ACCSCIENCE PUBLISHING

Beytulhikme An International Journal of Philosophy

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) System and Current Debates on Objectivity in Turkish Football

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Abstract

The problem of objectivity, and more specifically the possibility of attaining objective knowledge in football, has gained renewed prominence with the introduction of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system. While a number of assumptions exist regarding football fans' attitudes toward VAR, these have not been examined in sufficient depth within an epistemological framework. Based on semi-structured interviews, this qualitative article contributes to addressing this gap by drawing on conceptual resources from epistemology. It argues that VAR should not be treated simply as a technical reform, but as a phenomenon that must be situated within wider debates about objectivity, evidence, and judgment. The findings reveal that fans' reflections are more nuanced than is often assumed: not all fans subscribe to a naive empiricist understanding of objectivity, and many doubt that even advanced technology and well-intentioned referees can secure access to objective knowledge.

Keywords: Epistemology, objectivity, naive empiricism, football, video assistant referee (VAR), Turkish Super League.

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Citation: Bilgili, A. & Sevgi, M. A. (2026). The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) System and Current Debates on Objectivity in Turkish Football. *Beytulhikme An InternationalJournal of Philosophy*, 16(3): 1103-1113. https://doi.org/10.36922/BIJP94824

Received: June 8, 2026

Revised: September 22, 2026

Accepted: September 29, 2026

Published online: September 30, 2026

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1. Introduction

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Turkish football spectators regularly devoted hours to televised post-match programs in which former referees offered detailed evaluations of controversial decisions. Drawing on multi-angle, slow-motion replays, these broadcasts meticulously examined key moments believed to have influenced match outcomes. Repeated exposure to such retrospective scrutiny gradually cultivated the expectation that refereeing errors were not only identifiable but also correctable through technological means. As a result, many viewers came to regard real-time technological intervention as both feasible and necessary. A mechanism capable of reinterpreting contentious incidents as they occurred would have limited the most visible errors of on-field judgment.

This widespread confidence in epistemic objectivity, more specifically, the belief that refereeing errors could be resolved through appropriate technological intervention, contributed to the Turkish Super League's relatively early adoption of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system in Europe. Fenerbahçe's former president, Ali Koç, expressed strong support for the introduction of the VAR system shortly before its implementation in the Turkish Super League, a stance that illustrates the prevailing optimism of the period. Koç suggested that the adoption of VAR would not only minimize refereeing errors but also enhance the overall brand value of Turkish football by reducing tensions among supporters. It could, Koç argued, even mitigate broader forms of social polarization associated with football-related controversies ("VAR taraftarların ve halkın", 2018). Yet, from its initial implementation in 2018 onward, VAR proved far from resolving controversies in football and instead emerged as a new site of interpretive disagreement. Eventually, in the latter part of the 2023–2024 season, in response to growing public concerns and criticisms regarding refereeing errors, which were prominently articulated by Fenerbahçe's then president Ali Koç, the Turkish Football Federation decided to appoint foreign VAR officials for critical matches in the Turkish league (Reuters, 2024). Following a match in which Beşiktaş was defeated by Fenerbahçe as a result of a late penalty decision, club president Serdal Adalı advanced a broader critique of the system. He argued that dissatisfaction with VAR was not confined to a single club but was shared across all teams in the Turkish Super League. He expressed his disappointment that, although VAR operates effectively elsewhere and enhances the quality of the game, it has become a central source of controversy and dysfunction within Turkish football ("Beşiktaş Başkanı Serdal Adalı", 2026).

These controversies point beyond football governance and raise a broader epistemological question: Can technological mediation yield objective knowledge in domains saturated with interpretation and judgment? Taking this inquiry as a point of departure, this article examines football fans' perceptions of the VAR system within the context of epistemological debates surrounding the possibility of objective knowledge. Specifically, it analyzes various factors as articulated by the fans that hinder the achievement of total objectivity, exploring whether technological intervention can truly or at least partially transcend human subjectivity in the context of officiating. Drawing on 14 semi-structured interviews, this article aims to develop a richer understanding of how football supporters engage with questions of objectivity, evidence, and judgments.

