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Inclusive Leadership, Perceived Leader Moral Potency, and Leadership Empowerment: The Moderating Role of Leader Social Intelligence in Pakistan's Software Sector

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the connection between inclusive leadership and two crucial follower perceptions perceived leader moral potency and perceived leadership empowerment is explained. It also examines if the moderation effect occurs with the social intelligence of the leader in the information in the software sector in Pakistan. Data was collected with the use of a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design from 464 employees in public and private software firms. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation and Hayes' PROCESS macro Model 1 were used to analyze data. There was strong internal consistency of the measurement scales. The results showed moderate positive correlations between inclusive leadership, perceived leader moral potency, perceived leadership empowerment and leader social intelligence. The moderation analysis revealed that the relationship between inclusive leadership and perceived leadership empowerment was significantly enhanced by leader social intelligence. The moderating effect of inclusive leadership on the relationship between perceived leader moral potency and leader characteristics was not statistically significant at the conventional 5% level, however. However, inclusive leadership demonstrated significant positive conditional effects on moral potency at low, average and high levels of social intelligence. The study brings in a novel perspective to leadership literature by integrating four concepts of inclusion, morality, empowerment, and social intelligence. From a practical perspective, the results highlight the need to build leaders with inclusive leadership behaviors who have high social awareness and interpersonal skills.



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1. Introduction

In today's world, leaders are increasingly required to exploit workforce diversity, create psychologically safe surroundings and to develop ethically strong, empowered teams in a dynamic and uncertain world (Vyshishtya Anand, 2026). The concept of inclusive leadership has been emphasized as a leadership approach that intentionally includes, respects, and embraces diverse voices and viewpoints, allowing followers to feel valued, and empowered to contribute to the group's mission (Rathore, 2026). Inclusive leaders foster work environments that have greater voice, fairness, and belonging, which can lead to more positive work attitudes and performance measures. However, with the increasing importance of the concept of inclusive leadership in contemporary organizations, its psychological effects on followers' perception of inclusive leaders' moral characteristics and empowering actions are still not explored in depth (Mawela & Mulovhedzi, 2026). A little developed aspect is the connection between inclusive leadership and followers' sense of a leader's moral power. Moral potency is a leader's ability and willingness (as seen by followers) to detect moral issues, accept moral responsibility and to persevere in the presence of moral challenges (Hakeem et al., 2026). While the importance of the role of inclusive leadership in followers' judgment of their leader's moral potency has been little studied, that of other forms of leadership such as ethical leadership, authentic leadership, and transformational leadership has been the subject of significant research (Wardani et al., 2025). Empirical research is particularly lacking in the area of the relationship between inclusive leader behaviors and followers' perception of their leaders' moral efficacy, bravery, and ability to make moral decisions, particularly in pluralistic and diverse work contexts (Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). The second gap is related to perceived empowerment of leadership. Empowerment has been studied as a leadership product and/or a climate, but less research has focused on followers' perceptions of their leader as an empowering leader in an environment where inclusion is a priority. Most of the empowerment

literature deals with the concept of structural empowerment or psychological empowerment at the employee level instead of followers' perceptions of empowerment-oriented leader behaviors in inclusive contexts (Haryonno & Santoso, 2025). This makes it difficult to assess the impact of inclusive leadership on followers' attitudes towards their leaders' autonomy, participatory decision making and sense of influence on processes at work, and the extent to which these attitudes are systematically reinforced (Chui, 2020). Furthermore, previous literature views inclusive leadership largely as a positive leadership style and overlooks the importance of the social skills of leaders in influencing the meaning of inclusive leadership behaviors for followers (Fang et al., 2019). Social intelligence (defined as the capacity to accurately interpret social cues, manage one's social relationships, and adjust one's behavior according to social context) can significantly influence how well inclusive leadership behaviors are implemented. Leaders can have outwardly inclusive practice but the practice may be superficial, inconsistent or conflicting with follower needs if they have low social intelligence (Aye & Saw, 2026). On the other hand, if leaders have high social intelligence, their inclusive behaviors might be more accurately translated, more adapted to followers, and resonate with followers as more morally-based and authentic (Sharifi et al., 2026). Based on these observations, an important and under explored question arises: when does inclusive leadership lead to an increase in perceived leader moral potency and perceived leadership empowerment? In particular, little research has focused on the potential moderating effects of leader social intelligence on the link between inclusive leadership and these follower perceptions. Current knowledge about social intelligence and leadership mostly focuses on the relationship between social intelligence and leadership effectiveness and/or social outcomes, and much less on the interaction between social intelligence and distinct leadership styles (e.g., inclusive leadership) and its impact on relevant follower perceptions. Filling this deficit can deepen the literature on where and how inclusive leadership can foster followers'

perceptions of ethical credibility and empowerment. In this context, the current research explores how inclusive leadership relates to two important follower perceptions: perceived leader moral potency (Cai & Song, 2026) and perceived leadership empowerment (Ramasamy, 2026), and how leader social intelligence (Rudel et al., 2026) can influence the relationship. The study makes a contribution to the literature of leadership and organizational behavior in a few ways. First, it builds on the inclusive leadership literature by making the connection between inclusive behaviors and followers' perceptions of the leader's moral potency, which has played a somewhat underdeveloped role in the field of inclusive leadership but is key to ethical and responsible organizational practices. Second, it moves the discussion on perceived leadership empowerment beyond the realm of empirical measures, by situating it as a follower perception that is formed through inclusive leader behaviors. Third, it adds a boundary condition that adds the concept of leader social intelligence, with a finer-grained understanding of when followers are more likely to see inclusive leadership as a morally powerful and empowering behavior. Together, these have tackled gaps in theory and practice and provided practical guidance for organizations wishing to develop inclusive and socially intelligent leaders who can lead in establishing ethical and empowering cultures.

