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doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/28468637>

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“The Furthest from Mainstream”: Sexual and Gender Minorities Define Feminism

by

Tyler McCoy Gay

Under the Direction of Desmond Goss, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2022

## ABSTRACT

Using feminist standpoint theory and queer theory as a theoretical framework, I perform a secondary analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with a racially diverse group of sexual and gender minorities (SGM) on their definitions of feminism. I use abductive grounded theory to generate my findings. First, I use a deductive coding approach to compare SGM definitions to existing patterns in feminist research. Next, I use inductive line-by-line descriptive coding to provoke emergent themes. My findings indicate that SGM definitions of feminism share characteristics with the mostly white, cisgender, and heterosexual definitions of past research, such as support for women's empowerment in a patriarchal society and working towards gender equality through activism; however, in contrast to past inquiry, SGM respondents were overwhelmingly resistant to racism, homophobia, and transphobia within "mainstream" feminism. As such, I urge future researchers to explore feminist identification intersectionally, accounting for the interplay of multiple identity characteristics.

**INDEX WORDS:** Feminism, Feminist Standpoint Theory, Feminist Identity, White Feminism, Queer Theory, Queer Standpoint, Transgender Feminism, Nonbinary Feminism, Queer Feminism

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2022

“The Furthest from Mainstream”: Sexual and Gender Minorities Define Feminism

by

Tyler McCoy Gay

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Office of Graduate Services

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Georgia State University

May 2022

## **DEDICATION**

I want to dedicate this to my immediate family, my mother, father, and little brother. This accomplishment is undoubtedly a product of their endless love and support in these past 24 years. Because of them, I can explore my passion: to learn, to research, to teach. This research also belongs to all those Black and Brown queer children growing up or who grew up without love and support in their households. Your strength, resilience, and beauty are something I must never take for granted in my journey through academia. I hope I make all of you proud.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge my fabulous committee, a few brilliant colleagues, and a handful of my beautiful friends: Dr. Desmond Goss, Dr. Wendy Simonds, and Dr. Deirdre Oakley, Sam Hammer, Monisha Issano Jackson, Oluyemi Farinu, Brigitte Bowen, Paula Argueta, Abbi Hallman, Trent Rawlins, Caitlin Waits, Joseph Daniel, and Landen Watson. During racial unrest, a global pandemic, and a make-shift online program, each of you has extended unfathomable kindness and grace. Any future success of mine also belongs to you.

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## INTRODUCTION

Isolated in the context of the United States, activists, politicians, and the citizenry have contested the definition of feminism across time (Phillips, 1998). Political discourse in the U.S. organizes the feminist movement around achieving gender equality within a patriarchal sex-gender binary--a false duality that depicts sex and gender as separate but directly connected (Hird, 2000). In this duality, medical science constructs sex as binarized and fixed to physical interpretations of the body (i.e., either male or female). In contrast, gender is a more fluid phenomenon in which individuals perform masculinity or femininity based on unique social circumstances and interpretations of their physical bodies (Dvorsky and Hughes, 2008). Despite the complicated and historically contingent relationship between sex and gender (see Fausto-Sterling 2000 and Davis 2015), I use the term "gender binary" throughout my research to describe the relationship between biologically constructed notions of the sexed body (Hall, 2015) and gendered social performances of masculinity and femininity (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Feminism has been influential in transforming social understandings of the gender binary by upholding and challenging normative definitions of gender performance and gender equity (Rampton, 2010). Historically and presently, women of color and SGM complicate and inform the definition of feminism through resistance to racist, homophobic, sexist, and transphobic paradigms from the mainstream feminist movement (Mann and Huffman, 2005; Munro, 2013).

Qualitative researchers report a broad range of perspectives of feminism. Recent scholarship on feminist identity indicates a relationship between many social identity characteristics and feminist values or understandings; that is, definitions of feminism may differ depending on race, gender, class, age, and geography (Home et al., 2001; Trier-Bieniek, 2007; Houvouras and Carter, 2008; Manago et al., 2009; McDougall, 2013; Swirsky and Angelone,

2014). Unfortunately, researchers primarily recruit cisgender, straight, and white women as respondents for qualitative studies that seek to define feminism (McDougall, 2013). The exclusion of minoritized populations, particularly Black, Latinx, and Asian women, and trans and gender-nonconforming folks of all races, is problematic, as minoritized identities are central to the ideological and political progression of the U.S. feminist movement (Mann and Huffman, 2005; Munro, 2013).

Using feminist standpoint theory and queer theory as a theoretical framework, I perform a secondary analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with a racially diverse group of sexual and gender minorities (SGM) on their definitions of feminism. In doing so, I aim to uplift the voices of minoritized social groups, such as queer and trans populations, who have been traditionally locked out of the feminist lexicon. I use abductive grounded theory to generate my findings. First, I use a deductive coding approach to compare SGM definitions to existing patterns in feminist research. Next, I use inductive line-by-line descriptive coding to provoke emergent themes. My findings indicate that SGM definitions of feminism share characteristics with the mostly white, cisgender, and heterosexual definitions of past research, such as support for women's empowerment in a patriarchal society and working towards gender equality through activism; however, in contrast to past inquiry, SGM respondents were overwhelmingly resistant to racism, homophobia, and transphobia within "mainstream" feminism. My findings suggest a need to expand inquiry into how marginalized populations relate to the feminist movement, especially under-researched populations, such as nonbinary femmes and transgender men. Moreover, SGM definitions of feminism highlight patriarchy's connection to many other forms of oppression, such as white supremacy, transphobia, heteronormativity, ableism, and

xenophobia. As such, I urge future researchers to explore feminist identification intersectionally, accounting for the interplay of multiple identity characteristics.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1.1 A Brief History of Marginalized Identities in U.S. Feminism**

Social movement researchers frame feminism as progressing in categorical "waves" (Orr, 1997; Kinser, 2004; Rampton, 2010; Christensen, 1997; Thompson, 2002; Breines, 2002). I recognize that the wave metaphor is limited. Instead, I contend that the issues and activism of women of color and queer and transgender people have always been present in the women's liberation movement. Below, I present a brief historical overview of events occurring within periods depicted as feminist waves to demonstrate the relationship between social identity and the feminist movement. Mainly, I review how the visibility and resistance of racial, sexual, and gender minorities throughout the U.S. feminist movement challenged and reshaped understandings and definitions of feminism. I separate my review of the feminist movement by general periods where major political events occurred.

#### ***1.1.1 1848-1920***

Historians define the first wave of feminism primarily by the suffrage movement (Rampton, 2010). Its beginning dates to 1848, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mary M'Clintock, Martha Coffin Wright, Jane Hunt, and Lucretia Mott organized the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York (Kinser, 2004). The attendees drafted the Declaration of Sentiments – eleven resolutions for women's legal, economic, and political equality (Bratt, 1995). Though the first wave incited significant critiques of the U.S. patriarchal political structures, it emphatically centered gender-normative white women (Rampton, 2010). Wellman (1991) writes that the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention was the product of a particular

social network of privileged white women and men. Due to the limited representation of women's experiences, the conference resulted in a narrow set of objectives. For example, the white women leaders of the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention, Stanton and Mott, were both explicitly racist and consistently resistant to collaborating with abolitionists or advocating for abolitionist initiatives (Davis, 1983). However, abolition was a central issue facing Black women at the time (Tetrault, 2014).

Kimberlé Crenshaw (2010) argues that the dominant version of U.S. history depicts the first wave as "commencing the participation of radical white women in the abolitionist movement" (p. 28). Yet Crenshaw argues that this history fails to capture the intentional exclusion of Black, Latina, Asian and Indigenous women by the first-wave leaders such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Some white leaders of the first wave, such as Anthony, frequently relied on white supremacist ethics to critique Black progress. Anthony, for example, was outwardly racist following the suffrage of Black men:

[s]o long as he was lowest in the scale of being we were willing to press his claims; but now, as the celestial gate to civil rights is slowly moving on its hinges, it becomes a serious question whether we had better stand aside and see 'Sambo' walk into the Kingdom first. (Anthony, 1981, p. x).

The exclusion of Black and indigenous women by white women was particularly disturbing considering that momentum and networks established from the anti-slavery movement catalyzed women's suffrage (Wellman, 1991; Kinser, 2004; Crenshaw, 2010; Tetrault, 2014). Black women leaders like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Mary Church Terrell advocated for women's rights and suffrage before the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention (Lange, 2015). Additionally, many Black women's clubs and organizations across the nation united to

establish the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). The NACW advocated for numerous policies that uplifted the Black community, including women's suffrage (Lange, 2015). Therefore, first-wave leaders excluded women of color while simultaneously exploiting their activism to benefit white women's suffrage.

### ***1.1.2 1920-1960s***

Following the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, feminist leaders within the most potent and funded feminist organization, the National Woman's Party, shifted their resources to pass the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) (Sherman, 1973). Drafted by Alice Paul and Crystal Eastman, the ERA broadly sought to expand social and economic opportunities for women by prohibiting discrimination based on sex (Freedman, 2013). Yet, their broader initiatives spoke little to issues faced by women of color or working-class women. The white leaders of the National Women's Party failed to acknowledge or support the problems of Black women who remained disenfranchised by Jim Crow and institutional segregation following suffrage (Sklar, 1999; Staples, 2019). Additionally, the Great Migration of Blacks across the country for jobs catalyzed a resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan and white terror in the U.S., bringing serial lynchings and interracial rape of Black women across the country (Freedman, 2013). However, the National Women's Party refused to endorse the project as they argued it failed to advocate for issues primarily relating to women (Freedman, 2013). The activism of Black women in the NACW and the National Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) bridged support from the broader white feminist movement to issues that Black women faced. For example, in 1922, Black women in the NAACP launched an organizational initiative with the slogan "A Million Women United to Stop Lynching" (Anti-Lynching Crusaders, 1922). The president of NACW, Mary B. Talbert, mobilized a coalition of support from white women-led organizations, such as the National

Consumers League and the National Council of Women to criminalize the lynching of Black men and women (Freedman, 2013). Nonetheless, the interracial collaboration from women's organizations shifted the women's movement's political landscape. White women began attending NACW meetings and conferences, and white suffrage newspapers denounced lynching and rape of Black women to their readers (Freedman, 2013).

