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Linguistic Registers and Social Identity in Contemporary Xhosa Music: A Comparative Study of Zahara's *Inameva* and Big Xhosa's *Ninyile*

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ABSTRACT

Language in music serves as a tool for identity construction and cultural expression, especially in societies where many languages are spoken. It helps people express their identity and connect with their heritage through words and melodies. This study investigates linguistic registers and social identity in contemporary Xhosa music through a comparative analysis of Zahara's *Inameva* and Big Xhosa's *Ninyile*. This study employed register theory and social identity theory as theoretical frameworks to examine how these artists employ distinct linguistic styles to align with different cultural and generational audiences. This study employed a qualitative approach, utilising linguistic and discourse analysis to examine lexical choices, syntax, and stylistic elements used in both songs. The findings reveal that *Inameva* uses formal isiXhosa register, poetic patterns, and traditional proverbs, reinforcing cultural preservation and appealing to older audiences or listeners. *Ninyile* uses urban slang, informal registers, and hip-hop styles, which resonate with younger audiences and urban identity groups. This study also examines how linguistic registers' variation in Xhosa music influences its role in language preservation or transformation. It suggests that while changes in language within Xhosa music mirror broader social developments, it also highlights the balance between keeping traditions alive and embracing new ideas. This research contributes to discussions on language sustainability, maintaining cultural identity, and how music shapes linguistic practices.

Keywords: Xhosa Music; Linguistic Registers; Social Identity; Language Variation; Contemporary Music; Zahara; Big Xhosa

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1. Introduction

Music functions as a powerful medium for cultural expression, linguistic continuity, and identity formation. It plays an important role in preserving and transforming languages, especially in linguistically diverse societies, reflecting how communication and identity are constantly evolving^[1-4]. In South Africa, isiXhosa music has long been a key tool for storytelling, passing on traditions, and sharing opinions about society or social commentary. Traditional isiXhosa music, deeply rooted in oral traditions, has relied on poetic lyricism, proverbs, and structured repetition to convey messages of history, morality, and identity^[5-9]. With the emergence of contemporary genres such as Afro-soul and hip-hop, linguistic expressions in isiXhosa music have undergone noticeable shifts. Contemporary Xhosa artists adopt diverse linguistic registers that range from traditional poetic isiXhosa to modern urban slang to connect with diverse audiences. This shift raises essential questions about the evolving nature of isiXhosa in music: Does the adoption of informal or hybrid registers aid in language preservation, or does it contribute to linguistic decline?

Despite the growing body of literature exploring language change, code-switching, and identity in African music^[10-17], there is limited research that has directly compared how linguistic registers in contemporary Xhosa music serve identity construction and influence language sustainability. This study addresses this gap by focusing on two emblematic artists: Zahara (Bulelwa Mkutukana) and Big Xhosa (Sesethu Myeki). Their respective songs, *Inameva* and *Ninyile*, illustrate contrasting linguistic styles and generational appeals. The principal aim of this study is to analyse how linguistic registers in contemporary Xhosa music contribute to social identity formation and language evolution. To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives: (1) to compare the linguistic registers used in Zahara's *Inameva* and Big Xhosa's *Ninyile*; (2) to examine how linguistic choices reflect cultural and generational identities; and (3) to explore the extent to which contemporary Xhosa music contributes to the preservation or transformation of isiXhosa.

Drawing on register theory and social identity theory, the study employs a qualitative research design and linguistic and discourse analysis to examine lexical choices, syntax, and stylistic features in both songs. The analysis foregrounds how Zahara and Big Xhosa use language to articulate so-

cial identities, engage with cultural traditions, and shape the evolving role of isiXhosa in the contemporary music landscape.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Music in Language and Identity

Music has always been important in preserving and evolving language, particularly in oral traditions, where songs are used for storytelling, passing on culture, and bringing people together^[18]. Many music traditions and styles are closely linked to ethnic and regional identities, helping communities feel connected. Dominguez^[19] examined how Amazigh music helps preserve Indigenous identity by linking older and younger generations, ensuring that oral traditions continue in North Africa. Similarly, Myrie, Breen, and Ashbourne's^[20] study examines how music functions in relation to identity development for African, Caribbean, and Black-identified emerging adults who have immigrated to Canada. According to Myrie, Breen and Ashbourne^[20], music and its associated memories provide connections to group identity and are instrumental in defining the identities of an individual or group of people.

