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Consider This: How Heated Rivalry became a viral success

An expert on fandom and reading culture explores the mix of timing, online buzz and reader passion that helped transform a hockey romance into a global phenomenon.

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It's impossible to ignore the wild popularity of *Heated Rivalry*. While some viral hits peak and quickly disappear, the Canadian hockey romance books and television show continue to gain momentum globally, even being referenced at real-world athletic events like the Olympics and NHL games.

While it's tough to pinpoint the exact equation for a viral sensation, according to Danielle Fuller, Professor in the Department of English and Film Studies, there are a few factors that caused a perfect storm of public interest. "It didn't come out of nowhere," Fuller says. "A whole constellation of factors came together to make a moment where this could be a hugely successful cultural product."

From today's era of multimedia fandom to a shifting respect for the romance genre, from the current state of the world to showrunner Jacob Tierney's production choices, Fuller unpacks some of the reasons audiences simply can't get enough of Shane and Ilya.

Fandom in a multimedia age

Before the first scene for the show was even filmed, *Heated Rivalry* had already built a devoted audience. The television series is based on author Rachel Reid's 2019 novel, the second book in her popular *Game Changers* series. Fans were already talking about the books online, so discussing the television adaptation was a natural extension of that buzzing conversation.

"In contemporary reading culture, the level of investment — especially particular book series and popular genres like romance — is really intensified by the fact that people can be so connected with each other online," Fuller says.

While fandoms have existed for ages, the big shift has been in how interconnected everything is. "Readers move across platforms to find out about their next book, to connect with other readers, to share their enthusiasm," Fuller adds.

This also sparks a phenomenon known as "forensic fandom," formerly the domain of films and television, wherein book fans will analyze every detail of every scene, unpacking moments of characterization, and sharing all their thoughts with fellow fans on multiple platforms.

"There's a level of intellectual as well as emotional investment that people put into their love for these kinds of series," Fuller says.

However, precisely because there were so many fans already "shipping" (a term in fan culture that refers to rooting for a particular romantic pairing) Shane and Ilya before the series debuted, it can make adapting their story for the small screen a tricky matter. As Fuller explains, in today's media ecology, the various platforms all interact with one another — social media with streaming services, books with video games and the endless spinoffs and projects that build upon the worlds of successful series — to create an immersive experience.

"If you're a director, you're contributing to either maintaining or possibly destroying that experience for the readers who are already invested, who know every little nuance and detail, every single thing you change," Fuller says, who adds that one of the things showrunner Tierney really got right was his respect for the existing fandom.

The interconnected nature of modern fandom was also a way the show could draw in other fan bases, Fuller adds. For example, Tierney mentioned in an interview that he showed *Heated Rivalry* lead actors Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie scenes from the Swedish television series *Young Royals* in order to highlight the subtle ways the show's protagonists built chemistry through subtle glances and small moments. Knowing that their beloved show served as inspiration was enough to encourage the *Young Royals* fandom — which includes Fuller herself — to check out *Heated Rivalry*.

Fuller suspects there are many other fandoms, from queer romance readers to hockey romance devotees, who were likewise drawn in because there was overlap between the series or show they loved and the world Tierney was building.

The power of a happily ever after

Romance, formerly a genre that was looked down on by many, is now an absolute powerhouse in the book industry and beyond with countless fans unapologetically seeking their beloved happily ever afters. "The romance industry is huge," Fuller says. "Even in Canada, we know there's a substantial readership for romance and a potential audience for any adaptations or versions."

Creators on BookTok — a popular and vocal subcommunity on TikTok focused on literature — can partially be credited with shifting attitudes towards the romance genre. "They've made romance reading a more respectable, less denigrated genre. It's still very gendered as feminized in problematic ways but they've sort of rehabilitated it in a sense," Fuller says, citing the "romantasy" subgenre as "a product of the influence and power of recommendation culture."

