

Charting higher-order models of brain function beyond pairwise interactions

Received: 9 August 2025

Accepted: 16 July 2026

Published online: 29 July 2026

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Traditional models of brain connectivity primarily focus on pairwise interactions, overlooking collective dynamics among multiple regions. Although many higher-order interaction (HOI) metrics have been proposed, their comparative properties and utility remain unclear. Here, we systematically compare information-theoretic and topological HOI metrics using resting-state and task fMRI data from 100 unrelated Human Connectome Project subjects. We identify a taxonomy of redundant, synergistic, and topological metrics, with the latter bridging the redundancy-synergy continuum. Despite methodological differences, all HOI metrics align with the brain's sensorimotor-to-association hierarchy, yet reveal distinct molecular signatures linking redundancy to metabolic profiles and synergy/topological scaffolds to receptor architecture. HOI metrics outperform pairwise connectivity in brain fingerprinting, whereas pairwise models remain competitive for task decoding. Multivariate analyses further identify topological descriptors as key links between brain function and behavioral variability. Overall, our findings provide a conceptual map of HOI methods for studying multi-regional brain interactions across cognitive and clinical neuroscience.

The brain's remarkable computational and adaptive abilities have traditionally been explored using network models^{1–5}, where nodes represent distinct brain areas and connections denote pairwise relationships between them. Structural connectivity (SC) maps the anatomical wiring of the brain^{6,7}, while functional connectivity (FC) captures statistical dependencies in neural activity^{8–10}. Over the past two decades, these network models have significantly advanced our understanding of brain function in health^{11–13}, during tasks or cognitive states^{14–19}, and in clinical populations^{20–23}. However, by focusing solely on dyadic interactions, they often miss the complex group-level dynamics underpinning processes like rapid network reconfiguration during decision-making and learning, or the evolution of brain dynamics across age^{24–27}.

Mounting evidence from micro- to macro-scale studies^{28–31} increasingly highlights the importance of higher-order interactions (HOIs)^{32–34} – the collective dynamics involving simultaneous interactions among three or more brain regions^{35–40}. Such interactions underpin crucial neural mechanisms, including neuronal avalanches, cell assemblies, and distributed encoding^{10,25,27,39,41–43}. Recent advances in information theory and algebraic topological approaches provide robust theoretical and computational frameworks for characterizing higher-order properties, thereby bridging traditional network models and the emergent spatiotemporal complexity of neural systems^{44–48}.

Building on seminal works^{49,50}, information-theoretic approaches provide a robust framework for capturing the collective dynamics of neural systems, by characterizing the interactions among brain regions

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in terms of different kinds of information: redundancy and synergy^{51–53}. Redundant interactions reflect duplicated or overlapping information between regions, often within the same functional module – such as sensory-motor systems – and are hypothesized to support robust and fault-tolerant coding^{27,46,54}. In contrast, synergistic interactions arise when information is accessible only through the joint activity of multiple regions, revealing computations not captured by individual regions^{37,44}. These typically span distinct networks, including the default mode and frontoparietal systems, and have been linked to cognitive integration, flexibility, and consciousness^{46,55,56}. While it is known that conventional FC analyses predominantly capture redundancy^{43,54,57–59}, synergy is increasingly recognized as critical for distributed computation^{25,60–63}, development⁶⁴, aging^{24,65,66}, neuromodulation^{67,68}, and it is clinically relevant in conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease^{69,70}, stroke⁷¹, schizophrenia⁷², and autism⁷³.

Parallel to these developments, topological data analysis (TDA)^{74–76} has emerged as a powerful tool to probe the geometrical and topological structure of high-dimensional neural data^{77,78}. By leveraging concepts from algebraic topology⁷⁹ – such as persistent homology^{80,81} and Reeb-like graphs^{82,83} – TDA detects invariant features, like homological cycles, which reveal hidden higher-order relationships within brain networks^{84–91}. A growing body of literature shows that these approaches capture aspects of the brain’s architecture that are invisible by traditional pairwise analyses, offering fresh insights into emergent properties relevant to consciousness^{85,92}, health⁹³, cognition⁴⁷ and disease^{94–96}. However, the growing interest in HOIs and the resulting rapid development of diverse methodological frameworks – especially in information theory and topological data analysis – has led to a fragmented research landscape (see Supplementary Fig. S1 for a quantitative trend of HOI-based brain-connectivity studies). Existing approaches often operate in isolation, each grounded in distinct theoretical assumptions and computational principles. As a result, it remains unclear how these methods relate, whether they capture overlapping or complementary aspects of brain organization, and under what conditions one may be preferred over another.

Here, we address this critical gap by providing the first systematic comparison of higher-order frameworks in the human brain. We evaluated ten widely used metrics – spanning information-theoretic and topological approaches – and benchmarked them against classical pairwise connectivity using resting-state and task-based fMRI data from 100 unrelated subjects in the Human Connectome Project^{97,98}. By mapping their relationships, spatial profiles, and behavioral relevance, our analyses uncover three distinct clusters of HOI metrics and reveal how they align with known cortical hierarchies and micro-architecture. While pairwise functional connectivity performs comparably in task decoding, higher-order metrics provide added value in brain fingerprinting and brain-behavior mapping. Together, this work provides a first insightful lens to navigate the growing landscape of higher-order

analyses and establishes a foundation for their broader application in cognitive and clinical neuroscience.

Results

To provide a comprehensive benchmark of higher-order descriptors of human brain organization, we analyzed resting-state and task fMRI data from 100 healthy unrelated subjects of the Human Connectome Project (HCP)^{97,98}. Following standard minimal preprocessing⁹⁹, we extracted regional time series using a combined parcellation that included 100 cortical regions from the Schaefer atlas¹⁰⁰ and 16 sub-cortical regions from the Tian atlas¹⁰¹, yielding 116 regional signals per subject (see Methods). This whole-brain representation serves as the foundation for computing a range of higher-order metrics spanning from information theory to topological data analysis.

As a baseline measure of pairwise interdependence, we consider functional connectivity (FC) as the Pearson correlation between all pairs of regional time series^{102,103}. This widely used measure captures zero-lag linear relationships and serves as a reference point for evaluating more complex, higher-order descriptors.

Next, we quantified redundant and synergistic dependencies using three complementary information-theoretic frameworks, among the most employed in the field. First, we used the Integrated Information Decomposition (PhilD) in its bivariate form^{46,104}, estimating synergy (*PhilD Syn*) and redundancy (*PhilD Red*) as information that persists from past to future between pairs of regions. Second, we employed Partial Entropy Decomposition (PED)^{57,105} on triplets of regions to isolate the synergistic (*PED Syn*) and redundant (*PED Red*) components of their joint entropy. Third, we calculated the O-information⁵⁰, a multivariate measure quantifying the net balance between synergy and redundancy in triplet interactions; negative values (*O-Syn*) indicate synergy-dominated relationships, while positive values (*O-Red*) reflect redundancy dominance. Each redundant-synergistic pair is hereafter referred to as a conjugate metric, reflecting complementary dimensions of a single decomposition framework.

In addition, we examined topological features of brain interactions. From the FC matrix, we derived two homological scaffolds⁸⁵: the frequency-based scaffold (*Fscaff*), which weights edges by the number of one-dimensional loops they appear in, and the persistence-based scaffold (*Pscaff*), which weights edges by the persistence of these loops. Both approaches identify edges contributing to persistent homological features, i.e. one-dimensional loops, thereby retaining the most topologically informative connections⁸⁵. Finally, to capture higher-order temporal structure, we relied on a recent topological approach^{47,106} to identify hypercoherent triangles (*Triangles*) – triplets of mutually coherent interactions irreducible to pairwise links – and tracked the evolving homological scaffold over time (*TScaffold*). Together, these metrics – spanning topological and information-theoretic approaches – provide a comprehensive lens to characterizing higher-order interdependencies in large-scale brain organization (Table 1; Fig. 1). Although applications here focus on triplets for consistency and tractability, most frameworks are extensible to larger sets of regions (see Methods for a detailed description of each framework and Supplementary Fig. S2 for an overview of the complete workflow).

Higher-order taxonomy

We begin by examining how each connectivity metric maps onto the brain’s large-scale organization and how they relate to one another in terms of spatial distribution and informational content (Fig. 2). To enable consistent comparisons across methods, we projected all metrics onto brain regions and pairwise connectivity by aggregating weights into region-wise nodal scores and edge-wise connectivity scores, respectively (see Methods for details). Figure 2a shows the resulting connectivity matrix and cortical maps, averaged across resting-state fMRI data of the 100 subjects (each with 2 sessions and 2 phase-encoding directions, see Methods for details). All values are

Table 1 | Overview of the metrics to characterize large-scale brain organization

Method	Type	Temporal
FC ¹	Classic	✗
Pscaff, Fscaff ⁸⁵	Topology	✗
PhilD Red, PhilD Syn ¹⁰⁴	IT	✓
O-Red, O-Syn ⁵⁰	IT	✗
PED Red, PED Syn ⁵⁷	IT	✗
TScaffold, Triangles ^{47,106}	Topology	✓

Each method is classified by its analytical domain (Type: Classic, Topology, or Information Theory [IT]) and whether it incorporates temporal information (Temporal). While all genuine higher-order metrics were applied to triplets for consistency, most are extensible to larger region sets. Time-resolved metrics were averaged across time to enable comparison with static descriptors (see Methods).