At an individual level, music shapes personal identity by influencing how people perceive themselves and interact with their cultural environment. Pöder and Kiilu^[21] highlight how individuals use music to define themselves within social and cultural contexts. Their study on music pedagogy students demonstrates that musical identity constantly evolves and is influenced by cultural and social environments. Jackson^[22] highlights how music has long brought people together, uniting communities, nations, and ideologies. It reflects shared beliefs and helps individuals understand their place within a group. Adegoke^[10] argues that popular music contributes to resistance, self-identity, and national representation in African cultures. It can be both a form of resistance and a way of expressing belonging^[10]. To this end, Adegoke^[10] further states that popular music is one of the major examples or manifestations of popular culture, a familiar and common vehicle through which popular culture is conveyed virally.

Moreover, language and identity are deeply embedded in musical genres, often reflecting the experiences and struggles of different social groups. To this end, Nisak^[23]

states that linguistic choices in the song's lyrics affect power dynamics in media and performances in her study on how gender is represented in Indonesian dangdut music. Similarly, Jardezký^[24] examined how French rap music borrows or uses English words in performance, demonstrating that mixing languages in hip-hop challenges strict language norms and symbolises translinguistic identity. Although these examples are drawn from different global contexts, they show how artists use linguistic variation to negotiate identity in culturally specific ways. This principle directly applies to the Xhosa music analysed in this study, where artists similarly navigate linguistic choices to express generational and cultural affiliation.

2.2. Registers in African Music

In African music, the choice of language or switching between languages within a song is itself a way for performers to express their multifaceted identities. However, musicians may sometimes choose to include multiple languages in their songs to attract and connect with larger, more diverse audiences^[25]. African music operates as a cultural archive and a communicative modality where musical genres and practices reflect and shape linguistic identities^[26–28].

Moreover, linguistic registers refer to the different levels or styles of language used depending on social context, purpose, and audience^[29]. Sociolinguistic theorists have explored the diverse forms of language variation based on factors such as region, class, and identity^[30]. Pescuma et al.^[31] explain that registers are a recurring variation in language use depending on the purpose and the social context. This variation is especially noticeable in youth cultures, urban settings where multiple languages are spoken, and traditional oral music systems, where mixing languages, using different tones, and varying styles of expression are quite common.

Therefore, linguistic registers in African music are not merely passive reflections of language but active tools of enregisterment processes through which linguistic features become socially recognised styles^[32]. In hip-hop, for instance, artists draw from informal vernaculars and urban slang to forge a linguistic register that critiques and affirms social norms^[33]. Similarly, tonal and register-based transformations in African art music echo linguistic patterns in Indigenous languages, reinforcing paralinguistic meaning in performance^[34]. According to Konoshenko^[25], instead of

employing linguistically homogeneous forms of local languages, Guinean musicians often use what can be described as 'urban' vernaculars or hybrid registers characterised by the strong influence of French through code-mixing or borrowing. These dynamic hybridisation and linguistic adaptation are similarly observable in the work of Big Xhosa, whose stylistic register mixes isiXhosa with urban slang and multilingual expressions to engage youth subcultures.

Music is used across formal and informal registers, from ceremonial and religious contexts to street performances and political protests. For instance, in East African English, register differentiation is marked by formal stylistic features when encoding information and involving the addressee, showcasing how linguistic features align with cultural expression^[35]. These patterns are echoed in music, where different styles and registers are adopted to suit political, spiritual, or social intentions.

Additionally, youth language practices offer fertile ground for studying how music fuels register innovation. Hollington and Nassenstein^[36] highlight how linguistic creativity in African urban spaces leads to fluid repertoires where music becomes a crucible for hybrid identities. Languages like Sheng in Kenya are shaped by music and performance, creating ethnic and stylistic registers to navigate urban life^[37–39]. Isiaka^[40] extends this by discussing "translingual splinters" in Nigerian youth languages, where musical modality influences lexical and stylistic variation across genres.

Registerial variation also plays a role in genre formation. Malanoski^[41] notes that genres can function as registers, with distinct semiotic and linguistic traits emerging in response to social contexts. This view parallels analyses of linguistic tone and pitch systems in African music, where melodic structures reflect the phonology of native languages^[42,43]. Finally, register-based distinctions also guide audience perception and community membership in music cultures. Agha^[44] describes registers as layered communication methods that reflect changing power dynamics. In this view, African music serves as a public platform where language is used to explore ideas of authenticity, resistance, and belonging within a group. These assertions apply to isiXhosa music, where Zahara and Big Xhosa engage different registers to preserve tradition or provoke cultural shifts, reinforcing and negotiating group identity through their lyrical

choices.

