

“The Strong, Silent Type”: Analyzing the Portrayal of the Cost of Masculine Gender Performances in *The Sopranos*

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ABSTRACT

Media portrayals of the “strong, silent type” reinforce the expectation that men should not demonstrate or even acknowledge their emotions. This trope, however, reflects more significant societal norms around masculine practices that can have profoundly negative impacts on individual men as well as those around them.

Emotional compression (or modern stoicism) is fundamentally different from emotional repression. Emotional compression practices can allow men to process their feelings privately and then communicate their feelings clearly without the distortion of uncontrolled bursts of emotion. The treatment of mental health and masculinity in Season 5 of *The Sopranos* “holds up a mirror” to the costs of emotional repression for men as part of masculine gender performances. The show highlights, sometimes quite brutally, the costs of emotional repression to men and the people around them. In doing so, the content of the show implies that therapy could help men learn to face their feelings and alleviate their suffering as well as that of their families, though only if men are willing to face the feelings of vulnerability that come with having emotions.

KEYWORDS

Stoicism; Alexithymia; Hegemonic masculinity; Emotional repression; Mental health; Gender performances

INTRODUCTION

The Sopranos as a series has successfully infiltrated into the zeitgeist of pop culture from its first air date in 1999 to its end date in 2007, with a continued effect long after the show’s run ended. From its cult following to its long-lasting resonance with fans and creatives in the entertainment industry, the impact of *The Sopranos* is extensive, both in terms of its influence on later television programs and its resonance with its audience. The impact has been so long-lasting that *Rolling Stone* recently ranked the series as the number one greatest television show of all time.¹ A common theme within *The Sopranos* is the idea of the “American Dream” and its frequently adverse effects on those trying to enact it.² The “American Dream” includes social mobility, consumerism, and materialism.² We focus our analysis on the representation of emotional expression and compression for men. The series shows the effects that trying to enact American hegemonic masculinity characteristics has on their male characters, especially Tony Soprano. We argue that the treatment of mental health and masculinity in Season 5 of *The Sopranos* “holds up a mirror” to the costs of emotional repression for men as part of performing qualities of hegemonic masculinity.

We first discuss the context of *The Sopranos*, one of HBO’s earliest one-hour dramas, with a particular emphasis on its depiction of therapy. We then define and discuss key terms: hegemonic masculinity and alexithymia, as well as comparing emotional repression to emotional compression. Third, we discuss our methodological approach to analyzing the fifth season of *The Sopranos*. Fourth, we present our findings. Finally, we discuss how the series’ portrayal of mental health issues and characters’ maladaptive behaviors helped to confront the problematic hegemonic masculinity standards depicted in the show. We argue that *The Sopranos* overtly critiques the links between “successful” masculine performances and emotional repression by portraying the negative consequences that occur when men are unable or unwilling to address their emotions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HBO, *The Sopranos*, and the depiction of therapy

The Sopranos was one of HBO’s first original one-hour dramas and changed the network’s whole outlook. HBO was created as a Home Box Office, initially airing movies and live sports events. The network began creating original programming to expand its audience (and paying members). FCC regulations around “decency” are far more lenient for pay cable networks than for broadcast television. On broadcast television, anything considered “indecent” was cut to ensure advertising and the moral

integrity of the audience were not compromised. Cable and pay-cable did not have this responsibility, as they had “more leeway in the area of explicit content and no commercial interruptions.”³ The original programming on HBO had shorter seasons and fewer episodes than broadcasting networks; this gave networks like HBO more money for production. The increased budget for production ensured a realistic, “quality” series for a niche audience of young, urban adults who were expected to handle the graphic content of programs like *The Sopranos* in an “introspective way” and to understand that the series “tackled ‘issues’ in an insightful manner.”^{3,4} The in-depth characterization within the series, created over 100 hours of airtime, allows the audience to understand the characters’ behaviors and encourages analysis of why characters are the way that they are, which could not be explored in other, shorter television series.

Understanding the themes and impact of the show extends beyond thinking of it as entertainment. According to Sayre and King (2010), much of what we know about other people comes to us in some form of entertainment.⁵ Television reflects American culture, as it “holds up a mirror to society.”⁶ Television is a form of communication to the audience, not just an art form.⁷ Messages in each television series reflect the society communicating the message.⁷ David Chase’s creation of *The Sopranos* demonstrates this capacity for reflection as the series is in “close synchronicity of the mood and agenda” of 1999 to 2007.² Even though the messages may reflect a broader societal mood, not all audiences are going to receive messages the same way or even the way its creators intended. Television serves a “bardic function,” as it produces a multitude of complicated meanings varying by audience member; as such, television can prompt conversations about our most traditional views.⁷ Television comments on ideological issues in societies but usually never has a full, concise conclusion, which opens audiences up for meaningful conversations about real-world issues of the time.⁷

The Sopranos combined many aspects of television that many still admire and continue to explore. The series combined the “strains” of television styles that already existed (crime programs, soap operas, situational comedy, and therapeutic talk shows) with an overwhelming dark worldview that echoed America’s disposition at the time.² For example, the protagonist, Tony Soprano, is deeply flawed but also humanized in such a way that the audience cannot help but root for him, popularizing the anti-hero as a protagonist on prime-time television. Although Tony Soprano was not the first anti-hero protagonist, and definitely not the last, his character stands out among an array of anti-heroes. In the end, he has no actual redeeming qualities, seen as an “immoral, spiritually bankrupt psychopath who, in the final analysis, is only out for himself.”² Despite this, many people connected with his character and feel sympathy for him, likely due to their relationship with Tony Soprano from the beginning of the series.⁸