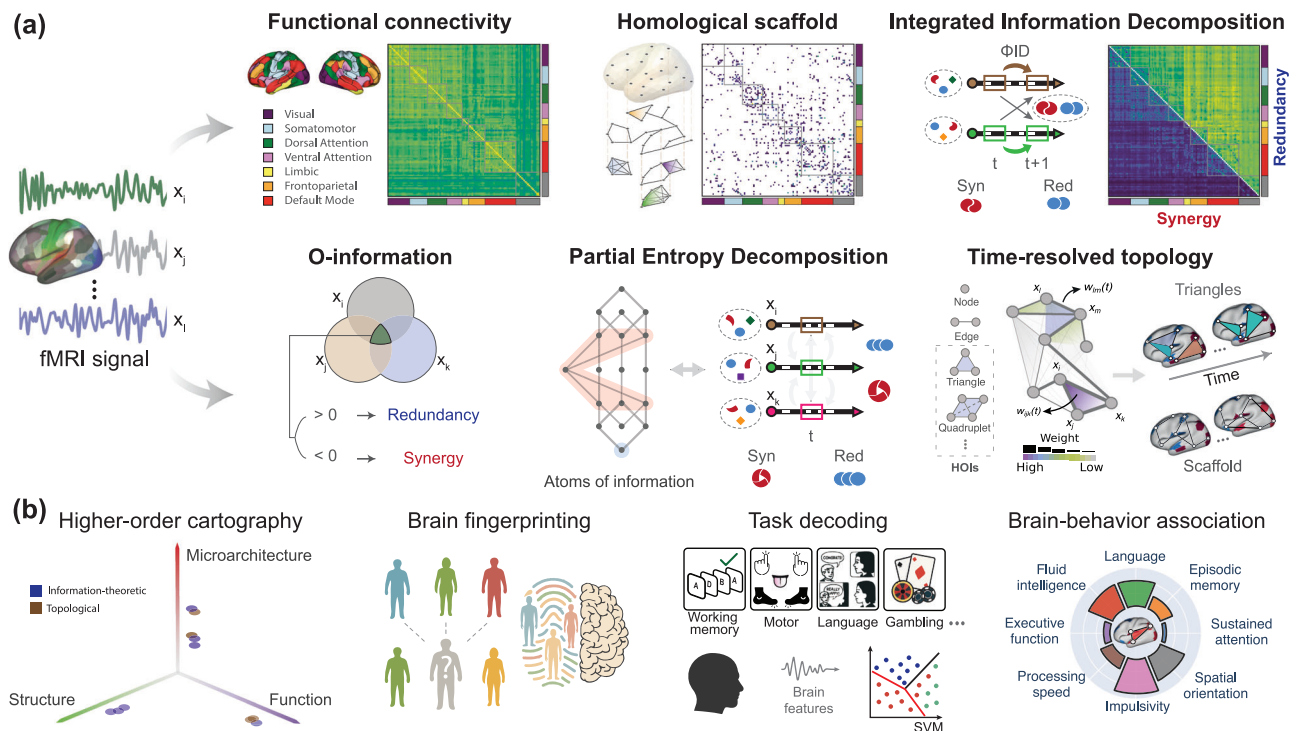


Fig. 1 | Overview of the approaches and applications. **a** Schematic illustration of the metrics used to characterize functional relationship from fMRI data. Approaches include functional connectivity (FC), homological scaffolds derived from topology (Pscf, Fscf), and the bivariate form of Integrated Information Decomposition (PhiID), which partitions information into redundant and synergistic components. Other approaches explicitly capture three-way dependencies, including O-Information, Partial Entropy Decomposition (PED), and a time-resolved topological method that tracks hypercoherent triangles (Triangles) and the

evolving scaffold over time (TScaffold). **b** We consider several brain applications, including the structural-functional cartography of higher-order organization, subject-level brain fingerprinting, cognitive task decoding, and associations between brain organization and behavioral traits. Information-theoretic and topological descriptors offer complementary perspectives on brain micro-architecture, function, and individual variability. Parts of the figure were partly reproduced from ⁴⁷.

expressed as percentile ranks to enable comparison across methods. The spatial patterns reveal distinct organizational signatures. As shown in the top row of Fig. 2a, metrics such as FC, redundancy-based observables (e.g., PhiID Red, PED Red, O-Red), and triangle-based metrics tend to highlight sensory and visual cortices and connections between regions belonging to the same resting state network (RSN)¹⁰⁷. This is shown in SI Fig. S3 (nodal projections by RSN) and SI Fig. S4 (within vs. between-RSN connectivity). In contrast, metrics that capture synergistic interactions (e.g., PhiID Syn, PED Syn) can be associated with interactions between regions belonging to different resting state networks and assign greater weight to transmodal systems, including the frontoparietal and default mode networks. These findings align with prior observations linking redundancy to stable, stimulus-driven processing in unimodal systems, and synergy to integrative processing in transmodal regions involved in abstract cognition^{46,57}. Yet, this is the first time these principles are systematically confirmed across a unified set of classical, topological, and information-theoretic metrics.

To quantitatively assess the relationships between the different metrics while preserving the richness of the original data, we computed pairwise Spearman correlations across their edge-level projections (Fig. 2b). The resulting similarity matrix revealed a structured organization, which we visualized through complete-linkage hierarchical clustering of the corresponding distance matrix (Fig. 2c). This analysis uncovered three major clusters. The first comprises redundancy-dominated metrics – including FC, PhiID Red, PED Red, O-Red, and Triangles – which capture overlapping or shared information between regions. A second cluster consists of the three metrics based on the topological scaffold (Pscf, Fscf, and TScaffold), reflecting

mesoscale structural features. The third cluster groups synergy-dominated metrics – PhiID Syn, PED Syn, and O-Syn – highlighting connections that contribute to unique integrative information. However, this clustering structure shifts when looking at the nodal-level projections: TScaffold aligns more closely with synergy-based metrics than with topological or redundant metrics (see SI Fig. S5 for the nodal-level counterpart of Fig. 2b–d).

To further investigate how these metrics relate to canonical models of brain organization, we computed their correlations with group-average structural and functional connectivity (Fig. 2d). This structure-function cartography places each measure in a two-dimensional space defined by its correspondence with structural connectivity (SC; x-axis) and functional connectivity (FC; y-axis). Redundancy-based metrics – including FC, PhiID Red, PED Red, and Triangles – cluster in a region with strong correlation to FC but weaker links to structure. Pscf and Fscf also align with FC, but exhibit stronger coupling to SC, suggesting a link between the topological relations between the functional links and the underlying physical structure of the network. In contrast, synergy-based metrics – including PhiID Syn, PED Syn, and O-Syn – are located in a distinct quadrant characterized by negative correlations with FC and low positive and negative correlations with SC. This decoupling suggests that synergy captures integrative dynamics not accessible with the classical FC approach. Remarkably, the scaffold-based metric (TScaffold) occupies an intermediate position, with a clear shift in the clustering when transitioning from nodal- to edge-level projections, bridging the gap between redundant and synergistic frameworks (see SI Fig. S6 for comparison between nodal and edge projections). This suggests that the TScaffold might encode a blend of local redundancy

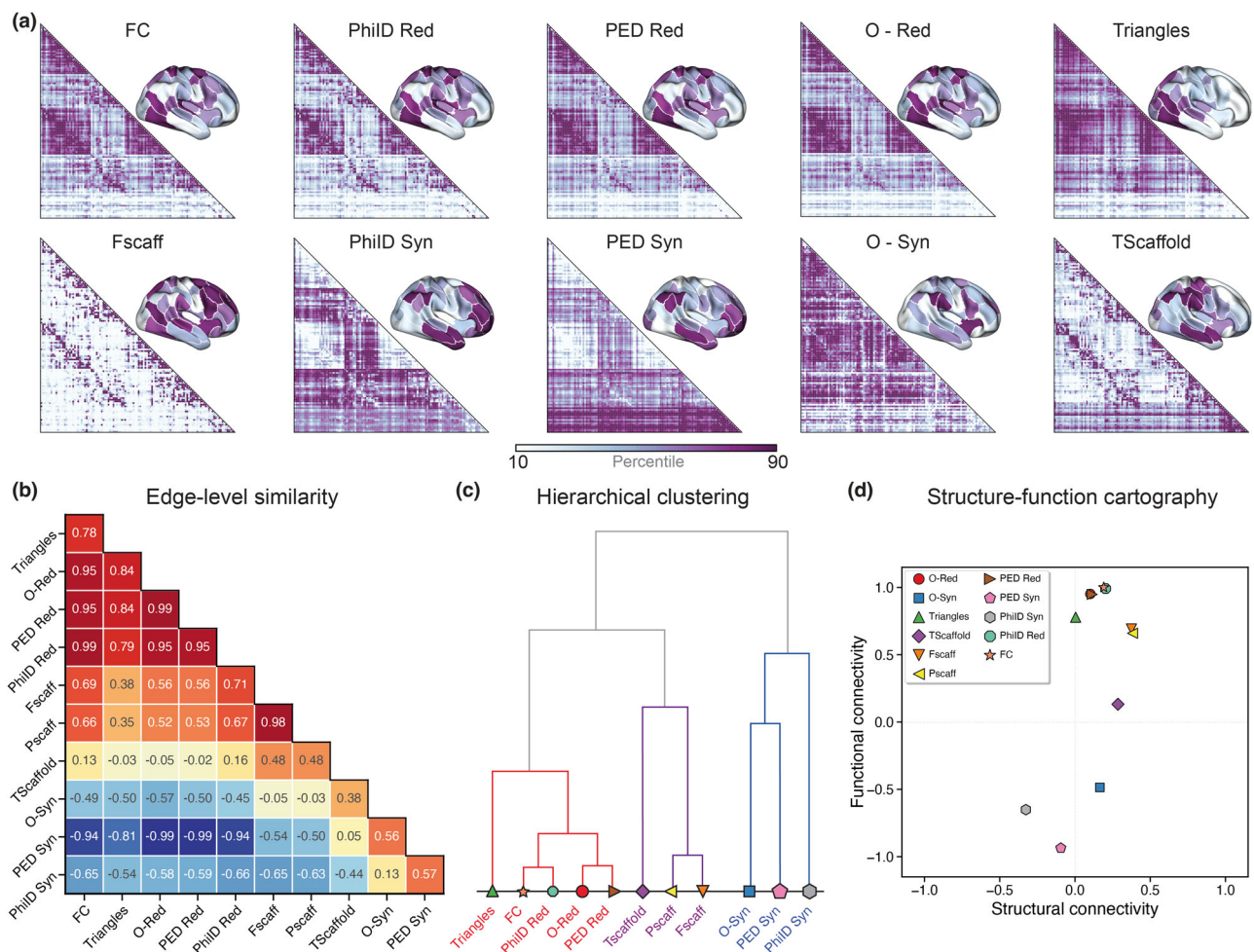


Fig. 2 | Navigating the landscape of higher-order brain observables. **a** Nodal- and edge-level spatial distributions of the connectivity metrics examined in this study, averaged across 100 subjects (see Methods for details). Metrics shown in the first row predominantly highlight contributions from sensory-motor regions, whereas those in the second row exhibit more distributed patterns, both in nodal values and edge-level connectivity. **b** Edge-level similarity between all metrics, computed using Spearman correlation, reveals clusters of methods with shared

spatial structure. **c** A complete-linkage hierarchical clustering based on a distance metric $\sqrt{2(1-\rho)}$ shows a clear separation between redundancy, topological, and synergistic descriptors, confirming the complementarity of their underlying representations. **d** Structure-function cartography positions each measure in relation to group-average structural and functional connectivity, highlighting differences in their alignment with anatomical and functional architecture, revealing distinct groupings.

and distributed synergy, representing the correlation architecture by which the structural connectivity sustains different kinds of synergy in brain function. Together, these findings reveal that connectivity metrics cluster according to their unique properties, each capturing distinct but complementary dimensions of brain organization.

