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Presenting a model to improve the professionalism of Iraqi football referees

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Abstract

This qualitative study employed grounded theory to examine the development of professional football refereeing in Iraq and to construct a new theoretical framework. The research population included national and international referees, instructors, specialists, and individuals involved in referee training and evaluation. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted using purposive and snowball sampling, with theoretical saturation achieved at the twelfth interview. Data was analysed through open, axial, and selective coding. Coding reliability reached 81% based on inter-coder agreement, confirming data trustworthiness. The findings identified five key elements essential to enhancing referee professionalism: organizational and financial support, training and skill development, improved media representation, increased international collaboration, and upgraded sporting facilities. These elements contribute to improved refereeing accuracy, higher competition standards, enhanced professional status, and more positive cultural perceptions of refereeing in Iraq.

Introduction

Football plays a major role in modern societies, and refereeing is a vital yet stressful part of the game. In Iraq, Refereeing is tough despite football's widespread appeal because of inadequate training, a lack of professional growth, and social and economic issues. Iraqi referees contend with antiquated processes while other nations embrace contemporary training techniques. Enhancing match quality and decreasing stadium violence requires referees to become more proficient, particularly in the areas of player control, stress management, and technology use.

The difficulties of using Video Assistant Referee (VAR) technology have also been brought to light by recent studies. These difficulties include the referees' interactions with the technology, its social acceptance, and its psychological consequences. Even while technology has decreased errors, there is still room for improvement in how people engage with it. A model for handling arbitration errors based on ongoing assessment and decision-correction was put out by Bahtoon. In a study including 54 assistant referees, Targahaya et al. (2022)(Rasoul, 2024) demonstrated that video instruction enhanced refereeing errors and improved refereeing performance.

The study's findings support the significance of incorporating video technology into the teaching process. Spitz et al. (2021)(Jaafar, 2021) also found in a larger study of 2,195 matches in 13 countries that the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) was effective in 9,132 potential incidents, with the average on-field time being 62 seconds. These results show that technology can assist referees in making decisions and pave the way for the development of guidelines in sports. Tabassum et al. (2022) found in a study aimed at investigating the effect of self-efficacy on the performance of Pakistani football referees that referees with high levels of self-efficacy performed better in managing decision-making pressure and interacting with players. They made fewer errors and had greater self-confidence. This study, conducted within the framework of Bandura's theory on the importance of psychological training to enhance self-efficacy and improve the quality of refereeing. Agari Loaiza et al. (2020)(Nasief, 2024) also studied psychological characteristics such as stress control, motivation, mental skills, and team cohesion in a study conducted on professional and semi-professional Colombian referees. The results showed differences in these characteristics depending on the role, experience, age, and educational level. Significant differences were observed between stress control, age, and

educational level. This study emphasizes the importance of studying the textual and social factors affecting referees' performance and indicates the need for further research in this area. In a study conducted by Hajipour et al. (2003) on the motivations for using Video Assistant Referee (VAR) technology in the Iranian Premier League, they found that factors such as improving camera quality, standardizing stadium standards and equipment, and using modern technologies are the most important influencing factors. They recommended that sports federation managers use these results to effectively implement VAR technology.

Research Methodology

This qualitative, developmental research aimed to explore and understand the professional development of football referees in Iraq using the grounded theory approach. The study targeted referees at various levels—national, international, and professional—alongside academics, experts, and stakeholders in the refereeing field. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement or at least four years of related research experience.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted, reaching theoretical saturation by the twelfth. Data were analyzed in three coding stages:

1. Open coding – identifying key themes from interview content,
2. Axial coding – connecting categories with subcategories,
3. Selective coding – integrating findings into a theoretical framework.

The final model was reviewed by participants and peers to validate the conclusions and ensure analytical depth. The approach provided a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing refereeing professionalism in Iraq.

