

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth After Sexual Trauma: A Bibliometric Review

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Sexual trauma is a pervasive global issue with profound psychological consequences. While extensive research has examined these outcomes individually, a comprehensive mapping of how resilience and posttraumatic growth (PTG) feature within this literature remains underexplored. **Objective:** This bibliometric review aims to systematically map global scholarly output on sexual trauma in relation to resilience and PTG, identifying key contributors, thematic trends, influential works, and knowledge gaps across the academic landscape. **Methods:** A total of 213 documents published between 1993 and 2025 were retrieved from the Scopus database using a title-based search strategy. After screening and removing 8 duplicates or irrelevant records, 205 documents were retained for bibliometric analysis. The data were analysed with biblioMagika®. Citation metrics, keyword co-occurrence, and authorship patterns were evaluated to map intellectual and thematic structures. **Results:** The analysis revealed a steady growth in publication volume over the past two decades, with psychology (58.54%), medicine (48.29%), and social sciences (33.66%) as the dominant disciplines. “Resilience” emerged as the most frequently occurring and cited keyword, followed by “child sexual abuse,” “sexual violence,” and “posttraumatic growth.” Influential contributors and institutions were largely concentrated in high-income countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, with limited representation from low- and middle-income regions. Citation analysis revealed a growing focus on strengths-based frameworks, such as self-efficacy and community resilience. **Conclusion:** This review highlights an evolving shift from deficit-focused trauma models toward resilience and recovery-oriented paradigms. Despite increased scholarly attention, critical gaps remain in geographical diversity, intersectionality, and longitudinal methodologies. These findings offer strategic direction for future research, particularly in advancing trauma-informed care, culturally sensitive interventions, and policy reform.

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual trauma continues to pose a serious threat to both public health systems and the criminal justice sector, demanding multifaceted responses from policy-makers,

clinicians, and legal authorities (1). Notably, its incidence escalates within settings of sociopolitical unrest, where systemic instability tends to erode legal protections and heighten vulnerabilities (2). Within such vulnerable environments, acts of sexual aggression (ranging from coerced sexual initiation to rape) are not only common but also carry enduring psychological and physiological consequences, including compromised mental health and maladaptive stress regulation mechanisms (3). Evidence further suggests that individuals exposed to profound life stressors, such as sexual violence,

frequently present with symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress, indicating a disruption in psychological well-being (4). Importantly, the presence of PTSD symptomatology following sexual assault has been empirically associated with elevated risks of suicidal ideation, highlighting the need for early psychological intervention (5).

Traumatic experiences often precipitate profound psychological and somatic distress, reflecting the complex relationship between external events and internal coping mechanisms (2). Cognitive responses following trauma, particularly those involving shame, fear, and self-blame, have consistently been associated with detrimental psychological outcomes, reinforcing the view that such cognitions may exacerbate the negative sequelae of trauma exposure (3). For instance, male survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) commonly encounter crises related to their sexuality and gender identity. These individuals may internalise self-blame for their perceived failure to prevent the abuse, a response frequently shaped by dominant sociocultural narratives that equate masculinity with strength and the ability to physically resist assault (4). Despite the well-established links between sexual victimisation and a wide spectrum of adverse physical and mental health outcomes, it is important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of survivor trajectories. A considerable number of individuals demonstrate resilience and ultimately lead functional, fulfilling lives without significant long-term impairments (1).

Despite a substantial and growing body of research on sexual trauma, resilience, and posttraumatic growth, there remains a lack of systematic synthesis capturing how these areas interconnect within the academic literature. The interdisciplinary nature of this research (spanning psychology, psychiatry, trauma studies, social work, and gender-based violence) often results in fragmented findings and limited cross-disciplinary integration. This fragmentation hampers the accumulation of coherent knowledge, the translation of research into practice, and the development of comprehensive policy responses. Notably, the absence of bibliometric analyses in this field restricts our understanding of key contributors, thematic patterns, and emerging trends, thereby impeding efforts to coordinate global research, enhance clinical interventions, and guide future inquiry.