Multimodal characterization of topological and informational gradients

Previous work showed how macroscale cortical gradients derived from conjugate information-theoretic metrics of synergy and redundancy reveal fundamental principles of brain organization^{46,57}. Building on this foundation, we systematically compared informational gradients computed via three complementary frameworks – philID, PED, and the O-information metric – and a novel topological gradient based on scaffold and triangles metric^{47,106} to explore the relationship between informational and topological gradients. Specifically, for each brain region i , we computed the four gradients at the subject level as the difference between synergy and redundancy in each conjugate metric (e.g., $\text{PhilID Syn}(i) - \text{PhilID Red}(i)$), as well as the difference between TScaffold and Triangles, and subsequently averaged them across individuals (Fig. 3a).

Nodal-level projections of conjugated metric pairs converged on similar spatial patterns. That is, all four gradients peaked in frontoparietal regions and diminished in sensorimotor areas, with strong inter-gradient similarity (Pearson's $\rho > 0.8$). Furthermore, each gradient aligns strongly with the established sensorimotor–association (S–A) axis, recently defined as the average of multiple cortical hierarchies¹⁰⁸. All gradients were positively correlated with the S–A axis (Spearman's $r > 0.6$, $p < 0.001$). On this basis, we can summarize all the gradients above by considering a unified higher-order interactions axis (HOI axis), defined as the mean of these four gradient differences (Fig. 3a). This unified gradient provides a single metric that integrates informational and topological signatures of cortical organization (see also SI Fig. S7 for these results at the individual level).

To investigate the micro-architectural properties of these gradients, we correlated each nodal projection with the cortical maps of four metabolic markers, four transporters, and 15 receptors – following recent approaches^{109,110} (Fig. 3b). This analysis reveals a notable dichotomy: redundancy- and triangle-based metrics exhibited stronger associations with metabolism, whereas synergy- and scaffold-based metrics aligned more closely with receptor densities. Consistent with these results, the redundancy–synergy gradients and the

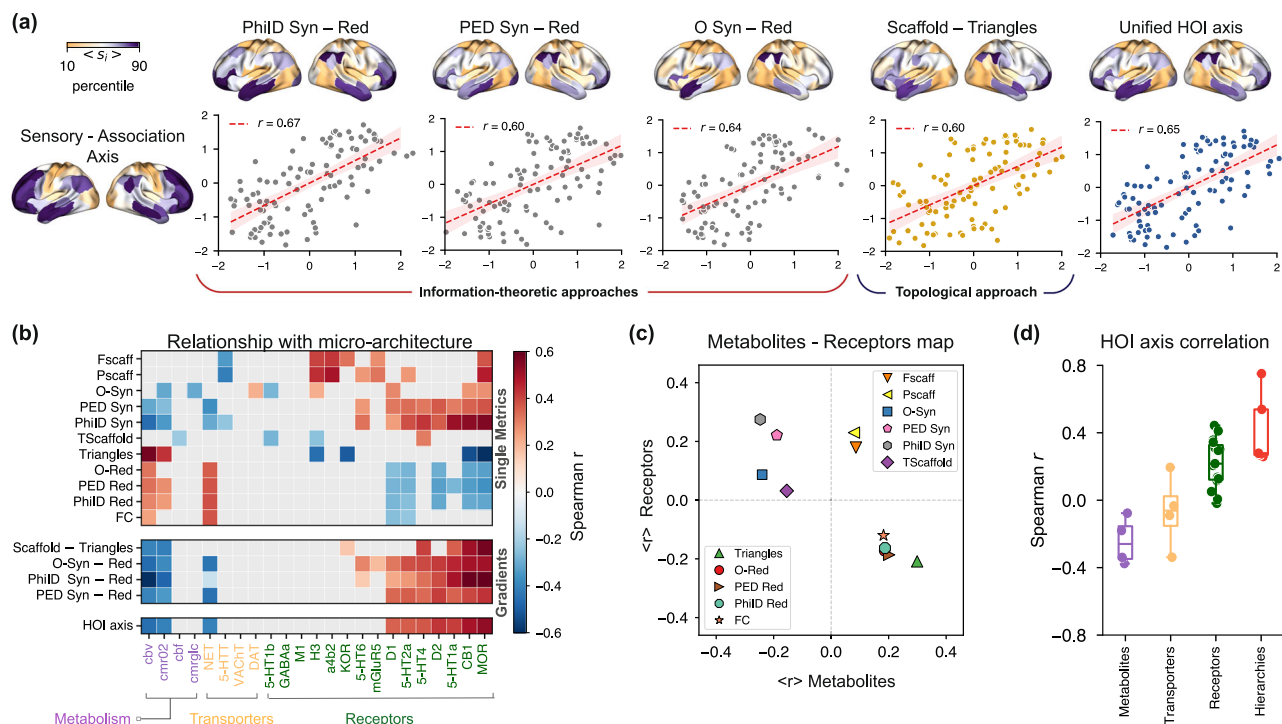


Fig. 3 | Multimodal characterization of informational and topological gradients. **a** Gradients derived from conjugate information-theoretic and topological metrics align with the sensory-association (S-A) axis¹⁰⁸. The upper panel shows subject-averaged cortical maps for four individual gradients, as well as their mean, which defines the unified higher-order interaction axis (HOI axis). Scatter plots depict regional z-scored gradient values against S-A values (dashed lines = linear fits; shaded bands = 95% CI; r = Spearman's correlation). **b** Correlation profiles between each gradient (y-axis) and cortical maps, including measures of receptors, transporters, and metabolism (x-axis) reveal distinct molecular signatures associated with each gradient. Significance was determined via 1000 two-sided spin-

permutations¹¹¹ to account for spatial autocorrelation; gray indicates non-significance ($p > 0.05$). **c** A two-dimensional cartography where each metric is positioned by its average Spearman correlation with receptors (y-axis) and metabolism (x-axis), revealing distinct clusters associated with redundancy, synergy, and topology. **d** The Synergy-Redundancy axis correlates positively with receptor distributions and cortical hierarchies, and negatively with metabolism. Box plots show correlations across metabolic ($n = 4$), transporter ($n = 4$), receptor ($n = 15$), and hierarchy maps ($n = 4$), where n denotes the number of independent brain maps. Box plots indicate the median (center line), interquartile range (IQR; box), and whiskers ($1.5 \times$ IQR).

composite unified HOI gradient correlated positively with receptor maps and negatively with metabolism. Significance was assessed against autocorrelation-preserving spin-based null models^{111,112}.

As shown in Fig. 3c, the different molecular profiles of our metrics can be captured in a two-dimensional cartography, where each metric is positioned according to its average correlation with metabolism maps (x-axis) and receptor expression (y-axis). This cartography reveals three distinct clusters: (i) a synergy group – comprising PhIID Syn, PED Syn, O-Syn, and TScaffold – characterized by strong positive correlations with receptors and negative correlations with metabolism maps; (ii) a scaffold-specific group – including scaffold frequency and scaffold persistence (P/Fscf) – positively correlated with both receptors and metabolism maps; and (iii) a redundancy group – consisting of PhIID Red, PED Red, O-Red, and Triangles – aligned positively with metabolism maps and negatively with receptors.

Finally, to contextualize the HOI axis within the broader landscape of cortical organization, we examined its correspondence with four established macroscale hierarchies: evolutionary and developmental cortical expansion^{113,114}, T1w/T2w ratio as a proxy for cortical myelination^{115,116}, and functional specialization¹¹⁷. As shown in Fig. 3d, we observed robust positive correlations between the HOI axis and both receptor profiles and cortical hierarchies, while the correlations with metabolic attributes were consistently negative. Thus, this axis not only integrates complementary informational and topological signatures, but crucially it also mirrors the fundamental principles shaping cortical structure. The convergence of these two elements

reinforces the view that redundancy and synergy are deeply embedded within the hierarchical organization of the brain.

Brain fingerprinting and task decoding

We next evaluate how each connectivity measure supports two key applications in functional neuroimaging: brain fingerprinting¹¹⁸, the ability to reliably identify individuals based on their functional connectivity patterns, and task decoding^{14,119,120}, the classification of ongoing cognitive states from brain activity.

To evaluate brain fingerprinting performance, we employed two complementary metrics. The identification rate quantifies the ability to correctly match the same subjects across sessions, capturing the proportion of accurately identified individuals within a dataset¹¹⁸. In parallel, individual identifiability (I_{diff}) measures the distinctiveness of a subject's connectivity profile, defined as the difference between average within-subject and between-subject similarity¹²¹. These two metrics together provide a comprehensive view of individual trait stability and separability. As shown in Fig. 4a, when considering whole-brain connectivity, PhIID Red achieves the highest identification rates, nearing perfect subject matching. Fscf and FC follow behind. However, when evaluated by I_{diff} , the highest scores are observed for the synergy and redundancy components of O-information. This suggests that O-information metrics better distinguish individuals at the group level, as reflected in the larger separation between intra- and inter-subject similarity. In other words, group-level separability comes at the cost of higher within-subject variability, which undermines identification accuracy.

