1	Impact of ComBat harmonization on PET radiomics-based tissue classification: a dual-center
2	PET/MR and PET/CT study
3	
4	Doris Leithner ¹ , Heiko Schöder ¹ , Alexander Haug ² , H. Alberto Vargas ¹ , Peter Gibbs ¹ , Ida Häggström ¹ ,
5	Ivo Rausch ³ , Michael Weber ^{2b} , Anton S. Becker ¹ , Jazmin Schwartz ⁴ , and Marius E. Mayerhoefer ^{1,5}
6	
7	¹ Department of Radiology, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York, USA
8	² Department of Biomedical Imaging and Image-guided Therapy, Division of Nuclear Medicine, Medical
9	University of Vienna, Austria
10	³ Center for Medical Physics and Biomedical Engineering, Medical University of Vienna, Austria
11	⁴ Department of Medical Physics, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York, USA
12	⁵ Department of Biomedical Imaging and Image-guided Therapy, Division of General and Pediatric
13	Radiology, Medical University of Vienna, Austria
14	
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19	Correspondence:
20	Dr. Doris Leithner (Fellow)
21	Department of Radiology, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center
22	1275 York Avenue, 10065 New York, USA
23	Tel.: +1-212-610-0705; Fax: +1-212-794-4010; Email: leithned@mskcc.org
24	
25	Short title: PET/MR and -CT radiomics harmonization

1 ABSTRACT

- Rationale: To determine whether ComBat harmonization improves ¹⁸F-FDG-PET radiomics-based tissue
 classification in pooled PET/MR and PET/CT datasets.
- 4 Methods: Two-hundred patients who had undergone ¹⁸F-FDG-PET/MR (two scanners/vendors; 50
- 5 patients each) or -PET/CT (two scanners/vendors; 50 patients each) were retrospectively included. Grey-
- 6 level histogram (GLH), co-occurrence matrix (GLCM), run-length matrix (GLRLM), size-zone matrix
- 7 (GLSZM), and neighborhood grey-tone difference matrix (NGTDM) radiomic features were calculated
- 8 for volumes of interest in the disease-free liver, spleen, and bone marrow. For individual feature classes
- 9 and a multi-class radiomic signature, tissue classification was performed on ComBat-harmonized and
- 10 unharmonized pooled data, using a multi-layer perceptron neural network.
- 11 **Results:** Median accuracies in training/validation datasets were: GLH, 69.5/68.3% (harmonized) vs.
- 12 59.5/58.9% (unharmonized); GLCM, 92.1/86.1% vs. 53.6/50.0%; GLRLM, 84.8/82.8% vs. 62.4/58.3%;
- 13 GLSZM, 87.6/85.6% vs. 56.2/52.8%; NGTDM, 79.5/77.2% vs. 54.8/53.9%, and radiomic signature,
- 14 86.9/84.4% vs. 62.9/58.3%.
- Conclusion: ComBat harmonization may be useful for multi-center ¹⁸F-FDG-PET radiomics studies
 using pooled PET/MR and PET/CT data.
- 17
- 18 Key Words: PET/MRI; Radiomics; Harmonization

1 INTRODUCTION

Radiomics, a computer-assisted technique for extraction of quantitative features from diagnostic images
(1,2), is increasingly applied to positron emission tomography (PET) (3). However, PET radiomic
features are known to be sensitive to image acquisition and reconstruction parameter variations,
instrumentation bias (4), and probably also injected dose, and are therefore of limited use in multi-center
studies without further pre-processing.

