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**Abstract**

*In January 2021, the #MeTooInceste hashtag emerged on French-speaking Twitter, allowing victims of incest to recount their experiences and bring their narratives to light. As the private became public, many defined this movement as a “liberation of speech” (Idoiaga Mondragon, et al., 2022). An extremely taboo subject (Ambroise-Rendu, 2016; Giuliani, 2016), incestuous sexual abuse was suddenly at the heart of the public debate, with politicians and the media commenting on the movement. However, with institutionalisation comes distortion (Ehrlich, 2014). Looking at 1,122 tweets, our comparison of incest testimonies and their reactions on Twitter shows that there is distortion of the victims' narratives on two aspects: (i) when naming the perpetrator, and (ii) when naming the act. The results show that (i) while victims do name perpetrators, reaction tweets tend to erase them, and (ii) while victims name the act specifically, reactions tend to broaden the subject and talk of sexual abuse in general. The taboo might constrain the content of victims' testimonies, and institutionalisation distort the narratives, but this movement focused public attention on the subject and normalised at least the use of the word itself. Through this study, we wish to assess exactly how these voices are changing the discursive norm about incest.*

**Key words:** social media, Twitter, critical discourse studies, incest, sexual violence, taboo, narrative

## 1. Introduction

Incest is both a taboo subject and a taboo word. In France, it remained for a long time *a crime without a name*, referred to as *monstrous acts*, *indecent assault*, *the most odious offence*, or even *a crime one shies away from naming* as told by a judge in 1845 (Ambroise-Rendu, 2016; Giuliani, 2016). The word *incest* wasn't introduced into the penal code until 2015, more than 200 years after the adoption of the first French penal code in 1791.

In spite of this taboo, incest was recently at the heart of public debate. At the beginning of January 2021, French author Camille Kouchner published her memoir, *La familia grande*, in which she recounts sexual assault on her brother by her stepfather, Olivier Duhamel. A few days after these disclosures, a victim shared her experience of incest on Twitter with the #MeTooInceste hashtag. The movement gained momentum when the feminist group *NousToutes* [All of us] tweeted using the same hashtag: other victims recounted their experiences and brought their narratives to light.

What has been characterised as a private and taboo subject gained attention and emerged as a major topic of public discussion in France, thus giving the impression that discourse on incest became normalised in the public sphere. This impression of normalisation can be shown by the description of the movement. For example, the movement has been described as a “liberation of speech” or as “breaking the taboo”. With more victims recounting their experiences, those narratives of violence got institutionalised, in the sense that they were reported and commented on by the media and politicians. While the term incest was at the forefront of the movement, the reactions of some politicians revealed that they were unable to utter the word. Instead, they used euphemisms, such as *such acts* or *considerable tragedy*. These observations are in line with previous studies on victims' discourse of sexual violence, which tend to go through distortion in the process of institutionalisation. In other words, victims' narratives get reformulated as they ‘move beyond their original contexts of productions’ (Ehrlich, 2014, p. 467 on the legal context). Violence is made less visible by using different naming strategies to refer to the act itself, and by avoiding references to the perpetrator (Clark, 1998; Coates et al., 1994).

Drawing on previous research in discourse of sexual violence and distortion, our study investigates French narratives of incest on Twitter during the #MeTooInceste movement. The research question is the following: did the #MeTooInceste movement foster the normalisation of incest victims' discourse or did it lead to their distortion? To answer this question, we compare naming strategies to refer to the perpetrator and the act of incest in testimony tweets and in reaction tweets (from politicians, the media, and others).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: we first present previous studies on sexual discourse (Section 2), and the theoretical background (Section 3). The following section (Section 4) covers the methodological decisions, including the data collection and annotation. We also discuss ethical concerns about our position as researchers and activists, and as victims and non-victims. And we explain the tools we used in order to stay safe and well while working on narratives of incest. We then delve into the analysis of the data (Section 5),

looking at the representation of the perpetrators and the act in our corpus. Finally, we discuss the findings and suggest the possible outcomes this project could offer (Section 6).

Before going any further, we would like to mention that there will be no detailed account of incest narratives.

## ***2. Literature Review: Studies on Discourse of Sexual Violence***

### **2.1 Incest Discourse in France**

The literature on incest in France shows a clear consensus on the absence of a name. Incest is defined as ‘unnameable’ (Ambroise-Rendu, 2016; Montas & Roussel, 2010), ‘unspeakable’ (Romero, 2018), ‘nameless’ (Giuliani, 2016). While #MeTooInceste is often defined as ‘breaking the taboo’, this is not the first time that the discourse of incest enters the public sphere.

In her analysis of incest discourse in 19th-century French society, Giuliani (2016) investigates the different ways of talking about this topic. The literary genre stands out for its romanticisation of incest, contrary to other genres. In politics, and consequently, in law, the crime of incest is kept silent. Although incestuous cases do exist, they are dealt with behind closed doors. At the head of the family, the father (whether biological or not) is the authority figure and must represent the exemplary nature of the French family. Incest is synonymous with danger, since it represents the corruption of the French family. Over the years, discourse on the danger of incest has no longer been confined to the political sphere. There are social investigations produced by doctors, but here too incest is not named. However, these investigations also bring a new dimension to incest, which is associated with the working class and is said to be a crime of poor people. In the second half of the 19th century, the press also showed an interest in this subject, relying on a register of scandal and horror. Those who perpetrate incest are monsters, but the act itself is never named.

