

A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF GRIEF, METAPHOR, AND IDENTITY IN THE LYRICS OF NICKI MINAJ

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Abstract

This study investigates how language in popular music functions as a performative tool for expressing grief and constructing identity. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and the Sociolinguistics of Identity, the paper conducts a detailed linguistic analysis of four autobiographical songs by Nicki Minaj: “*Autobiography*,” “*All Things Go*,” “*Last Time I Saw You*,” and “*Are You Gone Already*.” The research explores how metaphor, deixis, evaluative language, and narrative stance reveal the singer’s evolving affective and social self. Through CMT, recurring metaphors such as Life Is a Journey, Grief Is a Weight, And Time is a Thief are decoded to show how abstract emotional states are conceptualized through embodied and experiential language. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the analysis demonstrates how Minaj positions herself within multiple shifting identities—artist, daughter, mother, and sister—while negotiating trauma, loss, and fame. The findings reveal that language in Minaj’s lyrics operates not only as aesthetic expression but also as an index of emotional labour and identity performance. This paper contributes to growing scholarship at the intersection of linguistics, music, and affect by demonstrating how autobiographical rap lyrics serve as a meaningful site for identity construction and emotional narration. It argues for the inclusion of hip-hop texts as valid and necessary material for linguistic analysis, especially in the African American and global diasporic cultural context.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Sociolinguistics of Identity, Nicki Minaj, Grief Discourse

1.0 Introduction

The language of contemporary rap and hip-hop is more than lyrical performance—it is a discursive space for negotiating identity, trauma, and social meaning. In particular, the use of autobiographical content and emotional vulnerability in rap lyrics challenges long-held assumptions about the genre’s association with hypermasculinity and bravado. Artists like Nicki Minaj harness the poetic potential of language to give voice to complex emotional experiences such as grief, self-doubt, and familial loss. In doing so, they perform the self through linguistic choices that are both intensely personal and socially resonant (Morgan, 2009; Alim, 2006). Language in music has long served as a vehicle for cultural memory and identity formation. Within African oral traditions, the articulation of grief and loss is central to the expressive genres of dirge, chant, and lament. These oral forms draw heavily on metaphor,

repetition, and narrative framing to encode community values and confront mortality (Okpewho, 1992). African American musical traditions—including blues, gospel, and hip-hop—inherit this linguistic legacy, using metaphor and stylized storytelling to voice individual and collective suffering (Dyson, 2007). Despite growing scholarship in rap linguistics and sociolinguistics, few studies have directly interrogated how artists use language to perform grief and trauma within the lyrical form (Cutler, 2007; Ibrahim, 2011). Even less attention has been given to the role of linguistic identity construction in the expression of affect, particularly among female artists navigating gendered spaces in rap culture. This underexplored intersection of grief, identity, and linguistic performance forms the central concern of this study.

Nicki Minaj, born Onika Tanya Maraj, is one of the most influential and stylistically

versatile figures in contemporary hip-hop. Rising to prominence in the late 2000s, Minaj quickly established a reputation for her rapid-fire flow, theatrical alter egos, and genre-blending approach that spans hip-hop, pop, and R&B (Hess, 2016). Her discography reveals a deep engagement with themes of female empowerment, fame, mental health, and personal loss (Love, 2019). While much of her public image is marked by bravado and flamboyance, Minaj's more introspective tracks often reflect a layered and emotionally rich narrative voice. Songs such as "Autobiography," "All Things Go," and "Last Time I Saw You" reveal a lyrical vulnerability that complicates the dominant perception of her persona (Halliday & Brown, 2018). By centring grief, abandonment, and longing, these works foreground the affective dimensions of Minaj's artistry and offer fertile ground for examining how linguistic form constructs emotional experience.

This research is grounded in a dual-theoretical framework combining the Sociolinguistics of Identity and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Accordingly, the aim of this study is to investigate how Nicki Minaj linguistically performs grief and constructs selfhood in selected autobiographical songs. The study pursues three objectives:

1. To analyse the discursive and metaphorical strategies through which grief is linguistically encoded;
2. To identify how linguistic features—such as deixis, repetition, and metaphor—construct an autobiographical narrative;
3. To examine how these strategies, contribute to the performance of gendered, diasporic, and affective identity in Minaj's music.

The study contributes to ongoing discourse in language arts, sociolinguistics, and cross-cultural communication by demonstrating how grief, identity, and memory are constructed through language in contemporary music.

2.0 Literature Review

This literature review situates grief, identity, metaphor, and gendered linguistic performance at the intersection of rap music and linguistic analysis, particularly examining how these elements converge uniquely in the work of

female artists. While extensive research addresses the linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of hip-hop, few studies explore grief as a structured language strategy.

2.1 Rap Music and Emotional Expression

Over the past two decades, scholarship has increasingly documented the role of emotional disclosure in rap. Early scholarship by Cutler (2007) highlighted how language in rap constructs authenticity, primarily through coded toughness, yet left affective presence largely underexamined. Recent quantitative content studies have begun exploring emotional content more directly. For instance, Alexander (2020) reports a marked rise in mental-health references—depression, grief, trauma—in top rap tracks between 1998 and 2018.

