

# Understanding the Dynamics between Vaping and Cannabis Legalization Using Twitter Opinions

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## Abstract

Cannabis legalization has been welcomed by many U.S. states but its role in escalation from tobacco e-cigarette use to cannabis vaping is unclear. Meanwhile, cannabis vaping has been associated with new lung diseases and rising adolescent use. To understand the impact of cannabis legalization on escalation, we design an observational study to estimate the causal effect of recreational cannabis legalization on the development of pro-cannabis attitude for e-cigarette users. We collect and analyze Twitter data which contains opinions about cannabis and JUUL, a very popular e-cigarette brand. We use weakly supervised learning for personal tweet filtering and classification for stance detection. We discover that recreational cannabis legalization policy has an effect on increased development of pro-cannabis attitudes for users already in favor of e-cigarettes.

## Introduction

Electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) are battery-powered devices designed to heat up a liquid containing nicotine, cannabis and other chemicals, and to deliver its contents in the form of an aerosol (Cullen et al. 2018). Vaping is the process of inhaling aerosols from an e-cigarette. Studies show that e-cigarettes have the potential to benefit adult smokers as a tobacco smoking cessation tool (Hajek et al. 2019; Walker et al. 2020). Although e-cigarettes are considered to be less harmful than smoking combustible tobacco products like cigarettes and cigars, e-cigarettes have risks associated with respiratory health (Polosa et al. 2019) and nicotine addiction (Barrington-Trimis et al. 2016). E-cigarettes are also widely blamed for the recent increase of tobacco use in adolescents due to targeted advertising, appealing flavors, social normalization, lack of awareness about health risks, illegal sales, and easy access to minors (Jackler et al. 2019; Barrington-Trimis et al. 2015; U.S. Food & Drug Administration 2018). This increase has been largely attributed to JUUL, an e-cigarette with a discreet USB-like design, which dominates the U.S. e-cigarette market with 82.9% market share as of 2019 (Conway 2020). JUUL and other e-cigarette companies have been the target of recent policy regulations

with the goal of mitigating adolescent tobacco use (Jackler et al. 2019). The U.S. Surgeon General report concluded that the growing popularity of e-cigarettes among minors is a public health concern and suggested plans for spreading health risk awareness and market regulations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2016).

Concomitant with the growing use of e-cigarettes has been the increasing use of cannabis vaping (Johnston et al. 2020). Cannabis vaporization among adult cannabis users is believed to be a healthier alternative than combustible cannabis, with better taste and weaker odor, flexibility in carrying and concealing, and better euphoric sensation (Morean et al. 2017). The psychoactive property of cannabis attributed to its Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) content has attracted medical and recreational use resulting in some US states legalizing cannabis use. Despite its positive traits, cannabis vaping has also raised concerns. From 2017 to 2019, cannabis vaping has doubled to tripled amongst high school students (Johnston et al. 2020) and the use of THC products is linked to the 2019 nationwide outbreak of e-cigarette or vaping product use-associated lung injury (EVALI) (Chatham-Stephens et al. 2019). The cannabinoid-enriched e-liquids readily available in the market lack quality control as well as toxicological and clinical assessment (Giroud et al. 2015). This controversy poses policy-related questions for states looking to legalize cannabis.

Although researchers are still evaluating the effects of cannabis legalization legislation on patterns of cannabis use and associated harms across different populations (Smart and Pacula 2019), current tobacco and e-cigarette users may be an especially vulnerable group for cannabis use escalation and related harms (Agrawal, Budney, and Lynskey 2012; Lemyre, Poliakova, and Bélanger 2019), including continued tobacco use and increased dependence and difficulty in stopping use. Thus policy makers and public health professionals may need to think about targeted messages and interventions to help discourage co-use of substances and to increase tobacco cessation interventions for these more vulnerable groups.

Recent studies have also found that cannabis legalization laws may have an association with modes of cannabis administration. In both adolescents and adults, individuals who live in states with legal cannabis laws are more likely to

try vaping cannabis than those who do not reside in states with legalized cannabis (Borodovsky et al. 2016, 2017). We do not yet know, though whether there is a causal or even temporal association between legalization and mode of use, but examining whether legalization is associated with how cannabis is consumed can have important policy and health implication.

The goal of our work is to understand the potential association between cannabis legalization and increases in cannabis vaping interest (and potential use) among individuals already predisposed to vaping e-cigarettes or electronic nicotine delivery systems. Even though studies (Dai et al. 2018; Audrain-McGovern et al. 2018; Giroud et al. 2015) have looked into e-cigarette and cannabis co-use, the relationship between the policy of legalizing recreational cannabis and this co-use is not well-understood. Social media platforms have been used to share personal experiences and opinions related to cannabis and e-cigarettes use (Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2014; Kim et al. 2017). However, most of the studies rely on survey data collected from volunteers and do not utilize the vast amount of social media content.

To estimate the causal effect of recreational cannabis legalization on the development of pro-cannabis attitudes and potential cannabis vaping in e-cigarette users, we design an observational study using Twitter data and matching (Stuart 2010). Our population of interest is U.S. users who have expressed positive stance towards JUUL vaping but have not mentioned cannabis before a focus state’s recreational cannabis legalization date. We assign the users from that state (e.g., California) to the treatment group and the other users are assigned to four control groups based on their state’s cannabis policies, ordered from most to least strict: (1) Users from states with illegal cannabis, (2) Users from states with legal medical cannabis with limited THC, (3) Users from states with legal medical cannabis, and (4) Users from states with legal recreational cannabis. The outcome is whether a user initiates a pro-cannabis tweet within  $N$  months of the legalization effective date of the treatment state. Since the treatment and control assignment is not randomized, we use the potential outcome framework to create a balanced pseudo-population for estimating the causal effect of the treatment on the outcome.

In order to deal with the noisy Twitter data, our methodology involves multiple steps. We collect from Twitter a dataset of JUUL users and their vaping- and cannabis-related tweets. We utilize weakly supervised learning to identify tweets related to personal experiences, opinions, and observations. Focusing on individuals with personal tweets allows us to study the topics of interest for ordinary users. We annotate a subset of the tweets asking annotators to label the stance of the tweet author on e-cigarettes or cannabis use to one of three classes: “In favor,” “Against,” or “Neither.” We use supervised stance detection to predict stance in the full dataset. In contrast to the sentiment analysis methods that focus on determining the polarity of emotion expressed in a text, stance detection is concerned with identifying the position or standing of users on a particular topic. Finally, to account for confounding, we use matching to find the appro-

priate control group users and estimate the effect of cannabis legalization on cannabis vaping rates of e-cigarette users.