While incest was largely concealed in the 19th century, the situation changed in the second half of the following century, as shown by Ambroise-Rendu (2016). In this study, the author does not analyse the way in which incest is named, but rather its presence in the media. They first approached this topic in the 1970s through its representation in art, followed by sociological surveys (particularly in rural areas). In the 1980s, ‘mainstream’ television took it up, inviting victims to share their stories. Before the broadcasting of a live TV show, the press comments: ‘The bars of the incest prison are about to shatter’. While this attention on victims is new, the criticisms against how the subject enters the public sphere are not. Complaints from the audience described incest as an ‘appalling topic’. Moreover, one of the victims participating in a TV show got sued for libel and lost. A newspaper then commented: ‘rape within families should remain secret’.

Victims’ narratives of incest are also at the heart of #MeTooInceste, and similarly to the TV shows in the 1980s, #MeTooInceste was described as breaking the taboo. To the best of our knowledge, only one linguistic study has been carried out on #MeTooInceste. Idoiaga Mondragon et al. (2022) carried out a quantitative lexical analysis of more than 20,000 tweets with the hashtag.

One of their main findings was the absence of the words *pudeur* [decency] and *attentat à la pudeur* [indecent assault] which were once the predominant expressions to refer to incest. Based on these findings, they argue that the movement led to a liberation of speech that broke the silence on incest and the taboo surrounding the word.

## 2.2 Sexual Violence Discourse on Social Media

#MeTooInceste emerged four years after #MeToo began trending on Twitter, in October 2017. It is a form of networked feminism, which is ‘made possible by the affordances of the social media platform in which it circulates’ (Boyle, 2019, p. 3). More specifically, social media campaigns such as #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, or #BeenRapedNeverReported correspond to hashtag feminism.

Studies on these hashtags look at how sexual violence discourses are emerging and developing on social media. For example, Mendes et al. (2019) analyse #BeenRapedNeverReported to investigate ‘what experiences are (not) being recounted in each text, which details are (not) provided, and what impact the presence or absence of these disclosures have on the overall narrative accounts of assault’ (2019, p. 1294-1295). They find that using this hashtag allows women and girls to turn their individual stories into a collective narrative, subsequently highlighting the systematic and widespread nature of sexual violence. Moreover, they can speak about their experiences without directly saying that they were raped and/or giving details. Overall, the repeated use of the hashtag ‘creates new forms of dialogue, connectivity, and awareness’ (2019, p. 1302).

The widespread nature of sexual violence is also revealed by the various language-specific hashtags similar to #MeToo, such as the Spanish #YoTambien [MeToo], the Italian #QuellaVoltaChe [TheTimeThat], or the French #BalanceTonPorc [SquealOnYourPig] which emerged in France in October 2017. In a comparative study, Lopez et al. (2019) observe several differences between English #MeToo tweets and French #BalanceTonPorc tweets. Regarding #MeToo tweets, the authors argue that the tweets aim at creating a solidarity network between victims, an aspect which is also found by Keller et al. (2018) when asking why girls and women participate in digital feminist campaigns. On the other hand, #BalanceTonPorc tweets focus on denouncing perpetrators (as expected by the hashtag) and sharing individual stories. The first person singular pronoun is more frequent in French tweets than in English ones, and sexual violence experiences are described in much detail (in opposition to what was found by Mendes et al., 2019). Among the individuals who are denounced, family members are present, more so in French tweets than in English tweets.

Regardless of these differences, social media have facilitated the digitised narratives of victims of sexual violence with ‘the uptake of digital technologies [having] provided victims of sexual violence a way “to tell their stories in their own way, in a setting of their choice”’ (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 1305).

## 2.3 Institutional Discourse on Sexual Violence

Even though social media was at the heart of studies on sexual violence discourse in recent years, investigations on this topic did not start with hashtag

feminism. Before the emergence of social media, studies on the representation of sexual violence focused on institutional discourse such as the media or in the legal domain. More specifically, two linguistic aspects have been analysed in the institutional discourse: (i) references to the act, and (ii) references to the perpetrators.

Among the studies investigating references to the act of sexual violence, Coates et al. (1994) claim that there is a need for a new vocabulary to describe sexual assault accurately. They explain that if sexual assault is misrepresented and if the language used to describe sexual assault and consensual sexual act is too similar, they might then become indistinguishable. They find that terms used in trial judgements, such as *intercourse*, are clearly more appropriate for consensual acts. The descriptions of men's sexual assaults on girls including *brief touching* or *fondling* not only make the violent nature of the act invisible but also conceal the perpetrator's responsibility, as in *the offences involved the touching* (Coates & Wade, 2004).

The responsibility of the perpetrator is also obscured by other linguistic constructions. Still in the legal domain, Ehrlich (2001) investigates the grammar of non-agency used by the perpetrator. For instance, she observes the use of agentless passives in the description of the assault by the defendant. Similar strategies have been found in the media, as a way to conceal the responsibility of the perpetrators and to avoid blaming them. For example, Clark (1998) investigates reports of sexual violence in the *The Sun*: 'One of the most common [strategies] is to lessen the awareness of a man's guilt by making him invisible' (1998, p. 187), which can be done by using passive forms. The author argues that 'with no explicit agency given, the rape becomes a quality of the woman rather than an act upon her' (1998, p. 190).