The research committee set

The dependability of the interviews was determined by calculating the percentage of agreement among the participants. In order to accomplish this, three interviews were recoded by a PhD graduate in sports management who was in charge of interview coding. According to the researcher and co-researcher, codes that were comparable were deemed to be "agreement," and codes that differed were deemed to be "disagreement" in each interview. The percentage of participants who agreed was determined using the following formula. The findings demonstrated that the coders' dependability was very high and generally equal.

$$\text{Percentage: Intra – subject agreement} = \frac{\text{Number of agreements: 2}}{\text{Each number:}} \cdot \%100$$

The results of these codings can be seen in table 3-1.

Table 3-1: Inter-coder reliability

Class	Total number of tokens	Number of agreements	Number of disagreements	Coder reliability (percentage)
1	30	13	6	86%
2	35	15	9	85%
3	28	10	4	71%
the total	93	38	19	81%

According to Table 3-1, the reliability of the inter-codings using the above formula was 81%, which is higher than 60% and confirms the reliability of the codings.

Research Results

The results of this section are presented in two parts: a statement of the interview results and their coding.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the samples

Percentage of Frequency	Frequency	Components	Variable
20%	3	woman	sex
80%	12	man	
100%	15	the total	
6/6%	1	20-29	age
33/35%	5	30-39	
26/6%	4	40- 49	
33/35%	5	50 years and above	

100%	15	the total	
20%	3	Bachelor's degree	education
33/35%	5	Master's degree	
46/6%	7	doctorate	
100%	15	the total	
80%	12	Physical Education and Sports Science	field of study
20%	3	Non-physical education and sports science	
100%	15	the total	
26/6%	4	Football referees and assistant referees	
13/3%	2	Professional-level coaches	Position/Job
13/3%	2	University professors and faculty members	
6/6%	1	Football Association Squad and Technical Staff Directors	
13/3%	2	Refereeing Experts	
6/6%	1	Reporters	
6/6%	1	Former football players	
6/6%	1	Football club managers	
6/6%	1	Experts and specialists with Asian (C) refereeing certification	

100%	15	the total	Work history
13/3%	2	Under 5 years	
33/3%	5	5-15 years	
53/3%	8	15 years and older	
100%	15	the total	

Table 2: Causal conditions affecting the central phenomenon of the research

Concepts	Categories	Components of the Theory
✓ Training in rapid decision-making skills ✓ Thorough knowledge of the latest football rules and regulations ✓ Ability to communicate effectively with players, coaches, and other refereeing team members ✓ Ability to manage the flow of the match and control sensitive and tense situations ✓ Maintain a high level of physical fitness to referee high-speed, high-intensity matches ✓ Evaluate and analyze personal performance to identify strengths and weaknesses. ✓ Training in psychological skills to manage stress and maintain focus during the match.	Training and Skills Development	

✓ Allocate the necessary funds for training, equipment, and related expenses for referee development. ✓ Support and cooperate with the Federation in holding training courses and conducting periodic assessments. ✓ Providing training equipment, facilities, and appropriate training space. ✓ Incentive programs for outstanding referees, including awards and professional benefits. ✓ Providing opportunities for advancement and growth in the field of arbitration, participation in international competitions and major events..	Organizational Support and Advocacy	Causal conditions
✓ Periodic evaluation of referees' performance in competitions by experts. ✓ Providing accurate and constructive feedback to improve weaknesses and enhance strengths. ✓ Using match footage to review referee decisions and analyze critical scenes in detail. ✓ Holding periodic meetings with referees to review performance and	Continuous Evaluation and Feedback	

provide recommendations for improvement. ✓ Providing personalized evaluation reports for each referee to track progress and set development goals.		
✓ Providing financial rewards and moral benefits, such as vacations or special opportunities, for outstanding referees. ✓ Holding celebrations to honor successful referees and providing media coverage of their performance. ✓ Motivating referees to advance their professional level and achieve international success. ✓ Creating career paths for referees to advance from the national to the international level. ✓ Supporting referees' efforts in challenging situations ✓ Designing systems to evaluate referees' performance, creating healthy competition and an incentive for continuous improvement..	Motivation and Encouragement	

The causal conditions listed in Table 3 are five main categories, including "training and skills development," "organizational support," "continuous assessment and feedback," "motivation and encouragement," and "growth and experience opportunities." These categories were derived from 27 initial codes.

