

How video assistant referees could undermine on-field referees at the FIFA World Cup

Written by Job Fransen, Lecturer in Skill Acquisition and Motor Control, University of Technology Sydney

[Video-assistant referees](#) (VAR) were introduced into the FIFA World Cup for the first time this year.

For those who haven't been paying attention: VAR are a team of off-field officials who can replay and review video of on-field refereeing decisions – particularly those involving goals, goalscoring opportunities, and penalties.

This sounds like it would be a good thing – but the technology has resulted in some [controversial](#) and [heavily debated](#) decisions at the World Cup in Russia.

Read more: [**World Cup VAR: technology is transforming the beautiful game**](#)

For example, the foul that afforded France's Antoine Griezmann a penalty to help seal the win against Australia in the first round of matches was initially overlooked by the ref. He was subsequently persuaded by advice from the VAR to review the video and award a penalty.

Antoine Griezmann's goal during France v Australia.

Conversely, Switzerland's equalising goal against Brazil – which propelled them into the round of 16 – might have been disallowed because a Swiss player had held a Brazilian player back illegally. But the VAR made no argument to review the goal.

Steven Zuber's equalising goal during Brazil v Switzerland.

Given the controversies generated by these decisions, one might question whether the introduction of VAR really improves the quality of refereeing. In fact, instead of improving the decision-making of on-field refs, VAR may actually undermine it.

The nature of expertise

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Becoming an expert at anything takes [dedicated practice](#) . One of the things experts excel at is the ability to perceive vital information in the surrounding environment, relate that to an extensive knowledge base built up through years of practice, and then translate this information into an [appropriate response](#) .

A referee who witnesses foul play will relate its type and gravity to the appropriate penalty set out in the rules of football, then decide whether to award a free kick and possibly a yellow card. This is commonly referred to as perceptual-cognitive expertise.

But it isn't this alone that sets an expert referee apart from everyone else. Referees not only have to make the right decision, they have to do it while taking into account the context of the decision – and all in the blink of an eye.

Intuitive versus rational decision-making

We are taught never to judge a book by its cover and to think carefully about decisions, but also to trust our intuition. Yet these instructions seem to contradict each other. They highlight the fact that there are [two systems of decision-making](#) : the fast, intuitive system, and the slow, rational, analytical system.

The rational system involves basing decisions on careful deliberation of relevant information, and the potential costs and benefits of a decision. Intuitive decision-making is [far less conscious and deliberate](#) , and is often more affected by emotion and gut feeling.

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For example, a study on decision-making in firefighters [found](#) that firefighters don't think, they just act based on their experience in previous situations. This highlights the intuitive nature of

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decision-making under pressure and the [role played by experience](#)

For football referees, there is no time for slow and rational decision-making either, due to the inherent pressures of the game. When making difficult decisions in challenging circumstances, referees must largely rely on fast and intuitive decision-making that is a product of extensive practice and experience. Because of this, problems with objectivity (referees are [inherently and unconsciously biased](#)) and accuracy (referees make some errors each game) are well recognised and accepted as an integral part of football.

VAR could undermine intuitive decision-making

The expert referees at the FIFA World Cup have spent years developing intuitive decision-making processes that allow them to make objective on-field calls. Despite considerable external pressure from fans, players and coaches, these decisions are correct most of the time.

For example, one study [found](#) that 73.8% of offside calls during the Fifa 2002 World Cup were assessed correctly. Referees in the English Premier League during the 2013-14 season were correct [95% of the time](#).

This is because referees have become experts at matching perceptual and contextual information from the game with knowledge about the rules, through years of extensive practice.

Providing referees with VAR could interfere with this intuitive process.

Read more: [Why this football tournament should be called the men's World Cup](#)

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Every refereeing decision brings a cost and a benefit to the game. The discrepancy between the VAR and the on-field referees could affect a referee's authority and subsequent decisions during the games. The addition of the VAR likely moves the decision-making process of expert referees from a highly effective intuitive process to a more rational or analytical one.

Given the limited experience of using VAR to date, and its potential interference with current on-field referees' expertise, it is questionable whether VAR truly adds value to on-field referees' performance. Perhaps it limits their ability to make intuitive decisions that reflect the fast-paced nature of the game, ultimately compromising the expertise they have worked so hard to acquire.

If the use of VAR continues, young referees should be trained to make decisions in the presence of VAR during the developmental process, and its implementation with more expert on-field referees should be thoroughly reviewed.

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