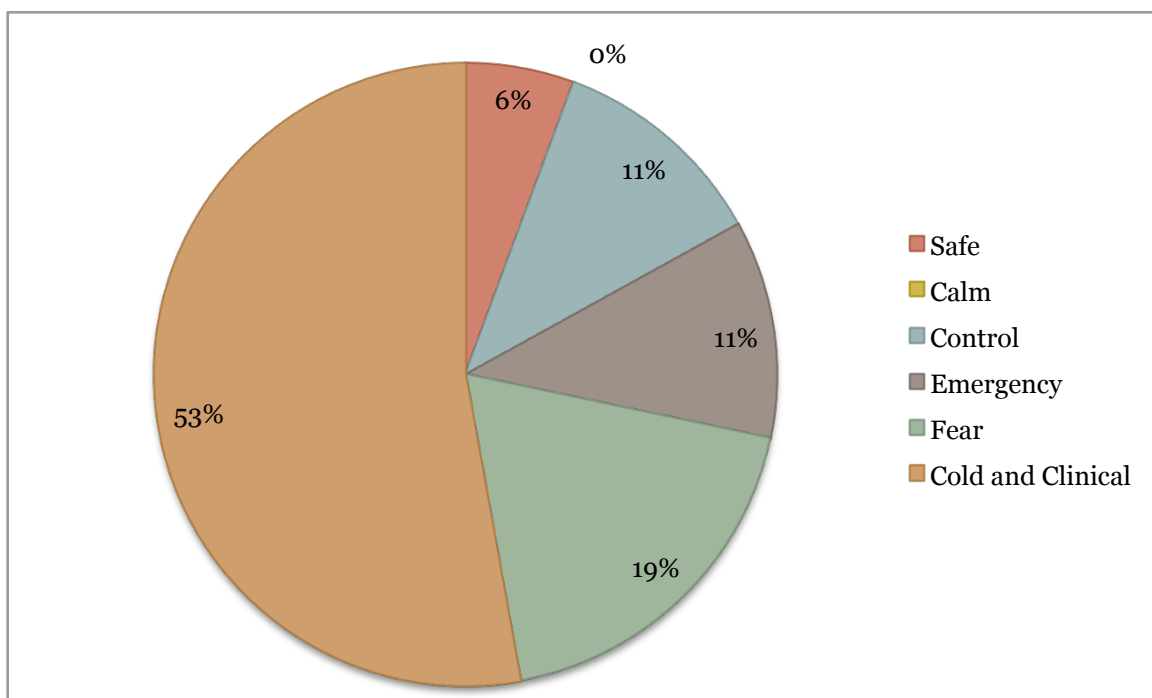


Childbirth in the Media

What South African respondents had to say

The survey participant was presented with an image of an operating theatre. She was then asked to select a word that she felt best described how she felt about the room as a place in which to have a baby.

The majority of respondents chose “cold and clinical” but it must be noted that 6% of the people who responded described it using the word “safe”.



According to research done in 2005 by midwife, Robyn Sheldon, South Africa's c-section rate is between 70 – 80% in private hospitals. This surgery is something which must be done in a hospital and is used as a life-saving intervention in high risk pregnancies. In interpreting these results we need to take into account the LSM grouping of the respondents. According to SAARF, those who have an internet connection would fall into the groups 8 to 10, which are also groups that are most likely to have Medical Aid and therefore access to private healthcare. It could be inferred that perhaps this has had an impact on what has been reported. This group also has the most access to various forms of media and are the most likely to make use of them. However, 66% felt they had not been influenced by what they had seen on TV and so we might assume that some of the answers may have been based on personal experience. The fact that these respondents were

most likely to have access to media would still be an important consideration as the influence it had would possibly be greater than the participant realised although to confirm this more research would be needed.

The responses to the Birth Centre room offers more insight into the South African culture around birth and perhaps how it might be shaped by the media. For the past decade, there has been an international trend in medical facilities to offer environments that more closely resemble a homely one than a medical one. South Africa has a number of these facilities which are both stand-alone and also within traditional hospital settings. Yet in the media, we still only see the most highly medicalised facilities as being the norm. I feel it is important to point out that in film making the setting is an important tool to help create the desired scene. Hospital locations are often used as a location for heightened drama and there are standard ways in which a hospital scene is shot that emphasises certain elements through colour etc. Audiences often don't realise that the media has trained them to subconsciously make these associations by playing on perceived norms and through repeated use of this imagery.

