Pragmatic Strategies in Framing Identity through Music Discourse: A Study of Gospel Music as a Pedagogical Tool

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Abstract

Music plays a crucial role in shaping and expressing identity, particularly in religious and educational settings. This study investigates the pragmatic strategies employed in framing identity through gospel music discourse, with a focus on its pedagogical significance. Using Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1986) as an analytical tool, the study explores how gospel music communicates implicit and explicit meanings that contribute to identity construction and faith-based learning. Data are drawn from song lyrics, worship performances, choir rehearsals, and interviews with gospel music educators and performers. The analysis reveals that gospel music employs ostensive-inferential communication, implicatures, and contextual assumptions to reinforce religious identity and group belonging. The study also identifies how gospel music facilitates cognitive effects such as emotional resonance, moral instruction, and social cohesion through optimized relevance. Additionally, the pedagogical function of gospel music is examined, highlighting its role in language acquisition, memorization, and cultural transmission. The findings contribute to both pragmatic and discourse studies by demonstrating how gospel music serves as a linguistically rich medium for identity formation and pedagogical engagement. The study concludes that Relevance Theory provides a robust framework for understanding the inferential processes and cognitive effects that make gospel music a powerful tool for discourse and education.

Keywords: *Pragmatics, Relevance Theory, Identity Framing, Gospel Music, Pedagogy, Inferential Communication.*

INTRODUCTION

Language and music are among the most powerful semiotic resources through which human societies construct, negotiate, and transmit meaning and identity. Scholars across linguistics, anthropology, and cultural studies have long recognised that identity is not a fixed attribute but a discursive accomplishment, continually produced and reproduced through social interaction (Hall, 1996; Fairclough, 1995). Music, as a communicative practice, occupies a particularly significant place in this process because it combines linguistic content with affective, embodied, and contextual dimensions of meaning (Small, 1998; Tagg, 2013). Within religious contexts, music does not merely accompany belief; it actively shapes how belief, belonging, and self-understanding are articulated and internalised.

Gospel music represents a distinctive communicative genre in which spiritual, cultural, and social identities are foregrounded through discourse. Beyond its aesthetic and devotional functions, gospel music operates as a form of meaning-making that encodes theological positions, moral values, and communal norms. African and African diasporic scholars have noted that gospel music functions as a vital medium for negotiating identity within Christianity,

particularly in postcolonial and multicultural contexts where religion, language, and culture intersect (Ukah, 2007; Adegbija, 2004). In many African settings, gospel music simultaneously affirms Christian faith and local cultural identity, challenging the assumption that religious discourse must be linguistically or culturally homogenised (Bamgbose, 2000).

Increasingly, scholars have also drawn attention to the pedagogical dimensions of gospel music. Music has long been recognised as an effective tool for learning, memory, and socialisation, especially in oral and semi-oral traditions (Swanwick, 1999). In religious contexts, gospel music facilitates the acquisition of doctrinal knowledge, moral instruction, and communal values, often in ways that are more emotionally engaging and cognitively accessible than formal teaching. Ukah (2007) observes that contemporary gospel music functions as an "informal yet powerful mode of religious education" (p. 315), transmitting theology through repetition, affect, and participation rather than through explicit exposition. This pedagogical role becomes particularly salient in choir rehearsals, worship sessions, and instructional performances where meaning is taught, corrected, and reinforced.

From a pragmatic perspective, the communicative effectiveness of gospel music lies in its reliance on implicit meaning rather than explicit instruction. Pragmatics, as the study of meaning in context, is concerned with how speakers and hearers negotiate meaning beyond what is linguistically encoded (Yule, 1996). Gospel music discourse exemplifies this principle, as listeners are routinely invited to infer identity-related meanings through shared beliefs, cultural knowledge, and performance cues. Identity in gospel music is thus not simply stated but pragmatically framed through implicature, presupposition, repetition, and multimodal signals.

This study is anchored in Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1986, 1995), a cognitive-pragmatic framework that conceptualises communication as an ostensive–inferential process. According to Relevance Theory, communicators design utterances with the expectation that hearers will derive sufficient cognitive effects to justify the effort required to process them. Meaning, therefore, is not fully encoded in linguistic form but inferred through contextual enrichment. As Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue, "the communicated content of an utterance is largely a matter of inference" (p. 182). Gospel music, with its poetic economy, emotional resonance, and repetitive structure, is particularly effective in achieving optimal relevance, allowing listeners to derive rich meanings with minimal processing effort.

