

**Research Article: New Research | Neuronal Excitability**

## **Secondary Ammonium Agonists Make Dual Cation- $\pi$ Interactions in $\alpha 4\beta 2$ Nicotinic Receptors**

Ammoniums Form Dual Cation- $\pi$ 's in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs

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55 structural differences, and suggests that a more compact cation allows for greater interaction with  
56 Loop C in the binding site.

## 57 **Introduction**

58 The neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChR) are members of the Cys-loop  
59 ligand-gated ion channel family and are established therapeutic targets for nicotine addiction, as  
60 well as possible targets for Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, pain, and other neural  
61 disorders (Romanelli et al., 2007). The receptors are pentamers, and eleven known subunits –  $\alpha$ 2-  
62 7,9,10 and  $\beta$ 2-4 – combine to form distinct subtypes (Gotti et al., 2006; Le Novère et al., 2002;  
63 Millar, 2003; Zoli et al., 2015). The nAChR binding site lies at the extracellular  $\alpha$ - $\beta$  interface,  
64 and it contains an aromatic box motif that binds the cationic moiety of the agonist through a  
65 cation- $\pi$  interaction (**Fig. 1**) (Dougherty, 1996, 2013; Van Arnam and Dougherty, 2014). Five  
66 aromatic residues are contributed by four loops – TyrA, Trp B, TyrC1, TyrC2, and TrpD  
67 (Corringer et al., 2000). In many studies of ligands binding to nAChRs, TrpB forms a  
68 functionally important cation- $\pi$  interaction, while the other aromatics apparently play other roles  
69 (Blum et al., 2010, 2013; Puskar et al., 2012; Tavares et al., 2012; Van Arnam and Dougherty,  
70 2014; Xiu et al., 2009).

71 A major goal in nAChR research is to develop agonists that target specific subtypes  
72 (Dineley et al., 2015; Holladay et al., 1997; Quik and Wonnacott, 2011). For example, the  $\alpha$ 4 $\beta$ 2-  
73 containing subtypes are expressed throughout the brain and are most associated with several  
74 aspects of nicotine addiction (De Biasi and Dani, 2011). The  $\alpha$ 6 $\beta$ 2-containing subtypes have a  
75 more restricted distribution. They occur on dopaminergic neurons, where they have been  
76 associated with reward-related behavior and Parkinson's disease, as well as on medial habenula  
77 neurons, which play a role in aversive behavior (Henderson et al., 2014; Jackson et al., 2013;

Quik and McIntosh, 2006; Zuo et al., 2016). Finding agonists that meaningfully distinguish between the  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  and  $\alpha 6\beta 2$  interfaces is an unsolved challenge, but metanicotine (rivanicline, TC-2403, or RJR-2403) and TC299423, have been found to preferentially activate  $\alpha 4\beta 2$ - and  $\alpha 6\beta 2$ -containing subtypes, respectively (Drenan et al., 2008; Grady et al., 2010; Wall, 2015; Xiao et al., 2011).

Previous analysis of TC299423 at  $\alpha 6\beta 2$  showed an unusual binding pattern, in that the agonist does not make a functional cation- $\pi$  interaction with TrpB or any other aromatic box residue (Post et al., 2015); thus, a unique binding mode may contribute to its subtype selectivity. Here, TC299423 and other agonists were studied at the more extensively characterized  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  receptor, in order to see if the unusual binding pattern persists. Several agonists were found to make cation- $\pi$  interactions with both TrpB and TyrC2, and we show that this dual cation- $\pi$  feature is a more general trend amongst secondary ammonium agonists (**Fig. 2**) at  $\alpha 4\beta 2$ .

## Materials and Methods

### *Molecular Biology*

Rat  $\alpha 4$  and  $\beta 2$  subunits were used as the basis for the constructs. The L9'A mutation in the  $\alpha 4$  M2 transmembrane domain, at the gate of the channel, was incorporated in order to amplify signal by shifting the stability of the channel partially toward the active state. This  $\alpha 4$ L'A $\beta 2$  construct is described as wild-type and/or  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  throughout the report for clarity in comparing non-canonical mutations made to the binding site, which is over 60 Å away from the channel gate. All constructs were in the pGEMhe vector, a cDNA plasmid optimized for protein expression in *Xenopus* oocytes. Site-directed mutagenesis was performed by PCR using the Stratagene QuikChange protocol, and primers ordered from Integrated DNA Technologies (Coralville, IA). Circular cDNA was linearized with SbfI (New England Biolabs, Ipswich, MA) and then transcribed *in vitro* using T7 mMessage mMachine kit (Life Technologies, Santa Clara, CA), with a purification step after each process (Qiagen, Valencia, CA). Final concentrations were quantified by UV spectroscopy.

