Although once thought to be a fleeting fad, the reality television boom that began during the summer of 2000 with the debuts of *Survivor* (2000–) and *Big Brother* (2000–) has proven to have much more staying power than critics originally thought. The persistence of reality TV has a lot to do with the many ways in which it supports the changing economics of the television business, which were initiated by increased competition with new media technologies, the proliferation of cable channels, and the globalization of the media industry around the same time. Drawing heavily from the soap opera in both business model and narrative structure, reality TV is the cheap filler that saves networks money so they can supplement the skyrocketing prices of their scripted primetime programming. Reality show budgets run 25–50% of those for scripted shows, which increasingly resemble the high production values of film in order to stand out in an oversaturated media environment. Although it is easy to bemoan the genre as a celebration of American exhibitionism, a perpetuation of tabloid culture, and the dumbing down of popular culture, it nevertheless engages social issues like class, sexuality, and race that often are ignored or treated too delicately in scripted dramas.¹

Beginning in 1992 with *The Real World*, MTV in particular produced reality programming that initially was lauded for engaging contentious topics of modern young-adulthood considered relevant to its core audience, such as homosexuality, AIDS, substance abuse, and racial and sexual prejudice. But what began as a social experiment about seven strangers learning how to live together and get along with each other, soon devolved into a platform for immature and irresponsible behavior as producers learned that certain character combinations would lead to the most conflict and by extension increased viewership and publicity.² These bankable character combinations routinely involved pitting strong-willed, African/American, urban females against naïve, white males from the Midwest or Christian women against homosexual gay men, etc.—leading to screaming arguments and sometimes even physical violence. Certain stereotypes concerning race and sexuality were the most televisual, produced better television drama, and therefore were and still are reinforced consistently across *The Real World*’s twenty-four seasons. The prevalence of reality programming has also trained potential contestants in the behavioral displays that get the most coverage; those seeking fame are quick to imitate such behavior and even to embody particular stereotypes.

Despite the pretext of using non–actors and being non–scripted, most reality television programming is carefully cast with these stereotypes in mind; participants go through an extensive screening process before filming begins. This casting strategy, developed by *Real World* co-
creators Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray, has since influenced many of the network’s other reality television shows, including MTV’s hit television series *A Shot at Love With Tila Tequila* (2007-2008), a reality dating competition starring Tila Nguyen—better known by her stage name Tila “Tequila.” Tequila is a Vietnamese singer, self-described “glamour model” and television personality, known for her 4’11” frame, surgically enhanced breasts, tattoos, and bisexuality. In one of MTV’s efforts to capitalize on the Internet’s cross-promotional potential and to exploit the drama that results from Tequila’s racialized sexuality, MTV cast her on the show after her quick rise to fame on MySpace.

*A Shot At Love* is similar to its predecessor *The Bachelor*, but with a very televisial twist; since Tequila is bisexual, sixteen men and sixteen women compete for her love. The producers maximize this twist by telling the contestants, who are pulled from all around the country and represent many different races and classes, that they are competing on a more traditional dating show; the 16 men are told that they are competing against the other men for Tequila, and the women believe they are participating in a lesbian dating competition against only other women. After Tequila eliminates ten contestants in the first episode, the remaining contestants, both male and female, share the same Beverly Hills home for the duration of the show. In the house, they sleep in the same oversized bed to encourage a plethora of sexual and racially charged encounters amongst the contestants. Those vying for “a shot at love with Tequila” participate in a variety of sexually explicit and gender blurring challenges to create the desired drama and conflict until one contestant remains.

