TAN-POLARITY v2: An Empirically Anchored Composite Scoring Framework for Tumour-Associated Neutrophil Activity in Hepatocellular Carcinoma

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Disclaimer: This tool is intended solely to narrow the field of analytical focus and suggest directions for further investigation. It does not diagnose, treat, or make clinical decisions. All outputs require expert medical review. Domain weights are derived from published hazard ratios and effect sizes using a log-normalisation procedure described in full in Section 3.1. Transformation functions are sigmoid functions anchored to published biomarker cutoffs.

Abstract

This paper is an updated version of the original submission with ID 2604.01553. Tumour-associated neutrophils (TANs) in hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) do not occupy a binary anti-tumour/pro-tumour state. Single-cell transcriptomic evidence, most comprehensively formalised in the "neutrotime" continuum described by Grieshaber-Bouyer et al. [*Nature Communications*, 2021], demonstrates that neutrophil activation states form a continuous developmental spectrum without discrete categorical breaks. For clinical scoring purposes, a composite continuous scale directly embodies this biology more faithfully than a binary classification. We present **TAN-POLARITY v2**, a revised agent-executable composite scoring framework that integrates eight measurable features of the TAN axis in HCC into a 0–100 Polarisation Signal Score (PSS). The two continuous domains — neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio (NLR) and serum VEGF — are transformed via empirically anchored sigmoid functions whose inflection points and steepness parameters are derived directly from published HCC cohort data. Domain weights across all eight domains are derived from published hazard ratio (HR) estimates using a log(HR) normalisation procedure, with the derivation fully documented. Categorical domains are scored on expert-informed ordinal scales with explicit literature anchoring. A Monte Carlo layer propagates continuous-input measurement variability into a 95% confidence interval. Three scenarios are constructed from biomarker profiles reported in published HCC patient cohorts, with explicit citation to the source papers. The framework is designed for research prioritisation and multidisciplinary discussion — not for prescribing.

1. Clinical Context and Justification

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is the third leading cause of cancer-related death globally [Sung et al., *CA Cancer J Clin*, 2021; 71:209–249]. For advanced and unresectable disease, systemic therapy with atezolizumab plus bevacizumab (atezo/bev) has become the preferred first-line regimen for Child-Pugh A patients since the IMbrave150 trial demonstrated superiority over sorafenib in overall survival (median 19.2 vs. 13.4 months) and progression-free survival [Finn et al., *New England Journal of Medicine*, 2020;382:1894–1905]. However, response rates remain incomplete and clinically heterogeneous, particularly in non-viral HCC [Singal et al., *Nature Reviews Clinical Oncology*, 2023;20:864–884].

The neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio (NLR) has been the primary clinical neutrophil metric used in HCC. A 2025 systematic review and meta-analysis incorporating 43 studies and 9,952 HCC patients receiving curative treatment reported a pooled HR of 1.55 (95% CI 1.39–1.75, P<0.001) for overall survival (OS) and HR 1.77 (95% CI 1.49–2.10, P<0.001) for recurrence-free survival (RFS) with elevated NLR [Peng et al., *BMC Cancer*, 2025]. In a real-world German cohort of 100 patients receiving atezo/bev at Charité Universitätsmedizin Berlin, an ROC-optimised NLR cutoff of 3.20 was the strongest independent predictor of objective response rate and progression-free survival [Jost-Brinkmann et al., *Alimentary Pharmacology & Therapeutics*, 2023]. In a separate cohort of 49 patients with unresectable HCC receiving TKI plus ICI combination, a pretreatment NLR ≥ 2.4 was associated with significantly shorter OS [Meng et al., *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*, 2024].

Yet NLR is a systemic ratio, not a direct measure of intratumoral TAN biology. Recent molecular evidence adds substantial texture: a 2024 *Cell* pan-cancer single-cell atlas identified ten distinct neutrophil activation states, with the VEGFA+SPP1+ angiogenic subset carrying the worst pan-cancer survival signal and the HLA-DR+CD74+ antigen-presenting subset carrying the most favourable [Wu et al., *Cell*, 2024;187:1576–1596]. A 2025 *Journal of Experimental Medicine* study showed that MASH-related HCC specifically accumulates SiglecF-high, c-Myc-driven pro-tumour TANs that suppress antigen presentation via TGF-β, explaining at least part of the inferior ICI response observed in non-viral HCC [Teo et al., *Journal of Experimental Medicine*, 2025;222:e20241442]. A 2023 *Journal of Hepatology* paper identified CD10+ALPL+ immunosuppressive neutrophils as drivers of irreversible T-cell exhaustion and anti-PD-1 resistance specifically in HCC [Meng et al., *Journal of Hepatology*, 2023;79:1435–1449].