7 ComBat harmonization has recently been proposed and successfully used by Orlhac et al. to 8 correct PET radiomic data for differences in imaging device and acquisition protocols while preserving 9 biological and pathophysiological associations (5). Notably, previous studies applying ComBat to PET 10 radiomics almost exclusively used data from different PET/CT scanners (5-11), but did not include 11 PET/MR data. Since PET/MR relies on a fundamentally different, MR-based method for PET attenuation correction (AC) (12), differences in PET radiomics may be more pronounced between PET/MR and 12 13 PET/CT. To our knowledge, only two studies compared ¹⁸F-FDG-PET radiomic feature values obtained 14 with PET/CT and PET/MRI. Vuong et al. compared ¹⁸F-FDG-PET radiomic feature values of nine patients with lung lesions who underwent PET/MR and subsequent PET/CT after a single ¹⁸F-FDG 15 16 injection, i.e., with PET performed at different time points, which, due to the differences in counts, is likely to affect radiomic feature values (13). Correlation coefficients suggested that 50% of texture 17 18 features were not robust/stable between the two scans, but the effects of this feature instability on 19 radiomics-based classification were not investigated, and no harmonization was applied. Tsujikawa et al. compared ¹⁸F-FDG-PET radiomics of 15 patients with gynecological or oral cavity/oropharyngeal cancers 20 21 who underwent PET/CT and subsequent PET/MR after a single ¹⁸F-FDG injection, i.e., also at different 22 time points (14). Contrary to Vuong et al., these authors reported a generally high degree of correlation 23 between PET/CT and PET/MR-based radiomic features; in particular, textural features were less affected 24 by differences in scanners and scan protocol than conventional and histogram features, possibly due to the 1 use of resampling with 64 bins (i.e. a bin width of 0.4). The impact of ComBat harmonization was not 2 evaluated in either study.

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r, pooled ¹⁸F-FDG-PET/MR and -PET/CT radiomics dataset with real-world, in part marked intrinsic ogeneity between institutions and vendors in terms of acquisition parameters according to standard cal practice. We focused on discrimination between visually similar, but biologically different 7 tissues, as a surrogate for lesions with similar tracer uptake. Rather than investigating statistical 8 differences between numerical radiomic feature values, we used tissue classification accuracy as the main

Therefore, our dual-center study aimed to determine the impact of ComBat harmonization in a

9 outcome measure, to simulate conditions comparable to those of current clinical radiomics trials.

10

11 **METHODS**

12 **Patients and Design**

13 Two-hundred consecutive patients (92 females, 108 males; mean age, 46.2 ± 17.3 years) who had undergone whole-body ¹⁸F-FDG-PET/MR or -PET/CT for clinical purposes from 01/2010-12/2020 were 14 retrospectively included. This Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act-compliant study was 15 16 approved by the Institutional Review Boards of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) and 17 the Medical University of Vienna (MUV); informed consent was waived. Inclusion criteria were: no 18 evidence of disease in the liver, spleen, or bone marrow, according to imaging, pathology, and clinical 19 reports; and imaging performed on one of four specified scanners (see below; 50 patients per scanner). 20 Exclusion criteria were: glucose levels >180 mg/dL prior to PET; substantial ¹⁸F-FDG extravasation; or 21 imaging artifacts obscuring analyzed tissues.

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Imaging Protocols

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1	mm ³ voxels using B-spline interpolation were applied; discretization and resampling values were chosen
2	because they are in the range of optimal settings for histogram and texture features reported by Yip et al
3	(18). Nineteen gray-level histogram (GLH), 24 co-occurrence matrix (GLCM), 16 run-length matrix
4	(GLRLM), 16 size-zone matrix (GLSZM), and 5 neighboring gray-tone difference matrix (NGTDM)
5	features were calculated (for a feature list, see Supplemental Table 2; for equations, see
6	https://pyradiomics.readthedocs.io/en/latest/features.html). ComBat harmonization (without empirical
7	Bayes assumption, with parametric adjustments and four batches) was applied to all features, separately
8	for the individual analyzed tissues, as previously described (5).
9	

10 Statistical Analysis

11 Cases were randomly assigned to a training dataset (70%; 140 patients), and a validation dataset 12 (30%; 60 patients); assignment to training and validation datasets was repeated five times (i.e., 5-fold cross-validation), and was identical for unharmonized and harmonized datasets to ensure comparability. 13 14 Separately for unharmonized and harmonized datasets, and independently for the different feature classes 15 (GLH, GLCM, GLRLM, GLSZM, and NGTDM), a multi-layer perceptron neural network (MLP-NN 16 (19); one hidden layer with at least three neurons) was used to discriminate between liver, spleen, and 17 bone marrow to generate a 3-tissue model, and then by also adding blood pool data to generate a 4-tissue 18 model, using all features of a class as input. Median accuracies were calculated for training and validation 19 datasets in the 3-tissue and the 4-tissue models, and Wilcoxon signed rank tests were used to compare 20 differences in accuracies between paired unharmonized and harmonized datasets. In addition, for the 3-21 tissue model, areas under the ROC curves (AUCs) were calculated for validation data using a pair-wise 22 (i.e., 1-versus-2 tissues) approach. Three-dimensional scatterplots were used to visualize scanner-specific 23 and organ-specific clustering in both unharmonized and harmonized datasets.

