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By Chandis Anderson

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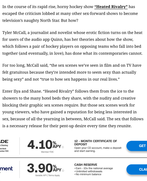

"Heated Rivalry" is turning into 2 viewers out of 1 and challenging assumptions that the generation that is frustrated by sex, romance or all. (Illustration by Sam Brown/CNN)

In the course of its rapid rise, horny hockey show **"Heated Rivalry"** has escaped the criticism lobbed at many other sex-forward shows to become television's naughty North Star but how?

Tyler McCall, a journalist and novelist whose erotic fiction turns on the heat for users of the audio app Quinn, has her theories about how the show, which follows a pair of hockey players who secretly have sex and fall into bed together (and eventually, in love), has done what its contemporaries cannot.

For too long, McCall said, "the sex scenes we've seen in film and on TV have felt gratuitous because they're intended more to seem sexy than actually being sexy" and are "true to how sex happens in our real lives."

Enter Ilya and Shane. "Heated Rivalry" follows them from the ice to the showers in the many bored beds they share, with the reality and creative blocking their graphic sex scenes conjure. But those scenes are not for young viewers, who have gained a reputation for being less interested in sex, because of all the yearning in between, McCall said. The sex that follows is a necessary release for their pent-up desire every time they reunite.

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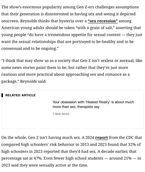
("Heated Rivalry" was produced for the Canadian network Crave but in the US airs on HBO Max, which shares parent company Warner Bros. Discovery with CNN.)



Viewers are remaining over (and lusting after) Hudson Williams (left) and Connor Storrie. (Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max)

Gen Z wants love

"Heated Rivalry" has become a "fascinating case study into **Zoomer** sexual psychology" said Chelsea Reynolds, an associate professor in Arizona State University who leads its Center for Media & Communities and studies the way young people react to sex in the media.

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The show's enormous popularity among Gen Z-ers challenges assumptions that their generation is dimensional in having sex and seeing it depicted onscreen. Reynolds thinks that hysteria over a "**sex recession**" among American young adults should be taken "with a grain of salt," asserting that young people "do have a tremendous appetite for sexual content — they just want the sexual relationships that are portrayed to be healthy and to be consensual and to be ongoing."

"I think that may show us as a society that Gen Z isn't sexless or asexual, like some news stories paint them to be, but rather that they're just more cautious and more practical about approaching sex and romance as a package," Reynolds said.

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On the whole, Gen Z isn't having much sex. A 2022 **report** from the CDC that compared high schoolers' risk behavior in 2015 and 2021 found that 12% of high schoolers in 2021 reported that they'd had sex. A decade earlier, that percentage sat at 47%. Even fewer high school students — around 12% — in 2021 said they were sexually active at the time.

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But they're still horny. They're not turned off by all sex onscreen, they just want it to feel real and romantic. They want love, but they're not doling it out to just anybody.

Considering the world events that transpired while Zoomers were coming of age, it's hard to fault them for exercising extra caution around sex, Reynolds said. Many of them were in high school and college when the Covid-19 pandemic began, she noted, when it was especially risky health wise, to casually hook up and explore sexually. And without the abortion protections of Roe v. Wade, plus the legislative attack on LGBTQ health care, a lot of Zoomers just don't consider the potential pleasures of sex worth risks like STIs or unwanted pregnancies, she said.

That said, Zoomers aren't avoiding sex completely, but they do want it to happen inside a committed relationship. A survey from a Kinsey Institute social psychologist and the dating app Feeld found that 65% of Zoomers "have fantasized about monogamy."

Fans dance onstage during a "Heated Rivalry" themed club night in West Hollywood, Iowa, in January. (Left) Hudson Williams/Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max; Brian Ach/Getty Images)

That longing for love is perhaps "Heated Rivalry's" greatest appeal for young viewers starved for romance, Madison Hastings, a 23-year-old **culture critic**, said.

"Weirdly, I feel like Gen Z is more tuned than they're given credit for," she said. "I don't think it's necessarily that they're having less sex. I think they're just having more intentional sex and creating more intentional relationships with people, not to dunk on millennials."

Katie Haas, an intimacy coordinator and popular sex education advocate on TikTok, said she's noticed that her Gen Z followers are extra thoughtful about the sex they want.

"Even the kinds of sex that some older crowds may categorize as careless are approached with more communication and more respect than previous generations," Haas said. "Gen Z isn't afraid to ask for what they really want."

Gen Z doesn't hate sex on screen done right

Plenty of shows popular among Zoomers feature lots of sex and nudity, like "Euphoria" and the Spanish Netflix hit "Elite," but those scenes have been **widely criticized** or **stymied**. That's because Gen Z is "pretty good at spotting inauthenticity" in onscreen sex, said Tyler McCall, the novelist and journalist.

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Many Gen Zers don't care for much of the onscreen sex they encounter: 48.4% of respondents in a 2021 UCLA survey (which included members of both Gen Alpha and Z) said they felt that there was "too much sex and sexual content in TV and movies."

Maya Thompson's character Ivy Lewis and Jacob Batalon's character Ben Ashford in "Euphoria" (Eddie Chen/HBO)

But the sex on "Heated Rivalry" is fun — it's consensual, deeply gratifying for both parties and a form of connection, Reynolds said. Or "Euphoria," meanwhile, sex is almost always entangled with addiction, abuse and trauma, and humans really that many viewers find gratuitous.

Jess Tomaga, a psychologist whose book "Generations" investigates the differences between Gen Z and older age groups, attributes Gen Z's tendency to be turned off by most sex in media to growing up among "ubiquitous pornography" and the shadow of the **#MeToo movement**, which exposed acts of sexual misconduct by powerful men.

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"They've seen enough pornography online and want a different portrayal of sex when they watch a streaming series," Tomaga said.

Hastings feared "Heated Rivalry" would be "Euphoria's" sequel" before she finally watched it — a flashy attempt to "throw in viewers through shock value, gratuitous imagery and sex," she said.

Her sisters finally convinced her to give it a try over Christmas. And despite its occasionally corny dialogue, the show's central romance and the ease and lightness of the characters' love almost immediately won her over, she said.

"It shows a younger generation of people who may not have had their first sexual experience or their relationship experience — you can maybe have it all — like, you can have this hot, exciting encounter, and then it can become something sweet and special and romantic, as well."

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