Data and text mining

Cosbin: cosine score-based iterative normalization of biologically diverse samples

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Abstract

Motivation: Data normalization is essential to ensure accurate inference and comparability of gene expression measures across samples or conditions. Ideally, gene expression data should be rescaled based on consistently expressed reference genes. However, to normalize biologically diverse samples, the most commonly used reference genes exhibit striking expression variability and size-factor or distribution-based normalization methods can be problematic when the amount of asymmetry in differential expression is significant.

Results: We report an efficient and accurate data-driven method—Cosine score-based iterative normalization (Cosbin)—to normalize biologically diverse samples. Based on the Cosine scores of cross-condition expression patterns, the Cosbin pipeline iteratively eliminates asymmetric differentially expressed genes, identifies consistently expressed genes, and calculates sample-wise normalization factors. We demonstrate the superior performance and enhanced utility of Cosbin compared with six representative peer methods using both simulation and real multi-omics expression datasets. Implemented in open-source R scripts and specifically designed to address normalization bias due to significant asymmetry in differential expression across multiple conditions, the Cosbin tool complements rather than replaces the existing methods and will allow biologists to more accurately detect true molecular signals among diverse phenotypic groups.

Availability and implementation: The R scripts of Cosbin pipeline are freely available at https://github.com/MinjieSh/Cosbin.

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Supplementary information: Supplementary data are available at Bioinformatics Advances online.

1 Introduction

High-throughput gene expression profiling provides the ability to study many genes in an organism under different biological conditions (Clarke et al., 2008). Between-sample normalization is essential to ensure accurate inference and comparability of gene expression measurements across samples or conditions. Ideally, such normalization should be based on a subset of consistently expressed reference genes (CEGs) to correct for technical differences (non-biological) among samples (Evans et al., 2018). Inaccurate normalization can significantly bias downstream analysis, potentially rendering the choice of test statistics for hypothesis testing (Zhao et al., 2020).

We and others have recognized that the direct application of size-factor-based or distribution-based normalization methods to biologically diverse samples can be problematic due to two major as-yet unresolved problems. First, the most commonly used reference genes are unreliable as internal controls for normalization because of their striking expression variability in both experimental and bioinformatic analyses (Jo et al., 2019). Second, while it is conceptually logical to determine scaling factors or global transformations based on the global distribution of many expressed genes when
the amount of asymmetry in the differential expression is high, this global adjustment (scaling or transformation) strategy may bias true differential expression toward the null (Fig. 1a) (Evans et al., 2018; Hicks and Irizarry 2015; Johnson and Krishnan 2022). The data-driven assessment tool quantro was developed to guide the choice of an appropriate normalization method using global transformations (Hicks and Irizarry 2015). A few normalization-by-testing strategies have also been proposed to mitigate the impact of asymmetrically and differentially expressed genes (aDEGs) with limited success (Evans et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2002).

To specifically address the impact of significant asymmetry in the differential expression on normalizing biologically diverse samples, we report here a Cosine score-based iterative normalization (Cosbin) method that eliminates aDEGs, identifies ideal CEGs (iCEGs) and calculates sample-wise normalization factors by equilibrating expression levels of iCEGs (Fig. 1). The Cosbin tool performs reference-free multiple normalizations across different biological conditions and is applicable to multi-omics data. As a novel normalization-by-testing strategy (Evans et al., 2018), the Cosbin framework makes no assumption that the total expression is the same or that differential expression across different experimental conditions is approximately symmetrical and thus complements rather than replaces existing methods (Evans et al., 2018; Johnson and Krishnan 2022). One additional benefit of the Cosbin tool is the concurrent detection of marker genes (MGs) and iCEGs (Lu et al., 2022) (Supplementary Information).

The Cosbin software is implemented in open-source R scripts (Fig. 1). We demonstrate the effectiveness of the Cosbin strategy, in comparison with six representative peer methods (three size-factor-based, two global-adjustment and one normalization-by-testing) (Evans et al., 2018; Johnson and Krishnan 2022), using realistic mixture simulations and quantitative accuracy measures against ground truth. We also report biomedical case studies where Cosbin is used to normalize gene expression and proteomics data from biologically diverse samples (Herrington et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2020). The Cosbin tool will allow biologists to more accurately detect true molecular signals among diverse phenotypic groups.