Queer romance is another thriving subgenre, and while Fuller adds that queer representation on television shows and in films has gradually become more nuanced and complex over the years, another potential spark behind the show's success is the particular narrative that *Heated Rivalry* offers. Tierney had a goal of telling not just a compelling queer love story, but one that drew upon the rom-com elements he loved in other stories, explains Fuller. "I think certainly among queer parts of the audience, I've seen a lot of people express happiness that yes, we finally get the cheesy, happy ending."

The relationship between Shane and Ilya is also the focus of many a steamy scene, with many viewers commenting on the show's spice factor — yet another part of the appeal for some subsets of the audience, Fuller says. "The smuttiness of some romance fiction is another reason why it's often denigrated as a genre and readers or viewers are made to feel ashamed about enjoying it," explains Fuller. "*Heated Rivalry* is unashamedly smutty as a book and Tierney does not dial it down in the adaptation."

Building an idealistic hockey world

It's no secret that hockey culture can come with its own set of problems, but that's not the world that Tierney brings to the screen — and that's another part of the appeal, Fuller says.

"The world is on fire," adds Fuller. "*Heated Rivalry* is escapist. It feels hopeful. And you actually do need hope that things can be like that one day."

Tierney's hockey arena and locker rooms are a utopian interpretation where fans can escape, ignoring the factors they might grapple with in the real world and focusing solely on the spectacle of the game and the romance between the two players.

"It shows a world of hockey that could have a more inclusive, accepting culture, wherein one kind of cookie-cutter version of masculinity doesn't have to be the norm."

The hidden perks of small budget production — and a winning release strategy

When it comes to return on investment, *Heated Rivalry* punches far above its weight. It cost as much to film the entire first season — an estimated \$11.5 million — as many television shows spend for a single episode. This turned out to be an unexpectedly positive thing, Fuller explains, because of the choices it forced Tierney to make.

Rather than trying to match the style of a big-budget production, the showrunner found a way to tell the story he wanted within the constraints he had. Instead of sourcing masses of extras for big, bustling stadium scenes, he filmed moments in hotel rooms and locker rooms. Fuller cites the example of a press conference scene where the camera remains zoomed in on the protagonists, with the press audible in the background but never actually shown on screen — a clever way to portray a press conference without having to populate an entire room with faux journalists.

These small but purposeful choices add up, and they make a big impact. "Some of the decisions that were probably driven by cost have produced something that feels very intimate, that encourages viewers to think and connect to the emotions the characters are having," Fuller says.

When filming for a show is wrapped, a whole new strategy comes into play, another arena where *Heated Rivalry* scored big, explains Fuller. Though the Canadian hit was initially produced by/for Crave, they sold it to HBO, a platform with a common, much larger subscriber base. Then, rather than dropping the entire season at once, as is relatively common in the era of streaming, they released the initial two episodes together before trickling out the remainder of the season, complete with a Boxing Day finale.

"Being released in this serial way with gaps between was very effective and worked especially well because more and more people could find out about it and still experience it together," Fuller says. "It really helps build an audience for the show as people are making content and sharing commentary online."

The next chapter

Season two of the smash hit is anticipated to debut in April 2027, although Fuller speculates the timing may be shifted to align with whenever Reid releases the next book in her *Game Changers* series.

Until then, fans can rewatch their favourite moments in the endless sea of GIFs, dig into the numerous thinkpieces released on the show's various nuances, and read the series that inspired it all (if they haven't already). The show's unanticipated massive success is proof that you don't always need a big budget to make a big impact — a high-quality production and an invested audience are the keys to success, and *Heated Rivalry* has scored on both accounts.

About Danielle

Danielle Fuller is a Full Professor in the Department of English and Film Studies. She researches readers and contemporary cultures of reading on- and off-line. Her latest book, co-authored with longtime collaborator DeNel Rehberg Sedo, is [Reading Bestsellers: Recommendation Culture and the Multimodal Reader](#) (2023). Recently, she has published articles on [Hamartstopper as a transmedia phenomenon](#) (with Melanie Ramdarshan Bold), and [popular memoir as a genre that moves through media and across languages](#) (with Corinna Norrick-Rühl). Danielle has enjoyed being part of TV fandoms since her 1970s obsession with *Charlie's Angels*.

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