Stockholm School of Economics
Bachelor Thesis in Retail Management

When Expectancy Met Reality

A quantitative study on understanding employee perceptions of reward systems through the lens of Expectancy Theory

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Abstract

While incentive systems are widely used to motivate employees, their effectiveness may depend not only on what is offered but also on how well those rewards align with individual preferences. Positioned within the field of organizational psychology, this study investigates how incentive alignment influences work motivation and job satisfaction, using Vroom's Expectancy Theory as the primary framework and Self-Determination Theory as a supporting perspective. The Valued Incentive Match Index (VIMI) was developed to capture the degree of fit between preferred and received incentives. A cross-sectional survey was conducted in a Swedish context targeting early-career professionals, and responses (N = 180) were analyzed using multiple regression and mediation analysis (via PROCESS macro, Model 4). The results show that VIMI significantly predicts motivational force, which fully mediates its relationship with job satisfaction. Among the three components of Expectancy Theory, only valence significantly predicted satisfaction, while expectancy and instrumentality were non-significant. This pattern suggests that the subjective value of rewards may play a more central role in shaping satisfaction than belief-based components. The study contributes to motivation theory by clarifying the role of valence and positioning motivational force as a dynamic mechanism linking incentive alignment to job satisfaction. It also introduces VIMI as a practical tool for assessing how well organizational rewards align with employee preferences and foster meaningful motivation.

Keywords: Expectancy Theory, VIE model, Employee motivation, Incentive systems, Job satisfaction

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

What makes an incentive system truly motivating? In a labour market shaped by hybrid work, shifting generational values, and a rising demand for personalization (Yang, 2024), this question has become increasingly difficult to answer. While organisations continue to invest in structured reward systems, employee expectations have shifted beyond conventional compensation frameworks, placing greater value on autonomy, flexibility, and opportunities for development (Yang, 2024; Figueiredo et al. 2025). This evolution has elevated motivation from a psychological concept to a strategic priority. Incentive systems, once seen as peripheral HR tools, are now central to engagement, retention, and long-term organizational viability (Figueiredo et al., 2025; Tarigan et al. 2022).

The urgency of this shift becomes clear when viewed in the context of ongoing labor market instability. Workforce participation remains below pre-pandemic levels, and turnover continues to rise across sectors (McKinsey, 2024). In response, organizations are being compelled to reevaluate long-standing assumptions not only about where and how work gets done, but about how value is created and maintained through the employee relationship (Nemteanu et al., 2021). In this environment, incentives must do more than compensate - they must connect. However, many existing systems continue to follow a top-down approach, prioritizing organizational logic over employee experience (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). As a result, many incentive systems may fail to reflect what employees actually find motivating (Figueiredo et al., 2025).

This misalignment is not abstract. A 2024 U.S survey by PeopleKeep found that only 47% of the respondents felt that their current benefits met their personal needs, and nearly two-thirds identified significant gaps in their reward packages (2024). These findings suggest that many organizations may be investing more in noise than impact, offering incentives that speak but do not resonate.

1.2 Previous Research and Research Gap

Incentive and reward systems have long been recognized as key tools for driving employee performance, satisfaction, and retention (Manzoor et al. 2021). When effectively designed, rewards act as positive reinforcements that not only stimulate performance, but also foster recognition and a sense of accomplishment (Blain et al., 2023). However, much of the existing studies in this field adopt an employer-centric perspective, emphasizing how rewards are structured and what outcomes they are intended to produce. While these elements are important, many studies prioritize these aspects at the expense of understanding how employees perceive, interpret, and internalize the incentive systems meant to motivate them.

Figueiredo et al., (2025), in a review of 61 articles, highlight the fragmented and top-down nature of existing reward research and call for more employee-centred perspectives. Although there is growing recognition that employee expectations are shifting, relatively little empirical research has examined how the perceived relevance of incentives shapes their motivational impact. Most existing models continue to emphasize what organisations offer, rather than how these offerings are received and interpreted by the individuals they are intended to motivate. This gap leaves important questions unanswered about how rewards acquire or lose motivational relevance in the eyes of the employees.

1.3 Research Questions and Purpose

This study aims to deepen the understanding of how incentive systems influence employee motivation and job satisfaction, with a particular focus on the role of perceived alignment between preferred and actual rewards. Defined as the degree of fit between employees' preferred and actual rewards, this concept - referred to as incentive alignment - offers a lens for exploring why some rewards systems succeed while others fail.

Grounded in Vroom's Expectancy Theory (1964), the research investigates how different motivational components - expectancy, instrumentality, and valence - relate to employee satisfaction, and whether perceived incentive alignment influences motivation through these mechanisms. More specifically, the study introduces the Valued Incentives Match Index

(VIMI) to quantify how well an organization's incentive system matches individual preferences.

Adopting an employee-centred lens, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of reward systems, not merely as organizational structures but as psychologically experienced constructs shaped by value congruence. The findings are expected to offer both theoretical insights into motivation models and practical implications for designing more effective incentive strategies.

Accordingly, the following research questions guide this thesis:

1. Do the components of Vroom's Expectancy Theory - expectancy, instrumentality, and valence - significantly predict job satisfaction?
2. Does the alignment between preferred and actual incentive systems (VIMI) significantly predict motivational force?
3. Is the relationship between incentive alignment and job satisfaction mediated by motivational force?

1.4 Delimitations

To ensure feasibility and maintain analytical clarity, this study establishes deliberate boundaries that define its scope and focus. These delimitations are informed by practical and methodological considerations, aiming to ensure that the research remains coherent and aligned with its core objectives.

This thesis specifically investigates preferences for incentive systems and examines the effects of alignment or misalignment between these preferences and actual systems on employee motivation and job satisfaction. To streamline data collection, the study focuses on a predefined list of financial and non-financial incentives.

To address the research questions, a quantitative approach was employed, using a convenience sample within a cross-sectional design. This method was selected for its ability to capture variation across respondents (Bell et al., 2019, p. 58), which is essential for the study's aims. However, this approach inherently limits the generalizability of the findings, but

these trade-offs were accepted to ensure feasibility. Similarly, the geographical focus was limited to Sweden, and data were collected in English between April 2 and April 27, 2025.

The questionnaire was not pretested with a sample from the target population. Instead, its face validity was assessed by a social contact deemed to possess the necessary competence to make such judgements, offering a commonsense interpretation of the scale scores (Malhotra, 2020, p. 304). The absence of a formal pretest may have limited the detection of potential weaknesses in the data collection method.

1.5 Disposition

This thesis is structured into seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the topic, outlines the research gap, formulates the study's purpose and research questions, and clarifies its delimitations. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework, defining key constructs such as motivation and job satisfaction. It draws on Vroom's Expectancy Theory and integrates complementary perspectives, particularly Self-Determination Theory.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological design, including sampling, questionnaire construction, and analytical strategy. It describes the measurement of key constructs, variables, and ethical and validation considerations. Chapter 4 reports the empirical findings. This includes descriptive statistics and the results of regression and mediation analyses testing the study's three hypotheses.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings in light of the theoretical framework and prior research, outlines the study's theoretical contributions, and presents managerial implications. It also addresses limitations and suggestions for future research. Chapter 6 contains the complete list of references, and Chapter 7 includes all appendices.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Conceptualizing Work Motivation

Motivation is a foundational concept in organizational behavior, yet it remains theoretically diverse and variably defined across disciplines (Pinder, 2014). Scholars have advanced a wide array of definitions, shaped by differing theoretical perspectives and level of analysis (Latham & Pinder, 2005). Broadly, motivation refers to the psychological forces - both external and internal, that influence the initiation, direction, and persistence of goal-directed behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Within the workplace context, this is often termed *work motivation,* referring specifically to the processes that determine the direction, intensity, and duration of effort in organizational settings (Pinder, 2014)

This thesis adopts Vroom's Expectancy Theory (1964) as its primary lens for understanding motivation, developed in section 2.5, framing it as the result of cognitive appraisals concerning effort, performance, and the perceived value of outcomes. Noted by Robbins & Judge (2023), Expectancy Theory offers a structured framework for examining how employees' beliefs about effort, performance, and rewards influence their motivation in workplace contexts.

2.2 The Strategic Function of Incentive Systems

Incentive systems are among the most commonly used organizational tools for influencing employee motivation and behavior (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). Ryan & Deci (2018) recognize motivation as a prerequisite for sustained performance, engagement, and innovation in the workplace. Asserted by Latham and Pinder (2005), even highly skilled employees may underperform in its absence. Empirical research shows that motivated individuals are more likely to persist in their efforts, collaborate effectively, and engage in proactive behavior (Steers & Porter, 1991).

