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**Title:** Does local leadership promote the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge? : Attitudes of Finnish municipality politicians and administrators in sports decision-making

**Year:** 2024

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Lee, A., Kärkkäinen, S., Vehmas, H., & Suomi, K. (2024). Does local leadership promote the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge? : Attitudes of Finnish municipality politicians and administrators in sports decision-making. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, Early online. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2024.2354550>

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To cite this article: Anna Lee, Salme Kärkkäinen, Hanna Vehmas & Kimmo Suomi (02 Jun 2024): Does local leadership promote the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge? Attitudes of Finnish municipality politicians and administrators in sports decision-making, European Journal for Sport and Society, DOI: [10.1080/16138171.2024.2354550](https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2024.2354550)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2024.2354550>



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Published online: 02 Jun 2024.



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# Does local leadership promote the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge? Attitudes of Finnish municipality politicians and administrators in sports decision-making

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## ABSTRACT

In their decision-making, municipalities increasingly face the challenge of creating value through the transfer of knowledge resources. While local decision-makers are responsible for sport-related decision-making, a much-debated question is whether sport-related knowledge is acquired and utilised throughout the decision-making hierarchy. Building on Max Weber's bureaucratic notions of rational-legal authority and other research, it is hypothesised that group-based leadership has a crucial function in the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge among local decision-makers. Drawing on large-scale survey data from 1 037 top decision-makers in Finnish municipalities, we show that the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge in local decision-making is determined by group-based leadership skills. The leadership of middle-level (i.e. committee) political decision-makers was particularly important in the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge. These findings support the view that the current debate on knowledge-based sports policy making should pay attention to administrative structures and leaders' abilities to foster sport-related knowledge across groups.

**Abbreviations:** groups: decision-making groups; politicians: elected decision-makers; PA: physical activity; exp: exponential; SE: standard error; OR: odds ratios; CI: confidence intervals

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 June 2023  
Accepted 8 May 2024

## KEYWORDS

Sports knowledge management; local sports policy; decision-making groups; hierarchies; Weber

One of the most popular research approaches to the promotion of physical activity (i.e., sports) in the public sector has been the investigation of knowledge-based practices such as the utilisation in decision-making of sports- or health-related information (e.g., Ahonen-Walker, 2021; Hakamäki et al., 2020; Hämäläinen et al., 2015; Head, 2016; Korsberg et al., 2021; Sam, 2005; Vos et al., 2016; Woods & Mutrie, 2012). However, even though the responsibility for promoting health through sports has transitioned to autonomous municipalities in various Western countries, Finland

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included, local decision-makers often face limitations in acquiring and utilising sport-related knowledge. This is due to marginal interest in allocating resources and prioritising policy agendas related to sports (e.g., Ahonen-Walker, 2021; Vos et al., 2016). Scholars in public policy (e.g., Blom-Hansen et al., 2021; Niiranen, 2020) and sport policy (e.g., Bergsgard & Rommetvedt, 2006; Hoekman et al., 2022) have emphasised the significance of multi-level structures encompassing both political and administrative leadership and responsibilities in understanding decision-making processes. For instance, Bergsgard and Rommetvedt (2006) found that Norwegian local political boards for sports had more influence than administrative bodies in allocating resources for sports. While it is crucial to explore the influences of these structures in the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge, this area remains largely unexplored in the sports policy domain. In this study, sport-related knowledge comprises a broad spectrum of information, including both tacit and explicit knowledge of sports.

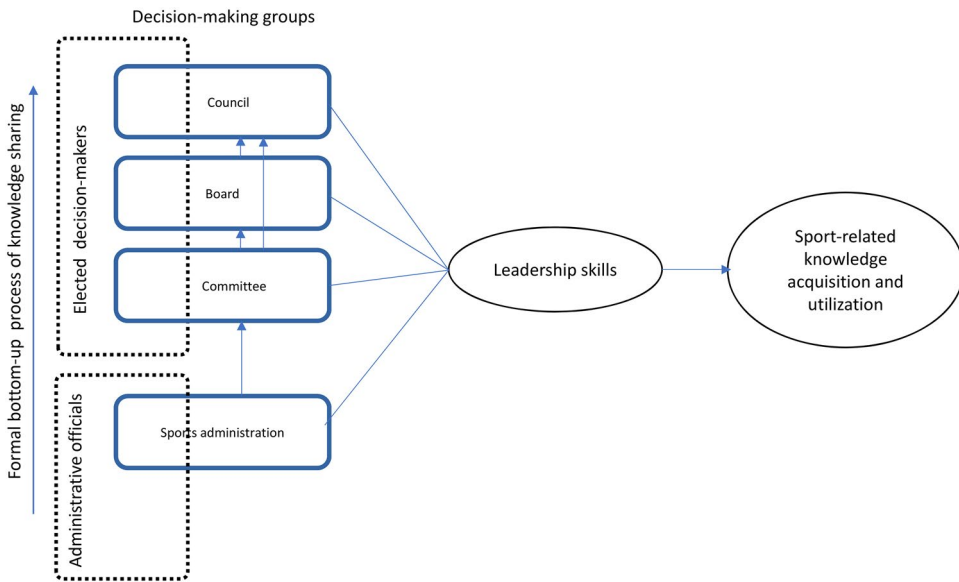
The process of acquiring knowledge and disseminating it typically involves the compiling of existing knowledge from various groups (Liverani et al., 2013; Matošková et al., 2018). Given that group leaders possess the dynamic capability to bridge different groups within an organisation, it has been recognised that leadership capabilities play a vital role in facilitating the acquisition and utilisation of knowledge within these groups (Lakshman, 2007; Lönnqvist, 2017; Niiranen et al., 2013; Nonaka et al., 2000; Srivastava et al., 2006; Von Krogh et al., 2012). For instance, leaders can motivate the utilisation of knowledge by sharing information with other groups (Srivastava et al., 2006; Von Krogh et al., 2012). Similarly, in the seminal work of Mouritzen and Svara (2002) on the dynamics of decision-making and leadership in local government, the authors highlight the distinct leadership roles played by administrators and politicians. They also propose that a basic imbalance in expertise and specialised knowledge weakens the formal principal-agent relationship between the two hierarchies. Both groups possess different leadership qualities that affect how information is transferred and acquired. For instance, administrators with strong administrative leadership skills, such as strategic planning and communication, are better equipped to facilitate knowledge sharing among members within their organisations. Conversely, politicians with effective political leadership skills, such as consensus-building, negotiation, and advocacy, can influence knowledge sharing levels among decision-makers, thereby enhancing the legitimacy, transparency, and responsiveness of policy decisions.

