***robustica*: customizable robust independent component analysis**

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ABSTRACT

Motivation

Independent Component Analysis (ICA) allows the dissection of omic datasets into modules that help to interpret global molecular signatures. The inherent randomness of this algorithm can be overcome by clustering many iterations of ICA together to obtain robust components. Existing algorithms for robust ICA are dependent on the choice of clustering method and on computing a potentially biased and large Pearson distance matrix.

Results

We present *robustica*, a Python-based package to compute robust independent components with a fully customizable clustering algorithm and distance metric. Here, we exploited its customizability to revisit and optimize robust ICA systematically. From the 6 popular clustering algorithms considered, *DBSCAN* performed the best at clustering independent components across ICA iterations. After confirming the bias introduced with Pearson distances, we created a subroutine that infers and corrects the components' signs across ICA iterations to enable using Euclidean distance. Our subroutine effectively corrected the bias while simultaneously increasing the precision, robustness, and memory efficiency of the algorithm. Finally, we show the applicability of *robustica* by dissecting over 500 tumor samples from low-grade glioma (LGG) patients, where we define a new gene expression module with the key modulators of tumor aggressiveness downregulated upon *IDH1* mutation.

Availability and implementation

robustica is written in Python under the open-source BSD 3-Clause license. The source code and documentation are freely available at https://github.com/CRG-CNAG/robustica. Additionally, all scripts to reproduce the work presented are available at https://github.com/MiqG/publication_robustica.

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Keywords

bioinformatics; independent component analysis; clustering; unsupervised learning; low-grade glioma; Python.

INTRODUCTION

Independent Component Analysis (ICA) is a matrix factorization method that dissects a mixture of signals into a predefined number of additive independent sources or components. ICA finds sets of statistically independent components by minimizing their mutual information[1]. In biology, ICA has a wide range of applications such as defining functional modules, removing technical noise, feature engineering, unsupervised cell type deconvolution, single-cell trajectory inference, or multi-omic analysis (reviewed in [2]). Thanks to its information-theoretic objective function, ICA results in components that provide a simpler, more reproducible, and more biologically relevant interpretation than other popular matrix factorization methods such as Principal Component Analysis (PCA) or Non-negative Matrix Factorization (NMF)[2–7].

FastICA[8], one of the most widespread algorithms used to perform ICA, starts with a random initialization to decompose the data matrix into a source matrix and a mixing matrix of non-Gaussian independent components (Sup. Fig. 1A). In 2003, Hymberg and Hyvärinen[9] developed *Icasso* to address the inherent randomness of *FastICA,* by running *FastICA* multiple times and clustering the components of source matrices across all runs (Sup. Fig. 1B). This clustering step involves two key choices affecting its computational efficiency and the final robust components: the distance metric and the clustering algorithm. Current implementations require pre-computing a potentially large Pearson distance square matrix to cluster components across ICA runs regardless of their different sign and order resulting from *FastICA*'s randomness[9–12]. However, correlation-based metrics are sensitive to outliers and non-Gaussian distributions as independent components, which may lead to calculating imprecise weights[13]. Additionally, more recently developed clustering algorithms could potentially improve the efficiency and quality of robust ICA.

Here, we developed *robustica*, the first Python package to carry out robust ICA with a fully customizable clustering metric and algorithm based on the powerful library *scikit-learn*[14]. By leveraging the customizability of our package to revisit and optimize the clustering step of the *Icasso* algorithm, we improved its precision, robustness, and memory efficiency. Finally, as a case study, we dissected gene expression signatures from patients with low-grade glioma (LGG) and found a set of genes related to the mechanism by which mutations in *IDH1* lead to less aggressive tumors.

RESULTS

robustica enables systematic evaluation of clustering algorithms to perform robust ICA

With *robustica,* one can fully customize the clustering method to use as long as they follow *scikit-learn* conventions[14]. We purposefully included this feature to compare how 6 different popular clustering algorithms perform at finding robust components (see Methods). As a benchmark, we dissected the >250 *E. coli* gene expression signatures from Sastry (2019)[15] into 100 components with 100 ICA runs and selected different clustering algorithms to compute the robust components. We then evaluated the performance of the different algorithms by measuring their run time, memory usage, and silhouette scores to quantify how similar each component is to the components in the cluster compared to the components assigned to other clusters. Overall, the *DBSCAN* algorithm showed the best performance taking ~20 seconds and ~5500 MiB of maximum memory usage to obtain clusters with the highest median silhouette scores (*median=0.89*). *CommonNNClustering* also performed well, with better memory efficiency at the cost of a lower silhouette score (*median=0.81*) (Fig. 1B; Sup. Fig. 2-3; Sup. Tab. 1).

