$ genomic mutation was introduced in the *CLN3* gene based on an in-house devel-

oped protocol [8]. As a result, we obtained two lines having the same genetic background, one representing the control and another the mutant (*CLN3*^{Q352X}) phenotypes. We created 6 replicates (samples) per line which were all grown in the same conditions and they were all at the same time-point of development.

6.3.2 Generation and culture of human cerebral organoids

Human whole brain organoids were derived from hiPSCs following the Lancaster and Knoblich, 2014 protocol [148]. All of the required growth mediums were purchased from Invitrogen, Gent, Belgium, unless otherwise specified. A total of 9,000 cells per well were seeded into a 96-ultra low adhesion plate (VWR) in embryoid body (EB) formation medium, combining DMEM-F12 (Invitrogen) with 20% KO-Serum Replacement (Invitrogen), 3% FBS (Invitrogen), 1% GlutaMax (Life Technologies), 1% NEAA (Thermo) and 0.0007% 2-Mercaptoethanol (Merck) and supplemented with Y-27632 (Merck Millipore) and bFGF(PreproTech) at a final concentration of 4 ng/mL. Embryoid bodies (EBs) were kept in this media for six days, after which the medium was replaced by Neural induction medium made of DMEM-F12 (Invitrogen) with 1% N2 supplement (Invitrogen), 1% GlutaMax (Life Technologies), 1% NEAA (Thermo) and 1% Heparin (Sigma) (final concentration 1 μ g/mL).

EBs were kept in this medium until the eleventh day, after which they were transferred into Matrigel (Corning) droplets and cultured in 24-well-plates under differentiation medium conditions. Cerebral organoid differentiation medium consisted of DMEM-F12 (Invitrogen) and Neurobasal (Invitrogen) media in a 1:1 ratio supplemented with N2 (Invitrogen), 1% GlutaMax (Life Technologies), 0.5% NEAA (Thermo), 1% Penicillin/Streptomycin (Invitrogen) and 0.025% Insulin (Sigma). The first four days of differentiation, medium was supplemented with B27 without vitamin A (Life Technologies) and organoids were kept in static conditions. Later, organoid plates were placed on an orbital shaker (IKA), rotating at 80 rpm, and cultured in differentiation media containing B27 with vitamin A (Life Technologies). Media was exchanged every second or third day and cerebral organoids were kept in culture for another 55 days after the start of differentiation (day 11).

6.3.3 Isolation of RNA samples

Total RNA was isolated from cerebral organoids using the RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen) following the manufacturer's instructions. An on-column DNase digestion step was included in the protocol and performed with RNase-Free DNase Set (Qiagen). Five samples per condition were taken as replicates where every sample consisted of a pool of three organoids. RNA concentration was spectrophotometrically determined using NanoDrop (ND 2000). Library preparation for sequencing was done with 1 μ g of total RNA using the TruSeq mRNA Stranded Library Prep Kit (Illumina) according to manufacturer's protocol. Briefly, the mRNA pull down was done using magnetic beads with an oligodT primer. To preserve strand information, the second strand synthesis was done with incorporation of dUTP so that during PCR amplification only the first strand was amplified. The libraries were quantified using the Qubit dsDNA HS assay kit (Thermofisher) and size distribution was determined using the Agilent 2100 Bioanalyzer. Pooled libraries were sequenced on NextSeq500 using the manufacturer's instructions.

6.3.4 RNA-Seq data processing and analysis

Illumina NextSeq single-end reads were filtered by using BBDuk (`trimq=10 qtrim=r ktrim=r k=23 mink=11 hdist=1 tpetbominlen=40`; <http://jgi.doe.gov/data-and-tools/bb-tools/>) to remove illumina adapters, PhiX library adapters, and to quality trim the reads. FastQC [6] was used to check the quality of the reads in order to assure that only high-quality reads were kept for subsequent analysis. Resulting reads were mapped to human GRCh37 genome by using tophat (version 2.1.1) [278] (`library-type=fr-secondstrand`) and Bowtie2 (version 2.3.2.0). Obtained alignment files were sorted by using samtools (version 1.6-5) [158] and the statistics of the alignment rate were obtained by using samtoolsflagstat. Cufflinks (version 2.2.1) [278] was used to quantify the transcripts and resulting expression values per gene were obtained in FPKM (fragments per kb per million reads). Differential expression analysis between the wild-type and mutant samples was conducted by using the cuffdiff program from the cufflinks tool. Only significantly differentially expressed genes with an absolute log₂ fold change greater than 1 were considered for subsequent analysis.

6.3.5 Gene Regulatory Network (GRN) reconstruction

For the set of significantly differentially expressed genes when comparing mutant and wild-type samples, experimentally validated direct gene-gene interactions were retrieved from MetaCore (Clarivate Analytics). The interaction types belonging to categories “Transcription regulation” and “Binding” were kept in the prior knowledge network (PKN) from MetaCore. The differential network inference method proposed by Zickenrott et al. [314] was used to prune the network edges (interactions) which were not compatible with the discretized gene expression program of the respective phenotype. Briefly, this method uses discretized differential gene expression data and infers two networks representing the mutant (disease) and wild-type (healthy) phenotypes as steady states. Some of the interactions derived from MetaCore have an unspecified regulatory effect, as the exact mechanism of regulation is not known in those cases. The proposed algorithm infers the regulatory effect (activation or inhibition) for such unspecified interactions based on the given gene expression pattern.

6.3.6 Identification of network perturbation candidates

The differential network topology allowed us to identify common and phenotype-specific positive and negative elementary circuits, i.e. a network path which starts and ends at the same node with all the intermediate nodes being traversed only once. These circuits have been shown to play a significant role in maintaining network stability [94] and the existence of these circuits is considered to be a necessary condition for having a stable steady (network) state [275]. Considering the importance of these circuits, it has been shown that perturbation of genes in the positive circuits induces a phenotypic transition [58]. Furthermore, the differential network topology also aids in identifying the differential regulators of the genes, which are common to both phenotype-specific networks. Altogether, the differential regulators and genes in the elementary circuits constitute an optimal set of candidate genes for network perturbation as they are able to revert most of the gene expression program upon perturbation. Identification of network perturbation candidates was carried out by using the Java implementation proposed by Zickenrott et al. [314].

6.3.7 *In silico* network simulation analysis for phenotype reversion

The Java implementation from Zickenrott et al. [314] was used to perform the network simulation analysis by perturbing multi-target combinations of up to four candidate genes identified in the previous step. The used algorithm gives a ranked list of single- and multi-gene(s) combinations (4 genes maximally) and their scores, which represent the number of genes whose expression is being reverted upon inducing the chosen perturbation. If a single- or multi-gene(s) perturbation combination obtains a high score, it is indicative of its ability to regulate the expression of a large number of downstream genes, hence playing a crucial role in the maintenance and stability of the phenotype under consideration.

6.3.8 Gene and pathway enrichment analysis

MetaCore (Clarivate Analytics) and EnrichNet [91] were used to conduct gene ontology (GO) and pathway enrichment analysis. The set of upregulated genes in the diseased network were used to identify the most over-represented biological processes and molecular functions associated with the genes in the network.

6.4 Results

6.4.1 Whole transcriptome analysis reveals impaired development in *CLN3*^{Q352X} cerebral organoids

Although there are a number of studies describing mechanism dysregulated in Batten disease, they do not provide insight into underlying transcriptional dysregulation in the pathologic brain compared to the healthy state. Therefore, we performed bulk RNA-seq analysis in our organoid model system for Batten disease to determine whether developmental differences were reflected in the gene expression profiles of the organoids. The differential expression analysis (DEA) of the transcriptomic data resulted in 972 genes to be significantly (Benjamini Hochberg corrected P -value <0.05 and $\log_{2}FC >1$) differentially expressed (up- and downregulated) between the Control and the *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutant phenotypes (see Figure 14).

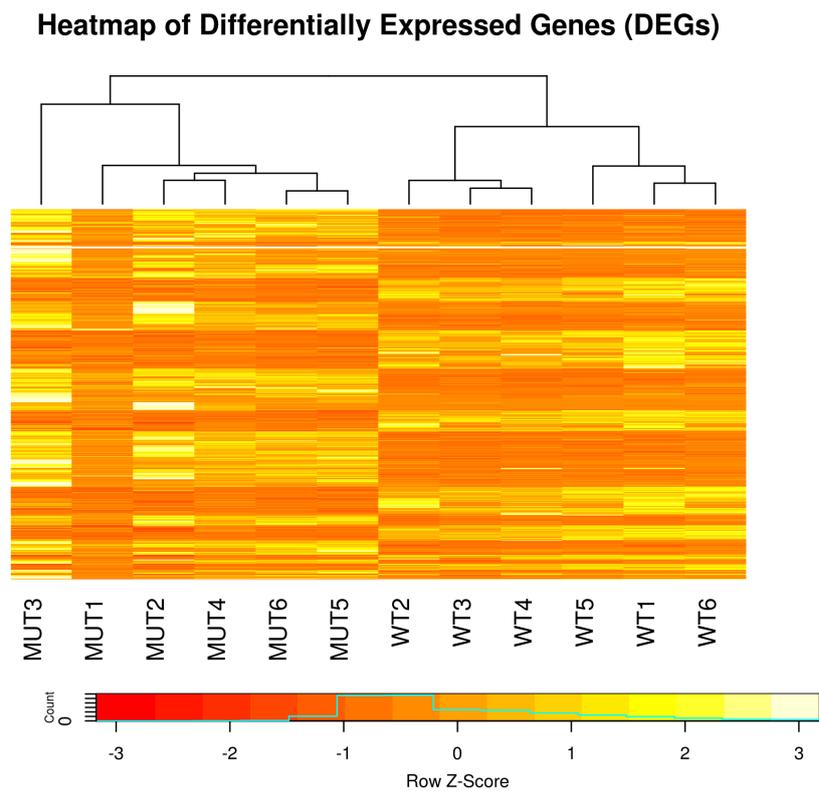


Figure 14: **Heatmap showing the clustering of differentially expressed genes between control (healthy) and $CLN3^{Q352X}$ (mutant) brain organoids**

Gene regulatory network (GRN) analysis

In order to gain a deeper understanding of Batten disease-related dysregulation at a systems-level, we employed a differential GRN-based approach to reconstruct phenotype-specific networks representing the $CLN3^{Q352X}$ -diseased (mutant) and control (healthy) phenotypes. The employed GRN inference approach by Zickenrott et al. [314] relies on discretized differential gene expression data and a prior knowledge network (PKN) of interactions to reconstruct phenotype-specific networks. The reconstructed $CLN3^{Q352X}$ -diseased network comprised 353 genes and 641 interactions, whereas the control healthy network contained 298 genes and 399 interactions (see Figure 15a,15b).

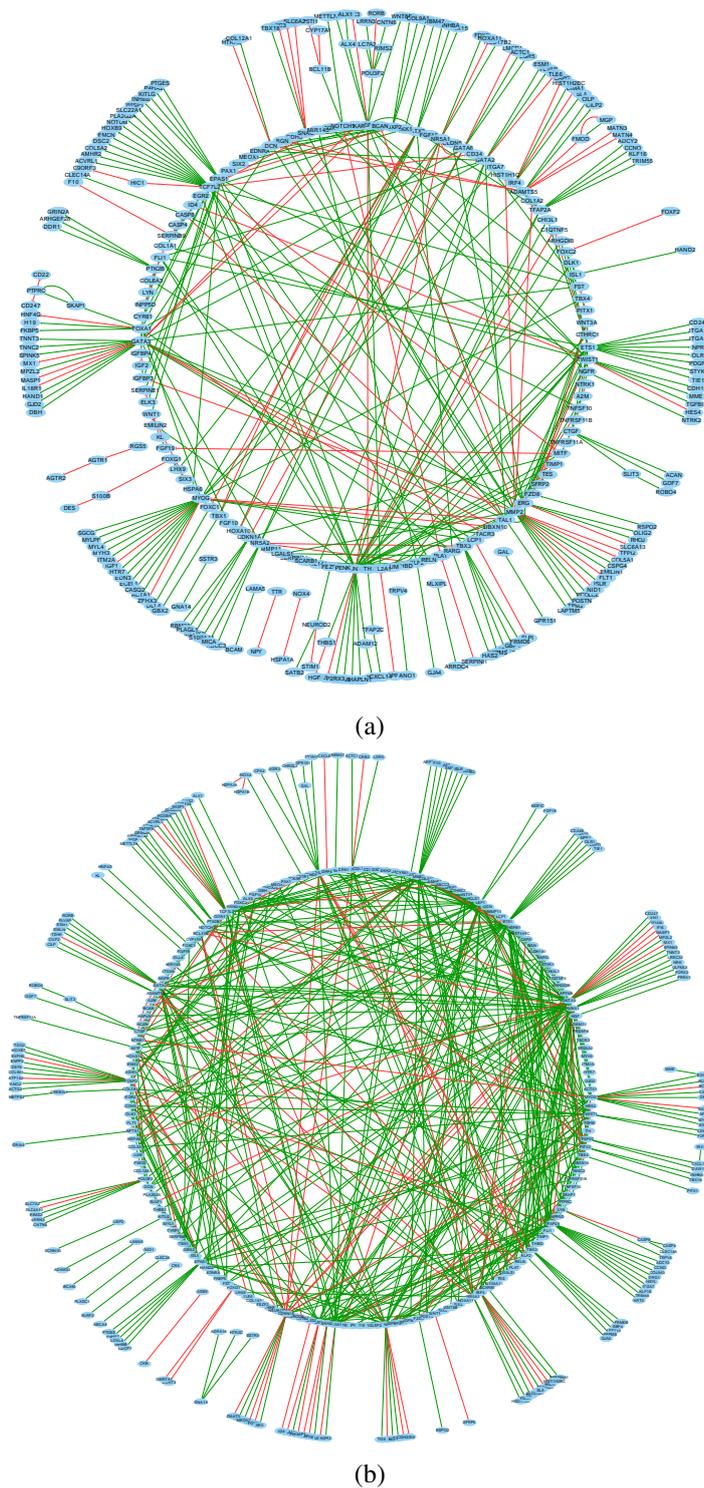


Figure 15: **GRN representing Batten diseased and control phenotypes.** a) Gene regulatory network representing the healthy phenotype contained 298 nodes (transcription factors and genes) and 399 interactions; b) GRN representing the diseased phenotype and contains 353 nodes and 641 interactions. Green arrowhead lines in the network represent positive interactions, i.e. activation (292 for the Control and 520 in the *CLN3* mutant), while the red ones represent negative interactions, i.e. inhibition (107 and 121 respectively in the two phenotypes).

Interestingly, GO analysis of the *CLN3*^{Q352X} diseased network revealed that most of the upregulated genes in the network are significantly enriched in cellular processes related to development. Some prominent examples are *PAX5*, *TBX15*, and *HAND1* genes, that are well known for their key roles in B cell [185], skeletal [255], and cardiovascular development [183]. Similarly, the downregulated genes, such as human leukocyte antigen (*HLA*) genes, were targeting biological processes and pathways related to the immune response and antigen processing and presentation (see Figure 16a). Moreover, pathway enrichment analysis conducted on the network showed that the genes in the network are significantly dysregulated in molecular pathways related to stem cells and development (see Figure 16b). Some prominent examples include *NOTCH1* [222], *WNT3A* [166], and *HES4* [72] genes, and they have been shown to play important roles in various developmental processes.

