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FRAMING FEMINISM ONLINE: A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article examines how feminism is framed in contemporary media discourse, using a combination of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Based on data from the English Web 2021 (enTenTen21) corpus, the study investigates the collocational patterns and modifiers most frequently associated with the notion of *feminism*, such as *radical*, *intersectional*, *mainstream*, and *geek*. These variants are explored across multiple genres – including blogs, news platforms, and reference sources – to reveal how linguistic framing reflects and reinforces ideological positioning. In addition to specific modifiers, the analysis also focuses on the four main historical waves of feminism – first-wave, second-wave, third-wave, and fourth-wave – examining how these are represented in metaphorical and evaluative meanings. The study considers the frequency and context of positive and negative collocates, as well as the broader semantic fields into which feminism is discursively integrated.

A central focus of the research is metaphorical framing, which functions to both simplify and politicize feminist discourse. Metaphors such as *laying the foundation*, *lighting a fire*, *amplifying voices*, and *drawing battle lines* are shown to play a key role in narrativizing the evolution, urgency, or radicalism of feminist strands. While media discourse enables the amplification of feminist voices and the emergence of new variants, it also sustains backlash and polarizing framings. The findings demonstrate that public discourse surrounding feminism is shaped not only by lexical choice but by metaphor, genre, and context, factors that collectively influence how feminism is interpreted, contested, and sustained in contemporary culture.

Keywords: feminism, corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, metaphor, feminist waves, EnTenTen21.

Introduction

In recent years, public conversation has once again turned toward feminism, but this time with a broader reach and sharper tone. Issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive autonomy, intersectionality, and the politics of representation are no longer confined to activist circles or academic panels. They've entered mainstream reporting, online commentary, and everyday digital exchanges. This renewed attention hasn't emerged in a vacuum; it reflects deeper social tensions surrounding identity, justice, and power. For scholars working across fields like media analysis, discourse studies, and sociolinguistics, these shifts open up new ground for studying how feminist perspectives are being articulated, challenged, or reshaped through contemporary communication.

One useful entry point into this evolving landscape is the English Web 2021 corpus (enTenTen21), part of the TenTen collection curated through Sketch Engine. With over 38 billion words sourced from across the internet – including news outlets, blogs, forums, and general websites – it provides a wide lens for observing how English is used today in digital spaces. More importantly, it reflects the voices of a wide array of users: activists, journalists, readers, and everyday participants in public life. The corpus enables close analysis of how feminism is talked about in different settings, whether in formal reporting or casual commentary, and helps trace patterns in framing, word choice, and recurring associations.

Feminism's portrayal in the media has never been fixed. From the beginning, the movement has had to contend with competing interpretations, some affirming, others deeply hostile. Every wave of feminism has introduced its own set of goals, rhetorical styles, and political claims. Each, in turn, has been filtered through the media systems of its time, sometimes supported, often distorted. The media, far from being a passive reflector of ideas, plays an active role in shaping public perception of feminism, helping to define its boundaries and determine which voices are considered credible.

The second wave, which began gaining visibility in the 1960s and extended into the 1980s, brought this media dynamic into sharp relief. Feminist writers and activists, including figures like Betty Friedan and Kate Millett, began pointing to the ways mass media reinforced limiting roles for women. Across television, advertising, and popular magazines, women were routinely depicted as housewives, objects of desire, or supporting characters. These portrayals not only excluded complexity but upheld gendered expectations that were difficult to challenge. At the same time, feminist protests, such as the 1968 Miss America pageant demonstration, were often sensationalised. Coverage relied on stereotypes, using lexemes like *bra-burners* to frame participants as radical or unserious (Bradley 2003; WMC 2020).

Yet during this same period, feminists were also building new media platforms of their own. Publications like *Ms. Magazine* in the U.S., *Isis International*, and *Manushi* created space for more nuanced and self-defined expressions of feminist politics. These outlets gave women editorial control and the freedom to engage with issues without having to cater to the expectations or constraints of mainstream publishers. Beyond offering alternative perspectives, such publications played a part in shaping what later became feminist media theory, foregrounding questions of authorship, power, and visibility (Bradley, 2003; Easysociology).

Table 1

Key Shifts in Media Portrayal of Feminism

Era	Media Portrayal Highlights
Suffrage–Early 20th	Marginalization, relied on feminist-run publications for positive coverage
1960s–1970s	Sensationalism, negative stereotypes ("bra-burners"), trivialization, but increased visibility
1980s–1990s	Continued negative framing, but some diversification of coverage; rise of backlash
2000s–2010s	More nuanced and diverse representations, but persistent marginalization and opposition frames
2010s–2020s	Greater visibility via digital media, intersectional focus, but ongoing challenges with stereotyping

Table 1 shows that representations of the second wave in media discourse are marked by contradiction. While reporting often relied on reductive stereotypes and spectacle, it also helped raise the public profile of the movement, especially during high-visibility protests. This interplay between amplification and distortion illustrates the broader challenge of achieving discursive legitimacy in contexts where feminist activism was routinely cast as extreme or oppositional.

