

R/THCO: Netnographic Observations of Online Communities for Semi-Synthetic Cannabinoid Use.

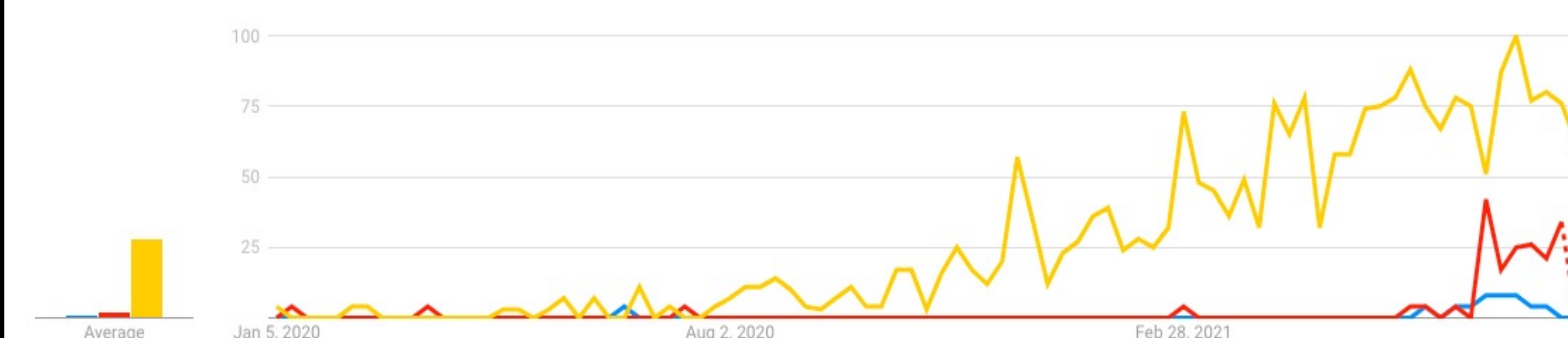
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Introduction

Since the passage of the Hemp Act in the 2018 Farm Bill, there has been a rise in interest in "Semi-Synthetic Cannabinoids" as demonstrated by Google Trends data reflecting interest in "THC-O-Acetate" (Blue), "THC-O" (Red) and Delta-8 (Yellow) from January 1st, 2020, to September 1st, 2021, depicted below:

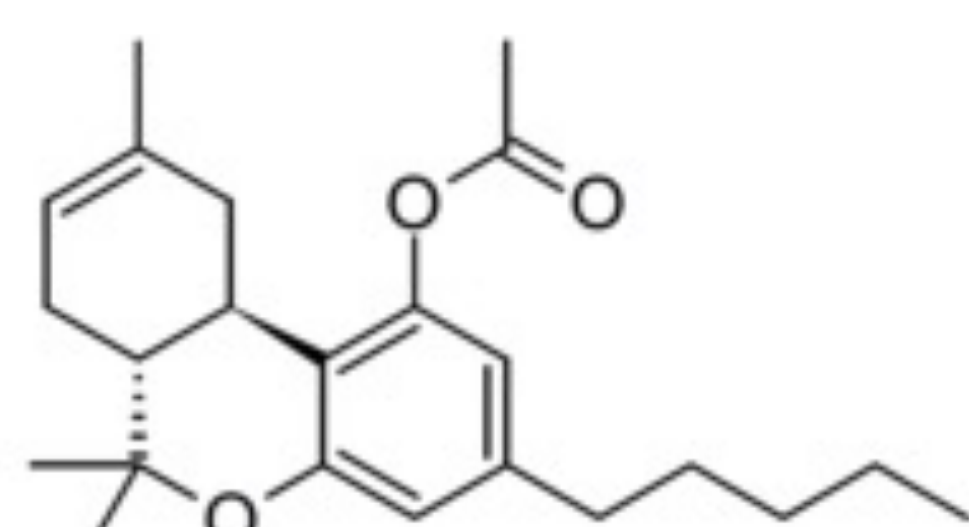


Key Findings

- One of the most common delivery device for semi-synthetic cannabinoid products are concentrate vaporizers and various ingestible goods (e.g. edibles) [Bone 2021]; which increasingly mirror products in legal hemp markets [images One and Two].
- Online communities will remain a crucial platform for the development of new cannabinoid products and constituencies [Gruzd 2013], a consequence of which is that the evolution of this trend will be mediated by prosumers of these products as much as by regulatory considerations [Anderson et al].

