Let's talk about alcohol: The role of interpersonal communication and health campaigns
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Chapter 5

Subjective reality:
The influence of perceived and objective conversational valence on binge drinking determinants

This chapter is under review as:
Chapter 5

Abstract

Previous studies have shown that interpersonal communication, and particularly perceived conversational valence (i.e., the perceived negativity or positivity of conversations) about health topics, influences health determinants. Based on 43 dyads ($N = 86$) discussing the topic of alcohol consumption, this study is the first to show that whereas perceived and objective conversational valence are positively related, only perceived conversational valence is a significant predictor of binge drinking attitudes and intentions. Thus, subjective reality matters more than objective reality. Furthermore, only the perceived valence of the participants’ own contributions, and not of their conversation partners, influences binge drinking intentions, indicating that self-persuasion is more influential than persuasion by others. Thus, conversations in which discussants themselves express negative opinions about unhealthy behaviors can enhance public health.
Interpersonal communication about unhealthy behaviors, such as excessive alcohol consumption, has been shown to influence social cognitive determinants of unhealthy conduct (e.g., Southwell & Yzer, 2007). A study on smoking cessation, for example, demonstrated that discussions about anti-smoking ads increased the intention to quit smoking (Brennan et al., 2010). Moreover, Real and Rimal (2007) revealed that talking about alcohol increased subsequent drinking intentions (see also Hendriks, Van den Putte, De Bruijn, & De Vreese, 2012; Van den Putte et al., 2011). Although it has been shown that whether people talk about alcohol and smoking is important for the determinants of these behaviors, limited research exists on the influence of how people talk about health topics. A few studies have shown that perceived conversational valence (i.e., how negative or positive people perceive their conversations to be) about health-related behaviors is important for health attitudes and intentions (e.g., Dunlop et al., 2010; Van den Putte et al., 2010). Whether this perceived conversational valence is related to a more objective measure of conversational valence, however, is not yet known. Moreover, whether the perception of the valence of the conversation is more predictive of subsequent attitudes and intentions than the objectively determined conversational valence is unclear. Lastly, although research has demonstrated the importance of self-perception and self-persuasion (e.g., Bem, 1965; Wilson & Dunn, 2004), it has not yet been explored whether the contribution of the self in the conversation is more important for discussion effects than the contribution of the conversation partner.

To address these lacunae in previous literature, the present study - focused on the effects of conversations about alcohol on binge drinking determinants - had three goals. First, we aimed to examine the association between perceived conversational valence and objective conversational valence. Second, we investigated how perceived and objective conversational valence link with changes in subsequent binge drinking attitudes and intentions. Third, we compared the effects of conversational valence of the participants themselves on binge drinking attitudes and intentions with the influence of conversational valence of the conversation partners. By investigating how perceived and objective conversational valence link with attitude and intention change, we provide important insight into which construct is more important for the prediction of health determinants. Furthermore, if our research shows that especially the conversational valence of the participants themselves, and not of the conversation partners, induces healthy binge drinking attitudes and intentions, health promotion attempts should stimulate discussions wherein the person is motivated to actively discuss alcohol negatively.
Chapter 5

Perceived versus objective conversational valence

Conversational valence has been shown to be important for the determinants of various health behaviors, such as cannabis use (Van den Putte et al., 2010), binge drinking (Hendriks et al., 2012), and obtaining a HPV vaccine (Dunlop et al., 2010). Hendriks et al. (2012), for instance, demonstrated that conversations that were perceived as negative toward alcohol consumption and binge drinking decreased subsequent intentions to binge drink. These studies had in common that they asked participants to indicate the valence of their conversations and thereby relied on measures of conversational valence obtained through self-perception and self-report.

Measures based on self-report and self-perception have several advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, these measures provide a unique insight into respondents' perceptions, knowledge, and values, and are easier and less expensive to collect than other measures. On the other hand, such measures can at times be at odds with reality, for instance, given the fact that people find it difficult to introspect or recall (Paulhus & Vazire, 2010). Therefore, there is a need to examine whether perceived conversational valence measures are in agreement with more objective conversational valence measures. Outside the context of interpersonal communication, there is a vast amount of research investigating the relationship between self-reported measures and more objective measures (e.g., Crockett, Schulenberg, & Petersen, 1987; Del Boca & Darkes, 2003; Ordoñana, González-Javier, Espín-López, & Gómez-Amor, 2009). However, no research to date has focused on the association between objective and perceived conversational valence. Therefore, a first goal of the present study was to investigate the extent to which perceived conversational valence (i.e., obtained through self-report) was related to a more objective conversational valence (i.e., obtained through content analyses). We predicted,

H1. Objective and perceived conversational valence measures are positively related.

