

**Università degli Studi di Verona**

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## Predicting genetic variants impact on genomic regulatory elements and CRISPR genome editing

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# Introduction

Omics sciences have swiftly emerged as fundamental tools for informing medical decisions. They serve as the foundational pillars supporting precision or personalized medicine (Ginsburg and Willard, 2009). The evolution and enhancements in sequencing technologies have brought about a profound transformation, substantially improving both the quantity and quality of available omics data. This technological progress has had a profound impact, drastically reducing the costs associated with analyses involving omics data. Furthermore it has empowered the accumulation of large dataset, even for individual patients (Voelkerding *et al.*, 2009). Individual-specific omics data serve as a priceless asset for capturing the distinctive biological attributes, or biomarkers, that define individuals and even offer insights into potential medical conditions, including diseases. Among these biomarkers, genetic variants hold a pivotal position, operating at the level of DNA sequences. Genetic variants can be located within genes (coding regions), or in other genomic regions (non-coding regions). In the complex landscape of cellular regulation, non-coding genetic variants frequently play important roles in the epigenetic machinery that governs the cellular environment (Maurano *et al.*, 2012). While interpreting the functional impact of genetic variants mapped within coding regions on the cellular environment is often straightforward and widely explored in the existing literature, non-coding variants functional interpretation presents challenges. We refer to the genomic regions governing the cellular environment as genomic regulatory elements (GREs). Currently, several computational tools designed to predict the effects of genetic variants within gene sequences are available to the scientific community. However, while these tools are valuable in assessing genetic variants impacts at broader level, they often fall short when it comes to accomodating the requirements of precision genomics. In the evolving landscape of precision medicine, ther is a growing need for computational resources that can seamlessly integrate individual-oriented aspects into their analyses. Moreover, since genomics plays an increasingly central role in healthcare decision-making, the development of more individual centric computational tools becomes fundamental. We addressed these challenges by proposing innovative algorithms and computational tools tailored for the analysis of genetic variant impact on GREs and CRISPR genome editing, at broad and individual-specific levels. Our primary focus has been on creating haplotype- and individual-aware methods, aligning with the growing demand for individual-centric genomics applications. Our research focused on developing novel algorithms designed to discover and find transcription factor binding sites (TFBSs) within DNA sequences, accounting for individual- and cell type-specific genetic variants. We propose a novel computational model to represent TFBSs called MotifGraphs, which employs graph data structures to efficiently represent genetic diversity between binding sites from different individuals or cell types, without sacrificing interpretability. To address the effects of genetic variants on TFBSs, we developed two novel algorithms GRAFIMO (Tognon *et al.*, 2021) and MotifRaptor (Yao *et al.*, 2021). GRAFIMO searches for occurrences of known TFBSs genome graphs (Paten *et al.*, 2017), while accounting for for individual haplotypes and genetic variants. MotifRaptor predicts and annotates genetic variants impact on TFBSs integrating different omics data, such as chromatin accessibility, gene expression and GWAS summary statistics. Additionally we introduced CRISPRme (Cancellieri *et al.*, 2023), a tool designed to CRISPR off-targets and evaluate the potential impact of individual genetic variants on target specificity. Importantly, CRISPRme considers single-nucleotide variants, accomadate bona fide haplotypes and handles spacer:protospacer mismatches and bulges. This tool is specifically designed to perform individuals-oriented analyses, considering the wide genetic diversity present in different populations.



# Transcription Factors

Transcription factors (TFs) (**Fig.2.1**) are fundamental regulatory proteins playing a key role in regulating the transcriptional state, cellular differentiation and developmental state of cells (Lambert *et al.*, 2018; Reimold *et al.*, 2001; Whyte *et al.*, 2013). In human, approximately 1600 proteins are recognized as TFs (Babu *et al.*, 2004). This number accounts for roughly 8% of all human genes, highlighting the critical role played by TFs orchestrating genetic regulation. TFs exhibit their regulatory prowess by often collaborating in a coordinated manner to influence gene expression. This collaborative orchestration is vital for fine-tuning and precisely controlling cellular process. Moreover, TFs display a remarkable versatility as they govern the activity of multiple genes across different cell types (Lambert *et al.*, 2018). TFs exhibit a modular structure, that is divided into three distinct domains (Latchman, 1997). (i) The DNA binding domain directs the TF to its precise target site on the genome. Through a specific recognition of DNA sequences, the DNA binding domain enables the TF to dock onto regulatory regions located across the genome. (ii) the activation domain facilitates interactions between the TF and other transcriptional regulators. By engaging with different co-factors and regulatory proteins, the activation domain plays a crucial role modulating gene expression, often acting as a bridge between the factor and the transcriptional machinery. (iii) The signal sensing domain captures external signals and transmits them to the broader transcriptional complex. These signals can originate from different sources, including cellular cues and environmental stimuli, and are essential for fine-tuning the TF regulatory actions in response to changing conditions. The interplay between these three domains allows TFs to function as highly versatile and adaptable components of the gene regulation machinery, responding to both internal and external cues to precisely control gene expression in a dynamic and context-dependent manner. TFs exert their function through different strategies. (i) TFs can either facilitate the recruitment of RNA polymerase to gene promoter regions, thus promoting transcription initiation, or block RNA polymerase access (Fuda *et al.*, 2009). (ii) TFs play a crucial role in shaping chromatin landscape by weakening DNA-histone interactions, increasing DNA accessibility and consequently facilitating gene expression. (iii) Some TFs catalyze histone deacetylation (Liu *et al.*, 2016), by removing acetyl groups from histones, thus promoting a more compact chromatin structure and consequently reducing gene transcription. (iv) Other TFs enhance DNA-histone interactions, leading to a more tightly packed chromatin structure and consequently repressing gene expression. Therefore, by binding short DNA sequences (~6-20 nucleotides (Stewart *et al.*, 2012)), known as transcription factor binding sites (TFBSs), they finely regulate gene expression in a cell-specific manner. TFBSs are located within gene promoters (Whitfield *et al.*, 2012) or in more distant regulatory elements such as enhancers, silencers, or insulators (Gotea *et al.*, 2010; Lemon and Tjian, 2000; Nolis *et al.*, 2009). While TFBS often exhibit recurring sequence patterns, referred to as *motifs*, TFs display a remarkable ability to bind to similar but not identical sequences, often differing by just a few nucleotides. The precise configuration of TFBS, coupled with the local chromatin structure, plays a pivotal role in fine-tuning TFs' regulatory functions within cells (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2013; Maurano *et al.*, 2015). During the process of DNA binding, Transcription Factors harness a combination of electrostatic and Van der Waals forces. Although TFs exhibit high specificity in binding to their target sequences, not every nucleotide within the binding site directly interacts with the TF. These interactions vary in strength, resulting in TFs binding not to a single specific sequence but to a closely related subset of targets. However, the sequence composition of the TFBS decisively dictates the strength of the TF-DNA interaction, known as binding affinity. Numerous studies have established links between different diseases and cancer types and genetic variants occurring within TFBS (Docquier *et al.*, 2005; Katainen *et al.*, 2015; Yu *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, variants within TFBS can disrupt the precise regulation of gene expression by TFs, potentially affecting the entire cellular environment and even propagating effects to neighboring cells. Moreover, the misregulation of gene expression governed by TFs caused by variants occurring in TFBS could affect the entire cell environment and be propagated to neighboring cells. Therefore, identifying such regulatory motifs would provide fundamental insights

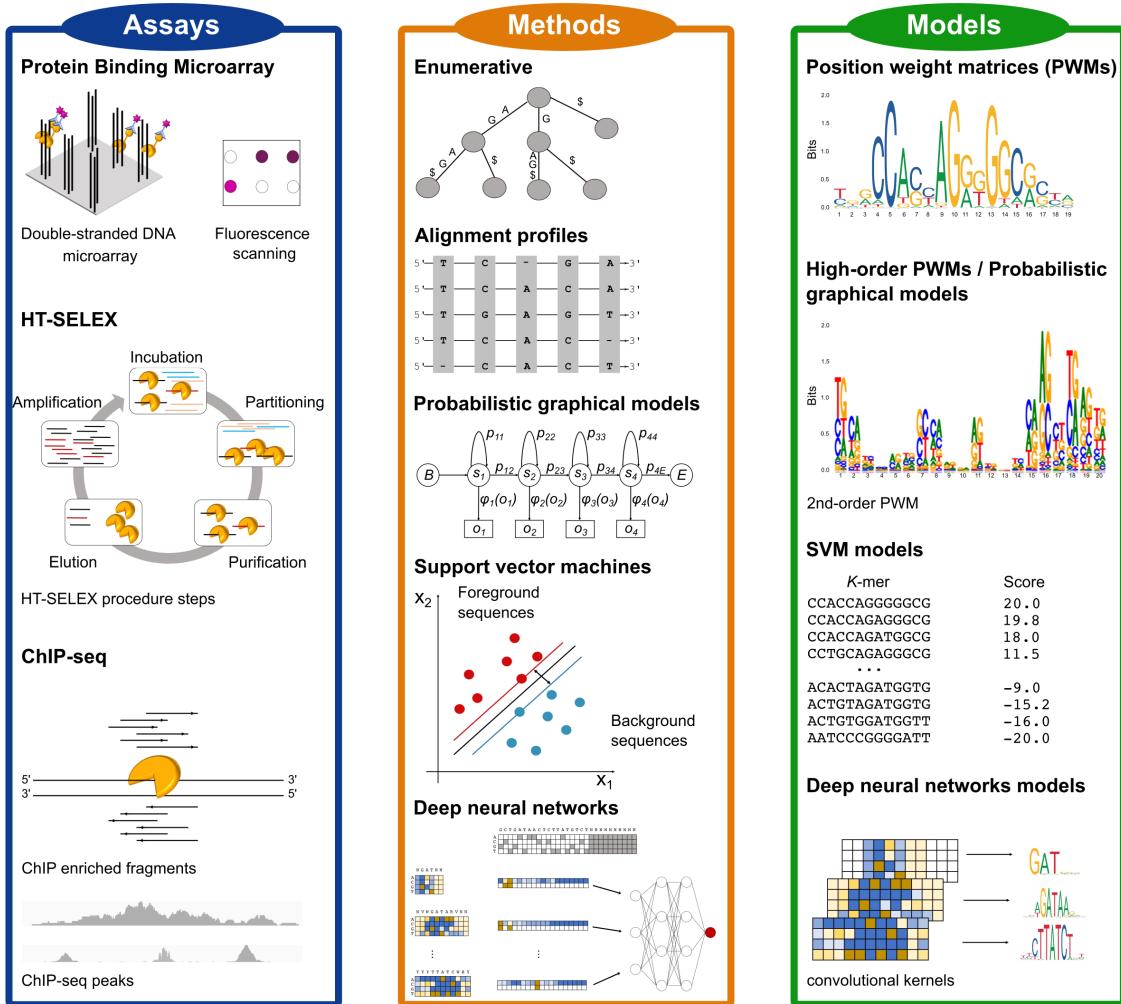


**Figure 2.1.** A human transcription factor (CTCF) binding its DNA target sequence.

on the complex mechanisms governing gene expression and the cell environment.

## 2.1 Discovering Transcription Factor Binding Site motifs

Several experimental assays have been developed to determine the binding site sequences of TFs in living cells or organisms (*in vivo*), or in test-tubes using synthetic or purified components (*in vitro*) (Jolma and Taipale, 2011). Early methods, like electrophoretic mobility shift assay (EMSA) (Garner and Revzin, 1981) or footprinting (Hampshire *et al.*, 2007), generally analyze a relatively small number of target sequences to find TFBS. As a result, they return small datasets of bound sequences. *In vitro* and *in vivo* high-throughput protocols such as PBM, SELEX or ChIP methods (Berger *et al.*, 2006; Jolma *et al.*, 2010; Collas and Dahl, 2008), facilitated the analysis of most target sites for factors of interest. As a result, large datasets of bound sequences have been generated, presenting an unprecedented opportunity to study and determine the TF binding landscapes. Experimental assays can recover the sequences bound by TFs along with their relative or absolute binding affinity. However, such datasets can incorrectly report unbound sequences as binding sites. In addition, the assays usually capture extra nucleotides in target sites, reducing data resolution and making manual analysis challenging. Motif discovery algorithms provide a computational framework to analyze these large datasets generated by experimental assays, discovering the sequences potentially bound by TFs and predicting their affinities (Pavesi *et al.*, 2004a; Tompa *et al.*, 2005; D'haeseleer, 2006; Das and Dai, 2007; Zambelli *et al.*, 2013; Tognon *et al.*, 2023). Given a sequence dataset, these algorithms typically recover sets of short and similar sequence elements. The prioritized sequence elements are later used to construct a motif model, summarizing the diverse binding site configurations observed among the prioritized sequences, and encoding their recurrent patterns and similarities (**Fig.2.2 (A)**). Several methods and models have been proposed to discover and represent TFBS motifs. Position weight matrices (PWMs) (Stormo, 2000) are the most popular models. PWMs are simple yet powerful and interpretable models, encoding the probability of observing a given nucleotide in each TFBS position. However, PWMs have some limitations, like the assumption of independence among



**Figure 2.2. Experimental and computational methods to discover TFBS and popular models to represent binding site motifs.** Protein binding microarray (PBM), HT-SELEX and ChIP-seq have become the most popular assays to determine TF binding preferences and identify their target sites (TFBS) in recent years. Computational motif discovery methods can be grouped into five classes, based on the algorithms employed to discover TFBS: enumerative, alignment-based, probabilistic graphical model-based, SVM-based and DNN-based methods. TFBS sequences prioritized by motif discovery algorithms are encoded in computational models representing the binding preferences of the investigated TFs.

the binding site positions. Therefore, several alternative motif models have been proposed (Siddharthan, 2010; Gorkin *et al.*, 2012; He *et al.*, 2021), as described below. The derived motif models can be employed in many downstream analyses, like searching potential binding site occurrences in regulatory genomic sequences, predicting the sets of genes regulated by the investigated TFs or assessing how genetic variants could affect their binding landscape.

### 2.1.1 Experimental methods to discover Transcription Factor Binding Sites

During the last decades, several techniques have been introduced to experimentally identify and assess TF binding sites and binding preferences (Jolma and Taipale, 2011) (Fig.2.2 and Table 2.1). Early studies on TF binding focused their analysis on gene promoters (Stormo, 2000) and employed in vitro methods, such as Electro-Mobility Shift Assay (EMSA) (Garner and Revzin, 1981) or DNase footprinting (Galas and Schmitz, 1978). EMSA exploits non-denatured polyacrylamide gel properties to separate bound and unbound DNA sequences. DNase footprinting combines EMSA with DNase I cleavage, identifying uncut regions (footprints) due to the protection of the bound TF. Generally, these assays produce datasets of a few hundred of bound sequences, exploring a limited spectrum of TFs binding landscape. Moreover, EMSA and DNase footprinting may be subject to technical constraints that could lead to inaccuracies in the reported sequences and binding preferences (Jolma and Taipale, 2011). The introduction of NGS technologies revolutionized the study of TFBS identification by encouraging researchers to develop methods that exploit the power of massively parallel sequencing (Fig.2.2). These methods have two major advan-

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tages: (i) they do not require any prior knowledge on the binding site sequence (Jolma and Taipale, 2011; Zia and Moses, 2012) and (ii) produce datasets of thousands of bound sequences allowing a better characterization of TF binding preferences (Stormo and Zhao, 2010). Protein binding microarrays (PBMs) (Berger *et al.*, 2006; Berger and Bulyk, 2009) recover short TFBS sequences ( $\sim$ 10 bp) and measure TF binding preferences *in vitro*. In PBMs, a tagged TF is released on a glass slide containing thousands of spots filled with short, immobilized DNA sequences. The tagged TFs are then incubated with fluorescent antibodies against the tag and subsequently washed to remove weakly bound factors. The fluorescence and DNA sequence enrichment are then used to quantify the TF–DNA binding strength and capture the bound sequences. Generally, the recovered sequences do not contain nucleotides flanking the investigated binding sites, producing high-resolution datasets. However, since the number of possible sequences grows as a function of the target length, PBMs can assess only a limited number of target sequences (Jolma and Taipale, 2011; Zia and Moses, 2012). PBM analysis is usually constrained to binding sites  $\sim$ 10–12 bp long. HT-SELEX (Jolma and Taipale, 2011; Jolma *et al.*, 2010) is a widely used *in vitro* method, coupling SELEX with high-throughput sequencing. A TF is released on a pool of randomized DNA sequences to allow the factor to select its target sites. The resulting TF–DNA complexes are separated from unbound sequences using affinity capture, and subsequently amplified through polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and sequenced. The resulting DNA library is enriched in binding sites for the studied TF and is used as the starting pool for another SELEX run (Jolma and Taipale, 2011; Jolma *et al.*, 2010). SELEX does not require any prior knowledge on the target sites of the investigated factor (Jolma *et al.*, 2013). Since SELEX reaction is typically performed in liquid phase and consequently does not suffer from physical constraints, the sequence space covered by HT-SELEX is often larger than that of PBMs. Moreover, by coupling sequencing with DNA barcode indexing, HT-SELEX allows to analyze hundreds of TFs in parallel. HT-SELEX produces datasets of thousands of high-resolution bound sequences, which include only a few nucleotides flanking the binding sites. However, since the starting DNA library is constituted by randomized sequences, HT-SELEX cannot recover the genomic binding locations for the investigated factor. The introduction of chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP) technologies (Collas and Dahl, 2008) radically changed the study of TFBS binding, enabling the genome-wide identification of regions bound by TFs *in vivo*. In ChIP, the TF–DNA complexes are cross-linked using formaldehyde. The DNA is then fragmented in  $\sim$ 100–1000 bp long fragments and subsequently immunoprecipitated with antibodies specific for the investigated TF. To recover the bound sequences, the cross-links are reverted. Then, the resulting fragments are amplified through microarray hybridization (ChIP-on-Chip (Collas and Dahl, 2008; Pillai and Chellappan, 2015)) or sequencing (ChIP-seq (Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Mardis, 2007)). To locate the binding regions, the recovered DNA fragments are mapped onto the genome. After ChIP-seq reads mapping, peak calling algorithms (Thomas *et al.*, 2017; Guo *et al.*, 2012; Zhang *et al.*, 2008) are employed to predict the genomic binding locations for the investigated factor. Peak calling algorithms identify the genomic regions showing greater enrichment in mapped DNA probes with respect to a control experiment and mark those regions as binding locations, or peaks (Pepke *et al.*, 2009). ChIP methods produce large datasets of thousands of genomic regions, whose length ranges from few hundreds to thousands of nucleotides, from which we can identify the likely TFBS for the investigated factor. Although ChIP technologies, and particularly ChIP-seq, are currently considered the current ‘golden standard’, they have some limitations. (i) ChIP can detect indirect binding, identifying other TFBS not belonging to the investigated factor (Worsley Hunt and Wasserman, 2014). (ii) ChIP-seq peaks may be false positives, recovered because of poor antibody quality (Pickrell *et al.*, 2011). (iii) ChIP-seq returns low-resolution datasets, whose sequences include several nucleotides flanking the target TFBS. ChIP-exo (Rhee and Pugh, 2011) addresses the latter issue, employing a lambda exonuclease to trim ChIP sequences, removing some of the nucleotides flanking the target sites. Alternatively, since most TFs bind their target sequences in open chromatin regions, experimental assays targeting open chromatin like ATAC-seq or DNase-seq (Buenrostro *et al.*, 2013; John *et al.*, 2011) can be employed to recover *in vivo* genomic locations likely to contain TFBS. ATAC-seq and DNase-seq are generally employed when the factors binding the target regions are not known. In summary, the current high-throughput *in vivo* and *in vitro* assays generate datasets of thousands of sequences potentially containing several possible binding configurations of TFBS, thereby enabling better characterizations of TFs binding landscapes.

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Experimental assay	Description	Output	De novo motif discovery capability	Type	Identification of genomic binding locations	Throughput
Competition EMSA	Bound DNA sequences are identified by observing changes in the electrophoretic migration of DNA sequences through non-denatured polyacrylamide gel	Bound DNA sequences	No. Used to validate known binding sites	<i>in vitro</i>	No	Low
DNase footprinting	Pools of DNA sequences are incubated with the TF of interest; then, the DNA is degraded using DNase I. The unbound fragments are cut in all positions, while the bound DNA is protected by the TF	Bound DNA sequences.	No. Used to validate known binding sites.	<i>in vitro</i>	No	Low
Protein Binding Microarrays	Arrays of ~40 000 spots with short, immobilized DNA sequences are incubated with a tagged TF, and then washed to remove weakly bound proteins. The bound sequences are identified through fluorescence-based detection	Continuous values describing fluorescence intensity on each array spot	Yes. Limited to short motifs (~12bp)	<i>in vitro</i>	No	High
HT-SELEX	The TF is added to a pool of randomized DNA fragments. The bound sequences are selected and constitute the starting pool for the next experimental round. The procedure is repeated for several rounds. Sequencing is employed to recover the sequence of the bound DNA fragments	DNA sequences	Yes	<i>in vitro</i>	No	High
ChIP-based technologies	TF-DNA complexes are cross-linked with formaldehyde and immunoprecipitated employing TF-specific antibodies. The bound sequences are then prioritized employing qPCR microarrays (ChIP-on-Chip) or through sequencing (ChIP-seq). ChIP-exo integrates exonuclease treatment to enhance sequence resolution	Genomic binding location coordinates	Yes. Limited by the inability to distinguish direct and indirect binding	<i>in vivo</i>	Yes	Low

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**Table 2.1.** Generally, EMSA and DNase footprinting are used to validate known TFBS, while currently PBMs, HT-SELEX and ChIP-based methods are preferred to discover novel binding sites. ChIP-based assays are the only methods that recover the TF genomic binding locations. The throughput column refers to the number of samples that can be processed in parallel by each method (high: hundreds of samples; low:a few samples).

