Gordon Institute
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Exploring the role of Digital Leadership in Advancing Digital Accessibility and Perceived Inclusion of Employees with Disabilities in South Africa

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Philosophy (Change Leadership).

Abstract

Digital transformation has redefined how organisations function, yet people with disabilities remain excluded from fully participating in digitally mediated workplaces. This study explores how digital leadership influences digital accessibility and perceived inclusion among employees with disabilities in South Africa. The research addresses key gaps, the lack of empirical frameworks linking leadership behaviours to accessibility outcomes, limited understanding of how accessibility mediates inclusion experiences, and scarce evidence contextualised to South Africa's socio-economic and legislative landscape. Guided by Transformational Leadership Theory, Organisational Inclusion Theory and the complementary philosophy of Ubuntu, the study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design using a survey. While the small sample limits statistical generalisability, the findings provide valuable exploratory insights for theory refinement and policy advancement.

Results revealed strong, positive correlations between digital leadership and digital accessibility, and between accessibility and perceived inclusion. Mediation analysis confirmed that digital accessibility fully mediates the relationship between leadership and inclusion. The direct effect of leadership on inclusion was non-significant, identifying accessibility as an essential, practical mechanism through which leadership intent must be translated to achieve perceived inclusion. The study contributes a contextually grounded model of digitally mediated inclusion, advancing theory and offering practical insights for leaders and policymakers to embed accessibility as an ethical and strategic imperative within South Africa's evolving digital workplace.

Keywords

#Digital_leadership; #digital_accessibility; #peoplewithdisabilities; #inclusion; #inclusive_workspaces

Declaration

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy specialising in Change Leadership at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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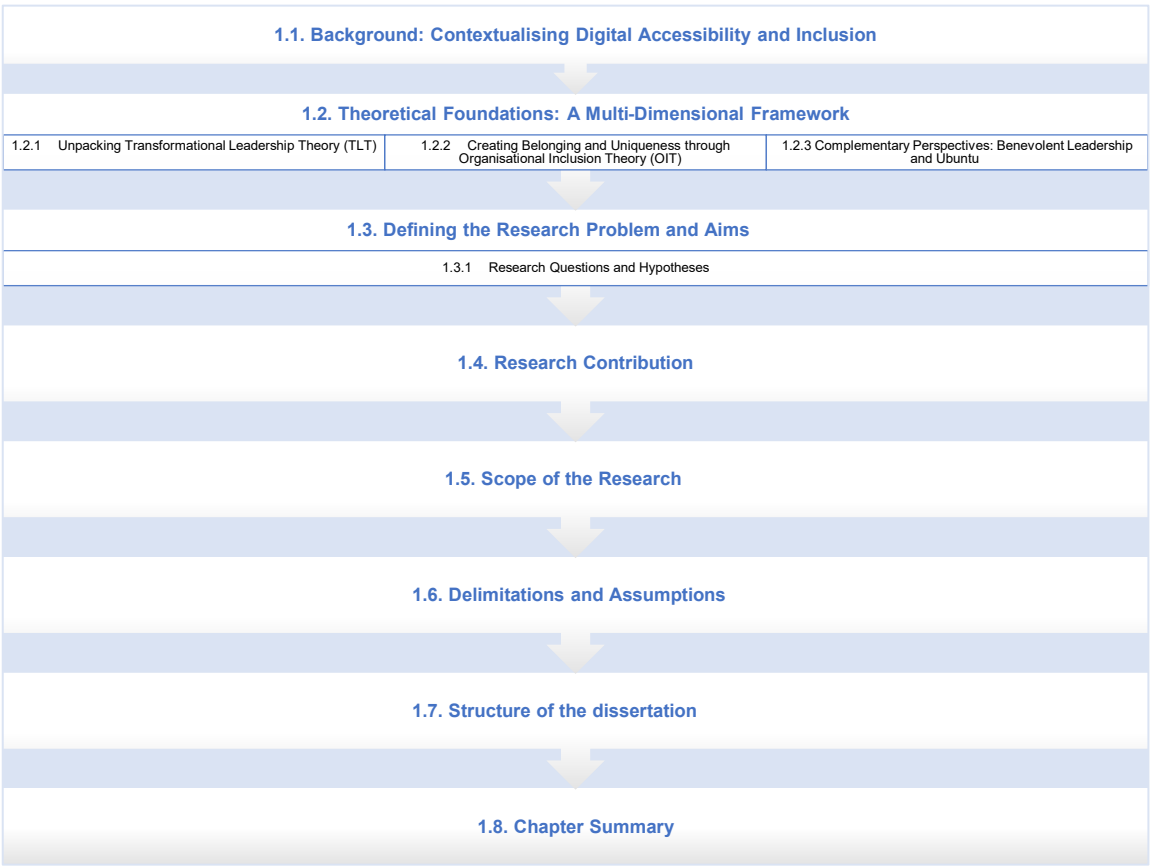
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1. Introduction

Chapter 1 establishes the foundation of the research and outlines the background to the problem, clarifies the gaps for the justification of the study, presents the purpose and scope of the study. This chapter also positions the research within the broader theoretical landscape, demonstrating how leadership behaviours, accessibility practices and perceived inclusion intersect to shape employee's daily work experiences. By presenting the practical, policy and scholarly relevance of the topic, this chapter motivates why examining digitally mediated inclusion is not only timely but essential for supporting equitable organisational transformation in South Africa. The roadmap below illustrates the flow of the chapter.

Figure 1: *Chapter 1 Roadmap*



Source: Author

1.2. Background: Contextualising Digital Accessibility and Inclusion

The acceleration of digital transformation in business environments globally has resulted in digital systems becoming fundamental to optimal organisational functioning. During the Covid-19 pandemic, work-from-home and hybrid environments became necessary

to combat the spread of the virus. In South Africa, the pandemic catalysed the need for more sophisticated systems that allowed for mobility and real-time updates. The pandemic also exposed inadequacies in digital accessibility and inclusion across both public and private sectors.

The debate on this digital accessibility and inclusion has transitioned from a basic understanding of the "digital divide" to a more sophisticated understanding of "digital inclusion". Digital inclusion is a complex concept and is more than just reliable, reasonably fast internet access; it also involves access to appropriate digital devices, skills acquisition, technical support, and usable content for autonomy and involvement. The implication is that digital exclusion deepens social exclusion and therefore digital inclusion is a part of social inclusion.

Buthelezi et al. (2024) states that there are approximately 1.3 billion people with disabilities worldwide. In South Africa specifically, this situation is severe. Of the total population, 6.6% or 3.5 million people live with disabilities. This study explores the plight of people with disabilities and includes the digital divide and the level of technological accessibility for people with disabilities from impoverished communities.

Botha et al. (2023) highlights that South African legislation has a target of 2% inclusive employment of people with disabilities as a starting point, but the actual representation of people with disabilities in the workforce is only 1.3%. Employees with disabilities often encounter insurmountable challenges in the workplace, ranging from negative perceptions to inaccessible environments and even difficulties in acquiring reasonable accommodation (Charles et al., 2023). From a policy level, South Africa has mandated fair and equitable employment for people with disabilities; however, most companies still encounter challenges in realising a fully accessible digital work environment.

The difference between high-level policy and lived reality and experience is a key issue in this study; similarly, learnerships have a substantial budget but often do little to align with market efficacy, leaving individuals with disabilities in a holding pattern of training after training without a landing spot in the labour market, or a pathway to find one. This is not necessarily attributed to technology limitations but rather leadership’s failure to prioritise digital accessibility and integrate into core organisational strategies.

From a practical perspective, many organisations struggle to integrate assistive technologies, accessible digital platforms and inclusive work practices effectively. Krok (2024) cites results from the “Attitudes to Digital Accessibility” survey, where 75% of respondents were committed to enhancing digital accessibility but were unable to due to competing demands, while 69% of respondents stated that they did not have sufficient

time to address accessibility issues. Leaders set the tone from the top and have the potential to positively influence inclusion (Brimhall, 2019). Cortellazzo et al. (2019) stress the role digital leaders have in enhancing clear communication, providing support for digital tools and creating an inclusive culture. However, it remains unclear how these leadership behaviours translate into meaningful accessibility improvements for people with disabilities.

1.3. Theoretical Foundations: A Multi-Dimensional Framework

From a theoretical perspective, existing research on digital leadership has focused on performance outcomes, technological innovation and change management (Nxumalo, 2020).

1.3.1 Unpacking Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT)

Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) highlights the role of leaders in inspiring and assisting employees to transition and has been widely adopted in organisational research. Its application to digital accessibility contexts remains underexplored, particularly regarding its impact on organisational inclusion for employees with disabilities (Nxumalo, 2020). This study extends Transformational Leadership Theory by operationalising its subdimensions proposed by Rafferty & Griffin, (2004) which include: vision, inspirational communication, intellectual stimulation, supportive leadership, and personal recognition within the specific domain of digital inclusion for employees with disabilities. This extension is not a theoretical departure but a contextual refinement, grounded in empirical literature and aligned with the study's aim to address leadership's role in shaping accessible digital environments.

Given the paucity of research linking leadership behaviours to digital accessibility outcomes, particularly in South African organisations, this adaptation is both timely and methodologically appropriate. Below is an exploration of the five sub-dimensions as defined by Rafferty & Griffin (2004):

Vision: Illustrates the ideal future-based state, based on organisational values. A vision is used to provide a clear articulation of the leader's objective to provide an accessible and inclusive work environment that will inspire collective commitment to organisational values and encourage employees to embrace change and new behaviours.

Inspirational communication: Using language that is positive, encouraging and emotive to build motivation and confidence among stakeholders. In the context of digital accessibility, this attribute could be crucial for inspiring employees to adopt new technologies and fostering a culture of support.

Intellectual stimulation: This dimension encourages employees to critically analyse their problems and to propose innovative solutions to enhance their conceptual and analytic capabilities. A leader who intellectually stimulates their team can evoke creative, practical problem-solving to resolve digital accessibility challenges beyond traditional solutions.

Supportive leadership: Reflects a leader's genuine attentiveness to the individual needs of their team members, fostering a work environment that is both emotionally supportive and psychologically safe. This type of leadership is especially significant for employees with disabilities, who may encounter unique barriers in the workplace and benefit from tailored accommodation and empathetic engagement to thrive professionally.

Personal recognition: Rewarding employees for specific performance achievements to serve as motivation and encouragement.

By further segmenting Transformational Leadership Theory into the above five subdimensions, the study can build on the generic understanding of "transformational leadership" and precisely link leader-specific behaviours to digital accessibility and perceived inclusion outcomes. This model is more robust, relevant and empirically testable.

1.3.2 Creating Belonging and Uniqueness through Organisational Inclusion Theory (OIT)

Similarly, **Organisational Inclusion Theory** (Shore et al., 2011) describes inclusion as an employee's personal sense of being a valued and respected member within the team, where their everyday experiences affirm both their need for belonging and their desire to be recognised for what makes them unique. This definition is founded on the "optimal distinctiveness theory", which postulates that people have a fundamental need to be simultaneously similar and different to others (Shore & Chung, 2022).

Shore & Chung (2022) defines **belongingness** as an employee's fundamental need to feel accepted and connected within a group they can relate to. This sense of belonging is nurtured through meaningful, supportive relationships with their leaders and peers. These relationships affirm an individual's place within the team and fosters psychological safety. Conversely, **value in uniqueness** embraces the importance of acknowledging and appreciating the distinct attributes of what differentiates individuals from each other. When employees feel that their personal identifiers like their race, gender or abilities are not merely acknowledged but valued, their experience of inclusion deepens. It is this

recognition of individuality within a collective that makes people feel both seen and respected (Shore & Chung, 2022).

Shore & Chung (2023) further elaborate that leaders play an influential role in a group or team setting. Additionally, their behaviour acts as a powerful indication to employees about the level of inclusion that can be expected. Leaders can either be a positive role model and mirror the behaviours required for fostering inclusion or can negatively contribute to behaviours that exclude and ostracise individuals (Shore & Chung, 2023). The Organisational Inclusion Theory is crucial, as it looks beyond a diverse workforce to the psychological experience of inclusion, highlighting that an organisation can be diverse without being inclusive (Shore et al., 2011).

Despite South Africa's progressive legislation, a significant gap exists between inclusive policy formulation and practical implementation in digital environments. While digital leadership has been widely studied, accessible digital workplaces for employees with disabilities in South Africa remain limited. This study bridges these gaps by converging both theoretical perspectives to examine how digital leadership practices influence digital accessibility (the usability of digital tools and systems by all employees) and perceived inclusion and support (employees' personal sense of being included and valued in the workplace).

1.3.3 Complementary Perspectives: Benevolent Leadership and Ubuntu

To provide a robust and contextually sensitive lens for interpreting the study's findings, this research will incorporate two complementary perspectives: Benevolent Leadership and the indigenous African philosophy of Ubuntu. While the empirical model is built on the frameworks of Transformational Leadership Theory and Organisational Inclusion Theory, these concepts will be used in the Discussion chapter to enrich the understanding of how belonging and uniqueness are created in a diverse, non-Western environment.

Luu (2019) cites **Benevolent Leadership** as a culturally rooted leadership approach, originating in Confucian traditions, that emphasises a leader's deep, personal concern for the holistic wellbeing of their team members, both professionally and personally. Rather than focusing solely on performance outcomes, benevolent leaders demonstrate empathy, patience and active support, particularly toward individuals facing adversity, such as employees with disabilities.

This style of leadership fosters a workplace climate where people feel genuinely cared for and psychologically safe. By offering tailored support and helping employees navigate

challenges, benevolent leaders contribute meaningfully to a sense of belonging and personal value. These actions not only counteract negative self-perceptions but also promote emotional well-being. In doing so, benevolent leadership becomes a practical and visible force in cultivating a disability-inclusive environment, mediating the link between leadership behaviour and employee thriving.

The **Ubuntu Philosophy** offers a deeply rooted, indigenous African lens through which this study interprets inclusion and support, particularly in digitally mediated work environments. Grounded in the principle of “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (“a person is a person through other people”).

Mutanga (2023) through the lens of Ubuntu, highlights the importance of communal interdependence, mutual respect, and shared problem-solving. Rather than viewing inclusion as an individual experience alone, Ubuntu frames it as something nurtured through relationships and collective care. This perspective aligns closely with Shore et al.’s dimensions of belongingness and uniqueness, suggesting that people feel truly included when they are both embraced by the group and recognised for what makes them distinct. When Ubuntu is applied to digital leadership, the use of technology is encouraged not just for efficiency but as a tool for promoting wellbeing, ensuring accessibility, and enabling full participation, especially for employees with disabilities. In doing so, it reinforces dignity and affirms each person’s value within the broader organisational community.

1.4. Defining the Research Problem and Aims

The research problem centres on how digital leadership influences digital accessibility and perceived inclusion for employees with disabilities in South African organisations. While digital transformation has accelerated, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, there remains a significant gap in understanding how leadership behaviours specifically facilitate or hinder digital accessibility. This study refines this problem by integrating a multi-dimensional theoretical framework that addresses the following key issues:

- The **lack of empirical frameworks** linking digital leadership behaviours to accessibility outcomes. The existing frameworks fail to establish a clear, multi-level framework that links digital leadership behaviours to tangible accessibility and inclusion outcomes for employees with disabilities. The study aims to address this by operationalising leadership into discrete, measurable practices and creating a link to the key dimensions of Shore’s Organisational Inclusion Theory.

- **Limited understanding of the mechanisms** through which **digital accessibility influences perceived inclusion** for employees with disabilities.
- **Insufficient evidence regarding effective leadership practices to promote digital inclusion in South African organisational contexts**. The research will address this in the Discussion chapter by applying Ubuntu principles to interpret the quantitative findings, exploring how feelings of inclusion are shaped by a sense of communal independence and collective responsibility.
- The **absence of integrated theoretical models** that explain the relationships between digital leadership, accessibility and inclusion in digital work environments.

The research aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the relationships between digital leadership, digital accessibility, and perceived inclusion for employees with disabilities in South African organisations. This addresses critical gaps in both practical workplace application and theoretical understanding of how leadership behaviours influence digital accessibility and feelings of workplace inclusion. Despite South Africa's progressive Employment Equity Act, there remains limited empirical evidence on effective leadership practices that enhance digital workplace experiences for employees with disabilities (Charles et al., 2023).

1.4.1 Research Question and Hypotheses

Primary Research Question: How does digital leadership influence digital accessibility, and how does this in turn affect perceived inclusion of employees with disabilities in South Africa. The following hypotheses support the research question:

- **H_1:** Digital leadership positively influences digital accessibility.
- **H_2:** Digital accessibility positively influences perceived inclusion among employees with disabilities.
- **H_3:** Digital leadership has an indirect positive effect on perceived inclusion through digital accessibility.

The study will provide empirical insight into how digital leadership can enhance workplace accessibility and contribute to creating more equitable and inclusive digital work environments for employees with disabilities in South Africa. More specifically, the findings will have practical implications for leadership development, accessibility policy formulation, and digital transformation strategies in South African organisations. This

study closes an important gap in South African disability inclusion research, where leadership's role in ensuring digital equity has been understudied, despite legislative commitments.

1.5. Research Contribution

This study aims to make several contributions to both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, it extends the Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass,1985) by applying the theory to digital accessibility contexts, which will demonstrate the correlation of leadership behaviours and inclusive hybrid environments. Additionally, it advances Organisational Inclusion Theory (Shore et al.,2011) by examining its relevance in digitally mediated environments, particularly for employees with disabilities. By integrating these theories, the research fills an empirical gap in South African literature where studies have solely focused on general outcomes and not inclusion through digital leadership (Nxumalo, 2020). The findings of the study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how leadership influences accessibility and inclusion, potentially influencing future theoretical models that incorporate digital equity.

From a practical perspective, the study seeks to provide empirical insights on how digital leadership can enhance and promote workplace accessibility, which contributes towards creating an equitable and inclusive work environment for people with disabilities in South Africa. Accessible-by-design environments reduce operational inefficiencies, offer diversified talent pools and elevate employee experiences.

The findings of the study could have the potential to influence leadership development paths, inclusive and digitally accessible policy formulation and accelerated digital transformational strategies in South Africa. For instance, the study may create awareness of digital accessibility tools and software, resulting in a prioritisation of assistive technologies and training, increasing employee morale, retention and productivity (Krok, 2024). Another example could be a policy change; this research supports the implementation of the Employment Equity Act by highlighting the role of leaders in bridging the digital divide (Buthelezi et al., 2024).

Lastly, this study closes a significant gap in South African Disability Inclusion research, where leadership's role in ensuring digital equity has been understudied. The study aims to offer a foundation for future interventions that promote sustainable inclusion in a digitally transforming economy.

1.6. Scope of the Research

This study focuses on South African people with disabilities across industries in the formal sector in digitally mediated environments. The respondent group is people with disabilities, which includes visual, auditory, sensory, motor and cognitive disabilities. The unit of analysis is at an individual level, allowing for comparison between leadership practices, accessibility levels and inclusion outcomes. The research will rely on validated survey instruments to ensure rigour. By effectively maintaining this scope, the study seeks to produce insights that can be generalised and that are relevant to digital transformation and disability inclusion across sectors.

1.7. Delimitations and Assumptions

The scope excludes informal sectors, non-digital workplaces, and organisations outside of South Africa to maintain contextual relevance. The study does not specify explicit technologies but focuses on how leaders influence their accessibility. By delimiting this scope, the study pursues insights that can be generalised and that are relevant to digital transformation and disability inclusion across sectors, while acknowledging limitations such as self-reported data biases.

The study is based on the perceived experiences of people with disabilities and does not independently audit technical conformance.

1.8. Structure of the dissertation

- **Chapter one** - provides the practical and theoretical framework of the problem, brief outline of the research purpose, the scope of the research and the contributions of the study.
- **Chapter two** - provides a comprehensive literature review that encompasses digital leadership, transformational leadership, digital accessibility, inclusion theory and the climate in South Africa for people with disabilities.
- **Chapter three -** presents the research question and hypothesis that guides the empirical investigation. The chapter clarifies the logical relationships illustrated by the literature in chapter 2 and outlines the analytical framework which will inform the data collection process and the subsequent statistical testing.
- **Chapter four** - includes the research methodology, instrument design, sampling procedures, data collection and data analysis.

- **Chapter five** - investigates the outcomes of the data collection and provides clear findings from the data collected.
- **Chapter six** - discusses the findings linking it back to the literature review, the implications of the findings and recommendations.
- **Chapter seven** - concludes the dissertation by synthesising key insights from the research, outlining the theoretical and practical contributions. The chapter also outlines the study's limitations and offers recommendations for future studies.

The introductory chapter has provided essential insight into the background, clarified the research problem, established the theoretical grounding, research aims, contribution of the study and the scope of the research. The subsequent chapters detail the methodology, findings and implications of the study for enabling more equitable and inclusive workplaces in South Africa.

1.9. Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 has shaped a layered and contextually grounded narrative that is both theoretically rigorous and responsive to the lived realities of South African workplaces. The key insights emerging from this expanded framework are as follows:

The Research Problem Is Deeply Layered

Digital accessibility and inclusion for employees with disabilities in South Africa cannot be reduced to a lack of technology. It is a complex and persistent challenge shaped by gaps between policy and practice, entrenched social inequalities, and leadership approaches that often overlook inclusion as a strategic priority. This framework positions the research as a vital tool for unpacking and addressing these interwoven issues.

A Nuanced Theoretical Model Is Needed

To engage meaningfully with this problem, the study moves beyond universalist leadership theories and embraces a more context-sensitive approach. The proposed model integrates the actionable dimensions of Transformational Leadership Theory, the psychological insights of Organisational Inclusion Theory, and the culturally resonant principles of Benevolent Leadership and Ubuntu. Together, these perspectives offer a robust and locally relevant framework for understanding how leadership can shape inclusive digital environments.

The Contribution Is Both Meaningful and Actionable

This research stands to make a significant impact on both academic discourse and organisational practice. Theoretically, it introduces a fresh lens for examining leadership in non-Western contexts, challenging dominant paradigms and expanding the scope of inclusion research. Practically, it reframes digital accessibility not just as a moral obligation, but as a strategic opportunity; one that can unlock economic value, enhance employee well-being, and support the emergence of a new generation of leaders committed to equity and transformation. In doing so, the study helps bridge the gap between South Africa's progressive legislative intent and the everyday experiences of its workforce.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The global digital landscape is evolving at an unprecedented pace, transforming how organisations operate, communicate, and engage with their workforce. During this time of constant change, effective leadership is vital for managing not only digital transformation but also for maintaining a focused approach to human capital development and inclusion. While digital transformation has become a strategic enabler for businesses across all sectors, its implementation has predominantly emphasised technological capability and operational efficiency. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding how digital transformation intersects with leadership and the inclusion of people with disabilities, particularly in digitally mediated work environments. Lauring & Jonasson (2023) notes that inclusion theories have "largely ignored" the revolutionary changes brought by digital collaboration, and a "deeper theoretical discussion on the implications of technology-mediated interaction for workplace inclusion thus remains to be initiated" (p.1).

The South African environment provided a salient context when the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the urgent need for digitally inclusive strategies by exposing structural disparities in digital access and participation. Employees with disabilities are among the most vulnerable stakeholders and remain so in this transition (Ngqunguza et al., 2024). Despite progressive policies promoting inclusion, the lived experiences of people with disabilities reveal continued barriers (Charles et al., 2023) ranging from inaccessible platforms to limited leadership engagement in accessibility planning. For example, a recent qualitative study in South Africa found that new employees with disabilities often face inadequate induction and orientation practices, discomfort in disclosing their disabilities to colleagues, and frustration with superficial inclusion efforts, exposing a gap between policy compliance and genuine workplace inclusion (Bam & Ronnie, 2020).

This literature review systematically explores three interrelated constructs essential in addressing these challenges: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility and Perceived Inclusion in the workplace. To situate this challenge in South Africa, one must confront stark realities. Persons with disabilities (PWDs) constitute approximately 6.6% of the national population (Buthelezi et al., 2024a). Yet, their labour market participation remains marginal: estimates suggest that nearly 80% of PWDs are unemployed, with employment levels especially low among youth and those in rural areas (South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2020). Despite progressive legislation, the representation of people with disabilities in employment remains critically low. According

to the Department of Employment and Labour (2023), only 1.2% of employees are identified as having a disability, far below the 2% target set by government policy. This persistent underrepresentation demonstrates that exclusion is both structural and systemic.

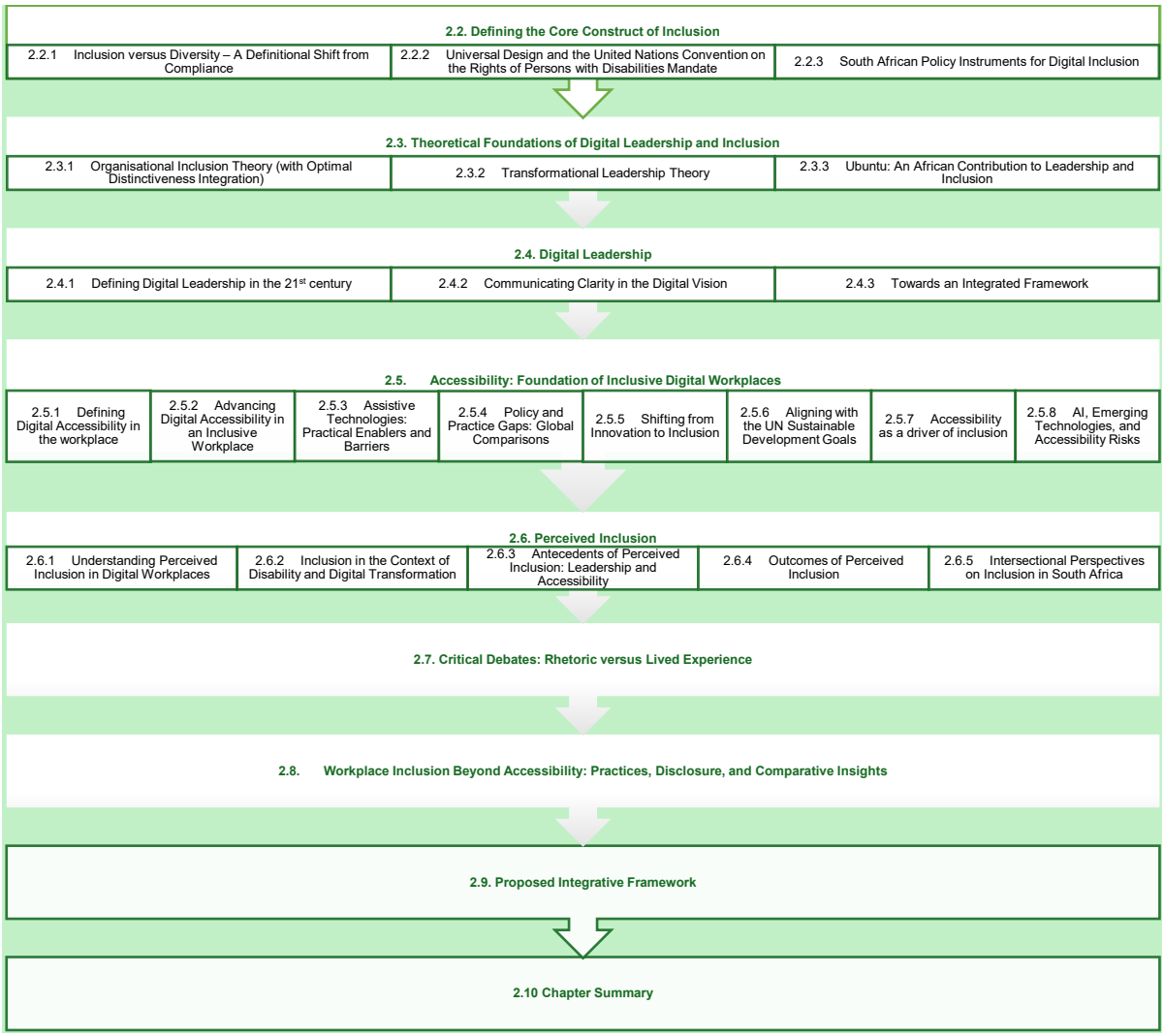
Scholars highlight that these patterns reflect not only accessibility barriers but also entrenched socio-economic inequalities that systematically exacerbate exclusion (Gordon et al., 2020). South Africa's overall unemployment rate stood at 32.9% in the first quarter of 2024 (Statistics South Africa, 2024), illustrating the severe structural constraints that compound the marginalisation of PWDs. Together, these figures highlight the urgency of embedding accessibility and inclusion as leadership imperatives within digital transformation strategies.

This literature review systematically engages three interrelated constructs: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. This study employs the Organisational Inclusion Theory and the Transformational Leadership Theory, augmented by the more contemporary conceptualisations of Adaptive and Integrative leadership, which will provide insights into how leaders can foster both structural access and psychological belonging to marginalised groups, specifically employees with disabilities. These frameworks provide insights into how leaders can foster both structural access and psychological belonging among marginalised groups, with a particular focus on employees with disabilities.

Digital inclusion is not merely a technical adjustment but a fundamental prerequisite for equitable participation. Accessibility entails designing or adapting systems so that all individuals, irrespective of ability, can engage without barriers (Krok, 2024b). Globally, more than **1.3 billion people or 16% of the total population,** live with significant disabilities, many of whom face persistent exclusion in technology, infrastructure, attitudes, and policy (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Embedding accessibility is thus not only a legal and ethical responsibility but also a strategic imperative.

Without inclusive design and accountable leadership, digital transformation risks widening, rather than narrowing, inequality. This phenomenon has been described by Heeks (2022) as adverse digital incorporation, a scenario where marginalised groups are technically included in digital systems yet derive disproportionately less benefit or even experience new forms of disadvantage, due to power imbalances and the lack of supportive measures. The following sections examine each construct systematically and illustrate the theoretical and empirical gaps that this research aims to address. Figure 2 below depicts the breakdown of the headings and sub-headings of the chapter.

Figure 2: *Chapter 2 roadmap*



Source: Author

2.2. Defining the Core Construct of Inclusion

The effective integration of employees with disabilities necessitates a clear and theoretically grounded definition of inclusion that moves beyond superficial compliance and towards measurable, experiential outcomes.

2.2.1 Inclusion versus Diversity – A Definitional Shift from Compliance

The discourse on equity in the workforce has undergone a critical conceptual shift over the past few decades, moving past its focus on **diversity,** which is the composition of the workforce with an emphasis on inclusion in the active creation of the organisational environment. Shore et al., (2018) further add that diversity is conventionally understood as the mixture of individual attributes and characteristics, encompassing both visible categories (such as race, gender, and disability) and invisible distinctions (such as tenure

or life experience). Additionally, Shore et al. (2018b) reiterate that the focus on composition often situates diversity within legislative and compliance frameworks, defining it by the historical divisions that impact employment outcomes.

In contrast, Shore et al., (2018) defines **inclusion** as the creation of a supportive organisational culture where all people can be their authentic selves while simultaneously contributing to the collective as valued and full members. This distinction is fundamental: diversity can be mandated through legislation, making it an exercise in compliance; **genuine inclusion, however, stems from voluntary organisational actions and proactive cultural engineering**. Without proactive cultural efforts, merely recruiting individuals from marginalised social categories is unlikely to translate into true career success or equitable access to valued opportunities, such as promotions, critical informational networks, or decision-making roles.

The failure to achieve full integration is manifested in pervasive exclusionary practices, including the subtle and ambiguous forms of discrimination known as **microinequities**, which occur frequently and **perpetuate a chronic lack of opportunities for targeted groups**. Consequently, the literature insists that inclusion requires actively levelling the playing field and demanding that organisations move beyond minimal legal adherence to achieve genuine and equitable access (Shore et al., 2018). In practice, however, disability has often not been “high on the diversity radar” of organisations; many corporates have devised diversity and inclusion strategies, however, give scant attention to disability compared to other demographics (Gould et al., 2019). This oversight contributes to the gap between policy rhetoric and employees’ everyday experiences, highlighting the need for deliberate organisational focus on disability inclusion.

2.2.2 Universal Design and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Mandate

The global take on inclusion is increasingly grounded in economic and social imperatives rather than charity. Universal design, defined as the design of environments and technologies usable by all people without adaptation, demonstrates that accessibility should be integrated from inception rather than treated as a retrofit (Krok, 2024b). The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** safeguards this principle, requiring states to mainstream accessibility across systems and services.

In South Africa, institutional commitment remains uneven. Research on higher education conducted by Zongozzi & Ngubane (2025) highlights significant policy and capacity gaps in digital access and disability inclusion. Achieving meaningful inclusion therefore

requires more than rhetorical compliance; it necessitates dedicated leadership, resource allocation, and sustained capacity-building.

2.2.3 South African Policy Instruments for Digital Inclusion

South Africa has established a progressive policy framework that theoretically supports digital inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities in the workplace. The Employment Equity Act (1998) remains the cornerstone legislation governing equal opportunities in the workplace in South Africa. Section six of the Act prohibits discrimination based on disability and advocates for reasonable accommodation. Nxumalo (2020) and Botha et al. (2023) cite that while the Act sets a 2% target for people with disabilities in the workplace, national employment figures have fallen below 1,2% (Department of Employment and Labour, 2023) with digital accessibility factors being documented as a contributing factor.

The 2015 revision of the **Code of Good Practice on the Employment of Persons with Disabilities** provides clear guidance on workplace accommodations, including digital accessibility considerations. Section 6.3 of the code highlights “accessible technology and information” as a critical element of reasonable accommodation. However, Maclean et al. (2024) highlights the poor implementation of these provisions. The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act also aligns with removing systemic barriers and promoting equality and equitable access to all people.

Notably, some organisations have demonstrated that the EEA’s inclusion targets are attainable with intentional strategies. Maclean et al. (2024) reports on a state-owned enterprise in the Western Cape that successfully met the 2% disability employment target. The enabling factors included proactive recruitment and hiring practices, tailored orientation programmes for employees with disabilities, and the active involvement of those employees in shaping the company’s inclusion processes. Such examples illustrate that when leadership commits to concrete, inclusive practices like accessible onboarding and consultative policy design, where policy goals can translate into real outcomes, even as many other employers continue to fall short.

2.3. Theoretical Foundations of Digital Leadership and Inclusion

Integrating the **Organisational Inclusion Theory and the Transformational Leadership Theory** offers a nuanced understanding of how leadership behaviours influence Digital Accessibility and Perceived Inclusion for employees with disabilities.

2.3.1 Organisational Inclusion Theory (with Optimal Distinctiveness Integration)

Organisational Inclusion Theory conceptualises how workplace structures and leadership behaviours shape employees' sense of belonging and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). Drawing on Brewer's **Optimal Distinctiveness Theory**, this model argues that inclusion reflects a balance between two competing psychological needs: the need for belongingness and the need for uniqueness (Leonardelli et al., 2010).

Belongingness refers to the emotional experience of being accepted as an insider, having reliable access to information, and being included in group decision-making processes. It represents the universal human need for affiliation and membership in valued groups (Shore et al., 2018c).

Compared to Social Identity Theory (Harwood, 2020), which emphasises group categorisation and exclusionary dynamics, and Belongingness Theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which foregrounds the psychological need for acceptance, Organisational Inclusion Theory offers a more balanced perspective by recognising that both needs must be met simultaneously. This dual framing is particularly useful for studying inclusion in workplaces undergoing digital transformation.

In contrast, **uniqueness** captures the extent to which individuals feel their distinct attributes, perspectives, and identities are recognised and valued. For employees with disabilities, uniqueness is especially salient, as their need for accommodation and accessible systems require not only acceptance but also explicit organisational recognition as legitimate aspects of their participation (Randel et al., 2018a).

Organisational Inclusion Theory is not without limitations, and while it captures the psychological dimensions of inclusion, Lauring & Jonasson (2023) argues it remains **under-theorised in relation to digital contexts** and accessibility challenges. Much of the empirical literature is concentrated in the Global North, limiting understanding of how belonging and uniqueness are negotiated in contexts marked by systemic inequality, such as South Africa (Shore et al., 2018). While Organisational Inclusion Theory provides a strong conceptual anchor, its practical application to **digital accessibility in under-resourced and unequal environments remains a critical gap**.