2.3. Social Identity and Language in Music

Music has long served as a medium for expressing social identity. Individuals often define themselves and others through musical preferences, which signal affiliation with particular social groups, lifestyles, and cultural values^[21,45-49]. This process is especially evident in youth cultures and subcultural movements, where stylistic choices in music function as markers of group identity^[50,51]. Music is also important in shaping personal and professional identities, particularly among those who engage with it as performers or educators^[21].

Language in music is more than verbal expression; it encompasses the semiotic, symbolic, and performative dimensions that shape individual and collective identities^[52,53]. Hence, language and music share a close relationship in constructing social meaning. Multilingual musical practices, such as singing in non-native or minority languages, foster intercultural understanding and identity negotiation^[54,55]. These practices, described as “musilingual,” reflect the layered identities of performers and audiences alike and can increase awareness of cultural diversity^[56].

Furthermore, Dell’Anna, Leman, and Berti^[57] describe music as an “embodied language,” emphasising its ability to connect people and its communicative power. Through elements like rhythm, harmony, and performance, music brings people together, creating shared emotional experiences. These collective musical activities strengthen group unity and reflect important cultural narratives and traditions^[57]. This view is echoed in broader theoretical work suggesting that music enables multiple interpretations and identity constructions depending on cultural and social contexts^[49].

Music carries deep symbolic meaning and holds significant political power. It is vital to social justice movements and identity politics, providing a platform for marginalised communities to express themselves and drive societal change through shared musical experiences^[58]. Chand^[59] similarly highlights how music acts as a symbol in social movements, with its use of language strengthening group unity and spreading key messages of shared beliefs and ideas. Here, language is not merely communicative but deeply affective and mobilising^[59].

Inegbe^[60] also emphasises the sociolinguistic role of music in contemporary arts, particularly in its ability to reflect and challenge moral and linguistic norms. When combined with visual mediums like film, language in music becomes a platform where identity is shaped and questioned, and where society is critically examined^[60]. This pairing amplifies the dialogue around who we are and the issues we face as communities. In the context of this study, these insights reinforce the argument that Xhosa music, through artists like Zahara and Big Xhosa, functions not only as artistic output but as a discursive site where social identity, resistance, and moral values are actively shaped

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employed Halliday register theory^[61] and Tajfel & Turner social identity theory^[62] to help explain how the use of language in music shapes cultural identity, influences social belonging and contributes to how language evolves and develops in today's society.

3.1. Register Theory

Register Theory, a component of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), was used to explain how language varies according to context. SFL views language as a social semiotic system, a resource for meaning-making^[63]. Register, in this framework, is shaped by three contextual variables: Field (what is happening), Tenor (who is involved and their relationships), and Mode (how the communication is delivered)^[64]. The register theory helps this study highlight the linguistic and stylistic contrasts between Zahara and Big Xhosa in this study.

Zahara's use of formal, poetic, and spiritual registers frames or positions her as a preserver of cultural heritage. In contrast, Big Xhosa's reliance on slang, informal tones, and humour registers aligns him with urban youth culture. Register Theory was applied to effectively shed light on how these contrasting linguistic styles in music are influenced by their context, shaped by social realities, and charged with deeper ideological significance. It highlights how artists navigate cultural boundaries, making their linguistic choices a reflection of broader identity and societal dynamics.

3.2. Social Identity Theory

Tajfel's Social Identity Theory^[62] posits that people shape their sense of identity based on the groups to which they belong. These affiliations include linguistic communities, where shared language is key in fostering a collective identity and social cohesion. This theory provides valuable insight into how language in music strengthens bonds within specific cultural or social groups, reflecting and reinforcing group identity. It highlights how people use social categorisation to align with or differentiate themselves from others^[65].

Applied to this study, Social Identity Theory supports the interpretation of how Zahara and Big Xhosa use language to communicate and signal group belonging, cultural alignment, and social stance. Zahara's identity reflects her alignment with cultural heritage, spirituality, and the continuity of Xhosa traditions. In contrast, Big Xhosa shapes his identity through bold satire, confrontational themes, and inventive use of language, positioning himself as a voice for the countercultural generation. In both cases, language serves as a dynamic tool, allowing artists to establish their roles within societal structures and engage in broader conversations about identity and cultural belonging.

