

“Navigating” Mental Health Rhetoric by Twenty One Pilots

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Mental health is an increasingly popular topic as society fights the stigmas and lack of awareness that previously dominated perceptions. Conversations about mental health are common within social media, news outlets, movies, and even music. While these are all popular forms of media, music is becoming a more relevant way for people to express themselves or relate to others. A study completed in 2017 shows that young individuals in the United States listen to music more than five hours a day with people of all ages increasing their music consumption by 36.6% (Kresovich 617). With the rise of music consumption, lyrics about mental health are heard by many people that may struggle with their own mental health. It is important to understand what rhetoric is being presented by artists through their music and how it influences audiences. Twenty One Pilots is a specific band that produces content regarding mental health, such as their 2024 song “Navigating.” Although some people are concerned about whether pop music romanticizes mental health, this paper argues that “Navigating” does the opposite. The band members, who have the ethos of personal experience with mental illness, use diction, delivery, and arrangement to create an appeal to pathos that normalizes mental health struggles while encouraging help-seeking behaviors, especially for men.

Background and Context

Twenty One Pilots is a musical duo that consists of lead singer Tyler Joseph and drummer Josh Dun. The band was originally formed in 2009 by Joseph and two other members who were replaced by Dun when they left in 2011 (Gwenevere). Their music is a unique mix of several genres—alternative rock, rap, hip hop, and electropop. Through their catchy tunes, Twenty One Pilots use lyrics and music videos to engage in storytelling about a variety of topics with a prominent theme in mental health. In fact, they have created a story in their music videos across their albums that follows a character called Clancy, played by Joseph. Clancy’s story is set in a dystopian world where he continuously attempts to escape the city of Dema and fight against its rulers, Blurryface and his Bishops (Layman). Dun plays a character who is a part of the rebellion, helping Clancy through his journey. The storyline is sometimes interpreted as a metaphor for the continuous cycle of dealing with mental health issues.

“Navigating” is one of the songs from the 2024 *Clancy* album that can be viewed as part of the larger story. For the purposes of this paper, though,

the lyrics and music video of “Navigating” will be analyzed as a standalone text because as blog writer Drew Layman says, “The beauty of *Clancy*... is that you don’t need to follow the story to enjoy the music.” To provide some context, the music video begins with Joseph and Dun getting out of a small boat, greeted by three men with torches at the edge of a forest. The video then switches between the group of men leading Joseph and Dun through the forest, and the duo performing in a clearing at night with a large bonfire behind them. About halfway through these clips, a new person carrying a mask is introduced, but the face is not revealed until he reaches the clearing at the same time as Joseph and Dun. The mysterious figure is revealed to be Dun, forcing Joseph to realize he was imagining his friend up until this moment. They demonstrate this with flashbacks where Dun disappears from previous clips. Finally, the two meet in the middle of the clearing with Dun handing Joseph the iconic mask he is known for wearing.

Analysis of Lyrics

The music of “Navigating” is playing throughout the course of the video, and the style of the lyrics is the first thing that indicates part of the rhetorical message—normalizing mental health. Style refers to the ornamentation of ideas through words, including diction. The diction of the lyrics contributes to the band’s use of pathos to emotionally connect to the audience. In the chorus of the song, Joseph repeatedly sings, “I’m navigating, I’m navigating my head” (Twenty One Pilots); these exact lyrics are repeated after the line, “disassociate” (Twenty One Pilots). The specific word choices reflect how it feels to have a variety of mental health struggles. Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification explains how this strategy helps Twenty One Pilots connect with their audience; Burke claims people remain unique individuals but join together as “substantially one” when they identify with each other (1287). Individuals with anxiety, depression, and other diagnoses deeply relate to the idea of navigating troubling thoughts. Therefore, these listeners identify with those struggling with mental illness, including the band members. Despite the line that seems to apologize for having mental illness, “Pardon my delay” (Twenty One Pilots), the band members’ expression of their personal struggles helps listeners understand they are not alone in their experiences because mental health is a part of life for many people. This identification encourages the audience to feel connected to the band and be more receptive to their message.

The normalization of discussing mental health also opens the door for Twenty One Pilots to use diction specifically to encourage struggling people to reach out for help. This is accomplished by first demonstrating the impact of mental illness. The opening of the song expresses, “This haze around my face, makes me feel all alone” (Twenty One Pilots). The statement of feeling ‘alone’ clearly communicates the isolation that is often caused by mental health

struggles. The bridge continues the theme of isolation: “Kind of feels like everybody leaves, feelin’ the reality that everybody leaves” (Twenty One Pilots). Without blatantly stating that he feels alone, Joseph uses the phrase “everybody leaves” to evoke emotion in audience members. Those who understand the isolation that comes with mental struggles can relate to the lyrics, and those who have not personally struggled feel sympathy and understanding.