Entering the 1930s, Black women continued to pioneer new cultural understandings of what issues impacted women. Such as Madame Sara Washington, one of several Black beauty columnists that challenged racist and fatphobic depictions of femininity in the beauty and fashion industry in the late 1920s (Purkiss, 2017). Furthermore, Black women almost entirely facilitated education in the segregated schools of the Jim Crow south (Loder-Jackson et al., 2016). Scholars note that the activism of Black women teachers in the south catapulted school integration into the public spotlight (Kluger, 2004; Patterson, 2001). Following *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954), the integration of U.S. schools systematically removed Black women from their former jobs and positions of power. However, the decades of their work “left behind cautionary lessons about how societal forces conspire to marginalize, and even render invisible, Black women's contributions to U. S. society” (Loder-Jackson et al., 2016, p. 200).

### ***1.1.3 1960s-1980s***

Recognition of a second feminist wave surfaced around the 1960s. Specifically, social movement researchers (Meyerowitz, 1993; Horowitz, 1996; Coontz, 2011) highlight Betty Friedan's (1963) bestselling book *The Feminine Mystique* as a defining catalyst for the second wave movement. Through personal narrative, Friedan (1963) argued that U.S. society forced women into marginal positions within the family through housework and patriarchal marriage. Notably, many activists and historians (Bowlby, 1987; Horowitz, 1996; Turk, 2015) critiqued

Friedan's book for excluding the dominant issues of women of color and working-class women at the time. Unsurprisingly, the emergence of what would become known as "the second wave" was highly exclusionary and prioritized heterosexual, cisgender white women as it developed alongside and borrowed rhetorical power from the growing Civil Rights Movement (Christensen, 1997; Thompson, 2002; Breines, 2002).

During this time, women of color played a significant role in critiquing and destabilizing the exclusive mainstream narrative. For example, Shirley Chisolm's run for president showcased unprecedented anti-racist feminist politics on a national scale, which influenced both the messaging of the Black liberation movement and the feminist movement (Curwood, 2015). Women of color activists began developing several independent feminist organizations (e.g., Third World Women's Alliance, founded in 1968; National Black Feminist Organization, founded in 1973; and Women of All Red Nations, and Asian Sisters, founded in 1974) to address the interconnected issues of racism, classism, and imperialism which white feminists ignored (Thompson, 2002, p. 339). An effective form of resistance came from the Combahee River Collective, a Black women's organization founded in 1974. The collective released a "Black Feminist Statement" against the mainstream feminist movement. This statement emphasized that Black women's "experience on the periphery...led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women" (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 211).

In addition to resistance from women of color, gay and lesbian activists surfaced in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a binding force against the second-wave's heterosexism (D'Emilio, 2009; Podmore and Tremblay, 2015). The gay liberation movement (GLM) introduced a radical sexual politics that bolstered "feminism's attack upon traditional sex roles and the affirmation of a non-reproductive sexuality" (D'Emilio 2009). Lesbians within the GLM found that gay men's



issues were overrepresented within the movement and failed to acknowledge fundamental differences between non-heterosexual men and women (Podmore and Tremblary, 2015).

Therefore, lesbian separatists developed the lesbian liberation movement in 1972 to "promote a separate politicized lesbian feminist identity" that emphasized, "where lesbians saw themselves in relation to feminism and gay liberation" (Podmore and Tremblary, 2015, p. 121). The rise of the lesbian liberation movement proved to be extraordinarily contentious for mainstream feminist leaders (Whisman, 1993; Walters, 1996; Chenier, 2004). For example, lesbian politics provided a new dimension of feminism critical of the mainstream's exclusive reliance on the hierarchal gender binary (Walters, 1996). The division between straight mainstream feminist leaders and lesbian feminists led to the strategic exclusion of lesbians from the movement by literally purging lesbian members from the National Organization for Women (Walters, 1996).

Mainstream feminists during this period also excluded the trans community (Stryker 2007; Bettcher, 2012; Hagen et al., 2017). Stryker (2007) writes that the heterosexism of mainstream second-wave feminists and the ascendance of feminist lesbian separatists ostracized transgender women. The intentional exclusion of transgender women by lesbians and straight feminists later became known as trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF). Cristan Williams (2014), a transactivist and scholar, has defined TERF as a term that "refers to a particular type of person who wraps anti-trans bigotry in the language of feminism" (p. 2). Stryker (2007) argues that trans activists, particularly transgender women, illuminated and problematized gender binary essentialism within the second wave. However, as Namaste (2009) writes, women activists mostly ignored or harassed trans women during the second wave. In some cases, cisgender feminists intentionally excluded trans women from feminist spaces. For example, the 1976

Michigan Womyn's Music Festival branded itself a feminist event while enforcing a "womyn-born womyn" policy that banned trans women (Gamson, 1997, p. 179).

#### ***1.1.4 1980s-2000s***

Anita Hill's 1991 televised testimony to an all-white, all-male Senate Judiciary Committee about Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas's sexual harassment was undoubtedly a developmental milestone for a newly popularized third wave. Wing (1997) writes that the denigration of Anita Hill's character on national television drew emotional reactions from many women, particularly women of color. This event helped launch a new direction in feminism. Rebecca Walker coined the term "third wave" in her 1992 Ms. Magazine article responding to the confirmation of Thomas by the United States Senate:

So I write this as a plea to all women, especially the women of my generation: Let Thomas' confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave (Walker, 2001, p. 80).

Unlike the first two waves, Black and Brown feminist writers and activists pioneered the third wave through exhaustive critiques of mainstream feminism (Mann and Huffman, 2005; Orr, 1997; Kinser, 2004). The third-wave leaders emerged simultaneously with a hyper-critical and conservative anti-feminist movement (Kinser, 2004). During the 80s and 90s, scholars and activists of color, particularly women, maintained the political power of feminism through

illuminating the social, economic, and political power of liberating the most marginalized women in the U.S. and around the globe (Orr, 1997; Kinser, 2004; Mann and Huffman, 2005).

The emergence of the riot grrrl movement was another distinct feature of the third wave (Kearney, 1997; Rosenberg and Garofalo, 1998; Schilt, 2004). Riot grrrl surfaced as a challenge to the "predominantly white, male punk scene" (Rosenberg and Garofalo, 1998, p. 809). Though bands such as Bikini Kill and Bratmobile are the origins of this feminist sub-movement, riot grrrl grew beyond the music industry to challenge mainstream narratives about girl youth culture (Kearney, 1997). For example, activists associated with riot grrrl utilized zines and magazines as political tools to disseminate information on sexism, heterosexism, racism, fatphobia, and many other issues that negatively impacted the socialization of women and girls (Schilt, 2004). Some scholars (see Schilt, 2003, 2004; Gillis and Munford, 2004) argue that riot grrrl's diffusion into mainstream culture through music, zines, and magazines is a distinctive feature in transforming the trajectory and reputation of feminism.

Building on the post-structuralist theories of Michel Foucault, scholars such as Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, and Eve Sedgwick popularized queer theory in the 1990s (Ramirez, 2020). McBean (2015) argues that Butler's *Gender Trouble* was "a key turning point in narratives of feminism" due to its "challenge [of] feminism's foundational category, 'woman'" (p. 9). Further, Stryker (2007) notes the growing discipline of transgender studies contributed heavily to the queering of womanhood. As these ideas permeated mainstream feminist discourse, the third wave became critical of universal womanhood, a key feature depicted in the last "waves" of feminism. Third-wave feminists noted that the first and second conceptualization of femininity was exclusive to middle-class, heteronormative, white, cisgender women (Okeke, 1996; Banks, 2004). For third-wave feminists, "there is no one truth, no privileged knowledge; all knowledge

is historically and culturally specific, the product of a particular discourse" (Tyler, 2011, p. 18). Further, third-wave feminism emphasizes "the many ways in which feminism is lived out" and "influence[s] the feminist movement at large" (McDougall, 2012, p. 4). Women of color, young women, and sexual and gender minorities were central in this paradigm shift.

### ***1.1.5 2000s-Present***

Today, there is debate concerning the existence of a "fourth wave" (Wyre, 2009; Rampton, 2010; Munro, 2013; Paasonen, 2005). Proponents of a fourth wave claim "that the internet itself has enabled a shift from 'third wave to 'fourth-wave feminism'"; however, "the existence of a fourth wave has been challenged by those who maintain that increased usage of internet is not enough to delineate a new era" (Munro, 2013, p. 23). One notable characteristic of the ALLEGED? fourth wave is the utility of a global internet community of feminists who use online portals to organize political movements and communities. The political power of the internet has produced benefits to the feminist movement. For example, Blevins (2018) argues that the accessibility of social media in the U.S. has integrated more men into feminist movements, such as #MeToo, which has led to mass consciousness-raising on issues of sexism, heterosexism, and racism. Munro (2013) claims that fourth-wave feminists have integrated "cancel culture" as a digital micropolitics to target sexism and misogyny online. TRANSITION The "trending" feature of the internet has ushered in more intersectional digital activism. For example, Brown and colleagues (2017) write that Black women and Black SGM ushered in hashtags like #SayHerName, #BlackTransLivesMatter, and #AllBlackLivesMatter to critique the lack of intersectional mobilization within the mainstream Black Lives Matter movement.