2. Research Gap

Existing leadership literature has documented that inclusive leadership is a strong predictor of various outcomes, including psychological safety, voice, innovation and performance, but it has focused primarily on followers' perceptions of leaders' moral potency (defined as followers' perceptions of leaders' capacity, responsibility, and courage to act morally) and leadership empowerment (defined as followers' perceptions of leaders' autonomy, participation, and empowerment) (Chui, 2020). It is conceptually well aligned with moral responsibility and empowerment, but there is a theoretical gap, as the models of inclusive leadership do not relate these constructs to one another and do not specify the mechanisms and

boundary conditions when inclusive leadership is understood as morally responsible and empowering (Ubaidillah, 2026). Moreover, most research on leader social intelligence focuses on it as a boundary condition that explains how followers process specific leadership styles, rather than as a moderator of the relationship between inclusive leadership and follower perceptions; the moderating role of leader social intelligence in the relationship between inclusive leadership and follower perceptions is very little studied (Mansoor & Qazi, 2026). In practice, any firm that encourages diversity, inclusion and ethical behavior puts significant resources into the creation of "inclusive" leaders, but it often fails to consider evidence-based indicators of when such leaders will appear morally credible and empowering to their followers (Vetoniemi & Kärnä, 2026). Organizations can develop leaders to adopt inclusive behaviors technically, but not socially, without grasping the moderating function of social intelligence, which result in a lack of moral trust and empowerment (Gül & Tuna, 2026). This study has considered the relationship between inclusive leadership and perceived leader moral potency and perceived leadership empowerment, and how leader social intelligence can enhance or diminish these relationships, thereby filling a theoretical gap by bringing together the concepts of inclusive leadership with the concepts of morality, empowerment and social intelligence in one framework, and a practical gap by providing more precise insight into what kinds of leader capabilities organizations need to develop to encourage leader moral potency and perceived leadership empowerment in workplaces. On the basis of these research gap main research questions are followings:

- RQ1:** What is the relationship between Inclusive leadership and Perceived Leader's Moral Potency?
- RQ2:** What is the relationship between Inclusive leadership and Perceived Leadership Empowerment?
- RQ3:** How does Leader's Social Intelligence moderate the relationship between Inclusive

leadership and Perceived Leader's Moral Potency?

RQ4: How does Leader's Social Intelligence moderate the relationship between Inclusive leadership and Perceived Leadership Empowerment?

3. Purpose and Problem statement

Leaders are increasingly expected to lead, manage performance and also to build inclusion, maintain high levels of ethical behavior and to empower followers as part of increasingly diverse and complex organizational contexts (Tushar et al., 2022). Despite the prevailing belief that inclusive leadership is a leadership style that fosters fairness, voice, and a sense of belongingness, research on inclusive leadership has so far primarily examined its impact on general follower outcomes like job satisfaction, engagement, and performance, but not yet on more specific follower perceptions of leader moral capacities or empowering behaviors (Joy & Jose, 2026). Therefore, it is unclear exactly how and if inclusive leadership influences followers' perceptions of the moral power of the leader and their sense of leadership empowerment (Karbasi & Alavi, 2024). Meanwhile, there are increasing concerns about unethical behavior, abuse of power, and lack of effective empowerment, that can undermine trust and obstruct sustainable organizational learning. Theoretically and practically, it is important to understand the contextual conditions in which inclusive leadership can enhance leaders' perceived moral power and empowering nature (Ashfaq et al., 2026). Yet existing research rarely brings these constructs together in one conceptual framework and the conditions and processes by which inclusive leadership impacts upon these follower perceptions are not well specified (Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). The leader's social intelligence is one factor that's often overlooked. Leaders can engage in inclusive behaviors but if they are not socially aware, have an ability to build high quality relationships and adjust their behavior to suit the followers, their inclusive behaviors may not be viewed as morally sound or truly empowering (Aye & Saw, 2026). In most studies, social intelligence has been considered as a direct

determinant of leadership effectiveness instead of an intervening variable that enhances or detracts from the impact of specific leadership styles. This means that the relationship between inclusive leadership and key follower perceptions is not fully understood due to the lack of knowledge regarding how leader social intelligence influences that relationship (Zikai Song et al., 2026). Consequently, the primary problem that this research aims to clarify is the bounds of inclusive leadership on followers' perceptions of leader moral potency and leadership empowerment conditions and under what conditions. In particular, this study aims to investigate the positive relationship between inclusive leadership and these perceptions as well as whether the leader's social intelligence either bolsters or weakens this relationship between inclusive leadership and perceived leader moral potency and perceived leadership empowerment. Overcoming this challenge may help to provide a more complex account of the situations where followers will perceive inclusive leadership as ethically and empowering images of leadership, and give some implications for leadership development and organizational practice.

4. Literature Review

Psychological empowerment is a major research topic in organizations research, and is described as the motivational factors within the individual that help him or her to take initiative and engage in the organization (Qadumi et al., 2026). Research into leadership in the recent past has focused on the qualities and actions of a leader which facilitates this empowerment. Inclusive leadership has been found as one of the primary factors influencing empowerment and respects diversity and values followers' contributions (Arriza & Wahyuni, 2026). Inclusive leadership isn't always successful. The perceived effectiveness of leadership is claimed to be "social embedded" (Pantić et al., 2026) meaning that it is dependent on a leader's ability to solve complex social dilemmas and respond to conflicting social needs. This demands a high social intelligence which is defined as, "receiving and understanding social information as well as changing behavior in response to it" (Song et al., 2026). In this report, the theoretical model is

explored, which examines the moderating role of the leader's social intelligence between inclusive leadership and followers' perceived empowerment.

4.1 Inclusive Leadership: Behavioral Antecedent

Three key behaviors, namely openness, accessibility and availability, are associated with inclusive leadership (Gao et al., 2026). These attributes help followers know that they are listened to and feel safe to take risks (Gül & Tuna, 2026). This leadership style is founded on justice which meets the need of the employees of belongingness and uniqueness, creating an "in-group" atmosphere even with different workgroups (Altaher et al., 2024). For instance, inclusive leaders have shown to improve innovation performance by providing staff space to voice their opinions without fear, and by encouraging staff to break rules, but in a constructive way to foster positive change (A. Zhang & Hahn, 2026). Because psychological distress and a positive organizational climate are the themes of inclusive leadership, mental health and engagement are correlated (Rajun et al., 2024). Inclusive practices make employees feel like insiders, and control withdrawal behaviors, leading to better sustainability of employee relations (Chigome et al., 2026).