### *Ion Channel Expression*

105 *Xenopus laevis* oocytes (stage V to VI) were sourced from both an institute facility and Ecocyte  
 106 Bio Science (Austin, TX). Oocytes were injected with 50 nL solution containing either 5 or 10  
 107 ng mRNA, injected in a 1:2  $\alpha 4$ : $\beta 2$  ratio **in order to control for a pure population of the**  
 108 **( $\alpha 4$ L9'A) $_2$ ( $\beta 2$ ) $_3$  stoichiometry. The alternative stoichiometry ( $\alpha 4$ ) $_3$ ( $\beta 2$ ) $_2$  has a much lower**  
 109 **EC<sub>50</sub> due to the extra L9'A mutation. We therefore avoided a mixed population containing**  
 110 **both stoichiometries.** Cells were incubated 24-48 hours at 18°C in ND96 solution (96 mM NaCl,  
 111 2mM KCl, 1 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub>, and 5mM HEPES, pH 7.5) enriched with theophylline, sodium  
 112 pyruvate, and gentamycin.

### 113 *Non-canonical Amino Acid Incorporation*

114 The cyanomethylester form of NVOC-protected tryptophan and phenylalanine analogues was  
 115 coupled to dinucleotide dCA and enzymatically ligated to UAG-suppressor 74-mer THG73  
 116 tRNA<sub>CUA</sub>. The product was verified by MALDI time-of-flight mass spectrometry on a 3-  
 117 hydroxypicolinic acid matrix. The non-canonical amino acid-coupled tRNA was deprotected by  
 118 photolysis either on a 500 W Hg/Xe arc lam, filtered with Schott WG-320 and UG-11 filters, or  
 119 with an M365LP1 365 nm 1150 mW LED lamp (Thor Labs, Newton, NJ) immediately prior to  
 120 coinjection with mRNA containing the UAG mutation at the site of interest. mRNA and tRNA  
 121 were typically injected in a 1:1 or 1:2 volume ratio in a total volume of 50 or 75 nL respectively,  
 122 so that 25 ng of mRNA was injected per cell. In cases where observed agonist-induced currents  
 123 were low after 48-hour incubation – likely due to low protein expression – a second injection of  
 124 mRNA and tRNA was performed after 24 hours. The fidelity of non-canonical amino acid  
 125 incorporation was confirmed at Trp with a wild-type recovery experiment where tryptophan was  
 126 loaded onto tRNA. If this experiment yielded similar to EC<sub>50</sub> to wild-type, then the cell  
 127 incorporated the charged residue and nothing else. This was accomplished with the Tyr sites by  
 128 comparing tRNA charged with Phe to a conventional Tyr-Phe mutation. A read-  
 129 through/reaminoacylation test served as a negative control by injecting unacylated full-length 76-  
 130 mer tRNA. Lack of current proved no detectable reaminoacylation at the suppression site.

### 132 *Whole-Cell Electrophysiological Characterization*

133 (S)-nornicotine hydrochloride was purchased from Matrix Scientific (Columbia, SC), while varenicline  
 134 (Pfizer), metanicotine and TC299423 (Targacept) were generous gifts. Agonist-induced currents were  
 135 recorded in TEVC mode using the OpusXpress 6000A (Molecular Devices, Sunnyvale, CA) at a holding  
 136 potential of -60 mV in a running buffer of Ca<sup>2+</sup>-free ND96, **which since  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  is Ca<sup>2+</sup> permeable,**  
 137 **prevents interference from Ca<sup>2+</sup>-activated channels endogenous to the oocyte.** Agonists were

138 prepared in  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -free ND96 and delivered to cells via a 1 mL application over 15 sec followed by a 2 min  
 139 wash. Data from dose-response experiments, **representative traces are shown in Figure 5**, were  
 140 normalized, averaged, and fit to the Hill equation using Kaleidagraph (Synergy Software, Reading PA). In  
 141 data tables, N is the total number of oocytes analyzed, and cells from different frogs on at least two  
 142 different days were used for each point. Fluorination plots are visualized here with Prism (GraphPad  
 143 Software, La Jolla, CA).  $\text{EC}_{50}$  and Hill coefficient errors are presented as SEM.