According to Akerele (2023), the employee-employer relationship is often conceptualized as a reciprocal exchange, wherein organizations seek productivity and commitment, while employees expect fair compensation, recognition, and opportunities for growth. Incentives function as a bridge in this exchange, intended to align organizational goals with individual motivation (Condly et al., 2003).

Beyond administrative function, reward systems are increasingly viewed as strategic levers for performance and engagement (Figueiredo et al., 2025). According to Armstrong & Taylor (2020), the structure and delivery of incentives shape employee attitudes, fortifying behaviors that contribute to organizational objectives. In this regard, incentive management is not merely a human relations tool but a key element of organizational strategy (Tarigan et al., 2022).

The theoretical foundation for understanding how rewards affect behavior can be traced back to Skinner's (1948) theory of operant conditioning, which posits that behavior is shaped by its consequences, either through reinforcement to encourage repetition or punishment to deter it. Subsequent research has emphasized that the effectiveness of reinforcement depends on the individual's subjective evaluation of the reward (Deci et al., 1999). In this view, incentives that lack personal relevance are less likely to function as effective reinforces, shedding light on the vitality of perceived value in motivational processes.

2.3 Exploring the Motivation-Satisfaction Relationship

While job satisfaction and motivation often are treated as separate constructs in organizational research, some scholars argue that the two are intrinsically linked. Job satisfaction is typically defined as an individual's affective evaluation of their work experience (Weiss, 2002), whereas motivation, discussed in prior sections, concerns the cognitive processes underlying goal-directed effort.

McCormick and Ilgen (1985) suggest that many motivation theories implicitly address job satisfaction, as both constructs involve individuals' interpretations of the value and outcomes associated with their work. This perspective can be related to Vroom's Expectancy Theory

(1964), which conceptualizes motivation as a function of three interdependent components: expectancy, instrumentality, and valence. In this framework, motivation is strongest when employees believe that their effort will lead to performance (expectancy), that performance will result in outcomes (instrumentality), and that those outcomes are personally desirable (valence). Job satisfaction, in turn, according to Vroom (1964), can be understood as an affective arising when these expectations are fulfilled, functioning as a confirmation that effort has resulted in desired and valued outcomes.

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2018) provides further explanatory power by emphasizing that satisfaction is more likely to emerge when motivation is autonomous and supports the fulfillment of basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. From this view, job satisfaction is not merely the result of receiving external rewards, but reflects a deeper psychological alignment between what individuals do and what they value. This complements Vroom's notion of valence by explaining why certain outcomes are more affectively rewarding than others.

At the same time, some scholars have proposed more complex directionalities between the two constructs. Erez and Judge (2001) argue that satisfaction can function as a *starting point* for motivation, particularly in environments where positive emotional states influence employees' willingness to engage with their tasks. Similarly, Brown and Peterson (1993) show that the strength of the motivation-satisfaction relationship is highly contingent on contextual factors such as job design, role clarity, and perceived autonomy. In situations characterized by limited control or poor alignment between individual and organizational goals, motivation may not reliably influence satisfaction, and the other way around. These perspectives do not contradict Vroom's model, but rather underscore that the link between motivation and satisfaction is context-dependent, shaped by both cognitive expectations and broader workplace dynamics.

2.4 The Organizational Importance of Job Satisfaction

While the previous section examined how job satisfaction emerges from motivation, it is also crucial to understand why increasing satisfaction matters for firms. This, in turn, clarifies why organizations should be interested in the drivers of motivation.

The relationship between job satisfaction and job performance has long been a central focus in industrial-organizational psychology. Judge et al. (2001) refer to it as the field's "Holy Grail", noting that interest in this link dates back to its earliest foundations. While early work, such as that of Vroom (1964) questioned that satisfaction directly drives performance, arguing instead that motivation is the more immediate predictor, subsequent research has advanced the question. Acknowledging significant developments in recent years, Judge et al. (2001) revisit the topic and their meta-analysis reveals a stronger and more consistent correlation between satisfaction and performance than previously believed.

Harter et al. (2002) expand on this view, showing that employee satisfaction and engagement are linked to key business indicators such as profitability, productivity, customer loyalty, employee turnover, and workplace safety. This underscores that while satisfaction begins at the individual level, its impact scales across the organization. Obiekwe et al. (2019) fortify this scaling effect, arguing that satisfied employees drive organizational performance and encourage managers to be interested in employee's attitudes. Edmans (2012) offers a further contribution by showing that high levels of employee satisfaction generate superior long-horizon returns, framing it as an intangible asset whose value becomes visible through market-recognized outcomes. While change may take time, the authors encourage managers to invest in job satisfaction, for the long run.

2.5 Vroom's Expectancy Theory of Motivation

Vroom's Expectancy Theory (1964) remains one of the foundational models within the category of process theories of motivation. Unlike content theories, which focus on identifying what motivates individuals (e.g., Maslow's Hierarchy), process theories seek to

explain the cognitive mechanisms through which motivation occurs (Robbins & Judge, 2023).

Expectancy theory conceptualises motivation as a rational and goal-oriented process in which individuals evaluate the relationship between their effort, the performance it produces, and the rewards associated with that performance. The model proposes that motivation results from the interaction of three components: Expectancy (E), Instrumentality (I), and Valence (V), which interact multiplicatively to determine the overall motivational force (Vroom, 1964).

Expectancy (E) refers to an individual's belief that a certain level of effort will result in successful performance. It captures perceptions of self-efficacy and control over one's actions. When expectancy is high, individuals believe their effort will likely result in the desired performance.

Instrumentality (I) denotes the perceived likelihood that a given level of performance will be followed by specific outcomes or rewards. It reflects the strength of the perceived connection between performance and consequences.

Valence (V) is the subjective value or attractiveness of a given outcome to the individual. It is inherently comparative and subjective, defined by an individual's preference ordering among available outcomes. For example, a monetary reward may hold high valence for one employee and low valence for another.

According to the theory, these three components interact multiplicatively to determine motivational force (M), expressed in the simplified formula:

$$M = E \times I \times V$$

M = motivational force, E = expectancy, I = instrumentality, V = valence

The multiplicative interaction among the three components highlights a fundamental premise of the theory, namely, the absence or significant weakness of any single element substantially reduces the overall motivational force. Thus, all three components must be perceived positively for motivation to be sustained (Vroom, 1964).

2.5.1 Reflections on the Modern Applications of Expectancy Theory

The continued relevance of Expectancy Theory lies in its ability to account for individual variation in perceptions, expectations, and value judgements (Latham & Pinder, 2005). However, several scholars caution against treating the theory as a fully comprehensive model of motivation. While its rational structure is analytically useful, it tends to underrepresent emotional, social, and contextual influences that also shape employee engagement (Lloyd & Mertens, 2018). In particular, the theory's emphasis on extrinsic rewards may limit its explanatory power in contexts where intrinsic drivers or relational dynamics dominate.

Relatedly, Pinder (2014) underscores that motivation and performance are not interchangeable constructs. Performance depends not only on effort, but also on ability, environmental conditions, and task clarity. This distinction highlights that components such as expectancy and instrumentality, which hinge on perceived control and organizational clarity, may be more sensitive to contextual variability.

To address these limitations, this study draws on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2018) as a supporting interpretive lens, offering insight into autonomy, competence, and relatedness as drivers of motivation. While the empirical investigation is grounded in Expectancy Theory, and does not operationalize SDT variables directly, its inclusion enables a more nuanced analysis of the potential motivational significance of both financial and non-financial incentives.

2.6 Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Ryan and Deci (2018), is a content-based motivation theory that complements process-oriented models such as Vroom's Expectancy Theory (Gagné & Deci, 2005). While Expectancy Theory emphasizes cognitive evaluations of effort, performance, and outcomes, SDT focuses on the psychological conditions under which motivation becomes internalized and sustained.

At its core, SDT posits that individuals are more likely to engage in and persist with behaviors when three basic psychological needs are satisfied: autonomy (experiencing volition and self-endorsement), competence (feeling effective and capable), and relatedness (feeling socially connected) (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Satisfaction of these needs fosters intrinsic motivation and facilitates the internalization of external goals.

SDT supplements Expectancy Theory in deepening the understanding of the valence component by explaining why certain outcomes are perceived as desirable. When rewards support competence and relatedness, individuals are more likely to internalize their value. However, the fulfillment of autonomy determines whether this internalization becomes self-endorsed (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Thus, even well-intentioned incentives may fail to motivate if they are perceived as controlling.