*A Shot At Love* debuted at No. 1 in its time period across all of cable TV in the network’s target demographic of persons 18-34, averaging a 2.0 rating. The first season finale had 6.2 million viewers, which at the time was MTV’s most watched series telecast. The success of Tequila’s show reflects a variety of issues related to television representation and celebrity in the early 21st century media environment. This paper explores the relationship among Tequila’s success, her bisexuality, and her Asian ethnicity in order to reconceptualize racial and sexual representation in an era of reality television, celebrity culture, and television’s convergence with new media forms. While Tequila adheres to a particular stereotype of Asian female sexuality perpetuated in pornography, and provides a showcase for immature and exploitative behavior on her show, she also challenges the white, middle-class, heterosexual hegemony that has long dominated televisual representation in the US. Given this tension, I approach Tequila with ambivalence. On the one hand, she is a “bad” feminist role model for exploiting her Asian bisexuality for profit. However, Tequila’s celebrity and the popularity of her reality show reflect a savvy understanding of new business strategies that are developing as the television industry increasingly overlaps with the new media economy. Her story and celebrity text illustrate the influence that economic profit motives are having on contemporary televisual representation and by extension, how racial and sexual representations are shaped in the process.

Although glamour modeling and self-sexualization online have led to economic power and a relative amount of fame for Tequila, this paper questions whether embracing Tequila’s success as feminist agency actually serves to challenge gendered and racial power relations in the media. Given that as of 2011, Tequila’s stardom has flamed out, and she, like so many other reality TV stars, is struggling to keep a presence in popular culture and make a living, what does her story tell us about the cycle of celebrity in relation to the changing media industry? How does her relationship to the commercial motives of the television industry affect her place in popular culture? Can she represent a productive form of diversity for televisual representation? And, can representations like Tequila’s provide correctives or valuable alternatives to conventionally stereotypical images of minority groups during their quick fifteen minutes of fame?

**Tila Tequila’s Body of Work**

Journalists tend to describe Tequila as evidence of the Internet’s democratic potential. She catapulted to stardom in 2006 when she was deemed (with 1.5 million friends) the most popular “friend” on MySpace, the once colossal
SELLING THE HYPERSEXUAL BODY

social networking site that has since declined in popularity after Facebook and Twitter overtook the market. Her fame (calculated according to page views circa April 2006) even landed her on TIME magazine’s list of the most influential people in 2006. In trying to understand and quantify Tequila’s fame for TIME magazine, Lev Grossman writes, “She is something entirely new, a celebrity created not by a studio or a network, but fan by fan, click by click, from the ground up on MySpace… she turned her online persona into a full-fledged business.” Although she did stand out and make a name for herself by starting with only a MySpace profile and excessively advertising herself, the concept of a self-made celebrity is not entirely “new.” Fan magazines and gossip columns have long been part of the star-making industry, and clever celebrities have utilized these from the early days of the film industry to build up their popularity with fans and manipulate their image for greater profit. Nonetheless, journalists, particularly when writing about the Internet and reality television, tend to take broad strokes in their understanding of celebrity and are quick to proclaim something new and original when in fact it has a long history.

In his foundational text about stardom, Richard Dyer suggests that the popularity of certain celebrities can best be explained, not by their novelty, but instead by their deep, structural relationship with the ideological contexts of their time. Tequila’s celebrity text represents a cross-section of ideological concerns in contemporary popular culture including the clash between the idealistic rhetoric and the actual reality of the Internet’s democratic potential, the rise and influence of pornography in popular culture, and the role of neoliberal post-feminism. While Tequila is in some ways a self-made celebrity, her fame also represents several ideological questions resulting from the increased popularity of online social media and reality television in the contemporary media environment: do online technologies and reality television give us more freedom and control over the media and our participation in it than before? Do they offer minority races and sexualities an opportunity for public exposure and political influence? Is there a distinction between our “private” identity and the “public” self we present online or in front of cameras? To what extent is exploiting sexuality empowering

Representing an insidious branding culture in today’s media environment, this collage shows the ways that Tila Tequila has branded herself as a sex object across multiple media outlets.
for women, particularly for women who are racial and sexual minorities? And, what are the lingering effects of branding ourselves to survive in a highly commercial and media saturated environment?