## 144 **Results**

### 145 *Binding Studies of TC299423 and metanicotine at $\alpha 4\beta 2$*

146 All studies here used the previously described  $(\alpha\text{L9'A})_2(\beta 2)_3$  receptor (Kuryatov, 2005;  
 147 Nelson et al., 2003). TC299423 was first probed for cation- $\pi$  interactions at TrpB and TyrC2  
 148 (TyrA, TyrC1, and TrpD have never been implicated in a cation- $\pi$  interaction). In these  
 149 experiments, the site of the aromatic residue of interest is mutated to a TAG stop codon. mRNA  
 150 made *in vitro* is injected into *Xenopus* oocytes alongside a bioorthogonal  $\text{tRNA}_{\text{CUA}}$  that has been  
 151 chemically appended to the non-canonical amino acid of interest. To probe for an agonist cation-  
 152  $\pi$  interaction, a series of residues with electron-withdrawing groups that weaken the interaction is  
 153 used. Typically, fluorotryptophans ( $\text{F}_n\text{Trp}$ ) are used to probe Trp and fluorophenylalanines  
 154 ( $\text{F}_n\text{Phe}$ ) are used to probe Tyr (fluorinating tyrosine causes the phenol group to deprotonate at  
 155 physiological pH). The endpoints of the two series –  $\text{F}_4\text{-Trp}$  and  $\text{F}_3\text{-Phe}$  – are both thought to  
 156 approximate a situation in which the dominant electrostatic component of the cation- $\pi$  interaction  
 157 has been completely removed, allowing a semi-quantitative comparison of Trp and Tyr residues.  
 158 Any change in binding is revealed by a changed  $\text{EC}_{50}$  value, monitored by two-electrode voltage  
 159 clamp electrophysiology dose-response experiments. If the interaction is weakened by these  
 160 substitutions,  $\text{EC}_{50}$  correspondingly increases. This change is visualized in so-called fluorination

plots of the log of the fold-shift in EC<sub>50</sub> against the calculated gas-phase cation- $\pi$  interaction strength.

At TrpB, TC299423 showed an increase in EC<sub>50</sub> with each additional fluorine substituent on the ring (**Table 1**), but the maximum fold-shift in EC<sub>50</sub> observed at F<sub>4</sub>Trp was only 6.6-fold. While this is a modest loss of function – ACh experiences a 66-fold loss of function at F<sub>4</sub>Trp in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  (Xiu et al., 2009) – there is nevertheless a linear trend in the fluorination plot (**Fig 3**). Thus, it can be said that TC299423 makes a functional, if modest, cation- $\pi$  interaction with TrpB in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$ .

**Table 1. TC299423**

TrpB	EC <sub>50</sub> ( $\mu$ M)		n <sub>H</sub>		I <sub>max</sub> ( $\mu$ A)		Fold Shift	N
Trp	0.023	$\pm$ 0.0009	1.4	$\pm$ 0.06	0.22	- 1.46	1	15
F <sub>1</sub> Trp	0.043	$\pm$ 0.0008	1.3	$\pm$ 0.03	0.12	- 1.2	1.8	11
F <sub>2</sub> Trp	0.052	$\pm$ 0.001	1.2	$\pm$ 0.04	0.05	- 0.62	2.2	14
F <sub>3</sub> Trp	0.13	$\pm$ 0.003	1.2	$\pm$ 0.03	0.11	- 1.41	5.5	12
F <sub>4</sub> Trp	0.15	$\pm$ 0.007	1.1	$\pm$ 0.05	0.15	- 0.77	6.6	14
TyrC2	EC <sub>50</sub> ( $\mu$ M)		n <sub>H</sub>		I <sub>max</sub> ( $\mu$ A)		Fold Shift	N
Phe	0.098	$\pm$ 0.003	1.1	$\pm$ 0.03	0.06	- 1.08	1	17
F <sub>1</sub> Phe	0.14	$\pm$ 0.005	1.2	$\pm$ 0.04	0.05	- 0.38	1.5	12
F <sub>2</sub> Phe	1.6	$\pm$ 0.07	1.3	$\pm$ 0.06	0.05	- 0.57	16	9
F <sub>3</sub> Phe	3.0	$\pm$ 0.25	1.3	$\pm$ 0.11	0.07	- 0.18	30	7

TyrC2 was then probed for a cation- $\pi$  interaction with TC299423 and showed an unexpected trend, with F<sub>3</sub>Phe substitution resulting in a 30-fold increase in EC<sub>50</sub>. When presented as a fluorination plot (**Fig 4**), these results show a linear trend, showing that in addition to a cation- $\pi$  interaction with TrpB, TC299423 makes a functional – and energetically more significant - cation- $\pi$  interaction at TyrC2.

