# Multi-modal Differentiable Unsupervised Feature Selection


## Abstract

Multi-modal high throughput biological data presents a great scientific opportunity and a significant computational challenge. In multi-modal measurements, every sample is observed simultaneously by two or more sets of sensors. In such settings, many observed variables in both modalities are often nuisance and do not carry information about the phenomenon of interest. Here, we propose a multi-modal unsupervised feature selection framework: identifying informative variables based on coupled high-dimensional measurements. Our method is designed to identify features associated with two types of latent low-dimensional structures: (i) shared structures that govern the observations in both modalities, and (ii) differential structures that appear in only one modality. To that end, we propose two Laplacian-based scoring operators. We incorporate the scores with differentiable gates that mask nuisance features and enhance the accuracy of the structure captured by the graph Laplacian. The performance of the new scheme is illustrated using synthetic and real datasets, including an extended biological application to single-cell multi-omics.


## 1 INTRODUCTION

In an effort to study biological systems, researchers are developing cutting-edge techniques that measure up to tens of thousands of variables at single-cell resolution. The complexity of such systems requires collecting multi-modal measurements to understand the interplay between different biological processes. Examples of such multi-modal measurements include SHARE-seq [Ma et al., 2020], DBiT-seq [Liu et al., 2020], CITE-seq [Stoeckius et al., 2017], etc., which have provided biological insights and advancements in applications such as transcription factor characterization [Joung et al., 2023], cell type identification in human hippocampus [Xiao et al., 2022], and immune cell profiling [Leblay et al., 2020].

Multi-modal learning is a powerful tool widely used across multiple disciplines to extract latent information from high-dimensional measurements [Sun, 2013, Yan et al., 2021]. Humans use complementary senses when attempting to "estimate" spoken words or sentences [Raij et al., 2000]. For example, lip movements can help us distinguish between two syllables that sound similar. The same intuition has inspired statisticians and machine learning researchers to develop learning techniques that exploit information captured simultaneously by complementary measurement devices.

Due to their applicability in multiple domains, there has been a growing interest in multi-modal approaches. Algorithms such as Contrastive Language–Image Pre-training (CLIP) [Radford et al., 2021] and Audioclip [Guzhov et al., 2022] have pushed the performance boundaries of machine learning for image, text, audio, analysis, and synthesis. The multi-modal data fusion task dates back to Hotelling [1936], which proposed the celebrated Canonical Correlation Analysis (CCA). CCA has many extensions [Andrew et al., 2013, Lindenbaum et al., 2022] and applications in diverse scientific domains [Pimentel et al., 2018, Chen et al., 2017]. Despite their tremendous success, classical or advanced multi-modal schemes are often unsuitable for analyzing biological data. The large number of nuisance variables, which often exceeds the number of measurement, often causes correlation based methods to overfit.

To attenuate the influence of nuisance or noisy features, several authors proposed unsupervised feature selection (UFS) schemes [Solorio-Fernández et al., 2020]. UFS seeks small subsets of informative variables in order to improve downstream analysis tasks, such as clustering or manifold learning. Empirical results demonstrate that informative features are often smooth with respect to some latent structure [Degeest et al., 2018]. In practice, the smoothness of features can be evaluated based on how slowly they vary with respect to a graph [He et al., 2005]. Follow-up works exploited this idea to identify informative features [Zhao and Liu, 2012, Shaham et al., 2021]. An alternative paradigm for

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UFS seeks subsets of features that can be used to reconstruct the entire data effectively [Balın et al., 2019].

While most fusion methods focus on extracting information shared between modalities, we propose a a multi-modal UFS framework to identify features associated both with structures that appear in both modalities, and structures that are *modality-specific*, and appear in only one modality. To capture the shared structure, we construct a symmetric shared graph Laplacian operator that enhances the shared geometry across modalities. We further propose differential graph operators that capture smooth structures that are not shared with the other modality. To perform multi-modal feature selection, we incorporate differentiable gates [Yamada et al., 2020] with the *shared* and *modality-specific* graph Laplacian scoring functions. This leads to a differentiable UFS scheme that attenuates the influence of nuisance features during training, and computes a more accurate Laplacian matrix [Lindenbaum et al., 2021].

Our contributions are four folds: (i) Develop a *shared* and *modality-specific* Laplacian scoring operators. (ii) Motivate our operators using a product of manifolds model. (iii) develop and implement a differentiable framework for multi-modal UFS. (iv) Evaluate the merits and limitations of our approach with synthetic and real data and compare it to existing schemes.

## 2 PROBLEM SETTING AND PRELIMINARIES

We are given two data matrices $\boldsymbol{X} \in \mathbb{R}^{n\times d}, \boldsymbol{Y} \in \mathbb{R}^{n\times m}$ whose rows contain $n$ observations captured simultaneously in two modalities. The two sets of observations can be, for example, two arrays of sensors, cameras with different angles, etc. We are interested in processing modalities with bijective correspondences, which implies that there is a registration between the observations in both modalities.

Though the observations are high-dimensional, we assume that there are a small number of parameters governing the physical processes that underlies the data. These parameters can be continuous such as in a developmental process, or discrete - for example, when the observations can be characterized by clustering. However, the latent structure in both modalities may not be identical. For example, the two sets of observations may be generated by sets of sensors with different resolutions or sensitivity. For illustration, consider the observations shown in Fig. 1 (left). Both modalities follow a very similar tree structure. The bottom tree, however, has an additional bifurcating point that does not appear in the upper tree (green points).

Thus, we assume the latent parameters can be partitioned into two subsets. The first component, denoted $\boldsymbol{\theta}_s$, captures the structures shared by both modalities. The second component, denoted $\boldsymbol{\theta}_x$ for modality $\boldsymbol{X}$, and $\boldsymbol{\theta}_y$ for modality $\boldsymbol{Y}$, captures the modality-specific structures that only appear in one set of observations. For example, the additional branch in the bottom tree (modality $\boldsymbol{Y}$) in Fig. 1 is governed by a parameter in $\boldsymbol{\theta}_y$. Thus, the observations $\boldsymbol{X}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y}$ are non-linear transformations of $\boldsymbol{\theta}_s, \boldsymbol{\theta}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{\theta}_s, \boldsymbol{\theta}_y$, respectively.

