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Connor Storrie and Jackson Williams in "Heated Rivalry" (Sabrina Lantos)

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The Rise of 'Heated Rivalry': What Hollywood Can Learn From Canada's Gay Hockey Smut Phenomenon | Analysis

HBO Max, Crave execs and CLAAD trell TheWrap why stories about sex, underrepresented communities and romance are still a recipe for success on TV

Jose Alejandro Bastidas December 19, 2025 at 6:15 AM

The meteoric rise of "Heated Rivalry," a TV series about a romance between two closeted professional hockey players, came out of nowhere.

The Canadian production secured 12.4 release on HBO Max more days before it was due to premiere on north. It hallowed in popularity almost immediately despite no major pre-launch marketing campaign — no buzz-building teasers on TV, no big social media push to introduce its then largely unknown cast to viewers. And a devoted base of book fans waiting in anticipation, which blossomed into a worldwide obsession as viewer reaction to the show's graphic romance went viral on social media.

The rapid embrace of "Heated Rivalry" marks the latest success story for media companies that bet on underrepresented communities. By leaning into both the book fans and LGBTQ+ audience centering representation, producers have created a cultural phenomenon.

"We had a feeling this was going to be lightning in a bottle," said Justin Bochman, VP of content development at programming for Bell Media, which produced the show. "It's clear that the fanbase is hungry for this type of thing."

With Hollywood facing unprecedented change given consolidation of companies like Paramount and Skydance, the bidding war for Warner Bros. and the American social production reshaping toward conservative ideals, the success of a show like "Heated Rivalry" in the U.S. stands as proof that the entertainment industry need pull back its stance on diverse storytelling to retain audience attention — but rather double down on stories that present the world as it really is.

Based on the "Game Changers" romance novel series by Rachel Reid, "Heated Rivalry" chronicles the connection between Boston-based Russian team captain Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) and Montreal star Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams), as it grows from a series of secret sexual encounters into a deeper relationship through the years of playing for rival teams. Created by "Letterkenny" writer and actor Jacob Tierney, the show is produced by Canada's Bell Media for its streamer, Crave, and distributed by HBO Max in the U.S. and Australia.

Like the book franchise, the show proudly wears the label of gay smut, with graphic sex scenes being viewers is before emotionally hooking them with a tender love story. "It played to my like 'Challengers' meets Red, White and Royal Blue," said Jason Bieler, HBO and HBO Max senior vice president of global content planning and programming.

"On one hand, there's this danger, edginess and heightened sexual tension in the pursuit of this clandestine connection. But there's this aching sadness and handiness that can come with finding that romantic intimacy, but having to experience it almost removed from your life," he added. "There are lots of moments in the show that really resonate."

Three weeks after its release, "Heated Rivalry" grew to become Crave's top original series on record, increasing its viewership by nearly 4pctt since its 9pm. 28 premiere, according to data from Amazon Channels. It's also been a hit for HBO Max, standing among the platform's top five scripted debuts of 2025 — comparable to the debut of Max Drama Series Jeremy "Big Mac" — along with being the top debut for an acquired, non-animated title since the platform's launch in November by internal data. Bieler said the show is also the top debut of 2025 for accessories on the platform since its release, presented by "Dr. Welcome to Derry".

The show has stayed on HBO Max's top 10 in the U.S. since its Nov. 28 premiere, and even surpassed "Derry" for the top spot for at least one day. And it produced a deluge of social media engagement across platforms, from Instagram and TikTok to YouTube creators and the video podcast crowd.

The series was renewed for Season 2 on Dec. 13, with HBO Max expanding its distribution deal to bring the drama to Asia, Latin America and some countries in Europe. Bell Media remains the sole creative driving force behind the show, with HBO Max remaining strictly a licensing partner.

"If HBO wants to give us feedback, we'll take it. They have been very hands-off," Bochman said. "They're pretty good at it, but I think this model worked for us."

Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie in "Heated Rivalry" (Sabrina Lantos)

The ball goes beyond "Heated Rivalry" being a gay-centered drama with three graphic sex scenes in almost every episode. Even weeks before the show premiered, buzz was building among the romance novels' loyal fans — composed of mostly women with an active presence on BookTok, a social media community for book lovers within TikTok. Now the books are surging in popularity across platforms like Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Audible.

Centering a queer romance also gave the show a leery base of support from LGBTQ+ audiences, who tend to drive viewership after putting their stamp of approval on new programming.

"More than half of LGBTQ Americans and three in six non-LGBTQ people, about 84 million Americans combined, say they are more likely to watch a TV show if at least one of the characters is LGBTQ," said Megan Townsend, GLAAD's senior director of entertainment research and analysis. "We know our stories have universal appeal."