Twenty One Pilots continues to use diction to subtly encourage the rhetoric of seeking help rather than staying stuck in loneliness. This can be seen at the beginning of the song when Joseph says, “But when our fingers touch, I feel my way back home” (Twenty One Pilots). This quickly establishes the song is directed toward a loved one, or at least a trusted individual. By stating that this person’s presence brings him “back home” and gets him out of his head, he is communicating to listeners that they can feel relief in a similar way. However, this line only seems to focus on a person’s physical presence. They take their rhetoric a step further in their chorus by saying, “Give me some advice” (Twenty One Pilots). This is a specific request for help directed toward a trusted individual and tells the audience it is acceptable for them to seek help. The delivery of the line also adds to an emotional appeal. Most of the song is upbeat except during the bridge. Despite this line still having a fast beat, Joseph draws this line out more than the others and puts extra emphasis on the word ‘advice.’ Pathos is used here, as the listener can hear the desperation and emotion in Joseph’s voice, allowing them to truly feel what he is feeling. This emotional connection encourages the audience with similar desperation to seek help the same way and at least begin confiding in someone as the rest of the song expresses.

Analysis of Music Video

With a better understanding of the lyrics, the “Navigating” music video builds upon the rhetorical message of seeking help when struggling with mental health. Twenty One Pilots specifically use pathos through their visual storytelling, to emotionally connect to their audience. It is clear how important Dun is to Joseph during their journey — Dun is shown walking directly beside Joseph and constantly holds out his hand to assist him when he is tired. The audience connects to the emotional bond between the two, whether it is because they relate to having such an important relationship or because they desire such support. This makes the audience feel more devastated when they realize, along with Joseph, that Dun was never actually there. Not only do they watch Dun disappear from right next to Joseph at the clearing, but they also see specifically the journey Joseph went through alone. For example, rather than grabbing Dun’s hand for help walking up a steep hill, he is shown using the trunk of a tree. Twenty One Pilots

created these emotional scenes to help the audience realize how much of a difference getting help can make for someone who is struggling. This forces the audience to reflect on how much they desire support in their own lives, pushing them to take that first step to seeking help.

The ending of the music video solidifies the message of reaching out for help. After the audience feels the emotional rollercoaster of connecting to Joseph and Dun's bond to then find out it was all a part of Joseph's imagination, seeing the real versions of them meet in the clearing is a relief. Joseph accepting the mask that Dun holds out for him can be interpreted as Joseph finally accepting help rather than imagining it to cope with his mental health. The feeling of satisfaction and relief for the characters is another thing that forces the audience to reflect on their own choices of avoiding help. The video ends in a more impactful way as it pans out to show a cluster of torches behind the two men. This illustrates that Joseph finally has a community to rely on through his mental health journey. The ending uses pathos to elicit feelings of relief and peace for the characters in the music video, pushing audience members to strive for the same emotions in real life by replacing their isolation with community and accepting help.

The rhetorical arrangement of this video—Joseph's journey with Dun, the flashbacks to Dun as an imagined figure, and finally the acceptance of help—may appeal more specifically to men struggling with mental health. Typically, men have a more difficult time seeking help compared to women. Though this does not apply to all men, it is a noticeable pattern that men refrain from disclosing anything about their mental health struggles because they fear "being ridiculed, marginalized, and of being seen as 'unmanly' by other men" (Krumm et al. 119). Due to this fear, they may pretend they are handling their struggles well when in reality, they are not. Men watching the "Navigating" music video might connect more strongly to Joseph and his coping mechanism of imagining Dun to convince himself he does not actually need help. Joseph does not let his lonely coping mechanisms go until he is confronted with the real Dun and forced to admit he needs help. Peer-reviewed psychiatric research shows that having the permission of other men is a "contributing factor to men's acceptance of help-seeking" (Krumm et al. 119). Watching Joseph accept the mask from Dun, which can symbolize accepting help, provides the audience with a healthy and supportive interaction between two men. This example of a man offering another man help puts forth the idea for male viewers that they do not have to be afraid of being perceived negatively for needing help. Through the video's rhetoric, Joseph and Dun are giving them the 'permission' to seek help that men often seek from other men.

Analysis of Band's Ethos

This song and video present's another layer of convincing men to seek help because Joseph and Dun establish ethos as men who have personally struggled with their mental health. Joseph openly expresses his experience with mental health struggles during an interview:

“When I first started writing music, I didn't think anyone would hear it and so there was an honesty to...that's just naturally there that is hard to recreate because now I know that if we write a song people are going to hear it. But then, because people resonated with it early on, the honesty, I realized that honesty was really important.” (Pilots Content)

This interview reveals how Joseph uses Twenty One Pilots' music to honestly talk about his own struggles with mental health. With the realization that his audience appreciated that honesty, he decided that it was important to keep it throughout their music. Rhetorician Quintilian recognizes that a good man who speaks honestly is a better orator and will be “heard with greater credit than a bad man” (362). This means Joseph and Dun's honesty about their mental health struggles as men in “Navigating” makes the male audience more receptive to what they have to say about dealing with those struggles; people trust them to write about how it feels and how to fight it.