The Sopranos’ depiction of its protagonist in therapy sessions is another reason the audience could connect so much with the character, as they could access his deepest, repressed thoughts. Tony Soprano as a character is morally ambiguous, but viewing him in therapy allows a view into this ambiguity, with a discussion of his thoughts, feelings, motives, dreams, and flashbacks that would have otherwise remained invisible.⁹ This open portrayal of therapy and how much information it gave the audience about Tony Soprano likely impacted many audience members’ views of therapy. Glen Gabbard, professor of psychiatry at Baylor College of Medicine, claimed that the series caused an increase in men seeking out psychotherapy.¹⁰ The portrayal of Tony Soprano discussing his innermost thoughts in therapy allows the audience to identify the reasons behind his panic attacks and outbursts of violent behavior. Many individuals may not have personally experienced therapy or conversations regarding mental health, so portraying these interactions is essential. In particular, U.S. dominant culture encourages all men, regardless of their proximity to the dominant group, to control their emotions and only rely on themselves.¹¹ Seeking professional help for emotional issues through therapy is non-conforming or resistant to hegemonic masculinity and its associated gender performances. Men, compared to women, are less likely to even “recognize emotional problems when they exist,” the first step towards seeking help.¹² A lack of recognition of their emotions is common among male characters in *The Sopranos*.

Hegemonic masculinity and The Sopranos

Emerging in the 1980s, the term hegemonic masculinity allows researchers to discuss the practices of masculinity that are “the currently most honored way of being a man.”¹³ Few men, if any, can enact all the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. Yet, the centrality of hegemonic masculinity to “real” manhood pushes all men to position themselves in relation to this idealized version of masculinity.¹³ Although the content of hegemonic masculinity is relational, one can look at the characteristics of masculinity celebrated at a specific time within a particular culture. For example, current American cultural views of hegemonic masculinity advocate “the denial of weakness or vulnerability, emotional and physical control, the appearance of being strong and robust, dismissal of any need for help, a ceaseless interest in sex, the display of aggressive behavior and physical dominance.”¹⁴ It is these signifiers of masculinity that individual men must figure out how to engage with and enact.

The hegemonic ideal is ever-changing along with society and circumstance. It depends on society’s interpretation of men in relation to women, varying by a wide array of social positions, including race, sexuality, class, national identity, and generation. That said, Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) argue that it is essential to recognize masculinity as a *performance* that asserts claims to

privileges, such as deference to men's preferences and protection from exploitation.¹⁵ Men in different social locations will find some aspects easier to perform than others. For example, in a study of men with licenses to carry concealed guns, Stroud (2012) found that older men turned to carrying a concealed weapon as their capacity to dominate others physically decreased due to age. This alleviated their feelings of vulnerability and allowed them to retain the capacity to elicit fear in others.¹⁶ That is, these men were able to enact a kind of physical dominance and continue to feel like "real" men.

Messerschmidt (1993; 1997) argues that criminal and antisocial behavior offers an array of choices for men to enact masculinity. While Messerschmidt applies this argument to all men (though the type of antisocial behavior varies from group to group), participation in criminal activity is a way for men blocked from legal avenues of economic dominance to demonstrate that they are still men worthy of respect.¹⁷ The men in *The Sopranos* also rely on violence in the illegal market (i.e., "the street") to demonstrate physical dominance and emotional control, as well as deny vulnerability. The cultural setting in the series reflects real societal expectations regarding masculinity. For example, the mafia functions through different power levels, "[a]ll mafias are vertical-and hierarchical- at the family level."¹⁸ There is a ranking system in organized crime; one starts at the bottom of "the family" and works their way up. As seen in *The Sopranos*, the higher ranking one has in the mafia's hierarchy, the more power, money, and respect one receives. And yet, the higher one's ranking within "the family," the higher the potential consequences for stepping out of sync with norms and expectations. *The Sopranos* offers an exaggerated portrayal of the tension many men experience around performing masculinity.

Barnes (2015) analyzes the impact of neoliberalist ideals in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, showing the similarities within the shows' frameworks.¹⁹ The concept of providing for one's family by any means is seen through the main character of each show. This idea is celebrated within hegemonic masculinity in the same way neoliberalist views emphasize profit. Ideals supporting both neoliberal and hegemonically masculine viewpoints underscore the importance of wealth and the individual. These neoliberal ideals appear throughout *The Sopranos*, as characters do anything for financial gain and power, even if it goes against what is morally correct. Collier (1998) suggests that hegemonic masculinity traits in society are associated with characteristics such as "unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, aggressive and dispassionate," which are characteristics with a solid connection to criminal behavior.^{20, 13} The male characters in *The Sopranos* all strive to perform such aspects of masculinity through their criminal behavior. Their commitment to aggression, emotional repression, and the priority they place on independence (both financial and emotional) are overt.

