

Mogler Lukas (Orcid ID: 0000-0001-8987-2785)

Auwärter Volker (Orcid ID: 0000-0002-1883-2804)

Stove Christophe (Orcid ID: 0000-0001-9117-4759)

Thevis Mario (Orcid ID: 0000-0002-1535-6451)

Brandt Simon (Orcid ID: 0000-0001-8632-5372)

Functional evaluation of carboxy metabolites of synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists featuring scaffolds based on L-valine or L-*tert*-leucine

Elise Wouters¹, Lukas Mogler², Annelies Cannaert¹, Volker Auwärter² and Christophe Stove^{1*}

¹Laboratory of Toxicology, Department of Bioanalysis, Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Ghent University, Ottergemsesteenweg 460, 9000 Gent, Belgium

²Institute of Forensic Medicine, Forensic Toxicology, Medical Center – University of Freiburg, Faculty of Medicine, University of Freiburg, Albertstr. 9, 79104 Freiburg, Germany

*Corresponding author: christophe.stove@ugent.be.

Tel.: +32 9 264 81 35. Fax. +32 9 264 81 83.

Short title: Functional evaluation of SCRA metabolites

Abstract

Indole and indazole-based synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists (SCRAs), featuring valine or *tert*-leucine substituents, are commonly abused new psychoactive substances (NPS). A major metabolic pathway for these SCRAs is hydrolysis of the terminal amide or methylester functionalities. Although these hydrolysis products were already detected as main ingredients in some ‘legal highs’, these metabolites are often poorly characterized. Here, we report a systematic investigation of the activity of seven common hydrolysis metabolites of fifteen SCRAs featuring scaffolds based on L-valine or L-*tert*-leucine in direct comparison to their parent compounds. An activity-based cannabinoid receptor 1 (CB₁) bio-assay was used for activity profiling of SCRAs and their metabolites in a stable HEK293T cell system. The recruitment of β -arrestin2 to the activated CB₁ (each fused to one part of a split Nanoluciferase) was provoked by adding the (putative) SCRAs. Luminescence of the functionally complemented luciferase was monitored by a 96-well plate-reader. The major hydrolysis metabolites of 5F-AB-PINACA, ADB-CHMICA, ADB-CHMINACA, ADB-FUBICA, and their methyl- and ethylester derivatives showed no detectable CB₁ activation at concentrations

This article has been accepted for publication and undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: 10.1002/dta.2607

up to 1 μ M. On the other hand, metabolites of 5F-ADB-PINACA, AB-CHMINACA and ADB-FUBINACA did retain activity, although significantly reduced as compared to the parent compounds (EC_{50} values > 100 nM). Activity-based characterization of SCRA and their metabolites at CB_1 may not only allow a better insight into the complex interplay between SCRA and their metabolites in intoxications, but may also allow to apply the concept of ‘activity equivalents’ present in biological fluids or, alternatively, in confiscated materials.

Keywords

New psychoactive substances, synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists, carboxy metabolites, bio-assay, cannabinoid receptor 1

1. Introduction

During the last decade, new psychoactive substances (NPS) have emerged on the illicit drug market, with synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists (SCRA) being the most prominent class in Europe.¹ SCRA are man-made substances that exert their effects through binding to two G-protein coupled receptors (GPCRs), namely cannabinoid receptors 1 (CB_1) and 2 (CB_2).^{2,3} CB_1 receptors are primarily located in the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord) and mediate the psychotropic effect of cannabis (alternatives), whereas CB_2 receptors are mostly expressed in the peripheral nervous system, the spleen and the immune system and are involved in immunosuppression and pain perception mediation.^{4,5}

Synthetic cannabinimimetics, which mimic the actions of endogenous and natural compounds acting on the cannabinoid receptors, are often far more potent than the main psychoactive substance found in cannabis, delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (Δ^9 -THC). The intake of these highly potent drugs of abuse has caused considerable morbidity and mortality in the United States, Europe and Japan, as well as in many other countries.⁶⁻⁸ Observed adverse effects include agitation, hypertension, acute kidney injury and tachycardia and may even result in fatalities.⁹⁻¹⁶

As xenobiotics, SCRA undergo extensive metabolism and clearance, mainly by the liver, to remove these substances from the human body. The goal of drug metabolism is to detoxify potentially harmful compounds and excrete them from the body. In certain cases, bioactivation of these compounds, which might lead or contribute to toxicological effects, has been reported.

For example, major hydroxylated metabolites of JWH-018 and AM-2201 retained full agonist activity at nanomolar concentrations.^{17,18}

Although hydroxylation of the pentyl side chain of SCRAs is a common metabolism pathway, the major pathway for SCRAs featuring scaffolds based on L-valine and L-*tert*-leucine involves amide hydrolysis of the L-valinamide or L-*tert*-leucinamide functional groups¹⁹⁻²¹ or methyl- or ethylester hydrolysis of L-valinate or L-*tert*-leucinate groups.^{22,23} Hydrolysis of the terminal functionality is more pronounced for compounds containing an L-valinate or L-*tert*-leucinate group compared to their amide analogs, due to the more metabolically labile characteristic of the methylester functionality.²⁴ The enzyme responsible for the biotransformation of the primary amide moiety, resulting in major carboxylic acid metabolites, was identified in human liver microsomes (HLMs) as carboxylesterase 1 (CES1).^{23,24} In addition to a transformation catalyzed by enzymes, a pyrolytic formation of the carboxylic acids has to be considered when the drugs are smoked.^{25,26}

Further adding to the complexity of the SCRA problem is that, in addition to the rapid and constant emergence of new SCRAs, relatively little is known about the pharmacology of these SCRAs and their metabolites. More particularly, only few studies have focused on the pharmacological characteristics of hydrolysis metabolites.^{17,27-34} Recently, there has been an increased interest, since knowledge about SCRA metabolite activity data might empower forensic laboratories to elaborate on the possible contributory role of these metabolites in human intoxications and in side-effects related to SCRAs. A concept of ‘total cannabinoid activity’, rather than merely the cannabinoid activity related to a main compound can be envisaged. When referring the activity in a biological matrix relative to that of a given concentration of a reference compound, this concept can further be defined as ‘activity equivalents’ being present in e.g. blood or serum of an intoxicated or deceased person.