As Mouritzen and Svara (2002), drawing upon Max Weber's bureaucratic theory of rational-legal authority point out, leadership is closely intertwined with the group the leaders are members of and is constrained by the boundaries of its formal roles and responsibilities (Beetham, 1991; Sager & Rosser, 2021). Authority is derived from established rules, laws, and procedures, which are central characteristics in modern bureaucracies, such as those observed in Finland, rather than personal attributes or customary norms (Joensuu & Niiranen, 2018; Melin, 2009; Virikko, 2016). The ideology of rational-legal leadership has contributed to the widely recognised politics-administration typology of the Western leadership model and its reliance on legitimating principles (Beetham, 1991; Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). The discourse surrounding this bureaucratic model has highlighted the tension between bureaucratic expertise and political oversight. The literature on Weberian bureaucracy specifically acknowledges the privileged role of bureaucrats (i.e., administrators) in providing

information and serving as pivotal policy advisors. Whereas, the ability of non-expert politicians to effectively regulate a specialised and enduring bureaucracy has been a topic of persistent research interest (Blom-Hansen et al., 2021; Hansen & Ejersbo, 2002; Hennau, 2020). While this theoretical ideal of a bureaucracy with two complementary hierarchies and the fundamental rational-legal features of the modern state is a stereotypical model of the roles of public decision-makers, rigid adherence to this typology may not fully capture the nuanced ways in which authority and knowledge are exercised and decisions made in practice (Sager & Rosser, 2021). In addition, while in this study the term knowledge refers to the overall acquisition and utilisation of sport-related information available to decision-makers in sport-related decision-making, the study can be regarded as indicative only on the broader issue of knowledge in the field of sports governance and policy research.

Through the above-described theoretical lens, we aimed to assess the significance of structural elements in local sport-related decision-making and to ascertain whether the basic tenets of the rational-legal leadership model remain applicable in contemporary local sport policy contexts. More specifically, this study examined whether group-based leadership contributes to the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge. This aim was approached by analysing the influence of leadership skills on sport-related issues and the influence of decision-making groups on Finnish local decision-makers' (i.e., political (elected) leaders and non-elected administrative officials who take part in local decision-making regarding sports) attitudes towards acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge. In this context, assessing sport-related knowledge involves integrating explicit (formal and systematic) and tacit (subjective insights) knowledge types, acknowledging their interplay within shared contexts, as proposed by Nonaka et al. (2000). The structure of the decision-making groups (the council, board, committee for sports and sports administration) is similar across all the 293 mainland Finnish municipalities, thereby facilitating comparison of the decision-makers in them. Decision-makers are of importance in knowledge management processes, as these are seen as among the priorities of strategic decision-making due to its influence on an organisation's success (Ahonen, 2015; Joensuu & Niiranen, 2018; Lönnqvist, 2016). Studying decision-makers' attitudes is a common approach in sports knowledge management research. However, most studies only survey administrative officials or municipal managers (e.g., Fahlén, 2017; Hoekman et al., 2022; Korsberg et al., 2021; Ståhl & Hakamäki, 2019).

By studying the influence of group-based leadership on decision-makers' attitudes towards acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge, this study contributes to the debates on sport-related decision-making in Finnish municipalities in several ways. First, it contributes to the growing literature on knowledge management in sports as the level of understanding and expertise required for effective decision-making in sport-related matters in the context of municipal governance (Fahlén, 2017; Hoekman et al., 2022; Korsberg et al., 2021; Niiranen, 2020; Ståhl & Hakamäki, 2019). Second, it builds on existing insights on how hierarchical arrangements influence the distribution of public authority and decision-making processes regarding sports (e.g., Bergsgard & Rommetvedt, 2006; Fahlén, 2017; Hoekman et al., 2022; Hoogendam, 2021; Sam & Ronglan, 2018; Stenling et al., 2023). Third, this research builds on insights from Weber's rational-legal authority, by analysing how, in municipal sports



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model for studying local decision-makers' attitudes towards sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation. Group-based leadership skills are assumed to influence attitudes.

governance, the hierarchies, formalised rules and procedures, and impersonal decision-making inherent in a rational-legal authority may shape the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge among decision-makers in Finnish municipalities. **Figure 1** illustrates the conceptual model applied in the study.