Drawing from these findings, the aim of our study is to investigate processes that were observed in studies on institutional discourse in the representation of sexual violence, by focusing instead on both institutional discourse and victims' testimonies. Twitter offers a space where both discourses are present. By doing so, we offer a contribution to the literature on incest discourse by complementing the only study on #MeTooIncest (Idoiaga et al., 2022) with a study that is both qualitative and quantitative.

### **3. Theoretical Framework: Investigations of Emancipatory Discourse**

#### **3.1 Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis**

By looking at emancipatory discourse, our study falls within the scope of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth FCDA), which is, according to Lazar (2014, p. 182, emphasis added):

a perspective that seeks to examine the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and power asymmetries get discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and *contested* in specific communities and discourse contexts.

In addition to looking at dominant discourses (as most commonly done in CDA) FCDA also aims at investigating discursive strategies used by

marginalised groups (most specifically women) to resist these dominant discourses. However, studies on discourse of resistance remain underdeveloped in the field of (F)CDA (Nartey, 2022).

As highlighted by Lazar, discourses of resistance can also be confronted to discourses of counter-resistance: 'Power struggles [...] work dynamically both ways. Just as members of disadvantaged groups may resist, interactionally, the exercise of power by dominant groups, so too dominant groups may engage in discourses of counter-resistance' (Lazar, 2014, p. 188-189). In the case of sexual violence discourse, counter-resistance can take the shape of distortion. Previous feminist critical discourse studies on victims' narratives of sexual violence have shown that in the process of institutionalisation, victims' narratives get reformulated, distorted: '[a]s women's narratives of violence move beyond their original contexts of productions [...], they are modified so that they conform to institutionally privileged genres' (Ehrlich, 2014, p. 467 with reference to Trinch, 2003 and Ehrlich, 2012, 2013). This notion of distortion is central in our analysis of incest discourse, as Camille Kouchner's revelation and the #MeTooInceste hashtag sparked numerous reactions by the media and from politicians on social media.

### 3.2 Social Media Critical Discourse Analysis

Situated in Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), our study focuses on the notion of distortion and investigates potential forms of power in discourse of sexual violence on social media, more specifically looking at #MeTooInceste on Twitter.

Discursive power in the media was traditionally understood in terms of high centralisation, with mass media having the control over content production and the audience being merely consumers. This vision of a monopoly on content production changed with the emergence of social media. Social media users are not only consumers of content, they also participate in producing it (KhosraviNik, 2017). Nevertheless, it does not mean that social media brought about a complete redistribution of discursive power. What social media have done is challenge the centralisation of this power, and by doing so 'the traditional dichotomy of powerful/powerless voices is eroding' (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2015, p. 211).

As KhosraviNik (2017) argues:

As far as a SM-CDS approach is concerned, both macro/political/industrial and local communicative notions of power are still at play, even though the local communication dynamic of Social Media appears to have eroded the power of/behind discourse. (p. 583)

In fact, 'large claims regarding the emancipatory functions of new media – decentralisation of power and grass root sharing of symbolic power – have not actually materialised, or are yet to be tested' (KhosraviNik, 2014, p. 291). One example of such study in this direction is Bouvier's analysis (2020) of the #MeToo Twitter feed. Her findings reveal the presence of influencers, using the hashtag for self-promotion. Among these influencers were men with creative industry jobs or businesses.

Despite this limitation, social media offer new possibilities for critical discourse studies to analyse a type of discourse which remained for a long time largely under-investigated: emancipatory discourse.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1 Data Collection

We used the Twitter API for Academic Research to collect French tweets using the #MeTooInceste hashtag from January 14 to January 27, 2021, which correspond to the first two weeks following the first mention of the hashtag<sup>2</sup>. The selection of tweets was based on Twitter’s relevancy criterion, a system that considers factors such as keyword relevancy and user engagement. This method of selection is particularly suitable for our study as it closely mirrors the linguistic exposure experienced by Twitter users. The criteria form the foundation for how tweets are displayed to users, thereby providing us with a realistic view of user experiences and interactions on the platform.

The resulting dataset contains 1,122 tweets, which were then annotated in different categories: (i) testimonies and (ii) reactions. Reactions include tweets from politicians or political institutions, media outlets, and other kinds of accounts (i.e. general public). Table 1 presents an overview of our #MeTooInceste corpus.

Types of tweets	Number of tweets	Tokens
Testimonies	107	4,209
Reactions	1,015	31,805
Politics	96	3,304
Media	193	5,730
Other	726	22,771
Total	1,122	36,014

**Table 1.** Overview of the #MeTooInceste corpus

### 4.1 Annotation of Naming Strategies

The aim of our study is to look for potential distortion, more specifically via naming strategies of two key notions: strategies to refer to the perpetrator, and strategies to refer to the act of incest itself.

Regarding naming strategies for the perpetrator, we looked at whether the perpetrator was named in the tweet or not at all. When the perpetrator was named, we annotated it based on the following categories:

- **family member term:** when the tweet refers to the perpetrator with either:
  - a usual family term, e.g. *stepfather*
  - periphrases, e.g. *mother’s brother* instead of *uncle*
  - near-synonyms, e.g. *genitor* instead of *father*

- **name:** when the perpetrator's proper name is given in the tweet, i.e. either their first name, family name, or both, e.g. *Olivier Duhamel*.
- **function:** when the perpetrator is referred to via their social position, e.g. *a town council member*
- **other:** when the perpetrator is referred to via other miscellaneous strategies, e.g. *close relations*. We noticed and annotated two recurrent subcategories here:
  - **general statement:** some tweets use general statements that indirectly refer to or define a sexual aggressor, e.g. *sexual relationships between an adult and a young child*
  - **pronouns:** some tweets refer to the perpetrator only via a personal pronoun, e.g. *he, him, you, they*. Note that possessive determiners, e.g. *his* or *their*, were not annotated for that category because we considered them too indirect.

