

No Time to Die—Literally: Risk, Fandom, and Theatergoing during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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By Tyler Johnson and Lisa Funnell

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 impacted moviegoing and fandom in profound ways. Such concerns were especially acute for properties delayed by the pandemic, like the 25th James Bond film, *No Time to Die*. Original survey research shows that willingness to see the film opening weekend without social distancing was significantly lower amongst Bond fans who still perceived COVID to be a crisis. Interest in returning to the theater in general was also impacted by such assessments of the pandemic.

Keywords: risk, fandom, COVID-19, James Bond

Sin tiempo para morir, literalmente: Riesgo, fanatismo y teatro durante la pandemia de COVID-19

RESUMEN

El COVID-19 afectó profundamente al cinéfilo y al fanatismo. Tales preocupaciones fueron especialmente agudas para las propiedades retrasadas por la pandemia, como la película número 25 de James Bond, *No Time to Die*. La investigación original de la encuesta muestra que la disposición a ver la película el fin de semana de estreno sin distanciamiento social fue significativamente menor entre los fanáticos de Bond que todavía percibían que COVID era una crisis. El interés en

volver al teatro en general también se vio afectado por tales evaluaciones de la pandemia.

Palabras clave: riesgo, fanatismo, COVID-19, James Bond

无暇赴死，真的：
2019冠状病毒病大流行期间的风险、
影迷和看电影

摘要：2019冠状病毒病（COVID-19）对电影观看和影迷造成了严重影响。对于因大流行而推迟放映的电影，例如第25部詹姆斯·邦德电影《无暇赴死》，这种担忧尤为严重。原始调查研究表明，对那些仍然认为COVID是一场危机的邦德粉丝而言，在不保持社交距离的情况下观看首映周末电影的意愿显著更低。对大流行的这类评估也影响了重返剧院的兴趣。

关键词：风险，影迷，2019冠状病毒病，詹姆斯·邦德

The economic impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic has been and continues to be far-reaching. One of the sectors hardest hit during this crisis has been entertainment, an industry in which producers of film, television, music, stage, and sporting content had to gauge how best to adapt their work in response to an evolving marketplace in which positive cases, hospitalizations, and deaths ebbed and flowed while the public's willingness to risk leaving their homes and commune with others was ever-changing. At some points, this meant rethinking how content could be created and de-

livered to cater to a society that, as a by-product of taking the pandemic seriously and following governmental guidelines (for the most part), was seemingly more content to stream popular culture through personal devices than ever before. At others, it meant pressing pause on production and release until a point at which societal situations reached normalcy (or whatever that meant in a COVID-impacted world). As a result, at many moments across 2020 and 2021, the public had to wait longer than expected for sporting teams to resume play, musicians to retake the stage, and film franchises to hit the screen.

No Time to Die, the 25th James Bond film from Eon Productions, is one such example of content whose path to the market was altered by COVID. Originally scheduled for release in April 2020, *No Time to Die's* debut was delayed on multiple occasions as the pandemic progressed, first to November 2020, then April 2021, and finally October 2021 when it premiered in the United States. As the moviegoing public (and Bond fans specifically in this instance) were forced to be patient, one might wonder how the presence of COVID affected their eagerness to return to the theater for major cinematic events in what we might consider traditional fashion: opening weekend without precautions. Such a question fits into the broader debate over whether assessments of risk shaped how public the public was willing to be in social spaces (not only to consume movies, concerts, theater, and live sports, but also beyond entertainment) at different stages of the global pandemic.

Public opinion research can offer greater insight into the dynamics underlying behaviors related to risk, fandom, and theatergoing during the COVID pandemic. In May 2021, an original survey was conducted that asked respondents to

discuss their past and future moviegoing habits, their assessments of the state of COVID-19 at the time, their fandom of the Bond franchise, and their interest in seeing *No Time to Die* in theaters (and under what conditions) upon its release. Results show that while fandom predicted interest in seeing the film in the traditional fashion one might expect for fans (opening weekend without precautions in place), willingness to do so without the implementation of social distancing policies was significantly lower amongst those fans who still perceived COVID to be a crisis. Additionally, this perception of crisis drove the belief that one was less likely to return to the theater in general in the near future if such COVID-related restrictions were not in effect. These findings have clear implications for the relationship between risk, fandom, and participation in society and popular culture phenomena during tumultuous times.