The empirical investigation employed a substantial dataset ( $n = 1037$ ) sourced from the Changes in Finnish Public Sport Administration Survey conducted in 2014 and 2020. The participants consisted of Finnish local top decision-makers, including chairs of political decision-making groups and sports administration officials. As laid down by the Local Government Act (410/2015), decisions on sport-related issues are made by the *elected political decision-makers* in municipal councils and on relevant boards and committees, whereas the (non-elected) decision-makers, i.e., *administrative officials* in the sports administration department, hold informal decision-making power. Drawing on the Weberian rational-legal leadership model, the next section outlines a set of hypotheses on the influence of the different decision-making groups and of related leadership skills on attitudes towards sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation. Subsequently, the data and research methods employed are outlined, followed by the presentation and discussion of the analysis and results.

## Theoretical background and hypotheses

One approach to investigating knowledge acquisition or utilisation has been to examine a leadership model that, by steering the bottom-up knowledge-sharing process (e.g., through proposals and agendas), informs the formal decision-making process (Joensuu & Niiranen, 2018; Nonaka et al., 2000; Sayyadi, 2019; Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Wang et al., 2014). For example, Wang et al. (2014) claimed that most organisational

norms originate from explicit statements by leaders or other workers. In turn, these norms can structure the behaviour of the organisation’s members and thereby increase the predictability of decisions. Western democracies, such as Finland, have operationalised the Weberian ideal-type of leadership model in which administrative officials, who are politically uncommitted and loyal to the elected decision-makers, implement political decisions (Joensuu & Niiranen, 2018; Melin, 2009). Moreover, Weber emphasised the strong role of administrative officials as a driver of the public interest. His argument was that their independent status secures the realisation of the public interest against the interests of political groups and the continuity of state activity against political uncertainty (Beetham, 1991; Weber, 1978).

### Leadership model in Finnish municipalities

Since the tasks of the local decision-making groups in Finland are determined by the Local Government Act (410/2015), the dualistic decision-making processes practiced are similar across different policy areas (e.g., social and health care, education). Thus, both the juridical frame of Finland’s municipal leadership system and the ways in which group-based leadership contributes to the process of knowledge acquisition and utilisation offer analytical premises for predicting authority-based rationality and hence attitudes.

According to the Local Government Act (410/2015), all Finnish municipalities must have a council, board, and committees for election auditing (see Figure 2). The council has the municipality’s highest decision-making power while the board and the municipal manager are responsible for the preparation and implementation of issues

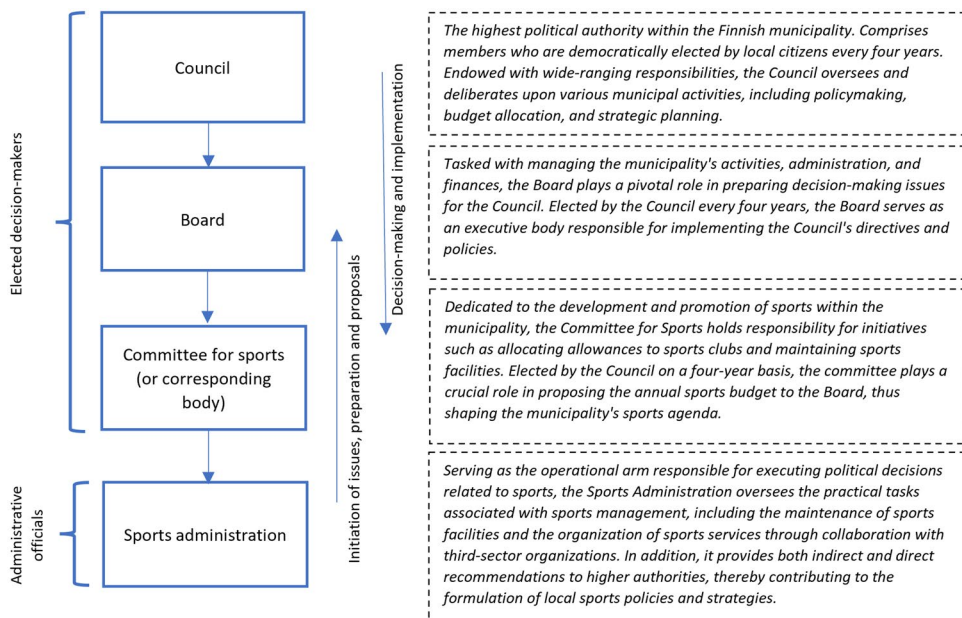


Figure 2. Finnish municipality formal decision-making model and agenda-making process.

together with the relevant committee and administrative officials. However, the decision-makers on the council and the board are highly dependent on committees and administrative officials for the provision of reliable and usable information through statutory proposals and preparations (Virikko, 2016).

In sports, as in other policy domains like education and culture, decision-makers in councils and boards oversee all policy areas. However, committees dedicated to sports and sports administration are composed of experts expected to provide professional leadership in sports (Ahonen, 2015; Niiranen et al., 2013). These officials serve as facilitators of public sports services and are mandated by law to actively participate in the municipal decision-making process (Hämäläinen & Villa, 2014; Holli & Turkka, 2021; Virikko, 2016). They play a pivotal role in sharing knowledge upwards, as they are responsible for preparing materials and proposals for committees, which then present recommendations to boards and councils. Board members, who handle decision-making agendas for councils and oversee their implementation, typically have extensive experience in council and committee work and often represent political parties (Goldsmith & Larsen, 2004). As a result, council decision-makers receive proposals underpinned by knowledge-based arguments.

