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Loudly Lydia: a look at the modern Lydia Bennet in “The Lizzie Bennet Diaries,” and what she implies about Austen in contemporary social debates

Abstract

Pride and Prejudice has captivated audiences for nearly two centuries and its adaptations have given insight to Austen’s social commentary in each generation. When *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* premiered in 2012, the Bennet sisters were introduced to a new minefield – the 21st century. Using transmedia to relate with a young and eager-to-engage audience, the series modernizes the plots and characters to better relate viewers with the social commentary of the 19th century. The web videos employ Lydia, a character largely ignored in literary scholarship, to explore the dynamics of Austen’s women in a male-dominated society. It makes her relatable and dynamic, using the loud, flirtatious girl from the novel to create a still-loud but vulnerable woman viewers are able to empathize and identify with.

In this article, I use *LBD*’s Lydia to explore topics of slut-shaming and victim-blaming language, relationship violence and shame-induced silence.

Through these topics, Lydia's story warns modern audiences of the consequences of their indifference when it comes to sexual harassment and violence toward women. In light of the #metoo movement and allegations of powerful men keeping victims silent, conversations about victimizing and deprioritizing women have become prevalent across the country. I show how using Austen to examine these social issues can bring light to the progress—or lack thereof—that's occurred over the past 200 years.

Introduction

Dodie Smith, the author of *The Hundred and One Dalmations*, once exclaimed, "How I wish I lived in a Jane Austen novel!" She isn't alone in the sentiment. Today, entire vacations, festivals, tours, and an industry have developed around recreating Jane Austen's world. The Jane Austen festival, held every year since 2000 in Bath, U.K., has created a week where fanatics are encouraged (and in some cases required) to don regency clothing and promenade around the town's centuries' old buildings. According to its official website, nearly 500 costumed individuals are expected to participate in the festival during September of 2018.

Such recreations of Austen's world are just one way audience members engage with her works and characters. Other Austen fans seek to emulate the author by using her works to look at their own society with a critical eye. They do this by interacting with and modernizing her world. For this paper, I'm particularly

interested in these two engagement methods, the *modernizing* and *interacting* of Jane Austen's novels by audiences.

Austen's novels were revolutionary because of their focus on the everyday. Readers recognized characters and situations from their own, ordinary lives and even continue to do so today. They may not know the regulated and strict courtship rituals of her novels, but even young readers can recognize the flirting, uncertainty, and cautious hope of Jane Bennet's falling in love with Mr. Bingley. Film and other media industries have capitalized on this reader familiarity. Endless adaptations and retellings repeat storylines from all six of Austen's novels while board games, house decorations and even jewelry with Jane Austen quotes or themes can be purchased. Sequels extend, reimaginings supplement, and soundtracks score the worlds of the Bennet sisters, Emma Woodhouse, Anne Elliot and others.

It isn't just this sense of familiarity that has fueled Austen's popularity throughout the centuries. The questions she poses about society, her use of irony, and the critical lens she sees through have shaped the writers and filmmakers of each subsequent generation. Suzanne R. Pucci and James Thompson address the Austen obsession in their introduction to the collection, *Jane Austen and Co: Remaking the Past in Contemporary Culture*. They write,

The Austen phenomenon, then, is not confined to Austen but in its extended sense serves as a model for examining and understanding how contemporary culture inevitably enters into those texts – visual, literary, and touristic – that remake and makeover the past. (Pucci, 4)

As these writers note, modernization is one of the ways Austen's fans engage with her world. Today, issues and problems of contemporary society inform readings of Austen's works at the same time that her novels inform conversations about contemporary society. After all, Jane Austen is arguably one of the first feminist writers. She provided observations about women in a patriarchal society long before "feminism" and "patriarchy" became part of the cultural vernacular. Using Austen as a means of entering debates on social issues helps readers understand the world around them.

In this paper, I use Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* and its modern YouTube adaptation, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, (2012-2013) to explore recent debate surrounding gender politics, sexual harassment and the current double standard in dating. The series' depiction of Lydia Bennet, a character largely ignored in *Pride and Prejudice* scholarship, best explores these issues. *LBD* employs Lydia and her original plotlines to enter current debates on gender and dating. I utilize a modern adaptation of Austen's novel to illustrate how these adaptations are either directly or indirectly using Austen to address contemporary issues. As Pucci and Thompson argue,

Instead of denigrating or complaining about what popular film and media have 'done to the novel,' we take such activities as our point of departure in an attempt to help students compare their response to these films through their lived experience that both conditions and can also enhance and enrich their understanding of the novels embodied in past time and space. (Pucci, 5)

While not as true as it once was, critics often degrade literary adaptations that stray from their source material. However, adaptations provide an entrance to engage with Austen's works in new ways for students and readers. As *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* exemplifies, they assist audiences in applying Austen's Regency-era focus to their own lives.

