

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Outside the Scope: Tracing the Impacts of Intersectionality's Shift from the Academic to the Public

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How has intersectionality—a term rooted in Black feminist theory and finally coined in the late 80s by Black feminist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw—become a part of popular discourse in the media decades after it was first introduced in legal theory? What began as a concept and theory closely tied to Black feminism is being used to describe not only the struggles faced by Black women, but also the struggles of other marginalized groups. Who were some of the actors that began to transition intersectionality from the pages of legal theory into the public sphere? Through three case studies: an episode of the podcast *#IntersectionalityMatters* by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the rise of “intersectionality” in *Teen Vogue*, and blog posts from the Crunk Feminist Collective, some of the movement of intersectionality from the academic to the public. Knowing how the term moved and who moved it are imperative to understanding the current stakes of intersectionality in American politics.

How has intersectionality—a term coined in the late 80s by Black feminist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw—become a part of popular discourse in the media decades after it was first introduced? What began as a concept and theory closely tied to Black feminism is being used to describe not only the struggles faced by Black women but also of other individuals with two or more marginalized identities. The understanding of intersectionality outside of Black feminist circles is a direct result of several catalysts, including Black feminists and activists. These activists worked to move intersectionality from the academic sphere into the public knowledge through a variety of channels, including online digital media throughout the late 20th and early 21st century. The accessibility of digital media through the Internet plays a role in why intersectionality is widely understood in the present.

In 1989, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw published “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. The intersectional framework outlined by Crenshaw works through race and gender discrimination legal cases to show examples of when the courts viewed Black women either through only a racial lens or a gendered lens. The judicial system ultimately failed to comprehend Black women’s issues because they did not attempt to see them through both lenses and recognize that they are impacted by a unique variety of factors. Crenshaw’s article further explains the importance of the need for a combined approach with the following metaphor:

...Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways and that the contradiction arises from our assumptions that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional. Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it

can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.

Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” from the above metaphor.

How did this term move from the pages of late 80s legal theory to become a widely used concept within communities of marginalized individuals who face two or more “avenues” of discrimination? Black feminist scholars, like Crenshaw, created and continued to engage with the term outside of their academic circles in online digital media, such as in blogs, online opinion articles, and podcasts. Although Crenshaw’s original work was based in law, intersectionality should and could be applied in several areas of life, such as education, politics, sports, and popular culture. In 1991, Crenshaw published a second legal review piece entitled “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” that applies an intersectional framework into sexual and domestic violence in the United States. This companion piece continued to evolve intersectionality beyond Black women and solely racial and gendered lenses. Different races, as well as class, were explored in this article. Through examples that outline different aspects of intersectionality, Crenshaw continues to reveal the important aspects of culture and identity that intersectionality works to take into consideration when understanding those who have multiple marginalized identities.

Overall, there has been a substantial increase in the public’s awareness of intersectionality. As shown in Figure 1, the rise in the use of intersectionality began to take off in the 21st century, a couple decades after Crenshaw first coined the term. Some of the spread of the concept and term from the academic sphere to the general public can be traced back through the rise and widespread use of digital media in the late 20th and early 21st century. My analysis will focus on *The Crunk Feminist Collection* and *Teen*

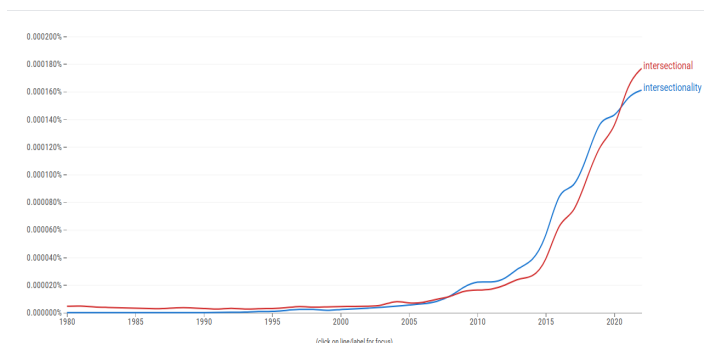


Fig. 1 | Google Ngram of the terms "Intersectionality" and "Intersectional", 1980-2025. Captured by the author.

Vogue as sites of intersectionality in the digital media, as well as Crenshaw's own continued contributions to the spread of intersectionality. Crenshaw is active in the digital space through her organization the African American Policy Forum and their podcast *#IntersectionalityMatters*, which will serve as the final point of my analysis. Finally, my analysis will explain the stakes of understanding the digital media's role in promoting intersectionality, especially in context with the present political realities in the United States surrounding education and diversity, equity, and conclusion.

Literature Review: Defining Intersectionality

And to boot, there was no name for this problem. And we all know that, where there's no name for a problem, you can't see a problem, and when you can't see a problem, you pretty much can't solve it.

-Kimberlé Crenshaw, "The Urgency of Intersectionality"

One of the biggest results of intersectionality's move from the academic to the public as a result of digital media platforms is the wide array of definitions and understandings of what "intersectionality" actually is. In "Mapping the Margins" and "Demarginalizing the Intersection," Crenshaw defined intersectionality as a theory that addressed the "gap" in anti-discrimination law. For my paper, which seeks to understand intersectionality outside the scope of the law, I will use the following definition from scholar Kathy Davis. Their research focuses on how intersectionality has become a "buzzword," which is a similar claim in my research, so I chose their definition:

'Intersectionality' refers to the interaction between gender, race, [class,] and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power.

