

I CAN DANCE WITH YOU HONEY: DISCO, SEXUALITY AND RACE IN THE CREATION
OF ABBA-FEVER



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Abstract

This Master's thesis focuses on the Swedish popular music group ABBA in the context of the 1970s disco culture of the United States. By examining how ABBA were influenced by other cultures, the study intends to assess whether the group are engaging in cultural appropriation. The study also examines ABBA's representations of sexuality and gender performance, focusing on how the group seemingly are 'queer', although the members are cisgender and heterosexual. The study analyses ABBA from three viewpoints: disco culture, sexuality and gender, and race. Critical race theory, Richard Dyer's theory on Whiteness and queer theory are used as tools for analysis. Cultural materialism is used as the overall theoretical frame from which the study examines disco as a cultural phenomenon. The analysis focuses on four of ABBA's songs released in the 1970s: *Voulez-Vous*, *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)*, *Does Your Mother Know* and *Summer Night City*, as well as the videos released to accompany them.

The study is divided into six chapters. First, the thesis introduces the cultural context and key concepts of the study, followed by a chapter introducing the theory and methodology utilised in the analysis. Next, it outlines the history of disco music to situate ABBA within the era. Chapters four and five examine ABBA in relation to minorities who were strongly associated with disco: the LGBTQ community and Black communities in both the United States and Europe. The final chapter discusses the implications and conclusions of the study.

The implications of the study are that ABBA engage in cultural appropriation, and more specifically, content appropriation, by using features of African American cultures to their advantage. This is evident in how the group used key features of disco music, which stemmed from traditional African music styles, in their songs. Moreover, the group takes advantage of queer communities by participating in disco culture, which was inherently Black and queer, and pandering to these communities, while being heterosexual and cisgender. ABBA, among other similar acts, participated in the white-washing, commercialising and de-queering of disco as a culture and genre of music.

Tiivistelmä

Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma tarkastelee Yhdysvaltojen 1970-luvun diskokulttuurin vaikutusta ruotsalaisen ABBA:n esiintymiseen, tuotantoon ja ulosantiin. Tutkielma tarkastelee ABBAa kolmen teeman kautta, jotka ovat: 1. diskokulttuuri, 2. seksuaalisuus ja sukupuoli, sekä 3. rotu. Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, voiko ABBA:n tuotantoa pitää kulttuurisena omimisenä. Tähän pyritään tutkimalla, miten ABBA omaksui musikaalisia ja ulkoasuun liittyviä vaikutteita muista

kulttuureista. Tutkielma tarkastelee myös, miten ABBA ilmentää seksuaalisuutta ja sukupuolta. Erityistarkastelun kohteena on, miten ABBA välittää normeista poikkeavaa seksuaalisuuskuva, vaikka jäsenet itse ovat heteroseksuaaleja ja cis-sukupuolisia. Analyysissä keskitytään neljään ABBA:n 1970-luvulla julkaisemaan kappaleeseen: *Voulez-Vous*, *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)*, *Does Your Mother Know* sekä *Summer Night City*. Analyysissä on käytetty apuna queer-teoriaa, kriittistä rotuteoriaa sekä Richard Dyerin teoriaa valkoisuudesta. Tutkielman yleisvaltainen viiteteoria on kulttuurimaterialismi, jonka näkökulmasta diskokulttuuria tarkastellaan kulttuurisena ilmiönä.

Tutkielma on jaettu kuuteen kappaleeseen, joista jokainen keskittyy yhteen teemaan. Kukin kappale esittelee teeman historiallisen taustan, minkä jälkeen teemaa analysoidaan käyttäen sille määriteltyä teoriaa. Ensimmäinen kappale asettaa tutkielman kontekstin, ja esittelee keskeiset käsitteet ja teorit. Toinen kappale käsittelee teorioita yksityiskohtaisemmin. Kolmannessa kappaleessa tarkastellaan diskokulttuuria, jotta voitaisiin sijoittaa ABBA aikakauden kontekstiin. Seuraavat kappaleet käsittelevät ABBAa suhteessa diskokulttuuriin liitettyihin vähemmistöryhmiin, joita ovat seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistö sekä Yhdysvaltojen ja Euroopan mustien yhteisöt. Viimeinen kappale käsittelee tutkielman tuloksia ja päätelmiä.

Tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, että ABBA on osallistunut diskokulttuurin juuriltaan irrottamiseen ja sen erottamiseen alkuperäisistä konnotaatioista queer-kulttuurin ja afroamerikkalaisen kulttuurin parissa. Tulokset osoittavat myös, että ABBA osallistuu kulttuuriseen omimiseen ja erityisesti sisällön omimiseen, käyttämällä hyväkseen diskomusiikin piirteitä, jotka pohjautuvat afrikkalaisiin musiikkityyleihin. ABBA käyttää hyödykseen myös queer-kulttuuria vetoamalla sen jäseniin diskokulttuuriin kautta, vaikka ABBA:n jäsenet itse ovat heteroseksuaaleja cis-sukupuolisia. ABBA ja muut tuon ajan valkoiset, heteronormatiiviset diskoartistit osallistuivat diskokulttuurin ja -musiikin kaupallistamiseen, queer-juurien hävittämiseen sekä valkopesuun.

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Chapter 1: *Masters of the Scene...* Introduction

In recent years, trends from the 1970s have been recirculating in mainstream fashion, bringing along with it bell-bottom trousers, voluminous hair styles and platform shoes. In addition to the clothes, 1970s popular music has become popular once again, and groups like ABBA have gained a new generation of fans who have caught the disco fever. Moreover, modern artists, such as Lady Gaga and Dua Lipa, have tried their hand at disco music. However, disco culture had a long history behind it before groups like ABBA and these modern artists started to participate in the genre and transformed it into something else entirely.

Disco music was a characteristic feature of the 1970s, especially in New York City where it originally emerged. The term 'disco' is shortened from the word 'discotheque', which is a neology of the French words 'disque' (disc) and 'bibliothèque' (library) ("Discotheque", merriam-webster). The word 'discotheque' can be translated as 'disc-library'. In the 1970s disco as a genre was seen as an antidote, or a protest, against rock and grunge music and the lifestyle around them. During the 1970s, rock and disco music were pitted against each other (Per F. Broman 56; Gillian Frank). They were considered opposites: according to Frank, disco was associated with homosexuality, while rock was associated with heterosexuality (279). This juxtaposition eventually led to the shunning of disco music and the culture around it. The most famous demonstration and example of this is the event known as the Disco Demolition Night which took place at a baseball game on July 12, 1979, in Chicago. The main point of the event was to physically destroy disco records to demonstrate how much the participants detested disco culture. The event was organised by Steve Dahl, a rock radio DJ. He employed a homophobic rhetoric in his radio show, verbally attacking fans of disco, and making fun of the perceived queerness of the genre (Frank; Tim Lawrence, "Disco" 131). The Disco Demolition Night took place almost exactly 10 years after the Stonewall Riots began. This is an interesting parallel, because the riots fought against homophobia, while the Demolition Night intended to destroy a culture that was inherently homosexual. This shows how sexual orientation was associated with music genres, attaching homosexuality to disco music, and heterosexuality to rock music.

Fashion in the 1970s was versatile, like the music scene: fans of rock would not wear similar clothes as fans of disco. According to Valerie Steele, 1970s fashion can be divided into two periods (281). Fashion of the 1960s continued to be in style from 1970 to 1974, but from 1975 to 1979, fashion

became more conservative (281). The first half favoured “conspicuous outrageousness”, “retro fantasies” and “ethnic influences” (281). In this context, ethnic influences can be understood as a euphemism for Blackness. As noted above, the late 1970s saw a new rise of conservatism, which was also visible in the fashion trends of the time. In the modern revival of 1970s trends, influence of styles from the first half of the decade are most apparent, as well as influence from the likes of Studio 54 and music videos from the decade.

The term ‘culture’ is utilised as an umbrella term to refer to “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or a social group”, or “the characteristic features of everyday existence ... shared by people in a place or time” (“Culture”, merriam-webster). The term can be further separated into sub-categories, such as popular culture, or underground culture. James O. Young notes that artistic features are often considered a “crucial feature” of culture (*Cultural* 9). Young also considers the term ‘culture’ to include not only traits of beliefs, but also the people themselves (10). As such, people are culture (10). However, Young notes that defining a specific culture is difficult, because they evolve and change over time (12). Additionally, different cultures are influenced by one another and the lines between them are blurred (12; 13).

Marie Moran states that the words ‘culture’ and ‘cultural’ should be used to “refer to those thoughts, actions, things and institutions that are “to do with social meanings, identities, narratives, beliefs, ideologies, stories, values and so on” (8). Disco culture embodies all of these: the music conveys stories that build narratives, and events at discotheques allowed people to form their identities and re-evaluate the social constructs that society enforced. These notions will be discussed further in chapter 3. Furthermore, Moran suggests that ‘culture’ should be considered as a “substantive category” that “is made up of the practices and processes which constitute it” (8). Disco culture is made up of practices such as dressing up, going out and dancing. By copying and following the practices and processes, groups like ABBA and the fans attending their concerts are able to participate in the culture, even though they are not a part of the social group that originally created disco culture. The present study examines culture from this point of view.

According to Donald E. Hall, the field of ‘cultural studies’ stresses the idea that “the study of culture today and in the past should involve the full range of ways in which people ... express and have expressed themselves” (*Literary* 301). By this he means utilising sources such as “popular songs and theatrics, fashion, film, advertising, and television”, and not only literary texts (301) to study culture. Hall states that these kinds of sources help in understanding “the diversity of human perception and

experience”, which cultural studies often aim to do (301). The present study examines music videos and lyrics from different viewpoints to demonstrate the far-reaching impact of disco culture.

Cultural appropriation is defined as “the taking of something produced by members of one culture by members of another” (Young, “Profound” 136). Common examples of cultural appropriation include the use of traditional clothes, such as the headdresses worn by Native Americans, by those who are not Native Americans. Young has identified three categories of cultural appropriation, specifically regarding the field of arts. The first category is object appropriation, which occurs when “a tangible object ... is transferred from members of the culture that produced it to the possession of outsiders” (136). By outsiders, Young means those who are not a part of the original culture (136). Young cites the transfer of the Parthenon friezes to the British museum as the most famous case of object appropriation (*Cultural* 1).

The second category, content appropriation, occurs when someone “uses the cultural products of another culture” when producing their own art, such as musicians performing a music style from another culture (“Profound” 136). Young uses musicians as an example of content appropriation: “a musician that sings the songs of another culture” engages in content appropriation (*Cultural* 6). Further, Young identifies two subcategories of content appropriation: style appropriation and motif appropriation. Style appropriation occurs when “artists produce works with stylistic elements in common with the works of another culture” (6), such as making music within the category of a specific musical genre that is common for another culture. Motif appropriation occurs when artists are influenced by art from another culture, but do not create art in the same style (6).

The last category Young calls subject appropriation, which includes a member from another culture representing “members or aspects of another culture”, for instance by painting a picture of indigenous people (“Profound” 136). Examples of subject appropriation would be the paintings by Jean-Léon Gérôme, such as *Prayer in the Mosque* (1871) and *Pool in a Harem* (1876). The first painting depicts an image of a group of dark-skinned men praying. The second painting depicts an image of a dark-skinned slave in the middle of white-skinned women. Throughout his career, Gérôme painted several paintings of life in the “Muslim world” or “the Orient”, and his works often include images of “exotic costume, architecture and interiors” and “ethnic types” (“Pool”). Subject appropriation differs from the other types in that “no artistic product of a culture is appropriated”, but what is being appropriated is “another culture or some of its members” (*Cultural* 7). The analysis below will argue that ABBA are engaging in content appropriation by using Black and African American musical and stylistic traditions in their art.

As stated above, the present study examines the music and videos of ABBA, a Swedish music group formed in 1970. The group comprised of four members: Agnetha Fältskog, Benny Andersson, Björn Ulvaeus, and Anni-Frid Lyngstad. The study falls into the field of cultural studies, as it examines a key phenomenon of the 1970s popular culture: disco. The study intends to show how ABBA were influenced by disco culture by presenting a history of disco, and analysing ABBA from the viewpoints of sexuality and queerness, and race. These three aspects are at the root of disco culture, and as such, parsing ABBA's performances from these angles offers valuable information about the way White and heterosexual artists utilised certain aspects of disco culture and its origins to their benefit.

Before meeting each other and becoming ABBA, the group members all had a background in music (Sharon Davis). Both Lyngstad and Fältskog led successful solo careers prior to the group's formation, and Andersson and Ulvaeus had bands of their own, as well as solo careers (Davis). The official ABBA website indicates that Andersson and Ulvaeus started writing songs together in the late 1960s, and later the band was joined by Fältskog and Lyngstad ("The Story"). As a quartet, the group started working together and rose to international fame with the Eurovision Song Contest in 1974, which they won with the song *Waterloo*. During the contest, the song was sung in Swedish, but since the song proved to be a hit, ABBA released an English version in the same year (Broman 52). Interestingly, *Waterloo* was not their first song choice for the competition, that was *Hasta Mañana* ("Hasta Mañana"). *Waterloo* reached number one in musical charts all over Europe, and in the United States it reached the top ten ("The Story"). *Waterloo* the album was also very popular in Sweden. After the waves of Eurovision success died down, ABBA's popularity faltered slightly because of a stigma that the Eurovision win brought them, as the contest was not considered culturally valuable at the time ("The Story"). Their next international hit was *SOS*, which was released over a year after the Eurovision Song Contest.

The release of *Mamma Mia* in 1975 granted ABBA the return to the peak of musical charts, and it established the group as icons of pop music. After the release of *Mamma Mia*, ABBA's popularity continued growing throughout the 1970s, and it has not stopped since. Without a doubt, one can say that ABBA are a truly emblematic group, who became musical icons of the 1970s era and Sweden as a country. ABBA's music continues to be celebrated all over the world: their music has inspired a Broadway musical, *Mamma Mia!*, and two film adaptations based on it: *Mamma Mia!* (2008), and *Mamma Mia 2: Here We go Again* (2018). Ola Johansson states that these revivals have "solidified their songs ... as bedrocks of the popular music canon" (134), and the films have brought ABBA

a new generation of fans, who continue to love and listen to their music decades after the group's original emergence.

The present study utilises cultural materialism as the main theoretical frame from which the study examines ABBA. Cultural materialism is a theoretical approach within cultural studies that aims to situate texts and other cultural phenomena within the political situation of the era in which they were produced whilst drawing on theorisations made possible in the present moment (Peter Barry 179). In the context of the present study, this involves analysing the disco culture of the 1970s, by using the knowledge that we have today about the society of the 1970s and the continued value of ABBA and disco music, half a century later.

The data for the present study consists of the lyrics and the music videos of a selection of ABBA songs. The complete lyrics are available in Appendix One: Song Lyrics. The study examines these songs from the points of view of sexuality and queerness, and race. These viewpoints were chosen because they highlight the different aspects of ABBA that are the most conspicuous. Furthermore, these three aspects were in turmoil during the 1970s because of the changes that the society at the time was facing. When studying ABBA from these viewpoints, one can see the effects of societal and cultural influence on the group and their performances.

By studying popular culture, researchers gain a deeper understanding of our culture, and it shows us the underlying currents of our society and social climate. Products of popular culture reveal important aspects of the surrounding culture and its history, which is why the study of popular culture allows researchers to gain insight on the opinions, concerns and interests of a larger part of the population than, for instance, studies on just political decisions. Popular culture reaches millions of people, and as such its influence should not be ignored. By studying ABBA's lyrics and music videos, the present study gains access to how the culture and social climate of the 1970s affected ABBA's performance, and how the result can be understood from the perspective of the present-day, taking into account the historical context of ABBA.

The aim of the present study is to trace how ABBA drew on other cultures through their music and videos and evaluate whether the influences are benign borrowings or cultural appropriation. Given that ABBA were not accused of appropriation at the time when the songs were released, this question assumes that it is reasonable to re-evaluate past actions in the light of modern sensibilities. The thesis begins by outlining the history of disco music to situate ABBA's music and videos within the era.

Then, it examines ABBA's production in relation to minorities who were strongly associated with disco: the LGBTQ community and Black communities in both the United States and Europe.

The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How is the influence of disco music and disco culture evident in ABBA's productions?
2. How do ABBA represent sexuality and queerness in their lyrics and music videos?
3. How do ABBA represent race in their songs and music videos?

In answering these questions, the study also aims to consider whether ABBA have merely been influenced by minority music culture or whether their actions can be deemed appropriation.

Queer theory will be utilised to show how ABBA represent and perform gender and sexuality. The theory emerged in the 1990s, and Connell describes this as a "new wave of gay and lesbian thought" (43). Queer theory of the 1990s criticised "the cultural constraints" that are known as heteronormativity, "that pushed people into fixed identities within gender binaries" (43). In addition, new forms of cultural and political activism fuelled these critical thoughts (43).