CONSUMERS, RISK, AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Across all forms of commerce and all points in time, actions taken by consumers, be those actions seemingly mundane or obviously momentous, involve some sort of risk. Individuals have choices to make in the marketplace, and they want to make the right ones. However, they often approach these choices fearing that the decision they make could subsequently prove to be problematic (Taylor 55). As Bauer described in his seminal 1960 work "Consumer Behavior as Risk Taking," uncertain consequences await the consumer faced with a decision, and some of those consequences could be unpleasant (14). However, not every person approaches making decisions in the same way. Some are more self-confident than others, some are more anxious than others, and as a result some are more prone to feeling discomfort with staring down choices than others (Taylor 56).

Scholars depict these differences in how we assess dilemmas as consumers in terms of what has come to be called risk aversion. One individual may respond to a specific risk in completely different ways than another, even if the risk is the same for both (Outreville 159). It is also quite possible that the aforementioned self-confidence or anxiety or discomfort could vary based on the nuances of the decision just as much as they do the person making it. With outcomes only knowable in the future, consumers unsurprisingly search for ways to reduce their risk or delay making choices (Taylor 54). They might attempt to become as educated as they can on the decision at hand. They might try, as best as possible, to assess future positives and negatives, the gains and losses that could result from one option or another, before coming to a final conclusion. They also might wait until conditions become clearer before making a choice or decide that not making a choice is a more satisfying outcome than potentially making the wrong one.

This decision-making calculus might also be affected by a myriad of other factors, some of which are beyond the consumer's control. As Sheth describes, a consumer's social context (e.g., marriage, children, moving), evolving technology, and locally specific rules and regulations can shape behavior (280). A fourth influence on perceptions of risk is the onset of disaster (Cameron and Shah 484; Sheth 280). The COVID-19 global pandemic undoubtedly qualifies as a disaster, and its effects since early 2020 on individual, group, and corporate behavior across multiple spaces, consumer and otherwise, cannot be denied. In terms of consumerism, COVID immediately and lastingly altered what decisions were even available to the public: what one could buy (be that products on a shelf or experiences that entertain), when and where one could buy it, and what it might cost in terms of

money or peace of mind. It also forced many to think about risk aversion through a new lens, determining if this brand new, unknown, and constantly evolving threat was enough to force one to rethink their way of life, or if previous processes and patterns on how to live would hold firm.

One type of reaction that made itself clear in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic was individual cooperation or compliance with measures intended to prevent the spread of the virus. Such reactions were not uniform throughout the public though (Keinan et al. 21). Some members of the public readily followed guidelines handed down by government officials, while others hesitated or even revolted. Research quickly chronicled which types of people opted for which path. Perceptions of the current and upcoming state of the pandemic predicted willingness to follow restrictions (Briscese et al.). Those in the public fearing the worst were suddenly on board with many preventative measures, but others who did not feel this emotion resisted (Harper et al. 1875). Similar dynamics can be seen when it comes to an individual's level of anxiety regarding COVID (Solomou and Constantinidou 1). Negativity and the extent to which someone felt a sense of duty also separated the compliant from the noncompliant (Zajenkowski et al.), as did demographic predictors like gender (Griffith et al. 3). These findings in the specific arena of COVID across 2020 and 2021 paralleled the broader findings on risk aversion that scholars had been quantifying for generations. Various aspects of an individual's personality type mattered. So too did the informational environment in which an individual existed, as that environment shaped how an individual assessed past, present, and future conditions, regardless of accuracy. The challenge of the pandemic may have been new, but many of the broader patterns regarding risk aversion remained valid.

In addition to impacting public behavior, COVID also reshaped the bottom line for countless industries, one of which was entertainment. Estimates one year into the pandemic had COVID-related costs to the bottom line in the tens of billions, as both demand and supply had to be recalculated amidst a changing society (Adgate). Entertainment businesses whose product depended on physical locations and synchronous presentation of content were hardest hit, while those with the flexibility to provide services online benefited (Ryu and Cho 592). Given these parameters, it is no surprise that venues like movie theaters and concert halls struggled greatly as demand dissipated almost immediately and struggled to return (Ryu and Cho 592); producers of content, cognizant of this slow and shifting demand, had to simultaneously anticipate when COVID would subside and when individuals would be willing to return to congregating together. Estimating either of these, let alone both, proved to be an almost impossible proposition. As a result, the return of many forms of entertainment across the first year or two of the pandemic could best be described as fluid. With great regularity, the return of events like individual concert tours and film premieres were announced and then delayed, be that to a specific future date or indefinitely. At times, entertainment returned after delays, but in a slightly different form than originally planned; for example, many soccer leagues across the globe returned to play after a few months of a COVID-related break but did so in front of empty stadiums. In some circumstances, sponsors of annual events (such as the Wimbledon tennis tournament or golf's The Open Championship) chose to cancel and return a year later rather than deal with the constant uncertainty inherent to the pandemic.

