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Looking at Listening: Gender and Race in Commercial Advertising for Radio Sets in Southern Africa from the 1950s to the 1970s

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ABSTRACT

This article takes a visual approach to the study of an aural medium. It argues that the radio set had a powerful visual presence in popular culture in Southern Africa between the 1950s and the 1970s when most people bought their first radio sets. Advertisements for radios carried by the press offer the most prominent examples of this iconography. In South Africa, Rhodesia and Zambia, radio advertisements developed a distinctive aesthetic that blended global and local influences and framed the relationship between the new technology and society. Although the radio set was presented as part of a forward-looking, ostensibly inclusive vision of modernity, sales strategies also served to associate radio with whiteness and masculinity by looking backwards to the racial and gendered hierarchies of the colonial past. The homogeneity of advertising on both sides of the liberation divide demonstrates the pervasive cultural influence of settler colonialism both before and after formal decolonisation.

KEYWORDS

Media; history; culture; advertising; decolonisation

Introduction

The invention of radio transformed the sound of the twentieth century. However, the visual impact of the radio set as a symbol of modernity in film, popular art and most prominently commercial advertising has been overlooked by historians of the technology. This article presents the first transnational comparative study of advertisements for radio sets, taking the press in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia from the 1950s to the 1970s as its subject. I explore the relationship between popular culture, technological change and decolonisation to argue that the visual representation of radio used the aesthetics of modernity to repackage and reinforce colonial imaginaries of gender and race before and after the demise of colonialism. My analysis reveals that the radio set was marketed to Southern African consumers as a symbol of masculinity and whiteness reflecting a broader cultural and economic landscape of pervasive settler influence in Southern Africa during this period.

A dramatic boom in sales of radio sets across the global South from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s transformed the technology from an elite luxury item to a household

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commonplace, following in the wake of its earlier popularisation in Europe and North America in the 1920s and 1930s. In Southern Africa, sets began to appear in white settler homes from the 1920s, but their prohibitive cost and reliance on mains electricity initially excluded most black consumers. The arrival of cheaper, battery-powered transistor sets from the late 1950s offered the possibility of a mass African market. In South Africa, where sales were highest, the percentage of the population owning radio sets more than doubled, from 8 per cent in 1960 to 22 per cent in 1970. In Rhodesia (as it was then called) and Zambia, the boom was smaller in scale but more dramatic, as ownership rose from 2 per cent in 1960 to around 10 per cent in the early 1970s, by which time at least half of the black population had become regular listeners (Mytton 1983, 76).¹ The globalisation of radio coincided with and was driven by another global transformation, in advertising, as agencies switched from selling products to marketing glossy lifestyles. Selling the item was replaced by selling happiness, or, as the art theorist John Berger observed at the time, “publicity is about social relations, not objects” (1972, 132). The new style of advertising developed by agencies on New York’s Madison Avenue was swiftly adopted across the world and advertisements became a powerful site for the projection of normative visions of the “good life” and modernity (Tungate 2007). The advertisements analysed below were produced or commissioned by radio manufacturers in Southern Africa, notably Supersonic, Marilyn and Gallo, and international firms including Eveready in Britain, Blaupunkt in West Germany and Philips in the Netherlands. During the period of this study, advertising for radio sets experienced a golden age, lavish in style, strong on lifestyle and light on technical detail, but when the market became saturated in the mid-1970s advertising was taken over by high-street retailers who rarely included more than basic information and a price.

The radio boom and the mid-century revolution in advertising coincided with the political upheaval of decolonisation in Africa. The end of empire had a dramatic impact on the sound of radio broadcasts, as the anodyne tones of the colonial “information” service were replaced with radical nationalist propaganda overnight (Brooke 2021). But a visual history of the radio set in Southern Africa tells a different story of entrenched cultural coloniality on both sides of the so-called liberation front line. Although most of the continent had gained independence by the mid-1960s, including Zambia and Malawi in 1964, liberation was postponed in other parts of Southern Africa until the 1970s and beyond. Here, uniquely, the global radio boom and the mid-century revolution in advertising dovetailed with the ongoing presence of an increasingly aggressive form of settler colonialism, which sought to project not only political but also economic and cultural influence across the region. Advertisements for radio sets reflected this coloniality by taking inspiration from the racial and gendered hierarchies of the Victorian “civilising mission” (Tamale 2011, 14–16). The result was a bold marketing strategy that was based on the fiction that black consumers aspired to an idealised white settler lifestyle which combined glamour, modernity and technology with suburban respectability and a patriarchal household. The press in Rhodesia and South Africa exemplified this phenomenon, but, strikingly, so too did the press in independent Zambia. The history of advertising and popular culture therefore complicates and disrupts the watershed of political decolonisation.

My methodology explores the visual history of the radio set by looking at Southern Africa’s “adland” (Tungate 2007) through the lenses of gender and race. Historians have

rarely taken a visual approach to the study of the medium, although Alistair Pinkerton's work on the role of radio sets in film is a recent exception (2019, 180–184). However, they do concur that radio technology, like air travel, film and fast cars, was promoted by the late colonial state in Africa to revitalise its image as modern, or, as Brian Larkin puts it in his study of radio in colonial Nigeria, as a tool of the “colonial sublime” (2008, 16–47). In a Southern African context, Marissa Moorman identifies the same phenomenon in colonial Angola (2019, 26–35). However, both studies focus on colonial policymaking and, more generally, there is no scholarship on the ways in which visual culture promoted the association between radio and whiteness. My research demonstrates that whiteness was a major theme in advertising for radios, drawing on the approach of other historians of advertising in Southern Africa who have examined the racial hierarchies associated with products such as soap in Zimbabwe (Burke 1996) and imported goods on the Zambian Copperbelt (Kalusa 2013).

