

## The same old song? Exploring conceptions of the 'feelgood' film in the talk of *Mamma Mia!*'s older viewers

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Labelled as a 'communal extravaganza'<sup>1</sup> and 'the first Saga karaoke musical',<sup>2</sup> *Mamma Mia!* has enjoyed phenomenal box-office success of the seemingly unlikely, though clearly carefully designed, kind.<sup>3</sup> For Ashley Elaine York, the film is a key example of what she describes as the 'millennial women's blockbuster', a new form of 'chick flick' that has moved beyond the original target audience of 18- to 34-year-old women by appealing more widely to younger and older viewers.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the opportunities *Mamma Mia!* has offered for repeat viewing and some highly vocal and visible audience participation are akin to practices associated with cult classics like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman, 1975) and, more recently, the *Sing-a-Long-a Sound of Music* screenings.<sup>5</sup>

The audience research presented in this chapter is informed by such debates and developed out of an interest in *Mamma Mia!*'s cultural status; its appeal as a repeatable and pleasurable film experience potentially problematised academic conceptions of cult as chiefly non-mainstream and male-oriented.<sup>6</sup> However, what emerged in the very early stages of our research, and

continued throughout, was the overwhelming sense that a taken-for-granted element, the film's 'feelgood factor' (a term repeatedly employed in newspaper reviews and marketing materials), had come to play an organising role in people's enjoyment of *Mamma Mia!* Specifically, it seemed to unlock a whole range of meanings and pleasures for members of the very audience group that had been held responsible for some of the film's success, the not-so-regular cinemagoers aged 40 and above.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, this chapter addresses the pleasures and enjoyment of *Mamma Mia!* as evidenced in the responses of 12 repeat viewers (three male, nine female, aged 47 to 81), with specific focus on the meanings and significances behind the use of the ostensibly unambiguous term 'feelgood' as a descriptor for the *Mamma Mia!* film experience.

Our research employed two main methods: multi-method questionnaires, followed by semi-structured interviews. Initially, recruitment centred on a screening at the Aberystwyth Arts Centre cinema, a popular *Mamma Mia!* screening venue, in late August 2010. The post-screening questionnaire was designed to identify repeat viewers, assess kinds and levels of enjoyment of the film and elicit information about people's engagements with the formal aspects of *Mamma Mia!* as well as the potential importance of viewing context (including possible differences between watching the film on DVD and in the cinema). Questions were also anchored around the issue of the kind of film *Mamma Mia!* was for these audiences, and how industry and more vernacular categorisations of the film (e.g. blockbuster, chick flick, cult, feelgood, romcom, etc.) might relate to viewers' general enjoyment of the film. We received 29 questionnaire responses from a mixed audience – young families, students, middle-aged women and men – with eight participants providing their contact details for follow-up interviews. Strategic sampling led to the recruitment of six *Mamma Mia!* viewers from a village in South Wales, five of whom had enjoyed a screening of the film at a resident's hen

night in the village hall. General snowballing resulted in 16 further contacts across England and Wales, providing us with a total of 51 questionnaire responses.

The scope of this chapter allows for a detailed discussion neither of the Aberystwyth screening nor of the overall questionnaire responses. Instead, we focus on the materials gathered during the project's follow-up interview stage. As indicated above, questionnaire responses pointed towards *Mamma Mia!*'s status as a 'feelgood' film for older people who had seen the film repeatedly (i.e. at least twice). Twelve of these participants had indicated their willingness to be interviewed. They were Cath (47), Pete (52), Steph (60) and Janet (64) from Aberystwyth; Alice (59), Amy (69), Jean (71) and David (81) from the village in South Wales; and Jane (58), Ken (59), Helen (62) and Marilyn (66) from London, Swansea and the Isle of Wight.<sup>8</sup> Although our socio-demographic information about interviewees is limited, we consider all interviewees to be broadly middle class and, in most cases, educated to degree level. Respondents had seen the film between two (Alice) and six (Ken) times. Except for Jane and Ken, all participants had seen it at least once at the cinema. Ten interviews were conducted in person (partly in pairs, in the case of Alice/Amy, Jean/David and Jane/Ken), while Helen and Marilyn were interviewed over the telephone. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