Readers easily overlook Lydia Bennet as a character amid the broader themes and commentaries of *Pride and Prejudice*. She's written-off early in the novel as flirty and inconsequential, and when her storyline begins to affect Lizzie and Jane, she's demonized. However, her storyline serves as a reminder of the defining male presence in society, the reliance of women's reputations on external factors and the cost of shame-based secrecy for women. In *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, producers Bernie Su and Hank Green use Lydia to examine these concepts in a modern world through her interactions within her family, her relationship with George Wickham, and the internet community created by the series. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* expands the character of Lydia Bennet to explore contemporary societal expectations for young women. Ultimately, the series finds these expectations as hypocritical and harmful in the modern world as they were when Austen first commented on them in *Pride and Prejudice*.

On January 28, 1813, *Pride and Prejudice* introduced the world to the Bennet sisters. Their stories reminded audiences of how easily women can become victims of situations created by an emphasis placed on the importance of males and their success. The sisters needed to marry because of an entail that placed a male cousin

over daughters. It gave the sisters an uncertain financial future and Mrs. Bennet a marriage obsession. Today, our social circumstances may seem wildly different, but allegations of sexual harassment by powerful men are proving that the consequences of a male preference in Austen's world and ours are much the same. It's been over 200 years, but in this paper I explore how themes Austen first wrote about, sadly, haven't changed.

Pride and Prejudice and The Lizzie Bennet Diaries

Austen's most famous and adapted novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, focuses on the Bennet sisters and the trials and tribulations of marriage in a class-based society. The sisters' lives and financial securities rely on their ability to find an advantageous marriage because of an entail that will leave everything to their closest male relative, an unknown cousin named Mr. Collins. The oldest sister Jane is enamored by Mr. Charles Bingley, and Elizabeth, the main character, watches as her sister's heart is broken at their separation. Elizabeth, meanwhile, has her own problems as her opinions on Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy evolve. All the while, the youngest Bennet sister, Lydia, is in the background flirting with officers and traveling to Brighton for a summer of play. Lydia takes center stage in the climax of the novel when she reveals, to the family's horror, that she has run away with George Wickham, a handsome military officer with a history of lying to get his way. Mr. Darcy finds the couple and ensures their wedding, though it results in a loveless marriage based on money and saving familial reputation. In the novel's

epilogue, Austen lets the readers know the fate of Lydia and Wickham's marriage, "His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer;" (Austen, 296). Such a description contrasts sharply with the rewarding and happy marriages of her sisters.

Directors, playwrights and producers have brought this famous novel to the stage and screen many times, but on April 9, 2012, a new type of adaptation premiered. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, produced by Bernie Su and Hank Green, was a new beast, and unlike anything that had been done before. Airing on YouTube, the series created 100 main story episodes following a contemporary Elizabeth Bennet, known as "Lizzie," through the modernized events of Austen's novel. The 3- to 10-minute vlog-style videos depict three of the Bennet sisters, Lizzie, Jane and Lydia, living, working and struggling in the 2010s. The three are in their early 20s, and the events of *Pride and Prejudice* are told through the girls' perspectives using character impersonations and a revolving cast of guest characters. Lizzie depicts Mrs. Bennet by dressing up in a flower shawl and giant hat. Meanwhile, Bing Lee makes an appearance during Lizzie and Jane's stay at Netherfield during a house renovation. Financial insecurities come from student loan debt instead of a looming entail. The directors of the series choose to recreate Austen's socially-obsessed world in the audience's century by making small changes that bring the events and struggles of the novel into situations viewers found familiar.

However, the *Lizzie Bennett Diaries* sought to do more than just modernize the plot. It engaged audience members with nearly 70 supplementary and expanded

side-videos and countless social media posts produced by the series' characters. It enlarged the world of *Pride and Prejudice* by focusing on something for which Austen's novels are famous: *dialogue*. All the series' characters interacted on social media; indeed, popular ones such as Darcy were seen talking with others on Twitter long before they appeared in Lizzie's videos. The series focused on transmedia to build the world of *Pride and Prejudice* online on various social media platforms. Their audience was already engaging in dialogue with each other online and the series asked viewers to include the characters of the novel in their world. Luckily for them, it worked. Audiences flocked to participate in the series during its original run, interacting with Lydia on Twitter, making fashion suggestions to Jane on Pinterest, and commenting on Lizzie's YouTube channel. The series allowed viewers to do something that audiences have long tried to do with Jane Austen festivals and tourism. *LBD* allowed audiences to interact with novel. Instead of simply walking in the footsteps of Austen and her characters, viewers could have vibrant conversations with their favorites. Audiences could place themselves in the world of Austen's characters and they loved it.

The series became nothing less than a phenomenon, and the first episode, "My name is Lizzie Bennet" has been watched over 2.9 million times nearly 5 years after it first premiered. It has spawned two books and won the 2013 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Creative Achievement in Interactive Media-Original Interactive Program. This award was established to recognize works that engaged

their audience on multiple platforms, something that *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* arguably pioneered.