The inferential nature of gospel music discourse is further enhanced by its multimodal character. Live worship performances integrate lyrics, melody, gesture, facial expression, and congregational response, all of which function as ostensive cues guiding interpretation. Kress (2010) notes that contemporary meaning-making is increasingly multimodal, and gospel worship exemplifies this integration of semiotic resources. Through such performances, identity is not only cognitively inferred but physically enacted, reinforcing Small's (1998) assertion that music is a social act through which participants explore and affirm relationships, values, and collective identities.

Within African and diasporic Christian communities, gospel music also plays a crucial role in cultural transmission and linguistic socialisation. The use of indigenous languages, code-switching, and culturally embedded metaphors allows gospel music to function as a site where faith and culture co-exist rather than compete. Myers-Scotton (1993) demonstrates that language choice indexes social identity, while Adegbija (2004) argues that multilingual practices in African religious discourse promote inclusion and cultural affirmation. These

insights underscore the importance of examining gospel music not only as religious expression but as pragmatic discourse through which identity and pedagogy are jointly realised.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the pragmatic strategies employed in framing identity through gospel music discourse, with particular attention to its pedagogical function. Drawing on data from song lyrics, worship performances, choir rehearsals, and interviews with gospel music educators and performers, the study explores how inferential communication, implicature, presupposition, and contextual assumptions operate within gospel music to project values, affirm group belonging, and facilitate learning. By situating gospel music within the analytical framework of Relevance Theory, the study contributes to pragmatics and discourse studies by demonstrating how music functions as a linguistically rich, cognitively efficient, and pedagogically powerful medium of communication.

In doing so, the study also responds to calls within African linguistics and discourse studies for greater attention to indigenous and faith-based communicative practices as legitimate sites of theoretical inquiry (Bamgbose, 2000; Omoniyi, 2006). Ultimately, this research argues that gospel music is not merely an artistic or devotional practice but a sophisticated pragmatic system through which identity is framed, meaning is inferred, and pedagogy is enacted.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate how pragmatic strategies within gospel music discourse frame identity and function as pedagogical tools using Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory.

And the objectives are to analyze the pragmatic features of gospel music discourse, including implicature, presupposition, and contextual assumptions, that contribute to identity construction. Examine how inferential communication in gospel music facilitates the transmission of cultural, spiritual, and moral values in educational contexts. And evaluate the effectiveness of gospel music as a pedagogical tool in shaping linguistic and social identity among learners and worshippers.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant on theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical grounds. Theoretically, it contributes to the field of pragmatics by extending the application of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory beyond its traditional domains of conversational, political, and literary discourse to the relatively underexplored area of gospel music discourse. While Relevance Theory has been widely used to explain inferential communication in spoken and written texts (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995; Yule, 1996), its application to musical discourse remains limited. By demonstrating how gospel music achieves optimal relevance through implicature, presupposition, and contextual enrichment, this study deepens understanding of the cognitive-pragmatic processes underlying meaning-making in multimodal religious discourse.

From a discourse and identity perspective, the study advances scholarship on identity construction by showing how musical discourse functions as a powerful site for framing religious and communal identities. Identity scholars have long emphasized that identity is discursively constructed rather than inherently fixed (Hall, 1996; Omoniyi, 2006). This study builds on that insight by illustrating how gospel music lyrics, performances, and instructional contexts pragmatically index belonging, faith alignment, and moral positioning. In doing so, it

enriches discourse studies by foregrounding music as a legitimate and analytically fruitful domain of identity work.

Methodologically, the study is significant in its integration of multiple data sources—song lyrics, worship performances, choir rehearsals, and interviews—within a single pragmatic framework. This multimodal approach responds to calls by discourse analysts and social semioticians to move beyond purely textual analysis and account for embodied, contextual, and performative dimensions of meaning (Kress, 2010; Fairclough, 1995). The study thus offers a replicable model for future research on music discourse, religious communication, and other forms of multimodal meaning-making.

