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# Poetic Voices of Sexual Victimization: A Thematic Analysis and Topic Model of Online Poetry (2003-2025)

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**ABSTRACT** *This study examines sexual victimisation through poetry published online between 2003 and 2025. Poetic data has rarely been used in sexual victimisation research, leaving gaps in understanding and risking misrepresentation. Poetry offers a unique lens for exploring emotions and experiences often absent from conventional sources. A mixed-methods approach combines thematic analysis of a random sample of 50 poems with topic modelling of a corpus of 3,747 poems. Thematic analysis identifies five recurring themes: details of victimisation, contributing factors, aftermath of victimisation, comprehension of sexual victimisation, and healing process. Topic modelling reveals 35 topics aligned with these themes, while trend analysis shows no consistent shifts in prevalence over time. Findings underscore poetry's capacity to convey sensitive phenomena and highlight its potential for criminological inquiry. Methodological implications for integrating creative expressions into research are discussed.*

**KEYWORDS** poem, victim, mixed-methods, sexual violence, sexual abuse

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Art has long reflected societal and cultural shifts, with literary forms—particularly poetry—serving as powerful tools for expression of emotions and resistance against social norms. Poetry has historically played a pivotal role in social movements, challenging public opinion, inspiring social change, and amplifying marginalised voices (Walker, 2018; Walkington, 2020). This makes it especially relevant in the context of sexual victimisation, a topic that, despite extensive scholarly attention (see, e.g., Fawcett & Shreshta, 2016; Pollino, 2023; Riggs, 2021), remains underreported due to victim stigmatisation and shame (Delker et al., 2020; Goodarzi et al., 2020; Wieberneit et al., 2024). Disclosure of sexual victimisation thus remains difficult. Legal and ethical constraints further limit research in this area (see, e.g., Jackson et al., 2013), leaving many stories unheard and resulting in a skewed portrayal of reality. Relying solely on official statistics and reported cases is therefore insufficient.

Artistic approaches—particularly the use of poetry—offer a means to navigate these barriers, as they can reach hard-to-reach populations and offer alternative understandings of reality (Davis, 2021; Jacobsen, 2014/2020). In particular, use of poetry enables the inclusion of non-dominant voices and a fuller representation of lived experiences (Cutts, 2020; Leite et al., 2024; Faulkner, 2019; Fernández-Giménez et al., 2019; Walker, 2018). What makes poetry powerful is its ability to resist and its cultural marginality, through which it enlarges understanding and portrays what it is like to be human (Faulkner, 2019). This makes it a valuable source for studying sexual victimisation disclosure (Pollino, 2023). This is essential, as dominant narratives often silence or overlook marginalised voices (Armstrong et al., 2018). Integrating poetry with scientific research can thus deepen our understanding of sexual victimisation (Leite et al., 2024).

This study aims to answer two research questions:

RQ 1: What are the most prevalent themes in online poetry on sexual victimisation?<sup>1</sup>

RQ 2: How does the prevalence of topics in online poetry on sexual victimisation change over time?

A thematic analysis combined with topic modelling is used to address these questions. By doing so, this study enables quantitative identification of patterns across a large poetry corpus while qualitatively interpreting their contextual meanings, thereby contributing to understandings of sexual victimisation through combining scientific analysis and poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the terms ‘survivor’ and ‘survivorship’ are preferred today, the terms ‘victim’ and ‘victimisation’ will be used in this study. This choice was made based on both personal considerations as well as on the analyses of the poems, in which most writers referred to themselves as victims.

## 2 STATE OF THE ART(S)

### 2.1 Poetry, trauma, culture, and activism

The arts are often seen as emotionally driven and the sciences as rooted in objective, replicable facts (Gould, 2023). However, this distinction has led science to isolate the “objective” facts from the cultural contexts in which they arise (Braund & Reiss, 2019; Leavy, 2020). Integrating art and science helps situate facts within broader cultural narratives, offering a richer understanding of complex issues such as sexual victimisation (Leite et al., 2024).

Literary trauma theorists argue that trauma can be processed and expressed through literature (Basu, 2022; Pederson, 2014). Traumatic experiences such as sexual victimisation can be difficult to process. Some theorists argue that this results in the inability to fully process trauma, leaving gaps in one’s memory (Caruth, 1996/2016; Pederson, 2014). As a consequence, it can take time for someone to reach a certain stage in their healing progress. Others, however, argue that repressed memories do not emerge through writing (Pederson, 2014). These memories previously remained untold because an individual chose not to disclose them. Trauma theorists focus on how trauma is experienced and expressed. Creative writing—practised through either prose or poetry—is a form of expressive art that can support emotional processing. Research shows that it can benefit mental health (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Gustavson, 2012), making it a potential coping mechanism for victims. Poetry, through its use of metaphor and stylistic nuance, allows for indirect expression (Arcilla, 2024; Basu, 2022), capturing the full range of human experience (Davis, 2021), and shaping how that experience is understood (Jacobsen, 2014/2020).

Poetry also preserves cultural memory, especially from communities whose stories are often silenced (Basu, 2022). Cultural poetics emphasises that poetry is not just the product of individual expression but a fusion of imagination, language, and culture (Webster, 2015). As such, poems can reflect or challenge the dominant narratives of their time, which makes them valuable records of both personal and collective experience.

Beyond healing and cultural preservation, poetry also serves as a form of activism (Arcilla, 2024; Davis, 2021; Diehl, 2017). The internet has amplified this role, enabling victims to find communities and share their stories more widely. For example, the #MeToo movement saw people around the world disclose sexual victimisation experiences online (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Gallagher et al., 2019). Many turned to blogs or poetry when in-person disclosure felt unsafe or unsupported (Fawcett & Shreshta, 2016). This suggests that online poetry could contribute to our understanding of sexual victimisation experiences.

## **2.2 Online disclosure of sexual victimisation**

Recently, the World Health Organisation estimated that one in three women experience sexual victimisation (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2024). However, many victims of sexual violence belong to an unseen and unregistered population (O'Donohue & Schewe, 2019). As a result of attached stigmas and possible negative reactions (Delker et al., 2020; Wieberneit et al., 2024), many are cautious when it comes to disclosing sexual victimisation experiences, leaving many stories untold and unheard. This became especially visible during the #MeToo movement, which not only provided a platform for victims to share their stories, but also highlighted the widespread nature of the issue (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Gallagher et al., 2019).

As a consequence of these challenges and the difficulty of disclosing in person, some victims resort to disclosing online (see e.g. Fawcett and Shreshta, 2016). Digital media provide victims with the opportunity to disclose on their own terms and to counter possible harmful and incorrect narratives (Pollino, 2023). One can have multiple motivations to disclose online. These motivations can be both individual-oriented, or other-oriented (Gorissen, Van den Berg, Bijleveld, et al., 2023). Examples of individual-oriented motivations include the need for support and justice, whereas examples of other-oriented motivations include education, activism, and providing support. The online sphere facilitates disclosure of rather intimate details. This facilitation is caused by multiple factors, among which the possibility of anonymity, creating more openness in the online sphere (Subramanian, 2023). Additionally, according to Gorissen, Van den Berg, Ruiter, and Bijleveld (2023), disclosure differs depending on the platform.