Metanicotine, an isomer of nicotine in which the pyrrolidine ring has been opened, has antinociceptive effects in mice and is more potent and efficacious than ACh at  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  receptors



(Damaj et al., 1999; Papke et al., 2000). When analyzed via a fluorination series at TrpB in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$ , metanicotine displayed a functional cation- $\pi$  interaction, with a linear fluorination plot and F<sub>4</sub>Trp resulting in a 25-fold shift in EC<sub>50</sub> (Table 2, Fig 3). TyrC2 also shows a linear fluorination plot, with the F<sub>3</sub>Phe mutation causing a 51-fold shift relative to Phe (Fig 4). TyrA was probed and showed no meaningful changes in metanicotine EC<sub>50</sub> upon fluorination (Table 2,

**Table 2. Metanicotine**

TrpB	EC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	n <sub>H</sub>	I <sub>max</sub> (μA)	Fold Shift	N
Trp	0.64 ± 0.02	1.3 ± 0.0	0.08 - 0.89	1	13
F <sub>1</sub> Trp	0.79 ± 0.02	1.4 ± 0.0	0.12 - 0.80	1.2	16
F <sub>2</sub> Trp	3.6 ± 0.1	1.5 ± 0.1	0.15 - 0.56	5.6	14
F <sub>3</sub> Trp	13 ± 1	1.6 ± 0.1	0.07 - 0.30	20	12
F <sub>4</sub> Trp	16 ± 2	1.3 ± 0.1	0.03 - 0.11	25	12

TyrA	EC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	n <sub>H</sub>	I <sub>max</sub> (μA)	Fold Shift	N
Phe	19 ± 5	1.1 ± 0.2	0.02 - 0.16	1	7
F <sub>3</sub> Phe	17 ± 2	1.3 ± 0.1	0.01 - 0.03	0.9	6

TyrC2	EC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	n <sub>H</sub>	I <sub>max</sub> (μA)	Fold Shift	N
Phe	0.41 ± 0.03	1.2 ± 0.07	0.06 - 2.78	1	17
F <sub>1</sub> Phe	0.86 ± 0.06	1.2 ± 0.08	0.04 - 0.07	2.1	11
F <sub>2</sub> Phe	11 ± 1	0.6 ± 0.1	0.03 - 0.13	27	8
F <sub>3</sub> Phe	21 ± 1	1.4 ± 0.2	0.04 - 0.24	51	12

nicotine and ACh also showed no meaningful shifts in EC<sub>50</sub> at this site (Xiu et al., 2009). Thus, metanicotine also forms dual, functional cation- $\pi$  interactions at TrpB and TyrC2 in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$ .

Both metanicotine and TC299423 are typical nicotinic pharmacophores in that they have a cationic amine moiety, a hydrogen bond donor associated with that amine, and a hydrogen bond acceptor several angstroms away (Blum et al., 2010). In contrast to the tertiary ammonium nicotine and the quaternary ammonium ACh, metanicotine and TC299423 are both secondary

187 ammonium ions. Thus, to test whether this feature was associated with the novel dual cation- $\pi$   
 188 interaction, additional secondary amine agonists were analyzed.

### 189 *Establishing a Binding Trend for Secondary Amines*

190 Varenicline (Chantix<sup>®</sup>) is a smoking cessation drug that is thought to work by serving as  
 191 a partial agonist to  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  (Coe et al., 2005a, 2005b) It has a secondary ammonium as its cationic  
 192 center. This drug has previously been shown to form a cation- $\pi$  interaction at TrpB in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$   
 193 (Tavares et al., 2012), with a 23-fold shift in EC<sub>50</sub> at F<sub>4</sub>Trp (**Table 3, Fig 3**), but had not been  
 194 analyzed at TyrC2.

**Table 3. Varenicline**

TrpB*	EC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	n <sub>H</sub>	Fold Shift	N
Trp	0.0024 ± 0.0001	1.2 ± 0.1	1	15
F <sub>1</sub> Trp	0.0057 ± 0.0002	1.2 ± 0.1	2.4	11
F <sub>2</sub> Trp	0.0057 ± 0.0021	1.2 ± 0.1	2.4	14
F <sub>3</sub> Trp	0.027 ± 0.001	1.3 ± 0.1	11	12
F <sub>4</sub> Trp	0.056 ± 0.005	1.1 ± 0.1	23	14

TyrC2	EC <sub>50</sub> (μM)	n <sub>H</sub>	I <sub>max</sub> (μA)	Fold Shift	N
Phe	0.0014 ± 0.0002	1.3 ± 0.14	0.04 - 0.14	1	10
F <sub>1</sub> Phe	0.0020 ± 0.00009	1.5 ± 0.09	0.02 - 0.08	1.4	8
F <sub>2</sub> Phe	0.011 ± 0.00097	1.2 ± 0.11	0.02 - 0.1	8.1	12
F <sub>3</sub> Phe	0.027 ± 0.0016	1.1 ± 0.06	0.02 - 0.09	19	8

195 Nonsense-suppression based fluorination studies were conducted for varenicline at TyrC2  
 196 as discussed above. The corresponding fluorination plot shows a linear trend with a 19-fold shift  
 197 for F<sub>3</sub>Phe, confirming that varenicline makes a cation- $\pi$  interaction with TyrC2 in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  (**Table 3,**  
 198 **Fig 4**).

