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## Assessing the prospects of VAR implementation in Indian football: A qualitative study on stakeholder perceptions

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### Abstract

The study explores in-depth interviews (n=10) with professional players, referees and fans on implementing V.A.R in India. Findings reveal mixed feelings as V.A.R can improve the accuracy but not be successful as respondent fear that it will eradicate emotions from the game particularly in India where viewership traits are different from other countries. The study puts up factors which are important to consider before implementation of the technology starting from finance, logistical, communication, emotional and human labor perspective. It will provide insights for policymakers to navigate the complexities of V.A.R adoption, ensuring accuracy while not hampering the emotions.

**Keywords:** V.A.R, Emotions, Football management, Corruption, Viewership

### Introduction

The Virtual Assistant Referee (V.A.R.) is a match official, who reviews on field decisions which could generally lead to an unfair situation in the game. The V.A.R. has similar characteristics as a 3rd Umpire in Cricket. However, since the implementation and the idea of implementing the same was introduced officially in 2018, it has faced several controversies. Before proceeding further, one should understand how the V.A.R. actually functions. Unlike the 3rd Umpire, which has to be called for by the on-field Umpires, the V.A.R. has certain limitations. The V.A.R. is used mainly for incidences that might occur during a match; (i) Goals (ii) Penalty Decisions (iii) Mistaken Identities and (iv) Direct Red Card.

The Sheffield Football Association, proposed a letter to the Football Association stating the game should be played in 120 yards long and 80 yards wide, with a "Lillywhite" size five ball. It evolved from what used to be considered a "Kicking and Pushing around..." game half a century before (1866). Till about 1890, Football became institutionalized with the FA Cup, Leagues and Standard Rules being applied and coming in to play, to make the sport more Disciplined and Fairer. When the researcher asked people watching football for over 30 years, he found that previously during the time of Pele, Maradona; players were allowed to wear Pendants and accessories during the match. In the years to come, Football and its rules became more uniformed. Even so that 'Fouls' were called by the term 'Hacks'. Looking back at the evolution of the game, the most controversy made by an addition to the Game is the Virtual Assistant Referee. This Research was done taking into account the criticism and what is better for the game. On sending Video footages of an incident to over 90 Referees across the World, on watching the replay on "Slow Motion they were likely to give a Red Card" whereas it actually was a Yellow Card, according to a 'Journal in Cognitive Research'. The 8 Research suggests that the intensity of the incident occurred cannot be understood if watched in replay, or in slow motion, since even small contacts could look like a bigger deal in replays. According to Müller, "Soccer is getting more Fair and Slower" and calls it a problem. His article also reads that since V.A.R. has taken over, it has been causing a lot of controversies and not all the fans are sold out about the Fact that was a good Addition to the game. The present research will try to see the potential areas of problem which will be more of a qualitative nature as to understand the feelings of fans and expert for the game when technology is applied, because in Indian context the sport is much more emotionally knitted rather with rules and regulations.

### Rationale of the study and Problem statement

A study by Penas, Rey, and Kalen in the International Journal of Performance Analysis in Sport, based on July 2019 shows how V.A.R. has altered elite soccer while a BBC study says that V.A.R. has an accuracy of 93-98.9% within its first two years, as stated by IFAB. But according to a YouGov survey of the BBC Sport, more than two-thirds Premier League fans found V.A.R. has made football less interesting. Historical incidents, such as Maradona's infamous "Hand of God" goal in 1986, illustrate the effect of such technology; the goal, scored with his hand, would have been disallowed, and this might have changed Argentina's World Cup victory. Another notable case is the mistaken identity in 2014 when referee Andre Marriner wrongly sent off Keiran Gibbs instead of Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain. With the popularity of football in India, it is important to explore the perceptions of Indian fans toward V.A.R. because their opinions may influence its adoption and discourse in Indian football.

