

TOXIC MASCULINITY PORTRAYED BY HOMELANDER'S CHARACTER IN *THE BOYS* GRAPHIC NOVEL

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of toxic masculinity as portrayed in *The Boys* graphic novel, focusing on the character Homelander. Toxic masculinity refers to harmful behaviors and attitudes—such as dominance, violence, and misogyny—that stem from traditional expectations of masculinity. Using theoretical frameworks by Kupers and Connell, the research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, analyzing all seventy-two issues of *The Boys*. Data were collected through close reading of the graphic novel, review of existing literature, and examination of dialogue that reflects toxic masculinity. The study addresses two research questions: (1) How is toxic masculinity represented through Homelander's character? and (2) How does toxic masculinity manifest in gender relations within the story? The findings reveal that Homelander embodies three key aspects of toxic masculinity: misogyny, violence, and dominance. These traits are supported by twenty-two textual examples from the graphic novel. Regarding gender relations, the study identifies three patterns shaped by toxic masculinity: power relations, production relations (control over roles and resources), and cathexis (emotional or sexual attachments influenced by dominance). These are illustrated by seven examples from the text. In conclusion, *The Boys* uses Homelander to vividly depict toxic masculinity and its harmful impact on gender dynamics. The graphic novel thus serves as a critical commentary on destructive masculine norms in contemporary society.

Keywords: *Toxic Masculinity, Graphic Novel, Gender Relations, The Boys*

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of toxic masculinity has drawn more and more attention from academics in a variety of fields, such as gender studies, media studies, psychology, and sociology. Prior studies have looked at the ways that toxic masculinity appears in a variety of social settings, including popular culture, the workplace, families, and schools. In the fast-changing social scene of today,

masculinity is changing significantly. As society works through the complexity of gender roles and expectations, conventional ideas of what it means to “be a man” are under question and redefining. This change affects people, relationships, and the larger culture. Connell (2005) defined masculinity as the behaviors and associated activities of men and manhood in life. This represents a manifestation of gender

practices related to masculinity and feminism that are socially constructed. In the context of society, masculinity may create either negative or good social constructs, depending upon the hierarchy of masculinity. It can be seen from toxic masculinity as a branch of masculinity in male characters.

The idea of toxic masculinity is still a hot topic in modern culture, changing with transforming cultural standards and more understanding of gender relations. Though the fundamental concepts of dominance, emotional repression, and aggressiveness still hold, their expressions and the surrounding conversation have evolved. According to this literature, “toxically” macho males resulted from emotionally detached father-son interactions. These psychologists put forward an essentialist view of male emotional growth and toxic masculinity as culturally normal but treatable by involving fathers. Policy debate of turn-of-the-century caught on this recommendation (Harrington, 2021).

On the other side, Kupers (2005) stated that elements of hegemonic masculinity that support the social destruction of others, thereby promoting their dominance, define toxic masculinity. Extreme rivalry and avarice, lack of awareness or lack of regard for the experiences and emotions of others, and a strong drive to dominate and control others are among the negative masculine qualities linked with toxic masculinity. He also defined misogyny, wanton violence, aggression, and dominance as a part of toxic masculinity.

In contrast, toxic masculinity is not a natural or biological trait, it is closely connected to the social construction of gender because it is the worst example of socially prescribed masculine norms that promote dominance, emotional

suppression, and aggression. This shows how societal expectations, not natural traits, shape and reinforce behaviors that keep inequality going and make it harder to build healthy, fair relationships. According to Lorber (1994), a social construct is something that exists not in objective reality, but as a result of human interaction. It exists because humans agree that it exists. Every society has a gender structure, a means by which bodies are assigned a sex category from which gender as inequality is built. Meanwhile, according to Connell (2005), gender studies are the study of men and women and all of their complexity, not only of women. The concept of gender is still controversial, particularly in cases when the definitions originate from an organization.

