EP300 and FCGR2B Emerge as Coordinated Mediators of Chromatin-Driven Immune Evasion in Melanoma Resistance

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Abstract:

Immune checkpoint inhibitors targeting PD-1 have significantly improved outcomes in metastatic melanoma, yet 40–60% of patients exhibit primary resistance. While tumor-intrinsic epigenetic dysregulation has been implicated, its interplay with immune evasion remains poorly defined. In this study, we analyzed RNA-seq data from the GSE168204 dataset (n = 25 pre/on-treatment biopsies) comparing responders (n = 9) and non-responders (n = 16) to anti-PD-1 therapy. Using DESeq2 (|log2FC| > 1.5, padj < 0.05), we identified key differentially expressed genes (DEGs) in non-responders, including chromatin remodelers SMARCA2 (log2FC = 1.63, padj = 0.005) and KAT6B (log2FC = 2.8, padj = 1.2e-08), and the inhibitory receptor FCGR2B (log2FC = 2.196, padj = 0.001). Functional enrichment and protein–protein interaction analysis highlighted EP300 and KMT2A as hub genes linking histone acetylation (GO:0000123) to extracellular matrix remodeling (KEGG:04512). Transcription factor analysis identified STAT3 and RELA as central regulators of this resistance signature. These findings suggest that non-responder melanomas coordinately upregulate chromatin modifiers and immune checkpoints, promoting immune evasion. Our results nominate EP300 and FCGR2B as potential therapeutic targets to overcome resistance, warranting preclinical validation.

Keywords:

Anti-PD-1 resistance melanoma ; SMARCA2; EP300; FCGR2B; Chromatin remodeling; Epigenetic regulation; Tumor microenvironment

Introduction:

Immunotherapy Resistance in Melanoma: The Unmet Challenge

Immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs) targeting PD-1 have revolutionized metastatic melanoma treatment, with 40–50% of patients achieving durable responses [3]. However, primary resistance remains a major clinical hurdle, with over half of patients deriving no benefit [4]. While tumor mutational burden (TMB) and PD-L1 expression partially predict response, recent evidence implicates **epigenetic reprogramming** as a key mediator of immune evasion [9]. Specifically, chromatin remodelers (e.g., SWI/SNF complexes) can silence interferon signaling and antigen presentation [5], but their interplay with inhibitory immune receptors (e.g., FCGR2B) is poorly understood.

The Epigenetic-Immune Axis in Resistance

Chromatin regulators like EP300 and KMT2A modulate PD-1 response in other cancers [6] yet their role in melanoma remains undefined. Concurrently, non-responders often exhibit upregulated immune checkpoints beyond PD-L1, including LAG3 and TIGIT [13]. Intriguingly, FCGR2B—an inhibitory Fcγ receptor—was recently linked to macrophage-mediated immunosuppression in melanoma [2], but its association with epigenetic dysregulation has not been explored.

Materials and Methods:

Dataset Acquisition and Preprocessing

RNA-seq data were obtained from the **Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO)** under accession number **GSE168204**, comprising transcriptomic profiles from 25 metastatic melanoma tumor biopsies, including pre-treatment (n = 10) and on-treatment (n = 15) samples. Patients were classified into **responders (R; n = 9)** and **non-responders (NR; n = 16)** based on clinical response criteria.

Sample distribution:

- Pre-treatment: 5 NR, 5 R
- On-treatment: 11 NR, 4 R

Quality control was performed using **edgeR**, with genes expressed at <10 counts across all samples filtered out. All analyses were conducted in **R (v4.3.2 "Eye Holes")** on a Windows UCRT platform.

Differential Expression Analysis

Differential gene expression was assessed using the **DESeq2** package (v1.42.1) [11], with default settings. Genes were considered significantly differentially expressed if they satisfied the thresholds:
|log FC| > 1.5 and **adjusted p-value (padj) < 0.05** using the **Benjamini–Hochberg** correction.

Functional Enrichment Analysis

Functional enrichment of upregulated genes in non-responders was performed to identify enriched biological terms and pathways.