4.2 Inclusive leadership and Perceived Leader's Moral Potency

Inclusive leadership has a significant effect on the perceived moral potency of organizational leaders in organizational contexts through an ethical work climate, organizational-appropriate work behaviors and organizational culture (Hadisuwito et al., 2025). Leaders who can incorporate a variety of viewpoints are inclusive leaders, adding to their moral and ethical claims. This leadership style is linked to greater worker trust, satisfaction and commitment, all of which are important facets of perceived moral potency (Pinandito & Muafi, 2026). Inclusive leadership is key in creating an ethical working environment, giving ethical values, fairness and integrity to the organizational practices (Sulastri et al., 2026). This moral atmosphere boosts employee confidence and

decreases burnout (Bakker et al., 2014), resonates with the goals of an organization, and improves job satisfaction (Ahmad & Umrani, 2019). Positive work behavior is encouraged due to inclusive leadership as it satisfies the psychological needs, motivates the employee, and encourages personal growth (Judijanto, 2026). It can improve the cognitive engagement and work motivation, which helps to create a pleasant work environment that has a positive impact on the long-term well-being of employees (Othman et al., 2025). Psychological safety of an organization is positively and directly related to culture and satisfaction via inclusive leadership, which is yet to be explored. In general, this approach to leadership creates a positive and inclusive work environment, ultimately contributing to the success of the organization and the well-being of its employees (Fahad, 2024). Inclusive leadership is transformed into responsible leadership, which is a key factor in constructing inclusive organizations and is a combination of social and ethical issues (Bhatti et al., 2023). This is suitable for inclusive organization that facilitates the cooperation and participation of different people in the organization (Bhatti et al., 2023). While inclusive leadership has been shown to boost perceived moral potency, the context of the organization and intervening variables need to be considered. The relationship between inclusiveness, ethics and employee outcomes, among other things, should be explored further in other organizational contexts. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis H1: Inclusive leadership has positive and significant relationship with Perceived Leader's Moral Potency.

4.3 Inclusive leadership and Perceived Leadership Empowerment

There is increasing evidence that inclusive leadership and employee feelings of leadership empowerment are a critical connection point for enhancing the performance and innovation of employees (Li, 2026). New studies indicate that inclusive leadership fosters a workplace culture that enables employees to be psychologically empowered and perform their jobs better and

more innovatively (Wakhyuni et al., 2026). Inclusive leadership are those leaders who actively involve all team members in the team, creating an inclusive atmosphere and everyone feels good about the team (Zhang et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a significant relationship between inclusive leadership and outcomes (job performance, innovation, etc.) via psychological empowerment (Shore et al., 2026). For example, psychological empowerment was found as an important facilitating factor between perceived inclusive leadership and job performance among university teachers (Huang, 2023). Psychological empowerment plays an important significant role between high level of inclusive leadership and innovation capacity of nurses (Zhang et al., 2022). Psychological empowerment is one of the crucial factors that make an organization more innovative and inclusive leadership can make a contribution in this regard (Shin et al., 2026). Evidence of the benefits of inclusive leadership for people's perceived empowerment has been shown with some potential challenges. For instance, not all may feel ready to be actively involved in inclusive practice and others may feel overwhelmed by expectations to be involved (Shore et al., 2026). This puts the spotlight on the individuality of employees and the organization's context in terms of leadership style. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis H2: Inclusive leadership has positive and significant relationship with Perceived Leadership empowerment.

4.4 Leader's Social Intelligence as a Moderator between Inclusive leadership and Perceived Leader's Moral Potency

Positive outcomes of inclusive leadership are fostered in safe and engaging workplaces (Shin et al., 2026). A moderating variable that aids a leader in dealing with stakeholder sensitivities and in being effective in using the moral courage to act inclusively is social intelligence (Zikai Song et al., 2026). An element of inclusive leadership is also a "fulcrum of inclusion" that can help amplify and transform inclusion throughout the levels of the organization (Joy & Jose, 2026). Inclusive leaders

provide opportunities for participation, voice, and belonging, allowing people to remain the same and to serve the collective vision (Lees, 2026). This leadership style is one of the strategies that can contribute to the shift from negative to positive behaviors, and in some cases, it is the formation of psychological safety which allows the team members to express their opinions without fear of repercussions (Qadumi et al., 2026). In this framework, an understanding of how organizational identification and leader-directed helping behaviors can be enabled by the support of insider status and relational coordination is provided (Tung & Ramasamy, 2026). An inclusive leader's effectiveness in interacting with the environment is moderated by social intelligence (Ali et al., 2024). Inclusive leadership sets the stage for equity and fairness, and social intelligence adds the additional sense to the leader that can make it happen when the environment is complex with various stakeholders (Parmankulova, 2026). Advanced socially intelligent leaders are more aware of the needs and points of view of a variety of stakeholders, and use inclusive behaviors with greater accuracy. Social intelligence plays a pivotal role here, helping leaders to identify micro-level experiences, and give them a meaning at the organizational level (Litvinova, 2026). Managers can become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses in their organization through the use of social intelligence to properly apply the characteristics of inclusive leadership based on the context they are part of (Jiang et al., 2026). Inclusive leadership is not social intelligence, but it can be rather "social intelligence" can moderate the intensity and success of the inclusive leadership. It is a medium through which the organizational values are seen in everyday working practice, thereby ensuring the "fulcrum" of inclusion is used effectively to create positive outcomes for the employees and moral power for the organization. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis H3: Leader's Social Intelligence moderate the relationship between Inclusive leadership and Perceived Leader's Moral Potency in such a way when Leader's Social Intelligence is high this relationship is strong and vice versa.