Maintaining looked into the graphic novel as a potent tool for societal involvement, especially in its ability to visually and narratively dissect complex themes, the writer chose a specific exemplifies this potential graphic novel by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson namely *The Boys*. This is a series that relentlessly deconstructs the superhero archetype and so offers a stark and often disturbing lens through which to examine the corrosive effects of unchecked power and toxic masculinity. It was released for the first time by WildStorm (DC Comics), but after the first volume, it was decided to cancel. Dynamite Entertainment revived it, and the following eight volumes were then published. The series began in October 2006 and ended in November 2012 with the release of the 72nd and final issue.

Toxic masculinity has had a major influence on social mores for men and women as well the writer selected Homelander's character. He is the hero and also the major villain, as a model of toxic masculinity. It becomes the deconstruction of men's function in

society which is men can also be weak and unable to be superior as other men should have been due to their personality, which will start the toxic masculinity. Influenced by a person's cultural, financial, ideological, and ethnic background as well as their situation, masculinity/masculinity is wide and varied. Still, the way that youth view masculinity in modern society, on television, in literature, and even in other scholarly sources is often severely simplified, stressing toxic masculinity traits such as physicality, superiority, and power.

Based on the foundation laid by previous studies that have carefully examined various aspects of toxic masculinity, many researchers have participated in study with various objects. In a study by Silmi Syarifah and Evita Santi (2024) entitled Toxic Masculinity: Negative Attitudes Towards Gender-Based Professions, depicted the impact and solutions for negative attitudes towards gender-based professions. The study results show that the phenomenon of toxic masculinity has an impact on men who are victims of masculinity. However, this can be minimized for victims by developing personal abilities, focusing on goals, and getting support from the closest environment.

Despite studies on gender-based professions and how this idea is visually and narratively deconstructed within the modern graphic novel genre, particularly in the complex and disturbing portrayal of characters like Homelander in *The Boys*, whose extreme embodiment of toxic masculinity necessitates a targeted exploration outside traditional literary and sociological frameworks, existing study has explored the impact of toxic masculinity across various social and professional contexts. Not only that, the theory used in this study is different from

the previous studies. The writer uses Kuper's theory about toxic masculinity (2005) and Connell's theory about gender studies (2005).

This study intends to bring up toxic masculinity in superhero graphic novels as a result of related studies and the topics referenced above. A situation appears to be developing within us. This study considers how this study provides us with information about toxic masculinity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of toxic masculinity has attracted more scholarly and popular attention in recent years, especially in the domains of psychology and gender studies. The psychological and social aspects of toxic masculinity as exemplified by Homelander in the graphic novel series *The Boys* are examined in this study particular cultural manifestation of toxic masculinity arises within this hierarchy, where characteristics like dominance, emotional repression, aggression, and entitlement are not only accepted but also exalted.

The concept of toxic masculinity is a prominent issue in contemporary culture, evolving alongside shifting cultural norms and an enhanced comprehension of gender dynamics. While the core principles of dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression remain relevant, their manifestations and the accompanying discourse have transformed. According to Kupers (2005), toxic masculinity is an element of hegemonic masculinity that serves as an overarching notion. The concept of toxic masculinity emphasizes the belief that the causes of male aggression and other social problems are universal. The concept of toxic masculinity depicts these socially damaging characteristics of hegemonic masculinity that are prized

and believed culturally, such as misogyny, violence, aggression, and dominance (Kupers, 2005).

According to Kupers (2010), the conduct of misogyny is the hate of women. Males and elite masculinity or hypermasculinity are usually the offenders of this sexism. The condition in its form is conduct displayed by someone who exhibits anti-feminism and also exhibits too strong masculinity. Next, violence is morally devoid of activity. It's usually with toxic masculinity, violence is used just to win acceptance from others. Every man has that urge and seeks different methods to meet it. The constant frustration of a man's demand for respect can lead to toxicity (Kupers, 2010).

Kupers (2010) stated that aggression is any deed causing injury to another person, driven to prevent such harm. Such a broad definition can encompass a wide range of behaviors from those in which no harmful stimulus is introduced such as purposefully hiding information from another person (or other passive-aggressive behaviors). Then, dominance means men objectify, mistreat, and control women using their greater power. In prison, people with more authority typically mistreat those with less power. Though in the grand scheme of things the power of the toughest prisoner and sexual predator is rather meager, being the dominant male in the yard or in the cellblock gives one a lot of power in that very small world and there are very few other ways that power can be expressed (Kupers, 2010).