Many biological data modalities are high dimensional and contain noisy features, which hinders the discovery of the underlying shared or modality-specific structures. Here, our goal is to identify groups of features associated with the shared structures $\boldsymbol{\theta}_s$ (e.g., the groups of features that are smooth on the shared bifurcated tree in Fig. 1) and groups of features associated with the modality-specific structures $\boldsymbol{\theta}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{\theta}_y$ (e.g., the features that are smooth with respect to the additional branch ($\boldsymbol{\theta}_y$) of modality $\boldsymbol{Y}$ in Fig. 1). To achieve this goal, we compute two graphs that correspond to the two modalities. We use a spectral method to uncover the shared and graph-specific structures, and apply a feature selection method to detect variables relevant to these structures. To better understand our approach, we first introduce some preliminaries about graph representation in Sec. 2.1, and discuss related work on feature selection in Sec. 2.2.

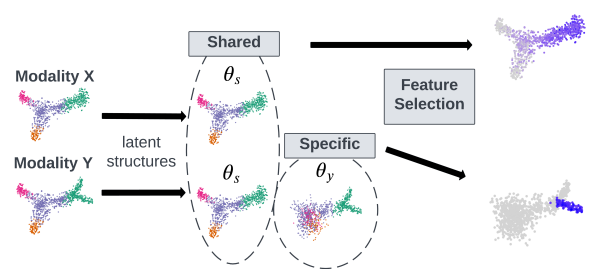



Figure 1: Overview of the goal: discovering features associated with shared and modality specific latent structures

### 2.1 THE GRAPH LAPLACIAN AND LAPLACIAN SCORE

A common assumption when analyzing high-dimensional datasets is that their structure lies on a low dimensional manifold in the high dimensional space [Linderman et al., 2019, Peterfreund et al., 2020]. Methods for manifold learning are often based on a graph that captures the affinities between data points. Let $\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)}, \boldsymbol{y}^{(i)}$ denote the $i$-th observation in the $\boldsymbol{X}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y}$ modalities and let $\boldsymbol{K}_x, \boldsymbol{K}_y$ be, respectively, their affinity matrices whose elements are computed by the following Gaussian kernel functions.

$$(\boldsymbol{K}_x)_{i,j} = \exp\big(-\frac{\|\boldsymbol{x}^{(i)} - \boldsymbol{x}^{(j)}\|^2}{2\sigma_x^2}\big),$$
$$(\boldsymbol{K}_y)_{i,j} = \exp\big(-\frac{\|\boldsymbol{y}^{(i)} - \boldsymbol{y}^{(j)}\|^2}{2\sigma_y^2}\big),$$

where $\sigma_x, \sigma_y$ are user-defined bandwidths that control the decay of each Gaussian kernel. Intuitively, the affinities

decay exponentially with the distances between samples, thus capturing the local neighborhood structure in the high-dimensional space.

We compute the normalized Laplacian matrix by $\boldsymbol{L}_x = \boldsymbol{D}_x^{-\frac{1}{2}} \boldsymbol{K}_x \boldsymbol{D}_x^{-\frac{1}{2}}$, where $\boldsymbol{D}_x$ is a diagonal matrix of row sums of $\boldsymbol{K}_x$. Similarly, $\boldsymbol{L}_y$ is computed for modality $\boldsymbol{Y}$. An important property of the Laplacian matrix is that its eigenvectors corresponding to large eigenvalues reflect the underlying geometry of the data. The Laplacian eigenvectors are used for many applications including data embeddings [Belkin and Niyogi, 2003], clustering [Von Luxburg, 2007], and feature selection [He et al., 2005]. For the latter, a popular metric for unsupervised identification of informative features is the Laplacian Score (LS) [He et al., 2005],

$$\boldsymbol{f}^T \boldsymbol{L}_x \boldsymbol{f} = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \lambda_i (\boldsymbol{f}^T \boldsymbol{u}_i)^2, \tag{1}$$

where $\boldsymbol{L}_x = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \lambda_i \boldsymbol{u}_i \boldsymbol{u}_i^T$ is the eigendecomposition of $\boldsymbol{L}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{f}$ is the normalized feature vector. Intuitively, when $\boldsymbol{f}$ varies slowly with respect to the underlying structure of $\boldsymbol{L}_x$, it will have a significant component projected onto the subspace of its top eigenvectors, and a higher score.

### 2.2 DIFFERENTIABLE UNSUPERVISED FEATURE SELECTION

A key limitation of the Laplacian score stems from its underlying assumption that the Laplacian matrix $\boldsymbol{L}_x$ accurately reflects the latent structure of the data. This assumption, however, may not be valid in the presence of many noisy features. In such cases the top eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{L}_x$ may be heavily influenced by noise and would not capture the underlying structure accurately. A recent work [Lindenbaum et al., 2021] addresses this problem by developing Differentiable Unsupervised Feature Selection (DUFS), a framework that estimates the Laplacian matrix while simultaneously selecting informative features using Laplacian scores. Specifically, DUFS computes a binary vector $\boldsymbol{s} \in \{0,1\}^d$ that indicates which features are kept ($s_j = 1$) and which features are not ($s_j = 0$). Let $\Delta(\boldsymbol{s})$ denote a diagonal matrix with $\boldsymbol{s}$ on the diagonal. At each iteration of DUFS, the Laplacian is computed based on $\tilde{\boldsymbol{X}} = \boldsymbol{X}\Delta(\boldsymbol{s})$, while simultaneously updaing $\boldsymbol{s}$ by optimizing over the following loss function.

$$\mathcal{L} = -\frac{1}{n}\mathrm{Tr}[\tilde{\boldsymbol{X}}^T \boldsymbol{L}_{\tilde{x}} \tilde{\boldsymbol{X}}] + \lambda \|\boldsymbol{s}\|_0, \tag{2}$$

where Tr[] denotes the matrix trace. The first term equals the sum of Laplacian Scores across all features normalized by the total number of samples $n$ in a training batch. The second term is a $\ell_0$ regularizer that imposes sparsity to the number of selected features, with $\lambda$ being a tunable parameter that controls the sparsity level. The output of DUFS is a list of a small number of selected features, and the Laplacian matrix $\boldsymbol{L}_{\tilde{x}}$ learned from them.

