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Prospectus

Introduction

The current political and social culture of the United States does not allow for an open and accepting dialogue regarding LGBT stories due to the recent rise of conservatism, therefore, an analysis must be done on modern queer television to discover how it may be contributing to these harmful narratives. By analyzing how the popular audience is being exposed to these narratives, we are better prepared to educate people about the harm being caused by these potentially inaccurate representations. This is an important avenue of study because society's perception of LGBT people is rooted in how they are represented in everyday life which is most easily referenced in popular media. To ensure that media representations of LGBT people are not perpetuating harmful stereotypes or subgroups of queerness, it is vital that popular media representations are well informed and aware of the effects that they can have on young audiences. Because young queer people usually find community in seeing themselves represented on-screen while discovering their identity (Soto-Sanfiel & Villegas-Simón 2024), it is important for diverse and accurate representations to be available during the critical period for identity construction.

Considering these cultural concerns, I will be analyzing select scenes from the 2025 television series *Heated Rivalry* in order to determine how being closeted, hyper-masculinity, and their relationship affects the representation of sex between the main characters, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rosanov. My research will focus on the following questions: 1) how does

sex/sexuality function in Shane and Ilya's relationship? 2) how does masculinity impact their relationship and their sex?

My design will focus on a textual analysis of select sex/sexuality scenes from *Heated Rivalry* (2025) on HBO Max. A "sex scene" will be defined as a scene with one or more characters engaging in sexually explicit behavior, such as anal intercourse, fellatio, or anilingus. A "sexuality scene" will be defined as a scene in which one or more characters discuss or insinuate the following topics: their sexuality, being closeted, coming out, or same-sex relationships. These scenes will be identified and then grouped together (coded) by common themes in order to analyze their effects on the larger text more easily. Once these codes are solidified, analysis can be done to begin focusing on the research questions.

Literature Review

In order to study *Heated Rivalry*'s representation of sex, queer representation in media must be characterized more generally. The word "queer" is a flexible descriptor that can be used to describe something that is sexually LGBT, but it transcends this surface level definition by offering a term representative of the exploration beyond the sexual realm into one of pathology, deviance, and alternativeness (Bronski et al. 2006). For my purposes, when referring to characters or themes as queer, it will be used as a more all-encompassing term for LGBT themes or themes about sexuality rather than in reference to deviation from the norm.

Among queer scholars, a prominent topic of discussion is "coming out" stories' representation of queer people's inner turmoil. "Coming out" can be defined as one's realization and acknowledgement of their sexual identity (Gross, 1991). While it can be argued that coming out is an integral part of most queer people's lives, modern queer media representation is overrun

with closeted male characters and their coming out stories (Bronski, 2000). Within queer scholarship, there are two sides of the debate on the closeted spectrum: those that believe staying closeted means that you are ashamed of your sexuality and those that believe outing someone further instills the idea of homosexuality or queerness as something that should be hidden or shameful (Gross 1991). This debate surrounding closted queer people advances the notion of shame, regardless of which side you argue. In promoting queerness' connection to shame, the pushback that begins to fester against homosexuality is similar to that of LGBT people or allies against homophobia.

In the past, queer representation in media, and specifically in television, has been restricted to gay or lesbian characters as they exist in a heterosexual storyline (Invisibility, homophobia and heterosexism: Lesbians, gays and the media, 1993). By isolating queer characters to side characters, or ones that reaffirm the moral wrongness of homosexuality, these representations created a problematic worldview for the heterosexual popular audience consuming it (Invisibility, homophobia and heterosexism: Lesbians, gays and the media, 1993). This isolation of LGBT characters perpetuates the idea that queer people are less important, or that they have less compelling stories than do heterosexual people.

While queer representation in the media is constantly growing and changing, the frequency of gay male representation is consistently higher due to its more stereotypical nature. This becomes obvious when examining streaming platforms' use of gay and lesbian stories in order to solidify subscribers and increase stock price (Sender 2025). By diversifying their representations of sexuality, notably by including man-loving-man stories, streaming platforms like Hulu, Prime Video, and Netflix are appealing to the growing desire for multiculturalism that their audiences crave (Sender 2025). Shugart expresses a pattern that popular media holds for

gay characters; gay identities are only legitimized by their assimilation to a heterosexual norm, meaning that self representation of one's queerness is only produced through its importance to heterosexism (Shugart 2003). Similarly, so long as a gay male characters remain masculine, and reject femininity, they may identify as queer or surround themselves with queer people or content and be accepted by the popular audience (Poole 2014). This phenomenon is seen in *Brokeback Mountain*, a film that represents two "normal" masculine men engaging in a hidden same-sex relationship with one another, as it garners empathy and support from its audience (Poole 2014). By perpetuating the stereotypes of femininity or masculinity within queerness, these representations are simply resituating LGBT stories in the heterosexual norm.

