

Research Trends in Maternal Distress during the Perinatal Period: A Bibliometric Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Maternal distress is a global perinatal mental health issue. As numerous studies have shown that maternal distress can negatively impact maternal quality of life and child developmental outcomes, it is crucial to conduct current research on maternal distress during the perinatal period. This study reviews the literature on maternal distress in this context and analyses global research productivity from 2015-2024. A bibliometric analysis was conducted on 184 documents from the Scopus and Web of Science databases. The data were processed via R Studio (Biblioshiny) to evaluate annual scientific production, citations, leading journals, authors, study affiliations, each country's scientific output, and the most cited countries. This bibliometric analysis of 184 documents from 103 sources indicates that 2019 and 2021 were the years with the highest literature production, with a 5.84% annual growth rate. The Journal of Affective Disorders is the primary publication in this field. The key contributor to the literature is Monk C, with 8 articles and 395 citations. Babol University of Medical Sciences stands out as the most influential affiliation, with 27 articles. The United States of America (USA) has the highest volume of scientific contributions in this area and ranks the highest among the top countries in terms of academic citations. The most frequently cited keywords include 'pregnancy', 'depression', 'female', 'anxiety', and 'adult'. The findings of this bibliometric review suggest that the topic has garnered less attention, indicating an opportunity to identify research gaps that require further investigation.

Keywords: *Maternal Distress, Bibliometric Analysis, Perinatal Women, Pregnancy, Postpartum Period*

The transition to motherhood refers to a woman's physical, psychological, social, and interpersonal variations during her perinatal period (Hwang et al., 2022). Previous studies have outlined changes in the body, role, identity, and behaviour of women after pregnancy and delivery (Meleis et al., 2000). Various challenges and demands, such as breastfeeding difficulties (García et al., 2024), infant sleep problems (Cook et al., n.d.), lack of quality sleep (Lillis et al., 2018), and health issues (Bergink et al., 2015; Munk-Olsen et al., 2022) arise during the perinatal period. Women's responses to these changes and

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challenges can be adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive responses include effectively coping with perinatal needs, whereas maladaptive responses involve ineffectively coping with those needs, resulting in psychological distress (DeFoor & Amiri, 2023). Although many studies have been conducted in the area of psychological distress among perinatal women, emotional or perinatal distress has been viewed primarily from a biomedical perspective for many years (Matthey, 2010). Later, many researchers interested in maternal mental health began to examine maternal distress from a de-medicalized angle that considered women's psychological, social, and cultural contexts (L. Barclay et al., 1997; L. M. Barclay & Lloyd, 1996; Nicolson, 1999). Owing to a lack of clarity surrounding the concept, a concept analysis was conducted to comprehensively explain maternal distress in light of women's experiences following childbirth. This analysis emphasized that perinatal women normally respond to the myriad of changes, demands, and challenges encountered during the transition to motherhood. It spans a continuum, varying from low to high distress, and encompasses four dimensions: stress responses, adapting responses, functioning and control responses, and connecting responses (Emmanuel & St John, 2010). This conceptualization was based on the theoretical framework of a grounded theory of motherhood (Rogan et al., 1997).

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the global rate of mental illness, primarily depression, is 10% for pregnant women and 13% for postpartum women (*Perinatal Mental Health*, n.d.). In developing countries, this percentage is greater, i.e., 15.6% during the prenatal period and 19.8% during the postpartum period. Researchers have reported that perinatal mental disorders can have negative consequences for both mothers and children (Diego et al., 2004; Evans et al., 2001; Leigh & Milgrom, 2008; Milgrom et al., 2004; O'Connor et al., 2002; Talge et al., 2007). Studies in the area of maternal distress have focused more on longitudinal studies to understand the effects of maternal distress on the well-being of the mothers and the development and behaviour of their children (Choe et al., 2013; Deave, 2005; Hicks et al., 2019) and cross-sectional studies to identify the factors influencing maternal distress (Bhushan et al., 2020; Kahalon et al., 2022; Law et al., 2018; Leigh & Milgrom, 2008; Seimyr et al., 2013). Intervention studies have also been conducted to reduce maternal distress (Chen et al., 2000; Coo et al., 2024; Hynie et al., 2015; Nugent et al., 2014). A few reviews have been published in this area (Ammerman et al., 2010; Fontein-Kuipers et al., 2014; Staver et al., 2021).

