

Dysregulation of DNA methylation patterns may identify patients with breast cancer resistant to endocrine therapy: A predictive classifier based on differentially methylated regions

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Abstract. Endocrine therapy (ET) is one of a number of targeted therapies for estrogen receptor-positive breast cancer (BRCA); however, resistance to ET has become the primary issue affecting treatment outcome. In the present study, a predictive classifier was created using a DNA methylation dataset to identify patients susceptible to endocrine resistance. DNA methylation and RNA sequencing data, and the clinicopathological features of BRCA, were obtained from The Cancer Genome Atlas. Stringent criteria were set to select and classify patients into two groups, namely those resistant to ET (n=11) and sensitive to ET (n=21) groups. Bump hunting analysis revealed that 502 out of 135,418 genomic regions were differentially methylated between these two groups; these regions were differentially methylated regions (DMRs). The majority of the CpG sites contained in the DMRs mapped to the promoter region. Functional enrichment analyses indicated that a total of 562 specific genes encompassing these DMRs were primarily associated with 'biological progress of organ morphogenesis and development' and 'cell-cell adhesion' gene ontologies. Logistic regression and Pearson's correlation analysis were conducted to construct a predictive classifier for distinguishing patients resistant or sensitive to ET. The highest areas under the curve and relatively low Akaike information criterion values were associated with a total of 60 DMRs; a risk score retained from this classifier was revealed to be an unfavorable predictor of survival in two additional independent datasets. Furthermore, the majority of genes (55/63) exhibited a statistically significant association between DNA methylation and mRNA expression ($P < 0.05$). The association

between the mRNA expression of a number of genes (namely calcium release activated channel regulator 2A, Schlafen family member 12, chromosome 3 open reading frame 18, zinc finger protein 880, dual oxidase 1, major histocompatibility complex, class II, DP β 1, C-terminal binding protein 1, ALG13 UDP-N-acetylglucosaminyltransferase subunit and RAS protein activator like 2) and the prognosis of patients with estrogen receptor-positive BRCA and ET resistance was determined using Kaplan-Meier Plotter. In summary, the predictive classifier proposed in the present study may aid the identification of patients sensitive or resistant to ET, and numerous genes maybe potential therapeutic targets to delay the development of resistance to ET.

Introduction

Breast cancer (BRCA) is the most common type of cancer in women globally (1) and is characterized by notable heterogeneity (2). The expression levels of estrogen and progesterone receptors (ER/PR) and human epidermal growth factor receptor (HER2) have been investigated to further classify BRCA into numerous subtypes: Luminal (ER⁺/PR⁺), HER2-positive (ER⁻/PR⁻/HER2⁺), basal-like or triple negative (ER⁻/PR⁻/HER2⁻), claudin-low and normal-like BRCA (3). Based on these guidelines (4), ~70% of patients with BRCA may be classified as the luminal subtype (5). Endocrine therapy (ET), one of the crucial adjuvant treatments for luminal BRCA, suppresses tumor growth by targeting the ER signaling pathways. Unfortunately, >30% of ER-positive tumor types are intrinsically endocrine-resistant at diagnosis; ~40% of breast tumor types that initially respond to ET eventually acquire resistance (6). Additionally, the clinical characteristics of BRCA may be notably heterogeneous even when similar expression levels of ER are observed (7).

ET resistance in ER-positive tumor cells may be ascribed to a variety of factors, including the post-transcriptional modifications of ERs (8,9) or activation of the ER-independent growth factor signaling pathways (10); however, these results have not been further investigated for the effective clinical treatment of BRCA (11,12). Upon metastasis, surgical intervention and present second-line therapeutic strategies have

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limited effectiveness. Thus, precisely predicting the prognosis of patients with BRCA and ET resistance is vital for generating the most appropriate individualized treatment.

As ER status alone is inadequate for identifying patients responsive to ET, multi-gene signatures from gene transcripts have been obtained via analyses with Oncotype DX (13) and MammaPrint tests (14). The expression profiles of these biomarkers may substantially aid the prediction of therapeutic outcomes and the selection of adjuvant therapy (3); however, transcriptional expression may be regulated by a variety of factors and appears to be unstable. Additionally, gene transcripts may not reflect marked changes in regulatory mechanisms, including epigenetic alterations, which may result in disease susceptibility. This represents a limitation of current molecular diagnostic tools based on gene expression assays (15).

DNA methylation is a chemical modification of DNA that does not result in alterations in its sequence and may be inherited during cell division. It is well established that notable alterations to the genome-wide DNA methylation landscape may occur in the early stages of cancer initiation and during cancer progression, and throughout the acquisition of drug resistance (16,17). The hypermethylation of tumor suppressor genes or the hypomethylation of oncogenes may be associated with the development of BRCA (18,19). DNA methylation is an enzymatic process and may be reversed by epigenetic inhibitors (17). Compared with genetic transcription (mRNA), DNA is inherently stable and may be obtained from numerous sources, including tissue, plasma, saliva and urine (20). Therefore, the DNA methylation profile is promising for identifying patients susceptible to ET. In addition, specific epigenotypes have been identified for the characterization and molecular subtyping of BRCA (21-23); however, few studies focusing on the DNA methylome associated with endocrine-resistant BRCA have been conducted. Furthermore, previous studies have revealed that remodeling of the epigenome is associated with the endocrine-resistant cell phenotype (24,25). Thus, DNA methylation signatures may serve as predictive biomarkers to identify ET-responsive patients with BRCA.

DNA methylation levels may be simultaneously determined via microarray analyses of numerous CpGs. An increasing number of genome-wide DNA methylation profiles of various types of cancer are available from public databases (26). Previous studies have revealed the importance of methylation in genomic regions compared with that at a single CpG island (27,28). A genome-wide bump hunting approach, introduced by Jaffe *et al* (29), was originally designed to identify differentially methylated regions (DMRs) detected on numerous microarray platforms, including the Infinium HumanMethylation450 BeadArray (HM450 array). This approach was demonstrated to effectively model expression profiles without measurement errors, remove batch effects and detect regions of interest. The present study aimed to identify a novel predictive classifier of BRCA by applying the bump hunting method and logistic regression to The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) BRCA datasets on the basis of the DNA methylation profile of BRCA. The results of the present study may aid the identification of patients susceptible to endocrine resistance.

Materials and methods

Data downloading and processing. The DNA methylation profiles associated with BRCA were determined using an HM450 array; the corresponding RNA sequencing data (IlluminaHiSeq_RNASeqV2 arrays; measured using RSEM software; version 1.2.31) (30) and detailed clinicopathological features, including ET information, were downloaded from TCGA (accessed: January 2016; known as the Genomic Data Common Data Portal; <https://portal.gdc.cancer.gov/>); there were a total of 885 and 1,213 tumor/adjacent tissues with DNA methylation and RNA sequencing data, respectively. Among them, 787 tumor/adjacent tissues possessed both DNA methylation and RNA sequencing data. These samples were used to examine the association between DNA methylation and mRNA expression for the DMRs included in the predictive classifier. Additionally, two DNA methylation datasets based on HM450 array analysis, namely GSE75067 (31) and GSE72251 (32) from the Gene Expression Omnibus database (33) (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/>), were used as independent datasets to assess the predictive potential of DNA methylation as a classifier of endocrine resistance.

Patient enrollment. In order to investigate the DNA methylation patterns associated with sensitivity to ET, inclusion criteria for patient enrollment were set. In the present study, all patients were: i) Diagnosed with BRCA; ii) female and ≤ 75 -year-old; iii) positive for tumor types of tumor, node and metastasis (TNM) stage < 4 (34,35) and ER α expression; and iv) treated with ET. Consequently, of the 1,097 patients with BRCA, 404 patients were selected. Of these patients, those with disease free survival (DFS) ≤ 30 months were regarded to resist ET and were defined as the resistant to ET (RTE) group. Those with DFS > 100 months were classified as the sensitive to ET (STE) group; patients without DNA methylation data were excluded. Furthermore, there were 11 and 21 patients in the RTE and STE groups, respectively; the data of these patients were included for the predictive classifier building. Either a Fisher's exact test or a Student's t-test were conducted to determine differences of clinicopathological features between these two groups.

Model construction and selection. The level 3 DNA methylation β -value of BRCA from TCGA was defined as the percentage of DNA methylation in the tissue samples at each CpG probe; the methylation ranged from 0.0 (unmethylated) to 1.0 (fully methylated). In the present study, the M-value [$\text{logit}(\beta)$] was used instead of the β -value to calculate the test statistics; however, for ease of interpretation, the β -value was employed to report differences in methylation levels between the groups. The association between M- and β -values were determined as follows: $M\text{-value} = \text{Log}_2[\beta\text{-value}/(1-\beta\text{-value})]$.

For the identification of DMRs, CpG sites that did not target specific genes and sites without data in any patients were excluded. Additionally, differential expression analysis was conducted to reveal the DMRs between the RTE and SET groups with the R-package 'bumphunter' (version 1.10.0) (29). This package was used to determine regions of methylation that deviated from the baseline values. DMRs were defined as genomic regions of differential methylation between

two populations with a P-value <0.001 and covering ≥ 3 CpG sites. The diagnostic potential of these DMRs was further investigated by producing receiver operating characteristic curves (ROCs) and calculating the area under the curve (AUC). The median β -value across the CpG sites in each DMR (m_s) was calculated and the difference of m_s between the two groups (d) was determined. Finally, DMRs with an AUC ≥ 0.6 and $|d| > 0.2$ were included to build the predictive classifier, and were ranked in an ascending order of P-values obtained from the bump hunter analysis.

In the first step of the classifier building, 3 DMRs per analysis were added into the predictive classifier. The mean m_s of each DMR across all patients in the STE group, representing relatively normal DNA methylation, was calculated as m_R . In the second step, a Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated between the m_R and m_s of each patient, labeled as the r_p value (-1 to 1). A positive r_p value represented the expression profile, indicating an association with patients in the STE group; otherwise, the expression profile of patients was considered to be less associated with the STE group. In step three, the effect of r_p values on the prediction of patients with ER-positive BRCA resistant to ET was evaluated via the logistic regression analysis; the predictive classifier was then generated. Simultaneously, ROCs in addition to the AUC were used to assess the diagnostic potential of the predictive classifier. A 95% confidence interval (CI) of the AUC was calculated according to the order of the observed AUC values among 1,000 permutations. Finally, for the model selection, the Akaike information criterion (AIC) was used to determine the goodness of fit and the simplicity of the classifier. As aforementioned, 3 DMRs were included each time and the process (steps 1-3) was repeated until all 80 DMRs were included. A risk score (RS) was then able to be calculated based on the final classifier.