The influence of perceived and objective conversational valence

Although it is important to assess an objective measure of conversational valence and understand the link between perceived and objective conversational valence, it is not necessarily the case that objective conversational valence is a more important predictor of subsequent health attitudes and intentions as compared
to perceived conversational valence. A second goal of the present research was to compare perceived with objective conversational valence in terms of changes in binge drinking determinants, thereby providing insight into the question whether the perception of the conversation or the objectively observed conversation is particularly relevant for health changes.

We argue that it is especially important how people perceive their discussions about health topics and how they interpret, experience, and remember information exchanged during the health-related conversation. For instance, research has shown that the influence of conversations on attitudes and knowledge depends on whether the discussant experiences and remembers the conversation as containing positive or negative arguments (Vinokur & Burnstein, 1974). The importance of perception is also in line with research on the self-perception theory (Bem, 1965; Wilson & Dunn, 2004), entailing that people infer their attitudes and other internal states from perceptions of their own conduct. For instance, when participants are asked to behave in a certain way or play a role in line with a certain viewpoint, this induces attitudes in accordance with this viewpoint, presumably because participants perceive their own behaviors as indicative for their actual preferences (e.g., Janis & King, 1954; Strack et al., 1988). Thus, the subjective experience and perception of the valence of the discussion seems especially relevant for subsequent attitudes and intentions. Given these notions, we expected,

H2. Perceived conversational valence is stronger related to attitudes and intentions toward binge drinking as compared to objective conversational valence.

The role of self-persuasion and the influence of the conversation partner

Self-persuasion thus seems important for determining attitudes and evaluations. A potential implication of this could be that how negatively or positively one speaks during a health conversation is more important for changes in health attitudes and intentions than how positively or negatively one's conversation partner speaks. This comparison between conversational valence of the self and conversational valence of the conversation partner has not yet been investigated. In fact, research focusing on interpersonal communication usually assumes that people are influenced by the persons to whom they are speaking (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and not necessarily by what people are saying themselves. The third goal of this study was therefore to investigate this comparison and to shed light onto the question whether actively voicing your own opinion is really
necessary for conversation effects to occur, or whether listening to your
conversation partner voicing his or her opinion is equally influential.

Self-generated persuasion (i.e., convincing oneself by voicing arguments or
opinions) has been shown to result in more powerful and long lasting effects as
compared to other persuasion attempts, given the fact that people view themselves
as especially credible and reliable (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001) and because people
tend to come up with arguments they themselves find specifically compelling (e.g.,
Greenwald & Albert, 1968). In their classic work, Janis and King (1954) for
instance showed that when people gave a counter-attitudinal speech, their attitudes
changed more strongly in the direction of the speech as compared to when they just
listened to someone else delivering the same speech (potentially due to increased
processing and elaboration; Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Thomson, 2006). This
finding is also consistent with the saying-is-believing effect (Higgins, 1999); that
is, when people are asked to verbalize a particular opinion, this elicits judgments,
knowledge, and attitudes in agreement with the expressed opinion. Expressing a
viewpoint could result in a shift in attitudes (e.g., when the expressed viewpoint is
counter-attitudinal) but also in more extreme and stronger attitudes (e.g., when the
expressed viewpoint is in line with existing attitudes; Downing et al., 1992; Powell
& Fazio, 1984). We therefore argue that it is likely that conversational valence of
oneself is particularly important for subsequent attitude and intention change.
Based on the above-mentioned, we expected,

H3. Conversational valence of the self more strongly influences attitudes
and intentions toward binge drinking than conversational valence of the
conversation partner.

The present study

The present study was conducted in the context of alcohol consumption.
Alcohol abuse, and binge drinking in particular, are prominent public health
concerns. Excessive alcohol consumption frequently results in serious accidents,
fights, and harassments, and is a large cause of preventable death and morbidity
(e.g., Cherpitel, 2007). Furthermore, excessive alcohol use is associated with many
major disease outcomes, such as liver cancer, epilepsy, hemorrhagic stroke, and
coronary heart disease (Rehm et al., 2003). Despite these detrimental effects of
alcohol abuse and binge drinking, many people engage in these behaviors.
Especially young people, and college students in particular, tend to do so (Kypri et
al., 2005; O'Malley & Johnston, 2002; Wechsler et al., 1994). Given the adverse
effects of excessive alcohol consumption, these findings are particularly alarming. Research aimed at addressing and preventing this particular health problem is therefore especially called for. We intended to confront this issue by investigating how perceived and objective conversational valence, and the distinction between the participants themselves and the conversation partners, induce changes in binge drinking attitudes and intentions.

