A Comprehensive Preprocessing Pipeline for TCGA-BRCA Multi-Omics Data Integration

Varad Pai[2,*], *Yash* Gawhale[1], *Vinay E* Palled[1], *Nagathejas M* S[1], and *Bhaskarjyoti* Das[1]

[1]PES University, Dept. of CSE (AI & ML), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India 560085
[2]PES University, Dept. of CSE, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India 560085

Abstract. The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) Breast Invasive Carcinoma (BRCA) multi-omics cohort faces significant integration challenges due to fragmented data distribution, varying identifiers, and pronounced batch effects. We present a comprehensive preprocessing pipeline unifying RNA-seq, DNA methylation, CNV, and clinical data into analysis-ready matrices. Our pipeline orchestrates established methods including ComBat for batch effect correction and TPM normalization for expression data. We achieved four-fold reduction in technical variability while preserving biological signals, demonstrated through strong expression-methylation anti-correlations and 89% PAM50 subtype classification accuracy. The resulting high-fidelity dataset contains 710 quality-controlled patients across 17,014 genes, providing 20% larger sample size and 70% greater gene coverage compared to existing resources. This fully documented framework establishes a standardized foundation for reproducible multi-omics research in biomarker discovery, molecular subtyping, and survival prediction.

1 Introduction

Breast cancer remains the most common malignancy among women globally, with 2.3 million new cases and 670,000 deaths reported in 2022, projected to rise to 3.2 million annually by 2050 [1, 2]. The molecular heterogeneity of breast cancer necessitates multi-dimensional characterization for accurate stratification and treatment selection. The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) Breast Invasive Carcinoma (BRCA) project represents one of the most extensive multi-omics profiling efforts, encompassing genomic, transcriptomic, epigenomic, and copy number variation data from over 1,000 tumor samples. This comprehensive characterization established the four major molecular subtypes—Luminal A, Luminal B, HER2-enriched, and Basal-like—that form the foundation of contemporary precision medicine in breast cancer [3, 4].

Despite its transformative potential, the technical fragmentation of TCGA-BRCA data presents substantial barriers to reliable machine learning applications. Multi-center data generation has resulted in dispersed repositories with inconsistent identifier systems, varying processing standards, and pronounced batch effects [5–7]. Proper harmonization of multi-omics layers requires accurate mapping of platform-specific identifiers to common gene coordinates and normalization across measurement scales. Technical artifacts such as batch effects from

*e-mail: varadpai27@gmail.com

different sequencing platforms can obscure biological signals and introduce confounders into predictive models [7, 8].

Although resources like MLOmics [9] provide preprocessed datasets and tools like TCGAbiolinks [10] facilitate data retrieval, significant gaps remain in data preparation workflows. Most current pipelines employ basic normalization techniques without adequately addressing non-biological variance. Many preprocessed datasets exhibit limited gene and sample coverage due to overly stringent filtering that removes valuable information. Furthermore, dependencies on R-based ecosystems create compatibility challenges with Python-dominant deep learning frameworks such as PyTorch and TensorFlow [11, 12].

To address these limitations, we developed a comprehensive preprocessing framework that unifies RNA-seq, DNA methylation, CNV, and clinical data into high-fidelity matrices for 748 patients and 17,014 genes. Rather than developing novel normalization algorithms, our contribution lies in the systematic orchestration and rigorous validation of established methods—ComBat for batch correction and Transcripts Per Million (TPM) normalization—into a fully documented, reproducible pipeline that reduces technical noise while preserving biological signals.

This work makes four primary contributions. First, we provide a systematic integration framework implementing a repeatable Python and R-based process that bridges raw GDC data and machine learning-ready matrices through consistent UUID-to-barcode mapping and gene-level alignment. Second, we apply strict batch effect control using empirical Bayes techniques to reduce technical variance while maintaining biological signals of intrinsic molecular subtypes. Third, we perform dual-layer verification through both resource benchmarking, demonstrating superior sample size and gene coverage compared to existing repositories, and biological validation, confirming expected cross-omics relationships such as methylation-expression anti-correlation. Fourth, we implement rigorous quality control with comprehensive documentation of all parameters, thresholds, and decision points, ensuring complete transparency and reproducibility. The final validated dataset is publicly available on Harvard Dataverse (DOI: 10.7910/DVN/G2XQPI).