However, one of the compelling features of *The Sopranos*' storylines is the unflinching portrayal of the costs of these performances. Senior (2017) examines how *The Sopranos* depicts a crisis in masculinity and deconstructs Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity. Senior argues that the series creates a space for new masculine gender identity through feminist structures encouraging forms of emotion, attachment, and pleasure socially frowned upon otherwise.²¹ Male viewers' attachment to the character of Tony Soprano and the portrayal of his fragile mental state creates an empathetic, feminine connection rather than a narcissistic, masculine one. This depiction of "feminine" behaviors, which benefit Tony Soprano's mental health, further supports the idea that existing masculinity structures hinder emotional growth.²¹ At first glance, Barnes (2015) and Senior (2017) offer competing interpretations of masculine performances in *The Sopranos*. However, we assert that these arguments capture different perspectives on how the male characters enact masculinity. Barnes focuses on how Tony Soprano and other men in the show successfully enact core features of hegemonic masculinity. Senior, on the other hand, highlights the ways the show's plotlines demonstrate how Tony Soprano's misery stems from his inability to understand his emotions.

Emotional compression versus repression

In ancient Greece, the idea of stoicism contained the concept that the morally and intellectually perfect person did not publicly display passionate emotions.²² This does not mean that one does not experience the complete spectrum of emotions, but rather that one guards their passionate feelings from the public sphere to process and experience their emotions fully. Táiwò (2020) refers to this technique as "emotional compression" and suggests that it allows individuals to later communicate their feelings clearly and fully without distorting what they are feeling by publicly portraying one particularly intense emotion.²² This is beneficial, as individuals can process intense, negative emotions, such as anger and aggression, in private rather than through impulsive outbursts. In addition, this could lead to less violence and aggression overall, as individuals can convey their emotions outwardly and verbally, allowing for mutual understanding rather than an altercation. Indeed, Táiwò (2020) argues that emotional compression is potentially pro-social emotional labor for men that scholars often overlook in discussing masculine gender performances.

In modern society, people often confuse the practice of emotional compression with emotional repression. US culture values masculine performances that demonstrate few emotional displays and a capacity for emotional repression as part of "the denial of weakness or vulnerability, emotional and physical control, [and] the appearances of being strong and robust."²⁴ Psychologists refer to emotional repression and unavailability as alexithymia, which is the impairment of how one recognizes and communicates

one's emotional state.²² Levant (1992) describes men's high incidence of having at least a mild form of alexithymia due to being socialized to be emotionally stoic, as they were encouraged to repress their feelings.²³ A study among individuals experiencing depressive episodes and rates of alexithymia shows that subjects with high rates had trouble with perspective-taking and emotional recognition in others.²⁴ Alexithymia's impairment of emotions also causes individuals to resort to "maladaptive behavioral strategies in response to frustration," such as aggression.²⁵ Put another way, in several studies, violent offenders demonstrate higher levels of alexithymia than non-violent offenders.²⁵⁻²⁷

Media portrayals of male protagonists, particularly "men of action"²⁸, frequently embody hegemonic masculinity in ways that men in the real world cannot.²⁹ These men of action "are strong, silent, and ostentatiously unemotional."²⁸ The "strong, silent type" is a ubiquitous character that is a trope.³⁰ Actors such as Gary Cooper, John Wayne, and Clint Eastwood earned fame and professional respect for playing characters who exhibited profound emotional repression. Most cowboys in westerns throughout the early 1900s exemplified the "strong, silent type" trope.³¹ Several characters on *The Sopranos* overtly reference the "strong, silent type," simultaneously referencing the ability to repress emotional responses as a desirable quality while demonstrating the terrible cost of alexithymia on themselves and the people around them.

In the first episode of the series, Tony Soprano brings up the American actor Gary Cooper, well-known for playing strong, silent types in movies. The "strong, silent type" (and the consequences when real, human men try to embody it) is an overarching theme of the show. Season 5 strongly features this theme. The series' first episode sets the scene for the tensions that come to a head later in the show, as Tony overtly discusses his fears of recognizing his own emotions. In Tony's first visit to his psychiatrist after collapsing due to a panic attack, Dr. Melfi mentions that Tony told his physician that he has been feeling depressed. This obviously makes Tony uncomfortable as he looks around and finds a way to change the subject. Tony brings up Dr. Melfi's Italian heritage and how his mother would have loved it if they got together, using his sexuality as an affirmation of his masculinity to counteract the implied weaknesses of being depressed (i.e., unable to control one's emotional reactions).

Dr. Melfi ignores the comments and again brings up Tony's emotions. Tony, his eyes narrowed and tone increasingly hostile, goes into a monologue about how, nowadays everyone must talk about their problems. He sneers as he says it, implying that all this talking shows weakness. Tony's monologue ends with, "What ever happened to Gary Cooper? The strong, silent type. That was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings. He just did what he had to do. See, what they didn't know was once they got Gary Cooper in touch with his feelings that, they wouldn't be able to shut him up! And then it's dysfunction this and dysfunction that!" The very first episode lays out a core tension explored in the show: successful men should not talk about or give in to their feelings, even as Tony sits in therapy doing precisely that. Tony valorizes this emotionally repressed gender performance, even though he also believes even the ideal "strong, silent type" would express a flood of emotions if given a chance to release them.