This finding is supported by Wen et al. (2025), who show that songs labelled as "coping music" were widely used during times of collective distress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Both studies offer compelling context: rap is no longer confined to bravado and street discourse but serves as a public avenue for mourning and mental health expression. However, these studies remain largely genre-wide; they do not delve into how artists linguistically encode grief or how this encoding interacts with identity, especially for female rappers.

2.2 Metaphor Theory and the Language of Grief

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has been instrumental in uncovering how abstract experiences—especially grief—are given concrete expression through metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) pioneered the understanding that humans conceptualize emotions via spatial, physical, and container schemas (e.g., "heartache is heavy"). Building on this, Kastner (2025) conducted a corpus study of popular songs, revealing dominant grief metaphors— "loss is absence," "grief is burden," "sorrow is physical force." These metaphor patterns are instrumental for emotional resonance and enable listeners to linguistically track the shape of sorrow. Still, existing studies rarely combine metaphor mapping with analysis of linguistic performance or identity work in rap. This study addresses that gap by applying CMT to Minaj's lyrics to identify how metaphorical construction of grief becomes an identity marker.

2.3 Linguistic Performance and Identity Construction in Hip-Hop

Rap is a prime site for linguistic innovation, including code-switching, dialectal variation, and stylistic elaboration. Cutler (2007) asserts rap's language is performative, constructing individual and communal identity through recognizable socio-linguistic markers. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) further theorize identity as relational, emergent, and indexical. They argue that linguistic choices—lexical, phonological, narrative—anchor identity within social space. Drawing on these frameworks, Brown (2024) details how rappers construct persona through strategic language shift and narrative framing. While Brown's dissertation is expansive, it primarily examines male artists. The present study focuses on Nicki Minaj—a female rapper navigating rap's gendered discourse space—examining how she uses deictic framing, first-person narrative, and stylized code-switching to position herself as vulnerable yet strong, intimate yet public.

2.4 Grief Across Rap Subgenres

Though scholarship on drill, trap, and gangsta rap has illuminated grief as communal trauma, these genres treat sorrow differently than autobiographical rap. In their analysis of drill music, Walk and Chen (2018) find grief is expressed through themes of loss, violence, and vengeance—rooted in community trauma and coded through aggressive lyrical tone. While their work is deeply valuable, it does not address intimate grief narratives or gendered emotional expression. In contrast, Nicki Minaj's grief lyrics, while autobiographical, may share thematic echoes of loss and survival but are performed through nuanced emotional language and self-fashioning strategies. Comparing Minaj's rhetoric with these genres reveals how grief operates differently across rap subgenres, situating it within female lyrical subjectivity rather than collective trauma discourse.

2.5 Gendered Identity and Emotional Disclosure in Female Rap

Female rappers constantly negotiate the tension between toughness, sexuality, and vulnerability. Pough (2007) notes the emergence

of “raunch culture”—a discursive phenomenon where women use explicit language, sexuality, and performative confidence to counter misogynistic tropes. Minaj exemplifies this through lyrics that are sexualized yet emotionally raw. Ireland (2017) specifically studies Lady Gaga, Young M.A., and Nicki Minaj, noting that Minaj foregrounds vulnerability—especially grief—as a strategic tool to construct a multifaceted identity that defies stereotypes. Durán (2023) examines Minaj's lyricism in feminist contexts, arguing that her expressions of grief undermine the assumption that female rap must be sexually charged or instrumental. These studies suggest that grief is not only emotionally resonant but also rhetorically powerful. What remains unstudied, however, is how grief, as performed through language, functions as a sign of identity and empowerment.

3.0 Materials and Methods

3.1 Corpus Selection and Rationalization

A purposive corpus of four autobiographical songs by Nicki Minaj was selected—“Last Time I Saw You,” “Autobiography,” “All Things Go,” and “Are You Gone Already.” These tracks, spanning official album releases, were chosen for their explicit emotional content and public expressions of grief, making them ideal for discourse and metaphor analysis. Together, these songs represent varied narrative contexts—personal loss, mental disintegration, relational rupture—and offer a coherent window into the artist's grief performance (Wen, Smith, & Liu, 2025). The selection conforms to qualitative discourse analysis standards, focusing on depth of interpretation rather than corpus breadth (Walk & Chen, 2018; Brown, 2024).

3.2 Theoretical Framework

3.2.1 Sociolinguistics of Identity

Grounded in Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) theory, this study views identity as dynamically constructed through discourse. Language markers such as indexicality, deixis, and style-shifting are treated as signals of self-positioning. We trace how Minaj uses first-person pronouns, emotional distance, or self-reference to modulate her persona and authorial stance.

3.2.2 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) model posits that abstract domains (e.g., "grief") are cognitively structured via source domains like physical burden or spatial loss. Methodologically, this study follows the "metaphor identification procedure" and source-target mapping used in music lyric analysis by Vuong (2025) and Christensson (2021), allowing systematic detection of grief metaphors.

3.3 Analytical Procedures

3.3.1 Transcription and Data Preparation

Full lyrical transcriptions were obtained from verified lyric databases and cross-checked with album liner notes.

3.3.2 Metaphor Identification

Using CMT mapping procedures (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) adapted for lyrics (Vuong, 2025; Christensson, 2021), the analysis:

1. Identified lexical expressions reflecting grief or loss.
2. Mapped these onto source-target conceptual mappings (e.g., "grief is burden").
3. Categorized metaphor groups for narrative function and identity construction.