My interest in the gendered nature of advertisements was initially piqued by Tsitsi Ella Jaji's analysis of advertising for Telefunken sets in the Senegalese magazine *Bingo*. Jaji locates images of black women purchasing radios in the 1950s in a continental moment of blackness, glamour and modernity fostered by cultural magazines such as *Drum* and *Zonk!* (2014, 139–145). In Southern Africa, by contrast, the relationship between radio technology, blackness and femininity was less comfortable, so my research seeks to complement Jaji's findings by demonstrating the extent of this divergence. Deborah Spitulnik's (1998) work on Zambia in the late colonial period and the 1980s is the only historical study directly concerned with advertising for radios in Southern African. Spitulnik identifies several instances of patriarchal messaging but, like Jaji, chooses instead to find in advertisements an inclusive narrative of globalised modernity, bourgeois aspiration and individual agency that flattened gender difference (1998, 70–72, 76–78). In response to Jaji and Spitulnik, and taking my lead from Kim Golombisky and Peggy Kreshel's study of advertising in post-war U.S.A. (2017), I argue that beneath the ostensibly inclusive veneer of modernity, radio remained doggedly associated with patriarchal tropes about domesticity.

Historians of radio and of commercial advertising in Africa have conventionally written single-country studies, but for the last decade or so cultural history has been increasingly concerned with finding transnational connectivities (for influential examples, see Barber 2018; Bloom, Miescher, and Manuh 2014). I chose to adopt a transnational approach to analyse the cultural continuities between independent Zambia and the settler states of South Africa and Rhodesia to demonstrate that political decolonisation had a limited impact on popular culture, at least in the first decade after independence. Historians have traditionally grouped Zambia with the rest of “black Africa” to the north as its settler population was small and the independence process was relatively swift and peaceful. By adopting a regional lens, I highlight the ways in which settler colonialism had a cultural reach far beyond its formal borders. It is hoped that future studies will progress this argument to include lusophone Southern Africa as well.

The scope of this article is far from exhaustive but it aims to offer meaningful comparisons by covering a large geographical region over two decades. My analysis uses mostly anglophone publications in South Africa, Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) and Zambia, or Northern Rhodesia as it was called in the early years of this study. Newspapers and

magazines were sampled monthly throughout the period, or for as long as they were published. They require a brief introduction. Of the South African publications, the *Rand Daily Mail* was the leading newspaper intended for an Anglo-white audience in South Africa, *World* was the comparable publication for a black audience, while *Drum* and *Zonk!* were cultural magazines aimed at black readers, with some circulation outside South Africa. The *Rhodesia Herald* was the country's leading newspaper with a mostly white audience, while the *Bantu Mirror* used English and vernacular languages to reach an African audience. The *Northern News* was originally intended for a settler audience in Northern Rhodesia, but shortly after independence it renamed itself the *Times of Zambia* and became the most popular black newspaper. The colonial government publication *Nkhani za Kum'mawa* was mostly in Chichewa for African readers in the east of the country, while the English-language *Central African Mail* was aimed at a national African readership. When it was nationalised at independence, it became the *Zambia Daily Mail*. Although these last two newspapers were government-controlled, they relied on commercial advertising revenue like all the others. The circulation figures for these publications were relatively low in global terms but they were leaders in their respective countries.

Radio and Gender

Before the late 1950s, advertisements for radios were aimed at an exclusively male audience. The typical advertisement of the late 1940s or early 1950s featured little more than a picture of a set and a description of its technical specification, but the approach was far from gender-neutral. For a start, the foregrounding of technical detail was infused with a vision of science, progress and modernity that was clearly intended to speak to male readers in an era when few women had access to technical education. Specialist jargon abounded, with its own particular poetry, from the "110–250 volt tapped transformer" and the "crystal pick-up" on the Pilot Maestro to Blaupunkt's "directional ferrite rod antenna", and the Space Leader's "special Metallupe internal aerial" made by Eveready.² Marketing referenced other forms of technology that were associated with masculinity at the time, such as a Philips' 1948 "Masters of the Air" advertisement that featured a radio set next to a fighter aeroplane and claimed: "From the war years there emerged amazing examples of man's conquest of time and distance ... In the foreground of Radio progress stands the name of Philips".³ Both Eveready and Supersonic sought to associate the radio with the then male world of space exploration by depicting astronauts using radios and giving sets names such as Spacegram and Space Cadet.⁴ The dominance of masculine names for radio sets was another feature of the 1950s. The Pilot Maestro was an obvious example, as were the Chief, Cavalier and Playboy sets produced by Supersonic.⁵ Significantly, the masculine themes of radio set names were more pronounced for Southern African companies such as Pilot and Supersonic than for international companies like Philips and the West German firm Blaupunkt, which generally used gender-neutral names. The Supersonic Boudoir, produced in ivory-toned plastic from 1956, was the only set to make reference to femininity before 1960.⁶

However, although the advertising industry remained dominated by men, advertisers began to realise that there was a female market for the new, cheaper transistor sets from the late 1950s, and so women, both black and white, started to appear in radio

advertisements. Initially they were always depicted listening to the radio in the company of men, but by the early 1960s white women were being shown listening on their own, as were black women from the early 1970s, as shown in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#). As the influence of Madison Avenue began to change the style of advertising in Southern Africa from the early 1960s the association between the radio set and masculinity was, in some ways, diluted as technical specifications were slimmed down and replaced by a more inclusive “lifestyle” appeal to prestige, glamour and romance. The names of sets produced in Southern Africa also became more gender-neutral, such as Supersonic’s new Champion and the PRG 83 or the Malibu by Tempest.⁷ [Figure 1](#), for instance, was clearly designed to attract female consumers by featuring the new owner of a radiogram telling a friend that she was “not kidding – it only costs R31.50!” But Southern African advertisements also imagined racialised limits to feminine purchasing power; unlike Telefunken’s strategy in Senegal (Jaji 2014, 139–145), black women were never shown buying sets and it was implied that, at best, they might receive them as gifts, as illustrated by [Figure 2](#)’s strapline, “Gosh! She Likes It”.⁸



Figure 1. “I’m not kidding”, *Zonk!*, June 1964, p. 34. (Source: Bodleian Library).