Tools and databases used:

- **Gene Ontology (GO)**: Biological Process (BP), Molecular Function (MF), Cellular Component (CC) annotations were analyzed using **clusterProfiler** (v4.10.1).
- **Pathway enrichment**: KEGG and Reactome terms were identified using the **ReactomePA** package (v1.46.0).

Significance criteria: Terms with **p.adjust < 0.05** and **q-value < 0.2** were retained.

Protein–Protein Interaction (PPI) Network Construction

PPI data were retrieved from the **STRING database** (version 12) [16] via the **STRINGdb** R package. Genes were mapped to STRING identifiers, and interactions with a **confidence score > 400** (medium-to-high confidence) were retained. Networks were visualized in **Cytoscape (v3.9.1)**, and **hub genes** were prioritized based on **degree centrality**. Cluster detection within the PPI network was performed using the **MCODE** plugin.

Transcription Factor and Receptor Annotation

Transcription factors regulating upregulated DEGs were identified using **TRRUST v2** [7]. Receptor annotations were derived from curated gene sets and analyzed using **OmnipathR** (v3.10.1), which also enabled mapping of **receptor–TF regulatory interactions**.

Results:

Differential Gene Expression Analysis Between Responders and Non-Responders

To uncover transcriptional differences associated with anti-PD-1 therapy response, we performed differential gene expression analysis between responders (R) and non-responders (NR) using **DESeq2**. A total of **4,536 differentially expressed genes (DEGs)** were identified based on an adjusted p-value < 0.05 and an absolute log□ fold change > 1.5. Of these, **2,863 genes were upregulated** and **1,673 were downregulated** in non-responders relative to responders.

Key Upregulated Genes in Non-Responders:

- **Chromatin remodelers:**
    - *SMARCA2* (log□FC = 1.63, padj = 0.005)
    - *KAT6B* (log□FC = 2.8, padj = 1.2e-08)
- **Immune checkpoint regulator:**
    - *FCGR2B* (log□FC = 2.196, padj = 0.001)
- **Extracellular matrix component:**
    - *COL1A1* (log□FC = 3.9, padj = 1.8e-06)

A summary of selected DEGs is provided in **Table 1**, while the complete list is available in the **Supplementary Files**. The overall distribution of DEGs is visualized in **Figure 1 (volcano plot)**, highlighting significantly upregulated (left) and downregulated (right) genes in the non-responder group. Cluster analysis of the **top 30 DEGs** is shown in **Figure 2**, which illustrates clear expression-based separation between responders and non-responders.

Functional Enrichment Analysis of Differentially Expressed Genes (DEGs):

Functional enrichment analysis of the upregulated genes in non-responders revealed significant associations with pathways related to chromatin remodeling, immune signaling, and extracellular matrix dynamics (Figures 3–7).

Gene Ontology (GO) Enrichment

- **Biological Processes (GO-BP):** The most significantly enriched terms included *nucleosome assembly* (GO:0006334, padj = 1.8e−16) and *extracellular matrix (ECM) organization* (GO:0030198, padj = 0.0008), indicating coordinated chromatin and structural remodeling in resistant tumors (**Figure 3**).
- **Molecular Functions (GO-MF):** Enriched functions included *structural constituent of chromatin* (GO:0030527, padj = 9.9e−42), *GTPase activator activity*, and *ECM structural constituents* (GO:0005201, padj = 3.3e−14), highlighting the role of nuclear and matrix architecture in immune evasion (**Figure 4**).
- **Cellular Components (GO-CC):** Top enriched terms included *nucleosome* (GO:0000786, padj = 3.9e−30), *CENP-A-containing chromatin*, and the *voltage-gated calcium channel complex* (GO:0005891, padj = 3.6e−06) (**Figure 5**).