4.5 Leader's Social Intelligence as a Moderator between Inclusive leadership and Perceived Leadership Empowerment

The empirical evidence and theoretical models about the role of social intelligence as a moderating variable between inclusive leadership and perceived empowerment are not as such included in the research provided in the past. The literature includes social intelligence as one of the important constructs within the context of inclusive leadership; however, it also states a moderating role of social intelligence in the specific relationship between inclusive leadership and perceived empowerment (Shore et al., 2026). It is worth able that one theoretical framework study indicated that the relationship between inclusive leadership and psychological distress of school teachers is a moderation relationship, but rather a mediation relationship with mediators being social intelligence and organizational climate (Ağalday & Bozan, 2026). Empirical evidences or the theoretical connection in the provided corpus, which would explain the condition of social intelligence as a factor that affects strength or direction of pathway between inclusive leadership and perceived empowerment (Li, 2026; Zhang et al., 2022). While there is limited evidence of social intelligence as a moderator in this discussion, included in research is a list of other variables that act as moderators or mediators between inclusive leadership and outcomes related to empowerment. Social intelligence is an important moderator in models in which inclusive leadership relates to employee behaviors through psychological empowerment (Hudie et al., 2017). In particular, relationship of inclusive leadership on innovative work behavior and psychological empowerment is significant if leader-member exchange in social intelligence relationship is high (Çetinkaya & Yeşilada, 2022). There is evidence that social intelligence and leader political skill is a positive moderating variable between inclusive leadership and structural empowerment (Hudie et al., 2017). Relations between inclusive leadership and organizational outcomes such as affective organizational commitment (Ferdiana et al., 2023) and pro-social rule breaking, innovative work

behavior (Awan et al., 2025; Yeşilada, 2022) and psychological empowerment are already known to be moderated by social intelligence (Song et al., 2026). Therefore, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis H4: Leader's Social Intelligence moderate the relationship between Inclusive leadership and Perceived Leadership Empowerment in such a way when Leader's Social Intelligence is high this relationship is strong and vice versa.

5. Theoretical Framework with Underpinning Theories

This study can be supported by the basis of two theories, namely Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson, 1999) and Social Information Processing Theory. Leaders who engage followers, value, appreciate, and respect their ideas, give information to followers, and treat them fairly may elicit positive employee responses that lead to greater perceptions of leader moral responsibility and ability to take ethical action, as well as greater perceptions of leader as a person who empowers followers (Zhang & Hahn, 2026). This theory thus suggests that there are expected positive correlations among inclusive leadership, perceived leader moral potency and perceived leadership empowerment (Zhang et al., 2022). There is an explanation in terms of Social Information Processing Theory about moderating role of leader social intelligence. Employees look at the way leaders interpret words, their actions, how they communicate and respond to social situations as significant information when judging a leader (Pardede, 2026). Socially intelligent leaders have a better grasp of employee needs, can pick up on interpersonal cues, communicate inclusively, and can adjust their behavior to different employees (Rudel et al., 2026). As such, inclusive behaviors of socially intelligent leaders can be read as being more authentic, principled and empowering (Hudie et al., 2017).

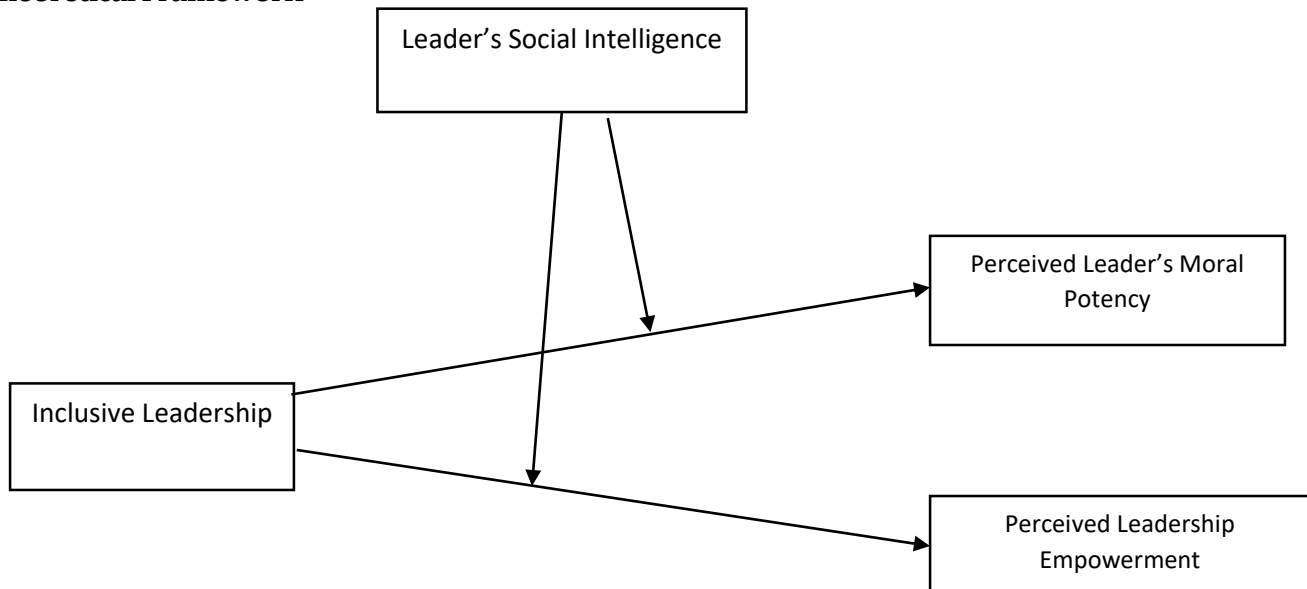
The research on inclusive leadership also highlights the proactive nature of leaders' behaviors to foster feelings of belongingness, uniqueness, autonomy and competence in followers, while the social-intelligence perspective

reinforces the notion that effective leadership requires the understanding and management of interpersonal relationships and social signals. Based on this study, it is expected that leader social intelligence will have an impact on the interpretation of the followers for inclusive leader behavior.

High social intelligence leaders are better able to understand employees' social and emotional

needs, respond to them and communicate the sense of inclusion in a credible and relationship-sensitive way. Hence, social intelligence could reinforce the link between inclusive leadership and perceived leader moral potency and perceived leadership empowerment. These theories together offer a rational basis to explain direct relationships suggested in study and moderating role of leader social intelligence.

