

## Hookah and B&H Youth: Towards a Subculture?

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**Abstract:** The basic role of this paper is the representation of the new emerging subculture among the Bosnian youth population, and that is hookah bars. This paper presents some theoretical depictions of hookahs in popular culture, definitions of subcultural trends and the connections formulated between hookahs and subcultures, but this paper also relied on a descriptive research, a survey which analyzed the notion of whether or not hookah bars are the new subculture in Bosnia. The paper concludes that hookahs can be perceived as a phenomenon heading towards a subculture, as well as the idea that hookah bars remain a fashionable part of young people's lives in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Keywords:** hookah, subculture, B&H, auto-tune rapping

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## Introduction

Every day various lifestyle modifications, activities and trends change the manner in which we perceive our surroundings on the (sub)cultural level. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a new trend is emerging – the trend of smoking hookahs. Numerous club-owners adjust their cafes in order to better satisfy the trend of shisha smoking, whereas various club-goers can be noticed relaxing, listening to music, chatting and simply enjoying the water-pipe experience throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As hookah bars started gradually appearing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it became evident that shishas were not the only elements giving color to such environments. Rather, some standards of musical taste changed, the general special design of such cafes was adapted, as well as the overall trend of using hookahs began to grow. The oriental features of hookah bars slowly transformed when music is taken into account. From oriental music styles to auto-tune, folk, and pop music and thereby such alterations definitely impacted our understanding of the hookah lounge environment. However, it should be noted that the ‘ritual’ of using shishas was not merely reserved for the twenty-first century, because the motif of hookah had been present even earlier. For example, in Disney’s cartoon adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*, the Caterpillar is seen enjoying his shisha while speaking with the heroine, and also, in the Star Wars franchise, Jabba the Hutt is also depicted smoking a hookah filled with a greenish liquid<sup>2</sup>. Certain forums (“Smokers; A subculture”, “Among the Rich, Sexy, Chic, and Even Gangsta – Hookah is a Common Ritual”) discussed the idea of hookah turning to a newly-formed subcultural trend, or even a new ritual.

Therefore, the basic aim of this paper is to examine the idea of hookah smoking as a new subcultural trend in Bosnia and Herzegovina visible in the lives of many (young) people. The notion of using shishas is also closely followed by a keen interest in a new musical taste marked by the previously-mentioned auto-tune rapping, but also by a change in fashion and clothing among hookah smokers. The role of this paper will be to observe whether such popular trends hold any merit for the subcultural sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Prior to discussing the hookah subculture in B&H, it is important to make a basic outline of the concept ‘subculture’, which is the topic of the next section.

<sup>2</sup> For more pieces of information, see Disney’s adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* from 1951, and Lucas’s motion picture “Star Wars Episode 6”.

## Literature Overview

The term ‘subculture’ is usually applied to smaller groups of people who share the same lifestyle, mainly musical and sartorial, which is at great odds with the mainstream society and its culture. As suggested by Ken Gelder (2005), although the term has risen to prominence in the 1940s, the concept of subculture is not neoteric if one thinks of various movements throughout history in music and literature associated with particular behavioral pattern and clothing style (pp. 1-3). The subcultural theory is traced to the early 1920s and the Chicago School which examined immigrant and ethnic groups as well as the working class with the aim of ascertaining the liability of the groups to crime. The Chicago School also established overviews of the groups’ “non-normative, (i.e., *deviant*) collective behavior”. For example, African-Americans and Italians were seen as strike-breaker subculture that argued for their rights in a non-standardized way. It can be inferred that the understanding of subculture is related to ethnic background, behavioral patterns, and class (Williams, 2011, n.p.). In the same vein, Milton M. Gordon described subculture in 1946 as a:

subdivision of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as class status, ethnic background, regional and rural or urban residence, and religious affiliation, but *forming in their combination a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participating individual.* (Gelder, 2005, Chapter 3, p. 46)

The definition above shows that subculture formation is influenced by a range of factors including ethnic, social, and religious ones. Studies conducted by scholars from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), founded in 1964, at the University of Birmingham argued that youth subcultures emerged as reactions to standardized mass culture (Gelder, 2005, p. 67). In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) Dick Hebdige analyzes British post-war youth subcultures (beats, teddy boys, mods, skinheads, and punks) in the light of CCCS’s arguments as subcultures that emerged to subvert parental and institutional control evident in the deviant behavior that some of the groups displayed. Nevertheless, the post-subcultural thought maintains that subcultures need not be deviant and need not share the same social class or ethnic belonging which puts forward that one’s background does not influence their subcultural identity. Hebdige scrutinizes the above-mentioned groups’ mannerisms, argot, sartorial and musical tastes with their influence on mass consumption and industry

(pp. 94-96), and other aspects of the subcultures' collective identity.