3.3.3 Discourse and Identity Analysis

Employing a discourse-analytic lens (Walker & Chen, 2018; Brown, 2024), the study examines:

- Pronoun usage (first-person, collective, zero-person forms).
- Code-shifting between Standard English and AAVE or dialectal forms.
- Narrative and temporal framing (flashbacks, present-tense immediacy).
- Emotional tone and intensification strategies (repetition, hyperbole, clash of lexical frames).

3.4 Limitations Acknowledged

- Analysis relies exclusively on textual transcriptions, without performance elements like melody or rhythm, which can affect interpretation (Vuong, 2025).
- Only four songs were analysed; while offering analytical depth, the findings should not be generalized to all Nicki Minaj or female rap artists.

- The RQ-driven metaphor identification is qualitative, limiting external validity—future work could combine frequency analysis or cognitive interview methods (e.g., Vuong, 2025).

4.0 Results: Mapping Identity, Grief, and Self-Performance in Lyrics

This section presents the analytical findings derived from a close reading of four selected songs by Nicki Minaj—*All Things Go*, *Are You Gone Already*, *Autobiography*, and *Last Time I Saw You*—using a dual framework that combines Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and the Sociolinguistics of Identity. Contemporary rap and pop lyrics often function as autobiographical spaces, allowing artists to craft hybrid identities that intersect with race, gender, class, and affective labour (Bradley, 2017; Hess, 2016). In the case of Nicki Minaj, such performances frequently blur the line between public persona and private vulnerability, providing a complex discursive terrain for semiotic and sociolinguistic analysis. Drawing on CMT, this section examines how metaphors such as *grief is guilt*, *time is motion*, and *emotion is containment* structure the ways in which Minaj linguistically negotiates loss, motherhood, success, and identity transformation (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Kövecses, 2010).

Simultaneously, using principles from the Sociolinguistics of Identity, this section foregrounds how Minaj's shifting use of personal pronouns, affective stance, code-switching, and deixis mark various identity positions—including daughter, sister, mother, survivor, and artist—constructed within and through discourse (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). These performances are contextually rooted in African American cultural expression and hip-hop's discursive practices, which function as both narrative strategy and social critique (Alim, 2006; Cutler, 2014).

4.1 All Things Go: Grief as Moral Inheritance and Temporal Identity

Nicki Minaj's "*All Things Go*" is a thematically dense elegy that reconfigures grief, guilt, love, and legacy as components of

autobiographical identity. The lyrics map emotional terrain through metaphorical and indexical structures that encode the artist's lived contradictions. The performance moves through time, memory, and social obligations, constructing an identity that is simultaneously public and private, resilient and remorseful.

4.1.1 Grief is Guilt: Metaphorizing Responsibility and Omission

Minaj's statement:

"I lost my little cousin to a senseless act of violence / His sister said he wanted to stay with me, but I didn't invite him"

unfolds as a highly compressed metaphorical structure. Within CMT, this passage reflects the mapping *grief is guilt*, wherein the source domain of moral omission (failing to invite) is mapped onto the target domain of death and loss. The agency reversal—where the singer imagines herself as potentially preventing tragedy—turns grief into a space of moral reckoning. The metaphoric construction is intensified by the follow-up rhetorical reflection:

"Why didn't he ask? Or am I just buggin'?"

This is a linguistic enactment of accountability. Through the rhetorical shift, Minaj blurs causality, underscoring *grief as interpretive uncertainty*. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this forms part of what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) call *positionality*—she claims subjectivity as a survivor and as someone haunted by inaction. The use of the informal *buggin'* retains her performative alignment with AAVE (African American Vernacular English), thus indexing her cultural authenticity.

4.1.2 Time is Loss: Temporal Compression and Emotional Density

Temporal deixis is central to this song's construction of memory. In:

"Cherish these days, man, do they go quick / Just yesterday, I swear it was '06 / Ten years ago, that's when you proposed"

Minaj employs compressed time frames that dramatize the metaphor *time is fleeting motion*. The juxtaposition of "'06" and "ten years ago" works as a double-layered *temporal anaphora*—invoking a remembered moment with intensified emotional clarity. Through this mapping, *grief*

becomes time travel, where memory loops redefine identity.

CMT elucidates how experiential time is containerized and collapsed, while socio-linguistically, this demonstrates *reflexive identity positioning*—Minaj articulates who she has become by anchoring her evolving self to precise but emotionally disordered time points.

4.1.3 Layered Selves and Role Conflict: Private vs. Public Woman

A recurring identity contrast emerges in lines such as:

"And I know Jelani will always love me and I'll always love him / And I'm just his little sister, not Nicki Minaj when I'm around him"

Here, Minaj performs deictic identity modulation. "Nicki Minaj" operates as a symbolic construct of public identity, while "little sister" denotes her relational footing (Goffman, 1981). This is a classic indexical contrast, showcasing what De Fina (2006) refers to as *contextual identity shifts*. The persona bifurcation enacts *grief as social role conflict*.

Further, in:

"I love my mother more than life itself and that's a fact / I'd give it all if somehow I could just rekindle that"

Minaj uses metaphorical expression (*rekindle*) to signify emotional reconnection. Within CMT, *love is fire*, and *estrangement is extinguished flame*. This metaphor reinforces how relational gaps are framed as failed emotional energy, and thereby *grief becomes emotional entropy*.