2 Methods

2.1 Eliminating asymmetric DEG and interim normalization

Because a few highly expressed genes can account for a large share of total expression, overall differential expression is asymmetric across conditions (e.g. grouped or diverse samples) when the number or magnitude of up/down-regulated expressions in each condition is unequal (Fig. 1a, Supplementary Fig. S1) (Evans et al., 2018). In the problem formulation, for simplicity, we focus our discussions on the basic yet challenging case of multiple grouped samples. However, our results hold for diverse individual samples.

Mathematically, an aDEG \( t_{aDEG} \) associated with group \( k \) is defined as a gene expressed significantly high in group \( k \) while universally low in any other groups (expressed in group \( k \) as exclusively as possible), approximately

\[
\begin{align*}
    x_k(t_{aDEG}, k) &> 0, \\
    x_{l}^k(t_{aDEG}, k) &\approx 0,
\end{align*}
\]

where, \( x_k(t_{aDEG}, k) \) and \( x_{l}^k(t_{aDEG}, k) \) are the averaged expressions of gene \( t_{aDEG} \) in groups \( k \) and \( l \), respectively (Fig. 1). Accordingly, the cross-group expression pattern of an aDEG can be represented consisely by the Cartesian unit vectors \( \hat{e}_k \), readily serving as the ground reference for scoring *de novo* aDEGs (Fig. 1b). Fundamental to the efficiency of Cosbin is the newly proposed score \( \cos(x(i), \hat{e}_k) \) that measures directly the similarity between the cross-group expression pattern \( x(i) = [x_1(i), x_2(i), \ldots, x_K(i)] \) of gene \( i \) and the reference aDEG expression patterns of constituent groups in scatter space, where \( K \) is the number of constituent groups. Specifically, for gene \( i \) and group \( k \), the aDEG score is given by

\[
t_{aDEG}(i) = \arg\max_{1 \leq k \leq K} \cos(x(i), \hat{e}_k) = \arg\max_{1 \leq k \leq K} \left. \frac{x_k(i)}{\sqrt{\sum_{l=1}^{K} x_l^2(i)}} \right|^{1/2},
\]

where the ‘max’ operation in (2) is applied to address significantly asymmetric differential expressions among multiple groups. Because

![Fig. 1. Cosbin concept and framework. (a) Toy illustration of asymmetric differential expression and resulting biased individual readouts: Genes 1 and 2 (green) are iCEGs, Gene 3 (orange) is aDEG, while common total readout count produces biased between-sample normalization where two iCEGs become differentially expressed and one aDEG becomes less differentially expressed. (b) Geometrical locations of significant aDEGs (red, corners), iCEGs (green, center) and general DEGs (blue, the rest), in the scatter simplex of data matrix. (c) Overall workflow of Cosbin algorithm with two major consecutive iterative loops.](image-url)
Impactful aDEGs with higher scores are sequentially identified and removed thereafter. Normalization is performed by equilibrating expression levels for the remaining genes, and Cosbin iterates to the next round of aDEG identification and inter interim normalization (Wang et al., 2002). Sequential elimination of impactful aDEGs should ease the asymmetry in differential expression across groups, reduce normalization bias and improve the efficiency of identifying the next aDEG. Iterations continue until aDEG identification or inter interim normalization converges at a stable point.

2.2 Identifying ideal CEGs and final normalization

We finalize normalization by identifying iCEGs and determining normalization factors across groups and individual samples. Mathematically, the cross-group expression pattern of an iCEG can be represented by the 'all-ones' vector \( \mathbf{1} \) (Evans et al., 2018), serving as the ground reference for scoring CEGs (Fig. 1b). Accordingly, the iCEG score is given by

\[
t_{iCEG}(i) = \cos \left( \mathbf{x}(i), \mathbf{1} \right) = \frac{\sum_{k=1}^{K} x_i(k)}{\sqrt{\sum_{k=1}^{K} |x_i(k)|^2}},
\]

where \( 1/\sqrt{K} < t_{iCEG}(i) < 1 \). Once iCEGs are identified, normalization is refined by equilibrating expression levels for iCEGs and the algorithm iterates to the next round of iCEG identification (Evans et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2002). The iterations between iCEG identification and re-normalization continue until iCEG identification or re-normalization converges at a stable point.