199 Varenicline was the third secondary ammonium agonist to demonstrate functional cation-  
 200  $\pi$  interactions with both TrpB and TyrC2 in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$ . To support the notion that a dual cation- $\pi$

201 interaction is associated with secondary ammonium agonists in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$ , we transformed nicotine –  
 202 which makes a single cation- $\pi$  interaction at TrpB – into a secondary ammonium. Nornicotine –  
 203 nicotine that has been demethylated at the pyrrolidine N – is a natural component of tobacco that  
 204 is a precursor to the well-documented carcinogen *N'*-nitrosonicotine that is a byproduct of the  
 205 curing process.(Siminszky et al., 2005)

**Table 4. Nornicotine**

TrpB	EC <sub>50</sub> (μM)		n <sub>H</sub>		I <sub>max</sub> (μA)		Fold Shift	N
Trp	1.7	± 0.1	1.3	± 0.1	1.33	- 9.37	1	13
F <sub>1</sub> Trp	4.6	± 0.2	1.3	± 0.1	0.27	- 0.9	2.8	16
F <sub>2</sub> Trp	11	± 0.7	1.3	± 0.1	0.04	- 0.11	6.4	8
F <sub>3</sub> Trp	26	± 2	1.5	± 0.1	0.05	- 1.28	16	16
F <sub>4</sub> Trp	44	± 4	1.2	± 0.1	0.95	- 1.51	27	8

TyrC2	EC <sub>50</sub> (μM)		n <sub>H</sub>		I <sub>max</sub> (μA)		Fold Shift	N
Phe	3.3	± 0.3	1.2	± 0.1	0.02	- 1.42	1	15
F <sub>1</sub> Phe	5.5	± 0.3	1.0	± 0.1	0.04	- 0.11	1.7	11
F <sub>2</sub> Phe	31	± 3	1.2	± 0.1	0.03	- 0.26	9.6	10
F <sub>3</sub> Phe	35	± 2	1.4	± 0.1	0.02	- 0.14	11	12

206 Nornicotine is much less potent than its methylated analog, with an EC<sub>50</sub> of 1.8 μM, a 20-  
 207 fold greater value than for nicotine. The fluorination plot of nornicotine at TrpB shows a cation- $\pi$   
 208 interaction, with F<sub>4</sub>Trp resulting in a 27-fold shift in EC<sub>50</sub>, demonstrating a functionally  
 209 important cation- $\pi$  interaction (**Table 4, Fig 3**). Results at TyrC2 show the same type of trend  
 210 seen for other secondary ammonium agonists analyzed in this report, with a linear fluorination  
 211 plot and a 11-fold loss of function for F<sub>3</sub>Phe (**Table 4, Fig 4**).

## 212 Discussion

213 Structure-function studies of four different agonists with distinct overall structures but a  
 214 common secondary ammonium moiety have established a functional cation- $\pi$  interaction with

215 both TrpB and TyrC2 in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs. Nornicotine forms a cation- $\pi$  interaction with TyrC2, but  
 216 nicotine, which only differs from nornicotine by being a tertiary rather than secondary  
 217 ammonium, does not. This nicotine/nornicotine comparison in particular presents a compelling  
 218 case that the dual cation- $\pi$  interaction is a consequence of the secondary ammonium group of  
 219 select agonists at  $\alpha 4\beta 2$ .

220 The significance of TrpB in agonist binding to nAChRs remains a central tenet of the  
 221 pharmacology of this system. In a cation- $\pi$  interaction, the aromatic ring of Trp is a stronger  
 222 binding site than those of Tyr or Phe, regardless of the nature of the cation, but Tyr and Phe can  
 223 certainly make strong cation- $\pi$  interactions. (Davis and Dougherty, 2015) Early studies focused  
 224 on ACh and nicotine and found that only TrpB showed a strong response to fluorination. We  
 225 have now found that four other agonists show, in addition to TrpB, a significant response to  
 226 fluorination at TyrC2. These four are structurally diverse, but share a common feature of being a  
 227 secondary ammonium. The implication is clear that the more compact secondary ammonium is  
 228 able to establish an additional interaction compared to the bulkier quaternary (ACh) or tertiary  
 229 (nicotine) systems.

230 Two studies of the primary ammonium agonist GABA at pentameric receptors – one at  
 231 the RDL insect GABA receptor and one at the prokaryotic ELIC receptor – show that this  
 232 primary ammonium agonist makes functionally important cation- $\pi$  interactions to the aromatics  
 233 at positions B and C2 (Lummis et al., 2005; Spurny et al., 2012). Again, a more compact agonist  
 234 can make a dual cation- $\pi$  interaction. A recent computational study of the AChBP aromatic box  
 235 suggests that the side chains of each aromatic box residue can contribute to the overall cation- $\pi$   
 236 binding energy in the ACh-AChBP complex (Davis and Dougherty, 2015). However, from a

237 functional perspective, only TrpB is universally important, with TyrC2 being identified here as  
238 contributing in some, but not all, cases.

