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Assessing the vulnerability of single-cell RNA-sequencing classifiers to adversarial attacks with *adverSCarial*

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Several **machine learning** (ML) algorithms dedicated to the detection of healthy and diseased cell types from single-cell RNA-sequencing data (scRNA-seq) have been proposed for biomedical purposes. Before establishing clinical routines and diagnostic decision support tools based on these methods, concerns about their security must be surveyed. Among the possible threats are **adversarial attacks**, the deliberate introduction of carefully crafted input data into ML models, taking advantage of the vulnerabilities in the models' decision-making processes to cause misclassifications or faulty outputs. With **transcriptomic data**, we propose to explore this by modulating gene expression values to **simulate** a wide range of causes, whether technical biases, biological and experimental design variations, or malicious events.

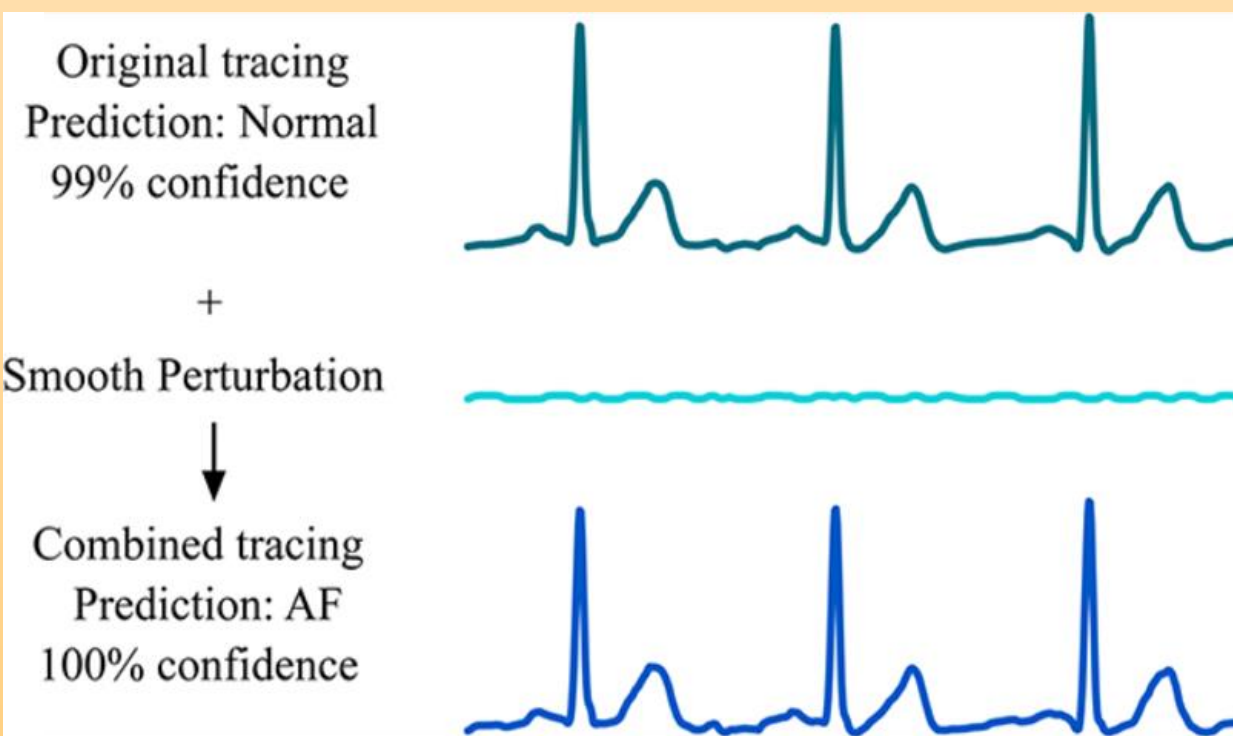
AdverSCarial an original R package available in Bioconductor that can be used by researchers, developers, and end-users interested in surveying ML tools that cluster and annotate cells from scRNA-seq data. The package provides a toolkit for the assessment of these algorithms' robustness/vulnerabilities and for evaluating the important variables/features used by the models to reach a final decision and produce an output. AdverSCarial is resource-optimized and potentially works on all kinds of single-cell classifiers.