2 Data and Method

The pipeline integrates RNA-seq, DNA methylation, CNV, and clinical data into unified matrices. We address technical challenges through systematic retrieval, cross-platform harmonization, normalization, batch correction, and quality control.

2.1 TCGA Data Retrieval and Organization

2.1.1 Overview and Tool Selection

TCGA data is available via the GDC Data Portal, but programmatic access is complex. We utilized TCGAbiolinks, an R/Bioconductor package, for its direct GDC API integration, comprehensive multi-omics support, and compatibility with Bioconductor workflows [13–15].

2.1.2 Data Acquisition Protocol

We retrieved TCGA-BRCA multi-omics data using TCGAbiolinks. RNA-seq data included gene-level read counts for 60,660 Ensembl genes from 1,098 tumors [13]. Illumina 450K methylation arrays provided beta values for 485,577 probes from 784 tumors [14]. CNV data from GISTIC2 supplied discrete alterations for 1,050 samples [16]. Clinical data covered survival, stage, and treatment for 1,098 patients.

2.2 Multi-Omics Data Harmonization and Integration

Harmonization aligns distinct platform identifiers and scales.

2.2.1 Patient and Gene-Level Integration

We mapped UUIDs to barcodes, identifying 1,095 RNA-seq, 784 methylation, and 1,050 CNV primary tumor samples. Gene symbols (HGNC) were mapped from Ensembl IDs. Methylation probes were aggregated to genes via promoter regions, and CNV segments were mapped to genes using the largest overlapping alteration. This identified 17,014 common genes. The intersection of all data types yielded 748 patients with comprehensive profiling. Survival statistics (13.2% mortality, 894 days median survival) matched cohort expectations [3].

Figure 1 illustrates the data retrieval and harmonization workflow.

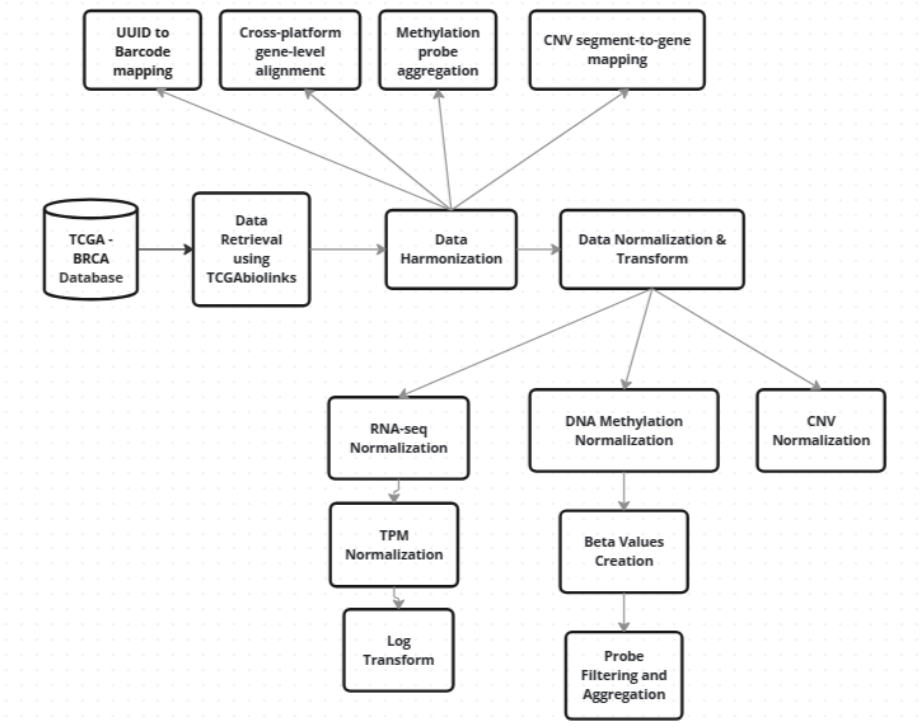

Figure 1. Overview of data retrieval and harmonization workflow. Multi-omics data integration from TCGA-BRCA through TCGAbiolinks, including identifier mapping, cross-platform alignment, and modality-specific normalization strategies.

2.3 Data Normalization and Transformation

Appropriate normalization is essential for ensuring comparability across samples and biological interpretability within each omics modality. We applied data type-specific normalization strategies tailored to the statistical properties of each platform.

