

## **SENSATION SEEKING, GENDER AND PROGRAMME PREFERENCES IN TELEVISED SPORT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Sport has emerged as one of the major media events of our time of such magnitude that it is no more possible to distinguish between the phenomena of television and sport. The purpose of this study is to determine the relations between sensation seeking, gender and preferences in viewing televised sport. The reason being that the sensation seeking theories can offer media researchers a valuable approach to understanding why and how people use television to create their own excitement and entertainment. The survey methodology was used in this study. The questionnaire included the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS), which is a standardised psychological test, as well as a questionnaire that categorises a variety of sport in three major groups. Group A consists of violent combative sport, group B of aggressive combative sport and group C consists of non-aggressive stylistic sport. Ninety two (N=92) respondents were randomly selected to complete the Sensation Seeking Scale and to indicate their preferred sport programmes in terms of the three groups that range from extreme combative aggressive to more stylistic and artistic sport programmes. Results in this study indicated a direct relation between high sensation seeking and viewing violent combative sport (Group A). Low sensation seeking viewers also tend to view more stylistic sport on television (Group C). The hypothesis on gender differences was also supported. The male population is more attracted to violent combative sport, while the female population prefers to view more stylistic and artistic sport on television.*

**Key words:** Sensation seeking; Gender; Preferences; Violent combative;  
Aggressive combative and non-aggressive stylistic sport.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of televised sport has changed radically over the last 50 years. New and cheaper technologies and the subsequent availability of television for all (even satellite television that offers a greater variety of sport programmes), have made watching sport one of the most commonly loved leisure activities in our global society. There has been a major shift from the fifties in broadcasting televised sport as pure information orientated news which had to be reported free of charge, up to a highly commercialised entertainment industry that runs on billions of dollars. The watershed in the paradigm shift in the broadcasting of televised sport came with the 1956 Melbourne Games which sparked an intensive debate on sport reporting as information versus entertainment. The charter concerning the television rights of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was consequently revised and from that point on the Olympic Games became the exclusive property of the International Olympic Committee. All rights to broadcast the Olympic Games could now be sold to international television

networks. Through this exclusive mandate to sell broadcasting rights to major networks, the IOC generated a new record income of 1.5 Billion Dollars in Athens compared to the 1.35 Billion in Sydney 2000 (Weingarten, 2004).

The real consumer in sport is the spectator. When we hear the term “spectator” we immediately think of big stadiums and big crowds shouting and applauding their teams. In scientific terms this first consumer level of sport is known as the primary consumer. The secondary consumer includes all the sport spectators who watch their favourite sport on television and listen to radio commentary programmes on sport. Tertiary level of sport consumers are those people who read all about their favourite sport in papers and magazines after the sport event (Potgieter, 2003). Although new spectacular stadiums have been erected in the last decade and the attendance of live matches has increased, the phenomenon of the primary consumer itself has not changed significantly. The most radical changes of consumer sport have been on the secondary level of watching sport programmes on television. The Olympic Games as mentioned above can be used as an example to illustrate the magnitude of changes that have taken place in terms of the phenomenon of televised sport, and the exponential effect of the television in our global society can be fully appreciated. During the 2004 Athens Games 300 television networks broadcasted from Athens and a record 35 000 hours of Olympic Games coverage were broadcasted all over the world compared with the 29 600 hours that were reported in Sydney in 2000 and 20 000 in Barcelona in 1992. Even in our own country a record 1 965 hours were broadcasted on the Olympic Games 2004 in Athens (Weingarten, 2004). If this is an indication of the growing demand of television viewers watching sport as their most favourite leisure activity, it is imperative that the psycho-social sciences must come to a deeper understanding of this fascinating phenomenon. This scientific information can also be valuable to the decision makers in the industry of televised sport to target their audiences more effectively.

Sensation seeking can provide some of the answers that explain the rapid developments in the viewing of televised sport. Sensation seeking according to Maslow’s theory lies on a very basic physiological level. The antecedence of sensation seeking in a person is probably a combination of a genetic origin and the way the person was raised by the parents (Potgieter, 2003).