Adversarial attacks on medical data

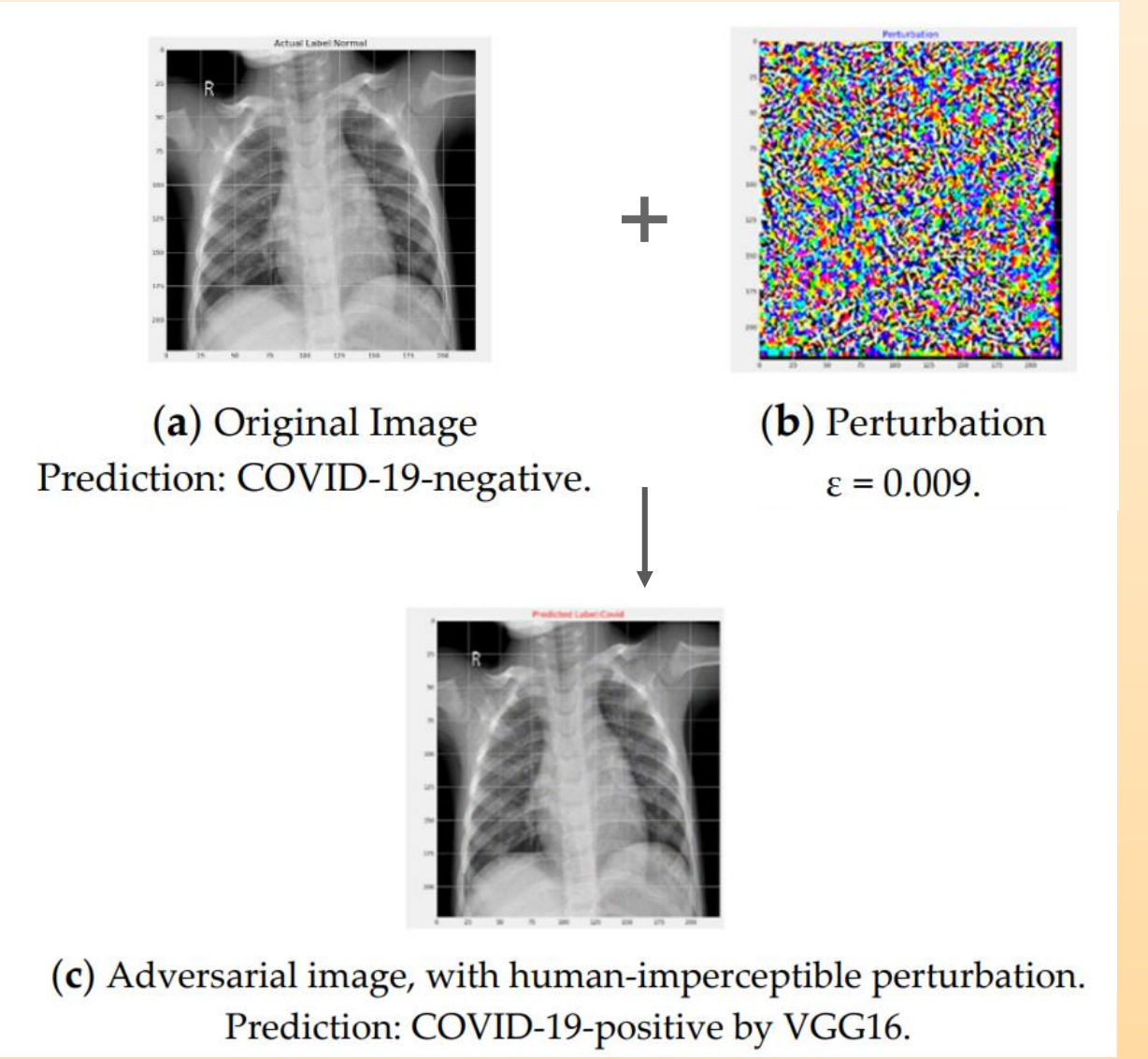
Within the field of medical research, numerous examples of successful adversarial attacks on dedicated ML classifiers are found in the scientific literature: data from electrocardiogram (ECG), X-ray, pathology slides. These attacks are based on the following sequence:

- 1) Start from raw data (images or signals)
- 2) Add small / imperceptible perturbations
- 3) Produce a change of classification

