Summary

In the last decade Internet sneaked into our daily shopping activities. This thesis tried to investigate whether online consumers go differently about their shopping than consumers in a conventional store, because of unique features of the online shopping context. The aim of this thesis was to contribute to the literature that studies online consumer behavior by examining the differential effects of the online and conventional shopping environment on consumer self-regulation. Two primary and unique features of the online store, relative to the conventional store, were considered to have a different and important impact on consumer self-regulation: lack of physical presence and the perceived risky nature.

First, considering the lack of physical presence in the online store, it was argued that the lack of physical proximity makes it difficult for online consumers to experience sensorial information. As a consequence, an online shopping context was expected to engender less affective responses than a conventional store. Consumers’ experienced affect is a prominent precursor of failures in regulating impulses to buy. Therefore, it was argued that the relatively affect-poor online store causes better self-regulation of impulses. In contrast to the widespread notion that the Internet is the ultimate impulse buying medium, online consumers were expected to have fewer intentions to engage in impulse buying.

Second, considering the perceived risky nature of the Internet, it was argued that because of the perceived risky online shopping environment, the consumer goal in an online store differs from the goal in a conventional store, and subsequently influences how consumers regulate themselves. More specifically, employing Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT: Higgins, 1997), it was argued that the perceived risky nature influences the primary self-regulatory goal of online consumers, that avoiding losses, rather than achieving gains would become the primary goal. The goal to avoid losses is called a prevention focus, and is concerned with the absence and presence of negative outcomes, with duties and responsibilities. Self-regulatory goals prompt individuals to selectively pay attention to and rely on information that helps them to attain their goal. Therefore, given a stronger prevention focus among online consumers, it was expected that the online purchase process is qualitatively different from conventional purchases. More specifically, online consumers were expected to rely more on online information that appeals to their prevention focus, like
information on safety and security. I will continue this chapter by summarizing the main findings.

**Overview of the Main Findings**

**Chapter 2: Online versus Conventional Shopping: Affect and Impulse Buying Intent**

Chapter 2 addressed the influence of the lack of physical presence as a specific feature of the online shopping environment. The results demonstrated that individuals in an online shopping environment experience less intense affect, than individuals in a conventional shopping context. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that online consumers have less impulse buying intentions in terms of the urge to buy and the lack of planning. These results provide evidence for the central hypothesis that online consumers regulate their purchases more than consumers in the conventional store. The experiments reported in Chapter 2 were the first to examine the differences in affective responses in conventional and online shopping contexts. By not only experimentally establishing this effect, but also by examining a consequential effect on consumers’ ability to regulate impulsive buying behavior, the current thesis addressed the need for understanding the differences between online and conventional consumer behavior. Furthermore, this thesis showed strong support against the predominant idea that the Internet is the ultimate medium for impulse purchases (e.g., LaRose, 2001; LaRose & Eastin, 2002, claim negative effects of the Internet on consumers’ ability to regulate impulse buying). Chapter 3 and 4 further address the influence of another specific feature of the Internet on the nature of consumers’ self-regulation: the perceived risky nature of the Internet.

**Chapter 3: Online versus Conventional shopping: Effects on Regulatory Focus**

In Chapter 3 the perceived risky nature of the Internet was considered in examining the effect of the online vs. conventional shopping environment on consumers’ risk perceptions and nature of regulatory focus. Three experiments demonstrated that an online shopping context, by its risky nature, engenders prevention-focused self-regulation. The findings reported in Experiment 1 showed that individuals in an online shopping context report higher levels of risk perception and prevention-focused self-regulation. Experiment 2 replicated these findings by using an implicit measure of prevention-focused self-regulation. Moreover, the findings demonstrated that the effect of an online shopping environment on prevention focus carries over to behavior in a domain unrelated to shopping, i.e., the performance on an anagram task. Furthermore, Experiment 3 extends the findings reported in Experiment 1 and 2 by demonstrating that the effects of shopping environment on risk perception and prevention focus occur irrespective of the type of product.
The experiments in this chapter were the first to demonstrate that an online store initiates prevention-focused self-regulation among consumers, which implies that RFT might explain differences between consumer responses in online and conventional shopping contexts. Furthermore, the findings of Experiment 2 showed that a prevention focus is consequential for behavior unrelated to shopping (i.e., task performance), this indicates that the initiated prevention focus might also be consequential for how online consumers go about their shopping.

