

## The influence of Emotional Feelings on Refereeing Decisions in Football

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### ABSTRACT

Football referees in Burkina Faso experience strong emotions when making refereeing decisions. The aim was to analyse the influence of emotions on decision-making during matches. This was a two-phase mixed survey of referees. The first was a questionnaire survey: "Sport Emotion Questionnaire SEQ" by Jones et al, (2005) involving 79 referees. The second was a self-confrontation interview with the central referee of the last match. The data was analysed using the authors' model and SPSS Version 21. The verbatim analysis confirmed the five dimensions of emotion identified in the literature. Happiness and excitement appeared to be statistically associated with the level of refereeing, competition and seniority. The preponderant role of emotions in the refereeing decision-making process in football was highlighted. A central and complex theme, it would be wise to consider psycho-physiological studies of referees in order to determine the mechanisms by which discrete emotions are expressed.

**Keywords:** *Football referees, Emotion, Decision-making, Self-confrontation interview*

Refereeing in football, as in all other sports, is a highly demanding activity. The Federation International de Football Association (FIFA) was set up in 1904 to ensure that the laws of the game are applied uniformly, so that refereeing is more rational and fairer. To achieve greater impartiality and clarity in refereeing, a number of innovations have been introduced. The most recent of these is the use of Video Assistant Refereeing (VAR) to improve referees' decisions in contentious situations. Despite these technological advances, refereeing decisions are always challenged. These challenges generate strong emotions among referees, who must nevertheless officiate matches with a certain degree of impartiality.

Burkina Faso is no exception to the general phenomenon of violence against referees. Preliminary surveys carried out by the Ouagadougou Regional Referees' Commission and the Burkinabe Refereeing Department show that football referees are faced with enormous difficulties related to the environment on the pitch. It is in this sense that Vautrot (1995) stated

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that "being a football referee in the 20th century may not be too difficult, but remaining one is much more so". Football refereeing in Burkina Faso is strongly contested by players, coaches and supporters. Witness the front page of the *Sidwaya sport du Burkina* newspaper in issue 9388 of 10 June 2021: Violence in Burkina Faso's stadiums: an increasingly sad spectacle. These comments reflect the fact that football referees in Burkina Faso are increasingly the victims of violence. The Burkina Faso professional football league has noted a number of cases of aggression against referees, according to reports No. 050/S20-21 from matches on the 32nd day of the national D1 championship in Burkina Faso. Insulting remarks were recorded during the ASECK v Majestic match at the home of the ASECK team's water carrier. More recently, on 2 May 2024, the Executive Secretary of the professional football league signed a decision sanctioning players and managers of the professional football league (LFP Decision No. 035-s23/24). Such are the realities of football in Burkina Faso. Some authors report that transgressive and disruptive behaviour in sport can be seen as aggressive behaviour (Reynes, Pantaléon & Long, 2007).

This description of football refereeing shows that everywhere else, football referees officiate matches in situations of pressure, tension and emotion. Indeed, the concept of "emotion" is a commonly used term that is difficult to define precisely (Clay, 2009). The same author states that emotion is a constellation of high-intensity responses comprising typical expressive, physiological and subjective manifestations. They are generally accompanied by characteristic action tendencies and represent a break in continuity with the processes underway in the subject at the time of their appearance. This point of view shows the complexity of the concept of emotion, which is at once physical, physiological, cognitive, behavioural and communicational, and which is always expressed in response to a stimulus. Scherer & Sangsue (2021) state that emotion can be considered as a process of components that encompasses all the organic sub-systems and that is mainly directed by changes in the evaluation of the information received. If emotion influences the evaluation of the information received, then refereeing decision-making situations that take place in a pressurised environmental context are significantly synchronised with emotions. In this sense, Clay (2009) points out that emotions are characterised by a high degree of synchronisation, as the whole body and mind tend to react in unison. Emotions are therefore the result of evaluating external or internal stimuli according to certain criteria and are focused on the triggering event (the stimulus). They have a major impact on an individual's behaviour (Clay, 2009). Sporting competition is therefore emotionally charged, punctuated by alarms and inevitable jolts, which need to be countered by self-regulatory behaviours to "control, restructure or suppress" emotions deemed harmful or unpleasant (Levêque, 2014).

