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Growth Hacking: A Modern Marketing Approach For Rapid Growth Of Start-Ups In The Digital Era (Case Study Of The Algerian Start-Up Yassir).

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses one of the trendy digital marketing concepts, which is Growth Hacking for the development of start-ups, based on the results of an exploratory survey focused on the Netnographic method. The objective of our research is to shed light on the potential of growth hacking marketing practices to boost the growth of start-ups. To achieve our objective, we conducted an exploratory qualitative survey using the Netnographic method to analyse the practices that concern growth hacking observed in the mobile application and digital platforms of the start-up Yassir. The study concludes that Yassir has demonstrated how a start-up can exploit growth hacking practices to grow in emerging markets. Through sponsorship techniques, product adaptation, social media campaigns, continuous testing, and careful data analysis, Yassir has managed to build a large, loyal audience. By combining innovation, local adaptation, and marketing agility, Yassir has transformed the challenges of the African market into growth opportunities, thus becoming a leading example of a successful start-up in the region.

Keyword: Growth hacking; Digital marketing; Start-ups' growth; Netnography; Yassir start-up.

Introduction:

Marketing is essential for any company. It enables communication with its target market. However, marketing can be costly, particularly for new start-ups. Start-ups usually begin by developing an idea and a product. Then, they need marketing to announce their launch. Yet, with limited resources and funds compared to established corporate budgets, start-ups must explore innovative, cost-effective promotion methods (Lee, 2019). Recently, start-ups have turned to smart, growth-focused "hacks" to promote themselves, giving rise to the concept of "growth hacking" (Rauhala & Sarkkinen, 2015). Growth hacking prioritizes firm growth by attracting more customers to its unique products and services through the continual use of creativity, social metrics, and customer-centric strategies (Holiday, 2014).
Growth hacking is a digital marketing buzzword introduced by Ellis (2010) that refers to rapid experimentation and testing aimed at scaling a business model. It uses digital strategies to test a product's potential to attract new customers quickly (Bohnsack & Liesner, 2019). A well-known example is Dropbox, which used a referral system offering extra storage to users who invited others, leading to exponential growth. Other successful examples include Airbnb, HubSpot, PayPal, and Hotmail. Companies that excel in growth hacking often integrate viral sharing into the on boarding process, enabling new customers to promote the product within their networks, fuelling the exponential growth (Cavallo, A., et al., 2024).
The importance of our research comes from the importance of the concept it deals with. Namely growth hacking, which is a specific strategy focused on the rapid growth of a company, usually a start-up. It uses analytical methods, tests, and digital techniques to quickly boost the number of users or revenues, with the aim of growing exponentially by maximizing the effectiveness of marketing efforts. This includes optimizing

conversions and acquiring customers at minimal cost (Conway, T., & Hemphill, T. 2019). It is in this context that this study is taking place. The objective is to show the opportunities offered by this new concept to increase the growth of young companies. By studying one of the most successful start-ups in Africa. It is therefore a question of answering the following problem: *how did the start-up Yassir exploit growth hacking practices to establish itself in the North African market?*

To answer our research question, we will follow this structure: the first part focuses on the theoretical and conceptual framework of the subject. The second part is devoted to a case study by applying a qualitative method (netnography). Finally, the conclusion provides a synthesis of the results, the contributions of the research, and some recommendations.

I. Conceptual framework

1. Growth hacking:

Growth hacking is crucial for start-ups, as they often lack the budget and resources for traditional marketing (Holiday, 2012). It focuses on achieving rapid business growth with minimal spending, leveraging the power of the Internet and data-rich platforms (Vasquez, 2014). The concept of *growth hacker* emerged in 2010, introduced by Sean Ellis, who define it as someone dedicated exclusively to growth. Andrew Chen later popularized the term, describing a growth hacker as someone who does everything possible to attract new clients. According to J. Casanova (2013), growth hacking is a new form of viral marketing, where user engagement increases the likelihood of referrals. A rare combination of marketing and technical skills characterizes a growth hacker, who creatively uses data and early feedback to optimize products and encourage sharing (Schawbel, 2013). Despite its growing popularity, the concept remains often misunderstood. A thematic analysis of presentations from 17 speakers at the (2014) Growth Hacking Conference reveals the essential components of a growth hacking campaign achieving Product-Market Fit, analysing user data, optimizing conversion rates, fostering viral growth, and ensuring retention and scalable growth:

Product/Market Fit: This phase is essential in Blank's model (2013) and focuses on validating product-market alignment early on by gathering feedback from an MVP (Ries, 2011; Holiday, 2013). Start-ups must demonstrate proof-of-concept to secure funding (Preger, 2016). However, Gans et al. (2000) and Thiel (2014) argue that start-ups may better serve niche markets with minimal competition, rather than disrupting large markets.

