

## Where Are We Running To?

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On the inside or outside of the prison, contemporary society is dominated by material consumer culture where the objects or things that are consumed come to have a sensual quality. “[T]hings like shirts and shoes, music, furniture, cars and bikes, technology, food and drink maintain an important presence within the Prison” (Griffiths University, 2013, p.4). Consumption, of course, does not end with these mundane consumables. Specific sites also become a consumption space in their own right, a kind of a gravity well of the time of one’s life.

As a prisoner serving a sentence, I have limited access to the wider public sphere. My view of the world is therefore focused on the consumption space within a medium-security male prison, where I deploy a specific and subjective approach to material culture studies. That is, I will rely on my own personal experience, descriptions and interpretations of social behaviour within the prison (Robertson 1987, p.36). My objective is to provide an understanding “between persons and things” within the consumption space (Woodward, 2013, p.15).

One node of material (consumer) consumption is the sale of running shoes in the male prison system in Victoria, Australia. My observation of the consumption of running shoes by prisoners will provide the material for consideration of the psychological and sociological inquiry into the actions of consumers, in addition to the exploration of the symbolic meaning of the objects themselves. That is, I have observed that the purpose running shoes serve in the prison is to foster feelings of autonomy, difference and choice. This is in contrast to the general conformity imposed by prison issued clothing and footwear – the ‘prison issue’ is demoralizing and systematically deprives people of individuality. Individuals are classified as ‘the other’ (Harper, 2014, p. 2), removed from society, given little choice and a limited sense of personal or political agency in the public sphere (Belk, 1988, p. 142; Wise, 2012).

### **THE PROMISES MADE**

As it applies to the prisoner, the product is interpreted as promising an affirmation, one that implies that they are still, in part at least, included in the wider system of consumption in the ‘free world’ outside of the prison

– as such material consumption is a symbol of hope (Chantraine 2009). Miller (1987) says that a neo-liberal society that is dominated by the market determines the classification of people based on their consumption of material objects. That is, people are either included or excluded based on the quality of the products they purchase. Prisoners deceive themselves with the consumption of material objects, such as expensive running shoes, so as to divert their sense of self from the harsh reality of their bleak confinement and removal from society.

### **THE SEMIOTIC ELEMENTS**

The running shoes which are sold within the prison, the Asics brand, are a wide point of communicative engagement between people, one which brings into play colours, logos, words and myths, all of which signal value and meaning for the conscious and subconscious sense of self. The possession and wearing of the item is used to regulate and control the symbolic value of the objects, so the person is seen to have control and mastery of the signs and codes of their social cohort (Thwaites *et al.*, 2002; Woodward, 2013). That is, “the dominant signified” seems to act as an ordering of, or a “symbolic marker of class” (Thwaites *et al.*, 2002, p. 83), which signifies autonomy in opposition to the conformity of being imprisoned. More so, the running shoes operate as metaphorical signifiers of athleticism, strength and heroism that are metonymic signifiers of the Asics shoe company<sup>1</sup> and even society itself (*ibid*). This situation illustrates the process that exists between persons and things, and the system of behaviour and relationships from which they emerge.

### **THE CULTURAL PURPOSE**

According to Wright (2000), one of the purposes of the prison industrial complex is to create docile people through punishment to produce an image of good order and security within the prison (Western, 2011). In the context of this paper, I will note that the ability to purchase running shoes through Mamgoneet Prison’s ordering of privileges indicates that access to material goods and objects are notably reserved for those prisoners who comply with the coercive and disciplinary program of the prison.

## **SPECIAL SPENDS – THE SYSTEM OF PRIVILEGES**

Mamgoneet Prison has an incentive based program that provides prisoners with access to a variety of items that are not available at the prisoner's canteen (Harper, 2012; Harper, 2014). The purpose of the Prisoner Shop is to "stock items" of a "convenience nature" (Harper, 2014, pp. 2-3). That is, prisoners are approved to purchase additional food products such as "confectionery, soft drinks, stationery, education needs, postage stamps, toiletries, [quilts and quilt] covers, pillows, telephone credits ... [and] plain packaged tobacco products subject to their behaviour and finances" (Wise, 2013, p. 2). Additionally, prisoners can request the purchase of other items, such as "sporting requisites [like running shoes<sup>2</sup>], hobby items, electrical items, music CDs and tapes" (ibid). The request must be submitted to the Operations Manager/Supervisor of the prison through the special spend process and that person is required to "take into consideration ... [the prisoner's] current behaviour and attitude, work/program attendance and general compliance' before approving the request"<sup>3</sup> (Harper, 2012, p. 18). Chantraine (2009, p. 59) says this system of privileges becomes the "pragmatic management of daily life for the penitentiary administration".