The third wave, which emerged in the 1990s and extended into the early 2010s, shifted attention toward the multiplicity of gendered experience. Moving beyond the assumption of a unified category of *woman*, feminist discourse increasingly adopted intersectional approaches that examined how gender, race, class, sexuality, and cultural background interact. This shift was gradually reflected in the media, which began incorporating more diverse feminist voices, including those from queer and racialised communities that had long been absent from mainstream narratives (Walker 1995; Hooks 2000).

During this period, feminist activism extended beyond legal and political arenas into the sphere of popular culture. Media products began to feature female characters who challenged conventional roles, though often within frameworks that neutralised political content by framing empowerment as an individual, depoliticised trait. At the same time, digital platforms provided alternative spaces for feminist discourse. These new environments coexisted with enduring media framings that continued to simplify or sideline feminist demands (Gillis 2007; Krijnen 2017).

The variety of representations illustrated in Table 1 points to both the expansion and fragmentation of feminist discourse. While the public presence of feminism increased, so did tensions between activist goals and the commercial appropriation of feminist language. These tensions fuelled critical debates around postfeminist narratives, symbolic co-optation, and the changing definitions of feminist identity in media culture.

The fourth wave, which took shape in the 2010s, is shaped by digital activism. Hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, and #HeForShe illustrate how social media has become central to feminist organising, allowing messages challenging gender-based violence and systemic inequality to spread rapidly and globally (Savage 2021; Shiva 2019). The digital landscape today comprises a broad array of genres – from journalism to influencer content, from personal testimony to viral campaigns.

These platforms have created opportunities for participation and visibility that were previously out of reach for many marginalised voices. Yet increased visibility has also brought new risks. Feminists active online frequently encounter harassment, targeted backlash, and surveillance, highlighting the vulnerabilities of engaging in public discourse within algorithmically curated spaces (Vice 2019; The New Feminist 2022).

As Table 2 illustrates, the digital context has amplified feminist reach while intensifying representational contradictions. Some media support and legitimise feminist arguments, while others revive stereotypical portrayals, framing feminism as radical, threatening, or politically disruptive.

Table 2

Media Representation Highlights by Feminist Wave

Wave	Media Representation Highlights
Second Wave	Mainstream news coverage; often negative, sensationalized, marginalizing; focus on protests
Third Wave	Broader, more diverse representation; use of popular culture and early internet; intersectional focus
Fourth Wave	Digital activism and social media dominance, global reach, mainstream news adaptation

The trends outlined in Tables 1 and 2 reflect the portrayal of feminism in media. While each wave has covered the thematic scope and visibility of feminist discourse differently, mainstream representations have not fully reflected new developments in society, often simplifying and distorting developments. Feminist messages have rarely escaped ideological mediation: second-wave activism is characterized by sensationalism, third-wave ideals are favoured by commodification; digital feminism outlines the fourth wave. These recurring patterns clearly demonstrate how both traditional and digital media continue to shape public perceptions of feminism.

Media and Feminism

The media has played a key role in shaping how feminism is viewed, received, and discussed in public life. It has not acted as a neutral space for information, but as a site where narratives are actively constructed. These narratives frequently misrepresent or marginalise feminist positions, whether through distortion, selective visibility, or subtle reframing. Traditional and digital platforms alike remain contested grounds where feminist meanings are negotiated, watered down, or pushed aside.

Tuchman's work (1978) on symbolic annihilation highlighted how the absence or misrepresentation of women in media leads to their cultural erasure. When women are shown, they are often confined to narrow roles – as victims, caretakers, or objects of desire. Such portrayals reinforce dominant gender ideologies and restrict how women are positioned in public space.

This argument is developed further by van Zoonen (1994), who links media representation to broader institutional logics and power hierarchies. Feminist voices, she suggests, are often framed as marginal or unreasonable and are removed from their political context. In doing so, the media depoliticises feminist arguments and presents them as personal or emotional claims. Fraser and van Zoonen also point to a visibility paradox: feminism may appear in media, but often in ways that weaken its structural critique.