Method

Participants and procedure

Eighty-six undergraduate students, 21 men and 65 women ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.52$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.67$), of the University of Amsterdam took part in a two-wave study and received credits for cooperation. Participants were familiar with each other and registered in dyads. Two weeks before visiting the lab, participants individually answered an online questionnaire measuring binge drinking attitudes and intentions (T0). At the beginning of the survey, a definition of binge drinking according to Dutch guidelines - defined as the consumption of four or more (for women) or six or more (for men) alcoholic beverages on one occasion - was given to ensure that the participants correctly understood our definition. Two weeks after the baseline assessment, participants arrived at the research lab in dyads. Given the fact that the current research was part of a larger study, one component of the procedure was not relevant for the present research. That is, participants were shown either an anti-alcohol video or no anti-alcohol video. Therefore, all analyses controlled for ad condition. Omitting ad condition as a factor in the analyses did not change the results.

Thereafter, participants were brought to a room resembling a living room where they were asked to discuss the topic of alcohol and binge drinking with their dyadic partner. Participants were monitored and recorded during the conversation by a hidden camera and microphone. All participants gave permission for the use of their recordings afterwards. After talking about the topic for approximately five minutes, participants were escorted back to their individual PCs where they were asked to fill out another survey. Attitude (T1) and intention (T1) were again assessed, as well as the perceived conversational valence of the participants themselves and of the conversation partners. Furthermore, the discussions were coded by four independent coders to obtain a more objective measure of conversational valence.
Materials and measures

**Binge drinking attitude.** Attitude toward refraining from binge drinking was assessed as the average score of six items measured on seven-point scales ("If I would not binge drink during the next two weeks, this would be ... " 1 = Very harmful to 7 = Very harmless; 1 = Very negative to 7 = Very positive; 1 = Very unsociable to 7 = Very sociable; 1 = Very unwise to 7 = Very wise; 1 = Very bad to 7 = Very good; 1 = Very unpleasant to 7 = Very pleasant; MT$_{T0}$ = 5.25, SD$_{T0}$ = 1.05, $\alpha_{T0}$ = .88; MT$_{T1}$ = 5.17, SD$_{T1}$ = 0.92, $\alpha_{T1}$ = .87).

**Binge drinking intention.** The intention to refrain from binge drinking was measured as the average score of three items ("I intend to not binge drink during the next two weeks", “I plan to not binge drink during the next two weeks”, and “I will try to not binge drink during the next two weeks”) which could be answered on seven-point scales (1 = Very unlikely to 7 = Very likely; MT$_{T0}$ = 3.86, SD$_{T0}$ = 2.09, $\alpha_{T0}$ = .98; MT$_{T1}$ = 3.63, SD$_{T1}$ = 2.07, $\alpha_{T1}$ = .99).

**Perceived conversational valence.** Perceived conversational valence of the self was measured through three questions (based on Hendriks et al., 2012): "How negative or positive have you spoken during the conversation about ..." (a) "drinking alcohol", (b) "binge drinking", and (c) "being drunk" which could be answered on seven-point scales (1 = Very negative to 7 = Very positive, M = 4.31, SD = 1.06, $\alpha$ = .75). Thirty-three percent of the participants scored below midscale, indicating a negative conversational valence of the self, and 56% scored above midscale, indicating a positive conversational valence of the self. The remaining 11% scored exactly midscale (i.e., indicating a neutral valence). Perceived conversational valence of the conversation partner was measured through three questions: "How negative or positive has your conversation partner spoken during the conversation about ..." (a) "drinking alcohol", (b) "binge drinking", and (c) "being drunk" which could be answered on seven-point scales (1 = Very negative to 7 = Very positive, M = 4.29, SD = 1.05, $\alpha$ = .73). Thirty-three percent of the participants scored below midscale, indicating a negative conversational valence of the conversation partner, and 50% scored above midscale, indicating a positive conversational valence of the conversation partner. The remaining 17% scored exactly midscale (i.e., indicating a neutral valence).
Content analysis