User Data Analysis: Start-ups often struggle with large data volumes, making actionable insights challenging (Mucklow, 2014). User data analysis involves technology, heuristics, and usability analysis, along with web analytics, to support user growth hypotheses. Cohort analysis, which breaks down data by customer group, is key (Reis, 2011; Skok, 2013), though meaningful data requires an initial user base (Conway T., & Hemphill, T, 2019).

Conversion Rate Optimization (CRO: involves understanding user behaviour to improve sales, and Ellis' (2013) optimization loop of planning, testing, and analysing achieves this. Successful companies adopt strategic testing for sustained growth (Econsultancy, 2014).

Viral Growth: Viral marketing leverages social networks to spread product awareness (Leskovec et al., 2007; Zhu and Huberman, 2014). Growth hackers target influential users. They use hybrid models that mix viral and traditional channels (Goel et al., 2012; Klein, 2014). Virality types include inherent, artificial, and word-of-mouth (Croll and Yoskovitz, 2013).

Retention/Scalable Growth: Growth relies on customer retention, with metrics like Lifetime Value and Net Promoter Score (NPS) assessing customer advocacy (Reicheld and Schefter, 2000; Quint, 2014). NPS segments customers as Detractors, Passives, or Promoters, affecting viral growth.

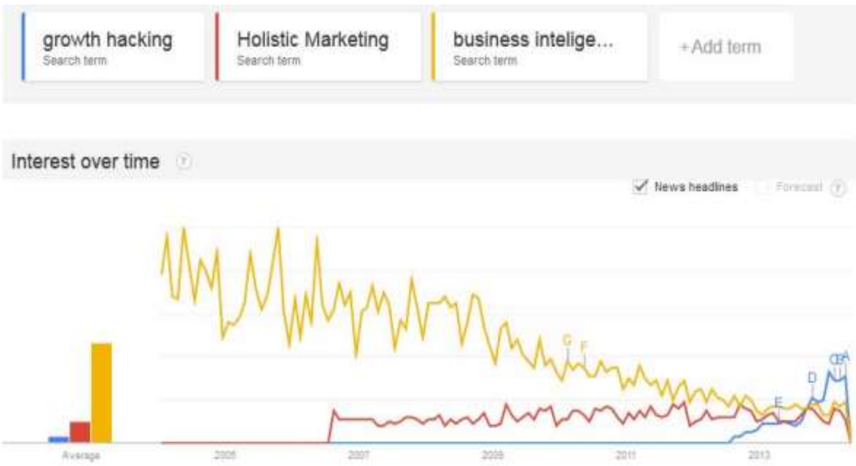

Figure 1: The evolution of Growth Hacking.
Source: Google Trends.

The marketing technique of growth hacking is rapidly gaining popularity and is becoming more significant than traditional marketing methods. Its primary goal is to consistently increase key measurable marketing metrics, particularly for startup businesses aiming to scale from zero to millions quickly. Unlike established brands that rely on traditional marketing strategies like press releases and TV ads, new global brands such as Facebook, Dropbox, and Twitter leverage growth hacking to reach large audiences without substantial marketing budgets (Holiday, 2013). This approach focuses on generating online traffic as a crucial first step in converting internet users into paying customers (Fishbein, 2014).

