Chapter 5

Summary and General Discussion
Researchers have studied goal-oriented behavior for more than a century, seeking to understand how people reach their objectives. The resulting literature provides insights into how people control and regulate their cognition and behavior, which enables them to engage in goal-directed actions that maximize their long-term best interests. It also describes how people protect their own well-being across a range of situations, such as eating and drinking (Mischel, Shoda, and Rodriguez 1989), religious practices (McCullough and Willoughby 2009), learning (Bjork, Dunlosky, and Kornell 2013), and interpersonal relationships (Fitzsimons and Finkel 2011). With this dissertation, I explore how self-regulatory goals drive consumer behavior.

5.1 | Main Findings and Scientific Implications

Drawing on research that suggests the consumer context affects self-regulatory processes and that self-regulation can occur implicitly, I explore why and how situational characteristics – that is, progress information (Chapter 2), store atmospherics (Chapter 3), and brands (Chapter 4) – affect consumer goal pursuit. Moreover, this dissertation highlights three domains in which people engage in self-regulatory actions, construed as the self in relation to time and space (Chapter 2), the self in relation to the physical world (Chapter 3), and the self in relation to itself (Chapter 4). These three chapters constitute the empirical body of this dissertation and correspond to the three domains, enabling me to show when and how various implicit self-regulatory processes in the course of consumer goal pursuit shape, and are shaped by, the consumer context and interact to affect motivated, goal-directed consumer behavior. Across 12 studies, I adopt different operationalizations of both hypothetical and real self-regulatory goals, indices of motivation (i.e., motivational intentions, choice, willingness to buy, willingness to pay, and overt goal pursuit behavior), and implicit and explicit trait measures and state manipulations of the focal concepts. I also test my predictions using both student samples and more heterogeneous samples of U.S. and European consumers and apply various methods, ranging from experiments to field and cross-sectional studies. My results are robust to all these variations, suggesting that the demonstrated effects persist across a wide range of real-world consumer behaviors.

Chapter 2 focuses on how goal pursuit unfolds over time and space. Specifically, I examine the dynamic interplay between construal level and the framing of progress from an initial state toward a desired state (i.e., distance traveled from the initial state to the current state, or to-date, versus distance remaining between the current state to the desired state, or to-go) and its influence on motivation for goal pursuit. Three studies demonstrate that progress framing affects motivation at the beginning and end of goal pursuit – such that to-date cues are more motivating close to the initial state and to-go cues are more effective close to the desired state – as well as when people are halfway and have an abstract rather than a concrete mindset. A
to-date frame then promotes higher levels of motivation than a to-go frame. In addition, the studies provide insights into how progress framing differentially affects the motivation felt by people with an abstract mindset when they are halfway to goal attainment. Because an abstract mindset influences representations of time and space and induces an overestimation of distance between the initial and current state or current and desired state, a directional effect results, such that equal progress framed in terms of to-date or to-go leads, respectively, to higher and lower levels of motivation. These findings show how the implicit bias in estimating spatial and temporal distance interacts with progress framing to guide self-regulation and goal pursuit (Carver and Scheier 1998; Koo and Fishbach 2008; Trope and Liberman 2010). Specifically, I show at which phase in goal pursuit implicit self-regulation benefits most from different types of progress information.

Chapter 3 considers the link among exposure to a disordered environment, the need for order, and consumer goal pursuit. Building on research that suggests people have a strong need to perceive their environment as orderly and structured, I have proposed and tested the novel hypothesis that people reaffirm their sense of order by setting and pursuing goals. Four studies demonstrate that both acute (induced by a disordered store environment) and chronic high need for order increases the perceived attractiveness of well-defined goals, clear means to attain them, and actual motivation in goal pursuit. Furthermore, the desire to reaffirm a sense of order represents the underlying mechanism that drives the effect of a disordered environment on goal attractiveness and goal pursuit. A disordered environment increases the need for order, thereby boosting the need to regain a sense of order; setting and pursuing goals offers an effective way to reaffirm that experience and satisfy the need for order induced by existing disorder. These findings introduce a new, implicit, self-regulatory strategy by which consumers can remedy perceptions of disorder (Heine, Proulx, and Vohs 2006; Kay et al. 2008; Kruglanski 1989; Landau et al. 2004), and they demonstrate that a goal to reaffirm that the world is not ruled by randomness increases self-regulatory goal pursuit.

Finally, Chapter 4 focuses on the role of the self-regulatory goal of feeling good about the self. Five studies examine whether generic references to the self in brand names influence brand judgment; they also explore systematically the conditions that produce such a generic self-referencing effect. Generic references to the consumer’s self in brand names induce self-associations and affect brand judgment. With the assumption that the self-referencing effect stems from a self-evaluative basis, I demonstrate that biased brand judgments reflect the valence of consumers’ self-view, such that consumers with a favorable self-view find self-referencing brand names more appealing, whereas an acutely impaired self-view negatively affects brand evaluation. These effects are more pronounced for brands of self-expressive, rather than non–self-expressive, products. The findings thus provide a fuller understanding of brands’ important role in regulating consumers’ selves (Brendl et al. 2005; Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Sherman and Cohen 2006). In turn, the results demonstrate that consumers implicitly feel attracted
to generic self-referencing brands that enhance their self-view and avoid such brands if they produce a negative impact.

