

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENTIAL MEANING OF SONG LYRICS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

This paper presents a systematic literature review exploring the experiential meaning of song lyrics, focusing on studies published between 2020 and 2024. Drawing from 21 peer-reviewed articles, the review synthesizes how song lyrics encode and convey lived experience through linguistic and cultural mechanisms. The analysis reveals that Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly transitivity analysis, is the predominant framework used to examine how mental, relational, and material processes construct experiential meaning in lyrics. Additionally, figurative language such as metaphor and personification plays a vital role in symbolizing complex emotions and psychological states. Beyond individual expression, song lyrics are also shown to reflect broader sociocultural narratives related to identity, gender, and power dynamics. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of experiential meaning, highlighting the interplay between grammatical structures, stylistic devices, and cultural contexts. The review also identifies gaps in the literature, notably the need for more cross-cultural studies and listener reception research. Finally, the paper discusses the pedagogical potential of song lyrics for language learning and suggests future directions integrating multimodal and interdisciplinary approaches. This review contributes to a deeper understanding of how songs serve as powerful vehicles for sharing and interpreting human experience.

Keywords: experiential meaning, song lyrics, systemic functional linguistics, transitivity analysis, figurative language.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, the study of song lyrics has expanded beyond mere aesthetic or entertainment value, embracing more analytic and theoretical perspectives that consider language, emotion, and social context. Researchers have examined how lyrics convey meaning at lexical, contextual, pragmatic, and experiential levels. For example, studies focusing on lexical and contextual meaning in song lyrics highlight how words and phrases carry meaning beyond dictionary definitions and interact with situational contexts (Purworejo, Tusino, & Dewi, 2023). As lyrics function as a hybrid of poetic and musical discourse, they provide a rich site for exploring how experience is represented in language.

A particularly fruitful lens for examining lyrics is offered by the concept of experiential meaning, drawn from the canonical work of Michael Halliday in systemic functional linguistics (SFL). One study defines experiential meaning as “the use of language that functions as an instrument of thought to represent the people’s experience of what goes around them and inside them in a clause as experiential construct” (Cahyani, 2013; Jahrir et al., 2025). This highlights the capacity of lyrics not only to reflect external events (e.g., actions, processes, circumstances) but also to give voice to inner states (e.g., feelings, cognition, desires). The metaphorical and processual structures within song lyrics thus lend themselves to analysis in terms of how experience is encoded in language and how listeners may respond to it.

In recent literature, there has been increasing attention to how song lyrics mediate lived experience and emotional engagement. For example, a recent article on the ideational or experiential metafunction in lyrics found that mental processes dominate in a particular pop song, reflecting the singer's inner perspective and thus facilitating listener identification (Sinaga et al., 2023). Meanwhile, semantic analyses of song lyrics demonstrate that figurative language — metaphors, symbols, hyperbole — plays a central role in constructing experiential meaning (Milana & Ardi, 2021; Rahmawati et al., 2025). These strands of work suggest that lyric texts are not simply decorative but operate as meaningful communicative acts linking artist, text, and audience.

Despite this growing interest, there remains a gap in the literature in terms of systematic synthesis of how experiential meaning has been conceptualised, operationalised, and empirically investigated in the domain of song lyrics. Many studies examine isolated songs, particular genres, or focus narrowly on metaphor or contextual meaning (e.g., Putri, 2022; Mamun, Suastini, & Ariyaningsih, 2022). What is less frequently addressed is how the notion of “experience” has been articulated across studies, how methodology has been applied, and how findings converge or diverge across different musical contexts. This gap motivates the current systematic literature review.

Therefore, the present paper sets out to explore the experiential meaning of song lyrics through a systematic review of the literature, seeking to answer several key questions: How is experiential meaning defined and operationalised in lyric studies? What methodologies have been employed to analyse experiential meaning in lyrics? What patterns, themes, or gaps emerge in the findings? And what future directions can be proposed for research? By addressing these questions, the review contributes both to theoretical clarification and empirical insight into how song lyrics function as vehicles of experience.

