Subcultures are not right and wrong. They are not correct and incorrect. They are not black and white. In a world where people strive to belong and seek comfort in identifying with others, subcultures prove to be a sensitive subject. What one person sees as a trend another may see as a way of life. So what exactly determines the validity of a subculture? Throughout this discussion, we will look at an example of a culture on the controversial line of subculture versus passing fad: Bohemianism. Through the in depth review of Bohemian society, we see how their way of life is influenced by their identification with the culture. Next we will take a look at what exactly a subculture is; We will evaluate at its components and determine how they all come together to create a home for those who identify within one. Lastly, we will dissect the Bohemian culture and decide whether it fits within the criteria of a subculture, or if it goes against what a subculture represents.

*Human beings are significant. Life is a Gift. The afterlife is one’s impact on the world.*

These three sentences are not just strong statements to Bohemians, but are principle beliefs in their lifestyle (“Bohemianism”). To understand where these beliefs come from, one must understand the history of Bohemians. This subculture is not a new “fad” or “phase”; Its origin dates back to the 1800’s. The bohemian culture rose from those people who lived in opposition to the lives of the wealthy bourgeoisie, giving them a homologous style that set them apart from the rest of society. The style from the 1800’s peasant class still lends itself to the culture today.
The poverty taken on by most of those in the class regulated their fashion sense in that they did not buy top of the line clothing, but rather made do with whatever they could get their hands on (while still allowing them to feel un-restricted and free). This fashion was very diverse, the commonalities being loose articles, mixed and not matched pieces, looks of unkemptness, and flowing pieces allowing optimal movement (“Boho…”). Figure 1 shows an example of a traditional bohemian, while figures 2 and 3 show how the fashion has been adapted in the modern day. All include the mixing of patterns, flowing clothing, and incorporates the “peasant” aspect of the culture (which is emphasized in the “peasant blouse” in figure 2).

These individuals had a passion for art, literature, and music, and pursued this passion regardless of the income it may or may not bring (Schwartz). Their “vagabond” or “gypsy” lifestyle away from their origins of Bohemia coined them the name Bohemian (“Boho…”). Carrying on the tradition of renouncing permanent residency, many Bohemians sought out communal living to satisfy their need for shelter. The renouncing of permanent shelter may sound crazy to the
average person, but for the eccentric, free spirited Bohemian, anywhere had the potential to be home. Their passion for self expression, exhibited through their hobbies, passions, and style, set them apart from everyday society. They demonstrate their cultural values through the rejection of strict moral principles (Schwartz). It remains understood that they feel constricted by these moral principles, and cannot be carefree spirits while worrying about following rules and guidelines. Embracing drug and alcohol use, the Bohemians sought to release their inner carefree spirit and optimize their creativity (“Bohemianism”). The culture created by these societal outcasts is still very much emulated and carried out in today’s world. One may picture a modern day bohemian as an emerging artist couch hopping from night to night, or an up and coming musician who lives his life on the road trying to support himself through gigs. Devoting one’s life to their passions, renouncing comfort to pursue said passions, appreciating the world around them, fostering a care for other individuals, and striving to make a lasting impact through one’s work in order to leave a legacy all encompass what true Bohemianism strives for.

Understanding the key elements of a subculture is the first step towards deciding what qualifies as one. Every true subculture should involve the following criteria: sense of belonging, homologous style, routine expressive rituals, and structure. The argument of subculture is not one for the weary. The case proves to be sensitive for many because one’s subculture not something to be taken lightly; It is a way of life. For those who feel defined by their subculture, the constant struggle to feel validated is taxing in a world where many overlook subcultures as “passing phases” and “hobbies”. In general terms, a subculture is a way one finds a sense of belonging and satisfaction through homologous behaviors with those who feel the same way. Yuniya Kawamura, an Associate Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York further describes the term through her studies of Japanese subcultures, stating:
Identity plays an essential role in the development of young men and women through every generation. Identity is what an adolescent insists on having, and he or she continually searches for it through music preferences, looks, sexuality, relationships, and so on… Subcultures, by their very existence, suggest that there are alternative forms of cultural expression that reflect a plurality in a group that seems, on a superficial examination, to dominate the members of a society.

Kawamura explicitly explains that one’s subculture deals directly with their sense of identity. Through commonalities in preferential subjects such as music and style, members of subcultures find satisfaction in associating themselves with like minded individuals. These groups often express their shared beliefs and habits through homologous styles and values. From sharing the same clothing style to performing the same rituals, no subculture acts without meaning. Because their actions do not always follow the norms of society, it is common for outsiders to look at a subculture’s behavior or style as “meaningless” or “attention seeking”. However, Dick Hebdige, a British media theorist and sociologist, counters these incorrect opinions through his writing in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. He offers a detailed analysis of the importance of style in subcultures through his study of the Goth subculture. Hebdige explains, “The objects chosen [clothing] were, either intrinsically or in their adapted forms, homologous with the focal concerns, activities, group structure and collective self image of the subculture. They were objects in which (the subcultural members) could see their central values held and reflected”.

