

LEADERSHIP STYLES AND EMPLOYEE INCLUSION: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP ON EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS IN NIGERIAN WORKPLACES

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of transformational leadership on employees' perceptions of inclusion in Nigerian workplaces. Grounded in Transformational Leadership Theory, Shore et al.'s Inclusion Framework, and Social Identity Theory, the research explores how leaders' behaviours, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, shape employees' experiences of belongingness and uniqueness. A mixed-methods design combined survey data from 362 employees across banking, telecommunications, and education sectors with 20 semi-structured interviews. Quantitative analysis revealed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.61, p < 0.01$) between transformational leadership and inclusion, with Idealized Influence emerging as the most robust predictor ($\beta = 0.28, p < 0.01$). Qualitative findings corroborated these results, emphasizing ethical role modelling, fair treatment, and participatory communication as drivers of inclusion. Collectively, transformational leadership explained 48 percent of the variance in inclusion perceptions. The study concludes that transformational leadership enhances inclusion by fostering trust, fairness, and recognition of individuality, yet its efficacy is moderated by Nigeria's hierarchical and culturally diverse context. The paper contributes to leadership and diversity scholarship by contextualizing transformational leadership within African organizational realities and offers practical guidance for managers and policymakers seeking to build equitable, high-performing workplaces.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Employee Inclusion, Nigerian workplaces, Leadership Ethics

1.0 Introduction

In contemporary organizational scholarship, leadership style has emerged as a critical determinant of employee experience, workplace culture, and organizational effectiveness. Leadership not only drives performance but also influences perceptions of fairness, inclusion, and belonging (Alharbi & Rjoub, 2022; Northouse, 2021). As global and local work environments become increasingly diverse—shaped by demographic shifts, digital transformation, and evolving social expectations—leaders are expected to go beyond traditional management and adopt inclusive, people-centered practices that empower employees and harness diversity as a strategic asset (Nishii & Mayer, 2020; Shore

et al., 2018). Within this context, leadership is understood not merely as positional authority but as a transformative force that shapes psychological safety, engagement, and inclusivity in the workplace (Afsar & Umrani, 2019).

Workplace inclusion, a concept gaining prominence in recent human resource and organizational behavior studies, extends beyond demographic diversity to encompass employees' perceptions of belonging, fairness, and voice in organizational decision-making (Shore et al., 2018; Mor Barak, 2023). An inclusive workplace ensures that individuals—regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, or socio-economic background—feel valued and are provided equal opportunities to contribute meaningfully to organizational goals. In the Nigerian context, the importance of inclusion is particularly salient due to the country's heterogeneous socio-cultural composition, characterized by over 250 ethnic groups, complex religious affiliations, and historical inequalities (Ogunyemi & Akande, 2022). These realities often manifest in organizational hierarchies, recruitment patterns, and promotion practices, shaping employees' perceptions of inclusion or exclusion (Amah & Oyedele, 2023).

Transformational leadership has been widely identified as a leadership approach capable of promoting inclusivity and equity in organizations (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019; Afsar & Umrani, 2019). Conceptually developed by Burns (1978) and expanded by Bass (1990), transformational leadership emphasizes four key components—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Leaders who demonstrate these attributes inspire collective vision, encourage innovation, and attend to individual employee needs, creating conditions that promote psychological empowerment and inclusion (Choi et al., 2020; Owoyemi & Adenuga, 2021). Empirical evidence has shown that transformational leaders enhance employees' sense of belonging, trust, and engagement by modeling fairness, fostering open communication, and supporting diversity in viewpoints (Alharbi & Rjoub, 2022; Edeh & Ogbu, 2022).

