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Understanding the age manipulation among Ghanaian football referees, and its detrimental impact on the sport: Ghanaian referees in perspective

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Abstract

Football in Ghana is a deeply rooted and passionately followed sport (Charway & Houlihan, 2020). The Ghana Football Association plays a central role in its administration. Referees are vital in upholding the integrity of the game and face significant challenges addressed through various reforms and development initiatives. Age manipulating or reducing age to allow an unfair advantage undermines the physical and ethical standards essential for fair play and integrity in sports. It can lead to decreased performance, inconsistent officiating safety risks, and a loss of trust (Daga, Agostino & Cazzoli, 2023). These issues are detrimental to the overall health and reputation of the sport. This study uses a qualitative exploratory research design with 12 referees, nine males, and three females, to explore the age manipulation phenomenon among referees in Ghanaian football. They were conducted within the context of Ghana, a nation with a rich historical and cultural background in West Africa. The research focuses on referees participating in the Ghana Premier League (GPL) and Division One League (DOL). Data collection involved semi-structured one-on-one interviews and telephone conversations with referees, aiming to capture their experiences and insights. This study explores the current prevalence rate, causes, and implications of age manipulation among soccer referees in Ghana. Key factors identified include the desire to extend careers, financial motivations opportunities for advancement and inadequate age verification processes. The implications of age manipulation are multifaceted. They affect trust in the sport, young referees' development, and cheating referees' mental health. The study advocates for the implementation of robust age verification systems, transparency in referee selection processes, and the need for stringent penalties to mitigate age fraud.

Keywords: Age manipulation, career longevity, integrity of sports, physical capability, world of football

Introduction

Football in Ghana has a rich history that goes way back to the early 20th century when European merchants and colonial officers brought the sport to the country. It quickly became a favourite among the locals and has been overseen by the Ghana Football Association (GFA) since 1957, which is responsible for nurturing talent at all levels. The Ghana Premier League (GPL) is the top-tier competition in the country and features some big-name clubs like Kumasi Asante Kotoko Sporting Club, Accra Hearts of Oak Sporting Club, Dreams Football Club, Bechem United, and many more. The Division One League (DOL) serves as the second tier (Charway & Houlihan, 2020) [8]. On the international stage, Ghana is well-represented by teams like the Black Stars (Men), Black Queens (Women), and various youth teams like the U-17 and U-20 squads. However, despite these successes, there are still some challenges to overcome, such as financial constraints, infrastructure deficiencies, and administrative controversies. Football plays a crucial role in fostering national unity and pride among its diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Major events, especially when the national team, the Black Stars, is playing, serve as powerful moments of togetherness (Rosenzweig & Zhou, 2021) [27]. But football is not just culturally significant for Ghana, it also contributes significantly to the country's economy. It generates employment opportunities in clubs, leagues, and industries like tourism and media. For young Ghanaians, football is a major avenue for talent development, inspiring dreams of becoming professional players, thanks to the success stories of Ghanaian players in global leagues. Ghana's achievements in international football, including impressive performances in FIFA World

Cups and Africa Cup of Nations, have also boosted the country's reputation in the world of sports and promoted cultural exchange (Akpabli, 2023) ^[3]. In the world of football, integrity forms the backbone of the sport's appeal and competitive fairness but in Ghanaian football, the phenomenon of age manipulation, particularly among referees, poses a significant threat to the game's integrity and ethics. Age manipulation, the act of falsifying one's age to gain an advantage, undermines the principles of transparency and accountability that are essential for the sport's health and growth (Norman, 2022) ^[22]. The causes of this malpractice are multifaceted, stemming from pressures related to unemployment, poverty, and the pursuit of a longer career in football, a sector that promises not only financial rewards but also social esteem within and beyond Africa. Historically, age manipulation has been a persistent issue in sports. Notable instances include the 2014 and 2022 controversies involving the Ghana under-17 football teams. In 2014, the team was banned from the 2015 African U-17 Championship after being found guilty of manipulating their ages in a qualifier against Cameroon. Similarly, in 2022, after a complaint by Morocco, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) banned Ghana from the next two editions of the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup qualifiers and imposed a \$100,000 fine. These incidents underscore the routine manipulation in sports, where individuals and sometimes guardians take drastic measures, such as acquiring fake birth certificates, to compete against younger, less physically mature opponents (Ndlovu, Proches & Naidoo, 2020; Truskewycz, Drummond & Jeanes, 2021) ^[21, 33].