While the film was often discussed in interviews as a 'woman's film' (and, to a lesser extent, a 'chick flick'), 'feelgood' was these respondents' first choice in describing *Mamma Mia!* as a kind of film. Moreover, participants who raised its possible 'woman's film' status often added that, in their experience, it could also be enjoyed by men (in fact, for one of the married couples we interviewed, it was almost the only film that managed to bridge their otherwise divergent film tastes). As a result of participants' emphasis on 'feelgood', and due to the scope of this chapter, issues of gender play only a minor role in the context of this study.



We also cannot do full justice to the complexities of individual interviews here. Instead focus will lie on overall patterns across responses (e.g. repetitions, key concepts, distinctions, discrepancies, modalities of talk), while bearing in mind that the scope of our research does not allow for any representative claims or demographic distributions.<sup>9</sup> While we paid attention to participants' discursive strategies (in relation to wider socio-cultural processes and 'public' discourses), we also took their reflections seriously as representations of their cognitive, emotional and embodied sense-making.<sup>10</sup>

In film studies, 'feelgood' has been discussed by Charles Burnett in terms of the way in which it works as a mode associated with the sentimental, life-affirming endings of Steven Spielberg's films.<sup>11</sup> Its meanings for audiences who choose to make sense of a film experience as 'feelgood' have, however, not been sufficiently explored. Within the context of respondents' talk, there was a sense that 'feelgood', though at times difficult to define, functioned to place and make sense of *Mamma Mia!* in relation to other films and film-going experiences, and that this worked in a number of ways (associated, for instance, with issues of affect, realism and notions of the 'fun' and the 'serious'). In the spirit of conciseness, this chapter identifies and explores four main ways in which the terms 'feelgood' and, by extension, 'fun' were mobilised in participants' talk.

### **'Feelgood' in relation to personal, cultural and musical familiarity**

Our respondents, some of whom considered themselves to be long-term ABBA likers, felt that the use of ABBA's music was key to the appeal and success of *Mamma Mia!* They were aware that the film had special significance for people in their age group, and this related to the ability of ABBA's music to 'bring back memories' of, and 'take [them] back' to, their youth and

things they did when they were young (e.g. Marilyn, Steph, Alice, Helen). In some ways, this specific appeal connects with David Shumway's and Estella Tincknell's arguments about the 'rock 'n' roll soundtrack' or 'compilation score' film. For them, the use of pop or rock music's 'back catalogue' serves as a 'vehicle for nostalgia', with films ranging from *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973) to *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) using songs whose style conjures up ideas of, or a longing for, a past cultural era.<sup>12</sup> For Shumway (drawing on Fredric Jameson), this strategic appeal can be termed 'commodified nostalgia', in that these songs are seen to evoke a broad, widely disseminated sense of a decade or era rather than conjure up memories linked to an audience member's life history. As Shumway argues,

if hearing a song on the radio invites us to remember our own past, movies use the same technique to evoke the fiction of a common past. Popular music works because it was and is widely shared, but not necessarily because the audience literally remember the songs.<sup>13</sup>

However, the ideas of youth that the music conjured up for our respondents were very much related to the intrinsic tie between ABBA, their songs and what Annette Kuhn would term 'repetitive' or 'habitual' memories from respondents' youthful past.<sup>14</sup> In some cases, the film's music was seen to bring back memories of ABBA themselves (particularly their appearance on the Eurovision Song Contest, or 'when ABBA were up on the stage', to use Marilyn's words). Yet, most often, it was seen to take respondents back to a period in their own life history, in that the 'period when ABBA were famous' was also 'their youth' and 'their era' (Steph, Helen and Cath). In particular, the songs reminded Cath, Helen, Jane and Steph of events in their lives (relationships, having young children, disco dancing, things they did after college) that occurred when ABBA were topping the pop charts. Even respondents who did not self-identify as long-term ABBA likers

noted that the songs were 'in the background' (Jean) when they were younger. Indeed respondents linked the film's special appeal for their age group precisely to having grown up with these songs, with their immediate familiarity functioning as a source of pleasure (Janet) and enjoyment (Cath) when watching *Mamma Mia!* Liking the songs and familiarity with the songs thus served, for these respondents, as the 'immediate cue' or 'point of entry' (Amy and Alice) into the film and this, more than anything else, made it a film that was naturally and inevitably enjoyed.