## 1.2 Qualitative Inquiry into Feminist Definitions

Qualitative research is crucial in highlighting a nuanced feminist experience across social identities (see Home et al., 2001; Trier-Bieniek, 2007; Houvouras and Carter, 2008; Manago et al., 2009; McDougall, 2013; Swirsky and Angelone, 2014); nevertheless, it continues to center white, cisgender, and heterosexual women. McDougall (2013) notes that “there is a need to expand the [qualitative] research regarding feminist identity to include more... studies that might better reflect the diversity...[of] living out feminism” (p. 22). A review of recent qualitative research is crucial because past research depicts the intimate connection between one’s social identity and self-defined feminism. However, I demonstrate that past research has often failed to recruit non-white, non-heterosexual, and non-cisgender respondents – which fails to account for the many different marginalized identities impacted by patriarchy.

Home et al.’s (2001) qualitative study draws from a focus group of eight women to explore generational influences on one’s identification with the feminist movement. The authors did not identify the social identity characteristics of respondents. Home and colleagues (2001) separated the eight women into two groups of four entitled: *Emerging Feminists* and *Experienced Feminists*. *Emerging Feminists* were women who adopted a feminist identity within the past two years of the study. In comparison, *Experienced Feminists* were women who came into their feminist identity between the 1960s and 1980s. Findings indicated that *Emerging Feminists* and *Experienced Feminists* had notably different paths to identifying with feminism. For example, *Experienced Feminists* benefited from “awakening” into feminism during a significant historical period for human and civil rights. *Experienced Feminists* also reported having access to a variety of feminist activities during the emergence of the feminist movement. They acknowledged that the accessibility to information about feminism, feminist events, and

feminist community spaces solidified their feminist identity. *Emerging Feminists*, on the other hand, reported their experiences with feminism as “intimidating, with negative images of ‘bra-burning radicals’” and “spoke of their frustration at not having any formal exposure to feminism during their undergraduate careers and feeling as if they had no understanding of feminism that fit with their vision of themselves” (Home et al., 2001, p. 14).

Trier-Bieniek (2007) conducted two focus groups with six self-identified feminists to explore how the women in the sample perceive the women’s movement. Of the six, five of the women were white. Two of the women were a part of an LGBT organization on the college campus where the study took place; however, the authors never revealed their sexual identities. The most common themes were: (1) *I Am a Feminist*; (2) *Women’s Rights and Radical Feminists*; (3) *Gender Equality*; (4) *Men as Feminists*; (5) *Feminist Stigmas and Stereotypes*; and (6) *A Unifying Definition of Feminist*. *I Am a Feminist* captured enthusiastic identification with feminism. Participants within *Women’s Rights and Radical Feminists* sought to separate mainstream egalitarian “feminists” and “Radical, extreme, or activist feminists” (Trier-Bieniek, 2007, p. 31). Responses within *Gender Equality* “defin[ed] feminist as those concerned about equality for both men and women” (Trier-Bieniek, 2007, p. 31). *Men as Feminists* relays conversations about whether men could be feminists; notably, all participants agreed that men could be feminists. *Feminist Stigmas and Stereotypes* highlights respondents’ acknowledgment that feminism generally has a negative stereotype in mainstream society. Lastly, *A Unifying Definition of Feminist* articulates frustration with the complexity of defining feminism and a desire for one distinct definition.

Houvouras and Carter (2008) recruited a sample of 270 college students and asked them to define feminism. The sample for this study is relatively diverse, with men making up around

42% and racial minorities compromising around 30% of the sample. Yet, the authors do not analyze how gender and racial identities influence definitions of feminism. Additionally, they include many non-feminist students of all genders in the study, centering on many anti-feminist cisgender men within the analysis. The authors categorized the responses into three themes: (1) *Attitudes and Beliefs*; (2) *Actions*; and (3) *Personal Characteristics*. *Attitudes and Beliefs* captured a range of responses, with students defining positive and negative belief systems attributed to feminism. For example, many students listed gender equality as foundational to feminism, while others called feminism man-hating or women supremacist. *Actions* outlined responses that defined feminism in terms of activism or performances of specific actions. Though over 50% of respondents define feminism in terms of action, the students split in determining what types of actions feminists accomplish. Some students described feminism as promoting and fighting for gender equality, while others suggested discriminating against men was inherent to feminism. *Personal Characteristics* capture responses that attach certain personality traits to feminists in their definition of feminism. Like the first two themes, *Personal Characteristics* had both positive and negative reactions. However, contrary to the other themes, positive responses made up only a small portion of responses. Almost half of responses included within the *Personal Characteristics* theme characterized feminists as “aggressive,” “whiney,” “lesbians,” or “butch” (Houvouras and Carter, 2008, p. 249).

Manago, Brown, and Leaper (2009) explored feminist identity among 140 Latina high school students. The researchers asked each respondent to write an essay on how they define feminism. The authors identified five main themes. Of these, *Equality*, *Femininity*, and *Female Empowerment* were most prevalent. Respondents in the Equality category define feminism in the context of seeking “equality” in political and economic rights between men and women (Manago

et al., 2009, p. 757). *Femininity* describes responses where students embrace their role as more feminine – or “as ‘real’ women” – in the context of normative U.S. gender roles (Manago et al., 2009, p. 760). The third most common theme, *Female Empowerment*, describes a collective desire of women to improve or support the lived experiences of other women and “qualities of womanhood” (Manago et al., 2009, p. 762). *Feminism as Bias* refers to women who have negative attitudes toward men. Finally, *Feminism as Sexism* refers to respondents who defined feminism as gender-based discrimination from women to other women.

McDougall (2013) collected narratives from women who were active through the second wave of feminism. The author interviewed 14 women who attended the National Women’s Conference in 1977, the only conference sponsored by the federal government in U.S. history. Twelve of the women were white, and two of the women were Native American. The authors found six overarching themes among the study participants. *Working Toward Justice* refers to participants who highlight actively pursuing justice for women. The second category, *Valuing Self and Other Women* captured women who defined feminism in terms of self-empowerment or the empowerment of other women. Respondents in *Women with Diverse Perspectives* represented feminists as “part of a larger community of women with diverse experiences and relationships to feminism and the feminist movement” (McDougal, 2013, p. 45). *Relevancy in Personal Lives* described women who categorized feminism as an identity for interpreting their gender-based struggles. Respondents within *Future Orientation* saw feminists as working for gender equality for future generations. Finally, definitions within *Changing Understandings of Feminism* relayed the perception of ever-changing attitudes and meanings of feminism.

Swirsky and Angelone (2014) asked 97 women resistant to feminism to discuss their interpretations of the feminist movement. Of the 97 women, 82% were white, and 54% were



under 35 years of age. The responses consisted of three broad themes. Women within *Negative Stereotypes and Feminism* defined feminism as an extremist movement and suggested that feminists advocate for women's supremacy. *Feminism is Unnecessary* featured participants indicating that the U.S. had already achieved gender equality. Finally, *Other (Confusion about feminism)* included a range of responses from women that implied a confusion surrounding the definition or purpose of feminism within one's life.

Collectively, these qualitative researchers provide several takeaways that inform my research. Principally, each study indicates that definitions of feminism are flexible to the subjective lens of respondents, with some predicting that socialization processes influence differences in definitions (Home et al., 2001; McDougall, 2013). I also recognize consistent themes across several of the studies above, including themes of equality within an explicit gender binary, negative stereotypes of feminism, and confusion about the definition of feminism. I problematize past qualitative inquiry into feminist research for several reasons. Firstly, each study defines feminism as binarized, ignoring how patriarchy impacts the lives of sexual and gender minorities. I especially problematize the lack of trans respondents or discussion of how patriarchy impacts trans women. Next, several studies report findings of feminist identification from extremely small samples with little identity diversity. I acknowledge that focus groups encourage more organic communication styles among small groups (Billson, 1989). Still, focus groups also provide researchers with an experimental method that exposes new and diverse social behaviors (Byers and Wilcox, 1991). Most of the respondents mentioned above are white women, cisgender, and heterosexual, even within the focus group research with a petite sample size. My study expands upon past work to offer a sizeable qualitative sample of racially diverse SGM to undercut the continuous underrepresentation of these groups.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.3 Feminist Standpoint Theory and Queer Theory

Following the Marxist tradition, Nancy Hartsock (1983) introduced feminist standpoint theory to critique the unchallenged positivism of masculinity in empirical research. The feminist standpoint theory refocused the locus of knowledge to the standpoint of women to legitimize existing and emerging claims of gender-based discrimination and violence (Hekman, 1997). In constructing her argument for a feminist standpoint, Hartsock (1983) argued that researchers must integrate methodological considerations that uplift and empower women to report their relationship to U.S. patriarchy. Soon after, scholars like Dorothy Smith (1987) began introducing feminist standpoint methods. By the early 1990s, women and feminist scholars across several disciplines had introduced feminist standpoint theory as a theoretical and methodological approach to their research designs (Hekman, 1997).