Intersectionality can be both a practice and way of thinking, as well as a way to describe someone or something's approach towards something (i.e. intersectional thought, intersectional feminist). The definition above is not Crenshaw's, but I appreciate how this definition encompasses the many areas of life in which these interactions can occur yet puts the original lenses on their own. I insert "class" into this definition because both of Crenshaw's legal publications address the "gap" between race and gendered experiences for Black women and speak to how class also plays a role in the lived experiences of Black women.

While I have chosen a definition above that best serves the premises of my work, the ambiguity of intersectionality is both a

strength and a weakness of the theory. Its wide interpretation has been used by others who "miss the mark" on what intersectionality ultimately hopes to achieve. For example, research exploring intersectionality in the digital feminist knowledge found that some people confuse "intersectionality" with a "diversity" framework, which seeks to "[privilege] the inclusion and recognition of difference." Below is a chart that summarizes research findings done by Akane Kanai, a scholar in Australia, who sought to understand the many ways by which individuals who self-identified as female scholars came to understand what intersectionality was:

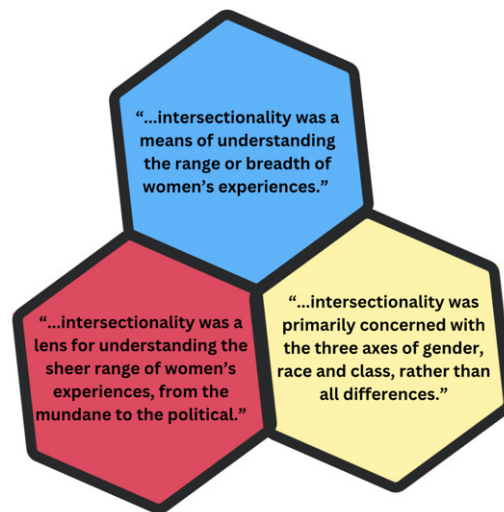


Fig. 2 | Sample interpretations of "Intersectionality". Created by the author.

As demonstrated by the visual above, there is much variance in the definitions outlined above. A result of intersectionality's movement is revealed, showing the theory has begun to take new shape and meanings. Much like the game of "Telephone," the more avenues that an idea, term, or concept travels—in this case, intersectionality—means that more and more people can engage with it. At the same time, the multitude of channels leads the idea, concept, and term further and further away from the original source. This allows for multiple instances of other people to twist, stray, and even change the original meaning of an idea, term, or concept. An example of this is not only seen in the diagram above, but most notably with intersectionality's ties to critical race theory and its attack by the "right" in American politics. Although my research will not cover the political right's construed views of "intersectionality," it is a point that is deserving of research and consideration. This is especially important and timely, as the United States begins the second term presidency under Donald J. Trump. At the same time, straying from the original source allows for others to expand upon and build the theory into something more than it was. The writers of the Crunk Feminist Collective, *Teen Vogue*, and even Crenshaw herself have continued to expand intersectionality's applications outside the scope of the law.

The Origins of Intersectionality

"She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both."

-Anna Julia Cooper, "The Status of Woman in America"

Crenshaw is credited with coining the term intersectionality, but she was not the first Black woman to think about how race,

gender, class, and sometimes sexuality, all work together to create the lived experiences—both positive and negative—of Black women in America. Although Crenshaw's work in "Demarginalizing the Intersection" and in her second legal review article, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," are widely credited with coining the concept and idea of intersectionality, Black feminists, such as Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Beale, and Angela Davis spoke and wrote about intersectionality.

200 years prior to Crenshaw coining the term, Sojourner Truth was pioneering for intersectional thought in American society. Her speech "Aren't I a Woman" can and should be seen as an early example of how an intersectional approach was necessary to understanding Black women's lived experiences. Anna Julia Cooper is another early thinker of intersectional thought. Her essay, "The Status of Woman in America," shares observations surrounding the many ways women have progressed in the shifting American landscape, paying respect to Black women's position in overcoming both racial and gender barriers. A few other contributors to intersectional thought include (but are not limited to) Frances Beale and her "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" (1970) and Audre Lorde, who added sexuality into her intersectional thought in the late 20th century.

In 1977, a group of Black feminists led by Demita Frazier, Beverly Smith, and Barbara Smith published the "Combahee River Collective Statement", which is seen as an integral text in intersectionality. The statement details the collective's commitment to "...struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppressions." They understood that many of these aforementioned types of oppression are "interlocking," creating the lived experiences of Black women.

In the 1980s, Angela Davis published *Women, Race, and Class*, which explores intersectional questions within the context of the women's rights movement. bell hooks published *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, the first of several books detailing contemporary Black feminism. Her title is an ode to Sojourner Truth's speech. In 1982, scholars Patricia Bell-Scott, Gloria T. Hull, and Barbara Smith created an anthology of essays in Black Women's Studies known as *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Their collection, which also included the aforementioned "Combahee River Collective Statement," encouraged the path towards intersectionality by calling for a focus on "multilayered oppressions" of Black women through an emphasis on Black women's studies. In the introduction of their work, Hull and Smith speak about "the politics of Black women," urging for the understanding of the "general political situation of Afro-American women" and "the necessity for Black women's studies to be feminist, radical, and analytical." Their work explored Black women in relation to feminism and anti-racism and highlighted the efforts of Black women in the social sciences, natural sciences, and literature. *But Some of Us* also suggested further reading on Black women's work in music, photography, and other archival materials from the 19th and 20th centuries.