To obtain an objective measurement of conversational valence, a transcript was written for all recorded conversations. Then, four independent coders watched all videos and coded all transcripts according to a coding book especially developed for the purpose of the present study. An instruction and a training session were organized during which all coders coded the same training transcripts and during which problems could be discussed and solved. While three of the four coders agreed often, one of the four coders disagreed frequently with the other three coders. Omitting this particular coder resulted in an acceptable intercoder reliability between the three remaining coders, Krippendorff’s alpha = .71 (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

Every statement related to alcohol or binge drinking was coded, separately for the two persons in the conversation. When a statement increased the chance that the participant would consume alcohol (e.g., "I like drinking alcohol") it was coded as a positive statement about alcohol or binge drinking. When a statement decreased the chance that the participant would consume a lot of alcohol (e.g., "I hate being drunk") it was coded as a negative statement about alcohol or binge drinking. After the coding process, objective conversational valence for each person in the conversation was calculated by subtracting the number of negative statements from the number of positive statements. Higher scores indicated a more positive objective valence toward alcohol. An average score across the coders was calculated and was used during the analyses (M = -1.18, SD = 3.37). Sixty-two percent of the participants made more negative than positive statements, indicating a negative conversational valence, and 33% made more positive than negative statements, indicating a positive conversational valence. The remaining 5% scored exactly midscale (i.e., indicating a neutral valence).

Data analysis

All variables were standardized prior to the analyses. Multilevel linear mixed effects models were used to account for the dependent nature of the data (i.e., individuals nested within dyads). It must be noted that it was not possible to enter the statements from both the participants themselves and the conversation partners in the same multivariate model because statements from each participant in a dyad were simultaneously statements from the participant themselves, and, for the dyad partner, statements from the conversation partner (i.e., this would result in using the same data twice and thus inflate our results). Therefore, three univariate
models were tested using conversational valence measures from the participants themselves and three univariate models were tested using conversational valence measures from the conversation partners. These three analyses tested the relationship between objective and perceived conversational valence, between perceived conversational valence and binge drinking attitudes and intentions, and between objective conversational valence and binge drinking attitudes and intentions. Table 5.1 shows the correlations among the main study variables.

Results

The relationship between perceived and objective conversational valence

A significant relationship between perceived and objective conversational valence of the self was revealed, $\beta = .41, p < .001$. When focusing on the conversation partner, a significant relationship between perceived and objective conversational valence of the conversation partner ($\beta = .52, p < .001$) was also found. That is, when the content analysis showed that more negative than positive statements were made by the participants (conversation partners), participants also perceived that they (their conversation partners) had spoken more negatively about alcohol and binge drinking. Thus, objective and perceived conversational valence were positively related, thereby supporting H1.

The influence of perceived and objective valence of the self and conversation partner

Perceived valence. A significant effect of perceived conversational valence of the self on attitude at T1 ($\beta = -.24, p = .011$) and intention at T1 ($\beta = -.26, p = .002$) toward refraining from binge drinking was revealed, controlling respectively for attitude and intention at T0. When participants declared to have spoken negatively about alcohol, their attitudes toward refraining from binge drinking became more positive and their intention to refrain from binge drinking increased. Alternately, when participants declared to have spoken positively about alcohol, their attitudes toward refraining from binge drinking became more negative and their intention to refrain from binge drinking decreased. Analyses with perceived valence of the conversation partner as predictor showed the same pattern of results for attitude at T1 ($\beta = -.22, p = .013$), controlling for attitude at T0. However, no significant relationships at the $p < .05$ level were found.
Table 5.1
Correlations among main study variables.

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<td>1. Perceived valence self</td>
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<td>2. Perceived valence conversation partner</td>
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<td>3. Objective valence self</td>
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<td>.39**</td>
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<td>4. Objective valence conversation partner</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.58**</td>
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<td>5. Attitude T0</td>
<td>-.38**</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>-.10</td>
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<td>6. Attitude T1</td>
<td>-.46**</td>
<td>-.41**</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>7. Intention T0</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>.53**</td>
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<td>8. Intention T1</td>
<td>-.42**</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.70**</td>
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**. Correlation is significant at the .01 level.
*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level.
between perceived valence of the conversation partner and intention at T1 ($\beta = -.16, p = .060$), controlling for intention at T0.