Referees in Ghana play a crucial role in football by making sure the game is fair and everyone follows the rules. The Ghana Football Association (GFA) is in charge of its training and certification, which includes intense programs covering the game rules, fitness tests, and practical officiating. Despite efforts to keep things honest with measures like VAR technology and stricter monitoring, there have been instances of corruption and bias that have made fans and players lose trust (Eiserloh, Foreman & Heintz, 2020) ^[14]. On top of that, referees also have to deal with threats and abuse, which affects how well they perform. To improve the quality of officiating, the GFA has implemented development programs like workshops and international exchanges. These programs expose referees to the best practices from around the world, intending to boost their overall performance and credibility. Referees in football have a big job when it comes to maintaining fairness and integrity during matches. They make important decisions on things like fouls, penalties, and other incidents, all in line with the established guidelines. Their impartiality helps prevent and punish unsportsmanlike behaviour, like diving and time-wasting, which keeps the game's spirit alive (Dawson, Webb & Downward, 2021) ^[11]. Not only that, referees also prioritize player safety. They stop the game when there are injuries, make sure the field conditions are safe, and manage player behaviour to prevent any violence. On top of all that, they also keep things running smoothly by managing substitutions and keeping track of the match timing. Referees are like the authority figures on the field, and players, coaches, and fans all respect their decisions. This respect is crucial for maintaining order and discipline during the game. In addition, referees are quick to mediate conflicts, preventing them from getting worse and making sure the matches proceed without any hiccups (Devís-Devís, Serrano-Durá & Molina, 2021) ^[13].

According to Tabassum, Khadim, and Hussein (2020) ^[32], age manipulation among referees presents a major challenge to the integrity and fairness of sports officiating. This issue stems from the physical demands that come with high-level refereeing, where agility and fitness are key. If older referees lie about their age, they might struggle to keep up with the speed of the game, which could result in missed calls or wrong decisions. This deception not only hides their true physical abilities but also raises doubts about their experience and judgment. Refereeing often has age restrictions at different levels of competition, designed to ensure fairness and give younger officials opportunities. Age manipulation allows referees to extend their careers beyond what's legitimate, putting deserving younger referees at a disadvantage. This practice undermines the credibility of officiating systems, eroding trust and damaging the sport's reputation (Aguilar, Castillo-Rodríguez, Chinchilla-Minguet, & Onetti-Onetti, 2021) ^[9]. Moreover, age manipulation can compromise the health and safety of referees, especially in physically demanding sports. Being dishonest about their age could put referees in situations where their well-being is at risk during matches, potentially leading to serious incidents. Ultimately, just as age manipulation among players distorts fair competition, age manipulation among referees creates an uneven playing field in officiating. It goes against the principles of fairness and equality, which are crucial for upholding the credibility and integrity of sports as a whole. Addressing age manipulation among referees is crucial for upholding the fundamental principles of fair play and sportsmanship in football. The integrity of the game relies heavily on the honesty and transparency of match officials, making it imperative to root out any form of deception that compromises the credibility of refereeing decisions (Aliende, Bacigalupe & Escot, 2022) ^[4].

Age manipulation among referees is a big problem that seriously affects the integrity of sports. Referees need to be in top physical shape to keep up with the fast pace of the game. As they get older, their physical abilities naturally decline, so, if a referee lies about their age to appear younger, it can mess things up and might not have the physical capabilities they need to make accurate decisions during matches (Silva, Leonardo, Rodrigues & Krahenbühl, 2022) ^[30]. Experience is important, of course, but the physical demands of being a referee are no joke. Age manipulation can create a false impression that the referee has both the experience and the physical capability when in reality they might be lacking in one or both. This compromises the quality of officiating and can throw off the fairness of the game (Daga, Agostino & Cazzoli, 2023) ^[10]. Fair play is all about consistent and unbiased officiating but when referees start experiencing the effects of aging, their decision-making can become inconsistent. This can have a big influence on the outcome of the game and how players and fans perceive its fairness (Nurcahya, Rusdiana, Hidayat, Sidik, Kusumah, Yamin & Akbar, 2023) ^[23]. Referees also play a crucial role in enforcing safety rules. If a referee manipulates his or her age and is less physically capable, they might miss fouls or put players at risk. When referees manipulate their age, it undermines that trust by suggesting dishonesty for personal gain. Age manipulation creates doubt about the legitimacy and governance of the sport, unfairly denies younger referees opportunities for growth and development, hinders the progress of talent and sets back refereeing standards (Rubia, Lorenzo-Calvo & Lorenzo, 2020) ^[28].