However, despite extensive global attention on transformational leadership and diversity management, empirical research exploring the relationship between transformational leadership and employee perceptions of inclusion within Nigerian workplaces remains limited. Previous Nigerian studies have largely focused on leadership's effects on employee commitment,

performance, or motivation (Okonkwo & Nwosu, 2021; Akinbode & Lawal, 2022), often neglecting how leadership behaviors shape employees' perceptions of inclusion and belonging. This gap is particularly concerning given Nigeria's socio-economic complexities, where leadership practices often intersect with issues of favoritism, ethnic bias, and power distance (Adetiba, 2020; Amah & Oyedele, 2023). As such, a deeper understanding of how transformational leadership influences inclusion perceptions is essential for promoting equitable and high-performing workplaces.

This study therefore examines the impact of transformational leadership on employees' perceptions of inclusion in Nigerian workplaces, with a focus on how leadership behaviors such as individualized consideration and inspirational motivation contribute to perceived inclusion. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates quantitative and qualitative insights to capture both the statistical relationship and lived experiences of employees under transformational leaders. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to leadership and inclusion literature by contextualizing transformational leadership within Nigeria's diverse work environment. Practically, the findings are expected to guide managers, HR professionals, and policymakers in designing leadership development and inclusion strategies that enhance employee engagement, trust, and organizational effectiveness.

2.0 Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

Global research provides substantial evidence linking transformational leadership with inclusivity, engagement, and organizational citizenship. Breevaart and Zacher (2019) found that transformational leadership fosters psychological safety and belongingness among employees, leading to higher inclusion perceptions. Similarly, Nishii and Mayer (2020) demonstrated that leaders who display empathy and intellectual stimulation create equitable work climates that enhance inclusion across diverse teams.

In the African context, Afsar and Umrani (2019) reported that transformational leadership significantly predicts employees' inclusion and job satisfaction through the mediating effects of trust and empowerment. Edeh and Ogbu (2022) in Nigeria observed that inclusive leadership behaviors improved employee morale and reduced intergroup conflict, though their study emphasized leadership diversity awareness rather than transformational attributes specifically.

Owoyemi and Adenuga (2021) established a strong relationship between transformational leadership and perceived fairness in Nigerian manufacturing firms, suggesting that transformational behaviors mitigate cultural bias in managerial decision-making. Likewise, Amah and Oyedele (2023) found that transformational leadership promotes inclusive work culture by facilitating open communication and value-based leadership practices. However, they noted a lack of consistent institutional frameworks to sustain inclusivity in most Nigerian organizations.

Despite these insights, a research gap persists. Most Nigerian studies have explored leadership's impact on employee commitment, performance, or motivation (Okonkwo & Nwosu, 2021; Akinbode & Lawal, 2022), while few have empirically examined how transformational leadership behaviors specifically shape **employees' perceptions of inclusion**. Furthermore, existing works often adopt single-method quantitative approaches, overlooking qualitative perspectives that capture employees' lived experiences of inclusion.

The present study is anchored on three complementary theoretical perspectives—Transformational Leadership Theory, Shore et al.'s Inclusion Framework, and Social Identity Theory; which together provide a comprehensive lens for examining how leadership behaviors shape employees' perceptions of inclusion in Nigerian workplaces.

Transformational Leadership Theory provides the foundational lens for understanding the role of leadership in motivating and inspiring employees. Initially conceptualized by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass (1990, cited in Okonkwo & Nwosu, 2021), this theory asserts that transformational leaders elevate followers to achieve collective goals that transcend personal self-interest. Bass and Riggio (2020) operationalized transformational leadership into four key behavioral dimensions. First, Idealized Influence reflects the leader's ability to serve as an ethical role model, fostering trust and admiration. Second, Inspirational Motivation involves articulating a compelling vision that cultivates a shared sense of purpose among followers. Third, *Intellectual Stimulation* emphasizes encouraging creativity, innovation, and critical problem-solving, while fourth, *Individualized Consideration* pertains to providing personalized support, mentoring, and attention to employees' unique needs. In the Nigerian organizational context, where hierarchical and autocratic leadership traditions are prevalent, transformational leadership offers an alternative approach that promotes empathy, participatory decision-making, and recognition of workforce diversity (Edeh & Ogbu, 2022).