3.3. Application of the Framework in This Study

This study followed a clear and structured approach in applying the Register Theory and Social Identity Theory. The Field–Tenor–Mode framework in Register Theory helped to identify and organise the language features in Zahara's and Big Xhosa's lyrics. This approach showed how their language reflects their social roles and communication styles. At the same time, Social Identity Theory was applied through the lenses of social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison. This helped the researchers to better understand how language use reflects group membership, audience and identity alignment. **Figure 1** below visualises how these frameworks were integrated into the research process, from theory to analysis, interpretation, and cultural insight.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design and Rationale

This study adopts a qualitative approach to analyse linguistic registers and social identity in the selected contem-

porary Xhosa music. A qualitative approach is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how language is used to construct identity and meaning within musical discourse. J. W. Creswell and J. D. Creswell^[66] believe that qualitative research aims to understand human experiences and social phenomena. This makes it suitable for studying linguistic variations and the use of language in music.

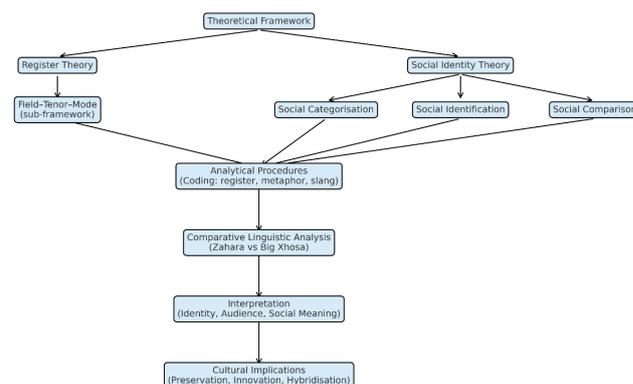


Figure 1. Application of Register Theory and Social Identity Theory in the Study.

The comparative analysis method was also used to analyse the language similarities and differences between Zahara's *Inameva* and Big Xhosa's *Ninyile*. Cocq and Szekely^[67] describe comparative analysis as a structured way to examine and compare two or more subjects, identifying their similarities, differences, and recurring patterns. This method helps highlight unique features and shared elements in their linguistic styles. It uses organised comparisons to evaluate how the language in Zahara's *Inameva* and Big Xhosa's *Ninyile* influences social/group identity. Focusing on these differences, the study seeks to understand how modern Xhosa musicians manage language variation and whether these variations help preserve or transform the language.

4.2. Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Data for the study comprises purposively selected excerpts from Zahara's *Inameva* and Big Xhosa's *Ninyile*. These songs were chosen for their thematic relevance, popularity, and linguistic richness. The purposive selection of these songs aligns with qualitative research methods that prioritise depth and meaningful analysis rather than breadth. This approach allows for a focused examination into contrasting linguistic registers used in the songs, which serve the study's comparative aims^[66,68]. The excerpts analysed

and the lyrics were transcribed, translated from isiXhosa to English, and formatted for comparative linguistic analysis. Care was taken to retain original meanings, metaphoric leanings, and stylistic devices in translation.

4.3. Data Analysis Methods

The analysis started with transcribing and translating Zahara’s and Big Xhosa’s lyrics, ensuring the meanings were accurate. Transcriptions were made from official song releases and cross-referenced with publicly available lyric databases. The translations aimed to preserve metaphor, tone, and stylistic features in the original isiXhosa, including proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references.

Following transcription, the data were subjected to open coding to identify salient linguistic features. These included lexical choices (e.g., formal vs. colloquial vocabulary), syntactic structures, instances of code-switching, and stylistic devices such as repetition, simile, metaphor, and cultural allusions. Each identified feature was assigned a label reflecting its function and thematic relevance. The translated lyric excerpts were then examined using Halliday’s Field–Tenor–Mode framework to determine their register. This involved looking at the content or subject matter (Field), the relationship between the artist and their audience (Tenor), and the method of communication (Mode) to understand the register of each song. This coding guided the classification

of lyrics into formal or informal registers and helped interpret how each artist shaped their linguistic choices based on context.

These elements were then examined using Social Identity Theory to explore how they reflected the artist’s identity and connected with their audience. In particular, identity markers, such as generational positioning, resistance to norms, or alignment with cultural heritage, were mapped onto linguistic features to assess how language was used to perform or negotiate social group belonging. Furthermore, a comparative analysis was conducted to examine patterns and contrasts in register use and identity construction across the two artists. This process reflects the analytical pathway illustrated in **Figure 1** (see Section 3.3), linking theory, method, and interpretation.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Before proceeding with the analysis and discussion of *Inameva* and *Ninyile*, it is essential to present key excerpts from both songs alongside their English translations to help create a clear understanding of their language features. The lyrics presented in **Table 1** below were selected based on their linguistic significance. They illustrate key elements such as register, syntax, lexical choices, and stylistic features that are essential for the comparative analysis in this study.