In this context, we investigated here the activity of fifteen parent compounds, featuring scaffolds based on L-valine and L-*tert*-leucine, and their respective carboxy metabolites, using a bio-assay that monitors activation of the CB₁ receptor. Compounds of this structural family, carrying carboxamide L-valine and L-*tert*-leucine moieties, are highly prevalent on the European market and show a high potency, resulting in numerous cases of severe intoxications.^{26,35}

SCRAs and their structural analogues, derived from L-valinamide or L-valinate investigated in this study, include 5F-AB-PINACA, 5F-AMB-PINACA, 5F-AEB-PINACA, AB-CHMINACA and AMB-CHMINACA (Figure 1). SCRAs and their structural analogues, derived from L-tert-leucinamide or L-tert-leucinate, include 5F-ADB-PINACA, 5F-MDMB-PINACA, ADB-CHMICA, MDMB-CHMICA, ADB-CHMINACA, MDMB-CHMINACA, ADB-FUBICA, MDMB-FUBICA, ADB-FUBINACA and MDMB-FUBINACA (Figure 1). As the same hydrolysis metabolite featuring a carboxylic acid moiety might derive from more than one parent compound, hydrolysis of these fifteen SCRAs results in seven carboxy metabolites, i.e. 5F-AB-PINACA-COOH, AB-CHMINACA-COOH, 5F-ADB-PINACA-COOH, ADB-CHMICA-COOH, ADB-CHMINACA-COOH, ADB-FUBICA-COOH and ADB-FUBINACA-COOH. Pharmacological properties of the above-mentioned hydrolysis metabolites were compared with those of their parent compounds. The objective of this study was to clarify the possible impact of amide or ester hydrolysis across a range of SCRAs featuring scaffolds based on L-valine or L-tert-leucine, to allow a better insight into their potential contribution to the *in vivo* toxicity profile.

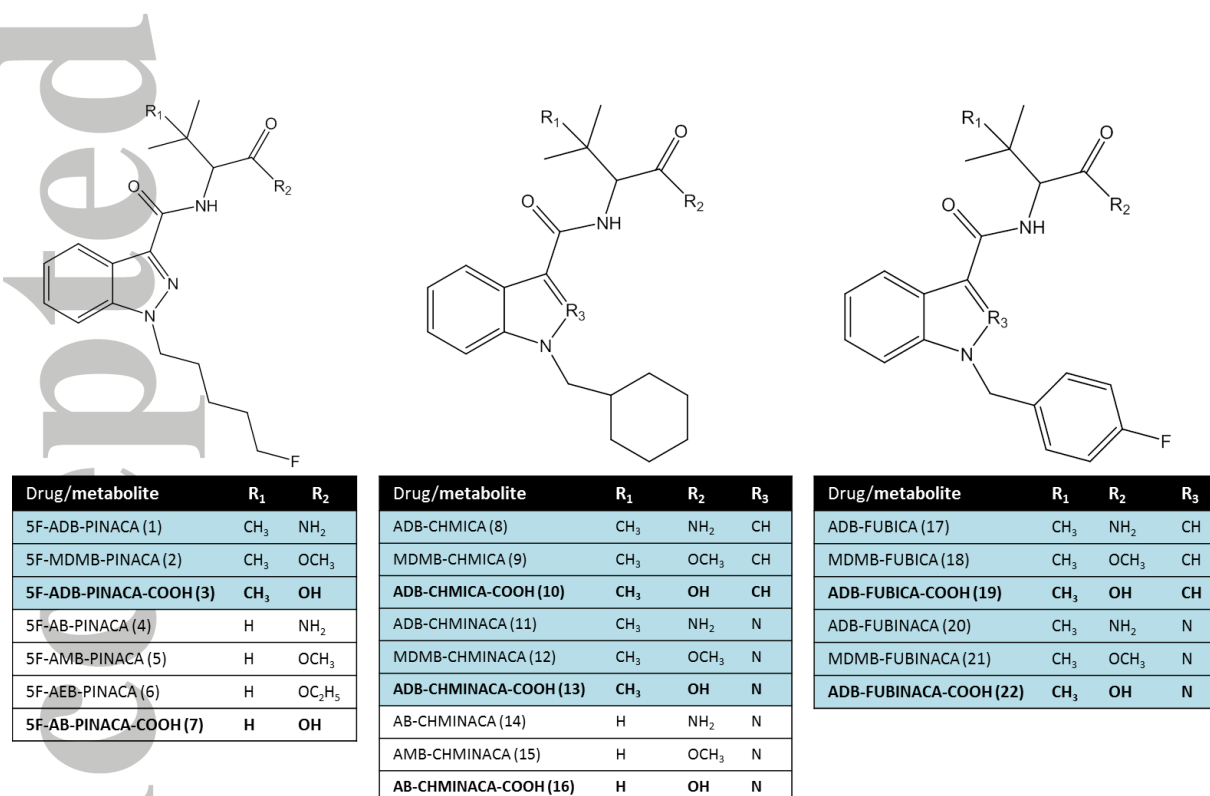


Figure 1 Structures of SCRAs featuring a scaffold based on L-valine (white) and L-tert-leucine (blue) and their respective most common carboxy hydrolysis metabolites.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Chemicals and reagents