2.3 Cosbin workflow and software

The Cosbin workflow consists of six major analytic steps (Fig. 1c):

1. Initial normalization. An initial between-sample normalization is performed using total count (Evans et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2002).
2. Data cleaning. Genes whose norms \( |\mathbf{x}^T(i)| \) are lower or higher than pre-fixed thresholds are removed as noise or outliers.
3. aDEG score and removal. For each remaining gene, score \( \max_{1 \leq k \leq K} \cos (\mathbf{x}(i), \mathbf{e}_k) \) is calculated and the top ranked aDEG is iteratively eliminated.
4. Interim normalization. The rescaling factor per condition/sample is determined by the total count of non-aDEGs and used to normalize the remaining genes.
5. iCEG score and selection. For each remaining gene, score \( \cos \left( \mathbf{x}(i), \mathbf{1} \right) \) is calculated and the top iCEGs are selected.
6. Final normalization. The rescaling factor per sample is determined by the total count of iCEGs and used to normalize all individual genes. Within the loop comprising Steps 5 and 6, a sequence of increasing score thresholds may be applied to stabilize normalization.

We implemented the Cosbin workflow in R script and performed a community-trial software testing (Supplementary Information). The R script is open-source at GitHub and is distributed under the MIT license. The Cosbin software tool is easy to use and applicable to multi-omics data. Importantly, a group label on each sample is required in the input, and the output file contains the scores for individual genes belonging to either aDEGs or iCEGs.

2.4 Performance index

We emphasize that the Cosbin strategy aims to address normalization bias due to the impact of significant aDEGs. In simulation studies, we proposed four quantitative criteria to comparatively evaluate the performance of Cosbin and peer methods against the ground truth embedded in realistic simulations (Supplementary Information). To determine the location correctness of iCEGs against ground truth, we used the (i) average Cosine score in degree and (ii) average mean-squared-error of log-fold-change (LFC-MSE), which measure the dislocation of iCEGs from the ground truth after normalization by Cosbin and peer methods (Supplementary Fig. S8) (Evans et al., 2018). As these genes are iCEGs, if normalization is performed correctly then both the average Cosine score in degrees and LFC-MSE between samples of different conditions should be close to 0. For studying the impact of various normalization strategies on downstream differential analysis, we used (iii) the whole or partial receiver operating characteristics (ROC/pROC) curve and (iv) the area under ROC curve (AUC/pAUC) in order to assess the sensitivity and specificity of detecting general DEGs after normalization by Cosbin and peer methods (Evans et al., 2018; Jo et al., 2019). In our benchmarking studies, we proposed two quantitative criteria to evaluate the impact of different normalization methods on downstream marker gene (MG) detection among biologically diverse samples (Parker et al., 2020), namely (v) PI index and (vi) average deviation degree (ADD).

3 Results

We conducted three phased experiments to evaluate the performance of Cosbin and its R software tool. Specifically, we performed comparisons between Cosbin and six peer methods using realistic simulation data, assessment of the impact of Cosbin on detecting MGs among many groups using benchmark gene expression data, and a biomedical case study applying Cosbin to real proteomics data.

3.1 Comparative evaluation of Cosbin and peer methods using simulation data

We conducted extensive experiments to evaluate the performance of Cosbin and six peer methods using simulation data (Evans et al., 2018) (Supplementary Information). As is widely recognized, the evaluation of biased normalization due to aDEGs in real data is very difficult in practice (Zhao et al., 2020). Thus, the performance of methods addressing the impact of aDEGs must be quantitatively evaluated using simulation data embedded with ground truth (Sun et al., 2013). The six peer methods in our comparison consisted of three size-factor-based approaches (i) Total Count (Evans et al., 2018), (ii) Trimmed Mean of the M-values in edge R (TMM/edgeR) (Robinson and Oshlack 2010), (iii) Differential Expression analysis of RNA-Seq (DESeq2) (Love et al., 2014); one normalization-by-testing approach, (iv) Difference by Expressed Gene Elimination Strategy (DEGES) (Sun et al., 2013); and two global-adjustment or transformation approaches, (v) Cumulative-Sum Scaling (CSS) (Paulson et al., 2013) and (vi) smooth quantile normalization (qsmooth) (Hicks et al., 2018). DEGES is not a self-contained normalization method but an add-on preprocessing step to improve the TMM/edgeR method (Sun et al., 2013).