**Gosh!
She Likes It**

So will you when you see the range of beautiful Supersonic radiograms. They are fine to look at and fine to listen to. The three band radio puts you in touch with the world. The automatic record player makes New Year swing.

Supersonic radiograms are battery operated. You can use them anywhere in Zambia. You will have music wherever you are. Go to your nearest dealer now to get set for a Happy New Year with a Supersonic radiogram.



Figure 2. "Gosh! She Likes It", *Zambia Mail*, 6 January 1970, p. 6. (Source: University of Zambia Library, UNZA).

In other ways, the representation of male and female listeners remained profoundly unequal and it was the male gaze that defined the relationship between radio technology and women in the realm of commercial advertising, whether black or white. The visual depiction of women became increasingly objectified and even sexualised by the 1970s. From the mid-1960s, around half of all women shown in advertisements were depicted in figure-hugging clothes or adopting suggestive poses, as seen in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#).⁹ This was part of a global trend towards the more explicit commodification of the female body in advertising (Golombisky and Kreshel 2017, 35–39) but it was particularly striking in independent African states such as Zambia, where a conservative dress policy for women was officially encouraged from the early 1970s – in this case, the wearing of the traditional *chitenge* and the banning of miniskirts (Hansen 2004, 168–172). The effect in the press was to create an awkward incongruity between the images of women in news articles, uniformly dressed in the *chitenge* and often poorly photographed, next to subversively under-dressed models in eye-catching advertisements.

That [Figure 2](#) could have been created by a Zambian company and published in a government-owned paper featuring a black woman wearing a miniskirt was testament to the exceptional power of commercial advertising to subvert government-sanctioned cultural norms.¹⁰ An unusually bold challenge to the national dress ruling was carried in the pages of the commercially owned *Times of Zambia* in 1972 when a Supersonic advertisement presented a black woman wearing a bikini with the sleazy tagline “easy on the eye and easy on the ear”.¹¹

This was an exceptional case, as radio advertisements were more likely to depict white sexuality than black, but by using the black female body to sell radios in the 1970s Zambian advertisers were taking their lead from marketing strategies that had long been used by the white settler press. An early example from Supersonic was carried by the *Rand Daily Mail* in 1954 and featured a beach scene with a scantily dressed couple in an intimate pose ([Figure 3](#)). Although the name of the set – Companion – was gender-neutral, the foregrounding of the long-legged female figure and the phallic extended aerial created an association between radio and (white) sex, in a way that was clearly intended for a male audience.¹² From the mid-1960s, the representation of white female bodies also became more sexualised in the black press. [Figure 1](#) presented



Figure 3. “Supersonic Companion”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 July 1954, p. 5. (Source: British Library).

Zonk!'s black readership with a glamorous white woman listening to her new radiogram as she lies prone on the floor in a coquettish pose, her long legs kicked in the air.

The racialisation of sexuality had a distinctive Southern African aesthetic, as sexualised representations of white femininity were found most commonly in advertisements produced by white-owned Southern African companies. In 1966, the Rhodesian manufacturer Marilyn described its new Silver Star model as "perfect company". A picture of a seductively smiling young white woman accompanied the claim that "nothing can give more pleasure, or match a mood better, than a Marilyn radio; it's the perfect companion – always there, always reliable", feminising the radio set as a substitute companion for lonely men.¹³ The "radio set as woman" trope was most obvious in advertisements commissioned by the South African company Tempest. To launch the new Penthouse series in the *Rhodesia Herald* in 1970, a young white woman is shown operating a radio, but it is obvious from her positioning behind the set and her plunging cleavage as she leans forward that she is not supposed to be listening to it. In radio advertisements, listeners are almost never shown looking directly at the photographer but here, as in the Marilyn advert, the defiant model breaks the fourth wall and looks the reader straight in the eye.¹⁴ The smutty, inuendo-laden text of the advertisement speaks for itself:

For the man with the right kind of experience. The all-new Tempest "Penthouse" Stereo was designed for men with two kinds of experience. The man with the romantic experience ... who knows that sweet smooth Stereo music is essential when entertaining. As well as the guy who'd rather experience the joys of a Stereo system packed with all the technical refinements available. For both, the "Penthouse" is a real pleasure-maker. Faithful reproduction, good-looking design, true dependability – just turn on and enjoy! If you haven't got other things on your mind here's some of what you'll find on the daddy of them all – The "Penthouse" Super 80 – shown above. See it at the dealers – If you like he'll show you our other Tempest Systems too ... as long as you've got the right kind of experience.¹⁵

White female nudity could even be found in the pages of the government-owned *Zambia Daily Mail*. The selling point for Sanyo's new FT 818.8 car radio in 1973 was that "travel can be a bore, unless you have good company". An unimpressive image of the set was surmounted by a white woman, naked from the waist up and in three-quarter profile, as barely concealed as the implication that listening to the radio was comparable to having sex, not to mention safer in a moving car.¹⁶ By contrast, black women were never shown in sexually provocative poses and they were always depicted looking down or away from the camera. In fact, the Supersonic advertisement from 1972 mentioned above was the only time a black woman was shown wearing a bikini in this period; black nudity was otherwise entirely absent. The was true for male bodies as well as female; while black men were always fully clothed, white men were regularly shown in revealing swimming trunks from the 1950s.