The study is also pedagogically significant, particularly in contexts where music plays a central role in education, religious instruction, and cultural transmission. Scholars of music education have emphasized that music enhances learning by engaging emotion, memory, and social interaction (Small, 1998; Swanwick, 1999). This research adds a pragmatic explanation for these outcomes by showing how gospel music facilitates learning through inferential communication and contextual relevance. By explicating how learners and worshippers derive meaning from musical discourse, the study provides insights that can inform curriculum design, faith-based education, and language pedagogy, especially within African and diasporic Christian settings.

Finally, the study is socially and culturally significant. Gospel music remains a vital communicative resource in many African societies, where it intersects with language, religion, and identity politics (Ukah, 2007; Agawu, 2003). By analyzing gospel music as discourse rather than merely as art or worship, the study highlights its role in sustaining communal values, negotiating modernity, and reinforcing collective identities. In this way, the research contributes to broader conversations on culture, communication, and social cohesion in both African and global contexts.

Previous Studies on Gospel Music, Identity, and Pragmatics

Previous research on gospel music and related musical genres has been extensive but unevenly distributed across disciplines. Ethnomusicological studies have examined gospel music as a cultural and historical practice, particularly within African and African diasporic contexts. For instance, Agawu (2003) and Tagg (2013) highlight how African and popular musical forms encode social meanings and cultural identities, emphasizing music as a semiotic system. Similarly, Ukah (2007) explores African Christian music as a site of religious expression and social transformation, underscoring its role in shaping communal consciousness. While these studies offer valuable insights into music and identity, they do not engage directly with the pragmatic processes through which meaning is inferred by listeners.

In sociolinguistics and discourse studies, identity has been widely theorized as interactionally constructed through language use (Goffman, 1959; Hall, 1996; Omoniyi, 2006). Myers-Scotton's (1993) work on social motivations for code-switching in Africa demonstrates how linguistic choices index social identities and group affiliations. Although these studies provide a strong theoretical foundation for understanding identity as discursive, they rarely extend their analysis to musical discourse, particularly gospel music, where language operates alongside melody, rhythm, and performance. Within pragmatics, scholars such as Yule (1996) and Verschueren (1999) emphasize that meaning is context-dependent and often implicitly communicated. Relevance Theory, proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995), has been applied to various forms of discourse, including political speech, advertising, and literary texts,

to explain how speakers achieve optimal relevance. However, its application to music discourse—especially gospel music—remains limited. Where music is discussed, it is often treated metaphorically rather than as a site of systematic pragmatic inference.

In music education studies, researchers such as Swanwick (1999) and Small (1998) argue that music functions as a powerful pedagogical resource because it engages cognition, emotion, and social interaction. Yet, these studies tend to focus on educational outcomes rather than the linguistic and pragmatic mechanisms that make music pedagogically effective. The absence of a pragmatic lens means that the inferential work performed by learners and worshippers during musical engagement is insufficiently accounted for.

Taken together, these studies reveal a clear research gap: while gospel music has been examined from cultural, theological, sociological, and educational perspectives, there is a paucity of research that integrates pragmatics, identity construction, and pedagogy within a single analytical framework. This study responds to this gap by applying Relevance Theory to gospel music discourse, thereby offering a nuanced account of how implicit meaning, cognitive effects, and contextual assumptions converge to frame identity and support pedagogical goals.

Statement of the Problem

Gospel music occupies a central position in many religious and educational contexts, functioning not only as a form of worship but also as a powerful medium for teaching, socialization, and identity formation. Across African and Western Christian communities, gospel music is routinely used to transmit theological doctrines, moral values, communal norms, and cultural histories. Despite its pervasive presence and pedagogical significance, scholarly engagement with gospel music has largely focused on its theological, ethnomusicological, or sociological dimensions, often overlooking its pragmatic and discursive mechanisms as a form of meaning-making.

From a linguistic perspective, identity is not a fixed or essential attribute but a discursive construct negotiated through language use in specific social contexts (Hall, 1996; Omoniyi, 2006). Gospel music, as a multimodal discourse combining lyrics, performance, gesture, and audience interaction, provides a rich site for examining how identity is pragmatically framed and reinforced. However, existing studies rarely examine how listeners infer meaning from gospel music through pragmatic processes such as implicature, presupposition, and contextual enrichment. As a result, the cognitive and inferential dimensions through which gospel music achieves communicative effectiveness remain underexplored.