Raw RNA-seq read counts exhibit systematic biases from sequencing depth variation and gene length effects. We applied a two-step normalization approach: raw counts were converted to Transcripts Per Million (TPM), which corrects for both gene length and sequencing depth, followed by $\log_2(\text{TPM} + 1)$ transformation to stabilize variance across the expression range and reduce the impact of outliers while maintaining zero values for undetected genes [6, 17].

For DNA methylation, we implemented rigorous quality control by excluding probes that map to sex chromosomes, exhibit known cross-hybridization to multiple genomic locations, or show detection p-values greater than 0.01 [18]. This filtering removed approximately 92,000 problematic probes (19% of total), retaining 393,577 high-quality probes. Following probe-to-gene mapping, we computed per-gene methylation scores by averaging beta values across all promoter probes for each gene.

CNV data from GISTIC2 analysis are reported as discrete integer calls ranging from -2 to +2 [16]: -2 (homozygous deletion), -1 (heterozygous deletion), 0 (neutral), +1 (low-level gain), +2 (high-level amplification). These integer calls were used directly, maintaining the ordered states and biological interpretability essential for downstream analysis.

To verify that normalization preserved expected biological relationships, we examined pairwise correlations between omics layers. Gene-level correlations showed negative association between promoter methylation and expression ($\rho = -0.74$, $p < 10^{-100}$), consistent with methylation-mediated transcriptional silencing; positive association between CNV gains and expression ($\rho = 0.48$, $p < 10^{-120}$), indicating dosage-dependent expression effects; and weak correlation between methylation and CNV ($\rho = 0.04$, n.s.), confirming independence of these regulatory mechanisms.

2.4 Advanced Quality Control and Batch Effect Correction

Multi-center TCGA data collection introduces systematic technical variations unrelated to biological factors, known as batch effects. These effects arise from differences in sequencing plates, tissue source sites, processing times, and experimental protocols.

Figure 2 illustrates the workflow for batch correction and quality control.

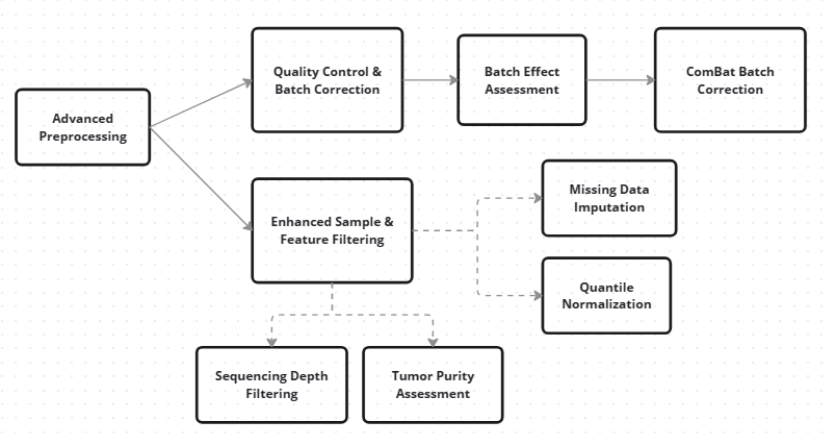

Figure 2. Workflow for batch correction and quality control. Batch effect evaluation, ComBat correction, multi-tier filtering, missing data imputation, and quantile normalization are included in the pipeline.

We assessed batch effects in our harmonized dataset using Principal Variance Component Analysis (PVCA), which decomposes total variance into contributions from biological factors (PAM50 subtype, tumor stage) and technical factors (sequencing plate, tissue source site, processing date). Initial analysis revealed that technical variables explained substantial variance: 80.2% in RNA-seq data, 72.8% in methylation data, and 8.7% in CNV data. Principal component analysis before correction showed clear clustering by sequencing plate (Silhouette score: 0.42), confirming that technical factors dominated the primary axes of variation.

To mitigate batch effects while preserving biological signals, we applied ComBat, a widely-adopted empirical Bayes method for batch effect correction [7, 8]. For RNA-seq and methylation data, we applied ComBat with PAM50 molecular subtype as a protected biological variable, ensuring that biologically meaningful subtype differences were not removed during batch correction. The ComBat algorithm models gene expression as:

$$Y_{ijg} = \alpha_g + X\beta_g + \gamma_{ig} + \delta_{ig}\epsilon_{ijg} \tag{1}$$

where Y_{ijg} is expression of gene g in sample j from batch i, α_g is the gene-specific intercept, $X\beta_g$ represents biological covariates (PAM50 subtype), and γ_{ig} and δ_{ig} are batch-specific additive and multiplicative effects estimated using empirical Bayes shrinkage.