## Background and Related Work

**Social media data in public health.** Previous studies have used data from social media for the analysis of public health issues such as maternal mortality, pregnancy, mental health, and substance use (Abebe et al. 2020; Liu et al. 2019; Copersmith, Dredze, and Harman 2014; Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2014; Kıcıman, Counts, and Gasser 2018). Social media data has also been used to study cannabis user behaviors and online interactions (Cabrera-Nguyen et al. 2016; Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2014). Kim et al. (2017) used e-cigarette-related tweets and user profile information to categorize users into individual, vape enthusiasts, informed agencies (news or health), marketer, and spammer. Unger et al. (2018) performed a study to show an association between tobacco-related Twitter activities and actual tobacco use. There have been studies on understanding the public response to public health policy changes using content analysis of a few thousand tweets (Hatchard et al. 2019; Harris et al. 2014). Although previous work (Young, Padwa, and Bonar 2019) outlines the potential of social media for understanding the impact of the cannabis legalization policy, there has been no study on estimating the causal effect of recreational cannabis legalization policy on the co-use of cannabis with e-cigarettes and our study is the first to do that.

**Opinion mining and stance detection.** Opinion mining is often used interchangeably with the sentiment analysis task that mainly focuses on opinions expressing or implying positive or negative sentiments (Liu 2012). The machine learning approach to sentiment analysis requires labeled data to train sentiment classifiers whereas the lexicon-based approach uses predefined rules and generic polarity scores of words expressing sentiment. VADER (Hutto and Gilbert 2014) is a popular lexicon-based sentiment analysis tool designed for sentiment analysis of unlabeled social media text by handling slangs and emoticons. However, VADER focuses on the tweet polarity and it is insensitive to the target context (attitude towards cannabis or vaping). Al-dayel and Magdy (2019) distinguish sentiment analysis from stance detection, a task of inferring a supportive or opposing attitude towards a given topic or entity. AlDayel and Magdy (2020) survey the literature of stance detection on social media and identify three main machine learning approaches: supervised learning, weakly-supervised with transfer learning, and unsupervised learning.

**Causal effect estimation.** Rubin (1974) formalized the potential outcome framework for causal effect estimation from randomized and non-randomized studies. In an observational study with non-randomized treatment assignment, matching methods can be employed for balancing the covariates between treatment and control groups (Stuart 2010). Sensitivity analysis on the matching parameter choices is recommended to provide less subjective results (King and Nielsen 2019; Shahid and Zheleva 2019). For the estimation of the variance of the causal effect, bootstrapping is recommended (Stuart 2010; Austin 2016). Matching methods have been used in answering public health and socio-economic

questions using social media data (Dos Reis and Culotta 2015; De Choudhury and Kıcıman 2017; Altenburger et al. 2017; Park et al. 2020). Quasi-experimental designs have also been used to handle unobserved confounding in policy-related observational studies with social media data (Tian and Chunara 2020).

## Problem Description

The main goal of our study is:

*To understand the impact of recreational cannabis legalization on the development of pro-cannabis attitude for the population with a positive attitude toward e-cigarettes by analyzing public opinions on Twitter.*

To achieve this goal, we collect and thoroughly analyze a new dataset with JUUL and cannabis-related tweets. Our main task is to estimate the causal effect of legalization on developing a pro cannabis attitude for e-cigarette users. We define three additional tasks to support the data preprocessing and analysis.

## Data Collection and Cleaning

Twitter is a social media platform skewed towards younger users (Wojcik and Hughes 2019) which makes it appropriate for our study. Since JUUL is the dominant e-cigarette of choice, we focused on collecting tweets related to JUUL from its inception in 2016 to 2018 using Crimson Hexagon API<sup>1</sup>. We also collect the cannabis-related tweets for those users from 2014 to 2018. We use keyword and hashtag filters provided by a domain expert on the team, summarized in Table 1 along with statistics of the number of users and tweets selected in the final JUUL-related dataset  $D_J$  and cannabis-related dataset  $D_C$ . The annotations described in more detail in the section on Stance Detection showed that this keyword strategy has a very low false positive rate of 0.5% and 3.8% in the annotated samples from  $D_J$  and  $D_C$  respectively.

From the collected raw tweets, we retain only English tweets of U.S. users, discarding all tweets from JUUL’s official Twitter handle. Using regular expressions, we match the user profile’s reported location to the fifty U.S. states and the District of Columbia. Since the location is optionally entered by the users as free text, we discard users with missing location information or users with other text string unrelated to location. There is also a variance in the location format for the users that have entered the location. We match the self-reported location to U.S. address patterns containing at least state name, state abbreviation, or main cities of the states. Figure 1 shows the distribution of users with JUUL-related tweets across the U.S. states along with the cannabis policies of the states as of December 2018.

## Data Model

We represent the data as two types of entities, tweets and users.

**Tweet entity.** A tweet instance  $M_i \in \mathbf{M}$  is defined in terms of its attributes:  $d$  is the tweet creation date,  $W$  is the raw tweet text,  $\mathbf{X}$  is a vector representation of tweet

text, and  $v$  is the ID of user posting the tweet.  $\mathbf{X}$  is represented with the mean word vector obtained from pre-trained Glove Twitter word embeddings (Pennington, Socher, and Manning 2014).

**User entity.** A user instance  $V_i \in \mathbf{V}$  is defined in terms of its attributes which can be divided into two categories: raw and aggregated. Raw attribute consist of user’s U.S. address ( $s$ ). We also consider other raw user attributes such as friend counts, follower counts, number of statuses liked but discard those since the values of these covariates obtained from Twitter API are not guaranteed to have been measured pre-treatment as required by the causal estimation task. The first aggregated attribute is the mean of tweet text representation posted by the user  $v_i.X = \text{mean}(m_i.X \mid m_i.v = v_i)$ . The other aggregated attributes are the first JUUL-related tweet creation date  $v_i.d_j = \min(m_i.d \mid m_i.v = v_i \wedge \mathbf{M} \in D_J)$ , and the first cannabis-related tweet creation date  $v_i.d_c = \min(m_i.d \mid m_i.v = v_i \wedge \mathbf{M} \in D_C)$ .

## Data Analysis Tasks

**Personal tweet selection.** Since we are interested in the opinions of the general public, the first task is to identify personal tweets. We refer to a tweet as a “personal” tweet if the tweet author shares experiences, opinions, or observations on cannabis/e-cigarette use, whether their own or someone else’s. All other tweets are referred to as “non-personal” tweets. Non-personal tweets can consist of promotional content, factual information or news. We frame the personal tweet selection problem as a binary classification task and retain the tweets belonging to the personal class for further analysis. We consider both tweets and retweets because previous work has shown that retweeting usually indicates trust and agreement with the tweet content (Metaxas et al. 2015). We also present results without the retweets.

