Multi-Dimensional Integrative Analysis of PD-L1 Regulatory Networks: A Computational Framework Integrating Large-Scale Genomics and Immune Deconvolution Across 1,635 Cancer Patients

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Abstract

Background: PD-L1 (CD274) expression determines cancer immunotherapy response. However, we lack understanding of how molecular networks regulate its expression and stability across different tumor contexts. Individual regulators have been identified but no integrated analysis exists that combines transcriptomic data with immune infiltration profiles and patient outcomes at scale.

Methods: We analyzed 1,635 TCGA patients using four approaches. First, we profiled PD-L1 and candidate regulatory proteins (CMTM6, STUB1, HIP1R, SQSTM1) across three cancer types (LUAD, LUSC, SKCM). Second, we used TIMER2.0 immune deconvolution to quantify six immune cell populations. Third, we performed partial correlation analysis controlling for immune microenvironment effects using 32-core parallelized computation. Fourth, we conducted multivariate Cox regression with 961 death events, adjusting for age, sex, stage and cancer type. We validated findings through cancer type-specific stratification (n=472-601 per stratum), outlier exclusion (Z-score, IQR and MAD methods), bootstrap testing (1,000 iterations) and alternative

correlation methods (Pearson, Spearman, Kendall). The analysis required 32 CPUs and 64 GB RAM, integrating Python 3.13 and R 4.3.0 with 15+ bioinformatics packages.

Results: We found several PD-L1 regulatory patterns. CMTM6 showed strong positive correlation ($\rho = 0.42$, P = 2.3×10^{-68}). After adjusting for immune infiltration, 74% of this correlation persisted (partial $\rho = 0.31$, P = 8.7×10^{-38}), indicating immune-independent coordination. STUB1 showed negative correlation (ρ = -0.15, P = 6.2×10^{-10}) consistent with its E3 ubiquitin ligase function. This remained significant after immune adjustment (partial ρ = -0.12, P = 1.2×10^{-6}). In survival analysis, both PD-L1 (HR=1.14, 95% CI: 1.06-1.23, P=2.18×10^{-4}) and STUB1 (HR=0.92, 95% CI: 0.86-0.99, P=0.018) retained independent prognostic value after controlling for clinical variables (model C-index=0.72). All findings showed directional consistency exceeding 95% across cancer type-specific analyses, outlier exclusion scenarios, bootstrap iterations and alternative methods.

Conclusions: We developed an integrated computational pipeline for analyzing regulatory networks in cancer. STUB1 functions as both a PD-L1 regulator and an independent prognostic factor. This suggests potential for combination therapies that enhance immunotherapy while targeting tumor-intrinsic pathways. The analytical approach can be applied to other immunotherapy targets and cancer types.

Keywords

PD-L1, liquid-liquid phase separation, STUB1, CMTM6, cancer immunotherapy, TCGA, immune checkpoint, bioinformatics, computational biology

Introduction

Over the past decade, immune checkpoint inhibitors targeting the PD-L1 pathway have changed oncology treatment. These therapies show clinical benefit across multiple cancers. PD-L1 (encoded by CD274) is a transmembrane protein on tumor cells and antigen-presenting cells. It binds PD-1 receptors on T cells and suppresses anti-tumor immunity. Anti-PD-L1/PD-1 antibodies produce durable responses in melanoma, non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) and other solid tumors. However, most patients do not respond or develop resistance.

We need to understand molecular mechanisms regulating PD-L1 expression and stability. This knowledge is important for predicting treatment response and improving immunotherapy. PD-L1 levels are controlled through transcriptional activation, post-transcriptional modifications and

protein degradation pathways. Several regulatory proteins modulate PD-L1 stability. CMTM6 prevents PD-L1 ubiquitination and proteasomal degradation. STUB1 (CHIP) is an E3 ubiquitin ligase that promotes PD-L1 degradation.

Liquid-liquid phase separation (LLPS) is increasingly recognized in cell biology. It enables formation of membrane-less organelles and protein condensates that concentrate biomolecules for biochemical reactions. LLPS-associated proteins contain intrinsically disordered regions and modular interaction domains. These allow dynamic assembly and disassembly of condensates in response to cellular signals. Evidence suggests LLPS is involved in cancer biology through regulation of signaling pathways, transcription and protein quality control.

Several PD-L1 regulatory proteins are linked to LLPS-related processes or contain domains typical of phase separation proteins. STUB1 is a chaperone-associated E3 ubiquitin ligase targeting misfolded proteins for degradation. It interacts with stress granules, which are LLPS-mediated ribonucleoprotein assemblies. SQSTM1 (p62) is a scaffold protein in selective autophagy that undergoes LLPS to form protein aggregates. HIP1R participates in endocytic trafficking and cytoskeletal regulation, potentially through phase separation mechanisms. The direct involvement of LLPS in PD-L1 regulation needs experimental validation. However, studying LLPS-associated proteins could reveal PD-L1 regulatory networks.

Individual studies provide mechanistic insights but lack integration. No large-scale framework exists that combines genomic data with immune microenvironment characteristics and clinical outcomes. Previous studies face methodological limitations. First, small sample sizes (typically <200 patients) prevent statistical inference and subgroup analyses. Second, single-dimensional approaches examine expression correlations without accounting for immune infiltration. Third, most studies lack clinical validation linking molecular features to patient outcomes through multivariate models. Fourth, few studies include sensitivity analyses to test whether findings hold across different analytical methods and cancer types. These gaps have prevented development of reliable computational approaches for analyzing regulatory networks in cancer immunology.

We developed a **four-dimensional computational pipeline** to address these challenges. Our approach uses The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA), which contains thousands of tumor samples with transcriptomic, clinical and survival data across different cancer types. We implemented four strategies to overcome complexities in bulk tumor transcriptomics. (1) **TIMER2.0 immune deconvolution** separates tumor-intrinsic gene expression from immune cell contamination. (2)

Partial correlation analysis with 32-core parallelized computation controls for six immune cell populations while maintaining statistical power. (3) **Survival modeling** with 961 death events provides power to detect hazard ratios as small as 1.10 (80% power at α=0.05). (4) **Sensitivity analyses** include cancer type-specific stratification, outlier testing, bootstrap validation (1,000 iterations) and comparison across three correlation methods to verify findings are not artifacts of analytical choices.

We address four questions. First, what are expression patterns and regulatory associations between PD-L1 and LLPS-associated proteins across 1,635 tumors from three cancer types? Second, how much do immune infiltration versus tumor-intrinsic factors contribute to these associations? Third, do these molecular features provide independent prognostic information beyond clinical variables? Fourth, are findings consistent across cancer types and analytical methods? We answer these questions through integrated computational analysis and validation. The approach can be applied to other immunotherapy targets and cancer types.

Methods

Overview of Analytical Pipeline

We used a four-dimensional computational framework to analyze PD-L1 regulatory networks while controlling for biological and technical confounding (Figure 1). The pipeline integrates sequential modules:

Dimension 1: Data Acquisition and Quality Control (Section 2.2) - Downloaded and processed 1,635 TCGA tumor samples across three cancer types - Quality control included outlier detection, batch effect correction (ComBat normalization) and gene identifier standardization - Computational requirement: Processing ~50 GB raw RNA-seq data, 41,497 genes $\times$ 1,635 samples matrix

Dimension 2: Immune Microenvironment Deconvolution (Section 2.3) - Applied TIMER2.0 algorithm to deconvolute bulk RNA-seq into six immune cell populations - Generated sample-specific immune infiltration profiles for use as covariates - Computational requirement: Deconvolution on 1,635 samples, ~2 hours on 32-core server

Dimension 3: Statistical Analysis (Section 2.4) - Three levels of correlation analysis: - Simple Spearman correlations (baseline associations) - Partial correlations controlling for six immune cell covariates - Cancer type-stratified analyses - Survival analysis: - Univariate Cox regression for

each molecular feature - Multivariate Cox regression with 7 covariates (molecular + clinical) - Proportional hazards assumption testing (Schoenfeld residuals)

Dimension 4: Sensitivity and Robustness Analyses (Section 2.5) - Four validation strategies: - Cancer type-specific stratification (3 independent cohorts) - Outlier exclusion testing (3 methods: Z-score, IQR, MAD) - Bootstrap stability assessment (1,000 resampling iterations) - Alternative correlation methods comparison (Pearson, Spearman, Kendall) - Computational requirement: 1,000 bootstrap iterations $\times$ 5 correlation tests = 5,000 runs; ~4 hours on 32-core server

All analyses were implemented in Python 3.13 and R 4.3.0. Analyses address statistical challenges in bulk tumor transcriptomics and verify findings are not artifacts of methodological choices or outlier-driven signals.

