

## **An Analysis of the Commodification of Superheroes in *The Boys Series***

Pakapol Chomsaeng\*, Nanthanoot Udomlamun  
Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities,  
Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand  
\*corresponding author: earthkung777@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

This study is an analysis of Amazon Prime's series *The Boys* Season 1 by Eric Kripke to find out how the idea of corporate capitalism is portrayed and how the commodification of superheroes in a capitalist world corrupts the ideas of hero and superhero in the series. As we are living in a world of capitalism, many big global companies gain profit through the exploitation of labor and ideas. *The Boys* portrays the nature of capitalist exploitation in combination with the exploited concept of the superhero. The series introduces a world that heroes do not save the world for good deeds, but money and popularity. This analysis shows how the concept of a hero can be corrupted by capitalism and how a corporation can benefit from commodifying superheroes as products. The study concludes that Vought International creates a vicious cycle by creating superheroes, making profits from the commodification of the superheroes, and then spending the profits for the creation of more superheroes. The process results in a change in superheroes' conscience. With money and popularity, they become selfish and start to drift apart from the path that they should follow, and even do non-heroic acts to maintain their status in society.

*Keywords:* *The Boys*, hero, superhero, corporate capitalism, commodification

### **Introduction**

Nowadays, due to the popularity of films, many written works have been adapted into screenplays for movies or TV series, yet they maintain their ability to portray human lives and cultures as well as having an impact on audiences in a similar manner to other works of art. Tom Sherak, the former Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, stated in an interview that, "Film is a reflection of society, both present and past. I think the film and its innovations sometimes have to catch up to society but sometimes it leads society too" (Shah, 2015). Thus, it seems undeniable that movies and TV series can simultaneously lead and reflect a society in positive or negative ways.

In the last decade, superhero movies have been the most popular movie genre. According to New York Film Academy (2017), highest-grossing films are almost exclusively superhero films due to opportunities for reality escaping, advanced special effects, and larger comic-book fan bases. Superhero movies are usually set in a fantasy world where a superhero is typically a good guy who tries to save the world without a pursuit for wealth or fame. However, in real life, we are living in a capitalist world where wage and profit are crucial factors. Many companies implement corporate social responsibility projects and publicize them as an evidence of their contribution to social and community development with an aim for building positive company images and making more profits. Meanwhile, an exploitative nature of capitalism is rarely visible to the public's eyes.

The main focus of this study is the first season of Amazon Prime original series *The Boys* (2019) by Eric Kripke. The series is based on the comic book series with the same

title by Garth Ennis (2016). The series is set in the fictional world where superhumans or “supes” are real, and they are employed and become assets of a corporate company, Vought International. The company is portrayed as an evil American capitalist corporate or a supes agency that benefits from selling services of their superhero employees and their related merchandises. From the outside, “supes” may look like decent people, but most of them are actually corrupted and not heroic. Moreover, Vought International also tries to infiltrate the Government by supplying their superheroes to the military. The protagonists are a group of people without super-power who casually call themselves “The Boys” who try to get revenge on the Company and the supes.

In contrary to most superhero films and series in which superheroes are idealistically portrayed, following the fundamental belief that heroes are good, and villains are bad, *The Boys* introduces a story of corrupted superheroes in a capitalist world that we may find ourselves living in. With such idealistic concept in mind, a company such as Vought International can manipulate the idea of hero and use it as a tool to earn benefits. The notions of hero and superhero are, therefore, in question. Some people with superpowers do not become superheroes because they want to do the good deed, but to gain money and reputation. This inevitably leads to a question, “How can we define a hero?” This can be an important question in our present world where a hero is still regarded as a role model.

The study will analyse *The Boys* Series by using the definition and characteristics of hero and superhero, the meaning and characteristics of corporate capitalism, and definition and processes of commodification in order to discuss how corporate capitalism may impact the idea of hero and superhero. Significantly, this study will help readers and movie audiences understand the concept of superhero and raise their awareness of how capitalism can taint and exploit the concept.