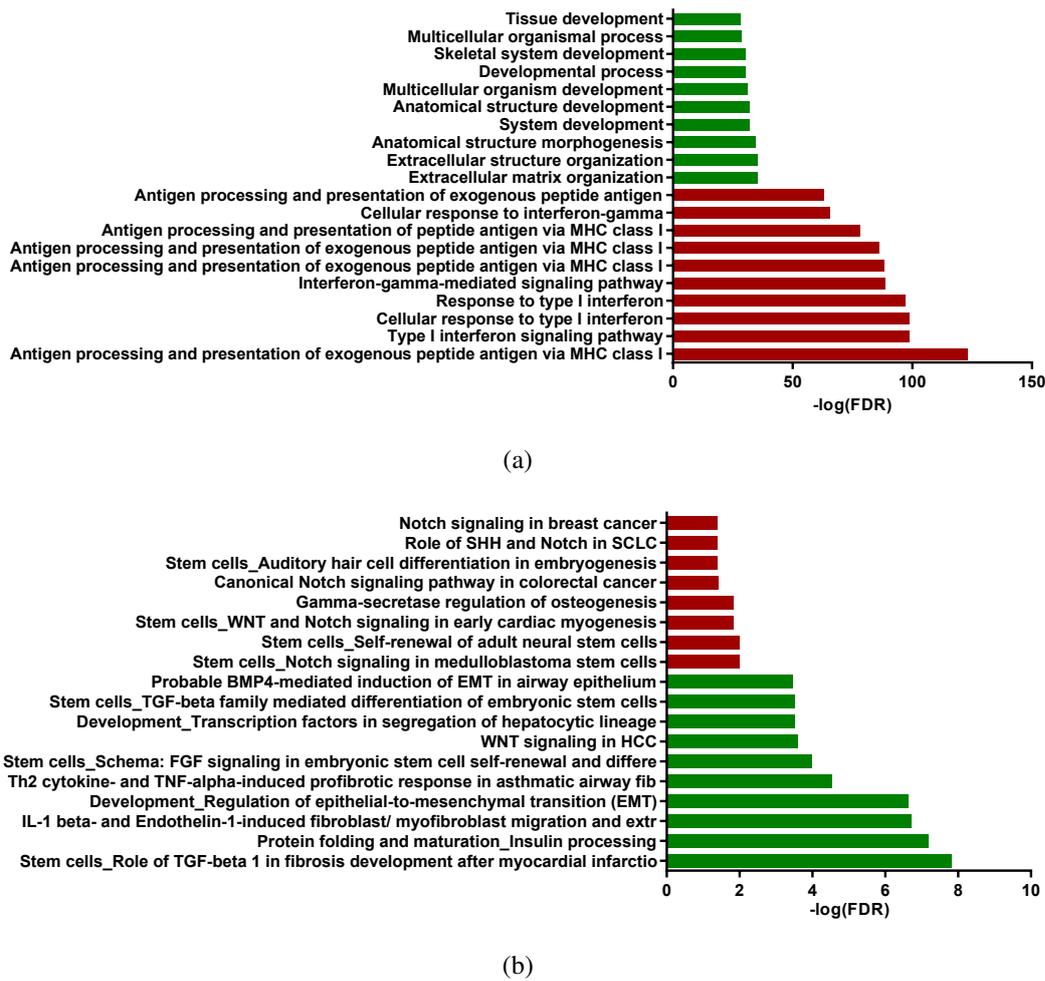


Figure 16: **Gene and pathway enrichment.** a) Gene enrichment analysis of $CLN3^{Q352X}$ network (top). Genes which were upregulated in the disease phenotype indicated a significant enrichment of cellular processes highlighted in green, while processes associated with downregulated genes are depicted in red. b) Pathway enrichment analysis of the $CLN3^{Q352X}$ network (bottom), upregulated pathways are highlighted in green, while pathways associated to downregulated genes are marked in red.

Additionally, evaluation of gene expression data outside the disease network indicated expression changes related to cortical neuron morphogenesis and central nervous system development and highlighted decreased expression of associated genes, such as *FOXG1* [99], *FEFZ2* [71], *CTIP2* [207], *SATB2* [28], *TBR1* [69] or *NEUROD2* [213] in $CLN3^{Q352X}$ mutant cerebral organoids (see Figure 17). This suggests that alterations in development and cortical neuronal specification may occur during early development in our isogenic $CLN3^{Q352X}$ organoids, compared to the control.

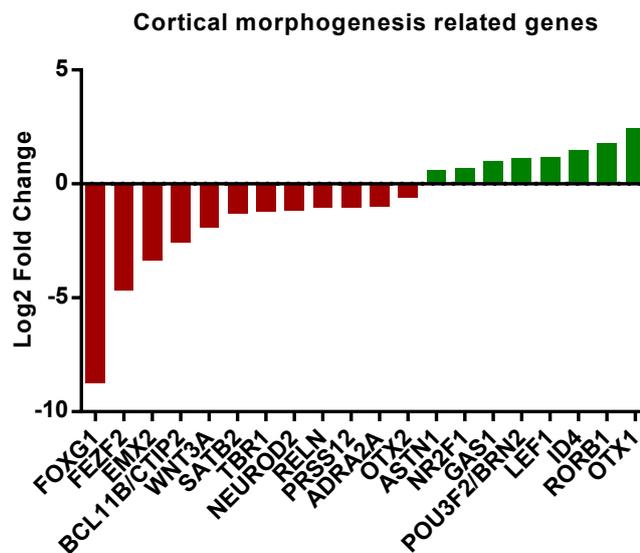


Figure 17: Log 2 fold change expression values for genes related to brain development and cortical morphogenesis showed a downregulation in mutant samples in comparison to control for most of the genes.

6.4.2 Lysosome enzyme expression is altered in $CLN3^{Q352X}$ cerebral organoids and lipofuscin storage material is present

Following up on our RNA-seq analysis, we sought out connections between our expression data and pathways that are especially relevant in JNCL, coupling the findings to molecular and biochemical analyses. Thus, we screened our dataset for genes that were differentially expressed between our control and $CLN3^{Q352X}$ mutant organoids and were related to lysosomal and vesicle-mediated transport pathways. The list of genes belonging to these pathways was extracted from Pathcards [19], an integrated database of human biological pathways and their annotations.

Among the differentially expressed genes related to lysosomal pathways, we found several lysosomal enzymes, such as $TPPI/CLN2$, a soluble serine protease in the lysosome, or cathepsins, like cysteine proteases $CTSC$, $CTSK$ and $CTSZ$ (see Figure 18). Increased amounts of TPP1 protein have been described in various pathological conditions such as neurodegenerative lysosomal storage disorders, inflammation, cancer and aging [92]. Moreover, $TPPI$ has been reported to interact with the $CLN3$ gene [287]. Consistent with existing reports, we could also find an in-

creased amount of *TPP1* in our *CLN3*^{Q352X} cerebral organoids, compared to the control brain organoids.

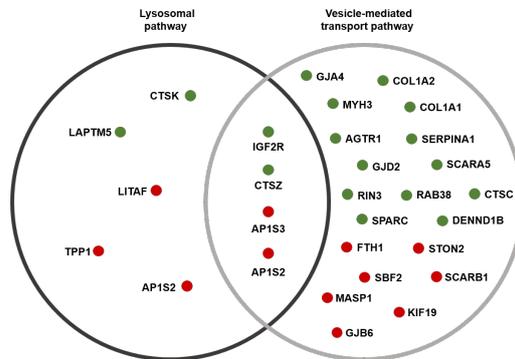


Figure 18: **Lysosome enzyme expression is altered in *CLN3*^{Q352X} cerebral organoids.** Venn diagram showing the differentially expressed genes related to lysosomal and vesicle-transport pathways that are differentially up- (green) or downregulated (red) in the *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutant brain organoids.

Importantly, the functional characterization of cerebral organoids by autofluorescence (confocal laser excitation) and ultrastructural analysis (transmission electron microscopy) showed that developed *in vitro* batten disease model recapitulates important disease hallmarks, such as increased autophagic vacuoles and presence of intracytoplasmic and electron dense storage material in the organoid cultures [90] (unpublished work. Data not shown here). The carried out functional characterization also reinforces the idea that the pathogenesis of JNCL is associated with alterations in lysosomal compartments that might start with dysregulations at the transcriptional level.

6.4.3 *In silico* network perturbation analysis

In view of diseases as network perturbations [62, 3], we performed *in silico* network perturbations to identify the most influential genes in the diseased network. The network perturbation analysis highlighted the governing role of the perturbation candidates in the GRN. In this regard, simulation of single transcription factor perturbations revealed that *FOXA1*, *TALI*, *GATA3*, *ETS1*, and *RUNX1* play an important role in maintaining the diseased phenotype network, i.e. leading to a significant reversion of the pathological gene expression program upon perturbation. Existing literature suggests a crucial role of these transcription factors (TFs) in various human developmental processes. For example, *FOXA1* has been widely known to be involved in the development of T-

cell [151], midbrain dopaminergic neurons [78], and mammary gland and prostate [22]. Similarly, other TFs such as *TALI*, *GATA3*, *ETS1*, and *RUNX1* have been reported to play important roles in the development of hematopoietic [230, 308, 115], immune [15], and cardiovascular systems [86]. Furthermore, dysfunction of these genes has been associated with hematological malignancies [230, 263], congenital heart defects [304] and cancers [124, 47]. Considering their topological characteristics and key roles in the developmental processes, they constitute ideal candidates for perturbation. A perturbation combination of *TALI*, *GATA3*, *ETS1*, and *RUNX1* reverted the gene expression state of 118 other genes in the diseased network. Although the predicted genes are not necessarily responsible for disease onset and progression, they are able to revert most of the diseased gene expression program upon perturbation (Table 8). These finding suggests that the predicted genes might play a crucial role in the establishment of the disease phenotype.

Single-gene perturbation			Multi-gene perturbations		
Rank	Score	Gene	Rank	Score	Genes
1	82	<i>FOXA1</i>	1	118	<i>TALI, GATA3, ETS1, RUNX1</i>
2	69	<i>TALI</i>	2	116	<i>FOXA1, MYOG, MMP2, GATA3</i>
3	67	<i>LEF1</i>	3	114	<i>FOXA1, MMP2, GATA3, ETS1</i>
4	67	<i>GATA3</i>	4	114	<i>FOXA1, GATA3, ETS1, RUNX1</i>
5	66	<i>MMP2</i>	5	113	<i>FOXA1, MYOG, GATA3, ETS1</i>
6	65	<i>RUNX1</i>	6	111	<i>FOXA1, MYOG, GATA3, RUNX1</i>
7	65	<i>ETS1</i>	7	111	<i>FOXA1, MMP2, GATA3, RUNX1</i>
8	64	<i>GATA6</i>	8	110	<i>MYOG, FOXA1, MMP2, RUNX1</i>
9	63	<i>MYOG</i>	9	110	<i>MYOG, FOXA1, GATA3, GATA2</i>
10	63	<i>IRF4</i>	10	110	<i>FOXA1, MMP2, GATA3, GATA2</i>

Table 8: **Top 10 key candidate genes from single- and multi-gene network perturbation simulation analysis.** Genes are ranked based on their score. The score represents the number of genes whose discretized expression is reverted (shifted from the pathologic towards the healthy phenotype) upon *in silico* perturbation. The scores obtained for different candidate genes are a qualitative measure of their ability to revert the disease phenotype.

6.5 Discussion

The development of an *in vitro* Batten disease model and associated transcriptomic analyses in the context of genetic variation in *CLN3* are, to our knowledge, non-existent in humans to date. In order to bridge this knowledge gap, we report a systems-level study utilizing the transcriptomic data from an *in vitro* Batten disease model harboring the *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutation and the phenotypic hallmarks of this disease. We identified significant changes in the gene expression levels of impor-

tant genes that are associated with development and differentiation. This highlights the potential of created isogenic cell line to recapitulate disease features as a consequence of introducing a disease-causing mutation in the *CLN3* gene. To our knowledge, the conducted study constitutes a first attempt to generate a computational disease model of Batten disease, employed for investigating the contributions of c.1054C>T mutation in the *CLN3* gene to brain formation and to the pathophysiology of Batten disease in general.

Additionally, we were able to describe lysosomal alterations already happening at the transcriptional level, concomitant with the differential expression of genes that govern lysosomal and vesicle-mediated pathways. To this end, we report a downregulation in *TPPI* peptidase in our *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutant organoids. Notably, we observed an increase at the protein level. *TPPI* has been shown to be involved in the initial degradation of subunit c when adding both purified *TPPI* and soluble lysosomal fractions, containing various proteinases, to mitochondrial fractions, which normally results in rapid degradation of subunit c, but not in the presence of a *TPPI* inhibitor or when the enzyme is non-functional, as in *CLN2* disease [75]. We hypothesize that the sustained increase in *TPPI* levels might be a cellular response to degrade extra subunit c of mitochondrial ATP synthase (SCMAS) starting to accumulate in the lysosomes due to *CLN3* deficiency, while the expression levels may change rapidly in response to the cellular demands. Another altered lysosomal enzyme in our *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutant organoids was *CTSD*, aspartic protease especially abundant in neuronal lysosomes. *CTSD* was also found inducing lysosomal storage material in mouse CNS neurons that presented a deficiency in this enzyme [72]. We reported a decrease in protein levels of *CTSD*, which might be compensated by the cells at the transcriptional level by upregulating several other cathepsin genes, such as *CTSC* or *CTSZ*.

Interestingly, GO analysis of the *CLN3*^{Q352X} diseased network revealed that most of the upregulated genes in the network are significantly enriched in cellular processes related to development. Some prominent examples are *PAX5*, *TBX15*, and *HAND1* genes, that are well known for their key roles in B cell [185], skeletal [255], and cardiovascular development [183]. Similarly, the downregulated genes, such as human leukocyte antigen (*HLA*) genes, were targeting biological processes and pathways related to the immune response and antigen processing and presentation

The DEA of the transcriptomic data obtained from control and *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutant organoids pro-

vided additional insight into Batten disease-associated dysregulation at the gene-expression level. The GRN analysis provided a systems-level view of this dysregulation and revealed the underlying key genes maintaining the disease phenotype. The cellular processes and pathway enrichment analysis of upregulated genes in the disease phenotype network showed a strong association of these genes with developmental processes and pathways (see supplementary Figure 20). Some prominent examples are *PAX5*, *TBX15*, and *HAND1* genes, that are well known for their key roles in B cell [185], skeletal [255], and cardiovascular development [183]. The enrichment analysis suggested skeletal system development to be one of the several processes that is significantly disrupted in this disease. The normal outcome of this process is the development of the skeleton over time, from its formation until becoming a mature structure [21], however, this process is significantly affected in Batten disease. As evident from existing studies, deposition of lysosomal residual bodies, the end products of prelysosomal and intralysosomal degradation of cellular constituents, is ubiquitous and affect skeletal muscles in Batten disease [233, 216]. Surprisingly, the TGF-beta, Wnt and BMP signaling pathways that were found to be significantly associated with the diseased network are widely known for their fundamental roles in embryonic skeletal development and postnatal bone homeostasis [299, 167]. Similarly, other developmental processes such as tissue development, multicellular organism development and extracellular matrix (ECM) organization were significantly enriched concomitant with signaling pathways regulating stem cell differentiation and epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition. Interestingly, there is compelling evidence suggesting major changes in the expression of numerous ECM molecules in nervous system-related disorders, such as multiple sclerosis [261], Alzheimer disease, and Parkinson disease [25, 254]. Furthermore, various disease models of nervous system disorders and LSDs share common features, such as neuro-inflammation and neuro-degeneration [12, 20]. Taken together, these results suggest the dysregulation of developmental pathways and processes in the Batten disease model, consistent with existing literature explaining the phenotypic characteristics of this disorder throughout its course.