To address this gap, the present study applies a bibliometric approach to map the global scholarly output on sexual trauma with a specific focus on resilience and posttraumatic growth. It aims to identify leading

authors, journals, institutions, and countries shaping the field, as well as the most cited works and influential themes. Specifically, this review addresses the following questions: (1) How has publication volume evolved over time? (2) Who are the most prolific and influential authors, and what topics do they emphasize? (3) Which journals, institutions, and countries contribute most significantly? (4) What documents receive the highest citations, and what core issues do they address? (5) What are the dominant and emerging keywords within this domain? By answering these questions, this study seeks to illuminate the field's intellectual structure and inform future research, practice, and policy directions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Search Strategy

This study used the Scopus database to retrieve and map the global scholarly output on resilience and posttraumatic growth among survivors of sexual trauma. Scopus was selected due to its comprehensive peer-reviewed coverage and suitability for bibliometric analysis. A systematic search of article titles was conducted on May 29, 2025, using the following search string:

TITLE((resilience* OR "mental toughness" OR adaptability OR hardiness OR "bounce back ability" OR "stress resistance" OR "recovery capacity" OR resiliency OR "posttraumatic growth" OR "post-traumatic growth" OR "self-efficacy" OR grit OR "sense of coherence" OR thriving OR resourcefulness OR "positive adaptation" OR "psychological flexibility") AND ("sexual trauma" OR "sexual abuse" OR "sexual assault" OR rape OR "childhood sexual abuse" OR "sexual violence")).

No restrictions were applied regarding language, source type, document type, or subject area. The publication time frame was set from 1993 to 2025.

Data Collection

The search initially yielded 213 records. These documents were screened for relevance by reviewing titles and abstracts. After removing 8 documents due to duplication or irrelevance to the core topic, a total of 205 records were retained for bibliometric analysis. No language restrictions were applied during the search process; however, all 205 retained records were published in English as indexed by Scopus. Figure 1 presents the flow diagram of the search and screening process, adapted from Punj et al. (2021) and Moher et al. (2009) (5, 6).

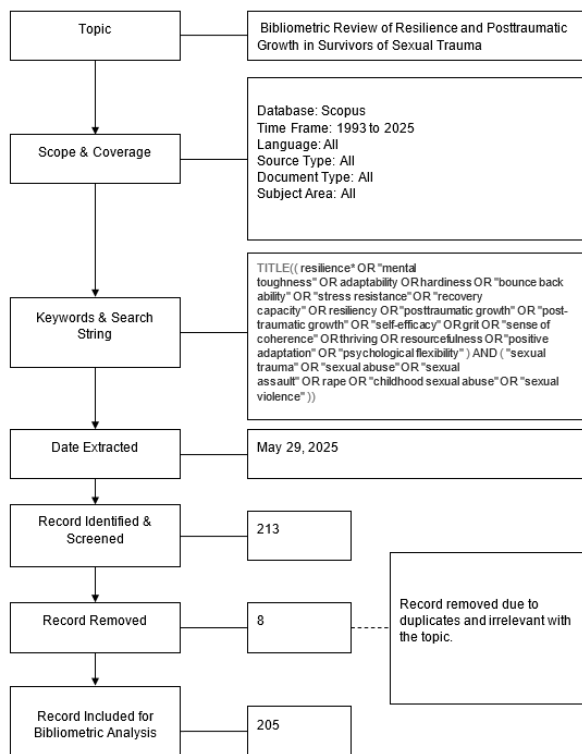


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the search strategy. Source: Punj et al. (2021), Moher et al. (2009)

Data Cleaning and Harmonisation

The final dataset was exported in .csv format from Scopus and cleaned manually. Duplicate entries and irrelevant items were removed. Author names, institutional affiliations, and country information were standardised using OpenRefine’s clustering functions. Keyword harmonisation was also performed to merge semantically similar terms (e.g., “posttraumatic growth” vs. “post-traumatic growth”) (7, 8).

Tools

Descriptive analysis and visualisation were conducted using biblioMagika®, an Excel-based tool for bibliometric preprocessing and data presentation (9, 10).