Methods

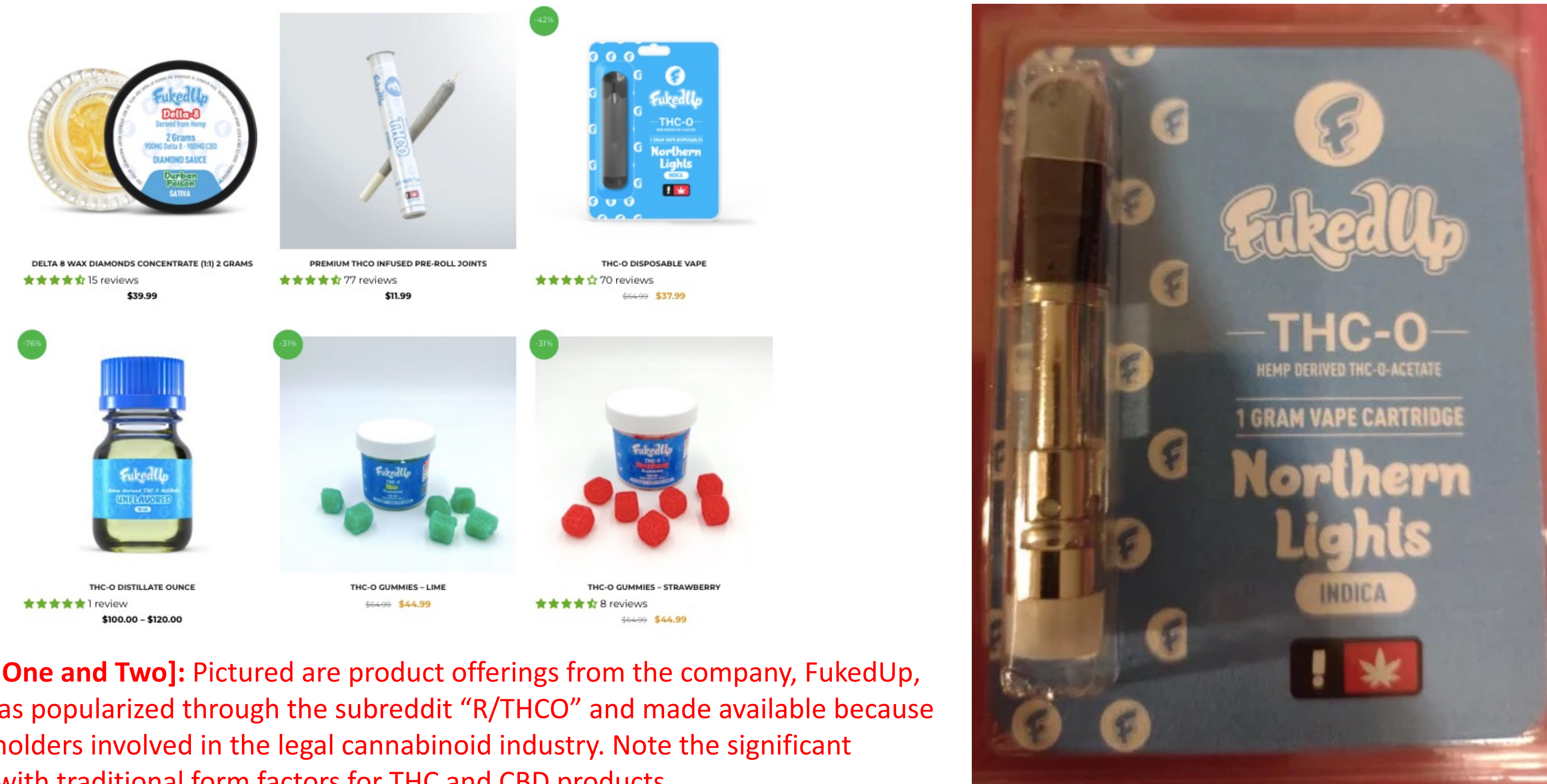
- The use of rapid ethnographic methodologies has been explored in design processes [Heinonen and Medberg 2018] and medical settings [Ackerman et al 2015].
- Netnography takes advantage of online field sites and social media networks [Kozinets 2010]. Social scientific research is crucial for contextualizing data driven frameworks and the increasing diversity of consumers and markets for cannabinoid products [Clemens and Tierney 2020], [Figure One].



[Figure One]: THC acetate ester (THC-O-acetate, THC acetate, O-acetyl- Δ^8 -THC, THC-O, ATHC) is a "pro-drug" of THC, able to bypass the first pass metabolism effect. To "increase potency". Notably, any cannabinoid can be subject to acetylation, not just THC, making this type of chemical formulation particularly significant.