Emotional compression, however, is not about denying or refusing the existence of feelings. Instead, this concept emphasizes that the processing of emotions is private rather than public. In this way—thinking about stoicism as emotional compression rather than repression—could encourage the perception that using a private therapy space to work through feelings is fundamentally masculine. Tony Soprano seeks out a private space to face his feelings in therapy. Throughout the series, he demonstrates flashes of understanding about the costs of his emotional repression. Despite this, he cannot relinquish his desire to embody the "strong, silent type." Rather than identifying his failure to meet these expectations of masculine performance as a fundamental flaw in the "strong, silent type" itself, he violently lashes out and hurts himself and his loved ones. In doing so, we argue that the show critiques the ties between emotional repression and "successful" masculine performances.

HYPOTHESES

We had three hypotheses prior to conducting our content analysis. Does *The Sopranos*—in its portrayal of its characters—demonstrate: 1) a relationship between hegemonic masculinity and emotional repression, 2) a damaging impact of emotional repression on Tony Soprano in the series, and 3) the damaging effects that Tony Soprano's emotional repression has on the people around him?

METHODOLOGY

The first author watched the entire series and identified main themes focusing on manifest content, which Berg defines as "elements that are physically present and countable."³² This allowed us to identify themes to analyze in closer detail: masculinity, violence, genetics, repression of emotion, mental health, and therapy. Masculinity, violence, and repression of emotion are central struggles in many of the lives of the male characters. Based on the initial coding, we opted to focus on the entirety of Season 5 because the conflicts of the season—the introduction of an unknown family member, marital stress between Tony and his wife, and Tony's fickle relationship with therapy—highlighted the tensions around emotional displays, control, and masculinity.

Season 5 delves deeper into issues that began developing in earlier seasons, including Tony’s aversion to therapy and fear of his own emotions displayed in Season 1, Episode 1 (S1E1). Tony “quit” therapy towards the end of Season 4, citing his lack of progress over the last four years as his reason. He specifically points to his continued lack of impulse control which has contributed to making mistakes at work. In doing so, he glosses over his progress in addressing his depression and panic attacks. Dr. Melfi tells Tony, “now that the panic attacks and the baseline depression have been dealt with, the real work can begin” (S4E11) on finding out who Tony really is behind his mask. After Dr. Melfi says this, Tony states he no longer thinks therapy is working. Truly facing his emotions and the consequences of those emotions is too much for Tony. As he goes through his everyday life without the support of therapy in Season 5, his panic attacks worsen. This process of him quitting and eventually returning to therapy in Season 5 emphasizes the positive differences therapy makes, even without Tony’s total commitment to change. Season 5 is, in many ways, the pinnacle of *The Sopranos*’ demonstration of the rewards and challenges of therapy.

Once we focused on Season 5, we developed a more detailed coding rubric (see **Table 1**). The first author then engaged in a more fine-grained content analysis that sought to draw out the latent content, the symbolic or deeper structural meaning of the text and scenes.³² This was done by focusing on content that dealt with discussions of masculinity, violence or aggression, repression of emotion, and mental health or therapy. Many scenes fit into multiple categories, relying on unspoken and symbolic connections between unresolved emotions, masculinity, and acts of aggression or violence.

Theme	Looking for
Masculinity	Mention of money, sex, respect, reputation, providing for the family, “real” man, strong silent type
Violence	Any form of aggressive behavior, physical (e.g., hitting, slapping, killing) or verbal (e.g., insulting or threatening someone)
Family/Genetics/Nature	Mention of traits being passed down through the family, statements someone is “just like” another family member
Repression of Emotion	alluding to unresolved issues from the past, lack of self-awareness, inappropriate outbursts, refusal to deal with emotional or relationship problems with other people, signs of depression
Mental Health/Therapy	Mention of psychiatry, therapy, Dr. Melfi, describing people as “insane”/ “crazy,” panic attacks

Table 1. Coding Rubric.

RESULTS

Throughout Season 5 of *The Sopranos*, the audience receives more information about Tony Soprano’s past and becomes more aware of his unresolved emotional issues. Over the course of this season, it becomes clear that Tony’s aggressive behavior and his anxiety attacks stem from a feeling of helplessness that developed from his childhood. A sense of power or control is a demonstration of hegemonic masculinity.¹⁴ The panic attacks that Tony experiences leave him feeling as though he is not in physical or emotional control and that, therefore, he is failing as a man. Tony also suffers from depression, diagnosed by his psychiatrist Dr. Melfi, which often makes people feel powerless and out of control, prompting more feelings of failure.³³ These underlying feelings, accompanied by his responsibilities as the boss of both his traditional family and organized crime family, cause emotional conflict. Tony demonstrates certain traits resembling alexithymia, which frequently co-occurs with depression.²⁴ The inability to deal with his emotions causes him to resort to negative behaviors. Tony’s emotional conflicts and feelings of failure as a man cause him to lash out aggressively at those closest to him, both verbally and physically.

The heightened expectations of men's behavior in the mafia are comparable to the hegemonic masculinity expectations of men in society. The inability to live up to these expectations creates frustration, sadness, and resentment that the men in *The Sopranos* do not know how to recognize or deal with healthily, resulting in outbursts of aggression and violence. The men in *The Sopranos* demonstrate characteristics of alexithymia and emotional repression rather than emotional compression. The plotlines of the show draw on the consequences of that emotional repression and, in doing so, demonstrate the negative impact of emotional repression on the male characters and the people around them.