Complementing this perspective, Shore et al.'s (2018) Inclusion Framework conceptualizes inclusion as the simultaneous experience of belongingness and uniqueness. While belongingness reflects the extent to which employees feel accepted and integrated within the organizational group, uniqueness acknowledges and values the individual contributions and identities of each employee. Leaders play a central role in operationalizing inclusion by fostering environments where employees feel both accepted as part of the collective and appreciated for their distinct perspectives and skills.

Finally, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, cited in Okonkwo & Nwosu, 2021) provides insight into the psychological mechanisms underpinning inclusion. The theory posits that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept and self-esteem from membership in social groups. In Nigeria, where workplaces are often influenced by ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations, in-group and out-group dynamics can shape perceptions of fairness and inclusion. Transformational leaders, through behaviors such as ethical role modeling, vision communication, and individualized consideration, can mitigate these divisions by promoting a shared organizational identity that transcends subgroup boundaries.

By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this study proposes that transformational leadership positively influences employees' perceptions of inclusion in three primary ways. First, it enhances *belongingness* through ethical role modeling, fair treatment, and clear communication of organizational vision. Second, it values *uniqueness* by recognizing individual contributions and providing personalized support and mentorship. Third, it reduces *group divisions* by cultivating a collective identity that emphasizes shared goals and organizational values over subgroup affiliations. This integrative framework provides a multi-dimensional lens to examine the interplay between leadership behaviors and inclusive workplace practices within the unique socio-cultural context of Nigeria.

Despite the growing corpus above, several gaps remain that this study directly addresses. First, explicit empirical work that links transformational leadership dimensions to *employee perceptions of inclusion* (measured as belongingness and uniqueness) remains sparse in the Nigerian context: most Nigerian studies emphasize engagement, performance, or organizational efficacy rather than the distinct two-dimensional construct of inclusion. Second, where inclusion is considered, measurement validation for Nigerian workplaces is limited; many studies adopt international scales without demonstrating local psychometric properties—an issue that undermines construct validity in culturally specific contexts. Third, much of the extant Nigerian evidence is cross-sectional and sector-bound (e.g., oil and gas, SMEs, higher education), which

constrains causal inference and generalizability across public, healthcare, and informal sectors. Fourth, the literature reveals contextual moderators (resource constraints, hierarchical culture, ethnic dynamics) that attenuate certain leadership dimensions—especially Intellectual Stimulation—but systematic tests of moderators and mediators (e.g., organizational justice, social identity processes, psychological safety) remain underdeveloped in Nigeria. Finally, there is a relative shortage of mixed-methods and longitudinal studies that combine robust quantitative modelling with rich qualitative accounts of employees’ lived experiences of inclusion, a methodological gap that limits nuanced theory-building for leadership and inclusion in emerging economies.

In sum, while prior Nigerian and international studies extensively establish the importance of transformational leadership for employee outcomes, they leave open specific empirical questions about (a) how each transformational dimension maps onto the dual components of inclusion (belongingness and uniqueness) in Nigeria, (b) which contextual contingencies moderate those effects, (c) the local psychometric adequacy of inclusion measures, and (d) the lived, qualitative dynamics that explain statistical relationships. The present mixed-methods study addresses these gaps by: explicitly operationalizing inclusion as belonging plus uniqueness using validated instruments adapted and tested for the Nigerian context; examining the separate predictive roles of Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration; integrating qualitative interviews to surface contextually grounded mechanisms (e.g., ethnic favoritism, hierarchical deference); and testing theoretical linkages between transformational leadership and social identity/psychological safety mechanisms that plausibly mediate inclusion outcomes.

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining a cross-sectional survey with semi-structured interviews to explore the relationship between transformational leadership and employee perceptions of inclusion in Nigerian workplaces. This design enhanced validity through triangulation and provided both statistical evidence and contextual insights.

