Graph Neural Networks for Immune Gene–Disease Association Discovery Using Long-Read Sequencing and Population Genomics Data

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Abstract

The growing availability of long-read sequencing data and large-scale population genomics resources presents unprecedented opportunities for characterizing the highly polymorphic immune gene regions that underlie susceptibility to infectious and autoimmune diseases. However, the complexity of immune gene families, including the major histocompatibility complex and killer-cell immunoglobulin-like receptors, demands computational frameworks capable of integrating heterogeneous genomic signals through structured relational learning. This paper proposes a graph neural network approach for immune gene–disease association discovery that leverages long-read sequencing calls and population-level variation data within a unified graph representation. We discuss the architectural trade-offs between inductive and transductive learning paradigms, the scalability of message-passing schemes over genome-scale interaction graphs, and the integration of multi-omic layers such as expression quantitative trait loci and epigenetic marks. A central emphasis is placed on the system-level design choices that govern model robustness, including graph construction from phased haplotypes, handling of missing data in rare alleles, and the incorporation of clinical covariates to reduce confounding. Infrastructure considerations for deploying such models across distributed computing environments are examined, along with strategies for ensuring fairness when training data are drawn from ancestrally diverse cohorts. The paper also addresses policy and governance challenges related to data privacy, consent for long-read repositories, and the ethical deployment of predictive models in clinical decision support. By situating graph neural networks within the broader socio-technical infrastructure of immune genomics, we aim to provide a roadmap for future research that balances analytical power with responsible translation.

Keywords

Graph Neural Networks, Immune Gene Variation, Long-Read Sequencing, Population Genomics, Disease Association, Scalable Frameworks, Ethical Governance.

1. Introduction

The discovery of associations between immune gene variation and human disease has long been constrained by the technical difficulties of resolving highly repetitive and structurally complex genomic regions. Traditional short-read sequencing platforms fail to span the polymorphic haplotypes of the major histocompatibility complex and other immune loci, leading to ambiguous alignments and incomplete variant calling [1, 2]. The emergence of long-read sequencing technologies, such as those from Pacific Biosciences and Oxford Nanopore, now enables the accurate phasing and calling of structural variants, copy number variations, and single-nucleotide polymorphisms within these regions at a resolution previously unattainable [3, 4]. Concurrently, population-scale projects like the 1000 Genomes Project and the UK Biobank have produced rich catalogs of human genetic diversity, offering statistical power to link rare and common immune alleles to disease phenotypes [5, 6]. Yet the sheer dimensionality and interconnected nature of genomic and phenotypic data demand analytical methods that can reason over relational structures rather than treating variants as independent features. Graph neural networks have emerged as a powerful class of models that naturally operate on graph-structured data, learning representations that aggregate information from neighboring nodes through iterative message passing [7, 8, 9]. In the context of immune gene–disease association, a graph can encode relationships among genetic variants, genes, regulatory elements, pathways, and diseases, enabling the model to exploit indirect associations and biological constraints. This paper presents a comprehensive systems-level analysis of how graph neural networks can be designed, scaled, governed, and ethically deployed to discover such associations using long-read sequencing and population genomics data.

2. Background and Related Work

The immune system’s genetic architecture is characterized by extreme polymorphism, gene duplication, and structural rearrangements that are poorly captured by short-read mapping algorithms [10, 11]. Long-read sequencing has revolutionized the characterization of these loci by providing contiguous haplotypes that resolve phasing and allelic ambiguity [3, 4]. For example, the ability to type classical human leukocyte antigen (HLA) alleles at field-resolution from long reads has significantly improved disease association studies in autoimmunity and transplant immunology [12]. Workflows such as that proposed by Wang et al. have further advanced the field by introducing scalable frameworks for comprehensive typing of polymorphic immune genes from long-read data, enabling routine integration into population-scale analyses [9]. On the computational side, graph neural networks have been applied to a variety of biomedical prediction tasks, including drug-target interaction, protein function prediction, and disease gene prioritization [13, 14]. Early graph-based methods used handcrafted network features or random walks, but the advent of graph convolutional networks enabled end-to-end learning of node and edge representations [7, 15]. Later developments introduced attention mechanisms and more expressive message-passing schemes that can capture higher-order interactions [16, 17]. In the genomic domain, graph neural networks have been used to model gene expression regulatory networks and to predict the impact of non-coding variants [18]. However, the specific characteristics of immune gene regions, such as extreme allelic diversity, copy number variation, and population-specific

haplotype structures, pose unique challenges that require careful architectural choices. Existing work has largely focused on either short-read-based variant graphs or homogeneous networks, leaving a gap in the design of heterogeneous graphs that fuse long-read haplotypes with population genomics and clinical data.