### **Methodology**

This research is textual analysis and a qualitative research. It will contain an analysis of all eight episodes of Amazon Prime original series *The Boys* Season 1 (2019) by Eric Kripke. The series is popular in comic fan communities and it has been ranked among the most watched Amazon original series ever only two weeks after its release. The show currently has an 84% rating on Rotten Tomatoes with an audience score of 94% and “anecdotally [*The Boys*] seems to be a driver of much online discussion” (Bojalad, 2019). The positive feedbacks have been given for the way the series incorporates the idea of hero and superhero into an exploitative capitalist world.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Definitions and Characteristics of Heroes**

A “hero” refers to a person who is admired for having done something very brave or having achieved something great (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*, 2020). Each person may have a different idea of hero in their mind. There are several studies on heroes and they have provided different definitions for a hero. Franco et al. (2011) describe and summarize the characteristics of hero into 5 points. First, they would act for service of others who are in need, whether it is for an individual, a group, or a community. Second, they would perform voluntarily. Third, they would recognize the potential risk or sacrifice that they made by taking these actions. Fourth, they would accept the fate of their sacrifice. Fifth, they would engage in these actions without any expectation of reward or external gain. In their study, Franco et al. (2011) also add that heroes normally had their own personal rules or beliefs. These beliefs were the core of their heroic acts and they would sacrifice themselves to maintain those principles. In addition, Kinsella et al. (2015) state that heroes have 12 central traits which consist of

moral integrity, bravery, conviction, courage, self-sacrifice, selflessness, determination, inspirational, helpfulness, protectiveness, honesty and strength. Staats et al. (2009) state that heroes would concern about others' well-being and have higher level of empathy. They believe that compassion makes people do heroic acts by rushing to help people in danger without hesitation. They also need to understand others from their perspective in order to understand the suffering of others in need. All three studies may have different view of the principles of hero, but they all suggested that being a hero is about doing a quest and helping others even when they may put themselves in danger.

### **Superhero**

“Superhero” is a fictional or film character who has special strength and uses it to do good things and help other people (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*, 2020). Superhero film genre could be regarded as a sub-genre of hero films. Award-winning writer Neil Gaiman (2019) describes about a superhero plot in his Masterclass that superheroes possibly appear in different fictional genres – novels, films, or “the hallmark of the superhero genre, the comic book”. Gaiman adds that the Great Depression and World War II eras are considered to be the golden age of superhero comics by many literary historians. Escapist plot, high moral beliefs, and cheap price could be the main factors that made superhero comic books attract audiences.

Stan Lee (2015), a legendary comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer, stated that a superhero is “a person who does heroic deeds and has the ability to do them in a way that a normal person couldn't”. As a superhero, you must possess a more extraordinary power than anyone could have, and you must use the power for a good cause. According to Morris and Morris (2012), basically, superheroes have more extraordinary powers and abilities than normal people do. They would stand by justice, help the weak, and use good power to defeat evil. They also suggest that people usually do not notice real life heroes like police, firefighters or doctors as much as superheroes in fiction because people usually think see these occupations as performing a common duty. The principle of classic superhero plot is simply the battle of good versus evil. The superhero normally follows the same principles as a typical hero, but they would have some extraordinary elements that make them outstanding and outshine a typical hero. Those elements may include fancy costumes, a supernatural ability, or a charismatic personality

### **Corporate Capitalism**

Corporate capitalism can be characterized by “industrialization and the dominance of big businesses, and policies which have allowed investors to invest with limited liability” (Misachi, 2017). These dominant corporations could impact a society in both positive and negative ways when the society is driven by money. Misachi (2017) also adds that big corporation can have powers and influence over their government in corporate capitalism society. Moreover, many government policies and decisions also help these large businesses. Corporate capitalism could also lead to inequalities, unemployment, and repression of workers. On a more positive side, this system could benefit the economic as it is “likely to experience a higher income growth”. However, the system encourages people to desire for more and more profits.

One of several countries that run on the corporate capitalist system is the United States which could be seen as an epicenter of World's capitalism. Tim Kasser et al. (2007) describe the characteristics of American Corporate Capitalism or ACC as the system in which particular individuals (e.g. shareholders) privately own the property. The basis of ACC is that “members of society will be provided with the opportunity to get what they

want (i.e., a profit, a wage, and/or a product) through competing with each other and pursuing their self-interests". The competition could lead to the best quality goods and services being offered at the lowest price for the consumers, which would be good for the whole society (Kasser et al., 2007). ACC is, thus, a system that encourages everyone in the cycle - capitalists, laborers, or consumers - to gain more profit, and then they can spend the money that they gain for their own self-interest. In doing so, people become ignorant towards the benefit of others. Fundamentally, the system of ACC works best when "capitalists, laborers, and consumers are each able to pursue their own self-interest to the maximum extent possible" (Kasser et al., 2007). It means that the capitalists have more interest in the benefits than creating products and hired laborers for the social good. The owner of products will try to maximize the profit by lower the wages. On the other hand, the laborers also act for themselves by selling their skills, time, and energy not for social good but for the highest salary instead. Consumers also pursue their self-interest by using their own income to buy what they want. They want to buy products at a lowest price as possible, ignoring lower profits of the capitalist and lower wages of the laborers (Kasser et al., 2007).