Not all representations of white femininity were sexualised. If the black women of "adland" were uniformly demur, white women were sometimes depicted as shrewish and aggressive – for example, the grotesquely misogynistic imagery of [Figure 4](#). The advertisement carried by the *Times of Zambia* in 1971 shows a middle-aged white couple in a car. While the husband concentrates on driving in silence his wife hectors him from the passenger seat, her eyes wide with manic intent and her skull-like face dominated by an enormous mouth. Because he lacks a Blaupunkt car radio, the brow-beaten husband has no choice but to listen to his witch-like wife.¹⁷

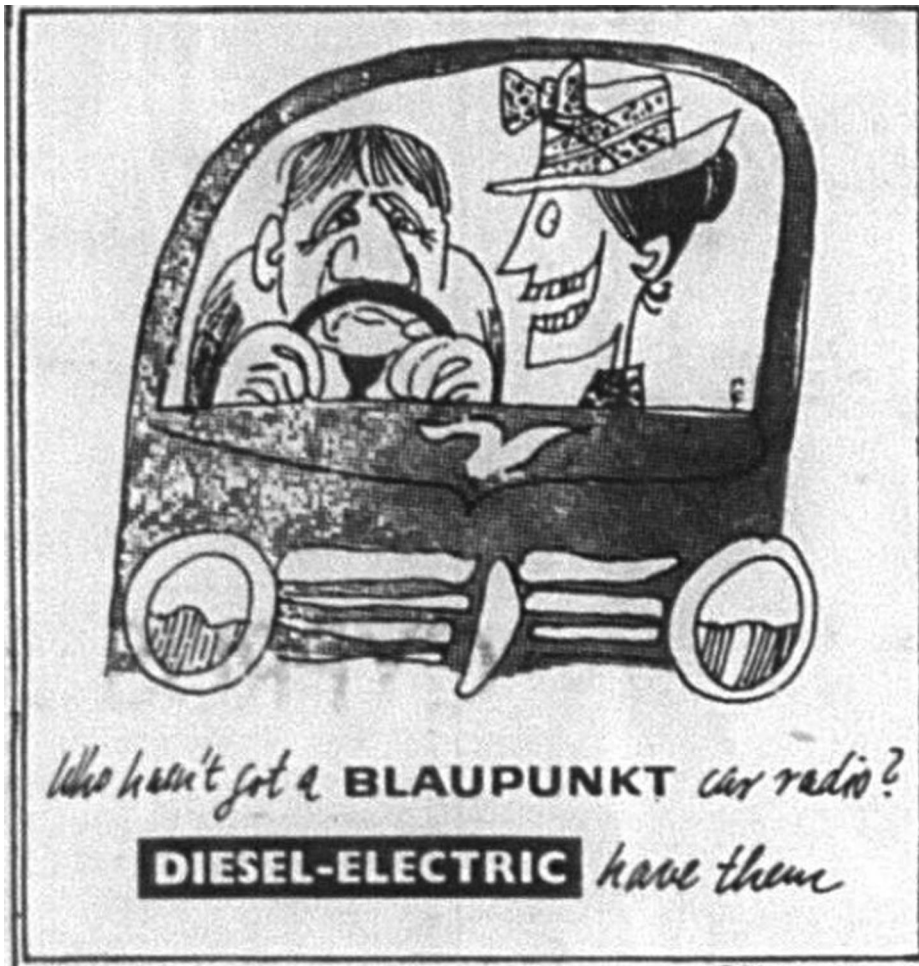


Figure 4. "Diesel Electric", *Times of Zambia*, 5 March 1971, p. 12. (Source: UNZA).

Black femininity was presented as more passive and less sexualised than white femininity, but, across the board, advertisements suggested that both black and white women were inferior to men. For instance, women were never shown operating the set if a man was present (see [Figures 5 and 6](#)). Similarly, in advertisements depicting men and women listening in cars, women were never driving. In a more subtle way, this hierarchy was reinforced by the universal implication that women only ever listened to music, unlike men, who apparently liked to listen to talk programmes as well. The message that lay behind this distinction between male and female listeners was that men were supposedly more curious, discerning and intellectual in their use of radio technology than women, who merely sought entertainment. Since only men were seemingly capable of appreciating the full potential of radio, it was implied that the technology was inherently masculine.

The association between radio and masculinity was particularly clear in advertisements that featured men and women listening together. The first to show a black couple (and also the first to show a black woman) appeared in 1959 for the Eveready Spacegram



Figure 5. “Eveready Spacegram”, *Drum*, August 1959, p. 15. (Source: Bodleian Library).

and was carried regularly by *Drum* and *Zonk!* until 1961. A young couple dance, demonstrating their shared enthusiasm for music programmes. However, the text of the advertisement explains that the radio set could offer men much more besides: “a man who owns a radio enjoys more and learns more” as “it brings you all the things you want to hear and know about. It entertains and amuses you – and also helps you get knowledge of the world. Music from the world’s finest bands – sports news – thrilling radio plays – valuable education programmes”.¹⁸ By contrast, it was implied that a woman would only listen to music.