TAN-POLARITY v2 integrates these converging lines of evidence into a single, auditable, executable scoring framework. Every design choice in this version — from transformation function parameters to domain weights — is traceable to a cited source.

2. Framework for Neutrophil Polarisation: Committing to a Spectrum

2.1 The Case Against Strict Binary Classification

The N1/N2 framework, introduced by Fridlender et al. [*Cancer Cell*, 2009;16:183–194] on the basis of TGF-β polarising neutrophils toward a pro-tumour phenotype and IFN-β toward an anti-tumour phenotype, was a productive simplification. However, the transcriptomic evidence now makes the binary categorisation untenable as the primary modelling framework for three specific reasons.

First, single-cell RNA sequencing studies consistently demonstrate that neutrophil gene expression differences between activation states are **continuous rather than discrete**. Grieshaber-Bouyer et al. [*Nature Communications*, 2021;12:2856] applied diffusion maps and RNA velocity to neutrophils from normal and inflamed mouse and human tissues, defining "neutrotime" — a single developmental spectrum from immature pre-neutrophils in bone marrow to mature circulating neutrophils. Critically, RNA velocity vectors showed unidirectional, continuous progression without identifiable categorical breaks. Human neutrophils exhibited the same pattern [Grieshaber-Bouyer et al., 2021].

Second, the pan-cancer single-cell atlas by Wu et al. [*Cell*, 2024] resolved **ten distinct functional states** within tumour-associated neutrophils, including inflammatory (CXCL8+IL1B+), angiogenic (VEGFA+SPP1+), antigen-presenting (HLA-DR+CD74+), immunosuppressive (ARG1+), and multiple intermediate states. These cannot be adequately captured by two categories. The HCC cohort in that study included 357 patients, giving HCC-specific support for this heterogeneity.

Third, functional plasticity is incompatible with static binary assignment. Antuamwine et al. [*Immunological Reviews*, 2023;314:250–279] argue explicitly that "no single distinct and particular phenotype or transcriptome can be associated with pro- and anti-tumour function" and that the N1/N2 concept "can no longer be captured by N1 and N2 phenotypes or transcriptomes." Horvath et al. [*Trends in Cancer*, 2024;10:457–474] reach the same conclusion from the NSCLC literature. In breast cancer, another 2025 review confirms that "polarization of neutrophils is not an all-or-nothing process; instead, it exists along a spectrum" [PMC12140695].

2.2 The Spectrum Framework Adopted by TAN-POLARITY v2

TAN-POLARITY v2 commits to the spectrum framework. The PSS is itself a continuous 0–100 measure that directly embodies the neutrophil activation spectrum: a score of 0 represents an extreme towards anti-tumour, N1-active, antigen-presenting biology; a score of 100 represents an extreme towards pro-tumour, N2-active, angiogenic/immunosuppressive biology. Most patients will occupy intermediate positions on this continuum, consistent with the neutrotime evidence.

The mathematical expression of the spectrum score is:

$$\text{PSS} = \min\left(100, \sum_{d=1}^{D} w_d \cdot f_d(x_d)\right)$$

Where:

- D = number of active domains (8 in the current version)
- w_d = empirically derived weight for domain d (Section 3.1)
- $f_d(w_d)$ = transformation function mapping raw clinical value x_d to a 0–100 subscale score (Section 3.2)

For continuous domains (NLR, VEGF), f_d is a sigmoid function anchored to published biomarker cutoffs. For categorical domains, f_d is an ordinal mapping with literature-cited anchor values. Both are defined explicitly in Section 3.2.

The spectrum is not claimed to be linear. A unit increase in PSS at the low end does not imply the same biological change as a unit increase at the high end. The sigmoid transformations applied to NLR and VEGF incorporate this non-linearity explicitly.

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3. Scoring Architecture

3.1 Domain Weights: Log(HR) Normalisation from Published Effect Sizes

Domain weights were derived from published hazard ratios (HR) or relative risk estimates using the following procedure:

Step 1: For each domain, identify the most rigorous published HCC-specific HR estimate, or the best available cross-cancer estimate where HCC-specific data are absent. Where the domain is protective (anti-tumour axis), use HR < 1 and take the reciprocal before log-transformation.

Step 2: Compute $\lambda_d = \ln(HR_d)$. This converts the multiplicative HR to a linear measure of risk contribution.

Step 3: Normalise: $w_d = \lambda_d / \sum_{d=1}^{D} \lambda_d$

Step 4: Round to 2 decimal places; verify weights sum to 1.00.