Clustering ICA runs with Euclidean distances improves the precision of robust ICA

After running ICA multiple times, the *Icasso* algorithm computes a potentially large Pearson distance matrix (Sup. Fig. 1B). However, the sensitivity of Pearson distance to non-Gaussian distributions strongly biases weights in robust independent components, as the standard deviation of the weights across components in the same cluster strongly correlates with their average (Sup. Fig. 4-5). We tackled this problem with a simple subroutine to infer and correct the sign of the components across ICA runs to enable using Euclidean distances (see Methods). Our approach produced robust components with high silhouette scores and lowered the bias and standard deviation of their weights (Sup. Fig. 4-5). Since this implementation required less memory but more time to cluster sign-corrected components (Sup. Fig. 4D), we compressed the feature space of all ICA runs through PCA to reduce the overall run time and memory usage while maintaining the same performance (Sup. Fig. 4; Sup. Tab. 2-6).

Finally, we assessed how much the resulting gene modules differ using either Pearson or Euclidean distances (Sup. Tab. 7). While both approaches found highly similar modules, Euclidean distance tended to find more components of high silhouette scores (Sup. Fig. 6A and B). In addition, we measured how much the high precision of Euclidean distance made the modules significantly more robust to random noise compared to Pearson distance and allowed using fewer runs to recover most of the gene modules defined using 100 ICA runs to compute robust components (Sup. Fig. 6C and D; Sup. Tab. 2-7). Bypassing the bias introduced by Pearson distances through Euclidean distances increased the reproducibility of the gene modules defined through robust ICA.

Our sign inference-and-correction subroutine creates high-quality, robust independent components by enabling us to efficiently cluster independent components across ICA runs using Euclidean distances (Fig. 1C).

robustica recovers a gene expression module with the key regulators of tumor aggressiveness in LGG mechanistically associated to mutations in *IDH1*

As a case study, we dissected gene expression profiles from >500 LGG tumor samples from The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA). LGGs are characterized by mutations in the isocitrate dehydrogenase (*IDH1*) enzyme that decrease tumor aggressiveness by indirectly inhibiting the *E2F* transcription program, an important switch controlling homeostasis and tumorigenesis[16–18]. We then explored whether certain gene modules associated with *IDH1* mutations recovered known molecular mechanisms.

Weights in component 7 were highly associated with *IDH1* mutation status, survival probability, and expression-based indices of cell proliferation (Sup. Fig. 7A-C). We related these sample traits to the gene expression signatures by defining a module of 421 genes (Sup. Fig. 7D; Sup. Tab. 8) which, as expected, was enriched in proliferation-related biological processes (Sup Fig. 8; Sup. Tab. 8) and contained 7 out of the 9 genes used to compute the mitotic index[19] and known proliferation markers as *MKI67*[20]. Interestingly, our gene module also included 4 *E2F* transcription factors (*E2F1, E2F2, E2F7, E2F8*) and was enriched with 98 targets of *E2F*s (Sup. Fig. 9; Sup. Tab. 8).

With this, we demonstrate the utility of *robustica* to identify gene sets whose combined expression in LGG is associated with genotypes and phenotypes of interest. Our identified module contained downstream effectors controlling cell proliferation associated with *IDH1* mutation status and tumor aggressiveness (Fig. 1D), demonstrating the biological applicability of this approach.

CONCLUSION

We created *robustica*, a new Python package built on top of *scikit-learn* that enables performing precise, efficient, and customizable robust ICA. Through its customizability, we explored how different clustering algorithms and distance metrics can further optimize robust ICA. Our sign correction subroutine improved the precision, robustness, and memory efficiency of the clustering step. Finally, we showcased how *robustica* can be used to explore gene modules associated with combinations of features of biological interest. Given the broad applicability of ICA for omic data analysis, we envision *robustica* will facilitate the seamless computation and integration of robust independent components in large pipelines.