Football, a high-stakes sport, has become psychologically demanding (Bizzini and Piffaretti, 1998). This means that referees need to process information quickly and efficiently in order to make the best possible choices. Considered as key players in the chain, referees are placed in the midst of time pressures, conflicting relationships (players/referees/coaches/spectators/managers), match pressures (extensive media coverage), challenges to their physical integrity (physical and verbal aggression and/or threats) and fear of failure. These factors accelerate the emergence of psychological problems and place referees in particularly emotional situations (Reynes, Canovas, & Ferrand, 2008).

The central question that emerges is that of looking at the effects of emotions in overcoming the significant cognitive and emotional demands during matches. Dussouille, & Lopez (2019) have reported that emotions can directly influence cognitive processes such as the individual's judgement, perception of situations, fear of the attentional bundle, or even the level of

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concentration. Some authors have also found that negative emotions can be accompanied by a weakening of motivation (Lee, 2018). From attentional and motivational processes to physiological processes, it has to be said that emotions run through all human states (Lazarus, 1999; Russell & Feldman-Barrett, 1999). By way of illustration, it has been reported that emotions have an impact on the peripheral nervous system, which is responsible for variations in physiological indicators such as blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension, etc. (Larsen et al., 2003). Physical and sporting activities are sources of emotions and sometimes these emotions can even become intense when we are talking about extreme sports and situations (Guilloux, 2015). Therefore, if sport is particularly conducive to triggering reactions, it is necessary to know the effects of these emotions in order to consider a control plan. For example, it seems important to devote attention not to eradicating emotions at source, but to understanding and decoding emotions during the competition (Lévêque, 2014), because decision-making in sport is based on real constraints of time, information, limited cognitive capacity and the difficulty of finding an optimal solution that can be calculated, all of which generate strong emotions (Bennis & Pachur, 2006). It has been mentioned that referees who make split-second decisions seem to apply heuristic strategies to reduce the complexity of the situation (Raab, 2012). Other researchers have argued that the use of cues leads referees to make poor decisions (Souchon et al., 2010). For example, crowd noise has been found to influence football referees' decisions in favour of the home team. (Downward & Jones, 2007; Nevill, Balmer & Williams, 2002).

If we make the link between the violence suffered by referees during the Nana, Kaboré & Ziba (2024) matches and their emotional feelings in the refereeing decision-making process, we find that these decisions are most often taken in highly emotional situations. In order to objectify this problem, we felt it necessary to analyse the influence of emotional feelings during matches on referees' decision-making in the city of Ouagadougou.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### *Participants*

This mixed descriptive study took place from January to June 2024 in the city of Ouagadougou. The study population consisted of league referees in the Burkina Faso championship. The survey of volunteers resulted in the inclusion of 79 football referees with an average age of  $31.47 \pm 5.77$  years. The inclusion criteria were as follows: to be a league or federation referee; to be an international referee; and to be available at the time of the survey. The non-inclusion criteria were: to be an amateur referee and to be unavailable at the time of the survey.

#### *Data collection*

Data collection was carried out in two phases:

##### **1. Questionnaire survey**

The 79 referees completed the "Sport Emotion Questionnaire SEQ" by Jones et al (2005) on the Kobo box platform. This questionnaire measures emotions through the following variables:

- Anxiety expressed through uneasy; tense; nervous; apprehensive; anxious.
- Dejection expressed through upset; sad; unhappy; disappointed; dejected.
- Excitement expressed through; exhilarated; excited; enthusiastic; energetic.
- Anger expressed through irritated; furious; annoyed; angry.
- Happiness expressed through pleased; joyful; happy; cheerful.

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This questionnaire was used not only because of its ease of analysis and specificity of application in measuring emotion in sport but also because of its valid and reliable psychometric properties (Martinent, Ledos & Nicolas, 2016). It is of the Lykert type and comprises 22 items divided into five dimensions (Not at all; Not very; Moderately; A little; Extremely).

### *2. Video analysis of behaviour*

After the questionnaire survey, we undertook a behavioural survey, i.e. an analysis of the non-verbal behaviour of the trio of referees (1 central referee and 2 touchline referees) during the final phase of the national championship. This was done by video analysis of the referees during the final match of the championship. The aim and usefulness of this video analysis is to go beyond the limits of psychometric analysis by means of the questionnaire in order to explore more precisely the emotional process during the competition, i.e. the dynamic and reciprocal relationships that take place during the competition between the perception of the situation, the emotions felt, the emotional regulation strategies and the directional interpretation of the emotions (Martinent, Ledos & Nicolas, 2016).