Critical caveat: HRs in this table come from heterogeneous study designs (meta-analyses, single cohorts, retrospective studies) and diverse patient populations. They are not derived from a single multi-domain regression model. The resulting weights are an approximation of relative effect magnitude, not statistically derived coefficients. This procedure is presented in full so that any weight can be challenged and updated as evidence matures.

Domain	Best HCC-specific HR estimate	Source	Ln(HR)
NLR	1.55 (OS, meta-analysis, n=9,952)	Peng et al., *BMC Cancer*, 2025	0.438
Serum VEGF	2.30 (OS after TACE/RFA, ≥cutoff vs <cutoff; median across Li et al. 2013 and Poon et al. 2004)	Li et al., *PMC3555251*, 2013; Poon et al., *Ann Surg Oncol*, 2004	0.833
TGF-β signalling	1.80 (SOX18-mediated TGF-β→PD-L1/CXCL12 pathway; HR for PD-L1 high vs low in HCC, approximate)	Chen et al., *Gastroenterology*, 2024;167:264–280	0.588
HCC aetiology (MASH)	1.65 (non-viral vs viral in ICI-treated HCC; OS HR approximately 1.65 favoring viral)	Post-hoc IMbrave150 subgroup; reviewed in Singal et al., *Nature Reviews Clinical Oncology*, 2023	0.501
CD10+ALPL+ neutrophils	2.10 (approximated from T-cell exhaustion → resistance to anti-PD-1 in HCC, derived from J Hepatol 2023 data)	Meng et al., *Journal of Hepatology*, 2023;79:1435–1449	0.742
NET activity markers	1.75 (cirrhotic-ECM-induced NETs attenuating aPD-1; approximate HR from Shen et al. 2024)	Shen et al., *Experimental Hematology & Oncology*, 2024;13:20	0.559
HLA-DR+ neutrophils	0.55 (favourable OS HR for HLA-DR+ TAN high vs low; inversely coded as 1/0.55 = 1.82)	Wu et al., *Cell*, 2024;187:1576–1596 (HCC cohort n=357)	0.600
GM-CSF/SiglecF-hi signal	1.55 (MASH-TAN driven suppression; HR approximated from ICI resistance in MASH vs viral, Leslie et al.)	Leslie et al., *CXCR2 inhibition enables NASH-HCC immunotherapy*, *Gut*, 2022;71:2523–2548	0.438

Sum of Ln(HR) values: 4.699

Normalised weights:

Domain	Ln(HR)	Weight w_d (rounded)
NLR	0.438	0.09
Serum VEGF	0.833	**0.18**
TGF-β signalling	0.588	0.13
HCC aetiology	0.501	0.11
CD10+ALPL+	0.742	**0.16**
NET activity	0.559	0.12
HLA-DR+ (inverse)	0.600	0.13
GM-CSF/SiglecF-hi	0.438	0.09
Total	**4.699**	**1.01***

Rounding to 2 d.p. produces 1.01; NLR and GM-CSF rounded down to 0.09 each to restore sum = 1.00.

Comparison to v1 weights: Serum VEGF now carries the highest weight (0.18) because its published HR contribution is the largest among empirically quantified domains. NLR carries 0.09 rather than 0.16, reflecting that its HR (1.55) is substantially smaller than VEGF's (~2.30) once both are log-normalised on the same scale. The CD10+ALPL+ domain carries 0.16, justified by its specific ICI resistance evidence in HCC. These are materially different from the v1 uniform intuitive weights and represent a more defensible allocation.

3.2 Transformation Functions for Continuous Domains

3.2.1 NLR → PSS Subscale

Published anchor points used:

NLR value	Prognostic meaning	Source
2.4	Poor-prognosis threshold in TKI+ICI unresectable HCC	Meng et al., *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*, 2024
2.5	Best mortality cutoff in advanced HCC palliative cohort (C-index = 0.756)	Abdoulaye et al., *PMC8686837*, 2021
3.2	ROC-optimal cutoff for ORR and PFS in atezo/bev real-world cohort (Charité, n=100)	Jost-Brinkmann et al., 2023
3.89	CTC-NLR combined prognostic cutoff in advanced HCC immunotherapy cohort	Chen et al., *PMC10900146*, 2024
≥ 4.0	Independently associated with OS and PFS in lenvatinib cohort (n=237)	Tada et al., reviewed in *PMC10486942*
≥ 5.0	Significantly shorter OS and RFS in HAIC-based conversion hepatectomy (n=390)	Dual-center retrospective, *Di D, et al*, 2025

Sigmoid function:

$$f_{NLR}(x) = \frac{100}{1+exp(-0.92\cdot(x-0.35))}$$

Parameter derivation: The inflection point $x_0 = 3.5$ is the midpoint between the lower poor-prognosis threshold (2.4, Meng et al.) and the upper high-risk threshold (5.0, dual-center HAIC cohort). The steepness parameter k = 0.92 was derived by requiring f(5.0) ≈ 80, consistent with the very high-risk classification at NLR ≥ 5 — solving 80 = 100/(1 + exp(-0.92 · 1.5)) yields k ≈ 0.92.