Table 1. Selected Lyrics and Translations from *Inameva* and *Ninyile* – Linguistic Data Overview.

IsiXhosa Lyrics	English Translation
Zahara	
<i>Inameva, iyahlaba, ndincede</i>	“It has thorns, it pricks, help me”
<i>Ndizoguqa ndithandaze</i>	“I will kneel and pray”
<i>Nokuba le ndlel' imxinwa, likhon' ithuba lam lokuthubeleza ndizofika</i>	“Even if this path is narrow, there is an opportunity for me to move carefully and arrive”
<i>Ubomi bethu bahlukile kodwa ikhon' indawo esidibana kuyo</i>	“Our lives are different, but there is a place where we meet”
<i>Val' amehlo akho, ujonge ngentliziyo yakho</i>	“Close your eyes, look with your heart”
<i>Siyafana, sijun' intw' enye, sijun' ukuphila</i>	“We are the same, we seek the same thing, we seek to live”
<i>Kukhw' induli eluhlaza engabiyelwanga</i>	“There is a green hill that is unfenced”
<i>Mna ndimthembile uMdali wezulu nomhlaba, ngoba wasinika ubukhosi</i>	“I trust the Creator of heaven and earth because He gave us dominion”
Big Xhosa	
<i>Phu! Ninyile</i>	“Phu! You have pooped”
<i>SA rappers umsunu wenu nonke</i>	“SA rappers, your intergluteal cleft to you all”
<i>And'noyiki but besides uBig Zulu</i>	“I am not scared of you, except for Big Zulu”
<i>Nasty C, ukhumsh' int'engapheliyo</i>	“Nasty C, you speak English non-stop”
<i>Stogie T, isus' ingath' umithisil</i>	“Stogie T, your stomach looks like you are pregnant”
<i>Cassper Nyovest, intsheb' ingath' uyibhokwe</i>	“Cassper Nyovest, the beard is like you are a goat”
<i>Bass ingathi unguRick Ross, qha obityileyo</i>	“Bass, you are like Rick Ross, but you are a thin one”
<i>Costa Titch, umncul' ingathi ng'popi huis</i>	“Costa Titch, music is like a doll house.”
<i>They call me 10Pac 'cause I'm 5 times better than 2Pac</i>	“They call me 10Pac because I'm five times better than 2Pac”
<i>And'yity' ikaka, kakker kakest</i>	“I don't eat nonsense, more nonsense, most nonsense”

5.1. Linguistic Features and Registers in Inameva and Ninyile—A Functional Perspective

Drawing on the Register Theory (field–tenor–mode) triad, this analysis highlights how both artists engage different registers to construct meaning, convey identity, and appeal to contrasting audiences. For instance, *Inameva* uses a formal and poetic register with elevated language, spiritual references, and repeated rhythms. These elements connect the song to traditional Xhosa music and oral practices. Such traditions often serve to educate, reinforce morals, and create deep emotional connections^[5,69]. Zahara’s lyrics, like “*Inameva, iyahlaba*” (“It has thorns, it pricks”), serve as metaphors deeply rooted in cultural expression, which means life is full of adversities. They reflect traditional isiXhosa poetic forms and connect with the values of the elder generation. This aligns her music with preserving isiXhosa oral traditions, ensuring that cultural and moral teachings remain alive through her art. The phrase embodies metaphoric symbolism rooted in isiXhosa poetic heritage, aligning with the narrative forms of praise poetry and religious reflection^[70,71].

In contrast, Big Xhosa’s *Ninyile* uses an informal, casual, urban register that connects with youth culture and

street performances. His lyrics feature direct speech, slang, and satirical humour, reflecting the experiences of younger audiences who live in a world influenced by digital trends, multilingual interactions, and globalised contexts. This approach highlights his embrace of modern creativity and innovation in expressing identity. For instance, lines like “*SA rappers umsunu wenu nonke*” (“SA rappers, your intergluteal cleft to you all”) reflect hip-hop’s battle style, performative aggression, and urban bravado^[72,73], redefining isiXhosa through urban vernaculars. This is a derogatory message of disapproval of SA rappers. Reflecting the linguistic trends of younger audiences influenced by digital communication and global hip-hop culture^[74–78].

