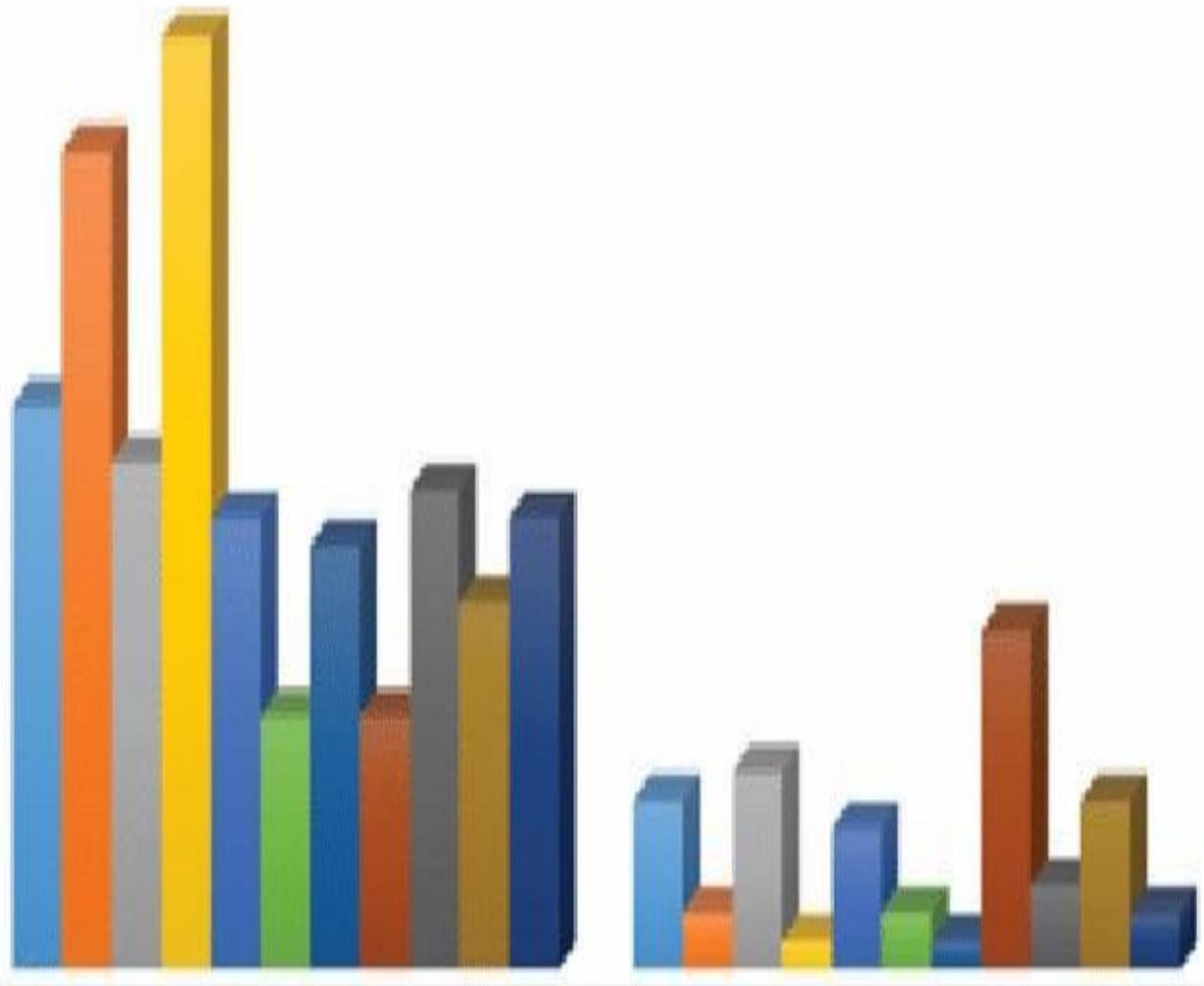


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Research Article

Motivation and Job Satisfaction Among Graphic Designers: Applying Maslow and Herzberg in Creative Work