Joseph and Dun's credibility is even more influential to male audience members because they are celebrity males. While the audience should be careful about trusting someone's rhetoric simply because they are a celebrity, research demonstrates that male celebrities who open up about their mental health struggles influence “a wider societal and cultural discourse” (Stahl 13). Joseph and Dun's celebrity status in the music world is fairly big, as “Navigating” has 12,578,524 views—a number that is consistently growing. Not only are Joseph and Dun reaching more men than a typical person, but they are also demonstrating to male listeners that they are not afraid to express themselves to so many people. Understanding that the duo decided to keep their honest experiences in their music knowing millions of people are listening, the audience will start to view expressing their own struggles as brave rather than weak. So, as male celebrities who have experience with mental health problems, their music is incredibly influential to men.

Analysis of Reception

To fully understand the rhetoric of Twenty One Pilots' “Navigating,” it is important to look into all parts of the rhetorical situation. This paper has already analyzed the text (“Navigating”) and speaker (Twenty One Pilots), so it is beneficial to also address the audience's reception. Music about mental health, such as “Navigating,” is impactful to audiences in numerous ways. Alex Kresovich identifies these influences through a study in

which college students completed a survey about their exposure to pop songs that mention mental health. The results show that college students who developed parasocial relationships with the artist and perceived personal connections to the song had reduced stigma, more support for mental health resources, and increased willingness to offer mental health support to those around them. Contrary to Kresovich's hypothesis, the study did not support the idea that music influences listeners' willingness to seek help for their own mental health. This is an interesting finding, as it indicates that the rhetoric in "Navigating" should not be successful in encouraging the audience to seek help for mental health struggles. However, comments from the audience that will be explored in this section seem to prove the rhetoric is successful. Kresovich has a possible explanation for this contradiction, stating that future research needs to "look deeper into what type of solutions – if any – are being advocated for in these popular songs" (625). It may be that the diction and pathos Twenty One Pilots use specifically address help seeking, whereas the songs in the study may have simply discussed the struggles of mental illness.

Although research has proven mental health in songs benefit listeners in a variety of ways, there are still concerns that artists who express their struggles may be encouraging them to "romanticize mental health struggles and view depression as trendy or as a 'fascinating' character trait" (Kresovich 625). Blogger Aaron Cooper believes that Twenty One Pilots glamorizes mental illness, encouraging audience members to "Stay depressed and lonely but stay alive! We'll see you on the tour!" (para. 12). Cooper's idea that Twenty One Pilots are capitalizing on their audience's mental health struggles is a bold statement, but it is simply an opinion without any rhetorical analysis. While he does point to songs such as "Neon Gravestones," Cooper does not provide specific evidence to support his claim. He also does not acknowledge the audience reception, which seems important since they are who he is worried about. While the idea of music romanticizing mental health struggles is a valid concern, a rhetorical analysis of "Navigating" proves the audience reception to be positive—not negative.

The "Navigating" music video is posted by Twenty One Pilots on YouTube, which has comments underneath where the audience discuss their reception of the song. Most of the comments appear to discuss the band, lyrics, or music video in a good light. YouTube users of all genders comment about the video's positive impact on their life while sharing their own experiences. User OliviaRena explains she has Asperger's Syndrome and relates to disassociating and navigating daily interactions with social cues she may miss, saying, "I can't wait to tell my therapist about this song." Another user, [angiemoon4859](#), shares that her grandmother died within the month that the song was released. She thanks Twenty One Pilots for being her support and addresses the fan base, "I love you clique." [Heatherdavis345](#) shares a lot more

detail about her experience with grief. However, she also shares how she reached out to her husband for support and “Navigating” allowed her to take a moment for a much needed cry when she was previously in denial. These are all examples of audience members who have reached out for help due to this song, whether it is to a therapist, significant other, or online friends.

Other users may not explicitly state how they have reached out for help or started to overcome mental struggles. However, they do use the conversation about “Navigating” to start opening up about their own experiences. Twentyonebernduns8822 shares their struggle with brain fog and dissociation during group conversation. User M0unds_ is simpler about sharing their struggles but does so nonetheless when they say, “This album might be my savior. I am going through a hard time right now.” Overall, these users demonstrate how the rhetoric of “Navigating” has encouraged them to reach out for help in their personal life or begun to express their struggles to this small community of fans rather than suffering in isolation. Looking at the audience reception in the rhetorical situation, it is clear that the band’s rhetoric helps viewers and encourages them to seek solutions rather than wallow in their mental illness.

Conclusion

It is clear that as music continues to rise in popularity, messages about mental health will reach an increasingly larger number of people. While there are some valid concerns about romanticizing mental health within songs, Twenty One Pilots use their song “Navigating” to present rhetoric that encourages the audience, especially men, to seek help when they are struggling. Not only do the band members have the ethos to speak about mental health due to their own struggles, but they also think deeply about how their songs can help people. From the diction and delivery of the lyrics to the thought-provoking arrangement of the music video, the band uses these strategies to elicit an appeal to pathos about how mental health struggles feel and how it might improve through seeking help from trusted individuals. The audience reception to the song and music video proves to be positive, as comments communicate how helpful Twenty One Pilots has been in their individual journeys with various mental health struggles. Their rhetoric truly does help their fans navigate through their personal experiences with mental health while encouraging help-seeking behaviors.

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