According to OP 2.2-5, prisoners who do not conform to the rules are penalized by the Disciplinary Officer who has at [their] disposal the option to impose sanctions (Harper, 2013). As a result of the prisoner's non-compliance to the community expectations of the prison, a loss of privileges is imposed (ibid). For example, "any prisoner ... found guilty of a prison offence will be ineligible to purchase 'special spends' for a period of three months" (Harper, 2013, p. 8). Therefore, the special spend process is a covert disciplinary measure which aims to create docile prisoners with the threat of punishment, while it provides the opportunity for officers to challenge unacceptable institutional behaviour by the removal of the 'candy system'<sup>4</sup> – a system of privileges or rewards that are granted to the compliant prisoner (Chantraine, 2009; Harper, 2013; Western, 2011).

Nonetheless, a prisoner who continues to be a 'bad-machine'<sup>5</sup> and receives disciplinary punishment still has desires and needs for the consumption of other material objects of value. As such, this scenario sets the stage for interaction with others within the prison and initiates the emergence of the black market – a trading or acquiring of material objects through an alternative agency for the prisoner. Therefore, "it is in acquiring, using and

exchanging things that individuals come to have social lives” within the prison (Lucy, 1996, p. 12).

## ACCEPTANCE OF OTHERS

The psychological and social importance of the acceptance of one’s peers in penal institutions is a vital survival mechanism for most prisoners. The main dialogue in the prison revolves around a constant battle of gossip and harassment of the other, until the purchase of an expensive and colourful pair of running shoes enters the peripheral vision of the audience. Exclamations such as ‘those runners are mad’ are a colloquial type of argot that confirms approval of the wearer’s choice and their style of running shoes by the receiver of the symbol. On the face of it, this seemingly simple expression does not mean much to the reader. However, it becomes a decisive observation and forced interaction for the prisoner – *‘Is this comment the basis of building a relationship or is it a threat against me?’*

The individual who possesses the clean, crisp, and unique shoes becomes the focal point, as the item transmits a symbolic message to the receiver and acts as a conversation starter: *‘What size are they bruz? Where did you get ‘em? What catalogue are they in? How much did they cost ya? They’re the ones I was tellin’ ya about’* (Warde, 1994; Griffiths University, 2013). The answer to these questions and statements are obvious to the person asking and just as obvious to the person who is expected to respond because the prison only has one avenue for the purchase of such an object (Griffiths University, 2013, p. 40; Harper, 2012, p. 18).

This node of communicative engagement between people creates an opportunity for interpersonal inclusion in a space, one that is designed for solitary reflection, punishment and reform (Robertson, 1987). The prisoner, who possesses the clean, crisp, and unique shoes, begrudgingly accepts the onerous responsibility of explaining and defending his consumption choices to others, at least until another prisoner becomes the subject of conversation by purchasing another more colourful pair of running shoes. I have experienced, observed and interpreted this interaction between prisoners as a break in the mundane routine of punishment, conformity, and the bleak existence of becoming a docile individual through reform.

The purchasing of materialistic items of consumption – subject to the individual person’s behaviour – acts as a reward. It is a system of privileges

aimed at correcting unacceptable behaviour, which allows, if only for a brief moment, the person to feel like a ‘real person’ – a free person in the community with the free-will to participate in the mass consumption of ideological capitalistic individualism (Chantraine, 2009; Fromm, 1976; Harper, 2013; Warde, 1994).

