

## **The Bond Brand Remains an Enigma and a Paragon of Symbolism**

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“The resilience of the James Bond narration prompts an apparently simple yet still unanswered question: How can this be possible? After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the cybernetic revolution and the rise of a new globalized consciousness, how can a narration born in 1953 still function past the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century without undergoing any major changes other than occasional paradigmatic adjustments? In short, what in the world could James Bond still have to say?”

-- Daniel Ferreras Savoye, *The Signs of James Bond*

In this cross-sectional review of literature related to the James Bond brand, I evaluate researchers' exploration of the film series' source material, interpretive attempts to decode Bond's cultural relevance over a near sixty-year run, and a unique and apt approach to understanding how Bond's brand managers update the film series using a brand assemblage model. I would argue that an evaluation of Bond as a serial brand is of particular importance, given its unparalleled success and the growing trend within media organizations to create content for serial or binge consumption. To date, the preponderance of the scholarly work on Bond argues it is the character's complicated and opaque persona that perpetuates fans' interest and willingness to identify with him as either hero or antihero. I conclude with an appreciation for why Bond still matters and will probably continue to matter, despite structural and societal challenges that are unique to the Bond brand.

## **Bond and Ian Fleming.**

Ian Fleming introduced the world to James Bond in 1953 through the publication of his novel, *Casino Royale*. However, it is the James Bond film series that has captured the cultural zeitgeist through 24 films spanning 58 years. Because of the success of the Bond brand, researchers have conducted a variety of studies evaluating various elements of the brand, strategies employed by its dedicated brand curators and Bond's social relevance over time. Authors have paid particular attention to product placement in Bond films, given the brand's association with luxury and refinement. While the literature differs in some respects, authors generally agree that the Bond brand is unique.

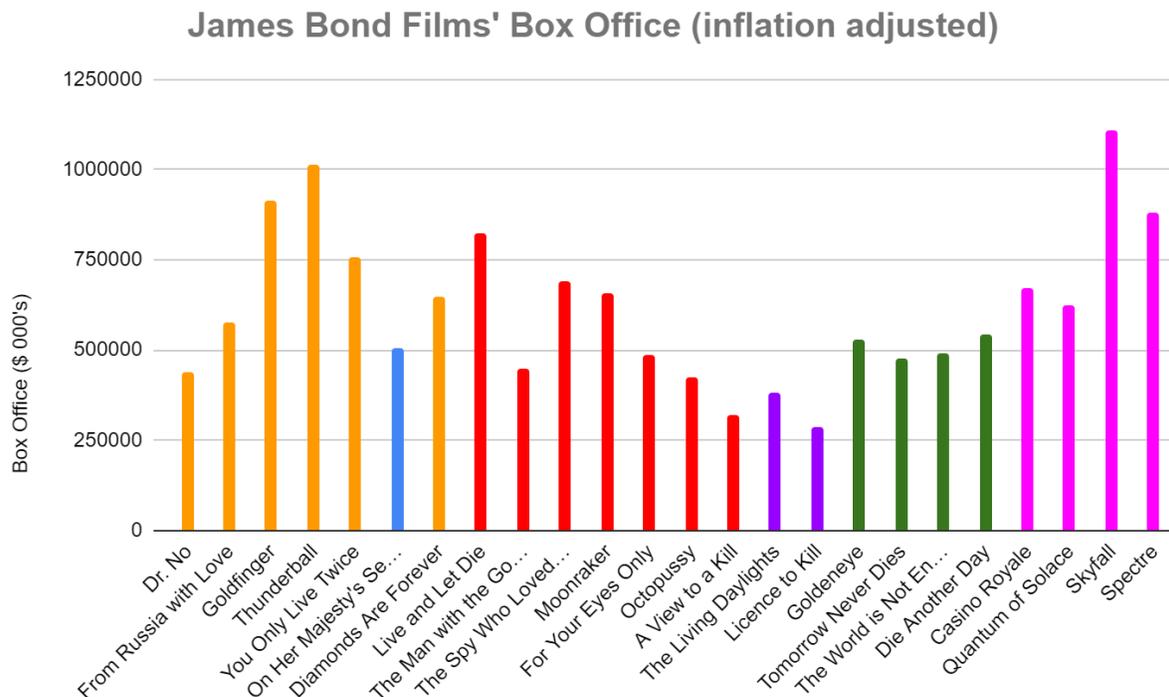
To begin with, Bond is arguably a vessel as much as he is an iconic hero. Experts point out that author Ian Fleming deliberately wrote the Bond character this way, having chosen an innocuous name and written a character description that lacked in detail. In *For Your Eyes Only*, author Ben McIntyre points out that "James Bond has no children, no siblings and no parents...he is the empty vessel into which the reader decants his expectations". (McIntyre, 2008). Dyer, in evaluating the 2005 book, *Ian Fleming & James Bond: The Cultural Politics of 007*, puts it this way: "It was precisely because the Bond character was devoid of any personal history that readers and viewers could project themselves into the stories and enjoy the fantasy of living the sort of life that he lived." (Dyer, 2017).