In Ghanaian football, more and more referees are pretending to be younger than they are and this threatens the game's fairness and honesty (Pambo, Adu-Adadey, Ankras, Agbodzakey & Scharhag, 2020) ^[25]. When referees lie about their age, they can work longer and may even get unfair advantages. This dishonesty harms the trust in all football games. Some reasons could be pressure from the football organisation, insufficient oversight of the referees, or societal expectations. Manipulating about age has many bad outcomes and it can harm the spirit of fair play, player morale, and faith in the referees (Yagüe, Salguero, Villegas, Sánchez-Molina & Molinero, 2023) ^[36]. Most studies (Kwadwo, 2023; Pambo, *et al.*, 2020; Romann, Javet, Cogley & Born, 2021) ^[17, 25, 26] on age manipulation in Ghanaian football look at the players, not the referees. Also, there are not enough studies comparing this problem with other sports. This kind of comparison could show us if some cultural or organizational factors are enabling age manipulation. We also need to research the ethical issues with age manipulation and whether the current rules are working. While concrete data on the prevalence of age manipulation among referees in Ghanaian football may be challenging to come by, anecdotal evidence and occasional incidents suggest that this unethical behaviour exists within the officiating ranks. The clandestine nature of age falsification makes it difficult to detect and deter, posing a significant challenge to maintaining the integrity of the sport. There are some suggested solutions, like better ways to check age and tougher punishments but we do not know if these ideas would work well for Ghanaian football settings. This article delves into the intricate web of causes behind age manipulation among referees in Ghanaian football, discerning the role of various economic, social, and technological factors. Moreover, it examines the profound implications of such unethical practices, which range from hampering the career opportunities of younger, legitimately aged referees to corroding the essence of democracy and fairness in Ghanaian football.

Research Questions

1. What is the current prevalence rate of age manipulation among soccer referees in Ghana?
2. What are the primary causes and motivations behind soccer referees engaging in age manipulation in Ghana?
3. What are the long-term ethical implications of age manipulation on the development of young referees in Ghana?
4. What measures or strategies can be employed to avert and alleviate age manipulation among soccer referees in Ghana?

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The qualitative exploratory research approach was used to collect data. According to Denny and Weckesser (2022) ^[12], qualitative research methods refer to a broad class of empirical procedures designed to describe and interpret the experiences of research participants in a context-specific setting. The qualitative research method was considered suitable for this research and aligned with addressing the research questions because it allowed for engagement with referees who were intricately involved in national league matches (GPL & DOL) and the collection of data was ultimately informed by their experiences and knowledge.

This research drew on the phenomenological paradigm, which examines how individuals make sense of the world around them. Phenomenologists maintain that human action is meaningful and that people ascribe meaning to their own and other people's actions. The fundamental difference in this approach is that, in the phenomenological paradigm, the researcher's task is to interpret and gain an understanding of human actions and then describe them from the point of view of the person or people being studied (Kuchinke, 2022; Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2020) ^[16, 34].

Study Area

Ghana, located in West Africa, has a fascinating history that spans several centuries. It was home to powerful ancient kingdoms, like the Ashanti and the Ghana Empire. These kingdoms were so influential that they turned the region into a major trade hub, especially for gold. This caught the attention of European traders in the 15th century. Fast forward to 1957, Ghana made history as the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence from colonial rule. Known for its vibrant culture and great economic potential, Ghana continues to be a major player in West Africa. Its influence stretches beyond its borders, making it an important nation in the region (Camara, 2020; Smith & Boscarol 2022) ^[7, 31].