2. Epistemological debates on objectivity and knowledge

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of knowledge. Epistemologists primarily examine whether genuine knowledge is attainable, seek to establish the criteria by which claims are justified, and reflect on the properties that distinguish knowledge from mere belief. Traditionally, the standard definition of knowledge requires a belief to be both true and justified. However, following Edmund Gettier's short but influential 1963 paper, these criteria were called into question. Gettier argued that the traditional model fails to provide sufficient conditions for knowledge, since there may be cases in which a belief is both justified and true, yet true only by coincidence (Gettier, 1963). Despite this challenge, the traditional criteria were not entirely discredited; rather, they are now generally viewed as necessary, but not "sufficient," for a complete definition of knowledge (Bunnin & Yu, 2004, p. 283). One of the most influential approaches to addressing the problem of the justification of belief has been empiricism, which maintains that sensory experience plays a central role in grounding and validating knowledge claims. Although contemporary empiricists do not reduce all knowledge to sensory experience, they emphasize its pivotal role in providing the justification necessary to transform mere belief into knowledge. Naive forms of empiricism—often reflecting everyday assumptions rather than contemporary theory—on the other hand, deny that observation is mediated by prior theories or conceptual frameworks. From this perspective, sensory experience offers direct access to the world, and observational evidence can function as an autonomous basis for verifying or falsifying a hypothesis.

Discussions concerning the possibility of attaining objective knowledge are not confined to formal philosophical inquiry. In everyday life, laymen also engage with epistemological questions, evaluating truth claims and standards of justification, often without explicit awareness

of doing so. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, forced the public to engage with conflicting expert assessments and recommendations, leaving many individuals uncertain about which professional authorities to trust or follow (Filkuková et al., 2021, p. 2; Yavuz, 2022).

Football constitutes one such social arena in which fans enter and navigate through epistemological debates. Collins et al.'s discussion on the shifting epistemic authority between referees and spectators constitutes a good example in this sense. They argue that the introduction of television replays has fundamentally altered the role and authority of the referee. Traditionally, referees' authority and their ontological status were rooted in their "epistemological privilege." Simply put, they had the best view on the pitch, seeing things no one else could. However, modern broadcasting has eroded this advantage. Today, fans watching at home often have a superior view thanks to multiple camera angles and slow-motion replays. The result is what the authors call a "strong disharmony"; the audience may have epistemic advantage over the official, yet the official still holds the power to make the final call. As Collins et al. note, this gap undermines the credibility of both the referee and the sport itself. In this context, technology, and in our case the VAR can be seen as a strategic move to restore harmony; by giving referees access to the same footage as the fans, it attempts to reclaim their epistemic edge and validate their authority (Collins et al., 2016, pp. 11–13).

A recurring assumption in public and academic discussions in football refereeing is that lay understandings of knowledge within this context reflect a form of *naive empiricism*. Football fans are assumed to conceive objectivity primarily in terms of enhanced visual access, believing that additional camera angles, clearer images, or more advanced technological instruments would yield more objective and reliable judgments (Hamsund & Scelles, 2021). Within this prevailing depiction, officiating errors are thus attributed mainly to the limitations of human sensory perception rather than to interpretive, normative, or institutional factors. In this article, this portrayal is treated as an empirical assumption and examined through semi-structured interviews with stadium-going spectators. Our analysis focuses on how fans conceptualize objectivity in refereeing and assess the epistemic potential of the VAR system, particularly whether VAR is perceived as a means of overcoming human sensory limitations or whether persistent doubts about objectivity are attributed to alternative factors beyond perception.

Such an analysis on how fans really perceive objectivity needs to engage especially with debates that emerged in mid-twentieth-century philosophy of science and continue to shape contemporary discussions concerning the possibility of objective observation and the extent to which existing theories, interests, predispositions, and beliefs shape what subjects see and how they interpret evidence. For instance, in his 1958 book *Patterns of Discovery: An Inquiry into the Conceptual Foundations of Science*, Norwood Russell Hanson argued that perception is inherently theory-laden. Drawing on examples from Gestalt psychology, Hanson showed that perception cannot be reduced to passive reception of sensory data; instead it is a process in which prior knowledge and expectations shape what is seen. For instance, a trained physicist and an "Eskimo" baby would not see the same thing when looking at an X-ray tube. Although they are observing the same object, the physicist's specialized training and theoretical knowledge enable him to see features and meanings that remain inaccessible to the baby. Consequently, Hanson rejected the possibility of theory-free or neutral observation (Hanson, 1965, pp. 13–18). Thomas Kuhn extended this line of reasoning by arguing that observation in the natural sciences, no less than in other domains, is shaped by theoretical commitments. In his 1962 seminal work, Kuhn emphasized that pre-existing scientific paradigms fundamentally shape what is observed. In Europe, for instance, astronomers were blinded by Aristotelian cosmology and had to wait for the Copernican and Galilean challenges to it to be able to "see" sunspots and identify new stars. In contrast, in China, where the belief that celestial objects were immutable was absent, such observations were ordinary and regularly recorded long before the invention of the telescope (Kuhn, 2012, pp. 116–117). Similarly, Barry Barnes argued that the acceptance of scientific theories, regardless of how robust the empirical evidence supporting them may be, depends in part on non-scientific, social factors. He illustrated this point with the reception of the discovery of Neptune by British and French scientists in 1846, which was acknowledged and celebrated earlier in France than in the United States. Barnes attributes this divergence to politics and debates over secularism. In France, the intelligentsia were particularly inclined to mobilize science as a symbolic tool in broader struggles over the role of religion in public life, which facilitated the rapid acceptance of the discovery. In contrast, the absence of a comparable anti-clerical agenda in the US led American astronomers to adopt a more cautious stance and to underline the British and French scientists' failure to predict the exact behavior of the planet (Barnes, 1982, pp. 95–98).