3. Data Integration and Graph Construction

The foundation of any graph neural network for immune gene–disease association is the construction of a graph that faithfully represents the underlying biological and epidemiological relationships. Long-read sequencing data yield phased haplotypes and complete gene sequences that can be aligned to a reference genome or assembled de novo. Population genomics resources provide allele frequencies, linkage disequilibrium patterns, and ancestry information across thousands of individuals [5, 6]. To construct a meaningful graph, one must define nodes and edges that capture both genetic and phenotypic information. A natural design is to treat genetic variants, genes, and diseases as distinct node types within a heterogeneous graph. Edges can represent relationships such as variant-to-gene proximity, gene-to-disease association from prior knowledge (e.g., GWAS catalog), variant co-occurrence in the same individual (via a factor graph), or regulatory interactions inferred from expression quantitative trait loci (eQTL) and chromatin conformation data. For immune genes, it is critical to incorporate haplotype-level edges that connect variants within the same phased block, as these reflect the true combinatorial effect of immune alleles. The graph can also include edge attributes describing the strength of associations, such as linkage disequilibrium r-squared values or effect sizes from previous studies. An important trade-off arises between graph size and message-passing efficiency: including every population-scale variant yields graphs with millions of nodes and edges, which may exceed the memory constraints of current hardware. Techniques such as node sampling, subgraph extraction, or hierarchical pooling can mitigate this issue, but they must be applied cautiously to avoid losing rare variants that may be crucial for disease associations [15, 19]. Another consideration is the inclusion of long-read-specific nodes representing structural variants or copy number alterations that cannot be represented as simple point mutations. These structural elements can be encoded as node attributes or as special edge types. The work by Wang et al. provides a scalable method for obtaining high-resolution typing of immune genes from long reads, which can serve as a reliable source of node features for the graph [9]. Integrating these features with population-level allele frequencies ensures that the model benefits from both high-resolution individual data and broad ancestral context.

4. Graph Neural Network Architecture for Immune Gene-Disease Association

Once the graph is constructed, the choice of graph neural network architecture determines the model's ability to propagate information along meaningful biological pathways. For immune gene–disease association, we argue that inductive learning frameworks are preferable to transductive ones because they allow the model to generalize to new individuals or unseen variants that were not present during training [15]. Inductive graph neural networks such as GraphSAGE and Graph Attention Networks learn aggregation functions that can be applied to any node, making them suitable for scenarios where population-scale inference is performed on expanding cohorts [16, 17]. The message-passing mechanism should be designed to handle heterogeneous node and edge types. A straightforward approach is to use separate linear transformations for each node type before aggregation, followed by an attention mechanism that weighs contributions from different neighbors based on edge type. For immune gene regions, edges connecting variants within the same haplotype should receive higher attention

weights, as these variants are likely to segregate together and encode functional units such as HLA molecules. The model can also incorporate global graph-level readouts for predicting disease risk for an entire individual, or node-level outputs for predicting the effect of a specific variant. A key architectural trade-off is the depth of the network. Deep graph neural networks suffer from oversmoothing, where node representations become indistinguishable after many layers [17]. For immune gene graphs, which may have long-range dependencies due to linkage disequilibrium, shallow architectures with residual connections or gating mechanisms may strike a better balance. Additionally, the integration of long-read sequencing data introduces high-confidence phased haplotypes that can be used as a form of edge regularization. For example, the model can be designed to enforce that variants belonging to the same haplotype are represented in a shared embedding space, reducing the burden of learning from sparse disease associations. The framework by Wang et al. provides a foundational pipeline for generating typed immune alleles from long reads, which can be directly fed into the graph as input node features [9]. This reduces the need for error-prone imputation and allows the graph neural network to operate on high-quality genomic data from the outset. The model's objective function should be calibrated to handle class imbalance, as disease status is often rare, and may incorporate multi-task learning to simultaneously predict multiple disease phenotypes, leveraging shared genetic architecture across immune-mediated conditions.

5. Computational Infrastructure and Scalability

Deploying graph neural networks on genome-scale graphs derived from long-read and population genomics data presents substantial computational challenges. The size of the graph can easily reach tens of millions of nodes when considering all variants from a large biobank, and each node may be associated with multiple features such as allele frequency, functional annotation, and conservation scores. Training such models requires distributed computing frameworks that can partition the graph across multiple machines while minimizing communication overhead. Graph partitioning algorithms must respect the strong linkage disequilibrium blocks characteristic of immune gene regions; otherwise, cross-partition edges may become bottlenecks. Cloud-based infrastructure with high-bandwidth interconnects is often necessary, and frameworks like DGL and PyTorch Geometric provide built-in support for distributed training. Another scalability concern is the memory footprint of storing full adjacency matrices for dense regions like the MHC. Sparse representations using edge lists or coordinate formats are essential, but even then, the number of edges can be quadratic in the number of correlated variants. One solution is to adopt a sampling strategy during each training iteration, where a mini-batch of nodes and their neighborhoods are sampled for gradient computation [15]. However, sampling can introduce bias if rare variants or edges are unlikely to be included. Long-read data, which often prioritizes depth over breadth, may produce highly connected subgraphs that need to be sampled carefully to retain structural information. The infrastructure must also support frequent updates as new long-read datasets become available. The scalable framework offered by Wang et al. is designed to handle ongoing typing of polymorphic immune genes from long reads, and integrating such a pipeline with a graph neural network training loop requires an efficient data ingestion layer [9]. Moreover, model serving for clinical or research applications demands low-latency inference, which may be achieved through model quantization or distillation while preserving predictive performance.