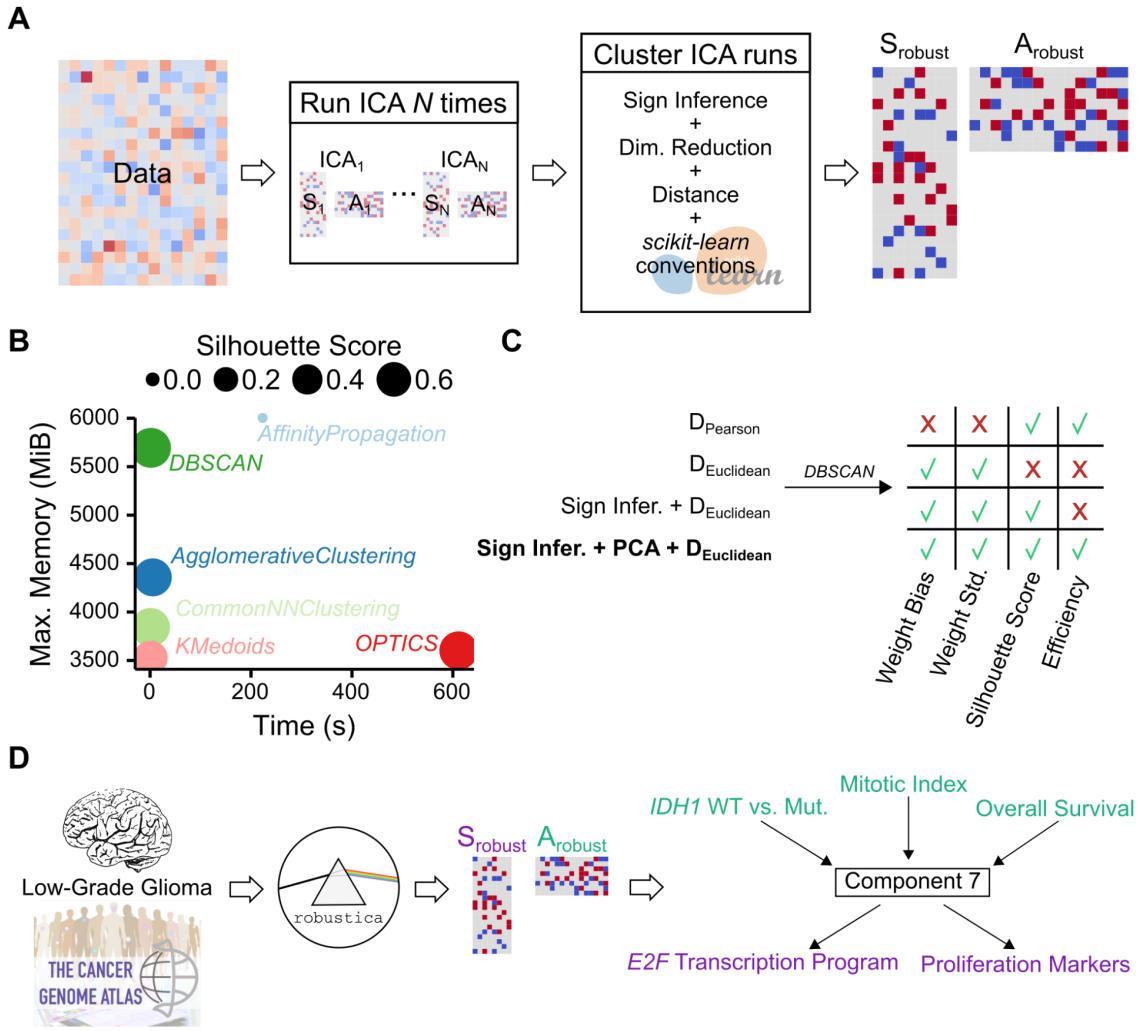

Figure 1. Development and implementation of *robustica* to carry out robust Independent Component Analysis (ICA). (**A**) *robustica* enables fully customized robust ICA. We built *robustica* following *scikit-learn*'s programming conventions to enable full control of both the iterative and clustering steps facilitating customization and optimization. In particular, *robustica* includes a subroutine to infer and correct the signs of components across ICA runs that improves the precision and efficiency of the clustering step by enabling us to use Euclidean distance metrics and to compress the feature space. (**B**) Comparison of clustering algorithms for robust ICA using Sastry (2019)[15] 's dataset. Maximum memory usage and time for each clustering algorithm to cluster 100 ICA runs with 100 components each. Dot sizes indicate median silhouette scores (the larger the better). (**C**) Development steps to improve the precision (*Weight Std.*) and efficiency while reducing the bias of robust ICA through our sign inference-and-correction subroutine combined with PCA and Euclidean distances, using Sastry (2019)[15] 's dataset. (**D**) Case study workflow for robust ICA. We dissected >500 tumor samples from LGG patients with *robustica* into 100 robust independent components. Component 7 was simultaneously associated with multiple sample features (*IDH1* mutation status, mitotic index, and overall survival) and contained genes known to be mechanistically associated with mutations in *IDH1* that modulate tumor aggressiveness.

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COMPETING INTERESTS
The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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