It follows that subculture is a complex concept with various taxonomies and their subtaxonomies. For example, John Irwin proposed that a subculture can be classified as: a social world, an explicit lifestyle, and an action system (Gelder, 2005, pp. 73-77). The complexity of the definition is also reflected in its prefix 'sub' which summarizes the above-mentioned interpretations of subculture. Gordon explains that 'sub' refers to a subdivision of a culture (46), while Sarah Thornton sees 'sub' as denotative of a subterranean or subaltern culture in comparison to the mainstream culture. Furthermore, Hebdige postulates the problematic of defining culture itself (1979, pp. 5-19), showing the difficulty in arriving at a precise definition of subculture due to the fluidity of 'culture'. The aim of the present research is not to challenge any of the definitions above or to take rigid stances. The paper aims to investigate the hookah goers in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a subculture in accordance with the essence of the literature overview. The methodology section that follows will provide a more in-depth presentation of the research conducted.

### Methodology

In order to identify hookah as a subculture among Bosnians and Herzegovinians, we carried out an online research via Google Forms. We opted for a descriptive research and its methods to avoid any bias in analyzing hookah as a subculture. According to Stephen Tripodi and Kimberly Bender, descriptive research is used to describe "characteristics of a sample and relationships between phenomena, situations, and events" (Thyer, 2010, p. 120), especially local social phenomena that are new by answering the questions "who, what, when, where, how" (p.120). Tripodi and Bender further propose that descriptive research is rooted in ethnography yet does not aim at describing causal relationships of a phenomenon observed (Thyer, 2010, p. 120). This correlates favourably with our research since our aim is not to reach conclusions on neither the impact of hookah subculture nor the repercussions of consuming hookah but to investigate hookah as a subculture in B&H with its main traits. As explained by Tripodi and Bender, there is a number of descriptive research methods, one of them being questionnaire surveys (Thyer, 2010, p. 209) with random sampling (Thyer, 2010, p. 207).

In line with Tripodi and Bender's explanation, our research was conducted online via Google Forms and included a total of a hundred random and anonymous respondents, all hookah consumers and goers, between the ages of 18-40 from Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Srpska, and Brčko District. The respondents did not receive any kind of payment for completing the questionnaire, thus more honest and trustworthy answers were expected. The questionnaire was conducted in B/C/S for the sake of clarity. All the statements were translated into English upon the completion and closing of the questionnaire. The total number of questionnaire items is eighteen. However, the items were grouped for easier analysis of the respondents' affiliation with the hookah subculture and the existence of the hookah subculture in B&H in general.

The questionnaire was tailored to consist of five introductory or placement questions related to the respondents' age, gender, residence, income, and hookah visiting frequency, which would determine whether subculture belonging depends on such determinants. The rest of the questionnaire included three groups of statements, each group consisting of four statements. The groups were organized according to the subcultural traits outlined in Literature Overview: sartorial and music tastes, and identity or subculture belonging, as presented in the table below.

<p><b>1. Style of Dress</b></p>	<p>1.1. I would describe my fashion style as: a) casual, b) elegant, c) sport-like, d) boho, e) other</p> <p>1.2. I connect hookah bars with a certain fashion style.</p> <p>1.3. I most frequently dress in the manner of the music which I listen to.</p> <p>1.4. On the streets I can easily recognize if someone is visiting hookah bars on the basis of their fashion style.</p>
<p><b>1. Music</b></p>	<p>2. 1. I more easily and quickly connect with people who listen to the same music type as myself.</p> <p>2. 2. When it comes to music, I mostly listen to: a) pop, b) foreign (all genres), c) folk, d) autotune rap (Jala, Buba, Rasta, Senidah, etc.), e) other</p> <p>2. 3. The type of music I usually listen to is the same music you can hear in hookah bars.</p> <p>2. 4. I connect hookah bars with the type of music which can be heard inside of them.</p>
<p><b>3. Identity &amp; Belonging</b></p>	<p>3.1. I am more relaxed in hookah bars than in other cafes/bars.</p> <p>3. 2. I believe that people who visit shisha bars are often stigmatized as unwanted in other types of bars.</p> <p>3. 3. I mostly hang out with people who visit hookah bars.</p> <p>3. 4. I consider hookah an integral part of my life.</p>