However, due to the discrete nature of the $\ell_0$ regularizer, the standard discrete indicator vector $\boldsymbol{s} \in \{0,1\}^D$ will make objective in Eq. (2) not differentiable and finding the optimal solution intractable. Following, [Yamada et al., 2020], one can relax the $\ell_0$ norm to a probabilistic differentiable counterpart, by replacing the binary indicator vector $\boldsymbol{s}$ with a relaxed Bernoulli vector $\boldsymbol{z}$. Specifically, $\boldsymbol{z}$ is a continuous Gaussian reparametrization of the discrete random variables, termed Stochastic Gates. It is defined for each feature $i$:

$$z_i = \max(0, \min(1, 0.5 + \mu_i + \epsilon_i)), \quad \epsilon_i \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2) \tag{3}$$

where $\mu_i$ is a learnable parameter, and $\sigma$ is fixed throughout training. The loss function in Eq. (2) can now be reformulated as follows, which is the final objective of the DUFS:

$$\mathcal{L} = -\frac{1}{n}\mathrm{Tr}[\tilde{\boldsymbol{X}}^T \boldsymbol{L}_{\tilde{x}} \tilde{\boldsymbol{X}}] + \lambda \|\boldsymbol{z}\|_0. \tag{4}$$

## 3 METHOD

We now derive our approach for unsupervised feature selection in multi-modal settings. Our method is designed to capture two types of features: (i) Features associated with latent structures that are *shared* between two modalities. (ii) Features associated with *differential latent structures*, that appear in only one modality. In Sec. 3.1 and 3.2, we derive two operators designed to capture shared and differential structures, respectively. To motivate our approach and illustrate the difference between shared and differential structures, we specifically address two examples: (i) shared and differential clusters and (ii) product of manifolds. We use the proposed operators in Sec. 3.3 to derive mmDUFS.

### 3.1 THE SHARED STRUCTURE OPERATOR

To motivate our approach, let us consider the artificial example illustrated in Fig. 2. The lower figure in the left panel shows the observations in modality $\boldsymbol{Y}$, which contains samples from a mixture of three distinct Gaussians. The upper figure shows modality $\boldsymbol{X}$, where one of the three clusters is partitioned again into three (less distinct) clusters.

It is instructive to study the *ideal setting* where we make the following assumptions: (i) The largest distance between two nodes within a cluster, denoted $d_{\text{within}}$ is much smaller than the smallest distance between pairs of nodes of two clusters, denoted $d_{\text{between}}$. (ii) The bandwidth $\sigma_x, \sigma_y$ is chosen such that $d_{\text{within}} \ll \sigma_x, \sigma_y \ll d_{\text{between}}$. In this setting, the three Gaussians constitute three main clusters, with no connections between pairs of nodes of different clusters and similar weights between pairs of nodes within clusters. Thus, the leading eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{L}_y$ span the subspace of the three *indicator vectors*. That is, vectors that contain the square root of the degree of a node in a cluster and a zero value outside the cluster. See Von Luxburg [2007] and illustration

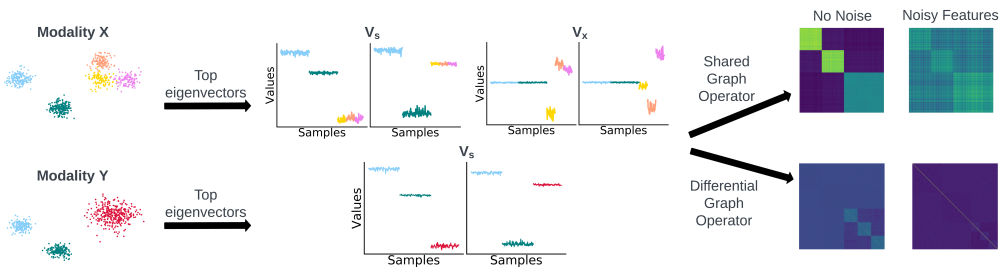



Figure 2: Visualization of the eigenvectors and the affinity matrix of the proposed operators on an artificial cluster example. Left: Visualization of the clusters. Middle: Leading eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{L}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{L}_y$. Right: Affinity matrices of the proposed shared graph operator (top) and the differential graph operator (bottom) with/without the presence of noisy features.

in Fig. 2. The matrix $\boldsymbol{L}_x$ has two extra significant eigenvectors that span the separation of the third cluster, which appears only in $\boldsymbol{X}$. We denote by $\boldsymbol{V}_s$ a matrix that contains the indicator vectors of the three partitions that appear in $\boldsymbol{X}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y}$ and by $\boldsymbol{V}_x$ a matrix that contains the partitions that appear only in $\boldsymbol{X}$. In our ideal setting, the two Laplacian matrices $\boldsymbol{L}_x, \boldsymbol{L}_y$ are equal to

$$\boldsymbol{L}_x \approx \boldsymbol{V}_s\boldsymbol{V}_s^T + \boldsymbol{V}_x\boldsymbol{V}_x^T, \qquad \boldsymbol{L}_y \approx \boldsymbol{V}_s\boldsymbol{V}_s^T. \tag{5}$$

To capture *shared* latent structures we compute the following shared operator $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}}$,

$$\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}} = \boldsymbol{L}_x\boldsymbol{L}_y + \boldsymbol{L}_y\boldsymbol{L}_x. \tag{6}$$

For the cluster setting, the orthogonality between the matrices $\boldsymbol{V}_s, \boldsymbol{V}_x$ implies $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}} \approx 2\boldsymbol{V}_s\boldsymbol{V}_s^T$.

The symmetric product of the two Laplacians captures clusters that appear in both modalities while removing modality-specific clusters, see right panel of Fig. 2. We note that a similar operator to Eq. (6) is proposed in [Shnitzer et al., 2019] for computing low-dimensional representations. Here, we combine our operator with DUFS to develop a multi-modal feature selection pipeline. We illustrate the usefulness of the shared operator for the product of manifold setting.

