

Semantic and Rhetorical Construction of Resilience in Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off"

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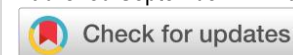
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ABSTRACT

This study examines how semantic and rhetorical strategies construct the theme of resilience in Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off (Taylor's Version)." Using a qualitative descriptive method grounded in Leech's (1981) theory of meaning and Ullmann's (1962) semantic theory, the study identifies fifteen data items drawn from the song's verses, pre-choruses, chorus, interlude, and bridge. The data were analyzed for lexical and contextual meaning as well as for the rhetorical structures—repetition, parallel structure, contrast, metaphor, personification, reported speech, and direct address—that shape those meanings. The findings show that resilience in the song is constructed progressively: the speaker first acknowledges external judgment, then expresses persistence and internal reassurance, followed by declarations of independence and composure, and finally extends this resilience outward through direct address to the listener and a concrete narrative application. The study concludes that resilience in the song is not encoded in a single word but distributed across a network of lexical items and rhetorical devices that together construct an active, self-directed, and socially aware response to criticism. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on the semantic analysis of contemporary song lyrics as a form of resilience discourse.

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1. Introduction

Semantics is the branch of linguistics that deals with meaning, examining how words, phrases, and sentences convey both literal and implied significance (Lyons, 1995; Palmer, 1981). Beyond literal, dictionary-based meaning, language also carries contextual and connotative meaning that depends on the situation in which it is produced (Ullmann, 1962; Leech, 1981; Ritonga et al., 2024). This distinction is particularly relevant to the study of song lyrics, a text type in which lexical choices are deliberately arranged to encode emotional, social, and psychological meaning beyond their surface content (Cruse, 2000; Latif et al., 2025).

Among contemporary popular songs, Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off" occupies a distinctive position as a cultural text explicitly concerned with resilience—the capacity to withstand criticism and adversity without being defined by it (Masten, 2001). The song's re-recorded edition, "Shake It Off (Taylor's Version)" (Swift, 2014/2023), repeats and develops this theme across its verses, pre-choruses, chorus, interlude, and bridge, making it a rich object for semantic and rhetorical analysis.

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on the classical distinction between denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the stable, objective, literal meaning of a lexical unit, often termed its dictionary meaning, while connotation encompasses the ancillary, subjective, and socio-cultural associations attached to a word beyond its core definition (Ullmann, 1962). Leech (1981) develops this distinction further by proposing that meaning operates on several interacting levels, including conceptual meaning and associative meaning, the latter of which includes connotative, stylistic, affective, reflected, collocative, and thematic meaning. In analyzing song lyrics, the emphasis typically shifts toward associative and contextual meaning, since this is the mechanism through which abstract themes such as psychological resilience are encoded in concrete, singable language. This analysis is further supported by lexical semantics, which scrutinizes the internal relational system of word meanings—such as synonymy, antonymy, and sense relations—to map the thematic coherence of a text (Cruse, 2000).

In song lyrics, semantics plays an essential role because every line or phrase carries both literal and implied meaning. At the same time, meaning in song lyrics is rarely constructed by lexical choice alone; it is reinforced by rhetorical structure. Repetition, parallelism, contrast, metaphor, personification, and direct address are patterned linguistic devices that make a song's central message more prominent and memorable (Simpson, 2004), while the way a text positions a speaker in relation to an implied audience is a matter of discourse and social cognition (Fairclough, 1992). A complete semantic account of a resilience-themed song lyric, therefore, needs to integrate lexical and contextual meaning with rhetorical structure and social-cognitive positioning, rather than treating these as separate concerns.

Several recent studies have examined how semantic and rhetorical strategies construct meanings of resilience, empowerment, and emotional strength in contemporary song lyrics. Nasution, Lismawarni, Sinambela, and Daulay (2025) applied Leech's seven types of meaning to a selection of Taylor Swift's songs and found that her lyrics rely heavily on connotative and affective meaning to construct personal narratives, a pattern that closely parallels the present study's focus. In a related study, Diko (2024) examined the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of Taylor Swift's "Look What You Made Me Do" and showed that lexical choices marking transformation and self-assertion function as linguistic signals of resilience and reclaimed agency. Beyond Taylor Swift's discography, Neisya, Aprilia, Darlius, and Lestiana (2023) analyzed figurative language and imagery in Katy Perry's "Roar" and found that the song constructs empowerment through assertive lexical choices and vivid imagery that position the speaker as autonomous and self-defined. Ompusunggu and Damanik (2026) examined denotative and connotative meaning in Adele's "Someone Like You" using the same Leech–Ullmann theoretical foundation adopted in the present study, demonstrating that connotative meaning carries the emotional weight of song lyrics and confirming that this framework is well suited to uncovering the layered emotional meanings within them.