Simulation data were generated either from a mixture of Dirichlet and truncated normal distributions (mixture simulation) or by using the simulateReadCounts function in Tag Count Comparison (TCC) R package (TCC simulation) (Sun et al., 2013). Each simulated data matrix contained 1000 genes with 168 iCEGs (green, 16.8%) 232 general DEGs (blue, 23.2%) and 600 aDEGs (red/orange/pink, 60%), across 3 groups with 10 replicates per group. The iCEGs are determined by \( \cos \left( \mathbf{x}(i), \mathbf{1} \right) \geq 0.95 \), and the percentages of upregulated aDEGs were 10%, 30% and 60% for each of the three groups, respectively. The aDEGs are generated from a truncated normal distribution centered at \( \mathbf{e}_4 \) in the mixture simulation (Supplementary Fig. S2) and are generated with a pairwise fold-change of 10 in TCC simulation (Supplementary Fig. S5) (Sun et al., 2013).

The average deviation-in-degree of \( \cos \left( \mathbf{x}(i), \mathbf{1} \right) \) values were used to evaluate the accuracy of iCEG restoration and discriminative accuracy was evaluated using both ROC/pROC curves and AUC/pAUC values to assess ability to distinguish between general DEGs and iCEGs (e.g. blue versus green) after normalization by Cosbin and six alternative and previously published (peer) methods.
The experimental results are summarized in Table 1, Supplementary Table S1 and S2, Figure 2, and Supplementary Figure S4. In both mixture and TCC simulation studies, Cosbin consistently outperforms all six peer methods in terms of lower average dislocation of iCEGs (Table 1, Supplementary Tables S1 and S2) and higher AUC/pAUC of detecting DEGs (Table 1, Fig. 2h, Supplementary Fig. S2). Note that the relative performances of the six peer methods assessed in our experimental comparisons are consistent with previous reports in similar comparison studies (Evans et al., 2018; Johnson and Krishnan 2022; Sun et al., 2013). Notably, in terms of addressing the significant asymmetry in differential expression across multiple conditions, three popular size-factor-based methods (Total count, TMM/edgeR and DESeq2) perform relatively well, while two popular distribution-based methods (CSS and qsmooth) do not perform well. The poor performance of CSS is expected because CSS was designed specifically to normalize ‘sparse’ expression profiles (marker-gene survey data) (Paulson et al., 2013) (Supplementary Information). The experimental results are summarized mainly in Figure S4, and additionally in Figure 2 and Table 1 (# iCEGs = 168, the fixed number of simulated iCEGs). These results show that the performance of Cosbin remains robust even when using a small number of iCEGs, as was quantitatively measured by both the accuracy of iCEG restoration (average dislocation) and AUC values of DEG detection. To evaluate how the performance of global adjustment methods changes with different amounts of asymmetry in differential expression, we conducted simulation studies with varying level of aDEG imbalance. The experimental results on CSS and qsmooth are summarized in Supplementary Figures S11 and S12.

### Table 1. Average dislocation of iCEGs (no. of iCEGs = 168) in degree and AUC of detecting general DEGs (no. of DEGs = 232) after normalization by Cosbin and six peer methods, summarized from mixture simulation studies

| Methods      | Average dislocation of iCEGs in degree (mixture simulation) | AUC of detecting general DEGs (mixture simulation) |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Total count  | 18.29 \*                                                   | 0.75                                              |
| TMM/edgeR    | 17.46 \*                                                   | 0.81                                              |
| DESeq2       | 15.28 \*                                                   | 0.82                                              |
| DEGES/TCC    | 17.63 \*                                                   | 0.80                                              |
| CSS          | 28.81 \*                                                   | 0.65                                              |
| qsmooth      | 18.91 \*                                                   | 0.73                                              |
| Cosbin       | 1.42 \*                                                    | 0.99                                              |

Note: Note that the maximum possible iCEG dislocation in this case is about 55 \*.

3.2 Assessment of Cosbin impact on marker gene quality using benchmark dataset

We assessed the impact of between-sample normalization by Cosbin and two peer methods (Total Count and DEGES/TCC) on MG quality using a benchmark gene expression dataset (GSE28490 comprised of K = 5 groups). Total Count represents the baseline method and DEGES/TCC represents the most competitive peer method (Evans et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2020). The definition of MG and related discussion are given in Supplementary Information. The quality of MGs is evaluated quantitatively by:

\[
P_1 = \frac{1}{M(K-1)} \sum_{i=1}^{M} \sum_{j=1}^{K} \left( \frac{x_{ij}(MG)}{\max_{k} x_{ij}(MG)} - 1 \right) \tag{4}
\]

where, M is the number of MGs, and 0 \leq P_1 \leq 1. By the definition of MG (Parker et al., 2020), an ideal MG expression matrix corresponds to a row-permutation matrix with its minimum zero value simulation may not represent a typical case of biologically diverse samples, see Supplementary Figure S1 (more blue-DEGs in mixture simulation) versus Supplementary Figure S5 (fewer blue-DEGs in TCC simulation). However, TCC simulation may not represent a mature simulation tool for analyzing multiple conditions, as acknowledged previously by its authors (Sun et al., 2013). Additional experimental results and discussion are presented in Supplementary Information (Supplementary Figs S3, S6 and S7, Supplementary Tables S1 and S2).