Pathway Enrichment

- **KEGG Pathways:** Upregulated genes were enriched in immune and cancer-related pathways, including *systemic lupus erythematosus* (hsa05322, padj = 3.3e−29), *neutrophil extracellular trap formation* (hsa04613, padj = 1.7e−24), *microRNAs in cancer* (hsa05206, padj = 2.3e−05), *ECM–receptor interaction* (hsa04512, padj = 2.3e−05), *calcium signaling pathway* (hsa04020, padj = 0.036), and *viral carcinogenesis* (hsa05203, padj = 2.3e−05) (**Figure 6**).
- **Reactome Pathways:** Significant pathways included *chromatin modification* (R-HSA-4839726, padj = 1.1e−21), *histone deacetylation* (R-HSA-3214815, padj = 1.7e−36), *RNA polymerase I promoter opening* (R-HSA-73728, padj = 9.9e−40), *RUNX1 regulation of megakaryocyte differentiation* (R-HSA-8936459, padj = 1.5e−37), *granulopoiesis regulation* (R-HSA-9616222, padj = 2.1e−37), and *NOTCH signaling* (R-HSA-157118, padj = 5.7e−14) (**Figure 7**).

These results highlight extensive alterations in chromatin structure, immune function, and ECM signaling in anti-PD-1-resistant melanomas, suggesting that transcriptional rewiring and microenvironmental remodeling contribute to immune escape.

Protein–Protein Interaction (PPI) Network and Hub Gene Analysis:

A protein–protein interaction (PPI) network was constructed using the STRING database (version 12) based on significantly upregulated genes in non-responders. The resulting interaction map was imported into Cytoscape for visualization, with node attributes scaled by log□ fold change values. The network revealed a densely connected cluster of histone variants and transcriptional regulators, suggesting coordinated epigenetic remodeling in non-responders.

Hub genes were identified based on interaction degree, with the top 20 listed in **Table 2** (full list available in the Supplementary Files), and the primary interaction cluster visualized in **Figure 8**. Notable hub genes included multiple histone variants (e.g., **H3C12, H3C13, H2BC4, H2BC11**), as well as epigenetic regulators such as **EP300** (degree = 252), **CREBBP**, **KMT2A** (degree = 206), and **KDM6A**. Several immune-related genes also emerged as hubs, including **PTEN**, **TLR4**, and **PTPRC**. The high connectivity and upregulation of EP300 and KMT2A—key transcriptional co-activators—suggest their potential role in rewiring transcriptional control within the tumor microenvironment.

The full network was exported as a Cytoscape-compatible CSV file, containing both node and edge attributes, to support further annotation and exploration. To identify functional gene modules, **MCODE** clustering was applied, revealing 41 distinct

clusters enriched for biological processes including chromatin remodeling, immune signaling, and inflammatory response. **Figure 8** displays the top-ranked cluster identified through this analysis.

Transcription Factors (TFs) and Receptor Enrichment in Upregulated Genes of Non-Responders:

To explore the regulatory mechanisms underlying gene expression changes in non-responders, we analyzed transcription factor (TF) enrichment and upstream modulators, including receptors and chromatin regulators, associated with the upregulated genes.

Transcription Factor Enrichment

Using the **TRRUST database**, we identified key TFs that are likely to regulate the upregulated genes in non-responders. The most enriched transcription factors included **SP1**, **NFKB1**, **RELA (NF-κB)**, **SP3**, **STAT3**, **TP53**, **ETS1**, and **YY1**. These TFs are widely recognized for their roles in inflammation, immune evasion, and cell proliferation—hallmarks of resistance to anti-PD-1 therapy.
Figure 9 displays a bar plot of the top 10 enriched TFs.

To further understand regulatory connectivity, we constructed a **TF–target gene network** that maps the direct relationships between the top 20 enriched TFs and their downstream targets. **Figure 10** presents this regulatory network.

Upstream Modulators of Transcription Factors

Using the **OmniPath** database, we identified upstream modulators—both classical surface receptors (e.g., **DDR1**, **PTPRC**) and chromatin-associated regulators (e.g., **EP300**, **KDM6A**)—that may influence TF activity through intracellular

signaling or epigenetic modification. The top 20 modulators included:

EP300, EGR1, FOXA1, TAF1, EBF1, TCF12, TCF4, ZEB1, CHD2, NANOG, FOXP1, BDP1, POU5F1, MYCN, PRDM1, WT1, PGR, TCF7L2, KDM6A, NFIA, E2F1.