To our knowledge, no bibliometric reviews have focused on maternal distress. Since it is essential to identify the emerging areas and gaps in the literature related to maternal distress during pregnancy and the first year postpartum period, conducting research on this topic in the future is necessary. A bibliometric review can analyse the current trends and emerging patterns of research.

Research Questions

1. What is the current status of research focusing on the literature concerning maternal distress during the perinatal period?
2. What are the key thematic areas identified in maternal distress research advancements?
3. What are the key findings of maternal distress research?
4. What possible research gaps exist regarding maternal distress during the perinatal period?

METHODOLOGY

A bibliometric review analyses and evaluates the growing body of literature to identify patterns and trends in studies in a particular field (Merigó et al., 2015). This review method helps researchers understand previously published works, the current state of scientific knowledge, and the opportunities that are coming up in the subject matter.

To meet this objective and understand the emerging trends in research related to maternal distress, this study employs the bibliometric methodology of performance analysis. It uses a series of bibliometric indicators (e.g., annual scientific production, citations of the studies, most relevant journals, authors, affiliations of the published works in the field, each country's scientific production, most cited countries, and trend topics) to identify unaddressed gaps in that area. R Studio (Biblioshiny) software was used for performance analysis.

Data collection

After a relevant area was found, keywords related to the construct were set up. The search was performed through Scopus and Web of Science, which have a collection of studies that can provide a comprehensive view of the world's research output. The search was performed via keywords "Maternal distress" OR "Postpartum distress" OR "Prenatal distress" OR "Perinatal distress" OR "Postnatal distress" OR "Prepartum distress". The inclusion criteria for the studies were studies from 2015-2024 and the studies from the fields of Psychology and Nursing. A total of 290 studies were collected from Scopus, and 218 studies were added from the Web of Science on the basis of the inclusion criteria. After 508 studies from two databases were merged, 177 duplicate studies were removed. After the remaining 331 studies were validated, 184 were included in the final collection. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta- Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 flow diagram is shown in Figure 1 (Page et al., 2021). Those studies were imported into an Excel datasheet and uploaded to R Studio (Biblioshiny) software to begin bibliometric analysis.