### 2.1.2 Computational methods and models to discover and represent Transcription Factor Binding Sites

The TFBS motif discovery problem can be formalized as follows. Given a set of positive DNA sequences  $S$ , obtained from an experimental assay targeting a certain TF, and a set of negative sequences  $B$  the goal is to find one or more recurrent, short and similar subsequences in  $S$  that maximize the discriminatory power between  $S$  and  $B$ . Such subsequences are called patterns or motifs and are likely bound by the investigated TF. The negative set  $B$  can contain randomly generated or selected genomic sequences, with similar nucleotide content and length of those in  $S$ . The retrieved patterns are used to construct and train a computational model  $M$  (motif model), representing the discovered motif. These models can then be used to identify new potential binding sites, given a new set of sequences, and to predict the strength of the TF–DNA binding. Motif discovery can be considered a classification or a regression problem, depending on the type of data used to train  $M$  (Tognon *et al.*, 2023). The datasets derived by experimental assays like ChIP-seq or HT-SELEX provide hundreds or thousands of sequences containing binding sites. In this setting, motif discovery becomes a classification problem. In fact, the goal is to discriminate between bound and unbound sites in the input sequences and train the motif model with the identified binding sites. The datasets produced by other experimental technologies like PBMs provide the relative binding strength for large sets of sequences of equal length. Therefore, rather than discriminating between bound and unbound sequences, in this setting  $M$  learns the relative binding affinities associated to each target site in the input dataset, transforming motif discovery into a regression problem. In both settings, the final goal is to derive a computational model  $M$ , describing the recovered TFBS and capable of predicting new binding events, along with their affinity, in sequences not used during model training. Motif discovery algorithms can be classified in enumerative, alignment-based, probabilistic graphical models, support vector machine (SVM)-based and deep neural network-based methods (**Fig.2.2**). Other approaches to discover TFBS motifs in genomic sequences use phylogenetic footprinting (McCue *et al.*, 2001; Blanchette and Tompa, 2002). The core principle of phylogenetic footprinting is that functional elements, such as TFBS, are more likely to be conserved across evolutionarily related species, while non-functional elements are more susceptible to mutations. Although phylogenetic footprinting was one of the first techniques proposed for identifying TFBS, it is still widely used to examine TFBS conservation across different organisms (Balazadeh *et al.*, 2011; Xu *et al.*, 2012; Katara *et al.*, 2012). In a recent study (Glenwinkel *et al.*, 2014), the authors proposed a novel method that utilizes phylogenetic footprinting to discover TFBS. Before describing the algorithms, we briefly review the models to describe TFBS motifs. The most common models to represent TFBS are consensus sequences (Day and McMorris, 1992), PWMs (Stormo, 2000, 2013), high-order PWMs (Siddharthan, 2010; Korhonen *et al.*, 2017), SVM-based (Gorkin *et al.*, 2012) and deep neural network-based (He *et al.*, 2021) models. Consensus sequences summarize the discovered TFBS by denoting the most frequently observed nucleotide at each motif position in a prioritized sequence set. Although TFBS have conserved positions not tolerant to mutations (Li and Ovcharenko, 2015), other binding site locations admit alternative nucleotides. Degenerate consensus accommodates ambiguous motif positions employing IUPAC symbols. However, consensus sequences cannot encode the contribution to TF–DNA binding of each nucleotide at each motif position. PWMs address this limitation, providing an additive model with the contribution of each motif position to the binding site. PWMs construct an ungapped alignment between motif candidate sequences and count the frequency of each nucleotide at each position. The statistical significance of PWMs is often measured employing relative entropy (RE) (Stormo, 1998). RE quantifies the difference between computed nucleotide frequencies and those obtained from aligning random sequences. PWMs are visualized as logos (Schneider and Stephens, 1990), where the height of each nucleotide is proportional to its RE. Despite their wide success, PWMs still assume independence between motif positions. Probabilistic graphical models address this limitation by modeling dependency between motif nucleotides. These models include high-order PWMs like dinucleotide weight matrices (DWMs), Bayesian networks (BNs), Markov models (MMs) or hidden Markov models (HMMs) (Siddharthan, 2010; Korhonen *et al.*, 2017; Barash *et al.*, 2003; Siebert and Söding, 2016). DWMs and high-order PWMs are often visualized as logos with  $q$ -mers replacing the single nucleotides, where  $q$  is the dependency order between neighboring nucleotides. Importantly, probabilistic graphical models can account for variable spacing between half-sites of two box motifs. However, the number of model's parameters and its complexity grow exponentially with  $q$ , often resulting in the model overfitting the

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input dataset. SVM-based models train a SVM kernel learning the binding site structure from the input sequence dataset. TFBS are represented by either a list of  $k$ -mers with associated weights or support vectors used to discriminate between bound and unbound sequences, depending on the employed kernel (Boeva, 2016). In the former case, the weights reflect the  $k$ -mer contribution to the motif sequence. SVM-based models can account for variable spacing between the half-sites of two box motifs, like probabilistic graphical models. Importantly,  $k$ -mers indirectly capture  $k$ -th order dependencies between neighboring nucleotides. However, simple SVM-based models are limited to consider short  $k$  ( $\sim 10$  bp) and cannot represent longer motifs. Gapped  $k$ -mers (Ghandi *et al.*, 2014b) addressed this limitation, handling longer TFBS and sequence degeneration in non-informative motif positions. To visualize the discovered motifs, SVM-based models are often reduced to PWMs computed aligning the informative  $k$ -mers. Deep neural network (DNN)-based models integrate the diverse, complex and hierarchical patterns governing TF–DNA binding events in input nucleotide sequences. Although DNN-based models are accurate and powerful, their ‘black box’ nature is a major limitation (Park *et al.*, 2020). Many frameworks visualize the discovered motifs as PWMs, computed aligning the sequences activating the convolutional kernels of the DNN (Koo and Ploenzke, 2020). However, DNNs often learn distributed representations where multiple neurons cooperate to describe single patterns. Therefore, motifs learned by single kernels and the resulting PWMs are often redundant with each other. DeepLIFT (Shrikumar *et al.*, 2017) proposed a method to assign importance scores to the kernels. Comparing the activation of each neuron to a reference value, DeepLIFT selects which kernels contribute most to the TFBS definition, reducing motif redundancy. TF-MoDISco (Avsec *et al.*, 2021a) extended this idea by clustering and aggregating the discovered motifs, using the importance scores assigned to the kernels. However, computing interpretable models without losing some information learned by the DNN is still an open challenge.

### Enumerative methods

Enumerative motif discovery algorithms (**Fig.2.2**) assume that motifs are overrepresented patterns in the input dataset  $S$ , with respect to a set of background genomic sequences  $B$ . Enumerative algorithms may assume that the motif length  $|M| = k$  is known a priori. Given  $|M| = k$ , the general idea is to collect the approximate occurrences of all potential  $4^k$   $k$ -mers in the sequences of  $S$  and assess if the difference between the number of matches found in  $S$  and  $B$  or the expected number of matches from a background model is statistically significant. Then, a PWM is obtained building an ungapped alignment from the statistically significant  $k$ -mers. Searching the approximate occurrences of all  $4^k$   $k$ -mers quickly becomes impractical, even for small  $k$ . Early proposals introduced the usage of heuristics to reduce the search space, for example, searching only patterns occurring at least once in each sequence  $s \in S$  (Li *et al.*, 1999) or restricting mismatching locations to specific motif positions (Califano, 2000). However, mismatches can occur at any motif position. Weeder (Pavesi *et al.*, 2001, 2004b) and SMILE (Marsan and Sagot, 2000) proposed using suffix trees (STs) (Weiner, 1973) to efficiently explore the entire motif search space. They leverage the indexing capabilities of STs to perform approximate pattern matching, without restrictions on mismatching positions. This enabled achieving high accuracy in motif discovery, while reducing computational costs. To determine the statistical significance of motif candidates, SMILE and Weeder compare the motifs frequencies in  $S$  with those in a set of random genomic sequences or the promoters of the same organism, respectively. However, these approaches can be computationally intensive and are not scalable on the large datasets generated by PBM, HT-SELEX or ChIP assays (Liu *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, more efficient approaches specifically tailored to work on large datasets were proposed. MDscan (Liu *et al.*, 2002) and Amadeus (Linhart *et al.*, 2008) use word enumeration to discover motif candidates in sequence datasets. MDscan employs ChIP peaks shape to identify non-redundant patterns abundant in the most enriched sequences and uses a third-order Markov background model to assess motif statistical significance. Amadeus evaluates all  $k$ -mers in  $S$  and groups similar patterns in list. Each list is grouped into motifs, statistically evaluated using a hypergeometric test. However, word enumeration can be still computationally demanding. To address this challenge, DREME (Bailey, 2011) proposed using regular expressions to count approximate frequencies of motifs in  $S$  and  $B$ . To evaluate the motifs’ statistical significance, DREME employs Fisher’s exact test, comparing the number of sequences in  $S$  and  $B$  in which the motifs occur. However, regular expressions can be computationally expensive when analyzing large  $S$ , and may detect false positives or miss motifs. Trawler, HOMER and STREME (Ettwiller *et al.*, 2007; Heinz *et al.*, 2010; Bailey, 2021) reintroduced STs, proposing different optimizations to make the methods scalable on large datasets. Trawler and HOMER optimized the statistical assessment step using  $z$ -scores derived from the normal approximation to the binomial distribution and the hypergeometric distribution, respectively. Instead of improving the statistical assessment, STREME reduces the motif search space by first identifying overrepresented seed words of different lengths on the ST. Then, STREME counts the

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number of approximate matches of the most significant words on the ST. By identifying seeds of different lengths, STREME discover motifs of different lengths in one single tree visit.

### Alignment-based methods

Alignment-based motif discovery algorithms compute alignment profiles to describe motifs binding preferences (**Fig.2.2**), avoiding exhaustive  $k$ -mer enumeration. This approach involves constructing an alignment by selecting motif candidate sequences from the input dataset  $S$  and evaluating the resulting profile using various measures, like nucleotide conservation, information content or profile statistical significance. Motif statistical significance is determined by computing the probability of obtaining the same alignment from either a background dataset  $B$  or random sequences. Alignment-based motif discovery algorithms typically assume that the motif length  $|M|$  is known a priori. For alignment-based algorithms, motif discovery can be formalized as a combinatorial problem. Given  $|M| = k$  the goal is to find the best alignment profile by combining  $k$ -mers from  $S$  according to a scoring criterion. The best alignments are then used to generate the corresponding PWMs. Most alignment-based algorithms assume that each sequence in  $S$  contains zero or one binding site. Therefore, there exist  $(\sum_{s \in S} |s| - |M| + 1)^{|S|}$  possible profiles, built by combining  $k$ -mers in all possible ways. Since enumerating all possible solutions is computationally impractical even for small datasets, alignment-based algorithms employ heuristics, such as greedy (Hertz and Stormo, 1999), expectation-maximization (EM) (Bailey *et al.*, 1994), stochastic (e.g. Gibbs sampling) (Lawrence *et al.*, 1993), or genetic algorithms (Lee *et al.*, 2018). CONSENSUS (Hertz and Stormo, 1999) proposed a greedy approach to construct alignment profiles incrementally. It solves the problem initially on two sequences and progressively solves it by adding the remaining sequences  $s \in S$  one by one. CONSENSUS stores the best partial alignments hoping to find the highest-scoring profiles. However, if motifs are not conserved, CONSENSUS may potentially discard the highest-scoring solutions. The MEME algorithm (Bailey *et al.*, 1994; Bailey and Elkan, 1995; Bailey *et al.*, 2006) proposed a different strategy based on EM. It iteratively refines an initial profile by substituting some  $k$ -mers in the profile, with others more likely to produce better solutions. MEME evaluates the fit of each  $k$ -mer in  $s \in S$  to the current profile, rather than a background model. MEME identifies motifs occurring more than once in each sequence and computes their statistical significance, and the method does not rely on TFBS conservation. However, the algorithm may converge prematurely to local maxima and convergence heavily depends on the algorithm starting conditions. In contrast to MEME, Gibbs sampling (Lawrence and Reilly, 1990) employs a stochastic approach to add  $k$ -mers to the alignment instead of a deterministic one based on the profile fit. Gibbs sampling replaces  $k$ -mers in the profile with others selected with probability proportional to its likelihood score. The algorithm's stochastic nature reduces its likelihood to converge to local maxima, but it may require multiple runs to achieve reliable results. However, several methods using Gibbs sampling and its extensions have been proposed (Neuwald *et al.*, 1995; Hughes *et al.*, 2000; Workman and Stormo, 1999; Liu *et al.*, 2000; Thijs *et al.*, 2001; Frith *et al.*, 2004b). Genetic algorithms are an alternative approach overcoming the limitations of EM and stochastic methods. GADEM (Li, 2009) combined EM local search with genetic algorithms to refine profiles, avoid convergence to local maxima and overcome Gibbs sampling stochastic nature. However, due to their computational complexity, genetic algorithms are computationally demanding when analyzing thousands of sequences. Using alignment profiles, the solution space grows exponentially with the size of  $S$  and even with employing heuristics analyzing thousands of sequences is computationally impractical (Zambelli *et al.*, 2013). MEME-ChIP (Machanick and Bailey, 2011) and STEME (Reid and Wernisch, 2011) improved the MEME algorithm to analyze ChIP datasets. While MEME-ChIP focuses the analysis on a random subset of sequences, STEME speeds up EM steps indexing the sequences in a suffix tree. However, using random subsets of  $S$  may cause missing critical motif instances and constructing ST from thousands of sequences may be computationally demanding. ChIPMunk (Kulakovskiy *et al.*, 2010) proposed a greedy profile optimization like EM developed to discover motifs in large ChIP-seq datasets, while accounting for ChIP peaks shape. XXmotif (Hartmann *et al.*, 2013) and ProSampler (Li *et al.*, 2019b) proposed methods combining enumerative motif discovery with iterative and stochastic profile refinement, respectively.

### Probabilistic graphical model-based algorithms

The inclusion of dependencies between nucleotides in TFBS has been subject of debate (Tomovic and Oakeley, 2007; Morris *et al.*, 2011; Zhao and Stormo, 2011). Some studies have shown that dependencies exist between neighboring and non-neighboring nucleotides in TFBS (Slattery *et al.*, 2014; Rohs *et al.*, 2010). Enumerative and alignment-based algorithms represent motifs as PWMs, which do not account

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for dependencies between the binding site positions. PWMs can be extended to account for the frequency of di- or trinucleotides (high-order PWMs), like DWMs (Siddharthan, 2010). Dimont (Grau *et al.*, 2013) and diChIPMunk (Kulakovskiy *et al.*, 2013a) proposed extensions to alignment-based methods to discover and represent motifs as DWMs. However, these methods capture dependencies only between neighboring nucleotides. Probabilistic graphical models (**Fig.2.2**) such as BNs, MMs or HMMs provide powerful frameworks for capturing dependencies between TFBS nucleotides. In (Barash *et al.*, 2003) the authors proposed using BNs trained via EM to model TFBS. The proposed approach captures dependencies between neighboring and non-neighboring positions but assumes the same order of dependence throughout the entire motif. Similarly, in (Ben-Gal *et al.*, 2005), the authors introduced VOBN models. VOBNs use BNs accounting for variable orders of dependencies between positions. However, training BNs is not computationally scalable when analyzing thousands of sequences and these models are prone to overfitting when trained on hundreds of sequences. MMs and HMMs provide more efficient and scalable frameworks than BNs to include dependencies between motif positions. Therefore, researchers focused on developing algorithms using these models to learn dependencies in large sequence datasets produced by NGS assays. TFFMs (Mathelier and Wasserman, 2013) and Discrover (Maaskola and Rajewsky, 2014) proposed HMM-based models learning the dinucleotide dependencies between neighboring motif positions in large sequence datasets. In addition, TFFMs learn the properties of the sequences flanking the TFBS. MMs can be extended to capture different orders of dependencies between neighboring nucleotides, as demonstrated in (Eggeling *et al.*, 2014), where the authors proposed a method to discover CTCF citepbell1999protein motifs using variable-order MMs. Similarly, MMs can also be extended to capture dependencies between non-neighboring nucleotides as proposed in Slim (Keilwagen and Grau, 2015). However, MMs and HMMs typically only capture low-order dependencies. BaMMotif (Siebert and Söding, 2016; Ge *et al.*, 2021) proposed a motif discovery algorithm employing a Bayesian approach to efficiently train Markov models up to fifth-order dependencies on thousands of sequences.

### SVM-based methods

SVMs (Boser *et al.*, 1992) have been successfully applied to different problems in computational biology (Ben-Hur *et al.*, 2008), including TFBS motif discovery (**Fig.2.2**). This is achieved by decomposing bound (foreground dataset  $S$ ) and unbound sequences (background dataset  $B$ ) in  $k$ -mers and using their frequencies as features to train a sequence similarity kernel (Ben-Hur *et al.*, 2008). Generally, to each  $k$ -mer is assigned a weight proportional to its contribution to the definition of the positive or negative training sets, or to its likelihood of being a motif candidate. While earlier methods (Leslie *et al.*, 2001; Eskin *et al.*, 2002; Kuang *et al.*, 2005) were designed for protein sequence homology, recent SVM-based algorithms have been developed to discover TFBS motifs. Furthermore, SVMs can efficiently analyze datasets of thousands of sequences. Kmer-SVM (Lee *et al.*, 2011; Fletez-Brant *et al.*, 2013) proposed a method to discover TFBS motifs in sequence datasets, using the spectrum kernel (Leslie *et al.*, 2001) Kmer-SVM counts the exact matches for all contiguous  $k$ -mers in  $S$  and  $B$ , building the  $k$ -mers feature space. The mismatch and wildcard kernels (Kuang *et al.*, 2005; Leslie and Kuang, 2003) were introduced to count  $k$ -mer frequencies while allowing a fixed number of mismatching positions for each  $k$ -mer. This approach was later extended to allow for less restrictive  $k$ -mer frequency estimation, offering flexibility in the motif structure without affecting scalability on large datasets. Agius and coworkers (Agius *et al.*, 2010) extended the concept of mismatch kernels by developing the di-mismatch kernel. The di-mismatch kernel is a first-order Markov mismatch kernel based on the dinucleotide alphabet, which handles sequence variability and accounts for dependencies between neighboring nucleotides. To maintain scalability on large datasets small  $k$  ( $\sim 10$ ) is used, discovering short motifs. However, TFBS lengths range between 6 and 20 bp, making it challenging to fully characterize longer motifs with short  $k$ -mers. In addition, increasing  $k$  often results in sparse feature vectors overfitting the training dataset. Gapped  $k$ -mers (Ghandi *et al.*, 2014b) proposed to represent longer motifs as  $k$ -mers with gaps in non-informative or degenerate TFBS positions, accounting for motif variability in sequence and length. Gkm-SVM (Ghandi *et al.*, 2014a, 2016) extends kmer-SVM to train SVM kernels employing gapped  $k$ -mers as features. The algorithm considers larger  $k$  preventing model overfitting and reducing the method's dependency on parameters' choice. LS-GKM (Lee, 2016) optimizes the algorithm for scalable SVM training with gapped  $k$ -mers on large-scale sequence datasets. LS-GKM also provides other kernels for SVM training.

### DNN-based methods

DNNs have become increasingly popular in computational biology (Talukder *et al.*, 2021; Zeng *et al.*, 2020b; Singh *et al.*, 2016, 2019; Zeng *et al.*, 2018; Kelley *et al.*, 2018; Li *et al.*, 2019a; Yin *et al.*, 2019;

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Manzanarez-Ozuna *et al.*, 2018). due to their ability to learn complex patterns (Park and Kellis, 2015) from large omics datasets (Zhang *et al.*, 2019). Convolutional neural networks (CNNs) (LeCun *et al.*, 2015), originally developed for image classification (LeCun *et al.*, 2015; Sainath *et al.*, 2013; Vu *et al.*, 2017), have been successfully applied to analyze *in vivo* TF–DNA interactions (Alipanahi *et al.*, 2015; Zhou and Troyanskaya, 2015; Kelley *et al.*, 2016; Zeng *et al.*, 2016) (**Fig.2.2**). CNNs apply non-linear transformation to input data, learning and representing complex patterns in a high-dimensional space (Bengio *et al.*, 2013) This simplifies classification tasks and enables accurate prediction of TFBS in genomic sequences. CNNs represent genomic sequences as 1D or 2D images with four associated channels (A, C, G, T) (Zeng *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, classifying TFBS in genomic sequences becomes a two-class image classification problem. Typically, CNN architectures designed for motif discovery and classification consist of one or more sets of four layers: the convolutional layer, the max-pooling layer, the fully connected NN layer and the output layer (Zeng *et al.*, 2016). DeepBind (Alipanahi *et al.*, 2015) and Basset (Kelley *et al.*, 2016) proposed two CNN architectures to discover motifs in different datasets, such as ChIP-seq, HT-SELEX, PBM and DNase-seq. The discovered motifs in DeepBind and Basset are visualized as PWMs. The PWMs are computed by aligning and grouping the sequences that activate the convolutional layer. While DeepBind and Basset have demonstrated promising results in predicting TFBS, their performance may be limited by the quality of training data and the significant computational resources and time required for model training. These limitations have led to the development of novel methods, such as BPNet (Avsec *et al.*, 2021a), which address some of these issues by incorporating additional features in the model and using more efficient training processes. BPNet proposed a dilated CNN architecture, allowing the model to learn and integrate diverse complex features without sacrificing the spatial and base resolution of the input data. However, TF–DNA interactions involve not only the direct binding between TF and DNA but also the interactions between multiple binding subregions (long-term interactions) and the nucleotides with high-order structures of TFs (short-term interactions). Long short-term memory networks (LSTMs) (Hochreiter and Schmidhuber, 1997) and bi-directional LSTMs (BLSTMs) can efficiently capture long-term and short-term dependencies of sequential signals. LSTMs and BLSTMs are well suited for modeling TF–DNA interactions as genomic sequences can be viewed as sequential signals with long-term and short-term dependencies. DeeperBind (Hassanzadeh and Wang, 2016) introduced a hybrid CNN–LSTM architecture removing the pooling layer to maintain the positional information of potential motif instances. Similarly, DanQ (Quang and Xie, 2016) proposed a hybrid CNN–BLSTM architecture to capture the positional dynamics of genomic sequences for TFBS motif discovery. The BLSTM replaces the fully connected NN. Factornet (Quang and Xie, 2019) extended the DanQ approach by incorporating additional features in the model and using a Siamese BLSTM architecture to improve model training.