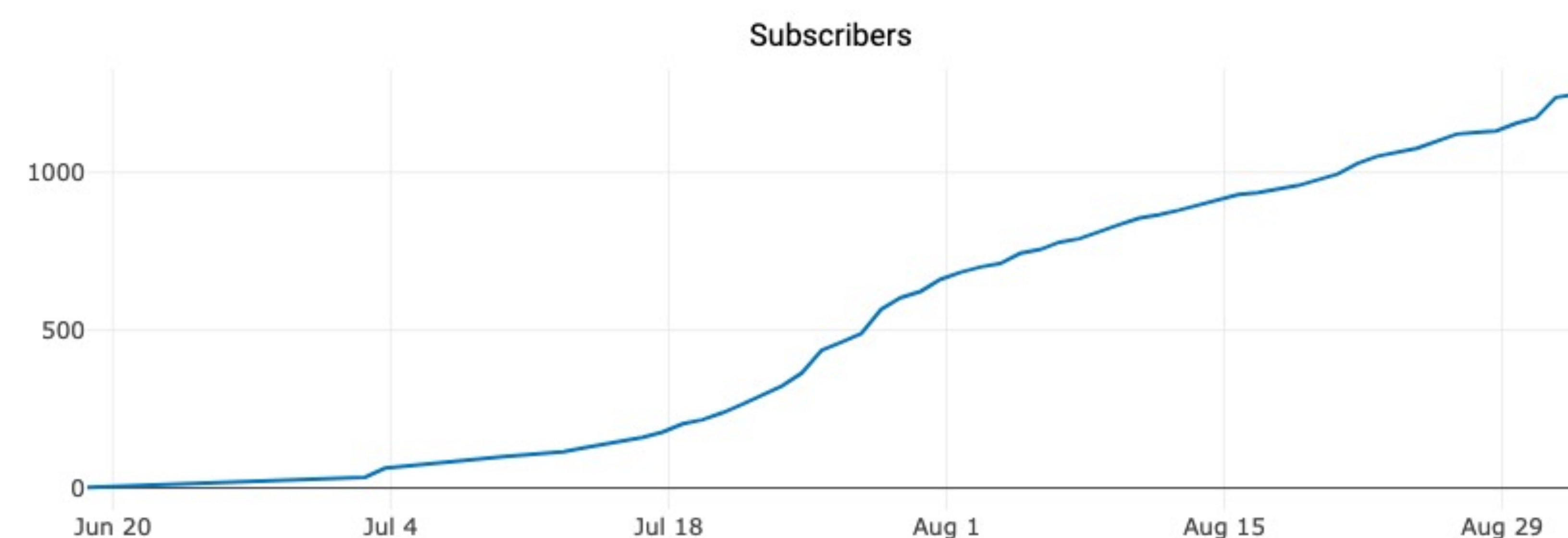
- This investigation entailed an examination of content submitted to an online community focused on the semi-synthetic cannabinoid, THC-O-Acetate on the social media platform, Reddit.
- By exploring the actor-network relationships and language associated with this community or "subreddit", it became clear that the types of form factors associated with these substances played a significant role in the development for the market for products like FokedUp's THCO alongside the growth of markets for legal cannabinoid goods [Figure Two].