By distinguishing between autonomous and controlled motivation, SDT introduces a complementary lens that emphasizes the importance of need-supportive environments over purely instrumental incentives. While SDT constructs were not measured in the survey instrument of this study, the theory provides a complementary lens for interpreting how individuals experience and evaluate rewards. Specifically, SDT helps clarify how intrinsic needs shape the perceived value (valence) of different incentives (Gagné & Deci, 2005), introducing a more nuanced account of motivation quality and psychological fulfillment.

2.7 Theoretical Prediction

The present study formulates three theoretical predictions based on Vroom's (1964) Expectancy Theory of Motivation. As outlined in the preceding framework, the model conceptualizes motivation as a function of three interdependent cognitive components: expectancy, instrumentality, and valence. The following predictions correspond to the research questions outlined in Section 1.3 and guide the empirical analysis.

First, it is anticipated that each component of the expectancy model will predict job satisfaction. This expectation is grounded in the theoretical proposition that all three components contribute to employees' cognitive evaluations of whether their work effort results in valued outcomes. Among the three, valence is expected to demonstrate the strongest association, as it directly reflects the subjective value attributed to work-related outcomes.

H1: Expectancy, instrumentality, and valence will each predict job satisfaction, with valence showing the strongest effect.

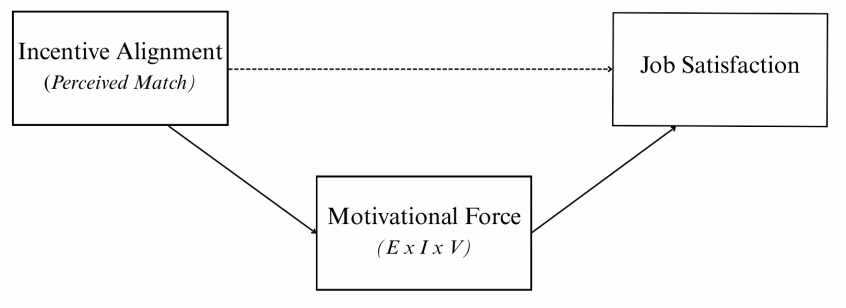
Second, this study posits that incentive alignment, defined as the congruence between an individual's preferred and actual reward systems, will significantly predict motivational force, calculated as the product of the three expectancy components. When rewards align with individual preferences, the anticipated value of outcome (valence) is expected to increase, thereby strengthening the motivational appeal of work-related effort. Accordingly, alignment is expected to function as an antecedent to motivation, enhancing the overall strength of motivational force.

H2: Perceived incentive alignment will significantly predict motivational force, operationalized as the product of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence.

Third, it is hypothesized that motivational force will mediate the relationship between incentive alignment and job satisfaction. Drawing on Expectancy Theory, this implies that alignment influences satisfaction indirectly by increasing motivational force - the internal drive that arises when individuals perceive a clear link between effort, performance, and the attainment of valued outcomes.

H3: Motivational force will mediate the relationship between incentive alignment and job satisfaction.

Figure 1 | Hypothesized mediation model



Note. Solid lines represent the mediated pathway; the dotted line indicates the direct effect of incentive alignment on job satisfaction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In order to gather insights relevant to the research questions, a deductive quantitative research strategy was utilized, where Vroom's Expectancy Theory acts as a set of concerns in relation to the collection of data. The insights were collected using a self-administrated questionnaire

composed of structured questions, following a cross-sectional design. This approach was intended to capture participants' current incentive systems alongside their preferred incentive systems at a specific point in time. The survey was distributed online, since mobile marketing research has potential to reach a broader audience, get faster results, and elicit higher quality response (Malhotra, 2020, p. 44).

Although findings can only be generalized to the population from which the sample is drawn (Bell et al., 2019, p. 177), the goal is to derive broader conclusions about organizational incentive systems rather than limiting the scope to a specific workplace. Cross-sectional surveys enable variation in the chosen variables, and examine patterns of association between these variables without time ordering the variables (Bell et al., 2019, p. 58).

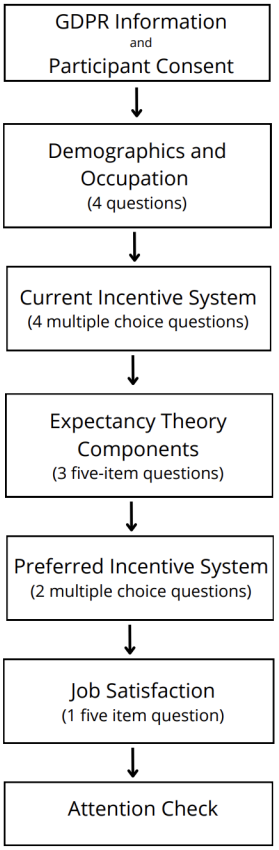
Further, as one crucial part of the study relies on participants' own preferences, it is essential to collect responses in a manner that minimizes bias and outer influences. While qualitative approaches may offer more nuanced insights, the use of self-administered questionnaires in this study helps reduce interviewer effects and social desirability bias (Bell et al., 2019, p. 233).

3.2 Questionnaire Design Process

The survey for this study was guided by Malhotra's Questionnaire Design Process (2020). In accordance with the author, the content of individual questions was developed with attention to necessity and relevance, ensuring each question served a clear purpose. To address potential issues of respondent inability and unwillingness to answer, the questionnaire primarily employed structured questions with clearly defined response options and formats. These included both multiple-choice and scale-based items. Following established best practices, response options were designed to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive, with some allowing for multiple selections where appropriate. This structure enhanced respondent comprehension and facilitated more accurate responses, while also improving data processing efficiency.

Consistently with Malhotra (2020), the wording and sequencing of questions were iteratively refined to reduce potential response bias. The survey began with the demographics, aligning with the author's recommendation to start with simple, non-sensitive questions in order to ease participants into the process. More complex or personal questions were placed in later sections. Regarding form and layout, the questionnaire was divided into clearly defined sections, each with numbered questions to enhance clarity and navigability. The final version consisted of seven blocks comprising a total of sixteen questions, and the structure is illustrated in *Figure 2.* The full questionnaire is available in Appendix A.

Figure 2 | Questionnaire Design



3.4 Sample

The intended target population for this study was newly employed individuals. A non-probability sampling method - specifically, convenience sampling - was used, selecting participants based on accessibility and availability. This approach is commonly applied to improve response rates (Bell et al., 2019, pp. 197-198).

Although generalizing from convenience samples should be done with caution when the sample consists of undergraduate students (Peterson & Merunka, 2014), this method was deemed appropriate. Including students helped access newly employed individuals, many of whom are assumed to be in early career stages.

This sampling choice draws on organizational socialization, which holds that early-stage employees are still learning the attitudes, behavior, and knowledge required to function effectively in the organization (Fang et al. 2010). Cable et al. (2013) note that tension between employees' self-expression and organizational control is especially pronounced when first entering, but can hold up to at least six months before organizational values are internalized. By targeting individuals who have not yet been fully socialized, the study captures perceptions still primarily shaped by personal values. This is particularly important given valence's central role in the theoretical prediction, as valence is inherently subjective.

The survey successfully reached a broad range of early-career workers, with only 12 participants reporting more than five years at their current workplace. However, the final sample was skewed toward white-collar roles (140 out of 180), a distribution that emerged naturally.

3.5 Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey distributed via personal network on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, as well as outreach at the Stockholm School of Economics and Stockholm University. A total of 295 survey responses were initially recorded from the survey, with data collected between April 2 and April 27.

After applying exclusion criteria - including participants who did not complete the survey, failed the attention check question, or completed the survey <1 minute, the sample was reduced to 180 valid responses. All included participants reported current work experience, making them eligible for analysis related to workplace incentives, motivation, and satisfaction.

3.6 Ethical Discussion

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent, in accordance with GDPR and the regulations of the Stockholm School of Economics (SSE). To respect participant autonomy, anonymity was assured and the right to withdraw was emphasized. Incomplete responses were excluded to uphold data integrity.

3.7 Measures

In this study, Vroom's conceptual framework has been adapted to fit the research context where *i* represents the effort invested in one's current work role, and *j* refers to a range of valued work-related outcomes, including both financial and non-financial incentives as described in the questionnaire.

3.7.1 Expectancy

The expectancy that effort on behavior *i* will lead to outcome *j*, was measured with 5 items. Respondents were asked "Finally, continuing with your thoughts about your workplace, please rate the following statements on a scale of (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree), followed by:

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(1) I believe that if I put in more effort at work, I will achieve higher performance.
(2) I have the necessary resources and support to perform well in my role.
(3) My training has prepared me to succeed in my position.