## 2.2 Transcription factor binding sites databases

With the recent advancement in experimental technologies, a vast amount of TF-related data have been generated and stored in databases (**Table 2.2**). The ENCODE project (Consortium *et al.*, 2012) provides multiple data on functional elements in the human genome collected across different tissues and cell types. ENCODE stores TF-related genomic data such as ChIP-seq targeting several TFs and DNase-seq. Similarly, Cistrome (Zheng *et al.*, 2019) and GTRD (Kolmykov *et al.*, 2021) provide TF-related genomic data from different organisms and across different species, cell types and tissues, respectively. Furthermore, GTRD stores large collections of curated ChIP-seq, ChIP-exo and ChIP-nexus datasets. HOCOMOCO (Kulakovskiy *et al.*, 2013b, 2018) and JASPAR (Sandelin *et al.*, 2004; Fornes *et al.*, 2020) provide large collections of curated, experimentally derived and computationally predicted TFBS motifs for several TFs from different species. They store PWMs and DWMs obtained by analyzing ChIP-seq and SELEX datasets. In addition, HOCOMOCO models were generated integrating sequence datasets with evolutionary conservation and DNA shape. Similarly, Cis-BP (Weirauch *et al.*, 2014) stores experimentally derived and computationally predicted PWMs, obtained integrating multiple sources, including published literature, other databases and experimental datasets. TRANSFAC (Wingender *et al.*, 1996, 2000) collects experimentally validated and manually curated PWMs for various TFs from different eukaryotic organisms, and includes data on TF-associated proteins, DNA binding domains and, regulatory elements. FactorBook (Pratt *et al.*, 2022) provides computationally predicted PWMs generated analyzing ENCODE data and includes TF expression data across tissues and cell types. Unibind (Puig *et al.*, 2021) collects experimentally validated and curated PWMs from different organisms, providing information on structural properties and conformation of TF–DNA complexes and their genomic binding locations across different cell types and tissues. UniPROBE (Newburger and Bulyk, 2009) stores curated PWMs

for several eukaryotic TFs, generated analyzing PBM datasets. HTRIdb (Bovolenta *et al.*, 2012) stores data on TF–target genes interactions in human, collected from published literature and other databases, in different cell types, experimental methods and disease state, also providing functional annotations for the target genes. TFCancer (Huang *et al.*, 2021) collects TF–gene interactions across 33 cancer types, providing tools to identify TF expression alterations and their roles in biological processes and signaling pathways in cancer.

Type	Name	Reference	Data type	Model organism	TFs
Sequence database	ENCODE	(Consortium <i>et al.</i> , 2012)	ChIP-seq DNase-seq ATAC-seq	<i>Caenorhabditis elegans</i> <i>Drosophila melanogaster</i> <i>H. sapiens</i> <i>M. musculus</i>	> 1,500
Sequence database	Cistrome	(Zheng <i>et al.</i> , 2019)	ChIP-seq DNase-seq	<i>H. sapiens</i> <i>M. musculus</i>	1,773 (ChIP-seq)
Sequence database	GTRD	(Kolmykov <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	ChIP-seq ChIP-exo ChIP-nexus DNase-seq	<i>A. thaliana</i> <i>C. elegans</i> <i>D. rerio</i> <i>D. melanogaster</i> <i>H. sapiens</i> <i>M. musculus</i> <i>R. norvegicus</i> <i>S. cerevisiae</i> <i>S. pombe</i>	3,988 (ChIP-seq) 1,708 (ChIP-exo + ChIP-nexus)
Motif models database	HOCOMOCO	(Kulakovskiy <i>et al.</i> , 2013b, 2018)	PWMs DWMs	<i>H. sapiens</i> <i>M. musculus</i>	680 (human) 453 (mouse)
Motif models database	JASPAR	(Sandelin <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Fornes <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	PWMs DWMs	53 species	> 1,500
Motif models database	Cis-BP	(Weirauch <i>et al.</i> , 2014)	PWMs	<i>A. thaliana</i> <i>C. elegans</i> <i>D. rerio</i> <i>D. melanogaster</i> <i>H. sapiens</i> <i>M. musculus</i> <i>N. crassa</i> <i>R. norvegicus</i> <i>S. cerevisiae</i> <i>X. tropicalis</i>	> 5,000
Motif models database	TRANSFAC	(Wingender <i>et al.</i> , 1996, 2000)	PWMs	> 300 species	> 10,000
Motif models database	FactorBook	(Pratt <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	PWMs	<i>H. sapiens</i> <i>M. musculus</i>	> 881 (human) 49 (mouse)
Motif models database	Unibind	(Puig <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	PWMs	<i>A. thaliana</i> <i>C. elegans</i> <i>D. rerio</i> <i>D. melanogaster</i> <i>H. sapiens</i> <i>M. musculus</i> <i>R. norvegicus</i> <i>S. cerevisiae</i> <i>S. pombe</i>	841

Motif models database	UniPROBE	(Newburger and Bulyk, 2009)	PWMs	<i>C. elegans</i> <i>C. parvum</i> <i>H. sapiens</i> <i>M. musculus</i> <i>P. falciparum</i> <i>S. cerevisiae</i> <i>V. harveyi</i>	726
TF-target gene interaction database	HTRIdb	(Bovolenta <i>et al.</i> , 2012)	TF–gene interaction networks	<i>H. sapiens</i>	284
TF-disease association database	TFcancer	(Huang <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	TF–cancer associations	<i>H. sapiens</i>	364

**Table 2.2.** The table presents a summary of the TF-related databases discussed in Section 4. For each database, the table reports the database main purpose (Type), the available type of data (Data type), the model organisms for which data are provided (Model organisms), the number of TFs (TFs) and the database website (Website).

## 2.3 Downstream analysis on transcription factor binding sites

The discovered motifs can be employed in several downstream analyses: motif comparison, motif scanning, motif enrichment analysis and assessing genetic variants effects on TF–DNA binding affinity (Tognon *et al.*, 2023). Motif comparison measures the similarity between the discovered motifs and annotated TFBS. Motif comparison allows for linking known TFs to the newly discovered motifs (Gupta *et al.*, 2007) and inferring the relationship between the input sequences and function of the annotated TF (Weirauch *et al.*, 2014). For this task, several tools have been developed such as Tomtom, STAMP, MACRO-APE or MoSBAT (Gupta *et al.*, 2007; Mahony and Benos, 2007; Vorontsov *et al.*, 2013; Lambert *et al.*, 2016). These tools search annotated database for motifs matching the input consensus sequence or inferred motif matrix. Moreover, motif comparison tools have been developed to interpret and annotate the potential motifs encoded in the convolutional filters of a CNN model. Motif scanning scans sets of genomic regions searching for potential occurrences of the input motif. The goal is to recover sets of potential binding locations for the investigated factor. Given a motif model (e.g. a PWM) and a set of sequences, motif scanning algorithms assign a score to each sequence using the input model. A common challenge is to determine a reliable cutoff on the scores assigned to the sequences to discriminate between true and false binding events (Boeva, 2016). Several motif scanning tools are currently available such as MOODS, FIMO or PWMscan (Korhonen *et al.*, 2009; Grant *et al.*, 2011; Ambrosini *et al.*, 2018). The HOMER suite (Heinz *et al.*, 2010) also provides a motif scanning functionality. Recently, MOODS was extended to search instances of motifs modeled as high-order PWMs (Korhonen *et al.*, 2017). GRAFIMO (Tognon *et al.*, 2021) extended classical motif scanning to panels of thousands of genomes encoded in genome graphs (Paten *et al.*, 2017), considering individual genetic variants and haplotypes while searching for potential motif occurrences. Motif enrichment analysis (MEA) searches for over- and underrepresented motifs in gene regulatory regions. Analyzing the TFBS enrichment in regulatory regions governing sets of genes, researchers can link the investigated TFs to their function within the cell environment. MEA consists of two steps: (i) scanning regulatory regions for motif occurrences and (ii) statistical testing of motif enrichment. TFs whose motifs are significantly overrepresented (enriched) in the scanned regulatory regions are marked as transcriptional regulators for the target gene set. There are many MEA tools available to the community, such as Clover, Pscan, AME or oPOSSUM-3 (Frith *et al.*, 2004a; Zambelli *et al.*, 2009; McLeay and Bailey, 2010; Kwon *et al.*, 2012). HOMER (Heinz *et al.*, 2010) provides a functionality to perform MEA. Haystack (Pinello *et al.*, 2018) proposed an integrated MEA strategy, investigating motif enrichment in cell-type-specific regions and incorporating gene expression data to assess the transcriptional activity of the studied factors and their impact on the regulated genes. Genetic variants have been shown to impact TF–DNA binding events (De Gobbi *et al.*, 2006; Wienert *et al.*, 2015; Weinhold *et al.*, 2014) including variants associated with common diseases in regulatory elements (Maurano *et al.*, 2012) potentially altering the transcriptional state of the cell (Deplancke *et al.*, 2016). As a result, there has been a growing interest in developing tools to predict the impact of variants on TFBS (**Table 2.3**). TRAP (Thomas-Chollier *et al.*, 2011) and CATO (Maurano *et al.*, 2015) use PWMs to predict the impact of variants on TFBS by comparing the binding affinity scores of reference and alternative sequences. TRAP repeats the procedure on a collection of TFBS, reporting the motif showing

Motif model	Software	Reference	Original input data type	Output	Year
PWM	TRAP	(Thomas-Chollier <i>et al.</i> , 2011)	ChIP-seq	Allele-specific score	2011
PWM	CATO score	(Maurano <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	DHS sites	Ranked list of TFBS affected by SNPs	2015
PWM	atSNP	(Zuo <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	Sequences overlapping input SNPs	Allele-specific score	2015
PWM	GRAFIMO	(Tognon <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	ChIP-seq	Allele-specific score	2021
PWM	MotifRaptor	(Yao <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	DNase-seq	Allele-specific score	2021
SVM based	DeltaSVM	(Lee <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	DNase-seq	Allele-specific score	2015
SVM based	GkmExplain	(Shrikumar <i>et al.</i> , 2019)	DNase-seq	SNP impact on whole TFBS	2019
DNN based	DeepBind	(Alipanahi <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	ChIP-seq, HT-SELEX	Single SNP impact	2015
DNN based	DeepSEA	(Zhou and Troyanskaya, 2015)	ATAC-seq, DNase-seq	Single SNP impact	2015
DNN based	Basset	(Kelley <i>et al.</i> , 2016)	ChIP-seq, DNase-seq	Single SNP impact	2016
DNN based	Basenji	(Kelley <i>et al.</i> , 2018)	ChIP-seq, DNase-seq	Single SNP functional impact	2018
DNN based	Enformer	(Avsec <i>et al.</i> , 2021b)	DNA sequences	SNP functional impact	2021

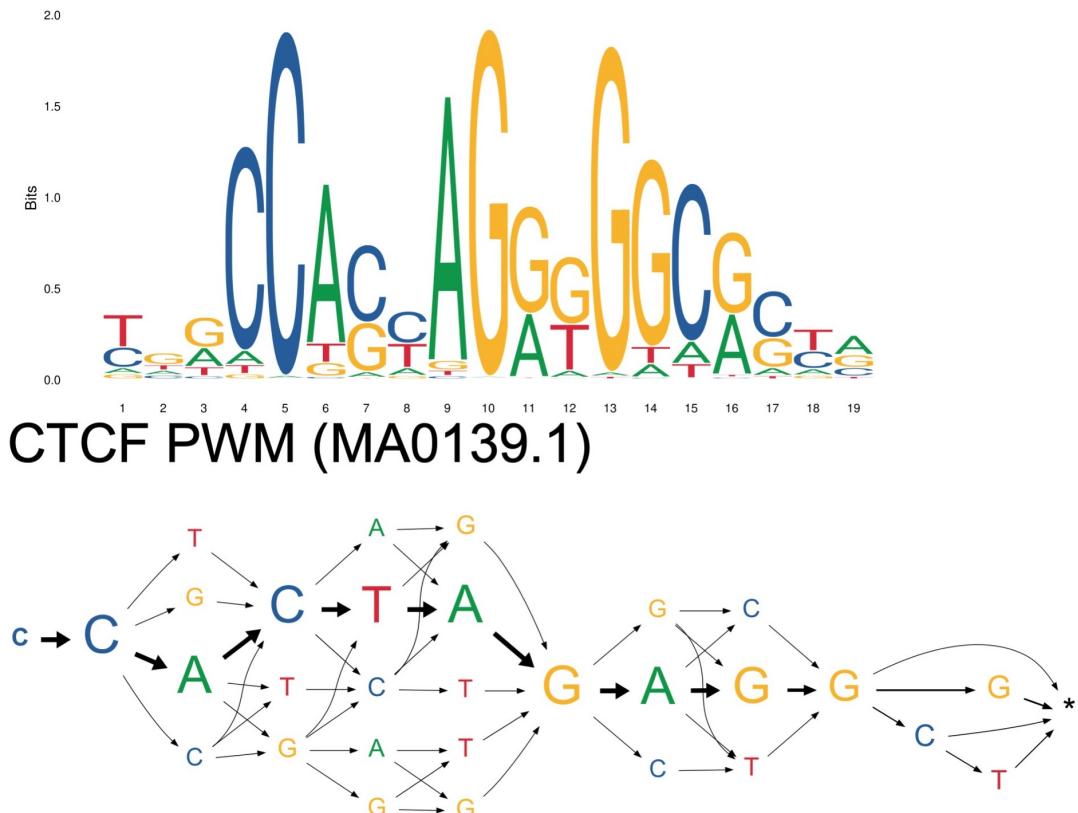
**Table 2.3. Software to assess genetic variants impact on transcription factor binding sites.** The table provides an overview of the tools for predicting the impact of variants on TFBS as discussed in Section 5. For each tool, the table report the employed TFBS model (Motif model), the original data type used to test each method in their original publication (Original input data type), the output type (Output), the year (Year) and the associated publication (Reference)

the largest score change. CATO, instead, provides a ranked list of disrupted motifs, obtained using a logistic model trained with the information content difference between reference and alternative sequences, TF occupancy and phylogenetic conservation. However, these methods are not scalable when analyzing thousands of single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs). atSNP (Zuo *et al.*, 2015) proposed a scalable strategy to assess the impact of thousands of SNPs on TFBS by computing the statistical significance of the computed affinity scores, in addition to the difference between the reference and alternative sequence binding scores using PWMs. GRAFIMO (Tognon *et al.*, 2021) extended the scalability to millions of SNPs by scanning collections of PWMs on genome graphs, while accounting for haplotypes. MotifRaptor (Yao *et al.*, 2021) integrates chromatin accessibility, gene expression and GWAS summary statistics, to predict and annotate functional effects for large non-coding variant datasets, using PWMs. DeltaSVM (Lee *et al.*, 2015) and GkmExplain (Shrikumar *et al.*, 2019) se SVM-based motif models to assess variant impact. DeltaSVM scans DNA positions overlapping each SNP in the input dataset using a pretrained list of  $k$ -mers with associated weights and computing the difference between the reference and alternative sequence scores. However, it assesses the impact of individual variants, not accounting for relationships between variants. GkmExplain overcomes this limitation by considering the impact of variants not in individual positions, but on sequence features, like entire  $k$ -mers. DeepBind (Alipanahi *et al.*, 2015) and DeepSEA (Zhou and Troyanskaya, 2015) employ DNN-based models to predict variant impact on TFBS. DeepBind uses mutation maps to assess variant effect on binding affinities by considering the importance of each motif position within the model. DeepSEA uses in silico saturated mutagenesis to predict the impact of individual variants on the whole sequence context and features like TFBS. Similarly, Basset (Kelley *et al.*, 2016) employs in silico saturated mutagenesis by learning critical nucleotides governing chromatin accessibility. Basset assigns importance scores to each position in the input sequences and attempts to map the variants' impact to the TFBS in the input sequences. Basenji (Kelley *et al.*, 2018) extends Basset's workflow by providing functional annotations to SNPs affecting sequence features like TFBS and returning potential changes in gene expression patterns. However, Basenji is limited to predict SNP effects on distal regulatory elements within a 20 kb range. Enformer (Avsec *et al.*, 2021b) overcomes this limitation by employing transformer architectures to extend the range up to 200 kb, providing more comprehensive and accurate functional effects of variants on sequence elements and gene expression.



# Motif Graphs

Several studies showed that TFs present population-specific (Kasowski *et al.*, 2010), cell-type-specific (Gertz *et al.*, 2013; Arvey *et al.*, 2012), and even individual-specific (Tognon *et al.*, 2021) binding sites. Algorithms analyzing only the reference genome would provide general models, which could return wrong TFBS predictions when analyzing personal genomic sequences. Motif models integrating data from different populations, cell-types, or individuals would recover more reliable TFBS occurrence predictions (**Fig.3.3 (A)**). Moreover, such models would better predict the consequences of noncoding variants on TF-DNA binding events, and they could encode variable orders of nucleotide dependencies. Importantly, graph data structures are often interpretable and intuitive. With this aims in mind we developed the Motif Graph, a framework integrating the advantages of *probabilistic graphical models-based* and *SVM-based* motif discovery algorithms, without sacrificing model interpretability. A Motif Graph model  $G$  is defined by a set of vertices  $V$ , a set of edges  $E$ , and a set of paths  $P$ . Each vertex  $v \in V$  on the graph is labeled with a nucleotide, or mathematically  $\text{label}(v) \in \{A, C, G, T\}$ . Each edge  $e \in E$  represents the allowed links between consecutive nucleotides in the TFBS motif. Each path  $p \in P$  represents a *haplotype* embedded in  $G$ , which correspond to one sequence used to train the Motif Graph model. Currently, the



**CTCF motif graph**

**Figure 3.3. Comparison between CTCF MotifGraph model and its PWM from the JASPAR database.** On top the CTCF motif available on JASPAR database (MA0139.1). On the bottom the Motif Graph model trained using 100 k-mers obtained from a ChIP-seq experiment targeting CTCF binding site on HepG2 cell line.

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model is limited to encode 1st order dependencies between consecutive nucleotides. However, the model is flexible and accomodate variable length motifs, beside recording the training sequences.

### 3.1 Motif Graph model construction

Motif Graph motif discovery procedure (**Algorithm 1**) is constituted of two main steps:  $k$ -mers prioritization, and graph model training and construction. To prioritize the  $k$ -mers Motif Graph currently employs the  $k$ -mer based motif discovery procedure implemented in Gkm-SVM (Ghandi *et al.*, 2014a). Therefore, given a positive sequence dataset  $S$  and a background dataset  $B$ , for each  $k$ -mer of length  $k$  in  $S$ , the algorithm counts the number of matches in  $S$  and in  $B$ , allowing mismatching positions (see **Section 2.1.2** for further details). Then, a similarity kernel is trained using the recovered  $k$ -mers frequencies. The trained kernel assigns to each  $k$ -mer in  $S$  and in  $B$  a weight proportional to its contribution in defining the foreground or the background dataset. The algorithm then ranks the  $k$ -mers according to their weight scores. The Motif Graph model is iteratively trained employing a greedy approach, which adds the top ranked  $k$ -mers to  $G$  incrementally, one by one (see **Algorithm 2** for details). Each  $k$ -mer is aligned to the current  $G$  to maximize the number of nucleotides matching the current model. While aligning the  $k$ -mers to the current Motif Graph model, the algorithm shifts the input  $k$ -mer on the right and on the left up to a defined offset number of nucleotides. In our experiments with set the offset to 3. Once built the model, we construct a scoring matrix similar to the widely used *PSSM*. However, our scoring matrix account for 1st order dependencies between nucleotides, recalling the well-known DWMs (see **Section 2.1.3** for details). The scoring matrix is used to assign a likelihood score and classify new sequences as potentially bound or not bound by the investigated factor. In other words, the score describes how likely is the scanned sequence to contain a potential binding site. To score a sequence we slide the scoring matrix along the string employing a procedure similar to classical PWM scanning tools like FIMO (Grant *et al.*, 2011).