Krijnen (2017) takes this further, arguing that even when feminism is visible, it is regularly detached from women's everyday lives. Feminist actors are depicted as hostile or inflexible – traits that are often read as excessive in media environments that favour restraint and neutrality. These portrayals continue to shape the unease that surrounds the label *feminism.*

The rise of digital media has changed how feminist discourse circulates. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok allow messages to spread quickly,

creating space for decentralised activism and diverse voices. Campaigns like #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, and #BringBackOurGirls have demonstrated how digital platforms can raise awareness and build counter-publics (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). Banet-Weiser (2018) uses the term *popular feminism* to describe this phenomenon – feminism that gains visibility through mass appeal but risks losing political clarity. She notes that when feminist language is taken up by commercial media, it can be stripped of depth and turned into a brand.

This shift is not without backlash. Feminist voices online are often targeted by harassment, trolling, and disinformation (Gillespie 2020). Even widely supported campaigns can be co-opted or distorted – either by companies seeking to market social values or by anti-feminist groups aiming to discredit them.

Corpus-based discourse analysis provides a way to track these processes. Research using the enTenTen21 corpus, for example, has shown that lemmas like *radical*, *toxic*, *outdated*, and *aggressive* frequently appear near the word feminism, suggesting persistent negative associations (Roy 2023). By analysing these patterns, it becomes possible to see how language shapes perception – and how ideology is embedded in everyday usage.

Corpus-based research into feminist discourse points to both cross-cultural variation and the importance of specific contexts. Analysis of British and German press materials from 1990 to 2009 shows that in Britain the word *feminism* was often linked to equality, rights, and political activism, whereas in Germany it was more frequently connected with radicalism, gender conflict, and other negatively marked associations. Collocational evidence further indicates that in the British press the term clustered with reformist and policy-related vocabulary, while in German newspapers it was regularly paired with lexemes suggesting extremism or rigidity, which contributed to divergent public images of the movement (Titelman 2011). More recent work on Chinese social media demonstrates a similar dynamic of contestation: on Weibo the label *feminist* has shifted semantically and is now frequently used in pejorative ways, signalling ideological polarization in online debate (Bao 2023). Studies in other languages confirm the situatedness of the term. In Turkish sources, the word *feminizm* is most commonly used when writers discuss women's rights or political reform (Özyürek, & Coşkun 2025). In those settings, it often becomes part of arguments about whether society should hold on to long-standing traditions or embrace modernizing change. The Italian debate looks rather different. Formato (2024) examines Italian materials to see how innovations like the schwa enter common discussion. The analysis pays close attention to experiments such as the adoption of the schwa and traces how these forms are taken up in arguments about grammar, gender, and the public visibility of women. The study focuses on experiments such as the adoption of the schwa and shows how these practices become part of wider disputes about grammatical gender and the visibility of women in public discourse. Together, these examples suggest that lexical evidence can capture not only how feminism is talked about but also how it is positioned within wider cultural and political arguments.

Although digital media has opened up access, the structures through which feminist discourse is produced and circulated remain uneven. For researchers and activists alike, close attention to how feminism is framed – not just in content, but in the systems that support or undermine its presence – remains essential.

Methods of Studying Media Discourse on Feminism

Corpus linguistics has become a well-established approach in media discourse analysis, particularly where language plays a role in shaping public ideologies and power structures. As McEnery and Hardie note, corpus methods enable scholars to uncover patterns across large-scale text datasets that would likely go unnoticed through manual analysis alone. This methodology offers an empirical and replicable foundation (McEnery and Hardie 2011, 2) for linguistic inquiry. In feminist media research, where language choices often reflect and reproduce social hierarchies, corpus-assisted discourse analysis proves especially valuable in revealing how gendered narratives are constructed, reinforced, or challenged.

What makes corpus tools particularly useful is not only their capacity to quantify language use, but also their potential to illuminate the discursive roles words and phrases play in context. For example, a study by Tsapro and Semeniuk (2021) explored how the lemma *women* was represented in *The Economist* across twenty years. Their findings revealed a noticeable shift: in the early 2000s, references to women were often tied to vulnerability and dependence, while in the 2020–2021 corpus, women were more frequently described in active, empowered roles. This diachronic change mirrors broader societal developments and supports Mautner's view of corpus linguistics as a methodological *check and balance* within critical discourse studies (Mautner 2010, 122).

However, like all methodologies, corpus-based critical discourse analysis (CDA) has its limitations. Although it excels at identifying frequent patterns, it may miss marginal or emerging discourses, especially those voiced by underrepresented groups. Tools such as Sketch Engine can highlight collocational tendencies, but interpretation still depends heavily on the researcher's judgment, which introduces a degree of subjectivity. Moreover, digital corpora often overrepresent commercially popular texts, which can bias the findings. These concerns underscore the importance of pairing corpus analysis with close qualitative readings and being critically aware of the corpus's structure and scope.

