

# Addressing the taboo: Understanding why consumers purchase cannabis from illicit sources and how to incite motivation for change

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## Introduction

- In the early months and years following legalization, the regulated cannabis sector experienced slow growth. (Armstrong, 2021)
- These issues were slowly addressed, and by early 2022, it was estimated that the legal cannabis market comprised the majority of sales (Statistics Canada, 2022).
- Despite early market success, a large portion of cannabis consumers continue to acquire some or all of their cannabis through unregulated sources (i.e., dealers, friends, unregulated stores and websites). (Donnan, 2022)
- Purchasing cannabis through unregulated sources is a threat to public health and safety (BC Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, 2022), as cannabis products that have not been tested may not be appropriately labeled with cannabinoid strength, and could be contaminated with mold, pesticides, or other harmful chemicals.
- To encourage the transition to safer, regulated sources, it is pertinent to improve our understanding of consumer purchase decisions within the unregulated market, and to identify barriers that consumers experience within the legal market.

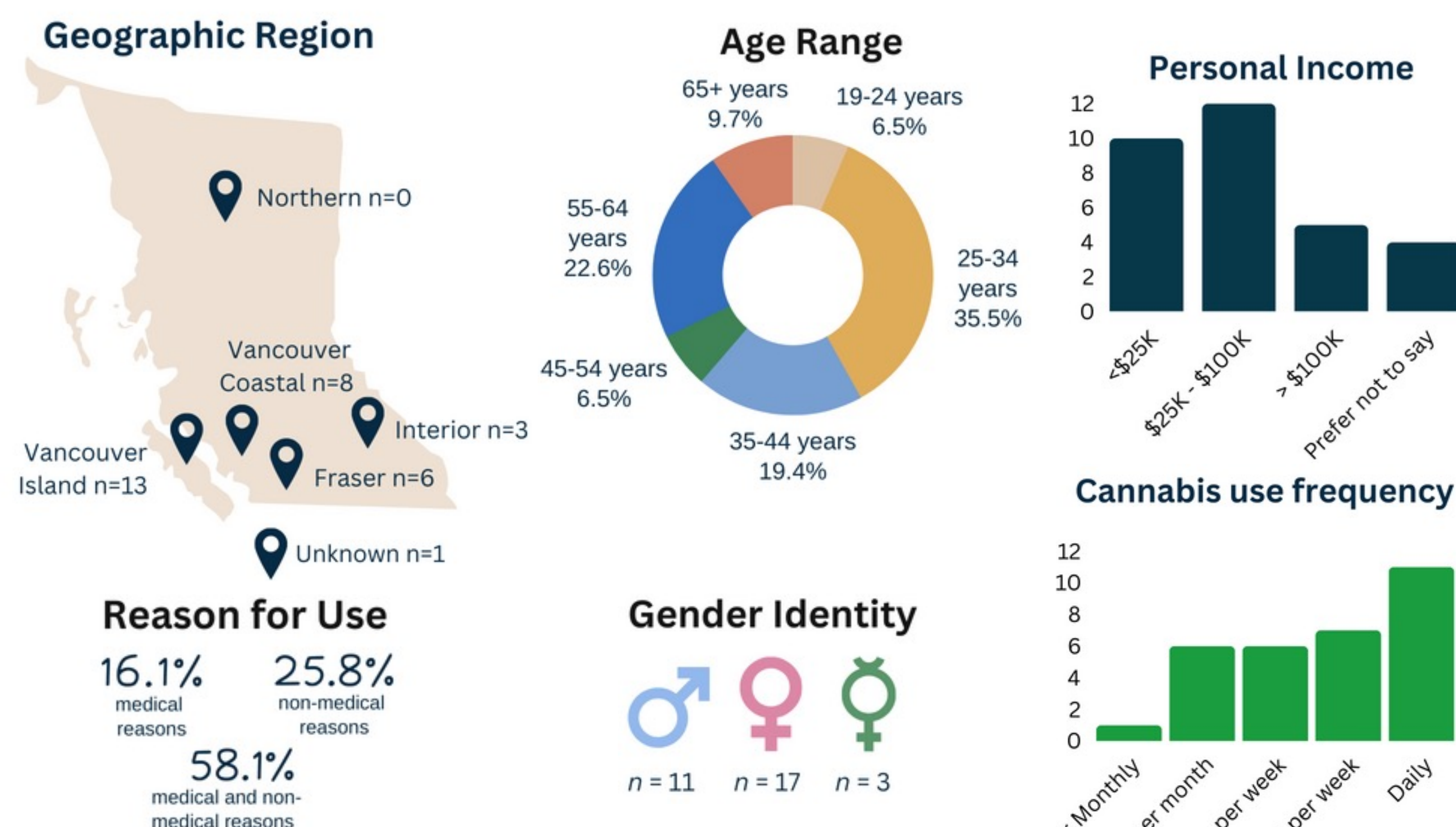
## Objectives

- To improve understanding of cannabis consumers illicit purchase decisions in British Columbia (BC), and to explore motivational factors for transitioning to the legal market. Specifically, to understand 1) the illicit cannabis purchasing process and mechanism for source decisions; 2) experiences with legal and illicit sources; and 3) potential factors and policy changes that could encourage purchasing from the legal market.

## Methods and Procedure

- The present study used a qualitative approach to explore cannabis purchase behaviours in BC.
- Efforts were dedicated to including diverse participant demographics, such as sex/gender, age, education, employment, and geographic region, as well as a range of cannabis purchase behaviours.
- Participants were recruited primarily through an online recruitment platform called ReachBC, as well as through popular online forums (e.g. Reddit).
- To encourage participation and compensate participants for their time, a \$25 Amazon gift card was offered.
- Two researchers conducted each interview, which was then transcribed verbatim.
- Transcription records were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach in NVivo.

## Sample



## References

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  4. BC Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General. (2022). *Chemical Analysis of Illicit Cannabis*. Government of British Columbia, Canada.