In the opening lines of "Demarginalizing," Crenshaw makes a note stating that she hopes to use *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us* as a "point of departure." She hopes to build off of and contribute to the canon of works on intersectionality featured in the anthology. Consequently, Crenshaw

analyzes three court cases: *DeGraffenreid v General Motors*, *Moore v Hughes Helicopter*, and *Payne v Travenol* to show what is at stake with the absence of the intersectionality being recognized in the law. In the *DeGraffenreid* suit, five Black women sued General Motors because their seniority system "perpetuated the effects of past discrimination against Black women." The courts ruled in favor of General Motors because the law did not recognize Black women as a protected class, only race and sex separately. As a result, Black women could not claim sex discrimination. Although no Black women were hired before 1964, white women were hired during this time frame. The race discrimination claim was dismissed soon after the court refused the sex discrimination claim. The courts ruled that "Congress either did not contemplate that Black women could be discriminated against as 'Black women' or did not intend to protect them when such discrimination occurred."

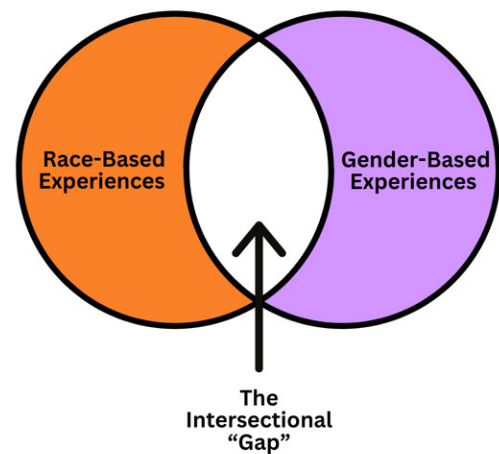


Fig. 3 | The Intersectional Gap. Created by the author.

Although Black women do fall into two protected classes, a gap exists between these two classes. While the lived experiences of Black women exist within this gap, the law is not set up in a way that acknowledges there is a gap. Even today, legal remedies within the gap for Black women still do not exist, as intersectional cases are still largely unsuccessful in the courts.

Crenshaw concluded that as the law stands, "Black women are protected only to the extent that their experiences coincide with those of either [Black men or white women]." This is exacerbated by the legal precedent explored in the second and third cases, *Moore v. Hughes Helicopter* and *Payne v. Travenol*, where Black women were denied the opportunity to represent women and Black people, respectively, as questions about their ability to accurately represent each group were raised. These cases led to further alienation of Black women in the legal realm, as the courts "...treated Black women in ways that deny both the unique compoundedness of their situation and the centrality of their experiences to the larger classes of women and Blacks."

"Demarginalizing" mainly calls for redress of the law to understand how race and gender play out for Black women and other women of color. Most of her examples in the piece, however, include aspects of classism that make these lived experiences even more complex, as many of the plaintiffs in the cited case law are

within the working or middle class. Their socioeconomic status plays a significant role in their lived experiences as much as their race and gender. Intersectionality gives us a way to think about these issues simultaneously; to continue championing the racial and gender equality that early feminists, like Sojourner Truth, spoke of two centuries ago even without the term. Intersectional frameworks need to be created in order for the law to address this issue and match the lived experiences of Black women. The existing frameworks cannot be altered. A new way of understanding the “interaction of race and gender” and the resulting triumphs and hardships that make up the Black female lived experience, however, can be found through intersectionality.

The Combahee River Collective hoped to “...combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.” This example shows that in some instances, intersectionality was meant to encompass more than just the lived experiences of Black women. “Demarginalizing” was not supposed to be the only way by which intersectionality can be thought through and applied to only Black women. Crenshaw emphasizes the “openness” of intersectionality in her second law review article. Going outside of the scope of intersectionality’s original application could explain why there are many ways in which intersectionality appears.

“Mapping the Margins” focuses its impacts on sexual violence, domestic abuse, and rape for women of color. In the piece, Crenshaw dives into different types of intersectionality, further expanding the scope and understanding of what intersectionality looks like as a theory and thought framework. Crenshaw outlines three specific types of intersectionality: structural, political, and representational. Structural intersectionality emphasizes women’s location at the intersection and most closely aligns with the intersectionality explored in “Demarginalizing.” An example of structural intersectionality given by Crenshaw is how immigrant women of color often cannot report instances of domestic violence because of their status and/or lack of protection from deportation without their husbands. Worse still, immigrant women face upending their entire families if they report abuse and reveal that they are undocumented. Political intersectionality explores how women of color sometimes face the dilemma of groups with different goals, such as how releasing statistics on domestic violence in Black and brown communities feeds into stereotypes about angry and uncontrollable men of color, despite its benefit for women of color advocating on a feminist agenda. Finally, representational intersectionality explores how women of color are represented in popular culture as well as how women of color are seen culturally. An example of representational intersectionality in popular culture is Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and how the protagonist Celie, her relationship to her father and Mr. ____ (Mister), and the male/female relationships between several of the characters portray Black women, Black men, and Black male/female relationships. Celie can be seen as a hero for women, especially those who suffer from domestic abuse, as she stands up to Mister. It can also be seen as perpetrating Black male stereotypes, resulting in what seems to be a step forward for Black women at the expense of Black men. Crenshaw also includes examples of other cultural practices, such as how Asian women are taught to save the honor of their family over everything, “obliging women not to scream rather than obliging men not to hit,” and women of color not reporting domestic violence because of a “general unwillingness among people of color to subject their private lives to the scrutiny and control of a

police force that is frequently hostile.”