Data Source and Sampling Procedures

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews and telephone conversations were conducted with the GPL and DOL referees. According to Buys, Casteleijn, Heyns, and Untiedt (2022) ^[6], this method allowed us to gather valuable insights from referees. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The interviews took about 20 to 30 minutes each because the researchers wanted the participants to share their relevant stories to give us a better understanding of the topic we were researching. The study's sample size was determined by considering the data saturation. Data were analysed using thematic coding. In analysing the data, the researchers allowed the codes to emerge from analysing the interview transcripts. They continually read through the transcripts, finding dominant patterns, working inductively with emerging categories, and frequently comparing them. Since the study involved interactions with individuals, extreme caution was taken to avoid harming them and to ensure that their right to privacy was respected. The researchers informed the referees that their participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was sought before data collection. The participants were also told that they had the option to decline or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. We recorded all the interviews using an audio device (Mobile phone). We did not let anyone know who else part of the sample was, and we made sure that the contents of other interviews remained confidential. When we analyzed the data, we made sure not to include any personal details of the respondents or any information that could reveal their identities. The same principle was applied to all the referees mentioned during the data collection process, and we presented the findings in terms of general narratives. To gather a wide range of detailed information, we used different methods like purposeful sampling, snowball sampling, criterion sampling, and diversity sampling. These methods helped us collect lots of juicy data about the phenomenon we were studying.

Analysis Results

Table 1: Demographic data

Category	Details	Frequency
Gender	Males	9
	Females	3
Age Groups	20-29	4
	30-39	6
	40-49	2
Refereeing Experience	0-5 years	2
	6-10 years	7
	11-15 years	3

Table 1 shows that there are nine male referees and three female referees included in the data. In terms of age distribution, the majority of referees fall within the 30-39 years age bracket (6 referees), followed by those aged 20-29 years (4 referees), and finally, those aged 40-49 years (2 referees). Regarding refereeing experience, the data indicates that most referees have between 6 to 10 years of experience (7 referees), while fewer referees have either 0-5 years (2 referees) or 11-15 years (3 referees) of experience. This table provides a snapshot of the demographic and experience profile of the referees surveyed, showing a predominance of male referees, a peak in the 30-39 age range, and a significant number with 6-10 years of refereeing experience.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Current Prevalence Rate of Age Manipulation	Age manipulation is normal among some Ghanaian soccer referees
Primary Causes and Motivations of Age Manipulation	Career longevity Financial Incentives and Opportunities Lack of Stringent Verification
Ethical Implications	Loss of integrity and trust Psychological impact Impact on career path Perpetuation of unethical culture
Strategies to Curb Age Manipulation	National Database Documentation and Verification Biometric Registration Transparency and Accountability Stringent Punitive Measures

Theme 1: Current Prevalence Rate of Age Manipulation

The participants were of the view that the majority of referees in Ghana have two dates of birth, thus, their real date of birth and football or referee date of birth. The following excerpts support this claim:

In refereeing age manipulation is a lot. And if my memory can serve me right, there was a year that some people changed their date of birth so that could get FIFA badges. Yes 2011-2012 season, they went to forge their birth certificate, we were using birth certificates at that time and I was a league referee so I know. When I was a league referee in 2010, some of the senior referees wanted me to fortify my age, but because I was young, I didn't do it. I said, oh, me, my age is okay. Why should I change my age? That was what I asked them.

Another participant said that

I have been a league referee for 12 years and I reduced my age by 10 years. During my time as an active referee, I had two dates of birth, real age, and football age because my colleagues saw me to be young in terms of stature.

Theme 2: Primary Causes and Motivations of Age Manipulation

Participants gave varied explanations for the causes of age manipulation among Ghanaian referees. Career longevity, financial incentives and opportunities, and lack of stringent verification are the causes.

Career longevity

Some participants perceived that referees manipulated their age to extend their careers, as certain age limits may force them to retire earlier than they wished. Referees can continue officiating matches and maintaining their professional status by appearing younger. Some of such participants expressed:

Most of the referees didn't join the referee at the right age. Meaning, they wanted to be referees, but they didn't get the opportunity. The time that they joined the referee, it was too late. Now that they, you know, as you are in the work, you also get to know a lot of things and that is the time that your age is also catching on you that you do ask you to retire first it used to be 50 years now it is 45 in Ghana so you would like to beat that age bracket so that by the time, for example, if I join a referee at 25, then probably I will be promoted to the division one at age 30 if I am lucky, I'm promoted at 30, then I have another 15 years to be on it. Though your chronological age, you are older than your chronological age, they will just be using that just to beat down, promoting and they want to be in the league for long.