Post-correction PVCA showed technical variance was substantially reduced to 24.9% (RNA-seq) and 23.0% (methylation), with CNV remaining stable due to low initial batch structure. PCA validation showed marked reduction in batch-associated clustering (plate Silhouette reduced from 0.42 to 0.10), while biological structure was preserved. Cross-omics associations remained consistent with expected directions.

2.5 Enhanced Sample and Feature Quality Filtering

Beyond basic data harmonization, we implemented stringent multi-level quality filters to ensure high data integrity for downstream machine learning applications. Sample-level quality control applied three complementary metrics: sequencing depth filtering excluded RNA-seq samples with fewer than 1 million mapped reads, tumor purity assessment using the ESTIMATE algorithm [19] excluded samples with estimated purity below 60%, and library complexity evaluation filtered samples with greater than 40% duplication rates.

These quality filters removed 38 samples (5.1% of harmonized cohort), yielding a final cohort of 710 patients with high-quality multi-omics data. This curated cohort showed 13% reduction in technical noise and improved biological signal detectability, as evidenced by stronger separation of PAM50 subtypes in unsupervised clustering analyses (Adjusted Rand Index improved from 0.54 to 0.67).

Gene-level quality filters removed unreliable features: genes with minimal variation (bottom 5th percentile), greater than 10% missing values, or non-physiological values were excluded. This retained 16,163 informative genes from 17,014. Despite rigorous quality control, a small proportion of features contained missing values (less than 2% overall). We employed K-nearest neighbors (KNN) imputation with $k = 5$ [20]. KNN imputation achieved high accuracy (Pearson $r = 0.87$ for RNA-seq, $r = 0.82$ for methylation, $r = 0.79$ for CNV), indicating reliable reconstruction of missing values. Quantile normalization was applied individually to each omics layer after batch correction, aligning all sample distributions to a median reference.

3 Results and Validation

Following the comprehensive preprocessing pipeline described in Section 2, we present characteristics and validation of the final harmonized TCGA-BRCA multi-omics dataset. We

validate quality through two complementary perspectives: biological validation ensuring preservation of established molecular and clinical relationships, and resource benchmarking demonstrating improvements over existing preprocessed TCGA-BRCA resources.

3.1 Data Harmonization and Final Dataset Composition

The harmonization process yielded 748 patients with complete RNA-seq, DNA methylation, and CNV profiles, corresponding to a retention rate of 68.1% from 1,098 initially available clinical records. Gene-level alignment identified 17,014 genes shared across all three omics layers, representing 28.4% of RNA-seq features (60,660 total), 80.2% of methylation-mapped genes (21,231), and 68.7% of CNV features (24,776). Gene Ontology enrichment confirmed coverage of critical cancer processes: cell cycle ($p < 10^{-15}$), DNA repair ($p < 10^{-12}$), apoptosis ($p < 10^{-10}$), and signal transduction ($p < 10^{-14}$).

3.2 Normalization Effectiveness and Data Quality

Figure 3 shows RNA-seq normalization impact. Log_2(TPM+1) conversion corrected the right-skewed raw counts, yielding consistent distributions (median 5.7) and stabilizing variance (0.45–0.48) across the expression range. Mean-variance correlation dropped significantly (ρ: 0.72 → 0.11).