Crenshaw’s legal review articles set the groundwork for intersectionality as a term. It would slowly begin to grow in the years to come in a number of ways, both inside and outside of the academic circle. Intersectionality could sum up the thought process that understood multiple identities could create unique lived experiences. Intersectionality also emphasized the importance of understanding this dynamic in “individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies.” Crenshaw’s efforts to name the theory that so many Black female scholars and activists began to notice and articulate decades before her channeled the existing momentum behind intersectionality. Giving this framework a name helped make it more accessible for people to find intersectionality and begin to unpack it, including content featured in online digital media platforms.

The Early Digital Dispersal: A Case Study of The Crunk Feminist Collective and Hip-Hop Feminists

“...One man said to me, the question is “What matters more? Your Blackness or your womanhood?” To him I replied, “Find me the moment in which I’m not one of those at exactly the same moment I am the other and I will answer your question.”

-Brittney C. Cooper, The Crunk Feminist Collective

Black people have always used a number of unorthodox channels as spaces of community discourse. Barber shops and beauty salons, for example, were not only places for people to get their hair done, but also sites where Black people could meet, speak freely, and share ideas with one another. Schools and other formal channels were not always the safest options for Black people to engage in discussions about their culture. It is not surprising that Black women used the Internet as another space for discourse and discussion of ideas. Over time, digital spaces have come to play large roles in the identity formation of not only Black girls and women, but for many individuals who have learned to rely on the Internet in their everyday lives. This is especially true for those who may not find their histories traditionally taught in schools. Previous research has been done to support this claim:

...online culture in general [is a] crucial gateway to political [conceptualizations] of identity...young people often adopt explicitly self-educative practices in relation to their online travels. For young Black feminists, digital networks also allow an easier and more forceful articulation of their own knowledge, experiences and perspectives on racialised and gendered social life than is possible in face-to-face settings.

Brittney C. Cooper, along with Robin Boylorn and Susana Morris, are the founders of the Crunk Feminist Collective, an online platform that promotes ideas of Black feminism and intersectionality. The three consider themselves to be “hip hop” or “crunk” feminists. The term “hip hop feminist” was coined by Joan Morgan, a scholar and Black feminist best known for her 1990s work *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*. Cooper, Boylorn, and Morris grew up in the 1990s, a time when Black women faced a myriad of labels and stereotypes like “welfare queen” and “baby mama.” Alongside these negative connotations were positive and empowering Black female portrayals that coincided with the rise of female representation in hip hop. When Boylorn, Cooper, and Mor-

ris entered graduate school together, they began to embrace the swagger and resistance that so many of the women and female emcees they grew up watching did in hip hop: Queen Latifah, Left Eye, Lil' Kim, MC Lyte, and Lauryn Hill. The Crunk Feminists hope to embody their boldness of these Black women on the pop cultural stage in their pursuit of Black feminist understanding.

After they completed graduate school, Cooper and Boylorn decided to revive the community they had found in one another. As women who could be seen as “breaking into” the academic sphere as first-generation students, the crunk feminists wanted to make space for “Black and brown women who loved hip hop but didn’t love sexism could say what needed to be said.” The Crunk Feminists Collective was launched on March 1, 2010 as an online community that created space for women to be in dialogue and respectful discourse with one another, wrestling with the many issues that impacted Black women at the time.

In 2017, the Crunk Feminist Collective published a selection of essays originally published on their blog entitled *The Crunk Feminist Collection*. The introduction of the collection of essays specifically outlines how the goal for both the blog and the consequent anthology was never to be on the same page, but simply to create a safe space. No feminist is identical in their politics or even race, and those values are present in their published collection of essays and posts. The individuals in the collective and even some of the authors of the essays in the Collection are not Black, furthering their desire for a shared space that engages in discourse and dialogue.

The crunk feminists are working hard to create something that can easily be engaged by a myriad of people. Not only is their platform available online, but their integration of “crunkness” into more complex concepts like Black feminism, gender politics, family dynamics, and even community issues helps make these seemingly complex topics more accessible outside of academic circles.

Using the Internet as a safe space does not come without challenges. Interacting on publicly digital spaces opens up these “safe spaces” for surveillance or interaction by those who may not share in the identities of the women “talking back” in these spaces. It was not always a bad thing, as observing and interacting in these spaces allowed for people who may not directly agree or relate to the lived experiences of the women of color who wrote the blogs the opportunity to engage, participate in dialogue, and learn something outside of their worldview. At the same time, however, it allowed opponents, and even internet trolls, the agency to fuel discord. The Internet is known to be a site where typical social pressures and social desirability is shifted. As these social dynamics shift, people act more boldly with both good and bad intentions.

The Collective, along with other digital spaces, was one of many “platformed Black feminist communities” that allowed for Black women and femmes to continue to be in dialogue with one another, even if not physically located near each other. It also allowed for the performance of “talking back,” an act of resistance against their oppressors, even if the oppressed people did not directly interact in these spaces.