Having created the character in this way, Fleming leaves the door open to many of the brand devices the Bond filmmakers use to keep the audience engaged. Bond is permanently ensconced in British exceptionalism, which gives rise to his use of gadgetry and his devotion to the Crown. The Broccoli family, which still holds rights to the Bond Brand, insists that elements such as these are never altered. Bond is the center of his universe and, while he is permitted

collaborators, they must be secondary or transient. Christian Caryl puts it this way -- “The whole point of Bond is that we know precisely what we’re going to get, and we’ll be mighty disappointed if we don’t. Shaken, not stirred. Submissive supermodels. Cars that put Google and Tesla to shame. Villains with shark tanks and neon names.” (Caryl, 2015).

As documented in *The Century of the Self* (2002), an existential struggle was underway between capitalism and socialism at the time Fleming was writing his spy novels. Given Fleming's personal beliefs on the matter, it is not surprising that brands and conspicuous consumption played an important role in the Bond narratives. More than this, though, United Artists (UA) kicked off the Bond film franchise in the wake of two important developments for the film industry, the need for post-depression-era funding and the development of a Hollywood star system (Nitins, 2011). As a consequence, Bond became an ideal vehicle for luxury brands such as Omega, Bollinger and Tom Ford. For fans, who flocked to Bond for fantasy and escapism, such product placement arguably contributed to the brand’s value.

Given Bond’s invention at the onset of the Cold War, much has been made of the level of imperialism he embodies, his misogynistic and racist tendencies, and the implied if not articulated supremacy of capitalism and consumerism he espouses. These are attributes which the Broccolis have airbrushed with time, but most analyses focus on the fact that Bond persists despite these legacy shortcomings. *Skyfall* and *Spectre*, the two most recent Bond films are, in fact, among the franchise’s most successful.



(Source: adapted from 007james.com; colors represent different actors portraying Bond)

Early in the life of the Bond film franchise, Bond is outwardly dismissive of women. In the words of Preece, et. al, “Between bullets, tarantulas and cliff-tops [Bond] finds time to lay woman after woman as dispassionately as if they were foundation stones”. (Preece, 2019).

"Bond girls" are objects to be beheld and respected only insofar as they represent a threat. The Ursula Andress scene in *Dr. No* (1962) “views the scantily clad Honey Rider (Honeychilde in the novel) as she steps from the water carrying shells from the ocean. She is both the object of desire for Bond and the cinematic audience.” (Cox, 2014). By the time Daniel Craig is cast as Bond in *Casino Royale* (2006), the role’s masculinity has been entirely recast. “In a deliberate allusion, Honey Rider’s climactic cinematic arrival is reprised by Halle Barry’s entry as a Bond Girl in *Die Another Day* (2003). Strikingly, in the 2006 instalment (sic) of the Bond phenomenon, it is the male Bond that is offered up for the audience’s voyeuristic gaze”. (Cox,

2014). It is this notion of updating Bond, while remaining true to the spirit of Ian Fleming's hero, that receives considerable attention among Bond scholars.

“James Bond is still very strong because of its heritage and the way it balances the essence of the brand. It stays true to the book character but adapts to consumer trends and lifestyles. There's still the mystique of being British and sophisticated, and there's a level of security with Bond that consumers buy into.”

-- Carl Lumbard, 2005

### **Bond Brand Management.**

While much more has been written on the semiotic nature of Bond the character, Bond literature does explore the nature of Bond the commercial asset. In the era of postmodern capitalism, a brand must simultaneously be multi-dimensional and deliver a sense of community. In this way, a wide range of consumers can engage in immaterial labor and add value to the brand.

According to Thomas et al., “a heterogenous community comprises an assemblage of diverse actors, including consumers, producers and social and economic resources...(that) often have multiple and divergent views on authenticity, membership and consumption.” (Thomas, 2013).

As Dyer puts it, the Bond Brand builds a sense of community by offering “a way of drawing a diverse public into an imagined unit, much as a sports team can unify the diverse citizens of a city”. (Dyer, 2017).

Given that UA releases a new Bond film every 2-3 years, on average, the Bond Brand is also unique in its consumption. By the time a new chapter is written, social norms have shifted, and fans have had time to refocus. In this way, Bond can correctly be classified as a “serial brand”.

