

Intersectionality on the go: The diffusion of Black feminist knowledge across disciplinary and geographical borders

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Abstract

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989 as a critique of feminist and critical race scholarship's neglect of—respectively—race and gender. Since then, the concept has been interpreted and reinterpreted to appeal to new disciplinary, geographical, and sociocultural audiences, generating heated debates over its appropriation and continued political significance. Drawing on all 3,807 publications in Scopus that contain the word "intersectionality" in the title, abstract, or keywords, we map the spread of intersectionality in academia through its citations. Network analysis reveals the contours of its diffusion among the 6,098 scholars in our data set, while automated text analysis, manual coding, and the close reading of publications reveal how the application and interpretation of intersectional thinking has evolved over time and space. We find that the diffusion network exhibits communities that are not well demarcated by either discipline or geography. Communities form around one or a few highly referenced scholars who introduce intersectionality to new audiences while reinterpreting it in a way that speaks to their research interests. By examining the microscopic interactions of publications and citations, our complex systems approach is able to identify the macroscopic patterns of a controversial concept's diffusion.

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KEYWORDS

complexity science, diffusion, feminism, intersectionality, sociology of knowledge, women's studies

1 | INTRODUCTION

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989 as a critique of feminist and critical race scholarship's neglect of—respectively—race and gender. Focusing exclusively on either, Crenshaw argued, failed to apprehend the experiences of Black women inhabiting the intersection of two dimensions of inequality. The idea that Black women face different forms of exclusion than White women due to the intersection of sexism and racism was not new (e.g., Collins & Bilge, 2016; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Hooks, 1984; Wilson, 1978). Yet, the term was novel. How has intersectionality traveled within academia since its coinage?

“Intersectionality” today is seemingly everywhere. Leslie McCall was already writing in 2005 that the concept “is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with other fields, has made so far” (2005, p. 1771). A “buzzword” with dedicated conferences, special issues, and journals (Davis, 2008), intersectionality today is part of the standard curriculum of women's studies (Collins & Chepp, 2013). Intersectionality has also broken out from its original moorings in feminist, legal, and critical race scholarship to cross countries and continents, disciplines, and subfields. At the time of writing, Google Scholar lists 59,900 publications on intersectionality, while Web of Science counts over 100 distinct research areas under its umbrella. Along its journey, “intersectionality” has been interpreted and reinterpreted to speak to its new disciplinary, geographical, sociocultural, and political surroundings.

Intersectionality is variously understood as a theory, a research paradigm and a strategy to transform power relations (e.g., Hancock, 2016). How the concept has evolved has also been heavily contested. Some argue that intersectionality's newfound popularity comes at the expense of Black women, whose voices and knowledge rooted in lived experience has been erased (e.g., Jordan-Zachery, 2007). Others argue that race has been eclipsed by class in the hands of continental European scholars (Carbado et al., 2013) and that “Whitewashed” intersectionality has lost its transformative potential (Bilge, 2013). Nash (2018) describes the “intersectionality wars” in which Black feminists defend intersectionality from “misuse and abuse.” By now nearly everything about intersectionality is contested: “its histories and origins, its methodologies, its efficacy, its politics, its relationship to identity and identity politics, its central metaphor, its juridical orientations, its relationship to ‘Black woman’ and to Black feminism” (Nash, 2017, pp. 117–118). Scholars have therefore suggested that intersectionality should be defined by what it does, rather than by what it is (Cho et al., 2013).

The aim of this article is not to offer another reflection on what intersectionality is or does. Inspired by Mügge et al. (2018)—who trace intersectionality's journey within political science—we broaden the scope and empirically scrutinize how it traveled through networks consisting of thousands of scholars. How is the concept defined and applied across disciplines and geography? What is the role of individual scholars in this process? Drawing on all ($n = 3,807$) publications in Scopus that contain the word “intersectionality” in the title, abstract, or keywords, we map the spread of the concept through its citations. We use network analysis to study the citation structure and automated text analysis, manual coding, and the close reading of publications to analyze how intersectionality has been interpreted and applied during its spread. Our complex systems approach focuses on the micro-interactions of publications and citations, and how these generate macro patterns of diffusion (Byrne, 1998; Granovetter, 1973) and interpretation (Abbott, 2001). Our contribution is twofold. First, rigorous empirical analysis improves our understanding of the multiple dimensions of intersectionality's spread and incorporation into the mainstream of many disciplines. Second, our study gives detailed insight into the process of the diffusion of scientific concepts and what happens if a new concept takes root in new disciplines. Confirming the worry of critical scholars, we find

that interpretations, understandings, and applications of intersectionality increasingly diverge from its original meaning and sources as it travels. This process is similar to the diffusion of academic knowledge more generally.

In what follows, we first review the literature on the diffusion of intersectionality and its relation to the politics of knowledge production and the sociology of knowledge. We then detail our methods. Our findings are organized under four headings: (1) macroscopic patterns in the diffusion network of intersectionality scholars, (2) the role of disciplines and geography, (3) how different diffusion communities use and conceptualize intersectionality, and (4) the role of leading figures in the translation of the concept across disciplines and subfields. We find that how intersectionality is understood changes as the concept travels to new audiences. For example, the largest diffusion community consists of primarily U.S.-based scholars who see intersectionality as a tool to empower Black women. While the development of methodological tools to operationalize an intersectional lens to identity is a key concern for a diffusion community of psychologists. Leading figures—whom we call “hubs”—are central in introducing and translating the concept to their peers so that it becomes thematically, theoretically, or methodologically interesting. This, at least, is the role they are credited with by scholars who cite them.

2 | THEORIZING INTERSECTIONALITY'S JOURNEY

Works addressing the genealogy of intersectionality and the current structure and future prospects of the field contain numerous clues about the diffusion of intersectional thinking and scientific ideas more generally. Many of these works point to the central role of Crenshaw (1989), the role of disciplines and geography, and the politics of academic knowledge production. Our review of the key works generates five expectations about the diffusion of intersectionality.

Genealogies of intersectionality point out that intersectional thinking has a much longer history than the term itself; many refer to the speech “Ain't I a Woman?” by Sojourner Truth at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Born into slavery, Truth campaigned for its abolition and for equal rights for women; by focusing on the oppression of Black women, she challenged essentialist thinking in single categories. Crenshaw (1989) is often referenced as the foundational article on intersectionality (Nash, 2016), with Crenshaw's location in law and critical race and feminist studies informing how intersectionality subsequently spread in academic publications.