The population comprised employees in banking, telecommunications, and education sectors, chosen for their heterogeneous workforces and relevance to Nigeria’s economy. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, a minimum of 384 respondents was targeted for the quantitative survey, with participants selected through multi-stage sampling to ensure representation across organizations, departments, and hierarchical levels. For the qualitative strand, 20 participants from the survey pool were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives based on gender, ethnicity, and job roles.

Data were collected using two instruments. Transformational leadership was measured with the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X), while employee inclusion was assessed with Shore et al.’s (2018) Inclusion Scale, both adapted to the Nigerian context and rated on a five-point Likert scale. The interview guide featured open-ended questions to explore experiences of leadership, fairness, and inclusion. Questionnaires were distributed electronically and in print, while interviews were conducted in person or online, each lasting 30–45 minutes.

Quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS v25 using descriptive statistics, correlation, and multiple regression, focusing on the influence of leadership dimensions—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—on perceptions of inclusion. Qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed thematically with NVivo, and findings were integrated through a convergent parallel approach.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants,

who were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation.

4.0 Result and Discussion

Table 1: Response Rate, Sectoral Distribution, and Demographics

| Category | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Survey Response | | |
| Targeted Respondents | 384 | 100.0 |
| Valid Responses | 362 | 94.3 |
| Sectoral Distribution | | |
| Banking | 123 | 34.0 |
| Telecommunications | 105 | 29.0 |
| Education | 134 | 37.0 |
| Gender Distribution | | |
| Male | 198 | 54.7 |
| Female | 164 | 45.3 |
| Organizational Hierarchy | | |
| Senior Management | 52 | 14.4 |
| Middle Management | 118 | 32.6 |
| Non-Managerial Staff | 192 | 53.0 |

Table 1 shows a high response rate (94.3%), strengthening the reliability of the findings. The sectoral spread suggests a balanced representation across banking (34%), telecommunications (29%), and education (37%), which allows generalization across multiple industries. The gender distribution (55% male, 45% female) reflects relatively balanced participation, although male employees are slightly more represented. The organizational hierarchy distribution indicates that the majority of respondents (53%) were non-managerial staff, providing perspectives from those most likely to experience inclusion challenges. Senior management (14%) and middle management (33%) were also represented, allowing analysis across hierarchical levels.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis

| Variables | r | p-value |
|--|------|---------|
| Transformational Leadership ↔ Employee Inclusion | 0.61 | < 0.01 |

Table 2 reveals a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.61, p < 0.01$) between transformational leadership and employee inclusion. This means that as leaders display transformational behaviours, employees’ sense of inclusion tends to increase. The significance level ($p < 0.01$) indicates this relationship is statistically robust, reducing the likelihood that the result is due to chance. This supports global findings (e.g., Nishii & Mayer, 2020) that transformational leadership enhances fairness, belongingness, and trust in diverse workplaces.

Table 3: Regression Analysis of Transformational Leadership Dimensions on Employee Inclusion

| Predictor Dimension | Beta Coefficient (β) | p-value | Interpretation |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------|---|
| Idealized Influence | 0.28 | < 0.01 | Strongly associated with fairness and trust |
| Inspirational Motivation | 0.24 | < 0.05 | Correlated with employees’ sense of belonging |

| | | | |
|------------------------------|------|--------|--|
| Intellectual Stimulation | 0.19 | < 0.05 | Predicted perceptions of voice and participation |
| Individualized Consideration | 0.21 | < 0.01 | Linked with psychological safety and recognition |

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.48$ → Transformational leadership explains 48% of the variance in employee perceptions of inclusion.