- Donnan, J., Shogan, O., Bishop, L., Swab, M., & Najafizada, M. (2022). Characteristics that influence purchase choice for cannabis products: A systematic review. *Journal of Cannabis Research*, 4(1), 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42238-022-00117-0>

## Results

### Themes

#### Product characteristics

Quality  
Packaging  
Price



#### Retailer Characteristics

Financial Accessibility  
Product Variety  
Convenience  
Access to Information  
Customer Service  
Inclusivity and Accessibility  
Physical Environment  
Digital Environment



#### Social Influences

Stigma  
Cultural Norms  
Peer Influence  
Online Influences



#### Personal Values

Supporting Local  
Environmentalism  
Trust and Loyalty  
Sentiments toward Government



#### Consequences of Legalization

Purchase Freedom  
Gap for Medical Consumers  
Cannabis Terminology

The flowers in the illicit market are a far better product than what I will get at the government stores. ID40

When you burn it, like the ash needs to be like, all white and you can just tell straight away and by taste too. And even when you break apart the nugs like it will sticky and then you just get it like resin all over your fingers right? And that's when you know it's like good stuff. ID30

I'd say quality wise, maybe the regulated market is a bit better in that sense... it's just like it's verified that it's more quality assured. ID120

I think one of the worst things about the legal weed is it has a ridiculous amount of packaging on it. Like you are totally killing the environment by getting a single joint with a paper, like a paper packaging paper, cardboard then it is in plastic, and then there's like a seal. So that's also something that's always bothered me. It's extremely wasteful. ID101

I can get a package of ten edibles from my unlicensed source for \$10 and from the licensed source, two doses are like the same price... So it's like not even comparable. ID73

I do know, like with the oil cartridges are like the for the weed pens and stuff, they are quite of lesser quality when you get them unregulated and they'll like leak sometimes or they're sticky and they're all their burn like they're just not as good. ID97

I tend to turn towards the grey market... for CBD just because like I do find that that's something that's like really overpriced and you know. ID103

They often have promo codes, which I love, like a good 20% off your entire order kind of thing. Or they have sales like on specific things or like buy one ounce and you'll get another whatever free. ID101

The price is higher. Make it worthwhile to me. If I could if I could get an analysis on the package because they won't let you see it. So you can't even have a window to look and be like, "Oh, yeah no that is a nice shaped bud"... And I think honestly, the gamble is too great for the cost. ID73