Theoretical Framework



6. Research Methodology

Quantitative, cross-sectional research design was used in this study to investigate the effect of inclusive leadership on perceived leader's moral potency and perceived leadership empowerment, as well as moderating role of leader's social intelligence among the employees in software development firms in Pakistan. The data was gathered using a structured and self-administered questionnaire that included 14 items for inclusive leadership (Hamilton. K.M. 2022), 12 items for moral potency (Hannah & Avolio, 2010), 11 items for leadership empowerment (Konczak et al, 2000; Arnold et al, 2000) and 21 items for social intelligence (Silvera et al, 2000), all on a Likert-type item response scale. The reliability of all scales was determined by internal consistency analysis, which resulted in a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.840 – 0.938, thus showing high reliability. For testing

hypothesized moderating effect of leader social intelligence on relationships between inclusive leadership and two outcome variables, this study followed Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 1) in SPSS, estimating interaction terms and conditional effects at different levels of moderator (Hayes, 2017). This analytical approach allowed for a detailed analysis of both direct and interaction effects, thus bridging the gap between empirical and study's theoretical approach and research goals.

7. Data Analysis and Findings

The results of the statistical analysis of 464 responses are provided here. This analysis consists of demographical profile, reliability, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and moderation analysis (Hayes proc Model 1) (Hayes, 2017).

7.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1: *Frequencies and Percentages of Demographic Variables of Study (N = 464)*

Variables	Category	F	%
Age	25 to 30 years	284	61.2%
	30 to 35 years	128	27.6%
	35 to 40 years	20	4.3%
	40 years and above	32	6.9%
Gender	Male	360	77.6%
	Female	104	22.4%
Formal Education	Bachelor	200	43.1%
	Master	244	52.6%
	MPhil/PhD	20	4.3%
Sector	Public	128	27.6%
	Private	336	72.4%
Total		464	100.0%

Note. *F* = Frequency, % = Percentage.

A sample size of 464 respondents was used. The majority of respondents were between 25 and 30 years old (61.2%) and had a master's degree (52.6%) and were employed in the private sector (72.4%). The characteristics suggest that the

sample is largely made up of young and well educated workers.

7.2 Reliability Analysis

Table 2: *Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)*

Scale	α	n
Inclusive Leadership (IL)	0.909	14
Perceived Leader's Moral Potency (MP)	0.910	12
Perceived Leadership Empowerment (LEW)	0.938	11
Leader's Social Intelligence (SI)	0.840	21

Note. α = Cronbach's Alpha

All constructs showed satisfactory internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha scores being above the recommended level of .70. The scales for Inclusive Leadership ($\alpha=.909$), MP ($\alpha=.910$), LEW

($\alpha=.938$), and Social Intelligence ($\alpha=.840$) are reliable.

7.3 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3: *Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables*

Variable	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Inclusive Leadership (INCL)	3.66	0.62	-0.96	2.12
Perceived Leader's Moral Potency (MP)	3.66	0.62	-0.80	2.20
Leader's Social Intelligence (SI)	3.49	0.45	0.71	0.82

Perceived Leadership Empowerment (LEW) 3.77 0.71 -0.67 0.59

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation

The mean values were between 3.49 and 3.77, indicating positive perceptions by the respondents, in general. Standard deviations that are less than 1 signify that there is not much spread. Skewness

and kurtosis statistics are acceptable to normality so parametric analyses can be used.

7.4 Correlation Analysis

Table 4: *Pearson Correlation Matrix (N = 464)*

Sr	Variables	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Inclusive Leadership (INCL)	464	3.66	0.62	1.00			
2	Perceived Leader's Moral Potency (MP)	464	3.66	0.62	.739**	1.00		
3	Leader's Social Intelligence (SI)	464	3.49	0.45	.382**	.420**	1.00	
4	Perceived Leadership Empowerment (LEW)	464	3.77	0.71	.634**	.687**	.323**	1.00

Note. ***p* < .01 (2-tailed).

The results of Pearson correlation showed significant positive correlations between all the study variables (*p* < .001). Inclusive Leadership was strongly correlated with MP (*r* = .739) with higher levels of inclusive leadership being associated with higher MP. There was also a strong positive relationship between Inclusive Leadership and LE (*r* = .634). MP and LE also were highly correlated (*r* = .687). For all three sub-dimensions of social

intelligence, moderate positive correlations with Inclusive Leadership (*r* = .382), MP (*r* = .420) and LE (*r* = .323) were observed. All the correlations were less than .80 thus there is little multicollinearity.

7.5 Moderation Analysis

Model 1: Inclusive Leadership → MP moderated by Social Intelligence

Table 5: *Moderation Analysis: Inclusive Leadership → Perceived Leader's Moral Potency Moderated by Social Intelligence*

Path / Effect	B	SE	95% Confidence Interval	p-value
Constant	1.7336	0.7570	0.2460 – 3.2211	<i>p</i> = .023
Inclusive Leadership (INCL)	0.3307	0.1945	−0.0515 – 0.7129	<i>p</i> = .090
Social Intelligence (SI)	−0.1742	0.2228	−0.6121 – 0.2636	<i>p</i> = .435
Interaction (INCL × SI)	0.1024	0.0561	−0.0079 – 0.2127	<i>p</i> = .069
Conditional Effect at Low SI (16th percentile)	0.6428	0.0391	0.5660 – 0.7196	<i>p</i> < .001
Conditional Effect at Medium SI (50th percentile)	0.6794	0.0332	0.6141 – 0.7446	<i>p</i> < .001
Conditional Effect at High SI (84th percentile)	0.7306	0.0431	0.6459 – 0.8152	<i>p</i> < .001

Note. Model $R^2 = .571$, $F(3, 460) = 204.186$, *p* < .001. The interaction term was not significant at the .05 level.

There was a statistical significance ($R^2 = .571$, $F = 204.186$, $P < .001$) for the regression model, which accounted for 57.1% of the variance in MP. Inclusive Leadership X Social Intelligence did not

statistically differ ($\beta = .102$, $p = .069$). Hence, Social Intelligence did not significantly moderate the relationship between Inclusive Leadership and MP. While conditional effects were positive and

significant at low, medium, and high levels of Social Intelligence, the moderation hypothesis is rejected as the conditional effect did not reach the .05 significance level.