**Topic analysis.** The second task is to gain understanding of the different JUUL-related and cannabis-related topics shared by users in their personal tweets. Topic analysis gives intuition about the breadth of expressed opinions and experiences and their relevance to the research goal. The topic analysis also helps us perform a qualitative evaluation of the personal tweet selection process.

**Stance detection.** The third task is to identify whether a user is in favor of or against cannabis and e-cigarette use by detecting stance in personal tweets. A user can express a positive attitude toward e-cigarette or cannabis by tweeting about ongoing personal use, the experience of use, intention to use, positive opinion or advantages of e-cigarettes or cannabis. Similarly, a negative outlook on e-cigarette or cannabis can be expressed by tweeting negative experiences, negative opinions, intention to quit, information about harmful effects or disadvantages. We perform stance detection for each tweet by determining whether the tweet author is in favor of or against e-cigarette or cannabis use. Tweets can belong to one of three classes: “In favor,” “Against,” or “Neither.” We define a user as pro-e-cigarettes or pro-cannabis if the majority of the tweets posted by the user in a given period are in support of JUUL or cannabis use.

<sup>1</sup><https://apidocs.crimsonhexagon.com/>

Dataset	Date Filter	# Users	# Tweets	Hashtags or Keywords Filter
$D_J$	2016-2018	312K	597K	'juul', 'juulvapor', 'juulnation', 'doitjuul'
$D_C$	2014-2018	194K	3.28M	'weed', 'ganja', 'marijuana', 'cannabis', 'mary jane', 'THC', 'marihuana', 'hash', 'reefer', 'hashish', 'bhang', 'CBD', 'green goddess', 'locoweed', 'maryjane', 'spliff', 'hemp', 'wacky baccy', 'sinsemilla', 'doobie', 'acapulco gold'

Table 1: Summary of the dataset collected from Twitter. The number of users and tweets are for the dataset after applying language and location filters.

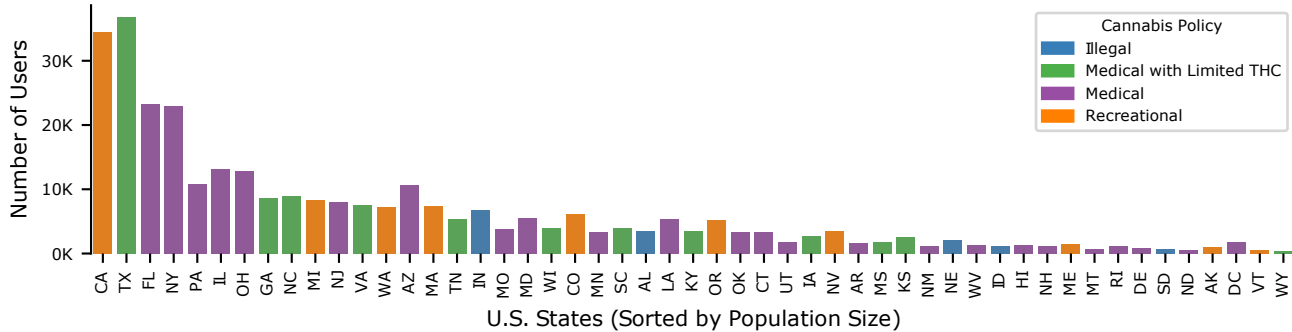


Figure 1: Distribution of users in dataset  $D_J$  with JUUL-related tweets across the U.S. states along with the cannabis policies of the states as of December 2018

## Causal Effect Estimation

Our main task is to estimate the causal effect of recreational cannabis legalization policy on the initiation of pro-cannabis tweets for the pro-e-cigarettes population. The potential outcome framework considers each unit to have two potential outcomes depending on whether the unit is treated. The causal effect of a treatment ( $T \in \{0, 1\}$ ) is defined as the difference between the two potential outcomes,  $v_i.E = v_i.Y(1) - v_i.Y(0)$ , where  $v_i.Y(1)$  is the user  $v_i$ 's outcome when treated,  $v_i.Y(0)$  the outcome when not treated. Due to the fundamental problem of causal inference, the causal effect is generally calculated at the population level. The average treatment effect (ATE) is obtained as the difference of mean outcome between treatment and control groups. The gold standard for causal effect estimation is randomized controlled trials (RCT) which randomly assign the population of interest into treatment and control groups. Randomization ensures that confounding cannot impact the estimate and that unit covariates are balanced. When RCTs are not possible, researchers resort to quasi-experimental design (Shadish et al. 2002). In our work we rely on a specific type of such design, called matching. Matching creates a pseudo-population to balance the covariate distribution in the treatment and control group (Stuart 2010). In Nearest Neighbor Matching (NNM), each instance in the treatment group ( $v_i$ ) is matched with the nearest neighbor in the control group ( $v_j$ ) based on a distance metric ( $D$ ) that takes covariates as input. Mathematically, the matched pair ( $v_i, v_j$ ) is defined as follows:

$$(v_i, v_j) | D(v_i.X, v_j.X) \leq D(v_i.X, v_k.X) \wedge v_i.T = 1 \wedge v_j.T = 0 \wedge v_k.T = 0 \wedge v_i, v_j, v_k \in \mathbf{V} \wedge v_i \neq v_j \neq v_k \quad (1)$$

where  $v_i.T = 1$  indicates the user  $v_i$  is in treatment group. In Propensity Score Matching (PSM), the covariates are sum-

marized by a scalar that acts as a distance measure to choose appropriate control subjects. Propensity scores can also be used in Inverse Probability of Treatment Weighting (IPTW) which inverse-weights treatment and control subjects for creating a balanced pseudo-population. A user's propensity score ( $v_i.e$ ) is defined as its probability of receiving the treatment given its covariates i.e.  $v_i.e = P(v_i.T = 1 | v_i.X)$ . The estimation of ATE with matching works with three main assumptions: ignorability, stable unit treatment value assumption (SUTVA), and positivity. Ignorability states that the treatment assignment of a unit is independent of the potential outcomes conditional on the observed covariates of the unit. This assumption implies that there are no unobserved confounders. The SUTVA assumption states that the outcomes of a unit are not affected by the treatment assignments of other units. Positivity states that the probability of receiving either treatment by each unit is larger than zero.

## Data Analysis

In this section, we describe the methodologies employed for selecting personal tweets, topic extraction, stance detection, and the results they yield on our dataset.

