



Sex is Storytelling in Heated Rivalry: A Queer Hockey Romance Reviewed

Image Credit: HBO / Crave

In a television landscape that often shies away from queer intimacy, Mary O'Leary analyzes the ways Heated Rivalry places sexual intimacy at the heart of its storytelling.

By [Mary O'Leary](#) | Feb 6 2026

Television's newest book-to-screen queer hockey romance, *Heated Rivalry*, debuted on Crave and HBO Max this past December, earning worldwide acclaim and infamy for its candid portrayal of sex throughout its six-episode run. This depiction has garnered both praise and criticism from queer and television critic communities, calling into question why such amounts of sex were shown, and whether it's influenced the exponential growth of the show's viewership.

The story itself follows two rival hockey captains, Canada's Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Russia's Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie), as their clandestine sexual relationship becomes something more over the course of their careers. Their romance brings forth conversations relating to toxic masculinity in sports, cultural miscommunication and the growth of LGBTQ+ acceptance throughout the 2010s.

On top of that, the show has done wonders in changing the narrative of LGBTQ+ representation in the NHL and other hockey leagues. Currently, there are zero out male gay hockey players within the NHL, with much of the sport's history being plagued with anti-LGBTQ+ policies and rhetoric. With real-life hockey player Jesse Kortuem crediting the show as inspiration for his own coming out, the possibility of more players following suit increases exponentially.

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The show's presentation of its Russian character, Ilya, is also quite radical in its representation, with Russia's 'anti-gay propaganda' laws being a major plot point in the series. For this reason, *Heated Rivalry* has unsurprisingly garnered a huge fanbase of Russian viewers both at home and abroad.

The show itself is not without its criticisms however, particularly with its wide use of 'fanservice' sex scenes and its primarily straight female audience. Many queer critics of the show are rightfully wary of such depictions leading to the fetishization of gay men amongst the show's fanbase.

This, of course, begs the question of why sex was so frequently used throughout the narrative, and whether it will influence future queer stories within the romance genre. Are these sex scenes examples of much-needed representation, pure objectification, or simply an effective way to explore a romance story?

It's also important to note that unlike the discourse surrounding *Heated Rivalry*, most straight shows which depict a wide variety of sex scenes, are not nearly as debated. Straight romances which depict explicit intimacy scenes are thus offered the luxury of acceptance without controversy. Ironically, the double standard applied to queer romances helped give rise to the explicit sexual representation as seen in *Heated Rivalry*.

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Unlike said straight romances, sex within *Heated Rivalry* acts as the foundation for which its main characters' experience conflict. In that sense, it is the inverse of traditional straight romances, where romantic intimacy is established first and sexual intimacy follows. For Shane and Ilya, sex is both the reason why they must keep their relationship a secret, and the reason why they cannot deepen their relationship on an emotional level. Furthermore, the moment that their romantic relationship develops emotionally, the show ceases its intimacy scenes almost entirely.

As such, the use of sex and its frequency on screen become more than just 'sexy fanservice', it becomes central to how the show's narrative communicates the romantic development between Shane and Ilya. This is not to say that *Heated Rivalry's* scenes do not fall under the umbrella term of fanservice, but only that their connection to the romance's main narrative allow for such scenes to not feel too forced. Even within individual sex scenes, the show takes the time to focus on how the emotional connection between the two fluctuates as they become less reliant on sex.

Moving forward, it will be interesting to see how Hollywood interprets *Heated Rivalry's* sex success. One wonders whether it will bring about a rise in sex scenes, a rise in queer love stories, or simply a rise in spicy sports romances. That being said, most will likely misunderstand what it is that made *Heated Rivalry's* sex scenes so central to the plot.

Romance as a genre is one currently defined by a growing depiction of sex, but since intimacy is a key part of real relationships, it shouldn't be completely demoralized. It seems almost inevitable that sex will continue to hold an increasing influence on storytelling in all its forms. Ignoring its significance in life and in romantic narratives overlooks a primary aspect of human experience that many want reflected in the stories they consume. It's unsurprising that a queer romance was the show to launch sex into the spotlight in such a way, with its mere existence already being a subversion of traditional heterosexual romances.

The success of *Heated Rivalry* offers hope for greater recognition of sex and its importance in mainstream straight, gay, and lesbian romances. Though not without its criticisms or frustrations, *Heated Rivalry* certainly heralds this future of more narratively driven, sex-included storytelling.

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