Model validation. As public datasets with both DNA methylation (determined via an HM450 array) and treatment information were unavailable, patients with ER-positive BRCA without explicit information regarding ET were used. The independent datasets, GSE75067 and GSE72251, which determined DNA methylation in 87 and 70 patients with ER-positive BRCA, respectively, were used as external validations of the predictive classifier. An RS was assigned to each patient; Kaplan-Meier (KM) survival analysis was then performed to investigate the association between RS and cumulative rates of overall survival (OS) and invasive disease-free survival (IDFS). As for GSE75067, univariate and multivariate analyses using Cox regressions were also performed to screen out the independent factors affecting OS.

Identification of the function of genes included in DMRs. Functional enrichment analysis was performed using the R-package 'clusterProfiler' (version 3.6.0) (36) to investigate the well-known database, Gene Ontology (GO; <http://geneontology.org/>) (37,38). The specific genes, which were mapped by DMR analysis, were annotated with GO 'biological process' (BP), 'molecular function' (MF) and 'cellular component' (CC) terms. GO terms of $P < 0.01$ and $P_a < 0.05$ obtained via the Benjamini and Hochberg method (39) were considered to be statistically enriched.

Correlation between DNA methylation and mRNA transcripts. Pearson's correlation coefficients were further calculated to reveal the correlation between DNA methylation and mRNA expression. Since the sample sizes of the groups were limited, the data of 787 tumor/adjacent tissues in the TCGA dataset were employed for the correlation analysis. Since one DMR could contain several CpG sites mapped to one specific gene, several Pearson's correlation analyses were conducted separately to examine the associations between these CpG sites and the mRNA level of the gene. The CpG site in a specific DMR with the lowest P-value was demonstrated to exhibit the strongest correlation with the mRNA expression, and presented.

Effects of numerous specific genes on relapse-free survival (RFS). KM Plotter (<http://kmplot.com/analysis/>) (40,41), a tool containing the gene expression and survival data of $>4,000$ patients with BRCA, was used to perform KM survival analyses to further assess the association between mRNA expression and RFS. Patients with ER-positive BRCA and ET were selected, and divided into the high and low expression groups based on the median expression levels of each specific gene. Subsequently, survival curves were created and log-rank tests were conducted.

Results

Identification of DMRs associated with the response to ET in patients with ER-positive BRCA. As presented in Fig. 1A, patients with BRCA meeting the inclusion criteria were divided into two groups according to their DFS, namely the RTE and STE groups. Detailed clinicopathological and treatment information of these 32 patients were presented in Table I. Of them, five patients had received tamoxifen, while 14 patients had been treated with aromatase inhibitors (anastrozole, letrozole and aromasin). The remaining patients were treated with one type of these drugs for a period of time, and subsequently treated with another type. A Fisher's exact test and a Student's t-test were conducted to determine differences between these two groups. No statistically significant differences in TNM stage and receptors status were observed between the two groups. In the RTE group, the tumor types of eight patients (8/11, 72.7%) were TNM stage II and three (3/11, 27.3%) were TNM stage III; however, in the STE group, five (5/21, 23.8%), 12 (12/21, 57.1%) and four (4/21, 19.0%) tumor types were classified as TNM I, II and III stages ($P=0.205$), respectively. As for receptor status, nine tumor types (9/11, 81.8%) from the RTE group and 16 (16/21, 76.2%) tumor types from the STE group were PR-positive ($P=1.000$). In addition, only two tumor types (2/11, 18.2%) from the RTE group and two tumor types (2/21, 9.5%) from the STE group expressed HER-2 ($P=0.738$). The mean age of the patients in the RTE groups was slightly higher compared with that of the patients in the STE group; no statistical significance was observed ($P=0.235$). Based on the aforementioned results, the clinicopathological data of these two groups were comparable.

Aberrant methylation profiles of DMRs were identified between the RTE and STE groups (Fig. 1B). Genomic locations were grouped into clusters (regions) based on a maximum distance of 500 base pairs (bp); of the 135,418 genomic

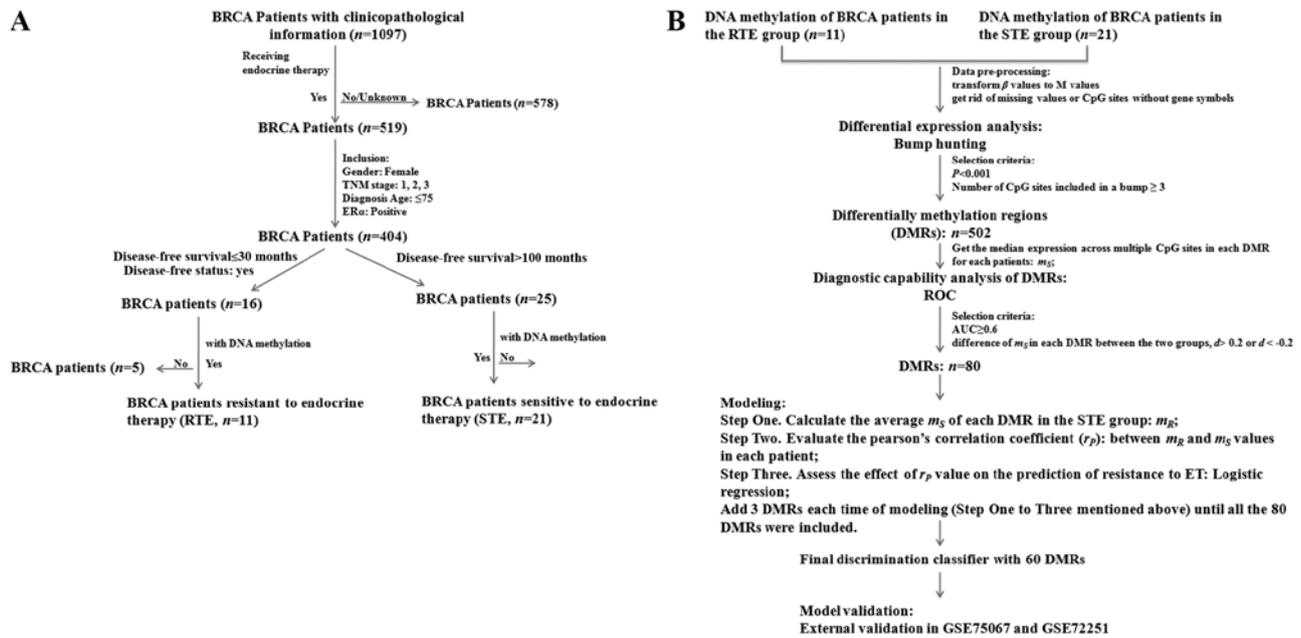


Figure 1. Flow chart of patient selection and model construction. (A) Publicly available DNA methylation, RNA sequence and clinicopathological features of BRCA were downloaded from The Cancer Genome Atlas. Stringent criteria were set to select and classify patients into two groups, namely the RTE ($n=11$) group and the STE ($n=21$) group. (B) Bump hunting was used to identify DMRs, which was used to construct a predictive classifier. The final classifier had 60 DMRs and was validated in an independent dataset (GSE75067). BRCA, breast cancer; TNM, Tumor Node Metastasis; ER α , estrogen receptor α ; RTE, resistant to endocrine therapy; STE, sensitive to endocrine therapy; ROC, receiver operating characteristic; AUC, area under the curve; DMR, differentially methylated regions; ET, endocrine therapy.

regions, 502 regions, including 5,252 CpG sites were significantly differently methylated ($P < 0.001$) and had ≥ 3 individual CpG sites (Fig. 2A). Due to the limited sample sizes of these two groups, multiple testing correction was not conducted. Of the 502 DMRs, the median size was 803 bp, with a range of 41-3,509 bp; the median number of CpGs in each DMR was 10, with a range of 3-32. According to the annotation files, the majority of the 5,252 CpG sites were mapped to the promoter region (TSS1500 and TSS200), the gene body and the 5'-untranslated region (UTR) and 3'-UTR, in addition to the first exon (Fig. 2B). Of note, each CpG site may simultaneously be detected in the promoter and other regions due to the various transcripts of a specific gene. These 502 DMRs encompassed 562 specific genes, and genes in the top ranked 20 DMRs were calcium release activated channel regulator 2A (EFCAB4B), paraoxonase 3, homeobox C4 (HOXC4), podoplanin (PDPN), major histocompatibility complex, class II, DQ β 2, hlt bHLH transcription factor, major histocompatibility complex, class I, J (pseudogene)/zinc ribbon domain containing 1 antisense, pseudogene, proline rich transmembrane protein 1/palmitoyl-protein thioesterase 2, family with sequence similarity 24 member B/chromosome 10 open reading frame 88 pseudogene, achaete-scute family bHLH transcription factor 2, histone cluster 1 H4 family member L/histone cluster 1 H3 family member I, tenascin XB, EYA transcriptional coactivator and phosphatase 4, lymphotoxin α , epithelial stromal interaction 1 (EPSTI1), dimethylarginine dimethylaminohydrolase 2, GATA binding protein 5, heparan sulfate-glucosamine 3-sulfotransferase 1, major histocompatibility complex, class II, DO α and homeobox C8 (HOXC8) (genes in the top ranked 50 DMRs were listed in Table II). Functional enrichment analysis was performed on these

