

VELO HIGUERAS, M., DOUGLAS, F. and KENNEDY, C. 2024. *Using emoji to explore midwives' perspectives of freebirth*.  
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# Using emoji to explore midwives' perspectives of freebirth.

VELO HIGUERAS, M., DOUGLAS, F. and KENNEDY, C.

2024

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# Why emojis?

## **Freebirth is a controversial topic**

Controversial topics unearth deep-seated values about what is right or wrong, but not always easy to research as people likely to self-censored if views not in line with socially approved ones

## **Emotions are a fundamental part of midwifery work**

Midwives' emotions are drivers for their attitudes and beliefs, and therefore will have great influence on their behaviors towards freebirth

## **Emotions may be acted upon, but also suppressed or concealed**

Emotions may not always be easy to put into words. Exploring midwives' emotions may require the use of imaginative research methods to explore this hidden terrain

# A bit of background on emojis

## A communication revolution

1960s smiley and emoticons

1999 - first set of emoji created by Shigetaka Kurita

Now used by more than 90% of the online population

## UNICODE and licensing

3664 emojis (UNICODE 15.0)

Emoji is a “font” rendered differently across devices and platforms

Emoji images have copyright (twemoji 14.0 used in this presentation)

## Research trends

ON emojis:

- Communication and linguistics studies
- AI sentiment analysis of social media trends

WITH emojis:

- Consumer research
- Data analysis (coding) with emojis
- Emojis as data collection tool

## PHASE 1

- Qualitative interpretive description design
- To explore the *what, how* and *why* of midwives' perspectives on freebirth
- 14 UK clinical midwives recruited via social media across all UK countries
- **Emoji elicitation** before online conversational interview
- Reflexive thematic analysis

## PHASE 2

- Online quantitative survey
- To explore how constructs in phase 1 may be presented in the wider UK midwifery population
- Convenience and snowballing sampling
- Recruitment planned for Autumn 2024

## INTERPRETATION



Using a feminist lens to look at issues of autonomy, power and agency in midwives' experiences

# The study



# Setting up

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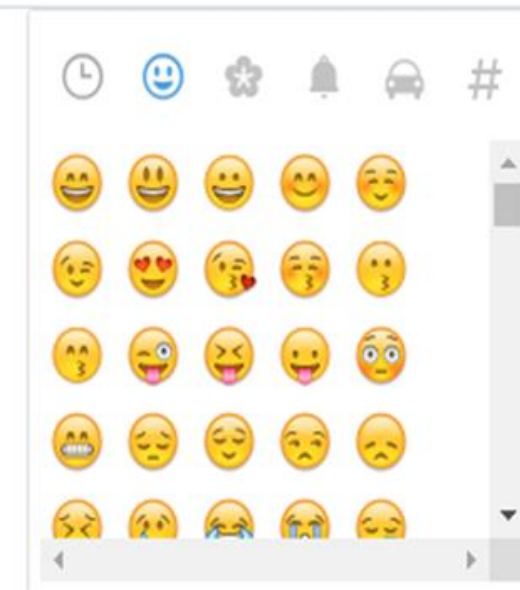
Am I crazy for considering this?

# Tech challenges

**Using only emojis, please express how you feel or what comes to your mind when you think about freebirth**

- You can use as many emojis as you wish and in whatever order you prefer
- If answering this from a phone or similar device, please do not use the emoji menu on your device keyboard to input your answer.