In digital workplaces, accessibility becomes the mechanism that enables both dimensions. Accessible systems allow employees with disabilities to participate fully (belongingness) while ensuring that their distinctive contributions, shaped by lived experiences of disability are not marginalised, but rather integrated into organisational

knowledge (uniqueness). In this context, digital accessibility operationalises the belonging-uniqueness balance in contemporary organisations.

The Organisational Inclusion Theory model suggests that inclusive settings enable individuals to experience a sense of belonging to a group while simultaneously having their unique qualities or attributes recognised as valued contributions to the group. This dualism has significant implications for employees with disabilities who often require targeted support to overcome their unique needs and barriers to ensure their equal participation and recognition within organisational systems.

Assimilation occurs when an employee feels high belongingness but low uniqueness, forcing them to suppress their authentic self to fit in. Conversely, **exclusion** occurs when an employee feels high uniqueness but low belongingness, leading to isolation. The Organisation Inclusion Theory (Shore et al., 2011) directly builds on Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, demonstrating that inclusive settings must actively enable individuals to experience both a profound sense of belonging to a group while simultaneously having their unique qualities recognised and valued for their contributions to the group.

In digital workplaces, accessibility plays a crucial role in ensuring that people with disabilities feel valued and integrated into organisational systems. In this sense, inclusion is not about what is excluded, but what is embraced. Additionally, it is about developing systems, practices and norms that acknowledge and respond to differences (Randel et al., 2018). Krok (2024) argues that there are still many challenges that need to be addressed at an organisational level. This includes organisational commitment to digital accessibility, a need for accessibility awareness and why it is important and lastly, a full appreciation of the difficulties that people with disabilities face. However, few empirical studies have applied Organisational Inclusion Theory to technology and digital environments, and the experiences of people with disabilities (Ngqunguza et al., 2024), especially in developing countries like South Africa.

This study will build on the call to action to adapt inclusion frameworks to account for accessibility inclusion in modern workplaces (Gewurtz et al., 2022).

2.3.2 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) adds a second exploratory lens to understand how leaders' behaviours inspire and empower followers through four dimensions: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. These dimensions support leaders to not only implement

technology advancements but also to create inclusive environments for employees to thrive (Sacavém et al., 2025). Evidence provided by Hanaysha et al. (2012) links Transformational Leadership Theory to improved job satisfaction and intellectual stimulation.

In comparison, **Adaptive Leadership** (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023) emphasises mobilising organisations to solve systemic challenges under conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) while Harris et al. (2022) argue that **Distributed Leadership** challenges leader-centric models by dispersing influence across networks. Adaptive leadership highlights the limitations of Transformational Leadership Theory's leader-focused orientation. Critics argue that Transformational Leadership Theory sometimes assumes leaders operate in **resource-rich, stable contexts**, a problematic assumption in South Africa's public and private sectors, where structural inequities, resource scarcity, and resistance to change are pervasive.

Nevertheless, Transformational Leadership Theory's emphasis on **vision-driven behavioural change** makes it especially relevant to digital accessibility, where leaders must persuade stakeholders to integrate accessibility into core systems. The gap, however, lies in limited empirical research applying Transformational Leadership Theory directly to the leadership of accessibility initiatives or to the lived experiences of employees with disabilities.

2.3.3 Ubuntu: An African Contribution to Leadership and Inclusion

While transformational, adaptive, and distributed leadership theories provide valuable insight into how leaders influence organisational change, they largely originate from Western epistemological traditions that prioritise individual agency and rationality. In contrast, **Ubuntu** offers a distinctly African epistemology that centres on relationality, collective dignity, and interdependence (Mutanga, 2023). The principle *"I am because we are"* encapsulates a worldview in which personhood is constituted through relationships with others. When viewed through this lens, leadership becomes a relational process of co-creation rather than a top-down exercise of authority.

Ubuntu aligns with the **transformational** emphasis on empathy and moral purpose, while extending beyond it by embedding leadership within communal interdependence rather than individual charisma. Similarly, it complements **distributed leadership** by recognising that resilience and innovation emerge from collective, rather than purely cognitive, responses to change. Ubuntu insinuates that leadership resides not only in formal structures but also in the moral fabric of social relationships. It reframes power

and influence as moral stewardship and an obligation to act in the service of communal well-being (Metz, 2011; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2018).

From an inclusion perspective, Ubuntu resists instrumental or managerial framings of diversity. It positions inclusion as an **ethical imperative**, rooted in the recognition of shared humanity and interdependence. For South African organisations navigating competing socio-economic priorities, Ubuntu offers a moral justification for accessibility and inclusion (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2018), leaders have a collective responsibility to remove barriers and affirm the dignity of people with disabilities. This contrasts sharply with Western models that often justify accessibility in terms of legal compliance, reputation management, or productivity gains. Ubuntu, therefore redefines inclusion as a matter of **justice and moral accountability**, not organisational convenience.

Yet, scholars caution that Ubuntu's normative power has not always translated into structural transformation. Although Ubuntu is frequently referenced in corporate charters and public policy statements, it often functions symbolically rather than operationally (Metz, 2011; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2018). The gap between Ubuntu's philosophical ideals and its practical enactment in leadership behaviours highlights a **persistent empirical void**: little is known about how Ubuntu-informed leadership concretely shapes digital accessibility or inclusive workplace practices. Addressing this gap offers an opportunity to indigenise leadership studies by linking African moral philosophies to contemporary debates on digital transformation and inclusive organisational design.

Accordingly, while the quantitative model tested in this dissertation is grounded in the measurable constructs of Transformational Leadership Theory and Organisational Inclusion Theory , the principles of Ubuntu serve as a critical interpretive framework in the Discussion (Chapter 6). The empirical findings on leadership behaviours and perceived inclusion are analysed through an Ubuntu lens to explore their deeper, relational meanings within the South African context. This approach allows the study to address the persistent empirical void regarding how Ubuntu-informed leadership is enacted in practice, using the quantitative data as a foundation for a richer, context-specific analysis.

2.4. Digital Leadership

Digital leadership has emerged as a complex, multifaceted construct, shaped by the rapid pace of organisational digitalisation and the imperative to align technological change with human-centred values.

2.4.1 Defining Digital Leadership in the 21st century

Digital leadership is defined as specific behaviours and strategies that leaders adopt to leverage technology to achieve organisational change. In 2024, Braojos et al. conceptualised digital leadership as “a style of competencies, behaviours, and practices that inspire and motivate employees in the context of digital transformation” (p. 1471). This conceptualisation is reinforced by Qiao et al. (2024), who highlights the significant role that leaders play in setting a compelling digital vision and executing strategies to realise it. The themes above are reiterated by AlNuaimi et al. (2022) and Qiao et al. (2024) who state that digital leadership is a fusion of transformational leadership attributes and digital technologies that enables leaders to collectively promote support from the organisation for digital initiatives. Therefore, effective digital leadership is not only a catalyst for technological change but also a key enabler of inclusive and supportive environments, particularly for employees with disabilities.

2.4.2 Communicating Clarity in the Digital Vision

Digital leadership is paramount in guiding organisations through digital transformation, with a strong emphasis on communication clarity, employee empowerment, and inclusivity. Founded in Transformational Leadership Theory, effective digital leaders articulate a clear and captivating vision, ensuring that employees understand and align with digital strategies (AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Braojos et al., 2024). In digitally mediated environments, ambiguity in communication can hinder coordination and trust. Digital leaders who provide clear structures, articulate expectations and communicate digital priorities effectively help reduce this ambiguity, which in turn can foster trust and support employee engagement (op ´t Roodt et al., 2024).

Furthermore, digital leaders are also responsible for ensuring adequate communication, transparency, agility and that all employees have access to the tools, appropriate communication, and training necessary to succeed in technology-driven workplaces (Tigre et al., 2023). Inclusive digital leadership fosters an organisational culture that prioritises equitable participation, leveraging digital tools to reduce barriers and enhance collaboration among diverse employees (Trani et al., 2020; Utete, 2022). Ultimately, digital leaders who integrate digital fluency with empathy and accessibility principles contribute to greater employee engagement, commitment, and overall organisational responsiveness and agility in an evolving digital landscape.

The concept of digital leadership is gaining traction as a strategic imperative for organisational inclusion. Cortellazzo et al. (2019) argues that inclusive digital leaders

proactively prioritise digital accessibility by embedding inclusive design principles and fostering usability in digital systems. Chadli et al. (2021) adds to the conversation by stating that organisational culture significantly influences the implementation of digital accessibility. Their findings suggest that accessibility practices succeed when aligned with leadership-driven cultural values and digital transformation strategies. However, even among organisations that commit to accessibility, implementation is often derailed by competing priorities, time constraints or a lack of awareness (Krok, 2024).

Industry research further highlights persistent barriers such as limited accessibility training, insufficient incentives, and perceived costs, which undermine accessibility adoption in practice (Huq et al., 2023; Inal et al., 2020). This indicates a need for stronger leadership advocacy and capacity-building to ensure that accessibility initiatives are not sidelined by other pressures.

While the literature on digital leadership has expanded, it primarily focuses on innovation, performance and operational outcomes (Sacavém et al., 2025). Eberl & Drews (2021) note that the relational aspects of digital leadership remain ambiguous. This gap highlights the need for empirical studies that evaluate the experiential dimension of digital leadership in fostering inclusive digital environments. By extending the current conversation beyond innovation to include relational and accessibility-orientated outcomes, this study aims to expand the conceptual understanding of digital leadership and its influence in creating inclusive digital environments.

2.4.3 Towards an Integrated Framework

Digital Leadership as the Nexus of Inclusion, Accessibility, and Change

Taken together, Organisational Inclusion Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Ubuntu provide a robust yet incomplete picture of inclusive change in digitally transforming organisations. Organisational Inclusion Theory emphasises the psychological need for belonging and uniqueness as twin anchors of inclusion (Shore et al., 2018). Transformational Leadership Theory explains the behavioural mechanisms through which leaders inspire and mobilise followers towards shared goals (Bass, 1985). Ubuntu embeds both within a moral and cultural framework grounded in empathy, collective accountability, and social justice (Metz, 2011; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2018). However, in an era where technological change reshapes every facet of organisational life, **digital leadership** emerges as the critical integrator that translates these theoretical insights into practice.

Digital Leadership as the Integrative Construct

Digital leadership has evolved as a distinct but complementary construct that bridges traditional leadership theory and technological transformation. Defined as the capacity to leverage digital technologies to achieve strategic and human-centred change, it encapsulates the competencies, behaviours, and mindsets required to guide organisations through digital transformation (Braojos et al., 2024; Qiao et al., 2024). Digital leaders act as visionaries who communicate technological purpose clearly, cultivate employee empowerment, and align innovation with inclusivity (AlNuaimi et al., 2022).

Using the perspective of Organisational Inclusion Theory, digital leadership can be seen as the **contextual vehicle** through which belonging and uniqueness are actualised in digitally mediated environments. By ensuring digital systems are accessible, leaders affirm employees' belongingness; by recognising and accommodating diverse digital competencies and abilities, they acknowledge uniqueness. Similarly, through the transformational lens, digital leadership operationalises **visionary influence and individualised consideration** by promoting equitable access to technology and adaptive learning opportunities (Tigre et al., 2023; Walkowiak, 2024).

When viewed through Ubuntu, digital leadership extends beyond efficiency and competitiveness to embody **moral stewardship**, the ethical responsibility to ensure that technological innovation uplifts rather than excludes (Metz, 2011; Mutanga, 2023b). This fusion situates digital leadership as both a **technical and ethical practice**, linking innovation to social justice and collective human prosperity.

2.5. Accessibility: Foundation of Inclusive Digital Workplaces

Digital accessibility is no longer a discretionary technical adjustment; it is recognised internationally as a **human right**. The **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** requires states to ensure access to information and communication technologies on an equal basis with others (United Nations, 2006). The **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1)** sets out standards to make digital content perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust (World Wide Web Consortium [W3C], 2018)).

Yet, despite these frameworks, accessibility is inconsistently implemented. In South Africa, the **Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA)** and the **Employment Equity Act** explicitly prohibit discrimination on the

grounds of disability. This gap between **progressive legislative intent** and **practical implementation** highlights a recurring theme in South African policy: the existence of strong normative frameworks undermined by weak accountability structures. Legislation often relies on self-regulation and voluntary compliance, and enforcement mechanisms are limited (Nxumalo, 2020), resulting in many organisations adopting policies in principle but failing to integrate accessibility into digital systems and daily workplace practices. This tendency towards symbolic compliance means that without enforcement, accessibility remains aspirational rather than transformative, leaving employees with disabilities excluded from many benefits of digital transformation.

2.5.1 Defining Digital Accessibility in the workplace

Krok (2024) emphasises the importance of digital accessibility, which involves creating digital content and tools that are accessible to all abilities, regardless of their impairments. Furthermore, Krok adds that equal participation and a sense of belonging require a digital workplace that is usable by all workers, including those who use assistive technology. This entails developing accessible and practical digital tools and information that integrate universal design principles for efficient use and removing digital barriers that prevent participation (Lindberg et al., 2024). Ha (2024) adds that digital accessibility aims to achieve “equitable access and participation while promoting diversity and inclusion”. It is important to note that even with technically accessible systems, technology-mediated communication can impair traditional social cues, creating "psychological detachment" or "social distance" that can lead to exclusion if not actively managed by leaders (Lauring & Jonasson, 2023, p. 2).

2.5.2 Advancing Digital Accessibility in an Inclusive Workplace

Inclusive digital leadership is fundamental to fostering an equitable work environment where all employees, including those with disabilities, can fully participate in digital transformation efforts. Despite widespread advocacy for “universal inclusion,” employees with disabilities frequently face workplace exclusion and stigma, necessitating initiative-taking leadership interventions (Trani et al., 2020; Utete, 2022). In South Africa, several legislations advocate for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace; however, implementation is slow (Nxumalo, 2020). Digital leaders must establish strong relationships with their teams to prevent isolation, particularly in virtual and hybrid settings, as effective team cohesion enhances engagement and psychological safety (Tigre et al., 2023).

Three dimensions are critical to digital accessibility in organisations: user-friendliness, assistive technology availability, and organisational responsiveness. User-friendly platforms, designed in alignment with accessibility guidelines such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), enhance navigability and ease of use for all employees, improving engagement and productivity (Krok, 2024). Additionally, providing assistive technologies (AT), such as screen readers and captioning systems, remains essential for employees with disabilities.

Compliance alone does not ensure inclusion. Accessibility must be included in the digital transformation process from procurement to training and adoption and must be championed by leadership (Trani et al., 2020; Utete, 2022). Digital accessibility requires continuous organisational responsiveness, ensuring that accessibility features remain functional amid software updates and system changes (Krok, 2024). A proactive approach to digital accessibility fosters an equitable and high-performing workplace.

Recent research highlights several concrete best practices to achieve these goals. Nacheva, (2025, p. 56) identifies the following key enablers of a digitally inclusive workplace: “organisation-wide accessibility training for all employees, active involvement of people with disabilities in user testing” and design feedback, “regular accessibility audits” of digital systems, clear internal accessibility policies and guidelines, and visible leadership commitment to a culture of accessibility as key measures that promote an inclusive digital workplace. By adopting such practices, for example, by consulting employees with disabilities when rolling out new software or by conducting routine checks to ensure all corporate web services meet accessibility standards, organisations move beyond just compliance toward normalising accessibility as a core value.

2.5.3 Assistive Technologies: Practical Enablers and Barriers

Studies highlight persistent challenges such as a lack of licences for assistive technologies software, poor interoperability with corporate systems, and inadequate training for both users and colleagues in higher education institutions (Zongozzi & Ngubane, 2025). In South Africa, such gaps often force employees with disabilities to rely on personal resources to secure access, exacerbating inequalities already shaped by socio-economic status and location (Charles et al., 2023; Gordon et al., 2020). Thus, while assistive technologies are enablers, inequitable distribution and poor institutional support often deepen exclusion.

The discussion of disability inclusion must transition from a normative appeal for social justice to one firmly anchored in economic evidence, thereby refuting the persistent tendency to frame disability employment as a purely charitable endeavour. The failure of

organisations to proactively remove systemic barriers to full participation results in a profound, quantifiable cost of exclusion. In fact, businesses have tangible incentives to become more inclusive. Gould et al. (2019) note rising social expectations for disability inclusion: for instance, surveys indicate many consumers prefer to support companies that employ people with disabilities, and studies have found that hiring people with disabilities can offer firms unique insights into diverse markets and improve overall performance. These trends suggest that inclusion is not only ethically sound but can also confer competitive advantage.

This economic argument is compellingly quantified by models that estimate the benefits of moving towards a fully accessible and inclusive society. An example that resonates with the above argument is a critical economic model developed for the Canadian context established a framework focused on the essential absence of barriers to inclusion, rather than the absence of disability itself. According to the study by Tompa et al. (2022), this calculation estimated that achieving a fully accessible state would yield a massive total economic value of $337.7 billion (Canadian dollars), which constitutes a significant 17.6% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The sheer magnitude of this figure substantiates the argument that inclusion is a decisive economic imperative that generates benefits for all of society, transcending the immediate social advantages for the PWD population. This imperative is especially relevant in developing economies, such as South Africa, where efficient resource utilisation and policy execution are often challenged by economic and structural limitations.

2.5.4 Policy and Practice Gaps: Global Comparisons

International comparisons highlight the consequences of weak enforcement. In the European Union, the **European Accessibility Act (2019)** introduces mandatory accessibility standards with compliance deadlines and penalties, while in the United States, the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** and Section 508 of the **Rehabilitation Act** have been widely litigated, creating strong organisational incentives for compliance. By contrast, South African legislation relies heavily on **self-regulation** and voluntary compliance, with under-resourced monitoring systems (Nxumalo, 2020).

This creates **symbolic compliance**, where organisations adopt policies but fail to integrate accessibility into digital systems and workplace practices. The lack of enforcement mechanisms renders accessibility aspirational, rather than transformative, leaving employees with disabilities excluded from the benefits of digital transformation. Strengthening accountability and introducing clearer standards in South Africa could help bridge this gap between intent and outcome.

2.5.5 Shifting from Innovation to Inclusion

Leaders play a significant role in influencing how digital tools are introduced and integrated into daily operations. However, Eberl & Drews (2021) implies that while digital leadership is progressively being recognised as a core competency, its influence on inclusion outcomes remains underexplored.

2.5.6 Aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015 and propose a shared framework for governments, businesses and individuals to tackle global challenges such as poverty, education, climate change and economic growth. Sustainable Development Goal 16 emphasises the establishment of peaceful and inclusive societies that facilitate justice for all and the creation of effective, accountable and inclusive institutions across all levels of governance. More specifically, SDG 16.6 (United Nations, 2015) aims to “develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels”. The SDGs aim to reduce inequality among all people with a special focus on people with disabilities. Inclusive digital practices can help foster workplaces where people with disabilities can obtain and retain employment, use their talents, and advance their careers within organisations. Ensuring digital accessibility and inclusive leadership in the workplace aligns with this global development agenda, highlighting that inclusion is not only a local organisational issue but part of a broader international commitment to sustainable, inclusive development (United Nations, 2024; Nacheva, (2025).

2.5.7 Accessibility as a driver of inclusion

Digital accessibility is the foundation of workplace inclusion. In absentia, employees with disabilities remain structurally excluded from full participation in digital work environments. Considering the future of work where hybrid environments are the norm, digital systems have become the primary interface for communication, collaboration and performance. Accessible tools promote independence, reduce reliance on others and signify organisational commitment to equity (Tigre et al., 2023).

Digital leadership is essential for creating positive employee experiences in digital environments. Using individualised consideration, leaders have a responsibility to ensure that digital tools of trade and platforms accommodate diverse needs, integrating assistive technologies to enhance workplace accessibility (Shore et al., 2011).

Through the lens of Organisational Inclusion Theory, inclusion is achieved when individuals experience both belonging and uniqueness. Accessibility acknowledges and accommodates individual needs, which enables employees to contribute meaningfully. When employees are denied access to digital platforms, they are not just denied tools but also a voice, autonomy and recognition.

2.5.8 Artificial Intelligence (AI), Emerging Technologies, and Accessibility Risks

Chemnad & Othman (2024) highlights both the opportunities and risks for accessibility that Artificial intelligence (AI) introduces. AI-powered captioning, translation, chatbots, virtual assistants and adaptive interfaces can improve access; however, AI systems trained on biased datasets frequently reinforce ableist assumptions. The potential to perpetuate existing bias remains one of the most significant risks (Chemnad & Othman, 2024).

Buthelezi et al. (2024) expands this argument by showing that inclusive leadership mitigates the risks of exclusion in digital transformation by actively embedding accessibility into technology adoption processes. However, critiques caution that without explicit **accessibility audits** in AI governance frameworks, these technologies may exacerbate social inequalities (Iseko, 2025). In South Africa, Mwansa et al. (2025) stresses the infrastructural limitations such as limited broadband access in rural areas, which exacerbate the risk of **digital exclusion layered upon disability-based exclusion**.

2.6. Perceived Inclusion

2.6.1 Understanding Perceived Inclusion in Digital Workplaces

Perceived inclusion is based on an individual's subjective experience of being accepted, valued and empowered to contribute meaningfully within an organisation (Shore et al., 2011). While inclusion may be dealt with on a structural level as well as through policy interventions and representation, perceived inclusion is personal and centres around if and how employees feel included in the organisation, a significant distinction as they may continue to feel excluded despite formal efforts (Shore et al., 2018b).

Perceived inclusion is influenced by factors such as access to systems, support mechanisms, leadership behaviours and company culture in digitally mediated environments. Inclusion means more than just showing up to people with disabilities, it necessitates accessible systems, individualised accommodation and equal participation

in digital processes (Lindberg et al., 2024). Technology-mediated interactions fundamentally alter the dynamics of group membership and the experience of being valued. In these settings, the risk of exclusion increases because communication becomes more formal and opportunities for informal social exchange are limited, making it harder for employees to feel a true sense of belonging (Lauring & Jonasson, 2023)

2.6.2 Inclusion in the Context of Disability and Digital Transformation

Even considering the increased attention to workplace diversity, people with disabilities continue to report lower levels of perceived inclusion, especially in digital and hybrid work environments (Gewurtz et al., 2024). This is often linked to inaccessible tools, poor communication or not being included in digital change processes (Shore et al. 2018; Utete, 2022). This is further supported by Trani et al. (2020) who highlights that leadership behaviours such as empathy, individualised consideration and transparent communication play a fundamental role in enhancing perceived inclusion, particularly when implemented with accessible systems. In other words, technology and leadership jointly shape whether employees with disabilities feel included on an everyday basis.

This is echoed in evidence from direct workplace experiences. Bam & Ronnie (2020) found that in South African organisations, employees with disabilities frequently encounter challenges in their initial employment experiences that can set a tone of exclusion. Participants in their study described induction and onboarding processes that did not adequately accommodate their needs, uncertainty about if or how to disclose their disabilities to co-workers, and a prevailing desire to strive for “normality” due to stigma. All of which contributed to feelings of frustration and vulnerability. These early experiences illustrate how formal diversity policies and even accessible technology will have a limited impact on perceived inclusion if they are not accompanied by genuine, on-the-ground inclusive practices and cultural acceptance.

2.6.3 Antecedents of Perceived Inclusion: Leadership and Accessibility

Perceived inclusion arises from both **leadership behaviour** and **structural conditions**. Inclusive leaders create climates of fairness, respect, and psychological safety by soliciting input and acknowledging individual contributions (Shore & Chung, 2022). Transformational leaders enhance this by linking individual aspirations to collective visions and embedding inclusive practices in organisational systems (Hanaysha et al., 2012).

Digital accessibility strengthens these antecedents by translating values into practice. Research in higher education demonstrates that inaccessible systems lead directly to

feelings of marginalisation, while accessible environments improve students' self-efficacy and belonging (Zongozzi & Ngubane, 2025). Wittmer & Lin (2017) further explains that workplaces with accessible platforms signal to employees with disabilities that they are valued as contributors, which further enhances perceptions of inclusion .

2.6.4 Outcomes of Perceived Inclusion

The outcomes of perceived inclusion are wide-ranging. At the **psychological level**, inclusion is associated with improved wellbeing, reduced stress, and higher engagement (Shore et al., 2018a). Employees who perceive themselves as included report higher self-esteem and psychological safety, enabling them to share ideas without fear of negative repercussions (Randel et al., 2018).

At the **organisational level**, perceived inclusion is linked to greater job satisfaction, stronger commitment, reduced turnover intentions, and enhanced performance (Alfalih & Ragmoun, 2025). Inclusive environments also foster creativity and innovation, as diverse perspectives are integrated into team problem-solving processes. This sentiment is echoed in a recent study conducted by Travis et al. (2020) on behalf of Catalyst, where feelings of inclusion by 49% of respondents expressed a posive impact on team problem-solving, and 18% expressed how inclusive work environments triggered innovation. Moreover, perceptions of inclusion contribute to **employer reputation and legitimacy**, as organisations that are seen as genuinely inclusive attract talent and build stakeholder trust (Roberson, 2006).

Conversely, employees with disabilities may experience disengagement even in organisations with progressive diversity policies if the organisational climate does not genuinely support inclusion. When diversity initiatives are driven mainly by compliance and lack authentic commitment, negative management or fellow peer's attitudes can weaken inclusion outcomes. This highlights that employee perceptions and the encouragement to use accessible systems matter just as much as formal policies (Wittmer & Lin, 2017).

2.6.5 Intersectional Perspectives on Inclusion in South Africa

For people with disabilities in South Africa, a matrix of intersecting inequalities such as gender, race, location, socio-economic status, language and education can combine to reinforce exclusion. Intersectionality as a framework insists that disability cannot be understood in isolation, but must be situated within broader systems of inequality (Crenshaw, 1989).

Gender Inequities

Women with disabilities face a “double disadvantage,” as they encounter discrimination based on both gender and disability. Moodley & Graham (2015) found that women with disabilities in South Africa report lower employment prospects, higher rates of poverty, and reduced access to healthcare compared to men with disabilities. These disparities are not only structural but also cultural; women with disabilities are often stereotyped as dependent rather than as contributors to the economy. This marginalisation limits their participation in both formal labour markets and digital workspaces.

International Labour Organisation (ILO) studies highlight that women with disabilities are among the least represented in managerial and leadership positions worldwide. Such findings highlight that gender and disability interact in ways that exacerbate exclusion, requiring targeted policies that recognise these overlapping vulnerabilities.

Race and Class: Legacies of Apartheid

In South Africa, disability is deeply intertwined with race and class. Historical legacies of apartheid created systemic educational and economic disadvantages for black South Africans, which continue to affect people with disabilities disproportionately. Recent research in the South African public service confirms that infrastructural, managerial, and attitudinal barriers remain pervasive, preventing people with disabilities from accessing equitable opportunities even when formal targets exist (Charles et al., 2023). Many black learners with disabilities were historically excluded from mainstream education, relegated to under-resourced “special schools,” or denied formal education altogether. These structural disadvantages persist, limiting pathways to higher education and employment.

Gordon et al. (2020) provides evidence that socio-economic inequalities in South Africa are multidimensional, manifesting across healthcare, education, and income. People with disabilities who are also from historically disadvantaged racial groups face compounded exclusion, as poverty restricts their access to assistive technologies, healthcare, and accessible workplaces. This means that disability inclusion cannot be pursued without simultaneously addressing race and class-based inequalities.

By contrast, countries with stronger redistributive policies, such as the Scandinavian states, demonstrate how inclusive education systems and welfare provisions mitigate these compounded barriers (Taneja-Johansson & Powell, 2024). Futhermore, the study accentuates the experience of educators in providing quality education for children with

special needs which strengthens the notion of equal support and opportunities. This comparison highlights the need for South Africa to move beyond rhetorical commitments towards resource-backed policies that dismantle systemic inequalities.

Rural and Urban Divides

Geographic location further shapes inclusion outcomes. People with disabilities in rural South Africa face compounded exclusion due to weak infrastructure, limited access to healthcare, poor public transport, and inadequate internet connectivity. Zongozzi & Ngubane (2025) highlights how rural students with disabilities struggle to access online education, while their urban peers benefit from better resources. In the workplace, the same dynamics apply; rural employees often lack exposure to assistive technologies, digital literacy training, and remote work opportunities.

The Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report also shows that many organisations, particularly in rural provinces, fail to meet the mandated 2% disability employment target, demonstrating the uneven distribution of inclusion across locations (Department of Employment and Labour, 2023). Without targeted rural inclusion strategies, digital transformation risks entrenching rather than alleviating inequalities.

Language and Education

In South Africa, language and education remain critical yet underaddressed dimensions of intersectional exclusion (Universities South Africa, 2022), especially in digital contexts. Cele (2021) notes that despite constitutional recognition of 11 official languages, digital systems continue to be predominantly English-centric, marginalising employees with disabilities who speak isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, and other indigenous languages. This lack of multilingual accessibility in digital tools and educational resources reduces meaningful participation and perpetuates ongoing social exclusion. To foster more inclusive workplaces and digital environments, proactive policy implementation, resource allocation, and technological development are needed to enhance the digital presence and usability of indigenous languages (Cele, 2021).

Educational attainment is another decisive factor. People with disabilities are more likely to leave school early, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds often attend under-resourced schools. This limits their digital literacy and readiness for inclusion in modern workplaces (Mwansa et al., 2025). Globally, UNICEF et al. (2024) reports that children with disabilities are among the most likely to be excluded from education, with long-term effects on employability and workplace inclusion. In the South African context, the interaction between disability, language, and education thus reinforces systemic inequities that persist into adulthood (Mwansa et al., 2025).

2.7. Critical Debates: Rhetoric versus Lived Experience

Although the discourse of inclusion has gained prominence in organisational policy and academic research, scholars caution that it often remains **managerial rhetoric** rather than a lived reality for employees with disabilities. Roberson (2006) argues that inclusion is frequently blended with diversity headcounts, producing an emphasis on representational metrics at the expense of genuine participation. This distinction is crucial; an organisation may appear inclusive on paper but foster environments where employees with disabilities feel marginalised or tokenised.

South Africa exemplifies this paradox with progressive frameworks such as the **Employment Equity Act** (Republic of South Africa, 2023) and the **White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (Department of Social Development, 2015) mandate inclusion, but their translation into practice has been uneven. Gordon et al. (2020) highlights how socio-economic inequalities intersect with disability to produce systemic exclusion, even in sectors where policy commitments exist. According to the *Department of Employment and Labour (2023), the 24th Commission for Employment Equity Report*, indicates that representation of people with disabilities across all economic sectors remains approximately 1%, suggesting that many organisations engage in symbolic compliance rather than substantive transformation. This reflects a broader "implementation deficit" in which rights-based frameworks are weakened by limited institutional capacity, poor enforcement, and inadequate resources. Consequently, the experience of inclusion is often aspirational rather than lived, particularly for black South Africans with disabilities in rural or under-resourced settings.

Recent evidence shows that, despite policies mandating equitable representation, actual disability employment across both public and private sectors falls significantly short of targets. For example, the *Commission for Employment Equity (2024)* highlights that the national workforce has yet to reach the mandated 2% disability inclusion benchmark. This disconnect between policy ambition and workplace reality highlights the critiques of symbolic compliance (Ahmed, 2015), where inclusion is treated as a performative exercise rather than an organisational transformation.

The critique extends beyond South Africa with Ahmed (2015) describing "diversity talk" as a form of institutional performance that allows organisations to signal progressiveness without altering structures of power. In such contexts, disability inclusion is often subordinated to more visible diversity categories such as gender and race, creating a "hierarchy of inclusion" in which disability remains peripheral. This resonates with findings from Lup & Canonico (2024), which show that neurodiverse professionals often

encounter disclosure dilemmas and persistent gatekeeping, preventing them from attaining leadership roles even in organisations that publicly champion inclusion.

Global comparisons reinforce the argument that rhetoric frequently outpaces reality. In Europe, disability inclusion is often framed as part of corporate social responsibility rather than embedded in mainstream organisational practice (Vogelauer et al., 2020). By contrast, Scandinavian models, which integrate disability into broader welfare and labour policies, demonstrate how sustained enforcement mechanisms and social protections can reduce the rhetoric-reality gap (Bonfils et al., 2017)

Critically, the **digital transformation of workplaces** magnifies this tension. On one hand, organisations brand themselves as innovative and inclusive by adopting digital platforms; on the other hand, failure to ensure accessibility within these systems deteriorates employees' trust and reinforces exclusion.

Together, these critiques position perceived inclusion as a **litmus test of authenticity;** it reveals whether leadership behaviours and accessibility policies translate into tangible experiences of belonging and value, or whether they remain symbolic gestures. In the South African context, this debate stresses the urgent need to move beyond rhetorical commitments toward enforceable, resource-backed strategies that deliver meaningful workplace inclusion for people with disabilities.

2.8. Workplace Inclusion Beyond Accessibility: Practices, Disclosure, and Comparative Insights

While digital accessibility is foundational, workplace inclusion for people with disabilities also relies on broader organisational practices such as **reasonable accommodation**, **equitable recruitment and retention policies**, and **supportive disclosure cultures**. Reasonable accommodations ranging from flexible working hours to adaptive equipment are often mandated by legislation, but their implementation varies widely. In South Africa, limited budgets and weak enforcement mechanisms mean that many employees never receive the accommodations to which they are entitled (Charles et al., 2023).

A key barrier to inclusion lies in the **disclosure dilemma**. Many employees with invisible disabilities, such as chronic illnesses or mental health conditions, choose not to disclose their disability status due to fear of stigma or career disadvantage (Lup & Canonico, 2024). As a result, they may not access accommodations, perpetuating exclusion despite formal policies. Disclosure is thus a double-edged sword; while it enables access to support, it simultaneously exposes employees to potential discrimination. This dynamic

highlights a critical gap in organisational cultures that prioritise numerical compliance over building climates of trust and psychological safety.

South African evidence shows that disclosure rates are particularly low among black employees with disabilities, who already contend with structural disadvantages in education and employment (Botha et al., 2023; Charles et al., 2023). In such contexts, disability intersects with race, class, and geography, creating compounded risks of exclusion. Failure to address these dynamics minimises the transformative intent of national policies such as the Employment Equity Act and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015).

Comparative studies suggest that workplace inclusion is more advanced in contexts where **systemic mechanisms** support both accommodation and disclosure. In the United Kingdom, the **Disability Confident Scheme** incentivises employers to proactively recruit and retain employees with disabilities. In a recent study conducted by the UK Department for Work & Pension (2023) on the Disability Confident Scheme, 83% of respondents who subscribed to the scheme noted that employing people with disabilities had no effect on the organisation's productivity. In Canada, the **Accessible Canada Act (2019)** aspires towards a barrier-free Canada while the **Canda Disability Benefit Act** serves as a commitment to provide Canadians whom are of working age with an income to reduce poverty and financial burden Saberi & Li (2024). Scandinavian countries have gone further, embedding accessibility and inclusion into mainstream labour policies, with strong unions and social protections ensuring consistency of practice (Halvorsen et al., 2017). These global examples highlight how structural and cultural mechanisms reinforce disclosure and accommodation, while South African frameworks often remain aspirational without sufficient institutional capacity.

Critiques argue that without embedding inclusion in everyday practices, policies risk being tokenistic. Foster & Wass (2013) argues that workplace norms built around the "ideal worker" able-bodied, constantly available, and fully productive continue to disadvantage employees with disabilities. This critique resonates strongly in South Africa, where dominant organisational cultures often equate disability with reduced competence, reinforcing exclusionary practices.

Taken together, workplace inclusion for people with disabilities must be understood as a **multi-layered process**: digital accessibility provides the technical foundation, but disclosure cultures, accommodation practices, and structural reforms determine whether employees can genuinely participate. Without these dimensions, inclusion remains

rhetorical rather than lived, particularly in contexts marked by historical and structural inequities.

2.9. Proposed Integrative Framework

The proposed integrative framework for this study operates on two distinct but complementary levels, allowing for both empirical rigor and contextual depth.

The first model is the **Empirical Model:** At its core, the study will empirically test a model derived from Transformational Leadership Theory and Organisational Inclusion Theory. This model hypothesises that Digital Leadership practices (as an evolved form of transformational leadership) influence Perceived Inclusion, with Digital Accessibility acting as a key mediating variable. This causal pathway forms the basis of the quantitative analysis and hypothesis testing.

