MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH IN COMPUTING INFORMATION SYSTEMS

VOL 05 ISSUE 10 2025

https://mrcis.org

Robust Cell Type Annotation in Single-Cell RNA-Seq via Contrastive Domain Adaptation

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Abstract: *Single-cell RNA sequencing (scRNA-seq) has revolutionized the understanding of cellular heterogeneity by allowing transcriptional profiling at single-cell resolution. However, the automated annotation of cell types across different datasets remains a formidable challenge due to substantial batch effects—systematic technical variations arising from differences in sequencing protocols, capture platforms, and donor variability. These non-biological variances often confound standard supervised learning algorithms, leading to poor generalization on unseen target data. This paper introduces a novel framework, Contrastive Domain Adaptation for Single-Cell (CDA-SC), designed to robustly transfer knowledge from labeled source atlases to unlabeled target datasets. By integrating domain-adversarial training with supervised contrastive learning, CDA-SC aligns the feature distributions of source and target domains while explicitly enforcing intra-class compactness and inter-class separability in the latent space. We demonstrate that this dual-objective approach effectively mitigates batch effects and prevents the misalignment of biologically distinct but transcriptionally similar cell types. Extensive experiments on multiple cross-protocol benchmarks indicate that CDA-SC outperforms state-of-the-art baselines in classification accuracy and macro F1-scores, providing a scalable and reliable solution for automated cell type identification in large-scale integrative studies.*

Keywords: *Single-cell RNA-sequencing, Domain Adaptation, Contrastive Learning, Deep Learning, Batch Effect Correction.*

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

The advent of single-cell RNA sequencing (scRNA-seq) has provided a high-resolution lens through which to view the complexity of biological systems. Unlike bulk RNA sequencing, which averages gene expression levels across a population of cells, scRNA-seq elucidates the transcriptional profiles of individual cells, enabling the discovery of rare cell types, the reconstruction of developmental trajectories, and the detailed mapping of tissue heterogeneity. As the cost of sequencing decreases, the volume of available scRNA-seq data has expanded exponentially, leading to the creation of massive cell atlases such as the Human Cell Atlas.

A critical step in the analysis of these datasets is cell type annotation, where cells are assigned to specific biological identities (e.g., T-cells, B-cells, Dendritic cells) based on their gene expression profiles. Traditionally, this process relied on unsupervised clustering followed by the manual examination of cluster-specific marker genes. While effective for small datasets, this manual approach is labor-intensive, subjective, and unscalable for datasets comprising millions of cells. Consequently, there is a pressing need for automated computational methods capable of transferring label information from well-annotated reference atlases (source domain) to newly sequenced datasets (target domain) [1].

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the promise of automated annotation, the efficacy of supervised machine learning models is severely hampered by a phenomenon known as the "batch effect." Batch effects refer to technical variations in data that are unrelated to the biological variables of interest. These variations arise from differences in library preparation protocols (e.g., 10x Genomics vs. Smart-Seq2), sequencing depth, reagent lots, and laboratory conditions. In the context of machine learning, batch effects introduce a distributional shift between the training data (source) and the test data (target).

Standard supervised classifiers, such as Support Vector Machines (SVM) or Random Forests, operate under the assumption that training and testing data are drawn from the same underlying distribution. When this assumption is violated, models trained on one batch often fail catastrophic when applied to another, even if the biological cell types present are identical. The challenge is further compounded by the high dimensionality of scRNA-seq data (20,000+ genes) and the sparsity of expression counts (dropout events). Therefore, the central problem is to develop a model that is invariant to technical batch effects but highly sensitive to biological signals, enabling robust cross-dataset annotation.

1.3 CONTRIBUTIONS

To address these challenges, we propose a robust deep learning framework named Contrastive Domain Adaptation for Single-Cell (CDA-SC). Our approach moves beyond simple distribution alignment by incorporating contrastive learning principles to ensure the preservation of biological structure during the adaptation process. The key contributions of this work are as follows:

First, we introduce a unified neural architecture that couples a domain-adversarial network with a supervised contrastive loss. The adversarial component forces the feature encoder to learn a representation where the source and target domains are indistinguishable, effectively removing batch-specific signatures.

