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4 Drug combination sensitivity scoring facilitates the discovery of synergistic and efficacious drug

5 combinations in cancer

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27 **Abstract**

28 High-throughput drug sensitivity screening has been utilized for facilitating the discovery of drug
29 combinations in cancer. Many existing studies adopted a dose-response matrix design, aiming for
30 the characterization of drug combination sensitivity and synergy. However, there is lack of
31 consensus on the definition of sensitivity and synergy, leading to the use of different mathematical
32 models that do not necessarily agree with each other. We proposed a cross design to enable a more
33 cost-effective testing of sensitivity and synergy for a drug pair. We developed a drug combination
34 sensitivity score (CSS) to summarize the drug combination dose-response curves. Using a high-
35 throughput drug combination dataset, we showed that the CSS is highly reproducible among the
36 replicates. With machine learning approaches such as Elastic Net, Random Forests and Support
37 Vector Machines, the CSS can also be predicted with high accuracy. Furthermore, we defined a
38 synergy score based on the difference between the drug combination and the single drug dose-
39 response curves. We showed that the CSS-based synergy score is able to detect true synergistic and
40 antagonistic drug combinations. The cross drug combination design coupled with the CSS scoring
41 facilitated the evaluation of drug combination sensitivity and synergy using the same scale, with
42 minimal experimental material that is required. Our approach could be utilized as an efficient
43 pipeline for improving the discovery rate in high-throughput drug combination screening. The R
44 scripts for calculating and predicting CSS are available at <https://github.com/amalyutina/CSS>.

45

46 **Author summary**

47 Being a complex disease, cancer is one of the main death causes worldwide. Although new
48 treatment strategies have been achieved with cancers, they still have limited efficacy. Even when
49 there is an initial treatment response, cancer cells can develop drug resistance thus cause disease

50 recurrence. To achieve more effective and safe therapies to treat cancer, patients critically need
51 multi-targeted drug combinations that will kill cancer cells at reduced dosages and thereby avoid
52 side effects that are often associated with the standard treatment. However, the increasing number
53 of possible drug combinations makes a pure experimental approach unfeasible, even with
54 automated drug screening instruments. Therefore, we have proposed a new experimental set up to
55 get the drug combination sensitivity data cost-efficiently and developed a score to quantify the
56 efficiency of the drug combination, called drug combination sensitivity score (CSS). Using public
57 datasets, we have shown that the CSS robustness and its highly predictive nature with an accuracy
58 comparable to the experimental replicates. We have also defined a CSS-based synergy score as a
59 metric of drug interaction and justified its relevance. Thus, we expect the proposed computational
60 techniques to be easily applicable and beneficial in the field of drug combination discovery.

61

62 **Introduction**

63 Despite the great advances in the understanding of cancer, there remains a major gap
64 between the vast knowledge of molecular biology and effective anti-cancer treatments. Next
65 generation sequencing has revealed the intrinsic heterogeneity in cancer survival pathways, which
66 partly explains why patients respond differently to the same therapy [1]. To reach effective and
67 durable clinical responses, cancer patients who become resistant to standard treatments need
68 multi-targeted drug combinations, which shall effectively inhibit the cancer cells and block the
69 emergence of drug resistance [2-4].

70 In order to predict novel drug combinations, high-throughput drug screening has been
71 applied on a large variety of cancer cell lines and more recently on patient-derived cancer samples
72 [5-6]. Ideally, a promising drug combination should achieve the therapeutic efficacy at reduced

73 dosages, and therefore also minimize the toxicity and other side effects associated with high doses
74 of single drugs [7-8]. Therefore, both the sensitivity and synergy of a drug combination need to be
75 considered when evaluating the high-throughput screening results for further validation [9].

76 Many high-throughput drug combination screens combine two drugs at a full matrix of
77 multiple doses, for which the cell viability or growth inhibition effects are measured [10-11]. The
78 drug combinations are usually ranked based on the degree of synergy, such that the drug
79 combinations that produce higher growth inhibition effects compared to the single drugs will be
80 prioritized. However, there have been multiple methods to score drug synergy, each of which relies
81 on a different mathematical model that do not fully agree with each other [12]. The lack of
82 consensus on the choice of synergy scoring methods may partly explain the difficulty to validate
83 drug combination discoveries in a high-throughput setting [13]. On the other hand, focusing only on
84 synergy but not on sensitivity may produce false positive drug combinations that do not necessarily
85 reach therapeutic efficacy, despite being synergistic [14]. However, unlike the sensitivity of single
86 drugs which can be directly derived from dose-response curves [15], the sensitivity of a drug
87 combination remains largely undefined, as the same sensitivity can be achieved using different dose
88 combinations. Furthermore, there is a lack of scoring approaches to fully capture the synergy and
89 sensitivity simultaneously.

90 On the other hand, the dose-response matrix utilizes a full factorial design to test multiple
91 dose combinations, and thus demands a relatively large amount of cancer cells. For patient-derived
92 cancer samples which are typically rare and restricted in volume, the full dose-response matrix
93 design may be infeasible for testing even a minimal number drug combinations. Furthermore,
94 cancer samples of different genetic profiles are known to respond differently to the same drug
95 combination. With the limited amount of drug combinations as the training data, it becomes a

96 daunting task for any machine learning approach to navigate the combinatorial space to pinpoint
97 the most promising drug combinations that are specific for individual cancer samples [16].

98 To overcome these challenges, we proposed a cost-effective experimental and
99 computational procedure to facilitate the prediction of drug combination synergy and sensitivity.
100 We utilized an experimental design where two drugs are crossed at their IC₅₀ concentrations, and
101 either drug is allowed to span over multiple doses while the concentration of the other drug is fixed.
102 The resulting dose-response curves are utilized to defined a drug combination sensitivity score
103 (CSS). Using a large scale of drug combination study, referred to as the O'Neil data [17], we showed
104 that the CSS is highly reproducible, suggesting its robustness as a metric for characterizing drug
105 combination responses. Furthermore, we found that the CSS can be predicted at high accuracy using
106 chemical and pharmacological features of the drug combinations. Based on the difference between
107 the observed and expected CSS values, a drug synergy score can be determined straightforwardly.
108 We showed that such a CSS-based synergy score can also detect the true synergistic and
109 antagonistic drug combinations with high accuracy. Compared to the dose-response matrix design,
110 the cross design requires minimal amount of experimental materials, while it still maintains a
111 sufficient level of accuracy for capturing both synergy and sensitivity simultaneously. We foresee
112 that such an experimental design and its CSS scoring would facilitate the standardization of drug
113 combination analysis that is currently lacking in functional chemical screening, and would allow for
114 the scale up of drug combination testing eventually for personalized medicine.

115

116 **Results**

117 **CSS values are highly reproducible and robust**

118 We applied the CSS scoring on the O'Neil drug combination data, which consists of 22,737
119 drug combinations for 39 cancer cells [17]. We found that the CSS₁ and CSS₂ values calculated using

120 either drug fixed at its IC_{50} concentration are highly correlated (Pearson correlation = 0.82, p-value
121 = 2×10^{-16} ; Fig 1A). Both CSS_1 and CSS_2 values ranged from 0 to 50, with a marginal absolute difference
122 of 5.62 (Fig 1B). Such a high level of consistency holds true for all the 39 cancer cell lines and the
123 majority of the 38 unique drugs, suggesting the robustness of the CSS scoring method (Figs 1C and
124 D, Fig S1). We also found a high correlation between the CSS value and those derived from single
125 replicates (minimal correlation = 0.97, Table S3). In order to check whether the CSS values are within
126 the range of the CSS replicates for each drug combination, we calculated the minimal and maximal
127 values over the CSS replicates for each drug combination and plotted them together with CSS values
128 over the standard deviation of the CSS replicates. For a better visualization, we applied a generalized
129 additive model to smoothen the CSS lines and obtain 95% pointwise confidence interval around the
130 mean (Fig S2). Only 4% of the drug combinations have the CSS values being out of the CSS replicate-
131 based limits, however this can be explained by the higher variance over the replicates.