Sigmund Freud stated that healthy people are constantly exploring new ways to reduce tension and stress by engaging in activities that create excitement and stimulate the nervous system that will lead to an aroused state (Poretz, 2000). A wide variety of theories that include arousal, sensation seeking, self-efficacy and self-mastery have attempted to scientifically explain the tendencies for people to participate in sport and extreme sport (Skinner, 1992). It is clear from available literature that sensation seeking is an integral part of the field of Sport Psychology and it is also clear that more intensive research is needed in this area to clarify all the scientific constructs that are associated with the fascinating phenomenon of sensation seeking.

According to Zuckerman (1994: 27) sensation seeking can be described as a deep urge and eagerness for “varied, novel, and intense sensations and experiences”. These peak experiences can also be described as a rush, a blast or a high. Sensation seeking can also be seen as a psychological trait where the individual seeks out novel experiences and dangers and enjoys the thrill that comes with it (Wann, 1997).

Sensation seeking, according to Zuckerman (1994), is one of the most creative areas in personality research that assisted significantly in the prediction of a wide variety of leisure behaviours that include the media and specifically the viewing of televised sport. Consequently, the primary aim of this study is to look at sensation seeking as it relates to the viewing of certain sport programmes. This study is also an attempt to go beyond the normal demographic analysis and to cut deeper into the true nature of the phenomena that are researched in this study. This more intensive research has become necessary, because television programming has become extremely specialised (Perse, 1996). This research on the different types of sport is placed on a continuum of violent and aggressive combative sport on the one side to stylistic, artistic and non-aggressive sport on the other side of the continuum. The notion is that while fans are watching their favourite sport on television, they can create their own unique high levels of stress and arousal. This stress is usually positive because viewers can control their own involvement in the game.

Zuckerman's (1979; 1983) Sensation Seeking Scale ideally suits the assessment of sensation seeking levels that can be associated with positive stressful situations, for example, the viewing of exciting sport on television. The Sensation Seeking Scale has effectively been used to determine the sensation seeking levels in a variety of contexts in sport, specifically the participant itself. The Scale has effectively discriminated among high- and low-risk sport (Jack & Ronan, 1998) and between athletes and nonathletes (Schroth, 1995). The Sensation Seeking Scale has also been effectively employed to uncover the relationship between sensation seeking, extroversion and openness to experience (Aluja *et al.*, 2003). Although it is not possible to compare the quality of excitement of the real participant and the spectator that watch their favourite sport on television, experts start to accept the fact that televised sport has become the most common mode for modern man to create his/her own excitement and thrills (McDaniel, 2003). The nail biting uncertainty of outcomes in big sport events that serves to create suspenseful endings can be effectively provided by sport programmes that involve violent and aggressive play (Gan *et al.*, 1997). Research also shows that the television viewer is not only attracted to violent combative sport, but can also appreciate stylistic sport as a form of entertainment. This is in alignment with the fact that the viewer can create his/her own optimum levels of stimulation (OLS) by regulating his/her own involvement in viewing televised sport (Zuckerman, 1994).

With regard to gender, one of the aims of this study is to establish the gender differences in preferences for televised sport. Available literature suggests that levels of sensation seeking differ for males and females. Studies on sensation seeking suggest meaningful age and gender differences which can be attributed to the variations in testosterone levels between males and females (Zuckerman, 1994). "Males tend to report higher levels of sensation seeking than females, which declines over the course of the lifecycle in both sexes" (McDaniel, 2003: 16).

## **PURPOSE AND SCOPE**

The purpose of this study is to determine the relations between sensation seeking, gender and preferences in viewing televised sport. The first aim of this study is to determine whether high levels of sensation seeking relates significantly to the preference of viewing violent combative televised sport. A second aim is to determine whether low sensation seeking is linked to the preference of viewing non-aggressive stylistic televised sport. The third aim is to determine whether the male population tends to view more violent combative televised sport and

whether the female population prefers to view more non-aggressive stylistic televised sport. According to available research it is hypothesised that a positive relation will exist between high sensation seeking and the preferences of viewing violent combative televised sport. The second hypothesis will be to relate low sensation seeking with the preference of viewing non-aggressive stylistic televised sport. The third hypothesis, also extrapolated from available literature, suggests that the male population will prefer the viewing of violent combative televised sport and the female population will prefer more non-aggressive stylistic televised sport.