4.1.4 Living Substitution: Children as Vessels of the Lost

Perhaps the most layered metaphor is:

"My child with Aaron woulda been sixteen any minute / So in some ways I feel like 'Caiah is the both of them"

This expresses *grief as substitutional parenting*. According to Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) conceptual integration theory, the identity of the lost child and the living child blend into a single symbolic construct. Minaj reanimates the lost child within the living one—a mythic transfer that mythologizes parental love.

This metaphor becomes theological in:

"It's like he's 'Caiah's little angel lookin' over

him”

The lost becomes protector; death becomes guardian mythology. From a sociolinguistic standpoint, this enactment affirms *Minaj’s maternal identity as relational and redemptive*—she does not “move on” from grief but incorporates it into ongoing self-definition.

4.2 Are You Gone Already: Dialogues with the Departed and Fragmented Selfhood

Nicki Minaj’s “Are You Gone Already”, featuring Billie Eilish, constructs a layered, introspective exploration of maternal grief, fractured identity, and unresolved communication with the dead. The duet structure allows for a unique semiotic and linguistic blend between emotional restraint (Billie Eilish) and emotional unravelling (Nicki Minaj). Through fragmented syntax, metaphorical saturation, and overlapping voices, the lyrics dramatize the *self* as split between memory and mourning, public persona and private collapse.

4.2.1 Metaphor of Finality: Death as Absence and Silence

The recurring line:

“Quiet when I’m comin’ home and I’m on my own”

manifests a primary metaphor in CMT: *death is silence* and *loss is isolation*. Billie Eilish’s whispered delivery further accentuates the embodied experience of grief as *auditory void*. This metaphor recurs across the chorus, emphasizing the repetition of absence as a lived temporal rhythm. The line’s collocation with “*I could lie, say I like it like that*” signals a resigned negotiation with grief, wherein denial becomes a linguistic coping mechanism. CMT identifies this as an instance of *affective dissonance*, a cognitive metaphor where *pain is truth too difficult to speak*.

4.2.2 “I Just Believed You’d Awaken”: Mythic Hope and Identity in Collapse

In a critical line:

“I just believed you’d awaken”

Minaj encodes a mythic denial of death. Within CMT, this is a metaphor of *death is sleep*, one of the oldest conceptual mappings identified in classical and religious narratives (Kövecses, 2010). The utterance creates a *liminal space* where grief is not yet reality; it is suspended belief. This line reflects *symbolic contradiction*—the speaker

both knows the loss and refuses it.

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, the use of the declarative “*I just believed*” in place of “*I hoped*” asserts certainty where uncertainty dominates. This rhetorical shift performs identity through illusion: a mother clinging to linguistic constructions as a substitute for presence. This fits Hall’s (2005) model of *identity as emergent in discourse*, revealing how language is used to *stall* identity destabilization.

4.2.3 Dialoguing the Dead: Performed Interpersonal Communication

The track is haunted by vocatives:

“Call me / Won’t you call me?”

“So dear Onika, yes, where Onika?”

These phrases operate as semiotic relics of unreceived speech. The repeated invocations of “call” create an auditory chain that mimics unanswered voicemails or spiritual pleas. In CMT terms, this dramatizes *communication is resurrection*: the speaker believes that speech might restore the dead. This notion is deeply entrenched in cultural mythologies of naming as summoning.

Meanwhile, “*dear Onika*” stages an intra-personal address, a classic case of *self-fragmentation* in trauma discourse. The singer is both speaker and listener—*mother and mourner, Onika and Nicki*. This aligns with sociolinguistic identity theory, particularly De Fina and Georgakopoulou’s (2012) emphasis on *positioning within narrative*. The referential use of her birth name distances her from the performed identity of Nicki Minaj, marking a return to foundational vulnerability.

4.2.4 Linguistic Breakdown: Syntax as Emotional Collapse

Minaj’s verse showcases paratactic listing and prosodic rhythm:

“The waiting, the gazing / The painting, the raging / The ravin’, the pacing / The praying, the shaking”

This unpunctuated verbal chain mirrors internal spiralling and grief-induced mental disintegration. The accumulation of -ing forms enacts an experience of grief that is continuous, unsorted, and embodied. These lines instantiate what CMT terms processual metaphorization—emotion as a series of physiological states. Moreover, this linguistic spiral performs the collapse of semantic

order, making language itself a site of trauma.

4.2.5 Introspective Guilt and Maternal Mourning

In the second verse, Minaj addresses her deceased child directly:

“All this guilt you carry is heavy / One day, you'll have to forgive Mommy”

Here, the metaphor is *guilt is weight*, a common mapping in CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The maternal self is both accused and absolved, suggesting a sociolinguistic contradiction where Minaj constructs herself as both morally responsible and spiritually redeemed. The second-person address functions as a narrative healing mechanism, blurring grief expression with imagined moral dialogue.

Furthermore:

“Why would anyone want to love me?”

serves as a rhetorical diminishment of self, typical in narratives of parental trauma. The sociolinguistic function is to index brokenness as part of identity, aligning the persona with cultural expectations of female remorse and Black maternal strength under duress.