Despite the possibility of disclosure that opens up through the use of social media and the many benefits attached to certain digital forms of disclosure, these forms have also been criticised. One critique of movements like #MeToo, for instance, relates to the exclusion of marginalised groups (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019). Online forms of disclosure give the impression of accessibility, allowing anybody to speak and to be heard. Yet, this image seems to be a misrepresentation of reality. It is important to consider platforms aside from those used during viral movements, not only because information disclosed differs on these platforms (Gorissen, Van den Berg, Ruiter, & Bijleveld, 2023), but also to allow more stories to enter the discourse of those who have previously been unheard.

As poetry challenges dominant narratives and gives voice to non-dominant perspectives (Walker, 2018), using poetry to study sexual victimisation offers a way to include underutilised data and reach unregistered populations. These poems can also be found online today. Online poetry therefore offers a way to (partly) bypass the silencing of marginalised groups that is present in dominant narratives (Armstrong, 2018), as it can offer different perspectives from other platforms. Incorporating poetry into criminological research supports a victim-centred approach that includes these marginalised voices (Gildea, 2020). This is

particularly important in the context of sexual victimisation, where rape myths continue to shape public understanding (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Pollino, 2023). As Pollino (2023, p. 1996) argues, such an approach is essential to “fully advocate for those affected by sexual violence”. This requires engaging with non-dominant narratives and recognising the broader cultural context. By integrating creative forms of data, researchers can capture the complete human experience (Davis, 2021). Moreover, prevailing narratives often focus narrowly on gender, failing to consider intersectionality as well as organisational and cultural dimensions of sexual violence (Armstrong et al., 2018). Combining the arts and sciences enriches our understanding of sexual victimisation (Leite et al., 2024).

### **2.3 This study**

Despite growing awareness of sexual victimisation, many experiences remain unreported due to stigma, shame, and barriers to disclosure (Delker et al., 2020; Wieberneit et al., 2024). Traditional data sources fail to capture the full scope of these experiences. This study addresses this gap by examining online sexual victimisation poetry, as it provides a unique means to amplify underrepresented voices. Specifically, it seeks to identify prevalent themes within these poems and examine how these themes evolve over time. By combining thematic analysis with topic modelling, the study integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches, enabling both a nuanced understanding of the experiences expressed and the identification of broader patterns across a large corpus. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive, victim-centred understanding of sexual victimisation and highlights the potential of creative expression as both a source of data and a tool for social awareness.

## **3 DATA**

Data were collected from September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024, until February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025. Given the broad scope of sexual violence (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013), multiple keywords were used to ensure a comprehensive coverage. The term “sexual violence” was interpreted broadly to include sexual assault, (child) sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, rape, sexual harassment, (childhood) sexual trauma, and #MeToo. These terms guided the search for communities and websites. These terms were either preceded or followed by the terms “poem(s)” or “poetry”, which allowed for poetry websites where these terms were included to be uncovered. All websites found using this method have been included. With the exception that websites and specifically published poems had to be in English, no further exclusion criteria were applied. This ensured a global reach, as all websites are globally available, and maximised data collection.

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Poems were identified using the specific tags and keywords that are used for categorisation on websites themselves (see Table 1, column “Tag/webpage”). Through this, poetry regarding sexual victimisation can be identified from other poems about, for example, love, animals, or fruit. Inflections, conjugations, and abbreviations of tags were also used to maximise retrieval. When a poem was found using one tag, additional tags associated with it were used to find more poems. This process yielded a total of 4,273 poems (see Table 1). Hello Poetry provided a total of 1,933 poems, whereas only one poem was found on the websites Poem Hunter and New Pathways.

**Table 1**  
*Websites, tags, and number of poems found and used*

Website	Tag/webpage	Number of poems found	Number of poems used
Hello Poetry	Rape	1,484	1,465
	Raped	25	17
	Rapist	21	10
	Twrape	12	2
	Rape culture	39	17
	Sexual abuse	101	69
	Sexual assault	152	67
	Sexual assault (misspelled)	15	8
	Sexual harassment	14	9
	#metoo	188	140
	CSA	46	40
	SA	71	42
	COCSA	13	2
	Molest	17	7

Website	Tag/webpage	Number of poems found	Number of poems used	
AllPoetry	Molested	13	4	
	Molestation	78	34	
	Rape	130	124	
	Raped	23	22	
	Rapist	13	11	
	Sexual abuse	111	110	
	Sexual assault	123	114	
	Sexual harassment	13	13	
	#metoo	31	29	
	CSA	35	31	
	SA	8	6	
	COCSA	5	1	
	Molest	7	7	
	Molestation	12	10	
	Poetry soup	Short rape poems	25	25
Rape poems		23	21	
Best sexual abuse poems		12	12	
Best sexual harassment		6	6	
Power poetry		Rape	616	573
		Raped	4	4
	Rapist	6	1	
	Rape culture	58	40	
	Sexual abuse	140	136	
	Sexual assault	163	106	
	Sexual harassment	31	27	
	#metoo	14	14	
	CSA	4	4	
	SA	3	2	
	Molest	5	5	
Molested	4	2		

Website	Tag/webpage	Number of poems found	Number of poems used
Survivors in transition	n.a.	144	144
Kaleidoscopepoetry	n.a.	100	100
Sexual assault care	n.a.	22	22
Centre for action on rape and abuse	n.a.	18	17
Into the light	n.a.	15	15
Inspirational poems	n.a.	14	14
Family friend poems	Sad poems > rape	13	13
Rape and sexual violence project	n.a.	10	10
Recovery from child sexual abuse	n.a.	9	9
HealthyPlace	n.a.	6	6
Healing through poetry	n.a.	6	6
Poem Hunter	n.a.	1	1
New Pathways	n.a.	1	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>4,273</b>	<b>3,747</b>

Note. The table is ordered based on websites and tags.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4 METHODS

Data were manually transferred to an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Each entry included the website of publication, associated tags, poem title, publication date, author, and the poem itself. Poems not written in English or published multiple times were excluded, resulting in 4,220 entries. Additional duplicates were removed using Excel's conditional formatting (Microsoft, n.d.-a). This process resulted in a final dataset of 3,747 unique poems (see Table 1).