In *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, producers explore the character of Lydia using social media. From the moment she is introduced, it is clear that Lydia is a very brash young woman, loud in manner and careless in actions. She enjoys boys, shopping and drinking and often exasperates her two older sisters, Jane and Lizzie. However, audience members get to know a softer, more vulnerable side of Lydia through her supplementary vlogs. Here, the audience comes to understand the insecurities of the character and the low expectations everyone—including her family—places on her. Everyone has compared her to Lizzie and Jane her entire life and the only way she's found to stand out is to be loud, energetic and social. The audience is invited to understand the motivations behind the Lydia from the novel whose loudness, energy and flirting is demonized by Austen and the Bennet family. This changes *our* understanding of Lydia and encourages us to follow along with Lydia's plot, which is sometimes only revealed in videos Lydia posts and shown as separate from Lizzie's main videos. The audience does so because they empathize with Lydia. They recognize their own insecurities in her fears and their own mistakes in hers.

Although Lydia begins as a regular on Lizzie's main videos, a falling out with her sister causes Lydia to become more prolific in creating her own vlogs. Lydia's videos ultimately depict her connection with Wickham during a weekend getaway at Las Vegas. Viewers see the beginning of their relationship, mixed in with Lydia's

desire to make up and reconnect with her sisters. However, Wickham encourages their separation and viewers are shown their devolution into a toxic, dependent and emotionally abusive relationship. Audiences following along with her channel, and not only watching Lizzie's point of view, see the consequences of Lizzie and Jane ignoring Lydia. It ultimately leads to the climax, however, the series gives Lydia's plot a new twist.

While elopement is still a problem today, it doesn't hold the same social implications it did during Austen's time. Lizzy and Jane's reputations would have been intact. So the series modernizes Lydia's scandal. The directors task themselves with finding the modern-day elopement and discovers one in the sex tape. Main-story viewers see Lizzie getting a call from Charlotte about a website advertising a sex tape from "The Lydia Bennet, the YouTube star." Lizzie rushes home to see what Lydia was thinking only to discover that the tape, which was only made when Wickham threatened to leave Lydia over it, was sold without her knowledge. It's revealed that Wickham used Lydia's YouTube fame from her blogs to market and sell a tape of them ("Consequences"). Darcy saves the day by buying out the rights to the video and paying Wickham off. However, unlike Austen's novel, Lydia is given a redemption she isn't afforded in the source material. She reconnects with her sisters and the series shows her attempting to heal from Wickham's betrayal.

Where the audience of *Pride and Prejudice* finds Lydia amusing and intriguing, the audience of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* becomes more than invested or annoyed in Lydia; they *identify* with her. After all, they were able to watch

Wickham's manipulation of her play out before their eyes. This identification with Lydia is rare for fans of the source material, but the development given to Lydia in the series gave rise to audiences caring about and seeing themselves in her. Lydia's insecurities about relationships, her family and her future are relatable and ones the audience has experienced themselves.

Lydia's development and popularity have led the producers of the series to follow in the footsteps of other Austen-fanatics and create a continuation of the series (and thus the novel's) events. A book titled *The Epic Adventures of Lydia Bennet* by Kate Rorick and Rachel Kiley, the primary writers for Lydia's vlog, follows the fallout of the modern Lydia's scandal and the impact it left on her life and social circle. It continues to explore the roles and consequences of women and their relationships Lydia initiates in the original novel.

Loudly Lydia: a character analysis

Pride and Prejudice describes Lydia early on as being good-humored and frivolous. In Chapter 3, Austen comments on the character's personality by saying, "Catherine and Lydia had been fortunate enough to be never without partners, which was all that they had yet learnt to care for at a ball" (8). In the web series, Lydia similarly introduces herself. She initially barges into Lizzie's room obsessed with Bing Lee, their new eligible neighbor. She quickly begins preening for the camera and widely smiling, trying to capture the audience's attention (My Name is Lizzie Bennet").

In the novel, Austen gives Lydia little character development. She remains boisterous and flirty from the beginning until after her marriage with Wickham. When Lydia returns to the Bennet household after her marriage, Elizabeth remarks on her lack of change, “Lydia was Lydia still; untamed, unabashed, wild noisy, and fearless. She turned from sister to sister, demanding their congratulations” (Austen, 296). However, the series gets the audience to relate and feel for Lydia, giving her character dimension. She’s still untamed and unabashed. But she just appears fearless. The series shows that in reality Lydia has insecurities and doubts. This means Lydia’s ultimate fall hits home for audiences even more so than in the original novel.

In Austen’s book, Lydia’s character development is stagnant, and ultimately she doesn’t learn from her mistakes. Austen gives her many problematic roles, such as the embarrassing sister, flirt, and blissfully unaware wife, but two in particular stand out: Lydia is a caution against pride *and* a warning against impulsive and immoral behavior. Austen doesn’t give Lydia a satisfactory arc because in many ways she serves as a plot device. She’s the dogs in *The Hundred and One Dalmations* that wrap up their owners with leashes causing them to meet and fall in love. Lydia is a way to bring Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy together. However, Austen employs her character to inform the reading of other characters in the novel.