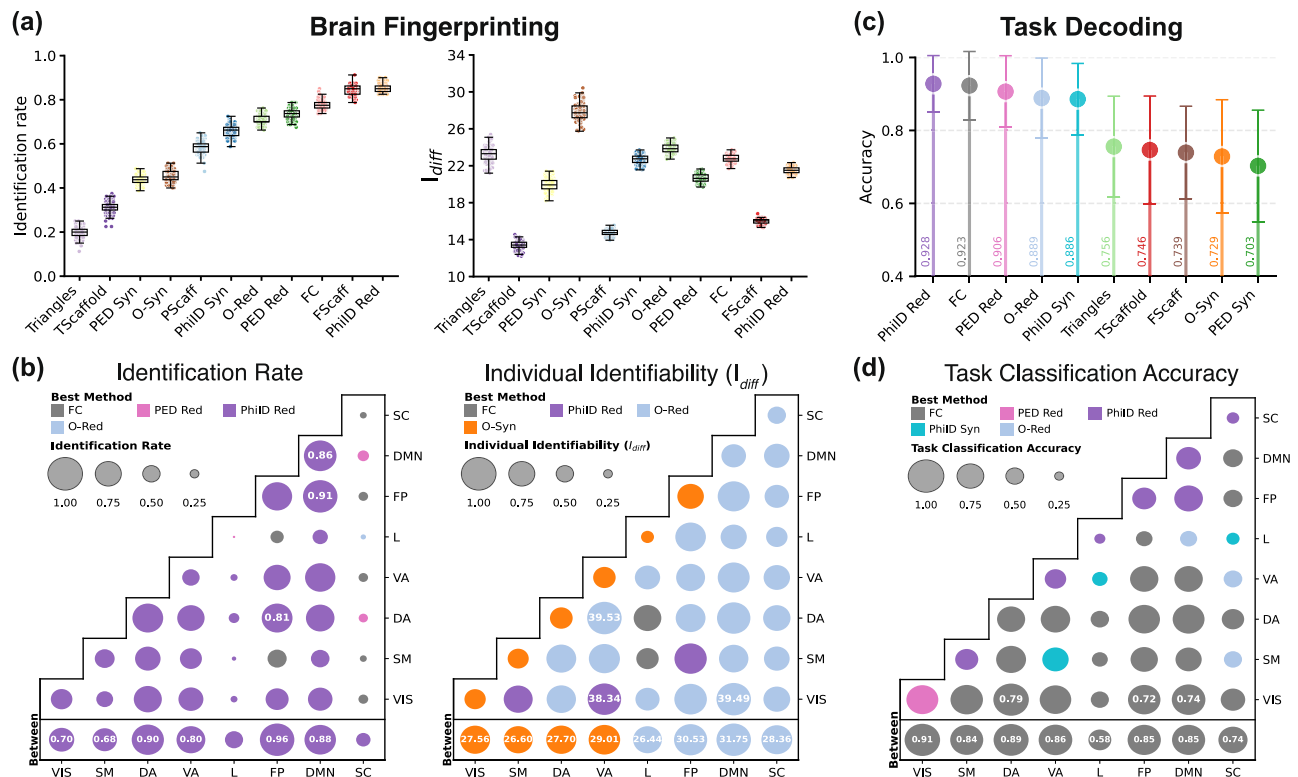


Fig. 4 | Comparison of connectivity metrics for brain fingerprinting and task decoding. **a** Whole-brain fingerprinting performance measured by identification rate (left) and individual identifiability score I_{diff} (right). Box plots show the distribution across $n = 100$ bootstrap iterations of 80 subjects each (median, interquartile range [IQR], whiskers at $1.5 \times IQR$). PhilD Redundancy and scaffold-based metrics yield the highest identification rates, whereas redundancy- and synergy-based metrics achieve higher I_{diff} , reflecting stronger group-level separation. **b** Region-level fingerprinting performance, computed separately within and between the seven Yeo resting-state networks¹⁰⁷. The best-performing method varies by metric and network: functional connectivity (FC) is no longer dominant, with information-theoretic descriptors (e.g., PhilD Red, Red, Syn) showing

improved identifiability, especially in transmodal regions. **c** Whole-brain task decoding accuracy using a linear support vector machine with leave-one-subject-out cross-validation. Dots indicate mean accuracy across folds; error bars show standard deviation. FC consistently performs among the top methods. **d** Task decoding accuracy at the resting-state network level, with FC remaining dominant in transmodal and associative systems. Together, these results highlight a trade-off: while information-theoretic metrics enhance subject identifiability, FC remains the most effective for decoding task states. The functional networks analyzed correspond to: visual (VIS), somatomotor (SM), dorsal attention (DA), ventral attention (VA), limbic (L), frontoparietal (FP), default mode network (DMN), and subcortical (SC).

To examine the spatial specificity of these results, we also assess fingerprinting performance within and between canonical resting-state networks (Fig. 4b). While no single metric dominates across all networks and metrics, PhilD Red achieves the best identification rates across most of the systems. In contrast, synergy- and redundancy-based metrics (O-Syn and O-Red) again lead in individual identifiability, particularly within transmodal networks such as the frontoparietal and default mode systems. These findings align with prior evidence that higher-order cognitive areas contribute most strongly to inter-individual variability in brain organization^{118,121–123}. Notably, restricting our analyses to transmodal cortex (by repeating the comparisons at both node and edge level using only transmodal regions) was almost as discriminative as whole-brain data, reinforcing the view that cognitive individuality is rooted in distributed, higher-order networks.

We next assessed the ability of each connectivity measure to decode cognitive states from fMRI data. Following recent approaches¹²⁴, we trained a linear support vector machine (SVM) to classify task conditions using a leave-one-subject-out cross-validation strategy, applied at both whole-brain (Fig. 4c) and network-level (Fig. 4d) connectivity. Across tasks and brain networks, FC consistently ranks among the best-performing metrics, with redundancy-based approaches (PhilD) leading the pack.

Together, these findings reveal a clear dissociation between connectivity features that support individual identification and those

that decode cognitive states. Higher-order metrics – particularly those based on PhilD redundancy, frequency scaffolds, and O-information synergy and redundancy – enhance subject discriminability. In contrast, classical pairwise approaches such as FC remain most effective for decoding dynamic brain states. These results emphasize the importance of aligning connectivity metrics with the specific goals of neuroscientific inference, whether focused on trait-level individuality or state-level cognition.

FC decomposition and brain-behavior analysis

To comprehensively evaluate how higher-order connectivity metrics contribute to explaining pairwise FC patterns in both resting-state and task fMRI, we defined row-wise multilinear regression models aimed at reconstructing the FC matrix. Specifically, for each brain region i , we predict its FC profile – that is, its connectivity to all other regions $j \neq i$ – using the different higher-order profiles as predictors.

Regression coefficients were estimated using ordinary least squares, and the goodness-of-fit for each region was quantified by the adjusted R^2 , reflecting how well the model predicted that region's observed FC profile (SI Fig. S8 for a schematic illustration). This regression approach builds on previous methodologies^{125–127}, uniquely focusing on individual node-level connectivity. As expected, the model that includes all HOI metrics almost fully explained the FC (range 0.90–0.99). To disentangle the relative contribution of each measure, we performed dominance analysis to partition the total variance

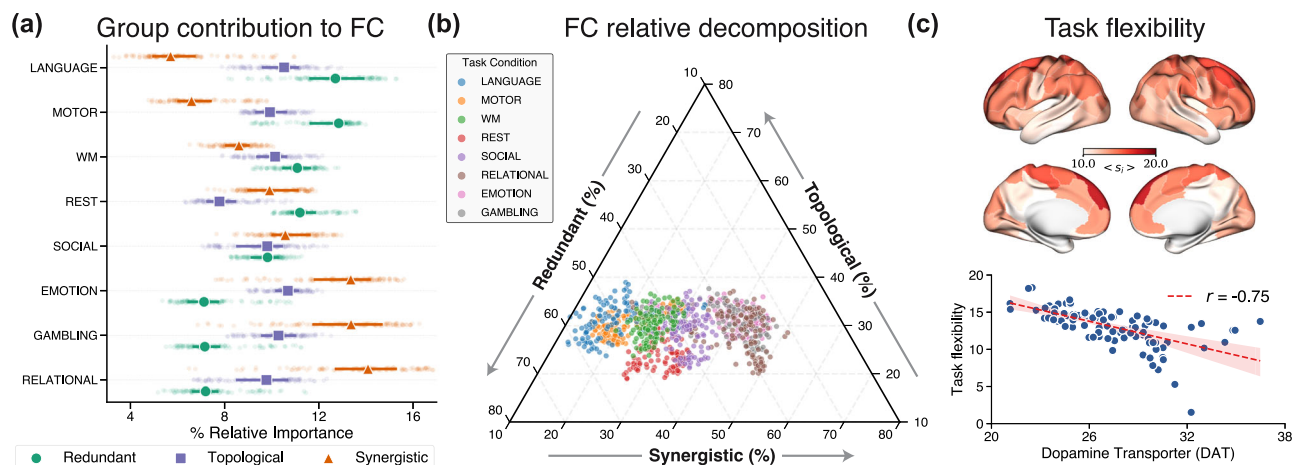


Fig. 5 | Multivariate analyses reveal task-dependent contributions of higher-order metrics. **a** Dominance analysis quantifying the relative contribution of redundant (green circles), synergistic (orange triangles), and topological (violet squares) metric families in predicting region-wise FC. Synergistic components dominate in socially relevant tasks (emotion, gambling), while redundant components are more prominent during rest, motor, and language conditions. Each dot represents one brain region ($n = 116$); central markers indicate the group median and error bars the interquartile range (IQR) across regions. **b** Ternary plot of brain regions (colored by task) showing the normalized contributions of the three metric

families per region. Clustering highlights task-specific functional configurations. **c** Cortical map of task flexibility, defined as the mean Euclidean distance of a region's task-specific positions from its centroid in the ternary space (from **b**). Regions with higher flexibility show greater task-driven reconfiguration. Task flexibility is negatively correlated with dopamine transporter (DAT) density ($n = 100$ cortical regions; Spearman $r = -0.75$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting a stabilizing role of dopaminergic tone in functional adaptability. The regression line and shaded band indicate the linear fit and 95% confidence interval.

explained (R^2) into distinct contributions from three classes of metrics: redundant, synergistic, and topological (Fig. 5a).

Our analysis revealed distinct patterns across tasks. Topological contributions remained relatively stable across cognitive conditions, whereas redundant and synergistic contributions varied substantially by task type. Specifically, synergistic contributions were most pronounced during “social” cognitive tasks (e.g., emotion, gambling, relational tasks), while redundancy dominated during rest, motor, and language conditions. We visualize these differences using a ternary plot (Fig. 5b), where each region's profile for a given task is positioned based on the normalized contribution of the three metric classes. This visualization qualitatively reveals distinct clusters corresponding to different cognitive tasks. To further explore how each region reconfigures across tasks, we defined a measure of task flexibility: the average distance of a region's task-specific positions from its centroid in the ternary space. High flexibility indicates greater modulation of a region's functional profile across cognitive states. Intriguingly, mapping this flexibility across the cortex (Fig. 5c) revealed a striking spatial pattern: task flexibility was negatively correlated with dopamine transporter (DAT) maps. In other words, brain regions with lower DAT density exhibited greater shifts in their functional contributions across tasks, suggesting that dopaminergic tone may act to stabilize or constrain higher-order functional reconfiguration. This highlights a potential neurochemical mechanism underpinning regional adaptability in large-scale brain dynamics.

Finally, to determine whether certain methods better capture brain-behavior relationships, we performed partial least squares correlation (PLSC) analyses^{128,129}. This multivariate technique identifies latent components that maximize covariance between functional metrics and cognitive performance¹³⁰. We independently applied PLSC to each metric across all tasks, assessing how effectively each method explained individual differences in behavior.

The PLSC analysis consistently identified a single statistically significant latent variable for most methods (Fig. 6a), reflecting multivariate associations between functional brain profiles and behavioral outcomes. Topological representations consistently outperformed traditional FC, explaining greater shared covariance and correlations. Specifically, triangles captured the highest covariance (approximately

80% across tasks), followed by PED redundancy and PED synergy (60–70%), while FC explained only 40–50%. Statistical significance was established through permutation testing (5000 repetitions).