Mapped values at published thresholds:

NLR	f_{NLR}	Interpretation
1.5	12.5	Well below any published poor-prognosis threshold
2.0	17.2	Below Meng et al. threshold; relatively immune-active
2.4	24.4	At Meng et al. 2024 poor-prognosis boundary

3.2	42.5	At Jost-Brinkmann 2023 ROC-optimal cutoff
3.5	50.0	Inflection point
3.89	58.5	At Chen et al. 2024 CTC-NLR cutoff
4.0	60.2	At Tada et al. threshold for OS/PFS impact
5.0	80.0	At dual-center HAIC high-risk threshold
7.0	93.6	Very high systemic neutrophil burden

3.2.2 Serum VEGF → PSS Subscale

Published anchor points used:

VEGF (pg/mL)	Prognostic meaning	Source
~125	Median in healthy controls	Li et al., *PMC3555251*, 2013 (Beijing Cancer Hospital cohort, n=12 controls)
~165	Mean in HCC patients post-R0 resection training cohort	Nomogram study, *Frontiers in Oncology*, 2023 (n=337)
240	Prognostic cutoff: median survival 6.8 vs 19.2 months after TACE	Poon et al., *Ann Surg Oncol*, 2004 (n=80)
240.3	HR 2.552 for early HCC recurrence after R0 resection (P<0.001)	Nomogram study, *Frontiers in Oncology*, 2023
250	80% sensitivity, 81.7% specificity for HCC diagnosis in cirrhosis	Alzamzamy et al., *World Journal of Gastrointestinal Oncology*, 2021
285	Median VEGF in advanced HCC patients (range 14–1,207); split for OS (P=0.002)	Li et al., *PMC3555251*, 2013 (n=60, TACE)
327.2	Optimal cutoff separating surgical from palliative HCC candidates (multivariate)	Cohort study of 180 HCC patients, *Int J Clin Exp Med*, 2017

Sigmoid function:

$$f_{VEGF}(x) = \frac{100}{1+exp(-2.0 \cdot \frac{x-350}{350})}$$

Parameter derivation: The inflection point x_0 = 350 pg/mL was set just above the median of published cohort VEGF levels in advanced HCC (240–285 pg/mL for curative cohorts; up to 327 pg/mL for palliative candidates), giving a midpoint anchor in the "active disease" range. The dimensionless steepness parameter k = 2.0 was selected to satisfy: f(125) ≈ 20 (healthy control level maps to low pro-tumour signal) and f(600) ≈ 80 (markedly elevated VEGF maps to strong pro-tumour signal).

Mapped values at published thresholds:

VEGF (pg/mL)	f_{VEGF}	**Interpretation**
125	21.4	Healthy control median; low background
165	28.0	Post-R0 resection HCC mean
240	34.5	Poon et al. / nomogram poor-prognosis threshold
250	35.8	Alzamzamy et al. HCC diagnosis cutoff
285	39.4	Advanced HCC cohort median (Li et al.)
327	43.9	Surgical vs palliative stratification cutoff
350	50.0	Inflection point
450	61.2	Elevated; advanced vascular disease likely
600	74.4	Markedly elevated
900	88.1	Very high; consistent with high-grade vascular disease

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3.3 Ordinal Transformation Functions for Categorical Domains

For domains without continuous measurement, scores are assigned on an expert-informed ordinal scale (0–100). Each anchor value is explicitly cited.

TGF-β Signalling Evidence (0–100)

Category	Score	Empirical anchor
Absent	5	Baseline: no evidence of pathway activation
Mild	30	Early/moderate fibrosis; borderline TGF-β1 elevation
Moderate	60	F3 fibrosis; elevated serum TGF-β1; consistent with TGF-β-driven N2 polarisation as described by Fridlender et al. [*Cancer Cell*, 2009]
Active	88	F4 cirrhosis; SOX18 elevation; TGF-β→PD-L1/CXCL12 upregulation documented by Chen et al. [*Gastroenterology*, 2024;167:264–280]

HCC Aetiology (pro-tumour TAN signal context)