To generate radiomic signatures for tissue discrimination, principal component analysis (based on
 Eigenvalues >1, maximum of 25 iterations for convergence) based on all features of all classes was

1	performed, separately for 3-tissue and the 4-tissue models. Principal radiomic components were used as
2	input for the MLP-NN, and accuracies and AUCs were calculated as described above.
3	To investigate the impact of the number of hidden layers for MLP-NN classification -i.e., to test whether
4	the MLP-NN would, by itself, be able to correct for technical differences between PET/CT and PET/MR
5	scanners with an additional hidden layer-MLP-NN classification was again performed in the
6	unharmonized dataset of the 3-tissue model, this time using the scanner type as an additional nominal
7	input variable (factor), and using a network architecture with one hidden layer first, and then an
8	architecture with two hidden layers.
9	Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE)-based case-wise classifications from all five MLP-NN
10	iterations performed using radiomic signatures were used to model the impact of scanner type, organ,
11	method (unharmonized and harmonized), as well as all two- and three-way interactions, on the percentage
12	of correctly classified VOIs, taking multiple measurements per patient into account. All tests, including
13	MLP-NN, were performed using SPSS 24.0 (IBM, Armonk, USA). The specified level of significance
14	was <i>P</i> <0.05.
15	
16	RESULTS
17	3-tissue model
18	Using unharmonized datasets consisting of pooled data from the four scanners, ¹⁸ F-FDG-PET
19	radiomics-based tissue discrimination yielded median accuracies ranging from 50.0-62.4% for individual
20	feature classes (Table 1). The multi-class radiomic signature (ten principal components) provided 62.9%
21	median accuracy in the training and 58.3% in the validation dataset. Depending on the feature class,
22	AUCs for 1-versus-2 tissue discrimination suggested poorer separability of the spleen from the other
23	tissues; separation of liver and bone marrow from the respective other two tissues was similar for most

24 feature classes (Fig. 2).

ComBat harmonization significantly improved ¹⁸F-FDG-PET radiomics-based tissue discrimination for 1 all feature classes, but most prominently for GLCM features (median accuracy, +38.5 percentage points 2 (p.p.) in the training and +36.1 p.p. in the validation cohort) and GLSZM features (median accuracy, 3 4 +31.4 p.p. in the training and +32.8 p.p. in the validation cohort) (Table 1) (Fig. 3). Tissue classification 5 was also improved for the radiomics signature (ten principal components), with a median accuracy of 6 86.9% in the training (+24.0 p.p. compared to unharmonized data) and 84.4% in the validation dataset 7 (+26.1 p.p. compared to unharmonized data). Similarly, AUCs for 1-versus-2 tissue discrimination were 8 markedly improved in all cases (Fig. 2). Notably, GEE analyses revealed lower classification accuracies 9 (i.e., higher misclassification rates) in the PET/MR cohort than in the PET/CT cohort (Supplemental Table 3). 10

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12 **4-tissue model**

Using unharmonized datasets, ¹⁸F-FDG-PET radiomics-based tissue discrimination yielded 13 14 median accuracies ranging from 39.6-46.3% for individual feature classes (Table 2). The multi-class 15 radiomic signature (eleven principal components) provided slightly better results, with 51.6% median 16 accuracy in the training and 48.8% in the validation dataset. Again, ComBat harmonization significantly improved ¹⁸F-FDG-PET radiomics-based tissue discrimination for all feature classes except GLH, but 17 18 most prominently for GLSZM features (median accuracy, +41.6 p.p. in the training and +42.9 p.p. in the 19 validation cohort) and NGTDM features (median accuracy, +20.6 p.p. in the training and +18.8 p.p. in the 20 validation cohort) (Table 2). Tissue classification was also improved for the radiomics signature (ten 21 principal components), with a median accuracy of 82.1% in the training (+30.5 p.p. compared to 22 unharmonized data) and 81.3% in the validation dataset (+32.5 p.p. compared to unharmonized data). 23 Similar to the 3-tissue model, accuracies were lower (i.e., the percentage of misclassified cases was 24 higher) in the PET/MR cohort than in the PET/CT cohort (Supplemental Table 3).