Although the development of *in vitro* Batten disease model and GRN-based modeling of transcriptomic data provided insights into key developmental pathways affected by the disease, we acknowledge that the presented approach has some important limitations. Foremost, *in vitro* cultured cerebral organoids present variable shapes and features, unlike that of a mature human brain.

Moreover, they lack surrounding tissues that are important for the interplay of neural and non-neural tissue cross talk, such as meninges, bones and vasculature [149]. Due to these factors, organoids showed marked variability, particularly between preparations. To account for these variations, controls as well as mutant organoids were prepared at the same time, grown in the same medium, and organoids from at least three different independent derivations were taken per experiment. It is also important to be aware that the transcriptomic data analysed in this study was profiled by bulk RNA-seq, which has its own limitation due to the heterogeneity caused by diverse cell types in the brain [217]. To this end, the reliance on literature-derived interaction networks and further contextualization of these networks with discretized gene expression data maximizes the perseverance of context-specific interactions in the reconstructed GRN models, while removing the noise in the data by filtering incompatible interactions. However, a more sophisticated study, assessing different neural cell types in isolation or performing single-cell RNA-seq profiling would greatly improve the power of this analysis to detect significant disease-associated changes [246]. Furthermore, as the *in silico* network perturbation analysis revealed *FOXA1*, *TALI*, *GATA3*, *ETS1*, and *RUNX1* to be the key regulators maintaining the Batten diseased phenotype, a complementary random perturbation analysis could aid in assessing the significance of these predictions. In addition, an experimental validation of these predictions by TF knock-down or over-expression would greatly benefit in understanding the specific contributions of these TFs to the disease outcome.

Altogether, our data suggests that the introduction of the c.1054C>T mutation in the *CLN3* gene causes the accumulation of pathological storage material and lysosomal enzyme dysregulation at the early stages of brain development, which can be modelled with cerebral organoids. Furthermore, gene expression profiling on control and *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutant organoids allowed us to characterize transcriptional changes that arise as a consequence of this mutation. We believe the development of this Batten disease *in vitro* model system and generation of corresponding transcriptomic profiles will provide the scientific community with a valuable resource to further dissect its underlying mechanism, helping in its early diagnosis as well as in designing potential therapeutic treatments.

Chapter 7

General Discussion

The large-scale development of high-throughput sequencing technologies has allowed the generation of reliable omics data at different regulatory levels. Integrative computational models enable disentangling the complex interplay between these interconnected levels of regulation by assessing these large quantities of biomedical information in a systematic way. However, modeling human diseases by computational approaches demands the reconstruction of reliable network models that are context-specific and encapsulate the regulatory gene expression program. For example, it has become increasingly clear that it is the cross-talk between epigenetic and transcriptomic layers that regulates gene expression programs across various human cell types [53, 274, 41]. Although existing integrative methods for reconstructing network models provide meaningful insights for understanding the underlying mechanisms of gene regulation, they suffer from some important limitations. First and foremost, these methodologies usually rely on histone modification marks for active enhancer identification (H3K27ac) to predict active enhancer regions and associate them to their target genes based on ad hoc criteria, such as the nearest gene or all genes within a defined range. Such enhancer annotations might lead to the inference of false-positive (and -negative) interactions as it has been shown that enhancers do not necessarily act on the closest promoter, but can bypass neighboring genes to act on more distant genes along the same as well as a different chromosome [100, 109]. Secondly, these approaches rely on position weight matrix (PWM)-based predictions of transcription factor (TF) binding in regulatory regions to associate regulator TFs with their respective target genes. Such PWM-based predictions might lead to the inference of many false-positive interactions due to the detection of false-positive motifs, as indicated

by existing studies [313, 163]. Lastly, these methods lack systematic benchmarking of predictive network models against experimental cell-type-specific TF chromatin immunoprecipitation-sequencing (ChIP-seq) data.

These limitations suggest the need for more sophisticated integrative computational methods that rely only on experimental data from different regulatory levels to reconstruct reliable cell-type-specific networks. As such, these network models can help us in addressing the fundamental biological questions related to cell-type-specific and disease-associated transcriptional regulation. Moreover, the application of such tailor-made integrative network models is yet to be explored in the context of epigenetic and transcriptomic dysregulation that play a crucial role in normal cellular differentiation processes and lies at the core of many disorders [161, 295]. Therefore, reconstructing cell-type-specific network models by integrating epigenetic and transcriptomic information can provide deeper insights into underlying mechanisms, e.g. allowing us to predict specific external stimuli (e.g. TF over-expression) that can overcome epigenetic barriers restricting the differentiation potential of cells.

In order to address the aforementioned limitations, we developed INTREGNET, a computational framework that reconstruct cell-type-specific core transcriptional regulatory networks (TRNs) for various human cell types and cell lines. Chapter 3 provides a concise overview of this approach. The reconstructed networks allowed us to understand cell-specific regulation of TFs at the epigenetic and transcriptomic level, thus enabling us to predict efficient combinations of instructive factors (IFs) for desired cellular conversions between any two cell types of interests. This method is based on the systematic integration of epigenetic and transcriptomic information to reconstruct core TRNs, offering several advantages over current approaches. Firstly, it exclusively relies on experimental data for TRN reconstruction, which increases precision compared to PWM-based methods that are not cell-type-specific. In particular, INTREGNET introduces cell-type-specificity by integrating information on TF ChIP-seq experiments, chromatin accessibility and active cis-regulatory elements to accurately reconstruct networks. Secondly, integration of protein-protein interaction (PPI) data allows for dissecting region-specific cooperative and competitive TF-binding, i.e. the joint effect of multiple TFs on the transcription of target genes. Considering these protein-protein interactions are critical for prioritizing more efficient combinations of IFs, exemplified by the complex formation of *SOX2* and *POU5F1* that is necessary for

inducing pluripotent stem cells [242, 27]. Finally, the devised strategy for predicting efficient IFs actively incorporates differences in the epigenetic landscape between the initial and target cell type. Despite the specific combination of IFs, the amount of epigenetic restructuring required during reprogramming is a key determinant of cellular conversion efficiency [219]. INTREGNET accounts for these epigenetic landscape differences by penalizing the calculated efficiency of IFs with the amount of required restructuring.

In principal, INTREGNET can be customized for applications for human disease modeling, in view of diseases as network perturbations from healthy to disease phenotype [62]. A core TRN reconstructed from different epigenetic and transcriptional profiles obtained from pathological cells might help in identifying causal TFs that establish or maintain the disease phenotype. Finally, *in silico* network perturbations can guide experimental efforts in pre-selecting a set of putative target TFs, whose perturbation induces the conversion into a healthy phenotype, with vast amounts of potential applications to personalized medicine. To our knowledge, INTREGNET is one of the first approaches that aims at identifying highly efficient IFs based on the systematic integration of information linked to multiple regulatory levels, and is expected to find diverse applications in the field of regenerative medicine. In particular, considering the success of *in vivo* reprogramming in preclinical models, we believe INTREGNET to be a valuable tool for alleviating the impediment of low efficiency by guiding cellular conversion experiments.

The remarkable development of high-throughput sequencing technologies has allowed the generation of great quantities of genomic, epigenomic and transcriptomic data for various human diseases that has allowed us to dissect the mechanisms behind the onset and progression of multifactorial diseases. As such, many studies have used information from an individual regulatory level to identify causal genes and understand the mechanisms underlying the pathophysiology of Alzheimer's disease (AD). For example, genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have successfully identified numerous susceptibility genes for AD [89, 125, 130, 33]. Similarly, based on the crucial role of DNA methylation in cellular processes [214], including gene regulation [229], cellular differentiation [131] and genomic imprinting [221], there have been many studies linking changes in DNA methylation status to the pathogenesis of AD [259, 290, 61]. Furthermore, analysis of genome-wide transcriptomic data sets from post-mortem brain tissue has unveiled various key genes in different biological pathways associated with AD [286]. These findings highlight that changes

associated with AD are not restricted to a particular regulatory layer and can be observed across genetic, epigenetic and transcriptomic levels [147, 61, 179, 100, 109, 170]. Although various levels of genomic regulation, including DNA methylation, chromatin modifications and microRNAs (miRNAs), are known to be highly interconnected at the functional level [63], commonly used analytical approaches are usually restricted to analyzing only one or two layers of molecular information in association with AD [61, 286, 107], and, moreover, are mostly restrained to correlations. Therefore, an integrative multi-omics systems biology approach to uncover the relative, interdependent contribution of various molecular layers in the development and course of AD is of utmost importance.

In view of the interplay between genomic, epigenomic and transcriptomic dysregulation in AD, in the study described in Chapter 4, we applied a novel approach for prioritizing AD-associated genes (i.e. genetic variation) based upon AD-linked variation at the epigenomic and transcriptomic level. To this end, by making use of an integrative graph-diffusion based method [66], we have integrated information from different molecular regulatory levels into a directed functional gene-gene interaction network. The proposed method uses information about AD-associated genetic and epigenetic variation in upstream regulatory genes affecting intermediate (mediator) genes, which, through gene-gene interactions, in turn, affect proximal downstream genes evoking expression changes. As such, this approach ranks genes within such gene-gene interaction networks, based on their potential to evoke downstream changes. Some of the most prominent candidate genes include *ETSI*, *WT1* and *APP* genes, which are all known to be involved in various neuronal cellular processes, while expression changes of these genes have been implicated in the course of AD [121, 169, 208, 181].

We have also shown that the approach presented in Chapter 4 not only identifies disease-related multi-omics signatures and key genes, but also has the ability to predict putative drugs that could revert the disease phenotype. Connectivity map [145] was used as a reference database for linking subnetworks of mediator genes to drugs that have been shown to produce opposite gene expression profiles. A systematic drug enrichment analysis led to the prediction of levycycloserine and apramycin as the most promising existing drugs for reverting the observed AD-associated gene expression profiles. Interestingly, cycloserine treatment has been found to significantly improve implicit memory [251] and cognitive function [279] in AD patients, suggesting the potential of

the proposed approach in recapitulating previously-known drugs as well as predicting novel candidates.

In conclusion, the conducted analysis offers a novel approach for integrating information from different levels of regulation in order to detect and rank AD-associated genetic variation based on their functional significance. Such analysis will find its applications in predicting potentially causal genes for other human pathologies where individual datasets are available from different -omics levels. Thus, we are providing the scientific community with a novel approach that can pave the way for deconvoluting complex and multifactorial human diseases, hence fostering the developmental of novel treatment strategies.

Although developments in high-throughput sequencing technologies and computational analysis of obtained datasets have enhanced our knowledge about AD causal genes, the mechanisms underlying dysregulation of implicated pathways are yet to be explored. A comprehensive characterization of these pathways demands the integrative analysis of various interconnected layers of regulation that have been overlooked and/or understudied so far. In-depth integrative analyses of such pathways, as performed for the sphingolipid (SL) pathway in the Chapter 5, could aid in obtaining more insight in the yet unclear pathogenesis of AD, thus providing avenues for designing more effective therapeutic treatment strategies.

Owing to significant alterations in the expression and methylation levels of SL-associated genes in AD, and the possibility of using them as a biomarkers [190], we aimed at conducting an integrative analysis focused only on the genes involved in SL function. Some of the most prominent candidate genes predicted to underlie SL dysregulation include *CAVI*, *SIPRI/2* and *SPHK1*, which are all known to be implicated in the development and course of AD [282, 87, 171, 267, 154].

Of note, a similar analysis (unpublished observations; data not shown) was conducted on genes associated to tryptophan (TRP), more specifically the TRP-kynurenine (KYN) pathway, implicated in AD [307, 228, 112]. Unlike in the case of SL, the integrative epigenetic and transcriptomic analysis found no significant disease-associated changes at the network level. Considering the fact that the TRP-KYN pathway mainly reflects a metabolic cascade, it is not surprising that a GRN and associated integrative analyses are not that successful, as genes involved in metabolic cascades are not expected to highly interact with each other at the epigenetic and transcriptomic level. To

conclude, this analysis could serve as a negative control and indirectly validate our findings of significant changes in SL metabolism in AD, where strong interconnectivity of involved genes was observed at the epigenetic and transcriptional regulatory levels.

Development of *in vitro* disease models and analyses of profiled transcriptomic datasets to attain systems-level understanding of disease-associated dysregulation provide avenues for pre-clinical validation of potential cell therapy applications. Such analyses are very scarce for rare neurological disorders such as Batten disease. In particular, the development of an *in vitro* Batten disease model and comparative transcriptomic analyses in the context of genetic variation in *CLN3* are very limited and, to our knowledge, non-existent in humans to date. In order to bridge this gap in the literature, we report a systems-level study utilizing the transcriptomic data from an *in vitro* Batten disease model harboring the *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutation and the phenotypic hallmarks of this disease.

The differential expression analysis (DEA) of the transcriptomic data obtained from control and *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutant organoids provided additional insight into Batten disease-associated dysregulation at the gene-expression level. The GRN analysis provided a systems-level view of this dysregulation and revealed the underlying key genes maintaining the disease phenotype. The cellular processes and pathway enrichment analysis of upregulated genes in the disease phenotype network showed a strong association of these genes with developmental processes and pathways. Some prominent examples are *PAX5*, *TBX15*, and *HAND1* genes, that are well known for their key roles in B cell [185], skeletal [255], and cardiovascular development [183]. The enrichment analysis suggested skeletal system development to be one of the several processes that is significantly disrupted in this disease. The normal outcome of this process is the development of the skeleton over time, from its formation until becoming a mature structure [21], however, this process is significantly affected in Batten disease. As evident from existing studies, deposition of lysosomal residual bodies, the end products of prelysosomal and intralysosomal degradation of cellular constituents, is ubiquitous and affect skeletal muscles in Batten disease [233, 216]. Surprisingly, the TGF-beta, Wnt and BMP signaling pathways that were found to be significantly associated with the diseased network are widely known for their fundamental roles in embryonic skeletal development and postnatal bone homeostasis [299, 167]. Similarly, other developmental processes such as tissue development, multicellular organism development and extracellular

matrix (ECM) organization were significantly enriched concomitant with signaling pathways regulating stem cell differentiation and epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition. Interestingly, there is compelling evidence suggesting major changes in the expression of numerous ECM molecules in nervous system-related disorders, such as multiple sclerosis [261], Alzheimer disease, and Parkinson disease [25, 254]. Furthermore, various disease models of nervous system disorders and LSDs share common features, such as neuro-inflammation and neuro-degeneration [12, 20]. Taken together, these results suggest the dysregulation of developmental pathways and processes in the Batten disease model, consistent with existing literature explaining the phenotypic characteristics of this disorder throughout its course. Altogether, our data suggests that the introduction of the c.1054C>T mutation in the *CLN3* gene causes the accumulation of pathological storage material and lysosomal enzyme dysregulation at the early stages of brain development, which can be modelled with cerebral organoids. Furthermore, gene expression profiling on control and *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutant organoids allowed us to characterize transcriptional changes that arise as a consequence of this mutation. We believe the development of this Batten disease *in vitro* model system and generation of corresponding transcriptomic profiles will provide the scientific community with a valuable resource to further dissect its underlying mechanism, helping in its early diagnosis as well as in designing potential therapeutic treatments.