Model 2: Inclusive Leadership → LE moderated by Social Intelligence

Table 6: Moderation Analysis: Inclusive Leadership → Perceived Leadership Empowerment Moderated by Social Intelligence

Path / Effect	B	SE	95% Interval	Confidence	p-value
Constant	2.8326	1.0152	0.8376 – 4.8275		p = .006
Inclusive Leadership (INCL)	0.1403	0.2608	−0.3723 – 0.6529		p = .591
Social Intelligence (SI)	−0.4748	0.2988	−1.0620 – 0.1125		p = .113
Interaction (INCL × SI)	0.1611	0.0753	0.0132 – 0.3089		p = .033
Conditional Effect at Low SI (16th percentile)	0.6311	0.0524	0.5282 – 0.7341		p < .001
Conditional Effect at Medium SI (50th percentile)	0.6886	0.0445	0.6012 – 0.7761		p < .001
Conditional Effect at High SI (84th percentile)	0.7692	0.0578	0.6556 – 0.8827		p < .001

Note. Model $R^2 = .416$, $F(3, 460) = 109.100$, $p < .001$

The regression model explained 41.6% of the variance in LE ($R^2 = .416$, $F = 109.100$, $p < .001$). Inclusive Leadership and Social Intelligence were statistically significant ($p = .033$, $\beta = .161$). This suggests that Inclusive Leadership and LE are positively coupled with the introduction of Social Intelligence. The moderation effect was positive with conditional effects growing with increased Social Intelligence. As such, the moderation hypothesis is supported.

7.6 Overall Findings

The results show that there is a positive relationship between Inclusive Leadership and both of the outcome variables. Social Intelligence only appears as a significant moderator for the relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Leadership Empowerment, but not for the relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Moral Potency. The overall results give partial support to the conceptual model proposed.

Hypothesis Summary

Hypothesis	Evidence	Decision	Reason
H1: INCL → MP	Positive significant conditional effect	Supported	Positive relationship observed.
H2: INCL → LE	Positive significant conditional effect	Supported	Positive relationship observed.
H3: SI moderates INCL → MP	Interaction $p = .069$	Not Supported	Interaction not significant.
H4: SI moderates INCL → LE	Interaction $p = .033$	Supported	Interaction significant.

8. Findings and Discussion

The study results reveal the link between inclusive leadership and perceived leader's moral potency, which is strengthened by enhancing the leader's social intelligence. The interaction term is statistically significant ($b = 0.1611, p = 0.0329$), and the conditional effects display that the social-intelligence higher-ordered factors have more of an effect on the outcome when social intelligence is higher. That is, inclusive leadership is more likely to be perceived as morally sound, ethical, and strong when it is performed by a socially intelligent leader (Herttalaampi et al., 2025). The results indicate that inclusive leadership is a participative leadership in nature and a moral signal as well. If a leader is listened to by people, included in their world, valued, followed employees are likely to see the leader as morally potent moral capable, moral courageous, and ethically committed (Atwi & Hassani, 2021). Analysis in survey is that it's not just if they see inclusive behavior that employees are reacting to it, but also on the moral quality of the behavior (Agbejule & Lehtineva, 2022). Social intelligence can be used to make inclusive practices more convincing for a socially intelligent leader, thereby improving perceptions of moral potency (Herttalaampi et al., 2025). This is significant, as moral potency is frequently a basis for trust, voice, ethically actionable behavior and employee readiness to follow the leader. This finding is in line with recent research on leadership that indicates that moral and relational leadership behaviors influence follower moral judgments and ethical responses (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009). For instance, research on ethical and inclusive leadership shows that leaders have the ability to increase followers' moral potency, which subsequently is significantly associated with constructive ethical behavior (Sulastri et al., 2026). Studies of integrity, inclusive and ethical leadership of leaders also indicate that followers conclude on the moral character of the leader based on the leader's actions. It also aligns with the over-arching inclusive leadership literature (Çetinkaya & Yeşilada, 2022). Systematic reviews and meta-analytic work indicate that inclusive leadership is related to positive outcomes, including innovative

behaviors, voice, and task performance, in part by fostering feelings of belongingness, psychological safety, and trust (Awan et al., 2025; Arriza & Wahyuni, 2026). Findings of this study builds on that literature by demonstrating that inclusive leadership can also be a moral path: it can positively impact the leader's, particularly when social intelligence is high. That's a helpful one since much existing inclusive leadership research has focused on psychological/relational rather than moral mechanisms (Herttalaampi et al., 2025). Results indicate that inclusive leadership can positively influence perceived leader's moral potency, which is reinforced by the leader's social intelligence. This suggests that behaviors that are inclusive are more likely to be perceived as a socially meaningful act when they are practiced by a leader who can read the social context and react with interpersonal sensitivity (Atwi & Hassani, 2021; Endalan, 2025). Theoretically important result, as inclusive leadership is presented here as a moral leadership style as well as a relational one. The result also corroborates previous research indicating that morally oriented leadership behaviors can boost followers' moral potency, trust, and ethical conduct; and extends the inclusive leadership field by defining social intelligence as a boundary condition that enhances moral perceptions (Amallia et al., 2021; Cai & Song, 2026; Çetinkaya & Yeşilada, 2022). Overall, this finding suggests that inclusive leadership contributes to employees' perceptions of the leader's moral strength, and that social intelligence enhances this effect. If this is a hypothesis, then it can be discussed as a supported hypothesis.

The results suggest that there is a positive association between inclusive leadership and perceived leadership empowerment. Inclusive leadership's correlation with LE is moderate to high ($r = .634, p < .001$), and the interaction model indicates that inclusive leadership is positively related to LE regardless of social intelligence levels. The direct influence of inclusive leadership on LE is not significant in the moderated model, but the interaction is significant ($p = .0329$), which indicates that the influence of inclusive leadership on LE increases with the