1 Impact of number of hidden layers for MLP-NN

Using radiomic signatures (principal components) extracted from unharmonized data in the 3-
tissue model, MLP-NN classification with one hidden layer yielded median accuracies of 71.0% (range,

4 66.0-71.1%) in the training and 62.8% (range, 59.4-71.1%) in the validation sets. With two hidden layers,

5 median accuracies were 71.0% (range, 64.5-74.0%) in the training and 67.2% (range, 61.1-70.0%) in the

6 validation sets. Differences between MLP-NN with one and MLP-NN two hidden layers were neither

7 significant in the training (P=0.89) nor in the validation sets (P=0.27).

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9 DISCUSSION

Our results suggest that ComBat harmonization enables successful ¹⁸F-FDG-PET radiomicsbased tissue classification in pooled PET/MR and PET/CT datasets. ComBat led to substantial and statistically significant gains in terms of classification accuracies for both individual radiomic features classes and multi-class radiomic signatures (Table 1, Fig. 2), as typically applied in radiomics research, and in both the 3-tissue and the 4-tissue models, though at different accuracies probably due to introduction of a tissue (i.e., blood pool) without actual intrinsic structure.

16 ComBat harmonization is a post-reconstruction algorithm based on empirical Bayes estimation 17 (20). Originally developed to reduce the batch effect in genomic data, ComBat has recently been applied 18 to multi-center PET, CT, and MRI data (5,21,22). Several PET radiomics studies with heterogeneous datasets utilized ComBat to improve classification (6-11), but very few investigated the actual effects of 19 20 ComBat on PET radiomics-based classification. In patients with cervical cancer, and using data from three centers, Lucia et al. reported a combined ¹⁸F-FDG-PET/CT and MR radiomics-based locoregional 21 control prediction accuracy of 98% for harmonized and 86% for unharmonized data (6). Da-Ano et al. 22 observed similar trends when testing different ComBat modifications in a slightly extended cervical 23

cancer cohort, and for several classifiers (23). However, ComBat did not improve cervical cancer survival prediction when ¹⁸F-FDG-PET features were combined with clinical parameters (8).

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3 While for PET/CT, the CT component provides attenuation coefficients and correction factors for PET AC, the standard approach in PET/MR is a T1-weighted gradient-echo Dixon sequence to generate 4 5 an AC map for separation of soft-tissue, fat, lung, and air (12). This approach, while robust (24), leads to 6 systematic underestimation of attenuation coefficients in the presence of cortical bone (25). Further, 7 uniform attenuation coefficients are assigned to the separated tissue types in MR-based AC, meaning that, 8 contrary to CT-AC maps (26), no noise is present in the MR-AC maps. Noise therefore does not translate 9 into PET images using MR-based AC. These differences may not only affect standardized uptake values, 10 but also PET radiomic features, and thus, comparability between PET/MR- and PET/CT-based metrics. 11 Figure 3 clearly illustrates the clustering of radiomic features (represented by the top three principal 12 components) to the different scanners in the unharmonized datasets. ComBat decreased/resolved this 13 scanner-specific clustering, and improved organ-specific clustering, leading to higher classification 14 accuracies in both the 3-tissue and the 4-tissue models (Tables 1 and 2). Notably, there was an imbalance between PET/MR and PET/CT in terms of accuracies, with PET/MR data showing slightly lower 15 accuracies than PET/CT in the unharmonized datasets, and clearly lower accuracies after harmonization 16 17 (Supplemental Table 3) – i.e., the benefit of ComBat application was greater for PET/CT than for 18 PET/MR.

19 We used an MLP-NN for tissue classification, which –though a long-establish machine learning 20 algorithm- is not as commonly used in radiomics research as other algorithms. However, MLP-NN has 21 often yielded better results than other, more popular techniques, such as random forests (27-31). The use 22 of MLP-NN also enabled us to explore the impact of an additional hidden layer on classification results, 23 which led to slight but statistically non-significant improvement of results. While we cannot rule out that 24 other algorithms might have achieved even better classification accuracy, it seems unlikely that the choice 25 of a different algorithm would have affected our main result, i.e., that ComBat improves tissue

classification in technically heterogeneous datasets. The retrospective design of our study together with
our use of clinical PET scans (for which raw data were not stored in our institutions) precluded us from
using more uniform image acquisition and reconstruction settings. While this technical heterogeneity
within pooled PET data from different institutions reflects clinical reality, use of pre-defined, more
uniform imaging protocols, for instance in prospective multi-center studies, is likely to decrease the
impact of ComBat harmonization, or even make its use unnecessary.