Investigating V.A.R. controversies in football is particularly important because the system impacts the game greatly. V.A.R. has significantly changed the dynamics of a match, perceptions of fairness, and experiences of players and fans, causing both excitement and skepticism. Its influence on global fan engagement and the emotional aspects of football call for an investigation into its impact on the sport's relationship with its audience. Ethical issues that refer to the concepts of fair play and sportsmanship and the problems V.A.R. subjects' referees to necessitate specific training schemes and rule modifications. Public opinion can be influenced by a study of media reports of V.A.R.-related incidents.

### Literature review

#### Sports and Technology

The involvement of technology in sports has drastically changed the mode of training athletes, competition, and fan engagement. Data analytics and machine learning have been very promising in improving performance and preventing injuries. Data analytics applies the statistical and computational techniques to help analyze large-scale sports datasets-such as athlete performance data-to tease out patterns informative of training and coaching strategies. Machine learning falls under the more general category of artificial intelligence with algorithms and models that learn and adapt with experience, providing almost immediate feedback both to the athlete and the coach to make informed decisions and possibly improve performance even further (Liu *et al.*, 2020) [7]. Virtual and augmented reality have also affected the fan's experience. With virtual reality, fans are thrust into simulated environments from which they live sporting events. They can "feel" these events as though they were personally in attendance, even though hundreds of miles apart. These advancements have enhanced the performance of sport alongside injury prevention rather than fan excitement-well visible impacts that have some technological input regarding how sports are played and coached and watched.

Augmented reality increases the excitement of live sports through the overlaying of digital elements that give the fans real-time insights about the game. Virtual reality and AR also support the training and performance of athletes. VR simulates game scenarios and gives real-time feedback to the athletes, while AR gives extra insights during training

(Liu *et al.*, 2020) [7]. These technologies, however, have their own challenges. Data analytics and machine learning, for instance, though useful, perpetuate biases in player recruitment and selection. The similarity is that neither VR nor AR technologies are accessible and can be used by very few fans with low incomes in poor or isolated areas (Ratten & Dana, 2020) [10].

Technology, however, presents transformative opportunities for sports, which benefit athletes, coaches, and fans. Such technologies require careful assessment and implementation to ensure they are utilized with equity, accessibility, and ethical consideration to promote a more inclusive and innovative sporting landscape.

#### Concept of Corruption in Sports

Corruption in sports is a multi-billion-dollar issue that is destroying athletic integrity and fan trust (World Economic Forum, 2016). It takes the forms of match-fixing, bribery, doping, and embezzlement and is motivated by profit and power. The problem is directly related to other forms of societal corruption and weak governance, with many organizations struggling to enforce accountability. Mega-events such as the Olympics and World Cup enhance corruption risks, including contract fraud and exacerbation of inequalities in developing countries. Match-fixing is an alteration of the outcome of a sport for money, and in many cases, this is carried out with organized crime, according to the International Olympic Committee (2019) [4]. Technologies such as data analytics and machine learning help in the identification of specific patterns of corruption, as demonstrated by Australian tennis (Gainsbury, 2017) [2]. In addition, blockchain technology could also be helpful in tracking funds transparently. According to Manoli (2018) [9], corruption bears a negative impact on values in sports, such as fair play and honesty, which are in the form of match-fixing, bribery, and influence peddling.

Algorithmic bias and technical blockchain issues pose newer challenges (Maddux *et al.*, 2019) [8]. Sound governance, effective engagement of stakeholders, and proper assessment of proposed solutions will determine the ending of corruption. Involving athletes, fans, and other stakeholders would be important in recovering the integrity of sports. The entire research is going to be based on How the V.A.R. has affected the proceedings of a Football match, the limitations of the V.A.R. and How it can be Improved.

#### Case Studies on Misuse of the Technology

The 2018 FIFA World Cup, held in Russia, was the first major tournament to use the Video Assistant Referee (V.A.R.) system. Developed to minimize referee mistakes, V.A.R. enables video referees in a control room to observe key incidents in a match such as goals, penalties, and red cards, and advise the on-field referee. The on-field referee will then review footage on a pitch-side monitor before making a final decision. Though acclaimed to increase the accuracy of decision-making, V.A.R. has also raised many controversial issues. It makes the game flow badly because such delays cause inconvenience to both players and fans. Accuracies do outweigh the time taken. Decisions are subjective; for instance, during the semi-final of 2018 World Cup between England and Croatia, a penalty was awarded to Croatia raised the issues of decision interpretations despite use of technology. Overall, V.A.R. has started a debate in terms of achieving fairness with excitement and pace for football (BBC Sport, 2019).

