

A Document Analysis of VAR Implementation and Referee Decision-Making in Malaysian Professional Football

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ABSTRACT

Football is one of the most widely followed sports in the world, and decisions made by referees directly influence match results, perceptions of fairness, and the credibility of officiating. The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system was introduced to improve decision-making accuracy and fairness by assisting referees in cases of clear and obvious errors. However, despite its implementation in Malaysian professional football, concerns persist regarding the consistency of decisions, referee authority, and the effectiveness of VAR procedures. This study aims to examine VAR implementation in Malaysian professional football by analysing official documents, including match reports, VAR records, regulations, and governing guidelines. The analysis focuses exclusively on secondary data sources, including official match reports, VAR review records, regulatory documents, and officiating guidelines related to VAR implementation in Malaysian professional football. This study employs document analysis as the primary research instrument. The instruments consist of a structured document analysis checklist and coding framework developed to systematically examine VAR implementation and referee decisionmaking in Malaysian professional football. Official match reports issued by the Malaysian Football League (MFL) for the 2024/25 and 2025/26 Malaysia League seasons, which typically range from 2 to 5 pages per match and provide formal records of match incidents, disciplinary actions, and referee decisions. In addition, VAR review records and post-match referee assessment reports produced by the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) were examined to evaluate decision outcomes, review processes, and referee performance feedback. Data analysis in this study involves a systematic review of selected documents related to VAR implementation and referee decision-making in Malaysian professional football. Official match reports, VAR records, referee assessment reports, and competition regulations are analysed using a structured document analysis checklist and coding framework based on the Laws of the Game and VAR protocol. VAR incidents are coded by incident type, review procedure, nature of the decision, and final outcome, enabling the identification of patterns and the evaluation of decision consistency and procedural alignment. *Keywords: Video Assistant Referee (VAR), decision making, Laws of the Game*

How to Cite

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INTRODUCTION

Football is one of the most widely followed sports in the world, and decisions made by referees directly influence match results, perceptions of fairness, and the credibility of officiating. Because the Laws of the Game are applied globally, referees are expected to make decisions that are not only accurate but also consistent across different competitions and contexts. In reality, referees often operate under significant pressure, making immediate decisions in fast-paced and uncertain situations. When these decisions are questioned or viewed as incorrect, public confidence in officiating can be weakened.

To address long-standing concerns related to human error and decision bias, football authorities have gradually introduced technological support into officiating. Among these innovations, the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system represents a major development in modern football. VAR is designed to assist referees in reviewing clear and obvious errors or serious missed incidents in key match situations, including goals, penalties, direct red cards, and cases of mistaken identity. Importantly, VAR does not replace the referee's authority but serves as a decision-support mechanism, with the referee remaining responsible for the final judgement.

In the Malaysian context, VAR was formally introduced into professional football competitions starting from the 2024/25 season following approval from FIFA and structured training programs organized by the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) and the Malaysian Football League (MFL). While this development reflects progress toward international officiating standards, the early stages of VAR implementation have been accompanied by controversial decisions and public debate. Despite this attention, academic research examining VAR application and referee decision-making in Malaysian professional football remains limited.

The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system was introduced to improve decision-making accuracy and fairness by assisting referees in cases of clear and obvious errors. However, despite its implementation in Malaysian professional football, concerns persist regarding decision consistency, referee authority, and the effectiveness of VAR procedures. Discussions surrounding VAR in Malaysia have largely been shaped by media reports and public opinion following its controversial debut season, rather than systematic academic analysis. While international studies have examined VAR's impact on refereeing accuracy, most focus on European or elite football contexts and offer limited insight into local implementation practices in Malaysia (Kolbinger & Lames, 2017; Spitz et al., 2021).