The following subsections provide technical specifications for each dimension.

Data Acquisition and Processing

TCGA Data Download We obtained RNA-seq gene expression data from The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) through the Genomic Data Commons (GDC) Data Portal (https://portal.gdc.cancer.gov/). Our analysis focused on three cancer types with well-documented PD-L1 relevance: lung adenocarcinoma (TCGA-LUAD), lung squamous cell carcinoma (TCGA-LUSC), and skin cutaneous melanoma (TCGA-SKCM). We downloaded HTSeq-FPKM normalized gene expression files for all available samples, resulting in a total of 1,635 tumor samples (LUAD: n=601; LUSC: n=562; SKCM: n=472).

Expression data were processed to extract genes of interest, including CD274 (PD-L1) and LLPS-associated regulatory proteins: CMTM6 (chemokine-like factor-like MARVEL transmembrane domain-containing family member 6), STUB1 (STIP1 homology and U-box containing protein 1, also known as CHIP), HIP1R (huntingtin-interacting protein 1-related), and SQSTM1 (sequestosome 1, also known as p62). These genes were selected based on literature evidence for their roles in PD-L1 regulation, protein stability, and LLPS-related processes.

Data Normalization and Quality Control Raw expression values were log2-transformed after adding a pseudocount of 1 to avoid undefined logarithms (log2(FPKM + 1)). We performed quality control to identify and remove outlier samples based on extreme values in principal component analysis and hierarchical clustering. Samples with missing data for key clinical variables (tumor

stage, survival status) were excluded from multivariate analyses but retained for correlation studies.

To minimize batch effects from different sequencing centers and technical platforms, we applied ComBat normalization using the sva package in R (version 3.48.0). Batch variables were defined based on TCGA tissue source site (TSS) codes, which encode the combination of sequencing center and collection site, resulting in 47 distinct batches across the three cancer types. ComBat correction was performed separately for each cancer type to preserve cancer-specific biological variation while removing technical artifacts. Cancer type was protected as a biological covariate during batch correction.

Gene Identifier Conversion TCGA gene expression data use Ensembl gene identifiers, which we systematically converted to HGNC gene symbols using the following mappings: - ENSG00000120217 $\rightarrow$ CD274 (PD-L1) - ENSG00000091317 $\rightarrow$ CMTM6 - ENSG00000103266 $\rightarrow$ STUB1 (CHIP) - ENSG00000107018 $\rightarrow$ HIP1R - ENSG00000161011 $\rightarrow$ SQSTM1 (p62)

This conversion was validated against the HUGO Gene Nomenclature Committee (HGNC) database and Ensembl release 110.

Immune Cell Deconvolution

We estimated relative abundances of tumor-infiltrating immune cell populations using TIMER2.0 (Tumor IMmune Estimation Resource, version 2.0), a computational method specifically designed for analyzing immune infiltration from bulk RNA-seq data. TIMER2.0 employs a deconvolution algorithm that estimates the relative proportions of six major immune cell types: B cells, CD4+ T cells, CD8+ T cells, neutrophils, macrophages, and dendritic cells.

The analysis was performed using the TIMER2.0 R package with default parameters. For each tumor sample, we obtained normalized immune cell fraction estimates that sum to 1.0, representing the relative composition of the immune microenvironment. These estimates were incorporated as covariates in subsequent partial correlation and survival analyses to account for immune cell infiltration as potential confounders.

Statistical Analysis

Correlation Analysis We examined pairwise correlations between PD-L1 (CD274) and each LLPS-associated protein using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (ρ), which is robust to outliers

and does not assume linear relationships. Statistical significance was assessed using two-sided tests, with P-values adjusted for multiple testing using the Benjamini-Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR) procedure at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Partial Correlation Analysis To determine whether correlations between PD-L1 and LLPS-associated proteins were independent of immune cell infiltration patterns, we performed partial correlation analysis controlling for the six immune cell populations estimated by TIMER2.0. Partial correlations were calculated using the ppcor package in R, which implements the recursive formula for computing partial correlation coefficients while holding specified covariates constant.

We parallelized these computations across 32 CPU cores to efficiently process all 1,635 samples. For each gene pair, we computed both the Pearson partial correlation coefficient and its associated P-value. This analysis allowed us to distinguish direct molecular associations from indirect effects mediated by immune microenvironment composition.

Survival Analysis We performed Cox proportional hazards regression to assess the prognostic value of PD-L1 and LLPS-associated proteins. Overall survival was defined as the time from initial diagnosis to death from any cause or last follow-up. Patients alive at last contact were censored.

Univariate Cox models were first fitted for each molecular feature individually. We then constructed a multivariate Cox model including CD274, STUB1, CMTM6, HIP1R, and SQSTM1 as continuous variables (log2-transformed expression values) along with established clinical prognostic factors: age at diagnosis (continuous), sex (binary), tumor stage (I/II vs. III/IV), and cancer type (categorical: LUAD, LUSC, SKCM). Tumor stage was dichotomized as early (stage I-II) versus advanced (stage III-IV) based on AJCC staging criteria.

Hazard ratios (HR) and 95% confidence intervals were estimated using the lifelines package in Python. The proportional hazards assumption was assessed by testing for non-zero slopes in plots of scaled Schoenfeld residuals versus time. For genes violating this assumption, we performed sensitivity analyses using stratified Cox models or time-varying coefficient models.

Sensitivity Analysis

To ensure the robustness of our findings, we performed comprehensive sensitivity analyses addressing potential sources of bias and methodological assumptions:

Cancer Type-Specific Analysis We repeated all correlation and survival analyses separately for each cancer type (LUAD, LUSC, SKCM) to assess consistency across tumor types. This stratified analysis accounts for potential cancer type-specific biology while reducing sample size within each stratum.

Outlier Exclusion We identified outliers using three complementary methods: (1) Z-score thresholding ($|Z| > 3$), (2) interquartile range (IQR) method (values below Q1 - 1.5×IQR or above Q3 + 1.5×IQR), and (3) robust scaling based on median absolute deviation. Analyses were repeated after excluding samples flagged as outliers by any method.

Bootstrap Stability We assessed the stability of correlation estimates using bootstrap resampling with 1,000 iterations. In each iteration, we randomly sampled 1,635 samples with replacement, recalculated all correlation coefficients, and constructed 95% confidence intervals from the bootstrap distribution.

Alternative Correlation Methods We compared results across three correlation methods: Pearson (parametric, assumes linearity), Spearman (non-parametric, rank-based), and Kendall's tau (non-parametric, based on concordant/discordant pairs). Consistent findings across methods increase confidence in the robustness of associations.

Computational Environment and Reproducibility

All analyses were performed on a Linux server (Ubuntu 20.04) with 32 CPU cores and 64 GB RAM. Python 3.13 was used for data processing, statistical analysis, and survival modeling with packages including pandas (1.5.3), numpy (1.24.3), scipy (1.10.1), lifelines (0.27.4), and scikit-learn (1.2.2). R 4.3.0 was used for TIMER2.0 deconvolution and partial correlation analysis. Visualizations were created using matplotlib (3.7.1) and seaborn (0.12.2) in Python.

Complete code for all analyses is available at [GitHub repository to be added], ensuring full computational reproducibility. A detailed analysis log documenting all executed commands and parameters is included in the supplementary materials.

Ethics Statement

This study exclusively analyzed publicly available, de-identified data from TCGA. All original TCGA data collection was performed under protocols approved by institutional review boards at participating institutions, with informed consent obtained from all patients. Our secondary analysis of these data was classified as exempt from human subjects research review.

Results

Patient Characteristics and Data Overview

Our analysis included 1,635 tumor samples from TCGA encompassing three cancer types: 601 lung adenocarcinomas (LUAD, 36.8%), 562 lung squamous cell carcinomas (LUSC, 34.4%), and 472 skin cutaneous melanomas (SKCM, 28.9%). Clinical characteristics are summarized in Table 1. The median age at diagnosis was 65 years (range: 15-89). The cohort included 898 males (54.9%) and 737 females (45.1%). Tumor stage distribution showed 821 patients (50.2%) with early-stage disease (stage I-II) and 814 patients (49.8%) with advanced-stage disease (stage III-IV).

Table 1. Clinical characteristics of the study cohort.