Some fans argued that the decision was incorrect, while others felt that it was the right call. This highlights the fact that V.A.R. is not a perfect system and that there will always be some subjective decisions. Despite these criticisms, there is evidence to suggest that V.A.R. has improved the accuracy of refereeing decisions. During the World Cup, V.A.R. was used 455 times, resulting in 20 decisions being overturned. This shows that V.A.R. is having a positive impact on the game by reducing errors made by referees. In conclusion, the introduction of V.A.R. has had a significant impact on football, both positive and negative. While some fans and experts have criticized the system for disrupting the flow of the game, others have praised it for improving the accuracy of refereeing decisions. As with any new technology, there are still some teething problems with V.A.R., but overall, it seems to be making football fairer and more accurate.

### Research questions

The paper tries to find out answers to the following research questions-

- **RQ1:** How do Indian football fans and expert perceive corruption within the game?
- **RQ2:** How do fans and expert of football in India, interpret the role of V.A.R. in the game and how V.A.R will affect the game?
- **RQ3:** What do fans and expert feel on implementing V.A.R in Indian football?
- **RQ4:** What measures and reforms should be taken before the implementation of V.A.R?

### Theoretical framework

This framework endeavors to provide a structured lens through which to analyses the multifaceted dynamics of technology adoption in sports, with a specific focus on its implications for enhancing the overall sporting experience. Roger's Diffusion of Innovation (1962), theory can be utilized to gain valuable insights into the attitudes and responses of Indian football fans towards the implementation of V.A.R. technology in European football. This is particularly relevant in light of allegations or concerns regarding corruption. The theory offers a structured approach to comprehending how new advancements, such as V.A.R., are either embraced or rejected within a particular community or culture, specifically in this instance, Indian football enthusiasts.

1. **Innovators and Early Adopters:** Represent a subset of Indian football fans who are quick to embrace the adoption of V.A.R. technology in European football. They might see V.A.R. as a positive innovation that enhances the integrity of the game by reducing corruption or unethical practices. These fans may actively support the use of V.A.R. and advocate for its implementation in Indian football as well.

2. **Early Majority:** This group of Indian fans might be more cautious and require evidence or information about the effectiveness of V.A.R. in addressing corruption issues in European football. They may take a more balanced stance, waiting to see how V.A.R. evolves and its impact on the integrity of the game, and then may find it suitable for the sport.
3. **Late Majority and Laggards:** Some Indian football fans may be resistant to understand the underlying issues with the adoption of V.A.R. technology, such as viewing it as a medium that could potentially be misused for corrupt practices in European football. They might express skepticism and distrust regarding the implementation of V.A.R., especially if they perceive it as a source of controversy or manipulation.

### Technological Acceptance Model

Explains how users come to accept and use a new technology, identifying two key factors: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. In the context of V.A.R. (Video Assistant Referee) in Indian football, this model provides an excellent framework for understanding adoption. V.A.R. must be proved useful for the right decision-making and easy to use and efficient in its application among the stakeholders of the game, which include referees, players, and fans. However, inconsistency in its application and interruption of the game flow in India expose gaps in the perceived ease of use and usefulness. Addressing these issues through clearer guidelines, better referee training, and improved communication can increase its acceptance and ensure that V.A.R. will positively contribute to Indian football.

### Methodology Used

The researcher used purposive sampling with 2sets of in-depth interviews(n=10), data were collected through interviews with Indian football fans, as well as persons belonging to the Professionals' side of the sport.