239       A popular model for nAChR gating proposes that loop C moves on agonist binding so as  
240 to clamp down on the agonist and more clearly define the aromatic box (Wang et al., 2009). This  
241 movement of loop C is proposed to be a key functional feature of the gating mechanism. It may  
242 be that with the less bulky secondary ammonium agonists, loop C is able to move closer to the  
243 agonist. This larger motion by loop C leads to a closer contact between TyrC2 and the agonist,  
244 enabling a cation- $\pi$  interaction and making TyrC2 responsive to fluorination. AChBP structures  
245 with varenicline vs. nicotine bound do not show a meaningful difference in the position of loop  
246 C, but AChBP did not evolve to undergo a gating process and likely undergoes minimal  
247 conformational changes when binding small molecules (Celie et al., 2004; Rucktooa et al.,  
248 2012).

249       In summary, we have found a distinction in the binding mode of agonists at the  $\alpha 4\beta 2$   
250 nAChR. The natural agonist ACh and the prominent component of tobacco nicotine both make a  
251 cation- $\pi$  interaction to TrpB, along with other hydrogen bonding interactions. In contrast, four  
252 agonists that share a common feature of being secondary ammonium ions make a dual cation- $\pi$   
253 interaction to TrpB and TyrC2. This pattern may be unique to the  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  subtype, as it was not  
254 reported for TC299423 at the  $\alpha 6\beta 2$  subtype (Post et al., 2015). Further studies of other agonists  
255 and other subtypes could provide valuable guidance in designing more subtype-selective  
256 activators of nAChRs.

257

## 258 Figure Captions

259 **Figure 1.** A view of nicotine at the  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  binding site. The crystal structure of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  (PDB 5KXI) on the left shows  
 260 the aromatic box motif, with each loop contributing to the binding site in a unique color and nicotine in gray. The  
 261 schematic on the right details the hydrogen bond (red) and cation- $\pi$  interaction (purple) interactions previously  
 262 determined for nicotine with TrpB ( $\alpha 4$ : 149), as well as how TyrC2 ( $\alpha 4$ : 197) could interact with other agonists.  
 263 TyrA ( $\alpha 4$ : 93), TyrC1( $\alpha 4$ : 190) and TrpD ( $\beta 2$ : 57) are shown in the crystal structure but omitted from the schematic  
 264 for clarity. An alignment of each loop contributing to the box in the human nAChR family is shown at the bottom.

265  
 266 **Figure 2.** The structures and electrostatic potential maps of acetylcholine and nicotine are shown here for  
 267 comparison to the secondary amine agonists and have been calculated with Hartree Fock 6-31G\*\* (shown on a scale  
 268 of -10 to +150 kcal/mol)

269 **Figure 3.** Fluorination plots of all the agonists tested in this report at TrpB in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$ . The x-axis is the predicted  
 270 M06/6-31G(d,p) DFT-calculated energies between a sodium ion and each side chain (labeled) in the gas phase as  
 271 described in Davis et al. The y-axis is the log of the fold-shift in  $EC_{50}$ . Each agonist tested showed a linear trend,  
 272 and therefore demonstrated a functional cation- $\pi$  interaction at TrpB, as previously seen with acetylcholine and  
 273 nicotine. Data plotted for varenicline is from Tavares et. al.

274  
 275 **Figure 4.** Fluorination plots of all the agonists tested in this report at TyrC2 in  $\alpha 4\beta 2$ . The x-axis is the predicted  
 276 M06/6-31G(d,p) DFT-calculated energies between a sodium ion and each side chain (labeled) in the gas phase as  
 277 described in Davis et al. The y-axis is the log of the fold-shift in  $EC_{50}$ . Each agonist tested shows a linear trend,  
 278 and therefore demonstrates a functional cation- $\pi$  interaction with TyrC2, a result not previously seen with acetylcholine  
 279 or nicotine.

280  
 281 **Figure 5.** Representative traces from dose-response experiments with a variety of agonists, non-canonical amino  
 282 acid substitutions, and  $I_{max}$  values  
 283  
 284