Serial brands are “those involving two interrelated properties. First, they are episodic, in that

they are issued iteratively, with a separation between one release and the next. Second, they are highly epistemic consumption objects...because their intrinsic episodic nature both invites consumers to pay renewed attention when a next installment of the brand is released and leads consumers to expect that there will be something new”. (Parmentier, 2015).

In 2009, Lury et. al described a model for brands as assemblages, rather than mass products. The framework the authors describe relies on the observation that, in the era of postmodern capitalism, “the bundle of characteristics or attributes comprising the product was both multiplied and dispersed across different stages of production and distribution. Attributes that had previously been held constant (apparently fixed properties) were now made variable.” (Lury, 2009). This manipulation, awarded to marketing and involving the destabilization and re-stabilization of products, was pursued in order to achieve optimum product positioning vis-a-vis competition and consumption.

In light of its complex semiotic nature and the varying degrees of adaptation it has undergone with time, the Bond brand appears to be a natural entity to undergo evaluation through a brand assemblage lens. Indeed, *License to Assemble: Theorizing Brand Longevity*, does just that. In *License to Assemble*, authors Preece et. al deploy a three-level assemblage model emphasized by De Landa’s *Assemblage Theory* (2016) to explain the basic model of the Bond brand’s success. Specifically, the authors categorize elements of the assemblage as follows:

- The highest tier (Macro) is occupied by sociocultural contexts – geopolitics, popular culture, gender relations – which can be readily modified,
- The middle tier (Meso) is occupied by brand mediators (industry players), and

- The bottom tier (Micro) is occupied by the Bond character, villains, girls, locations, etc. - contributors to the assemblage that must meet an extraordinary threshold in order to be modified.

According to the Preece study, the Bond brand's success stems from a combination of a known formula, embodied within the micro-assemblage and populated with heritage elements of the Bond books and prior films, coupled to variation in the macro-level assemblage (e.g. changing what the villain is up to). Within the meso-assemblage, brand stewards make tactical decisions regarding how the brand assemblage comes together at a particular time and place. Paramount to this effort are members of the Broccoli family, who act as conservators to the film franchise, and who influence the Bond brand perhaps more than any other, including that of Ian Fleming publications, owner of the Bond book franchise. Barbara Broccoli and half-brother Michael Wilson allow the story and Bond's interplay with culture to vary (meso- and macro-assemblage elements) but adhere strictly to Fleming's source material. As Barbara Broccoli puts it "there are two things you mustn't mess with. The first is the character of Bond. That's fixed. The second is the girl formula. That is also fixed." (Preece, 2019).

### **Bond as a Serial Brand.**

At the intersection of serial brand and brand assemblage research rests a question – how can brand assemblage theory explain how serial brands come to expire? According to brand assemblage proponents, serial brands are perpetuated by adding elements to the assemblage while removing others in order to 1) introduce enough that is new to engage the audience and 2) update the serial brand to keep it relevant to consumers. By extension, therefore, one could argue that the failure to complete these objectives could lead to a serial brand's demise. In a 2015 study, Parmentier and Fischer examined one such example.

From 2003 to 2012, America's Next Top Model (ANTM) aired two seasons per year. The reality show focused on high fashion model aspirants competing to be chosen as ANTM by a panel of experts. Parmentier and colleagues conducted a longitudinal netnography and found that certain components of the ANTM brand assemblage (e.g. narratives of "high fashion" and "meritocracy") were key to its success and that altering these led ANTM consumers and brand intermediaries, such as the entertainment media, to destabilize the ANTM brand assemblage. The key catalyst, according to the authors, is perceived incoherence, and the tools employed by those engaged in immaterial labor are social media platforms, amplified by media arbiters. Specifically, "In the context of a serial brand assemblage, consumers exercising their material and expressive capacities can highlight and amplify the incoherence of the assemblage components" (Parmentier, 2015). Importantly, this conclusion runs counter to arguments for satiation and brand fatigue previously contemplated in the literature. Indeed, given that ANTM is a reality show that enjoyed strong ratings for over five years before encountering a precipitous decline, it is notable that the show *Survivor* soldiers on after 20 years and 40 seasons.