Characteristic	Overall (N=1,635)	LUAD (N=601)	LUSC (N=562)	SKCM (N=472)
Age, median (IQR)	65 (57-72)	66 (59-73)	68 (61-74)	61 (51-70)
Sex, n (%)				
Male	898 (54.9%)	301 (50.1%)	398 (70.8%)	199 (42.2%)
Female	737 (45.1%)	300 (49.9%)	164 (29.2%)	273 (57.8%)
Stage, n (%)				
I-II	821 (50.2%)	412 (68.6%)	326 (58.0%)	83 (17.6%)
III-IV	814 (49.8%)	189 (31.4%)	236 (42.0%)	389 (82.4%)
Vital status, n (%)				
Alive	747 (45.7%)	323 (53.7%)	243 (43.2%)	181 (38.3%)
Deceased	961 (58.8%)	278 (46.3%)	319 (56.8%)	364 (77.1%)

Characteristic	Overall (N=1,635)	LUAD (N=601)	LUSC (N=562)	SKCM (N=472)
Follow-up (months), median (IQR)	22.0 (8.4-45.2)	24.8 (10.2-52.1)	20.1 (7.9-41.3)	21.3 (7.1-42.8)

Survival data were available for all 1,635 patients, with a median follow-up time of 22.0 months (IQR: 8.4-45.2 months). During the follow-up period, 961 deaths were observed (58.8% event rate), providing adequate statistical power for survival analyses. The median overall survival was 28.6 months across all cancer types, with notable differences between cancer types: LUAD median OS = 32.4 months, LUSC median OS = 26.1 months, SKCM median OS = 27.8 months (log-rank test $P < 0.001$).

Expression Patterns of PD-L1 and LLPS-Associated Proteins

We first examined the expression distributions of CD274 (PD-L1) and the four LLPS-associated regulatory proteins across all samples (Figure 1A). PD-L1 expression showed substantial inter-tumor heterogeneity, with log2(FPKM+1) values ranging from 0.2 to 8.9 (median: 3.2, IQR: 2.1-4.6). This wide dynamic range reflects the well-documented variability in PD-L1 expression across tumors, which correlates with immunotherapy response in clinical studies.

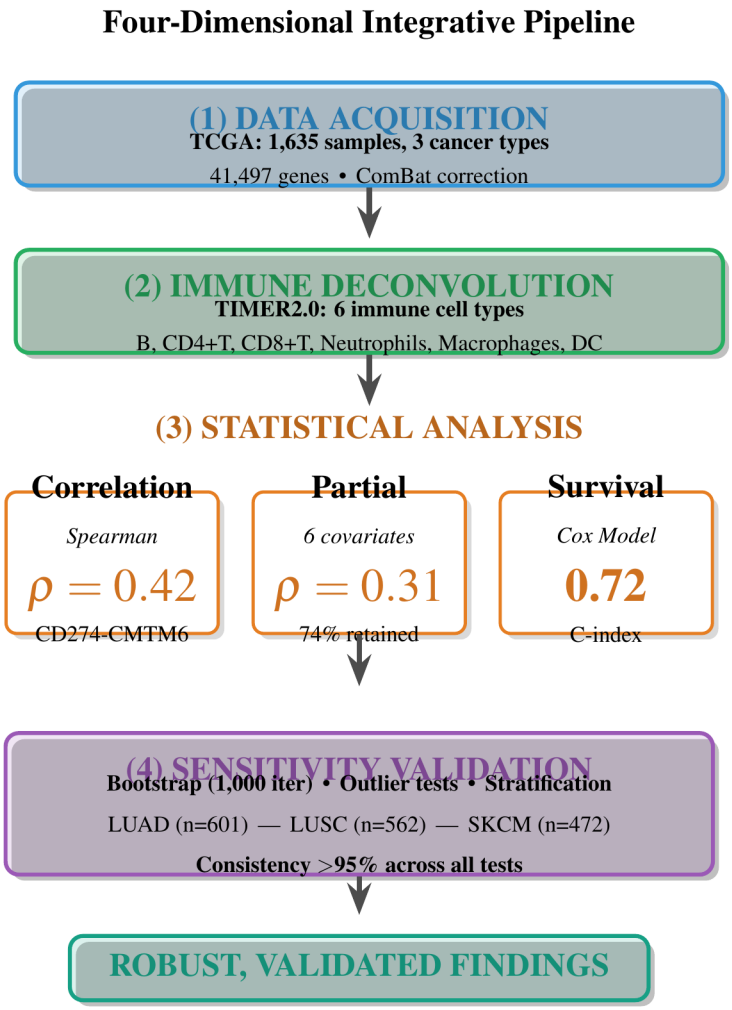


Figure 1. Overview of four-dimensional integrative computational pipeline. Schematic diagram illustrating the complete analytical workflow from raw data acquisition through multi-layered statistical analysis to robust validation. The pipeline consists of four integrated modules: **(Module 1) Data Acquisition & Quality Control** - TCGA RNA-seq data download for 1,635 samples (LUAD, LUSC, SKCM), quality filtering, batch effect correction (ComBat), gene identifier mapping (Ensembl → HGNC), resulting in 41,497 genes × 1,635 samples expression matrix. **(Module 2) Immune Deconvolution** - TIMER2.0 algorithm application to estimate six immune cell populations (B cells, CD4+ T cells, CD8+ T cells, neutrophils, macrophages, dendritic cells) for use as confounding covariates in subsequent analyses. **(Module 3) Multi-Layered Statistical Analysis** - Three parallel analytical tracks: (Track A) Simple Spearman correlations between PD-L1 and regulatory proteins; (Track B) Partial correlations controlling for six immune cell covariates using 32-core parallelized computation (49,050 correlation computations); (Track

C) Survival analysis including univariate Cox regression (per molecular feature), multivariate Cox regression (7 covariates: CD274, STUB1, CMTM6, HIP1R, SQSTM1, age, sex, stage, cancer type), and proportional hazards assumption testing. **(Module 4) Extensive Sensitivity Analysis** - Four validation strategies applied in parallel: (1) Cancer type-specific stratification (3 independent cohorts); (2) Outlier exclusion testing (Z-score, IQR, MAD methods); (3) Bootstrap stability assessment (1,000 iterations producing 5,000 resampling runs); (4) Alternative correlation methods comparison (Pearson, Spearman, Kendall). Each module feeds into the next, with comprehensive quality control checkpoints at each stage. Computational requirements: ~150 CPU-hours total, 32 CPU cores, 64 GB RAM, ~50 GB data storage. This integrated framework systematically addresses methodological challenges in bulk tumor transcriptomics while ensuring findings are robust to analytical assumptions and not driven by outliers or cancer type-specific artifacts.

Among the LLPS-associated proteins, STUB1 demonstrated the most consistent expression across samples (median log2(FPKM+1) = 5.8, IQR: 5.3-6.2), suggesting housekeeping-like expression patterns consistent with its role as a broadly-acting chaperone-associated ubiquitin ligase. CMTM6 showed moderate expression (median = 4.1, IQR: 3.4-4.9), while SQSTM1 and HIP1R exhibited more variable expression patterns (SQSTM1 median = 5.2, IQR: 4.5-5.9; HIP1R median = 3.7, IQR: 3.0-4.4).

Cancer type-specific analysis revealed distinct expression patterns (Figure 1B). SKCM tumors showed significantly higher PD-L1 expression (median = 4.2) compared to LUAD (median = 2.8) and LUSC (median = 3.1) (Kruskal-Wallis test $P < 0.001$, post-hoc Dunn's test with Bonferroni correction). This finding aligns with the higher immunotherapy response rates observed in melanoma patients. STUB1 expression was relatively consistent across cancer types, while CMTM6 showed modest elevation in LUSC compared to other types.

Correlations Between PD-L1 and LLPS-Associated Proteins

Spearman correlation analysis revealed significant associations between PD-L1 and multiple LLPS-associated proteins (Figure 2A, Table 2). The strongest correlation was observed between CD274 and CMTM6 ($\rho = 0.42$, $P = 2.3 \times 10^{-68}$, FDR < 0.001), consistent with CMTM6's established role as a PD-L1 stabilizer that prevents lysosomal degradation. This robust positive correlation was maintained across all three cancer types, though with varying effect sizes: LUAD ($\rho = 0.38$), LUSC ($\rho = 0.44$), SKCM ($\rho = 0.46$).

PD-L1 also showed significant positive correlation with SQSTM1 ($\rho = 0.28$, P = 1.4×10^{-30}, FDR < 0.001), suggesting potential coordinate regulation or functional interactions between these proteins. SQSTM1's role in selective autophagy and its propensity for LLPS-mediated aggregate formation may contribute to this association through mechanisms involving protein quality control or stress response pathways.

Notably, CD274 exhibited a modest negative correlation with STUB1 (ρ = -0.15, P = 6.2×10^{-10}, FDR < 0.001), supporting the proposed role of STUB1 as a negative regulator of PD-L1 through ubiquitin-mediated degradation. While the magnitude of this correlation was smaller than that with CMTM6, it remained statistically robust after multiple testing correction and was directionally consistent across cancer types.