285

286 **5.7 References**

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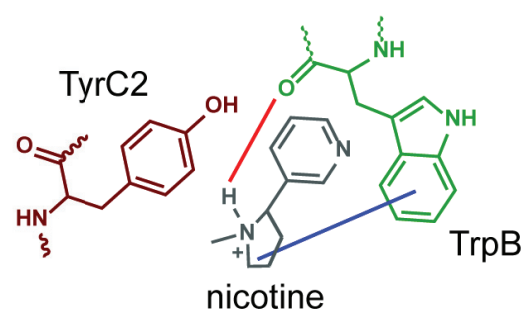
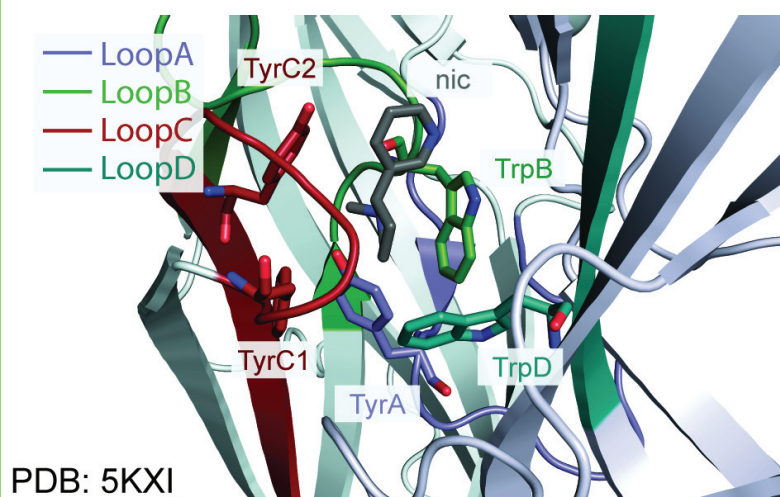


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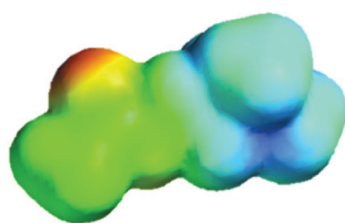
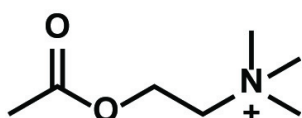
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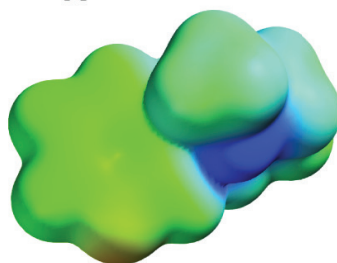
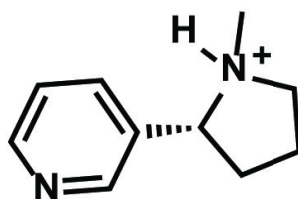


— cation- $\pi$  interaction  
— hydrogen bond

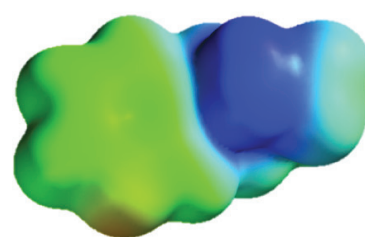
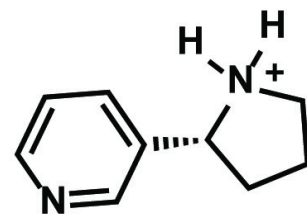
	Loop A	Loop B	Loop C	Loop D
$\alpha 1$	W R P D V V L <b>Y</b>	<b>W</b> T Y D G S V V	<b>Y</b> S C C P T P <b>Y</b> L D	<b>y</b> <b>W</b> I E M Q W
$\alpha 2$	W I P D I V L <b>Y</b>	<b>W</b> T Y D K A K I	<b>Y</b> D C C A - I <b>Y</b> P D	<b><math>\delta</math></b> <b>W</b> I D H A W
$\alpha 3$	W K P D I V L <b>Y</b>	<b>W</b> S Y D K A K I	<b>Y</b> N C C E - I <b>Y</b> P D	
$\alpha 4$	W R P D I V L <b>Y</b>	<b>W</b> T Y D K A K I	<b>Y</b> E C C A - I <b>Y</b> P D	<b><math>\beta 2</math></b> <b>W</b> L T Q E W
$\alpha 6$	W K P D I V L <b>Y</b>	<b>W</b> T Y D K A E I	<b>Y</b> N C C E - I <b>Y</b> T D	<b><math>\beta 4</math></b> <b>W</b> L K Q E W
$\alpha 7$	W K P D I L L <b>Y</b>	<b>W</b> S Y G G W S L	<b>Y</b> E C C K - P <b>Y</b> P D	<b><math>\alpha 7</math></b> <b>W</b> L Q M S W
$\alpha 9$	W R P D I V L <b>Y</b>	<b>W</b> T Y N G N Q V	<b>Y</b> G C C S - P <b>Y</b> P D	<b><math>\alpha 9</math></b> <b>W</b> I R Q I W
$\alpha 10$	W R P D I V L <b>Y</b>	<b>W</b> T H G G H Q L	<b>Y</b> G C C S - P <b>Y</b> P D	<b><math>\alpha 10</math></b> <b>W</b> I R Q E W