Initially criticized for undermining the rationality and, by extension, the authority of natural sciences, challenges to the neutrality of observation have gradually gained wider acceptance. While many contemporary philosophers of science continue to regard these critiques as significant, albeit with reservations, belief in the objectivity of observation is widely assumed to be deeply embedded in

everyday thinking. Lay publics, including football fans, are often presumed to hold a view of objectivity grounded in good faith and accurate perception, with technology understood as a means of enhancing access to neutral and reliable facts. The interviews conducted in this study provide an opportunity to examine this assumed gap between academic debates on observational objectivity, which have been ongoing for more than half a century, and lay understandings of what objectivity entails.

3. Literature on the VAR

The majority of the existing literature on VAR is situated within media studies and sports sciences. The edited volume by Armenteros et al. offers a substantial comparative analysis of the factors that led sports authorities to implement the VAR system, as well as the technical challenges that made its use problematic in sports like football, basketball and tennis. This study was a good example of how media studies and sports sciences could use sociological and psychological perspectives to better understand fans' and sports professionals' reactions to and expectations of the VAR system (Armenteros et al., 2020).

In *Bad Call: Technology's Attack on Referees and Umpires and How to Fix It*, Collins et al. examine the transformation of sports officiating with a particular emphasis on the concept of justice. Although they dive into philosophical territory by invoking concepts like "ontology," "epistemology," and "epistemological privilege," the book ultimately functions as a practical guide, offering solutions to improve the integrity and fairness of football (Collins et al., 2016, pp. 7–11).

Such works rarely analyze the issue from an explicitly philosophical standpoint. Even when philosophical matters show up, they are seldom placed at the center of the analysis. For instance, although Armenteros et al.'s volume engages with concepts like justice and fairness, it cannot be classified as a work within the discipline of philosophy. Similarly, although Dadı and Yıldız's study on Turkish referees' reception of the VAR system includes interview excerpts touching on objectivity, the article does not intend to analyze objectivity claims from a philosophical perspective (Dadı & Yıldız, 2022, pp. 59–60).

There are, however, a limited number of studies that approach the VAR system from a philosophical perspective. Nuhrat's article on fairness and the VAR system in football is a notable example. She argues that trust in VAR both rests on, and also reinforces ocularcentrism. Drawing on interviews with Turkish referees and VAR officials, Nuhrat demonstrates how the VAR ranks the senses and places vision at the top of the hierarchy. By doing so, VAR marginalizes other sensory registers and produces a kind of false transparency in which only what is visible counts as epistemically valid. VAR, in this perspective, presupposes an observer who is rational and also capable of grasping objective reality "as it is." (Nuhrat, 2023). While Nuhrat's discussion is highly valuable for understanding how professionals conceptualize fairness and the possibility of objective observation, it does not examine spectators' views on epistemological questions in the way our article aims to do. In another example, Foster discusses who has epistemological privilege in football and how VAR shapes the distribution of that privilege. Despite references to philosophical themes, the main discussion in Foster's work revolves around in what ways such technologies work or do not work in flow sports and how fan experiences in matches are affected by such technologies (Foster, 2024).