It happened that the perpetrator was referred to in multiple ways in one tweet. In that case, each strategy was counted as one occurrence. However, due to the brevity of most tweets, the concurrent use of multiple strategies was very limited in our corpus, i.e., in only 35 tweets out of 1,122.

The second parameter corresponds to naming strategies used to refer the act of incest itself. We divided naming strategies into eight different categories:

- **only in hashtag:** some tweets do not refer to incest in their text in any way except via the word *inceste* contained in the MeTooInceste hashtag.
- **inceste in tweet:** some tweets use the term *incest* in their text, or some derivation, e.g. *incestuous*, and not just the MeTooInceste hashtag.
- **incest periphrasis:** some tweets use a periphrasis explicitly referring to incest, which can be semantically defined as sexual violence by a family member, generally on a minor.
- **specific description:** some tweets describe the assault not only in an explicit way but also in a specific way – in concrete details.
- **underspecified description:** some tweets partially describe the assault, without specifying every element that qualifies them as sexual assaults.
- **underspecified periphrasis:** some tweets explicitly refer to some, but not all, of the semantic features of incest, e.g. *sexual violence on minors*.
- **euphemism:** some tweets refer to incest in a less shocking, socially more acceptable, vaguer manner, e.g. *those facts, the act, this subject*, or sometimes with a pronoun, e.g. *it, this, about this*.
- **dysphemism:** some tweets refer to incest in a willingly more shocking, socially less acceptable way, e.g. *massacre*.

Similarly to perpetrators, it happened that the act was referred to in multiple ways in one tweet. Again in that case, each strategy was counted as one occurrence. However, due to the brevity of most tweets, the concurrent use of



multiple strategies was very limited in our corpus, i.e., in only 32 tweets out of 1,122.

### 4.3 Ethical Concerns

The ethics of working with publicly available data is a source of debate, even more so when the data is considered sensitive, when ‘research [delves] into the acutely personal about someone, or that someone experiences’ (Silverio et al., 2022, p. 4). Following Silverio and colleagues’ distinction of sensitive topics, working on narratives of incest is regarded as doing research on “a difficult topic” as it ‘involves discussions of factors relating to [...] sexual abuse, and research examining deviant sexual behaviour’ (2022, p. 6).

The study was not submitted to an ethics committee and the reason for this is twofold: first, the exploratory nature of this study on social media data which can be considered as a ‘grey area’, and second, the need for an approval from an ethics committee in social sciences is not entirely widespread in France (Henderson et al., 2013; Bachaud, 2022). However, this decision does not entail that ethical aspects were not discussed through the different steps of the study. The discussion on informed consent can be found in Section 6. As for the questions of anonymisation and traceability, the data was very carefully handled: in the present article, usernames and identifiable information are not given in quoted tweets, and examples are translated and never fully quoted, making the data completely anonymous. Unfortunately, open science and replicability of research do not go hand in hand with the principle of protecting participants. In this study, we decided that the latter gets the upper hand<sup>3</sup>.

In an attempt to be as transparent as possible in the frame of CDA and in line with standpoint theory and the notion of situated knowledge, we would like to share our own reflections on our position, working on this topic. As Haraway explains: ‘The knowing self is partial [...] therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.’ (1988, p. 586). **Océane Foubert**: When the MeTooInceste movement arose, I noticed how politicians struggle to say the word *incest*. I might have noticed this as a linguist, but I am not only a linguist. I am also a victim of incest. Researching incest discourse allows me to ‘create theory from the location of pain and struggle’ (hooks, 1994: 74). I also believe that a topic should be analysed from a plurality of viewpoints, as done in our research, and in the case of sexual violence research, victims’ viewpoints, such as mine, are fundamental. **Lola Marinato**: As a woman, I am a victim of violence, sexual abuse, and discrimination. I am not a victim of incest, but I fight against stigmatisation, discrimination, and any sort of violence. Most of all, I fight against silence, and I like to think that somehow through my work as a researcher in linguistics I can help victims of silence. **Robin Vallery**: I am not a victim of incest, and I am a man, which makes me less likely to be the victim of sexual violence and more likely to have internalised sexist biases about sexual violence. I consider that good research, by investigating empirically grounded truths, is ultimately meant to serve the people, including sometimes, dominated groups and activists seeking to fight domination and build a better society. **Quirin Würschinger**: As a researcher using social media datasets and social network analysis, I find the distortion of narratives on social media very troubling. I believe controversial issues should be openly discussed and scrutinised, and I see open discourse as a crucial tool for societal progress. I advocate for the potential and responsibility of science to analyse and

illuminate problematic developments. Through rigorous and open analysis, we can inform the public and institutions, guiding measures to improve society.

Researching with care means caring for participants as well as caring for researchers. When working on a difficult topic, one has to bear in mind that the exposure to the data might be emotionally challenging to us, researchers (Rager, 2005). Silverio et al. (2022) offer an overview of ways in which researchers can care for themselves when working on sensitive, challenging, and difficult topics. To keep an eye on the emotional impact such research can have on us, we implemented the following strategies: adopting an appropriate schedule for data collection and annotation, and maintaining balance between this study and other tasks at work (other research projects, PhD thesis, teaching, etc.). Above all, this study has shown us that teamwork and communication are key elements to healthy research.