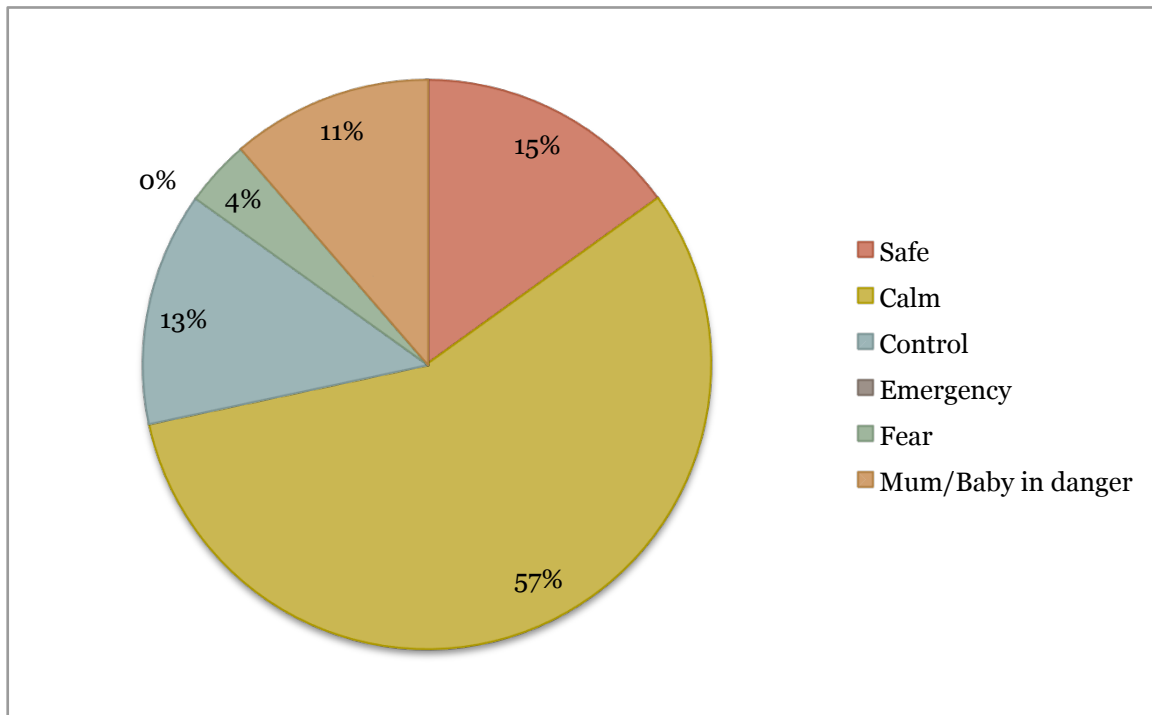
Historically childbirth was a dangerous time and in many cultures a spiritual leader was often present due to the very real possibility that the mother and/or baby might die. This fear has been perpetuated through the media, despite the fact that childbirth today is arguably the safest it has even been in the entire history of humans. While many are likely to believe this is due to modern medicine and the fact that women are more likely to give birth in a hospital through the use of technology, the truth is that there are many other factors at play – such as general health, nutrition and good pre-natal care. Modern medicine has made many advancements in our understanding of the process of pregnancy and childbirth, but also our ability to pick up complications at an early stage that enables them to be dealt with before becoming life-threatening.

In interviews with a number of women and their partners I was made aware of a distinct bias for a hospital birth. When asked to elaborate on their views of why they would feel safest in a hospital the answers often revolved around the aspect of danger and a longing for safety. Many women felt comforted by the close proximity to modern technology and welcomed it as part of the options made available to them. Another question I asked in these interviews was how they had discovered that this was the safest way to have a baby and all interviewees responded that it was information they had been told by a medical practitioner (mainly doctors) or from a respected family member.

Another interesting perspective to come out of these interviews was that Midwives were rated as being much less qualified to be at a birth than a doctor, and that midwives were understood to simply be a nurse that works with

pregnant women. One birth partner said in response to the idea of a midwife-led birth “Why would you let an air hostess land the plane?”

In light of these responses I think it is unsurprising that the culture surrounding birth in the 8-10 LSM groups is more geared towards a hospital birth and so an active birth room would represent things like fear, emergency and even the feeling that mother and baby would be in danger without the immediate presence of modern technology at a birth.