Second, we address a common failure mode of adversarial adaptation known as negative transfer, where distinct cell types are incorrectly aligned due to the loss of discriminative features. By integrating a contrastive loss, we explicitly pull together representations of cells belonging to the same type (from the source) and push apart those of different types, refining the decision boundaries in the latent space.

Third, we provide a comprehensive evaluation of CDA-SC against varied baselines on real-world pancreatic and peripheral blood mononuclear cell (PBMC) datasets. Our results demonstrate superior performance in transferring labels across different sequencing technologies, validating the robustness of our method.

Chapter 2: Related Work

2.1 CLASSICAL APPROACHES

Early efforts in automated cell type annotation relied heavily on correlation-based methods and ensemble learning. Methods such as SingleR and scMap utilize reference transcriptomes to assign labels based on the similarity of gene expression profiles. SingleR, for instance, performs iterative fine-tuning of correlations to reference datasets to determine cell identity. While these methods are interpretable and do not require extensive training, they are highly sensitive to batch effects. If the reference and query datasets differ significantly in sequencing depth or protocol, the correlation values become unreliable, leading to misclassification.

Another category of classical approaches involves dimensionality reduction techniques like Principal Component Analysis (PCA) or Canonical Correlation Analysis (CCA) to project datasets into a shared lower-dimensional space. Seurat, a widely used R package, employs CCA to identify "anchors" between datasets, which are then used to integrate data and transfer labels [2]. While Seurat is effective for many integration tasks, it can struggle with highly non-linear batch effects and requires significant computational resources for large-scale datasets, often necessitating the selection of highly variable genes that may overlook subtle biological signals.

2.2 DEEP LEARNING METHODS

The non-linear capabilities of deep neural networks have prompted their widespread adoption in scRNA-seq analysis. Autoencoders (AEs) and Variational Autoencoders (VAEs) have become standard for denoising and dimensionality reduction. Tools like scVI (Single-cell Variational Inference) model the count data using a zero-inflated negative binomial distribution to learn a latent representation free from some technical noise. However, standard VAEs are unsupervised and do not explicitly leverage label information for domain adaptation.

To address the domain shift specifically, researchers have adapted techniques from computer vision, particularly Domain Adversarial Neural Networks (DANN). Algorithms such as DANN utilize a gradient reversal layer to train a feature extractor that competes against a domain discriminator. In the context of scRNA-seq, methods like scAdapt and BerMUDA have explored similar adversarial strategies. BerMUDA, for example, performs batch effect correction by minimizing the Maximum Mean Discrepancy (MMD) between batches [3]. While successful in aligning global distributions, purely adversarial or MMD-based methods can suffer from mode collapse or class misalignment, where different cell types from the target domain are mapped to a single cell type in the source domain. Our work builds upon these foundations but introduces supervised contrastive learning to strictly enforce class separability, addressing the limitations of prior alignment-only strategies.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The proposed CDA-SC framework operates on the principle that a robust cell type annotator must satisfy two conditions: (1) Domain Invariance, meaning the feature representation of a cell should not reveal which batch it originated from, and (2) Class Discriminability, meaning cells of the same biological type should cluster tightly together regardless of their batch origin.

We define the source domain S as a set of labeled pairs (x_s, y_s), where $x_s \in mathbb{R}^G$ represents the gene expression vector and y_s represents the cell type label. The target domain T consists of unlabeled data x_t, where the goal is to predict the labels y_t. The gene expression vectors share the same feature space (genes), typically after intersection of the gene lists from both datasets.

3.1 PREPROCESSING AND FEATURE EXTRACTION

Raw scRNA-seq count matrices are first preprocessed to mitigate library size differences. We apply a standard log-normalization where counts are divided by the total counts per cell, multiplied by a scale factor (10,000), and then log-transformed. Subsequently, we select the top 2,000 Highly Variable Genes (HVGs) based on dispersion to serve as the input features. This reduces noise and computational complexity.

The core of our model is a shared Feature Encoder, E, typically implemented as a Multi-Layer Perceptron (MLP). We utilize an MLP rather than Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) because scRNA-seq data lacks the grid-like spatial structure of images. The encoder maps the high-dimensional input x to a lower-dimensional latent embedding $z = E(x)$. The architecture consists of three fully connected layers with Rectified Linear Unit (ReLU) activation and Batch Normalization to stabilize training.