These previous studies confirm that semantic and rhetorical analysis can reveal how song lyrics construct emotional and social meaning, and that Taylor Swift's songs in particular have become an increasingly popular object of semantic inquiry. However, most of these studies either examine a broader corpus of songs at a general level or focus on a different thematic concern, such as gender empowerment or grief, and relatively few trace how meaning is distributed and developed across the full structure of a single song—from verse to pre-chorus, chorus, interlude, and bridge—rather than treating the chorus as the sole bearer of thematic meaning. This is the gap the present study addresses.

Based on this background, the study addresses two research questions: (1) What lexical and contextual meanings construct the representation of resilience in the lyrics of "Shake It Off (Taylor's Version)"? (2) What rhetorical structures and social-cognitive strategies support this construction? Accordingly, this study aims to identify and describe the lexical and contextual meanings, as well as the rhetorical and social-cognitive strategies, through which resilience is constructed in the song, and thereby to illustrate how a seemingly simple, repetitive pop song can encode a psychologically and socially complex message.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method, which is appropriate for describing and interpreting linguistic phenomena in their natural textual context rather than measuring them numerically (Moleong, 2013). The primary data source was the complete lyrics of "Shake It Off (Taylor's Version)" by Taylor Swift, originally released in 2014 as part of the album *1989* and re-released as part of *1989 (Taylor's Version)* in 2023 (Swift, 2014/2023). The lyrics were retrieved from Genius.com, a publicly accessible lyrics database. Secondary data consisted of references from books and journal articles related to semantics, meaning analysis, discourse, and resilience.

Data were collected through a documentation technique: the researcher read the complete lyrics repeatedly and identified words, phrases, and expressions that were lexically or contextually related to the representation of resilience. Fifteen data items were identified across the song's verses, pre-choruses, chorus, interlude, and bridge.

The data were analyzed in two stages. First, each data item was analyzed for its lexical meaning and its contextual meaning, following Leech's (1981) framework of meaning and Ullmann's (1962) denotation–connotation distinction. Second, the data were analyzed for the rhetorical structures that shape and reinforce these meanings—including repetition, parallel structure, contrast, metaphor, personification, reported speech, and direct address—drawing on Simpson's (2004) stylistic framework, and for their social-cognitive function, drawing on Fairclough's (1992) discourse-analytic perspective on how texts position speakers and audiences in relation to social judgment.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, each data item was cross-checked against its immediate co-text as well as against the song's overall thematic structure, so that a proposed contextual meaning was accepted only when it

was consistent with both levels of context. The findings are presented descriptively, supported by tables that summarize the distribution of meaning types and rhetorical structures across the data.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings obtained from the analysis of “Shake It Off (Taylor’s Version).” The findings are organized into two parts: the lexical and contextual meanings that construct resilience, and the rhetorical structures and social-cognitive strategies that reinforce those meanings.

3.1 Lexical and Contextual Meaning in the Representation of Resilience

Table 1. Lexical and Contextual Meaning Found in the Lyrics

No	Data	Lexical Item / Expression	Meaning Type
1	Data 1	play	Lexical meaning
2	Data 2	hate	Lexical and contextual meaning
3	Data 3	fake	Lexical and contextual meaning
4	Data 4	shake it off	Contextual meaning
5	Data 5	heartbreakers gonna break	Contextual meaning
6	Data 6	that's what people say	Contextual meaning
7	Data 7	can't stop, won't stop movin'	Contextual meaning
8	Data 8	it's gonna be alright	Contextual meaning
9	Data 9	I'm dancing on my own	Contextual meaning
10	Data 10	I never miss a beat	Lexical and contextual meaning
11	Data 11	that's what they don't see / don't know	Contextual meaning
12	Data 12	I make the moves up as I go	Contextual meaning
13	Data 13	lightnin' on my feet	Lexical and contextual meaning
14	Data 14	you could've been gettin' down to this sick beat	Contextual meaning
15	Data 15	but I'm just gonna shake	Contextual meaning

The chorus data (Data 1–5) form the foundation of the song’s resilience theme. The verbs play, hate, and fake carry lexical meanings describing specific types of behavior, but through repetition and contextual placement they come to represent recurring, predictable patterns of criticism directed at the speaker. The expression “shake it off” (Data 4) shifts from its literal, physical sense to a contextual, metaphorical meaning of releasing or dismissing negativity, functioning as the song’s central resilience metaphor.