Some researchers critiqued the early feminist standpoint theory for generalizing women's experiences and failing to "develop a conception of the feminist standpoint that can account for the multiplicity of women's perspectives and the diversity of women's experiences" (Hawkesworth, 1999, p. 135). Harding (1993) writes that exclusively highlighting the gendered issues of one group of women or generalizing all women's lives under patriarchy does not capture the power of feminist standpoint theory, which is uncovering and promoting the various contexts in which women's issues emerge. I borrow from more recent utilizations of feminist standpoint theory that appreciates the many subjective positions in which a marginalized standpoint appears. I specifically employ Gurung's (2020) definition in my analysis, which extends feminist standpoint theory to uplift and center a broad range of marginalized identities that lack social capital or societal power under patriarchy.

I combine feminist standpoint theory with queer theory to situate the perspective of my SGM sample. Queer theory is a philosophical movement that resists heteronormativity and the stability of binarized gender and sexuality categories. Jagose (1996) defines queer as "those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire" (p. 47). Thus, queerness seeks to unravel notions of innate social identification. King (1999) writes that queer individuals articulate a particular standpoint that is purposefully resistant to heteronormative interpretations of society. Further, King (1999) discusses the importance of "queer consciousness" in standpoint research because it disrupts conscious and unconscious heterosexist patterns (p. 487). Queer consciousness goes beyond just resisting assumptions of heterosexuality; instead, this perspective intentionally obstructs normative interpretations of social reality.

Feminist standpoint theory and queer theory are distinct theoretical frameworks seeking to critique identity structures that uphold hierarchical power systems. Feminist standpoint theory informs this research by re-centering knowledge production toward participants' personalized experiences within this study. Also, as my research relates to SGM who identify outside of the gender binary and as non-heterosexual, I employ queer theory to acknowledge the dual relationship between patriarchy and heteronormativity and the instability of fixed social identity characteristics. I combine the two theories to re-center feminist knowledge from the hegemonic representation of white, cisgender, and heterosexual women to underrepresented SGM populations.

## METHODS

### 1.4 Primary Study

I analyze data from a preexisting and ongoing qualitative exploration of LGBTQ student experiences in Atlanta, Georgia. This study utilizes a grounded theory approach (see Charmaz, 2014) to explore how SGM students view queer acceptance in Atlanta and universities within the Atlanta-metropolitan area. The Primary Investigator (PI), Rosalind Chou, began collecting interviews in 2016. Both the P.I. and co-investigators, including myself, collected interviews until the summer of 2021. I started working on the primary study as a graduate research assistant (GRA) at the beginning of the 2019 academic year and continued until Fall of 2021. The P.I. and co-investigators predicted 30-50 interviewees as the sample size needed to reach saturation (Hagaman and Wutich, 2017). To date, the PI and co-investigators have collected 30 in-depth interviews. I utilize 25 of these interviews for my analysis.

All participants are 18 or older, identify as “LGBTQIA+”, and have attended college in the Atlanta area. Due to the hiddenness of the population, the P.I. and co-investigators utilize purposive sampling methods for recruitment (Etikan et al., 2016). Since data collection began in 2016, the recruitment processes have remained consistent. The P.I. created a physical and digital flyer for dissemination (Appendix A). Investigators posted flyers inside academic campus buildings, restaurants, and coffee shops on Georgia State University's (GSU) Atlanta campus to recruit. The investigators also emailed digital flyers to LGBTQ+ student organization leaders to request that leaders disseminate flyers to organization members. The investigators utilized snowball sampling to aid the recruitment of hidden SGM populations. Though recruitment is not exclusive to one university, the PI indicates in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) study form that the project targets students at GSU. Currently, all participants are GSU students.

The PI began data collection in 2016. The PI and co-investigators interviewed participants in a designated office on GSU's Atlanta campus. However, in Spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic required alterations to interview procedures because students could not return to campus. Therefore, the investigators amended the project IRB to include online video software (i.e., Zoom, WebEx, and Google Meet) as a substitute for in-person interviews. Interview lengths range from 30 to 120 minutes. To protect participant identities, the investigators assigned an anonymous alphabetical identification to each interviewee. The P.I. stores all interviews on a data storage device locked in a secure office space at GSU. Since the pandemic limits access to the GSU campus, the investigators made the data accessible to all investigators through a password-locked Dropbox folder.

Transcription methods have varied throughout the project. The P.I. and co-investigators transcribed manually from 2016 to 2019. In 2019, the investigators began using Otter.ai, an online and automated transcription service, for convenience. To check for errors, investigators cross-reference the original interview's audio with the newly produced Otter transcription. In 2020, the P.I. hired two undergraduate research assistants (R.A.s) for the academic year. To provide the R.A.s with transcription skills, the investigators chose to switch back from Otter.ai to manual transcription. An investigator trained both R.A.s on how to transcribe the interviews manually. Immediately following training, the R.A.s oversaw all transcription for the project in 2020. Following the completion of the 2020 academic year, investigators returned to using the Otter.ai service for convenience.

## **1.5 Secondary Study**

The PI on the primary study is not addressing feminism in their upcoming project. As I interviewed participants for the primary study, the emerging data provided essential insights into

feminist studies. For this research, I examine how 25 racially diverse sexual and gender minorities develop their definitions of feminism. My research utilized only two questions in the interview guide from the primary study: “Do you identify as a feminist?” and “How do you define feminism?” I performed a secondary analysis on 25 interview data collected before and during my involvement in the project. I coded all data with NVivo 12 qualitative coding software.

## **1.6 Participants**

Of the 25 participants in this study, there is a diversity of gender, sexuality, and racial identities. Below, I outline participants’ social identity characteristics, including race, gender, sexuality, and preferred pronouns. I assigned each participant within the sample to a corresponding letter within the alphabet (Appendix B). I will use these alphabetized markers to reference participants in my analysis. As SGM discourse is consistently shifting (Watson et al., 2020), I provide some identity definitions below:

1. Cisgender – Cisgender persons maintain gender identities that align with the binarized sex category (i.e., male/female) assigned at birth.
2. Transgender (or Trans) – Transgender persons maintain gender identities that contradict binarized sex category assigned at birth. Transgender people may still identify within the binary as a transgender man or woman; however, transgender people also identify outside of the gender binary as nonbinary, agender, or genderqueer.
3. Queer – Queer persons maintain a diversity of gender and sexuality identities and performances. Queer serves as an umbrella term for various non-heteronormative gender and sexuality identities (Callis, 2016). Queer is intentionally ambiguous and fluid to contrast the rigid nature of binarized gender and sexuality identity structures.

4. Pansexual – Pansexual persons maintain a sexual identity with sexual attraction to all genders.
5. Asexual – Asexual persons maintain sexual identities which hold lower than average or an absence of sexual activity. (Steelman and Hertlein, 2016).

I undergo interview data from cisgender and trans/non-binary gender identities in this study.

Cisgender respondents make up the slight majority, with nine cisgender women and four cisgender men. However, trans and nonbinary respondents make up almost half of the sample, with 12 respondents. Of these 12, seven respondents identify as nonbinary, three as transgender men, and two as transgender women.

Sexuality is the most diverse social attribute within the sample, with eight recorded sexuality identities represented. Those who identify as queer are the most represented in the sample, with seven respondents. Bisexual and lesbian respondents were the second most represented sexuality in the sample, with five respondents each. Two respondents identified as gay, two as asexual, and two as straight. Finally, pansexual is the least represented in the sample with only one respondent.

There are five racial identity groups featured in the sample. White respondents make up the majority, with 11 respondents. Black respondents are the second most represented group in the study at nine respondents; of the remaining respondents, two respondents identified as Asian, two respondents as mixed racial identity, and one respondent identified as Latinx.

## **1.7 Coding Procedure**

I employ analytical strategies rooted in the grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss conceptualized the theory to challenge positivism in mainstream social research. The original purpose of grounded theory was a purely inductive and "ground-up

approach," where social scientists produced theories rooted directly in their data collection (Reichert, 2007). However, scholars critique the original Glaser and Strauss method for "incorporate[ing] a taken-for-granted vocabulary and discourse of positivism when arguing for the scientific legitimacy of G.T." (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014, p. 154). For instance, when Strauss and Corbin (1990) introduced an expanded strategy for G.T. that promoted theory construction, Glaser (1992) critiqued it as "forcing" findings.

To contrast the positivist G.T. tradition, some qualitative scholars (see Charmaz, 2014; Bryant, 2002; Mills et al., 2006) argued for a new constructivist G.T. method that is pragmatic yet relative to the specific context and interactions that emerge between the researcher and participant within a study. The foundation of the constructivist G.T. method incorporates abductive logic (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). Kelle (1995) writes that the abduction process is utilized in qualitative research "to explain new and surprising empirical data through the elaboration, modification, or combination of pre-existing concepts." (p. 34). More specifically, G.T. includes deductive processes, in which pre-defined concepts inform the research and coding process (Crabtree and Miller 1992). In this study, I explored my interview data using both inductive and deductive strategies.

Firstly, I drew from the deductive thematic analysis method (Pearse, 2019) to construct a preliminary codebook. When applying this deductive model, researchers should identify pre-existing themes within theoretical or conceptual frameworks to develop their preliminary codebook (Boyatzis 1998; Crabtree and Miller 1992; Pearse, 2019). Therefore, I drew from my review of past qualitative research on feminist identification to construct my preliminary codebook, entitled "Traditional Themes" (see Appendix D).