Corpus linguistics is most effective when embedded within broader interpretive frameworks. Its integration with CDA allows researchers to move beyond surface-level frequency counts and consider the ideological and sociocultural meanings behind linguistic patterns. As Brezina, Weill-Tessier, and McEnery (2020) emphasize, raw frequency gains meaning only when interpreted in context. This methodological complexity, between empirical data and critical interpretation, enriches feminist media analysis by allowing both scale and nuance.

In today's media landscape, discourse is increasingly shaped by digital and multimodal formats. As Talbot (2007) points out, media language is inherently intertextual and polyvocal, blending institutional, personal, and cultural voices. By drawing on corpora that include blogs, news outlets, and social media, scholars can investigate how key words such as *empowerment*, *equality*, or *toxic feminism* shift in meaning depending on genre and context. These variations are crucial for understanding how feminism is framed and reframed in public discourse.

Ultimately, the contribution of corpus linguistics to feminist media studies lies in its ability to expose how repeated linguistic choices contribute to social meaning-making. As Fuster-Márquez and Almela (2018) argue, lexical patterns are more than

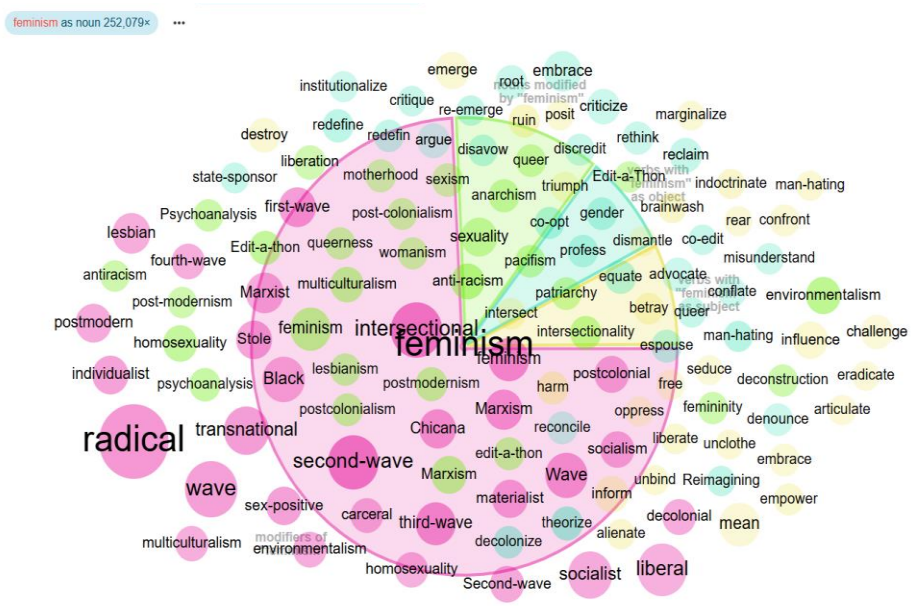
statistical regularities – they signal underlying ideologies. In the case of feminism, such patterns can reveal whether the movement is presented as liberating or antagonistic, unifying or divisive. In a climate of ideological polarization, corpus methods offer a rigorous way to uncover and critique the dominant discourses shaping public perception.

To investigate how feminism is represented in contemporary digital discourse, this study carried out a corpus-based analysis using the enTenTen21 English Web 2021 corpus via Sketch Engine. The research focused on collocates and keyword contexts surrounding the lemma *feminism*, including references to feminist waves, public figures, and thematic clusters. The aim was to trace evaluative language and recurring semantic associations to better understand the discursive construction of feminism across online spaces.

Dominant Collocates and Semantic Prosody

The lemma *feminism* most frequently co-occurs with evaluative modifiers (See Pic. 1) such as *radical*, *modern*, *toxic*, and *inclusive*. Notably, the presence of pejorative qualifiers (e.g., *toxic feminism*, *extreme feminism*) was substantial, suggesting a semantic prosody that often leans toward delegitimization. However, collocates such as *empowering*, *inclusive*, and *transformative* also appeared in significant frequency, indicating a parallel discourse of feminist affirmation.

The keywords-in-context (KWIC) analysis showed that negative framings of feminism frequently appeared in opinion columns, comment sections, and politically conservative blogs, where the notion was often positioned as a threat to traditional values or as a source of societal division. In contrast, progressive media and academic blogs tended to frame feminism in affirmative lexemes, emphasizing themes such as empowerment, equality, and justice.