One essay in particular posted online and later published in the collection by Britney C. Cooper applies intersectional thought to a modern context. “My Brother’s Keeper and the Co-optation of Intersectionality” is an honest-yet-factual analysis of President Barack Obama’s “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative. From the Obama foundation website, the initiative was first started in

...February 2014, in response to the death of Trayvon Martin. The program sought to address the persistent opportunity gaps boys and young men of color face and to ensure all young people can reach their full potential. We believe communities are the unit of change to realize improved life outcomes for boys and young men of color. Research shows that the collective work of community leaders, members, and public and private agencies pursuing the same goals for boys and young men of color can lead to sustainable, place-based change.

Cooper is enraged by this initiative because of not only how it seeks to only address issues within the Black community for men and not women, but also the thirty women who co-signed the initiative. Cooper laments,

“In a moment when it is so clear that the war on women is real, I wonder how Black women can accept analyses coming out of the White House re: [My Brother’s Keeper] that marginalize Black women’s struggle... Do we really believe that men have it worse than we do?”

Most of her essay outlines the struggles faced by Black women, echoing the political intersectionality that Crenshaw details in “Mapping the Margins.” Cooper talks about how “to deal with Black women’s struggles would be to have to confront issues of male privilege, rampant sexism, and copious amounts of sexual and physical violence perpetrated on Black women at the hands of Black men.” Political intersectionality explores how women of color sometimes face the dilemma of groups with different goals, such as how releasing statistics on domestic violence in Black and brown communities feeds into stereotypes about angry and uncontrollable men of color, despite its benefit for women of color advocating on a feminist agenda. Much of Cooper’s argument centers around ideas of intersectionality that are more accessible for the many types of people who may come across the blog post. People who do not have a background in feminist theory, or even those who do not play close attention to the politics of President Barack Obama, could understand Cooper’s application of intersectionality within the essay. Cooper even mentions Crenshaw and her work twice in the post. The first mention is of Crenshaw’s African American Policy Forum and their letters—one signed by 200 Black men and the other signed by over 1,400 women of color—calling for inclusion of women and girls in Obama’s “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative. The second mention is at the end, when Cooper summarizes the theories outlined in “Demarginalizing the Intersection,” explaining the employment discrimination faced by Black women and “the gap” they sometimes find themselves in. Cooper’s direct mention of Crenshaw helps bridge the theory back to its original source. Giving people a modern example with “My Brother’s Keeper” strays away from the original legal case examples, but it makes it far more relatable to people who are not familiar with case law.

Another article that explores intersectionality in the Collection is entitled “SlutWalks v. HoStrolls.” This article, first released a few years before Cooper’s My Brother’s Keeper piece, echoes similar sentiments of intersectionality, but from a gendered perspective. The context of the article comes from SlutWalks Toronto, “...an activist response to the ill-informed, misguided, words of a Toronto police officer who suggested that ‘women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized.’” Cooper’s issue does not come from the desire of the women to stand up against the words of the police officer and take a stand against victim-

blaming in sexual assault. Her issue instead comes from the mission statement of the organization, which stated “they are “tired of being oppressed by slut-shaming; of being judged by [their] sexuality and feeling unsafe as a result,” they are reclaiming and reappropriating the word ‘slut.’” Cooper’s main point highlights how the SlutWalk movement may come off tone-deaf. These women, who want to take a stand by reclaiming the word “slut,” may not truly understand what it means to be defined by terms like slut, jezebel, or ho. This statement by Cooper could be seen as a double standard, especially surrounding the use of the n-word within Black communities, which she addresses in her work. The main point of the essay lies in the need for an approach to sexual violence activism that encompasses the varied identities of women who may face it. While a SlutWalk may be empowering for some, it leaves others out. This type of marginalization can be compared to the marginalization of Black women that Crenshaw outlines in “Demarginalizing.” The experiences of women may seem universal, but that does not mean the remedy will be the same. SlutWalk misses the point for how to include other identities in ways outside of reclamation. At the end of the blog, Cooper mentions a movement called Stop Street Harassment that is addressing the issues of safety for women in schools and on the streets through a multiracial lens, “[recognizing] that challenges to that safety while similar in some respects, can differ across race and class.” With thought and intention, it is possible to address issues of sexual violence that pays respect to intersectional identities of all the women who experience it. Once again, Cooper has taken a point of cultural significance at the time that allows for people to better understand intersectionality.

Cooper’s engagement and the Crunk Feminist Collective are working to promote the ideas of intersectionality throughout the mass public. Not only do the two examples outlined show that the author has a clear grasp on intersectionality, but Cooper also makes note to mention Kimberlé Crenshaw when she is explicitly discussing intersectionality as well. While certain individuals may choose to engage with the Crunk Feminist Collective’s blog or pick up their book in a library, anyone can engage with the content, whether positively or negatively, and understand more about intersectionality.

Strike a Pose, Let’s Vogue: Intersectionality in Magazines

“They were already having conversations on Tumblr and on social media around intersectional feminism and racism and reproductive rights and gender fluidity — all these conversations were happening in the margins, but there was no mainstream media platform that created an intersection [where] all of those aspects of their identities could be celebrated.”

—Elaine Welteroth, Editor-in-Chief of *Teen Vogue*, 2016-18

Magazines provide another aspect of digital media that shows how intersectionality moved from the academic to the general public. One prominent example of this shift is *Teen Vogue*. It will serve as the focus of my analysis.