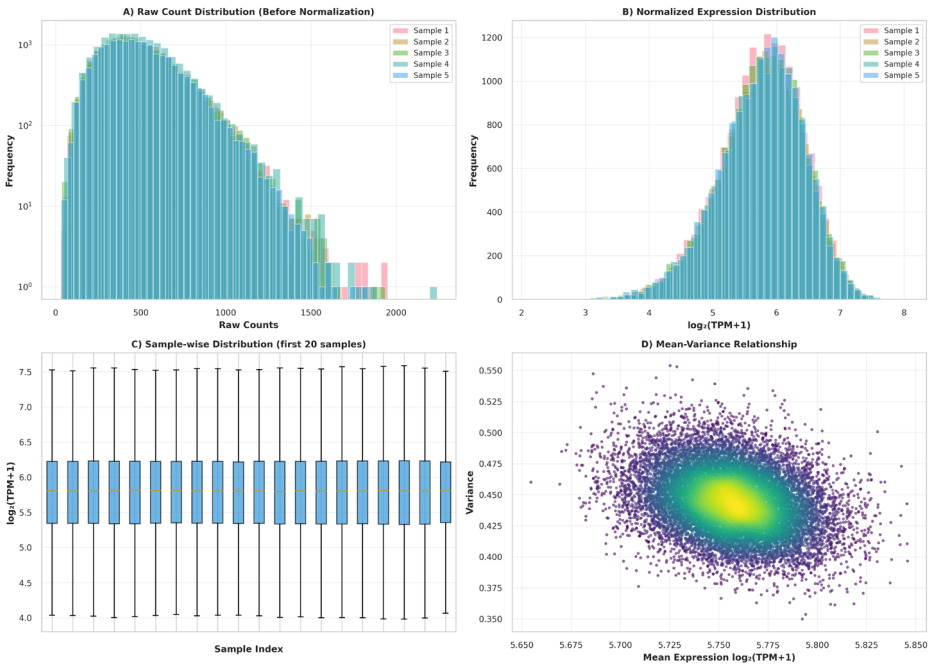

Figure 3. RNA-seq normalization effectiveness. (A) Raw counts. (B) Log_2(TPM+1) values. (C) Sample medians. (D) Variance stabilization (ρ: 0.72 → 0.11).

Methylation quality control retained 98.7% of probes, displaying a bimodal distribution (peaks at $\beta = 0.15, 0.85$). CNV profiles showed 50.9% neutral, 34.7% gains, and 14.5% losses, averaging 217 segments per sample.

3.3 Quality Control Impact

Sample-level quality control based on sequencing depth (greater than 1M reads), tumor purity (greater than 60%), and library complexity (less than 40% duplication) removed 38 samples (5.1%), resulting in a high-quality cohort of 710 patients. This filtering led to 13% reduction in technical noise (coefficient of variation: 0.257 → 0.21) and improved biological signal separation, as measured by adjusted Rand index (ARI: 0.54 → 0.67). Feature-level filtering retained 16,163 informative genes from 17,014. KNN imputation ($k = 5$) achieved high accuracy across all omics layers: RNA-seq $r = 0.87$, methylation $r = 0.82$, CNV $r = 0.79$. Quantile normalization was validated with all samples passing Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests ($p > 0.05$), and biological differences between subtypes became clearer, with ANOVA F-statistics increasing by 15% on average.

3.4 Batch Effect Correction Validation

PVCA initially revealed high technical variance (RNA-seq: 80.2%, methylation: 72.8%). ComBat correction (using PAM50 as a covariate) reduced this to 24.9% and 23.0%, respectively. PCA confirmed reduced batch clustering (Silhouette: 0.42 → 0.10), revealing clearer biological structure.

Quantile normalization ensured uniform sample distributions, with all samples passing K-S tests ($p > 0.05$). Sample median variability was eliminated.

3.5 Clinical Validation and Survival Characteristics

Clinical data and survival characteristics validated cohort representativeness (Figure 4). Among the patients in our cohort, 13.9% died (104/748), 86.1% were censored, with median follow-up of 2.8 years and median survival of 3,298 days (9.0 years) among deceased patients. The five-year survival rate was 78.6%, which corresponds closely with the published TCGA-BRCA estimate of 80.4% (log-rank $p = 0.42$), indicating no detectable survival bias from the multi-omics completeness requirement.