Verse 1 introduces a second layer of meaning through reported speech. The repeated line “that’s what people say” (Data 6) allows the speaker to voice external judgment about her own behavior before responding to it, establishing the pattern of external criticism that the chorus subsequently answers. The Pre-Chorus data—“can’t stop, won’t stop movin’” (Data 7) and “it’s gonna be alright” (Data 8)—carry contextual meanings of persistence and internal reassurance respectively, the latter functioning as a form of self-talk in which the speaker’s inner voice, imagined as music, offers comfort.

Verse 2 reverses the epistemic frame established in Verse 1. Where Data 6 shows the speaker acknowledging what others say about her, Data 11 (“that’s what they don’t see” / “that’s what they don’t know”) shows her recognizing the limits of others’ awareness, implying that her real confidence exists beyond public perception. This is reinforced by Data 9 (“I’m dancing on my own”) and Data 12 (“I make the moves up as I go”), both of which carry contextual meanings of independence and improvisation, and by Data 10 (“I never miss a beat”), whose idiomatic contextual meaning—remaining composed and unaffected—extends the resilience established in the chorus into a more private register. Data 13 (“lightnin’ on my feet”) adds a metaphorical meaning of speed and vitality to this picture.

Finally, the Interlude and Bridge data extend the song's meaning outward. Data 14 ("you could've been gettin' down to this sick beat") is addressed directly to the listener, generalizing the song's message of resilience from personal narrative to shared advice. Data 15 ("but I'm just gonna shake"), set within a concrete narrative scene involving a former partner, applies the meaning already established through "shake it off" to a specific, everyday instance of romantic disappointment.

Viewed as a whole, Table 1 shows that contextual meaning considerably outweighs purely lexical meaning across the fifteen data items, with only Data 1 ("play") analyzed as carrying lexical meaning alone. This distribution supports Ullmann's (1962) argument that connotative, context-dependent meaning is where the emotional and thematic weight of a text resides, and confirms Leech's (1981) observation that associative meaning, rather than conceptual meaning in isolation, is central to how a text builds a coherent thematic message.

3.2 Rhetorical Structures and Social Cognition in Shaping Lyrical Meaning

Table 2. Rhetorical Structures Found in the Lyrics

No	Data	Rhetorical Structure
1	play, play, play, play	Repetition
2	hate, hate, hate, hate	Repetition
3	fake, fake, fake, fake	Repetition
4	shake, shake, shake, shake	Repetition
5	shake it off	Metaphorical expression
6	players – haters – fakers – heartbreakers	Parallel structure
7	I and they	Contrast
8	that's what people say (repeated)	Repetition / Reported speech
9	can't stop, won't stop movin'	Parallel negative structure
10	it's gonna be alright	Personification
11	I'm dancing on my own	Declarative imagery / self-affirmation
12	I never miss a beat	Idiomatic expression
13	that's what they don't see / don't know (repeated)	Repetition / Epistemic contrast
14	I make the moves up as I go	Imagery of improvisation
15	lightnin' on my feet	Metaphor
16	you could've been gettin' down to this sick beat	Direct address to listener
17	but I'm just gonna shake	Contextual application / repetition

The analysis identified seven recurring rhetorical devices: repetition, parallel structure, contrast, metaphor, reported speech, personification, and direct address. Repetition is the dominant device in the chorus, where the fourfold repetition of play, hate, fake, and shake emphasizes the predictability of the criticism the speaker faces, while the parallel structure of players–haters–fakers–heartbreakers groups these critics into a single, patterned category. The contrast between I and they, evident throughout the song, positions the speaker's chosen response against the behavior of others, reinforcing the idea that resilience lies in the speaker's own agency rather than in changing others' behavior.

Beyond the chorus, reported speech reappears as a structural device in both "that's what people say" and "that's what they don't see/know," letting the speaker voice and then reframe public opinion. "Can't stop, won't stop movin'" employs a parallel negative structure similar in form to the chorus pattern, while "it's gonna be alright" personifies the music in the speaker's mind as a source of reassurance. "I'm dancing on my own" and "I never miss a beat" rely on declarative

imagery rather than repetition, marking a rhetorical shift from describing others to asserting the speaker's own state. Notably, "you could've been gettin' down to this sick beat" is the only data item that directly addresses the listener, broadening the song's rhetorical scope from personal narrative to general advice.