Austen primarily uses her plot for comparison to Georgiana’s. The youngest Bennet and Darcy sisters are narrative foils to one another and Austen shows in

Lydia how the pride that kept the Darcy family quiet about Georgiana's experience with Wickham ultimately hurts Lydia and the Bennets. As Ruth Yeazell notes,

Although Austen adheres to convention by sparing Georgiana the disgrace of the more vulgar Lydia, she also condemns the pride that moved Darcy to keep the affair secret; as Darcy himself comes to realize, he has preserved his sister's reputation at the expense of Lydia's... (Yeazell, 133)

Darcy's pride and desire to maintain his family's name kept him from condemning Wickham openly. By not telling her family the truth when Darcy reveals it, Elizabeth similarly protects the Darcy name and her own shame of being taken in by Wickham's lies. Elizabeth kept the truth from her sisters in the original novel, which allowed Lydia to ruin her reputation by falling victim to Wickham's tricks. In this role, Lydia isn't given any development and really serves as a warning against pride silencing victims and the maintaining of reputation for the men who prey on them.

Austen gives Lydia another role: warning women who don't follow the acceptable behavior of society. The novel shows this warning primarily through the parallels between Lydia and her father, Mr. Bennet. "Lydia Bennet is presented as foolishly running off with Wickham, and thus endangering both her and her family's reputations, while Mr. Bennet is depicted as suffering the consequences of an impulsive love match in which he was taken in by appearances" (Hinnant, 303-304). Although relatively few would argue that Mrs. Bennet isn't a type of punishment for Mr. Bennet, the character doesn't get the same comeuppance

Austen saves for those who have been morally wrong. At the end of the novel, Lydia's miserable marriage is compared with the happy marriages of her sisters, and she is left with a husband that not only doesn't love her but also forces her to rely on the handouts of her sisters. With Lydia, Austen is warning women readers to be careful about abandoning the rules of society, especially when a clear double standard exists between men and women.

Adapting for the internet age

In his book *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*, Thomas Leitch explores what it means to adapt classic literature. He writes, "To revitalize adaptation study, we need to reframe the assumption that even the most cursory consideration of the problem forces on us—source texts cannot be rewritten—as a new assumption: source texts must be rewritten" (16). Adaptations are often informed by the world they are being created in. Rewriting and making connections to modern audiences is thus critical to any adaptation, but especially ones like Austen that specifically comment on society. Leitch looks at various ways adaptations can rework their source material. One of these ways is "adjustment," "whereby a promising earlier text is rendered more suitable for filming by one or more of a wide variety of strategies" (Leitch, 98). In this way, adaptations can expand and explore situations and characters that aren't widely talked about. They are able to function as an entity outside of the original classic while maintaining what makes the source a favorite. For example, take another Austen adaptation, Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*,

a modern retelling of *Emma*. Much like *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, the movie attempts to draw parallels between Austen's world and a contemporary one (Beverly Hills). Both adaptations modernize characters, update scenery and situations but maintain the essence and commentary of Austen's works. As Pucci and Thompson write, ". . . *Clueless* emerges here not as the modern, faddish, frivolous, and ephemeral version of a timeless classic but as an updated elaboration of Austen's own inventive experimentation with narrative technique and social analysis" (7). *Clueless* showed writers that Austen's works didn't need to be set in the same place and time to hold their meaning. *LBD* followed in its footsteps and continued to show that what matters is getting the spirit, humor and social commentary of Austen's novels correct. Adaptations such as these two capture the essence of classic novels and bring the works' themes, situations, and characters to the world of their audience.

While adaptations, in general, have been present since the creation of cinema, the age of the Internet has created a new medium for adapting classics. This evolution was led by fans, who cleared a path with online chatrooms, fanfiction and more. Henry Jenkins said in his book, *Convergence Culture*, that "old and new media will interact in ever more complex ways." *LBD* was just another step in this interaction. The series paved a new path for online literary adaptations after its prevalence and success. Austen, with her international popularity, emphasis on the gendered manners of society, and attention to dialogue, was a prime candidate for leading this charge. As Pucci and Thompson write,

With the figure of Austen at the center of this proliferation of media, it becomes increasingly difficult and misleading to make sharp or convincing distinctions between high and low, elite and mass culture; between literature and popular entertainment” (5).

Austen’s fans brought her work and audience online with the popularization of the Internet. It blurred the dichotomy that exists between high and low art. It made these classics accessible to the masses. New online versions of *The Great Gatsby*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and more gained popularity after *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, all thanks to the series breaking down the wall between classics and the less elite medium of online video.