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**Algorithm 1: Motif Graph motif discovery.**

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**Input:**  $S, B, k$   
**Output:**  $G$

```

1 frequencies ← countFrequencies( $S, B, k$ )
2 kernel ← trainKernel(frequencies)
3 kmers, weights ← extractWeights(kernel)
4 rankedKmer ← sort(kmers, weights)
5  $G \leftarrow \emptyset$ 
6 for kmer in rankedKmers do
7    $\leftarrow G \leftarrow \text{addKmers}(G, \text{kmer})$ 
8 return  $G$ 
```

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**Algorithm 2: Motif Graph model training.**

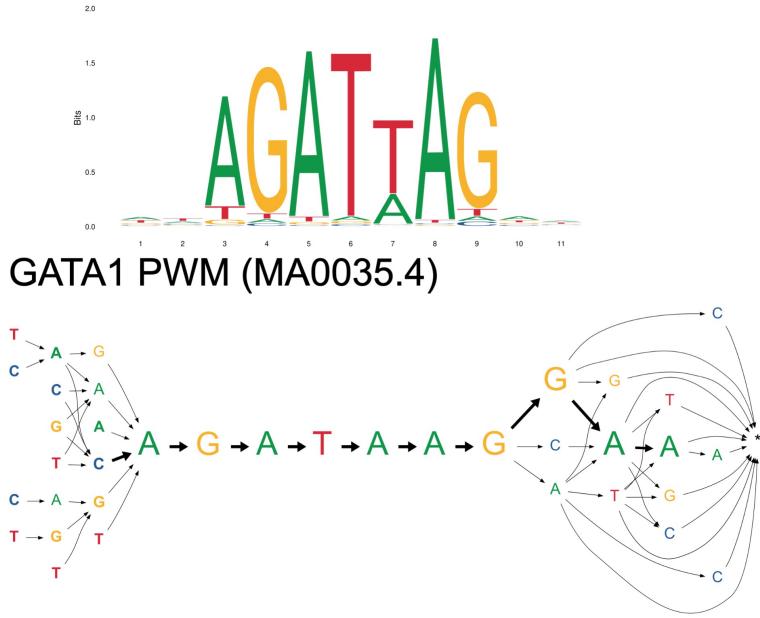
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**Input:**  $G$ , kmer,  $i$   
**Output:**  $G$

```

1 if  $i = 1$  then
2    $\leftarrow \text{return } G$ 
3 for  $j$  in 1 to 3 do
4    $\leftarrow \text{matchesLeftOffset, alignmnetLeft} \leftarrow \text{countMatchesLeftOffset}(G, \text{kmer}, j)$ 
5 for  $j$  in 1 to 3 do
6    $\leftarrow \text{matchesRightOffset, alignmnetRight} \leftarrow \text{countMatchesRightOffset}(G, \text{kmer}, j)$ 
7  $\leftarrow \text{getBestAlignment}(\text{matchesLeftOffset, alignmentLeft, matchesRightOffset, alignmentRight})$ 
8  $G \leftarrow \text{insertKmer}(G, \text{alignment})$ 
9 return  $G$ 
```

---



**GATA1 motif graph**

**Figure 3.4.** Comparison between GATA1 MotifGraph model and its PWM from the JASPAR database. On top the GATA1 motif available on JASPAR database (MA0035.4). On the bottom the Motif Graph model trained using 100 k-mers obtained from a ChIP-seq experiment targeting GATA1 binding site on K562 cell line.

Training k-mers	10	50	100	200	350	500	750
AUC	0.69	0.69	0.72	0.63	0.60	0.55	0.55
F1-score	0.62	0.69	0.71	0.65	0.62	0.57	0.56

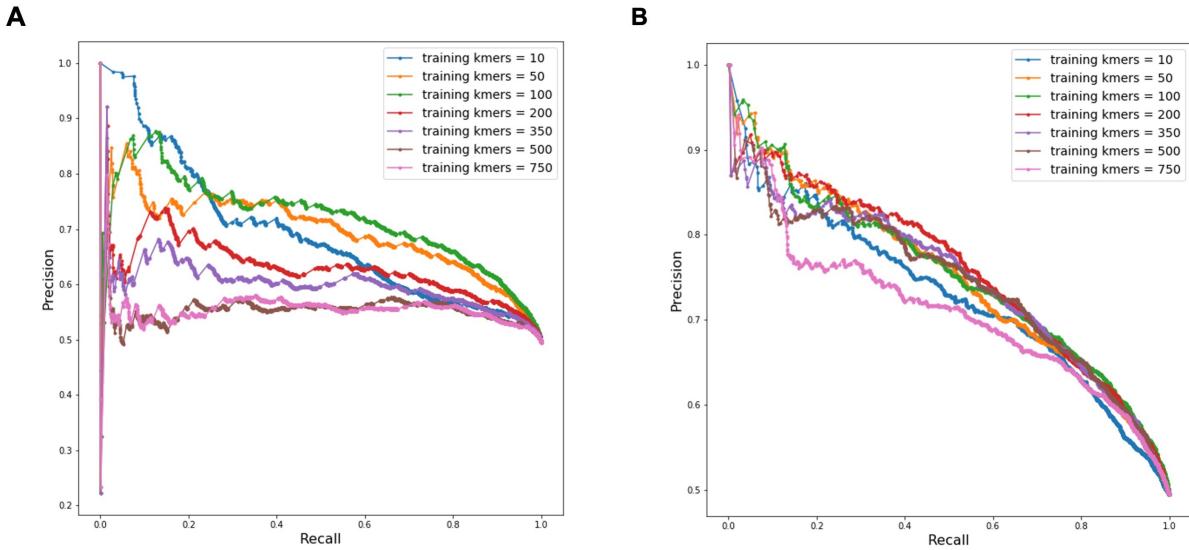
**Table 3.4.** CTCF Motif Graph model AUC and F1-scores values with different number of training k-mers.

## 3.2 Results

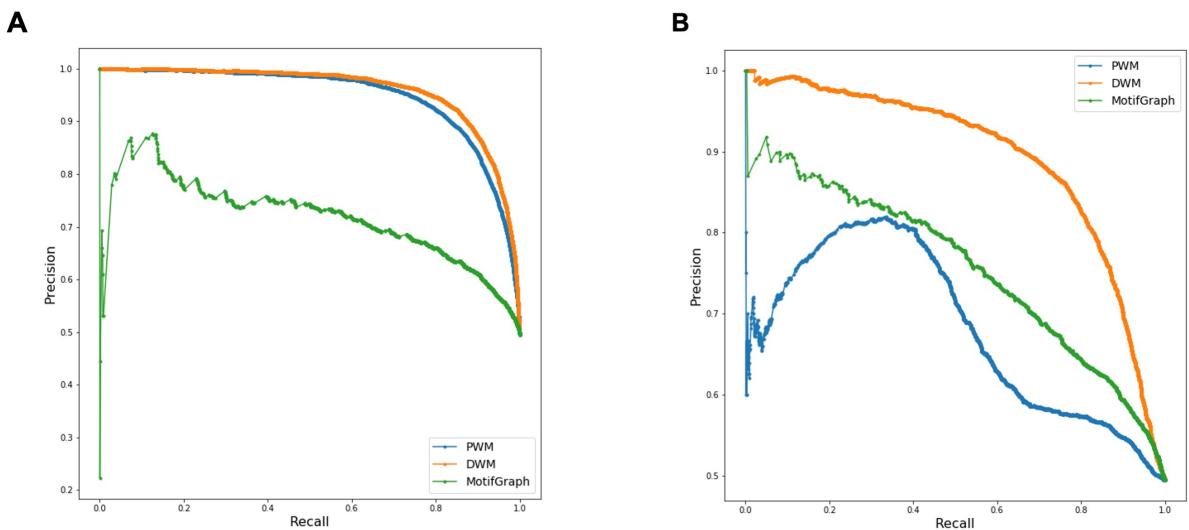
To test our motif discovery algorithm we obtained 10,000 ChIP-seq peak sequences from the ENCODE Project database (Consortium *et al.*, 2012) for CTCF and GATA1 Transcription Factors, obtained on the HepG2 and K562 cell lines, respectively. The original ChIP-seq datasets were sorted according to the peaks enrichment score in decreasing order, in order to test our algorithm on reliable peaks. Interestingly, the trained Motif Graph models were closed to the motifs PWM available on the JASPAR database (Sandelin *et al.*, 2004) for both CTCF and GATA1 (**Fig.3.3** and **Fig.3.4**). For both TFs, the Motif Graph models captured the main motif sequence. The main motifs are also enforced by the edge thickness which is proportional to the number of training k-mers supporting each  $p \in P$ . Then, we tested the discriminative performance of both Motif Graph model, with different number of training k-mers (**Fig.3.5**), to establish the optimal number of training sequences for the CTCF and GATA1 Motif Graph models. To compare the models discriminative performance, we performed a cross-validation experiment using splitting the  $S$  and  $B$  dataset in training and testing set (75% and 25%, respectively). We trained the models with 10, 50, 100, 200, 350, 500, and 750 k-mers. For CTCF the best performance in terms of both AUC (0.72) and F1-score (0.71) were obtained training the Motif Graph on 100 k-mers (**Table 3.4**). For GATA1 the model returned the best AUC using 200 k-mers (0.76), while the best F1-score (0.70) was obtained training the model with 100 sequences (**Table 3.5**). Then, we compared the Motif Graph models discriminative performance against the corresponding PWM and DWM models, recovered from JASPAR (Sandelin *et al.*, 2004) and HOCOMOCO (Kulakovskiy *et al.*, 2016) databases, respectively. For CTCF, both the PWM and the DWM models returned better predictive performance than our model (**Fig.3.6 (A)**). On the other hand, on GATA1 data our model showed better performance than PWMs, but still performed worse than DWMs (**Fig.3.6 (B)**).

Training k-mers	10	50	100	200	350	500	750
AUC	0.73	0.75	0.75	0.76	0.74	0.74	0.71
F1-score	0.68	0.68	0.70	0.69	0.70	0.69	0.67

**Table 3.5.** GATA1 Motif Graph model AUC and F1-scores values with different number of training k-mers.



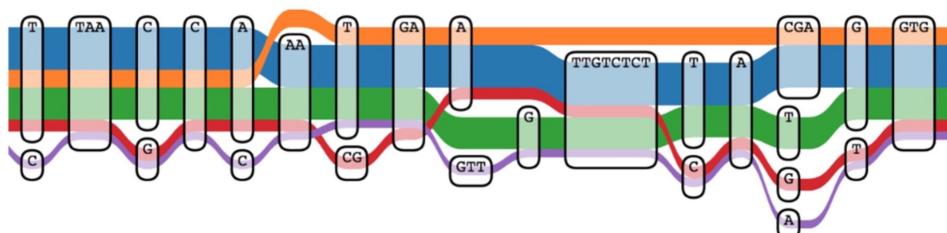
**Figure 3.5. Precision-Recall curves obtained varying the number of  $k$ -mers used to train the Motif Graph models.** To establish the number of training  $k$ -mers returning the best discriminative performance we computed the Precision-Recall curves of different Motif Graph models trained using 10, 50, 100, 200, 350, 500, and 750  $k$ -mers on (A) CTCF and (B) GATA1



**Figure 3.6. Comparing Motif Graph, PWM, and DWM Precision-Recall curves.** We compared the discriminative power of the Motif Graph models against that of PWMs and DWMS for both (A) CTCF and (B) GATA1.

# Predicting genetic variants impact on transcription factor binding sites

Many have highlighted the significant influence of genetic variations on TF-DNA binding events (De Gobbi *et al.*, 2006; Weinhold *et al.*, 2014; Guo *et al.*, 2018). Genome-wide association studies (GWASs) have revealed thousands of genetic variants, known as single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs), that are associated with complex human traits. Notably, these SNPs are typically situated within noncoding regions of the genome, many of which function as regulatory elements such as enhancers (Maurano *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, SNPs have the potential to influence gene expression by modulating TF-DNA interactions. These genetic variants can disrupt TF-DNA binding sequences, potentially leading to alterations in downstream gene expression patterns (Deplancke *et al.*, 2016). Crucially, mutations that affect transcription factor binding sites (TFBS) can persist within specific haplotypes found in populations (Kasowski *et al.*, 2010),, contributing to the emergence of population-specific TFBS. Similarly, genetic variability between cell types can give rise to cell-type-specific TF target sequences. Therefore, it becomes imperative to develop software tools capable of predicting the potential impact of genetic variations on TFBS specificity, while also considering haplotype and cell-type-specific mutations. In pursuit of this goal, we have introduced two tools designed for predicting the effects of mutations on TFBS within haplotypes and across different cell types. GRAFIMO (Tognon *et al.*, 2021) is a variant- and haplotype-aware motif scanning tool searching potential occurrences of known TF motifs on genome graphs (Paten *et al.*, 2017). Briefly, genome graphs are graph-based data structures, where nodes correspond to DNA sequences and edges describe allowed links between successive sequences. Paths through the graph, which may be labelled (such as in the case of a reference genome), correspond to haplotypes belonging to different genomes (Sirén *et al.*, 2020) (**Fig.5.7**). MotifRaptor (Yao *et al.*, 2021) investigates the imapct of genetic variants on TFBS interpolating different omics data, such as cell type-specific transcriptomic data and chromatin accessibility. In particular, MotifRaptor is designed to support researchers while annotating variants located within non-coding regions, and provides a potential functional annotation for these mutations. In our research we extend the current MotifRaptor to employ SVM-based motif models (**section 2.1.2**), which often provide better predictions on variants impact than PWM models (Tognon *et al.*, 2023).



**Figure 5.7. Genome Graphs data structure visualization.** Each color corresponds to a path in the graph. Each path represents the genomic sequences of one of the individual genomes encoded in the Genome Graph structure.

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## 5.1 GRAFIMO

In recent years, several tools have been proposed for scanning regulatory DNA regions, such as enhancers or promoters, with the goal of predicting which TF may bind these genomic locations. Importantly, it has been shown that regulatory motifs are under purifying selection (Li and Ovcharenko, 2015; Vorontsov *et al.*, 2016), and mutations occurring in these regions can lead to deleterious consequences on the transcriptional states of a cell (Guo *et al.*, 2018). In fact, mutations can weaken, disrupt or create new TFBS and therefore alter expression of nearby genes. Mutations altering TFBS can occur in haplotypes that are conserved within a population or private to even a single individual, and can correspond to different phenotypic behaviour (Kasowski *et al.*, 2010). For these reasons, population-level analysis of variability in TFBSs is of crucial importance to understand the effect of common or rare variants to gene regulation. Recently, a new class of methods and data structures based on genome graphs have enabled us to succinctly record and efficiently query thousands of genomes. Genome graphs optimally encode shared and individual haplotypes based on a population of individuals. An efficient and scalable implementation of this approach called variation graphs (VGs) has been recently proposed (Garrison *et al.*, 2018). VGs offer new opportunities to extend classic genome analyses originally designed for a single reference sequence to a panel of individuals. Moreover, by encoding individual haplotypes, VGs have been shown to be an effective framework to capture the potential effects of personal genetic variants on functional genomic regions profiled by ChIP-seq of histone marks (Groza *et al.*, 2020). During the last decade, several methods have been developed to search TFBS on linear reference genomes, such as FIMO (Grant *et al.*, 2011) and MOODS (Korhonen *et al.*, 2009) or to account for SNPs and short indels such as is-rSNP, TRAP and atSNP (Macintyre *et al.*, 2010; Thomas-Chollier *et al.*, 2011; Zuo *et al.*, 2015), however these tools do not account for individual haplotypes nor provide summary on the frequency of these events in a population. To solve these challenges, we have developed GRAFIMO (GRAph-based Finding of Individual Motif Occurrences) (Tognon *et al.*, 2021), a tool that offers a variation- and haplotype-aware identification of TFBS in VGs. Here, we show the utility of GRAFIMO by searching TFBS on a VG encoding the haplotypes from all the individuals sequenced by the 1000 Genomes Project (1000GP) (Siva, 2008; Zheng-Bradley *et al.*, 2017).

### 5.1.1 Desing and implementation

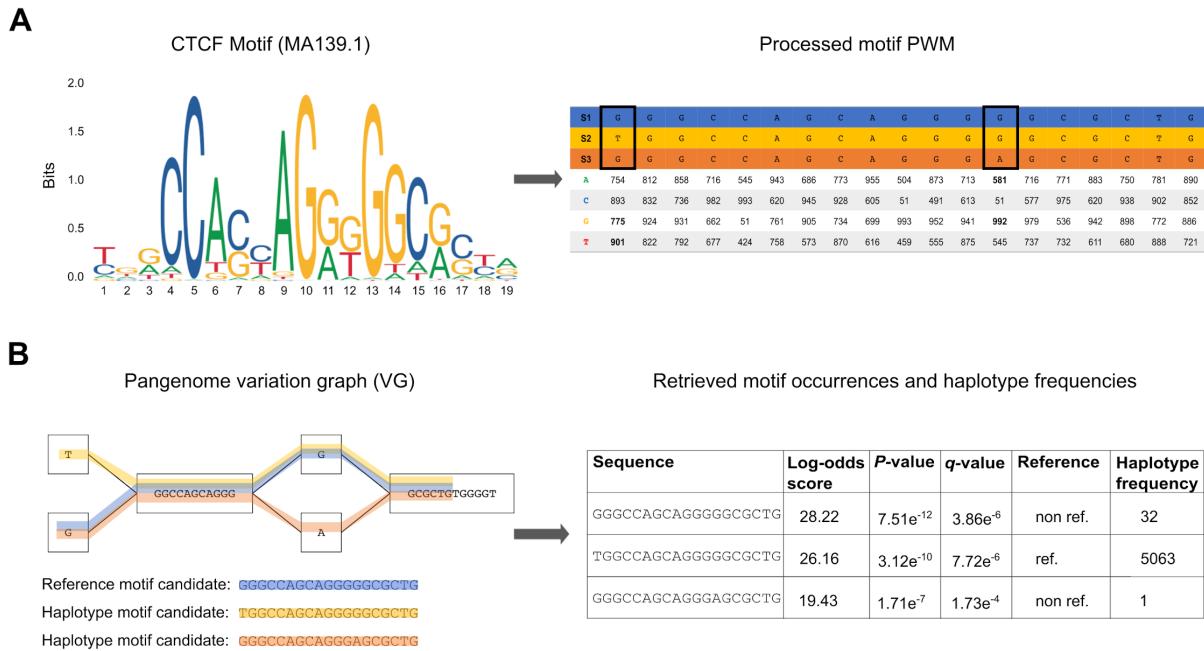
GRAFIMO is a command-line tool, which enables a variant- and haplotype- aware search of TFBS, within a population of individuals encoded in a VG. GRAFIMO offers two main functionalities: the construction of custom VGs, from user data, and the search of one or more TF motifs, in precomputed VGs. Briefly, given a TF model (PWM) and a set of genomic regions, GRAFIMO leverages the VG to efficiently scan and report all the TFBS candidates and their frequency in the different haplotypes in a single pass together with the predicted changes in binding affinity mediated by genetic variations. GRAFIMO is written in Python3 and Cython and it has been designed to easily interface with the *vg* software suite.

#### Genome variation graph construction

GRAFIMO provides a simple command-line interface to build custom genome variation graphs if necessary. Given a reference genome (FASTA format) and a set of genomic variants with respect to the reference (VCF format), GRAFIMO interfaces with the VG software suite to build the main VG data structure, the XG graph index (Garrison *et al.*, 2018) and the GBWT index (Novak *et al.*, 2017), used to track the haplotypes within the VG. To minimize the footprint of these files and speedup the computation, GRAFIMO constructs the genome variation graph by building a VG for each chromosome. This also speeds-up the search operation since we can scan different chromosomes in parallel. Alternatively, the search can be performed one chromosome at the time for machines with limited RAM.

#### Transcription factor motif search

The motif search operation takes as input a set of genomes encoded in a VG (.xg format), a database of known TF motifs and a set of genomic regions (BED format), and reports in output all the TFBS motifs occurrences in those regions and their estimated significance (**Fig.5.8**). To search for potential TFBS, GRAFIMO slides a window of length k (where k is the width of the query motif) along the paths of the VG corresponding to the genomic sequences encoded in it (**Fig.5.8(B)**). This is accomplished by an extension to the *vg find* function, which uses the GBWT index of the graph to explore the *k*-mer space of the graph



**Figure 5.8. GRAFIMO TF motif search workflow.** (A) The motif PWM (in MEME or JASPAR format) is processed and its values are scaled in the range [0, 1000]. The resulting score matrix is used to assign a score and a corresponding P-value to each motif occurrence candidate. In the final report GRAFIMO returns the corresponding log-odds scores, which are retrieved from the scaled values. (B) GRAFIMO slides a window of length k, where k is the motif width, along the haplotypes (paths in the graph) of the genomes used to build the VG. The resulting sequences are scored using the motif scoring matrix and are statistically tested assigning them the corresponding P-value and q-value. Moreover, for each entry is assigned a flag value stating if it belongs to the reference genome sequence ("ref") or contains genomic variants ("non.ref") and is computed the number of haplotypes in which the sequence appears.

while accounting for the haplotypes embedded in it. By default, GRAFIMO considers only paths that correspond to observed haplotypes, however it is possible also to consider all possible recombinants even if they are not present in any individual. The significance (log-likelihood) of each potential binding site is calculated by considering the nucleotide preferences encoded in the PWM as in FIMO. More precisely, the PWM is processed to a Position Specific Scoring Matrix (PSSM) (Fig.5.8(A)). and the resulting log-likelihood values are then scaled in the range [0, 1000] to efficiently calculate a statistical significance i.e. a P-value by dynamic programming as in FIMO (Grant *et al.*, 2011). P-values are then converted to q-values by using the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure to account for multiple hypothesis testing. For this procedure, we consider all the P-values corresponding to all the k-mer-paths extracted within the scanned regions on the VG. GRAFIMO computes also the number of haplotypes in which a significant motif is observed and if it is present in the reference genome and/or in alternative genomes (Fig.5.8(B)).

### Report generation

We have designed the interface of GRAFIMO based on FIMO, so it can be used as in-drop replacement for tools built on top of FIMO. As in FIMO, the results are available in three files: a tab-delimited file (TSV), a HTML report and a GFF3 file compatible with the UCSC Genome Browser (Lee *et al.*, 2020). The TSV report contains for each candidate TFBS its score, genomic location (start, stop and strand), P-value, q-value, the number of haplotypes in which it is observed and a flag value to assess if it belongs to the reference or to the other genomes in VG. The HTML version of the TSV report can be viewed with any web browser. The GFF3 file can be loaded on the UCSC genome browser as a custom track, to visualize and explore the recovered TFBS with other annotations such as nearby genes, enhancers, promoters, or pathogenic variants from the ClinVar database (Landrum *et al.*, 2020).