132 **Fig 1. Robustness and replicability of CSS.** (A) The correlation of CSS_1 and CSS_2 over all the drug
133 combinations; (B) Density plot of the CSS_1 and CSS_2 distributions; (C) The correlation per cell line
134 colored according to the tissue type; and (D) The correlation per drug colored according to the drug
135 target class.

136 Notably, we found that drug combinations that involved bortezomib showed much lower
137 correlation (0.26) between the CSS_1 and CSS_2 values compared to other drug combinations. Since
138 the O'Neil data contains the replicates for single drug screening, we analyzed the coefficient of
139 variation (CV) of the cell viability readout for each drug in the replicates. As expected, we found that
140 bortezomib has the highest CV (0.28), suggesting a relative low quality of the drug sensitivity data
141 involving this drug (Fig S3). Therefore, the lower correlation between the CSS_1 and CSS_2 for a drug
142 combination may be attributed to a higher experimental variation, and thus were considered as low
143 quality data points. For the subsequent analysis, we selected only those drug combinations that

144 have the absolute difference between CSS_1 and CSS_2 lower than 10, resulting in a total of 18,905
145 drug combinations. After this filtering the correlation between CSS_1 and CSS_2 was further improved
146 (Pearson correlation = 0.93, p-value = 2×10^{-16}). Furthermore, the mean absolute difference between
147 CSS_1 and CSS_2 was 3.83, which became comparable to the variability determined from the technical
148 replicates of CSS_1 and CSS_2 (2.92 and 3.06 respectively), suggesting that the difference between CSS_1
149 and CSS_2 is similar to what is expected when repeating the experiment. Taken together, CSS_1 and
150 CSS_2 values are highly consistent and therefore supported their averaging as a summary for the drug
151 combination sensitivity score.

152 **CSS can be predicted using machine learning approaches**

153 Given that the CSS is highly reproducible as a summary of the overall sensitivity of a drug
154 combination, we explored whether CSS can be predicted using pharmacological and chemical
155 information of the drugs. We considered a drug combination as a combination of its drugs target
156 profiles as well as their chemical fingerprints, with which the machine learning approaches
157 illustrated in the previous section can be optimized by exploring the feature space using the training
158 data. We examined three major machine learning methods for predictions: Elastic Net, Random
159 Forests and Support Vector Machines.

160 We found that all of these machine learning approaches worked reasonably well, with the
161 Elastic Net consistently achieving the best performance, with the mean MAE of 4.01 which is
162 comparable to that (2.07) of a technical replicate (Table 1). Note that in our cross-validation setting
163 the drug combinations in the test data were not present in the training data, the machine learning
164 methods were still able to predict the CSS values for new drug combinations by exploring the feature
165 similarity in the drug targets and chemical fingerprints. The prediction performance thus validated
166 our hypothesis that a drug combination can be considered as a combination of their drug target

167 profiles and chemical-structural properties, with which the CSS score can be predicted with high
168 confidence using the state-of-the-art machine learning approaches.

169 **Table 1. The prediction performance for Elastic Net, Random Forests and Support Vector**
170 **Machines, as compared to the upper limit when selecting randomly one technical replicate as the**
171 **prediction.**

<i>Method</i>	<i>RMSE</i>	<i>R2</i>	<i>COR</i>	<i>MAE</i>
<i>Elastic Net</i>	5.20±1.11	0.80±0.06	0.90±0.03	4.01±0.86
<i>Random Forests</i>	6.30±1.18	0.71±0.07	0.85±0.04	4.75±0.9
<i>Support Vector Machines</i>	7.47±1.32	0.57±0.08	0.80±0.04	5.80±1.07
<i>Technical replicate</i>	2.87±0.59	0.93±0.04	0.97±0.02	2.07±0.45

172 All the values are mean+/-standard deviation.

173 Since both the drug target profiles and chemical fingerprints were considered as the drug
174 combination features, we next evaluated their prediction performances separately using the Elastic
175 Net method. For drug-target profiles we collected known targets that were experimentally validated
176 as well as the additional secondary targets that were predicted with high confidence using the SEA
177 method. For chemical fingerprints we used the MACCS fingerprint which contains 166 structural
178 features [18]. As expected, when combining all the features the model achieved the best
179 performance (Table 2). We found that in general drug target profiles were predictive of CSS,
180 especially when including the experimentally validated targets. The predicted targets using the SEA
181 method did not improve the prediction accuracy significantly, indicating that even though
182 secondary drug target interactions may occur, most likely they have minor functional impact that
183 may not lead to the changes in cancer cell viability and thus does not contribute to the prediction
184 of CSS. On the other hand, we found that chemical fingerprints were less predictive of CSS compared
185 to the drug-target profiles, suggesting that the use of MACCS might be suboptimal to capture the
186 relevant structural information for predicting the drug combination sensitivity. However, as the

187 focus of this study was to show the validity of using machine learning methods to predict the CSS
188 score, we decided to explore other chemical fingerprint features as a future step.

189 **Table 2. The prediction performances for drug-target features and chemical fingerprint features**
190 **using Elastic Net.**

<i>Feature</i>	<i>RMSE</i>	<i>R2</i>	<i>COR</i>	<i>MAE</i>
<i>Validated targets</i>	5.66±1.27	0.77±0.07	0.88±0.04	4.26±0.95
<i>Validated + predicted targets</i>	5.70±1.22	0.76±0.06	0.87±0.04	4.34±0.95
<i>Fingerprints</i>	6.27±1.19	0.71±0.06	0.85±0.04	4.87±0.94
<i>Validated targets + fingerprints</i>	5.30±1.14	0.79±0.06	0.89±0.03	4.07±0.88
<i>All features</i>	5.20±1.11	0.80±0.06	0.90±0.03	4.01±0.86

191 All the values are mean+/-standard deviation.

192 We considered the regression coefficients that were determined in the Elastic Net model as
193 an indication of their importance to contribute to the CSS prediction. We collected 67 features that
194 have their absolute coefficients greater than 3 for at least one cell line. Unsupervised hierarchical
195 clustering with the Manhattan metric was then applied to group the cell lines and the selected
196 features (Fig 2). We found that certain drug target features were present with high coefficients
197 across all the cell lines. For example, DNA topoisomerases including TOP1MT, TOP2A, TOP2B and
198 TOP1 were selected, with an average coefficients of 8.2, 2.7, 2.6 and 1.0 separately. Despite the
199 difference in the level of variable importance, all the DNA topoisomerases showed positive
200 coefficients in 38 of 39 cell lines, suggesting that targeting DNA topoisomerases were associated
201 with a higher CSS. DNA topoisomerases are known proteins which are essential for cell replication
202 and metabolism [19]. Including a topoisomerase inhibitor can thus enhance the drug combination
203 sensitivity in many cancer cell lines. On the other hand, the only cell line that showed negative

204 coefficients for TOP1MT was LNCAP (prostate cancer), which turned out to be the cell line that has
205 the smallest average CSS scores for drug combinations involving the TOP1MT inhibitor (topotecan)
206 (Fig S4).