## METHODOLOGY

The standardised Sensation Seeking Scale of Zuckerman (1979; 1983) was the survey method utilised in this study. The statements on the Sensation Seeking Scale contain two options, A or B. The preference for one of the two statements is indicated by circling either A or B. The preference for the viewing of televised sport is categorised in three major groups, namely group A which consists of violent combative sport for example boxing, kick boxing and rugby, group B which represents the aggressive combative sport for example, basketball, soccer, hockey and auto motorcycle racing and group C which represents the non-aggressive stylistic sport for example gymnastics, figure skating, dancing and tennis. These categories are based on the research done by McDaniel (2003), as well as taking into account the South African sport context.

Data were selected by emailing and handing out questionnaires to the general public. No inclusion or exclusion was set, the reason for this non criterion approach is to sample a representative group of people from the general public. The population was extrapolated from the Ekurhuleni Municipality geographic area. The reason for choosing this specific sampling group is that they represent an average urban population that watches televised sport on a regular basis. The only prerequisite for the respondents was that they had to have a television set and watch televised sport on a regular basis. The sample group included 150 respondents and the obtained response rate was 61.33%. Ninety two questionnaires were returned.

The Sensation Seeking Scale consists of four subscales. The four subscales constructs are: thrill and adventure seeking (TAS), experience seeking (ES), disinhibition (Dis) and boredom susceptibility (BS). The total sensation seeking score is obtained by adding the four subscales scores. The TAS scale measures the desire to engage in thrill seeking risky and adventure activities like hang-gliding, parachuting, mountain climbing and other extreme sport activities. The ES scale assesses the desire to seek arousal through the mind and senses. The non-conformist lifestyle of reaction groups like the hippies of the 1960's who lived spontaneously and loved unplanned travel is an effective description and representation of this scale. The Dis scale involves a more traditional type of sensation seeking which includes activities like gambling, drinking, partying and sex. The BS scale is directly linked to the aversion for boring experiences like repetitive routine work. People who measured high on this scale are extremely restless under conditions of monotonous, repetitive activities and consistent conditions (Zuckerman, 1979).

Descriptive statistics are applied and the data are presented in figures to give a simplistic explanation of the data. Spearman's rank order correlation was used to determine the strength of the relation between the variables, sensation seeking and the viewing of various televised

sport. This is the non-parametric alternative to Pearson's correlation. If the p-value (sig. 2-tailed) is equal to or below 0.05, there is a significant relation (at the 5% level of significance) between the two variables under observation. If the p-value is equal to or below 0.10, there is a significant relation at the 10% level of significance (Wilcox, 2003).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demographic profiles

In Figures 1 and 2 the ages and gender profiles of the respondents are presented. The ages of the respondents range from 19 to 60 years with a frequency percentage varying across the different age categories. All the age groups are sufficiently represented. The age group between 19 and 25 represents more than half the population used in this study. The over representation of this age group may be a good indication of the new technologically young generation who grew up with television and the broad choice of DSTV satellite. With regard to the gender of the respondents, 43.5% were male and 56.6% were female, which is a sufficient representation of both genders (Figures 1 & 2).