**Product of manifolds.** Let $\mathcal{M}_a, \mathcal{M}_b$ and $\mathcal{M}_s$ be three low-dimensional manifolds embedded in $\mathbb{R}^n$, which are smooth transformations of three sets of latent variables $\boldsymbol{\theta}_a, \boldsymbol{\theta}_b$ and $\boldsymbol{\theta}_s$. To further motivate our approach, consider the case where modalities $\boldsymbol{X}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y}$ each contains observations from the products $\mathcal{M}_y, \mathcal{M}_x$ given by,

$$\mathcal{M}_y = \mathcal{M}_s \times \mathcal{M}_a, \qquad \mathcal{M}_x = \mathcal{M}_s \times \mathcal{M}_b.$$

Note that the dependence on $\boldsymbol{\theta}_s$ is shared between $\mathcal{M}_x, \mathcal{M}_y$, while the dependence on $\boldsymbol{\theta}_a, \boldsymbol{\theta}_b$ is modality-specific.

In a product of manifolds $\mathcal{M}_x = \mathcal{M}_s \times \mathcal{M}_b$, every point $\boldsymbol{x} \in \mathcal{M}_x$ is associated with two points $\boldsymbol{x}_s \in \mathcal{M}_s$ and $\boldsymbol{x}_b \in \mathcal{M}_b$. Thus, we can define projection operators $\pi_b^x(\boldsymbol{x}), \pi_s^x(\boldsymbol{x})$ that map a point $\boldsymbol{x}$ in $\mathcal{M}_x$ to points in $\mathcal{M}_b, \mathcal{M}_s$, respectively.

In addition, for every function $f^b : \mathcal{M}_b \to \mathbb{R}$ we define its extension to the product manifold $\mathcal{M}_x$ by

$$(f^b \circ \pi_b^x)(\boldsymbol{x}) = f^b(\pi_b^x(\boldsymbol{x})).$$

An important property of a product $\mathcal{M}_x$ is that the eigenfunctions $f_{l,m}^x$ of the Laplace Beltrami operator are equal to the pointwise product of the eigenfunctions of $\mathcal{M}_b, \mathcal{M}_s$, extended to $\mathcal{M}_x$.

$$f_{l,m}^x = (f_l^s \circ \pi_s^x)(f_m^b \circ \pi_b^x). \tag{7}$$

We refer to [Zhang et al., 2021b] for a detailed description of the properties of the product of manifolds. A simple example of a product of manifolds is a 2D rectangle area $(\boldsymbol{\theta}_s, \boldsymbol{\theta}_b) \in [0, l_s] \times [0, l_b]$. the projection $\pi_s^x$ yields the first coordinate, while $\pi_b^x$ yields the second. The eigenfunctions of the product with Neumann boundary conditions are equal to,

$$f_{l,m} = \cos(\pi l \boldsymbol{\theta}_s / l_s)\cos(\pi m \boldsymbol{\theta}_b / l_b). \tag{8}$$

**Observations generated uniformly at random over the product of manifolds.** Here, we assume that the observations in the two modalities are generated by random and independent uniformly distributed samples over $\mathcal{M}_x, \mathcal{M}_y$. Let $\boldsymbol{\phi}_{l,m}^x(\boldsymbol{x}_i), \boldsymbol{\phi}_{l,k}^y(\boldsymbol{y}_i)$ denote the eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{L}_x, \boldsymbol{L}_y$ evaluated at $\boldsymbol{x}_i, \boldsymbol{y}_i$ respectively. In the asymptotic regime where the number of points $n \to \infty$, the eigenvectors converge to the eigenfunctions as characterized in Eq. (7).

$$\begin{aligned} \boldsymbol{\phi}_{l,m}^x(\boldsymbol{x}_i) &= \boldsymbol{\phi}_l^s(\pi_s^x(\boldsymbol{x}_i))\boldsymbol{\phi}_m^b(\pi_b^x(\boldsymbol{x}_i)) \\ \boldsymbol{\phi}_{l,k}^y(\boldsymbol{y}_i) &= \boldsymbol{\phi}_l^s(\pi_s^y(\boldsymbol{y}_i))\boldsymbol{\phi}_k^a(\pi_a^y(\boldsymbol{y}_i)). \end{aligned} \tag{9}$$

Details about the definition and rate of convergence can be found, for example, in [Cheng and Wu, 2022, García Trillos et al., 2020], and reference therein. It is instructive to consider the ideal case, where due to their dependence on the independent projections $\pi_b^x$ and $\pi_a^x$, the eigenvectors $\boldsymbol{\phi}_{l,m}^x, \boldsymbol{\phi}_{l,k}^y$ satisfy the following orthogonality property,

$$(\boldsymbol{\phi}_{l,m}^x)^T\boldsymbol{\phi}_{l',k}^y = \begin{cases} 1 & l = l', m = k = 0 \\ 0 & o.w. \end{cases} \tag{10}$$

It follows that the operator $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}}$ is equal to,

$$\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}} = \boldsymbol{L}_x \boldsymbol{L}_y + \boldsymbol{L}_y \boldsymbol{L}_x = \sum_l (\boldsymbol{\phi}_l^s \otimes \boldsymbol{\phi}_0^a)(\boldsymbol{\phi}_l^s \otimes \boldsymbol{\phi}_0^b)^T, \tag{11}$$

where $\otimes$ denotes the Hadamard product. The vectors $\boldsymbol{\phi}_0^a, \boldsymbol{\phi}_0^b$ constitute the degree of the different observations and have little effect on the outcome. Thus, the leading eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}}$ are associated with the shared component and not the differential components in the product of manifolds. Below, we illustrate this phenomenon with two examples.

**Example 1: points in a 3D cube.** Consider points generated uniformly at random over a 3D cube of dimensions $[0, l_s] \times [0, l_a] \times [0, l_b]$. Let $\boldsymbol{Y} \in \mathbb{R}^{n \times 2}$ constitute the first two coordinates of $n$ independent observations, and let $\boldsymbol{X}$ constitute the first and third coordinates. This is a simple case of a product of manifolds, where the shared variable $\theta_s$ is the first coordinate, while the modality-specific variables $\theta_a, \theta_b$ are the second and third coordinates. Following Eq. (8), the eigenvectors of the graph Laplacian matrices $\boldsymbol{L}_x, \boldsymbol{L}_y$, evaluated at $(\theta_s, \theta_b)$ and $(\theta_s, \theta_a)$ converge to,

$$\begin{aligned} \phi_{lm}^x(\theta_s, \theta_b) &= \cos(\pi l \theta_s / l_s) \cos(\pi m \theta_b / l_b) \\ \phi_{lk}^y(\theta_s, \theta_a) &= \cos(\pi l \theta_s / l_s) \cos(\pi k \theta_a / l_a). \end{aligned} \tag{12}$$

The first row of Fig. 1 (Appendix A) shows a scatter plot of the points in $\boldsymbol{X}$ (located according to the first two coordinates), colored by the values of the leading eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{L}_x$. The second row shows the points in $\boldsymbol{X}$, but colored by the eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}}$. As expected, all the eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}}$ are functions of the shared coordinate $\theta_s$.