### Personal Tweet Selection

We pose the task of identifying personal tweets as a binary classification problem with two classes: "personal" and "non-personal." We apply a weakly supervised approach to classify personal tweets and then filter out tweets from accounts that have predominantly non-personal tweets together with tweets from potential bot accounts.

Weakly supervised learning is a machine learning paradigm to deal with time- and cost-sensitive annotation of training data by learning predictive models utilizing inaccurate or noisy labels. We use Snorkel (Ratner et al. 2017) for programmatically creating training data with weak supervision. After generating weak labels with Snorkel, we randomly sample 20K tweets with label confidence scores greater than 80% from each of  $D_J$  and  $D_C$ . The sampled data and sample weights based on confidence scores are used to train a Gradient Boosting Machine (GBM) classifier from scikit-learn library.

Snorkel allows users to write arbitrary labeling functions that label data points or abstain from labeling. The labeling functions are soft rules and have unknown accuracies, correlations, or conflicts. The outputs of the labeling functions are automatically modeled by a generative model that produces probabilistic labels that can be used to train a discriminative model for classification. We define four labeling functions with three functions applying heuristics for capturing personal tweets and a function using transfer learning to decide whether a tweet is a personal experience:

1. if tweet contains URL return “non-personal” else return “personal”
2. if tweet contains first-person pronouns return “personal” else return “abstain”
3. if subjectivity(tweet) < 1 return “non-personal” else if subjectivity(tweet) > 4 return “personal” else return “abstain”
4. if confidence\_score(tweet) > 0.6 return “personal” else if confidence\_score(tweet) < 0.1 return “non-personal” else return “abstain”

The first labeling function is motivated by the fact that promotional and news-related tweets usually contain an URL. The second labeling function is based on the assumption that tweets with first-person pronouns are more likely to be personal tweets than others. The third labeling function checks the subjectivity score obtained from the MPQA (Wilson, Wiebe, and Hoffmann 2005) subjectivity lexicon to determine the label of the tweets. A highly subjective tweet is likely to express personal opinion whereas a tweet with low subjectivity may be a non-personal tweet. The fourth labeling function uses the confidence scores of a tweet being a personal experience obtained from a transfer learning approach which we introduce next. The thresholds are chosen to encourage low false positives.

A transfer learning approach focuses on utilizing knowledge gained by a model in a source domain to a destination domain. In our case the destination domains are cannabis and e-cigarettes. We chose two source domains, dietary supplement use (Jiang, Calix, and Gupta 2016) and medication use (Jiang et al. 2018) for the task of personal experience classification. First, we apply instance-based domain adaptation (Pan and Yang 2009) to select 5.7K samples from the source datasets<sup>2</sup> that are the most similar to the sample of 50K tweets each from  $D_J$  and  $D_C$  target dataset. The cosine similarity of word vectors obtained from pre-trained

<sup>2</sup>[https://github.com/medeffects/tweet\\_corpora/](https://github.com/medeffects/tweet_corpora/)

Glove twitter word embeddings (Pennington, Socher, and Manning 2014) is used as the distance metric to choose source instances that are the closest to the target instances. Next, a deep learning-based classifier similar to one employed by Jiang et al. (2018) is used to obtain a confidence scores on a tweet expressing personal experiences.

We evaluate the personal tweet classification pipeline by annotating 500 tweets from  $D_J$  that are randomly sampled from the top 1, 500 tweets categorized as personal experiences by the transfer learning classifier. We also annotate 500 tweets from  $D_C$  using the same process. The tweets are annotated by trained graduate students where each tweet is labeled by two annotators. The graduate students are asked to answer the multiple-choice question “To the best of your judgment, is this tweet about a personal experience, opinion, or observation?” with one of the options “Yes,” “No,” or “Not sure.” The observed average agreement between the annotators is 94.6% with Krippendorff’s alpha coefficient equal to 0.47 for e-cigarettes tweets. For cannabis tweets, the inter-annotator observed agreement is 85.6% with Krippendorff’s alpha coefficient of 0.55. We only use the labels with an agreement between the annotators for the evaluation of the pipeline. The macro averaged F1-score of the e-cigarette evaluation dataset increases from 49% by the transfer learning classifier to 71% by Snorkel’s generative model to 94% by the discriminative GBM classifier. Similarly, the macro averaged F1-score of the cannabis evaluation dataset changes from 47% by transfer learning to 89% by Snorkel to 87% by GBM classifier. We choose confidence score thresholds of 0.1 and 0.5, based on performance in the evaluation dataset, for categorizing tweets in  $D_J$  and  $D_C$  as personal tweets respectively. 83% of tweets in  $D_J$  are categorized as personal tweets whereas only 45% of tweets in  $D_C$  fall into personal tweets with the majority of cannabis-related tweets being promotional or related to news. We retain the tweets from user accounts that have majority of personal tweets for further analysis.

We check for the presence of bots for the user accounts selected for further analysis. We use seven available lists of bot accounts previously used by other studies (Broniatowski et al. 2018; Tian and Chunara 2020) to filter out bot accounts in our dataset. We observe that 33 out of 37 bot accounts present in the original dataset are filtered out by the personal tweet selection pipeline demonstrating some robustness toward automated accounts. Interestingly, we notice the remaining four bot accounts, which we filter out from further analysis, produce more human-like content. Let  $M_{JP}$  and  $M_{CP}$  respectively be the retained tweets from  $D_J$  and  $D_C$ .

## Topic Analysis

We perform topic analysis on the tweets retained by the personal tweet selection approach. We use Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) available via python’s scikit-learn library for automatically extracting topics. To obtain more meaningful and interpretable topics, we run LDA using concept tokens extracted from tweets instead of generally used word tokens or word n-grams. We extend the graph-based concept extraction technique (Rajagopal et al. 2013) to handle