One reason these YouTube literary adaptations have been so successful is their ability to engage with a new, increasingly online audience. The most successful of these adaptations views cross-platform programming as an essential part of their storytelling. “By engaging in the social media platforms occupied by the audience, each series bridges the gap between the story and the viewer, and creates a richer level of immersion,” argues Jessica Seymour (112). *LBD* and other online series bring characters into the virtual spaces their audiences occupy and require viewers to interact with the plotlines of the story. As Seymour writes,

In a similar manner to real-world internet users, the characters exist and engage in the virtual space as (assumed) extensions of a physical body. The link between the characters and the audience is intensified because the two groups occupy the internet’s virtual space and use transmedia to engage with

each other. This is a particularly engaging new style of storytelling because not only does it establish the audience as a peripheral character and occasional collaborator, the narrative itself is structured to allow the secondary characters in the story the opportunity to offer their insights and tell the audience their side of the story. (105-106)

This new way of adapting classics gives opportunities for viewers to relate to the characters through shared interests and online habits. Fashion fanatics find a kindred spirit in Jane and her Pinterest page dedicated to the outfits she wears in the story's plots and episodes. We are in an age when YouTube reached more adults during peak viewing hours (8 p.m. to 11 p.m.) than any major U.S. cable network. Society is moving online, and to keep classics and adaptations alive, the venues must follow their audiences. These series are accomplishing this and in doing so, bringing classic novels to an online and ready-to-be-engaged audience.

Lydia, slut shaming and victim blaming

To understand how Lydia's interactions in the world of *LBD* illustrate the double standard for women in relationships, it's essential to place her in the context of the national conversation surrounding sexual harassment, the #metoo movement and the concept of "slut shaming." The recent rise in progressive thinking regarding these issues came after the airing of the series during 2012-2013. However, the show still explores many of the themes that are recently taking a national stage using Austen's original plotlines.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines slut shaming as “the action or fact of stigmatizing a woman for engaging in behavior judged to be promiscuous or sexually provocative.” The concept may be a relatively new one for some, but all too familiar for many others. The idea is tied closely to a double standard between men and women when it comes to romantic relationships. When men date multiple people, they’re often indulged or encouraged to celebrate sexual conquests. However, a woman can be stigmatized and ostracized for nearly identical behavior. This double behavior can also link with a more systematic and sinister practice in society, victim blaming.

Victim blaming is the idea of blaming the survivor of sexual harassment or violence for the offender’s actions. It questions the intentions of the victim and creates doubt that leads to a shockingly low incarceration rate for rape and attempted rape offenders. This idea manifests in the treatment and questioning of victims. Investigators asking what a woman was wearing during the time of an assault or commentators implying that a victim was “asking for it” are all instances of victim blaming.

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries depicts a Lydia ripe for exploitation in the world of slut shaming and victim blaming. It modernizes classic Austen scenes by trading balls for bars and parallels regency courtship with the hook-up culture of today. Yet, it is the language Lydia, her two sisters, and their online audience uses that sets the stage for a conversation about Austen’s warning to women who don’t follow gender expectations in a male-dominated society.

In *LBD*'s second video, Lizzie introduces Lydia as “we’re all really proud she’s too old to be on any reality shows about having babies in high school,” (*My Sisters: Problematic to Practically Perfect*). Lizzie also justifies introducing her viewers to her sisters by saying they’ll know who she’s talking about, “In a month, or more like a week, when I’m all, ‘ugh, Lydia’s being a stupid, whorey slut again,” (*My Sisters*). The audience is first introduced to Lydia by Lizzie in relationship to her promiscuity. To Lizzie, and initially to her viewers, Lydia’s personality is completely overshadowed by her behavior in the dating world. Lizzie’s use of “slut” to refer to her sister directly relates back to the concept of slut shaming in contemporary society and sets up a type of internal victim blaming Lydia illustrates at the end of the series’ plot. Lizzie’s use of this harsh language to describe her sister gives license to her viewers to see and treat Lydia the same. This idea is wrestled with in the follow-up book written from Lydia’s perspective. She writes, “And people... they aren’t afraid of using stuff against you. Of taking your lowest, most regrettable moments and saying that’s all you are. All you ever can or will be.” (Rorick, 10). She blames this on anonymous internet users. However, her own sister defines Lizzie in terms of her sexual exploits.

However, after this introduction, viewers come to see Lydia as a more dynamic and multidimensional character than her literary counterpart. As one writer of the show, Kate Rorick puts it, “we’ve always said that the biggest change we made with the storyline was not the sex tape, but the fact that we actually liked Lydia. . . We watch her be vulnerable and get her heart broken in a way that the

brash Lydia from *P&P* never shows,” (325). In the novel, Lydia is oblivious to the suffering she caused. The narrator comments, “[Elizabeth] blushed, and Jane blushed; but the cheeks of the two who caused their confusion suffered no variation of color” (Austen, 240). Literary Lydia has no sense that she has committed any wrongdoing and even complains her wedding was too small. However, in *LBD*, Lydia is visibly upset when she first appears in Lizzie’s video after the scandal during the episode, “An Understanding.” She sarcastically echoes Lizzie’s earlier introduction by lamenting, “None of this would have happened if I hadn’t been acting like a stupid, whorey, slut again right?” (*An Understanding*). In that video, she goes on to admit the tape was a mistake, calling it her fault, taking responsibility in the scandal and sorrow she causes Jane and Lizzie, and internally victim-blaming herself. While citing Wickham’s emotionally abusive tactics, she doesn’t blame Wickham or list his behavior as an excuse. Instead, she lists it as another reason she now views herself as pathetic.