In summary, our data suggest that radiomics studies using pooled ¹⁸F-FDG-PET data from
PET/MR and PET/CT devices are feasible and should utilize ComBat harmonization as a pre-processing
step, at least in retrospective technically heterogeneous datasets, or also prospectively if no uniform
imaging protocol is implemented. We expect this strategy to improve generalizability of results and
facilitate the development of radiomics-based applications for use in clinical practice.

12

13 DISCLOSURE

M.E.M. received speaker honoraria from Siemens, GE, and Bristol-Myers Squibb. H.S. received
honoraria for consultancy from Aileron Therapeutics. No other potential conflicts of interest relevant to
this article exist.

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1 KEY POINTS

- 2 QUESTION: Is ComBat harmonization useful in pooled PET/MR and PET/CT radiomic data?
- 3 PERTINENT FINDINGS: ComBat improves PET radiomics-based tissue classification for both
- 4 individual radiomic features classes and multi-class radiomic signatures.
- 5 IMPLICATIONS FOR PATIENT CARE: ComBat harmonization should be applied in multi-center
- 6 radiomics studies using pooled PET/MR and PET/CT data.

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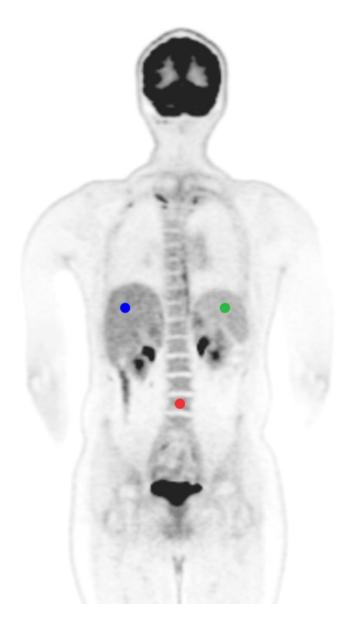
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- **Figure 1:** Representative ¹⁸F-FDG-PET image showing VOI placement in the three-tissue model: liver
- 3 (blue), spleen (green), and bone marrow (red).

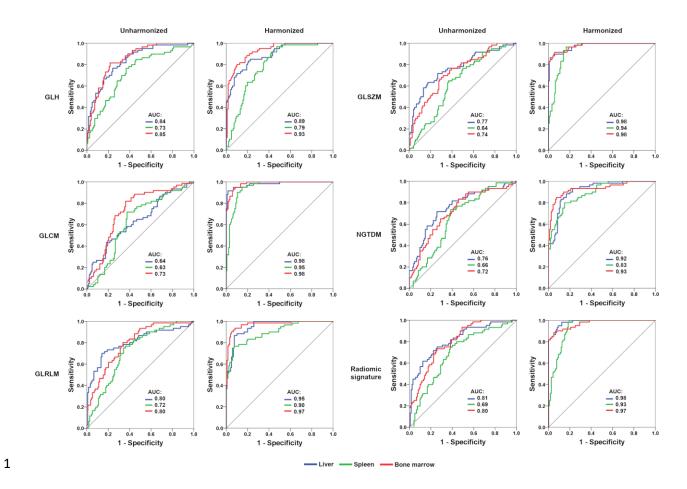


Figure 2: ROC curves (validation set) for pair-wise (1-versus-2) MLP-NN-based tissue discrimination
(median of five iterations shown). Following ComBat harmonization, AUCs are clearly improved for
individual radiomic features classes and radiomic signatures.