The word 'gender' is used to produce and naturalise masculinity and femininity, but it can also be used to deconstruct and denaturalise them (Judith Butler, *Undoing* 42). Butler discusses the concept of norms at length. According to Butler, considering something to be outside of a norm, or against it, still defines it in relation to the norm (42). Butler notes that "to be not quite masculine or not quite feminine is still to be understood exclusively in terms of one's relationship to the "quite masculine" and the "quite feminine"" (42). Therefore, only the dismantling of the normative gender construction would free people from gendered thinking.

The word 'race' is used colloquially to distinguish people from each other on the basis of their skin tones. As will become clear below, the difference is often noted in relation to White people. According to Richard Dyer, 'race' refers to "intrinsically insignificant geographical/physical differences" between people (*White* 1). In order to discover how race is a key aspect of ABBA's performance, critical race theory will be used. Critical race theory (henceforth CRT) is a movement that intends to transform the relationships "among race, racism and power" (Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic 2). According to Delgado and Stefancic, CRT looks at similar issues as civil rights and ethnic studies discourse, but it considers them in a wider perspective (3). CRT "questions the very foundations of the liberal order", such as "equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law" (3). Moreover, CRT is interested in the "relationship between racism

and economic oppression” that is, race and class (11). This applies to ABBA, because they benefited from being White and, later on in their career, from being from a high social rank.

The present study also draws on Dyer’s notions on Whiteness. According to Dyer, the thought that “whites are not of a certain race, they’re just the human race” (*White* 3) is prevalent in racial representation. Similarly, the term ‘ethnic’ is used to refer to all non-White people, but it often has a negative connotation, while the term ‘White’ is considered neutral. Dyer argues that at the centre of analysing White racial imagery are privilege and dominance in society (9). Acknowledging the existence of ‘Whiteness’ is important because of this privilege and dominance, according to Dyer, as the acknowledging of Whiteness as a concept will aid in undermining its dominance in society and reaching equality. Analysing White performers from the point of view of CRT and Whiteness allows for the discovering of how these artists benefit from society’s preference towards White people. The present study utilises the theories of CRT and Whiteness to pinpoint how ABBA represent race in their music videos, and how this representation can be interpreted. These two theories help noticing the underlying implications of ABBA’s racial representation, which are covert and often go unnoticed. The following chapter will introduce these theoretical concepts in more detail.

Chapter 2: *Give Me Some Air...* Theory and Methodology

The present chapter introduces the theoretical frameworks in more detail, beginning with cultural materialism and a statement on research ethics, followed by queer theory and gender performativity. The chapter concludes with an introduction to critical race theory.

2.1. *Cultural materialism*

Cultural materialism uses the past to analyse cultural topics from the point of view of the present, “revealing the politics of our own society by what we choose to emphasise or suppress of the past” (Barry 178). This includes knowledge about prejudice regarding social status, race, gender and sexuality. According to Neema Parvini, cultural materialism is influenced by “anti-humanist theories” that assume that humans are “structural products of power” (244).

Barry notes that cultural materialism is concerned with studying historical material “within politicised framework” which includes “the present which those literary texts have in some way helped to shape” (176). The term ‘cultural materialism’ was first used in 1985 by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, who, according to Barry, are the best-known practisers of cultural materialism (176). Barry defines the term ‘cultural’ as including all forms of culture, and not only ‘high culture’, such as Shakespeare’s plays that he focuses on (177). The present study focuses on a typically ‘low culture’ phenomenon: popular culture. ‘Materialism’ in this context refers to “the opposite of ‘idealism’” (177). Consequently, according to Barry, cultural materialism stresses “the functioning of the institutions through which Shakespeare is now brought to us”, such as the film industry and publishers who publish books (177). Moreover, Parvini argues that cultural materialists challenge the importance that is placed on those who are regarded as the ‘greats’ today (245). As Parvini states, Shakespeare was a White, middle class male, and as such his “sectional interests” do not represent the interests of everyone (245), because he had a privileged status and role in society.

Drawing on examples identified by Jonathan Dollimore, Barry re-examines “the functioning of the institutions through which Shakespeare is now brought to us”, such as the film industry and publishers who publish books. This analysis shows how plays like *Henry V*, which was originally favoured for its promotion of the Tudor claims to the throne, were re-utilised during WWII to promote nationalistic feelings and produce a sense of righteousness as the driving force behind military conflict. Despite the seeming triviality of songs like *Waterloo*, the appearance of a song making playful references to a battle in which more than 40 000 people died in the mid-1970s reveals a significant revision in

cultural understandings of the events of 1815. This reflects the circulation of different themes in culture.

There are four main characteristics within cultural materialism: historical context, theoretical method, political commitment, and textual analysis (Barry 176). Historical context refers to the ‘timelessness’ of historical texts (176). According to Hall, speaking of texts as ‘timeless’ is not useful, as “doing so erases the ways in which complexity of a given time period is reflected in the concerns expressed in a text” and in its reception (*Literary* 303). In addition, calling a text ‘timeless’ “ignores the fact that texts actually help produce the belief systems of their time period” (303). In contrast, Barry states that if texts from the past are still studied today, they can be called ‘timeless’ (176). Moreover, Barry notes that cultural materialism allows texts to “rediscover [their] histories, which previous kinds of study have ignored” (176). Barry writes about the study of Shakespeare’s plays, but his ideas can be adapted into the present study as well, as the study analyses ABBA from viewpoints that have been previously ignored. Hall and Barry’s arguments can be connected as they both criticise removing texts from their historical origins. They both highlight the fact that when analysing cultural products, one should consider the time period when it was produced, including the prevailing beliefs, norms and other social factors of the time. Additionally, as Hall notes, “[l]iterary and other cultural texts are connected in complex ways to the time period in which they were created. Systems of social power are both reflected in and reinforced by such texts” (*Literary* 303). Parvini highlights the importance of reviewing present-day culture by examining the “culture of the past” in order to achieve change (245). Cultural products are also connected to the times when they resurface and gain traction, in other words, when they circulate. The present thesis investigates how the cultural and social climate of the 1970s affected disco culture, and ABBA specifically.

The second characteristic, theoretical method, refers to “a break with liberal humanism and absorbing the lessons of structuralism, post-structuralism, and other approaches” that became popular after the 1970s (Barry 176). Parvini connects cultural materialism with queer theory, materialist feminism and race studies (245). These theories support each other in underlining the issues of society. The third characteristic, political commitment, “signifies the influence of Marxist and feminist perspectives”, and the “break from the conservative-Christian framework” which have led literary criticism in the past. Moreover, as Louis Althusser states, ideology recruits individuals into subjects by interpellation and hailing (699). The ideology of disco lies in a set of values that are implicit in the music and lyrics. Althusser uses a policeman calling out to a person on a street as an example of hailing: when a person turns around at the call, they recognise that the “hail was [‘]really[‘] addressed to him”, and the person

becomes a subject (699). Similarly, as lyrics of disco songs call out to people both literally and figuratively, people who respond to the call recognise themselves in them and become subjects.

The last characteristic of cultural materialism places emphasis on textual analysis and highlights the importance of applying theories on “canonical texts which continue to be the focus ... of academic and professional attention, and which are prominent national and cultural icons”, instead of only creating abstract theories without utilising them in practice (Barry 176-77). The present study builds on this idea in that it applies theories, such as CRT and queer theory, on cultural products: disco and ABBA. This way we can see in practice how the theories work, and what kind of new readings can be found about cultural icons.

Jack Halberstam writes about the importance of studying ‘low culture’, and what he calls low theory. Low theory studies topics that are generally deemed unimportant and shallow, such as products of popular culture. According to Halberstam, “[b]eing taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous and irrelevant” (6). By this he means that by ignoring topics that are considered irrelevant, shallow or non-serious, we miss opportunities to study culture on a level that would reveal important aspects of society. These aspects are often those that differ from the mainstream of interests, such as interests of people of colour, non-straight people and women. Halberstam argues that the wish “to be taken seriously is ... what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production” (6), instead of opting for something that is considered ‘frivolous’, as Halberstam writes. Halberstam’s notions relate directly to the topic of the present study. Disco culture was the embodiment of frivolousness and not taking oneself seriously, and most people interested in it before the latter half of the 1970s were people of colour and non-straight people. If we did not study disco culture, we would not know about the underlying, deeper levels of meaning within the culture, as what is commonly connected to disco are the extravagant clothes and *Saturday Night Fever*.

According to Halberstam, low theory can be considered the alternative for ‘high theory’, and it can be understood as a “mode of accessibility”, or a theoretical model “that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples” (16). Low theory also “refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintains the *high* in high theory” (16). As such, low theory goes against the grain of what is usual in academia and opts instead to study topics that are generally deemed unworthy of studying. Halberstam writes that these topics are “areas beside academia rather than within it” (7). Furthermore, Halberstam describes them as “alternative cultural and academic realms”, and “the intellectual worlds conjured by losers, failures, dropouts and refuseniks” (7). Finally, Halberstam states that these worlds

“serve as the launching pad for alternatives precisely when the university cannot” (7). By this he means that by studying topics that are generally not studied in academia, creating new knowledge about previously poorly understood topics becomes possible through low theory. This reflects the notion above about the possibilities that studying areas like disco culture brings: researchers gain a more profound understanding of a culture that was at first limited to a specific group of people only. Following Halberstam’s notions, low theory acts as a form of resistance. In this context, resistance “takes the form of investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing, such as failure and stupidity” (11). Halberstam continues by stating that failure may mean, for instance, “refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit” or “a counterhegemonic discourse of losing” (11-2). Conducting studies utilising low theory is resistance against the norms of academia.

2.1.1. Research ethics

All materials used in the present study are in the public domain, including the videos from which screengrabs have been taken. The videos are covered by the commons license and can therefore be cited, as the study provides references to each of them.

2.2. Critical race theory and Whiteness

Critical race theory will be used to examine how ABBA perform race in their music and videos, and what kind of connotations and implications their performance carries. CRT has its roots in law, but since its beginnings it has spread to other areas as well (Delgado and Stefancic 3). The present study considers CRT in the context of popular culture, where musical traditions that originate from racialised people, are utilised by White people. Delgado and Stefancic note that CRT does not only try to make sense of the surrounding social situation but also attempts to change it for the better (3). The theory was born in the 1970s, when the achievements of the civil rights movement started to falter, and the key figures of CRT saw a need for new theories to battle the issues that still prevailed (4). CRT is influenced by critical legal studies and radical feminism (4). According to Duncan Kennedy and Karl E. Klare, the critical legal studies movement, henceforth CLS, strives to “create a more humane, egalitarian, and democratic society” (461). The movement derives from several other social theories but does not rely on a set group of principles (461), and Kennedy and Klare note that there are different opinions on the principles of CLS within the movement (462). Additionally, Roberto Mangabeira Unger states that the main trends within CLS reject the “attempt to impute current social arrangements to the requirements of industrial society, human nature, or moral order” (563).

This connects to CRT in that both theories aim to dismantle the prevailing societal standards, which simultaneously uplift certain groups of people while oppressing others.

Radical feminism builds on similar assumptions as CRT, albeit focusing on gender rather than race. Accordingly, power is assumed to be at the centre of gender relations, and that men have power over women in society (Connell 34). The radical feminist movement grew out of the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s (32; 33). Whereas the first wave of feminism focused more on the roles that are assigned to genders (34), radical feminism moved on beyond that, because the earlier focus did not consider power relations within gender issues (34). According to radical feminists, the power imbalance stems from men oppressing women because they have power over them (34) in the patriarchal society. Radical feminism presumes that the oppression of women is caused by the assumption that women are inherently different from men (Chris Beasley 54). Radical feminists denounce the idea that women should be considered in relation to men (54) and should instead be considered as individuals. As such, radical feminists consider the source of women's oppression to be sexual oppression, as women are oppressed precisely for being women (54). According to Beasley, radical feminism encourages critique of the prevailing heterosexual and heteronormative society, and the "rejection of male dominance" (54). Thus, radical feminists aim for total equality in society, and the dismantling of patriarchy. Other social movements, such as the women's liberation movement and the sexual revolution, assisted in advancing the ideas of radical feminists.

Other influences on CRT come from European philosophers and American radical tradition (Delgado and Stefancic 4). The influence from these other theories is visible in the central principles of CRT, and in the issues that it is interested in. For instance, CRT has borrowed views on the "relationships between power and the construction of social roles" and the "largely invisible collection of patterns and habits that make up patriarchy and other types of domination" from feminism (5). These principles connect to gender and queer theory in that all of these theories discuss social roles, patterns and habits in society. In addition, CRT is interested in the "redressing of historic wrongs" and "the insistence that legal and social theory have practical consequences" (5). Therefore, CRT aims for the bettering of society by challenging the harmful traditions and habits, such as institutional racism and oppression.

Delgado and Stefancic discuss four central concepts of CRT, the first of which is that racism is "ordinary", and not something exceptional (7). This suggests that "racism is difficult to cure or address" (7) because it is ignored. The second concept is "interest convergence or material determinism", meaning that significant portions of society have low motivation to fight racism because they benefit

from it (7). These portions include “white elites” and “working-class people” (7), which also includes people of colour. The third concept is the “[‘]social construction[‘] thesis”, which proposes that “race and races are products of social thought and relations” (7). According to this view, race is not a biologically valid category, but something that society has invented (7), which is an idea similar to Butler’s theory of gender being a social construct. CRT is particularly interested in how society tends to ignore the notion that race is a social construct, and how society enforces “pseudo-permanent characteristics” (8) on people who represent different races. These characteristics can be parts of a person’s physical appearance, or personality traits. The fourth, more recent, concept within CRT focuses on “differential racialization” (8). This area is interested in the way that society “racializes different minority groups at different times” (8). This is done “in response to shifting needs such as the labor market” (8). Within the scope of the present study, this can be seen in the shifting attitudes towards Italian people in the United States, as was discussed in relation to *Saturday Night Fever*. In short, CRT looks at these four concepts, and particularly the reasons as to why society behaves this way.

Studying Whiteness and its implications shapes the understanding and perception of society. Whiteness and ‘White culture’ dominate Western society, and its influence is immense. Popular culture is also vastly dominated by White, Western artists, and while they are influenced by artists of colour, they often do not disclose it, or the audiences ignore it. White artists may be unaware of being influenced by artists of colour because they see their own culture and race as the norm, and do not consider the idea that their cultural products might not be completely original.

Dyer notes that there has been little research about the images of White people (1). Often the term ‘race’ is thought to not refer to White people, but to everyone else (1). As noted above, ‘White’ has become to mean the norm from which others deviate (1; 3). Other races are categorised with words such as ‘Black’ and ‘Brown’, with the intention of indicating that these people differ from ‘the norm’. Often this is done subconsciously, but it is also done consciously.

2.3. Queer theory and gender

‘Cisgender’ is a key concept within gender studies. According to B. Aultman, the word refers to people whose “gender is on the same side as their birth-assigned sex” (61). This means that a person identifies mentally with the sex that they were born with, for example, a woman who identifies as female, in contrast with a transgender person who does not identify this way. The term ‘cisgender’ emerged in the 1990s, when trans activists started to criticise the prevailing language used to discuss

sex and gender (61). Trans activists and those who supported them noted that being cisgender was typically presented as 'natural', and everything else was not (61). The use of the word 'cisgender' can also aid in diversifying the conversation around sex and gender, by allowing room for other types of gender identification as well (61). The use of the word distinguishes a person as 'cis', instead of 'trans', or vice versa (62).

Rather than considering gender 'natural', Butler posits the idea of gender as a set of behaviours which one performs. The behaviours might be conscious, such as choosing to wear a dress or wearing make-up, but are often subconscious, such as crossing one's legs or sitting with one's knees apart. She uses the exaggerated femininity of drag queens to explain her point, but her real interest is in day-to-day performances of gender. She contemplates the question of whether 'gender' is a concept that is culturally and politically created, or whether it is a concept based on biology (*Trouble* 164). In other words, whether someone is considered a 'woman', or a 'man' based on their biological sex, or if it is a social and political construct that dictates what kind of representations of 'women' or 'men' are accepted in society. Understanding gender as performative ties into this thought. Butler states that in society, there is a "disciplinary production of gender" that "effects a false stabilization of gender in the interest of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain" (172). This refers to the ways how society dictates how one 'should' look like, or how one 'should' act or behave based on one's biological sex. Behaviours that resist such patterns are described as 'queer'. Understanding gender as performance allows us to look at the ways in which ABBA's music, their videos and their clothing indicate gender without concerning ourselves with the performers' sex or orientation.

Today, the word 'queer' is often used when referring to a person's sexual orientation. However, the word has "homophobic origins" (Barry 138), and in the past carried inherently negative connotations, as also noted by Hall. Indeed, Hall states that during the Victorian era "a [']queer['] was something that you clearly did not want to be" (*Queer* 14). Since the Victorian era, non-heterosexual people have started to reclaim the term as something positive and empowering, turning it around from its origins as a term of abuse. This is especially notable today on different social media platforms. With the use of this term, it is understood that one's sexuality differs from the heteronormative framework. The term 'queer' is used to indicate that one is not heterosexual, or that they otherwise identify as a non-binary person. Hall argues that the term 'queer', when used as an adjective, means that "there is no easy answer to the question" of 'what are you?' (12; 13). If one is asked this question, and they cannot answer it within the realm of heteronormativity that the society presents, they could use the

term 'queer' to describe themselves. It is a form of identification (13), which allows people who do not identify with the heteronormative framework presented by society, to indicate this, without having to specify it further. According to Hall, "systems of identification always convey social values as they chart people" (13). Because of this, the word 'queer' carries connotations that are socially charged.