This internalized victim blaming is something viewers recognize in themselves. They’ve had their heart broken and trusted the wrong people, just as Lydia has in the series. Lydia’s remorse in the series is ill-placed; it isn’t her fault that Wickham betrayed and used her. Yet, this ill-placed remorse is exactly what relates her to viewers. They’ve been there before and they want to stand up for Lydia the way they weren’t able to stand up for themselves in similar situations.

Austen initially uses Lydia’s flirtatious personality as a warning to women to follow the patriarchal rules laid out for them in courtship. Lydia’s “punishment” is

an unsatisfactory marriage. Yet in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Lydia's undeserved punishment is society's response to her victimization. They're cruel and conflate her mistake to define Lydia herself. Lydia's self-blaming reflects her internalization of the initial slut shaming by the audience. The real penalty in the series, then, is for Lizzie and the audience. Their initially harsh judgments of Lydia have created a situation where they now see her as the victim, and yet Lydia blames herself. Both these messages serve as admonition to a society that condemns female promiscuity and, indeed, devalues women in general.

Lydia, pride and silence

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries' version of Lydia explores the Austen theme of chastising Darcy and Elizabeth for their silence. Wickham is portrayed as emotionally abusive, and viewers can see an actual, physical difference in Lydia from her bubbly and smiling demeanor in early videos to the limp, dejected version of Lydia in the later videos with Wickham (*Special Two*).

Emotional abusers tend to all share several behaviors: they restrict contact with their partner's family, force their partner to perform sexual practices against their wishes, threaten to break up in order to get what they desire, and act affectionately only when it benefits them (Porrúa-García, 216-17). All of these behaviors Wickham references or visually represents, mostly in the last episode of he and Lydia together, *Special Two*. This choice to have Lydia suffer emotional abuse made her more sympathetic to viewers, reinforcing their and Lizzie's guilt for

ignoring the obvious signs of her abuse. Austen's Lizzie can be partially excused for not recognizing Lydia's manipulation by Wickham because she and Lydia didn't write. Lizzie wasn't aware of their connection, though an argument could be made that the elder sister is at fault for this lack of communication. Yet, creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* wanted to reiterate Austen's original message about Elizabeth's pride and ignorance of her sister's wellbeing and its consequences. In the series' Lizzie had a clear source to check in on with her sister, as did audiences, through Lydia's personal vlogs. Yet, they ignored it, ignored her.

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries uses this initial message to explore the meaning of silence to safeguard family pride. Its method of doing so opens up conversations about the expectations surrounding women, relationships, and dating today. The reason Lydia is able to become so vulnerable and dependent on Wickham is her separation from her sisters. Lydia and Lizzie get in a fight that stops them from communicating and causes Lizzie to ignore Lydia's vlog updates.

As the audience is aware, the series establishes early on Lydia's insecurity and need for attention. Before the vlogs, she gets this from bugging her older sisters and in an active social circle. During the vlogs, she gets it from her own and Lizzie's video viewers. She is the most actively engaged with the audience on social media and regularly interacts with audience members on Twitter. However, once she loses an emotional connection with Lizzie, Lydia is vulnerable for Wickham to pose as her emotional savior. Instead, he jeopardizes her actual emotional wellbeing.

According to *The National Domestic Violence Hotline*, a woman will leave an emotionally abusive relationship an average of seven times before leaving for good. One of the reasons women so often return to these relationships is a need for emotional connection. One of the characteristics of emotionally abusive relationships, as already mentioned, is isolating the abused. In *LBD*, Wickham clearly fed on Lydia's need for compassion and attention and used her estrangement from her sisters to isolate her. Feeding off her need for an emotional connection, he threatens to leave her if she doesn't film a sex tape with him. Unaware of his motivations, she reluctantly agrees. Wickham then sells the sex tape to a website and uses Lydia's recent internet fame as marketing. He then disappears. Lydia's situation would have been avoided had Lizzie reached out to her sister or if Lizzie had been honest about Wickham and Darcy's history with her family. Instead, Lizzie remains silent and passive. Like Austen, the series' creators clearly fault Lizzie for this.

Silence manifests in society in another way: the systematic silencing of victims of sexual harassment and violence. This isn't directly referenced in either the series or Austen's novel. However, this rapid and recently discussed issue can be given new light when looked at through the events of *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Recent allegations against major industry players such as Harvey Weinstein and Matt Lauer have brought to light how sexual harassment and violence are systematically hushed and thus allowed to continue. Powerful men were and are able to get away with unbelievable conduct while their victims are

paid off, gagged under non-disclosures, or simply too ashamed to come forward. Real life is echoing the actions of Georgiana and Mr. Darcy. They too are ashamed and frightened of the reputational stain exposing Wickham would create. Lydia's abuse in the series and marriage in the novel are arguably the direct result of Wickham's reputation remaining intact, something that wouldn't have happened if the Darcy family had come forward about his initial wronging of Georgiana. Austen was commenting on the implications of shaming victims into silence centuries before the #metoo movement called for action and awareness.