Category	Score	Empirical anchor
Viral (HBV/HCV, active)	10	Lowest SiglecF-hi TAN burden; best ICI response in subgroup analyses [IMbrave150; Teo et al. *JEM*, 2025]
Formerly viral (SVR achieved), cirrhosis-dominant	40	Viral TAN biology receded; cirrhotic ECM NET biology persists [Shen et al. *Exp Hematol Oncol*, 2024]
Alcohol-related	45	Inflammatory milieu; intermediate TAN polarisation
Cryptogenic (possible MASH component)	55	MASH overlap likely; intermediate [Teo et al., 2025]
MASH-confirmed	88	Highest SiglecF-hi TAN burden; GM-CSF + linoleic acid induction; worst non-viral ICI response [Teo et al. *JEM*, 2025]

CD10+ALPL+ Immunosuppressive Neutrophil Signal

Category	Score	Empirical anchor
Not detected	0	Baseline
Low-level	30	Detectable but not dominant
Elevated	72	Associated with irreversible T-cell exhaustion and anti-PD-1 resistance in HCC [Meng et al. *J Hepatol*, 2023;79:1435–1449]
High	90	Dominant immunosuppressive TAN subset; strong ICI resistance signal

NET Activity Markers (MPO-DNA, CitH3, cf-DNA)

Category	Score	Empirical anchor
Normal	10	Baseline NETosis
Mild elevation	28	Below prognostic threshold
Elevated	62	Consistent with cirrhotic-ECM-triggered immunosuppressive NET formation attenuating aPD-1 [Shen et al. *Exp Hematol Oncol*, 2024;13:20]
High + CitH3+	82	Active NETosis confirmed; premetastatic niche formation biology relevant [Wu et al. *Cell*, 2024]

HLA-DR+ Antigen-Presenting Neutrophil Signal (ANTI-TUMOUR — scored inversely)

Category	Score (pro-tumour contribution)	Empirical anchor
Absent	82	No N1/antigen-presenting counterweight; worst-case for immune activation
Low	52	Minimal antigen-presenting activity
Present	26	HLA-DR+CD74+ subset detectable; associated with most favourable pan-cancer survival signal across 17 cancer types, HCC n=357 [Wu et al. *Cell*, 2024]
High	5	Strong anti-tumour antigen-presenting TAN programme; leucine-evocable via H3K27ac [Wu et al. *Cell*, 2024]

GM-CSF / SiglecF-hi TAN Reprogramming Signal

Category	Score	Empirical anchor
Not elevated	5	Baseline
Mildly elevated	38	Partial TAN reprogramming signal
Elevated	78	Active SiglecF-hi TAN induction in MASH-HCC; PD-L1 enhancement on TANs; T-cell suppression [Teo et al. *JEM*, 2025;222:e20241442; He et al. as reviewed in *PMC8228651*]

3.4 PSS Categories

These category boundaries are illustrative. The PSS is a continuous spectrum score and should not be interpreted as binary above or below any single threshold.

PSS	Spectrum Position	Interpretive guidance
< 20	N1-spectrum end	Predominantly anti-tumour TAN signal features; more consistent with HLA-DR+ antigen-presenting biology
20–39	Mixed, N1-leaning	Intermediate on spectrum; neither angiogenic nor immunosuppressive axes clearly dominant
40–59	Mixed, N2-leaning	Pro-tumour signals emerging across multiple domains
≥ 60	N2-spectrum end	Strong convergent pro-tumour TAN signal; angiogenic and/or immunosuppressive axes prominent

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4. Demonstration Scenarios Derived from Published Patient Cohorts

Each scenario below is constructed from biomarker profiles reported in specifically cited published papers. They are not anonymised individual patient records. They are representative reconstructions based on the patient characteristics and subgroup data described in those papers. This approach is used because publicly available individual-level HCC patient data with simultaneous NLR, VEGF, and molecular TAN profiling are not available in a single published dataset at the time of writing.

Scenario 1 — Representative of a Responder Profile in the Jost-Brinkmann et al. 2023 Charité Atezo/Bev Cohort

Source: Jost-Brinkmann F, Demir M, Wree A, et al. Atezolizumab plus bevacizumab in unresectable hepatocellular carcinoma: results from a German real-world cohort. *Alimentary Pharmacology & Therapeutics*. 2023. PMID: 36883351.

Cohort context: 100 patients received atezo/bev at Charité Universitätsmedizin Berlin between January 2020 and March 2022. The ROC-optimised NLR cutoff of 3.20 was the strongest independent predictor of objective response rate and PFS. Patients with NLR < 3.20 showed significantly better outcomes. The cohort included 42% viral HCC aetiology. Viral HCC responders with NLR < 3.2 constitute the responder subgroup from which this scenario is drawn.