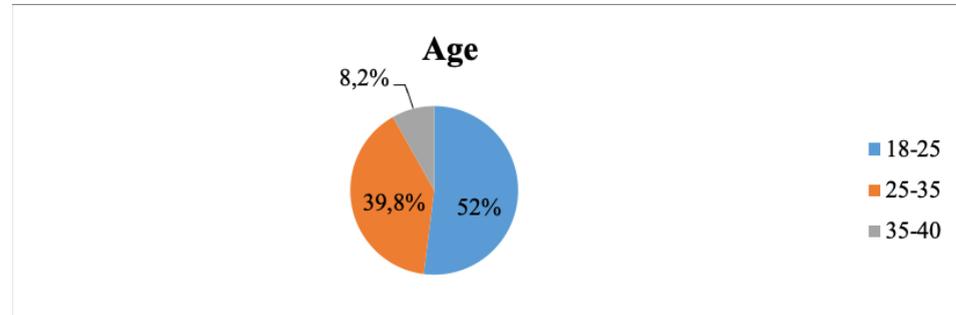
**Table III. 1.** Groups and items used in the questionnaire.

The assessment and analysis of the statements was a combination of descriptive research and Likert's scale. This unidimensional scale of measurement usually consists of a set of items, i.e. statements, to which the respondents express their (dis)agreement on a five-point continuum: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree. We used this continuum for measuring the respondents' attitudes to their potential hookah subcultural identity and belonging. Furthermore, it was important to measure how often our respondents visit hookah bars to determine whether the frequency of visits influences the membership in hookah subculture or not. For the aforementioned purpose, we also used Likert's five-point frequency scale: very often, often, occasionally, rarely, and very rarely. In addition, as visible from Table 1, we have used single-answer multiple choice, also with a five-continuum range, for one statement pertaining to style of dress and two pertaining to music tastes. The aforementioned was done in order to avoid any imposition and stereotyping on our part. The next section of the paper shows that the questionnaire results are organized into four subsections mentioned earlier in this section: Placement, Style of Dress, Music, and Identity & Belonging.

The restricted use of individual responses could account for certain inconsistencies appearing within the survey; however, such restrictions do not impede the research from reaching its needed goal. Individual opinions, subjective perspectives could provide a better overview concerning the relationship which may be formulated between subcultures and industries. Such detailed replies could explain the reasons why the subculture of hookahs could be perceived as an industry, but they could additionally give more insight into the connection between hookah bars, clothing styles, music preferences, all of which may be adapted into a new, rising hookah industry. Additionally, any detailed individual elaborations provided by the non-hookah goers could also explain why certain individuals want to dissociate themselves from the new trend, or why in general they refuse to be perceived as members of the new subculture, regardless of their age, sex or residence in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

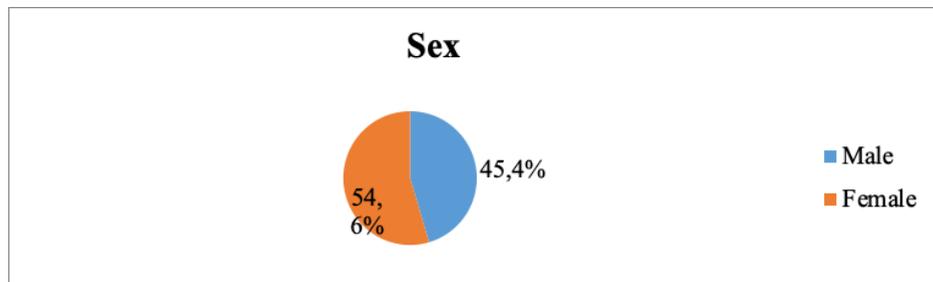
**Discussion of the Results**

**IV.1. Placement**



**Table IV. 1. 1.**

The first placement question of our research focused on the age group of our respondents. Out of 100 respondents, 52% belong to the age group between 18 and 25 years, 39.8% belong to the age group of 25-35, while 8.2% fall in the age group of 35-40. The results in this case created a positive correlation between the B&H youth and the subcultural notions regarding hookahs. Although the 8.2 % show that hookah subculture may include individuals outside the “youth” scale, it is important to note that the subcultural context in this paper is focused predominantly on the Bosnian youth.