Interestingly, although the triangles approach captured the most covariance, the temporal scaffold-based representations yielded the strongest correlations between brain connectivity and cognitive scores. Figure 6b and c illustrates the loadings of the first significant latent variable for the scaffold-rest condition. This apparent dissociation reflects a key property of PLSC: covariance can be high even when correlation is modest if the latent variables have large variance, whereas smaller latent variances can yield high correlations despite lower shared covariance. In our case, brain regions with the highest positive loadings (i.e. bootstrap ratio threshold of $|BSR| \geq 2$, warm colors) were predominantly located within and between unimodal sensory networks, whereas the highest negative loadings (cool colors) localized primarily to transmodal (e.g. default mode network) and subcortical pathways. Behaviorally, cognitive domains including Working Memory, Verbal Episodic Memory, Sustained Attention, Spatial Orientation, Language, Fluid Intelligence, and Executive Function also showed negative loadings. Concordance in sign indicates a positive brain-behavior association: individuals with reduced scaffold-derived connectivity in transmodal DMN regions and increased connectivity in unimodal visual areas tend to perform worse on a broad set of cognitive tasks. This pattern was not significant for Processing Speed and Episodic Memory (see SI Fig. S9 for analogous results across other methods, where associations were generally weaker).

Discussion

Recent strides in information theory and computational topology have increasingly offered novel approaches to characterize multiregional higher-order interactions (HOIs) from neuroimaging recordings^{27,44,131}, extending beyond standard pairwise functional connectivity (FC). Here, we addressed the lack of a systematic understanding of these diverse metrics by mapping their interrelations, biological underpinnings, and utility in brain fingerprinting, task decoding, and brain-behavior associations.

To help readers navigate this rapidly expanding field (see SI Fig. S1 for a numerical survey tracking the recent growth of HOI literature)

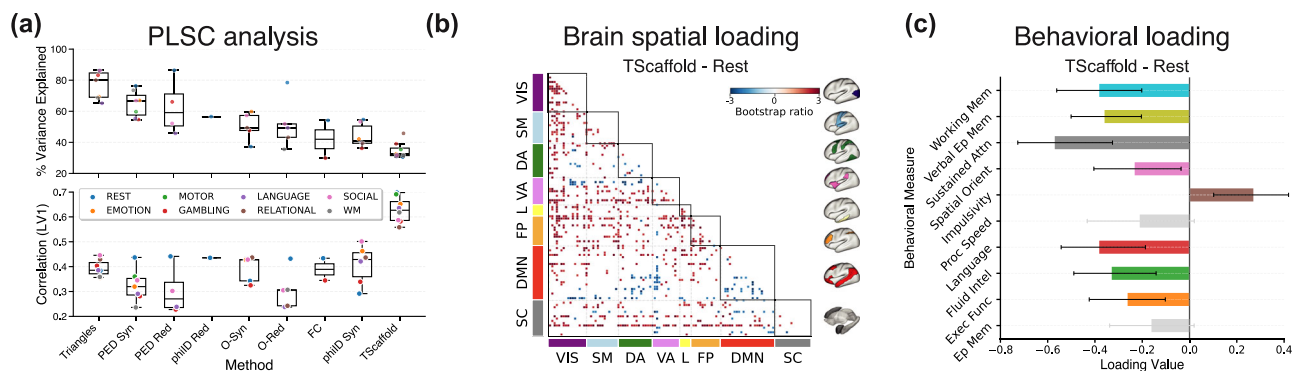


Fig. 6 | Multivariate analyses reveal behavioral relevance of higher-order metrics. **a** Variance explained (top) and brain-behavior correlation for the first latent variable (LVI; bottom) from partial least squares correlation (PLSC), run independently for each task-metric combination ($n = 100$ subjects). Topological methods (Triangles and TScaffold) outperform classical functional connectivity (FC). Box plots show the median, interquartile range (IQR), and $1.5 \times$ IQR whiskers across $n = 8$ task conditions; individual points are colored by task. PLSC significance was assessed with 5000 permutations ($p < 0.05$); salience reliability was assessed with 5000 bootstrap resamples. **b** Spatial distribution of reliable PLSC brain saliences for TScaffold at REST of the LVI, reordered by the Yeo 7-network cortical parcellation. Only connections with a bootstrap ratio (BSR) such that $|BSR| \geq 2$ are

shown. Positive saliences concentrate in the visual and somatomotor cortices; negative saliences are mostly located in the DMN. **c** Behavioral loadings for TScaffold at REST of the LVI. Negative loadings dominate across multiple cognitive domains, indicating that reduced transmodal connectivity and increased unimodal coupling are linked to lower cognitive performance. Impulsivity shows a positive loading, suggesting the opposite pattern for this domain. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals (CI) from bootstrapping. Non-significant loadings (CI crosses zero) are shown in gray. The functional networks analyzed correspond to: visual (VIS), somatomotor (SM), dorsal attention (DA), ventral attention (VA), limbic (L), frontoparietal (FP), default mode network (DMN), and subcortical (SC).

and to summarize our full pipeline overview, from metric definitions to downstream applications, we provide a schematic in Supplementary Fig. S2. Our comparative analysis, at nodal and edge-level projections, consistently reveals three families of observables: redundancy-based metrics, synergy-based metrics, and topological scaffolds (Fig. 2). In brief, we found that these computational modes align strongly with established sensorimotor-association cortical hierarchies and distinct neurochemical profiles. Furthermore, while synergy and redundancy significantly enhance subject identifiability (fingerprinting), classical pairwise FC remains optimal for decoding specific cognitive states.

These findings are notable in two major respects. First, despite their distinct theoretical principles, information-theoretic approaches – including O-Information⁵⁰, Partial Entropy Decomposition (PED)^{57,105}, and Integrated Information Decomposition (PhIID)¹⁰⁴ – converge reliably into synergy and redundancy clusters. This convergence suggests that the brain conveys different kinds of synergy and redundancy with a similar spatial and network organization. While previous work hinted at this alignment^{46,48,57}, here we systematically validated it across multiple HOI frameworks. Second, topological descriptors consistently align with informational modes: triangles align with redundancy, scaffolds correlate with synergy, particularly at the nodal level. This cross-framework correspondence suggests that distinct topological motifs may implement different modes of information processing, reflecting underlying structure-function relationships in the brain.

These observations are consistent with previous studies linking synergy negatively with both FC and structural connectivity (SC)⁴⁶, whereas redundancy and triangles positively correlate with these traditional connectivity metrics. Notably, homological scaffolds⁴⁷ exhibit a uniquely dual role: nodally, they reflect synergy; at the edge level, they correlate with FC and SC (Fig. 2 and SI Fig. S5). This suggests that scaffolds function as integrative structures, balancing anatomical constraints with dynamic information integration.

Our findings further align with recent topological HOI research: while Varley et al. reported that O-information synergistic interactions are particularly represented in cycles and three-dimensional cavities of data clouds¹³², Poetto et al.¹³³ demonstrated that (significantly larger than expected) PhIID synergistic contributions appear on edges internal to topological cycles. By extending these observations to our

definitions of scaffolds, we suggest that the association between topological scaffolds and synergistic interactions reflects a general organizational principle of higher-order neural dynamics.

Yet, what are the biological underpinnings of these organizational common profiles? And, do consistent patterns emerge across different frameworks? To address this, we examined how nodal projections of multiple metrics relate to cortical hierarchies, receptor expression, and metabolism maps (Fig. 3). Remarkably, synergy/scaffold and redundancy/triangle gradients converge onto a shared HOI axis, which strongly aligns with the well-known Sensorimotor-Association (S-A) cortical hierarchy¹⁰⁸ – suggesting that computational modes (synergy vs. redundancy) are embedded within evolutionary, anatomical, and functional gradients^{117,134}.

Examining the biological substrates of the HOI axis revealed robust associations with cortical neurochemistry. The axis correlated positively with neurotransmitter receptor density, and negatively with metabolic maps and transporter distribution, thus suggesting a clear physiological dissociation. This pattern was mirrored across individual metrics: redundancy- and triangle-based ones mapped onto metabolically efficient sensorimotor regions, supporting stable, low-cost communication; synergy- and scaffold-based ones instead were enriched in receptor-dense association cortices. These findings point to two complementary regimes of brain function respectively—one optimized for reliable signaling¹⁰⁹, and a second for flexible, neuromodulator-driven integration⁴⁶. These results are also consistent with prior work linking transmodal regions to complex cognition, executive control, and consciousness^{109,135}, as well as with emerging models in which neuromodulation enables dynamic network reconfiguration in support of adaptive behavior^{69,136}.

When considering neuroscientific applications, higher-order connectivity metrics surpassed pairwise FC in brain fingerprinting¹¹⁸ (Fig. 4). O-Red and O-Syn achieved the largest identifiability scores (I_{diff})¹²¹, whereas PhIID-Red and scaffold-based topological metrics produced the highest identification rates, supporting recent findings⁹³. These metrics resolve fine-grained, higher-order dependencies that conventional FC misses. Notably, restricting our analyses to transmodal cortices only (for comparisons at both node and edge level) was almost as discriminative as whole-brain data, reinforcing the view that cognitive individuality is rooted in distributed, higher-order networks¹³³.

The pattern reverses for cognitive task decoding: classical FC consistently ranked among the top-performing metrics when considering whole-brain connections or distinct functional networks (Fig. 4). Hence, features that maximize trait-level identification differ from those best suited to capture cognitive states. PhilD redundancy, frequency-domain scaffolds, O-information synergy and redundancy enhance the former –subject discriminability–, whereas classical FC is still optimal for the latter –decoding cognitive states. This aligns with extensive evidence indicating that task-related brain reconfiguration induces inter-regional differences in BOLD response¹³⁷, which can be effectively captured using classical FC analyses, such as increased integration during cognitively demanding tasks like the N-back^{19,138}, or decreased segregation in FC during motor execution tasks^{17,139}. Again, these results show that an appropriate alignment of the chosen metric with the inferential goal – trait versus state in this case – is critical for neuroscientific applications.

Multivariate brain-behavior analyses further underscore the importance of higher-order topology (Fig. 5). Triangle metrics explain the largest overall variance, yet scaffold metrics show the strongest and most generalizable correlations with behavioral performances across tasks. Because scaffolds sit between nodal synergy profiles and the structural constraints of SC and FC, they appear to integrate redundant and synergistic information into network configurations that directly support behavioral variability.

Task-dependent analyses further showed that cognitive demands modulate the balance of HOI types in a manner consistent with the HOI-S-A axis alignment: association-heavy tasks (social, relational) amplify synergy and scaffold contributions, while sensorimotor and language tasks emphasize redundancy and triangles (Fig. 5), partially aligning with prior work^{46,48}.