4.2.6 Identity Realignment through Temporal Markers

The verse begins:

“Today, it's 12/3/23 / Your baby's three, he's the best, Onika”

Minaj anchors her grief in precise temporal language, creating what Labov (1997) calls external evaluation—the use of exact dates to validate emotion and memory. Through this, she constructs identity as a timeline, not merely as an affective state. The specificity of “12/3/23” produces a temporal index of grief, locating the trauma within lived time.

The use of “your baby’s three” also constitutes a relational identity frame—Minaj positions herself as mother, not artist. The phrase “he’s the best, Onika” is syntactically unusual—Minaj appears to refer to herself in third person, suggesting an inner voice, a *possible version of herself* offering solace.

4.3 Autobiography: Trauma, Redemption, and the Linguistic Rebuilding of the Self

Nicki Minaj’s “Autobiography” is a raw, emotionally charged narrative of familial dysfunction, loss, motherhood, and regret. It is both confession and catharsis. Here, Minaj steps

outside the bravado of her public persona and instead constructs a vulnerable, fragmented self, expressed through metaphor, personal naming, and performative address. The song is a fertile site for applying both Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and the Sociolinguistics of Identity, illuminating how identity is narrated through embodied metaphors and socially indexed discourse.

4.3.1 The Lord and the World: Religion and Protection as Primary Metaphors

Repeated lines such as:

“May the Lord protect me as the world gets hectic / My voice projected, my life reflected”

establish foundational CMT mappings: *life is a battle*, *the world is chaos*, and *God is a protector*. These metaphors position Minaj as both agent and supplicant—a speaker asserting her voice while simultaneously seeking divine shield. According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), metaphors of divine protection are common in narratives of trauma, where the speaker externalizes safety onto a metaphysical force.

This religious metaphor blends with an identity act—Minaj frames her voice as not only audible but *projected* and *reflected*, suggesting language as both defence and testimony. Through these lines, she constructs herself as both a vessel of survival and a mirror of pain, embodying what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) describe as the *identity of endurance*.

4.3.2 Fragmented Family and Memory: Violence and Ambivalence

In the first verse, Minaj recalls her father:

“Daddy was a crack fiend / Two in the mornin', had us runnin' down the block like a track team / When you burnt the house down and my mother was in it”

Here, the metaphor *family is a battlefield* merges with *home is danger*. The trauma is not metaphorical—it is literal and remembered through *kinetic imagery* (“runnin’...like a track team”), highlighting the *bodily encoding of fear*. In CMT, *pain is movement* becomes a viable lens: the speaker re-enacts trauma through action-oriented syntax, suggesting a trauma vocabulary grounded in velocity and threat (Kövecses, 2010).

Socio-linguistically, the use of “Daddy” instead of

“father” juxtaposes intimacy with betrayal, reinforcing emotional ambivalence. Such lexical choices are markers of relational identity, where terms of endearment are used to signify ruptured kinship bonds (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012).

4.3.3 Naming the Mother: Sovereignty and Survival

A central identity construction appears in:

“She’s my Queen and I ain’t even British”

This metaphor *mother is monarch* establishes maternal reverence, subverting colonial iconography (Queen of England) into Black matriarchal power. CMT frames this as *motherhood is royalty*, a mapping that sanctifies the maternal figure while also implying *rescue through lineage*. By asserting her mother as her “Queen,” Minaj reconstructs family hierarchy in redemptive terms—her mother is no longer a victim but an empowered survivor.

This metaphor serves a dual function in identity discourse: it both elevates the mother and validates the self—Minaj survived and finished school because of this royal, sacrificial figure. This aligns with Goffman’s (1959) concept of *face*, where individuals perform identities in relation to others’ perceived moral worth.

4.3.4 Mourning Unborn Life: Maternal Guilt and Internal Dialogue

In a particularly poignant moment, Minaj confesses:

“To conceive you, then leave you / The concept alone seems evil, I’m trapped in my conscience”

This statement is laced with metaphors of internal imprisonment: *conscience is a prison, guilt is confinement*. CMT clearly identifies *guilt as weight or constraint*—here, Minaj is literally “trapped.” The ethical metaphor (*abandonment as evil*) also exposes Minaj’s negotiation with religious and societal narratives around motherhood.

Through the Sociolinguistics of Identity, this moment reveals voice layering—Minaj shifts from artist to a *failed mother*, a repentant moral subject. The phrase *“how the f** would they know what I was ready to do?”* is directed both at external judgment and self-doubt. This dialogic structure mirrors Bakhtin’s concept of *polyphony*—a narrative made of competing internal voices

(Bakhtin, 1981).

4.3.5 Self-Address and Split Selves: “Can You Hear Me?”

Refrains such as:

“Can you hear me? Yeah”
“I hear you sayin’, ‘Mommy don’t cry, can’t you see I’m right here?’”

function as acts of imagined speech from an absent child. CMT interprets this as *absence is presence through imagination*, where fantasy becomes a compensatory communicative act. Minaj builds a myth of emotional proximity, constructing her child as an unseen comforter.

Socio-linguistically, these utterances are ventriloquations—Minaj speaks through and for the lost child, collapsing *interpersonal and intrapersonal identity roles*. These acts represent a linguistic redemption arc, in which voice becomes a tool for healing and reintegration (Hall, 2005).