Feminist and critical race scholars have studied the spread of intersectional thinking to other disciplines. Cho et al. (2013)—two legal scholars and a sociologist—reflect on two decades of scholarship in their special issue on the emerging “field of intersectionality studies” and describe a loosely connected patchwork of disciplinary islands, which they hope will be bridged to bring greater cohesion to the field. Cho and colleagues distinguish between two ways in which intersectional thinking spreads. The first process is *centrifugal*, when ideas travel and adapt to new disciplines; the second is *centripetal*, when scholars at the margins of their respective disciplines draw on literatures from further afield. The centrifugal process is driven by institutional forces that mold intersectional thinking to the methodological standards, practices, and discourses of specific disciplines; centrifugal works include Hancock (2007) in political science, Cole (2009) as well as Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) in psychology, Choo and Ferree (2010) in sociology, and Walby (2007) in philosophy. Cho and colleagues (2013, p. 807) further point to the relative privilege or marginality of intersectionality scholars, knowing that mainstream disciplinary work is credited more within academic institutions than critical interdisciplinary work.

A 2012 special issue edited by Devon Carbado, Kimberlé Crenshaw (law), Vickie Mays (psychology), and Barbara Tomlinson (literature) on intersectionality's travels highlighted the role played by geography and disciplines in intersectionality's diffusion and conceptualization. In the introduction, the editors emphasize the differences between European and U.S. approaches. European scholars, they argue, often use intersectionality to articulate abstract interactions but are less attentive to race, which is deemed less important than class (cf. Lutz et al., 2011). Bilge (2013) argues that this European treatment has neutralized intersectionality's political potential.

In line with findings from the sociology of science, Carbado et al. (2013) find that contextual differences—be it geographies or disciplines—generate alternative engagements with the theory. Kathy Davis (2008) frames the spread of intersectional thinking as a success story, which she attributes to the open-ended ambiguity of the initial theory. Davis draws on the work of sociology of science scholar Murray S. Davis (1971, 1986), who posits that novel scientific theories must be specific enough to be of interest to experts in the field. The theory should also be open and incomplete enough so that scholars in other fields can adjust it to their interests and be encouraged to build on it.

Collins and Chepp (2013) identify six core ideas addressed by intersectional thinking: interrelations between systems of power; the co-construction of knowledge and power; attention to relational processes; the co-construction of knowledge and social relations; the significance of boundaries; and a concern for complexity. Particularly the last three themes are relevant for our study. The co-construction of knowledge and social relations refers to the idea that standpoints and world views—and not just social relations—but also are relational and construct each other (Collins, 1990, 1993). Following Collins and Chepp, we argue that social relations between academics influence the production and diffusion of knowledge. The role of boundaries refers to the construction of group identities; here the authors argue that intersectionality has been successful in transcending disciplinary boundaries within the academy. The concern for complexity connects intersectionality to complexity science, which can be seen as a diffused field or a “collection of work that addresses fundamental questions on the nature of systems and their changes” (Walby, 2007, p. 449). Both intersectionality and complexity science interrogate system complexity, privileging notions such as emergence, the relation between micro-interactions and macro patterns, and nonlinearities.

Building on this extant work on the spread of intersectional thinking, we expect the following: first, the trail of intersectionality's spread will appear as clusters of disciplinary communities loosely connected by scholars working at their margins. Second, communities will be tied together geographically. Third, interpretations of intersectionality will correspond to scholars' disciplinary and geographical locations. Fourth, Crenshaw (1989) will be referenced by nearly all scholars and will be the most central scholar in the network. Fifth, each community will have local central scholars like scientific stars (Merton, 1968) or leaders of invisible colleges (Carley, 1990; Crane, 1972)—likely established scholars within their disciplines.

3 | DATA AND METHODS

The diffusion of intersectionality is a complex process of micro-interactions between scholars referencing and building on each other's work. To reveal regularities and exceptions in this process, we adopt the approach developed by Keuchenius et al. (forthcoming). We construct a network representing the diffusion of intersectionality in terms of citations. We analyze the macroscopic structures of this network and how these relate to geography and disciplines. Consequently, we investigate how intersectionality is used and adapted by individual scholars and communities in the network. This methodology allows us to study the entire trail of intersectionality including its spread among scholars, conceptual journey, and how these two relate.

Our sample includes data on publications in the Scopus database with “intersectionality” in the keywords, abstract or title. We retrieved: author(s), title, journal, publication date, author research areas, keywords, abstract, and references. Although Scopus has broad coverage, it privileges journal articles over books and book chapters (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). We therefore manually included all publications that received more than 30 references from publications in our sample but which were missing from Scopus (see online Appendix A). We also retrieved meta-data on journals' subject areas from Scimago Journal & Country Rank. Our data set contains 3,807 publications authored by 6,098 scholars, published between 1983 and November 2018.

Network analysis enables us to reconstruct intersectionality's journey. Nodes in the network represent authors ($n = 6,098$) who have published on intersectionality. Edges in the network are drawn from new scholars

publishing on intersectionality (edge source) to previously published intersectionality scholars whom they cite (edge target). These directed edges represent influence from earlier to later authors. When publications are coauthored by multiple authors publishing on intersectionality for the first time, we draw edges between them. This generates a diffusion network that includes 6,098 scholars (nodes) and 45,264 edges.

For the analysis of the community structure of this network—the degree to which the network can be split into communities of scholars that predominantly reference each other—we use the Leiden algorithm (Traag et al., 2019). We determine statistical significance by comparing the network's community structure to that of a random network with the same degree distribution (see online Appendix B). Additionally, we analyze the in-degree distribution of the network—the number of incoming edges each scholar obtained—over time and the location of the high in-degree scholars in the network. The in-degree is a proxy for the scholar's importance in diffusing the ideas of intersectionality to their peers. Finally, we investigate the relation between detected communities and their geographical and disciplinary constitution.

To provide an overview of how intersectionality has been adapted by scholars in the network, we use topic modeling followed by the close reading of key publications (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). Topic modeling is an unsupervised machine learning method that identifies topics in large textual data sets, allowing us to identify principal themes and frames in the data (Bail, 2014; DiMaggio et al., 2013). We use a topic modeling technique called Latent Dirichlet Allocation (Blei et al., 2003; Pritchard et al., 2000) that outputs topics—list of words—present in the abstracts in our data set. To investigate the relationship between communities and topics, we examine whether scholars of different communities engage with distinct topics. We have set the model parameter for the number of topics, a contested value in the literature, to 15, but found similar relations between topics and diffusion communities for higher and lower parameter settings (see online Appendix C for more details).