Taken together, the results of my research lead to a more nuanced understanding of how self-regulatory goals implicitly guide consumer behavior. They demonstrate that goals to which consumers lack conscious access still can drive self-regulation and goal pursuit. In these instances, participants perform their actions effectively, without knowing why or even that they executed their behavior. As such, this dissertation contributes to extant literature by demonstrating that people can navigate their goal-directed actions adequately without postulating an inner pilot of behavior or engaging in decision making that guides goal-directed behavior through an act of conscious will (Fitzsimons and Bargh 2004; Förster and Jostmann 2012; Papies and Aarts 2011).

The results also demonstrate that self-regulation and goal pursuit cannot be viewed in a vacuum, because the (consumer) context triggers goals and supports self-regulatory goal pursuit (Bargh 1994; Dijksterhuis and Aarts 2010); we cannot understand consumer behavior without taking into account how consumers interact with the world around them. To invoke implicit self-regulatory actions, consumers must be responsive to their goals and the immediate social and physical environment in which they pursue those goals. This dissertation illustrates how situational cues initiate and support the regulation of goal-directed actions in a highly efficient, flexible fashion and thus provides insights into the interplay between the consumer context and goal pursuit.

In summary, the findings contribute to extant literature on (dynamic) goal pursuit, (implicit) self-regulation, motivation, and the impacts of environmental factors – or more specifically, stimuli in the retail environment – on consumer judgment, decision making, and behavior. Integrating these diverse streams of research sheds new light on how goal-directed consumer behavior is affected by, and affects, the sometimes puzzling and complex world in which we live.

5.2 | Managerial Implications

My research has numerous implications for marketers who are interested in consumers’ goal pursuit, such as loyalty marketers who seek to manage their customer relationships (Dorotic, Bijmolt, and Verhoef 2012; Leenheer et al. 2007). Feedback on goal progress is key to successful customer-relationship management in general and reward programs in particular (Kivetz, Urminsky, and Zheng 2006; Lewis 2004; Nunes and Dreze 2006; Taylor and Neslin 2005). The findings in Chapter 2 show that framing progress in the right moment in a way that reminds consumers of their previous investments or that the goal is within reach, encourages them to participate in a reward program, stay involved, and increase and accelerate their spending levels. Loyalty marketers should design or structure progress information and feedback interventions that emphasize the work the consumer already has done when they are closer to the initial state but highlight the work left when they are close to the desired state. Halfway to goal attainment,
Summary and General Discussion

the road traveled from the initial state should be stressed, rather than the road ahead toward the desired state, because doing so results in more motivation to finish the reward program. In other situations in which people try to attain goals, these findings again are relevant. For example, weight loss programs should design progress feedback systems in such a way that they emphasize at the right phase of goal pursuit the weight that people have already lost or still have to lose to reach a desired state. Similarly, financial services might develop programs to encourage consumer saving by providing feedback that emphasizes what has been saved to date or what remains, depending on their progress level.

Chapter 3 adds to knowledge of environmental psychology and how tangible and intangible store atmospherics might affect consumer cognition and behavior. Prior research has shown that characteristics of the physical environment affect the way consumers think and make consumption decisions, including color (Mehta and Zhu 2009), scent (Lee, Kim, and Vohs 2011), ceiling height (Meyers-Levy and Zhu 2007), and crowding (Noone and Mattila 2009). Chapter 3 contributes to this line of research by demonstrating that orderliness as an environmental property also can influence how consumers think and act. The findings show that in a chaotic store environment consumers seek ways to restore their sense of order and structure, and that a reward program can function as a useful tool to satisfy this need in the face of disorder. Stated differently, this research suggests that (mild forms) of disorder in the retail environment can improve the effectiveness of a reward program. A key factor in whether participation in a reward program increases was the design of the reward program. To be able to restore a sense of order the final reward of the program should be clear, the manner in which points are collected self-evident, and the layout of the point report straightforward.

On a more abstract level, the findings caution against the negative impact of disorder and chaos in the retail environment. Marketers should be more aware of the fact that shopping experiences are rich with sensory stimuli and often more complex and chaotic than they realize. They bombard consumers with new ideas, products, brands, and price changes to increase sales and their share of wallet, but customers tend to prefer a less complex context. Reactions to complex settings can include shopper frustration that significantly decreases satisfaction, spending levels, and loyalty (Hui, Bradlow, and Fader 2009; Inman, Winer, and Ferraro 2009). In a related vein, the findings of Chapter 3 have implications for “clean desk” policies, as often applied to reduce disorganized offices and chaotic desks and thereby boost work efficiency. My results support the idea that disorganized offices instigate a motivation to attain a certain goal and thus might stimulate working toward deadlines and decisions, rather than constraining efficiency.