Textarea with emoji Unicode input



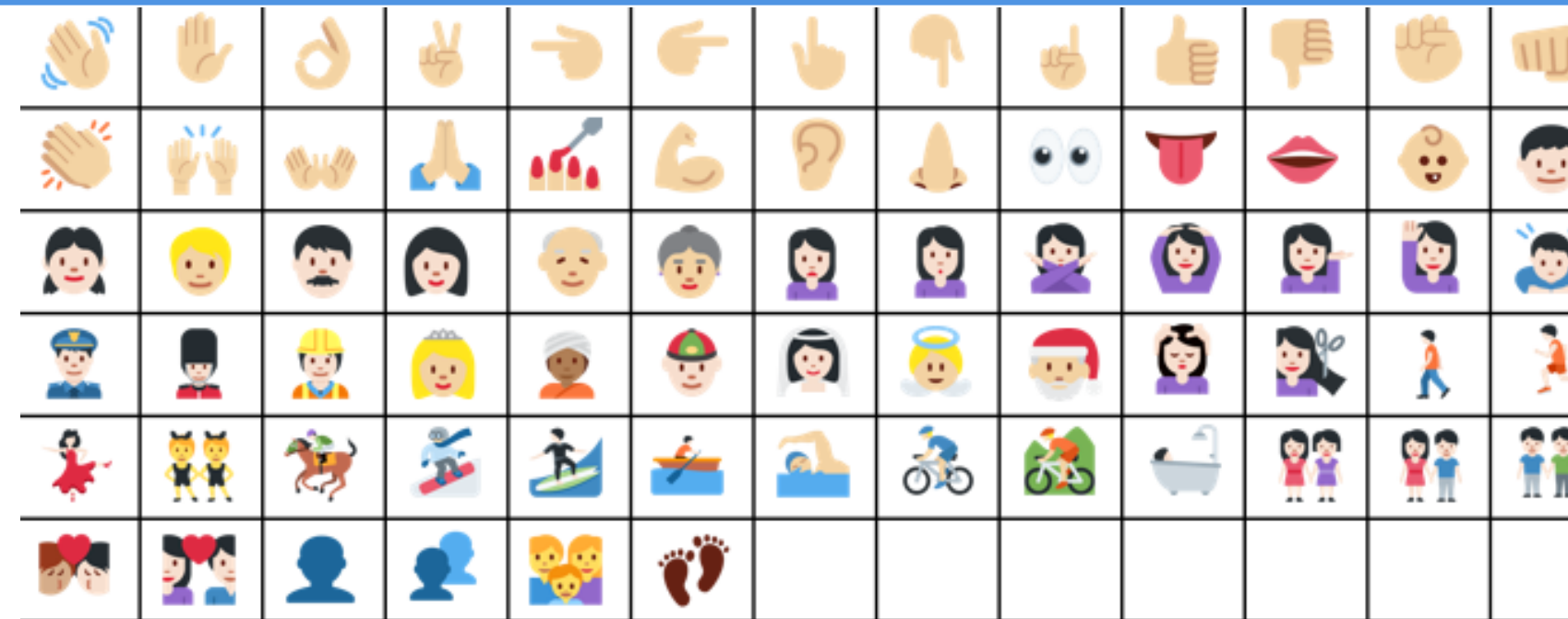
[Emoji-picker v1.2.0 \(GitHub\)](#)

# Available emojis

Total: 830

iOS 6.0 (Sept 2012)

UNICODE 6.0





# Evaluation questions

## Q1:

How much time did you dedicate to create the emoji expression?

## Q2:

How easy or difficult did you find using the emoji selection menu? (0= extremely difficult, and 5= extremely easy)

## Q3:

Did you miss any emoji from the selection menu that you would have liked to use?

## Q4:

Did you feel the emojis allow you to express your views in an easy manner? if not, what were the difficulties?

## Q5:

Do you have any other comments or feedback about the use of emojis in this research?