Connell (2005) observes that the notion of gender remains contentious, particularly when such definitions originate from an institution. Since the majority of these definitions focus on the expected roles of men and women, he asserts that gender should be examined from two broad perspectives: the global

scale and the local scale. The emergence of gender studies is inextricably linked to the influence of universities and social movements.

Meanwhile, Kimmel Michael (2011) states that the term gender differs from sex, with sex pertaining primarily to biological equipment. Namely, the chromosomal, chemical, and anatomical composition of males and females. Gender denotes the significance attributed to differences within a society. Male and female denote biological sex, but masculinity and femininity represent gender, the construct that influences an individual's perception as a man or woman. Gender disparities in socialization within a culture significantly shape the perceptions of masculinity and femininity in a given situation. In this theory, Connell (2005) developed a social theory of gender relations that asserted that gender on a large scale is a social structure, not just a matter of identity. There are four models of gender relations structures, such as power relations, production relations, cathexis (emotional relations), and symbolism.

According to Connell (2005), power relations is the relations of power reveal the most apparent indicators of crisis tendencies: a historical decline in the legitimacy of patriarchal authority and a worldwide movement for women's liberation. This is driven by a fundamental conflict between the inequality of adults and the universalizing principles of modern governmental frameworks and market dynamics.

Next, production relations have undergone significant institutional transformations. The significant postwar increase in married women's employment in affluent nations and the much more substantial integration of women's labor into the monetary

economy in developing countries are particularly noteworthy. A fundamental conflict exists between the equal contributions of adults to production and the gendered ownership of the products of social labor (Connell, 2005).

Furthermore, cathexis has notably transformed with the normalization of lesbian and gay sexuality as a public alternative within the heterosexual paradigm. This transformation was bolstered by women's widespread assertion of sexual pleasure and autonomy over their bodies, influencing both heterosexual and homosexual practices. The patriarchal structure constrains expressions of emotion, attachment, and pleasure that it inherently generates (Connell 2005).

Then, symbolism is a relation defined by symbols indicative of a relationship, particularly in differentiating gender. Seeking justice in this domain entails distinguishing between symbolic differences and symbols of domination and ensuring that cultural resources are equally accessible to the most disadvantaged population (Connell 2005).

Several research studies have been conducted concerning this topic, one of them is conducted by Silmi Syarifah and Evita Santi (2024) entitled *Toxic Masculinity: Negative Attitudes Towards Gender-Based Professions*, depicted the impact and solutions for negative attitudes towards gender-based professions. The research results show that the phenomenon of toxic masculinity has an impact on men who are victims of masculinity. However, this can be minimized for victims by developing personal abilities, focusing on goals, and getting support from the closest environment.

Next, there is a research by Sculos (2017) entitled *We Are the Beast: On Toxic Masculinity and Social*

Responsibility in Disney's Beauty and the Beast, depicted how Disney's animated classic *Beauty and the Beast* (2019) and the live-action remake in 2017 differentially treat social responsibility, concerning the various sides of characters and communities represented, for the toxic masculinity exhibited by its most prominent male characters, Gaston and the Beast. This essay uses *Beauty and the Beast* as a heuristic to understand the relationship between social responsibility, toxic masculinity, contemporary capitalism, and radical political and economic change.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the writer employs a descriptive approach. According to Creswell (2014), the descriptive approach is collecting data through the use of explicitly defined phrases, words, and character conversations is known as a descriptive technique. Then, in this study, the words, sentences, or dialogue in the text of the graphic novel related to the conflict issue and the struggle of the main character to overcome the conflicts become the data of the study.

The data source of this study is *The Boys* graphic novel written by Garth Ennis and co-created, designed, and illustrated by Darick Robertson. This graphic novel debuted in October 2006; the series concluded in November 2012 after 72 issues were published. The series is set between 2006 and 2008 in a world where superheroes exist, and 9/11 marked the destruction of the Brooklyn Bridge instead of the Twin Towers.