Notably, there is a lack of document-based research examining official regulations, match reports, and refereeing guidelines to understand how VAR influences referee decision-making and accountability in Malaysian professional football. Accordingly, this study aims to examine VAR implementation in Malaysian professional football by analysing official documents such as match reports, VAR records, regulations, and governing guidelines. Through a document analysis approach, the study seeks to understand how VAR procedures are applied in practice, how referee decision-making is documented, and whether consistency and accountability are maintained. The findings are intended to contribute to academic knowledge, inform football stakeholders, and support ongoing efforts to improve fairness and transparency in professional football officiating in Malaysia.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the implementation of VAR protocols in Malaysian professional football based on official match reports, VAR records, regulations, and officiating guidelines.
2. To analyse referee decision-making in factual and subjective VAR-related incidents in Malaysian professional football.
3. To evaluate the consistency and accuracy of referee decisions in accordance with the Laws of the Game and VAR protocol.
4. To examine how VAR implementation affects referee authority and accountability in Malaysian professional football.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Video Assistant Referee (VAR)

The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system is a technology-assisted officiating mechanism that supports referees in reviewing clear and obvious errors or serious missed incidents in key match situations, while preserving the referee's final decision-making authority (International Football Association Board). Within this study's framework, VAR interacts with referee judgement through structured procedures such as checks and reviews, influencing decision accuracy and consistency (Spitz et al., 2021). Meanwhile, in Malaysia, VAR implementation, following FIFA approval and referee training by the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) and the Malaysian Football League (MFL), illustrates both the benefits and challenges of applying VAR protocols in practice.

Referee Authority and Decision-Making

Under the Laws of the Game 2025/26, the referee remains the final decision-maker, while VAR functions solely as an assisting match official that may recommend, but not determine, reviews (International Football Association Board, pp. 189–191). This structure preserves referee accountability and ensures that technology does not replace human judgement in applying the Laws of the Game (Triviño, 2023). Although VAR has been shown to improve decision accuracy in major incidents, final decisions remain dependent on referees' judgement, particularly in subjective situations (Spitz et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). As supported by previous research, VAR (Video Assistant Referee) can help uphold justice and fairness in football by assisting referees in making more accurate decisions in ambiguous situations.

Meanwhile, previous studies have shown that implementing VAR in football has psychological effects on athletes, as they are aware that all their actions are under constant surveillance. In addition, VAR disrupts the rhythm of the game due to the lengthy review process, which may influence referees' decision-making (Halle Archibald, Duncan R. D. Mascarenhas & Ian Cunningham, 2025). In contrast, other scholars have emphasised that the implementation of VAR in football has been particularly effective in identifying unsporting behaviour, rather than merely correcting routine tactical infringements.

Their analyses suggest that VAR interventions are more strongly associated with serious disciplinary and behavioural offences such as violent conduct, simulation, and off-the-ball incidents, which are often difficult for on-field officials to detect in real time. Notably, these offences show a strong correlation with VAR reviews, underscoring the system's role in enhancing disciplinary enforcement rather than micromanaging routine tactical fouls. This perspective reframes VAR not simply as a corrective tool for factual errors, but as a mechanism that strengthens ethical conduct and accountability within the game by targeting conduct that undermines sporting integrity (Nazarudin MN, P P Abdul Majeed A, Musa RM, Raj NB, Kuan G, Abu Osman NA (2025). Research further suggests that VAR-related pressures may indirectly influence referee authority, highlighting the importance of examining documented decision outcomes (Tamir & Bar-Eli, 2021; Gasparetto, 2023).

Traditional Vs Modern Refereeing System

Most studies on sport officials report the means between conditions or groups, but ignore the variance of the data in terms of individual differences (Avugos et al., 2021). Sport officials have historically received less scholarly attention in sport science than athletes and coaches, despite the significant influence of their decisions on athlete performance and competition outcomes. Nevertheless, this trend has gradually shifted over the past two decades, with growing academic interest in various dimensions of refereeing. More recently, scholarly work has expanded to include the impact of technological advancements on sports officiating, particularly the integration of decision-support technologies (e.g., Royce, 2012; Spitz et al., 2021).

In addition, early research on officiating focused on bias, personality factors, and various sources of stress experienced by officials (Avugos et al., 2021). Pierce et al. (2021) reported that many proposed solutions intended to address officiating challenges often result in referees being assigned additional matches and extended working hours. This increased workload may contribute to officiating fatigue or encourage leagues to operate with fewer referees than required by official game

regulations. Such practices can negatively affect officiating performance and, in turn, reduce the overall quality of the game.

Challenges Occurs for Referee Decision-Making During the Implementation of VAR in Football Games

Previous studies have also indicated that the implementation of VAR has raised legal and ethical concerns, as there remains a lack of a clear legal framework and standardized ethical guidelines governing its use in major football competitions. This ambiguity can lead to inconsistent interpretations, reduce transparency in decision-making, and challenge the legitimacy of the review process in high-stakes matches (Ghorbani Asiabar, 2025). In addition, the absence of clearly defined procedural boundaries may create uncertainty among referees when determining when and how VAR intervention should occur.