The second model is the **Interpretive Framework**: To ensure the findings are deeply contextualised and culturally resonant, the analysis in the Discussion chapter is guided by the principles of Ubuntu and Benevolent Leadership. These philosophies are not measured as variables but are employed as analytical lenses to interpret the quantitative results. For example, they help explain how and why specific leadership behaviours foster a sense of belonging and uniqueness in a manner that is meaningful within a South African organisational culture.

This dual-level framework repositions digital leadership as the convergence point of technology, established leadership theory, and contextually relevant ethics. It allows the study to leverage a generalised positivist methodology while embracing the nuanced insight afforded by indigenous and culturally-specific philosophies.

The resulting theoretical synthesis posits that:

1. **Digital Leadership** (as an evolved form of transformational leadership) provides the strategic and behavioural mechanisms for inclusive digital transformation.
2. **Digital Accessibility** acts as a **mediator** linking leadership intent and employees' perceived inclusion.
3. **Ubuntu** grounds the framework in African humanist ethics, ensuring that digital transformation aligns with principles of equity, dignity, and social justice.

This framework thus repositions digital leadership as the **convergence point** of technology, ethics, and inclusion, integrating global leadership theory with contextually relevant African philosophy. By empirically examining these linkages within South

African organisations, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of how leaders can drive equitable digital transformation that meaningfully includes people with disabilities.

2.10. Chapter Summary

The reviewed literature reveals dynamic advancements in the fields of digital transformation and leadership but also uncovers persistent blind spots in the approach to inclusion and specifically towards people with disabilities. Scholars have explored digital leadership predominantly in the context of performance, innovation and change, which emphasises the importance of visionary leadership and technological agility (Sacavém et al., 2025).

Likewise, the body of research of digital accessibility has expanded over the years, responding to global policy initiatives and standards such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Technical solutions exist; however, their implementation is fragmented in countries such as South Africa (Ngqunguza et al., 2024). Another challenge is that the interpretation of accessibility is a compliance issue when it should be dealt with holistically in the leadership strategy (Krok, 2024).

Simultaneously, perceived inclusion has attracted attention for its role to influence employee engagement and well-being (Randel et al., 2018, Shore et al., 2011). However, in the mainstream, few empirical studies have explored the connection between perceived inclusion and digital systems or leadership behaviours, especially among employees with disabilities. Studies have failed to focus on how digital exclusion impacts employees' feelings of belonging, recognition and fairness of work, which is key to maintaining diverse and high performing teams.

From a theoretical perspective, Organisational Inclusion Theory (Shore et al., 2011) and Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) provide a strong theoretical approach to the dual requirement of structural access and psychological inclusion. However, this does not apply to digitally mediated work environments for people with disabilities. Although these theories are frequently referenced in more general inclusion or digital participation literature, few empirical studies have explored how they are practiced, especially in the South African context where digital exclusion and the underemployment of people with disabilities continues despite progressive legal frameworks.

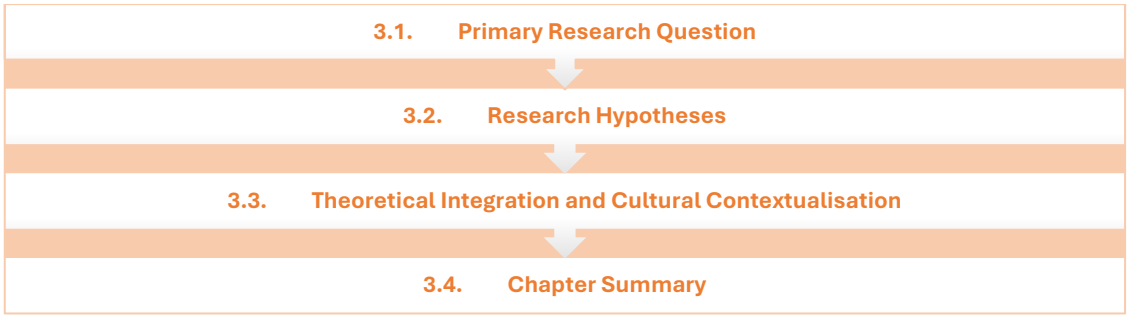
CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The purpose of this chapter is to frame the key research question and associated hypotheses. The chapter builds on the research problem presented in Introduction and Literature review of the study.

Despite the accelerated growth of digital transformation globally, people with disabilities continue to face significant barriers to participation in the workplace as highlighted by the literature. Digital accessibility, which refers to extent to which technologies, systems and processes are used within an organisation, continues to be one of the most persistent challenges. Enhancing digital accessibility has the potential to balance the scales and provide equitable opportunities for people with disabilities to participate meaningfully and fully in an organisation. Research constantly highlights the critical role that leaders play in embedding accessibility and inclusion into the organisation's culture. Several scholars have noted that progressive disability inclusion stems directly from a leaders authenthic commitment and a deliberate effort to prioritise inlcusion in strategic decision making.

Building on Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985),Organisational Inclusion Theory (Shore et al., 2018), and the Ubuntu philosophical framework (Metz, 2011; Mutanga, 2023), this study explores how digital leadership influences digital accessibility and, in turn, shapes perceptions of inclusion among employees with disabilities in South African organisations. The research grounds the lived experiences of these employees, recognising their perspectives as vital to understanding how leadership behaviours translate into inclusive digital practices. Figure 3 serves as a visual aid to assist the reader through the chapter.

Figure 3: *Chapter 3 roadmap*



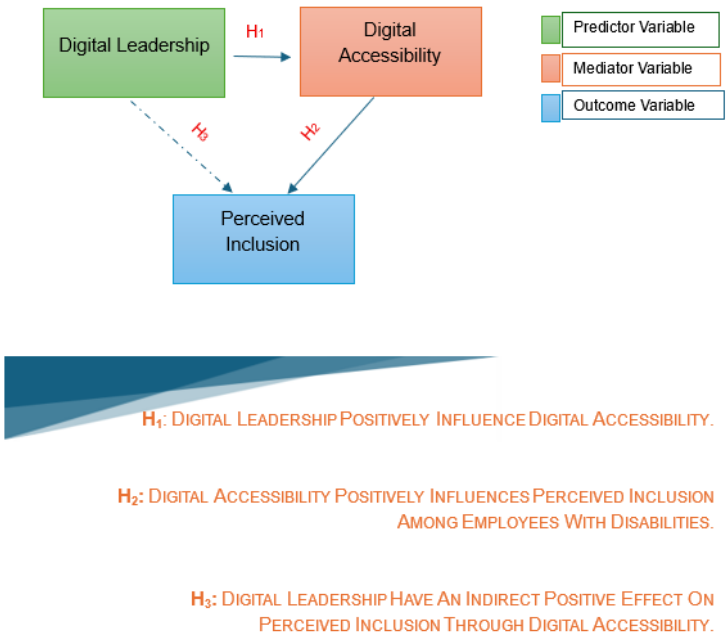
Source: Author

3.1. Primary Research Question

The following research question were designed to address gaps identified in the literature and to empirically test the relationships between the key constructs introduced in Chapter 2.

Research Question: How does digital leadership influence digital accessibility and perceived inclusion among employees with disabilities?

Figure 4: *Conceptual Model illustrating the relationship between digital leadership, digital accessibility and perceived inclusion*



Source: Author

3.2. Research Hypotheses

Drawing on the theoretical and empirical insights discussed in Chapter 2 and supported by recent literature, the study proposes the following hypotheses to guide the quantitative analysis:

H_1: Digital leadership positively and significantly influences digital accessibility within organisations.

Rationale: Leadership behaviours that reflect transformational and inclusive principles, such as articulating a clear digital vision, modelling accessibility, and empowering staff are linked to stronger organisational capacity for implementing accessible technologies. Recent empirical evidence supports this relationship through multiple pathways:

- **Resource allocation and policy translation**: Maclean et al. (2024) demonstrated how transformational leadership in a South African state-

owned enterprise translated employment equity policies into concrete inclusive recruitment and accommodation practices. Their case study revealed that leaders who embraced inclusion allocated specific budgets for accessibility audits, assistive technologies, and staff training.

- **Managerial support as implementation enabler**: Nacheva (2025) identified top management support as a critical factor in ensuring digital accessibility in workplace contexts, noting that leadership endorsement directly influences whether accessibility is prioritised in procurement, development workflows, and organisational policies.
- **Organisational climate creation**: The literature consistently shows that transformational leaders create organisational climates that normalise accessibility considerations, moving beyond compliance-only approaches to embed accessibility in core business processes (Huq et al., 2023; Inal et al., 2020).

H_2: Digital accessibility positively and significantly influences perceived inclusion among employees with disabilities.

Rationale: When digital platforms, systems, and communication tools are accessible, employees with disabilities are more likely to feel engaged, valued, and included in the organisation. This relationship is supported by both theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence:

- **Participation and belonging**: Accessible digital tools enable meaningful participation in work activities, which is fundamental to inclusion experiences. Recent research demonstrates that limited accessibility implementation constrains participation in digital collaboration and reduces experiential inclusion for people with disabilities (Inal et al., 2020).
- **Beyond tokenism to meaningful inclusion**: Gould et al. (2019) emphasised through their analysis of corporate social responsibility practices that tokenistic or compliance-only approaches fail to produce perceived inclusion, while sustained, mainstreamed accessibility and accommodations are associated with more meaningful inclusion experiences.

H_3: Digital leadership practices indirectly influence perceived inclusion through digital accessibility.

Rationale: Leaders shape inclusion not only through interpersonal engagement but also by influencing the technological and cultural infrastructure that enables equitable participation. Digital accessibility acts as a mediating mechanism through which leadership fosters inclusion:

- **Causal pathway evidence**: Multiple studies illustrate segments of the causal chain from leadership approach (transformational) → organisational policies and climate (resources, norms, accommodations) → accessibility practices implemented → employee perceptions of inclusion and engagement (Karimi & Khawaja, 2024; Maclean et al., 2024; Nxumalo, 2020).
- **Ubuntu leadership integration**: Recent empirical work on Ubuntu leadership demonstrates its emphasis on relationality, empathy, and "people first" norms, which translates into management practices that enhance inclusion in South African contexts (Bam & Ronnie, 2020). This culturally anchored approach to leadership provides additional theoretical support for the mediation hypothesis within the South African context.

3.3. Theoretical Integration and Cultural Contextualisation

The proposed hypotheses reflect a multi-theoretical integration that is particularly relevant to the South African context. Transformational Leadership Theory provides a behavioural lens, suggesting that leaders who inspire and empower others can drive inclusive digital change. Organisational Inclusion Theory highlights the importance of belonging and recognition as outcomes of inclusive practice. Ubuntu adds a moral and cultural dimension, framing accessibility and inclusion as ethical imperatives rooted in South Africa's commitment to social justice and communal responsibility.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated the empirical relevance of Ubuntu philosophy in organisational contexts. Bam & Ronnie (2020) found that Ubuntu-informed leadership approaches, which emphasise collective responsibility and human dignity, were particularly effective in creating inclusive workplace environments for people with disabilities in South African organisations. This cultural framework enhances the theoretical foundation by providing locally relevant leadership constructs that complement Western theories.

3.4. Chapter Summary

This chapter has enhanced the research questions and hypotheses that lay the foundation for the empirical investigation, supported by recent peer-reviewed literature

and theoretical frameworks. By linking digital leadership, accessibility, and inclusion within a coherent multi-theoretical framework that incorporates both Western and African philosophical traditions, it lays the groundwork for the methodological approach detailed in Chapter 4, which outlines the research design, data collection tools, and statistical procedures used to test the hypotheses.

The enhanced literature foundation, incorporating recent empirical findings from 2020-2025, strengthens the rationale for each hypothesis and provides robust theoretical grounding for the proposed relationships. This positions the study to make significant empirical and conceptual contributions to the fields of leadership, digital transformation, and workplace inclusion, particularly within the context of disability and organisational change in developing economies.

CHAPTER 4 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

4.1. Introduction

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological framework that guided the empirical investigation. The study's design was shaped by the need to examine the complexities between digital leadership, digital accessibility and perceived inclusion within a South African context while drawing on the perspectives of people with disabilities. To achieve this, the chapter presents a structured account of the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research, the rationale for adopting a quantitative design, and the procedures followed to ensure rigour, coherence, and ethical integrity throughout the research process.

The chapter proceeds by detailing the population and unit of analysis, followed by the sampling and recruitment strategies used to reach a hard-to-access population. It then introduces the measurement instrument, outlining the development and structure of the questionnaire and the steps taken to prepare, screen, and manage the data. Issues of reliability, validity, and data protection are addressed to demonstrate the methodological soundness of the study.

The chapter concludes with an overview of the analytical techniques used to test the hypotheses, including correlation analysis, non-parametric group comparisons, and mediation analysis. To provide a clear overview of the chapter's structure and the logical sequence of methodological decisions, Figure 5 below presents a visual roadmap of the research methodology.

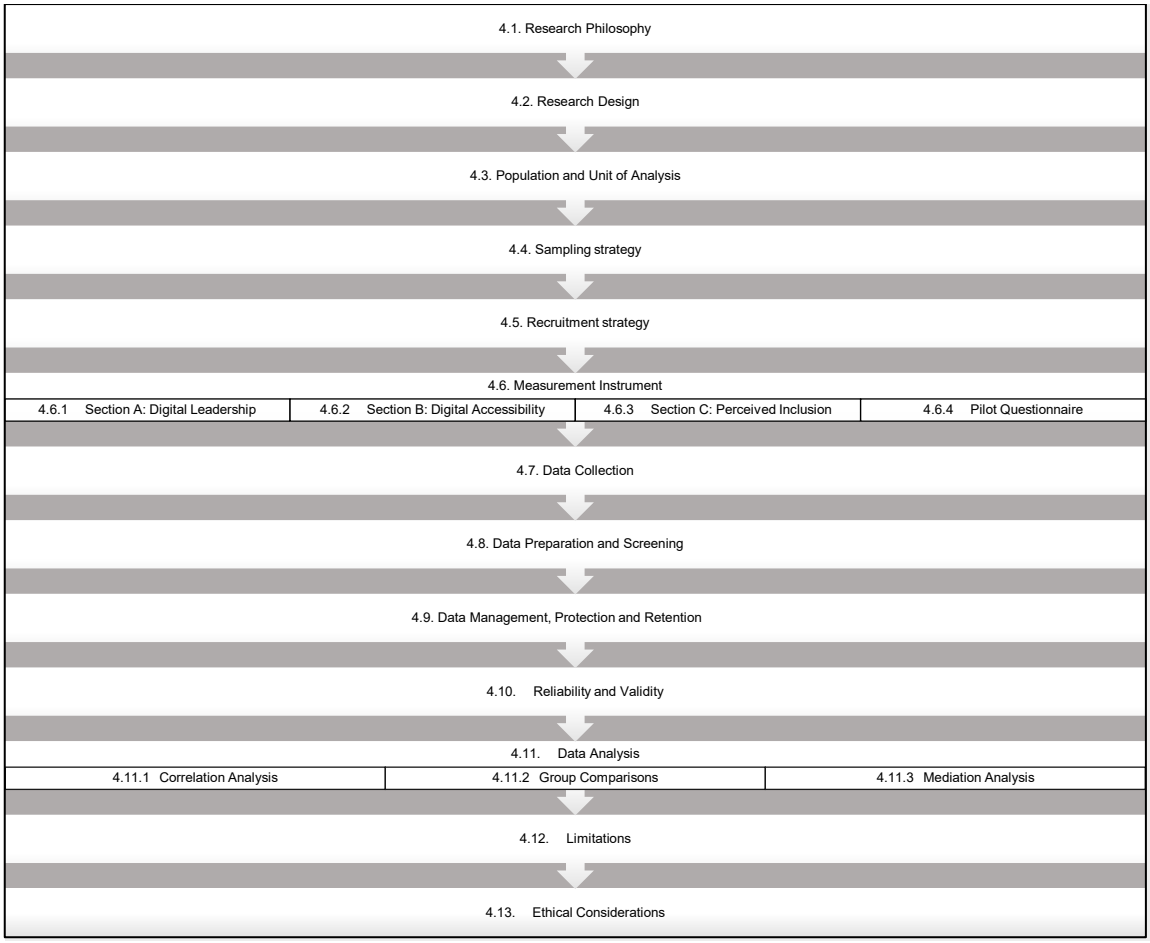


Figure 5: *Chapter 4 roadmap*

Source: Author

4.2. Research Philosophy

This study adopted a **positivist research philosophy** that is aligned with its quantitative nature. It is also founded on the premise that reality can be measured objectively and empirically through observable phenomena by the researcher (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Saunders et al., 2023). Furthermore, Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) reasons that positivism is an appropriate research philosophy for investigating quantifiable relationships, which in this study are Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility and Perceived Inclusion among people with disabilities. A deductive approach was used; the study was initiated with a theory-driven hypothesis on how Digital Leadership and Digital Accessibility influence Perceived Inclusion. The data was then used to test the hypothesis. By systematically observing these phenomena using standardised instruments, positivism enabled the researcher to produce objective, replicable and generalisable deductions that were imperative for evidence-based recommendations in the South African context (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Saunders et al., 2023).

4.3. Research Design

This study adopted a **quantitative, cross-sectional research design** using a structured online survey to examine the relationships between Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion among employees with disabilities. The original intention was to use a confirmatory, multivariate approach (e.g., Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modelling) given the theoretical model guiding the research. However, due to the limited number of survey responses received (N = 41), the design was pragmatically adjusted to an exploratory analytical approach. According to Hair et al. (2019) small samples may not provide the statistical power or estimation stability required for complex multivariate procedures; in such cases, more exploratory and distribution-free techniques are recommended. Pallant (2020) similarly advises adapting analytic strategies in alignment with sample characteristics.

This study used an **explanatory research design** to empirically test specific hypotheses concerning the impact of Digital Leadership on Digital Accessibility and Perceived Inclusion among employees with disabilities. The design was explanatory as it identified and quantified the influence of digital leadership and digital accessibility on the outcome variable, i.e., perceived inclusion by employees with disabilities in the workplace in South Africa. An explanatory research design was relevant as it assisted in explaining the relationships between the constructs of the study: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility and Perceived Inclusion (Saunders et al., 2023).

Given that the objective of the study was to capture the data at a single point in time, a cross-sectional study was selected. Cross-sectional studies are commonly used in business research to provide a “snapshot” of the relationship among the constructs (Saunders et al., 2023). The quantitative approach caters for objective measurements using Likert-scale survey items and facilitates inferential analysis to determine significant predictors of perceived inclusion. This study used a correlation design, which will allow the researcher to observe and analyse how relationships between variables in a natural work setting correlate without manipulating any conditions.

Given the current practical constraints and the study’s primary objective, a cross-sectional study is more conducive; however, a longitudinal approach may reveal greater insight over time. Overall, this approach allows us to explore potential causal links in a generalised manner across people with disabilities.

4.4. Population and Unit of Analysis

The Employment Equity Act (2022, p.2) defines employees with disabilities in South Africa as people "who have a long-term or recurring physical, or mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with various barriers, may substantially limit their prospects of entry into or the advancement in employment". The population of this study comprised of all South African employees with disabilities in the formal sector who participate in digital-mediated workplaces. This included individuals with various disabilities such as visual, auditory, sensory, motor or cognitive impairments. This is aligned with the research problem's emphasis on digital leadership and inclusion, as the target population directly experiences the phenomena being examined. The study focused on various sectors to ensure a broader generalisability.

Participants were adults (legal working age and above) with a self-identified disability, working in South Africa, and using digital tools, platforms or systems in their work environment. The unit of analysis is the individual employee. Each individual employee provided raw data in the form of responses on their perceptions and experiences of digital leadership, accessibility and inclusion, which were measured individually.

4.5. Sampling strategy

The practical aim of this study was to assess organisational inclusion; the target population was defined as employees who self-identify as having a disability (physical, sensory or cognitive) or those who were medically diagnosed in small to large organisations. A non-probability sampling strategy was used to select a sample from the population. The study used **purposive and convenience sampling** techniques, given the practical challenge of identifying and randomly sampling employees with disabilities due to privacy and the dispersed nature of this group.

Purposive sampling involved identifying networks, forums and organisations that involve people with disabilities. **Convenience sampling** leverages voluntary participation and would also come into play through online recruitment using social media platforms or emailing the survey link. Snowball sampling also supplemented the above sampling methods and involved the initial participants referring or sharing the survey with their peer group. No strict probabilistic sample frame was applicable for this study; the emphasis was on collecting a diverse and sufficient sample size to enable robust statistical analysis. Lieber (1990) outlines the importance of having an appropriate sample size to draw generalisable conclusions.

4.6. Recruitment strategy

To maximise the survey's reach and improve the response rate, multiple recruitment strategies were implemented. The survey was reposted on various social media platforms, including Facebook and LinkedIn, targeting groups and communities dedicated to people with disabilities. In addition to organic outreach, the researcher made direct contact with a range of disability advocacy groups and requested that the survey link be distributed within their networks. This was done through formal email communications and follow-ups.

A notable outreach success involved an entrepreneur who operates a radio station focused on people with disabilities. The researcher was invited to speak about the study and its objectives during a live segment on the station, which enhanced visibility. Following the broadcast, the survey was also promoted via the radio station's social media platforms. These targeted dissemination strategies reflected a deliberate and sustained effort to reach a broader, more inclusive audience and to ensure that the voices of people with disabilities were actively engaged in the study.

Although over 280 responses were initially sought, 52 responses were received, but only 41 responses were ultimately usable for analysis. While this represented a limitation in statistical generalisability, small-sample research is recognised as valuable in under-researched populations (Hair et al., 2019), particularly where access is constrained.

4.7. Measurement Instrument

The researcher applied for ethical clearance from the Gordon Institute of Business Science, which was approved before commencing with the research (as evidenced in Appendix A). The application included the research methodology (chapter 4), the survey questionnaire and the template for informed consent that accompanied the questionnaire.

The study employed a structured survey questionnaire that was initially drafted in English and subsequently translated into isiZulu and Sesotho (two of South Africa's official languages). This translation aimed to improve accessibility and inclusiveness, ensuring that participants could engage with the instrument in their home languages. The translations were reviewed for accuracy and cultural relevance, helping to maintain the meaning of each item across languages. By offering the survey in multiple languages, the research enhanced participation from a diverse workforce and mitigated language barriers in the data collection process.

The research instrument was a structured survey questionnaire composed of four sections; three sections used the Likert scale items to measure key constructs. Salkind (2012) cites the development of the Likert scale in 1932, which has become a widely used and popular attitude assessment scale. The instruments used the Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) to ensure consistency and measurability in responses, thereby promoting a transparent data analysis.

The questionnaire itself was composed of a demographics section and **three main constructs: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion**. Adapting existing validated scales helped to ensure content validity and alignment with accepted definitions of each construct. In developing the final instrument, the wording of items was slightly modified to fit the organisational context of this study while preserving their original intent. All adapted items were phrased as statements to which respondents indicated their level of agreement.

4.7.1 Section A: Digital Leadership

Digital Leadership was assessed using items adapted from the Digital Leadership Index developed by Zeike et al. (2019). The original index consists of six items capturing leaders' attitudes, competencies, and behaviours in leveraging digital tools and driving digital transformation initiatives. For example, items in the original scale probe the extent to which a leader proactively drives digital transformation and inspires others in the digital realm.

In this study's questionnaire, these items were contextualised to the organisation's environment, maintaining their focus on digital proficiency and visionary leadership in technology and were presented in simplified English before translation. The adaptation from Zeike's index provided a theoretically grounded way to measure digital leadership, as the source instrument had demonstrated good reliability and a clear factor structure in prior research (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

4.7.2 Section B: Digital Accessibility

Digital Accessibility was measured with items drawn and adapted from two disability inclusion instruments: the Disability Inclusion Profile (DIP-23) and the Workplace Culture and Disability Inclusion Questionnaire (WCDIQ). The DIP-23 is a 23-item employer self-assessment tool developed to evaluate an organisation's disability inclusion policies and practices (Chan et al., 2021). It features items spanning areas like executive-level commitment to inclusion and staff-level practices, and has shown a two-factor structure (e.g., focusing on executive practices vs. mid-level practices). Notably, the DIP-23 has

been found to be a psychometrically sound measure for a workplace's disability-inclusive climate.

Similarly, the WCDIQ was designed to assess cultural aspects of workplace disability inclusion (Iwanaga et al., 2018). From these instruments, relevant items were adapted to the context of digital accessibility, that is, the degree to which the organisation's digital systems, tools, and information are accessible to all employees, including those with disabilities. The wording was tailored to reflect digital environments (for instance, referring to accessible technology and digital platforms) while echoing the content of the original disability inclusion items. Using these sources ensured that the Digital Accessibility scale in the survey captured both policy-level and cultural dimensions of inclusion, grounded in existing research on disability-inclusive workplaces.

4.7.3 Section C: Perceived Inclusion

The Perceived Inclusion construct includes items which was adapted from Chung et al. (2020). This scale was designed to capture employees' personal sense of inclusion within the organisation. For example, feeling valued, included in decision-making, and accepted by their team. In particular, the items resemble aspects that consist of statements about an individual's access to core organisational activities and information networks (e.g. participation in decision-making). They also reflect the two key dimensions of inclusion identified by Shore et al. (2011), namely, belongingness and uniqueness, by asking whether employees feel like esteemed members of their work group whose unique qualities are appreciated.

In adapting the perceived inclusion scale, care was taken to ensure that the statements were relevant to the organisation's context (e.g. referencing inclusion in digital initiatives where appropriate) while staying true to the constructs of feeling accepted, involved, and valued as highlighted in existing inclusion frameworks.

All survey items across the three constructs were measured on a five-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from "Strongly Disagree (1)" to "Strongly Agree (5)". This scaling allowed participants to indicate the extent of their agreement with each statement. The use of a consistent Likert format for all items facilitated ease of response and is typical for assessments of perceptions and attitudes in research. By using established scales and translating them carefully into local languages, the instrumentation of this study was designed to yield reliable, inclusive, and meaningful measures of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion within the South African organisational context. The survey instrument is included under Appendix B.

4.7.4 Pilot Questionnaire

Ensuring the reliability and validity of the measurement instrument is paramount to research. Creswell and Creswell (2023) suggest that the use of a pilot test to evaluate the suitability of the instrument for the sample, to assess the internal consistency of the questions and lastly, to amend or revise the content, format or guidelines of the instrument. Ideally, an **exploratory factor analysis (EFA)** would be performed on the pilot data using principal axis factoring and oblique rotation to examine the underlying factor structure of the instrument. However, factor analysis procedures require a relatively large sample, commonly no fewer than 50 cases for EFA.

In practice, guidelines suggest having at least five to 10 participants per item for factor analysis to produce stable results. With only four usable respondents and over 20 questionnaire items, the data fell short of these recommendations. As Hair et al. (2019) caution, EFA with a very small sample risks drawing spurious or non-generalisable conclusions. Therefore, a modified approach was applied; the primary validity assessment relied on item-total correlations and conceptual consistency.

Prior to full-scale distribution, the questionnaire was piloted from 21 July 2025 to 3 August 2025 (two-week period). During this pilot, five participants completed the survey and were invited to provide feedback on item clarity, structure, and language. No negative feedback was received regarding item interpretation or usability. This pilot exercise confirmed that the instrument was clear and comprehensible, and no revisions were necessary before deployment. The pilot phase, therefore, contributed to confirming face validity, logistical feasibility and enabled the researcher to test the real-world application and performance before full-scale deployment.

4.8. Data Collection

Data was collected via the online survey platform Google Forms to accommodate participants' diverse accessibility needs. An online approach was appropriate as it reached participants across different regions of South Africa. The online approach also offered convenience and anonymity for the respondents. Online administration was also advantageous for accessibility, as the survey can be designed to be compatible with assistive technologies such as screen readers for the visually impaired, which aligned with the study’s focus on digital accessibility. The anonymity and voluntary participation are significant to this study and will promote honest responses that will be respected at all times (Salkind, 2012; Saunders et al., 2023).

The questionnaire ran from 4 August until 25 September 2025. The questionnaire was distributed to participants as a link via email, social media platforms and, through partner organisations and networks supporting people with disabilities who are employed. The questionnaire was open for a specified data collection period, which was eight weeks. This timeframe was initially envisaged to be four weeks, but due to the low response rate, the timeframe was extended. The researcher anticipated collecting more responses by translating the questionnaire into isiZulu and Sesotho; however, no responses were received on the translated questionnaires.

Before commencing with the survey, participants were presented with an informed consent form that clearly outlined the purpose of the study, what the study entailed and their rights with respect to: voluntary participation, to decline or withdraw at any time, and the assurance that all responses would remain confidential. Participants indicated their consent before proceeding to the questions. The survey was anonymous, and all identifying personal data was removed in compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), 2013. General demographic data was collected to describe the sample. By using an online survey with these procedures, the study ensured data quality through a consistent, self-administered questionnaire and adhered to ethical standards of informed consent and participant anonymity.

4.9. Data Preparation and Screening

After the closure of the survey, all responses were downloaded into an Excel workbook. The Excel workbook was initially reviewed and categorised based on usability. A total of 11 invalid entries were removed, ensuring that only fully completed and relevant responses were retained for analysis. The resulting dataset was then coded numerically in preparation for statistical analysis in SPSS (as evidenced in Appendix C). According to Pallant (2020), data preparation procedures should include meticulous verification of data entry accuracy, handling of missing values, and labelling of variables in a consistent and meaningful manner. In line with these protocols, each survey item was assigned a numeric code reflecting the Likert-scale response, and variable names were defined clearly to correspond with their theoretical constructs.

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 30 was used to run additional preliminary checks, such as frequency distributions, descriptive statistics, and identification of potential outliers were conducted to assess the data's integrity. These preparatory steps were essential to ensure that the dataset was suitable for the non-parametric analyses and reliability tests described in subsequent sections. The study additionally used Hayes's PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS to formally test the

mediation model, as this tool is well-suited for smaller samples and does not require the stringent assumptions of SEM.

4.10. Data Management, Protection and Retention

All research data was stored securely in accordance with the POPIA (2013), as well as the relevant institutional data governance policies. Data was housed on encrypted, password-protected servers, with regular backups conducted to maintain data integrity and to prevent loss.

No personal identifiable information or sensitive personal data was collected during the study. Participants remained entirely anonymous, and all published outputs reflect only aggregated results; and no individual participant was identifiable in any form of dissemination.

Access to the dataset is strictly limited to the researcher, with restricted access granted under supervision where necessary. All procedures for handling data complied with the principles of lawful processing, data minimisation, and purpose limitation, as outlined in POPIA (2013).

In line with institutional regulations, the anonymised dataset will be retained for a period of 10 years in a secure, access-controlled institutional repository. Once this retention period concludes, the data will be securely destroyed.

4.11. Reliability and Validity

As mentioned above, the **exploratory factor analysis (EFA)** was not a feasible option given the limited data sample. More weight was placed on the strong pattern of correlations observed; items intended to measure the same construct showed high inter-correlations (most item pairs $r > .50$ within constructs) and lower correlations with items of other constructs, supporting discriminant validity between Digital Leadership, Accessibility, and Inclusion. In summary, the measurement model was deemed acceptably reliable and conceptually sound for an exploratory study, but any conclusions about factor structure were tentative. This informed the decision not to proceed with a full CFA (which would be underpowered) and to focus subsequent analyses on composite scores rather than latent variable modelling.

Reliability was measured using the **Cronbach's Alpha** to ensure internal consistency reliability in measuring each individual construct identified. An alpha value of ≥ 0.70 was used as the threshold for acceptable reliability. In addition to Cronbach's alpha, the mean inter-item correlation (MIIC) was examined for each scale as a supplementary indicator

of internal consistency. Hair et al. (2019) recommend an average inter-item correlation in the range of roughly 0.3 to 0.5 for a well-balanced scale. This dual approach (α and MIIC) to reliability was particularly important given the small N, since Cronbach's α can be sensitive to the number of items and participants.

4.12. Data Analysis

Following the factor and reliability analysis, **composite scores** for each construct were computed by calculating the average of the items in a specific domain. This enabled the use of the three primary variables i.e., Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility and Perceived Inclusion, in the rank-based correlation and bootstrapped mediation (Hayes PROCESS Model 4), which resulted in improved parsimony and interpretability. With reliable composite scores computed for each key construct, the study next examined the relationships and differences of interest using non-parametric statistical tests. All inferential analyses were conducted in the past tense, reflecting that the study had already been executed on the collected data.

4.12.1 Correlation Analysis

To test the associations between Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion, Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficients (Spearman's p) were calculated. Spearman's p is the non-parametric equivalent of Pearson's r and is appropriate for ordinal or non-normally distributed data (Pallant, 2020). Unlike Pearson's correlation, Spearman's does not assume interval-scale data or normality; instead, it assesses the monotonic relationship based on ranked values, making it ideal for Likert-scale composites in a small sample (Pallant, 2020). According to Pallant (2020, p.211), the strength of correlations was interpreted with Cohen's (1988) effect size conventions (r = 0.10 to 0.29 →small, r = 0.30 to 0.49 →medium, r = 0.50 to 1.00 → large).

This analysis addressed the bivariate relationships in the research model, essentially probing whether higher perceived digital leadership is associated with higher accessibility and inclusion, as hypothesised. By using Spearman's method, the study ensured that these tests were robust against the observed deviations from normality and the ordinal nature of the data.

4.12.2 Group Comparisons

The study also explored whether perceptions differed across various demographic subgroups (such as gender, age category, tenure, and digital literacy level). Instead of t-tests and ANOVAs (which require normal distributions and equal variances), non-

parametric group tests were employed. For comparing two groups (e.g. male vs female respondents), the Mann–Whitney U test was used. This test ranks all responses and then compares the mean rank between the two groups, effectively testing if one group tends to have higher scores than the other.

For comparing three or more groups (e.g. different age brackets or categories of digital literacy), the Kruskal–Wallis H test was applied. Kruskal–Wallis is an extension of Mann–Whitney for >2 groups and likewise evaluates differences in median ranks across categories rather than differences in means. Using these tests, the researcher examined, for instance, whether younger employees reported different inclusion levels than older employees, or whether digital accessibility perceptions varied by tenure. In each case, the non-parametric approach ensured that the comparisons remained valid despite the data's non-normality and heterogeneity. As Pallant (2020) notes, non-parametric alternatives carry fewer assumptions and thus are suitable fallback options when parametric criteria are not satisfied. The trade-off is a potential loss of power, meaning a true effect might be harder to detect with the small N. Acknowledging this, the analysis focused on directional differences and effect sizes in addition to p-values.

The results of the Mann–Whitney and Kruskal–Wallis tests (reported in Chapter 6) indicated no statistically significant differences at the 5% level across most demographics, which, given the limited sample, suggests that any large subgroup disparities were unlikely.

4.12.3 Mediation Analysis

Finally, to address the central hypothesis about mediation that Digital Accessibility mediates the effect of Digital Leadership on Perceived Inclusion, a bootstrapped mediation analysis was performed. The study employed Hayes's PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS to formally test the mediation model, as this tool is well-suited for smaller samples and does not require the stringent assumptions of a Structured Equation Model (SEM). Specifically, 5,000 bootstrap resamples were requested to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals for the indirect effect. Bootstrapping is a resampling technique that builds an empirical approximation of the sampling distribution of a statistic (here, the indirect effect) by repeatedly sampling from the data with replacement. This approach "generates robust confidence intervals and indirect effects without requiring large-sample assumptions".

In other words, it allows one to test mediation even when classical normal theory approaches (Sobel test, etc.) might be unreliable due to non-normality or small sample sizes. It also endorses bootstrapping to improve inference in modest samples, since it

makes no distributional assumptions and instead relies on the data at hand. The PROCESS Model 4 estimates the total effect of the predictor on the outcome, the direct effect (controlling for the mediator), and the indirect effect via the mediator simultaneously.