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates motivation and job satisfaction among graphic designers by applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory to the creative workplace. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 professional graphic designers working in a mix of agencies, in-house teams, and freelance practice. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) revealed five principal themes: basic security and financial stability, autonomy and creative freedom, recognition and growth, work environment and relationships, and alignment with values and meaningfulness. Findings indicate that while Maslow's hierarchy explains need progression for many designers (e.g., financial security enabling pursuit of esteem needs), Herzberg's distinction between hygiene factors (e.g., pay, working conditions) and motivators (e.g., achievement, recognition, responsibility) offers sharper explanatory power for job satisfaction in creative contexts. The study concludes that organisations seeking to enhance motivation and satisfaction among designers must address both adequate hygiene factors and opportunities for intrinsic motivation — especially autonomy, mastery, and meaningfulness. Practical recommendations for managers and suggestions for further research are provided.

Keywords: motivation, job satisfaction, graphic design, Maslow, Herzberg, qualitative research, creative work

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1. Introduction

Design work sits at the intersection of creativity, commerce, and collaboration. Graphic designers translate ideas into visual form under constraints of client needs, brand systems, time, and technology. Motivation and job satisfaction in such contexts not only affect designers' well-being but also influence creativity, productivity, and the quality of deliverables (Amabile, 1996; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Despite extensive organisational psychology literature on motivation, fewer studies focus specifically on creative professionals such as graphic designers (Cobanoglu & Erdogan, 2017; though see Amabile, 1996). Understanding how classic motivation theories—Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) and Herzberg's two-factor theory (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959)—map onto the lived experiences of graphic designers can help managers create environments that foster both satisfaction and creative performance.

This study asks:

How do Maslow's and Herzberg's frameworks explain motivation and job satisfaction among graphic designers?

Using a qualitative approach, the research explores designers' narratives to identify which needs and factors most strongly impact their motivation, and how organisational practices can be tailored for creative work.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Motivation theories in organisational behaviour

Motivation research in organisational contexts has developed across several influential paradigms: need-based theories (e.g., Maslow, 1943), process theories (e.g., Vroom's expectancy theory), and job-design models (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Maslow's hierarchy posits that humans are motivated by a progression of needs from physiological and safety, to belongingness and esteem, culminating in self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). Herzberg's two-factor theory distinguishes hygiene factors — conditions that prevent dissatisfaction (e.g., salary, working conditions) — from motivators that actively produce satisfaction (e.g., achievement, recognition) (Herzberg et al., 1959).

2.2 Motivation in creative professions

Creativity research emphasises intrinsic motivation as a key driver of creative performance (Amabile, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Intrinsic motivators include autonomy, interest in the task, relevance to personal values, and opportunities for mastery — conditions frequently referenced by creative professionals (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). However, extrinsic factors (pay, deadlines) also shape creative work, sometimes undermining intrinsic motivation when misapplied (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999).

2.3 Job satisfaction and creative output

Job satisfaction correlates with productivity and retention (Spector, 1997). For designers, satisfaction depends on both the creative process and organisational structures that support that process (Kelley & Kelley, 2013). Studies in creative industries suggest that job design elements (autonomy, task significance) and social factors (supportive supervision) strongly predict satisfaction and creative output (Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

2.4 Applying Maslow and Herzberg to creative work

Maslow provides a broad frame to understand designers' developmental needs — e.g., the need for financial security may enable the pursuit of esteem and self-actualisation through creative work (Maslow, 1943). Herzberg's model offers a finer operational distinction: motivational satisfiers like recognition and responsibility directly enhance satisfaction; hygiene failures create dissatisfaction but do not produce satisfaction if merely addressed (Herzberg et al., 1959). Prior research that applies these frameworks to creative occupations shows mixed results: some find Herzberg's distinction useful (e.g., in advertising, media), while others argue that creative work blurs the hygiene/motivator line because pay and resources can influence intrinsic motivation indirectly (Amabile, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Maslow's hierarchy and Herzberg's two-factor theory to build a conceptual lens for investigating graphic designers' motivation and satisfaction.