<sup>2</sup> Links to the websites are the following: Hello Poetry: <https://hellopoetry.com/>; AllPoetry: <https://allpoetry.com/>; Poetry soup: <https://www.poetrysoup.com/>; Power poetry: <https://powerpoetry.org/>; Kaleidoscopepoetry: <https://www.kaleidoscopepoetry.com/my-poems-2/>; Sexual assault care: [http://www.sacc.to/sya/ownwords/archive.htm#poem\\_e](http://www.sacc.to/sya/ownwords/archive.htm#poem_e); Centre for action on rape and abuse: <https://caraessex.org.uk/survivorspoetry.php>; Into the light: <https://www.intothelight.org.uk/poems-and-art/>; Inspirational poems: <https://www.inspirational-poems.net/rape-poems>; Family friend poems: <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poems/sad/rape/>; Rape and sexual violence project: <https://rsvporg.co.uk/blog/category/survivor-stories/poetry/>; Recovery from child sexual abuse: <https://www.recovery-from-child-sexual-abuse.org.uk/poems/>; HealthyPlace: <https://www.healthyplace.com/abuse/articles/poetry-from-rape-survivors>; Healing through poetry: <https://www.healingthroughpoetry.net/poems-about-sexual-assault>; Poem Hunter: <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/i-will-always-be-a-victim-of-sexual-abuse>; New Pathways: <https://www.newpathways.org.uk/2022/07/15/from-victim-to-survivor-poem/>.

The qualitative analysis involved a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using Atlas.ti version 23.2.1.26990 for Windows (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2023). Thematic analysis allows for the identification of patterns in textual data, which can be categorised in themes. As it is not necessarily advised to analyse large amounts of qualitative data (Elo et al., 2014; Vasileiou et al., 2018), the thematic analysis was performed on a sample of 50 poems. This sample size was based on a recommended sample size for qualitative studies (Vasileiou et al., 2018). As saturation was found to have been reached after 50 poems, no further poems were added to the sample. Random sampling ensured equal selection of poems (Berndt, 2020). Given the novelty of the use of poetry in criminology, an inductive approach was used to allow for the emergence of themes that may differ from those found in prose or other victim narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In addition, the final dataset was pre-processed for Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling (Blei & Lafferty, 2007). LDA is a probabilistic topic modelling technique used to discover underlying themes (topics) within a collection of documents (a corpus). Each document is seen as a mixture of various topics, and each topic is characterised by a distribution of words. By combining thematic analysis with topic modelling, a bigger corpus of poetry can be analysed quantitatively, while accounting for contextual clues through a qualitative analysis (Daenekindt & Huisman, 2020). Qualitative analysis therefore ensures the inclusion of all voices, allowing inclusion of non-dominant and less prevalent voices and perspectives, while topic modelling allows an overarching view of these voices and perspectives in a quantitative manner. Through this, all perspectives can be considered, allowing for consideration of non-dominant voices against dominant perspectives. Pre-processing included removal of punctuation, and converting text to lowercase in Excel (Microsoft, n.d.-b; n.d.-c). After importing the spreadsheet as a Unicode text file in R version 4.4.2 (R Core Team, 2024), language was standardised, and stop-words and numbers were removed. Lemmatisation was avoided to preserve poetic features (Navarro-Colorado, 2018). This process resulted in a final corpus of 3,745 poems.

Multiple topic models were tested with varying numbers of topics (K) and hyperparameters. These models were assessed based on coherence levels of the topic terms. The final model with 35 topics was selected based on statistical topic coherence and human evaluation of usefulness of topic terms (Meaney et al., 2023), accounting for relevance of topic terms and diversity between topics. A trend analysis was then performed by plotting the yearly relative prevalence of each topic, accounting for fluctuations in publication volume (Vander Beken et al., 2021).

Topic modelling and quantitative analyses were conducted using R packages “tm”, “stringr”, “quanteda”, and “textminer” (Benoit et al., 2025; Feinerer & Hornik, 2025; Jones, 2021; Silge & Robinson, n.d.; Wickham, 2023). Trend analysis was performed using “dplyr”, “tidyr”, and “topicmodels” (Grün & Hornik, 2024; Wickham et al., 2023; Wickham et al., 2024). The trend analysis

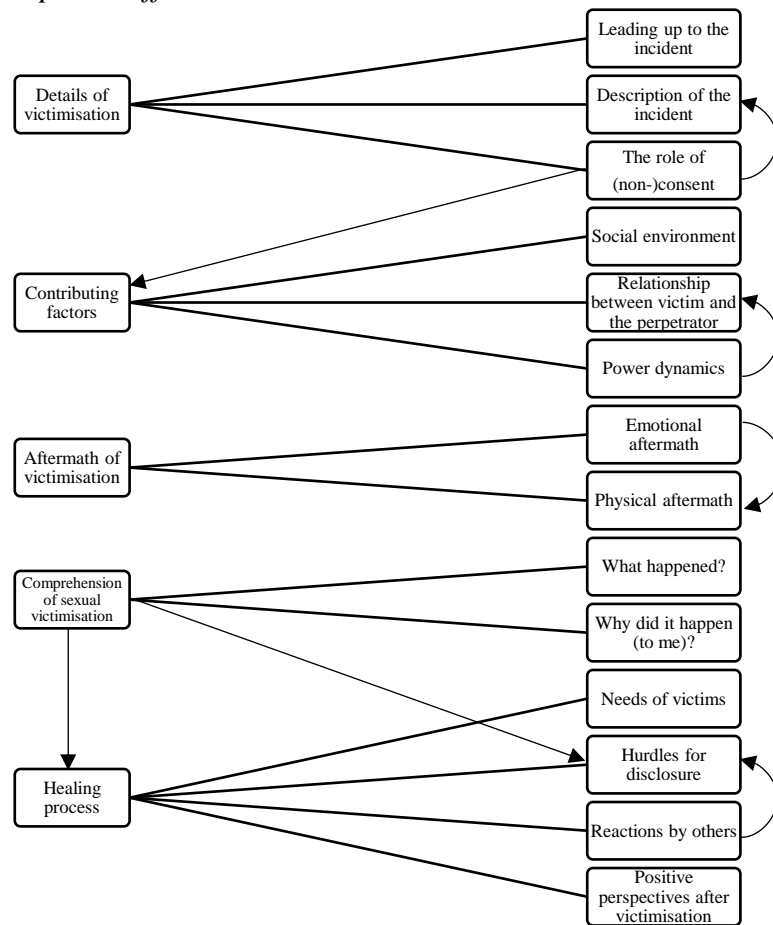
was visualised with “ggplot2” (Silge & Robinson, n.d.; Wickham et al., 2025). Microsoft Copilot 365 and Gemini 2.0 Flash were used to assist in writing code. All codes written and data used can be found in a corresponding GitHub repository (see Islam, 2025).