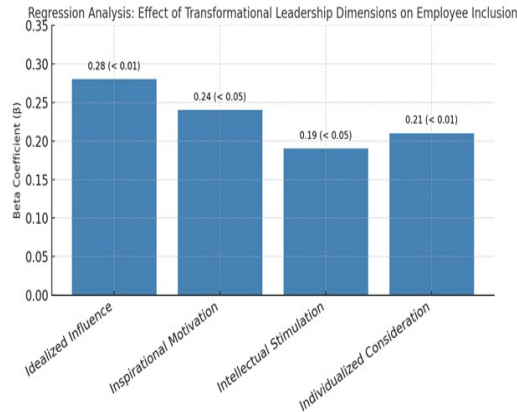


Table 3 shows that all four dimensions of transformational leadership significantly predict employee inclusion. Idealized Influence ($\beta = 0.28$) emerged as the strongest predictor, highlighting the importance of ethical leadership and fairness in Nigeria’s ethnically diverse workplaces. Inspirational Motivation ($\beta = 0.24$) reflects the role of shared vision in fostering belongingness, while Intellectual Stimulation ($\beta = 0.19$) emphasizes employees’ need for voice and participation in decision-making. Finally, Individualized Consideration ($\beta = 0.21$) indicates that personal recognition and mentorship are critical to creating psychological safety.

The overall model explains 48% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.48$) in inclusion perceptions, demonstrating that transformational leadership is a major determinant of inclusion outcomes, though other organizational and cultural factors may also play significant roles.

Discussion of Findings

The quantitative and qualitative findings collectively demonstrate that transformational leadership significantly enhances employees’ perceptions of inclusion within Nigerian workplaces. These results reinforce the propositions of Transformational Leadership Theory, which underscores leaders’ ability to elevate followers’ motivation and ethical conduct (Bass & Riggio, 2020). Among the leadership dimensions, Idealized Influence emerged as the most robust predictor of inclusion, underscoring the importance of ethical role modelling and fairness in countering entrenched patterns of favoritism and ethnic loyalty in Nigeria. This outcome is further consistent with Social Identity Theory, which posits that effective leadership can mitigate in-group and out-group divisions by fostering a shared organizational identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, as cited in Okonkwo & Nwosu, 2021). The findings also align with Shore et al.’s (2018) Inclusion Framework, which conceptualizes inclusion as the balancing of belongingness and uniqueness. In the present study, Inspirational Motivation was shown to enhance belonging by cultivating a collective vision, while Individualized Consideration promoted uniqueness by providing personalized recognition and support. Although Intellectual Stimulation was the weakest predictor, it nonetheless encouraged participation and employee voice, corroborating arguments that opportunities for involvement are

central to perceptions of organizational fairness (Edmondson, 2019).

Evidence from both Nigerian and international contexts lends further support to these results. Asuzu (2025), for example, demonstrated that transformational leadership strongly predicted inclusivity and equity in tertiary institutions in Delta State, advocating for leadership development initiatives to promote inclusivity in higher education. Similarly, Adenigbagbe et al. (2025), examining SMEs in Abuja, found that Inspirational Motivation and Individualized Consideration significantly improved employee performance and retention, although Intellectual Stimulation had comparatively weaker effects due to contextual constraints. These parallels suggest that Nigerian organizations may prioritize ethical leadership and vision-driven belonging over creativity and innovation, reflecting the influence of cultural and institutional dynamics.

Beyond the Nigerian context, Owolabi (2025) reported that transformational leadership accounted for 31.4% of the variance in employee engagement within the oil and gas sector, underscoring its central role in fostering workforce motivation and cohesion. This finding resonates with the present study’s regression model ($R^2 = 0.48$), which illustrates the considerable explanatory power of transformational leadership in predicting inclusion outcomes.

Nevertheless, the evidence also indicates that the effects of transformational leadership are not uniformly strong across all dimensions or contexts. Adenigbagbe et al. (2025) found that Intellectual Stimulation was statistically insignificant in Abuja SMEs, attributing this to organizational resource constraints and rigid structural systems. Likewise, Atoki et al. (2024) observed that although transformational leadership enhanced organizational efficacy in petroleum companies, its influence was moderated by cultural resistance and methodological limitations. Taken together, these variations suggest that while transformational leadership generally advances inclusion and related outcomes, its effectiveness is shaped by contextual factors such as industry norms, cultural expectations, and organizational structures.