### ***Interaction between the leadership and groups***

Weber's notions of legitimate authority means that leaders are recognised as having the right to exercise power and influence over others and that their authority is considered valid and justified within the social or organisational framework in which it operates (Beetham, 1991). Weber's typology of legitimate authority comprises three main types of legitimate authority (*rational-legal*, *traditional*, and *charismatic*) that offer insights into how authority in certain hierarchies may influence acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge. Within a rational-legal leadership framework, authority is derived from formal rules, laws, and procedures rather than personal qualities or traditional norms. Here, decision-making groups operate within established politics-bureaucratic hierarchies and follow prescribed processes. Traditional leadership is based on long-standing customs, traditions, and beliefs. In decision-making groups influenced by traditional leadership, individuals may hold authority due to their hereditary status, age, or tenure in the group. In turn, charismatic leadership is characterised by the personal charisma and persuasive abilities of the leader. Decision-making groups led by charismatic individuals are often inspired by the leader's vision and personality. (e.g., Beetham, 1991.; Melin, 2009; Sager & Rosser, 2021)

The leadership model that characterises Finnish municipalities most closely resembles the Weberian rational-legal authority framework. This is primarily because Finnish municipalities operate within a formalised bureaucratic structure and hierarchical arrangements highlighting impersonal decision-making processes (Melin, 2009.; Niiranen et al., 2013). It is thus possible that individuals with leadership skills based on their expertise and adherence to organisational protocols are likely than others to hold positions of authority. For example, decision-makers in these groups are positioned to leverage their authority and expertise to enhance the acquisition, dissemination, and application of sports-related knowledge, ultimately contributing to



more informed and effective decision-making outcomes in sports. Notwithstanding the debate on the usefulness or applicability for modern administration studies of the Weberian model (Sager & Rosser, 2021), some leadership theorists (e.g., Sayyadi, 2019; Washington et al., 2008) contend that most groups offer their leaders a range of possibilities for (or constraints on) their actions. For example, expressing interests, externalising knowledge, and presenting or proposing ideas are leadership skills that are readily identifiable by group members. Many knowledge management researchers (e.g., Adams, 2004; Ahonen, 2015; Joensuu & Niiranen, 2018; Nonaka et al., 2000; Von Krogh et al., 2012; Wang et al. 2014) have sought to understand the relationship between leadership and knowledge processes by looking into hierarchical distinctions, similar to those in Weber's model, in the process of knowledge acquisition and utilisation. This view does not reject the idea of links between group-based leadership and knowledge but instead emphasises the importance of the processes which determine what kind of leadership is needed to acquire or disseminate the relevant knowledge (Lepsius & Lepsius, 2017; Nonaka et al., 2000; Oc, 2018). In light of this notion and the hierarchical structure, division of labour, and adherence to formalised rules and procedures that characterise Finnish municipalities, we expect the groups in the different hierarchies to furnish the basis for individual leadership which, in turn, is expected to influence the acquisition and utilisation of knowledge, in this instance, sport-related knowledge. Hence, our first hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** Leadership skills in promoting sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilization are influenced by the leaders' decision-making groups.

### ***Groups as a differentiating factor***

According to the policy-administration typology, differences in how roles are structured across local administrative and political decision-making groups could result in differences in the perceived relevance of leadership skills when dealing with sports issues. Respectively, Biggard and Hamilton (1987) argue that decision-makers whose leadership strategies are similar and who exhibit a similar range of leadership activity are also more likely to show similar performance in leadership. In turn, their strategies as leaders will differ significantly from those of their subordinates. However, outside of the Weberian policy-administration typology indications of wide differences even within policy groups have been observed (e.g., Bergsgard & Rommetvedt, 2006; Goldsmith & Larsen, 2004; Joensuu & Niiranen, 2018; Sam, 2005; Virikko, 2016). For example, conflicting views exist on whether officials or board or council chairs possess most power in the municipality (e.g., Goldsmith & Larsen, 2004; Joensuu & Niiranen, 2018). Finnish local administrative officials are seen as having a high level of expertise and autonomy in their respective fields. Due to their permanent position, they are better able to maintain the continuity of public services than a changing political leadership (Goldsmith & Larsen, 2004). Despite the significant role administrative officials play in knowledge transfer, Niiranen et al. (2013) found that within social and health care sectors, Finnish local officials perceived elected decision-makers as primarily responsible for guiding knowledge utilisation. Consequently, elected decision-makers bear a greater burden in acquiring knowledge from agendas, work documents, and

presenters compared to officials. They are increasingly expected to possess a broad knowledge base and the ability to justify and evaluate the impacts of their decisions (Ahonen, 2015; Niiranen et al., 2013). In the domain of sports policy research, Hoekman et al. (2022) argued that local sports officials predominantly rely on their beliefs and personal experiences rather than empirical research findings when assessing effective strategies. On the other hand, Sam (2005) suggested that within national sports policy dialogues, specific guidelines dictating the functions of taskforces (e.g., commissions of inquiry and advisory committees associated with sports) are designed to restrict bureaucratic and political latitude. Consequently, committee members in numerous instances are selected from beyond the civil service. Hence, the aforementioned studies suggest that sports administrative officials may not perceive their own leadership skills as pertinent in the bottom-up acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge.