In the researcher's analysis, Digital Leadership was entered as the independent variable (X), Perceived Inclusion as the dependent variable (Y), and Digital Accessibility as the mediator (M). The regression models within PROCESS were based on ordinary least squares, but all significance testing for the mediation used the bootstrap confidence interval of the indirect effect (product-of-coefficients). This is crucial, as the bootstrap method remains valid under violations of normality, a condition known to exist in the data. The mediation analysis was thus conducted in an exploratory yet inferentially rigorous manner, aligning with the study's revised analytical paradigm. The output (reported in detail in the results chapter) included the bootstrapped indirect effect estimate and its 95% confidence interval. Because zero was not contained in this interval, a statistically significant mediation was confirmed (at $\alpha = 0.05$). The use of PROCESS and bootstrapping allowed us to draw this insight with "**acceptable validity and precision"** even under small-sample conditions.

Throughout all analyses, results were interpreted in context and with caution. Given that statistical generalisation is limited for N = 41, the emphasis was placed on theoretical and practical interpretation of patterns (e.g. consistency of positive relationships, absence of large group disparities) rather than on broad population inference. This approach aligns with the guidance that smaller samples can still yield valuable conceptual insights, contributing to exploratory theory-building even if they cannot conclusively prove hypotheses (Hair et al., 2019). In summary, the methodology was adapted to balance scientific rigour with feasibility by using descriptive analysis, careful assumption checks, non-parametric tests, and bootstrapped estimation, the study upheld robust analytical standards consistent with Pallant's (2020) and Hair et al.'s (2019) recommendations for quantitative research under constrained sample sizes.

4.13. Limitations

Although a cross-sectional design offers practical advantages, it limits the ability to observe changes over time. Self-reported measures could introduce social desirability bias among participants. While the structured survey provided valuable standardised data, it did not capture the depth and nuance of participants' lived experiences. The study could be significantly strengthened in future by incorporating a qualitative dimension to elevate participant voices and explore context-specific insights in greater detail.

A further limitation centres on the mode of data collection. Due to the questionnaire being distributed online, participation required access to digital devices and a stable internet connection. This may have disadvantaged individuals who experience severe digital accessibility barriers, those who, by definition already the most marginalised within digitally mediated work environments. Their absence from the sample may imply that the study underrepresents the experiences of employees with disabilities with limited digital access.

Additionally, purposive elements and the relatively small sample size in the sampling process mean that caution must be exercised when attempting to generalise the findings to the broader population of South African organisations. These methodological constraints were acknowledged in the interpretation of the results, and efforts were made to mitigate their influence through rigorous instrument design and targeted outreach.

4.14. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered strictly to the ethical guidelines and principles as outlined in the university's code of conduct. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were given a background to the study, including its purpose, procedures, possible risks emanating from the study, the guarantee of anonymity and their rights, including the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

The researcher ensured full compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA, 2013) by anonymising all data and ensuring strict security protocols to safeguard confidentiality. As people with disabilities are among the most vulnerable populations in South Africa and are most susceptible to discrimination and stigmatisation, special attention was given to the ethical implications of the study. Participants were assured that their responses would be used responsibly and for the sole purpose of academic research.

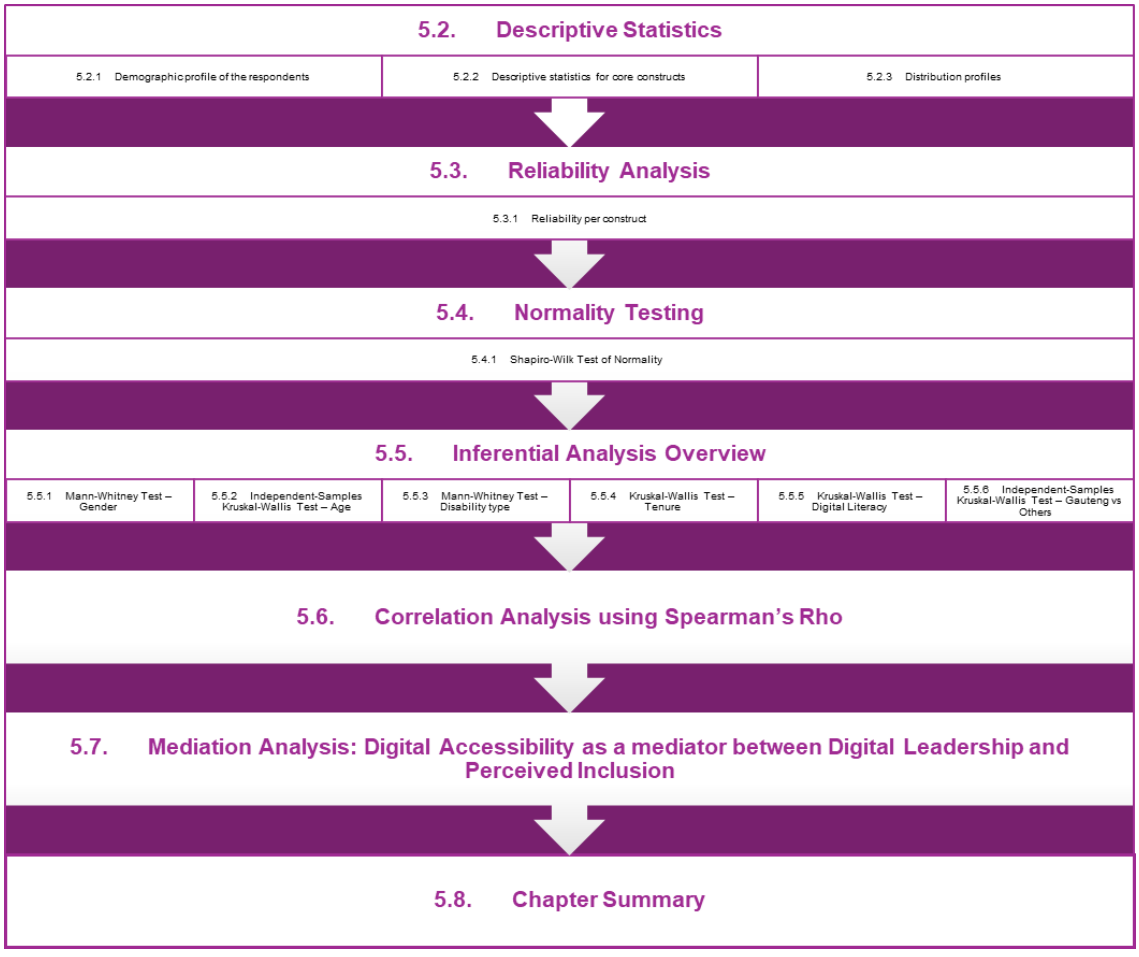
By ensuring compliance with these ethical standards, the research aims to respect the dignity and rights of all participants, fostering a psychologically safe environment throughout the research process.

CHAPTER 5 – RESULTS

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical results of the study in alignment with the research objectives and conceptual framework. The analysis proceeds from the evaluation of measurement reliability and data distribution through to descriptive, correlational, and inferential testing. The chapter aims to establish the strength, direction, and nature of the relationships among Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion, as well as to assess whether perceptions differ across demographic groups. Figure 6 below provides a visual representation of the chapter.

Figure 6: *Chapter 5 roadmap*



Source: Author

5.2. Descriptive Statistics

This section presents the descriptive statistics for the three primary constructs under investigation: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. Descriptive analysis was conducted to provide an overview of how participants responded to the composite measures derived from multi-item scales. Measures of central tendency (median), variability (interquartile range), and distributional shape were examined. Given the ordinal nature of the data and the use of Likert-type response scales, emphasis was placed on medians and rank-based summaries rather than means. This summary provides the foundational context for the inferential analyses reported in subsequent sections.

5.2.1 Demographic profile of the respondents

Understanding the participants in the study is fundamental to interpreting its findings. The demographic composition of respondents provides essential context for analysing how perceptions of digital leadership, Digital Accessibility, and inclusion are experienced across different groups. Given that the study focuses on employees with disabilities across South African organisations, the demographic overview not only situates the sample within its social and occupational landscape but also highlights the diversity of perspectives that underpin subsequent analyses.

Beyond serving a descriptive function, the profile reflects the lived realities of a workforce navigating digital transformation amid persistent accessibility and inclusion challenges. By examining characteristics such as gender, age, type of disability, education level, and organisational tenure, this section establishes a foundation for understanding how these attributes may shape employees' perceptions of leadership practices and their sense of inclusion within digital work environments.

The summary below therefore, provides an overview of the sample's demographic characteristics before progressing to the statistical analyses that explore relationships among the study's core constructs.

Figures 7 and 8 below demonstrate that the sample comprised slightly more female respondents (56.1%) than males (43.9%). The majority of participants were between 36 and 45 years of age (51.2%), followed by those aged 26–35 years (19.5%) and 46–59 years (19.5%), indicating a predominantly mid-career cohort.

***Figure 8**: Distribution of Respondents by Gender*

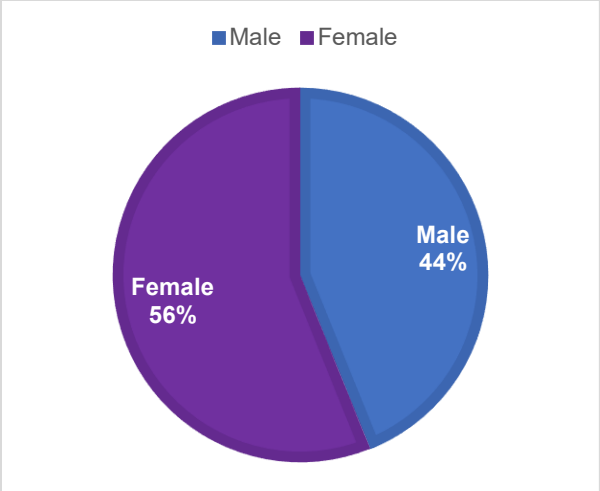
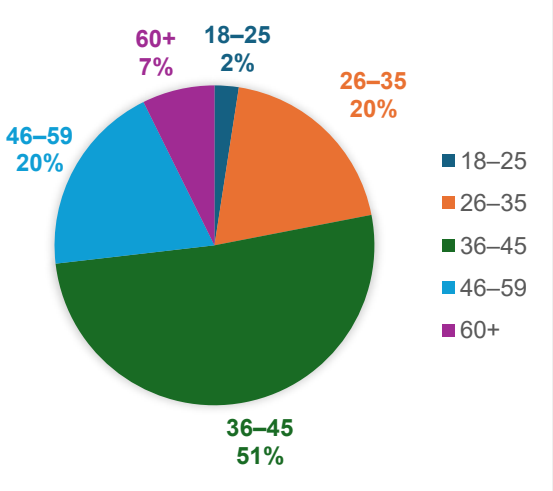


***Figure 7**: Distribution of Respondents by Age Group*



Source: Author

Table 1 below also illustrates the disability classifications; 61.0% reported cognitive or other types of disabilities, while 39.0% identified with sensory or motor disabilities. Regarding educational attainment, most respondents held post-school qualifications, with 41.5% possessing postgraduate qualifications (NQF 8 and above) and a further 17.1% holding bachelor's degrees (NQF 7). This reflects a relatively well-educated sample. Concerning organisational tenure, the largest proportion of employees (34.1%) had been with their organisation for two to five years, followed by 24.4% with six to ten years' experience. This indicates that the sample represents both newly appointed and longer-serving employees.

Overall, the demographic profile demonstrates diversity in gender, age, education level, and disability type, providing a balanced foundation for analysing perceptions of digital leadership, accessibility, and inclusion across varied employee backgrounds.

Table 1: *Demographic Profile of Respondents*

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Gender	Male	18	43.9%
	Female	23	56.1%
Age	18–25	1	2.4%
	26–35	8	19.5%
	36–45	21	51.2%
	46–59	8	19.5%
	60+	3	7.3%
Type of Disability	Sensory + Motor	16	39.0%
	Cognitive + Other	25	61.0%
Highest Education Level	Matric	7	17.1%
	NQF 5	4	9.8%
	NQF 6	1	2.4%
	NQF 7	7	17.1%
	NQF 8+	17	41.5%
	Other	5	12.2%
Tenure in the organisation	0 – 1 years	5	12.2%
	2 – 5 Years	14	34.1%
	6 – 10 Years	10	24.4%
	11 – 19 Years	9	22.0%

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage
	20+ Years	3	7.3%

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

Collectively, these demographic characteristics offer a balanced representation of employees with disabilities across gender, age, education, and tenure categories. The following section presents descriptive statistics for the study's three core constructs, Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion to provide an overview of respondents' perceptions before advancing to inferential analyses.

5.2.2 Descriptive statistics for core constructs

Descriptive statistics provide an essential overview of respondents' perceptions across the study's three primary constructs, i.e., Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. This section summarises the central tendencies and variability of these variables to establish an empirical baseline for subsequent inferential analyses. By examining the means, standard deviations, and distribution patterns of the composite scores, the analysis offers insight into how employees with disabilities perceive their leaders' digital practices, the accessibility of digital systems, and their own sense of inclusion within organisational contexts. These descriptive findings serve as the foundation for testing the study's hypotheses and for identifying patterns that may illuminate the mechanisms linking digital leadership, accessibility, and inclusion in South African workplaces.

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise respondents' perceptions across the three core constructs: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. The dataset comprised 41 valid responses, with no missing data across the three composite variables. Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and distributional characteristics for each construct.

***Table 2**: Descriptive Statistics Summary*

		Mean Digital Leadership	Mean Digital Accessibility	Mean Perceived Inclusion
N	Valid	41	41	41
	Missing	0	0	0

	Mean Digital Leadership	Mean Digital Accessibility	Mean Perceived Inclusion
Mean	3,3610	3,4279	3,9930
Std Deviation	,88597	,92915	,75792
Skewness	-,210	-,220	-,765
Std Error of Skewness	,369	,369	,369
Kurtosis	-,680	-,873	,201
Std Error of Kurtosis	,724	,724	,724
Minimum	1,50	1,64	2,00
Maximum	5,00	5,00	5,00

Source: SPSS

All mean values were above the midpoint (3.00) of the five-point Likert scale, indicating generally positive perceptions across constructs. Standard deviations were below 1.00, reflecting limited variability and a relatively homogeneous distribution of responses. The slight negative skew (-0.21 to -0.77) suggests a mild tendency toward higher agreement, while kurtosis values (-0.87 to 0.20) confirm approximate mesokurtic distributions.

Table 3: *Summary of Central Tendency and Distribution Patterns*

Construct	Central Tendency	Variability	Distribution Shape	Interpretive Summary
Digital Leadership	Moderate (3.36)	Moderate (SD = 0.89)	Slightly left-skewed	Leadership viewed positively but somewhat varied across respondents
Digital Accessibility	Moderate-high (3.43)	Moderate (SD = 0.93)	Slightly left-skewed	Systems perceived as accessible, though with minor inconsistency
Perceived Inclusion	High (3.99)	Low (SD = 0.76)	Left-skewed	Strong and consistent sense of inclusion across employees

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

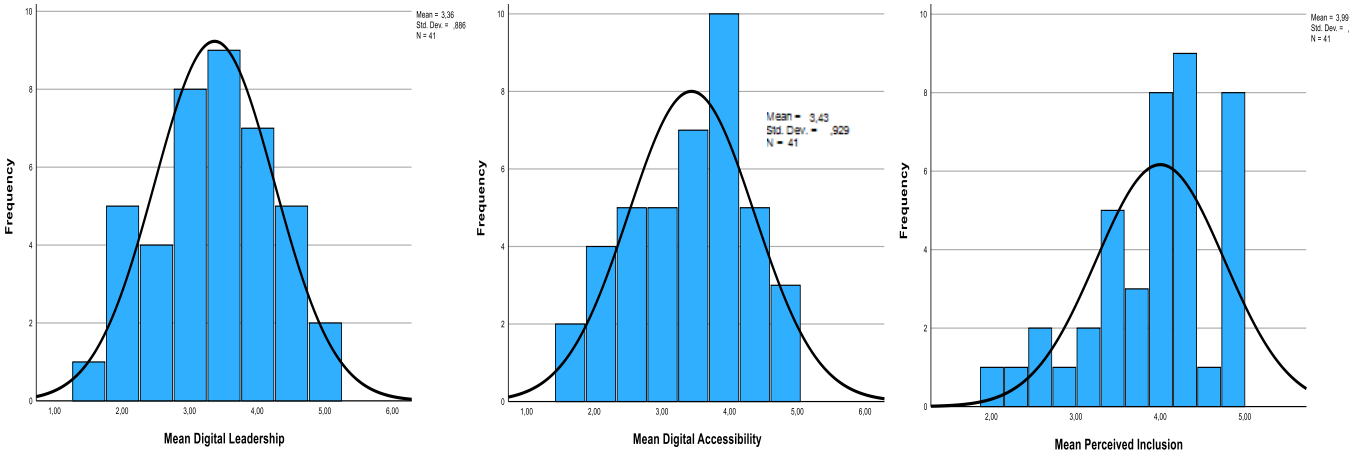
Collectively, the results indicated in table 3 above are moderately to highly positive ratings across all variables and minimal dispersion. The distributional properties informed

subsequent assumption checks for normality and guided the selection of non-parametric inferential tests (Kruskal–Wallis H and Mann–Whitney U) appropriate for the sample size and ordinal data characteristics.

5.2.3 Distribution profiles

To supplement the descriptive statistics, frequency distributions were generated for each composite variable. The frequency distributions for each construct are summarised visually in Figure 9 below, which confirms the mild left-skew noted earlier.

***Figure 9**: Distribution of Composite Construct Scores*



Source: SPSS

Responses for Digital Leadership ranged from 1.50 to 5.00, with the majority of participants (approximately 70%) reporting values between 3.0 and 4.5, indicating generally positive yet moderately varied perceptions of leadership behaviour in digital contexts. Digital Accessibility displayed a similar profile, with over 60% of respondents scoring 3.5 or higher, suggesting that most employees perceive organisational digital systems as accessible. Perceived Inclusion exhibited the highest concentration of positive responses, with approximately 75% of participants scoring above 4.0, reflecting a broadly inclusive organisational environment.

These frequency trends reinforce the descriptive findings reported in Table 3, illustrating mild left-skewness across constructs and overall positive evaluations.

5.3. Reliability Analysis

Before proceeding to inferential analyses, it was necessary to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement instruments used to operationalise the study's three

constructs: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. Reliability assessment ensures that each construct demonstrates stable and coherent measurement across its respective items, confirming that the observed scores reliably capture the underlying concepts they are intended to represent. Given the study's modest sample size (N = 41), Cronbach's alpha and the MIIC were employed as complementary indicators of scale reliability. This dual approach allows for a robust assessment of internal consistency while mitigating small-sample limitations. The following section presents the reliability coefficients for each construct, demonstrating the degree to which the measurement model maintains conceptual coherence and psychometric soundness across all items.

A **reliability assessment was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency** of the 28-item survey instrument encompassing three constructs: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. Cronbach's Alpha and the MIIC were used to determine the reliability of each subscale. The results are presented in table 4 below.

Table 4: *Reliability Statistics Summary*

Statistic	Value	Interpretation
Cronbach's Alpha	0.968	Excellent internal consistency
Items (N)	28	All items retained
MIIC Range	0.25 – 0.84	Moderate to strong inter-item correlation
Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted	0.966 – 0.968	No single item weakens reliability
Reliability Level	Very High	Suitable for inferential analysis

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

The **overall Cronbach's Alpha for the instrument was 0.968**, indicating excellent internal consistency across all items. The MIIC values ranged from 0.25 to 0.84, reflecting moderate-to-strong positive inter-item relationships. Examination of the "Alpha if Item Deleted" coefficients (0.966–0.968) showed minimal variation, confirming that the removal of any single item would not substantially affect the reliability of the scale.

Table 5: *Reliability per Construct Summary*

Construct	Items (N)	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	MIIC Range	Reliability Level	Interpretation
Digital Leadership	10	0.946	0.56 – 0.81	Excellent	Strong internal coherence among leadership behaviour items
Digital Accessibility	11	0.958	0.42 – 0.80	Excellent	Highly reliable measure of accessibility and inclusion alignment
Perceived Inclusion	7	0.923	0.47 – 0.74	Excellent	Consistent reflection of belongingness and uniqueness

Note. α = Cronbach's Alpha; MIIC = Mean Inter-Item Correlation.

Reliability thresholds interpreted as: ≥ 0.90 = Excellent; 0.80–0.89 = Good; 0.70–0.79 = Acceptable.

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

The high reliability levels illustrated in table 5 above justify the aggregation of individual item responses into composite mean scores (Mean_DL, Mean_DA, and Mean_PI) for use in subsequent inferential and mediation analyses.

5.3.1 Reliability per construct

Digital Leadership

The **Digital Leadership subscale** (DL1–DL10) yielded a **Cronbach's Alpha of 0.946**, confirming excellent internal consistency. **MIIC values were (0.56–0.81)**. The "Alpha if Item Deleted" coefficients (0.940-0.947) confirmed that all items contributed proportionately to the overall reliability and are illustrated in table 6 below.

Table 6*: Item Statistics – Digital Leadership*

Item Statistics	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
DL1: My manager actively seeks feedback from employees with	2,98	1,214	41

Item Statistics	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
disabilities on the accessibility of digital tools			
DL2: Leaders in my organisation demonstrate a commitment to providing accessible digital resources	3,44	,976	41
DL3: My manager champions the use of assistive technologies to support employees with disabilities	3,15	1,216	41
DL4: Leaders in my organisation clearly communicate the importance of digital accessibility	3,49	1,075	41
DL5: My manager provides opportunities for me to learn about and use digital tools	3,54	1,286	41
DL6: Leaders in my organisation are fully aware of the challenges employees with disabilities face when using digital tools	3,59	1,183	41
DL7: Leadership regularly reviews feedback from employees with disabilities to improve accessibility	3,07	1,170	41
DL8: Leaders hold teams accountable for accessibility goals	3,44	1,050	41
DL9: Managers support a culture where digital inclusion is everyone's responsibility	3,61	,997	41
DL10: My manager integrates digital inclusion objectives into the team's performance and / or strategic goals	3,32	1,105	41

Source: SPSS

Digital Accessibility

The **Digital Accessibility subscale** (DA1–DA11) recorded a **Cronbach's Alpha of 0.958**, reflecting excellent reliability. **MIIC values ranged between 0.42 - 0.80**. "Alpha if Item Deleted" values range from 0.955 - 0.959 showing that no item weakened the scale's reliability as demonstrated in table 7 below.

Table 7: *Item Statistics – Digital Accessibility*

Item Statistics	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
DA1: My organisation provides assistive technologies to support employees with disabilities	3,41	1,245	41
DA2: Digital systems (e.g., internal portals, video conferencing tools) are accessible to employees with visual, auditory, motor, cognitive and / or other impairments	3,41	1,303	41
DA3: Senior leadership actively monitors whether digital platforms are accessible for all users	3,32	1,213	41
DA4: Policies on digital accessibility are consistently applied in daily operations and software procurement	3,34	1,087	41
DA5: Digital tools used in this organisation are regularly reviewed for compatibility with assistive devices (e.g., screen readers)	3,22	1,151	41
DA6: Training is effective in helping me use digital platforms confidently	3,54	1,002	41
DA7: The training provided is quality and is effective	3,39	1,070	41
DA8: The digital tools provided enable and empower me perform my job	3,85	,882	41

Item Statistics	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
DA9: I know where to report digital accessibility problems in my organisation	3,71	1,209	41
DA10: My organisation involves employees with disabilities in testing or improving digital systems	3,07	1,212	41
DA11: Digital accessibility is considered when new platforms or systems are procured	3,44	1,119	41

Source: SPSS

Perceived Inclusion

The **Perceived Inclusion subscale** consisted of seven items (PI1–PI7) capturing employees' feelings of belonging, uniqueness, and value within their organisational and team environments. This subscale achieved a **Cronbach's Alpha of 0.923**. The **MIIC range of 0.47 to 0.74**. The "Alpha if Item Deleted" values ranged from 0.916–0.924 as depicted in table 8 below.

***Table 8**: Item Statistics – Perceived Inclusion*

Item Statistics	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
PI1. In my organisation, people with disabilities are treated as full and valued members of the team	4,22	,988	41
PI2. The views and contributions of employees with disabilities are respected during digital meetings and collaborative work	3,95	1,048	41
PI3. I believe my organisation actively supports the professional growth of people with disabilities	4,12	,927	41

Item Statistics	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
PI4. The digital platforms we use at work allow employees with disabilities to engage fully in team communication	3,88	1,029	41
PI5. I feel confident that leadership promotes an inclusive environment for people with disabilities across both physical and virtual spaces	3,95	,999	41
PI6. I feel comfortable disclosing accessibility challenges in my work environment	4,00	1,000	41
PI7. I believe my organisation takes proactive steps to ensure inclusion, not just compliance	3,83	1,116	41

Source: SPSS

All three constructs **exceeded the 0.90 reliability threshold**, demonstrating that the instrument consistently measured employees' perceptions of digital leadership, accessibility, and inclusion. Composite mean scores (Mean_DL, Mean_DA, Mean_PI) were therefore computed for subsequent inferential analyses.

5.4. Normality Testing

Assessing data normality is a fundamental preliminary step in quantitative analysis, as it determines the suitability of parametric or non-parametric statistical procedures. In this study, normality testing was conducted to evaluate whether the composite scores for Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion conformed to the assumptions required for parametric analysis. Establishing the distributional characteristics of the data was particularly important given the modest sample size (N = 41) and the ordinal nature of the Likert-scale measures. The assessment involved both statistical and visual methods, including the Shapiro-Wilk test and the examination of histograms and Q–Q plots. Together, these techniques provided a robust evaluation of the data's symmetry, skewness, and kurtosis, enabling a methodologically sound decision regarding the most appropriate analytical approach for subsequent hypothesis testing.

Before proceeding to inferential analyses, the normality of the composite variables, Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion, was examined. Each construct was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, and checking distributional assumptions was critical given the relatively small sample size (N = 41) and the ordinal nature of the data. This normality check ensured that the appropriate statistical tests (parametric or non-parametric) could be selected for subsequent analysis.

5.4.1 Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality

The assumption of normality was evaluated for the three composite variables, i.e. Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion, to determine the suitability of parametric versus non-parametric analyses. The Shapiro-Wilk test was selected because it provides greater sensitivity for smaller samples (N = 41) than the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and is specifically recommended for datasets below 50 cases.

Table 9 below presents the Shapiro-Wilk results. Digital Leadership (W = 0.980, p = 0.665) and Digital Accessibility (W = 0.961, p = 0.171) did not significantly depart from normality, whereas Perceived Inclusion (W = 0.936, p = 0.024) showed a statistically significant deviation. Thus, only the inclusion construct violated the normality assumption. However, because all three variables were derived from ordinal Likert-scale data and the sample size was modest, non-parametric analyses were uniformly applied to ensure methodological consistency and statistical robustness.

Table 9: *Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality for Composite Constructs*

Construct	Shapiro–Wilk (W)	p-value	Distribution	Decision	Appropriate Test
Digital Leadership	0.980	.665	Normal	Fail to reject H_0	Non-parametric
Digital Accessibility	0.961	.171	Normal	Fail to reject H_0	Non-parametric
Perceived Inclusion	0.936	.024	Non-normal	Reject H_0	Non-parametric

Note. *Non-parametric tests were used for all constructs owing to the small sample size and ordinal Likert-scale data*.

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

Beyond the formal test, descriptive skewness and kurtosis values corroborated the observed patterns. All three distributions showed mild negative skewness, indicating that most responses clustered toward the higher end of the five-point scale. Skewness values for DL (-0.21), DA (-0.22), and PI (-0.77) each had a standard error of approximately 0.37, confirming a slight left-tailed shape. Corresponding kurtosis values DL (-0.68), DA (-0.87), and PI (+0.20) with a standard error of -0.72 fell near zero, suggesting the data were neither sharply peaked nor heavy-tailed and that no extreme outliers were present.

The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test were further substantiated through visual inspection of the histograms illustrated in section 5.2.3. above and the Q-Q plots (Appendix D, Figure 19). Both Digital Leadership and Digital Accessibility demonstrated near-normal distributions, whereas Perceived Inclusion showed a visible left-skew, indicating higher concentrations of positive ratings and corroborating the statistical evidence of non-normality.

Given these results, the study proceeded with non-parametric inferential tests to examine potential differences across demographic subgroups and to test the hypothesised relationships among constructs. Specifically, the Kruskal-Wallis H test was employed for variables with more than two categories (e.g., age, tenure, digital literacy), and the Mann-Whitney U test was used for dichotomous variables (e.g., gender, province, type of disability). These approaches are robust for non-normality and appropriate for ordinal Likert-scale data. The next section, therefore, presents the inferential findings that explore how employee demographics influence perceptions of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion.

5.5. Inferential Analysis Overview

Inferential analysis was conducted to test the study's hypotheses and examine differences and relationships among the three constructs: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. As reported earlier, the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality indicated statistically significant deviations from normality for all composite constructs ($p < .05$), confirming non-normal data distribution. Given the modest sample size ($N = 41$) and the ordinal-level data derived from Likert-type scales, non-parametric tests were selected as the most appropriate analytical approach. These procedures are robust under conditions of non-normality and small sample sizes (Pallant, 2020).

Accordingly, Mann-Whitney U tests were used to compare median differences between two independent groups, while Kruskal-Wallis H tests compared differences across more than two groups. Spearman's rank-order correlations were employed to examine bivariate associations among the constructs, and a bootstrapped mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS Model 4 tested the indirect effect of Digital Leadership on Perceived Inclusion through Digital Accessibility. Each inferential test was conducted at a 95% confidence level ($\alpha = .05$). For the Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests, effect sizes were calculated using the formula $r = z/\sqrt{N}$ to provide a measure of practical significance.

The following subsections present these results systematically, beginning with the Mann-Whitney U tests for gender and disability type, followed by the Kruskal-Wallis H tests for age, tenure, digital literacy, and provincial location. The section concludes with the correlation and mediation analyses.

5.5.1 Mann-Whitney Test – Gender

The variable Gender was examined to determine whether male and female employees differed in their perceptions of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. Investigating gender-based differences is theoretically important within digital transformation and inclusion studies, as gender can influence access to digital tools, representation in leadership structures, and subjective experiences of inclusion. Furthermore, gender remains a salient demographic factor in South African workplaces, where digital equity and leadership representation continue to evolve.

Table 10: *Mann–Whitney U Test Results for Gender Differences on Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion*

Construct	Gender	*n*	Median	Mean Rank	*U*	*Z*	*p*	*r*	Effect Size Interpretation
Digital Leadership	Male (1)	18	4.10	24.39	137.50	–1.83	.068	.29	Small–medium
	Female (2)	23	3.95	18.15					
Digital Accessibility	Male (1)	18	4.00	22.81	171.50	–0.93	.350	.15	Small
	Female (2)	23	3.89	19.70					
Perceived Inclusion	Male (1)	18	4.20	23.94	147.50	–1.57	.116	.25	Small–medium
	Female (2)	23	4.05	18.83					

Note. *$r = z/\sqrt{N}$, where $N = 41$.*

Effect size interpretation: 0.10 = small, 0.30 = medium, 0.50 = large (Pallant cites Cohen, 1988).

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

A Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to determine whether perceptions of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion differed significantly between male and female respondents, and the results are reported in Table 10 above. This non-parametric alternative to the independent samples t-test was selected because the data were ordinal and non-normally distributed, as confirmed by the Shapiro–Wilk tests.

For **Digital Leadership, no statistically significant difference** was observed between males (n = 18) and females (n = 23), U = 137.50, z = -1.83, p = 0.068. The corresponding effect size was r = 0.29, indicating a small-to-medium effect.

Similarly, **Digital Accessibility scores did not differ significantly** between genders, U = 171.50, z = -0.93, p = 0.350, r = 0.15, reflecting a small effect.

Lastly, for **Perceived Inclusion, the results again indicated no significant gender-based difference**, U = 147.50, z = -1.57, p = 0.116, r = 0.25, also representing a small-to-medium effect.

Across all three constructs, the median scores for male and female respondents were closely aligned, and the null hypotheses of no gender difference were therefore retained. This suggests that participants, regardless of gender, reported comparable perceptions of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion within their organisations.

5.5.2 Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test – Age

Age was examined as an important demographic variable to determine whether perceptions of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion varied across generational groups. Age can influence digital engagement, comfort with technology, and perceptions of organisational inclusion, particularly in digitally transforming environments. Testing for age differences therefore provides insight into whether perceptions of leadership and accessibility are consistent across workforce cohorts or whether generational disparities may exist in how employees experience digital inclusion initiatives.

Table 11: *Kruskal-Wallis H Test Results for Age Differences on Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion*

Construct	*H*(df)	*p*	*r*	Effect Size Interpretation	Significance	Directional Observation
Digital Leadership	3.23 (4)	.520	.28	Small–medium	No	Consistent across all age groups
Digital Accessibility	5.58 (4)	.233	.37	Medium	No	Slightly higher for younger cohorts (non-sig.)
Perceived Inclusion	6.69 (4)	.153	.40	Medium	No	Slightly higher for 26–45 age groups (non-sig.)

Note. *r = √H/√N, where N = 41. Effect size interpretation: .10 = small, .30 = medium, .50 = large (Pallant cites Cohen, 1988).*

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

A Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to evaluate differences across five age categories: 18-25 years, 26-35 years, 36-45 years, 46-59 years, and 60 years and above.

As can be deduced from the results reported in Table 11 above, no statistically significant differences across age groups for any of the three constructs:

- Digital Leadership: H(4) = 3.23, p = 0.520, r = 0.28 (small-to-medium)
- Digital Accessibility: H(4) = 5.58, p = 0.233, r = 0.37 (medium)
- Perceived Inclusion: H(4) = 6.69, p = 0.153, r = 0.40 (medium)

Results of the Kruskal–Wallis H tests illustrated in Table 11 above indicated no statistically significant differences in Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, or Perceived Inclusion across age groups. Mean rank comparisons suggested that employees, irrespective of age, shared similar perceptions of leadership, accessibility, and inclusion within their organisations, with all effects small to medium in magnitude.

The effect sizes were calculated using r = √H/√N, with N = 41. Although minor median rank variations were observed, particularly slightly higher Perceived Inclusion among employees aged 26-45, these differences were not statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypotheses for all three constructs failed to reject, indicating that employees across all age groups perceived digital leadership, accessibility, and inclusion in a broadly similar way.

5.5.3 Mann-Whitney Test – Disability type

Disability type was examined to determine whether experiences of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion differed between respondents with different functional limitations. Because several disability categories in the original dataset were very small, six reported categories were collapsed into two analytically stable groups: (i) Sensory + Motor (n = 16), representing visual, auditory, sensory, or motor impairments; and (ii) Cognitive + Other (n = 25), representing cognitive and other functional limitations. Testing for group differences allows us to assess whether employees with different types of disability report comparable perceptions of leadership, accessibility, and inclusion. Table 12 below provides the results of the Mann-Whitney U tests between the constructs and disability type.