7.1 Current challenges and future perspectives

The most important limitations encountered in computational approaches for disease modeling are discussed in Chapter 2, and the studies described in this thesis are also subject to some of those limitations. One of the most important limitation that all computational network-based approaches suffer from is the validation of reconstructed network models. The currently used gold-standard for network validation concerns cell-type-specific TF ChIP-seq data, however, due to a large number of known human TFs and various cell types, ChIP-seq profiling for every TF is far from being complete. Even though INTREGNET, a method described in Chapter 3, leverages a comprehensive compendium of over 11,000 publicly accessible TF ChIP-seq profiles from the Cistrome database [186], we still run into the problem of missing data. For example, *LIN28A* was identified as a core TF of induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs), but its binding sites have not been

profiled by CHIP-seq in any human cell type or cell line. As INTREGNET relies on TF CHIP-seq data to reconstruct core TRN models, it cannot be contained in the core TRN and predicted as an IF for inducing PSCs. However, the amount of available TF binding site profiles is steadily increasing, which eventually will mitigate this problem in the future. Moreover, the availability of additional epigenetic profiles, such as multiple histone modifications and chromatin conformation, will become greater in the future, opening the possibility of integrating them into the TRN.

Similarly, another important limitation of INTREGNET is reliance on bulk datasets. Indeed, transcriptomic and epigenetic heterogeneity in cellular populations can influence successful conversion due to the existence of different sub-populations exhibiting distinct conversion efficiencies [31]. In this regard, modeling core TRNs using single-cell data could allow the identification of sub-populations with the highest conversion propensity. Furthermore, single-cell data can help in devising novel experimental strategies for cellular conversion, such as initially priming cell populations and subsequently inducing the desired cell type conversion.

Another prominent limitation of network-based modeling approaches is their reliance on literature-derived gene-gene interaction networks. Although these prior knowledge networks (PKN) help us in understanding the transcriptional regulation of genes, they are far from being complete. As described in Chapter 4, despite being able to prioritize AD-associated genes by systematically integrating multi-omics data onto a functional gene-gene interaction network, we acknowledge that the presented approach has certain limitations, providing avenues for future improvements. For example, the employed network diffusion approach can investigate the mediator effects of only those genes that are present in the gene interaction network. This highlights the problem of missing data in the literature, as currently, the well-curated and experimentally proven gene-gene interaction maps are not covering the whole spectrum of human genes, rather they are more enriched towards well-studied TFs and genes. As such, these results may be biased towards such well-studied, hence highly connected, genes in the network. This bias might arise due to their high connectivity, which contributes to higher chances of finding various differentially methylated or differentially expressed gene in their network neighbourhood. However, decreasing expression profiling costs and an increasing number of gene knock-down and over-expression experiments in data bases like gene perturbation atlas (GPA) [302] and gene expression omnibus (GEO) [50], will eventually help towards completing the functional interaction maps.

The inference of causality is another important limitation inherent to integrative studies considering the epigenetic and transcriptional data for understanding disease-related dysregulation. It is impossible to say whether epigenetic and transcriptional differences detected between AD and control individuals represent a cause or consequence of pathology. However, unraveling the causal or consequential relationship of these changes is now possible by the help of *in vitro* (or even *in vivo*) studies where epigenetic editing or transcriptional knock-down and over-expression experiments can help us in understanding their contributions to the disease.

One of the most critical limitations confronted in epigenetic studies are small to moderate sample sizes, limiting their potential to detect significant changes. This is exemplified by some of the very high *p*-values reported for differentially methylated genes in Chapter 4. Also the results of Chapter 5 should be interpreted with caution, as only three probes survived correction for multiple testing in the differential methylation analysis. Although analyses described in Chapter 5 identified novel and pre-identified SL-related genes based on their epigenetic and transcriptional changes, the moderate sample size might have limited detectable changes in AD samples. This limitation can be seen as an opportunity for conducting more diverse studies including wide-range of analyses in other brain regions to further investigate the role of SL function in AD. Nevertheless, our results provide a clear evidence about the involvement of SLs and related molecules in AD, highlighting the diagnostic and SL-targeted drug-development potential of predicted genes. Even though the reported genes and epigenetic modifications are not predictive signs of disease progression, our data can serve as a starting point to further investigate the role of SLs in AD. Thus, exploring SL function and associated molecules dysregulated in AD could aid in the development of new therapeutic approaches.

Although the development of *in vitro* Batten disease model and GRN-based modeling of transcriptomic data provided insights into key developmental pathways affected by the disease, we acknowledge that the approach presented in Chapter 6 has some important limitations. Foremost, *in vitro* cultured cerebral organoids present variable shapes and features, unlike that of a mature human brain. Moreover, they lack surrounding tissues that are important for the interplay of neural and non-neural tissue cross talk, such as meninges, bones and vasculature [149]. Due to these factors, organoids showed marked variability, particularly between preparations. To account for these variations, controls as well as mutant organoids were prepared at the same time, grown in

the same medium, and organoids from at least three different independent derivations were taken per experiment.

It is also important to be aware that the transcriptomic data analysed in this study was profiled by bulk RNA-seq, which has its own limitation due to the heterogeneity caused by diverse cell types in the brain [217]. To this end, the reliance on literature-derived interaction networks and further contextualization of these networks with discretized gene expression data maximizes the perseverance of context-specific interactions in the reconstructed GRN models, while removing the noise in the data by filtering incompatible interactions. However, a more sophisticated study, assessing different neural cell types in isolation or performing single-cell RNA-seq profiling would greatly improve the power of this analysis to detect significant disease-associated changes [246].

Furthermore, as the *in silico* network perturbation analysis conducted in Chapter 6 revealed that *FOXA1*, *TAL1*, *GATA3*, *ETS1*, and *RUNX1* play a crucial role in maintaining the Batten diseased phenotype, an experimental validation of these predictions by TF knock-down or over-expression would greatly benefit in understanding the specific contributions of these TFs to the disease outcome.

Even though the research conducted in this thesis covers a wide range of cell types, tissues, diseases, and techniques, the current status of our understanding of epigenetics and transcriptomic cross-talk in regulating normal cellular processes and their dysregulation in various disorders is far from being complete. Thus, while solutions can be offered to address the specific limitations described above, a more radical shift in integrative computational approaches is required to truly mature this emerging field. Although advances in sequencing technologies have made it easier to generate and share high-quality multi-omics datasets, the field still seems to lag behind in how to deal with these datasets and interpret the findings of the integrative analyses. By harnessing the computational power of the present era and advances in integrative modeling and machine learning, it may be possible to generate predictive models that may aid in the diagnosis and prognosis of multifactorial human disorders [108], thereby fostering the development of novel therapeutic strategies that could make personalized medicine a reality.

Chapter 8

Valorization

The multifactorial nature of neurodevelopmental disorders, like Batten disease, or age-related disorders, such as Alzheimer's disease (AD), requires the generation and integrative analysis of biological data from different regulatory levels (genomics, epigenomics, and transcriptomics) to advance our understanding of the underlying mechanisms. A deep and thorough understanding of these multi-layered mechanisms at systems-level is the key to deconvolute the complexity of human pathologies, hence fostering the development of novel and effective treatment strategies.

Despite recent advances in next-generation sequencing technologies and the development of novel computational modeling approaches that shed more light on disease processes, we are still far from completely characterizing the disease-causative agents and finding a definite cure for most human pathologies, including AD. This highlights the need for explorative studies that utilize multi-level regulatory information to decipher the underlying mechanisms controlling normal gene expression regulation and their dysregulation in human disorders. In order to meet this challenge, the research presented in this thesis aims to further accelerate research in the field of computational disease modeling. Though it is unlikely that the work carried out in this thesis will have a direct impact on society in the short run, the approaches introduced here will definitely guide future studies, bringing the existing knowledge one step closer to its applications in disease intervention.

All in all, the research presented in this thesis highlights the potential of computational disease modeling and integrative multi-omics analysis for dissecting human disorders and proposing ra-

tional therapeutic strategies. For example, the approach presented in chapter 3 may find its application in facilitating experimental attempts for treating human developmental disorders, that arise due to a disruption in the normal cellular differentiation process [161, 295]. To this end, the proposed method (INTREGNET) is able to predict specific sets of instructive factors (IFs) that can induce desired cellular conversion events with increased efficiency, hence overcoming a long-standing problem in regenerative medicine hampering the translation of therapeutic interventions into clinical applications.

The research work described in chapters 4 and 5, focused on AD, offers novel insights into epigenetic and transcriptomic dysregulation by comparing multi-omics datasets from patients and healthy controls. Different markers identified at the genome-wide level, as well as by zooming in on sphingolipid metabolism, can be further tested for their potential as diagnostic markers or as putative drug targets. Furthermore, expanding existing knowledge about the involvement of different regulatory layers in AD-associated dysregulation is already a merit on itself, as such a deeper understanding of underlying mechanisms is vital for the development of novel therapeutic intervention strategies.

The final scientific efforts described in chapter 6 are directed towards generating a computational model of Batten disease in order to understand the functional consequences of a particular mutation in the *CLN3* gene, and to identify genes and pathways compromised in this human neurodevelopmental disorder. The conducted gene regulatory network (GRN) and *in-silico* gene perturbation analyses revealed key driver genes in maintaining the diseased phenotype network, i.e. leading to a significant reversion of the pathological gene expression program upon perturbation. The reported findings not only highlight the potential of employed systems-level approaches to identify relevant genes and associated molecular mechanisms implicated in Batten disease, but also provide a prediction of putative candidate genes that might be the drivers of disease-related dysregulation. We believe this study has a direct impact on the society as it provides the scientific community with a very a first *in vitro* and *in silico* *CLN3*^{Q352X} mutation Batten disease model, as well as the fact that it identifies key genes to be experimentally validated for their potential as an early diagnostic marker or target for designing potential therapeutic treatment strategies.

Taken together, the research work conducted in this thesis may have a substantial impact on our society, providing the scientific community with novel approaches to develop computational disease

models and dissect their underlying mechanisms. These computational models can help us unlock the biological systems [29], as well as devise new intervention strategies to halt the progression of human disorders or cure them. Finally, after going through four years of extensive training and hands-on practical experience, I am confident in saying that my efforts have allowed me to explore the computational disease modeling field in depth, also identify associated gaps and weaknesses in existing knowledge and approaches. During the last year of my project, I have stretched my skills beyond the vigorous foundation provided by my supervisors to meet the requirements to advance in this field. The expertise I have gained throughout my Ph.D. trajectory has enabled me to design my own studies and write grant proposals, which means I am now ready to make a real impact on society as an independent researcher.

Chapter 9

Summary

The remarkable development of high-throughput sequencing technologies has allowed the generation of great quantities of genomic, epigenomic and transcriptomic data for various human diseases that has allowed us to dissect the mechanisms behind the onset and progression of multifactorial diseases. Owing to the multifactorial nature of most human disorders, recent advancements in computational disease modeling, by integrating regulatory information from different levels, provide a new framework for understanding the complex nature of human health and disease. For example, modelling of complex gene interaction networks has been very useful for disease modelling [143, 13, 182] and for disentangling the interplay between different regulatory layers [193, 93, 195]. However, integrative network modelling approaches –i.e. linking different regulatory layers– [193, 93, 195, 104] are still scarce, which hampers the possibility of studying the crosstalk established among regulatory layers for determining a given phenotype or mediating phenotypic transitions [73]. As such, developing tailor-made computational models is a crucial step in understanding the contributions of genomic, epigenomic, and transcriptomic landscapes in cellular circuitry, lineage specification, and the onset and progression of human disease.

In order to bridge the gaps in the literature, we report integrative systems-level approaches to dissect the underlying disease mechanisms, helping in their early diagnosis as well as in designing potential therapeutic treatments. The research conducted in this thesis can be divided into five parts. CHAPTER 2 constitutes a concise overview of existing computational methods in the field of systems biology. Particular attention is paid to state-of-the-art gene regulatory network (GRN)

based methods for instructive factors (IFs) determination and human disease modeling. Along with the strengths, the limitations of these methods are highlighted, thereby providing avenues for the research conducted and described in the following chapters.

Due to a clear lack of integrative methods for predicting more efficient sets of instructive factors, CHAPTER 3 describes INTREGNET, an integrative computational method for systematically identifying reliable minimal sets of IFs that can induce desired cellular conversions with increased efficiency. The application of this method is demonstrated in an *in vitro* setting, where limited conversion efficiency is a crucial barrier for its application in regenerative medicine.

As explained above, the heterogeneous and multifactorial nature of human disorders, such as Alzheimer's disease (AD), requires the integration of regulatory information from different -omics levels in order to capture the underlying mechanisms behind the onset and progression of this disease. In CHAPTER 4, global multi-omics alterations in AD patients are identified by comparing genomic (gene aberration), epigenomic (DNA methylation) and transcriptomic data sets of 46 diseased patients with 32 age-matched controls.

CHAPTER 5 features an integrative exploration of specific neurobiological pathways known to be impaired in AD. A comprehensive analysis of gene expression and DNA methylation levels is performed for genes known to be associated with sphingolipid function. The identified key genes and their particular methylation signatures offer mechanistic insights into AD pathology and may act as potential biomarkers.

In vitro modeling of human diseases allows us to gain crucial insights into mechanisms underlying disorders, hence devising and optimizing new strategies for therapeutic intervention. CHAPTER 6 features the differential network-based analysis of transcriptomic data sets obtained from brain organoids that served as an *in vitro* model of Batten disease. This study focuses on identifying key genes and pathways that are disrupted during the course of this disease.

In conclusion, we believe that the work conducted in this thesis provides the scientific community with a valuable resource to understand the underlying mechanism of multifactorial diseases from an integrative point of view, helping in their early diagnosis as well as in designing potential therapeutic treatments.

Chapter 10

Curriculum Vitae

Muhammad Ali was born on the 16th of June, 1989 in Gujranwala, Pakistan. He grew up and went to school in his home town. After finishing his bachelor's in Bioinformatics from Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan in 2011, he joined the University of Saarland, Germany for a Masters in Bioinformatics. During his master's degree, the scientific areas which grabbed his interest were modern methods in drug discovery and gene regulatory network (GRN) analysis. For his master thesis, he worked in the lab of Prof. Volkhard Helms and characterized the biochemical and biophysical properties of protein-protein interaction interface residues. As GRN modeling and analyses were among his favorite areas of interest, after completing his master's degree, he applied for a doctoral position in the computational biology group of Prof. Antonio del Sol at the University of Luxembourg. Luckily, he got this most-awaited opportunity to join Prof. Antonio del Sol's research group and excel in this interesting field of science. Fortunately, during early months of his Ph.D., his supervisor (Prof. Antonio del Sol) got an EU Joint Programme – Neurodegenerative Disease Research (JPND) grant on Alzheimer's disease (AD) epigenetic analyses for biomarker identification, originally proposed by Dr. Daniel van den Hove from Maastricht University. Based on Muhammad's interests, his supervisor allowed him to work on this grant together with scientific personnel from Maastricht University. That was the time when the challenging era of Muhammad's doctoral degree started. He did multiple projects during the course of his Ph.D. degree together with very kind and supportive promoters from Maastricht University (Dr. van den Hove and Dr. Pishva), as well as expert advisers from the University of Luxembourg (Dr. Angarica and Dr. Jung). Overall, the aim of his doctoral degree was to develop network-

based approaches for modeling human disease. In addition to conducting his research jointly at the University of Luxembourg and Maastricht University, he presented his research at numerous national and international platforms provided by the Epi-AD consortium under the framework of JPND grant. These opportunities broadened Muhammad's exposure to the scientific world and gave him the confidence to be an independent researcher. During his Ph.D., Muhammad has also been a tutor and practical supervisor in several Bachelor courses at the University of Luxembourg. Next to teaching others, Muhammad also kept on expanding his own skills by taking courses and workshops in statistics, team and project management, and scientific writing to evolve his research and aptitude. After successfully defending his doctoral degree thesis, Muhammad has planned to join the biomedical data science group of Dr. Enrico Glaab at the University of Luxembourg, to further expand his work on human disease modeling and integrative GRN analyses through the implementation of machine learning and systems biology approaches.