#### **4.1 Ethical considerations**

This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Board of the Faculty of Law and Criminology of Ghent University (Faculty of Law and Criminology Ethics Board approval granted on November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024). Ethical considerations that remained important for reflection included the fact that, although the data was openly available, it concerned sensitive topics and was produced by a sensitive population (see e.g., Gallagher et al., 2019). This was mainly important to keep in mind during the qualitative analysis and interpretation of both the qualitative and quantitative data afterwards. Additionally, poems have now been included in this study, resulting in a permanent online record. This issue was addressed through ensuring participants’ anonymity. Names and pseudonyms of writers, as well as poem titles have not been included in this article. Instead, the ranking number based on a poem’s order in the Excel data file has been used.

### **5 RESULTS THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

Five overarching themes emerged from the thematic analysis: details of the victimisation, contributing factors, aftermath of victimisation, comprehension of sexual victimisation, and healing process. Overlap of themes showcases complexity and interconnectedness. This is illustrated in Figure 1, in which it is shown that sub-themes description of the incident and the role of non-consent are related to each other, as well as power dynamics and the relationship between victim and perpetrator. The emotional aftermath can be said to manifest in physical consequences, while reactions from others may create additional barriers for disclosure, which is illustrated as well. Furthermore, an individual’s understanding and comprehension of sexual victimisation appears to play a role in their healing process.

**Figure 1***Themes: overlap and differences*

*Note.* Arrows indicate interconnectedness.

### 5.1 Details of victimisation

Writers often described their victimisation experience in graphic detail. The theme *details of victimisation* capture factual descriptions of incidents, excluding authors' understanding of whether what happened qualifies as sexual victimisation. Two sub-themes were identified. The first, *leading up to the incident*, includes events that occurred just before the sexual victimisation. Writers described various settings, such as bars, bedrooms, and gardens, where they were with the perpetrator right before they were sexually victimised. These scenes often involved casual interactions such as small talk or laughter, sometimes accompanied by alcohol use. Such descriptions highlight the diverse and often disarming contexts in which sexual victimisation occurs, as reflected in the line "you'll never see it coming" (Poem 254). The second sub-theme, *description of the incident*, includes what happened once sexual victimisation began. Writers shared both their own behaviour and thoughts, and the perpetrators' behaviour. Common experiences include freezing, the inability to resist or fight back, struggling to breathe, and wanting to visually or aurally block out the experience. Some writers describe their physical reactions and attempts to fight back. Physical

pain and emotional distress were commonly mentioned. This underscores the different bodily reactions one can experience during sexual victimisation. Many poems focused on the perpetrator's behaviour, often describing forceful actions and a disregard for explicit or implicit signs of non-consent, such as "force their way in" (Poem 2142):

you were  
Kneeling over my numb body  
and a feeling of pain  
As you push yourself up against me  
And that's when I felt cold.  
(Poem 254)

Some writers described their victimisation graphically and explicitly, which can be illustrated through the following quote:

Brutality thrashed me upon my belly knocking out my teeth into voiceless silence. I felt the heat of Savagery's edged semen falling onto my back. Joining in on the saturation, Brutality saddled my frame in preparation. Its massive punishment felt sliding between spine and flesh. My hair fisted and reined, yanked so severely that it became masterly in tune with his stride, where only guttural syllables was heard from my demise to their pleasure.  
(Poem 2291)

Writers also reflected on the role of *(non-)consent* during their victimisation experience. Expressions of non-consent ranged from explicit refusals (e.g., saying "no") to more implicit cues such as signs of pain or use of body language, including shaking or fighting back. In cases where consent was given, it was often described as reluctant, uninformed, or constrained by an inability to say no. This sub-theme is closely linked to the description of the victimisation but focuses specifically on how consent—or the lack thereof—was communicated and experienced. It highlights the complexity of consent in sexual victimisation experiences and the varied ways victims attempt to express resistance.

## 5.2 Contributing factors

The analysis identified several factors that may increase a person's risk of experiencing sexual victimisation. These were grouped into three sub-themes: the victim's social environment prior to victimisation, their relationship with the perpetrator, and the power dynamics involved. The social environment sub-theme includes situations that may predispose someone for future sexual victimisation. For example, some writers described growing up in abusive households, as reflected in lines such as: "that house was a nightmare itself" (Poem 2919). Other references included financial instability, such as "unpaid bills" (Poem 2954), and

parental substance abuse. One writer also mentions parental complicity in sexual victimisation by a neighbour, highlighting how unsafe environments can contribute to vulnerability:

how could they  
not see the lifeless 7 year old  
who returned home that day  
how could they let me into that house  
(Poem 523)

Others, however, described being unable to recognise their experiences as sexual victimisation due to the safe and supportive environment they grew up in:

How was I supposed to know, when all I have ever known was love?  
(Poem 2766)

The *relationship between victim and perpetrator* also played a role. Perpetrators were both known and unknown to the victims, as indicated by references to individuals such as a “person from the bar”, as well as “(grand)fathers” and “(best) friends”. Writers frequently described false pretences of love, trust, and safety, dynamics that made sexual victimisation more difficult to recognise or resist:

The tears you cry, the screams you try to muffle as you realize the ones  
who should protect you  
Are the ones who make you run; run far, far away, but where?  
(Poem 3249)

These relationships often made it difficult for victims to leave abusive situations. Writers reflected on past connections with perpetrators, expressing difficulty in feeling anger or hatred. This may have contributed to prolonged abuse and challenges in processing afterwards.

Some poems explicitly address *power dynamics*. One writer, for instance, mentioned oppression and misogyny explicitly (Poem 2291), while others described the perpetrator’s dominance or their own vulnerability. A few captured the relational dynamic itself, such as being the “puppet led by the same puppeteer” (Poem 2570). Other power imbalances were implied, such as references to “(teenage) girls” and “(young) boys”, suggesting age-based vulnerability, while mentions of female victims and male perpetrators highlighted gendered power imbalances. For example, one writer describes the perpetrator as a “strong, tall male” (Poem 1145), underscoring the physical and symbolic imbalance of power.

### 5.3 Aftermath of victimisation

The analysis revealed a clear theme around life after victimisation. Writers described both emotional and physical consequences, though these were not always clearly distinguished. Pain, for example, was frequently mentioned without further details. Common emotional consequences included low self-worth, fear, anxiety, sadness, depression, suicidal ideation, and flashbacks. Many expressed a sense of no longer being the same person, with one writer even thanking their perpetrator for “making me this crazy, \*\*\*\*\* person I am today” (Poem 624). Some experiences, such as discomfort with physical touch, reflected both emotional and physical consequences. Other physical effects included sleep disturbances and lasting bodily injuries. Certain coping mechanisms also reflected the physical aftermath of victimisation. One writer, for example, describes how they “destroyed themselves” and “ripped themselves open to know it was real” (Poem 49). Although these coping mechanisms require an active role, they stem directly from the emotional trauma and were therefore included in this theme.