Whereas topic modeling provides a bird's eye view of how different scholarly communities narrate intersectionality, the close reading of key publications helps us to see in granular detail how groups of scholars conceptualize intersectionality. We are aware that our own positions as White female researchers employed by a wealthy institution in a western democracy may influence our readings (Labelle, 2020). To circumvent this bias we picked a random sample of publications from each community, between 25 and 100 depending on the community's size, to explore how authors use intersectionality and refer to key publications and scholars in their community. This manual coding consisted of first selecting passages that reference key figures within communities and their publications, and then, identifying common themes and narratives within these passages.

4 | MAPPING THE STRUCTURE OF INTERSECTIONALITY'S DIFFUSION

Figure 1 shows that the diffusion network has a clear community structure (modularity value = 0.60, p -value < .01 see online Appendix B). Intersectionality did not spread like an oil stain, evenly and outward from a single center. Instead, the trail shows multiple centers and local webs within the 6,098 scholars in our data set, much like the loosely connected arenas theorized in the literature (Carbado et al., 2013). Whereas the network can be categorized into communities, these are not segregated. The three largest communities comprise 42% of all scholars in the giant component, and the largest 12 communities (each size > 100), 86% of all scholars (see Figure 2). Our analysis focuses on these 12 communities.

The in-degree—the number of incoming edges—is very unequally distributed in the network. The most influential scholars—for example, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Leslie McCall, Elizabeth Cole, Lisa Bowleg, Kathy Davis, Nira Yuval-Davis, Ange-Marie Hancock, and Olena Hankivsky—are each cited by 448 up to 2,320 distinct scholars. Most other scholars (90%) receive less than 13 references. Scholars with high in-degree can be seen as hubs in the diffusion of intersectionality since later scholars reference hubs' works in their first intersectionality publication. We find that the hubs are spread across various communities (see Figure 1). In-degree within

The diffusion network of intersectionality

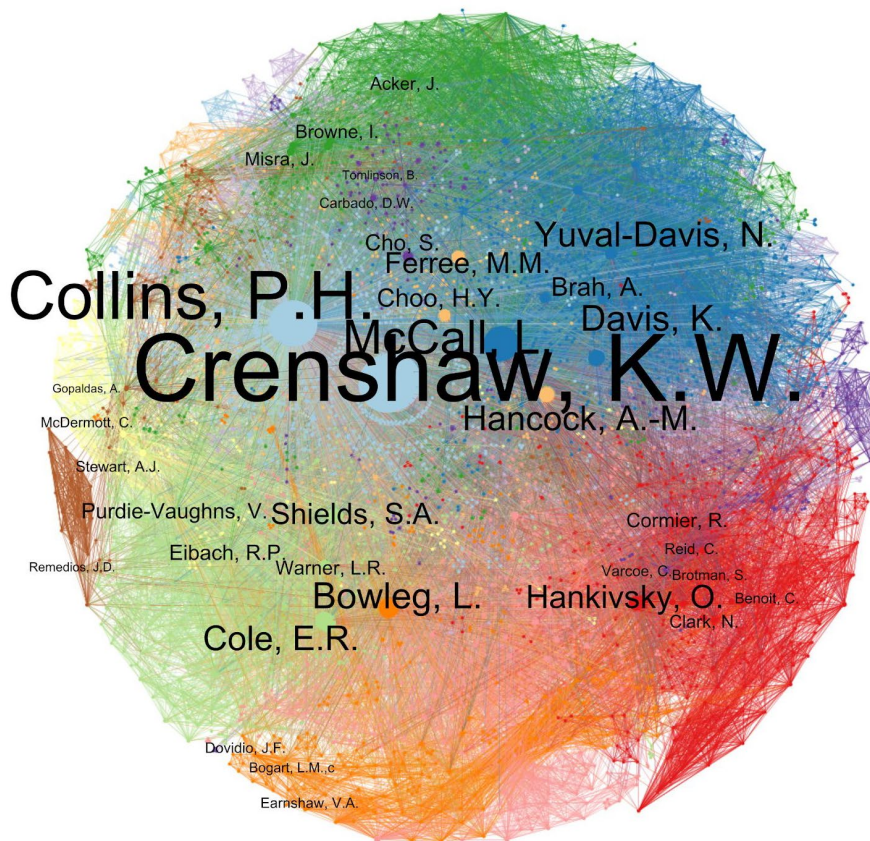


FIGURE 1 The diffusion network of intersectionality. The nodes are scholars who have published on intersectionality. Directed edges are drawn from scholars publishing on intersectionality for the first time (edge source) to published scholars whom they cite (edge target). The nodes are coloured by community. The most important scholars for the diffusion of intersectionality are labelled, with the labels sized according to their in-degree [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

communities is likewise very unequally distributed. Most communities contain one or several hubs (e.g., Bowleg in community 7, Olena Hankivsky in community 5) cited by between 25% and 58% of community members.

While all communities grow exponentially, the speed and timing of their growth differ (Figure 3). Community 0, a U.S.-centered community around Crenshaw and Hill Collins, grows first; community 2, located in psychology, only takes off after 2005. In this growth, the hubs are often forerunners in their respective communities (Figure 4).

Given their central location and timing, we can view these hubs as scientific opinion leaders in a two-step flow of communication (Katz, 1957). Innovations first spread to a small number of opinion leaders who in turn diffuse it to their followers. Similar leading roles exist in the diffusion of scientific innovations (Carley, 1990; Crane, 1972). But before turning to this, we ask: how do community structures in the diffusion network relate to geography and disciplines?

