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April 14, 2015

I Can't Even Because Language: Investigating Attitudes Towards Internet Phrases in Speech

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## Abstract

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By Sarahmarie Specht-Bird

This study examines how the Internet-engendered phrases *I can't even* and *because X* are used in the speech of Emory undergraduate students, what the prevailing attitudes towards them are and how these attitudes affect their use, and how they function as markers of group membership. Based on previous work on Internet language (e.g., Crystal, 2011; Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008) and sociolinguistic examinations of novel speech features (e.g., Buchstaller, 2014), this study undertakes a twofold data collection methodology involving a survey measure followed by three in-depth focus groups to gather detailed information about the reported use of these phrases. The findings of the study indicated that both *I can't even* and *because X* function as tersely worded, efficient “conversation enders” associated with conveying humor. The use of both is dependent on understanding of reference; however, *I can't even* is more stigmatized and indicated to be used only humorously and ironically or to mock the speech of young, white females, while *because X* is not reported to carry either stigma or prestige or to be associated with any particular group of people. The lack of stigma for *because X* and its grammatical function seems to indicate that this is a more productive, lasting construction, while the notoriety of the stereotype associated with *I can't even* undermines its productivity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Upon receiving a Grammy in 2014, country singer Kacey Musgroves began her acceptance speech with a curious three-word declaration: *I can't even*. This construction, which seems to indicate a sense of being overwhelmed or unable to express emotion, has engendered both excitement and anger from popular media and academia alike. Writer Devin Largent on the popular site Thought Catalog decries *I can't even*, saying that "...it makes zero sense" and bemoaning the fact that "we have succumbed to the idea that these phrases indicate complete thoughts. And that is something with which I cannot deal." In March 2014 Gawker featured a video by comedy group Garlic Jackson entitled "Woman Literally Almost Dies Because She Can't Even," in which a woman repeatedly utters the phrase *I can't even* to the point of medical emergency. Even more recently, in March 2015, the phrase attracted the attention of Saturday Night Live. In a skit starring Bobby Moynihan, Dakota Johnson, Cecily Strong, and Aidy Bryant, three coworkers complain repeatedly and hyperbolically about such minutiae such as how it is so cold that it is "literally Antarctica" in the office and how they "can't even" with their broken-armed coworker "Margo," who truly cannot close the window due to said broken arms. As humorous, if not unbearable, as people may find this phrase to be, still other outlets have defended it, such as Slate writer Rebecca Cohen's assertion that "*I can't even* is now a sentence" and that it is "an Internet-inflicted way of saying, 'I can't even express how I'm feeling right now,'" as well as linguist Mark Liberman's (2011) explanation of the use of *even* for emphasis. By far the most innovative quality of *I can't even* is its communicative function: in and of itself, the construction needs no further explanation but can successfully and completely transmit its meaning of being unable to fully encompass an emotion without any redundancy or repetition.

An important parallel phenomenon of a linguistic construction engendered by the Internet is the new syntactic construction *because X* (e.g., *because science*; *because reasons*). While *because X* has also received both support and criticism, this construction has certainly been received more positively than its contemporary *I can't even*. Like *I can't even*, *because X* represents not lexical but grammatical change: as explained by the American Dialect Society, the “traditional” use of *because* is as a conjunction between two clauses, while the new *because* needs not be followed by anything other than a noun, adjective, or verb, and conveys a wider meaning than the old. The American Dialect Society voted *because* as the Word of the Year for 2013 with the rationale that “ [in the] past year, the very old word *because* exploded with grammatical possibilities in informal online use... Now one often sees tersely worded rationales like ‘because science’ or ‘because reasons.’ You might not go to a party ‘because tired.’ As one supporter put it, *because* should be Word of the Year ‘because useful!’” (American Dialect Society). While both *I can't even* and *because X* are productive in that they can communicate a wealth of information without going into explicit explanation, *because X* has received much less backlash than has *I can't even*. Whether this is due to lack of demographic association, lack of awareness, less use, or another feature is a question that will be explored in the present study.

The choice to focus on these constructions is deliberate: both *I can't even* and *because X* are very recent linguistic features generated by the Internet that have gained both positive and negative media attention for their use, and they, unlike vocabulary terms such as the modern *lol* or *swag*, represent novel grammatical, rather than lexical, constructions. Examining their use and attitudes towards them can give a clearer general picture of the behavior of new features generated by the Internet and can shed light on the effect of attitudes on the use of such phrases in speech. However, since these are such new constructions and to this date no empirical

research specifically focusing on these two linguistic items has been carried out, the theoretical background must focus on distinct but parallel research and aspects related to their use. These areas are: general work on the language of the Internet, language change, adolescence and gender, and language attitudes. This Introduction section gives a preliminary view of these areas of research and presents the research foci for the present study, and the following Theoretical Background section gives more specific information found in the related literature. The first area of consideration is the relationship between the Internet and language change.

### **The Internet and language change**

These constructions are a small piece of the much larger picture of language change facilitated by technology and online communication. Starting in the early 2000s with the rise of the Internet as a medium of social connection, linguists such as David Crystal began to pave the way for the new area of study called Internet Linguistics. In his groundbreaking work *Language and the Internet*, Crystal (2001) presents a linguistic perspective on the Internet as a powerful medium for a new register of language as a response to assertions that technology is a “risk for humanity” and “destroying” language. Exploring the Internet as a formidable tool for linguistic innovation, he poses the following questions: “Do the relaxed standards of e-mails augur the end of literacy and spelling as we know it? Will the Internet herald a new era of technobabble? Will linguistic creativity and flexibility be lost as globalization imposes sameness?” (2). Similarly, popular claims that the Internet is leading to the complete and utter ruin of language drove Tagliamonte and Denis’s (2008) investigation of teen language on Instant Messaging (IM) networks, the aim of which was to identify the true nature of IM language among teenagers<sup>1</sup>. The authors concluded that the suggestion that language is degrading due to the influence of the

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<sup>1</sup> This study is discussed in greater detail in the Theoretical Background section.

Internet is misguided, pointing out that if these teens did not possess a native command of their linguistic system, the speech observed in IM communication would be impossible, that the nature of IM “reveals fluid mastery of the sociolinguistic resources in their speech community,” and, most notably, that perhaps “computer-mediated communication... is not the ruin of this generation at all, but an expansive new linguistic renaissance” (27).

The fear that technology will completely and irreversibly change language, while perhaps irrational, is not entirely unfounded. The internet represents a world where information is available in seconds, where global communication previously impossible without long periods of time is made possible in an instant, where new phenomena can occur and be talked about before “real life” can catch up. Language change has always been a constant, but the emergence of the Internet is a completely different and much more powerful vehicle for rapid change than anything that ever existed before. Everything on the Internet is fast: statuses on Facebook are liked in seconds, videos on YouTube are posted, shared, and within hours may have thousands of views. Linguistic constructions employed in articles, video clips, comments and posts can be seen quickly and by almost anyone. Changes in language that may have taken much longer in the past are now facilitated and spread much more rapidly due to this global connector. Considering this power, we are better able to understand the array of possibilities that the Internet will have for language moving forward into the future.

However, the degree to which spoken language will change is of great debate, as is the degree to which technology and the media have an effect on language change. Buchstaller (2014) discusses the lack of empirical support for the assertion that media directly causes change or influences certain phenomena in language in light of her research on quotatives (e.g., *be like*, *go* in reporting the speech of a third party: *She was like*, “*No way*”). There is no debate as to

whether the media imparts knowledge on its audiences, but the degree to which media actually *changes* language is more unclear. The wider dissemination of information via outlets such as the Internet and television has the potential to reach a variety of people; as an example, Buchstaller mentions the unprecedented reach of the 2008 Obama campaign through its YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook accounts and the ability of this reach to fundamentally change voting behavior.

Still, while these effects demonstrate the ability of the Internet to facilitate social relations both online and offline, they neither prove that these phenomena would not have occurred without the influence of the Internet, nor do they say anything about the long-term likelihood of Internet-engendered phenomena continuing to exist in spoken interaction in the future. Crystal (2011) mentions a few vocabulary terms that have come into existence due to the Internet, such as *download* in the sense of giving a “full report,” *hack* in the sense of “solve,” and *offline* as “unavailable,” but emphasizes that in a 2004 glossary search he was able to find only a few such uses, and that “only a tiny number [of usages] are heard outside of the domain of electronic communication” (61). Since that time the Internet and therefore its linguistic occurrences have certainly changed, and will continue to do so. Therefore, while it is clear that the Internet has engendered many new linguistic constructions, it is not certain what the future trajectory of Internet language will look like in terms of the actual adoption of features.

### **Adolescence and gender**

In a discussion of recently appearing utterances in the English language, it is essential to examine the specific subgroups in which these phrases are appearing. In general, the most innovative language change tends to occur among younger populations. In her study on the variation and change in the use of the quotatives *be all*, *go*, and *like*, Buchstaller (2014)

emphasizes that there is a “persistent age effect” for these recent innovations, and mentions that in the mid 1990s the frequency of occurrence of *be all* slowed down when it fell out of use by young people in California and instead began to be replaced by *be like* (98). The overall use of a linguistic feature is largely driven by its popularity among younger generations.

Another important factor in language change is gender. Women are consistently on the forefront of linguistic innovation, and in written language are more likely to use features such as punctuation (Crystal, 2011). Moreover, a consideration of gender is not just important for language change but also for language variation. Work such as that by Eckert (1998) has emphasized that men and women speak differently; since women are often at greater pains to prove that they belong, they generally implement more features more commonly associated with “standard” language (i.e., the language spoken by a more powerful or prestigious group) in their speech. However, the author also mentions that gender differences cannot simply be reduced to this comparison of “standard” usage. Through a study of the speech of several different groups at a high school, Eckert concluded that desire to belong to a particular group, and not just gender, is a primary factor in the choice to use certain linguistic features (Eckert, 1998). This area of research will be more fully discussed in the following Theoretical Background section.

### **Language Attitudes**

An important consideration for investigating language change and new linguistic innovations is language attitudes. To examine the import, gravity, and permanence of new features such as *I can't even* and *because X*, it is necessary to understand how ideologies both towards a language variety in general (i.e., language generated by the Internet) and the specific features used. Language attitudes research is a broad field, but broadly speaking, an attitude is defined as a learned “psychological construct” that embodies a positive or negative affect

towards an idea or object; attitudes are learned, not innate, and are expressed outwardly in a variety of ways (Garrett, 2010). The study of language attitudes can take place on many levels and with many foci, including attitudes towards words, certain grammatical features, accents, codeswitching, and overall attitudes towards specific languages and their speakers. It has been demonstrated previously in this introduction that a pervasive ideology exists about the negative influence of the Internet on language, a belief that the language of IM, texting and other forms of computer-mediated communication is “bad” or “incorrect” language. Understanding the population from which this attitude arises and the relationship with the population who uses such language can help to shed light on the reasons for using certain linguistic features. In her study of the use of quotatives, Buchstaller (2014) dedicates an entire chapter to the examination of ideologies surrounding the new quotatives *be like* and *go*, with particular focus on negative attitudes surrounding the use of *like*. The author begins the discussion by mentioning the array of communication that she has received in the past attempting to derail her area of study, such as an email with the following line: “I am disappointed that someone of your status would support and defend the use of filler words as somehow meaningful in the English language. I never speak in such a manner, nor will I tolerate those around me so doing” (199). This passage indicates a prescriptivist perspective, which is defined in linguistics as a point of view that “requires that language use, as in other matters, things shall be done the ‘right’ way” (Buchstaller, 2014). In light of the fact that the features on which she focuses have long been associated with adolescence and their so-called “casual” or “incorrect” speech, Buchstaller also makes the point that adolescents and their speech have long suffered from the prevailing idea that they are tainting an otherwise stable and perfect language, and that “many of us... are hyper-attentive to adolescent speech, falsely assuming that vernacular features are only ever found in the speech of

present-day adolescents” (204). What many people forget, though, is that language change is not a recent phenomenon, and neither is the association of teenagers with the destruction of “correct” grammar. Buchstaller describes the period between ages 13 and 17 as the “exuberant age bracket that contributes most to the advancement of linguistic changes” (205) and insists that those linguistic purists themselves were once members of this category of speakers, with their own social, physical, and linguistic features characteristic of the time in life that is riddled with uncertainty and the quest for a stable identity. Speakers’ linguistic patterns tend to become more stable during or after adolescence; therefore the language spoken by older generations is typically crystallized and does not tend to take on new features (Buchstaller, 2014).

While much prevailing negativity surrounding certain linguistic features is due to age difference, the use or non-use of a feature can also be defined more broadly by a desire to associate or not associate with a particular language, culture, or group. According to Garrett (2010), attitudes are related to habits, values, beliefs, opinions, and social stereotypes, the last of which is shaped by social categorization. He notes that “such groups can be diverse in nature: people from a particular country, region, or city, people who drive a particular type of car, people who ride bicycles, used-car dealers, academics, people of a particular ethnicity, males and females, and even...people with a particular name” (32). Attitudes are thus inseparable from their social contexts, and can vary drastically depending on the population of interest. In the present study, attitudes are taken into consideration both in terms of the overall theoretical study of ideology surrounding the Internet and computer-mediated communication and for the individual features *I can't even* and *because X* in the speech of undergraduate students. This attitudinal perspective is undertaken in order to understand the relationship between the population with whom the phrases are indicated to be associated and those who give this



indication, to gain a clearer picture of the group-membership marking role of the constructions, and to provide a more accurate and well-rounded understanding of the underlying function of these features.

### **Moving Forward**

The present study aims to investigate the occurrence of the relatively recent constructions *I can't even* and *because X*. While the grammar of these phrases is considered, the primary goal of this research is to examine the use of these phrases in the speech of Emory undergraduates, to describe the attitudes towards them, and to investigate how these attitudes affect the choice to use them or not use them. The two main research questions are as follows:

1. What are the attitudes towards *I can't even* and *because X* among Emory undergraduates, and how is the choice to use them or not use them informed by the attitudes surrounding them?
2. What does the use of *I can't even* and *because X* imply about membership in a certain social group?

A mixed-methods approach is used, with an online survey distributed to the Emory University undergraduate population followed by three 35-45-minute long focus groups composed of individuals who indicated at the end of the survey that they were willing to be contacted for participation. Initial predictions for this study, which were based on previous research on language change and language attitudes, were that both phrases would be used to communicate humor and build rapport among a group of speakers, but that *I can't even* would much more often be negatively stereotyped; *I can't even* was predicted to be associated with female usage, while *because X* was predicted not to have an association with gender; *I can't even*

was predicted to be more widely understood than *because X*, but *because X* was predicted to have a wider range of functionality than *I can't even*.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section gives a review of the key theoretical ideas related to the question of how the Internet-engendered constructions *I can't even* and *because X* function in spoken language. As the present study is an attitudinal investigation, the purpose of this section is to discuss how the use of certain linguistic constructions can serve to create solidarity within a group and to identify a speaker with a particular type of person, or to put distance between a speaker and a specific other population of speakers. The Internet and language is discussed first, followed by gender and adolescence as factors in language change, language attitudes research, and finally, the use of linguistic features to mark group membership.

### **The Internet and factors in language change**

Wherever there is language, there is language change. Some lexical items come into use and remain, while others become obsolete. Our daily social interactions constantly influence our linguistic choices. Considering this, it is not surprising that much attention has begun to be given to the role of the Internet in the appearance of new linguistic phenomena. Communication via the Internet, particularly social media and forum sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, blogging sites, and Reddit, not only allows for more ease of interaction between more physically distant parties but also allows for increased daily written communication between peers and contemporaries. As mentioned previously, much research (e.g., Crystal, 2011; Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008; Merchant, 2001) has investigated the specific characteristics defining this new genre of writing, which occupies a place between the casual, informal nature of speech between friends and the formal nature of standardized writing.

### *Internet linguistics and language change*

The aforementioned work is just a part of a growing body of research called Internet linguistics, which investigates the increasing influence of the Internet on language, the social implications of this type of language, and how language is used on the Internet within and between groups in certain contexts. Perhaps the foremost figure in the field of Internet linguistics is David Crystal, whose work *Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide* (2011) explores this area of study in light of several perspectives and examples of specific foci within Internet linguistics. In discussing language change and its relation to the Internet, Crystal notes five areas of consideration: vocabulary, orthography, grammar, pragmatics, and styles. Vocabulary is perhaps the most salient and obvious example of a change driven by the use of the Internet. Crystal notes that “vocabulary is always the area of language that most readily manifests change” (58), and cites examples such as *blogger* and *tweet*, which have arisen as a consequence of particular types of sites and have been adopted into vernacular use. The author does mention, however, despite the rapid addition of terms in English due to the Internet and particular advances in technology, if all of the terms that have appeared due to the Internet were to be counted, they would probably still number less than a few thousand; when compared to wider sets of specific vocabulary such as that for specific areas of scientific study, this number is very small. As such, we must “conclude that the Internet is as yet playing a relatively minor role in the character of a language’s lexicon” (60). Crystal emphasizes that grammatical—rather than lexical—change is the area in which lasting innovation is taking place.

Although lexical change is more apparent and more easily integrated into use, particularly online, the occurrence of grammatical change within particular contexts can be quite telling of social relations on the Internet. As Crystal mentions, “When [grammatical change] does occur on the Internet, it tends to be restricted to a particular situation or group of users, and

it often gives the impression of being a cult usage” (2011; 63). As an example of a particular grammatical change, Crystal cites the substitution of *z* for *s* to mark plurality; the particular niche that uses this construction was at the time of publication small, however, and much work remains to be carried out on such features. On the Internet writing tends to be more fluid; in online writing, unlike formal academic writing, it is common to see longer sentences or phrases without punctuation and segments that would not occur in “traditional” writing. An extract cited by Crystal exemplifies this quality of Internet writing:

In the past couple of days I’ve been blogging away to my heart’s content...well, as much as my partner will let me, cos we’ve only got one computer and you wouldn’t believe the number of times we both try to use it at the same time – not to mention the power cuts – oh yes, they happen a lot where we live and they’re a real pain, but as I say blogging away about – all sorts of things... (Crystal 69).

This excerpt demonstrates the casual quality of speech found on blogs. This is similar to speech, where structured paragraph forms and formal constructions do not occur. However, unlike speech, this writing also employs punctuation, capitalization, and other rules found in formal or academic writing. This illustrates the particular nature of Internet language: it is written, so it follows some rules of “proper” language conventions, but it is also used for social communication, and so it carries the casual, informal qualities of speech among peers.

Apart from the grammar of Internet language, the role of pragmatics is also interesting to note. Pragmatics studies the linguistic choices people make, the factors that drive these choices, and the intentions behind those choices. Crystal (2011) mentions that many of the writing conventions found on the Internet do not follow those of spoken language. A *troll*, for example, is someone who writes intentionally contradictory or offensive statements on posts in forums or other sites on the Internet to cause irritation or a negative reaction among the audience. Where this use of language would violate conventions in spoken language, it is a common occurrence

on the Internet. This is just one example of how Internet language can sometimes behave differently than either spoken language or formal written language. Not only does Internet language (such as that used on IM or in blogs) contain novel orthographic constructions (i.e., grammatical constructions such as the plural *-z*), but it also contains novel choices and behaviors. Crystal notes that this most likely has to do with anonymity: although social interaction is still taking place, the “speakers” are able to hide behind their screens and cover their real identities. Therefore a construction or behavior that may not be acceptable (or as acceptable) in speech has a place and a reason for use on the Internet.

In summary, the Internet has allowed for (and will continue to allow for) language change like no other medium in history. As Crystal mentions, “The Internet is the largest area of development we have seen in our lifetimes. Only two things are certain: it is not going to go away, and it is going to get larger” (149). The linguistic study of the Internet has never been so prominent and will only continue to grow in its importance as technology, social networking, and information sharing continue to increase online worldwide. Therefore it is important that we consider the implications it has for language use and change.

#### *Interactions in Internet language and language change: gender and adolescence*

In order to study language change, it is necessary to consider the factors that drive it. One of the most salient of these factors is gender. As a general rule, linguistic innovation is more quickly accepted, adopted and used by women. Crystal (2011) mentions in his section describing the language of Twitter that at the time of publication, the majority of Twitter users were women, which he asserts was unsurprising given that women are more likely to engage in “social chat” (Crystal 2011; Business Insider). In addition, women are more likely to use features such as punctuation and exclamations in writing. In speech, too, women tend to drive linguistic change

An example of this is the recent phenomenon called *creaky voice*, in which speech, particularly at the ends of sentences or utterances, is articulated with an accompanying high glottal tension, resulting in the vibration of only one end of the vocal cords. Yuasa (2010) conducted a study in which participants rated the likelihood of a list of linguistic features, including creaky voice, to be used by males or females. In the majority of cases creaky voice was indicated as a female use. Yuasa explains this phenomenon as a repurposing; upwardly mobile women have begun use this particular linguistic feature to emphasize their status and to assist them in securing greater opportunities. This is but one example of a recent linguistic innovation that has been embraced and led by women.

The discussion of women and language change is part of a larger body of work that focuses on language and gender. First and foremost, the most crucial point to take from this area of study is that men and women speak differently. Eckert (1998) discusses how there exists a distinction between “women’s speech” and “men’s speech.” Women’s speech is typically thought of as more conservative, and while this is not always true, this view tends to be due both to the fact that women are in a subordinate position in linguistic interaction and to the historic exclusion of women in the workplace: “Because women’s position in society is generally subordinate to men’s, and because women have fewer opportunities to secure their positions through occupational success or other abilities, they find it necessary to use symbolic means to enhance their position” (Eckert, 67). Historically, women are seen as other, as different from the standard, and so they are in a disadvantaged position and must work harder to prove that they belong. If a particular feature can be used to mark women as a member of a desired group, it is likely that that feature will be adopted and put into use. However, the view that women’s speech is more conservative than men’s, Eckert argues, is too generalized. The author conducted a study

on the speech of several social groups at a high school and noting that the adoption of certain linguistic features (in this case the phonetic variation of three “vowels in flux”: *ae*, *ay*, and *uh*). Eckert concluded that the choice to use these particular features had less to do with gender and more to do with the social group to which one belonged: in this case the author focused on “burnouts,” whose language was more liberal with regard to these features, and “jocks,” who employed more conservative language. However, when going further and adding the gender dimension within these groups, it was determined that burnout girls used the most innovative features, whereas the jocks—both male and female—used more conservative language. Thus, Eckert concludes, it is not simply a question of whether males’ or females’ language is more conservative or innovative but rather how speakers use linguistic features to identify with particular groups. As Eckert states: “While men develop a sense of themselves and find a place in the world on the basis of their actions and abilities, women have to focus on the production of selves— to develop authority through a continual proof of worthiness” (73). Whatever social group they belong to, women are at greater pains to focus on and to construct who they are, and a large part of this identity and group membership building consists of linguistic choice.

In addition to gender, language change is also intimately tied to age<sup>2</sup>. In her work *Quotatives: New Trends and Sociolinguistic Implications*, Buchstaller (2014) discusses the new quotatives *be like* and *go*, in light of their history, context, attitudes towards them, and their place in the speech of adolescents. The use of these features, she argues, serves as a distinguishing factor to set certain groups apart. Speaking about the importance of adolescence in language change, she comments:

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<sup>2</sup> A more detailed discussion of the research regarding the use of particular linguistic features as markers of in-group (e.g., Buchstaller, 2014; Paolillo, 2011) will be covered in the following subsection.



The age span we call adolescence, i.e. the ages of about 13 to 17, tends to be characterized by stylistic exuberance, relying on the exploitation of semiotic resources such as fashion, music, ways of speaking, as well as other linguistic features for the ‘creation of distinction’ between individual personae and stylistic repertoires (204).

The vast majority of innovations in language originate from this age group, as Buchstaller mentions. As young people are trying to discern their individual place within a population, their choice to use specific linguistic features over others identifies them as part of a particular group or, conversely, marks them distinctly as non-members of other particular groups. Citing several past studies such as Paolillo (2011) as Cutler (1999) Buchstaller discusses the widespread finding that in order to identify themselves with a particular group, adolescents adopt not only stylistic characteristics such as clothing and music but also specific linguistic features, such as the use of one language over another in a particular community (e.g., Paolillo, 2011; the use of Hindi versus English in an online relay chat community), or *r*-deletion and the alternation of (t/θ) and (d/ð) in speech (Buchstaller, 2014; 95). These findings indicate that the employment of these resources can become emblematic of an “in-group marker via which individuals can claim and display solidarity with and membership in the community” (95).

The importance of the use of linguistic features to define group membership has never been more salient than in the past decade, as social networking and time spent on the Internet has taken front stage in communication among young people. In a study by Merchant (2001), the overlap of language change, the Internet, and adolescents was investigated by observing the language and writing of six teenage girls, ages 14-16, within the context of Internet chat. The author found that chatroom interactions are combinations of interactive writing and real-life, face-to-face speech, and that the spelling conventions in these contexts are based on how words sound in speech, rather than how they are represented in formal writing. This serves to distinguish the language used by these adolescents from the formal language of education and

mark these speakers as identifying with other speakers in their own age group. Examples of some linguistic features identified by Merchant in this register include phonetic spellings (e.g., “NE1” for *anyone*) and acronyms (e.g., the ubiquitous modern *lol*; the use of such terms, Merchant mentions, falls within the long-standing tradition of using abbreviations in informal correspondence, such as *SWALK* for *sealed with a loving kiss*). The author concludes that chatroom speak is a distinct linguistic code that represents a shared repertoire. Rather than viewing this language as incorrect or erroneous, Merchant urges teachers and other older speakers to help teenagers understand when it is the appropriate time to use certain conventions over others, i.e., that the language used in IM is an acceptable, understood register when used for IM communication, but only the academic register of English is acceptable for formal writing.