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(4) My performance goals and expectations are clearly communicated to me.
(5) My workload allows me to perform at my best.

3.7.2 Instrumentality

The instrumentality of behavior *i* leading to any outcome was measured with 5 items. Respondents were asked "Now, still reflecting on your workplace, please rate the following statements on a scale of (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree), followed by:

(1) I believe that my performance is fairly evaluated by my manager.
(2) I trust that high performance will result in recognition or reward.
(3) At my workplace, high-performing employees are given better career opportunities.
(4) Career advancements at my workplace are based on performance rather than how long an employee has been with the company.
(5) I see a clear connection between my performance and the rewards I receive.

3.7.3 Valence

The valence or subjective value assigned to outcome *j* (Vroom, 1964), was measured with 5 items. Respondents were asked "Thinking about your current workplace, please rate the following statements on a scale of (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree)", followed by:

(1) The incentives offered at my workplace motivate me to perform better.
(2) Receiving a different type of incentive (than what I have today) would increase my motivation.
(3) The rewards I receive at work align with what I personally value.
(4) The rewards at my workplace encourage me to stay committed to my role.
(5) The rewards offered at my workplace meet my expectations.

3.7.4 Job Satisfaction

To measure job satisfaction, the "work itself" facet from the Facet Satisfaction Scale (FSS) developed by Bowling et al. (2018) was used. This scale was considered appropriate for the selected research questions, as it effectively captures the affective components of job satisfaction. In agreement with the authors, the respondents in this study were asked to rate statements on a scale of (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree). The statements were as follows:

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(1) Overall, I am very pleased with the types of activities that I do on my job.
(2) I would be more content with my job if I were doing tasks that are different from the ones I do now. *(reverse-scored)*
(3) I am more satisfied with the types of work I currently do than with almost any other work I have ever done.
(4) All in all, I am very satisfied with the things I do at work.
(5) All in all, I would rather have some other kind of duties in my work. *(reverse-scored)*

3.8 Reliability and Validity

3.8.1 Measurement of Expectancy Theory Components

Given the lack of existing validated instruments connecting Vroom's Expectancy Theory to incentive systems, the measures used in this study were developed specifically for this research. Bell et al. (2019, p. 169) emphasize that when developing multiple-indicator measures, the dimensions of a concept should be defined based on theory and research associated with that concept. Accordingly, all items used to measure the components were carefully designed to ensure conceptual alignment with the Expectancy Theory framework.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each of the three components - expectancy, instrumentality, and valence. All items exceeded the accepted threshold, indicating satisfactory internal consistency reliability (Bell et al., 2019, p. 173). For an overview of all questionnaire constructs and their internal reliability, see Appendix B. These results support the use of mean composite indices for each construct in the subsequent analyses. Notably, the valence scale included a reverse-coded item to encourage thoughtful responses and enhance validity, particularly important given valence's central role in the theoretical prediction.

To assess validity, intercorrelations among the Expectancy Theory components were examined. Evidence of convergent validity was found through significant correlations. Additionally, the correlations among the constructs were not so high to suggest they do not make a unique contribution, thereby supporting discriminant validity (Malhotra, 2020, p. 702). These findings support the theoretical distinctiveness of each VIE component while affirming their conceptual relatedness within the expectancy framework. For an overview of intercorrelations, see Appendix C.

3.8.2 Measurement of Job Satisfaction

The items used to measure job satisfaction is derived from the "work itself" facet of the Facet Satisfaction Scale (FSS), which measurement qualities have been examined by Bowling et al. (2018). The authors demonstrate that this subscale is a reliable measure of job satisfaction related to the nature of the work performed, with strong internal consistency. Although this scale is well established, Cronbach's alpha was also calculated on this study's sample to confirm internal consistency, and the resulting alpha exceeds the accepted threshold (see Appendix C). Thus, the result supports the use of the FSS as a valid measure of job satisfaction.

3.9 Data Analysis

3.9.1 Computation of Valued Incentive Match Index (VIMI)

To quantify the degree of alignment between employee's preferred and actually received incentives, a Valued Incentive Match Index (VIMI) was constructed. This index captures how well an individual's most valued incentives are represented in their current workplace offering, assigning higher weights to more preferred incentives. The score is computed using the following formula:

$$VIMI_i = \sum_{j=} = 1^{n}(Offered_{i\,j} \times (k + 1 - Rank_{i\,j}))$$

j = incentive type, i = individual

In practice, current incentive systems were captured through a multiple-choice question, where participants selected which incentives were currently provided in their workplace. These selections were then binary-coded for each incentive type (1 = offered, 0 = not offered). Continuously, personal preferences were measured by asking participants to rank the same set of incentives based on how valuable they found them. These rankings were reverse-coded, so that higher preferences received higher numerical weights - i.e., the top-ranked incentive received a weight of *k,* the second *k* - 1, and so forth.

The theoretical range of the VIMI score extends from 0 to 25. A score of 0 indicates no alignment, meaning that none of the respondent's preferred incentives are currently offered. In contrast, a score of 25 represents a perfect alignment, meaning that all of the respondents' most valued incentives are currently offered at their workplace. Lastly, it is important to note that the match score reflects positive alignment only, meaning it awards points only when incentive is both offered and valued. This approach emphasizes the motivational importance of receiving personally meaningful incentives, aligning with the motivational logic of Vroom's expectancy theory.

3.9.2 Computation of Total Motivational Force

Based on the components scores described in the measures section, three continuous variables were created in SPSS Statistics (version 30) to represent expectancy, instrumentality, and valence. Each score was computed as the mean of the respondents responses on the 5 item scale, ranging from 1 to 7 depending on the extent of agreement. A higher mean score in expectancy reflects a stronger belief that increased effort will lead to improved performance. Similarly, a higher score in instrumentality indicates a stronger belief that high performance will be rewarded. Finally, a higher valence score suggests that the respondent places significant value on the rewards offered by their workplace.

To compute the total motivational force, these three components scores were multiplied together, in line with Vroom's multiplicative model.

$$Total\ Motivational\ Force\ (Force_{\mathrm{i}}) = Expectancy_{\mathrm{i}} \times Instrumentality_{\mathrm{i}} \times Valence_{\mathrm{i}}$$

i = individual

Based on this formula and the scale range, the theoretical minimum motivation force score is 1, and the maximum is 343.

3.9.3 Regression and Mediation Analysis

To empirically evaluate the hypotheses formulated in section 2.3, a structured statistical analysis was employed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 30) and the PROCESS macro (Model 4) developed by Hayes (2022). The analytical strategy consisted of multiple linear regressions and mediation analysis.

- Hypothesis 1: Component-wise Prediction of Job Satisfaction

To test hypothesis 1 - that expectancy, instrumentality, and valence would each positively predict job satisfaction, with valence exerting the strongest effect - a simultaneous multiple regression model was estimated. The three expectancy components were entered as independent variables, and job satisfaction (measured via a multi-item Likert scale) was specified as the outcome variable. This analytic strategy enabled assessment of the unique and relative contribution of each component to the variance in satisfaction, consistent with the additive interpretation of motivational predictors in the expectancy framework.

- Hypothesis 2: Incentive Alignment as a Predictor of Motivational Force

To test hypothesis 2 - that incentive alignment would significantly predict motivational force - a simple linear regression was conducted. Incentive alignment was operationalized via the Valued Incentive Match Index (VIMI), which quantifies the degree of congruence between employees' preferred and actual incentive structures. Motivational force was computed as the multiplicative product of the three expectancy components (i.e., E x I x V), in accordance with Vroom's (1964) formal model. The regression model assessed whether higher levels of alignment were associated with stronger motivational force.

- Hypothesis 3: Mediating Role of Motivational Force

To test hypothesis 3 - that motivational force mediates the relationship between incentive alignment and job satisfaction - a mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS macro (Model 4). In this model, VIMI was specified as the independent variable (X), motivational force as the mediator (M), and job satisfaction as the dependent variable (Y). The indirect effect was estimated using 5,000 bootstrapped samples, and mediation was considered present if the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero. This procedure enabled evaluation of whether the influence of alignment on satisfaction operates indirectly through motivational processes, consistent with the expectancy-theoretic mechanism

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

4.1.1 Variables of Interest

Descriptive statistics for the main study variables are shown in *Table 1*. Participants reported moderately high expectancy (M = 5.14, SD = 1.27), instrumentality (M = 4.74, SD = 1.35), and valence (M = 4.17, SD = 1.32). The calculated motivational force had a mean of 114.66 (SD = 72.09). Job satisfaction averaged M = 4.39, (SD = 1.16). The Valued Incentives Match Index (VIMI) showed a mean of 9.09 (SD = 6.00). Intercorrelations among these variables are reported in Appendix D.