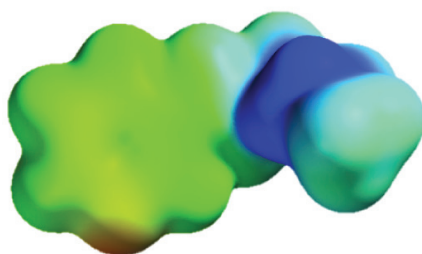
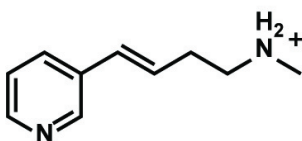
acetylcholine



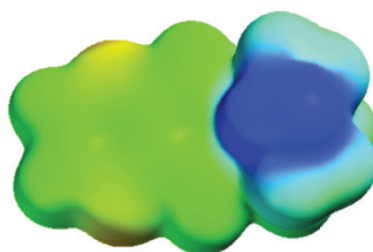
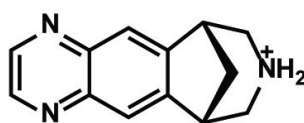
nicotine



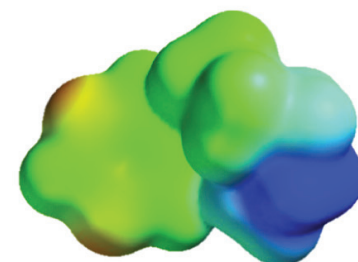
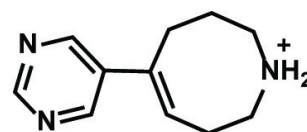
nornicotine



metanicotine

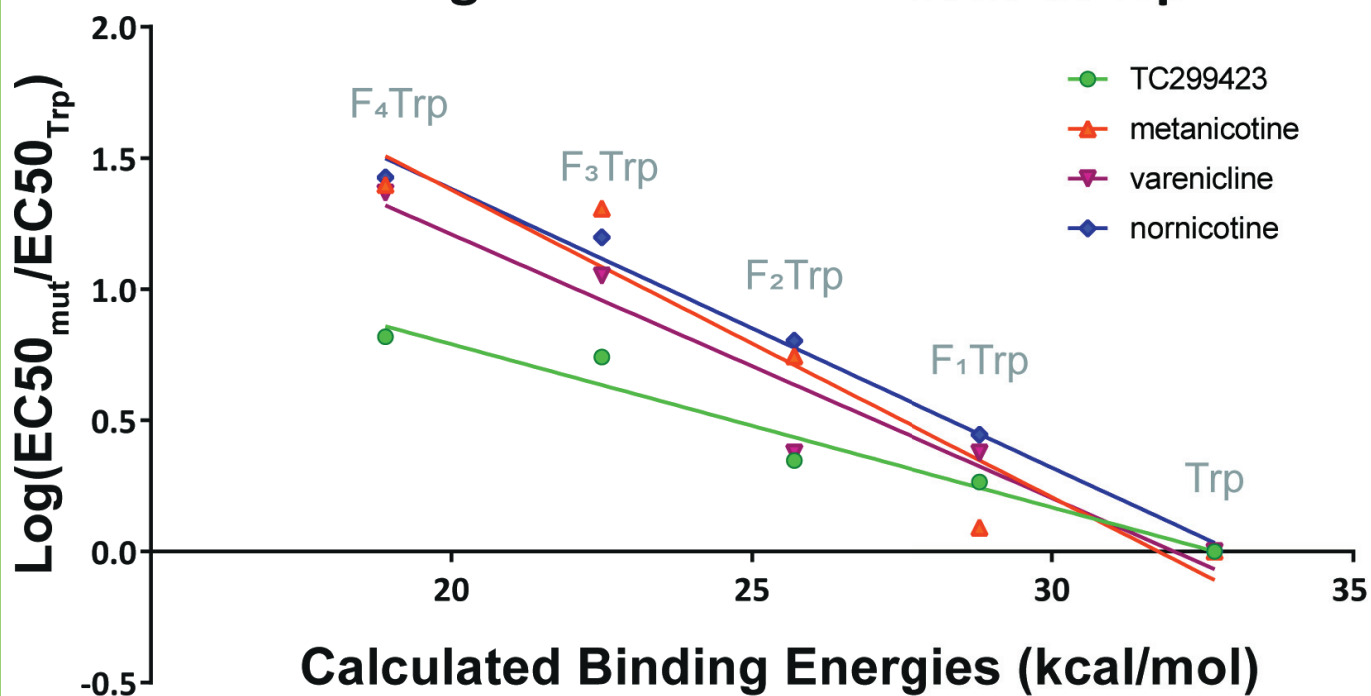


varenicline



TC299423

## Probing Cation- $\pi$ Interactions at TrpB



## Probing Cation- $\pi$ Interactions at TyrC2

