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From Gen Z To Gen X: Heated Rivalry Is Changing How India Watches Queer Stories

Puja Talwar and Ekta Sinha on why Heated Rivalry captivates the girls, the gays and the theys!

07 FEB 2026 · EKTA SINHA

If you were at the cottage this summer, you already know. If you weren't, well, you've either been living under a rock or blissfully unaware of the most feverish queer discourse to hit our timelines in years. What began as fan edits, breathless X threads, and group chat meltdowns (mine is called Heated) has now officially landed on Indian screens via Letterpen Play, dragging all of us into its emotionally repressed, longing-soaked universe. Naturally, I did what any self-respecting Gen Z culture writer would do: I forced a Gen X journalist to watch it with me.

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Puja Talwar, my friend and a senior journalist, has covered the rise of K-pop, tracked the globalisation of K-dramas, and dissected Bollywood's evolving star system. She has seen fandom cycles rise, peak, and implode. I, on the other hand, have lived through stan Twitter wars, algorithm-driven obsession, and the kind of queer representation that exists as much in silent and subtext as it does on screen. So when this show, equal parts slow-burn romance and cultural flashpoint, finally arrived in India, I needed to know: is this just another internet moment, or are we witnessing a shift in how queer love stories are consumed, discussed, and canonised across generations?

I had been on Talwar's case for months. As a Gen Z culture writer, my algorithm had long surrendered to Shane and Ilya edits. Her Instagram was still relatively sane. So when she finally pressed play, her first reaction? Shock.

"I have not seen something so explicit yet beautiful on screen," she told me, eyes widening even in recollection. Compared to our regular That Bit, which often leave things to implication, this was "out there." The sex hits first and hard. But what surprised her wasn't the heat; it was what came after. "Then it fades into the background. You want to know how they go from here." That "here" is where our generations begin to diverge and, strangely, converge.

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The Performances

Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams' performances were nothing short of spectacular. Connor brought an incredible depth to his emotion, even his anger and rage were layered and palpable, making Shane feel soft-hearted yet capable of cutting, sharp words when needed. Hudson poured his heart and soul into every scene, creating a performance that feels once-in-a-lifetime, truly generational. Both of them are stars of their era, rising at a pace rarely seen. From relative unknowns to international sensations, they've captured hearts across borders, with a fandom journey from Canada to India that's already cementing them as some of the biggest names in the industry today.

Growing Up With Fear vs Growing Up With Fandom

For Talwar, a teenager in the '90s, queerness wasn't romance-coded. It was crisis-coded. When Freddie Mercury, Greg Louganis, and Rock Hudson publicly battled AIDS, homosexuality and illness became synonymous in mainstream imagination. "People were forced to think it was the same thing," she said. "Homosexuality and AIDS, which is simply heartbreaking to think about."

India hadn't liberalised yet. There was no Pride Month march or media boom. Queer characters, when they existed in Hindi cinema, were punchlines.

By the time I was a teenager, the internet had already done what decades of silence could not. I discovered YAOI, a Japanese genre of male-male romance created largely by women for women. What began in 1970s manga circles evolved into a global subculture. The term fujoshi — literally "rotten girl" — emerged to describe straight women who consume and obsess over these stories. When I explained this to Talwar, she laughed. "So it's extended foreplay for straight women minus their pain on screen?" Maybe. But it's also about power.

YAOI was, in many ways, born out of exhaustion, women tired of watching unequal heterosexual dynamics. Two men in love meant no prescribed gender roles. No cultural script of "the man leads, the woman follows." Just two people negotiating desires. Which is precisely what *Heated Rivalry* does.

That feels especially true in the context of this story, and perhaps even more interesting when you consider that it is written by a queer woman, Rachel Reid. In queer fandom circles, there's a running joke: only a woman could write men like this, with this much consent, this much emotional articulation, and aching tenderness. For generations, women have consumed romances that rarely centered their pleasure, their interiority, or their need for emotional safety. So when they write male-male love stories, some argue, they reimagine intimacy itself — stripping away rigid gender scripts and rebuilding desire with softness, negotiation, and mutual vulnerability at its core.

The Unpacking

To unpack this further, Talwar spoke to Shivraj Parshad, Executive Coach and Coming Out Coach at Brevis Consulting. "For me, *Heated Rivalry* works because it offers something mainstream romance rarely does: a love story between equals," says Parshad. "So many queer narratives we've seen over the years are rooted in tragedy, shame, or secrecy. This isn't that. This is about two men choosing vulnerability and intimacy over performance, over the identities they feel pressured to uphold. That emotional honesty is powerful."