### **Commodification**

The term "commodification" is the process in which a thing or a person is treated or considered as a commodity (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus*, 2020). Commodification is "the act of taking something's original form and commercializing it, turning it into an object of trade and capital" (Haenfler, 2017). It was seen as "expropriating the means of production from much of the population in order to create a supply of laborers who must labor in order to purchase, and consumers unable to produce for their direct use" (Butsch, 1984, p. 217). However, the increasing of mainstream norms made it become an assessment on human value and worth (Greaves et al., 2007), making it a thing that everyone expects to have. In the capitalist economic system, commodification is one of the instruments for gaining money for the capitalists. Both material and immaterial things can be transformed into commodities.

There are two sociological processes related to commodification, diffusion and defusion. Diffusion is the process of spreading unknown products into a wider society. When the market recognizes a product, the business owner starts "the process of advertising and promoting that thing to the public" (Haenfler, 2017). On the other hand, defusion was the process of "watering down" or rebranding the products. Businesses use defusion to alter the meanings and commodify things that have already existed, but might not be popular in the market by magnify the strength and minimize the weakness of products. "In doing this, they were able to present certain 'enjoyable' parts of identities and leave out other aspects, constructing the identity or item to be more marketable" (Haenfler, 2017). These two processes are very crucial for capitalists to sell the commodity. Diffusion usually helps introduce the products to the consumers while defusion reintroduces the products to the market. As a result, these processes enable the capitalists to earn more money from creating product images and drawing attention from the consumers.

### **Related Works**

There are several related studies to this research. In regards to the concept of hero and meaning of hero, James Simms from Otterbein University described the materials of hero through time in his paper *The Eternal Hero: A Study of the Evolution of the Literary Character throughout History*. The research was about the evolution of the value of hero in each era. He concluded that "each era has its own values, so each character reflects

those values” and those values came from an understanding of the author of what the hero should be (Simms, 2017).

As for commodification, Harold Dawson from Marshall University explained how people commodify tragic in film industry in his paper *The Commodification of Tragedy: A Critical Examination of Contemporary Film*. The research was about how the film company changed the tragedy into the story for entertainment and get money from it. He stated that “film and documentary-style cinematic productions are objects for consumption that presents tragedy as a simplistic and distorted spectacle of simulated reality” and the film like *Titanic*, *United 93*, and *We Are...Marshall!* “share the conspicuous traits of distortion in historical facts through fictionalization of the event and reduction of complexity carried out by the entertainment industry” (Dawson, 2007).

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **A Corporate Capitalist World in *The Boys***

*The Boys* depicts the idea of corporate capitalism through a portrayal of an American multi-billion-dollar company, Vought International, and its businesses. The story of *The Boys* is set in a fictional world where some people possess special abilities or “super-abled”. They became superheroes protecting civilians who have no super powers. However, these superheroes, or “supes” in short, do not work as non-profit heroes rather as paid employees of Vought International.

In the fictional world of *The Boys*, the society is driven by the hero culture propagated by the superhero agency behind it. As a megacorporation, Vought International plays a major role in the society. The company fits with the definition of corporate capitalism. Misachi (2017) defines the meaning of corporate capitalism as “a capitalist market economy dominated by hierarchical and bureaucratic corporations that control the factors of production and the amount of profits they generate”. For American Corporate Capitalism, capitals like shareholders will privately own the property (Kasser et al., 2007). In the first episode, the series introduces Madelyn Stillwell, Vought’s Senior Vice President of Hero Management at the Company’s Annual Shareholder’s Meeting, who summarizes an increase of net income and profit that they gain from superhero business. She states, “thanks to the 200 plus superheroes in the Vought family. We see a bright future ahead, where there is a Vought hero in every town” (Kripke, 2019). This shows that the goal of Vought International is to expand the network of supes around the United States, which means the more supes, the more money for Vought. Obviously, seen as an example of an American Corporate Capitalist, Vought International shows “the private ownership of property by particular individuals” (Kasser et al., 2007), or shareholders in this case. As a Natural characteristic of American Corporate Capitalist, they invest resources of their own to purchase something and then use that property as “a means of producing some good or service” (Kasser et al., 2007), with a goal to gain the income. Vought benefits from their resources, the supes, in the production of superhero services and goods including licensed superhero merchandises.