**Table IV. 1. 2.**

The second question focused on the gender of the participants, and the results obtained showed that 54.6% of the participants were women, while 45.4% were men, implying that there is not much difference in gender when it comes to membership in the B&H hookah subcultural scene.

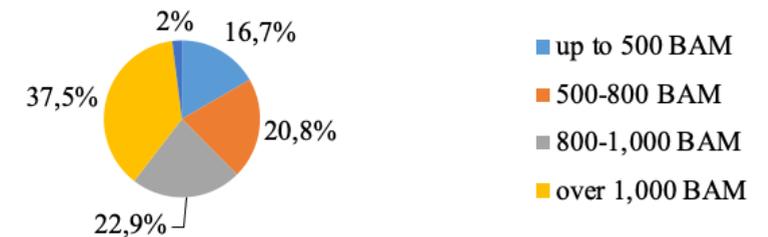
**Residence**



**Table IV. 1. 3.**

The third question determined the place of residence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the gathered results showed that the majority of the examinees come from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 87.9%, while 7.1% come from the Republic of Srpska and 5.1% come from Brčko District. Although the percentage scale in this case is lower for both the Republic of Srpska and Brčko District, our research substantiates the idea that hookahs are present in all parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, therefore the presence of the hookah subculture is evident at the level of the entire country.

**Monthly Income**



**Table IV. 1. 5.**

The next question of the survey focused on the monthly revenue of our examinees. 37.5% participants said they have monthly revenues higher than 1,000 BAM, 22.9% have monthly income on the scale between 800 and 1,000 BAM, 20.8% between 500 and 800 BAM, 16.7% respondents to 500 BAM, while 2% named other amounts. Although the gap between the rich and the poor is wide, the overall B&H community is not clearly defined and grouped into various social strata, which suggests that the hookah subculture is not solely formed within the working-class community as was the

case with most subculture around the world. Such results corroborate the post-subcultural thought mentioned in Literature Overview which argues that members of contemporary subcultures need not share the same racial, ethnic, and class affiliation. Therefore, based on the results above, it can be concluded that hookah subculture in B&H comprises different social echelons.

**Hookah visit/consumption frequency**



**Table IV. 1. 6.**

In response to hookah visit/consummation frequency question, 22.2% of those surveyed answered they do it very often, 24.2% often, 35.4% do so occasionally, while 8.1% and 10.1% said they go there/consume hookah rarely and very rarely. The overall response to this question points to a positive rise in hookah’s popularity due to the fact that the majority of the respondents said that they visit hookah bars. Furthermore, it indicates that one does not necessarily have to visit hookah bars very often in order to belong to a particular subcultural group or trend, but rather occasional visits and flexible timing may also situate a person within a subcultural sphere.

**IV.2. Style of Dress**

**I would describe my style as**



**Table IV.2.1.**

Table IV. 2. 1. shows that the majority of 38.1% said they dress casually, 32% elegantly and 22.7% sport-like, while other 3.1% opted for different styles, such as sporty elegant style. The results in this case present the idea that the clientele of hookah bars dress mostly casually, however people who enjoy going to hookah bars also prefer elegant or sport-like attires. Hence, the hookah subculture then may have several taxonomies or sub-subcultures in terms of clothing styles, which refutes our argument that sport-like attires are the usual types of fashion recognizable inside hookah bars and hookah subculture in B&H.

**I connect hookah bars with a certain fashion style.**



**Table IV. 2. 2.**

The statement in the table above aimed at finding the connection between hookah bars and a particular style of fashion. 16.2% of those questioned said that they completely agree, 33.3% said they agree with the statement, 29.3% said that they do not agree, 10.1% said they completely disagree, while 11.1% were undecided. The results are ambiguous since, according to those who agreed with the statement, a particular correlation can be

formed between hookah bars and fashion designs. This further substantiates the idea that the hookah subculture, like other types of subcultures, can be expressed through fashion and be recognizable. On the other hand, the percentage of those who disagreed confirms the results of Table IV.2.1. and the conclusion that hookah subculture has sub-subcultures and cannot be recognized solely by sport-like fashion.