207 **Fig. 2. The feature importance map by Elastic Net for each cell line.** Cell-line independent as well
208 as cancer subtype-specific features can be identified by evaluating the regression coefficients of the
209 Elastic Net model. Features such as TOP1MT, TOP1, TOP2A/B has shown consistently positive
210 coefficients as compared to features such as AKT1/2/3 which showed cancer subtype specificity in
211 breast cancer (indicated as arrows).

212 At the cell line level, we found that cell lines of the same tissue type did not necessarily
213 cluster together, indicating their distinctive drug combination response profiles. However, we found
214 that the breast cancer cell lines did form a major cluster including KPL1, ZR751, EFM192B, OCUBM
215 and T47D, while the only outlier was MDAMB436. Indeed, MDAMB436 is the only triple negative
216 breast cancer (TNBC) subtype, while the other cell lines are either ER positive (KPL1, ZR751 and
217 T47D), or HER2 positive (EFM192B and OCUBM). It has been known that TNBC respond anticancer
218 drugs differently from ER and HER2 positive breast cancers due to the distinctive disease
219 mechanisms [20]. The features selected for the CSS prediction separated these two distinctive
220 breast cancer subtypes, suggesting the validity of using CSS to cluster cancer of different subtypes.
221 Furthermore, we found that AKT targets (AKT1/2/3) were among the top ones that showed higher
222 importance in the non-TNBC group. A combination of an AKT inhibitor and TOP1MT inhibitor
223 therefore can be suggested to treat non-TNBC but not necessarily for TNBC breast cancers. On the
224 other hand, we found that CHEK1 and PARP3/4 targets were selected for MDAMB436 but not for
225 non-TNBC group, suggesting that a combination of a CHEK inhibitor and PARP inhibitor might be
226 tested for TNBC, but not for non-TNBC. The mechanisms of actions for the proposed drug
227 combination may prove interesting for experimental validations. Taken together, the features that

228 were selected from the CSS prediction may help to pinpoint the underlying target interactions,
229 which are of pivotal importance to identify the drug combination response biomarkers.

230

231 **The CSS-based synergy scores can predict the true synergy and antagonism**

232 Next, we defined the degree of drug synergy as the differences between the dose-response
233 curves of a drug combination and its single drugs. We derived three variants of the CSS-based
234 synergy score (S_{sum} , S_{max} , S_{mean}) and compared them with the HSA, Bliss, Loewe and ZIP synergy
235 scores that were determined using the full-dose response matrix. We evaluated whether the CSS-
236 based synergy scores using the cross design can capture the ground truth. Although determined
237 using only one row and one column from the dose-response matrix, all the CSS-based synergy scores
238 managed to obtain a good correlation with the synergy scores based on the dose-response matrix
239 design (Table 3).

240 **Table 3. Correlations of the CSS-based synergy scores with those derived using four reference**
241 **models that were calculated using the full dose-response matrices.**

<i>Synergy Scores</i>	<i>HSA</i>	<i>Bliss</i>	<i>Loewe</i>	<i>ZIP</i>
S_{sum}	0.72	0.72	0.46	0.55
S_{max}	0.71	0.65	0.51	0.49
S_{mean}	0.65	0.63	0.41	0.44

242

243 We found that the CSS-based synergy scores correlated relatively well with the HSA and Bliss
244 scores, while the correlation started to decrease when comparing to the Loewe and ZIP scores. Since
245 all the synergy scoring models utilized different assumptions for the reference of no synergy, we
246 therefore did not expect a perfect correlations in such pairwise comparisons. Of all the three
247 variations of CSS-based synergy score, we found that S_{sum} showed the best correlation with those

248 determined using the full dose-response matrix. As S_{sum} considers the additive effect of single drug
249 sensitivities as the expectation of no synergy, it thus can be considered a more conservative scoring
250 method compared to S_{max} and S_{mean} , where the maximal and average effect of single drugs were
251 considered as reference separately. To control the false discovery rate of detecting synergistic
252 combinations, we therefore proposed S_{sum} as a more appropriate scoring method for the cross drug
253 combination design.

254 Furthermore, we evaluated the predicting accuracy of the CSS-based synergy scores for true
255 synergistic and antagonistic drug combinations. We applied a stringent criteria to determine the
256 ground truth from the dose response matrix data, such that all the synergy scores (HSA, Bliss, Loewe
257 and ZIP) must be higher than 5, or lower than -5, to be classified as a true synergistic or antagonistic
258 drug combination, respectively. From the O'Neil data, we identified 3,716 true synergistic and 218
259 true antagonistic drug combinations. We then asked the question of whether the CSS-based synergy
260 scores that were determined using the cross design can predict the ground truth. We showed that
261 the CSS-based synergy scores managed to achieve the area under the ROC curves of 0.997 (S_{sum}),
262 0.996 (S_{max}) and 0.992 (S_{mean}) to detect the true synergistic and antagonistic combinations correctly
263 (Fig 3A). Note that in order to calculate the synergy score, only two vectors of the drug combination
264 responses are needed, rather than the full dose-response matrix. Therefore, the CSS-based synergy
265 score needs a substantially fewer measurements compared to the other well-established synergy
266 scores. Still, the CSS-based synergy scores can predict the most synergistic and antagonistic drug
267 combinations with high accuracy. On the other hand, the CSS-based synergy score and the CSS drug
268 combination sensitivity score were using the same unit as the percentage of the actual drug
269 response compared to the theoretical upper limit. Therefore, the synergy score can be interpreted
270 as the extra benefit of combining two drugs that can achieve an effect closer to the upper limit. We
271 summarized both CSS drug sensitivity scores and CSS-based synergy scores for all the drug

272 combinations as an S (sensitivity)-S (synergy) plot (Fig 3B; Table S4). By applying a threshold of the
273 3rd quantiles for CSS and S, we can clearly identify the most promising drug combinations that fulfill
274 both the sensitivity and synergy criteria, while avoiding the false positive drug combinations that
275 might be synergistic but do not achieve a sufficient high level of sensitivity. Taken together, the
276 combined use of CSS drug combination sensitivity score and its associated synergy score allows a
277 simultaneous evaluation of the sensitivity and synergy for a drug combination, which will facilitate
278 a more systematic analysis of high-throughput drug combination data with much less experimental
279 materials.

280 **Fig. 3. (A) The ROC curves for the CSS-based synergy scores to detect true synergistic and**
281 **antagonistic drug combinations. (B) The S-S plot for all the drug combinations.** The drug
282 combinations with the 75th percentile and above for both the CSS and the S scores were considered
283 as the prioritized hits for further experimental validation and highlighted in red.

284

285 Discussion

286 Drug combinations may potentially lead to more durable clinical responses by overcoming
287 intra-tumoral heterogeneity and drug resistance to monotherapies. Identifying drug combinations
288 that are tailored for personalized medicine is a challenge, as the number of possible combinations
289 may easily grow exponentially [21]. High-throughput drug combination screening has been
290 increasingly utilized for early detection of true synergistic and effective drug combinations.
291 However, systematic identification of drug combinations is difficult, as the concepts of synergistic
292 versus effective drug combinations are often intertwined and sometimes interchanged without
293 sufficient clarification. Furthermore, there is a lack of consensus on what the definition of synergy
294 is, which might contribute to the poor reproducibility of many drug combination studies. The

295 uncertainty about the endpoint measurement in drug combination screens brings additional
296 complexity for any machine learning approach to tackle the prediction problem.