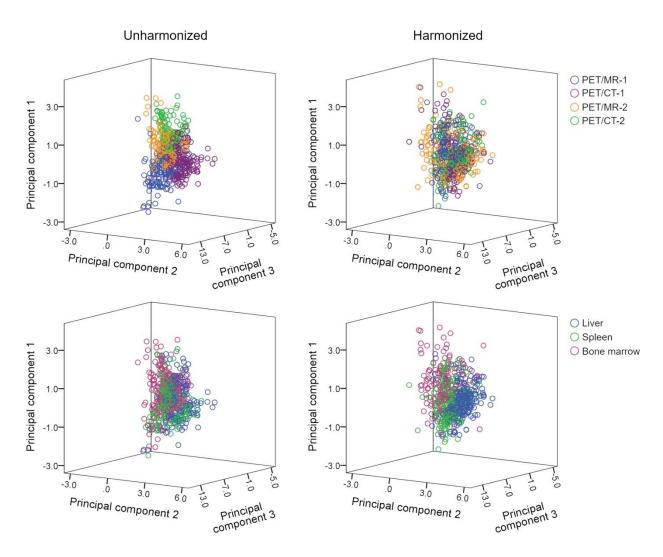


Figure 3: 3D scatterplots showing obvious scanner-specific clustering within the unharmonized dataset,
which is decreased/resolved in the harmonized dataset. Conversely, clustering according to tissue type
(liver, spleen, and bone marrow) is improved in the harmonized dataset; in particular, the liver cluster
(blue) is now clearly visible.

1 TABLE 1. Tissue classification based on radiomic feature classes and signatures in the 3-tissue

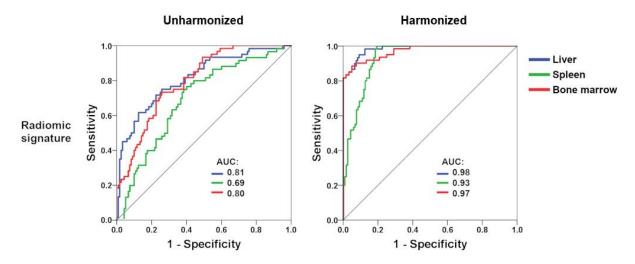
2 model

	Unharmonized		Harmonized		
	Median	Range	Median	Range	Р
GLH:					
Accuracy-training (%)	59.5	57.4-62.1	69.5	66.0-77.1	0.043
Accuracy–validation (%)	58.9	53.3-61.1	68.3	58.3-73.9	0.043
GLCM:					
Accuracy-training (%)	53.6	47.9-56.7	92.1	88.1-95.2	0.043
Accuracy–validation (%)	50.0	48.9-55	86.1	80.6-90.6	0.043
GLRLM:					
Accuracy-training (%)	62.4	58.8-64.5	84.8	82.4-89.5	0.043
Accuracy–validation (%)	58.3	57.2-62.8	82.8	73.9-87.8	0.043
GLSZM:					
Accuracy-training (%)	56.2	52.9-57.9	87.6	84.0-89.0	0.042
Accuracy–validation (%)	52.8	51.7-58.3	85.6	74.4-90.6	0.043
NGTDM:					
Accuracy-training (%)	54.8	53.3-55.7	79.5	75.5-82.9	0.043
Accuracy–validation (%)	53.9	50-59.4	77.2	73.9-85.0	0.042
Radiomic signature:					
Accuracy-training (%)	62.9	61-63.6	86.9	86.0-90.0	0.043
Accuracy-validation (%)	58.3	55.6-63.9	84.4	76.7-86.7	0.043

1 TABLE 2. Tissue classification based on radiomic feature classes and signatures in the 4-tissue

2 model

	Unharmonized		Harmonized		
	Median	Range	Median	Range	P
GLH:					
Accuracy-training (%)	46.3	44.8-48.9	56.1	53.6-60.4	0.043
Accuracy–validation (%)	45.8	42.5-49.2	53.8	46.3-56.3	0.043
GLCM:					
Accuracy-training (%)	43.4	37.5-46.1	62.7	60.5-64.3	0.043
Accuracy–validation (%)	39.2	36.7-41.7	57.5	50.8-65.0	0.042
GLRLM:					
Accuracy-training (%)	46.3	43.4-47.1	63.0	57.3-64.5	0.042
Accuracy–validation (%)	41.7	40.4-47.9	59.2	52.5-61.7	0.043
GLSZM:					
Accuracy-training (%)	43.4	41.4-43.8	86.0	83.0-87.5	0.043
Accuracy–validation (%)	39.6	36.3-42.9	82.5	68.8-85.0	0.043
NGTDM:					
Accuracy-training (%)	42.1	39.6-45.0	62.7	60.0-64.3	0.043
Accuracy–validation (%)	42.5	36.7-46.7	61.3	57.1-65.8	0.043
Radiomic signature:					
Accuracy-training (%)	51.6	48.2-56.6	82.1	80.0-86.3	0.042
Accuracy-validation (%)	48.8	42.9-50.8	81.3	67.5-82.9	0.043



ROC curves for pairwise PET radiomic signature-based tissue discrimination before and after ComBat harmonization. ComBat improves tissue classification and should be applied in multi-center studies using pooled PET/MR and PET/CT data.