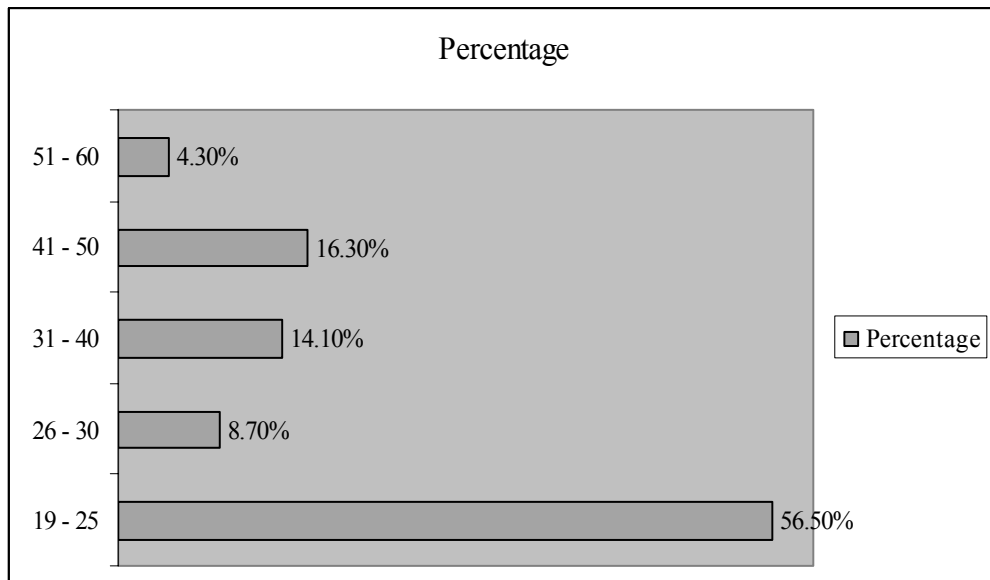


FIGURE 1. AGE PROFILE

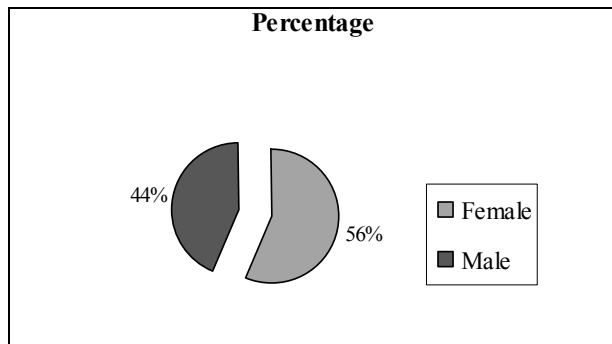


FIGURE 2. GENDER PROFILE

### Sensation seeking and preferences in viewing televised sport

High sensation seeking relates significantly to group A (violent combative sport). The results indicated a significant ( $p=0.018$ ) positive relation that exists at the 5% level of significance ( $p<.05$ ) between group A and the general scale (total sensation seeking count). A significant relation also exists between the subscales TAS (thrill and adventure seeking) and Dis (disinhibition) with group A (violent combative sport) (Figure 3). The implication is that people who like to engage in thrill seeking, risky and adventure activities (TAS) and people who are attracted to social disinhibition like gambling, drinking and partying have a strong attraction to watching violent combative sport on television. These findings are supported by the research of McDaniel (2003). No significant relations between group A and all the other subscales of sensation seeking were found.