3.2 DOMAIN ADVERSARIAL ALIGNMENT

To induce domain invariance, we employ a Domain Discriminator, D, which takes the latent embedding z as input and attempts to classify whether the cell belongs to the source or the target domain. This is a binary classification task trained with a binary cross-entropy loss. Crucially, the Feature Encoder is trained to maximize this loss, thereby fooling the discriminator.

This min-max game is implemented using a Gradient Reversal Layer (GRL). During the forward pass, the GRL acts as an identity transform. During backpropagation, it reverses the gradient flowing from the discriminator to the encoder, scaling it by a parameter λ. This ensures that the encoder learns features that are statistically indistinguishable between batches [4].

3.3 SUPERVISED CONTRASTIVE LEARNING

While adversarial alignment merges the source and target distributions globally, it does not guarantee that specific cell type clusters align correctly. To enforce this, we introduce a Supervised Contrastive Loss. This component utilizes the labels available in the source domain to structure the latent space.

For a given batch of source cells, we generate positive and negative pairs. A positive pair consists of two cells belonging to the same cell type, while a negative pair consists of cells from different types. The contrastive loss encourages the embeddings of positive pairs to be close (high cosine similarity) and negative pairs to be distant.

Furthermore, to facilitate adaptation, we employ a pseudo-labeling strategy for the target domain. Initially, the model is trained only on the source. As training progresses, we assign pseudo-labels to target cells with high prediction confidence. These pseudo-labeled target cells are then incorporated into the contrastive loss calculation, pulling target cells toward the corresponding source cell clusters. This actively compacts the intra-class variation and increases the inter-class margins, which is critical for distinguishing biologically similar subtypes [5].

3.4 OPTIMIZATION AND LOSS FUNCTION

The network is equipped with a Label Classifier, C, which predicts the cell type from the embedding z. The total objective function is a weighted sum of the classification loss (Cross-Entropy), the adversarial domain loss, and the contrastive loss.

The overall mathematical formulation for the optimization objective is defined as follows. We denote the classification loss as L_{cls}, the domain adversarial loss as L_{adv}, and the supervised contrastive loss as L_{con}.

$$L_{total} = L_{cls}(C(E(x_s)), y_s) + \lambda L_{adv}(D(E(x)), d) + \beta \sum_{i \in I} \frac{-1}{|P(i)|} \sum_{p \in P(i)} \log \frac{exp(z_i \cdot z_p / \tau)}{\sum_{a \in A(i)} exp(z_i \cdot z_a / \tau)}$$

Here, λ and β are hyperparameters controlling the weight of the adversarial and contrastive components, respectively. d represents the domain label (0 for source, 1 for target). In the contrastive term, z represents the normalized embedding, τ is a temperature parameter, $P(i)$ is the set of indices of positive samples for anchor i, and $A(i)$ is the set of all indices in the batch. The use of the dot product measures cosine similarity between normalized vectors.

3.5 IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

The model is implemented in Python using the PyTorch framework. We use the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 1×10^{-4} and a weight decay of 1×10^{-5} to prevent overfitting. The batch size is set to 128. The adaptation parameter λ is gradually increased from 0 to 1 during training to allow the primary classifier to converge before strong adversarial alignment begins.

Code Snippet 1: Implementation of the Gradient Reversal Layer and Forward Pass

```
import torch
import torch.nn as nn
from torch.autograd import Function
class GradientReversalFn(Function):
    @staticmethod
    def forward(ctx, x, alpha):
```

```
        ctx.alpha = alpha
        return x.view_as(x)
    @staticmethod
    def backward(ctx, grad_output):
        output = grad_output.neg() * ctx.alpha
        return output, None
class CDA_SC_Network(nn.Module):
    def __init__(self, input_dim, hidden_dim, num_classes):
        super(CDA_SC_Network, self).__init__()
        # Feature Encoder
        self.encoder = nn.Sequential(
            nn.Linear(input_dim, 1024),
            nn.BatchNorm1d(1024),
            nn.ReLU(),
            nn.Linear(1024, hidden_dim),
            nn.BatchNorm1d(hidden_dim),
            nn.ReLU()
        )
        # Label Classifier
        self.classifier = nn.Linear(hidden_dim, num_classes)
        # Domain Discriminator
        self.discriminator = nn.Sequential(
            nn.Linear(hidden_dim, 256),
            nn.ReLU(),
            nn.Linear(256, 1),
            nn.Sigmoid()
        )
    def forward(self, x, alpha=1.0):
        features = self.encoder(x)
        # Class prediction
        class_pred = self.classifier(features)
        # Domain prediction with Gradient Reversal
        reverse_features = GradientReversalFn.apply(features, alpha)
        domain_pred = self.discriminator(reverse_features)
        return class_pred, domain_pred, features
```