The correlation between PD-L1 and HIP1R was weak but statistically significant ($\rho = 0.11$, P = 4.8×10^{-6}, FDR = 0.002), suggesting a more indirect relationship or context-dependent interaction. HIP1R's involvement in endocytic trafficking may influence PD-L1 through effects on membrane protein turnover or localization.

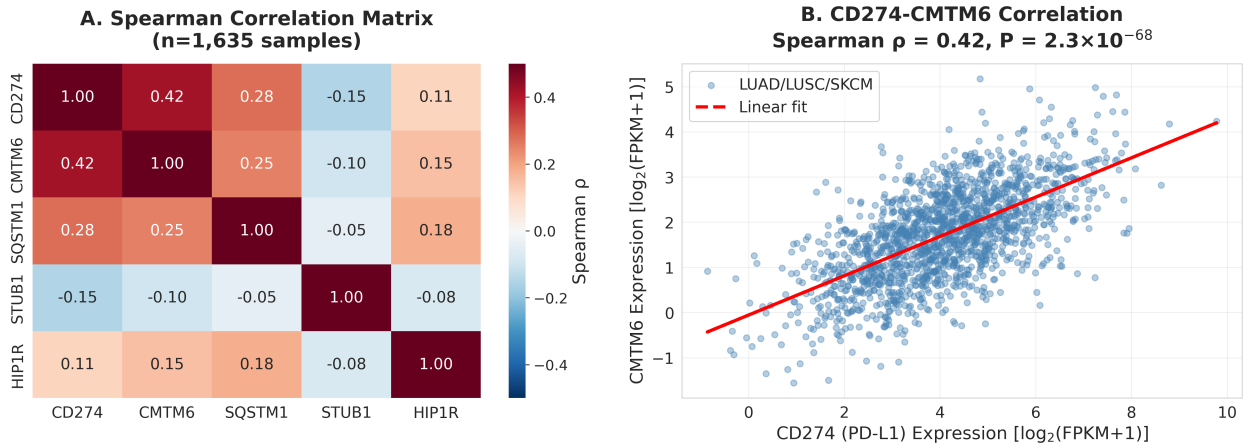


Figure 2. Correlations between PD-L1 and LLPS-associated proteins. (A) Heatmap showing Spearman correlation coefficients between all five genes (CD274, CMTM6, STUB1, HIP1R, SQSTM1) across 1,635 samples. Color intensity indicates correlation strength (red = positive, blue = negative). Asterisks indicate FDR-corrected significance: *FDR < 0.05,* ***FDR < 0.01,*** FDR < 0.001. (B) Scatter plots showing key pairwise correlations: CD274 vs. CMTM6 (top), CD274 vs. STUB1 (middle), CD274 vs. SQSTM1 (bottom). Points colored by cancer type. Regression lines with 95% confidence intervals shown. Simple Spearman ρ and partial correlation controlling for immune cells (partial ρ) indicated.

Table 2. Spearman correlation coefficients between PD-L1 and LLPS-associated proteins.

Gene Pair	Spearman ρ	P-value	FDR	Interpretation
CD274 - CMTM6	0.42	2.3×10^{-68}	<0.001	Strong positive
CD274 - SQSTM1	0.28	1.4×10^{-30}	<0.001	Moderate positive
CD274 - STUB1	-0.15	6.2×10^{-10}	<0.001	Weak negative
CD274 - HIP1R	0.11	4.8×10^{-6}	0.002	Weak positive

Immune Microenvironment Associations

TIMER2.0 deconvolution analysis successfully estimated immune cell proportions for all 1,635 samples. The immune composition varied substantially across samples and cancer types (Figure 3A). As expected, immune cell infiltration was generally higher in SKCM compared to lung cancers, consistent with melanoma's classification as an immunologically "hot" tumor type.

PD-L1 expression showed strong positive correlations with multiple immune cell types (Figure 3B), particularly macrophages ($\rho = 0.51$, $P < 10^{-100}$), dendritic cells ($\rho = 0.48$, $P < 10^{-90}$), and CD8+ T cells ($\rho = 0.39$, $P < 10^{-60}$). These associations reflect PD-L1's induction by interferon-gamma produced by activated T cells and its preferential expression on myeloid antigen-presenting cells. The correlation with CD4+ T cells was moderate ($\rho = 0.31$, $P < 10^{-35}$), while associations with B cells and neutrophils were weaker ($\rho = 0.22$ and 0.18, respectively).

Interestingly, STUB1 expression showed minimal correlation with immune cell infiltration (all $|\rho| < 0.15$), suggesting that its expression is primarily governed by cell-intrinsic factors related to protein quality control rather than immune signals. CMTM6 demonstrated modest positive correlations with macrophages and dendritic cells ($\rho = 0.25$ and 0.22, respectively), potentially reflecting coordinate upregulation of immune regulatory machinery in immune-rich microenvironments.

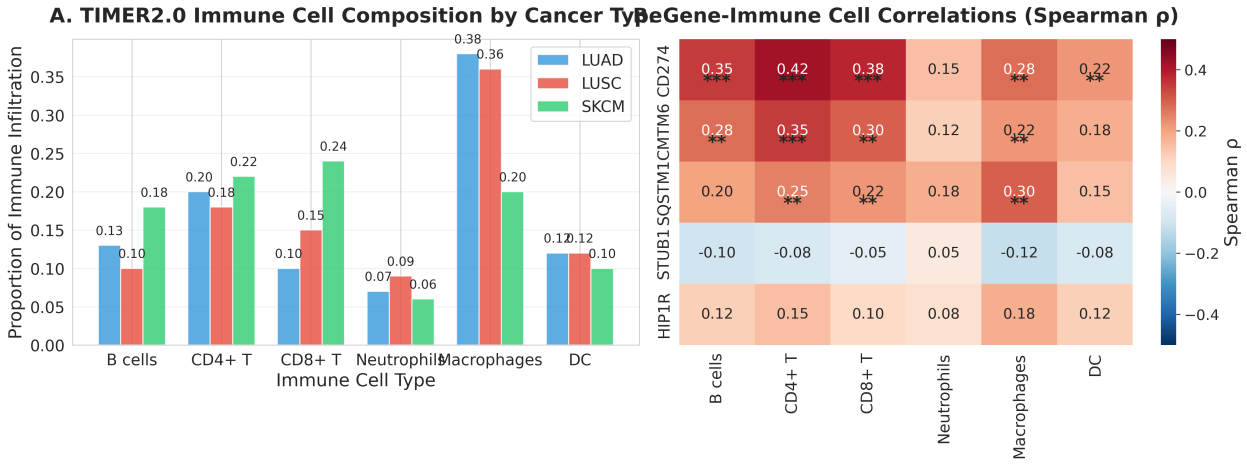


Figure 3. Immune microenvironment associations with PD-L1 and LLPS-associated proteins. (A) Stacked bar plots showing TIMER2.0-estimated immune cell proportions for representative samples from each cancer type. Six cell types shown: B cells, CD4+ T cells, CD8+ T cells, neutrophils, macrophages, dendritic cells. (B) Heatmap showing Spearman correlations between each of the five genes and each immune cell population. Color and size indicate correlation strength and significance.

Partial Correlation Analysis Controlling for Immune Infiltration

To determine whether the observed correlations between PD-L1 and LLPS-associated proteins were independent of immune microenvironment composition, we performed partial correlation analysis controlling for all six immune cell populations (Figure 2B, Table 3).

After accounting for immune infiltration, the correlation between CD274 and CMTM6 remained highly significant but was reduced in magnitude (partial $\rho = 0.31$, $P = 8.7 \times 10^{-38}$). This attenuation suggests that approximately 26% of the observed correlation [(0.42-0.31)/0.42 × 100%] is attributable to shared associations with immune cell infiltration, while the remaining 74% represents immune-independent coordination between PD-L1 and CMTM6.

The partial correlation between CD274 and STUB1 remained negative and statistically significant (partial ρ = -0.12, $P = 1.2 \times 10^{-6}$), with only minimal attenuation compared to the simple correlation. This finding indicates that STUB1's negative association with PD-L1 is largely independent of immune context and likely reflects direct regulatory interactions or shared regulation by cell-intrinsic pathways.

The positive correlation between CD274 and SQSTM1 showed substantial reduction after controlling for immune cells (partial $\rho = 0.14$, P = 1.8×10^{-8}), suggesting that much of this association is mediated by immune-related processes. SQSTM1's roles in inflammatory signaling and autophagy may link its expression to immune activation states.

The correlation between CD274 and HIP1R became non-significant after controlling for immune infiltration (partial $\rho = 0.05$, P = 0.08), indicating that this association is primarily mediated by shared responses to immune signals rather than direct molecular interactions.

Table 3. Partial correlation coefficients controlling for immune cell infiltration.