#### 5.1.2 Searching motif occurrences with GRAFIMO

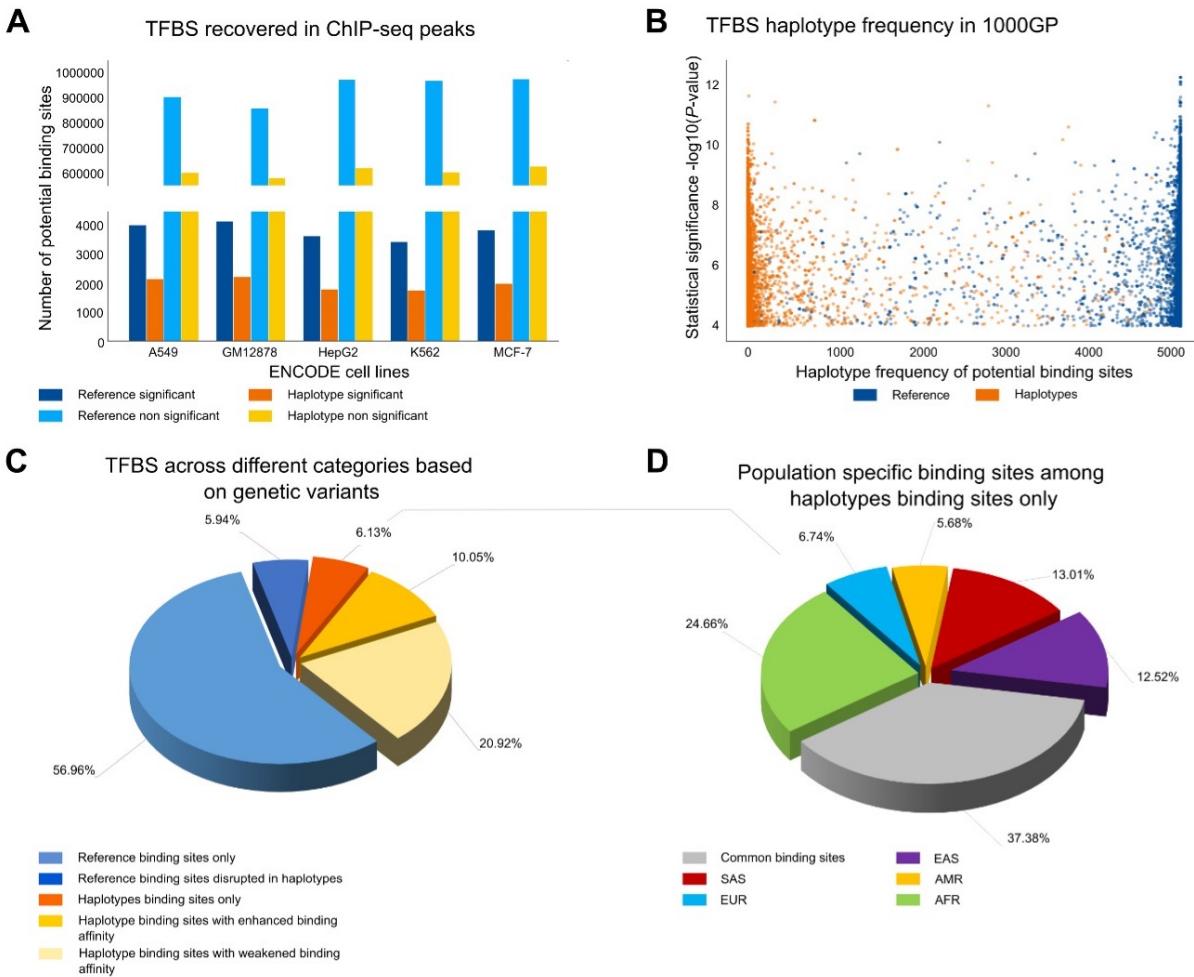
GRAFIMO can be used to study how genetic variants may affect the binding affinity of potential TFBS within a set of individuals and may recover additional sites that are missed when considering only linear

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reference genomes without information about variants. To showcase its utility, we first constructed a VG based on 2548 individuals from the 1000GP phase 3 (hg38 human genome assembly) encoding their genomic variants and phased haplotypes. We then searched this VG for putative TFBS for three TF motifs with different lengths (from 11 to 19 bp), evolutionary conservation, and information content from the JASPAR database (Fornes *et al.*, 2020): CTCF (JASPAR ID MA0139.1), ATF3 (JASPAR ID MA0605.2) and GATA1 (JASPAR ID MA0035.4). To study regions with likely true binding events, for each factor we selected regions corresponding to peaks (top 3000 sorted by q-value) obtained by ChIP-seq experiments in 6 different cell types (A549, GM12878, H1, HepG2, K562, MCF-7) from the ENCODE project (Consortium *et al.*, 2012). We used GRAFIMO to scan these regions and selected for our downstream analyses only sites with a P-value  $\leq 1e-4$  and considered them as potential TFBS for these factors. Based on the recovered sites, we consistently observed across the 3 studied TFs that genetic variants can significantly affect estimated binding affinity. In fact, we found that thousands of CTCF motif occurrences are found only in non-reference haplotypes, suggesting that a considerable number of TFBS candidates are lost when scanning for TFBS the genome without accounting for genetic variants (**Fig.5.9(A)**). Similar results were obtained searching for ATF3 and GATA1. We also found several highly significant CTCF motif occurrences in rare haplotypes that may potentially modulate gene expression in these individuals (**Fig.5.9(B)**). Similar behaviours were observed for ATF3 and GATA1. We also investigated the potential effects of the different length and type of mutations i.e. SNPs and indels on the CTCF, ATF3 and GATA1 binding sites. However, we did not observe a clear and general trend. By considering the genomic locations of the significant motif occurrences we next investigated how often individual TFBS may be disrupted, created or modulated. We observed that 6.13% of the potential CTCF binding sites can be found only on non-reference haplotype sequences, 5.94% are disrupted by variants in non-reference haplotypes and  $\sim 30\%$  are still significant in non-reference haplotypes but with different binding scores (**Fig.5.9(C)**). Similar results were observed for ATF3 and GATA1. Interestingly, we observed that a large fraction of putative binding sites recovered only on individual haplotypes are population specific. For CTCF we found that 24.66%, 6.74%, 5.68%, 13.01%, 12.52% of potential CTCF TFBS retrieved on individual haplotype sequences only are specific for AFR, EUR, AMR, SAS and EAS populations, respectively (**Fig.5.9(D)**). Among the unique CTCF motif occurrences found only on non-reference haplotypes in CTCF ChIP-seq peaks we uncovered one TFBS (chr19:506,910–506,929) that clearly illustrates the danger of only using reference genomes for motif scanning. Within this region we recovered a heterozygous SNP that overlaps (position 10 of the CTCF matrix) and significantly modulates the binding affinity of this TFBS. In fact, by inspecting the ChIP-seq reads (experiment ENCSR000DZN, GM12878 cell line), we observed a clear allelic imbalance towards the alternative allele G (70.59% of reads) with respect to the reference allele A (29.41% of reads). This allelic imbalance is not observed in the reads used as control (experiment code ENCSR000EYX) (**Fig.5.10**). Taken together these results highlight the importance of considering non-reference genomes when searching for potential TFBS or to characterize their potential activity in a population of individuals. We also compared the performance of GRAFIMO against FIMO. FIMO is faster and requires less memory, when scanning a single linear genome. However, when considering the 2548 individual genomes and their genetic variation, GRAFIMO proves to be generally faster than FIMO. Moreover, we benchmarked how GRAFIMO running time and memory usage change using an increasing number of threads. By increasing the number of threads, we observed a dramatical drop in running time, while memory usage remained similar.

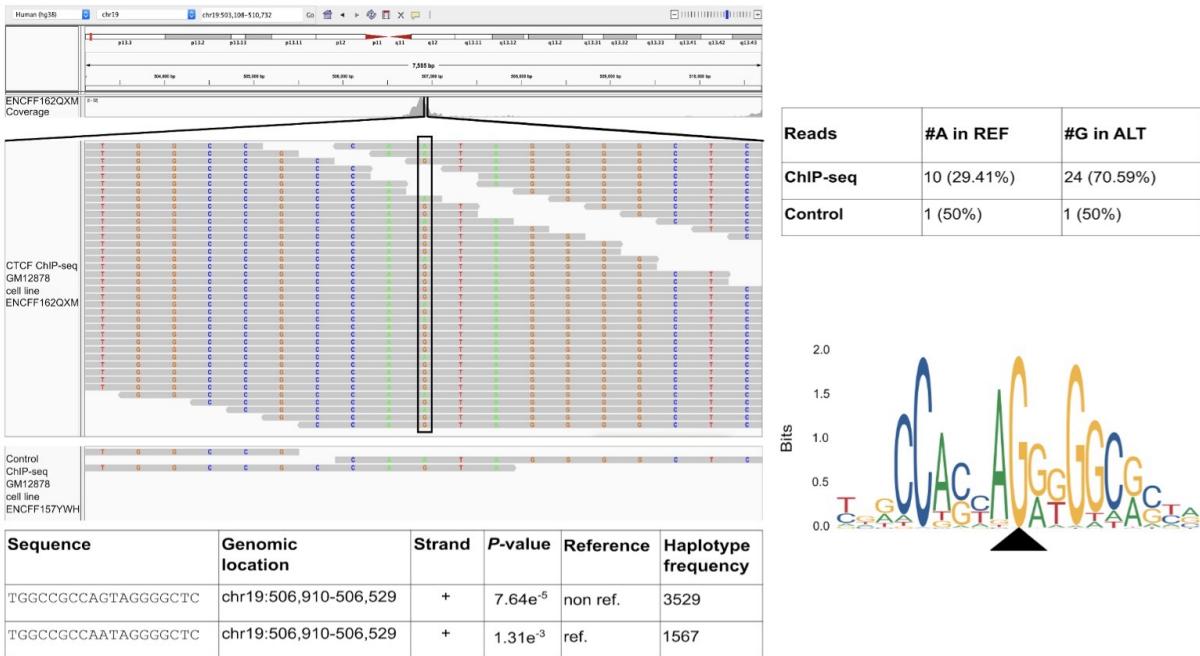
## 5.2 MotifRaptor2

Several studies showed that genetic variants can enhance or disrupt TF-DNA binding affinities. Moreover, most of the SNPs ( $\sim 90\%$ ) associated to common diseases and complex phenotypical traits thorough GWAS analyses have been located within REs, such as enhancers or promoters. MotifRaptor exploits cell-type specific data, like chromatin accessibility and gene expression, to predict the impact of SNPs prioritized via GWAS on TFBS sequence and the corresponding TF-DNA interactions. MotifRaptor workflow is currently constituted of three steps (**Fig.5.11**). (i) Characterize important cell-types through the enrichment of the phenotype associated SNPs in open chromatin regions. (ii) Search TFBS whose binding potential is significantly modulated by the previously prioritized variants, in the investigated cell-types. (iii) Identify and visualize individual TF-SNP modulation events. The original MotifRaptor employed TFBS PWM models to predict SNP impact on the binding sites of the investigated factor. However, PWMS have several limitations, like the assumption of independence between neighboring and non-neighboring nucleotides within TF target sites, and often they require large amount of training data to return reliable models (Zhao and Stormo, 2011) (see **Section 2.1.3** for details). *K*-mer-based motif

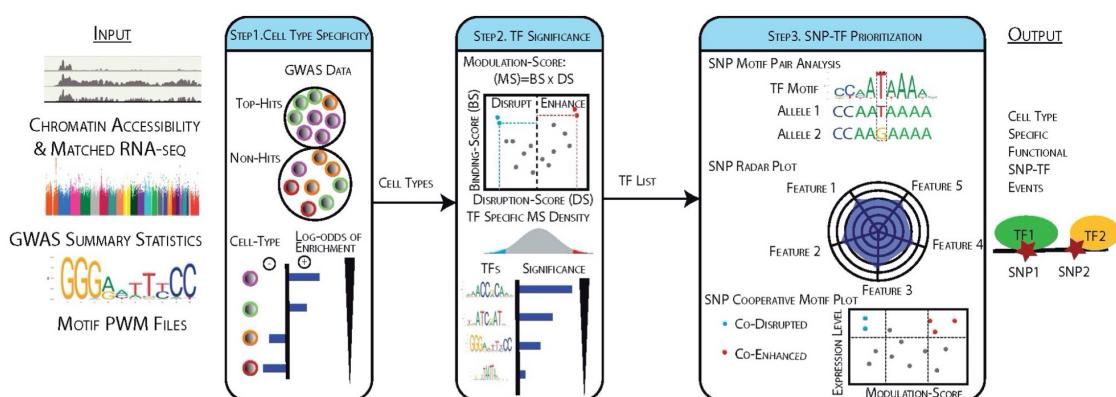
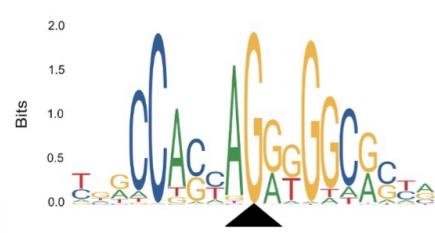


**Figure 5.9. Searching CTCF motif on VG with GRAFIMO provides an insight on how genetic variation affects putative binding sites.** (A) Potential CTCF occurrences statistically significant ( $P\text{-value} \leq 10^{-4}$ ) and non-significant found in the reference and in the haplotype sequences found with GRAFIMO on hg38 1000GP VG. (B) Statistical significance of retrieved potential CTCF motif occurrences and frequency of the corresponding haplotypes embedded in the VG. (C) Percentage of statistically significant CTCF potential binding sites found only in the reference genome or alternative haplotypes and with modulated binding scores based on 1000GP genetic variants (D) Percentage of population specific and common (shared by two or more populations) potential CTCF binding sites present on individual haplotypes.

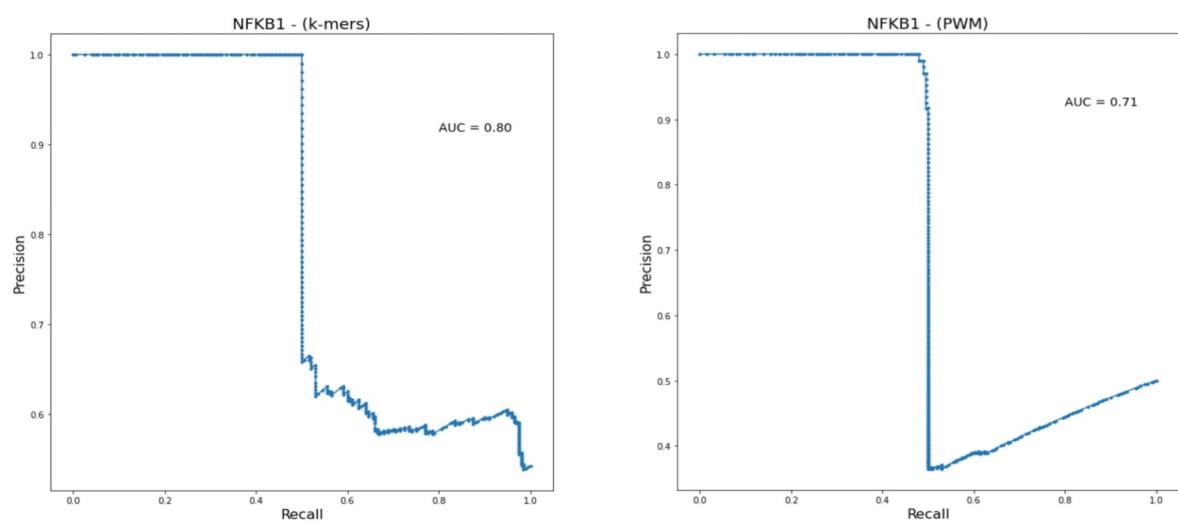
models address some of PWMs' limitations. (i)  $K$ -mers are features that are either present or not in the training dataset, therefore, the resulting models do not require large amount of training data. (ii)  $K$ -mers capture  $k$ th order dependencies between neighboring nucleotides. Therefore, we extended the MotifRaptor analysis to consider  $k$ -mer-based motif models to assess the impact of genetic variants on TFBS. With this aim we integrated Gkm-SVM analysis pipeline in MotifRaptor framework, to compute sequence scores reflecting SNPs impact on binding sites. We tested MotifRaptor2 by predicting how NFKB1, RUNX3 and STAT1 binding landscapes are affected by genetic variation, considering SNPs linked to rheumatoid arthritis trait. The  $k$ -mer based models for the investigated TFs were obtained using Gkm-SVM on ChIP-seq peak sequences from the ENCODE Project database. Interestingly, we observed that  $k$ -mer-based motif models show a higher discriminative power than PWM when identifying bound and unbound sequences (ChIP-seq peak and random sequences, respectively) (Fig.5.12). Therefore, MotifRaptor2 is a promising tool to produce reliable predictions regarding genetic variants impact on transcription factors binding landscapes.



**Figure 5.10. Considering genomic variation, GRAFIMO captures more potential binding events.** GRAFIMO reports a potential CTCF binding site at chr19:506,910-506,929 found only in haplotype sequences, searching the motif in ChIP-seq peaks called on cell line GM12878 (experiment code ENCSR000DZN). The reads used to call for ChIP-seq peaks (ENCF162QXM) show an allelic imbalance at position 10 of the motif sequence towards the alternative allele G, instead of the reference allele A. The imbalance is captured by GRAFIMO which reports the sequence presenting G at position 10 (found in the haplotypes), while the potential TFBS on the reference carrying an A is not reported as statistically significant ( $P$ -value  $\gtrsim 1e-4$ ). CTCF motif logo shows that the G is the dominant nucleotide in position 10.



**Figure 5.11. MotifRaptor analysis workflow.** Three steps are performed: (1) characterize relevant cell types based on the enrichment of phenotype associated SNPs in chromatin accessible sites, (2) find TFs with binding sites that are significantly modulated by genetic variants in these cell types and (3) identify and visualize individual TF-SNP regulation events



**Figure 5.12.** Precision-Recall curves for NFKB1 models ( $k$ -mers and PWM) and AUC.



# CRISPR genome editing

CRISPR gene editing (Cong *et al.*, 2013) enabled the genetic engineering of the genomes of living organisms. CRISPR provides a simple and programmable platform coupling the binding to genomic target sequences with diverse effector proteins restricted by protospacer adjacent motif (PAM) sequences. By delivering the Cas9 nuclease complexed with a synthetic guide RNA (gRNA) into a cell, CRISPR provides a simple and programmable platform to modify the genomic sequence at a desired location, potentially allowing the removal or addition of genes *in vivo*. Importantly, CRISPR offers unprecedented opportunities to develop novel therapies by introducing targeted genetic or epigenetic modifications to the genomic regions of interest. CRISPR-Cas9 offers high fidelity and simple construction and its specificity depends on two factors: (i) the target sequence and (ii) the PAM sequence. The target sequence is 20 bp long as part of each CRISPR locus in the gRNA array (Ran *et al.*, 2013). Typically, crRNA has multiple unique targets. Cas9 selects the genomic location by pairing the gRNA with its complementary sequence on the host DNA. Since the gRNA sequence is not part of the Cas9 complex, it can be designed independently to target specific genomic locations (Bialk *et al.*, 2015). To exploit the exonucleasic function Cas9 recognize its PAM sequences. PAMs are very short nonspecific sequences, occurring in several locations along the genome (Ran *et al.*, 2013). Once assembled the required sequences, Cas9 finds the targets on the genome, guided by the gRNA. The Cas9 nuclease opens both genomic strands of the target sequence to introduce novel modifications in it. Cas9 works in two main methods: (i) knock-in, and (ii) knock-out mutations (**Fig.6.13**). In knock-in, homology directed repair (HDR) employs DNA sequences similar to the targets to repair the breaks in the genome caused by Cas9 exonucleasic actions, using exogenous DNA as repairing template. Importantly, this method relies on periodic and isolated damaged spots in the target sites to start the DNA repair operations. In knock-out, mutations in the DNA inserted by Cas9 result in the repair of breaks through nonhomologous end joining (NHEJ). DNA repair via NHEJ often results in random insertions and deletions in the target sequence, which may disrupt, enhance, or alter the function of the target site. Since CRISPR-Cas9 enables a targeted random gene disruption, designing gRNA finely guiding Cas9 to the desired target sequence (*on-targets*) is fundamental to avoid unexpected and dangerous outcomes on undesired targeted sequences (*off-targets*). Most importantly, genetic variants may alter protospacer and PAM sequences and may influence both on-target and off-target potential. Therefore, it is fundamental to consider genetic variability when designing gRNA, to avoid potential undesired and dangerous outcomes on the host genome, in particular in clinical settings.