# Analysing the data

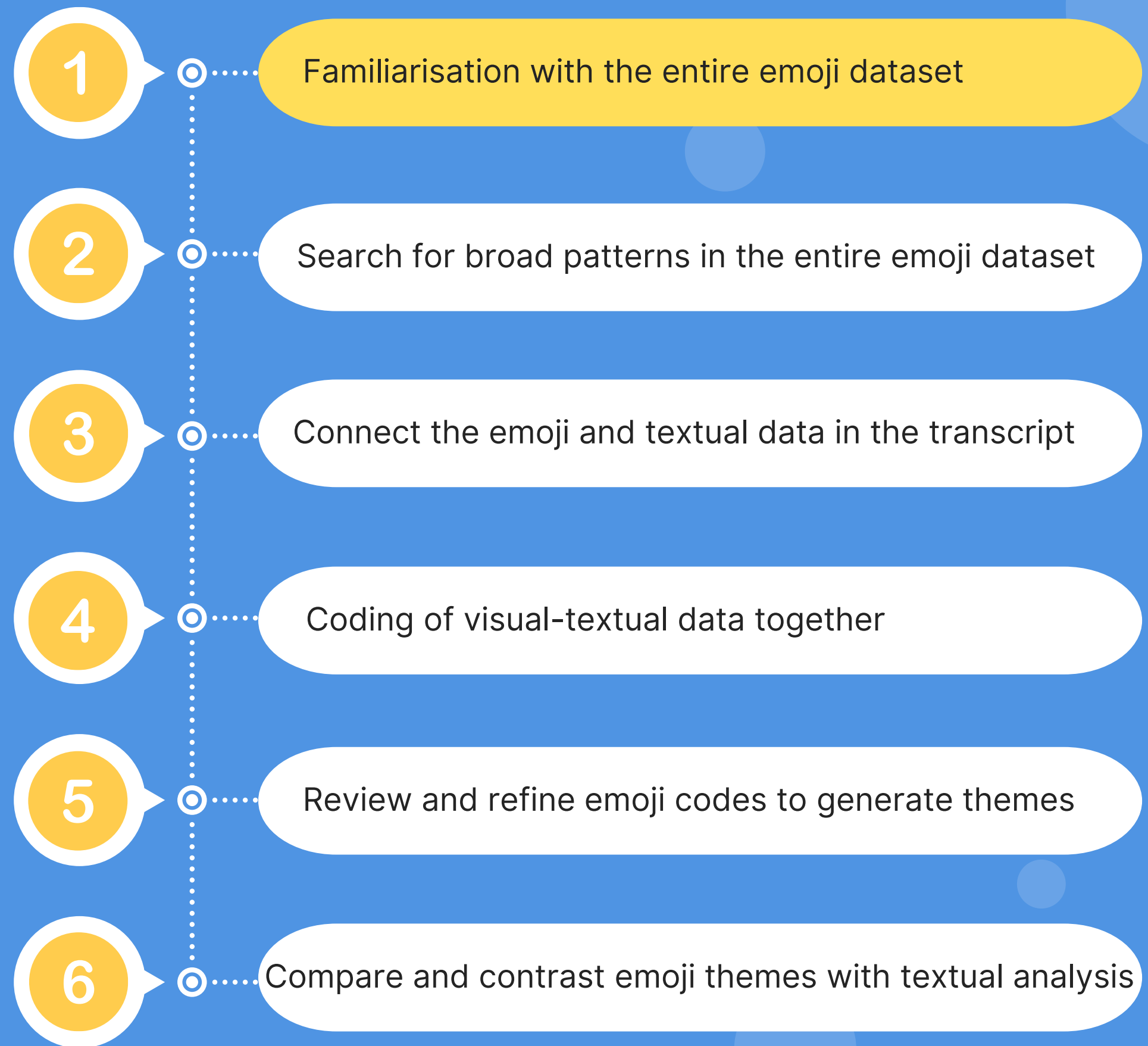
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Navigating unmapped terrains!