In sum, although philosophical perspectives on VAR in football do exist, they remain limited both in scope and in number. In particular, there is a notable lack of studies that place epistemological debates at the center of the analysis. This article aims to address this gap by examining the Turkish Super League as a case study.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the VAR system as a phenomenon that has been widely debated within both the sociology of sport and public/media discourse. Rather than approaching VAR solely as a technical or regulatory instrument, the study seeks to construct a discussion ground by incorporating perspectives drawn from the Turkish football public through interviews. In doing so, it aims to bring into dialogue context-specific interpretations of VAR with broader epistemological and sociological debates on objectivity, perception, and judgment. The study utilized semi-structured interviews, a method commonly employed to explore individuals' lived experiences, meanings, and interpretations of social phenomena, enabling researchers to gain insight into how participants construct their social reality (Bolderston, 2012, p. 67). In this context, interviews are used to explore how participants experience particular phenomena and how they interpret and make sense of those experiences. (Seidman, 2006, pp. 9–10).

The qualitative research interview can thus be understood as a method for gathering descriptions of the interviewees' life-worlds in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 9). In line with this perspective, the present study does not aim to quantitatively measure attitudes toward VAR; rather, it seeks to explore how VAR is experienced, interpreted, and contested within the everyday culture of football. While a set

of predefined interview questions was prepared in advance, the natural flow of conversation was prioritized, and participants were encouraged to elaborate on their own experiences and viewpoints. Interviews were thus treated as conversational processes through which knowledge was co-constructed between the researcher and the participants, reflecting the interpretive and context-dependent nature of qualitative inquiry (Seidman, 2006, pp. 78–81).

The interview questions were designed to elicit multidimensional perspectives on the VAR system and were structured around four main axes: general perceptions, emotional experiences, debates on fairness and objectivity, and technical and procedural evaluations. Within this framework, participants were asked to compare their experiences of football before and after the introduction of VAR, to reflect on whether the system produces fairness, and to consider the extent to which decision-making processes can be regarded as objective. In particular, questions addressing whether a single correct interpretation exists in football, whether different individuals observing the same incident arrive at the same conclusion, and whether factors such as camera angle or replay speed influence decisions were used to explore how participants evaluate processes of seeing and interpreting. In addition, the emotional impact of VAR on the fan experience, such as excitement, hesitation, and enjoyment, alongside the differences between in-stadium and mediated (screen-based) experiences, constituted an important dimension of the interviews. The scope of the questions was also extended to situate VAR within a broader socio-political context, including issues such as perceived favoritism toward certain teams, debates over foreign referees, and the economic structures of modern football. However, the interviews did not follow a rigid question–answer format; instead, new themes were allowed to emerge based on participants' responses, and the process developed in an interactive manner. Accordingly, the data were generated not only from responses to predetermined questions but also from the meaning-making processes that emerged through participants' lived experiences during the interviews.

For this study, it was deemed appropriate to begin with football fans within our immediate social circles. This initial preference helped minimize potential errors and allowed certain risks to be managed at an early stage of the research. Subsequently, the participant pool was expanded through snowball sampling. In total, 14 individuals were included in the study. The participants' ages ranged between 24 and 46. The sample was predominantly male, reflecting the gendered nature of active football fandom and stadium attendance in the Turkish context. Although the majority of participants were university graduates, individuals from different educational backgrounds were also included. In terms of occupation, the sample displayed a heterogeneous distribution, including public employees, self-employed individuals, and private sector workers.

In the participant selection process, particular attention was paid to ensuring that all participants were active football fans who regularly watched matches and, in most cases, attended games in stadiums. This ensured that participants were directly exposed to the debates surrounding the VAR system, which constitute the core focus of the study, and enabled them to ground their epistemological evaluations in their own lived experiences. Furthermore, in order to ensure diversity, balance club-related biases, and avoid constructing a homogeneous fan profile, interviews were conducted not only with supporters of major clubs with large fan bases in Türkiye but also with fans of other teams.

The interviews were conducted either online or face-to-face, depending on participants' availability and accessibility. Interview durations ranged from 45 to 120 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, with the resulting transcripts constituting the primary dataset for analysis. The transcripts were analyzed thematically through repeated close readings, during which recurring patterns and emerging themes were identified, refined, and organized into broader analytical categories. The analysis combined themes emerging from the interviews with concepts drawn from the study's epistemological framework, enabling participants' perspectives to be interpreted in dialogue with relevant theoretical debates.

5. Discussion

Several studies have shown that the implementation of VAR in top European leagues, such as the Bundesliga and Serie A, has dramatically increased the percentage of correct decisions (Schwab et al., 2023, p. 1029). Yet, despite this measurable improvement, the system has remained a subject of considerable debate since its introduction, with many expressing dissatisfaction with VAR-related decisions both in stadiums and on television programs (Scanlon et al., 2022, p. 1085).