Subsequently, a self-confrontation interview lasting approximately thirty minutes to one hour was conducted with the central referee, as all decisions were his responsibility. The initial instructions given were to pause the video when a decision was being made and to ask follow-up questions if necessary (Dugény et al., 2023). The self-confrontation interview is a procedure during which the interviewee is confronted with an audiovisual recording of his or her activity (match) and is asked to show, comment on and explain the significant elements of this activity for him or her in the presence of an interviewer (Theureau, 2006). In this way, the referee recounted and expressed his emotional feelings during the actions viewed through the video (Sève et al., 2007).

### *Statistical analysis*

The data was analysed by averaging the item scores in each dimension. In addition, a statistical analysis was performed between the different dimensions and the independent variables. The significance of the tests was set at  $p < 0.05$ . For the analysis of the referee's verbatim, the content analysis method was applied. We used the five emotions commonly experienced in sporting situations according to Jones et al (2005). The discrete emotions thus identified were listed.

### **Scoring Instructions**

Anxiety = (uneasy + tense + nervous + apprehensive + anxious)/5

Dejection = (upset + sad + unhappy + disappointed + dejected)/5

Excitement = (exhilarated + excited + enthusiastic + energetic)/4

Anger = (irritated + furious + annoyed + angry)/4

Happiness = (pleased + joyful + happy + cheerful)/4

**RESULTS**

*Table 1: Respondent characteristics*

characteristics	Size = 79	percent
<b>Seniority in refereeing</b>		
0 to 5 years	31	(40%)
11 years and over	14	(18%)
6 to 10 years	33	(42%)
<b>Study level:</b>		
Post -primary	1	(1.3%)
Secondary	18	(23%)
University	60	(76%)
<b>Socio-professional status</b>		
Government agent	37	(49%)
pupil	1	(1.3%)
Student	20	(27%)
Private Sector	17	(23%)
<b>Referee level</b>		
Federation	17	(24%)
International	11	(15%)
League	43	(61%)
<b>Level of competition</b>		
Second division	39	(51%)
First division	37	(49%)
<b>Category</b>		
Assistant referee	27	(34%)
Central referee	19	(24%)
not yet determined	33	(42%)

Table 1 shows the breakdown of the study sample by socio-demographic characteristics. Comprising 79 referees, our study sample is made up of 24% (17) of referees at federal level, 15% (11) at international level and 61% (43) at league level. The study population is made up of referees whose seniority varies between 0 and 5 years (40%); between 6 and 10 years (42%) and 1 year or more (18%). In terms of socio-professional status, the vast majority are civil servants (49%), followed by students (27%) and private-sector employees (23%). As for the level of competition, 51% of referees were in the second division and 49% in the first division. In addition, 27% of referees were assistant referees and 24% were central referees.

*Table 2: Average scores according to the authors' analysis model*

Variables	Average score	Correspondence
Anxiety	0.88	A little
Dejection	0.43	Not at all
Excitement	1.83	Moderately
Anger	0,53	A little
Happiness	2.81	Quite abite

Table 2 shows the mean scores for the five dimensions presented in the analysis model. It can be seen that anxiety had a mean score of 0.88 associated with the modality little; the dimension downcast was associated with a score of 0.43 with the modality not at all. As for excitement, it had a score of 1.83 associated with the modality moderately.

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**Table 3: Relationship between independent variables and the various dimensions**

<b>Dimension Happiness</b>			
<b>Variables</b>	<b>OR</b>	<b>IC (95%)</b>	<b>P_Value</b>
<b>Referee level</b>			
<b>Federation</b>	-		
<b>International</b>	-		
<b>League</b>	<b>7.75</b>	[0.58-289]	<b>0,02*</b>
<b>Level of competition</b>			
<b>Second division</b>	-		
<b>First division</b>	<b>4.21</b>	[0.47-110]	<b>0,03*</b>
<b>Seniority in refereeing:</b>			
<b>0 to 5 years</b>	--		
<b>6 at 10 years</b>	1.34	[0.24-8.40]	0.7
<b>11 years and over</b>	2.85	[0.22-47.5]	<b>0.04*</b>
<b>Dimension Excitement</b>			
<b>Level of competition</b>			
<b>Secnd division</b>	-		
<b>First division</b>	0.38	[0.07- 1.87]	<b>0. 02*</b>
<b>Seniority in refereeing:</b>			
<b>0 to 5 years</b>	-		
<b>11 years and over</b>	0.42	[0.04-3.91]	<b>0,04*</b>
<b>6 to 10 yeras</b>	1.78	[0.39- 9.50]	0,5

**\*p ≤ 0.05**

Table 3 shows the relationship between the various dimensions described in the questionnaire and the independent variables. Statically significant relationships emerged respectively between the Happiness dimension and the level of refereeing (p = 0.02); with the level of competition (p = 0.03) and seniority in refereeing (p = 0.04). As for the Excitement Dimension, it appeared to be correlated with the level of competition (p = 0.02) and seniority in refereeing (p = 0.04).