In *Watching Dallas*, Ien Ang draws on Pierre Bourdieu's conception of 'popular pleasure', arguing that 'what matters is the possibility of identifying oneself with it [the object of pleasure] in some way or other, to integrate it into daily life'.<sup>15</sup> For Ang, 'popular pleasure' is therefore 'first and foremost a pleasure of recognition'.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, a number of our respondents noted that the film's focus on characters who are forced to think about their past had encouraged them to reflect nostalgically on the freedom associated with life before parenthood, involving discussions of 'spontaneous carefree days before mortgages and children' (Cath) and 'looking back over ... relationships you've had' (Steph). However, the use of ABBA's music in *Mamma Mia!* seemed to function for our respondents less as an elicitor of longing for a past era and more in the terms described by Ang. The film 'pulls you in' because ABBA, their songs and their lyrics are known and recognisable. These respondents *do* literally remember these songs, rather than nostalgia being evoked through a style of popular song that is a vague marker of a past era. And this 'pleasure of familiarity' (as Janet terms it) is inextricably entwined with 'habitual', everyday memories from each respondent's youth to which the ABBA music served as sonic background.

Importantly, respondents noted that there was something specific about the ABBA songs that aided this process – that they are catchy or, in Janet's words, have a 'tendency to get on your brain'. For these respondents, ABBA songs are songs 'you remember straightaway even if you haven't heard them for



years' (Helen); they are songs one can easily sing along to. It was the songs' specific characteristics, then, which seemed to make the pull back to respondents' youth quick, straightforward and easy. Moreover, respondents' relationship with the ABBA music informed the sense that *Mamma Mia!* was a particularly unique experience, shedding light on the appeal of *Mamma Mia!* as a film that hovers between popular music soundtrack film, classical Hollywood musical and an 'ABBA-specific 'jukebox musical'.<sup>17</sup> 'Feelgood', in this sense, encapsulated the range of ways in which the film was seen to pleurably and instantly speak to respondents through the vehicle of the ABBA music: taking them back, pulling them in, conjuring up ABBA-inflected memories from their past and connecting with them through catchy, culturally and personally familiar songs. Indeed, as will become evident, ABBA's music was almost inseparable from the wider *Mamma Mia!* film experience, and continued to resurface in participants' 'feelgood' talk.

### **'Feelgood' in relation to affective and embodied response**

Watching *Mamma Mia!* was seen as a hugely positive experience for our participants because of the 'happy' state that they were left in as the film finished (Jean). They felt they had been 'lifted' by the film (David), that it had made them smile and 'feel positive about life' (Steph) as well as just 'physically happy' (Jane). Both Jane and Helen associated this with the fact that the end of the film features the actors singing ABBA songs over the credits. Marilyn also noted that the actors in the film all seemed to be enjoying themselves, and this seemed to feed into the film's ability to be contagiously joyful and happy.

Of course, this aspect of the 'feelgood' experience could be seen to relate to the oft-acknowledged appeal of musicals as films whose 'musical performances' are associated with 'a joyous and responsive attitude to life' and a 'live and immediate

performance of feeling'.<sup>18</sup> It also accords, to a certain extent, with Linda Williams' conception of 'body genres', in that 'the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, associating a film with the term 'feelgood' can be seen, on one level and as with the term 'horror', as a labelling of a film in relation to the kind of bodily sensation it evokes. Certainly, the affective responses described above could be termed emotional or sensational mimicry, in that the 'affective states' of the characters/actors were mimicked or, in Carl Plantinga's terms, 'caught' by our respondents during their viewings of the film.<sup>20</sup> However, this seems to have worked in a more multifaceted way than Williams' notion of 'mimicry' suggests, and to have related to a range of textual and extra-textual factors associated with the film and its screening contexts.