Silence can have violent consequences as well. These same themes are seen in studies exploring the cause of underreporting by rape victims. According to the *National Sexual Violence Hotline*, only 310 out of every 1,000 rapes are reported to the police. Even for those that are reported, rape kit testing is often deprioritized resulting in evidence sitting for years before a lab looks. This has created a backlog that results in too many victims never seeing justice. Even worse, out of every 1,000 rapes, only 6 of the perpetrators will be incarcerated. One reason rapes are so overwhelmingly underreported is the shaming violence victims undergo. Being raped is often more of a stain on the victim's reputation than it is on that of the offender's. Investigators and commentators perpetrate this with their language, which is often full of victim blaming and slut shaming.

Similarly, the idea of silence as an act of complacency is found in the rape culture on college campuses that have sparked lawsuits, backlash and, even worse, unnecessary victims of known offenders. According to a study published in *Violence*

and Victims, “Studies that use long follow-up periods tend to show alarming rates of sexual reoffending among rapists” (Liask, 74). This study found that in a sample of nearly 2000 men, “76 repeat rapists actually accounted for 439 of the rapes, averaging 5.8 each,” (Liask, 78). It also found that in many cases, the 120 men who met the criteria for rape or attempted rape were also violent in other forms.

According to the study,

A majority of these men, 70 of the 120 (58.3%) admitted to other acts of interpersonal violence, including battery, physical abuse and/or sexual abuse of children, and sexual assault short of rape or attempted rape. Including their 483 acts of rape, these 120 individuals admitted to a total of 1,225 different acts of interpersonal violence.

Sexual violence perpetrators, because of low reporting and convictions, are often able to repeat their violent acts, and as shown in this study, many take this opportunity. This has particularly become an issue on college campuses. While some debate surrounds the claim that repeat offenders make up most rapes and attempted rapes on campus, one thing is clear: repeat offenders commit acts of sexual violence at alarming rates. However, the slow-moving systems in place on college campuses allow accused perpetrators to stay on campus for sometimes years after their accusation leading to second, third, or more victims (Saul). Similar to Lizzie, by not acting on the information they're given, Title IX offices have been arguably complicit in the rapes of additional victims by repeat offenders.

Neither Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* nor *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* relate Lydia, Elizabeth or Darcy's storylines to direct sexual violence. However, the implications are there. Austen originally implied that silence and pride were twin culprits in Lydia's victimization by Wickham. *LBD* creators then expanded that message to include Lizzie's pride and subsequent shunning of her little sister as a warning. Lydia's plot illustrates the consequences of emotionally abusive isolationism and silence in the face of sexual harassment and abuse. She also shows the ease with which someone can fall for the tactics and manipulation of an emotional abuser such as Wickham. These themes are all too real in the discussions surrounding sexual harassment in the workplace and the underreported and under-prosecuted nature of rapes in the U.S. and on college campuses.

Lydia and her audience

Austen's societal commentary surrounding Lydia and relationship expectations maintains its relevance today. However, one of the most interesting applications of translating Austen's work for the online age is the way her messages are incorporated with audience engagement. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* gives readers a stake in Lydia's wellbeing and attempts to hold them at fault for her eventual downfall. For the series, Lizzie and the characters of the story aren't the only ones at fault for Lydia's victimization. The viewers have been engaging with Lydia and Lizzie throughout these events and they share in the consequences.

Austen's novels are unique in their ability to confront and engage readers in this way. Their emphasis on normal social occurrences and focus on class and society place the plotlines and themes of the novels in line with the interactions happening on the Internet today. Both the novels and social media showcase how society interacts with one another. Placing Austen's works online and in the digital and social media spheres illustrates an awareness of society. Today, important conversations are happening online. Using social media expands Austen's world and creates another way characters are able to socialize with other outside of the face-to-face conversations taking place in Lizzie's videos. According to Jessica Seymour, *The LBD* used fan interactions to actively further the plot. When Lydia Bennet is shown to be dating George Wickham in her personal vlog, fans of the series took to Twitter to warn her to leave him. Lydia was established early in the narrative as a sensitive and insecure character, and so she is portrayed as particularly dependent on Wickham for acceptance and love. The audience reaction to the character solidifies Lydia's dependence on him by apparently proving that everybody, even her fans, expect her to make poor decisions. In attempting to warn Lydia, the audience facilitated George's manipulations by making her less willing to trust anyone but him. (111-112)

Fans of the series are encouraged to participate and even criticize the plot, serving as spectators and extras to the shows' world.

One way the series attempts to prompt this type of engagement is by creating a world of literary characters audience members are encouraged to interact with as they would any other friend or family member.

Emma Approved and *LBD* are not exactly innovations in connecting social media and several other media forms together. While they function for the purpose of creating an original, creative online endeavor, the composition of these specific adaptations across several forms of media is an exact replica of the lives of readers and viewers in 2014. It is not uncommon for people to have several social media accounts that are linked together or updated separately. (Caddy,48).