**Table 4: Analysis of the Self-Confrontation Interview (SCI)**

<b>Period of the match (in minutes)</b>	<b>Recognised decision-making situation</b>	<b>Verbatim of the decision-making process for the situation</b>	<b>Discrete emotions identified</b>
8 Minutes	Goal	I was in a situation of doubt and that can influence the rest of the match. When there are no irregularities in the goal, the referee is calm. But in this case, the goal was marred by a lot of irregularities and that made me feel uncomfortable.	<b>Worried, anxious</b>
11 Minutes	Yellow card	The offending player's team-mates protest. This leads to negative emotions which can have an impact on the rest of the match.	<b>Anger</b>
15 Minutes	Verbal warning	I gave this verbal warning because it was a minor offence; to tell the player that if he continued, he would be shown the yellow card.	<b>Satisfied</b>
27 minutes	Direct free-kick	Minor fault	<b>Happy</b>

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Period of the match (in minutes)	Recognised decision-making situation	Verbatim of the decision-making process for the situation	Discrete emotions identified
28 Minutes	Direct free-kick	Normal emotion; nothing to worry about Decision taken in accordance with the rules; I'm calm but it often happens that the behaviour of the players has a negative influence on the referee and puts him under pressure.	<b>Sad</b>
40 Minutes	Corner, players in the penalty area	Maximum concentration: the penalty area is a strategic place for the referee. It's a place where any error in decision can influence the outcome of the match. The kicker was sent off and the danger was averted	<b>Satisfied, pleased</b>
46 Minutes	Goal-scoring opportunity	I anticipate to make my presence felt; to play on the psychology of the players The message has got through, I feel at ease	<b>satisfied</b>
49 Minutes	I blew the whistle to restart play and the players are still jostling each other	An angry situation, there was protest	<b>Anger, furious</b>
54 Minutes	The defender commits the foul and charges the attacker	The feeling was that I shouldn't give a card, the player had already been evacuated, I spoke to my assistants and we agreed to let it go.	<b>Nervous, anxious</b>
65 Minutes	Penalty cancelled	A player is not allowed to shoot the ball twice in succession - the decision was correct	<b>Satisfied</b>
70 Minutes	Duel between 2 players in the penalty area	Self-control for greater appreciation	<b>Energetic, enthusiastic</b>
72 Minutes	Penalty refused with a yellow card	There was a lot of irregularity before the shot. The player committed a foul, that's why. Even though there was pressure, I was calm.	<b>Enthusiastic</b>
79 Minutes	Corner with a lot of jostling	You have to be close to the action and be able to anticipate when a decision is going to be taken.	<b>Enthusiastic</b>
85 Minutes	Direct free kick from outside the penalty area	Concentrate as hard as you can and think about what might happen	<b>Stretch</b>
91 Minutes	Corner in stoppage time	Anticipation of different actions because a goal scored will change the result	<b>Nervous, anxious</b>
93 Minutes	Free kick in the air	No difficulty for the referee	<b>Happy</b>

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Table 4 highlights the discrete emotions revealed by the analysis of the verbatim of the various recognised decision-making situations. The five emotions defined in the Jones et al. (2005) questionnaire stand out.

### DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to analyse the influence of emotional feelings on refereeing decisions in football. To do this, active football referees first completed the Sport Emotion Questionnaire SEQ by Jones et al, (2005) and then a video recording was made of the trio of referees during the final match of the football championship. The central referee was asked to comment on his behaviour in a self-confrontation interview.