Reference standards of all parent compounds including 5F-ADB-PINACA (*N*-[(2*S*)-1-amino-3,3-dimethyl-1-oxobutan-2-yl]-1-(5-fluoropentyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide), 5F-MDMB-PINACA (methyl (2*S*)-2-[[1-(5-fluoropentyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carbonyl]amino]-3,3-dimethylbutanoate), 5F-AB-PINACA (*N*-[(2*S*)-1-(amino-3-methyl-1-oxobutan-2-yl)-1-(5-fluoropentyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide), 5F-AMB-PINACA (methyl (2*S*)-2-[[1-(5-fluoropentyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carbonyl]amino]-3-methylbutanoate), 5F-AEB-PINACA (ethyl (2*S*)-2-[[1-(5-fluoropentyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carbonyl]amino]-3-methylbutanoate), ADB-CHMINACA (*N*-[(2*S*)-1-amino-3,3-dimethyl-1-oxobutan-2-yl]-1-(cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide), MDMB-CHMICA (methyl (2*S*)-2-[[1-(cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indole-3-carbonyl]amino]-3,3-dimethylbutanoate), ADB-CHMICA (*N*-[(2*S*)-1-amino-3,3-dimethyl-1-oxobutan-2-yl]-1-(cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indole-3-carboxamide), MDMB-CHMINACA (methyl (2*S*)-2-[[1-(cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carbonyl]amino]-3,3-dimethylbutanoate), AB-CHMINACA (*N*-[(2*S*)-1-amino-3-methyl-1-oxobutan-2-yl]-1-(cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide), AMB-CHMINACA (methyl (2*S*)-2-[[1-(cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carbonyl]amino]-3-methylbutanoate), ADB-FUBICA (*N*-[(2*S*)-1-amino-3,3-dimethyl-1-oxobutan-2-yl]-1-[(4-fluorophenyl)methyl]-1*H*-indole-3-carboxamide), MDMB-FUBICA (methyl (2*S*)-2-((1-[(4-fluorophenyl)methyl]-1*H*-indole-3-carbonyl]amino)-3,3-dimethylbutanoate), ADB-FUBINACA (*N*-[(2*S*)-1-amino-3,3-dimethyl-1-oxobutan-2-yl]-1-[(4-fluorophenyl)methyl]-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide), MDMB-FUBINACA (methyl (2*S*)-2-((1-[(4-fluorophenyl)methyl]-1*H*-indazole-3-carbonyl]amino)-3,3-dimethylbutanoate) and their metabolites 5F-AB-PINACA-COOH ((2*S*)-3-methyl-2-[[1-(5-fluoropentyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carbonyl]amino]butanoic acid), 5F-ADB-PINACA-COOH ((*S*)-2-[[1-(5-fluoropentyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carbonyl]amino]-3,3-dimethylbutanoic acid), ADB-FUBICA-COOH ((*S*)-2-[[1-(4-fluorobenzyl)-1*H*-indole-3-carbonyl]amino]-3,3-dimethylbutanoic acid), ADB-CHMINACA-COOH ((2*S*)-2-[[1-(cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carbonyl]amino]-3,3-dimethylbutanoic acid), AB-CHMINACA-COOH ((2*S*)-2-[[1-(cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carbonyl]amino]-3-methylbutanoic acid), ADB-CHMICA-COOH ((*S*)-2-[[1-(5-fluoropentyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carbonyl]amino]-3,3-dimethylbutanoic acid) were purchased from Cayman Chemical (Ann Arbor, MI, USA).

JWH-018 ((naphthalen-1-yl)(1-pentyl-1*H*-indol-3-yl)methanone) was purchased from LGC (Wesel, Germany). Poly-D-lysine and fetal bovine serum (FBS) were procured from Sigma-Aldrich (Steinheim, Germany). Dulbecco's modified eagle medium (DMEM) + GlutaMAX, Opti-MEM I Reduced Serum, trypsin, penicillin and streptomycin were procured from Thermo Fisher Scientific (Pittsburg, PA, USA). Nano-Glo[®] Live Cell substrate furimazine and Nano-Glo[®] dilution buffer were purchased from Promega (Madison, WI, USA). Methanol and DMSO were purchased from Fisher Scientific (Leicestershire, UK).

2.2. Cannabinoid reporter bio-assay

A live cell-based assay, based on the NanoLuc Binary Technology (NanoBiT[®], Promega) was used to evaluate activity at CB₁. Upon activation of CB₁, an intracellular protein, β -arrestin2 (β -arr2), which participates in the agonist-mediated desensitization of GPCRs, will be recruited. The generation of a HEK293T cell line stably expressing both the CB₁ receptor (C-terminally fused to the large part of the NanoLuciferase; LgBiT) and β -arr2 (N-terminally fused to the small part of NanoLuciferase; SmBiT) has been described previously.²⁹ This cell line can be used for structure-activity relationship determination of reference compounds, as well as for the screening of biological matrices for cannabinoid activity.^{32,36,37}

HEK293T cells stably expressing CB₁-LgBiT and SmBiT- β -arr2 were maintained in Dulbecco's Modified Eagle's Medium (DMEM), supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), 100 μ g/mL streptomycin and 100 IU/1 penicillin in a humidified environment (37°C, 5% CO₂). For the bio-assay, cells were seeded on a poly-D-lysine coated white 96-well plate at 5 x 10⁴ cells/well. The next day, cells were washed twice with Opti-MEM I Reduced Serum Medium and 100 μ l Opti-MEM I was added to the wells. First, the Nano-Glo Live Cell detection reagent (Promega) was prepared by a 20-fold dilution of the cell-permeable furimazine substrate in aqueous Nano-Glo LCS dilution buffer. Twenty-five μ L of this reagent was added to each well and luminescence was monitored in a TriStar² LB 942 multimode microplate reader controlled by ICE software (Berthold Technologies GmbH & Co., Bad Wildbad, Germany) during an equilibration period of 15 minutes. Once the luminescent signal had stabilized, monitoring was shortly interrupted for the addition of 10 μ L of the 13.5x concentrated agonist solutions in Opti-MEM I/methanol (50:50), ranging from 0.01 nM up to 10 μ M end concentration in the 96-well. This resulted in a final volume percentage of 3.7% methanol in each 96-well, which does not pose a problem to the cells within the timeframe of the assay. Subsequently, luminescence was

detected for 120 minutes. A solvent control (blank), as well as a reference compound (JWH-018) was included in duplicate or triplicate on each plate.