297 We developed a novel scoring approach called CSS for drug combinations that can be
298 efficiently determined using a simple experimental design. We found that the CSS is highly replicable
299 and therefore can be considered as a robust metric to characterize drug combination sensitivity. To
300 leverage the drug combination CSS data, we also developed a testing platform to allow for a
301 systematic evaluation of the prediction accuracy of different machine learning methods. We found
302 that the target information for the compounds as well as their chemical fingerprints are highly
303 predictive of the CSS values, with an accuracy comparable to the experimental replicates. Therefore,
304 the rationale of considering a drug combination as a combination of their target and fingerprint
305 profiles can be justified. This would also allow the augmentation of single-drug screening and drug
306 combination screening data to train a machine learning model, as many drugs are multi-targeted
307 which are equivalent to a drug combination with the same target profile. In this study we focused
308 on drug combination prediction within the same cell line. In the future, we would include the
309 molecular features of the cell lines to improve the prediction accuracy as well as identify drug
310 combination specific biomarkers across different cell lines. On the other hand, as the focus of the
311 current study is to propose the new experimental design and to justify its associated drug
312 combination scoring methods, we tested the predictability of CSS using conventional machine
313 learning methods, and showed that CSS can be accurately inferred from the pharmacological
314 features of drug combinations. More advanced machine learning methods such as Deep Learning
315 [16] or network-based methods [22] may further improve the prediction accuracy, which will be
316 tested as future work.

317 A truly promising drug combinations shall reach therapeutic efficacy via a strong synergy.
318 While there have been multiple synergy scoring methods that can be applied to the full dose-

319 response matrix design, they do not always produce the consistent results. The truly synergistic and
320 antagonistic drug combinations may therefore be determined by finding the consensus across the
321 different scoring methods [12]. We developed a CSS-based synergy score to quantify the degree of
322 interactions in a drug pair, and showed that the CSS-based synergy score can identify the truly
323 synergistic and antagonistic drug combinations accurately. Therefore, the CSS-based synergy score
324 can be used for the prioritization of a primary drug combination screen using the cross design, after
325 which only the significant drug combinations warrant a confirmation screen using the full dose-
326 response matrix design. Furthermore, we proposed a novel S-S plot to visualize drug combination
327 sensitivity and synergy using the same scale, which enables an unbiased way to explore high-
328 throughput drug combination data more efficiently. On the other hand, the CSS is defined at the
329 IC_{50} concentrations of the background drugs. Therefore, a synergistic drug combination determined
330 by the CSS-based synergy score should be more therapeutically relevant than a drug combination
331 where the synergy is detected at a higher concentrations, which are often associated with unwanted
332 off-target effects and side-effects.

333 The advantage of the proposed cross design is that drug combination screens and single-
334 drug screens can be implemented in a sequential manner, which requires much less cells and
335 compound materials compared to a full dose-response matrix. With the introduction of CSS scoring,
336 we are foreseeing a lower technical barrier to carry out large scale drug combination studies with
337 minimal cellular materials. Although the drug combination data we explored here involves cancer
338 cell lines, the cross design and its CSS scoring can be readily applied for ex-vivo drug screening,
339 where the amount of patient-derived materials can be extremely limited and technically difficult to
340 obtain due to culture constraints [23]. With the help of CSS and its visualization tools, drug
341 combination discovery can be more quickly advance and may eventually lead to the validation of
342 personalized drug combinations in clinical trials.

343

344 **Materials and Methods**

345 **The cross drug combination design**

346 We proposed a cross design to test the synergy and sensitivity of a drug pair by first
347 introducing the concepts of background drug and foreground drug: background drug is the drug
348 fixed at its IC_{50} concentration while foreground drug is added into the background drug with multiple
349 concentrations. We allow that either drug in the pair to be the background drug, so that two vectors
350 of dose mixtures will be produced and intersected at the IC_{50} concentrations (Fig 4). The dose-
351 response curves for these two vectors will be determined using cell viability or toxicity assays, where
352 the inhibition percentages can be calculated using negative and positive controls. Note that the
353 cross design requires specifically the combinations at the IC_{50} concentrations, which need to be
354 determined based on single drug sensitivity screening or prior knowledge.

355 **Fig. 4. The cross design to determine the drug combination sensitivity score.** Compared to the full-
356 dose response matrix design (left panel), only the single row and single column that correspond to
357 the IC_{50} concentrations of the two drugs were utilized for the calculation of CSS (middle panel).
358 Either Drug1 or Drug2 can be considered as the background drug fixed at its IC_{50} concentration while
359 the other is considered as the foreground drug with multiple doses being titrated. The resulting two
360 dose-response curves will be summarized as the drug combination sensitivity score (CSS), from
361 which a synergy score can also be calculated as the deviation from the expected value when there
362 is no interaction.

363 **Determination of the CSS drug combination sensitivity scores**

364 With the drug combination dose-response curves determined in the cross design, the CSS
365 summarizes the area under the curve similar to the AUC and DSS (Drug Sensitivity Score) scoring

366 approaches [24-25]. Namely, a four-parameter log-logistic function is used to fit the dose-response
 367 curve for a concentration x of the foreground drug according to:

$$368 \quad y = y_{min} + \frac{y_{max} - y_{min}}{1 + 10^{\lambda(\log_{10} IC_{50} - \log_{10} x)}}, \quad (1)$$

369 where y_{min} and y_{max} are the minimal and maximal inhibition (the bottom and top asymptotes of the
 370 curve, $0 \leq y, y_{min}, y_{max} \leq 1$; IC_{50} is the concentration of the foreground drug with which the drug
 371 combination reaches 50% inhibition of the cell growth; λ is the slope of the dose-response curve.

372 The dose-response curve (1) is transformed by substituting x with $x' = \log_{10}(x)$ as:

$$373 \quad y = y_{min} + \frac{y_{max} - y_{min}}{1 + 10^{\lambda(\log_{10} IC_{50} - x')}} \quad (2)$$

374 The area under the \log_{10} -scaled dose-response curve (AUC) is determined according to

$$375 \quad AUC = \int_{c_1}^{c_2} y_{min} + \frac{y_{max} - y_{min}}{1 + 10^{\lambda(m - x')}} dx' = y_{min}(c_2 - c_1) + (y_{max} - y_{min}) \frac{1}{\lambda} \log_{10} \left(\frac{1 + 10^{\lambda(c_2 - m)}}{1 + 10^{\lambda(c_1 - m)}} \right), \quad (3)$$

376 where $[c_1, c_2]$ is the \log_{10} concentration range for the foreground drug tested in the experiment, and
 377 $m = \log_{10}(IC_{50})$.

378 The AUC is further normalized as the proportion of its theoretical upper bound according to:

$$379 \quad AUC' = \frac{AUC - t(c_2 - c_1)}{(1 - t)(c_2 - c_1)}, \quad (4)$$

380 where t is the minimum inhibition level that is considered meaningful (by default it is fixed at 10%,
 381 assuming that the inhibition below 10% is experimental noise).

382 The CSS for the foreground drug is defined as a percentage and varies between 0 and 100:

$$383 \quad CSS = 100AUC' \quad (5)$$

384 As there are two drug combination dose-response curves depending on which drug is fixed
 385 as the background drug, we refer to the results of Eq. (5) for either scenario as CSS_1 and CSS_2 , and
 386 consider them as two samples that are generated from the same random variable. We take the
 387 average of CSS_1 and CSS_2 as the CSS for the drug pair, i.e.