Picture 1. N-gram of the lemma *feminism*

Table 3 presents key modifiers frequently found alongside *feminism* in the enTenTen21 corpus. These reflect not only the diversity of the media discourse on feminism but also some trends in how unstable and contested this discourse remains. The modifiers show ongoing shifts in how feminism is defined and discussed.

Some collocations draw from earlier movements – first-wave, second-wave, radical, liberal. Others, like with collocates *decolonial, geek, militant,* or *carceral*, come from more recent developments or issue-specific debates. All of them reflect some form of ideological positioning. Their use depends on context, audience, and the type of platform.

The genres in which these modifiers appear differ notably. Academic and reference materials often include postmodern or materialist feminism. In contrast, activist lexemes like *fourth-wave* or *sex-positive feminism* are more common in blogs, online media, and user posts. Regional domains (.ca, .au) show further variation, pointing to local feminist concerns.

These patterns make clear that feminism is not presented as a single idea. Modifiers assign it different meanings, with varying levels of approval or critique. What feminism means in one space can be very different in another. The way these collocations appear helps to explain how feminist discourse is shaped, circulated, or resisted across digital environments.

Table 3

Modifiers of *Feminism* and Their Contextual Associations

modifier	**collocation**	**primary contexts / domains**
first-wave	first-wave feminism	reference/encyclopedia
second-wave	second-wave feminism	education, reference/encyclopedia, culture & entertainment
third-wave	third-wave feminism	reference/encyclopedia
fourth-wave	fourth-wave feminism	news, discussion, reference/ encyclopedia
radical	radical feminism	religion, home & family, blogs
liberal	liberal feminism	education, politics & government, blogs
socialist	socialist feminism	politics & government
marxist	marxist feminism	culture & entertainment
materialist	materialist feminism	reference/encyclopedia
postmodern	postmodern feminism	(no specific domain given)
postcolonial	postcolonial feminism	blogs, reference/encyclopedia
decolonial	decolonial feminism	(no specific domain given)
intersectional	intersectional feminism	canadian domain
individualist	individualist feminism	reference/encyclopedia, discussion
sex-positive	sex-positive feminism	blogs, reference/encyclopedia, discussion
lesbian	lesbian feminism	blogs, reference/encyclopedia
transnational	transnational feminism	(no specific domain given)
carceral	carceral feminism	(no specific domain given)
mainstream	mainstream feminism	blogs, multi-topic
militant	militant feminism	culture & entertainment
chicana	chicana feminism	reference/encyclopedia
black	black feminism	(no specific domain given)
geek	geek feminism	(no specific domain given.)

To explore how different strands of feminism are constructed in media discourse, this section applies critical discourse analysis (CDA) to prominent modifiers of the term *feminism*. These modifiers do more than name distinct currents within the movement; they contribute to broader ideological work – legitimizing some positions, marginalizing others, and at times, reframing the movement's goals altogether. Their discursive positioning provides insight into how societal attitudes toward gender politics are shaped and contested.

Radical feminism is often presented in a confrontational manner. Phrases such as *radical feminism blames men for all societal ills* represent simplistic, emotionally charged accusations instead of complex analyses of patriarchy. The verb *blames* casts radical feminism as unreasonable or hostile, aligning it with disruption rather than reform. In this framing, its political critique is distorted into an image of extremism.

> *Radical feminism blames men for the oppression of women and seeks to dismantle patriarchal systems that are seen as deeply entrenched in all social institutions.*
>
> *Critics often argue that radical feminism is too exclusionary in its focus on gender alone, neglecting race and class in its analysis of power structures.*

By contrast, *mainstream feminism* is typically associated with institutionalized forms of gender equality. The collocation suggests social legitimacy but is also criticized for its limitations. Phrases like *mainstream feminism has ignored women of color* illustrate how this formulation can privilege certain experiences – often those of white, middle-class women – while marginalizing others. Thus, *mainstream* becomes less a mark of broad relevance and more an index of exclusion.

> *Mainstream feminism has failed to adequately address the concerns of women of color, often centering the experiences of white, middle-class women as universal.*
>
> *She found mainstream feminism unwelcoming to queer voices and nonbinary identities, highlighting its limitations in representing the full spectrum of gendered experiences.*

Postcolonial feminism appears primarily in academic and activist contexts and is described using language that emphasizes critique and deconstruction. Phrases like *postcolonial feminism deconstructs the Western gaze* highlight its counter-hegemonic focus. This strand interrogates the universalism of Western feminist narratives, stressing the need for context-specific approaches.