Another referee opined that:

I reduced my age through persuasion by my senior referees during my first annual registration. After giving out my exact age, I was told I am still young so there is a need for me to reduce my age to last longer in my tenure of refereeing.

Financial incentives and opportunities

Participants professed that financial incentives are a significant factor contributing to age cheating among soccer referees. In many football associations, referees are often assigned to matches based on age, physical fitness, and perceived ability to handle the game. This claim is captured in the following excerpts:

Oh yes! The more, the longer you stay in the profession, you will be going for matches, then you will be getting money. You earn higher than when you are officiating Division 3 matches. But when you are using your own 27, the moment you reach 30, nobody will mind you again. So, they have to reduce their age so they can go forward. It's also the finances, that are the main reason to get to be in the league for a longer time. To get more matches, to get money. You

know the longer you stay in the league, some matches, because of your experiences, some matches will be given to you. So you go to more matches, more than the other ones.

Another participant said that:

Older and experienced referees lie about their age to appear younger and more physically fit, thus qualifying them for higher-level matches (FIFA, GPL & DOL) that come with increased match fees, allowances, or goodies. Matches of that earn the referees a lot of opportunities to meet prominent and influential people.

One referee also said that:

Yes, there are incentives such as match allowance and opportunities to travel abroad. Aside from that, some referees want to be seen or recognised all the time because in our system here, when referees retire people do not recognize them anymore that is why they reduce their age drastically to officiate more matches which comes with a lot of opportunities.

Lack of Stringent Verification

Age cheating in sports is a persistent issue that undermines the integrity and fairness of competitions. While much focus has been placed on age cheating among players, referees are also susceptible to this malpractice. The lack of stringent verification processes contributes significantly to this problem. Some referees believe that Ghana Football Associations lack robust age verification systems with birth certificates and other documents being easily forged, and lack access to advanced technology for verifying documents and conducting thorough background checks. This claim is succinctly captured in the following excerpts:

Referees are promoted without anyone verifying the documents of such individuals. Most referees did new birth certificates and through that, they altered their date of birth. Those presented weighing cards have changed every piece of information by clearing it with correction fluids. The FA should have done a thorough check on the documents presented to the referees. You see, in 2016 I was called by my regional chairman and he only asked me to give him my date of birth for promotion without taking any documents from me for verification.

Theme 3: Ethical Implications of Age Manipulation

The ethical implications of age manipulation among referees featured prominently in participants' responses to the interview. These include loss of integrity and trust, psychological impact, impact on the career path, and perpetuation of unethical culture.

Loss of integrity and trust

Loss of integrity and trust due to age manipulation among soccer referees is a significant issue that undermines the credibility of the sport. Age manipulation gives an unfair advantage to referees who possess more experience or physical capabilities than their younger counterparts. This can lead to biased officiating and skewed game outcomes. Some participants said:

Some referees reduce their age to gain promotion to DOL, GPL, and FIFA which makes the younger ones not get a chance by blocking their chances. And because they have blocked their chances not to go, if they also reach there, they also will reduce their ages.

Psychological impact

Young referees who engage in age manipulation may experience cognitive dissonance, a state of mental

discomfort that arises from holding conflicting beliefs or values. Engaging in dishonest practices can affect a young referee's self-esteem. They may feel unworthy or less competent, especially if they believe their success is based on pretences rather than their actual abilities and skills. This claim is captured in the following excerpts:

I remember in the year 2022 when I ran with some referees, I was 25 years but they also said they in the same age. I said to myself, ah, you, you are, they were like 35, 45 years. So, you see, psychologically, the younger ones will be disturbed because the older ones are blocking their chance.

Impact on career path

Referees typically advance through ranks based on experience, skill, and reputation. Age manipulation can artificially inflate a referee's perceived experience and capabilities, bypassing genuine progression milestones. This can lead to unfair advantages for referees who cheat, stalling the advancement of genuinely talented officials. This claim is captured in the following excerpts:

If the older referees don't go on retirement, you see, the place will be choked and there is no way the young referees can also climb the ladder. Hence, they will also reduce their age. I know some referees who were supposed to be promoted as league referees but because the list is choked, they are about 35 years without being promoted.