Merchant’s findings are echoed by the work of Tagliamonte and Denis (2008), who created and analyzed a corpus of the natural, unsolicited IM speech of 72 teenagers. The authors set out to investigate the popular claim that computer-mediated communication such as IM is bringing about the downfall of language or “linguistic ruin of the generation,” as one mentioned source put it. Like Merchant (2001), they found that IM language is a middle ground between speech and writing, and that it both draws on existing language conventions and shows variety and “the same dynamic, ongoing processes of linguistic change that are currently under way in the speech community in which the teenagers live” (25). Rather than dismissing the language used online as an incorrect form of spoken or written language, it is important to understand that Internet language is dynamic and highly productive within the context of communication, particularly for adolescents.

In summary, language change is a constant process, but it has never been more dynamic than with the Internet. Communication is quicker, more efficient, and can link people from vastly

different places and who speak different languages and dialects. The existing trends in language change (i.e., the tendency for women and young people to be on the forefront) continue to be factors, and new occurrences that arise as a result of online interaction will play an important role in the distinction of certain groups. In the following subsections, two important considerations of the social significance of linguistic features generated by the Internet will be discussed: language attitudes research, and the use of particular linguistic occurrences as markers of in-group and out-group membership.

### **Language attitudes and markers of group membership identity**

A discussion of language attitudes is crucial for understanding perceptions of particular features of language, as well as the judgments behind and reasons for use of certain constructions. Language attitudes research aims to identify and examine particular attitudes of non-linguists or everyday speakers towards language as a whole or certain linguistic features, how people talk about their own and others' language (e.g., Niedzielski and Preston, 2000; Lippi-Green, 1997) In his introductory work *Attitudes to Language*, Garrett (2010) introduces the importance of the consideration of language attitudes as follows:

Language attitudes permeate our daily lives. They are not always publicly articulated and, indeed, we are not always conscious of them. But many nevertheless are overt, and we probably notice them in particular when they are negative and articulated explicitly, and often argumentatively, in public arenas such as the media or in our day-to-day conversations. (1-2).

It is precisely because attitudes are hidden and not always obvious, Garrett argues, that it is important to study them and their impact on social groups and populations as a whole. Variation in language, which may be viewed as objectively positive from a linguistic or sociological standpoint, always carries social meaning and, depending on the context, can bring “social disadvantage or advantage” (2). Certain dialects and features are often privileged over others

and, if a member of a group who uses a manner of speaking that is negatively stereotyped or stigmatized, there can be serious negative social consequences.

### Attitudes towards Adolescent Language

Much language attitudes research examines how people (especially non-linguists) talk about language, both their own and others'. In *Folk Linguistics*, for example, Niedzielski and Preston (2000) discuss a study that addresses a wide array of research on language attitudes toward various dialects and manners of speaking across the United States, including African American Vernacular English (AAVE), learner English, regional variations of English, slang, gendered and "taboo" language, and others. In these studies, interviews were conducted with groups of people across the United States, and questions were posed about the opinions of grammaticality of certain types of language, such as the language of the south or the north. The multi-faceted conclusions of this study can tell us a great deal about the prevailing attitudes towards specific aspects of speech. While the majority of the study was focused on regionalism, a great deal of respondents discussed slang, which Niedzielski and Preston define as "probably refer[ring] to anything which is not standard," and indicate that is "a very common usage for many of [their] respondents, particularly for African-Americans" (172). However, the authors focus less on the "non-standard" indication of slang and more on its nature as "racy, lively, vivid, current, hip, cool, and in-group"; it is also "status-conferring" in that the use of a particular feature aligns the speaker with a very specific demographic or group (172). From the interviews mentioned, the respondents not only believed that slang has this status-conferring, in-group marking power, but also that it was distributed most prominently through the media and popular American culture. For features that are strongly associated with race, in particular (e.g., the use of *man*—as in *yeah, man*—as being tied to black culture but having been adopted widely by

adolescents in general), the majority of respondents denied face-to-face interaction as the means by which slang is disseminated, as the respondents who indicated using these features also indicated not having black classmates (Niedzielski and Preston, 172). Two important conclusions can be drawn from this area of Niedzielski and Preston's research: one, that the media has (and is perceived widely as having) a key role in the transmission and adoption of slang in adolescents' speech, and two, that among adolescents slang is seen as status-conferring and important to group membership. The use of slang indicates the high productivity of particular features within this group and is therefore an important component of the identity of young people.

This consideration of adolescent language and slang versus adult language is also taken up by Buchstaller (2014), who discusses ideologies and attitudes towards the new quotatives *be like* and *go*. As discussed, these new features, like most innovations in speech, are mostly embraced and utilized by younger age brackets in the population. To introduce the wide array of attitudes towards these forms, Buchstaller states:

Attitudes towards language use in general, and towards innovative forms of quotation in specific, tend to fall in two broadly defined camps. Some people are open minded towards variability in language use... On the other end of the ideological spectrum, some people judge language use based on the idea that certain linguistic phenomena are correct and others incorrect (199).

This second perspective represents *prescriptivism*, the idea that a certain manner of speaking or a particular linguistic feature is more "right" than another. Prescriptivism a phenomenon that falls within the scope of standard language ideology, a viewpoint wherein it is believed that there is a "correct" way of speaking and an "incorrect" way of speaking. Lippi-Green (1997) describes this as the "standard language myth": objectively, there is no one single, "correct" form of any language but rather within every language there is a multitude of dialects, and even further, each speaker utilizes his or her own idiolect. And yet there is still a prevailing attitude, usually

possessed by educated, higher-class speakers, that there is one proper way of speaking. This idea arises in Buchstaller's discussion of attitudes towards her own research when she mentions the variety of responses to her work that she has received, a number of which are quite negative. One example of a critic cited by Buchstaller described these quotatives as "utterly devoid of any value" and meaningless "filler words"; other examples of extreme negative ideologies include images of signs posted on a college campus that include such phrases as "Don't sound stupid, stop saying like" (Buchstaller 198-201). The author mentions that the majority of these negative attitudes are found in older speakers. Youth is thought of as immature, reckless, lazy, carefree, and overly concerned with social identification and status; as such, the linguistic features used by young people are associated with and transferred to this general impression, which becomes expressed in such negative language attitudes (206). The crucial flaw in this logic, though, is that each of us "seem[s] to succumb to a case of selective amnesia once we have outgrown our wild adolescent years," but each generation plays a key role in language innovation— this has always been true, and there is no reason to think that it will not continue to be true for current and future generations (Buchstaller 205). Thus, the pattern continues: the "out-group" of older generations perceives the speech of the adolescents as incorrect, lazy, and stupid, while the "in-group" of adolescents sees the quotatives *be like* and *go* as friendly, informal, colloquial, less emphatic, and indicative of membership in the group (Buchstaller 207).

The negative attitudes of older speakers towards younger speakers' use of these quotatives is just one example of ideologies of one group being superimposed on another. Indeed, this does not have to be manifested as an age-related attitudes but can rather be seen in any type of group and its judgment of the language—written or spoken— of another. The choice to use a specific linguistic feature, while it may appear to be unconscious and inconsequential, is

extremely important in marking a speaker (or writer) as a member of a group and, as a result, building identity. A feature that is shared or understood to have meaning in a certain context only makes sense in that context, and as such, its use indicates a shared repertoire among members of a population.

In this study, I will examine the use of and attitudes towards the new Internet-driven linguistic innovations *because x* and *I can't even* in the speech of American undergraduate students at a southern university. Considering the aforementioned work on Internet language, language change, and language attitudes, I present the use of these phrases as new features that indicate shared knowledge of implicit meaning (for *because X*) and humor, irony and group identification (for *I can't even*). These are both highly innovative phrases that serve as tersely worded “conversation-enders” and as indicators of both group membership and strong identification as non-members of a particular demographic. Based especially on the work of Buchstaller (2014), I employ both a survey and a series of follow-up focus groups to determine the nuances of use of these features in speech and writing.

## METHODS

This study utilized a two-part methodology to investigate the use of and attitudes towards *I can't even* and *because X* in the language of Emory undergraduates. The first part was a survey that targeted more objective, quantitative aspects of use, and a number of open-ended questions were also included. The second part was a series of focus groups that were designed to serve as a follow-up to the picture of language use generated by the survey.

**Survey.** The first part of the twofold data collection method used was an online survey consisting of forty questions of the following types: demographic information multiple choice, free response, and scaled response (see Appendix A for full survey). The survey was created with SurveyMonkey and posted on official Emory class year, organization, and program Facebook pages. A series of five demographic questions gathered information on student status and class year, gender, age, native language, and affiliation with a fraternity or sorority. The survey was begun by 121 participants; of those, 91 responses were viable (i.e., the respondent answered at least one question about *I can't even* and *because X* beyond the demographic information portion). Of those respondents, 69.23% were female and 30.77% were male, and the majority of respondents (60.44%) were seniors in the college (see Appendix B for full demographic information of survey respondents). Because not every respondent who began the survey answered all (or even a majority) of the questions posed, I determined it necessary to count partial responses, the criterion for which was that the participant answered at least one question of interest beyond the demographic information. The responses from the 30 participants who did not answer questions past this section were not included in the analysis.

Thirty-five questions addressing the use of *I can't even* and *because X* followed the demographic portion, and for each construction the questions focused on the following areas: (a)



experience with reading the phrase in written communication, (b) experience with hearing the phrase in spoken speech, (c) using the phrase in written communication, (d) using the phrase in spoken speech, (e) perception of speaker identity based on the use of the phrase, and (e) attitude towards the phrase. Questions about the two constructions included: simple yes/no responses (e.g., *Have you heard the phrase I can't even in spoken speech?*; *Have you read the phrase because X in written communication?*), scaled responses addressing frequency of use and observation (e.g., *How often do you see the phrase because X in written communication?*; *How often do you hear the phrase I can't even in spoken speech?*), multiple choice questions about the context of use and observation (e.g., *In what context do you use the phrase I can't even the most in written communication?*), multiple choice questions about speaker judgments (e.g., *When you hear or see the phrase I can't even, what does that indicate about what the speaker is feeling or saying?*), multiple choice questions about attitudes (e.g., *When you hear someone say the phrase I can't even, what is your attitude toward or opinion of that phrase?*), and both multiple-choice and open-ended response questions following to two short dialogues, each involving use of one of the two constructions. A follow-up question at the end of the survey asked participants if they would be willing to be contacted for further participation in focus groups.

A mixed quantitative and qualitative analysis was undertaken for the survey results. Answers to the multiple choice questions addressing awareness of usage, most common context of usage, and attitudes were counted, and percentages of respondents' answers within each question were calculated and compared. Open-ended questions were read individually. After reading the responses, themes that emerged were identified in order to categorize responses based on several anticipated areas, including gender, negative and positive stereotypes, online versus offline usage, emotion (e.g., irritation, anger), and functionality (e.g., conciseness,

communication of inability to express ideas) (See Appendix C for full list of key areas of analysis). Based on these responses, a picture of the use of *I can't even* and *because X* among Emory University undergraduates was created.

**Focus groups.** Based on the responses and contact information given at the end of the survey, three mixed-gender focus groups of three people each were created. Each respondent who indicated willingness to be selected for participation in focus groups was placed in a list on Microsoft Excel, which was then randomized, and the first nine participants were selected and contacted via email. The first group consisted of two females (one male was also selected for this group, but did not attend the session), the second consisted of two females and one male, and the third consisted of one female and two males (see Appendix E for demographic information of focus group participants). At the beginning of each session an oral consent was read to the participants, after which the participants indicated their agreement vocally. The interviewer then began recording the session using the Apple iPhone Voice Memos application. Each session lasted 35-45 minutes, and each entire session was recorded. During the interview I asked questions similar to those on the survey, but which targeted certain ideas indicated in the survey responses. Examples include questions to identify usage and context (e.g., *What do you think informs the use of both of these phrases? As in, what do you think is behind the decision to use them: Emotions? Humor? A certain social context and identification with that context?*) and attitudes and stereotypes of the phrases (e.g., *The survey results showed overwhelming evidence that I can't even was associated with female usage, and in general carried negative stigma, as indicated by words like "preppy," "sorority girl," "stupid," etc. Do you agree with this? Is there a certain demographic associated? How about for because X?*). At the end of the session the participants were given a debrief, after which I stopped the application and saved the

recording to a password protected iPhone and uploaded the data to a password protected computer for storage until the completion of the project. Each focus group interview was transcribed and then analyzed for similar key themes indicating usage and attitude (i.e., words indicating gender; negative stereotype words such as *lazy*, *sloppy*, *stupid*, *can't finish sentences*, etc.; and words indicating purpose or function, such as *conciseness*, *conversation ender*, *summarization*, *efficiency*, etc). See Appendix C for key concept areas used in the survey and focus group methodology and Appendix F for focus group transcriptions.

## RESULTS

As mentioned in the previous section, a two-phased study design was used to investigate the use of and the attitudes towards *I can't even* and *because X* in speech. The first phase was an online survey sent to the Emory University undergraduate community through social media, and the second was a series of three focus groups comprised of randomly selected survey respondents who indicated their willingness to participate in further study. As mentioned in the methodology, a mixed quantitative and qualitative analysis was used; quantitative survey responses were analyzed using SPSS and the Analyze Data feature of SurveyMonkey, and qualitative responses were read for key words within several areas of interest and categorized accordingly (see Appendix C).

In this chapter the findings are divided by phases of the study: the survey results are discussed first, followed by the focus group findings.

### **Survey**

Initial findings from the survey indicated that the vast majority of respondents have both heard *I can't even* and *because X* in speech and read them in online writing, but responses varied greatly in their indication of most frequent context for each phrase. The use of *I can't even* was indicated to serve as an ironic marker of in-group membership. It was strongly associated with a very particular demographic and used to mock that demographic within a group that would understand this demographic reference. *Because X* was mostly reported to serve as an efficient, concise way of explaining a concept without elaboration due to previous mutual understanding.

Since the survey was long (40 questions) and designed to gather a variety of data, a selected set of questions was analyzed. For the quantitative survey analysis, these include: experience with hearing and seeing *I can't even* and *because X*, attitudes toward the use of each

phrase when heard in speech, what the phrases indicate about the speaker, and the demographic reported most likely to use these phrases. As the research questions addressed reported contextual use and attitudes towards the phrases, the following survey areas are analyzed in this section: elaboration on the choice to use either phrase, the specific communicative goal and social meaning of each phrase, and elaboration on who would use either construction were the areas of interest.

#### Experience with I can't even and because X

As evidenced in Table 1, the overwhelming majority of respondents said they had either heard in speech or read online *I can't even* and *because X*, with *because X* being reported as heard and seen less frequently. Possibilities for the disparity in reported appearance were discussed in the focus groups; these include the infamy and prevalence of *I can't even*, the communicative, effective nature of *because X* compared to *I can't even* that allows *because X* to be less obtrusive and noticeable in speech, and the lack of association with demographic with *because X*. These areas will be addressed further in the focus groups section below.

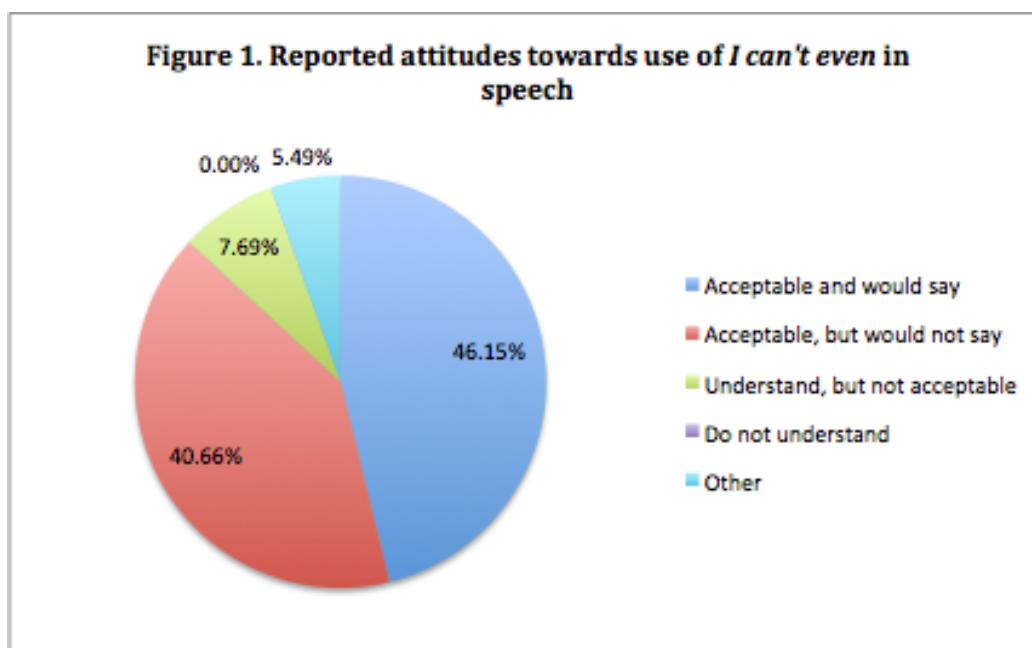
<b>Construction</b>	<b>Context of interest</b>	<b>Percentages of responses</b>
<i>I can't even</i>	Spoken conversation	<b>96.7%</b> have heard, 3.30% have not heard
	Online communication	<b>96.7%</b> have seen, 3.30% have not seen
<i>Because X</i>	Spoken conversation	<b>89.01%</b> yes, 10.99% no
	Online communication	<b>86.81%</b> yes, 13.19% no

Table 1. Reported experience with spoken and written forms of *I can't even* and *because X*.

#### Attitudes towards I can't even and because X when heard in speech

Questions 10-13 of the survey asked participants to select from a multiple-choice list of possible responses to indicate their attitude toward or opinion of *I can't even* and *because X*

when they were heard in spoken speech. Questions 10 and 12 were multiple-choice questions, and each of these questions was followed by an open-ended question asking for elaboration on the response to the multiple-choice item. The breakdown of responses to the multiple-choice question of reported attitudes to *I can't even* is outlined in Figure 1.



As shown in Figure 1, the majority of respondents (86.81%) found *I can't even* to be an acceptable phrase, and of those respondents, slightly more than half (46.15%) indicated that they would use it themselves. Meanwhile, 7.69% understood the phrase but did not determine it to be acceptable for spoken use, 5.49% gave “other” as a response, and 0% indicated that they did not understand the use of *I can't even*. Since this question gave the option for elaboration afterwards, many participants followed up with a qualification of response. This was of particular interest to the “other” response, and the elaborations represented a variety of reasons for use or non-use. Participants who indicated use gave explanations outlining its communicative efficiency, for example:

- “I feel like it accurately gets my point across. It’s not grammatically correct, but it serves its function.”
- “It’s part of the vernacular. I used it ironically initially but now it’s become a part of my daily language.”
- “I use it because it’s a very quick, concise way of conveying my annoyance toward something.”

Participants who indicated their acceptance of the phrase but that they would not use it themselves indicated their awareness of its effectiveness, humor, or ability to communicate, but had doubts about the grammaticality and the social implications or stigma attached to the use of the construction:

- “I don’t really mind when other people say it, but when I say it, I feel like a middle-schooler.”
- “I grew up with very correct grammar, so that phrase doesn’t work for me. However, I don’t care if others use it.”
- “I am guilty of using the phrase a lot perhaps because it is convenient but more so because I find it very funny. Not quite sure why but it’s amusing to hear others say it & I found myself using it because I’ve heard it so much.”
- “I feel that it is only appropriate in certain circumstances, specifically in casual situations when I [am] (or someone else [is]) expressing their frustrations to be funny. I think the connotation of it being overused or ridiculous is what makes it so funny an[d] relatable when I use it.”

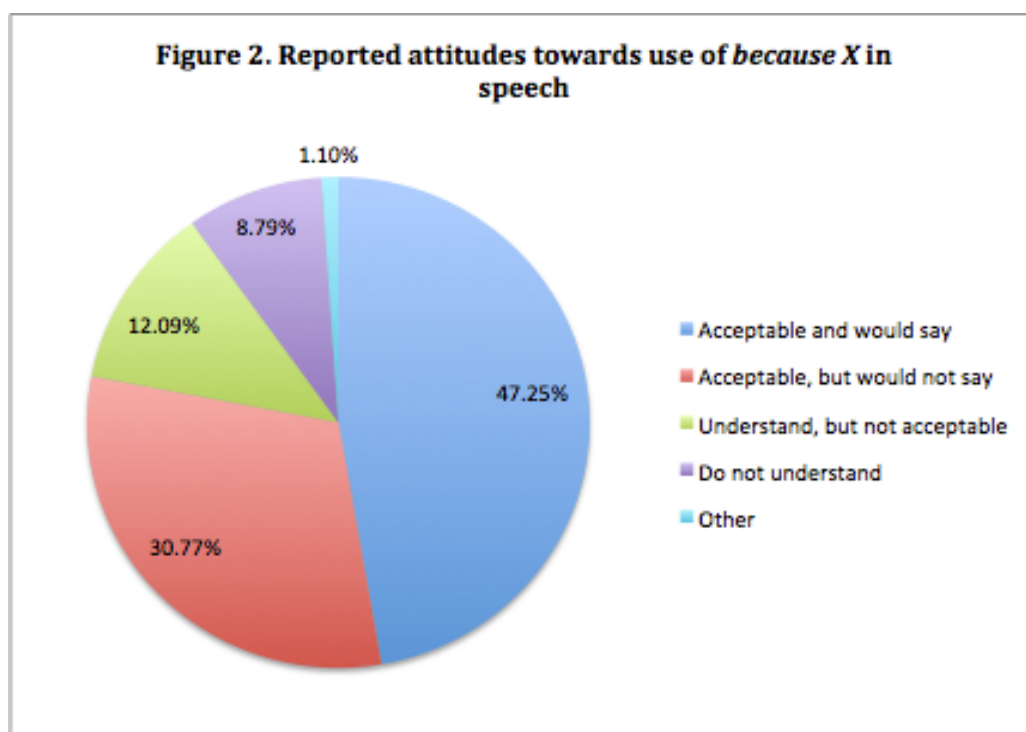
Participants who indicated that they would not use the phrase and who also found it to be unacceptable expressed their impression of the construction sounding agrammatical, childish, stigmatized, or otherwise incorrect:

- “I think that the phrase is negative.”
- “It’s overused and grammatically incorrect in an annoying [way]...”
- “As I search for career opportunities and continue to think about my life after my undergraduate education, I try to practice speaking in proper English. I want to appear well-spoken and eliminate the colloquial phrases I have used and continue to use on occasion in college, such as ‘like’ or abbreviations. I see ‘I can’t even’ as one of these phrases.”
- “The stigma attached to the phrase is largely feminine.”

- “It is tacky and unclear language.”

Overall, these responses indicate an understanding of both the function of and motivation for using the construction *I can't even*, but the choice not to use it seems to be driven by social stigma, desire to appear well-spoken and to eliminate “incorrect” speech, and identification as a non-member of a certain group, i.e., those who speak “improper” or “unclear” English.

Reported attitudes towards the use of *because X* in speech yielded similar results (see Figure 2). A majority of respondents (78.02%) indicated that they found the construction to be acceptable in speech, and over half of those respondents (47.25%) said that they themselves would use it in speech. Meanwhile, 12.09% indicated that they understood the phrase but did not find it acceptable in speech, 8.79% indicated that they did not understand the phrase, and 1.10% gave the response “other.”





As with the previous question regarding attitudes toward the use of *I can't even*, the option for elaboration was given. The respondents gave a variety of explanations for the use or non-use of *because X*. Participants who said that it was acceptable and that they would use it, like those who said they would use *I can't even*, gave communicative efficacy, efficiency, humor, and connection within a particular group as reasons for use:

- “I feel like this phrase accurately shows a causation for something.”
- “I see it as a way to connect with other people around my age and to put people at ease when communicating.”
- “It’s a casual, humorous way to sum up the reason (or lack of a reason) for something happening.”
- “I use it because it establishes that either my reasoning is unsound and I am aware, I do not feel like explaining myself, or that the more complex argument is self explanatory given a single concept.”
- “Again, it’s nice and concise. It’s quicker and easier than completely explaining what annoys you and why.”
- “I would use this phrase when I’m trying to be funny or hyperbolic. By just saying “because X,” it gives the feeling that I am so overwhelmed by emotion that I either cannot think of the words to describe it or that I have lost the ability to use the English language.”

Several participants in this category also stressed that they would use it, but only in very particular contexts:

- “I use it because reasons. Just kidding, I use it because it’s easier to say one word instead of a phrase to explain something in casual conversation. I would never use it outside of a very casual conversation and I would only ever use it with peers.”
- “I would use it online but not in spoken language, primarily because the people I know who use it in spoken language are annoying and it reminds me of them.”

Those who indicated that they had heard *because X* and understood it but would not use it gave similar responses to those asking the same question about the use of *I can't even*, i.e., it may not be appropriate for certain contexts, or may not be as acceptable as a different construction, or just that they simply did not incorporate it into their speech:

- “While I understand the phrase, I do not connect with it emotionally and I don’t feel like it’s necessary in expressing my feelings. It is easy enough for me to find another phrase that means the same thing, but that I connect with more.”
- “It’s not as annoying or as common [as *I can’t even*] so I don’t mind when people say it, but I couldn’t see myself saying it.”
- “Again I get why it’s used, but it’s [not] something I need to convey my emotions with.”