A 2017 New York Times article entitled “Refashionista” was a profile on the youngest and second-Black female editor of *Teen Vogue* magazine, Elaine Welteroth. Welteroth was only 29 years old when she became the editor of *Teen Vogue*. The article, written

by Jazmine Hughes, details the way Welteroth worked her way up in the communications world, unafraid to detail experiences of Black culture that were so commonly missing from the fashion-centered views of magazines. Hughes describes the audiences for the largest magazines of her time: “...CosmoGirl (for sassy white girls), Seventeen (for ambitious white girls), YM (for white girls prone to toxic shock syndrome). *Teen Vogue*—for rich white girls. ..” Growing up, Welteroth didn’t read these magazines, as she preferred publications like *Ebony* and *Essence* that always feature Black women. Throughout her education, interning, and eventual days in the workforce, Welteroth always seized opportunities to add the views and lived experiences of people of color to the white homogeneity of the magazine world.

With the rise of social media, teen magazines, along with many paper-based aspects of life, were already facing obstacles as they tried to compete with digital platforms. Gone were the days of receiving a magazine in the mail as digital newsletters took over. As one of the two magazines left producing paper issues, *Teen Vogue* needed to shift to something more than just beauty and fashion to compete for its readership. Following the 2016 Presidential Election, Welteroth saw an opportunity and deep desire from readers to include more socially conscious material. The election of Donald J. Trump over Hillary Clinton thrust a spotlight on the many issues, such as sexism and racism, that continued to impact the United States.

The shift pre- and post-Trump in *Teen Vogue* was drastic, yet successful. Young Americans were passionate about developing as a whole person. No longer did readers only care about what the it-color of the season was, but they also cared about what issues were on the ballot and the importance of theories, such as intersectionality, meant for marginalized individuals.

Teen Vogue ran its first print issue in 2002, with its digital presence beginning in 2003. Through a primary search on *Teen Vogue*’s website, the earliest mention of “intersectionality” was in 2015, the same year that Phillip Picardi was named the digital editor of *Teen Vogue*. This is important to note because Picardi would work closely with Welteroth and Marie Suter, the sitting creative director of *Teen Vogue*. The three are known to be the triumvirate that revolutionized *Teen Vogue* to the politically conscious platform that it is today.

Keyword	Number of Results	Earliest Mention	Latest Mention
“Intersectionality”	151	7/23/2015	11/15/2024
“Intersectional”	286	8/26/2015	10/24/2024
“Kimberlé Crenshaw”	31	10/19/2016	11/15/2024

Fig. 4 | *Teen Vogue* use of keywords. Created by the author.

Research done on the “Voices” section of *Teen Vogue* magazine in 2017, its final year in print, shows that a magazine can be a site of “intersectional feminism.” *Teen Vogue* deems its shift as a response to “a generation that demands substance,” re-emphasizing that teens don’t only look in fashion magazines for tips on how to look good or have better sex. What is even more notable about *Teen Vogue*’s shift from print and digital issues to a digital publication is that more and more people visited their website in 2018, the year they went solely online. In the late 2010s, *Condé Nast*, parent company of *Teen Vogue*, reported that 8.7 million people engaged with the digital publication, and 13.6 million followed *Teen*

Vogue's various social media accounts. I conducted my own research on the articles of *Teen Vogue*'s website, which are listed in Figure 4.

The earliest mention of intersectionality that I located on *Teen Vogue*'s website was in an article entitled "How Taylor Swift's Apology to Nicki Minaj Makes an Important Statement" by Casey Lewis, a Senior Editor. Lewis puts intersectionality, albeit briefly, in discussion with pop culture. Nicki Minaj released two music videos that year, including "Anaconda," which shattered the record for most views in 24 hours, and "Feeling Myself" which featured Beyoncé, one of the most important musicians and entertainers of the 21st century. Neither video received nominations for the 2015 Video of the Year award. Because of her "double snub" nomination from the Video of the Year category, Minaj took to Twitter, expressing her anger. Taylor Swift, whose music video "Bad Blood" was nominated and would later win Video of the Year, took Minaj's commentary as a personal attack and not as commentary on the flaws of the music industry. Lewis explains this misunderstanding, a common occurrence in the digital world, but also uses the cultural moment as a touchstone for discussion surrounding larger issues at play, writing:

How many times have you wrongly interpreted a text, or read the grin emoji as a straight-up grimace? But white privilege (defined as societal privileges that benefit white people) is a very real thing, and so is white feminism (i.e. feminism that ignores intersectionality – how oppressive institutions, like racism and sexism, overlap and can't be examined separately).

Once again, similar tactics used by Cooper of the Crunk Feminist Collective are implemented by Lewis in their article. Intersectionality, which may seem complex and convoluted, is related to pop culture, creating an accessible example. Even without prior knowledge of the Minaj/Swift interaction, readers can easily pick up and begin to understand this theory.

The article outlined above, along with the many others published between 2015 and the present, proves that *Teen Vogue* is another site of intersectionality's move from the academic to the public. *Teen Vogue*'s continued publication of articles dealing with intersectionality also show that it was received in a largely positive way by its readers over time. *Teen Vogue*'s movement, however, has a marked difference from the platform set up by the Crunk Feminist Collective. The Crunk Feminists sought to create space for women of color to engage with one another, both the individuals who wrote the different blogs, along with viewers, who would engage via the comments section. *Teen Vogue* sought to create space for learning about a variety of socially conscious topics like intersectionality for the sake of educating their masses and keeping up with the times. This is understandable, as *Teen Vogue* has a different agenda as a business—to keep and expand their readership—whereas the Crunk Feminist Collective is not a corporation. Despite this, both digital spaces show that the academic has moved to the public, helping spread intersectionality to the masses.