Furthermore, while music education scholars acknowledge the pedagogical value of music in enhancing memory, emotional engagement, and moral learning (Swanwick, 1999; Small, 1998), there is limited empirical research that explains how these pedagogical outcomes are achieved at the level of discourse and pragmatic interpretation. In particular, the application of cognitive-pragmatic theories, such as Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1986, 1995), to gospel music discourse is still sparse. This theoretical gap limits our understanding of how gospel music achieves optimal relevance and produces strong cognitive effects that shape religious identity and learning. The problem, therefore, lies in the lack of systematic, theory-driven pragmatic analyses that explain how gospel music functions simultaneously as a discourse of identity construction and as a pedagogical tool. Without such analysis, the linguistic richness and educational potential of gospel music remain insufficiently theorized within pragmatics and discourse studies. This study addresses this gap by examining the

pragmatic strategies through which gospel music frames identity and facilitates pedagogical engagement, using Relevance Theory as an analytical framework.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1986), a cognitive-pragmatic framework that explains how meaning is inferred and interpreted in communication. The theory posits that human communication is not merely a process of decoding linguistic messages but an inferential process in which hearers construct meaning based on contextual assumptions and shared knowledge. It emphasizes the idea that every act of communication carries with it a presumption of optimal relevance, meaning that speakers (or communicators) intend to make their utterances as relevant as possible to the hearer while expecting the hearer to invest only as much processing effort as is necessary to derive the intended meaning.

Relevance Theory builds upon Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and his concept of implicature, extending the discussion from conversational maxims to cognitive interpretation. Whereas Grice focused on the cooperative use of language to generate implicatures, Sperber and Wilson's theory centers on how communicators use ostensive-inferential communication — where the speaker provides evidence of her communicative intention and the hearer infers the meaning through contextual enrichment. In the context of gospel music discourse, Relevance Theory provides a robust framework for understanding how listeners derive spiritual, moral, and identity-related meanings from lyrics, performances, and worship interactions. Gospel songs often rely on indirect communication, metaphor, presupposition, and implicature to evoke emotional and cognitive responses. Through these pragmatic devices, the artist or worship leader conveys meanings that transcend the literal text, inviting listeners to infer deeper truths about faith, belonging, and divine relationship. The inferential process becomes a crucial aspect of identity formation, as believers internalize messages that align with their spiritual and communal self-concepts.

Furthermore, Relevance Theory helps explain how gospel music functions pedagogically. In music pedagogy — especially within faith-based contexts — learners are guided not only through explicit instruction but also through inferential learning. The repetition of key phrases, the interplay of verbal and non-verbal cues, and the affective power of melody work together to reinforce doctrinal and moral lessons. Listeners infer meaning from the contextual and emotional relevance of the song, which in turn facilitates cognitive engagement and identity alignment.

Thus, Relevance Theory illuminates how pragmatic strategies in gospel music — such as implicature, presupposition, and contextual assumption — shape listeners' interpretations and strengthen their spiritual and cultural identities. The framework is therefore apt for this study because it bridges the cognitive, communicative, and pedagogical dimensions of gospel music discourse, demonstrating how musical language can both frame identity and educate through pragmatic meaning-making.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Sources

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in discourse–pragmatic analysis, an approach suited to examining meaning as context-dependent, inferential, and socially situated (Creswell, 2013). Theoretical framing is provided by Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1986, 1995), which conceptualizes communication as an ostensive–

inferential process, where listeners actively derive meaning based on expectations of relevance rather than exhaustive linguistic encoding.

Within this framework, gospel music is treated as a form of discourse in which identity and pedagogy are pragmatically realized through lyrics, performance practices, and contextual cues. The data comprise a multimodal corpus from globally influential gospel traditions in African and Western contexts. These include officially released song lyrics by prominent artists such as Hillsong Worship, Sinach, Lauren Daigle, and Nathaniel Bassey, and video recordings of live worship performances sourced from verified church and artist platforms. Selection criteria emphasized engagement with themes of identity, worship, and spiritual instruction, alongside pedagogical relevance in faith communities. Cultural and performative diversity were also considered, ensuring the corpus represents a range of worship styles, linguistic practices, and performance settings.