In Chapter 2 it was demonstrated that the online shopping context, as compared to a conventional shopping context, engenders more reflective or conscious self-regulation. The findings reported in this chapter demonstrated that this self-regulation is prevention-focused in its nature. However, Chapter 3 did not provide an answer to what the possible consequences are of a prevention focus for the online shopping process. Therefore, Chapter 4 continues where Chapter 3 left off, and addresses the question whether prevention-focused self-regulation influences the processing of online information. More specifically, Chapter 4 examines whether a consumer’s prevention focus predicts the persuasiveness of information typically given in online stores, i.e., assurances on the safety of the online store, the online payment or the product purchased.

Chapter 4: Regulatory Fit and Online Shopping: Effects of prevention Focus Compatibility of Web Content on Consumer Responses

Chapter 4 revealed that the online consumers’ prevention focus is consequential for the persuasiveness of online information (i.e., web content). More specifically, the effects of the fit between consumers’ prevention focus and online information on consumers’ responses were examined. In two experiments it was demonstrated that online safety cues, i.e., information that gives assurance on the safety of the online store, the online payment, or the product purchased, are more persuasive for prevention-focused consumers. The findings of Experiment 1 showed that online safety cues lower risk perceptions, but only for prevention-focused individuals. Experiment 2 replicated this finding and additionally demonstrated that online safety cues engender more positive attitudes toward the website and the online retailer and engenders more favorable behavioral intentions to use the website in the future, but again only for prevention-focused individuals.

The experiments in this chapter were the first that addressed the persuasiveness of online safety cues on consumer responses. Furthermore, the findings reported in the experiments showed evidence for the hypothesis that safety-oriented online information fits the consumers’ prevention focus. The findings demonstrated that online safety-oriented information is persuasive in terms of lowering risk perceptions, creating positive attitudes and behavioral intentions, but only for prevention-focused individuals. This implies, that online retailers should address the consumers’ strong focus on losses (i.e., prevention focus) with
assurances that there is nothing to lose. More generally, the findings indicate that regulatory fit applies to and is predictive of online consumer behavior.

Whereas Chapter 2 demonstrated that online shopping environments engenders self-regulation, Chapter 3 demonstrated that this concerns a prevention-focused self-regulation. Chapter 4 demonstrated the consequences of this prevention focus for the persuasiveness of online information.

Conclusion

The overarching research question in the thesis was: Will unique features of the ‘clickable’ online shopping context as compared to the ‘brick-and-mortar’ conventional shopping context affect a) the extent and b) the nature of consumer self-regulation, and subsequently c) the online shopping process? Two unique features of the online, as compared to the conventional, shopping context are considered in answering this question: lack of physical presence and perceived risky nature. The results from the experiments presented in this thesis consistently show that online consumers regulate themselves better and differently from consumers in the conventional brick-and-mortar store. First, addressing the first part of the research question, the results reported in Chapter 2 demonstrate the online consumer behavior is more regulated. In other words, online consumers have a more reflective buying behavior style: they are better at regulating their urges to buy and in conducting planned purchases. Second, addressing the second part of the question, the results in Chapter 3 demonstrated that online consumers’ self-regulation is prevention-focused in nature. Online consumers are more focused on preventing negative outcomes. Third, addressing the last part of the research question, the findings in Chapter 4 demonstrated that a prevention-focused self-regulation affects the online consumers’ shopping process, i.e., information preferences. Online consumers are more sensitive to information that fits the prevention focus.

The insights that emerge from these findings shed new light on online consumer self-regulation and show that shopping in the clickable online store is qualitatively different from shopping in the brick-and-mortar conventional store. For online retailers the question remains: how to regulate online consumers’ self-regulation?