Participants who indicated that they did not find the phrase acceptable and would not use it said that they found the construction to be ungrammatical, incorrect, or somehow an indication of being unable to fully express oneself in English:

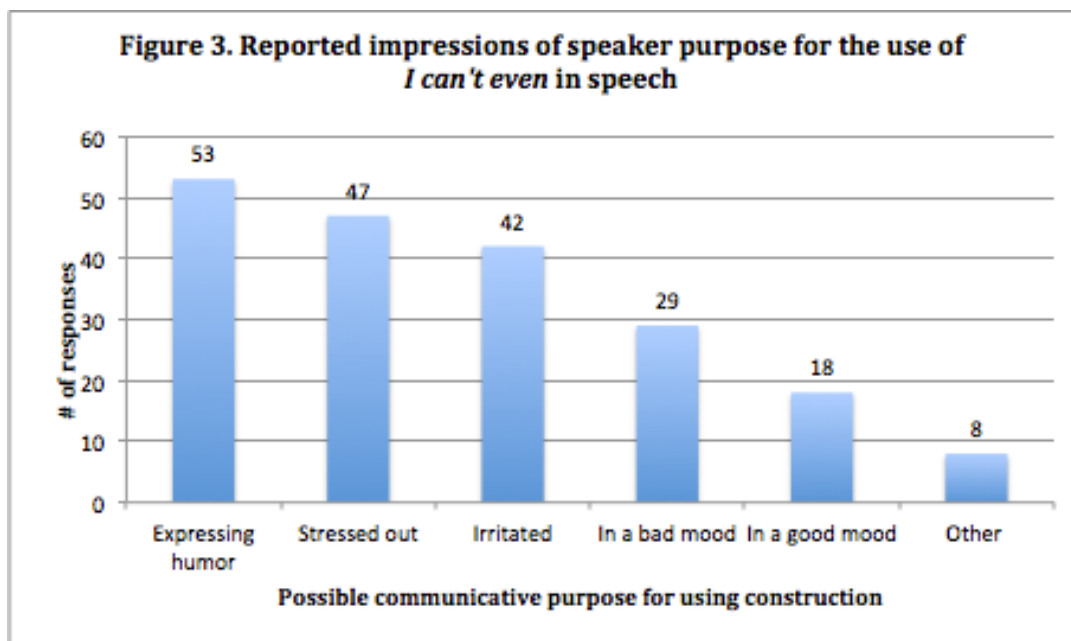
- “The meaning can be ambiguous, so I don’t think it always makes the point people are aiming for. I think it’s ineffective.”
- “It also does not have any real meaning. I get the point but people should learn how to use their words...”
- “It sounds somewhat ridiculous to me.”
- “I try to be more detailed about my reasoning.”
- “It is poor grammar to speak like that.”
- “It’s dumb.”

Overall, participants who indicated that they understood and/or would use the construction *because X* indicated humor, efficiency, and social connection as reasons for its use, and those who indicated that it was not acceptable and/or that they did not understand it indicated that it was either simply not a part of their speech practice or that their impression of the phrase was that it was ungrammatical and incorrect. Indication for non-use of *because X*, in contrast to that of *I can’t even*, was never associated with a particular demographic (i.e., females).

*What the use of I can’t even and because X indicates about the speaker or user*

Question 22 asked participants to indicate what the use of *I can't even* and *because X* indicated about the feeling or mood of the speaker (or user, if written) and purpose of the use, and gave as options: expressing humor or trying to be funny, stressed out, irritated, in a bad mood, in a good mood, and other, and was followed by the option for elaboration. Participants were able to select multiple responses.

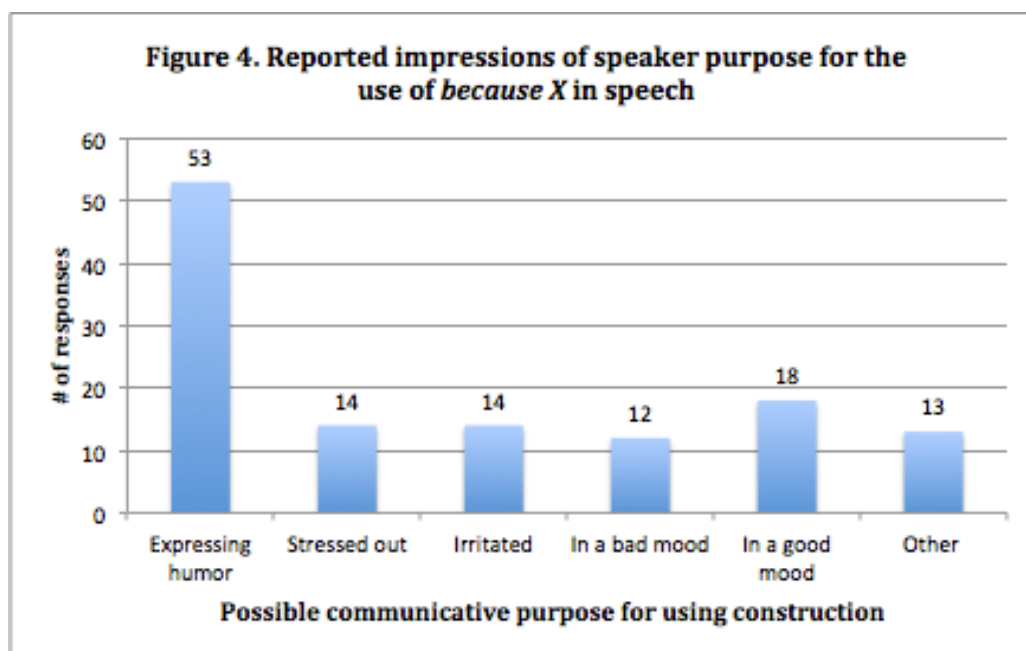
For *I can't even*, a variety of possible communicative purposes were indicated, with the majority of respondents giving “expressing humor or trying to be funny,” “stressed out,” and “irritated” as reasons (see Figure 3).



The most frequent answer (53 responses out of 67 answers; 79.1%) was that the speaker used the phrase because he or she desired to communicate humor or was trying to be funny, but overall the construction seemed to carry a variety of meanings. 47 respondents (70.1%) indicated that the speaker could be stressed out, 42 (62.7%) indicated that the speaker could be irritated,

and a still relatively high numbers of participants indicated that the speaker could be in a bad mood (29 respondents; 43.3%) or a good mood (18 respondents; 26.7%).

Question 23 was identically formatted to question 22 but targeted the motivation for use of *because X*. The vast majority of respondents (53 out of 67; 79.1%) indicated that this phrase was used primarily to convey humor (see Figure 4)<sup>3</sup>.

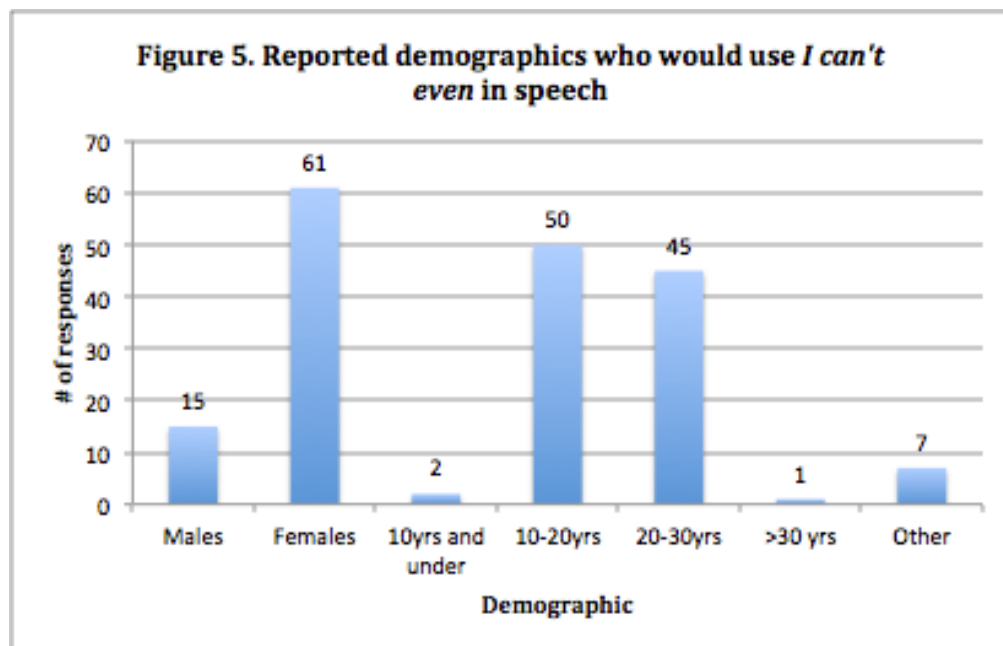


As seen in Figure 4, the most frequent response for impressions of motivation for use of *because X* was the attempt to convey humor or that the speaker was trying to be funny. All of the other responses (e.g., stressed out, irritated, in a bad mood, in a good mood, etc.) were comparatively low numbers, ranging from 12-18 (17.9%-26.9%), indicating that the primary purpose of *because X* was not to convey any sort of emotion but rather to act simply as a humorous expression.

#### Reported demographic

<sup>3</sup> These percentages may have been influenced by the lack of appropriate responses given as options for the purpose of *because X*; elaborations indicated that the reason for using *because X* was communicative efficiency. For further discussion about this question, see page 64 in the Discussion section.

Question 29 asked participants to indicate who they thought would use the phrase *I can't even*. Multiple answers were allowed. In terms of gender, the most frequent response was females (61 out of 66 responses; 92.4%); however, in the optional elaboration section several participants indicated that the construction might be used by males, particularly those who identify as gay. In terms of age, the two most frequent responses were people between 10 and 20 years of age (50 responses; 75.8%) and between 20 and 30 years of age (45 responses; 68.2%) (see Figure 5).



An option for elaboration followed this question. Participants who tied the use of the phrase to gender gave responses such as the following:

- “The construction *I can't even* has been coded with a stereotypical ‘white girl’ persona (usually blonde, under 20 and associated with sororities or cheerleading) to an extent that others will intentionally avoid using it.”
- “Basic<sup>4</sup> bitches who can't think of their own sentences.”

<sup>4</sup> The descriptor *basic* is mentioned multiple times throughout the Results and Discussion. Based on the responses on the survey and focus group participants’ comments, this phrase indicates a demographic typically associated with young, white, upper middle- to upper-class, white females, occasionally indicated as “sorority girls.”

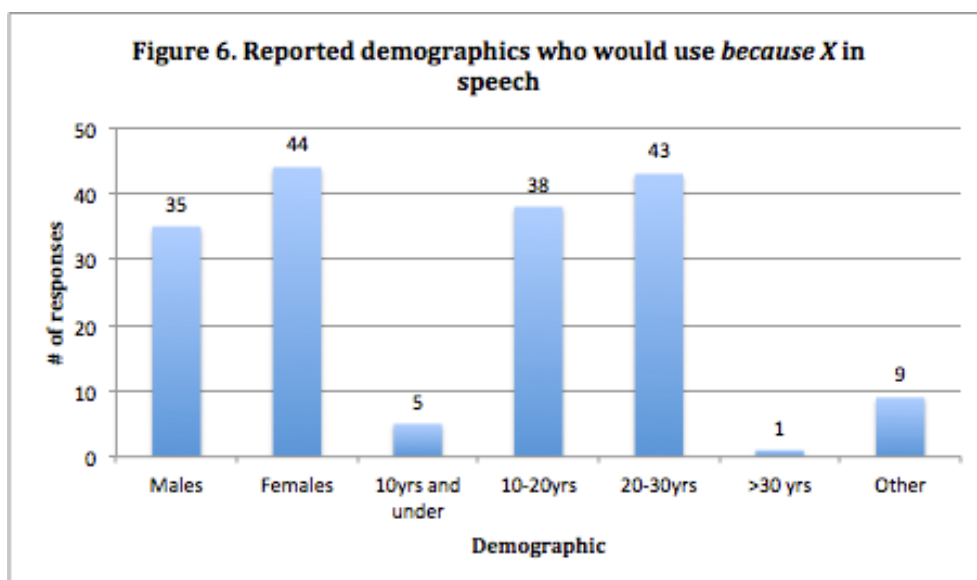
- “I mostly hear the usage of ‘I can’t even’ in female to female undergraduate exchanges.”
- “Occasionally males use the phrase, but it definitely carries a feminine stigma. Therefore, usually only females use it.”
- “In my experience, it’s mainly females and queer men who tend to use this phrase.”

Elaborations on the use of *I can’t even* as it relates to age included the following:

- “General topic for college people.”
- “It’s generally the female youths, but not kids.”
- “It isn’t something children or older adults would say, but I have heard middle age (over 30) women say it.”
- “Teen and college age girls tend to use it.”

Overall, the impression gained from these responses is that the participants have a very clear demographic for people who would use *I can’t even*, that seems to be based in the speech of young, female speakers in their late teens to early twenties, and is often strongly associated with college.

Question 35 was formatted identically to question 29 but targeted the demographic of those who would use *because X*. Multiple answers were allowed. In terms of gender, there was more variation than for *I can’t even*.



The majority reported female usage (44 out of 64 responses; 68.8%), but reported male usage (35 respondents; 54.7%) was also high. In terms of age, the most frequently reported demographics were people between 10 and 20 years of age (38 responses; 59.4%) and between 20 and 30 years of age (43 responses; 67.2%) (see Figure 6).

An option for elaboration followed this question. Participants who indicated gender as a demographic consideration did not tend to agree; some respondents also tied *because X* to female usage and some tied it to male usage, while the majority said that anyone could use it:

- “Females more likely, but males still possible.”
- “Both sexes use this, possibly males more.”
- “I usually consider this phrase to be used by males between ~15-25 years old.”
- “This is more common for anyone to say.”
- “It’s a phrase common to people regardless of gender, but I tend to hear it mostly from people of my own age group.”
- “I don’t know, but again, probably youths. I can see males using it too though.”

One respondent indicated explicitly that *because X* had less gender association than *I can’t even* in speech:

- “*Because X* seems less radically silly compared to *I can’t even*, as well as it doesn’t have the gendered traction that I believe *I can’t even* has. (basic bitches).”

The use of *because X* was also heavily associated with younger people and people who are familiar with the Internet:

- “Internet vernacular often populates this age and gender group.”
- “I’ve only heard it used in college...”
- “Preppy people, who overuse social media.”
- “...As a woman I’ve noticed females using phrases like this and other phrases like ‘I can’t even’ much more than males. I don’t hear ‘because’ in spoken communication but I’ve seen it on social media.”

Overall, *because X* seems to be much less associated with a specific demographic than is *I can’t*

*even*, and its use does not carry a negative stigma, or at least it is not as strong or as frequent as that of *I can't even*. When it is associated with a particular demographic, it is usually young people and those who are familiar with social media and the Internet.

*What do these phrases communicate that another phrase would not?*

Questions 24 and 25 asked participants to give an explanation of what they thought the phrases *I can't even* and *because X*, respectively, communicated that another phrase would not. These questions were of particular importance because they targeted motivation behind the use of the phrases and the specific purpose of the constructions in speech. As it was an open-ended question, participants gave a variety of responses. These fell within several categories of analysis, as determined by the researcher after reading all responses (see Appendix C).

For *I can't even*, the three main areas identified in the responses were humor, conciseness or grammatical function, and ironic use to make fun of a very specific demographic. Participants who indicated that they did not use the phrase indicated that they did not use it because they perceived it as ungrammatical, “immature,” or “improper,” or associated with a negative stereotype. A majority of respondents indicated their awareness of the phrase and its function in speech, but their judgment of it as an acceptable (or, rather, unacceptable) phrase was largely tied to the association with a very specific demographic. On the other hand, even those who reported negative attitudes towards it indicated their awareness of its purpose in conveying meaning through humor.

Examples of responses dealing with the function of *I can't even* as conveying humor are as follows:

- “Humor and also because it communicates something that can't be done with another combination of words.”
- “When something is really ridiculous.”
- “Expresses disagreement humorously.”



- “I think I use this construction to share discomfort and/or stress with others in a mostly lighthearted manner.”
- “...more light-hearted sense of exasperation such as in response to friends or family [who] are being ridiculous, ironic, etc. (in a humorous sense).”
- “For me it implies it’s something I technically can do/deal with but I’m implying that it’s either stressful or annoying, but humorously.”

Participants who indicated that *I can’t even* was useful because of its conciseness and efficiency or its unique ability to communicate in the absence of other constructions gave responses such as the following:

- “When I can’t even find the words to begin describing how I feel about some subject. It is meant to replace the absence of another construction.”
- “I use it to describe my lack of words or willingness to approach a situation at hand and I think that is what I try to communicate with it that a different construction would not.”
- “It’s just short for saying I can’t handle you or I can’t deal with this, but if you leave off the last construct of the sentence then it sounds more dramatic because it now seems to apply to whatever ending you can think of.”
- “It communicates a mixture of emotions more complex than I might be able to articulate in any one word.”
- “It can be a sentence on its own that means that there’s really no words to say.”
- “It allows you to say that you feel unable to do something without saying what it is you can’t do.”

A final area of consideration in response was the use of *I can’t even* in a specific context that would understand its ironic usage, and to mock a specific demographic. Excerpts from participants whose responses fell into this category include the following:

- “I only use it to mock suburban white girls at Starbucks. I literally can’t even because of all of the pumpkin spice lattes right now.”
- “[I use it] to mock basic bitches.”
- “[It is a] joking way to mimic those who use it.”

Overall, in response to the question of why one would use or not use *I can’t even* and what it communicates that another construction cannot, respondents indicated that it was an efficient,

minimalist way to express exasperation or annoyance. It was also indicated that it was associated with a specific demographic (i.e., “suburban white girls,” “Starbucks,” “basic bitches”) and the choice not to use it was often born of a desire to disassociate oneself from that demographic; conversely, the choice to use *I can't even* was also associated with this demographic, but it is used ironically to make fun of the speakers who would typically use it. Participants who indicated that they would not use the construction said that they made this choice in order to avoid what they perceived as incorrect speech or improper grammar.

For *because X*, the three main areas identified in responses were humor, conciseness and ease of use, and context-specificity in regards to previously known information among a particular group. Participants who reported that they did not use the phrase gave as reasoning that they perceived it to be “lazy” or “improper,” but to less of an extent than *I can't even*. No negative stigma or stereotype or specific demographic was attached to *because X*, so it was not mentioned that this construction could be used ironically to make fun of a particular group.

For participants who indicated that they would use the phrase and said that they would do so because *because X* conveyed humor, examples include the following responses:

- “...It can act as a funny way to explain some oddity.”
- “It’s funny and succinct/abrupt.”
- “More playful than formal construction.”
- “Just to be funny... like ‘because science.’”
- “As a joke, to simplify something to one word.”

For participants who indicated that they used *because X* because it was efficient, productive, or uniquely communicative, some sample responses include:

- “It is an oddly effective construction because you can encompass everything associated with ‘x’ without listing everything separately. For example, I might say, ‘Everything is terrible because school,’ and I would communicate all of the stressors associated with school (classes, meetings, homework, tests, group projects, papers, cost, etc.).”

- “It’s a way of justifying something without having to really justify it, i.e., ‘because reasons’ means basically the same things as ‘for the hell of it.’ It’s also a way to just shorten a phrase... ‘because tired’ is obviously just lacking the subject and verb in-between the two words.”
- “Brevity, efficiency, definiteness.”

Finally, several respondents indicated that the use of *because X* indicated a shared repertoire of information and rapport among a particular group. The use of *because X* (i.e., *because school*, *because science*) enables the speaker to convey meaning without being redundant or providing excess information already possessed by members of a particular group or community. *Because X* is given as sufficient explanation because the reason should already be known and obvious to the listener. Examples of these responses are as follows:

- “I use it to explain things that should already be known/obvious.”
- “I feel like I only use it with people I am very good friends with so it’s a kind of inside joke.”
- “I use it because the point is usually obvious. I think it’s similar to saying ‘[reason], duh’ that was popular back in the day.”
- “It makes it seem as if the answer is particularly obvious and overwhelming. It’s more blunt.”
- “It allows me to give a reason without going into detail because the listener and I already know the details. Like if I talk about somebody being a jerk online and I say, ‘because the internet,’ it’s because the listener and I already know that the internet is full of jerks.”

In summary, *I can’t even* and *because X* are used in speech to communicate very specific ideas. They are similar in that they are both reported to serve as small, efficient segments that carry a large amount of meaning, and they are both associated with an attempt to convey humor. While they are also both sometimes referred to as “incorrect” or “ungrammatical,” the major difference between them is that *I can’t even* is overwhelmingly associated with a certain demographic and is negatively stereotyped, while *because X* is simply communicative and humorous and, in

general, not associated with any one type of speaker. These ideas will be explored further in the following Discussion section.

### **Focus groups**

As mentioned in the Methods section, the three focus groups were comprised of a total of eight survey respondents who indicated their willingness to be contacted for participation. Group 1 consisted of two females, Kelsey and Lindsay<sup>5</sup>; Group 2 consisted of 2 females, Amy and Hilary, and one male, David; Group 3 consisted of two males, Blake and John, and one female, Ashley. The focus group sessions were conducted less as interviews and more as casual conversations regarding the use of *I can't even* and *because X* in the everyday experience of the participants; however, a set of questions and areas for discussion were prepared for the sessions (see Appendix D).

In order to examine possible patterns in the responses, the transcriptions of all focus groups were read critically for words, phrases, ideas, and sentiments that fell into several broadly defined categories of analysis, which were determined after examining all responses (see Appendix C). The groups are numbered according to the order in which they were conducted. In the following subsections, portions of conversation are selected and presented to show these areas of response, but the complete interviews can be found in Appendix F.

### **I CAN'T EVEN**

Members of each group said that they had heard *I can't even* in spoken language during their time at Emory, but few participants said that they themselves used it, or that they used it frequently. Several participants indicated that they found the phrase annoying, overused, or too

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms used for anonymity in all focus groups.

common, and so they avoided using it in daily interactions. Kelsey, who initiated the conversation in Group 1, explained the overuse of *I can't even* as a key factor in avoiding it:

**Group 1: Kelsey and Lindsay**

Kelsey: Um, I don't use *I can't even*. I used to actually, when it was I guess more new, but it quickly... I felt like it quickly became overused and became annoying, so... and started... at first it was just kind of a quirky thing that you'd see on the Internet, but then it started like... being everywhere and sounding annoying and dumb.

For Kelsey, the initial appearance of *I can't even* represented a quirky, interesting new linguistic feature, but once it became overused and too popular, she began to find it less useful or communicative. Another important point to note about Kelsey's response is her indication that *I can't even* began as an online, Internet-based usage. Her impression is that the phrase originated online and that its use was acceptable there but not in spoken language when it became too popular and overused. This idea of *I can't even* originating online but being adopted into use that later became irritating was echoed by the participants of Group 2. Hilary and David discussed the online origins of this phrase and how it came to be associated with a negative stereotype and was then therefore avoided:

**Group 2: David, Hilary, and Amy**

Hilary: I'm on Tumblr a lot, and I feel like *I can't even* like... you started seeing that with like, the younger Tumblr users who would get really excited about talking about a TV show or something, and they'd be like, "I can't even! Look at this! Look at this thing I GIFed!" Something like that. So I don't know, that's the demographic I've always associated with it, like younger social media users who get excited about things.

David: Yeah. And then I've seen the rebound of people making fun of... people who get excited on Reddit, for instance.

Hilary and David's responses show that what may have originated as a communicative phrase online became well-known and widely adopted, possibly not just by that certain demographic but

also by other people who used the phrase in an attempt to mock the “younger social media users who get excited about things.” As in the surveys, there was a strong association with its use as an attempt to convey humor, and all of the participants agreed that if they were to use it (or if they were to hear their friends use it), it would almost be in an ironic, mocking way. This brings up the key point about *I can't even* discussed in these interviews: its ironic use to mock a specific demographic. That demographic varied slightly from participant to participant: as we have seen, Hilary indicated that she associated the use of *I can't even* with excited young Tumblr users, while other participants presented some other impressions. In nearly all cases, *I can't even* in spoken language was tied to young female speakers.

### **Group 3: Blake, John, and Ashley<sup>6</sup>**

John: As far as I know, like... this is my experience with it. It kinda came out of like, the valley girl type place, kind of how *swag* and *yolo* came out of like... Justin Bieber's followers, so people use it ironically to kind of make fun of them... That's just... that's just how I've seen it used. Like, *swag* is usually to make fun of like 13- or 14-year-olds.

Ashley: ... I would have a mindset about a person that said *I can't even* just... not ironically, and it would be a very valley girl stereotype.

John: Yeah, it's tied very closely to like Starbucks and Uggs, that whole thing.

John and Ashley's comments indicate to us that there is a very specific population in mind when one chooses to utilize the phrase *I can't even*, and in doing so, it communicates meaning to the listener. Lindsay, on the other hand, had a very different impression of who would use *I can't even*. But even so, she still indicated that she associated this phrase with a very specific demographic that was, to her, well-known for its frequent use:

### **Group 1**

Lindsay: Uh... *I can't even*, when I think of it, I think of, like, black Twitter. Like, they use it all the time. So, it's kind of interesting... It's its own little community.