In applying this framework to Bond, the questions become, "What narratives and devices are important to the brand assemblage, how important are those engaged in immaterial labor related to the brand, and how does Bond best transition from a particular era in order to sustain relevancy". Studies of the brand rightly conclude that the actor portraying Bond matters. The most obvious example of this is when United Artists and the Broccolis had to bring back Sean Connery after the dismal performance of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, starring George Lazenby. However, the formula for the actor playing Bond is not immediately obvious. Bond's two most successful versions – the working man's Sean Connery and the hypermasculine Daniel Craig – were both rejected at first. Variety's Brent Lang, in an interview with Barbara Broccoli

and Michael Wilson noted in relation to the choice of Craig, “On paper, the choice was shocking. Craig, with his blond hair, boxer’s swagger, creased face and gruff volatility, didn’t fit the mold. He wasn’t conventionally handsome, he didn’t smack of fine living and chateaubriand and he lacked the black or brown locks that previous Bonds, from Sean Connery to Pierce Brosnan, had all rocked...Craig’s selection was considered to be such an affront to 007 purists that websites, dubbed CraigNotBond, sprang up to decry his casting.” (Variety, 2020).

Thus, if the physical embodiment and affectations of Bond are mutable, mythological elements of the Bond character must supersede this particular piece of the puzzle. Cooper et al. sought to identify important Bond brand narratives by conducting an interpretive textual analysis in 2010. In doing so, the authors identified three archetypal narratives, that of the lover, hero and outlaw, that could be represented semiotically by brands associated with Bond (in this case, Bollinger, Aston Martin and Jaguar). As with De Landa and Parmentier, Cooper’s examples nest the Bond brand assemblage, with the brand placements supporting both the idealized archetypes that compel viewers and the heritage associations consumers make with Bond (in this case luxury and Britain). By tying the myth to known identifiers of the Bond character (Aston Martin, which growls the way a British motorcar growls), the filmmakers reinforce the expectations of the Bond consumer. Cooper et al., conclude that popular culture assists in the construction of self and social experience, and that the Bond films continually reinforce the archetypal storyline, allowing consumers to engage with the narratives “in the quest to construct an ideal self” (Cooper, 2010).

While, among critics, one of the Bond brand’s liabilities is its roots in the cold war era, its lengthy history also offers its brand managers the ability to engage in nostalgia and heritage in ways other serial brands can’t. For example, the Bond mythology is associated with several

catch phrases fans expect to experience when they see a new entry in the film lineage. With time, Bond's brand stewards are free to engage playfully with these expectations. For example, in *You Only Live Twice*, operative Dikko Henderson mixes a vodka martini for Bond, quipping "That's, um, stirred not shaken. That was right, wasn't it?". In *Goldfinger*, Bond tries out his iconic "Bond, James Bond" introduction on Tilly Masterson, only to be thwarted by her disinterest:

Bond: "You don't look like a girl who should be ditched"

Tilly: "Never mind that. Please take me to a garage."

Bond: "Certainly. By the way, my name is Bond, Ja--"

Tilly: "As quickly as possible..."

A final surprise for the Bond serial brand is its success throughout the rise of social media.

There are numerous websites devoted to the evaluation of Bond, and it is through social media that many of today's serial brands are re-assembled, disassembled and mourned upon narrative closure (Parmentier, 2015; Russell, 2014). In the case of Bond, it is the brands and iconography on display that drive the preponderance of the discourse, and the sheer volume of available material provides Bond fans with the opportunity to draw comparisons and assign fetish value.

### **Critique of the Literature to Date.**

Thus far, it appears that much of the research on the Bond brand has been conducted through an interpretive lens, although there are examples of both fundamental and critical research. Yes, Bond is a flesh-and-blood character, but he is also a metaphor for order over disorder, the primacy of Western culture, loyalty to one's country and any number of other representations

derived from Ian Fleming's pen. The Bond films are filled with idiosyncratic facts and symbols, from the notion of a "license to kill", to Bond's Walther PPK, to his having studied Oriental languages while at Cambridge. These provide audiences, through online chatrooms and in private conversations, the ability to critique the Bond brand informally, while simultaneously providing scholars the fuel necessary to conduct studies of the brand's societal meaning and impact. As sex symbols, Bond and the actors that portray him receive considerable attention for the cultural significance of their proclivities. This is only amplified by the way in which Fleming wrote about his protagonist and the characters that surround him. Whether Bond knows it or not, he is already gender fluid, in addition to being promiscuous, in the eyes of many who attach signifiers to his behaviors. Second to interpretive approaches, several studies do explore fundamental aspects of the Bond brand, primarily as they relate to the unusual role the Broccoli family plays in its curation, most notably Preece (2019) and Comentale (2005). Barbara Broccoli captured the academic world's collective view of her family's influence in one quote: "Don't make changes that the studios or the outsiders [want]. Don't let them force you into making changes.' [Cubby] always used to say, 'they are temporary people making permanent decisions.'"" (Preece, 2019).