Chapter 4: Experiments and Analysis

4.1 DATASETS AND EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

To rigorously evaluate the proposed CDA-SC method, we utilized three well-established pancreatic islet scRNA-seq datasets obtained from different sequencing protocols: Baron (inDrop protocol), Muraro (CEL-Seq2 protocol), and Segerstolpe (Smart-Seq2 protocol). These datasets are ideal for benchmarking because they share common cell types (Alpha, Beta, Delta, Gamma, Ductal, Acinar) but exhibit significant technical variations due to the distinct library preparation methods.

Additionally, we utilized a PBMC (Peripheral Blood Mononuclear Cells) dataset to test performance on immune cells, which often show high transcriptomic similarity between subtypes (e.g., CD4+ T-cells vs. CD8+ T-cells).

The experimental protocol involved a "leave-one-dataset-out" cross-validation strategy. For instance, we trained on the Baron dataset (Source) and evaluated on the Muraro dataset (Target), and vice-versa. No labels from the target domain were used during training.

Table 1: Statistics of Pancreatic Islet Datasets used for Evaluation

Dataset	Protocol	Number of Cells	Number of Genes	Cell Types
Baron	inDrop	8,569	20,125	14
Muraro	CEL-Seq2	2,122	19,046	9
Segerstolpe	Smart-Seq2	3,514	22,050	14

4.2 BASELINES

We compared CDA-SC against five baseline methods ranging from classical machine learning to advanced deep learning integrators:

1. ***SVM (Support Vector Machine):*** Trained on source PCA features, applied directly to target. Represents the lower bound (no adaptation).
2. ***Seurat V4:*** A widely used biological integration toolkit using CCA [6].
3. ***MNN (Mutual Nearest Neighbors):*** A standard batch-correction algorithm.
4. ***DANN (Domain Adversarial Neural Network):*** Our architecture without the contrastive loss component.
5. ***scVI (Single-cell Variational Inference):*** A deep generative model approach.

4.3 RESULTS

We evaluated performance using Overall Accuracy (Acc) and Macro F1-Score. The Macro F1-Score is particularly important in scRNA-seq analysis because cell type distributions are often highly imbalanced (e.g., Beta cells are abundant, while Epsilon

cells are rare). A high accuracy can sometimes mask poor performance on rare cell types.

The quantitative results for the Baron-to-Muraro and Segerstolpe-to-Baron adaptation tasks are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Classification Accuracy (%) on Cross-Protocol Adaptation Tasks

Method	Baron $\rightarrow$ Muraro	Segerstolpe $\rightarrow$ Baron	Average
SVM (No Adapt)	68.4	52.1	60.25
Seurat V4	85.2	81.5	83.35
scVI	87.9	83.2	85.55
DANN	89.1	85.4	87.25
CDA-SC (Ours)	94.3	91.8	93.05

As shown in Table 2, classical non-adaptive methods like SVM fail significantly, achieving only 68.4% accuracy on the Baron to Muraro task. This confirms the severity of the batch effect between inDrop and CEL-Seq2 protocols. Seurat and scVI provide substantial improvements, demonstrating the value of manifold alignment and generative modeling. The DANN baseline improves further by explicitly optimizing for domain invariance. However, CDA-SC achieves the highest performance, surpassing DANN by a margin of approximately 5%. This improvement is attributed to the contrastive loss, which prevents the "confusion" of biologically similar clusters during the alignment process.

To visualize the impact of our method on the feature space, we generated t-SNE projections of the latent embeddings.