**Objective valence.** No significant effects of objective conversational valence of the self on attitude T1 ($\beta = -.16, p = .088$) or intention T1 ($\beta = -.17, p = .051$) toward binge drinking was found at the $p < .05$ level, controlling respectively for attitude and intention at T0. This result entailed that when participants made more negative than positive statements about alcohol, their attitudes and intentions toward refraining from binge drinking did not significantly change as a function of the uttered statements. Objective conversational valence of the conversation partner also had no effects on attitude ($\beta = -.12, p = .167$) or intention at T1 ($\beta = -.11, p = .206$), controlling respectively for attitude and intention at T0.

Concluding, in line with H2, whereas perceived conversational valence was significantly related to changes in attitudes and intentions, objective conversational valence was not. Also, although both the conversational valence of the self and the conversation partner had no influence when looking at objective valence, the finding that perceived conversational valence of the self elicited changes in binge drinking intentions (whereas perceived conversational valence of the conversation partner had no significant effects on intention change) partly supported H3.

**Discussion**

The present study was the first to investigate the relationship between perceived and objective conversational valence, the changes in binge drinking attitudes and intentions as elicited by these two different ways of looking at conversational valence, and the influence of the distinction between the self versus the conversation partner. Three main conclusions can be drawn. First, perceived and objective conversational valence are positively related. Second, perceived conversational valence predicts attitude and intention change whereas objective conversational valence is unrelated to changes in these behavioral determinants. Third, although both perceived conversational valence of the self and conversation partner influence binge drinking attitudes, only perceived conversational valence of the self, and not of the conversation partner, significantly influences binge drinking intentions.

The first main conclusion concerns the association between perceived and objective conversational valence. As argued, it is important to relate psychological
self-reported measures with objective ones, because measures based on self-report and self-perception - although they provide a unique insight into people's perceptions and knowledge - can suffer from introspection and recall issues and may therefore not always correspond with reality. The results showed that the perceived conversational valence measure, as used by other researchers (Dunlop et al., 2010; Hendriks et al., 2012), was positively associated with the more objectively coded conversational valence measure, thereby rendering its use appropriate for use in future research. The medium to large correlations (Cohen, 1992) between objective and perceived conversational valence show that young people are relatively accurate in the description and recall of the objective valence of their discussions about alcohol. Because measures based on self-report and self-perception are also more easy and cheaper to obtain, we would advise scholars and practitioners to measure perceived conversational valence instead of a more objective conversational valence.

The second main conclusion is related to the changes in binge drinking attitudes and intentions as elicited by perceived and objective conversational valence. The results indicated that when participants perceived that they had spoken negatively (positively) about alcohol, their attitudes and intentions became more positive (negative) toward refraining from binge drinking. This finding is in line with other research showing that perceived conversational valence influences health determinants (e.g., Dunlop et al., 2010; Hendriks et al., 2012; Van den Putte et al., 2010). We found substantial effects of the conversation on changes in binge drinking attitudes and intentions (i.e., beta weights of -.24 and -.26), thereby further emphasizing the importance of interpersonal communication for health determinants (see also Real & Rimal, 2007; Southwell & Yzer, 2007; Van den Putte et al., 2011). In contrast with the significant effects of perceived conversational valence, objective conversational valence did not induce significant changes in binge drinking attitudes and intentions at the conventional $p < .05$ level. The supremacy of perceived conversational valence is in line with self-perception research and is in agreement with our expectation that the self-perception, subjective experience, and recall of the valence of the conversation is more important than the objectively assessed valence (e.g., Bem, 1965; Wilson & Dunn, 2004). After talking about alcohol, our participants’ attitudes and intentions mostly changed as a function of how they perceived their conversation as opposed to how the conversation more objectively went.

These two findings together hold potentially important implications for health research and health promotion interventions. Given the relevance of interpersonal communication - and conversational valence in particular - for the determinants of health behavior, the present findings further our understanding of
effective health promotion interventions, and show that interpersonal communication is a potentially useful tool to increase healthy binge drinking intentions and attitudes. By designing interventions that stimulate conversations that are negative about unhealthy conduct (for instance by organizing discussion groups in which only the negative aspects of binge drinking are discussed; Janis & King, 1954) more healthy attitudes and intentions can be evoked. This importance of interpersonal communication is particularly relevant for the development of successful interventions aimed at reducing binge drinking prevalence rates because college students, who especially engage in binge drinking, are particularly prone to peer influence and are often present in social settings where the topic of alcohol consumption is discussed (Bot et al., 2005; Dorsey et al., 1999). Furthermore, we showed that it is particularly important to measure how people perceive their discussions. It seems that the simple act of asking a person to reflect on a previous health conversation not only results in a relatively accurate description of the conversation that occurred but also predicts subsequent health attitude and intention change.