Firstly, for our respondents, ABBA's songs had always been supremely effective at being affective. Repeated words used to describe ABBA's music (and its beat, rhythms and melodies) were 'vibrant', 'bouncy', 'powerful', 'dynamic', 'fun', 'energetic', 'upbeat' and 'happy', and these were seen to cause (in the film and, previously, when they had listened to the songs outside of the film) the following affective or embodied states: being uplifted or 'lifting you up and out', releasing endorphins and making you want to get up and dance (Alice, David, Jane, Cath). Consequently, the ABBA songs were seen as key to the film's ability to literally make you feel-good. If, in Leslie M. Meier's words, 'popular music's ability to rouse a physical and emotional response' is 'much of its appeal',<sup>21</sup> then, for our respondents, ABBA are the exemplar of this and the perfect source material for a musical's 'live and immediate performance of feeling'.<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, the emotionally contagious nature of *Mamma Mia!* was also attributed, for cinema screening attendees, to the emotions or affective states of their fellow audience members, with participants commenting on the pleasures of attending and responding to other viewers' enjoyment of the film (e.g.



contagious laughter, singing and dancing). Indeed, Helen, Amy, Alice, David and Jean all responded in kind, by getting up and joining in, and this was seen to mark the film, and the experience of watching it in the cinema, as distinctive and special.

Thirdly, Marilyn and Jean noted that watching the actors sing and dance in the film made them feel that they wanted to be (or could imagine being) in the film dancing with the actors. While watching the film, Marilyn had realised that she 'was moving, tapping [her] feet', while Jane, in a related vein, had felt 'like skipping and carrying on' with the dancing and singing once the film had ended. This kind of embodied response to the film could be considered to be a combination of sonic and 'kinesthetic engagement'.<sup>23</sup> In her work on audience responses to the BBC television series *Strictly Come Dancing*, Karen Wood argues that her participants experience 'kinesthetic contagion' in that they 'passionately describe' (as many of our respondents did) 'the feeling of joyful pleasure in uplifting ... movement'.<sup>24</sup> For Wood, 'wanting to join in and feeling involved with the dance are key indicators of kinesthetic engagement', leading to viewers feeling 'active or energised' and having a 'desire to move'.<sup>25</sup> In the case of our respondents, the contagious happiness of the film's characters and (in some cases) fellow audience members, the intrinsic bodily affect of the ABBA songs themselves and the kinesthetic engagement elicited by the film's combination of music and movement thus allowed, to borrow Wood's expression, for 'a multiplicity of converging senses' while the film was viewed.<sup>26</sup>

While, as noted earlier, such appeals have long been attributed to film musicals, *Mamma Mia!*'s potential to elicit such a range of affective and embodied responses meant that discussions of affect in the interviews were more consistently linked with the category of 'feelgood'. Consequently, while, for Steph, *Mamma Mia!* has 'got a touch of musical because of the singing and dancing', it is more accurately classified, for her, as a 'positive sing-along make you feel happy and good

about life type of film' or, for Pete, as a 'happy family sort of enjoy it film'. This illustrates that these respondents are more inclined to categorise the film in relation to its affective nature than in relation to more established genre categories. Indeed, for Janet and David, *Mamma Mia!* could be most closely aligned with the category of 'feelgood' because, for them, the film was obviously designed, by its makers, to be a 'feelgood' film 'from its inception', and this seems to connect with Marilyn's comment that the actors all seemed to be enjoying performing in the film. In other words, the film's makers and stars were seen to be working in the mode of 'feelgood', and our respondents were conscious of this – an idea that will be returned to later in the chapter.

### **'Feelgood' as a (functional) viewing choice**

Throughout the interviews, *Mamma Mia!* was loosely classified (using terms like 'type of film' or 'kind of thing') as a film that performed a key function. A repeated remark across the interviews was that 'if you're feeling light-hearted' (Alice) or if you're feeling down and need cheering up, this film could be pulled out and watched and would make you 'feel good about [yourself]' (Steph). In addition to being able to listen to the songs again, this was a key reason given for why the film would continue to be re-watched on DVD in the future. Indeed, for Cath and Marilyn, a pleasurable aspect of the film is that their 'feelgood' response to it is predictable: 'each time, you know what's going to happen and how you're going to feel' (Cath).