The Effect of Tony Soprano's Behavior on Himself

Tony Soprano has hegemonic masculine ideals pushed at him from all directions. His father and uncle were also in the mafia and taught Tony the masculine expectations he must embody to be successful as a member of organized crime. Tony learns that repressing his feelings and denying weakness or vulnerability to anyone (even those closest to him) are core facets of respected masculine gender performances. He also learns acceptable outlets for his feelings from his family: eating, enacting violence, and pursuing sexual conquests. All three of these "acceptable" outlets cause harm to himself and others.

Tony demonstrates his aversion to therapy in S5E4, where the "strong, silent type" is again overtly referenced. While discussing AJ (Tony's son)'s future with his guidance counselor, the possibility of AJ seeing a psychologist arises. The guidance counselor asks Tony whether he approves of therapy. Despite his experiences with therapy's positive impact, Tony cannot express support, stating, "People use it as a crutch. And I always wonder what happened to Gary Cooper, the strong silent type." This ideal of the "strong, silent type" echoes throughout the series, as Tony demonstrates how deeply rooted he believes that the denial of weakness or vulnerability is integral to "real" masculinity, even as the burden of repressing his feelings eats away at his mental stability.

Therapy and counseling do not fit into the societal gender roles assigned to men, pushing them to view these resources as negative and stigmatize themselves and others for needing help.⁷ This stigmatization only further encourages alexithymia behaviors seen in these characters, as they refuse to accept the support they need to understand and process emotions. Tony's attitude towards therapy reflects this, both in his refusal to let his son participate in therapy and his own conflicted feelings about using therapy himself.

Tony's panic attacks are a negative consequence of his inability to express his feelings. Anything that causes him to access repressed and unresolved emotions from his past trigger the attacks. These emotions create such anxiety that his body goes into panic mode; he becomes breathless, starts sweating, his vision blurs, and he occasionally even loses consciousness. The panic attacks seen in Season 5 reflect unresolved emotions around events just before his cousin was arrested, something that Tony does not like to speak about. The feelings are so powerful that the mere mention of the word "cousin" prompts a panic attack in S5E4. Carmela is chatting about her cousin and Tony must sit down as he starts to have shortness of breath.

Tony Blundetto, Tony Soprano's cousin, has been in prison for the last 17 years for a hijacking gone wrong; he returns home in Season 5. Tony S. and Tony B. grew up together, along with Christopher Moltisanti, and were close in their youth. Both of them were supposed to participate in the hijacking that ultimately sent Tony B. to prison. At the beginning of Season 5, the audience learns that Tony S. was in the hospital during the hijacking because he got mugged by a group of men. However, in S5E9, Dr. Melfi points out that Tony's recent panic attacks have all been brought on by conversations mentioning cousins, demonstrating the long-lasting effects of Tony's unresolved emotions from the past.

While almost having a panic attack during the discussion, Tony admits to Dr. Melfi that he was in the hospital that night because he got into an argument with his mother, had a panic attack, passed out, and hit his head, requiring stitches. Out of embarrassment and shame of his "weakness," Tony concocted a false story of what happened, causing him to repress his guilt about his cousin going to prison while he did not. This burying of emotions for fifteen years, encouraged by masculine performances to remain "strong and silent," have contributed to severe panic attacks that affect the quality and safety of Tony's life. Tony S.'s guilt, both at having had a panic attack and then lying about it, casts a shadow on his relationship with his cousin. Tony S. is certain that his cousin resents the fact that Tony S. should have been at the hijacking. For Tony S., the possibility that he could have helped his cousin avoid prison if only he had not been "weak" haunts his current interactions with his cousin. The two of them butt heads over the course of Season 5, and instead of Tony S. reuniting with someone he was close to in his youth, he collects yet another enemy.

Tony's isolation is another negative consequence of his emotional repression. His relationships with his wife and children suffer because he cannot express his feelings to anyone. His wife, tired of Tony's infidelity and emotional unavailability, asked for a divorce at the end of Season 4. In Season 5, Tony lives in his mother's old house. Tony's relationship with his mother was deeply conflicted, something Tony has avoided addressing in therapy. Indeed, Tony's most profound and most painful emotions have

roots in his dysfunctional relationship with his mother. Living in a house full of echoes of his late mother, a woman Tony loved and hated in equal measures, Tony receives almost no visitors.

Tony's relationship with his nephew, Christopher Molitsanti, also demonstrates Tony's isolation and inability to connect meaningfully with the people he cares most about. Christopher struggles with addiction to heroin. Christopher went through an intervention and was sent to a rehab facility in episode 10 of Season 4 (an episode entitled "The Strong, Silent Type"). When he returns in Season 5, he is clean. He has done some preliminary work to acknowledge and address his emotions and the impact those emotions had on his addiction, something that Tony cannot wrap his head around. The show's creators use these storylines and characters to highlight the ongoing problems Tony's emotional repression creates.