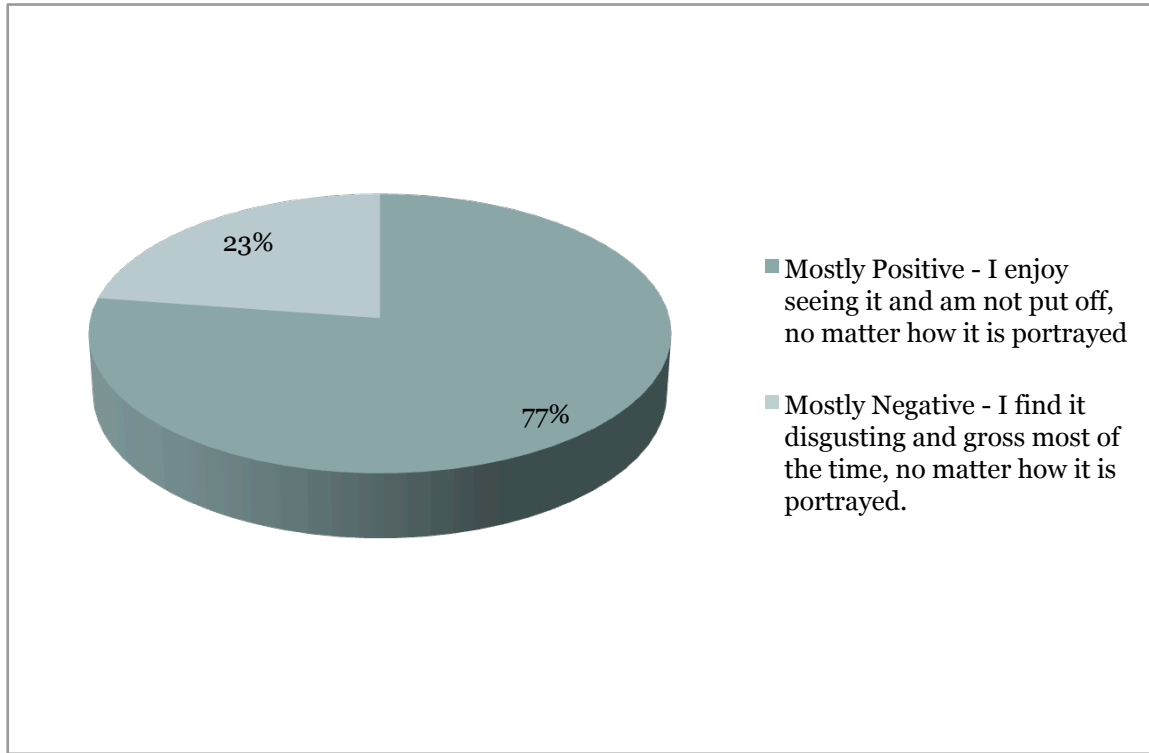
Another aspect of childbirth I would like to look at more closely in future would be the influence of childbirth preparation classes and how that form of media has a particular influence over women and their choices. In “Misconceptions” by Niaomi Wolf, she discovered that many of the childbirth education classes run by the hospital in which the woman gave birth were geared towards educating the women and their partners on the policies of the hospital, rather than giving informative and unbiased information about childbirth. By educating the women on hospital policies they could have more compliant patients who would accept various interventions as routine instead of women wanting a birth experience more catered towards her own needs.

As was previously mentioned, the women completely the survey are in LSM groups that have medical aid. The majority of medical aids offer payment towards medical aid approved childbirth education as part of their pre-natal care. As a result, women are channeled into classes that will be catering towards specific