In addition to chiming (to an extent) with functionalist approaches to the study of media/audience relations, this perspective on the film could be seen to support the kind of popular and academic arguments that Charles Burnetts and R. L. Rutsky and Justin Wyatt note have long been made about films associated with 'fun', sentiment or entertainment.<sup>27</sup> For them, these kinds of film, in political terms, are often construed

as instruments of mass manipulation, inviting escapism and artificially heightening people's morale, rather than dealing with real-world issues or problems. One counter to this kind of interpretation is that *Mamma Mia!* was discussed by respondents as somewhat extraordinary, not only because of the ABBA music but also because it stood out in relation to these participants' usual viewing habits and tastes. Pete, Janet and Amy noted that they generally like 'serious' films, ranging from *Raise the Red Lantern* (Yimou, 1991) to *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993), while Steph generally enjoys thrillers, and Ken is predominantly a viewer of westerns and war films. A number of other respondents noted that they enjoy a range of films for different reasons because films can come 'at different levels' (Alice) or reach you in 'different ways' (Jane). Consequently, when asked whether *Mamma Mia!* was one of their favourite films, many respondents noted that it was their favourite within 'its line' or in a 'light-hearted way', whereas other favourite films would be valued for different reasons. It is possible to read these qualifications as discursive markers of taste, as justifications for enjoying what others might consider less adequate entertainment. Participants' talk certainly displayed awareness of possible objections to the film, and of being judged as part of its audience. Alice noted that 'young men with an image to protect' may not enjoy (or admit to enjoying) a film like *Mamma Mia!*, which hints towards a gendered reading but also towards the film's invitation to 'let go'. Furthermore, the film's value as a guaranteed 'feelgood' experience did not preclude respondents from being critical of aspects of the film, such as implausible aspects of its plot. Indeed, the film's story, overall, was seen as an 'absolute scream' or 'cheesy', because of these plot implausibilities (Amy and Helen) or because the three prospective father characters in the film were seen to be thinly characterised (Cath and Janet).

However, when considering the film's function as 'feelgood', respondents tended to discuss the film (positively) in terms of the



lack of demands it made on them. Unlike 'serious' films that 'get your mind working' or 'go to a deeper place inside' or 'require thought and concentration' (Jane, Alice, Amy), you 'don't have to think' about *Mamma Mia!* afterwards: it's 'undemanding', 'pleasant', 'uncomplicated' or 'like reading a good book and it's finished and you've enjoyed it' (Janet, Alice, Pete, Helen). For Janet, if you 'go on thinking' about a film afterwards, then it does not work as a 'feelgood' film, because 'feelgood' is 'instant ... like chocolate biscuits or something' (a comment that seems to connect with respondents' discussions of the familiarity and catchiness, as well as the oft-discussed, non-political, fun-focused nature of ABBA's music).<sup>28</sup> Discussing alternative ways in which the pleasures of 'fun' films can be understood, Rutsky and Wyatt argue that 'fun' films can be seen to offer 'an autonomous space that resists, and in fact levels, the presumed superiority of seriousness'.<sup>29</sup> In its 'instant' ability to make you feel good, and in terms of the lack of demands it places on the viewer, *Mamma Mia!* can therefore be seen to give respondents an 'autonomous space' to enjoy and gain pleasure from a film that, despite the criticisms they and others have made of it, is a conscious respite from the 'serious' films that they also value and gain other kinds of pleasure from.<sup>30</sup>