Notably:

- **EP300 acetylates STAT3 at lysine 685**, enhancing its transcriptional activity [3].
- **EP300 also acetylates RELA (NF-κB)**, promoting its transcriptional function [4].

Figure 11 shows the top 10 receptors ranked by the number of transcription factors they regulate.

Figure 12 presents the full receptor–TF interaction network for the top 20 receptor candidates.

Ligand–Receptor Interactions

To uncover upstream extracellular signals, we investigated ligand–receptor interactions influencing the identified pathways. A key interaction pair included **COL1A1 (ligand)** and **DDR1 (receptor)**. DDR1-mediated collagen signaling has been shown to promote immune evasion by forming physical collagen barriers that exclude T cells from the tumor microenvironment [9].

Figure 13 illustrates the ligand–receptor interaction network involving the top 20 ligands identified.

Discussion

Our study uncovers a coordinated epigenetic–immune program underlying resistance to PD-1 blockade in metastatic melanoma. Three major findings emerge:

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1. Chromatin Remodeling Establishes an Immune-Suppressive Niche

We identified **SMARCA2** (log$\square$FC = 1.63) and **KAT6B** (log$\square$FC = 2.8) as chromatin remodelers significantly upregulated in non-responders. These genes regulate **nucleosome repositioning** (GO:0006334) and **histone acetylation** (GO:0016573), supporting previous reports that **SWI/SNF complexes** contribute to immune evasion by silencing interferon-stimulated genes in melanoma [1]. Although direct spatial transcriptomic evidence in melanoma is limited, studies in other solid tumors, such as lung cancer, have linked **SMARCA2 dysregulation** with altered **CD8$\square$ T-cell infiltration** and immune evasion [12], suggesting that similar mechanisms may contribute to immune exclusion in melanoma.

Protein–protein interaction (PPI) analysis further highlighted **EP300**, a transcriptional coactivator, as a central node connecting chromatin remodeling to immune regulatory pathways. EP300 is known to **acetylate key transcription factors** such as **STAT3** and **RELA (NF-κB)** at specific lysine residues, thereby enhancing their transcriptional activity and promoting the expression of immunosuppressive genes [19,14]. Acetylation of RELA at **lysine 310**, in particular, is critical for full NF-κB activation. In preclinical models of lung adenocarcinoma, **EP300 inhibition** restored sensitivity to PD-1 blockade [17], suggesting that targeting chromatin remodeling could reprogram the tumor immune microenvironment to improve response to immunotherapy.

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2. FCGR2B Emerges as a Co-opted Immune Checkpoint

We observed significant upregulation of **FCGR2B** (log FC = 2.96), an inhibitory Fcγ receptor, in non-responders. FCGR2B is implicated in **macrophage-mediated immunosuppression** and **T-cell inhibition** through engagement with IgG-opsonized targets [2]. Our transcription factor enrichment analysis identified **RELA (NF-κB)** as one of the most enriched TFs in non-responders. While direct transcriptional regulation of **FCGR2B by RELA** has been documented in B cells [18], its relevance in melanoma remains to be validated. RELA activity may be further amplified by **EP300-mediated acetylation**, forming a potential **feedforward loop** in which EP300 enhances RELA's transcriptional output, including the upregulation of immunosuppressive targets such as FCGR2B.

Although **FCGR2B** has been the focus of early-phase clinical trials in hematologic malignancies (e.g., NCT04502394), its potential as an immune checkpoint in solid tumors like melanoma remains underexplored. These findings suggest that FCGR2B may serve as a **novel immunotherapeutic target** in resistant disease.