genes. Consequently, 48 BP, 8 MF and only one CC GO terms were significantly enriched with a P-value < 0.01 and a false discovery rate q-value < 0.05 (Fig. 2C-E). The top-ranked representative 10 BP GO terms were 'skeletal system development' ($P=6.24 \times 10^{-7}$), 'cell-cell adhesion via plasma-membrane adhesion molecules' ($P=1.64 \times 10^{-15}$), 'homophilic cell adhesion via plasma membrane adhesion molecules' ($P=9.51 \times 10^{-21}$), 'pattern specification process' ($P=7.88 \times 10^{-7}$), 'embryonic organ morphogenesis' ($P=1.86 \times 10^{-6}$), 'gland development' ($P=6.45 \times 10^{-7}$), 'forebrain development' ($P=9.95 \times 10^{-8}$), 'regulation of hormone levels' ($P=5.88 \times 10^{-5}$), 'cell fate commitment' ($P=4.35 \times 10^{-11}$) and 'muscle organ development' ($P=2.19 \times 10^{-5}$). The associated genes are listed in Table III, including the HOX family of genes, such as HOXC4 and HOXC8, the protocadherin (PCDH) α gene cluster, such as PCDHA4, PCDHA7, PCDHA10, PCDH8 and PCDHGA1, and other genes known to affect the tumor growth and metastasis [including C-X-C motif chemokine ligand 12, SRY-box 2, E74 like ETS transcription factor 5 (ELF5), epidermal growth factor receptor, tumor necrosis factor and fibroblast growth factor receptor 1, etc.]. Additionally, these genes were significantly associated with the MF GO terms of 'protein heterodimerization activity' ($P=1.34 \times 10^{-4}$), 'transcription factor activity, RNA polymerase II core promoter proximal region sequence-specific binding' ($P=1.10 \times 10^{-6}$), 'transcriptional activator activity, RNA polymerase II transcription regulatory region sequence-specific binding' ($P=5.79 \times 10^{-7}$), 'transcriptional activator activity, RNA polymerase II core promoter proximal region sequence-specific binding' ($P=3.85 \times 10^{-5}$), 'glucuronosyltransferase activity' ($P=1.38 \times 10^{-7}$), 'retinoid binding' ($P=1.21 \times 10^{-4}$), 'retinoic acid binding' ($P=2.77 \times 10^{-6}$) and 'oxidoreductase activity and acting on NAD(P)H, oxygen

Table I. Clinicopathological features of patients with breast cancer from The Cancer Genome Atlas included in the present study.

Patient ID	Age (year)	TNM stage	DFS (month)	Relapse/death	ER	PR	HER2	Group	Drug name	Regimen indication	Radiation therapy	History of neoadjuvant treatment
TCGA-A2-A0YC	59	2	26.2	Yes	Pos	Pos	Neg	RTE	Arimidex	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-A7-A13E	62	2	18.3	Yes	Pos	Neg	Neg	RTE	Arimidex, Anastrozole	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-A7-A13H	61	2	26.1	Yes	Pos	Pos	Neg	RTE	Anastrozole	-	-	No
TCGA-A7-A26H	72	2	10.2	Yes	Pos	Neg	Pos	RTE	Anastrozole	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-A7-A425	70	3	14.6	Yes	Pos	Pos	Neg	RTE	Arimidex	-	Yes	No
TCGA-AO-A0JA	36	3	4.7	Yes	Pos	Pos	Neg	RTE	Tamoxifen	Recurrence	-	No
TCGA-AO-A126	39	2	8.8	Yes	Pos	Pos	Neg	RTE	Tamoxifen	Recurrence	-	No
TCGA-E2-A10B	67	2	6.4	Yes	Pos	Pos	Neg	RTE	Arimidex	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-E9-A1N6	52	2	22.1	Yes	Pos	Pos	Pos	RTE	Tamoxifen, Letrozole	-	-	No
TCGA-E9-A1NF	60	2	3.0	Yes	Pos	Pos	Neg	RTE	Tamoxifen	-	-	No
TCGA-LQ-A4E4	73	3	22.4	Yes	Pos	Pos	Neg	RTE	Anastrozole	-	Yes	No
TCGA-A2-A04R	36	1	121.9	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Tamoxifen, Anastrozole	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-A2-A0CR	54	2	107.9	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Tamoxifen, Anastrozole	-	-	No
TCGA-A2-A0EN	70	2	134.3	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Anastrozole, Tamoxifen	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-A2-A0EP	56	1	118.4	No	Pos	Neg	Neg	STE	Arimidex	-	No	No
TCGA-A2-A25A	44	2	107.6	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Femara	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AO-A125	72	2	113.5	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Tamoxifen, Aromasin	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AQ-A04L	48	2	130.0	No	Pos	Neg	Pos	STE	Tamoxifen	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AR-A0TT	53	3	108.9	No	Pos	Neg	Neg	STE	Tamoxifen, Anastrozole	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AR-A0U3	59	2	134.0	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Anastrozole	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AR-A1AK	70	1	103.8	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Anastrozole	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AR-A24H	65	2	160.8	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Anastrozole, Tamoxifen	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AR-A24M	38	3	120.2	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Letrozole, Tamoxifen	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AR-A24Q	49	2	104.2	No	Pos	Neg	Neg	STE	Anastrozole	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AR-A24R	45	3	112.7	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Letrozole, Tamoxifen	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AR-A24T	46	3	105.2	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Letrozole, Tamoxifen	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AR-A24V	52	2	105.2	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Tamoxifen, Anastrozole	Adjuvant	-	No
TCGA-AR-A2LE	69	1	138.1	Yes	Pos	Neg	-	STE	Tamoxifen	-	-	No
TCGA-GM-A2DA	46	2	214.7	Yes	Pos	Pos	Pos	STE	Tamoxifen, Aromasin, Letrozole	-	-	No
TCGA-GM-A2DL	50	1	115.6	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Tamoxifen, Arimidex	-	-	No
TCGA-GM-A2DM	57	2	106.0	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Arimidex	-	-	No
TCGA-GM-A2DN	58	2	101.5	No	Pos	Pos	Neg	STE	Arimidex	-	-	No

TNM stage was determined according to the staging system of American Joint Committee on Cancer, either version 5th, 6th or 7th (34,35). Pos, positive; neg, negative; RTE, resistant to endocrine therapy; STE, sensitive to endocrine therapy; DFS, disease free survival; ER, estrogen receptor status determined by immunohistochemistry; PR, progesterone receptor status determined by immunohistochemistry; HER2, human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 status determined by immunohistochemistry.

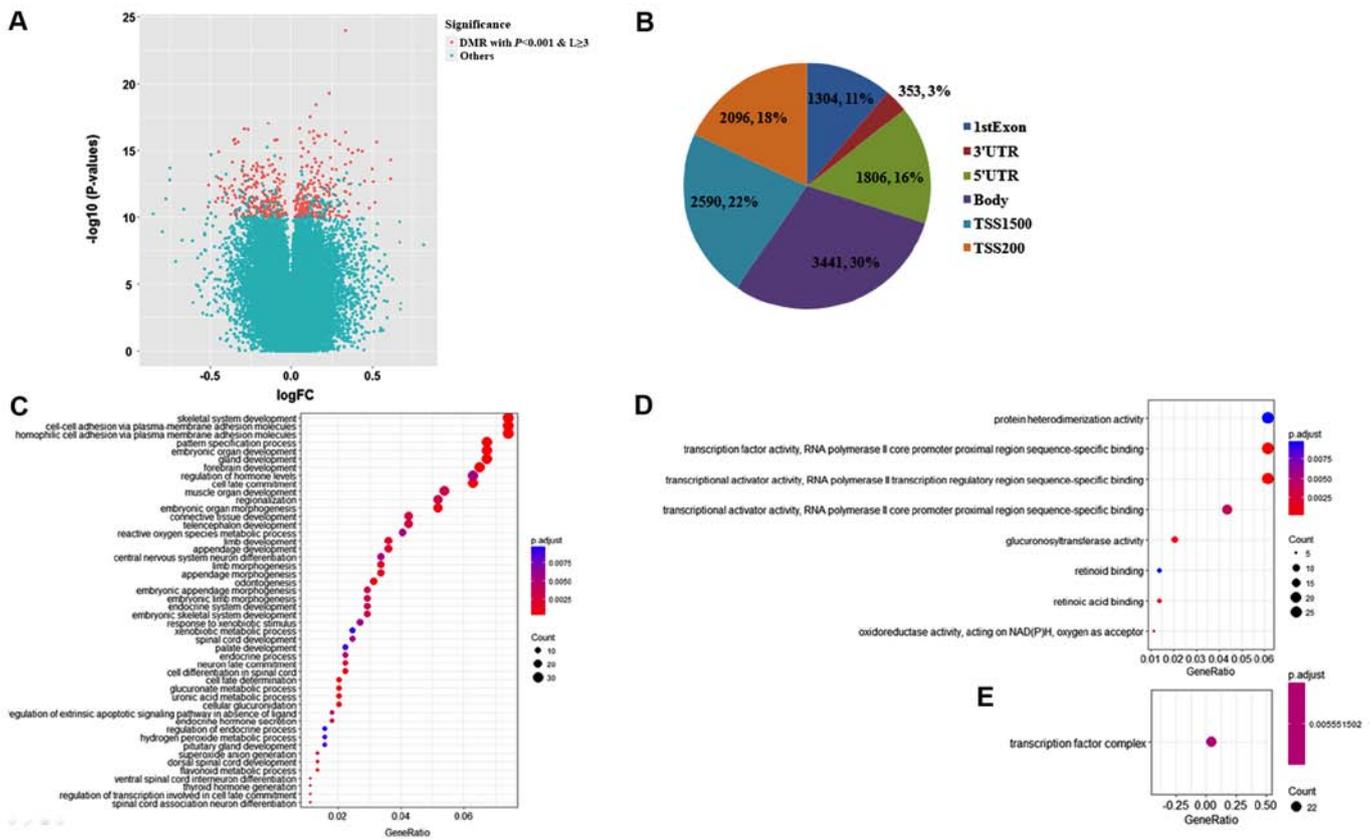


Figure 2. Identification of DMRs by bump hunting. (A) DMRs were defined as the genomic regions differentially methylated between two populations at a P-value <0.001 (retained from bump hunting) and covering ≥ 3 CpG sites. In total, 502 out of 135,418 genomic regions were regarded as DMRs and represented as red points in the volcano plot, while other genomic regions were indicated as blue points. The x-axis represented the log-transformed FC of the β -value between the resistant to endocrine therapy group and the sensitive to endocrine therapy group, and the y-axis represented the log-transformed P-value retained from bump hunting. (B) Pie chart indicating the location of 5,252 CpG sites enclosed in these DMRs. As observed, the majority of the CpG sites mapped into the promoter region (TSS1500 and TSS200), and then the gene body, followed by the 5'UTR and 3'UTR and 1st Exon. Gene Ontology (C) Biological Process, (D) Molecular Function and (E) Cellular Component terms were enriched by 562 specific genes encompassed by DMRs. FC, fold change; DMR, differentially methylated regions; UTR, untranslated region.

as acceptor' ($P=3.85 \times 10^{-5}$). The only significant CC GO term was 'transcription factor complex' ($P=1.31 \times 10^{-5}$).