2.4. Data processing

Relative Luminescence units (RLU) over time of all SCRA were corrected for solvent control and inter-well variability. Concentration-responses (area under the curve; AUC) were calculated and normalized to the maximum response of the reference compound, JWH-018, arbitrarily set as 100%. The mean and standard error of the mean (SEM) were derived from three independent experiments (hence, $n = 3$), the results from each of these experiments stemming from the analysis of duplicates or triplicates (hence, each data point is the result of 7-9 determinations). EC_{50} values were determined using the GraphPad Prism software (San Diego, CA, USA), via non-linear regression analysis (variable slope, four parameters).

3. Results and discussion

The SCRA investigated in this study can be divided into 3 main categories: (1) PINACA derivatives (1-pentyl-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide derivatives), (2) CHMICA and CHMINACA derivatives (1-(cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indole-3-carboxamide and 1-(cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide, respectively) and (3) FUBICA and FUBINACA derivatives (1-[(4-fluorophenyl)methyl]-1*H*-indole-3-carboxamide and 1-[(4-fluorophenyl)methyl]-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide, respectively). Each category is subdivided into scaffolds based on L-valine or L-*tert*-leucine, and are hereafter referred to as the numbers depicted in Figure 1. To quantify the potency and efficacy of the 15 SCRA and their common metabolites, the EC_{50} and E_{max} values were determined. As JWH-018 was the first detected SCRA in the end of 2008³⁸ and the most commonly used standard SCRA in the field of toxicology, it was chosen as the reference compound. The observed EC_{50} value for JWH-018 in the bio-assay expressing CB_1 was 36.8 nM, with a 95% confidence interval (CI) of 28.6-50.4 nM, which is in agreement with earlier published data from our research group.^{17,32}

3.1.1-Pentyl-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide derivatives (PINACA)

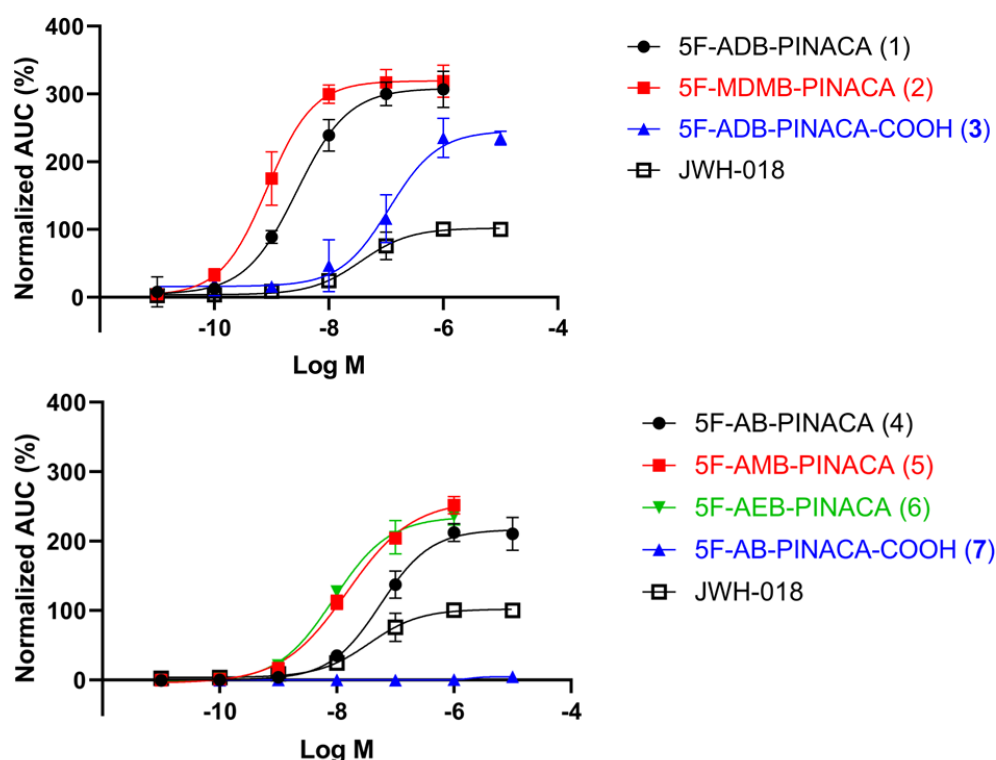


Figure 2 Sigmoidal concentration-response curves of PINACA-based SCRA derivatives for the CB₁ receptor. Each data point represents the mean value ± SEM of 3 experiments (n = 3).

All derivatives of the 1-Pentyl-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide family investigated in this study contain a 5-fluoropentyl group linked to N₁ of the indazole ring (Figure 1). The *L*-*tert*-leucinamide derivative 5F-ADB-PINACA (**1**) and the *L*-*tert*-leucinate derivatives 5F-MDMB-PINACA (**2**) showed a high potency at CB₁, with EC₅₀ values of 2.76 nM (95% CI: 1.24-5.41 nM) and 0.84 nM (0.52-1.24 nM), respectively (Figure 2)(Table 1). A fatal intoxication in Japan due to intake of 5F-MDMB-PINACA (**2**), also referred to as 5F-ADB, resulted in postmortem blood concentrations of 0.19 ng/mL (0.5 nM) of the parent compound.³⁹ In that case, investigation of the urinary metabolites revealed the presence of the carboxy metabolite **3**, generated after ester hydrolysis by carboxylesterase. However, no blood or urinary concentration was reported for that metabolite.