According to Connell, new forms of cultural and political activism "defied conventional categories, played radical games with gender meanings, and set about 'queering' everything in sight" (43). Used as a verb, 'queering' means, for instance, providing queer readings of products of popular culture that originally may not have intended to include queer connotations, like the present thesis does with ABBA's productions. According to Hall, queer theories "work to challenge and undercut any attempt to render "identity" singular, fixed, or normal" (*Queer* 15). Therefore, identity cannot be defined within simple terms, as identity varies from person to person. Hall continues, "queer theories always recognize our own acculturation into notions of normality" (16) and paying attention to the "actions and belief systems comprising our "selves"" (16) is important. By this he means that society dictates what is considered 'normal', which often goes unnoticed by people. Noting this is important in regard to growing into one's own person. In addition, Hall states that queer theories generally assume that "we are not all "really" any one thing" (101), be it strictly heterosexual, homosexual or something else altogether. According to Barry, queer theory questions the "distinction between the naturally-given, normative 'self' of heterosexuality and the rejected 'Other' of homosexuality" (139), referring to the notion of heterosexuality being the norm while other sexualities differ from it. As Hall notes, "queer theories demand a questioning of the conventional ... even as we recognize that conventions allow for effective communication and other useful forms of social interaction" (*Queer* 7). Meaning that even though conventions that one is used to seem valid and accurate, they should be put under consideration. What is commonly deemed 'normal', does not necessarily ring true to everyone. Furthermore, as society progresses, evaluating the concepts that are considered 'normal' is important, because as time passes, they may start to seem dated and even harmful. The present study utilises these notions of queer theory to depict the 'queerness' of ABBA's lyrics and music videos, and what aspects in them differ from what is considered the 'norm'.

Butler uses the hyper-femininity of drag queens as an example to illustrate the performativity of gender. Butler states that "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (175). She also states that the art of drag "mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (174). This means that when men dress up as women in the way that drag queens do, they perform exaggerated versions of characteristic behaviours that are generally

attached to women and utilise them to create a gender-defying performance. Drag parodies the concept of “an original or primary gender identity” (174) through exaggeration and humour. Drag queens make the gender performance of cis women more visible by exaggerating aspects of femininity such as the wearing of makeup and the equally exaggerated hair styles and outfits. In a way, the art of drag is also a commentary on society’s constricted views on gender and as such acts as resistance against them, even though the drag queen’s performance itself might be about something else completely. The costumes that ABBA wear appear to perform gender in a similar manner to those of drag queens: they are exaggerated and highlight the feminine or masculine aspects of the members. Additionally, imitating ABBA in a drag performance is a well-accepted tradition within drag culture. For instance, well-known American drag queens Trixie Mattel and Katya performed an ABBA medley in a show at the PlayStation Theatre in New York, in 2019. Their performance included the songs *Waterloo* and *Dancing Queen*, which is considered a ‘gay anthem’ with its references to being a ‘queen’, dancing and the carefree atmosphere of the song. The following chapter will introduce disco music and disco culture in detail, and situate ABBA further in its context.

Chapter 3: *I Feel Real When You...* Background and History of Disco

This chapter seeks to answer the first research question: “how is the influence of disco music and disco culture evident in ABBA’s productions?”. The chapter reviews the history of disco from its emergence as a musical form to its immense popularity and influence around the world, including groups like ABBA. The chapter is divided into four sections. First, it identifies the features of disco as a musical form. Second, it focuses on the people at the heart of disco culture: the musicians who created the sounds on the discs. Third, the chapter discusses the discotheque as a physical space, how they functioned and became places of gathering for those involved in disco culture. The fourth section examines ABBA in the context of disco culture.

3.1. *Disco as a musical form*

Disco originated in the United States, and thematically it was closely related to rioting. This will be discussed further in section 3.2. The term ‘disco music’ emerged in 1973 (Tim Lawrence, “Queering” 236). Theoretically disco music is characterised by “a four-on-the-floor beat” and “a polyrhythmic percussion and clipped vocals” (“Disco” 128). The bass was an important feature of disco music, as it would guide the dancers’ motions on the dancefloor. This kind of a beat rhythm enabled inexperienced dancers to recognise when to move their feet: the bass would signal the four-on-the-floor beat, marking the timing when dancers should move their feet. This eventually led to the expression ‘put your feet on the beat’. Polyrhythmic percussion refers to a “simultaneous combination of contrasting rhythms” (“Polyrhythm”, merriam-webster), often played on drums. ‘Clipped vocals’ refers to the end result of DJs editing recorded songs: they would cut out or extend parts of the songs, which resulted in the vocals being repetitive and fragmentary (Lawrence, “Defence” 143). Earl Young is often cited as the creator of the four-on-the-floor-beat (*Love*). Young is a prolific drummer, and he is a founding member of the The Trammps (*Love*). Their cover of the song *Zing! Went the Strings of My Heart* (1972) was one of the first songs to feature this beat rhythm (*Love*). The song opens with the beat, followed by the lyrics: “dear when you smiled at me/I heard a melody/It haunted me from the start/Something inside of me started a symphony/Zing! Went the strings of my heart”. After the release of Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes’ *The Love I Lost* in 1973, for which Young played the drums, the beat rhythm became massively popular and adopted by other groups and artists as well (*Love*). At this point, disco music was still developing, and this type of music was mostly referred to as soul and funk music. Some of the genres that influenced disco music were African American blues, jazz and R&B (Reynaldo Anderson).

The clipped vocals and repetitive lyrics of disco songs allow the listeners to focus on the sound, rather than the meaning (Lawrence, “Queering” 238). Disco songs were often longer than tracks of other genres, which enabled the audience to dance and enjoy the song for a longer time. It also highlighted the skills of DJs, who would mix their own remixes of popular songs (Frank Hoffman 626). As noted above, one of the central features of disco music is the usage of bass (Jens Gerrit Papenburg 210). Papenburg notes that discotheques would use advanced sound machines, which enhanced the bass sounds of disco songs (209). Disco musicians combined the 12-inch vinyl and the sub-bass speaker technologies “for the constitution, exploration, and exploitation of the lower end of music” (210). According to Papenburg, the 12-inch vinyl “allows for a better resolution of bass frequencies than other record formats” (210). In addition, the 12-inch-vinyl allowed the DJs to play extended mixes of popular disco songs (Lawrence, “Queering” 239). The market for selling records blew up after the creation of the 12-inch vinyl, as prior to this, DJs would have to use two discs to mix songs together (Alan Jones and Jussi Kantonen 25). The improved quality of sound and the lessened work of DJs was a significant change in the production field of disco music.

Disco music draws influence from other genres such as R&B, soul, funk and gospel (Lawrence, “Queering” 236). This is most notable in the rhythm and vocals of disco music. The rhythm often follows the beats of traditional African music styles, from which R&B, soul, funk and gospel originate from. Traditional African music styles feature percussion instruments, which are in a key role in disco music as well. Common themes of disco songs include love, sex and emotions, and according to Dyer, disco is characterised by eroticism, romanticism and materialism (“Defence” 103). These features do not limit only to disco as a music genre, but are common tropes used in the marketing of disco music and the discotheques. Moreover, Dyer connects disco inherently with capitalism and consumerism. According to him, the connection is evident in the production of disco music, which includes the making and selling of records (“Defence” 101; 103). As the 1970s went on, disco became an entire culture broadening from the music to fashion and lifestyle, spreading rapidly to other cities and countries as well.

The pioneers of disco music are people who one might not consider to be disco artists at all: for instance, James Brown is often considered as one of the original disco artists. Brown was an American musician, known for his soulful voice and funky beats. He is regarded as a great influence on disco music, although Brown himself “spoke dismissively of the genre”, and stated that disco censored funk music, only keeping its repetitiveness (Alice Echols 19). Echols’ article does not further

elaborate on this, but it can be interpreted as Brown criticising the way disco was made more appealing to White audiences by removing it from its roots in African American music styles. Furthermore, the African American music styles that disco was inspired by were considered more primitively sexual, as noted by Dyer (“Defence” 104). White audiences considered this lewd and socially unacceptable, which is inherently a racist view. Despite his disdain for disco, Brown attempted his hand at creating disco music during his career. His song *Too Funky in Here* (1979) utilises common disco elements: repetitive and simple lyrics and a funky beat, which allow the listener to focus on the sound, rather than the lyrics. Although it is a disco track, the song was not a hit at the time (Echols 21). The appreciation for Brown as a disco artist and as a pioneer of the genre did not flourish until later, after the disco craze of the 1970s had already died down. Other artists who made disco popular include Sylvester and Donna Summer, who is often dubbed as the ‘queen of disco’. In addition, *Soul Makossa* (1973) by Manu Dibango is often regarded as the “first true disco hit” (Frank Hoffman 627).

Importantly, all the artists mentioned in the paragraph above are Black. Dyer notes that since the late 19th century, American popular music has largely copied music styles that were typically considered “black music”, such as the Charleston, rock’n’roll and swing (“Defence” 104). As noted above, music by Black people was considered “more primitive and more ‘authentically’ erotic”, and as such, music inspired by Black people was seen as “sexual and physical” by White people (“Defence” 104). Brown and Dibango’s dance styles during their performances were very sexual in nature. Dibango, and his backup singers and dancers, would gyrate and shake their hips to the beat of the music. Brown was more energetic and mobile during his performances. He would also gyrate and thrust his hips, and he would jump and do the splits. His backup dancers would often kneel or squat, alongside of performing hip movements at different speeds. Only a decade earlier the sexually suggestive performance style of Elvis Presley was considered inappropriate for live broadcasting (Ian Inglis 41), which showcases how quickly the landscape of entertainment changed during this time period. Moreover, the sexual dance style might have been more acceptable for Brown and Dibango, as eroticism was linked to being Black. Dyer states that when White disco artists use features that are common in music by Black people, it inherently “signifies physicality”, and more specifically, sex (“Defence” 105). These features include the above-mentioned repetitive lyrics as well as use of “various African percussion instruments” (“Defence” 105), such as the drums. The analysis below will show how this can be seen in ABBA’s productions.

When disco arrived in Europe, it was cleaned up and whitewashed to appeal to the European market, and its links to rioting disappeared. In a word, the genre was Europeanised. The word ‘Europeanisation’ is used mainly in relation to political issues, but the present study adopts it to refer to the phenomenon of a music genre becoming notably ‘European’, compared to its nature prior to its Europeanisation. The European adaptation of disco music became to be known as ‘Eurodisco’. According to Jones and Kantonen, Eurodisco has an identifiable sound, where “the producer’s role was the most important and where the singer was relegated to second place” (59). Hoffman states that European disco musicians developed “forms that were more appropriate to its dance imperatives” (626). This statement refers to the artists creating songs that were longer, as previously mentioned. Eurodisco songs were often sung in English, which was the case in most of the songs mentioned in the present study. This aided the artists in gaining international fame. ABBA also sang mainly in English. This notion will be discussed further in section 5 below.

Some popular Eurodisco artists include the German groups Boney M. and Arabesque, and the Spanish group Baccara. ABBA are also often categorised as Eurodisco. The members of Boney M. were Black, while the members of Baccara, Arabesque and ABBA are White. Boney M. were musically inspired by gospel music, which is reflected in their song lyrics. For instance, their song *Rivers of Babylon* (1978) references biblical themes, as the title suggests: “there the wicked/carried us away in captivity/required from us a song/now how shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”. Moreover, this line can be interpreted as referencing slavery. Their songs are influenced by the members’ Caribbean origins, and as such include imagery of slave ancestry. Boney M. are a prime example of how themes of disco music translated from American disco to the European version. Additionally, many of the group’s songs are covers of songs by other artists, but with an added disco twist.

Disco music from specific countries became to carry titles of their own, such as Italodisco, which is disco music that originates from Italy. Giorgio Moroder is a famous Italian disco music producer, who has produced songs for popular American disco artists such as Donna Summer, including her “first world-wide hit” (Tilman Baumgärtel 44), *Love to Love You Baby* (1974). This song is a prime example of the repetitiveness and clipped vocals that Lawrence uses to characterise disco music. This collaboration shows that while the ‘face’ of disco music was still a Black person, there is a White person behind the production, steering the genre further away from its origins.

Some of the most famous disco producers of the 1970s include Meco Monardo, who produced hits such as *Doctor's Orders* (1975) by Carol Douglas (Jones and Kantonen 76). *Doctor's Orders* encompasses all the key disco features: repetitive lyrics, funky beat and lyrics about love. Douglas sings: "doctor's orders say there's only one thing for me/Nothing he can do 'cause only you can cure me". Monardo also produced, and played the keyboards and the trombone for, an album of disco-versions of the music in the *Star Wars* film (76). Boris Midney produced music for the group USA-European Connection (78). As the name suggests, Midney's music combined features of American disco and Eurodisco, and the group's first album *Come into My Heart* came out in 1978. Jean-Marc Cerrone's first hit was the 1976 track *Love in C Minor* (88). The song caused controversy with its "intensified sexual activity and orgasmic screaming" (88), but became immensely popular, nonetheless. Like Douglas' song, *Love in C Minor* contains repetitive lyrics, and openly sexual connotations. The lyrics consists of the opening dialogue, a repeated line of "love me", and towards the end the controversial sequence of sounds of growing sexual pleasure. In 1978, *Billboard* magazine awarded Cerrone several titles honouring his talent, including Disco Artist of the Year and Best Producer of a Disco Record (90). Notably, all of the above-mentioned producers are White men, but most of the singers of their famous tracks are Black women, further showcasing how the Black artists were overlooked and the White artists behind the production were put up on a pedestal and awarded.

Record labels housed disco artists, including singers, producers and instrumentalists. Jones and Kantonen cite Casablanca Records as the only record label that "went for disco big time" (51), meaning that this label focused predominantly on disco music, while other labels housed artists of various genres. Casablanca Records was based in New York, and they housed some of the most famous disco artists of the time, such as Donna Summer and Giorgio Moroder (casablancarecords). The company was founded in 1974 by Neil Bogart (Jones and Kantonen 52), and towards the end of the 1970s the company began to take in artists of other genres as well, such as Kiss (54). Today the label has returned to its dance music origins, and they mainly house electronic dance music artists, the only remaining artist from the 1970s being Giorgio Moroder (casablancarecords). In addition to record labels and producers, discotheque DJs grew to have a key role in discovering new artists. Discotheque DJs would play music from lesser-known artists, compared to radio DJs who favoured already established artists (Lawrence, *Love*). Consequently, partygoers would grow to have their favourite DJs and would go to discotheques specifically to hear a certain DJ play. This shows the position of power that DJs held in the world of disco, and how habits from disco culture have transferred into the music scene of the modern time.

3.2. *The people*

As noted above, disco music originates from the cultures of gay people and people of colour, and as such, most of the pioneers of disco were Black or queer, or both. Even today disco is considered a genre of ‘the gays’, but today the genre is also attributed to women, who originally were not the target audience of disco music. According to Dyer, ‘disco’ is a sensibility that embodies “dancing, club, fashion, film” (“Defence” 101), and therefore does not only limit to the music genre or the nightclub, but it reaches to a way of dress, film genre, a dance style and lifestyle. Dyer also states that disco is historically and culturally specific, tied specifically to the 1970s (“Defence” 101). As such, disco can be considered a movement that took part in the gay liberation and aided the people at the heart of disco culture gain visibility in mainstream media. Today, mainstream media often overlooks the Black and queer origins of disco and credits the White artists for creating and defining of disco. This is due to the whitewashing of the genre, and predominantly White productions taking over the genre.

The music styles that preceded disco relied heavily on traditional African music, which employs rhythmic beats that allow the listeners to move and dance along to the music. Additionally, ‘slave music’ styles contributed heavily to the creation of this kind of music. Music by enslaved people combines characteristics of traditional African music with a rhythmic beat that helps one endure hard physical labour. Consequently, the Black originators of disco music utilised these traditional styles to create a more modern type of music that still incorporated the characteristics of traditional music. One of the artists to do this was Sylvester James, who is professionally known by his first name. Anderson states that Sylvester had an “incalculable” influence on disco music and, consequently, the electronic music of today. According to Anderson, Sylvester’s musical style was influenced by “African American blues, women of the church, hippies, drag queens and other members of the gay community” (qtd. in Gamson). Sylvester’s look was androgynous, he was Black and openly gay. He encompassed all the things that disco was built around. He would also wear clothing that was traditionally associated with women, and William Rees calls him a “disco-diva” (248), which is a term commonly used about women. Some of Sylvester’s most famous songs include *You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)* (1978), *Dance (Disco Heat)* (1978) and *Do Ya Wanna Funk* (1982). According to Rees, *You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)* was “a pioneering track in the usage of electronic instrumentation and effects in popular music” (248), and these effects are still widely used in contemporary pop music. The re-release of *You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)* by Jimmy Somerville in 1984 further situated the song in queer culture. Sylvester died of AIDS in 1988. The AIDS

crisis was one of the key elements that was used to criticise disco culture, and Sylvester fought against the stereotype of AIDS being solely a 'queer disease'.