***Table 12**: Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Differences in Construct Scores between Disability Groups*

Construct	Disability Group	*n*	Mean Rank	*U*	*Z*	*P*	*r*	Effect Size Interpretation
Digital Leadership	Sensory + Motor	16	20.94	199.00	-0.03	.979	.00	Negligible
	Cognitive + Other	25	21.04					
Digital Accessibility	Sensory + Motor	16	20.47	191.50	-0.23	.820	.04	Small
	Cognitive + Other	25	21.34					
Perceived Inclusion	Sensory + Motor	16	23.19	165.00	-0.94	.348	.15	Small
	Cognitive + Other	25	19.60					

Note. *Each Mann–Whitney U test produces a single U, z, and p value per construct, reported in the first row. r = |z|/√N, where N = 41. Effect size thresholds: 0.10 = small, 0.30 = medium, 0.50 = large.*

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

Given that the dependent variables were non-normally distributed and the grouping variable consisted of two independent groups, Mann–Whitney U tests were conducted for each construct. There were no statistically significant differences between the Sensory + Motor group and the Cognitive + Other group for any of the three constructs:

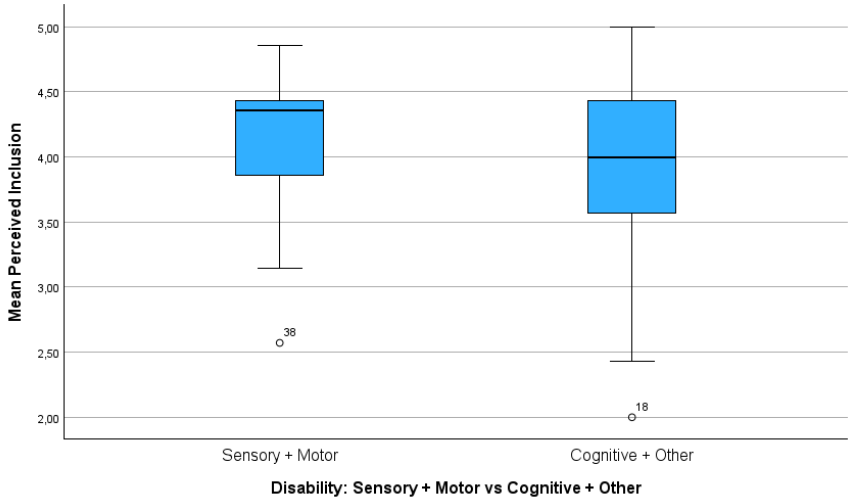
- Digital Leadership: U = 199.00, z = -0.03, p = .979, r = 0.00
- Digital Accessibility: U = 191.50, z = -0.23, p = .820, r = 0.04
- Perceived Inclusion: U = 165.00, z = -0.94, p = .348, r = 0.15

Effect sizes (r) were calculated as |z|/√N, with N = 41. All effect sizes were in the small range. Mean rank comparisons showed very similar perceptions of Digital Leadership and Digital Accessibility across the two groups (Digital Leadership: Sensory + Motor mean rank = 20.94; Cognitive + Other mean rank = 21.04. Digital Accessibility: Sensory + Motor mean rank = 20.47; Cognitive + Other mean rank = 21.34). For Perceived Inclusion, the Sensory + Motor group showed a slightly higher mean rank (23.19) than the Cognitive + Other group (19.60), but this difference was not statistically significant. The null hypotheses were therefore retained for all three constructs.

Boxplots display the distribution of scores, with boxes representing the middle 50% of data and whiskers extending to non-outlier ranges. The circle represents a mild outlier case.

Consistent with the non-significant results, similar distributional patterns were observed for Digital Leadership and Digital Accessibility (not shown). Figure 10 below illustrates the distribution of Perceived Inclusion scores for employees with Sensory + Motor and Cognitive + Other disabilities. The boxes represent the interquartile range (IQR), the horizontal line marks the median, and the whiskers indicate the minimum and maximum values excluding outliers.

***Figure 10**: Boxplot of Mean Perceived Inclusion by Disability Type*



Source: SPSS

One mild outlier is visible within the Sensory + Motor group (case 38), but this does not materially influence the overall pattern. The visual evidence supports the conclusion that perceptions of inclusion are broadly comparable across disability types.

5.5.4 Kruskal-Wallis Test – Tenure

Employee tenure was examined to assess whether length of service within the organisation influenced perceptions of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. Tenure is a meaningful organisational characteristic as it may shape employees' familiarity with legacy systems, access to digital resources, and exposure to leadership practices. Newer employees might experience digital transformation differently from those with long-standing service. Analysing tenure-based differences thus helps determine whether digital leadership and inclusion efforts are experienced consistently across service cohorts.

***Table 13:** Kruskal-Wallis H Test Results for Tenure Differences on Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion*

Construct	*H*(df)	*p*	*r*	Effect Size Interpretation	Significance	Directional Observation
Digital Leadership	1.20 (4)	.878	.17	Small	No	Consistent across tenure groups

Construct	*H*(df)	*p*	*r*	Effect Size Interpretation	Significance	Directional Observation
Digital Accessibility	0.87 (4)	.928	.15	Small	No	Consistent across tenure groups
Perceived Inclusion	3.49 (4)	.480	.29	Small–medium	No	Slightly higher for 0–1 year group (non-sig.)

Note. *r = √H/√N, where N = 41. Effect size thresholds: 0.10 = small, 0.30 = medium, 0.50 = large (Pallant cites Cohen, 1988).*

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

A Kruskal–Wallis H test was performed to compare five tenure categories (0-1 year, 2-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-19 years, and 20+ years) across the three constructs. The non-parametric test was chosen due to the ordinal nature of the tenure variable and the non-normal distribution of the data.

The results indicated no statistically significant differences across tenure groups for any of the constructs:

- Digital Leadership: H(4) = 1.20, p = 0.878, r = 0.17 (small)
- Digital Accessibility: H(4) = 0.87, p = 0.928, r = 0.15 (small)
- Perceived Inclusion: H(4) = 3.49, p = 0.480, r = 0.29 (small-to-medium)

Effect sizes (r) were computed using r = √H/√N, where N = 41.

Mean rank values were relatively consistent across all tenure groups (see Table 13), confirming that perceptions of leadership behaviour, accessibility of digital systems, and inclusion were comparable regardless of years of service. The null hypotheses for all constructs failed to reject.

5.5.5 Kruskal-Wallis Test – Digital Literacy

The self-rated level of digital literacy was examined to determine whether it influenced participants' perceptions of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion within the organisation. Digital literacy reflects employees' confidence in using

digital tools and may shape their engagement with leadership communication, access to systems, and inclusion in technology-mediated work environments. This analysis, therefore, explored whether perceptions of leadership, accessibility, and inclusion varied across employees with different levels of digital proficiency.

Table 14: *Kruskal–Wallis H Test Results for Digital Literacy Differences on Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion*

Construct	*H*(df)	*p*	*r*	Effect Size Interpretation	Significance	Directional Observation
Digital Leadership	1.09 (3)	.780	.16	Small	No	Higher for intermediate & advanced (non-sig.)
Digital Accessibility	0.89 (3)	.827	.15	Small	No	Slightly higher for intermediate & advanced (non-sig.)
Perceived Inclusion	2.34 (3)	.505	.24	Small–medium	No	Higher for intermediate group (non-sig.)

Note. *r = √H/√N, where N = 41. Effect size thresholds: 0.10 = small, 0.30 = medium, 0.50 = large (Pallant cites Cohen, 1988).*

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

A Kruskal–Wallis H test was conducted to compare four self-rated literacy groups (None, Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced) across the three constructs. The non-parametric approach was appropriate due to ordinal data and a non-normal distribution (N = 41).

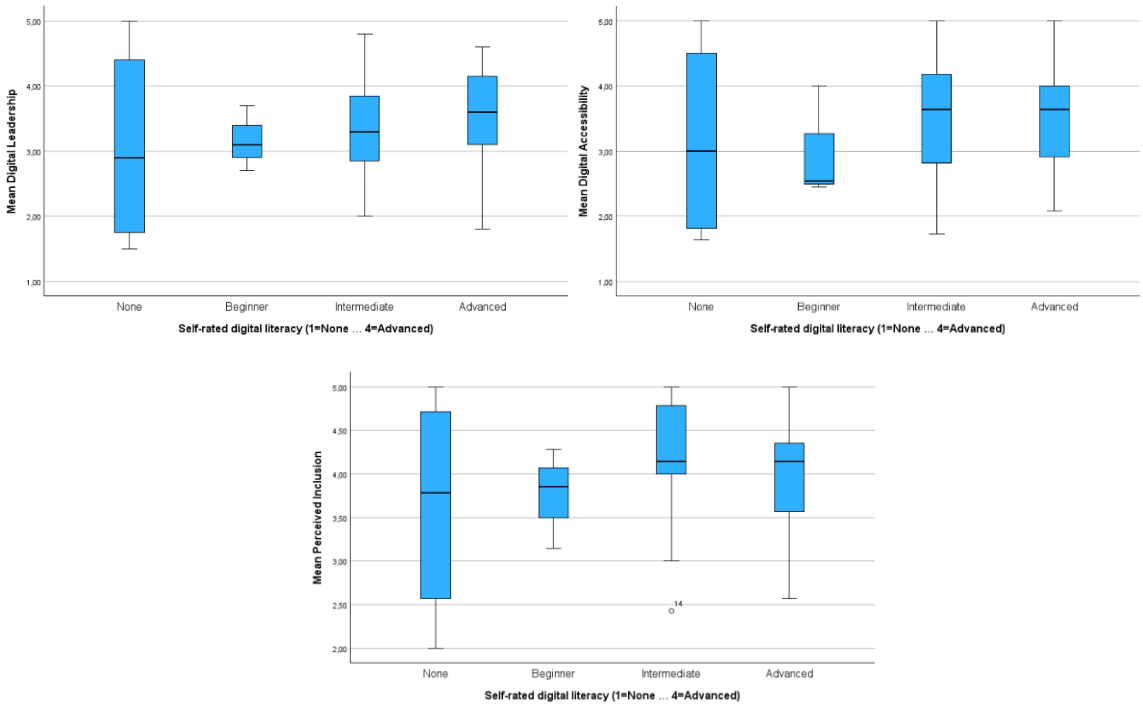
Results revealed no statistically significant differences across digital literacy levels for any construct:

- Digital Leadership: H(3) = 1.09, p = 0.780, r = 0.16 (small)
- Digital Accessibility: H(3) = 0.89, p = 0.827, r = 0.15 (small)
- Perceived Inclusion: H(3) = 2.34, p = 0.505, r = 0.24 (small–medium)

Although non-significant, the mean rank values suggested a mild positive trend in which participants with intermediate (Mean Rank = 20.34) and advanced (Mean Rank = 23.27) literacy reported marginally higher scores for Digital Leadership than those with beginner (Mean Rank = 17.00) or no literacy (Mean Rank = 18.63). Comparable patterns were

observed for Digital Accessibility and Perceived Inclusion (refer to table 14 above). The null hypotheses failed to reject for all constructs.

***Figure 11**: Boxplots of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion by self-rated digital literacy*



Source: SPSS

Figure 11 displays the distribution of scores across four digital literacy levels (None, Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced) for each construct. The boxes represent the interquartile range (IQR), the horizontal lines denote medians, and whiskers indicate the minimum and maximum non-outlier values. The boxplots illustrate that the median scores and IQRs overlap substantially across all literacy levels, visually confirming the Kruskal-Wallis results ($p > .05$). Slightly higher medians are visible for participants with intermediate and advanced literacy, aligning with the minor positive directional trend observed in Table 13. A mild outlier (case 14) appears in the intermediate group for Perceived Inclusion but does not influence the overall findings.

***Note.** Boxplots depict the middle 50 % of the data (IQR). Whiskers represent data ranges excluding outliers, and circles indicate mild outlier cases.*

5.5.6 Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test – Gauteng vs Others

The variable Province was analysed to determine whether employees' geographical location influenced perceptions of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. This comparison was included because regional differences in infrastructure, connectivity, and access to digital resources could potentially affect employees' experiences of organisational digital transformation and leadership visibility. Gauteng, as the country's economic and administrative hub, was expected to show marginally higher perceptions of digital enablement and inclusion compared to other provinces.

Table 15: *Kruskal–Wallis H Test Results for Provincial Differences on Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion*

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.[a,b]	Decision
1	The distribution of Mean Digital Leadership is the same across categories of Gauteng vs Other.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	,638	Fail to reject the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Mean Digital Accessibility is the same across categories of Gauteng vs Other.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	,505	Fail to reject the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Mean Perceived Inclusion is the same across categories of Gauteng vs Other.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	,906	Fail to reject the null hypothesis.

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

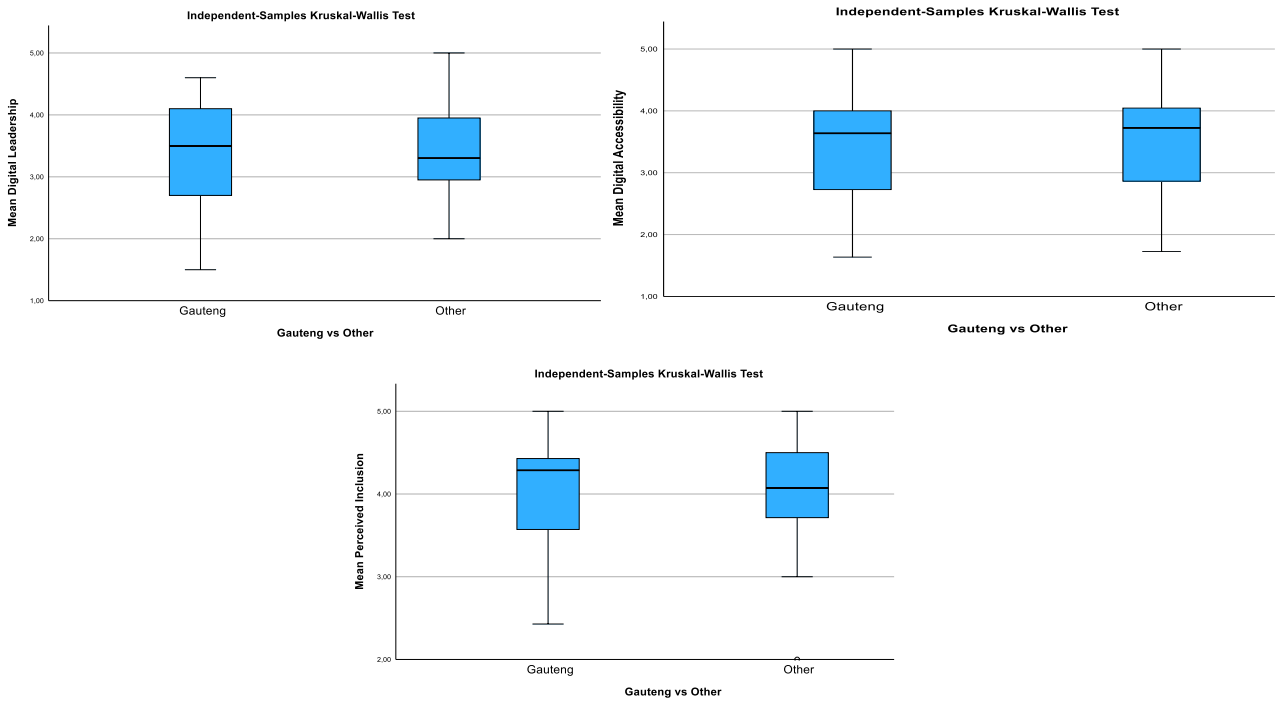
A Kruskal–Wallis H test was conducted to compare perceptions between two regional groups: Gauteng (n = 27) and Other Provinces (n = 14). The test was chosen because the data were non-normally distributed, and the grouping variable comprised two independent categories. Results are reflected in Table 15 above and revealed no statistically significant differences between the two provincial groups across any of the constructs:

- Digital Leadership: H(1) = 0.22, p = 0.638, r = 0.06 (negligible)
- Digital Accessibility: H(1) = 0.44, p = 0.505, r = 0.10 (small)
- Perceived Inclusion: H(1) = 0.01, p = 0.906, r = 0.02 (negligible)

Results of the Kruskal–Wallis H tests (see Table 15) indicated no statistically significant differences in Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, or Perceived Inclusion between employees based in Gauteng and those in other provinces. The nearly identical distributions across regional groups suggest that the organisation's digital leadership and inclusion initiatives are being experienced consistently across its geographical footprint.

Effect sizes (r) were calculated as $r = \sqrt{H}/\sqrt{N}$, where N = 41. The results show that median perceptions of digital leadership, accessibility, and inclusion were statistically similar for employees located in Gauteng and those in other provinces. The null hypotheses for all three constructs failed to reject.

***Figure 12**: Boxplots of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion by Province (Gauteng vs Others)*



Source: SPSS

Figure 12 above presents the distribution of scores for Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion across employees based in Gauteng and other provinces. Each box represents the interquartile range (IQR), with the horizontal line

indicating the median and whiskers showing the minimum and maximum non-outlier values. Results of the Kruskal–Wallis H tests (see Table 15 and Figure 12) showed no statistically significant differences in Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, or Perceived Inclusion between employees based in Gauteng and those in other provinces.

The overlapping boxplots and nearly identical median values visually confirm the absence of statistically meaningful provincial variation across all three constructs. The plots demonstrate substantial overlap between the two provincial groups, confirming the Kruskal–Wallis results ($p > .05$) that there were no statistically significant differences across any construct. The close alignment of median values further supports the interpretation that digital leadership, accessibility, and inclusion are perceived consistently, regardless of geographic location.

Following the group comparison analyses, which found no statistically significant differences across gender, age, disability type, tenure, digital literacy, or provincial location, the next stage of the inferential analysis examined the relationships among the three core study constructs. Specifically, Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to assess the strength and direction of associations between Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. This non-parametric approach was selected because the data were ordinal and non-normally distributed, aligning with the analytical strategy established for this study.

5.6. Correlation Analysis using Spearman's Rho

To assess the strength and direction of associations among the three core constructs: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion, a Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis was conducted. This non-parametric test was chosen because the data were measured on ordinal (Likert-type) scales and did not meet the normality assumptions for Pearson's r (as indicated by Shapiro-Wilk tests in a prior section). Spearman's rho (p) is appropriate under these conditions, as it does not require a normal distribution and instead evaluates monotonic relationships between ranked data (Pallant, 2020). In other words, Spearman's correlation is suitable for ordinal or non-normally distributed data (Pallant, 2020) , making it the correct choice for the current dataset.

***Table 16**: Spearman's rho correlations*

			Mean Digital Leadership	Mean Digital Accessibility	Mean Perceived Inclusion
Spearman's rho	Mean Digital Leadership	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,911	,623
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<,001	<,001
		N	41	41	41
	Mean Digital Accessibility	Correlation Coefficient	,911	1,000	,676
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	.	<,001
		N	41	41	41
	Mean Perceived Inclusion	Correlation Coefficient	,623	,676	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001	.
		N	41	41	41

Source: SPSS

Table 17: Spearman's Rho correlation matrix

Relationship	Spearman's p (rho)	Sig. (2-tailed)	N	Interpretation
Digital Leadership ↔ Digital Accessibility	0.911	p < .001	41	Extremely strong, positive, statistically significant relationship
Digital Leadership ↔ Perceived Inclusion	0.623	p < .001	41	Moderate-strong, positive, statistically significant relationship
Digital Accessibility ↔ Perceived Inclusion	0.676	p < .001	41	Strong, positive, statistically significant relationship

Note. *All three correlations were significant at the* ***p < .001*** *level.*

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

The Spearman correlation matrix (N = 41) revealed that all pairwise relationships between DL, DA, and PI were positive and statistically significant (two-tailed p < .001). Table 17 above displays the correlation coefficients (p) along with significance levels. Digital Leadership was found to correlate very strongly with Digital Accessibility (p = 0.911, p < .001). Digital Leadership also showed a moderately strong positive correlation with Perceived Inclusion (p = 0.623, p < .001). Likewise, Digital Accessibility was strongly positively correlated with Perceived Inclusion (p = 0.676, p < .001).

All three correlations were significant at the p < .001 level, indicating robust associations despite the modest sample size. No negative or non-significant correlations were observed; higher perceived Digital Leadership is consistently associated with higher Digital Accessibility and greater inclusion perceptions among employees.

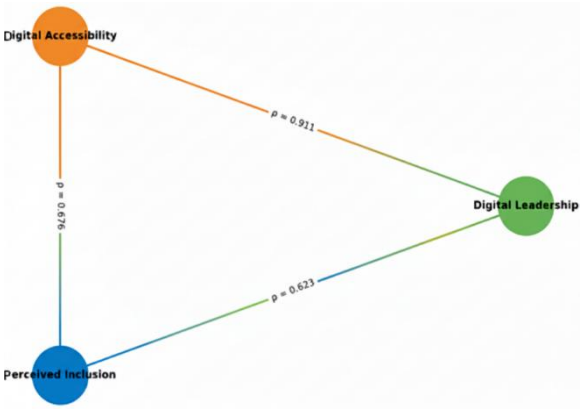


Figure 13: Spearman's rho correlation triangle

Note. *Nodes represent constructs; edges display Spearman's rho correlation coefficients. All values are statistically significant at p < .001 (N = 41).*

Source: Author

Figure 13 visually represents the Spearman's rank-order correlations among the three core constructs: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. Each edge of the triangle denotes the strength of association (p) between two variables. The illustration confirms the statistically significant and positive relationships reported in Table 17, with the strongest correlation observed between Digital Leadership and Digital Accessibility (p = 0.911), followed by Digital Accessibility and Perceived Inclusion (p = 0.676), and then Digital Leadership and Perceived Inclusion (p = 0.623). All relationships are significant at p < .001 (two-tailed).

Collectively, these correlation results confirmed strong and statistically significant associations among the study's three primary constructs, thereby satisfying the preconditions for conducting the mediation analysis reported in the following section.

5.7. Mediation Analysis: Digital Accessibility as a mediator between Digital Leadership and Perceived Inclusion

This section reports the results of a mediation analysis designed to test whether Digital Accessibility mediates the relationship between Digital Leadership and Perceived Inclusion. Mediation analysis is appropriate when the aim is to determine whether the effect of an independent variable (X) on a dependent variable (Y) occurs indirectly through a third variable, known as a mediator (M). In this model, Digital Leadership is posited to influence Perceived Inclusion through its effect on Digital Accessibility. Given the modest sample size (n = 41) and the non-normal distribution of the data, Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) was employed using 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples, allowing robust estimation of direct, indirect, and total effects without assuming normality. All variables were entered as continuous composites based on previously validated scale scores.

***Table 18**: Mediation Model Outcomes*

Path	Relationship	Coefficient (B)	SE	p-value	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Upper)	Interpretation
a	DL → DA	0.951	0.071	< .001	0.808	1.094	Significant predictor
b	DA → PI (controlling for DL)	0.458	0.218	0.042	0.017	0.898	Significant predictor
c′	DL → PI (direct)	0.147	0.228	0.524	-0.315	0.609	Not significant

Path	Relationship	Coefficient (B)	SE	p-value	95% CI (Lower)	95% CI (Upper)	Interpretation
Indirect (a*b)	DL → DA → PI	0.435	0.235	-	0.048	0.940	Significant mediation

Source: Researcher's compilation adapted from SPSS

The a-path regression showed that Digital Leadership strongly predicted Digital Accessibility (B = 0.951, SE = 0.071, p < .001), explaining 82.2% of the variance (R^2 = 0.822) in accessibility. In the outcome model, Digital Accessibility predicted Perceived Inclusion when controlling for leadership (path b: B = 0.458, SE = 0.218, p = 0.042, 95% CI [0.017, 0.898]). The direct effect of Digital Leadership on Inclusion (path c′) was not significant (B = 0.147, SE = 0.228, p = 0.524, 95% CI [-0.315, 0.609]). The indirect effect of leadership on inclusion via accessibility was B = 0.435 (BootSE = 0.235, 95% CI [0.048, 0.940]), with the 95% confidence interval excluding zero. These results indicate a significant mediation: Digital Accessibility fully transmits the effect of leadership to inclusion (Table 18; Figure 14).

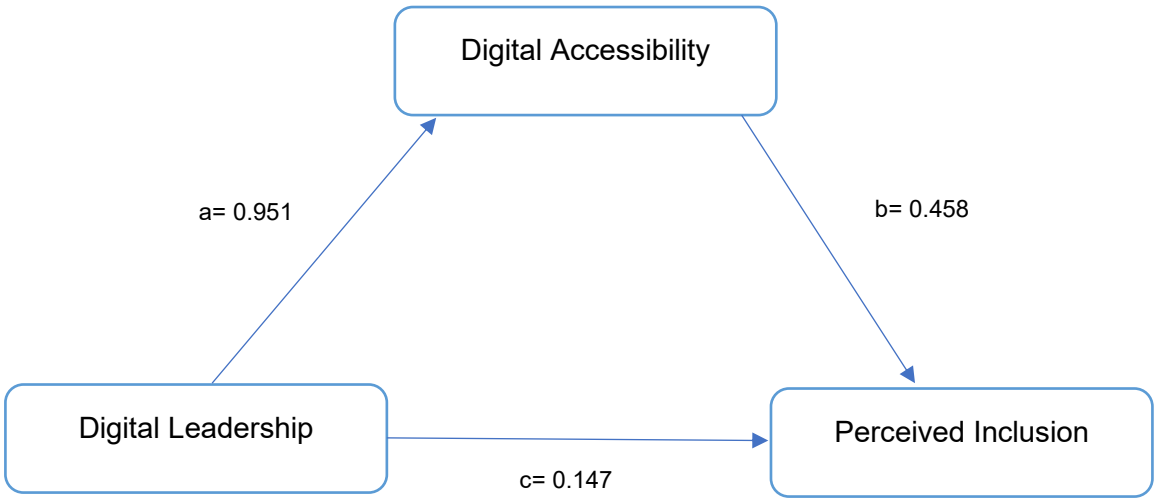


***Figure 14**: Mediation Model Analysis*

Source: Author

Figure 14 presents the mediation model tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4), in which Digital Accessibility functions as the mediator between Digital Leadership (X) and Perceived Inclusion (Y). The figure displays unstandardised path coefficients for each component of the model:

- Path a (DL → DA) was statistically significant (B = 0.951, p < 0.001),
- Path b (DA → PI) was also significant (B = 0.458, p < 0.05),

- The direct path c′ (DL → PI, controlling for DA) was not significant (B = 0.147, p = 0.524).

The significant indirect effect (a × b) supports the conclusion that Digital Accessibility mediates the effect of Digital Leadership on Perceived Inclusion. All coefficients were derived from 5,000 bootstrapped samples and reflect unstandardised estimates.

5.8. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the empirical findings from the study's descriptive, reliability, and inferential analyses. Results from non-parametric group comparisons revealed no statistically significant differences in perceptions of digital leadership, accessibility, or inclusion across demographic categories such as gender, age, disability type, tenure, digital literacy, or province. Correlational analysis using Spearman's rho confirmed strong, positive, and statistically significant associations among the three core constructs. Finally, a mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) indicated that Digital Accessibility significantly mediated the relationship between Digital Leadership and Perceived Inclusion. These results provide the empirical foundation for the conceptual and theoretical interpretations discussed in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6 – DISCUSSION

6.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to synthesise the empirical findings of the study, anchoring them within the theoretical and practical context established in the preceding chapters. The central research problem, as articulated in Chapter 1, focused on the significant and persistent disconnect between South Africa's progressive legislative frameworks for disability inclusion, such as the Employment Equity Act and the lived, practical reality for employees with disabilities in an era of accelerated digital transformation. While policy promotes inclusion, employees with disabilities continue to face profound barriers, low workforce representation, and systemic exclusion, a situation exacerbated by the rapid pivot to digitally-mediated work environments.

The study was guided by the primary research question: "How does Digital Leadership influence Digital Accessibility, and how does this in turn affect Perceived Inclusion of employees with disabilities in South Africa?". People with disabilities remain profoundly marginalised in the formal labour market, with representation hovering at approximately 1.2% against a mandated 2% target (Department of Employment and Labour, 2023). The acceleration of digital transformation during and following the Covid-19 pandemic both exposed and exacerbated this exclusion, revealing that digital systems, far from levelling the playing field, frequently reproduced and amplified pre-existing barriers.

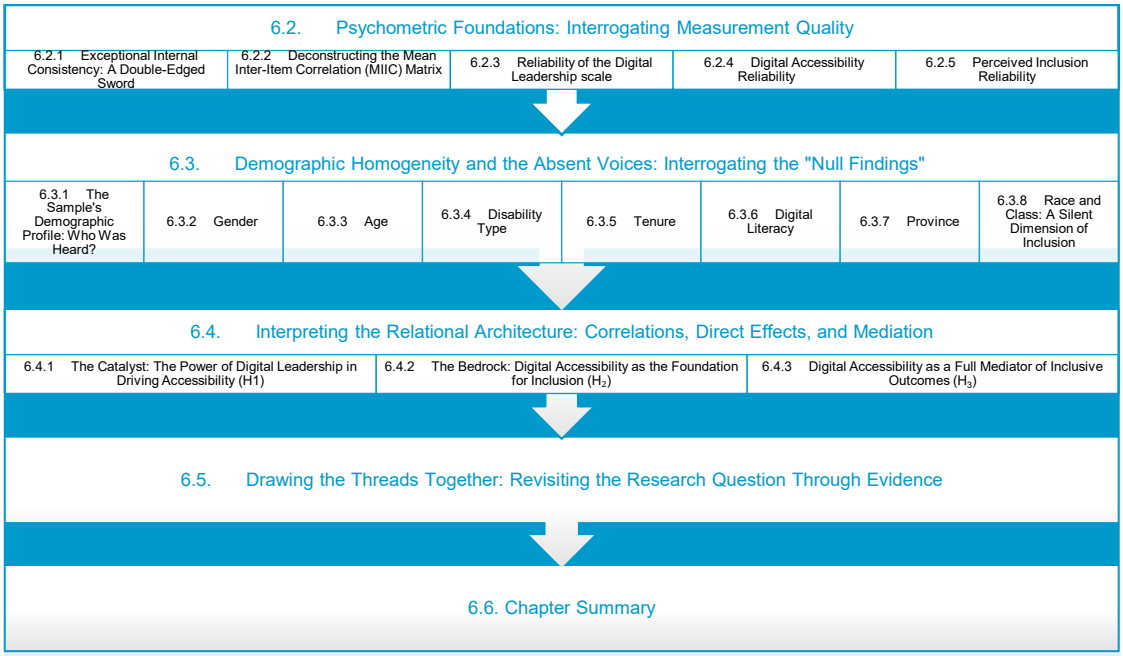
The study posed a deceptively straightforward question: how does Digital Leadership influence Digital Accessibility, and how does this in turn affect Perceived Inclusion of employees with disabilities in South African organisations? Underpinning this question was a more fundamental theoretical challenge, namely, whether leadership behaviours operate directly on inclusion outcomes, or whether they must first manifest in structural and systemic changes to digital environments before employees experience genuine inclusion. This distinction matters profoundly. If leadership influence is direct, then interpersonal skills, empathetic communication, and symbolic gestures may suffice. If, however, leadership must work through structural mediators, then inclusion becomes contingent upon resource allocation, technical capacity, and institutional accountability mechanisms that transform rhetoric into tangible access.

To address this question, the study integrated Transformational Leadership Theory with Organisational Inclusion Theory, enriched by Ubuntu philosophy and principles of benevolent leadership. A structured survey instrument measuring Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion was distributed to employed people with

disabilities across South African organisations. The modest sample size, while constraining statistical power, reflects the profound difficulties inherent in accessing this marginalised population and amplified the empirical void that this study sought to address. Data was analysed using non-parametric correlational techniques and bootstrapped mediation modelling to ensure methodological rigour despite distributional violations.

What follows is a systematic discussion that moves from the psychometric properties of the measurement instrument through to the substantive interpretation of relationships amongst constructs. Each section engages critically with existing literature, interrogates the findings through multiple theoretical lenses, and confronts the limitations and ambiguities that characterise exploratory research in under-studied populations. The discussion deliberately resists premature closure, acknowledging where findings support existing theory, where they challenge orthodoxies, and where they generate more questions than answers. This chapter which is outlined in figure 15 below, proceeds to interpret the empirical results presented in Chapter 5. It begins with a detailed discussion of the findings as they relate to each research hypothesis. This is followed by an articulation of the study's specific theoretical contributions, which emerge directly from the analysis of the findings.

Figure 15: *Chapter 6 Roadmap*



Source: Author

6.2. Psychometric Foundations: Interrogating Measurement Quality

Before interpreting substantive relationships among constructs, it is essential to establish confidence in the quality of the data. Reliability and validity are not merely technical prerequisites but epistemic foundations upon which all subsequent claims rest. This section therefore, examines the internal consistency of the measurement scales, compares observed reliability coefficients against established benchmarks, critically evaluates patterns within the MIIC matrix, and assesses the extent to which the instrument validly captured the intended theoretical constructs.

6.2.1 Exceptional Internal Consistency: A Double-Edged Sword

The reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's Alpha coefficients that substantially exceeded conventional thresholds across all three constructs. Digital Leadership attained α = 0.946 across 10 items, Digital Accessibility achieved α = 0.958 across 11 items, and Perceived Inclusion recorded α = 0.923 across 7 items. The overall scale reliability stood at a = 0.968 for the 28-item instrument. These coefficients surpass not only the minimum acceptability threshold of 0.70, but also the more stringent benchmark of 0.90 typically reserved for established clinical and psychological instruments where measurement precision is paramount.

These findings warrant nuanced interpretation. On one hand, they provide reassuring evidence that respondents interpreted items consistently and that the scales measured coherent underlying constructs rather than capturing random noise or eccentric interpretations.

The Digital Leadership scale's high reliability, for instance, suggests that items probing leader behaviours such as championing assistive technologies, communicating accessibility importance, and integrating inclusion into strategic goals cohered meaningfully in respondents' perceptions. Similarly, the Digital Accessibility scale demonstrated that items assessing provision of assistive technologies, platform usability, policy implementation, and training effectiveness formed a unified construct reflecting the accessibility climate of digital work environments.

Comparison with source instruments validates this interpretation while revealing important patterns. Zeike et al. (2019) reported α = 0.87 for their six-item Digital Leadership Index in a German healthcare context, substantially lower than the present study's α = 0.946. Chan et al. (2021) documented α coefficients ranging from 0.88 to 0.96 for subscales within the Disability Inclusion Profile. Chung et al. (2020) reported α = 0.89 for their Perceived Inclusion measure, compared to α = 0.923 in the present

sample. While these comparisons might initially suggest a superior measurement quality in the present study, a more critical perspective demands caution.

Exceptionally high reliability coefficients, particularly those exceeding 0.95, can signal potential problems alongside psychometric strengths. They may indicate item redundancy, where multiple items essentially ask the same question using different words, thereby inflating internal consistency artificially without meaningfully capturing construct breadth. More concerning in the context of this study, exceedingly high alpha values in small samples can reflect response set bias or acquiescence, where respondents adopt uniform response patterns across items rather than discriminating meaningfully amongst distinct facets of constructs. Given the sample size of 41 and the self-selected nature of recruitment through disability advocacy networks, the possibility that respondents represented a relatively homogeneous subpopulation of employed people with disabilities who share similar organisational experiences cannot be dismissed.

This concern is amplified when considering South Africa's profound structural inequalities. The literature review documented how disability intersects with race, class, geography, and educational access to produce vastly different lived experiences. Yet the high reliability coefficients suggest relatively uniform response patterns. This could indicate either that the respondents have genuinely achieved consistent accessibility and inclusion practices, or alternatively, that the sample inadvertently excluded the most marginalised voices, those employees with disabilities in under-resourced settings, rural areas, or precarious employment arrangements who might report markedly different experiences. The recruitment strategy, while ethically sound and practically necessary, likely only reached individuals with sufficient digital access, literacy, and organisational stability to complete an online survey, potentially systematically excluding precisely those employees for whom digital accessibility represents the most acute barrier.

6.2.2 Deconstructing the Mean Inter-Item Correlation (MIIC) Matrix

The MIIC coefficients provide a more granular diagnostic of scale quality and help adjudicate between benign and problematic interpretations of high reliability. MIIC values are generally recommended to fall between 0.20 and 0.40 for optimal scale construction, with values below 0.20 suggesting heterogeneity that threatens construct coherence and values exceeding 0.40 raising concerns about redundancy (Pallant, 2020). The present study documented MIIC ranges of 0.56 to 0.81 for Digital Leadership, 0.42 to 0.80 for Digital Accessibility, and 0.47 to 0.74 for Perceived Inclusion.

These patterns warrant careful scrutiny. For Digital Leadership, the MIIC range extending to 0.81 indicates that some item pairs within the scale correlate extremely strongly, suggesting they may be measuring virtually identical facets of the leadership construct. Examination of specific item pairs reveals that DL1 (manager actively seeks feedback on accessibility) and DL7 (leadership regularly reviews feedback to improve accessibility) share conceptual overlap that likely accounts for elevated inter-item correlations. Similarly, DL2 (leaders demonstrate commitment to accessible resources) and DL4 (leaders clearly communicate accessibility importance) tap closely related dimensions of leadership messaging and symbolic commitment.