The fan dimension of the debate is even more complex. According to some studies, despite initial hesitation regarding its implementation, support for VAR has gradually increased, even in light of its acknowledged shortcomings. Other studies draw attention to the predominance of critical attitudes toward VAR on social media and suggest that the majority of tweets about the technology express dissatisfaction or skepticism (Schwab et al., 2023, p. 1029). For instance, in their analysis of VAR's impact on English Premier League fans, Kolbinger and Knopp (2020) found that supporters tend to express

predominantly negative sentiments, particularly on social media platforms such as Twitter. Examining 58,264 VAR-related tweets from 129 Premier League matches, they reported that 76.2% conveyed negative sentiment, while only 12.3% were positive.

In our analysis, the interviewees generally expressed support for the use of VAR, despite concerns that the system diminished excitement and introduced ambiguity regarding the referees' roles. This support, however, was not uniform and appeared to be more pronounced among those who were more inclined toward naive empiricism.

5.1. Objectivity as a matter of better perception

The interviewees who are inclined toward naive empiricism understood objectivity largely in terms of improved perception. They suggested that better technology enables more accurate perception and, on this basis, expressed the view that all but fanatical supporters would be persuaded by the enhanced visual access made possible by VAR. In this respect, their perspective is broadly consistent with the argument that greater transparency through the introduction of additional technologies, such as stadium screens or public announcement systems, could increase fan satisfaction with refereeing decisions (Nuhrat, 2023, p. 291; Schwab et al., 2023, p. 1036).

Some of our interviewees appear firmly convinced that improved technology can eliminate, or at least significantly reduce, mistaken interpretations:

"When you watch the incident on the screen, it becomes clear who did what. That is the logic behind the VAR system." (Ö, 31, journalist)

"Football is not that complicated, after all. How many different interpretations can there really be of the same incident?" (A, 24, psychologist)

For these respondents, the inability of VAR to resolve certain problems stems from the deliberate malice of its interpreters:

"Sometimes, instead of showing the full video, they freeze a single moment from one angle for a second and show only that image. This is a form of manipulation. Fans are deliberately being misled in this way. There's a similar situation with the offside line. The software developers might be deliberately giving us an inaccurate image. The fact that the image appears on the screen so late strengthens the possibility of this kind of manipulation." (Ö, 31, journalist)

"The current atmosphere in Turkish football is such that even trust in the offside lines has eroded. People are now asking who controls the technology. In this environment, VAR no longer appears as a mechanism of justice, but rather as an instrument of injustice." (D, 26, teacher)

One may confuse this line of skepticism with that of Collins (2019), who argues that the mediated, technological representation produced by VAR cannot fully capture the complexity of the real world. This is particularly evident in offside detection systems, which rely on computer-generated reconstructions intended to represent the events on the field. Such reconstructions, however, cannot perfectly reproduce reality and therefore inevitably involve a margin of error (Collins, 2010, p. 140). Consequently, the potential for error persists even within VAR's visual and technological framework. Our aforementioned interviewees, however, held a different view. They believed that the technology is in fact capable of representing reality accurately, but that actors intentionally refrain from using this capacity in order to favor certain teams over others. At this point, it is important to emphasize that any skepticism toward the operation of the VAR system should not automatically be taken as evidence that an individual has moved beyond naive empiricism. A person may retain a broadly naive empiricist position while simultaneously believing that VAR fails to function properly because of referees' bad faith, institutional interests, or other relations of power. By contrast, a true critique of naive empiricism addresses a deeper issue: even when advanced technology expands observational capacity, and even without deliberate manipulation by actors, certain obstacles still prevent the production of objective knowledge and reliable judgments.

5.2. Power relations in Turkish football

Allegations that football authorities grant privileges to clubs supported by powerful lobbying networks have long circulated. As Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen note, many fans perceived FIFA as privileging Global North, and particularly European teams during the 2018 World Cup, often at the expense of teams from the Global South, a view frequently articulated in relation to the use of VAR in those matches (2023, pp. 874–876). The interviewees in our study who believe that the VAR system cannot resolve all the problems in football, and especially that it cannot deliver justice, primarily point to the direct or indirect influence of power relations within Turkish football. A recurrent theme in the interviews was the perceived hierarchy among Turkish clubs and the unequal distribution of power within Turkish football. In particular, many interviewees described Galatasaray, Fenerbahçe, Beşiktaş, and Trabzonspor as the "Big Four" and argued that these clubs tend to receive more favorable treatment in both on-field refereeing and VAR decisions. In their view, such advantages derive mainly from these clubs' greater financial resources, long-standing championship legacies, exceptionally large fan bases, and extensive media support.