The scope and limitations of this study are to know Homelander's character portrayal of toxic masculinity and gender relations in *The Boys* graphic novel. The writer chose 26 episodes from 72 episodes of *The Boys* graphic novel to gain the data because the writer

selectively analyzed 26 episodes out of 72 to ensure a manageable dataset that allowed for in-depth qualitative analysis, focusing on episodes deemed most representative of the study's specific research questions.

The writer employed descriptive analysis and qualitative methods to examine toxic masculinity in *The Boys* graphic novel and its portrayal of Homelander's character. The writer reads the graphic novel a couple of times to comprehend the story and the timeline, then makes notes with relevant data, and then collects data marked for analysis. The writer also reviews relevant literature to round out their understanding of the research issue.

Following data gathering, the writer develops and analyzes the given material. In this study, the method of data analysis is the methodical development of the data. The writer utilizes content analysis to examine the graphic novel via several procedures including three ongoing flows of activity that is data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification by through Miles and Hubberman's theory (1994).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Toxic Masculinity Portrayed by Homelander's Character

According to Kupers (2005), toxic masculinity is an element of hegemonic masculinity that serves as an overarching notion. The concept of toxic masculinity emphasizes the belief that the causes of male aggression and other social problems are universal. The concept of toxic masculinity depicts these socially damaging characteristics of hegemonic masculinity that are prized and believed culturally, such as misogyny, wanton violence, aggression, and dominance.

Then in this study, there is only three toxic masculinities portrayed by

Homelander's character from the four elements, such as misogyny, violence, and dominance. Also, found twenty-two data points from *The Boys* graphic novel for this element.

1) Misogyny

Misogyny is the hatred of women. Men and elite masculinity or hypermasculinity are often those who are guilty of this sexism. The disorder manifests as behavior shown by an individual who demonstrates anti-feminist attitudes and an overpowering display of masculinity (Kupers 2005). The following data misogyny portrayed by Homelander's character can be seen below:



Figure 1. (The Boys Issue 3)

Homelander: Suck it...!

Starlight: What? What is the matter with you...?

Homelander: Nothing. Beyond the fact that I want a blowjob and incredibly... seem to be encountering communication difficulties. You get on your knees, and you put it in your mouth, and you suck the goddamn thing!

Starlight: You cannot! Cannot! Cannot! Cannot!

Based on the figure above, Homelander's character embodies a misogynistic element, as evident in the dialogue between him and Starlight. The dialogue *"Nothing. Beyond the fact that I want a blowjob and incredibly...seem to be encountering communication difficulties. You get on your knees, and you put it in your mouth, and you suck the goddamn thing!"* This means Homelander treats Starlight as a simple object for his sexual fulfillment and ignores her autonomy and consent. Homelander's demand for a sexual act, along with his harsh and disapproving tone against her, highlights sexism.

2) Violence

Violence is morally devoid of activity. It is usually with toxic masculinity; violence is used just to win acceptance from others. Every man has that urge and seeks different methods to meet it. The constant frustration of a man's demand for respect can lead to toxicity. Thus, society boasts well-known stereotypes of toxic masculinity or domestic violence. Then, with toxic masculinity, the form of dominance is harmful (Kupers, 2005). The following data violence portrayed by Homelander's character can be seen below:



Figure 2. (The Boys Issue 23)

Homelander: You are fucking little cocksuckers; I am going to fucking kill you!! You are dead, you little shits! I know who you are! You are dead!

Homelander: I will fucking find you fucking fuck!

Homelander: Hhhh. How do they keep getting our number?

Based on the figure above, the figure shows a scary example of toxic masculinity in extreme violence. By the dialogue *"You are fucking little cocksuckers, I am going to fucking kill you!! You are dead, you little shits!"* then *"I'll fucking find you fucking fuck!"*, it is clearly shown that Homelander enjoys doing these violent things because of the cruel look on his face and the detailed descriptions of violence. This brings up an important part of poisonous masculinity which is mixing up violence with power and fun. It says that violence is not just a way to get something done.

Furthermore, the figure above shows how poisonous masculinity shows up in extreme violence, treating people, especially women like objects and beating them up, and the unhealthy pleasure of power through violent acts. It makes the harmful nature of this philosophy clear by showing how it can hurt people physically and mentally.