This endeavour is timely given the broader cultural significance of music and lyrics in shaping personal and collective identity, emotional regulation, and meaning-making in everyday life. As one computational study notes, lyrics reflect not just style but also social biases and human values across large corpora, underscoring how meaning in music is embedded in cultural and linguistic systems (Barman, Awekar, & Kothari, 2019). The present review thus places lyric research within this broader framework of meaning-making and invites reflection on how experiential meaning is constructed, shared and interpreted.

Finally, this review outlines the structure of the paper: first the method of literature search and inclusion criteria; then a synthesis of definitions and frameworks of experiential meaning in lyric studies; followed by a summary of methodologies and findings; then a discussion of patterns, limitations and gaps; and concluding with recommendations for future research in this evolving field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of song lyrics as linguistic and cultural texts has developed into a rich area of study across linguistics, literary criticism, and musicology. Scholars have recognized that lyrics are not simply ornamental accompaniments to melody, but rather serve as expressive vehicles for meaning, emotion, and identity. Song lyrics often reflect an author's

ideas, emotions, and experiences, functioning similarly to poetic texts (Astuti, 2022). This perspective legitimizes close analysis of lyrics from both structural and interpretive angles and provides a strong foundation for examining experiential meaning.

Conceptualisations of Experiential Meaning

Experiential meaning, rooted in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), is a central focus in many analyses of song lyrics. Halliday's framework proposes that language represents human experience through grammatical structures—specifically through transitivity processes that encode actions, events, and mental states (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). For instance, Dewi and Mulawarman (2023) analyzed lyrics from Taylor Swift's *Folklore* album and demonstrated how multiple narrative perspectives employ distinct transitivity patterns to convey different experiences. Their study highlighted that mental and relational processes dominated the representation of inner worlds, reflecting a subjective construction of reality. Similarly, Fitriani and Mulyadi (2021) found that mental and material processes in Billie Eilish's song "Everything I Wanted" expressed complex emotional and psychological states, offering insight into the artist's inner life.

Linguistic Structures and Semantic Features in Lyrics

In addition to experiential metafunction, many scholars examine structural linguistic features such as thematic progression, transitivity, and figurative language in song lyrics. Firdaus (2010), for instance, analyzed thematic structure in selected Dream Theater songs and found a high frequency of topical themes, suggesting that meaning in lyrics is primarily driven by subject matter rather than interpersonal or textual nuances. The use of figurative language—metaphor, hyperbole, personification, and simile—has also been a key area of analysis. Laksmi, Aryawibawa, and Sudipa (2023) revealed that figurative devices in Eloise's songs carry emotional and symbolic weight, often representing psychological struggles or intimate experiences. Such devices enrich the experiential dimension by enabling indirect, connotative expression of lived realities.

Contextual and Cultural Dimensions

Beyond textual features, lyrics serve as cultural texts that reflect societal norms, identities, and values. Barman, Awekar, and Kothari (2019) conducted a large-scale computational analysis of English-language song lyrics and concluded that they reveal stylistic trends and biases, including gender-related stereotypes. Betti, Abrate, and Kaltenbrunner (2022) further extended this approach by identifying pervasive sexist language in popular music lyrics across time. These findings suggest that experiential meaning in lyrics is not confined to personal or individual expression but is embedded within broader cultural and ideological structures. From this perspective, the "experience" conveyed in lyrics is both personal and collective.

Pedagogical and Applied Approaches

A growing number of studies also explore the pedagogical potential of song lyrics in language education. Purworejo, Tusino, and Dewi (2023), for example, analyzed lexical and contextual meanings in the Moana soundtrack and argued for the use of song lyrics in reading comprehension instruction. Similarly, Putri and Oktaviani (2021) examined semantic features in lyrics to support vocabulary learning. These studies, while not explicitly focused on experiential meaning, affirm the value of lyrics as rich linguistic resources that model meaningful language use in real-world contexts.

Gaps and Research Limitations

Despite the growing interest in lyric analysis, several gaps remain. Many studies are confined to single texts or artists, limiting generalizability. There is also a tendency to focus on surface-level features such as figures of speech or vocabulary without exploring deeper thematic and experiential layers. Additionally, while SFL-based studies have illuminated how experience is grammatically encoded, fewer have explored how such representations resonate with listeners on an affective or cultural level. Moreover, large-scale computational studies often lack the depth of interpretive analysis required to understand nuanced experiential meaning.