Many of these tensions result from the fact that Tequila is emblematic of an insidious understanding of branding that dominates contemporary pop culture. In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein describes this approach to branding “as a new paradigm that eliminates all barriers between branding and culture, leaving no room whatsoever for unmarketed space.” By selecting particularly racially sexualized images of herself to post on her webpage and crafting a persona built on accessible sex appeal and a “taboo-bending lack of inhibition,” Tequila carefully and skillfully constructs herself as a brand. Tequila’s seductive pinup photos, tattoo paraphernalia, anti-normative persona, and signature grammatical style are consistent across her blogs, websites, books, magazine spreads, television shows, and other aspects of her paratext. Together, they become a collection of Tila Tequila brand extensions; each element of the media franchise helps expand and build her star text for consumption by her fans, while she, and her publicists, carefully court and cater to her fan base through free web-based interfaces.

Tequila is a product of what Henry Jenkins calls convergence culture: “By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.” With this definition, Jenkins points to the fact that the film, television, and new media industries increasingly are intertwined. Tequila, for example, started on MySpace, had her own television show, authored a book, has posed in men’s magazines, made film cameos, and appeared in the gossip rags. As a product of convergence culture, where media companies cater to fans in unprecedented ways, a majority of Tequila’s success can be attributed to the fact that she has offered up her body and persona to be consumed, debated, and in a way produced, by her fans across these media. “Nguyen,” Grossman writes “clearly grasps the logic of Web 2.0 in a way that would make many CEOs weep.” She knows that sex sells and that new technologies in convergence culture give even more opportunities for market expansion as well as points of entry for fans. Her celebrity text, like many reality television stars’, could arguably not exist without today’s media consolidation, which was heightened after global trends in neoliberalism led to the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the eventual merging of several media conglomerates.

The impact of this media consolidation and the reach of the resultant partnerships reflects a change described by Klein: “what was once a process of selling culture to a sponsor for a price has been supplanted by the logic of ‘co-branding’ – a fluid partnership between celebrity people and celebrity brands.” Tequila reflects how American culture increasingly amounts to a brand culture where not only are corporations, networks, or studios worried about branding, but politicians, celebrities, academics, and average people are versed in branding strategies, integrating them into their everyday life when they apply for jobs, build a profile page, or go out on a first date. Tequila is intriguing arguably because she is an extreme example of what many people face as they try to brand and market themselves in both their personal and professional lives. Every aspect of Tequila is marketed: her stage name, “Tequila,” inspired by a rebellious commodity, is itself a promise of her body as a commercial site, a promise that is fulfilled by tie-ins with the liquor industry that fuel the drama of *A Shot at Love*. In this branded universe, Tequila, however, represents a contemporary feminist paradox, where both empowering and problematic discourses shape her body and celebrity text. Tequila’s fame represents a resurgent trend that has roots in early film stars and WWII pinups, in which glamour modeling—described by Maddy Coy and Maria Garner as “the marketing of self-sexualization through the body”—is framed as “successful entrepreneurship.” Tequila became famous for being “sexy;” by marketing herself online and posting self-made glamour shots of herself posing seductively, Tequila capitalizes on today’s post-feminist landscape, in which women—after attaining a limited understanding of gender equality—have rejected some of the tenants of second wave feminism, particularly those that
decried sexualization as disempowering.\textsuperscript{20} She reflects a post-feminist ideology in which sexual attention is seen as empowering and capitalizing on sex appeal is considered “feminism in action.”\textsuperscript{21} Reciting a form of neoliberal discourse that is common in reality TV,\textsuperscript{22} Tequila and her admirers tend to proclaim her post-feminist success to be an outcome of self-determination, where success and failure are dependent on personal skill or weakness and not dependent on social, economic, or political constraints.\textsuperscript{23} Her representation in the media reflects a larger, and arguably problematic, post-feminist trend where the focus of progress and success has shifted from collective consciousness and equality to individualism. This shift elevates consumption and capital accumulation as strategies to heal most social, economic, and political dissatisfactions.\textsuperscript{24} Tequila’s posting of sexually explicit pictures of herself and branding of herself in relation to her MySpace profile is only an extreme example of what many women and young girls are practicing as they build their own profiles and create their own online presence. Her celebrity text therefore represents a key ideological question about the broader relationship between sexuality and power in a post-feminist media environment, particularly in relation to online media.