### Sampling techniques and sample selection criteria

The professionals are divided into 3 categories: (a) Former sportsman, (b) Former or present referee, & Administrative personnel in the sports department, in a sporting institution. The fans will have a criterion, wherein: (a) Must be following football for more than 8 years, & (b) Must be following Indian football.

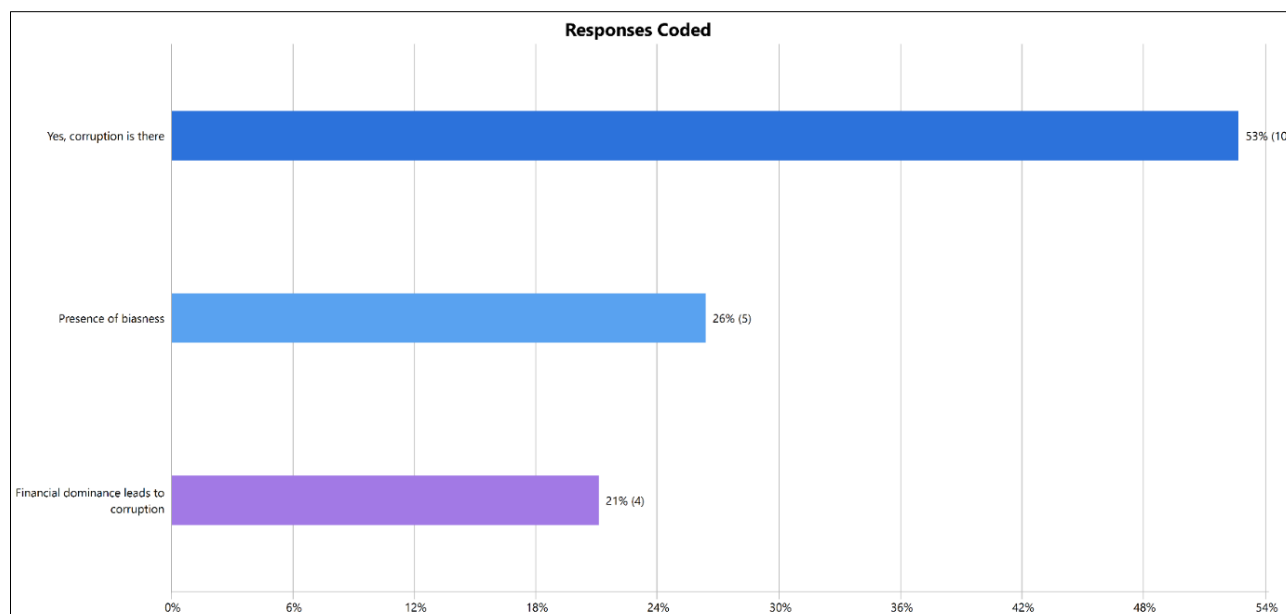
### Data Analysis Technique

The interview data was later filtered and coded into themes using MAXQDA, a qualitative software, to obtain answers to research questions.