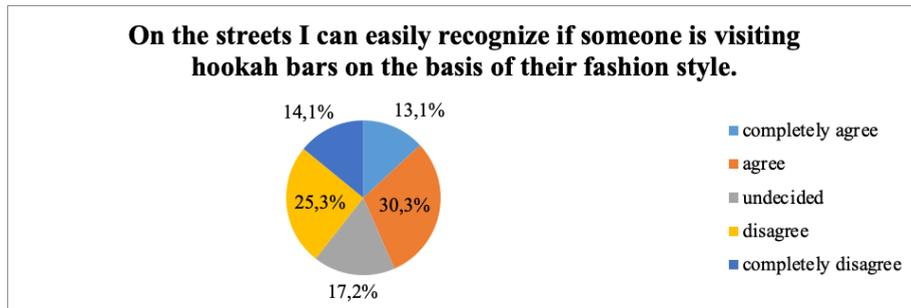


Table IV. 2. 3.

The statement above shows that 13.1% of the respondents completely agree, 30.3% agree, 25.3% disagree, 14.1% disagree completely, while 17.2% were undecided. Results of this item are inconsistent with the results obtained in Table IV. 2. 2. where the majority of subjects expressed their disagreement with hookah bars being associated with a particular style. This inconsistency exemplifies some drawbacks of this type of a survey; however, such responses indicate that certain members of the hookah subculture may not be easily recognizable outside hookah bars.

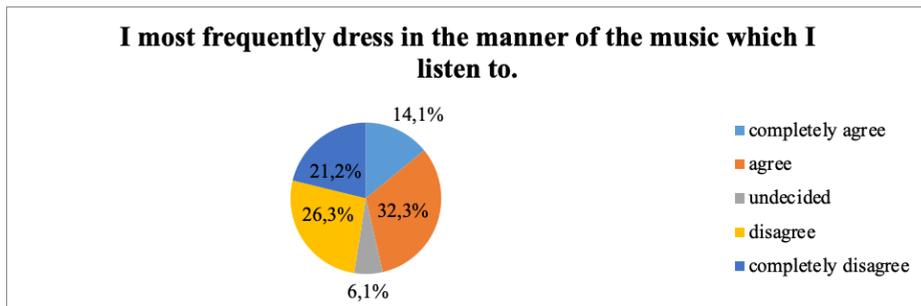


Table IV. 2. 4.

The item above relates to the previous item in the questionnaire and in this part, 32.3% replied that they agree, 26.3% that they disagree, 21.2% that they completely disagree, 14.1% that they completely agree and 6.1% were undecided. This indicates that sometimes, in everyday practice, it may be very difficult to discern which person prefers/listens to a particular music style on the basis of their clothing.

IV. 3. Music

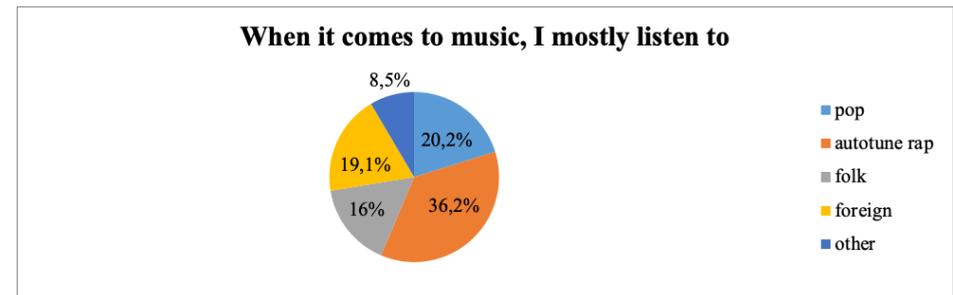


Table IV. 3. 1.

The majority expressed their liking for the auto-tune music trends, 20.2% for pop music, 19.1% for music outside the Bosnian language sphere, 16% for folk music, and the rest prefer either all of the mentioned or some other music genre. There is a satisfactory agreement with the idea of how music contributes to hookah bars' popularity since this survey indicates a clear-cut bound between the young listeners of auto-tune (Buba, Jala, etc.) in Bosnia and local bars which serve shishas. Evidently, certain subcultural trends such as hookah are entwined with fashion and music tastes which mark their popularity in the current day and age. The previously mentioned connection is endorsed with the results of the next item.