Those within subcultures prescribe meaning in all that they do; If they did not, then they would be no different than those in the mainstream, meaninglessly following along with the trends of those around them. Hebdige continues, “In *Profane Culture*, Willis shows how, contrary to the popular myth which presents subcultures as lawless forms, the internal structure of any particular
subculture is characterized by an extreme orderliness; each part is organically related to other parts and it is through the fit between them that the subcultural member makes sense of the world.” Through his explanation of structure within subcultures, Hebdige makes clear that true subcultures are complex organizations with an order and uniformity that remain undisturbed in their sincerest forms. While there are many different viewpoints on what it takes to qualify as a subculture, it is important to also keep in mind what does not qualify as a subculture. This argument is brought to light by Micah Issit in his work Goths: A Guide to an American Subculture. Primarily focusing on the validity of the Goth subculture, he explains: “A subculture can be generally defined as any distinct cultural group within a larger culture. A counterculture, by contrast, is a type of subculture characterized by the development of ideologies, aesthetics, or other beliefs that are in direct opposition to the larger culture.” In simpler terms, a subculture stands for something while a counterculture stands against something. To an outsider, any culture different than one’s own is just... different. The argument of subculture versus counterculture is not always black and white when determining whether a group belongs in one category or another. However, with insight and knowledge about a specific subculture, one can use the above criteria – sense of belonging, homologous style, routine expressive rituals, and structure - to decide for themselves whether their subgroup is considered a true subculture, or simply a counterculture.

This first dispute that comes to mind when arguing the the validity of Bohemians as a subculture deals with the prospect of it being considered a counterculture. It was mentioned in the first paragraph that Bohemian culture began as they “lived in opposition to the lives of the wealthy bourgeoisie”. What began as an attempt to “undermine the bourgeoisie” grew into something much bigger than the initial intent (Shwartz). While it appears that the Bohemians
began as a counterculture, the adherence to the above criteria proves that their homologous style, routine expressive rituals, sense of belonging, and structure qualifies them as a legitimate subculture. The Bohemian subculture follows a specific style. As the style allows for much liberty in self expression, its key element is freedom. In more than one sense of the word, the Bohemian fashion lends its followers an air of no restrictions. From the room for individual interpretation of fashion to the literal non-restrictive clothing, the fashion sense has a meaning behind it that reminds Bohemians of their emancipation and sovereignty to create and be one with the world. With clothes they feel comfortable and free in, they are able to fully immerse themselves in their own passions creative process. This immersion leads to the discussion of the Bohemian’s routine expressive rituals. As mentioned previously, the Bohemians have their pillars: renouncing permanent residency, rejecting strict moral values, pursing passions at great lengths. These homologous actions all pursue the same overarching goal: ultimate freedom. While these manners would most likely bring discomfort and stress to the average mainstremener, they bring contentment to the Bohemian as they have nothing tying them down. Such behaviors demonstrate how the Bohemian mindset is different than those outside the culture. It shows that the comfort found in their cultural norms is in their structure… or lack thereof. To an outsider it may seem as if they have no unified structure. From the Bohemian point of view, however, the structure is obvious. They thrive on the absence of routine. They flourish in the lack of permanence. They prosper in the prospect of the unknown. Their structure is freedom. Being able to identify with others who crave this freedom gives Bohemians a sense of belonging. Their complete renunciation of control allows them to feel as though they are truly bonding with the world and those around them. Bohemianism gives its members a way to not only be themselves, but to maximize their human potential. Through exhibiting a homologous style, demonstrating
routine expressive rituals, expressing structure, and providing a sense of belonging, the Bohemian culture has grown from a measly counterculture to surpass all the qualifications of a subculture.

Bohemian culture is more than a trend. It is more than a fashion fad and it is more than phase in one’s live. Bohemian culture is a means of existence. The culture itself provides a home for those who want to feel free. Debate over its validity as a subculture calls for the defining of the term. To be a subculture, a group must have a distinct homologous style, demonstrate routine expressive rituals, express structure, and provide a sense of belonging. Because Bohemianism fulfills the four criteria, the distinctive way of living is in fact a subculture.
Works Cited


Kawamura, Yuniya. "Understanding Subcultural Studies: Dick Hebdige Revisited."