### Data Findings and Analysis Participant's Information

**Table 1:** Demographics

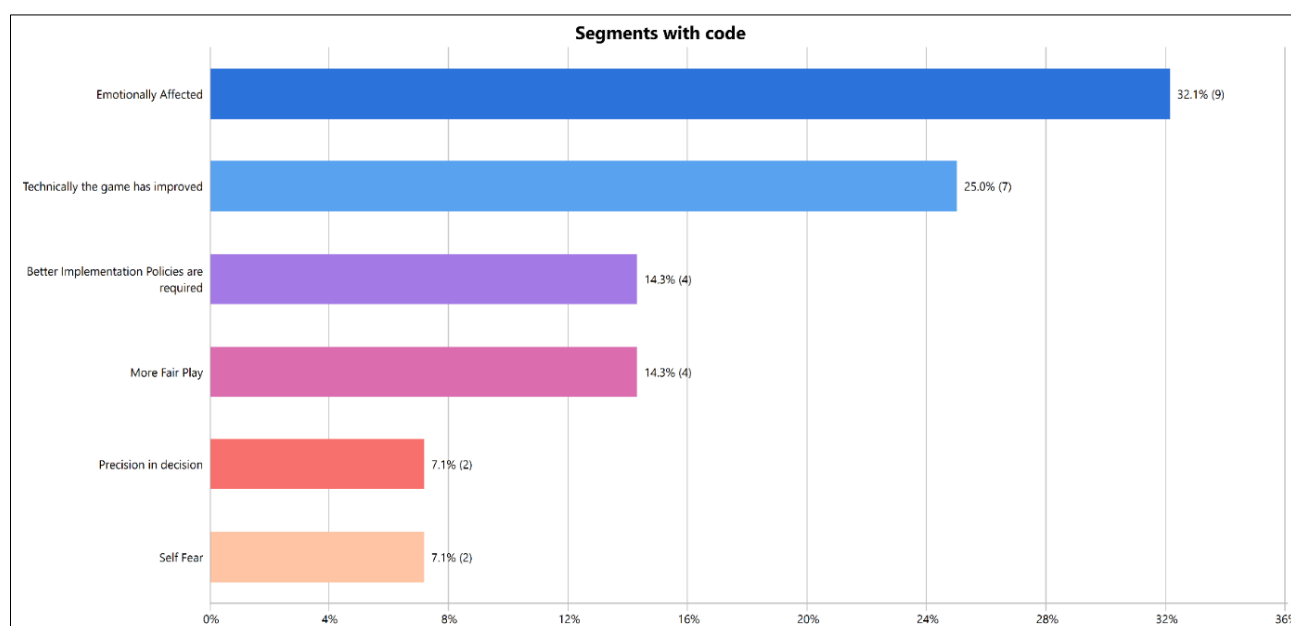
Sl. No.	Name	Designation
1.	Liam Bain	Sports Commentator
2.	Kiyan Nassiri	Professional playing for ATK Mohun Bagan
3.	Mark Joshua Glass	Former professional footballer
4.	Varun Anklesaria,	Professional footballer
5.	Rishab Daryanani	Working professional, and a Football Enthusiast
6.	Suvradeep Roy	Football Enthusiast
7.	Shubham Shah	Student specializing in Marketing and Advertising
8.	Aditya Raj	Working professional, and a football fan
9.	Anonymous, (who requested his privacy to be maintained)	Sports broadcaster
10.	Micah Peters	Professional footballer



**Fig 1:** How do Indian football fans and expert perceive corruption within the game? (RQ1)

From the above graph, it is found that most of the expert and fans acknowledge that corruption is there which can be because of biasness among match officials or financial dominance, “*refereeing decisions are often based on who is playing. If it’s a popular or financially powerful team, the biased nature is fairly prominent on some occasions*” (from personal interview). It is evident that though biasness