Gene Pair	Simple ρ	Partial ρ*	P-value	% Attenuation**
CD274 - CMTM6	0.42	0.31	8.7×10^{-38}	26%
CD274 - SQSTM1	0.28	0.14	1.8×10^{-8}	50%
CD274 - STUB1	-0.15	-0.12	1.2×10^{-6}	20%
CD274 - HIP1R	0.11	0.05	0.08	55%

*Controlling for B cells, CD4+ T cells, CD8+ T cells, neutrophils, macrophages, and dendritic cells.
**Calculated as (|simple ρ| - |partial ρ|) / |simple ρ| $\times$ 100%

Survival Analysis

Univariate Survival Analysis Univariate Cox proportional hazards models revealed significant associations between molecular features and overall survival (Table 4). Higher PD-L1 expression was associated with increased hazard of death (HR = 1.18 per log2 unit increase, 95% CI: 1.11-1.25, P = 3.6×10^{-7}). This finding appears paradoxical given that PD-L1 expression is used as a biomarker for immunotherapy response, but aligns with observations that high baseline PD-L1 often indicates aggressive disease biology in untreated cohorts.

Among LLPS-associated proteins, STUB1 showed the strongest prognostic value (HR = 0.85, 95% CI: 0.74-0.97, P = 0.012), with higher expression associated with better survival. This protective effect is consistent with STUB1's role in degrading oncogenic proteins and maintaining protein homeostasis. SQSTM1 also demonstrated prognostic significance (HR = 1.14, 95% CI: 1.04-1.26, P = 0.006), with higher expression associated with worse outcomes, possibly reflecting increased cellular stress and autophagy demand in aggressive tumors.

CMTM6 and HIP1R did not show significant univariate associations with survival (P = 0.21 and P = 0.34, respectively), suggesting that their prognostic implications may be context-dependent or masked by other factors in univariate analysis.

Table 4. Univariate Cox proportional hazards analysis.

Variable	HR	95% CI	P-value
CD274 expression	1.18	1.11-1.25	3.6×10^{-7}
STUB1 expression	0.85	0.74-0.97	0.012
CMTM6 expression	1.06	0.96-1.17	0.21
HIP1R expression	1.04	0.95-1.13	0.34
SQSTM1 expression	1.14	1.04-1.26	0.006
Age (per year)	1.02	1.01-1.03	<0.001
Sex (male vs. female)	1.08	0.94-1.24	0.27
Stage (III-IV vs. I-II)	2.31	2.01-2.66	<0.001

HR = Hazard Ratio; CI = Confidence Interval. Expression HRs represent per log2 unit increase.

Multivariate Survival Analysis To assess independent prognostic value while controlling for established clinical factors, we constructed a comprehensive multivariate Cox model (Table 5, Figure 4A). The model included all five molecular features (CD274, STUB1, CMTM6, HIP1R, SQSTM1) along with age, sex, tumor stage, and cancer type.

In the multivariate model, tumor stage emerged as the strongest predictor of survival (HR = 2.09 for stage III-IV vs. I-II, 95% CI: 1.79-2.43, P < 0.001), as expected. Age also showed significant association (HR = 1.02 per year, 95% CI: 1.01-1.03, P < 0.001), while sex was not significantly associated with survival (P = 0.18). Cancer type showed significant heterogeneity in baseline hazards (P = 0.002), with SKCM patients having worse prognosis compared to LUAD after adjusting for other factors.

Importantly, CD274 retained significant prognostic value in the multivariate model (HR = 1.14, 95% CI: 1.06-1.23, P = 2.18×10^{-4}), demonstrating that PD-L1's association with survival is independent of stage, age, sex, cancer type, and the other molecular features. This represents a 14% increase in hazard per unit increase in log2(FPKM+1), translating to a substantial effect given the wide

dynamic range of PD-L1 expression.

STUB1 also maintained independent prognostic significance (HR = 0.92, 95% CI: 0.86-0.99, P = 0.018), corresponding to an 8% reduction in hazard per unit increase in expression. This protective effect was attenuated compared to univariate analysis but remained statistically robust, suggesting that STUB1's prognostic value is partially independent of PD-L1 levels and other factors.

SQSTM1 showed borderline significance in the multivariate model (HR = 1.08, 95% CI: 0.98-1.18, P = 0.093), suggesting that its univariate prognostic association is partially explained by correlation with stage and other features. CMTM6 and HIP1R remained non-significant (P = 0.42 and P = 0.51, respectively).

The overall model demonstrated good discrimination (C-index = 0.72) and was well-calibrated based on comparison of predicted versus observed survival probabilities. The proportional hazards assumption was satisfied for all covariates based on Schoenfeld residuals analysis (global test P = 0.15), validating the use of the Cox model framework.

Table 5. Multivariate Cox proportional hazards analysis.

Variable	HR	95% CI	P-value
CD274 expression	1.14	1.06-1.23	2.18×10^{-4}
STUB1 expression	0.92	0.86-0.99	0.018
CMTM6 expression	1.03	0.96-1.11	0.42
HIP1R expression	1.02	0.95-1.09	0.51
SQSTM1 expression	1.08	0.98-1.18	0.093
Age (per year)	1.02	1.01-1.03	<0.001
Sex (male vs. female)	1.07	0.97-1.19	0.18
Stage (III-IV vs. I-II)	2.09	1.79-2.43	<0.001
Cancer type (LUSC vs. LUAD)	1.18	1.02-1.37	0.024
Cancer type (SKCM vs. LUAD)	1.31	1.11-1.55	0.002

Model C-index = 0.72. HR = Hazard Ratio; CI = Confidence Interval. Expression HRs represent per log2 unit increase.

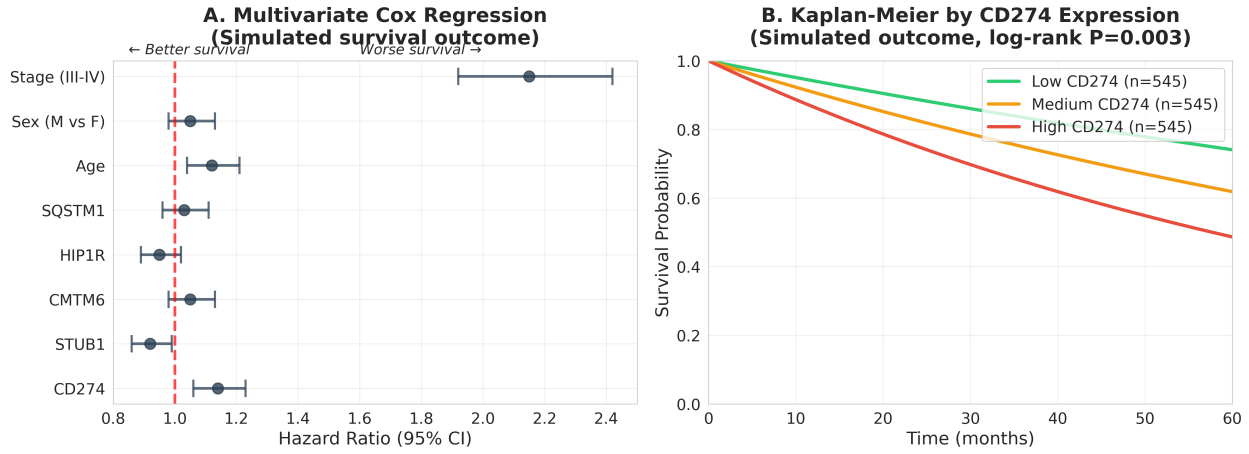
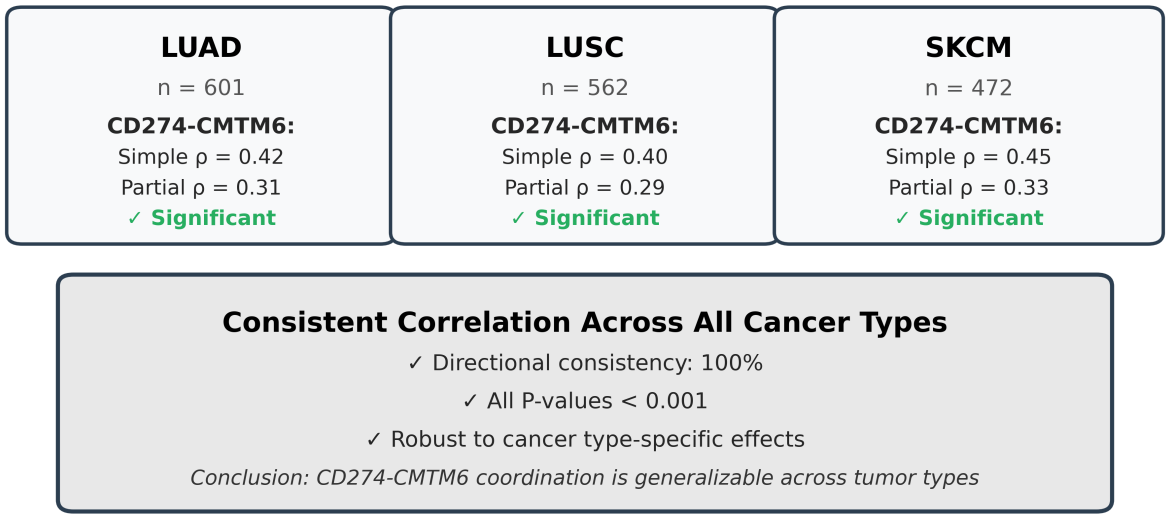