4.3.6 Voice, Projection, and Self-Repair

The line:

“My voice projected, my life reflected”

is repeated across all choruses, serving as a metanarrative. Minaj defines her self through sound—voice is survival, testimony, and penance. CMT views *voice as identity*, a metaphor increasingly validated in trauma narratives (Gibbs, 2008). The juxtaposition of “projected” and “reflected” also marks the duality of expression—the external voice (projected) is contrasted with internal truth (reflected).

From a sociolinguistic lens, this repeated structure enacts performativity—each chorus is not just musical but ritualistic identity reinforcement. The act of *repeating one’s truth* becomes an effort at linguistic homeostasis, especially in the face of personal rupture.

4.4 Last Time I Saw You: Loss, Regret, and the Linguistic Reconstruction of Emotional Memory

In “*Last Time I Saw You*,” Nicki Minaj confronts loss through the lens of retrospective desire and unspoken emotional labor. The track is structured as an interior monologue filled with regrets, emotional ellipses, and imagined do-overs. Framed as a post-mortem of a failed relationship or loss—whether romantic, familial, or platonic—the lyrics carry profound metaphorical weight and identity implications.

4.4.1 Regret as Temporal Rewriting: “I wish I’d...”

The recurring refrain:

“I wish I’d hugged you tighter the last time that I saw you”

“I wish I didn’t waste precious time the night when I called you”

serves as the song’s emotional and metaphorical core. In CMT terms, regret is a form of time travel. The speaker’s use of counterfactuals reflects the mapping *the past is a malleable object*, and *emotions are revisions*. As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) note, metaphors shape how we re-experience events—here, Minaj rewrites the emotional script, filling gaps with imagined alternatives that restore intimacy and closure.

In sociolinguistic terms, the “I wish” structure becomes a discursive identity strategy. Each wish is not only a longing but a performative act of remorse that aligns with moral self-positioning (Bamberg, 1997). The speaker constructs herself as the one who *should have known*, *should have done more*, and thus implicitly earns the right to mourn.

4.4.2 Distance, Guilt, and Internal Dialogues

Verse 1 opens with:

“Beggin’ me to stay, and then you walk away / There’s somethin’ that you wanted to say”

This linguistic paradox—a *plea for presence followed by departure*—suggests interpersonal dissonance. The interplay of contrasting actions (begging and leaving) creates a metaphor of emotional distance, where *physical closeness does not guarantee connection*. CMT interprets this as *communication is movement*, and here, misalignment in movement implies relational failure.

The phrase “I killed it” in Verse 2 further intensifies the guilt metaphor. While seemingly colloquial, it becomes a CMT-coded utterance: *guilt is culpability*, *relationships are living beings*, and to “kill” one is to *fail in moral or emotional duty*. This self-incriminating phrasing ties into sociolinguistic notions of self-monitoring and moral positioning in identity performance (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012).

4.4.3 Communicative Rupture: “Messages we unsended”

Minaj catalogues lost moments:

“Messages we unsended / Best friends we somehow unfriended”

These lines compress a lexicon of disconnection. In CMT, *relationships are communication*, and *unsent messages are silenced selves*. By highlighting non-actions (what wasn’t said or done), Minaj reveals the meta-discursive absences that fracture emotional narratives.

Socio-linguistically, this moment enacts postmodern detachment—Minaj performs a digital-age identity in which relationality is mediated, erased, or revoked via interface metaphors. The de-friending and message withdrawal represent the erosion of social face (Brown & Levinson, 1987), a public-private collapse where once-intimate bonds are now inaccessible.

4.4.4 Whimsy and Lament: The Nursery Rhyme of Loss

The post-chorus uses childlike imagery:

“Starlight, star bright, first star I see tonight / Wish I may, I wish I might...”

This invocation of a familiar nursery rhyme functions as a mythopoetic metaphor. In CMT terms, *wishing is emotional time travel*; here, childhood imagery serves as a coping mechanism, regressing the speaker to an age of magical thinking. The song momentarily moves from *adult regret* to *childlike hope*, suggesting that language itself is a comfort object.

This also marks a sociolinguistic shift: Minaj draws on intergenerational and cultural memory, embedding personal grief within broader folkloric frames. As Bauman (1986) notes, repetition of shared poetic forms can reaffirm communal identity, even in isolation.

4.4.5 “Bombs Away”: Emotional Detonation and Lingering Dreams

The bridge,

“Bombs away... I still dream about you”

maps emotions as warfare. CMT renders *pain is explosion*, *grief is detonation*. The semantic link between violence and remembrance underscores the internal fallout of suppressed emotions. Dreaming is the final domain of relational

survival, suggesting that memory is the last stage of intimacy.

Socio-linguistically, “I still dream about you” restores a private pronoun-based intimacy that earlier stanzas struggled to maintain. The use of *still* marks continuity—a temporal identity anchor, asserting that despite detachment, the emotional self remains tied to the absent other.

5.0 Discussion: Language, Identity, and Metaphor as Vehicles of Grief Performance

This study set out to examine how grief, loss, and personal identity are articulated and negotiated through the lyrics of Nicki Minaj. The overarching research problem addressed the limited attention given to the intersection of linguistic form, identity construction, and metaphorical framing in the emotional narratives embedded in popular music—particularly among female African American artists. Using a dual-analytical framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and the Sociolinguistics of Identity, this discussion synthesizes findings from the analysis of four tracks—*All Things Go*, *Are You Gone Already*, *Autobiography*, and *Last Time I Saw You*—to explore the linguistic strategies that shape the artist’s performance of grief and self.

