

The integration of the Hook Model into E-sports marketing: A promotional perspective

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Abstract

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This paper explores the integration of the Hook Model—comprised of the stages Trigger, Action, Variable Reward, and Investment—into e-sports marketing, with a particular focus on the promotional component of the marketing mix. As e-sports emerges as a dominant force within the digital entertainment industry, traditional marketing approaches are being replaced by behaviorally driven frameworks designed to cultivate user habits and enhance engagement. Through a detailed examination of the e-sports ecosystem—including developers, players, teams, and spectators—this study analyzes how promotional strategies can be optimized using the Hook Model. Real-world examples, such as time-sensitive rewards and engagement triggers in games like Valorant, demonstrate the practical alignment of this model with audience retention strategies. While the framework proves effective in sustaining user attention and fostering brand loyalty, ethical concerns regarding behavioral manipulation and digital addiction are critically discussed. The study concludes that, when applied responsibly, the Hook Model can serve as a powerful tool for marketers seeking to build enduring connections with e-sports audiences. Future research directions are proposed to further examine the long-term effects and ethical dimensions of habit-forming marketing strategies in digital environments.

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1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies has catalyzed the transformation of many traditional sectors, and among the most prominently affected is the sports industry. In recent years, electronic sports (e-sports) have emerged not only as a competitive and recreational activity but also as a significant economic and cultural phenomenon within the digital ecosystem. Defined as organized video game competitions often broadcast to spectators via online platforms, e-sports encapsulate a hybrid identity combining elements of gaming, media, entertainment, and professional sport [1]. With millions of participants and an ever-expanding audience base, e-sports have evolved into a global industry supported by an elaborate infrastructure of game developers, players, teams, fans, and sponsors [2].

This growth has been paralleled by a strategic shift in marketing practices, particularly in how brands interact with and retain digital audiences. The promotion component of the marketing mix (4Ps); encompassing advertising, public relations, direct marketing, sponsorships, and sales promotions has become increasingly critical in the e-sports

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landscape. Unlike traditional advertising models, e-sports marketing requires an adaptive, immersive, and behaviorally-informed approach to capture the attention and loyalty of digital-native users. It is within this context that the Hook Model, developed by Nir Eyal and Ryan Hoover (2014), offers an intriguing theoretical and practical framework [3].

The Hook Model presents a four-phase loop—Trigger, Action, Variable Reward, and Investment—designed to cultivate user habits and foster long-term engagement with digital products. While originally conceived for app development and behavioral product design, the model holds promising implications for digital marketing strategies, especially within environments such as e-sports where user engagement and behavioral reinforcement are central to both gameplay and brand interaction.

This paper aims to explore the integration of the Hook Model into e-sports marketing, particularly through the lens of the promotion element of the marketing mix. By mapping the model's components onto real-world promotional tactics used in the e-sports industry, the study endeavors to offer a novel interpretive framework for understanding and enhancing digital audience engagement. A key premise of this inquiry is that the Hook Model, when effectively embedded into marketing strategies, can provide a systematic method for increasing user retention, fostering community participation, and ultimately amplifying brand loyalty within the e-sports domain.

To this end, the subsequent sections of the article will provide a conceptual overview of the e-sports ecosystem and its stakeholders, outline the theoretical underpinnings of the Hook Model, demonstrate the model's practical applicability within e-sports promotional strategies—drawing on examples such as Valorant—and engage in a critical discussion of the model's effectiveness, limitations, and implications for the future of digital sports marketing.

2. Literature Review

The intersection of e-sports, digital marketing, and behavioral design has attracted growing scholarly attention, driven by the convergence of entertainment technologies and participatory media cultures. To establish a comprehensive understanding of the topic, this section examines core areas of literature: the e-sports ecosystem, promotional strategies in digital marketing, and the theoretical foundations of the Hook Model.