increase of social intelligence. The use of inclusive leadership by a socially intelligent leader seems to have a greater impact on empowering employees in a simple way (Arriza & Salamah Wahyuni, 2026). The conditional effects are consistent with this pattern: the higher SI, the greater the effect of inclusive leadership on LE (from .6311 at a lower SI to .7692 at a higher SI) (Qadumi et al., 2026). The results indicate that employees feel empowered when there is inclusive leadership but this empowerment is related to the social intelligence of the leader (Ağalday & Bozan, 2026). A leader that knows how to interact with others on a socially intelligent level, reacts accordingly, and communicates in a relationally intelligent way will make more employees feel autonomous, capable, and valued. This enhances the leader's inclusive actions as more real and psychologically meaningful (Hudie et al., 2017). This is important because empowerment is likely to be more than just about authority being delegated to employees, it is also about how their leader supports and understands their needs. Findings suggests that social intelligence is an enabler for inclusive leadership to be a more positive empowerment experience (Ullah et al., 2021). Results are highly similar to previous studies. Past research repeatedly found positive relationships between inclusive leadership and psychological empowerment, and between psychological empowerment and why inclusive leadership contributes to outcomes like innovative work behavior, engagement, and job satisfaction (Hadisuwito et al., 2025). For instance, many research studies have identified inclusive leadership as a significant predictor of psychological empowerment, which has been found to predict innovation and performance. More recently the literature also confirms the underlying concept that inclusive leadership is not just a direct approach, but one that is relational and contextual (Zhang & Hahn, 2026). A systematic review finds that inclusive leaders include employees through appreciation of diverse voices, champion diversity, and facilitate participation—but only when the interaction between leader and employees is good. This is also in line with the research on the social intelligence of leaders, which

indicates that socially intelligent leaders are more effective at building trust, engagement and positive employee experiences (Wakhyuni et al., 2026). Results indicate that inclusive leadership has a positive relationship with the perceived level of leadership empowerment, with this relationship being stronger when leader social intelligence is high. This indicates that when inclusive behaviors are provided by a leader who understands interpersonal cues, responds sensitively and adapts behaviors for employees, employees feel more empowered. In this regard, social intelligence serves as a key boundary condition to support the empowering impact of inclusive leadership. The results align with previous studies that found inclusive leadership is associated with psychological empowerment and related positive outcomes (including innovation, engagement and job satisfaction). They also contribute to the literature by showing that an inclusive leadership effect of empowerment is more distinct when the leader has higher social intelligence. In total, this results corroborate the idea that inclusive leadership is a style of leadership that benefits and empowers people, and that this impact of inclusive leadership can be reinforced by the social intelligence of the leader (Endalan, 2025). Thus, while improving empowerment through inclusive behavior is a must, there is a need to build leaders' relational and social-cognitive skills as well.

This study's results indicate that inclusive leadership and social intelligence are related to perceived leader's moral potency, and this relationship is positive and significant. The interaction term was significant ($b = .1611$, $p = .0329$) and the conditional effect of inclusive leadership on the outcome strengthened as SI increased from .6311 at lower SI to .7692 at higher SI. This suggests that inclusive leadership will be more likely to be translated into increased perceptions of moral potency when the leader is socially intelligent (Mesdaghinia et al., 2019). In effect, inclusive leadership is just the beginning, and it gains credibility as a moral cue when a leader is attuned to others, sensitive to their perceptions, and adept at interpersonal interactions. Social intelligence seems to allows leaders to convey

inclusiveness that followers feel is “moral, ethical and professional” in a way that is trusted (Song et al., 2026). That is, employees do not watch just the leader's actions, but how the leader is effective in doing the inclusive actions during social interaction. This is important because Perceived Leader Moral potency is a follower moral evaluation of leader's moral capability and moral strength. If there is a high level of social intelligence, inclusionary practices like listening, inviting voice and treating people fairly will be perceived as authentic and morally sound, rather than symbolic (Akkermans et al., 2013; Pérez-López & Alegre, 2012). This is why the relationship is strengthened with the high social intelligence and lowered with the low social intelligence. Results are very congruent with other studies on the effects of positive leadership, which have found that effects can be contingent on the leader's intelligence, relational skills, and/or contextual fit. The positive and significant interaction suggests that, the higher the leader social intelligence, the more impactful the relationship of inclusive leadership and perceived leader's moral potency. The conditional effects reinforce the anticipated pattern: The relationship is strongest at higher levels and weaker at lower levels of social intelligence. This is evidence of the critical role of social intelligence as a boundary condition for making inclusive leadership effective as a credible moral stance (Kelemen et al., 2026). The results suggest that leader's social intelligence significantly influences the relationship between inclusive leadership and perceived leader's moral potency. This implies that the leader needs to be socially intelligent to be able to craft moral perceptions, meaning that inclusive leadership is more likely to be understood as a form of moral message when it is delivered by an adaptive, sensitive and interpersonal leader. The findings are consistent with (Çetinkaya & Yeşilada, 2022; Endalan, 2025; López & Alegre, 2012) that indicate that leader intelligence and ethical credibility enhance relational and ethical results and confirm that social intelligence is a factor in the development of inclusive behavior that has a moral component.

Results show a significant positive moderation effect of leader's social intelligence on inclusive leadership–perceived empowerment link. The interaction term did not prove to be significant in the model predicting LE, but conditional effects indicated a stronger positive effect when social intelligence increased from .6311 at lower SI to .7692 at higher SI. This means that inclusive leadership in the form of a socially intelligent leader is more empowering. In terms of substance, this implies that leader's social intelligence is required to maximize empowerment, inclusive leadership alone is not sufficient. The leader has a high degree of social intelligence, which likely enables them to “read” employee needs and fine-tune communication, respond appropriately, and make inclusion real, not symbolic (Schermuly et al., 2025). This creates a positive feeling of respect, competence and psychological empowerment for employees. Obviously, this is significant because the empowerment that can be achieved through a formal expression of voice or autonomy is not the empowerment at all. Staff also need to read the leader's actions as being sincere, supportive and socially sensitive (Çetinkaya & Yeşilada, 2022). Findings suggests that social intelligence is the force behind inclusive leadership's “social credibility” and the way in which inclusive actions become inclusive feelings of empowerment (Ağalday & Bozan, 2026). This finding is in line with the broader inclusive leadership literature, which holds that inclusive leadership is a relational and context-specific leadership approach, not necessarily effective in the same way across contexts. There are mixed results about the efficacy of inclusive leadership on diversity and employee empowerment, and these may rely on the way leaders engage with followers and their relational environment, according to a systematic review. It is also consistent with research indicating that interpersonal or social-cognitive skills are important aspects of leadership that can be taught (Shin et al., 2026). The findings from social intelligence research indicate that socially intelligent leaders are more effective in interpersonal exchange, which leads to higher levels of engagement, employee retention, and employee performance. As an illustration, research