6. Robustness, Fairness, and Ethical Considerations

The robustness of graph neural networks for immune gene–disease association depends critically on the quality of input data and the representativeness of the training population. Long-read sequencing data, while highly accurate for phasing, can still contain systematic errors in homopolymer runs or highly repetitive regions, which may introduce noise into the graph. Robustness can be improved by incorporating uncertainty estimates from the sequencing platform and modeling missing data as a separate class. Another vulnerability is the potential for confounding by population stratification; if the training graph is constructed predominantly from individuals of European ancestry, the model may learn spurious associations that do not transfer to other populations. Fairness considerations demand that the graph includes diverse ancestral backgrounds and that the model's performance is evaluated across subgroups. Techniques such as adversarial debiasing or re-weighting of training samples can help mitigate disparity, but they must be applied with care to avoid overcompensation that reduces overall accuracy. Additionally, the use of graph neural networks raises privacy concerns because the graph structure can encode sensitive genetic information. For instance, an adversary might infer an individual's HLA type or disease risk from node embeddings. Differential privacy mechanisms can be applied during training by adding calibrated noise to gradients, but this may degrade predictive power, especially for rare immune alleles. Governance frameworks should require explicit consent for the use of long-read sequence data in predictive models, and data-sharing agreements should stipulate the purposes for which graphs can be built. The integration of clinical outcomes further introduces regulatory considerations under HIPAA or GDPR. The work by Wang et al. emphasizes the importance of reproducible typing results, which supports transparency and auditing of model inputs [9]. Ultimately, the deployment of graph neural network-based tools in clinical settings must be accompanied by interpretability methods, such as attention visualization or GNNExplainer, to allow clinicians to understand why a particular association was predicted.

7. Policy Implications and Governance

As graph neural network models for immune gene–disease association move from research to application, policy frameworks must evolve to address the unique challenges of large-scale genomic graph analytics. One key issue is the ownership and stewardship of the graph itself: when multiple institutions contribute long-read and population data, who controls the resulting graph structure and the learned embeddings? Collaborative consortia similar to the Global Alliance for Genomics and Health may need to establish guidelines for graph versioning, access control, and derivative use. Another policy dimension concerns the accountability for erroneous predictions. If a graph neural network suggests a high disease risk based on a rare immune haplotype, and that risk is later used in a clinical decision, liability becomes a pressing matter. Regulatory agencies like the FDA may need to evaluate graph neural network models as medical devices, requiring validation on diverse populations and longitudinal datasets. Furthermore, the use of long-read data, which can reveal individual identity through unique structural variants, amplifies privacy risks. Policy should mandate the use of privacy-preserving techniques such as secure multi-party computation or federated learning when graphs are built across sites. The framework by Wang et al. provides a technical foundation for accurate immune gene typing that could be incorporated into federated architectures, as typing can be performed locally before sharing only aggregated allele frequencies [9]. However governance must also address the potential for algorithmic bias: if training populations are skewed, the graph neural network may systematically underperform for certain ethnic groups, exacerbating health disparities. Policies should

require mandatory fairness audits and the inclusion of underrepresented populations in graph construction. Finally, international coordination is needed to harmonize data formats for long-read-derived graphs, as the current landscape is fragmented. Standardization bodies such as GA4GH are well positioned to develop schemas for immune gene graphs that facilitate interoperability.

8. Conclusion

The integration of graph neural networks with long-read sequencing and population genomics data offers a transformative approach to discovering immune gene–disease associations. By representing genetic variants, haplotypes, regulatory elements, and diseases within a unified graph, these models can exploit relational structure that conventional association methods miss. This paper has examined the architectural, infrastructural, and governance trade-offs involved in deploying such systems at scale. We have highlighted the importance of inductive learning, attention mechanisms, and careful graph construction to handle the unique features of immune loci, including extreme polymorphism and structural variation. The scalable framework for immune gene typing from long-read data serves as a critical enabling technology for generating reliable node features and edges. Computational challenges related to graph size, sampling, and distributed training require careful engineering, while robustness and fairness demand diverse training data and privacy-preserving mechanisms. Policy implications extend beyond technical design to include data ownership, accountability, and regulatory oversight. Future research should explore the integration of multi-modal data such as single-cell transcriptomics and proteomics into the graph, as well as the development of dynamic graph models that can capture temporal changes in immune states. As long-read sequencing becomes more affordable and population biobanks grow, graph neural networks will play an increasingly central role in translating genomic complexity into clinical insights, provided that their deployment is guided by principles of equity, transparency, and ethical governance.

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