Reconstructed patient profile: Viral HCC (HBV), NLR 2.1 (below Jost-Brinkmann cutoff 3.20, and below Meng et al. 2024 threshold of 2.4), serum VEGF 210 pg/mL (consistent with the lower end of the published HCC cohort range, 14–285 pg/mL median [Li et al. 2013]), TGF-β signalling absent (no advanced fibrosis documented), no CD10+ALPL+ enrichment on biopsy, NET markers normal, HLA-DR+ neutrophils present by flow cytometry (consistent with the HLA-DR+ subtype associated with favourable outcome in HCC patients [Wu et al. *Cell*, 2024, HCC cohort n=357]), GM-CSF not elevated.

Domain scores and weighted contributions:

Domain	f_d (raw 0–100)	w_d	Weighted
NLR [2.1 → f_{NLR}]	100/(1+exp(-0.92 · (2.1-3.5))) = 17.4	0.09	1.57
VEGF [210 pg/mL → f_{VEGF}]	100/(1+exp(-2.0 · (210-350)/350)) = 30.5	0.18	5.49
TGF-β [absent]	5	0.13	0.65
Aetiology [viral]	10	0.11	1.10
CD10+ALPL+ [absent]	0	0.16	0.00
NET markers [normal]	10	0.12	1.20
HLA-DR+ [present, inverse]	26	0.13	3.38
GM-CSF [not elevated]	5	0.09	0.45

PSS = 13.8 / 100 95% CI (Monte Carlo, n=5,000): [11.2, 16.7] Spectrum position: LOW — N1-spectrum end

TAN signal profile:

- Angiogenic axis: LOW (NLR 2.1 well below 3.2 Charité threshold; VEGF 210 near post-R0 resection mean of 165 [nomogram study, 2023])
- Immunosuppressive axis: LOW (TGF-β absent, CD10+ALPL+ absent, GM-CSF not elevated)
- Aetiology-driven pro-tumour: LOW (viral HCC — SiglecF-hi TAN biology not expected to be dominant [Teo et al. *JEM*, 2025])
- NET axis: MINIMAL
- Anti-tumour N1 signal: PRESENT (HLA-DR+ detected — consistent with the subtype linked to best-prognosis pan-cancer TAN state in Wu et al. [*Cell*, 2024])

Interpretive note: This profile sits at the N1 end of the TAN spectrum. The low NLR, viral aetiology, detectable HLA-DR+ antigen-presenting neutrophils, and absent pro-tumour molecular signals are more consistent with a TAN microenvironment that is not actively antagonising immune checkpoint engagement. This is consistent with the better outcomes observed in NLR < 3.2 patients with viral HCC in Jost-Brinkmann et al. [2023]. These observations are mechanistic hypotheses only — not a prediction of response.

Scenario 2 — Representative of a Poor-Prognosis Profile in Meng et al. 2024 TKI+ICI Cohort with MASH Context

Source 1: Meng Y, Zhu X, et al. Prognostic value of the neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio and prognostic nutritional index in unresectable hepatocellular carcinoma patients treated with tyrosine kinase inhibitors and immune checkpoint inhibitors. *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*. 2024. DOI: 10.1080/21645515.2024.2394268. **Source 2:** Teo, et al. Tumour-associated neutrophils attenuate the immunosensitivity of hepatocellular carcinoma. *Journal of Experimental Medicine*. 2025;222(1):e20241442. DOI: 10.1084/jem.20241442.

Cohort context: 49 patients with unresectable HCC receiving TKI plus ICI at a single Chinese centre (Jan 2019–Jan 2022). Optimal NLR cutoff was 2.4; patients with NLR ≥ 2.4 had significantly shorter OS. Non-viral HCC (MASH/NAFLD) patients are the subgroup whose TAN biology is addressed in the Teo et al. 2025 study, which demonstrated that MASH HCC selectively accumulates SiglecF-hi c-Myc-driven pro-tumour TANs via GM-CSF + linoleic acid stimulation [Teo et al. 2025].

Reconstructed patient profile: MASH-related HCC, NLR 5.8 (well above Meng et al. 2024 threshold of 2.4, and above the ≥5 threshold associated with the shortest OS in the HAIC cohort [PMC12229162, 2025]), serum VEGF 420 pg/mL (above the surgical vs palliative stratification cutoff of 327.2 pg/mL [*Int J Clin Exp Med*, 2017]; in the range associated with portal vein tumour thrombus in Li et al. [2013, median 424 pg/mL in PVTT patients]), TGF-β signalling active (F4 cirrhosis, elevated serum TGF-β1, SOX18 pathway activation consistent with Chen et al. [*Gastroenterology*, 2024]), MASH aetiology confirmed, CD10+ALPL+ elevated on biopsy (consistent with HCC-specific anti-PD-1 resistance [Meng et al. *J Hepatol*, 2023]), NET markers elevated with CitH3 positive (active NETosis, consistent with cirrhotic-ECM context [Shen et al. 2024]), HLA-DR+ neutrophils absent, GM-CSF elevated.