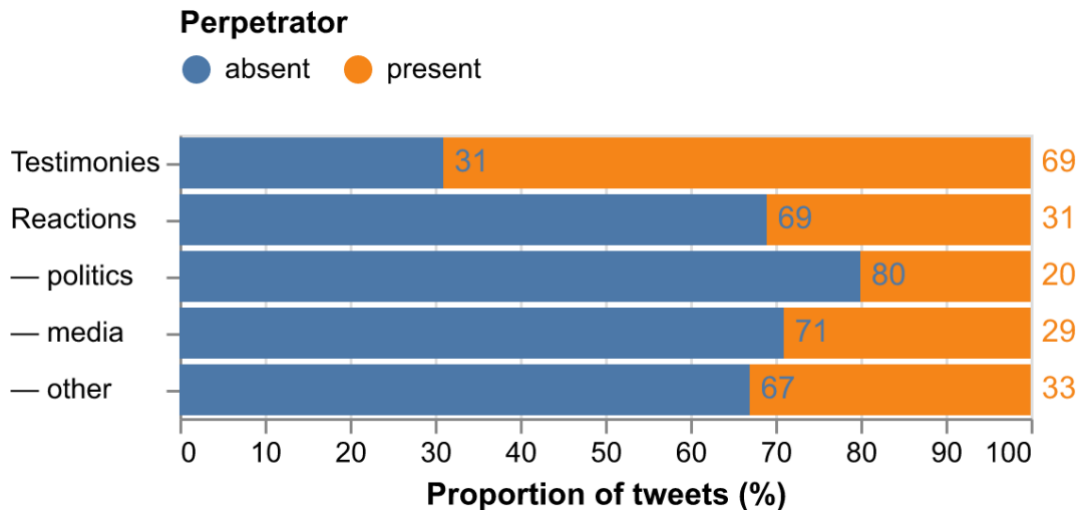
## 5. Results

### 5.1 (Not) Naming the Perpetrator: From Family Members to Nobody

As mentioned above, previous critical discourse studies on sexual violence have shown that the agent of the act – the perpetrator – tends to be erased, as a way to conceal the violence of the act as well as the perpetrator's responsibility. Looking at the presence or absence of the perpetrators, our findings are in line with these previous studies, as shown in Table 2 and Figure 1.

Types of tweets	Present %	(Raw)	Absent %	(Raw)
Testimonies	69	(74)	31	(33)
Reactions	31	(315)	69	(700)
Politics	20	(19)	80	(77)
Media	29	(56)	71	(137)
Other	33	(240)	67	(489)
All (testimonies and reactions)	35	(393)	65	(729)

**Table 2.** Percentage of presence or absence of the perpetrator in each type of tweets



**Figure 1.** Distribution of presence or absence of the perpetrator in each type of tweets

Overall, the results suggest that agency is present in the majority of testimonies, whereas it is erased in the majority of reaction tweets, revealing the distortion of victims' discourse of incest. Moreover, numbers within reaction tweets are very close, giving a first impression of homogeneity of non-testimony discourse of incest. This distortion is confirmed when looking at the naming strategies used to refer to the perpetrators.

When victims refer to the perpetrator in their testimonies, it comes to no surprise that they mainly do so by using incest-specific terms, such as family member names. While most of the testimonies used specific family members' names, some victims also refer to family members with periphrases such as *my mother's brother* instead of *my uncle*, *my mother's boyfriend* instead of *my stepfather*, or with more atypical terms such as *my genitor* instead of *my father*. Such phrases put more distance between the victim and the perpetrator as the expression of the family relationship is weakened. We also observed some cases in which the perpetrator was referred to by pronouns such as *you*, *he*, or *him*, and one unique case in which the perpetrator was mentioned by their name.

As mentioned above, reaction tweets tend not to express the perpetrators. The minority of tweets that do mention the agent of the act, do so differently than in testimonies. Reactions do not refer to the perpetrators by using incest-specific terms, and those strategies are also more diverse. In the few cases when reaction tweets refer to perpetrators of incest, they do so by either using family member names, as done in testimonies, or by referring to mediatised cases, by either naming the perpetrator, such as Duhamel being the first big mediatised case, or by referring to their function. It might seem difficult for people who do not share testimonies to talk about perpetrators, as they cannot name specific family members, however examples of incest-specific terms were found in some of the tweets, such as *relatives* or *incestors*. Yet, most of the reaction tweets do not specifically refer to perpetrators of incest, but to other forms of sexual violence.

Others named in these tweets are perpetrators of sexual violence towards children (*adults*, but also *pedophiles* or *teachers*). Among these perpetrators, some tweets specifically target people from the *elite*, who are *rich* or from the *Parisian left*. Also, they name perpetrators of sexual violence in general

(*predators, abusers or rapists*), or use terms which are not specific to sexual violence (*persecutors*). One naming strategy which is specific to reaction tweets is to refer to perpetrators as non-human beings, e.g. *pigs, monsters, or ogres*. Similar reactions were found at the end of the 19th century when stories of incest were reported in the press for the first time (Giuliani, 2016). This strategy participates to the dehumanisation of perpetrators, as also found by Clark (1998) in reports of sexual violence in the press. Finally, one frequent term used to refer to perpetrators in reaction tweets is *men*. This is due to one tweet published in January 2020 asking the question *how do you stop men from raping?*. Because this tweet was blocked, it was followed by a series of tweets asking the same question and using the MeTooInceste hashtag.