In another Eveready advertisement that ran in the same period, the masculinity of radio was even more obvious. A young, black couple relax next to their new radiogram (Figure 5). The man announces that he is “a radio fan” because “my Spacegram lets me know what’s happening in the world”, but the woman prefers listening to music and shies

away from the radio function of the machine altogether, declaring herself to be “a record fan” who likes the set because it “plays them all without winding”.¹⁹ This division was a distinctive feature of advertisements for radiograms, which tended to feature women listening to records – usually by male artists – instead of the radio (e.g. [Figures 1 and 2](#)).

Similar messaging could be found in advertisements that featured white couples. In 1973, the General Electric Company of Zambia Ltd (GEC(Z)) invited readers of the nationalised *Zambia Daily Mail* into an idealised white home. In the foreground, a man controls the radio while a young woman lounges in the background. GEC(Z) pitched to a male audience that:

No man is an island – sufficient to himself – each man needs to be in touch with the world. The vital activities outside and inside Zambia are brought to you clearly and quickly by radio. Radio gives you Moscow, Paris, London, Tokyo or Lusaka – at your fingertips.

Squandering the promise of such omniscience, the woman is shown stubbornly ignoring the radio and choosing to read a glossy magazine instead.²⁰ Here, and across the region’s press, commercial advertising consistently drummed home the message that women were second-class listeners who were interested only in entertainment and incapable of appreciating the full potential of the radio, a man’s machine.

Radio and Race

The sales strategies that drove the radio boom in Southern Africa sought to glamourise the racial hierarchies of settler colonialism as much as its gendered inequalities. Images of black listeners began to appear in the pages of *Drum*, *Zonk!* and *World* in South Africa, the *Bantu Mirror* in Rhodesia and the *African Mail* and *Nkhani* in Northern Rhodesia from the late 1950s. This superficial decolonisation of radio marketing (if only in the black press) reflected the political mood of the “Wind of Change” era and the end of colonial rule to the north. However, the boom in sales was not driven by the politics of liberation but by technological innovation. The appearance of transistor sets in the late 1950s transformed radio ownership across the global South and did more than anything else to popularise radio listening in Southern Africa. Not only were transistor sets cheaper to produce than valve sets, they also used less power so they could easily be run on batteries, which were also becoming more affordable during this period. In 1951, for example, a basic portable valve set manufactured in South Africa by Supertone cost £29.17.6 with batteries costing an extra £2.2.8, but by 1959 an equivalent transistor portable made by Supersonic in Southern Rhodesia could be bought for £16.16.0, with a promise that batteries would “cost only a few shillings a year”.²¹ Thanks to the arrival of transistors, radio ownership now became a possibility for many members of the black middle class.

The appeal of new technology and value for money was universal and played a major role in advertising for radio sets regardless of race. But in other ways advertisements continued to reinforce radio’s early association with whiteness, most obviously for sets produced by Southern African radio companies such as Supersonic and Siera. For a start, black and white people were never shown listening together. This kind of racial segregation was hardly surprising in settler-ruled South Africa and Rhodesia, but it was more striking in Zambia, where black listeners did not appear in the pages of the *Times of Zambia* until 1972 and where images of white listeners continued to dominate both

national newspapers until the mid-1970s. This oddity was symptomatic of a general time lag between political and cultural decolonisation in the region thanks, in part, to the entrenched nature of settler-owned commercial interests in the early years of independence. Nor was the sluggish pace of cultural decolonisation peculiar to Zambia. In neighbouring Malawi, the national newspaper did not depict a black radio listener until the mid-1970s.²² The overall effect was to create an uncomfortable dissonance in postcolonial African newspapers between the racialised messaging of commercial advertising for luxury items, which inevitably caught the eye first, and the Africanised content of government-controlled news columns. Meanwhile, advertisements in the white press featured only white listeners until black listeners began to appear from the mid-1970s.²³

Across Southern Africa, the sense of racial hierarchy was reinforced by the difference between advertisements for cheap, non-durable products such as soap, milk and beer, which generally showed images of African consumers, and luxury durable items like radio sets, cars or plane flights, which were associated with whiteness and the settler lifestyle (Kalusa 2013, 144–145). To an extent, this segregation of marketing reflected the commercial realities of the disparity in purchasing power between most white settlers and Africans, but it was also a product of the racialised imaginaries of the Johannesburg-based advertising agencies that shaped sales strategies in the region. As Timothy Burke has demonstrated, from the 1950s there was a consensus among industry experts that the best way to sell products to aspirant black consumers was to market them as white luxuries. Nimrod Mkele, South African executive at the American-owned agency J. Walter Thompson, explained in 1959:

Africans tend to reject those products which are advertised as being exclusively for them. For such products carry with them the connotations of inferiority which the African meets in his everyday experience whenever he is at the end of segregated services. What happens in this case is that the product becomes psychologically downgraded and the African does not buy it.²⁴

Put in other words, the mantra of the day was “advertise white, sell black”. Like the assimilationist colonial attitude from which it derived, this strategy was premised on the supposed superiority of a white settler culture that had long been associated with luxury consumerism, as Deborah Posel (2019, 36–42) has shown in her study of department stores in colonial Cape Town.