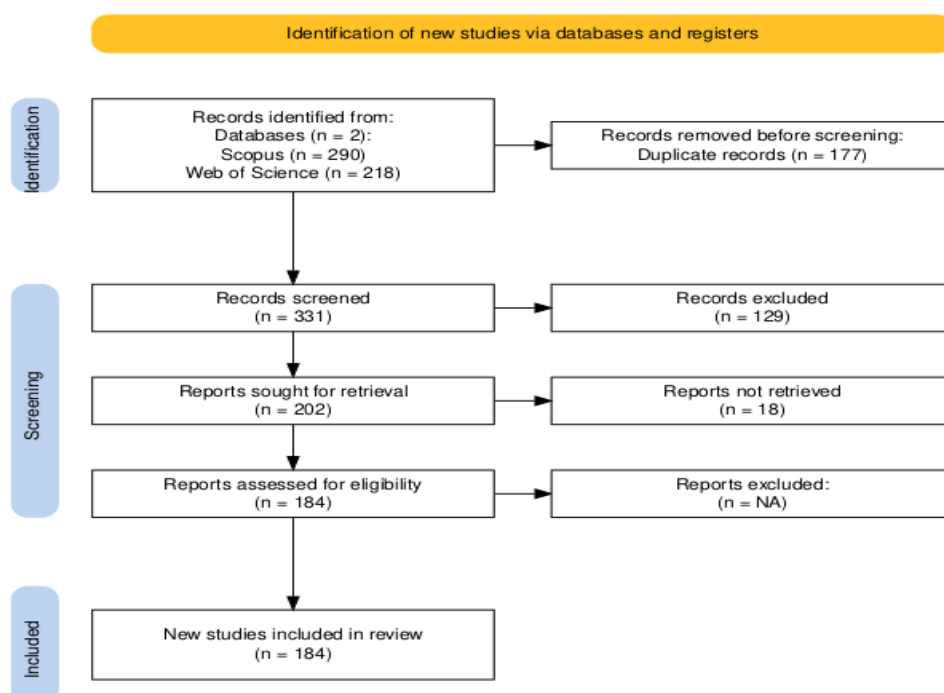


Fig. 1 Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analysis (PRISMA) flowchart showing the search procedures used in the review

RESULTS

The study's results presented the findings of research advancements in maternal distress. The results presented here are based on the outlined research questions.

Volume and Growth Pattern

After the current literature regarding maternal distress during the perinatal period was investigated, the researchers obtained a knowledge base of 184 documents, including articles, books, book chapters, proceedings, and reviews. The annual growth pattern in the literature is plotted in Figure 2. While the status of the scientific production of literature in this area has been analysed, there has been steady growth. The number of articles rose and fell irregularly in the initial years, and a significant upwards trend occurred in the recent years. Nevertheless, the growth is not linear, with peaks and dips, resulting in fluctuations in the production of literature. Despite fluctuations, the overall figure indicates that an increase in growth pattern can be found in the observed years.

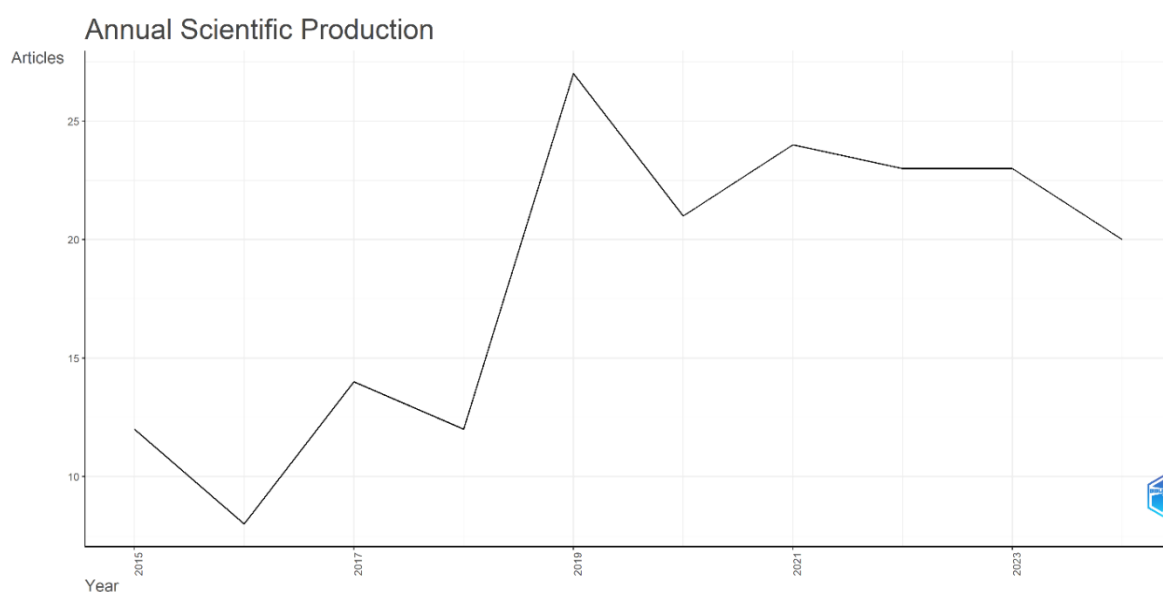


Fig. 2 Annual growth pattern of literature of maternal distress during the perinatal period