Overall, we find that even in the minority of cases where the perpetrator was present in reaction tweets, it is done in a very different way than in testimony tweets. These examples reveal the distortion of victims' narratives as the discussion becomes more general and abstract. This could also be explained by the emergence of the #MeTooGay hashtag shortly after #MeTooInceste.

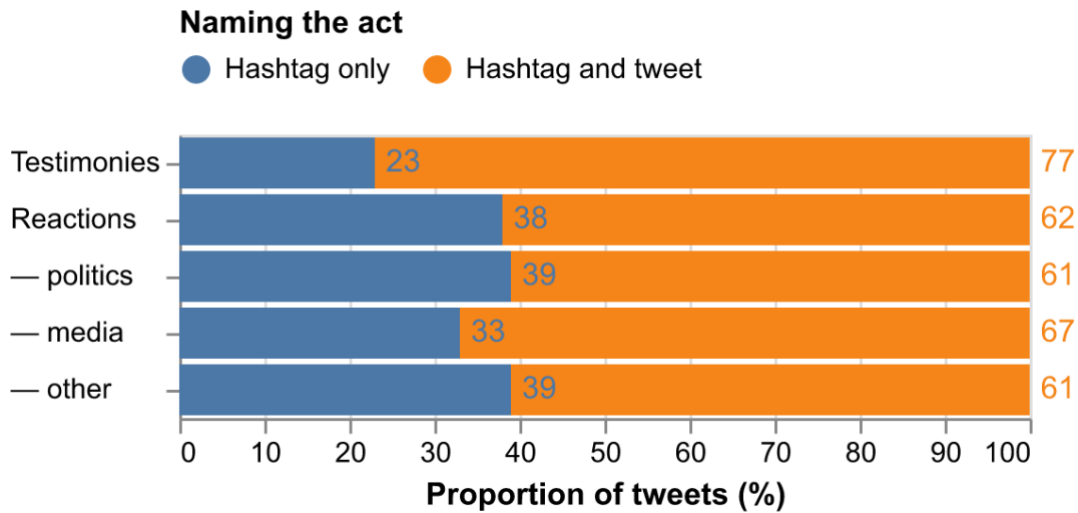
## 5.2 Naming the Act: From Incest to Sexual Violence

We observed different strategies to express the act linguistically. Those strategies were used more or less frequently depending on the type of tweets, with a clear contrast between testimonies and reactions.

First, we investigated whether tweets express incest anywhere else than in the hashtag. While this is true for the majority of tweets, reaction tweets do so less often (62%) than testimonies (77%). Whether reaction tweets are from politicians, the media, or other sources, the proportions of tweets expressing incest only in the hashtag are close, as shown in Table 3 and in Figure 2. For this reason, these tweets are combined in our analysis – even though the media tweets refer to incest 67% of the time instead of 61%, so there is slightly less distortion in that regard.

Types of tweets	Only in hashtag %	(Raw)	In hashtag and in tweet %	(Raw)
Testimonies	23	(25)	77	(82)
Reactions	38	(386)	62	(629)
Politics	39	(37)	61	(59)
Media	33	(64)	67	(129)
Other	39	(283)	61	(443)
All (testimonies and reactions)	35	(393)	65	(729)

**Table 3.** Percentage of tweets expressing the act only in the hashtag or in the hashtag and in the tweet

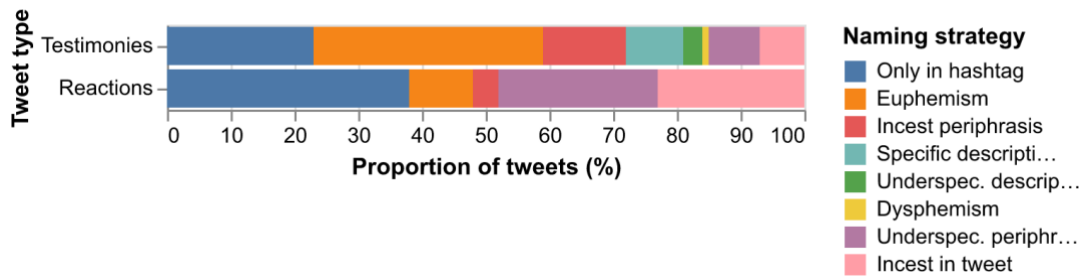


**Figure 2.** Distribution of tweets expressing the act only in the hashtag or in the hashtag and in the tweet in each type of tweets

Next, we will investigate the “in hashtag and in tweet” strategies separately, i.e. the 77% of testimonies and 62% of reactions will be divided into euphemisms, incest periphrases, etc. When looking at those strategies separately, we can see that expressing incest only in the hashtag is the preferred strategy of reaction tweets (38% of them), as can be seen in Table 4 and in Figure 3. The main goal of these tweets is to show support, they do not comment on incest but on the courage of victims for speaking up.