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<sup>6</sup> From this point forward, focus groups will be referred to by their number only.

Kelsey: [surprised] Huh!...

Lindsay: Yeah.

[...]

Kelsey: That's interesting... I find that really funny because *I can't even*... I associate with like, rich white girls. That's who I imagine when I hear it spoken... I've only ever seen it spoken by like... a lot of times white sorority girls, honestly... I think I maybe saw an Asian girl use it once? But it's really racially tied in my experience.

Similarly, Hilary, Amy, and David indicated very quickly their association with this “valley girl,” white female demographic:

### **Group 2**

Hilary: ...Usually female is the stereotype.

Amy: Well, Americans.

David: Yeah, Americans.

Amy: Straight up Americans, for sure.

David: Like, valley girl.

Hilary: American female teenagers who like... I don't know, maybe not preteens, maybe that's too young, but... 13-, 14-year-olds.

Amy: Yoga pants. iPhone cases.

David: White girls.

All: Yeah. [laugh]

While each of these demographic associations is slightly different, it is important to note that the use of *I can't even*, whether ironically or not ironically, is always associated with specific groups of people, and understanding its meaning within a certain context necessitates familiarity with that particular demographic. An interesting point related to this idea was brought up in Group 3, when Blake, John, and Ashley all indicated that they saw *I can't even* as being purposefully used to identify oneself with a group:

### **Group 3**

Blake: I'm not sure, I think people use [*I can't even*] to fit in, like one of those things to say it to belong to the group. And the people on the outside use it to define you as being part of that social group, and then hate you for it...

[all laugh]

Researcher: So if you said it to belong to a group, what group would you belong to?

Blake: Can I just say basic people? Is that a real group? [laughs]

John: Late teen to early 20s sorority valley girl, almost... I would say almost exclusively white, uh, upper middle class to upper class...

[...]

Ashley: I largely agree with all of that, that it's like... as far as the purpose of it... it's either... maybe it's to fit into a group or to be categorized in that group, but it's more purposefully used as a joke, or to poke fun, or to like, simulate being part of that group, and make fun of that.

As evidenced from these excerpts, the use of *I can't even* is dependent on the reference to a particular demographic. Responses seem to show that it is an understandable phrase that conveys humor, frustration, or feeling overwhelmed, but it is also highly context-specific, and is mostly used ironically or as a joke.

## **BECAUSE X**

Like the results from the survey, discussion surrounding *because X* in the focus groups indicated that there was neither a particular demographic nor a negative stigma associated with this phrase; rather, *because X* was indicated to be highly productive in its ability to communicate a large amount of information that would otherwise be redundant efficiently, and to serve as a marker of group in that previous knowledge is required for its use.

The high efficiency of *because X* was the key topic for discussion; its grammatical and conversational productivity was mentioned in every interview.

### **Group 1**

Kelsey: ...Um yeah, I second the efficiency thing. Quick, easy, you don't have to think... If I say, "I'm tired because thesis," like, that tells you all you need to know. I don't need to tell you that "well, I'm struggling with my research question and I'm struggling with the independent variables," I don't need to ramble to you about all my problems, I just tell you "because thesis." That tells you everything.

Lindsay: Because life!

Kelsey: [laughs] Yeah, because life. Yeah! [laughs] It's just like... life is hard, you know, because life.



Similarly, Blake and John discussed *because X* as a compression of many ideas or reasons for doing something into one neat package, like a “joke without the punch line, but everyone knows the punch line.” Elaboration never follows the use of *because X*, and is not necessary because this small construction communicates everything that the audience would possibly need to know about the topic being discussed:

### Group 3

Researcher: What about *because X*? Is there... what about grammatical purpose? What is that? Or, grammatical, communicative...

John: So I think it's supposed to be funny, there's the first thing. And it's supposed to compress a lot of ideas down into just like, one quick joke.

Blake: And also kind of end a thought or conversation or anything. Because you don't like really follow that up with anything, it's just kind of the end.

[...]

John: ... Like, you take all the stereotypes and lump it into one and throw it and it's done. It's like everybody gets all of those stereotypes at once so it's like 30 jokes just combined.

Blake: So it's almost like the joke without the punch line, but everyone knows the punch line.

Later, in the same focus group, the discussion turned back to *because X*, and whether more than one word could be inserted after *because* and still maintain the structure and meaning of the phrase. An interesting comparison was made in terms of the function of *because X*:

### Group 3

Blake: Unless you just have *because* and that one word, it doesn't bring meaning anymore. So I think like the theory that it like... packs all of this information into one is like more true then, because like... as soon as you get that second word you just don't have that.

John: It's a zip file.

Blake: Yeah. You don't have the assumption of like... this is what you're trying to do, you're trying to use the *because X* grammatical construction.

From these conversations, it becomes clear that *because X* is noted primarily for its efficiency and tightly structured grammatical function. Giving *because X* as a reason is sufficient explanation and does not require further examples or reasons. However, most of the respondents also indicated that this phrase, like *I can't even*, was highly context specific, as prior knowledge of the information being “explained” by *because X* is necessary to understanding.

### **Group 2**

Hilary: Or it can be some kind of stereotype or something... like the Internet has a stereotype for being like really over the top and silly, so you don't have to say, “The Internet is over the top and silly,” it's just like... the person knows what you're talking about.

David: Yeah so it does require... like if the person doesn't know what you're talking about, they really won't understand and it doesn't work.

While *because X* does not refer to or is not associated with a particular demographic, there is still a measure of shared, previously acquired information required for interaction. As such, it is, like *I can't even*, highly related to group membership and social ties. In discussing both *I can't even* and *because X* and the context in which they would be used, Amy commented that they are part of an established rapport between friends.

### **Group 2**

Amy: Well, yeah. If you're thinking about the irony... like who do you use it with? You're using it with your friends, where you kind of already have this established rapport and expectations of how you're supposed to speak to one another... so I think that in that situation...it is an inside joke and part of... that's why you're using it, because you want to make them laugh or it's funny...

In Group 1, Kelsey made a similar comment:

### **Group 1**

Kelsey: I think relating to someone, yeah, definitely. If you say one of these phrases and the other person understands it, then that implies sort of similar experiences. Um, because somehow you both know this weird phrase...

These comments present the phrases as key features of certain relationships, “inside jokes” that bring members of particular groups together. Like *I can't even, because X* communicates shared understanding of a concept and requires prior experience.

A final area for consideration in the analysis of the data is the comparative utility of the phrases *because X* and *I can't even*. On multiple occasions, it was mentioned that *because X* had no stereotype or demographic association, was more communicative, and was more flexible than *I can't even*. On the other hand, *I can't even* was described as communicating humor and acting as a shared, inside joke among a group, but was not as effective of a construction as *because X*.

## Group 2

David: I don't know... You can begin a sentence with “I can't,” you don't usually begin sentences with two words, and one of them is “because.” [laughs] Um... whereas *I can't even* is a sentence fragment; *because X* isn't even a sentence fragment, kind of, like you could... but since it's so short I feel like it's even more fragmented in terms of further away from a sentence.

Researcher: Hm. And *because* I mean... it might be like *because science* or *because reasons*, but it's also changeable, like you can put reasons in there.

Hilary: Yeah, I think it's more versatile than *I can't even*.

Amy: Yeah, it's unchanging.

David: Because concepts.

Researcher: Yeah. Because it's more versatile, yeah.

David: Yeah. Whereas *I can't even*... isn't very flexible. I mean, depending on what you put in the second half, but just like the *I can't even* is overwhelming.

Amy: And just like... emotional intensity of the speaker... *because X* seems to be lessened in that it could be incorporated into daily speech, it's not like a dramatic... as dramatic a break, um... as that caused by *I can't even*.

As this conversation shows, both *I can't even* and *because X* are efficient and communicative phrases, but it seems more likely to the participants in this group that *because X* would be

adopted into daily use in speech because of its flexibility and ability to appear in a greater variety of contexts and communicate a wider range of ideas; in addition, its lack of association with a certain demographic allows it to function without as great a connotation.

Analysis of these results of the study yielded several major patterns and areas for consideration, the implications of which will be explored further in the following Discussion section.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this section is to synthesize the results of the study and to draw connections to theoretical understandings of language attitudes, language change, and Internet language. This study was designed to investigate the use of *I can't even* and *because X* in the speech of undergraduate students. Specifically, the study sought an understanding of attitudes towards these phrases and motivations that informed their use, and how their use (or non-use) functioned as markers of group membership. In order to measure the use and attitudes towards these phrases, an online survey was employed. Three follow-up focus groups provided more detailed, nuanced description of the use of and attitudes towards these constructions. Both parts of the twofold research method gave conclusive results, answered the research questions of interest and showed clear patterns, which will be discussed in this section. As this was an attitudinal study investigating the reported use of *I can't even* and *because X* in speech, the main focus of the analysis was how the attitudes towards these phrases influenced the use of the phrases, as well as their meaning, social function, and likelihood to remain in speech. Of particular interest to this discussion is the key characteristic of gender in the perceived use of *I can't even*, and the precise, functional grammatical purpose of both phrases.

### **I CAN'T EVEN**

In general, respondents indicated that *I can't even* was overwhelmingly associated with a very particular demographic (i.e., typically female speakers, often described as “valley girl” or “basic”), which was highly stigmatized. The ironic use of *I can't even*, which was indicated to occur more frequently than a straightforward, serious use, was dependent upon the understanding of the mocking of this particular demographic. However, it was also described as conveying humor and serving as a succinct method of “conversation ending.” Thus, a general picture of the

use of *I can't even* can be identified: it is a humorous but stigmatized construction that is often found “annoying” and obtrusive. The implications of this identity is discussed in the following section.

## **Gender**

Both on the survey and in the focus groups, gender was an important factor in the perceived use of *I can't even*; young women were indicated as the most likely speakers to use this construction. As mentioned in the theoretical background, this is unsurprising, given that women and young people tend to be those on the forefront of language change. Women tend to accept new linguistic features into their speech more readily than men (Crystal, 2011), and the acceptance of these constructions serves to emphasize the fact that women must work harder to discern their place within a social hierarchy. As Eckert (in Coates, 1998) states, women moving into groups “are generally seen as interlopers, and are at greater pains to prove that they belong” (67). If incorporating features that identify them as part of a social group will help them to become more ingrained in that group, then it is likely that they will do so. Both the survey and focus groups yielded the result that *I can't even* is almost always hyperbolic, over-the-top, and humorous, whether it is used by a female or a male speaker. Whether one uses it to express inability to communicate emotion, to mock the stigmatized (female) group who would use it, or both, using it indicates that the speaker has an understanding that the members of the group to which they are speaking (a) understand the phrase, (b) understand to what the phrase is referring, and (c) will accept this use and, consequently, the speaker. In the case of *I can't even*, employing this phrase in speech among a group who understands it as a reference to that particular stereotyped demographic can serve as a means by which the speaker communicates his or her membership in that group that uses the phrase ironically. The casual, conversational context in

which this feature is found creates an environment in which speakers can build rapport with one another by using such phrases. Thus, *I can't even* serves as a humorous, communally understood tool to connect members of a group together.

As mentioned by several respondents in the focus groups, *I can't even* has a very specific feminine stigma and demographic attached to its use, i.e., it was reported that mainly females would use it and seemingly because of this it carries a negative connotation. While all of the participants said that they would not use it seriously but only in a manner that mocked this population and/or attempted to convey humor, they also mentioned that its use was tied to identifying strongly with a particular group. There was a clear idea communicated that one would only use it to mock “white, basic sorority girls” or “valley girls” with their “Starbucks and Uggs.” This serves to underscore the theoretical finding that there is an inherent difference between the perception of speech of women and that of men. As has been discussed, while men are more conservative in their adoption of new linguistic features, women are more on the forefront of the use of the new features; on the other hand, when it comes to grammatical variables (Eckert mentions negative concord, as in *I didn't do anything* versus *I didn't do nothing*), women are considerably more conservative (Eckert, 1998; 66). Their relatively conservative overall linguistic behavior is balanced out by their openness to adopting new forms— which may eventually become standard features of language. However, as mentioned previously, Eckert also discusses her findings that the use of certain features to mark membership cannot be reduced to gender alone; the larger picture is much more complicated. Men and women are both at pains to prove that they belong in a group, and consequently adopt features that mark them as such. Since women have historically occupied a subordinate position to men in the workplace and in social settings, it is more common for women to employ

“symbolic means to enhance their position” (Eckert, 67). While men tend to use their actions and abilities to find a place in society, women must constantly invent and reinvent themselves, creating and performing identities as a “continual proof of worthiness” (73). The adoption of new phrases such as *I can't even*, which is almost always hyperbolic and humorous, is a symbolic means by which women can indicate their membership in a particular group and their solidarity with other speakers, as well as to establish a comfortable rapport with other members of the group.

For the participants who indicated that only young, rich, white women would say *I can't even*, and that they themselves would not say it, either because they are male and they do not want to be identified as using a “feminine” phrase, or because they have a negative stereotype of this group, it can logically be assumed that their reluctance to use such a phrase is tied to (a) annoyance at its overuse, and more importantly, (b) desire to separate themselves from the negative stigma of the population that they identified as using this phrase. A number of focus group participants expressed their frustration at the overuse of the phrase, their particular idea of the population who is perceived as using it, and the relationship between these two factors. The strong negative sentiment surrounding the use of *I can't even* echoes the complaints about other new linguistic features, such as those mentioned by Buchstaller (2014) that staunchly rejected any use of *like* or *be like* and cited such quotatives as “lazy,” “incorrect,” or otherwise simply unacceptable for speech, as well as the IM features investigated by Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) and the prevailing attitudes that these features are incorrect and annoying, and that the Internet is inevitably leading to “linguistic ruin.” The conscious choice to avoid *I can't even*, or the choice to use it ironically to mock the white, female, upper middle- to upper-class demographic, is a reflection of the fact that female speech is very often set aside as “other,” or



somehow not as desirable compared to the more “normative” speech of males. By using *I can't even* ironically, a speaker is communicating that he or she is definitively not part of the stigmatized group who would use it, and is setting him or herself at a distance from the speech of this population.

### **Group membership**

Returning to the idea of language change and innovators, it makes sense that new constructions arise within both female and young populations: as they are searching for their particular niche within a community the use of linguistic constructions can be helpful in distinguishing oneself as part of a group or, conversely, as a clear non-member of a group (Paolillo, 2011; Buchstaller, 2014). This idea of group membership arose multiple times over the course of the survey and focus groups, and it was demonstrated that *I can't even* served as a manner by which one can mark him or herself as a non-member of a particular demographic and also a member of the group in which he or she is currently speaking. In focus group 3, this idea was discussed in relation to the demographic association and what that association did for the use of *I can't even* in speech:

### **Group 3**

John: Well, I think [I can't even] is supposed to like... I think it's intentionally supposed to not make you sound dumb, but like... the situation is so overwhelming that you've lost the ability to language... [all laugh]. That's my impression of it. But because like valley girls picked it up and they're already thought of as dumb, the two just kind of collided and killed it. Um... because I actually think it was like really clever at first, but then it just got used until it broke.

R: Hm. So it's the association with that population that makes it unpopular.

John: And popular.

R: And popular.

Ashley: Popular as a joke, I think.

John: It makes it infamous.

Blake: [...] I'm not sure, I think people use it to want to fit in, like one of those things to say it to belong to the group. And the people on the outside use it to define you as being part of that social group, and then hating you for it.

In this conversation, *I can't even* is clearly communicated as a tool with which speakers identify themselves as both a member of the group that understands the ironic, mocking use of the phrase, and as non-members of the stereotyped group with which the phrase is strongly associated. Thus, *I can't even* serves as a succinct, easily understandable way of saying, "I am expressly not a member of the group who would use this phrase, because I find this group to be in some way displeasing, and therefore I will use this phrase in this context because this group in which I am currently knows that I am not serious." The use of *I can't even* acts as a social glue, so to speak, that can bring people together but at the same time mark them as separate from a commonly held idea of who would use the phrase in a serious manner.

Again, it is important to remember that all of these perceptions are based on reported speech and attitudes from the survey measure and the focus group responses. At the same time that the participants on the survey and in the focus groups are talking about the way *I can't even* functions as a marker of group membership for those who they perceive as using it, they are communicating their non-membership in the social demographic with which it is associated and therefore creating solidarity with other speakers who understand this as a reference. The conscious choice to use *I can't even* for humor and hyperbolic expression underscores its unconscious function as a referential lexical item used to distinguish one group from another.

### **Conversational function**

The understanding of *I can't even* is dependent not solely on explicit semantic meaning but rather sociological, pragmatic preexisting knowledge of a demographic and attitudes towards this demographic, which are then expressed in speech. As mentioned above, it was expressed

multiple times on the survey and throughout the focus group sessions that this phrase would only be used within a very specific population, who would understand the reference to the “basic,” “white girl” demographic and therefore understand the meaning of the phrase. The preexisting knowledge of the reference to this demographic is crucial in understanding the nuance communicated by the use of *I can't even*.

However, it was also mentioned that *I can't even* does also communicate emotion. Even without consideration of the “basic bitch” or “valley girl” connotation, *I can't even* is reported to communicate a lack of ability to fully express emotions, being overwhelmed, or otherwise being so frustrated or excited that the ability to coherently express oneself is temporarily unavailable. On multiple occasions throughout the focus groups it was mentioned that when *I can't even* was first being seen on the Internet, it was quirky and humorous, but its overuse and new associations quickly led to it being avoided or used only mockingly and ironically. Kelsey mentions this in the very beginning of the first focus group session:

### **Group 1**

Kelsey: Um, I don't use *I can't even*. I used to, actually, when it was I guess more new, but it quickly... I felt like it quickly became overused and became annoying, so, and started becoming more associated with like... at first it was just kind of a quirky thing you'd see on the Internet, but then it started like... being everywhere and sounding annoying and dumb. So I stopped using it.

While Kelsey didn't finish her thought on the associations brought on by *I can't even*, it can be assumed from the rest of her comment that what led her to avoid using the phrase was a change in how it was being used and what it was being associated with. According to her account, in its original form *I can't even* was simply a usage found online, but somehow it came to be associated with an already stereotyped group of speakers and therefore became undesirable for

serious use in speech. The result of this association is a generally negative attitude towards *I can't even*, and a playful but rather sarcastic undertone in its spoken usage.

However, the results of the study do still seem to indicate that while *I can't even* can communicate frustration or being overwhelmed, it is never separate from the purpose of communicating humor. This was discussed in focus group 1:

### **Group 1**

Researcher: Does [*I can't even*] explain something on its own, or is it always going to be tied to like, humor or emotion? On the survey, humor was really, really tied to *I can't even*. So, some kind of emotion, some kind of humor, some kind of trying to express something. Is it functional on its own?

Kelsey: Okay. So you're asking if it can be used and not carry an emotion. Or carry an emotion other than the two we have named: humor and frustration.

Researcher: Yes.

Kelsey: I don't think so.

Lindsay: I mean... what else would it be if it wasn't humor or like a different emotion? It could be sad, like, *I can't even*...[all laugh]

Kelsey: [sad, melodramatic, laughing] *I cannnnn't even!*

Lindsay: I don't think so. Like, I think it would be weird. But it could catch on, maybe. Like if people like it. But I think it would take a while.

Kelsey: But as of now it's purely tied to specific emotions.

The "specific emotions" mentioned here by Kelsey are presumably the attributes of frustration and humor mentioned earlier in the conversation. Based on this discussion, it seems that these participants perceive *I can't even* as a joke, first and foremost, but a joke only used within a context that understands the reference being made. Although it may not be possible to trace the exact origins of the phrase and determine its function in that original manifestation, it is reasonable to assume that even in the original context it was used as a means to communicate which humor, hyperbolic frustration, or a general sense of being overwhelmed. Regardless of the possibility of any archetypal form of *I can't even*, its use now is in every case tied to the expression of humor or frustration.

## BECAUSE X

While *I can't even* was found to have a very specific associated demographic and was reported to primarily exist as ironic or mocking in spoken language, *because X* had no strong demographic association, and was not reported to communicate anything other than humor and efficiency. Similarly to *I can't even*, *because X* is at least partially dependent on the listener having a preexisting amount of information about a particular topic. Most importantly, it is a highly productive and efficient phrase and is capable of communicating a great deal of information in very few words.

### Necessity of preexisting information within the context of a group

Like *I can't even*, it was reported that a crucial ingredient in understanding the use of *because X* in speech is preexisting information of the subject about which the speaker is talking. However, unlike *I can't even*, this does not mean the knowledge of reference to or mocking of a particular set of speakers in a population but rather shared knowledge of the general reason the speaker is giving as the *X* after *because*. This idea is discussed in focus group 2.

#### Group 2

Hilary: Well [using *because X*] means you're not in a formal situation, like you're not giving like, real reasons, it's just like, "You know what I'm talking about."

Amy: Definitely focused on efficient communication, if not sparse. Because it's like, "I'm not going to spell it out for you, this was the hashtag of what I just said."

Researcher: So it's like... so you don't *have* to explain it to the person. So... does that mean there's like some kind of pre-shared knowledge?

Hilary: Or it can be some kind of stereotype or something... like the Internet has a stereotype for being like really over the top and silly, so... you don't have to say "The Internet is over the top and silly," it's just like... the person knows what you're talking about.

David: Yeah so it does require... like if the person doesn't know what you're talking about, they really won't understand and it doesn't work.

As demonstrated by this excerpt, the successful use of this phrase in a conversation is dependent on the listener and the speaker sharing a repertoire of information. The speaker chooses to use *because X* because he or she knows that the listener will understand all the nuances of the succinct reason just given. As Hilary mentions, if a speaker and a listener engage in an exchange in which they discuss the Internet and both are well versed in the qualities and characteristics of what is found on the Internet, it would be redundant for the speaker to go into greater detail. This type of exchange is entirely dependent on not only commonly shared knowledge but also the awareness that this knowledge is shared and that the listener will understand the speaker. In using *because X*, the speaker and the listener engage in an unspoken, below-the-surface exchange of greater detail that is communicated implicitly. Using *because X* means that both the speaker and the listener are part of a group that possesses a host of information that does not require further explanation, and therefore the use of this phrase marks the speakers as parts of the same cohort. However, unlike the group membership marking function of *I can't even, because X* does not target or refer to a specific type of person or group of people; while it has some demographic associations, there is no general stereotype or stigma (or prestige, for that matter) about a particular population that would use it. Therefore, *because X* neither belongs to any specific group nor acts as a feature that can be used to mock a particular type of person. Rather, it is a succinct manner by which a speaker and a listener can relate quickly without redundancy or unnecessary elaboration, and its function as a tool for mutual understanding can be described in light of its ability to bring together a speaker and a listener within the context of preexisting mutual information.

### **Productivity**

While questions regarding *I can't even* evoked immediate negative responses having to do with the association with the “basic white girl” demographic from the majority of respondents, *because X* was treated much more neutrally. Most of the focus group discussion time was spent talking about *I can't even* rather than *because X*; this is most likely because of the wide array of attitudes towards *I can't even* and the lack of specific attitudes towards *because X*. When it was discussed, however, it was mentioned on more than one occasion that the merit of *because X* is its remarkable productivity. It is capable of conveying a vast amount of information with just two words, and in doing so avoids restating what should already be obvious to the listener if he or she is already a member of the group with the pre-shared knowledge. This idea was discussed in focus group 1.

### **Group 1**

Kelsey: [...] If I say “I’m tired because thesis,” like... that tells you all you need to know. I don’t need to tell you that, “Well, I’m struggling with my research question and I’m struggling with the independent variables,” I don’t need to ramble to you about all my problems, I just tell you, “Because thesis.” That tells you everything.

Lindsay: Because life!

Kelsey: [laughs] Yeah, because life. Yeah! [laughs] It’s just like... life is hard, you know, because life.

To an audience who already understands everything that a thesis entails: a great amount of hours of work in the library, original independent research, a defense, etc., it would be redundant to restate all the specifics of the process. Rather than waste energy and time reiterating all of these details, it makes much more sense to use a succinct feature that can communicate all of this information in an efficient package. As mentioned above, this efficiency hinges upon the previous understanding and shared knowledge of more detailed information regarding the stated reason after *because*, but if this pre-shared knowledge within a population exists, *because X* can be used as a highly productive feature.

As a final note on the indicated productivity of *because X*, it is important to mention a possible oversight in the creation of the survey questions. The conclusion that *because X* communicates an efficiency or brevity was mostly gleaned from the open-ended questions and from the focus groups. Survey Question 23, which asked participants to indicate what the use of *because X* indicated about what the speaker was doing, saying, or feeling, gave only the options “expressing humor,” “stressed out,” “irritated,” “in a bad mood,” “in a good mood,” and “other.” Most participants who said “other” elected to give elaborations, many of which indicated that *because X* was used primarily because of its efficiency and ability to communicate a large amount of information without unnecessary elaboration. The singularity in responses and indication that *because X* was used mainly to communicate humor may result from the lack of appropriate options given in this question. Nevertheless, from the focus groups and elaborations on the survey, it is evident that the primary purpose of *because X* is to communicate quickly and effectively without redundancy.