Purposive sampling guided data selection, prioritizing depth and richness over representativeness, a standard practice in qualitative research (Palinkas et al., 2015). Together, these materials provide a robust communicative environment in which linguistic, paralinguistic, and contextual features interact to produce meaning.

Analytical Procedure and Methodological Rigour

Data analysis was interpretive and theory-driven, focusing on how gospel music discourse achieves optimal relevance by balancing cognitive effects with processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). The analysis examined pragmatic strategies such as implicature, presupposition, deixis, repetition, and ostensive cues, alongside contextual assumptions enabling listeners to infer identity-related and pedagogical meanings. Both verbal elements (lyrics and spoken directives) and non-verbal features (intonation, gesture, musical dynamics, and audience response) were considered, reflecting the multimodal nature of gospel communication (Kress, 2010; Forceville, 2009).

Analysis proceeded iteratively between data and theory, allowing patterns to emerge inductively while remaining theoretically informed. Consistent with discourse-analytic practice, interpretation was grounded in the situational and cultural contexts of the data, with attention to both explicit statements and pragmatically inferred meanings (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008). Methodological rigour was ensured through triangulation across multiple data types, including lyrics and performance recordings, strengthening the credibility of findings by demonstrating consistency in pragmatic strategies across communicative contexts (Denzin, 2012). Interpretive validity was supported through engagement with existing scholarship in gospel music, discourse studies, and religious communication. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process by acknowledging the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis and the researcher's positionality within faith-informed contexts (Tracy, 2010).

DATA ANALYSIS

Overview of the Analytical Framework

This section presents a qualitative pragmatic analysis of selected gospel music discourse, grounded in Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1986/1995). Drawing on song lyrics, worship performances, choir rehearsals, and interviews with gospel music practitioners, the analysis demonstrates how inferential communication underlies identity framing and pedagogical meaning-making. Gospel music discourse is treated as a multimodal communicative system in which linguistic form, performance context, and shared cultural

knowledge interact to produce strong cognitive and emotional effects at relatively low processing cost (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Discourse scholars have long argued that identity is constructed through repeated linguistic and symbolic performance rather than fixed attributes (Hall, 1996; Omoniyi, 2006). In musical contexts, identity work is enacted not only through words but through rhythm, gesture, and communal participation, an insight emphasized by ethnomusicologists such as Merriam (1964) and, more recently, Stokes (1994), who argue that music is a central medium through which people "perform" belonging and selfhood.

Gospel Music as Relevance-Driven Pedagogical Discourse

Gospel music transcends lyrical meaning to incorporate performance practices that teach, socialise, and reinforce communal norms. Call-and-response participation, a central feature of African and African diasporic worship, distributes communicative effort between leaders and congregation. This structure produces immediate cognitive and emotional effects — affirmation, solidarity, and collective identity — in line with Relevance Theory's account of ostensive stimuli guiding inference (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Ethnomusicologists such as Agawu (2003) contend that call-and-response patterns in African-derived musics serve to co-construct meaning through participation, rather than through passive reception.

Choir rehearsals demonstrate how pedagogical intentions are embedded within pragmatic instruction. Commands like "Sing it like you believe what you're saying" explicitly link interpretation to performance, foregrounding meaning over technique. According to Schippers (2010), music education in community settings involves both affective and cognitive domains, where emotional engagement with meaning becomes as important as technical proficiency. Such rehearsal practices make explicit the implicit learning that occurs in gospel settings.

Interviews with gospel music practitioners further illuminate pedagogical intent. Statements like "Worship teaches people theology" align with Small's (1998) argument that musicking is a form of social action that transmits cultural and moral values. Similarly, Nketia (1974), in his classic study of African music, highlights the educational role of music in socialising young people into communal values, reinforcing the assertion that gospel music serves as informal curriculum in many faith communities.

Furthermore, identity reframing through declarative assertion and repetition is a key pragmatic strategy across the corpus. In *No Longer Slaves* (Bethel Music, 2015), the repeated statement "I'm no longer a slave to fear / I am a child of God" performs direct identity reconstitution. The pragmatics of repetition here function as ostensive cues that emphasise the inferential link between linguistic form and intended meaning (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). The pedagogical power of repetition resonates with cognitive theories of learning, which hold that repeated exposure enhances memory, comprehension, and internalization of concepts.