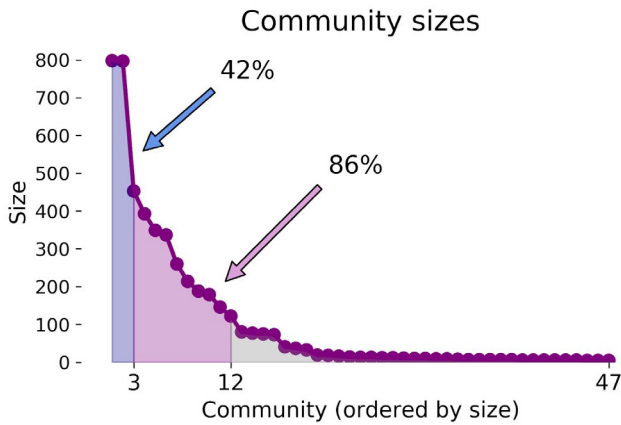


FIGURE 2 Distribution of community size in the diffusion network, with a small number of large communities and a large number of small communities. The largest 3 and 12 communities respectively contain 42% and 86% of all scholars in the giant component of the diffusion network [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Growth and share of communities over time

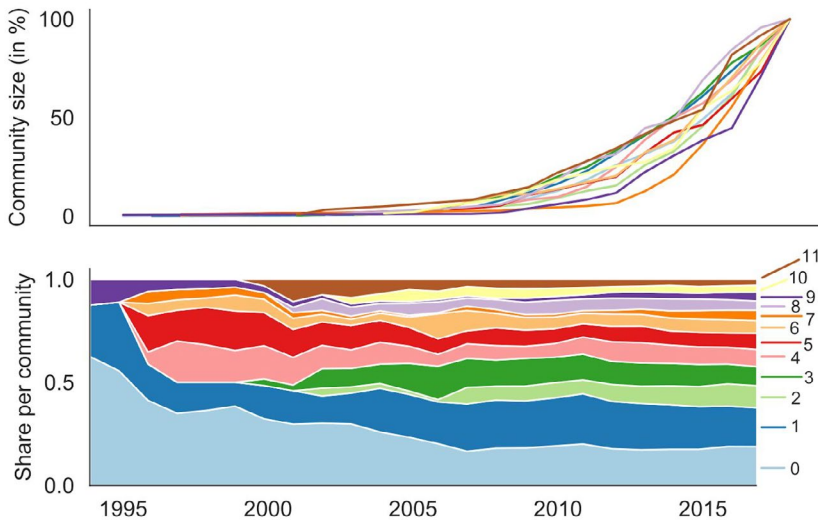


FIGURE 3 Temporal evolution of the largest 12 communities. The top figure shows the communities' growth curves, most of which are exponential. The bottom figure shows each community's share of total scholars at different points in time. Some communities (0 and 1) emerged early, others (2, 3 and 10) later [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

5 | THE ROLE OF GEOGRAPHY AND DISCIPLINES

The scholarly communities in the diffusion network of intersectionality are to some extent informed by geography (Figure 5). Communities 1 and 3, for example, are dominated by scholars based respectively in continental Europe and the United Kingdom. This is in contrast to all other communities, in which the vast majority of scholars—from 57% in community 5 to 88% in community 10—are based in the United States. This overview suggests that while

Growth of communities and indegree of researchers over time

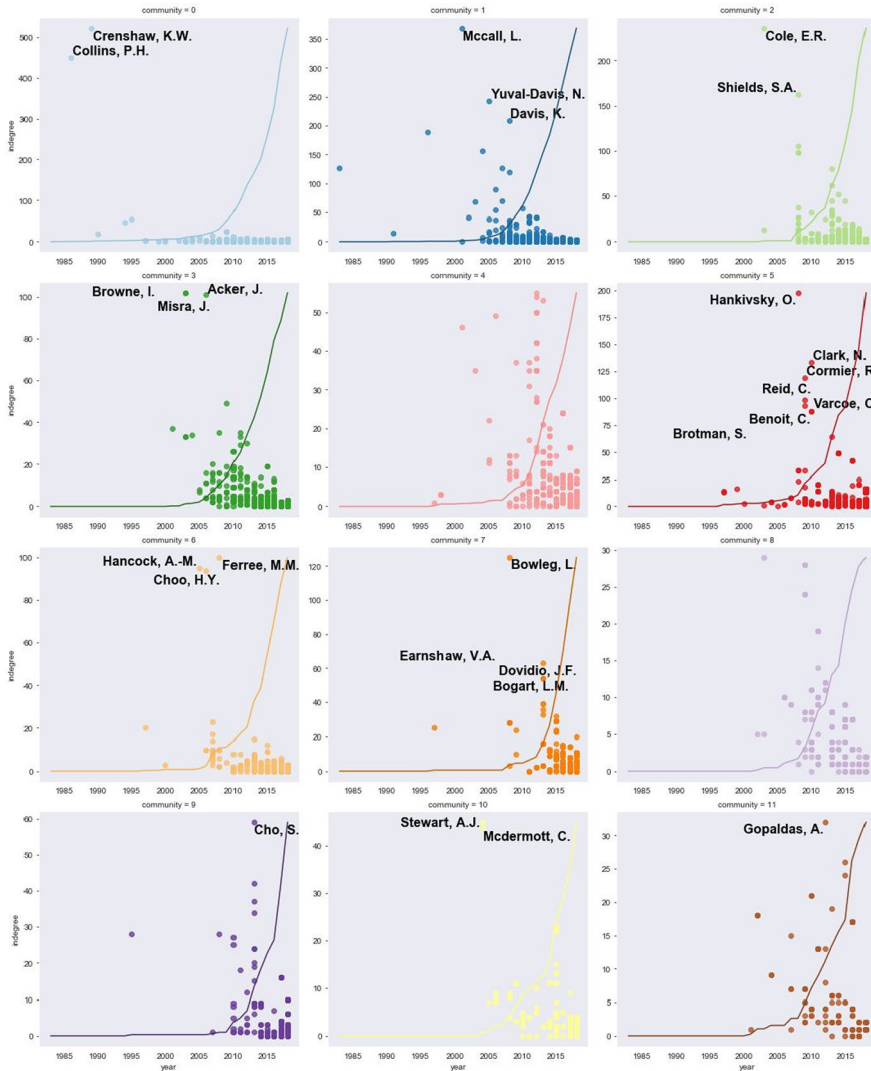


FIGURE 4 The growth (line) and local—within community—in-degree of researchers (scatter) in each community over time. The hidden y-axis for growth runs from 0% to 100%. Local hubs (scholars referenced by more than 25% of their community) are labelled. Most communities have at least one hub, among the first in the community to publish on intersectionality [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

geography has influenced the diffusion of intersectionality, it is far from the only compass. The data do not present neatly demarcated geographical communities.

How do disciplines tie scholars together? Cho et al. (2013) argue that institutional forces pull scholars toward their respective academic disciplines, subjecting intersectionality to established power structures and research practices, while marginalized scholars often remain skeptical of integrating mainstream methods and theories into their intersectional research. The latter act as centripetal forces, rendering the field a more connected and cohesive whole. Academic disciplines have been identified as the main foci around which the work of intersectionality scholars is organized. In our data and diffusion network, this would mean that communities are organized around disciplines, with scholars on the margins forming ties between communities.