Despite having a strongly reduced potency when compared to the parent compounds **1** and **2**, hydrolyzed metabolite **3** still shows a higher E_{max} value than that of reference compound JWH-018 (± 2.5-fold) (Figure 2)(Table 1). Furthermore, the potency of metabolite **3** was 41-fold reduced when compared to parent compound **1**, resulting in an EC₅₀ value of 113 nM for 5F-ADB-PINACA-COOH (**3**). Longworth *et al.*³¹ investigated the activity of the non-fluorinated

structural analogue ADB-PINACA and its hydrolyzed metabolite ADB-PINACA-COOH, using a fluorometric assay of membrane potential. These authors reported a 256-fold reduction in potency of the metabolite ADB-PINACA-COOH compared to its parent compound (EC₅₀ value of 1.3 nM for the parent compound vs. 333 nM for its metabolite). The fact that hydrolysis of parent compound **1** is apparently less detrimental for CB₁ activation than hydrolysis of its non-fluorinated structural analogue ADB-PINACA might be explained by the reported beneficial effect of fluorination of the aliphatic tail for the overall activity of the compound¹⁴, attributable to the electronegativity of the halogen. Alternatively, we cannot exclude that assay differences underlie this dissimilarity.

Investigation of the L-valinamide derivative, 5F-AB-PINACA (**4**), as well as the methyl and ethyl L-valinate derivatives, 5F-AMB-PINACA (**5**) and 5F-AEB-PINACA (**6**), respectively, revealed notable structure activity relationships (SARs) in this study. The EC₅₀ values for **4**, **5** and **6** at CB₁ were 55.4 nM (31.2-85.1), 15.1 nM (10.2-23.9) and 8.76 nM (5.5-17.0) (Figure 2)(Table 1). Substitution of the amide group by methyl or ethyl ester groups resulted in higher potency towards CB₁. However, this finding is somewhat discordant with the findings by Banister *et al.*,³⁸ who reported a lower potency at CB₁ for **5** than **4** (1.9 nM vs 0.48 nM) by the implementation of a Fluorometric Imaging Plate Reader (FLIPR[®]) assay. Whereas this assay measures the Gβγ-mediated activation of inwardly rectifying potassium channels, the NanoBiT[®]-based bio-assay measures the direct recruitment of β-arr2 to the CB₁ receptor. Therefore, one should keep in mind that findings might differ due to different experimental assay set-ups (canonical vs. non-canonical), which could even reflect - although still mostly unexplored for SCRAAs - biased signaling. On the other hand, similar efficacies for compounds **4**, **5** and **6** were observed, namely an efficacy about 2.5-fold that of JWH-018 (Table 1).

The amide hydrolysis product of parent compound **4**, 5F-AB-PINACA-COOH (**7**), was the third most prevalent metabolite generated in human hepatocytes.²¹ In the bio-assay, metabolite **7** of parent compounds **4**, **5** and **6** shows almost no activity at CB₁, which is in agreement with earlier observations by Noble *et al.*³² for the hydrolyzed metabolite of the structural analogue AB-PINACA. As even the most 'inactive' metabolite within this study, i.e. metabolite **7**, still shows some minor activity at high concentration (10 μM), none of the screened metabolites are considered to be an antagonist.

Overall, consistent with earlier published data^{38,40}, the *L-tert*-leucine-functionalized SCRA (R₁= CH₃) (Figure 1), like **1** and **2** (EC₅₀ = 0.84-2.76 nM), are more potent than their *L*-valine-functionalized SCRA counterparts **4**, **5** and **6** (EC₅₀ = 8.76-55.4 nM). This also holds true for the carboxy metabolite **3** of the *L-tert*-leucine-functionalized SCRA, which has an EC₅₀ value of 113 nM, whereas no activity could be observed for the hydrolyzed metabolite **7** of the *L*-valine-functionalized SCRA derivatives.

3.2. 1-(Cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indole-3-carboxamide (CHMICA) and 1-(cyclohexylmethyl)-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide (CHMINACA)