### ***I can't even* and *because X* in the future**

While it was not my primary goal to investigate the possibility of *I can't even* and *because X* remaining as lasting features in spoken English, this question arose as a consequence of the main analyses of the use of and attitudes towards these phrases in speech. *I can't even* and *because X* are similar in their requirement of preexisting information being shared between the speaker and the listener and in their ability to efficiently and succinctly communicate a large amount of information in very few words, but they differ greatly in their connotation, pragmatic, and grammatical functions. Because of these differing aspects, a question that could logically follow is that of whether either or both of these constructions are likely to remain in speech and become more adopted into daily language as they continue to evolve.



As this was a small study dealing with reported speech, it is important to remember that the findings may not be generalizable to other populations or to larger picture phenomena. However, based on the findings it is interesting to note that there are distinct patterns of use and attitudes associated with either of the phrases. As outlined in the Results section, 96.7% of participants reported that they had heard *I can't even* in speech, and 89.01% reported that they had heard *because X* in speech. In addition, similar numbers of participants reported that they would use *I can't even* and *because X* in speech: 46.15% said they found *I can't even* to be acceptable and would use it in speech, and 47.25% reported that *because X* was acceptable and that they would use it in speech. These results seem to indicate a more widespread experience with *I can't even* than with *because X*; more respondents said that they had heard the former than the latter. However, based on the open-ended elaboration responses and focus group discussions, it seems to be that *I can't even* is heard more often, and is more notorious than *because X*. *Because X*, unlike *I can't even*, has no reported negative stigma and is not negatively associated with a particular demographic. While both are humorous constructions found in the speech of young adults, and both convey an array of information in just a few words, they are vastly different in their connotation and pragmatic function.

It seems more reasonable, based on the results of this study, that *because X* is the more likely construction to remain in usage. When asked for attitudes towards *I can't even* and ideas of who would use it, the focus group respondents commented immediately, indicating its associated demographic and connotation; however, when asked to describe their attitudes towards *because X*, the reactions were slower and much less negative. While *I can't even* may possess communicative power in that it allows the speaker to express their being overwhelmed or their lack of ability to describe their emotions, the reported association it bears with a negatively

stereotyped demographic makes it more unlikely that it will ever comprise a grammatical, communicative feature of English without the implication of ironic use or of a mocking of that particular demographic. *Because X*, on the other hand, was not reported to have negative stigma,, and was not reported to be associated with any particular type of person, and, most importantly, it is productive in that it is capable of communicating a great deal of information efficiently.

The likelihood of a construction remaining in speech is hypothetical and unpredictable, of course, but certain features of a phrase can point to whether it is more linguistically likely than another phrase to become adopted into common usage. Metcalf (2004) gives five factors in predicting a new word or construction: frequency of use, unobtrusiveness, diversity of users and situations, generation of other forms and meanings, and endurance of the concept. Of these, unobtrusiveness (that is, whether the phrase fits and flows naturally with preexisting speech) is the most interesting to note when considering the future of *I can't even* and *because X*. A word is unobtrusive if it “camouflages itself to give the appearance of something we’ve known all along” (Metcalf, 2004; 155). If a word or phrase seems familiar and fitting with preexisting speech rather than foreign and awkward, it will have a better chance of surviving in a language. While *I can't even* and *because X* are both lexical items comprised of words already existing in the English language, they have different levels of obtrusiveness based on the attitudes and usages reported in this study. *I can't even* appears to be more obtrusive pragmatically due to its use to convey humor via mocking a particular demographic and its prominent negative stigma. As was reported by survey and focus group participants, it is less flexible and productive than *because X*, i.e., it does not appear in as many contexts, is always ironic, almost always refers to a very specific group of people, and does not have the ability to communicate as much information as succinctly as does *because X*. Meanwhile, *because X* is a small but powerful particle that seems

to fly under the radar when it comes to everyday usage. The majority of participants in the focus groups tended to focus on *I can't even* when asked about both constructions, and were quick to point out that it was stigmatized, notorious, infamous, annoying, and associated with “white girls” and “Starbucks.”, not one participant readily offered an idea of a demographic or a negative attitude towards *because X*. This is perhaps the strongest indication that *because X* represents more real, lasting, presently occurring language change than does *I can't even*.

However, the lack of reported group association could also be due to the fact that the majority of respondents are all from a relatively homogenous demographic: 18-22 year old, mostly white undergraduate students. This lack of reported attitude could indicate that this is a demographic that would use it, but of which the members of this group are unaware. Nevertheless, with the available data it is possible to gain a general (if not generalizable) picture of the use of *because X* in speech: this construction represents the emergence of a new grammatical feature, one that is quite functional at that. It is frequent for speakers to have opinions about new slang phrases or words and to associate them with populations (e.g., *dude, yolo, swag* with adolescents), but when it comes to lasting grammatical change, it is less likely that there will be strong opinions one way or the other regarding *because X*. It is simply language- a grammatical particle, like the conjunction *because* or the quotative *be like*. While this idea is merely conjectural and only time will show whether or not these constructions will remain in speech, this essential functional difference between the phrases, more than anything, presents evidence that *because X* is more likely to be adopted into the daily speech of English speakers than is *I can't even*.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the reported use of the Internet phrases *I can't even* and *because X* in the speech of Emory undergraduate students. The attitudes towards these phrases were examined, as well as the ways in which these attitudes affected the use of the use of the phrases in speech. The survey measure gathered a wide array of information from 91 students, including their experience with the phrases, their opinions of the phrases, and what specifically they thought the phrases communicated. The follow-up focus groups served as conversations wherein the use of *I can't even* and *because X* was discussed at greater length. Both of these methods gave conclusive results and answers to the research questions.

*I can't even* and *because X* were both reported to have been heard in speech by a majority of respondents, and most respondents said that they recognized and understood these phrases. For *I can't even*, a strong demographic association with female speakers exists, as does a negative stigma towards the phrase. Many participants indicated that they were annoyed with the phrase or that they saw it too often. *Because X*, on the other hand, did not have a strong association with one particular kind of group, and opinions about this construction were neither overwhelmingly positive nor overwhelmingly negative. *I can't even* acts as a marker of group membership in that it is understood within a group (such as that of the focus groups) in terms of being a reference to the stigmatized female population who is seen as using it frequently. When using it ironically or to mock these people, the speaker is communicating to the group that he or she understands that this use is a reference, and is therefore speaking and acting in a way that marks them as belonging in that group that understands the reference. Similarly, the function of *because X* is context dependent: it transmits a large amount of information without going into detail because the speaker is aware that the listener will know what the speaker refers to. An

example given in the focus groups is “because the Internet”– the Internet is known for being hyperbolic and over the top, but if the speaker and the listener are both familiar with the qualities of the Internet, it is not necessary to explain these qualities; the listener will understand all the nuances implicitly. This type of exchange using *because X* indicates that this is a highly productive, communicative phrase that is understood only within the context of a group wherein the speaker and listener share implicit knowledge of a certain topic. Since *because X* was not reported to carry any particular stigma or prestige, and because it has this effective, implicit communicative function, it was discussed that *because X* has more grammatical function than *I can't even*, is less obtrusive in speech, and given the possible question of the future of these phrases, it is more likely that *because X* would remain in speech. While this prediction is merely a conjecture, it serves to underscore the difference between the use of *I can't even* and *because X*: while more respondents indicated that they had had experience with *I can't even*, the conversations within the focus groups indicated that the infamous nature of *I can't even* made it seem both more quirky and more irritating, while *because X* seems to fit more naturally into and does more productive work in existing speech.

Despite these findings and implications, there are several limitations to the study. Since only 91 undergraduates from a relatively similar demographic at one American university were surveyed and only 8 of those participants were interviewed in focus groups, these findings may not be generalizable to other populations and may not represent the true status, use, and attitudes of *I can't even* and *because X*. Additionally, the study and its results were based not on naturally occurring speech but rather reported speech. Since participants were asked to consciously think about their own speech practices and that of their peers but their naturally occurring speech was not observed or measured directly, this may not give a true, clear picture of the actual occurrence

in spontaneous speech. Additionally, although focus group participants were selected randomly out of the list of those who indicated on the survey that they were willing to be contacted for participation, many of these participants were my friends or acquaintances who were somewhat familiar with the research; this may have skewed their responses. Furthermore, as the survey was designed to gather a wealth of information about these phrases, it was quite long and so many participants did not complete it entirely. Marking questions as optional or cutting down the amount of questions asked may have led to a more well-rounded picture of the use of the constructions in speech.

Possibilities for future directions of this research could include greater consideration of the effects of race, age, and social class on the use of and attitudes towards these phrases. Additionally, a different methodology, such as a corpus or observational study, could investigate the true spontaneous speech and their frequency and context of occurrence and could give a clearer, more detailed and realistic picture of their actual use. A comparison could be undertaken between spoken and written language (particularly online use), and a more detailed analysis of the distinctions between the use of *I can't even* and *because X* in these two types of language could be helpful in describing the behavior of these phrases. A longitudinal study could be utilized to observe the occurrence of these phrases within the next ten years in order to see how the phrases evolve in speech. Finally, this area of research could be duplicated within the context of additional universities or other populations to investigate whether these findings are specific to this university or more generalizable to a larger community of speakers.

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## Appendix A: Survey

Demographics Portion

1. Are you an Emory undergraduate student? Yes/No
2. Is English your first/native language? Yes/No
3. What is your year at Emory? Freshman/Sophomore/Junior/Senior
4. What is your gender? Male/Female
5. Are you affiliated with a sorority or fraternity? Yes/No

Study questions

6. Have you heard the phrase "I can't even" (i.e., I can't even with you right now, I literally can't even) in spoken speech? Yes/No
7. Have you read the phrase "I can't even" in written text on the Internet? Yes/No
8. Have you heard the phrase "because X" (i.e., because the Internet; because reasons) in spoken speech? Yes/No
9. Have you read the phrase "because X" (i.e., because the Internet; because reasons) in written text on the Internet? Yes/No
10. When you hear someone say the phrase "I can't even" or any of its derivatives (i.e., I can't with you, I have lost the ability to even) what is your attitude toward or opinion of that phrase?
  - a. This is an acceptable phrase and I would readily say it myself.
  - b. This is an acceptable phrase and I understand it, but I would not say it myself.
  - c. I understand this phrase, but it is not acceptable.
  - d. I do not understand this phrase.
  - e. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
11. Please elaborate on your answer to question 10. Why do you use it or not use
12. When you hear someone say the phrase "because X," what is your attitude toward or opinion of that phrase?
  - a. This is an acceptable phrase and I would readily say it myself.
  - b. This is an acceptable phrase and I understand it, but I would not say it myself.
  - c. I understand this phrase, but it is not acceptable.
  - d. I do not understand this phrase.
  - e. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
13. Please elaborate on your answer to question 12. Why do you use it or not use it?
14. How often do you use the phrase "I can't even" or any of its derivative phrases (i.e., I can't even with you, I can't even right now, I have lost the ability to even) in...
  - a. Spoken conversation with your peers at Emory?
    - i. Never --- A few times per year --- A few times per month --- A few times per week --- Multiple times per day
  - b. Written communication?
    - i. Never --- A few times per year --- A few times per month --- A few times per week --- Multiple times per day
15. How often do you use the phrase "because X" (i.e., I want to sleep because tired, Because reasons) in...
  - a. Spoken conversation with your peers at Emory?

- i. Never --- A few times per year --- A few times per month --- A few times per week --- Multiple times per day
    - b. Written communication?
      - i. Never --- A few times per year --- A few times per month --- A few times per week --- Multiple times per day
16. How often do you hear or see the phrase "I can't even" or any of its derivative phrases (i.e., I can't even with you, I can't even right now, I have lost the ability to even) used in...
- a. Spoken conversation with your peers at Emory?
    - i. Never --- A few times per year --- A few times per month --- A few times per week --- Multiple times per day
  - b. Written communication?
    - i. Never --- A few times per year --- A few times per month --- A few times per week --- Multiple times per day
17. How often do you hear or see the phrase "because X" (i.e., *I want to sleep because tired, because reasons*) used in...
- a. Spoken conversation with your peers at Emory?
    - i. Never --- A few times per year --- A few times per month --- A few times per week --- Multiple times per day
  - b. Written communication?
    - i. Never --- A few times per year --- A few times per month --- A few times per week --- Multiple times per day
18. In what context do you use the phrase "I can't even" or any of its derivative phrases the most in communication?
- a. Text messages
  - b. Online- social networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
  - c. Online- blogs (e.g., Tumblr)
  - d. Online- forums (e.g., Reddit)
  - e. Online- articles
  - f. Online- formal writing
  - g. Spoken speech
  - h. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
19. In what context do you read or hear the phrase "I can't even" or any of its derivative phrases the most in communication?
- a. Text messages
  - b. Online- social networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
  - c. Online- blogs (e.g., Tumblr)
  - d. Online- forums (e.g., Reddit)
  - e. Online- articles
  - f. Online- formal writing
  - g. Spoken speech
  - h. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
20. In what context do you use the phrase "because X" (i.e., because reasons; because the Internet) the most in communication?
- a. Text messages

- b. Online- social networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
  - c. Online- blogs (e.g., Tumblr)
  - d. Online- forums (e.g., Reddit)
  - e. Online- articles
  - f. Online- formal writing
  - g. Spoken speech
  - h. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
21. In what context do you read or hear the phrase "because X" (i.e., because reasons; because the Internet) the most in communication?
- a. Text messages
  - b. Online- social networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
  - c. Online- blogs (e.g., Tumblr)
  - d. Online- forums (e.g., Reddit)
  - e. Online- articles
  - f. Online- formal writing
  - g. Spoken speech
  - h. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
22. When you hear or see the phrase "I can't even," what does that indicate about what the speaker is feeling or saying? Check all that apply.
- a. Expressing humor or trying to be funny
  - b. Stressed out
  - c. Irritated
  - d. In a bad mood
  - e. In a good mood
  - f. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
23. When you hear or see the phrase "because X," what does that indicate about what the speaker is feeling or saying? Check all that apply.
- a. Expressing humor or trying to be funny
  - b. Stressed out
  - c. Irritated
  - d. In a bad mood
  - e. In a good mood
  - f. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
24. If you use the construction "because X," for what reason do you use it? What does it communicate that a different construction would not?
- \_\_\_\_\_
25. If you use the construction "I can't even," for what reason do you use it? What does it communicate that a different construction would not?
- \_\_\_\_\_

*Please read the following dialogue:*

Person A: I'm having a party tomorrow, you should come.

Person B: I'd love to, but I can't.

Person A: Why not?

Person B: I have so much work to do. GRE studying, thesis...

Person A: Ugh, I can't even with you.

Considering the preceding dialogue, answer the following:

26. Does the use of "I can't even" in this case make sense? Yes/No
27. Is this a likely dialogue to happen in spoken language, in your experience? Yes/No
28. Would you consider a dialogue such as this to be common in your experience at Emory?  
Yes/No
29. In your opinion, who would use this construction? Check all that apply.
  - a. Males
  - b. Females
  - c. People under 10 years of age
  - d. People between 20 and 30 years of age
  - e. People over 30 years of age
  - f. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
30. Please elaborate on your answer to the previous question.  
\_\_\_\_\_
31. What does "I can't even" mean or communicate in this instance?  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Please read the following dialogue:*

Person A: What are you doing tonight?

Person B: Uh... I don't know, homework maybe. You?

Person A: Nothing! Because senior!

Considering the preceding dialogue, answer the following:

32. Does the use of "because X" in this case make sense? Yes/No
33. Is this a likely dialogue to happen in spoken language, in your experience? Yes/No
34. Would you consider a dialogue such as this to be common in your experience at Emory?  
Yes/No
35. Who, in your opinion, would use this phrase?
  - a. Males
  - b. Females
  - c. People under 10 years of age
  - d. People between 20 and 30 years of age
  - e. People over 30 years of age
  - f. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
36. Please elaborate on your answer to the previous question.  
\_\_\_\_\_
37. What does "because X" communicate in this instance?  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### Option to participate in focus groups

The research team is interested in conducting short interviews in a focus group setting as a follow-up to this survey. These sessions will involve a more qualitative, in-depth look into the use of "I can't even" and "because X" in spoken language at Emory. As a respondent of this survey, you are eligible to participate in these sessions if you are interested.

38. Are you willing to be contacted for participation in the follow-up focus groups? Yes/No

39. If yes, please enter your email address. \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation in this survey! Your responses provide the researchers with valuable information regarding the occurrence of and attitudes toward internet phrases. If you have any questions or wish to see the final results of the study, please contact Sarahmarie Specht-Bird at [sspecht@emory.edu](mailto:sspecht@emory.edu) or Dr. Susan Tamasi at [stamasi@emory.edu](mailto:stamasi@emory.edu), because awesome.

## Appendix B: Descriptive Measures of Survey Respondents

English Language Status	91.21% (83 respondents) English is native language 8.79% (8 respondents) English is not native language
Class year	10.99% (10) freshman 17.58% (16) sophomore 10.99% (10) junior 60.44% (55) senior
Gender	70.33% (64) female 29.67% (27) male
Greek Life Affiliation	23.08% (21) affiliated 76.92% (70) not affiliated



## Appendix C: Key Areas of Analysis and Example Words for Survey and Focus Groups

*I can't even*

Key area	Word/phrase examples
Humor	<i>Humorous</i> <i>Joking</i> <i>Jokingly</i> <i>Poking fun</i> <i>Make fun [of]</i> <i>Ironic</i> <i>Ironically</i> <i>Comical</i> <i>Dramatic</i>
Gender/Demographic Association	<i>White [girls]</i> <i>Girls</i> <i>Middle- to upper middle-class</i> <i>Rich white girls</i> <i>Gendered</i> <i>Stigmatized</i> <i>Feminine</i> <i>Starbucks; Uggs</i> <i>Basic [bitch]</i> <i>Sorority</i> <i>Valley girl</i> <i>California</i>
“Improper” or “ungrammatical” judgment	<i>No real meaning</i> <i>Poor grammar</i> <i>Tacky</i> <i>Unclear</i> <i>Annoying</i> <i>Vague</i> <i>Not descriptive</i> <i>Irritating</i> <i>Lazy</i> <i>Can't finish sentences</i> <i>Not proper</i>
Context-specificity	<i>With friends only</i> <i>Casual</i> <i>Informal</i> <i>Inside joke</i>

*Because X*

<b>Major area</b>	<b>Key word/phrase examples</b>
Humor	<i>Funny</i> <i>Humorous</i> <i>Hyperbolic</i> <i>Sarcastic</i> <i>Witty</i> <i>Extravagant</i> <i>Playful</i> <i>Joke</i> <i>Irony</i>
Conciseness/grammatical function	<i>Curt</i> <i>Simple</i> <i>To the point</i> <i>Justification</i> <i>Brevity</i> <i>Efficiency</i> <i>Effective</i> <i>Succinct</i> <i>Abrupt</i> <i>Zip file</i> <i>Compression of ideas</i> <i>Versatile, versatility</i> <i>Flexible</i> <i>Conversation ender</i> <i>Packs information in</i>
Requirement of prior knowledge	<i>Inside joke</i> <i>Already know [what you're talking about]</i> <i>Assumption [of understanding]</i> <i>[Avoid] redundancy</i>

### Appendix D: Interview Schedule

This session will serve as a follow-up to the themes covered in the survey. While there are some pre-formed questions, this is designed to open up a conversation about overarching themes and not a traditional “interview.” The purpose is to build a deeper understanding of the use of *I can't even* and *because X* in speech, but the deeper goal is to understand how new features of a language are viewed among a certain population, and how and why they are adopted (or not adopted) into daily use based on these views. All comments and ideas will be welcomed and considered.

1. General reminder of subject matter: Let's talk about the uses of *I can't even* and *because X* generally in your experience. Do you ever say these things? How often, why, and with whom?
2. What is your attitude towards or idea of these phrases? As in, if you heard someone saying either in passing, what would your thought about that person be?
3. On the survey, *I can't even* was overwhelmingly associated with a very specific stereotype. For example, consider the following responses:
  - a. *Basic bitches who can't think of their own sentences [use it].*
  - b. *Occasionally males use the phrase, but it definitely carries a feminine stigma, therefore, usually only females use it.*
  - c. *It's a construction usually used by suburban white girls (possibly in a sorority).*
 What do you think about these responses? Do you agree? Do you see the association with this population as having any effect on the use of this phrase, either by you or by others?
4. Continuing with the idea of stereotype, do you see either or both of these phrases as being associated with a particular group of people? Which group or groups, and why do you think that is?
5. On the survey, both *I can't even* and *because X* were indicated to serve some grammatical or communicative purpose that no other existing construction could serve. Do you think they serve a specific purpose, and if so, what is the purpose? Are they effective, and why? Is one more effective or preferable than the other?
6. What do you think is the most essential difference between *I can't even* and *because X*? How are they similar and different in what they accomplish?

## Appendix E: Focus Group Participant Demographics

<b>Group</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Year</b>
1	Kelsey	Female	Senior
	Lindsay	Female	Freshman
2	David	Male	Senior
	Hilary	Female	Sophomore
	Amy	Female	Senior
3	Blake	Male	Senior
	John	Male	Senior
	Ashley	Female	Sophomore

## Appendix F: Focus Group Transcriptions

Transcription key:

... Pause or trail in participant's speech

[ ] Description of pitch, laughter, or other non-speech feature indicated in brackets

**Group 1: Kelsey and Lindsay**

R: Researcher

[Researcher reads consent to participants; all orally agree and state names]

R: So, this session is really designed to be like a follow-up to the questions we talked about on the survey. While there are some pre-formed questions that I came up with it's really designed to be a conversation about the overarching themes and ideas that were covered. And the purpose is to build a deeper understanding of the use of *I can't even* and *because X* in speech, specifically in your own speech in daily life at Emory. But the deeper goal is to understand how the new features of a language are viewed among a certain population, and how and why they are adopted or not adopted in daily use based on those views. So like really, all comments and ideas will be welcomed and considered, so it's really just supposed to be like a conversation.

So I guess just to begin, so... a reminder of the subject matter: we're talking about the construction *I can't even* and *because*, right, and just like your general experience. So just to start, do you say these things? How often and why and with whom? Just kind of a general...

KELSEY: Um, I don't use *I can't even*. Um, I used to actually, when it was I guess more new, but it quickly... I felt like it quickly became overused and became annoying, so, and started becoming more associated with like... at first it was just kind of a quirky thing that you'd see on the internet, but then it started like... being everywhere and sounding annoying and dumb. So I stopped using it. Um [raise in pitch]... I use *because* sometimes. Just because I think it's kind of funny and it's easy and fast and quick and... yeah. It's just useful.

LINDSAY: Um, I use *I can't even*, but only when I'm like... when I can't think of anything else to say, or when I'm like fed up and ready to go, ready to leave. I really use *because*... I don't know. I never really heard it til I got here, so it was... different. And it still doesn't make sense but when you ask a question and people keep asking why, it's like, *because this..*

KELSEY: because reasons!

[all laugh]

LINDSAY: it's like a... a conversation ender.

KELSEY: That's a good point! Yeah, I've never thought of that— *because* is a very like... “I'm done talking about this, this is my response”... it kind of ends the conversation, in a way, but not in a mean way.

LINDSAY: I feel like *I can't even* ends the conversation too, because like... you say it, and then you walk away.

KELSEY: [laughs] Never thought of that! Yeah... I guess I didn't associate *I can't even* with um.. as much of the like... you described it as being fed up with something? I always just associate it with like... humor and like not being able to believe something, but not really being angry or upset at all. I don't know why I have that different view of it, I don't know. [pause] Oh, where have you heard it or seen it? Where did you first see it or hear it?

LINDSAY: Um, that's a good question. I don't remember. Probably... more than likely one of my friends used it. It has to be. Or maybe I saw it on Twitter.

KELSEY: Yeah, that's where I first saw it... Not Twitter, actually, sorry, Tumblr. Specifically. Tumblr.

LINDSAY: Oh yeah! Like they had the little funny pictures of like... stupid things and you can comment, it would be like, “I can't even”–

KELSEY: Yeah, it would be so funny that you can't even!... Whatever the hell that means! [laughs]

LINDSAY: Or... or it was stupid, and then it was like, I can't even deal with your stupidity right now.

KELSEY: Yes! Yeah, so it has variety of emotions attached to it.

R: And you said you had... you didn't hear it until you came to Emory? Or that was *because*?

LINDSAY: That was *because*... that wasn't a thing. So. I don't know.

R: When did you start... like... noticing either of these two? I don't know, I know you said *because* was when you [LINDSAY] came to Emory but like... either of you, do you remember?

KELSEY: Well...first, you should specify that her [LINDSAY] coming to Emory is less than a year ago.

R: Right.

KELSEY: So.. that's relatively recent. So like if I heard something when I first came to Emory that's a longer time ago. But... uh... *I can't even* I probably first saw online... um... I'm not sure...less than two years ago. But other than that I don't know. And *because*...uh... more recent. I'm still not really sure. Maybe within one year. I think. But I never thought about it, I

don't know. I'm not sure if... yeah you should take my response with a grain of salt because I don't remember at all.

R: So... you [KELSEY] mention that the reason you stopped saying *I can't even* is because it was like...overused and annoying... like it was quirky but then it started... kind of getting stupid. Um, but *because* isn't really like that for you?

KELSEY: Yeah, um... I don't... that's true, yeah. I don't know why. I guess I don't hear *because* as often. I hear *I can't even* a lot more often. So *because* hasn't been overused yet. Maybe. Maybe it will be one day but as of right now no.

R: Okay. So like... You think that... well, I don't know, I don't want to put words in your mouth but...the fact that *I can't even* has become overused and very common is what makes it annoying? Or... is it more like...