2. Techniques used in growth hacking:

Growth hacking employs a variety of innovative and data-driven techniques to achieve rapid growth. Here are some key techniques commonly used in growth hacking (Holiday, (2013); Feiz, D., et al, (2021); Shariatnejad, A., et al, (2023)):

- *A/B Testing*: Experimenting with different versions of a webpage, email, or advertisement to determine which one performs better in terms of user engagement, conversions, or other metrics.
- *Viral Marketing*: Creating content or campaigns that encourage sharing among users, leveraging social networks to increase reach and engagement. This often includes referral programs or incentivized sharing.
- *Content Marketing*: Producing valuable and relevant content to attract and engage a target audience, ultimately driving traffic and conversions. This can include blogs, videos, infographics, and more.
- *Search Engine Optimization (SEO)****:*** Optimizing website content to rank higher in search engine results, increasing organic traffic. This includes keyword research, on-page optimization, and link building.
- *Social Media Engagement*: Utilizing social media platforms to connect with users, share content, and build a community around the brand. Engaging with users through comments, direct messages, and interactive posts can enhance brand loyalty.
- *Email Marketing****:*** Developing targeted email campaigns to nurture leads and encourage conversions. This can include personalized offers, newsletters, or automated follow-ups based on user behaviour.
- *User Feedback and Analytics*: Gathering user feedback through surveys or interviews to understand pain points and preferences, along with analysing data to identify patterns and optimize strategies.
- *Freemium Models****:*** Offering a free version of a product with the option to upgrade to a paid version for additional features. This encourages users to try the product. It boosts the chances of converting them to paid customers.
- *Influencer Marketing****:*** Collaborating with influencers to reach new audiences and build credibility. Influencers can help promote products to their followers, driving traffic and sales.
- *Leveraging Data and Automation*: Use data analytics tools to track user behaviour, segment audiences, and automate marketing processes. This can enhance targeting and efficiency.
- *Community Building****:*** Creating a sense of community around the brand through forums, social media groups, or events. Engaging with users and fostering a loyal customer base can lead to organic growth.
- *Gamification****:*** Integrating game-like elements into the user experience, such as rewards, challenges, or leader boards, to increase engagement and motivation.

These techniques often work best when used together. They let businesses experiment, learn, and quickly scale their growth.

3. Growth Hacking Process:

Growth hacking is an iterative cycle, data-driven and testing-focused, aimed at accelerating the company's growth by constantly optimizing user acquisition and retention.

Figure 2: Growth hacking process.
Source: Herttua, T., et al., (2016).

According to the figure 2, the growth hacking process begins by analysing the company's current situation and product using data-driven methods. If social media or other data are available, it should be analysed to identify insights. Data analytic tools are essential for this step. Next is product optimization, where design is crucial. Unlike traditional marketing, growth hacking focuses on creating a product people naturally want. Insights from data analysis inform ideas that enhance the product. Once optimized, A/B testing is conducted with at least two product versions, focusing on a few clear goals and one variable change per test to ensure clear results. The version with the best performance is selected. After testing, the product is ready for the "hack" phase, which involves implementing targeted growth strategies. The content, design, and specific tactics are chosen based on the company's goals and previous learnings. Measurement and analysis are key to this step, which emphasizes retaining existing users rather than just acquiring new ones. Growth hacking is an ongoing cycle of analysis, testing, and optimization that must be repeated continuously for sustained success.

II. Methodology framework

This study employs netnography to collect data, a term combining "Internet" and "ethnography" coined by Robert Kozinets in the 1990s, initially for consumer and marketing research online (Netnography = InterNET + EthNOGRAPHY) (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography, along with other forms of online investigative research (Lugosi et al., (2012); Costello, L. et al., (2017)), is regarded as an "effective and unobtrusive way to study online brand communication and behaviour" (Bengry-Howell et al., 2011). With the rapid expansion of internet forums and easy access to rich data, netnography has gained wide acceptance across various disciplines, including business, marketing, economics, management, information systems, cultural studies, and sociology (Bengry-Howell et al., 2011). Kozinets (2010) lists six criteria for choosing sites for netnographic research. They should be: (1) relevant to the topic, (2) active with recent interactions, (3) interactive with user communication, (4) substantial in user numbers, (5) diverse in demographics, and (6) data-rich.

This method is well-suited to the digital era (Bartl et al., 2016; Bernard, 2004) and serves effectively as an exploratory tool for examining emerging phenomena (Kozinets, 2010), such as the new marketing practices, we're currently investigating, particularly in the promotion and growth hacking. This approach is particularly well suited to emerging phenomena in digital marketing, as it directly observes online activities to extract rich insights. In practice, this study follows the three steps outlined by Kozinets (2010): data entry, data collection, finally data analysis, and interpretation.