### **'Feelgood' as an idealistic mode or sensibility**

The most prevalent way in which *Mamma Mia!* was distinguished from other musicals was related to what some participants saw as the film's consistent focus on happiness at the expense of any 'underlying seriousness' (Amy). Drawing on such examples as *Carousel* (King, 1956) and *The Sound of Music* (Wise, 1965), Janet, Amy, Pete and Jane noted that musicals are 'sometimes serious' and 'don't always have happy endings' and that, in the case of *The Sound of Music*, one would not 'necessarily come out smiling' but perhaps be 'spiritually uplifted' by a

storyline focused around good overcoming evil. For these respondents, *Mamma Mia!* was therefore distinctive because of the absence of evil, villainy, crisis and tragedy from the film's narrative and story world, which was considered a positive, or at least unusual, attribute of the film. *Mamma Mia!* is seen to leave no 'loose ends' as 'everyone ended up with somebody' (Jane); there are 'no real serious ... tragedies like you get in some of the other films today' (David); and although other films may have a happy ending, 'usually they'll have some crisis in the middle' (Pete). This might again suggest that the film is being valued because of its 'escapism' (a term used less frequently by respondents than we expected). However, Alice, in particular, sees this absence of villainy and crisis as 'refreshing' because it allows the film 'just for once' to be 'peopled by characters' who are 'like the people in [her] life'. For her, *Mamma Mia!* is distinctive because it is not about 'good and evil' but just about a lot of people who 'care about each other' and who are 'trying their best to get on with life and maybe not doing it quite right'. In this sense, *Mamma Mia!*'s characters bring the film closer to her real-life experiences, partly because they are, for her, imperfect and normal rather than heroic or villainous.

For David, Alice and Cath, this absence of antagonistic forces from *Mamma Mia!*'s narrative is seen, then, as a distinctive factor in the film's categorisation as 'feelgood'. This suggests that 'feelgood' works as a kind of 'modality' for these respondents, which relates to the film's focus on happiness and problematises the film's straightforward categorisation into more established, or widely used, genre categories. Indeed, it is notable that, when respondents were asked to give examples of other films that they would place with *Mamma Mia!* in the 'feelgood' category, they either struggled to give examples (with Steph noting that she 'can't really think of any other film that's quite the same') or gave a wide range of eclectic film examples that cross traditional genre categories, including Disney films, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Newell, 1994), *The Full Monty* (Cattaneo, 1997),

*Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2008) and even, in Ken's case, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (Eastwood, 1976).

Indeed, *Mamma Mia!*'s status as a film that sits precariously on the edge of the conventional musical genre was also related to the perceived playfulness and imperfection of some of the singing and dancing in the film. For Helen, the fact that the film's cast weren't professional singers or dancers made them 'unlikely' choices for a musical. Discussions of the imperfections in Pierce Brosnan's vocal performance were particularly interesting in that they seemed to connect with Alice's conception of *Mamma Mia!* as a film full of imperfect (and therefore ordinary and not heroic) characters. While Ken and Jane acknowledged the criticism that Brosnan had received for his weak singing abilities, they (along with Marilyn and Pete) noted that this made the film 'more real' and less 'contrived'. For these viewers, Brosnan's imperfect singing 'made him more of a real person than this sort of superhero', illustrating that 'you can't have great perfection in life' and that 'life's not perfect' (Jane and Marilyn). As a result, for Pete, Brosnan's as well as Colin Firth's and Stellan Skarsgård's apparent inability to sing made their characters seem like 'ordinary guys', rendering *Mamma Mia!* 'a kind of film about ordinary people'.

This focus on the (vocal) performances of the stars in the film therefore relates to a tension in the respondents' talk between seeing the film as 'fun' and 'real'. While imperfect star performances made the characters seem more 'ordinary', they also informed respondents' appreciation of *Mamma Mia!* as a film that is 'fun' and does not take itself (and its narrative and characters) too seriously. In the same stretch of talk where Jane discussed the realness of Brosnan's imperfect voice, she also noted that this aspect of the film 'was fun'. Furthermore, both Pete and Janet felt that the decision to cast actors who could not sing illustrated that the film was not 'bothered about going for any kind of realism' and that it was fundamentally 'humorous'. This complicated, and quite contradictory, assessment of the imperfections in actors' performances therefore seems to slide



between seeing the actors in the film as characters and as stars, with imperfections seeming to suggest an 'ordinariness' that can be contrasted with the perfect, polished performances associated with traditional musicals. Furthermore, these imperfections seemed to remind respondents that the film's story was not to be taken seriously and (as noted earlier) was all about the actors having fun. In this sense, the film's effectiveness as entertainment was related to Brosnan and company's willingness to have a go at the singing (and the kind of dancing that, to Helen, was 'pretty hectic for actors of their age') and succeeding in entertaining them. This factor, then, seemed to further extend and enhance the film's life-affirming qualities and the sense that (in terms of the story world and the star performances) the film was operating in the mode of 'feelgood' – a mode that, for the respondents, associates notions of imperfection with fun, ordinariness and a lack of seriousness.