A fundamental consideration in HOI research is the choice of interaction order. Here, we focus on third-order interactions, since the 2-to-3 step, i.e., from pairwise to triplets, is the first regime where irreducible synergy and redundancy emerge beyond dyads. The same frameworks can, in principle, extend to fourth order and higher, potentially revealing broader multi-region dependencies (e.g., distributed hyper-synergies across cognitive networks). Yet, the number of candidate multiplets grows combinatorially, making exhaustive whole-brain analyses quickly infeasible. We note that the computational cost of the evaluated HOI metrics varies considerably; detailed benchmarks, including estimated time complexity for all metrics, are reported in Supplementary Tables S1 and Supplementary Figs. S10. Moreover, we quantified the added value of higher orders by comparing O-information at orders 3 and 4 (Supplementary Fig. S11). Higher orders may prove especially valuable when probing distributed cognitive systems, such as the default-mode or frontoparietal networks, where four or more regions are thought to engage in irreducible collective computation. Indeed, to overcome the computational bottleneck of exhaustive searches at these scales, future analyses can leverage targeted strategies, specifically: (i) anatomical pre-selection to reduce the region pool, (ii) structural or functional sparsification of candidate hyperedges, and (iii) probabilistic sampling approaches.

Our findings should be considered in light of several limitations that also point toward promising directions for future work. First, while no single study can exhaust the rapidly expanding landscape of HOI metrics, here we prioritized frameworks with established prevalence in the neuroscience literature and widespread use in resting-state fMRI research. To test the generality of our conclusions beyond this core set, we additionally evaluated persistent entropy as a complementary topological descriptor, along with a recently developed hypergraph inference method that does not fall strictly within either the topological or the informational framework¹⁴⁰ (See Supplementary Figs. S12–S14). Moreover, we included mutual information, transfer entropy, and precision as classical pairwise benchmarks (see

Supplementary Figs. S13 and S14). The inclusion of these pairwise metrics enables direct comparison with the recent large-scale benchmark of pairwise measures¹⁴¹, confirming that the added value of HOI metrics is not an artifact of the specific pairwise baseline chosen. We further assessed the robustness of our analysis with respect to the choice of hyperedge-to-region projection by employing alternative hypergraph centrality metrics^{142,143} (Supplementary Fig. S15). Nonetheless, recent extensions of O-information^{52,144–149}, as well as other metrics that probe the importance of higher-order structure beyond synergy and redundancy^{69,150,151}, may yield complementary insights. Second, our analyses were conducted on fMRI data from healthy subjects of HCP. Assessing the generalizability of our findings to clinical populations and across different age groups remains an important direction for future research^{24,69}, as well as their use to study mesoscale brain organization¹⁵². Third, the relatively slow sampling of fMRI constrains inference on fast neural dynamics; integrating higher-temporal-resolution modalities such as MEG, EEG, or intracranial recordings would offer important complementary perspectives on the dynamics of HOIs¹⁴⁶. Fourth, redundancy estimates are known to be sensitive to preprocessing choices; although we used established pipelines¹⁵³, we did not systematically explore variation across preprocessing strategies, parcellation schemes, or denoising approaches^{154,155}. However, to partially test robustness, we conducted a preliminary evaluation on the larger 1200-subject HCP cohort (S1200, August 2025 release). Although processed with a different, non-comparable minimally processed pipeline, as mentioned in the HCP guidelines, the fundamental synergy-redundancy gradients and their core spatial organization were highly preserved, despite some variation in the exact hierarchical clustering of the metrics (Supplementary Fig. S16). Systematically assessing these preprocessing factors in larger datasets remains an important direction for future research. In conclusion, our findings suggest that higher-order interactions reveal latent axes of brain organization that are not accessible via pairwise connectivity. These axes, rooted in distinct computational, structural, and molecular substrates, provide a principled framework to interpret integration, segregation, and their behavioral correlates in the human brain.

Methods

Data sources and preprocessing

HCP data. We used fMRI data from the Human Connectome Project (HCP), specifically the U100 unrelated subjects subset from the HCP 900 Subjects Data Release^{14,97}. This cohort includes 100 healthy adult participants (54 females, 46 males; mean age = 29.1 ± 3.7 years), selected to ensure no family relationships. Per HCP protocol, all participants provided written informed consent approved by the Washington University Institutional Review Board. Ethical approval for analyses on the HCP data was obtained from the Swiss Ethics Committee on research involving humans. All procedures adhered to relevant guidelines and regulations.

MRI data were acquired on a 3T Siemens Prisma scanner using the HCP standard scanning protocol. Structural MRI consisted of a higher-resolution T1-weighted 3D MPRAGE sequence (TR = 2400 ms, TE = 2.14 ms, TI = 1000 ms, flip angle = 8°, FOV = 224 × 224 mm, voxel size = 0.7 mm isotropic). Diffusion-weighted imaging used spin-echo echo-planar imaging (EPI) with three b-value shells (1000, 2000, and 3000 s/mm², 90 directions per shell plus 6 b=0 volumes; TR = 5520 ms, TE = 89.5 ms, flip angle = 78°, FOV = 208 × 180 mm). Resting-state fMRI scans (rfMRI_REST1 and rfMRI_REST2) were collected over two sessions using gradient-echo EPI (TR = 720 ms, TE = 33.1 ms, flip angle = 52°, FOV = 208 × 180 mm, voxel size = 2 mm isotropic), each with two phase-encoding directions: left-right (LR) and right-left (RL). Notice that although the acquisition design included 2 sessions and 2 phase-encoding directions per subject, one scan had preprocessing issues, yielding a total of 399 resting-state fMRI scans analyzed.

In addition to resting-state scans, seven task-based fMRI paradigms were acquired across two sessions: gambling (tfMRI_GAMBLING), relational (tfMRI_RELATIONAL), social (tfMRI_SOCIAL), working memory (tfMRI_WM), motor (tfMRI_MOTOR), language (tfMRI_LANGUAGE; including story-listening and arithmetic), and emotion (tfMRI_EMOTION). Working memory, gambling, and motor tasks were recorded on the first day, while relational, social, language, and emotion tasks were acquired on the second. For each session, both LR and RL phase-encoding acquisitions were used to compute all the different scores. All analyses used the minimally preprocessed HCP data. Full acquisition and preprocessing details are available in the original HCP publications^{14,97}.

Brain parcellation. We employed a parcellation of the brain into 116 regions of interest, combining 100 cortical parcels from the Schaefer atlas¹⁰⁰ with 16 subcortical regions from the Tian atlas¹⁰¹. This combined cortical-subcortical parcellation was used consistently across structural and functional connectivity analyses. Following the standard 7-network Yeo atlas parcellation¹⁰⁷, we classify brain networks into unimodal (visual, VIS; somatomotor, SM; dorsal attention, DA; ventral attention, VA) and transmodal (limbic, L; frontoparietal, FP; default mode, DMN) systems.

Group-level structural connectivity. A group-representative structural connectome was constructed using diffusion-weighted MRI data from the same 100 unrelated HCP subjects. Diffusion scans were processed with MRtrix3, following a standard pipeline comprising multi-shell, multi-tissue response function estimation, constrained spherical deconvolution, and tractography with 210⁶ streamlines per subject. Cortical and subcortical segmentations based on the Schaefer (100 regions) and Tian (16 regions) atlases, respectively, were used to parcellate the brain and generate individual connectivity matrices. A group-level structural connectome was then computed by averaging across subjects, preserving edge weights corresponding to streamline counts.

Functional data preprocessing. We used the minimally preprocessed fMRI data provided by the HCP⁹⁹, which includes artifact removal, motion correction, and registration to standard space. Key steps in the HCP functional pipeline included volumetric and grayordinate-based spatial preprocessing, and weak high-pass temporal filtering (cutoff > 2000 s).

For resting-state fMRI, we applied additional preprocessing: a Butterworth bandpass filter ([0.008 Hz, 0.08 Hz]) was applied in both forward and reverse directions (python `nilearn.NiftiLabelsMasker`).

For task fMRI, the same preprocessing steps were applied, with the exception of bandpass filtering, as the optimal frequency bands for task-based signals remain task-dependent¹⁵⁶. The resulting region-wise time series were used for all functional connectivity and classification analyses.

Brain maps from neuromaps. We used the `neuromaps` toolbox (<https://github.com/netneurolab/neuromaps>)¹⁵⁷ to obtain a set of brain maps capturing cortical hierarchies together with metabolism, and neurotransmitter receptor and transporter brain topographies. Surface-based maps were transformed to the standard `fsLR32k` cortical surface using linear interpolation and parcellated into 100 cortical regions using the Schaefer-100 atlas in `fsLR32k` space¹⁰⁰. Volumetric data were retained in MNI152 space and parcellated using the Schaefer-100 volumetric atlas.

Maps depicting cortical hierarchies included the T1w/T2w ratio as a proxy for intracortical myelination^{115,116} and the evolutionary and developmental expansion maps^{113,114}. Also from `neuromaps`, we recover the Margulies gradients as a proxy for the functional hierarchies, and the Metabolic maps include cerebral blood flow, cerebral blood

volume, oxygen metabolism, and glucose metabolism^{158,159}. Neurotransmitter maps encompassed densities of 19 different neurotransmitter receptors and transporters spanning 9 neurotransmitter systems: serotonin (5-HT1a, 5-HT1b, 5-HT2a, 5-HT4, 5-HT6, 5-HTT), dopamine (D1, D2, DAT), norepinephrine (NET), acetylcholine ($\alpha 4\beta 2$, M1, VACHT), histamine (H3), glutamate (mGluR5), GABA (GABAA/BZ), opioid (MOR), and cannabinoid (CB1)^{21,109,160,161}. These maps provide a high-resolution, multi-receptor perspective on the molecular architecture of the human cortex¹⁵⁷.

Higher-order frameworks

O-Information (Ω): Redundancy and Synergy. The Total Correlation¹⁶² TC and the Dual Total Correlation¹⁶³ DTC, are given by the following formulas:

$$TC(\mathbf{X}^n) = \sum_{i=1}^n H(X_i) - H(\mathbf{X}^n), \quad (1)$$

$$DTC(\mathbf{X}^n) = H(\mathbf{X}^n) - \sum_{i=1}^n H(X_i | \mathbf{X}_{-i}^n). \quad (2)$$

Here, $\mathbf{X}^n$ is a vector of n random variables, $\mathbf{X}^n = (X_1, \dots, X_n)$, $H(\cdot)$ represents the Shannon entropy, and $\mathbf{X}_{-i}^n$ represents the vector of $n-1$ variables composed by all minus X_i i.e., $(X_1, \dots, X_{i-1}, X_{i+1}, \dots, X_n)$. Both TC and DTC are non-negative generalizations of mutual information, meaning they are zero if and only if all variables $X_1, \dots, X_n$ are statistically independent of one another.