**Example 2: videos taken from different angles.** Our second example is based on an experiment done in [Lederman and Talmon, 2014], where the two modalities constitute two videos of three dolls rotating at different angular speeds. The first camera (modality $\boldsymbol{X}$) captures the middle and left doll, while the second camera (modality $\boldsymbol{Y}$) captures the middle and right dolls (see Fig. 4a). Here, the shared variable $\boldsymbol{\theta}_s$ is the angle of the middle doll captured by both modalities. The modality-specific variables $\boldsymbol{\theta}_a, \boldsymbol{\theta}_b$ are the angles of the left and right dolls captured by each modality separately.

To illustrate Eq. (11) in this example, we first compute an approximation of the eigenvectors $\boldsymbol{\phi}_l^s$. To that end, we cropped each image in one of the videos such that only the middle doll (which appears in both modalities) is shown. One may think of this operation as a projection to the shared manifold. Next, we computed from the cropped images the leading eigenvectors $\boldsymbol{\phi}_l^s$ of the Laplacian matrix. Fig. 2 (Appendix A) shows the leading three eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}}$ as a function of $\boldsymbol{\phi}_1^s, \boldsymbol{\phi}_2^s, \boldsymbol{\phi}_3^s$ as computed by the cropped images. The figure shows a linear dependency between the vectors, which implies that the shared operator retained only the shared component of the two modalities.

### 3.2 THE DIFFERENTIAL GRAPH OPERATORS

We design two operators $\boldsymbol{Q}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{Q}_y$ to infer latent structures that are *modality specific* to $\boldsymbol{X}, \boldsymbol{Y}$ respectively.

$$\boldsymbol{Q}_x = \tilde{\boldsymbol{L}}_y^{-1} \boldsymbol{L}_x \tilde{\boldsymbol{L}}_y^{-1}, \qquad \boldsymbol{Q}_y = \tilde{\boldsymbol{L}}_x^{-1} \boldsymbol{L}_y \tilde{\boldsymbol{L}}_x^{-1}, \tag{13}$$

where $\tilde{\boldsymbol{L}}_x = \boldsymbol{L}_x + c\boldsymbol{I}$, $\tilde{\boldsymbol{L}}_y = \boldsymbol{L}_y + c\boldsymbol{I}$, and $c$ is a regularization constant. We address the cluster example used for the shared operator to motivate the use of these operators.

**Differential clusters.** In the synthetic cluster example in Fig. 2, modality $\boldsymbol{X}$ has three smaller clusters not observed in modality $\boldsymbol{Y}$. We show that one can detect the *differential clusters* of modality $\boldsymbol{X}$ via the leading eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{Q}_x$. By Eq. (5), we can approximate $\tilde{\boldsymbol{L}}_y$ via,

$$\tilde{\boldsymbol{L}}_y = (1+c)\boldsymbol{V}_s \boldsymbol{V}_s^T + c\boldsymbol{V}_{\text{comp}} \boldsymbol{V}_{\text{comp}}^T, \tag{14}$$

where $\boldsymbol{V}_{\text{comp}} \in \mathbb{R}^{n \times (n-3)}$ contains, as columns, vectors that span the complementary subspace to $\boldsymbol{V}_s$. We write $\boldsymbol{Q}_x$ as:

$$\boldsymbol{Q}_x = \tilde{\boldsymbol{L}}_y^{-1} \boldsymbol{L}_x \tilde{\boldsymbol{L}}_y^{-1} = c^{-2} \boldsymbol{V}_x \boldsymbol{V}_x^T + (1+c)^{-2} \boldsymbol{V}_s \boldsymbol{V}_s^T. \tag{15}$$

The differential operator in Eq. (15) has two terms. The first spans the subspace corresponding to the differential structure $\boldsymbol{V}_x$, while the second spans the subspace of the shared structure $\boldsymbol{V}_s$. Since $c^{-2} > (1+c)^{-2}$, it follows that the leading eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{Q}_x$ span the subspace of $\boldsymbol{V}_x$.

In theory, we can directly apply these operators to learn the structures. However, in many real-world applications, e.g., single-cell multi-omic technologies, both $\boldsymbol{X}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y}$ can be very noisy. In particular, abundant noisy features (e.g., genes) might dominate the data, and the top eigenvectors of $\boldsymbol{L}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{L}_y$ might not capture the underlying structure, which would be detrimental to the learning of $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}}$, $\boldsymbol{Q}_x$, and $\boldsymbol{Q}_y$. As shown in the affinity matrices on the right of Fig. 2, the structures are less clear when many noisy features are present. Therefore, it is necessary to have a feature selection framework that can effectively remove these noisy features in our multi-modal setting. With the aforementioned DUFS feature selection framework as the foundation, we will show in the next section how we can incorporate it into our proposed operators in the multi-modal setting.

### 3.3 MMDUFS

In this section, we describe our framework, termed multi-modal Differential Unsupervised Feature Selection (mmDUFS). We incorporates differentiable gates [Lindenbaum et al., 2021] with loss functions based on the shared and differential operators, detailed in Sec. 3.1 and 3.2. Our goal is to compute an accurate shared graph operator ($\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}}$

in Eq. (6)) and differential graph operators ($\boldsymbol{Q}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{Q}_y$ in Eq. (13)) while simultaneously selecting the informative features. Let $\boldsymbol{f}_x, \boldsymbol{f}_y$ denote a feature vector in $\boldsymbol{X}, \boldsymbol{Y}$, respectively. To quantify how noisy or informative the features are with respect to the shared structure, we replace the Laplacian $\boldsymbol{L}$ in Eq. (1) with $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}}$, which yields the shared score $\boldsymbol{f}_x^T \boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}} \boldsymbol{f}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{f}_y^T \boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}} \boldsymbol{f}_y$. Similarly, $\boldsymbol{f}_x^T \boldsymbol{Q}_x \boldsymbol{f}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{f}_y^T \boldsymbol{Q}_y \boldsymbol{f}_y$ quantify the smoothness of these features with respect to the differential graph operators $\boldsymbol{Q}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{Q}_y$. The rationale behind these generalized Laplacian Scores is similar to the original score. For instance, let $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}} = \sum_{i=1}^n \lambda_i \boldsymbol{u}_i \boldsymbol{u}_i^T$ be the eigendecomposition of $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}}$. If $\boldsymbol{f}_x$ varies slowly with respect to the underlying shared structure, it will have a larger component projected onto the subspace of $\boldsymbol{P}_{\text{shared}}$, thus leads to a higher score.