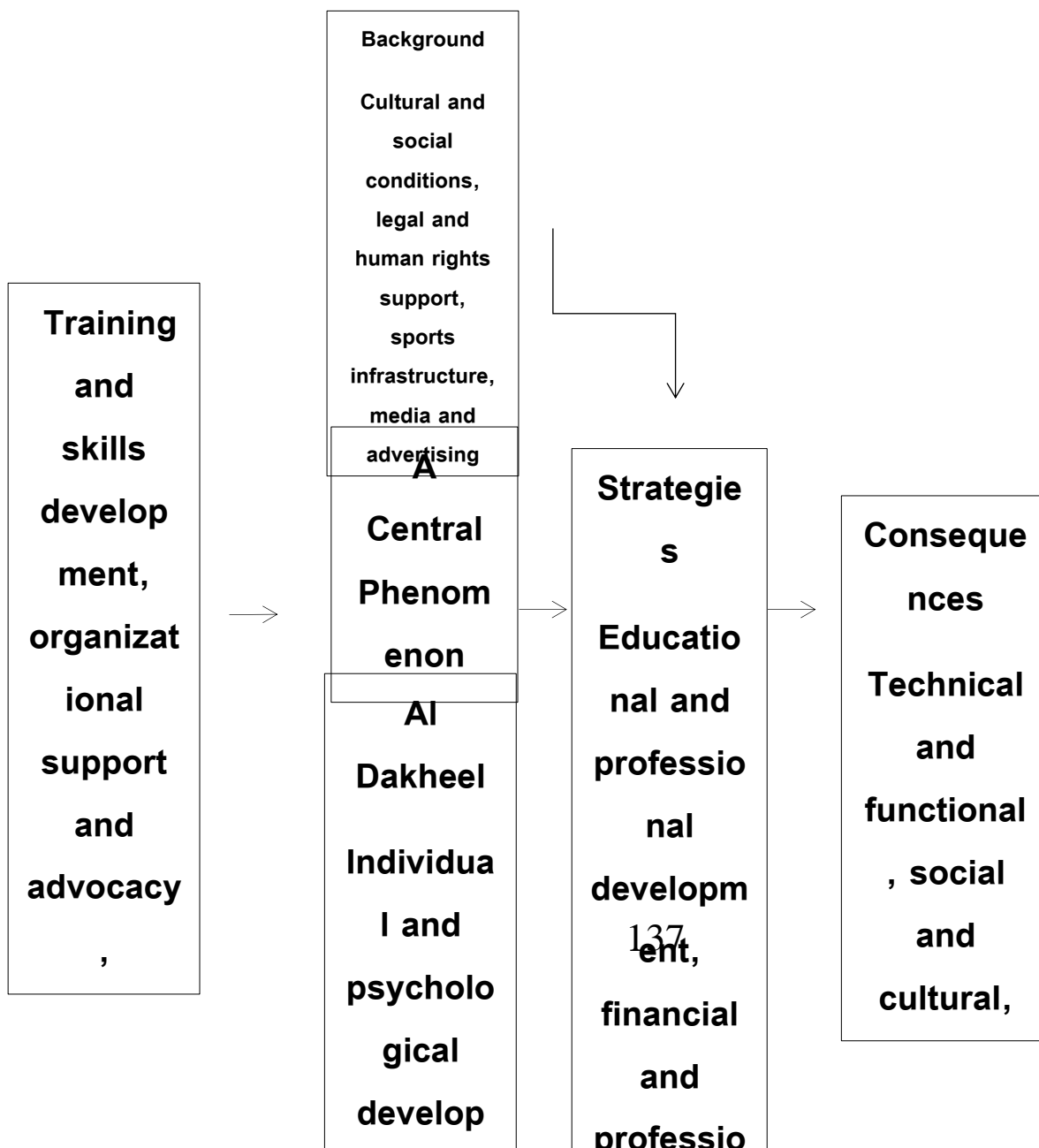
Table 3: Contextual conditions influencing the central phenomenon of the research