Topic Label (Dataset)	Tokens ranked by frequency (with minimum 1% support)
Nicotine addiction ( $M_{JP}$ )	nicotine_addiction, dollar, addiction, generation, cool_be, puff, cigarette_pack, think_juul, s_juul, juul_addiction, never_smoke, air, have_time, fight, have_dollar, iphone
Smoking ( $M_{JP}$ )	smoke, smoke_juul, quit, feel, smoke_cigarette, rn, smoke_cigs, not_do, quit_smoke, cloud, fun, bad_be, stop_smoke, everybody, quit_juul, fool, smoke_weed
Teenagers and parents ( $M_{JP}$ )	get_juul, mom, find_juul, dad, end, leave_juul, when_hit, find_mom
Purchase experience ( $M_{JP}$ )	pod, juul_pod, buy, buy_juul, buy_pod, be_pod, pod_pack, mango_juul_pod, get_pod
Flavors and accessories ( $M_{JP}$ )	thing, shit, room, weekend, juul_room, juul_shit, cucumber_pod, order, juul_thing, mean, pen, only_thing, juul_cucumber_pod, lose_juul_charger, first_thing, fuckin_juul, customer
Cannabis odor ( $M_{JC}$ )	shit, smell, smell_weed, room, weed_amp, head, walk, somebody, pull, only_thing, want_smoke
Cannabis legalization ( $M_{JC}$ )	marijuana_legalization, support, legalization, company, marijuana_cannabis, ballot
Cannabis consumption ( $M_{JC}$ )	way, thc, dog, good_be, bud, cannabis_industry, marijuana_plant, lung, kick, flower, weed_be, marijuana_bill, wax, hash_oil, try_weed

Table 2: Relevant topics and concept tokens ranked by frequency.

text data from tweets. First, we use TweepParser<sup>3</sup> (Kong et al. 2014) library to tokenize tweets, assign the tokens with Part-of-Speech (POS) tag, and construct a dependency tree. Next, we utilize the dependency structure and POS tags to extract concepts combining lemmatized tokens. We capture linguistic features such as noun phrases, verb phrases, and adjectival and adverbial modifications. We extract 20 topics each from the tweets in two data sets  $M_{CP}$ , and  $M_{JP}$  independently. Using other default parameters of scikit-learn LDA, we treat the number of topics as a hyperparameter and use the perplexity score metric as well as manual inspection for selecting 20 topics. The topic analysis confirms that users are sharing their opinions or experiences related to JUUL and cannabis use. Table 2 shows example topics with top-weighted concepts automatically extracted by LDA. The users in  $M_{JP}$  are discussing opinions on nicotine addiction, experiences of smoking, purchase of refill for e-cigarette device, JUUL flavors and accessories, and JUUL experiences together with parent encounters. The individuals in  $M_{CP}$  discuss cannabis legalization policies, the encounter of cannabis odor, and modes of cannabis consumption. The last row also captures the topics suggesting dual-use. The e-cigarette device may be used to intake cannabis in the form of dried “buds,” “wax,” or “THC.”

### Stance Detection

For the stance detection task, we first determine the stance of each personal tweet by classifying the tweet into one of “In favor,” “Against,” or “Neither” classes. In this section, we describe the annotation procedure and classification methodology.

**Annotation.** We perform annotation of 3,000 tweets to prepare a dataset<sup>4</sup> for training and evaluation. We select the top 1,500 tweets from each of  $D_J$  and  $D_C$  with the highest confidence from the transfer learning (TL) classifier. For each 1,500 tweets, we sample 500 tweets for annotation by trained graduate students and 1,000 tweets for annotation by Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers. We ask

two multiple-choice questions for each tweet. The questions asked for sampled cannabis tweets are as follows:

Q1. “To the best of your judgment, is this tweet referring to cannabis?” Answer: Yes or No.

Q2. “To the best of your judgment, is the person who wrote this tweet in favor of or against cannabis use?” Answer: In favor, Against, or Neither.

The e-cigarette annotation included the same questions where “cannabis” was replaced with “e-cigarettes.” The answers to the first question helped us evaluate the tweets filtering process using keywords and hashtags by accessing the fraction of false positives for the tweets selected for annotation. The answers to the second question help us prepare a dataset to train and evaluate the tweet stance classification model.

We use Labelbox<sup>5</sup> for internal annotation and training of graduate students. For internal annotation, each tweet is annotated by two graduate students. The workers for crowdsourcing were selected such that they are from the United States, have an overall approval rate of greater than 95%, and have worked on at least 100 tasks. In addition to the worker qualifications, we add a quiz question as an additional quality assurance step. The quiz question includes a random example from the instructions and the workers need to answer it correctly for their work to be accepted. The detailed instructions provided to crowdsourced workers are available as supplemental material<sup>4</sup>. Each worker is asked to answer two questions for each of five tweets. A task is assigned to three workers and labels are decided by majority voting. If there is no majority on the second question, the conflict is resolved by an additional annotation by a graduate student. Table 3 summarizes the observed average inter-annotator agreement (IAA) percentages and Krippendorff’s alpha coefficients for internal and crowdsourced annotators.

**Tweet stance classification.** We learn two classifiers separately for each of the datasets  $M_{JP}$  and  $M_{CP}$  using the tweet word vector features. We use the crowdsourced annotations for training and internal annotations for evaluation. The dataset for tweet level stance classification obtained

<sup>3</sup><https://github.com/ikekonglp/TweepParser>

<sup>4</sup><https://github.com/edgeslab/vaping>

<sup>5</sup><https://labelbox.com/>

Q.No.	Platform	Dataset	IAA %	$K_\alpha$
Q1	Labelbox	JUUL	98.6	-0.006
Q1	Labelbox	Cannabis	96.0	0.52
Q1	MTurk	JUUL	99.5	0.61
Q1	MTurk	Cannabis	97.1	0.63
Q2	Labelbox	JUUL	80.4	0.55
Q2	Labelbox	Cannabis	71.0	0.46
Q2	MTurk	JUUL	81.7	0.58
Q2	MTurk	Cannabis	68.6	0.43

Table 3: Observed inter-annotator agreement (IAA) and Krippendorff’s alpha ( $K_\alpha$ ) scores for annotated samples described in the section on Stance Detection.

Dataset (↓)/Labels(→)	In favor	Neither	Against
E-cigarettes	76%	17%	7%
Cannabis	54%	42%	4%

Table 4: Stance distribution in the annotated tweets.

after annotation shows imbalanced distribution with more tweets in favor of e-cigarette and cannabis use as shown in Table 4. We perform model selection and hyperparameter tuning to choose a stance classification model robust to class imbalance and overfitting. Moreover, we want the classifier to have a low categorical cross-entropy for the predictions to ensure a less noisy probabilistic classifier. Here, we report the best performing classifier after experimenting with logistic regression, support vector machine (SVM), and an LSTM-based deep learning model for stance classification. Logistic regression with balanced class weights and complexity parameter  $C = 1$  achieves the best weighted AUC of 81.0% (micro-AUC 92.9%) for e-cigarette and 75.4% weighted AUC (micro-AUC 85.3%) for cannabis evaluation data. Additionally, we use the scikit-learn library’s probability calibration to improve the cross-entropy loss from 0.74 to 0.48 for e-cigarette and 0.82 to 0.71 for cannabis evaluation data, performed with 20% held out data. The predicted class probabilities are added to the tweet instances in  $M_{JP}$  and  $M_{CP}$  as a derived attribute  $m_i.p_s$ .

