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Video Assistant Referee (VAR) as a Governance Mechanism: A Conceptual Framework for Referee Decision-Making in Malaysian Professional Football.

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ABSTRACT

The integration of technology into football officiating has fundamentally transformed referee decision-making and governance in professional football. The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system was introduced to improve decision accuracy and fairness by assisting referees in incidents involving clear and obvious errors. Although Malaysian professional football has implemented VAR, concerns remain about the consistency of decisions, referee authority, procedural transparency, and stakeholder confidence. Existing studies have focused mainly on decision accuracy, match outcomes, and spectator perceptions, with limited attention to VAR as an institutional governance and decision-support mechanism within emerging football systems. This conceptual paper addresses this gap by proposing a theoretical framework that synthesises FIFA Laws of the Game, IFAB VAR protocols, competition regulations, and relevant sport governance literature. The framework conceptualises VAR as an institutional mechanism that restructures officiating processes and redistributes decision authority between on-field referees and video officials. The paper identifies four interrelated dimensions that determine officiating effectiveness: decision consistency, procedural adherence, referee authority, and officiating credibility. The paper argues that VAR effectiveness depends not only on technological capability but also on the alignment of regulatory protocols, referee interpretation, and organisational governance. The proposed framework contributes to sport governance literature by providing a theoretical foundation for evaluating technology-assisted officiating and offering practical guidance for governing bodies seeking to strengthen transparency, referee development, and public trust in professional football.

Keywords: *Video Assistant Referee (VAR); decision-making; Laws of the Game; conceptual framework; document analysis.*

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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 (International Football Association Board, 2023). In reality, referees often operate under significant pressure, making immediate decisions in fast-paced and uncertain situations (Spitz, 2021). 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 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 organised 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.

Accordingly, this paper proposes a conceptual framework that explains VAR implementation as a governance mechanism within Malaysian professional football. Rather than evaluating match outcomes, the study theoretically examines how VAR protocols restructure referee authority, standardise decision procedures, and institutionalise accountability in officiating. The framework positions VAR as part of a broader regulatory system that connects technological decision support with organisational governance and stakeholder trust. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to develop a conceptual explanation of how VAR functions as a governance mechanism influencing referee decision-making and officiating credibility 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 [IFAB], 2025). Within this study's framework, VAR interacts with referee judgment 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 (FAM, 2024; MFL, 2024).

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

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[IFAB], 2025, pp. 189–191). This structure preserves referee accountability and ensures that technology does not replace human judgment 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' judgment, 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 (Sors et al., 2021).

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 (Ponce-Bordón et al, 2022). Research further suggests that VAR-related pressures may indirectly influence referee authority, highlighting the importance of examining documented decision outomes (Tamir & Bar-Eli, 2021; Gasparetto, 2023).

Traditional Vs Modern Refereeing System

Most studies on sport officials report means across conditions or groups but ignore the variance in the data that reflects 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 their decisions have on athletes' performance and competition outcomes (MacMahon et al., 2015). 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 (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 adversely affect officiating performance and, in turn, reduce the overall quality of the game (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). These developments indicate that technological officiating systems, such as VAR, should be understood within the broader structural changes in refereeing, in which monitoring and accountability increasingly shape officiating performance.

Challenges Occur 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 no clear legal framework and standardised 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

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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 raised significant regulatory concerns, particularly regarding financial governance, disciplinary proportionality, match integrity, and the practical challenges of technological integration.

Theoretical Perspective: Institutional Governance of Officiating

This study is grounded in institutional theory, which explains how organisational behaviour is shaped by formal rules, monitoring structures, and pressures for legitimacy (Scott, 2014; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In professional sport, governing bodies establish regulations not only to organise competition but also to standardise conduct and maintain credibility among stakeholders (Washington & Patterson, 2011). The introduction of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) represents a form of technological institutionalisation, whereby monitoring procedures and review protocols regulate how referees interpret and apply the Laws of the Game. Within this framework, referees no longer function solely as autonomous decision-makers but operate within an accountability structure in which decisions can be reviewed, justified, and evaluated. Consequently, VAR functions as a regulatory mechanism that aligns individual judgment with institutional expectations, strengthens procedural legitimacy and reinforces public trust in officiating. Within institutional theory, monitoring mechanisms enhance organisational legitimacy by demonstrating compliance with established rules and standards. In football competitions, VAR reviews serve as visible compliance procedures that signal fairness and procedural accountability to stakeholders such as clubs, players, and supporters.