KELSEY: [laughs] what are you trying to say?

R: I'm just asking! This is for both of you guys too.

KELSEY: Um.. yeah, *I can't even* becoming annoying ...was partly because of it being overused and partly because of the context in which it was used. I started noticing... at first it was just on the Internet, and just a written response to something being really, really funny or really, really frustrating. But then it would just be used by people like... all the time for not really any good reason, I felt... uh, just as an attempt to be funny by making a reference to something that everyone would get... It's just like [creaky voice; mocking] *Ha! Oh my god, I can't even.* [laughs] It's hard to...I'm sorry, I'm trying to explain myself precisely.

LINDSAY: I feel... I feel like *because* is not like... quite as popular as *I can't even*, not yet anyway. So...

KELSEY: Yeah, I agree.

LINDSAY: I don't know, it just caught on really quickly.

KELSEY: [laughs] yeah. [pause] Now that I think about it, maybe I did hear *because* before I heard *I can't even*... but I don't know.

R: Um... Okay. Cool. So I guess um... talking about one or both of these phrases being annoying or overused versus the other... so on the survey there were quite a few responses having to do with certain stereotypes for *I can't even* and *because*. So I guess I'm wondering when you hear these phrases, what do you associate with them, do you think there's a stigma, and like, is one different than the other? So I guess I'm asking what and who you associate with either of those two phrases.

LINDSAY: Uh...*I can't even*, when I think of it, I think of, like, black Twitter. Like, they use that all the time. So, it's kind of interesting...

KELSEY: (surprise) huh!

LINDSAY: ...But *because*... I don't...I really don't know. Is it Emory students? Is it an Atlanta thing, like maybe an outside Emory Atlanta thing? But yeah, that's how... *I can't even*, I mostly hear it that way.

R: Interesting. So you hear it mostly in like... written? More written than spoken?

LINDSAY: Yeah.

KELSEY: Um, that's fascinating that you said that. You said black Twitter?

LINDSAY: Mm-hmm.

KELSEY: When you say Black Twitter... that means Twitter used... in the African American community, right? Or...

LINDSAY: Yeah.

KELSEY: Ok.

LINDSAY: Yeah, it's like its own little community.

KELSEY: That's interesting. I don't use Twitter, so I didn't know what that meant. So I wanted to make sure I wasn't assuming. But yeah, I find that really funny because *I can't even* I associate that with like.. rich white girls. That's who I imagine when I hear it spoken. If it's written, I don't really have any like... demographic association, but in spoken word I've only ever seen it spoken by like... a lot of times white sorority girls, honestly. White sorority girls, mostly. I think maybe I saw an Asian girl use it once? But it's really racially tied in my experience.

R: And gender? Is gender a factor?

KELSEY: (immediately) Yeah, girls. Women. Sorority girls, yeah.

LINDSAY: I would say both. Yeah.

KELSEY, R: Interesting. Cool.

R: And you said... is it like that it's more gendered and stereotyped in spoken than in written?

KELSEY: Yeah. Yeah.

R: So if it was written, anyone could be saying it?



KELSEY: Yes.

R: Does *because* have any kind of like, association with any kind of population for you guys?

KELSEY: I don't know, I guess maybe the only association I can think of is like people who use the Internet a lot, people who spend a lot of time on the Internet. Because it came, it arose from the internet. But for *because*, I don't have any gender or race or anything.

R: Cool. Um...so I'm trying to figure out how to phrase this question. Um, I guess I'm wondering if... so these ideas of who uses these phrases really defines...I mean you guys have a pretty clear response to the idea of like who uses this phrase, and it's like (dramaticizing) *ohh, I can't even*. So do you think that, or do you see that the association with certain populations, either for bc or ICE, as like having an effect on the use of the phrase, either by you or by others, or like attitudes towards it? So I guess, do you think that the association with a certain demographic either positively or negatively or neutrally affects how people view it and how people use it, like how often it's used now?

KELSEY: Well I can only talk about ICE because I don't have a demographic for bc. But I feel like I've heard a lot of other people other than me associate ICE with... I think it's like, more just like... girls who they perceive as dumb, it's not necessarily rich girls, I mean I'm just thinking of sorority girls as being rich but I guess they aren't all; that's just a stereotype, I guess. But yeah, since I know a lot of people who associate that phrase with it sounding stupid and people sounding stupid when they use it, I think people don't like the phrase as much because of that.

LINDSAY: I would say like... I think that because of the way they use it like on Twitter, like affected how I say it. Because I didn't think of it as humor, I thought it was like, you know, frustration, I can't even deal with this today, so, it's just like... I don't use it in that context and I think that's because that's how they used it.

KELSEY: Yeah, so that community on Twitter uses it maybe differently than my experience, because I don't use Twitter so I have no idea what the Twitter use of it is, if it's different than... I've seen it on tumblr and in real life, and that's it. And on Facebook, but it originally came from Tumblr.

LINDSAY: But I think there's like... I don't know, there's like an overlap between them because the people I follow on Twitter, I also follow on Tumblr. And sometimes they have their things like... linked.

KELSEY: I don't really use Tumblr much, pretty much I just see a lot of screen shots that get posted on Reddit, I use Reddit a lot, so I'll see like, sometimes Tumblr screenshots on there, so yeah.

R: So on the survey, I got a lot of responses about ICE and bc indicating some kind of essential grammatical purpose. Like, they're functional, they serve some kind of purpose. What do you think that purpose is, can it be a lot of purposes? And do you think that one is more functional

than the other, or communicative? I guess I'm wondering what you guys think, what purpose do these phrases serve? That could be like... you said humor, or expressing something, like what do they do that another construction can't do? And are they effective?

LINDSAY: I feel like... it's like... shorter, so I won't have to like spend time arranging words to like explain it when I can explain it in like three words or two, and so... and you get the point, so it's like, I guess I wouldn't say time saver, but I guess when you're upset and you just want to go quick...

R: Conversation ends.

KELSEY: Yeah, that's funny, never thought of that. Um, yeah, I second the efficiency thing. Quick, easy, you don't have to think. Which is maybe why ICE has the negative stigma of it sounding stupid, because we're supporting it with, "hey, you don't have to think about it!" Um, but... yeah, it's like what it does that other constructions can't do? ICE has these, yeah, emotional connotations that we've discussed, be it frustration or humor. And usually if it's humor, something happens and you can't believe it and you're like, *I cannn'tttt evennnn!* And, um, I guess it's just a very particular type of humor that you find funny, or a type of frustration...it's just a really specific emotion that you're expressing that is hard to otherwise express. So it's just been tied to a bunch of...since it's been tied to enough like pictures and responses it has developed really specific emotion too, really specific emotions, I guess. So, it's useful, in that sense. And then bc... I find useful ... it just kind of like... it says a lot, with only two words. If I say "I'm tired because thesis," like... that tells you all you need to know. I don't need to tell you that, "Well, I'm struggling with my research question and I'm struggling with the independent variables," I don't need to ramble to you about all my problems, I just tell you "because thesis." That tells you everything.

LINDSAY: Because life!

KELSEY: [laughs] yeah, because life. Yeah! [laughs] It's just like... life is hard, you know, because life.

R: Do you think... so you said you can say bc thesis or bc whatever, like.. and it explains without having to explain. Is that only functional within a certain population? Do you think that there's a reason that it's popular in college, or here at least?

KELSEY: Yeah, well since I believe we mentioned that we saw... well, I mention that I saw *because* online, on the internet. And then I heard it in spoken speech after that. So because it apparently originated online, it's going to be popular among younger people who use the internet more. So like, I wouldn't use it with my mom, because she wouldn't get it. [to LINDSAY] Do you agree or disagree?

LINDSAY: Yeah, like, I don't think they use bc where I'm from. Like we have whole different words to describe...

KELSEY: Where are you from?

LINDSAY: Alabama. Huntsville. And so, I don't know. I never heard it.

KELSEY: But Alabama is still in the southeast. Do you think it's tied to college populations? Or is it tied to this region? What do you think?

LINDSAY: Hm. Probably region. Because like most of my...

KELSEY: But you're from geographically the same region, so if you haven't heard it there...

LINDSAY: That's true. Then maybe it's not.

KELSEY: I mean, is there a big college where you're from?

LINDSAY: I mean, University of Alabama but that's like three hours away.

KELSEY: Ah, that doesn't count.

LINDSAY: So... no, and like, where I live, I don't live in the city, I live in the country, and so...

KELSEY: So then maybe it's tied to city, not country, maybe it's not about the college students, more about the urban population.

LINDSAY: I live in a rural area, where sidewalks do not exist. [laughs] And everything is 30 minutes away, so if you're without a car... that's it.

KELSEY: I got you... It's hard to compare if I've heard these things at home or not, because I don't... I mean, no, I don't think I've heard them at home, but I think that's just because I don't interact with people in my hometown nearly as much as I do here because I don't live there anymore. I am four years into college, I don't have much connection to my hometown anymore other than my family and friends. I hang out with high school friends sometimes but I don't think I've heard them say those phrases... No, no, I have heard bc from my old friends, but I've never heard any of them say ICE.

LINDSAY: I've heard my friend, she said I can't even. What were we talking about?... We were talking about something, and I was like hm.. hm... But there are a lot of new things I haven't heard either, so it's kind of interesting.. very interesting.

KELSEY: Yeah, it changes fast.

R: Do you think that it's possible for I can't even to exist without any kind of mood connotations, or like, is it possible for it to exist without being like... trying to be funny, or trying to be something? I don't know if I'm phrasing that well.

LINDSAY: Are you asking like... can I say I can't even and it makes sense without all the different...

R: Does it just explain something on its own, or is it always going to be tied to like, humor or emotion? On the survey, humor was really, really tied to I can't even. So, some kind of emotion, some kind of humor, some kind of trying to express something. Is it functional on its own?

KELSEY: Okay. So you're asking if it can be used and not carry an emotion. Or carry an emotion other than the two we have named: humor and frustration.

R: Yes.

KELSEY: I don't think so.

LINDSAY: I mean... what else would it be if it wasn't humor or like a different emotion? It could be sad, like, *I can't even*... [all laugh]

KELSEY: [sad, melodramatic, laughing] *I cannnn't even!*

LINDSAY: I don't think so. Like, I think it would be weird. But it could catch on, maybe. Like if people like it. But I think it would take a while.

KELSEY: But as of now it's purely tied to specific emotions.

R: Is because x always humorous?

LINDSAY: No.

KELSEY: I don't think it is, in my experience. I've never heard someone sound genuinely... I mean, whenever someone says because x to me, it does usually... okay, it can be purely humorous, but sometimes it can carry some frustration, like as I said earlier, "I'm tired because thesis." That carries some frustration, but it's humorous at the same time. If I was actually angry, I wouldn't use that phrase. If I was actually frustrated. It...

LINDSAY: I don't know. I would. Like, okay for example yesterday I was talking to my mom, and I was like, I was having like a bad day yesterday, and she was like, "What's wrong?" and then I was like, "Because life." And she was like, "what does that even mean? What about life?" [laughs] I was like, "I don't know, just everything!" And she was like, "Can you be more specific?" So. I don't know. [all laugh]... And like... yeah, I use it when I can't think of other words but I have a general problem, and I can't describe it because it's like so broad maybe?

R: Broadness, yeah. Or like it's overwhelming?

KELSEY: Yeah! That's a great word for it. It's not really frustration so much as being overwhelmed, which is why you can't talk about it. Yeah. That's good.

R: It may be getting too.. uh, meta or something... but like... where does the humor come from? Like why, what about that construction makes it funny?

KELSEY: Oh God. Explaining humor. This kills the joke. [laughs] Um... I...

LINDSAY: Probably because like... it's not something that you would normally hear every day... so when someone says it it's just like... what? What do we do now?

KELSEY: [laughs] Yeah, that's a good point.

LINDSAY: So maybe in that way...

KELSEY: Yeah, I guess I mean, we laugh at like funny sounding speech all the time. Just a lot of time jokes are like screwing around with language and making something sound unusual, what you're not expecting, used to hearing, so I guess maybe that's all.

R: Like a violation of expectation.

KELSEY: Yeah, I guess.

R: Or like the fact that *because* is a preposition but it's being used differently.

KELSEY: Yeah, maybe something about the grammatical weirdness makes it funny. Uh, it could be related to like that other... you know, the Doge stuff, that's kind of faded out of popularity now. But it was really the same thing, it was really only funny because it was messing with grammar.

LINDSAY: Wait, Doge?

KELSEY: It was when people would talk like...

R: Many thesis. Such right.

KELSEY: Wow. So Art. Much pretty. Like, mixing the wrong adjective...

R: Yeah like adverb and adjective mixing up with what it can modify...

KELSEY: Yeah, mixing the wrong grammar structures and that was the whole like, humor of it, was that the grammar was wrong. And for some reason we find that funny. I don't know why.

R: Yeah. So, you say you think that's fading. Um...

KELSEY: I don't see it or hear it... like ever anymore.

R: Do you think that I can't even or because x will fade, or are fading, or are they more or less likely than something like that?

KELSEY: Come to think of it, I do still sometimes say like, "Wow." You know. "So x." or "Such x." Sometimes. But I don't see it ever anymore. Like it used to be in memes and pictures

on the internet all over the place, but now I never see it. I only ever occasionally hear it in spoken speech. I don't know why. Um, but for I can't even and because... No idea.

LINDSAY: I don't know, I feel like I can't even and because will be around. Maybe not a long time, but probably within the next two years. And then something else will happen. I feel like... it's popular but not like... as popular, but then like it might come back if somebody starts using it, like... a lot. I don't know if that makes any sense.

KELSEY: Yeah. Actually, now that I think about it, if we go with the long end of my estimation, that I heard I can't even for the first time two years ago, then that's a pretty long time, now that I think about it, for like some stupid slang that arose from the Internet. Like what I just referenced, the Doge stuff, like that is... only like a year old and I already don't see it anymore. So...

LINDSAY: It might still be around just not used as often, like...

KELSEY: Yeah... Yeah. But um, yeah I feel like I can't even has been around for a little while. And I still hear it a lot. So.

R: What is it about those two.. either or both of them that would theoretically make them stick around longer?

LINDSAY: Maybe coming up with new ways to use it?

KELSEY: Are you asking what *would* make them or what *is* it about them?

R: What *is* it about them? Or like how are they different from something like Doge?

KELSEY: I guess honestly because Doge was like stupid humor and it didn't accomplish any function. Like, it was just humor. Whereas because and I can't even actually express specific emotions in an efficient way. Emotions are hard to express, man. Like, if we have an easy way to say them.... That's awesome, let's keep it. I'mma keep saying because.

R: Mmhm. It's like an appropriate mix of humor and...

KELSEY: Yeah, because it accomplishes something, it is functional. So it could last. Both of them. Maybe I'll start using I can't even again, who knows.

LINDSAY: So... I can't even as a joke... Like, I think... I don't know, I feel like sometimes people just say it to continue the joke and it turns into something serious.

KELSEY: Turns into something serious? How so?

LINDSAY: Like... I don't know.

R: Like you start using it ironically then it feeds into your speech?

KELSEY: OH. Yeah.

LINDSAY: And then you use it all the time so it's just like a part of your language now.

KELSEY: Yeah [laughs], you can start using it ironically and then... yeah, I can see that.

R: Interesting.

LINDSAY: I don't know, I was just thinking about... um, like the word *bae*. Like, I started using that as a joke, and now I legit use it like all the time.

KELSEY: *Legit* is another one of those! I used to say just "legit" as like making fun of it, but now I just said it without thinking about it, it's an unconscious part of my vocabulary now.

R: Yeah, like I'm starting to say "straight up" all the time too. Like, "I straight up did that."

KELSEY: Oh God. And when you start thinking about all your slang you've incorporated you just get real existential and like... [laughs] Uh but yeah, *legit* is something that I used to use ironically and now it just happens.

R: Okay, now I have this question. So *bae* and *legit* and *straight up* are like vocabulary, like they're vocabulary slang, is that different than these phrases? And if there's a difference, do you think that's going to like... is that affecting their effectiveness? I don't know. Like how are they different from other slang? I don't know. I don't know if they are.

LINDSAY: Like... so you're asking how I can't even and because are different from from like... *bae* and...

R: Like vocabulary terms.

LINDSAY: Um... I don't know. Hm.

KELSEY: I guess simple vocabulary terms like *legit*, *bae*, maybe they have more versatility in the ways in which they can be used, whereas I can't even and because, as we have already established, are very particularly tied to a particular situation, a particular emotion, whereas these single words... you can use them in just about any situation, any emotion. Especially once it's past the point of being ironic, like once the word has actually entered your subconscious vocabulary. Like, I've used *legit*, now that I think about it, like I've used it entirely seriously when I was... I almost said *legit upset*. [laughs] Um...

R: I think I've emailed it to my adviser before...

KELSEY: Yes, I have been like really upset, and been like, "This is legit hard!" or "frustrating" or "awful," you know? Like, I've used it in bad ways. So it's not tied to emotion, whereas the phrases we're talking about are. Um...

R: Interesting. Like a specific word having a connotation, but not necessarily being tied to emotion, there's a difference.

KELSEY: Yes. Yeah, *legit* for me has just become a synonym for *very*. Or *extremely*, I guess. Or *seriously*.

LINDSAY: I first heard it in a song. Like, too legit to quit.

[all laugh]

KELSEY: I feel like it's a slightly different meaning of the word... we don't need to get into the discussion of the word *legit* though.

R: Yeah. Well, I don't think I have anything else. Unless y'all have anything else you want to say, or questions, points?

KELSEY: Hm. Uh, I guess I'm curious like... how would you feel if an adult, like your parent started using these phrases, because x and I can't even?

R: It would be hilarious.

LINDSAY: Yeah. Like, for example, my brother... what did he try to say one time? I don't know, and he used it so out of context... I was like, what are you trying to say? I don't understand. I don't remember what he was saying though. Because like, I think it would be funny, but then I feel like once they learn it, it would become so annoying to the point that you don't want to use it anymore. Yeah.

R: Interesting... I think I would just be very taken off guard. If my mom said it, I'd be like, you know that? Where did you hear that?

KELSEY: I wish I could remember now... over the break my mom said something, and it wasn't either of these phrases but it was something... some other modern slang that came from the internet, and she used it wrong, and I just kinda cringed. [laughs] Like, I just felt really awkward. I don't remember what it was though.

R: So these phrases are very tied to like... what do we think, gender? Age population?

KELSEY: I say age. Well, for I can't even I think it is tied to gender, but for both of them age, yeah. It would be weird if older people said them.

R: So do you think... now I'm just thinking. If it's age or a withn-group kind of thing, do you think it might serve some kind of function of solidarity, or um... or like, I don't know, relating to someone your own age? I don't know.



KELSEY: I think relating to someone, yeah, definitely. If you say one of these phrases and the other person understands it, then that implies sort of similar experiences. Um, because somehow you both know this weird phrase that... I mean, in the end, when you're restricted to this little Emory bubble, it seems that these phrases are everywhere, but then they're really not, if you go... like you said you never hear it in your hometown. So it seems like it's all over the place in this college environment. So maybe if you ever heard it outside of this environment, you'd feel like...

LINDSAY: Oh my God, I know you!

KELSEY: ...Whoaaa, I've never heard that outside of Emory! Or something, you know? So. Hm.

R: Yeah. So I was thinking about the fact that if you heard it but if like your family member or someone outside of this community it would be weird, so that indicates that something about this phrase is very tied to your sense of belonging in this specific community.

LINDSAY: I don't know, I feel like if my cousin like... we're the same age, or my friend from home used it, I would be okay with it.

KELSEY: Age.

R: Right, it's a very age thing.

KELSEY: If my parents used it, it would be weird, but if my brothers or sisters used it, that's more normal to me. Okay, my oldest brother is like 31 so that would be weird, because he's like a little too old to... I don't know, he'd probably be upset if he heard me saying [impersonating voice] "You're too old to use that!" [laughs] But yeah, like, I could see my younger older brother using it more easily than I can imagine my older older brother. My younger brother is um.. 24.

R: Okay. So not so much this population but...

KELSEY: 27 I guess....

LINDSAY: Hey, you're me! I always forget his age... like my younger older brother... I thought he was... 25...He turned 25 last year... He's actually 27... It's like, oh!

KELSEY: Yeah, why can't I ever remember my siblings' ages? Yeah! It's like when you live with this person for your whole life you kind of just stop counting their age. Like, he's 24! Wait no, he was 24 three years ago. [laughs]... Because they don't change much, so you forget that they're aging. It's weird.

R: That's funny. So very much I get like... if it's a group thing, it's very age driven, not necessarily like a geographic or a place thing.

KELSEY: Yeah, because of the internet I think anyone... I think since we both think that these things came from the internet... it could be anywhere. But because the internet is used by younger people, it's gonna be restricted to age.

R: And like, social media specifically.

KELSEY: Social media. Yeah, because like, my parents use the Internet, but not in the same way that I do.

LINDSAY: Yeah, that's true.

KELSEY: They use the internet for...

LINDSAY: Shopping.

KELSEY: Yeah, but I shop on the internet too. But my parents... Facebook, recently, but that's purely to like... talk to people and connect with people that they know. And um, like read the news.

LINDSAY: Oh, the day my mother discovered Amazon.

KELSEY: Ah. Oh, my mom has always known about Amazon. She used to buy like... non-perishable groceries on Amazon. She quit doing it for some weird like... there was... she didn't like that they weren't collecting taxes or something? I was like... [laughs] Mom.

LINDSAY: I always find it funny, like... my mom she's like, "[name], did you know you can do this on the computer?"

KELSEY: [laughs] Yes.

R: Yeah, we use the internet very differently than our parents for sure. ... Okay, awesome.

LINDSAY: So... this is not relevant, but um... you know how we were talking about *legit*? So I asked my grandmother, I was like, "So grandmother..." She was getting ready to go to church. "So grandmother, can I get your digits?" And she gave me her address.

KELSEY: [laughs] that's hilarious.

LINDSAY: So I was like, what? I said, "Digits, grandma." She's like, "You mean the house number?" And I was like, "No, your phone number!" So. There's like age there.

R: Yeah. Totally an age thing. One of my main research sources talks about age and language ideology and whether people of a certain age think that the language used by younger generations is like...right or not. So that's super interesting. Digits. A

Alright, well, I'm going to stop recording now. Thank you guys so much.

**Group 2: David, Hilary, and Amy**

R: Researcher

[Researcher reads consent, each participant agrees]

R: So this is called a focus group, which is typically thought of as an interview, but this is less of an interview and more of a casual conversation, trying to get to the root of the uses of these. So it's supposed to serve as a follow-up to the themes covered in the survey, so as I said there are some pre-formed questions but it's really just supposed to be a conversation. Um, so it's [reads description on sheet] deeper goal... understand how used and viewed, what say... how adopted or not adopted to daily use based on those views. So really all comments and ideas will be welcomed and considered. So y'all can say whatever.

So just a general reminder of what we're talking about. Again, I can't even and because x. So just to start, let's just talk about them in your general experience. So... do you say these things, how often, why, with whom, why not?

HILARY: I feel like I haven't said I can't even since like... early high school, but I still say because x, just because I feel like there's not a reason do go in depth if me and the person I'm talking to know what I'm talking about. So.

AMY: I actually thought I can't even was a recent phenomenon, so clearly I'm not in the loop [laughs]. I started hearing it at university and I thought it was funny, even, that people were talking that way and I found myself using it because obviously you start talking like the people around you talk. Um... definitely more just for comedic effect...

DAVID: Definitely for comedic effect. Like the biggest thing I can think of is [mutual friend], going like, *I can't even*... and then he finishes it with ...*begin to understand*, but like he start... he definitely pauses to mark that phrase before expressing his frustration...

R: So frustration? Okay.

DAVID: Yeah, like, frustration or just... let's see... there's a word I'm thinking of...

HILARY: Exasperation?

DAVID: Yeah, exasperation or confoundment, something like that, like being completely befuddled.

AMY: Yeah, like, "how could people actually be this way, or think that way?..."

AMY: Yeah, "How could people be this dense?" [all laugh]

R: Okay, interesting.

AMY: It's definitely used ironically, I think. Sometimes.

R: Both of them, I can't even and because? Or...

DAVID: Yeah, I think because is shorthand, like you use it with people you're comfortable with and you know that it's like, you know why. I don't need to tell you... For because x I think there are a couple ways to use it, because um... let's see, you can either do it like not in a sassy way, like, [flat tone of voice] *because x*. Like, *because science*, *because reasons*.

AMY: *Because senior*.

DAVID: Yeah, because *I don't care*. Like... um, as opposed to... I don't know, I feel like you can try and make it a little more like... emph[atic]... like there are different ways to say it, like there's the silly side and when you're making a point, I think.

R: And those are always separate?

DAVID: Not, I mean... I don't think that they're always separate, I think that they're intertwined, but I think that there's definitely at least two sides. Because when you're in an argument with somebody, and like you're just being... you want to make them feel silly, you say *because x* because you want to make it seem obvious. Like, *because economics*, because, like, you know... that's why people buy stuff. Like, you're an idiot! As opposed to like, why aren't you turning in your stuff and... you complain and say, *because work*.

R: So they're different.

AMY: And neither one is positive, it seems. Like there's no positive usage... Like the usage is always prompted either by digging at another person or I think also just... there's a stereotype of who actually speaks that way so I think a lot of my friends use it being like.. I don't really talk this way, like-

DAVID: It's a caricature.