3.1 Maslow's hierarchy as a developmental scaffold

Maslow's model posits needs that range from basic (physiological, safety) to higher-order (esteem, self-actualisation). For designers, physiological and safety needs translate to basic compensation and job security — foundational prerequisites for creative engagement. Belonging needs map to collaborative studio culture and team relationships; esteem connects to recognition of creative achievement; and self-actualisation corresponds to opportunities for self-expression, experimentation, and professional growth (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's model helps explain sequential transitions: designers may prioritise stable income early in their career and later seek fulfilment through challenging, meaningful work (Locke, 1976).

3.2 Herzberg's two-factor theory: hygiene vs. motivators

Herzberg distinguishes between hygiene factors (salary, company policy, working conditions) and motivators (achievement, recognition, the job itself, responsibility, advancement) (Herzberg et al., 1959). Applied to graphic design, inadequate hardware/software, low pay, unpredictable scheduling, or hostile client relationships act as hygiene deficits that produce dissatisfaction. Conversely, creative

autonomy, recognition from peers and clients, and opportunities to lead projects are motivators that generate satisfaction and higher performance.

3.3 Integrative perspective for creative work

Combining the two models yields a pragmatic analytic map: Maslow's hierarchy identifies domains of need (from survival to self-fulfilment) while Herzberg specifies which organisational levers will reduce dissatisfaction versus generate satisfaction. The integrated model recognises that some needs (e.g., self-actualisation) align with Herzbergian motivators, but that hygiene factors (e.g., fair pay) are prerequisites for pursuing higher-order needs (Maslow, 1943; Herzberg et al., 1959). Additionally, modern motivation scholarship (Deci & Ryan, 2000) emphasises autonomy, competence, and relatedness — concepts that align with both Maslow's higher needs and Herzberg's motivators. This integrated theoretical framework guided the study design and coding scheme.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research design and rationale

A qualitative phenomenological design was chosen to explore the lived experiences of graphic designers regarding motivation and job satisfaction. Phenomenology is appropriate when seeking a deep, contextualised understanding of participants' subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach prioritises participants' narratives to reveal how theoretical

constructs (Maslow, Herzberg) manifest in everyday professional life.

4.2 Participants and sampling

Purposive sampling targeted mid-career and senior graphic designers (3–15+ years' experience) across three settings: creative agencies, in-house corporate teams, and freelance practitioners. Eighteen participants ($n = 18$) were recruited via professional networks and social media design groups to achieve depth and diversity of perspectives. The sample included 10 agency designers (full-time), 5 in-house designers, and 3 full-time freelancers. Participant demographics: ages ranged from 26 to 44; genders balanced; geographical distribution covered urban areas in one country (for practical recruitment), but participants had international client exposure. Sample size aligns with qualitative norms for phenomenological saturation (Mason, 2010).

4.3 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting 45–75 minutes each. Interviews were conducted remotely via video calls and were audio-recorded with consent. The interview guide included prompts about career history, sources of motivation, positive/negative workplace experiences, perceptions of recognition and compensation, autonomy, and desired changes. Field notes supplemented recordings to capture non-verbal observations and reflexive impressions.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Institutional ethical standards were followed: informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary

participation, and secure data storage. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants, and identifiable organisational details were omitted. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Ethical procedures prioritised protecting vulnerable information about contracts or employer critiques.

4.6 Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process followed six phases: familiarisation, initial coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and writing up. Coding was both inductive (grounded in participants' words) and deductive (informed by Maslow and Herzberg constructs). NVivo-like manual coding spreadsheets were used to organise codes and link illustrative quotes to themes.

4.7 Trustworthiness and rigour

The study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative trustworthiness: credibility (member checks with five participants to confirm interpretations), transferability (thick description of context), dependability (audit trail of coding decisions), and confirmability (reflexive memos documenting researcher biases). Triangulation across participant types (agency, in-house, freelance) enhanced validity.

5. Findings

Thematic analysis produced five interrelated themes that illuminate how Maslow's and

Herzberg's models play out in graphic designers' experiences: basic security and financial stability; autonomy and creative freedom; recognition and growth; relationships and workplace environment; and alignment with values and meaningfulness. Each theme is presented with illustrative participant quotations and interpreted through the theoretical framework.