Table 1 | Descriptive statistics for key variables

Variable	**Mean**	**SD**
Expectancy index	5.14	1.27
Instrumentality index	4.74	1.35
Valence index	4.17	1.32
Motivational force	114.66	72.09
Satisfaction index	4.39	1.16
VIMI	9.09	6.00

4.1.2 Insights from Incentive Alignment

Table 2 summarizes the most preferred financial and non-financial incentives, their availability, the proportion of respondents who both prefer and receive each incentive, and their standardized contribution (β) to the Valued Incentive Match Index (VIMI) based on multiple linear regression. Salary increases were the most preferred financial incentive (73.9%), followed by performance bonuses (19.4%). However, only 45.0% of participants both preferred and received salary increases. Among non-financial incentives, career

development and flexibility ranked highest, yet match rates remained relatively low. Salary increases (β =.506) and career development opportunities (β = .432) were the strongest predictors of VIMI. All included match variables were statistically significant predictors of VIMI at the $p < .001$ level. The retention bonus was excluded from the regression model predicting VIMI due to low preference frequency (1.7%), and insufficient variance.

Table 2 | Incentive preferences, availability, match rates, and contribution to VIMI

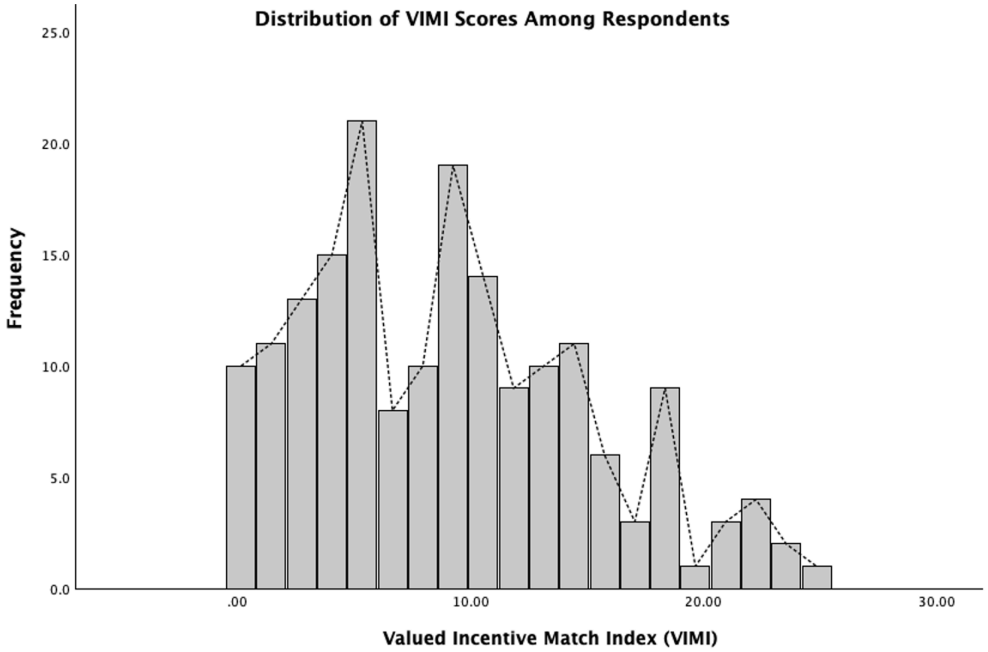
		Financial Incentives overview		
Incentive	% Ranked as #1 Preference	% Receive it	% Match (Prefers and Receives)	Contribution to VIMI (β)
Salary Increases	73.9	54.4	45.0	0.506
Performance Bonus	19.4	30.0	8.3	0.207
Commision-Based Pay	5.0	12.8	6.7	0.215
Retention Bonus	1.7	10	5.6	-
		Non-Financial Incentives overview		
Incentive	% Ranked as #1 Preference	% Receive it	% Match (Prefers and Receives)	Contribution to VIMI (β)
Career Development	32.8	30.6	3.3	0.432
Flexibility	29.4	45.0	10	0.270
Recognition	15.6	25.6	7.2	0.257
Job Security	14.4	27.8	3.9	0.158

Workplace culture	7.8	47.8	11.7	0.228

4.1.3 Distribution of VIMI Scores

A histogram for VIMI-scores (*Figure 3*) illustrates a right-skewed distribution, indicating that while some participants report high alignment between their preferred and received incentives, a larger portion of the sample reported moderate to low alignment between preferred and received incentives. The average VIMI score of 9.09 (SD = 5.99, N = 180), suggests substantial variation in how well workplace incentives reflect individual motivational preferences.

Figure 3 | Distribution of Valued Incentives Match Index (VIMI) scores



4.1.4 Exploratory Analysis

To examine the distinct role of perceived alignment, a supplementary regression was tested whether the total number of received incentives predicted motivational force. Results showed no significant relationship (β = .036, p = .630), suggesting that the quantity of rewards offered is insufficient to explain variation in motivation. Full output is presented in Appendix E.

4.2 Testing the Hypothesized Relationships

This section presents the results for Hypotheses 1 to 3 and addresses the study's three research questions. First, it examines whether the components of Vroom's Expectancy Theory - expectancy, instrumentality, and valence - predict job satisfaction (H1/RQ1). It then tests whether perceived incentive alignment (VIMI) predicts motivational force (H2/RQ2), and finally, whether motivational force mediates the relationship between VIMI and job satisfaction (H3/RQ3).

Statistical significance was assessed at the conventional threshold of $p < .05$ throughout the analyses (Bell et al., 2019, p. 328).

4.2.1 Testing H1

To test Hypothesis 1, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether the three components of Vroom's Expectancy Theory - expectancy, instrumentality, and valence - significantly predict job satisfaction, while controlling for age, gender, job type and tenure (*Table 3)*. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(7, 172) = 12.29$, $p < .001$, and accounted for approximately 30.6% of the variance in job satisfaction (Adjusted $R^2 = .306$).

Among the expectancy theory components, only valence emerged as a statistically significant predictor of job satisfaction (β = .424, p < .001). Neither expectancy (β = .131, $p = .102$) nor instrumentality (β = .102, $p = .308$) reached statistical significance.

Table 3 | Regression model predicting job satisfaction from expectancy, instrumentality, and valence

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
Valence index	0.374	0.074	.424	5.049	<.001
Expectancy index	0.120	0.073	.131	1.645	.102
Instrumentality index	0.088	0.086	.102	1.022	.308
Age	0.164	0.099	.113	1.655	.100
Gender	0.014	0.147	.006	0.095	.925
Job type	-0.197	0.187	-.071	-1.054	.293
Tenure at current workplace	0.098	0.065	.107	1.509	.133

The results offer partial support for Hypothesis 1. As shown in the regression analysis, valence was a significant and strong predictor of job satisfaction, consistent with its theorized role as the most proximal determinant of affective outcomes. In contrast, expectancy and instrumentality did not reach statistical significance when included in the model.

To verify the stability of regression coefficients, multicollinearity diagnostics were conducted. All Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were below 2.5 and tolerance values above 0.4, indicating that multicollinearity was within acceptable limits (Field, 2024, p. 441). Full diagnostics are reported in Appendix F.

H1: Expectancy, instrumentality, and valence will each predict job satisfaction, with valence showing the strongest effect.

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4.2.2 Testing H2 and H3

To evaluate Hypotheses 2 and 3, a mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes's (2022) PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals. The analysis tested whether motivational force mediates the relationship between perceived incentive alignment (VIMI) and job satisfaction. Results are presented in *Table 4* and *Figure 4*.

The analysis revealed that VIMI significantly predicted motivational force (B = 3.76, p <.001), and that motivational force, in turn, significantly predicted job satisfaction (B = 0.0092, p< .001). The direct effect of VIMI on job satisfaction was not statistically significant (B = -0.01, p = .452), indicating that the effect of VIMI on job satisfaction was fully mediated by motivational force. The indirect effect of VIMI on job satisfaction via motivational force was significant (B = 0.0346, 95% CI [0.0164, 0.0551]).