Another participant said that:

This act delays and blocks young referees' chance of being promoted because those who are supposed to go on retirement will still be on the league list.

Perpetuation of unethical culture

Genuine young referees may face unfair competition for opportunities and development pathways when older individuals misrepresent their age to prolong their careers. Some participants said:

It is against our culture for an individual to falsify his or her age and these young referees copy such unethical attitudes from the older ones they meet during training and course. When these young boys and girls copy this behaviour, it becomes generational. Ghanaian culture also frowns on deceiving people and age cheating is classified as deceit.

One participant said that:

Senior referees are role models to the young ones and when the latter see that their role models have reduced their age, the act of reducing one's age teaches the young referees to be unfaithful which is morally wrong.

Theme 4: Strategies to Curb Age Manipulation

The strategies to curb age manipulation among referees featured prominently in participants' responses to the interview. These include the introduction of a national database, documentation and verification, biometric registration, transparency and accountability, and stringent punitive measures.

National Database

Some participants were of the view that there should be a national database that takes every citizen's records immediately after birth. This claim is captured in the following excerpts:

In Ghana as a whole, there should be a database that will keep records or information about every individual immediately after birth so that there will be no way one can falsify his or her age in every aspect of their life.

Documentation and Verification

Some referees were of the view that documents should be verified thoroughly so that age manipulation can be minimized or eradicated from the system. This claim is captured in the following excerpts:

Do you know something, I blame the Football Association for age cheating among referees. The majority of the referees are workers and they have SSNIT cards. They should have asked them to bring their SSNIT card which bears their number, so that they will cross-check the age that they are giving. They didn't do that. The best way to solve this is to do thorough identification and verification on every referee's document before being promoted. The background checks go on even to the referee's basic school he/she attended.

Another participant said that:

Before a referee is promoted, there should be a request for a Basic Education Certificate which contains their names and actual date of birth by the referees committee.

Biometric Registration

Some referees claim that the best technological way to curb age manipulation in Ghana football is that, the FA must task all league referees to produce their National Identification Card (Ghana Card) which bears the name and date of birth of every Ghanaian citizen. This claim is captured in the following:

Thank God we now have the Ghana Card, which in some way is solving a lot of problems in the country. So, I think the usage of the Ghana Card can help curb this menace. Every referee must submit his or her Ghana Card to the FA to be synchronized with the national database before being able to officiate in the league.

A referee said

The referee's committee should request Ghana Cards from referees before promotion because most Ghanaians used their real age during the of the card in other to match or correspond with their academic documents.

Another referee said

The GFA must thoroughly check all Ghana cards because most Ghanaian football referees have gone to do fake Ghana cards to cheat the system, thus, they have two Ghana cards (fake and original). This can be done by synchronizing every card to the National Authority database to know those with fake and original cards.

Transparency and Accountability

Some participants were of the view that there should be transparency and accountability at the football governing body and its various committees. This claim is captured in the following excerpt:

The Ghana Football Association and Referees Association should not be biased in promoting referees who are due for promotion. I was supposed to get a FIFA badge in 2010 but because of favouritism and nepotism, I was not promoted and because of this attitude by our leaders I reduced my age drastically to suit FIFA standards. The right thing must be done by the referees' committee at the FA so that no referee will have the guts to reduce his or her age to get promoted.

A participant echoed that

The referees' committee is part of the cause because when the time comes for promotion, that chance will be given to referees who are supposed to go on retirement but due to

reduction of age will still be in that slot as a league referee. This allows the young referees to reduce their age in other to meet promotion requirements.

Stringent Punitive Measures

Some referees believe that there should be punishment for those who have sham their ages. This can be seen in the following excerpts:

It is because of our system. In other jurisdictions, it is punishable by law. The culprits must be demoted to the lower tie in football so that it will serve as a deterrent for other referees who have to reduce their ages.