Concepts	Categories	Components of the Theory
✓ General beliefs and opinions regarding the role of referees and their professionalism in football. ✓ The role of family and society in supporting referees, especially in the early stages of their professional careers. ✓ The influence of veterans and social role models on the motivation and drive of young referees toward professionalism. ✓ The level of public awareness of referees' rights and responsibilities and its impact on creating greater respect and acceptance for them.	Cultural and Social Conditions	land
✓ International law supports football arbitration ✓ Financial support and employment contracts ✓ Training and professional development programs	Legal and Legal Support	

✓ Support for referees against psychological pressure and threats ✓ Monitoring and evaluating referees' performance		
✓ Adequate stadiums and sports facilities ✓ Advanced technology and tools for evaluating referees ✓ Establishing and developing specialized arbitration and technical training centers in Iraq ✓ Medical and material support systems	Legal and Legal Support	
✓ Regular and positive media coverage for referees ✓ Referee branding and media identity creation ✓ Sponsored advertisements for referees ✓ Television programs and documentaries specializing in arbitration ✓ Advertising activities on social media ✓ Training referees on the principles of dealing with the media ✓ Training referees on the principles of dealing with the media	Media and Advertising Support	
✓ Cooperation with FIFA and the Asian Football Confederation ✓ Exchange of expertise and training with referees from developed countries	Communication Networks and International Cooperation	

✓ Membership and participation in international arbitration networks Like the FIFA Referees Network		
✓ The presence of Iraqi referees in international competitions and prestigious tournaments. Supporting international refereeing development programs.		

According to Table 3, these conditions, also known as contextual categories, represent environmental factors that directly or indirectly influence existing strategies. In this study, five basic categories were identified, including cultural and social conditions, legal and regulatory support, sports infrastructure, media and advertising support, and communication networks and international cooperation. These categories were derived from 25 initial codes that indicate the contextual conditions influencing the phenomena under study.



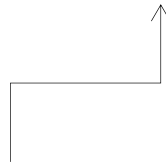


Figure 1: Axial coding pattern based on the model template

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to design a model to improve the professionalism of football referees in Iraq by identifying the factors influencing refereeing. The study adopted a qualitative and exploratory approach using grounded theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 experts including referees, coaches, academics, and media professionals. The results showed that factors such as professional training, financial and psychological support, the use of technology, and the creation of a positive sports culture contribute to improving referees' efficiency (Aysaa Kadhim et al., 2021). Causal variables, the main phenomenon, methods, outcomes, treatments, and context were all included in the six-dimensional conceptual model that was introduced.

The study concentrated on the value of skill development and training, especially when it comes to making prompt and accurate decisions under duress. Additionally, studies have demonstrated that simulation methods help referees make better decisions, which enhances both their performance and the reputation of officiating as a whole. Referees must be able to communicate effectively with players, coaches, and other members of the refereeing crew in order to retain mutual respect and ease stress. Referees with strong verbal and nonverbal communication skills are better able to manage the game, according to Diener (2006).

Successful refereeing also requires the ability to control delicate situations and remain composed, since this increases their credibility and lowers the possibility of mistakes. Referees who receive stress and pressure management training make better choices in high-pressure situations, according to Bright et al. (2022).

Given that matches demand quick thinking and precise decision-making, physical fitness is a crucial aspect of referee performance. Regular physical training enhances referees' capacity to observe and predict the game, as shown by Castilla et al. (2007). Referee performance is continuously assessed, which aids in addressing shortcomings and enhancing strengths. Referees can improve their performance by regularly assessing and comprehending their skills. Video and performance analysis software are useful tools in this context. According to a study by Schroedter et al. (2022), referees who receive video feedback and keep a close eye on their performance are better equipped to make choices and comprehend the game more thoroughly.

Contextual Factors

Along with 25 main contextual elements, this study identified four essential criteria for improving referee professionalism: media and commercial support, sports infrastructure, legal and judicial support, and cultural and social environment.