3) Dominance

Dominance means men objectify, mistreat, and control women using their greater power. In prison, people with more authority typically mistreat those with less power. Though in the grand scheme of things, the power of the toughest prisoner and sexual predator is rather meager, being the dominant male in the yard or in the cellblock gives one a lot of power in that very small world and there are very few other ways that power can be expressed (Kuper, 2005). The following data dominance portrayed

by Homelander's character can be seen below:



Figure 3. (The Boys Issue 20)

Homelander: Someone standing in the wrong place when large objects were being flung through the air. I do not particularly care.

Homelander: But it is quite incredible that you should take a simple grudge as far as you have. So much... Upheaval. So much blood is yet to be shed.

Homelander: Then again, it is not all that remarkable. Now that I stop and think about it. Such incredible ire over so little. Because you are not really a man for grand causes, are you?

Based on the figure above, the figure shows an example of toxic masculinity in dominance that Homelander's had. The dialogue "*Someone standing in the wrong place when large objects were being flung through the air. I do not particularly care.*" represents Homelander getting to the heart of toxic masculinity's need to be dominant. Also, how it changes people's intentions and permits them to be dangerous. Furthermore, it shows a scary lack of humanity, which is a key part of toxic control. He thinks that people are disposable and puts his power and deeds ahead of other people's well-being.

Throughout the words Homelander speaks in the dialogue between him and Butcher, Homelander aims to establish his physical, emotional, and psychological domination over Butcher using threats, manipulation, and arrogance, so demonstrating the destructive and hunger for authority character of toxic masculinity.

4.2 Toxic Masculinity Portrayed in Gender Relations

Connell (2005) observes that the notion of gender remains contentious, particularly when such definitions originate from an institution. Since the majority of these definitions focus on the expected roles of men and women, he asserts that gender should be examined from two broad perspectives: the global scale and the local scale. The emergence of gender studies is inextricably linked to the influence of universities and social movements. He also developed a social theory of gender relations that asserted that gender on a large scale is a social structure, not just a matter of identity. There are four models of gender relations structures such as power relations, production relations, cathexis, and symbolism.

Then the writer only finds three gender relations portrayed by Homelander's character in toxic masculinity from four elements such as power relations, production relations, and cathexis. The writer found seven data from The Boys graphic novel for this element.

1) Production Relations

The relations of power reveal the most apparent indicators of crisis tendencies which is a historical decline in the legitimacy of patriarchal authority and a worldwide movement for men's and women's liberation. This is driven by a fundamental conflict between the

inequality of women and men, and the universalizing principles of modern governmental frameworks and market dynamics (Connell 2005). The following data power relations portrayed by Homelander's character in toxic masculinity can be seen below:



Figure 4. (The Boys Issue 4)

Homelander: Hhhhhh. Try and get it into your shit-filled head, you little prick. That man in there is from Vought-American. That means he's the money.
Homelander: And we don't fuck around in front on the money. Got me?

Based on the figure above, it can be seen that the power relation in toxic masculinity is represented by the Homelander. The dialogue *"Try and get it into your shit-filled head, you little prick. That man in there is from Vought-American. That means he's the money,"* shows how toxic masculinity affects power relations, especially when it comes to gender. By setting up a hierarchy in which financial power can be seen *"the money from Vought-American"* becomes the ultimate judge of behavior and worth.

This reinforces a system where loyalty and respect are expected in the presence of those with economic

dominance. Showing how toxic masculinity works with capitalist structures to keep people in line and stop them from questioning the established power structures. This turns people into pawns in a system that is meant to keep male dominance and economic exploitation going.

2) Power Relations

Production relations have undergone significant institutional transformations. A fundamental conflict exists between the equal contributions of men and women to production and the gendered ownership of the products of social labor (Connell 2005). The following data production relations portrayed by Homelander's character in toxic masculinity can be seen below:



Figure 5. (The Boys Issue 21)

Queen Maeve: Except there are guts all over the instruments! Except we don't know how to fly! Black Noir was the fucking pilot, you unbelievably stupid shit!