Tony is unable to connect with the new, post-drug treatment Christopher. The two had been close, with Christopher being Tony's "right hand" man. Season 5 focuses on the yawning distance between these two characters. Overall, Tony and Christopher are in very different places in Season 5. Tony, now living on his own, is drinking, partying, and eating more than he had been while living with Carmela. Christopher, however, is sober, focusing on himself and his future. Tony swings back and forth between shaming Christopher for his addiction and then shaming him for his sobriety, which takes a toll on Christopher. Tony goes back and forth with himself, shaming himself for his "weakness" and mental health struggles and then shaming himself for attending therapy which helps him with these struggles. Tony's disconnect from this new, sober Christopher is seen in S5E10. While upstate with his cousin and nephew, Tony encourages Christopher to have a drink after stating he is sick of hearing his hardships about his sobriety. This comment sticks with Christopher; on his drive back to New Jersey afterward, Christopher tears up. Christopher references this moment again in S5E12 while talking to his fiancée, Adriana. Christopher is upset about Tony's repeated digs regarding his sobriety. He expresses his frustration and resentment about Tony to Adriana, stating he is done with his uncle, and that he could take Tony out in a second.

This evolution of Christopher is integral in critiquing Tony's dated, damaging ties to gender and emotional expression. Christopher's sobriety is important as it resembles Tony's mental health journey. When Christopher is struggling, it provides an opportunity for Tony to provide support to someone he loves. However, Tony sees this vulnerability in Christopher as a weakness, the same way he sees it in himself. It is a threat to manhood and Christopher's duty as his soldier. Tony's reaction is to go on the attack, to force Christopher to repress his feelings as a real man should, instead of helping Christopher through emotional connection. This outlook destroys Christopher and Tony's relationship, leaving Tony isolated at the top.

As Tony chooses to avoid the steps towards emotional maturity he discovers through therapy, and potentially the enactment of compassion rather than repression, the negative consequences become more apparent. Tony's overeating is a negative consequence of his inability to express his feelings. In S5E2, Tony's weight plays a role in the tensions between himself and his cousin. Tony B. cracks jokes regularly about Tony's weight. Tony laughs them off to Tony B.'s face, but later, Tony wakes up from a night of drinking alone in his mother's old home. After drunk dialing Tony B. the night before, Tony S. looks in the mirror and takes off his shirt, squeezing and examining his gut. Finally, he examines himself in the mirror, looking disappointed. This shows Tony is aware of his unhealthy habits with food and their effect on his body and health. However, he can't help but continue to use food to cope with his inability to express his emotions.

Effect of Tony Soprano's Behavior on his Families

Tony returns to therapy in S5E5 to discuss his attraction toward his nephew's fiancée, Adriana, with Dr. Melfi. It is a moment where the audience can see Tony's progress over the four years of therapy. He seeks to discuss his impulses rather than instantly acting on them. Tony admits that it would "kill" Christopher if he ever had sex with Adriana. Still, instead of acknowledging that he loves Christopher, Tony points to his years of training his nephew to be his number two as the reason this betrayal would be a disaster. Despite this twisted view, Dr. Melfi points to his return to therapy to avoid destructive behavior as a milestone. Dr. Melfi advises Tony to be honest with himself, stating that if he believes he cannot control his urges, he should set some boundaries and stay away from Adriana.

The next time Tony sees Adriana, they both deliberately try not to be alone together. By the night's end, however, Tony offers to drive her to score some cocaine. Unfortunately, while driving, Tony swerves to avoid a raccoon and crashes the car early in the morning. Although Tony did not betray Christopher, he did not follow through with his plan to maintain boundaries. If they had not gotten in a car crash, it is unclear whether Tony and Adriana would have avoided acting on their attraction.

The news of the crash spreads amongst the family, along with rumors of a sexual relationship between Adriana and Tony. By the time these rumors get to Christopher, people are saying Adriana was giving Tony a blowjob and that this was the reason for the car crash. The rumors leave Christopher distraught and paranoid. Tony's years of sexual infidelity make it difficult for Christopher to believe that nothing happened between his fiancée and his uncle. Christopher loses his temper, assaults Adriana, and then kicks

her out of their house. He first looks for cocaine in Adriana's purse and, when he cannot find it, drowns his feelings of betrayal in alcohol. Christopher drives drunk to Bada Bing, the strip club owned by Tony's associate, and shoots at Tony's car parked out front. He runs out of bullets and enters the bar, where Tony is seated upstairs. Christopher aims the gun at Tony and is immediately disarmed by security guards. Christopher screams, "you're lucky I ran out of loads," as he is dragged outside. This conflict between Tony and Christopher is the first of many, leading to the death of their relationship and, ultimately, Tony's murder of Christopher.

Tony's relationship with Christopher is entangled with Christopher's sobriety. Tony was the one who sent Christopher away to rehab and then is the leading cause of Christopher's first relapse. Tony provides some support and responsibility for Christopher's relapse this time by sparing his life and allowing Christopher to hear from the doctor that nothing could have occurred between him and Adriana due to her body position during the crash. To face the rumors head-on, Tony convinces Carmela to attend dinner at Vesuvio's with him, Adriana, and Christopher, proving to other members of the "family" that all issues are resolved. Christopher, however, still feels humiliated.

Tony's support and ability to connect with Christopher are due to his attendance of therapy within this episode. Since Tony was first able to discuss his feelings in therapy, he had a better understanding and control over his emotions. As a result, he could connect with Christopher during his emotional crisis, empathizing with him rather than becoming angry with him. However, this support is not seen in future conflicts between Tony and Christopher, despite Tony's understanding of how fragile Christopher's sobriety is, especially when it comes to issues regarding Adriana.