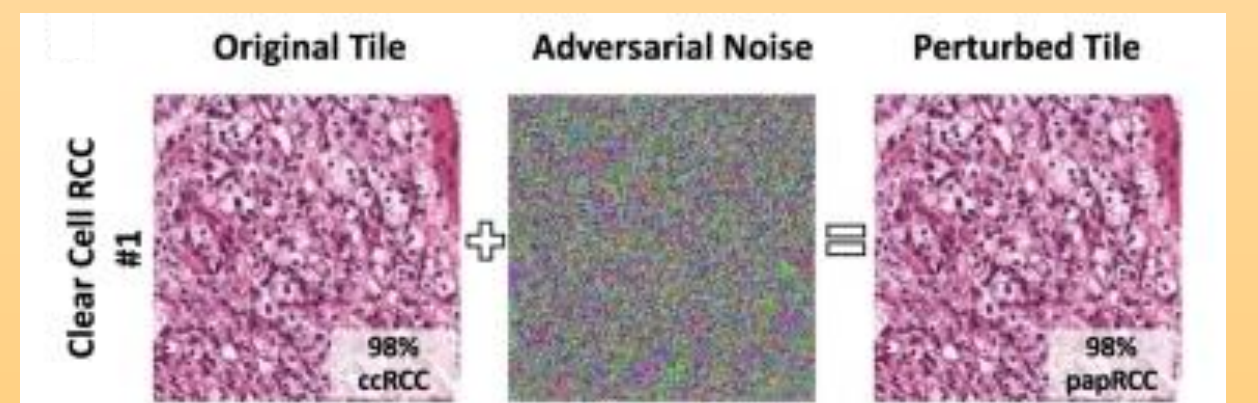
ECG [1]



X-ray [2]



Pathology slides [3]



Attack modes

Single-gene

Produces cell misclassification and mislabelling after altering the expression of one gene only.

Max-change

Tries to modify as many genes as possible without affecting the cell clustering output. The final complementary gene list consisting of the untouchable genes is referred to as the cell cluster signature.

CGD - Cluster-based Gradient Descent

Gradient-derived adversarial perturbation method devised for black-box scRNA-seq classifiers. This iterative, cluster-based modification process (one gene by step, whole cluster perturbation instead of cells) is guided by an approximated gradient of the cell type likelihood with respect to a gene j expression.