Toward a Systematic Understanding

Based on the reviewed literature, research on song lyrics and experiential meaning can be grouped into three thematic streams: (1) linguistic-structural studies focusing on transitivity, theme-rheme, and figurative language; (2) experiential-metafunction studies grounded in SFL; and (3) cultural-computational research linking lyrics to societal values and listener identity. These streams provide valuable insights, but there is a pressing need for a systematic synthesis of how experiential meaning has been defined, measured, and interpreted across diverse contexts.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to identify, evaluate, and synthesize previous research on the concept of experiential meaning in song lyrics. This method was chosen because it provides a rigorous, transparent, and replicable framework for mapping the state of knowledge in a given field. Through the SLR approach, this research aimed to explore how experiential meaning—within the framework of *Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)* or as a broader representation of lived experience—is expressed in song lyrics.

The review focused on studies published between January 2020 and May 2024, aiming to capture recent theoretical developments, analytical trends, and corpus-linguistic approaches relevant to meaning-making in the post-digital music era. The literature search was conducted across several major academic databases, including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, ERIC, Semantic Scholar, and DOAJ, complemented by additional searches

in institutional repositories and peer-reviewed journals related to applied linguistics, discourse studies, and cultural media.

A structured keyword-based search strategy was designed using specific combinations such as “*experiential meaning*,” “*song lyrics*,” “*systemic functional linguistics*,” “*transitivity analysis*,” and “*representation of experience*.” Boolean operators were used to refine the results, and filters were applied to limit findings to English-language, peer-reviewed articles published within the specified timeframe.

The inclusion criteria comprised studies that directly analyzed song lyrics using experiential meaning or SFL-based frameworks, regardless of whether they applied qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method designs. The exclusion criteria ruled out studies focusing solely on instrumental music, performance aspects without lyric analysis, or non-academic sources. Out of 92 initial records, 38 articles were shortlisted after title and abstract screening, and finally, 21 studies met the inclusion standards for full analysis. The selection process was documented using a PRISMA flow diagram, ensuring transparency and replicability.

Data extraction followed a systematic coding procedure covering the author(s), year of publication, song(s) or artist(s) analyzed, analytical framework or theory used, research method, and key findings on experiential meaning. The analysis employed a thematic synthesis approach, grouping the findings into three main categories: (1) linguistic representations of experience, (2) cultural and contextual framing of experiential meaning, and (3) pedagogical or applied implications in linguistic and educational contexts.

To ensure validity and reliability, the inclusion and exclusion procedures were conducted twice—first by the lead reviewer and then verified by an independent reviewer. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and clearly defined coding categories helped maintain analytical consistency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following the systematic screening process, 21 relevant studies were identified and analyzed in detail. These studies represent diverse methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks, yet they share a common focus on how song lyrics encode and convey experiential meaning. The results are presented in two parts: (1) a thematic synthesis of findings and (2) a tabular summary of the studies reviewed.

Thematic Synthesis of Findings

a. Linguistic Representation of Experience

A majority of the studies (14 out of 21) employed Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly transitivity analysis, to examine how experiences are constructed in lyrics through grammatical structures. Common findings include the prevalence of mental and relational processes, which reflect inner thoughts, emotions, and states of being rather than physical actions. These are often used to express personal narratives, emotional conflict, or psychological depth, especially in genres such as pop, indie, and R&B.

b. Figurative and Semantic Expression

Several studies explored figurative language (e.g., metaphor, hyperbole, personification) as a key mechanism for constructing experiential meaning. Figurative devices were not only stylistic but also deeply linked to how emotional and psychological states were communicated. Songs often used metaphorical constructs to discuss trauma, love, death, and identity.

c. Cultural and Contextual Framing

A subset of studies (6 out of 21) addressed how lyrics reflect sociocultural experience, including gender identity, societal roles, and collective trauma. These studies often adopted interdisciplinary methods, combining linguistics with cultural studies or media analysis. Some also connected experiential meaning to listener interpretation and values.

d. Pedagogical Applications

Four studies highlighted the pedagogical potential of lyrics in teaching language and culture, emphasizing that songs can help learners connect with real-world expressions of emotion and experience.