Communities' geographies

georegion	AF	AS	EU	NA	OC	SA	UK	Total
community								
0	2.8%	2.1%	6.9%	75.2%	1.4%	1.6%	10.0%	100 %
1	1.3%	4.6%	35.9%	25.0%	6.4%	2.0%	24.9%	100 %
2	0.9%	0.7%	5.2%	86.5%	4.7%	0.0%	2.0%	100 %
3	2.1%	7.3%	21.3%	36.9%	8.1%	1.0%	23.4%	100 %
4	0.0%	1.5%	7.3%	82.3%	4.1%	0.3%	4.7%	100 %
5	4.9%	10.7%	13.4%	57.3%	3.4%	1.8%	8.5%	100 %
6	0.4%	0.4%	11.3%	79.8%	2.7%	0.8%	4.7%	100 %
7	2.9%	0.5%	1.4%	84.7%	4.3%	2.4%	3.8%	100 %
8	0.0%	4.4%	11.6%	68.0%	9.9%	0.0%	6.1%	100 %
9	1.1%	0.0%	7.5%	76.4%	7.5%	0.0%	7.5%	100 %
10	0.0%	2.1%	2.8%	88.0%	0.7%	0.0%	6.3%	100 %
11	0.0%	6.7%	10.9%	68.9%	1.7%	0.0%	11.8%	100 %

FIGURE 5 Geography of diffusion communities. Each cell presents the percentage of scholars (row) based in this geographical area (column). Significantly high or low column cells values are coloured green (high) or pink (low), based on a two-sided z-test with $\alpha = .05$. The geographical areas are Africa (AF), Asia (AS), Europe (EU), North America (NA), Oceania (OC), South America (SA) and the UK separately. Values are based on the location of scholars' current institution, available in Scopus [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Figures 6 and 7 visualize the disciplinary embedding of the communities. On the one hand, some communities stand out in terms of their research disciplines. For example, 22 and 16% of scholars in community 7 publish in "Public Health, Environmental and Occupational Health" and "Health Social Science" journals, respectively. Scholars of community 11 are unique in publishing on intersectionality within business, econometrics, and

Communities' main research areas

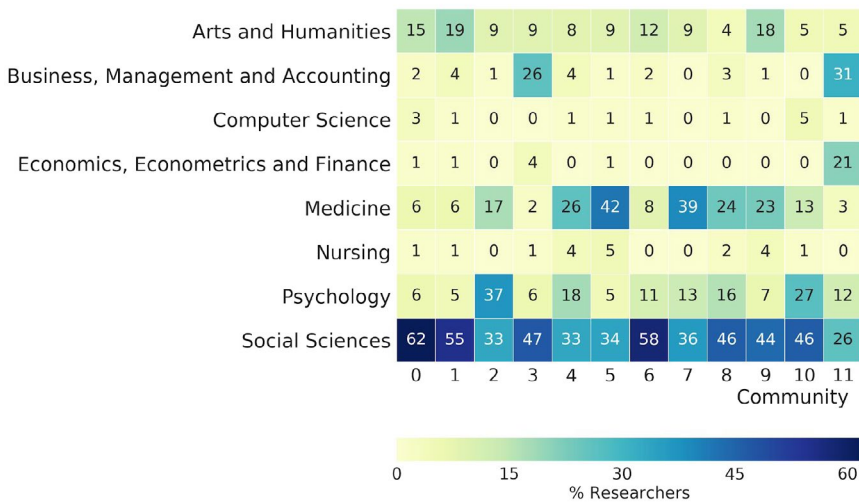


FIGURE 6 Main research areas of the communities. Each cell value and colour represents the percentage of researchers of that community active in a particular research area (e.g., 26% of researchers in community 3 published in business, management and accounting). The figure only contains research fields for which at least one community significantly deviates from the overall network (two-sided z-test) and which involve at least 5% of the community's scholars [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

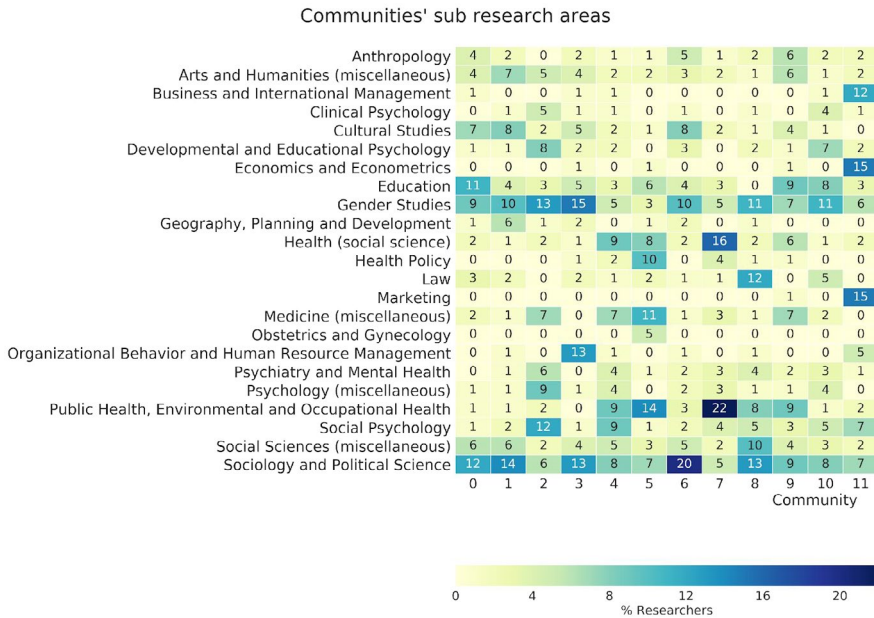


FIGURE 7 Sub-areas of research for the communities. Each cell value and colour represents the percentage of researchers of that community active in a particular subfield (e.g., 22% of researchers in community 7 published in public health, environmental and occupational health). The figure only contains research fields for which at least one community significantly deviates from the overall network (two-sided z-test) and which involve at least 5% of the community's scholars [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

marketing. On the other hand, some communities are very alike in their disciplinary focus yet remain separate in the diffusion network, such as the two largest communities (community 0 and 1).

These results allow for many more detailed observations, but the key take away is that disciplinary forces have indeed shaped the spread of intersectionality but, like geography, cannot fully account for the observed community patterns. To better understand how diffusion communities emerged, we delve deeper into how scholars in these communities narrate intersectionality.