In S5E10, Tony lashes out at Christopher when the two of them are having dinner with Tony Blundetto. Tony brings up Christopher's sobriety, poking fun at it and eventually encouraging him to have a drink, stating he is "driving everybody crazy" with his 12-step program. Tony is aware of Christopher's struggles with sobriety as he saw how fragile it was in Episode 5 but still unleashes this verbal aggression. Despite his own mental health struggles, Tony cannot let go of the belief that asking for help is a weakness. Although he later apologizes and admits that Christopher is doing the right thing, Tony takes this moment to align with Tony B., who, at that point in the series, is more effectively displaying the ideals of hegemonic masculinity that Tony values. Tony B. seems self-sufficient and strong, while Christopher must rely on others' support to stay clean. This specific example is interesting, as it deals with addiction when discussing self-betterment. Rehabilitation programs work best if the individual accepts their problems, legitimately wants to change, and works to do so. The same can be said regarding traditional therapy, emphasized in the series with Tony Soprano. Tony is in therapy but can never seem to show a changed mindset in the way Christopher does (at least, for a while). Tony represses his frustration and helplessness, redirecting those emotions into anger and resentment.

In S5E12, Christopher's sobriety falters again, and Christopher reaches out to Tony for support. However, this time Tony's response reflects his inability to deal with guilt and sadness. Adriana La Cerva's involvement with the FBI ends as she finally tells Christopher that she has been an informant for the past couple of months. Ultimately, Christopher exposes the truth to Tony, who then hires a hit on Adriana to protect his work "family." After Adriana is murdered, Christopher begins using heroin again to cope with the loss of his fiancée and his role in her death. Tony finds Christopher in his office watching television, where the two demonstrate their grief over losing someone they both cared about through self-destruction and violence.

In the scene, Tony walks into his office, rubbing his face and letting out a deep sigh when he sees Christopher. He asks if Christopher is alright, though he already knows something is wrong. As Christopher talks, Tony's whole body tightens in rage.

Tony Soprano: The fuck is wrong with you?

Christopher: I snorted a little H. I know... but I can't stand the pain... I loved her.

Tony Soprano: Fucking pain, huh... you think you're alone in this!

Tony starts by breathing deeply, perhaps trying to control his anger, but as Christopher continues talking about his feelings about Adriana and her death, Tony's brow furrows, and his teeth clench before he violently attacks Christopher, knocking him down and repeatedly kicking his nephew while Christopher cries out in pain. Tony's alexithymia characteristics mean he cannot effectively pursue healthy ways to deal with his anger, fear, frustration, and anxiety. There is a sort of jealousy there, as Christopher can release this emotion and fall apart; however, Tony cannot since he is the boss and must show emotional control and strength. Tony pushes any emotion other than anger to the side to remain able to do business. Tony's statement, "you think you're alone in this," inserts an enormous amount of unaddressed emotional suffering into his assault on his nephew. This unaddressed suffering directly linked to Tony's violent outburst against someone he truly cares about shows the costs of these masculine ideals.

Tony's inability to express his sadness and guilt about Adriana's death and to demonstrate genuine concern and care for his nephew are a result of his years of emotional repression, which only creates further emotional issues that need to be resolved. Tony's refusal to support Christopher, punishing him as he reaches out for help, kills the possibility of Christopher's future

recovery. Tony's actions communicate to Christopher that he will not encourage this behavior. Just like Tony, Christopher must bottle up his emotions, stay "strong," and deal with things on his own, which does not align with successful sobriety. These scenes lay the groundwork for Tony's eventual murder of his nephew in Season 6.

Tony's refusal to deal with his feelings from his past also contribute to Tony Soprano's eventual murder of his cousin, Tony Blundetto. In S5E9, Tony has a breakthrough in therapy regarding his panic attacks and his guilt about his cousin's arrest and imprisonment. The embarrassment and shame of his weakness, and the guilt that he might have contributed to his cousin going to prison, has followed Tony into adulthood. This discovery gives Tony power as he has found a trigger of his panic attacks and can now address the emotional issues head-on. Dr. Melfi encourages Tony to come clean to Tony B. Tony, however, cannot make himself do it. After years of emotional repression, the thought of confessing the truth and communicating his emotions is foreign to Tony.

This knowledge that his panic attacks are an expression of guilt and embarrassment about the events around the ill-fated hijacking seventeen years ago weighs heavily on Tony. He would also have to admit weakness both then and now to admit the truth. His inability to talk through the issue with Tony B. creates intense anxiety for Tony, which he deals with through violent and aggressive behavior. For example, in S5E10, Tony loses control while having a casual discussion with one of the bartenders at Bada Bing. In the conversation, Tony focuses on a threat he cannot control to alleviate his anxiety: the proximity of the airport to their homes and businesses and the potential threat of a terrorist attack. The bartender shrugs and suggests that the solution is to "live for today." The answer enrages Tony, who proceeds to violently assault the bartender, throwing glasses at him and bashing him over the head with anything he can grab.

The relationship between Tony Soprano and Tony B. sours over the course of Season 5. This is because of Tony Blundetto's struggles to lead a "straight and legal" life and Tony Soprano's continued avoidance of admitting what happened seventeen years ago. Tony Soprano only ever manages to discuss what happened the night of the hijacking with his cousin when he already knows he must execute his cousin. Not long after returning home from prison, Tony Blundetto returned to organized crime, killed someone, and angered the head of another mafia family. The tension between Tony is finally resolved in S5E12 when Tony admits the truth to Tony B., but it is too late. The damage of the secret is irreversible. Tony Soprano murders his cousin with a shotgun, seeking to spare his cousin's torture at the hands of other mafia members.