We next assessed how the performance of Cosbin changes as the number of iCEGs changes, such as when the iCEG subset is very small in either total number or as a proportion. To this end, we have conducted additional experiments using different numbers (50, 100 and 150) and proportions (5%, 10% and 15%) of iCEGs identified and used for determining normalization factors in the Cosbin pipeline applied to our simulation studies. The experimental results are summarized in Figure S4, and additionally in Figure 2 and Table 1 (# iCEGs = 168, the fixed number of simulated iCEGs). These results show that the performance of Cosbin remains robust even when using a small number of iCEGs, as was quantitatively measured by both the accuracy of iCEG restoration (average dislocation) and AUC values of DEG detection. To evaluate how the performance of global adjustment methods changes with different amounts of asymmetry in differential expression, we conducted simulation studies with varying level of aDEG imbalance. The experimental results on CSS and qsmooth are summarized in Supplementary Figures S11 and S12.
attained using the \( P_1 \) index. The larger the \( P_1 \) value, the poorer the quality of MGs.

The top 144 MGs were detected after normalization by total count, TCC and Cosbin; the geometric proximity of these MGs to the vertices of the scatter simplex is shown in Figure 3a (color-coded). Results show that Cosbin outperforms the Total Count and DEGES/TCC in terms of higher MG quality. Notably, Cosbin achieves a lower \( P_1 \) \( \text{Cosbin} = 1.566 \times 10^{-2} \) when compared with \( P_1 \) \( \text{TCC} = 1.929 \times 10^{-2} \) and \( P_1 \) \( \text{total-count} = 1.925 \times 10^{-2} \). These improvements by Cosbin correspond to a relative reduction of 18.8% over TCC and 18.6% over total count in terms of \( P_1 \) index. We further calculated the ADD of the top 144 MGs in relation to the ideal reference, which is summarized in Supplementary Table S4. Again, Cosbin achieves a much lower \( \text{ADD}_{\text{Cosbin}} = 2.4210 \) when compared with \( \text{ADD}_{\text{TCC}} = 2.7330 \) and \( \text{ADD}_{\text{total-count}} = 2.6980 \). These improvements by Cosbin correspond to a relative reduction of 11.4% over TCC and 10.3% over total count in terms of the ADD.

This benchmarking study also indirectly shows consistent relative performances of these methods, as was also observed in the mixture simulation study, and that DEGES/TCC appears to be less effective for normalizing biologically diverse samples. Additional experimental results and discussion are presented in Supplementary Information (Supplementary Fig. S9, Supplementary Table S4).

### 3.3 Case study of Cosbin on subtype signature genes using vascular proteomics data

We further demonstrated the utility of Cosbin on normalizing experimentally acquired proteomics data from biologically diverse samples for the purpose of detecting subtype signature genes (SSGs). The dataset was obtained from a cohort of ‘pure’ fibrous plaque (FP), fatty streak (FS), and normal (NL) vascular specimens (Fig. 3b) (Parker et al., 2020). After normalization over 824 proteins by Cosbin, 31 SSGFP, 23 SSGFS and 18 SSGNL, are detected. The corresponding heatmap is shown in Figure 3c, the scatter simplex with color-coded SSG is given in Supplementary Figure S10, and the protein names are listed in Supplementary Table S3.