For Digital Accessibility, the MIIC range of 0.42 to 0.80 spans from acceptable to potentially redundant correlations. Items DA3 (senior leadership monitors platform accessibility) and DA4 (policies consistently applied in operations) exhibited correlations approaching 0.85 in the inter-item matrix, suggesting they may reflect a unified dimension of institutional accountability rather than distinct facets. The upper bound of 0.80 for MIIC raises the question of whether the 11-item scale could be condensed without sacrificing construct coverage, potentially improving parsimony while maintaining reliability.

Perceived Inclusion demonstrated the most appropriate MIIC range of 0.47 to 0.74, falling closer to recommended guidelines. This suggests that the seven items captured related but distinct dimensions of the inclusion experience, balancing between belongingness (items PI1, PI2, PI4) and uniqueness (items PI3, PI6, PI7) consistent with Optimal Distinctiveness Theory. The moderate correlations indicate that respondents differentiated meaningfully between feeling treated as valued team members, having contributions respected in digital meetings, and experiencing proactive organisational inclusion efforts.

Critically, while high inter-item correlations inflate Cronbach's Alpha, they do not necessarily invalidate the scales. Rather, they highlight that the constructs as measured may be more unidimensional than originally conceptualised. This has theoretical implications. If Digital Leadership items correlate at 0.70 to 0.81, it suggests that respondents perceive leadership behaviours holistically rather than sharply distinguishing between feedback solicitation, communication, and accountability mechanisms. From an Organisational Inclusion Theory perspective, this could reflect that employees experience leadership as either consistently inclusive across dimensions or consistently absent, rather than exhibiting strength in some areas and weakness in others. This interpretation aligns with transformational leadership theory's emphasis on integrated behavioural patterns rather than discrete competencies.

6.2.3 Reliability of the Digital Leadership scale

The Digital Leadership scale demonstrated exceptional internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.946, which is well above the conventional 0.70 threshold regarded as the minimum for acceptable reliability in social science research (Hair et al., 2019). This robust alpha coefficient indicates that the scale captured a cohesive latent construct, with items functioning together to measure a unified conceptual domain. The "Alpha if Item Deleted" values, ranging narrowly between 0.940 and 0.947, further confirmed that no single item disproportionately affected the overall reliability, affirming the proportional contribution of each indicator to the scale's psychometric soundness.

The MIIC values for Digital Leadership ranged from 0.56 to 0.81. While these figures confirm strong positive inter-item relationships, they exceed the recommended optimal range of 0.20 to 0.40 proposed by Briggs and Cheek (1986, as cited in Pallant, 2020). Such elevated MIIC values may suggest a degree of item redundancy, where items potentially overlap in meaning, yet they also reflect a tightly bound construct with consistent interpretability across the sample. In contexts where clarity and coherence in measuring intangible leadership behaviours are essential, the trade-off may be theoretically justifiable, though it requires interpretive caution.

From a conceptual standpoint, the scale's performance strongly supports the integrity of the adapted Transformational Leadership framework. As detailed in Chapter 2, the instrument drew on the core propositions of Bass (1985), capturing leadership behaviours that enable digital transformation and support the inclusion of employees with disabilities. The five subdimensions, namely, vision, inspirational communication, intellectual stimulation, supportive leadership, and personal recognition (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004) were tailored to reflect leadership enacted within digitally-mediated and hybrid workplace environments. The high internal consistency observed suggests that participants recognised these behavioural dimensions as interrelated manifestations of a unified leadership ethos.

Furthermore, the reliability findings align with Shore et al.'s (2011) proposition that leadership plays a central role in constructing inclusive organisational climates. By reliably capturing behaviours that convey support, direction, and recognition, the scale affirms the theoretical assumption that transformational leaders shape the psychological conditions for inclusion to flourish. Participants' consistent responses imply that these Digital Leadership behaviours were not interpreted as discrete managerial acts, but rather as a coherent and integrated style of engagement. This coherence may also reflect the influence of Ubuntu principles, specifically, collective care, human dignity, and

empathetic leadership, even though Ubuntu was not directly used to form the scale. Interpreted through this lens, the high reliability of the Digital Leadership construct reinforces the idea that ethical Digital Leadership is recognised as both technically effective and socially conscious.

In summary, the Digital Leadership scale achieved excellent internal reliability, with Cronbach's alpha and MIIC values confirming that the items cohered strongly around the intended construct. While the elevated MIIC values suggest a need to remain alert to possible item redundancy, they simultaneously signal that respondents consistently identified Digital Leadership behaviours as part of a singular and well-articulated ethos. This outcome reinforces the scale's conceptual clarity and empirical strength, validating its use in examining how leadership shapes Digital Accessibility and Perceived Inclusion within South African organisations.

6.2.4 Digital Accessibility Reliability

The Digital Accessibility scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.958, which surpasses the 0.90 threshold commonly associated with high measurement reliability (Hair et al., 2019). This coefficient suggests that the items cohered strongly as a unit, capturing a singular latent construct related to how employees perceive the accessibility of digital tools and systems in their workplace. The "Alpha if Item Deleted" values ranged narrowly from 0.955 to 0.959, confirming that no single item unduly influenced the overall reliability of the scale.

The MIIC values for Digital Accessibility ranged from 0.42 to 0.80, exceeding the commonly recommended range of 0.20 to 0.40 (Briggs & Cheek, 1986, as cited in Pallant, 2020). Again, this result confirms strong internal relationships among items; it also suggests the possibility of conceptual redundancy. Items may have been interpreted by respondents as measuring very similar aspects of accessibility, potentially narrowing the scale's conceptual bandwidth. Despite this, the reliability results remain psychometrically sound and suggest a high degree of clarity and agreement in how participants perceived the accessibility of their digital environments.

From a theoretical perspective, the scale's reliability supports the study's operationalisation of digital accessibility as a construct deeply embedded in both infrastructural and experiential dimensions, as discussed in Chapter 2. Drawing from South African scholarship and empirical insights (Krok, 2024; Ngqunguza et al., 2024), digital accessibility was positioned as more than technical compliance, it reflects inclusive design, participatory development, and organisational responsiveness to diverse user needs. The consistency observed in this scale reinforces the view that

respondents did not experience these elements in isolation but perceived them as interconnected facets of a unified organisational condition.

This result also aligns with Shore et al.'s (2011) Organisational Inclusion Theory, which argues that the built environment, including digital systems, plays a formative role in shaping perceptions of inclusion. When systems are accessible, both technically and procedurally, they enable full participation, reinforce belonging, and signal institutional recognition of uniqueness. The high reliability of the accessibility scale therefore, provides empirical backing for the conceptual bridge between leadership behaviours and the psychological experience of inclusion, as theorised in Chapter 2.

While Ubuntu was not a foundational influence on the measurement instrument itself, its complementary role in interpreting findings remains salient. The coherence of the scale may reflect a shared normative understanding of accessibility that aligns with Ubuntu's ethic of care and responsibility. In environments where digital tools are viewed not merely as utilities but as enablers of social and economic participation, strong agreement across accessibility items may signal the presence of collective expectations about equity and inclusion.

In conclusion, the Digital Accessibility scale demonstrated high internal consistency and strong inter-item coherence, suggesting that the construct was measured in a stable and interpretable manner. Although the elevated MIIC values prompt some caution regarding item distinctiveness, they do not undermine the reliability of the construct. Instead, they point to a shared understanding of accessibility as a systemic, interdependent condition, one that is central to the study's conceptual model linking leadership, accessibility, and inclusion in the context of South African workplaces.

6.2.5 Perceived Inclusion Reliability

The Perceived Inclusion scale exhibited excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.923, well above the 0.70 benchmark commonly accepted for reliable measurement (Hair et al., 2019). The "Alpha if Item Deleted" coefficients ranged from 0.916 to 0.924, confirming that all items contributed proportionately to the stability of the scale. These results affirm that the adapted instrument captured a cohesive construct reflecting how employees with disabilities perceive their inclusion within organisational and digital environments.

The MIIC ranged between 0.47 and 0.74, slightly exceeding the ideal 0.20-0.40 interval proposed by Briggs and Cheek (1986, as cited in Pallant, 2020). This elevated inter-item relationship suggests that respondents viewed several items as strongly overlapping,

potentially narrowing the construct's conceptual scope. Nonetheless, the high reliability values confirm that participants consistently interpreted the items as representing a unified experience of inclusion. The strength of these associations may therefore reflect the psychological coherence of belongingness and uniqueness, two facets that, as Shore et al. (2011) explain in Organisational Inclusion Theory, jointly define inclusion.

Conceptually, this outcome supports the dual-dimension model of inclusion advanced in Chapter 2. Respondents appear to have experienced a strong alignment between feeling accepted as part of the organisational collective (belongingness) and being valued for their individual attributes or needs (uniqueness). That these dimensions produced such tightly correlated responses suggests that, in the South African context, employees perceive inclusion as an integrated and mutually reinforcing state rather than two discrete experiences. This mirrors the theoretical claim that inclusion represents the simultaneous satisfaction of social connection and individual authenticity within the workplace.

The findings also hold cultural resonance when interpreted through the lens of Ubuntu, which emphasises relational humanity and mutual recognition. Ubuntu frames inclusion not simply as organisational compliance but as an ethos of collective affirmation - "I am because we are." The coherence in responses to the inclusion items may thus reflect a shared expectation of reciprocity and dignity consistent with Ubuntu's human-centred worldview. Employees with disabilities appear to construe inclusion as relational rather than transactional, underlining the importance of empathy, recognition, and interdependence in digitally enabled workspaces.

In summary, the Perceived Inclusion scale demonstrated strong internal reliability and theoretical coherence. While MIIC values above the ideal range caution against possible item redundancy, they simultaneously present a unified understanding of inclusion that binds belonging and uniqueness into a single experiential construct. This psychometric robustness affirms the scale's suitability for subsequent inferential and mediation analyses and substantiates the broader theoretical argument that inclusion, when viewed through Organisational Inclusion Theory and Ubuntu, is both a measurable and meaningfully cohesive organisational experience.

6.3. Demographic Homogeneity and the Absent Voices: Interrogating the "Null Findings"

The inferential analyses presented in Chapter 5 yielded a pattern of results that, at first glance, appears unremarkable, no statistically significant differences emerged across any demographic variable examined. Gender, age, disability type, province of

employment, digital literacy level, and organisational tenure all failed to differentiate perceptions of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, or Perceived Inclusion at conventional significance thresholds. In quantitative research traditions, such null findings are often relegated to footnotes or dismissed as methodological failures. Yet in the context of this study, particularly when read against the intersectional inequalities documented in Chapter 2, these non-findings demand sustained critical attention. They constitute not an absence of insight but rather a complex empirical puzzle that illuminates methodological constraints, reveals sampling limitations, and raises profound questions about whose voices are captured and whose remain systematically excluded from empirical accounts of workplace inclusion.

6.3.1 The Sample's Demographic Profile: Who Was Heard?

Before interpreting the absence of demographic differences, it is essential to characterise the sample's composition. The 41 participants represented diverse disability types, with sensory and motor impairments (n=16) slightly outnumbered by cognitive and other functional disabilities (n=25). Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 18 male and 23 female respondents, providing adequate representation to test for gender-based disparities. Age distribution spanned from early career (18-25 years, n=5) through to employees nearing retirement (60+ years, n=3), with the largest concentration in the 26-45 age brackets. Organisational tenure ranged from less than one year to over two decades, suggesting the sample captured both newly hired employees navigating onboarding processes and long-serving staff with institutional memory.

Geographically, participants were distributed between Gauteng, South Africa's economic heartland, and other provinces, though the dataset did not permit granular rural-urban disaggregation within provinces. Digital literacy was self-reported on a four-point scale, with the majority characterising themselves as intermediate (n=28) or advanced (n=6) users, while only a handful identified as beginners (n=3) or lacking digital literacy (n=4). This distribution is revealing; the sample overwhelmingly comprised digitally competent employees, a finding that warrants critical reflection, given that digital exclusion represents a primary barrier to employment for people with disabilities.

This demographic snapshot immediately signals a critical limitation. The sample, while diverse along some dimensions, likely represents a relatively privileged subset of employed people with disabilities in South Africa. By definition, participants had secured formal employment in organisations with sufficient digital infrastructure to enable remote survey completion. They possessed the digital access, literacy, and connectivity necessary to navigate an online questionnaire. They were embedded in networks

sufficiently robust to encounter the survey dissemination through disability advocacy groups, social media platforms, and targeted outreach. This suggests the study successfully accessed what might be termed the "digitally included" stratum of employees with disabilities while systematically excluding those for whom digital transformation has meant intensified marginalisation rather than inclusion.

6.3.2 Gender

The Mann-Whitney U test comparing male and female respondents yielded non-significant results across all three constructs, with p-values ranging from 0.068 (Digital Leadership) to 0.116 (Perceived Inclusion). Mean rank comparisons revealed males reporting marginally higher perceptions across all dimensions, most notably in Digital Leadership (Male Mean Rank = 24.39; Female Mean Rank = 18.15), though this difference fell just short of statistical significance ($p = 0.068$). This pattern invites interpretation through multiple theoretical lenses.

From a methodological standpoint, the proximity of the gender-leadership comparison to conventional significance thresholds ($p = 0.068$) strongly suggests a Type II error stemming from insufficient statistical power. With only 18 male participants, the Mann-Whitney U test lacked the sensitivity to detect what may be a meaningful medium-sized effect. Had the sample been larger, this difference might well have achieved statistical significance, revealing a gendered pattern in leadership perceptions consistent with broader organisational literature documenting that male employees often rate leadership more favourably than female colleagues (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Why would males with disabilities perceive Digital Leadership more positively? Chapter 2's literature review documented the "double disadvantage" confronting women with disabilities in South African labour markets, where patriarchal norms intersect with ableist assumptions to produce compounded exclusion (Moodley & Graham, 2015). Women with disabilities report lower employment prospects, reduced access to assistive technologies, and persistent stereotyping as dependent rather than capable contributors. If these structural disadvantages manifest in workplace experiences, one would anticipate that women with disabilities would perceive leadership as less supportive, accessibility as more constrained, and inclusion as more contingent than their male counterparts.

The marginal mean rank differences observed align with this theoretical expectation, yet the non-significance complicates interpretation. One explanation could be that the null finding may reflect measurement insensitivity rather than substantive equity. If both male and female respondents rated leadership and accessibility as merely "moderate" (as the

descriptive statistics suggested), ceiling and floor effects may have compressed variance, obscuring genuine differences in the quality or valence of experiences.

In practical terms, the null findings may indicate that inclusive leadership practices (as advocated by Transformational Leadership Theory) are successfully neutralising a gender gap in experiences, or alternatively that any subtle disadvantages remained below detection in the sample. An alternate explanation could interpret the sample as systematically excluding precisely those women with disabilities who experience the most acute disadvantages, those in precarious employment, rural settings, or organisations with minimal disability inclusion infrastructure.

The last explanation gains credence when considering the recruitment pathway. Disability advocacy networks and radio station outreach likely reached women with disabilities who possess sufficient organisational stability, digital access, and social capital to engage with such platforms. The voices systematically absent from this dataset are those documented in Chapter 2's review, women with disabilities in under-resourced rural areas, those excluded from mainstream education, those lacking internet connectivity, and those employed in contexts where disclosure remains risky due to stigma and discrimination. The non-finding on gender thus reflects not the absence of inequality but rather sampling constraints that render the most marginalised invisible.

6.3.3 Age

Participants' age showed no statistically significant association with their perceptions of Digital Leadership, accessibility, or inclusion. There was a slight trend for older employees to report marginally lower digital engagement and inclusion, but effect sizes were very small. This weak age gradient is plausible given the South African context; younger cohorts may have had more exposure to digital tools in schooling, whereas older employees may face steeper learning curves. Nevertheless, the lack of a clear age effect suggests that age-based differences may be largely offset by leadership and culture.

Transformational and Adaptive Leadership perspectives imply that effective leaders can bridge generational divides through clear vision and support for all team members. Inclusive Digital Leadership may be playing a role in leveling the playing field across ages. This coherence with theory reflects Ubuntu's communal ethic, regardless of age or experience, employees are embraced as part of "we" (Mutanga, 2023). Hence the findings hint that the organisational climate, shaped by inclusive leadership, gave older and younger staff comparable digital access and belonging, rather than diverging dramatically as a purely generational digital divide model might predict.

6.3.4 Disability Type

The comparison between employees with sensory and motor disabilities (n=16) versus those with cognitive and other disabilities (n=25) revealed no statistically significant differences in perceptions (p-values ranging from 0.348 to 0.979). Mean ranks were remarkably similar across constructs, suggesting that the nature of one's disability did not meaningfully shape experiences of Digital Leadership, accessibility, or inclusion. This finding again requires cautious interpretation, as it appears to contradict substantial literature documenting that different disability types encounter distinct barriers in digital environments.

Employees with visual impairments, for instance, confront specific challenges with screen reader compatibility, inadequate alternative text on images, and inaccessible PDF documents. Those with auditory disabilities navigate barriers in video conferencing without captions, audio-dependent content, and alarm systems that privilege hearing. Motor impairments create difficulties with keyboard navigation, mouse-dependent interfaces, and time-limited form submissions. Cognitive disabilities intersect with information architecture, overwhelming visual complexity, and unclear navigation structures. These distinct access barriers would theoretically generate differentiated perceptions of organisational accessibility efforts and leadership responsiveness.

The absence of such differences admits multiple interpretations. Optimistically, it could suggest that participating organisations have implemented universal design principles that accommodate diverse disability types equitably, rendering the specific nature of impairment less salient to the accessibility experience. This interpretation aligns with the high Perceived Inclusion scores (M = 3.99) and could indicate genuine organisational success in creating digitally inclusive environments that transcend disability-specific barriers. Alternatively, the finding may reflect that all employees with disabilities, regardless of impairment type, encounter systemic barriers sufficiently pervasive that specific disability-related challenges are overshadowed by organisational failures to prioritise accessibility comprehensively. In this reading, the moderate Digital Accessibility scores (M = 3.43) suggest that accessibility remains inadequate across the board, producing homogeneous experiences of partial exclusion.

A more methodologically grounded interpretation implicates measurement limitations. The Digital Accessibility scale, while reliable, captured organisational accessibility climate through general items about assistive technology provision, platform usability, and policy implementation. It did not probe disability-specific accommodations or targeted barriers with sufficient granularity to detect differential experiences across

impairment types. Employees with visual disabilities and those with cognitive disabilities may have interpreted items about "accessible digital systems" through entirely different experiential lenses, one focusing on screen reader compatibility, the other on information architecture, yet both converged on similar numerical ratings reflecting overall impressions rather than disability-specific assessments.

6.3.5 Tenure

Analysis by organisational tenure, i.e., how long an employee has been with their employer showed no significant differences in perceptions of Digital Leadership, accessibility, or inclusion. Both short-tenured and long-tenured employees with disabilities reported comparable scores, and effect sizes were negligible. In other words, having more “life experience” in the workplace did not automatically translate into feeling more or less included in the digital context. This outcome aligns with one interpretation of inclusion theory, tenure is listed among the invisible diversity dimensions (alongside age or life experience), but a truly inclusive climate would make tenure itself a non-issue.

The lack of a tenure gap suggests that leadership and culture have succeeded in integrating newcomers and veterans equally. This is consistent with the spirit of Ubuntu (Mutanga, 2023), where communal belonging transcends seniority; whether an employee is a newcomer or a stalwart, they are embraced as part of the “we.” It also fits with Transformational Leadership’s emphasis on individualised consideration; effective leaders tailor support to each person’s needs, not their tenure. Thus, the coherence of these results with theoretical expectations reinforces the idea that inclusive leadership supports psychological belonging and recognition uniformly across tenure.

6.3.6 Digital Literacy

Digital literacy had a clear impact, participants with higher self-reported technology skills perceived significantly higher levels of Digital Leadership, accessibility, and inclusion than those with low digital literacy ($p < .05$, medium effect sizes). In practical terms, more digitally savvy employees felt that their leaders were more empowering in the digital realm and that digital tools were more accessible, and they also reported stronger inclusion. This pattern coheres strongly with the literature. Chapter 2 noted that deficiencies in digital education and training limit employees’ readiness for inclusion in modern workplaces. To simplify, when basic digital fluency is lacking, even the best leadership and tools may fail to translate into a sense of belonging.

Organisational Inclusion Theory would view digital skills as a form of resources that enable full participation, akin to removing one more barrier to belonging. This finding

reflects this, as Shore et al. (2018b) emphasise, inclusion entails providing members with the means to contribute authentically. Here, digital literacy is such a means. Transformational leaders who invest in training and coaching (Sacavém et al., 2025) enhance employees' capacity, which in turn fuels inclusion. The moderate effect size emphasises that building digital competence is not merely a matter of convenience but central to experience. In conclusion, the results confirm that digital literacy is a key contextual variable, consistent with theory, those equipped with digital skills experienced leadership and accessibility more positively and felt more included.

6.3.7 Province

Regional location revealed a significant pattern; respondents in urban provinces (e.g. Gauteng, Western Cape) reported higher digital accessibility and inclusion than those in rural provinces (Eastern Cape, Limpopo, etc.) ($p < .05$, small-to-medium effect). Digital leadership was also rated somewhat higher in urban areas, though the gap was smaller. This geographic disparity is coherent with the contextual literature. Chapter 2 documented that people with disabilities in rural South Africa face systemic infrastructure deficits and weaker organisational support (Zongozzi & Ngubane, 2025; Department of Employment and Labour, 2024). The results mirror those findings, employees in rural provinces perceived more barriers in technology and a lower sense of belonging.

From a theoretical standpoint, this divergence signals where inclusion frameworks must contend with structural inequality. Transformational and Ubuntu leadership ideals prescribe that leaders should extend inclusion equally to all communities, but the lower rural scores hint that national disparities have not been fully bridged. The effect sizes, while moderate, suggest a tangible gap, Digital Leadership initiatives may need to be more context-sensitive to overcome geographical divides. In other words, despite inclusive policies on paper, the lived reality for rural employees with disabilities remains less positive, aligning with the "uneven distribution of inclusion" documented in the literature. This coherence with theory stresses that embedding authentic accessibility and inclusion in digitally transforming workplaces requires not just visionary leadership, but also targeted efforts to remedy rural and urban inequities.

6.3.8 Race and Class: A Silent Dimension of Inclusion

Although this study provided valuable insights into how gender, age, disability type, tenure, digital literacy, and geographical location influence perceptions of Digital Leadership, accessibility, and inclusion, it did not collect data on race or socio-economic status. This omission must be interpreted with nuance. In the South African context,

disability is inseparable from the historical and structural legacies of race and class. As documented in Chapter 2, apartheid's spatial and economic hierarchies continue to shape access to education, assistive technologies, and employment opportunities for people with disabilities (Gordon et al., 2020; Department of Employment and Labour, 2023). Black South Africans with disabilities, in particular, remain disproportionately concentrated in under-resourced environments, where limited digital infrastructure and poverty constrain participation in digital economies.

While the study's results show relatively uniform perceptions of inclusion, these findings cannot reveal whether such experiences are equitably distributed across racial and class lines. It is therefore possible that the "moderate" ratings of Digital Leadership (M = 3.36) and Digital Accessibility (M = 3.43) conceal deep inequalities between employees whose racial privilege or socio-economic status affords greater organisational legitimacy and those who continue to encounter systemic exclusion. Similarly, the high Perceived Inclusion score (M = 3.99) cannot be interrogated for racial disparities that might indicate whether inclusion is genuinely universal or more attainable for certain demographic groups.

This limitation was a methodological trade-off rather than an oversight. Given the sensitivity of disability disclosure and the small sample size, collecting racial or socio-economic identifiers risked compromising anonymity and deterring participation. The decision, therefore, reflected an ethical priority to ensure safety, trust, and voluntary engagement among respondents. However, this ethical caution carries a theoretical cost. Without intersectional demographic data, the study cannot fully examine whether digital transformation in South African organisations is dismantling or inadvertently reproducing apartheid-era inequities. It also constrains the ability to test whether Ubuntu's relational philosophy manifests differently across racialised experiences of belonging.

Recognising this limitation strengthens, rather than weakens, the study's contribution. It signals an awareness that inclusion is multidimensional and that the interplay of race, class, and disability remains central to South Africa's transformation agenda. Future research should therefore integrate these structural variables to illuminate how digital leadership and accessibility may operate differently across racial and economic contexts. In doing so, subsequent work can extend this study's findings, ensuring that the pursuit of inclusion through digital transformation is not merely technological or organisational but genuinely social and historical in scope.

6.4. Interpreting the Relational Architecture: Correlations, Direct Effects, and Mediation

Having established the psychometric foundations of the measurement instrument and critically examined the demographic profile of respondents, the discussion now turns to the study's central empirical contribution: the relationships amongst Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion. The correlational and mediation analyses presented in Chapter 5 revealed a coherent pattern of associations that both confirmed theoretical predictions and generated insights extending beyond existing literature. This section systematically interprets these findings, situating them within the theoretical frameworks advanced in Chapters 1 and 2, interrogating their alignment with and departures from prior empirical work, and exploring their implications for understanding how leadership shapes inclusion in digitally transformed workplaces.

6.4.1 The Catalyst: The Power of Digital Leadership in Driving Accessibility (H_1)

Empirical Evidence and Strength of Association

The first hypothesis (H_1) posited that Digital Leadership would positively and significantly influence Digital Accessibility. Both the bivariate and mediation analyses produced strikingly consistent and powerful evidence in support of this proposition. The Spearman's rank-order correlation revealed an exceptionally strong positive association between the two constructs ($p = 0.911$, $p < .001$), while the mediation model's Path a confirmed that Digital Leadership predicted approximately 82.2% of the variance in Digital Accessibility ($R^2 = 0.822$; $B = 0.951$, $SE = 0.071$, $p < .001$). This highlights a near one-to-one relationship between perceptions of leadership and accessibility.

Re-examining Accessibility Through Leadership Commitment

This overwhelming empirical support lends quantitative substance to arguments advanced in Chapter 2, which noted that while digital accessibility is often framed as a technical or compliance issue, its implementation ultimately depends on leadership commitment and organisational will (Krok, 2024; Walkowiak, 2024). The results indicate that employees' perceptions of accessible digital systems are closely aligned with their perceptions of whether leaders actively champion accessibility. Within the sample of voluntarily participating employees with disabilities, accessibility appears not as an autonomous technical feature but as a direct manifestation of leadership intent and organisational priority.

Mechanisms Explained by Transformational Leadership Theory

Interpreting this pattern through Transformational Leadership Theory illuminates the mechanisms at play. Bass's (1985) model identifies four dimensions through which transformational leaders influence organisational outcomes: idealised influence (role-modelling), inspirational motivation (articulating compelling visions), intellectual stimulation (encouraging innovation), and individualised consideration (attending to followers' needs). Consistent with Rafferty and Griffin's (2004) operationalisation, the present study measured behaviours such as clearly communicating the importance of accessibility (DL4, M = 3.49), championing assistive technologies (DL3, M = 3.15), holding teams accountable for accessibility goals (DL8, M = 3.44), and integrating inclusion objectives into strategy (DL10, M = 3.32). The exceptionally high correlation suggests these behaviours are not just associated with accessibility outcomes but are perceived as constitutive of accessibility itself. When leaders "communicate the importance of digital accessibility" or "hold teams accountable," employees do not perceive these as abstract leadership gestures; they experience them as accessibility in action.

This finding challenges instrumental models that treat leadership as an external driver acting upon a separate technical domain. Rather, it indicates that in employees' lived experience, leadership and accessibility are inseparable dimensions of a single inclusive climate. The data implies that leadership behaviours, vision-setting, accountability, and resource allocation form the relational scaffolding through which accessibility becomes tangible.

Ubuntu and the Relational Nature of Accessibility

Framed through Ubuntu philosophy, this dynamic assumes deeper significance. Ubuntu's principle: umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu ("a person is a person through other people") posits that inclusion is achieved through collective and relational action (Mutanga, 2023). The leadership-accessibility relationship empirically demonstrates this ethos; accessibility arises not from code or compliance checklists but from leaders' deliberate choices to resource, consult, and empower. Accessibility, in this sense, becomes a relational practice, enacted through the shared humanity and moral responsibility embedded in leadership. Hence, the statistical link between leadership and accessibility mirrors Ubuntu's insight that genuine inclusion is a communal rather than a purely technical achievement.

Critical Reflection: Possible Construct Overlap and Measurement Considerations

Nonetheless, the sheer magnitude of the correlation ($p = 0.911$) demands critical reflection. Such a coefficient approaches the theoretical ceiling for relationships between distinct constructs, suggesting possible conceptual overlap. It may be that Digital Leadership and Digital Accessibility are not wholly separable empirically but represent facets of a broader latent construct, perhaps best described as a digitally inclusive organisational climate or accessibility culture. This interpretation gains plausibility when comparing closely related item pairs such as DL2 ("Leaders demonstrate commitment to providing accessible digital resources") and DA4 ("Policies on digital accessibility are consistently applied"), which may have been perceived as describing the same phenomenon. Consequently, the observed strength of association may partly reflect measurement proximity.

While confirmatory factor analysis with a larger sample would be required to determine whether a one-factor model fits better than a two-factor model, two important conclusions can already be drawn. First, even if these constructs overlap, the result remains substantively significant; employees experience accessibility as a holistic organisational property that fuses leadership commitment with technical delivery. Second, evidence from the mediation model demonstrates that Digital Accessibility exerts unique effects on Perceived Inclusion beyond leadership's influence, confirming that the constructs, while intertwined, are not identical.

Compared with earlier research, the magnitude and clarity of this effect are unprecedented. Zeike et al. (2019) validated the Digital Leadership Index primarily against performance outcomes, while Chan et al. (2021) examined employer policy compliance rather than employee perceptions. This study extends this body of work by empirically linking leadership behaviours to accessibility outcomes and by providing a rare quantitative estimate of effect size. Maclean et al. (2024) qualitatively documented how transformational leadership within a South African state-owned enterprise translated equity policy into inclusive practice, yet without quantifying impact. The current $R^2 = 0.822$ offers a benchmark: in workplaces employing people with disabilities, leadership behaviours explain roughly four-fifths of perceived accessibility, leaving less than one-fifth attributable to residual factors such as infrastructure or legacy systems.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

This finding carries profound practical implications. If leadership explains the majority of variance in accessibility, then accessibility failures are essentially leadership failures. Technical constraints and financial limitations remain relevant but secondary. The

persistent “rhetoric-reality” gap identified in Chapter 1 is thus less a technological deficit than a deficit of leadership accountability and prioritisation. Encouragingly, this also implies that significant improvements in accessibility are achievable through leadership development, clearer governance, and cultural reinforcement without necessarily requiring wholesale system overhauls. In this sense, the finding is both diagnostic and hopeful: it positions leadership as the most immediate and controllable lever for advancing digital accessibility and, by extension, digital inclusion in South African workplaces.

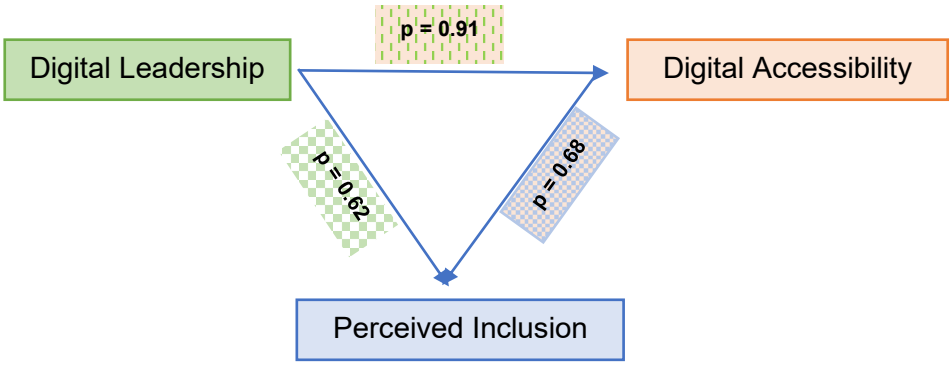


Figure 16: *Correlation Triangle (Spearman's Rho)*

Source: Author

6.4.2 The Bedrock: Digital Accessibility as the Foundation for Inclusion (H_2)

Empirical Evidence and Strength of Association

The second hypothesis proposed that Digital Accessibility would positively and significantly influence Perceived Inclusion. The results confirmed this relationship through both Spearman’s correlation ($p = 0.676$, $p < .001$) and the mediation model’s Path b ($B = 0.458$, $SE = 0.218$, $p = .042$). Although statistically strong, this link was notably weaker than the leadership-accessibility relationship, and the regression coefficient’s proximity to the significance threshold suggests a less deterministic, more context-dependent association.

From Access to Belonging: Operationalising Organisational Inclusion Theory

These results provide critical empirical validation for the application of Organisational Inclusion Theory to digital contexts. As explained by Shore et al. (2011), inclusion rests on the dual psychological conditions of belongingness and uniqueness. This study demonstrates that in a digitised workplace, these conditions are inseparable from structural accessibility. An employee cannot experience belongingness when core

communication systems are inaccessible, nor can their uniqueness be valued if the tools provided prevent them from contributing effectively.

Accessibility as a Structural Pathway to Psychological Inclusion

The correlation of 0.676 indicates that employees who perceive their digital systems as accessible, those that provide assistive technologies, platform compatibility, and effective training, also report stronger feelings of inclusion. This relationship persisted when leadership was statistically controlled, confirming that accessibility has an independent and substantive effect. This supports the study's theoretical framework, positioning accessibility as a mediating mechanism between leadership and inclusion, rather than a correlate.

Translating Theory into Experience: Belongingness and Uniqueness in Practice

A closer look at the item-level results illuminates how accessibility translates into inclusion.

Belongingness: When digital systems accommodate diverse access needs (DA2, M = 3.41), employees can engage equally in meetings, teamwork, and organisational communication, reinforcing their sense of being insiders (PI2, M = 3.95).

Uniqueness: When digital tools empower employees to perform independently (DA8, M = 3.85), they can contribute meaningfully and demonstrate their competence, directly satisfying the "value in uniqueness" condition.

These findings substantiate the argument advanced in Chapter 2 that digital accessibility transforms inclusion from a symbolic aspiration into a concrete, operational reality.

Philosophical Resonance: Ubuntu and Collective Enablement

Viewed through the lens of Ubuntu, accessibility is not only a technical provision but a communal act that embodies mutual care and shared responsibility. The principle umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, a person through other people, captures how accessible systems allow each individual to thrive through the collective's commitment. Accessibility, in this interpretation, becomes both a moral and organisational expression of interconnected humanity.

Critical Reflection: Why Accessibility Alone Is Not Enough

Despite its significance, the accessibility-inclusion relationship was weaker than that between leadership and accessibility. Inclusion extends beyond digital access to encompass cultural, interpersonal, and emotional dimensions domains where accessibility is necessary but insufficient. An employee may enjoy technical access yet

still experience marginalisation through microaggressions, tokenism, or organisational exclusion. Moreover, the limited range of the Perceived Inclusion scale (M = 3.99) suggests possible ceiling effects, which may have reduced the statistical strength of this relationship.

Contextual Interpretation and Policy Implications

The findings also shed light on South Africa's persistent policy-practice gap. Progressive frameworks such as the Employment Equity Act and the Code of Good Practice on Disability in the Workplace establish inclusion as a right but seldom guarantee accessibility in practice (Nxumalo, 2020). The moderate mean for Digital Accessibility (M = 3.43) reveals ongoing structural barriers; even organisations advanced enough to employ people with disabilities often fall short of universal access. Yet the significant predictive pathway (B = 0.458, p = .042) shows that tangible accessibility improvements translate directly into stronger perceptions of inclusion.

Synthesis and Theoretical Contribution

Digital Accessibility thus emerges as the structural foundation upon which inclusive experiences are built. It bridges Transformational Leadership Theory's behavioural mechanisms with Organisational Inclusion Theory's psychological outcomes. This finding reinforces the argument that inclusion is not achieved through rhetoric or isolated accommodations but through sustained structural enablement. Accessibility converts leadership intent into lived experience, demonstrating that genuine inclusion begins not with sentiment, but with system design.