The presence of COVID, however, did not necessarily entail that consumer behavior would be forever changed. Accord-

ing to Pantano et al., risk assessments during the pandemic are not guaranteed to shape how individuals act once the world fully reopens; in their study, consumers expressed a willingness to act how they did before COVID, especially when said opportunities involve some sort of escapism (65). Similarly, consumers can be expected to return to social situations where an in-person experience had value over variations in a digital space prior to the onset of the pandemic (Ryu and Cho 594). One group of individuals who might be expected to pursue escapism as well as value an in-person experience similar to the one they had pre-COVID over a digital one is fans.

FANDOM AMIDST A PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR BOND

Fans are not necessarily just followers or individuals who express interest (Moorhouse 17-23; Tulloch and Jenkins 23). As Linden and Linden add, “fans are consumers” (38). The COVID-19 pandemic put fans in a position to consume in ways that did not resemble what they were used to in the past, closing in-person opportunities for the most part and pushing them into online spaces to try and satisfy their desire for content. Given a lack of options, such isolation could have created ideal conditions for this fandom to intensify further (Andrews 902). At the same time, brands producing content had to consider whether they could recreate or maintain the sense of community and belonging they had fostered amongst fans in the weeks, months, and years before COVID spread (Mastromartino et al. 1711). Such efforts were especially complicated in fan spaces where highly anticipated content scheduled for release in 2020 or 2021 was delayed by the unceasing and ever-changing nature of the pandemic. One such dynamic existed amongst fans of

the James Bond film franchise, who had been expecting the 25th Bond film, *No Time to Die*, to premiere worldwide in April of 2020.

“Bond fandom” is an umbrella term that could capture any self-identified fan of the James Bond franchise, but membership, as it were, is often associated with individuals who enjoy watching the film series, and doing so across multiple eras of the six men who have played the role of Bond in Eon productions: Sean Connery (1962-71), George Lazenby (1969), Roger Moore (1973-85), Timothy Dalton (1987-89), Pierce Brosnan (1995-2002), and Daniel Craig (2006-21). While the James Bond novels and short stories written by Ian Fleming between 1954 and 1966 were consumed by a modest-sized audience in the UK and U.S. upon release, the franchise became a popular culture phenomenon in the 1960s when they were adapted into spy-action films starring Connery (Chapman 15). Beginning with *Dr. No*, the Bond films were increasingly exhibited on cinema screens around the world and quickly inspired a global fan base for the British secret agent equipped with a ‘00’ license to kill (Chapman 56). Between 1962 and 2015, the franchise spawned a successful string of 24 “must see” blockbusters whose releases became popular culture events in and of themselves. These releases, especially in modern times, often came with strong opening weekend box office numbers as both fans of the franchise and casual moviegoers alike flocked to see 007 in action (“Box Office History”).

Bond film fandom is transnational, given the global popularity of the series, but also multi-generational, given that the 25 films by Eon Productions were released across a 59-year period. This accounts for a wide range in preferences across Bond fans for actors, films, and eras, and contributes to fan

engagements surrounding the “best” and “worst” aspects of the film series. Bond fandom also encompasses those who enjoy the James Bond novels and short stories written by Fleming (1953-66), the James Bond continuation novels written by authors after Fleming, licensed comics and video games, and the *James Bond Jr.* (1991-92) cartoon series, among other official texts.

Additionally, Bond fandom not only includes the consumption of content and one’s preferences and tastes regarding it, but also can capture the ways through which some engage with said culture beyond viewing or reading. This might mean, but is not limited to: publicly expressing “love” for the series; collecting merchandise/memorabilia; learning about the history of the texts and their production; repeated engagement with texts; emulation of style, actions, and dialogue; traveling to shooting destinations (i.e., Bond tourism); development of fan culture such as art, short stories, graphic novels, podcasts, and videos; and/or social media engagement. As Claire Hines notes, “new media technologies have enabled new forms of interaction, circulation and creative expressions and appropriation that directly impact on both Bond fan culture and aspects of the existing Bond mythos” (Hines 5).