Next, I utilized a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to develop a separate



codebook based on emergent themes from interview data concerning participant definitions of feminism. When finding new themes in qualitative research, Romano et al. (2003) indicate that "reduction" is a critical first step in the coding process. These authors define "reduction" as "selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming raw data to make it useful" (Romano et al., 2003, p. 221). Therefore, to assist the development of my new codes, I employed various reduction processes. I ran a word frequency in NVivo using the interview transcripts to populate the 100 most common words across the data. Next, I removed stop words, which Romano et al. (2003) define as customary, mundane, and extraneous words such as "like," "also," etc., that muddle the process of finding consistent themes in qualitative coding software (p. 222). I completed this process in waves. When words unrelated to my analysis arose after my first removal of stop words, I removed newfound stop words from the word frequency inquiry. I completed three waves of removing stop words. Using the new data from this word frequency inquiry, I produced a word cloud to emphasize the most frequently used words within the data by making them more prominent and more vibrant than other words (Appendix G). This word cloud data visualization guided me to consistent themes across the sample. Next, I created a word tree in NVivo, drawing from words distinguished from the word cloud (Appendix H). The word tree feature in NVivo connects user-selected words to specific quotes and phrases within the data. I then used patterns across my word tree to develop a new codebook entitled "Emergent Themes" (Appendix E). I then coded all interview data with my inductive codebook.

Following both my deductive and inductive procedure, I reviewed the "Traditional Themes" and "Emergent Themes" to narrow and assess overlap between the two codebooks (MacQueen et al., 1998). Initially, the first codebook, "Traditional Themes" held six codes. Contrarily, "Emergent Themes" contained five codes. I collapsed Traditional Themes and

Emergent Themes together to create the final codebook entitled SGM Feminism. In my final codebook, there are six codes total: (1) *Explicit Gender Binary* (2) *Fluid or Complicated*; (3) *Negative or Exclusive Reputation*; (4) *Attitudes on Men*; (5) *Race and Racism*; (6) *Sexual and Gender Minority Exclusion*; and (7) *Empowerment for All* (Appendix F).

## RESULTS

### 1.8 SGM Feminism

#### 1.8.1 *Explicit Gender Binary*

Using the *Explicit Gender Binary* code, I captured traditional understandings of feminism, in which SGM promoted “equality,” “equal rights,” “equal opportunity,” “egalitarianism,” or “no stigma” between “a man and a woman.” Close to half of the study defined feminism explicitly through the gender binary. Some respondents even used essentialist gender language to discuss feminism. For example, Participant F (cisgender woman, white, pansexual) argued that feminism “in basic terms” is just “the equality between the sexes” and further stated, “This isn’t a discussible topic. It’s true. That’s my definition. I think it’s most people’s definition.”

Some have insisted that holding sexual minority identity organically produces empathy or advocacy for gender minority populations (Willoughby et al., 2010; Worthen, 2016). However, research surrounding non-heterosexual attitudes towards transgender and gender-nonconforming populations is sparse, as the sexuality of participants in social research is rarely identified (Worthen, 2016). Homonormativity and cisnormativity within the LGBTQ+ community exist in abundance (Stryker 2008; Bryant, 2008; Duggan, 2002). Homonormativity refers to entrenched white-capitalist norms or behaviors among gays and lesbians that ostracize and discriminate against sexual minorities perceived as deviant, such as bisexuals, non-white sexual minorities,

polyamorists, or gender-nonconformists (Duggan, 2002). Similarly, cisnormativity underscores the taken-for-granted and deliberate acts of exclusion or violence from non-heterosexual and heterosexual cisgender peoples towards trans and gender non-conforming populations (Pyne, 2011). I do not mean to suggest that Participant F maliciously excluded transgender people from her feminism, but instead that we must consider how our many identities hold privileges and disadvantages simultaneously. SGM, who defined feminism in binarized terms, almost all identified as cisgender.

Further, cisgender sexual minority populations were more likely to draw from socially constructed medical terms like “sex.” However, medical terminology for gender, such as “sex,” has consistently been debunked as transphobic and exclusionary of the complexities of human anatomy and physiology (Fausto-Sterling, 2019). Gender researchers are becoming more concerned about the pervasive role of cisnormativity among sexual minorities, especially as research suggests that lesbians, gays, and bisexuals are more empathetic to transgender and gender-nonconforming people (Savin-Williams, 2005). For example, Worthen (2016) called for future research on “LGB [lesbian, gay, and bisexual] attitudes and their feminist ideologies” towards transgender and gender non-conforming individuals to trace persisting mistreatment of transgender populations (p.37). In my research, the majority of SGM relying still on the gender binary indicates that cisgender sexual minorities are not intrinsically aware or advocating for the experiences of gender minorities within their feminism. Future research should inquire about transgender acceptance among cisgender sexual minorities, particularly as it relates to feminist activism.

### ***1.8.2 Fluid or Complicated***

Qualitative research highlights an inability to define feminism (Home et al., 2000; Quinn and Radtke, 2006; Trier-Bieniek, 2007; McDougal, 2013; Swirsky and Angelone, 2014). I also saw most respondents articulated in some form that feminism was fluid, confusing in nature, or a complex phenomenon. Mainly, SGM demonstrated confusion about feminism through their response to the question, “How do you define feminism?” When asked for her definition, Participant U (cisgender woman, Latinx, asexual) paused to think, “How would I define feminism... I’m trying to... Wait, let me think about this for a second.” Participant J (nonbinary, Black, lesbian) shared a similar moment, taking two long pauses before attempting, “It [feminism] has to include...[pause] it should not include...[pause] I’m not really sure how to describe it. I guess the definition is complex[laughs].” Lotz (2003) attributes many issues to the unclear definition of feminism, including generational and regional differences, media portrayals of feminism, and access to accurate and current information about the feminist movement.

In my analysis, I discovered that social identity structures were central in complicating SGM definitions of feminism. A few SGM even recognized a relationship between their shifting social identities to the fluidity of their definitions of feminism. Like Participant X (cisgender woman, Mixed-Race, lesbian), who began her definition by stating, “I don't think that just feminists itself speaks to my politics enough.” Participant X labeled herself as Indo-Caribbean, Black, an immigrant, a woman, and a lesbian. These identities influence the construction of her feminism, particularly as she navigates different identities within different social spaces. She explained that she tied her definition and understanding of feminism to her personal development in life and academia. She noted that she shifts her definition of feminism depending on the

“space” she’s in as well as who she surrounds herself with, thus recognizing how social environments shape identity definitions,

I think the fluidity for me, like, reflects my continuous journey in academia, and just like in the world in general. Um, and so I've already spoken about how, like, I used to align very closely with, like, those who share similar identities and now that shifted. So, when these shifts in, like, my politics, for better use of word, happen. I think I like to gravitate more towards, like, labeling myself in one way or another. And there is no, like term, more and less. I would have to make a whole sentence that would adequately describe it every single time. And so, I think it shifts, depending on the spaces that I'm in 100%.

Drawing from Participant X’s response, I argue that an individual’s identity characteristics progress in relation to their social environment. Indeed, place and space impact sense of belonging and identity development (Morely, 2001). Night-time spaces and academic institutions (Horne et al. 2001), for instance, are crucial for bringing people into the feminist movement. The role of space in feminist identification is vital for SGM, as heterosexuals have excluded SGM from many public areas. Historically, SGM have cultivated gay and lesbian nighttime spaces where they can receive community and safety from the “heterosexual and unaccepting ‘outside’ world” (Browne and Bakshi, 2011, p. 179). Additionally, white SGM traditionally excluded non-white SGM from established gay and lesbian clubs, prompting SGM of color to produce their own community spaces (Held, 2015). Stigmatized groups such as SGM and racial and ethnic minorities benefit by having an established communal environment in extraordinary ways, including self-acceptance, socialization with similar identities, access to educational or political resources, and mental health benefits (Rook, 2001; Shumaker & Hill, 1991; Walen & Lachman,

2000). Queer spaces have also served as a site for activism and debate over feminist issues for SGM (Taylor and Rupp, 1993; Knopp, 2007).

Meanwhile, gay and lesbian night-time spaces are rapidly declining across the U.S. due to gentrification, social media, and the assimilation of queer people into normative culture (Mattson, 2019). As of 2019, there are only 21 lesbian bars left in the United States (Mattson, 2019). Unfortunately, people of color-owned queer spaces have been hit the hardest over the decades, with almost 60% disappearing since 2007 (Mattson, 2019). Where then do SGM and SGM of color go to negotiate their identities? In the context of feminist identity, Participant X mediates this based on spaces where she finds similar social identities,

I would really only consider myself a feminist with, like, a word before that, like a black feminist, or like a decolonial feminist, or a radical feminist. When I'm in super like radical spaces with, like decolonial black feminist, then, like, I can speak about all those things at once.

I argue that defining feminism finds much of its fluidity here. This participant highlights her definition as constrained to the intelligibility shared among her differing social groups. She explained that when she is among a “radical” group of feminists, she can articulate a feminism that is most true to her politics. SGM of color often negotiate aspects of their identity depending on whether they are heterosexual racial minority communities or white SGM populations (Goode-Cross and Tager, 2011). Identity negotiation is not exclusive to SGM of color – it is a social fact. All individuals who engage with society are constrained by what is socially visible and accessible. In a society that privileges cisgender, heterosexual, and white identities, SGM and SGM of color deviate from normative understandings of reality just through their visibility. As I demonstrated in my literature review, women of color and SGM challenged and

transformed the definition of feminism through challenging racism, homophobia, and transphobia from the mainstream leadership. However, these transitions of feminist consciousness were not abrupt. The rise of inclusive and intersectional feminist politics has come through decades of negotiations of marginalized people within particular social spaces or among certain social groups. This flexibility is what continues to unravel and reconstruct the feminist movement and the very definition of feminism.