Table 4 | Mediation analysis of motivational force on the relationship between VIMI and job satisfaction

Path	**Effect (B)**	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**95% CI (LLCI, ULCI)**
a. VIMI → **Force**	3.76	0.87	4.35	<.001	[2.05, 5.47]
b. Force → **Satisfaction**	0.0092	0.0011	8.31	<.001	[0.0070, 0.0114]
c': VIMI → **Satisfaction (Direct effect)**	-0.01	0.013	-0.75	.452	[-0.0363, 0.0162
a x b: Indirect effect (VIMI → **Force → Satisfaction)**	0.0346	0.0099	-	-	[0.0164, 0.0551]

The results provide statistical support for Hypothesis 2, confirming that perceived incentive alignment significantly predicts motivational force. Participants who reported a stronger match between preferred and actual incentives (as measured by VIMI) also reported a higher motivational force, operationalized as the product of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence.

H2: Perceived incentive alignment will significantly predict motivational force, operationalized as the product of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence.

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The results also provide statistical support for Hypothesis 3, demonstrating that motivational force fully mediates the relationship between VIMI and job satisfaction. This suggests that incentive alignment influences satisfaction primarily through its impact on employee motivation.

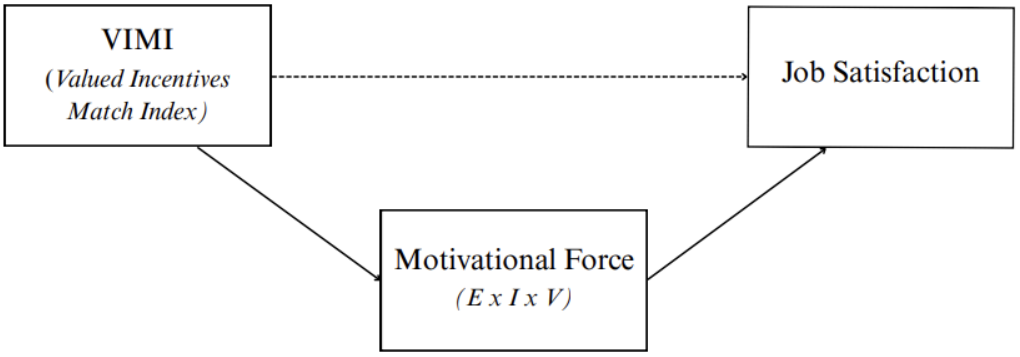
H3: Motivational force will mediate the relationship between incentive alignment and job satisfaction.

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4.2.3 Mediation Summary and Illustration

Taken together, the findings offer empirical support for the proposed theoretical framework. The results indicate that the perceived alignment between preferred and actual incentives enhances motivational force, which in turn drives job satisfaction. Although VIMI initially had a small direct effect on satisfaction, this effect disappeared when motivational force was accounted for, confirming it as the key mechanism.

Figure 4 | Mediation model of the relationship between incentive alignment (VIMI), motivational force, and job satisfaction



The statistical mediation model illustrates the relationship between VIMI, motivational force, and job satisfaction. The pathway from VIMI to motivational force was significant, as was the path from motivational force to job satisfaction. The direct path from VIMI to job satisfaction, however, became non-significant when motivational force was included in the model, indicating full mediation.

5. Discussion

5.1 Revisiting the Research Questions

This study aimed to explore how perceived alignment between preferred and actual incentive systems affect employee motivation and job satisfaction, using Vroom's Expectancy theory. To contextualize the findings, it is useful to revisit the research questions that guided this study. Specifically, the study aimed to answer (1) if the components of Vroom's Expectancy Theory - expectancy, instrumentality, and valence - significantly predict job satisfaction, (2) if the alignment between preferred and actual incentive system (VIMI) significantly predict motivational force, and lastly (3) if the relationship between incentive alignment and job satisfaction will be mediated by motivational force.

5.2 Summary of Main Findings

Hypothesis 1 predicted that each of the Expectancy Theory components - expectancy, instrumentality, and valence, would positively predict job satisfaction, with valence having the strongest effect. The regression analysis provided partial support for this hypothesis. While all three components were theorized to play a role in shaping satisfaction, only valence emerged as a statistically significant predictor when all variables were included in the same model. This indicates that it is the perceived value of rewards themselves that has the strongest and most distinct influence on job satisfaction.

Considering hypothesis 2, results confirmed a significant positive relationship between VIMI and motivational force, meaning that employees who experience stronger match between their preferred and received incentives are more motivated. This highlights the practical and psychological significance of personalized reward design. Descriptive data on incentive preferences also reveals that mismatches between preferred and received incentives are relatively common, suggesting that standardized reward systems may fail to resonate with many employees. Lastly, regarding hypothesis 3, the mediation analysis provided evidence of full mediation. The relationship between VIMI and job satisfaction was explained entirely through motivational force. Incentive alignment did not have a direct effect on job satisfaction once the motivational force was included in the model.

In practical terms, the findings suggest a sequential pathway. Satisfaction is not a product of rewards alone, but of rewards that matter. Employees are not satisfied simply because incentives exist - they are satisfied when those incentives feel personally meaningful. This is where VIMI proves essential. It captures whether the right incentives are offered. And when that alignment is achieved, it amplifies motivational force, which becomes the mechanism that drives job satisfaction.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

5.3.1 Incentive Alignment as a Theoretical Construct

Aiming to contribute to the field of organizational psychology, this study offers theoretical advancements within the scope of Vroom's Expectancy Theory. While the theory has long been recognized for its explanatory power in linking effort, performance, and outcomes (Robbins & Judge, 2023), it has been critiqued for underspecifying how valence is psychologically constructed (Erez & Judge, 2001), and motivational force remains an underexplored mediating mechanism in empirical research.

A central contribution of this thesis is the development and validation of the Valued Incentive Match Index (VIMI). While Vroom's model includes valence to account for subjective reward desirability, it does not explain how that desirability is formed. By measuring alignment directly, VIMI adds conceptual clarity to the valence component of Expectancy Theory and introduces a concrete way to assess the psychological resonance of incentives.

The observed significant relationship between VIMI and motivational force suggests that aligned rewards actively drive motivational energy, affirming the importance of value congruence within motivational models. This interpretation is further supported by Deci et al. (1999), who argue, drawing on operant conditioning, that reinforcement strengthens behavior only when the consequence is personally valued. In this context, VIMI serves as a proxy for the extent to which incentives are likely to function as effective reinforcers, and thereby as meaningful drivers of motivation.

5.3.2 Empirically Validating Motivational Force as a Mediator

The mediation analysis extends the theoretical implications of VIMI by revealing how incentive alignment exerts itself through motivation. VIMI only translates into higher job satisfaction when it activates motivational force. In other words, alignment alone is not sufficient. This finding is reinforced by the exploratory regression (Appendix E), which showed that the total number of received incentives did not significantly predict motivational

force. This finding underscores the idea that it is not the quantity of incentives, but their perceived relevance, that drives motivation.

This pattern aligns with Vroom's foundational premise that motivation connects expectations to outcomes (1964). However, the findings in this study challenge the common empirical practice of treating motivational force as a static output. It implies that motivational force serves as an internal engine translating structural inputs into observable consequences. In this sense, motivation is not the endpoint; it is the mechanism through which aligned incentives become psychologically meaningful and behaviorally effective.

5.3.3 Contextualising Valence

The regression results further underscore valence as a critical component. As the only Expectancy Theory component that significantly predicted job satisfaction, valence reaffirms the centrality of subjective value. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2018) provides a complementary lens to interpret this finding. According to SDT, rewards may energize behavior to the extent that they are delivered in ways that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In this context, a high VIMI-score may indicate not only a match between preferences and offerings, but also a greater likelihood that rewards are perceived as psychologically meaningful.

These results also lend support to theoretical perspectives that call for a broader understanding of motivation beyond rational calculation. Lloyd and Mertens (2018), for example, argue that traditional expectancy models underplay emotional and contextual influences. In a related vein, Pinder (2014) emphasizes that motivation and performance are distinct constructs, cautioning that performance is shaped not only by motivational force but also by ability, environmental conditions, and task clarity. This distinction may help explain why expectancy and instrumentality, which are rooted in perceived control and clarity, are more vulnerable to contextual variability than valence.

A similar insight is offered by Self-Determination Theory, which holds that unclear effort-outcome linkages can undermine employees' sense of effectiveness, thereby frustrating the basic psychological need for competence (Ryan and Deci, 2018). Taken together, these perspectives help explain why valence may have played a more central role in this study. In certain organizational contexts, particularly among early-career employees who experience less feedback and task transparency, valence may exert a compensatory effect. This could help sustain motivation and job satisfaction even when beliefs about effort and reward linkages are less predictive.

