

STICKERNOMICS - Stuart Fuller answers the big question of our time: how many packs of Panini stickers do you need to fill an album?

Theballisround.co.uk

The problem with brilliant ideas is that – unless you are the cleverest person in the world – someone else will almost certainly have done it before you did. Of course you can argue that it was your idea first and hope they back down, but when the “person” in question is one of the world’s most respected magazines you are onto a loser.

So whilst The Economist may claim to have published their research into the craze of football stickers first, mine was researched and written out of love, and an understanding of a cult that is sweeping the nation – Paninitis.

I’m a huge fan of the work of Dunbar and Levitt with Freakonomics, Erik Qualman and his Socionomics and, of course, Kuper and Szymanski with Soccernomics. But Stickernomics has got thousands of grown men reliving their youths.

Panini’s sticker business doesn’t rely purely on major football championships. At any time, there must be at least a couple of collections going on, whether it be a film tie-in, the latest boy band or the annual Premier League albums. But every two years comes the main event. Whether it be a European Championships year or a World Cup one, the footballing world goes crazy for small oblong stickers.

Never have Panini stickers been so popular. The reason? It’s a generational thing. I’m of an age where the tradition of spending my pocket money on packets of stickers, then taking my swaps into the playground is one of my enduring childhood memories. As we’ve grown up, we’ve still hung onto that feeling, trying to actively encourage our kids to take up the habit, reliving our schooldays through them. And if they have no interest? Then we simply pretend we are collecting for them. They will thank me one day when they are worth a fortune, we tell ourselves.

Scientific research

So my idea. I wanted to try and understand some of the myths behind collecting the stickers. Is there actually a “golden sticker”, one that nobody had? Was there a regional/international bias? Did it make any difference if you bought in bulk or individual packets? And what impact had social media had on collecting?

Ambitious? Possibly. Will anyone care? Probably not. Would I end up filling up my sticker book any quicker? I very much doubt it. So what do those clever chaps at The Economist say?

According to Sylvain Sardy and Yvan Velenik, two boffins at the University of Geneva, you would have to buy 899 consecutive packets to beat the odds and fill your album – an outlay of £449.50, based on a very complex algorithm looking at the simple probability that in every pack you get five different stickers, with 640 to collect, and diminishing returns for every packet you open.

The Economist wasn’t the only section of the media that was trying to understand the real numbers behind the stickers. In an interview with The Independent this week, Matthew Scroggs, who works at a secondary school in West London, worked out that the average football fan should expect to

purchase 4,505 stickers, or spend £413.24, to complete the whole book. Doesn't sound so much fun when you put it like that, does it?

The one question that has always been asked is "does it make a difference where I buy my stickers?" That was to be the basis of my study. Whilst Panini say there are equal numbers of each sticker printed and randomly distributed in a pack, the fact I currently have nine Kolo Toures would suggest otherwise. But those big brained Swiss mathematicians carried out a sample test back during the 2010 World Cup and found that they got each sticker on average nine times out of a sample of 6,000 stickers, so maybe my glut of Toures isn't that unusual.

I started off by buying 10 packs from different locations. Never the same shop twice. Even when I was travelling around Europe I managed to find shops that sold the stickers; Zürich, Stockholm, Boston, Hong Kong. The latter took a bit of research, but a superb concierge in my hotel tracked down a secret stash.

As any researcher will tell you, one data set can be made to prove anything. So to get a different view point I bought a box of 100 packets, sealed at the factory. Well, that's what it said on eBay, although I was mindful of the 300,000 packets that were stolen from a warehouse in Rio in April. The box cost me £37.99, a 28% discount on buying them retail, which raised a flag or two in my mind. The methodology was the same, opening 10 packs a day and recording the results.

So what did my experiment tell me? Well, I am still 50 or so stickers shy of completing the set with a swap list that is greater than my 'got' list and so far the 'hobby' has cost me (including the Current Mrs Fuller, as I gave her housekeeping to buy the random packs for me) around £275, which is significantly less the average amount Scroggs, Sardy and Velenik suggest.

Was there any geographical bias in the uniqueness of my stickers? There didn't appear to be. The concept of buying a full box of 100 was marginally less successful than buying 10 packets in 10 different locations, but my findings aren't exactly statistically significant. The nearest I get to being an Economist is when I bought an online subscription to the magazine.

Of course, I'm investing for my daughters' future rather than some kind of personal football obsession. After all, one day the completed book will be a collector's item. And, of course, it's all about pure statistical research. That's what I tell everyone who questions why someone of my age is collecting stickers.