Because of its influence on queer representation, much scholarly work has been done on *Brokeback Mountain* and its connection to a holistic view of queer media studies. While Jack and Ennis both fall under the "masculine" category, Jack is the less masculine of the two which leads to the interpretation of him being more gay; Jack is more romantic and emotional, makes the first moves, and is sexually submissive (de Jesus et al., 2016). The constituents of masculinity do not vary greatly between queer media texts, meaning that these same ideals should ring true in analyses of other queer films or television shows. In order to convince popular audiences about the importance of queer love stories, their queerness must be abated to a certain degree and replaced with supplemental straightness, so that the audience can better relate to and understand the cultural significance of the characters' choices (Leung 2008). By highlighting the straight culture that exists in *Brokeback Mountain*, its popular audience is more likely to empathize with and critique the film (Leung 2008). While the popular audience's contributions are necessary for the growth of LGBT representation, it can be problematic to dilute queerness to such an extreme

that straight culture is being highlighted in supposedly queer films because it will lessen the potential for future growth and diversification of representation.

Furthermore, while gay male characters are prevalent in popular culture, there are stereotypical ways in which they are typically presented to their audience. When presenting queer characters on-screen, those that break or bend gender rules– more masculine women and more feminine men– are presumed to be less easily accepted and have more negative attitudes surrounding their identities (Herek 2002). This explains why, in modern media, queer characters are placed in more gender-conforming roles– hockey players in Heated Rivalry (2025), cowboys in Brokeback Mountain (2005), rugby players in Heartstopper (2022), etc.-- so that the shows are less likely to receive critiques or complaints. Even in media texts that are created for gay male audiences, themes of masculinity are prioritized and expected to be the norm amongst gay men (Goltz 2007). Alternatively, the vast majority of queer representation in the past has represented a feminine gay man stereotype, with the most noticeable unspoken sign of gayness being high voice pitch (Cartei & Reby 2012). In leaving the unspoken up to the interpretation of the spoken voice, producers of LGBT films and television have allowed gay male characters to slip through the cracks, while the more overt representations insist on the masculinity of gay males (Herek 2002 ; Cartei & Reby 2012).When gay male sex is given a place in popular media, it often comes at the detriment of emotionality in the relationship between the two characters due to the struggle between masculinity and femininity (Soto-Sanfiel & Villegas-Simón 2024). This emotionality is important to queer people because it offers a more introspective view of how queer relationships actually function, so it can be very harmful when it is removed from the narrative.

Most people turn to culture and popular media to inform their opinions of constructs that are separate from themselves such as queerness, race studies, etc. Popular media is the primary

source for the public's attitudes and exposure towards LGBT identities and how queer people exist (Soto-Sanfiel & Villegas-Simón 2024). Representation of LGBT characters in popular media informs social knowledge on queerness by acting as a mediator for conversations about queerness and, in the case of accurate representation, informing young queer audiences' identity formation (Soto-Sanfiel & Villegas-Simón 2024). With the competing past and present stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, respectively, the audience is usually left wanting more out of LGBT representation because, on both spectrums, they are not accurate representations of the average queer person (Joyrich 2014).

While *Heated Rivalry* is a novel media text, there is still some applicable scholarship that has been published on hockey, queerness, and effects of the show itself. In 2023-2024, prior to the release of *Heated Rivalry* but still contextually relevant to my analyses, the NHL underwent a serious controversy regarding queer pride and its representation in sports. What began with a single player's "religious complaint" turned into a league wide ban of pride memorabilia (Phillips 2025) which serves to prove that queer representation needs to be analyzed more closely to find instances of inaccuracies or misappropriations that harm the overall impact of pride movements. Additionally, Phillips states that corporate and public LGBT initiatives perpetuate fetishization instead of genuine queer love and romance (Phillips 2025). Because *Heated Rivalry* was created and produced in Canada, it features more socially liberal ideals than may typically be seen in the United States; this social liberality is offset by the prevalence of Canadian nationalism due to its comparative and competitive nature (St. Amant & Ali 2026). The effects of the presence of Canadian homonationalism in *Heated Rivalry* have been researched and can add interesting insight towards the context of my analysis.

Methodology

I will be performing a textual analysis of the television series *Heated Rivalry* focusing my research through queer theory and critical media theory. Queer theory can be used when analyzing a text through the lens of what is alternative or less socially prevalent, such as LGBT, sexual deviance, or other minority social groups (Ahmed, 2014). This will be helpful for my discussions about sex in addition to my analysis of how queerness plays a role in sex and relationships in *Heated Rivalry*. Critical media theory will be helpful while examining the show for instances of social power or structure working through the characters, socialized sex, and ideologies surrounding being LGBT or closeted (Andrisani, 2026).

As referenced in the literature review, de Jesus has researched how the taboo nature of sex in *Brokeback Mountain* is materialized through their choice of language (de Jesus et al., 2016). Due to its similarity in studying a gay male media created for the popular audience, his methodology will be helpful to my research. While I will also be analyzing sex, my research will focus more on its function and how it creates other agendas within *Heated Rivalry* than on how sex is materialized in the show.

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