The findings from Chapter 4 provide insights into the power of creating an association between consumers and brand names. Companies need to build and develop a strong and positive brand perception, because such perceptions enhance consumer loyalty and affect behavior, thereby fostering brand profitability and customer lifetime value (Park et al. 2010). I contribute to this line of research by highlighting the importance of implicit, unconscious
processes for increasing personal relevance and demonstrating that establishing an association between the customer's self and the brand, by merely including 'I' and 'my' in the brand's name, may be sufficient to influence brand evaluations and consumer choices. Many opportunities exist for marketers to capitalize on such generic, self-referencing cues. For example, loyalty marketers who want to attract reward program members might be more successful if they incorporate first-person pronouns in the reward program's name (e.g., MyPoints) or the name of the reward collected (e.g., MyTowel). Whether it is intuition or not, many companies seem to already exploit this brand naming strategy. Examples are succesfull personalized websites, such as MyKLM and MyVodafone, and popular smartphone apps like iTranslate, MyOrder, and MyTracks. Opportunities for generic self-referencing are particularly relevant in offline settings, which do not allow marketers to alter content quickly and on the basis of personal information to make offers more personally relevant. Focused targeting and one-to-one communication is a current trend for marketing, but a generic self-referencing branding strategy has another advantage: The brand name appeals to the whole market, rather than a particular segment or individual customer, leading to a larger potential base of loyal customers.

5.3 | Suggestions for Research

This dissertation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of consumers’ goal-directed behavior, yet many interesting questions remain to be addressed. As I noted in Chapter 1, it seems surprising that consumer researchers have paid so little attention to goal-directed consumer behavior. Much of what consumers do involves self-regulatory goals, such as when they try to lose weight, save money, or pursue a promotion at work. Moreover, most research focuses on consumers’ motivation to attain a single goal that remains fixed during a specific period of time (Carver and Scheier 1998; Locke and Latham 1990), even though the pursuit of a single, static goal is rarely representative of real-life situations. Consumers pursue a multitude of goals, but we know very little about how they manage to pursue multiple goals, especially over a relatively long period of time (Baumgartner and Pieters 2008; Louro, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2007; Kopetz et al. 2012). Faced with a multiple goal environment, which presents people with distinct self-regulatory challenges, how do consumers determine which goals are most important? Which factors determine the goals to be included in the consideration set? In what conditions do consumers recalibrate their focal goal? When do consumers faced with competing goals persist in or abandon their current goal and shift to another goal? As these questions indicate, the study of the dynamics of goal pursuit and how consumers pursue multiple goals, or how goal pursuit changes over time, represents a very rich, potentially fruitful area for further investigation.

Another line for research would be to determine the degree to which self-regulation is not just an implicit, unconscious mechanism but also can be performed automatically.
Strictly speaking, a process is automatic if it unfolds without the person’s awareness, intention, effort, and control (Bargh 1994). Despite the increasing consensus that people often lack any conscious access to or awareness of the complex mental processes and behaviors they perform, it is still unclear whether higher level processes can be performed in a completely automatic fashion. A lively debate thus has emerged, such that some researchers argue self-regulation can be performed automatically (Fitzsimons and Bargh 2004; Hassin 2013; Papies and Aarts 2011), while others contend that the automatic mode of self-regulation interacts with the more intentional, effortful notion of self-regulation that has been the focus of traditional research ( Förster and Jostmann 2012; Strack and Deutsch 2004). If the latter is true, another exciting research avenue would be to investigate how, why, and in what ways deliberate and automatic self-regulatory processes complement one another.

This research responds to the surge of interest in both marketing and psychology pertaining to sensory marketing and the role of situated cognition and embodiment in perceptions, judgments, and decision making. Recent psychology findings establish that the relationship among the mind and body and the surrounding context is more complex than previously assumed (Eelen, Dewitte, and Warlop 2013; Krishna and Schwarz 2014; Meier et al. 2012; Van den Bergh, Schmitt, and Warlop 2011). Moving beyond the idea that goal-directed actions are solely a consequence of mental activities (i.e., activated goal representations, schemas, or prototypes), evidence on situated cognition indicates that situational factors substantially influence the mind (Barsalou 2008). The perspective of situated cognition assumes that physical, emotional, motivational, and other sensory cues guide information processing by helping people decide how to act in a certain context. As a result, consumers’ perceptions, judgments, and decisions are not stable but vary across contexts (Schwarz 2006), in line with the findings I present in the empirical chapters of this dissertation. Although the richness of research at the interface of sensory marketing, situated cognition, embodiment, and consumer behavior is clear (for an overview, see Krishna and Schwarz 2014), more developed theories are required to explain when and why situations and bodily experiences influence consumer behavior.

5.4 | Conclusion

In summary, by investigating consumer motivation, and specifically the implicit self-regulatory mechanisms in consumer goal pursuit, this dissertation advances understanding of how consumers interact with the context to attain their objectives. In so doing, this dissertation offers an initial step toward a more nuanced understanding of implicit goal-directed consumer behavior. I demonstrate that the consumer environment affects, and is affected by, self-regulatory processes, with important consequences for goal pursuit. Continued research should advance further to a richer understanding of the interplay between self-regulatory goals and the (retail) environment, to unravel the complexities of consumers’ choices and behaviors.