The consensus acknowledges that inquiries, whether in the form of taskforces, royal commissions, or special committees, exhibit fundamental similarities despite their varying structures (Sam, 2005). Typically initiated by governmental entities, these inquiries are charged with investigation, data collection, reportage, and recommendation. They often are mandated to engage with the public through hearings, forums, and submissions. Essentially, these decision-making bodies are recognised as governmental units utilised in the development of policies and possess distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from other entities involved in policy formulation, such as political parties, interest groups, or bureaucratic bodies (Bradford, 1999). Accordingly, Nonaka et al. (2000) discovered that middle-up-down leadership fosters more effective knowledge creation compared to traditional top-down leadership. Middle-level decision-makers act as mediators between top and bottom levels, fostering trust, facilitating knowledge acquisition, and aligning with the organisation's vision, thus serving as key knowledge producers and shapers (Nonaka et al., 2000). Also Niiranen et al. (2013), showed that Finnish local committee members' legislative proposals and other presentations to the council and board were important for the elected decision-makers' acquisition of knowledge (see Figure 2). In line with this, Bergsgard and Rommetvedt (2006) found that Norwegian municipalities with a sectorized or specialised political board for overseeing sports, demonstrated a higher propensity to allocate financial support to sports compared to municipalities with less specialised boards. Similarly, Sam's (2005) study, focusing on the roles of committees in shaping national sports policies, suggests that due to the broad scope of their mandates and the requirement for extensive consultation, inquiries have the potential to amass a substantial amount of information. Consequently, the structures and dynamics of an inquiry from the committees significantly influence the outcomes of policy-making processes (Sam, 2005). Hence, we hypothesise that especially, the committee's decision-makers will need more leadership skills in promoting the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge than the officials.

**Hypothesis 2:** If personal leadership skills in sports policy are perceived as insufficient, the committee will express more negative attitudes than the officials towards sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilization.

## Data and methods

To test these hypotheses, this study drew on data collected by electronic questionnaires in 2014 and 2020 from 2 584 top decision-makers (chairs, vice-chairs, and sports officials) of local councils, boards, committees for sports and sports administrations in all the mainland Finnish municipalities. The surveys were sent to 304 municipalities in 2014 and 293 in 2020. Response rates were 30% (N=787) for the 2014 survey and 27% (N=736) for the 2020 follow-up survey, leading to total 1 523 respondents (59% male). More specifically, 238 respondents represented both election periods (2014–2017 and 2018–2021) and 1 285 one or other election period. When analysing complete cases in the final model, the data comprised 1 037 responses. Table 1 shows the variables and their descriptive statistics. The nonresponse analyses of both survey rounds showed that the target population was adequately represented (Fisher & Herrick, 2013; Laver, 2014).

### Response variable

Attitudes towards sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation were assessed by the statement ‘Decision-makers have sufficient knowledge about sport-related issues when making decisions’. For the analysis, the four options from ‘completely agree’ to ‘completely disagree’ were dichotomised into ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’. Nearly as many agreed (51%) as disagreed (49%). However, the majority of the respondents in 2014 disagreed (64%) with the statement on the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge compared to 36% in 2020. Across the groups, agreement and disagreement on knowledge acquisition and utilisation between 2014 and 2020 was greatest (37% higher agreement) between the committee members. The level of agreement between the administration officials remained more even over time.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for the response and independent variables.

Variables	Description of variables and coding	N	%
<b>Response variable</b>			
Sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation	Decision-makers have sufficient knowledge about sports-related issues when making decisions	1037	100
	0 = agree	532	51
	1 = disagree	505	49
<b>Independent variables</b>			
Leadership skills	I consider my own leadership skills for dealing with the municipality's sports issues to be good enough	1037	100
	0 = agree	833	80
	1 = disagree	204	20
Decision-making group	Respondent's decision-making group	1037	100
	1 = council	296	29
	2 = board	257	25
	3 = committee for sports	258	25
	4 = sports administration	226	22
Year	Year of measurement	1037	100
	0 = 2014	469	45
	1 = 2020	568	55

### ***Independent variables***

This study focused on two types of characteristics and their interdependence (i.e., interaction). As illustrated in [Table 1](#), *leadership skills and decision-making groups* were studied owing to their importance in knowledge acquisition and utilisation. Among the decision-making groups (municipal council, board, committee for sports and sports administration), the sports administration group was set as the reference group in the analysis. In addition to the main independent variables, *year of measurement* (2014 and 2020) was analysed in case any significant effects emerged that could be explained by changes in attitudes related to different leadership skills or across groups between the two election periods. However, the changes observed call for further empirical investigation as, for example, changes in attitudes to the promotion of knowledge acquisition and utilisation could be an outcome of a change in legal frameworks. Finally, given that strong associations have previously been found between leadership and knowledge acquisition and utilisation, we analysed whether the influence of different leadership skills differed across the decision-making groups. This was performed by measuring the interaction effects between skills and groups.

It is important to note that the dataset has limitations, particularly with respect to the representation of the outcome variables and explanatory variables. The fact that only one item in the survey questionnaire represents the outcome variable limits the depth of the analysis. Similarly, the explanatory variables are also limited in scope, which may constrain the extent to which relationships and patterns in the data can be explored.

### ***Statistical analysis***

The hypotheses in this study were tested using a series of logistic regression models to evaluate the associations between the predictors of the participants' attitudes towards sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation. Because we were testing a theoretical proposition with specified predictors and an interaction term, we used the stepwise modelling method (Peng & So, 2002). The selection criteria were confirmed by applying the likelihood ratio test. Odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were used to evaluate the impact of the independent variables on the attitudes of interest. The level of significance was set at  $p < .05$ . The analysis was performed with R software (R Core Team, 2020).