Classifier building for predicting the response to ET in patients with ER-positive BRCA based on DMR patterns. Following the process presented in Fig. 1B, 502 DMRs were identified, of which 457 DMRs had an AUC ≥ 0.6 . Finally, 80 DMRs remained to build the predictive classifier set (with a difference of m_s between the RTE and STE groups >0.2).

As presented in Fig. 3A, the logistic regression, including 60 DMRs, had the highest AUC to distinguish the RTE group from the STE group, and a relatively low AIC to indicate the goodness of fit and the simplicity of the classifier. Therefore, these 60 DMRs listed in Table IV were included. Among them, 31 DMRs, including EFCAB4B, secretoglobin family 3A member 1 (SCGB3A1) and dual oxidase maturation factor 1 (DUOX1), were hypermethylated in the RTE group, and the remaining DMRs, including tripartite motif containing 58 and ELF5, were hypomethylated in the RTE group. Unsupervised hierarchical clustering analysis of these patients in the RTE and STE groups was performed based on these 60 DMRs. As presented in Fig. 3B, patients were divided into two classes, as follows: Class 1 was mainly enriched for patients in the STE group (20/21), while class 2 comprised 10 patients

in the RTE group and one in the STE group. In total, only two samples (2/32, 6.25%) were incorrectly sorted into the wrong group.

Based on the aforementioned 60 DMRs, an equation based on the aforementioned logistic regression, $\ln(p/1-p)=7.207-12.610x$, was generated to evaluate the probability of resistance to ET in patients with ER-positive BRCA. The denoting of letters in the equation is as follows: p, the probability of resistance to ET, and x , r_p values between m_R and m_S across 60 DMRs in each patient. Thus, the RS was generated and described as follows: $RS=e^{7.207-12.610x}/(1+e^{7.207-12.610x})$.

Application of RS on the prognosis of patients with ER-positive BRCA in two additional independent test datasets. The GSE75067 dataset containing the data of 87 patients with ER-positive BRCA was used instead to externally analyze the prognostic power of the RS on BRCA. The RS of each ER-positive patient was calculated; the median RS among these patients was 0.161, with a range of 0.051-0.982. As observed in Fig. 3C and D, whether the cutoff value of RS was 0.2 or 0.5, patients with higher RS values tended to exhibit significantly shorter OS times compared with those with lower RS values (log-rank test, $P=0.042$ and $P<0.001$, respectively). Furthermore, Cox regression analysis

Table II. DMRs between patients resistant and sensitive to endocrine therapy.

Bumps (no.)	Chr	Start coordinate of DMR	End coordinate of DMR	Gene(s)	Number of CpGs in DMR	DMR P-value
23474	12	3862221	3862597	EFCAB4B	12	1.28x10 ⁻⁵
95719	7	95025194	95026937	PON3	25	1.46x10 ⁻⁵
25363	12	54446100	54448913	HOXC4	26	2.21x10 ⁻⁵
2013	1	13909161	13910796	PDPN	17	2.35x10 ⁻⁵
88062	6	32729174	32730299	HLA-DQB2	31	3.60x10 ⁻⁵
81042	4	185938933	185941625	HELT	23	4.27x10 ⁻⁵
87538	6	29974022	29975078	HLA-J;NCRNA00171	32	4.52x10 ⁻⁵
87958	6	32119616	32121249	PRRT1;PPT2	32	4.96x10 ⁻⁵
15619	10	124638756	124639892	FAM24B;LOC399815	19	5.27x10 ⁻⁵
16983	11	2291347	2292905	ASCL2	22	6.87x10 ⁻⁵
87359	6	27840957	27842098	HIST1H4L;HIST1H3I	16	8.00x10 ⁻⁵
87946	6	32063774	32064749	TNXB	31	8.77x10 ⁻⁵
90707	6	133561614	133562196	EYA4	19	9.02x10 ⁻⁵
87773	6	31539601	31540750	LTA	18	9.29x10 ⁻⁵
29316	13	43565901	43566902	EPSTI1	14	9.85x10 ⁻⁵
87830	6	31695903	31697276	DDAH2	32	9.90x10 ⁻⁵
66889	20	61050560	61051561	GATA5	15	1.00x10 ⁻⁴
77952	4	11430022	11431359	HS3ST1	12	1.03x10 ⁻⁴
88100	6	32975875	32978129	HLA-DOA	24	1.27x10 ⁻⁴
25345	12	54402431	54403314	HOXC8	12	1.42x10 ⁻⁴
12810	10	50969997	50970591	OGDHL	11	1.71x10 ⁻⁴
17099	11	2890019	2891118	KCNQ1DN	30	1.74x10 ⁻⁴
84428	5	140305713	140306458	PCDHAC1; PCDHA7; PCDHAC1; PCDHA12; PCDHA6; PCDHA10; PCDHA4; PCDHA11; PCDHA8; PCDHAC1; PCDHA6; PCDHA1; PCDHA2; PCDHA9; PCDHA1; PCDHAC1; PCDHA13; PCDHA5; PCDHA3; PCDHA10	11	1.80x10 ⁻⁴
16989	11	2397201	2397977	CD81	16	1.80x10 ⁻⁴
36576	15	72667883	72669149	HEXA; C15orf34	15	1.99x10 ⁻⁴
84434	5	140345966	140346403	PCDHAC2; PCDHA7; PCDHA12; PCDHA6; PCDHA10; PCDHA4; PCDHA11; PCDHA8; PCDHA6; PCDHA1; PCDHA2; PCDHA1; PCDHA9; PCDHA13; PCDHA5; PCDHAC1; PCDHA3; PCDHAC2; PCDHA10	10	2.01x10 ⁻⁴
23388	12	2800055	2801584	CACNA1C	14	2.03x10 ⁻⁴
16985	11	2321770	2323059	C11orf21;TSPAN32	26	2.09x10 ⁻⁴
46839	17	46655164	46656543	HOXB4	19	2.52x10 ⁻⁴
5778	1	92951355	92952268	GFI1	12	2.56x10 ⁻⁴
83500	5	112073348	112073769	APC	15	2.70x10 ⁻⁴
26639	12	103351180	103352454	ASCL1	13	2.76x10 ⁻⁴
109271	X	153236083	153238579	HCFC1; TMEM187	19	2.81x10 ⁻⁴
78985	4	76555547	76556042	CDKL2	11	2.94x10 ⁻⁴
42578	16	88717134	88717989	CYBA	13	3.13x10 ⁻⁴
107070	X	16729564	16731095	CTPS2	15	3.16x10 ⁻⁴
80825	4	174449827	174451468	HAND2; NBLA00301	14	3.34x10 ⁻⁴

Table II. Continued.

Bumps (no.)	Chr	Start coordinate of DMR	End coordinate of DMR	Gene(s)	Number of CpGs in DMR	DMR P-value
59778	2	75425832	75428132	TACR1	21	3.35x10 ⁻⁴
61130	2	127413363	127414883	GYPC	12	3.47x10 ⁻⁴
86294	6	291687	293285	DUSP22	10	3.65x10 ⁻⁴
93730	7	27280914	27282444	EVX1	22	3.75x10 ⁻⁴
15319	10	118030848	118034357	GFRA1	30	3.76x10 ⁻⁴
67499	21	34442160	34443672	OLIG1	14	3.93x10 ⁻⁴
100809	8	54163622	54164442	OPRK1	10	4.01x10 ⁻⁴
62324	2	177052486	177053496	HOXD1	12	4.35x10 ⁻⁴
87226	6	25652381	25652815	SCGN	10	4.38x10 ⁻⁴
11057	1	248020350	248021163	TRIM58	10	4.42x10 ⁻⁴
13473	10	75118103	75118887	TTC18	12	4.48x10 ⁻⁴
47489	17	59476505	59478068	TBX2	17	4.92x10 ⁻⁴
97172	7	130125511	130126871	MEST	16	4.98x10 ⁻⁴

Chr, chromosome; DMR, differentially methylated region.

indicated that, following the adjustment for age, tumor type, lymph node status and PR expression, RS was an independent predictor for OS in patients with ER-positive BRCA (hazard ratio: 2.551; 95% confidence interval, 1.048-6.206; P=0.039; Table V).

Additionally, the GSE72251 dataset containing the data of 70 patients with tumor types expressing ER was used for further validation; the median RS among these patients was 0.227, with a range of 0.053-0.957. As presented in Fig. 3E, patients with RS ≤ 0.2 tended to have a better OS times, but statistical significance was not observed (log-rank test, P=0.717); however, the OS times of patients with RS ≤ 0.5 were significantly longer compared with that of their counterparts with RS > 0.5 (log-rank test, P=0.006; Fig. 3F). IDFS data were available in this dataset and were also analyzed. As presented in Fig. 3G, no significant differences in IDFS were observed between the two groups (patients with BRCA and RS > 0.2 compared with those with RS ≤ 0.2); however, patients assigned a higher RS exhibited a significantly longer IDFS compared with those with a lower RS when the cutoff of RS was set as 0.5 (P=0.009; Fig. 3H).