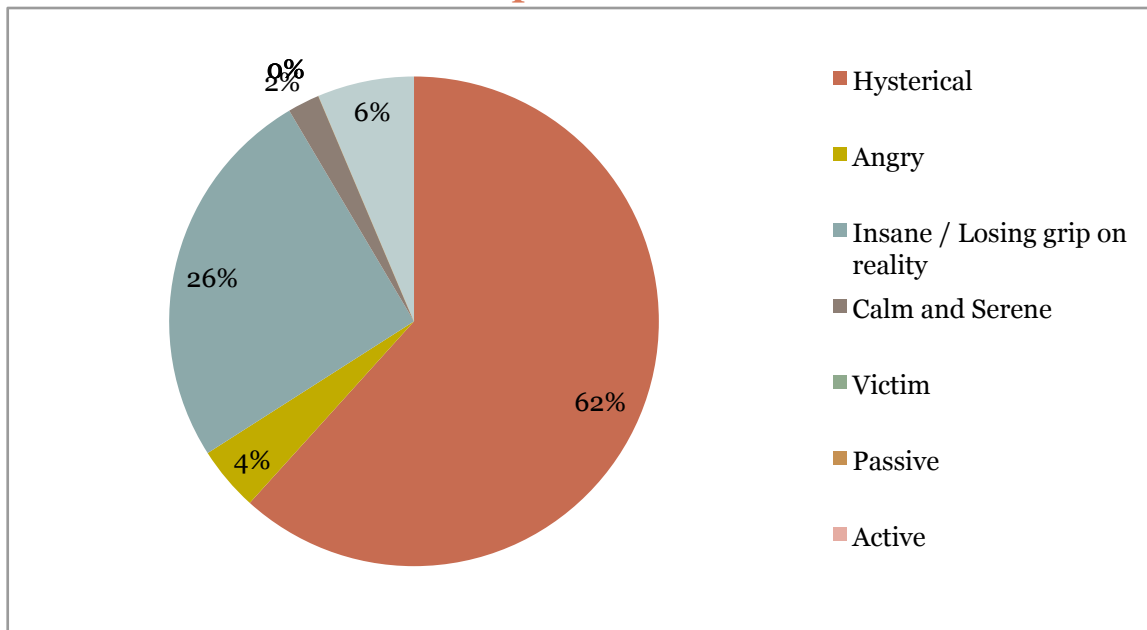
aims and may be influenced greatly by when certain professional want the women to know.

Childbirth education is an important tool for women to help them make informed choices and so the information they receive should be unbiased and completely tailored towards helping the woman come to her own educated choices regarding birth.

How do South African women feel about seeing a birth on TV?

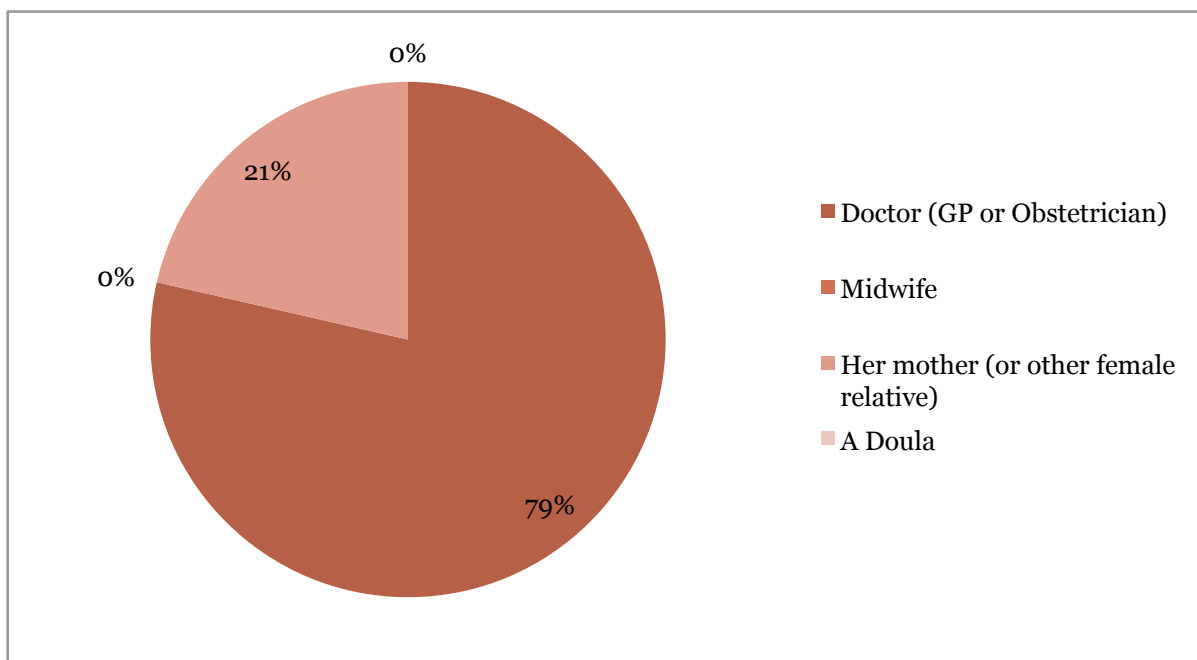


How are women in labour represented in the Media?