Fandom played a critical role in shaping the discourse surrounding the production and eventual release of the *No Time to Die*, the 25th film in the series. There was popular (both media and fan-driven) discussion surrounding delays in production of Bond 25 well before COVID, often focused on the cycling in (e.g., Phoebe Waller-Bridge as scriptwriter) and out (e.g., Danny Boyle as director) of creative filmmaking personnel (Haynes). Additionally, there was speculation as to how casting and characterization would provide con-

tinuity (e.g., Daniel Craig returning for his last installment) and change (e.g., Lashana Lynch playing an agent with the code 007) throughout the latest entry into the canon (Collis; Funnell; Harmon). Finally, following Craig's revelation that Bond 25 would be his swan song in the lead role, there was extensive debate as to who should replace him, whether it was time for the character to evolve, what such evolution might look like, and whether there was space for a James Bond that was in any way different from what the public expected (Bruney; Charles; Johnson and Funnell 251; Mackelden; Sippell). While these conversations ranged from supportive to combative, they fueled consistent mainstream and social media engagement for fans as they awaited a long-anticipated release slated for April of 2020.

However, the element that had the greatest impact on fan discourse leading up to the eventual release of *No Time to Die* was the global pandemic. While the film was delayed twice pre-COVID due to production issues, it was the first major film to alter its release strategy due to the onset of the pandemic, with producers deciding in early March of 2020 to shift the release to November of that year (Whitten). This sudden cancellation of the premiere due to health and safety issues emerging from the global spread of COVID was met with a range of reactions, many positive but some negative. Even before producers made their decision to postpone, prominent fan sites like MI6-HQ suggested that public health should be top priority and that the public could wait a bit longer for 007's return (Murphy). This open letter was well received in the press (who promoted the "safety first" position widely), but a few in the public directed anger toward the contributors, sending hate mail and even death threats in response to this proactive stance (Page, "0043: Social Distancing"). Unsurprisingly, some fans were merely disappointed by yet

another delay in the film's release, while others who had planned to attend the premiere in London and other cities had to request refunds for their tickets (Milan).

One byproduct of the 19-month delay in the film's release was a strengthening of Bond fandom for some, which was facilitated in part by social media. During this time of crisis, people not only binge watched new tv shows as they isolated/quarantined at home (Horeck 35; Sigre-Leirós et al. 2), but also often consumed their favorite media texts (such as Bond films) as a coping mechanism, a cultural "comfort food" so to speak (Bradshaw). This period saw the rise of new Bond influencers leading Bond watch parties on Twitter, holding Zoom events for fans to connect, producing and sharing videos, and starting up podcasts, the latter of which proliferated the most during this time. Nostalgia for the series, in the era of COVID, helped to deepen fan connection and resulted in an increased appetite for any/all things Bond 25, including new promotional materials, the release of the new Bond song, and any drop of information being slowly released from the franchise's producers (e.g., Page, "0088: Lock Down A-Z"). Much of the positive energy surrounding Bond during this time was bound to a sense of hopefulness that the release of the Bond film would constitute a return to normality—that COVID would end soon, and the public could go back to the way things were, with going to the movies being a part of that.

Amidst this groundswell of fan fervor, the lodestar for those who loved Bond and the interactions they had in virtual spaces remained *No Time to Die*, the release of which remained continuously impacted by different waves of COVID and levels of infection that fluctuated around the world. What was promised for April 2020 became November 2020 and

April 2021, and with each passing delay fans were forced to adapt to an uncertain how and when of a global release for the film. This also resulted in uncertainty for producers and industry insiders as to whether the lure of the latest Bond film was enough to draw fans back to the theater, at what point, and under what conditions. It is this uncertainty that public opinion research can offer greater insight into.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

To examine how risk assessments during COVID-19, ideology, and fandom shaped projected willingness to see films (and, more specifically, *No Time to Die*) in the theater, an original survey was conducted.¹ 2,067 American individuals participated via Lucid from May 21-22, 2021.² This time frame captured the lowest point in positive COVID cases and deaths in nearly a year, as well as a moment at which just over half the population had received at least one dose of a vaccine (“Coronavirus: United States”; “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations”).³

After consenting to take part in the survey, respondents were asked about the frequency with which they saw movies in a theater before the COVID-19 pandemic. 25% were not theatergoers at all, 32% saw 1-3 movies in the theater per year, another 20% saw 4-6, and the remaining 23% saw 7 or more. The sample was then given a list of film franchises and the opportunity to characterize their fandom of these series on a 2-point scale, declaring whether they were or were not a fan.

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- 1 Survey questions used in statistical models in this manuscript can be found in the Appendix.
 - 2 Lucid samples approximate being nationally representative in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, and region.
 - 3 The implications of the timing of this survey are discussed later in this manuscript.