Geographical Spread of Literature

The geographical trends of the scholarly literature and cited countries are highlighted in Figure 3 and Figure 4, respectively. Figure 3 shows that the articles were assigned to a certain country according to the nationality of the university with which all individual authors were affiliated, resulting in a total contribution of 516. The leading country is the United States of America (USA), with 226 documents, accounting for 43% of the total production. This country was followed by Australia (35), Spain (33), Canada (27), Iran (26), and the Netherlands (26). The dominant trend of research on perinatal distress in the USA may be because of their high-income status and advanced healthcare systems.

The most cited country in this scholarly publication is the USA, with 1487 citations, followed by Canada, Italy, Australia, Finland, and the Netherlands, with 383, 306, 226, 149, and 136 citations, respectively.

Country Scientific Production

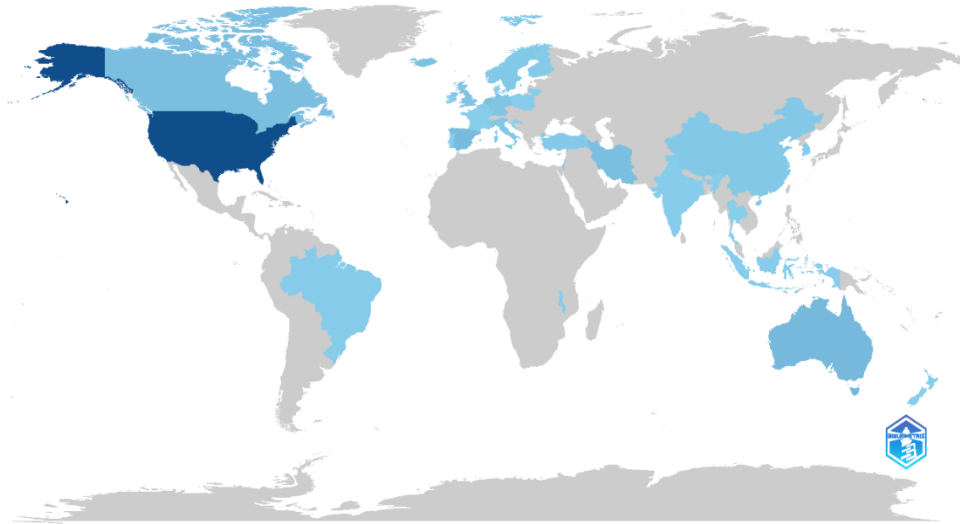


Fig. 3 The geographical trend of scholarly literature of maternal distress during the perinatal period