## 6.1 CRISPRme

CRISPR genome editing offers extraordinary opportunities to develop novel therapeutics by introducing targeted genetic or epigenetic modifications to genomic regions of interest. Briefly, CRISPR provides a simple and programmable platform that couples binding to a genomic target sequence of choice with diverse effector proteins through RNA:DNA (spacer:protospacer) complementary sequence interactions mediated by a gRNA spacer sequence matching a genomic protospacer sequence restricted by PAM sequences. Editing effectors may consist of nucleases to introduce targeted double strand breaks leading to short insertions/deletions (indels) and templated repairs (for example, Cas9), deaminases for precise substitutions (base editors) or chromatin regulators for transcriptional interference or activation (CRISPRi/a), among others, to achieve a range of desired biological outcomes (Anzalone *et al.*, 2020). CRISPR-based systems may create unintended off-target modifications posing potential genotoxicity for therapeutic use. Several experimental assays and computational methods are available to uncover or forecast these off-targets (Clement *et al.*, 2020). Off-target sites are partially predictable based on homology to the spacer and PAM sequence. Beyond the number of mismatches or bulges, a variety of sequence features, like position of mismatch or bulge with respect to PAM or specific base changes, contribute to off-target potential (Clement *et al.*, 2020; Bao *et al.*, 2021; Hsu *et al.*, 2013; Doench *et al.*, 2016). Com-

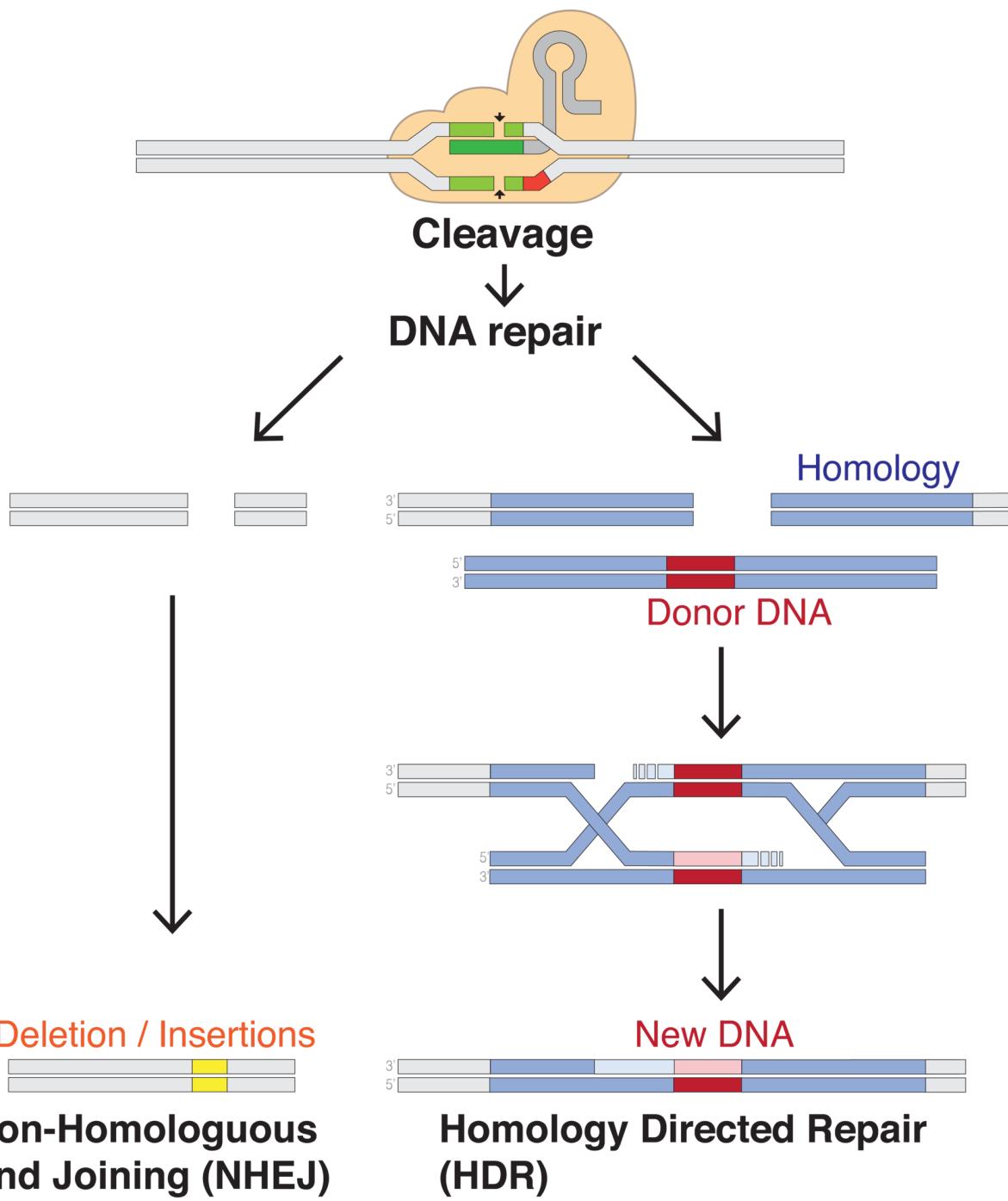


Figure 6.13. CRISPR gene editing via HDR and NHEJ.

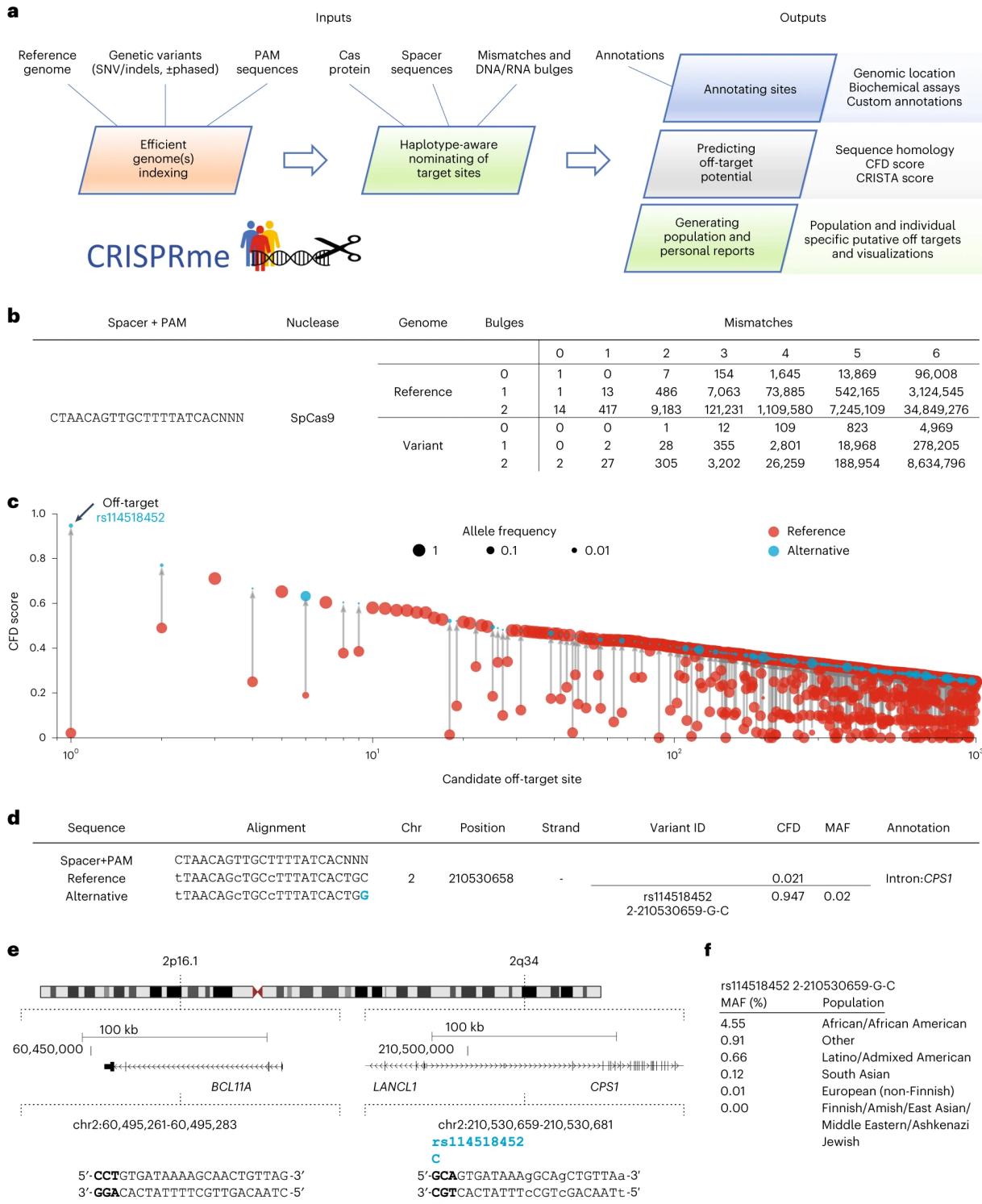
putational models can complement experimental approaches to off-target nomination in several respects: to triage gRNAs before experiments by predicting the number and cleavage potential of off-target sites and to prioritize target sites for experimental scrutiny. Genetic variants may alter protospacer and PAM sequences and therefore may influence both on-target and off-target potential. Gene editing strategies designed to specifically recognize patient mutations may increase the likelihood of editing mutant alleles, whereas variants that reduce homology to the anticipated target may decrease the efficiency of the desired genetic modification. Although a variety of in vitro and cell-based experimental methods can be used to empirically nominate off-target sites, these methods either use homology to the reference genome as a criterion to define the search space and/or use a limited set of human donor genomes to evaluate off-target potential (Bao *et al.*, 2021; Chaudhari *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, computational methods may be especially useful to predict the impact of off-target sequences not found in reference genomes. Prior studies considering gRNAs targeting therapeutically relevant genes using population-based variant databases like the 1000 Genomes Project (1000 G) and the Exome Aggregation Consortium have highlighted how

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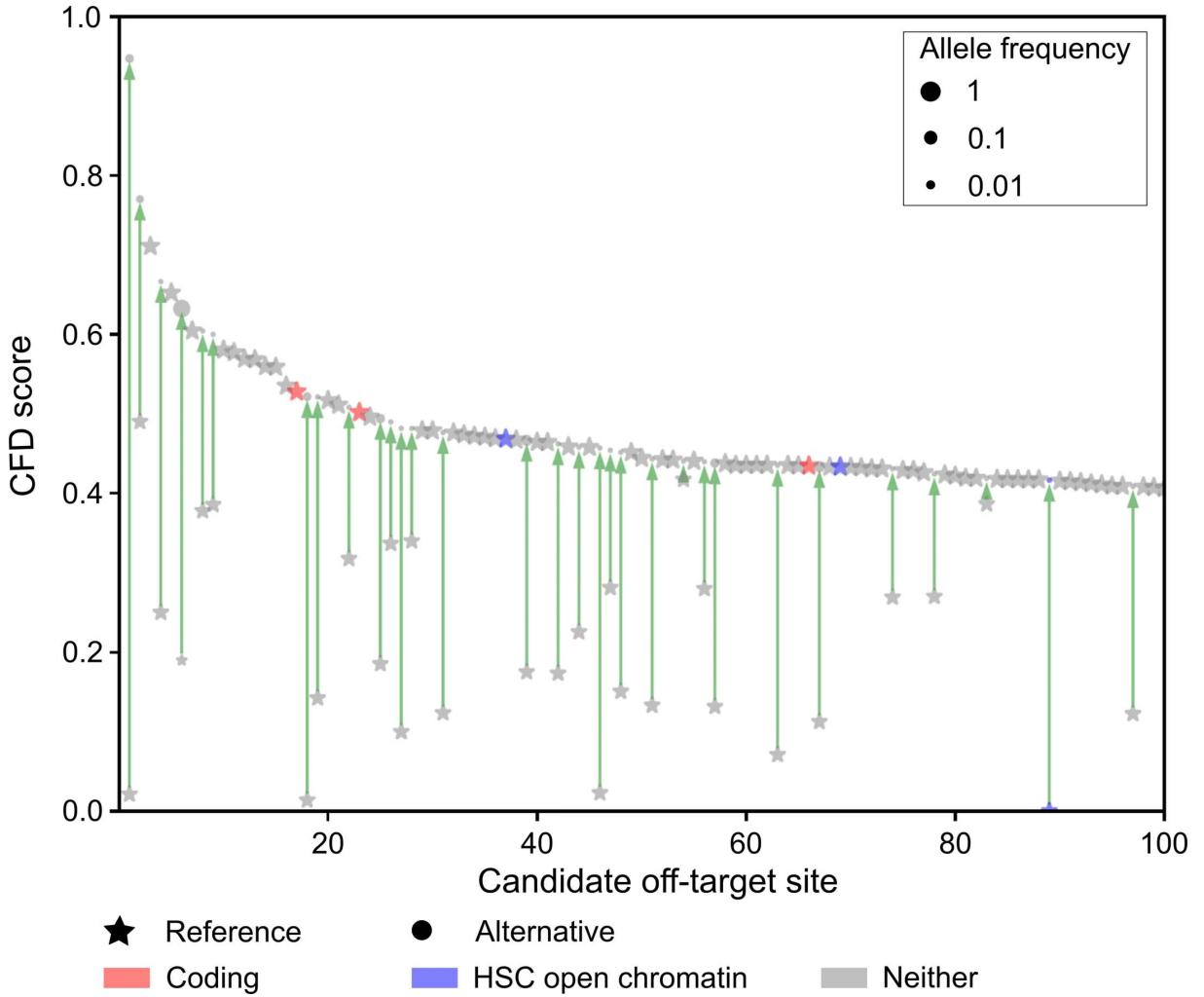
genetic variants can substantially alter the off-target landscape by creating novel and personal off-target sites not present in a single reference genome (Lessard *et al.*, 2017; Scott and Zhang, 2017). Although these prior studies provide code to reproduce analyses, implementation choices make these tools not suitable to analyze large variant datasets and to consider higher numbers of mismatches. In addition, these methods ignore bulges between RNA:DNA hybrids, cannot efficiently model alternative haplotypes and indels, and require extensive computational skills to utilize. Several user-friendly websites have been developed to aid the design of gRNAs and to assess their potential off-targets (Concordet and Haeussler, 2018; Listgarten *et al.*, 2018; Labun *et al.*, 2019; Park *et al.*, 2015). Even though variant-aware prediction is an important problem for genome editing interventions, these scalable graphical user interface (GUI) based tools do not account for genetic variants. In addition, these tools artificially limit the number of mismatches for the search and/or do not support DNA/RNA bulges. Therefore, designing gRNAs for therapeutic intervention using current widely available tools could miss important off-target sites that may lead to unwanted genotoxicity. A complete and exhaustive off-target search with an arbitrary number of mismatches, bulges, and genetic variants that is haplotype-aware is a computationally challenging problem that requires specialized and efficient data structures. We have recently developed a command line tool that partially solves these challenges called CRISPRitz (Cancellieri *et al.*, 2020). This tool uses optimized data structures to efficiently account for single variants, mismatches and bulges but with substantial limitations. Here, we substantially extend this work by developing CRISPRme, a tool to aid gRNA design with added support for haplotype-aware off-target enumeration, short indel variants and a flexible number of mismatches and bulges (Cancellieri *et al.*, 2023). CRISPRme is a unified, user-friendly web-based application that provides several reports to prioritize putative off-targets based on their risk in a population or individuals. CRISPRme is flexible to accept user-defined genomic annotations, which could include empirically identified off-target sites or cell-type-specific chromatin features. The tool can integrate population genetic variants from sets of phased individual variants (like those from 1000 G (Lowy-Gallego *et al.*, 2019)), unphased individual variants (like those from the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP) (Bergström *et al.*, 2020)) and population-level variants (like those from the Genome Aggregation Database (gnomAD) (Karczewski *et al.*, 2020)). Furthermore, it can accept personal genomes from individual subjects to identify and prioritize private off-targets due to variants specific to a single individual. Here, we demonstrate the utility of CRISPRme by analyzing the off-target potential of a gRNA currently being tested in clinical trials for sickle cell disease (SCD) and  $\beta$ -thalassemia (Frangoul *et al.*, 2021; Canver *et al.*, 2015; Wu *et al.*, 2019). We identify possible off-targets introduced by genetic variants included within and extending beyond 1000 G. We predict that the most likely off-target site, overlooked by prior analyses, is introduced by a variant common in African-ancestry individuals (rs114518452, minor allele frequency (MAF) = 4.5%) and provide experimental evidence of its off-target potential in gene edited human CD34+ HSPCs. Furthermore, we demonstrate that allele-specific off-target potential is widespread across various nucleic acid targeting therapeutic strategies.

### 6.1.1 A computational tool for variant-aware off-target nomination

CRISPRme is a web-based tool to predict off-target potential of CRISPR gene editing that accounts for genetic variation. It is available online at <http://crisprme.di.univr.it>. CRISPRme can also be deployed to local, protected and isolated environments as a web app or command line utility, neither of which transfer or store data online, therefore respecting genomic privacy and regulations. CRISPRme takes as input a Cas protein, gRNA spacer sequence and PAM, genome build, sets of variants (VCF files for populations or individuals), user-defined thresholds of mismatches and bulges and optional user-defined genomic annotations to produce comprehensive and personalized reports (**Fig.6.14(A)**). We have designed CRISPRme to be flexible with support for new gene editors with variable and extremely relaxed PAM requirements (Walton *et al.*, 2020). Thanks to a PAM encoding based on Aho-Corasick automata and an index based on a ternary search tree, CRISPRme can perform genome-wide exhaustive searches efficiently even with an NNN PAM, extensive mismatches (tested with up to seven) and RNA:DNA bulges (tested with up to two). Notably, a comprehensive search performed with up to six mismatches, two DNA/RNA bulges and a fully nonrestrictive PAM (NNN) on a small computational cluster node using 20 CPUs and 128 GB RAM (Intel Xeon CPU E5-2609 v4 clocked at 2.2 GHz) takes  $\sim$ 34 h of real time and  $\sim$ 152 h of CPU time (including both user and system times). All the 1000 G variants, including both single-nucleotide variants and indels, can be included in the search together with all the available metadata for each individual (sex, superpopulation and age), and the search operation takes into account observed haplotypes. Importantly, off-target sites that represent alternative alignments to a given genomic region are merged to avoid inflating the number of reported sites. Although several tools exist



**Figure 6.14. CRISPRme provides web-based analysis of CRISPR-Cas gene editing off-target potential reflecting population genetic diversity.** (A) CRISPRme software takes as input a reference genome, genetic variants, PAM sequence, Cas protein type, spacer sequence, homology threshold and genomic annotations and provides comprehensive, target-focused and individual-focused analyses of off-target potential. It is available as an online webtool and can be deployed locally or used offline as command-line software. (B) Analysis of the BCL11A-1617 spacer targeting the +58 erythroid enhancer with SpCas9, NNN PAM, 1000G variants, up to 6 mismatches and up to 2 bulges. (C) Top 1000 predicted off-target sites ranked by CFD score, indicating the CFD score of the reference and alternative allele if applicable, with allele frequency indicated by circle size. (D) The off-target site with the highest CFD score is created by the minor allele of rs114518452. Coordinates are for hg38 and 0-start for the potential off-target and 1-start for the variant-ID. MAF is based on 1000G. (E) The top predicted off-target site from CRISPRme is an allele-specific off-target with 3 mismatches to the BCL11A-1617 spacer sequence, where the rs114518452-C minor allele produces a de novo NGG PAM sequence. PAM sequence shown in bold and mismatches to BCL11A-1617 shown as lowercase. Coordinates are for hg38 and 1-start. (F) rs114518452 allele frequencies based on gnomAD v3.1. Coordinates are for hg38 and 1-start. Spacer shown as DNA sequence for ease of visual alignment.



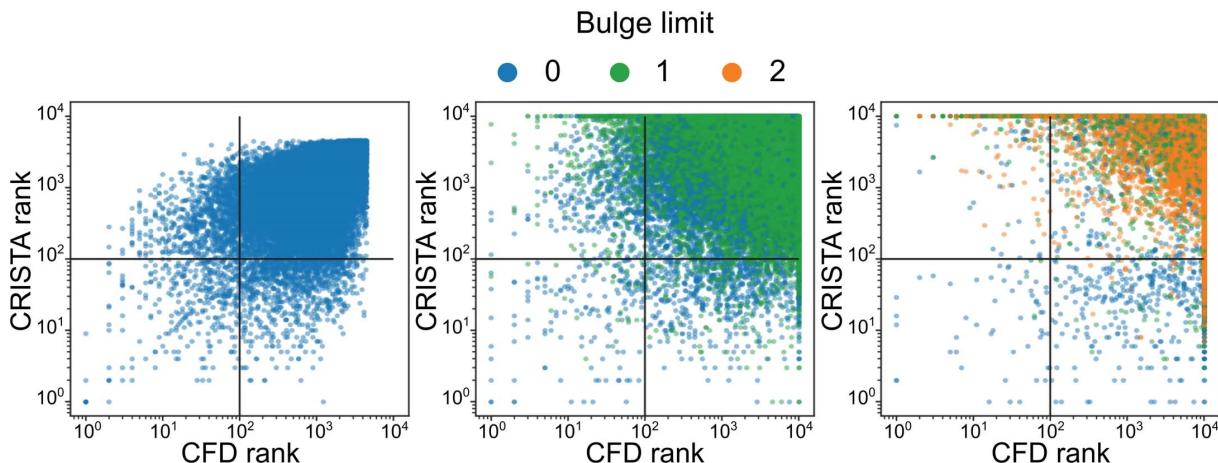
**Figure 6.15. Top 100 predicted off-target sites for BCL11A-1617 spacer by CFD score.** CRISPRme search as in Fig.6.14. Candidate off-target sites within coding regions based on GENCODE annotations and ATAC-seq peaks in HSCs based on user-provided annotations (data from (Corces *et al.*, 2016)) are highlighted.

to enumerate off-targets, to our knowledge, only two command line tools (Lessard *et al.*, 2017; Fennell *et al.*, 2021) incorporate genetic variants in the search. However, they have several limitations in terms of scalability to large searches, number of mismatches, bulges, haplotypes and variant file formats supported and do not provide an easy-to-use GUI. CRISPRme generates several reports. (i) it summarizes for each gRNA all the potential off-targets found in the reference or variant genomes based on their mismatches and bulges (Fig.6.14(B)) and generates a file with detailed information on each of these candidate off-targets. (ii) it compares gRNAs to customizable annotations. By default, it classifies possible off-target sites based on GENCODE (Frankish *et al.*, 2019) (genomic features) and ENCODE (Consortium *et al.*, 2012) (candidate cis-regulatory elements (cCREs)) annotations. It can also incorporate user-defined annotations in BED format, such as empiric off-target scores or cell-type-specific chromatin features (Fig.6.15). (iii) using 1000 G and/or HGDP variants, CRISPRme reports the cumulative distribution of homologous sites based on the reference genome or superpopulation. These global reports could be used to compare a set of gRNAs based on how genetic variation impacts their predicted on- and off-target cleavage potential using cutting frequency determination (CFD) or CRISPR Target Assessment (CRISTA) scores (Abadi *et al.*, 2017) (Fig.6.16). CRISPRme includes multiple scoring metrics and can be easily extended with new ones, including scores tailored for different editors. Finally, CRISPRme can generate personal genome focused reports called personal risk cards. These reports highlight private off-target sites due to unique genetic variants.