Cultural and societal factors are significant, particularly in nations like Iraq where referees deal with issues including low regard for their job and public pressure. Webb and colleagues (2015)ⁱ A study showed that referee performance is improved by social and cultural support. Since stringent laws like Article 23 of the FIFA Statutes help to reduce threats and boost self-confidence, legal protection is crucial to ensuring a secure atmosphere for referees (Samuel et al., 2021).ⁱⁱ pointed out.

Improving training facilities and equipment is necessary in Iraq since sports infrastructure plays a crucial role in referee skill development. Slack and associates (2013)ⁱⁱⁱ verified that referees' efficiency is increased when they practice in a realistic setting. Finally, media support contributes to raising community awareness of the importance of arbitration through constructive criticism and coverage of referees' achievements. This enhances their public image and increases respect for their profession, especially in the Iraqi context, which requires specialized and educational media in this field.

Anthony (2010) asserted that the media contributes to raising the level of respect for referees by positively promoting their performance and providing constructive criticism. A study by Mukhlesi et al. (2013)^{iv} also showed that Regarding the influence of the media in Iran, the most positive role of the press is in supporting football and contributing to enhancing its image among the public, which positively impacts the stadium environment and referees' performance. Studies have indicated that the media has a dual role in football; it contributes

positively to awareness and promotion, but it can also be detrimental by focusing excessively on marginal aspects.

International communication networks and cooperation play a fundamental role in developing refereeing, especially in developing countries like Iraq. Cooperation with international federations and sports academies provides opportunities to acquire skills and experience. Webb et al. (2016) also demonstrated that this cooperation improves referees' performance by keeping them informed of the latest developments.

Five key aspects should be prioritized in order to increase the professionalism of Iraqi referees: international cooperation, infrastructure development, legal protection, good media coverage, and cultural and social assistance. To improve referees' abilities and lessen the strain on them, the Iraqi Football Association should work with foreign organizations and the media to offer a suitable training environment and efficient legal assistance.

Influencing Factors

The study found that five fundamental factors—personal and psychological—have an impact on the professionalism of football arbitration in Iraq. International cooperation, media and advertising, social and cultural, organizational and structural, and educational and professional development. besides the twenty-four open criteria.

An examination of the actual state of arbitration in Iraq showed several obvious issues, such as low psychological pressure and motivation, a lack of chances for ongoing education and certification, a weak organizational structure and funding, unfavorable media coverage, a societal perception of arbitration that is unfavorable, and a lack of international collaboration. Individual and mental Referees encounter psychological pressure from criticism and threats, as well as a lack of support and motivation, which impairs their effectiveness and self-confidence. These issues are among the most significant hurdles. According to Goldstein et al.'s (2004) research, referees' performance is negatively impacted by psychological strain and a lack of social support, particularly during crucial situations. In addition to 33 strategic sub-factors, the study identified seven strategic axes to improve the professionalism of Iraqi football referees: media and advertising; international cooperation; social and cultural support; financial and professional support; education and professional development; and psychological skills.

The most prominent challenges:

The psychological aspect: According to studies by Goldstein (2004) and Torrell-Hani (2015), referees experience extreme psychological pressure as well as a lack of support and

motivation, which has an impact on their performance and self-confidence.

Education and training are hampered by inadequate funding and a shortage of trained coaches. referee development, but research indicates that consistent practice improves performance (Webb et al., 2011). Organizational Structure: The Iraqi Federation's inability to attract and retain talent is a result of its disjointed organizational structure, poor financial support, and inadequate planning. Samuel and associates (2020)

Media: Professional media contact can improve referees' public image and reduce pressure from negative criticism and weak favorable publicity (Webb et al., 2018). Social and Cultural Aspect: Referees' performance suffers as a result of players' and the public's disrespect and unfavorable opinions about refereeing (Gorgout et al., 2012). International Cooperation: While international participation helps to increase referee efficiency, poor international relations and limited access to contemporary refereeing technologies impede the development of refereeing in Iraq (Webb et al., 2018).