"it's usually just, you know, young people that got a job, right? They're not they haven't had any training or experience, yeah." ID105

Yeah, I've actually experienced like a 100% rate of having my concerns addressed by illegal companies... I've always found that their customer service is like above and beyond what you'll get in regular market at any store really ID86

It does feel disconnected. It feels like they're talking to like the this very small cohort of like the rich cannabis people... But it doesn't really seem targeted towards like just your everyday [consumer] ID86

I would say it would be nice to just have stuff on the shelf where you can go and pick it up and... say, I'll buy this rather than have to go to the wall and remember all the ridiculous names that things have and then go and tell them to the person. ID 107

If I'm trying to find an exclusively sativa or indica, I'm more likely to go unregulated again because there's just more variety. ID97

There's no healing or compassionate element to it. It's all really slick and gangster like and very trendy and appeals to somebody who is probably younger ID84

There are so many online stores. And I think it's kind of tricky to see which ones are legal and which ones aren't... So buying online is better if people have a barrier for going in, but it's not failsafe ID76

So there's no room at all to call anything that is medicinal, there's no room at all to grow a plant to a certain ratio of CBD to THC so that it's actually going to work on a specific issue or ailment. ID 84

I do find that the fancier the store is the more expensive the products are too ID103

That's one reason I don't like going to the [regulated location] is because everybody can see you... I would like some privacy and that's kind of why I am going down the [unregulated location] which was downright scary. It was more lucrative because I'm not going to run into anybody from town down there... But I just felt I was putting my life in jeopardy. ID 110

it's just part of normal, my normal social community life. If I'm getting cannabis from a regulated store, it's more like going to the gas station... So there's convenience and then there's quality of life: visiting friends and admiring their garden. ID74

At one point there was a Reddit post where somebody had a spreadsheet that they had updated all the different websites you could buy from. ID107

Being raised in B.C. has a huge influence on what I think of everything in general. But as far as being involved in the cannabis culture, you know, it's just all around you. Drug culture is all around me. ID 84

In B.C. we do sort of like the more established culture and stuff for growing cannabis and producing cannabis products. I do definitely have a preference for B.C. local at least. ID110

There's very little that is recyclable or compostable... I was making decisions based on companies that were doing things in sustainable ways... The packaging makes more sense to me and it aligns with my values. ID73

You hit the nail right on the head. I think. With the small store, it's about loyalty and the relationship that we built up with them, you know, and just their really broad, broad scope of knowledge. ID105

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A regulated source? Oh, God, I, I don't. I have kind of my own personal reasons because of how B.C. handled the they went legalizing weed... So I kind of don't support... there were places that had been allowed to help people with chronic pain, chronic illness for three decades that they shut down. ID94

The regulated market has sort of I feel like it's swung a little too far into catering to recreational users at the expense of medical users. And there are ways to make there be a better middle ground. ID 111

People like me can go out and purchase legally and be able to consume legally without having to worry about somebody knocking on the door... Now, would I be in trouble if I got busted with one of these [unregulated products]? So I don't worry about it. ID 40

I've [not] gotten anything that I really didn't like from the regulated market, I honestly just kind of wrote it off as "Okay, it's the government. They don't know what they're doing". ID111

The vape carts, I'm most likely to buy through the government sources. There's a little bit more of a risk there, especially in the vape carts that I'm not happy with. The edibles, I just buy locally because they're cheap. ID 40

We were always a big fan of the head band and cheese and stuff like that. But now with regulation, everything's got a different name and it's much harder to keep track of. Plus each grower has their own copyrights and licenses and whatever else making it even more confusing. ID119

## Discussion

- Findings from this study highlight many factors that influence purchase decisions among consumers who obtain cannabis through unregulated sources.
- Despite purchasing all or some of their cannabis from the unregulated market, most people were supportive of legalization and felt that legal cannabis is **safe, accessible, and of good quality**.
- However, these individuals feel that there are several barriers that prevent them from being loyal to the regulated market.
- Key barriers include **price, availability of promotions and discounts, access to information** (detailed product information, and medical information), **limitations on quantities they can purchase, product variety, and accessibility and inclusivity**.
- A minority of participants hold **strong political or personal views**, making it unlikely that they will switch to regulated cannabis even with changes within the industry.