Accordingly, VIMI can be viewed as an operational extension of valence, capturing the alignment between organizational rewards and individual motivational priorities. Rather than simply cataloguing what is offered, it captures how incentives are experienced, positioning VIMI as a practical and theoretical bridge between structural design and motivational impact. VIMI therefore gives empirical shape to the abstract concept of valence, offering a method for assessing its presence and strength in real-world settings.

5.4 Managerial Implications

5.4.1 Recurring Assessments of Incentive Preferences

Positioned within the field of organizational psychology, this study offers not only theoretical contributions but also practical relevance for human resource management and organizational leaders. The interpretation of incentive alignments' effect on motivational force and its mediating role in job satisfaction informs how incentive systems can be more effectively designed and managed. As discussed in Section 1.1, today's labour market is shaped by hybrid work, shifting values, and an increasing demand for personalization (Yang, 2024). In response, Figueiredo et al. (2025) call for more employee-centered approaches, warning that without them, incentive systems risk failing to capture what truly motivates employees.

The findings of this study support this concern. The variation in VIMI scores (*Figure 3*) indicates that many employees do not experience a strong match between the rewards they value and those they receive. To address this gap, organizations should implement recurring

assessments to systematically track employee preferences. These do not need to be resource-intensive but should capture both subjective importance of rewards (valence) and incentive alignment. By integrating such feedback loops, organizations can better pace evolving employee expectations.

At present, many organizations still rely on top-down approaches to incentive design, overlooking the employee experience (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). These assessments, however, ensure employees are included in shaping the system, and, making it more likely that they will experience increased motivation.

5.4.2 Clarify the Path to Rewards

Alignment alone is insufficient if employees do not understand how rewards can be attained. Even desirable incentives may fail to motivate when the connection between effort, performance, and outcomes is unclear. This was evident in the results, with valence being the only significant predictor of job satisfaction. Although this does not imply that respondents rated the belief-based components low, it suggests that, within this sample, they had limited influence on satisfaction.

One plausible explanation is that when reward systems are ambiguously communicated or inconsistently applied, these beliefs lose predictive power. This echoes the concern raised in the background, that many organizations may be investing more in noise than impact, offering incentives that sound effective on paper but are not clearly understood or meaningfully structured.

To address this, organizations must prioritize transparency in how reward systems operate. Managers play a central role by communicating expectations, performance criteria, and how these link to incentives. Strengthening this transparency not only supports the expectancy and instrumentality components of motivation, but also enhances perceptions of fairness and competence, defined as two predictors of satisfaction emphasized in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2018).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that implementing assessments and promoting transparency involves certain risks. Assessments must be carefully designed to avoid survey fatigue and oversimplified snapshots of dynamic preferences. Similarly, transparency requires balance. Overemphasizing what is measurable may crowd out other important but less tangible contributions. These risks do not undermine the value of alignment or clarity, but they highlight the need for thoughtful execution. As asserted by Ryan & Deci (2018), motivation depends not only on the structural design, but on how individuals perceive and internalize the systems around them.

5.4.3 The Element of Choice

To accommodate the diversity in what employees find valuable, organizations should adopt modular or customizable reward systems that allow individuals to select from a portfolio of benefits. By giving employees some degree of choice, organizations can increase the likelihood that the offers will carry high valence. This approach aligns with principles from Self-Determination Theory, which posits that motivation and wellbeing are enhanced when individuals experience autonomy and psychological ownership over outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Involving employees in the design or selection of their reward structures, such as enabling them to choose between monetary bonuses, flexible scheduling, or career development resources - support these autonomy needs. In turn, this sense of volition can strengthen the affective value of rewards, increasing their motivation and satisfaction-inducing effects.

Organizations might operationalize this by offering flexible benefit menus, or creating opt-in recognition and reward schemes tailored to different perspectives. By building the element of choice into the reward process, organizations not only enhance perceived value but also intensify the motivational mechanisms identified in both Expectancy Theory and Self-Determination Theory. Implementing such assessments would represent a shift from the top-down approach still prevalent in many organizations, where incentive systems are shaped more by organizational logic over employee experience (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020).

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

5.5.1 Methodological and Sample Limitations

The study adopted a quantitative approach, utilizing a convenience sample within a cross-sectional design. Whilst this methodology captures variation across respondents, this approach limits the generalizability of the findings by restricting the conclusions to the specific group of participants surveyed, and to the particular time frame during which data was collected (Bell et al., 2019, pp. 58, 198). Thus, the result cannot say certainly that incentive alignment causes motivation, only that they were associated at this point in time. Additionally, while the model assumes that incentive alignment influences motivation, which in turn influences job satisfaction, this directional assumption reflects the theoretical lens applied rather than a tested casual sequence. It is possible that satisfaction could also reinforce motivation, or that the relationship between these constructs is reciprocal. Future research using longitudinal or experimental methods could further explore these dynamics and provide a more nuanced understanding of how motivational processes unfold over time.

In addition to design-related limitations, the characteristics of the sample population place boundaries on the applicability of the results. Specifically, the sample consisted predominantly of white-collar workers. As a result, conclusions regarding the impact of valence and the mediating role of motivational force on job satisfaction should only be interpreted within this occupational context. Future research should therefore investigate whether these relationships hold in blue-collar settings as well. Such exploration would contribute to being able to compare the mediating role of motivational force across both occupational groups.

Additionally, the survey targeted newly employed individuals. This focus limits the applicability of the findings to later career stages, where motivational drivers may differ. Future research should examine whether the observed relationships persist in mid- and late-career professionals to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how incentive alignment operates over time.

5.5.2 Conceptual and Measurement Limitations

One conceptual limitation concerns the use of Self-Determination Theory as a supporting framework. Although SDT helped interpret the findings, its core constructs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness - were not directly measured in the study. This limits the ability to empirically evaluate the theory's role in the observed relationships. Future research could incorporate validated SDT scales to more systematically assess how psychological need satisfaction interacts with incentive alignment and motivation.

Further, the VIMI developed in this study was designed to address the research questions posed and to quantify alignment by awarding points when an incentive is both valued and offered. Higher-ranked incentives receive higher weights and thus contribute to more points. Because the offered variable is binary, any incentive not provided contributes zero points regardless of its preference weight. As a result, VIMI captures only positive alignment and ignores misalignments, such as incentives that are highly valued but not offered, or those offered but not valued. Therefore, in its current form, the VIMI score does not penalize or differentiate between the mismatches, and thus does not disentangle which type of misalignment that occurs.

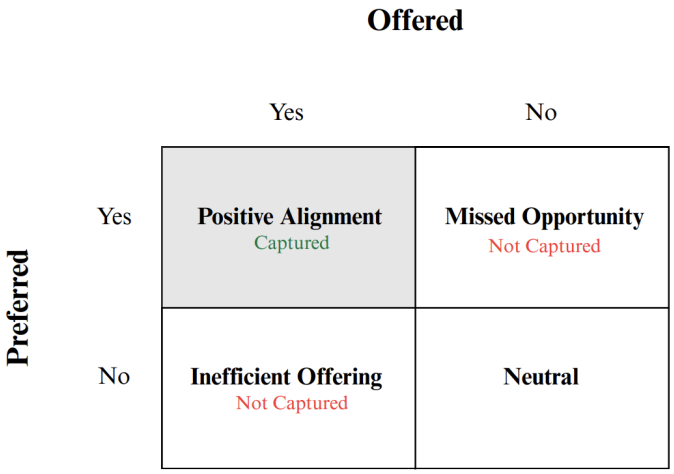
A further conceptual limitation is that the VIMI score may inadvertently reflect differences in actual job performance rather than the actual psychological alignment. Currently, if a participant values an incentive and it is offered, this is counted as alignment in the VIMI calculation. However, the absence of a valued incentive may not signal misalignment but rather indicate that the individual has not met the performance thresholds required to merit that reward. Consequently, the measure may conflate lack of incentive alignment with the consequences of underperformance or career stage.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating actual performance data and extending VIMI beyond its current scope. In this study, VIMI only captures positive alignment and does not test for misalignments. However, future research could fill the gap that was left in this study, and disentangle between misalignments and count for the most

critical ones. For conceptual illustration, the Incentive Alignment Matrix (*Figure 5*) was developed to clarify what VIMI currently captures and to map out additional alignment states worthy of investigation, although these were beyond the scope of the present study.

Conceptually, these misalignments can be categorized as missed opportunities, inefficient offering, and neutral states. Expanding VIMI in this direction would provide sharper guidance for incentive system design, empowering organizations to deliver rewards that align with individuals values, and that are truly motivating.