African perspectives on oral tradition emphasise the role of repetition in cultural transmission (Finnegan, 2012; Agawu, 2003). From a discourse perspective, such reiteration performs identity work by stabilizing collective self-understanding and emotional alignment within communities, a phenomenon also noted in performance studies (Turner, 1982).

Sinach's *I Know Who I Am* similarly foregrounds collective identity through assertions of divine chosenness and empowerment. Collective pronouns and repeated affirmations presuppose shared theological and cultural assumptions, reinforcing group identity without the need for elaborate explanation (Yule, 1996). Omoniyi (2006) argues that such identity

positioning in discourse reflects broader sociolinguistic hierarchies in which language use enacts belonging and affiliation.

Presupposition again, plays a central role in constructing authoritative identity claims. In *I Know Who I Am*, the line "I know who God says I am" not only states an identity; it systematically shifts the source of authority to divine discourse. This metapragmatic act situates identity within a larger theological frame, consistent with Relevance Theory, which views meaning as emergent through inferential mechanisms rather than explicit encoding (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Goffman's (1959) conception of identity performance highlights that selfhood is ratified through repeated social acts within established frames. Gospel music, as a performative frame, sanctions identity claims through collective repetition and affirmation. In African religious contexts, this resonates with Adegbija's (2004) and Bamgbose's (2000) observations that communal language practices serve to embed shared values and worldviews. Pedagogically, such divine anchoring reinforces learning by aligning identity with authoritative sources, a process that resonates with constructivist models of education where learners negotiate meaning through engagement with trusted knowledge sources (Vygotsky, 1978).

However, we observe that Nathaniel Bassey's *Imela* (2012) demonstrates how multilingualism functions as a pragmatic marker of cultural and religious identity. The strategic use of indigenous Igbo expressions such as "Imela," "Eze mo," and "Onyekeruwa" indexes in-group belonging while presupposing shared cultural knowledge. Verschueren (1999) argues that language choice in communicative acts is inherently pragmatic, reflecting social identity and group membership. From a relevance-theoretic perspective, meaning is accessed through contextual enrichment rather than explicit translation, reducing processing effort for listeners familiar with the cultural environment (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Myers-Scotton (1993) similarly notes that code choice in multilingual contexts functions to signal solidarity and shared values.

Repetition in *Imela*, particularly in chant-like sequences, reinforces theological meaning through implicature. Small (1998) positions musical repetition as central to embodied learning, and ethnomusicological work underscores its role in oral transmission and communal education (Merriam, 1964). On another plane, Lauren Daigle's *You Say* (2018) foregrounds internal dialogue as a pragmatic strategy for identity repair. The line "I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I'm not enough" presupposes a shared experience of insecurity and invites listeners to infer meaning based on personal reflection. Yule (1996) explains that such presumed background knowledge enhances interpretive efficiency.

The repeated affirmation "You say I am loved… You say I am Yours" serves as a pragmatic marker of authority transfer, shifting evaluative grounding from internal voices to divine affirmation. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) metaphor theory suggests that such linguistic patterns shape conceptual understanding by mapping complex psychological states onto more familiar experiential domains. Pedagogically, this discourse teaches cognitive reframing — a process also observed in narrative psychology as effective in reshaping self-concept and emotional resilience (McAdams, 1993). Through repetition and invocation of divine speech, the song models how language can be a tool for personal transformation, consistent with music education scholarship that highlights the affective and cognitive interplay in musical meaning (Swanwick, 1999).

Hillsong Worship's *What a Beautiful Name* (2016) exemplifies naming as a pragmatic and theological strategy. The declarative "You were the Word at the beginning" presupposes shared Christological knowledge, positioning listeners within a communal faith narrative. Levinson (1983) argues that such presuppositions support coherence in discourse by backgrounding contested meanings and foregrounding alignment.

The repetitive evaluative phrase "What a beautiful name it is" functions as a pragmatic intensifier. Verschueren (1999) discusses how evaluative repetition fosters interpretive flexibility and emotional resonance, allowing listeners to supply personal meaning through inference. Music education scholars note that such repetition enhances memorability and internalisation, making music an effective medium for inducing emotional and cognitive learning (Datta, 2016; Small, 1998).