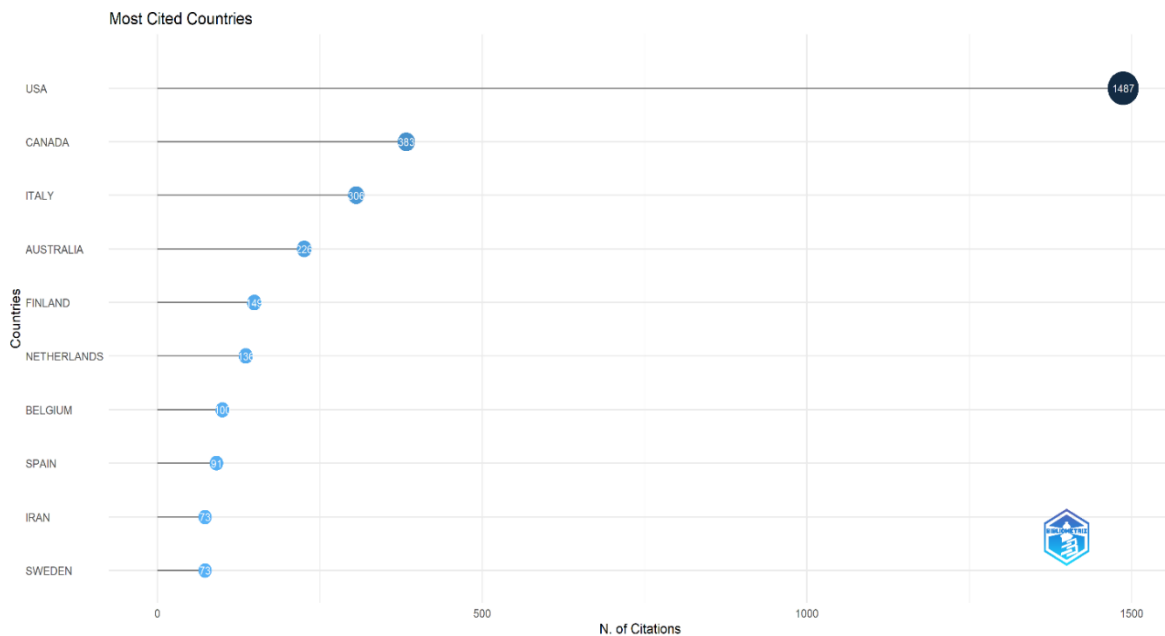


Fig. 4 The most cited countries of scholarly literature relating to maternal distress during the perinatal period

Analysis of the Main Contributors

This section analyses the high-impact authors who maintained their interest in maternal distress during the transition to motherhood, as depicted in Table 1. Table 1 shows the top contributors with the highest total citations in the database. Interestingly, Monk C is the most productive author according to the number of articles produced and the overall number of citations received. He had published eight articles in the area of perinatal distress and had received 395 citations for those articles. None of the authors with the greatest number of articles are included in the list of the top fifteen categories of high-impact authors. The authors with the most citations produced only four articles in the area of interest.

Table 1 Main contributors to the literature relating to maternal distress during the perinatal period according to the number of articles and citations

Rank	Author	Articles	Rank	Author	Citations
1	Monk C	8	1	Monk C	395
2	Caparros-Gonzalez R	6	2	Graziano P	285
3	Davis E	6	3	Mendez L	285
4	Faramarzi M	6	4	Barroso N	285
5	Karlsson H	6	5	Bagner D	285
6	Karlsson L	6	6	Trumpff C	244
7	Lobel M	6	7	Shiri R	215
8	Glynn L	5	8	Falah-Hassani K	215
9	Chehrazi M	4	9	Dennis C	215
10	Kataja E	4	10	Lugo-Candelas C	210
11	Pelto J	4	11	La G S	157
12	Sandman C	4	12	Genna V	157
13			13	Epifanio M	157
14			14	De L C	157
15			15	Roccella M	157

Analysis of Relevant Sources

The most relevant sources of articles and prominent institutions are depicted in Table 2. The Journal of Affective Disorders (13), Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology (11), Developmental Psychobiology (8), Development and Psychopathology (8), Infant Mental Health Journal (6), and Midwifery (5) are the leading publications focused on the area of interest. It also shows that the leading affiliation is Babol University of Medical Sciences, with twenty-seven articles, followed by the University of Granada and the University of Turku, with fifteen articles, and Columbia University and Northwestern University, with fourteen articles, with an interest in conducting research on maternal distress during the perinatal period.