Table II: Impacts of Publications

Most Pro-ductive Authors	Author’s Name	Current Affiliation	Country	TP	TC	C/P	C/CP	h	g	m
	Clark, Janine Natalya	University of Birmingham	United Kingdom	10	58	5.80	6.44	5	7	0.625
	Fayaz, Irfan	O P Jindal Global University	India	4	6	1.50	3.00	2	2	1.000
	Singh, Anneliese A.	University of Georgia	United States	4	86	21.50	21.50	4	4	0.235
	Pereda, Noemí	Universidad de Barcelona	Spain	4	6	1.50	3.00	1	2	0.250
	Barrios, Maite	Universidad de Barcelona	Spain	3	6	2.00	3.00	1	2	0.250
	Feinauer, Leslie L.	Brigham Young University	United States	3	231	77.00	77.00	3	3	0.091

CONTINUE

RESULTS

Impacts and trends of publications

Table I shows the subject area distribution of research publications. Psychology leads with 58.54% of total output, followed by Medicine (48.29%) and Social Sciences (33.66%). This highlights the interdisciplinary nature of research on sexual trauma, posttraumatic growth, and resilience, spanning mental health, medical, and societal perspectives. Fields like Arts and Humanities, Nursing, and Neuroscience, though contributing smaller shares, reinforce the breadth of academic interest in trauma-related topics.

Table I. Subject Area

Subject Area	Total Publications	Percentage (%)
Psychology	120	58.54%
Medicine	99	48.29%
Social Sciences	69	33.66%
Arts and Humanities	19	9.27%
Nursing	15	7.32%
Health Professions	5	2.44%
Neuroscience	5	2.44%
Environmental Science	4	1.95%
Computer Science	1	0.49%

Table II summarizes the most productive authors, institutions, and source titles. Janine Natalya Clark from the University of Birmingham is the most prolific author with 10 publications and a total of 58 citations. However, Leslie L. Feinauer and Zraly Maggie demonstrated higher impact with citation-per-publication (C/P) rates of 77.00 and 55.33, respectively. Among institutions, Boston University and Yale University both contributed 17 publications, with Boston University yielding the highest citation count (849) and average citations per paper (49.94). These metrics underscore the institutional concentration of influential research outputs.

Table II: Impacts of Publications

Most Productive Authors	Author's Name	Current Affiliation	Country	TP	TC	C/P	C/CP	h	g	m
	DiLillo, David	University of Nebraska-Lincoln	United States	3	18	6.00	9.00	2	3	0.400
	Mahoney, Colin T.	University of Colorado	United States	3	65	21.67	21.67	3	3	0.429
	Zraly, Maggie	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)	Denmark	3	166	55.33	55.33	3	3	0.188
	Hibert, Martine	Université du Québec à Montréal	Canada	3	78	26.00	39.00	2	3	0.167
Most productive institutions	Affiliation		Country	TP	TC	C/P	C/CP	h	g	m
	Boston University		United States	17	13	849	49.94	65.31	13	17
	Yale University		United States	17	17	546	32.12	32.12	11	17
	University of California		United States	15	15	332	22.13	22.13	7	15
	Sanatorio Franchin		Argentina	14	0	0	0.00	0.00	0	0
	University of Birmingham		United Kingdom	13	12	223	17.15	18.58	7	13
	University of Nebraska		United States	12	10	126	10.50	12.60	5	11
	Pennsylvania State University		United States	11	7	14	1.27	2.00	2	3
	Tel Aviv University		Israel	10	10	215	21.50	21.50	5	10
	Université du Québec à Montréal		Canada	10	7	159	15.90	22.71	4	10
	University of Barcelona		Spain	10	6	18	1.80	3.00	3	4
Most active source titles	Title			TP	TC	C/P	C/CP	h	g	m
	Journal of Child Sexual Abuse			12	12	287	23.92	23.92	9	12
	Journal of Interpersonal Violence			11	10	85	7.73	8.50	6	9
	Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy			10	7	195	19.50	27.86	6	10
	Journal of Traumatic Stress			7	6	202	28.86	33.67	5	7
	Violence Against Women			6	6	94	15.67	15.67	4	6
	Child Abuse and Neglect			5	4	121	24.20	30.25	4	5
	Child Abuse Review			4	3	146	36.50	48.67	3	4
	Journal of Loss and Trauma			3	3	61	20.33	20.33	2	3
	Child Maltreatment			3	3	111	37.00	37.00	3	3
	Social Sciences			3	1	2	0.67	2.00	1	1