# Proposed analytical framework



# Proposed analytical framework



# The dataset

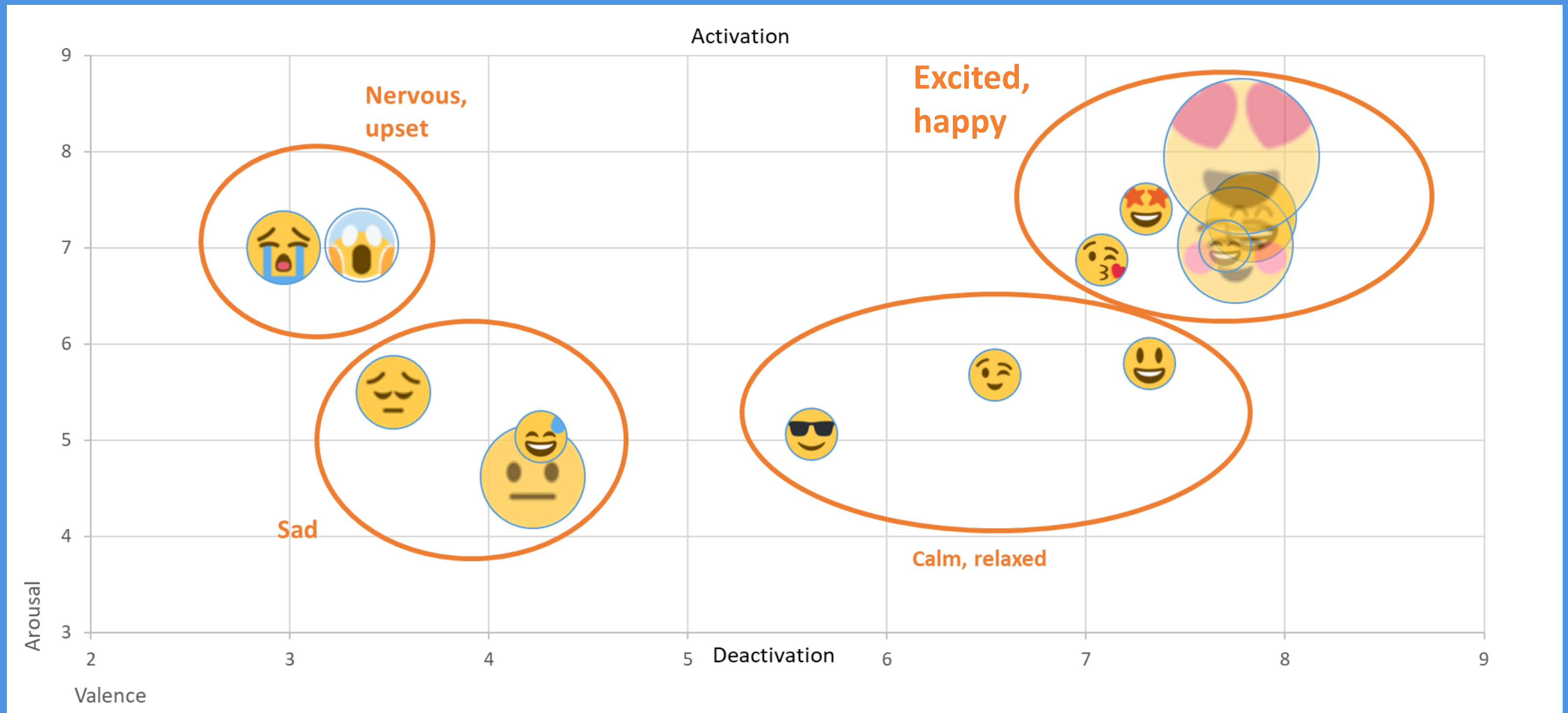
Claudia			Nell
Florence			Jaimie
Sally			Sheila
Zoe			Ezra
Lucy			Peaches
Imogen			Beth
Alys			Sian



# Proposed analytical framework



# Mapping the emotions



Adapted from [Kutsuzawa et al. 2022](#)



# Proposed analytical framework



emoji article • Saved

Home Insert Draw Design Layout References Mailings Review View Developer Help RCM Grammarly

Find Replace Select Dictate Sensitivity Editor Add-ins Open Grammarly

Clipboard Font Paragraph Styles

**R:** So these are the emojis that you chose when I asked you at the pre-interview survey “what comes to your mind or how do you feel when you think about freebirth?”, so could you tell me a little bit about what these emojis represent for you and why do you choose them?