> *Postcolonial feminism critiques the imposition of Western feminist ideals on non-Western societies, emphasizing the need for culturally specific approaches to women's rights.*
>
> *Postcolonial feminism provides a lens to explore the intersection of gender, race, and colonial history, particularly in contexts where Western intervention is framed as liberation.*

Intersectional feminism, now widely adopted in both academic and activist circles, is typically framed as inclusive and analytically nuanced. Descriptions such as

intersectional feminism considers race, class, and gender mark it as responsive to social complexity and historically embedded forms of oppression.

> *Intersectional feminism recognizes how overlapping identities – such as race, sexuality, and disability – compound experiences of oppression, offering a more inclusive analytical framework.*
>
> *Many activists today champion intersectional feminism as a response to the limits of earlier feminist waves that focused primarily on the experiences of privileged groups.*

Liberal feminism is commonly portrayed in the view of individual rights and legal reform. It aligns with institutional mechanisms of change but faces criticism for failing to confront structural inequalities. As such, it is often described in both affirming and limiting meanings.

> *Liberal feminism advocates for equal rights through legal reforms and public policy, working within existing political systems to achieve gender equality.*
>
> *Critics say liberal feminism often overlooks systemic inequalities in favor of individual empowerment, promoting a model of success that aligns with neoliberal values.*

These examples show how specific modifiers act as discursive markers, shaping the perceived scope and legitimacy of different feminist approaches. This pattern is further evident in lesser-represented or emergent variants.

Black feminism, for instance, is often positioned as a corrective to the exclusions of mainstream feminism. Statements like *Black feminism foregrounds lived experience and systemic racism* emphasize its rootedness in intersectionality and lived realities. The verb *foregrounds* signals a deliberate shift in focus, demanding recognition of race and systemic injustice.

> *Black feminism emerged as a response to the dual marginalization faced by Black women within both feminist and civil rights movements.*
>
> *Black feminism emphasizes lived experience and the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression.*

Chicana feminism introduces culturally specific critiques, often represented through language that emphasizes hybridity and resistance. The phrase *Chicana feminism challenges both white feminism and machismo*, positioning it as a dual critique of external and internal power structures.

> *Chicana feminism challenges both cultural machismo and the whiteness of mainstream feminist narratives.*
>
> *Chicana feminism centers the experiences of Mexican-American women navigating intersectional oppression.*

In contrast, militant feminism is commonly framed with alarmist language. Verbs such as *threaten* and nouns like *battle* cast this strand in adversarial terms, associating it with conflict rather than critique.

Militant feminism is often portrayed in the media as confrontational, overshadowing its political critique of systemic violence.

The protests were led by groups aligned with militant feminism, calling for immediate action on reproductive justice.

Geek feminism occupies a distinct place within digital discourse, often associated with tech culture and online activism. Phrases such as *geek feminism advocates for inclusion in digital communities* highlight its focus on participation, equity, and digital citizenship.

Geek feminism focuses on creating inclusive digital communities and addressing sexism in tech culture.

Geek feminism emerged in response to the exclusion of women from spaces like gaming, open-source coding, and tech forums.

Decolonial feminism is framed in strongly critical terms, often aligned with structural and epistemological resistance. Verbs like *resist* and metaphors such as *decolonizing the mind* emphasize its transformative ambition.

Decolonial feminism resists Eurocentric definitions of gender and insists on epistemic justice for Indigenous knowledge systems.

Unlike postcolonial perspectives, decolonial feminism aims to dismantle the foundational logics of colonial modernity altogether.

A closer linguistic analysis of these modifiers reveals the ideological functions of metaphor and verb choice in shaping perceptions. Verbs such as *resist*, *advocate*, *foreground*, *blame*, and *threaten* influence the tone and legitimacy assigned to each feminist strand. Likewise, recurring metaphors – *borderlands*, *unveiling*, *warfare*, *coding*, *decolonizing* – infuse these discourses with symbolic depth, evoking narratives of conflict, hybridity, or liberation.

In sum, these discursive patterns expose the ideological terrain in which feminism is negotiated. The modifiers not only differentiate strands of the movement but also influence how these strands are positioned, whether as central or marginal, radical or reformist, legitimate or deviant. Through language, the boundaries of feminism are continually drawn and redrawn in public discourse.

To analyze modifiers of feminism, this section turns to the foundational framework of the feminist movement: the first-wave, second-wave, third-wave, and fourth-wave feminism. These labels are more than chronological markers; they function discursively as ideological constructs that shape how feminism is understood, historicized, and narrated. They are frequently referenced in encyclopedic, educational, and media contexts, yet each carries a distinct metaphorical and evaluative framing.