A comparison between the content of white- and black-targeted advertisements reveals a standard set of messages that framed African radio listeners as inferior to their white counterparts. This held true across the time period of this study and on both sides of the liberation front line. Crude racial stereotyping was the most obvious manifestation. Figure 6 appeared in every edition of the vernacular Northern Rhodesian newspaper *Nkhani* between 1959 and 1961 as part of the listings for Radio Lusaka. Although the cartoon was not an advertisement in the strict sense, it featured the unmistakable Saucepan Special set produced by Eveready and promoted by the colonial government.²⁵ The explicit racism of the black-face grotesques in *Nkhani* was unusual by the 1950s, even by colonial standards, but it continued to lurk in commercial advertising into the 1970s. In an Eveready advertisement carried by the *World* in 1973, for instance, an African shouts “Man, hear that drum!” and smiles inanely while drumming, in an obvious reference to traditional imaginaries of the African savage.²⁶ A 1975 advertisement in the *Rhodesia Herald* shows three disembodied black male heads with rictus grins



Figure 6. “Nkhani zamu Wailesi za December” (radio listings), *Nkhani za Kum’awa* (Northern Rhodesia), December 1959, p. 11. (Source: British Library).

floating next to a Supersonic Chief in another image redolent of American black-face minstrelsy.²⁷

However, this kind of coarse stereotyping was rare and restricted to newspapers printed in colonial Northern Rhodesia or the settler states. More commonly, advertisements replicated and reinforced colonial assumptions about racial difference in more subtle ways by suggesting divergences in lifestyle between white settlers and Africans. For instance, white radio listeners were usually shown sitting down while black listeners were nearly always standing up. One reason for this was that advertisements never featured black people listening in cars, even though car radios were popular at the time

and black ownership of cars was on the rise. By contrast, around half of all advertisements aimed at white consumers showed white listeners sitting in cars. Common themes in this genre were the supposed power of radio to seduce women and its ability to calm nervous older drivers: “When motoring his nerves were chronic until he fitted ‘Supersonic’”.²⁸ Listening to the radio while driving might also be associated with older *trekboer* narratives about the settler’s triumph over nature. A lyrical Supersonic advertisement romanticised that “whether you’re driving on city highways or platteland roads, in Karoo dust or coastal rains, with snow on the berg or in the shimmering heat of the lowveld – your ... car radio will function perfectly”.²⁹ There was a recurrent association between the car radio and the wild frontier in advertisements carried by the settler press: for instance, the claim in 1964 that “Philips car radios are ideal in Central Africa” because “mountainous country, long distances, high and low altitudes, climatic and atmospheric conditions are all taken into account”.³⁰ Since white women were never shown driving, the effect was to associate whiteness with rugged settler masculinity.

Another reason why black listeners were usually depicted standing up was that advertisers rarely showed them listening to the radio in a reflective way. While black listeners were nearly always seen listening to music and often dancing, white listeners were generally sitting down and they rarely danced. The treatment of music demonstrates the ways in which racial hierarchies intersected with gender stereotypes. In the early days of advertising to black consumers, black men were sometimes shown listening to factual programmes (see [Figure 3](#) above), but after 1961 this trope disappeared altogether. Thereafter, all black listeners were implicitly grouped with white women as listeners who preferred the supposedly less intellectual pleasures of music to factual programming, which were, apparently, comprehensible only to white men. The effect was to further erode black masculinity in ways that echoed earlier colonial narratives of the “effeminacy” of blackness (Schwarz 2011; Sinha 1995).

Images of dancing Africans dominated advertisements targeted at black consumers from the start. An early example was an Eveready advertisement run repeatedly in *Zonk!* and *Drum* during 1959 and 1960 that showed a young black couple dancing and a middle-aged couple looking on and clapping.³¹ This cliché soon became an industry standard. The claim that owning a radio would give you more friends was also a regular message in black-targeted advertisements, while white listeners were usually shown in families or couples and seemed to have little interest in having friends or parties. In the early 1960s, for example, *Drum* carried a series of advertisements for Siera radios, with straplines such as “Make Music, Make Friends – with Siera”. The standard pitch was that “the man who makes with the music when friends are around is always popular – always ‘number one!’ Indoors and outdoors, Siera brings you and your friends musical fun ... at the lowest possible price”.³² Both *Drum* and *Zonk!* featured music pages and news of the latest releases, so the content of the magazines also reinforced the connection between radio and music in a contextual sense. But the association between blackness, dancing and sociability was not limited to South African cultural magazines; it was also prominent in Zambian newspapers that, unlike the magazines, were black-owned and overtly nationalist. Parties were a regular feature in advertisements carried by the government-owned *Zambia Daily Mail*, for instance, as shown in [Figure 7](#).³³

Of course, in reality many Africans did enjoy listening to music on the radio and sometimes they danced. But the dominance of this stereotype in advertisements across the

region served to associate radio with a reductive and racist vision of blackness. White listeners, meanwhile, were presented as being more thoughtful and less impulsive than black listeners. Even outside their cars, white listeners were generally shown sitting or reclining with a radio set as the focal point of a languid suburban respectability that contrasted with the frenetic physicality of scenes of black leisure. The difference in the tempo of advertisements also implied – in most cases quite accurately – that white people had more leisure time on their hands. A typical advertisement for Singer sets carried by the

Play time.



There's nothing like a party for relaxing. And there's nothing like the Philips GF 504 for a top class party. This battery and mains operated record player is ideal for every kind of celebration. Indoor or outdoor. Call in and examine our GF 504. Or any of the twenty or more models at any Philips dealer.



PHILIPS

the one with the after sales action.

Figure 7. "Play Time", *Zambia Daily Mail*, 6 September 1971, p. 7. (Source: UNZA).