Men in prison collect and wear running shoes as a fashion accessory as they do in the free world. However, the symbolic value of objects in prison is more sharply focused by the interpretation of the items within the isolated consumption community. An exaggerated importance placed on the consumption and collection of running shoes in the community would be a fetish. Within the prison, however, the consumption and collection is a sign of personal power, importance, wealth, and status (Thwaites *et al.*, 2002). As Tietjen (2013, p. 76) says it is a way for “others trapped in the de-habilitating confines of the [prison] to find their way out”. It allows the prisoner to hold onto their “old citizen self” and try for as long as they can to reject their ‘inside’ prison self by paradoxically conforming to the inside values of the prison (Tietjen, 2013). Therefore, these symbols are all messages aimed at the audience, both prisoners and the Prison Officers that work in the prison and their well accepted consumption habits and value judgments about what it is to be a person of a higher status, a distinguished person from the mass of docile people (Woodward, 2013).<sup>7</sup>

### **HOW IS THE PHENOMENON TO BE UNDERSTOOD?**

All cultures and societies have developed, through the workings of the various defused fields of power relations,<sup>8</sup> the meaning and value of things. However, material items like clothing and footwear have long acted as symbolic indicators of wealth, status, cultural knowledge and cohesiveness (Foucault, 1980; Woodward, 2013). This means, that through the use of language, social divisions are created – people are either included or excluded based on their consumption choices, or simply because of their behaviour and tastes (Bourdieu 1979; Warde, 1994). Therefore, as Belk (1988, p. 150) says:

We may suppose that money enlarges the sense of self because it enlarges imaginable possibilities of all that we might have and do. Money also

gives us the power to selectively acquire or reject purchasable objects, thereby more selectively shaping our extended self.

Freedom provides boundless opportunities for shopping and consumption for consumers to personalize the meeting of their needs, and to express their values through the products they consume (Edwards, 2001). Prisoners, however, are not free, rather they have imposing restrictions not only on their movement, but also in freedom of expression and experience as their options are limited and predetermined (Robertson, 1987; Leder, 2004). That is, there are no shopping centres, advertisements or end of season discount sales. There is only a fortified hole-in-the-wall Prisoner Shop commissary and an-out-of-date special spends catalogue where commodities are limited and seen as a privilege. Meaningful options are a thing of the past for the individual who is spatially and temporally removed from society (Chantraine, 2009; Harper, 2014).

According to Slater (1997, p. 154) “status is measured by one’s distance or exemption from mundane, productive labour; consequently, the manner of consuming time and goods must demonstrate that distance”. Furthermore, Belk (1982, p. 141) suggests that “possessions are seen as part of self”. It follows that an unintentional loss of possessions should be regarded as a loss or lessening of self (Sykes, 1958; Goffman, 1961). Therefore, in a capitalist society, individuals who do not, or cannot, acquire, possess, or control anything of materialistic value feel alienated, and are observed as having lost their community and individual identity (Belk, 1982; Fromm, 1976). Prisoners are observed attempting to replace the bleakness of emotional experience and material possessions/experiences within the environment of muted colours through the purchase of expensive and colourful running shoes. As well as seeking pleasure in the sensual qualities of limited material commodities, excitement and status, it is as if they are running from the bleakness of conformity (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979).

Prisoners use or display their purchasing of running shoes as social and symbolic capital. That means, a prisoner seen in, or with a pair of brand new running shoes is symbolically being heard to say that he is not only a person of wealth (and therefore importance), but he is a person with whom communicative engagement can be initiated. Whether the receiver of the message consciously aspires to exploit the sender of the message or subconsciously aspires to collude with others to exploit a vulnerable prisoner

remains unknown. However, what can be substantiated through my observation is that this face-to-face interaction is perceived by the sender or the receiver as an opportunity to determine what the other has to offer. That is, to make a value judgment – to “classify themselves or others ... through distinctive objects or practices in which their ‘powers’ or knowledge, is communicated via words or symbols” (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 16). Therefore, his new running shoes are a node of rapid social communication, a point of communicative engagement and comparison between persons, a point at which the receiver of such signs focuses his aspirations to improve his status through purchasing running shoes from the next up-to-date special spends catalogue.