\textit{Tila Tequila & The Politics of Representation}

Tequila has been a polemical figure in contemporary popular culture. Her antics online, on her television show, and in the gossip pages have produced a spectrum of followers from a devoted fan base to aggressive anti-fans. She follows in the footsteps of other “unruly women” who do not fit in with the media’s notion of conventional femininity. In fact, like fellow “unruly women” Roseanne Bar, Rosie O’Donnell, and Samantha Jones on \textit{Sex and the City}, Tequila uses her sexuality to disrupt traditional bourgeois notions of sex, gender, class, and race.\textsuperscript{25} However, because she also so easily adheres to the Asian bisexual fetish popularized in pornography and explicitly commodifies herself to those ends, her political potential is often lost in the process.\textsuperscript{26} She and her business partners, including MTV executives and members of her publicity team, undermine any political agendas when they seem to prioritize profit over feminist, racial, sexual, or class politics. As a result, Tequila remains a deeply ambivalent figure that represents many of the contradictions that minority women in the media face as they become more popular.

This tension between being exploitable and powerful is a form of hypersexuality common to minority women in the media who position themselves in relation to the long line of objectified women before them. In \textit{The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene}, Celine Parrenas Shimizu examines Asian/American performances and identities like Tequila’s that rely on sexuality. She explains how hypersexuality, “an obvious or exaggerated appeal to or performance of racialized sexual fantasy and desire,” draws attention to both the pleasures and the pains of being a minority woman, ultimately “expressing a yearning for better representations and realities for those marginalized by race and gender.”\textsuperscript{27} Tequila’s hypersexual performances on her website, shown mostly through self-made

\begin{figure}[h]
  \centering
  \includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
  \caption{Revealing Shimizu’s “hypersexuality of race,” in these images, Tila Tequila highlights a particular form of racialized sexuality by performing and constructing herself like an anime character in both self-made and professional photos.}
\end{figure}
glamour shots, as well as on her reality show, highlight a particular form of Asian sexuality; through makeup and styling Tequila constructs herself like an anime character. By exaggerating her already large wide-set eyes with makeup, calling attention to her surgically enhanced breasts with lingerie, which contrasts with her petite frame, and frequently playing into the Japanese schoolgirl or other Orientalist stereotypes common to the genre, she creates a new form of self-sexualized yellow face. And, because of the confessional nature of many of Tequila's blog posts, which are accompanied by pictures of a lonely and isolated young woman, it is easy to read the duality of pleasure and pain in her performance of self.

Shimizu notes, “As subjects, Asian/American women are born into a world where a representational tradition of hypersexuality forms and shapes general consciousness.” Asian/American women, like many other minority women, are continually interpellated as sexualized and racialized subjects, and they are always already sexualized and raced beings. Many of Tequila's fans, even those who participate on her website, comment on her racialized sexuality, sometimes being explicit about fetishes or prejudices about Asian women being exotic. For example, one emblematic commenter on a blog for the show said, “tila isn't all that but 2 words...Asian Fetish.” Nevertheless, in order to locate certain hypersexual performances like Tequila's historically, Shimizu attempts to recoup sexualized - or in her words “hypersexualized” - representations of Asian/Americans as having political potential. She understands them “as acts of resistance and moments of self-definition in sexual representational agency.” Shimizu’s work is an important intervention in feminist understandings of sexually explicit images of minority women; we cannot easily write off these representations as dangerous products of false consciousness, or only as part of a long tradition of imperialist images that commodify, objectify, and fetishize the bodies of Asian women. Instead, we must acknowledge if there are political, social, or personal agendas embedded in these types of performances, and if so, where they are located.