According to Frank, "disco music was associated with cultural difference" (284) from the beginning, because the performers of disco were mainly women and men of colour, and the audience was mostly gay men (284). Frank also notes that disco music was interpreted to reinforce gay pride, and affirm "gay identity, romance, and sexuality" (284). White gay men also regarded disco as the soundtrack for their liberation in the early 1970s, because it "coincided with ... the process of becoming politically visible and winning civil rights" (284). Similarly, Lawrence states that disco is commonly thought to have "emerged as an outgrowth of the Stonewall Rebellion" ("Queering" 230), referring to the Stonewall Riots, which started on June 28 in 1969, in New York City (Hall, *Queer* 40). The Stonewall Riots are often regarded as the starting point of the gay liberation movement and "a turning point in the history of gay life in the United States" (Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crago 724). The riots erupted when the police raided a gay bar, called the Stonewall Inn, which caused the attendees to "fight back" instead of "passively enduring humiliating treatment" from the police (724). Stonewall Inn was raided by the police more often than other bars, because of its reputation as a 'gay bar', and its guests, who were often transgendered people or drag queens. Today, the Stonewall riots are commemorated every year with pride parades throughout the month of June, all over the world. As the disco movement was growing and spreading to other communities beyond the gay community, the political antigay backlash grew alongside of it (Lawrence, "Queering" 285). As the decade went on, "opposing interests fought for the right to define and organize sexuality and gender" (285). On the other side of the spectrum were queer people and people of colour, and on the other side were heterosexual, White people.

The popularisation of disco is partially due to the release of the film *Saturday Night Fever* in 1977 (Frank 287), which focuses on Italian American people in New York. The film presents an Italian American main character, Tony Manero (played by John Travolta), who enjoys dressing up, disco and dancing. The film follows the lives of members of the Italian American community, at a surface level focusing on Tony's struggle of choosing between living his life as his family wishes or going against them and doing what he would like to do, which was dancing. At a deeper level, the film shows the racism, sexism and importance of religion of society at the time, although the film does not criticise the racist and sexist aspects. In the 1970s, Italians were not considered White in the United States, but the film shows the hierarchy between people of different races: the Italian Tony considers himself to be above Latinos and Black people. The most iconic songs in the film were

performed by the Bee Gees, a music group composed of White men. Ani Maitra states that the film suppresses the Black and homosexual origins of disco, and its soundtrack “elides the faintest bit of queerness disco might have possessed” (376). The White, male protagonist appealed to an audience of other White males, encouraging them to enjoy disco.

Lawrence pinpoints the year 1978 as the year when disco “exploded” (“Disco” 130) and reached the height of its popularity. The release of *Saturday Night Fever* in the preceding year arguably expedited this. Towards the end of the decade disco had fully spread to White, heterosexual communities, because entrepreneurs saw a great market in disco (“Queering” 241) and invested a lot of money into promoting disco music. This led to disco dominating the radio charts (Frank). The emergence of White artists like ABBA aided in this. Other such artists included the Bee Gees, the Village People and KC & the Sunshine Band. The Village People and KC & the Sunshine Band also had Black group members, but the founders and frontmen were White.

3.3. *The discotheque*

In order to differentiate disco the music genre and disco the physical space, the term ‘discotheque’ is used in this study to refer to the spaces for parties and nightclubs that played disco music. In contemporary speech, the word ‘nightclub’, or more colloquially, ‘club’ is more prevalent when referencing these kinds of places. Discotheques are commonly characterised as dark, sinful places with a spinning glitterball on the ceiling. In the 1970s, discotheques were very carefully decorated and often hosted party nights with different themes in order to attract large crowds of people. However, before the discotheque as it is known today came to be, discussing the beginnings and history of discotheques in the context of the present study is important.

Prior to the 1970s and the disco movement, places for dancing were only catering towards dancing in opposite-sex couples. These dances included, for instance, the Waltz, the Foxtrot and the Twist (Lawrence, “Queering” 231). Lawrence states that these dances were “to varying degrees patriarchal and heterosexist” (231). This was evident in how dancers could “only take to the floor if accompanied by a partner of the opposite sex”, and additionally, it was “standard practice for men to take the lead” (231). Discotheques differed from this significantly. A part of the sinful image of discotheques stems from the notion that one could not see who they were dancing with, because the lights were low and flickering. Therefore, one could be dancing with anyone, regardless of their gender. According to Frank, “[t]he gay liberation movement drastically transformed gay nightlife” (284). Frank states that prior to this, gay people were often harassed by the police and consequently

it was difficult for gay people to gather in public safely (248). In the early 1970s discotheques became sites of “political organizing, fund-raising, and celebration” for gay men, in addition to them helping “gays to imagine a sexual community and coordinate their gay identity” (285). In other words, these spaces were safe places of gathering and socialising for non-heterosexual people. Moreover, heterosexual women began to attend discotheques as well to avoid the advances of straight men (Frank).

Prior to public discotheques, parties would take place in “private party spaces”, such as the Loft (Lawrence, “Queering” 239). The parties at the Loft were not exclusive to gay people, but would attract all kinds of people, and no one was discriminated against (“Queering” 232). This meant that the atmosphere was accepting and open-minded, which allowed the guests to dress and look as they pleased. Additionally, they were able to engage with people of the same or the opposite sex.

Disco music allowed for the development of solo dancing, as dancing prior to disco was heavily heterosexual-oriented: attendees of dance events were expected to dance only with a partner of the opposite sex (231). This started to change at the beginning of the 1970s (233). Disco was the first genre that allowed people the freedom to choose to dance alone, in groups or with a partner. The freedom to choose enabled the possibility to dance with people of the same sex, and in mixed-sex groups. This shows how music affects behaviour, and societal norms: the new kinds of beats and sounds that disco brought allowed people to express themselves more freely and behave in ways that previously were not common. The lyrics of disco songs would also encourage the audience to dance. Several songs, such as Peaches & Herb’s *Shake Your Groove Thing* (1978) and KC & The Sunshine Band’s (*Shake, Shake, Shake*) *Shake Your Booty* (1976) are prime examples of this. The songs consist of repeated commands to ‘shake’ one’s body. Rees states that for the queer audience, “this was a call to sexual dancing, which equated to an unashamed demonstration of sensuality” (244). In modern speech, the word ‘disco’ is often used to refer to a dance style, which differs from how people danced in discotheques in the 1970s. Popular dance styles of the 1970s disco craze include the hustle, which had several variations, such as the Latin hustle and the New York hustle (Jones and Kantonen).

During the mid-1970s, public discotheques began to attract White people as well, with the opening and establishing of “clubs strictly devoted to dancing” (Frank 287). Lawrence writes in detail about the splitting of the discotheque scene. He states that “the queer potential of the early 1970s dance floor” was also prone to the emergence of discotheques catered to specific crowds (“Queering” 240). For instance, clubs only for White, male gays opened (240), which led to the opening of the

Sahara in 1976, the first discotheque for lesbian women (240). In 1977, party promoters' wish to find "an elite dance crowd" led to the emergence of "a marked hierarchy with the dance scene" (241). Consequently, several big discotheques opened with the idea of catering to these elite crowds that were "organized around fashion, film and so on" (241). Studio 54 is a prime example of a discotheque like this. Studio 54 is an iconic cultural establishment of its own, and it is often referenced in popular culture. Places like this became notorious for their celebrity guests, wild parties and elitist views, which was evident in how the guests were often evaluated based on what they were wearing, their attractiveness or their social status. People who did not fit the criteria were not let into the discotheque.

According to Jones and Kantonen, in 1974 there were 1500 discotheques in America, but already in 1975 there were 10 000 (71). This shows the scale of disco's popularity, and how fast it grew. In addition to the regular discotheques, roller-discos became popular. Roller-discos were discotheques where the attendees would wear roller skates and dance on them. Jones and Kantonen state that the first person to wear roller skates in a discotheque was Rollerina, a regular attendee of Studio 54, in 1977 (204). The roller-disco trend started a new wave of disco-craze, creating new fashions and new type of disco music specifically designed for roller-discos (Jones and Kantonen). The roller-disco trend emerged during the latter half of the 1970s, and therefore it was not a long-lived phenomenon. However, the connection between queerness and roller-disco continues in roller derby today.

Discotheques in Europe mimicked the style of American discotheques. They held a similar reputation, and they attracted similar crowds of free-minded people. The Embassy was a famous discotheque in London, with "one of the greatest club atmospheres" in the city during the height of disco's popularity (186-87). According to Jones and Kantonen, The Embassy is also known for being the filming location for Sylvester's music video for *You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)* (1978) (186). The music video allows present-day viewers to see what discotheques typically looked like in the 1970s. While the intention of the video is to match the song, it still serves snippets of the nightlife of the time. The video shows glitterballs, flashing lights, dancers in short shorts and same-sex couples dancing together in provocative motions. In addition, Sylvester himself is seen in different flashy outfits. In Figure 1, he is seen wearing a glittery outfit, with a fan in hand. In the background one can see stairs leading to the "mini-balcony" from where one could observe the people on the dance floor, and "make sure they saw you there, too" (186).



Figure 1. Screenshot from the music video for *You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)* (“You”).

Another popular discotheque in London was Heaven, which is known as the first gay nightclub in the city, and still exists today (187). Heaven was opened in 1979. The concept of Heaven was inspired by Studio 54, and the space featured high-quality sound and lighting systems that were utilised to create a novel discotheque experience (194). Jones and Kantonen note that Heaven “made a huge and immediate impact on London’s gay culture”, as prior to its opening the gay nightclub scene of the city was based on underground venues (188). Moreover, the opening of such a discotheque was a statement of its own, as homosexuality was decriminalised in England only 12 years prior (“Heaven”). Le Palace in Paris was the French version of Studio 54 (Jones and Kantonen 194). Much like Studio 54, Le Palace was known as the place where celebrities and the glitterati would frequent (194).

All of the discotheques mentioned above have the same features in common. They had a certain theme to attract people, whether it was based on exclusivity or inclusivity, a dress code or decoration. They were large, multi-floored spaces, often located in old theatres. They employed high technology in order to provide the best experience for customers, and to gain more visitors than other discotheques. Many of the European discotheques were modelled after Studio 54 and sought similar kind of reputation of exclusivity. As such, Studio 54 can be considered a type of a blueprint for discotheques that were opened after it. However, as the disco fever grew in intensity, the market became oversaturated, and it became more difficult for discotheques to come up with new ideas to attract high amounts of visitors. This arguably affected the decline of the popularity of disco, as people became less interested in it the more popularity and negative connotations it gained.

3.4. ABBA in the context of disco

The cultural influence of disco eventually reached Europe as well, and the implications of it are similar in the European context. While ABBA are a Swedish group, they were heavily influenced by disco, both musically and in terms of their performances. Today, when people think of ‘disco’, many think of ABBA even though they were not a pioneering group of the genre. Jones and Kantonen state that ABBA had their own “particular brand of pure Eurodisco” (69), and they declare the 1980 ABBA track *Lay All Your Love on Me* as “the purest slice of Eurodisco” (70). Most of ABBA’s endeavours at disco music were released in 1979, on the album *Voulez-Vous* (70). The album includes songs such as *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)*, *Summer Night City*, and the title track, *Voulez-Vous*. These songs are prime examples of ABBA’s take on disco music, as they employ the most characteristic elements of disco songs: repetitive lyrics, rhythmic beat and clipped vocals. Lawrence notes that *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!* was “a staple on the white gay dance floors of 1970s New York” (“Disco” 128), which shows that ABBA’s popularity did reach the United States as well. Davis states that ABBA began their career “with silks and satins, with just a discreet sprinkling of glitter” (14), implying that at the beginning of their musical journey, ABBA were not a disco music group, but the makings were there.

As ABBA are a Swedish group, their relevance to disco culture may not be obvious. However, the group has a crucial role in the Europeanisation of disco, and today they are considered an emblematic creator of 1970s disco music, especially in Europe. This is because ABBA were extremely popular and successful, and their ability to adapt their music style to current trends aided them in gaining new fans and break chart records. According to the official ABBA website, *Voulez-Vous* the song was partially created in the Bahamas (“Voulez-Vous”). Importantly, Ulvaeus and Andersson were able to listen to American radio stations, which were not available in Sweden at the time (“Voulez-Vous”). This enabled the two song writers to derive inspiration from American popular songs. As such, they were able to pick elements of disco to use in their songs (“Voulez-Vous”). ABBA’s most disco-like songs echo elements of freedom and liberation, which were salient features in 1970s, both in society and popular culture products. However, as the members of ABBA are White heterosexuals, applying these themes in their songs does not carry the same meaning as it does in the songs of the originators of disco, who were Black and queer.

In the 1970s, when ABBA were starting out as a group, they would tour open-air dance spots and dancehalls. As such, they were used to making music that was intended to be heard live, and music that was intended for dancing. Towards the end of the 1970s they started to shift from folk music

towards popular music, and disco especially when it started gaining popularity. The album cover of *Voulez-Vous* was shot at Alexandra's, "Stockholm's leading night club at the time" ("Voulez-Vous"). The cover can be seen below in Figure 2. This was an idea by Rune Söderqvist, a sleeve designer, who "felt that much of the album had a disco flavour" ("Voulez-Vous"). Evidently, ABBA were going for the disco market. ABBA also utilised the new technologies of music-making to their advantage. Lyrically ABBA's songs often employ themes of emotions: love, heartbreak and celebration of happiness are common topics in their catalogue. For instance, *Voulez-Vous* the album was written and recorded around the time of the divorce of Fältskog and Ulvaeus, and this emotional event inspired some of the songs on the album, making them very personal and heartfelt ("Voulez-Vous"). Additionally, as previously stated, these features are key elements of disco music, and as such ABBA were able to pander to the disco audience by creating songs specifically to fit into the category of disco. The artistic skills of ABBA members allowed the group to adapt to the musical trends of the decade, and aided them in their transition into disco music, and away from it, when the genre became unaccepted by society in the United States, and in Europe later on.

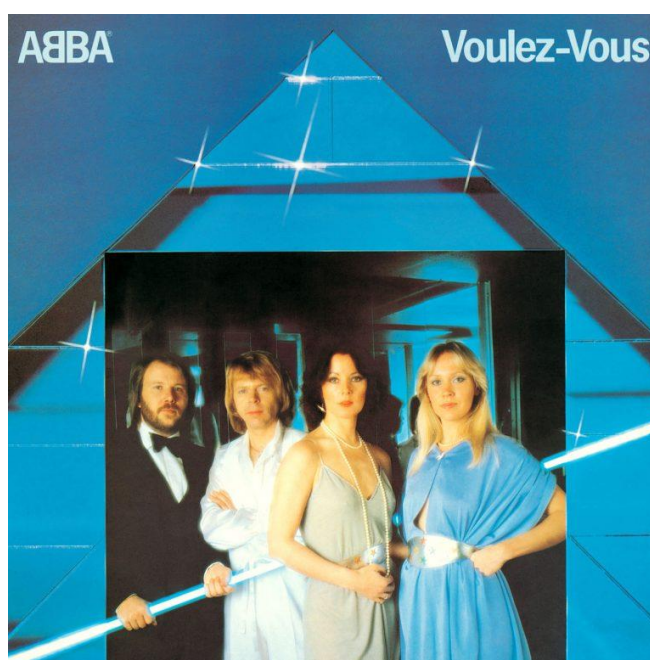


Figure 2. The album cover of *Voulez-Vous* (1979) ("Voulez-Vous").

During the release of the songs on *Voulez-Vous* the album, disco was already being whitewashed, and arguably ABBA contributed to this. ABBA participated in the whitewashing and de-queering of disco by employing elements that were typical of queer artists and artists of colour of the time. The aspect of race comes into question regarding different parts of ABBA and their musical per-

formances. All four group members are White, three of them Swedish, whereas Lyngstad is originally from Norway. ABBA are known for their flashy performance costumes, these outfits being iconic in their own right. The outfits include elements such as bell-bottom trousers, high heels on the men, ruffles, glitter and bright colours. The inspiration for them has evidently been drawn from other artists of the same era, such as James Brown and Sylvester. ABBA wear these outfits solely in their live performances and in their music videos. As the analysis below will show, ABBA wearing these outfits inspired by Black artists could be considered cultural appropriation, because they are wearing something from another race as a costume to entertain their audience.

