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## Why is America so horny for gay hockey jocks?

What Heated Rivalry and gay hockey smut can tell us about ourselves.

by **Alex Abad-Santos**

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The two heated rivals at the heart of *Heated Rivalry*. Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max



*Alex Abad-Santos* is a senior correspondent who explains what society obsesses over, from Marvel and movies to fitness and skin care. He came to Vox in 2014. Prior to that, he worked at *The Atlantic*.

To outsiders, the phenomenon of *Heated Rivalry* could not seem more impossible: A show about two rival hockey players is one of the most popular shows on HBO Max. Not only that, but these two puck buddies have a lot of sex. There has never been a moment in history when the world has been more obsessed with gay, Canadian, softcore porn.

Since the show premiered in late 2025, stars Hudson Williams and Connor

Storie have been on every red carpet and in every photoshoot, and they've talked to seemingly every entertainment publication in existence. They've amassed millions of social media followers overnight. (Their co-stars have become hot Hollywood commodities, as well.) And at this Sunday's Golden Globes, an awards show that brings together the biggest movie and TV actors on one stage, all eyes were on the two heated rivals.

The intensity of their stardom and how quickly the pair have ascended all raises the question: Why? What is it about *Heated Rivals* that everyone loves? What itch is this smutty hockey show scratching? Does the world simply thirst for hockey butts?

To get a better perspective on the show's popularity, I asked Vox's book critic and senior correspondent Constance Grady for some help explaining the popularity, the intensity of that popularity, and why it is and isn't at all surprising that women, in particular, are powering the gay hockey smut moment that we're living in.

**Constance, please tell me what you thought of *Heated Rivalry*. Have you read the books?**

I have to start off by admitting that *Heated Rivalry* is one of those things that is close enough to the stuff I like that I thought I should enjoy it, but then I simply did not.

**This is how I feel about confetti/funfetti cake. I like all the things that constitute confetti cake — vanilla, celebration, icing, buttercream, sugar, cake — separately, but it just doesn't work for me.**

*Heated Rivalry* is famously inspired by Real Person Fanfiction, specifically hockey RPF, which is big enough to be its own genre. (We'll get into it.) I like love stories, and I like fanfiction, so I was ready to be as obsessed with *Heated Rivalry* as everybody who watches it seems to be.

But I think I simply read too much fan fiction to be surprised by the structure of the story! It is a *very* tropey narrative, which you expect from a romance. In book form, that's part of the pleasure of the genre. Onscreen, though, I found myself craving more surprises and more specificity in the way the characters developed and the way they approached their relationship.

Also, all the time jumps made me feel like I should be doing math, and that stressed me out.

## Key Takeaways

- Even though *Heated Rivalry* is a story about the yearning, burning love (or lust) between two male hockey players, women are an integral part of its popularity success.

**This makes total sense. If you look at the structure of the first couple of episodes, it goes from time jump, to gay sex, to**

**getting harangued by parents, to time jump, to gay sex, and on, and on. It's not like there's any interesting progression either, because the through line is that they're just kinda texting?**

- While not as popular as heterosexual romance, gay guy smut is actually a very robust and popular subgenre.
- Despite liking all the individual ingredients that make up funfetti cake, Vox senior correspondent Alex Abad-Santos has yet to taste a funfetti cake he enjoys.

I will push back a little on the idea that there's no progression. The sex scenes are what bear the weight of the character development, which is something I think the show does pretty elegantly. ([There's a great analysis here.](#)) Within that context, the time jumps are part of the tropiness of it all. It's like the show is saying, "Why

waste time on anything that's not the love story?" I simply wanted the progression to surprise me a little more.

**But even though you weren't a fan, it's still an undeniable hit. Did that surprise you?**

Yes, and no! I am not surprised that *Heated Rivalry* has an obsessive fanbase, but I did not expect it to garner as much mainstream attention as it has.

Women have been writing love stories about queer men — and inserting those stories into the media they read and watch — for a long, long time. In Japan, the "Boy Love" genre — fiction about two beautiful boys in love, generally created by and for women — is absolutely huge, and it has been since it emerged in the 1970s. In the US, we usually date the obsession back to the advent of Kirk/Spock slash fanfiction around the same time, when *Star Trek* fan writers began exploring the idea that Kirk and Spock's friendship might have romantic undertones. There's been a massive underserved audience just waiting for a love story like this one for literal decades. It makes sense to me that they would pick up on it and champion it.