5.1 Theme 1 — Basic security and financial stability (Maslow: physiological/safety; Herzberg: hygiene)

A recurring motif was the centrality of reliable income and predictability. Particularly among early-career and freelance designers, financial stability was a prerequisite for pursuing creative goals.

“When the bills are late and clients are flaky, you can't think about experimenting. You're stuck taking what pays.” — “Aisha”, freelance designer.

Participants described irregular pay, late payments, and precarious contracts as sources of stress that undermined motivation. These issues functioned squarely as hygiene factors (Herzberg), creating dissatisfaction when absent. Aligning with Maslow, many designers indicated that once basic needs were secured, they were more likely to invest energy in projects that offered growth.

“Once I got a steady salary, I started pushing for more creative briefs. Before that, it was survival.” — “Rafî”, junior agency designer.

5.2 Theme 2 — Autonomy and creative freedom (Maslow: self-actualisation; Herzberg: motivator — the job itself)

Autonomy emerged as a powerful motivator. Designers valued freedom to propose concepts, set creative processes, and make production decisions.

“I need to be trusted to make design calls. Micromanagement kills the joy.” — “Ben”, senior in-house designer.

Autonomy maps onto both Maslow’s self-actualisation and Herzberg’s motivators (responsibility, the work itself). Many participants linked autonomy to increased ownership and higher-quality outcomes. Constraints (tight briefs, rigid brand guidelines without rationale) limited perceived autonomy and reduced job satisfaction.

“Rigid templates and approval-by-committee leave no room for doing something interesting.” — “Sana”, agency senior.

5.3 Theme 3 — Recognition and growth (Maslow: esteem; Herzberg: recognition, advancement)

Recognition from peers, clients, and leadership was central to designers’ sense of esteem. Public acknowledgment, portfolio-worthy work, and opportunities for professional development promoted satisfaction.

“Being credited, even internally, motivates me more than a small bonus. It means people see the craft.” — “Diego”, agency designer.

Participants reported that promotion pathways and skill-upgrading opportunities (workshops, conferences) aligned strongly with motivators in Herzberg’s framework. Conversely, a lack of feedback or invisible contributions led to frustration.

5.4 Theme 4 — Work environment and interpersonal relationships (Maslow: belongingness; Herzberg: hygiene — interpersonal relations)

Collaborative culture, supportive leadership, and constructive critique fostered belonging and satisfaction. Designers appreciated teams where ideas were debated respectfully and leadership advocated for design time.

“Good clients who trust the process and teams that back you up — those are the places I stay.” — “Maya”, in-house.

Toxic dynamics, disrespect for design work, or client pressures without mediation generated dissatisfaction. These interpersonal and environmental factors acted as hygiene elements per Herzberg: their absence caused unhappiness, but their presence alone did not guarantee deep satisfaction.

5.5 Theme 5 — Alignment with values and meaningfulness (Maslow: self-actualisation; Herzberg: motivator — achievement, the nature of the work)

Meaningful projects — where designers felt the work had social, aesthetic, or professional significance — were highly motivating. Alignment between personal values and project aims contributed heavily to sustained engagement.

“Working on pro bono for environmental groups felt like design with a purpose. I’d work nights for that.” — “Farah”, freelance.

This theme underscores modern motivational accounts (Deci & Ryan, 2000), emphasising relatedness and intrinsic meaning. For many participants, meaningfulness transcended pay and was a decisive factor in job choices.

6. Discussion

The findings indicate that both Maslow’s hierarchy and Herzberg’s two-factor theory have explanatory value for understanding motivation and satisfaction among graphic designers; however, their utility differs by domain and granularity.

6.1 Maslow: sequence of needs and contextual application

Maslow’s model aptly reflects designers’ developmental progression: securing basic needs (financial stability, safe working conditions) enables the pursuit of belongingness, esteem, and ultimately self-

actualisation through creative expression. The data showed many designers experience a phase-based motivation: early-career concerns centre on security, transitioning into esteem and self-fulfilment as careers stabilise. This sequencing supports Maslow’s contention that higher needs often emerge after lower needs are adequately met (Maslow, 1943). Nonetheless, Maslow’s linearity can be too rigid; some designers simultaneously value safety and self-expression, especially freelancers who balance both continually.