Correlation between DNA methylation and mRNA expression in DMRs included in the predictive classifier. Of the 60 DMRs, 63 specific genes were encompassed, and Pearson's correlation coefficients were determined to reveal the effects of epigenetic regulation. The CpG site in one specific DMR exhibiting the strongest correlation with mRNA expression was identified. The majority of the genes (55/63) had a statistically significant correlation between DNA methylation and mRNA expression with a P-value < 0.05; 17 genes had an r-value ≤ -0.3 (Table IV). Numerous representative DMRs and their correlation with mRNA expression in specific genes were presented in Fig. 4. Of these genes, EFCAB4B (P=1.28x10⁻⁵), Schlafen family member 12 (SLFN12; P=5.33x10⁻⁴), chromosome 3 open reading frame 18 (C3orf18; P=5.53x10⁻⁴),

zinc finger protein 880 (ZNF880; P=9.37x10⁻⁴), dual oxidase 1 (DUOX1; P=1.08x10⁻⁴¹) and major histocompatibility complex, class II, DPβ1 (HLA-DPB1; P=2.27x10⁻³) were hypermethylated in patients in the RTE group, while ELF5 (P=5.32x10⁻⁴), phospholipase A2 group III (PLA2G3; P=1.63x10⁻³), metallothionein 1G (MT1G; P=3.70x10⁻³), C-terminal binding protein 1 (CTBP1; P=4.15x10⁻³), ALG13 UDP-N-acetylglucosaminyltransferase subunit (ALG13; P=2.92x10⁻³) and RAS protein activator like 1 (RASAL1; P=5.93x10⁻³) were hypomethylated in patients in the RTE group compared with that in the STE group. Among them, ELF5 (r=-0.594, P=2.53x10⁻⁷⁶) exhibited the strongest negative correlation with mRNA expression, followed by PLA2G3 (r=-0.581, P=3.43x10⁻⁷²), C3orf18 (r=-0.567, P=3.93x10⁻⁶⁸), MT1G (r=-0.536, P=7.32x10⁻⁶⁰), SLFN12 (r=-0.533, P=3.98x10⁻⁶⁴), ZNF880 (r=-0.464, P=3.35x10⁻⁴³), DUOX1 (r=-0.456, P=1.08x10⁻⁴¹), EFCAB4B (r=-0.358, P=3.20x10⁻²⁵), HLA-DPB1 (r=-0.300, P=8.83x10⁻¹⁸), RASAL2 (r=-0.279, P=1.67x10⁻¹⁵), CTBP1 (r=-0.175, P=7.47x10⁻⁷) and ALG13 (r=-0.122, P=6.13x10⁻⁴).

Effects of the mRNA expression levels of numerous genes on the prognosis of patients with ER-positive BRCA and ET. Considering the association between DNA methylation and mRNA expression levels in the majority of the DMRs included in the prediction model, the effects of the mRNA expression levels of numerous genes on the prognosis of patients with ER-positive BRCA and ET were investigated using independent datasets in the KM Plotter tool. The cutoff value of the mRNA expression level for each gene was set as the median. A number of representative genes are presented in Fig. 5. Patients with higher mRNA expression levels of C3orf18 (log-rank P=0.003), ZNF880 (P=0.035), DUOX1 (P=0.013) and HLA-DPB1 (P=0.033) exhibited significantly longer RFS times compared with those with lower mRNA expression levels. Conversely, patients with lower expression levels of RASAL2

Table III. Top-ranked 10 biological process terms enriched by genes included in differentially methylated regions determined through the functional enrichment analysis.

Description	Gene ratio	Gene ID	P-value
Homophilic cell adhesion via plasma membrane adhesion molecules	33/446	PCDHA7/PCDHAC1/PCDHA12/PCDHA6/PCDHA10/PCDHA4/PCDHA11/PCDHA8/PCDHA1/PCDHA2/PCDHA9/PCDHA13/PCDHA5/PCDHA3/PCDHAC2/GYPC/FAT1/SDK1/IGSF9B/PCDH8/CDH7/PCDHGA4/PCDHGA6/PCDHGA1/PCDHGA5/PCDHGB1/PCDHGB4/PCDHGA3/PCDHGA8/PCDHGA2/PCDHGA7/PCDHGB2/PCDHGB3	9.51x10 ⁻²¹
Cell-cell adhesion via plasma-membrane adhesion molecules	33/446	PCDHA7/PCDHAC1/PCDHA12/PCDHA6/PCDHA10/PCDHA4/PCDHA11/PCDHA8/PCDHA1/PCDHA2/PCDHA9/PCDHA13/PCDHA5/PCDHA3/PCDHAC2/GYPC/FAT1/SDK1/IGSF9B/PCDH8/CDH7/PCDHGA4/PCDHGA6/PCDHGA1/PCDHGA5/PCDHGB1/PCDHGB4/PCDHGA3/PCDHGA8/PCDHGA2/PCDHGA7/PCDHGB2/PCDHGB3	1.64x10 ⁻¹⁵
Cell fate commitment	28/446	ASCL1/EVX1/OLIG1/TBX2/ELF5/TRIM15/SOX2/NKX6-2/NOTCH4/FGFR1/GDF7/FGF10/PROX1/WT1/SOX8/BCL11B/EBF2/PITX1/GSX1/GLI3/FGF13/PAX7/NKX2-5/LBX1/GATA3/NR2F2/TGFB11/GATA2	4.35x10 ⁻¹¹
Forebrain development	29/446	ASCL1/CXCL12/SOX2/KCNA1/FGFR1/GDF7/FGF10/NPY/SRD5A2/PROX1/ALK/BCL11B/PITX1/GSX1/GLI3/FGF13/DLX5/AQP1/DAB2IP/EGFR/NR2F2/RARB/TACC2/DUOX2/TRAPPC9/GATA2/PITX2/HTR5A/INHBA	9.95x10 ⁻⁸
Skeletal system development	33/446	HOXC4/HOXC8/HOXB4/HAND2/HOXD1/HOXB5/HOXD9/HAPLN3/HOXD4/FGFR1/TBX15/SRD5A2/COL11A2/PITX1/HOXC6/HOXC5/GLI3/DLX5/COL1A2/PAX7/GNAS/CDX1/TLL1/ALPL/RUNX3/RARB/CDKN1C/PITX2/SHOX2/BARX2/BMP8B/COL2A1/MEIS1	6.24x10 ⁻⁷
Gland development	30/446	ASCL1/HAND2/TBX2/ELF5/GPX1/HOXD9/SOX2/KALRN/TNF/NOTCH4/FGFR1/GDF7/FGF10/PROX1/WT1/BCL11B/PITX1/GSX1/GLI3/BSX/LIMS2/NKX2-5/GATA3/EGFR/CDKN1C/DUOX2/GATA2/PITX2/UGT1A1/IRS2	6.45x10 ⁻⁷
Embryonic organ development	30/446	HOXC4/ASCL2/HOXB4/HAND2/TBX2/HOXB5/HOXD9/TNF/HOXD4/FGFR1/CITED1/TBX15/FGF10/VANGL2/PROX1/EN2/GLI3/DLX5/GNAS/NKX2-5/LBX1/GATA3/EGFR/NR2F2/RARB/CDKN1C/GATA2/PITX2/SHOX2/COL2A1	7.50x10 ⁻⁷
Pattern specification process	30/446	HOXC4/HOXC8/HOXB4/ASCL1/HAND2/EVX1/TBX2/HOXB5/HOXD9/NKX6-2/HOXD4/FGFR1/CITED1/IRX4/FGF10/VANGL2/ GDNF/WT1/HOXC6/HOXC5/GLI3/PAX7/CDX1/SYNGAP1/NKX2-5/LBX1/PCDH8/NR2F2/PITX2/BCOR	7.88x10 ⁻⁷
Embryonic organ morphogenesis	23/446	HOXC4/HOXB4/HAND2/TBX2/HOXB5/HOXD9/HOXD4/FGFR1/TBX15/FGF10/VANGL2/PROX1/GLI3/DLX5/GNAS/NKX2-5/LBX1/GATA3/RARB/GATA2/PITX2/SHOX2/COL2A1	1.86x10 ⁻⁶
Regulation of hormone levels	28/446	CACNA1C/TACR1/OPRK1/TRH/KALRN/TNF/FGFR1/DUOX1/DUOXA1/SRD5A2/SOX8/GALR1/P2RY1/GNAS/KCNS3/GATA3/EGFR/DUOX2/DUOXA2/UCN/RAB11FIP3/UGT1A1/UGT1A8/UGT1A3/UGT1A9/UGT1A7/IRS2/INHBA	5.88x10 ⁻⁵

exhibited a significantly longer RFS (P=0.006) compared with those with increased expression levels. Additionally, separate survival curves associated with EFCAB4B (P=0.170),

SLFN12 (P=0.063), CTBP1 (P=0.170) and ALG13 (P=0.092) expression were generated; however, statistical significance was not observed.