Rhodesia Herald in 1972 shows a middle-aged man in a comfy chair listening intently while smoking a pipe. Elsewhere in the house a middle-aged woman listens as she busies herself with a Singer sewing machine, while in another room a young couple eye each other from a suitable distance, chaperoned by an imposing set. In this repressively bourgeois home, the young man's decision to sit on the floor seems almost risqué.³⁴ Another standard example of the style of white-targeted advertisements came from Philips in 1965. A young couple lie poolside while a middle-aged pair recline in director's chairs. All eyes are fixed on a Philips portable transistor set in the middle of the scene and contented smiles are shared all round (Figure 8).³⁵ Aside from the relaxed, luxurious setting, the advertisement was also typical for showing white listeners in leisure wear while black listeners were nearly always dressed in formal clothes, reflecting the muted sexuality of the imagined black home mentioned earlier. In white-targeted advertisements, swimming pools and beaches were popular venues for listening, but black listeners were rarely shown outside the home, echoing the reality of the "petty apartheid" measures that segregated swimming in South Africa in this period. Like the "Philips Family" advertisement, these idealised images of the settler good life appeared on both sides of the Zambezi and were as common in independent Zambia as they were in South Africa and Rhodesia.

Radio listeners were uniformly depicted as being members of the urban middle class, whether black or white, but the same could not be said for the supposed disparity in intelligence between the racialised target audiences. In general, the style of radio advertisements intended for black readers was simpler, more emotive, less textual and short on technical details. A comparison between two contemporary Southern Rhodesian advertisements illustrates the point. When Supersonic, at this point a Southern-Rhodesian-owned company, launched its new Transistor Chief in the early 1960s it used two different advertisements, one for the *Rhodesia Herald* and one for its African counterpart, *Bantu World*. For white readers of the *Herald*, the set was described as a "Shortwave or

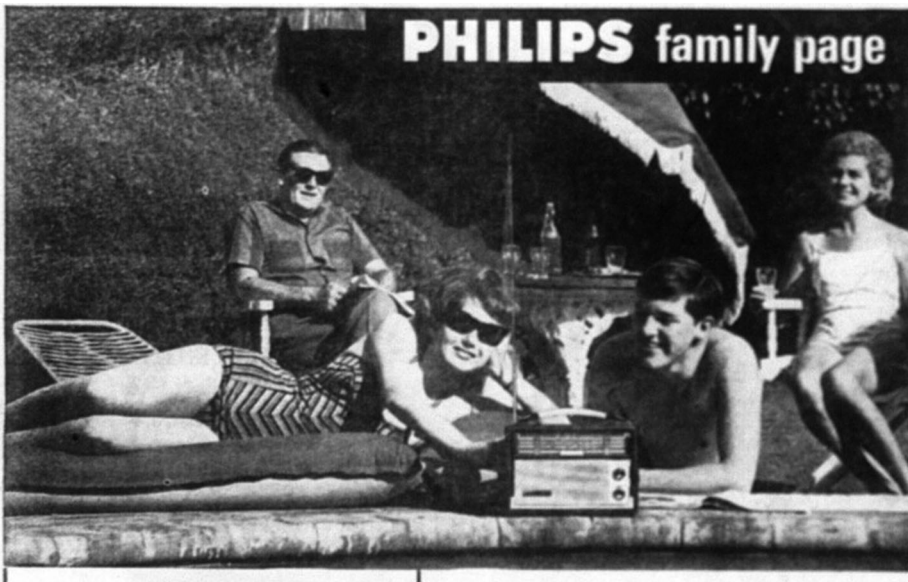


Figure 8. "Philips: The Friend of the Family", *Times of Zambia*, 29 July 1965, p. 6. (Source: UNZA).

Broadcast band receiver in preformed laminated wood cabinet with a highly polished first grade veneer”, which thanks to the “use of transistors and torch cell batteries gives low-cost listening with outstanding reception”. A stand-alone image of the set completed the advertisement.³⁶ By contrast, the Chief was advertised to the black readers of *Bantu World* in a simpler and more visual way. Under the headline of “Here’s how Supersonic Transistor Chief saves you over £4 every year”, a white schoolmaster complete with gown and mortar board points to a blackboard which explains that “old type” big batteries were expensive but new small batteries are cheap. The message is illustrated by a simple diagram showing that “each year you save £4’1’0”. A brief checklist confirms that the set is “cheaper to use; much stronger; batteries inside”. The technical description is simplified to “an attractive, up-to-the-minute cabinet, in either wood or plastic”, without mention of laminate or veneer. To reinforce the patronising, didactic tone, the advertisement concludes that “it all adds up to full marks for Supersonic”.³⁷

Conclusion

This article has explored the ways in which commercial advertising constructed a visual association between radio sets, masculinity and whiteness in Southern Africa during the boom years of the new technology. It has demonstrated that consumerism, colonialism, gender and race were mutually constitutive, not only in settler South Africa and Rhodesia, as they had been since the nineteenth century (Posel 2019), but also in postcolonial states such as Zambia, where cultural and economic continuities overshadowed the dramatic political changes brought by decolonisation. This article has also argued that a cultural history of radio requires consideration of its visual representation as well as its sonic presence. In independent Zambia, for instance, the sound of radio was unmistakably black, nationalist and liberationist (Brooke 2021), but in the pages of the national press it continued to look like a luxury item for white settlers. Market researchers and historians have found it notoriously difficult to assess the impact of specific advertisements on consumers, although Burke (1996), among others, has demonstrated that African consumers were critical and creative in their responses to advertising. An evaluation of these responses and the impact of advertising for radios lies outside the scope of the current study, but it is clear that advertisements served to perpetuate historical inequalities to frame the relationship between radio technology and society in an era when the majority of Southern Africans had never, or only recently, encountered the radio set.