To learn features with high generalized Laplacian Scores and accurate graph operators, mmDUFS learns two sets of Stochastic Gates $\boldsymbol{z}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{z}_y$ that filter irrelevant features in each modality. Similar to DUFS [Lindenbaum et al., 2021], these stochastic gates multiply the data matrices $\boldsymbol{X}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y}$ to remove nuisance features, i.e., $\tilde{\boldsymbol{X}} = \boldsymbol{X}\Delta(\boldsymbol{z}_x)$ and $\tilde{\boldsymbol{Y}} = \boldsymbol{Y}\Delta(\boldsymbol{z}_y)$. At each iteration, the updated graph operators ($\tilde{\boldsymbol{P}}_{\text{shared}}$, $\tilde{\boldsymbol{Q}}_x$, $\tilde{\boldsymbol{Q}}_y$) are recomputed based on the gated inputs.

mmDUFS has two modes: (i) detecting shared structures using the shared graph operator $\tilde{\boldsymbol{P}}_{\text{shared}}$, and (ii) detecting modality-specific structures using the differential graph operators $\tilde{\boldsymbol{Q}}_x$, and $\tilde{\boldsymbol{Q}}_y$. To learn the shared structure and the corresponding features, we propose to optimize $\boldsymbol{z}_x$ and $\boldsymbol{z}_y$ by minimizing the following loss function:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{shared}} = -\frac{1}{n}\text{Tr}[\tilde{\boldsymbol{X}}^T \tilde{\boldsymbol{P}}_{\text{shared}} \tilde{\boldsymbol{X}}] - \frac{1}{n}\text{Tr}[\tilde{\boldsymbol{Y}}^T \tilde{\boldsymbol{P}}_{\text{shared}} \tilde{\boldsymbol{Y}}] + \lambda_x \|\boldsymbol{z}_x\|_0 + \lambda_y \|\boldsymbol{z}_y\|_0,$$

where the first two terms are the Shared Laplacian Scores for each modality, and the regularizers $\lambda_x \|\boldsymbol{z}_x\|_0$ and $\lambda_y \|\boldsymbol{z}_y\|_0$ control the number of selected features for each modality, with tunable parameters $\lambda_x, \lambda_y$ that control the level of sparsity. In Appendix B.1, we suggest a procedure to tune these regularization parameters. Similarly, the loss functions $\mathcal{L}_x, \mathcal{L}_y$ are designed to detect features associated with structures that appear only in modality $\boldsymbol{X}, \boldsymbol{Y}$, respectively.

$$\mathcal{L}_x = -\frac{1}{n}\text{Tr}[\tilde{\boldsymbol{X}}^T \boldsymbol{Q}_{\tilde{x}} \tilde{\boldsymbol{X}}] + \lambda_x \|\boldsymbol{z}_x\|_0,$$
$$\mathcal{L}_y = -\frac{1}{n}\text{Tr}[\tilde{\boldsymbol{Y}}^T \boldsymbol{Q}_{\tilde{y}} \tilde{\boldsymbol{Y}}] + \lambda_y \|\boldsymbol{z}_y\|_0, \tag{16}$$

where the first term in each loss is termed Differential Laplacian Scores. In the following section we show the usefulness of these score functions for detecting relevant features.

# 4 RESULTS

We benchmark mmDUFS using synthetic and real multimodal datasets. For discovering the shared structures and associated features, we compare mmDUFS with the shared operator to the following variants of kernel fusion-based methods previously proposed for dimensionality reduction: (1) Matrix Concatenation (MC), where the Laplacian is computed based on a concatenated matrix of the two modalities. (2) Multi-modal Kernel Sum (mmKS) [Zhou and Burges, 2007], where the Laplacian is equal to $\boldsymbol{L}_x + \boldsymbol{L}_y$. (3) Multimodal Kernel Product (mmKP) [Lindenbaum et al., 2015]. where the Laplacian is equal to $\boldsymbol{L}_x \boldsymbol{L}_y$.

For each baseline, the $k$ features with the highest Laplacian Scores are selected. For the synthetic datasets, we set $k$ to be the correct number of informative features. We evaluate the performance of different methods by the F1-score $\text{F1} = \text{TP}/(\text{TP} + \frac{1}{2(\text{FP}+\text{FN})})$, where TP is the number of informative features selected by each method, FP is the number of uninformative selected features, and FN is the number of missed informative features. For the rescaled MNIST and rotating doll examples, the informative features are set to the $25\%$ pixels with the highest standard deviation.

## 4.1 SYNTHETIC EXAMPLES

**Rescaled MNIST.** We designed a rescaled MNIST example with shared and modality-specific digits. We first randomly sample one image ($28 \times 28$ pixels) of digits $0$, $3$, $8$. Then, we rescale each digit randomly and independently $500$ times resulting with $500$ images of $0$, $3$, and $8$. We concatenate pairs of $0$ and $3$ to create modality $\boldsymbol{X}$, and pairs of the same $3$ and random $8$ to create $\boldsymbol{Y}$, see example in Fig. 3a. Thus, this dataset consists of $500$ samples and $28 \times 56$ pixels in each modality, with digit $3$ shared between the modalities and digit $0$ and $8$ modality specific.

We apply mmDUFS with the shared operator to this example to select pixels corresponding to $3$. The left column of Fig. 3b shows the pixels gate values from mmDUFS for modality $\boldsymbol{X}$ (top) and $\boldsymbol{Y}$ (bottom). We can see that selected pixels outline the shape of the digit $3$ well. Table 1 compares the F1-score achieved by mmDUFS to three baselines. We can see that mmDUFS achieves a higher F1-score than all the baselines on both modalities, demonstrating its ability to identify informative features accurately.

