**Sociological Autobiography**

From the time I was born, social forces have molded, constructed, and influenced me. These forces have shaped who I have become as a person and how I interact with society. Understanding how I have been impacted by my immediate surroundings is an integral part of better understanding how I have been impacted by the greater society. One aspect that has been the most influential on my life is the culture of consumerism. Looking at the town I grew up in, the norms, values, and symbols of wealth and consumerism were very prevalent aspects of my everyday life.

Glen Ellyn, my hometown, is a small suburb of Chicago. It is only a few miles wide but it is home to some of the most friendly and generous people you will meet. With an average family income of $118,00 in 2011, it is also home to some of the wealthiest people you will meet. Glen Ellyn has been named one of the “Best Places to Live” for numerous years and I believe that is largely because of the amount of money there. People seem to move to Glen Ellyn when they hear that is a safe, affluent town with friendly neighbors and good schools. That is what motivated my parents to buy a house in the small town and settle down. Living in Glen Ellyn, my parents could afford to enroll me in a multitude of sports, clubs, and activities that have shaped who I’ve become today. In Addition, I am very fortunate to be able to attend a prestigious university largely due to my community’s ample resources. The people of Glen Ellyn pay high taxes to support high quality education and athletic systems. It is considered very normal for high school students in Glen Ellyn to be accepted to some of the most Ivy League colleges in the nation. In other towns, the resources might not be as beneficial. In areas without strong school systems, it is harder for families to afford college tuition. With a lack of tax dollars to uphold quality education, it is also harder for kids to be accepted to highly ranked universities.

Living in Glen Ellyn also provided me with a unique outlook on consumerism and materialism. Growing up, I became accustomed to buying things. The Sunday catalogues came filled with glossy pictures of new toys and cuter clothes. I observed my parents and my friend’s parents buy everything and anything. It seemed like the buying never stopped. And I was right. As soon as my dad said I could get my own debit card, I was out shopping with my friends every week. I love Glen Ellyn and I would move back there and raise my own family if I could. But the amount of money that people there spend on material possessions eludes me. In Glen Ellyn, it is normal to have a car for just three or four years and then buy a newer, shiner version. It is standard to update your wardrobe to stay with the latest fashion trends. It seems to me that people care a lot about their appearance, almost too much. But why? What drives the people of Glen Ellyn to constantly be looking for more material possessions? Sociologists suggest that most people weigh “status” by how much stuff they have. Ben Steverman, a reporter for Bloomberg News in New York, notes that the large majority of Americans love to use material possessions to signal their high status (Bloomberg 2011). Society would have us believe that you have a higher status if you have a big house, a new car, designer clothes, and expensive taste.

I didn’t realize how much wealth Glen Ellyn actually had until I came to Michigan Tech. I have often said that I was raised in a “Glen Ellyn Bubble” and the bubble was popped during my first year of college. I love Michigan Tech, Houghton, and the friends I’ve met here. However, Michigan Tech has made me realize that not everyone has equal financial capabilities to buy whatever they please. The economy has a large effect on how people spend their money and what they spend it on. Living in Glen Ellyn, there was more freedom to eat at restaurants, go to the mall, and travel. Because the economy in the Chicago area is booming, more and more shops and restaurants are drawn to the location. Michigan Avenue is famous for a reason. All the best and most expensive brands have stores there because they know wealthy people will buy their products. In Houghton, it is a different case. My first year at Michigan Tech, I was shocked when I realized that not everyone has a North Face jacket, Sperrys, and True Religion jeans. It was a foreign concept to me that most people do not have iPhones and MacBook computers. In Glen Ellyn, materials are some of the things that people value most. It is a never-ending struggle to have to highest status and the best appearance and the way people achieve that status is through consumption. That is the negative affect of the Glen Ellyn Bubble. While I was busy shopping and looking for different ways to keep up my appearance, other people were busy doing many other things not related to consumerism at all. My friends at Michigan Tech have told me that I always “dress nicely,” whatever that means to them. To me, this means that all the shopping I do has, in a sense, paid off. I invest in my appearance by buying clothes, shoes, and accessories that I think enhance my style. It has become a large part of my life, and a part of my identity. It’s not that my entire life has been focused around materialism and status, but it has been a big contributing factor.