## CONCLUSION

Acquisitions and displays of material and symbolic commodities are commonly accepted without question as ascribing a personal and social position, class, or status by which others may judge the possessors of such objects (Solomon, cited in Belk, 1988). In the grip of “casino-capitalism” our individualism is based in materialism and commodification of every human experience, this commodification has become the dominant semiotics of the moment (Bessant and Watts, 2007, pp. 26-27). Neo-liberal ideologies have generated myths of ideal lifestyles and the consequences of these myths are everywhere throughout society, even within the prison (Barthes, 1972). Despite these well-publicized myths of an ideal life through consumption, our spirits are lower than ever. We feel as if the nihilistic forces of local and international crime are driving us behind security shutters of all types. In their pivotal study Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, p. 230) note:

Living in unequal and individualistic societies, [people] use possessions to show [themselves] in a good light, to make a positive impression, and to avoid appearing incompetent or inadequate in the eyes of others. Consumerism shows how powerfully [people] are affected by each other. Once [people] have enough of the basic necessities for comfort, possessions matter less and less in themselves, and are used more and more for what they say about their owners. Ideally, [peoples] impressions of each other would depend on face-to-face interactions in the course of community life, rather than on outward appearances in the absence of real knowledge of each other.

Capitalism has deeply fractured society and relationships to the extent that individuals in prison are attempting to rebuild their public relationships through the commonality of self as consumer. Essentially, regardless of the location, people are all prisoners to the mythology of neo-liberalism. All that is left to do, it seems, is for people to spot a symbol or a sign, and use that to make contact with, rather than having any real knowledge or understanding of the other person.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Asics is an acronym for the Latin phrase *anima sana in corpore sano*, which translates as “a healthy mind in a healthy body” (see <http://corp.asics.com/en/>).
- <sup>2</sup> “The only runners/sneakers approved for purchase through prison shops are... [the] Asics brand with an upper price limit of \$160. Where appropriate, prisoners may purchase outside of these restrictions upon supply of special documentation from a medical officer or podiatrist” (Wise, 2013, DCI.4.08, p.3).
- <sup>3</sup> Mamgoneet Prison implements a unique “W-IV... attendance record for prisoners” (Norman, 2010, p. 1). The W-IV attendance record is an acronym for *Who (Prisoner)*, *What (Activity)*, *Where (Venue)*, and *When (Prisoner Day timeslots)* (ibid, p. 2). The system is designed to schedule required and completed attendances of prisoners at activities outlined within their Local Management Plan. For example, the attendance of an Offender Behaviour Program by a prisoner (ibid, p. 1). According to the weekly timetable at Mamgoneet prison, the objective of the “W-IV Prison Activity Timetable” is to allocate a prisoner “30 hours of meaningful activities per week”. More importantly, the timetable is a covert instrument of control, thus Prison Officers can locate a prisoner without delay and can impose a reprimand upon prisoners that do not comply with the timetable.
- <sup>4</sup> Chantraine (2009) introduces this term as a modern form of psychological rather than physical discipline to the non-conforming prisoner. The candy system, similar to the “special spends system” is an incentive based disciplinary program used by the Canadian prison system, to “*minimize disorder In prison*” (Chantraine, 2004 in Chantraine 2009, p.67, original emphases). That is, by the removal or granting of individual and collective privileges, such as mobility in prison or exceeding quotas of cell property to prisoners, the prison is able to control unacceptable behaviour whilst rewarding acceptable behaviour with treats, like running shoes, ‘time In the trailer’ (conjugal visits) or an excess of cell property. Hence the term “candies or candy system” is presented as something worth desiring, something *sweet* (Chantraine 2009, pp. 68-69, original emphases).
- <sup>5</sup> In a fictional sense, the concept referred to as “bad machine” is influenced after reading the play, *1984* by George Orwell, *A new adaption* created by Robert Idee and Duncan Macmillan. Metaphorically, I am referring to the individual – the non-conformist – of an institution as a bad machine. That is, an individual that is not compatible with other machines because it does not follow the program.



- <sup>6</sup> “What size are they bruz?” is a type of argot known within the prison system used to trick vulnerable prisoners, often new to prison, into revealing the size of their shoes. Thus, to have an invulnerable prisoner stand over them and take their shoes, which are then traded on the ‘black-market’ for other material objects of value within the prison. However, if a prisoner was to say “my size”, this is indicative that the prisoner is not vulnerable and can defend themselves against such covert violent behaviour. Hence, the threat is played down and seen as funny.
- <sup>7</sup> Interestingly, running shoes are symbolic of fitness, health and athleticism, which stands in opposition to the docile body within the prison. Perhaps there is a subliminal message being transmitted by the prison system that “It’s time to get fit and change your life”.
- <sup>8</sup> Foucault (1980) casts power relations as a wide field of human interactions, and not just the obvious forms of power as they relate to the state, and, for example, the police and justice as a punitive instance of power.

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