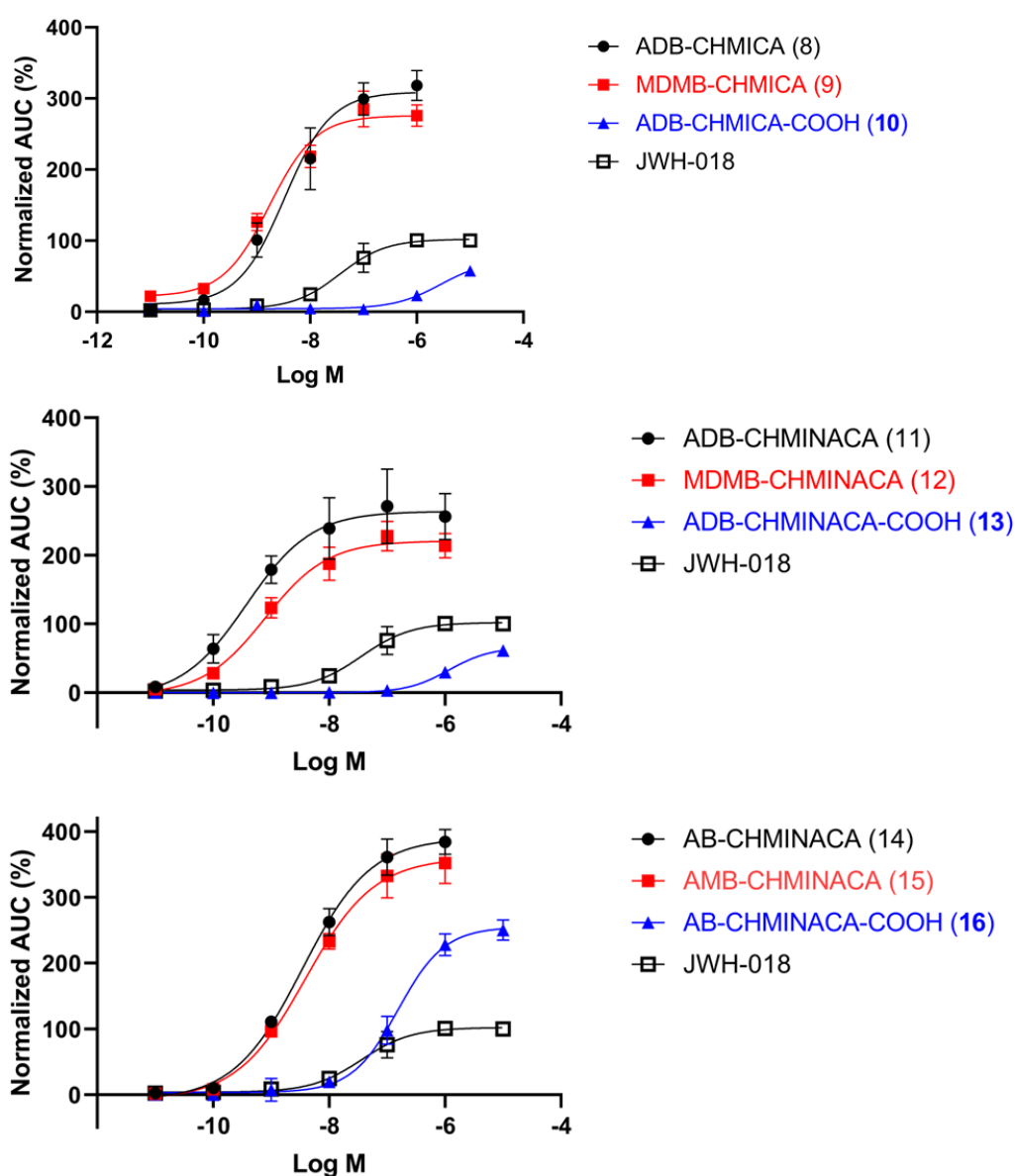


Figure 3 Sigmoidal concentration-response curves of CHMICA- and CHMINACA-based SCRA derivatives for the CB₁ receptor. Each data point represents the mean value ± SEM of 3 experiments (n = 3).

Since 2014, numerous non-fatal and fatal intoxications with the *L-tert*-leucine derivative MDMB-CHMICA (**9**) have been reported.^{9,12,41-46} Subsequently, the UK Government implemented the ‘Psychoactive Substances Act’ in 2016 to counteract MDMB-CHMICA-related intoxications. Nevertheless, only a minor reduction in the availability of MDMB-CHMICA from internet-based suppliers could be observed.⁴⁷ Although there is only limited data published concerning its structural analogue, ADB-CHMICA (**8**), which features a primary amide moiety, both parent compounds **8** and **9** are extremely potent at CB₁, with EC₅₀ values of 3.31 nM for compound **8** and 1.77 nM for compound **9** (Figure 3)(Table 1). Their hydrolysis metabolite **10** was found to be one of the most abundant *in vivo* Phase I metabolites in urine samples.²⁶ Hydrolysis of the primary amide or methylester severely impairs the activity of the metabolite compared to the parent compounds **8** and **9** (Figure 3). Notwithstanding, an efficacy of 57.6% of the E_{max} value of JWH-018 at high concentrations (10 μM) was retained.

ADB-CHMINACA (**11**) is one of the most potent CB₁ agonists from the panel of SCRA investigated in this study, with an EC₅₀ value of 0.34 nM (Figure 3)(Table 1), which is in agreement with earlier published data.^{29,32,34,48} ADB-CHMINACA (**11**), also referred to as MAB-CHMINACA, is sold over the Internet as a white powder and is mostly smoked in order to get ‘high’.⁴⁹ Typical doses reported by users, who mix it with herbs, vary from 0.25 mg up to heavy doses of 2 mg. In a fatal case in 2015, the presence of ADB-CHMINACA (**11**) was shown for the first time in human specimens, with the highest concentration of the parent compound found in the liver (156 ng/g).¹⁵ Subsequently, various intoxications with the highly potent ADB-CHMINACA have been reported, with blood concentrations of four individuals ranging from 5.2 up to 14.6 ng/mL (or 14 nM up to 39 nM).⁴⁸ The adverse effects observed in these individuals included vomiting, seizures, limb twisting, muscle tremors, aggression, agitation, slurred speech, among others. Amide hydrolysis was detected in ADB-CHMINACA (**11**) as well as in AB-CHMINACA (**14**) metabolism, but only as a minor transformation, since the cyclohexylmethyl tail appeared to be the preferred site of transformation.^{20,50,51} Although no EC₅₀ value could be determined for hydrolysis metabolite **13** of parent compounds **11** and **12**, it still showed significant activity at CB₁ at high concentrations, with an efficacy of 68.2% relative to JWH-018 (in agreement with findings of Cannaert *et al.*, 2017²⁹). While the human consumption of this metabolite has not been reported before, metabolite **13**, also referred to as

DMBA-CHMINACA, has recently been identified in a white powder-type product delivered in an airmail package to Korea.⁵²

Besides MDMB-CHMICA (**9**), the chemically closely related L-valine derivative AB-CHMINACA (**14**) has also frequently been encountered in forensic case work. It was identified amongst prevalently consumed drugs of abuse in patients presenting to an emergency department in London in the first half of 2015.⁹ The use of these drugs has been associated with adverse effects including cardiovascular effects, neurotoxicity and neuropsychiatric effects, potentially even more serious severe toxicity effects compared to the earlier generation SCRAs.¹² The *L-tert*-leucine derivatives **14** and **15** showed a lower potency compared to their L-valine counterparts **11** and **12** (Figure 3). An EC₅₀ value of 3.45 nM (1.96-6.14) was determined for compound **14** (Table 1), which is in agreement with the low EC₅₀ value of 7.4 ± 1.5 nM reported by Wiley *et al.*⁵³, which was determined by the binding of a slowly hydrolysable GTP analog to the G α -subunit using [³⁵S]GTP γ S turnover assay, instead of the β -arr2 recruitment assay used in this study. Hydrolysis metabolite **16** has been identified as a hydrolysis product of parent compounds **14** and **15** in a number of studies in urine and hair of abusers.⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶ Metabolite **16** clearly retains activity (EC₅₀ = 155 nM), although with a 45-fold impaired potency when compared to the parent compounds (Table 1). It has been reported by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) that the hydrolysis product of **14** and **15**, also listed under the name MBA-CHMINACA, has been sold as a 'research chemical' under the name 'AB-CHMINACA'.³⁵ This research chemical was purchased via the Internet from online vendors and analyzed at the Institute of Forensic Medicine, Freiburg, Germany.