The narrative compression in lines such as "My sin was great, Your love was greater" encapsulates theological doctrine through affective contrast—a pedagogical move that condenses complex ideas into accessible, memorable utterances. Brown and Levinson's (1987) work on politeness and implicature suggests that rhetorical questions and contrasts guide inference by framing intended meanings within familiar discursive structures.

Across the corpus, gospel music discourse systematically employs pragmatic strategies as well as cultural and pedagogical mechanisms — including explicit assertion, presupposition, repetition, multilingualism, implicature, evaluative language, and participatory performance — to frame identity and transmit meaning in ways that are cognitively efficient and emotionally compelling. These strategies allow listeners to infer theological, moral, and social meanings without explicit instruction, producing strong cognitive effects that align with their sociocultural and religious contexts. Gospel music thus emerges not just as worship or entertainment but as a linguistically and culturally rich pedagogical medium where identity, belonging, and learning occur through inferential communication, shared performance, and collective reinforcement.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that gospel music discourse constitutes a powerful site of pragmatic meaning-making in which identity is constructed, reinforced, and negotiated through inferential processes. Drawing on Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory, the study shows that identity-related meanings in gospel music are rarely exhaustively encoded in linguistic form; rather, they emerge through the interaction between minimal verbal input and richly shared contextual assumptions. This supports the central relevance-theoretic claim that communication is fundamentally inferential and that hearers actively construct meaning based on expectations of relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Short, repetitive affirmations such as "I know who I am" or "I'm a child of God" illustrate how gospel music relies on implicature rather than explicit propositional content. While the surface structure of such utterances appears simple, their interpretive depth is considerable within worship contexts.

Listeners are invited to infer a theologically grounded identity anchored in divine authority rather than personal circumstance. This aligns with Hall's (1996) influential argument that identity is "a matter of becoming as well as of being" (p. 4), continuously shaped through discursive practice. Gospel music thus functions as a recurring discursive ritual in which worshippers repeatedly rehearse and internalise a faith-based self-concept.

Furthermore, we witness communicative effectiveness which refers to the speaker's ability to deploy language in ways that align with contextual demands and audience expectations in order to achieve intended meanings (Yul-Ifode, 2001). From a pragmatic perspective, effective communication relies on shared knowledge and contextual assumptions, enabling hearers to infer meaning with minimal processing effort rather than through explicit explanation (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Verschueren, 1999). In gospel music discourse, the use of indigenous expressions and culturally grounded references presupposes theological and cultural familiarity, thereby enhancing relevance and reinforcing identity for in-group participants (Yule, 1996). Also African scholars have long noted that language choice in religious discourse is inseparable from identity affirmation (Bamgbose, 2000; Adegbija, 2004), and the findings of this study confirm that gospel music pragmatically embeds Christian identity within local cultural frames rather than displacing them.

Live worship performances intensify identity construction through multimodal ostension. Gesture, vocal emphasis, musical dynamics, and congregational participation all serve as communicative cues that guide interpretation and constrain inferential possibilities. As Kress (2010) observes, meaning in contemporary discourse is rarely monomodal, and gospel worship exemplifies this multimodal integration. Identity affirmation is not only heard but embodied, reinforcing Small's (1998) view of music as a social act through which participants explore and affirm relationships and values. In this sense, gospel music discourse extends pragmatic meaning-making beyond language into embodied experience.

Beyond identity construction, the findings equally reveal that gospel music functions as an implicit pedagogical discourse, transmitting theological and moral knowledge through relevance-driven communicative strategies. Rather than relying on explicit instruction, gospel music teaches through repetition, emotional resonance, and guided inference. This pedagogical process aligns closely with Relevance Theory's emphasis on cognitive effects: learning occurs when new information connects meaningfully with existing assumptions, producing insight with minimal processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

The pedagogical orientation of gospel music becomes especially visible in rehearsal discourse, where choir directors explicitly foreground meaning over technical execution. Utterances such as "sing it like you believe it" or "don't rush the Word" function as meta-pragmatic instructions that regulate interpretation and performance. Verschueren (1999) describes metapragmatics as the capacity of language users to reflect on and manage communicative behaviour, and gospel rehearsals provide clear evidence of such reflexive practice. These instructional moments reveal an awareness that effective communication depends not only on musical accuracy but on interpretive alignment between performer and audience.