### ***Model selection***

The stepwise analysis comprised four successive models. The initial model, known as the null model, included only a random intercept without any predictors. As the random intercept displayed a negligible variance, we proceeded with the subsequent three models. For the first hypothesis, we initially entered the predictors of leadership skills and group (Model 1) and then included the interaction term leadership skills \* group (Model 2). In the last step (Model 3), the year of measurement was fitted to the data to ascertain the predicted odds of the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge during 2014–2020. [Table 2](#) shows the equation for the logistic

**Table 2.** The logistic regression model equation for Model 3.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{logit}(\pi) = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{leadership} + \beta_2 \text{group}_{\text{council}} + \beta_3 \text{group}_{\text{board}} + \beta_4 \text{group}_{\text{committee}} + \beta_5 \text{year}_{2020} \\ & + \beta_6 \text{leadership} * \text{group}_{\text{council}} + \beta_7 \text{leadership} * \text{group}_{\text{board}} + \beta_8 \text{leadership} * \text{group}_{\text{committee}} \end{aligned}$$

regression of Model 3 where  $\pi$  is the probability of disagreement on the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge.

## Results

### *Interpretation of the results*

Based on the theoretical background, the proposition to be tested was that, in explaining knowledge acquisition and utilisation in sports, leadership skills are dependent on the decision-making group to which the decision-maker belongs. When examining perceived leadership skills by the different decision-making groups, the results revealed that the sports administrative officials (87%) and the committee decision-makers (84%) gave higher ratings of their skills than the board or council decision-makers. However, most of the officials (55%) considered that decision-makers in general do not have enough sport-related knowledge when tasked with making decisions in sports. In contrast, the council members' ratings of their leadership skills in sport-related decision-making showed the most disagreement (25%) compared to the other groups, with over half of them (51%) reporting that they did not have enough sport-related knowledge when decision-making. Nevertheless, the committee and board members mostly agreed that decision-makers had enough sport-related knowledge when deciding on sports issues.

The first hypothesis proposed that the impact of leadership skills in determining sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation is conditioned by the decision-making group the decision-maker is a member of. The results from Model 3, presented in Table 3, show that the most significant predictors of sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation were leadership skills (the odds of disagreeing on sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation for those who disagreed about the adequacy of their leadership skills in sports issues were 1.74 times greater than for those who agreed); in other words, the ratio of the probability of reporting insufficient acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge to the probability of reporting sufficient acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge was 1.74 times higher for those who disagreed about the adequacy of their leadership skills when compared to those who agreed) and group (the odds of reporting insufficient acquisition and utilisation sport-related knowledge were 0.69 times greater for the board's decision-makers than for the administrative officials). When adding the interaction term between leadership skills and group to Model 2, the strong effects of leadership skills disappeared. Since this indicates dependency on the group predictor, the first hypothesis was supported. In turn, the predictors of sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation that showed strong effects were board membership ( $p = .029$ ), reported leadership skills (agree) and the interaction of leadership skills (disagree) and committee membership ( $p = .019$ ). Therefore, the second hypothesis positing that

**Table 3.** Logistic regression models for the decision-makers' attitudes to sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation.

		$\hat{\beta}$	SE	OR (95% CI)
$\beta_0$	Intercept	0.93	0.18	2.53 (1.78; 3.58)***
	Leadership			
	Agree	1		
$\beta_1$	Disagree	-0.38	0.42	0.69 (0.30; 1.57)
	Decision-making group			
	Administration officials	1		
$\beta_2$	Council	-0.52	0.21	0.60 (0.40; 0.89)*
$\beta_3$	Board	-0.61	0.21	0.54 (0.36; 0.82)**
$\beta_4$	Committee	-0.54	0.21	0.58 (0.39; 0.82)**
	Year of measurement			
	2014	1		
$\beta_5$	2020	-1.15	0.13	0.32 (0.24; 0.41)***
				$\exp \hat{\beta}$ (95%CI)
	Leadership $\times$ decision-making group			
	Leadership (disagree) $\times$ administration officials	1		
$\beta_6$	Leadership (disagree) $\times$ council	0.98	0.51	2.67 (0.99; 7.22)
$\beta_7$	Leadership (disagree) $\times$ board	0.61	0.53	1.84 (0.66; 5.17)
$\beta_8$	Leadership (disagree) $\times$ committee	1.28	0.56	3.59 (1.21; 10.67)*
	AIC	1356.19		

Note: ID 1037.

\*\*\* $p < .000$ . \*\* $p < .001$ . \* $p \leq .05$ .  $p < .1$ .

if insufficient personal leadership skills are perceived in sport-related decision-making, the committee will display more negative attitudes than officials towards sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation was supported.

More specifically, when comparing the board's decision-makers and the administrative officials who agreed that they had sufficient leadership skills in sports issues, the odds for the board members to disagree on sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation were 0.64 times greater than the corresponding odds for the administrative officials. However, when comparing the committee's decision-makers and the administrative officials who disagreed about their leadership skills, the odds for the committee members to disagree on sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation were 2.56 (0.73\*3.51) times greater than the corresponding odds for the administrative officials. The interaction term between leadership skills (disagree) and the council ( $\exp(\hat{\beta}_6) = 2.58$ ) was close to significant ( $p = .053$ ). Interestingly, the interaction term between skills (disagree) ( $\exp(\hat{\beta}_7) = 2.00$ ) and the board was not significant ( $p = .172$ ) while the skills (agree) value ( $OR = \exp(\hat{\beta}_3) = 0.64$ ) for the board alone remained significant ( $p = .029$ ).