E-sports, once considered a niche subculture, has matured into a structured industry encompassing multiple stakeholders including game developers, players, professional teams, audiences, and sponsors. The ecosystem is anchored by competitive video games such as League of Legends, Valorant, and Counter-Strike, which provide the stage for organized tournaments and broadcasting events [1]. Game developers, in particular, hold significant control over content creation and monetization pathways. As Yükcü and Kaplanoğlu (2018) argue, these companies have evolved from mere content providers into multi-faceted digital entertainment corporations that integrate social media, influencer marketing, and community engagement into their core strategies [4].

The rise of mobile gaming, broadband access, and video streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube Gaming has further intensified the reach and cultural relevance of e-sports. Akgöl (2019) notes that the industry's financial model is largely sustained by audience-driven revenue streams, including advertising, subscriptions, and sponsorships. These dynamics underscore the importance of understanding audience behavior and the mechanisms by which engagement can be both initiated and sustained [5].

In the context of e-sports, promotion—one of the 4Ps in the traditional marketing mix—is not just about advertising, but rather about creating immersive brand experiences.

Promotional strategies typically include live-streamed sponsorships, influencer partnerships, social media campaigns, virtual product placements, and gamified promotions [6]. The boundary between player, viewer, and consumer is often blurred, as audiences participate in real-time chats, fan economies, and user-generated content that feed back into the promotional ecosystem.

Hutchins (2006) emphasizes that promotional content in e-sports is designed not only to inform but also to cultivate ritualistic user behavior. Unlike static media advertisements, e-sports promotions are dynamic and often embedded directly into the content of gameplay or stream narratives, making them more effective in shaping viewer perception and driving consumer action. This environment provides fertile ground for behavioral design frameworks such as the Hook Model to be operationalized [7].

Originally introduced in the field of product design, the Hook Model proposed by Eyal (2014) outlines a cyclical process that facilitates habit formation through four phases: Trigger, Action, Variable Reward, and Investment. Triggers—either external (e.g., notifications) or internal (e.g., emotional needs)—initiate user behavior. This is followed by a simple action, a variable reward that satisfies the user's need, and a subsequent investment that increases the likelihood of repeating the cycle. The model has been widely adopted in the design of mobile apps, social media platforms, and digital services [3]. While empirical applications of the Hook Model have predominantly focused on user interface design, its relevance to digital marketing strategies has begun to emerge. Fogg (2009), whose Behavioral Model for Persuasive Design inspired the Hook Model, underscores the critical interplay between motivation, ability, and triggers in shaping user behavior. When viewed through a marketing lens, the Hook Model provides a framework for understanding how promotional strategies can foster habitual brand interactions, particularly in high-engagement environments like e-sports [8].

However, critiques of the model point to ethical concerns surrounding user manipulation and digital addiction, particularly in industries designed to maximize screen time and consumption [9]. This tension is especially salient in the e-sports context, where the user experience is gamified by design, and where promotional content is deeply entwined with entertainment.

3. The E-Sports Ecosystem and Its Stakeholders

The e-sports ecosystem is a complex, multi-layered network composed of various stakeholders who interact dynamically within a digital and often gamified environment. Understanding the functions and motivations of these stakeholders is essential for contextualizing how promotional strategies and behavioral engagement models, such as the Hook Model, can be effectively implemented. This section delineates the principal actors in the e-sports landscape: game developers, video games as platforms, individual players and teams, and spectators. Each plays a vital role in shaping the economic and cultural logic of the industry.

3.1 Game Developers

Game developers serve as the foundational pillars of the e-sports ecosystem. They are responsible not only for the creation and technical maintenance of e-sports titles but also for curating the broader user experience, including in-game economies, competitive structures, and digital community spaces. As the industry has matured, developers have had to transition from a product-centric to an experience-centric model of operation [4]. No longer limited to designing software, developers now strategically leverage digital marketing channels, sponsorships, and influencer partnerships to create emotionally

resonant and habit-forming experiences. For instance, Riot Games, the developer of League of Legends and Valorant, invests heavily in community engagement through seasonal events, limited-time content, and integrated promotional triggers—mechanisms that align with the Hook Model's emphasis on frequent and behaviorally potent interaction cycles.