Naming strategies	Testimonies %	(Raw)	Reactions %	(Raw)
Only in hashtag	23	(25)	<b>38</b>	(386)
Euphemism	<b>36</b>	(39)	10	(102)
Incest periphrasis	<b>13</b>	(14)	4	(41)
Specific description	<b>9</b>	(10)	0	(0)
Underspecified description	<b>3</b>	(3)	0	(0)
Dysphemism	<b>1</b>	(1)	0	(0)
Underspecified periphrasis	8	(9)	<b>25</b>	(254)
Incest in tweet	7	(7)	<b>23</b>	(233)

**Table 4.** Naming strategies in testimonies and reaction tweets (higher percentage for every comparison is in bold)



**Figure 3.** Distribution of naming strategies in testimonies and reaction tweets

The vaguest forms of euphemisms – simply called ‘euphemism’ in our annotation – are the preferred strategy in testimonies with 36% of tweets choosing it. They can take the form of vague periphrases such as *what was done to me* or *what happened to me*. Some tweets also use the pretext used by the perpetrator to minimise the act, such as *a game* or *playing*. However, most of the tweets use quotation marks, precisely to highlight that those are the perpetrators’ terms. Half of the euphemisms are pronouns, such as *it* or *this*. This use of pronouns to avoid naming incest is exemplified by Camille Kouchner explaining that parents indirectly teach children that ‘this, this cannot be named’ (2022), i.e. incest cannot be named.

Non-testimony tweets use this strategy much less frequently (10%), but also in a different way. Incest is expressed in abstract terms like *this phenomenon*, *the facts*, *this topic*. Some periphrases even refer to the fact that it is taboo, in meta-linguistic fashion: *this sensitive topic*, *the taboo of all taboos*. There are also terms expressing pathos, such as *their terrible trauma*, *this horror*, *a broken childhood*, a type of phrases found to a lesser extent in testimonies. One of the most extreme euphemistic periphrases was also found in the reaction tweets: *misbehaviours of that sort*; if the hashtag was not present, it would be very difficult to interpret it as referring to an act of incest. To sum up, when we compare testimonies and reaction tweets, there is a difference in nature in how the same strategy is used. This observation is also true for other naming strategies.

Not all periphrases are vague, and hence, euphemistic. It is also possible to periphrase incest by conveying all the semantic elements defining it, i.e., sexual violence by a family member, generally on a minor: we call that strategy ‘incest periphrasis’ in our annotation. More specifically, testimonies (13% of them) express the idea of incest via an explicit, direct, matter-of-fact periphrasis, such as ‘I was [X] years old... I was [Verb of sexual violence] by [family member]’, with sometimes additional details such as the timeframe or the regularity of the assaults. This type of matter-of-fact phrasing is extremely typical of testimonies and is never found in reaction tweets, unless in direct quotations from testimonies. The few reactions (4% of them) with comparable incest periphrases, containing the same semantic elements, tend to use terms that are much more general and technical, like *intra-family sexual violence*.

There are also three strategies which occur exclusively in testimonies. One of them (in 9% of the testimonies) is the use of a specific description of sexual violence with some level of detail, in which the acts of violence are explicitly described. The use of the hashtag to tell personal stories and to denounce attacks was also present in #BalanceTonPorc (Lopez et al., 2019). Specific descriptions were not found at all in reaction tweets. A second strategy is

underspecified descriptions (8%), which are descriptions of the act but with so little detail that it does not explicitly describe a sexual aggression, such as *touch*. While these forms were also found in trial judgements as a way to minimise violence (Coates et al., 1994), it is not the case of victims sharing their experience in these tweets, as they express the fact that it was an aggression. Testimonies also differ from judgements in the way that these descriptions are used. Rather than using underspecified descriptions as nouns, such as *the touching*, victims always use terms referring to the perpetrator. The third strategy, used by only one victim, is a dysphemism, i.e., a term that is willingly shocking and has the opposite effect of a euphemism: *massacre*. It should be noted that the victim here is not referring only to their own experience in particular but rather describing the numerous acts of incest happening in society.

The following two strategies are, on the contrary, quite typical of reaction tweets. Their preferred strategy, after only expressing incest in the hashtag (38%), which we discussed above, is underspecified periphrases (25%) – a type of euphemisms that is comparatively less vague than the ones we simply annotated ‘euphemism’. Underspecification is one possible way to create euphemisms (Crespo-Fernández, 2015). Instead of expressing incest, the idea expressed is more generally sexual violence against minors, or sexual violence in general. Similarly to the naming strategies used to refer to the perpetrator, those tweets tend to broaden the debate to sexual violence, in particular in relation to the law, as most of the discussion is centred around whether there should be no legal time limit for pressing charges in case of sexual aggression against minors. It is also possible to imagine that it is comparatively easier for people to talk about sexual violence on minors and sexual violence than about the specificities of incest. However, given the lower number of testimonies using this strategy, it seems that victims generally prefer to express that specificity.

Finally, it might seem surprising that the word *incest* itself was more often found in reaction tweets (23%) than in testimonies (7%). In their investigation of tweets with #BeenRapedNeverReported, Mendes et al. also found that *rape* was not used in the tweets. They argue that using the hashtag is ‘a way for victims to speak about their experience without having to directly say they were raped or assaulted’ (2019, p. 1301). It could also be argued that when victims share their experiences, they would rather not speak about the subject in general terms and about the general notion of incest which the word expresses, but rather tell their personal stories in a more individualised way. When it comes to the use of the word *incest* in reaction tweets, it should be noted that the word is generally not used on its own, but in noun phrases, such as *victims of incest*. This is not the case in the rarer testimonies using it. Finally, while reaction tweets do use the term *incest* more than testimonies, one should remember that the preferred strategy of reaction tweets is to only mention the word in the hashtag.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

To summarise, the aim of this analysis was to investigate whether the discourse of incest has become normalised or whether the victims’ narratives are distorted. The comparison between testimonies and reaction tweets in the

use of naming strategies to refer to the perpetrator and to the act of incest shows that there is distortion of the victims' narratives, which is done in two main ways.

