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Magazine covers: Does colour count?

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Is it true that black faces on magazine covers hinder sales? Matebello Motloutg finds out.

He may be one of the country's best rugby players, but when Bryan Habana appeared on the cover of *SA Rugby* magazine last year sales dropped by about 20 percent, according to publisher Mark Keohane.

"Naturally, it does concern you because of the commercial reality," says Keohane of Highbury Safika Media which publishes *SA Rugby* and *SA Cricket*.

"But all editors and their respective publishers have a responsibility to continue to challenge the mindset of the consumer, so that we can finally get to the point where what sells the magazine is the achievement of the player and not necessarily the colour of this individual," he says, adding that cricketer Makhaya Ntini will soon feature on the cover of *SA Cricket*.

But *Sports Illustrated* editor Steve Smith says times have changed.

"I think it has been true in the past, but not in recent years. Our cover sales are primarily influenced by how well our national cricket and rugby teams are doing," he says.

In the past year, *Sports Illustrated* (SI), with its 61 percent white readership, has had three black sportsmen on its front page - Ntini, Habana and Ricky Januarie. This was three out of the ten sports covers the magazine features every year including the two *Swimwear* and *Beauties of Sport* editions.

"But that hasn't been a conscious decision in any way. My focus as the editor of SI is primarily on cricket and rugby, and I choose our cover personalities based on their popularity, performance and newsworthiness in those sports."

Sports Illustrated issues that sold well in the past year included the March publication featuring Habana on the cover, selling better than the cover featuring Springbok captain John Smit.

"You can't tell me that rugby fans who jump out their seats every time Bryan Habana gets the ball are going to shun a sports magazine because he is on the cover," says Smith.

Consumer psychologist Mich Robb says several factors are at play here.

"If you subscribe to a magazine, you buy it regularly because you identify with it.

"(But) we live in a society where races are clearly defined. I think our society still thinks racially and there are lots of reasons why that may be the case," Robb adds.

Former *Fair Lady* editor Ann Donald believes as a white middle class woman she would not have been able to meet the needs of black readers.

"Historically, not enough was known about that market to adequately cater for them. But that is beginning to change now. I don't think it's a question of black faces not selling. The issue is whether the magazine is relevant to me.

"White women in South Africa for many years had *Fair Lady* which was aimed at them, aimed at homemakers, while black women have always had *True Love* which understands where they are coming from," says Donald.

The skin colour of celebrities is the least of a magazine's concerns, according to *Cosmopolitan* editor Vanessa Raphaely.

"Of course it has something to do with colour - hair colour, how skinny or fat the person is, the clothes they are wearing, the way the person is standing," she says.

"What I can say is that brand consistency, image broadcast, brand value to consumer and whether the person fulfils what that brand is about will work but that does not guarantee good sales every month."

She says some of the best covers *Cosmopolitan* has had in its lifetime were black, citing South African actress Hlubi Mboya as among them.

"If you think South Africa feels racist, the rest of the world is even more racist. Cosmetic companies have a big push as to who we put on the covers and this usually depends on who has the best cosmetic contract," says Raphaely.

"For example if you feature (actress) Gwyneth Paltrow on the cover, you know that Estee Lauder will be supportive and advertise in your magazine. With (actress) Sharon Stone it will be Christian Dior and (model) Liz Hurley, Estee Lauder. And cosmetic contracts are largely given to white Americans."

True Love editor Busi Mhlaba says: "The magazine cover has to be one with a pull effect, this is a combination of photography, cover personality and strong cover lines."

Leadership magazine saw its sales increase by between 10 and 15 percent for the June-July issue last year when apartheid icon Nelson Mandela featured on the cover.

Editor John Doolan says there are two faces in the world certain to sell magazines - Mandela and Princess Diana.

Fair Lady's new editor Suzy Brokensha, whose first issue in April featured Jordan's Queen Rania on the cover, says a cover personality should have broad appeal, adding that she would love to feature former *True Love* editor and television personality Khanyi Dloomo and founder of Stoned Cherrie clothing, Khensani Nkosi.

"I think the problem lies with featuring actresses on the cover. That's where the problem is, where you find many magazines with the same person on the cover just because that person just released a new movie," says Brokensha.

"The key, for me, is that the person should have something interesting to say. Colour has very little to do with it," she says.

The Oprah Winfrey magazine *O* defies Mark Keohane's notion that black cover faces do not sell.

"The magazine promotes self-awareness, is all embracing, inspirational and eternally optimistic. Readers who buy *O* Magazine support and identify with these brand values, as well as Oprah herself. Who else can we put on the magazine than the face that represents and is this brand, Ms Oprah Winfrey?" asks publisher Julia Raphaely, who is also business director at Associated Magazines.

"It's part of the entire packaging of the magazine brand. People buy into the O philosophy and the principles this brand represent."

"A magazine's cover is its ultimate selling tool. It's a mini-billboard. The best covers are those ones that communicate the essence of the brand. For example, *Cosmopolitan's* 'Fun, Fearless Female' positioning is not only reflected in the editorial, but also in the cover model and barkers on the cover," says Julia Raphaely.

Managing director of research company Media Tenor SA, Wadim Schreiner, says no publishers can draw conclusions on the issue without proper qualitative research.

"It's pure speculation that black faces don't sell magazines. Just because there's one thing happening at the same time, does not mean there's a correlation. It's more the fear of publishers of change than anything else," he says.

"If this perception is independently verified and found to be true, it's a scary thought though," Schreiner adds.

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