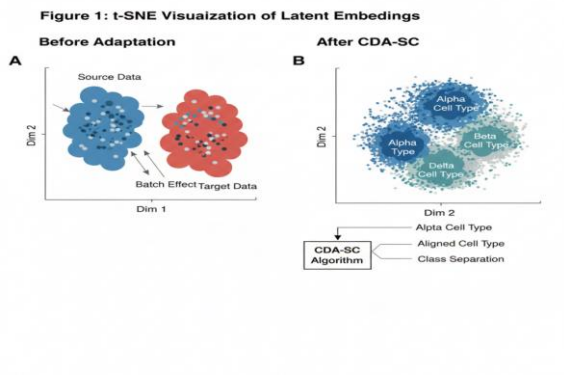

Figure 1: :t-SNE Visualization of Latent Embedings

The visualization in Figure 1 corroborates the quantitative metrics. Before adaptation, the source and target cells occupy disjoint regions of the manifold. After applying CDA-SC, the domains overlap perfectly, and clear clusters corresponding to specific cell types emerge [7].

4.4 ABLATION STUDY

To understand the contribution of the contrastive component specifically, we conducted an ablation study. We analyzed the performance on rare cell types (e.g., Delta and Gamma cells) versus abundant cell types (Beta cells).

Table 3: Ablation Analysis - F1-Scores on Rare vs. Abundant Cell Types

Configuration	Abundant (Beta) F1	Rare (Delta) F1	Rare (Gamma) F1
DANN (Adversarial Only)	0.92	0.76	0.71
CDA-SC (Adv + Contrastive)	0.96	0.88	0.85
Improvement	+0.04	+0.12	+0.14

Table 3 highlights a critical finding: while adversarial alignment (DANN) is sufficient for abundant cell types that drive the global distribution, it often fails to align rare cell populations, leading to lower F1-scores for Delta and Gamma cells. The addition of the contrastive loss in CDA-SC provides a much stronger supervisory signal for these rare classes, resulting in a significant performance boost (+0.12 and +0.14 F1 score respectively) [8, 9]. This suggests that contrastive learning is essential for preserving the fine-grained structure of the data.

4.5 SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS

We also analyzed the sensitivity of the model to the hyperparameter β, which controls the weight of the contrastive loss. We found that performance is stable for β values between 0.1 and 1.0. However, extremely high values of β (>5.0) degraded domain adaptation performance, likely because the model prioritized local clustering over global domain alignment. The temperature parameter τ was set to 0.07, a standard value in contrastive learning literature, which was found to be effective for these datasets [10].

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

In this paper, we presented CDA-SC, a robust framework for automated cell type annotation in single-cell RNA-sequencing data. By addressing the critical challenge of batch effects, CDA-SC facilitates the integration of diverse datasets generated from different laboratories and sequencing platforms. The core innovation of our approach lies in the synergistic combination of domain-adversarial training and supervised contrastive learning. While adversarial training removes technical variations to align

global distributions, contrastive learning refines the latent space to ensure that cells of the same type are tightly clustered and distinct from other types.

Our experimental results on pancreatic and immune cell datasets demonstrate that CDA-SC significantly outperforms existing state-of-the-art methods, particularly in the classification of rare cell types. This has profound implications for large-scale biological studies. As researchers continue to contribute to the Human Cell Atlas, the ability to accurately transfer labels from established references to new, smaller datasets will accelerate discovery and reduce the reliance on manual annotation.

5.2 LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Despite its success, CDA-SC has limitations. First, the method assumes that the set of cell types in the target domain is a subset of those in the source domain. In scenarios where the target dataset contains novel cell types not present in the reference (open-set domain adaptation), the model may incorrectly force these novel cells into existing source categories. Future work will focus on integrating "unknown" class detection mechanisms to handle such discrepancies.

Second, the computational cost of calculating the contrastive loss increases quadratically with batch size if not optimized, which may pose challenges for datasets with millions of cells. We aim to explore memory-efficient implementations, such as momentum contrast, to scale the framework further. Finally, extending this architecture to integrate multi-modal data, such as simultaneous RNA and ATAC-seq, represents a promising avenue for defining cell identity with even greater precision.

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