### 5.4 Comprehension of sexual victimisation

This theme captures the questions and internal struggles victims face when trying to make sense of their sexual victimisation experiences. The first sub-theme, *What happened?*, reflects the difficulty many victims have in recognising and labelling their experiences as sexual victimisation. Writers often expressed uncertainty about what exactly occurred and whether it qualified as sexual victimisation. Doubts about memory and self-perception were common. Some writers questioned whether what happened to them could be considered sexual victimisation because “it was at first what I wanted” (Poem 2906), while others admitted to consciously avoiding the label altogether:

To even think of it  
As \*\*\*\*\*  
Is to give it a name, to  
Make it tangible and real when  
I just want to forget.  
(Poem 432)

The second sub-theme explores victims’ struggle to understand why the victimisation occurred and why they were targeted: *Why did it happen (to me)?* Writers offered both internal and external explanations, touching on mental and physical aspects. Self-blame was common. Sometimes it was stated explicitly, other times it was implied. Some writers, for instance, expressed regret for trusting the perpetrator or for not resisting. Others clearly placed responsibility on the perpetrator, freeing themselves from blame. These different perspectives reflect the complex sense-making process victims undergo as they try to understand the causes and meaning of their victimisation.

## 5.5 Healing process

The *healing process* theme captures the active efforts victims and their environments make to cope with and recover from sexual victimisation. Unlike the aftermath of victimisation theme, which focuses on the consequences of victimisation, this theme highlights victims' needs and the challenges faced in moving forward. The first sub-theme focuses on *victims' needs*. Writers expressed a desire to disclose their experiences and talk about the incident. They also voiced a longing for freedom, peace, love, and emotional support. Being believed and supported by others is also frequently mentioned as a positive contribution to the healing process, and has therefore been included as a core need in this process:

They are the ones I can only care about  
 And who only care about me  
 I can't feel myself drowning  
 When I am near them  
 (Poem 3286)

Writers also described several obstacles in their healing process, captured in the second sub-theme: *hurdles for disclosure*. These included both explicit and implicit barriers. Some struggled to label their experience as sexual victimisation or remained in denial, making it difficult to speak out. This highlights the connection between the sense-making process covered in the *comprehension of sexual victimisation* theme and the ability to disclose. Others explicitly mentioned fear of judgment as a reason for staying silent.

The third sub-theme, *reactions by others*, reflects how external responses shaped victims' experiences. Negative reactions, such as not being believed, feeling misunderstood, or being blamed, were commonly reported. Broader societal issues, such as rape culture, also contributed to feelings of isolation. Positive reactions, though mentioned less frequently, included feeling supported and validated by others.

A fourth sub-theme, *positive perspectives after victimisation*, emerged from a minority of poems. Some writers describe personal growth or clarity gained through their sexual victimisation experiences. One thanked the perpetrator for helping them "cut out toxicity" (Poem 334) and realise who they could rely on. Other writers did not go as far as to thank the perpetrator, but did keep a positive attitude after their victimisation. They wrote about their ability to overcome the traumatic event and stated they will survive, with one stating "I thank God for saving me" (Poem 41).

Beyond personal healing, some writers extended support to others. One acknowledged the urge to "hide under a rock, to block out the world, to wish it away" (Poem 3249), but encouraged others to face the next day. Another urged readers to "shout it loud across the lands, if they think something is wrong" (Poem

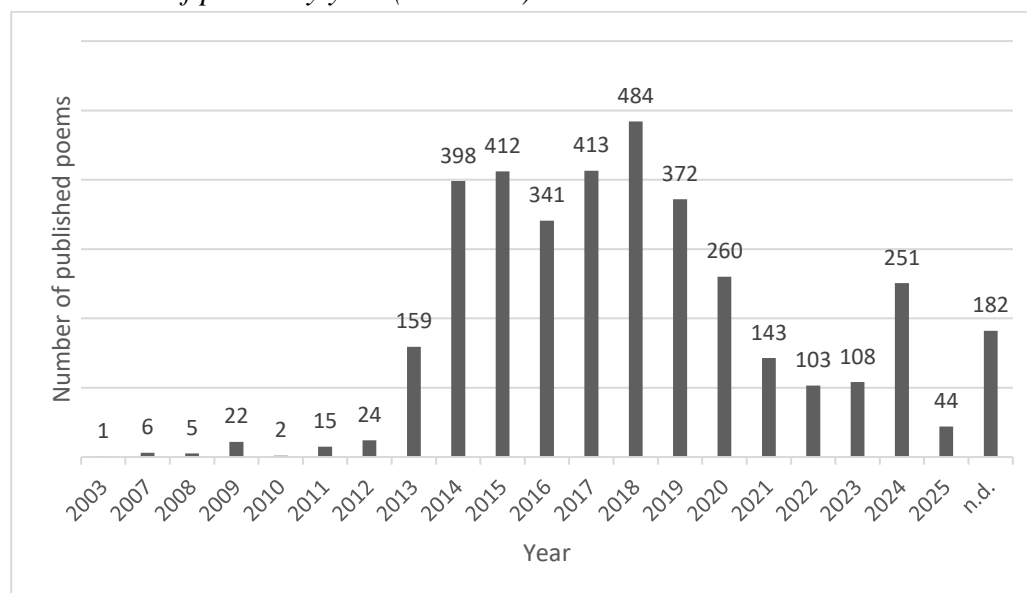
2509). These examples show how poetry becomes a space for self-expression as well as solidarity and encouragement.

## 6 RESULTS LDA TOPIC MODEL

Poems were written by many different authors. A total of 2,371 authors specified a name or pseudonym. Additionally, 148 poems were written by people who used “anonymous” as a pseudonym and 21 poems were written by someone who did not disclose their name or use a pseudonym. Poems were published between 2003 and 2025 (see Figure 2). A trend of increasing publications is visible from 2013, after which publication decreased in 2019. Most poems (484) were published in 2018 and only one poem was published in 2003. No publication date was provided for 182 poems.

**Figure 2**

*Publication of poems by year (n = 3745)*



### 6.1 Topics

Table 2 presents an overview of the 35 identified topics, along with the top five terms associated with each. These topics reflect a range of perspectives on sexual violence. Some address broader cultural contexts, such as injustice (Topic 1) and rape culture (Topic 30), while others focus on personal situations, such as home and family (Topics 9 and 21). Several topics relate to healing, including themes of renewal and empowerment through personal growth (Topics 2 and 5). Reactions from others also emerge, both positive (Topic 20) and dismissive (Topic 27). Additional topics explore the victimisation itself and contributing factors, such as appearance (Topic 3) and the absence of consent (Topic 7). The model’s coherence score was 0.101, indicating limited similarity among topic terms.