I did not expect that, like, Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie would be the stars of this year's Golden Globes. (HBO didn't either, which is why *Heated Rivalry* came out well after this year's nomination period closed. Even if the Globes were willing to bend their rules for a Canadian-produced show, they physically couldn't have done it.) It wasn't all that long ago that the idea that women are into stories about men in love would lead to fascinated tittering about how, after all, men like girl-on-girl action, too. And here we are with gay hockey RPF at the center of the mainstream! I genuinely would never have expected it.

**I suppose one can never underestimate the power of women who want to see some hot guys in love with each other.**

While this show is about hockey and gay sex, it also is about two guys texting each other furiously  
Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max

**Was the *Heated Rivalry* series already popular in book sales? Was this simply just a matter of popularity crossing genres (with TV having a bigger audience, of course)?**

Rachel Reid's Game Changers book series, of which *Heated Rivalry* is book two, was popular enough before this to get name-checked in a Washington Post article about hockey romance, but the scale was totally different. *Heated Rivalry* is a New York Times bestseller now for the first time. (It's unusual for genre romance to make the New York Times bestseller list, because a lot of the genre's sales go through channels the Times doesn't track or doesn't weigh heavily.) Vanity Fair found that, since the end of 2024, library holds on the book have gone up 10,534 percent. (!)

There was certainly a fanbase waiting for this show. But, I don't think anyone could have expected that it would blow up the way it has.

**One of the things that struck me is that there's a very large number of women obsessed with gay guy smut. *Heated Rivalry* would not be as big if women weren't interested. Is gay guy smut a popular genre for women readers in the book world?**

Gay guy smut is so popular that there are whole books trying to understand and explain why it is so popular. There's a lot of nuance to why different women are so into it, but one pretty central idea is that gay guy smut allows a woman the pleasure of reading a romance without having to deal with all the social baggage that comes with women's bodies. Internalized body hatred, weird kinks, gendered power dynamics — it all gets neutralized. What's left has room to become a lot freer and more compelling.

**I want to ask: Is gay guy *hockey* smut particularly popular? And as a subgenre, is gay guy smut the most popular of all the smuts?**

I would not say male-male romance outsells hetero romance. Romance is a big, booming world, one in which queer romance occupies a healthy niche, but the biggest sellers there do tend to be heterosexual.

Sports romance, however, is also a healthy niche, and hockey romance is the undisputed king of the subgenre. In the traditional publishing world, hockey romance novels are big enough that professional hockey players have been making TikToks about reading them since well before *Heated Rivalry* hit HBO.

In the fan world, almost every fan writer I have ever followed ends up

in the fan world, almost every fan writer I have ever followed ends up writing hockey RPF at one point or another. “We’ve lost another one,” is what I text my fic-reading friends when that happens.

**So what’s the deal with hockey? Why not tennis, or lacrosse, or baseball? Is it the butts?**

Some hockey romance fans have argued that it’s because hockey is so violent. It’s the only sport that not only still allows fighting, but also has a detailed code of conduct involving when and how to start fighting. To put such macho guys into a narrative that is by its nature about emotional vulnerability — well, there’s a nice frisson of tension there.

These two are EVERYWHERE! Getty Images for Moët & Chandon

**That makes sense. Going back to what you said about the how gay romance allows women to remove themselves: Gay hockey smut also seems like a way to explore traditional ideas about masculinity (e.g. physical strength) and allowing yourself to find eroticism in those ideas without tying it to the men (particularly straight ones) who are responsible for making it so toxic.**

Absolutely. A lot of the eroticism in *Heated Rivalry* comes from the sublimation of Ilya and Shane’s competition on the ice into the bedroom, so that the sometimes violent aggression of the game becomes neutralized and sexy. If that’s the fantasy you want to play with, there’s a certain appeal to simply erasing any nagging worries about how bad physical violence between men and women can get.

**And finally, the Winter Olympics are coming up. Do you think there’s any sport that has the chance to out-gay hockey this year?**

Listen, if physical peril is what makes for a great love story, the sports romance fandom should seriously be throwing more consideration behind bobsledding.

**I will be tuned into the (relatively) straight sport of ice dancing.**