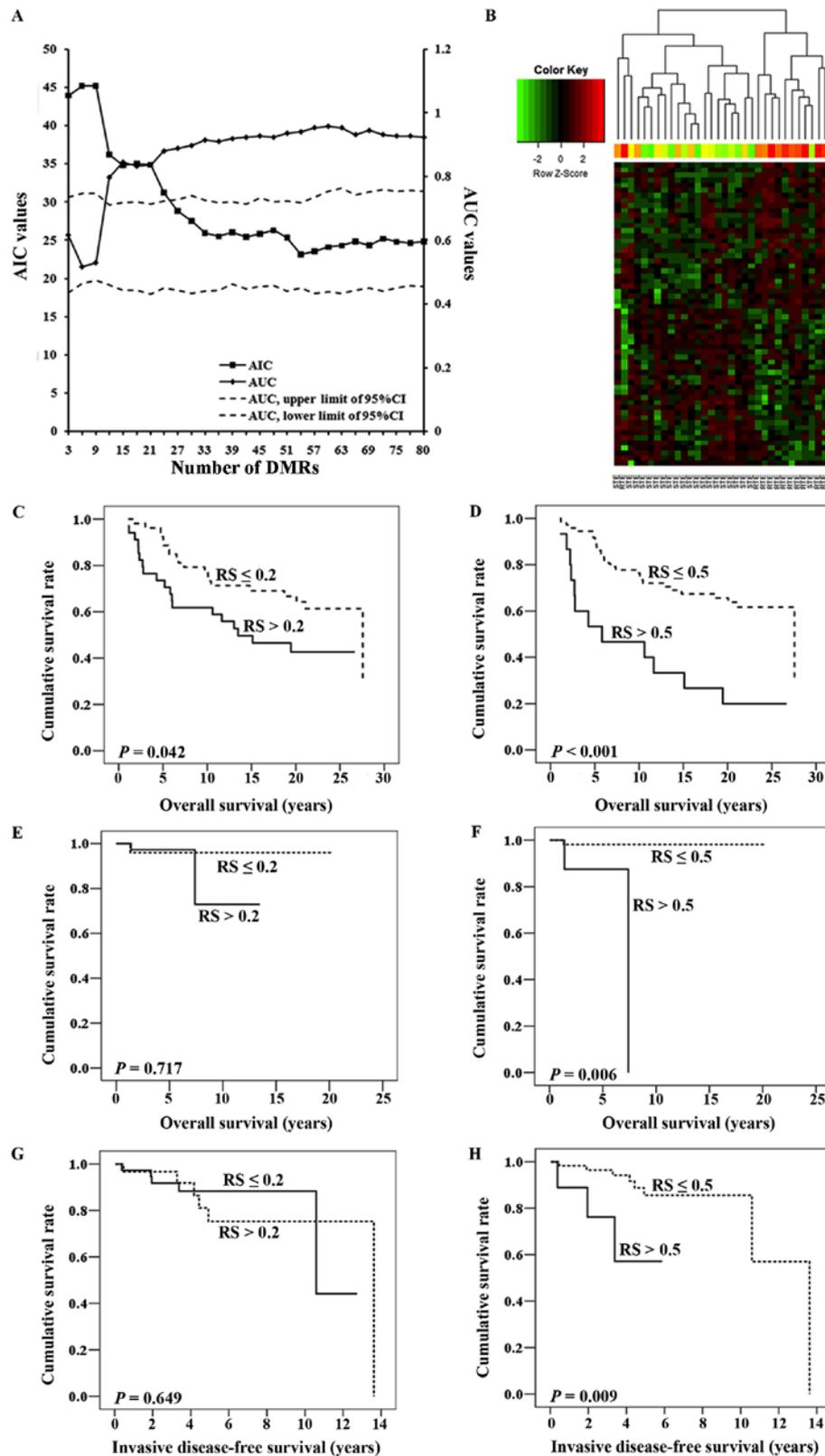


Figure 3. Construction and validation of the predictive classifier. (A) When modeling, 3 DMRs were included into the prediction classifier each time, followed by an assessment of the m_R in the STE group and the calculation of the r-value. The effect of the r-values was evaluated using the logistic regression, and AUC and AIC were simultaneously created to assess its diagnostic capacity, the goodness of fit and the simplicity of the classifier. The 95% CI of the AUC were calculated following 1,000 permutations. The left y-axis represented the AIC values, and the right y-axis represented the AUC values. The x-axis indicated the number of DMRs included in the logistic regression. (B) Hierarchical clustering was conducted on the DMRs. Each row of the heat map represented one of the DMRs with each column representing a different sample belonging to the RTE or STE group. RS was retained from each patient in the independent dataset GSE75067 on the basis of the predictive classifier. Kaplan-Meier analyses with log-rank tests were used to assess the effect of RS on OS time. The cutoff value of RS was set to be either (C) 0.2 or (D) 0.5. Similarly, for GSE72251, RS was assigned to each patient and Kaplan-Meier analyses were also used to assess the association between RS and OS, when the cutoff value was set to be (E) 0.2 or (F) 0.5. In addition, survival curves were also created by Kaplan-Meier analyses for invasive disease-free survival time, and the cutoff of RS was set to (G) 0.2 or (H) 0.5. AIC, Akaike information criterion; AUC, area under the curve; CI, confidence interval; RS, risk score; DMR, differentially methylated regions; RTE, resistant to endocrine therapy; STE, sensitive to endocrine therapy; OS, overall survival.

Table IV. Differentially methylated regions for predicting patients who are resistant to endocrine therapy.

Bumps (no.)	Gene symbol	r-value ^a	P-value ^b	DNA methylation (resistant/sensitive to endocrine therapy)	Chr	No. of CpG sites	P-values ^c
23474	EFCAB4B	-0.358	3.20x10 ⁻²⁵	Up	12	12	1.28x10 ⁻⁵
2013	PDPN	-0.210	2.94x10 ⁻⁹	Up	1	17	2.35x10 ⁻⁵
87359	HIST1H4L, HIST1H3I	-0.233, -0.270	3.41x10 ⁻¹¹ , 1.26x10 ⁻¹⁴	Up	6	16	8.00x10 ⁻⁵
29316	EPSTI1	-0.581	2.89x10 ⁻⁷²	Up	13	14	9.85x10 ⁻⁵
23388	CACNA1C	0.305	1.86x10 ⁻¹⁸	Up	12	14	2.03x10 ⁻⁴
83500	APC	0.075	3.57x10 ⁻²	Up	5	15	2.70x10 ⁻⁴
109271	HCFC1, TMEM187	0.072, -0.076	4.37x10 ⁻² , 3.27x10 ⁻²	Down	X	19	2.81x10 ⁻⁴
87226	SCGN	-0.194	3.83x10 ⁻⁸	Down	6	10	4.38x10 ⁻⁴
11057	TRIM58	-0.619	1.39x10 ⁻⁸⁴	Down	1	10	4.42x10 ⁻⁴
93160	MIR589, FBXL18	-, -0.255	-, 4.23x10 ⁻¹³	Down	7	12	5.07x10 ⁻⁴
18397	ELF5	-0.594	2.53x10 ⁻⁷⁶	Down	11	13	5.32x10 ⁻⁴
45490	SLFN12	-0.553	3.98x10 ⁻⁶⁴	Up	17	9	5.33x10 ⁻⁴
72514	C3orf18	-0.567	3.93x10 ⁻⁶⁸	Up	3	7	5.53x10 ⁻⁴
86221	SCGB3A1	-0.309	7.02x10 ⁻¹⁹	Up	5	14	5.56x10 ⁻⁴
19965	SIPA1	-0.260	1.13x10 ⁻¹³	Up	11	12	6.43x10 ⁻⁴
53071	ACP5	-0.222	3.18x10 ⁻¹⁰	Up	19	11	6.58x10 ⁻⁴
67311	MIR155HG	-0.424	1.01x10 ⁻³⁵	Up	21	7	7.44x10 ⁻⁴
16291	NKX6-2	-0.048	1.76x10 ⁻¹	Down	10	12	8.42x10 ⁻⁴
56468	ZNF880	-0.464	3.35x10 ⁻⁴³	Up	19	9	9.37x10 ⁻⁴
78770	IGFBP7	0.084	1.82x10 ⁻²	Down	4	8	1.01x10 ⁻³
12633	ALOX5	-0.189	8.55x10 ⁻⁸	Up	10	7	1.06x10 ⁻³
20753	PHOX2A	-0.225	1.79x10 ⁻¹⁰	Down	11	7	1.09x10 ⁻³
33797	PPP2R5C	0.068	5.51x10 ⁻²	Up	14	5	1.13x10 ⁻³
51880	NFIC	0.140	8.11x10 ⁻⁵	Up	19	5	1.17x10 ⁻³
87280	HIST1H4F	-0.228	1.14x10 ⁻¹⁰	Up	6	7	1.25x10 ⁻³
94632	IKZF1	-0.265	4.47x10 ⁻¹⁴	Down	7	6	1.25x10 ⁻³
67598	CBR1	-0.621	3.20x10 ⁻⁸⁵	Up	21	6	1.27x10 ⁻³
102219	ZNF572	-0.645	1.22x10 ⁻⁹³	Up	8	8	1.30x10 ⁻³
35402	DUOX1, DUOXA1	-0.456, -0.485	1.08x10 ⁻⁴¹ , 1.03x10 ⁻⁴⁷	Up	15	9	1.36x10 ⁻³
108507	CHRDL1	0.120	7.29x10 ⁻⁴	Down	X	9	1.61x10 ⁻³
69212	PLA2G3	-0.581	3.43x10 ⁻⁷²	Down	22	6	1.63x10 ⁻³
23113	GLB1L3	-0.175	8.25x10 ⁻⁷	Down	11	7	1.89x10 ⁻³
98905	VIPR2	-0.433	2.76x10 ⁻³⁷	Down	7	6	1.92x10 ⁻³
28896	GSX1	-0.094	8.09x10 ⁻³	Down	13	9	1.98x10 ⁻³
88104	HLA-DPB1	-0.300	8.83x10 ⁻¹⁸	Up	6	9	2.26x10 ⁻³
86545	CDYL	-0.073	4.05x10 ⁻²	Up	6	6	2.30x10 ⁻³
11209	DIP2C	-0.194	3.95x10 ⁻⁸	Down	10	15	2.50x10 ⁻³
97788	FAM115A	0.061	8.98x10 ⁻²	Up	7	4	2.54x10 ⁻³
84265	LOC389333	-0.165	3.14x10 ⁻⁶	Up	5	8	2.58x10 ⁻³
17233	TRIM68	-0.573	5.39x10 ⁻⁷⁰	Up	11	8	2.63x10 ⁻³
57826	KCNS3	-0.227	1.13x10 ⁻¹⁰	Up	2	8	2.65x10 ⁻³
30133	DOCK9	-0.119	7.89x10 ⁻⁴	Down	13	6	2.74x10 ⁻³
108522	ALG13	-0.122	6.13x10 ⁻⁴	Down	X	5	2.92x10 ⁻³
7843	SLAMF1	-0.270	1.33x10 ⁻¹⁴	Up	1	6	3.20x10 ⁻³
99079	ARHGEF10	-0.030	4.00x10 ⁻¹	Down	8	4	3.47x10 ⁻³
40848	MT1G	-0.536	7.32x10 ⁻⁶⁰	Down	16	6	3.70x10 ⁻³

Table IV. Continued.