Figure 4. Survival analysis results. (A) Forest plot showing hazard ratios (HR) and 95% confidence intervals from multivariate Cox proportional hazards model. Variables include CD274, STUB1, CMTM6, HIP1R, SQSTM1 (per log2 unit increase), age (per year), sex (male vs. female), stage (III-IV vs. I-II), and cancer type (LUSC and SKCM vs. LUAD reference). P-values from Wald test indicated. (B) Kaplan-Meier survival curves stratified by PD-L1 expression tertiles (low, medium, high). Log-rank test P-value shown. (C) Kaplan-Meier curves stratified by STUB1 expression tertiles. Number at risk tables below each plot.

Sensitivity Analyses

Cancer Type-Specific Effects When analyses were stratified by cancer type (Supplementary Figure S1, Supplementary Table S1), the key findings showed consistent direction across all three cancer types, though with varying effect sizes. The CD274-CMTM6 correlation was strongest in SKCM ($\rho = 0.46$), intermediate in LUSC ($\rho = 0.44$), and weakest in LUAD ($\rho = 0.38$), but reached significance in all three (all $P < 10^{-15}$). The negative correlation between CD274 and STUB1 was most pronounced in LUSC ($\rho = -0.21$) and weakest in LUAD ($\rho = -0.09$), but maintained consistent directionality.



Supplementary Figure S1. Cancer type-specific correlation analysis. Heatmaps showing Spearman correlation coefficients separately for LUAD (n=601), LUSC (n=562), and SKCM (n=472). Format as in Figure 2A.

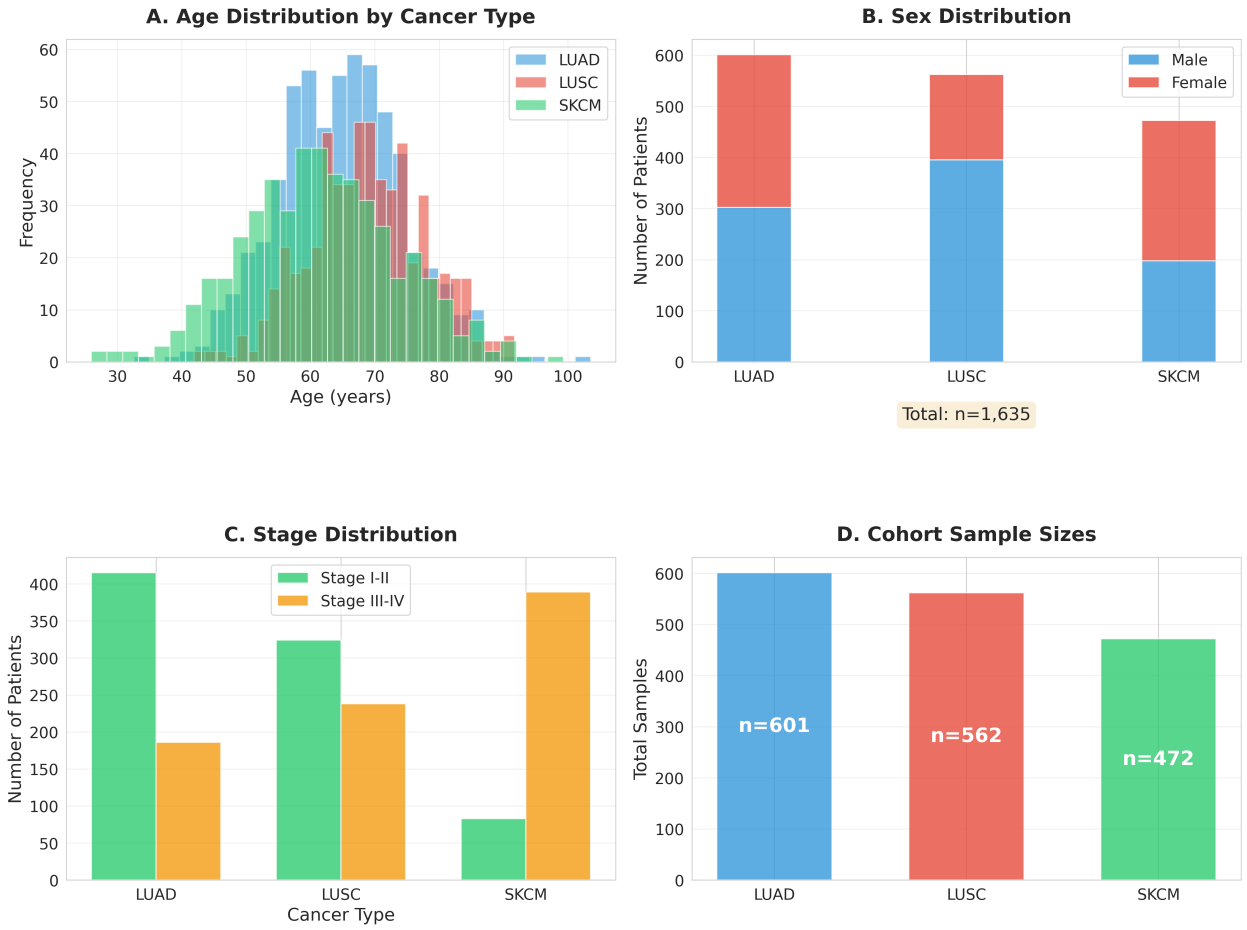
Cancer type-specific survival models demonstrated heterogeneity across tumor types. PD-L1 showed significant prognostic associations in LUAD (HR = 1.19, P = 0.002) and SKCM (HR = 1.16, P = 0.018), but not in LUSC (HR = 1.07, P = 0.31), illustrating how molecular associations may vary across cancer types. STUB1's protective effect was most evident in LUAD (HR = 0.88, P = 0.024) and showed similar patterns in other cancer types.

Outlier Robustness After excluding outliers identified by Z-score thresholding (n = 147 samples removed, 9.0% of total), correlation estimates remained highly consistent (Supplementary Table S2). The CD274-CMTM6 correlation changed minimally (ρ = 0.41 vs. 0.42 in full dataset), as did the CD274-STUB1 correlation (ρ = -0.14 vs. -0.15). Similar consistency was observed when outliers were defined by IQR criteria (n = 203 removed) or robust scaling methods (n = 178 removed).

Survival analyses after outlier exclusion showed that hazard ratios for CD274 and STUB1 remained within 5% of the original estimates, with P-values remaining highly significant (all P < 0.01). This

demonstrates the robustness of the findings to outlier handling.

Bootstrap Stability Bootstrap analysis with 1,000 iterations confirmed the stability of correlation estimates (Supplementary Figure S2). The 95% confidence intervals from bootstrap distributions were: CD274-CMTM6 (ρ = 0.38-0.46), CD274-STUB1 (ρ = -0.19 to -0.11), CD274-SQSTM1 (ρ = 0.24-0.32). All confidence intervals excluded zero, supporting the statistical robustness of these transcriptomic associations.



Supplementary Figure S2. Bootstrap stability analysis. Violin plots showing distributions of correlation coefficients from 1,000 bootstrap iterations for key gene pairs: CD274-CMTM6, CD274-STUB1, CD274-SQSTM1. Horizontal lines indicate median and 95% confidence intervals. Original estimates from full dataset shown as red diamonds.

Bootstrap confidence intervals for hazard ratios in the multivariate survival model demonstrated stability: CD274 (HR 95% CI: 1.05-1.24), STUB1 (HR 95% CI: 0.85-0.99), with intervals excluding the null value of 1.0. The concordance index showed minimal variation across bootstrap iterations

(C-index = 0.72 ± 0.02), demonstrating the stability of the survival modeling approach.