6 | COMMUNITY-SPECIFIC ADAPTATIONS

Now that we established the structural patterns of intersectionality's spread we explore its conceptual journey. Building on the community structure, we study how scholars in these communities understand and apply intersectionality. To do so, we turn to the content of their publications. Aided by topic modeling, we find the intersectionality literature covering topics ranging from migration to domestic violence and stigmatization (see online Appendix C). Figure 8 shows the relation between the diffusion communities and the topics they write about, illustrating differences in the communities' research narratives and interests. For example, community 7 is interested in "stigmatization" (topic 2), which hardly registers in other communities. Community 2, consisting mostly of social psychologists, focuses on "multiple identities" and "sexual orientation" (topics 11 and 12).

Although the distribution of topics provides general insight into the interests of scholars in the various diffusion communities, it does not yield granular understanding of how intersectionality is interpreted and narrated. We therefore describe in more detail discussions within the network's three largest communities, which we have labeled "The Black Feminist Core," "Categorically Extended Intersectionality," and "The Intersectional Psychologists." Each community has a distinct understanding of intersectionality. For the predominantly

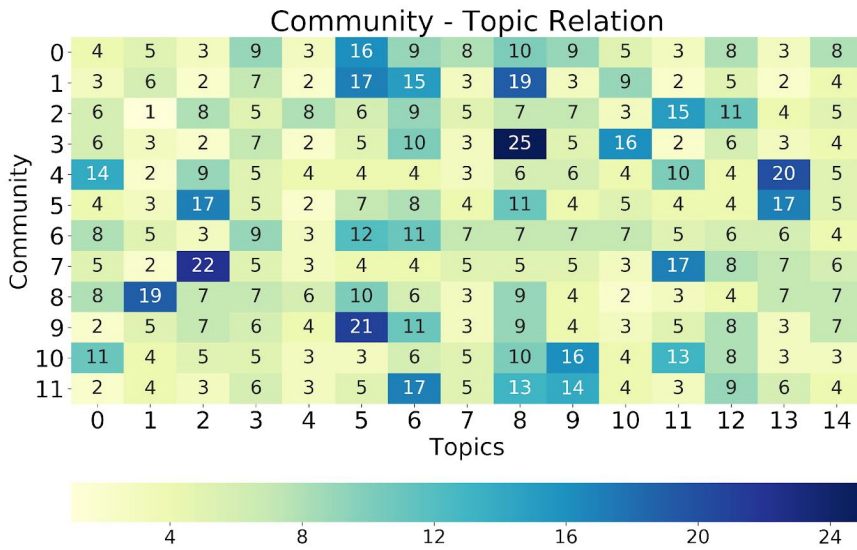


FIGURE 8 Topics (columns) that the members of communities (rows) cover in their publications. Each cell value and colour represents the percentage of a community's researchers addressing the topic (e.g., 21% of researchers in community 2 address topic 11, sexual identity and orientation) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

U.S.-based scholars of the “Black Feminist Core,” improving the lives of Black women is central to the intersectional project. Scholars within the “Categorically Extended Intersectionality” community—largely based in continental Europe and the United Kingdom—focus on interdisciplinary women's studies and treat intersectionality as an analytical framework and work-in-progress. They bring in more categories than race and gender and tend to focus on ethnicity and migration background rather than race. Finally, “The Intersectional Psychologists” focus on the methodological questions of intersectional research in individual psychology.

6.1 | Community 0: The Black Feminist Core

This community (798 scholars) is centered around the founders of intersectionality: Crenshaw and Hill Collins. Although the three most cited works in this community are canonical and cited by scholars in other communities too, they are particularly frequently referenced by scholars in community 0 (see online Appendix D). Hill Collins' book *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) is referenced by 42% and Crenshaw (1989) by 33% of scholars in Community 0. Surprisingly, only a third cite Crenshaw (1989), which many reviews consider to be *the* conceptual birth of intersectionality. Crenshaw (1991) is referenced by 30% of the scholars. Crenshaw's articles are located in law and closely related to critical race theory.

Angela Harris, part of the inner circle of critical race studies scholars who gave birth to intersectionality, argues that the voices of Black women are too often ignored in feminist and legal theory and that the gender essentialism in much feminist theory perpetuates the problem. In her critique of second wave feminists espousing a putative “women's experience” (Harris, 1990, p. 588), Harris builds on the work of the American writer, feminist, and civil rights activist Audre Lorde (1984). Reflecting on the field in her foreword to *Critical Race Theory* edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001), Harris recalls a 1989 workshop attended by Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams. Since then, critical race theory has “exploded from a narrow subspecialty of jurisprudence... of interest to academic lawyers into a literature” spanning departments (2001, p. xx).

Characteristic of this community is the view that intersectionality should be used to improve the lives of Black women. The majority of publications in this community (75%) are written by North American scholars and focus on the U.S. experience. A strong activist tone suffuses the work of this community, whether it is addressing its research subject of marginalized Black women or the current and future direction of intersectionality. In their edited volume, Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth Enid Zambrana treat intersectionality as “a systematic approach to understanding human life and behaviour that is rooted in the experiences and struggles of marginalized people” (2009, p. 4). Their mission is to: (1) rethink curricula and promote institutional change in higher education, (2) apply knowledge to create a society in which all voices are heard, and (3) advocate for public policies that are responsive to multiple voices (2009, p. 2). Researchers in this community are generally critical about using intersectionality for pursuits other than empowering Black women (Collins & Chepp, 2013). In this community, intersectionality is conceptualized as tool to unveil and change systems of oppression, for marginalized Black women in particular.

6.2 | Community 1: Categorically Extended Intersectionality

The second largest community, consisting of 797 scholars, reveals how intersectionality has crossed the Atlantic; it includes, in both absolute and relative terms, the highest number of scholars based in continental Europe and the United Kingdom (see Figure 5). The community's main contribution is applying intersectionality to categories beyond race and gender. Its members thereby treat intersectionality as an analytical framework that is not specific to Black women *per se*.

The central figures in this community are sociologists: McCall (based in the United States), Kathy Davis (based in the Netherlands), and Nira Yuval-Davis (based in the United Kingdom). Their geographical location influences how they frame and apply intersectionality: while scholars based in the United States and the United Kingdom largely focus on race, those based in continental Europe generally focus on ethnicity, applying the intersectional lens to individuals with migration or multiethnic backgrounds (Prins, 2006). Scholars in this community also introduce new disciplinary approaches from political science (e.g., Verloo, 2006), psychology (e.g., Staunæs, 2003), and geography (e.g., Valentine, 2007).