Gaps are more notable when it comes to methodological approaches to Bond. Owing to the subject matter and emphasis on narrative, it is unsurprising that Bond brand studies often involve qualitative approaches, such as coding analyses, interviews, observation and longitudinal netnographies. One of the attractions of the Preece study is that, while qualitative, it at least attempts to categorize the components of the Bond brand. Given the extensive amount of data available on Bond, the formulaic nature of the franchise and the highly objective nature of film distribution, it would seem feasible to conduct quantitative comparisons of Bond to various serial

brand alternatives (spy/action hero serial brands, long-running movie franchises). One might also be able to discern cultural and demographic variability and derive conclusions therein.

When it comes to socio-cultural and practical limitations, I noticed that there is very little literature on Bond from a non-Western point of view. This could be due to language and syntax issues, geographic limitations or researchers' areas of specialization. Given that one-third of *Skyfall*'s international ticket sales came from Asia and Latin America, this is a notable gap in the literature's collective evaluation of the brand.

### **Implications and Areas for Future Study.**

What it is revealed through an analysis of the Bond brand as a serial brand is how reliably successful it is based predominantly on its micro-assemblage. There are many successful serial brands in Hollywood, but few are both as successful as Bond and as time-tested through an assemblage model. The *Mission Impossible* series has been highly successful through seven installations, but no one other than the highly bankable Tom Cruise has played the part of protagonist, Ethan Hunt. Harry Potter has eclipsed Bond at the box office and drew over \$1.3 billion worldwide with its final installment. However, while the "Fantastic Beasts" spin-off has been successful, its second installment experienced significantly less interest than even the worst performing of the Harry Potter films. Finally, films within the Star Wars franchise have had to rely on appearances by heritage stars such as Carrie Fischer, Harrison Ford and Mark Hamill to draw in fans looking for a bit of nostalgia. According to a Forbes analysis of *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, a precipitous decline in weeks two through five of that movie's run bodes poorly for interest in the series.

Given research that points to the importance of social media and brand intermediaries in the success of serial brands, one of the areas I would like to see researchers explore is Bond's social media strategy. Thus far, the Broccolis and United Artists have been successful with their choices and campaigns. However, we have really only witnessed two Bond films where social media played a relevant part in their consumption. Franchises like Harry Potter and The Hunger Games have unique advantages when it comes to engaging via social media. Their audiences are younger and are more apt to participate as micro-influencers, their books' authors are both alive and culturally relevant, and their genre (sci-fi/fantasy) arguably offers a wider range of narrative exploration. Given the theoretical vulnerabilities of Bond in this regard, I would like to see researchers tease out how and where Bond remains relevant.

Another area that begs further exploration is Bond's popularity overseas. From the beginning, James Bond movies have generated international revenues several times that they have generated in the United States. If Bond's success is truly driven by the Raymond Chandler aphorism "every man wants to be James Bond and every woman wants to be with him", why do members of communities Bond does not represent (even exploits) flock to the theaters to see him? Does his persona transcend what is known of his creator and his biases?

Finally, I would enjoy a quantitative study of the elements of the Bond brand assemblage by category. Each film boasts a lead actor, an iconic vehicle, one or more gadgets, a bond girl, theme music, etc. By survey or mixed method, I believe researchers could quantify the effects of the choices the film producers have made. For example, I personally question the choice of BMW as a Bond car. On several occasions, Bond tangles with the Germans (e.g. Max Zorin, German industrialist in *A View to a Kill*, Gert Frobbe, the German actor who portrayed Goldfinger), and early Bond films still directly or indirectly make reference to the Nazis. One

would think that, if Goldfinger literally assaults Bond's masculinity with a laser, a Bond car from Bavaria might not be a terrific choice for the assemblage.

From here, one might be hard pressed to bet against Bond. However, the franchise arguably faces its toughest environment yet. For one, Daniel Craig will have, with the release of *No Time to Die*, completed his run as Bond. Most assuredly, fans will initially show up to see what the next Bond can do. As Cox et al., put it, "Bond is defined by the objectification central to the films, resulting in a type of public ownership that causes massive consternation at the time of change over to a new Bond" (Cox, 2014). However, calls for an African American Bond or a female Bond make this choice potentially more controversial than most. In addition, all that Bond "stands for" (in the Fleming-esque sense) is currently being called into question. The political and social fabric of the Western world is frayed, with issues such as capitalism's contribution to income inequality in the United States, racial tension in the U.S. and Europe, and the #metoo movement all contributing to a sense of disruption. The current state of affairs, therefore, again raises the question of whether Bond can remain relevant and still be true to his heritage. Only time will tell whether *Bond will Return...*

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