One of the places we can locate representational agency is in the way Tequila astutely manipulates new media technologies. Web 2.0 technologies potentially allow women like Tequila to control their own self-definition and manage their sexuality on their own terms. Although, since her rise to fame in 2006 Tequila has had publicists and mangers influencing and helping her manufacture her public image, Tequila’s core image has remained the same. With her profile and the images she chooses to upload, she's given the chance to redefine and constantly contextualize her bisexuality and her “alternative” identity on her own terms. For example, on her MySpace page she describes herself like this:

i [sic] like people who are really fucked up. I mean like tormented in one way or another because then i won't feel like such a freak around those that are "normal." nerds, geeks, and freaks are all my friends. Cool people are pretty damn lame. I am very high strung and suffer from multiple personalities...I am also bi-polar so that should explain my erratic postings. I like to read. I love to read. I am a nerd. I've always been a nerdy geek trapped inside a ummm...woman's body. Yea....that's me. People love me for some reason. I don't know why...i do but i just say i don't know why just to be modest.

In her profile, Tequila, as an author, makes a rather self-aware effort to distance herself from the “normal,” or the hegemonic. She achieves this distance by rejecting “official language” and grammar, refined political discourse, and by defining herself as a “freak.” She obliquely references her body - “inside a ummm...woman’s body” - but in so doing, she also wants to disrupt the notion of sexual women as anti-intelligent. Shimizu argues that hypersexual performances, often through their explicit appeals to perversity, allow a space for alternative gender performance and the disruption of white middle-class gender norms. Tequila does this by celebrating an alternative to the classically clean, white, middle-to-upper-class refined beauty. She is heavily tattooed and embodies a messier, dirty, and excessive punk style that foregrounds piercing and untraditional hair color with the hopes of broadening hegemonic understandings
SELLING THE HYPERSEXUAL BODY

of both female sexuality and beauty, while also
drawing attention to the artifice of femininity.\(^\text{33}\)

Additionally, she works to assert bisexuality as
a natural and valid lifestyle; perhaps even more than
other sexual identities, bisexuality is frequently still
considered taboo. Its association with Girls Gone
Wild and other semi-pornographic texts suggests
that bisexuality is simply a performance done by
heterosexual women seeking to be more sexually
daring and thus more attractive to men. However,
Tequila’s image, her assertion, explanation, and
defense of bisexuality, as well as her ubiquitous
presence across various media forms are important
correctives to Asian/American and LGBTQ
invisibility in the media.

Yet, because of Tequila’s relationship to
pornography, whether it is her soft-core glamour
modeling for men’s magazines like Maxim and
Stuff, her four different spreads in Playboy, or
her pornographic webcasting on her website, her
politics remain hotly debated. The work of feminist
video artist and theorist, Laura Kipnis provides
an important context in which to understand
Tequila, particularly why she is so divisive. During
the peak of the feminist pornography debates,
Kipnis investigated her visceral reaction to Hustler
magazine and perceptively contemplated whether
her response to the pornographic magazine was
one of “feminist disgust or bourgeois disgust.”\(^\text{34}\) At
the time, the feminists of the antiporn movement,
most visible in the work of Andrea Dworkin and
Katherine McKinnon, characterized pornography
as the symbol and culprit of women’s oppression.
But, by interrogating the motives of particular
antiporn feminists, and herself, who routinely
used the middle-class rhetoric of taste to criticize
pornography, she questioned the role that race and
class play in critiquing pornography. In Ecstasy
Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics
she writes,

Given that control over the body has
long been associated with the bourgeois
political project, with both the ‘ability
and the right to control and dominate
others,’ Hustler’s insistent and repetitious
return to the iconography of the body
out of control, rampantly transgressing
bourgeois norms and sullyng bourgeois

property and properties, raises certain
political questions.\(^\text{35}\)