CONTINUE

Table II: Impacts of Publications

Top 20 highly cited articles	Title	Source Title	Cites	Cites Per Year
	Resilience in Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse: A Systematic Review of the Literature	Trauma, Violence, and Abuse	215	19.55
	Resilience factors associated with female survivors of childhood sexual abuse	American Journal of Family Therapy	178	5.39
	Trajectories of PTSD symptoms following sexual assault: Is resilience the modal outcome?	Journal of Traumatic Stress	117	8.36
	Resiliency determinants and resiliency processes among female adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse	Journal of Counseling and Development	109	5.45
	Don't let the suffering make you fade away: An ethnographic study of resilience among survivors of genocide-rape in southern Rwanda	Social Science and Medicine	107	6.69
	Military sexual trauma in US veterans: Results from the national health and resilience in veterans study	Journal of Clinical Psychiatry	99	8.25
	Factors promoting resilience following childhood sexual abuse: A structured, narrative review of the literature	Child Abuse Review	97	8.08
	Perceived stress and mental health: The mediating roles of social support and resilience among black women exposed to sexual violence	Journal of Affective Disorders	85	12.14
	A Review of Child Sexual Abuse: Impact, Risk, and Resilience in the Context of Culture	Journal of Child Sexual Abuse	82	10.25
	Posttraumatic growth and sexual violence: A literature review	Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma	78	7.80
	Correlates of posttraumatic growth in adult sexual assault victims	Traumatology	73	6.08
	Posttraumatic Growth among Women Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Its Relation to Cognitive Strategies, Posttraumatic Symptoms, and Resilience	Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy	69	6.90
	Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence: Prevalence, Risk, and Resiliency in Undergraduate Students	Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma	66	11.00
	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder/PTSD in adolescent victims of sexual abuse: Resilience and social support as protection factors	Ciencia e Saude Coletiva	65	5.42
	Multidimensional assessment of resilience in mothers who are child sexual abuse survivors	Child Abuse and Neglect	63	3.00
	Resilience among women survivors of child sexual abuse	Affilia - Journal of Women and Social Work	61	2.44
	Assessing resilience in adults with histories of childhood sexual abuse	American Journal of Orthopsychiatry	61	2.10
	Educational resilience among African survivors of child sexual abuse in South Africa	Journal of Black Studies	60	3.75
	Predicting Bystander Behavior to Prevent Sexual Assault on College Campuses: The Role of Self-Efficacy and Intent	American Journal of Community Psychology	58	5.27
	Posttraumatic growth among female survivors of childhood sexual abuse in relation to the perpetrator identity	Journal of Loss and Trauma	56	2.67

In terms of source titles, the Journal of Child Sexual Abuse was the most active with 12 papers and 287 citations, averaging 23.92 citations per article. Journal of Traumatic Stress and Child Maltreatment showed higher average citations, indicating strong impact despite fewer publications.

Keyword Analysis

Table III lists the most frequent and impactful keywords. "Resilience" is the top keyword in both frequency (76 occurrences) and citations (1446), reflecting a central research theme. "Child sexual abuse," "sexual violence,"

and "posttraumatic growth" also show high citation metrics, indicating their pivotal role in the literature. The presence of terms like "self-efficacy," "conflict-related sexual violence," and "social support" signals a growing emphasis on psychological mechanisms and protective factors in trauma recovery.

DISCUSSION

This bibliometric analysis provides the first comprehensive mapping of scholarly output examining the intersection of sexual trauma, resilience, and posttraumatic growth

Table III. Top 20 author keywords

Keywords	Total link strength	Occurrences	Citations	Avg. citations
Resilience	121	76	1446	19.026
Child sexual abuse	68	45	457	10.156
Sexual violence	66	38	1327	34.921
Posttraumatic growth	61	34	757	22.265
Sexual abuse	33	22	353	16.045
Trauma	42	21	653	31.095
Posttraumatic stress disorder	35	16	336	21.000
Self-efficacy	21	14	292	20.857
Women	24	10	144	14.400
Conflict-related sexual violence	18	10	207	20.700
Rape	17	8	166	20.750
Protective factors	17	7	32	4.571
Coping	20	7	116	16.571
Mental health	9	6	75	12.500
Depression	18	6	186	31.000
Prevention	8	5	98	19.600
Posttraumatic stress	9	5	235	47.000
Social support	9	5	12	2.400
Social ecologies	11	4	56	14.000
Sexuality	4	4	211	52.750