First-wave feminism is often associated with the late 19th and early 20th centuries and centers on legal reform, especially women's suffrage. It is typically framed in retrospective, foundational terms. For example, statements like *First-wave feminism focused on gaining women's right to vote and access to education* (Britannica) and *The legacy of first-wave feminism includes the opening of universities to women* (Wikipedia) employ institutional and static verbs like *focused* and *includes*, which construct the wave as a closed historical chapter. The recurring metaphor of *laying the foundation* suggests its role in constructing the groundwork for all subsequent feminist movements.

First-wave feminism laid the foundation for later feminist movements by securing basic civil rights for women. (Oxford Reference)

Second-wave feminism emerges discursively as both expansive and contentious. Associated with the 1960s to 1980s, it tackled issues like reproductive rights, workplace equality, and the personal-political connection. *Examples such as Second-wave feminism demanded change not just in laws, but in culture and consciousness*, and *this wave of feminism ignited debates about sex, power, and patriarchy*, showing a more militant and intellectual tone. Verbs like d*emanded* and *ignited* evoke activism, while metaphors like *breaking the silence* or *lighting a fire* frame it as a revolutionary force. However, critiques of exclusivity, especially regarding race and class, are also prevalent: *Second-wave feminism has been criticized for centering white, middle-class women*.

Third-wave feminism, beginning in the 1990s, is framed as a departure from its predecessor's universalism, embracing multiplicity, identity politics, and cultural critique. Sentences such as *Third-wave feminism celebrates ambiguity and the fluidity of gender and sexuality*, and *This wave questioned the assumptions of essential womanhood and embraced pop culture as a feminist space* reflect its inclusive and often playful orientation. The metaphors of *opening doors* and *writing new scripts* characterize third-wave feminism as innovative and introspective, yet at times fragmented or diffuse in focus.

Third-wave feminism brought intersectionality and individual expression to the center of feminist activism.

Fourth-wave feminism is most commonly associated with digital activism and global outreach. Its discourse is about immediacy, technology, and social justice. Corpus-based examples include: *Fourth-wave feminism uses social media platforms to challenge sexism in real time* and *Campaigns like #MeToo are emblematic of fourth-wave feminism's viral impact*. Verbs like *challenge* and *expose*, paired with metaphors such as *amplifying voices* and *sparking digital revolution*, suggest a form of feminism that is reactive, decentralized, and globally networked. Still, criticisms are not absent: *Fourth-wave feminism risks becoming performative activism if not grounded in sustained action*.

These wave metaphors do more than simply organize historical phases. They function to underline certain feminist concerns and point out the problematizing of others. Each wave is characterized by assumptions about visibility, urgency, inclusivity, and efficacy. These discursive patterns frame feminism not as a single ideology but as evolving projects, each with its own contradictions and inheritances.

To support the corpus-based analysis of feminist modifiers, the table below presents a comparative view of how different strands of feminism are typically described through metaphor. These metaphors are important: they translate complex ideas into images and associations that are easier to understand and often carry emotional weight. Whether drawn from architecture, conflict, storytelling, or digital culture, such expressions do more than describe, they influence how feminism is perceived. They situate each strand within broader cultural narratives, hinting at how legitimate, radical, or relevant a particular form of feminism appears. While some metaphors add clarity and authority, others may simplify or misrepresent, highlighting the role figurative language plays in shaping public perceptions of feminism across media and everyday discourse.

Table 4

Metaphorical Framing of Feminist Modifiers

feminist modifier	key metaphors	discursive function / implication
first-wave feminism	laying the foundation	establishes origin; suggests permanence and legitimacy
second-wave feminism	breaking the silence, lighting a fire	frames as revolutionary, urgent, and transformative
third-wave feminism	opening doors, writing new scripts	highlights creativity, inclusivity, and multiplicity
fourth-wave feminism	amplifying voices, digital revolution	emphasizes technological activism, speed, and networked power
radical feminism	battle line, ideology of conflict	casts as confrontational and militant; signals threat or extremism
mainstream feminism	center stage, default setting	suggests dominance but also rigidity or exclusion of other voices
postcolonial feminism	reclaiming the narrative	marks as analytical and counter-hegemonic; questions universalism
intersectional feminism	overlapping identities, interwoven struggles	constructs complexity and systemic awareness
liberal feminism	legal scaffolding	frames as reformist and institutionally aligned; gradualist in tone
black feminism	lays bare structural injustice	metaphor of exposure; frames as revelatory and ethically grounded
militant feminism	draws the line, threatens civil order	evokes militarization; often used to discredit or marginalize
decolonial feminism	unlearning empire	emphasizes epistemic liberation; deep structural critique of knowledge systems

Metaphors don't just describe feminism, they fashion its public meanings. Figurative language offers a quick and easy way to gloss ideological differences with emotional effect that tends to determine the reception, support, or rejection of different kinds of feminism. Metaphors in the public discourse are not just stylistic tools; they are framing devices. They place feminism in an overall field of narratives, which in turn affect how various iterations of the movement are either legitimized or discredited.