388
$$CSS = (CSS_1 + CSS_2)/2 \quad (6)$$

389

390 **The O'Neil drug combination data**

391 Dose-response was measured as percentage of cell viability and retrieved from the
392 supplementary material of [17], which includes 22,737 experiments for 583 drug pairs that involves
393 38 unique drugs in 39 cancer cell lines, representing 7 tissue types. At the first stage, single-drug
394 screening was done using 8 concentrations to determine the IC_{50} concentration for each drug with
395 six replicates. At the second stage, a 4 by 4 dose matrix was utilized to cover the span of IC_{50}
396 concentrations for a drug pair with four replicates. To utilize the cross design, we picked up only the
397 row and the column corresponding to the concentrations closest to the IC_{50} of the single drugs.
398 These two vectors thus allowed the fitting of drug combination dose-response curves with which
399 the CSS can be calculated. The cell viability percentage was first transformed to inhibition
400 percentage according to:

401
$$\%inhibition = 100 - \%viability \quad (7)$$

402 In our analysis, the average % inhibition of the four replicates was used to calculate the CSS.
403 The robustness of the CSS values was assessed using the Pearson correlation across the four
404 replicates.

405

406 **Predicting the CSS using machine learning approaches**

407 With the CSS being determined for each drug combination, we sought to evaluate the
408 prediction accuracy of multiple machine learning methods. We considered a drug combination as a
409 combination of their targets and chemical fingerprints. We collected the known targets that have
410 been experimentally validated for the 38 drugs from Drugbank [26] and ChEMBL [27]. Furthermore,
411 we also utilized the Similarity Ensemble Approach (SEA) to predict additional secondary targets

412 based on the chemical structures of the drugs [28]. The targets that were predicted with Z-score
413 higher than 20, Tanimoto coefficient higher than 0.4 and P-value smaller than 0.01 were included.
414 The MACCS fingerprints of the drugs were determined using the SMILES strings with the R package
415 *rcdk* [29]. The resulting feature set for a drug combination altogether included 398 validated and
416 predicted targets and 166 MACCS fingerprints (Table S1 and S2).

417 We compared three state-of-the-art machine learning methods for the CSS prediction:
418 Elastic Net [30], Random Forests [31] and Support Vector Machines [32]. Elastic Net is a
419 regularization and feature selection method that combines both ridge and lasso regression by
420 including the L_1 and L_2 penalty terms. This method depends heavily on its penalty term that is
421 regulated by hyper parameters α and λ . In our studies, α was selected from the interval [0.1, 1] and
422 λ was chosen to minimize the difference between predicted and actual CSS scores. Random Forests
423 is an ensemble learning method that constructs multiple decision trees. In our studies, we set the
424 number of randomly selected predictors that is used at each split of the decision tree equal to the
425 rounded down square root of the number of variables. For Support Vector Machines, the tuning
426 parameters are the cost parameter C that sets the penalty for misclassification of a training point
427 and a smoothing parameter σ , based on the accuracy of predictions in cross-validation.

428 We focused on the model performance for predicting new drug combinations within the
429 same cell line, as the set of drug combinations in the training data did not overlap with that in the
430 test data. For each cell line, we randomly sampled 70% of the drug combinations to train multiple
431 machine learning models using 10-fold cross-validation. The optimized models were then used for
432 predicting the CSS values for the remaining 30% of the novel drug combinations. The same
433 processes were repeated 20 times by randomly splitting the training and test data. Four metrics
434 including coefficient of determination (R^2), root mean square error (RMSE), mean absolute error
435 (MAE) and Pearson correlation (COR) were utilized for model comparison. To benchmark the

436 performance of the machine learning methods, we utilized one randomly selected technical
437 replicate as the prediction to obtain the upper limit of the performance. All the methods were
438 implemented and evaluated using the R package *caret* [33].

439

440 **Determination of the CSS-based drug synergy scores**

441 The advantage of CSS is that it allows a direct comparison of the sensitivity between a drug
442 combination and its single drugs, and hence facilitates the quantification of drug synergy. The
443 degree of synergy is often calculated as the deviation of the observed drug combination effect from
444 the reference, which is defined as the expectation effect if the drugs are not interacting. We defined
445 three variants of CSS-based synergy scores (termed as S scores) as:

$$446 \quad S_{\text{sum}} = \text{CSS} - \text{sum}(\text{DSS}_1, \text{DSS}_2), \quad (8)$$

$$447 \quad S_{\text{max}} = \text{CSS} - \text{max}(\text{DSS}_1, \text{DSS}_2), \quad (9)$$

$$448 \quad S_{\text{mean}} = \text{CSS} - \text{mean}(\text{DSS}_1, \text{DSS}_2), \quad (10)$$

449 where the expectation was determined as a summary statistics of the normalized AUC based on the
450 single drug dose-response curves (termed as DSS values as proposed in [25]). For a non-synergistic
451 drug pair, the S score is expected to be zero. To evaluate the prediction accuracy of the CSS-based
452 synergy scores, we defined a set of true synergistic and antagonistic drug combinations as the gold
453 standard, which were determined using the full dose-response matrix data. We utilized the R
454 package *synergyfinder* [34] to calculate multiple versions of synergy scores including the HSA
455 (Highest single agency, [35]), the Bliss [36], the Loewe [37] and the ZIP synergy scores [38]. The
456 principles of these four models were briefed as below:

457 Consider that drug 1 at concentration x_1 and drug 2 at concentration x_2 were combined to
458 produce the inhibition effect of y_c , while their respective single drug effects were $y_1(x_1)$ and $y_2(x_2)$.

459 The synergy score was calculated as the difference between y_c and the expected effect y_e if there is
460 no synergy. Each synergy scoring took a different model for y_e :

461 1. HSA: y_e is the maximal single drug effect, defining

$$462 \quad S_{\text{HSA}} = y_c - \max(y_1(x_1), y_2(x_2)) \quad (11)$$

463 2. Bliss: y_e is the expected effect of two drugs acting independently, defining

$$464 \quad S_{\text{Bliss}} = y_c - (y_1(x_1) + y_2(x_2) - y_1(x_1)y_2(x_2)) \quad (12)$$

465 3. Loewe: y_e is the expected effect of a drug combined with itself, defining

$$466 \quad S_{\text{Loewe}} = y_c - y_1(x_1 + x_2) = y_c - y_2(x_1 + x_2) \quad (13)$$

467 4. ZIP: y_e is the expected effect of two drugs that do not potentiate each other, defining

$$468 \quad S_{\text{ZIP}} = y_c' - (y_1'(x_1) + y_2'(x_2) - y_1'(x_1)y_2'(x_2)), \quad (14)$$

469 where $y_c', y_1'(x_1)$ and $y_2'(x_2)$ are the fitted values based on the full-dose response matrix for the
470 combination and single drugs, respectively.

471 For each of the four models, the synergy scores were determined first for a given dose
472 combination and then were averaged over the full dose-response matrix. With the four synergy
473 scores determined for each drug combination, the true synergistic and antagonistic drug
474 combinations are those with all the four synergy scores consistently higher than 5 and lower than
475 5, respectively. The aim was then to use the CSS-based synergy score which was determined by the
476 cross design data to predict the ground truth determined by the full dose-response matrix design.
477 The area under the ROC curve was used for evaluating how well the CSS-based synergy scores can
478 predict the consensus drug combinations determined using the full dose-response matrix data.

479

480 **Acknowledgements**

481 This work was supported by the European Research Council Starting Grant agreement No
482 716063 (DrugComb), Academy of Finland Grant agreement No. 317689 and Helsinki Institute of Life

483 Sciences Research Fellow funding. A.M and W.W. are supported by the FIMM-EMBL PhD program
484 scholarship. We thank the authors of the O'Neil study for making the drug combination data fully
485 accessible.