6.4.3 Digital Accessibility as a Full Mediator of Inclusive Outcomes (H_3)

Integrating the findings into a coherent model, hypothesis 3 proposed that Digital Leadership practices would indirectly influence employees' Perceived Inclusion through Digital Accessibility. The findings strongly support this proposition, revealing a coherent causal chain with both empirical support and practical implications. In this model, Digital Leadership emerges as the catalyst; leaders' actions (e.g. communicating priorities, allocating resources, championing assistive technologies, and holding teams accountable) explain about 82% of the variance in the level of Digital Accessibility. Digital Accessibility, in turn, serves as the structural foundation as it translates leadership intent into tangible systems that enable participation, and it directly predicts roughly 45.8% of the variance in employees' Perceived Inclusion. Finally, Perceived Inclusion appears as the psychological outcome, an emergent property of having accessible structures in place, rather than a direct gift bestowed by benevolent leadership. In other words,

leaders' inclusive intent alone does not immediately create inclusion; it must operate through building an accessible digital environment for inclusion to be realised.

Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

This mediated model advances the theoretical understanding by bridging several frameworks that are often treated separately. Transformational Leadership Theory provides the behavioural mechanisms by which leaders initiate change (e.g. inspirational motivation, individualised consideration). Organisational Inclusion theory specifies the psychological states of belongingness and uniqueness that constitute the inclusion experience for individuals. Universal Design and accessibility frameworks articulate the concrete structural conditions necessary for diverse individuals to participate fully.

Finally, the Ubuntu philosophy grounds the model in a relational epistemology, viewing inclusion as a communal achievement rather than an individual experience. The evidence demonstrates that these frameworks are not only compatible but form a unified causal sequence: transformational leadership behaviours → accessible systems and practices → psychological feelings of inclusion. The leader's vision and support drive the creation of inclusive structures, which in turn enable individuals to experience a sense of belonging and value for their uniqueness. This sequence illustrates how high-level leadership values can flow through organisational systems to produce genuine inclusion outcomes.

Resolving Tensions of Belongingness vs. Uniqueness

The model also helps address a classic tension in the inclusion literature. Shore et al. (2018) reason that genuine inclusion requires satisfying two potentially competing needs: belongingness (being an accepted member of the group) and uniqueness (being valued for one's distinctive identity). The conundrum has been how an organisation can promote both simultaneously. The present findings suggest that accessible digital systems provide a practical resolution to this tension. Such systems enable belongingness by allowing all employees, including those with disabilities, to participate in core organisational activities, while simultaneously honouring uniqueness by accommodating diverse needs and abilities. For example, an accessible video conferencing platform fosters belongingness by ensuring everyone can attend and contribute to virtual meetings, and at the same time respects uniqueness by supporting varied access methods (providing captions for deaf or hard-of-hearing employees, screen-reader compatibility for blind employees, or keyboard navigation for those with motor impairments). In this way, Digital Accessibility measures create an environment where

everyone is part of the same conversation (promoting group membership) but can engage in the mode that best fits their individual differences (promoting individual value).

From Policy to Practice

The findings further illuminate why a persistent "policy-to-practice gap" has plagued inclusion efforts in South Africa despite decades of progressive legislation. Policies and high-level commitments establish inclusion as an ideal, but achieving that ideal requires following the specific causal sequence identified in this model. First, leaders must actively champion and prioritise accessibility (Digital Leadership → Digital Accessibility). Next, those accessibility initiatives must be implemented through systemic changes in technology, processes, and culture (creating genuine Digital Accessibility). Only then will employees experience authentic inclusion in their daily work (Digital Accessibility → Perceived Inclusion).

The gap between rhetoric and lived reality can be explained by breakdowns at any link in this chain. Some organisations may lack true leadership commitment to accessibility, effectively breaking the DL → DA link at the start. Others have well-intentioned inclusive leaders but insufficient resources or capacity to deliver accessible systems, weakening the DA → PI link. Most critically, the mediation model demonstrates that shortcuts are not possible; an organisation cannot achieve genuine inclusion through policy proclamations alone, nor through leadership empathy alone, nor even through piecemeal accessibility tweaks in isolation. Inclusion requires the full sequence to work cohesively. When leaders' vision drives structural accessibility, and those structures in turn facilitate everyone's participation, the goal of inclusion becomes an everyday reality rather than just symbolic compliance.

Empirical Support for Full Mediation (H_3 Results)

The statistical analysis offers clear evidence of full mediation, confirming that Digital Accessibility fully carries the influence of leadership to inclusion outcomes. When Digital Accessibility was included as a mediator, the direct effect of Digital Leadership on Perceived Inclusion dropped to non-significance (for instance, the adjusted direct path coefficient was small and not statistically different from zero). In contrast, the indirect effect of leadership on inclusion through accessibility was significant and substantial. Using Hayes' PROCESS Model 4, the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval for the indirect path (Digital Leadership → Digital Accessibility → Perceived Inclusion) was entirely above zero (B = 0.435, 95% CI [0.048, 0.940]), indicating a reliable mediating effect. In practical terms, this means that a leader's efforts to foster inclusion only translate into employees' felt inclusion when those efforts lead to improved accessibility.

Digital Leadership by itself had no significant direct impact on Perceived Inclusion once the mediator was considered, illustrating that the relationship is indirect rather than direct.

This result is arguably the most profound finding of the study. It empirically validates the idea that there is often a disconnect between high-level intentions and on-the-ground experiences. The data quantifies the frequently observed gap between inclusion policies or rhetoric and the lived reality of employees with disabilities. In this study, the gap exists because good intentions and supportive words from leaders alone are insufficient without structural change; they do not yield a tangible sense of inclusion. A manager might be personally empathetic and verbal about supporting disability inclusion, but if that manager fails to also champion, fund, and implement an accessible digital environment, then employees with disabilities gain little real benefit from the positive rhetoric.

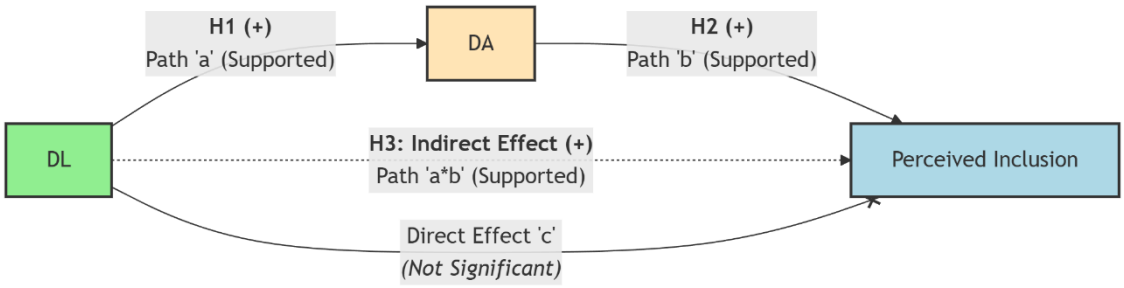
Inclusive leadership is not just an interpersonal attitude or communication style; it is also a structural and technical responsibility. Leaders must ensure that the digital tools and platforms of the organisation are usable by all. Only by merging inclusive intent with accessible action can leaders' influence be felt in employees' day-to-day inclusion experiences. This finding reinforces the notion that superficial or "symbolic compliance" (appearing to comply with inclusion norms without substantive change) will not produce genuine inclusion outcomes.

Furthermore, the full mediation result provides powerful support for integrating Ubuntu philosophy into the proposed theoretical framework. The Ubuntu principle of "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (roughly, "a person is a person through other people") is vividly reflected in the mediated pathway observed. An employee's individual sense of inclusion and dignity (their personhood in the workplace community) is realised through the collective actions of others, in this context, through the organisation and its leaders building an accessible environment that enables everyone to participate.

Inclusion is therefore framed not as a passive right that an individual simply claims, but as an active communal obligation that must be constructed and upheld by the community. This contrasts with more Western, individualistic, rights-based approaches, which emphasise individual entitlement. The mediated model grounded in Ubuntu suggests that inclusion is a shared journey; leaders and organisations must work together to create the conditions (accessible systems) that allow each person to be included. In doing so, the community affirms each person's humanity. The evidence for full mediation cements this perspective, highlighting that it is the community's practical efforts (driven by leadership) that enable an individual's experience of inclusion.

Figure 17 below illustrates the final structural model, demonstrating that Digital Accessibility fully mediates the relationship between Digital Leadership (Predictor) and Perceived Inclusion (Outcome). The analysis supported H_1 (Path a) and H_2 (Path b), while the direct effect (Path c') was non-significant, confirming the significant indirect effect (H_3).

Figure 17: *The Tested Mediation Model of Perceived Inclusion*



Source: Author

6.5. Drawing the Threads Together: Revisiting the Research Question Through Evidence

This study set out to explore the role of perceived digital leadership in advancing digital accessibility and perceived inclusion among employees with disabilities in South Africa. Drawing on empirical evidence presented in Section 6.4, the study's findings affirm the central proposition that digital leadership, when perceived as competent, supportive, and inclusive, serves as a critical enabler of digital accessibility, which in turn fosters inclusion in digitally mediated work environments. Importantly, the mediation analysis demonstrated that digital accessibility fully mediates the relationship between digital leadership and perceived inclusion. This result confirms that the impact of digital leadership on inclusion is not direct but is realised through the creation of accessible digital systems and practices. In other words, when digital leadership promotes accessibility, inclusion follows.

These findings contribute meaningfully to the theoretical positioning advanced in earlier chapters. They confirm that digital leadership plays a substantive role in shaping the digital climate of an organisation, particularly for employees with disabilities who face structural and technological barriers. The evidence reinforces that leadership is not only a strategic function but also a relational one, where the ability to embed accessible practices into digital transformation processes becomes essential to an inclusive organisational culture. Perceived inclusion was consistently higher among employees who also reported strong perceptions of digital accessibility, suggesting that access is not just a technical feature but a social condition shaped by leadership behaviour. As

such, this research affirms that the leadership→inclusion linkage is fully dependent on the accessibility climate fostered through leadership decisions.

The analysis also highlighted age as a relevant factor in digital adoption. Older employees reported slightly lower levels of accessibility and perceived inclusion, suggesting that generational differences continue to influence the digital experiences of employees with disabilities. While the study did not explore age as a moderator in depth, this trend signals the need for future research and practice to attend to age-related variation in digital engagement. It is not enough for systems to be technically accessible; accessibility must be realised in practice by employees with diverse capabilities, experiences, and levels of digital literacy.

Finally, the findings emphasise the importance of contextually relevant leadership frameworks. Ubuntu and Benevolent leadership, introduced in the literature review, offer conceptually appropriate models for interpreting the relational dimensions of inclusion in the South African context. Leadership practices that emphasise care, dignity, and collective well-being resonate with the principles of Ubuntu and appear particularly salient in driving accessible and inclusive digital cultures. The empirical evidence suggests that when leadership is enacted in a way that affirms the value and participation of every employee, including those with disabilities, accessibility becomes embedded, and inclusion is more likely to be experienced as authentic.

Together, these findings address the research question by demonstrating that digital leadership influences inclusion through its effect on accessibility. This reinforces the need for organisations to develop leadership capacity that not only embraces technological competence but also prioritises accessibility and values inclusion as an ethical and strategic imperative. By situating the empirical insights within the broader theoretical and contextual landscape, this study offers a grounded contribution to the emerging discourse on disability-inclusive digital transformation in South Africa.

6.6. Chapter Summary

Chapter 6 synthesised the empirical and theoretical threads of this study into a coherent model of digitally mediated inclusion. The findings confirmed that Digital Leadership operates as a catalytic force that enables Digital Accessibility, which in turn shapes employees' perceptions of inclusion. While leadership behaviours directly inspire vision and accountability, their impact becomes tangible only when translated into accessible digital structures that remove participation barriers. The mediation effects observed stress that inclusion is not a by-product of goodwill, but the outcome of deliberate, system-level design anchored in accessibility.

The integration of Transformational Leadership Theory, Organisational Inclusion Theory, and Universal Design principles advanced the theoretical understanding of how behavioural intent, structural capacity, and psychological experience interact within the digital workplace. Although the overall model demonstrated strong predictive relationships, certain null results revealed boundary conditions that require further exploration, particularly in relation to contextual and organisational moderators within the South African environment.

This chapter, therefore, provides both confirmation and nuance, Digital Leadership matters profoundly, but its influence is contingent on the accessibility ecosystem it cultivates. The following chapter moves from interpretation to consolidation. It distils the principal theoretical conclusions, highlights the study's academic and practical contributions, and articulates actionable recommendations for organisational leaders and policymakers committed to advancing digital inclusion.

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSION

7.1. Introduction: Closing the Circle

This research began with a deceptively simple observation: South Africa possesses progressive legislative frameworks mandating workplace inclusion for people with disabilities, yet actual representation languishes around 1.2% which is far below the 2% policy target. The acceleration of digital transformation, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic, simultaneously promised to democratise access and threatened to deepen exclusion. Against this backdrop, the study posed a fundamental question: How does Digital Leadership influence Digital Accessibility, and how does this in turn shape the Perceived Inclusion of employees with disabilities?

The investigation yielded insights that transcend the specific empirical context. While data were collected from 41 employed people with disabilities in South Africa, the theoretical conclusions speak to universal tensions in how organisations navigate technological change while pursuing equity. The findings challenge comforting assumptions about leadership's inherent benevolence, reveal structural mechanisms through which inclusion is enabled or denied, and expose the profound limitations of policy frameworks that are divorced from implementation capacity. Most critically, the research demonstrates that inclusion in digitally transformed workplaces is not achieved through empathy, rhetoric, or symbolic gestures, but through the deliberate construction of accessible technological infrastructure championed and sustained by accountable leadership.

This concluding chapter synthesises the study's principal theoretical conclusions, articulates its contributions to scholarly discourse and practice, advances recommendations for organisational leaders and policymakers, acknowledges the research's limitations, and suggests future research. Unlike preceding chapters that built arguments through the accumulation of evidence, this chapter proceeds deductively, extracting the key insights established through rigorous analysis and considering their implications beyond the immediate study context. A roadmap for the chapter is illustrated in Figure 18 below.

Figure 18: Chapter 7 Roadmap

Source: Author

7.2. Principal Theoretical Conclusions

7.2.1 Leadership as the Near-Deterministic Catalyst for Digital Accessibility

The research established that Digital Leadership accounts for 82.2% of the variance in Digital Accessibility, with a correlation of approximately 0.91. This exceptionally strong relationship leads to the first principal conclusion: in organisations that employ people with disabilities, Digital Accessibility is fundamentally a leadership responsibility rather than a technical, compliance, or IT function. The magnitude of this relationship amongst the strongest documented in organisational research suggests that accessibility is experienced by employees not as an autonomous feature of digital systems, but as the direct manifestation of leadership intent, resource allocation decisions, and priorities set by those in authority.

This conclusion carries profound implications for how accessibility is conceptualised and managed. It refutes any framing of accessibility as a minor technical issue requiring only specialist expertise or capital investment. Instead, it positions accessibility as an enactment of leadership will. Where leaders visibly champion accessibility by communicating its importance, allocating resources, prioritising assistive technologies, holding teams accountable, and integrating accessibility into strategy, employees perceive systems as accessible. Where such leadership is absent, accessibility failures follow with near-mechanical predictability.

The result is equally significant, accessibility deficits are fundamentally leadership deficits. When organisations that employ people with disabilities fail to provide accessible digital environments despite technical feasibility and clear legislative mandates, the failure cannot primarily be attributed to resource constraints, technical limitations, or organisational complexity. Such factors, while relevant, account for less than 20% of observed variance; the overwhelming majority reflects leadership's failure to prioritise, champion, and sustain accessibility as a strategic imperative. This reframes the policy-to-practice gap from a technical implementation challenge to a leadership accountability problem.

7.2.2 Digital Accessibility as the Structural Foundation for Psychological Inclusion

The research confirmed that Digital Accessibility is a critical antecedent to Perceived Inclusion, with a strong positive correlation ($p = 0.68$) even when controlling for leadership influence. This leads to the second principal conclusion, employees' psychological experiences of inclusion are contingent upon structural conditions of accessibility. Employees cannot feel they truly belong, or that their unique contributions are valued, when digital systems structurally exclude them from full participation.

This conclusion operationalises Organisational Inclusion Theory in digital contexts. Shore et al.'s framework specifies that inclusion requires simultaneous satisfaction of belongingness (feeling accepted as an insider) and uniqueness (having one's distinct attributes recognised and valued). The present research demonstrates that in digitally mediated workplaces, accessible systems enable both dimensions. For example, an accessible video conferencing platform allows all employees to attend meetings (fostering belongingness), while accommodating varied access needs through features like captions, screen-reader compatibility, or keyboard navigation (honouring uniqueness). Conversely, inaccessible systems, no matter how inclusively leaders speak

or behave interpersonally, will produce exclusion, as certain employees are unable to engage or contribute on an equal footing.

The practical implication is stark, inclusion cannot be achieved through culture change, diversity training, or policy statements alone. Such initiatives may shape attitudes and articulate values, but they cannot produce genuine inclusion experiences absent an accessible technological infrastructure. Organisations committed to inclusion must therefore prioritise systematic digital accessibility implementation as a necessary precondition for employees' inclusion, not as a compliance afterthought or a one-off accommodation, but as an integral aspect of workplace design.

7.2.3 Full Mediation: Leadership's Indirect Influence on Inclusion via Accessibility

One of the most theoretically significant findings was the full mediation model demonstrating that Digital Leadership's influence on Perceived Inclusion operates entirely through Digital Accessibility. The direct path from leadership to inclusion was non-significant ($p = 0.524$), while the indirect effect through accessibility was substantial (95% CI [0.048, 0.940]). This yields the third principal conclusion, leadership influences inclusion not through interpersonal inspiration alone, but through the structural transformation of technological systems.

This conclusion fundamentally reframes how leadership affects inclusion outcomes in digitally transformed workplaces. Traditional leadership paradigms emphasise psychological influence, leaders inspire through vision, motivate through communication, and support through empathy. The implicit assumption is that leadership primarily shapes followers' attitudes and sense of inclusion directly. The present research challenges this assumption, demonstrating that in digital work environments, leadership's effect on inclusion is not direct or solely psychological, but rather structural and technologically mediated.

The mechanism operates sequentially, leadership behaviours → accessible infrastructure → inclusion experiences. Leaders' empathy, inclusive rhetoric, and supportive communication do not directly translate into employees' felt inclusion unless they result in tangible changes to the digital environment. Leadership must manifest in concrete actions like provisioning assistive technologies, ensuring software/platform compatibility with accessibility standards, enforcing accessibility policies, and modelling inclusive tech practices. These structural changes to the work environment then enable employees with disabilities to participate and feel included. Shortcuts are impossible; an organisation cannot achieve genuine inclusion through charismatic leadership alone

without accessible systems, nor through technical fixes alone without leadership commitment to sustain them.

This conclusion also reflects Ubuntu philosophy's relational ethos. The principle "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" - a person is a person through other people is instantiated here, an employee's inclusion is not bestowed by a leader's goodwill alone, but is constructed through collective action to build an environment where everyone can participate. Leadership's true inclusive influence lies in mobilising the organisation to create structures that allow all members to contribute, rather than in offering individualised gestures of inclusion.

7.2.4 A Methodological Paradox: Psychometric Rigour Amidst Sampling Constraints

The study's measurement instrument demonstrated exceptional internal consistency (overall Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.968$, with $\alpha > 0.92$ for all subscales), giving confidence that the observed relationships are not artefacts of measurement error. However, this psychometric strength coexists with profound sampling limitations. The study accessed only 41 participants, predominantly employees with intermediate to advanced digital literacy.

This yields a fourth principal conclusion, empirical research on digital inclusion faces an inherent paradox, wherein the very methods needed to collect data (e.g. online surveys) can exclude those most affected by digital exclusion. By relying on online questionnaires, the study inevitably captured the experiences of those who were already digitally connected and included to some extent, while likely overlooking individuals in contexts of deeper exclusion, for example, people with disabilities in rural areas without reliable internet, those with very low digital literacy, those in precarious or informal employment, or in organisations with minimal commitment to inclusion. The absence of significant differences in perceptions across demographics such as gender, age, disability type, province, or tenure in the results likely reflects a homogeneous, relatively privileged sample, rather than true parity in experiences across these groups.

This conclusion demands epistemic humility. The study's findings about the relationships among leadership, accessibility, and inclusion are robust within the particular population sampled, but they cannot be assumed to generalise to all employees with disabilities in South Africa. For instance, the relatively high average Perceived Inclusion score (approximately 3.99 on a 5-point scale) in this study should not be interpreted as evidence that most South African workplaces are inclusive. Rather, it likely indicates that the individuals reachable and willing to participate in the study have, by necessity,

already overcome multiple barriers to secure employment and access digital workplaces. The voices absent in the data, such as those of women with disabilities in remote areas, Black employees navigating the compounded legacy of apartheid, or others in under-resourced settings, are probably those experiencing the greatest exclusion, and their omission means the conclusions must be viewed as reflecting a best-case subset of contexts.

7.2.5 Inseparability of Leadership and Accessibility in Employees' Perceptions

The exceptionally high correlation between Digital Leadership and Digital Accessibility ($p = 0.911$) raised questions about whether these are truly distinct constructs in practice or rather two facets of a unified phenomenon. This ambiguity leads to a fifth principal conclusion, in employees' lived experience, leadership and accessibility are perceived as inseparable aspects of an organisation's commitment to digital inclusion.

This conclusion challenges neat theoretical models that treat leadership as an input, accessibility as a process, and inclusion as an output. Such linear distinctions, while analytically convenient, do not fully reflect employees' perceptions. When employees observe their leaders championing and prioritising accessibility, they simultaneously experience the digital systems as accessible. Conversely, when leadership on accessibility is lacking, employees almost invariably encounter the digital environment as inaccessible. In other words, employees do not sharply distinguish between a leader's commitment to accessibility and the actual accessibility of tools and platforms; these are simply two expressions of the same organisational culture of inclusion (or lack thereof).

The theoretical implication is that effective digital-age leadership is not external to technology but is embedded within it. A leader's public commitment to accessibility, for example, is not just a symbolic act separate from "real" technical work; it is part of what makes the technical environment inclusive, by prompting resources and attention to be directed there. Likewise, establishing accountability for accessibility (such as setting accessibility performance metrics or goals) is not merely an administrative add-on; it becomes integral to defining what "accessible" means in that organisation. This perspective reconceptualises leadership and technology as interwoven in creating inclusion, leadership is exercised through the medium of technology policy and practice, and employees experience that interconnection holistically.

7.3. Research Contributions

7.3.1 Theoretical Contributions to Leadership and Inclusion Scholarship

This research makes several theoretical contributions at the intersection of leadership, technology, and inclusion. First, it extends Transformational Leadership Theory by elucidating how leadership can drive inclusion in a digital context. Traditional Transformational Leadership Theory emphasises leaders' interpersonal influence, inspiring and motivating followers toward higher performance and positive outcomes. This study refines that understanding by demonstrating that in digital work environments, a leader's transformational impact on inclusion is largely structural: leaders inspire inclusion not simply through vision and support, but by reshaping the technological landscape to be accessible. The finding that leadership's direct effect on Perceived Inclusion was non-significant, while its indirect effect via accessibility was substantial, provides empirical evidence of this structural mediation mechanism.

Second, the research advances Organisational Inclusion Theory by applying and testing its principles within the realm of digital work and accessibility. Shore et al.'s inclusion framework, which centres on belongingness and uniqueness, has often been discussed in a general organisational culture context. This study operationalised those inclusion outcomes in a digital setting, showing that accessible technology functions as a structural antecedent to the psychological experience of inclusion. In doing so, it expands inclusion theory beyond interpersonal dynamics and climate, highlighting the crucial role of technology and infrastructure. Inclusion in the 21st-century workplace must be understood as a socio-technical phenomenon, not only a function of attitudes and norms, but also of the tools and systems that mediate work.

Third, this study provides empirical support for the integration of Ubuntu philosophy into discussions of organisational inclusion and leadership. Ubuntu, with its emphasis on communal relations and the idea that "a person is a person through other people," has been proposed by some scholars as a valuable lens for understanding inclusive leadership in African contexts. The finding that leadership's effect on inclusion is fully realised only through collective, structural action (rather than direct individual influence) resonates strongly with Ubuntu's tenet that inclusion and personhood are achieved communally. By quantitatively illustrating how inclusion emerges from creating an environment that supports everyone (as opposed to direct leader-follower interpersonal inclusion), the study validates the relevance of indigenous African philosophical perspectives and demonstrates that they can offer more than cultural context, they can enrich the theoretical understanding of leadership and inclusion globally.

7.3.2 Methodological Contributions: Measuring New Constructs in Under-Researched Contexts

Methodologically, the research contributes by developing and validating an integrated survey instrument that captures employees' perceptions of Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion in tandem. Prior studies have typically measured these constructs in isolation or assessed accessibility and inclusion from management's perspective (e.g., compliance reports or policy audits) rather than from employees' lived experiences. By achieving high reliability across all subscales and revealing coherent, theory-consistent patterns of correlation, this instrument demonstrates that these complex, interdisciplinary constructs can be empirically assessed together, even in a relatively small sample.

This is particularly valuable given the challenges of researching disability inclusion in organisational settings. The successful recruitment of 41 employed people with disabilities, while modest in absolute terms, is a notable achievement in a context where this population is hard to reach and often hesitant to participate due to stigma or fear of repercussions. The study thus provides a template for quantitative inquiry in under-researched contexts, showing that with careful design and partnership with advocacy groups, it is possible to gather meaningful data from marginalised employee populations.

7.3.3 Contextual Contributions: Focusing on the South African Digital Inclusion Gap

Contextually, this study addresses a significant empirical gap in South African workplace inclusion research. Much of the existing literature on disability inclusion in South Africa has been qualitative or focused at the policy level, often lamenting the gap between progressive laws and on-the-ground realities. This research contributes quantitative, employee-centred evidence of how that gap manifests within organisations. It specifically pinpoints leadership's failure to implement accessible digital systems as a critical mechanism behind the persistent low employment and inclusion of people with disabilities, despite the country's strong anti-discrimination legislation.

Furthermore, by integrating Ubuntu philosophy into the analysis, the study grounds its conclusions in a local epistemological framework rather than relying solely on imported Western theories. This contextual approach enriches the discourse on digital transformation and inclusion in South Africa, illustrating how global concepts (like digital leadership and inclusion) interplay with local values and challenges. The result is a more nuanced understanding that can inform both scholars and practitioners, for instance, it

recognises that simply adopting international best practices on accessibility may not succeed unless they are championed by leaders in ways that resonate with communal values and address local capacity constraints.

7.3.4 Practical Contributions: Reframing Accessibility as a Leadership Priority

Practically, the findings reframe how organisations should approach digital accessibility. The fact that leadership factors explained over 80% of the variance in accessibility perceptions shifts the onus squarely onto organisational leaders. Rather than viewing accessibility as a niche issue for IT departments or a compliance box to tick, this study positions it as a barometer of leadership effectiveness and commitment to inclusion.

This finding calls for a shift in perspective among top management; rather than simply having an accessibility policy on paper, the focus should be on whether leadership is actively driving accessibility at all levels. It implies that leadership development programmes and performance evaluations include concrete inclusion and accessibility outcomes as key indicators of success. It also provides evidence to support advocates within organisations who have long argued that without buy-in and action from the top, accessibility initiatives will languish. The study gives leaders a clear mandate, if they genuinely intend to foster inclusive workplaces, they must treat digital accessibility as a strategic priority and part of their own leadership practice.

7.4. Recommendations for Management and Stakeholders

Building on the conclusions and contributions above, several actionable recommendations can be made for different stakeholders to advance digital inclusion in the workplace:

7.4.1 For Organisational Leaders: Embed Accessibility in Core Leadership Practices

Make digital accessibility a core leadership responsibility. Leaders at all levels, from executives to line managers, must recognise that ensuring accessible systems is as much their duty as financial stewardship or team development. The finding that leadership explains the vast majority of accessibility outcomes means leaders cannot delegate this to IT or diversity officers and then consider their job done.

In order to enact this leaders need to champion accessibility visibly and consistently. Leaders should communicate a clear commitment to digital accessibility, framing it as a non-negotiable value and a source of organisational strength. This involves setting a

vision that technology will empower every employee, including those with disabilities, and regularly speaking about and celebrating progress on accessibility initiatives.

Allocate dedicated resources for accessibility. Budgets and personnel must be assigned to implement accessibility improvements (such as procuring assistive technologies, upgrading software for compatibility, or conducting accessibility audits). If leaders fail to fund these efforts, it signals that accessibility is not truly a priority. By contrast, earmarking resources demonstrates genuine commitment and enables practical action.

Establish accountability and metrics. Leaders should integrate accessibility criteria into performance evaluations, project plans, and procurement processes. By adding accessibility goals to managers' objectives and requiring all new digital tools to meet accessibility standards, inclusion becomes a built-in responsibility. Holding teams (and oneself as a leader) accountable for accessibility outcomes will drive sustained focus.

Solicit and act on feedback from employees with disabilities. Leaders need to create safe channels for employees to report accessibility barriers and suggestions. Establish regular forums or confidential channels to encourage open communication about accessibility barriers. Most importantly, respond to feedback with timely action so that employees see issues being resolved, demonstrating that leadership is genuinely attentive to their needs.

Position accessibility as an innovation and performance enabler. Rather than treating accommodations as a compliance duty or charity, leaders should highlight how accessible design benefits everyone (e.g. captions help all viewers, ramps ease deliveries, etc.), spurs creativity, and opens new markets. By embracing the mindset that accessibility is a source of competitive advantage and innovation, leaders can motivate their organisation to pursue inclusion not just out of obligation, but out of a desire to excel. In summary, **organisational leaders must embed digital accessibility into core leadership practices**, ensuring that technology is inclusive by design and supported at all levels.

7.4.2 For Human Resources (HR) and Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) Teams: Move from Rhetoric to Infrastructure

HR and D&I professionals often lead inclusion programmes, but this research shows that without accessible infrastructure, inclusion efforts will fall flat. Therefore, these teams should:

Elevate digital accessibility within the inclusion agenda: Disability inclusion initiatives must give as much weight to removing structural barriers as to raising awareness. For instance, inclusion strategies should set explicit targets for improving digital accessibility (e.g., procuring assistive technologies, ensuring software compliance) alongside any training and awareness programmes.

Integrate accessibility into diversity metrics and audits: HR should expand their monitoring beyond representation numbers. Regular surveys or audits should assess whether employees with disabilities have the tools they need and feel included in digital workspaces. These accessibility metrics should be reported to leadership alongside other diversity and engagement indicators.

Collaborate with IT and procurement: D&I efforts cannot be siloed from technical decisions. HR and D&I should work closely with IT and procurement so that accessibility requirements are built into all technology projects and vendor contracts. Embedding inclusion criteria into these operational processes helps turn good intentions into concrete practice.

7.4.3 For IT and Digital Transformation Teams: Build Accessibility into Technology from the Ground Up

For technology teams, the message is clear, technical excellence must include accessibility. An IT solution that is fast, secure, and feature-rich is not truly excellent if it excludes a portion of employees from using it. IT and digital transformation leaders should:

Adopt universal design and accessibility standards from the start: Follow established accessibility standards (e.g., WCAG) and inclusive design principles from the start of any development or procurement process. Designing systems proactively for a wide range of abilities, for example, by ensuring keyboard navigation, screen-reader compatibility, and text alternatives for images, prevents costly retrofits later.

Ensure compatibility with assistive technologies: Make sure all critical systems (intranets, portals, communication tools, etc.) are tested for compatibility with assistive technologies like screen readers, voice recognition software, and alternative input devices. Involve actual assistive tech users in testing when rolling out updates or new tools to catch issues early.

Make accessibility auditing and improvement a continuous process: Just as cybersecurity or performance are ongoing concerns, accessibility should be continuously monitored. Conduct periodic accessibility audits of systems and maintain a list of needed

fixes or improvements. Treat accessibility maintenance as an essential aspect of system quality, on par with security or performance.

Include employees with disabilities in tech projects: Whether through formal co-design workshops, user testing sessions, or even hiring consultants with disabilities, involving the end-users who face accessibility challenges will vastly improve outcomes. They can offer insights that engineers or designers might overlook, leading to solutions that are more intuitive and effective for all.

7.4.4 For Policymakers and Regulators: Strengthen Enforcement of Digital Inclusion

South Africa's legislative framework for disability inclusion (e.g., the Employment Equity Act) provides a strong foundation, but as the research shows, implementation is lagging. Policymakers could take several steps to close this gap:

Mandate digital accessibility standards. Introduce regulations or guidelines that explicitly require organisations (above a certain size or in certain sectors) to adhere to digital accessibility standards for their workplace technologies. This could involve adopting international standards (such as WCAG 2.1 AA level) into national policy for both public and private sector digital platforms.

Link compliance to incentives and penalties. Strengthen the reporting requirements under employment equity or related laws to include specific indicators of digital inclusion (for example, percentage of systems audited for accessibility, investment in assistive tech, etc.). Organisations that excel could be publicly recognised or incentivised (through awards, procurement preferences, or tax breaks), while those consistently failing to provide accessible workplaces might face fines or other penalties. Clear consequences would drive home that accessibility is a serious, measurable outcome, not just a nice-to-have.

Support capacity-building for accessibility. Particularly for small and medium enterprises or public institutions with limited resources, government can play a role in providing toolkits, training, or even funding to assist with accessibility improvements. For instance, a government programme could offer grants or expert consultation to help organisations conduct accessibility audits and implement changes. By building national capacity in accessibility skills, policymakers ensure that the mandate for inclusion is achievable even for resource-constrained organisations.

7.4.5 For Disability Advocacy and Employee Groups: Focus on Structural Change

Advocacy organisations and employee resource groups have long fought for the rights of people with disabilities in the workplace. This research suggests refining their focus:

Push for transparency and accountability: Advocate for companies to publicly report on their digital accessibility efforts as part of sustainability or social responsibility reporting (King V). When organisations know they must disclose their record on accessibility (e.g. how many of their internal systems meet accessibility criteria, or results of employee inclusion surveys), they are more likely to take it seriously.

Equip stakeholders with knowledge and tools: Develop easy-to-use guides or scorecards that employees and advocates can use to evaluate their organisation's digital accessibility. By demystifying what an accessible system looks like, advocates can empower employees to identify issues and propose concrete solutions.

Highlight success stories and positive role models: Advocacy groups should publicise cases where strong leadership commitment led to meaningful improvements in inclusion. Sharing these stories, for example, a company that revamped its IT systems to be accessible and subsequently saw an increase in employees with disabilities thriving, can inspire other leaders and provide proof-of-concept that these changes are both possible and beneficial.

Collaborate across sectors: Sometimes, collective pressure works where individual voices cannot. Advocacy organisations might partner with industry bodies, tech companies, and research institutions to create broader initiatives (like an industry charter on digital inclusion) that organisations can sign onto. This creates a rising tide that can lift accessibility standards across the board and helps shift norms so that laggards feel pressure to catch up.

7.4.6 For Employees with Disabilities: Strategic Empowerment and Collective Voice

Finally, for employees with disabilities themselves, the findings reinforce several strategies:

Frame requests in terms of mutual benefit: When employees request assistive technologies or accessibility improvements, it can help to explain how these changes enhance overall productivity and team effectiveness. For instance, adopting accessible document templates or communication tools can benefit many colleagues (like those

working in noisy environments or with varying learning styles), not only the individual with a disability. Positioning accessibility needs as opportunities for the organisation to improve, rather than as personal special cases, may garner more leadership support.

Build alliances and share experiences: Employees with disabilities should consider banding together (formally or informally) to share experiences and advocate collectively for change. A single voice might be overlooked, but a group can provide mutual support and present a stronger case to management for needed improvements. Additionally, connecting with external networks or advocacy groups can provide resources and backing that strengthen employees' ability to push for accessibility internally.