### 6.1.2 A common allele-specific off-target for a gRNA in the clinic

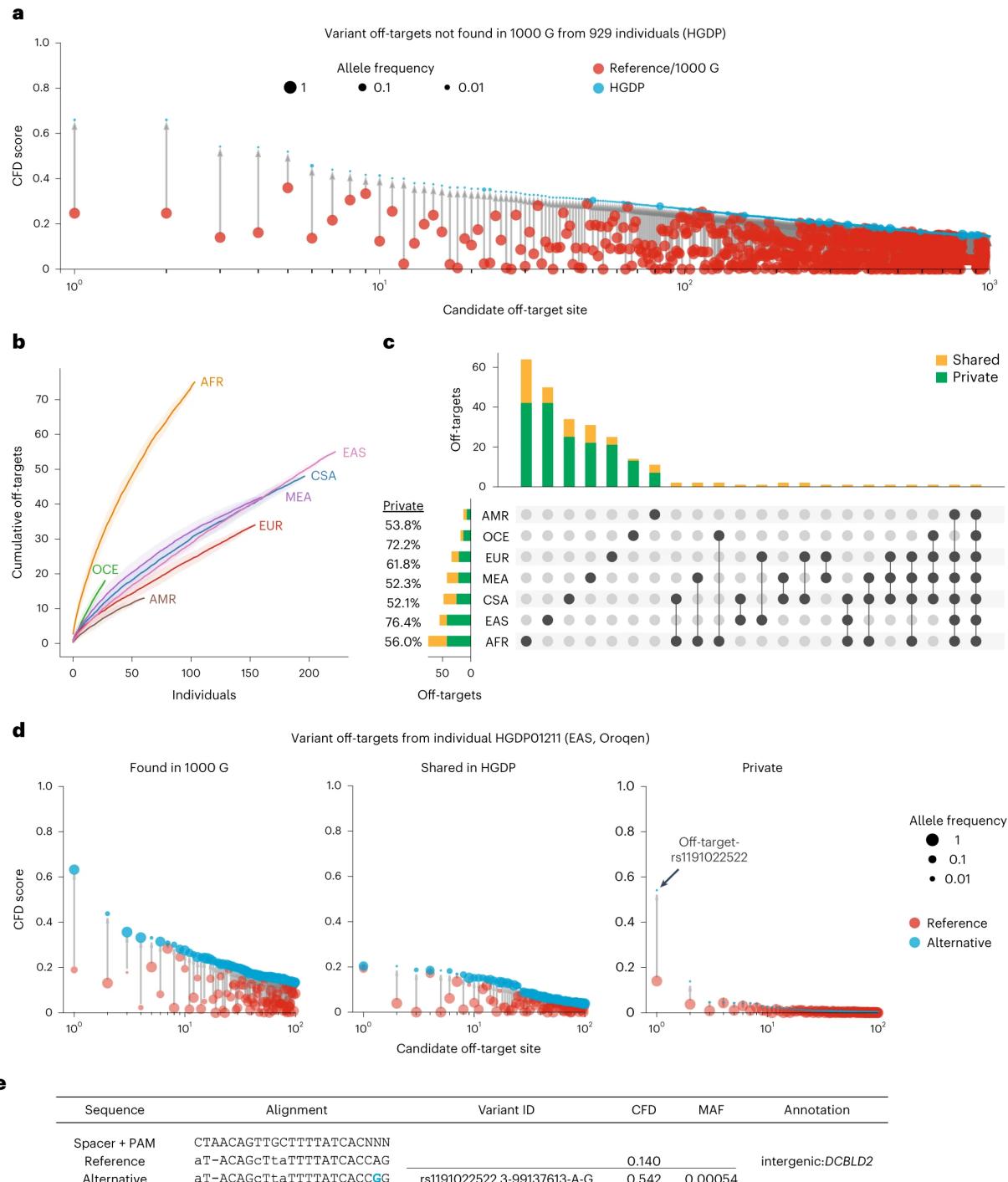
We tested CRISPRme with a gRNA (#1617) targeting a GATA1 binding motif at the +58 erythroid enhancer of BCL11A (Canver *et al.*, 2015; Wu *et al.*, 2019). A recent clinical report described two patients,

## Scatter plots with 0, up to 1 and up to 2 bulges

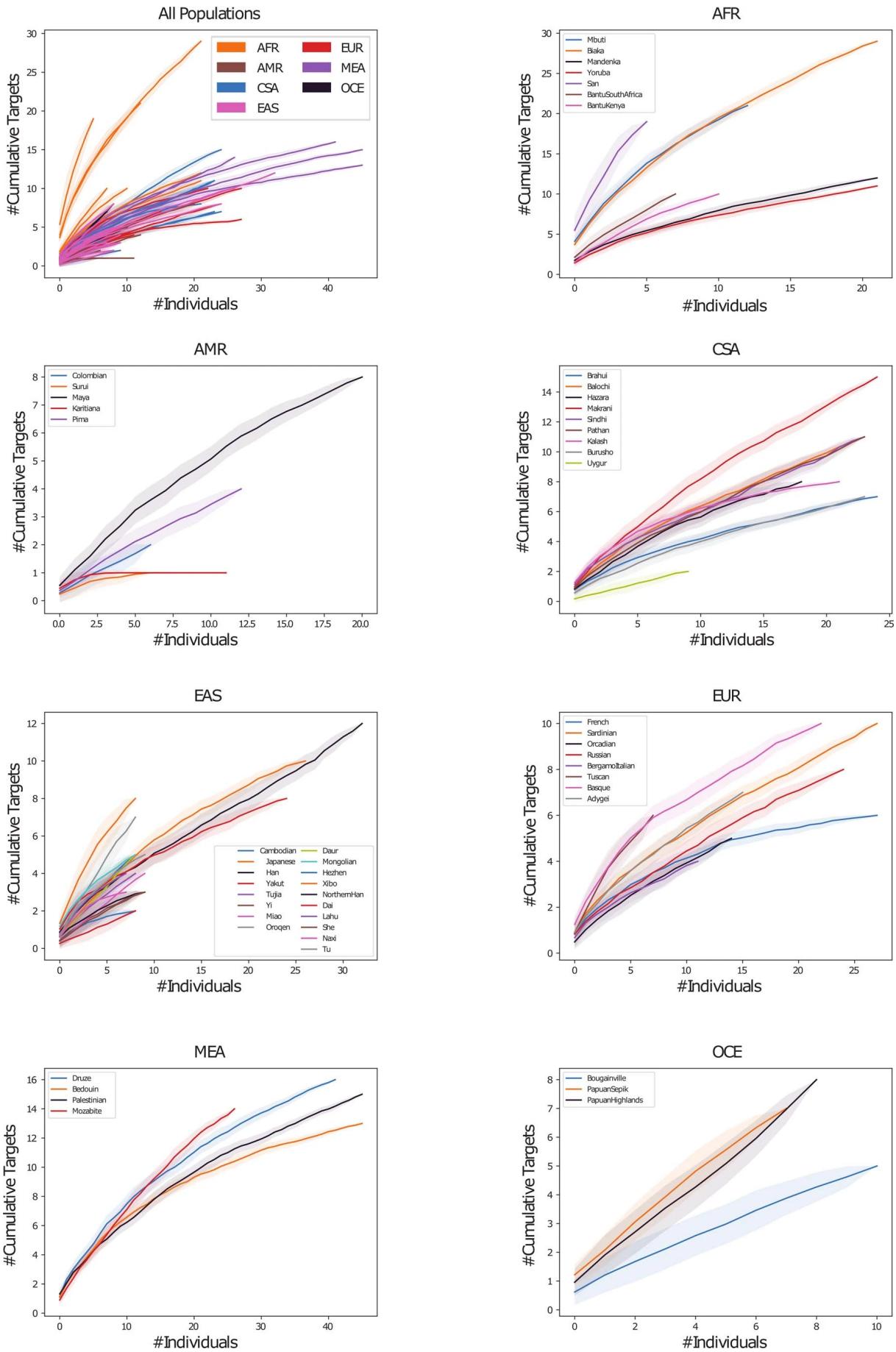


**Figure 6.16.** Plots with rank ordered correlation between CFD and CRISTA reported targets. Scatter plots show from left to right, the correlation of ranked targets, extracted by selecting top 10,000 targets sorted by CFD and CRISTA score, respectively. The left plot shows the rank correlation of targets with 0 bulges (Pearson's correlation: 0.57,  $p < 1e^{-10}$ , Spearman's correlation: 0.55,  $p < 1e^{-10}$ ), the center plot shows the rank correlation of targets with 1 bulge (Pearson's correlation: -0.16,  $p < 1e^{-10}$ , Spearman's correlation: -0.33,  $p < 1e^{-10}$ ) and the right plot shows the rank correlation of targets with 2 bulges (Pearson's correlation: -0.55,  $p < 1e^{-10}$ , Spearman's correlation: -0.80,  $p < 1e^{-10}$ ). The correlation values and  $p$ -values (two-sided) were calculated using standard functions from the Python scipy library. The colors represent the lowest count of bulges for each target, because the two scoring methods may prioritize different alignments and thus different number of mismatches and bulges pf the same target.

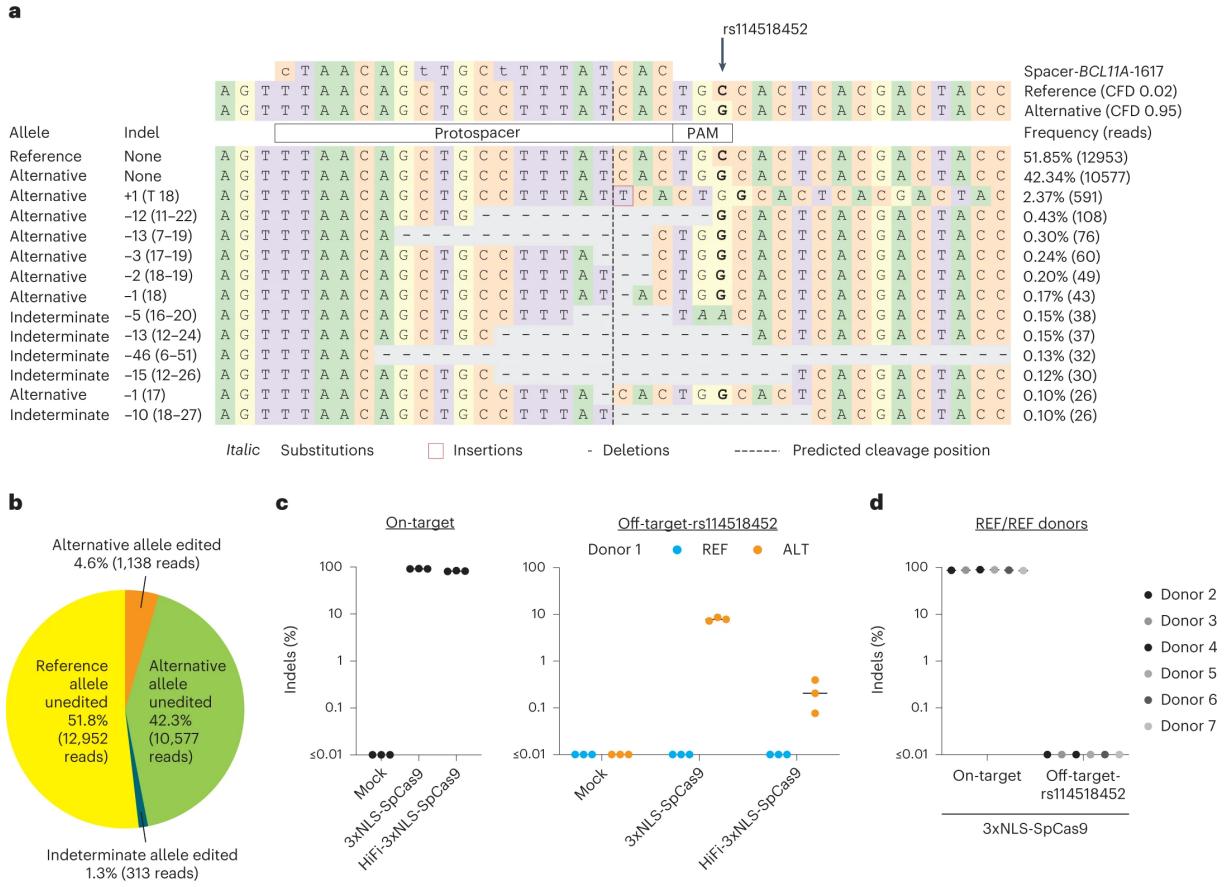
one with SCD and one with  $\beta$ -thalassemia, each treated with autologous gene modified HSPCs edited with Cas9 and this gRNA, who showed sustained increases in fetal hemoglobin, transfusion independence and absence of vaso-occlusive episodes (in the patient with SCD) following therapy. This study, as well as prior preclinical studies with the same gRNA (#1617), did not reveal evidence of off-target editing in treated cells when considering off-target sites nominated by bioinformatic analysis of the human reference genome and empiric analysis of in vitro genomic cleavage potential (Frangoul *et al.*, 2021; Wu *et al.*, 2019; Demirci *et al.*, 2019). CRISPRme analysis found that the predicted off-target site with both the greatest CFD score and the greatest increase in CFD score from the reference to alternative allele was at an intronic sequence of CPS1 (**Fig.6.14(C)** and (**D**)), a genomic target subject to common genetic variation (modified by a SNP with MAF  $\geq 1\%$ ). CFD scores range from 0 to 1, where the on-target site has a score of 1. The alternative allele rs114518452-C generates a TGG PAM sequence (that is, the optimal PAM for SpCas9) for a potential off-target site with three mismatches and a CFD score ( $CFD_{alt}$  0.95) approaching that of the on-target site (**Fig.6.14(E)**). In contrast, the reference allele rs114518452-G disrupts the PAM to TGC, which markedly reduces predicted cleavage potential ( $CFD_{ref}$  0.02). rs114518452-C has an overall MAF of 1.33% in gnomAD v3.1, with an MAF of 4.55% in African/African American, 0.91% in Other, 0.66% in Latino/Admixed American, 0.12% in South Asian, 0.01% in European (non-Finnish) and 0.00% in all other populations represented in gnomAD (**Fig.6.14(F)**). To consider the off-target potential that could be introduced by personal genetic variation that would not be predicted by 1000 G variants, we analyzed HGDP variants identified from whole-genome sequences of 929 individuals from 54 diverse human populations. We observed 249 candidate off-targets for gRNA #1617 with  $CFD \geq 0.2$  for which the CFD score in HGDP exceeded that found for either the reference genome or 1000 G variants by at least 0.1 (**Fig.6.17(A)** and **Fig.6.18**). These additional variant off-targets not found from 1000 G were observed in each superpopulation, with the greatest frequency in the African superpopulation (**Fig.6.17(B)**); 229 (92.0%) of these variant off-targets were unique to a superpopulation, and 172 (69.1%) of these were private to just one individual (**Fig.6.17(C)**). Furthermore, single-individual-focused searches (for example, an analysis of HGDP01211, an individual of the Oroqen population within the East Asian superpopulation) showed that most variant off-targets (with higher CFD score than reference) were due to variants also found in 1000 G ( $n = 32369$ , 90.4%), a subset were due to variants shared with other individuals from HGDP but absent from 1000 G ( $n = 3177$ , 8.9%) and a small fraction were private to the individual ( $n = 234$ , 0.7%) (**Fig.6.17(D)**). Among these private off-targets was one generated by a variant (rs1191022522, 3-99137613-A-G, gnomAD v3.1 MAF 0.0053%) where the alternative allele produces a canonical NGG PAM that increases the CFD score from 0.14 to 0.54 (**Fig.6.17(D)** and (**E**)). To experimentally test the top predicted off-target from CRISPRme, we identified a CD34+ HSPC donor of African ancestry heterozygous for rs114518452-C,



**Figure 6.17. CRISPRme provides analysis of off-target potential of CRISPR-Cas gene editing reflecting population and private genetic diversity.** (A) CRISPRme analysis was conducted with variants from HGDP comprising whole-genome sequencing of 929 individuals from 54 diverse human populations. HGDP variant off-targets with greater CFD scores than the reference genome or 1000 G were plotted and sorted by CFD score, with HGDP variant off-targets shown in blue and reference or 1000 G variant off-targets shown in red. (B) Cumulative distribution plot of HGDP variant off-targets with CFD  $\geq 0.2$  and increase in CFD of  $\geq 0.1$  per superpopulation (AFR: Africa, AMR: Americas, CSA: Central & South Asia, EAS: East Asia, EUR: Europe, MEA: Middle East, OCE: Oceania). Individual samples from each of the seven superpopulations were shuffled 100 times to calculate the mean and 95% confidence interval (shading around lines). (C) Intersection analysis of HGDP variant off-targets with CFD  $\geq 0.2$  and increase in CFD of  $\geq 0.1$ . Shared variants (black) were found in two or more HGDP samples whereas private variants (gray) were limited to a single sample. (D) CRISPRme analysis of a single individual (HGDP01211) showing the top 100 variant off-targets from each of the following three categories: shared with 1000G variant off-targets (left panel), higher CFD score compared to reference genome and 1000 G but shared with other HGDP individuals (center panel) and higher CFD score compared to reference genome and 1000 G with variant not found in other HGDP individuals (right panel). For the center and right panels, reference refers to CFD score from reference genome or 1000 G variants. (E) The top predicted private off-target site from HGDP01211 is an allele-specific off-target where the rs1191022522-G minor allele produces a canonical NGG PAM sequence in place of a noncanonical NAG PAM sequence. Spacer shown as DNA sequence for ease of visual alignment.



**Figure 6.18. HGDP superpopulation distribution plots.** HGDP variant off-targets with CFD  $\geq 0.2$  and increase in CFD of  $\geq 0.1$ . Individual samples from each of the seven superpopulations were shuffled 100 times to calculate the mean and 95% confidence interval. First panel shows distribution within all 54 discrete populations, colored by superpopulation. Additional seven panels show distribution of discrete populations within each listed superpopulation.



**Figure 6.19. Allele-specific off-target editing by a BCL11A enhancer targeting gRNA in clinical trials associated with a common variant in African-ancestry populations.** (A) Human CD34+ HSPCs from a donor heterozygous for rs114518452-G/C (donor 1, REF/ALT) were subject to 3xNLS-SpCas9:sg1617 RNP electroporation (NLS: nuclear localization signal) followed by amplicon sequencing of the off-target site around chr2:210,530,659-210,530,681 (off-target-rs114518452 in 1-start hg38 coordinates). CFD scores for the reference and alternative alleles are indicated, and representative aligned reads are shown. Spacer shown as DNA sequence for ease of visual alignment, with mismatches indicated by lowercase and the rs114518452 position shown in bold. (B) Reads classified based on allele (indeterminate if the rs114518452 position is deleted) and presence or absence of indels (edits). (C) Human CD34+ HSPCs from a donor heterozygous for rs114518452-G/C (donor 1) were subject to 3xNLS-SpCas9:sg1617 RNP electroporation, HiFi-3xNLS-SpCas9:sg1617 RNP electroporation, or no electroporation (mock) followed by amplicon sequencing of the on-target and off-target-rs114518452 sites. each dot represents an independent biological replicate ( $n = 3$ ), and lines represent medians. Indel frequency was quantified for reads aligning to either the reference (REF) or alternative (ALT) allele. (D) Human CD34+ HSPCs from six donors homozygous for rs114518452-G/G (donors 2–7, REF/REF) were subject to 3xNLS-SpCas9:sg1617 RNP electroporation with one biological replicate per donor followed by amplicon sequencing of the on-target and off-target-rs114518452 sites.

the variant predicted to introduce the greatest increase in off-target cleavage potential (Fig.6.14(C)-(F)). We performed ribonucleoprotein (RNP) electroporation using a gene editing protocol that preserves engrafting HSC function. Amplicon sequencing analysis showed  $92.0 \pm 0.5\%$  indels at the on-target site and  $4.8 \pm 0.5\%$  indels at the off-target site. For reads spanning the variant position, indels were strictly found at the alternative PAM-creation allele without indels observed at the reference allele (Fig.6.19(A)-(C)), suggesting  $9.6 \pm 1.0\%$  off-target editing of the alternative allele. In an additional six HSPC donors homozygous for the reference allele rs114518452-G/G,  $0.00 \pm 0.00\%$  indels were observed at the off-target site, suggesting strict restriction of off-target editing to the alternative allele (Fig.6.19(D)). The on-target BCL11A intronic enhancer site is on chr2p, whereas the off-target-rs114518452 site is on chr2q within an intron of a noncanonical transcript of CPS1. Inversion PCR demonstrated inversion junctions consistent with the presence of  $\sim 150$  Mb pericentric inversions between BCL11A and the off-target site only in edited HSPCs carrying the alternative allele (Fig.6.20(A) and (B)). Deep sequencing of the inversion junction showed that inversions were restricted to the alternative allele in the heterozygous cells (Fig.6.20(C) and (D)). Droplet digital PCR revealed these inversions to be present at  $0.16 \pm 0.04\%$  allele frequency (Fig.6.20(E)). Various high-fidelity Cas9 variants may improve the specificity of gene editing, although at the possible cost of reduced efficiency (Schmid-Burgk *et al.*, 2020). Gene editing following the same electroporation protocol using a HiFi variant 3xNLS-SpCas9 (R691A) (Vakulskas *et al.*, 2018) in heterozygous cells revealed  $82.3 \pm 1.6\%$  on-target indels with only  $0.1 \pm 0.1\%$  indels at

