

CANADA EDITOR'S PICK FEATURES FILM & TV

Why Women Love Gay Hockey Romance: How Heated Rivalry Connects Western TV to Japanese Manga

The "wine mom" phenomenon has deep roots in East Asian fan culture

By: Resonate Team
Published: January 15, 2026

Facebook X LinkedIn Threads



If you have been on social media lately, you have probably seen Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov. The two leads of the HBO/Crave series *Heated Rivalry* are everywhere, and the show is a genuine word-of-mouth sensation. Based on the *Game Changers* novels by Rachel Reid, the series centers on an illicit, decade-spanning romance between two of the National Hockey League's (NHL) biggest stars.

On the ice, Shane Hollander (*Hudson Williams*) is the "golden boy" captain of the Montreal Metros, while Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie) is his brash, Russian rival for the Boston Raiders. Off the ice, their performative animosity masks a secret sexual relationship that begins in their rookie year and evolves into a complex emotional bond. The drama thrives on the tension of the closet, the high stakes of professional sports, and a "years-long journey of love, denial, and self-discovery" as they navigate life in a hyper-masculine world that isn't ready for them.



Photo By HBO MAX

Jacob Tierney, the show's creator, recently told *The Hollywood Reporter*, "The baked-in audience for this is women. It's wine moms. They love this stuff." The data backs him up. Across platforms like TikTok and Instagram, the series has exploded, driven by a demographic that Hollywood historically overlooked. But this isn't a new trend. In Asia, women have been the primary consumers of male-on-male romance for over 50 years. What we are seeing with *Heated Rivalry* is the Western mainstreaming of a genre that started in 1970s Japanese manga.

The Billion-Dollar "Boys' Love" Economy

The genre *Heated Rivalry* belongs to is known in Asia as "Boys' Love" (BL). What began as underground manga in Japan has evolved into a massive economic engine. According to a 2025 report by SCB EIC, the Thai BL industry alone is projected to generate over \$4.9 billion (approximately \$150 million USD) by the end of 2025. This represents an annual growth rate of roughly 17% since 2019.

This isn't just a small side market. BL content's share of Thailand's total entertainment production value is expected to rise from 0.7% in 2019 to 3.9% in 2025. Popular titles like *2gether: The Series* became cultural landmarks, with the show surpassing one billion total views across all episodes. Other hits like *Bad Buddy* and *Cherry Magic!* have turned their lead actors into "idols" who sell out stadiums for fan meetings and concerts across Asia, South America, and Europe.



Why BL is a "Safe Haven" for Asian Women

To understand why BL is so popular in Asia, you have to look at the social pressures women face there. In many East and Southeast Asian societies, traditional gender roles remain rigid. Heterosexual romances in media often repeat the same tired "dominant man, submissive woman" tropes.

"In straight manhua and manga, female characters are often fetishized and unrealistic," one fan noted in a community forum. "In BL, characters are on a level playing field. They can push past masculine tropes. It shows that men can show emotion, sadness, and become flustered."

Read more: [Why Microdramas Are Taking Over Asia And Why The West Could Be Next](#)

For many, the appeal is the removal of the female character entirely. By taking women out of the equation, female viewers can enjoy a romance that isn't burdened by the "patriarchal nonsense" they experience in their daily lives. It offers a "Utopian space" where love is about equality rather than power dynamics. In countries where LGBTQ+ rights are still a struggle on the streets, these stories offer a vision of "pure love" that conquers all social barriers.

The Western Shift: From Niche to Netflix

While Asia has dominated the BL market for decades, Western production companies have finally caught on. The success of *Heated Rivalry* follows a trail blazed by other major Western "BL" adaptations. Netflix's *Heartstopper* and *Young Royals* showed that there is a hunger for earnest, romantic queer stories among young women and LGBTQ+ viewers alike.

Even feature films are getting in on the act. Amazon MGM's *Red, White & Royal Blue* became a global #1 hit on Prime Video, proving that "enemies-to-lovers" tropes involving two men can draw numbers that rival traditional rom-coms. These shows take the DNA of Asian BL—focusing on the "sweetness" and emotional growth of the relationship—and place it in a Western context.



Is it fetishization or a safe space?

There is a long-standing debate about whether women consuming gay content is "fetishizing" gay men. Some critics, like Jordan Firstman, have argued that these shows cater to people who "want to see two straight hockey players pretending to be gay."

But from an East Asian perspective, the lens is different. Sex researcher Lucy Neville suggests a more somber reason for the appeal. Neville found that many women who exclusively consume male-male romance are survivors of sexual violence. She wrote, "They just find [heterosexual sex] really triggering. Men together was something they could just watch and enjoy sexually, romantically, without having to really engage with some of the more complex stuff going on with their feelings about their own sexuality."



Heated Rivalry - (L to R) Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander and Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov in Episode 106 of Heated Rivalry. Cr. Sabrina Lantos © 2025

Heated Rivalry is proving that there is a massive, underserved market for high-production gay romance. The "wine mom" audience is loyal and they have high spending power. As noted by Dramallama App's 2024-25 Industry Growth report, over 51% of BL viewers now fall between the ages of 26 and 45.

By the time the second season arrives, the industry won't be able to ignore these viewers anymore. Whether it's through the lens of trauma, solidarity, or simple romantic escapism, women have found a home in the hockey rink. And as the ratings show, they aren't leaving anytime soon.



Where to watch Heated Rivalry

If you want to see what all the fuss is about, here is where you can find the series depending on your location:

- **United States:** All episodes are currently streaming on **HBO MAX**.
- **Canada:** The series is available on **Crave**.
- **United Kingdom and Ireland:** *Heated Rivalry* premiered on **Sky Atlantic** and the streaming service **NOW** on January 10, 2026.
- **Australia:** You can find the show on **Binge** or **Foxtel**.
- **New Zealand:** The series airs on **Sky**.

Author

Resonate Team

[View All Posts](#)

BL, Heated Rivalry, Hudson Williams

Facebook X LinkedIn Threads

More From Resonate



NEWS
Ken Jeong Snuck Easter Eggs Into 'The Hangover' Just to Make His Wife Laugh
JANUARY 16, 2026



NEWS
San Francisco Jury Clears Man of Murder in 'Grandpa Vicha' Killing
JANUARY 16, 2026



SOUTH KOREA
Police Clear Actress Nana in Home Intruder Case, Rule Actions as Self-Defense
JANUARY 16, 2026



NEWS
Michelle Yeoh Joins Avatar 4 and 5 as Na'vi
JANUARY 16, 2026



NEWS
BLACKPINK to Drop Mini Album 'Deadline' on February 27
JANUARY 16, 2026



FEATURES
Why Women Love Gay Hockey Romance: How Heated Rivalry Connects Western TV to Japanese Manga
JANUARY 15, 2026



NEWS
British Thai Star Becky Armstrong Cast As New 'Nanno' in 'Girl From Nowhere: The Reset'
JANUARY 15, 2026



NEWS
Arden Cho Auditioned For Differnet 'KPop Demon Hunters' Character - Before Landing Lead Role, Rumi
JANUARY 15, 2026



Candlelight Phoenix

A unique location, thousands of candles, and the best of music. Experience Candlelight

Candlelight

"Resonate" actively encourages positive representation in the media by making your voice heard by delivering interesting articles from your own perspectives to actively engage wider audiences.

Contact Us: Hello@WeAreResonate.com

Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, TikTok