3.2 Video Games as Interactive Platforms

Video games within the e-sports domain function not just as leisure activities but as immersive media platforms. Their design incorporates interactive features such as real-time feedback, customizable avatars, progression systems, and social features—all of which serve as mechanisms of both user engagement and monetization [10]. These platforms act as living ecosystems where promotional activities are seamlessly embedded into gameplay experiences. In doing so, video games themselves become fertile grounds for behavior-shaping models such as the Hook Model to take root. For example, time-limited in-game promotions often trigger user engagement (Trigger), elicit a user action (Action), offer a randomized reward (Variable Reward), and encourage future investment in the form of in-game currency or time (Investment).

3.3 Players and Teams

The role of players—both individual and team-based—is central to the e-sports industry. Players are not merely consumers of digital content but active participants who co-create the e-sports experience through their performances, interactions, and social media presence. Competitive players train rigorously, often in structured environments that mirror those of traditional sports teams, complete with coaches, analysts, and sponsorship contracts [1]. These players also serve as brand ambassadors and content creators, playing a dual role that merges competition with marketing. Their participation in events, product endorsements, and social streams often initiates Triggers in the Hook Model—encouraging fans and casual players alike to engage with promoted content or return to gameplay environments.

3.4 Spectators and the Audience Economy

Spectators constitute the largest and arguably most economically vital component of the e-sports ecosystem. Their participation, while often passive in terms of gameplay, is highly active in terms of content consumption, community engagement, and monetization. As Akgöl (2019) emphasizes, e-sports is a "bottom-up" movement, heavily reliant on the interactive nature of platforms such as Twitch, YouTube Gaming, and Discord. These environments facilitate parasocial relationships, fan economies, and user-generated content, all of which amplify the reach and effectiveness of promotional efforts. Spectators are frequently subjected to external triggers—such as live notifications, influencer cues, or limited-time viewing rewards—that entice them into cycles of habitual engagement [5].

Moreover, spectators play a crucial role in the data economy of e-sports. Their clicks, view times, and spending behaviors are meticulously tracked and analyzed, allowing companies to optimize their promotional strategies using behavioral data. This feedback loop enhances the applicability of the Hook Model by enabling marketers to personalize and iterate on their engagement techniques, thereby reinforcing cycles of attention and loyalty.

4. The Hook Model Explained

The Hook Model, developed by Nir Eyal and Ryan Hoover (2014), is a behavioral design framework intended to explain how digital products can create user habits by repeatedly engaging users through a four-phase cycle: Trigger, Action, Variable Reward, and Investment. Originally applied in the fields of app development and user experience design,

this model offers a compelling lens through which to understand the mechanisms of digital marketing—particularly in the context of e-sports, where user engagement is central to the ecosystem's sustainability. This section outlines each stage of the model, with conceptual depth and its relevance to marketing strategies in e-sports environments [3].

4.1 Trigger

Triggers are the initial cues that prompt a user to take action. These can be external, such as notifications, emails, advertisements, or social media alerts, or internal, arising from psychological states like boredom, loneliness, or a need for self-affirmation.

- External Triggers in e-sports include push notifications about upcoming tournaments, limited-time in-game offers, or promotional emails from game developers. For example, a message like “Valorant Night Market is now live!” functions as an external trigger designed to draw players into the game environment.
- Internal Triggers operate on emotional associations. A user feeling isolated might be internally triggered to open Twitch and watch their favorite streamer, seeking social connection or belonging [11].

These triggers are essential in e-sports marketing, as they initiate the behavioral loop that leads to user re-engagement with the game or content platform.

4.2 Action

The action phase is the simplest behavior performed by the user in anticipation of a reward. For a behavior to occur, the user must have sufficient motivation, ability, and a strong enough trigger—an idea rooted in Fogg's Behavior Model [8].

In the e-sports context, typical user actions include:

- Logging into a game following a trigger.
- Watching a live match on Twitch.
- Commenting on a gameplay video.
- Clicking on a promotional link to redeem an in-game bonus.

The ease and frequency of these actions are designed to require minimal effort, reinforcing user engagement. For instance, developers often simplify login procedures or offer one-click access to promotional events to lower the barrier to entry.