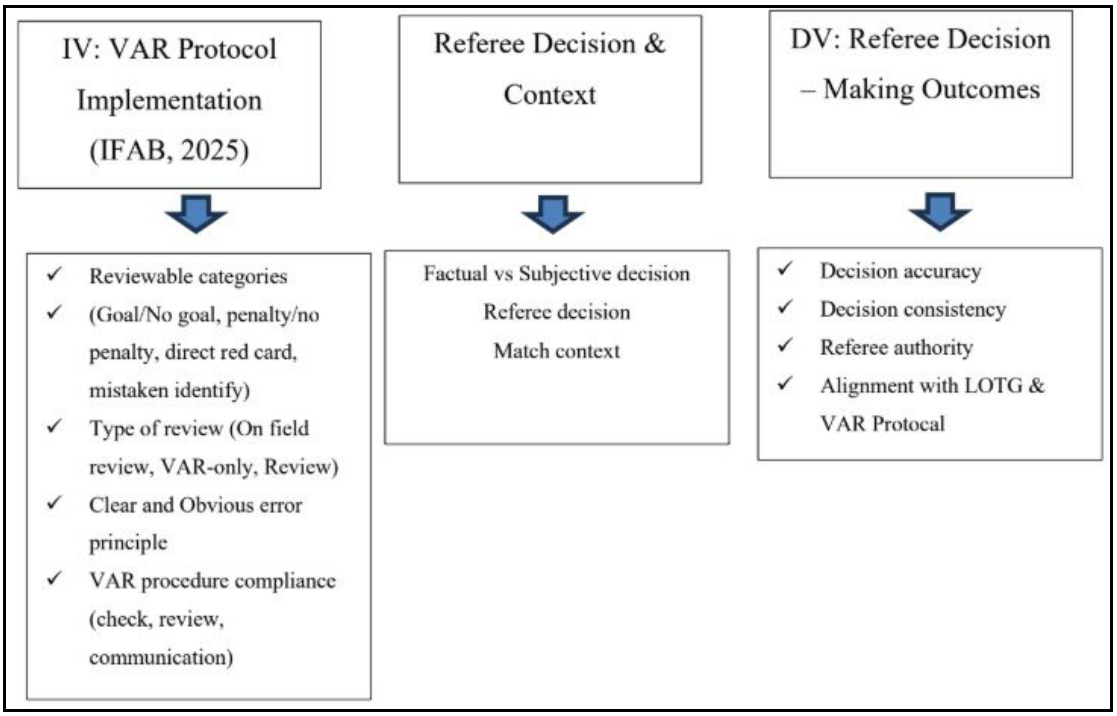
Conceptual Framework

The framework is based on the assumption that VAR introduces institutional oversight into the refereeing process. When officiating is monitored and reviewable, decision-making shifts from individual judgment toward regulated procedure. This shift produces four interconnected outcomes. First, monitoring promotes consistency in decision-making because similar incidents are evaluated using standardised protocols. Second, procedural adherence increases as referees must follow formal review steps. Third, referee authority is redefined, with decision-making shared between on-field and video officials. Finally, the credibility of officiating emerges when stakeholders perceive decisions as transparent and accountable. These dimensions collectively explain how VAR operates beyond technological correction and instead functions as a governance mechanism.

- **Decision consistency** refers to the application of similar decisions for similar match incidents.
- **Procedural adherence** refers to referees' compliance with established VAR review protocols.
- **Referee authority** refers to the extent to which referees retain final decision control during reviews.
- **Officiating credibility** refers to stakeholders' perception of fairness and transparency in officiating decisions.

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Figure 2.1:
Conceptual Framework of the Study



This paper contributes to sport governance literature by reconceptualising VAR as more than a decision-support technology. Previous research has primarily evaluated whether VAR improves accuracy, but has rarely examined how it alters organisational authority structures. The proposed framework demonstrates that VAR institutionalises officiating by embedding monitoring, reviewability, and procedural accountability into referee decision-making. As a result, referees transition from autonomous decision-makers to regulated officials operating within a monitored system. This perspective expands the understanding of officiating from a performance activity to a governance process and provides a theoretical basis for analysing other technological officiating systems in sport. For Malaysian football authorities, the framework highlights the importance of clear review procedures, transparent communication, and referee training to maximise the legitimacy of VAR implementation.

CONCLUSION

In summary, VAR should be understood not only as a technological aid but as an institutional mechanism within football governance. The system standardises decision procedures, redistributes authority between match officials, and strengthens accountability through reviewable decisions. The effectiveness of VAR, therefore, depends on governance

alignment rather than technological accuracy alone. By framing VAR within organisational regulation and officiating legitimacy, this study provides a theoretical explanation of how technological monitoring shapes referee decision-making. The framework provides a foundation for future empirical research and helps governing bodies develop policies that enhance transparency, consistency, and stakeholder trust in professional football competitions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare 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 primarily responsible for the conceptualisation of the study, the literature review, the research design, the development of the research instrument, the planning of data procedures, and the writing of the original manuscript. Muhammad Faizal bin Kutip supervised the research process and contributed to the review and proofreading of the manuscript to ensure the paper's academic quality. Adanan bin Jamal contributed valuable ideas and insights regarding the refereeing aspect of the paper. Nurul Ain Binti Md Desa assisted in enhancing the manuscript's quality through critical review and refinement of the writing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This paper is a conceptual study and does not involve human participants, surveys, or experimental procedures. The discussion is based solely on publicly available regulations, officiating guidelines, and institutional policy documents. Therefore, informed consent and human research ethical approval were not required. All referenced materials were used for scholarly purposes and cited appropriately in accordance with academic integrity standards.

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