### ***1.8.3 Negative or Exclusive Reputation***

The United States widely regards feminism as holding a negative reputation. A recent survey by Pew Research Center (2020) found that 45% of U.S. citizens see feminism as polarizing or unwelcoming. Similarly, past qualitative research demonstrates that both men and women hold strong anti-feminist attitudes or awareness of feminism as a controversial phenomenon (Home et al., 2000; Trier-Bieniek, 2007; Houvouras and Carter, 2008; Manago et al., 2009; Swirsky and Angelone, 2014). Among SGM definitions, some participants acknowledged feminism as holding a negative or exclusive reputation. For example, the only respondent in the sample who did not identify as a feminist, Participant D (cisgender woman, Black, bisexual), explained that feminism's emphasis on explicit women's rights issues turns her away from identifying with the movement. While she noted that she "did stand for a lot of female rights," she explained that she couldn't be a feminist unless she felt "a very strong emotion about it." This finding is notable as past research reports a relationship between anti-feminist attitudes or rejection of the feminist label to the perception of extreme positions towards gendered liberation (Edley and Wetherell, 2001; Wilcox, 1989; Yavorsky and Mikheeva, 2021; Bir, 2021; Dyer and Hurd, 2018).

Additionally, anti-feminists or those who reject the label of feminist are likely to support gender equality when researchers separate specific issues from the term feminism (Wilcox, 1989; Bir, 2021; Dyer and Hurd, 2018). Participant D's resistance to the feminist label articulates that those perceptions of extremity are outside white and heteronormative populations. An additional consideration is that Black women have historically felt a separation between the agenda of "mainstream" or "white" feminism, which excludes issues that many Black women face, such as racism and classism (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 1984; Mann 2013).

While many respondents enthusiastically embraced a feminist identity, several were critical of feminism. The majority highlighted a distinction between their feminism and what they considered "the mainstream." Participant C (agender trans woman, queer, white) illustrated this in her definition, clarifying that she was "definitely not interested in 'pussy hat if Hillary Clinton got elected I'd be at brunch right now' feminism." Many other respondents shared similar sentiments, explaining their negative feelings for feminism's historical exclusion of marginalized communities and issues they might face under patriarchy, such as Participant I (cisgender man, queer, white), who articulated that his feminism is not "mainstream feminism," "white feminism," or "second-wave feminism," which he saw as connected to "reductionist... binary, and transphobic" ideology. These findings demonstrate an awareness and adverse reaction among participants to feminism's historical exclusion of marginalized identities. Moreso, it captures a different aspect of feminism's negative reputation. Many empirical studies find that feminism draws a negative reputation from men, religious groups, and conservative women (Wilcox, 1989; Houvouras and Carter, 2008; Swirsky and Angelone, 2014); however, the SGM in this study demonstrate that mainstream interpretations of feminism are also regarded negatively from minoritized populations who identify as feminists. They share disdain for the



mainstream's continued neglect of communities of color and queer people. Participant X highlights this point in her definition – explaining that her identity and struggles are “constantly evolving and developing” while mainstream feminism remains “static.”

#### ***1.8.4 Attitudes Towards Men***

The literature on men's place within feminism varies widely. Some feminist scholars are skeptical about men's role within feminism (Leek, 2019), whereas others emphatically argue for their inclusion (Tienari and Taylor, 2019). Of the responses in this study, interpretations of men's place also varied. Most of the SGM in the study self-identified as feminist, highlighting feminism as a movement that should protect all people, including feminine and gender-nonconforming men within patriarchy. However, some SGM felt that feminism should exclude cisgender and straight men. A few men even struggled with claiming a feminist label.

The most notable example comes from two of the transgender men respondents. Participant A (transgender man, bisexual, white) identified strongly as a feminist but rejected the ability of cisgender men to identify as feminists. He stated, “I really hate it when people say feminism is for men too, because it's not.” He went on to add, “And I don't think women's liberation needs to come at coddling men's feelings.” Former inquiries into transgender men show similar patterns. For instance, some studies find that transgender men may become more enthusiastic feminists as they transition due to their former experiences with sexism or misogyny (Devor, 1997; Gardiner, 2013; Baker, 2018).

In contrast, Participant B (transgender man, no sexual preference, white) is confused about how he fits into a feminist movement that has been both transphobic and resistant to men (Hines, 2014). A recent qualitative study (Baker, 2018) on transgender men found that some respondents struggle with feminist identification when developing newfound “male privileges,”

such as higher-paying jobs (Budge et al., 2013). Participant B expressed some of these struggles as a transgender man,

I guess it goes back into like, these, these issues that I have, where it just feels like I don't know enough, or that I'm not good enough. And there is this kind of weird, (pause) these weird dynamics of like, there's terfs [transgender exclusionary radical feminist]. And then there's people who think that men shouldn't identify as feminist. And so for me, I'm like, well, what does that mean for me?

The confusion over these “weird dynamics” for transgender men uncovers some significant issues for binarized interpretations of feminism. Some transgender people, such as transgender men, do not fit neatly into the men/oppressor versus women/oppressed framework. However, they are still subject to or reinforce sexist and patriarchal oppression (Hines, 2014). The exclusion of transgender people and transgender men from feminist discourse undercuts how some marginalized identities, including those who identify or are socially intelligible as men, will experience patriarchy through oppressive factors outside of the gender binary, such as transphobia.

### **1.8.5 Race and Racism**

In her highly acclaimed essay, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, Audre Lorde (1984) criticized white feminists' reliance on white supremacy within the quest for gender liberation. While nearly four decades have passed since Lorde's publication, scholars and activists alike are still fighting to dismantle racism from the broader feminist movement (Carby 2004; Arya, 2012). As such, many respondents reflected on their disdain for persisting racism within the feminist movement. For example, Participant Y (nonbinary, lesbian, Black, and Latinx mixed race) hesitated to say yes when I asked if they were a feminist. They

followed by stating they “usually don’t tell people” that they are a feminist due to the prominence of trans exclusion and racism in the “mainstream” movement. They elaborated,

I don't know, I think I'm also very peculiar, like, particular about what sort of feminism I identify with. We have to be very conscious of the fact that white feminism is a thing. Their response indicates that “white feminism” impacts decisions to identify with the movement altogether, highlighting that racism is a primary concern for some Black feminists. The presence of racism in feminism has long turned Black people away from the feminist label, which has led to Black-women-led movements like womanism to advocate for racial and gender liberation simultaneously (Rodgers, 2017). Notably, some of the black women and femmes in this study regarded themselves as more of a womanist than a feminist.

While most interviewees who identified racism within feminism were Black, a few whites also denounced racism in the movement. An example of this comes from Participant C (agender, transgender woman, queer, white), who critiqued feminism overall for being ineffective at creating systemic changes for all impacted by patriarchy. She specifically cited white supremacy, or the failure “to recognize...feminism” as “a white movement” to qualify feminism’s unchanging reputation.

One has to recognize the ways in which feminism has been a white movement. The racism that is a part of feminism has to be recognized, and people dedicated to anti-racism, need to understand that if they're feminists that they need to make sure that their feminism and all of their actions are anti-racist actions.

Her argument denotes a crucial point about the interconnected nature of race and gender. To identify with feminism or gender liberation is to identify with and advocate for the liberation of

all gender marginalized folks, including women and gender minorities of color who face white supremacy alongside patriarchy.

### ***1.8.6 Sexual and Gender Minority Exclusion***

Overwhelmingly, respondents identified the exclusion of sexual and gender minorities from feminism in their definitions of feminism. Participants were generally critical of the homophobia that they saw within the movement. For example, participant X (cisgender woman, lesbian, Black and Asian mixed-race) emphasized that the origins of “traditional feminism” are “heterosexual.” She even explained that many “radical” Black feminists failed to acknowledge their straight privilege or advocate for the experiences of Black lesbians.

Similarly, Participant I (cisgender man, queer, white) discussed the exclusion of sexual minorities, highlighting that feminism “is not just heterosexual, as many people purport it to be.” He intentionally identified gay and feminine men’s vulnerability under patriarchy, as hypermasculinity under patriarchy is associated with internalized homophobia, anti-feminine attitudes, and anti-gay attitudes (Parrott et al., 2002; Warriner et al., 2013). This respondent's comments are important to consider, as patriarchy constricts sexual minority men in unique ways. For instance, Participant I explained that he struggled to come out as queer because of the fear of backlash from the men at his school. Furthermore, before he came out, he explained performing homophobic and sexist actions to fit in with his straight men peers. As such, he argues that gay, queer, and transgender men have much to gain from supporting feminism and overthrowing patriarchy.

Over half of the sample discussed trans-exclusionary feminism. The participants broadly discussed the exclusion or discrimination of transgender women. Several critiques the history of trans exclusionary radical feminism, while some discussed its continuing influence. For example,

Participant G (nonbinary, straight, white), who noted their awareness of “TERFs” whenever “trans issues start coming into the spotlight,” such as the widely publicized bathroom bills across southern state legislatures (Spencer, 2019), or with the visibility of transgender celebrities, like Laverne Cox and Caitlin Jenner. Participant G indicates that transphobia from feminists makes them reluctant to identify with the movement, and undoubtedly, transgender people and transphobic rhetoric are much more visible in the technological age (Fischer, 2018).