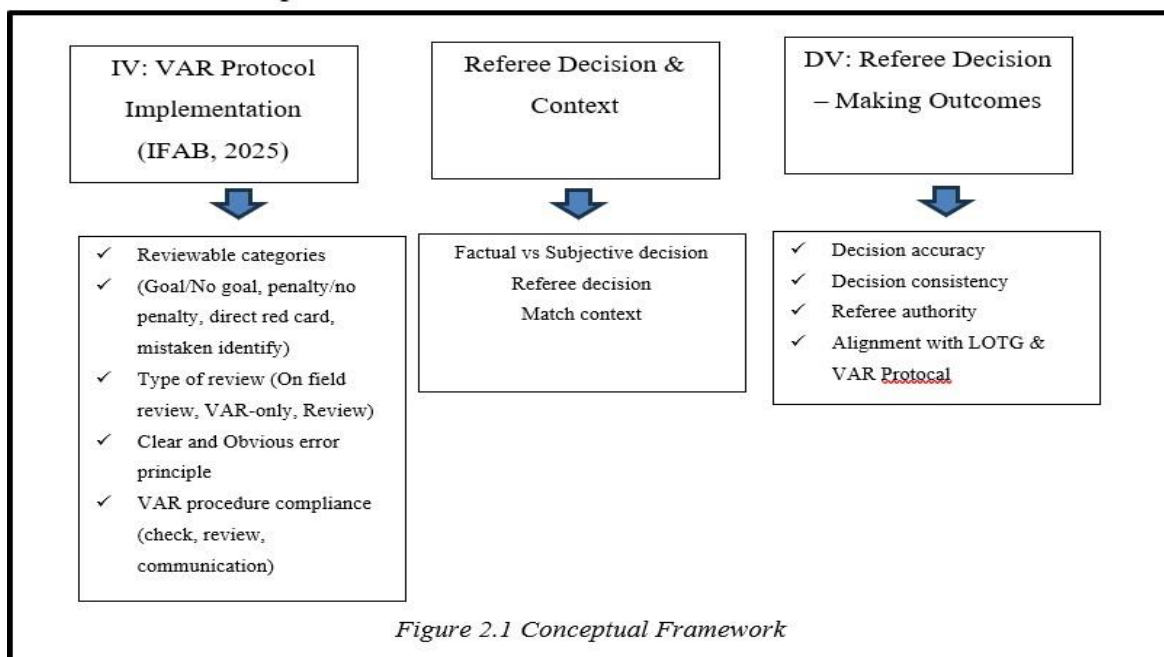
Such ambiguity can increase the likelihood of subjective application of review protocols, potentially resulting in disputes among teams, players, and governing authorities. The lack of regulatory clarity may also complicate dispute resolution processes, particularly when match outcomes are heavily influenced by VAR decisions. This argument concerning the necessity of a clear and coherent legal framework has been consistently advanced by earlier scholars, who observe that the growing integration of technology has driven the institutionalisation of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system in football. Nevertheless, the adoption of VAR has simultaneously generated significant regulatory concerns, particularly in relation to financial governance, disciplinary proportionality, match integrity, and the practical challenges of technological integration.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework positions VAR protocol implementation as the independent variable influencing referee decision-making outcomes in Malaysian professional football through the mediating role of referee decision and contextual factors. Specifically, VAR procedures are expected to affect decision accuracy, consistency, referee authority, and alignment with the Laws of the Game by shaping how referees interpret and apply technological support in both factual and subjective match situations.

Figure 2.1:

Conceptual Framework of the Study



CONCLUSION

The literature shows that VAR can enhance decision accuracy and consistency in key match incidents while maintaining referee authority, although outcomes remain influenced by referee judgement and contextual factors. This chapter provides the theoretical basis for examining VAR implementation in Malaysian professional football.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Widiya Habibah Binti Shamsuri was solely responsible for the conceptualization of the study, literature review, research design, development of the research instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis planning, and the writing of the original manuscript. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All participants were informed of the study's purpose prior to their involvement and provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and respondents' anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process. All data collected were used solely for academic purposes and handled in accordance with ethical research standards.

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