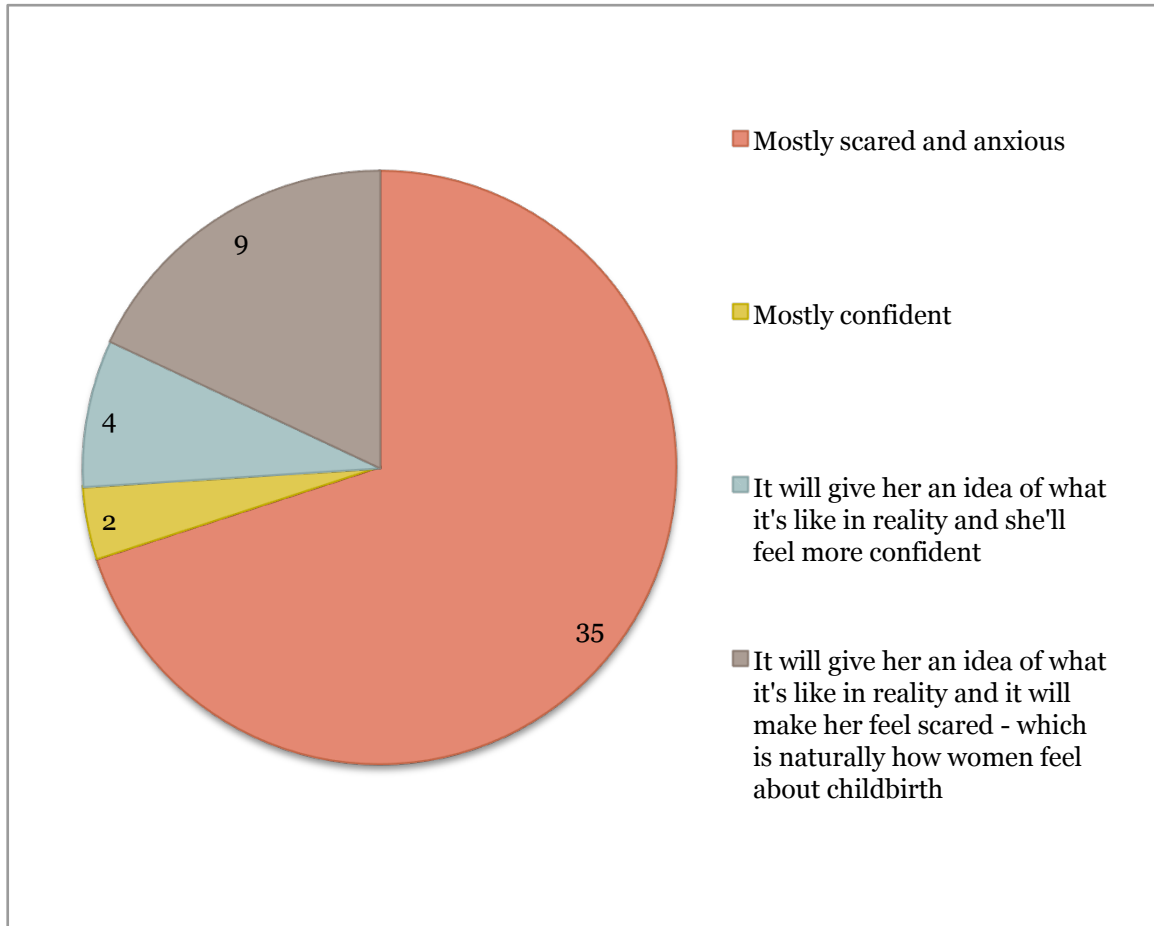


Which one person does a woman want with her the most in childbirth according to the media?