Homelander: But I thought, I thought you had a plan—

Queen Maeve: I thought you did!

Based on the figure above, it can be seen that the production relation in toxic masculinity is represented by the Homelander. The dialogue between Homelander and Queen Maeve highlights how toxic masculinity affects

their production relations by showing Homelander's unrealistic expectations of others, especially women. Along with his emotional weakness when faced with his incompetence, exposes a system where gendered expectations of competence and responsibility are used to keep his power. This ultimately shows how toxic masculinity in a hierarchical production structure leads to chaos and incompetence when faced with the realities of shared responsibility and the limits of unchecked male authority.

3) Cathexis

Cathexis has notably transformed with the normalization of lesbian and gay sexuality as a public alternative within the heterosexual paradigm. This transformation was bolstered by women's widespread assertion of sexual pleasure and autonomy over their bodies, influencing both heterosexual and homosexual practices. The patriarchal structure constrains expressions of emotion, attachment, and pleasure that it inherently generates (Connell 2005). The following data cathexis portrayed by Homelander's character in toxic masculinity can be seen below:



Figure 6. (The Boys Issue 46)

Starlight: I don't know don't know
Homelander: My theory is that he's

some sort of perfect Vought product, the ultimate corporate creature... So in light of what I was saying, you should definitely feel free to give him a little more shit

Starlight: I was actually thinking... About asking him how it would be. If I were to quit the team

Homelander: After all the hard work you put into joining in the first place?

Starlight: What the hell am I thinking, confiding someone like you?

Homelander: Yes, well. The devil gets into me into sometimes.

Based on the figure above, it can be seen that the cathexis or emotional relations in toxic masculinity is represented by the Homelander. The dialogue *"So in light of what I was saying, you should definitely feel free to give him a little more shit,"* highlight cathexis in toxic masculinity which suggests a faked, emotionless perfection, and along with his advice to Starlight. This becomes a part of cathexis because redirects emotional investment away from real human connection and empathy and toward power. Maintaining a tough, unbreakable exterior, and manipulating others while hiding a deep emptiness and fear of being vulnerable.

5. CONCLUSION

The Boys graphic novel starred the Boys, a CIA-backed group of operatives whose job was to manage and, if need be, kill supes. The team was comprised of Wee Hughie, Billy Butcher, the Frenchman, Mother's Milk, and the Female. The book followed their continued efforts fighting The Seven and Vought-American. The graphic novel represents toxic masculinity through the character of Homelander as the antagonist. The writer has presented an analysis of the Homelander's character which represents the toxic masculinity

and the toxic masculinity in gender relations. Furthermore, the writer provided a conclusion to answer the two problems of the study in this research. First, how does Homelander's character portrayed of toxic masculinity in The Boys graphic novel and what are the forms of toxic masculinity portrayed by Homelander's character in gender relations in The Boys graphic novel?

The first problem, the writer finds three toxic masculinities portrayed by Homelander's character from four elements such as misogyny, violence, and dominance. The writer found twenty-two data from The Boys graphic novel for this element. The second problem, the writer finds three gender relations portrayed by Homelander's character in toxic masculinity from four elements such as power relations, production relations, and cathexis. The writer found seven data from The Boys graphic novel for this element.

Several obstacles and limitations occurred during the study process, influencing both the depth and breadth of the analysis. One important constraint was the accessibility and availability of the information. The Boys graphic book has 72 issues, however related to time limits and access worries the writer was unable to conduct a thorough assessment of all volumes. This limitation may have resulted in the removal of other important portrayals of toxic masculinity. Furthermore, because the study used a qualitative-descriptive technique, most of the analysis was based on the writer's subjective interpretation.

Conversely, the writer finds a lot of information and data in analyzing The Boys graphic novel. However, the writer only focuses on Homelander to find the toxic masculinity and toxic masculinity in gender relations in the graphic novel. The writer advises more investigation

among other researchers who may apply the same theory, method, and item to examine several angles. One may see the elements from other angles, sociology, psychology, structuralism, and others. Moreover, the same theory and method might be compared by the next scholars to examine different literary works.

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