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3. Therapeutic Opportunities Beyond PD-1 Blockade

The convergence of **epigenetic regulation** (e.g., EP300, KMT2A) and **immune inhibition** (e.g., FCGR2B) highlights dual therapeutic vulnerabilities in PD-1-resistant melanoma. First, **epigenetic priming** with **histone acetyltransferase inhibitors** such as **A485** could promote chromatin accessibility, thereby enhancing antigen presentation and interferon signaling [8]. Second, **dual immune checkpoint blockade**, targeting both **PD-1 and FCGR2B**, may help to overcome resistance driven by macrophage- and B-cell-mediated immunosuppression.

Additionally, our analysis revealed **ligand–receptor interactions**—notably **COL1A1–DDR1**—suggesting that

stromal remodeling may contribute to T-cell exclusion[15]. This observation is supported by work from **Junquan Liu,.et al,** who demonstrated that **DDR1 inhibition** disrupts collagen alignment and improves T-cell infiltration in solid tumors [10].

Together, these results present a **systems-level framework** in which chromatin remodeling, immune checkpoints, and stromal signaling converge to sustain immune resistance in melanoma. These findings warrant further experimental validation and may guide future combination therapy strategies to overcome immune checkpoint blockade resistance.

Limitations and Future Directions

While our findings uncover novel insights into mechanisms of resistance to PD-1 blockade in melanoma, several limitations must be acknowledged:

Cohort Size Constraints

Our analysis was limited to a relatively small cohort of 25 patient samples (16 non-responders, 9 responders), which may not capture the full heterogeneity of resistance mechanisms. Larger, independent validation cohorts are required to confirm the generalizability of our findings.

Limitations of Bulk RNA-Sequencing

Bulk RNA-seq provides an average transcriptomic signal across all cell types, precluding cell-type-specific resolution. As such, we cannot determine:

- Whether the observed upregulation of chromatin remodelers (e.g., *SMARCA2*, *KAT6B*) originates from tumor cells versus stromal or immune components.
- Whether *EP300* activity is intrinsic to melanoma cells or derived from tumor-associated macrophages (TAMs).
- Whether *FCGR2B* expression reflects increased B-cell infiltration or melanoma-intrinsic expression.

These questions could be addressed through **single-cell RNA-sequencing (scRNA-seq)** of pre-treatment tumor biopsies.

Lack of Spatial Context

Our study lacks spatial transcriptomic data, which limits our ability to:

- Visualize patterns of **CD8☐ T-cell exclusion** in *SMARCA2*-high tumor regions.
- Confirm the spatial co-localization of **DDR1, COL1A1**, and immune cells.

These gaps could be addressed by:

- **Multiplex immunohistochemistry (IHC)** co-staining DDR1, CD8, and COL1A1.
- **Spatial transcriptomics platforms** (e.g., 10x Genomics Visium) to map stromal–immune interfaces.

Lack of Mechanistic Validation

Our proposed regulatory model—wherein *EP300* acetylates *STAT3* (K685) and *RELA* (K310) to drive *FCGR2B* expression, and *SMARCA2* mediates chromatin compaction to silence interferon signaling—remains hypothetical. Validation is needed through:

- **ChIP-seq** to confirm RELA binding at the *FCGR2B* promoter in melanoma cells.
- **In vitro functional assays** to measure STAT3 acetylation and target gene expression following EP300 inhibition.

Strategic Future Directions

To address these limitations and validate therapeutic hypotheses, we propose:

Functional Studies

- Test **EP300 inhibitors (e.g., A485)** in combination with **anti-FCGR2B antibodies** using:
    - **Patient-derived organoids (PDOs)** engineered to overexpress *SMARCA2*.
    - **NSG mouse models** engrafted with tumors from non-responder patients.

Multi-Omic Integration

- Incorporate **ATAC-seq** to define chromatin accessibility changes in non-responders versus responders.
- Use **quantitative proteomics** to measure *STAT3* and *RELA* acetylation levels across patient samples.