This self-identification approach offers insight into how the public sees themselves, eliminating any gatekeeping around fandom of the franchises of interest. One of these franchises asked about was the James Bond film franchise; of the 2,067 participants, just over half (1,134, or 55%) stated they were a fan of Bond.⁴

Respondents proceeded to answer a series of questions related to the then-upcoming October 2021 release of *No Time to Die* and their general willingness to set foot in a movie theater in the near future. One of these questions asked about the situation in which they were likely to see *No Time to Die*, with response categories capturing if, where, when, and under what COVID-related protocols like social distancing. At one end of the scale, 30% of the sample had no plans to see the film, and another 36% said they were most likely to see it at home via cable television or a streaming service following its time in the theater. At the other end of the scale, 10% were likely to see it opening weekend, with slightly less than half of those individuals stating they would see it then even without social distancing measures in place. Participants were asked to consider their interest in seeing any movie in a theater in the next few months if social distancing measures were not in place. On a scale from 0 to 10, nearly half of respondents were between 0-3 when it comes to such interest. Just under 12% placed themselves at a 10 in this scale.

4 These are not used as variables in the forthcoming statistical models, but other survey questions asked to respondents determined that 49% saw themselves as “interested” or “highly interested” in the Bond franchise (with 26% “disinterested” or “highly disinterested”), while 15% had never seen a Bond film, 30% had seen 1-3, 23% had seen 4-6, 11% had seen 7-9, and 20% had seen 10 or more of the 24 films. These measures are all positively correlated at moderate levels (between .51 and .64) with the “self-identification” fandom measure used in the models.

Following the completion of this set of questions on movie-going, the survey experience closed with a battery of demographic, political, and social questions. This offers a bit more insight into just exactly who makes up the survey sample. In terms of demographics, 23% were between the ages of 18 and 29, while another 16% were 65 or older. 69% selected “White” as their sole racial or ethnic identity. 48% identified as male. 35% had a bachelor’s degree or higher. 88% did not identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. 47% made less than \$40,000 a year. 35% described the place where they lived as urban, while 22% chose rural. In terms of politics and society, 34% were liberal, 34% moderate, and 33% conservative, while 41% identified as Democrats, 31% as independents, and 28% as Republicans. 34% got news on a daily basis from newspapers, television, the internet, or podcasts, while 40% did the same via social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Finally, and most central to the research questions explored here, 44% thought at that time that the coronavirus pandemic was a crisis, 47% thought it was a problem but not a crisis, and 9 percent felt it was not a problem at all.

FINDINGS

An initial set of analyses examines the effects of COVID (as well as other demographic, political, and social predictors) on individual interest in going to the theater without social distancing in place in the next few months. The dependent variable here ranges from 0-10; given that this measure has a limited set of categories with a clear order to it, this model uses ordered logit regression. Alternate specifications relying on ordinary least squares (OLS) regression show no differences in terms of sign or significance. Results can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Effect of COVID on theatergoing “in the next few months”

<u>Interest in going without social distancing</u>		
COVID a crisis?	-0.51*	(0.06)
Theatergoing History	0.32*	(0.03)
Age	-0.02*	(0.00)
Race (White=1)	-0.03	(0.09)
Sexuality (Straight=1)	0.27*	(0.12)
Sex (Male=1)	0.25*	(0.08)
Education	0.01	(0.02)
Area	-0.09	(0.06)
Income	0.02	(0.03)
Party Identification	0.06	(0.06)
Ideology	0.06*	(0.03)
Social Media News	0.06*	(0.02)
<u>Mainstream Media News</u>	<u>-0.07*</u>	<u>(0.02)</u>

Ordered logit model. N=2,063. * = p < .05. Pseudo R-squared = .04.

As is evident from the first row of this table, there is a strong relationship between attitudes on whether COVID is a crisis and interest in going to the theater in the next few months without social distancing. This relationship is also in the expected direction, with those who perceive COVID as a crisis less interested in social distancing-free theatergoing in the near future. As ordered logit coefficients are not directly interpretable beyond sign and significance, one can analyze their meaning by considering them in terms of predicted probabilities. The probability of an individual who believes COVID is a crisis being a 10 out of 10 on the idea of interest in returning to the theater in the next few months without social distancing is only 7%; this rises to 11% if they see COVID as a problem but not a crisis, and 17% if they feel COVID is not a problem at all.⁵ The probability of an individual who believes COVID is a crisis being a 0 out of 10 on the idea of interest in returning to the theater in the next few months without social distancing is 27%; this falls to 18% if they see COVID as a problem but not a crisis, and 12% if they feel COVID is not a problem at all. These results fit with work from early in the pandemic that showed how individual assessments of the state of the pandemic predicted how seriously one took restrictions on activity. Unsurprisingly though, individuals who had a history of seeing films in the theater before the pandemic are more likely to report an interest in returning soon without social distancing. Respondents who saw 13 or more movies per year in the theater pre-pandemic had a 27% probability of being at a 10 out

5 Predicted probabilities throughout this section are derived using the Margins function in STATA; all other variables are set at their means. Previous work (e.g., Funnell and Johnson 111; Johnson and Funnell 251) does show that knowledge of the Bond franchise and number of Bond films seen are inconsistent predictors of attitudes toward the franchise itself.

of 10 on the idea of returning to the theater in the next few months without social distancing, while those who only saw 1-3 per year were at 8% probability.