Appendix A

List of Abbreviations

3D	Three-dimensional
AD	Alzheimer's disease
APOE4	apolipoprotein E
A β	Amyloid β
BACE1	β -site APP cleaving enzyme-1
BBDP	Brain and Body Donation Program
BHSRI	Banner Sun Health Research Institute
CAV1	Caveolin 1
ChIP-Seq	Chromatin Immunoprecipitation sequencing
CHRM	cholinergic receptors muscarinic
CLU	clusterin
CNS	central nervous system
CTSD	cathepsin D
DEA	differential expression analysis
DEGs	differentially expressed genes
DMPs	differentially methylated probes
DNA	deoxyribonucleic acid
DNase-Seq	deoxyribonuclease sequencing
DTMC	discrete time markov chain
ECM	extracellular matrix

APPENDIX A. LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESC	embryonic stem cells
FDR	false discovery rate
FP	false positives
FPKM	fragments per kb per million reads
GABRB3	GABA-Alpha receptor subunit beta-3
GBA	glucosylceramidase Beta gene
GEO	Gene Expression Omnibus
GO	gene ontology
GRNs	gene regulatory networks
GS	Gold-standard
GWAS	genome-wide association studies
hmC	hydroxymethylated cytosine
HSCs	hematopoietic stem cells
IFs	instructive factors
IGAP	International Genomics of Alzheimer's Project
INTREGNET	INtegrative Transcriptional REGulatory NETworks
iPSCs	induced pluripotent stem cells
ITGB2	Integrin subunit beta 2
JNCL	juvenile neuronal ceroid lipofuscinosis
JSD	Jensen-Shannon divergence
LSDs	lysosomal storage disorders
mC	methylated cytosine
MCI	mild cognitive impairment
miRNA	microRNA
MSCs	mesenchymal stem cells
MTG	middle temporal gyrus
NCLs	neuronal ceroid lipofuscinoses
NIH	National Institutes of Health
NMDA	N-methyl-d-aspartate
NSCs	neural stem cells
PKN	prior knowledge network

PPI	protein-protein interaction
PSCs	pluripotent stem cells
PTGIS	prostaglandin 2 synthase
PWM	position weight matrix
RNA	ribonucleic acid
RNA-seq	ribonucleic acid sequencing
SCMAS	subunit c of mitochondrial ATP synthase
SIs	Sphingolipids
SNP	single nucleotide polymorphisms
SSCs	strongly connected components
TCGA	The Cancer Genome Atlas
TFs	transcription factors
TP	true positives
TRNs	transcriptional regulatory networks
TSS	transcription start site
uC	unmethylated cytosine
VPA	valproic acid
WT1	Wilms tumor suppressor

Appendix B

Scientific output

Major parts of this thesis are based upon work that has either been published or is in preparation for submission with the candidate as first author. In addition, the candidate has co-authored several publications of which minor parts are incorporated in the thesis. The full list of scientific outputs is listed below:

B.1 Publications in peer-review journals

- Ali M., del Sol A. (2018) Modeling of Cellular Systems: Application in Stem Cell Research and Computational Disease Modeling. In: Alves Barbosa da Silva F., Carels N., Paes Silva Junior F. (eds) Theoretical and Applied Aspects of Systems Biology. Computational Biology, vol 27. Springer, Cham

B.2 Submissions in peer-review journals

- Lardenoije R. et al. (2019) The Alzheimer's disease DNA (hydroxy)methylome in the brain and blood. *Clinical Epigenetics*.
- Jung S., Ali M., and del Sol A. (2019) Methods in Epigenetics-based Systems Biology and their Applications. *Elsevier: Epigenetics Methods*.

B.3 Manuscripts in preparation

- Ali M., et al. (2019) INTREGNET: Integrating epigenetic and transcriptional landscapes in a network-based model for increasing cellular conversion efficiency. *In preparation.*
- Ali M., et al. (2019) Identification of causal genes for Alzheimer's disease using a network-based integrative analysis of genomic, epigenomic and transcriptomic data. *In preparation.*
- Ali M., et al. (2019) The role of altered sphingolipid function in Alzheimer's disease; a gene regulatory network-based approach. *In preparation.*
- Giro G. G., et al. (2019) Modeling Juvenile Neuronal Ceroid Lipofuscinosis by genome editing in human induced pluripotent stem cells and cerebral organoids. *In preparation.*
- Giesert F., et al. (2019) Unique gene activity changes in ventral midbrain precede dopaminergic neuron degeneration in different PD models. *In preparation.*
- ENCODE-DREAM Consortium, Ali M., et al. (2019) Systematic evaluation of multimodal approaches to predict *in vivo* DNA binding landscapes of regulatory proteins across cell types. *In preparation.*

B.4 Oral presentations in scientific conferences, symposia and workshops

- An Integrative Approach for Network inference from Epigenetics and Transcriptomics data (2017). *2nd Annual EPI-AD meeting.* London, UK.
- Reconstructing cell-type-specific networks by integrating multi-omics datasets (2018). *Dutch Neuroscience Meeting.* Lunteren, Netherlands.
- A computational approach for the identification of highly efficient instructive factors (2018). *3rd Annual EPI-AD meeting.* Barcelona, Spain.
- Neuroepigenetic: a life span perspective (2018). *EPI-AD/EURON Workshop.* Barcelona, Spain.

Appendix C

Supplementary figures and tables

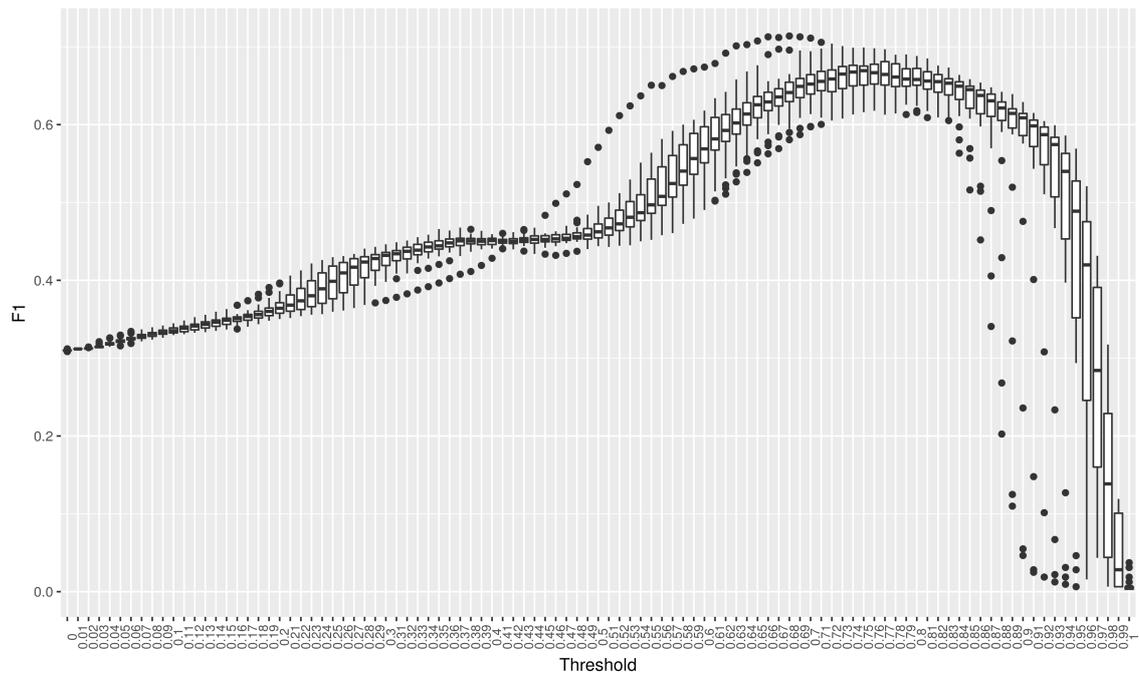


Figure 19: **Optimal correlation threshold** was considered to be 0.75. All samples having correlation higher than this were discarded from the background to compute JSD.

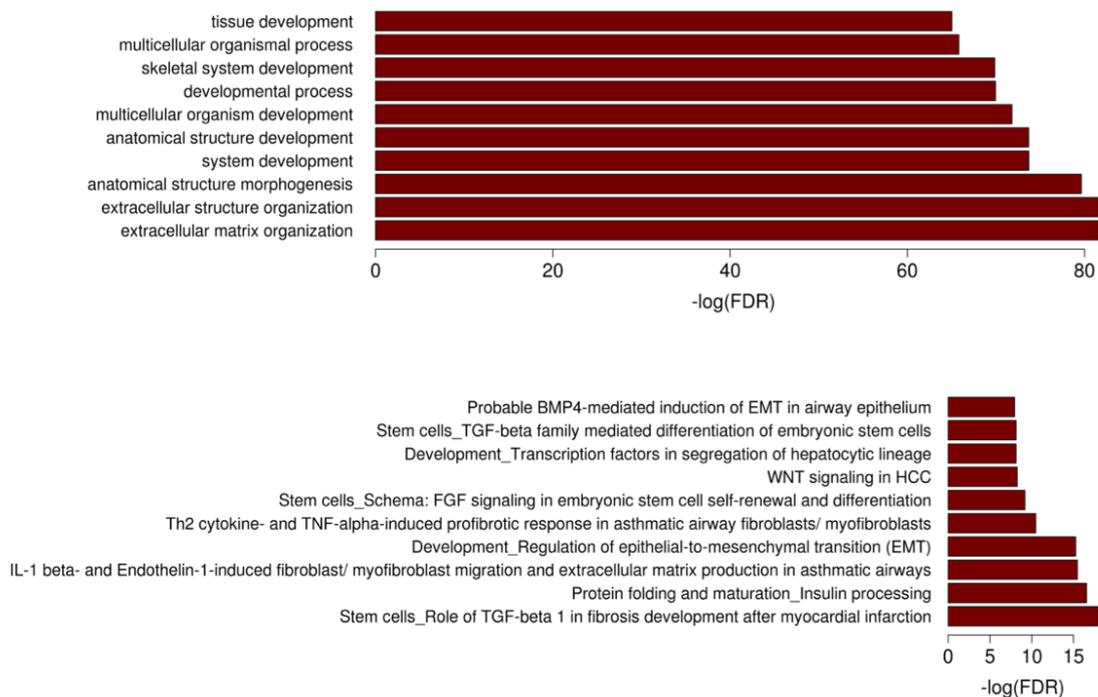


Figure 20: **Gene ontology enrichment analysis.** A) Gene enrichment analysis of disease network (top). Genes which are up-regulated in disease phenotype are significantly enriched in cellular processes associated to development. B) Pathway enrichment analysis of disease network (bottom). Genes which are up-regulated in disease phenotype are significantly enriched in developmental pathways.

Table 9: **Accession numbers of RNA-seq, DNase-Seq, H3K27ac and H3K4me3 histone marks** for all sample considered for reconstructing TRNs. The samples are taken from GEO, ENCODE and IHEC

Cell type/lines	RNA-Seq	DNase-Seq	H3K27ac	H3K4e3
A549	GSM1573117	ENCSR000ELW	ENCSR000AUI	ENCSR000DPD
Adipocytes	GSM1543671	GSM1443801	GSM1443807	ENCSR367VRA
BJ Fibroblast	GSM1510127	ENCSR000EME	GSM2401449	ENCSR000DQH
Cardiomyocytes	GSM1925978	GSE85630	GSM2280036	GSM2280016
ESCs	GSM1088317	ENCSR794OFW	ENCSR880SUY	ENCSR019SQX
Foreskin fibroblasts	GSM1588051	ENCSR251UPG	ENCSR822ZIG	ENCSR813CFB
GM12878	GSM754335	ENCSR000EJD	ENCSR000AKC	ENCSR057BWO
H9 ESCs	GSM1552696	ENCSR915BSC	ENCSR876RGF	ENCSR043VGU
HEK293	GSM1513689	GSM2392668	ENCSR000FCH	ENCSR000DTU
HeLaS3	ERR380552	ENCSR959ZXU	ENCSR000AOC	ENCSR340WQU
Hepatocytes	GSM1306654	ENCSR364MFN	ENCSR507UDH	ENCSR442ZOI
HepG2	GSM984650	ENCSR149XIL	ENCSR000AMO	ENCSR000AMP
CD34+ CMP	GSM976976	ENCSR468ZXN	ENCSR891KSP	ENCSR681HMF
HUVEC	GSM1273487	ENCSR000EOQ	ENCSR000ALB	ENCSR000AKN
iPSCs	GSM1088317	ENCSR261SMF	ENCSR875QDS	ENCSR263ELQ
K562	GSM1641262	ENCSR921NMD	ENCSR000AKP	ENCSR668LDD
Keratinocytes	GSM869035	ENCSR724CND	ENCSR666TFS	ENCSR703DFH
MCF7	GSM1817678	ENCSR000EPH	ENCSR752UOD	ENCSR985MIB
Melanocytes	GSM819489	ENCSR434OBM	ENCSR693VHX	ENCSR350JZR
Myoblasts	GSM1412725	ENCSR000EOO	ENCSR000ANF	ENCSR000ANK
Neuron	GSM1422448	ENCSR626RVD	ENCSR905TYC	ENCSR849YFO
NHDF	GSM1194807	ENCSR000EPO	ENCSR000APN	ENCSR000APR
NSCs	GSM1057334	ENCSR278FVO	ENCSR799SRL	ENCSR956CTX
Osteoblasts	GSM1333383	ENCSR000ELJ	ENCSR000APH	ENCSR000ATH
B cell	GSM1576394	ENCSR381PXW	ENCSR191ZQT	ENCSR939UQD
T cell	GSM1447398	ENCSR414IHC	ENCSR222QLW	ENCSR395YXN
Astrocyte	GSM1521786	ENCSR000EPM	ENCSR000AOQ	ENCSR000AOU
Lung Fibroblasts	GSM759890	ENCSR000EPR	ENCSR000AMR	ENCSR000AMW
HMECs	GSM721141	ENCSR000ENV	ENCSR000ALW	ENCSR000AML
Myotubes	GSM1412733	ENCSR000EOP	ENCSR000ANV	ENCSR000ANZ
SMCs	GSM1528677	GSM1024769	ENCSR210ZPC	ENCSR515PKY
Myotube	ENCFF320IDT	ENCFF026BDV	ENCFF345MCA	ENCFF044SEF
HMECs	ENCFF380GBC	ENCFF710XFX	ENCFF292XKK	ENCFF113WKS
Cardiac muscle cells	ENCFF888LPS	ENCFF054OJL	ENCFF214RHU	ENCFF190ZIS
Trophoblast	ENCFF342LYI	ENCFF334BDK	ENCFF698NII	ENCFF449TRE
Endodermal cells	ENCFF237ZQX	ENCFF168NOO	ENCFF587KQG	ENCFF385NQA
Mesendoderm (hESC)	ENCFF466QUZ	ENCFF993ETK	ENCFF318GQT	ENCFF293JHB
MSCs	ENCFF290OQE	ENCFF911JWG	ENCFF196AMI	ENCFF289UTW
NPCs	ENCFF789VZB	ENCFF315NGA	ENCFF874YBQ	ENCFF907ZOS
NPC (from H9)	ENCFF672VVX	ENCFF699MIZ	ENCFF779WYN	ENCFF076HNX
Astrocyte	ENCFF256APB	ENCFF558EUY	ENCFF040LCK	ENCFF254FYG
Monocyte CD14+	ENCFF299BIL	ENCFF581KXE	ENCFF039XWV	ENCFF640ZHV
Natural killer cell	ENCFF036GDL	ENCFF628EFJ	ENCFF240LSH	ENCFF505EGX
Megakaryocyte	S004BT	S004BT	S004BT	S004BT
Erythroblast	S002S3	S002S3	S002S3	S002S3
Monocyte CD16-	C005PS	C005PS	C005PS	C005PS
CD34+ CMPs	ENCFF690QPA	ENCFF846OZD	ENCFF660GJX	ENCFF020JLV
OCI-LY7	ENCFF773MOU	ENCFF190VGB	ENCFF929NXZ	ENCFF111JSX

Table 10: **Cellular conversion examples** with reported efficiency.

