

The *Gossip Girl* reboot feels more like propaganda for the elite than the frothy satire it promises.

# Super rich kids

**Tara Kenny** is a writer based in New York.

The pilot of the original *Gossip Girl* series aired in 2007, in a simpler time – or at least, a simpler time for rich kids. There was less overt class warfare and billionaire-hating, and the It Girl of the moment was heiress Paris Hilton, who aped working-class existence on *The Simple Life* and once described herself as “the closest thing to American royalty”. An aspirational show about the white, obscenely rich spawn of Manhattan’s ruling elites gallivanting around the city while their escapades were chronicled on an anonymous gossip blog made perfect sense.

A generation of teenagers watched enthusiastically and unironically, dreaming of a parallel universe where 16-year-olds sipped dirty martinis at masquerade balls rather than Passion Pop at the school formal. Some 14 years later, the show’s reboot takes place in the same universe, but with an altered social and political landscape.

Much of the chatter leading up to the premiere of the new *Gossip Girl* centred on the show’s promise of greater diversity and self-awareness. Most of the central teen clique is played by actors of colour, and the fact of being gay or living in Brooklyn (*quelle horreur*) is no longer a source of shame. The show’s creator, Joshua Safran, a writer and executive producer on the original *Gossip Girl*, claimed that the new characters would be more aware of their privilege than their predecessors, spawning the disparaging Twitter nickname “woke *Gossip Girl*”.

Today’s cultural climate demands “good politics” even from the rich. Take Kim Kardashian, who now spends her spare time freeing wrongfully incarcerated people from prison, or Paris Hilton’s rebranding from American royalty to an advocate against abuse at adolescent rehabilitation programs. It’s now

cool to care – or at the very least, it’s mandatory to gesture towards caring on social media.

High society virtue signalling – often a thinly veiled cover for the same old ruthless social order – is ripe for scathing analysis or frothy parody. But four episodes in, *Gossip Girl*’s capacity to deliver either remains unclear.

The new series centres on reluctant queen bee and social media influencer Julien (Jordan Alexander) and her estranged half-sister Zoya (Whitney Peak). Julien’s best friend Audrey (Emily Alyn Lind) is in the teenage version of a dried-up marriage with mild-mannered skater Aki (Evan Mock), and they both lust after hedonistic pleasure-seeker Max (Thomas Doherty).

A number of high-school drama tropes are inverted immediately. Heteronormative jealousy is for the most part replaced by queer, sex-positive exploration in the Audrey-Aki-Max love triangle. The trophy wives of *The O.C.* and the original *Gossip Girl* are supplanted by Max’s gay dad, Gideon, whose highly conceptual outfits and gender fluidity delight the audience but irk his husband. These inclusions broaden the boundaries of who and what teen dramas have historically considered to be aspirational and glamorous in a necessary and exciting way.

Unfortunately, the show’s central rivalry between Julien – who rules the roost at the Constance Billard School for Girls – and Zoya – an outsider scholarship kid – is underwhelming. Neither prospective schoolyard overlord seems to care much for that mantle, which makes for a low-stakes war. We’re told that Julien is influential and revered, but her dialogue and Jordan Alexander’s performance lack the energy necessary to make this claim credible. There are moments where Julien appears to have a pulse – such as when she uses her dead mother to guilt people into attending her party after being cancelled for fat shaming, and then uses the party as a platform to humiliate Zoya – but she backs down and apologises so



Zión Moreno as Luna, Jordan Alexander as Julien and Savannah Lee Smith as Monet in *Gossip Girl*. HBO / Binge

fast it gives you whiplash. The show is allergic to any real tension, promising conflict but resolving it instantly through laughably mature conversations in which adolescents accept responsibility for their actions and pledge to do better.

While Julien and Zoya are both Black, so far there is little meaningful engagement with how racial identity shapes their experiences of a traditionally white stratum of society. They share a love interest in Obie (Eli Brown), a morally righteous heir who assuages his guilt by protesting his real estate developer parents’ latest ventures and exclusively dating women of colour – who in this instance are also sisters. Are we meant to believe that this would not raise a red flag with social-justice minded Zoya? Or more broadly, that Black women do not have to compromise anything fundamental to rule over a bastion of Upper East Side privilege?

Real life gossip would suggest otherwise. This school year, the prestigious Dalton School – likely an inspiration for *Gossip Girl*’s fictional Constance Billard – introduced an anti-racist curriculum that was met with disdain from a group of parents and alumni who responded with an open letter that critiqued its perceived “obsessive focus on race and identity”. Amid the protests against police brutality and institutional racism that took place across the United States last year, new Instagram accounts began documenting past and present instances of racism against Black students at Dalton and other prestigious East Coast private schools. Granted, *Gossip Girl* is not the platform for a thorough analysis of these issues, but to present this community as a beacon of cultural inclusivity smacks of propaganda for the elites.

The precarious relationship between the stressed-out and underpaid teachers and the affluent student body is one point of tension that does not go unexamined. Frustrated writer-turned-English-teacher Kate Keller (Tavi

Gevinson) and the other teachers live in fear of the entitled students and their overbearing parents. “A mother just told me her son should be able to vape in my class because of his asymptomatic glaucoma,” complains Ms Keller at the parent-teacher interviews.

Worse still, these families have the power to get teachers fired for refusing to change a bad grade by threatening to cut their generous donations. As seen in 2019’s real-life college admissions scandal involving high profile parents including actresses Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman, some people will go to extraordinary lengths to rig the system to ensure their offspring’s admission to the Ivy League institution of their choice.

Even so, does this justify the teachers’ scheme to put the entitled brats in their place by spreading vicious gossip about them on an all-knowing social media account? Yes, as revealed in the first episode, the teachers are *Gossip Girl*! It doesn’t vindicate the behaviour, but if you’re willing to suspend disbelief, it’s an entertaining enough plot point and works as a hook for some class analysis, even if it’s hard to accept that middle-class teachers are committing the worst betrayals.

Between public sex in private member’s clubs, off-Broadway Jeremy O. Harris openings, 15th-birthday parties headlined by indie darling Princess Nokia and free time spent yachting with the last Shah of Iran’s well-endowed grandson, *Gossip Girl* gives us lots to ogle. On one level, it’s an alluring portrait of the trendiest corners of New York City. Yet, in the words of our omniscient narrator: “The only thing that makes a story interesting is how it’s told.” Celebrity cameos and lush backdrops can’t carry a show. Let’s hope that the remaining episodes of this rebooted *Gossip Girl* give us a narrative we can sink our teeth into, before we are forced to block, report and unfollow. ●

*Gossip Girl* is now streaming on Binge.

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