#IntersectionalityMatters: Crenshaw's Continued Influence

While my research has outlined the efforts of many individuals, collective, and organizations that have helped move Crenshaw's theory into the public, it is imperative to understand that Kimberlé Crenshaw has also played a significant role in the move-

ment of her theory from the academic to the public. Kanani states, "the widespread travel of concepts may resemble trafficking and plagiarism, divorced from their social contexts of emergence and the people who have theorized them." Although some of this "loss of context" has been the case for intersectionality, Crenshaw has worked to make this not the case. Below is a Google Ngram of Kimberlé Crenshaw's name.

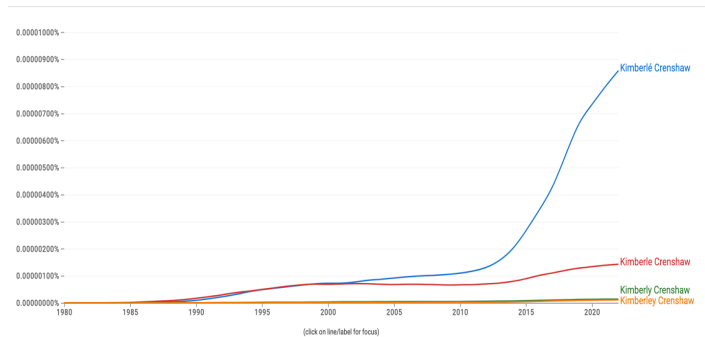


Fig. 5 | Google Ngram of "Kimberlé Crenshaw" and alternative spellings, 1980-2025. Captured by the author.

Crenshaw's name takes off about twenty years before terms like "intersectionality" and "intersectional" start to see a spike in search terms. In 1990, Crenshaw was one of the lawyers representing Anita Hill and her nationally televised testimony at the Senate confirmation hearing for Clarence Thomas. In the mid-1990s, Crenshaw started the aforementioned African American Policy Forum, "an innovative think tank that connects academics, activists and policy-makers to promote efforts to dismantle structural inequality." The second spike in 2014 is after the #SayHerName initiative was started by the African American Policy Forum in response to the Black Lives Matter movement and the frequent centering of Black men who are killed by police violence over Black women. Crenshaw's presence in the media continues to rise, as she is a public speaker. She is often interviewed by a variety of media sources about her theory.

All of Crenshaw's work—her work on the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas hearings, the mission of the African American Policy Forum and its largest initiative to-date, #SayHerName, and her continued contributions through legal and academic publications—continues to strive for what she originally outlined in her legal review publications in the public eye. Her TedTalk, "The Urgency of Intersectionality," filmed in October 2016 has amassed 6.7 million views across TED social media platforms. As she continues to rise, so does intersectionality alongside her.

While the African American Policy Forum champions several platforms with #SayHerName, such as #TruthBeTold, a campaign against censorship and banned books, my research focuses on Crenshaw's podcast, *#IntersectionalityMatters*. Since the first episode of *#IntersectionalityMatters* in 2018, Crenshaw has tried to help listeners understand their own lives in "deeper, more nuanced ways." The podcast brings intersectionality to life by exploring today's most pressing issues. In what Crenshaw calls an "idea travel log," she lifts up the work of leading activists, artists, and scholars and has created a platform for people like herself who are working to bring intersectionality into the public eye.

In her two law review articles "Mapping the Margins" and "Demarginalizing the Intersection," Crenshaw writes in a way that someone with no legal expertise, but a working knowledge of

American racial politics could understand. Both of her legal theory articles could be understood by someone who doesn't have a legal theory background. Easily digestible topics, through the use of personal anecdotes and her integration of real-life cases, work to break down this complex theory. Through the use of excerpts and her public speaking appearances, Crenshaw continues to widen the original scope of her law review articles.

Crenshaw tries to apply this concept to everyday life in the United States because it is something that people experience in their everyday lives. In her law review article, she is applying a legal lens, arguing that the law needs to begin understanding that women of color should not be subject to only racial or gender scrutiny because their existence—and therefore their experiences—more often than not are defined somewhere in the intersection of these two realities. Through her podcast, she is doing so much more, framing intersectionality as a problem that impacts everyone; in a way it does, albeit in indirect and direct ways.

In one of the first episodes called, “Defending the C.R.O.W.N.: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Nappyness,” a Black woman news anchor named Brittany Noble shares her story about how she was fired from her job because of her hair. Tracee Ellis Ross is also on the show, explaining her hair care brand Pattern Beauty and how she came to love her natural hair, and engaging in a larger dialogue with Crenshaw and Noble about Black women's hair. If a Black woman were to hear this podcast, they could relate to the topic of a “hair journey” more than anyone else. All three women work through their lived experiences, both funny yet angsty, evoking emotions and reactions that are quite relatable. Most people can relate to a “bad hair day” in some way, shape, form, or fashion, even though the podcast frames it in a solely Black female experience.

In a similar fashion, states around the country have begun to pass the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (C.R.O.W.N.) Act, which prohibits racially based discrimination towards someone's hair. While this act mainly focuses on the lived experiences of Black women, as many of the hairstyles included in the language are bantu knots, braids, locs, and twists, the prohibition of hair discrimination indirectly allows for a more inclusive hair experience for all employees, no matter their race. By advocating for a better understanding of hair politics for Black women, there has been more acceptance for other individuals as well to wear their hair in ways that they feel comfortable with. Despite this progress, there is still more to go, not only in hair discrimination, but for the understanding and application of intersectionality.