Figure 5 | Incentive Alignment Matrix



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7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix A: Full questionnaire

GDPR

This survey is conducted in accordance with GDPR regulations. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw your consent at any time by closing the window. If you choose to withdraw, your data will be permanently erased.

All responses provided in the survey will remain strictly confidential. They will only be accessible to supervisors, tutors, and the course management team. The thesis written by the students will not contain any identifying information about you as a participant.

All data will be securely stored and processed by the Stockholm School of Economics and will be permanently deleted once the project is completed. For more information about your rights regarding personal data, please visit https://www.hhs.se/en/about-us/contact/data-protection/.

By selecting 'I consent', you confirm that you have read the above information and agree to take part in the study.

- ☐ I consent

Q1: What is your age?

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54

- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65+

Q2: What gender do you identify with?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Q3: How long have you been at your current workplace?

- ☐ Less than 6 months
- ☐ 6-12 months
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ 3-5 years
- ☐ More than 5 years

Q4: What type of work do you primarily do in your current job?

- ☐ White-collar (e.g., Corporate & Management Roles, Finance & Accounting, Technology & IT, Marketing & Communications, Healthcare)
- ☐ Blue-collar (e.g., Manufacturing & Production, Maintenance & Repair, Transportation & Logistics, Hospitality & Food Service)

Q5: Which financial incentives does your workplace currently offer?

- ☐ Salary increases (e.g., pay raises)
- ☐ Performance-based bonuses (e.g., end-of-year bonus, productivity bonus)
- ☐ Commission-based pay (e.g., sales commissions, performance-based earnings)
- ☐ Retention bonuses (e.g., bonuses for staying with the company for a set period)

☐ None of the above

Q6: What is your financial incentive mostly based on?

☐ My own performance
☐ My team’s performance
☐ A mix of both
☐ I do not receive financial incentives

Q7: Which non-financial incentives does your workplace currently offer?

☐ Recognition (e.g., "Employee of the Month", praise from managers)
☐ Career development (e.g., mentorship programs, leadership training)
☐ Flexible work (e.g., flexible hours, compressed work weeks)
☐ Job security (e.g., long-term contract)
☐ Workplace culture (e.g., team-building events, company social activities)
☐ None of the above

Q8: What is your non-financial incentive mostly based on?

☐ My own performance
☐ My teams’ performance
☐ A mix of both
☐ I do not receive non-financial incentives

Q9: Thinking about your current workplace, please rate the following statements on a scale of (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree)

☐ I believe that if I put in more effort at work, I will achieve higher performance.
☐ I have the necessary resources and support to perform well in my role.

- ☐ My training has prepared me to succeed in my position.
- ☐ My performance goals and expectations are clearly communicated to me.
- ☐ My workload allows me to perform at my best.

Q10: Now, still reflecting on your workplace, please rate the following statements on a scale of (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree)

- ☐ I believe that my performance is fairly evaluated by my manager.
- ☐ I trust that high performance will result in recognition or reward.
- ☐ At my workplace, high-performing employees are given better career opportunities.
- ☐ Career advancements at my workplace are based on performance rather than how long an employee has been with the company.
- ☐ I see a clear connection between my performance and the rewards I receive.

Q11: Finally, continuing with your thoughts about your workplace, please rate the following statements on a scale of (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree)

- ☐ The incentives offered at my workplace motivate me to perform better.
- ☐ Receiving a different type of incentive (than what I have today) would increase my motivation.
- ☐ The rewards I receive at work align with what I personally value.
- ☐ The rewards at my workplace encourage me to stay committed to my role.
- ☐ The rewards offered at my workplace meet my expectations.

Q12: Imagine you could freely choose how your work performance is rewarded. Please rank the following financial incentive systems in order of your personal preference, from most (1) to least preferred (4).

- ☐ Salary increases (e.g., pay raises)
- ☐ Performance-based bonuses (e.g., end-of-year bonus, productivity bonus)
- ☐ Commission-based pay (e.g., sales commissions, performance-based earnings)

- ☐ Retention bonuses (e.g., bonuses for staying with the company for a set period)

Q13: Imagine you could freely choose how your work performance is rewarded. Please rank the following non-financial incentive systems in order of your personal preference, from most (1) to least preferred (4).

- ☐ Recognition (e.g., "Employee of the Month", praise from managers)
- ☐ Career development (e.g., mentorship programs, leadership training)
- ☐ Flexible work (e.g., flexible hours, compressed work weeks)
- ☐ Job security (e.g., long-term contract)
- ☐ Workplace culture (e.g., team-building events, company social activities)

Q14: Please rate the following statements on a scale of (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree)

- ☐ Overall, I am very pleased with the types of activities that I do on my job.
- ☐ I would be more content with my job if I were doing tasks that are different from the ones I do now.
- ☐ I am more satisfied with the types of work I currently do than with almost any other work I have ever done.
- ☐ All in all, I am very satisfied with the things I do at work.
- ☐ All in all, I would rather have some other kind of duties in my work.

Q15: This last question is an attention check. Please choose "Green".

- ☐ Green
- ☐ Blue
- ☐ Red

7.2 Appendix B: Internal reliability for questionnaire measures

Variable	**Items (Q#)**	**Theoretical source**	**No. of items**	**Cronbach's alpha**
Expectancy	Q9	Developed by authors, guided by Vroom's Expectancy Theory (1964)	5	.847
Instrumentality	Q10	Developed by authors, guided by Vroom's Expectancy Theory (1964)	5	.863
Valence	Q11	Developed by authors, guided by Vroom's Expectancy Theory (1964)	5	.820
Job Satisfaction	Q12	Bowling et al. (2018)	5	.771

Note. Full item wording for each construct is provided in Appendix A.

7.3 Appendix C: Intercorrelations between expectancy, instrumentality, and valence

Variable	Expectancy	Instrumentality	Valence
Expectancy index	-	.618**	.411*
Instrumentality index	.618**	-	.668**
Valence index	.411**	.688**	-

Note. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

7.4 Appendix D: Correlation matrix of key variables

Variable	1. Expectancy	2. Instrumentality	3. Satisfaction	4. Valence	5. Motivational Force	6. VIMI
1. Expectancy	-	.618***	.345***	.411***	.700***	.144
2. Instrumentality	.618***	-	.441***	.668***	.825***	.338***
3. Satisfaction	.345***	.441***	-	.526***	.537***	.161*
4. Valence	.411***	.688***	.526***	-	.851***	.365***
5. Motivational Force	.700***	.825***	.537***	.851***	-	.313***
6. VIMI	.144	.338***	.161*	.365***	.313***	-

Note. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

7.5 Appendix E: Linear regression predicting motivational force from total number of received incentives

Predictor	**B**	**SE B**	**β**	**t**	**p**
# Rewards Received	0.37	9.8875	.036	0.483	.630

7.6 Appendix F: Collinearity statistics for expectancy, instrumentality, valence, age, gender, job type, and tenure at current workplace predicting job satisfaction

Predictor	Tolerance	VIF
Expectancy Index	0.613	1.631
Instrumentality Index	0.391	2.559
Valence Index	0.550	1.818
Age	0.838	1.193
Gender	0.945	1.059
Job type	0.768	1.302
Tenure at current workplace	0.850	1.176

7.7 Appendix G: AI disclosure

The use of generative AI in this thesis has been carefully considered in alignment with SSE's disciplinary regulations. The sole AI tool employed during the process was ChatGPT 4o. Its use was limited to refining our own writing, correcting grammatical errors, and reducing repetitive phrasing. Additionally, ChatGPT was utilized to assist with troubleshooting code-related issues in SPSS, and support the search for relevant academic literature.

The integration of AI tools has contributed to the quality of this study by enhancing the overall readability of the text. In addition, AI support in the SPSS analysis phase streamlined certain technical aspects, allowing us to allocate more time to data interpretation and analysis. While AI can enhance the quality of thesis content, we acknowledge its limitations. These include the black box nature of AI, as well as the risk of introducing human biases. Moreover, the effectiveness of AI is dependent on the clarity and precision of user input, where poorly framed prompts can yield misleading or incorrect outputs.

To mitigate these risks, all AI integration was approached with caution. All outputs generated by the tool were reviewed and validated, and the tool was used to refine language in text we had originally written, ensuring that all reasoning and analysis remained our own. This experience highlighted that while AI can enhance the overall content, it should - and has - served as a supportive tool. As a result, our experience with AI throughout this process deepened our appreciation for the value of human reasoning and judgement in academic work.