(PTG). The findings reflect a steadily growing academic interest in understanding how individuals recover, adapt, and even thrive following experiences of sexual trauma, particularly childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and conflict-related sexual violence. The keyword analysis confirms that “resilience” is the most prominent theme, appearing in 76 publications and garnering the highest total citation count (1,446). Closely aligned are terms such as “posttraumatic growth,” “self-efficacy,” and “social support,” suggesting a thematic shift toward positive psychological adaptations and protective factors in the aftermath of trauma. This shift marks a significant evolution in literature from early pathologising approaches toward frameworks that highlight survivors’ strengths and capacity for healing. The most highly cited studies underscore this transition. For example, the review titled “Resilience in Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse” received 215 citations, while articles on factors promoting PTG and self-efficacy consistently ranked among the top-cited works (11-19). These findings emphasise the centrality of protective processes such as coping skills, social support, and psychological flexibility in fostering recovery (20-29). The high citation rates of such works not only reflect academic interest but also signify their influence on policy and trauma-informed practice.

Geographically, the United States dominates scholarly contributions, with leading institutions such as Boston

University and Yale University producing high-impact work. However, emerging voices from Spain, Canada, and India indicate growing global engagement. Despite this, there remains an underrepresentation of research from low- and middle-income countries, where cultural perceptions, stigma, and systemic barriers may uniquely shape survivor experiences of trauma and recovery. From an authorship perspective, scholars such as Clark, Singh, and Feinauer stand out for their prolific and impactful work. Their contributions reflect a multidisciplinary lens, integrating insights from psychology, counseling, public health, and gender studies. Journals like *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, *Psychological Trauma*, and *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* have served as core platforms for disseminating this research, reflecting the field’s cross-disciplinary orientation.

Importantly, the analysis reveals that while trauma remains the focal point, research is increasingly exploring how survivors find meaning, reclaim agency, and reconstruct identity in the wake of sexual violence. Notably, terms such as “posttraumatic growth” and “self-efficacy” have gained traction in recent years, often in studies assessing recovery among female survivors, veterans, and marginalised populations. The emphasis on resilience and PTG is particularly visible in articles addressing military sexual trauma, genocide-related rape, and CSA, highlighting diverse survivor groups and cultural contexts.

While the adverse effects of childhood trauma are well-documented, emerging research highlights the potential for positive psychological transformation following such experiences (30). Traumatic events, rather than solely being sources of dysfunction, may serve as significant catalysts for change, facilitating opportunities for personal development and psychological resilience (31). In this regard, aversive life experiences have been linked to the emergence of personal growth, wherein individuals reframe their suffering into narratives of strength and transformation (32). This process, frequently termed posttraumatic growth (PTG), reflects adaptive strategies employed by victim/survivors that result in enhanced levels of functioning, autonomy, and self-awareness (1).

PTG is often characterized by the development of new meaning systems and the reconfiguration of self-perception, particularly among individuals who actively engage in meaning-making processes following trauma (3). Empirical evidence further indicates that, despite the severe psychological impact of sexual violence, many survivors not only recover on an individual level but also experience collective growth within their communities, suggesting a broader social dimension to trauma recovery (2). This growth may manifest in multiple domains, including enriched interpersonal relationships, expanded life possibilities, heightened appreciation for life, increased inner strength, and deepened spiritual or existential awareness (31). Such

findings challenge deficit-based models of trauma and emphasise the importance of incorporating resilience and strengths-based perspectives into community-based interventions.

Resilience has been identified as a key mediating factor in the development of posttraumatic growth (PTG) among individuals who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (30). Although widely studied, the concept of resilience remains multifaceted, with its definition and operationalisation often varying across disciplines and contexts (33, 34). One dominant perspective conceptualizes resilience as a form of psychological resistance to developmental risks across biological, psychological, and psychosocial domains (34). Alternatively, resilience is increasingly understood as the capacity to sustain or restore psychological well-being in the face of significant life challenges, including trauma, illness, and major transitions, while simultaneously fostering personal transformation and growth (35, 36).