486

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- 575

576 **Supporting Information**

577 Table S1. Drug target profiles including experimentally-validated primary and secondary targets, and

578 SEA-predicted secondary targets for the 38 compounds [SupTable1.xlsx]

579 Table S2. The chemical information including MACCS fingerprint profiles for the 38 compounds

580 [SupTable2.xlsx]

581 Table S3. The correlations of the CSS values obtained using the average of four viability replicates,

582 with the CSS values obtained from the replicate separately [SupTable3.xlsx].

583 Table S4. CSS drug combination sensitivity scores and S synergy scores for each drug combination

584 [SupTable4.xlsx]

585 Fig S1. The heatmap of the CSS1-CSS2 correlations sorted by drug combinations. Drug classes are

586 shown in different colors at the edges of the heatmap.

587 Fig S2. Replicability of CSS values over the replicates. The line plot of the minimal and maximal values

588 for the CSS replicates combined with CSS values over the standard deviation of the CSS replicates.

589 Fig S3. The coefficient of variation (CV) for each drug in the single drug screens. The correlations

590 between CSS1 and CSS2 for the drug combinations that involve a given drug were shown on top of

591 each bar.

592 Fig S4. The correlation between the variable importance of TOP1MT and the average CSS for

593 TOP1MT inhibitor for all the 39 cell lines. LNCAP is the only line which has a negative variable

594 importance for TOP1MT.

$$CSS = (CSS_1 + CSS_2) / 2$$

$$\text{Synergy} = CSS - \text{reference}$$

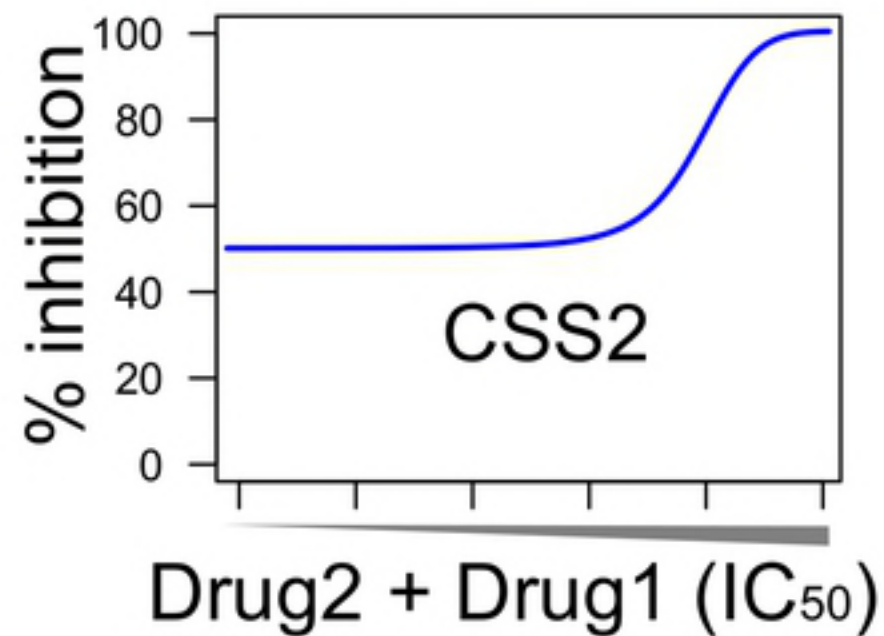
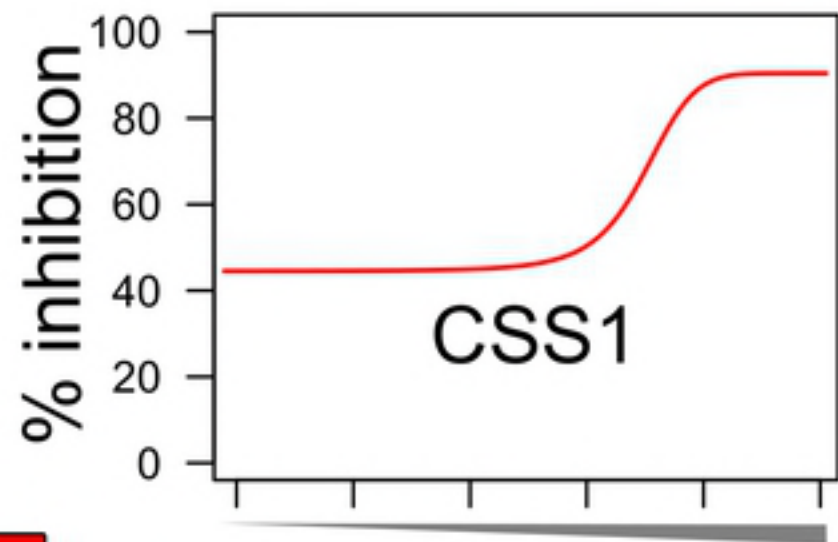
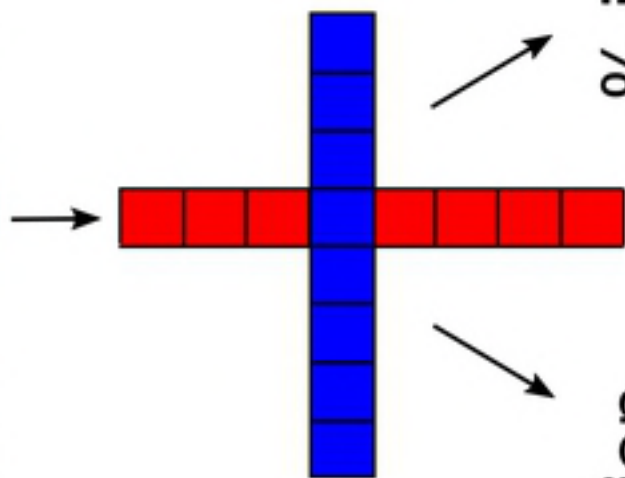
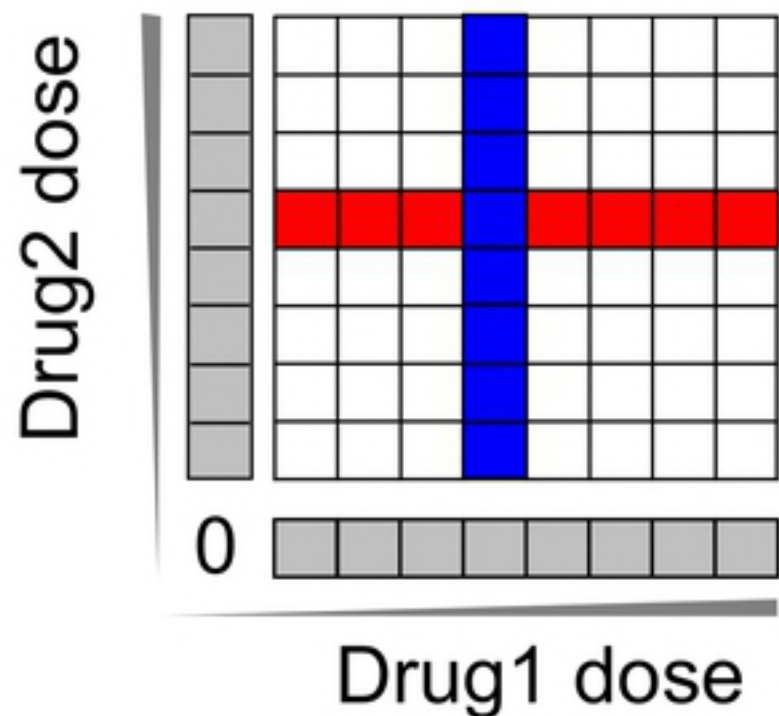