Table 2 Most relevant sources and prominent institutions contributing to literature relating to maternal distress during the perinatal period

SL No	Journals	No of articles	Affiliations	No of articles
1	Journal of Affective Disorders	13	Babol University of Medical Sciences	27
2	Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology	11	University of Granada	15
3	Developmental Psychobiology	8	University of Turku	15
4	Development and Psychopathology	8	Columbia University	14
5	Infant Mental Health Journal	6	Northwestern University	14
6	Midwifery	5		

Analysis of Trend Topics and Thematic Maps

Predominant keywords are depicted in Figure 5, and plots of the thematic map are displayed in Figure 6. Figure 5 shows that the topics with higher research activity are ‘pregnancy’,

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'depression', 'female', 'anxiety', and 'adult', with occurrences of 95, 81, 69, 67, and 50, respectively. 'Pregnancy complications', 'child abuse', 'epidemiology', and 'birth weight' are emerging terms that have appeared in the last 2-3 years. The words 'etiology', 'emotion', 'adolescent', 'puerperium', and 'salivary cortisol' have not been used frequently in recent years.

Figure 6 shows the four kinds of themes, motor themes, basic themes, niche themes, and emerging or declining themes, depicted in four quadrants. Motor themes are well-developed and important themes that drive the area forward, such as motor themes, including female, adult, and human, suggesting that they are well-established concepts within the dataset. Specialized and self-contained but less connected to the overall field are the niche themes such as birth weight, brain development, emotion regulation, fetal origins, Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) methylation, and glucocorticoid-receptor genes. The fundamental themes that are essential for understanding the field but require further research or exploration are pregnancy, anxiety, and depression. The areas that are emerging or losing focus in the research area are psychosocial stress, sex differences, and depressive symptoms.

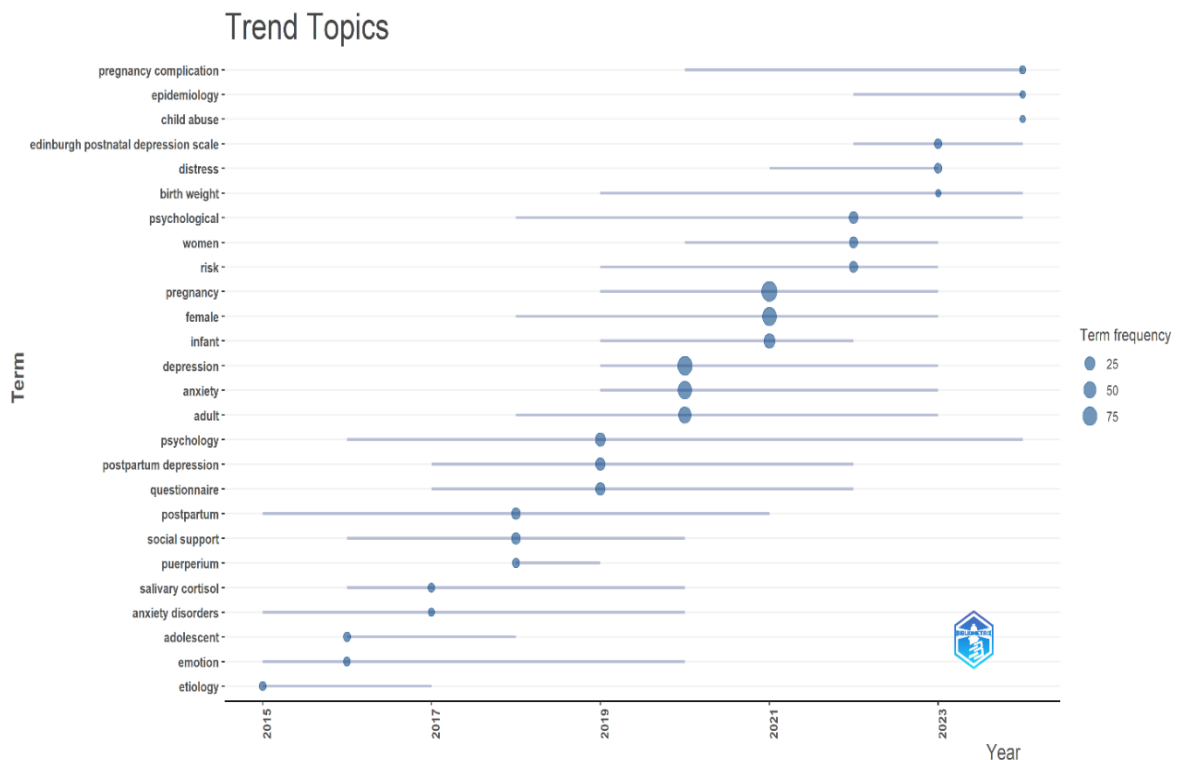


Fig. 5 Most used keywords in the literature relating to maternal distress during the perinatal period