"Yes, I have to admit that VAR has prevented some blatant mistakes against Anatolian clubs. But I would still say that greater effort is made to avoid decisions that might disadvantage teams like Galatasaray, Beşiktaş, and Fenerbahçe." (Ö, 31, journalist)

"Gençlerbirliği is a well-established club. It is one of the teams that left its mark on the Super League in the 1990s. But how much importance is really given to us? Are we just there for the Big Four? Let me give an example from this season's Galatasaray match. We lost 3–2 in a game we should have won 5–2. And then there was the penalty given against us in the Fenerbahçe match. Wasn't there VAR in those situations?" (M, 29, sales representative)

"As a Fenerbahçe fan, I think the big teams are favored. For example, our player Jhon Durán elbowed his opponent and should have been shown a red card, but he wasn't. It was a very clear red card. At the time Fenerbahçe was going through a difficult period, there were administrative problems, and VAR took all that into consideration and did not call the referee over. The referee saw it too, and still stayed silent." (G, 45, teacher)

Given football's extraordinary popularity in Türkiye, the broad social influence of these clubs also makes them politically significant. Indeed, a recurring theme in the interviews was that neither on-field officiating nor VAR decisions can be properly understood without reference to these underlying power relations.

"When officiating, referees have to take into account various factors, most of which are unrelated to the game itself. One of these is who is watching the match from the protocol stands. They have to keep an eye on that as well." (G, 45, teacher)

"Those with strong ties to centers of power will become champions. The quality of a team's squad matters far less. Neither VAR nor foreign referees can resolve this injustice." (M, 29, sales representative)

Some interviewees highlighted the idea that skepticism toward football officiating, including VAR, reflects broader political culture. These interviewees emphasized that distrust in Turkish football cannot be understood independently of the wider social context, particularly levels of social welfare, social capital, and interpersonal trust. At this point, our interviewees appear to move beyond naive empiricism in their analysis. Because, for them, the unfairness displayed by referees, as well as fans' interpretations of refereeing decisions, does not stem primarily from deliberate ill will, but rather from the broader influence of political culture, which they see as the main barrier to objective knowledge and access to the truth. This helps explain both refereeing errors and the ways in which fans interpret those errors:

"We are traditionally a tense society, and there are sociological and economic reasons behind this. The challenges Turkish fans encounter in daily life influence their interpretations of refereeing decisions. I have friends in Europe, and things are different there. In Italy and in Scandinavian countries, people are generally less stressed. When a referee says something or makes a decision, fans are more likely to trust it rather than immediately look for bad intentions." (Ö, 31, journalist)

"Our society tends to think in terms of conspiracy theories. People enjoy TV series like Kurtlar Vadisi, which explain everything through conspiracies, and they watch football with a similar mindset. I have been following the Spanish and Italian leagues for years, and believe me, serious mistakes happen there too. But because fans there are less inclined to explain everything through secret power networks and hidden agendas, they are more likely to see refereeing mistakes as simple human errors." (S, 46, education specialist)

"It is this lack of trust that leads to so much debate over these decisions. Strange mistakes happen in other leagues as well, but they are not discussed to the same extent. That is because the deep-rooted distrust we have here does not exist there in the same way." (M, 29, sales representative)

While some interpreted this widespread tendency among fans to view events through the lens of conspiracy as further evidence that VAR cannot resolve the underlying problems, others argued the opposite, that VAR is necessary precisely because of this pervasive climate of distrust. Referring to a news story claiming that the Turkish President had intervened with Saudi officials in connection with Fenerbahçe's transfer of the French footballer N'Golo Kanté, one interviewee remarked:

"Just think about it. Once Kanté joined Fenerbahçe, people started saying things like, 'Fenerbahçe and the government have made peace.' In a society where people make comments like that, we need VAR." (ME, 34, lecturer)

5.3. VAR's impact on on-field referees, players and fans

Our interviews indicated that participants perceived VAR as having transformed football by affecting different actors in distinct ways. A closer examination of these perceived transformations suggests that the issue is more complex than we had initially assumed. As the following discussion will show, even in areas where VAR might be expected to generate the strongest criticism, its perceived benefits were often still emphasized.