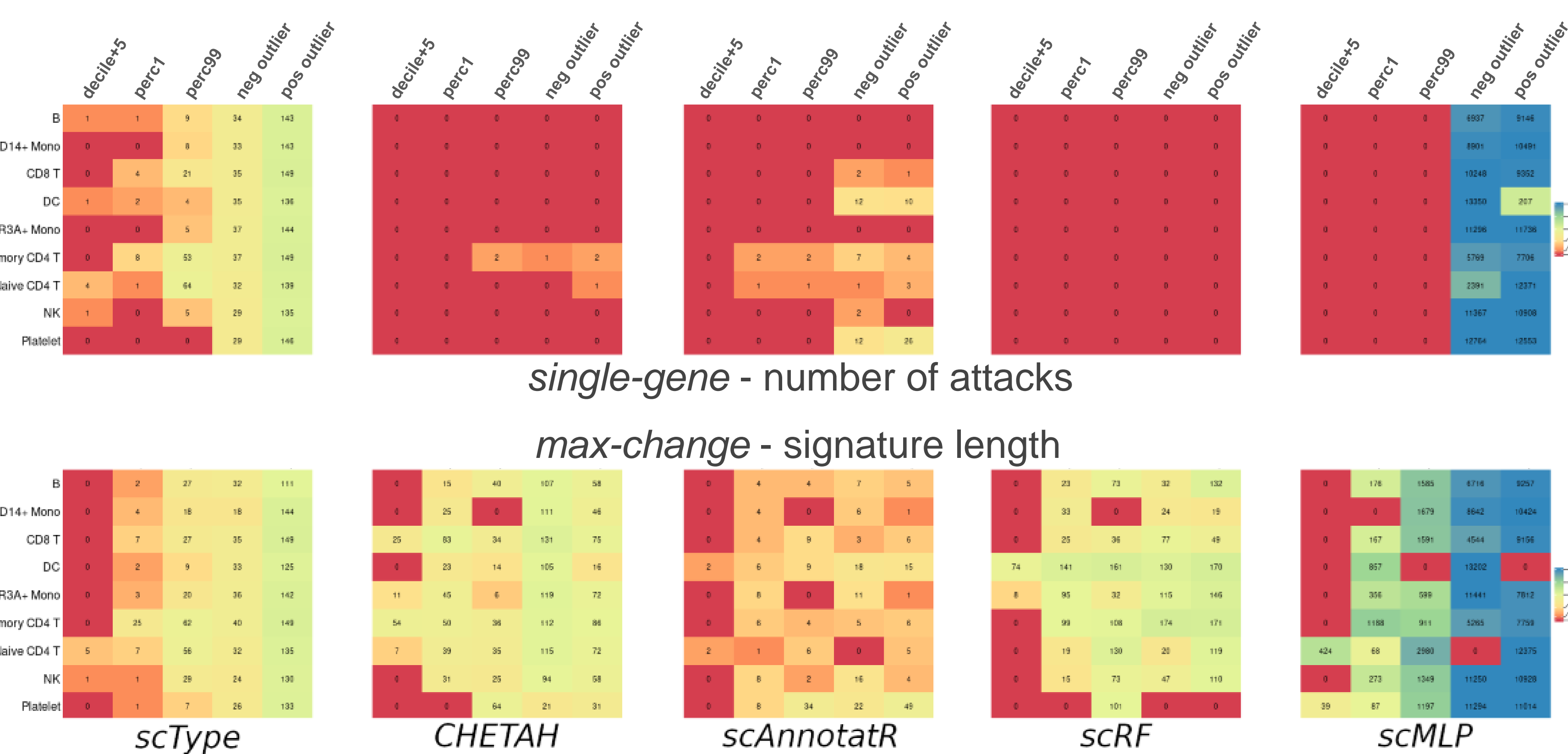
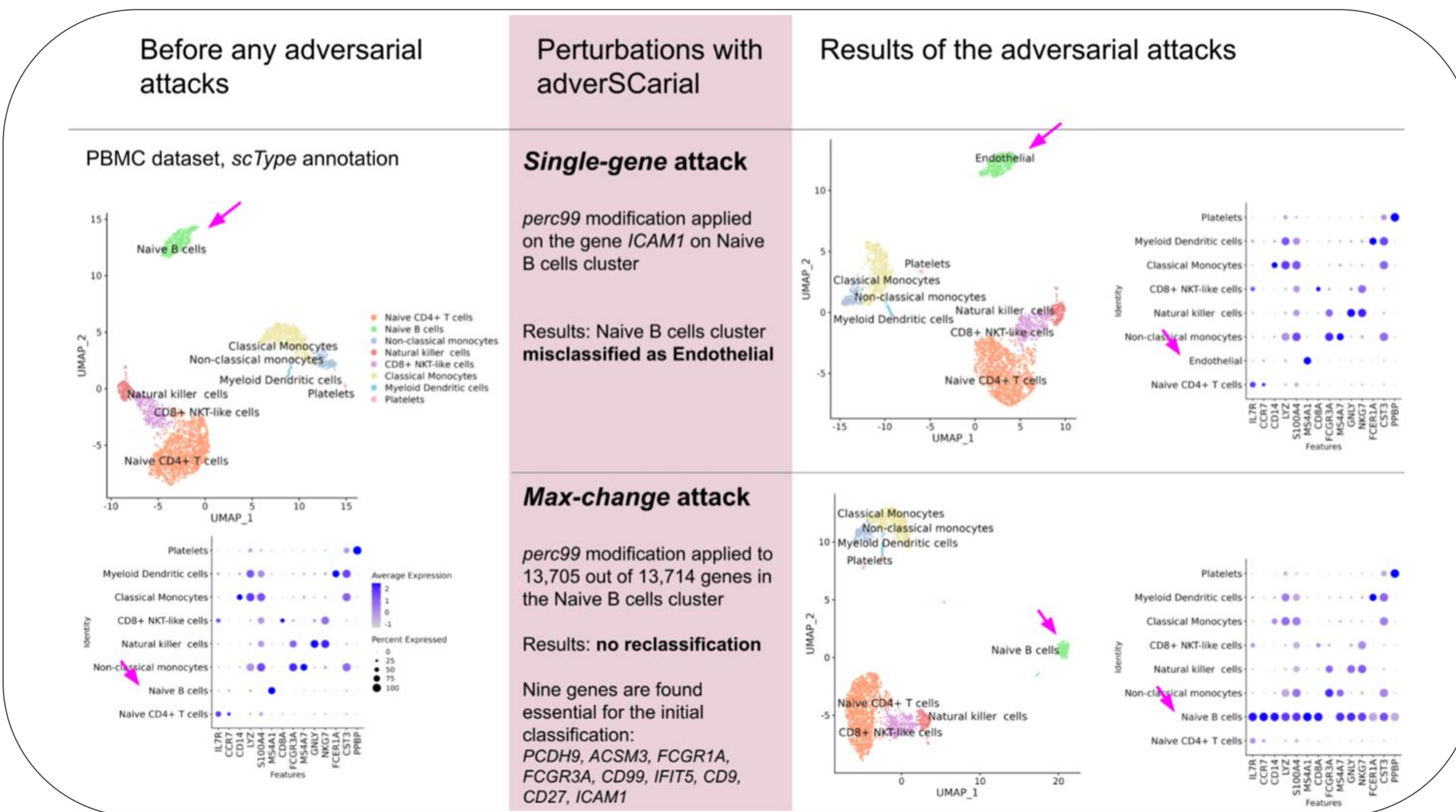
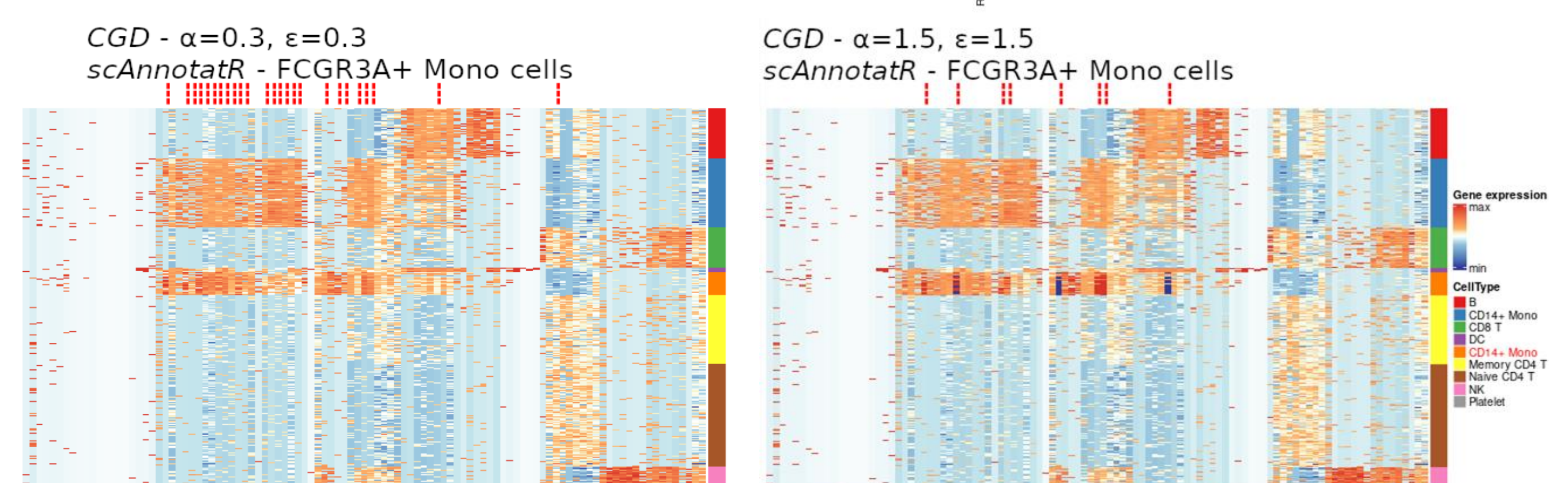
$$\text{slope} = (\nabla_{x_j}^d y_{x_i})_{\text{ctype}2, x_{\text{clust}m}} - (\nabla_{x_j}^d y_{x_i})_{\text{ctype}1, x_{\text{clust}m}}$$