This emphasis on meaning supports Swanwick's (1999) argument that musical education should prioritise expressive understanding rather than mechanical skill. By slowing tempo and encouraging reflective engagement with lyrics, rehearsal practices increase processing time and deepen inferential engagement, thereby enhancing relevance. Gospel music thus operates as a form of situated pedagogy in which learning is embedded within performance rather than abstracted into formal instruction.

Communal worship structures such as call-and-response further reinforce the pedagogical dimension of gospel music discourse. By distributing meaning-making across participants, these structures reduce individual cognitive load while strengthening collective

understanding. Agawu (2003) notes that participatory musical forms foster shared meaning and social cohesion, a claim borne out by the data analysed in this study. From a discourse-analytic perspective, this supports Fairclough's (1995) view of discourse as a social practice that both reflects and reproduces institutional values.

Finally, performers' reflective comments in interviews explicitly confirm the pedagogical intentions underlying gospel music practice. Descriptions of worship as "teaching theology" or of songs as "sermons" reveal a conscious alignment between communicative intention and audience inference. Such reflections lend further support to the relevance-theoretic account by demonstrating that gospel musicians deliberately design their discourse to guide interpretation and facilitate learning. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, metaphor structures understanding; framing songs as sermons reconceptualises music as instruction rather than entertainment.

Taken together, these findings suggest that gospel music extends Relevance Theory into a multimodal, pedagogical domain, demonstrating how inferential communication operates not only in everyday conversation but also in musically mediated, culturally embedded practices. Gospel music discourse thus emerges as a powerful educational resource, shaping identity and belief through pragmatic efficiency, communal participation, and embodied meaning-making.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined gospel music as a site of pragmatic meaning-making, demonstrating that worship songs function not merely as aesthetic or devotional artefacts but as complex forms of discourse through which identity, belief, and learning are jointly constructed. Drawing on Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory, the analysis has shown that meaning in gospel music is rarely exhaustively encoded in linguistic form; rather, it emerges through inferential processes grounded in shared theological, cultural, and performative assumptions. Gospel music thus exemplifies how communication achieves relevance through minimal explicit instruction and maximal contextual resonance.

The findings reveal that identity in gospel music discourse is pragmatically constructed through repetition, implicature, and embodied participation. Recurrent affirmations of belonging, worth, and divine affiliation operate as ostensive cues that guide listeners toward richly layered interpretations without demanding high processing effort. In this way, gospel music functions as a recurring discursive ritual in which worshippers rehearse and internalise faith-based identities. This supports discourse-theoretical views of identity as dynamic and socially produced, while extending pragmatic analysis beyond spoken and written texts to include musically mediated, multimodal communication.

The study further demonstrates that gospel music operates as an implicit pedagogical discourse. Learning occurs not through propositional teaching but through participatory engagement, emotional resonance, and guided inference. Rehearsal practices, call-and-response structures, and performance cues foreground meaning over technical execution, revealing an underlying pedagogical intentionality oriented toward interpretive alignment rather than formal instruction. In both African and Western contexts, gospel music thus serves as a culturally embedded mode of knowledge transmission that integrates belief, identity, and communal participation. By foregrounding the role of context, inference, and multimodality, this study contributes to pragmatics and discourse studies by broadening the analytical scope of inferential communication. It demonstrates that Relevance Theory offers a robust framework

for analysing musical discourse, particularly in settings where meaning is co-constructed through language, sound, movement, and shared belief systems. The analysis also underscores the importance of attending to culturally situated communicative practices, especially within African contexts where music functions as a central mode of social interaction and education.

Overall, the study argues for a broader conception of discourse—one that accommodates musically mediated and performative forms of communication as legitimate sites of pragmatic inquiry. By situating gospel music at the intersection of pragmatics, discourse studies, and music pedagogy, the paper affirms worship music as a powerful communicative and educational practice through which meaning, identity, and learning are continuously negotiated. It therefore opens productive pathways for further interdisciplinary research into how music functions as discourse across religious, cultural, and educational contexts.

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