AMY: Like, I'm not really the American person that says that, but I'm going to use it, and because I'm *so* not that person that's why it's funny that I'm using it, like that type of thinking.

DAVID: It's ironic.

AMY: Well yeah, back to the irony.

R: Mhm. So because x is never positive?

DAVID: I think that's a way of saying it, yeah.

R: Yeah. Or I can't even?

DAVID: They both seem to be complaints to some extent. Well no, I guess I can't even is more of a complaint than because x. But because x can also be a complaint: *because effort*.

AMY: I would use I can't even positively though, too.

R: How?

AMY: Like if you're SO excited, like, I can't! I can't even! Aagh!

DAVID: Ok, so degree...

AMY: [laughs] But that's my lack of expressivity.

HILARY: I feel like because x could be neutral, just like, if there was some really weird video or image or something, like, this is a cat video where the cat walks away from an explosion and like... sunglasses come down over its eyes or something and you'd just be like, because the internet. Or whatever.

R: And that... yeah, that's kind of neutral.

DAVID: Yeah... yeah but in that case it seems like you're kind of like... if it's being used to say... if because x can be used to say you're silly or someone else is silly, and then *because the internet* seems to make the internet silly... like...

HILARY: But don't people also say like, "I need this because reasons?" which is kind of like...

[all laugh]

R: So... So because x is... what I think I'm hearing you say is that it's not so much saying something about the speaker, but about who the speaker is speaking to?

DAVID: Kind of.

HILARY: Well it means you're not in a formal situation, like you're not giving like, real reasons, it's just like, "you know what I'm talking about."

AMY: Definitely focused on efficient communication, if not sparse. Because it's like, I'm not going to spell it out for you, this was the hashtag of what I just said.

R: So it's like... so you don't *have* to explain it to the person. So... does that mean there's like some kind of pre-shared knowledge?

HILARY: Or it can be some kind of stereotype or something... like the Internet has a stereotype for being like really over the top and silly, so... you don't have to say "the Internet is over the top and silly," it's just like... the person knows what you're talking about.

DAVID: Yeah so it does require... like if the person doesn't know what you're talking about, they really won't understand and it doesn't work.

R: Like, I told my mom, *because the Internet...*

DAVID: Yeah, and your mom was like... "what? What about the internet?"

AMY: [laughing] No, really, I want to know!

R: Okay, okay, interesting. Um... so, I've been looking at these phrases in relation to where they came from, how long they've been used, in what context have they been the most used... um, so, I guess I'm wondering... I know that they originated online, right? But like... how does the online use relate to the spoken use? Like is it different? Do different people use it in online versus spoken?

HILARY: I don't know, I'm on Tumblr a lot, and I feel like I can't even like... you started seeing that with like, the younger Tumblr users who would get really excited talking about like a TV show or something and they'd be like, "I can't even! Look at this! Look at this thing I GIFfed!" Something like that. So, I don't know, that's the demographic I've always associated with it, like younger social media users who get very excited about things.

DAVID: Yeah. And then I've seen the rebound of people making fun of... People who get excited on Reddit, for instance. Like...

R: Yeah, what does Reddit say about I can't even?

DAVID: Reddit doesn't say anything because it's a lot of people. But like... there are often... well, you know some of the frequent posts that are like... let's see... that are jokes within the community that are also kind of shorthand where you just say one thing and like lots of people have already seen it so it's easily recognized as what you're trying to do, as opposed to just, you know, the textural meaning. Like, things become memes, and not just the visual ones, but just like inside jokes on the internet. And I think both of those can be used on the internet. But aren't necessarily limited to that, depending on where you go.

R: Are they shorthand and inside jokes in speech too?

AMY: Well yeah, if you're thinking about the irony... like who do you use it with? You're using it with your friends, where you kind of already have this established rapport and expectations of how you're supposed to speak to one another... so I think that in that situation... it is an inside joke and part of... that's why you're using it, because you want to make them laugh or it's funny or... why you would even think they would find it funny.

DAVID: I just think you have to be more careful... no, careful's not the right word, but like, you don't use it in spoken language as much as I think you might in text because... or at least on Reddit it's pretty anonymous, and so I think that that helps, and so you don't need to worry about people connecting that to you. So it doesn't reflect on your identity whether people take you

seriously or you know, take the ironic message, either way. Um... whereas when you say it in speech, you're more limited to who you can say it to, because it's unprofessional. I mean, you know, to some extent. You might not say that to somebody you're just meeting, depending on...

AMY: It's standardized?

DAVID: Yeah, exactly. Whereas on the internet, you can say whatever you want... I mean, basically. And nobody will call you out for it. They can. There's no consequences.

AMY: I feel like such an ostrich... so it comes from Reddit and stuff? Like...

DAVID: It doesn't come from Reddit, it's just used...

HILARY: I started hearing it on Tumblr, but it might have like migrated somewhere else...

AMY: Because I really only saw it in... like, I heard it more in speech and that... maybe on a Facebook comment, but that shows my lack...

DAVID: I think that Reddit did lag behind speech.

R: Really?

DAVID: Yeah. 'Cause I think it had to become a real life trope, like a real life...

AMY: In spoken?

DAVID: Yeah. Like, for the internet to take it as a person that they would... you know, recognize, it had to be a real identity of a human being in the real world first.

HILARY: I mean, I honestly think it originated from like... excited teenagers on Tumblr. I saw it there way before... like I said, I saw it in high school, and I didn't hear it in real life until...

AMY: Wait, what year are you?

HILARY: I'm a sophomore.

AMY: Okay, I feel better, I'm a senior. [laughs] I was like, *when I was in high school*... Okay, I'm older, I feel better now, continue.

R: It's okay, I don't really Tumblr either so I wasn't sure where it came from... when I started doing research, it was like, okay, these people say this on Tumblr! Yeah, okay. I don't think I've ever heard this on Facebook, but I don't really do anything except for Facebook.

Okay, interesting... So what you're saying about the anonymity of Reddit... and the fact that like, it can't reflect on you what you're saying... kind of makes me think of um... that necessitates a negative stigma being attached to these phrases.

DAVID: Yeah...

HILARY: There definitely is one on Tumblr. Like, if you use those phrases it's like... ugh, get this middle schooler off tumblr.

DAVID: Yeah, exactly. I think that, like...

AMY: So there's no irony on Tumblr? That's....

HILARY: I mean, I guess... it's pretty clear when someone's being ironic because there's like... I don't know, Tumblr is weird, there are all these subcultures and there's like a specific way of typing when you're being sarcastic or something but if someone has like a... like a username or URL or whatever like, "Super[?] is super cool!" or something...

AMY: [joking], "Sprinkles!"

HILARY: Yeah, like, or like something from a TV show and it's clearly someone who would get very excited over a TV show and you see...

AMY: Like Hannah Montana!

DAVID: Yeah with like that kind of thing it's like you have a profile and you can compare that one statement that everything else that they've done, and if it is like.... All the same...

HILARY: Yeah, if their blog is nothing but like reaction gifs, and like flashing backgrounds and everything, then it's like, okay that person was using it ironically. Like, they've gone so far into the deep end of irony that no one can tell anymore.

DAVID: Yeah, Poe's Law.

AMY: [laughing] Off the deep end.

R: So... there is a stigma attached to them. Does I can't even or because... do either of them... are either of them... is one stronger than the other in their negative stigma?

HILARY: I can't even.

DAVID: I can't even is definitely stronger. I mean, because x is just fun shorthand. Like, I don't know...

HILARY: And it's more acceptable to use in speech too.

DAVID: Because I don't think anybody... I don't think there's as much of a stigma attached to it, because it doesn't tell as much about the person. I don't know.

HILARY: And it isn't attached to a specific emotion or anything.



DAVID: Yeah, it's more generalized, so it doesn't...

AMY: I just... I imagine a hair flip with I can't even, though. Personally. [laughs]

DAVID: Exactly. [laughs]

AMY: But I don't know who like... maybe it's from a TV show or something? Is there a character that specifically says I can't even? But... that's my image every time.

R: Um, okay. So I guess I'm just... this is interesting, this stigma thing with I can't even versus because x. If... do you associate a specific... I know we mentioned like young Tumblr users, but like... for speech, or for written, or for like both contrasting, do you associate a specific demographic with either, or both of those two phrases? Like, who would say it?

HILARY: Uh, I can't even is like... on top of younger people, like... usually female is the stereotype.

AMY: Well, Americans.

DAVID: Yeah, Americans.

AMY: Straight up Americans, for sure.

DAVID: Like, valley girl.

HILARY: American female teenagers who like... I don't know, maybe not preteens, maybe that's too young, but... 13, 14 year olds.

AMY: Yoga pants. iPhone cases.

DAVID: White girls.

HILARY, AMY: Yeah. [laugh]

DAVID: White valley girls in California. [laughs] But I mean, like... not...

HILARY: Not necessarily California.

DAVID: Yeah, I'm just like...

R: It's okay, you can say what your impression is, like in general. I actually got a bunch of like... I've got a bunch of sample responses here from the survey...

AMY: [mocking, high-pitched voice] Sorority! [sə.rá.rə.ti]

R: So, some examples. So it was rare to find someone who said that it was associated with females without a qualifier like “basic bitch” or “Starbucks.” If they mentioned female at all, it was always all of those together.

AMY: Pumpkin spice latte...

DAVID: Yeah, exactly.

R: [reading] “basic bitches who can’t think of their own sentences,” like, “occasionally males use the phrase but definitely a feminine stigma”... [more examples]

DAVID: Yeah, I guess the context for [friend’s name] using it is that at the house with the five of us living together, so... very insulated, not worrying about judging each other because we don’t care... Because we’re busy not caring...

R: And he uses it ironically?

DAVID: Maybe. I don’t know... well...

AMY: [laughing] he is that girl at heart.

DAVID: Well, he does use it for emphasis, and whether or not that’s ironic is the question...

AMY: He doesn’t even realize what he’s doing! [laughs]

DAVID: Yeah. Like, I don’t know anymore... like Poe’s Law. Poe’s Law is like satire- satire to the point that you can’t tell if it’s satire anymore or if it’s the real thing. And then the question is, when is it no longer satire.

R: Hm. Okay.... Is it more satire in speech? Or in writing? I guess writing is really broad because the Internet is a really big place. But...

HILARY: Speech, because you can’t hear the tone of their voice on the internet.

R: True.

AMY: I feel like the tone makes the statement.

DAVID: Yeah, and how much you know about the person. Yeah. It’s very personal but I think it’s easier to get more information from another human being, I think.

R: So, I’m just trying... I don’t know, I probably can’t answer this question, and I... it just drives me crazy, I really want to know. But how did it become that I can’t even was associated with white girls in sororities? Like, I just really want to know how that happened.

AMY: Yeah, that's what I was trying to think... there has to be some character on TV or something.

DAVID: I think it's the pattern of speech for one thing, like, "oh my God!" Um... Which, I don't know what it is about these phrases, um... but like, together they build up into like this valley girl way of talking.

HILARY: Yeah, and more and more like... text talk and everything is associated with the valley girl thing, like "omg!"

DAVID: Yeah, and that stuff has become more universal, like over time. Kind of like I can't even has, to an... slowly. But like, it started somehow, this way of expressing things really generally...

AMY: I mean, it points to a laziness of thought.

DAVID: I guess... but like... it's a laziness of expression...

AMY: Like, it's a basic thing, a laziness, an intellectual laziness.

HILARY: I don't think it's laziness, I think it's like, really really excited, I don't know why it's associated with like sorority girls, I guess like... I don't know...

AMY: I mean, I think like... because x... like you're not even going to give us the time of day to say a sentence?

HILARY: But there's a difference between shorthand and laziness.

AMY: Yeah, I mean...

R: What is the difference?

HILARY: Like, if you're talking to someone who knows... like, you're knowledgeable about it, you've talked about it before, then there's just no logical reason to go over it again, that would be redundant if you're having a conversation would slow down. Um...

DAVID: I think part of the reason it might be considered lazy is if... is because we think of people using it all the time, whoever they talk to... like, I don't know if this person really exists, ever, and like... but you can imagine someone who says I can't even and because x a lot... and that kind of person... that idea of, say, like, not using it for shorthand but just using it just... all the time, makes you think...

AMY: Like, what else do they do?

DAVID: ...yeah, might make you think that they take short... like, take shorthands in thought... um, but, even if that's not a real thing... I don't know.

AMY: Like they talk to you for three seconds and then they're on their phone again texting. And it's like, "oh, I can't even," and they're back on instagram. And you can see this...

DAVID: Yeah. And whether or not that person actually exists... that might be somebody that people think of. But I don't know how to check... I don't know, there's no way to test that...

AMY: Empirically.

DAVID: Yeah, exactly, so it doesn't really mean a lot. But...

HILARY: I do know there's this really annoying meme on like Facebook and stuff... where there's this videogame character who's really excited about stuff, his name is [Mr. Torg ?] and like... there's just like this picture of him that says, [name] approves this shit because reasons! And people like post it everywhere, it's always the top voted comment, it's like... why? You weren't even saying anything! You could have just liked it and it would have the same effect!

AMY: [whisper] because reasons.

HILARY: Which always really bothers me because like, people say wittier things in the comments but that's always the top voted comment that I look at every time I click on anything.

[pause]

DAVID: Yeah. I only played two, so I... yeah, sorry.

HILARY: It's from a videogame, yeah.

R: Um...

AMY: But there's also that lightheartedness too. Like, I think even if there's a negative stereotype...

DAVID: Yeah, people still use it.

AMY: It's fun! It's fun to use, like, language and speech is changing that way, so.. or that the idea that someone can get what you're talking about right away...

DAVID: It makes you feel like you're acting like someone else, which is also kind of fun. I don't know. Not acting like someone else but, you know, like... you're not like, doing it to make fun of whoever might actually be saying that, you're just doing it to get the reference. I guess that's part of it.

HILARY: I could think of a way that it could be just laziness though, like when someone doesn't actually know what they're talking about. Like, if I say "because blank," it will sound like I know what I'm talking about, like "because economics reasons" or something like that, it... you

might not even know what you're talking about, like, okay, what *about* economics? And they might not know, but they think that if they say that...

DAVID: Yeah, they've got buzzwords and then you can just like...

R: Like synergy!

DAVID: Yeah, because synergy! [all laugh]

AMY: Like, you know!

HILARY: And so sometimes I'm like, no, I don't, explain.

AMY: No, but, you know!

R: So it's like... effective if the other person... if there's like a shared repertoire of information, but if they don't, then it's like...

DAVID: If the other person is intelligent then it's fine because you know that they're not... that's not... there's no way that that's actually them; they're using it to be funny. But if you don't know, it's harder to tell.

R: Mm-hmm. [pause] Cool. Um, so... besides the idea of them being like... communicative in a certain context, are they tied to like... a specific emotion? Um, and are they different emotions? I know we talked about one being like, negative? But instead of just negativity, what does it communicate emotion-wise? Like is it just funny? Is it some kind of like....

DAVID: Emphasis and exaggeration.

HILARY: Yeah.

DAVID: I think. Mostly. Like, unless somebody's like... I think most people are using it ironically? I mean, no, well, like... in some ways somebody's trying to use a hyperbole, like, I can't even deal with these people, when it's like, yes you can really deal with these people, actually, physically deal with these people. That is the case.

AMY: [laughs] you just don't want to.

DAVID: But you just don't want to, and so you're overblowing your statement, you know, for... because we do that, because that's how we get, you know, people to feel how strongly we feel about something.

HILARY: I feel like it can be used for just like... strong emotion, but it's never strong emotion as a serious thing. Like, if you're like... something really dramatic happens on a TV show and you're like, oh my god, I can't even! And maybe you're sad or angry or whatever but you wouldn't say it if like someone died or something.

DAVID: Yeah, I think like, personal tragedy, no.

HILARY: Yeah. Stuff that like, isn't really of real consequence, like even if you feel strongly about it you know like, it's not actually a big deal.

DAVID: Always lighthearted.

R: Okay. Always.

HILARY: I mean, but it could be like... I'm sorry to keep bringing up Tumblr...

DAVID, R: No, no, please.

HILARY: But like... There's kind of like the stereotype, there'll be like these teenagers who watch TV shows and they'll be like, oh my God, my feels, I can't even! And so it's like...

DAVID: My favorite character!

HILARY: So like, yeah, so like it can be because they're sad, but like I said, it's never about like anything real, or consequential.

R: Mm. Yeah, my first thought was *Game of Thrones*.

DAVID: [laughs] Yeah, it warrants a level of non-seriousness. Like... you... yeah, like that light-heartedness. Like, whatever you're talking about, it's not important enough to give it more depth than you're giving it.

AMY: Or analysis.

DAVID: Yeah. [laughs]

R: Like, "how do I actually feel about this?"

AMY: [laughs] [mocking] That doesn't matter, how will it fit on Twitter?

R: Yeah.

DAVID: [laughs]

AMY: I don't even know how to use that.

R: Um... so... How is a male saying "I can't even" different than a female saying "I can't even"?

[all participants laugh]

HILARY: Well, a guy is probably making fun of a girl when he says it.

R: Okay. Always?

HILARY: Not always, but like... I can... like, when I think of a guy saying it, I imagine them saying it in like a stereotypically “girly” voice, like sarcastically.

AMY: Or... Only my homosexual friends say “I can’t even,” but like, it’s serious, it’s not trying to make fun. Like, that’s how they speak. So... in... I know that being gay gets tied to being feminine, in a weird way, even though I disagree, and I don’t think they’re necessarily... them doing that, they don’t think, oh! I’m adopting a girl way of speaking! I just... I think maybe it’s the lightheartedness that’s what they like. The playfulness, exaggeration, hyperbole. Versus a gendered understanding of language.

DAVID: I don’t think I’ve ever seen... Yeah, I don’t see guys say it to girls very often. I like... like in my house...

R: You say it to each other?

DAVID: Yeah, we say it to each other sometimes, like... in jest. But... let’s see. I’m trying to think of the couples in my house.

HILARY: Because x is a little different though....

AMY: Yeah, because x, I don’t think there’s anyone... No ties to gender.

R: Yeah, no ties to gender.

DAVID: [mutual friend] likes saying that more than [mutual friend], but there are some reasons for that.

R: What are the reasons for that?

DAVID: Well, because you’re her roommate. And you’ve been talking about this a lot. [laughs]

R: Oh, okay. [laughs] I thought you were going to say it’s because she’s on the internet a lot. But then again, so is [mutual friend].

DAVID: Yeah... I think it’s a little more of [mutual friend]’s personality though, a little more bubbly-bouncy and thinks that that’s hilarious. And I’m trying to think between [mutual friend] and [mutual friend]... kind of the same dynamic comes around... but [mutual friend]’s also on Tumblr. And [mutual friend]’s not... That might have something to do with it.

R: Okay. So a guy wouldn’t say it to a girl, but like... unless they were...

DAVID: I don't know. I mean, I haven't seen it, but that doesn't mean it can't happen. And like, I don't think I've got like a rule for it, because I had to think pretty hard just now about it. [laughs] Pretty hard. So. So if there is something, it's not like, huge gender line. But, you know, there might be something there.

HILARY: Yeah, I can't even might just be seen as like... this like, not like a serious emotion, but kind of emotionally charged and enthusiastic and seen as more of like... bubbly and girly and stuff, where a guy might not want to be associated with those traits as much, so...

DAVID: That's fair. That's a pretty big theme in... well, in like masculinity in general is like not emotional, well like, not...

AMY: No bubbles. No sparkles. MAN. Be a MAN.

DAVID: [laughs] which is wrong, which is not how masculinity should work, but that's the macho-ism.

AMY: [mocking] You don't show emotion!

HILARY: [mocking] You die of a heart attack at 65! That's how it work!

AMY: [whispering, mocking] In silence!

DAVID: Bottle it up into your arteries.

[all laugh]

R: While girls are like, I can't even! [laughs]

HILARY: That's why girls live longer.

AMY: Because they can't even. [laughs] [mocking, creaky voice] They can't even die!

[all laugh]

R: Oh my goodness. [laughs] We are almost done.

DAVID: Because emotions.

R: Precisely. Um... So the last question I have is super long, I'm going to try to make it a little shorter. Um. I've touched on this, and I don't want to beat a dead horse, but... on the survey with *I can't even* and *because X*, um, they were very different in their response and how people thought about them, but the one thing that was similar was that everyone said that they had like... some kind of essential grammatical purpose, um, that no existing construction had. Do you think they serve a specific purpose, and if so what is it? Like, are they effective, and is one more effective or preferable than the other?



HILARY: I don't think that *I can't even* can't be replaced. I mean, it's just like an exclamation really.

DAVID: Like, it's just popular right now. I mean, I think that there... like, I think that it has like a tiny niche in terms of, you know, the... like, the flippancy and popularity, basically. Like, how people use it, but beyond that, I don't know if there's anything about the construction of the sentence or something that's particularly...

AMY: Like, it's using structure differently, and if anything, sometimes incorrectly for a standardized version of grammar but I think it's more in the realm of pragmatics that's taking hold. Like we're talking about emphasis, and it seems like it's very much meaning. Like, the usage is rooted not so much in like... "let's reshape sentences to fit the speaker," it's more like, okay, I want to get this idea across. Insert structure.

HILARY: Yeah, *I can't even* is pretty much its own sentence. It's not like it's altering any sounds.

DAVID: Yeah, that's what I was thinking. It's so distinctive. Like, nobody says sentences that way. I don't know, it sounds very disjointed, and so it's like really easy identifiable from another sentence, I don't know if that's just because like...

R: It like... it breaks your expectations.

DAVID: Exactly.

HILARY: Like, it doesn't finish...

DAVID: The fact that it's not a real sentence... yeah, like...

HILARY: Like it's supposed to show that like, "I am so, like, strongly emoting about this, I cannot even finish this sentence."

AMY: Yes.

R: Like... mimesis. Like using language... as a sound... Yeah, nevermind. Yeah, I don't know. What about because x? Like what... is that super effective, what is its grammatical purpose, how is it...

HILARY: I mean, it's the same, like, because anything, it's just more condensed.

DAVID: I think it also plays off of... like, in school they never told us you could start a sentence with because [laughs]. Which is wrong. Because x. Um... I don't know, it's just... it...

AMY: [joking] "me go home."

DAVID: Yeah, exactly, like, it's a not-sentence. Like, again. And as such, its construction is really easily identifiable as "this is not serious." When you make a sentence, like, the way you make a sentence... the way you make the sentence correctly says something about what you're using the sentence for, I think. And saying "Because something" says "I'm not making this sentence, like grammatically correct..." like... "I'm making this sentence grammatically incorrect on purpose."

R: Hm. What you're using the sentence for, that's interesting. Not necessarily what the words themselves are saying but how the construction is used.

AMY: And the [audience] [unclear] – "With whom do you speak?" versus "Who ya talkin to?" Or... "eh?"

[all laugh]

DAVID: Yeah, it might be more correct, but it doesn't matter when like.. nobody's going to use that, and then, like in this case, it's one step further in like, not even... it's not even things people would actually use, it's just ridiculous.

R: Yeah. Wittgenstein would say it's a language game.

AMY: [laughs] Hey. My man. Dr. Pak's gonna kill me. I'm gonna write this paper on Wittgenstein and she's gonna be like, "no."

R: I'm going to write it on Wittgenstein and "because x." [laughs] No. Absolutely not.

AMY: No! But he would say, "It doesn't matter what the word is! It's its use! Its meaning is its use!"

R: No but it's like, "what does 'slab' say?!" You know like, "give me a slab, here's a slab," it's like "because X!" It's how you use language, it's not necessarily the words...

AMY: The label. He's all about meaning, context and use.

R: Yeah. He's all about slabs too.

AMY: And people make fun of him. I think he's a genius.

R: I like... the more I digest it, the more I think it's awesome. Okay. So. Just kind of a last question. And I know we talked about this a lot, but what do you think is the most essential difference between I can't even and because x, and how they similar and different in what they accomplish, so like, the conciseness, the...

DAVID: Like, between the two?

R: Between the two. So like, what is the most essential difference and the most essential similarity, like... how are they different in what they accomplish?

DAVID: Hm. Well you said similarity, so I'm going to say in their, you know, broken sentence structure they're very similar. And I think that's used to evoke the same... vein of silliness.

AMY: But is the because x formulation more broken than I can't even?

DAVID: I don't know. I think possibly, because you can begin a sentence with "I can't," you don't usually begin sentences with two words, and one of them is "because." [laughs] Um... Whereas I can't even is a sentence fragment; because x isn't even a sentence fragment, kind of, like you could... but since it's so short I feel like it's even more fragmented in terms of further away from a sentence

R: Hm. And because... I mean... It might be like because science or because reasons, but it's also changeable, like you can put reasons in there.

HILARY: Yeah, I think it's more versatile than *I can't even*.

AMY: Yeah, it's unchanging.

DAVID: Because concepts.

R: Yeah. Because it's more versatile, yeah.

DAVID: Yeah. Whereas *I can't even*... isn't very flexible. I mean, depending on what you put in the second half, it can be flexible, but just like the I can't even is overwhelming.

AMY: And just like... emotional intensity of the speaker... because x seems to be lessened in that it could be incorporated into daily speech, it's not like a dramatic... as dramatic a break, um... as that caused by I can't even.

R: Ok. Less dramatic. Interesting. Okay. Those are all the questions I have. I don't know if you guys have any more ideas or things... you don't have to.