	GE Signa PET/MR	GE Discovery 690	Siemens Biograph mMR PET/MR	Siemens Biograph TruePoint 64
Axial FOV (mm)	250	153	256	216
Matrix size	192 x 192	128 x 128	172 x 172	168 x 168
Voxel size (mm ³)	3.1 x 3.1 x 2.8	5.47 x 5.47 x 3.3	4.17 x 4.17 x 2.0	4.1 x 4.1 x 5.0
Iterations	2	2	3	4
Subsets	28	16	21	21
Sensitivity (cps/kBq)	21.2	7.5	13.2	7.6
Reconstruction algorithm	OSEM	OSEM	HD-PET	TrueX
Time per bed position (min)	5	3	5	4

SUPPLEMENTAL TABLE 1. Scanner and reconstruction parameters

FOV, field of view; OSEM, ordered subset expectation maximization

SUPPLEMENTAL TABLE 2. List of radiomic features

First order gray- level histogram (GLH)	Gray-level co- occurrence matrix (GLCM)	Gray-level run- length matrix (GLRLM)	Gray-level size- zone matrix (GLSZM)	Neighboring gray-tone difference matrix (NGTDM)
Energy	Autocorrelation	Short Run Emphasis	Small Area Emphasis	Coarseness
Total Energy	Joint Average	Long Run Emphasis	Large Area Emphasis	Contrast
Entropy	Cluster Prominence	Gray Level Non- Uniformity	Gray Level Non- Uniformity	Busyness
Minimum	Cluster Shade	Gray Level Non- Uniformity Normalized	Gray Level Non- Uniformity Normalized	Complexity
10 th percentile	Cluster Tendency	Run Length Non- Uniformity	Size-Zone Non- Uniformity	Strength
90 th percentile	Contrast	Run Length Non- Uniformity Normalized	Size-Zone Non- Uniformity Normalized	
Maximum	Correlation	Run Percentage	Zone Percentage	
Mean	Difference Average	Gray Level Variance	Gray Level Variance	
Median	Difference Entropy	Run Variance	Zone Variance	
Interquartile Range	Difference Variance	Run Entropy	Zone Entropy	
Range	Joint Energy	Low Gray Level Run Emphasis	Low Gray Level Zone Emphasis	
Mean Absolute Deviation	Joint Entropy	High Gray Level Run Emphasis	High Gray Level Zone Emphasis	
Robust Mean Absolute Deviation	Informational Measure of Correlation 1	Short Run Low Gray Level Emphasis	Small Area Low Gray Level Emphasis	
Root Mean Squared	Informational Measure of	Short Run High Gray Level	Small Area High Gray Level	

	Correlation 2	Emphasis	Emphasis	
Standard Deviation	Inverse Difference Moment	Long Run Low Gray Level Emphasis	Large Area Low Gray Level Emphasis	
Skewness	Maximal Correlation Coefficient	Long Run High Gray Level Emphasis	Large Area High Gray Level Emphasis	
Kurtosis	Inverse Difference Moment Normalized			
Variance	Inverse Difference			
Uniformity	Inverse Difference Normalized			
	Inverse Variance			
	Maximum Probability			
	Sum Average			
	Sum Entropy			
	Sum of Squares			

	Accuracy (mean) %	Std. error	95% Confidence interval
3-tissue model:			
Unharmonized-PET/MR	61.5	2.6	56.4-66.4
Unharmonized-PET/CT	62.4	2.4	57.5-67.1
Harmonized-PET/MR	77.7	2.8	71.6-82.7
Harmonized-PET/CT	98.7	0.7	96.6-99.5
4-tissue model:			
Unharmonized-PET/MR	49.8	2.2	45.6-54.1
Unharmonized-PET/CT	55.2	2.2	51.0-59.4
Harmonized-PET/MR	70.3	3.4	63.2-76.4
Harmonized-PET/CT	94.2	1.1	91.7-96.1

SUPPLEMENTAL TABLE 3. Accuracies by scanner type (PET/MR and PET/CT)