3.3. 1-[4-Fluorophenyl)methyl]-1*H*-indole-3-carboxamide (FUBICA) and 1-[(4-fluorophenyl)methyl]-1*H*-indazole-3-carboxamide derivatives (FUBINACA)

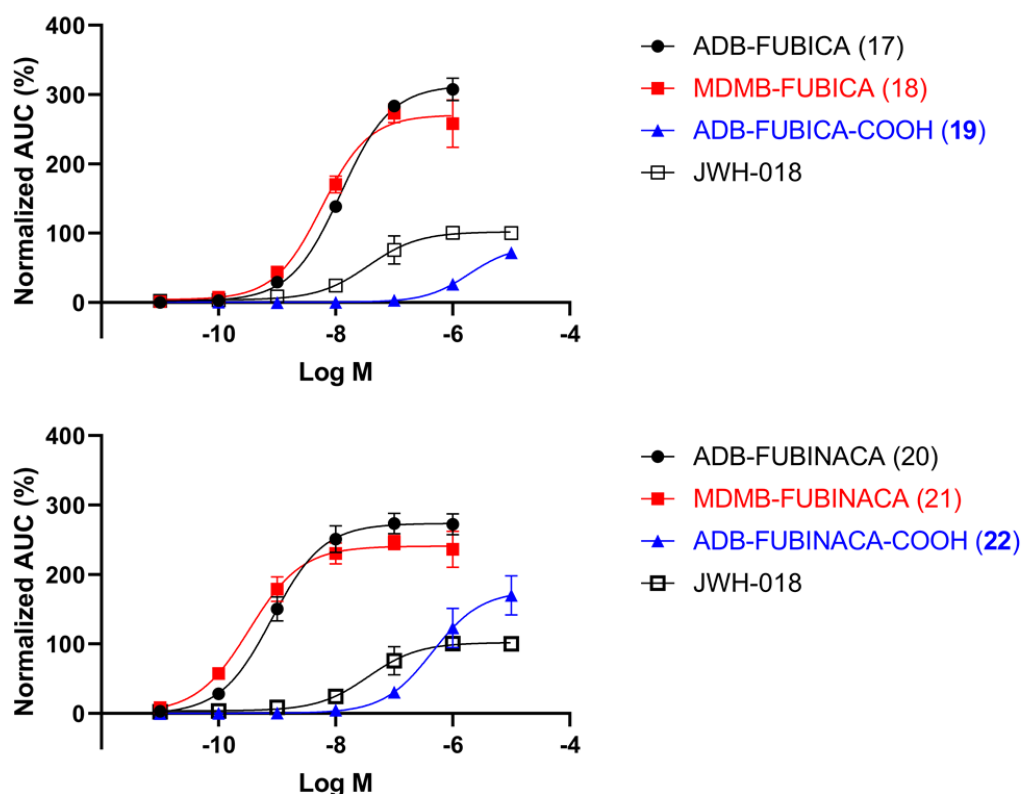


Figure 4 Sigmoidal concentration-response curves of FUBICA- and FUBINACA-based SCRA derivatives for the CB₁ receptor. Each data point represents the mean value \pm SEM of 3 experiments ($n = 3$).

Of the FUBICA and FUBINACA derivatives, featuring a fluorinated benzene ring coupled to N₁ of the indole or indazole ring, only *L-tert*-leucine derivatives were investigated in this study (Figure 1). For ADB-FUBICA (**17**) an EC₅₀ value of 12.3 nM (9.68-16.1) and an E_{max} value 3-fold higher than that of JWH-018 was determined (Figure 4)(Table 1). MDMB-FUBICA (**18**), which has been reported to be more selective towards CB₂ compared to the CB₁ receptor, shows an efficacy of 5.79 nM for CB₁, in agreement with GTP γ S binding results by Doi *et al.* (2018)⁵⁷ (EC₅₀ = 9.72 nM) and FLIPR[®] assay results by Banister *et al.* (2016)⁴⁰ (EC₅₀ = 2.7 nM). HLM incubation studies yielded the Phase I metabolite **19** from the parent compound ADB-FUBICA (**17**) following carboxamide hydrolysis.⁵⁸ At high concentrations, metabolite **19** reached an E_{max} value comparable with 81.8% of the efficacy of the reference compound JWH-018.