**E:** I think initially....so my feelings about freebirth... are quite excited and amazed and I think the 4th emoji 🌟, the one that's like a power kind of thing, and the sparkles ✨ and the claps 🙌 and the love heart eyes 😍, t's all quite like “whoa, amazing, this is so cool”. The one with the sunglasses 😎 as well, it's all like cool! ....and the Princess with the tiara 👑 reminds me of how people will congratulate people on birth, and particularly freebirth and say like “wow, she's such a queen.”. So for me those....the first seven emojis represent that feeling that I have about freebirth, the muscle 💪 being how strong people are and how courageous I think...birth in general is, but particularly taking it into your own hands like that.

And then, I put the thought bubble 💭 and the speech bubble 💬 because freebirth for me, it makes me think of the way that... planning a freebirth means having to think about birth... a lot more and talk about birth a lot more compared to maybe someone who's planning a birth within the system, where they probably do think and talk about it quite a lot, but ultimately they don't have to go to the depth of that you would have to go to plan a freebirth, I think. .... You wouldn't have to

Page 9 of 17 4147 words English (United Kingdom) Text Predictions: On Accessibility: Investigate Display Settings Focus

# Proposed analytical framework











emoji data analysis • Last Modified: Just now







Semantic units	participant	quote	Message	emotion conveyed	information conveyed
	11 - Peaches	like horror realization. "Oh my God, they've got these risk factors, there's this going on, what am I doing? What am I doing?" (...) This is scary. And not this is scary for these women, this is scary for me. I have a big responsibility here to get it right. I am potentially the only person that can help them to make the right decision, whatever that is for them. And can I get that right? In building that relationship in, in that relationship the best it can be. In still being a midwife in that scenario. Yeah, still being with women, even if they won't let you in	Emotion	fear of failing women	
	10 - Nell	And the next two are around people that make an actual and positive informed choice to have a freebirth, and they look at their options and they choose to do that. And I think that's something that it's out of our comfort zone as midwives, but I think if somebody's taken that power themselves, then that's a positive thing.	Emotion	positivity	
	10 - Nell	If it goes well then that's great, then for achieving what they want to achieve, and as healthcare professionals, I think we should be really mindful that people are not obligated to have a midwife present if they don't want to have one there, and if the outcome is good for them, that's great and..you know, that's kind of where I was getting with it	Emotion	positivity	
	10 - Nell	the first two I chose ...I didn't want it to be like a horrified face or anything, but I was a little bit...upset, I suppose, around I do know some people that have had freebirths because they can't access homebirth care, either through activity on the ward where we've not been able to send somebody out, or just for various reasons, maybe they're out of the criteria for home birth in an area and they feel like they've been pressured not to.. to go into hospital, so they choose a freebirth. And so that's kind of where I was getting into there around that fact if somebody's wanting to have a midwife present but feels like a freebirth is their only choice, then that's not a great place to be, I think.	Emotion	upset	
	11 - Peaches	But I think the rainbow always comes into it because more often than not it's about... freebirth for women is about it being restorative, it being about control, it being about taking back the power, and I think that's a really important part of it,	Information		empowerment
	11 - Peaches	that it's a gift and you've got a birthday at home .	Information		homebirth
	11 - Peaches	it was just that kind of indication that it's going full circle, that we used to be able to do this, that we did used to be able to just go off in the woods and plop our babies out, and people are coming back to it again because that's what we're made to do.	Information		returning to tradition
	11 - Peaches	we can do this, we can work our way through it	Emotion	Support	
		that's definitely my initial reaction. My initial reaction is "ohh fantastic, that's really	Emotion	excitement	

# Descriptive codes

## Information labels

	Homebirth
	Empowerment
	Freedom
	Trust (in oneself or in birth)
	Meditated decision
	Woman-centred
	Returning to tradition
	Uncertainty