Initial cell type	Instructive factors (IFs)	Final cell type	Efficiency
HSC	SOX2	NSC	Low
Adult Foreskin	HNF1A,HNF4A,ONECUT1,CEBPA,ATF5,PROX1,TP53-siRNA,MYC	Hepatocytes	High
Fetal Limb Fibro	HNF1A,HNF4A,FOXA3	Hepatocytes	Low
Forehead Fibro	FOXA2,HNF4A,CEBPB,MYC	Hepatocytes	High
Forehead Fibro	FOXA2,HNF4A,CEBPB	Hepatocytes	Low
HSC (CD33+ cord blood cells)	POU5F1,SOX2,KLF4	H1ESC	High
HSC (CD33+ cord blood cells)	POU5F1,SOX2	H1ESC	Low
NHDF (Also in BJ)	POU5F1,SOX2,KLF4	H1ESC	High
NHDF (Also in BJ)	POU5F1,SOX2	H1ESC	Low
ForeskinFibro	KLF4,SOX2,POU5F1,MYC	ESC	High
ForeskinFibro	KLF4,SOX2,POU5F1	ESC	Low
ForeskinFibro (Also IMR90)	LIN28A,SOX2,POU5F1,NANOG	ESC	Low
Keratino	POU5F1,SOX2,KLF4	H1ESC	High
Keratino	POU5F1,SOX2,KLF4,MYC	H1ESC	Low
Keratino	POU5F1,SOX2	H1ESC	Low
NSC	POU5F1,KLF4	H9ESC	High
NSC	POU5F1	H9ESC	Low
Keratino	POU5F1,SOX2,KLF4,MYC	H1ESC	High
Keratino	POU5F1,SOX2,KLF4	H1ESC	Low
ForeskinFibro	CBX2,HES1,ID1,TFAP2A,ZFP42,ZNF423	NSC	Low
Fetal Fibro	ZNF521	NSC	High
NHDF	SOX2,PAX6	NSC	Low
H1 ESC (or iPSC)	NEUROG2/NEUROD1	Excitatory Neuron	High
H9ESC	POU3F2,ASCL1,MYT1L	Neuronal Cells	Low
ForeskinFibro & Fetal Fibro	POU3F2,ASCL1,NEUROD1	Neuronal Cells	High
ForeskinFibro & Fetal Fibro	POU3F2,ASCL1	Neuronal Cells	Low
ForeskinFibro & Fetal Fibro	POU3F2,ASCL1,MYT1L	Neuronal Cells	Low
Adult Lung Fibro	ASCL1, POU3F2, MYT1L	Neuron	NA
NHDF	MYOD1	Myoblasts	Low
Fetal Dermal Fibro	MITF,PAX3,SOX10	Melanocytes	NA
Keratino (HaCaT & MET-4)	MITF,LEF1,SOX10,SOX9	Melanocytes	NA
Keratino (HaCaT & MET-4)	MITF,PAX3,LEF1,SOX10,SOX9,SOX2	Melanocytes	NA
Neonatal ForeskinFibro	TP63,KLF4	Keratino	NA
HUVEC	GFI1,RUNX1,SPI1,FOSB	HSC	NA
MSCs (derived from iPSC)	CEBPB	Adipocytes	NA
MSCs (derived from iPSC)	PPARG	Adipocytes	NA
MSCs (derived from iPSC)	PPARG, CEBPB	Adipocytes	NA

Table 11: **Differential expression analysis results for SL genes.**

GeneName	logFC	Pval	GeneName	logFC	FDR_adj_Pval
STS	-0.221	0.000001	DAG1	0.12	0.149213
ARSG	-0.148	0.000011	SGPL1	0.09	0.15077
EZR	0.631	0.000017	GM2A	0.08	0.163169
ALOX12B	-0.195	0.000033	SGPP1	-0.057	0.174859
SIAT7E	-0.921	0.000033	CD177	0.02	0.177314
B3GALNT1	-0.387	0.000033	SPNS3	0.026	0.177586
GLTP	0.484	0.000111	FUT3	-0.019	0.183127
CLN8	0.269	0.000163	NEU3	0.022	0.197916
CD8A	-0.122	0.000179	LRP8	0.089	0.197916
MAL2	-0.994	0.000196	S1PR5	0.198	0.222959
TFPI	0.241	0.000226	ALDH3B1	0.026	0.226414
CSNK1G2	0.347	0.000272	ARSI	-0.015	0.253376
RFTN2	0.529	0.000333	NOS1AP	0.157	0.253376
KDSR	0.372	0.000388	SELP	0.031	0.253376
P2RX7	0.466	0.000528	FLOT1	-0.166	0.253376
PPM1L	-0.139	0.000538	ITGAM	0.121	0.253376
SMO	0.331	0.000538	SAMD8	-0.043	0.261887
VAPA	-0.279	0.000538	DEGS2	-0.02	0.262364
ST8SIA2	-0.11	0.000538	MYO1A	0.017	0.262364
ELOVL4	-0.633	0.000538	NEU4	0.201	0.262364
CDH13	-0.654	0.000571	ADD2	-0.018	0.262777
RFTN1	-0.382	0.000624	SCN5A	0.01	0.262777
EHD2	0.327	0.00075	NSMAF	0.054	0.262777
ST8SIA5	-0.319	0.000784	ARSF	-0.071	0.262777
PRKD1	0.301	0.000784	IL2	0.016	0.262777
AGK	-0.43	0.000784	KCNA5	-0.15	0.262777
ATP1A1	-0.553	0.000932	CAV3	0.021	0.262777
ANXA2	0.369	0.000932	IRS1	-0.073	0.262777

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GBA	-0.206	0.001177	SPTLC1	-0.107	0.290484
CLIP3	-0.256	0.001177	FXVD1	-0.094	0.305446
PPT1	-0.303	0.001177	BAX	0.041	0.305446
NEU1	-0.237	0.001252	P2RX1	-0.024	0.306597
PPP2R1A	-0.416	0.001258	B3GALT2	-0.142	0.306816
BVES	0.127	0.001258	SIAT7A	0.121	0.307224
S1PR3	0.426	0.001297	KIF18A	0.017	0.310944
NOS3	0.428	0.001391	ST8SIA4	-0.037	0.324424
B4GALT6	-0.462	0.001518	GALC	-0.041	0.324424
ITGB8	0.196	0.001653	LIPE	0.071	0.324424
AKAP6	-0.322	0.002434	MAG	-0.215	0.33563
SRC	-0.132	0.002434	CD300LF	0.026	0.33563
TNFRSF1A	0.402	0.002806	RANGRF	0.084	0.340824
DLC1	0.604	0.002806	DEGS1	-0.071	0.357318
KCND2	-0.367	0.002806	FASLG	0.014	0.364778
ATP1B1	-0.768	0.002806	A3GALT2	0.011	0.383884
PPP2CA	-0.326	0.002806	PLA2G15	-0.048	0.383884
SERINC3	-0.233	0.002806	PEMT	-0.052	0.383884
CLN6	-0.169	0.002806	SGPP2	-0.079	0.383884
FUT7	0.076	0.002839	CHRNA3	0.014	0.383884
ITGB2	0.595	0.003333	ACER3	0.076	0.383884
ARV1	-0.297	0.003869	ALOXE3	-0.021	0.383884
SLC2A1	0.339	0.003895	LCP2	-0.017	0.384951
PRKD2	0.126	0.003925	TH	-0.021	0.384951
LRP6	0.108	0.003933	SLC22A6	-0.013	0.387013
LAPTM4B	-0.344	0.003933	ALDH3B2	0.01	0.387741
PLA2G6	-0.103	0.004259	CEL	0.099	0.409211
NOS1	-0.114	0.004742	CLIP1	-0.067	0.413476
ATP1B3	0.236	0.00488	KCNMA1	0.063	0.414249
KIT	-0.397	0.004889	S1PR1	0.131	0.418623

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PSAPL1	0.054	0.004889	ALDH3A2	0.051	0.428702
ATP2B4	-0.242	0.00542	EFNA5	0.016	0.46573
PRKD3	0.11	0.005787	COL4A3BP	-0.055	0.473057
PLEKHA8	0.063	0.007247	FUT5	0.009	0.489551
ST3GAL5	-0.222	0.007779	CERKL	-0.01	0.489551
DOCK2	0.307	0.00832	UGT8	0.104	0.490274
MAPK1	-0.185	0.008686	SIAT7A	-0.019	0.495334
MYADM	-0.22	0.010966	REEP2	0.078	0.495334
ENPP7	0.06	0.011654	TRAF2	0.023	0.507386
SPHK2	0.189	0.012052	SMPD2	0.012	0.524609
TGFBR2	0.408	0.012325	ELOVL2	-0.058	0.536481
ASAH1	-0.049	0.012325	ARSJ	0.015	0.548505
ST8SIA3	-0.427	0.012482	NAGA	-0.019	0.549817
HMOX1	0.229	0.012492	P2RY12	-0.108	0.554417
CLN3	0.08	0.013016	SUMF1	0.035	0.560218
TRPC4	0.054	0.013176	JAK2	-0.044	0.577173
DLG1	0.102	0.013176	CYR61	0.107	0.577173
ELOVL6	-0.154	0.0139	PLLP	-0.099	0.577173
MYOF	0.301	0.015835	FA2H	-0.081	0.595061
CD2	0.052	0.016233	SERINC2	0.011	0.598642
RTN4R	-0.19	0.016656	FAM57B	0.016	0.600442
ORMDL2	0.078	0.018476	SERINC5	-0.01	0.61055
ARSA	0.097	0.020241	TEX2	-0.03	0.615876
SIAT7C	0.158	0.020241	ABCB1	0.083	0.619912
ADRA1A	0.022	0.020241	ARSE	0.01	0.626264
S100A10	0.354	0.021262	TNF	0.011	0.626264
SPHK1	0.038	0.021262	CAV2	0.035	0.628475
SMPD1	-0.096	0.022814	ATP1A2	0.069	0.628475
SERINC1	-0.414	0.023649	ABCA12	0.005	0.664369
BMPR2	-0.253	0.023649	HDAC6	-0.042	0.673743

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PACSIN2	0.211	0.026042	S1PR4	0.015	0.673743
PRKACA	-0.039	0.026238	SELL	0.018	0.701221
PSAP	-0.113	0.026651	PRKCD	-0.034	0.708357
RALA	0.125	0.026726	MALL	0.032	0.710837
PRKAR1A	-0.353	0.029255	ST8SIA1	0.027	0.710837
ELOVL3	-0.036	0.030793	GBA2	0.017	0.715851
ADRA1B	-0.291	0.030962	CDH2	-0.027	0.722193
ARSK	-0.134	0.033417	SPTLC3	-0.008	0.765263
SGMS2	0.036	0.035346	PLVAP	-0.009	0.775108
CAV1	0.29	0.035346	MLC1	0.018	0.798132
FUT6	0.15	0.036918	HCK	0.025	0.799639
S1PR2	-0.044	0.038326	GAL3ST1	-0.018	0.801166
ORMDL3	0.167	0.046252	ARSB	0.008	0.805402
SELPLG	0.077	0.046424	MAL	0.042	0.805402
NPC1	0.211	0.047133	UGCG	-0.027	0.805976
GLA	0.081	0.051585	EMP2	0.005	0.805976
BMPR1A	0.127	0.055808	ACER1	0.003	0.805976
SMPD4	0.091	0.055808	SPRED1	0.027	0.813718
B4GALT3	0.119	0.055808	PTGS2	0.034	0.830598
ASAH2	-0.016	0.064646	HTRA2	0.008	0.865576
SPNS1	0.211	0.064735	F2R	0.013	0.865576
PTGIS	-0.043	0.065345	ACER2	0.003	0.878838
ADCYAP1R1	-0.028	0.065596	HEXA	-0.003	0.896144
ALDH5A1	-0.173	0.071878	CMTM8	-0.017	0.896144
PRTN3	-0.197	0.071878	FLOT2	0.01	0.896144
B3GALT4	0.079	0.073885	B3GALT1	0.002	0.932972
ELOVL7	0.172	0.087444	ESYT1	-0.005	0.945216
CERK	0.092	0.100127	ARSD	-0.005	0.954864
ABCC1	-0.02	0.100127	ARSH	-0.001	0.975073
ORMDL1	-0.084	0.100127	B4GALNT1	0.006	0.975637

APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

GPR6	-0.125	0.106324	ST8SIA6	0.001	0.97661
MAPK3	0.117	0.10701	PLTP	-0.009	0.979097
SPTLC2	0.072	0.10886	SGMS1	-0.001	0.990524
SPNS2	0.108	0.122663	SMPDL3B	0	0.992681
MARVELD1	0.044	0.122663	SFTPB	0	0.992681
ELOVL1	0.115	0.122663	NEU2	0	0.996678
GLB1	0.087	0.138449	PRKAA1	0	0.996678
HEXB	-0.146	0.140718	PRKAR2A	0	0.996678

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Table 12: **List of included manually selected GO terms**, ordered by each subtree of the GO (Biological Process, Cellular Component, and Molecular Function). Two terms were excluded before proceeding, as they are too generic (Lipid metabolic process, and Membrane raft).

BP (Biological Process)	MF (Molecular Function)	CC (Cellular Component)
caveola_assembly.gpml	ceramide_binding.gpml	caveola.gpml
ceramide_biosynthetic_process.gpml	glycosphingolipid_binding.gpml	plasma_membrane_raft.gpml
ceramide_catabolic_process.gpml	sphingolipid_binding.gpml	SPOTS_complex.gpml
ceramide_metabolic_process.gpml	sphingolipid_transporter_activity.gpml	
ceramide_transport.gpml	sphingosine-1-phosphate_receptor_activity.gpml	
galactosylceramide_metabolic_process.gpml		
ganglioside_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
ganglioside_catabolic_process.gpml		
ganglioside_metabolic_process.gpml		
glucosylceramide_metabolic_process.gpml		
glycosphingolipid_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
glycosphingolipid_catabolic_process.gpml		
glycosphingolipid_metabolic_process.gpml		
glycosylceramide_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
glycosylceramide_catabolic_process.gpml		
glycosylceramide_metabolic_process.gpml		
membrane_raft_assembly.gpml		
membrane_raft_distribution.gpml		
membrane_raft_localization.gpml		
membrane_raft_organization.gpml		
membrane_raft_polarization.gpml		
negative_regulation_of_sphingolipid_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
phytosphingosine_metabolic_process.gpml		
plasma_membrane_raft_assembly.gpml		
plasma_membrane_raft_organization.gpml		
positive_regulation_of_ceramide_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
positive_regulation_of_sphingolipid_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
protein_transport_into_membrane_raft.gpml		
protein_transport_into_plasma_membrane_raft.gpml		
regulation_of_ceramide_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
regulation_of_sphingolipid_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
sphinganine_metabolic_process.gpml		
sphingoid_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
sphingoid_metabolic_process.gpml		
sphingolipid_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
sphingolipid_catabolic_process.gpml		
sphingolipid_mediated_signaling_pathway.gpml		
sphingolipid_metabolic_process.gpml		
sphingomyelin_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
sphingomyelin_catabolic_process.gpml		
sphingomyelin_metabolic_process.gpml		
sphingosine-1-phosphate_receptor_signaling_pathway.gpml		
sphingosine_biosynthetic_process.gpml		
sphingosine_metabolic_process.gpml		

Table 13: **Textual representations of the subtree of the Biological Process; GO tree** containing the selected sphingolipid related terms. Parent-child dependency between terms is indicated by indentation. An asterisk ‘*’ marks each but the first occurrence of a term that is present multiple times in the subtree.