Analyses



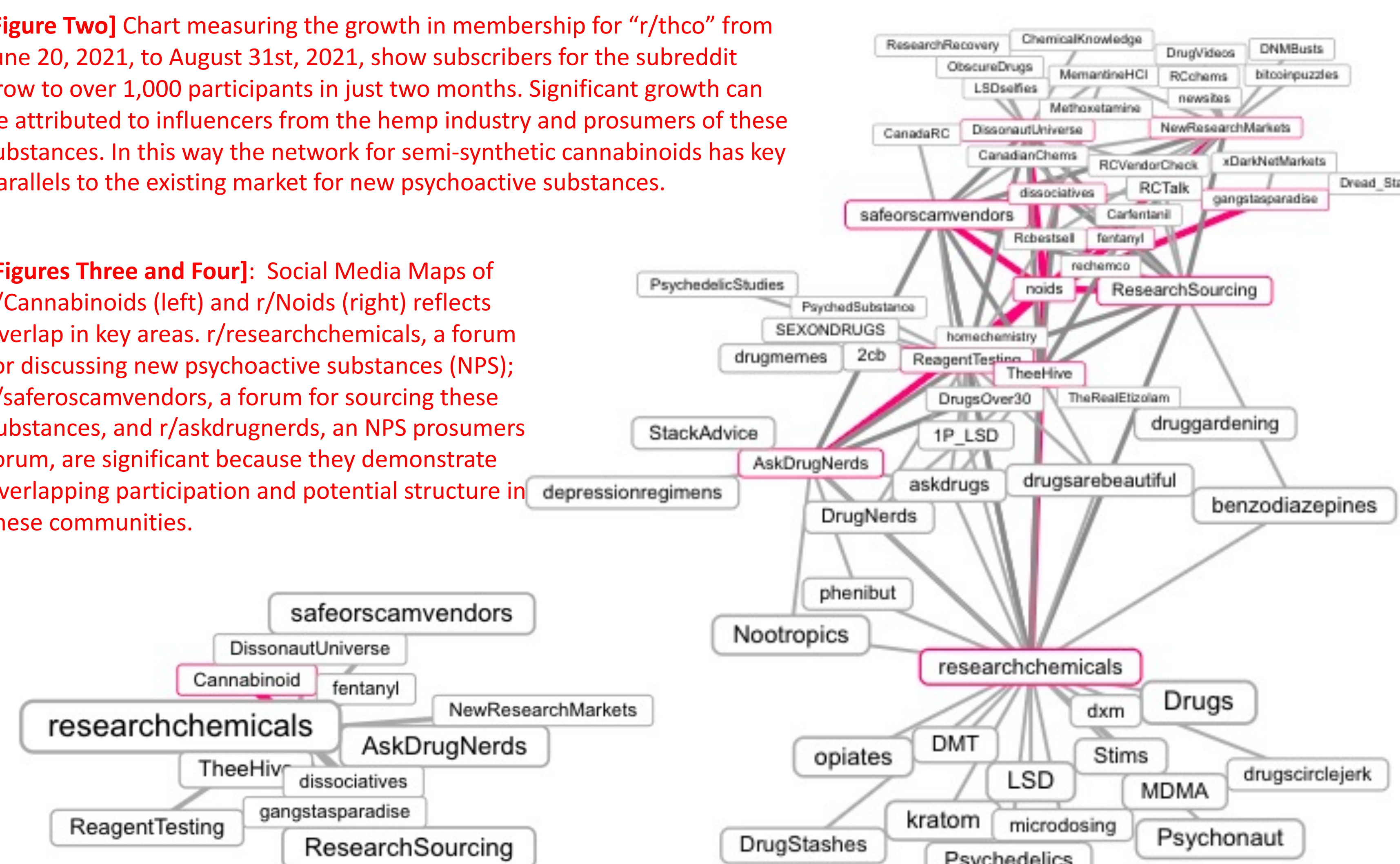
[Images One and Two]: Pictured are product offerings from the company, FokedUp, which was popularized through the subreddit "r/THCO" and made available because of stakeholders involved in the legal cannabinoid industry. Note the significant overlap with traditional form factors for THC and CBD products.

Results



[Figure Two] Chart measuring the growth in membership for "r/thco" from June 20, 2021, to August 31st, 2021, show subscribers for the subreddit grow to over 1,000 participants in just two months. Significant growth can be attributed to influencers from the hemp industry and prosumers of these substances. In this way the network for semi-synthetic cannabinoids has key parallels to the existing market for new psychoactive substances.

[Figures Three and Four]: Social Media Maps of r/Cannabinoids (left) and r/Noids (right) reflects overlap in key areas. r/researchchemicals, a forum for discussing new psychoactive substances (NPS); r/safescamvendors, a forum for sourcing these substances, and r/askdrugnerds, an NPS prosumers forum, are significant because they demonstrate overlapping participation and potential structure in these communities.



Conclusions

- *Green Chemists* – cannabis focused chemists – have emerged as prosumers – consumers who have influence over the process of design and creation of semi-synthetic cannabinoids. Aside from their historical contributions, *Green Chemists'* ability to interpret analytic data and contribute to scientific discourse, make them key interlocutors about potency and safety for more participants in these online communities.
- This netnographic examination of R/THCO reveals the vast array of social forces influencing this emergent trend. Beyond prosumers and cannabinoid laws and regulations, contemporary communities for "Research Chemicals" and historical connections with synthetic cannabinoids have also influenced the evolution of this trend [Figure Three and Four].
- How these communities navigate harm is constrained by these social forces [Bilgri 2018]. Marketing and branding have played a crucial role in shaping the information landscapes available to consumers, at times working with and against the influence of *Green Chemists*.
- Future research should aim to engage with a broader section of products, manufacturers, and digital communities for botanical semi and fully synthetic cannabinoids to develop harm reduction strategies to deal with these intersecting phenomenon.

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Acknowledgments

This research would not have been possible without the advice of Michael Gilbert and the assistance of Kaelas Munger. I am also deeply grateful for the collaboration and support of my colleagues in the Hemp Industry such as Christopher Enki, Jiries Meehan-Atrash, Pritesh Kumar, and Dr. Melanie Bone.