For a set of n random variables $\mathbf{X}^n = (X_1, \dots, X_n)$, the O-Information⁵⁰ (denoted by Ω) is calculated as follows:

$$\Omega(\mathbf{X}^n) = TC(\mathbf{X}^n) - DTC(\mathbf{X}^n), \quad (3)$$

In our study, we employ the O-information to investigate third-order interactions. For three variables X_i , X_j , and X_k , the O-information is equivalent to the interaction information¹⁶⁴ and can be expressed as:

$$\begin{aligned} \Omega(X_i, X_j, X_k) = & H(X_i) + H(X_j) + H(X_k) \\ & - H(X_i, X_j) - H(X_i, X_k) - H(X_j, X_k) \\ & + H(X_i, X_j, X_k) \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

The O-information is a real-valued measure that captures the balance between redundancies and synergies in arbitrary sets of variables, thus extending the properties of the interaction information of three variables¹⁶⁴ to larger sets (see related discussion in Ref. 49). In particular, the sign of the O-information serves to discriminate between redundant and synergistic groups of random variables: $\Omega > 0$ corresponds to redundancy-dominated interdependencies (*O-Red*), and $\Omega < 0$ characterizes synergy-dominated variables (*O-Syn*). These metrics were computed using the `HOI` toolbox, specifically the class of functions named `Oinfo` from the repository (<https://github.com/brainets/hoi.io>)¹⁶⁵.

Integrated information decomposition (Phi ID): *PhiID Red* and *PhiID Syn*. Consider three random variables: two source variables X^i and X^j , and a target variable Y . The Partial Information Decomposition (PID)⁴⁹ decomposes the total information provided by X^i and X^j about Y , given by Shannon's mutual information $I(X^i, X^j; Y)$, as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} I(X^i, X^j; Y) = & \text{Red}(X^i, X^j; Y) + \text{Syn}(X^i, X^j; Y) \\ & + \text{Un}(X^i; Y | X^j) + \text{Un}(X^j; Y | X^i), \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

where $\text{Red}(X^i, X^j; Y)$ represents the information provided by X^i and X^j about Y (redundancy), $\text{Syn}(X^i, X^j; Y)$ denotes the information provided jointly by X^i and X^j about Y (synergy), $\text{Un}(X^i; Y | X^j)$ is the unique information provided by X^i about Y , and $\text{Un}(X^j; Y | X^i)$ is the information that is

provided only by X^j about Y . The four terms of this decomposition are naturally structured into a lattice with nodes $\mathcal{A} = \{\{12\}, \{1\}, \{2\}, \{1\}\{2\}\}$, corresponding to the synergistic, unique in source one, unique in source two, and redundant information, respectively. To compute these terms, it is necessary to estimate redundancy. A common approach for this is the Minimum Mutual Information (MMI) estimator, which defines redundancy as the minimum mutual information between each source and the target. Synergy, in contrast, captures the additional information provided by the weaker source when the stronger source is already known¹⁶⁶. This choice is motivated by the fact that the MMI approach has been benchmarked on Gaussian data¹⁶⁶, and there is a long-standing body of literature supporting the use of Gaussian models to represent fMRI data^{167–169}.

Consider the stochastic process of two random variables $X_t = \{X_t^i, X_t^j\}$ and denote the two variables in a current state t , by X_t^i and X_t^j , and the same two variables in a past state $t - \tau$, by $X_{t-\tau}^i$ and $X_{t-\tau}^j$. The Integrated Information Decomposition (Φ ID) is the forward and backward decomposition of $I(X_{t-\tau}^i, X_{t-\tau}^j; X_t^i, X_t^j)$, called the time delay mutual information, in redundant, synergistic and unique information¹⁰⁴. The Φ ID can be represented by the forward and backward interactions of the product $\mathcal{A} \times \mathcal{A}$, resulting in 16 distinct atoms: synergy to synergy, redundancy to redundancy, unique in source one to unique in source two (and backward), and redundancy to synergy, among others. Following previous work⁴⁶, our analyses focus on two specific atoms quantifying the temporal persistence of redundancy and synergy: the *redundancy to redundancy* atom (ϕ_{Red}) and *synergy to synergy* atom (ϕ_{Syn}).

To compute these terms, it is necessary to employ an estimator for the redundancy to redundancy atom (ϕ_{Red}). Building on the Minimum Mutual Information (MMI) principle and following recent work on this approach, we compute it as follows:

$$\phi_{\text{Red}}(X_i, X_j) = \min_{i,j} \{ \text{MI}(X_i, X_j) \} \quad (6)$$

Once this approximation is obtained, all 16 Partial Information Decomposition (PID) atoms can be estimated. In particular, this allows for the computation of the synergy to synergy atom (ϕ_{Syn}). These metrics were computed using the `HOI` python toolbox, specifically the class `phiID_atoms` from the repository (<https://github.com/brainets/hoi.io>)¹⁶⁵.

Partial entropy decomposition (PED): PED Red and PED Syn. The Partial Entropy Decomposition (PED) framework^{57,105} offers a principled way to decompose the joint entropy of a set of discrete random variables into “atoms” that capture distinct modes of information sharing—specifically, redundancy and synergy. While aligning with the axioms of information decomposition^{49,170}. For a system

$$\mathbf{X} = \{X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n\},$$

the joint entropy is given by

$$H(\mathbf{X}) = \mathbb{E}[-\log P(x)], \quad (7)$$

where x denotes a particular configuration of $\mathbf{X}$.

Central to PED is the idea of “shared entropy”. Rather than summarizing a distribution with a single scalar $h(x) = -\log P(x)$, this method seeks to determine how different components of x jointly exclude probability mass—that is, how they “share” information.

This concept is generalized by considering all non-empty subsets of the system. Given a collection of sources $a_1, \dots, a_k$ (each a_i representing a subset of components). Redundancy is defined through the

measure first proposed by Makkeh et al.¹⁷¹ and used in Varley et al.⁵⁷:

$$h_{\text{sx}}(a_1, \dots, a_k) = \log \frac{1}{P(a_1 \cup \dots \cup a_k)}, \quad (8)$$

and its expectation yields the global measure

$$H_{\text{sx}}(A_1, \dots, A_k) = \mathbb{E}[h_{\text{sx}}(a_1, \dots, a_k)]. \quad (9)$$

Not every collection of subsets constitutes a valid “atom” in this decomposition. Following⁴⁹, Varley et al.⁵⁷ restrict their attention to combinations where no source is a subset of any other. Formally, if s is the power set of the components (excluding the empty set), the domain of valid atoms is defined as

$$\Lambda = \left\{ \lambda \in \mathbb{P}_1(s) : \forall a_i, a_j \in \lambda, a_i \not\subseteq a_j \right\}. \quad (10)$$

Within the lattice Λ , the partial entropy atom associated with a given collection α is obtained via Möbius inversion:

$$h_{\alpha}^{\mathbf{x}}(\alpha) = h_{\text{sx}}(\alpha) - \sum_{\beta \leq \alpha} h_{\beta}^{\mathbf{x}}(\beta). \quad (11)$$

Consequently, the joint entropy can be exactly recovered as

$$h(\mathbf{x}) = \sum_{\alpha \in \Lambda} h_{\alpha}^{\mathbf{x}}(\alpha). \quad (12)$$

For systems of three variables, PED allows us to decompose classical information-theoretic quantities into contributions attributable to redundancy and synergy. In particular, one may define a measure of redundant structure as

$$\mathcal{S}_R(X_i, X_j, X_k) = \{i\}\{j\}\{k\}, \quad (13)$$

which captures the information redundantly available from each individual variable. In contrast, the synergistic structure is given by the sum of all atoms representing information that emerges only when variables are considered jointly:

$$\begin{aligned} \mathcal{S}_S(X_i, X_j, X_k) = & \{i,j\}\{i,k\}\{j,k\} \\ & + \{i,j\}\{i,k\} + \{i,j\}\{j,k\} + \{i,k\}\{j,k\} \\ & + \{i\}\{j,k\} + \{j\}\{i,k\} + \{k\}\{i,j\}. \end{aligned} \quad (14)$$

Homological scaffolds: fscaff and pscaff. Persistent and frequency-based scaffolds are built on top of FC matrices and designed to high-light mesoscale structures⁸⁵. These methods identify groups of interacting regions by selecting topologically relevant groups of links that collectively form topological loops. The construction of these scaffolds relies on persistent homology, a technique in computational topology that analyzes the shape and structure of high-dimensional datasets^{172,173}.

Our approach begins with a weighted functional network, $W = (V, E, \omega)$, where V represents vertices (brain regions), E represents edges (functional connections), and $\omega : E \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ denotes the edge weights (i.e. Pearson correlations). To capture the network’s topological features across different intensity scales, we employ a weight rank filtration¹⁷⁴. This involves constructing a sequence of binary graphs, $G_{\omega} = (V, E_{\omega})$, where an edge $e \in E$ is included in G_{ω} if its weight $\bar{\omega}(e)$ is larger than or equal to a threshold ω . For each G_{ω} , we associate its clique complex K_{ω} . A clique complex is a simplicial complex where every k -clique in G_{ω} is promoted to a $(k-1)$ -simplex¹⁷⁴. The family of complexes $\{K_{\omega}\}$ then defines a filtration, $K_{\omega} \subseteq K_{\omega'}$ for $\omega > \omega'$, allowing us to track the emergence and disappearance of topological “holes” as the filtration progresses.

We compute the generators g_k^{ω} of the k -th homological group H_k along this filtration. Each generator identifies a specific hole in the

network's mesoscopic connectivity, such as a one-dimensional cycle (loop). The importance of each hole is quantified by its persistence ($\pi_g = \delta_g - \beta_g$), where β_g and δ_g are the “birth” (appearance) and “death” (disappearance) weights of the hole during the filtration, respectively.

These persistent homology generators are then projected onto a weighted network to form the homological scaffolds⁸⁵. We defined two types of scaffolds:

- **Frequency-filtered scaffold (*Fscaff*)**: This scaffold assigns weights to connections based on the number of topological loops they are part of. If an edge e belongs to multiple generators g_i , its weight ω_e^f is defined as the sum of indicator functions for each generator it belongs to:

$$\omega_e^f = \sum_{g_i} \mathbf{1}_{e \in g_i}$$

where $\mathbf{1}_{e \in g_i}$ is 1 if edge e is part of generator g_i , and 0 otherwise. Edges frequently participating in such loops are considered more significant.

- **Persistence-based scaffold (*Pscaff*)**: Here, connection weights are determined by the persistence of the topological loops during the filtration process. If an edge e belongs to multiple generators g_i , its weight ω_e^p is defined as the sum of the persistence values of those generators:

$$\omega_e^p = \sum_{g_i | e \in g_i} \pi_{g_i}$$

Links contributing to loops that persist over a broader range of filtration values (i.e., have higher π_{g_i}) are given higher importance, indicating more robust topological features.

By definition, both scaffolds share the same edge set of links, but with different weighting schemes. This construction highlights the role of links that are part of many and/or long-persistence cycles, effectively isolating functionally important edges within the network.