As noted in earlier sections of this article, the actors most directly and immediately affected by the introduction of VAR are on-field referees. The significance of this issue has also been recognized in the literature. While Tamir and Bar-

eli (2021, p. 66) argue that the VAR system has contributed to referees' authority and prestige by making the game fairer, Nuhrat draws a distinction between on-field referees and VAR in terms of how the VAR system serves their respective forms of authority. Different power dynamics operate within the game, including those related to seniority. If the on-field referee is more senior, he may be reluctant to rely on the VAR's input. Conversely, a junior referee may avoid appearing inexperienced by seeking or visibly relying on guidance from a senior VAR. In many cases, on-field referees are criticized for consulting VAR more frequently than necessary in order to diffuse responsibility and shield themselves from criticism, which is a tendency that can be explained by the power dynamics between on-field referees and VAR officials (Nuhrat, 2023, pp. 293–294). Notably, our interviewees expressed similar concerns:

"Turkish referees want VAR to make the critical decisions. The Turkish league is full of referees who have shown virtually no initiative since VAR review became available." (D, 26, teacher)

"Referees realized that every decision sparked an uproar, so they developed a kind of defense mechanism: 'Do not blame me; the people watching the video are making the decision. They have better tools than I do, and I simply follow their judgment.'" (S, 46, education specialist)

"No one expects justice from the referee anymore. Everyone expects it from VAR instead. The referee on the pitch has become little more than a figurehead." (AL, 33, construction worker)

Interviewees who highlighted the role of the Turkish Football Federation and other power centers in the governance and mismanagement of football reported that, following the introduction of VAR, they began to reconsider the extent to which referees could be seen as acting with malicious intent. Even when suspicion toward referees persisted, they no longer regarded them as the principal source of these controversial decisions.

"In a sense, the pre-VAR era felt better. At least then, we believed that refereeing errors were simply honest mistakes. Now, however, VAR makes us think that referees are not the real problem. Rather, it suggests that there are actors who deliberately allow these mistakes to happen so that certain teams are favored." (MU, 40, hairdresser)

"Referees calculate their decisions very carefully, and I do not mean that in a positive sense. They consider which call will generate the least controversy and which will protect them from possible repercussions." (İ, 40, police officer)

Despite these relatively sympathetic interpretations, interviewees nonetheless remained critical of the quality and performance of Turkish referees, especially when drawing comparisons with their European counterparts. One recurring theme in the interviews on this issue is the suggestion that matches in the Turkish Super League should be officiated by European referees:

"Our referees are theoretically very weak. They simply do not understand the game well enough. More importantly, they are also psychologically inadequate. They are fragile and unable to cope with high-pressure situations." (G, 45, teacher)

"When our referees officiate in Europe, their inadequacies become evident there as well. Most recently, Halil Umut Meler took charge of the Bayer Leverkusen–Arsenal match and once again made a highly questionable decision. In my view, bringing in foreign referees, even on a temporary basis, would be a solution." (D, 26, teacher)

Another group that emerged in our interviews as being affected by the VAR system was players. Even some interviewees who were critical of VAR acknowledged, when asked whether the system had any positive aspects, that the possibility of video review encouraged players to be more attentive to fair play and less willing to mislead the referee. In this sense, VAR was seen not only as a mechanism for correcting decisions, but also as a deterrent against certain forms of on-field misconduct.

"It encourages players to be more honest. After all, they know there's VAR to review the incident." (A, 24, psychologist)

"Diving is almost nonexistent these days, because players know they can be called out for it. I mean, I haven't seen a player dive or appeal for a penalty in a very long time." (G, 45, teacher)

Indeed, this was one of the expectations surrounding the VAR system. Authorities who were in favor of implementing VAR argued that it would enhance fair play by preventing players from deceiving the referee in order to obtain a penalty, have an opposing player sent off, or otherwise gain an undue advantage of that kind (Tamir & Bar-eli, 2021, p. 66). Carlos et al. observe that, following the implementation of VAR technology, both the number of fouls committed and the incidence of yellow cards declined. They suggest that this may be attributable to the increased transparency introduced by VAR, as players appear to adopt less aggressive behavior in anticipation of potential review (Carlos et al., 2019, p. 651).

The final group whose experience has been shaped by VAR is fans. In our interviews, participants frequently emphasized that VAR had dramatically altered their experience of excitement during matches. In particular, many noted that the possibility of VAR intervention, and of

a goal being overturned after it had initially been awarded, often prevented them from fully embracing the moment of celebration. In this sense, some fans expressed dissatisfaction, feeling that part of the pleasure of the game had been sacrificed in the name of fairness:

"The atmosphere in the stadium is completely ruined. A VAR decision is being reviewed, and everyone falls silent. The cheering stops. The pressure we put on to energize the team just disappears." (M, 29, sales representative)