First, while the majority of testimony tweets do refer to the perpetrators, it is the opposite in reaction tweets. These findings are in line with previous studies on discourse of sexual violence revealing the linguistic absence of perpetrators. Reaction tweets – which are mainly tweets of support – reinforce a type of discourse of sexual violence perpetuating the idea that there are victims of violence with no perpetrators<sup>4</sup>. The focus on victims of sexual violence, and more specifically the expectations to speak out, has been pointed out in previous studies (Hernández Orellana & Kunert, 2014; Trovato, 2023) and will be the subject of a follow-up study.

Second, while testimonies talk about experiences of incest, reaction tweets tend to broaden the discussion on sexual violence in general. This goes in line with the representation of sexual violence in public discourse which focuses on rape done by a stranger, even though it is not the majority of the cases (called 'real rape'; Estrich, 1988). When incest is mentioned in reaction tweets, it is done differently than when victims do it. As pointed out in the introduction, #MeTooInceste has often been defined as 'breaking the taboo'. Previous research on incest and the word itself have shown that the word is now used, on social media but also in the legal domain, while *indecent assault* and other older euphemisms are no longer in use (Ambroise-Rendu, 2016; Giuliani, 2016; Idoiaga et al., 2022). If the appearance of the word *incest* in the legal framework and its presence in the hashtag contribute to the reduction of the taboo, our findings show the widespread use of other strategies, such as euphemisms or underspecified periphrases, suggesting that the linguistic taboo is still there. A follow-up study will be carried out on the representation of #MeTooInceste in the press (as done by Tranchese, 2023 for #MeToo) to see whether our results can be generalised to a broader context.

A way of improving our method would be by taking a survivor-informed approach as proposed by O'Callaghan & Douglas (2021). However, ethical conflicts do arise when taking such an approach. Contacting Twitter users after gathering their testimonies could potentially increase the likelihood of triggering emotional responses. Another way of reaching out to victims would be by sharing a call for testimonies, or rather a call for sharing tweets which were previously posted using the hashtag. This method would imply filing for the ethics board, asking for informed consent, sharing with all participants a letter of information describing the study; describing what we do, how we do it, why we do it, how it could benefit them, etc. The aim would be to do research by, for, and with victims (Nartey, 2022). Working with charity organisations would be extremely valuable to such a study, having them train us on how to listen to and accompany victims in order to do possible follow-up interviews and having a contact list to share with participants. Working with charities could also mean using our results in a constructive way by for instance creating guidelines on how to better communicate on the subject (Semino et al., 2014).

Overall, our findings show that #MeTooInceste did not lead to the normalisation of victims' discourse of incest. However, the movement might have led to the normalisation of discussion around this topic in general, as these tweets have put incest at the heart of the public debate. On January 23, 2021, the French President Emmanuel Macron announced the creation of an independent commission on incest and sexual violence against children



(CIIVISE<sup>5</sup>). Less than two months later, the commission was formed. One of its aims is to listen to victims, and within a year, it received more than 16,000 testimonies. This commission was created thanks to the publication of Kouchner's memoir, *La Familia Grande* and #MeTooInceste.

#MeTooInceste provides a space for victims to tell their stories in their own way, but it is important to remember that they are doing so years after their childhood. As Camille Kouchner (2022) explained in an interview:

*Et puis en plus, quand vous êtes adolescent, enfant, vous ne pouvez pas savoir les dommages que ça va faire plus tard. Vous savez rien en fait. Et puis vous êtes élevé par vos parents et c'est vos parents qui vous apprennent à dire. Et là, ils vous ont appris les mots, ils vous ont appris à nommer les choses. Et ça, ça ne se nomme pas. Et avec leurs comportements, ils vous apprennent que ça, ça ne se nomme pas. On ne le nomme pas. On ne doit pas le nommer.*

[When you are a teenager, a child, it's impossible to know the damage this will cause later. You don't know *anything*, actually. And you are raised by your parents, who teach you how to *speak*. They taught you words, they taught you how to name things, and here, *this*, this cannot be named. Through their behaviour, they teach you that this, this cannot be named. You must not name it.]

When we talk about dominant discourses and think about who has access to discursive power, we often think about the media or politics, as done in this study. But as a child, this discursive power rests with the family, those from whom one learns how to speak, and the very same sphere in which these crimes are perpetrated. There are 160,000 children victims of sexual violence every year in France, most often in the family sphere. The first recommendation which was formulated by the CIIVISE (2022) is to systematically identify these victims. How? By not waiting for the children to speak out but by allowing them to reveal violence.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The authors discussed, conceived and revised this article together. Océane Foubert conceptualised the study and oversaw the project as a whole, and Lola Marinato was responsible for the ethical issues and took part in the literature review and data analysis. Robin Vallery was in charge of data annotation and contributed to the analysis, and Quirin Würschinger was in charge of the data collection and visualisation.

<sup>2</sup> We used the Twitter API with the following parameters: query: #metooinceste, lang: fr, sort\_order=relevancy.

<sup>3</sup> Our corpus is available upon request.

<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that responders wish to empower victims by focusing on them and to amplify their story, this could have been done by using retweets. However, we have found that retweets are mostly used for reaction tweets, as 11 reaction tweets and 3 testimonies were retweeted in our corpus.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ciivise.fr/> (last access: February 27, 2023)

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