Triangles and temporal scaffold. To characterize higher-order functional interactions over time, we rely on the recent topological approach¹⁰⁶, which generalizes edge-centric analyses¹⁷⁵ to dynamic simplicial complexes based on co-fluctuations among triplets of brain regions. Let $\{\mathbf{x}(t)\}_{i=1}^N$ be a multivariate time series with N brain regions and T time points, where each signal $\mathbf{x}_i$ is first z-scored to ensure comparability across regions: $\mathbf{z}_i = \frac{\mathbf{x}_i - \mu[\mathbf{x}_i]}{\sigma[\mathbf{x}_i]}$. While second-order co-fluctuation are defined as a temporal unwrapping of the Pearson correlation coefficient¹⁷⁵, i.e. $w_{ij} = z_i z_j$, we define the instantaneous third-order co-fluctuation among regions (i, j, k) at time t as:

$$\xi_{ijk}(t) = \frac{z_i(t)z_j(t)z_k(t) - \mu[z_i z_j z_k]}{\sigma[z_i z_j z_k]}, \quad (15)$$

where $\mu[\cdot]$ and $\sigma[\cdot]$ denote the temporal mean and standard deviation of the product time series. To differentiate concordant group interactions from discordant ones in a 3-order product, concordant signs are always positively mapped, while discordant signs are negatively mapped. Formally,

$$\text{sign}[\xi_{0\dots k}(t)] := (-1)^{\text{sgn}\left[(k+1) - \sum_0^k \text{sgn}[z_i(t)]\right]}, \quad (16)$$

where $\text{sgn}[\cdot]$ is the signum function of a real number. As a result, each co-fluctuation is assigned a signed magnitude:

$$w_{ijk}(t) = \text{sign}[\xi_{ijk}(t)] |\xi_{ijk}(t)|. \quad (17)$$

For each time point t , the full set of pairwise and triplet co-fluctuations defines a weighted simplicial complex $\mathcal{K}^t$, consisting of edges (i, j) with weight $w_{ij}(t) = z_i(t)z_j(t)$, and triangles (i, j, k) with weight $w_{ijk}(t)$ as defined above. In this setting, triangles capture coordinated fluctuations among three regions beyond pairwise correlations.

To extract the mesoscale organization of these time-varying simplicial complexes, we construct a topological filtration, considering multiple thresholds based on the weights of $\mathcal{K}^t$, generating a sequence of nested simplicial complexes that approximates with increasing precision the original weighted simplicial complex. At each step, triangles violating the simplicial closure condition—i.e., triangles whose minimum edge weight is lower than the triangle weight—are excluded and recorded in a violation list Δ_v (*Triangles*).

In a similar fashion as described in the previous section, by applying persistent homology to the well-defined filtration constructed from $\mathcal{K}^t$, we identify generators of one-dimensional cycles and construct a temporal scaffold graph (*TScaffold*). Each edge weight equals the number of 1D-cycles in which that edge participates, thus highlighting links that frequently close topological loops. We compute both triangle-based and scaffold-based metrics at every time point and derive their static counterparts by averaging these metrics across time. These metrics were computed using the original Julia code from the repository (<https://github.com/andresantoro/RHOSTS>).

Additional metrics

As additional metrics for comparison, we computed and evaluated persistent entropy, hyperedge inference (SINDy)¹⁴⁰, mutual information, transfer entropy, precision, and hypergraph centrality measures. Their definitions and the corresponding results are provided in the Supplementary Information.

Nodal and edge projections

To analyze the information conveyed by the different higher-order metrics at the edge and node levels, we applied a downward projection approach. Specifically, for all metrics defined at the triplets level—including O-information redundancy and synergy, PED synergy and redundancy, as well as the violating triangles—we computed edge- and node-level summaries by aggregating contributions from associated triplets. That is, for each edge (i, j) we assign a weight w_{ij} equal to the average sum of the weights of triplets including that edge, i.e. triplets of the form $(i, j, \bullet)$ with a weight $w_{ij\bullet}$, and the average is computed over the number of triplets $n_{ij\bullet}$ which include that edge. Formally:

$$w_{ij} = \frac{1}{n_{ij\bullet}} \sum_{k \in \mathcal{N}_{ij\bullet}} w_{ijk},$$

where $\mathcal{N}_{ij\bullet}$ denotes the set of nodes forming a triangle with edge (i, j) . Similarly, we define the nodal strength w_i of node i as the average sum of weights of the triangles connected to node i . Formally:

$$w_i = \frac{1}{n_{i\bullet\bullet}} \sum_{(j,k) \in \mathcal{J}_i} w_{ijk},$$

where $\mathcal{J}_i$ is the set of node pairs (j, k) that form a triplet with node i . This procedure enables comparison across metrics at a common resolution. Brain plots are obtained using^{176,177}.

Clustering

To investigate the similarity structure among the different metrics, we performed hierarchical clustering based on pairwise dissimilarity. We first computed a dissimilarity matrix between all pairs of the 11 edge or nodal projections using the distance metric $\sqrt{2(1-\rho)}$ ^{178,179}, where ρ is the Spearman correlation coefficient between each pair of metrics. This measure captures the degree to which two metrics share a similar

spatial distribution across functional connections (Fig. 2b) or cortical regions (SI Fig. S3a). We then applied agglomerative hierarchical clustering using the `scipy.cluster.hierarchy` module in Python with complete linkage (i.e. the distance between two clusters is defined as the maximum pairwise distance between their elements). The resulting dendrogram provides a data-driven representation of how the metrics group together based on their spatial dissimilarity, revealing shared patterns or functional relationships across different metrics.

Statistical analysis

To assess the significance of the spatial associations between the nodal projections of our metrics and various cortical maps (including metabolic attributes, receptor densities, and cell-type gene expression), we employed both spatially informed permutation testing and subject-level analyses. Specifically, we used a spin permutation test to evaluate whether observed correlations exceeded what would be expected by chance given the spatial autocorrelation of cortical anatomy. This method preserves the spatial structure of cortical maps while randomizing their alignment through rotations on the spherical surface, generating a null distribution against which empirical correlations can be compared. We performed 1000 spin permutations using the `spin_test` function from the ENIGMA Toolbox (<https://github.com/MICA-MNI/ENIGMA>)¹⁸⁰, following established procedures for spatial statistical inference in surface-based neuroimaging data. In parallel, we computed Spearman correlations at the individual subject level, correlating each participant's nodal projection with each cortical map. This produced a distribution of correlation values across subjects, which we tested against zero using two-sided one-sample t-tests. To correct for multiple comparisons across brain features, we applied Bonferroni correction. This dual approach allowed us to assess both the spatial robustness and individual-level consistency of our results.

Partial least square correlation (PLSC)

To examine the relationship between brain activity and behavior across the four different methods, we rely on Partial Least Square Correlation (PLSC) analyses. These analyses aimed to find connections between the functional links of each method and 10 cognitive scores across subjects. For each method, we consider the same number of functional connections, corresponding to $\binom{N}{2}$ entries. To enhance the stability of the functional connections, we averaged them over the two resting-state fMRI recordings (i.e., *REST_1* and *REST_2*). The cognitive scores considered belong to 10 cognitive subdomains in the HCP dataset, covering behavioral traits like episodic memory, executive functions, fluid intelligence, language, processing speed, self-regulation/impulsivity, spatial orientation, sustained visual attention, verbal episodic memory, and working memory¹⁴. When multiple raw scores were available for a subdomain, we obtained a single score through principal component analysis.

We performed the PLSC analysis separately for each of the methods. PLSC identifies linear combinations of functional connectivity values that maximally covary with linear combinations of cognitive scores, determined through singular value decomposition of the data covariance matrix¹²⁹. The weights of these linear combinations are commonly referred to as brain function and cognitive saliences, representing the left and right singular vectors of the data covariance matrix. We assessed the statistical significance of the PLSC components using permutation testing (5000 permutations; correlation patterns with $p < 0.05$ were considered significant)¹²⁹. To evaluate the reliability of non-zero salience values, we relied on a bootstrapping procedure (5000 random data resampling with replacement) and calculated standard scores with respect to the bootstrap distributions (salience values were considered reliable if the 95% CI did not cross the

zero or bootstrap ratio $|BR| > 2$)¹²⁹. We quantified the amount of cognitive traits' variance explained by functional connectivity values by summing the squared singular values corresponding to the significant PLSC components. This sum was normalized by the total sum of squared singular values obtained for each PLSC analysis¹²⁹. Notice that we rely on the `pypls` package for computing the PLSC analyses (<https://github.com/netneurolab/pypls>).

Reporting summary

Further information on research design is available in the Nature Portfolio Reporting Summary linked to this article.

Data availability

The neuroimaging and behavioral data analyzed in this study were obtained from the Human Connectome Project Young Adult dataset. HCP Young Adult data are publicly accessible through ConnectomeDB powered by Balsa after registration and acceptance of the HCP data use terms; restricted-access behavioral variables require separate approval. This study used minimally preprocessed resting-state and task fMRI data from the 100 unrelated subjects subset. The preprocessed resting-state fMRI data, as well as the concatenated task fMRI data, are available on Zenodo: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20260959>.

Code availability

One of the key outcomes of this work is the development of a collection of ready-to-use code for analyzing time series data from various higher-order interaction perspectives. All code is publicly available in the following GitHub repository: https://github.com/nplresearch/HOI_lenses_analysis. The analyses were conducted using Python for computing the Partial Entropy Decomposition (PED)¹⁸¹, PhilD, and O-information, and Julia for analyses involving Triangles, FScaffold, and PScaff. The implementations of O-information and PhilD are based on the open-source Python toolbox HOI¹⁶⁵, available at <https://github.com/brainets/hoi>.

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Author contributions

A.S., M.G., and G.P. conceived and developed the study idea. A.S. (lead) and M.N. (supporting) performed the formal analysis with contributions from S.P. and D.O.; M.D. and A.S. pre-processed the fMRI data. A.S., M.N., S.P., D.O., M.G., and G.P. contributed to the interpretation. A.S. and M.N. wrote the original draft with valuable revisions by G.P., M.G., D. O., and S.P. All authors contributed to review and editing. A.S. and M.N. contributed equally to this work as co-first authors; S.P. and D.O. contributed equally.

Funding

M.N. has received funding from the French government through the 'France 2030' investment plan, managed by the French National Research Agency (Agence Nationale de la Recherche; references: ANR-16-CONV000X / ANR-17-EURE-0029), as well as from the Excellence Initiative of Aix-Marseille University—A*MIDEX (AMX-19-IET-004). G.P. acknowledges support by ERC Consolidator Grant RUNES (Grant no. 101171380) and the MSCA Doctoral Network Beyond-TheEdge (Grant no. 101120085). A.S. has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant TemporalHOI agreement no. 101208090.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-026-75959-w>.

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Peer review information *Nature Communications* thanks Juliano Bandeira Lima and the other, anonymous, reviewer(s) for their contribution to the peer review of this work. A peer review file is available.

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