**Table 2***Topics and top five associated terms*

Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5
Injustice to rape victims	New life	Appearance	Body parts	Revenge by becoming better
Rape	Life	Eyes	Hands	Love
People	Day	Red	Skin	Kind
World	Will	Blue	Body	Beautiful
Victim	One	Hair	Lips	Poem
Victims	See	Black	Mouth	Write
Topic 6	Topic 7	Topic 8	Topic 9	Topic 10
Sadness	Non-consent	Life after rape	Home as scene of sexual violence	Silenced
Pain	Stop	Years	One	Want
Tears	Please	One	Room	Just
Cry	Back	Old	Eyes	Say
Blood	Feel	Still	Night	Can
Eyes	Hands	Two	Now	See
Topic 11	Topic 12	Topic 13	Topic 14	Topic 15
Gender inequality	Ignored non-consent	Hating perpetrator	(Im)purity	School
Man	Say	Will	Yet	School
Men	Said	Never	Now	Friends
Women	Yes	Know	Never	Day
Woman	Ask	Hate	Man	First
Without	Maybe	Pain	Rose	Friend
Topic 16	Topic 17	Topic 18	Topic 19	Topic 20
Giving in	Victim's body	Shame of victimisation	Unsafe children	Care and support
Said	Blood	Shame	Child	Life
Tried	Skin	Truth	Will	Self
Took	Flesh	Time	Evil	Others
Felt	Fire	Words	Hell	Well
Wanted	Dead	Pain	God	Now
Topic 21	Topic 22	Topic 23	Topic 24	Topic 25
Family	Escape	Innocent children	Used body	Acceptance
Mother	Run	Girl	Body	Just
Father	Away	Little	Took	Get
Man	Behind	Child	Now	Now
Never	Find	Young	Left	Know
Daddy	Way	Boy	Broken	Ill

Topic 26 Pretence of love	Topic 27 Feeling misunderstood	Topic 28 Memories	Topic 29 Inability to heal	Topic 30 Rape culture
Love	Know	Remember	Time	Will
Told	Just	Still	Still	Boys
Never	One	Night	Times	Girls
Loved	Feel	Body	Ever	Men
Wanted	Think	Bed	First	Fault
Topic 31 Depression	Topic 32 Nature	Topic 33 Apologies	Topic 34 (Un)safe home	Topic 35 Comprehension
Night	Sun	Sorry	Home	Can
Light	Wind	Say	Door	Never
Dark	Sky	Get	Walk	Will
Soul	Trees	Just	House	Speak
Darkness	Woods	Even	Car	Voice

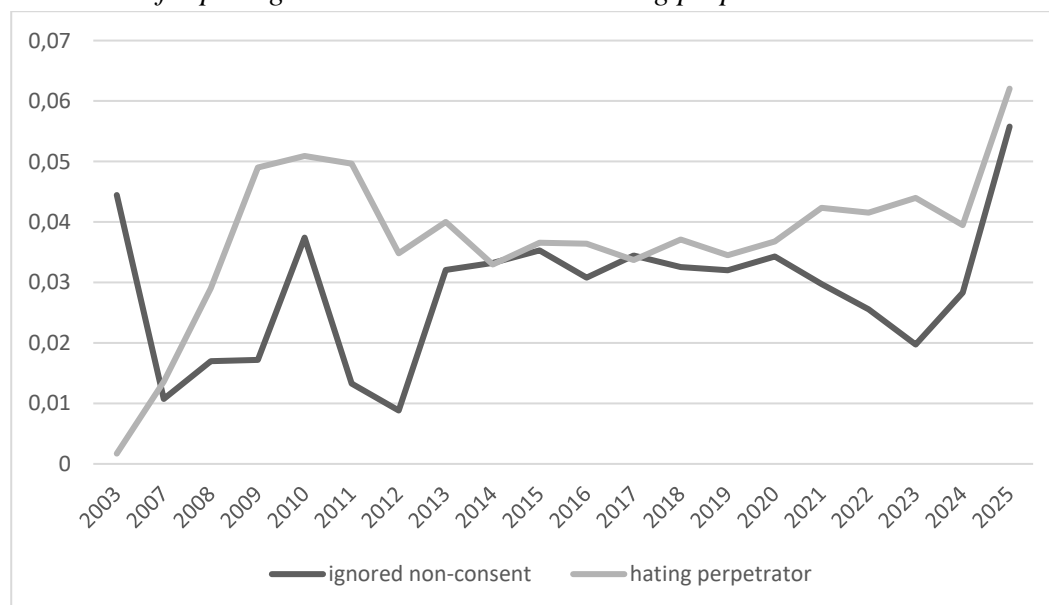
Note. Topics are presented in no particular order. Topic terms are presented in order of relevance.

### 6.2 Evolution of topics

Topic evolution over time was examined by plotting each topic’s relative yearly prevalence. Many topics peaked between 2007 and 2012, followed by a decline and subsequent stabilisation (see Figures A1-A7 in Appendix). While no single topic showed a distinct long-term trend, two topics (Topic 12: Ignored Non-Consent, and Topic 13: Hating Perpetrator) have shown a recent increase in prevalence (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Evolution of topics ignored non-consent and hating perpetrator*