Zahara’s use of syntactic parallelism and poetic repetition, like “*Ndizoguqa ndithandaze*” (“I will kneel and pray”), creates a thoughtful and reverent tone. In contrast, Big Xhosa’s fragmented syntax, code-mixing, and punchline-focused lyrics show creativity and break away from traditional language norms. These distinct approaches highlight their contrasting artistic identities and the changing landscape of isiXhosa music. **Table 2** below summarises these differences by illustrating how specific linguistic features in each artist’s work correspond with distinct register types.

Table 2. Register-Specific Linguistic Features with Examples from Inameva and Ninyile.

Original Lyrics (IsiXhosa)	English Translation	Linguistic Feature	Register Type
Zahara			
Inameva, iyahlaba, ndincede	“It has thorns, it pricks, help me”	Metaphor for life’s struggle, poetic imagery	Formal/Poetic
Ndizoguqa ndithandaze	“I will kneel and pray”	Spiritual tone, reverence	Spiritual/Traditional
Nokuba le ndlel' imxinwa, likhon' ithuba lam lokuthubeza ndizofika	“Even if this path is narrow, there is an opportunity for me to move carefully and arrive”	Symbolism, resilience theme	Formal/Inspirational
Ubomi bethu bahlukile kodwa ikhon' indawo esidibana kuyo	“Our lives are different, but there is a place where we meet”	Reflective unity, declarative syntax	Formal/Social Harmony
Val' amehlo akho, ujonge ngentliziyo yakho	“Close your eyes, look with your heart”	Imagery, metaphorical vision beyond the physical	Poetic/Spiritual
Kukh' induli eluhlaza engabiyelwanga	“There is a green hill that is unfenced”	Natural imagery, cultural connection	Poetic/Symbolic
Mna ndimthembile uMdali wezulu nomhlaba, ngoba wasinika ubukhosi	“I trust the Creator of heaven and earth because He gave us dominion”	Religious declarative structure	Spiritual/Traditional
Big Xhosa			
Phu! Ninyile	“Phu! You have pooped”	Slang emphasis, assertive challenge	Informal Vulgar Street Language/Hip-hop
SA rappers umsunu wenu nonke	“SA rappers, your intergluteal cleft to you all”	Confrontational, vulgar slang	Informal/Street Language
And'noyiki but besides uBig Zulu	“I’m not scared of you, except for Big Zulu”	Confident stance, informal phrasing	Urban/Assertive

tion. The two-way arrow in the middle shows that identity in music is fluid and may fit with either end or occupy positions in between. Zahara is on the left side, focusing on cultural preservation using poetic isiXhosa, spiritual symbols or metaphors, and traditional imagery. Her lyrical style evokes ancestral wisdom and continuity, attracting listeners who appreciate cultural heritage and spiritual depth. On the right side, Big Xhosa shows cultural innovation by using slang, parody, and bold performances to challenge language norms and connect with young people. His language use shows resistance, humour, and a modern twist on tradition.

5.2. Comparative Analysis of Lexical and Semantic Choices

The language choices made by Zahara and Big Xhosa not only express individual artistry but also reveal how they construct meaning and connect with different social groups. Zahara's choice of words is full of symbols and metaphors inspired by traditional isiXhosa poetry. Her lyrics make people think deeply or introspect, have faith, and stay strong. For example, the line “*Val’ amehlo akho, ujonge ngentliziyo yakho*” (“Close your eyes, look with your heart”) encourages emotional and spiritual vision. Similarly, “*Mna ndimthembile UMdali wezulu nomhlaba*” (“I trust the Creator of heaven and earth”) affirms her alignment with a faith-driven worldview. These phrases are rich in meaning, similar to praise poetry and religious idioms. They help create a persona deeply connected to cultural spirituality and ancestral wisdom, effectively building a bond with audiences who value traditional, thoughtful, and spiritual experiences.

Conversely, Big Xhosa's choice of words focuses on being provocative, wit, and cultural disruption. His use of slang and humorous insults subvert formal norms and connect with the language of urban youth. Lines like “*Ungand’ qhel’ umsunu, msunner, msunnest*” (“Don’t disrespect me, intergluteal cleft. intergluteal cleft, intergluteal cleftest”) and “*Cassper Nyovest, intsheb’ ingath’ uyibhokwe*” (“Cassper Nyovest, your beard is like you are a goat) reflect his bold use of language relying on humour, parody, and exaggeration. He makes fun of celebrity personas, includes pop culture references, and shows street credibility through mock confrontations, which is common in hip-hop lyrics.