## Conclusion

For our respondents, a range of factors informed *Mamma Mia!*'s status as a film that could be most readily associated with the loose, but 'useful' (in Janet's terms), category of 'feelgood'. This category seemed to encapsulate the film's appeal as a culturally and personally relevant, affective, deliberately non-serious and refreshingly tragedy-free experience that distinguished it from many of their other filmic encounters. In terms of the range of ways in which the film was seen to speak to our respondents, 'feelgood' could be seen to function as what Matt Hills (quoting Thomas Austin) would call a "'privatised" or "personal" quasi-genre label' with particular uses and meanings for these respondents that related to 'their own established social interests and cultural identities'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the term 'feelgood' functioned in respondents' talk rather like the way in which Hills has conceptualised the term 'cult'. It seemed to hover 'below genre' (as a personalised film

category) while also, at points, taking 'on the qualities of a meta- or supra-genre' or modality 'via its ability to transgress, transcend, and articulate other genres' (most prominently in relation to the respondents' conceptions of the musical).<sup>32</sup> For these respondents, 'feelgood' constitutes a way of approaching films like *Mamma Mia!* It clearly draws on the term's wider public circulation but also has a specific use and value for them: working to encapsulate the film's pleasures in relation to its specific appeals and characteristics and in the context of their life histories, cultural tastes and film-watching habits.

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## Notes

1. Feltz, Vanessa, 'Give us girls the feelgood films we want', *Express*, 20 January 2009, p. 11.
2. Hunter, Allan, 'So thank you for the music', *Express*, 11 July 2008, p. 48, with 'Saga' alluding to the well-known corporation that aims its products and services exclusively at the over-50s.
3. For a discussion of *Mamma Mia!*'s audience targeting, see Gant, Charles, 'ABBA hit top note', *Sight and Sound*, September 2008, p. 9, and Akers, Anne, 'Mamma Mia! An analysis of the UK's most popular film of all time', University of York MA dissertation, 2009. <http://www.stripeyanne.org/MammaMiaDissertation.pdf> (accessed 17 May 2012).
4. York, Ashley Elaine, 'From chick flicks to millennial blockbusters: spinning female-driven narratives into franchises', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2010, p. 4.

5. See Conrich, Ian, 'Musical performance and the cult film experience', in Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell (Eds), *Film's Musical Moments*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006, pp. 115–31, and Mathijs, Ernest and Mendik, Xavier, 'Editorial introduction: what is cult film?', in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (Eds), *The Cult Film Reader*, Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2008, pp. 1–12.
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7. Gant, 'ABBA hits top note'.
8. Names have been anonymised.
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15. Ang, Ien, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, London: Methuen, 1985, p. 20.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Gant, 'ABBA hits top note'.
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24. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 280 and 285.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
27. Cf. McQuail, Denis, 'With the benefits of hindsight: reflections on the uses and gratifications paradigm', in Roger Dickinson, Ramaswami Harindranath and Olga Linne (Eds), *Approaches to Audiences*, London: Arnold, 1998, pp. 151–65.
28. For instance, see Broman, Per F., "'When all is said and done": Swedish ABBA reception during the 1970s and the ideology of pop', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2005, pp. 45–66.
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30. We should note that, for some participants, *Mamma Mia!* also gave rise to intense emotion, contemplation and even tears, especially regarding the main characters' mother/daughter relationship. However, the film's ability to deal with 'every human emotion' (Jean) in a fleeting, non-tragic manner clearly added to the 'feelgood' factor.
31. Hills, Matt, 'The question of genre in cult film and fandom: between contract and discourse', in James Donald and Michael Renov (Eds), *The Sage Handbook of Film Studies*, London: Sage, 2007, p. 439.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 443.