**User stance detection.** Here, we describe our approach to detect a user’s overall stance by aggregating stance expressed in their tweets for a given period. The labels ”In favor,” ”Neutral,” and ”Against” obtained after probabilistic classification are assigned polarity scores of 1, 0, and  $-1$ , respectively. The overall stance for a user in a given period is the sign obtained after adding all the polarity scores. A user is defined as pro-JUUL if they have an overall positive polarity score based on tweets before a treatment state’s legalization date. A user is said to be pro-cannabis if they have an overall positive polarity score based on tweets after a treatment state’s legalization date and up to the end of the study period. An alternative user stance aggregation approach would be to give more weight to recent tweets.

## Causal Effect Estimation

Next, we describe how we estimate the causal effect of recreational cannabis legalization on developing a pro-cannabis attitude for e-cigarette users, a proxy for escalation from tobacco e-cigarette use to cannabis use, for three U.S. states. We consider a number of possible model choices, including type of matching and propensity score classifier, in order to perform sensitivity analysis and determine which model produces the best covariate balance and thus less biased causal effect estimation.

**Population of interest.** Our population of interest is pro-JUUL users from the United States with no cannabis-related tweets before the recreational legalization effective date of the treatment state. During our study period, from January 2016 to December 2018, six U.S. states, namely Nevada, Maine, Massachusetts, California, Vermont, and Michigan, have enforced recreational legalization of cannabis. We exclude Nevada and Maine from the analysis due to the low number of users in the treatment group. We also exclude Michigan as we have an outcome only for the first month after its legalization effective date. We focus on the remaining three, California (CA), Massachusetts (MA), and Vermont (VT), and consider each one individually as a treatment state. Users from all other 49 US states and DC are considered for the control group.

**Treatment/Control assignment.** We assign users from a ”treatment” state  $S$  with newly legalized recreational cannabis to the treatment group ( $T^{(S)}$ ). We assign other users to four control groups based on the cannabis policy of their state on the legalization effective date of the treatment state:

- $C_1^{(S)}$ : Users from all states with illegal cannabis
- $C_2^{(S)}$ : Users from all states with legal medical cannabis with limited THC
- $C_3^{(S)}$ : Users from all states with legal medical cannabis
- $C_4^{(S)}$ : Users from all states with previously legalized recreational cannabis

The legalization effective dates for CA, MA, and VT are January 1, 2018, July 28, 2017, and July 1, 2018 respectively.

To estimate a 95% confidence interval of the causal estimate, we run each experiment over 200 samples obtained by sampling tweet stance based on the stance classifier probabilities ( $m_i.p_s$ ), determining user stance for each sample and then assigning them to treatment or control when their stance towards e-cigarettes is in favor prior to cannabis legalization. Table 5 shows the mean and standard deviation of the population of interest belonging to treatment and control groups obtained after running 200 simulations. The comparatively low population size is likely due to the selection criteria for the study which require that a user has expressed opinion in favor of e-cigarettes but has not mentioned cannabis prior to the treatment state’s legalization date. There are comparatively few users from Vermont which is also one of the smallest states by population size. The reason behind the low sample size for Massachusetts is likely that the cannabis legalization date was prior to JUUL becoming very popular.

State	Sample Size				
	$T$	$C_1$	$C_2$	$C_3$	$C_4$
CA	126 (27)	511 (15)	2042 (30)	4947 (63)	1148 (23)
MA	37 (4)	33 (4)	220 (9)	997 (20)	113 (6)
VT	49 (3)	1476 (25)	7729 (60)	13709 (115)	6248 (71)

Table 5: Mean (and standard deviation) of sample sizes (rounded) for treatment and control groups obtained from probabilistic stance classifier with 200 simulations.

**Observed outcome.** We define a binary outcome  $Y$  that indicates whether a user initiated a pro-cannabis tweet within  $N \in [1, 6]$  months of the legalization effective date of the treatment state.

**Selecting covariates.** We use the pre-treatment tweets of users represented as a mean of  $n$ -dimensional word embeddings as the potential confounding covariates. We treat the dimension of word embeddings as a hyperparameter that tunes covariates balance based on sample size.

**Matching models.** We use three matching methods: 1:1 nearest neighbor matching (NNM), 1:1 propensity score matching (PSM), and normalized inverse probability of treatment weighting (IPTW). We also compare two propensity score classifiers, logistic regression (LR) and Gradient Boosting Machine (GBM), used by PSM and IPTW. We present the results for IPTW with Logistic Regression (IPTW-LR) which produces the most balanced samples. IPTW is also the recommended matching method for ATE estimation according to Stuart (2010). We also discuss the results of covariate balance and causal effect estimation by IPTW-GBM, PSM-LR, PSM-GBM, and NNM, together with IPTW-LR without considering retweets.

We use the nearest neighbor matching with replacement (Stuart 2010) approach for both NNM and PSM models. For NNM, we match pre-treatment covariates using cosine similarity-based distance metric as follows:

$$D_{\text{cosine}}(v_i.X, v_j.X) = 1 - \frac{v_i.X \cdot v_j.X}{\|v_i.X\| \times \|v_j.X\|} \quad (2)$$

For PSM, we match the propensity scores with a distance metric of squared Euclidean distance,  $D_{ps}(v_i.e, v_j.e) = (v_i.e - v_j.e)^2$ . The propensity score model predicts likelihood of treatment, i.e., belonging to a state with newly legalized cannabis given the covariates. We handle the class imbalance in LR and GBM propensity score models to ensure the propensity score model is not biased toward the majority class. Since we have multiple control groups, we define one propensity score model for each control group resulting in four models. For IPTW, the sample weight for user  $v_i$  is determined as  $v_i.w = (v_i.e)^{-1}v_i.T + (1 - v_i.e)^{-1}(1 - v_i.T)$ . To avoid dividing by 0 or by very small numbers, only scores between 0.05 and 0.95 are included.

**Assessing covariate balance.** We measure the absolute standardized mean difference (ASMD) of the distribution of the raw covariates in the treatment and control groups. The

same process is repeated for samples after matching to assess whether matching produced better covariate balance in the treatment and control groups. It is expected that the value of ASMD should be a low value (typically less than 0.1).