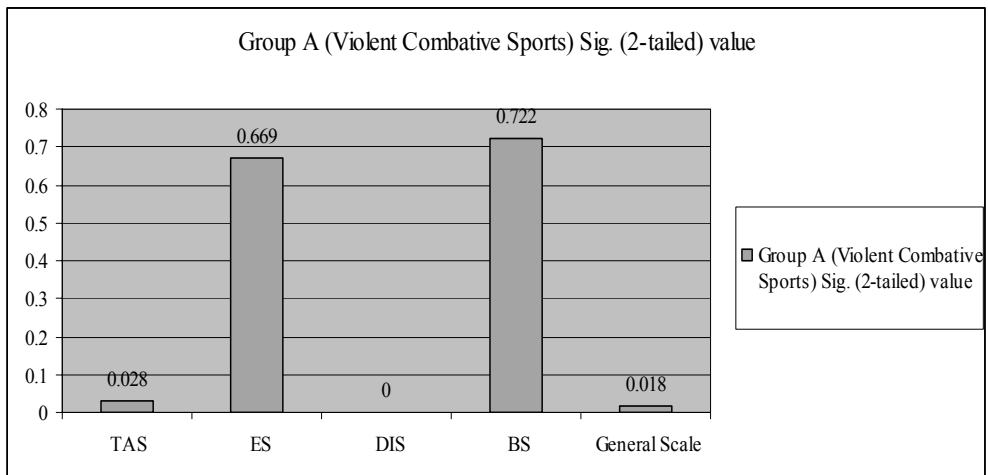
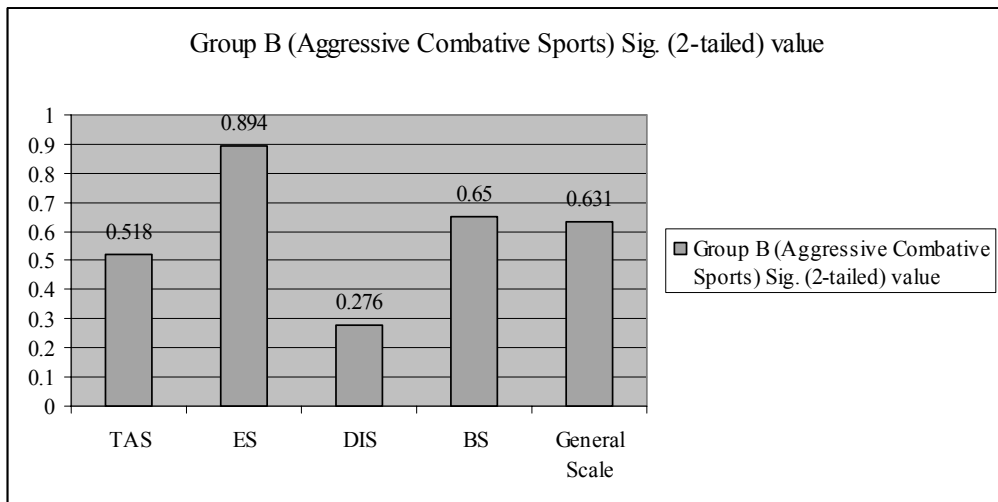


FIGURE 3. THE RELATION BETWEEN SENSATION SEEKING AND THE PREFERENCE OF VIEWING VIOLENT COMBATIVE SPORT

No significant relation between group B and the general scale and other subscales was found. A possible reason why no significant relation was found between sensation seeking and group B may be that group B represents the middle or neutral zone on the continuum from extreme violent combative to the non-aggressive stylistic sport. The sports listed in group B like basketball, soccer, hockey and auto motorcycle racing are not too aggressive and cannot be classified as stylistic either (Figure 4).



**FIGURE 4. THE RELATION BETWEEN SENSATION SEEKING AND THE PREFERENCE OF VIEWING AGGRESSIVE COMBATIVE SPORT**

A significant negative relation on the 10% level ( $p < .10$ ) of significance between sensation seeking (general scale -  $p = 0.086$ ) and group C was confirmed by the results in this study. The subscale thrill and adventure seeking (TAS) related negatively on the 10% level of significance ( $p = 0.071$ ) with non-aggressive stylistic sport (Group C). The subscale disinhibition (Dis) related negatively on the 5% level ( $p < .05$ ) of significance ( $p = 0.008$ ) with non-aggressive stylistic sport (Group C). Due to  $ES = 0.559$  and  $BS = 0.832$  it can be stated that a significant relation exists between low sensation seeking and group C. The implication of these findings is clearly that low sensation seeking individuals prefer to watch non-aggressive stylistic sport on television (Figure 5). These findings are in line with the results of similar studies done by McDaniel (2003) and Perse (1996).

