

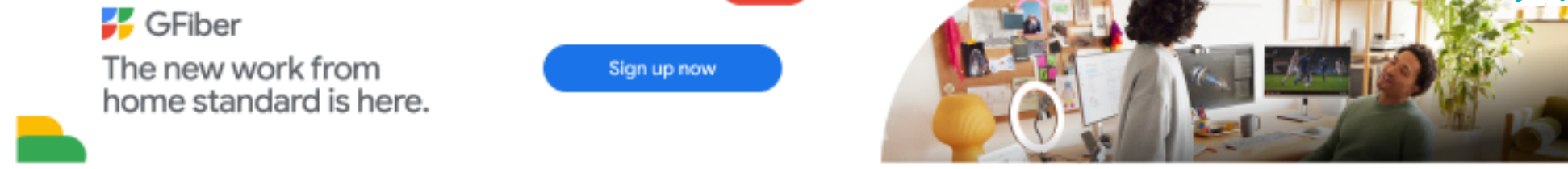


THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

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Analysis: LGBTQ+ representation and lack of misogyny makes 'Heated Rivalry' popular among women

Thu., March 12, 2026



Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander and Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov in "Heated Rivalry." (HBO Max)

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By Jordan Tolley-Turner
The Spokesman-Review

The revolving door of pop culture and what the internet deems as “trending” doesn’t appear to have many parameters. One month, it’s a pop star and what they did (or didn’t) do right, the next a push to fly off the shelves.

Trends are often rooted in consumerism and the oddly human impulse to purchase and find the next method of entertainment. Perhaps that’s what first led the masses to watch what, on the surface, appears to be a show about conventionally attractive male hockey players in an intense, yearslong, public-enemies-yet-secret-lovers romance with – to put it simply – sex. And a lot of it.

Although this description isn’t exactly untrue, the HBO Max TV series “Heated Rivalry” has spent months catching fire in popularity while simultaneously catching many viewers off guard in its emotional depth and realism. As the show’s audience has grown, the majority of those viewers have been young women, according to HBO figures reported by [the New York Times](#), including those of college age.

The interest of students, such as Washington State University’s Carly Ostrem and Courtney Ledwich was piqued by an “edit” on TikTok – an assortment of scenes taken from the show and put to music.

In fact, Ledwich went on to attend a packed “Heated Rivalry Night” at Spokane’s Knitting Factory in late February, hosted by Club 90s, a nationwide party promoter that commonly produces more niche events and raves. During the event, the DJ played songs associated with the show or from a popular edit that was then played on the big screen.

“I’m an avid concertgoer, and one of the reasons I love concerts is because everyone is there for the same reason,” Ledwich said. “I think that’s kind of what drew me to this event. All of these people just connected with this show in some way and loved it so much that they spent their money and their time to come to this event and hangout with a bunch of people who are in the same kind of mindset.”

But that event, which is one of many “[Heated Rivalry Nights](#)” continuing to be produced by Club 90s across the country, came long after Ledwich began to watch the show

“I went into it really only knowing that it was two hockey players who fall in love, but it’s also a little spicy,” Ledwich said. “That’s all I really knew going into it.”

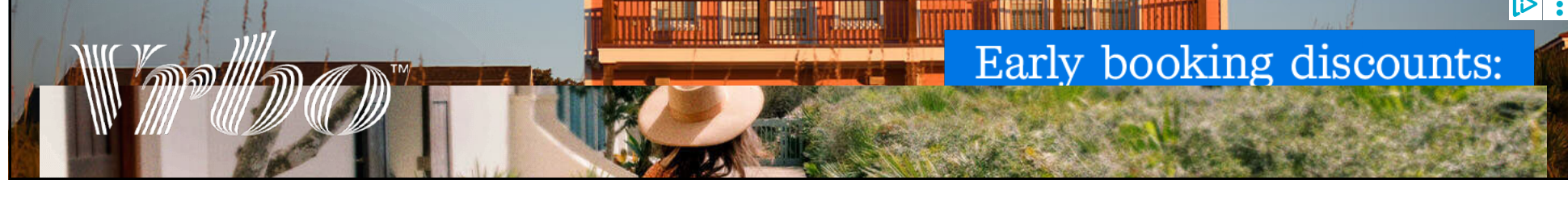
As the show progresses, the private romantic relationship between the primary characters (Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov) grows not only in tension, but in emotional connection. The common trope of “forbidden love” is somewhat flipped on its head as the show explores their fears of being in an openly gay relationship in the world of ice hockey, one with more “traditional” or conservative tendencies, while they long for each other’s sole love and commitment.