Tequila’s transmedia franchise evokes the same
tension between class-based and feminist
reactions and thus deserves the same qualification.
This is especially true because she is emblematic
of the increasing influence of pornography in
contemporary popular culture, reflecting broader
corns about its impact on contemporary media
representations.\(^\text{36}\)

Across her celebrity franchise, Tequila’s
body is consistently and defiantly out of control,
particularly with regards to femininity’s ties
to decorum, sexual restraint, manners, and
submissiveness; however, she is also out of control
with regards to class, for which the media criticizes
her most.\(^\text{37}\) Conservative watchdog groups and
liberal academics alike easily dismiss her behavior
and the show itself for its crass exploitation of the
fame-hungry lower classes that will do anything
for a chance to be on television.\(^\text{38}\) A Shot at Love is
particularly associated with the same classed-based
moral depravity that marked Hustler as especially
deviant. The show celebrates the grotesque body in
excess that is habitually critiqued by the upper class,
as signaling a lack of refinement or control over
one’s bodily or sexual impulses. Episodes of the
show include excessive drinking, mud wrestling,
foam baths, cross-dressing, S&M, and all around
nakedness. Tequila foregrounds the importance of
kissing and sexual attraction, publicly makes out
with almost every contestant, and spends the night
with the last five finalists. This is exactly the type
of controversial behavior that MTV encourages on
its reality programming because it has proven so
successful in attracting its target audience of 18-34
year-olds.

At the same time, Tequila also invites critique
of white heterosexist decorum and particularly
the stringent gender norms that go along with it.
Her bisexuality and the contestants’ willingness
to participate in gender-bending behaviors are
the most obvious support of this agenda. For
example in the second episode, Tequila has each
of the male contestants walk down a runway in
high-heels—many of them choosing to dance
down it in their underwear. Through these kinds
of activities, A Shot at Love is a place where
Because the show celebrates the grotesque body in excess that is habitually critiqued by the upper class as signaling a lack of refinement or control over one’s bodily or sexual impulses, *A Shot at Love* is particularly associated with the same classed-based moral depravity that marked *Hustler* as especially deviant.

Tequila openly discusses bisexuality and explicitly addresses misconceptions about it. Whether it is the result of a smart producer or not, Tequila seems invested in initiating a dialogue about bisexuality and other topics including “alternative” beauty, class biases, and anti-normative sexualities, all the while celebrating lower class taste. In these ways, she represents Horace Newcomb’s notion of television as a cultural forum, where television is understood as a productive cultural practice that raises questions and brings up issues for viewers to debate. Although arguably MTV was exploiting Tequila’s racialized sexuality to produce cheap controversial programming to fill time and generate high ratings, there is a significant political project going on simultaneously.

**Commercialization and the Limits of Representational Politics**

Despite the assertion of Tequila’s representational politics, it is also vital to understand the boundaries of hypersexual performances. As Luce Irigaray acknowledges, there are limits to capitalizing on the power of femininity. Because masculine forces and institutions ultimately shape and legitimate its power, the agency experienced through sexuality is never really the woman’s alone. For Tequila in particular, the commercialization and commodification of her body not only detracts from any disruptive political potential that she might have, but in many cases works against it. Tequila’s commercial motives are repeatedly foregrounded on her websites and her political agendas tend to resemble publicity stunts or thinly veiled ploys for more distinction in an oversaturated media environment.

Shoshana Magnet illustrates the pitfalls of economic profit motives when she contemplates whether or not the semi-pornographic photos of “alternatively” beautiful women on the suicidegirls.com website can be understood as feminist representations of sexuality. She too draws attention to how the eroticization of certain markers of “deviant” femininity—tattoos, piercings, brightly colored hair—is meant to disrupt the conventional norms of female beauty. However, Magnet also draws attention to the ways that the site structures racial and ethnic representations in ways that reinforce their exoticness or Otherness, ultimately perpetuating stereotypes instead of disrupting or redefining those representations. Most importantly, Magnet incorporates Dan Schiller’s discussion of digital capitalism and the political economy of the Internet to illustrate how the capitalist framework of the Internet tends to derail many of our utopian ideals of its democratic potential. She suggests that the Internet’s reliance on the accumulation of profit “has meant that a wide range of online practices are undergoing commodification.” Magnet’s analysis calls attention to the way that the market quickly
SELLING THE HYPERSEXUAL BODY

appropriates the radical potential of racialized and sexualized bodies in convergence culture, quelling its productive force in favor of profit accumulation.