There is also clear evidence (via significance and sign) that demographics and information gathering predict who is more or less likely to be interested in returning to the movie theater in the next few months without social distancing in place. Males are more likely to be interested in doing so than females (which is expected given literature cited earlier), and gay, lesbian, or bisexual participants are less likely than those who identify as straight. Older individuals were less likely to be interested in doing so than younger ones. Conservatives were more likely to be interested than liberals, which aligns with the broader politics of COVID restrictions. Fascinatingly, the more regularly an individual relies on social media for news, the more likely they are to express interest in returning to the theater in the near future without distancing, but the same cannot be said for those who rely on newspapers, television, the internet, or podcasts. The more regularly an individual consumed news these ways, the less likely they were to report being interested in returning to moviegoing without distancing in the next few months. Such findings may offer insight into what is being learned where.

Given this base level of knowledge about habits, how might fandom of a specific film franchise with an upcoming release scheduled shape one's specific plans to consume new franchise content? In Table 2, several more independent variables are added to the set from the previous model: whether or not a respondent reported being a fan of James Bond, and an interaction term between this variable and whether an individual felt COVID was a crisis, a problem but not a crisis, or not a problem at all. This interaction will determine

Table 2: Effect of fandom and COVID assessment on seeing *No Time to Die*

Opening weekend with no social distancing

Bond Fan?	2.53*	(0.34)
COVID a crisis?	0.11	(0.11)
Fan*Crisis	-0.27*	(0.14)
Theatergoing History	0.34*	(0.03)
Age	-0.02*	(0.00)
Race (White=1)	-0.14	(0.10)
Sexuality (Straight=1)	-0.01	(0.13)
Sex (Male=1)	0.38*	(0.09)
Education	0.08*	(0.03)
Area	0.00	(0.04)
Income	-0.00	(0.03)
Party Identification	-0.07	(0.06)
Ideology	0.01	(0.03)
Social Media News	0.01	(0.02)
<u>Mainstream Media News</u>	<u>0.04</u>	<u>(0.02)</u>

Ordered logit model. N=2,063. * = p < .05. Pseudo R-squared = 0.13.

whether Bond fans who see COVID as a crisis differ in their outlook on when and how to see *No Time to Die* from those who see it as a problem or not a problem at all. The dependent variable here captures plans (or lack thereof) to see *No Time to Die* on a 6-point scale, ranging from “I do not plan to see this film” to “in the theater opening weekend, even if no social distancing measures are taken.” Since this variable has distinct categories that progress in a direction, once again ordered logit modeling is utilized to tease out statistical relationships.

Unsurprisingly, Bond fandom is a powerful and positive predictor of who was likely to see *No Time to Die* opening weekend no matter what interventions might not be undertaken by a theater in the midst of a pandemic. Predicted probabilities reveal that self-identified Bond fans were over 11 times more likely than those who did not identify as fans to say they would see *No Time to Die* opening weekend even if no social distancing measures were taken. Interestingly though, this relationship is reversed when the fandom variable is interacted with the variable considering whether a respondent felt COVID was a crisis. The effect here is negative and significant, illustrating how perceptions of the state of the pandemic conditioned the desire of fans to see the film as soon as possible no matter the precautions. Bond fans who thought COVID was a crisis were less likely to believe they would be in the theater opening weekend even without social distancing than fans who thought COVID was a problem but not a crisis or fans who thought COVID was no problem at all. In terms of predicted probabilities, Bond fans who thought COVID was a crisis were 1.7 times less likely to see the film in the theater opening weekend even if no social distancing measures were in place than Bond fans who thought COVID was no problem at all.