Many European and U.K.-based scholars apply intersectionality to a wider set of categories. Valentine (2007), for instance, brings in ability, arguing that theories of intersectionality overestimate the ability of individuals to create their own lives. Verloo (2006) analyses how categories are represented in policies and how these are linked to inequality in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and class; she uses intersectionality to show that a one-size-fits-all approach to multiple discrimination, based on the assumption of the sameness of social categories, is inadequate. U.K.-based scholars (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2006) in this cluster working in the tradition of Crenshaw and Collins see potential for intersectionality in the praxis of feminism and see opportunities for global feminism in the context of global threats.

U.S.-based authors in this cluster are concerned with what intersectionality is and/or does. While Cho et al. (2013) focus on collaboration, Nash (2008) is more critical. Drawing on critical race legal scholars such as Harris, Crenshaw, and Matsuda central in the “Black Feminist Core,” Nash argues that intersectionality aims to disrupt cumulative approaches to identity. “Re-considering intersectionality enables activists to ask under what conditions organizing as ‘women’ or ‘blacks’ or ‘Black women’ makes sense, under what conditions temporary coalition-building makes sense” (Nash, 2008, p. 4). Nash (2016) also criticizes scholars in this community for rereading intersectionality's inaugural text and rewriting intersectionality as a feminist contribution driven by disciplinary politics.

Interestingly, Nash (2008) and Bilge (2013)—the most ardent critics of the broad appropriation of intersectionality—are part of this community that widens intersectionality's scope. This shows that many scholars are taking notice of their criticisms by citing them. This makes Nash and Bilge, perhaps to their own discomfort, part of this diffusion community. Diffusion communities are far from homogeneous academic communities that think alike; their members may indeed be unaware of being part of the clique. Nevertheless, diffusion communities lay bare

the trail of how intersectionality has spread. Nash, alongside other high in-degree scholars, has been crucial in diffusing and narrating intersectionality to this community.

6.3 | Community 2: The Intersectional Psychologists

This community (453 scholars) revolves around intersectionality in psychology. Scholars publish predominantly in the field of psychology including its subfields social psychology and developmental and educational psychology. A key objective is to develop tools to study intersectionality empirically at both the individual and structural levels. "Sexual identity" and "orientation" are among its leading research topics (topic 11). The journal *Sex Roles* is the community's preferred outlet, publishing more than half of its top 15 publications and two special issues on intersectionality edited by Stephanie Shields (2008) and Parent et al. (2013). The paper "Intersectionality and research in psychology" by Elizabeth R. Cole (2009) is referenced by almost half (46%) of the community's members, making Cole and Shields its principal hubs.

As psychology largely focuses on individuals and the intersectional lens challenges the discipline's quantitative and empirical orientation, scholars in this community frequently discuss methodological questions. How, for example, can regression analysis be combined with an intersectional approach? Bowleg notes that "the positivist paradigm that undergirds much (but not all) quantitative research appears to be orthogonal to the complexities of intersectionality" (2008, p. 317). Several highly cited publications offer "best practices" for applying intersectionality to psychological research (e.g., Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Warner, 2008). Members of this community hold fewer meta-discussions about the origins, state and purpose of intersectionality, focusing instead on operationalizing the concept for empirical psychological research.

The detailed descriptions of the largest three communities demonstrate that diffusion communities closely relate to specific interpretations of intersectionality. These interpretations presumably developed in diverging directions and in conjunction with the growth of the communities. To gain a deeper understanding of this interpretation process we take a closer look at the role of communities' hubs.

7 | THE EMERGENCE OF FIGUREHEADS

What is the role of hubs and the two-step flow of communication in the diffusion and interpretation of intersectionality? The latter identifies two phases in the diffusion of new ideas, where the innovation first spreads to opinion leaders and thereafter to their followers. To examine this leading role, we focus on the communities with the most prominent hubs (see Figure 9) in different disciplines: McCall, Davis, and Yuval-Davis in community 1 (sociology); Elizabeth R. Cole and Stephanie Shields in community 2 (psychology); Olena Hankivsky in community 5 (public policy); and Lisa Bowleg in community 7 (psychology). We explore how Collins, Crenshaw, and these hubs are referenced and how their work is narrated based on the coding of a significant number of publications with references to these scholars (Figure 9).

While Collins and Crenshaw are often referenced when authors write about the origins of intersectionality or are providing a definition of the term, far from every new scholar references Crenshaw or Collins (see online Appendix D). Different communities also refer to specific contributions by Collins or Crenshaw which speak to their research interests. For example, community 7 references Collins almost exclusively in relation to stigmatization, particularly HIV-related stigma, which is the community's main research topic: "For midlife and older Black women, manifestations of HIV-related stigma intersected with and was compounded by various forms of inequality rendered through ageism, racism, and sexism, what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) has described as a matrix of oppression" (Sangaramoorthy et al., 2017, p. 1,338). Hubs are often credited for their translation work. For instance, Hankivsky is accredited for introducing intersectionality to health research and public policy, the main interest of

Communities hubs

community	name	nr. edges from community members	% edges from community members	nr. citations analyzed
1	McCall, L.	369	46%	55
	Yuval-Davis, N.	243	30%	39
	Davis, K.	209	26%	40
2	Cole, E.R.	236	52%	96
	Shields, S.A.	162	36%	55
5	Hankivsky, O.	198	59%	47
	Clark, N.	133	39%	
	Cormier, R.	119	35%	
	Reid, C.	98	29%	
	Benoit, C.	93	28%	
	Brotman, S.	88	26%	
	Varcoe, C.	88	26%	
	Bowleg, L.	125	58%	27
7	Earnshaw, V.A.	63	29%	
	Bogart, L.M.,c	54	25%	
	Dovidio, J.F.	54	25%	

FIGURE 9 Hubs in communities 1, 2, 5 and 7, and the number and percentage of first-time intersectionality scholars in their community who reference them. The last column indicates how many community citations to the hub we analysed [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

community 5: "The paradigm of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1994[1991]), proposed in the field of women's health, has been highly useful in understanding the interplay between systems of power and oppression on the structural level (Hankivsky et al., 2010)" (Mora-Rios et al., 2016, p. 698).¹

Similarly, Cole—community 2's hub—is explicitly praised for her work in translating intersectionality for the field of psychology:

The construct of intersectionality has been used extensively by feminists, queer theorists, and critical race theorists; however, it has been only recently that scholars within our own fields of counselling and psychology have pointed to intersectionality as a critical analytic tool in understanding the experiences and consequences of holding membership in multiple social identity categories (Cole, 2009; Conwill, 2010) ... Cole (2009) has provided an excellent guide for how to integrate the rubric of intersectionality into psychological research. Cole also highlighted the bias in the literature on intersectionality toward the investigation of those who experience multiple dimensions of disadvantage.