Referees' effectiveness is enhanced when stress and tension are managed, according to research. Professional and financial assistance, such as good pay, job stability, and health insurance, boosts their motivation and raises the caliber of their work. Matior (2023). The level of performance is raised by the existence of a methodical, professional organization with precise evaluation tools and ongoing feedback. Da Silva and associates (2022). Technical assistance, such VAR technology, also helps to increase decision accuracy.

Referees' reputations are improved in large part by the media. Public confidence is raised and unfair criticism is decreased by social media communication and media relations training for referees (Cleland et al., 2021). By encouraging players and spectators to respect referees, societal pressures and threats are lessened. Internationally, collaboration with foreign federations, involvement in international competitions, and cooperative training initiatives are crucial for acquiring expertise and raising the standard of officiating in Iraq.

Results

Technical and functional, social and cultural, professional and economic, sports and functional, and organizational and structural elements are among the outcomes computed from the use of the pertinent model. They stand for a total of 16 primary codes and four categories aimed at enhancing the professionalism of Iraqi football referees. Increasing the precision and caliber of refereeing decisions is one of the most significant outcomes of elevating referee position. The accuracy of referee decisions during games can be considerably improved by

using technologies like video assistant referee (VAR) and specialized training, according to research (Helsen et al., 2023)^v.

In addition to improving the refereeing team's effectiveness, increasing the accuracy of refereeing decisions also boosts the referees' reputation and public trust. Other significant results include the capacity to control heated games and lower refereeing mistakes in stressful circumstances. Referees who perform well under pressure can make more accurate decisions, according to a number of studies (Ogabor et al., 2023)^{vi}.

Enhancing decision-making abilities in intricate and uncertain circumstances also helps referees and other refereeing team members coordinate better. The total caliber of matches is thereafter directly impacted by this coordination (Sabak et al., 2023)^{vii}.

Increasing public esteem for referees and altering cultural perceptions of the profession are two significant effects of elevating referee status. According to research, there is less stress and conflict during games in civilizations where referees are respected (Lee et al., 2024)^{viii}. In addition to improving the profession's social acceptance, cultivating and fostering a culture of respect for referees can also help to curb unacceptable behavior during games. Referees may experience less psychological strain as a result of these cultural and sociological shifts, which will improve their on-field performance. A more favorable atmosphere for the growth and advancement of the profession is also produced by increased respect for referees among spectators and in the media.

Referees' financial situation and employment prospects have a direct impact on the economic and professional repercussions. According to research, enhancing referees' financial situation might lessen the social and economic issues they encounter while also boosting their motivation and dedication to the job (Pena et al., 2018). Enhancing referees' financial situation and helping them to meet their equipment and training needs will open the door to raising the caliber of their work. In this sense, one of the most crucial things is to provide fresh job prospects for young referees.

Findings Young referees can enter the professional refereeing system and eventually develop into highly skilled and seasoned officials with the right training and supportive working conditions. For referees and federations, the growth of the refereeing branding and advertising sector may also represent a new revenue stream. Among the most significant results of raising referees' rank are better football games and higher standards of officiating. The presence of qualified and experienced referees in games has been demonstrated to improve match quality

and lower refereeing errors. Technical and technological assistance allows well-trained referees to make more accurate calls, which raises the standard of games overall. Increased backing for referees in international matches is another significant result.

Referees need greater technological and professional assistance because of the intense international competition. Utilizing technologies like video assistant referees (VAR) and offering suitable training environments for referees worldwide are two examples of this support (Castilla et al., 2007). Enhancing referees' standing has the effect of fortifying football federations' managerial and oversight systems. One way to help referee performance improve over time is to set up ongoing support and evaluation procedures.

Apart from tracking referee performance, these tools can also be used to pinpoint referees' areas of strength and weakness and give them continuous feedback. In addition to increasing refereeing competence, a regular and thorough review method makes the referee selection process transparent. In order to enhance referee quality, these systems can also assist officials and referee managers in making more calculated decisions.

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