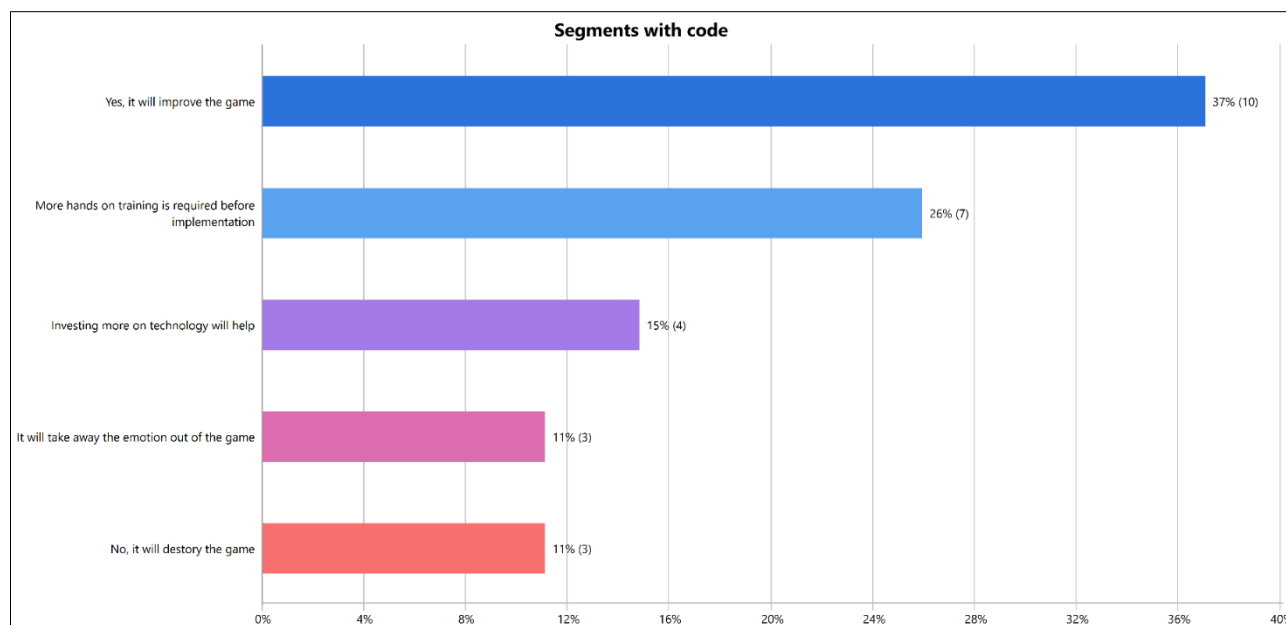
remains a constant problem leading to corruption, financial dominance in a game makes it more prone to get corrupted, but due to the advancement in technology such as V.A.R the corruption is coming to a decline, “*more we advance in our technology, the lesser dependency on humans and greater chance of making the game more transparent*” (from personal interview).



**Fig 2:** How do fans and expert of football in India, interpret the role of V.A.R. in the game and how V.A.R will affect the game? (RQ2)

From the data it is evident that V.A.R will emotionally affect the game for Indians, though it will technically improve the game. Respondents also feel that the game will be much fairer but a prior hand on training is required. V.A. R will also help in precision in taking decision but will instill fear among players. Implementing V.A.R will affect the emotions of fans watching the game, but on the same hand it

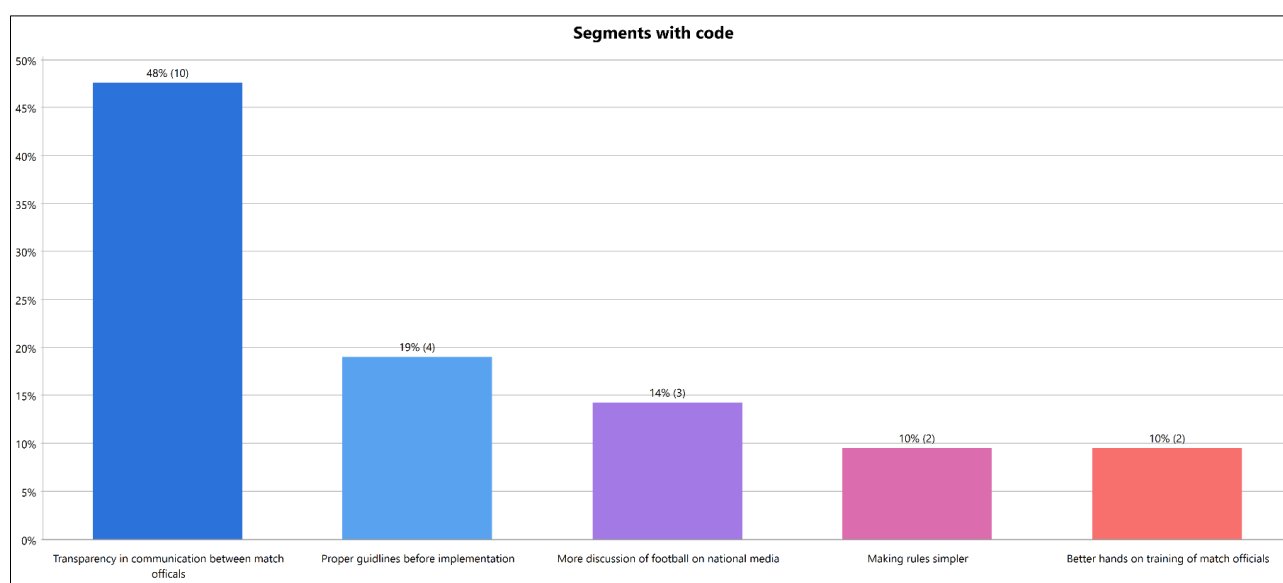
will technically improve the game, make decision precise and after proper hands-on training the self-fear can also be eradicated. From the code relation table, better implementation policy is required to improve the game, resulting in more fair play, but the more the game will become strict the worse the emotions will get hit as, “*it will take out the fun out of the game*” (from personal interview).