There are other examples of the negative impact of Tony's emotional repression: the tumultuous relationship with his wife, his tense relationship with each of his children, and his resentment-infused relationship with his sister. However, we focused on Christopher, Adriana, and Tony B. because in each of these instances, Tony Soprano ends up murdering the sources of his "weakness." Though he struggles to do so, Tony is unable to face, process, and express any feelings beyond anger. Being the boss of both families, his mafia and traditional family, he bottles up his emotions and, as Christopher says in S5E10, eats his feelings instead. Even Christopher, however, does not seem to see the link between Tony's emotional repression and his aggressive and violent outbursts. Tony's use of therapy throughout the show offers the audience a clear view into Tony's struggle to incorporate what he learns in therapy about his emotions and his desire to be strong and silent. Watching him struggle to enact what he learns in therapy highlights the costs of his failure: misery and death.

DISCUSSION

The Sopranos' portrayal of Tony Soprano creates an honest depiction of a man struggling with how to deal with his emotions while still trying to successfully fulfill his perceived role as a man in his family and his career. The thematic content of the series shows the level of masculinity expectations in society and the stigma placed on men for accessing mental health help. These two pressures strongly affect Tony Soprano, as he is held to a standard of masculinity as the boss of both his "families," and because he suffers from panic attacks and attends therapy to treat them. The contradiction between the external (i.e., being "strong and silent") and the internal (i.e., being truly stoic requires emotional vulnerability and expression) form a dominant theme of *The Sopranos*.

The series shows a level of connection between emotional repression, the trait of alexithymia, and aggressive behavior. The men throughout the series, particularly Tony Soprano, repress their emotions to maintain respect in the organized crime world. This affects their personal lives and the people around them. A pattern emerges as repressed emotions are brought to the surface and ignored repeatedly. Characters deal with these repressed feelings through aggressive or violent behavior that helps them avoid the frightening sense of vulnerability. Many of the characters lack the skills true emotional compression requires. The masculine expectations of men to behave a certain way to be respected encourages negative alexithymia behaviors, which lead to negative reactive behaviors when unprocessed emotions unexpectedly come to the surface.

The focus in Season 5 is Tony Soprano's unresolved emotions from his past and the consequences of that lack of resolution on himself and those around him. Tony's impulsive outbursts of aggression create problems for him at work and home. The theme of therapy throughout the series explores Tony trying to cope with his mental state and being unable to commit fully to the process because letting go of his idea of traditional masculinity is too frightening. For Tony Soprano, his role in the mafia does make this fear more realistic. Other men's perception that he is not manly enough could cause them to end his life. Yet, many men feel this fear even without the literal threat of murder. As Tony resists dealing with his emotions, his outbursts and panic attacks become more apparent, allowing the audience to see how unreasonable masculinity expectations and repressed emotions have profoundly negative impacts on an individual's mental state and behavior.

The series' exploration of mental health issues on such a large platform helped to defy the masculinity standards represented in the show. Overall, *The Sopranos'* exploration of mental health and masculinity brings awareness to the costs of men's emotional repression due to society's masculinity expectations. The outbursts of violence and aggression seen throughout the series are almost as common as the avoidance of one's emotional conflicts. The series ends with a cut to a black screen in the middle of a scene, giving the audience no resolution or closure. *The Sopranos'* plotlines do not offer simple or easy answers. Embracing therapy could have potentially helped Tony Soprano avoid harming the people around him. The audience will never know, however, because Tony pulled back from his emotions in fear and could not escape the destructive allure of the "strong and silent" masculine gender performance.

CONCLUSIONS

The most obvious place to start with future research is to expand the detailed coding in this article to the rest of the show's seasons. One of the main arguments of this article is that emotional repression plays a significant part in impulsive aggressive behaviors. Interesting patterns would emerge with more story arcs included in the analysis. This paper primarily focused on Tony Soprano and a few other key male characters. Future analysis could address more characters' approaches to dealing with difficult emotions. Another potential direction for future research is considering other series that feature therapy and mental health. For example, both *Tell Me You Love Me* and *In Treatment* are HBO series that deal with therapy as a central part of their storylines. How do these series deal with masculinity, emotional suppression, and aggression? It would be intriguing to see if *The Sopranos'* exploration of these topics is continued in the subscription network's later series, and if ideas surrounding these topics have evolved over time.

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PRESS SUMMARY

Media portrayals of the “strong, silent type” reinforce the expectation that men should not demonstrate or even acknowledge their emotions. This idea reflects common societal standards regarding masculinity, which can seriously impact individual men and those around them. Táíwò (2020) argues that emotional compression (or stoicism) fundamentally differs from emotional repression. Emotional compression allows individuals to process their feelings privately and then communicate them clearly and thoroughly without distorting, uncontrolled bursts of emotion. The treatment of mental health and masculinity in Season 5 of *The Sopranos* “holds up a mirror” to the costs of emotional repression for men as part of masculine gender performances. The show highlights, sometimes quite brutally, the costs of emotional repression to men and the people around them. In doing so, the content of the show implies that therapy could help men learn to face their feelings and alleviate their suffering and their families, though only if men are willing to face the feelings of vulnerability that come with having emotions.