Closer interrogation of the functions associated with the 72 SSG linked to each subtype underscores the biological validity of this analysis. Excitingly, this analysis allowed us to find some very interesting hits in FS with a convincing link to Nuclear Factor of kappa B (NFkB), an established mediator of early atherogenesis. The 14 of 23 SSGFS could be associated with NFkB signaling, including regulators of NFkB activation such as MCAM, CAST, KTN1 and NDRG1; coactivators of NFkB transcriptional activity DHX9 and DDX1; and numerous known NFkB response genes UGDH, CPNE3, ACAN, TMOD1, GNB2, CYBRD1, SND1 and TUBB6. The NFkB pathway is implicated in early atherogenesis as a mediator of proinflammatory signaling due to the retention of oxidized lipid species. Of particular note, MCAM/CD146 is known to be a major NFkB coactivator and has been identified as a key molecule in the promotion and retention of foam cells, which are the definitive feature of the FS tissue samples. The FP stage of the disease has been well characterized by our group (Herrington et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2020), to be upregulated in expression of proteins associated with the acute phase (e.g. C7, A2M and SAA4), immune (e.g. immunoglobulin genes), and apolipoprotein accumulation (e.g. APOB, APOD, APOE, APOA1/2 and APOC3). The SSGNL have functions related to cell adhesion (LIMS1, ITGA7, SPARCL1, SPON1 and TLN2), muscle cell biology (KRT8, MYL9 and SLMAP) and cytoskeletal organization (PDLC1, SYNM, VASP and NEXN).

Overall, the SSGs identified here reflect the established biological distinctions between a quiescent contractile healthy normal artery, the early stages of inflammatory response observed in FSs and the late-stage inflammatory and immunogenic biology of later-stage
FPs. Furthermore, these data support prior contentions that early intervention at the level of FS accumulation by the use of NFκB modulating drugs may be a viable strategy for slowing atherosclerotic progression.

4 Discussion

The Cosbin R package provides an efficient and accurate tool for normalizing biologically diverse samples, specifically addressing the challenge of bias due to significant asymmetry in differential expression across multiple conditions (Evans et al., 2018; Johnson and Krishnan 2022). Our study demonstrated that the elimination of significantly aDEGs is essential for obtaining good normalized data across biologically diverse samples. The proposed cosine-based test scores \( \cos(i,l), \vec{e}_k \) or \( \cos(x(l), \hat{I} \) matched exactly the definition of significantly aDEGs or iCEGs. The experimental results show that Cosbin outperforms existing peer methods, particularly for addressing biased normalization due to significant asymmetry in differential expressions. While the case studies here involve only transcripts and proteins, the Cosbin method and software tool are readily applicable to other omics data types.

Biologically diverse samples may be defined by two subtly different factors: a large portion of symmetric differential expression or a large portion of asymmetry in differential expressions (Evans et al., 2018). Global adjustment methods have been developed specifically for use when there are many symmetrically and differentially expressed genes. We thus recommend that users apply the quantro tool in a first attempt prior to Cosbin in order to readily assess whether some existing global adjustment methods are applied to other omics data types.

In relation to previous work, our goal of eliminating significant DEGs from determining normalization factors has also been addressed in prior work (Sun et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2002). For example, pairwise fold change has been used to detect and eliminate DEGs, and an iterative total count on remaining genes is calculated to normalize samples between two groups (Wang et al., 2002). Similarly, in DEGES, conventional statistical testing is first applied to detect and eliminate DEGs; various size-factor-based methods are then used to perform normalization (Sun et al., 2013). The unique property of Cosbin is that two cosine scores are specifically designed and used, one to detect and eliminate aDEGs and another to detect iCEGs, across multiple conditions and the final sample-wise normalization factors are determined only by the total count of iCEGs. Furthermore, Cosbin is readily applicable to datasets containing missing values, with the assumption that a sufficient number of normalization factors are calculated by Cosbin using a complete data matrix and then used to normalize the full data matrix in both interim and final normalizations.

Potential limitations associated with the assumptions made by the current Cosbin design include that no excessive global shift in expression occurs (Evans et al., 2018), the distribution of remaining general DEGs is approximately ‘symmetric’, a sufficient number of iCEGs exist and technical effects impact iCEGs and general DEGs alike across all biologically diverse samples. As a follow-up step, batch effect adjustment may be performed when needed (Clarke et al., 2008). For normalizing samples across multiple conditions, a two-stage phased normalization strategy is recommended in which within-condition samples (biologically similar) are firstly normalized using Total Count and then between-condition samples (biologically diverse) are then normalized using Cosbin (Zhao et al., 2020). For evaluating normalization performance, while PCR data are often used as a ‘gold standard’ to determine ‘true’ differential expression, we note that the practice of treating PCR as the ‘ground truth’ may not always be justified; there has been concern over possible errors in PCR data (Evans et al., 2018).

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Conflict of Interest: none declared.

Data availability

Benchmark dataset used in this paper can be downloaded from Gene Expression Omnibus (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/) under the accession number: GSE28490.

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