GO:0006665 sphingolipid metabolic process		
GO:0006665 sphingolipid metabolic process		
GO:0006672 ceramide metabolic process		
	GO:0006677 glycosylceramide metabolic process	
		GO:0006681 galactosylceramide metabolic process
		GO:0006678 glucosylceramide metabolic process
		GO:0046477 glycosylceramide catabolic process
		GO:0046476 glycosylceramide biosynthetic process
	GO:0046514 ceramide catabolic process	
		GO:0006689 ganglioside catabolic process
		GO:0046477 glycosylceramide catabolic process *
	GO:0046513 ceramide biosynthetic process	
		GO:0001574 ganglioside biosynthetic process
		GO:0046476 glycosylceramide biosynthetic process *
	GO:0001573 ganglioside metabolic process	
		GO:0001574 ganglioside biosynthetic process *
		GO:0006689 ganglioside catabolic process *
GO:0006684 sphingomyelin metabolic process		
	GO:0006685 sphingomyelin catabolic process	
	GO:0006686 sphingomyelin biosynthetic process	
GO:0006687 glycosphingolipid metabolic process		
	GO:0006677 glycosylceramide metabolic process *	
		GO:0006681 galactosylceramide metabolic process *
		GO:0006678 glucosylceramide metabolic process *
		GO:0046477 glycosylceramide catabolic process *
		GO:0046476 glycosylceramide biosynthetic process *
	GO:0001573 ganglioside metabolic process *	
		GO:0001574 ganglioside biosynthetic process *
		GO:0006689 ganglioside catabolic process *
	GO:0046479 glycosphingolipid catabolic process	
		GO:0006689 ganglioside catabolic process *
		GO:0046477 glycosylceramide catabolic process *
	GO:0006688 glycosphingolipid biosynthetic process	
		GO:0001574 ganglioside biosynthetic process *
		GO:0046476 glycosylceramide biosynthetic process *
GO:0046519 sphingoid metabolic process		
	GO:0006667 sphinganine metabolic process	
	GO:0046520 sphingoid biosynthetic process	
		GO:0046512 sphingosine biosynthetic process
	GO:0006670 sphingosine metabolic process	
		GO:0046512 sphingosine biosynthetic process *
GO:0030149 sphingolipid catabolic process		
	GO:0006685 sphingomyelin catabolic process *	
	GO:0046514 ceramide catabolic process *	
		GO:0006689 ganglioside catabolic process *
		GO:0046477 glycosylceramide catabolic process *
	GO:0046479 glycosphingolipid catabolic process *	
		GO:0006689 ganglioside catabolic process *
		GO:0046477 glycosylceramide catabolic process *
GO:0030148 sphingolipid biosynthetic process		
	GO:0046520 sphingoid biosynthetic process *	
		GO:0046512 sphingosine biosynthetic process *
	GO:0046513 ceramide biosynthetic process *	
		GO:0001574 ganglioside biosynthetic process *
		GO:0046476 glycosylceramide biosynthetic process *
	GO:0006686 sphingomyelin biosynthetic process *	
	GO:0006688 glycosphingolipid biosynthetic process *	
		GO:0001574 ganglioside biosynthetic process *
		GO:0046476 glycosylceramide biosynthetic process *
GO:0090153 regulation of sphingolipid biosynthetic process		
GO:2000303 regulation of ceramide biosynthetic process		
	GO:2000304 positive regulation of ceramide biosynthetic process	
GO:0090154 positive regulation of sphingolipid biosynthetic process		
	GO:2000304 positive regulation of ceramide biosynthetic process *	
GO:0090155 negative regulation of sphingolipid biosynthetic process		
GO:0090520 sphingolipid mediated signaling pathway		
GO:0003376 sphingosine-1-phosphate signaling pathway		
GO:0031579 membrane raft organization		
GO:0044857 plasma membrane raft organization		
	GO:0044854 plasma membrane raft assembly	
		GO:0070836 caveola assembly
GO:0031580 membrane raft distribution		
	GO:0001766 membrane raft polarization	
GO:0001765 membrane raft assembly		
	GO:0044854 plasma membrane raft assembly	
		GO:0070836 caveola assembly
GO:0006629 lipid metabolic process		
GO:0051665 membrane raft localization		
GO:0031580 membrane raft distribution *		
	GO:0001766 membrane raft polarization *	
GO:0032596 protein transport into membrane raft		
GO:0044861 protein transport into plasma membrane raft		

Table 14: **Textual representations of the subtree of the Cellular Component;** GO tree containing the selected sphingolipid related terms. Parent-child dependency between terms is indicated by indentation. An asterisk ‘*’ marks each but the first occurrence of a term that is present multiple times in the subtree.

GO:0035339 SPOTS complex
GO:0045121 membrane raft
GO:0044853 plasma membrane raft
GO:0005901 caveola

Table 15: **Textual representations of the subtree of the Molecular Function;** GO tree containing the selected sphingolipid related terms. Parent-child dependency between terms is indicated by indentation. An asterisk ‘*’ marks each but the first occurrence of a term that is present multiple times in the subtree.

GO:0046625 sphingolipid binding	GO:0043208 glycosphingolipid binding
	GO:0097001 ceramide binding
GO:0046624 sphingolipid transporter activity	
GO:0038036 sphingosine-1-phosphate receptor activity	

Table 16: **Benchmarking of inferred networks against gold-standard core networks.**

Cell type	Gold-Standard Network		Inferred Network		Match
	Source	Target	Source	Target	
ESC	NANOG	NANOG	NANOG	NANOG	Yes
ESC	NANOG	POU5F1	NANOG	POU5F1	Yes
ESC	NANOG	SOX2	NANOG	SOX2	Yes
ESC	POU5F1	NANOG	POU5F1	NANOG	Yes
ESC	POU5F1	POU5F1	POU5F1	POU5F1	Yes
ESC	POU5F1	SOX2	POU5F1	SOX2	Yes
ESC	SOX2	NANOG	SOX2	NANOG	Yes
ESC	SOX2	POU5F1	SOX2	POU5F1	Yes
ESC	SOX2	SOX2	SOX2	SOX2	Yes
Hepatocyte	ONECUT1	HNF4A	ONECUT1	HNF4A	Yes
Hepatocyte	ONECUT1	ONECUT1	ONECUT1	ONECUT1	Yes
Hepatocyte	FOXA2	FOXA2	FOXA2	FOXA2	Yes
Hepatocyte	HNF4A	FOXA2	HNF4A	FOXA2	Yes
Hepatocyte	HNF4A	HNF1A	HNF4A	HNF1A	Yes
Hepatocyte	HNF4A	HNF4A	HNF4A	HNF4A	Yes
Hepatocyte	HNF1A	HNF1A	HNF1A	HNF1A	Yes
Hepatocyte	HNF1A	HNF4A	HNF1A	HNF4A	Yes
Hepatocyte	CREB1	CREB1	HNF1A	ONECUT1	No
Hepatocyte	CREB1	FOXA2	HNF1A	FOXA2	No
Hepatocyte	USF1	ONECUT1	FOXA2	HNF1A	No
Hepatocyte	HNF4A	USF1	FOXA2	HNF4A	No
Hepatocyte	ONECUT1	FOXA2			No
HepG2	HNF4A	CEBPB	HNF4A	CEBPB	Yes
HepG3	HNF4A	FOXA1	HNF4A	FOXA1	Yes
HepG4	HNF4A	FOXA2	HNF4A	FOXA2	Yes
HepG5	HNF4A	HNF4A	HNF4A	HNF4A	Yes
HepG6	FOXA2	CEBPB	FOXA2	CEBPB	Yes

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HepG7	FOXA2	FOXA1	FOXA2	FOXA1	Yes
HepG8	FOXA2	FOXA2	FOXA2	FOXA2	Yes
HepG9	FOXA2	HNF4A	FOXA2	HNF4A	Yes
HepG10	FOXA1	CEBPB	FOXA1	CEBPB	Yes
HepG11	FOXA1	FOXA1	FOXA1	FOXA1	Yes
HepG12	FOXA1	FOXA2	FOXA1	FOXA2	Yes
HepG13	FOXA1	HNF4A	FOXA1	HNF4A	Yes
HepG14	CEBPB	CEBPB	CEBPB	CEBPB	Yes
HepG15	CEBPB	FOXA1	CEBPB	FOXA1	Yes
HepG16	CEBPB	FOXA2	CEBPB	FOXA2	Yes
HepG17	CEBPB	HNF4A	CEBPB	HNF4A	Yes
MCF7	ESR1	ESR1	ESR1	ESR1	Yes
MCF8	ESR1	FOXA1	ESR1	FOXA1	Yes
MCF9	FOXA1	ESR1	FOXA1	ESR1	Yes
MCF10	FOXA1	FOXA1	FOXA1	FOXA1	Yes
MCF11	ESR1	FOSL2			No
MCF12	ESR1	JUND			No
MCF13	FOSL2	ESR1			No
MCF14	FOSL2	FOSL2			No
MCF15	FOSL2	FOXA1			No
MCF16	FOSL2	JUND			No
MCF17	JUND	ESR1			No
MCF18	JUND	FOSL2			No
MCF19	JUND	FOXA1			No

Table 17: **Accession numbers of RNA-seq sample considered as the background for JSD computation.** The samples are taken from GEO [50], ENCODE [54] and IHEC consortiums.

| Accession ID |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| GSM417715 | GSM1156942 | GSM1158474 | GSM1519568 | GSM1695867 | GSM1023079 |
| GSM417716 | GSM1156943 | GSM1158475 | GSM1519569 | GSM1695868 | GSM1023080 |
| GSM453868 | GSM1156944 | GSM1158476 | GSM1519570 | GSM1695869 | GSM1023081 |
| GSM453869 | GSM1156945 | GSM1158477 | GSM1519571 | GSM1695905 | GSM1023082 |
| GSM485364 | GSM1156946 | GSM1158478 | GSM1521768 | GSM1695906 | GSM1023083 |
| GSM485365 | GSM1156947 | GSM1158479 | GSM1521769 | GSM1695907 | GSM1023084 |
| GSM485366 | GSM1156948 | GSM1158480 | GSM1521770 | GSM1695908 | GSM1023085 |
| GSM485367 | GSM1156949 | GSM1158481 | GSM1521771 | GSM1695909 | GSM1023086 |
| GSM485368 | GSM1156950 | GSM1158482 | GSM1521772 | GSM1695910 | GSM1023087 |
| GSM485369 | GSM1156951 | GSM1158483 | GSM1521773 | GSM1695911 | GSM1030556 |
| GSM485370 | GSM1156952 | GSM1158484 | GSM1521774 | GSM1695912 | GSM1030557 |
| GSM485371 | GSM1156953 | GSM1158485 | GSM1521775 | GSM1695913 | GSM1033470 |
| GSM485372 | GSM1156954 | GSM1158486 | GSM1521776 | GSM1697912 | GSM1033471 |
| GSM485373 | GSM1156955 | GSM1158487 | GSM1521777 | GSM1697913 | GSM1033472 |
| GSM485374 | GSM1156956 | GSM1158488 | GSM1521778 | GSM1701465 | GSM1033473 |
| GSM485375 | GSM1156957 | GSM1158489 | GSM1521779 | GSM1701466 | GSM1033474 |
| GSM485376 | GSM1156958 | GSM1158490 | GSM1521780 | GSM1701467 | GSM1037852 |
| GSM485377 | GSM1156959 | GSM1158491 | GSM1521781 | GSM1701468 | GSM1037853 |
| GSM485378 | GSM1156960 | GSM1158492 | GSM1521782 | GSM1701469 | GSM1037854 |
| GSM485379 | GSM1156961 | GSM1158493 | GSM1521783 | GSM1701470 | GSM1037855 |
| GSM485380 | GSM1156962 | GSM1158494 | GSM1521784 | GSM1701471 | GSM1037856 |
| GSM485381 | GSM1156963 | GSM1158495 | GSM1521785 | GSM1701472 | GSM1053748 |
| GSM485382 | GSM1156964 | GSM1158496 | GSM1521786 | GSM1701473 | GSM1053749 |
| GSM485383 | GSM1156965 | GSM1158497 | GSM1524370 | GSM1701474 | GSM1053750 |
| GSM485384 | GSM1156966 | GSM1158498 | GSM1524371 | GSM1701475 | GSM1053751 |
| GSM485385 | GSM1156967 | GSM1158499 | GSM1524869 | GSM1701476 | GSM1053752 |
| GSM485386 | GSM1156968 | GSM1158500 | GSM1524870 | GSM1701478 | GSM1053753 |

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GSM485387	GSM1156969	GSM1158501	GSM1524871	GSM1701479	GSM1053764
GSM485388	GSM1156970	GSM1158502	GSM1524872	GSM1704298	GSM1053765
GSM485389	GSM1156971	GSM1158503	GSM1524873	GSM1704299	GSM1053766
GSM485390	GSM1156972	GSM1158504	GSM1524874	GSM1704300	GSM1053767
GSM485391	GSM1156973	GSM1158505	GSM1524875	GSM1704301	GSM1053768
GSM485392	GSM1156974	GSM1158506	GSM1524876	GSM1704302	GSM1053769
GSM485393	GSM1156975	GSM1158507	GSM1527072	GSM1704303	GSM1053770
GSM485394	GSM1156976	GSM1158508	GSM1527073	GSM1704304	GSM1053771
GSM485395	GSM1156977	GSM1158509	GSM1527074	GSM1704305	GSM1053772
GSM485396	GSM1156978	GSM1158510	GSM1527075	GSM1704839	GSM1053773
GSM485397	GSM1156979	GSM1158511	GSM1527076	GSM1704840	GSM1053774
GSM485398	GSM1156980	GSM1158512	GSM1527077	GSM1704841	GSM1053775
GSM485399	GSM1156981	GSM1158513	GSM1528672	GSM1704842	GSM1053776
GSM485400	GSM1156982	GSM1158514	GSM1528673	GSM1704843	GSM1053777
GSM485401	GSM1156983	GSM1158515	GSM1528674	GSM1704844	GSM1053778
GSM485402	GSM1156984	GSM1158516	GSM1528675	GSM1704845	GSM1053779
GSM485403	GSM1156985	GSM1158517	GSM1528676	GSM1704846	GSM1053780
GSM485404	GSM1156986	GSM1158518	GSM1528677	GSM1704847	GSM1053781
GSM485405	GSM1156987	GSM1158519	GSM1528678	GSM1704848	GSM1053782
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GSM485408	GSM1156990	GSM1158522	GSM1528681	GSM1704851	GSM1053785
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GSM485411	GSM1156992	GSM1158524	GSM1528683	GSM1704853	GSM1053787
GSM485412	GSM1156993	GSM1158525	GSM1528684	GSM1704854	GSM1053788
GSM485413	GSM1156994	GSM1158526	GSM1528685	GSM1704855	GSM1053789
GSM485414	GSM1156995	GSM1158527	GSM1529688	GSM1704856	GSM1053790
GSM485415	GSM1156996	GSM1158528	GSM1529689	GSM1704857	GSM1053791
GSM485416	GSM1156997	GSM1158529	GSM1529690	GSM1704858	GSM1053792
GSM485417	GSM1156998	GSM1158530	GSM1529691	GSM1707595	GSM1053793