Bumps (no.)	Gene symbol	r-value ^a	P-value ^b	DNA methylation (resistant/sensitive to endocrine therapy)	Chr	No. of CpG sites	P-values ^c
26270	LIN7A	-0.291	7.61x10 ⁻¹⁷	Up	12	4	4.08x10 ⁻³
57453	TTC15	0.195	3.45x10 ⁻⁸	Down	2	5	4.13x10 ⁻³
77073	CTBP1	-0.175	7.47x10 ⁻⁷	Down	4	6	4.15x10 ⁻³
42328	FBXO31	-0.075	3.59x10 ⁻²	Up	16	3	4.28x10 ⁻³
85239	EBF1	0.035	3.28x10 ⁻¹	Down	5	4	4.31x10 ⁻³
19658	FERMT3	0.102	4.24x10 ⁻³	Down	11	4	4.32x10 ⁻³
7847	CD48	-0.143	5.38x10 ⁻⁵	Up	1	4	4.56x10 ⁻³
102571	TRAPPC9	0.060	9.15x10 ⁻²	Down	8	3	5.43x10 ⁻³
49506	HEXDC	0.078	2.90x10 ⁻²	Down	17	3	5.80x10 ⁻³
81036	ACSL1	0.060	9.37x10 ⁻²	Down	4	3	5.89x10 ⁻³
8503	RASAL2	-0.279	1.67x10 ⁻¹⁵	Down	1	3	5.93x10 ⁻³
40647	ZNF423	0.384	4.02x10 ⁻²⁹	Up	16	4	6.19x10 ⁻³
393	PRKCZ	-0.065	6.77x10 ⁻²	Down	1	3	6.31x10 ⁻³
11176	DIP2C	-0.194	3.95x10 ⁻⁸	Down	10	4	6.67x10 ⁻³

^aPearson's correlation coefficient between mRNA expression and DNA methylation; ^bP-values were obtained from Pearson's correlation analyses; ^cP-values represented the statistical significance of differentially methylated regions on identifying patients with estrogen receptor-positive breast cancer sensitive to endocrine therapy; Chr, chromosome.

Table V. Univariate and multivariate Cox regressions in the dataset GSE75067.

Clinical features	Univariate		Multivariate	
	HR (95%CI)	P-value	HR (95%CI)	P-value
Age (years, >50/≤50)	1.286 (0.677, 2.442)	0.442	1.688 (0.800, 3.563)	0.170
Tumor types (non-ductal/ductal)	0.613 (0.290, 1.294)	0.199	0.528 (0.224, 1.245)	0.145
Lymph node status (positive/negative)	4.199 (2.096, 8.411)	<0.001	5.319 (2.440, 11.596)	<0.001
Progesterone receptor expression (positive/negative)	0.472 (0.215, 1.036)	0.061	1.282 (0.429, 3.835)	0.656
Risk Score (>0.5/≤0.5)	3.463 (1.742, 6.887)	<0.001	2.551 (1.048, 6.206)	0.039

HR, hazard ratio; CI, confidence interval.

Discussion

Previous studies have indicated that dysregulated DNA methylation is associated with carcinogenesis and therapeutic effectiveness (16,17,42). In the present study, DMRs were identified via the bump hunting analysis, followed by the building of a predictive classifier to identify ET-responsive patients with ER-positive BRCA. The RS was then calculated, which served as an indicator to classify patients with ER-positive BRCA into two groups with distinct survival outcomes in two additional independent datasets.

Functional enrichment analyses demonstrated that genes with DMRs associated with ET sensitivity were associated organ morphogenesis and development and cell-cell adhesion. The present study mainly reported on two groups of genes, namely the PCDH family and homeobox genes. PCDHs, as part of the cadherin superfamily, were

originally identified in the rat brain via polymerase chain reaction analysis and were associated with certain types of neurological disease (43,44). Previously, aberrant PCDH expression was observed in a variety of human malignant tumor types, potentially due to post-translational regulatory mechanisms, including DNA methylation (45). In the present study, it was reported that the methylation status of numerous PCDHs, including PCDHA4, PCDHA7, PCDHA10, PCDH8 and PCDHGA1 may be associated with the resistance to ET. In addition, the tumor suppressor and oncogenic functions of PCDHs have been reported in BRCA (46,47). The effects of certain PCDHs, including *PCDH10*, have been associated with fulvestrant resistance in BRCA (48). The function of PCDHs is associated with numerous signaling pathways, including the Wnt/β-catenin (49) and receptor tyrosine kinase (50) pathways, which have been proposed to be associated with tamoxifen resistance. The results of

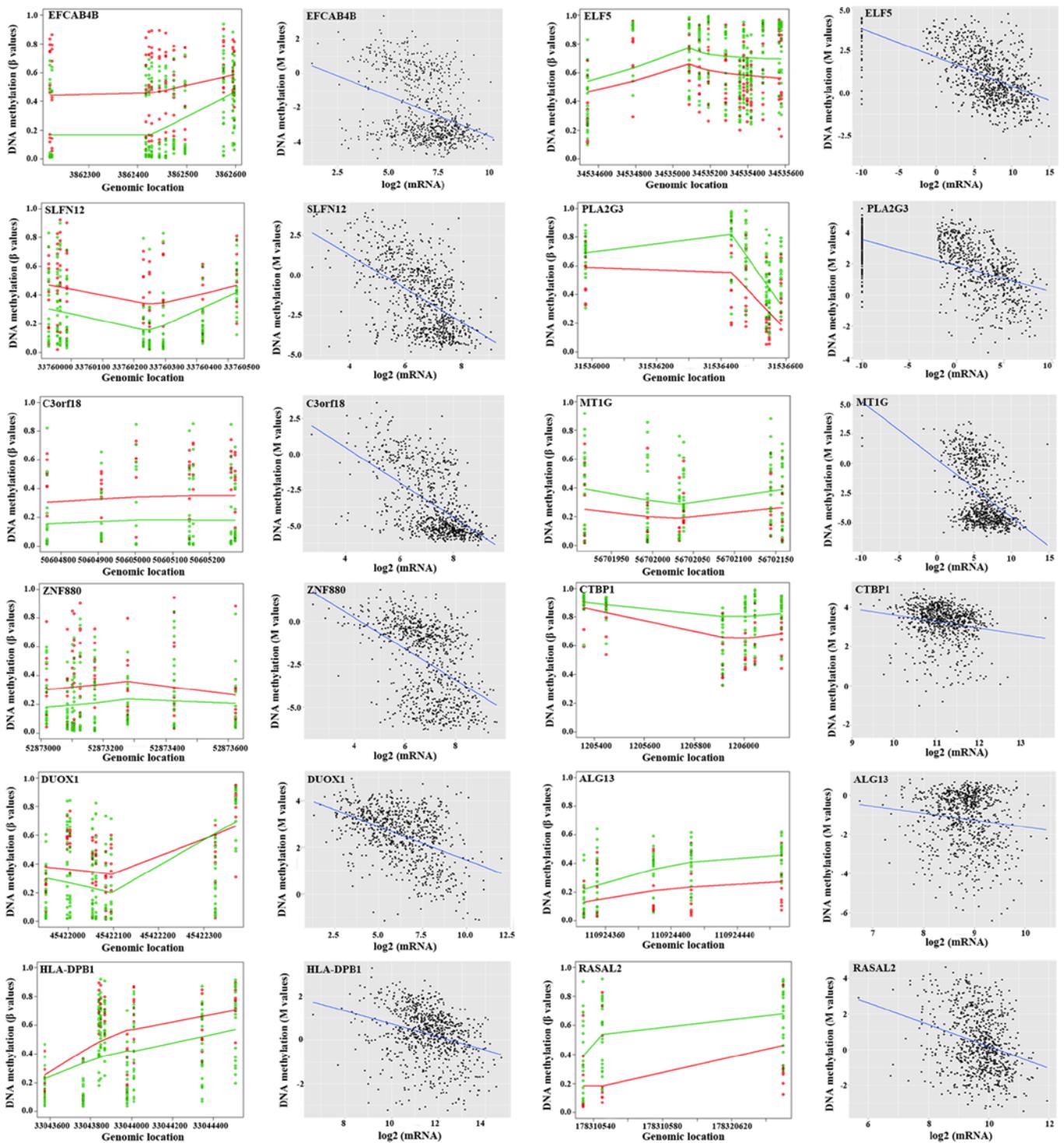


Figure 4. DMRs of a number of specific genes between the RTE and STE groups and their association with mRNA expression levels. Left: The points exhibited methylation measurements against genomic location. A total of 11 RTE and 21 STE samples were presented and represented by red points and green points, respectively, at each genomic location. The curves represent the smooth estimate of the population-level methylation profiles for RTE (red) and STE (green) samples. Right: Methylation measurements (M values) of a number of DMRs were plotted against the log-transformed mRNA expression. Each point represented an individual sample from 787 tumor/adjacent tissues measured using DNA methylation and RNA sequencing data. The specific gene covering the DMRs is presented in the top left. DMR, differentially methylated regions; RTE, resistant to endocrine therapy; STE, sensitive to endocrine therapy; EFCAB4B, calcium release activated channel regulator 2A; ELF5, E74 like ETS transcription factor 5; SLFN12, Schlafens family member 12; PLA2G3, phospholipase A2 group III; C3orf18, chromosome 3 open reading frame 18; MT1G, metallothionein 1G; ZNF880, zinc finger protein 880; CTBP1, C-terminal binding protein 1; DUOX1, dual oxidase 1; ALG13, ALG13 UDP-N-acetylglucosaminyltransferase subunit; HLA-DPB1, major histocompatibility complex, class II, DPβ1; RASAL2, RAS protein activator like 2.

the present study suggested a potential association between PCDHs and resistance to ET; however, further investigation is required.