## 7 INTEGRATION OF ANALYSES

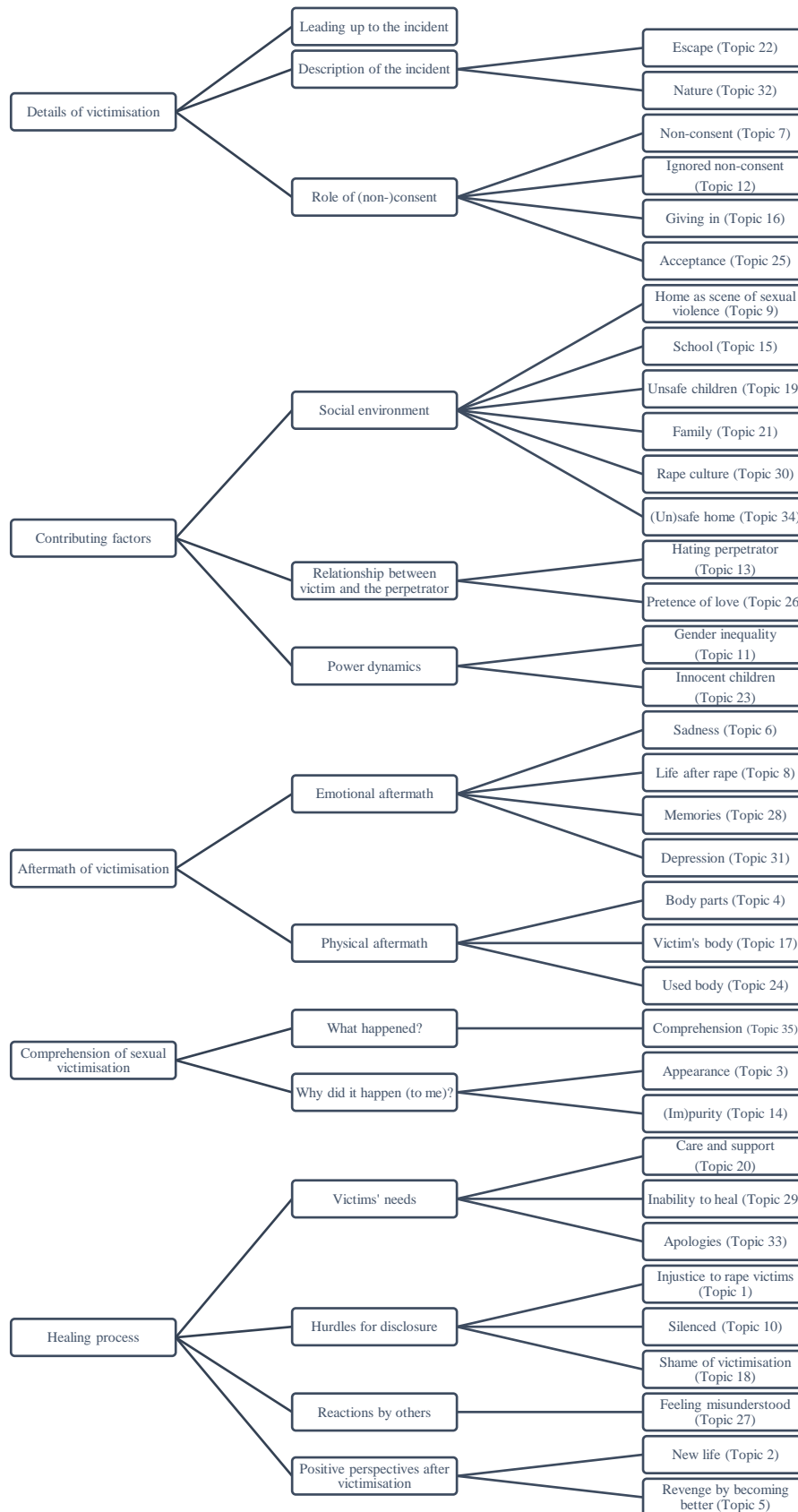
Integrating the thematic analysis with the topic model reveals strong alignment between the two. The topics identified through topic modelling map clearly on the themes and sub-themes initially established in the thematic analysis. All topics appear to form several groups that could be organised under the overarching themes identified through the thematic analysis, and illustrate the different dimensions of themes and sub-themes.

The multidimensionality of the theme of victimisation is reflected in and illustrated by topics such as escape and nature (Topics 22 and 32), which describe details of the incident, and topics related to consent (Topics 12, 16 and 25), which explore the *role of (non-)consent*. The theme *contributing factors* is illustrated by topics related to one's social environment, as well as the relationship with the perpetrator, and broader power dynamics. Topics include unsafe children (Topic 19), family (Topic 21), rape culture (Topic 30), and (un)safe home (Topic 34), hating perpetrator (Topic 13), and false pretence of love (Topic 26) gender inequality (Topic 11), and innocent children (Topic 23).

The *aftermath of victimisation* theme is illustrated through topics related to the emotional aftermath, such as sadness (Topic 6), life after rape (Topic 8), memories (Topic 28), and depression (Topic 31), and physical aftermath. The physical aftermath is illustrated through body-related topics (Topics 4, 17, and 24). The theme *comprehension of sexual victimisation* includes topics that capture comprehension (Topic 35), appearance (Topic 3), and (im)purity (Topic 14).

The *healing process* theme is covered by a variety of topics, including topics on care and support (Topic 20), inability to heal (Topic 29), and apologies (Topic 33), which reflect the sub-theme *victims' needs*. Injustice to rape victims (Topic 1), silenced (Topic 10), and shame of victimisation (Topic 18), highlight the *hurdles for disclosure* sub-theme, while feeling misunderstood (Topic 27) illustrates other's reactions. Finally, new life (Topic 2), and revenge by becoming better (Topic 5) illustrate the *positive perspectives after victimisation*.

**Figure 4**  
Thematic analysis x LDA topic model



## 8 DISCUSSION

This study used analysis of online poetry published online between 2003 and 2025 to examine experiences of sexual victimisation. A qualitative thematic analysis was performed on a random sample of 50 poems, followed by a quantitative LDA topic model applied to 3,745 poems. A trend analysis was then performed to assess changes in topic prevalence over time.

The thematic analysis revealed five overarching themes: details of victimisation, contributing factors, aftermath of victimisation, comprehension of sexual victimisation, and healing process. The topic model uncovered both cultural dimensions, such as rape culture (Topic 30), and personal dimensions, such as family dynamics (Topic 21), affecting victimisation experiences. Although some topics peaked between 2007 and 2012, the trend analysis revealed no consistent patterns over time. This would suggest that little to no cultural changes regarding sexual victimisation narratives have taken place over time. The small number of poems found before 2013, however, should be taken into account. It remains possible that the poems analysed were unable to capture cultural trends in society. Collectively, these findings illustrate that writers address a wide range of experiences related to sexual victimisation, ranging from the incident itself to its long-term impact. They also emphasise the interaction between the broader cultural, and social context with personal dimensions of sexual victimisation experiences, which is illustrated in for example the sub-theme *social environment* and topics injustice to rape victims (Topic 1) and gender inequality (Topic 11).

The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings demonstrated alignment. The thematic analysis adds nuance to the topic model, such as showing how both supportive and harmful family environments can affect victimisation which allows for contextualisation of family-related topics (e.g., Topic 21). Moreover, it provides for a deeper understandings of topics evoked. Topics regarding consent, or absence thereof, (Topics, 7, 12, 16, and 25) can for instance be explained through a victim's inability to resist, as found in the sub-theme *role of (non-) consent*. The topic model provides quantitative support for the thematic analysis, by revealing different facets of the themes found in the thematic analysis. For example, sadness (Topic 6) and depression (Topic 31) reflect the emotional aftermath of victimisation, a sub-theme of the *aftermath of victimisation* theme that emerged from the thematic analysis. Topics non-consent (Topic 7), ignored non-consent (Topic 12), giving in (Topic 16), and acceptance (Topic 25) illustrate different facets of the *role of (non-)consent*, a subtheme of *details of victimisation*. Other examples of topics providing quantitative support for themes found, include gender inequality (Topic 11), illustrating gendered *power dynamics* and comprehension (Topic 35), showing support for the theme *comprehension of sexual abuse*. Topic revenge by becoming better (Topic 5) shows support for the health benefits of writing poetry, as topic terms related to this emerge. This topic can also be said to illustrate the theme about the *healing process*. Together, the mixed-methods approach offers a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of

sexual victimisation, illustrating the value of combining poetic expression with scientific analysis.