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Bringing the show to the world

Bochman remembered coming into NYCON — the world's largest annual global market for entertainment content, hosted in Cannes, France — with a rare sense of confidence about selling "Heated Rivalry" to international distributors. That confidence helped guide the show's promotional strategy ahead of release too, with a focus on feeding the existing fandom with just enough information to keep interest growing.

Weeks ahead of the November release, fans lived for the occasional photo drop featuring Storrie and Williams in character. When Crave released the official trailer in October, the social media buzz grew strong enough that the Bell Media sales team had what Bochman referred to as "free advocates" across the world, clamoring for the show to be acquired for release in their countries.

Bieler said he was "impressed" by the show when he first watched it a few months before its release. "It became immediately clear 'Heated Rivalry' would be a highly impactful strategic acquisition for HBO Max ... I brought the show to our chief content officer, Casey Bloys, and to his credit, he immediately supported my advocacy for the show and we started negotiating."

On the week of its debut, "Heated Rivalry" secured distribution on HBO Max for the U.S. and Australia, along with Movistar+ in Spain and Sky in New Zealand. The show will also stream on Sky in the U.K. and Ireland starting Jan. 10.

"This is a weird business where you can't predict what's going to happen. Things that you think are going to do well flop, and things that aren't that good do great. This is not a science," Bochman said. "This one we felt so strongly that it was a hit, and then we saw the final show, we only kept getting more and more confident."

Graphic but tasteful

The established fanbase from the "Game Changer" books caught the interest of Bell Media's development team, led by Rachel Goldstein Cunn. Their prior history working with Tierney on shows like "Letterkenny" and "Shoresy" made him the perfect TV creator to bring the novels to life. He secured the rights from Reid with his commitment to staying true to the source material and making a true romance adaptation.

That mission included a carefully crafted portrayal of gay sex not typically shown with this much detail on television — whether one agrees with its authenticity or not.

"I remember in the first reading of the script, [Tierney] actually put a note in the draft that was sending the agents. 'This reads really graphically, but it's going to be handled tastefully. It's not pornography,'" Bochman said. "I've read the book now and the show is tame [in comparison]."

Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie in "Heated Rivalry" (Sabrina Lantos)

Bell Media executives were not afraid to work blue. The sex on "Heated Rivalry" is meant to showcase the desire between its lead characters, as well as their growing intimacy. Crave welcomed the storytelling approach, having been the Canadian distributor for prior HBO hits like "The White Lotus," "And Just Like That" and other titles that entered around sex.

"[The sex scenes make] it more homosexuality and people want to talk about it. There's nothing wrong with that," Bochman added. "The sex is what books you in at the beginning. But as the episodes go on, you get hooked by the love story. What's happening is not just surface; there are a lot of layers that really get to you as the series goes on."

"It's really the story of love against all odds and navigating the complexities of identity. I think that resonates across generations," Bieler said.

Romance has been a tried-and-true genre across mediums for centuries, with shows like Netflix's "Bridgerton," set to release its fourth season in January, as another example of a successful, sex-heavy romance novel adaptation that continues to garner attention and money for Hollywood.

"Even time one of these big romantic adaptations gets made, often they are a huge success. But every time, people seem to be surprised by it, which I think is a little strange [because] people are yearning for this," Townsend said. "Hopefully we'll start to see some more of those adaptations come through."

Connor Storrie in "Heated Rivalry" (Sabrina Lantos)

Queer stories pay off

For Townsend, the success of "Heated Rivalry" is only one example of queer storytelling paying off for the entertainment industry. Weeks after GLAAD reported that 20% of film content characters on TV during the 2024-25 season will disappear in this current year, due to shows ending or getting cancelled or characters being written off, seeing queer storylines centered in new and returning hits brings hope against those dire predictions — from "Heated Rivalry" to hit shows like FX's "Pluribus," Netflix's "Sandman" to Zoellian character, and the final season of "Stranger Things."

"It's important to see LGBTQ characters in all genres and in all character archetypes. We want everybody, from the hero to the villain to the boring person who works in the office, to have the option to tell those stories," she said.

Beyond being featured in the shows, Townsend noted that queer audiences also drive viewership as "trusted recommenders." LGBTQ+ viewers have been credited with helping shows like "The Hunting Wives," "Schoolgirls," "Slacks" and "Abbott Elementary" grow into long-term viewership successes.

"An networks and streamers look to build their audiences, keep them engaged and paying for a subscription every month, telling different, nuanced and interesting LGBTQ stories is going to be key to that bottom line," Townsend said.

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