Additionally, the HOX genes encode a family of highly conserved homeodomain-containing transcription factors that serve crucial functions during embryogenesis (51). In BRCA,

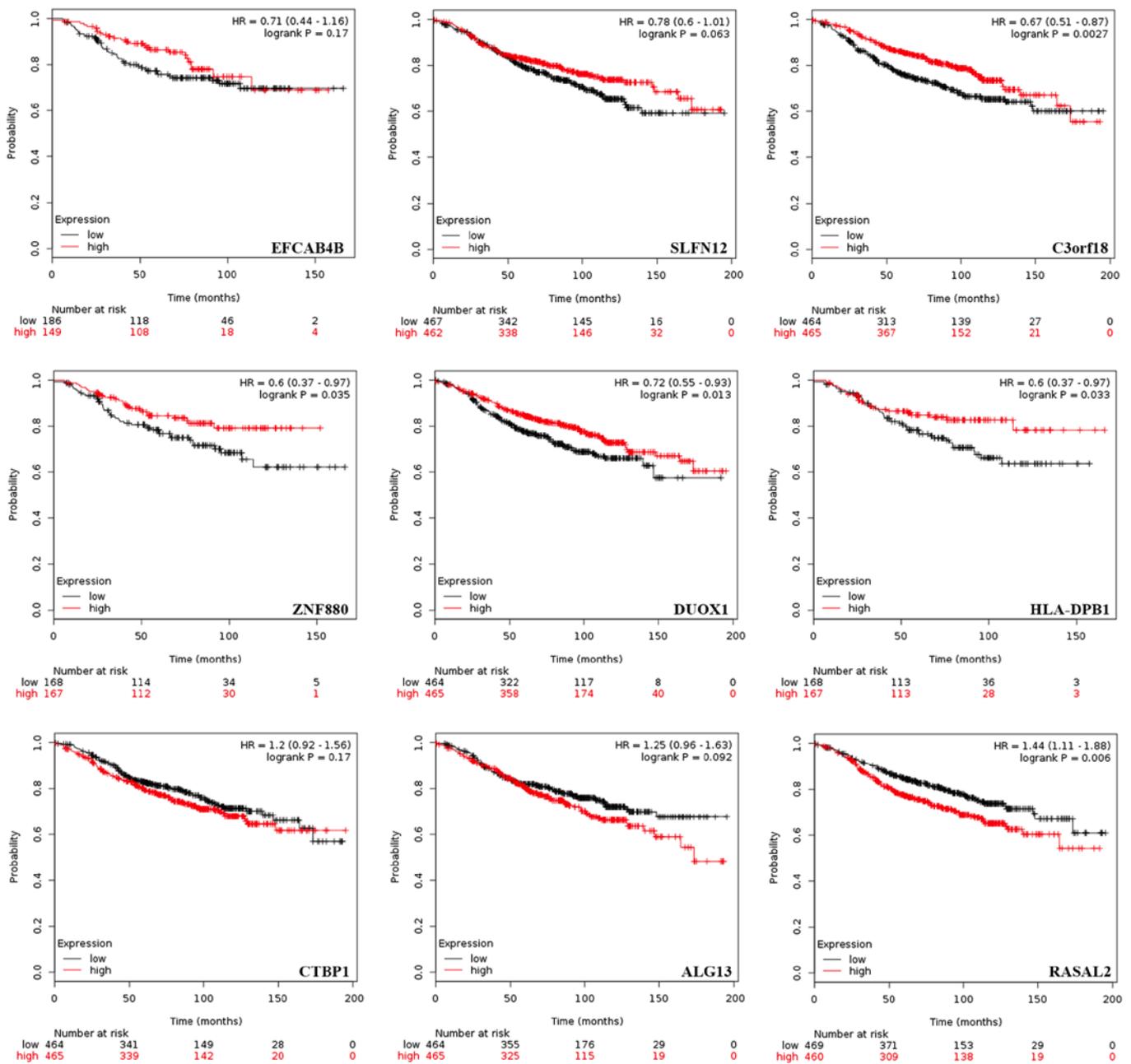


Figure 5. Prognostic significance of mRNA expression of a number of specific genes in estrogen receptor-positive patients with BRCA receiving ET. Effect of mRNA expression on the relapse-free survival time of patients with BRCA receiving ET was assessed using the Kaplan Meier plotter. P-values were obtained from Kaplan Meier analysis with a log-rank test. ET, endocrine therapy; BRCA, breast cancer; EFCAB4B, calcium release activated channel regulator 2A; SLFN12, Schlafen family member 12; C3orf18, chromosome 3 open reading frame 18; ZNF880, zinc finger protein 880; DUOX1, dual oxidase 1; HLA-DPB1, major histocompatibility complex, class II, DPβ1; CTBP1, C-terminal binding protein 1; ALG13, ALG13 UDP-N-acetylglucosaminyltransferase subunit; RASAL2, RAS protein activator like 2.

the expression of numerous HOX genes has been reported to be up- or downregulated, which may be associated with carcinogenesis, metastasis and tamoxifen resistance (52,53). It was proposed that HOX genes contribute to a major part of DNA methylation profiles in BRCA subtypes (54). In the present study, the methylation patterns of numerous HOX genes, including HOXB4, HOXB5, HOXC4, HOXC8, HOXD1 and HOXD4, were observed to be associated with resistance to ET.

DNA methylation of gene promoters may downregulate transcriptional expression, affecting tumorigenesis or the progression of tumor types (52). Therefore, gene promoters

have become the focus of research to investigate DNA methylation. Li *et al* (55) reported that 3.3% inter-tumor gene expression maybe attributed to DNA methylation in gene promoters. The present study revealed that the locations of DMRs were primarily in the gene promoter, namely TSS200 and TSS1500; however, other regions, including the gene body, additionally exhibited a large proportion of methylation, which indicated that other regions containing CpG sites may regulate gene expression, contributing to ET resistance. Li *et al* (55) revealed that in addition to the gene promoter, other regions may substantially affect inter-tumor gene

expression. For instance, enhancer methylation was associated with 4.0% of inter-tumor gene expression variation (56). Compared with a single CpG site, the varied methylation of genomic regions containing a number of CpG sites was more stable. Integrating the bump hunting method and logistic regression, 60 DMRs were reported to have the potential to identify patients with ER-positive BRCA and ET resistance. Due to the inadequate treatment information of the data from TCGA and the stringent criteria set, sample sizes in the present study were limited. Therefore, 11 patients with BRCA possessing a DFS \leq 30 months were regarded as exhibiting ET resistance, while 21 patients exhibiting a DFS $>$ 100 months were regarded as sensitive to ET (57,58). The limited sample sizes may reduce the comparative power of the identification of DMRs. Therefore, multiple test adjustment was not applied to retain potentially genuine biomarkers. Furthermore, the GSE75067 and GSE72251 datasets lacking treatment information were included to externally validate the model proposed in the present study. The survival curves, particularly when the cutoff value of RS was set as 0.5, demonstrated notable curve separation in patients with ER-positive BRCA. These survival analyses indicated the potential application of RS in the prediction of the prognosis of patients with ER-positive BRCA and suggested its potential for identifying patients resistant to ET; however, cohorts with a large sample size are required to further support this predictive classifier.

Pearson's correlation analyses revealed that the majority of DMRs (46/60) in the predictive model of the present study exhibited a negative correlation with the transcript expression. Numerous genes in this model, including ELF5 (59), CTBP1 (60) and zinc finger protein 423 (ZNF423) (61), have previously been reported to be involved in anti-estrogen resistance. Elevated expression levels of ELF5 were detected in luminal BRCA cells that had acquired resistance to tamoxifen (59). In addition, ELF5 may be a key transcriptional determinant of BRCA molecular subtypes by suppressing estrogen sensitivity in luminal BRCA cells (59). Furthermore, as a corepressor, CTBP1 was reported to be associated with the silencing of ubiquitin-conjugating enzyme E2 D1 and simultaneously elevated cyclin D1 expression levels, which may underlie the mechanism of acquired resistance to 4-hydroxytamoxifen (60). It was demonstrated that ZNF423 may be an estrogen-inducible BRCA1 transcription factor, and may contribute to variations in selective ER modulators in the prevention of BRCA (61). Additionally, a number of other genes, namely APC regulator of WNT signaling pathway, PDPN, EPSTI1, SCGB3A1, signal-induced proliferation-associated 1, acid phosphatase 5, tartrate resistant, MIR155 host gene, insulin like growth factor binding protein 7, arachidonate 5-lipoxygenase, protein phosphatase 2 regulatory subunit B γ , nuclear factor I C, IKAROS family zinc finger 1, carbonyl reductase 1, DUOX1, chordin like 1, disco interacting protein 2 homolog C, signaling lymphocytic activation molecule family member 1, Rho guanine nucleotide exchange factor 10, MT1G, lin-7 homolog A, crumbs cell polarity complex component, F-box protein 31, EBF transcription factor 1, trafficking protein particle complex 9, acyl-CoA synthetase long chain family member 1, RASAL2, ZNF423, protein kinase CZ, PLA2G3 and ALG13 have been reported to be involved in the development of cancer (62-65), including

BRCA; however, their association with ET resistance remains unknown. For instance, previous studies have identified the increased methylation of SCGB3A1 in metastases compared with that in primary breast tumor types (62,63). In non-invasive MCF7 cells, DUOX1 expression was upregulated compared with that in highly metastatic cells; DUOX1 overexpression sensitized cells to doxorubicin (64). In the present study, the increased DNA methylation of SCGB3A1 and DUOX1 were observed in the RTE group, indicating their potential function in resistance to anti-estrogenic treatment. Additionally, a significant difference in the methylation frequencies and expression levels of MT1G was reported between BRCA subtypes (65). MT1G hypomethylation in patients who were resistant to ET was detected in the present study, indicating its association with antiestrogen therapy. The present study also reported numerous genes that have been rarely investigated in cancer research, including EFCAB4B. EFCAB4B is a Ca²⁺-binding protein that serves a key function in store-operated calcium entry in T-cells (66). A previous study demonstrated EFCAB4B hypermethylation in a twin with rheumatoid arthritis compared with their healthy co-twin (67). The results of the present study indicate a putative function of EFCAB4B in ET or potential immune/inflammatory alterations in the tumor microenvironment; however, further investigation is required.

Generally, the targeting of numerous genes has been reported to be superior to targeting an individual target, and DNA methylation patterns have become a promising diagnostic tool in addition to gene transcripts in BRCA. In the present study, a number of DMRs were detected between patients with ET resistance and those sensitive to ET; DMRs were used to build a predictive classifier. Furthermore, an RS was generated based on the classifier, which may determine the distinct outcomes of patients with ER-positive BRCA, suggesting a beneficial function in the identification of patients who are resistant to ET. Additionally, a potential function underlying the development of BRCA and resistance to ET was indicated for a number of genes (EFCAB4B and SLFN12); however, further investigation using a larger cohort is required. The present study primarily proposed a useful tool for assessing patient responses to ET and a number of potential therapeutic targets to promote the sensitivity of patients to ET with ER-positive BRCA.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets analyzed during the present study are available from The Cancer Genome Atlas (<https://portal.gdc.cancer.gov/>) and the Gene Expression Omnibus (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/gds/>) databases.

Authors' contributions

FZ and YC participated in the conception and design of the study. FZ downloaded, analyzed the data and drafted the manuscript. YC revised the manuscript prior to submission. Both authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Patient consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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