Towards the end of the 1970s, disco as a genre and culture faced significant backlash. As disco became shunned and negative connotations were attached to it, queer fans of disco were not able to publicly enjoy the genre anymore. However, they could gravitate towards music like ABBA's, which was similar to disco music. Therefore, listening to music like ABBA's was possibly safer than listening to disco music, which was now socially unacceptable. Later, these new ABBA fans continued to follow ABBA's career and listen to their music. However, ABBA also participated in the de-queering of disco, as they are a heteronormative, heterosexual group, and disco was originally a part of the cultures of gay people and people of colour. The two couples that formed ABBA eventually got divorced, in 1979 and 1981 respectively ("The Story"). Arguably, the divorces broke the image of idyllic, heteronormative couples. This did not, however, affect the popularity of the group, and their popularity continued to grow throughout the next decade and further. The following chapter will discuss ABBA and sexuality, and what kind of connotations in relation to sexuality can be derived from their music videos, lyrics and performance.

Chapter 4: *Take It Now or Leave It... ABBA and Sexuality*

The thesis has so far set the theoretical and thematic background for the study in order to situate ABBA in their musical and cultural context. This chapter answers the second research question: “how do ABBA represent sexuality and queerness in their lyrics and music videos?”. To do this, queer theory and theory on gender performativity will be used to analyse the music videos and lyrics of the group’s most disco-like songs: *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)*, *Voulez-Vous*, *Does Your Mother Know* and *Summer Night City*. All four songs were released in 1979.

At the beginning of ABBA’s journey, the four members formed two couples. Fältskog and Ulvaeus married in 1971, Lyngstad and Andersson in 1978. This set up framed ABBA as a heteronormative, heterosexual group. Although the members of ABBA were heterosexual, they appealed to a queer audience in ways that not even the band members had initially anticipated. This is partly because during this era, queer matters were so repressed that they could be ‘hidden in plain sight’: for instance, Freddie Mercury was not considered homosexual even though his band was called ‘Queen’, and he wore leatherman outfits that are commonly associated with gay men. Homosexuality was decriminalised in Sweden in 1944 (Weldy 2), only 26 years before ABBA’s Eurovision win. The short time frame allows us to assume that homosexuality and the features associated with it were not yet fully accepted in society in the 1970s. Indeed, this is evident based on the accounts of, for instance, hatred against disco culture (Frank). As such, non-heterosexual people were forced to hide their identities and keep a low profile in order to avoid negative attention or even violent attacks. On the contrary, some people who did not accept homosexuality averted their attention away from homosexuality and queer matters in order to ignore it, and consequently enabled queer matters to stay ‘hidden in plain sight’, as noted above.

The heteronormativity of ABBA can be seen, for instance, in the way that the group is formed: the group comprises of two women, and two men and not, for instance, of just two men. Had the group comprised of two people of the same sex, it would have opened the door to even more queer connotations. Arguably, the setup of two women and two men placed ABBA in a safe zone, where they could avoid questions about their sexualities. The couples that formed ABBA eventually divorced, in 1979 and 1981 respectively (“The Story”), breaking the image of idyllic, heteronormative couples. This did not, however, affect the popularity of the group.

Today ABBA are known for their popularity among the gay and queer community, despite being very heteronormative and cisgender. Broman notes that ABBA's popularity among the gay community was a surprise to the members themselves (59). Citing concert reviews in *Time* magazine, Broman suggests that their popularity was partly due to the fact that the group "represented dance and unrestrained enthusiasm, and was anything but aggressive and masculine" (59). This seemed inviting to those who enjoyed and took part in disco culture. In addition, ABBA are a very camp group, which is one of the most evident factors in the queerness of ABBA. The theme of sexuality regarding ABBA comes into question in the context of the disco culture of the 1970s, which was an inherently queer phenomenon, as well as a culture that grew out of African American music.

As noted in section 3.4., *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)* and *Voulez-Vous* feature most of the key elements of disco: clipped vocals, repetitive lyrics and a rhythmic beat. *Voulez-Vous* was directly influenced by American disco music, as also noted in section 3.4. As such, the two songs were designed to fit the disco market, and *Voulez-Vous* the album was at the top of music charts in "more than 10 countries" ("Voulez-Vous"). This is evidence of the group's successful transfer into the disco market. *Does Your Mother Know* is not a disco song, although it is a fast-paced song that encourage people to dance: the official ABBA website calls it a "dancefloor stomper" ("Does"). The song was inspired by ragtime music, which is an African American music style. This will be explored further in the subsequent chapter.

'Camp' is a concept that connects both culture and queerness. Below, the section will define 'camp' and discuss its history and meanings. The history is organised chronologically. A vivid example of 'camp' would be, for instance, drag queens. Another example of camp is the aforementioned John Travolta as Tony Manero from *Saturday Night Fever*. The film opens with a scene of Travolta strutting on a street to the music of the Bee Gees. At the time of the film's release, Travolta's character was considered a masculine man, but as the concept of masculinity changed with time, the character became to be seen as flamboyant and camp: the character was not taken seriously anymore, and he came to be considered something other than a heterosexual male. This is similar to ABBA, as later on the male members came to be considered camp and non-heterosexual, based on their clothing choices and behaviour in their music videos.

'Camp' has many overlapping definitions, and John M. Wolf writes that it has "become the site of many and various cultural and ideological appropriations" (284). He continues by noting that 'camp' is a "queer sense-making practice that subverts dominant gender norms and heteronormative practices and institutions" (284). Thus, 'camp' can be understood as a means of expression that intend to defy

the limiting norms that prevail in society. Camp as a concept is inherently connected to queerness and queer culture (284), and Susan Sontag even notes that camp was “more or less” invented by homosexual people (12). According to Lynne Segal, camp was a part of a homosexual subculture, which considered camp as “suppression of ‘masculine’ behaviour for a type of parody of ‘femininity’” (121). This, however, is not the full scope of camp. Segal continues by stating that camp was also seen as containing a “positive aesthetic sensibility: a sense of beauty, a sense of pain” (121), such as in the art by Pierre et Gilles, whose photographs employ elements of religion and eroticism, often including homosexual imagery. Segal notes that “traditional camp culture did not see itself as political”, but several scholars consider it to be so today (121). This could be due to the fact that later on, the extravagant style of self-expression of gay people started to seem like political statements to people outside of this culture.

Segal states that camp was a manner for gay men to “declare the conventions of masculinity oppressive” (122) by acting and dressing in a more feminine way. In other words, by performing their gender in a non-normative manner. Importantly, as Wolf observes, camp is mainly associated with White and male members of the queer community, though noting that it does not apply to every White male in the community is necessary (284). In this sense, camp culture differs from disco culture, which originated from people of colour. Camp dates back to the late 17th century and the early 18th century (Sontag 4; 5) and can be seen in the arts of the time. For instance, the palace of Versailles in Paris employs a camp aesthetic (4), which can be seen in the extravagant design of the palace and its surrounding gardens. Sontag observes that the reasons for camp’s emergence lie in the changing artistic landscape of the time (5): the time period embodied “extraordinary feelings for artifice”, “taste for the picturesque and thrilling”, and the “total presence of character” (5). Examples of camp characters of the time include Giovanni Battista Pergolesi and Mozart (5).

According to Sontag, a key aspect of camp is extravagance (7), for instance in clothing and accessories. In addition, “camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is [‘]too much[‘]” (7). Therefore, ‘camp’ is art that takes itself seriously, but to an outsider seems over the top, tacky and even silly. The extravagance and excessiveness of camp aesthetics combine in ABBA. Like in the preceding century, in the 1970s camp was seen in the performance arts, such as cinema and music. Disco culture also included camp elements, which can be seen in the outfits that disco artists, such as Sylvester, wore. Indeed, the music video for his song, *You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)* (1978) can be considered ‘camp’, as Sylvester’s styling in the video is very non-normative and flashy, as discussed in section 3.2.

More recently camp was brought to the public eye in 2019, by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the United States. The museum presented an exhibition titled *Camp: Notes on Fashion*, which showcased items possessing a camp aesthetic. The exhibition was accompanied by the Costume Institute Gala, also known as the Met Gala, where celebrities donned on their vision of camp clothing. The exhibition was inspired by Sontag's seminal essay and book, titled *Notes on "Camp"*, which was first published in 1964 (The Met), and later included in an essay collection. The influence of Sontag's essay is visible also in the title of the exhibition. Sontag's essay lists 58 notions on what 'camp' is. Sontag, much like Wolf later, calls camp a "sensibility" (1). According to Sontag, "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (1). It is "playful, anti-serious" (10). Sontag goes on to call camp "esoteric" (1), meaning that it is not meant for everyone to understand and pick up on. She refers to camp as a secret and private code (1), intended for the queer audience.

Like Sontag, Moe Meyer calls camp "the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity" (139). Like disco culture, camp started to change its meaning and eventually disappear as it spread out into the public and gained a larger audience. Mainly, the heteronormative, heterosexual audience. According to Sontag, being 'camp' is, or should be, unintentional (6). By this she means that if one intends to create something 'camp', it will not be camp. For instance, John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* is considered camp today, but at the time of the film's release, it was not. It was taken seriously. Sontag goes on to state that deliberately intending to create something 'camp' is "always harmful" (6), because camp "rests on innocence" by both exhibiting it and corrupting it (7). "Seriousness that fails" (7), combined with the above-mentioned extravagance and exaggerating elements, is important for camp. Therefore, something can almost be camp, but end up not being camp, because it succeeds (7). Definitions change over time, and as such, a group like ABBA, who have definitely succeeded, may not have been 'camp' at the height of their success, but are considered camp today. This notion of changing definitions has also been noted by Sontag (8).

Freya Jarman-Ivens has divided Sontag's notions of camp into three main categories: style aesthetic and value, meaning and political work, and queer ("Musical"). While Sontag's essay suggests that camp is not political, Jarman-Ivens proposes that it is indeed a "political phenomenon" ("Musical"). For instance, when queer people choose to wear flamboyant, extravagant outfits at events to express themselves, it can be read as 'camp'. Examples of this include drag queens and attendees of pride parades. Moreover, Jarman-Ivens suggests that camp in relation to popular culture is when "it is at its

cleverest” because it “infiltrates popular culture posing as valueless, while presenting a parodic challenge to presumed norms of gender/sex relations” (“Musical”). This way popular culture productions that employ a ‘camp’ aesthetic challenge the prevailing norms and assumptions. According to Wolf, scholars claim that a need for camp today does not exist, that it has died and should be treated as a part of history (284). However, camp representations can be found in popular culture of today as well. For instance, Lady Gaga’s thoughtfully planned album concepts are often camp, which can be seen in the album art, her performances and music videos. Her latest album *Chromatica* (2020) employed a camp aesthetic with its exaggerated, futuristic concept.

As Sontag notes, if one intentionally tries to create a ‘camp’ product, it will not be camp. Thus, ABBA can be read as ‘camp’ because they did not intend to create a camp performance. In brief, camp is an inherently ‘queer’ concept, and it is closely related to the performing arts. Connecting ‘camp’ and queer theory will aid in analysing the queer factors in ABBA more profoundly. By understanding what ‘camp’ and queer theory are, including their history and where they come from help in grasping the queer implications that ABBA emit.

4.1. ABBA and camp

As noted above, ABBA can be considered a ‘camp’ group. According to Susan Sontag, visual aesthetics are an important aspect of camp (3). This includes, for instance, clothing and makeup, but the camp aesthetic has a “particular kind of style” (3). Sontag notes that camp is “the love of the exaggerated, the [‘]off[‘], of things-being-what-they-are-not” (3). This applies to ABBA, as their performance outfits were very exaggerated, and ‘off’, as in, not ‘regular’. As previously mentioned, camp is associated with the queer community, and as such, it thrives on androgyny: “what is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine”, and vice versa, “what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine” (4). This is also applicable to ABBA, especially Ulvaeus and Andersson, who perform gender in non-traditional ways. The masculine aspects of Fältskog and Lyngstad are not visible in the data of the present study. Camp being inherently queer adds into ABBA’s queerness as well. Broman describes ABBA as representing “dance and unrestrained enthusiasm, and ... anything but aggressive and masculine” (59), which are very camp features. Moreover, the male members of ABBA represent very ‘non-masculine’ men, which relates to camp’s idealisation of androgyny.

ABBA’s camp and queer features went unnoticed by the general, heteronormative public because they did not know to look for it. ABBA were a part of a subculture that was hidden from those who were not a part of it, but those who belonged in it knew which markers to look for. Examining

ABBA's music videos and lyrics closely allows us to see how the queer and camp factors are 'hiding in plain sight'. The music videos showcase ABBA's campness in their outfits and dancing. As noted above, the members are wearing flamboyant outfits and accessories, such as golden jewellery. This extravagance in their outfit choices follows Sontag's notions on camp. As ABBA's lyrics and videos offer possibilities for queer readings, and as the group is notably camp, they fall under the interest radar of queer culture. At the same time though, the group is seemingly heteronormative and convey heteronormative ideals. This contradiction is precisely what is interesting in ABBA from the point of view of the present study, and what attracts both non-heterosexual and heterosexual audiences to the group: at the surface level, the group does not differ from the mainstream ideal of a heteronormative, safe music group, but on a deeper level they pander to the queer audience by dressing up in outrageous outfits and by singing songs that do not overtly scream heterosexuality. However, as noted above, ABBA are a group consisting of heterosexual members, and as such they participate in the de-queering of disco culture, camp culture and queer spaces.

4.2. Analysis of appearance

By looking at ABBA as a group, one can say that all the members are cisgender and seem to perform their gender in normative ways. For instance, Lyngstad and Fältskog express cisgender through long hair, feminine body shapes, makeup and clothing style, which are features that are generally associated with women. The men, however, perform gender in non-traditional ways: they also have long hair, and their clothing style is not traditionally masculine. The men's way of dressing is in many cases outrageous and flashy, for instance in their performance of *Waterloo* at the Eurovision contest, and not something that White, heterosexual, cis men commonly would wear. ABBA's outfits were flashy and outrageous for tax purposes: in order to be able to classify these clothes as 'work clothes', they had to be so excessive that they could not be worn during one's free time.

The influence of disco can be seen, for instance, in the outfits that ABBA wore in their music videos and live shows. In *Voulez-Vous*, the members wore glittery jackets: Fältskog is wearing a pink jacket paired with a pink bodysuit, and Lyngstad is wearing a similar outfit in purple. These colours are traditionally considered 'feminine' colours. Andersson and Ulvaeus are wearing glittery jackets in a blueish green colour. Blue and green are traditionally considered 'masculine' colours, even though both can also be worn by women. In this way the members establish their gender performance as 'feminine' and 'masculine'. As the camera focuses more on the women, the men's outfits are not fully visible, but Ulvaeus is seemingly wearing tight, nude-coloured trousers, as seen in figure 3. The

men's outfits are camp, which is inherently a queer phenomenon, and an important aspect of the origins of disco culture.



Figure 3. Ulvaeus (on the right) wearing a glittery jacket, and nude trousers (“ABBA - Voulez-Vous”).

In the video for *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)*, the female members are at the forefront throughout the video. They are wearing casual clothing, which differs significantly from their usual performance clothing. Again, Fältskog is wearing a pink outfit, and Lyngstad is wearing white, as seen in Figure 4. Both women are wearing heels, which breaks the image of a casual event, and further establishes the women's heteronormative gender performance, as high heeled shoes are often considered women's clothing.



Figure 4. ABBA members dressed casually (“Gimme!”).

The male members are wearing casual outfits as well. Andersson and Ulvaeus are wearing earthy tones, such as white, brown and black, as seen in Figure 4. They are wearing jeans and flat shoes, which is very different from their outfits in *Voulez-Vous* where they wore colourful, glittery jackets. Andersson is also wearing a waistcoat which connects to the traditional Swedish folk outfits. This is reminiscent of ABBA’s origins as a folk music group, prior to their Eurovision win. Comparing the men’s outfits in each video, they differ immensely, as the concept of the videos is different. *Voulez-Vous* and *Does Your Mother Know* are set in a discotheque, and the members are clearly wearing performance outfits, while *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!* is set in a recording studio, indicating a private gathering. *Summer Night City* is set all over Stockholm, ranging from a discotheque to the streets, and even a boat. The members’ outfits, as well as the song lyrics, reflect the setting of the videos. *Voulez-Vous*, *Does Your Mother Know* and *Summer Night City* are about what will happen after a night out, while *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!* is about one person at home wanting someone to join them. The contradiction between ‘performance’ and ‘non-performance’ shows that ABBA are utilising prominent features of disco culture to build a certain image that is also supported by the song lyrics. Dressing up to go out was a key part of disco culture, and in the video for *Voulez-Vous*, the members are embracing this, while in *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!* they are not, because the song is about taking someone home, instead of trying to impress someone in a public setting. This indicates that ABBA are not fully immersed in the disco genre and culture but pick and choose which features to utilise, indicating that they exploit and appropriate a culture that is inherently queer. This way they are participating in the de-queering of disco.



Figure 5. Andersson and Ulvæus in *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)* (“Gimme!”).