Both Ostrem and Ledwich mentioned the sense of deep longing and raw emotion found within the back half of the season.

“Episodes 4, 5 and 6, which are the last three, I was like sobbing,” Ledwich said. “I was genuinely crying. I’m a romantic, and this show, unironically, had one of the best love stories I’ve ever watched or read in my life.”

Ostrem and Ledwich feel it is unique to see men in relationships this tender. Although traditional media has primarily portrayed men through emotionally stoic, power-based masculinity, instead Heated Rivalry heightens the character’s feelings and sense of passion.

“I think it explores themes that aren’t regularly explored in media, especially television, and I think that’s part of what makes it special,” Ostrem said.



One of those key themes comes from the show’s exploration of the LGBTQ+ community within ice hockey. This theme is what Washington State University student Dryden Bell, who studies strategic communication, was specifically intrigued by. Before watching “Heated Rivalry” and while in an English course, she wrote a research paper concerning sexuality in sports, particularly hypermasculine sports, such as hockey and football. While watching the show, she immediately saw the relation to much of her prior research.

“It was really interesting, because although there’s no denying they love the sport, there’s this constant toxic masculinity,” Bell said. “You could join the sport at a young age, develop and realize you are attracted to the same sex, but then, because you are in this toxic situation, it’s so much harder to come out and really know who you are.”

Bell was quick to note how there was equally intense public interest from those who thoroughly enjoyed “Heated Rivalry” and those who responded to the show’s backlash. LGBTQ+ representation in sports media simply isn’t common, causing inquiry as well as uncomfortable pushback rooted in homophobia.

“Obviously, if there’s a show about straight people, there’s going to be an emotional, personal connection and that just goes to show just how much society has really embedded this homophobic idea of watching two men together,” Bell said. “If there were more themes around this ... then I think it wouldn’t be so obscure and like, ‘Oh wow, this is so rare,’ because it shouldn’t be, but it is.”

[The Guardian reported](#) on the show’s wide appeal to women.

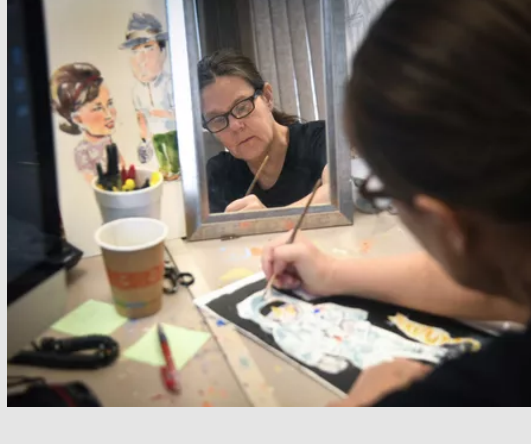
“Straight women, queer women, cisgender women, trans women; young and old, single and coupled, Canadian, American and increasingly every other nationality – they’re all going feral for the love story between Shane and Ilya,” the Guardian wrote.

“But what does it say about gender relations in 2026 that so many women are fantasizing about gay smut?” the Guardian continued. “The fervent popularity of Heated Rivalry suggests that for many, the real romantasy is not sex and romance with dragons and fairies, but sex and romance without misogyny and gendered hierarchy.”

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