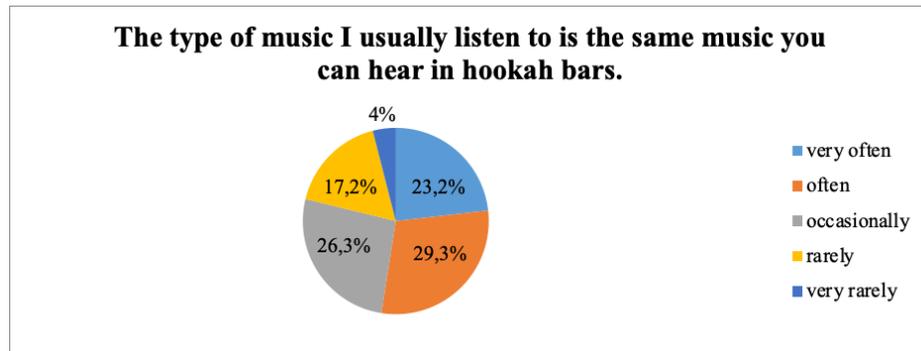


Table. IV. 3. 2.

29.3% participants said that music is often the same, 23.2% said very often, 26.3% said occasionally, 17.2% said rarely, 4% said very rarely. Taking into consideration the popularity of auto-tune rapping, the connection between hookah bars and the rising interest in auto-tune becomes obvious. Furthermore, if results from Table IV. 3. 1. are taken into consideration, it follows that the type of music hookah goers listen to in private life is not necessarily the same as the one played in hookah bars. Nevertheless, this does not jeopardize their membership in the hookah subculture.

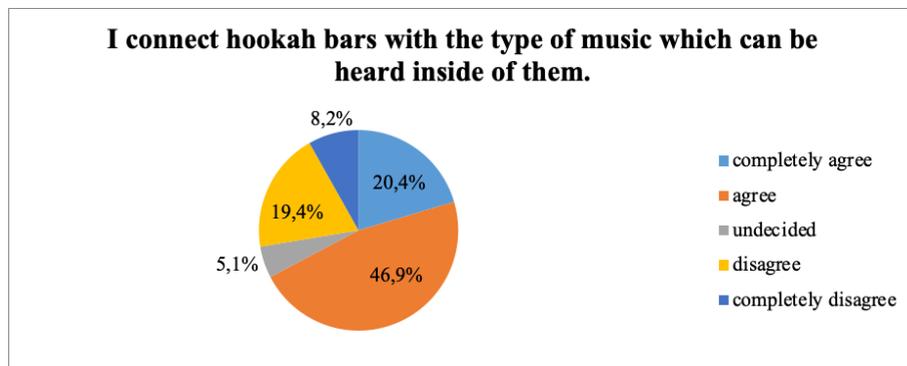


Table. IV. 3. 3.

A bit more than two-thirds of the participants expressed their agreement (67.3%), while 19.4% and 8.2% expressed their disagreement and complete

disagreement, while 5.1% remained undecided. Such results offer compelling evidence that music, for example auto-tune, is tied closely with shisha bars and that hookah subculture does have recognizable music tastes.

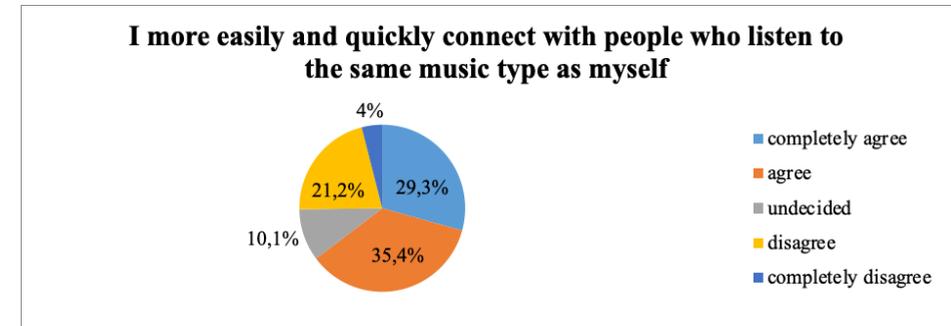


Table IV. 3. 4.

When asked about bonding along the lines of music tastes, the majority of 35.4% said that they agree about bonding more easily with people who listen to the same music type, 29.3% completely agree, 21.2% disagree, 10.1% undecided, while very few participants 4% disagree completely. These results support the notion that people who enjoy certain types of music styles easily connect with others of the same view, and this moreover indicates that certain subcultural groups more freely ‘flock together’ if their taste in music is similar/identical. The most striking resemblance is the tripartite link which exists between the hookah subculture, fashion and musical tastes which formulate a rising popularity between the Bosnian youth and contemporary trends.