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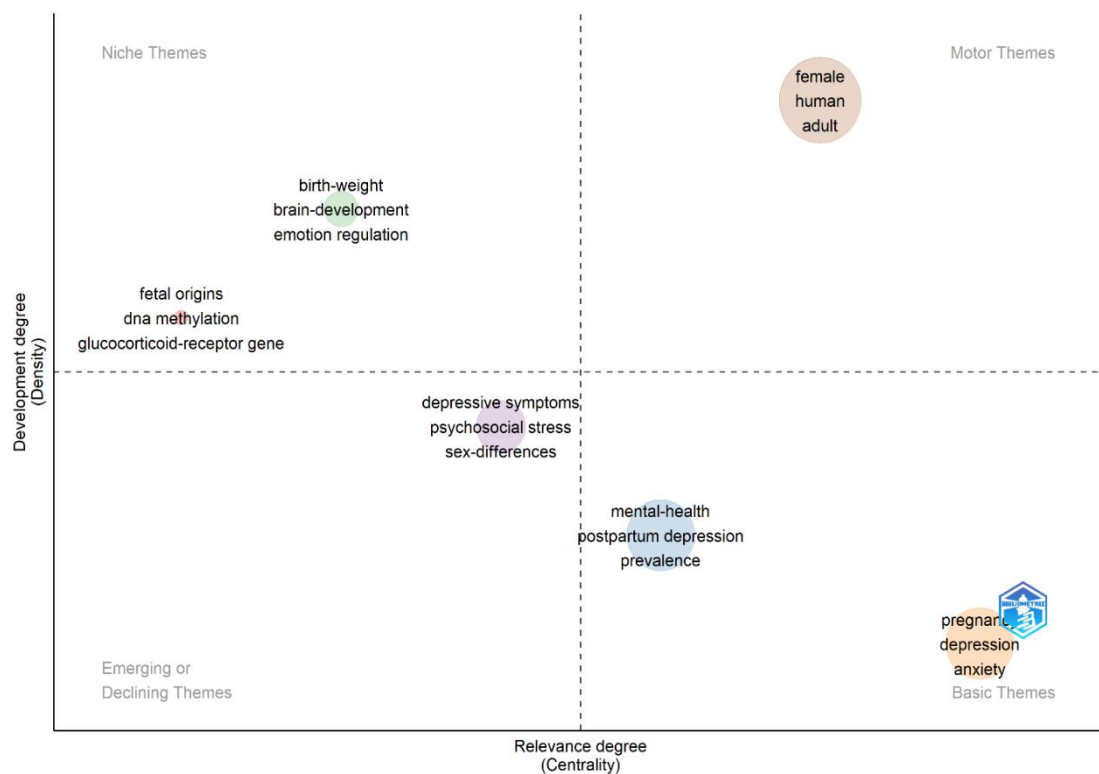


Fig. 6 Key thematic areas in the literature relating to maternal distress during the perinatal period

DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this paper show that 184 scholarly publications from 2015- 2024 related to maternal distress during the perinatal period. A fluctuating growth with peaks and dips over the years can be seen. If the initial years show a decline in the studies, the recent years show a sharp increase. This finding highlights the recent growing interest in maternal distress and highlights the need for more research in the field. The fluctuating growth may be due to changing research funding or the varying research interests of researchers. The USA accounted for 43% of the total scholarly production. The USA is considered a developed country on the basis of healthcare, life expectancy, and standard of living, and more research on maternal mental health using more funds has been conducted. Interestingly, the USA is the most cited country in their publications since it is conducting more research in maternal distress and making findings with more quality research that researchers from other countries often use American works to compare with their results.