4.3 Variable Reward

The variable reward phase is central to habit formation. Unlike fixed rewards, variable rewards introduce uncertainty and anticipation, making them more psychologically compelling. This concept draws on principles from behavioral psychology, particularly B.F. Skinner's work on operant conditioning.

In e-sports, variable rewards are widely used and take several forms:

- Loot boxes, seasonal chests, or daily login bonuses that offer randomized items.
- Receiving exclusive skins or emotes by watching tournament streams.
- Audience raffles or “drops” during live broadcasts.
- Earning in-game currency after winning competitive matches.

These rewards create dopaminergic anticipation—the uncertainty of what the user might receive drives them to repeat the action. Table 1 illustrates how variable rewards function in both gameplay and marketing domains within e-sports.

Table 1. Examples of Variable Rewards in E-Sports Context

Context	Variable Reward Type	Example
Gameplay	Randomized loot	Weapon skins from cases in Counter-Strike: Global Offensive
Streaming	Viewer drops	Special item drop for watching a League of Legends final
Promotions	Limited-time reward	Discount coupon for purchasing in-game currency
Community	Social feedback	Likes or shoutouts from popular streamers

4.4. Investment

The final stage, investment, involves the user putting something of value—time, effort, data, money—into the product or experience. Investment increases the likelihood of future engagement because the user builds a psychological attachment to their progress or identity within the system.

In e-sports, this is seen when players:

- Level up their in-game avatars or characters.
- Purchase battle passes or exclusive cosmetics.
- Contribute to forums or fan communities.
- Train and strategize with teams to improve competitive rankings.

These investments are not merely sunk costs; they create a sense of ownership and commitment, making users more likely to return to the game or platform and re-enter the Hook cycle. This aligns with IKEA effect principles in behavioral economics, where individuals place higher value on self-crafted experiences [12].

5. Mapping the Hook Model to E-Sports Promotion Strategies

The integration of the Hook Model into e-sports promotion strategies offers a powerful framework for cultivating sustained user engagement through iterative behavioral loops. Within the traditional 4Ps of marketing, promotion encompasses activities such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion, and direct marketing—each designed to inform, persuade, and remind target audiences. In the e-sports industry, where audience attention is fragmented and highly competitive, traditional promotional tactics alone are insufficient. Instead, brands and developers increasingly rely on behaviorally-informed promotion, where psychological engagement models like the Hook Model are embedded into campaign design. This section examines how each stage of the Hook Model can be operationalized through specific promotional mechanisms in the e-sports domain.

5.1. Triggers in Promotional Channels

Promotional triggers in e-sports are frequently designed to capture user attention and initiate a behavioral sequence. These are executed through a combination of external cues (e.g., advertisements, event notifications, emails) and contextually embedded messages within games or streaming platforms.

- Advertising campaigns for in-game events are distributed across platforms like YouTube, Twitch, and Discord.
- Push notifications for promotions (e.g., “Double XP Weekend!”) prompt re-engagement.

- Social media countdowns to new seasons or events activate anticipation and emotional readiness.

These triggers align with the initial phase of the Hook Model, encouraging users to begin a new cycle of interaction with the brand or platform.

5.2. User Action and Ease of Engagement

Once triggered, the next step is to facilitate low-effort user actions. In e-sports promotions, the key is to make the desired behavior—such as watching a stream, entering a code, or joining a limited-time event—frictionless and rewarding.

- Direct engagement includes participating in beta tests, entering sweepstakes, or clicking ads for discounts.
- Micro-interactions such as following a sponsor on social media or registering for an online tournament act as simple but effective behavioral actions.

By reducing the cognitive or procedural cost of action, marketers increase the likelihood that users will complete the behavior, as posited in Fogg's Behavior Model [8].

5.3. Variable Rewards in Promotional Design

To maintain engagement, promotional efforts often include variable reward mechanisms, which introduce uncertainty and create a feedback loop of expectation and reinforcement. These rewards are not only tied to gameplay but also directly to promotional activities.