IV. 4. Identity & Belonging

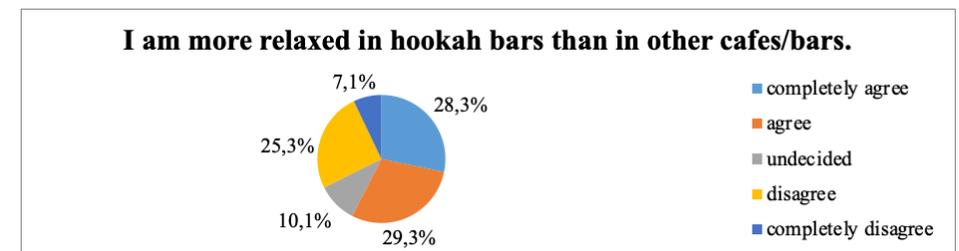


Table IV. 4. 1.

As visible from the chart above, the response rate to the statement above is the following: 29.3% said that they agree, 28.3% replied that they completely agree, 25.3% disagree, 10.1% are undecided and 7.1% completely disagree. As a very subjective statement, this result further explains that the definite majority of respondents opted for the positive replies in which they praise shisha bars as environments where they feel more at ease.

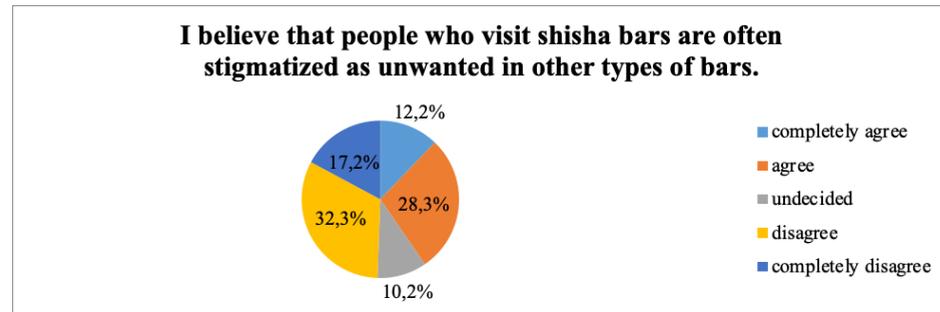


Table IV. 4. 2.

The responses to the statement indicated that 32.3% of the respondents disagree with the statement, 28.3% agree, 17.2% completely disagree, 12.1% completely agree, while 10.1% are undecided. Although the results differ only slightly, it should be noted that the majority still disagree with this statement and that persons frequenting hookah bars are not stigmatised as was the case with some subculture over the world, e.g. teddy boys in UK. It should be taken into consideration that the results numerically do not differ vividly.

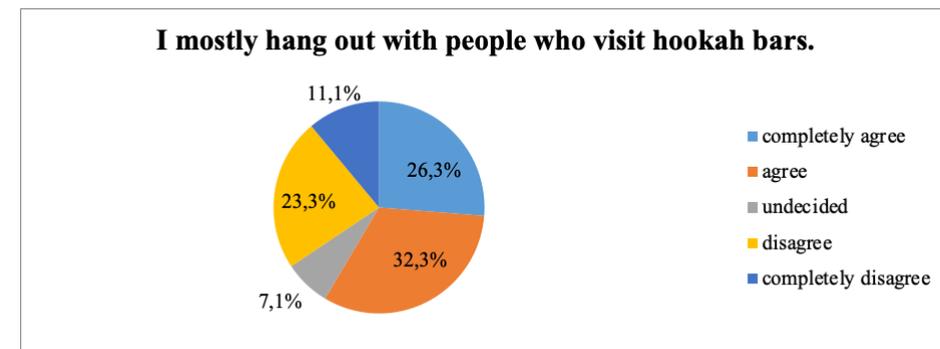


Table IV. 4. 3.

In response to the statement above, 32.3% said that they agree, 26.3% that they completely agree, 23.2% that they disagree, 11.1% that they completely disagree, 7.1% were left undecided. This perpetuates an important element because the majority of the answers indicate that the examinees meet with people who are in one way or another clients of various hookah bars, further establishing the notion of the popularity among the Bosnian youth, but also of the identity, a collective identity especially.