The metaphor of laying the foundation is also an inspiring metaphor that appears in discussions of the first wave, suggesting its structural role in later feminist

struggles. Construction metaphor – in phrases like *laid the groundwork* or *built the foundation for future gains* – picture through words of permanence, vision, and institutional legitimacy. This metaphor confirms that first-wave feminism is that of founding and procreative, bestowing a symbolic base in the history of feminism.

By contrast, *second-wave feminism* is often framed through metaphors of fire, rupture, and illumination – expressions such as *lighting a fire*, *breaking the silence*, or *igniting a movement*. These are metaphors that cast the movement as a catalyst, an urgent movement, and an insurgent movement. Sentences like *Second-wave feminism broke the silence around domestic violence* or *lit a fire that transformed society* suggest moral awakening and disruption.

> *While it is exhilarating, that can also be understood to also suggest volatility, which could be either seen ideologically as liberating or as difficult to navigate.*

Third-wave and *fourth-wave feminism* are frequently framed through metaphors of movement, fluidity, and amplification. Expressions like *opening doors*, *writing new scripts*, or *amplifying marginalized voices* mirror adaptability and inclusivity. Phrases such as *Third-wave feminism opened doors to a more fluid understanding of identity* or *Fourth-wave feminism amplifies silenced perspectives through digital activism* highlight these waves' responsiveness to cultural shifts and real-time engagement. The *digital revolution* metaphor often attached to the fourth wave suggests speed, connectivity, and a shift in professional fields, marked by hashtags, decentralized movements, and online mobilization.

In contrast, *radical* and *militant feminism* are discursively shaped by metaphors of warfare and conflict. Media narratives often reference *drawing battle lines*, *launching attacks on patriarchy*, or *refusing compromise*. These metaphors, found in statements such as *Militant feminism threatens civil discourse* or *Radical feminists have drawn a battle line that excludes moderate voices*, mark these trends as ideologically intense. While some interpret such framing as signaling courage and resistance, more often it functions to pathologize or delegitimize, equating activism with extremism and social discord.

Postcolonial and *decolonial feminism* are commonly represented through metaphors of knowledge, narrative, and critique. Expressions like *reclaiming the narrative*, *rewriting history*, and *unlearning empire* position these strands as intellectually disruptive and politically subversive. For example, *Postcolonial feminism reclaims the narrative from the colonial archive*, or Decolonial feminism urges a dismantling of imperial knowledge systems, foregrounding the movement's knowledge-based critique. These metaphors reinforce the idea that decolonial approaches aim not only to challenge material domination but also to restructure the categories through which oppression is understood and justified.

Black feminism and *intersectional feminism* tend to be framed through metaphors of structure, interconnection, and exposure. Descriptions such as *laying bare structural inequality* or *weaving together struggles* emphasize moral clarity and analytical depth. For example, *Black feminism lays bare the blind spots of white liberal feminism*, presents it as revelatory and essential to expanding feminist horizons. Likewise, metaphors like *interwoven oppression*, *layers of identity*, or *intersection points* convey the spatial and systemic complexity at the heart of intersectional thought. These

metaphors legitimize these strands as multidimensional, ethically grounded, and capable of addressing social inequalities in their full complexity.

In short, metaphorical framing is not neutral. It shapes which forms of feminism appear visionary or excessive, central or peripheral, coherent or fragmented. Figurative language contributes to the broader ideological landscape by constructing feminist identities as respectable, radical, reasonable, or disruptive. Recognizing these metaphoric patterns reveals how language reinforces boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, while also mobilizing affect in the cultural reception of feminist discourse.

Conclusions

This study's corpus-based and discourse-analytic approach illustrates how language both reflects and constructs public understandings of feminism. Across different waves and ideological strands, discourse is shown to embed evaluative frames through metaphors, modifiers, and collocational patterns. While digital platforms have amplified feminist voices and broadened public engagement, they also present new risks – reframing, co-optation, and backlash – that reinforce patriarchal logics in updated forms.

Metaphors play a key role in this process. Whether they refer to the strong beginnings of first-wave activism, the energy of second-wave protests, or the networked nature of intersectional and digital feminism, they influence how the movement is understood, supported, or dismissed. These metaphors aren't just stylistic choices – they shape the way feminist ideas take hold and circulate in today's digital culture.

Future research could expand this inquiry by analyzing multimodal content (e.g., images, memes, and video) or by comparing metaphorical framings across different contexts.

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