Minaj’s lyrical expression of grief is both poetic and strategic. Her language constructs identity not as a static essence but as a fluid, emotionally contingent narrative shaped by personal loss, guilt, and resilience. In “All Things Go,” she projects her future self as a mother—“as long as seven years from now, I’m takin’ my daughter to preschool”—while simultaneously revisiting moments of emotional rupture, such as her cousin’s death. This simultaneous orientation toward past trauma and future aspiration reflects a deeply temporal understanding of self, in line with the metaphor *life is a journey through time* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The use of *emotion as burden* and *grief as weight* metaphors was recurrent, as seen in “Are You Gone Already” where she states, “All this guilt you carry is heavy,” enacting grief as a tangible load.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the use of shifting pronouns and direct address across the tracks (“you,” “I,” “we,” “Onika”) enables a form of stance-taking that allows the artist to alternate

between intimate vulnerability and performative control. As Bucholtz and Hall (2005) suggest, identity is constructed in interaction; in these lyrics, interaction occurs between the artist and her imagined interlocutors—lost family members, fans, lovers, and her own inner child.

Through the lens of CMT, Minaj’s lyrics encode grief using multiple, often overlapping metaphors. In “Last Time I Saw You,” time is constructed as a missed opportunity—“I wish I didn’t waste precious time”—highlighting the metaphor *time is a finite resource*. The metaphor *emotion is war* also surfaces in “Autobiography” where the line “grab the iron and black out like I’m retiring” suggests rage and trauma as internal battlefields. These mappings help structure the cognitive framework through which listeners experience emotion and narrative progression.

CMT allows us to see how deeply embodied these metaphors are. In “Are You Gone Already,” the anticipation of healing—“I just believed you’d awaken”—invokes the metaphor *memory is resurrection*, while the repetition of “Why didn’t you come back to get me?” echoes the metaphor *abandonment is spatial distance*. These metaphors produce powerful affective resonances, transforming abstract emotion into concrete experiential scripts. The sociolinguistic dimension of the analysis underscores how Minaj constructs multiple selves through linguistic markers. In “Autobiography,” the use of narrative framing (“This is the autobiography of Nicki Maraj”) signals an overt break from her public persona, allowing her to inhabit a more vulnerable role as daughter, mother, and survivor. The alternation between declarative confidence and interrogative uncertainty in lines like “Why would anyone want to love me?” and “Rich, yes, but are you happy?” in “Are You Gone Already” demonstrates indexical alignment with private suffering rather than public success.

Pronouns and verb tenses are used tactically to shift temporal and emotional perspective. The intimate address to an unborn child in “Autobiography” (“I hear you sayin’, ‘Mommy don’t cry, can’t you see I’m right here?’”) constructs a dialogic space between the artist and her loss. This aligns with De Fina and

Georgakopoulou's (2012) observation that identity is narrated through relational positioning, rather than simply stated.

Minaj's grief narratives are not only personal but culturally situated. Her expressive range—including paratactic listing (“The waiting, the gazing / The painting, the raging”) and refrain-like repetition—recalls the oral lament traditions found in African American and African diasporic cultural forms (Smitherman, 2000). These songs function as textual mourning practices, integrating the artist's lived experience with inherited forms of communal grief expression.

Taken together, the four songs analysed in this study—“Autobiography,” “All Things Go,” “Are You Gone Already,” and “Last Time I Saw You”—offer a multi-dimensional account of how grief, memory, and identity are linguistically performed and emotionally processed. While all four tracks share a commitment to emotional authenticity, they diverge in their metaphorical framing, narrative structure, and affective register. “Autobiography,” the most overtly confessional of the selections, presents grief as an origin story. Its structure is linear and retrospective, with Minaj adopting a diaristic voice that positions herself as a narrator looking back on formative losses. The repeated invocation of her birth name, Nicki Maraj, and the direct address to an unborn child construct a private, familial space within which grief becomes part of her biographical identity. In contrast, “All Things Go” employs a more meditative tone, oscillating between aspirational futurity and unresolved mourning. Here, Minaj blends personal and professional subjectivities, imagining a life of motherhood even as she mourns the death of a cousin. The juxtaposition of temporal planes—past trauma and projected future—illustrates a sophisticated engagement with the metaphor life is a journey, where grief is not an endpoint but a continual detour.

“Are You Gone Already” offers a different emotional grammar altogether. It is the most elliptical of the four, employing fragmented phrases, rhetorical questions, and repetition to evoke the incomprehensibility of sudden loss. The track's use of spatial metaphors—“you didn't come back to get me”—frames abandonment as

dislocation, aligning with the metaphor love is proximity and loss is distance. There is a marked shift in pronoun use here, with “you” dominating the narrative, creating an imagined conversation with the deceased that resists closure. Meanwhile, “Last Time I Saw You” is the most introspective and temporally haunted track. It thematizes regret and missed opportunity, anchoring grief in the metaphor time is a finite resource. Lines such as “I wish I didn't waste precious time” render emotional damage as irreversible, producing a tone of quiet devastation. Unlike the dialogic nature of “Are You Gone Already,” this song feels soliloquized—more inwardly directed and emotionally static.