Fig1

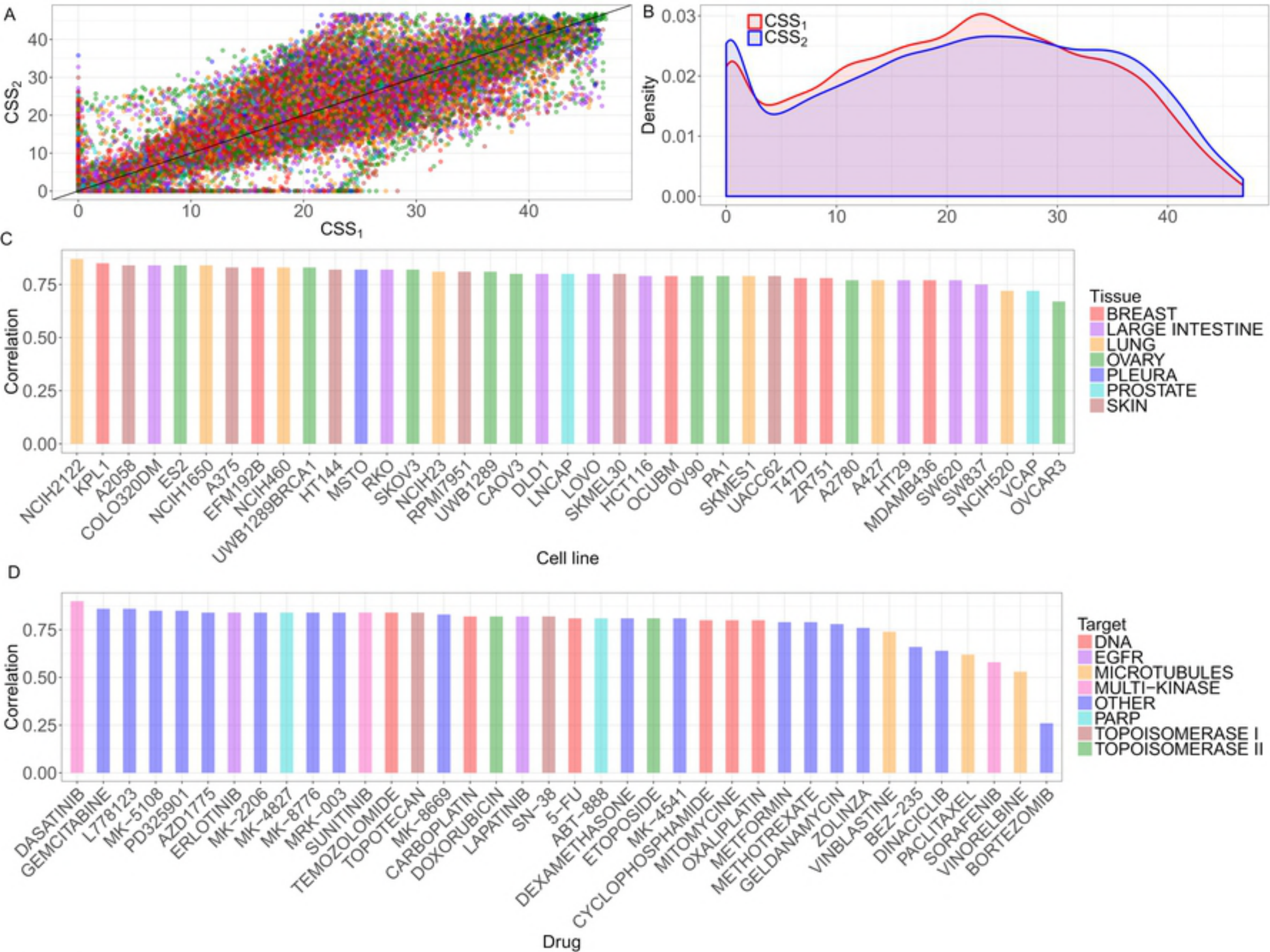


Fig2

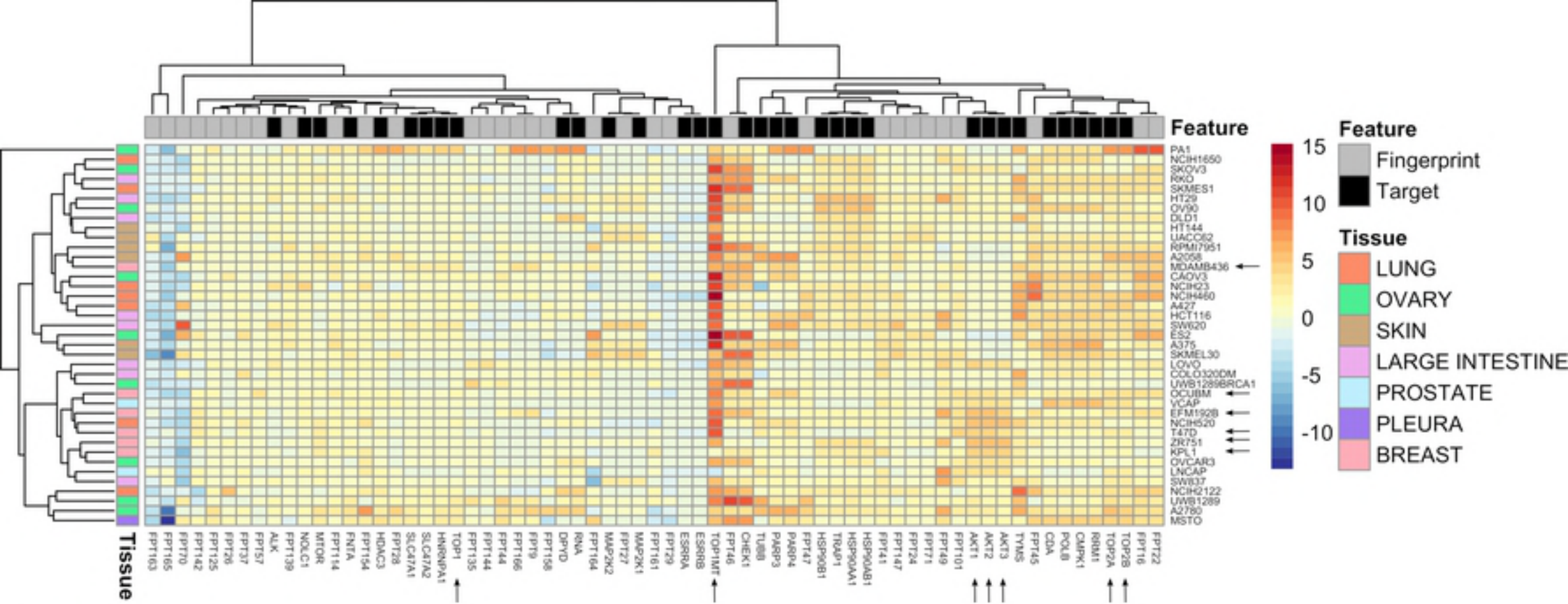