As seen in Figure 6, all of the members are wearing white in *Does Your Mother Know*. White is often considered a virginal colour, but the various colours of the disco lights make the outfits seem anything but chaste. The audience are mostly wearing dark colours, creating a contrast between them and the ABBA members. Again, the video is showing the members in a performance scenario, and their outfits reflect this: they are flashier than in the video for *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)*, but less so than in *Voulez-Vous*, where the members are wearing glitter and bright colours. Although the outfits are less flashy than in *Voulez-Vous*, they are still flamboyant: the necklines on the men’s jackets are cut in a deep V formation, and the neckline of Lyngstad’s outfit is also deep and reveals her shoulders, which differs from the other two videos. The flamboyant, flashy outfits re-establish ABBA’s campness.



Figure 6. ABBA in white. Screenshot from *Does Your Mother Know* ("Abba").

Summer Night City differs from the other three videos in that ABBA are neither performing on a stage nor recording the song in the video. The video is filmed in several locations, and it depicts the ABBA members on a night out, with other people who are not a part of the group. In this video, the members' outfits reflect their normative gender performance. The women change their outfits throughout the video, but the men's outfits stay the same. The women wear either white or dark clothing, and they are always opposing each other: while Fäلتskog wears dark, Lyngstad wears white and vice versa. One of their outfit sets can be seen in Figure 7. Lyngstad is wearing a leopard-print top with spaghetti straps, and Fäلتskog is wearing a white cardigan on top of a white jumpsuit. Their necklines are cut in a V-shape. Lyngstad is also wearing many golden jewellery pieces.



Figure 7. Lyngstad and Fäلتskog in *Summer Night City* ("Summer").

4.3. Analysis of performance and movement

The music video for *Voulez-Vous* opens with a view of a group of people dancing in red light in a discotheque-style setting. This differs from earlier ABBA videos, like *Mamma Mia!* and *Waterloo*, where the only people present were the ABBA members. Both of these earlier music videos are very simplistic: the four members are standing and sitting against a lightly coloured backdrop. These two music videos show that ABBA as a group do not embrace the dance style that is typical of disco: they seemingly wish to present themselves as different from other disco-era artists, by not performing in the way that other disco acts did. In *Voulez-Vous* and *Summer Night City*, however, the members' dancing is more unrestrained and freer. Fäلتskog is seen raising her arm and swaying her hips from

side to side. Her other arm is held flat against her stomach, as seen in Figure 8. Her pose looks as though she were waltzing without a partner. This echoes the changing landscape of public dancing of the time: Fältskog is emulating the old-fashioned waltz in an environment that is embracing the new style of solo dancing. Moreover, she as a cis woman is showing that she does not need a male partner to dance, be it the waltz or disco dance.



Figure 8. Fältskog dancing in *Voulez-Vous* (“ABBA - Voulez-Vous”).

The camera focuses on Fältskog the most out of the members, which may be because Fältskog was considered the more attractive one of the two female members (Davis). In this scene, Fältskog is dancing alone, which reflects the popularisation of solo dancing in the disco scene. The audience are also dancing without specific partners in a group of people of all genders. Towards the end of the video, the lights start to flicker and flash in different colours, showing the audience dancing wildly, while the ABBA members chant “a-ha” and invite the audience to sing along. This light effect enhances the image of a wild night out at a discotheque. The video is a prime example of the “unrestrained enthusiasm” that ABBA represent, according to Broman (59).

Like *Voulez-Vous*, *Does Your Mother Know* also takes place in a discotheque-like setting, possibly even the same one. It also opens with flashing red lights, which signal a wild party night out. Unlike other ABBA music videos, like *Waterloo* and *Mamma Mia*, in *Does Your Mother Know* the members are moving around more, dancing and clapping their hands. They are not executing any of the typical disco dance moves, such as the hustle, as mentioned in chapter 3. However, the women are dancing together, and the men individually, which reflects the new ways of dancing that surfaced within disco

culture. The members' dancing is as unrestrained and free as in *Voulez-Vous*, and perhaps even more so. For instance, Lyngstad is shimmying her shoulders back and forth and bending forwards. She is also raising her arms into the air and gyrating her hips forwards, which echoes the movements of James Brown, Sylvester's back up dancers and other disco-era artists. This is demonstrated in Figure 9.



Figure 9. Lyngstad dancing in *Does Your Mother Know* (“Abba”).

Contrary to most ABBA songs, in *Does Your Mother Know* the camera focuses most on one of the male members: Björn Ulvaeus, who is the lead singer in the song. He often takes eye contact with the camera, and as such, the viewer of the video. This creates an effect that Ulvaeus is singing directly to the viewer and flirting with them, as seen in Figure 10. He also winks at the camera, which matches the flirty lyrics of the song. With the combination of the wink, Ulvaeus' outfit and his dated hairstyle, this scene reads as camp from modern-day perspective, because it reflects the “seriousness that fails” that is characteristic of camp (Sontag 7).



Figure 10. Ulvæus looking at the camera in *Does Your Mother Know* (“Abba”).

Regarding the ABBA members’ movements in this video, the sexual aspects are similar to the other videos analysed above. The members’ positioning in this video is the same: Ulvæus stands on the viewer’s left, Fältskog and Lyngstad are at the centre, and Andersson is on the viewer’s right, playing an instrument. The men being apart from each other alleviate the connotations of male queerness, but the women at the centre together increase connotations of female queerness. Fältskog and Lyngstad are sharing one microphone with each other, Ulvæus joining them for each chorus. This can be considered an allusion to a group sex scenario, which will be discussed further below. In this scene, the microphone can be seen as a phallic symbol. In this reading, the microphone represents another male, balancing the gender division in the scene.



Figure 11. Ulvaeus, Lyngstad and Fältskog sharing a microphone (“Abba”).

The video for *Summer Night City* differs from the other three videos in that it takes place in multiple locations. One of the locations is a discotheque, like in *Voulez-Vous* and *Does Your Mother Know*. Moreover, the members are not on a stage, but are mixing with others and dancing with them in a crowd, which again reflects the notion of the changing landscape of dancing in public spaces. The song lyrics echo the desire for a wild night out, with sexual implications. Contrary to the other videos, the male members are also seen singing together, though the camera focuses mostly on the women. As seen in Figure 12 below, the men are often positioned with one of them standing behind the other. As they dance along to the music, the scene reads as though they are dancing together very closely, which reflects discotheques’ origins as safe spaces for gay men to gather and dance together.



Figure 12. Ulvaeus and Andersson in *Summer Night City* (“Summer”).

While the other videos are set in a discotheque, *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!* was filmed in the recording studio of Polar Music (“How”). The setting of the video is casual, and there are other people present in addition to the ABBA members. Again, the male members are in the background playing their instruments and singing backup vocals, while the female members are singing at the front. Equally to *Does Your Mother Know*, in this video the two women share one microphone. To be able to do that, they are standing very closely together, side by side. When they are not singing, they are looking at each other and smiling, or whispering into each other’s ears, creating an intimate scene between the two women (see Figure 13).



Figure 13. Lyngstad whispering into Fältskog's ear (“Gimme!”).

There are at least six men present in the video, including Andersson and Ulvaeus, while Fältskog and Lyngstad are the only women. This mirrors the common feature in disco culture, where women were utilised as the front piece of a performance, drawing attention to the group, while men were in the background. Moreover, it reflects the mingling of perceived gay men and perceived heterosexual women in discotheques.

In the videos for *Voulez-Vous* and *Does Your Mother Know*, the members are performing for an audience, while in *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!* they are singing in a studio without an audience. In *Summer Night City* they are singing to a camera, without a performance set. While the verses in *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!* convey an image of a lonely, sad narrator, the ABBA members are smiling, dancing and laughing in the music video. This suggests that the song was indeed meant to be an upbeat, playful song that fits the disco era perfectly. *Voulez-Vous*, on the contrary, is seemingly intended to be a playful song throughout, as are *Does Your Mother Know* and *Summer Night City*.

Fältskog is singing most of *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!*, Lyngstad joining in in the chorus and in the opening words of each verse. As such, Fältskog is telling the story of the narrator, which can make the listener assume that the narrator is a woman. Consequently, the chorus calling out for a man specifically makes the song seem heteronormative and suggests that the relationship in the song is heterosexual. However, in the video one can see that the male members are joining in to sing the chorus, including the line “gimme! Gimme! Gimme! A man after midnight”. While singing this line, the men are often looking at the women, which breaks the queer imagery. If Ulvaeus and Andersson were looking at each other, it would add another queer layer to the video. This kind of choreography

shows that the group were wary of attaching male homosexual connotations to themselves, which mirrors the society's attitudes towards non-heterosexual people.

4.4. Analysis of lyrics

Voulez-Vous, *Does Your Mother Know* and *Summer Night City* are narrated from a first-person point of view. They use personal pronouns such as 'we', 'you' and 'I', *Does Your Mother Know* uses 'you', 'I' and 'me'. In addition, in *Voulez-Vous* the lyrics mention a 'girl', and in *Does Your Mother Know*, the titular 'mother'. Contrary to *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!* and *Does Your Mother Know*, *Voulez-Vous* and *Summer Night City* do not include mentions of a specific love interest. None of the four songs are typical love songs, and prevailing themes in the song are enjoying life and living in the moment, and not longing for a steady relationship. For instance, in *Voulez-Vous* the lines state, "now is all we get/nothing promised/no regrets" reflect this, as well as "in the pale light of the morning/nothing's worth remembering" in *Summer Night City*.

The story in *Voulez-Vous* takes place at a crowded event, and involves three people: the narrator, the 'girl', and a 'you'. This set up excludes the possibility that the song is just about a couple in a relationship. The second verse opens with the lines "I know what you think/the girl means business/so I'll offer her a drink", and continues, "giving out a spark/across the room your eyes/are glowing in the dark". As is the case with *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!*, Fältskog and Lyngstad are the main singers of *Voulez-Vous*. As such, the listener may assume that the narrator is female. Therefore, the assumed female narrator is offering another woman a drink, giving a queer connotation to the song. In addition to the themes of enjoying life and having fun, *Voulez-Vous* is an overt invitation to a sexual adventure. The chorus opens with the titular question, "voulez-vous", which translates to 'would you like to' in English. Interestingly, the line was also used in the 1974 Labelle song *Lady Marmalade*. In this song, the group famously sings "voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir", meaning 'would you like to sleep with me tonight?'. The narrator is defined as a prostitute. In the case of *Lady Marmalade*, the phrase has an obvious sexual connotation, which may go unnoticed by the English-speaking audience. ABBA have chosen to only use the first two words of the phrase, thus omitting most of the sexual connotation. However, as *Lady Marmalade* was immensely popular, the audience of ABBA would be able to make the connection between the two songs, allowing *Voulez-Vous* to implicitly allude to a sexual encounter between the characters in the song. Moreover, Labelle is composed of three Black women. The notion of ABBA benefiting of the non-White background of disco music is further explored in chapter 5.

Given the sexual nature of the lyrics, and the fact that ‘vous’ is a plural form, as well as the polite form of addressing a stranger of high status, *Voulez-Vous* could reference a sexual encounter between multiple people. Similarly, in *Summer Night City* the lyrics “lots to take and lots to give”, “my kind of people everywhere” allude to this. This reading of the songs fits the general perception of disco culture being lewd, promiscuous and sexually free-minded. As noted in section 3.1., several disco songs include very explicit sexual connotations, such as *Love in C Minor* by Cerrone, which also suggests a group sex scenario. Moreover, discotheques like Studio 54 had a reputation of orgies taking place at the venue. The lyrics, “we’ve done it all before/and now we’re back/to get some more/you know what I mean” suggest that the narrator knows what they are looking for, as do the subjects of the song. The song celebrates sexual freedom and enjoying one’s body, connecting to the ideas of liberation that were prevalent in the 1970s.

Unlike the songs mentioned above, *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)* refers explicitly to a male love interest. The narrator is calling out into the universe for a man to appear to “help me chase/the shadows away”. The background music is upbeat and funky, which is the common feature of disco music, and the lyrics reflect the common tropes of disco music: love and emotions. The verses reflect the narrator’s life, which they see as dull and uneventful: “I gaze into the night/but there’s nothing there to see/no one in sight”. The lyrics can also be read as the narrator being tired of masturbating and feeling the urge to find a partner. The lyrics in the verses are seemingly non-sexual, but the lyrics in the chorus take a different turn. The chorus can be interpreted as a wish for a one-night stand, as the narrator longs for someone to “take me through the darkness/to the break of the day”. These lyrics allude to promiscuity and sex, which were common themes for disco songs in the 1970s, as previously noted. As the lyrics clearly address a ‘man’, this song is more fitting to the heteronormative world view and society of the late 1970s. Moreover, the two ABBA couples divorced in 1979, the same year as the three songs were released in. A biographical interpretation would support the reading of the narrator looking to have fun without a serious relationship.

Does Your Mother Know addresses a young ‘girl’, whose sexual advances the narrator downplays: “but girl you’re only a child”. The age of the girl is not specified, but she is significantly younger than the narrator. According to the official ABBA website, Ulvaeus has stated that the inspiration for the song came from a newspaper article about relationships between older men and young girls (“Does”). He wanted to turn the situation around: in the song, it is the girl chasing the man. While the narrator seems to reject the girl’s advances, the lyrics show that they also desire the girl. Throughout the song the narrator refers to her as “hot” and “cute”, and asks her to “take it easy”, “cool it” and

“take it nice and slow”. The narrator acknowledges the girl’s desire: “I can see what you want/ but you seem pretty young/ to be searching/ for that kind of fun”, and concludes: “so maybe I’m not the one”, revealing that the narrator is hesitant about rejecting the girl. The titular question, “does your mother know that you’re out?” further highlights the girl’s young age and suggests that she should still ask for her mother’s permission to go out. Connecting this line with the setting of the video, one can assume that the story takes place in a discotheque. As noted above, discotheques were considered places of sexual freedom and illicit acts.

As with many other ABBA songs, this song can also be interpreted as enforcing the heteronormative lifestyle: the narrator seemingly is male, and the love interest female. The queer connotations are stronger when connecting the lyrics to the music video. As previously noted, *Does Your Mother Know* is mainly sung by Ulvaeus, and the women are singing the backup vocals. Therefore, the narrator of this song can be interpreted as being a man. The women singing the backup vocals adds a queer layer, similarly to *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!*. The two female members join in to sing the chorus, which includes lines such as “I can dance with you, honey” and “I can chat with you baby/flirt a little maybe”, which address the ‘girl’. This adds a possibility of a lesbian, or a pansexual, reading of the song. Figure 14 shows Lyngstad and Fältskog singing together with one microphone. The queer connotations of the term ‘girl’, often written as ‘gurl’ in queer contexts, blur this interpretation. According to the Online Slang Dictionary, the differing spelling indicates that the person referred to as ‘gurl’ is not a cis woman, but a transgender person, or a “female impersonator”, like drag queens. It is also a term of endearment used by many gay men. Furthermore, the way that the camera is positioned makes the scene look like the lips of Fältskog and Lyngstad are very close to each other, adding to the possibility of a queer interpretation. In this scene, they are singing “take it easy/try to cool it girl/take it nice and slow/does your mother know”. This allows the interpretation that the two women are flirting with the girl.



Figure 14. Lyngstad and Fältskog singing together (“Abba”).

Summer Night City contains perhaps the most direct lyrical reference to sex: “walkin’ in the moonlight/love-makin’ in a park”. Like in *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!*, the narrator in *Summer Night City* seems to be looking for a lover for one night only. The narrator’s gender is not evident, and the lyrics do not contain pronouns referring to a partner of a specific gender. The lines stating “I know what’s waiting there for me/tonight I’m loose and fancy free” suggest that the narrator is open to whatever will happen during a night out. Moreover, the lines “it’s elusive call it glitter/somehow something turns me on” describe a stereotypical night at a 1970s discotheque perfectly. As noted in previous chapters, to outsiders the image of discotheques was lewd and sexually promiscuous. “Some folks only see the litter/we don’t miss them when they’re gone” underlines the exclusivity of disco culture. However, ABBA themselves are considered outsiders to the origins of disco culture, as they mirror the heteronormative gender performance, which the originators of the genre opposed.

The gender of the narrator is not evident in the lyrics of the four songs. This allows the listener to interpret the lyrics as they wish, leaving room for possible queer interpretations. However, given that the ABBA members themselves are heterosexual, the narrators of the songs can be considered such as well. Furthermore, the connection of ABBA as a group and the cultural and social climate of the 1970s suggests that, in order to stay clear from undesired publicity, the narrators would be heterosexual. ABBA represent queerness by employing characteristics from the culture of gay and queer people, including disco and camp. Analysing ABBA songs from this perspective enables the pinpointing of where the queer features are most prominent in the group’s performance. Queer theory aids in showing how ABBA challenge the prevailing thoughts regarding what heterosexual people ‘should’

act or look like. At the same time, ABBA participate in the de-queering of disco and camp, and as such their performance can be considered harmful.