Given its complex nature, understanding the mechanisms through which resilience facilitates adaptive functioning under emotionally demanding conditions is of paramount importance (36). In this context, resilience not only serves as a buffer against the detrimental impact of stressors but also represents a proactive strategy to prevent psychological exhaustion and promote flourishing in the aftermath of adversity (37). Interventions aimed at enhancing resilience have demonstrated the potential to help individuals reinterpret crises as opportunities for growth, allowing them to construct new meanings and narratives around their experiences. These cognitive and emotional processes are central to the emergence of PTG, which functions as a higher-order psychological adaptation that may significantly enhance overall quality of life (30).

Although posttraumatic growth (PTG) is often viewed as a compelling and constructive outcome of trauma, it is imperative to clarify that psychological growth should not be romanticised as a natural consequence of trauma exposure (2). Trauma itself is inherently damaging, and growth should never be interpreted as justification or a necessary result of suffering. Empirical evidence suggests that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), while impactful, are insufficient on their own to account for the emergence of PTG in survivors (30). Instead, a constellation of interrelated psychological, social, and contextual factors appears to facilitate this growth. These include emotional expression, cognitive processing, adaptive coping mechanisms like positive reappraisal, and personality traits such as agreeableness. Furthermore, the centrality of the traumatic event to one's identity, perceived control over the recovery process, personal resilience, and proactive engagement in growth-oriented behaviours have all been implicated in fostering PTG (31, 38).

In addition to these intrapersonal mechanisms, interpersonal and sociocultural influences are also critical. Research indicates that other than posttraumatic stress symptoms, perceived social support, religiosity or spirituality are significantly associated with PTG outcomes (38). Among women who have survived sexual violence, introspective practices, altruistic engagement, and activist efforts to prevent future victimisation emerged as meaningful pathways toward collective healing. In such contexts, assisting others was found to be not only a coping strategy but also a therapeutic channel through which PTG could be actualised (1). Notably, certain factors function more effectively as mediators rather than direct predictors of PTG. Examples include social support-seeking behaviours and perceived social validation (31). While demographic variables do not appear to significantly predict PTG among sexual violence survivors, the presence of positive social responses is consistently linked to greater PTG (32). These findings emphasise the multidimensional and dynamic nature of posttraumatic growth, emphasising the need for individualised, context-sensitive approaches in trauma recovery interventions.

Taken together, these findings affirm that the field of sexual trauma research is maturing, with increasing attention to resilience-promoting factors and long-term psychological growth. Nonetheless, several gaps persist. These include a lack of longitudinal and culturally sensitive studies, limited research on male and LGBTQ+ survivors, and a need for greater integration of qualitative perspectives to capture the nuanced and subjective aspects of PTG. Future research must adopt a more intersectional and globally inclusive approach, embracing diversity in survivor experiences and examining the interplay of socio-cultural, biological, and contextual factors that influence trauma outcomes. Moreover, investment in intervention-based studies is crucial to translate these findings into effective, trauma-informed care models.

This study has some limitations. First, it relied solely on the Scopus database, which, although comprehensive, may not capture all relevant publications indexed elsewhere. Second, the use of a title-based search strategy (while improving precision) may have excluded studies where resilience or posttraumatic growth were discussed only in abstracts or keywords. These factors may limit the overall comprehensiveness of the review, and future research should consider multi-database searches with broader criteria to provide a more inclusive mapping of the field.

CONCLUSION

This bibliometric analysis explored global research trends on sexual trauma, resilience, and posttraumatic growth. The findings reveal a steady increase in scholarly output, particularly over the past two decades, with dominant

contributions from high-income countries such as the United States. Core themes include childhood sexual abuse, psychological resilience, and adaptive recovery processes like posttraumatic growth. Recent research emphasizes strengths-based perspectives, especially among survivors from high-risk populations. The prominence of keywords such as “resilience,” “self-efficacy,” and “social support” reflects a shift toward trauma-informed and recovery-oriented frameworks. This study contributes by mapping the intellectual structure of the field, identifying influential publications, and highlighting existing gaps. Findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive research, broader global representation, and increased focus on longitudinal and intervention-based studies. Despite limitations of the Scopus database, the analysis underscores the value of bibliometric approaches in guiding future trauma research and shaping evidence-based practices.

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