A bibliometric review revealed that Monk C is the most productive author according to the number of articles produced and the overall number of citations received. Interestingly, the authors with more articles have only a limited number of citations, and the authors with more citations have only a limited number of publications in the area of interest. This might be because the authors with more publications might publish frequently on less widely discussed aspects, which leads to fewer citations, and high-impact authors could have established a significant impact in the field with landmark studies, addressing key issues or gaps in the field and thus seeking attention from other researchers. The Journal of Affective Disorders, Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology, Developmental Psychobiology, and Development and Psychopathology are prominent publications since they might present novel findings that can impact the understanding of psychological distress in perinatal women. Babol University of Medical Sciences is the leading affiliation since it extends more

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resources, data, funding, and collaboration opportunities to make a research output on maternal distress.

The commonly studied terms related to maternal distress over time are 'pregnancy', 'depression', 'female', 'anxiety', and 'adult', indicating growing and sustained interest. Terms such as etiology, emotion, adolescent, puerperium, and salivary cortisol have received less immediate attention. Pregnancy complications, child abuse, epidemiology, and birth weight are relatively new additions, indicating varying research priorities towards the physical and societal aspects of maternal distress. Motor themes such as female, adult, and human are foundational and central terms crucial to the field, serving as starting points for more specific research. Niche themes such as birth weight, brain development, emotion regulation, fetal origins, DNA methylation, and glucocorticoid-receptor genes indicate the epigenetic and neurobiological aspects of maternal distress. There is a chance of tracing the biological mechanisms behind maternal distress. The fundamental themes that form the basis of current research but require further development are pregnancy, anxiety, and depression. Although these are extensively researched areas, they still need deep exploration. The themes that are emerging or losing focus in the research area are psychosocial stress, sex differences, and depressive symptoms. They point to changing research priorities.

CONCLUSIONS

From the bibliometric review, it can be concluded that there are 184 publications from 2015-2024 on maternal distress during the perinatal period, with a fluctuating growth in the production of literature. The USA is the country with highest number of leading publications and the most cited country with abundant citations. Monk C is the most prolific author according to the number of articles produced and the citations received. The Journal of Affective Disorders, the Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology, Developmental Psychobiology, and Development and Psychopathology are the leading publications, and the Babol University of Medical Sciences is the leading affiliation. The main keywords in the area of maternal distress over time were 'female', 'pregnancy', 'humans', and 'adult' and identified female, adult, and human as motor themes; birth weight, brain development, emotion regulation, fetal origins, DNA methylation, and glucocorticoid-receptor genes as niche themes; pregnancy, anxiety, and depression as basic themes; and psychosocial stress, sex differences, and depressive symptoms as emerging or declining themes.

Implications

The main findings of the study have implications for emerging researchers, maternal mental health professionals, and policymakers. New researchers can probe into the less-studied areas identified in this review. Maternal mental health professionals can develop interventions or programs that reduce or prevent maternal distress through the identification of the factors contributing to it. Policy makers can also create a maternal mental health policy for national and global improved maternal well-being.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. Only performance analysis, not science mapping, which includes co-citation analysis, co-occurrence analysis, bibliographic coupling, and co-authorship analysis, is considered. It focused on only two databases, which limits the collection of studies to one hundred and eighty-six.

Further suggestions for the study

The identified gaps in this review can be explored further, especially with respect to biological factors. Since the global and regional prevalence of postpartum depression is high, more research needs to be conducted to explore this topic. More review articles, including the intellectual structure of the literature, are needed to identify more research trends and emerging areas.

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Research Trends in Maternal Distress during the Perinatal Period: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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