This range of devices also carries a social-cognitive function. The speaker's explicit acknowledgment of public judgment in Verse 1, followed by her reframing of that judgment in Verse 2, shows that social cognition in the song operates on two levels: awareness of how she is perceived, and an implicit invitation to the listener to adopt the same resilient outlook. This two-level pattern is consistent with Fairclough's (1992) view that texts do not merely describe social reality but actively position speakers and audiences in relation to it: by first quoting and then reframing public judgment, the song actively resists the authority of that criticism, inviting the listener to occupy the same resistant stance.

3.3 The Progressive Construction of Resilience

Taken together, the findings suggest that resilience in "Shake It Off" is constructed progressively rather than through a single lexical item. The song moves through four stages: first, an acknowledgment of external judgment (Data 6); second, persistence and internal reassurance (Data 7–8); third, declarations of independence, composure, and private confidence (Data 9–13); and fourth, an outward extension of this resilience through direct address to the listener and a concrete narrative application (Data 14–15). Repetition, parallel structure, and contrast anchor the first stage, while reported speech, personification, declarative imagery, and direct address distribute the remaining meaning across the verses, interlude, and bridge.

This four-stage progression also offers a partial answer to why the chorus alone has tended to dominate popular and scholarly attention to the song: the chorus data (Data 1–5) contain the highest concentration of repetition and are therefore the most immediately memorable, but the verses, pre-choruses, interlude, and bridge carry the interpretive work that gives the chorus its meaning. Without Verse 1's acknowledgment of judgment, for instance, the chorus's repeated "shake it off" would lack a clearly established object of resistance. The analysis therefore indicates that the chorus functions less as the sole carrier of the song's meaning than as a recurring anchor point around which the surrounding sections build a more complete, socially situated account of resilience.

3.4 Discussion

This finding is consistent with Leech's (1981) and Ullmann's (1962) view that associative and contextual meaning, rather than lexical meaning in isolation, carries the primary thematic weight of a text, since fourteen of the fifteen data items in this study were analyzed as carrying contextual meaning. These findings also corroborate previous studies in which Taylor Swift's song lyrics were shown to construct personal narratives through connotative and affective meaning (Nasution et al., 2025) and in which lexical choices marking transformation and self-assertion signaled resilience and reclaimed agency (Diko, 2024). The progressive, multi-stage construction of resilience identified in this study extends these findings by showing that such meaning is not confined to a song's chorus but distributed across its full structure.

This pattern is also broadly consistent with Neisya et al.'s (2023) finding that Katy Perry's "Roar" constructs empowerment through assertive lexical choices and vivid imagery, suggesting that resilience- and empowerment-themed pop songs may share a recognizable rhetorical architecture across artists. The prominence of contextual and connotative meaning over purely lexical meaning in this study also aligns closely with Ompusunggu and Damanik's (2026) finding that connotative meaning carries the emotional weight of Adele's "Someone Like You," using the same Leech–Ullmann framework adopted in the present study. Taken together, these points of alignment across four independent studies suggest that the analytical model developed here is not specific to a single song but reflects a broader pattern in how popular song lyrics encode emotionally significant themes.

For this reason, resilience in "Shake It Off" should be understood not as a property of any single word but as a cumulative discourse effect, distributed across lexical choice, rhetorical patterning, and the speaker's shifting relationship to an implied audience.

4. Conclusion

This study has shown that resilience in Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off (Taylor's Version)" is constructed through the interaction of lexical and contextual meaning with a range of rhetorical structures. Fifteen data items across the song's verses, pre-choruses, chorus, interlude, and bridge trace a progression from the speaker's acknowledgment of external judgment, through persistence and internal reassurance, to declarations of independence and composure, and finally to an outward extension of resilience toward the listener and a concrete narrative scenario. Rhetorical devices—repetition,

parallel structure, contrast, metaphor, personification, reported speech, and direct address—work together rather than in isolation to reinforce this progression, and this pattern aligns closely with previous semantic studies of Taylor Swift's songs and of other resilience- and empowerment-themed popular music.

As this study is limited to a single song analyzed qualitatively through close textual reading, its findings cannot be generalized to popular music as a whole. Future research could extend this framework comparatively across multiple songs or artists to examine whether the four-stage progression of resilience identified here—acknowledgment, persistence, declaration, and generalization—is a broader structural feature of resilience-themed popular music, or whether it is specific to this song and artist.

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