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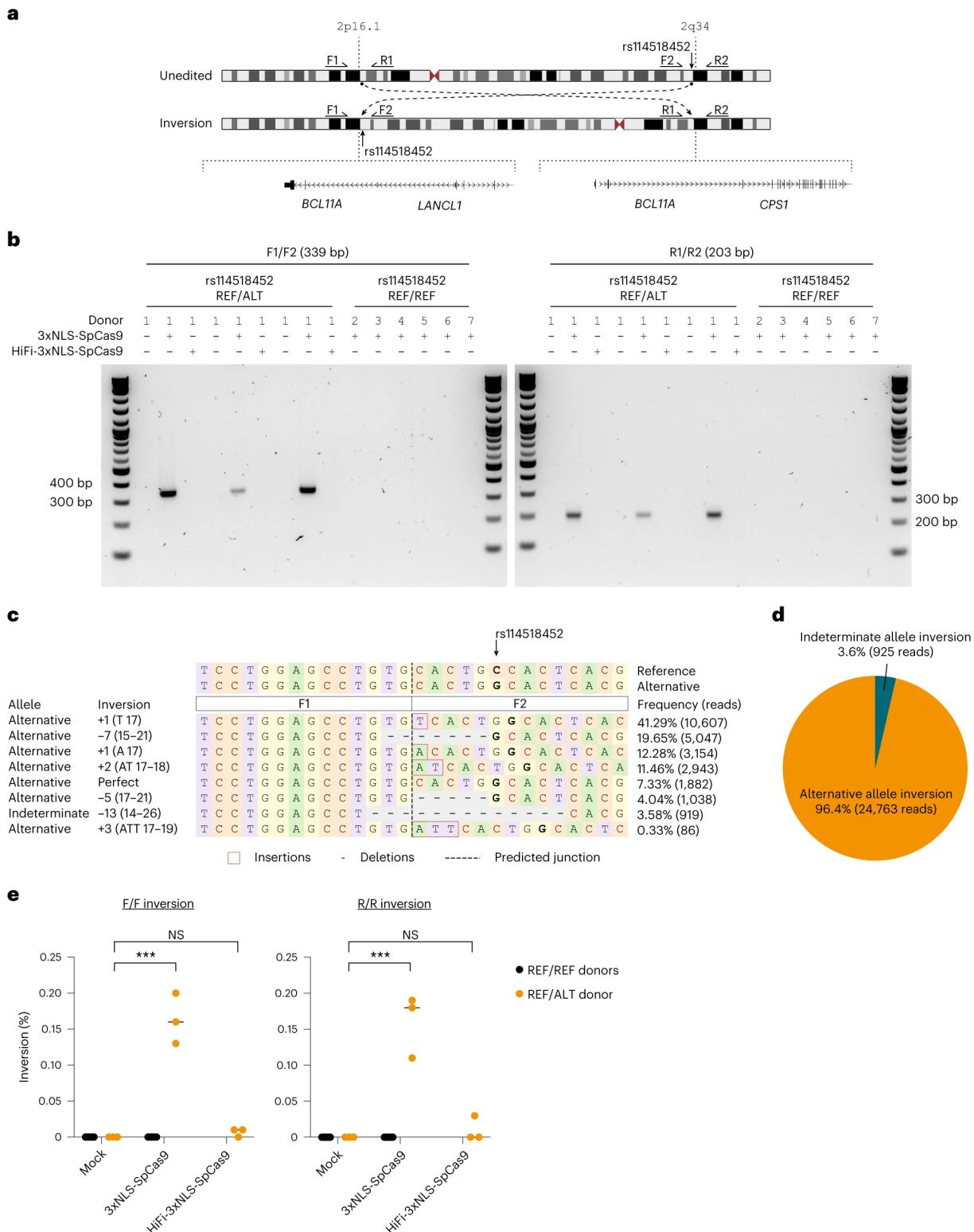
the rs114518452-C off-target site (that is, a ~48-fold reduction compared to SpCas9) (**Fig.6.19(C)**). Inversions were not detected following HiFi-3xNLS-SpCas9 editing (**Fig.6.20(B)** and (**E**)).

### 6.1.3 Allele specific off-target potential of additional gRNAs

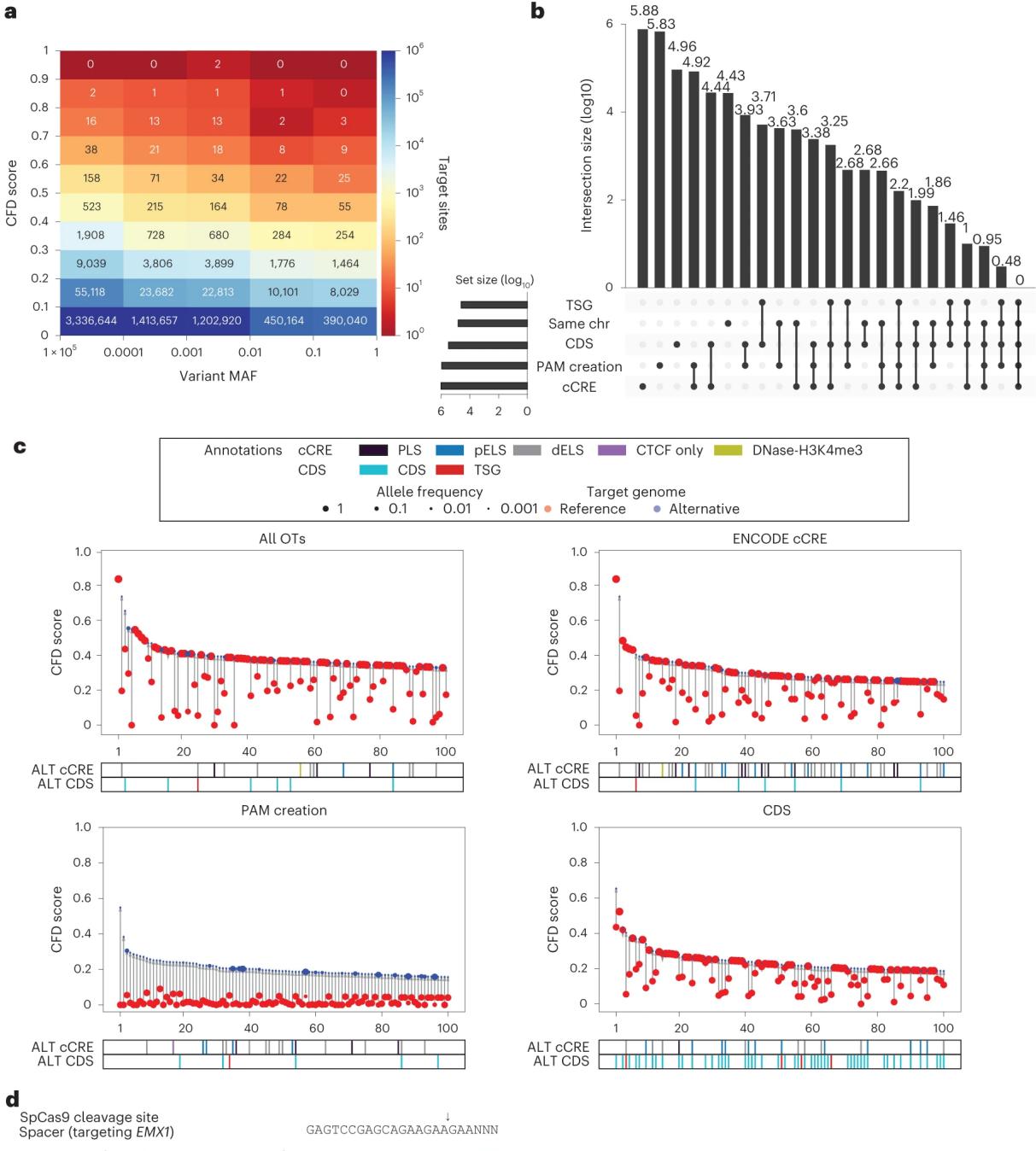
To examine the pervasiveness of alternative allele off-target potential, we evaluated an additional 13 gRNAs in clinical development or otherwise widely used for SpCas9-based nuclease or base editing (Xu *et al.*, 2017, 2019a; Stadtmauer *et al.*, 2020; Gillmore *et al.*, 2021; DeWitt *et al.*, 2016; Xu *et al.*, 2019b; Métais *et al.*, 2019; Tsai *et al.*, 2015; Zeng *et al.*, 2020a; Musunuru *et al.*, 2021) and 6 gRNAs for non-SpCas9-based editing such as for SaCas9 and Cas12a (Xu *et al.*, 2019b; Chu *et al.*, 2021; Newby *et al.*, 2021; Maeder *et al.*, 2019; De Dreuzy *et al.*, 2019). CRISPRme analysis including the 1000 G and HGDP genetic variant datasets showed 18% (95% confidence interval 13-23%) of the total nominated off-targets were due to alternative allele-specific off-targets. Most alternative allele-specific off-targets were associated with rare variants (MAF < 1%), although candidate off-targets associated with common variants were identified for each gRNA (**Fig.6.21(A)**). None of these alternative allele-specific off-target sites were described in the original manuscripts reporting the editing strategies and off-target analyses. CRISPRme produces visualizations to specifically highlight alternative allele-specific candidate off-target sites overlapping cCREs and protein coding sequences (including putative tumor suppressor genes (Zhao *et al.*, 2016)) and/or that involve PAM creation events (**Fig.6.21(B)** and (**C**)). For example, within the top 20 candidate off-targets nominated by CRISPRme for a SpCas9 gRNA targeting EMX1 (Tsai *et al.*, 2015), two sites involve genetic variants with high MAF (52% and 26%) and are associated with substantial increases in CFD score from REF to ALT (+0.69 and +0.44). The first is an intronic PAM creation variant, whereas the second introduces two PAM-proximal matches to the gRNA (**Fig.6.21(D)**). Notably, both of these candidate off-targets involve indel variants, underscoring the utility of CRISPRme to account for variants beyond SNPs. In addition to visualizing candidate off-target sites by predictive score rank (such as CFD or CRISTA) for SpCas9-derived editors, CRISPRme can also visualize candidate off-targets by number of mismatches and bulges, which may be especially useful for Cas proteins with distinct PAMs for which predictive scores are not readily available. For example, SaCas9 is a clinically relevant nuclease whose small size favors packaging to adeno-associated virus. For a SaCas9-associated gRNA targeting CEP290 (Maeder *et al.*, 2019) currently being evaluated in clinical trials to treat a form of congenital blindness (NCT03872479), CRISPRme nominated two candidate off-targets associated with common SNPs (MAF 7% and 5%) that reduced mismatches from five (REF) to four (ALT) that are predicted to produce cleavages within coding sequences (**Fig.6.21(D)**). CRISPRme can nominate variant off-targets for base editors and evaluate their base editing susceptibility within a user-defined editing window. For a gRNA targeting PCSK9 (ref. 37) that has been used with SpCas9-nickase adenine base editor *in vivo* in preclinical studies to reduce low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels, four of the top five candidate off-target sites involve alternative alleles, including one with CFD<sub>ref</sub> 0.2 and CFD<sub>alt</sub> 0.75 found in an ENCODE candidate enhancer element. CRISPRme nominated a candidate off-target associated with a rare variant (MAF 0.0007%) that increased the CFD score from 0.06 (REF) to 0.40 (ALT) that would be predicted to produce missense mutations in EPHB3, a putative tumor suppressor gene (**Fig.6.21(D)**). The underlying computational challenge that CRISPRme addresses extends beyond CRISPR-based applications to other technologies based on nucleic acid sequence recognition. For example, CRISPRme can nominate off-targets for RNA-targeting strategies, whether RNA-guided gene editors or even oligonucleotide sequences used as RNA interference or antisense oligo therapies (**Fig.6.22**). We performed a variant-aware search (without PAM restriction) for the FDA-approved antisense oligonucleotide Nusinersen (Finkel *et al.*, 2017; Mercuri *et al.*, 2018), which targets SMN2 pre-mRNA to treat spinal muscular atrophy. Using CRISPRme, we identified a potential off-target site within a coding region wherein a common SNP (MAF 2%) reduces the number of mismatches from three (REF) to two (ALT). Similarly, analysis of the FDA-approved RNA interference therapy Inclisiran (Raal *et al.*, 2020), which targets PCSK9 mRNA to treat hypercholesterolemia, revealed that its antisense strand has a candidate off-target in the 3' untranslated region of the ribosomal gene RPP14 for which a common insertion variant (MAF 36%) reduces the number of mismatches and bulges from seven (REF) to four (ALT).

### 6.1.4 Limitations and Discussion

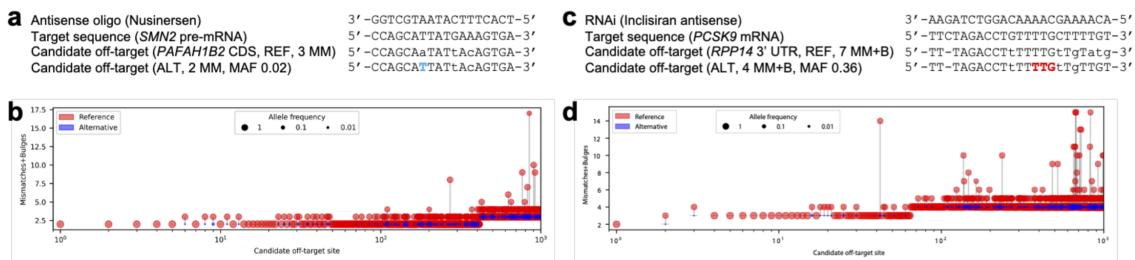
These results demonstrate how personal genetic variation may influence the off-target potential of sequence-based therapies like genome editing. Increased availability of haplotype-resolved genomes of diverse ancestry would enhance ability to nominate variant-associated off-target sites present in human populations. A limitation of current tools including CRISPRme is that potential off-targets cannot be enumerated



**Figure 6.20. Allele-specific pericentric inversion following BCL11A enhancer editing due to off-target cleavage.** (A) Concurrent cleavage of the on-target and off-target-rs114518452 sites could lead to pericentric inversion of chr2 as depicted. PCR primers F1, R1, F2 and R2 were designed to detect potential inversions. (B) Human CD43+ HSPCs from a donor heterozygous for rs114518452-G/C (donor 1) were subject to 3xNLS-SpCas9:sg1617 RNP electroporation, HiFi-3xNLS-SpCas9:sg1617 RNP electroporation or no electroporation with three biological replicates. Human CD43+ HSPCs from six donors homozygous for rs114518452-G/G (donors 2–7, REF/REF) were subject to 3xNLS-SpCas9:sg1617 RNP electroporation with one biological replicate per donor. Gel electrophoresis for inversion PCR was performed with F1/F2 and R1/R2 primer pairs on left and right respectively with expected sizes of precise inversion PCR products indicated. (C) Reads from amplicon sequencing of the F1/F2 product (expected to include the rs114518452 position) from 3xNLS-SpCas9:sg1617 RNP treatment were aligned to reference and alternative inversion templates. The rs114518452 position is shown in bold. (D) Reads classified based on allele (indeterminate if the rs114518452 position deleted). (E) Inversion frequency by droplet digital PCR (ddPCR) from same samples as in panel b with three replicates from the single REF/ALT donor and one replicate each from the six REF/REF donors. F/F indicates forward and R/R reverse inversion junctions as depicted in panel a. NS, not significant.



**Figure 6.21. CRISPRme illustrates prevalent off-target potential due to genetic variation** (A) Heatmap showing the distribution of alternative allele nominated off-targets for SpCas9 guides by CFD score and MAF. (B) UpSet plot showing overlapping annotation categories for candidate off-targets (tumor suppressor gene (TSG), candidate off-targets on the same chromosome (chr) as the on-target, CDS regions, cCRE from ENCODE and PAM creation events). (C) Top 100 predicted off-target sites ranked by CFD score for the gRNA targeting PCSK9 with no filter, found in cCREs, corresponding to PAM creation events, and in CDS regions. (D) Candidate off-target sites with increased predicted cleavage potential introduced by common (MAF 52% and 26%) indel variants for a SpCas9 gRNA targeting EMX1 (top left). Candidate off-target cleavage sites within coding sequences with increased homology to a lead gRNA for SaCas9 targeting of CEP290 to treat congenital blindness in current clinical trials due to common SNPs (right). Potential missense mutations in the EPHB3 tumor suppressor resulting from candidate off-target A-to-G base editing by a preclinical lead gRNA targeting PCSK9 to reduce low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels (bottom). MM denotes mismatches, deletions are shown in red, and SNPs are shown in blue.



**Figure 6.22.** Candidate transcript off-targets introduced by common genetic variants for non-CRISPR sequence-based RNA-targeting therapeutic strategies. **(A)** A common SNP (in blue) introduces a candidate CDS off-target site with 2 mismatches for the FDA-approved antisense oligo Nusinersen. **(B)** Top 1000 candidate transcript off-targets ranked by mismatches and bulges for Nusinersen from a search performed with the 1000G and HGDP genetic variant datasets. **(C)** A common insertion variant (in red) introduces a candidate 3'UTR off-target site with 4 mismatches + bulges for the FDA-approved RNAi therapy Inclisiran. **(D)** Top 1000 candidate transcript off-targets ranked by mismatches and bulges for Inclisiran from a search performed with the 1000G and HGDP genetic variant datasets.

based on structural variants or other complex genetic events such as combinations of indels and SNPs (Cancellieri *et al.*, 2023). Future extensions of CRISPRme based on new data structures such as graph genomes (Paten *et al.*, 2017; Garrison *et al.*, 2018) could enable these complex searches and improve their efficiency. The practical implications of allele-specific off-target editing need to be considered on a case-by-case basis. In the case of *BCL11A* enhancer editing, up to ~10% of SCD patients with African ancestry would be expected to carry at least one rs114518452-C allele, leading to ~10% cleavage at an off-target site that was not identified in prior studies of this gRNA using currently available tools. Our results highlight that allele-specific off-target editing potential is not equally distributed across all ancestral groups but is especially concentrated in those of African ancestry where genomic variation is most pronounced. Therefore, gene editing efforts that include subjects of African ancestry (like those targeting SCD) might pay particular attention to this issue. Gene editing efforts that focus on a specific patient population should consider genetic variants enriched in that population during off-target evaluation. However, our analysis also shows that variant off-targets may be private to a given individual, so all humans could potentially be susceptible to such an effect. Implementing off-target analysis and testing into therapeutic genome editing protocols in practice is an important issue that is broader in scope than our report. Fundamentally, variant-aware off-target analysis may identify off-target potential that would be overlooked by conventional analysis. Of note, as is true for off-target genetic changes in general, the mere possibility of somatic genetic alteration does not imply functional consequence. Although in principle, ex vivo-edited patient cells could be tested by sequencing before infusion, the functional importance of off-target edits may range from likely functional to likely neutral, so the mere presence of off-target editing in a cell product may not necessarily preclude its clinical use, and this testing could deplete precious material and delay therapy. We recommend several steps to minimize risk of unintended allele-specific off-target effects during therapeutic genome editing, consistent with regulatory guidance to consider effects of genetic variation. First, prioritize use of genome editing methods that maximize specificity, such as high-fidelity editors and pulse delivery. Second, nominate off-targets in a variant-aware manner, with particular attention toward genetic variants found in relevant patient populations, using a tool like CRISPRme (Cancellieri *et al.*, 2023). Third, use off-target detection assays that are variant-aware to empirically evaluate the likelihood of off-target editing, although these may imperfectly reflect editing in a therapeutic context (Supplementary Note 7). When possible, allele-specific off-target editing potential should be validated in primary cells of relevant genotype by sequencing. However, it may be difficult to obtain such primary cells to perform biological validation in a relevant therapeutic context. Fourth, perform a risk assessment of variant off-target editing given predicted genomic annotations, mechanisms of DNA repair, delivery to target cells and disease context. For example, off-target edits within tumor suppressor loci might carry greater risk than those targeting unannotated noncoding sequences. Fifth, if excess allele-specific genome editing risks are identified, consider including genotype among the subject inclusion/exclusion criteria. Finally, for therapeutic genome editing indications in which it is feasible (such as hematopoietic cell targeting), prospectively monitor somatic modifications in patient samples to gather information about the frequency and consequence of such events to help assess patient-specific risk and provide valuable information for the broader field as to the frequency and in vivo dynamics of off-target edits if present. CRISPRme offers a simple-to-use tool to comprehensively evaluate off-target potential across diverse populations and within individuals. CRISPRme is available at <http://crisprme.di.univr.it> and may also be deployed locally to preserve privacy.



# Future directions

In the next future, we plan to improve the Motif Graph framework by developing a more efficient and powerful model training procedure, which will account for  $k$ -mers weights when assigning the scores on the  $G$  edges. Moreover, we plan to speed-up the Motif Graph training procedure potentially employing string indexing algorithms, like Suffix Arrays or BWT. We plan to integrate the kernel and model training procedures in a single software implementation and extensively test the newly obtained framework on different TFBS data sources , such as ChIP-seq, HT-SELEX, PBM, etc.

In the next months we plan to implement MotifRaptor2 in a comprehensive software suite, and to extensively test the framework on different GWAS datasets, cell-types, and TFs.

We plan to extend CRISPRme framework to account for complex genetic mutation events, such as indels and structural variations. To accomplish this task, we plan to extend CRISPRme search to search off-targets on genome graph data structures, which handle indels and structural variations by definition. Moreover, we also plan to extend CRISPRme to analyze the transcriptome beside the genome. Analyzing the transcriptome would enable to directly estimate potential off-targets on the genome coding regions.



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