The synthesis of findings carries several important implications for both theory and practice. First, the evidence underscores the centrality of ethical and fair leadership in Nigeria’s ethnically diverse and hierarchically complex workplaces, where perceptions of favoritism and bias remain prevalent. Second, the results highlight the necessity of balancing belongingness and uniqueness; leaders who successfully articulate a shared organizational vision while simultaneously recognizing and valuing individual contributions are more likely to cultivate inclusive environments. Third, the findings demonstrate the significance of contextual contingencies: although transformational leadership is broadly effective, certain dimensions—particularly intellectual stimulation—may be less impactful in resource-constrained or rigidly hierarchical organizational settings. Collectively, these insights affirm the theoretical framework employed in this study and point to practical imperatives for Nigerian organizations to strengthen leadership development initiatives that prioritize fairness, vision, and individualized recognition.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the influence of transformational leadership on employees’ perceptions of inclusion in Nigerian workplaces through a mixed-methods design. The findings demonstrate that transformational leadership significantly enhances inclusion, with Idealized Influence emerging as the strongest predictor, followed by Inspirational Motivation, Individualized Consideration, and Intellectual Stimulation. These results affirm the relevance of Shore et al.’s (2018) Inclusion Framework and Social Identity Theory, showing that transformational leaders promote fairness, shared identity, and recognition of individuality. The evidence also underscores the contextual dynamics of Nigerian workplaces, where ethical role modelling and vision-driven communication are

especially valued, while intellectual stimulation is comparatively less effective due to structural and cultural constraints. The practical implications are clear: organizations should invest in leadership development initiatives that strengthen ethical decision-making, vision articulation, and personalized mentorship. Reinforcing fairness through transparent recruitment, promotion, and reward systems is essential for mitigating perceptions of favoritism, while platforms for employee voice remain important for innovation and inclusion. Interventions that address systemic gender disparities and ethnic biases, alongside cross-sector collaboration to share best practices, can further consolidate inclusive leadership. Aligning leadership strategies with Nigeria's broader goals of social cohesion and sustainable development will ensure that inclusion contributes not only to organizational performance but also to national progress. Future research should build on these findings by employing longitudinal designs to capture how leadership behaviors influence inclusion over time. Expanding the scope to public sector organizations, healthcare, and informal enterprises would provide broader insights into contextual variations, while examining intersectionality across gender, ethnicity, age, and religion would deepen understanding of inclusion dynamics. Comparative cross-cultural studies are also recommended to distinguish universal from context-specific patterns. Larger, more stratified mixed-methods studies will further enhance the generalizability and richness of evidence on transformational leadership and inclusion in Nigeria and beyond.

6.0 Limitation and Suggestion for Further Studies

Although this study provides valuable insights into the role of transformational leadership in shaping employee perceptions of inclusion within Nigerian workplaces, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, as it captures leadership-inclusion relationships at a single point in time. Longitudinal approaches would enable researchers to observe how transformational leadership behaviors evolve and influence inclusion perceptions over extended periods. Second, the sample was limited to three sectors—banking, telecommunications, and education—representing key pillars of Nigeria's economy but not its full industrial spectrum. As such, findings may not generalize to public institutions, manufacturing firms, or informal enterprises where leadership structures and inclusion dynamics differ markedly. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported survey data introduces potential bias arising from social desirability and subjective interpretation, although the inclusion of qualitative interviews helped mitigate this limitation through methodological triangulation.

Future research should expand sectoral coverage to include public, healthcare, and informal sectors, thereby enhancing representativeness and cross-sector comparison. Longitudinal and multi-level designs are particularly encouraged to capture temporal and hierarchical variations in leadership influence on inclusion. Additionally, examining intersectional variables—such as gender, ethnicity, age, and organizational tenure—would provide a richer understanding of how different employee groups experience inclusion under varying leadership styles. Cross-cultural comparative studies could also reveal whether the patterns identified in Nigeria are consistent across African and global contexts, advancing theoretical generalizability and practical insights into inclusive leadership development.

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