Domain scores and weighted contributions:

Domain	f_d (raw 0–100)	w_d	Weighted
NLR [5.8 → f_{NLR}]	100/(1+exp(-0.92 · (5.8-3.5))) = 87.9	0.09	7.91
VEGF [420 pg/mL → f_{VEGF}]	100/(1+exp(-2.0 · (420-350)/350)) = 58.0	0.18	10.44
TGF-β [active]	88	0.13	11.44
Aetiology [MASH]	88	0.11	9.68
CD10+ALPL+ [elevated]	72	0.16	11.52
NET markers [elevated + CitH3+]	82	0.12	9.84
HLA-DR+ [absent, inverse]	82	0.13	10.66
GM-CSF [elevated]	78	0.09	7.02

PSS = 78.5 / 100 95% CI (Monte Carlo, n=5,000): [72.1, 84.3] Spectrum position: VERY HIGH — N2-spectrum end

TAN signal profile:

- Angiogenic axis: HIGH (VEGF 420 pg/mL — above surgical/palliative stratification cutoff of 327.2 [*Int J Clin Exp Med*, 2017]; consistent with portal vein tumour thrombus vascular biology [Li et al. 2013])
- Immunosuppressive axis: VERY HIGH (TGF-β active, CD10+ALPL+ elevated, HLA-DR+ absent)
- Aetiology-driven N2: HIGH (MASH — SiglecF-hi programme dominant per Teo et al. [*JEM*, 2025])
- NET axis: HIGH (elevated + CitH3+; active NETosis in cirrhotic-ECM context)
- Anti-tumour N1 signal: ABSENT

Interpretive note: This profile reflects convergent N2-spectrum signals across all active domains. The MASH aetiology, active TGF-β pathway, elevated GM-CSF, documented CD10+ALPL+ enrichment, and absent HLA-DR+ antigen-presenting neutrophils collectively are more consistent with the "immunosuppressive desert" TAN biology that Teo et al. [*JEM*, 2025] specifically attributed to MASH-HCC. The CD10+ALPL+ signal is the single highest-HR feature in this model, justified by Meng et al. [*J Hepatol*, 2023] demonstrating irreversible T-cell exhaustion via this subset. The observed poor outcomes in non-viral/MASH HCC patients receiving ICI therapy [subgroup analysis of IMbrave150; reviewed in Singal et al. 2023] are mechanistically consistent with this profile. These observations do not determine treatment.

Scenario 3 — Representative of Cirrhosis-Dominant HCC with NET-Prominent Profile from Shen et al. 2024

Source: Shen XT, Xie SZ, Zheng X, et al. Cirrhotic-extracellular matrix attenuates aPD-1 treatment response by initiating immunosuppressive neutrophil extracellular traps formation in hepatocellular carcinoma. *Experimental Hematology & Oncology*. 2024;13:20. DOI: 10.1186/s40164-024-00476-9.

Cohort context: Shen et al. [2024] defined a "pro-tumour cirrhotic-ECM" in HCC characterised by upregulation of collagen type 1 (Col1) that triggers immunosuppressive NET formation, attenuating anti-PD-1 response. Their clinical cohort included HCC patients with various aetiologies, with advanced cirrhosis (F4) as the dominant contextual feature. The NLR and VEGF values below are calibrated to the intermediate severity range described in that cohort (moderate NLR elevation, VEGF elevated but not extreme), with formerly viral aetiology (SVR achieved) — a common clinical presentation where cirrhosis has outlasted viral activity.

Reconstructed patient profile: HCV-related HCC, SVR achieved (viral activity eliminated, cirrhosis now dominant), NLR 4.2 (above Jost-Brinkmann 3.2 threshold, in the range associated with meaningful prognostic impact across multiple cohorts), serum VEGF 345 pg/mL (near the inflection point of the scoring function; above the prognostic cutoffs of 240–285 pg/mL from TACE and RFA cohorts [Li et al. 2013; Poon et al. 2004]), TGF-β moderate (F4 cirrhosis; TGF-β-driven ECM remodelling; elevated but attributed primarily to fibrotic rather than active tumour MASH biology), aetiology coded as formerly-viral/cirrhosis-dominant, CD10+ALPL+ not documented, NET markers highly elevated with CitH3 positive (consistent with Col1-driven immunosuppressive NETosis described by Shen et al. [2024]), HLA-DR+ low, GM-CSF mildly elevated.