Lastly, we apply mmDUFS with the differential operator to select modality-specific pixels. The right column of Fig. 3b shows the pixel gate values for both modality $\boldsymbol{X}$ (top) and $\boldsymbol{Y}$ (bottom). We can see that mmDUFS selects pixels that outline digits $0, 8$ for modalities $\boldsymbol{X}, \boldsymbol{Y}$, respectively. Additionally, mmDUFS achieves F1-score $0.8059$ and $0.8832$ for $\boldsymbol{X}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y}$, showcasing its effectiveness in identifying features contributing to the differential structures.

**Synthetic Developmental Tree.** Tree structures are ubiquitous throughout different biological processes and data modalities in single-cell biology [Plass et al., 2018, Zhang

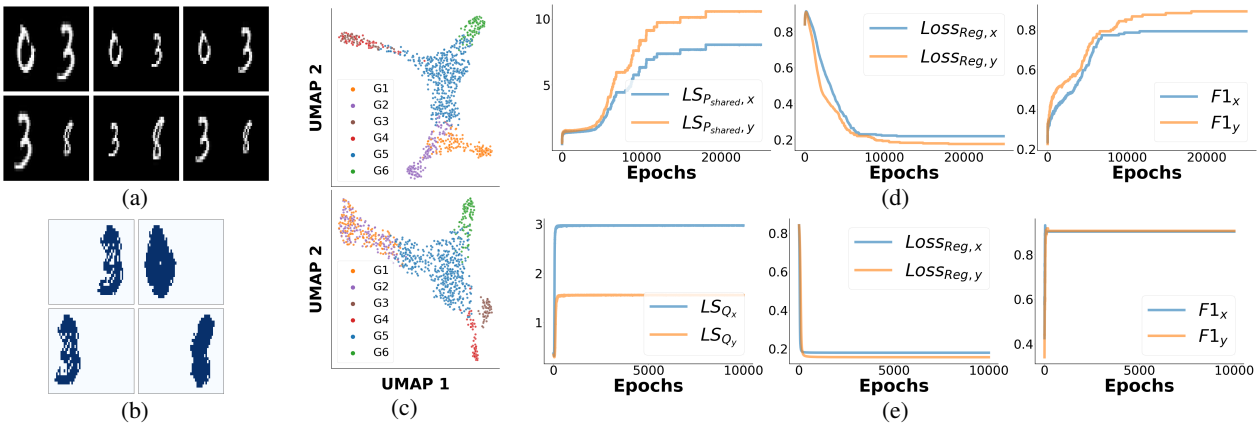



Figure 3: Left (a-b): Evaluation of the proposed approach on the rescaled MNIST dataset. (a): Random images from modality $X$ (upper row) and modality $Y$ (bottom row) in gray-scale. (b): Selected pixels (dark blue) for the shared operator (left column) and the differential operator (right column). Right (c-e): Synthetic developmental tree example. (c): UMAP embeddings of the tree using data from modality $\boldsymbol{X}$ (top) and modality $\boldsymbol{Y}$ (bottom). (d-e): Change of the Shared/Differential Laplacian Scores, regularization loss, and the F1-score of the selected features concerning the number of epochs (x-axis) for mmDUFS with the shared operator (panel (c)) and the differential operator (panel (e)).

| Dataset | Modality | MC | mmKS | mmKP | mmDUFS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rescaled MNIST | X | 0.3547 | 0.5291 | 0.5291 | **0.7093** |
| | Y | 0.4826 | 0.6219 | 0.6219 | **0.8159** |
| Synthetic Developmental Tree | X | 0.6000 | 0.7800 | 0.8400 | **0.8800** |
| | Y | 0.7800 | 0.8000 | 0.8200 | **0.9000** |
| Original Gaussian | X | 0.5000 | 0.7333 | **1** | **1** |
| | Y | 0.5500 | 0.6500 | 0.9500 | **1** |
| Gaussian + 10 Noisy Feats | X | 0.5000 | 0.7333 | **1** | **1** |
| | Y | 0.5000 | 0.6500 | 0.9000 | **1** |
| Gaussian + 30 Noisy Feats | X | 0.4667 | 0.7000 | 0.9667 | **1** |
| | Y | 0.4500 | 0.5500 | 0.8500 | **1** |
| Gaussian + 50 Noisy Feats | X | 0.4000 | 0.6333 | 0.9333 | **0.9667** |
| | Y | 0.4000 | 0.5500 | 0.8000 | **0.8500** |

Table 1: Comparison of F1-score between different methods on the rescaled MNIST example, the synthetic tree example, and the Gaussian mixture example with different numbers of additive noisy features.

et al., 2021a]. To understand the interplay of different mechanisms underlying the complex developmental process, it is vital to discover the genetic features that contribute to the tree structure shared across modalities and those that contribute to modality-specific structures.

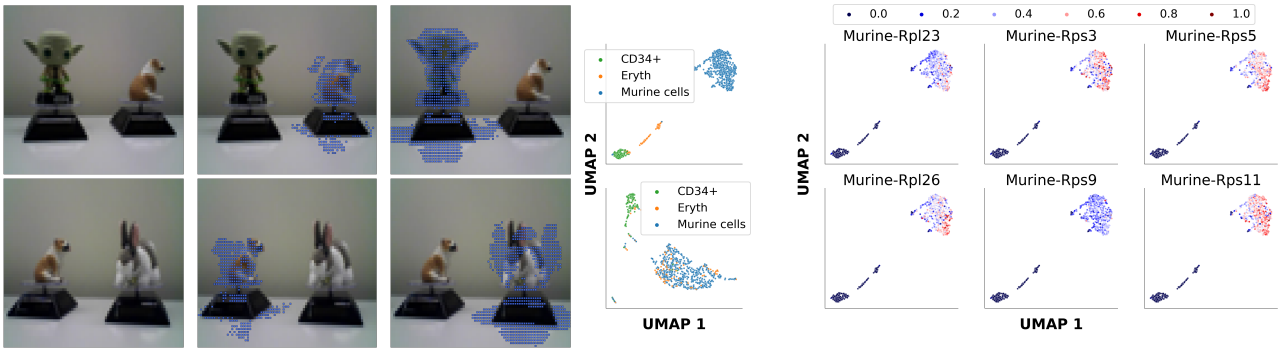
We evaluate mmDUFS using a simulated developmental tree example generated via a tree simulator [1]. The original data has 1000 samples and 100 features. We divide the data into half, such that each modality has 50 informative features that contribute to the shared tree structure, as shown in the UMAP embeddings in Fig. 3c, where the samples in the tree are grouped into different branch groups (labeled $G_1$ to $G_6$). We then add 50 features drawn from negative binomial distributions to each modality to create differential branches, that are only observed in one modality. Specifically, branches $G_1$ and $G_2$ are bifurcated in modality $\boldsymbol{X}$ (top UMAP embeddings) but are mixed in modality $\boldsymbol{Y}$ (bottom UMAP embeddings), and $G_3$ and $G_4$ are bifurcated in modality $\boldsymbol{Y}$ but are mixed in modality $\boldsymbol{X}$ (see Supplementary section B.3 for further details). After log transformation and z-scoring the data, we concatenate 200 features drawn from $N(0, 1)$ to each modality as noisy features.