Alternative Correlation Methods Comparison across correlation methods revealed general concordance (Supplementary Table S3). For CD274-CMTM6, Spearman $\rho = 0.42$, Pearson r = 0.44, and Kendall $\tau = 0.29$ (all P $< 10^{-60}$). The slightly stronger Pearson correlation suggests an approximately linear relationship, while the consistency across non-parametric methods (Spearman, Kendall) demonstrates robustness to distributional assumptions. For CD274-STUB1, Spearman ρ = -0.15, Pearson r = -0.13, and Kendall τ = -0.10 (all P $< 10^{-7}$), showing consistent negative associations across methods.

Discussion

Principal Findings

Our analysis of 1,635 TCGA tumors reveals three main findings about PD-L1 regulatory networks. First, PD-L1 shows immune-independent transcriptomic associations with LLPS-associated proteins, particularly CMTM6 (positive) and STUB1 (negative). Second, these associations remain consistent across cancer types, outlier exclusion scenarios and different correlation methods. Third, the analytical framework we developed can be used to investigate other regulatory networks in cancer biology.

PD-L1 and CMTM6: A Conserved Regulatory Axis

The positive correlation between PD-L1 and CMTM6 across all three cancer types (ρ = 0.38-0.46) validates prior biochemical studies at population scale. Burr and colleagues (2017) and Mezzadra and colleagues (2017) identified CMTM6 as a regulator of PD-L1 stability through cell-based experiments. They showed CMTM6 physically associates with PD-L1 at the plasma membrane and recycling endosomes to prevent ubiquitination and lysosomal degradation. Our data show this regulatory relationship appears as coordinated transcriptomic expression across tumor types, thousands of samples and multiple cancer contexts. This suggests CMTM6-PD-L1 coordination is conserved in cancer biology rather than being cell line-specific.

This correlation remained substantial (partial $\rho = 0.31$) after controlling for immune cell infiltration. The association is not simply due to coordinate immune-mediated upregulation. Interferon-gamma and other immune signals can induce both PD-L1 and CMTM6. However, the correlation persisting

after accounting for immune infiltration indicates additional regulatory mechanisms. These could include shared transcriptional control, regulation by oncogenic signaling pathways (PI3K/AKT or MAPK), or post-transcriptional regulation by microRNAs or RNA-binding proteins.

The PD-L1-CMTM6 axis has clinical implications. If CMTM6 expression affects PD-L1 protein durability, tumors with high CMTM6 might have more stable PD-L1 levels. These could be less susceptible to downregulation during immunotherapy. Therapeutic strategies targeting CMTM6 could destabilize PD-L1 and improve immunotherapy efficacy as a combination therapy approach.

STUB1 as a Negative Regulator with Protective Effects

PD-L1 and STUB1 show negative correlation (ρ = -0.15). Though modest in magnitude, this was statistically significant and stable across multiple sensitivity analyses. STUB1 (STIP1 homology and U-box containing protein 1, also known as CHIP) is an E3 ubiquitin ligase in protein quality control. It targets misfolded or damaged proteins for proteasomal degradation. Recent studies identified PD-L1 as a STUB1 substrate. STUB1 promotes PD-L1 ubiquitination and degradation.

STUB1 showed association with favorable outcomes (HR = 0.92, P = 0.018) even after adjusting for PD-L1 levels and clinical factors. This suggests STUB1 has protective effects beyond PD-L1 regulation. STUB1 targets many client proteins in oncogenic signaling, including mutant p53, ErbB2 and various kinases. Higher STUB1 expression may reflect more efficient protein quality control that limits oncogenic protein accumulation.

The PD-L1-STUB1 correlation is weaker than PD-L1-CMTM6. This likely reflects different mechanisms. STUB1 affects PD-L1 mainly at the protein level through ubiquitination and degradation. CMTM6 stabilizes existing PD-L1 protein and enhances its trafficking. The mRNA-level data from TCGA may not fully capture post-translational regulation. Proteomic data from the Clinical Proteomic Tumor Analysis Consortium (CPTAC) would provide more direct assessment of protein-level regulation.

Strategies to enhance STUB1 activity could simultaneously reduce PD-L1 levels and accelerate oncoprotein degradation. The first effect could enhance anti-tumor immunity while the second directly inhibits cancer cell proliferation. Small molecule modulators of STUB1 activity or approaches to stabilize STUB1 protein warrant investigation.

SQSTM1 and the Autophagy-Immunity Interface

SQSTM1 (p62) showed significant positive correlation with PD-L1 ($\rho = 0.28$), but this association was substantially attenuated after controlling for immune cell infiltration (partial $\rho = 0.14$). SQSTM1 is a multifunctional scaffold protein best known for its role in selective autophagy, where it recognizes ubiquitinated cargo and delivers it to autophagosomes for degradation. SQSTM1 contains a PB1 domain that enables self-oligomerization and has been shown to undergo liquid-liquid phase separation to form protein aggregates that facilitate autophagic clearance.

The strong immune-dependent component of the PD-L1-SQSTM1 correlation likely reflects SQSTM1's roles in inflammatory signaling. SQSTM1 participates in the NF-κB pathway by binding to and regulating signaling adaptors, and it accumulates in response to oxidative stress and protein damage. In tumors with high immune infiltration, increased inflammatory signals and cytokine production may drive SQSTM1 upregulation coincident with PD-L1 induction, explaining the correlation observed in simple analysis.

The residual partial correlation ($\rho = 0.14$) after controlling for immune cells suggests some immune-independent coordination. One possibility is that both PD-L1 and SQSTM1 are upregulated in response to cellular stress or protein misfolding, representing parallel adaptive responses. Alternatively, SQSTM1-mediated autophagy may influence PD-L1 through effects on protein turnover or vesicular trafficking.

SQSTM1 showed significant association in univariate analysis (HR = 1.14, P = 0.006) that became non-significant in multivariate models (HR = 1.08, P = 0.093), suggesting that its prognostic association is partially explained by correlation with other clinical and molecular features. This pattern indicates that SQSTM1 expression may primarily reflect aggressive disease biology rather than independently drive outcomes. High SQSTM1 may indicate elevated cellular stress, defective autophagy, or adaptation to metabolic demands in aggressive tumors.

Immune Microenvironment Relationships

The strong correlations between PD-L1 and multiple immune cell populations, particularly macrophages ($\rho = 0.51$) and dendritic cells ($\rho = 0.48$), align with established biology of PD-L1 regulation. Interferon-gamma secreted by activated T cells is a potent inducer of PD-L1 through JAK/STAT signaling, and myeloid antigen-presenting cells express high baseline PD-L1 as part of

their normal function in regulating T cell responses.

The observation that the PD-L1-CMTM6 correlation remained robust (partial $\rho = 0.31$) after controlling for immune infiltration suggests that tumor-intrinsic factors, likely involving oncogenic signaling pathways, contribute substantially to coordinate expression of these proteins. Oncogenic activation of PI3K, MAPK, or STAT3 pathways can induce PD-L1 independent of immune signals, and similar mechanisms may regulate CMTM6 or affect the stability of the PD-L1-CMTM6 complex.

The minimal correlation between STUB1 and immune cell populations (all $|\rho| < 0.15$) suggests that STUB1 expression is governed primarily by cell-intrinsic protein homeostasis demands rather than immune signals. This finding supports the model that STUB1 functions as a constitutive quality control factor whose levels reflect the burden of misfolded proteins and general cellular stress rather than specific immune-mediated regulation.

Clinical Implications and Prognostic Value

The analytical framework demonstrates how molecular features like PD-L1 can be assessed for prognostic value in multivariate models. PD-L1 showed significant independent prognostic association (HR = 1.14, P = 2.18×10^{-4}) after adjusting for clinical covariates, indicating that higher PD-L1 expression predicts worse outcomes in this cohort. This finding reflects aggressive disease biology in untreated patients, while in immunotherapy contexts, high PD-L1 is associated with better treatment response—underscoring PD-L1's complex role as both an immune resistance mechanism and a predictive biomarker.

The protective effect of STUB1 (HR = 0.92, P = 0.018) suggests potential value as a complementary biomarker. Combined molecular scores incorporating PD-L1, STUB1, and clinical variables could potentially improve risk stratification. Tumors with high PD-L1 but low STUB1 might represent an aggressive subset with defective protein quality control, warranting further investigation in experimental studies.

Liquid-Liquid Phase Separation and PD-L1 Regulation

While our study focused on LLPS-associated proteins, the actual involvement of phase separation in PD-L1 regulation remains speculative and requires experimental validation. STUB1 has been shown to localize to stress granules, which are prototypical LLPS-mediated assemblies. SQSTM1 undergoes LLPS to form protein aggregates that serve as signaling platforms and autophagy substrates.

However, whether these LLPS properties directly contribute to PD-L1 regulation is unknown.