While the perceived and objective conversational valence measures were positively related, perceived conversational valence was not always in line with objectively coded valence. That is, while it was objectively coded that 62% of the participants spoke negatively about alcohol, this was only perceived as such by 33% of the respondents. Furthermore, 56% of the participants perceived their own conversational valence as positive, while only 33% of the participants scored a positive objectively coded valence. A potential explanation could be that people more easily recall positive statements than negative ones, resulting in a more positive perceived valence than objective valence. This is in line with research showing that participants in conversations process conversations differently as compared to outsiders observing the discussion (Stafford, Waldron, & Infield, 1989). Because our results indicate that a positive perceived conversational valence elicits unhealthy binge drinking attitudes and intentions, it is worrisome that the majority of our participants perceived their conversation as positive. Encouraging interpersonal communication seems to be a two-edged sword. For some persons interpersonal communication can induce desirable effects when perceived conversational valence is negative about unhealthy conduct, for other persons it can produce unwanted effects when perceived conversational valence is positive about unhealthy behaviors. Hence, health interventions promoting interpersonal communication should take conversational valence into account to prevent undesired effects.

With regard to the third main conclusion, we found that although both perceived conversational valence of the self and of the conversation partner
influenced binge drinking attitudes, only perceived conversational valence of the self, and not of the conversation partner, influenced binge drinking intentions. This superiority of conversational valence of the self was also suggested when looking at the objective valence measures. Although no overall significant effects (at $p < .05$) were visible on binge drinking determinants, objectively coded statements from the participants themselves marginally significantly (at $p < .10$) influenced binge drinking attitudes and intentions. Statements from the conversation partner however, had no (marginally) significant effects at all on attitudes or intentions. Hereby, our study provides a first tentative insight into the relative contribution of the conversation partner and the potential role of self-persuasion. Our results suggest that during conversations about alcohol, people are more influenced by what they say themselves as compared to what their conversation partner is saying. These results support the idea of self-generated persuasion and the saying-is-believing effect (Briñol, McCaslin, & Petty, 2012; Higgins, 1999; Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001) and are in line with the classical study by Janis and King (1954) showing that when people give a speech they convince themselves more than when they listen to the same speech delivered by others. The fact that perceived conversational valence of the self, as opposed to perceived conversational valence of the conversation partner, was especially important for binge drinking intentions, implicates that health promotion interventions should not only aim to stimulate discussions that are negative about alcohol but should also promote an active participation in the discussion, preferably by stimulating discussants to actively voice opinions in line with the goal of the intervention.

Limitations and conclusions

The present research has a few limitations. First, although we found a positive association between perceived and objective conversational valence, the association between these two measures was not a perfect coefficient of one (i.e., the standardized regression weights varied between .41 and .52). Although this result could be expected given the fact that relatively moderate and even weak correlations between objective and self-reported variables are quite common (e.g., Horner, Harvey, & Denier, 1999; Otten, Littenberg, & Harvey-Berino, 2010), this means that there is some unexplained variance that predicts self-reported conversational valence. Future research should aim to explore which other concepts underlying and predict self-reported conversational valence.

Second, we compared objective with perceived conversational valence in terms of subsequent changes in self-reported attitudes and intentions. It is possible
that more objective outcome measures (e.g., actual behaviors) or less explicit ones (e.g., implicit attitudes) are weaker related to perceived conversational valence and stronger related to objective conversational valence (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). We encourage future studies to explore these relationships in more detail. Third, we measured perceived conversational valence shortly after the conversation occurred. It is possible that the association between this measure and the objective measurement becomes weaker when more time elapses, for example due to difficulties with remembering the conversation (Stafford, Burggraf, & Sharkey, 1987). Further research is needed to explore the relationship between perceived and objective conversational valence measures across a greater time span.

In closing, the present study provides some valuable insights. While objective and perceived conversational valence about health topics are positively related, especially perceived conversational valence influences health attitude and intention change. Furthermore, whereas the perceived conversational valence of people themselves significantly affects changes in peoples’ own health intentions, the conversational valence of their conversation partners does not. Thus, to induce more healthy attitudes and intentions, health promotion attempts should focus on stimulating health-related conversations, in which discussants actively participate, that are perceived as negative about the unhealthy behavior.