These different lexical and semantic approaches serve different identity purposes. Zahara’s use of metaphor-rich

diction shows cultural preservation and spiritual resilience, while Big Xhosa’s slang-filled insults and parody-filled similes show urban rebelliousness and resistance to traditional genres. Moreover, the way each artist structures their syntax also supports their stylistic intent. Zahara uses balanced syntax and poetic repetition, giving her verses a calm and thoughtful rhythm. In contrast, Big Xhosa's fast, disjointed phrases, mixing of languages, and multilingual puns show a chaotic but intentional mix of different languages and a casual style or informality.

This comparison shows that Zahara’s semantic or word choices support cultural continuity, while Big Xhosa’s language challenges traditional norms, leaning towards linguistic innovation and rebellion. These differences are not just about style or aesthetics; they show how each artist plays a unique but complementary role in shaping the changing Xhosa musical lexicon. To sum up this dynamic, **Figure 4** below shows a conceptual funnel that explains how Zahara and Big Xhosa’s specific lexical choices contribute to broader cultural identity outcomes, from preserving traditions to transformation and hybridisation. While Zahara enters the funnel through poetic and spiritual registers, Big Xhosa exemplifies urban slang and performative code-mixing, resulting in different cultural outcomes.

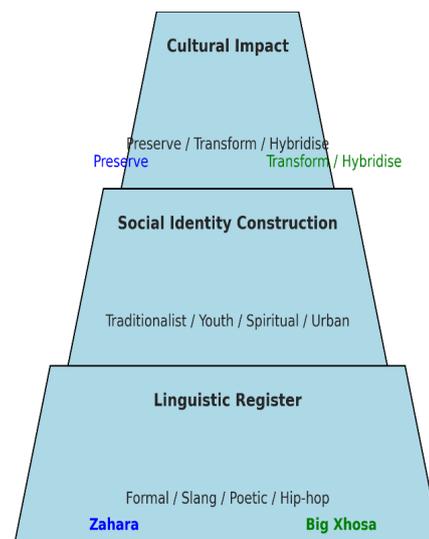


Figure 4. Language Impact Funnel; from Lexical Choice to Cultural Outcome.

5.3. Social Identity and Audience Perception

Language in music functions as a powerful index of social belonging, and in this study, register use by Zahara

and Big Xhosa becomes a visible marker of alignment with either traditionalist or contemporary cultural communities, highlighting the different audiences they engage with and the identities they embody through music.

Zahara’s *Inameva* retains poetic structures and metaphors and elevates isiXhosa to construct an identity aligned with spirituality, heritage, and perseverance. This language style corresponds with the sociolinguistic principle of linguistic prestige^[79], where poetic isiXhosa holds symbolic authority and cultural value. Her register choice connects with audiences who view language as a vessel for cultural continuity, particularly among older generations and cultural purists^[80]. By sticking to traditional styles, she positions herself as a guardian or custodian of Xhosa heritage, speaking from within a well-established value system.

In contrast, Big Xhosa’s song “*Ninyile*” shows how urban language adapts. His use of slang, mixing languages, and casual style fit with hip-hop culture and youth identity, challenging traditional language authority while embracing flexibility and performativity. According to linguistic accommodation theory^[81], speakers modify their speech to

match the identities and preferences of their audience^[82]. Big Xhosa's use of casual or informal isiXhosa and humorous confrontation places him within a digitally connected and culturally hybrid audience. His language shows he belongs to a changing, youth-driven culture where identity is shaped through experimenting with language and performance style.

These stylistic oppositions support the core idea of Social Identity Theory: individuals identify themselves and others through language^[83]. Zahara constructs an in-group centred on reverence, cultural memory, and poetic discipline. Big Xhosa represents an in-group that values creativity, irreverence, and flexible use of language. Each artist also indirectly defines their out-group, which includes people whose values and speech patterns they do not reflect.

Thus, Zahara and Big Xhosa use different language strategies to show their identities and attract different audiences. This difference shows how isiXhosa music is a place where identity is negotiated and either supports or challenges cultural norms through language choices. To sum up this section, **Table 4** compares the two artists' styles, language use, and audience connections across key areas:

Table 4. Comparative Overview of Social Identity Strategies in Zahara and Big Xhosa.