Finally, participants uniquely positioned non-binary people in their feminism. Participant Y (nonbinary, lesbian, Black and Latinx mixed race) explained that their feminism “is very queer, very, very queer” and included non-binary “femmes.” The word femme came up a handful of times to denote the particular type of nonbinary person vulnerable to patriarchal discrimination or violence. In the past, scholars have defined femme as a “bad” or “deviant” girl (Crocker and Harris, 1997). Others trace the roots of femme back to lesbian communities of the 1940s and 1950s (Nestle, 1992), while some find its emergence in the Black queer ballroom scene of 1960s Harlem (Bailey, 2014). Femme in the non-binary context refers to a gender performance that embodies feminine aesthetics (McCann, 2018; Nestle, 1992; Walker, 2012). Recent inquiry suggests that femmes are resistant to the normative cisgender and heterosexual identity scripts (Bailey, 2014; Brushwood Rose & Camilleri, 2002). As Schwartz (2020) proclaims, femmes “blur boundaries between normative (appearing feminine, straight, or cis) and subversive (while being feminist, queer, or trans)” (p.1). I find this noteworthy because respondents drew parallels between the experiences of “most marginalized femmes” and “women.” Some even specifically suggested that femmes assigned male at birth are under a great threat of violence within patriarchy. As social scientists are only recently inquiring into the lived

experiences of nonbinary people (Scwartz, 2020), further research should more clearly identify the issues nonbinary femmes face within a patriarchal society.

### ***1.8.7 Empowerment for All***

Nearly half of participants advocated for the liberation of marginalized identities outside of gender in their definitions of feminism. Some generally advocated for all oppressed groups, such as Participant Y (nonbinary, lesbian, Black and Latinx mixed race), who defined her feminist values as ensuring “we should all have the same basic needs met, emotionally, physically, mentally, all of that” or Participant P (nonbinary, queer, Black) who explained their feminism as “working to eradicate domination and elitism in all human relationships.” Participant S (cisgender woman, lesbian, Asian) explained the core theme of *Empowerment of All* most bluntly,

A feminist is someone who speaks for the marginalized, doesn't speak on behalf of the marginalized, but brings attention to the fact that there are people who are marginalized people, and their concerns and their questions are valid and should be addressed.

Indeed, respondents across *Empowerment for All* felt that feminism left many non-traditional marginal voices out of the broader feminist lexicon. Some definitions mentioned specifically who feminism should be empowering, such as men of color, disabled folks, sex workers, those without much formal education, under-resourced communities, the incarcerated, immigrants, and religious minorities in their definitions of feminism. Beyond advocating for marginalized groups, a few respondents demonstrated the connection between non-traditional social identities and gender liberation. Participant Q (transgender woman, straight, white) outlined in her definition that advocating for gender inequality naturally intersects with many other social identities, such as race and disability,

I would say I define feminism as the movement to create gender liberation, which would involve people of all marginalized identities, or creating equitable opportunities and access to people of marginalized genders, which wouldn't just include white cis women but would include Black cis men, and it includes, non-binary folks and trans folks and disabled cis men and disabled cis women and I would say in regards to the ways in which gendered violence impacts so many of us and trans racialized and disabled- and ableist ways. That is the goal of feminism, or feminism is the goal to end those violences.

This definition acknowledged the interconnected nature of social identities, indicating a relationship amongst multiple systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, white supremacy, and heterosexism – advocating for the liberation of all marginal people. Many feminists of color activists have held this vision of collective feminist liberation (Combahee River Collective, 1983; Harris, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Morgan, 2015). Feminism's role in empowering all marginalized people is undoubtedly becoming mainstream, as even The United Nations (2020) advocated recently for an “intersectional feminism” that strives for a “just future for all” across the globe. Many respondent definitions echoed this sentiment. Specifically, SGM – especially those who do not identify as white cisgender women – yearned for a feminism that recognizes their unique struggles and the relative struggles of other underrepresented groups in patriarchy.

## CONCLUSION

In my research, I asked how SGM define feminism and how their reported definitions vary from past studies. My findings suggest that SGM respondents shared similarities with past qualitative research on defining feminism, advocating strongly for women's empowerment and gender equality within their definitions. Several SGM defined feminism using an explicit gender binary framework, utilizing medical terms, such as “sex,” in their advocacy of gender equality.

Notably, most respondents who define feminism within such terms identify as cisgender. I conclude that all marginalized individuals carry both privileges and disadvantages across their many intersecting identities that impact defining feminism. In the context of cisgender sexual minority respondents, it was not inherent to advocate for issues of trans and non-binary peoples in their feminism. Future research should more clearly investigate the role of cisnormativity and transphobia in SGM definitions of feminism.

Another substantial similarity the participants share with past research is a recognition of feminism as challenging to define or elastic to varied social settings. Some of the respondents articulated that they saw their definitions transform as they entered different life course stages, such as attending higher education or adopting new friend groups. I assert that feminism is socially constructed. That is, many social factors shape how respondents define feminism, including their many social identities, their social environments, and the social groups they surround themselves with. Many of the qualitative studies I cite in my literature review ask relatively homogenous participant samples to define feminism, thus failing to extrapolate the impact of social structures on awareness and perceptions of feminism. I suggest that future qualitative studies on defining feminism target a diversity of societal forces in their sampling procedures to delineate the sociological processes of feminist identity development.

SGM definitions of feminism extend previous research in numerous ways, adding an overt awareness of inequality maintained from inside the feminist movement. Non-white, non-cisgender, and non-heterosexual communities have fought to be visible and extend the aims of the feminist movement throughout all of U.S. history. To contrast their definitions, some participants reference the historical exclusion from “mainstream feminism” or “the second wave of feminism.” In many ways, these definitions reveal limitations of traditional binarized



feminism – such as one transgender man who struggled to find his place in a trans-exclusionary movement that is also resistant to men. Additionally, participants find that the exclusionary rhetoric persists in today’s feminist movement – some mentioning the non-intersectional politics of contemporary feminist figures (i.e., Hillary Clinton) or TERF celebrities (i.e., J.K Rowling) as examples of how feminism still fails to uplift non-white and non-cisgender women. To expand the academic understanding of “mainstream” rejection, I advocate for future research to explore how racial, sexual, and gender minorities relate to mainstream feminist politics.

I also identify racism within feminism as another distinctive contribution to the subversion of traditional themes of feminism. Racial minority respondents primarily critique the existence of “white feminism.” However, a few white SGM even identified racism as the central issue facing the feminist movement to date. For some of the black women and femmes in the study, “white feminism” makes them resistant to identifying as a feminist – and few acknowledge that they identify more proudly with Black women-led movements like womanism. This finding suggests that future scholarship should explicitly recruit racial diversity in their sample and develop race-conscious survey questions regarding feminism. Additionally, feminist researchers should investigate the prevalence of womanism among SGM populations who feel ostracized by the mainstream feminist movement.

Unsurprisingly, participants identify feminism’s historical exclusion of SGM from the mainstream rhetoric. Many definitions advocate outright for trans women’s issues, which is entirely unique from past qualitative research on defining feminism. Others articulate an awareness of heterosexism and homophobia in mainstream feminism, which fails to situate many ongoing problems that sexual minorities face in patriarchy. For instance, a couple of participants explain that feminism relates to the experiences of feminine men. My findings also illustrate that

respondents include gender minorities outside of binary trans identities in their feminism, such as non-binary femmes. These findings present many areas for future scholarship, such as investigating how gender performance among cisgender gays and lesbians impacts feminist identification or the differential experiences of masculine and feminine non-binary identities within patriarchy.

Finally, I find that several SGM respondents articulate a feminist politic that seeks the inclusion and liberation of all marginal groups in society, both in the U.S. and abroad. Moreover, a few participants defined how gender liberation impacts a broad range of non-traditional social groups. Participants report that their feminism addresses sexism alongside racism, homophobia, and transphobia. Thus, for them, women's liberation is undeniably linked to the liberation of all others who lack structural or social power. The radical empowerment of all oppressed people in SGM definitions identifies what Cathy Cohen (1997) called “the interdependency among multiple systems” (p. 442). As such, I emphatically urge researchers to disidentify with “single oppression” paradigms within feminism that focus solely on gender-based oppression without considering how many other social identities and social forces facilitate one’s gendered experiences. As Audre Lorde (1984) famously wrote, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 2). Similarly, feminists’ scholars and activists must abandon the “master’s tools” of racism, homophobia, and transphobia within their methodological and theoretical aims if we are ever to dismantle the “master’s house.”

In conclusion, I acknowledge several limitations in my research. Firstly, qualitative content analyses are biased towards the researcher's lens (Kondracki et al. 2002). Additionally, I only interviewed 25 SGM for my study; therefore, my findings cannot be generalized for any sexual or gender minority population. I report and analyze the definitions of a highly diverse data

set yet fail to demonstrate the depth of how their many marginalized identities intersect to inform definitions of feminism. The methodological design of the primary study hindered my ability to explore definitions of feminism more intersectionally. Forthcoming explorations should consider these constraints as they seek to advance academic understandings of how people define feminism.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

## Recruitment Flyer

Georgia State University  
Department of Sociology and the Office of the Dean of Students

# Are you Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, or Asexual?

*We invite members of these communities to take part in an in-person interview about GSU's climate for members of sexual and gender minority groups.*

 **THE INTERVIEW IS CONFIDENTIAL**   
**AND WILL TAKE 60-180 MINUTES!**

To learn more or set up your confidential interview,  
email Dr. Chou at [rchou@gsu.edu](mailto:rchou@gsu.edu)  
or Dresden Lackey at [dlackey4@gsu.edu](mailto:dlackey4@gsu.edu).