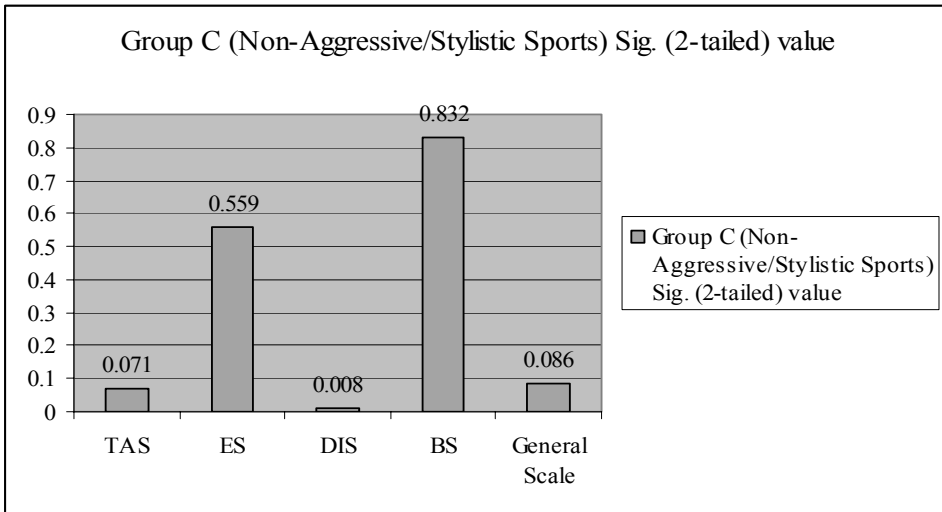


FIGURE 5. THE RELATION BETWEEN SENSATION SEEKING AND THE PREFERENCE OF VIEWING NON-AGGRESSIVE STYLISTIC SPORT

**Gender differences and preferences in viewing televised sport**

Research shows that significant differences exist between males and females in terms of their enjoyment and excitement levels that they derive from viewing televised sport (McDaniel, 2003). The results in this study support the third hypothesis. Results indicated a statistically significant difference ( $p=0.000$ ) on the 5% level of significance that exists between group A for males and females. Figure 6 represents significant differences between males and females in terms of group A. Twenty six males (65% of all the males) indicated group A (violent combative sport) as their first choice and only nine females (17.6% of all the females) indicated group A as their first choice. Therefore, the male population tends to view more violent combative televised sport like rugby and boxing.

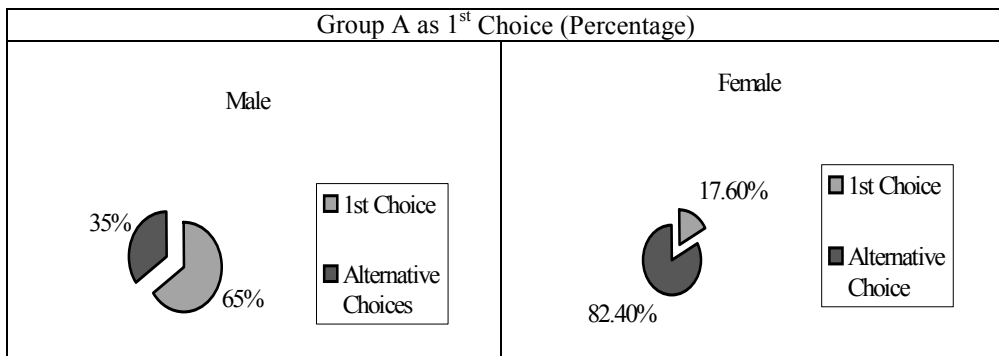
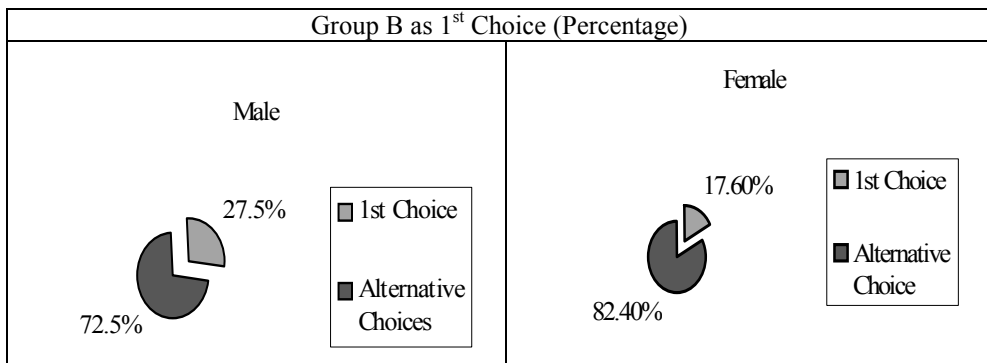


