

## Analysis

# Woman in the News: Paris Hilton

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Loquacious by a pool in the Hamptons in a leopard-skin swimsuit, with her flaxen hair gathered in bunches, Paris Hilton this week gave her tart response to being [dragged into the US presidential campaign](#) by John McCain. In a recent advertisement entitled "Celebrity", his campaign used images of her in an attempt to associate Barack Obama, his rival, with vacuous celebrities.

"I'm not from the olden days and I'm not promising change like that other guy. I'm just hot," she said to the camera, with her combination of baby-doll sweetness and sassy knowingness. "I want America to know that I'm, like, totally ready to lead."

It was a breakthrough moment similar to Mr Obama's victory speech at the Iowa caucus or Mr McCain's recovery from near political oblivion last summer. This time, however, the comeback kid was a 27-year-old celebrity who had rediscovered her own brand. More than 5m people have already watched the spoof.

"I think it was a very wise response for someone not always associated with wisdom because she laughed at herself," says Howard Bragman, a Hollywood publicist. "Paris's brand is about being hot and men and sex and fashion and fun. She is a beautiful girl with a rockin' body, and that never hurts."

Her poised rebuttal to Mr McCain's advertisement was in contrast to the Paris of a year ago. She had just been released early from a 45-day jail sentence for driving-related offences and made a half-hearted vow to change her ways, raise money for good causes and visit Rwanda. It was a mistake because nobody was interested in an altruistic Paris; readers of celebrity weeklies preferred the hedonist they loved to hate. The backlash was such that *Us Weekly* turned against its old standby and put a "Paris-free" logo on one cover.

"Our readers do not want a Paris who has found God and is going to Africa. Her brand is celebute heiress," says Melanie Bromley, *Us Weekly's* West Coast bureau chief, "We have not featured her in the magazine for a long time, but I've a feeling she is about to come back."

Ms Hilton was born into an affluent Californian family, the oldest of four children. Her father, Rick, is a property broker and developer in Los Angeles, specialising in mansions and estates in Beverly Hills and Bel-Air. Kathy, her mother, was a minor television and film actress.

Ms Hilton is often described as the heiress to the Hilton hotels fortune, since Conrad Hilton, who founded the chain, was her great-grandfather. In practice, she is unlikely to inherit much of it – her grandfather, Barron Hilton, disclosed last year that he plans to give most of his \$2.3bn (€1.5bn, £1.2bn) fortune to the family philanthropic foundation.

She is not short of cash. Having dropped out of her last private school before graduating, she had joined her sister, Nicky, as an "it girl" and socialite by her late teens. She was well-known in Manhattan society as a regular attendee of fashion shows and parties, carrying her trademark accessory, Tinkerbelle, a chihuahua, under her arm.

By 2003, Ms Hilton had gained enough notoriety to be cast in a reality television show called *The Simple Life* on the Fox channel with Nicole Richie. The conceit was pure Hilton – two privileged, rich girls have to experience life with the ordinary folks – and it drew a decent audience.

But her breakthrough performance was a video that emerged at the same time on the internet. It was a film of her with a former boyfriend, and became the first of a genre of “sex tapes” of people filmed by accident – or willingly – with partners. It would have forced many people into hiding, but not Ms Hilton, who had already started to exploit her image as a spoilt and brazen woman. Far from ruining her career, the tape was the making of her. The tape coincided with the emergence of reality television as rival to Hollywood films and television drama as a source of celebrities. The public appetite for celebrity coverage and scandal is as great as the 1950s, when Confidential magazine served up snippets about starlets.

“The old days of celebrity were about adoration but it is more complicated now. There is a cast of characters at any one time – the good girls, the sassy girls, the sluts. She is more mean girl than sweet girl,” says Michael Jackson, head of programming for the internet group, IAC.

Many parents might have been mortified, too, but Ms Hilton’s are made of sterner stuff. “Kathy and Rick love celebrity and glitz and glamour. Having a daughter who is one of the most famous women in America is very cool to them,” says Mr Bragman, who has worked with Mrs Hilton.

Indeed, Mr Hilton realised early on that his daughter, to whom the couple had given a perfect brand name, had something of value in the modern media world. In an interview in 2005, Ms Hilton said that her father’s constant advice to her was: “Don’t settle. You can always get a lot more.”

For a time, that worked well. Her fame brought her large sums for personal appearances and she has lent her name to perfumes and lines of clothes. She was not in the A-list of Hollywood actresses coveted by fashion labels but was solidly on the B-list. Her limitation was that she could not turn her fame into a singing or acting career. She formed the Heiress label to release a CD and appeared in a film. Both flopped. Meanwhile, she faced competition to stay in the headlines as other reality show stars gained prominence.

“I used to find her insufferable and representative of what I thought young women were being conditioned into – to sexualise themselves and not rely on their brains. Now she just bores me,” says Anna Holmes, managing editor of Jezebel, a fashion and celebrity internet site.

Ms Hilton’s comeback this week was not her idea. The script was written by Adam McKay, one of the founders of Funny or Die, an internet comedy site on which the video appeared. She merely delivered his lines.

Still, there are other hopeful signs for Ms Hilton. Ms Bromley says that her relationship with Benji Madden, a rock guitarist, has made her more human – and accessible – to the magazine’s readers. “Our readers are obsessed with life changes. They want to know when they will get engaged or have a baby, the sort of things that girls out there are going through,” she says.

Fame emerges in unlikely ways. Ms Hilton has Mr McCain (to whose campaign Rick and Kathy Hilton contributed) to thank for her latest bout. But she told him off anyway. No one exploits Paris Hilton’s image except Ms Hilton herself.