Feature	Zahara	Big Xhosa
Linguistic Register	Formal, Poetic, Spiritual isiXhosa	Informal, Slang-driven, Satirical, Code-mixed
Dominant Identity Alignment	Spiritual, Cultural Preservationist	Youthful, Urban Innovator
Audience Targeted	Older generations, cultural traditionalists	Urban youth, digital natives, genre disruptors
Identity Strategy	Continuity, Reverence, Spiritual Reflection	Confrontation, Humour, Linguistic Innovation
Group Differentiation Approach	In-group: Cultural custodians Out-group: Rebels	In-group: Urban youth Out-group: Traditionalists

5.4. Implications for Language Preservation and Change

Zahara’s song “*Inameva*” shows the preservative capacity of musical language similar to the features found in praise poetry and oral traditions, making the language more visible and respected. This is especially important today when many indigenous languages are pushed aside in popular media. Her song is not just a performance but also a cultural record, keeping both the language and identity alive. To this end, scholars agree that using indigenous languages in popular music helps keep these languages alive and encourages young people to have a positive attitude towards them^[4,84].

Zahara’s language style attracts audiences of all ages and shows that isiXhosa can still be poetic and expressive in contemporary music.

In contrast, Big Xhosa’s song “*Ninyile*” shows how language can transform and adapt. His lyrics mix isiXhosa with English and Afrikaans, use slang and insults, and have rapid, changing syntactic structures. From a sociolinguistic view, these features might seem unsettling, but they also show how language naturally evolves in fast-moving, urban youth cultures, helping languages stay functional and relevant across generations^[85–88]. Big Xhosa transforms isiXhosa into a tool for expressing identity in the digital age, using playfulness and hybridity to make it easy to understand.

Although language purists might criticise this style as harming isiXhosa, many sociolinguists believe that change is essential for a language to survive. Big Xhosa's use of multiple languages shows how isiXhosa can be adapted, not erased. By changing the language to fit modern times, he makes sure isiXhosa stays relevant on youth-focused digital platforms like social media, streaming, and freestyle battles. However, this evolution does not diminish Zahara's contribution. Instead, it shows that both artists play different but complementary roles. Zahara strengthens the roots of isiXhosa, while Big Xhosa extends its reach into new cultural areas. Their different styles highlight that preserving and transforming a language are not opposites but processes that depend on each other. Preservation ensures cultural depth, while transformation ensures relevance.

In the end, contemporary Xhosa music serves two purposes: it protects tradition and welcomes innovations. Whether people like Zahara's spiritual lyrics or Big Xhosa's humorous and parody lines, both styles use isiXhosa as a living language that honours its history while adapting to the present.

5.5. Reconciling Preservation and Transformation

Rather than treating preservation and transformation as opposing forces, this paper argues that both dynamics can and do coexist within contemporary Xhosa music. Zahara and Big Xhosa exemplify a linguistic continuum: while Zahara draws on isiXhosa's traditional forms to maintain cultural memory, Big Xhosa adapts the language for urban, youth-centred expression. Both artists represent a unique but complementary approach that keeps isiXhosa relevant for all generations

The coexistence of both linguistic strategies illustrates the dual function of music as a site of preservation and innovation. Zahara's work preserves linguistic form and spiritual narrative; Big Xhosa retools isiXhosa for relevance in contemporary discourse. Each artist's style responds to social and generational changes, making sure that isiXhosa is not only preserved but also used in new cultural settings.

This perspective fits with the bigger picture of how languages work in society, showing that it is important to keep minority and indigenous languages alive by being flexible and keeping them going^[88–90]. Just like Zahara's songs

connect people to their culture, Big Xhosa's changes make sure isiXhosa stays relevant by being creative and fun. In the end, Xhosa music creates a language environment where keeping the language alive does not mean it stays the same, and changing it does not mean losing it. This convergence shows that musical language, like culture, should preserve its history and memory while moving forward.

6. Conclusions

This study examined how linguistic registers are used to construct social identity in contemporary Xhosa music, focusing on Zahara's *Inameva* and Big Xhosa's *Ninyile*. The findings show that Zahara uses formal, poetic isiXhosa to reflect cultural preservation and spiritual connections, while Big Xhosa uses slang, humour, and mixing languages to express urban identity and linguistic innovation. These different styles show how isiXhosa music balances tradition and transformation. Zahara keeps the language and culture alive, while Big Xhosa brings isiXhosa into new social and digital spaces. Instead of being opposites, their language use shows that keeping traditions and transformation can coexist, sustaining the relevance and vitality of isiXhosa in contemporary expression.

Author Contributions

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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