III. Case study

Many start-ups find it challenging to use traditional marketing techniques due to limited budgets and time, so they make the most of all available technical resources. Some young companies, like Yassir might not even exist without growth hacking strategies.

According to the latest statistics from sites like "Technoram" and "We talk start-ups", Yassir, launched in 2017, has quickly established itself as a leading North African super application, and now operates in 45 cities within six countries, primarily in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. It serves over 8 million users and collaborates with more than 100,000 partners, including drivers, couriers, and merchants. The platform's diverse offerings cover ride hailing, food and grocery delivery, and digital financial services. With strong investor backing, including $150 million from a Series B funding round led by BOND in 2022, Yassir aims to strengthen its infrastructure, enhance engineering capabilities, and expand into new regions across Africa and the Middle East.

Yassir, as a tech start-up based in Algeria, has adopted many growth hacking marketing practices to grow rapidly in a competitive market. Through a combination of viral strategy, data optimization, and product innovation, it has been able to attract users, retain them, and accelerate its growth.

IV. Study method: netnography

In this section, we will adapt our case study using the netnographic method, and we will discuss the results at the same time:

1-The entry: Defining the research objective

Before we begin, it is essential to define a clear framework: the objective is to analyse how Yassir uses growth hacking to drive growth, its specific methods, and the effectiveness of these practices in a digital environment. Research questions may include: What are the most used growth hacking techniques at Yassir? How is user engagement driven through these techniques?

2-Data collection:

This step involves preparing the tools and methods to collect data in a systematic and organized manner and determine the sources of the data. In netnography, this includes observing publications, comments, and interactions between Yassir and its users on online platforms (blog, website, social networks, mobile

application, etc.). Based on Kozinets (2010), the following platforms will be selected as sources of information:
Social networks: Yassir's Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn accounts. They use them for sponsorship campaigns, seasonal offers, and community engagement via contests and testimonials.
Yassir's application: Observe interfaces and service options (transportation, delivery, etc.) to identify local adaptations and incentives for re-engagement.
Yassir Blog and Website: Analyse blog posts and website pages to identify growth hacking techniques, conversion content, and marketing messages.
Forums and Feedback Platforms: Sites like Trustpilot, Google Reviews, and social media comment sections provide a way to gather user feedback and see how Yassir interacts with feedback.
To collect more data and enrich the study, we also analyse the interviews of "Noureddine Tayebi" and "Mahdi Yettou", the 2 founders of Yassir, these interviews are published on sites like StartupBRICS, Disrupt Africa, and TechCabal, where they share the strategies and challenges of the start-up. We also analyse the news reports on fundraising, several articles reporting Yassir's fundraising and expansion plans are published in magazines like African Business, Reuters, and The Africa Report.

3-Data analysis and interpretation:

The data is analysed to identify effective growth hacking practices using MAXQDA software, to slice and calibrate results according to categories such as Referrals and Viral Rewards, adaption of the product, content marketing, testing and experimentation, Optimizing Re-engagement, analyse User Needs and multi-services ecosystem:

Use of Referrals and Viral Rewards

To accelerate user acquisition, Yassir adopted a referral system, a common practice in growth hacking. By encouraging existing users to invite their friends and family, Yassir created viral growth within its transportation and delivery services.
• Example: In its mobile application, for each friend referred, the user earns a credit or discount for future trips or delivery orders. This incentive system transforms each user into a brand ambassador, which helps to acquire new customers at a lower cost and generates rapid growth.

Adaptation of the product to local needs

Unlike universal solutions like Uber, Yassir was able to adapt its product to the specificities and needs of consumers in North Africa. By using user feedback and application data, Yassir refined its offer to better meet local expectations. This corresponds to a growth hacking approach focused on improving the product to make it a marketing lever.
• Example: In Africa, many consumers prefer to use cash payments. Yassir introduced this option to attract a large audience that does not necessarily have access to credit card payments. This innovation has overcome a common barrier in countries where credit cards are less widespread, thus expanding the potential user base.

Content Marketing Campaigns

According to our analysis of different social networks and the startup’s website, Yassir has invested in a social media marketing strategy, using Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to promote its services and engage its community. The posts include promotional offers, contests, tutorials, and testimonials from satisfied users. This strategy promotes user engagement and attracts new prospects by creating a sense of proximity to the brand.
• Example: On its social networks, Yassir regularly offers special promotions, such as discounts on rides during popular events or awareness campaigns to encourage the use of its delivery services during Ramadan. This contextual approach helps Yassir generate engagement and downloads.