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GSM485420	GSM1157001	GSM1158533	GSM1532280	GSM1707598	GSM1053796
GSM485421	GSM1157002	GSM1158534	GSM1532281	GSM1712007	GSM1053797
GSM485422	GSM1157003	GSM1158535	GSM1532282	GSM1712008	GSM1053798
GSM485423	GSM1157004	GSM1158536	GSM1532283	GSM1712009	GSM1053799
GSM485424	GSM1157005	GSM1158537	GSM1532284	GSM1712010	GSM1053800
GSM485425	GSM1157006	GSM1158538	GSM1532285	GSM1712011	GSM1057332
GSM485426	GSM1157007	GSM1158539	GSM1532286	GSM1712012	GSM1057333
GSM485427	GSM1157008	GSM1158540	GSM1533239	GSM1712013	GSM1057334
GSM485428	GSM1157009	GSM1158541	GSM1533240	GSM1712014	GSM1207205
GSM485429	GSM1157010	GSM1158542	GSM1533241	GSM1712015	GSM1207206
GSM485430	GSM1157011	GSM1158543	GSM1533242	GSM1712016	GSM1207207
GSM485431	GSM1157012	GSM1158544	GSM1533243	GSM1712017	GSM1060352
GSM485432	GSM1157013	GSM1158545	GSM1533244	GSM1712018	GSM1060353
GSM485433	GSM1157014	GSM1158546	GSM1533245	GSM1712019	GSM1060354
GSM485434	GSM1157015	GSM1158547	GSM1533246	GSM1712020	GSM1060355
GSM485435	GSM1157016	GSM1158548	GSM1533247	GSM1712021	GSM1060356
GSM485436	GSM1157017	GSM1158549	GSM1533248	GSM1712022	GSM1060357
GSM485437	GSM1157018	GSM1158550	GSM1533249	GSM1712023	GSM1060358
GSM485438	GSM1157019	GSM1158551	GSM1533250	GSM1712024	GSM1060359
GSM485439	GSM1157020	GSM1158552	GSM1533257	GSM1714397	GSM1060360
GSM485440	GSM1157021	GSM1158553	GSM1533258	GSM721696	GSM1062234
GSM485441	GSM1157022	GSM1158554	GSM1533259	GSM721697	GSM1062235
GSM485442	GSM1157023	GSM1158555	GSM1533260	GSM721698	GSM1062236
GSM485443	GSM1157024	GSM1158556	GSM1533261	GSM721699	GSM1062237
GSM485444	GSM1157025	GSM1158557	GSM1694954	GSM721700	GSM1062238
GSM485445	GSM1157026	GSM1158558	GSM1694956	GSM721701	GSM1062239
GSM485446	GSM1157027	GSM1158559	GSM1694957	GSM1717523	GSM1062240
GSM485447	GSM1157028	GSM1158560	GSM1694958	GSM1717524	GSM1062241

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GSM485449	GSM1157030	GSM1158562	GSM1694960	GSM1717526	GSM1062243
GSM485450	GSM1157031	GSM1158563	GSM1694961	GSM1717527	GSM1062244
GSM485451	GSM1157032	GSM1158564	GSM1694962	GSM1717528	GSM1062245
GSM485452	GSM1157033	GSM1158565	GSM1694963	GSM1717529	GSM1062246
GSM485453	GSM1157034	GSM1158566	GSM1694964	GSM1717530	GSM1062247
GSM485454	GSM1157035	GSM1158567	GSM1694965	GSM1717531	GSM1062248
GSM485455	GSM1157036	GSM1158568	GSM1694966	GSM1717532	GSM1062249
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GSM485459	GSM1157040	GSM1158572	GSM1694970	GSM1717536	GSM1063281
GSM485460	GSM1157041	GSM1158573	GSM1694971	GSM1717537	GSM1063282
GSM485461	GSM1157042	GSM1158574	GSM1694972	GSM1717538	GSM1063283
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GSM485463	GSM1157044	GSM1158576	GSM1694974	GSM1717540	GSM1063285
GSM485464	GSM1157045	GSM1158577	GSM1694975	GSM1717541	GSM1063286
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GSM485469	GSM1157050	GSM1158582	GSM1694980	GSM1717546	GSM1063291
GSM485470	GSM1157051	GSM1158583	GSM1694981	GSM1717547	GSM1063292
GSM485471	GSM1157052	GSM1158584	GSM1694982	GSM1717548	GSM1063293
GSM485472	GSM1157053	GSM1158585	GSM1694983	GSM1717549	GSM1063294
GSM485473	GSM1157054	GSM1158586	GSM1536176	GSM1717550	GSM1063295
GSM485474	GSM1157055	GSM1158587	GSM1536177	GSM1717551	GSM1063296
GSM485475	GSM1157056	GSM1158588	GSM1536178	GSM1717552	GSM1063297
GSM485476	GSM1157057	GSM1158589	GSM1536179	GSM1717553	GSM1063298
GSM485477	GSM1157058	GSM1158590	GSM1536180	GSM1717554	GSM1063299

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GSM485478	GSM1157059	GSM1158591	GSM1536181	GSM1717555	GSM1063300
GSM485479	GSM1157060	GSM1158592	GSM1536182	GSM1717556	GSM1063301
GSM485480	GSM1157061	GSM1158593	GSM1536183	GSM1717557	GSM1063302
GSM485481	GSM1157062	GSM1158594	GSM1536184	GSM1717558	GSM1063303
GSM485482	GSM1157063	GSM1158595	GSM1536185	GSM1717559	GSM1063304
GSM485483	GSM1157064	GSM1158596	GSM1536186	GSM1717560	GSM1064826
GSM485484	GSM1157065	GSM1158597	GSM1536187	GSM1717561	GSM1064829
GSM485485	GSM1157066	GSM1158598	GSM1536188	GSM1717562	GSM1196045
GSM485486	GSM1157067	GSM1158599	GSM1536189	GSM1717563	GSM1065157
GSM485487	GSM1157068	GSM1158600	GSM1536190	GSM1717564	GSM1065160
GSM485488	GSM1157069	GSM1158601	GSM1536191	GSM1717565	GSM1065161
GSM485489	GSM1157070	GSM1158602	GSM1536192	GSM1717566	GSM1065162
GSM485490	GSM1157071	GSM1158603	GSM1536193	GSM1717567	GSM1065917
GSM485491	GSM1157072	GSM1158604	GSM1536247	GSM1717568	GSM1065918
GSM485492	GSM1157073	GSM1158605	GSM1536248	GSM1717569	GSM1065919
GSM485493	GSM1157074	GSM1158606	GSM1536249	GSM1717570	GSM1065920
GSM485494	GSM1157075	GSM1158607	GSM1536250	GSM1717571	GSM1065921
GSM485495	GSM1157076	GSM1158608	GSM1536429	GSM1717572	GSM1065922
GSM485496	GSM1157077	GSM1158609	GSM1536430	GSM1717573	GSM1065923
GSM485497	GSM1157078	GSM1158610	GSM1536431	GSM1717574	GSM1065924
GSM485498	GSM1157079	GSM1158611	GSM1536432	GSM1717575	GSM1065925
GSM485499	GSM1157080	GSM1158612	GSM1536433	GSM1717576	GSM1065926
GSM485500	GSM1157081	GSM1158613	GSM1536434	GSM1717577	GSM1065927
GSM485501	GSM1157082	GSM1158614	GSM1536435	GSM1717578	GSM1065928
GSM485502	GSM1157083	GSM1158615	GSM1536436	GSM1717579	GSM1065929
GSM485503	GSM1157084	GSM1158616	GSM1536437	GSM1717580	GSM1065930
GSM485504	GSM1157085	GSM1158617	GSM1536438	GSM1717581	GSM1065931
GSM485505	GSM1157086	GSM1158618	GSM1537303	GSM1717582	GSM1065932
GSM485506	GSM1157087	GSM1158619	GSM1537304	GSM1717583	GSM1076106
GSM485507	GSM1157088	GSM1158620	GSM1543665	GSM1717584	GSM1076107

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GSM485508	GSM1157089	GSM1158621	GSM1543667	GSM1717585	GSM1076108
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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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GSM1362007	GSM1158158	GSM1503690	GSM1647943	GSM830402	GSM1204878
GSM1362008	GSM1158159	GSM1503691	GSM1647944	GSM830403	GSM1204879
GSM1362009	GSM1158160	GSM1503692	GSM1647945	GSM830404	GSM1204880
GSM1362010	GSM1158162	GSM1503693	GSM1647946	GSM830405	GSM1204881
GSM1362011	GSM1158163	GSM1503694	GSM1647947	GSM830448	GSM1206234
GSM1362012	GSM1158164	GSM1503695	GSM1647948	GSM830449	GSM1206235
GSM1362013	GSM1158165	GSM1503696	GSM1647949	GSM830450	GSM1206236
GSM1362014	GSM1158166	GSM1503697	GSM1647952	GSM830451	GSM1206237
GSM1362015	GSM1158167	GSM1503698	GSM1647954	GSM830452	GSM1206238
GSM1362016	GSM1158168	GSM1503699	GSM1647956	GSM830453	GSM1206239
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GSM1362018	GSM1158170	GSM1608006	GSM1647962	GSM830455	GSM1206242
GSM1362019	GSM1158171	GSM1608007	GSM1647964	GSM830456	GSM1206243
GSM1362020	GSM1158172	GSM1608008	GSM1647966	GSM830457	GSM1207643
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GSM1362030	GSM1158246	GSM1608018	GSM1649200	GSM838076	GSM1207653
GSM1362031	GSM1158247	GSM1608019	GSM1649201	GSM838078	GSM1207654

APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

GSM1362032	GSM1158248	GSM1608020	GSM1649202	GSM838080	GSM1207659
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GSM1362035	GSM1158251	GSM1608065	GSM1649205	GSM838086	GSM1207662
GSM1362036	GSM1158252	GSM1608066	GSM1649206	GSM838088	GSM1208968
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GSM1362038	GSM1158254	GSM1504074	GSM1649208	GSM838092	GSM1208970
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GSM1362042	GSM1158258	GSM1505566	GSM1649212	GSM838100	GSM1215103
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GSM1362044	GSM1158260	GSM1505568	GSM1649214	GSM838104	GSM1215105
GSM1362045	GSM1158261	GSM1505569	GSM1657075	GSM838106	GSM1215106
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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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GSM1362068	GSM1158284	GSM1505596	GSM1658392	GSM865292	GSM1216773
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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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GSM1362096	GSM1158312	GSM1641279	GSM1665189	GSM907013	GSM1216801
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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

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GSM1156903	GSM1158435	GSM1513233	GSM721126	GSM1011896	GSM1233280
GSM1156904	GSM1158436	GSM1513234	GSM1686546	GSM1011897	GSM1233281
GSM1156905	GSM1158437	GSM1513235	GSM1686547	GSM1011898	GSM1233282
GSM1156906	GSM1158438	GSM1513236	GSM1686548	GSM1013679	GSM1233283
GSM1156907	GSM1158439	GSM1513237	GSM1687384	GSM1013682	GSM1233284
GSM1156908	GSM1158440	GSM1513238	GSM1687385	GSM1013684	GSM1233285
GSM1156909	GSM1158441	GSM1513239	GSM1687386	GSM1013686	GSM1233286
GSM1156910	GSM1158442	GSM1513240	GSM1687387	GSM1013688	GSM1233287
GSM1156911	GSM1158443	GSM1513241	GSM1693049	GSM1013692	GSM1233288
GSM1156912	GSM1158444	GSM1513242	GSM1693051	GSM1013693	GSM1233289
GSM1156913	GSM1158445	GSM1513243	GSM1693052	GSM1013695	GSM1233290
GSM1156914	GSM1158446	GSM1513244	GSM1693053	GSM1013697	GSM1233291
GSM1156915	GSM1158447	GSM1513245	GSM1693054	GSM1018004	ERR169802
GSM1156916	GSM1158448	GSM1513246	GSM1693055	GSM1018005	ERR169803
GSM1156917	GSM1158449	GSM1513247	GSM1694663	GSM1020212	ERR358486
GSM1156918	GSM1158450	GSM1513248	GSM1694664	GSM1020213	ERR380549
GSM1156919	GSM1158451	GSM1513249	GSM1694665	GSM1020214	ERR380552
GSM1156920	GSM1158452	GSM1513250	GSM1694666	GSM1020215	GSM1563053
GSM1156921	GSM1158453	GSM1513251	GSM1695162	GSM1020216	GSM1563054
GSM1156922	GSM1158454	GSM1513252	GSM1695197	GSM1023059	GSM1573117
GSM1156923	GSM1158455	GSM1513253	GSM1695198	GSM1023060	GSM984650
GSM1156924	GSM1158456	GSM1513254	GSM1695199	GSM1023061	ENCFF320IDT
GSM1156925	GSM1158457	GSM1513255	GSM1695850	GSM1023062	ENCFF380GBC

APPENDIX C. SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES AND TABLES

GSM1156926	GSM1158458	GSM1513256	GSM1695851	GSM1023063	ENCFF888LPS
GSM1156927	GSM1158459	GSM1513257	GSM1695852	GSM1023064	ENCFF342LYI
GSM1156928	GSM1158460	GSM1513258	GSM1695853	GSM1023065	ENCFF237ZQX
GSM1156929	GSM1158461	GSM1513689	GSM1695854	GSM1023066	ENCFF466QUZ
GSM1156930	GSM1158462	GSM1517598	GSM1695855	GSM1023067	ENCFF290OQE
GSM1156931	GSM1158463	GSM1517599	GSM1695856	GSM1023068	ENCFF789VZB
GSM1156932	GSM1158464	GSM1517600	GSM1695857	GSM1023069	ENCFF672VVX
GSM1156933	GSM1158465	GSM1517601	GSM1695858	GSM1023070	ENCFF256APB
GSM1156934	GSM1158466	GSM1519560	GSM1695859	GSM1023071	ENCFF299BIL
GSM1156935	GSM1158467	GSM1519561	GSM1695860	GSM1023072	ENCFF036GDL
GSM1156936	GSM1158468	GSM1519562	GSM1695861	GSM1023073	S004BT
GSM1156937	GSM1158469	GSM1519563	GSM1695862	GSM1023074	S002S3
GSM1156938	GSM1158470	GSM1519564	GSM1695863	GSM1023075	C005PS
GSM1156939	GSM1158471	GSM1519565	GSM1695864	GSM1023076	ENCFF690QPA
GSM1156940	GSM1158472	GSM1519566	GSM1695865	GSM1023077	ENCFF773MOU
GSM1156941	GSM1158473	GSM1519567	GSM1695866	GSM1023078	

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