Stylistically, the tracks differ in rhythm, diction, and syntactic texture. “Autobiography” features long, narrative clauses that mimic written memoir, while “Are You Gone Already” relies on parataxis and enjambment, creating a breathless sense of urgency. “All Things Go” blends spoken-word intimacy with pop-rap accessibility, using rhyme and meter to stabilize its shifting emotional centres. “Last Time I Saw You” stands apart in its use of poetic abstraction and minimalism, drawing attention to silence, hesitation, and temporal rupture. Yet across these stylistic differences, a set of recurring linguistic strategies persists: metaphorical mappings of grief as burden, time as loss, and emotion as warfare recur in each track, underscoring the embodied, cognitive dimensions of affective language. This comparative analysis reveals that Minaj's lyrical expressions of grief are not only thematically consistent but also narratively and stylistically plural. Each song performs a different configuration of selfhood—grieving daughter, imagined mother, abandoned child, regretful survivor—demonstrating how identity is recursively shaped through linguistic enactments of emotion. These divergent modes of grief performance reinforce the central claim of this study: that metaphor and sociolinguistic stance are co-constitutive tools through which Minaj navigates personal loss and public identity. Through linguistic choices rooted in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and its performative cadences, Minaj maintains authenticity while navigating a mainstream

platform. This cultural grounding enhances the emotional and rhetorical weight of her lyrics, positioning them as both personal confessions and communal catharses.

The interplay of metaphor and identity in Minaj's lyrics offers broader implications for the study of language and emotion. By integrating CMT with sociolinguistic analysis, this study demonstrates how affective narratives are shaped through overlapping semiotic resources. The emotional lexicon of grief is not simply conveyed through language—it is constructed by it. This research also affirms the significance of musical texts as data for linguistic inquiry. Songs like these function as performances of emotional memory, using linguistic cues to signal transitions between roles, audiences, and affective states. The synthesis of metaphor and stance reveals the underlying structure of what appears to be spontaneous emotional expression.

These findings open up new possibilities for cross-disciplinary applications, including therapeutic contexts where music and lyric analysis might help individuals process grief. For scholars in linguistics, communication, media studies, and cultural psychology, this study models how metaphor and identity can be jointly analysed in narrative texts. Moreover, the framework used here can be extended to other artists and genres, especially those within marginalized communities, to investigate how metaphor and stance are used to perform resistance, healing, or cultural continuity. The integration of CMT and sociolinguistics thus enables a richer understanding of how language functions both cognitively and socially within emotionally charged discourse.

6.0 Conclusion

This study has explored the linguistic performance of grief and identity in the lyrics of Nicki Minaj, using a dual-theoretical framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and the Sociolinguistics of Identity. By analysing four emotionally charged tracks—*All Things Go*, *Are You Gone Already*, *Autobiography*, and *Last Time I Saw You*—the study has revealed how metaphorical structures and sociolinguistic positioning converge to encode deeply personal yet culturally resonant expressions of trauma, loss,

and emotional resilience.

While existing scholarship acknowledges the autobiographical and affective weight of music, few studies apply systematic linguistic frameworks to unpack how such meanings are constructed through signifying systems. This gap was addressed by analysing how Minaj's lyrics construct this effect through recurring metaphors—such as *grief is a weight*, *time is a commodity*, and *loss is spatial distance*—as well as through indexical strategies like pronoun shifts, temporal deixis, and direct address.

Each of the four songs examined reveals a distinct layer of Minaj's evolving identity, shaped by familial loss, maternal guilt, personal betrayal, and emotional vulnerability. In *All Things Go*, grief is contextualized within a vision of future motherhood and familial continuity, underscoring the complexity of time as both linear and cyclical. *Are You Gone Already* shifts the locus of grief to internal fragmentation and guilt, using metaphors of awakening, distance, and silence to depict unresolved mourning. *Autobiography* provides the most raw and confessional portrait of pain, as the artist reflects on violence, abandonment, and the moral weight of past decisions. *Last Time I Saw You* stages loss as missed emotional presence, drawing attention to the irreversibility of time and the cruelty of hindsight.

Across all four texts, identity is constructed as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed category. Through a sociolinguistic lens, Minaj's shifting personas—daughter, sister, mother, child, performer—are indexed through linguistic strategies that foreground emotional stance, alignment with imagined audiences, and resistance to external definitions of self. The application of CMT revealed how metaphor is not merely ornamental but foundational in encoding emotional experience. Furthermore, the analysis contributes to broader conversations in sociolinguistics and discourse studies about the semiotic and symbolic affordances of music. Hip-hop, as a genre, has long served as a medium for self-expression, resistance, and community building. Minaj's lyrical narratives not only fit within that tradition but also expand it, by foregrounding grief and feminine vulnerability in

a space often dominated by bravado and performative toughness. Her use of emotionally intimate discourse, framed within metaphorical and indexical structures, positions her as both participant in and innovator of hip-hop's expressive range.

The implications of this research are multifaceted. Methodologically, it demonstrates how integrating linguistic frameworks into music analysis can yield richer insights into how language performs emotion. Theoretically, it

contributes to the growing field of affective sociolinguistics, where emotional positioning is central to understanding how people construct selves and stories. Culturally, it affirms the validity of using popular music as data for studying identity, trauma, and social meaning—particularly among historically marginalized voices.

In conclusion, Nicki Minaj's grief lyrics are not isolated artistic statements but part of a broader discussion on identity work and emotional labour.

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