Discussion

The results of this study showed different factors leading to soccer referees in Ghana frequently lying about their age. These triggers include wanting to extend their careers, wanting more money, having chances to move up, and not having strict age checks. Our findings match what other people have found and show similar patterns and reasons in different places. One big reason this study found is referees wanting to have a longer career. Often, they lie about their age so that they can keep working after they retire and this matches what the World Football Summit (2020) found. They discovered referees in places with few job chances often lie about their age to keep their careers going longer and this factor is relevant in Ghana. Other reasons referees lie about their age are money-related. Research shows they lie about their age to keep earning money, especially in places where refereeing brings better financial benefits. Aguilar, Castillo-Rodríguez, Chinchilla-Minguet, and Onetti-Onetti (2021) ^[1] highlighted that in countries where people earn less, referees often inflate their age for higher-paid games and sponsorships and you can see this pattern happening in Ghana. Refereeing can bring in good money making lying about age a very tempting way to earn a living and chances for growth also cause age manipulation. Referees often lie about their age so they can get better jobs, which would give them more recognition and chances to grow. Morganti *et al.* (2022) ^[20] showed that referees in youth tournaments often lie about their age to get better jobs (Appointments). This matches our findings showing that referees in Ghana see age manipulation as a method to get better recognition and prestigious appointments. The lack of strict age checks also allows age manipulation because, in areas where age checks are inefficient, referees often lie about their age more. Kwadwo (2023) ^[17] found that without strong enough verification systems, more cases of age manipulation would be observed. This problem is frequent in Ghana where soccer governing bodies may not have strong enough systems to check referees' ages letting individuals lie about their ages. The results of this study match those of Aguila and his team, who studied how age, category, and experience impacted a soccer referee's ability to do their job. Both studies show how age and experience affect a referee's career and to what lengths they would go to keep their job. Furthermore, our study concurs with global patterns identified by the World Football Summit (2020) and Aguilar *et al.* (2021) ^[1] showing how common it is for referees to lie about their age in places with few career possibilities and significant financial benefits.

Norman (2022) ^[22] insists that age manipulation scandals can ruin how much the public trusts football referees and can also weaken the honesty of matches. This loss of trust impacts everyone who counts on the game being fair, like fans, players, and referees. Rubia, Lorenzo-Calvo, and

Lorenzo's (2020) [28] study says that age manipulation harms the growth of young referees. Older referees manipulating their age can push aside young honest referees. This cheats them out of the crucial experience they need for their career to move forward. Lima and others (2022) [18] explain that referees who lie about their age can feel guilt, nervousness, and worry about getting caught. These feelings can upset their mental health, and how well they perform in their job. Research by Otis and others (2022) [24], shows age manipulation can change a referee's career future. They can face penalties or bans which harm their chances of moving forward. This can send a referee's career dreams off-course and limit what they can do in the sport. MacRae (2023) [19] talks about how if we do not stop age manipulation, it can encourage dishonest behaviour in football refereeing. This keeps dishonest actions going and can affect how all sports are governed. This could lead to a wider problem damaging the honesty of the sport. Kwadwo (2023) [17] suggested that age manipulation is acceptable as long as one is not caught. This view has been supported by the current study, where some soccer referees could either be amoral or morally myopic. Being amoral is unthinking relative to either ethical processes or harmful outcomes, and being morally myopic implies being focused so much on outcomes that one fails to see, or one accepts as inevitable, the costly consequences of the programme. The reason for this could be that individuals immersed in officiating may have become accustomed to accepting certain activities and behaviours as being part of the culture of football. The risk with this is that undesirable values can become so deeply rooted in a culture, that members of an organization may not be consciously aware of them (Daft, 2018) [9]. Kwadwo (2023) [17] suggested that manipulation is not relative, meaning that its perception does not change, irrespective of the context within which it is demonstrated. According to this researcher, manipulation is personal and professional misconduct.