Midwife and Doula scored 0%

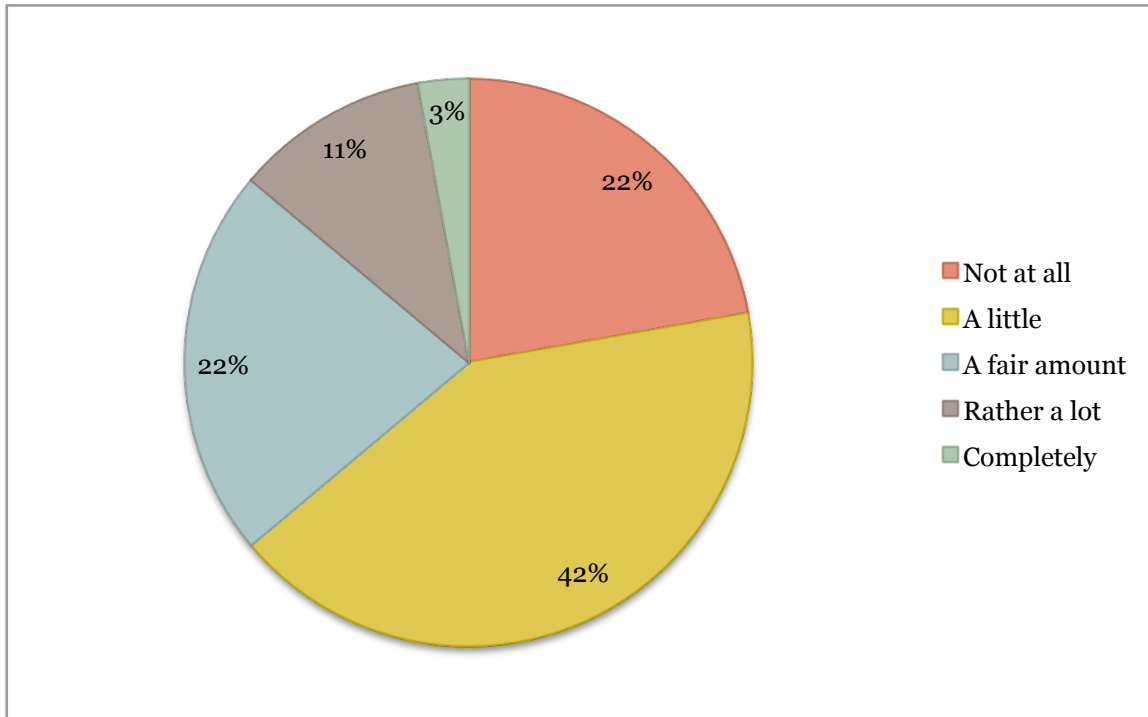


If a pregnant woman who has never seen a real birth before sees one on TV or in a Movie - how do you think the majority of birth scenes will make her feel? (even if she understands it's not really accurate)

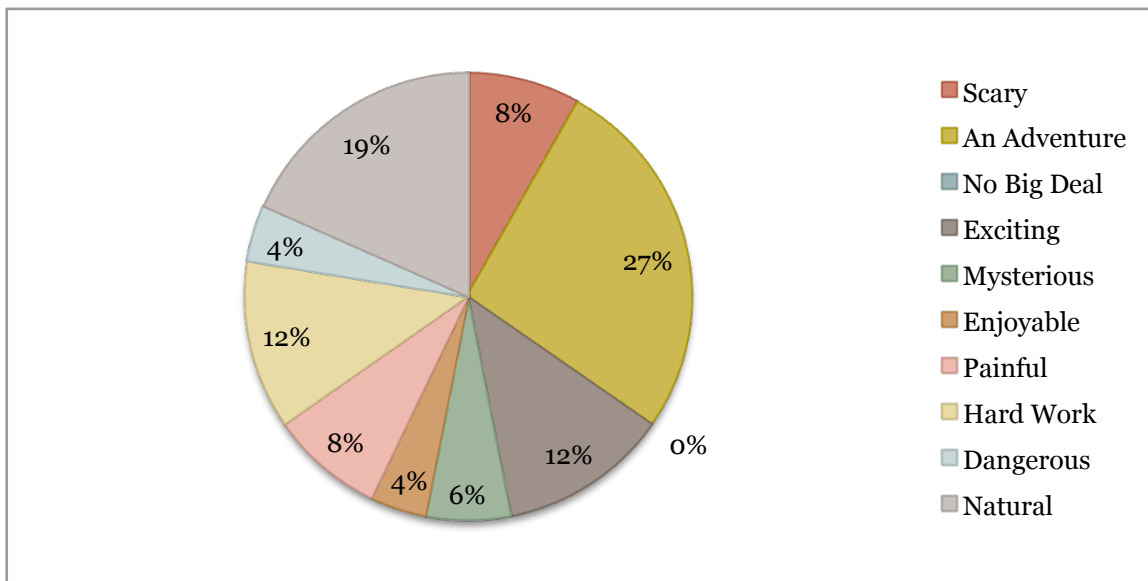


What follows are charts to represent the various responses to a number of the questions that were asked in the survey.

How much do you feel you have been influenced in your beliefs about childbirth by what you have seen on TV?



Despite how the media portrays childbirth, which word best describes childbirth in real life.



Are women just naturally afraid of having a baby?