ADB-FUBINACA (**20**) intake has led to multiple severe intoxications.⁵⁹⁻⁶¹ In a fatal case reported in the USA, related to the intake of compound **20**, a concentration of 7.3 ng/mL (19.1 nM) was detected in postmortem blood.⁶¹ In a nonfatal case, an even higher serum concentration of 15.6 ng/mL (41 nM) was determined after intake of ADB-FUBINACA (**20**) by ingesting two drops of e-cigarette fluid.⁵⁹ Its structural analogue, MDMB-FUBINACA (**21**) has similarly been linked to more than 600 poisonings, including 15 deaths over 2 weeks in Russia in 2014.⁶² Consequently, compound **21** has been designated as one of the deadliest cannabimimetics sold to date.⁶³ Interestingly, the structure of this highly potent agonist bound to the CB₁-Gα_i complex has recently been unraveled.⁶³ Delineating the structural basis of this complex revealed a C-shape binding mode of **21**, which stabilizes the active conformation of CB₁ to a greater extent compared to the partial agonist Δ⁹-THC. Also in this study, both compounds **20** and **21** show extremely high potency as CB₁ agonists, with EC₅₀ values of 0.82 nM and 0.36 nM, respectively (Figure 4)(Table 1). Whereas the estimated EC₅₀ value of compound **20** is in agreement with the low EC₅₀ value of 1.2 nM determined by Banister *et al.*³⁸ using a FLIPR[®] membrane potential assay, the EC₅₀ value of compound **21** estimated here (0.36 nM) deviates to a larger extent from the result obtained by Banister *et al.* (3.9 nM) but is in good agreement with the EC₅₀ value of 0.26 nM, as determined by [³⁵S]GTPγS assay by Gamage *et al.*³⁰ As already mentioned earlier, different EC₅₀ value outcomes can be explained by the implementation of different functional signaling assays, different cell lines (CHO vs HEK293T cells) or even biased signaling. Hydrolysis of the terminal moieties (primary amide and methylester for ADB-FUBINACA (**20**) and MDMB-FUBINACA (**21**), respectively) was found to be a common major metabolic pathway for both parent compounds.^{64,65} Metabolite **22** was the most abundant metabolite in 9 postmortem urine samples, associated with MDMB-FUBINACA (**21**) intake.⁶⁵ This metabolite **22** still showed significant, albeit impaired, activity at CB₁ at high concentrations, with an EC₅₀ value of 450 nM and an E_{max} of 176.6 %, relative to the efficacy of the reference compound JWH-018.

4. Conclusion

The present study provides critical and missing data related to the potential toxicological characteristics of common hydrolysis metabolites of 15 SCRA scaffolds based on L-valine and L-*tert*-leucine. Our results indicate an overall severely impaired activity of these metabolites at CB₁. Nevertheless, a broad variety in metabolite activity could be detected in the chemically closely related SCRA panel in this study, ranging from no activity detected to EC₅₀ values around 150 nM. Comparison of our data to already published activity data on the investigated compounds once more revealed that EC₅₀ values may markedly vary among different assays, possibly due to differences in functional signaling and choice of cell lines. Nevertheless, our data highlight that the hydrolysis metabolites of closely related SCRA scaffolds can possess markedly distinct pharmacological characteristics. Although we observed a strong reduction in efficacy (E_{max}) of the carboxy metabolites of L-valine and L-*tert*-leucine SCRA scaffolds for CB₁, when compared to the parent compounds, the efficacy of certain metabolites is still higher than that of JWH-018. This might imply that metabolites from ADB-FUBINACA, 5F-ADB-PINACA and AB-CHMINACA and their methyl- and ethylester functionalities could potentially contribute to the overall pharmacological or toxicological response *in vivo*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

E. Wouters was supported by BRAIN project grant (NPSSAY) from The Belgian Science Policy Office, A. Canaert was granted by Bijzonder Onderzoeksfonds (BOF) with grant number PDO026-18 and C. Stove was supported by Bijzonder Onderzoeksfonds (BOF) with grant numbers 01J15517 and 01N00814.

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Table 1 Potency (EC_{50}), efficacy (E_{max} , relative to JWH-018) of the selected SCRA and metabolites (n = 3).

Compound	EC_{50} (nM) (95 % CI)	E_{max} (%) (95 % CI)	Metabolite/Parent EC_{50}
5F-ADB-PINACA (1)	2.76 (1.24-5.41)	308.4 (277.8-346.4)	
5F-MDMB-PINACA (2)	0.84 (0.52-1.24)	319.3 (291.0-353.6)	
5F-ADB-PINACA-COOH (3)	113 (51.3-242)	245.6 (204.2-349.6)	40.9
5F-AB-PINACA (4)	55.4 (31.2-85.1)	216.8 (196.4-241.5)	
5F-AMB-PINACA (5)	15.1 (10.2-23.9)	258.6 (238.2-287.0)	
5F-AEB-PINACA (6)	8.76 (5.5-17.0)	235.4 (211.3-273.3)	
5F-AB-PINACA-COOH (7)	ND	ND	
ADB-CHMICA (8)	3.31 (0.94-12.4)	327.2 (280.4-459.4)	
MDMB-CHMICA (9)	1.77 (0.79-3.83)	285.1 (258.5-321.5)	
ADB-CHMICA-COOH (10)	ND	57.6 (35.7-92.4)*	
ADB-CHMINACA (11)	0.34 (0.02-0.91)	262.6 (236.7-301.1)	
MDMB-CHMINACA (12)	0.78 (0.22-1.90)	226.7 (202.9-261.2)	
ADB-CHMINACA-COOH (13)	ND	68.2 (63.5-73.0)*	
AB-CHMINACA (14)	3.45 (1.96-6.14)	390.5 (358.4-435.0)	
AMB-CHMINACA (15)	3.91 (1.86-8.44)	360.1 (322.2-421.2)	
AB-CHMINACA-COOH (16)	155 (97.4-277.6)	254.8 (227.3-292.3)	44.9
ADB-FUBICA (17)	12.3 (9.68-16.1)	313.6 (297.0-333.2)	
MDMB-FUBICA (18)	5.79 (2.97-10.25)	270.6 (243.7-303.0)	
ADB-FUBICA-COOH (19)	ND	81.8 (65.4-99.6)*	
ADB-FUBINACA (20)	0.82 (0.46-1.34)	273.6 (254.7-295.6)	
MDMB-FUBINACA (21)	0.36 (0.17-0.69)	240.9 (221.4-263.3)	
ADB-FUBINACA-COOH (22)	450 (176-749)	176.6 (141.0-314.7)	548.8
JWH-018	36.8 (28.6-50.4)	102.0 (97.6-107.5)	

*Maximum effect seen at 10 μ M

ND: not determined since saturation has not been reached