He adds that the appeal extends far beyond the LGBTQ+ community. "Women, especially, respond to it because it presents a kind of emotional transparency they often crave in relationships but don't always experience, particularly from men. A man-to-man romance sidesteps traditional gender power dynamics. It feels freer, less burdened by normative expectations of who should lead, who should soften, who should apologise. Yes, there's sensuality, and there's pleasure in the gaze. But at its heart, the story is about the courage to be fully seen. And that's universal."

I also spoke to Divyak D'Souza, a stylist and creative director, who was utterly surprised at our screening last week. He notes, "Watching *Heated Rivalry* as a gay millennial in India felt strangely healing. Queer representation in cinema in an Indian context pushes gay characters as sidekicks, punchlines, or tragedies. Watching a version of gay love that's messy, passionate, ambitious, sexual, and still deserving of a happy ending has been a joy. If I had seen something like this in my teens, I think I would have carried more hope and believed that my life could expand instead of shrink. It reinforces that a positive outcome isn't delusional; it's possible.

And the fact that so many straight audiences are invested? That feels like progress. Watching them root for a queer love story without irony or discomfort signals normalisation. It tells me the world is shifting slowly but meaningfully toward something softer, safer, and more expansive for all of us."

Consent Is Actually Romantic

What struck Talwar most wasn't just the chemistry, though she called it "fiery" and "steamy"; it was the equality. "In heterosexual relationships, there is always one who is in command," she said. "Usually the woman communicates emotionally. Rarely a man. God forbid they think from their bald heads."

Here, both Shane and Ilya ask consent and check on each other. Even in moments of lust or anger, there is no coercion masquerading as passion. "There was a huge amount of consent," she emphasised. "No one is overpowering the other."

For a generation raised on Bollywood's alpha heroes, where toxic masculinity was (and still is) sold as devotion, this softness feels warm to our hearts. For my generation, which grew up vocabulary-first — gaslighting, boundaries, trauma, attachment styles, it feels necessary. Shane, neurodivergent-coded, anxious, holding his clothes nervously before getting into bed, is not mocked for his sensitivity. Ilya, the supposed playboy, is allowed tenderness. Two hyper-masculine athletes playing a hyper-masculine sport reveal emotional vulnerability without surrendering their masculinity. That dismantling matters.

For decades, Bollywood caricatured gay men as effeminate comic relief. When it did attempt seriousness, like in Aligarh or Kapoor & Sons, queerness was framed in pain, secrecy, or moral conflict. In glossy streaming shows like Made in Heaven, queer identity often ended being reduced to sexual transgression. "Being gay was equivalent to having sex," Talwar said. "Nothing else."

Heated Rivalry refuses that 'soft porn' nature. Even if you cut out the explicit scenes, she insisted, "it would still be a good watch." Because the story is about emotional growth.

The Generation Gap That Isn't

There was a moment in our conversation where something shifted. "I rank fictional characters," Talwar confessed. "I live for romance on screens." So do I. She spoke about women her age choosing singlehood because emotionally articulate men are rare. I spoke about Gen Z girls who use queer media as a relationship litmus test; if a man refuses to watch a queer love story, what exactly is he uncomfortable with?

We both agreed: straight men should have mandatory screenings. But underneath the humour was something else. A quiet grief. Straight romance, culturally, feel exhausted. Repetitive. Meanwhile, this queer storytelling, particularly male-male romances, is doing the emotional labour mainstream heterosexual narratives have abandoned.

Maybe that's why this show feels like a phenomenon.

From Stigma to Stadium Kisses

In the '80s, coming out could mean exile. In *Heated Rivalry*, when Shane's parents say they suspected all along and simply wish he had told them sooner, it looks like generational healing. Talwar imagined the mother looking inward: *did I not create a safe enough space?*

For her, that scene was more powerful than anything she had seen before. More affecting than *Red, White & Royal Blue*, more emotionally resonant than older queer cinema she grew up around.

For me, it felt like the culmination of decades of storytelling, from coded subtext to locker-room honesty. And yet, we both acknowledged reality. India is not post-homophobia. Queer couples are still judged at family gatherings. Masculinity is still policed in classrooms and locker rooms. Conservative pockets persist globally, whether in parts of Russia, Korea, or small-town India.

But what has changed?

For Talwar, watching two masculine hockey players fall in love without shame dismantled a lifetime of stereotypes. For me, watching a Gen X journalist say "it's fine, it's no big deal" felt equally comforting. Maybe that's the power of a real love story. Not that a queer sports romance became popular, but that two women, shaped by completely different cultural climates, sat down to watch it, argued, laughed, unpacked decades of conditioning, and found themselves cheering for the same thing.

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