A/B Testing and Experimentation

Growth hacking relies on testing and experimentation to optimize the user experience and increase conversion rates. And based on our analysis of the mobile app and user feedback observed in their comments on social networks; Yassir regularly conducts A/B tests to adapt its features, offers, and user interface, observing which elements lead to a better retention rate, or engagement.
• Example: Yassir tested different welcome offers for new users, such as a free initial credit for the first ride or discounts for the first orders. This type of experimentation allows them to understand what encourages users to continue using the app after registration.

Optimizing Re-engagement Channels

To retain users, Yassir uses re-engagement techniques. These include push notifications in its app and personalized emails to inactive users. They aim to encourage users to return.

• Example: If a user has not ordered for a while, Yassir sends them personalized offers to encourage repeat use. These notifications can also trigger on specific days or events, like holidays, or during high-demand times.

Leveraging Data to Better Understand User Needs and Expectations

Yassir analyses the behaviour of its users to optimize its services, including the most popular routes, periods of high demand, and payment preferences.
• Example: By analysing geographic areas where demand is high, Yassir adapts driver availability to avoid waiting times. The company can also target its ads based on this data, for hyper-localized campaigns that meet the specific needs of each region.

Multi-Service Ecosystem and Growth Strategy

Yassir has not only focused its offering on transportation but has expanded its services to include food delivery, grocery delivery, and B2B services. This diversification strategy allows Yassir to expand its user base while encouraging the continued use of the application.
• Example: A user can switch from a transportation service to food delivery or grocery delivery on the same app, which improves loyalty and attachment to the Yassir ecosystem. These related services create an integrated ecosystem. It makes users more dependent on the platform.

CONCLUSION

The goal of our study was to highlight the practices of buzzword marketing, which is Growth hacking used by a leading technology start-up in North Africa "Yassir" to make its development fast, relevant, and more effective. The research followed an exploratory qualitative approach using the netnographic method. The results of the netnography highlight the importance of growth hacking as an indispensable approach for start-ups looking for rapid growth. By using innovative methods and data analysis, growth hacking allows young companies to maximize their growth potential with limited resources.
Yassir has demonstrated how a start-up can leverage growth hacking practices to thrive in emerging markets. Through referral programs, product adaptation, social media campaigns, continuous testing, and in-depth data analysis, Yassir has successfully attracted and retained a wide audience. By combining innovation, local adaptation, and agile marketing strategies, Yassir has turned the challenges of the African market into growth opportunities, establishing itself as a leading example of a successful start-up in the region. Although the concept of "growth hacking" is still in its early stages in Africa, the experience of its founder "Noureddine T," having founded and worked in several start-ups in Silicon Valley in the United States, has gained a level of creativity and expertise that has been instrumental in driving his start-up’s success in African markets. His background has allowed him to apply innovative growth techniques adapted to the specific needs of the local market.
Our theoretical contribution enriches the theory and literature on growth hacking as a new concept of modern marketing, by clarifying the concept of growth hacking, which has been subject to multiple interpretations since its inception. Our methodological contribution lies in the use of the qualitative method (Netnography) to exploit and analyse the growth hacking practices used by a start-up that has succeeded in its market. Our managerial contribution highlights the practices and means of growth hacking that allow entrepreneurs and founders of start-ups to increase the development of their start-ups.
We encourage all brands, especially start-ups to give more importance to the practices of growth hacking marketing to attract new customers, build loyalty, and grow rapidly while optimizing their resources. Therefore, start-ups should: Analyse data to guide their decisions; Conduct A/B tests to optimize strategies; Create referral programs to encourage word-of-mouth; Design an attractive product to encourage users to recommend it; Leverage social media to build a community; Automate marketing tasks to improve efficiency; Optimize for SEO to attract traffic. Use gamification to engage users. Focus on customer retention to boost loyalty and engagement. Measure and adjust to improve results.
For our future research initiatives, we aim to conduct a quantitative survey focused on identifying the growth hacking techniques employed by Algerian start-ups and the benefits they perceive following their implementation.

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