Magnet echoes media scholar Ellen Seiter who has critiqued the idealism of many new media theorists, and particularly the technological determinism of Yochai Benkler. Applying sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s categories of economic, cultural, and social capital to digital literacy, she writes, “New media theory simply reiterates ideology and reifies social inequity, turning gross discrepancies in access to economic, cultural, and social capital into differences of proclivity.” With this assertion, Seiter points to the fact that new media technologies do not easily erase entrenched social and economic disparities, despite what many new media theorists claim. Continually overestimating the democratic potential of new media technologies places undue pressure on minorities; their success or failure is too often individualized thus overlooking the financial, social, and cultural barriers that actually inhibit their potential. Tequila uses new media technologies to acquire social, economic, and culture capital, but her focus on profit unduly undermines her political project to the point that she is easily written off in popular culture. Many people in the popular press as well as some of Tequila’s fans, question her motives on her reality show as anything but commercial exploitation. Page six published rumors based on a source close to MTV that her show and her bisexuality was a sham; the story circulated widely across the Internet, severely undermining her representational politics. These assumptions were further entrenched when her romance with season one winner, Bobby Banhart literally ended once the show was over and she was immediately slated for season two.

Furthermore, the collaborative nature of web 2.0 technologies presents additional challenges for minorities like Tequila, who seek to assert representational politics across convergence texts. Jenkins discusses convergence media as a utopia of fan co-production with the text: “Consumers are learning how to use different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers.” As a result, Tequila caters to her fans in a variety of ways, calling them her “Tila Army.” Across her celebrity franchise, Tequila presents herself as the embodiment of particular cultural contradictions—bisexual, beautiful, and nerdy, aspiring popstar and girl next door—and as Jenkins notes, her fans “become hunters and gatherers moving back across the various texts trying to stitch together a coherent picture from the dispersed information.” Online, Tequila’s fans are actively engaged in posting interpretations, explanations, and defenses of Tequila’s actions. The comments on her webpage are commonly about figuring out what is “real” and what is “photoshopped,” or whether she’s being herself or trying to sell, brand, or market herself. Similarly, on her television show, contestants routinely pontificate about who Tequila “really is,” what she wants, and who she has had the best connection with. As Annette Hill points out about reality show celebrities in general, Tequila capitalizes on the tension between performance and authenticity that reality television promotes; Tequila thus solicits her fans “to look for the ‘moment of truth’ in a highly constructed and controlled television environment.” As a result, she complicates and even negates any political potential she had in the “self-representational agency” described by Shimizu because her celebrity text is actually a collaborative production.

The power Tequila gives her fans illustrates how authorial intent can get lost in the process as fans have more and more control over media texts. While the consequences of this fan control are not as severe when discussing fictional worlds like The Matrix, which arguably become more nuanced and rich with fan interaction, the consequences seem more dire when the identities of minorities, like Tequila, are the texts at stake. Minorities are already socially, politically, and economically marginalized and choose outlets like social media to have their voices heard and identities taken seriously on their own terms. However, the reality of convergence texts, which celebrate fan co-production, is a loss of authorial representational agency.