Table 2. Examples of Variable Rewards in E-Sports Promotion

Promotional Activity	Variable Reward Mechanism	Example
Watching Sponsored Streams	Random viewer rewards ("drops")	Exclusive in-game items for watching Valorant Champions Tour
Engaging with Social Content	Entry into randomized giveaways	Limited-edition merchandise raffles via retweet campaigns
Purchasing Promotional Bundles	Mystery bonuses or bonus points	Bonus loot boxes after purchase during seasonal events
Participating in Surveys	Entry into lucky draws	Survey completions rewarded with chance to win gaming accessories

This approach leverages the brain's sensitivity to variable outcomes, keeping users psychologically invested and reinforcing promotional effectiveness.

5.4. Investment through Community and Customization

The final phase, investment, is encouraged when promotional strategies allow users to commit resources—time, money, effort—thereby increasing their emotional and behavioral stake in the ecosystem. In e-sports, investment mechanisms are often designed to build brand attachment and encourage repeated participation.

- Progressive event systems (e.g., battle passes tied to promotional content) reward users who engage consistently over time.
- Exclusive badges, tiers, or avatars associated with campaign participation (e.g., early backer skins or limited-time branding elements) promote identity alignment.

- User-generated content contests, sponsored by brands or game developers, allow fans to contribute and showcase their creativity, increasing perceived ownership.

These investment-driven tactics result in more committed user bases who are more likely to re-enter the Hook loop, ensuring the longevity of the promotional strategy and the user's relationship with the brand or product.

5.5. Integrated Framework

Table 3 below provides a summary of how promotional elements in e-sports can be mapped to the four stages of the Hook Model.

Table 3. Hook Model Aligned with E-Sports Promotion Strategies

Hook Model Phase	E-Sports Promotion Example
Trigger	Notifications about limited-time tournaments
Action	Clicking a link to watch a livestream or redeem a game code
Variable Reward	Randomized rewards for participation or viewing
Investment	Purchasing a bundle, creating content, or progressing a battle pass

By embedding the Hook Model into e-sports promotional strategies, marketers are not only advertising a product or service—they are constructing habitual interaction architectures that blur the boundaries between gameplay, brand engagement, and community belonging.

6. Results and Discussion

The application of the Hook Model in e-sports promotional strategies provides an analytically robust and behaviorally intuitive framework for understanding and enhancing user engagement. However, while the model offers a coherent logic for structuring promotional efforts around habit formation, its real-world implementation within e-sports ecosystems invites both strategic promise and critical reflection. This section analyzes the effectiveness, limitations, and ethical implications of integrating the Hook Model into e-sports marketing, while also considering its broader impact on user behavior, brand loyalty, and the digital consumer experience.

6.1. Effectiveness in Driving Engagement and Retention

One of the key strengths of the Hook Model lies in its capacity to increase user retention by tapping into psychological drivers of behavior. In the competitive attention economy of e-sports, the capacity to keep users “hooked” is essential. Games like Valorant and League of Legends do not merely rely on gameplay quality; they are supported by layered promotional ecosystems that use triggers (e.g., event alerts), encourage simple actions (e.g., log-ins), offer variable rewards (e.g., loot boxes, viewer drops), and demand investment (e.g., time, customization) [11].

This cycle not only strengthens the user's engagement with the game but also deepens their relationship with peripheral entities—streamers, sponsors, and event organizers—thereby increasing brand touchpoints. Empirical evidence from marketing studies suggests that increased exposure and behavioral repetition enhance brand familiarity and positive sentiment [13]. Therefore, the Hook Model's design logic dovetails effectively with the goals of e-sports marketers aiming to transform casual participants into loyal brand advocates.

6.2. Scalability and Flexibility of the Model

Another advantage of the Hook Model is its scalability across diverse promotional formats and user segments. Whether through micro-interactions on social media, gamified loyalty programs, or large-scale tournament campaigns, each stage of the Hook cycle can be tailored to suit the specific needs and behavioral profiles of different e-sports demographics.

For example, casual players may be more responsive to frequent external triggers and small variable rewards (e.g., daily login bonuses), while competitive players might be more engaged through higher-stakes investments such as ranked tournaments or exclusive in-game assets. This adaptability allows developers and marketers to segment audiences and fine-tune promotional content accordingly, maximizing both reach and relevance.