We apply our model with the shared and differential operators to recover the features that contribute to the overall tree structure and the set of features that contribute to the split branches, respectively. Fig. 3d shows the change, during training with the shared loss, in the Shared/Differential Laplacian Scores, the regularization loss, and the F1-score. Fig. 3e shows the same properties for the differential loss. Table 1 compares the F1-score of the selected features between different methods. Here as well, mmDUFS clearly outperforms the other methods.

**Synthetic Gaussian Mixtures.** We generated a multimodal Gaussian mixture dataset, where $\boldsymbol{X}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y}$ each have 3 clusters. Two clusters are shared between modalities, and cluster 3 and 4 are specific to $\boldsymbol{X}$ and $\boldsymbol{Y}$, respectively. Each cluster has a set of informative features drawn from a multivariate Gaussian, along with noisy features (see Appendix B.2 for details).

We first apply mmDUFS to uncover the informative features of the shared clusters and the modality-specific clusters. In the figure of Supplementary section B.2, we plot the change of the average shared/differential Laplacian Scores across features, the regularization loss, and the F1-score of the selected features from mmDUFS with respect to the number of epochs, where we can see that mmDUFS gradually selects the correct features corresponding to high scores while sparsifying the number of features. To evaluate mmDUFS's feature selection capability in challenging regimes, we further inject 10, 30, and 50 noisy features into each

[1] https://github.com/dynverse/dyntoy




(a) (b) (c) (d) (e)

Figure 4: Left (a-c): Rotating dolls example. (a): Random images of the dolls from each video. (b-c): Selected pixels are marked in blue for mmDUFS with shared operator (b) and the differential operator (c). Right (d-e): CITE-seq data example. (d): UMAP embeddings using the RNA (top) and protein data (bottom), colored by cell type labels. (e): Similar UMAP embeddings colored by the expression level of several genes selected by mmDUFS with the differential operator.

modality and compare the F1-score of the selected features from different methods in each regime. As shown in Table 1, mmDUFS consistently outperforms the baseline methods while maintaining accurate feature identification capability, demonstrating its robustness against noise.

### 4.2 REAL DATA

**Rotating Dolls.** We evaluate mmDUFS's performance on the rotating doll video dataset described in Sec. 3.1 in which 2 cameras capture 2 dolls from different angles (Fig. 4a). By treating each video frame as one sample (4050 in total) and the gray-scaled pixels as features, we aim to uncover pixels that correspond to the shared doll (the dog) and the modality-specific dolls (Yoda and rabbit).

For mmDUFS with the shared operator, Fig. 4b shows selected pixels in both videos, as indicated by the blue dots. The shape of the dog is clearly delineated in both modalities. We further compute the F1-score of the selected pixels with respect to the underlying pixels that correspond to the dog. mmDUFS achieves F1-score of 0.7158 and 0.8033 for the two modalities, whereas MC achieves 0.2390 and 0.3822, and mmKS and mmKP achieve 0.5452 and 0.6868. Fig. 4c shows the selected pixels of mmDUFS with the differential operator in the two videos. In videos 1, mmDUFS select mostly pixels corresponding to the Yoda (F1-score: 0.8861). For video 2, mmDUFS select mostly pixels corresponding to the rabbit (F1-score: 0.7446).

**CITE-seq Dataset.** In single-cell biology, cell states are characterized by different features at different molecular levels. Identifying the contributing features is an open question crucial to understanding the underlying cell systems. We apply mmDUFS to a CITE-seq dataset from [Stoeckius et al., 2017], in which cells are profiled at both transcriptomic and proteomic levels measuring expressions of genes and protein markers, to identify the genes and proteins that characterize the cell states in the multi-modal setting.

In this data, a group of murine cells is spiked-in as controls to human cord blood mononuclear cells (CBMCs), and CITE-seq sequences the resulting cell system. Fig. 4d shows UMAP embeddings of the cells based on their RNA expression (top) and protein expression (bottom). From the full dataset, we analyzed 3 cell populations: murine cells (blue) and 2 CBMCs cell populations (Erythroids (orange) and CD34+ cells (green)). This dataset has 832 cells, with 500 top variable genes from modality 1 and 10 protein markers from modality 2. We can see that the murine cells are separable from the Erythroids in the RNA space but not in the proteomic space. To identify which gene markers contribute to the separation between cell groups, we apply mmDUFS with the differential operator to this data. We found that all the selected genes are murine genes that only express in the murine cells, as shown in Fig. 4e. This example demonstrates that mmDUFS can identify genetic markers contributing to the differential structures observed in single-cell multi-omic data.

## 5 DISCUSSION

We present mmDUFS, a feature selection method that learns two novel graph operators that capture the *shared* and the *modality-specific* structures in multi-modal data, while simultaneously selecting the features that are informative for these structures. MmDUFS can operate on small batches which makes it scalable to large datasets. On the other hand, finding the optimal regularization parameters for mmDUFS on real data may be challenging, for which we suggest an automatic procedure in Appendix B.1. A second potential limitation is the $\mathcal{O}(n^3)$ computational complexity required to compute $\tilde{\boldsymbol{L}}$ (Eq. (13)). A possible solution is to reduce the complexity by computing a sparse Laplacian matrix.

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