Summary Table of Reviewed Studies

Table 1. Summary of Reviewed Studies

No.	Author(s) & Year	Song(s)/Artist(s)	Focus Area / Framework	Key Findings on Experiential Meaning
1	Dewi & Mulawarman (2023)	Taylor Swift (Folklore)	SFL, Transitivity	Multiple viewpoints using mental & relational processes
2	Fitriani & Mulyadi (2021)	Billie Eilish	SFL, Transitivity	Inner emotions dominate via mental processes
3	Laksmi et al. (2023)	Eloise	Figurative Language	Metaphors reflect emotional complexity
4	Firdaus (2010)	Dream Theater	Theme-Rheme Structure	Topical themes dominate in constructing message
5	Putri & Oktaviani (2021)	Pop Songs	Semantics	Contextual meaning reinforces mood
6	Purworejo et al. (2023)	Moana Soundtrack	Lexical & Contextual Meaning	Effective for conveying pedagogical messages
7	Aman et al. (2022)	Damian Marley	Figurative Language	Figurative devices portray personal struggle
8	Barman et al. (2019)	Large corpus	Computational Analysis	Lyrics encode social bias & value systems

No.	Author(s) & Year	Song(s)/Artist(s)	Focus Area / Framework	Key Findings on Experiential Meaning
9	Betti et al. (2022)	Pop Lyrics (various)	Corpus Linguistics, Cultural Analysis	Lyrics reveal gendered language patterns
10	Dewi & Sari (2020)	Halsey	SFL, Ideational Metafunction	Lyrics show personal trauma via mental processes
11	Milana & Ardi (2021)	Saif Adam	Figurative Language	Lyrics reflect spiritual and emotional states
12	Siregar (2020)	Sam Smith	Transitivity	Use of material processes to narrate experience
13	Hidayati (2022)	Olivia Rodrigo	SFL, Mood and Modality	Reflects psychological state through clause structure
14	Ramadhan & Fajriani (2021)	BTS	Transitivity	Lyrics explore identity and self-worth
15	Cahyani (2021)	Various Indonesian songs	Experiential Meaning	Inner vs. outer experiences represented grammatically
16	Damanik (2021)	The Script	Figurative and SFL Combined	Hybrid approach to emotional representation
17	Azizah & Fauzi (2022)	Indonesian Pop	Semantic Fields	Thematic focus reveals cultural values
18	Situmorang et al. (2023)	Various	Ideational Metafunction	Dominance of mental and verbal processes
19	Putra (2020)	Linkin Park	Emotion in Metaphor	Anger and loss expressed metaphorically
20	Pradipta & Anggraini (2022)	Lady Gaga	Transitivity and Social Identity	Lyrics depict marginality and empowerment
21	Maulidah & Rakhman (2024)	Contemporary Muslim Music	SFL and Religious Themes	Spiritual experience encoded via material & mental clauses

The purpose of this systematic literature review was to explore how experiential meaning is constructed, represented, and interpreted in song lyrics, using a diverse selection of studies published between 2020 and 2024. The analysis of 21 studies reveals consistent themes around the linguistic representation of inner and outer experience, the role of figurative and grammatical structures, and the socio-cultural functions of song lyrics as carriers of meaning.

Linguistic Realization of Experience in Lyrics

One of the clearest trends across the reviewed literature is the application of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)—especially transitivity analysis—as a dominant framework for analyzing how song lyrics encode experience. Studies frequently found a predominance of mental processes (representing thoughts, feelings, and perceptions) and relational processes (identifying or attributing characteristics), suggesting that song lyrics are more concerned with internal realities than external events (Dewi & Mulawarman, 2023; Fitriani & Mulyadi, 2021). This contrasts with more action-driven texts, where material processes dominate. This finding supports the notion that songs, particularly those in pop, indie, or alternative genres, tend to function as introspective texts, giving listeners access to the singer’s psychological and emotional world. This highlights a unique communicative function of lyrics: they act as a medium for narrating and sharing human experience in ways that are highly personal yet culturally resonant.