More than a success story, Tila Tequila is a cautionary tale of how quickly the market and particularly digital capitalism can appropriate the political, social, or personal empowerment that new media technologies, reality television, and convergence culture promise for the politics of representation. This is especially true when those
politics are associated with the gendered, sexed, or racialized body. As Jenkins notes,

Convergence doesn’t just involve commercially produced materials and services traveling along well-regulated and predictable circuits...Entertainment content isn’t the only thing that flows across multiple media platforms. Our lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, and desires also flow across media channels.48

Tequila’s rise and fall in popular culture prompts us to ask questions not just in relation to her celebrity status, but also to ourselves as we face similar dilemmas about privacy, representation, and commercialization, albeit on smaller scales, when we participate in online social networking sites. Although she is an extreme case, the branding of her sexualized self is not dissimilar to what many people are also doing when they create profiles on social networking sites, especially as women contemplate their feelings about sexual representations online. Moreover, Tequila epitomizes a problematic trend in the cycle of reality celebrity in an industry that likes to take advantage of controversial racial and sexual representations. Although these images may begin with provocative political potentials, correct the invisibility of certain racial and sexual identities in the media, and disrupt the white middle-class hegemony of U.S. media culture, reality television’s embedded connection to the bottom-line of the television industry often quickly delegitimizes those projects, framing them simply as market exploitation. Therefore, Tila Tequila reflects some of the complicated and even contradictory ideological dilemmas that racial and sexual minorities experience as they position themselves in relation to new technologies and as they seek to assert their “alternative” representations in the convergent media environment.

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End Notes

2 Although much of MTV’s reality programming is criticized for everything from staging to exploitation to crass sensationalism, it has also continued to make socially conscious reality programming celebrated by critics such as 16 and Pregnant, The Buried Life, If You Really Knew Me and its Made and True Life series.
3 This format later inspired a long list of other dating competitions on MTV and its sister channel VH1, including A Double Shot At Love with the Ikki Twins replacing Tila Tequila as the host, That’s Amore starring Domenico Nesci, a 5-foot-3-inch Italian who had been a contestant on A Shot at Love, Rock of Love staring Bret Michaels, the lead singer from the band Poison, and several more spin-offs.
SELLING THE HYPERSEXUAL BODY


9 Dyer, Stars, 176.


12 In discussing his 2010 book Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts, Jonathan Gray defines paratext in the following way: “I draw the word from a book of that title by Gerard Genette, a French literary theorist. He was interested in all those things that surround a book that aren’t quite the ‘thing’ (or ‘the text’) itself. Things like the cover, prefaces, typeface, and afterwords, but also reviews….Your readers may be more familiar with ‘hype,’ ‘synergy,’ ‘promos,’ ‘peripherals,’ ‘extratextuals,’ and so forth…Certainly, paratexts are absolutely integral in terms of marketing, and in terms of grabbing an audience to watch the thing in the first place. But we’ve often stalled in our discussion of them by not moving beyond the banal observation that hype creates profits. What I wanted to look at is how they create meaning, how our idea of what a television show is and how we relate to it is often prefigured by its opening credit sequence, its posters, its ads, reviews, etc. Meanwhile, ‘peripherals’ belittles their importance, since they’re not at all peripheral, at least in potential….’para’ suggests a more complicated relationship to the film or show, outside of, alongside, and intrinsically part of all at the same time. Hence my fondness for [paratext] in particular.” Quoted in Henry Jenkins, On Anti-Fans and Paratexts: An Interview with Jonathan Gray (Part Two), Confessions of An Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins, March 8, 2010, http://henryjenkins.org/2010/03/on_anti-fans_and_paratexts_an_1.html (accessed December 10, 2010).


14 Grossman, “Tila Tequila.”


16 Klein, No Logo, 30.


28 Shimizu, The Hypersexuality of Race, 12.

29 Ibid.


31 Shimizu, The Hypersexuality of Race, 17.

buzznet.com, however its style and tone remains relatively consistent with her current website: http://misstilaomg.com/.
34 Laura Kipnis, *Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 227.
35 Kipnis, *Ecstasy Unlimited*, 224.
38 Stanley, “The Classless Utopia of Reality TV.”
45 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 18.
48 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 17.