(Smith, & Shin, 2015, p. 1462)²

This last passage also reveals a process of academic positioning, identifying the author and reader as part of "our field of counselling and psychology."

Sometimes Crenshaw and Collins are no longer referenced but eclipsed by the community hub:

The related concept of intersectionality, which suggests that social categories and identities are not independent but rather multidimensional and linked to structural inequalities (Bowleg et al., 2013), provides a useful reference in understanding how layered stigma works. However, while theory and research highlight the importance of understanding layered stigmas and intersectionality in relation to HIV vulnerability among BMSM, these factors have been largely overlooked in most quantitative research.

(Wilson et al., 2016)³

Our exploration of the role of community hubs shows that these scholars are not only introducing their peers to the idea of intersectionality, but also translating the concept in ways that make it relevant to their particular disciplines, fields, and subfields. Scholars who reference these leading scholars reinforce their role as hubs by creating narratives that credit them this role. Hubs thus seem to function as scientific opinion leaders or focal points (Collins, 1983) in a chaotic academic landscape that helps stabilize the concept of intersectionality. In extreme cases, we find that the origins of intersectionality have been forgotten as later references to the concept only cite these hubs, who become figureheads for intersectionality in their own communities. This aligns with what Cho et al. (2013) describe as the centrifugal process in the diffusion of intersectionality.

8 | CONCLUSION

Thirty years after its coinage, intersectionality has entered most disciplines that study people in some way. While there is no shortage of critical interventions that question the competing interpretations of what intersectionality is, does, or should be, our study—to the best of our knowledge—is the first systematic empirical attempt to combine quantitative and qualitative methods and a complex systems approach to reconstruct the macro and micro dimensions of intersectionality's spread through the academic literature.

In contrast to extant genealogies of intersectionality that tend to focus on highly cited works and those that are central to specific circles (for an exception in political science see Mügge et al., 2018), our study draws on all ($n = 3,807$) works available on Scopus that include the word intersectionality in the abstract, keywords, or title. Based on the extant literature, we formulated five expectations: (1) the trail of intersectionality's spread will resemble clusters of disciplinary communities; (2) communities will be tied together geographically; (3) scholars' interpretations of intersectionality will correspond to their geographical and disciplinary locations; (4) Crenshaw (1989) will be the most referenced work; and (5) each community will have its own scientific star.

Our findings reveal that intersectionality's diffusion trail is made up of highly connected webs within the 6,098 scholars in our data set. Within each of these communities, we find a few central and highly referenced scholars—whom we have referred to as “hubs”—who were crucial in introducing the concept to their peers. While these communities are oriented around disciplines—and to some extent, geography—our analysis suggests that they mostly form around specific narratives of intersectionality. For example, a “Black Feminist Core” of scholars based in the U.S. considers intersectionality primarily as a tool to empower Black women, while another large community made up primarily of psychologists seeks to operationalize intersectionality for psychological research on identity. The hubs are influential in creating these narratives of intersectionality for their respective communities, while their roles are recognized and reinforced by other scholars in the community. For example, scholars in the community around Hankivsky credit her for “bringing intersectionality to the field of women's health research.” While Crenshaw has the most central position in the overall diffusion network, acknowledged for both coining and defining intersectionality, she is not consistently referenced. At times intersectionality is introduced with a reference to the community's local hub, transforming the hub into a figurehead of intersectionality for this community. Previous studies underline the importance of academic stars or opinion leaders in the diffusion of ideas due to their status and reach (Carley, 1990; Crane, 1972; Price, 1963). Our study reveals that these hubs *also* translate ideas in ways that make sense to their surroundings. Scholars citing these hubs reinforce these new narratives. This way, hubs are credited for their role as translators, and references to the original works in some cases disappear.

The diffusion pattern of intersectionality supports broader findings from the sociology of knowledge, particularly how researchers' social relations inform the knowledge they produce (Collins & Chepp, 2013). Academics self-organize into social circles (Crane, 1972) or epistemic communities (Knorr Cetina, 1981) that uphold particular stories and knowledge claims. New scientific theories are transformed and redeployed as they traverse academic landscapes (Kaiser, 2009; Keuchenius et al., in press). Generally, scholars in various research communities will

agree on the importance of the novel theory, but will—often not knowingly—disagree on the particular content (Kuhn, 1970, p. 44; Gilbert et al., 1984). In that light, intersectionality's journey is no exception. Unlike Davis (2008), who ascribes the success of intersectionality to its ambiguous and open-ended nature, we suggest that the multiplicity of perspectives that developed during intersectionality's spread is a precondition and natural consequence of a novel idea that travels far. What is unique to intersectionality, is the—often heated and political—contestation that accompanied the transformations of the concept.

Our analysis focused on the most notable patterns in the diffusion network of intersectionality—its community structure and the existence and role of local hubs—which correspond to the centrifugal spreading process of intersectionality. While the 3,807 publications in Scopus that contain the word “intersectionality” in the title, abstract, or keywords represent the visible “elite” within intersectionality studies, we expect that there are many more works produced by scholars of color and other marginalized groups underrepresented and excluded in academia (Cho et al., 2013). Although we did not pursue the in-depth analysis of centripetal actors, the diffusion network detected scholars working on the margins of communities and at times bridging them. Future research will be needed to examine their role in the production and diffusion of knowledge. Additionally, we identify a novel research avenue on the emergence of hubs. We analyzed their leading role, but the question remains why certain scholars—and not others—acquire a central network position. Finally, our complex systems approach—which focuses on the emergence of macroscopic patterns rooted in microscopic events and interactions—does not explicitly capture power imbalances and racialized hierarchies that influence knowledge production and diffusion. Nevertheless, macro structures including power inequalities and institutional incentives feed back into individual actions and interactions. We hope that our work will inspire scholars to explore methods able to incorporate such feedback loops into systematic empirical research on intersectionality.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in figshare at <https://doi.org/10.21942/uva.12155982>.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This citation is one example of numerous quotes in our sample that references Hankivsky in this manner in community 5. We analyzed a random selection of 25 publications, which contained 47 references to Hankivsky.
- ² Similar to the previous Hankivsky quote, this citation is an illustration. The analysis is based on 90 randomly selected publications by scholars of community 2, which include 96 references to Cole.
- ³ This citations illustrates how Bowleg is referenced alongside a definition of intersectionality, without citing Collins or Crenshaw. Our data shows the same phenomenon for other hubs.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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