FIGURE 6. THE RELATION BETWEEN GENDER AND THE PREFERENCE OF VIEWING VIOLENT COMBATIVE TELEVIEWED SPORT

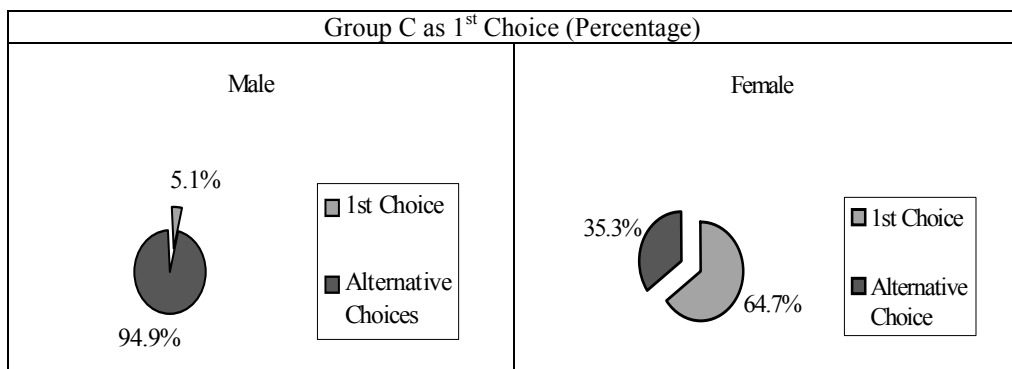


The differences between males and females who prefer watching aggressive combative sport like basketball, hockey, soccer and auto motorcycle racing (group B) were not significant in the findings of this study. As possible rationale, it may be reasoned that sport like basketball, hockey and soccer are the middle or neutral zone of sport that can either be classified as violent combative or stylistic artistic (Figure 7). Only 17.6% of females and 27.5% males preferred group B as their number one choice in viewing televised sport.



**FIGURE 7. THE RELATION BETWEEN GENDER AND THE PREFERENCE OF VIEWING AGGRESSIVE COMBATIVE TELEVISED SPORT**

As hypothesised, the female population tends to view more non-aggressive stylistic sport than the male population. A statistical difference exists ( $p=0.000$ ) between the males and females and their rating of group C (stylistic sport). Only two males (5.1% of all males) indicated group C as their first choice and 33 females (64.7%) indicated group C as their first choice (Figure 8). Therefore, the data in Figures 6, 7 and 8 are consistent with the third research hypothesis and suggest that a significant difference exists between males and females in their ratings of groups A and C.



**FIGURE 8. THE RELATION BETWEEN GENDER AND THE PREFERENCE OF VIEWING NON-AGGRESSIVE STYLISTIC SPORT**

These findings support the research of McDaniel (2003) who also found gender differences in their preferences to watch either violent combative or non-aggressive stylistic sport. Another explanation for these findings in gender differences is the fact that different testosterone levels in males and females are related to different levels of sensation seeking tendencies. Zuckerman's (1988) research shows that a tendency to live on the edge is more common in male population than in female population. Twenty years of research in this area suggests that significant differences between males and females exist in terms of their optimal level of stimulation and arousal (McDaniel, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

The rapid developments in the industry of broadcasting televised sport as a secondary spectator phenomenon has outrun the research in Sport Psychology, as well as all the psycho-social sciences involved in the study of the spectator phenomenon. This study is a small effort and a humble building block in the development of a proper scientific body that can assist social scientists to come to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This information can also be useful in more effective targeting of audiences and especially commercials through which profit margins can be improved. Some commercials with a high sensation seeking quality can be aligned with high sensation seeking sport programmes that will improve the total impact on the high sensation seeking individual watching the programme. The use of high stimulating images combined with dynamic music like hard rock can psych up the viewer to an optimal level of arousal. A more scientific based approach can increase the total efficiency in promoting sport more effectively, as well as improving the quality of the commercialised nature of sport.

The research in this study clearly indicates the difference between the preferences of viewing televised sport between high sensation seekers and low sensation seekers. High sensation seekers prefer to view violent combative sport and low sensation seekers prefer to view a more non-aggressive stylistic sport. The male population tends to view more violent combative sport, while the female population prefers to view more non-aggressive stylistic sport. It can be concluded that, because of the complexity and the rapid development of the phenomenon of televised sport in the last three decades, the significant findings of this study are promising and further research in this fascinating field of study is not optional, but a necessity.

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