6.2 Herzberg: hygiene and motivators in creative contexts

Herzberg’s separation of hygiene factors and motivators maps well onto designers’ accounts. Hygiene deficits (late pay, poor equipment, hostile clients) reliably produced dissatisfaction, consistent with Herzberg’s claims. Motivators — autonomy, recognition, meaningful work — produced job satisfaction and energised designers for enhanced creative output. Crucially, some features cross-cut the distinction; for instance, fair compensation (traditionally hygiene) also affected intrinsic motivation by enabling risk-taking and experimentation, suggesting indirect effects of hygiene factors on motivators (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, Herzberg’s model is useful, but context-sensitive interactions between factors should be acknowledged.

6.3 Integrating both models with contemporary theories

Contemporary self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) foregrounds autonomy, competence, and relatedness — themes

prominent in the findings — and aligns with both Maslow and Herzberg. Autonomy and competence correspond to Herzberg's motivators and Maslow's self-actualisation/esteem needs. Relatedness maps to Maslow's belongingness. This convergence suggests that motivation in creative professions is best understood through an integrated lens that recognises basic needs, hygiene baseline requirements, and the primacy of intrinsic drivers for creative engagement.

6.4 Practical implications for managers and organisations

Managers who wish to foster motivation and retention among designers must address both hygiene and motivators. Practical actions include:

- Ensuring timely, fair compensation and adequate resources (computers, software, time for iteration). These reduce dissatisfaction.
- Designing roles to increase autonomy where possible: empower designers to shape briefs, set processes, and negotiate timelines.
- Creating recognition systems: portfolio credit, internal showcases, awards, and narrative feedback.
- Supporting professional development: training budgets, conference attendance, mentorship.
- Cultivating supportive, collaborative cultures where critique is constructive and leaders protect creative time.

These interventions echo recommendations from job design literature (Hackman &

Oldham, 1976) and creativity research (Amabile, 1996).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This qualitative study explored how Maslow's hierarchy and Herzberg's two-factor theory explain motivation and job satisfaction among graphic designers. Findings reveal that designers' motivation is multifaceted: foundational hygiene factors (financial security, equipment, respectful clients) must be secured to avoid dissatisfaction, while motivators (autonomy, recognition, meaningful work) actively foster satisfaction and creative engagement. Maslow's developmental perspective illuminates how needs shift across career stages, and Herzberg's framework helps managers identify levers to reduce dissatisfaction and promote intrinsic motivation. Contemporary theories (e.g., self-determination) dovetail with these classic models, emphasising autonomy, mastery, and relatedness.

Practice recommendations:

- Prioritise reliable compensation and clear contracts to eliminate hygiene-related dissatisfaction.
- Increase design autonomy by involving designers in brief development and decision-making.
- Implement recognition mechanisms (crediting, showcases, performance narratives).
- Invest in resources and professional development to sustain mastery.

- Foster a collaborative environment that aligns projects with designers' values when possible.

Limitations and directions for future research

Limitations include a geographically limited sample and the qualitative design's limited generalizability. Future research could use mixed methods or longitudinal designs to examine how needs and motivators evolve, or experimental interventions testing the impact of autonomy-supportive management on creative output and job satisfaction.

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- How do pay, job security, and working conditions affect your creative work?
- How important is recognition (from peers, managers, clients) to you? Can you give examples?
- To what extent do you feel you have autonomy over your work? How does that affect motivation?
- What kinds of professional development or growth opportunities matter to you?
- Have you experienced a misalignment between your values and your projects? How did that impact your motivation?
- What changes would most improve your job satisfaction?

Appendix: Sample Interview Guide (for replication)

- Can you briefly describe your career path and current role?
- What aspects of your work do you find most motivating? Why?
- Tell me about a recent workday that felt particularly satisfying. What made it satisfying?
- Describe times when you felt dissatisfied at work. What contributed to that feeling?