The series also reveals the manipulative nature of the Company. To create superhero, Vought International develops “Compound V”, a chemical substance that gives people super-power. However, the experiment is kept as a secret from the public. To add value to their product, the Company creates a narrative that the supes are chosen by God and their super-power is innate. Donna, the mother of a leading character Starlight, admits to her daughter that she allowed the Company to inject her daughter with Compound V when she was a child. Evidently, Vought not only commodify people with super-power, but they also are also a manufacturer that produces super heroes for sale. All super-abled kids, growing up in the hero cultural environment and aspiring to be superheroes, finally

become employees of Vought international. This manufacturing cycle makes uncountable profits for Vought and impacts the society as a whole.

The emergence of Vought superheroes also changes the society. The superheroes become special, not only because of their power, but also from their status in the society. They become celebrities and a topic in people's everyday talks. They appear on television, in the movies, or even on boxes of cereal. Like Hollywood superstars or world-famous athletes, superheroes need managers. This is how Vought International takes a role as the biggest superhero management company in the world. All children injected by Compound V share the same idea that they are chosen by God and destined to become superheroes when they grow up. For example, Starlight entered a supes pageant, Miss Hero, in her hometown when she was young.

To earn more profits, Vought International commodifies their superhero services and products. As a commodity, it means that people need money to buy a product and service. When superheroes become assets of Vought, everything can be sold as merchandises including superhero films that dominate the box office and a superhero theme park in Paris. The Company's aquatic hero, The Deep, becomes the presenter of the Oceanland aquarium. Christian-hero, Ezekiel, preaches people at the Christian expo with \$170 entry ticket. "We are Vought. We make heroes super" (Kripke, 2019) is not just a gimmicky slogan, but is what the Company really does.

The fundamental of commodification includes the concepts of diffusion and defusion, and in *The Boys* Vought uses both of them. Diffusion is "the process of spreading styles, ideas, values, and norms into a wider society" (Haenfler, 2017). To diffuse the superhero culture, Vought introduces the world's greatest superhero team called "The Seven", which is a parody of a Hollywood superhero team, The Justice League from DC Comics. As a result of diffusion, supes all over the country dream to be part of The Seven. Starlight, a newly recruited supe, describes the selection process that, "they are auditioning girls nationwide" (Kripke, 2019). One member of The Seven is Homelander, a Superman-counterpart, who is the face of the company and the leader of the team. He is probably the best representative of an idealistic American, a white handsome man with blonde hair and blue eyes who dresses in red, white, and blue, with an American flag as a cape. His name obviously represents patriotism. He is the number -one superhero, not only because of his power, but also his popularity.

As for the process of defusion, Vought defuses some supes by minimizing some unpopular characteristics and maximizing those they want people to see. Defusion is "the process of depoliticizing or 'watering down' the values, meanings, ideals, and subversive potential of a group" (Haenfler, 2017). Queen Maeve is introduced, alongside Homelander, as the number-two superhero with a strong female character. People usually see them as an ideal superhero couple. What Vought do is accentuating her strong female looks and concealing her sexuality and drinking habit. People do not know that she is gay and alcoholic as the Company believes it might have an impact on her popularity among fans.

Another example of how Vought uses diffusion and defusion to introduce their superheroes to the market is Starlight. At first, Vought introduces her to the press as an innocent young girl from a Midwest small town with a girl-next-door personality. With a unique character strategically crafted by the Company that also creates rumors about her virginity, Starlight becomes popular among Christians and conservatives. On the other hand, to raise her popularity among young fans, Vought also makes use of a defusion process by dressing her in a sexier costume to attract men and empower her among women fans at the same time.

In addition, Vought International also commodifies superhero services. Typically, saving people in need is a basic duty of a superhero; however, if you need help from a Vought superhero, you need to pay for the service. This is shown in the first episode, during the meeting of Madelyn Stillwell and the Mayor from Baltimore, Stillwell tries to convince the mayor to hire a supe named Nubian Prince as the city's hero for \$300 million per year, including full PR supports and shares of merchandising. She suggests that Nubian Prince who does not have a military look fits Baltimore's demographics. She points out that despite his black skin color, white people will love him. Therefore, through commodification of superheroes and their services, the Company gains plenty of profits as Stillwell states at the shareholders meeting that, "it is without a doubt a good time to be in the superhero business" (Kripke, 2019).