In addition, the year of measurement was added into Model 3 to ascertain whether possible differences between two election periods explained the differences between the results of Models 1 and 2. The effects of the interaction term between leadership skills (disagree) and group remained similar, further supporting both hypotheses. Although the effect of the leadership skills (disagree) of the officials on sport-related knowledge remained statistically nonsignificant, the results indicated that for those officials who disagreed about their own skills, the odds ratio of not receiving enough

sport-related knowledge was 0.69 times greater than that of those who considered that their skills were sufficient. Thus, the comparison between officials who perceived their skills as insufficient and those who deemed their skills sufficient revealed a 31% decrease in the odds of lacking adequate sport-related knowledge. For the group predictors, membership of all the elected decision-making groups showed strong effects on attitudes when compared to the group of officials. Namely, the odds of not having enough sport-related knowledge were 0.60 times greater for the council members who perceived their leadership skills to be sufficient than the odds for the officials. This means that the odds for the officials who considered their leadership skills to be sufficient were 1.66 times higher than the corresponding odds for the council. Similarly, given sufficient leadership skills, the odds for the officials were 1.85 higher than the odds for the board and 1.72 higher than the odds for the committee.

For the year of measurement, the results showed that the OR of not having enough sport-related knowledge for responders in 2020 versus in 2014 was 0.32. In other words, the odds of disagreeing about having enough knowledge for the decision groups in 2014 were 3.13 times greater than for decision groups in 2020. Nevertheless, the effect of the measurement year may be explained by factors outside the data, since the interactions tested with the study variables did not reach statistical significances.

## **Conclusions and discussion**

Despite the often-reported advantages of acquiring and utilising sport-related knowledge in local decision-making in the promotion of the inhabitants' PA, such acquisition and utilisation continues to fall short of expectations. This study indicated that leadership patterns may facilitate the promotion of sport-related knowledge through multi-level decision-making processes. More specifically, we used the Weberian rational-legal model of authority as the main framework for explaining the relevance of group-based leadership for decision-makers' attitudes towards sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation in Finnish municipalities.

### ***Theoretical implications***

Our findings contribute in two ways to the current debate on whether sport-related knowledge is acquired or utilised in Finnish municipality decision-making. First, in line with the Weberian notions of rational-legal authority and previous research (e.g., Bergsgard & Rommetvedt, 2006; Joensuu & Niiranen, 2018; Sam, 2005), we found that group-based leadership skills were highly important in determining attitudes towards sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation. This implies that the formal leadership structure, especially the hierarchies of the local system determine the contribution of leadership in promoting sport-related knowledge in decision-making on sports policy.

Second, the findings align with Weber's bureaucratic rational-legal authority, emphasising hierarchy, impersonal decision-making, and adherence to rules. Sports officials, accustomed to formal procedures, may prioritise sport-related knowledge for effective performance. In contrast, politicians, focusing on political agendas, may express

negative attitudes, particularly when lacking leadership skills in sports. Furthermore, while sports officials gain authority from their hierarchical position and adherence to rules, politicians may perceive sport-related knowledge as less crucial, especially if they lack leadership skills in this area, leading to more negative attitudes. Moreover, in line with other studies (e.g., Ahonen, 2015; Bergsgard & Rommetvedt, 2006; Hoekman et al., 2022; Joensuu & Niiranen, 2018; Sam, 2005), the results showed that, in promoting sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation, leadership skills were more important to the elected decision-makers than to the officials. For example, the Norwegian study by Bergsgard and Rommetvedt (2006) found that at the local level, politicians exert a greater influence on sports policy than bureaucrats. This also confirms the divide between the attitudes of the elected decision-makers (council, board and committee) and those of the administrative officials in the domain of sports policy. However, in reality, the strict delineation between administrators and politicians may be eroded by overlapping responsibilities, informal networks, and collaborative decision-making processes.

While the absence of leadership skills in sports, particularly among committee leaders, hindered the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge, it underscores the crucial role of leadership within middle-level hierarchies in shaping local sports policy. This finding was also supported by Bergsgard and Rommetvedt (2006), who discovered that municipalities featuring a specialised political board which included sports, allocated greater financial support to sports compared to municipalities with less specialised boards. Also, the importance attributed to leadership skills in sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation by the sports committees corresponded to the finding reported by Nonaka et al. (2000) that the leadership of middle-level decision-makers is of the greatest importance because middle-up-down knowledge management is the most efficient path to knowledge creation. For example, middle-level decision-makers interact with both lower and upper-level groups and are thus able to act in support of the organisation's vision. Correspondingly, while sports committee decision-makers can apply pressure to maintain their political advocacy in sports throughout the political decision-making system, they must also support the professional identity and autonomy of officials in order to promote knowledge sharing among the upper administrative strata. Moreover, if the knowledge of administrative officials is not transferred in making their own statutory proposals (Korsberg et al., 2021), committee leaders might feel greater responsibility for taking the lead in transmitting knowledge-based proposals to the upper strata. While this might support the Weberian model, in which the administration enjoys autonomy, it also prompts the question, are committee leaders in fact first-hand knowledge providers rather than administrative officials?