It was not until taking this sociology class that I realized I have helped fuel the consumerism epidemic in society. I have always loved to shop. To me, shopping can be therapeutic and satisfying. It is amazing that the purchase of a new sweater or a new pair of shoes can make me feel happier. How is it that spending money on material objects can lead to contentment? When I wear clothing that I think look good, it makes me feel good. Why is that the case? Consumerism has many cultural causes: the desire to achieve high status, the goal to exhibit material wealth, and American’s natural competitiveness. In addition to those, another major cause of consumerism is the aspiration to improve appearance. If people all across the United States weren’t at all concerned with how they looked or how they presented themselves, consumerism wouldn’t exist. There is no denying that high heels are uncomfortable, but women continue to buy and wear them. Personally, I think that wearing heels makes me look better. My legs look elongated and I look taller. Whether I do actually look better in heels does not matter. What matters is that my perceived improved appearance makes me feel better. Subconsciously, I am more self-confident when I have heels on because I am more confident in how I look. Women in magazines and on TV are always flaunting their 4-inch stilettos. Stores across the country sell thousands of styles of high heels in hundreds of colors. Society tells women that wearing heels makes them look better. This is not just the case for tall shoes. Any item of clothing, accessory or make-up style can make someone feel happier or more confident.

There is great emphasis placed on how we look and what we wear. A cause of this controlling mindset is the media. The media fuels consumerism because it is constantly introducing new and better products. Take, for example, clothing stores. Clothing stores like American Eagle and Urban Outfitters present hundreds of new styles every month. If you buy a green cardigan, next month they will be selling a blue cardigan that is newer and “better.” Stores start selling bathing suits in January, and introduce new winter clothes in August. They seem to scream the message, “winter will be here in 4 months, so you better buy your new winter clothes now while they’re new! Forget about your winter clothes from last year!” Another example is Black Friday. The biggest consumption day of the year, Black Friday has started to encroach on the celebration of Thanksgiving. More and more stores are starting their Black Friday sales earlier and earlier. Last year, my cousin rushed through Thanksgiving dinner with the family because Walmart was having a sale that started at 8pm. It is called *Thanks*giving for a reason, and going out to buy more “stuff” on the occasion does not show much thankfulness. If Americans can’t devote one single day of the year to being thankful for what they already have, then consumerism is playing too big a role in society. If people took the time to realize all the materials they already have, there would not be a need for such intense post-Thanksgiving-shopping or a need for shopping in general. It promotes a very greedy nation. There are car advertisements online and on TV that introduce new car models almost weekly. The 2013 models are brought out at the beginning of 2012. Car companies change a few small details, produce an innovative commercial, and tell consumers why their 2011 model isn’t good enough anymore. The biggest problem is that the consumers believe them. People want to have new models of cars because they believe it improves their overall appearance. Generally, the wealthy people have the newest cars and the run down, 2003 models belong to the less wealthy. My family leases cars, so every 3 years we trade in our model for a new one. It is not traded in because after 3 years the car stops working. After 3 years, the car is considered “old” so it needs to be updated. If there weren’t sources telling people that they needed to buy more things and newer things to have an acceptable appearance, then society as a whole would consume a lot less. Consumerism and the media wouldn’t need to exist without continuously enhancing each other.

Looking at my life from a sociological perspective, I now realize how much consumerism affected my life without me even knowing. Like most people, I fell prey to the constant supply of “new and improved” products. Part of this was where I grew up. I loved growing up in Glen Ellyn, but it shaped me into the consumer that I am today. I observed my family and friends and learned that it was normal to want more and buy more. My parents had the financial ability that allowed me to get the toys, clothes, and games that I wanted. I am very thankful that I grew up where I did and that I was given the opportunities I had, but now I am very thankful that I registered to take a sociology class. It has made me realize how much control the culture of consumerism had over me, and still does. I have learned that my appearance is not as important as I perceived it to be. There are many more things in life that are much more important than material possessions. There are many more things in life that should make people happy, not just buying new things. I strongly believe that if the overall consumption of society decreased, people would be happier as a result.