The International Olympic Committee plays up how important it is to have tight records to stop age manipulation. They say the best way to do this is through hefty checks, which many leagues have done well and it helps stop age manipulation. The Asian Football Confederation in 2019 said that biometric systems helped make sure the age checks were correct and stopped people from lying about their age. Si and his team in 2020 said these systems are good for making sure referees' ages and identities are real, and they help a lot with age fraud. Transparency International talks up rules that make referee selection clearer, and it keeps officials in check for getting the age right. Aguilar and his team in 2021 say that being open in how decisions are made stops age manipulation, and it shows how important it is for officials to be accountable. UNICEF in 2020 told people about the bad long-term effects of age manipulation and showed how bad it is for the sport and the individuals involved. Armstrong and his team (2022) showed that organizing seminars and symposiums for referees and people involved with the sport can lessen how much age manipulation happens. The Court of Arbitration for Sport in 2018 said it is important to have severe punishments, like bans and fines, to stop age manipulation tactics. Akhtar in 2023 studied and said these punishments work well, and they help a lot in stopping age fraud with referees. The above evidence matches our findings showing that age manipulation can be eradicated by having a national database, proper documentation and verification, all referees presenting their Ghana card before

being promoted to GPL or DOL and having stringent punitive measures.

Practical Implications and Future Directions

Addressing age manipulation requires a comprehensive approach that includes improving career prospects for referees, enhancing financial incentives, creating clear pathways for professional advancement, and implementing stringent age verification processes. Football governing bodies in Ghana and other regions with similar challenges must prioritize the development of robust systems to ensure the integrity of the refereeing profession. Future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of these measures and exploring additional strategies to combat age manipulation in soccer. It is important to tackle the problem of referees lying about their ages in Ghana's soccer scene. This is vital to keeping the sport honest and fair by making sure age checks are reliable and will help football organizations become more trustworthy and open. Referees using their real age lowers the possible health risks from high physical strain on the job taking care of the referees' health. Proper referee age-keeping can help plan their career growth offering them chances for professional growth based on their talents. Eradicating age manipulation may lead to a fairer split of chances by improving financial outcomes for referees competing for work and support. Scientific studies in the future can focus on establishing all-inclusive policies for age authentication that leagues can apply making the enforcement consistent. Looking into the use of biological data and digital identification systems could offer more solid methods of age validation and cut manipulation odds. Introducing teaching programmes like seminars and symposiums about the consequences of age manipulation for referees and interested parties could encourage an atmosphere of truthfulness and openness. Following and studying the career path of referees who manipulate their age instead of those who do not deliver valuable information about the ongoing impact of this problem could be effective for local actions in Ghana to work with international football groups to share the best methods and resources for battling age manipulation.

Strengths of the study

Examination of information established that age manipulation is a significant subject in sports that affects the aspects of fair play and sanction. This research concerns a topical issue, especially in the Ghanaian football scenario. This is especially so since the study generates specific regional data about Ghana, which ought to be relatively more practical for the relevant sports bodies in the region and stakeholders. Referees appear not to be very diligent in verifying the age of players, especially in the lower-income nations and there is little research done on this aspect. Despite its focus on a relatively unexplored topic, this research brings new findings into the existing literature, acting as a point of reference for other people to have more focused research on different forms and dimensions of age manipulation in other countries or some other sports groups involved as an athlete or a coach.

Limitations of the study

By utilizing a semi-structured interview methodology, the participants were uncomfortable in sharing their experiences with the interviewer, although the interviewer tried to minimize any discomfort by ensuring a private, safe, and confidential environment. Another limitation of this study

was the small sample size. However, it should be noted that the general rule on sample size for interviews is that when the same stories, themes, issues, and topics emerge from the interviewees, then a sufficient sample size has been reached.

Suggestions

Based on the content of the article, it is recommended that researchers examine the psychological motivations and sociocultural factors driving referees to engage in age manipulation, including peer pressure, economic incentives, and societal attitudes towards age and assessing the effectiveness of educational programs aimed at raising awareness about the negative consequences of age manipulation among referees, coaches, and players.

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Data Availability Statement: Data are obtainable in a public, open-access repository.

Declaration: We declare that this study is the result of our original research.

Ethics approval and consent to participants

The right to informed consent, the right to engage in the study, the right to protection from harm of any sort, and the right to secrecy and confidentiality were all taken into account when protecting human rights. Formal consent was sought from those who willingly decided to partake in the study by validating a well-versed agreement form. The study's research questions and other terms that were used to ensure the participants' confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity were contained in this document. Special attention was given to the asymmetric informants, interviewer relationships, and potential scenarios of participants' susceptibility in public as recommended by specialized literature.

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