DAVID: I can't even.

R: [laughs] The most popular response to my question of, "Why do you use it?" was "Because reasons" for because. Because reasons, because efficiency, because words, because linguistics. Well, I think we're done, I'm going to stop recording. Thank you all so much.

AMY: I just wonder how they're like... represented... in the brain. Because it's like, you know, we use metaphor a lot, you know, and to talk about how we talk about metaphor in the brain, just like how it is... like maybe it's shaping the image, that whatever gets triggered by "language"... maybe it's calling up a different image, or a different something in the brain, and that's why we understand it more immediately, it's not just because it's a short word, maybe it's just something

about like, because reasons- because reasons is... a noun, and it's topic, so maybe it's more intense than a verb, so how it's represented in the brain... I don't know. That's all my psycholinguistics coming in.

[end of recording]

### **Group 3: Blake, John, and Ashley**

R: researcher

[Researcher reads consent, all participants agree orally]

R: This session is supposed to be a follow-up to the themes covered in the survey. So there are some pre-formed questions that I came up with, but most of the session so far haven't really gone according to that. So it's really just supposed to be a conversation about the overarching themes and is not really a traditional interview. So... the purpose is to build a deeper understanding of the purpose of *I can't even* and *because x* in speech, but um, the deeper goal is to see how new features of a language are viewed among a certain population, and how and why they are adopted or not adopted into daily use based on those views. So all comments and ideas will be welcomed and considered.

So just to start the casual conversation— reminding you, again, we're talking about *I can't even* and *because x*. So generally in your experience, do you say these things? How often, why, and with whom? What kind of context?

ASHLEY: With you when we're making fun of your project.

[all laugh]

R: Okay, yeah.

JOHN: I almost never hear it used seriously. It's always ironic. Just like swag, hashtag-4/20-blaze-it.

BLAKE: I use *swag* seriously, but... [all laugh]... I probably use *I can't even* ironically than I do seriously.

JOHN: The problem is, you start using it ironically for a while and then you've used it so frequently that it creeps in.

R: Yeah, I've found that to be happening in my project.

JOHN: Yeah, that actually happened to me with, ah... with *yolo*.

R: Yeah. What about *because x*? Is that one used as much, do you think? Do you use it as much?

BLAKE: I don't think I've ever said it. I've typed it so many times, like trolling on internet forums somewhere, or like on Reddit, but I don't think I've ever said it.

JOHN: Yeah, I don't think I've ever seen it off of Reddit.

R: Really?

JOHN: Yeah.

ASHLEY: I've heard people say it, but I don't think I've ever said it. But I've definitely heard people... but I definitely think it's also ironic. I don't know if I've ever heard it seriously been said, like, just as a joke or to end a conversation.

BLAKE: The other thing is, like... I don't know. The like, *x* in *because x* is like never actually a real reason. Like it's usually just a cop-out, you're just like, "Oh yeah, I'm doing this because *x*. Because reasons."

JOHN: Because 'murica. [America] That's my favorite one.

R: Interesting.

BLAKE: So I don't think it has any utility other than when I'm using it ironically or trolling.

R: Okay. Um. Interesting. So... not to be like, I don't know. Just to play devil's advocate, what do you mean by *ironic*?

BLAKE: Well... I think it's intent[ionally] infelicitous.

R: Okay... so...

ASHLEY: It doesn't really reflect what you actually mean. Like, you say it, but I don't actually mean that that's the reason why. Like, when I say *because x*, it would be because that actual reason... is just not the real reason.

JOHN: Yeah... I'd also say that the vast majority of them is, it's not because *x*, it's *because reasons*. Which is actually a reference to a web comic. Um, I think that's where it started.

BLAKE: *xkcd* or one of those.

JOHN: No, it wasn't *xkcd* actually, um... let me see. Because I can totally pull it up, I've seen it enough. I'm not 100% sure that that's where it came from, but that would be my guess.

BLAKE: That's certainly not how I was exposed to it. I was exposed to it on Reddit. So.

R: Interesting. Um... so... what about *I can't even*? Is it similar ironically? Or...?

JOHN: Um, as far as I know, like... this is just my experience with it. It kinda came out of like, the valley girl type place, kind of like how *swag* and *yolo* came out of like... Justin Bieber's followers, so people use it ironically to kind of make fun of them... That's just... that's just how I've seen it used. Like, *swag* is usually to make fun of like 13 or 14-year-olds.

ASHLEY: Yeah. I also think there could be like a stigma if you were not using it ironically, like you would have a mindset about... or at least I would have a mindset about a person that said *I can't even* just... not ironically, and it would be a very valley girl stereotype.

JOHN: Yeah, it's tied very closely to like Starbucks and Uggs, like that whole thing.

BLAKE: So basic.

R: Yeah. I was going to say, an interesting thing I found on the survey, so one of the things I have written up here, is that *I can't even* was overwhelmingly associated with a very specific demographic [all laugh] um.. and...

BLAKE: I don't know how anonymized that was, but I feel like... reflecting backwards on mine I might have been a little... a little bit too critical.

R: I mean, everyone... not everyone, but a lot of people had the same response. And it was almost always... if they said that it was female, or that a girl would say it, it was always qualified by like, "basic," or like that sort of thing. So it was like a super specific demographic tied to that.

[all laugh]

R: Just... I mean...

BLAKE: All of my friends say "I can't odd" to be ironic. So that's your next... that's your master's thesis. [All laugh]

R: What about *because x*? Is there a demographic associated with that?

ASHLEY: I feel like it's... Internet people.

JOHN: Yeah, I feel like it's really contained to Reddit, and 4chan, except 4chan is dead now, so just Reddit.

R: It's contained.

JOHN: It moves quick, so...

ASHLEY: I've never been on Reddit or anything like that, I know they exist but I don't really know, but.... So to me it's just internet in general, because I don't really know specific ones, but when I think of because x I think of that...

JOHN: Reddit is the front page of the internet, that's what they claim. It all starts there.

R: I uh, I have a Reddit, but I never like get on there.

JOHN: It's addicting.

BLAKE: Ah, some of my proudest moments. One of them is being on the top page of Reddit.

JOHN: You were on the front page?

BLAKE: Yes.

JOHN: Fuck you. [laughs]

R: Let's see... um... So one thing that I got on the survey is that *I can't even* and *because x* were both indicated to serve some kind of grammatical or like communicative purpose that no other existing construction could do. Do you agree with that, or do you think that there's a specific purpose for them? Is it grammatical? Is it like, pragmatic? I don't want to put words in your mouth, but like... what purpose do they serve?

BLAKE: So let's start with *I can't even*, because I feel like... so. For *I can't even*, I feel that if you're using it seriously, then often people will make fun of you because there are other ways to express, like.. how much you can't even. But... like, just saying *I can't even* is ridiculous. Using it ironically, though, it's very specifically targeted at... like, making fun of those valley girls slash basic type of people. So if you use it ironically, there may be other ways to also like, make fun of that type of demographic, but that's a very easy one, or at least a very popular one right now. I don't know why people say *I can't even*, you can just tell me why you can't deal with this "because I'm feeling this way," but...

JOHN: Well, I think it's supposed to like... I think it's intentionally supposed to not make you sound dumb, but like... the situation is so overwhelming that you've lost the ability to language... [all laugh] That's my impression of it. But because like valley girls picked it up and they're already thought of as dumb, the two just kind of collided and killed it. Um... Because I actually think it was like really clever at first, but then it just got used until it broke.

R: Hmm. So it's the association with that population that makes it unpopular.

JOHN: And popular.

R: And popular.

ASHLEY: Popular as a joke, I think.

JOHN: It makes it infamous.

BLAKE: [beginning unclear] I'm not sure, I think people use it to want to fit in, like one of those things to say it to belong to the group. And the people on the outside use it to define you as being part of that social group, and then hating you for it [?] [saying those things]

[all laugh]

R: So if you said it to belong to a group, what group would you belong to?

BLAKE: Can I just say basic people? Is that a real group?

R: [laughs] okay.

JOHN: Late teen to early 20s sorority valley girl, almost... I would say almost exclusively white... uh, upper middle class to upper class...

BLAKE: Your estrogen definitely has to be over 9000.

JOHN: [laughs] And like, you can't say it without a Starbucks cup in your hand. Like, it just doesn't work.

BLAKE: Well, maybe if you have your Instagram up with the picture that you just took of your Starbucks cup.

JOHN: Okay, maybe.

R: [laughs] Okay, y'all.

BLAKE: All the things we want you to write in your thesis. Right here.

R: Transcribing this is going to be interesting.

JOHN: That's okay, they can't read.

R: Oh my goodness. Okay, [ASHLEY], what do you think?

ASHLEY: No, I... I largely agree with all of that, that it's like... as far as the purpose of it... it's either... maybe it's to fit into a group or to be categorized in that group, but I think it's more purposefully used as a joke, or to poke fun or to... like simulate being part of that group, and make fun of that.

R: So it's more purposefully used to make fun of a group.

ASHLEY: Yeah.



JOHN: Like “tubular.” Nobody uses that except to make fun of like... stoner surfers.

R: Interesting.

BLAKE: Or stoner []?s

JOHN: You know, I don’t even hear them use it all that much.

BLAKE: I don’t know that many, so... there’s that.

JOHN: Yeah... surf culture’s not all that great on the East.

R: What about because x? Is there... what about the grammatical purpose? What is that? Or... grammatical, communicative...

JOHN: So I think it’s supposed to be funny, there’s the first thing. And it’s supposed to compress a lot of ideas down into just like, one quick joke.

ASHLEY: And also kind of end a thought or a conversation or anything. Because you don’t really like follow that up with anything, it’s just kind of the end.

JOHN: It’s like... let’s go invade Iraq! Because ‘Merica.

R: A compression of a lot of ideas into one thing.

JOHN: Especially if you’re like... making a joke or an insult about like a specific subgroup of people. Like, you take all the stereotypes and lump it into one and throw it and it’s done. It’s like everybody gets all of those stereotypes at once so it’s like 30 jokes just compressed.

BLAKE: So it’s almost like the joke without the punch line, but everyone knows the punch line.

JOHN: Kind of like that. That’s a good way to put it.

BLAKE: So it’s like, “knock-knock, banana, knock-knock, banana, knock-knock, because orange.” [all laugh] Because like, everyone knows what the ending is but you just... you cut right to it.

JOHN: And I think that it kind of like... takes people off guard because they’re not expecting... like, they’re expecting a lot more to follow and it just, completely truncates it. And so there’s a little bit of a shock value there too I think.

R: Interesting.

BLAKE: I also use it when I'm like... not really sure of the reasons, or because of why, so I'll just be like, "why did you throw that?" "I don't know, because Frisbee..." [all laugh] I don't know, that's what you do in the moment. Like, I don't know, I didn't actually think about it.

R: Yeah. So it could be... like, a lot of reasons, like a knowledge of a bunch of reasons, but also like... not knowledge...

BLAKE: Absence of a bunch of reasons.

R: Yeah. So either abundant presence of reasons or total absence of a bunch of reasons. Because reasons.

JOHN: Well, I'd say like even in that situation there are a lot of reasons, you just didn't think about them, and so like you're acknowledging the fact that there were a lot... there was a lot of shit going on that you just didn't think about. And so... yeah.

ASHLEY: Or also like, you just don't want to answer, or you don't want to have that conversation, or don't want feedback. So like... yeah, a cop-out, again.

R: It's a cop-out, but it communicates.

BLAKE: Like, just ignore it, it's fine.

ASHLEY: [laughs] yeah, exactly.

BLAKE: Because Frisbee. Sufficient answer. There you go.

JOHN: Yeah, I can't actually think of a time I've heard it spoken though. It's always, always written.

R: Okay. My next question was going to be about how does the written use of both of them compare to their um... spoken use. Either. This also includes *I can't even*.

JOHN: I can't even is not so much written as far as I can tell.

R: Really? Okay.

JOHN: Like... I hear it said a lot. Or like... if it is written, it's usually written in quotes.

BLAKE: Would it get autocorrected to "I cannot even"?

JOHN: [laughs]

ASHLEY: Yeah, I think *because x* is a lot more written than *I can't even*.

R: So... they're differentially seen written versus spoken. Um... but... I don't know, if we think that there's a difference... I don't know if we can ask this question, but... like, how does the written or online use compare to spoken use? Like is it... would it be different? Would *I can't even* written have like a different meaning or a different person than spoken?

JOHN: You know, actually, I do see it on Tumblr a lot, now that I think of it.

BLAKE: [laughing] I'm just thinking about the demographics of Tumblr.

JOHN: Yeah, which also helps to reinforce it...

R: Why? Can you specify?

BLAKE: I'm just thinking, like... the people that would be on Reddit versus the people that would be on Tumblr, and I would make the people on Tumblr like... I would equate it to like... somewhere in between like... the super super girly girls that are on Pinterest, and like... the ones that used to be on like, Myspace all the time, so they go to Tumblr, that's their home.

R: Elaborate. Wait. What is this demographic?

JOHN: 13 to 17-year-old, like... middle class girls...

BLAKE: Yeah, they're younger. So like Pinterest has like... the crafty things and stuff like that that I associate with like 40-year-old women. [laughs] Maybe I'm wrong, I don't have a Pinterest. So um... Tumblr is like... the like, like... late teens, like... early 20s, like, I have important things to share slash I saw something cool, so I'm going to share that too, and then I can't even.

JOHN: And then it's really... there's... Tumblr's got a lot of like social justice warriors, which is kind of annoying as a sociologist, just to throw it out there. Because like they're taking our ideas and they're using them wrong, and annoying everyone. Yeah. Yeah, and then you try and say them seriously, and you're like, shit, this 13-year-old in like California just ruined it for me. [laughs]

R: So, versus Reddit. What's the demographic of Reddit?

JOHN: Neckbeards. [laughs]

BLAKE: Both Redditors in this room have neckbeards [laughs]. Critical fact.

JOHN: I do not have a neckbeard. Nope. Nope nope. Fuck that.

BLAKE: [laughs] I shaved it recently, but yeah... I don't know, it's like middle 20s to like 30-year-old men, primarily, and then you get the occasional like, 14-year-old boy.

JOHN: White, middle class, atheist...

BLAKE: Very very far... which way is liberal?

JOHN: Left.

BLAKE: [laughs] They're like off the scale. Um...

JOHN: Yeah, they're very liberal. Except sometimes.

BLAKE: Well, front-pagers are very liberal.

JOHN: Yeah, but sometimes... every now and then you'll get an issue where they're not, and then they're *really* not.

R: Hm. Interesting.

JOHN: [citing example] "Hitler did nothing wrong..."

R: Hm. So would because x never be seen on Tumblr? Or the other way around?

JOHN: So, Tumblr is seen a lot on Reddit, because they like to make fun of them.

BLAKE: So I think *I can't even* would be on Reddit- ironically. I don't think it would ever be used seriously. It would just be downvoted instantly, into a Reddit abyss...

JOHN: It would be downvoted into oblivion if someone posted that.

R: Okay.

BLAKE: So they actually make comments about like... how they like the language or not, so that's useful. But I could definitely see jokes about I can't even to make fun of like... valley girls, or those like demographics we talked about being [out]voted, being pretty popular. Although it's pretty overplayed, so it has to be unique.

JOHN: It has to be pretty clearly ironic. Like, it can't be ambiguous.

BLAKE: [thinking] Because x on Tumblr...

JOHN: So I've... I've never spent any like... I've never actually gone to Tumblr itself, I've only seen screenshots.

R: I don't think I ever have either.

BLAKE: Oh, I used to have a tumblr.

JOHN: [laughs]

BLAKE: Um... I mean... Tumblr, as much as like we did define a sort-of demographic for it... there are just a little bit of people from everywhere on Tumblr. So like, I could see it being possible, but I can't recall it from experience.

JOHN: Yeah. Also like, in the Tumblr area, I can't even is a really popular comment, like if somebody notices something really.... So there are a lot of like really...

BLAKE: [mocking] Justin Bieber body pic! [gasps] I can't even! [laughs]

JOHN: I was going to say, like, really obsessed fans of stuff, so like... The Harry Potter fandom, the supernatural fandom, that kind of stuff is all on there. So if you post something like creative or interesting, or that I never noticed about whatever it is, then "I can't even" is very commonly the first comment on it.

BLAKE: And the third. And twelfth. And... spam, spam spam.

JOHN: It's kind of like "mind equals blown" (mind = blown).

R: Oh. Yeah. Hmm.

BLAKE: Actually, they serve almost the exact same function written, except "mind = blown" doesn't carry a demographic. Or does it?

JOHN: Yeah, and it doesn't have the hate associated with it. Like, if you posted that it wouldn't get negative votes, it would just sit there. Like, nobody would go after it, trying to kill you for it.

BLAKE: It would be like, yeah, okay, my mind was blown too. Vote.

R: Hmm. Let's see... So it's sounding like... I mean, obviously there's a huge stigma especially on the Internet against I can't even. Is there any kind of thought at all with because x?

BLAKE: Actually, now that I've started saying it to tell jokes, I think I'm actually going to start saying it in real life [laughs] Be that ironic. I think that would make me more ironic, yes?

JOHN: Meta.

BLAKE: So meta.

JOHN: [laughs]

ASHLEY: Yeah, I don't think... I don't think of a stereotype attached. Or like a stigma attached. As much. Or at all. Like I can't think of a certain person that I would... That automatically pops in my head when I hear *because x*.

BLAKE: Even if there was I would still use it, because I'm probably that type of person. [laughs]

ASHLEY: Like... I don't know. Just when you hear "I can't even" there's a certain picture that's in your head. But I don't think it's the same way for because x.

BLAKE: I think I would assume that like... okay, this person knows how to use a computer, like they have been on the internet recently. [laughs] Um... but other than that I don't think I would assume like... gender, age, sexuality, anything like that. Maybe age. I would probably... I would probably say like... late teens, 20s and 30s, probably not above or below that.

JOHN: Okay, so I just googled the words "I can't even," [shows phone] Those are the images associated.

BLAKE: Describe it for the transcriber, please.

JOHN: Okay. So we have a tiny Fiat; very, very bright pink nail polish; I don't recognize that brand of watch, but it looks expensive; and like... organic coffee. Um, and then there's about six trillion pictures of Starbucks. A lot of organic food... yeah.

R: Huh.

JOHN: That's what Google Images tells us. [laughs]

R: There's this question that I keep coming back to, and I don't know if I'm ever going to get an answer for it, but I really just wonder how this linguistic thing came to be associated with that specific population.

JOHN: So I... now that I think about it, I really think that Tumblr helped out with that a lot. Um... especially since most of the things that are funny were like... most of the things that it's associated with... that it's associated with went viral. So like, the comments always go viral with the content.

BLAKE: So as like... people were posting pictures of their pumpkin spice lattes and Starbucks, "I can't even, it's so good"... pumpkin spice latte went viral and I can't even went viral, as basic was going viral. They hated *basic*, so they hated *I can't even* because it's associated with *basic*, but they still love pumpkin spice latte, Starbucks. Logic.

JOHN: [laughs] because logic.

BLAKE: Because logic.

R: That should just be the conclusion of my thesis.

JOHN: I'll say I've used because logic before.

R: Mhm. I say *because reasons*, I say *because...* like, *because school*, *because senior*.

BLAKE: Because thesis.

R: Because thesis. Because fuck you. [all laugh]

JOHN: Okay, I've used "because fuck you" too. I think that one came from like... I think that was Bender from Futurama who said that though.

BLAKE: Because x?

JOHN: Like... why'd you do that? Because screw you, that's why. I can't quite remember if that's how...

BLAKE: I do remember that. Okay. Vaguely though.

JOHN: I can't remember exactly what he said because they'd have to censor it.

R: I like that idea. That's interesting. "The comments always go viral with the content." So it could have just been a comment thing that got associated.

JOHN: Well, if you look up most of the famous Tumblr posts, they usually have the first two or three comments in the screenshot.

R: True.

JOHN: Particularly if any of the comments are funny. But it's almost always the first comment, or the second, that gets attached with it.

R: Um. So I know we talked about them serving like... communicative purposes and there being a stigma with them, but... um... Are either of them like... tied to a specific emotion? Slash is it possible for them to appear without any kind of emotion behind them?

BLAKE: So I think I can't even is supposed... like if used unironically, it is intended to be used because you have so much emotion. And you have so much emotion that you can't even complete the rest of your sentence... like what was said before. And usually those are like... I would say the most common ones that I would associate with it would be like, excitement. Like, "Oh my gosh! I can't even!" Like, excitement...

JOHN: Surprise.

BLAKE: Yeah, surprise... or, anxiety.

ASHLEY: Or like, overwhelmed.

R: Yeah.

BLAKE: Yeah. So that's mine for those. For I can't even. If used ironically it's meant like... with the intention of getting a laugh, or like...

JOHN: It's always sarcasm. Sarcasm is an emotion right? It's the only one I experience. [laughs]

R: Any emotion at all for because x?

ASHLEY: I feel like it's kind of a lack of emotion, like, because you don't care enough to really explain anything that you're saying, you're just like, eh, because blah.

BLAKE: It's an avoidance strategy. Or you're using it to get a joke off. So, sarcasm. Maybe it's just that sarcasm has been on the rise. And along with sarcasm, I can't even and because x.

JOHN: Well, the Internet is very sarcastic.

BLAKE: So maybe there's something particularly sarcastic about these.

JOHN: Yeah.

R: Yeah. There's something to them, I don't know, they attracted my attention for a reason. [laughs] Um...

JOHN: They *weren't* handed to you by God?

BLAKE: Because language.

R: Because language. Yeah. Well, what really interested me about them was that they were grammatical things that were appearing, as opposed to just like a word.

JOHN: I'm really surprised you didn't use Doge.

R: Well, I do love Doge. I think he's great. But like... I don't know...

JOHN: Such thesis. Very work.

R: Yeah.. and like... We were talking about it in one of the groups, we were talking about how it's... that's kind of funny for the same reason as because x and I can't even are. It's like, because it kind of messes with your expectation of what it should be, and then kind of just screws with it.

BLAKE: I think you should have done Felicitous Badersnatch (?) [laughs]

JOHN: The what? [laughs]

BLAKE: The like... manipulations of Benedict Cumberbatch. [laughs]



R: Oh my goodness.

BLAKE: There's actually a linguist that did that. Like they started like trying to study the rules of like how you can and can't manipulate his name on the Internet.

JOHN: Yeah, because it's always recognizable.

R: Well but like... being able to mess with language has to be unobtrusive within that language. So it's like... if it was just totally off the wall and it wouldn't fit into the linguistic system of English then it wouldn't be funny or it wouldn't...

ASHLEY: Wouldn't get it. Yeah.

R: Yeah. Well, those are all the questions I have. I don't know if any of you have any more thoughts that you're dying to share about I can't even, because? Can you even? [laughs]

BLAKE: Does because x work with more than one word? Because I've only ever heard like, "because logic" or "because America," I don't think it works with more than one word, does it?

JOHN: I can't imagine it ever... I can't imagine a situation where you'd use more than one.

BLAKE: Or if you did, it would just like... make you think of it... like, oh, you're like actually saying, "because whatever," so unless you...

R: Yeah, I was going to say it would destroy the purpose of just having the one...

BLAKE: Unless you just have because and that one word, it doesn't bring that meaning anymore. So I think like the theory that it like... packs all of this information into one is like more true then, because like... as soon as you get that second word you just don't have that.

JOHN: It's a zip file.

BLAKE: Yeah. You don't have the assumption of like... this is what you're trying to do, you're trying to use the because x grammatical function.

R: Yeah, that's true. If you put more than one thing in there it would just be like... why are you... why did you not have a word after because? Yeah, it would just be a clause. Um... cool. Interesting.

JOHN: Very interview.

R: Such interview. Many thesis.

JOHN: [laughs] Wow. [laughs] I love Doge. You have no idea how much I love Doge.

BLAKE: Why do you love Doge? Because Internet.

JOHN: No, actually, I... linguistically, I just think it's really interesting. I feel like these are baby versions of it [the linguistic phenomenon behind Doge]. Like they use the same idea, they're just not as complicated.

BLAKE: I mean, Doge is pretty simple. You just like... you use a like... modifier that would not modify that word normally.

JOHN: Yeah, but you have to... there are like specific ones that you have to use for... it's really actually pretty complicated when you get down to it, there are a lot of rules...

ASHLEY: But I feel like with Doge you also have to understand the reference. You know? Like if you just hear it out of context...

JOHN: [laughs]

R: You never... right... when it first started happening, you would always see the picture of the dog with it, like it would be like many, wow...

ASHLEY: Yeah, but now like you get the reference so you can make those jokes. But if you said that to someone who didn't get it they'd just be like... you're dumb. But like, I can't even... like you said it, linguistically it makes sense, so even if like people who don't understand the culture don't get the reference, I feel like... the meaning is still there.

R: Yeah, like there isn't really one specific thing that was tied to I can't even, it's just like a nebulous idea of a basic white girl. But...

BLAKE: So can we like, bring your phone around the library and be like, "because x!" and see if people understand or not? [all laugh]

R: [laughs] That's a different study. Um...

BLAKE: "I hate you, because Carol."

R: I mean, I guess it's the same thing, like "because reasons" but there wasn't just one. So I don't know.

JOHN: And I don't know if that's the cause, I just know that like... it's really similar in the idea.

R: Yeah. I want to know who started these things, where they come from. Okay. Well, I'm going to stop recording, thank you, guys!

[end of recording]