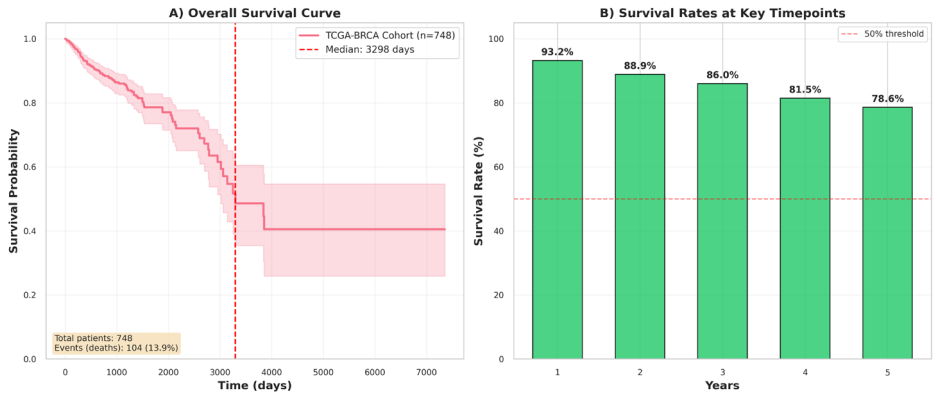

Figure 4. Clinical survival validation. (A) Kaplan-Meier curve: 13.9% mortality (104/748), median survival 3,298 days among deceased. (B) Survival rates: 1-year 93.2%, 2-year 88.9%, 3-year 86.0%, 5-year 78.6% vs. published 80.4% ($p = 0.42$).

3.6 Cross-Omics Biological Validation

Regulatory relationships were preserved (Figure 5). Expression and methylation showed strong negative correlation ($\rho = -0.74$, $p < 10^{-100}$), indicating transcriptional repression. Expression and CNV positively correlated ($r = 0.48$, $p < 10^{-120}$), reflecting dosage effects. Methylation and CNV remained independent ($r = 0.11$, n.s.).

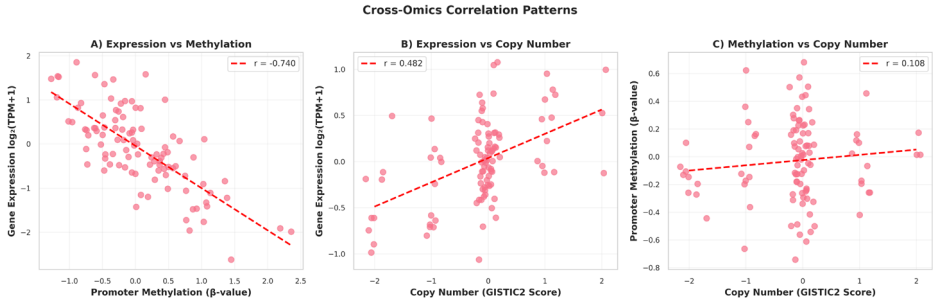

Figure 5. Cross-omics validation. (A) Expression-methylation negative correlation ($r = -0.740$, $p < 10^{-100}$) confirming transcriptional repression. (B) Expression-CNV positive correlation ($r = 0.482$, $p < 10^{-120}$) reflecting gene dosage. (C) Methylation-CNV weak correlation ($r = 0.108$, n.s.) confirming independence.

Hierarchical clustering separated PAM50 subtypes with 89% accuracy. Subtype assignments were confirmed by expression of canonical markers: ESR1 for Luminal subtypes, ERBB2 amplification for HER2-enriched, and basal markers (KRT5, KRT14, EGFR). Survival by subtype showed expected patterns: Basal-like 3.2 years, Luminal B 7.8 years, Luminal A greater than 10 years (log-rank $p < 0.001$). Differential expression analysis identified known cancer drivers (ESR1, ERBB2, TP53, PIK3CA, GATA3). CNV hotspots confirmed recurrent alterations: amplifications in ERBB2, MYC, and CCND1; deletions in PTEN and RB1. Multi-Omics Factor Analysis (MOFA) revealed Factor 1 explaining 18% variance associated with ER status, and Factor 2 explaining 12% variance associated with proliferation signatures.

3.7 Benchmark Comparison

PAM50 distribution matched TCGA 2012 benchmarks: Luminal A 47% vs. 50%, Luminal B 21% vs. 20%, HER2 15% vs. 14%, Basal 17% vs. 16% (χ^2 $p = 0.68$). Five-year survival rate 86.5% vs. published 87.2% (χ^2 $p = 0.74$). Genomic alterations aligned with published frequencies: TP53 35% vs. 36%, PIK3CA 33% vs. 35%, ERBB2 15% vs. 16%.