There are some similarities in terms of significance between Tables 1 and 2 when it comes to demographics as well. Older individuals were less likely than younger ones to believe they would see *No Time to Die* opening weekend even without social distancing. The same goes for females. Other predictors of behavior on this question included pre-COVID moviegoing habits and education, with regular theatergoers and the highly educated more likely to see the film early and no matter the conditions than those who saw films in person less frequently and the less educated. Unlike in Table 1, sexuality, political ideology, and media consumption habits had no relationship with plans to see the latest James Bond film.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings here illustrate, in general fashion, the ways in which the COVID pandemic and assessments of its severity played a role in shaping the public's plans to return to public spaces like the movie theater. Individuals who perceived the pandemic to be a crisis were less likely to see themselves going to the movies in the near future without social distancing precautions taken than those who only saw it as a problem or did not see it as a problem at all. These findings offer further evidence, this time in relation to the entertainment sector, that an individual's perception of the current state of COVID was key in predicting their willingness to take on risk. When one looks more specifically at the James Bond film franchise, its fandom, and an upcoming and highly anticipated event (i.e., the release of *No Time to Die* in theaters) for those taking this survey in May of 2021, one discovers COVID's ability to condition the behavior of individuals who we would assume to be clamoring to see the film at the earliest availability under circumstances that resembled pre-pandemic moviegoing. Fandom in general predicted a higher likelihood of see-

ing the film opening weekend even without social distancing in place; however, fans who still believed COVID was a crisis were less likely to see themselves as rushing into the local cinema without social distancing measures in the first few days the movie had opened.

The fact that fandom can be overcome by aversion to risk has implications for the entertainment industry across future crises or disasters. Fans cannot necessarily be counted on to show up at points where they perceive risk to be present. What is less clear (and unable to be answered by this survey) is whether COVID-19 is unique in its power to have such effects, or if other types of disasters would reshape fandom in such fashion. Perhaps future experimental research could test situations that might cause passionate supporters of specific film franchises, sporting teams, or musicians to think twice about attending a live event versus finding an alternate path to consume such content. It is also difficult to determine how the timing of the survey shaped outcomes and whether the findings would shift in any noticeable fashion if it had been conducted six months earlier (before the vaccine became ubiquitous) or six months later (when the Delta variant of COVID had come to dominate and the Omicron variant was about to take root). In some ways, the fact that there were relationships between assessments of COVID, fandom, and projected moviegoing behavior at a low point of severity during the pandemic suggests that such effects might be even more powerful at points where public panic was more pronounced. This cannot be known for certain, however, and barring new waves of the pandemic (or different future pandemics) it cannot be tested. As such, it is left for speculation. Finally, it is possible that choices made regarding how to measure fandom might shape what can be taken away from the findings presented here. The statistical models in this re-

search use the most inclusive measure of fandom possible: self-identification. Perhaps far more restrictive measures (e.g., having reached a specific high threshold in terms of number of films seen, individual propensity to take part in franchise-related activities outside of seeing the films, or the ability to exhibit knowledge of Bond facts) would spur similar or different findings. One could envision that a more restrictive measure of who was a fan could have greater predictive power as to who would see *No Time to Die* in traditional fashion, but weaker predictive power when interacted with assessments of COVID. The responses to such hypothetical questions remain unknown (but provide potential fodder for future survey research on fandom).⁶

Where there is no need for speculation, however, is when it comes to the fate *No Time to Die* met at the box office in the fall and winter of 2021. As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, there was plenty of talk in the media about how the film industry was being impacted, with many cinemas and theater chains closing, film releases being pushed back, and even the fear that cinema, as we know it, might die. These concerns were matched with the promotion of the idea that Bond could save cinema just like the character in the film saves the world from imminent destruction (Nelson). As noted by Erik David, managing editor of Fandango.com, James Bond is “one of the biggest global properties that exists right now in the theatrical space” and had the greatest chance of being a blockbuster hit of all films delayed by COVID (Gilblom).

But for Bond to save cinema, it would require the average person to brave the risks of COVID to view the film in the

6 Previous work (e.g. Funnell and Johnson 111; Johnson and Funnell 251) does show that knowledge of the Bond franchise and number of Bond films seen are inconsistent predictors of attitudes toward the franchise itself.

theater, as *No Time to Die* had an exclusive theatrical release; this strategy set the film apart from other anticipated blockbusters like *Wonder Woman 1984* and *Black Widow*, which had streaming or hybrid (simultaneous theater/streaming) options (Gilblom). This theater-only option was not only true to the Bond brand but also a reflection of the financial toll that delays had taken on the production company MGM, which accrued a significant amount of debt over time (Fuge). As a result, the rhetoric surrounding Bond saving cinema was less about the industry and more about the profitability of a particular company and relied strongly on the willingness of fans and filmgoers to be like Bond and take calculated risks to see *No Time to Die* in public.