**Fig 3:** What do fans and expert feel on implementing V.A.R in Indian football? (RQ3)

From the graph it can be said that implementing V.A.R in Indian football will improve the game, but prior to that training on this technology is required which will require investment. On another hand some respondents feel that

implementing V.A.R will take away the emotions out of the game and lead to destroyed viewership. Thus, people have mixed emotions related to implementation of technology.



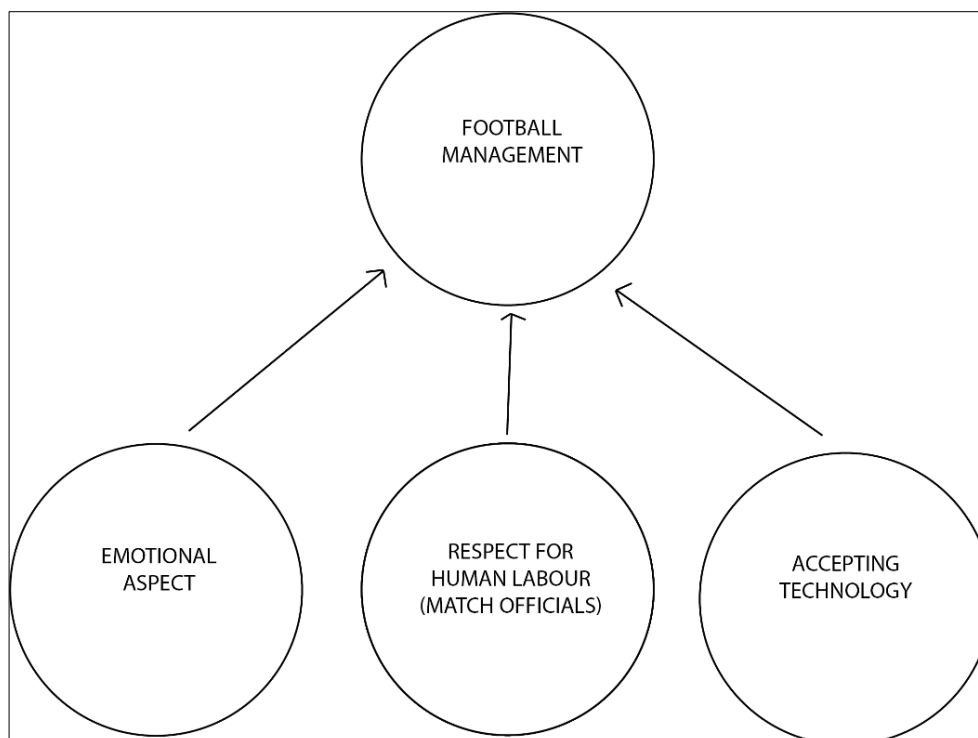
**Fig 4:** What measures and reforms should be taken before the implementation of V.A.R? (RQ4)

The code frequency shows that transparency in communication especially among match officials and to the viewers holds utmost importance. With respect to implementing V.A.R proper guidelines has to be laid down, and in India more debates and thorough discussions in national media is required to get nationalized opinions, moreover, better training and trying to make the game simpler in terms of rules can have a better viewership and game management. Transparency in overall communication within the game will have a better impact, on the other hand

we can see that making the rules simple and laying down proper guidelines will give clarity to the viewers as well. Similarly, the discussions of the game in media are not much, which is a grey area to be addressed.