Voulez-Vous and *Does Your Mother Know* show ABBA in a performance setting that was typical in the 1970s disco scene. The queer and non-heteronormative factors of the songs are most evident in the song lyrics, which may imply a sexual encounter between people of the same gender, as well as of different genders. As the lyrics do not specify the gender of the narrator, the listener may interpret the song as they wish. In addition, the effects used in the videos, such as the lighting, convey an image of a carefree night out. Because the lyrics of the songs do not refer to the narrator's gender specifically, drawing conclusions as to what kind of gender representations they depict is difficult. However, the lyrics can be analysed based on the members themselves: as the lead singers are women, the narrators of the songs can be considered female. On the contrary, though, as the songs were written by the male members, the narrators could be men as well. Moreover, the way that the members are positioned in the videos, and how the lyrics are divided between the members offer more room for analysis.

Analysing ABBA from the point of view of queer theory shows that, as Hall states, "we are not all "really" any one thing" (101), but we are multi-layered. Moreover, as ABBA represent the supposed 'norm' of society by being cisgender and heterosexual, reading their productions through the lens of queer theory shows how we do not really know what lies beneath the surface of people. Even though ABBA seemingly represent heterosexuality and cisgender, there are multiple sources of interest that can be understood otherwise. Further, by examining the group using modern theoretical approaches, we can see how the changing perspectives can offer new possibilities of understanding their performance. Chapter 5 will discuss ABBA in relation to race. The chapter explores how ABBA represent race by using the modern notions of CRT and theory on Whiteness.

Chapter 5: *La question c'est... ABBA and Race*

The fifth chapter answers the third research question: “how do ABBA represent race in their songs and music videos?”. The chapter first gives a brief background of the landscape of popular culture in Sweden during the 1970s in relation to ABBA, followed by an analysis of the racial aspects in the songs elected for the study.

5.1. *Background of ABBA in Sweden*

During the peak of ABBA’s popularity, “Sweden was a model welfare state” that had “global ambitions and a successful export-oriented economy”, which “allowed people to pursue an otherwise risky career in music” (Johansson 140). According to Johansson, the “malleability of Swedish culture” (136) allowed ABBA and other Swedish music groups to adopt international influence into their musical sound, and the look of the group. Johansson states that “a cosmopolitan outlook shapes social life in Sweden”, which has prompted a “tendency to adopt outside trends readily” (136) into Swedish culture. In addition, “Anglo popular music was adopted early in Sweden”, which included Swedish artists singing in English (139). Sweden’s internationally oriented cultural environment opened doors to artists like ABBA to pursue a career outside of Sweden as well, and the factors mentioned above most certainly helped ABBA in gaining their success and immense popularity all over the world. These factors combined to give ABBA and their team the necessary skills and knowledge to mould the group into a product that had potential to succeed internationally.

All four ABBA members are White, three of them Swedish, whereas Lyngstad is originally from Norway. The members do not physically look racially ambiguous, but the aspect of race comes into question regarding their musical performances. The privilege and dominance of White people in society is important when analysing White racial imagery (Dyer, *White* 9). The concept of ‘White racial imagery’ is often ignored because White people are regarded as the ‘norm’. Dyer even notes that some White people are considered whiter than others (19), and that in the past, Anglo-Saxons, Germans and Scandinavians provided the “apex of whiteness” (9). ABBA are, of course, Scandinavian, and Dyer’s notion underlines the fact that ABBA are indeed White and Caucasian, yet their musical performances are very non-White. Highlighting the ways in which White people present themselves enables the decoding of the meanings behind these representations.

According to Philip Nel, nostalgia for the sources of joy in one's childhood allows adults to ignore the potentially racist aspects of said sources, in order to not taint the positive memories associated with them (22). Similarly, with popular culture, its consumers often prefer to ignore cultural appropriation in order to continue enjoying the product. The existence of cultural appropriation is often questioned, and the responsibility of individuals to stop consuming racist products of popular culture is understated. The thought processes surrounding this often involve pushing the responsibility on other people, because people do not like to inconvenience themselves, and they do not like feeling guilty or uncomfortable for enjoying racist, or culturally appropriative products (see also Nel 22; 23). As noted above, cultural appropriation is often brought to the fore when discussing products of popular culture that are inspired by a culture other than the creator's own. Determining whether a product is culturally appropriative, or simply appreciative of another culture, is difficult. The question often culminates on the level of misrepresentation and disrespectfulness (Elizabeth Burns et al. 175). For instance, when a White author creates characters from different backgrounds in order to add diversity to a story, they are often accused of cultural appropriation. In cases like these, one can evaluate how these characters are represented: if they seemingly are only a diversity factor in the story without a meaningful role, the author may be trying to pander to a wider audience by appropriating cultures other than their own.

5.2. Analysis of appearance and performance

At first glance ABBA do not seem to represent anything other than 'Whiteness', or even 'Swedishness'. In fact, they do not seem to represent any race or culture at all, precisely because, as Dyer notes, Whiteness is considered 'the norm': if people are not distinctively marked as a category, they are considered 'normal', and 'ordinary'. Admittedly, though, this is not a reflection of the whole world: parts of the world where White people are not the majority, the perception may be different. At a deeper look, the way how ABBA are inspired by artists of other races is evident. As Nel notes, this is how "race is present especially when it seems to be absent" (4). Nel's book discusses racism in children's literature, but his ideas are applicable in the present study as well.

ABBA differed from other Eurodisco artists, who came from countries such as Spain, Germany and Italy. Today people from Spain and Italy are considered White, but in the 1970s they were not, as noted in section 3.2. As such, ABBA were able to stand out from other European disco artists. Compared to, for instance, Boney M., ABBA do not differ only by the race of the group members, but also in the way that the group present themselves: the women are clearly at the forefront in their performances, while in Boney M.'s performances, the audience's attention is often drawn to Bobby

Farrell, the only man in the group. Farrell would dance in an exaggerated manner, for instance by jumping and twisting his body, as seen in Figure 15. He would also accentuate these moves by making different kinds of facial expressions, and even by taking off his clothes. This is significantly different from the way that ABBA performed: the members would not make exaggerated facial expressions, and their dancing was minimal. The audience's attention is mostly on Fältskog and Lyngstad, as Andersson and Ulvaeus stay in the background in many of their music videos. *Does Your Mother Know* and *Summer Night City* are exceptions to this. Boney M.'s performance style reflects the styles of James Brown and other pioneering disco artists, while ABBA's is vastly different. This sets ABBA further apart from the Black originators of disco music: ABBA picked the features that benefited them and chose to ignore others.



Figure 15. Boney M. performing (“Boney”).

According to Davis, the ABBA members “spoke limited English” (13) when they first emerged from the Eurovision Song Contest, which painted them as a ‘foreign’ music group, setting them apart from other White artists of the same genre, who were popular at the time. ABBA’s image as a ‘foreign’, and moreover a ‘Swedish’, group benefited them. Swedish women are often considered very sexually appealing, and the image of two Scandinavian women at the forefront of the group potentially gained the interest of fans. The group members’ Swedish accents also added to this perception. Their accent is not prominent while singing, but while speaking it is more noticeable. This creates ambiguity which adds to the exoticism and foreignness of the group.

As noted in the previous section, ABBA do not embrace the dance styles that are typical for disco. Instead, their dancing is more subdued and reminiscent of the members’ careers in folk music prior to the formation of ABBA. Compared to artists like James Brown and Boney M., who would

move around on the stage and dance wildly, ABBA behaved in a calmer manner. This in itself is an example of Whiteness. ABBA do not threaten the status quo in any way and behave in a very ‘safe’ manner on camera. As noted in section 4, ABBA did not explicitly perform gender or sexuality in a norm-opposing way, but their songs and performances include implicit hints at non-heteronormativity. Similarly, ABBA do not defy Whiteness in an explicit manner. In their dancing this is seen in their calm movements: they did not have to intentionally sexualise themselves by dancing, or by removing their clothes, in order to be considered ‘sexy’, because their Whiteness and the privilege that comes with it ensures that they would be considered ‘sexy’. Black people have been highly sexualised throughout times, and this thought pattern has seeped into popular culture as well.

Dyer notes that light effects have been used throughout the history of photography and cinema to enhance the features of White people (*White* 83). Different lighting techniques are used to “assume, privilege and construct an idea of the white person” (84). White lights can be utilised to express the subject’s innocence, purity and goodness, while dark lights can be used to express the subject’s dirtiness and inner darkness. Dyer states that “light culture” constructs, assumes and privileges Whiteness by accentuating the features, such as blonde hair and blue eyes, of White people (122). Moreover, Dyer suggests that the dark-light juxtaposition is utilised to present heterosexual White couples in cinema by the men dressing up in dark colours, and the women in white (139). Importantly, this set up emphasises the “dark desire for the light” (139), and the purity and virginity of the White woman, who is dressed in white.



Figure 16. Glowing Fäلتskog in *Voulez-Vous* (“ABBA - Voulez-Vous”).

The videos for *Voulez-Vous*, *Does Your Mother Know* and parts of *Summer Night City* take place in a dimly lit nightclub. As seen in Figure 16, the dim lights accentuate Fäلتskog’s blonde hair, and the

red light forms a halo around her head. This makes her look almost angelic, which consequently reflects innocence and purity (124; 127). She seems to be glowing, which is a feature especially connected to White women, according to Dyer (122). Moreover, White women's visible sweating has been commonly referred to as glowing, as though to dehumanise them and make them appear more pleasing. Further, Black women would not 'glow', but 'sweat'. These kinds of techniques are used to racialize Black people. As noted above, highlighting features such as blonde hair, constructs and rebuilds imagery of Whiteness. Lyngstad, on the contrary, is under a dark light, making the contrast between the two women striking. As Dyer states, "[t]he white woman as an angel was ... the symbol of white virtuousness" (127). As such, the Black woman would be the opposite of this. While Lyngstad is also a White woman, her dark features act as a contradiction to Fältskog's light features. Lyngstad represents 'darkness' in this scene, which may be the opposite of innocence and purity. She is able to do this precisely because of her Whiteness: she is able to take on the role of an 'impure' character, because she can shed the role when she no longer needs it. Black women would not be able to do this. Moreover, Dyer notes that blonde haired women often represent 'good' people, while dark haired women represent 'bad' people (162). The same juxtaposition is seen on Andersson and Ulvaeus, but as they are positioned further away from each other compared to the women, it is not as evident.

The racially ambiguous aspects of ABBA can be seen through their style of clothing, which has clear influence from other disco artists of the time. As the disco-era outfits were inspired by Black artists, ABBA's fashion was indirectly inspired by them as well. This is an example of content appropriation. For instance, the glitter jackets that ABBA wear in *Voulez-Vous* are similar to what Sylvester wore in his music videos. The ABBA members' outfits in *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!* are casual and not explicitly inspired by disco. The women's outfits seem to be more fashionable and expressive than the men's (see Figure 4). While the women's outfits can be considered 'casual', as opposed to a 'performance outfit', the argument could be made that the 1970s fashion was partially inspired by Black people (Steele 281). Following this notion, the outfits that Fältskog and Lyngstad are wearing in the video mirrors trends created by Black people. In addition, the combination of white and gold was popular, and it was used by artists like Donna Summer and Earth, Wind & Fire. Moreover, as Steele notes, the earlier half of the 1970s followed trends from the 1960s, including outrageousness and retro and ethnic influences (281). As disco emerged in the early 1970s in the Black communities of America, the styles that came to be connected to disco, came from them. Consequently, groups like ABBA who did not participate in the genre until later on in the decade, were influenced by the

originators' styles which had become attached to the disco style. Today when we think of a typical 'disco outfit', we think of what ABBA wore, instead of what the originators did.

Writing about White men, Dyer notes that exposing one's body often leads to "the loss of legitimacy", in the sense of losing social status because clothes represent "wealth, status and class" (*White* 146). In addition, the revealing of the naked body may show the "inadequacies of the body by comparison with social ideals" (146). Because clothes represent wealth and power, without them the "white male body" is under evaluation: Dyer poses the question of, why should such people, who are "so unimpressive, so like others", hold so much power over others (146). In other words, Dyer suggests that a part of the White man's power comes from made up idealisations, or social constructs, that hold no real value once they are stripped off, both figuratively and literally. However, Dyer also argues that the physical body is often used as a concluding argument for explaining social differences (146-47). This theory suggests that White men have gained their social status due to being physically superior to others of which bodybuilders are an example (147; 153). Further, the defined and muscly body is seen as invincible in the sense that this type of body can "resist being submerged into ... femininity and non-whiteness" (153). As such, 'hardness' of the body is considered an ideal, and the apex of (White) masculinity. Other key features of bodybuilding are hairless bodies and artificially tanned skin (155), both of which reflect privileges that only wealthy people can afford: having the time and the financial means to acquire the 'perfect' body. In addition, hairlessness is considered a feature of the 'civilised man', while body hair is often associated with 'uncivilised', 'wild' men (155). Often the civilised man is White, and the uncivilised man is Black.

The men of ABBA do not expose their bodies in the videos that the present study examines. They are fully clothed in all three music videos. Following Dyer's notions, this reflects their high social status. However, as they do not expose their bodies, the audience does not see whether they are 'toned' or not, therefore Andersson and Ulvaeus do not seem to aim for an overtly masculine presentation of themselves. They also do not dance in a way that would affirm their masculinity, for instance by thrusting their hips or flexing their arms, which artists like Bobby Farrell from Boney M. would do. Moreover, all four ABBA members have long hair, which for Fältskog and Lyngstad reinforces their femininity, but for Ulvaeus and Andersson it does the opposite. Still, Anderson has a full beard which acts as a reinforcement of his masculine image, in contrast to the long hair.

ABBA as a group represent softness, as opposed to hardness that is considered masculine. Thus, ABBA as a group represent femininity. In their videos Fältskog and Lyngstad are at the forefront,

and their bodies are more exposed than the men's. As noted above, the women's outfits accentuate and highlight their feminine figures.

5.3. *Analysis of lyrics*

ABBA use non-English phrases in several of their most popular songs, such as *Mamma Mia* (1975) and *Voulez-Vous*. The phrase, 'mamma mia' is an interjection in Italian. The phrase has a multifunctional purpose and translating it into English is difficult. This adds a layer of vagueness to the song, which could leave the audience wondering whether ABBA are actually Italian. 'Voulez vous' is a question in French, meaning 'do you want to?'. The chorus of the song finishes with a French sentence: "la question c'est voulez-vous", which means 'the question is, do you want to?'. As noted in the previous chapter, this phrase was originally used in the song *Lady Marmalade* (1974) by Labelle. The original line asks, "voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir", meaning 'would you like to sleep with me tonight?'. Labelle was a music group composed of three Black women: Patti LaBelle, Nona Hendryx and Sarah Dash. The phrase, 'voulez-vous' has become associated with sex and an openly sexual woman. Therefore, when ABBA use this phrase, the listener associates it with a sexual connotation, but ABBA are able to avoid the negative connotation that comes with it, as they are White. As previously stated, eroticism and sexuality were attached to traditionally 'Black' music styles (*White* 104), and consequently Black people. Because of this racist stereotype, sexual themes in music by White artists were not considered as offensive or vulgar.

The mixing of non-English phrases with otherwise English lyrics adds exoticism to the songs. These expressions offer catchy hooks to the songs and attract attention. In order to appeal to non-English speaking audiences, ABBA have released versions of some of their songs in their native Swedish, and Spanish. In 1979 they released Spanish versions of the songs *Chiquitita* and *I Have a Dream*, which were very successful (ABBA site). Encouraged by the success, the group recorded a full album in Spanish, called *Gracias Por la Musica* (1980). The album includes Spanish versions of some of their biggest hits, including *Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! A Man After Midnight*, titled in Spanish as *Dame! Dame! Dame!*. The members' accents are more noticeable in the Spanish versions of the songs, which tells the listener that they are not native speakers. The use of other European languages aid in the downplaying of the group's Swedishness: as noted above, the group sang *Waterloo* in Swedish during the Eurovision contest, but today few people remember this detail. This is evidence of ABBA's successful transformation into an 'international' music act, in its many meanings. Moreover, as previously stated, ABBA almost chose *Hasta Mañana* as the competing song for Eurovision. The

use of a Spanish line ('see you tomorrow' in English) as the title and chorus hook further shows ABBA's wish to appeal to an international audience.

The lyrics of the songs analysed in the present study do not explicitly reflect themes of race. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, *Does Your Mother Know* was partially inspired by ragtime ("Does"), an African American music genre. Ragtime was born in St. Louis, and became popular in the late 1890s, echoing "the lively syncopation of minstrel songs" with an "emphasis on notes off of the main beat" (Burton W. Peretti 58). Ragtime is a predecessor to jazz (58), and consequently, to funk and disco. The genre was created by Black pianists, who combined "European piano music traditions and informal folk traditions of black Americans" (Patricia K. Shehan 22). The name of the genre originates from the "'ragged'" versions of the smooth and steady march tunes, hymns, and folk songs" (22; 23). One of the pioneers of the genre was Scott Joplin, whose compositions, such as the *Maple Leaf Rag* (1899), are now considered key pieces within the genre (Peretti).