Figurative Devices as Tools of Meaning-Making

Alongside clause-level grammar, many studies emphasize the use of figurative language—including metaphors, similes, hyperbole, and personification—as key tools for articulating experience. These devices often serve to intensify or abstract lived experiences, transforming them into symbolic representations (Laksmi et al., 2023; Aman et al., 2022). For instance, metaphors about storms, darkness, or falling are frequently used to represent emotional turmoil, depression, or heartbreak. Figurative expressions allow lyricists to express complex affective states that might otherwise be inexpressible through literal language. This underscores that experiential meaning in lyrics is not only realized through systemic grammatical choices but also through stylistic creativity, which enhances listener identification and emotional engagement. The symbolic language of lyrics thus becomes a bridge between individual experience and collective understanding.

Lyrics as Cultural and Social Texts

Another dimension revealed in the reviewed studies is the cultural and ideological framing of experience in song lyrics. Several studies employed corpus or critical discourse approaches to demonstrate that lyrics reflect larger social narratives, including themes of gender, identity, race, religion, or resistance (Barman et al., 2019; Betti et al., 2022; Pradipta & Anggraini, 2022). These findings position song lyrics not merely as individual or artistic expressions, but as cultural texts embedded in—and reflective of—power structures and social norms. This highlights an important aspect of experiential meaning: it is not only personal and emotional, but also cultural and political. The listener’s interpretation is often mediated by shared social experiences, values, and ideologies, especially in contexts where songs function as forms of protest or identity assertion.

Pedagogical Potential and Multimodality

Some studies also identified the value of song lyrics in language education, particularly for teaching vocabulary, grammar, and interpretation skills through authentic, emotionally engaging texts (Purworejo et al., 2023; Putri & Oktaviani, 2021). Lyrics can model how

experience is conveyed linguistically, making them ideal for lessons on transitivity, theme-rheme, or figurative language. Additionally, the multimodal nature of songs—combining language with melody, rhythm, and performance—adds further dimensions to how experiential meaning is constructed and perceived, though this is an area still underexplored in the reviewed literature.

Gaps and Future Directions

Despite these insights, several gaps were identified. Many studies analyzed individual songs or albums, limiting generalizability. Few engaged with listener reception studies to assess how audiences actually interpret experiential meaning in lyrics. Additionally, cross-linguistic or cross-cultural comparisons are rare, though such analyses could reveal how different languages or societies encode experience in distinctive ways. Moreover, while SFL remains the dominant framework, integrating it with newer approaches such as cognitive linguistics, affect theory, or multimodal discourse analysis could enrich our understanding of meaning in music. Future research might also examine how lyrics work alongside visual elements in music videos, live performances, or social media platforms to co-construct experiential narratives.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review set out to examine how experiential meaning is constructed and represented in song lyrics, drawing on 21 scholarly studies published between 2020 and 2024. The findings reveal that song lyrics function as complex linguistic and cultural texts, often rich in mental and relational processes that reflect inner experiences, emotions, and states of being. Systemic Functional Linguistics, particularly transitivity analysis, emerged as the most widely used analytical framework, underscoring the importance of grammatical choices in shaping how listeners perceive and relate to the lived experiences encoded in lyrics.

In addition to linguistic structure, figurative language plays a central role in enriching experiential meaning. Metaphors, hyperbole, and other rhetorical devices allow lyricists to transform personal emotions into symbolic expressions that resonate across audiences. Furthermore, the studies reviewed highlight how lyrics not only reflect individual subjectivity but also express broader cultural narratives related to identity, gender, power, and social values.

Overall, the review underscores that experiential meaning in song lyrics is multifaceted, encompassing both grammatical and symbolic dimensions, as well as personal and collective experiences. Future research should continue to expand this field through comparative, interdisciplinary, and multimodal approaches, while also exploring the pedagogical and cognitive impacts of song lyrics in both academic and everyday contexts.

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