This study carries implications for application of artistic inquiry in criminological research and our understanding of sexual victimisation. First, the findings demonstrate that poetry can be a meaningful research tool that offers unique insights not typically found in other forms of victim disclosure. Themes such as the *details of victimisation* and *contributing factors*, which are less prominent in analyses of non-poetic narratives (see Fawcett & Shreshta, 2016; Pollino, 2023; Riggs, 2021), emerged clearly in this study. These themes reveal intimate details of sexual violence. These details provide insight into and a factual perspective of incidents. Disclosure of graphic details of incidents, for example, provides insight into the actual circumstances during sexual violence. A potential explanation for the novelty of these themes follows from the ability to disclose indirectly through poetry (Arcilla, 2024; Basu, 2022). This might lower the threshold for disclosure, allowing one to tell graphic details that do not fit everyday language. This supports trauma theorists' claims that new knowledge can emerge through poetry (Caruth, 1996/2016; Pederson, 2014). As poetry is said to act as a strong medium for raising non-dominant voices (Walker, 2018), and viral movements are critiqued for not including these voices enough (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019), inclusion of poetry facilitates a more diverse representation of sexual victimisation. Through use of poetry among other sources, more different perspectives and voices are considered, providing a more complete picture of experiences. The topic model also revealed the interplay of individual and cultural dimensions of victimisation, reinforcing the importance of considering cultural contexts as emphasised in cultural poetics (Webster, 2015). While it can be argued that art and science should remain separate (Braund & Reiss, 2019; Gould, 2023), this study illustrates how poetry can enrich criminological inquiry, particularly on sensitive and complex topics such as sexual victimisation. The implication that follows from this finding is that analysing poetry in criminology allows for valuable insights that might otherwise be dismissed, by enabling the disclosure of difficult experiences.

As all research, this study has limitations. First, it included both poems where victimisation was explicitly stated and those where it was not. This approach aimed to capture a broader range of voices and to build a richer dataset for quantitative analyses. However, it also introduced the possibility of including poems written by non-victims (see e.g., Moore, 2022), which may distort the representation of lived experiences as no actual victimisation has taken place in these instances. Second, the search terms used may not have fully captured hidden communities or more subtle forms of online disclosure. Victims may share their experiences in coded or censored ways, making them harder to identify through keyword searches. This could result in certain voices and experiences not being represented in the dataset, limiting the external validity of the findings. Third, a temporal bias was present, as only a low number of poems was found up until 2013. This results in the fact that trends in early years need to be interpreted with

caution, as minimal data was available to draw conclusions. Future research could address these limitations by focusing only on poems where victimisation is explicitly stated and by using ethnographic methods to better understand how hidden communities disclose their experiences. This could help refine data collection and improve the accuracy and depth of future studies.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights into victims' experiences and online disclosure. Sexual victimisation is often accompanied by shame, making disclosure difficult. Relying solely on official statistics to understand, prevent, and respond to sexual victimisation is therefore insufficient. Poetry offers an alternative lens that allows for indirect disclosure and expression beyond everyday language. It creates space for voices that are often hidden or marginalised, enriching our understanding of sexual victimisation. This study demonstrates the value of moving beyond dominant narratives and highlights the potential of poetry as a meaningful tool in sexual violence research.

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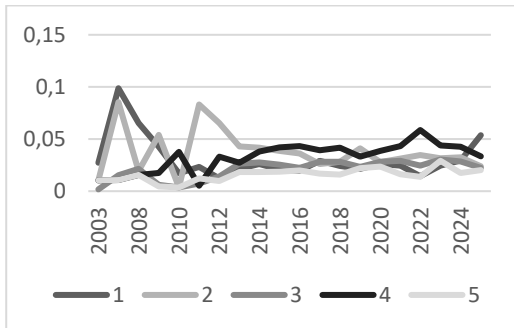
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## APPENDIX

### Evolution topics LDA topic model

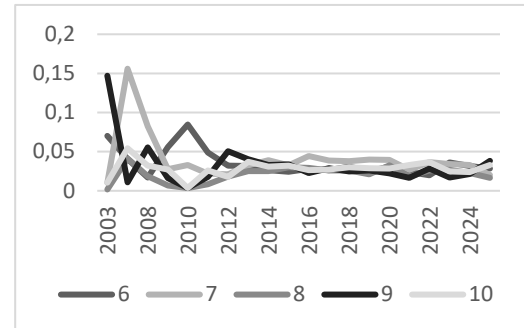
**Figure A1**

*Evolution topic 1 to 5*



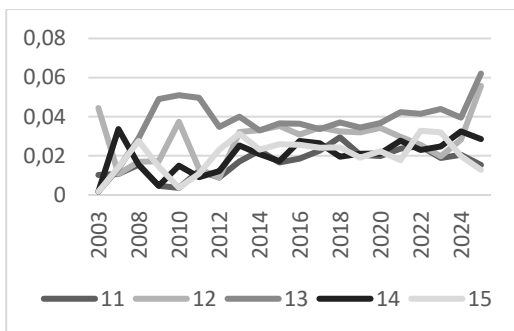
**Figure A2**

*Evolution topic 6 to 10*



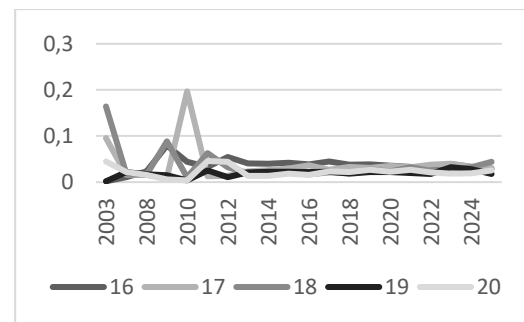
**Figure A3**

*Evolution topic 11 to 15*



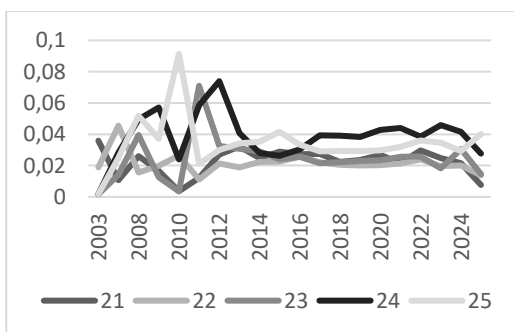
**Figure A4**

*Evolution topic 16 to 20*



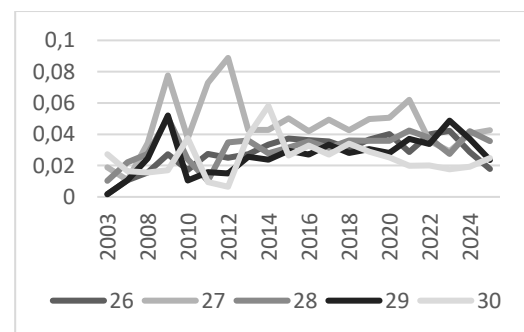
**Figure A5**

*Evolution topic 21 to 25*



**Figure A6**

*Evolution topic 25 to 30*



**Figure A7**

*Evolution topic 31 to 35*