From the coding we can majorly conclude that communication, discussions on national media will not only improve transparency but can also be helpful in creating a sports identity and public opinion at a large, whereas chalking out the guidelines, rules and its implementation will impact the game thoroughly.





**Fig 5:** The figure concludes 3 aspects from the paper which is to be acknowledged for a balanced management of football in India

## Results and Discussion

**Table 2:** Themes and Interpretations on the Impact and Perceptions of VAR in Football

General Themes Developed	Interpretations
General Views on VAR	Respondents have mixed feelings about VAR in football, with both positive and negative aspects.
Impact on the Game	professionals like 'Liam Bain' are concerned that V.A.R. has affected the emotional side of the game. They mention that players can't fully celebrate, and dream goals can be disallowed. Despite emotional impacts, there's recognition that V.A.R. has improved technical aspects of decision-making, especially in offside calls and handball decisions.
Perception of Corruption	Some respondents feel that corruption exists in football, especially in refereeing decisions favoring popular or financially strong teams.
Challenges and Controversies	Multiple respondents mention witnessing suspicious incidents related to VAR, including controversial red card decisions and other subjective judgments in European football matches.
Impact on Viewing Experience	VAR decisions have influenced the viewing experience, with professionals describing specific incidents that led to controversies.
Desire for Clarity and Consistency	There's a common desire for clear and consistent rules, transparency in decision-making, and improved communication between on-field referees and VAR officials to address the challenges associated with V.A.R.
Impact on Popularity in India	The perception of corruption in European football doesn't seem to significantly affect the popularity of the sport in India, where cricket remains dominant.
Participation in Discussions nationally and in media platforms	Some professionals have thought about or participated in discussions and movements related to corruption in V.A.R.
Opinions on Implementing V.A.R. in Indian Football	Opinions on implementing V.A.R. in Indian football vary, with some professionals supporting it as a means to improve the sport's level, while others prefer the game to remain as it is.
Impact on Fandom	Football enthusiasts share concerns about how V.A.R. decisions can impact their overall enjoyment and emotions while watching games. They note that V.A.R. can sometimes affect the fan experience, especially when goals are disallowed after celebration.
Potential Impact on Indian Football	some enthusiasts believe that V.A.R. could be implemented in Indian football but stress the need for investment in technology and training for referees.
Calls for Reforms	Several express the need for reforms in the current V.A.R. system to eliminate human error and ensure consistency.

## Conclusion and further scope of study

This study offers valuable insights into the perceptions and interpretations of football fans and experts in India regarding the role of Video Assistant Referee (V.A.R.) technology in the game. Through a comprehensive analysis of their responses, we have gained a deeper understanding

of the diverse viewpoints and considerations surrounding this technology in the context of Indian football. The study explored how fans and experts perceive the impact of V.A.R., potential benefits, concerns, and the broader implications for the sport. While there are varying opinions, common themes have emerged, shedding light on the

multifaceted nature of V.A.R. and its evolving role in football. These findings provide a foundation for future research and discussions on the use of technology in the beautiful game, emphasizing its potential to both enhance and challenge the essence of football.

Future research on V.A.R. (Video Assistant Referee) will need to go beyond the present findings in order to determine its long-term impact on football through holistic studies over a longer period to determine how the role of this technology evolves over several seasons. Its psychological and emotional dimensions will be observed in an attempt to gauge its influence on fans and players, where it leads the experience of emotions while watching and playing football, and how player performances are likely influenced due to V.A.R. Cross-cultural evaluation further informs exactly how V.A.R. is perceived and executed in various cultures globally, laying bare common problems, regional diversions, and, for the first time ever, so-called best practices. Probably most crucial, research in relation to refereeing preparation and decision making within a V.A.R. context would determine effectiveness, uniformity, and less controversy for football games. All of this research may well help towards an improved fit and exploitation of V.A.R. within football.

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