"There's a strange sense of anticipation throughout the stadium, a kind of curious suspense. Will the goal stand, or won't it? In the natural flow of football, a goal is scored, the player runs toward the fans, and the celebration begins. But with the current system, that feeling is often taken away from us during goal reviews." (Ö, 31, journalist)

These expressions of dissatisfaction are consistent with FIFA's own early reluctance to implement VAR. The organization was concerned that such technologies might disrupt the flow of the game by slowing it down (Scanlon et al., 2022, p. 1084). At the same time, and somewhat unexpectedly, other interviewees stated that the review process itself generated a different kind of excitement:

"I see it differently. For me, VAR has added to the excitement of football. There's something thrilling about waiting to see whether VAR will confirm the decision or disallow the goal." (A, 24, psychologist)

"It has brought a different kind of excitement to the game. At crucial moments, you have to wait for the VAR review." (İ, 40, police officer)

The impact of VAR on football fans extends beyond its effect on excitement. More importantly for the purposes of this article, it prompts some fans to reflect on the very possibility of objective knowledge. Interviewees' reflections point to an awareness that access to the truth is not secured simply by seeing more, but remains mediated by interpretation, interests, fears, and distrust. Such emphatic comments by our interviewees are analytically valuable precisely because fans and referees are fundamentally different actors within the game, and they hold distinct expectations. While referees are expected to act as impartially as possible, fans are often emotionally invested. Such bias and wishful thinking may partly explain why fans frequently express dissatisfaction with refereeing decisions (Schwab et al., 2023, p. 1036). Yet, as the following interview excerpts show, VAR also led some fans to move beyond naive empiricism:

"Before VAR was introduced, we expected that once the footage was available, everyone would agree on the decisions. But that did not happen. Even when two people watch the same incident, and watch it repeatedly from different angles, they can still reach entirely different conclusions. How is it possible that, in a game where we are all looking at the same position and the rules are supposedly clear, people still say completely different things? That is where bias enters the picture. Rather than judging incidents objectively, people interpret them according to how they want the outcome to be. Perhaps even if all decisions were left to artificial intelligence, and if an AI calculated every possible scenario and made the final call, people would still complain about injustice. That seems inevitable." (İ, 40, police officer)

"Football is a social activity built around human beings. And wherever human beings are involved, mistakes are inevitable." (Ö, 31, journalist)

"We saw this in the derby the other day. Everyone was confidently insisting that their own team had been treated unfairly. Even former referees were divided on television and across social media. Given that, how fair is it really to direct all the criticism at the referees?" (MU, 40, hairdresser)

6. Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that the football fans we interviewed often held more complex views than might initially be expected regarding the claim that technological mediation, such as VAR, can produce objective knowledge. Even when interviewees criticized referees, their broader reflections often pointed to a position more nuanced than a simple belief in "objectivity as a matter of better perception." Many acknowledged that referees may make mistakes without malicious intent, since football is shaped not only by events on the pitch but also by non-sporting factors. Similarly, the repeated observation that supporters of different teams can watch the same incident and still fail to reach agreement further reinforced doubts about the possibility of fully objective knowledge.

On the other hand, the findings caution against drawing overly broad conclusions. Many interviewees continued to praise the use of VAR in other countries, at times treating it as an almost unattainable ideal, or expressed confidence that foreign referees or foreign VAR officials could govern Turkish football more impartially. Such views suggest that belief in the possibility of objectivity has not disappeared altogether. They indicate that some supporters still assume that, under the right technological and institutional conditions, referees who are willing and adequately trained may be able to overcome the cognitive, psychological, and sociological limitations that obstruct access to objective knowledge.

Furthermore, our findings highlight several promising directions for future research. First, this study is centered on the views of a limited number of supporters and, although we sought to include participants from diverse age groups, professions, and club affiliations, the sample should not be

regarded as representative of Turkish football fans. Future research assessing whether the themes identified here also appear in samples that more closely reflect the wider population would further deepen our understanding of how supporters conceive the possibility of access to objective knowledge. Second, a comparative analysis would be especially valuable. One important avenue would be to examine how fans in European leagues, whose VAR systems are often perceived by Turkish supporters as far more effective and, at times, nearly flawless, understand the possibility of attaining objective knowledge through technological mediation. Such research would help clarify whether the patterns identified in this study are specific to Turkish football or whether they resonate with more global patterns in how fans interpret VAR, objectivity, and fairness.

Acknowledgments

None.

Funding

None.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: All authors *Formal analysis:* All authors *Investigation:* All authors *Writing–original draft:* All authors *Writing–review & editing:* All authors

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the currentstudy.

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