An unexpected finding was that the association between considering one's leadership skills as sufficient and the acquisition and utilisation of sport-related knowledge was only found for the boards. Moreover, no association was found for the boards between knowledge acquisition and utilisation and rating one's leadership skills as insufficient. However, linking this result with theory is challenging due to the limited literature available on local boards.

While the data for this study were collected in 2014 and 2020 and hence covered two consecutive municipal election periods (2014–2017 and 2018–2021), the research



design did not permit a longitudinal perspective on the local decision-makers' perceptions. However, we gained an overview on the development of sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation between two crucial periods. Time is critical in politics and interaction, as elections always bring changes that are counter-balanced by the permanent position of the administrative officials (Niiranen et al., 2013). The increase in agreement on the amount of sport-related knowledge between two consecutive election periods might be due to several reasons, such as changes in the roles of the elected decision-makers and the administrative officials following the national reforms which came into force in 2015 or the increase in awareness of sport-related issues as a result of the recent Sports Act (390/2015), which, following from the earlier Health Care Act (1326/2010), obliges municipalities to promote the health and well-being of their residents by assessing their physical activity. Municipalities should also prepare a welfare report (information about physical exercise) as a working tool for welfare policy planning, evaluation, and reporting. Furthermore, the second election period showed a clearer distinction in perceptions between the political groups and the administrative group. Namely, by the second period, leadership played a greater role in sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation in all the political groups than among the officials. In light of the suggestion by Holli and Turkkka (2021) that earlier systematic knowledge acquisition and utilisation processes have acquired neoliberal features along with the hybridisation of leadership models, the present changes observed in local sport-related knowledge acquisition and utilisation may also follow a similar group-based leadership pattern. Such changes between only two consecutive election periods might also suggest that decision-makers' attitudes to contemporary practices, such as the availability and use of sport-related knowledge, continue to lack the norms that shape the ability to understand knowledge acquisition and utilisation in decision-making.

### **Study limitations**

Although the insights yielded by this study lays a foundation for future research in this area, the study has several limitations. The simplicity of the key characteristics and the complementarity of roles between administrators and politicians in Weber's rational-legal authority are advantageous in many respects but also somewhat problematic. One limitation lies in the assumption that decision-making processes in bureaucratic structures strictly adhere to rational-legal principles (Sager & Rosser, 2021). In reality, decision-making in municipal contexts can be shaped by a multitude of factors beyond formal rules and procedures. These include political dynamics, interpersonal relationships, contextual considerations, and external pressures, which may not be fully accounted for by Weber's framework (see Long, 1949; Simon et al., 1950). However, this study represents a pioneering effort to elucidate local decision-makers' attitudes towards sport-related knowledge using the Weberian bureaucratic approach. This approach is considered appropriate because political institutions differ significantly from other entities like businesses in their practices and rules, necessitating a distinct theoretical approach (March & Olsen, 1996).

The research material utilised in this study also has its limitations. First, the dataset was drawn derived from an extensive survey questionnaire, which may limit the depth

and breadth of the variables of interest. Specifically, only one item from the survey questionnaire directly represented the outcome variable, a limitation which may restrict the granularity of our analysis and the identification of nuanced relationships. Second, the explanatory variables in our dataset are constrained in their scope, further limiting the extent to which we could explore complex patterns and associations in the data. Hence, while our findings provide valuable preliminary insights into promotion of knowledge in municipality sport-related decision-making, they must be interpreted with caution. To confirm and extend our findings requires further research on more comprehensive datasets.

Third, the use of dichotomous variables may have limited capture of the full complexity of sports-related factors. Fourth, in the survey questionnaire, respondents might have interpreted the item asking about their leadership skills in sports issues differently, since, for some, leadership meant leading people or advocating specific policies. Moreover, our data did not provide information on other potential antecedents linked to knowledge acquisition and utilisation such as human interaction (e.g., Niiranen et al., 2013). Despite its exploratory nature, we contend that this study has unveiled intriguing phenomena concerning the interplay between political leaders and public administrators, offering valuable insights for scholars interested in developing novel research methodologies within the field of sports policy.

### **Implications**

By recognising the hierarchical structure and formalisation inherent in rational-legal authority, policymakers can develop targeted strategies to enhance the integration of sport-related expertise within municipal governance. This may include providing training programs or resources aimed at improving the sport-related knowledge of decision-makers, particularly among politicians who may perceive such knowledge as less crucial. Efforts to foster collaboration and information-sharing between politicians and sports officials can also help bridge gaps in understanding and facilitate more informed decision-making in sports-related matters.

We suggest that although first-hand professional knowledge in local government is created by administrative officials, who in this study also showed overwhelming agreement on their leadership skills in sports, leadership efforts in managing sport-related knowledge, especially on the part of committee and council members, would be an important factor in promoting the inclusion of sport-related knowledge in decision-making on sports. Making changes in how sport-related knowledge is promoted might be easier for the committee and council since the composition of their members changes more frequently. Meanwhile, the institutionalised role of the sports officials should be safeguarded due to their key influence, upward accountability and credibility in the municipal knowledge process concerning sports. Although Finnish decision-makers are generally seen as underestimating the value of knowledge in their managerial work (Lönngqvist, 2017), decision-makers, especially those on the committee for sports, should be encouraged to develop leadership skills in sports issues, for example acknowledging the existence of numerous distributively led groups, such as the administration, which may exhibit greater creativity compared to formal, centralised leadership models (Von Krogh et al., 2012). By identifying patterns and

relationships between key variables, this study offers valuable directions for further investigation into the nuanced aspects of sports decision-making in the public sector.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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