## Emotional labels

	Admiration/pride
	Support
	Excitement
	Fear
	Sad/upset
	Happy and pleased

# Proposed analytical framework



# Emoji themes



## Supporting women making choices



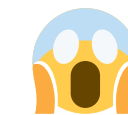
Proud of women taking the power



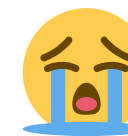
Sharing the joy with women



## Worries and concerns



Uncertainty and fears



When women feel freebirth is their only choice

For most midwives-participants, it was important to convey their support of women's right to make choices during pregnancy and to ensure women in their care felt this support. Participants used emojis such as thumbs-up 👍, smiley faces 😊 😄 😌 or red hearts 🥰 🍷 to convey this support. Midwives recognised how women that freebirth often engaged in extensive research 📖 🧠 and how women's decision is often the result of an informed and meditated process. Some midwives used the emoji 🆓 to express how freebirth represented '*freedom from the system and freedom in terms of your own free will, your choices and actions*' (Ezra). Women taking ownership of their pregnancy/birth and exercising choices was particularly exciting for midwives, that shared feelings of pride towards women's strenght 💪 and trust in themselves to '*take back their power*' (Peaches). Midwives used words such as exciting, amazing, brilliant or incredible to describe their feelings of admiration towards women, expressing this with emojis such as sparkles ✨, raised hands 🙌, clapping hands 🙏 or heart-eyes face 🥰. When women achieved a positive birth experience, midwives shared the joy and '*that warm glowy feeling of a wonderful birth*' (Imogen), expressing this as emotions like love, happiness or pleased, represented with hearts 🥰 🍷 🥰 and big smile faces 😄 😊 😊.



In contrast with these positive feelings, midwives also shared worries and concerns. Midwives reported feelings such as apprehension or fear of potential negative outcomes for mother or baby, using emojis such as 🤖, 😞, 😊. In one of the participants, this fear was influenced by a recent experience of poor neonatal outcome in the context of a freebirth. Midwives recognised their vulnerability to these feelings despite believing that in most cases births will have positive outcomes. This vulnerability stemmed from the unpredictability of birth but also with the uncertainty of not being privy to what was happening in the woman's birth space. Most significantly, stronger emotions were evoked when midwives reflected on why some women are choosing freebirth. Midwives reported feeling worried and upset by *'the fact that people are running away from maternity services'* (Sally) because *'we failed them in their care'* (Lucy) or because *'they can't access homebirth care'* (Nell). One midwife (Sheila) reported feeling disappointed that people *'feel safer and more protected if we're not there, it's not a great reflection on us or the system we have chosen to participate in'*. Midwives expressed these feelings with emojis such as 🙏, 😞, or 😐.

# Proposed analytical framework



# Evaluation data



Really nice, quirky  
thing to do

Takes some of the  
stuffiness out of  
research



Too simplistic if you  
would not have the  
interview to elaborate

Less likely to self-  
censor that if you  
asked for words



# Why emojis?

## **Rich emotional data**

Emojis in this study acted as emotional touchpoints, helping participants accessing their feelings and helping them to describe them to others

## **Facilitated engagement and rapport**

Emojis brought an element of playfulness to research, maintaining and enhancing social relationships between researcher and participants

## **Co-construction of meaning**

Emoji need to be integrated with the verbal communication to form a complete meaning. By giving the participants the opportunity to explain and elaborate, meaning construction became a collaborative process.

## **Visual data enhances the power of data**

Emoji used in dissemination outputs can provide an attention anchor for the audience, potentially promoting interaction and enhancing the power of data

# Strengths



Innovative tool for data collection



Analytical framework is robust but flexible enough to allow for adaptations



It is fun!!

# Limitations



Small and relatively homogenous sample of participants



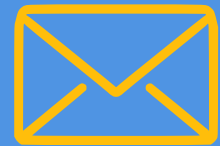
Emoji use may be constrained by technology limitations



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**Questions?**  
**Comments?**

# Get in touch



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**More on my PhD study here**