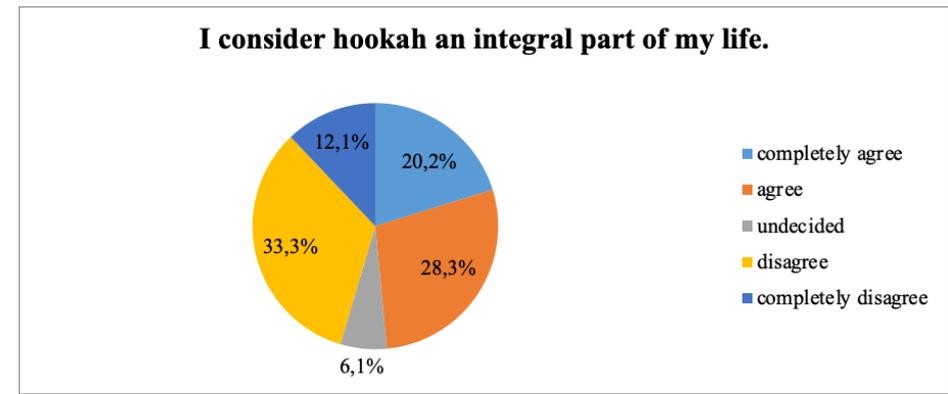


Table IV. 4. 4.

The survey question from Table IV. 4. 4. presented an interesting contrast where 33.3% said they disagree, 28.3% agree, 20.2% agree completely, 12.1% disagree completely and 6.1% were undecided. The ratio between the two opposing views is nearly identical which indicates that smoking hookahs or going to hookah bars can, but may not necessarily, be the integral part of the mainly young people’s subculture in B&H. Such results indicate that the examinees are not necessarily ‘immersed’ within the hookah subcultural trend utterly, albeit the subcultural trend remains highly prominent on a general scale.

**Conclusion**

This paper presented the idea of a new rising subcultural trend realized in the form of hookahs. It should be noted that particular shortcomings always exist in descriptive researches. In this regard, descriptive research was not suitable for finding out the manner in which hookahs are able to

influence industry or rather if hookah bars are the new, emerging, industry. Nonetheless, in our paper we discovered the following: the age group, sex, residence, and monthly income of our participants, but also the style of dressing which correlates to the hookah subculture, musical preferences and the issue of identity-belonging within the subcultural context. We discovered that sub-subcultural elements realized through dressing and music can also be integrated within the overall sphere of the hookah subculture. In other words, the hookah subculture consists of additional sub-subcultural taxonomies, such as elegant, casual and sport-like attires, as well as auto-tune rapping songs. This paper showed that people who visit hookah bars or generally associate themselves with the hookah subculture are not stigmatized or unwanted in other types of locales, even though certain members of any subculture may be perceived thus by a larger community. Further research could be developed in terms of hookah as a new subculture, especially in regards to how subcultures affect industry as a whole. In order to explore relations between industry and hookah subculture, interviewing hookah-goers could also be useful because such a research would grant better insight into the subjective ideas of the hookah clientele. Moreover, even non-hookah goers could be interviewed in order to gather more diverse opinions in regards to one topic. Individual responses could be analyzed in order to see if there are any logical fallacies and/or inconsistencies when a particular issue is presented from various sides and viewpoints. By granting more space for the examinees to openly express and describe their opinions in detail, future research could find logical inconsistencies and resolve any setbacks in discovering what a subculture is or is not, within the perception of wider audience. The survey was done on the basis of male-female sex division, but future surveys of similar type may encompass more diverse responses in terms of the examinees' sex. This paper showed that even though hookah may be a new rising trend, it is not exclusive or reserved solely for one gender group, but rather that it remains open for various members. Although we discovered that not all members of the hookah bar clientele perceive themselves as fully immersed into the hookah subculture, it is safe to conclude that hookah can be observed as a new subcultural trend, encompassing different sub-subcultural elements, or at least as a rising subculture in the twenty-first century Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, as the very title implies, hookah can be classified as a phenomenon heading towards a new, prominent subcultural trend, albeit there will always be some inconsistencies as explored in the previous segments of this paper. Hookahs may or may not be an exclusive part of the

Bosnian youth and their lifestyle; however they still remain a fashionable part of the community.

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