$$(x_{ij}^{n+1})_j = x_{ij}(1 - \delta_{ij}) + ((1 + \alpha \cdot \text{sign}(x_{ij}) \cdot \text{sign}(\text{slope}))x_{ij} + \epsilon \cdot \text{sign}(\text{slope}))\delta_{ij}$$

$$x_{\text{clust}m}^{\text{adv}} = (x_{ij}^{n+1})_{i \in \text{clust}m}$$

Detectability

Allowing for control over modification intensity using α and ϵ parameters, CGD yields invisible modifications with low values such as $\alpha = \epsilon = 0.3$ to visible ones with $\alpha = \epsilon = 1.5$. However, with low values the attacks have to impact many genes to fool the classifier, when far less genes are needed with higher values. In the example below, CGD imperceptibly adjusted 125 genes to alter *scAnnotatR* classification of the FCGR3A+ Mono cell cluster. Only 19 genes had to be ostensibly modified for the same result.



Evaluation of different types of scRNA-seq classifiers

We next conducted a comprehensive examination of the robustness of five distinct ML models dedicated to classifying scRNA-seq data. Three of these classifiers were sourced from existing literature: *scType* (marker-based model) [4], CHETAH (hierarchical classification) [5], and *scAnnotatR* (SVM) [6]. For the purpose of this evaluation, we implemented and trained two new classifiers, one based on random forests, hereby called *scRF*, and one deep learning neural network model based on a multilayer perceptron, called *scMLP*.

With the continuous expansion of **single-cell transcriptomics** in many domains, including clinical use and precision medicine, we believe *adverSCarial* can be of help for the development of more **reliable** scRNA-seq models, with improved **interpretability**.

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