6.3. Ethical Concerns and Behavioral Manipulation

Despite its strategic utility, the Hook Model also raises ethical questions, particularly regarding its potential to exploit cognitive biases and foster compulsive usage. The use of variable rewards—especially when linked to monetized mechanisms like loot boxes—has been criticized for mimicking the psychological triggers of gambling [14]. Critics argue that such systems risk encouraging excessive spending and unhealthy usage patterns, especially among younger or more vulnerable users. Furthermore, the investment phase may lead users to overcommit to a digital ecosystem, making it psychologically difficult to disengage without losing perceived value or status. This phenomenon, related to the sunk cost fallacy, reinforces behaviors that may not always align with users' best interests, particularly when combined with social pressure or fear of missing out (FOMO). These concerns necessitate a responsible marketing approach, wherein the Hook Model is applied with transparency and user well-being in mind. Game developers and marketers must balance commercial objectives with ethical design principles, incorporating opt-out mechanisms, spending limits, and informative disclosures about reward probabilities and promotional content.

6.4. Implications for Future E-Sports Marketing

The successful application of the Hook Model in e-sports marketing highlights a broader shift toward behavior-driven design in digital strategy. As user data becomes more granular and accessible, marketing efforts will increasingly rely on predictive analytics and personalization algorithms to tailor each stage of the Hook cycle to individual users in real-time [15].

This direction opens new possibilities for automated engagement systems that dynamically adapt triggers, rewards, and investment paths based on user behavior. However, it also intensifies the ethical stakes, requiring the development of regulatory frameworks and industry standards to prevent exploitative practices.

Moreover, the integration of the Hook Model invites further academic research. Longitudinal studies could investigate how long users remain in the engagement loop, what triggers lead to disengagement, and how variations in reward structure influence long-term brand perception. Exploring cross-cultural applications of the model could also yield insights into how different communities respond to behavioral marketing strategies within the global e-sports landscape.

5. Conclusions

The application of the Hook Model within the realm of e-sports marketing represents a significant shift in how digital engagement strategies are conceptualized, executed, and

evaluated. As demonstrated throughout this study, the four interconnected stages of the Hook Model—Trigger, Action, Variable Reward, and Investment—offer a psychologically grounded and operationally scalable framework for driving sustained user engagement across the e-sports ecosystem.

From the perspective of promotion, one of the core components of the marketing mix, the integration of the Hook Model facilitates more than traditional audience outreach; it supports the creation of habitual user loops that transform spectators into participants, and casual players into brand-loyal community members. By embedding promotional triggers into gameplay mechanics, aligning simple user actions with reward structures, and designing systems that incentivize long-term investment, e-sports organizations and marketers are able to foster deeper and more enduring forms of engagement.

The empirical and conceptual evidence presented suggests that this approach can increase brand affinity, enhance retention, and amplify the emotional resonance of digital campaigns. However, this success comes with clear ethical responsibilities. As the model intentionally leverages cognitive biases and psychological motivators, its misuse can lead to behavioral manipulation, excessive screen time, or compulsive monetization—issues particularly salient in a young and digitally immersed user base. Therefore, responsible implementation—guided by ethical design standards, transparency, and user consent—is paramount.

In addition, the Hook Model's utility extends beyond tactical campaign execution; it encourages a paradigm shift in marketing strategy, wherein behavioral science and digital design coalesce to create ecosystems that are not merely consumed but actively lived in. For the e-sports industry, which thrives on interactivity, community, and user participation, this model provides a lens through which to architect experiences that are both commercially effective and psychologically engaging.

Future research might explore the long-term psychological effects of prolonged engagement through Hook-based systems, cross-cultural variations in behavioral response to such promotional tactics, and comparative effectiveness across different genres or platforms in the e-sports landscape. As e-sports continues to mature and diversify, the demand for data-informed yet ethically conscious promotional strategies will only grow.

Ultimately, the fusion of the Hook Model with e-sports marketing marks an important development in the study of digital consumer behavior one that necessitates continuous reflection, innovation, and accountability.

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