Students must be 18 and older to participate.

\* Students will be encouraged to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable doing so for the duration of the interview.

## Appendix B

### Participant Identity Characteristics

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Sexuality Identity</b>	<b>Racial Identity</b>
Participant A	Transgender Man (He/Him)	Bisexual	White
Participant B	Transgender Man (He/Him)	No Sexual Preference	White
Participant C	A-Gender Transgender Woman (She/Her)	Queer	White
Participant D	Cisgender Woman (She/Her)	Bisexual	Black
Participant E	Cisgender Man (He/Him)	Asexual	Black
Participant F	Cisgender Woman (She/Her)	Pansexual	White
Participant G	Nonbinary (They/Them)	Straight	White
Participant H	Cisgender Man (He/Him)	Gay	Black
Participant I	Cisgender Man (He/Him)	Queer	White
Participant J	Nonbinary (They/Them)	Queer	Black
Participant K	Cisgender Woman (She/Her)	Bisexual	Black
Participant L	Transgender Man (He/Him)	Queer	White
Participant M	Cisgender Woman (She/Her)	Lesbian	Black
Participant N	Nonbinary (They/Them)	Bisexual	White
Participant O	Nonbinary (They/Them)	Queer	White
Participant P	Nonbinary (They/Them)	Queer	Black
Participant Q	Transgender Woman (She/Her)	Straight	White

Participant R	Cisgender Woman (She/Her)	Queer	White
Participant S	Cisgender Woman (She/Her)	Lesbian	Asian
Participant T	Cisgender Woman (She/Her)	Lesbian	Asian
Participant U	Cisgender Woman (She/Her)	Asexual	Latinx
Participant V	Nonbinary (They/Them)	Bisexual	Black
Participant W	Cisgender Man (He/Him)	Gay	Black
Participant X	Cisgender Woman (She/Her)	Lesbian	Mixed Race: Black and Asian
Participant Y	Nonbinary (They/Them)	Lesbian	Mixed Race: Black and Latinx

## Appendix C

### Literature for Preliminary Codebook

Literature for Development of Codebook Sub-codes	
Negative Reputation	Horne et al., 2000; Trier-Bieniek, 2007; Houvouras and Carter, 2008; Manago et al., 2009; Swirsky and Angelone, 2014
Empowerment of Other Women	Trier-Bieniek, 2007; Houvouras and Carter, 2008; Manago et al., 2009; McDougal, 2013
Explicit Gender Binary	Trier-Bieniek, 2007; Houvouras and Carter, 2008; Manago et al., 2009; McDougal, 2013
Attitudes Towards Men	Trier-Bieniek, 2007; Houvouras and Carter, 2008; Manago et al., 2009
Fluid, Confusing, or Complicated	Horne et al., 2000; Quinn and Radtke, 2006; Trier-Bieniek, 2007; McDougal, 2013; Swirsky and Angelone, 2014
Working Towards Justice	Horne et al., 2000; Houvouras and Carter, 2008; McDougal, 2013

## Appendix D

### Deductive Codebook

Deductive Codebook	
<b><i>Traditional Themes</i></b>	<i>This coding family captures primary themes within the qualitative Feminist Identity Development research in my literature review.</i>
Negative Reputation	This code captures responses of SGM who mention a negative reputation surrounding feminism as they are outlining their feminist identity definitions.
Empowerment of Other Women	This code captures responses of SGM who mention uplifting, empowering, or celebrating other feminists/women as they are outlining their feminist identity definitions.
Explicit Gender Binary	This code captures responses of SGM who mention seeking binarized gender equality (which I define as seeking equality amongst the genders within the framework of the male/female – man/woman gender binary in the U.S.) as they are outlining their feminist identity definitions.
Attitudes Towards Men	This code captures responses of SGM who mention attitudes (both positive and negative) toward men and their relationship to feminism as they are outlining their feminist identity definitions.
Fluid, Confusing, or Complicated	This code captures responses of SGM who acknowledge that the definition of feminism is a fluid, dynamic, and subjective phenomenon as they are outlining their feminist identity definitions.
Working Towards Justice	This code captures responses of SGM who acknowledge the importance of actively working towards gender justice as they are outlining their feminist identity definitions.



## Appendix E

### Inductive Codebook

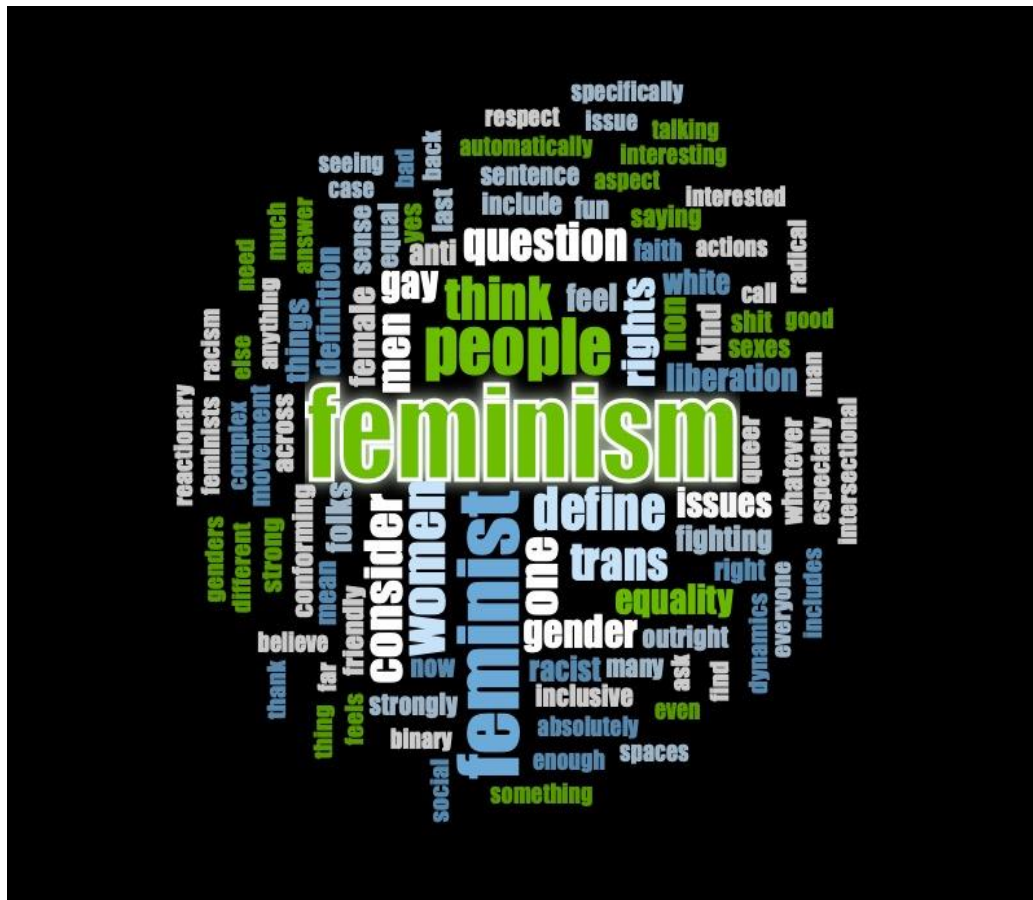
Inductive Codebook	
<b><i>Emergent Themes</i></b>	<i>This coding family captures unique themes from my line- by- line inductive coding of interview data.</i>
Distinction from Mainstream	This code captures responses of SGM who acknowledge a distinction between their definition of or experience with feminism to “mainstream” or popularized interpretations.
Racism	This code captures responses of SGM who acknowledge or critique the role of race or racism within patriarchy and/or feminism.
Heterosexism	This code captures responses of SGM who acknowledge a prioritization of heterosexual identities within patriarchy and/or feminism.
Transphobia	This code captures responses of SGM who acknowledge a prioritization of cisgender identities within patriarchy and/or feminism
Interconnected Oppression	This code captures responses of SGM who acknowledge different systems of oppression (e.g., white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, cissexism, xenophobia, etc.) as interlocked.

## Appendix F

### Final Codebook

Final Codebook	
<b><i>SGM Feminism</i></b>	<i>This coding family captures primary themes within the qualitative Feminist Identity Development research in my literature review.</i>
Negative or Exclusive Reputation	This code captures responses of SGM who mention a negative reputation surrounding feminism as they are outlining their feminist identity definitions.
Race and Racism	This code captures responses of SGM who acknowledge or critique the role of race or racism within patriarchy and/or feminism.
Explicit Gender Binary	This code captures responses of SGM who mention seeking binarized gender equality (which I define as seeking equality amongst the genders within the framework of the male/female – man/woman gender binary in the U.S.) as they are outlining their feminist identity definitions.
Attitudes Towards Men	This code captures responses of SGM who mention attitudes (both positive and negative) toward men and their relationship to feminism as they are outlining their feminist identity definitions.
Fluid or Confusing	This code captures responses of SGM who acknowledge that the definition of feminism is a fluid, dynamic, and subjective phenomenon as they are outlining their feminist identity definitions.
Sexual and Gender Minority Exclusion	This code captures responses of SGM who acknowledge a prioritization of heterosexual and cisgender identities within patriarchy and/or feminism.
Empowerment for All	This code captures responses of SGM who acknowledge different systems of oppression (e.g. white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, cissexism, xenophobia, etc.) as interlocked. SGM here define feminism as a movement that should uplift all marginalized identities.

## Word Cloud



## Word Tree