The Present State and Debate of Intersectionality

In a Vox article published in 2019, Jane Coaston interviewed Kimberlé Crenshaw, as well as a number of American conservatives, to paint the reality of what people think intersectionality means across the American landscape. Coaston sums up the debate in the following way:

The current debate over intersectionality is really three debates: one based on what academics like Crenshaw actually mean by the term, one based on how activists seeking to eliminate disparities between groups have interpreted the term, and a third on how some conservatives are responding to its use by those activists.

The first aspect of this debate was explored in the initial sections

of my research, exploring Crenshaw's role in framing intersectionality within the legal realm and moving it into the public sphere through her podcast, *#IntersectionalityMatters*. The second aspect of the debate was also briefly explored in my literature review. There are a number of individuals who don't quite understand what intersectionality is, sometimes confusing the term with diversity. The movement of intersectionality from the academic to the public inevitably created some discrepancies, as it exchanged one sphere to another. Thankfully, many activists and organizations, such as the Crunk Feminist Collective and the writers at *Teen Vogue*, are all examples of how accurate descriptions of intersectionality are being presented in the digital sphere. They are also all examples of how using online digital media and cultural indicators worked to move intersectionality to a larger audience.

The final aspect of this debate was not explored in depth in my paper but speaks to why the idea is an important issue to continue exploring. The Vox article includes the perspectives of some conservatives, who dive into their issues with intersectionality. Most conservatives do not have an issue understanding the theory itself—which echoes again the success of this theory in being understood by a wider audience—although it does not corroborate my argument about its movement in online digital media per se. The conservative issue with intersectionality lies within the effects of intersectionality. If the courts were to create a system where individuals with marginalized identities are given recognition, some conservatives see the results as an attack. In their viewpoint, creating a system where someone with no marginalized identity, for example, a middle-class heterosexual white man, will become the victim.

As a result, much of their rhetoric surrounding “intersectionality” is about their potential for shifting victimhood. While people are being called out on their missteps, as Cooper does in her articles about SlutWalks and My Brother's Keeper, for the *Teen Vogue* article about Taylor Swift, and even Crenshaw's discourse about the news anchor's boss who perpetrated hair discrimination, the desire is not to make the oppressors the victims. In fact, emphasizing these activists' decisions to speak, read, and write about the transgressions of those who perpetrate prejudices is all in an effort to highlight instances of a systemic issue that needs to be eradicated. Black feminists', *Teen Vogue's*, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's efforts are important now more than ever, as the political right continues to twist the narrative of intersectionality. As changes in the American government erase intersectionality, critical race theory, and even initiatives for diversity in schools, it is becoming more and more important for online digital media platforms to remain places of discussion.

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Author Footnotes

¹I include the term "intersectional" in my research for two reasons. First, some people discuss "intersectionality" by emphasizing taking an intersectional approach to something. Also, "intersectional" in some search engines, is a better term because it will capture both instances of "intersectionality" and "intersectional" in results.

²For the purpose of this paper and to combat what is believed to be inaccurate documentation and a resulting racialized depiction of Sojourner Truth, I refer to her speech as "Aren't I a Woman" instead of the more widely known "Ain't I a Woman?" To learn more about this history, see Painter, Nell Irvin. *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*. W.W. Norton, 1996.

As of September 27th, 2024, California became the first state to pass a law that would take into account intersectional identities as recognized by the law. SB 1137 calls for amendments to law in discrimination in the workplace, schools, housing, and businesses and companies. This bill is projected to be enacted on January 1st, 2025. Although SB 1137 will not change the lives of Californians overnight, this is a significant first step that addresses the ideas that Kimberly Crenshaw first explored in her papers 35 years ago. The foundation to fill the gap has begun to be poured not only for Black women, but for all people who may find themselves at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities.

See more: Pappoe, Yvette N. "The Shortcomings of Title VII for the Black Female Plaintiff." *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law and Social Change* 20, 1 (2019): 1-23.

See article: Crunktastic. "I Saw the Sign but Did We Really Need a Sign?: Slutwalk and Racism." *crunkfeministcollective.com*, October 6, 2011. <https://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2011/10/06/i-saw-the-sign-but-did-we-really-need-a-sign-slutwalk-and-racism/>

While 2015 makes sense in this context as the earliest mention of "intersectionality" because of who was in charge at the time, *Teen Vogue* does not have a fully comprehensive digital or physical archive that clearly includes or dates back to its early 2000s origins. It is possible there are earlier mentions, but limited resources don't allow for me to easily access this history.

Date retrieved from personal LinkedIn page: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/pfpicardi/details/experience>

I chose to include her name without the "é" because of the uniqueness of her first name. If someone hears her name in an auditory context, there could be several ways of spelling Crenshaw's first name, hence the more common spellings of Kimberlé represented on the graph.

It is important to note that this is not a result of the founders of the movement, 3 Black women, desiring to center Black male experiences over Black women. All three of the founders of the Black Lives Matter Movement: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, have spoken about their desires for intersectionality in #BlackLivesMatter. See article: Cobb, Jelani. "The Matter of Black Lives." *The New Yorker*, March 6, 2016.

At the time of my completion of research in January 2025, the C.R.O.W.N. Act is only legal in a little more than half the states across the United States. It is not recognized by the federal government either despite its passage in the House of Representatives in 2022.