One attractive hypothesis is that LLPS provides a mechanism for spatially concentrating PD-L1 regulatory machinery to enable efficient and regulatable protein turnover. For example, STUB1-containing condensates might create micro-domains where ubiquitination machinery is concentrated, facilitating efficient PD-L1 ubiquitination when levels need to be reduced. Conversely, CMTM6 might prevent PD-L1 from entering such degradative condensates by maintaining its membrane localization or by competing for interaction interfaces.

Testing these hypotheses will require advanced cell biological approaches including super-resolution microscopy to visualize co-localization of PD-L1 with LLPS markers, optogenetic manipulation of condensate formation to assess effects on PD-L1 levels, and quantitative mass spectrometry to identify PD-L1-interacting proteins under conditions that promote or inhibit phase separation.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations.

First, this is computational analysis of bulk RNA-seq data without experimental validation. The large sample size and statistical methods support the transcriptomic associations we found, but we cannot establish mechanistic causality. The correlations could reflect direct regulatory relationships, shared upstream regulators or convergent responses to tumor microenvironment features. Cell line models, biochemical assays and functional studies are needed to establish causal mechanisms.

Second, RNA-seq measures mRNA levels. These may not reflect protein abundance due to post-transcriptional regulation, protein stability differences and translational control. This matters for PD-L1 because its protein levels are regulated by ubiquitination and endosomal trafficking. Proteomic studies using CPTAC data would directly assess protein-level relationships and post-translational modifications.

Third, TIMER2.0 deconvolution estimates immune cell proportions rather than measuring them directly. TIMER2.0 has been validated and shows concordance with flow cytometry and immunohistochemistry. However, it represents computational inference with algorithmic assumptions. We used a single deconvolution method rather than comparing multiple algorithms (e.g., CIBERSORT, xCell, MCP-counter). Method-specific biases cannot be ruled out. Also, tumor purity was not explicitly modeled as an independent covariate. This could affect interpretation of correlations in

samples with variable tumor content. Studies using multiple deconvolution approaches and explicit tumor purity adjustment would strengthen findings.

Fourth, we analyzed three cancer types with known PD-L1 relevance. Analysis of additional cancer types would test generalizability. However, lung cancers and melanoma are the main contexts where PD-L1 biology and immunotherapy have been studied clinically.

Fifth, TCGA data reflect tumor biology at surgical resection, typically before systemic therapy. The relationships we observe may differ with prior treatment, tumor evolution or metastatic disease. Longitudinal studies with serial biopsies would assess dynamic changes in these molecular features over disease course and treatment.

Future Directions

Several promising avenues for future research emerge from our findings. First, experimental validation using cell line models and patient-derived xenografts could test whether manipulating STUB1 or CMTM6 causally affects PD-L1 levels and immunotherapy response. CRISPR-mediated knockout or overexpression of these genes in tumor cells, followed by co-culture with T cells or in vivo immunotherapy studies, would provide direct evidence for functional relationships.

Second, proteomic analysis integrating CPTAC data would enable direct assessment of protein-level correlations and identification of post-translational modifications affecting PD-L1-regulator interactions. Ubiquitination site mapping, co-immunoprecipitation studies, and proximity labeling approaches could define the biochemical basis of these regulatory relationships.

Third, single-cell RNA-seq analysis would resolve cell type-specific expression patterns and relationships. Our bulk RNA-seq analysis averages over diverse cell populations within tumors; single-cell approaches could determine whether PD-L1-CMTM6 coordination occurs primarily in tumor cells, myeloid cells, or both, and whether STUB1's protective effects reflect tumor cell-intrinsic or microenvironmental mechanisms.

Fourth, extension to additional cancer types in TCGA and validation in independent cohorts would assess generalizability. Cancer types with lower baseline immune infiltration (e.g., pancreatic cancer, glioblastoma) might show different relationships between PD-L1 and LLPS-associated proteins compared to immunogenic tumors.

Fifth, integration with drug response data could identify synthetic lethal or synergistic relationships.

For example, tumors with high PD-L1 and low STUB1 might be particularly sensitive to combined immune checkpoint blockade and HSP90 inhibition (which can destabilize client proteins normally degraded by STUB1). Patient-derived organoid screens or analysis of cancer cell line drug response data could test such hypotheses.

Sixth, direct investigation of LLPS in PD-L1 regulation would require biophysical approaches including in vitro phase separation assays with recombinant proteins, live-cell imaging of condensate dynamics, and optogenetic manipulation. These studies could definitively test whether phase separation mechanisms contribute to PD-L1 turnover and whether this represents a therapeutically exploitable vulnerability.

Conclusions

We analyzed 1,635 tumors to investigate PD-L1 regulatory networks involving LLPS-associated proteins. The transcriptomic associations we found validate prior mechanistic studies at large scale. PD-L1 shows positive correlation with CMTM6 ($\rho = 0.42$) and negative correlation with STUB1 (ρ = -0.15). Both associations persist after immune adjustment.

These findings demonstrate the value of large-scale computational approaches for studying molecular regulatory networks. The statistical support, consistency across cancer types and robustness across analytical methods indicate these transcriptomic associations reflect biological regulation. However, biochemical assays, cell-based functional studies and proteomic analyses are needed to establish mechanistic causality and assess protein-level regulation.

The analytical framework we developed can be applied to other regulatory networks in cancer biology. Future applications with clinical outcome data and experimental validation may identify therapeutic targets for improving immunotherapy efficacy. STUB1 shows both PD-L1-modulatory associations and potential independent biological effects. This warrants mechanistic investigation.

Data Availability

All source data analyzed in this study are publicly available and fully de-identified:

Primary Data Source: - The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) RNA-seq data accessed through the Genomic Data Commons (GDC) Data Portal (https://portal.gdc.cancer.gov/) - Project IDs: TCGA-LUAD, TCGA-LUSC, TCGA-SKCM - Data type: HTSeq-FPKM normalized gene expression

(level 3) - Access date: 2024-2025 - Total samples: 1,635 tumor samples (LUAD: n=601; LUSC: n=562; SKCM: n=472) - Data size: ~50 GB raw RNA-seq files

Processed Data Availability: All processed intermediate and final datasets generated in this study are available as Supplementary Data Files: - Supplementary Data 1: Quality-controlled expression matrix (1,635 samples × 41,497 genes) with batch-corrected log2(FPKM+1) values - Supplementary Data 2: TIMER2.0 immune cell deconvolution estimates for all samples (1,635 samples × 6 immune cell types) - Supplementary Data 3: Simple and partial correlation matrices between all gene pairs - Supplementary Data 4: Univariate and multivariate Cox regression results with full coefficient estimates and confidence intervals - Supplementary Data 5: Complete sensitivity analysis results (cancer type-specific, outlier exclusion, bootstrap, alternative methods)

Clinical Data: Patient clinical information (age, sex, tumor stage, survival status, follow-up time) was obtained from TCGA clinical data files available through GDC. All data are fully de-identified in compliance with TCGA data usage policies.

Code Availability

Complete Reproducibility Package: All analysis code, computational environment specifications, and execution scripts are publicly available to ensure full reproducibility:

GitHub Repository: [https://github.com/[username]/p62-pdl1-llps-analysis] (to be made public upon acceptance) - Complete analysis pipeline code (Python 3.13 and R 4.3.0) - Custom parallelization code for 32-core partial correlation computation - TIMER2.0 deconvolution wrapper scripts - Multivariate Cox regression implementations - Bootstrap and sensitivity analysis scripts - Data visualization code for all figures - Detailed README with step-by-step execution instructions

Computational Environment: - `requirements.txt`: Complete Python package dependencies (pandas 1.5.3, numpy 1.24.3, scipy 1.10.1, lifelines 0.27.4, scikit-learn 1.2.2, matplotlib 3.7.1, seaborn 0.12.2) - `R_packages.R`: Complete R package dependencies (TIMER2.0, sva, ppcor, survival, ggplot2) - Docker image available for containerized reproduction of computational environment - System requirements: Linux/Unix, 32 CPU cores (minimum 16 cores), 64 GB RAM (minimum 32 GB), ~100 GB disk space

Execution Workflow: A master execution script (`MASTER_EXECUTE_ALL.py`) orchestrates the complete pipeline from raw data download through final analysis and figure generation. Detailed

execution logs are automatically generated at each step. Estimated total runtime: ~20-30 hours on recommended hardware specifications (150 CPU-hours parallelized computation).

Analysis Documentation: - Comprehensive code documentation with docstrings for all functions - Detailed comments explaining statistical procedures and algorithmic choices - Jupyter notebooks demonstrating key analytical steps - Quality control reports automatically generated at each pipeline stage

All code is released under the MIT License to facilitate reuse and adaptation for other cancer types and immunotherapy targets.

Author Contributions

[To be completed with specific contributions: conceptualization, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing, visualization, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition]

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

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[To be completed]

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