The most distinctive feature of advertising for radios in Southern Africa was the coloniality of the intersection between race and gender and, specifically, the ways in which femininities and masculinities were racialised to promote a visual language of white superiority. Advertisements projected a sharper sense of difference between white men and women than their black counterparts by flattening the division between black masculinity and femininity. White men might drive fast cars, cogitate in armchairs or seduce women on the beach, while white women could be married or single, do housework or lounge next to suburban pools. They might even commodify their bodies to sell radio sets. Meanwhile, black men and women were simply shown listening to music together at home. In this way, advertisements marketed a white settler lifestyle that was imagined to be more glamorous, exciting and adult than an idealised black lifestyle that seemed more innocent, homogenous and almost-childlike by comparison. If the sound of the radio revolutionised

popular culture between the 1950s and the 1970s, the sight of the radio set in the Southern African press served, paradoxically, to reinforce its coloniality.

Notes

1. Set statistics compiled from BBC External Broadcasting Audience Research "World Radio and Television Receivers" reports (E3/1199/1 and E3/1201/1, BBC Written Archives Centre).
2. "The New Pilot Maestro", *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 April 1949, p. 13; "Blaupunkt", *Rhodesia Herald*, 20 February 1960, p. 4; "Now It Costs You Less Than Ever to Own a Radio", *Zonk!*, September 1958, p. 62.
3. "Masters of the Air", *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 March 1948, p. 9.
4. "Eveready Spacegram", *Zonk!*, August 1958, p. 55; "Out of this World", *Drum*, August 1956, p. 59.
5. "Out of this World", *Drum*, August 1956, p. 59.
6. *Ibid.*
7. "Everything Sounds Better on a Supersonic", *Rhodesia Herald*, 2 August 1967, p. 16; "PRG-83", *Zambia Daily Mail*, 27 August 1965, p. 6; "Listen", *World*, 17 January 1968, p. 5.
8. "Gosh! She Likes It", *Zambia Mail*, 6 January 1970, p. 6.
9. "I'm not kidding", *Zonk!*, June 1964, p. 34; "Gosh! She Likes It", *Zambia Mail*, 6 January 1970, p. 6.
10. "Gosh! She Likes It", *Zambia Mail*, 6 January 1970, p. 6.
11. "She's Choosy", *Times of Zambia*, 6 July 1972, p. 8.
12. "Supersonic Companion", *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 July 1954 p. 5.
13. "Marilyn Makes Perfect Company", *Rhodesia Herald*, 24 November 1966, p. 10.
14. "Philips All-Transistor 10 Band Car Radio", *Rhodesia Herald*, 1 September 1964 p. 6 and [Figure 5](#) are rare counter-examples.
15. "Tempest Introduce", *Rhodesia Herald*, 9 September 1970 p. 11.
16. "Sanyo is good company", *Zambia Daily Mail*, 15 September 1973, p. 9.
17. "Diesel Electric", *Times of Zambia*, 5 March 1971, p. 12.
18. "A Man Who Owns a Radio", *Drum*, September 1959, p. 17.
19. "Eveready Spacegram", *Drum*, August 1959, p. 15.
20. "No Man Is an Island", *Zambia Daily Mail*, 12 July 1973, p. 7.
21. "Supertone Portable", *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 March 1951, p. 6; "You Will Be Proud to Own a Transistor", *Zonk!*, January 1959, p. 38.
22. "Electra Radio", *Daily Times (Blantyre)*, 17 June 1976, p. 2.
23. For instance, "Tune in Loud and Clear", *Rhodesia Herald*, 1 March 1975, p. 4.
24. N. Mkele, "Advertising to the Bantu", *Second Advertising Convention in South Africa* (Durban 1959), p. 131, quoted in Burke (1996, 135).
25. "Nkhani zamu Wailesi za December", *Nkhani za Kum'mawa*, December 1959, p. 11. In this edition, in which the cartoon was first carried, a caption was included in Chichewa: "The Priest [Ushifwayo] says, 'Be prepared for the coming Christmas season, get your radios fixed and buy [new] batteries – you will be happy on that big day.'" I am grateful to Lisa Kwa-leyela for this translation.
26. "Get the Big Sound", *World*, 23 August 1973, p. 10.
27. "Tune in Loud and Clear", *Rhodesia Herald*, 1 March 1975, p. 4.
28. "Supersonic Car Radios", *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 February 1958, p. 5.
29. "The All-Wave Car Radio: Specially Made for South African Conditions", *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 February 1958, p. 5; 3 February 1953, p. 10.
30. "Philips All-Transistor 10 Band Car Radio", *Rhodesia Herald*, 1 September 1964, p. 6.
31. "A Man Who Owns a Radio", *Drum*, September 1959, p. 17; *Zonk!*, September 1959, p. 39.
32. "Make Music, Make Friends – with Siera", *Drum*, September 1963, p. 27.
33. "Play Time", *Zambia Daily Mail*, 6 September 1971, p. 7; for an earlier example, see also "The Greatest, the Newest, the Best", *Zambia Mail*, 24 September 1965, p. 4.

34. "Singer Sounds Super!", *Rhodesia Herald*, 11 November 1972, p. 8.
35. "Philips: The Friend of the Family", *Times of Zambia*, 29 July 1965, p. 6; *Rhodesia Herald*, 13 August 1965, p. 19.
36. "Supersonic Radio", *Rhodesia Herald*, 16 March 1960, p. 6.
37. "Here's How Supersonic Transistor Chief Saves You Over £4 Every Year", *Bantu World*, 8 April 1961, p. 4.

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