**ATE estimation.** The average treatment effect for NNM and PSM is computed using the balanced dataset ( $\mathbf{B}$ ) obtained after 1:1 matching. Let  $v_i$  and  $v_i^M$  respectively be an instance in the treatment group and its matched instance from the control group. The ATE is given by:

$$ATE_{\text{matching}} = \frac{1}{N_T} \sum_{v_i | v_i.T=1 \wedge v_i \in \mathbf{B}} v_i.Y(1) - v_i^M.Y(0) \quad (3)$$

where  $N_T$  is the instances in the treatment group. The average treatment effect with IPTW is calculated using equation 4.

$$ATE_{\text{IPTW}} = \frac{\sum_i (v_i.e)^{-1} \times v_i.T \times v_i.Y(1)}{\sum_i (v_i.e)^{-1} \times v_i.T} - \frac{\sum_i (1 - v_i.e)^{-1} \times (1 - v_i.T) \times v_i.Y(0)}{\sum_i (1 - v_i.e)^{-1} \times (1 - v_i.T)} \quad (4)$$

where  $v_i.Y(1)$  is the observed outcome for the treated individual  $v_i$  and  $v_j.Y(0)$  is the observed outcome for the individual  $v_j$  in control group. The 95% confidence interval is calculated as  $E_{ci} = \langle E_s - 1.96 \times \sigma_b / N_b, E_s + 1.96 \times \sigma_b / N_b \rangle$  where  $E_s$  is the mean estimated ATE,  $\sigma_b$  the standard deviation of ATE, and  $N_b$  the number of simulations.

**Causal effect of recreational cannabis legalization.** Figure 2 shows the box plot of ASMD scores of all covariates across the treatment group and each control group, before and after applying IPTW-LR. For California, matching results in a more balanced distribution with lower ASMD values. For Massachusetts and Vermont, although the overall covariate balance improves after matching, the improvement is not as good as that of California. Due to the relatively low average treatment population size in Massachusetts and Vermont, we use 25-dimensional word embedding compared to 200-dimensional in California. Additionally, California has a better covariate balance without matching compared to the other two states.

Figure 3 depicts the average treatment effect (with 95% confidence intervals) of recreational cannabis legalization policy on the initiation of pro-cannabis tweets for pro-cigarette users. The y-axis shows the ATE, the difference of the pro-cannabis tweet initiation rate between treatment and control groups, measured for  $N$  months after the policy effective date. We notice two main trends across all three treatment states. First, ATE is highest and increasing over time for control groups with illegal cannabis ( $C_1$ ). This implies that the cannabis tweet initiation rate is much higher in the states with newly legalized recreational cannabis compared to states in  $C_1$ . Second, ATE is close to zero or negative for control groups with already legalized recreational cannabis ( $C_4$ ). This implies the cannabis tweet initiation rate in states with already legal recreational cannabis is similar to or higher than a state with newly legalized cannabis. The other two control groups with some form of medical cannabis legalization ( $C_2$  and  $C_3$ ) are in-between  $C_1$  and  $C_4$  which makes intuitive sense. There is some variance in the trend across the three treatment states for  $C_2$  and  $C_3$ .



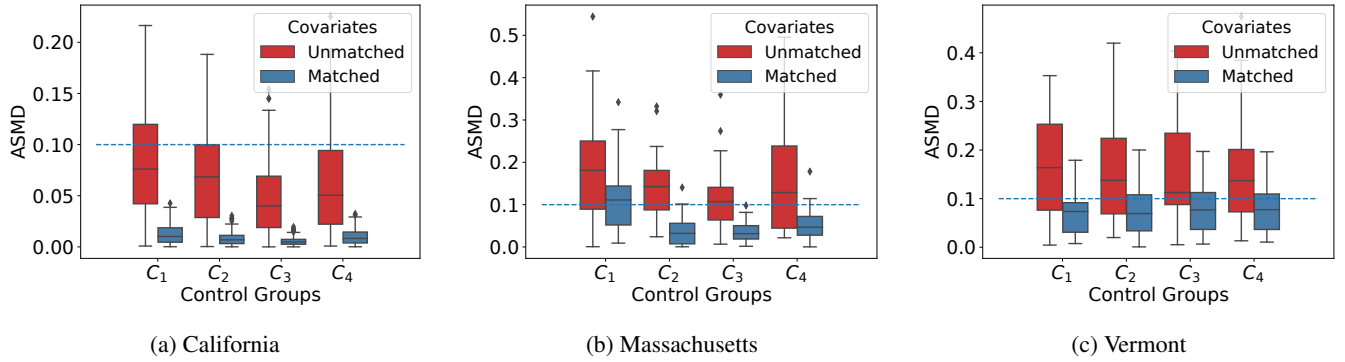


Figure 2: Assessing the covariates balance after IPTW matching. Lower absolute standardized mean difference (ASMD) scores are preferred for a balanced covariate distribution in the treatment and control groups. The horizontal dashed lines indicate a threshold of 0.1 ASMD.

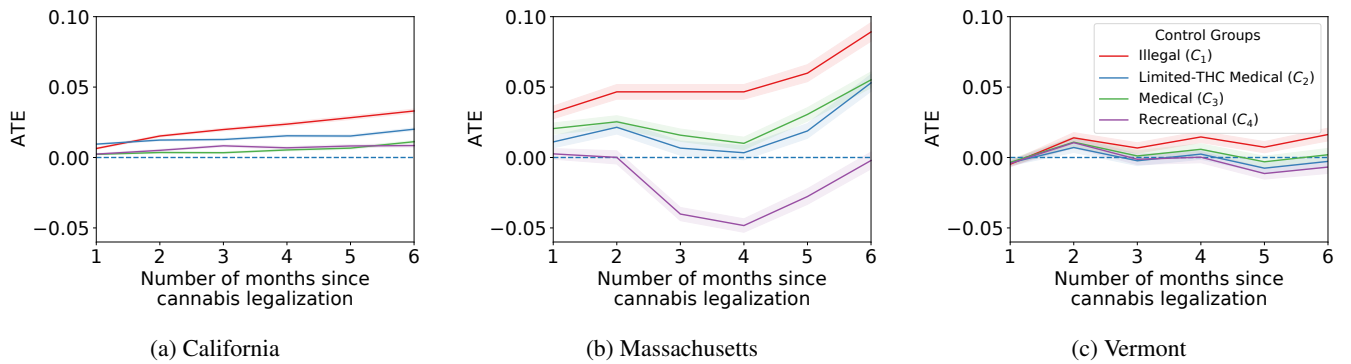


Figure 3: Average Treatment Effect (ATE) of recreational cannabis legalization policy compared to control groups based on state's cannabis policy. The x-axis shows the number of months since recreational cannabis legalization in the treatment state.