Fig3

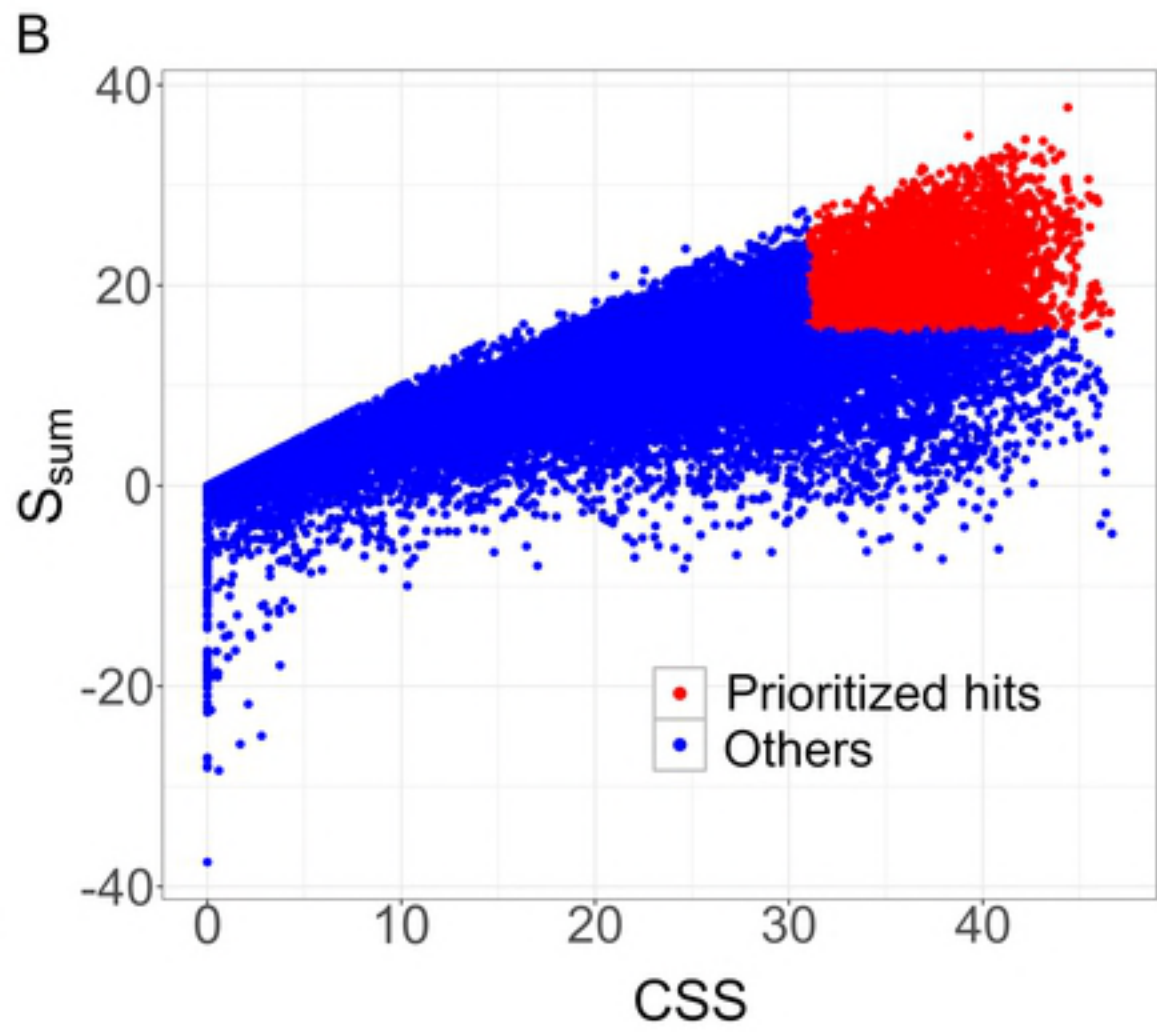
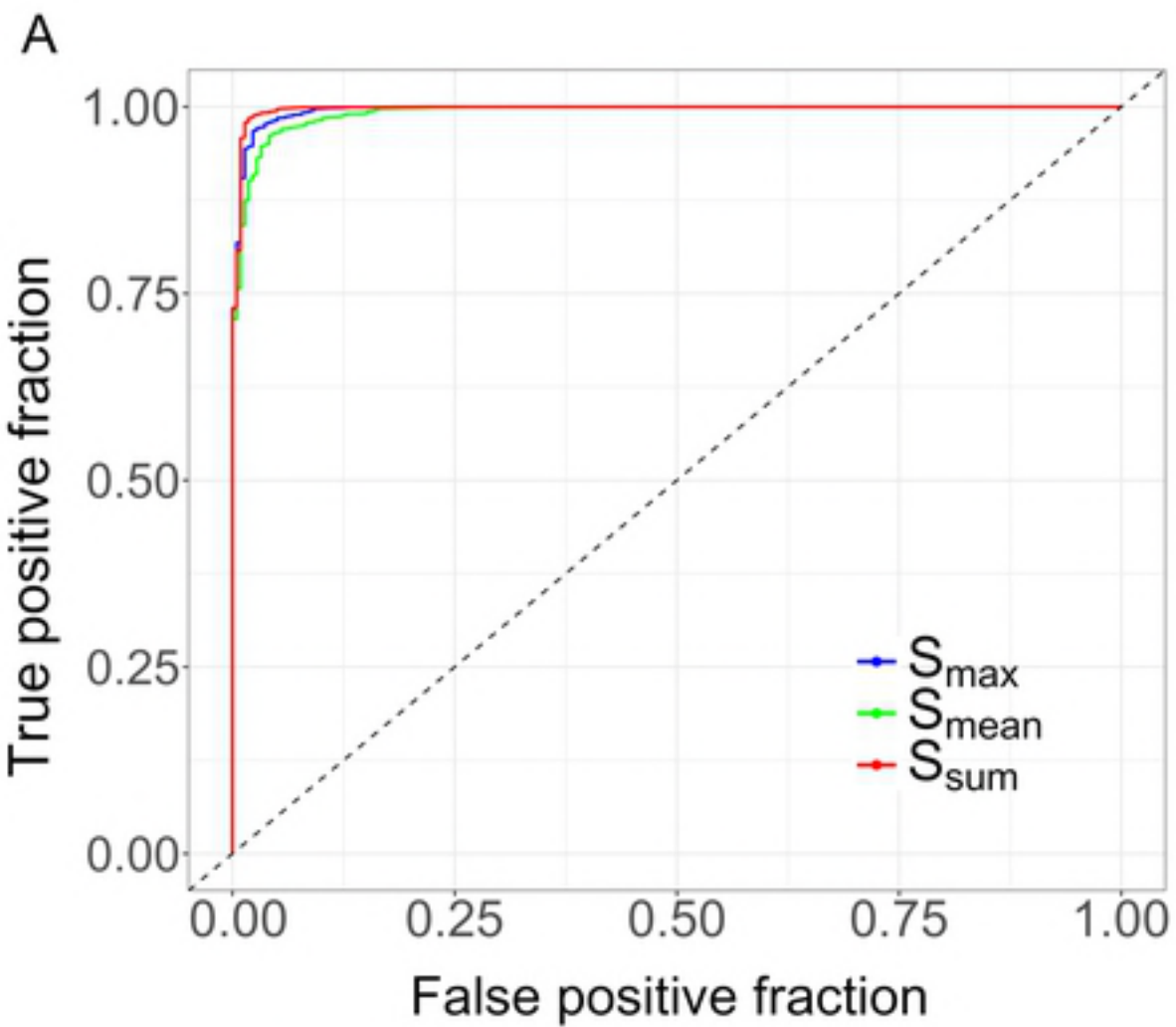


Fig4