on related topics indicates that other intelligence-related traits of the leader, besides the direct effect of leadership style, can moderate the relationship between leadership and outcomes, even when the direct impact of leadership style is positive (Qadumi et al., 2026). The positive interaction suggests that inclusive leadership has a stronger impact on perceived leadership empowerment when the leader's social intelligence is high. The conditional relationship further supports the direction predicted: The greater the social intelligence, the greater the inclusive leadership–empowerment relationship. The results indicate that there is a significant moderating effect of leader's social intelligence on the relationship between inclusive leadership and perceived leadership empowerment (Çetinkaya & Yeşilada, 2022; Shin et al., 2026). Increasing the likelihood of employees being empowered is more likely to happen when inclusive leadership is communicated by a leader who can read social cues and understand the social needs of employees and who can manage interpersonal relations well. In this respect, social intelligence comes to be the basis for making inclusive leadership more credible and more influential in terms of employees' sense of autonomy, competence, and psychological ownership (Tung & Ramasamy, 2026).

9. Theoretical and practical implications

This study theoretically builds on the inclusive leadership literature by establishing strong links between inclusive leadership and followers' perceptions of leader moral potency and leadership empowerment, which has been sparse in the field and mostly limited to generic attitudinal and performance outcomes. The scales used in the inclusive leadership, moral potency, leadership empowerment and social intelligence have a high level of internal consistency and considerable positive correlations between the scales further support the validity of an integrated framework between inclusive leadership, morality, empowerment and the capabilities of leaders in a software sector context. The study extends conditional process theories of leadership as the effect of inclusive leadership is moderated at least

partially by leader social intelligence and there is significant interaction effect for inclusive leadership–leadership empowerment relationship, and marginal interaction effect for inclusive leadership–moral potency relationship (Fry, 2003). The findings suggest that beyond just having a 'diversity' or 'inclusion' initiative, software firms in Pakistan should focus on building their internal social capital in the form of leaders who are not only very inclusive but also have high social intelligence which others can see as a positive and not as a negative trait and think that such behavior is ethically upright and empowering. Inclusive leadership development programs aimed at improving social awareness, relationship management and adaptive communication skills, and HR policies that acknowledge and reward inclusive leaders that can turn inclusion into increased follower moral confidence and empowerment in everyday software development firm's work contexts.

10. Limitation and Future Research Directions

There are a number of limitations to this study that warrant consideration. First, it had a cross sectional design that gathered data at a single time. However, although the results suggest important relationships between inclusive leadership, perceived leader moral potency, perceived leadership empowerment, and leader social intelligence, definite causal relationships are not established. For the question of whether inclusive leadership leads to shifts over time in employees' perceptions, longitudinal or experimental research would be more appropriate. Secondly, each of the variables was measured with the same self-administered questionnaire by the same respondents, largely. This can lead to common method or response bias since the respondents may answer in a consistent way to all the constructs, especially in self-report designs in which the predictor and outcome variables are measured in the same fashion. Likewise, all scales exhibited high internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranging from .840 to .938), but this does not guarantee total construct, convergent, and discriminant validity. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and other validity tests like average

variance extracted (AVE), Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT should therefore be used in future studies.

These limitations can be overcome in future research by using a longitudinal, multi-wave or experimental design. For instance, inclusive leadership might be assessed at time 1, leader social intelligence at time 2 and perceived moral potency and leadership empowerment at time 3. Such a design would minimize concerns for common-method bias and strengthen evidence of the temporal order of the relationships (Carter et al., 2018). Additional data could be gathered by asking employees to rate their own experiences with inclusive leadership, leaders to rate their employees' outcomes, and/or organizational records (if available). Comparing cross-culturally with other software firms in other countries with institutional and cultural contexts different from that of the study would also help to establish if the findings were context specific or more broadly applicable (Asiamah et al., 2022). Further research is also warranted to understand the reasons behind the high correlations between inclusive leadership and perceived leader moral potency and perceived leadership empowerment. Leader-member exchange, perceived organizational support, employee voice, and perceived fairness are potential mediators. Further, other moderators like the leader's emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, ethical climate, organizational justice, psychological safety, power distance, and employee digital literacy could be examined (Vladasel et al., 2021). Conversely, the interaction of aspects of inclusive leadership and social intelligence were significant for perceived leadership empowerment, but not for perceived leader moral potency, and should be replicated in future research using larger sample sizes and through an a priori power analysis specific to interactions. It is also possible to investigate whether or not social intelligence has direct effects, apart from the moderation, and whether it works through a mediation or moderated mediation mechanism (Malterud et al., 2016). Lastly,

qualitative interviews or mixed-method studies might be conducted to offer deeper explanations of the quantitative relationships found in this research on how an employee feels about the meaning of "morally potent" and "empowering" leadership in everyday workplace interactions within the context of Pakistani software and IT firms (Bangquiao & Galigao, 2025).

11. Conclusion of this study

Finally, this study shows the relationship between inclusive leadership with employees' perceptions of leader moral potency and leadership empowerment is positive, inclusive leadership is an important leadership approach in the context of software sector in Pakistan. Findings indicate that there are strong positive correlations between inclusive leadership and perceived leader moral potency and between inclusive leadership and perceived leadership empowerment. The moderation analysis also suggested that leader social intelligence was a significant positive moderator of the relationship between inclusive leadership and perceived leadership empowerment and that the effect of inclusive leadership was greater at low level of social intelligence, average level of social intelligence, and high level of social intelligence. The interaction between inclusive leadership and leader social intelligence in predicting perceived leader moral potency, however, was not statistically significant at the but inclusive leadership did show a significant positive conditional effect at all examined levels of social intelligence. The study makes a contribution to the leadership understanding by providing evidence that inclusive leadership can improve followers' perceptions of morally capable and empowering leaders, and that leader social intelligence has a specific role in the translation of inclusive leadership into perceived empowerment in software firms. The findings indicate that Pakistani software firms need to train leaders who possess inclusive behaviors and high social awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, and adaptation in communication.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research.

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