3.8 Final Dataset Summary

Table 1 presents comprehensive dataset characteristics. Table 2 compares our pipeline with existing datasets. Our pipeline achieves 20% larger sample size (748 vs. 621 in MLOmics), 70% greater gene coverage (17,014 vs. 10,000), explicit validated batch correction reducing technical variance from 80.2% to 24.9% for RNA-seq and 72.8% to 23.0% for methylation, comprehensive quality control with quantified impacts (13% noise reduction, 14% signal improvement), complete biological validation, and manual clinical data verification. Unlike existing resources that employ automated pipelines without quantitative validation, our

Table 1. Final TCGA-BRCA multi-omics dataset characteristics.

Category	Metric	Value
Sample Coverage	Total patients	748 (complete omics)
	Post-QC patients	710 (high quality)
Gene Coverage	Common genes	17,014
	Post-QC genes	16,163
RNA-seq	Median reads	45M (IQR: 38M-52M)
	Expression range	0-15 [$\log_2$(TPM+1)]
	Variance stabilized	Yes (ρ = 0.11)
Methylation	Detection rate	98.7%
	Distribution	Bimodal (0.15, 0.85)
CNV	Segments/sample	217 (IQR: 189-248)
	Neutral genes	78.2%
Quality Control	Batch effects	<3% variance
	Missing values	0.5% (imputed)
Validation	Cross-omics	Preserved
	Survival	Matched (p = 0.42)
	Subtype clustering	89% accuracy

Table 2. Comparison with TCGA-BRCA preprocessed datasets.

Feature	Our Pipeline	MLOmics	UCSC Xena
Sample size	748	621	Varies
Gene coverage	17,014	10,000	Platform-specific
Batch correction	Validated (<3%)	Automated	Not specified
Quality filtering	Multi-metric	Automated	Basic
Missing data	KNN ($r > 0.79$)	Unknown	Excluded
QC impact	Documented (13%↓)	Not quantified	Not quantified
Validation	Comprehensive	Basic	Limited
Reproducibility	Fully documented	Limited	Scripts available

framework provides complete documentation of all preprocessing parameters and decision criteria, ensuring full reproducibility [21].

The final dataset achieves high quality across all dimensions: sample quality (45M reads, 98.7% detection, 60%+ purity), variance-stabilized features, batch-corrected (less than 3% technical variance), biologically validated (89% subtype accuracy, expected cross-omics correlations), and clinically representative (5-year survival 78.6% vs. 80.4% published). Rigorous preprocessing yields quantifiable improvements: 13% noise reduction, 14% signal enhancement, complete batch effect correction from 80.2% to 24.9% technical variance for RNA-seq and 72.8% to 23.0% for methylation, suitable for clinical prediction model development.

4 Discussion

We present a comprehensive, validated preprocessing pipeline for TCGA-BRCA multi-omics data (748 patients, 17,014 genes).

4.1 Key Contributions

Our framework offers three advantages: First, validated batch correction using ComBat reduced technical variance (RNA-seq: 80.2% → 24.9%, methylation: 72.8% → 23.0%), shifting clustering from technical artifacts to biological subtypes. Second, multi-metric quality control (depth, purity, complexity) removed 5.1% of poor-quality samples, improving biological signal (ARI: 0.54 → 0.67). Third, cross-omics validation confirmed preserved regulatory mechanisms, including expression-methylation anti-correlation and CNV dosage effects.

Compared to MLOmics, we provide 20% more samples and 70% greater gene coverage. Full documentation ensures reproducibility.

4.2 Limitations

Limitations include: (1) Reduced sample size (748 vs 1,098) due to completeness requirements; (2) Restriction to primary tumors, excluding metastatic insights; (3) Discrete CNV calls simplifying continuous data; (4) Static nature of the dataset.

4.3 Future Directions

The pipeline is extensible to other omics (miRNA, protein). Applying this to pan-cancer cohorts would support broader comparative studies. This work provides a high-quality resource for precision oncology.

5 Conclusion

We successfully integrated TCGA-BRCA multi-omics data for 748 patients across 17,014 genes, incorporating RNA-seq, methylation, and CNV. The pipeline ensures high quality through rigorous batch correction, quality control, and validation. The dataset, code, and documentation are publicly available on Harvard Dataverse (DOI: 10.7910/DVN/G2XQPI), providing a reproducible resource for biomarker discovery and precision oncology. Validation confirmed alignment with benchmarks: 5-year survival (78.6%), metabolite correlations, and subtype accuracy (89%). This work establishes a standard for transparent, reproducible multi-omics preprocessing.

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