7.5. Limitations of the Research

No study is without limitations, and it is important to contextualise the conclusions drawn by acknowledging key constraints in this research:

7.5.1 Sampling Constraints and Generalisability

The most evident limitation is the small and non-random sample (N = 41). It must be noted that the small, non-random sample (N=41) and online survey method mean the findings reflect a relatively digitally-connected subset of people with disabilities, which cautions against over-generalisation. Participants were those who could be reached through networks and had the capability and willingness to complete an online survey. This means the sample likely under-represents individuals with disabilities who are unemployed or in very isolated/under-resourced settings in other words, the people who arguably have the most to gain from digital inclusion were least likely to be reflected in the data. Consequently, while the relationships observed (e.g., between leadership and accessibility) were very strong among those surveyed, it requires caution in generalising the exact strength of these effects to all contexts. It is possible that in different samples or with more varied participants, the patterns might differ in magnitude.

Moreover, the homogeneity of the sample might mask differences that exist in the broader population. For example, all provinces and multiple disability types were represented, but not necessarily in sufficient numbers to detect if, say, employees in rural provinces experience significantly lower accessibility. The lack of significant differences found does not guarantee true equality of experience, it may simply reflect the limitations of the sample composition.

7.5.2 Cross-Sectional Design and Causality

The research design was cross-sectional, capturing a snapshot at one point in time. As such, causal inferences must be drawn carefully. While the theoretical model and statistical mediation suggest a causal chain (leadership → accessibility → inclusion), the direction of effects based on this design alone cannot be guaranteed. There is a possibility of reverse or reciprocal causation, for instance, perhaps in some cases employees who feel highly included become more aware of or positive about their leaders' behaviours and the accessibility of systems (i.e., inclusion could influence perceptions of leadership and accessibility, rather than the other way around).

To bolster causal claims, longitudinal or experimental studies would be needed in the future. The conclusions in this dissertation are phrased in causal language (e.g. "leadership influences inclusion through accessibility") in line with the hypothesised model and supporting evidence, but they should be interpreted with the understanding that the research design has inherent limitations in proving causality.

7.5.3 Self-Report Bias and Common Method Variance

All data were collected via self-report from a single respondent group. This raises concerns about common method variance potentially inflating the observed relationships. For example, someone who is generally positive about their workplace might rate their leadership, systems, and inclusion all highly, while another more critical person might rate all low, thereby creating an artificial correlation between the variables due to individual response tendencies.

Additionally, since employees with disabilities may be sensitised to issues of inclusion, their perceptions could be influenced by personal expectations or experiences outside the immediate workplace (such as prior jobs or societal attitudes), which in turn affect how they rate their current environment. While measures were taken to ensure anonymity and reduce social desirability bias, self-reported perceptions inherently blend objective reality with subjective interpretation.

Future research can mitigate these concerns by incorporating multiple data sources, for instance, combining employee surveys with objective accessibility evaluations or with leadership assessments from other observers. In this study, the extremely high correlation between leadership and accessibility perceptions suggests they were almost interchangeable in respondents' minds; this could be a true reflection of reality, but it also could indicate a degree of halo effect or overlap in the survey items. Multi-method approaches would help discern this.

7.5.4 Lack of Intersectional Analysis

A notable limitation is the absence of detailed demographic analysis, particularly concerning race and socio-economic status. South Africa's history and current socio-economic landscape mean that disability inclusion cannot be fully understood without considering intersecting factors like race, education, and class. Unfortunately, to protect anonymity and encourage participation, the survey collected minimal personal data and did not explicitly gather information on race or income. As a result, this study cannot address whether, for example, Black employees with disabilities experience systematically lower digital accessibility than their white counterparts, or how poverty and location (urban vs. rural) might intersect with the workplace factors studied.

This limits the richness of the conclusions in a country where inequality is multidimensional. It points to a need for future studies to carefully incorporate intersectional lenses, perhaps through larger samples or qualitative components, to ensure that efforts to improve digital inclusion are attentive to those who may face multiple barriers.

7.5.5 Breadth Over Depth in Measures

The survey instrument prioritised breadth, covering various dimensions of leadership, accessibility, and inclusion in relatively few items each to keep the questionnaire manageable. This means some depth or nuance was sacrificed. For example, the Digital Accessibility scale took a broad view of accessibility features and policies, but did not delve deeply into specific accommodations or differences between, say, web accessibility vs. software accessibility, or the unique challenges of different disability types. Similarly, the Perceived Inclusion scale measured overall feelings of inclusion but did not distinguish between aspects like social inclusion, inclusion in decision-making, or career advancement opportunities.

So, while the results confirm strong general relationships, they do not illuminate finer-grained insights. An organisation might score well on overall accessibility, but their communication tools are accessible while their specialised software is not. Future research using more granular instruments or qualitative follow-ups could provide more detailed guidance on where exactly organisations should focus their accessibility efforts and how different facets of inclusion might be unevenly experienced.

7.5.6 Context-Specificity

Finally, the context of this study, South African organisations during a period of rapid digital change, must be kept in mind. Some findings may be context-bound. For instance, the particularly high influence of leadership might relate to the specific cultural or organisational climates in the sample (perhaps South African employees expect more directive leadership in driving new initiatives, or perhaps the novelty of digital transformation here means leadership stands out more as a differentiator). Likewise, the integration of Ubuntu philosophy is very pertinent to an African context but might need translation into other cultural value systems if applied elsewhere.

The study provides a detailed picture of a particular context with global implications, but it is not a one-size-fits-all blueprint. Researchers and practitioners in other countries should test which elements of these findings hold true or need adaptation in their environments.

7.6. Suggestions for Future Research

Building on both the insights and limitations of this study, future research could explore several avenues to deepen understanding and inform action:

7.6.1 Longitudinal Studies and Intervention Research

A critical next step would be to conduct longitudinal research that follows organisations (or individual employees) over time as accessibility initiatives are implemented. For example, a study could measure perceptions of leadership, accessibility, and inclusion before and after a company undertakes a major accessibility upgrade or training programme. This would help establish clearer causal direction, if inclusion scores rise following improvements in accessibility (and leadership engagement), that would strongly support the model's causality. Long-term studies could also examine whether these improvements are sustained and what it takes to maintain inclusion gains (e.g., do they plateau or require continuous leadership reinforcement?).

Intervention-based research is also valuable. Researchers might collaborate with organisations willing to pilot new accessibility interventions or leadership training focused on digital inclusion, and measure the effects. Such quasi-experimental designs would yield practical knowledge on what strategies work best to strengthen the leadership-accessibility-inclusion chain identified in this thesis.

7.6.2 Including the Most Excluded: Mixed-Methods and Qualitative Approaches

To address the sampling paradox noted earlier, future studies should incorporate methods that reach those currently left out of digital work research. Qualitative approaches like in-depth interviews or focus groups, perhaps conducted via phone or in-person in communities with limited internet, could capture the experiences of people with disabilities who are unemployed or in very low-tech environments. These narratives would enrich the understanding of what digital inclusion (or exclusion) looks like outside the corporate settings and might reveal additional barriers or mediating factors not evident in this study.

A mixed-methods approach could combine a broad survey (to get generalisable data from those who can be reached online) with purposively sampled case studies of individuals or organisations at the extremes (e.g., a person with a disability in a rural area relying on basic cell phone access, or an organisation that has virtually no accessible technology). Bringing these perspectives together would paint a fuller picture and ensure that conclusions and recommendations are not just tailored to relatively well-resourced scenarios.

7.6.3 Intersectional Research: Disability Across Race, Class, and Gender

Future research in South Africa (and other diverse societies) should explicitly investigate how intersectionality plays out in digital inclusion. This could involve ensuring surveys capture demographic data like race, education, and income, and then analysing whether the relationships found in this study hold equally across these groups. It's possible, for instance, that leadership commitment is even more crucial for those facing multiple forms of marginalisation (e.g., a Black woman with a disability in a male-dominated industry might rely even more on strong leadership advocacy to be included).

Additionally, large-scale studies or perhaps secondary analysis of national datasets (if they exist) might examine macro patterns, for example, do provinces or sectors with greater resources show smaller gaps in digital inclusion for people with disabilities than less resourced ones, which could suggest that the socio-economic context is a moderating factor? Incorporating an intersectional lens ensures that recommendations are equitable and address those who most need change.

7.6.4 Organisational Case Studies: How Is Accessibility Successfully Implemented?

While this research identified what needs to happen (leadership commitment, structural accessibility) for inclusion to improve, little is known about how organisations successfully execute these changes or why they fail. Detailed case studies of organisations, perhaps one that made significant progress and one that struggled, could yield rich insights. Through interviews with leaders, IT staff, HR, and employees with disabilities, a case study can uncover practical challenges (like budget conflicts, technical hurdles, or cultural resistance) and how they were overcome (or not).

Such research can also observe the dynamics over time, for example, an organisation might start strong with a charismatic leader driving accessibility, but if that leader leaves, does the initiative falter? Or conversely, a grass-roots effort might gradually win leadership buy-in. Documenting these stories would provide real-world lessons that complement the more general findings of this quantitative study.

7.6.5 Quantifying the Benefits: The Business Case for Accessibility

Another future direction is building the business case for digital accessibility with hard data. While inclusion and equity are moral and legal imperatives, organisations are also motivated by performance outcomes. Researchers could examine, for instance, whether companies that invest in accessible technologies see improvements in overall employee productivity, lower turnover among employees with disabilities (and perhaps others, if accessibility improvements help everyone), or access new markets (maybe by developing expertise in accessible design that can cater to customers with disabilities).

Such studies might involve comparing companies or units before and after accessibility initiatives on key performance metrics, or comparing similar organisations with different levels of accessibility commitment. By correlating inclusion efforts with outcomes like innovation (number of new ideas generated, patents filed), customer satisfaction, or profitability, scholars can provide evidence to persuade business leaders that accessibility isn't just the "right thing to do," but also confers competitive advantages.

7.6.6 Investigating Where the Model Breaks Down

The current study's model was supported overall, but no model is perfect. Future research should investigate exceptions or boundary conditions.

Exploring outliers might involve identifying unusual cases (through surveys or anecdotal reports) and examining them in depth. Understanding when the simple narrative

“leadership → accessibility → inclusion” does not hold can refine the theory further and lead to more nuanced models (for instance, adding other mediators or moderators).

7.6.7 Keeping Pace with Technological Change

Digital transformation is a moving target. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning-driven tools, virtual reality, and advanced automation are rapidly entering workplaces. Each comes with new accessibility challenges and opportunities. Future research should proactively look at how these next-generation technologies can be made inclusive or how they might inadvertently create new forms of exclusion. For instance, how accessible are AI-driven recruitment systems or virtual reality training programmes for people with various disabilities? Are leaders aware of these issues?

By staying ahead of the curve and examining inclusion in these cutting-edge areas, research can inform guidelines and policy before gaps widen. Additionally, studies could explore how digital accessibility efforts themselves can harness new tech, perhaps AI can help in adapting interfaces to individual needs, or data analytics can identify where employees encounter accessibility problems in real time.

7.6.8 Cross-Cultural Comparisons and Global Learning

Finally, it would be valuable to test whether the findings of this study hold in other cultural or national contexts, especially in the Global South, where digital inclusion is an emerging concern. Comparative studies between countries (e.g., South Africa and another country with a similar legislative framework but a different socio-economic context) could reveal whether leadership’s role is universally critical or if other factors play a bigger role elsewhere. Additionally, engaging with non-Western leadership paradigms (similar to how Ubuntu was used here) in other regions could further enrich the global discourse on inclusive Digital Leadership.

Such cross-cultural research reinforces that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, but sharing insights internationally could accelerate progress.

7.7. Concluding Reflections: From Rhetoric to Reality

This research began by identifying a troubling disconnect, progressive inclusion policies and aspirations on the one hand, versus the stubborn reality of exclusion on the other. In investigating this gap, the study found a key explanatory mechanism, the pivotal role of leadership in translating inclusive intent into tangible, accessible infrastructure. In digitally transformed workplaces, inclusion is not achieved by empathetic intentions or

policy rhetoric alone, but by concrete, sustained leadership actions that ensure digital systems are accessible to all.

These findings carry both a warning and a promise. On one side, there is a cautionary tale, accelerated digital transformation, if not guided by an accessibility ethos, can deepen inequality for people with disabilities. Technologies that are lauded as “future of work” innovations, from AI platforms to remote collaboration tools, can inadvertently become tools of exclusion if leadership does not insist on and invest in making them inclusive. Digital progress without inclusion will simply widen the divide, replacing old physical barriers with new digital ones.

On the other side, the findings offer hope and a clear path forward, meaningful improvement is attainable, and often without the need for completely new technology. In many cases, the knowledge and tools for accessibility already exist; what has been lacking is the will, prioritisation, and accountability that comes from effective leadership. Where leaders choose to champion accessibility, allocate resources, and embed inclusion into the fabric of their organisations, dramatic gains in participation and belonging follow. The research shows that it is less a question of technical possibility and more a question of organisational commitment.

Bridging the gap between inclusive rhetoric and everyday reality requires confronting some uncomfortable truths. Policies and diversity pronouncements that are not backed by accessible practices amount to performative inclusion. Such symbolic gestures may win applause or satisfy formal requirements, but they do little to change lived experiences. In fact, they can be counterproductive by creating an illusion of progress that dilutes urgency. The responsibility for moving from words to action lies squarely with leadership. Leaders must be willing to hold themselves and their organisations accountable to measure the accessibility of their systems, to admit where they fall short, and to take decisive action to improve.

In doing so, leaders can draw on ethical frameworks like Ubuntu that underpin the moral case for inclusion. Ubuntu reminds us that humanity is bound together; an organisation cannot fully succeed when some members are left out. This perspective reframes inclusion from being a compliance task or a favour to a marginalised group, into a collective obligation and opportunity. The question shifts from “Why should we accommodate?” to “How can we ensure everyone is empowered to contribute?”, aligning organisational values with actions.

It is also important to temper conclusions with humility about what remains unknown. This study captured only a slice of the reality, voices of those already in the system.

Many others, perhaps facing greater barriers, were not heard. Their absence is a reminder that current inclusion outcomes, even when positive, may reflect the easiest wins rather than the hardest challenges. Still, the insights gained are instructive. The evidence that was gathered unequivocally indicates that in environments where people with disabilities are present, leadership's commitment (or lack thereof) almost deterministically shapes the inclusivity of the digital workplace. Accessibility failures in such contexts are overwhelmingly failures of leadership and prioritisation.

Recognising this is powerful because it points to where change must happen. Technologies can always be improved, but the real leverage lies in human decisions. Leaders decide whether to budget for accessibility, whether to model inclusive behavior, and whether to listen to marginalised voices. Those decisions, as this research has shown, make the difference between a digital workplace that includes or excludes.

The stakes will continue to rise into the future. The digital transformation of work is not slowing down; if anything, it is accelerating. The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic has normalised remote and hybrid work. AI and automation are being integrated into daily workflows. Each advancement brings the potential either to break down barriers or to create new ones. The future will be shaped by whether inclusion is baked into these innovations from the start or addressed only after problems emerge. And that, in turn, is a matter of leadership vision and courage.

For organisations in South Africa and around the world, the implication is clear, digital inclusion cannot remain a peripheral concern or someone else's job. It must be treated as a strategic imperative, championed at the highest levels and woven into all aspects of operations. The organisations and leaders that understand this, that take accessibility as seriously as profitability or growth will not only fulfill their social responsibility, but also enhance innovation, resilience, and adaptability. Those that neglect this imperative risk reputational damage, legal consequences, and the loss of talent and opportunities.

Ultimately, the journey from rhetoric to reality is a leadership journey. It requires vision to imagine a truly inclusive workplace, honesty to assess the current gaps, and determination to drive change. This study has illuminated the path, when leaders lead on accessibility, inclusion can become a reality. The remaining question is one of will. The tools, knowledge, and frameworks are largely in place from universal design principles to supportive legislation to successful case studies that can be emulated.

In conclusion, closing the disability inclusion gap in the digital era hinges on moving beyond aspirational statements to accountable actions. The choice before every organisation is straightforward, continue with business as usual and perpetuate the

exclusion of a significant talent pool, or rise to the challenge and ensure that digital transformation leaves no one behind. The findings of this research provide both a warning and an encouragement. Failure to act will cement the very inequities society seeks to erase. But they encourage, by demonstrating that progress is within reach wherever there is genuine leadership commitment.

The challenge now is to translate understanding into execution. If the collective can implement what is needed, if leaders, employees, technologists, and policymakers each play their part, then the rhetoric of inclusion can finally be made real in the everyday digital lives of employees with disabilities.

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Appendix A: Ethical clearance confirmation

Gordon Institute of Business Science
University of Pretoria

Ethical Clearance Approved

Dear

Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.
You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.
We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

Ethical Clearance Form

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.

GIBS ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPLICATION FORM 2025/26

G. APPROVALS FOR/OF THIS APPLICATION

When the applicant is a student of GIBS, the applicant must please ensure that the supervisor and co-supervisor (where relevant) has signed the form before submission

STUDENT RESEARCHER/APPLICANT:

29. I affirm that all relevant information has been provided in this form and its attachments and that all statements made are correct.

Student Researcher's Name in capital letters:

Date: 06 Jul 2025

Supervisor Name in capital letters:

Date: 06 Jul 2025

Co-supervisor Name in capital letters:

Date: 06 Jul 2025

Note: GIBS shall do everything in its power to protect the personal information supplied herein, in accordance to its company privacy policies as well the Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013. Access to all of the above provided personal information is restricted, only employees who need the information to perform a specific job are granted access to this information.

Decision:

Approved

REC comments:

Date: 14 Jul 2025

Appendix B: Survey Instrument

I am conducting research on ***"Exploring the Role of Digital Leadership in Advancing Digital Accessibility and Perceived Inclusion of Employees with Disabilities in South Africa."***. To that end, you are asked to complete a survey relating to my topic. The survey should take no more than **18 minutes**. Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. Your participation is anonymous and only aggregated data will be reported. By completing the survey, you indicate that you voluntarily participate in this research. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

Researcher name:

Email: 20668938@mygibs.co.za

Phone:

Research supervisor name:

Email:

Phone: _____

Eligibility question:

Are you over 18 years old and currently employed? ☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**

Section A: Demographics

Age	18 -25		26 -35		36 - 45		46 - 59	60+	
Gender	Male		Female		Other				
Province	GP	NW	MP	LP	FS	KZN	NC	WC	EC
Disability Type	Visual		Auditory		Sensory		Motor	Cognitive	Other
Level of education	Below Matric (Less than Grade 12)	Matric	NQF 5	NQF 6	NQF 7	NQF 8+			
Job Role									

Tenure in the organisation	0 – 1 years	2 – 5 Years	6 – 10 years	11 – 19 years	20+ years
Level of digital literacy	None	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	
Sector / Industry					

Section B: Perceived Inclusion

Instructions: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

1. In my organisation, people with disabilities are treated as full and valued members of the team.
2. The views and contributions of employees with disabilities are respected during digital meetings and collaborative work.
3. I believe my organisation actively supports the professional growth of people with disabilities.
4. The digital platforms we use at work allow employees with disabilities to engage fully in team communication.
5. I feel confident that leadership promotes an inclusive environment for people with disabilities across both physical and virtual spaces.
6. I feel comfortable disclosing accessibility challenges in my work environment.
7. I believe my organisation takes proactive steps to ensure inclusion, not just compliance.

Section C: Digital Accessibility and Inclusion

Instructions: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

1. My organisation provides assistive technologies to support employees with disabilities.

2. Digital systems (e.g., internal portals, video conferencing tools) are accessible to employees with visual, auditory, motor, cognitive and / or other impairments.
3. Senior leadership actively monitors whether digital platforms are accessible for all users.
4. Policies on digital accessibility are consistently applied in daily operations and software procurement.
5. Digital tools used in this organisation are regularly reviewed for compatibility with assistive devices (e.g., screen readers).
6. Training is effective in helping me use digital platforms confidently.
7. The training provided is quality and effective.
8. The digital tools provided enable and empower me perform my job.
9. I know where to report digital accessibility problems in my organisation.
10. My organisation involves employees with disabilities in testing or improving digital systems.
11. Digital accessibility is considered when new platforms or systems are procured.

Section D: Digital Leadership Practices

Instructions: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

1. My manager actively seeks feedback from employees with disabilities on the accessibility of digital tools.
2. Leaders in my organisation demonstrate a commitment to providing accessible digital resources.
3. My manager champions the use of assistive technologies to support employees with disabilities.
4. Leaders in my organisation clearly communicate the importance of digital accessibility.
5. My manager provides opportunities for me to learn about and use digital tools.
6. Leaders in my organisation are fully aware of the challenges employees with disabilities face when using digital tools.
7. Leadership regularly reviews feedback from employees with disabilities to improve accessibility.
8. Leaders hold teams accountable for accessibility goals.

9. Managers support a culture where digital inclusion is everyone’s responsibility.
10. My manager integrates digital inclusion objectives into the team’s performance and / or strategic goals.

Appendix C: Codebook

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age	
18-25	1
26-35	2
36-45	3
46-59	4
60+	5

Gender	
Male	1
Female	2

Province	
Gauteng	1
North West	2
Mpumalanga	3
Limpopo	4
Free State	5
KwaZulu Natal	6
Northern Cape	7
Western Cape	8
Eastern Cape	9

Disability type	
Visual	1
Auditory	2
Sensory	3
Motor	4
Cognitive	5
Other	6

Level of Education	
Less than matric	1
Matric	2
NQF 5	3
NQF 6	4
NQF 7	5
NQF 8+	6
Other	7

Tenure in the organisation	
0 - 1 year	1
2 - 5 years	2
6 - 10 years	3
11 -19 years	4
20+ years	5

Level of digital literacy	
None	1
Beginner	2
Intermediate	3
Advanced	4

PERCEIVED INCLUSION

PI1. In my organisation, people with disabilities are treated as full and valued members of the team.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

PI2. The views and contributions of employees with disabilities are respected during digital meetings and collaborative work.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

PI3. I believe my organisation actively supports the professional growth of people with disabilities.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

PI4. The digital platforms we use at work allow employees with disabilities to engage fully in team communication.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

PI5. I feel confident that leadership promotes an inclusive environment for people with disabilities across both physical and virtual spaces.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

PI6. I feel comfortable disclosing accessibility challenges in my work environment.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

PI7. I believe my organisation takes proactive steps to ensure inclusion, not just compliance.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5
Digital Accessibility	

DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY

DA1: My organisation provides assistive technologies to support employees with disabilities.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DA2: Digital systems (e.g., internal portals, video conferencing tools) are accessible to employees with visual, auditory, motor, cognitive and / or other impairments.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DA3: Senior leadership actively monitors whether digital platforms are accessible for all users.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DA4: Policies on digital accessibility are consistently applied in daily operations and software procurement.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DA5: Digital tools used in this organisation are regularly reviewed for compatibility with assistive devices *(e.g., screen readers).*

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DA6: Training is effective in helping me use digital platforms confidently.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DA7: The training provided is quality and is effective.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DA8: The digital tools provided enable and empower me perform my job.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DA9: I know where to report digital accessibility problems in my organisation.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DA10: My organisation involves employees with disabilities in testing or improving digital systems.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DA11: Digital accessibility is considered when new platforms or systems are procured.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DIGITAL LEADERSHIP

DL1: My manager actively seeks feedback from employees with disabilities on the accessibility of digital tools.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DL2: Leaders in my organisation demonstrate a commitment to providing accessible digital resources.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DL3: My manager champions the use of assistive technologies to support employees with disabilities.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DL4: Leaders in my organisation clearly communicate the importance of digital accessibility.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DL5: My manager provides opportunities for me to learn about and use digital tools.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DL6: Leaders in my organisation are fully aware of the challenges employees with disabilities face when using digital tools.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DL7: Leadership regularly reviews feedback from employees with disabilities to improve accessibility.	
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DL8: Leaders hold teams accountable for accessibility goals.	
Strongly disagree	1

Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DL9: Managers support a culture where digital inclusion is everyone's responsibility.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

DL10: My manager integrates digital inclusion objectives into the team's performance and / or strategic goals.

Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly agree	5

Appendix D: Normality Assessment illustrations

This appendix presents the histograms and normal Q–Q plots generated for the three composite constructs: Digital Leadership, Digital Accessibility, and Perceived Inclusion.

The visual plots supplement the Shapiro-Wilk tests reported in Chapter 5 (Section 5.4.1) and provide graphical confirmation of each construct's distributional characteristics.

Digital Leadership and Digital Accessibility demonstrate approximate normality, whereas Perceived Inclusion displays a mild left-skew, consistent with the statistical results.

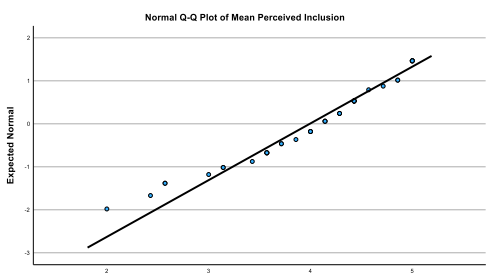
Table 19: *Normality testing per construct*

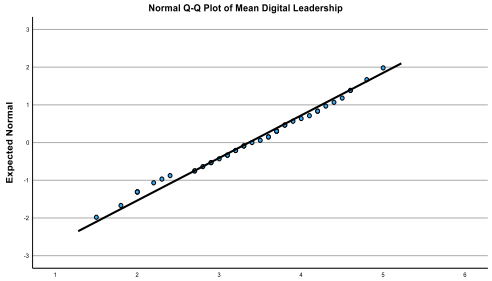
Descriptives				
			Statistic	Std. Error
Mean Perceived Inclusion	Mean		3,9930	,11837
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	3,7538	
		Upper Bound	4,2323	
	5% Trimmed Mean		4,0354	
	Median		4,1429	
	Variance		,574	
	Std. Deviation		,75792	
	Minimum		2,00	
	Maximum		5,00	
	Range		3,00	
	Interquartile Range		,86	
	Skewness		-,765	,369
	Kurtosis		,201	,724
Mean Digital Leadership	Mean		3,3610	,13836
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	3,0813	
		Upper Bound	3,6406	
	5% Trimmed Mean		3,3705	
	Median		3,4000	
	Variance		,785	
	Std. Deviation		,88597	
	Minimum		1,50	

	Maximum		5,00	
	Range		3,50	
	Interquartile Range		1,30	
	Skewness		-,210	,369
	Kurtosis		-,680	,724
Mean_Digital Accessibility	Mean		3,4279	,14511
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	3,1347	
		Upper Bound	3,7212	
	5% Trimmed Mean		3,4372	
	Median		3,6364	
	Variance		,863	
	Std. Deviation		,92915	
	Minimum		1,64	
	Maximum		5,00	
	Range		3,36	
	Interquartile Range		1,41	
	Skewness		-,220	,369
	Kurtosis		-,873	,724

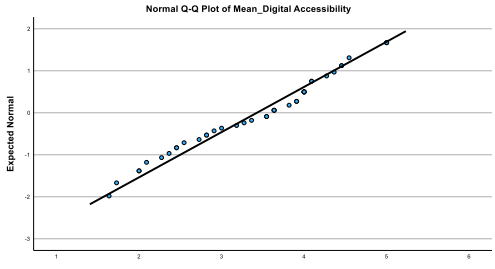
Source: SPSS

Figure 19: *Normal Q–Q Plot for the three core constructs*





Normal Q–Q Plot for Digital Leadership



Normal Q–Q Plot for Digital Accessibility

Source: SPSS

Appendix E: Consistency Matrix

Purpose

This matrix demonstrates the alignment between the research problem, theoretical foundations, methodology, analysis, and outcomes - ensuring coherence throughout the study.

Research Question & Hypothesis	Literature Review (Chapter 2)	Data Collection Tool (Chapter 4)	Data Analysis (Chapter 5)	Findings & Recommendations (Chapters 5-6)
PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION: How does digital leadership practices influence digital accessibility, and how does this in turn affect perceived inclusion of	**Theoretical Frameworks:** • Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) • Rafferty & Griffin, 2004) • Organisational Inclusion Theory (Shore et al., 2011, 2018) • Ubuntu Philosophy (Mutanga, 2023; Metz, 2011) • Benevolent Leadership (Luu, 2019) **Key Literature Domains:**	**Structured Online Survey** • N = 41 employed people with disabilities • Google Forms platform • 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) **Survey Sections:** • Demographics (8 items) • Digital Leadership - DL (10 items) • Digital Accessibility - DA (11 items)	**Descriptive Statistics:** • Means, medians, standard deviations • Frequency distributions • Skewness and kurtosis **Assumption Testing:** • Shapiro-Wilk normality tests • Visual inspection (histograms, Q-Q plots) **Reliability Analysis:** • Cronbach's Alpha (internal consistency) • Mean Inter-Item Correlations (MIIC)	**Key Findings:** • Digital Leadership strongly predicts Digital Accessibility ($p = 0.911$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = 0.822$) • Digital Accessibility significantly influences Perceived Inclusion ($p = 0.676$, $p < .001$; $B = 0.458$, $p = .042$) • Full mediation confirmed: Digital Accessibility mediates the relationship between Digital Leadership and Perceived Inclusion

employees with disabilities in South Africa?	• Digital Leadership (Zeike et al., 2019; Braojos et al., 2024; AlNuaimi et al., 2022) • Digital Accessibility (Krok, 2024; Nacheva, 2025; Zongozzi & Ngubane, 2025) • Workplace Inclusion (Randel et al., 2018; Shore & Chung, 2022) • South African Context (Charles et al., 2023; Nxumalo, 2020; Buthelezi et al., 2024)	• Perceived Inclusion - PI (7items) **Languages:** English, isiZulu, Sesotho **Data Collection Period:** 4 Aug - 25 Sept 2025	**Non-parametric Tests:** • Mann-Whitney U (2-group comparisons) • Kruskal-Wallis H (3+ group comparisons) **Correlational Analysis:** • Spearman's rank-order correlation (p) **Mediation Analysis:** • Hayes PROCESS Model 4 • 5,000 bootstrap resamples • Bias-corrected confidence intervals	(indirect effect B = 0.435, 95% CI [0.048, 0.940]) • No significant demographic differences across gender, age, disability type, tenure, or province **Theoretical Contributions:** • Empirically validates the application of TLT and OIT to digital contexts • Demonstrates Ubuntu principles in organisational practice • Establishes accessibility as structural enabler of inclusion **Practical Recommendations:** • Leadership development programmes focusing on digital accessibility • Embed accessibility into procurement and system design

				• Establish accountability mechanisms for accessibility goals • Involve employees with disabilities in technology design and testing
H_1: Digital leadership positively influences digital accessibility	**TLT Mechanisms:** • Vision communication (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004) • Inspirational motivation • Intellectual stimulation • Supportive leadership • Personal recognition **Digital Leadership Literature:** • Leaders drive accessibility implementation (Walkowiak, 2024; Maclean et al., 2024) • Organisational culture shapes accessibility practices (Chadli et al., 2021) • Resource allocation critical (Nacheva, 2025)	**Digital Leadership Scale (10 items)** • Adapted from Zeike et al. (2019) Digital Leadership Index • Sample items: ○ DL1: Manager seeks feedback on accessibility ○ DL2: Leaders demonstrate commitment to accessible resources ○ DL4: Leaders communicate the importance of accessibility ○ DL8: Leaders hold teams accountable	**Bivariate Analysis:** • Spearman's correlation: DL ↔ DA • $p = 0.911$, $p < .001$ (very strong positive relationship) **Mediation Model - Path a:** • DL → DA • $B = 0.951$, $SE = 0.071$, $p < .001$ • $R^2 = 0.822$ (82.2% of variance in DA explained by DL) **Effect Size:** • Very large effect (Cohen's conventions)	**H_1 SUPPORTED** **Finding:** • Digital Leadership explains 82% of variance in Digital Accessibility, demonstrating exceptionally strong predictive relationship **Interpretation:** • Leadership behaviours (vision-setting, championing assistive technologies, accountability) directly translate into accessible digital environments • Accessibility perceived as manifestation of leadership commitment

		Digital Accessibility Scale (11 items) • Adapted from DIP-23 (Chan et al., 2021) and WCDIQ (Iwanaga et al., 2018) • Sample items: ○ DA1: Organisation provides assistive technologies ○ DA3: Leadership monitors platform accessibility ○ DA4: Policies consistently applied		• Leadership failures = accessibility failures **Recommendation:** • Prioritise leadership development in digital accessibility • Establish clear accountability frameworks • Integrate accessibility into strategic planning
H_2: Digital accessibility positively influences perceived inclusion among employees with disabilities	**Organisational Inclusion Theory:** • Belongingness dimension (Shore et al., 2011) • Uniqueness dimension Optimal distinctiveness (Leonardelli et al., 2010) **Digital Accessibility & Inclusion:**	**Digital Accessibility Scale (11 items)** ○ Items cover: ○ Provision of assistive technologies ○ Platform compatibility (visual, auditory, motor, cognitive needs) ○ Policy implementation ○ Training effectiveness	**Bivariate Analysis:** • Spearman's correlation: DA ↔ PI • $p = 0.676$, $p < .001$ (strong positive relationship) • **Mediation Model - Path b:** • DA → PI (controlling for DL) • $B = 0.458$, $SE = 0.218$, $p = .042$ • 95% CI [0.017, 0.898]	**H_2 SUPPORTED** **Finding:** • Digital Accessibility significantly predicts Perceived Inclusion, with strong positive correlation **Interpretation:** • Accessible systems satisfy dual needs of belongingness

	• Accessible systems enable participation (Lindberg et al., 2024) • Technology as enabler vs. barrier (Gewurtz et al., 2024) • Universal Design principles (Krok, 2024) **Ubuntu Philosophy:** • Collective enablement (Mutanga, 2023) • Relational humanity ("umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu")	○ Feedback mechanisms **Perceived Inclusion Scale (7 items)** • Adapted from Chung et al. (2020) • Sample items: ○ PI1: Treated as valued team members ○ PI2: Contributions respected in digital meetings ○ PI4: Platforms allow full engagement ○ PI6: Comfortable disclosing challenges	**Effect Size:** • Large effect (Cohen's conventions)	(participation) and uniqueness (accommodation) • Structural accessibility enables psychological inclusion • Accessibility is necessary but insufficient (cultural factors also matter) **Recommendation:** • Implement universal design principles • Ensure assistive technology availability • Regular accessibility audits • Combine technical solutions with an inclusive culture
H_3: Digital leadership has an indirect positive effect on perceived	**Integrated Framework:** • TLT provides behavioural mechanisms • OIT specifies psychological outcomes (belongingness + uniqueness)	**All Three Constructs Measured:** 1. Digital Leadership (IV) - 10 items 2. Digital Accessibility (Mediator) - 11 items	**Hayes PROCESS Model 4:** • Independent Variable (X): Digital Leadership • Mediator (M): Digital Accessibility • Dependent Variable (Y): Perceived Inclusion	**H_3 SUPPORTED - FULL MEDIATION** **Finding:** • Digital Accessibility fully mediates the relationship between Digital Leadership and Perceived Inclusion

inclusion through digital accessibility (mediation hypothesis)	• Accessibility as mediating structure • Ubuntu grounds ethics and relationality **Mediation Logic:** • Leaders shape organisational structures (Maclean et al., 2024) • Structures enable/constrain participation (Shore et al., 2018) • Technology-mediated inclusion (Lauring & Jonasson, 2023)	3. Perceived Inclusion (DV) - 7 items **Design:** • Cross-sectional survey enabling path analysis and mediation testing	• 5,000 bootstrap resamples • Bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals **Paths Tested:** • Path a: DL → DA (B = 0.951, p < 0.001) • Path b: DA → PI (B = 0.458, p = 0.042) • Path c': DL → PI direct (B = 0.147, p = 0.524, ns) • Indirect effect (a×b): B = 0.435, 95% CI [0.048, 0.940] **Mediation Type:** • Full mediation (direct effect non-significant; indirect effect significant with CI excluding zero)	**Interpretation:** • Leadership influences inclusion indirectly through creating accessible structures • Direct leadership influence (interpersonal) is insufficient without systemic change • Explains policy-practice gap: good intentions require structural implementation • Validates Ubuntu principle: inclusion achieved through collective/structural action **Theoretical Contribution:** • Demonstrates structural mediation mechanism • Bridges macro (leadership) and micro (individual experience) levels • Empirically validates integrated TLT-OIT-Ubuntu framework

				Practical Implications: • Leadership training must include accessibility implementation skills • Symbolic commitment insufficient - resource allocation critical • Policy must translate into technical infrastructure • Accountability mechanisms essential