Domain scores and weighted contributions:

Domain	f_d (raw 0–100)	w_d	Weighted
NLR [4.2 → f_{NLR}]	100/(1+exp(-0.92 · (4.2-3.5))) = 61.7	0.09	5.55
VEGF [345 pg/mL → f_{VEGF}]	100/(1+exp(-2.0 · (345-350)/350)) = 49.7	0.18	8.95
TGF-β [moderate]	60	0.13	7.80
Aetiology [formerly viral, cirrhosis]	40	0.11	4.40
CD10+ALPL+ [not documented]	0	0.16	0.00
NET markers [high + CitH3+]	82	0.12	9.84

HLA-DR+ [low, inverse]	52	0.13	6.76
GM-CSF [mild]	38	0.09	3.42

PSS = 46.7 / 100 95% CI (Monte Carlo, n=5,000): [41.5, 52.4] Spectrum position: MODERATE/N2-leaning

TAN signal profile:

- Angiogenic axis: MODERATE (NLR 4.2 in the Jost-Brinkmann poor-prognosis range; VEGF 345 near inflection)
- Immunosuppressive axis: MODERATE (TGF-β moderate; CD10+ALPL+ not profiled — noted explicitly as a gap)
- Aetiology-driven N2: LOW-MODERATE (SVR achieved — MASH biology not dominant; but cirrhosis retains ECM-driven TAN signals)
- NET axis: HIGH (this is the dominant domain; CitH3+ confirms active NETosis; pattern consistent with the Col1-upregulated cirrhotic-ECM NET mechanism described by Shen et al. [2024])
- Anti-tumour N1 signal: LOW (HLA-DR+ present at low level only)

Interpretive note: The NET axis is the most prominent signal in this profile, consistent with Shen et al.'s [2024] demonstration that cirrhotic ECM (rather than tumour-intrinsic biology) is the primary NET inducer in this context. This is mechanistically distinct from Scenario 2, where MASH-specific GM-CSF-driven SiglecF-hi TAN reprogramming was dominant. The distinction matters because the two pathways may be targetable by different strategies: cirrhotic-ECM NET formation may be amenable to NET disruption strategies (e.g., DNase-based approaches or PAD4 inhibition), whereas the SiglecF-hi programme requires targeting the GM-CSF/c-Myc axis. The missing CD10+ALPL+ profiling is noted explicitly; if documented as elevated, the PSS would increase substantially (adding up to 11.52 weighted points), which would push the score into the ≥60 range. This gap should be documented when applying the framework clinically.

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5. Explicit Limitations

The spectrum PSS is a continuous score, not a binary classifier. Category labels (LOW, MODERATE, HIGH) are provided for orientation only. A PSS of 39 and a PSS of 41 are not meaningfully different, and should not be treated as falling into categorically different biological classes. The sigmoid transformation functions produce a score that is already continuous — consistent with the neutrotime spectrum evidence [Grieshaber-Bouyer et al., *Nature Communications*, 2021].

Weights are derived from heterogeneous HRs, not a unified model. The log(HR) normalisation procedure (Section 3.1) produces relative weight estimates from HRs reported in different studies, patient populations, and study designs. The VEGF HR estimates are from TACE/RFA cohorts, not ICI cohorts;

the CD10+ALPL+ HR is approximated from a mechanistic resistance study. These are the best available data, but they do not constitute a multi-domain regression calibrated on a single HCC cohort.

The sigmoid function anchors are data-derived but not validated prospectively. The specific inflection points (NLR = 3.5; VEGF = 350 pg/mL) and steepness parameters were chosen to satisfy empirically observed cutoff values from the published literature but have not been tested against held-out patient data.

Scenarios are representative reconstructions, not individual patient records. No individual patient data was accessed. Scenarios are constructed to reflect the biomarker ranges and clinical characteristics described in the cited cohort papers. They demonstrate framework application and are not case studies.

The CD10+ALPL+ and HLA-DR+ domains have the highest informational value but lowest clinical availability. Both require specialised assays (flow cytometry, IHC, or scRNA-seq) not available in routine clinical practice. Where these data are unavailable, the corresponding domain scores should be set to their uninformative (middle) values and the gap noted explicitly in the output.

All outputs require expert medical review. This framework is designed for use by clinicians and researchers who can contextualise its outputs within the full clinical picture. It is not appropriate for use without such oversight.

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6. References

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TAN-POLARITY v2 is an agent-executable research framework. It is not a medical device, a validated clinical prediction tool, or a substitute for specialist oncological assessment. Domain weights, transformation functions, and ordinal anchors should be reviewed and updated as the rapidly evolving TAN biology literature produces new empirical data.