**Sensitivity analysis.** Next, we show the sensitivity of effect estimates to the choice of matching model: IPTW with LR (chosen), IPTW with GBM, PSM with LR, PSM with GBM, and NNM with cosine similarity. Figure 4a depicts the covariate balance obtained after running five matching models for California as the treatment state. All the matching models improve the covariate balance after matching with IPTW-LR having the lowest ASMD. Figure 5 shows the estimated causal effects for the treatment state of California and the same five models described above. We observe a nearly consistent magnitude of ATE for the states with illegal cannabis across all the matching methods. There is some variation in the estimation of ATE for control groups other than  $C_1$ . IPTW method has tighter confidence intervals compared to other matching models. Also, the choice of the propensity score model is less sensitive in IPTW compared to PSM.

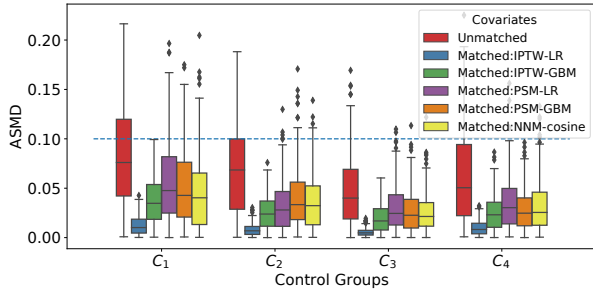
Figures 4b and 5f show the IPTW-LR covariate balance and causal effect estimated for California when all retweets are discarded. The covariate balance before and after matching is consistent with the settings when retweets are included. Although the effects are smaller compared to the estimate including retweets for control groups  $C_1$  and  $C_4$ , the generic trends of those control groups across the three treat-

ment states are still preserved. The trends for  $C_2$  and  $C_3$  are fairly consistent with the estimate including retweets. The population size for Massachusetts and Vermont is too small for the analysis when retweets are excluded.

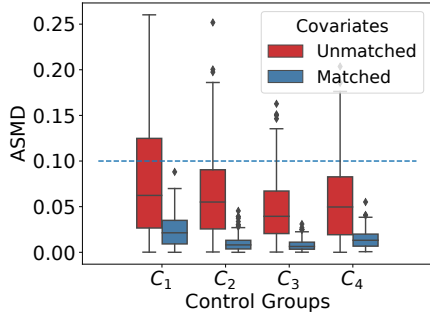
### Potential Limitations

One of the limitations of our work is associated with the noise and bias in Twitter data. Although studies have suggested correspondence between Twitter activities and real use of e-cigarettes and cannabis among young adults (Cabrera-Nguyen et al. 2016; Unger et al. 2018), Twitter activities are noisy proxies to the real-world phenomenon. Moreover, selection bias can potentially be introduced in our pipeline of data collection, location filtering, and personal tweet selection. Similarly, the errors in the stance detection models can act as a potential measurement bias for the downstream task of causal effect estimation which is why we use probabilistic classifiers to capture measurement errors as the variance of the causal effect estimate.

Another limitation is related to the causal inference assumptions. For example, there may be latent confounders that violate the ignorability assumption of propensity score matching. However, if we assume that state assignment is close to randomized, i.e., users could be living in any of the



(a) ASMD for matching methods when retweets are included.



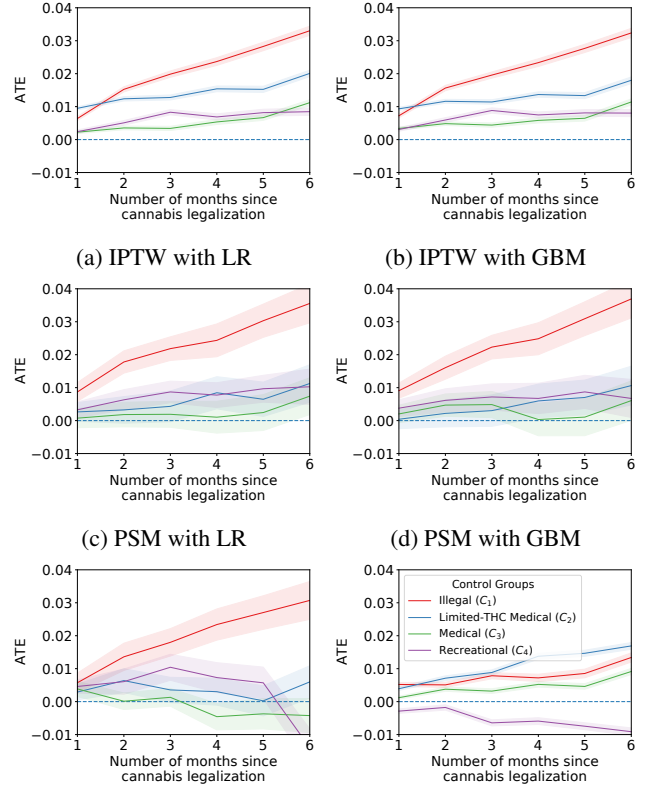
(b) ASMD for IPTW with LR (best model) when retweets are excluded.

Figure 4: Sensitivity analysis of covariate balance, when treatment state is California, for matching methods and inclusion/exclusion of retweets.

states, then this assumption makes sense. Then the balancing approach addresses inherent differences between specific users and thus reduces the confounding bias assuming the unobserved confounders are often associated with the observed covariates (Stuart 2010). Another possible concern is the violation of the SUTVA assumption, where the treatment can “spill over” to the control individuals. An example in our context can be a user from a control state tweeting in support of recreational cannabis legalization in the treatment state. Even in presence of spillover, the estimated ATE, the difference of pro-cannabis tweet initiation rate, is likely an underestimation of true ATE. Some potential future directions include studying the effect of network interference and the generalizability of the results to other states.

## Conclusion

In this work, we show that cannabis legalization likely has an impact on cannabis uptake for vaping users. Using a novel partially-annotated Twitter dataset, we leverage weakly supervised learning and transfer learning for personal tweet selection as well as e-cigarette and cannabis stance detection. We perform sensitivity analysis of different causal model choices on the estimation. We discover users with a positive attitude toward e-cigarettes in states with legalized recreational cannabis are much more likely to develop a pro-cannabis attitude and potentially start cannabis vaping than users in states where cannabis is illegal.



(e) NNM with cosine similarity (f) IPTW with LR (no retweets)

Figure 5: (a-e): Sensitivity analysis of Average Treatment Effect (ATE) for matching methods when treatment state is California and retweets are included. (f): ATE estimation with IPTW-LR (best model) when retweets are excluded. The x-axis shows the number of months since recreational cannabis legalization in California.

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