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(Table 1)

GeneID	baseMean	log2FoldChange	lfcSE	stat	pvalue	padj
100302278	1.57693524494273	3.43127134716989	1.1862536717925	2.89252748274746	0.00382155746591999	0.020237925575706
645520	2.23944959013747	4.21060265719893	0.947317807172052	4.44476249187006	8.7989018329519e-06	0.000167517957247477
729737	1186.16600607583	1.85701081996872	0.657112901260041	2.82601485438473	0.00471310783621156	0.0235264089799799
729759	17.4137493071576	7.25548513179509	1.48583410358219	4.88310580185424	1.04427801138992e-06	2.81504634328663e-05
81399	28.0353538737398	4.57582164397408	0.75422168108519	6.06694524796845	1.30365974324185e-09	8.46869356870539e-08
107984841	143.793072768933	2.58085109444073	0.603773614756466	4.27453441383278	1.91537120574941e-05	0.000319065935344339
107984847	227.761099053972	2.97416657393554	0.591936537519034	5.02446864726593	5.0482825969061e-07	1.52408514554885e-05
107984849	29.9915565811509	1.87648194262128	0.685760622151437	2.73635126020242	0.00621246727751893	0.0290565612733321
105378580	53.5579164326631	1.91089120865553	0.414970058002552	4.60488936925607	4.12685190123527e-06	8.97741193418832e-05
284593	5.68788537259092	-1.813902181	0.656662729958398	-2.76230414 5	0.00573949852306079	0.0273317743957957
8511	122.765713379762	2.77730402711752	0.522887509705936	5.31147517499401	1.08741385538976e-07	4.15807046354585e-06
105378949	17.6310829541834	-2.711349283	0.709908031540787	-3.81929655 32	0.000133832800336688	0.00151942437602014
8764	11730.6531669402	-1.535702345	0.510382936594115	-3.00892180 1	0.00262176587701715	0.0152471414185533
388588	160.009303845045	-2.601339454	0.558206442638038	-4.66017454 4	3.15941352192875e-06	7.15374257232874e-05
100133612	8.23711512848261	-2.030196196	0.76998130153979	-2.63668246 5	0.00837211604286078	0.0361244854388 7
105376673	9.74163931365781	-4.644403908	1.65383582298518	-2.80826176 6	0.00498097210699313	0.0245341310439972
284661	3.58654767744336	-4.720467419	1.6242485616837	-2.90624694 4	0.00365792640322053	0.0195953903890437
55966	409.922172549919	-3.912070848	0.85652409869991	-4.5673797 72	4.9385876839077e-06	0.000104380773015424
148645	20.5201487764738	-2.785372857	0.886958467096289	-3.14036447 1	0.00168737762114787	0.010831875697046
387509	2546.12424469508	-2.280234353	0.59941238572815	-3.8041161	0.000142311383013126	0.001599616173901 3

				77		

Table (2)

STRING_id	GeneSymbol	Degree	log2FoldChange
ENSP00000346839	FN1	310	-1.957673251
ENSP00000352252	H3C12	278	-2.515948088
ENSP00000333277	H3C13	272	-5.354650119
ENSP00000263253	EP300	252	-2.313545877
ENSP00000244537	H4C6	248	-7.739781464
ENSP00000355657	H3-4	246	-4.692499087
ENSP00000411355	PTPRC	224	-2.190052752
ENSP00000332194	H2AC20	214	-4.470291901
ENSP00000262367	CREBBP	212	-1.979801064
ENSP00000358155	H2AC18	210	-3.269413113
ENSP00000361021	PTEN	206	-1.523926192
ENSP00000436786	KMT2A	206	-2.748972172
ENSP00000321744	H2BC4	194	-4.11423315
ENSP00000363089	TLR4	194	-1.9621741
ENSP00000289316	H2BC5	190	-2.100870263
ENSP00000477527	H2BC17	190	-3.642363024
ENSP00000482674	H2BC3	190	-6.494513763
ENSP00000367203	KDM6A	188	-1.746178128
ENSP00000476136	H2BC11	188	-4.09081271
ENSP00000479169	H2BC9	188	-5.76814074

Top 30 DEGs: R vs NR

GO Enrichment

GO Enrichment

Top Transcription Factors for upregulated Genes in NON_R

Top 10 Receptors by Number of TF Targets (upregulated Genes)

Top 20 Ligand-Receptor Network