In this way, the series creates viewer investment in the storylines. Through the series' use of social media for its characters, Lydia becomes another friend to check in with on Facebook, sandwiched between your friend's new cat and a cousin's new baby. This integration makes users a vital part of the narrative. Scott Caddy writes in his essay, "Fan Media and Transmedia: Jane Austen in the Digital Age,"

The immersion of these adaptations into the lives of their potential viewers is not only smart, but embraces the long tradition of Janeism for generations of readers. This tradition, which existed long before the advent of the Internet and digital age, was started by readers who had embedded Austen and her works into their lives just as they would any friend or confidante." (48-49)

Austen's works have long sparked feelings of familiarity and engagement in their readers. One simply needs to look at fans interacting with *LBD* characters in the

context of the Jane Austen Festival to understand how easily *Pride and Prejudice* is able to draw in audiences.

The application of this engagement to better understand how Lydia and *LBD* are used to confront the audience with Austen's original commentaries comes from their investment and participation in the narrative of the story. In the series, her separation across platforms heightens Lydia's outsider status. Lydia continues to create her own series of videos that *LBD* consumers can either watch or ignore. As Myles McNutt writes in a review of the series, "For those who aren't following Lydia's story, Lizzie's shock is also our shock, and more importantly Lizzie's guilt at not paying more attention becomes our guilt at not clicking on those prompts to watch Lydia's latest video. . . ." (McNutt). If the audience decides to engage with the series by staying true to the novel's perspective and thus only watching videos from Lizzie's point of view, the subtle message is those viewers are perpetuating the same silence and attitude that ultimately allows Wickham to trick Lydia. Separate accounts and transmedia serve to isolate Lydia from her family much as she was in the source material after traveling to Brighton. Yet this adaptation choice obligates the audience to share in Lizzie's guilt for ignoring Lydia. It also applies Austen's original message about the dangers of pride and silence to the viewers, forcing them to ponder their own behavior in Lydia's victimization.

Even well-meaning viewers, who encouraged Lydia to separate from Wickham and continued to monitor her accounts and videos, are held at fault in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* universe. In Lydia's follow up book she writes,

People kept tweeting me to make at least one more vlog. I saw that. It took me a couple of weeks before I decided it would be better to turn off my Twitter notifications and delete the app from my phone. But during that time, I saw everyone saying how awful it was that my last video – before everything came apart – was about how I had fallen completely in love with George Wickham, and that I really needed to post just one more, at least one more. They weren't being mean. I know that. They pitied me. They wanted me to rise up and be this strong, independent woman and show that I was going to be okay. They wanted a proper end to my story.” (Rorick, 27)

However, unlike Austen's tidy epilogue in *Pride and Prejudice*, *LBD* leaves Lydia in a much more ambiguous place. Lydia is a foil for all young women growing into their sexuality at a time when sexual harassment, debates about gender roles, relationship violence and slut shaming are all raging. Many of which see their lives play out on the internet in the same way Lydia's story does in *LBD*. Like her, their life events are celebrated and touted on social media and their insecurities and failures are broadcast by their friends. Powerful men silence their experiences and victimization much in the same way Mr. Darcy originally functions to silence Georgiana's experience with Wickham. They watch as friends and colleagues are violated and silenced in the same manner they experienced but were too ashamed to come forward or punished for. They're defined by the clothes they wear and their past relationships, continuously told to behave in certain ways or risk bringing on to themselves the violent actions of another person. It's in these ways that Lydia

becomes so relatable to the audience of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. They're seeing their life experiences being played out through the plot of a classic novel.

Conclusion

Using Austen as a lens to view contemporary society works because of her novels' focus. They're already observing, commentating and critiquing society, and as much as the world has changed since Jane Austen's time, many of society's issues have not. This is why her novels are still so beloved. Readers see themselves in the relationships, both familial and romantic, portrayed in the pages.

Adaptations of her works continue this familiarity, adding a voice and face for viewers to engage and better interact with Austen's content. However, it seems like social media and online adaptations were made with Jane Austen in mind. Austen specializes in social circles, and today, those circles have moved online. YouTube literary adaptations bring Austen's social commentaries to the platform audiences are already using.

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries uses Lydia in a way that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* refuses to. Lydia is the lightning rod and mirror for Lizzie, Darcy and the viewer's guilt. The adaptation takes Austen's warnings about pride and interprets them in a way that multiplies Lizzie's own fault and casts blame on the audience as well. Its use of slut shaming language and depiction of relationship abuse and victim blaming bring a much-too-common problem to the forefront of viewers' minds. Yet the series' use of audience participation and engagement turn the mirror

on our own society. Viewers' participation in Lydia's shunning, mimicking of Lizzie's shaming language, and ultimate demand for resolution all show the potential damage society's treatment and expectations for women cause. It demands the audience to reflect on when they've done these same things in their own lives and confront the consequences it might have had for those involved.

Pride and Prejudice and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* remind viewers that society's treatment of women regarding their sexual freedom and relationship morality haven't changed as much as expected in the last 200 years. Yet, by viewing modern conversations through the lessons of Jane Austen and participating in the character exercise explored through interactions with Lydia in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, we can begin to see how society has stayed stagnate on these issues for too long. Elopement may have evolved into slut shaming and online sexual humiliation, but the message warning against powerful men and prideful silence still rings hauntingly true.

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