### **Corporate Capitalism and Corrupted Heroes**

"Hero is a title reserved for those who perform truly great feats. Too many are undeserving... Just money worshipers playing hero" (Horikoshi, 2017). The quote is taken from *My Hero Academia*, Japanese animation series with a similar theme with *The Boys*, as it is also set in a society where superheroes work for money. This statement fits with the greed of superheroes portrayed in *The Boys*. Corporate capitalism of Vought International has exploited the concept of hero and supes are corrupted by the capitalist system. Their ultimate goal is popularity and money. A characteristic of workers in the American corporate capitalism is that they "act in their own self-interest, selling their time, energy, and skills not for the social good but instead for the highest possible wage" (Kasser et al., 2007). Since a hero should "performed [their heroic act] voluntarily" and "engage in these actions without any expectation of reward or external gain" (Franco et al., 2011), superheroes who perform their duty for money is not regarded as a hero. However, a paid hero becomes normalized in a society misled by an American Corporate Capitalist such as Vought International which is one of the "owners of the means of production are not expected to create products and hire laborers for the social good, but rather as a means of creating profit and accumulating further capital for their own self-interest" (Kasser et al., 2007). A money-minded superhero can be seen in a scene where Translucent, a member of The Seven, mentions about copyright infringement as a serious crime that would cost Vought \$1.2 billion per year and would also impact his income.

The corrupted superheroes bred by the evil corporate capitalist can be seen more as a villain. Their high status in the society makes supes think they can do whatever they want, as Homelander says, "I'm Homelander, and I can do whatever the f—k I want" (Kripke, 2019). The Deep uses the hierarchical structure of the supes community for his advantage when he sexually assaults Starlight who later decides to call him out, tarnishing his image as a supes, resulting in his suspension and relocation. In addition, superheroes and collateral damages or accidents can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Vought International helps their supes get away from the crime that they commit without taking any responsibility. Moreover, their high status in the society also creates a false consciousness among the supes. This has been gradually corrupting Starlight who dreams about becoming one of The Seven. In the beginning of the series, she complies with the Company's policy in order to realize her dream and to maintain her position in The Seven despite having to reinvent herself involuntarily.

A hero needs a quest. Joseph Campbell describes in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* about the basic narrative pattern of story of hero. The story of hero will start with the departure. Starting with the status quo, the hero will receive a quest or mission. He or she will start their journey to accomplish the great deeds with a goal like "Theseus when he arrived in his father's city, Athens, and heard the horrible history of the

Minotaur” (Campbell, 2004). As long as there are villains, superheroes will always be needed. Therefore, Vought manipulates the concept of the hero’s quest by shipping a Compound V substance to a terrorist to create super villains. For an unlimited income, the terrorist will create villains for supes to fight with to guarantee a long lasting superhero business. Homelander is a hero who manages to create an unnecessary quest to boost his popularity and empower himself. The corporate capitalism makes these superheroes drift apart from the traditional path of a hero.

However, there is yet a character, Starlight, who can be regarded as a modern-day representation of a traditional hero. Unlike Homelander, she is raised as good Christian. She wholeheartedly believes that her power is Godly-given. With this belief, she performs heroic acts that match those of traditional heroes. Starlight demonstrates all twelve traits of hero suggested by Kinsella et al. (2015). For example, she becomes an “inspiration” for kids who want to be like her. Despite being raised as a religious Christian, she has “courage” and “honesty” to say what is on her mind and opposes to some parts of the bible. Other example of her “bravery” is seen when she tells the public that she was sexually assaulted by her teammate. She also shows a sense of “self-sacrifice” when she decides to help people despite jeopardizing herself.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Boys* portrays a twisted futuristic world where superheroes are real and become commodities of a corporate capitalist. The society in the series is shaped by two hegemonic powers: corporate capitalism and superhero culture. Vought commodifies the supes using two processes. They use a “diffusion” process to introduce the new heroes that they created into the market, giving them characters or gimmicks that fans will be interested and use a “defusion” process for some supes by redesigning the costumes or adjusting their public personas. Although the capitalist society bends the path of a hero, some corrupted ones can still resume their heroic path. Despite being slightly corrupted by the system in the beginning, characters such as Starlight can get back to the path of a selfless hero. On the contrary, several superheroes become too corrupted to change. Homelander, one of those who are the prime products of Vought International, is completely corrupted and selfish. Since the series portrays how the corrupted supes and their exploitative manager, Vought international, manipulates and benefits from the idea of hero, the series has successfully engaged its audiences in reconsidering the definitions of hero and villain.

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