According to the official ABBA website, Andersson has stated that the line "take it easy" in *Does Your Mother Know* is reminiscent of a ragtime tune ("Does"). While the website admits that the song is not a ragtime song, ABBA "found inspiration in all sorts of musical genres" and cites the group's motto as "if it worked, it worked" ("Does"). This motto reflects the ignorance that is at the heart of cultural appropriation: White people are able to pick and choose the features of other cultures that they want to utilise, while still being able to avoid the negative connotations that come with truly being a part of that culture. The official ABBA website further states that this genre exploration, or exploitation, was a key factor in ABBA's success, showcasing exactly how White music groups benefited from adopting features from traditionally Black music genres. This also reflects interest convergence, the second principle of CRT: as ABBA and other groups benefited from utilising these features, they had little interest in fighting cultural appropriation and consequently racism. It is also another example of ABBA's content appropriation of other cultures.

In brief, ABBA depict race in a manner that is culturally appropriative. More specifically, they engage in content appropriation, which involves utilising cultural products from another culture to one's own advantage. Following Young's notions, ABBA's content appropriation includes features of both motif appropriation, and style appropriation. Style appropriation occurs in all four songs as they incorporate influence from disco and all the different music styles that fused together and eventually became disco. Moreover, ABBA's outfits were inspired by Black disco artists. *Does Your Mother Know*

falls into the category of motif appropriation, as it was loosely inspired by ragtime, but is not specifically a ragtime song.

The appropriation does not limit to just these four performances, but it has deep roots in the popular culture of the time, tying into disco's expansion to the White community. CRT and the theory on Whiteness have aided in showing how to parse ABBA's race performance, and how to make sense of it. Utilising CRT has also shown how evident the 'ordinariness' of racism is: when looking at a group like ABBA, one does not notice any appropriative aspects at first glance, but after deeper inspection these features are glaring. As such, ABBA's representation of race is implicit.

Parsing ABBA's performance of race through Dyer's notions on Whiteness allows us to see how the group can avoid the racial stigmas that are attached to Black performers. As Delgado and Stefancic have also noted, different types of stereotypes are attached to people of different races. Connecting this to Dyer's ideas of the idealisation of the White, male body as opposed to a Black body, shows how ABBA take advantage of their white skin colour: although the videos show them performing in a discotheque, which were considered sinful venues, the members themselves are not considered to be so. In addition, despite the lyrics with several sexual connotations, the ABBA members are separated from them. Because of their White skin, and their uncharacteristic, costume-like performance clothes, the audience can assume that the ABBA members are playing a role on stage. On the contrary, as stereotypes of wildness, overt sexuality, high libido and promiscuity are associated with people of colour, Black artists would not be able to shed the 'role' that they play on stage as easily.

ABBA succeeded in their field by adopting images from people of colour and using them to their advantage, which can be seen in the way that they dress and compose their songs. ABBA's racial representation often goes unnoticed, which highlights CRT's notion of racism being ordinary: one would not consider ABBA anything other than White and Scandinavian at first glance, but the influence from another culture becomes evident at a deeper analysis. Reviewing the history of disco in previous chapters has allowed the present chapter to show how ABBA being influenced by Black artists is visible. As noted above, ABBA profited from appropriating the aspects of disco culture that made it popular in the first place, but at the same time participated in erasing the non-White origins of the genre and culture. Additionally, ABBA's use of non-English phrases in their most popular songs adds exoticism to them, which can be considered as ABBA pandering to audiences outside of their own community, or as the group trying to undermine their Swedishness and their Whiteness in order to appear racially ambiguous. Analysing ABBA from the point of view of race supports CRT's goal of trying to make sense of social surroundings and the intention to better them, because the

analysis shows how ABBA represent race. Consequently, the ways in which White artists represents race becomes visible, and these practices can be adjusted so that they are not culturally appropriative.

Chapter 6: *Nothing Promised, No Regrets...* Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to examine the influences on ABBA's music and videos in the light of contemporary sensibilities about appropriation, LGBTQ issues and gender. The study has shown that re-evaluating the past in the light of modern sensibilities is well-founded, as the trends from the 1970s have been circulating back into current fashion. As the social climate has changed since the 1970s, evaluating the original sources of the trends brings awareness to the origins from where they came. The framework of cultural materialism was set to situate the study within the field of cultural studies: the thesis has applied the knowledge that we have today of disco culture, popular culture and the society of the 1970s to analyse a phenomenon from this period.

By examining ABBA in relation to disco music and disco culture, the most common features of disco music were identified in the ABBA songs: repetitive lyrics, rhythmic beat and clipped vocals. The music videos examined in the present thesis take place in discotheques, which shows that ABBA were trying to appeal to the disco market. The songs had direct influence from American disco songs, as Andersson and Ulvaeus were listening to American radio stations when writing them. This indicates that since ABBA started making disco-inspired music towards the end of the 1970s, they already knew what a hit song in the genre should include, and as such they were able to create songs that fit the ideal of a disco hit. ABBA are very talented musicians, which allowed them to try out different genres, and move away from them when attitudes of the general public towards them shifted.

ABBA's performance costumes were heavily inspired by disco artists. Importantly, they wore these outfits precisely as performance costumes, which underlines the performance-aspect of their participation in disco culture. After the performance was over, they would shed the role of disco divas. This opposes the origins of disco, where the genre was used as a celebration of one's true nature and character as Black or queer people. The analysis in the present study could have been improved further by introducing more original artists in detail, and also by taking into account their song lyrics and performances for a more thorough comparison.

The originators of the disco music genre were closely connected with two major minority groups: Black communities and LGBTQ communities in the United States and Europe. Moreover, ABBA's disco songs echo themes of freedom and liberation, which originally celebrated the freedom and liberation from the racist, homophobic, heteronormative society that disco culture and discotheques brought the originators of the genre. In ABBA's music the themes reflect sexual liberation in the

sense that the characters in the songs engage in sexual activities that were frowned upon, such as group sex and one-night stands.

Although ABBA's representation of sexuality seems unambiguous, the present study has shown that the lyrics and videos offer possibilities for different kinds of readings. Thus, ABBA's representation of sexuality can be manifold. The formation of ABBA leads towards a heteronormative reading of the group, which was at the time reinforced by the fact that the members were married to each other. Today we know that the members have divorced, and this offers more possibilities for different readings of their music. All four songs analysed in the study have a sexual undertone, which builds on the ambiguity of the narrator's, and consequently the members', sexual orientation. On one hand, the sexual theme reflects the sexual freedom of disco culture and the society of 1970s. On the other hand, however, the covertness of the sexual themes shows that ABBA were cautious about singing about topics that may be considered controversial.

Utilising queer theory has allowed the study to explore a side of ABBA that is culturally well known, but hard to explain verbally: ABBA's popularity within the queer community, and ABBA's 'queering' of themselves, which is likely done subconsciously. ABBA's campness is one of the most evident factors in the queerness of the group. The study has shown how ABBA represent camp, which is inherently a queer phenomenon. The camp features of ABBA situate them in the queer canon of popular culture, and the tradition has been continued by the two *Mamma Mia!* films. As the study has shown, these connotations allow for a queer reading. As camp is a queer phenomenon, and ABBA are a group of heterosexual, cisgender people, the argument could be made that they cannot be camp. However, as ABBA did not intend to create a camp image of themselves, but it came to be unintentionally, the group can be considered camp.

ABBA's representations of queerness and sexuality combine in the lyrics and music videos of these four songs. Analysing ABBA from the perspective of queerness has shown that ABBA both support and defy heteronormative ideals: on the surface it seems that the group sings about heterosexual relationships and the members present themselves according to heteronormative standards, but upon closer inspection, other conclusions can be drawn. ABBA challenged the normative ideals for heterosexual people of the time, as the male members' gender performance was non-normative. This can be seen in the way that they dress in the videos. Fältskog and Lyngstad perform gender in a normative manner through their physical appearance, such as long hair, wearing makeup and feminine clothing, for instance, high heels. The men, however, perform gender opposing the norm that is usual for men: Ulvaeus and Andersson wear clothing that is traditionally considered non-masculine, such as heeled

boots and glittery clothes. The queer elements of the songs lie in the combination of the lyrics, videos, in the gender performance of the two male members and the lyric division between the members. As the songs support a non-heteronormative reading, all listeners are able to identify with the narrator, despite their gender, sex, or sexual orientation. Different techniques are used in the videos to either encourage or avoid queer connotations: the members are often grouped together by sex; the male members do not sing to each other, but the female members do. Furthermore, some of the lyrics imply group sex scenarios of mixed-gender groups. These techniques highlight the underlying homophobic thought patterns that were growing in society at the time, but at the same time they give hints towards the possibility of queerness, which may be appealing to non-heterosexual audiences. ABBA use this ambiguity to their advantage by pandering to both heterosexual and non-heterosexual audiences. Further research could examine other ABBA songs and their respective music videos from other decades to determine whether the same conclusions can be drawn, or whether the group's ambiguous representation of sexuality is solely limited to their disco songs.

As ABBA are a group composed of four heterosexual, White people, they participated in the de-queering of disco by employing elements that were typical of gay artists and artists of colour of the time. De-queering the genre erases its origins, and thus strips it away of its essential meanings and makes it more facile. As the genre was separated from its origins, it became commercialised and capitalised on. ABBA aided in this by proxy. In addition, ABBA had a key role in popularising disco in Europe, and spreading the genre further away from its origins in a small, specific group of people in the United States.

The present study also aimed to examine how ABBA represent race in their productions. The analysis has shown that ABBA's representation borrows from other cultures. In addition, the study has highlighted ABBA's ambiguous representation of race: even though they seem to represent only Whiteness, at a deeper look it is not so. ABBA have undoubtedly benefited in their career from being White, because society favours White people over others. The racially ambiguous aspects of ABBA can be seen through their style of clothing, which has clear influence from artists of colour at the time. Moreover, the musical style of the songs analysed in this study was inspired by genres like disco and ragtime, which have their roots in African American traditional music. ABBA have succeeded in their field by adopting imagery from people of colour and using them to their advantage. ABBA's racial representation highlights CRT's notion of racism being ordinary: one would not consider ABBA anything other than White and Swedish at first glance, but the influence from another culture becomes evident at a deeper analysis. Applying Dyer's notions on Whiteness has shown how ABBA on one

hand accentuate their Whiteness, but on the other hand downplay it. Moreover, theory on Whiteness has shown how ABBA have benefited in their career from being White and Scandinavian.

Reviewing the history of disco has allowed the study to show how ABBA being influenced by Black artists is distinguishable. As noted above, ABBA profited from appropriating the aspects of disco culture that made it popular in the first place, but at the same time the group participated in the erasing of the non-White origins of the genre and culture. Additionally, ABBA's use of non-English phrases in their most popular songs adds exoticism to them, which can be considered as ABBA pandering to audiences outside of their own community, or as ABBA trying to appear something other than Scandinavian and erasing their own origins. ABBA were influenced by the originators of the disco genre, who were Black people, queer people and mostly men. The influence can be seen most prominently in the way that ABBA dress, and in their use of the typical characteristics of disco in their music, such as the beat, themes of songs and the aesthetic in their music videos. As the notions above show, ABBA engage in cultural appropriation by conducting content appropriation. Furthermore, the way they have utilised disco culture to their advantage suggests that the group also participate in motif and style appropriation by wearing outfits inspired by Black artists and using traditionally Black and African American music styles in their own music. The line between appreciation and appropriation is blurry and hard to define, but as the thesis has demonstrated, there is sufficient evidence to claim that in ABBA's case, appropriation is the fitting term. Further research would benefit from a deeper look into the original disco artists and comparing White artists other than ABBA to them. This would allow for a wider scope, which in turn would assess whether cultural appropriation is a wider phenomenon in disco culture or not.

The three research questions intertwine and overlap each other. By examining ABBA from the different viewpoints, the study has given a wide understanding of how the group's image has evolved from a folk music group into an iconic disco group, even though they only made disco music for a short period of time in the span of their career. Although ABBA moved on from disco at the beginning of the 1980s, their disco image has stuck and today they are considered one of the key disco music acts. This is a prime example of how the genre moved away from its origins and was taken over by others. The implications of the study are that readings of popular culture products change over time. When ABBA originally emerged, their performance was not considered 'queer' or racially insensitive in their own time, but today they can be read as such. The study has shown that by connecting different social and cultural theories, one can analyse the underlying implications of ABBA's performance, revealing important aspects regarding sexuality and gender, queerness and race. Despite ABBA's

flaws and errors regarding representation, they are still a respected and celebrated popular music group. By studying history of popular culture and music, we can learn to avoid committing the same errors, and as such, pointing out the ways in which past representations may be insensitive, is important.

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Appendix One: Song Lyrics

Voulez-Vous (1979)

People everywhere
A sense of expectation
Hangin' in the air
Givin' out a spark
Across the room your eyes
Are glowin' in the dark
And here we go again
We know the start
We know the end
Masters of the scene
We've done it all before
And now we're back
To get some more
You know what I mean

Voulez-vous
Take it now or leave it
Now is all we get
Nothing promised
No regrets
Voulez-vous
Ain't no big decision
You know what to do
La question
C'est voulez-vous
Voulez-vous

I know what you think
The girl means business
So I'll offer her a drink -

Lookin' mighty proud
I see you leave your table
Pushin' through the crowd
I'm really glad you came
You know the rules
You know the game
We've done it all before
And now we're back
To get some more
You know what I mean

Voulez-vous
Take it now or leave it
Now is all we get
Nothing promised
No regrets
Voulez-vous
Ain't no big decision
You know what to do
La question
C'est voulez-vous
Voulez-vous

And here we go again
We know the start
We know the end
Masters of the scene
We've done it all before
And now we're back
To get some more
You know what I mean

Voulez-vous
Take it now or leave it

Now is all we get
 Nothing promised
 No regrets
 Voulez-vous
 Ain't no big decision
 You know what to do
 La question
 C'est voulez-vous
 Voulez-vous

Lyrics written by: B. Andersson and B. Ulvaeus

Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight) (1979)

Half past twelve
 And I'm watchin' the late show
 In my flat all alone
 How I hate to spend the evening on my own
 Autumn winds
 Blowin' outside the window
 As I look around the room
 And it makes me so
 depressed to see the gloom
 There's not a soul out there
 No one to hear my prayer

Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!
 A man after midnight
 Won't somebody help me
 Chase the shadows away
 Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!
 A man after midnight
 Take me through the darkness
 To the break of the day
 Movie stars

Find the end of the rainbow
With a fortune to win
It's so different from
The world I'm living in
Tired of TV
I open the window
And I gaze into the night
But there's nothing there to see
No one in sight

There's not a soul out there
No one to hear my prayer

Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!
A man after midnight
Won't somebody help me
Chase the shadows away
Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!
A man after midnight
Take me through the darkness
To the break of the day

Lyrics written by: B. Andersson and B. Ulvaeus

Does Your Mother Know (1979)

You're so hot
Teasing me
So you're blue
But I can't take a chance
On a chick like you
It's something I couldn't do
There's that look
In your eyes
I can read in your face

That your feelings
Are driving you wild
But girl you're only a child

Well I can dance with you honey
If you think it's funny
But does your mother know
That you're out
And I can chat with you baby
Flirt a little maybe
Does your mother know
That you're out
Take it easy
Better slow down girl
That's no way to go
Does your mother know
Take it easy
Try to cool it girl
Take it nice and slow
Does your mother know

I can see what you want
But you seem pretty young
To be searching
For that kind of fun
So maybe I'm not the one
Now you're so cute
I like your style
And I know what you mean
When you give me
A flash of that smile
But girl you're only a child

Well I can dance with you honey
If you think it's funny

But does your mother know
That you're out
And I can chat with you baby
Flirt a little maybe
Does your mother know
That you're out
Take it easy
Better slow down girl
That's no way to go
Does your mother know
Take it easy
Try to cool it girl
Take it nice and slow
Does your mother know

Lyrics written by: B. Andersson and B. Ulvaeus

Summer Night City (1979)

Summer night city
Summer night city

Waiting for the sunrise
Soul dancin' in the dark
Summer night city
Walkin' in the moonlight
Love-makin' in a park
Summer night city

In the sun I feel like sleepin'
I can't take it for too long
My impatience slowly creepin'
Up my spine and growin' strong

I know what's waiting there for me
Tonight I'm loose and fancy free

When the night comes with the action
I just know it's time to go
Can't resist the strange attraction
From that giant dynamo
Lots to take and lots to give
Time to breathe and time to live

Waiting for the sunrise
Soul dancin' in the dark
Summer night city
Walkin' in the moonlight
Love-makin' in a park
Summer night city

It's elusive call it glitter
Somehow something turns me on
Some folks only see the litter
We don't miss 'em when they're gone

I love the feeling in the air
My kind of people everywhere

When the night comes with the action
I just know it's time to go
Can't resist the strange attraction
From that giant dynamo
And tomorrow when it's dawning
And the first birds start to sing
In the pale light of the morning
Nothing's worth remembering
It's a dream, it's out of reach
Scattered driftwood on a beach

Waiting for the sunrise
Soul dancin' in the dark
Summer night city

Walkin' in the moonlight

Love-makin' in a park

Summer night city

Lyrics written by: B. Andersson and B. Ulvaeus