Analysis of the results of the questionnaire survey does not show any increased anxiety in terms of average scores. In fact, with regard to the independent variables, the analyses showed statistically significant relationships between the “happiness” dimension on the one hand and the “excitement” dimension on the other. This clearly demonstrates the difficulty of objectifying the emotion felt, despite the standardised tools available to measure it. These results are similar to those of another author who, in a study of three groups of sports people, one of whom was subjected to a high level of stress, found that there was no significant difference in decision-making (Hepler, 2015). The influence of emotions on decision-making in sport is obvious, but little is known about the decision-making process in stressful situations (Hepler, 2015). Decision-making situations are issues that have preoccupied scientists in recent years (Bakker, 1992). Regardless of the discipline practised or the position held, when we talk about sport, we are talking about decision-making, even more so for referees. This is why some authors claim that sport is considered to be an ideal laboratory for the study of decision-making (Gilovich, 1984; Gilovich et al, 1985).

The results of our analyses also showed that the "happiness" dimension studied was statically associated with decision-making for league-level referees, first division referees and referees with more than 11 years' seniority. If the term "Happiness" in the scale refers to the variables pleased joyful, happy and cheerful, this could be explained by the fact that emotions with a positive valence (joy, surprise, etc.) would facilitate decision-making, especially among experienced referees. This result is similar to those of other authors who have mentioned that the emotion of happiness is associated with the most intuitive and rapid functioning of simple recognition, i.e. that the dynamics of the positive affective evaluation of certain situations in the match would lead to confidence, either in one's first decision option, or by the satisfaction that follows the fact of immediately finding an option (Dugény, et al., 2023). Decisions in sport are therefore influenced by the athlete's emotional state (Gaspar & Perez, 2000).

The "excitement" variable also appeared to be significantly associated with the following variables: level of competition, position category and seniority. It appears that the longer the referee has been in the position of central referee and officiating in the first division, the more emotions are expressed. It therefore emerges that these variables (level of competition, job category and seniority) generate anxiety in the sense that decisions in sport are influenced by the athlete's emotional state, fears, self-confidence, possibilities, preferences, fatigue, pressure from the environment or subjective assessment of the risks of the decision (Gaspar & Perez, 2000). In the specific case of this high-stakes match, the external environment or the fans' subjective assessment of the risks of escalation could necessarily influence the referee's behaviour. However, as the referee interviewed stated, "the emotional impact of the decision depends on the referee's experience".



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Furthermore, the analysis of the self-confrontation interview revealed discrete emotions that were highlighted in the Jones et al 2005 questionnaire. This suggests that refereeing decisions in football are always imbued with emotion, regardless of the referee's experience. Emotions (anger, joy, fear, etc.) have always been present because they are inherent to human beings. It is in this sense that some authors claim that refereeing is an ideal environment in which to study decision-making (Gilovich, 1984; Gilovich, Vallone & Tversky, 1985)

Refereeing a match means making decisions, which must be taken in accordance with the established rules. But how do you do this in highly stressful, emotionally-charged situations? Many studies have looked at this problem. For example, authors have found that referees who make split-second decisions apply heuristic strategies to reduce the complexity of the situation (Souchon et al., 2010). Furthermore, the beneficial aspects of the heuristic strategies used by referees in their decision-making have been highlighted (Dosseville, Laborde, & Raab, 2011). In terms of bias, crowd noise has been found to influence football referees' decisions in favour of the home team (Downward & Jones, 2007; Nevill et al., 2002). All these studies account for the influence of emotions in refereeing decisions and reflect the fact that emotions have often been considered as biases or impediments to decision-making in sport, particularly football where decision-making takes place in a situation of cognitive evaluation (Tenenbaum et al., 2013).

With regard to the analyses in this study, it should be noted that the occurrences of negatively valenced emotions are as important as positively valenced emotions. This means that emotions, whether they are facilitating or inhibiting, can have a similar harmful or pleasant effect if the person expressing them does not contain them at an optimal level (Nana, Kaboré & Ziba, 2024).

### CONCLUSION

Carried out with a view to analysing the influence of emotional feelings on decision making among football referees in the Burkinabe championship, this study showed that refereeing decisions are always marked by emotion and that the dimensions of happiness and excitement described in the Jones et al (2005) questionnaire are correlated with certain independent variables such as refereeing level, level of competition, seniority in refereeing and level of competition. These results show not only the existence of links between decision-making processes and emotions but also specific relationships with certain dimensions.

Also, analysis of the verbatim from the self-confrontation interview further reveals the predominant role of emotions in football referees' decision-making. All in all, given the complexity of studying the influence of emotions on decision-making, it would be wise to consider a prospective psycho-physiological study to determine the mechanisms of emotional expression during the practice of PSA.

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## The influence of Emotional Feelings on Refereeing Decisions in Football

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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