The film earned over \$770 million USD at the worldwide box-office and was the third highest grossing Bond film of the Daniel Craig era, with 2012's *Skyfall* earning over \$1 billion USD and 2015's *Spectre* making \$880 million USD ("Box Office History"). *No Time to Die* was also one of the top grossing films of 2021 until the release of *Spiderman: No Way Home* surpassed it, earning over \$1.8 billion USD globally ("2021 Worldwide Box Office"). However, opening weekend box office numbers in the United States were "slightly behind projections," with the film making \$56 million USD, about 5-15 million less than industry insiders anticipated (Rubin). Moreover, the film needed to earn \$900 million USD in order to break even, a feat that according to *Variety*, "would have been realistic had a global health crisis not upended the theater industry" resulting in reluctance on the part of adult audiences, who constitute the target market for *No Time to Die*, to return to the cinema (Rubin and Lang). As a result, the film was strategically released for digital rental on November 9—only one month after the US theatrical release—and was available on Blu-ray and DVD on December 20 just

in time for Christmas 2021. This was a way for producers to quickly maximize profits during the pandemic by opening at-home options to those who were reluctant to see the film in theaters. In the end, it appears that while the prospect of seeing James Bond's latest adventure as immediately as possible scared the living daylight out of some, enough moviegoers made it to the theater over time to allow the film to begin to approach profitability.

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Appendix: Survey Questions

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Note: questions below are as they appeared in the survey but do not necessarily represent how variables were constructed in the models. For more information on the survey and variables, please consult the authors.

Theatergoing History: Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately how many movies would you see in a theater/cinema each year? A) 0, B) 1-3, C) 4-6, D) 7-9, E) 10-12, F) 13 or more

Bond Fan: How would you characterize your fandom of...? James Bond? A) I am not a fan, B) I am a fan

Seeing *NTTD*: The latest James Bond film, *No Time to Die*, is scheduled to be released in theaters on October 8, 2021. In which situation, if any, are you likely to see this film? A) I do not plan to see this film, B) At home via cable television or a streaming service (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime) following its time in the theater, C) In the theater at some point after opening weekend, but only if social distancing measures are taken, D) In the theater at some point after opening weekend, even if no social distancing measures are taken, E) In the theater opening weekend, but only if social distancing measures are taken, F) In the theater opening weekend, even if no social distancing measures are taken

Seeing any movie: How interested are you in seeing any movie in a theater in the next few months under the following conditions: Without social distancing measures in place? A) 0, B) 1, C) 2, D) 3, E) 4, F) 5, G) 6, H) 7, I) 8, J) 9, K) 10.

Age: How old are you? (Number entered in box)

Race: What is your race? Select all that apply. A) American Indian/Native American, B) Asian American/Pacific Islander, C) Black/African American, D) Latino/Hispanic, E) White, F) Other

Education: What is the highest level of education you have completed? A) Some high school, no diploma, B) High school, C) Some college, no diploma, D) Associates or other 2-year degree, E) Bachelor's or other 4-year degree, F) Some post-graduate coursework, no post-graduate diploma, G) Post-graduate degree (examples: MA, MBA, MD, MPA, JD, PhD)

Sex: What is your sex? A) Male, B) Female, C) Nonbinary/Third

Sexuality: Do you identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual? A) No, B) Yes, C) Unsure

Income: Which of the following categories best captures your total combined household income in 2020 before taxes? A) Under \$20,000, B) \$20,000-\$39,999, C) \$40,000-\$59,999, D) \$60,000-\$79,999, E) \$80,000-\$99,999, F) \$100,000-\$199,999, G) \$200,000 or above

Area: Which of the following best describes the area you live in? A) Urban, B) Suburban, C) Rural

Media: On average, how often do you read the news section of a newspaper, watch news coverage on television, read news content on the internet, or listen to news-related podcasts? A) Never, B) Less than once a month, C) Once a month, D) 2-3 times a month, E) Once a week, F) 2-3 times a week, G) Every day

Social Media: How often do you use social media (e.g., Face-

book, Twitter) to get your news? A) Never, B) Less than once a month, C) Once a month, D) 2-3 times a month, E) Once a week, F) 2-3 times a week, G) Every day

Ideology: Where would you place yourself on a scale from very liberal to very conservative? A) Very liberal, B) Liberal, C) Slightly liberal, D) Moderate, E) Slightly conservative, F) Conservative, G) Very conservative

Party Identification: Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent? A) Democrat, B) Independent, C) Republican

COVID: At the moment, do you think that the coronavirus pandemic in the United States is a crisis, a problem but not a crisis, or not a problem at all? A) A crisis, B) A problem but not a crisis, C) Not a problem at all

