

GROWTH HACKING FOR SMES RESILIENCE AND INTERNATIONALIZATION: EXPLORING STRATEGIES, IMPACTS, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACCELERATED GROWTH

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ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a significant role in the global economy, contributing to job creation, innovation, and economic growth (European Commission, 2023; Jean et al., 2024). International expansion has emerged as a crucial strategy for SMEs to capitalize on global market opportunities and address increasing competitiveness (Hutchinson et al., 2009). A study conducted by the European Commission (2010), analyzing data from 2007 and 2008, found that SMEs engaged in international activities experienced higher turnover growth (over 50%) compared to those that did not (around 33%). Internationally active SMEs also exhibited greater employment growth, with exporters and importers reporting higher rates than non-exporters and non-importers. Furthermore, SMEs demonstrated a strong correlation between internationalization and innovation, successfully launching new products/services and implementing process innovations more than their counterparts. Moreover, the recent literature points to the positive relationship between internationalization and resilience (Martins et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024).

However, international expansion presents complex challenges for SMEs, as they must navigate factors such as cultural, regulatory, and market differences, manage limited financial and human resources, and adapt their business strategies to international contexts (Braitto et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2017). In this regard, the combination of digitization and internationalization has proven highly effective in overcoming some of these barriers and facilitating global growth for SMEs (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2020). Digital technologies enable SMEs to overcome geographical constraints, expand their customer base, and improve operational efficiency (Gaweł et al., 2023; Kolagar et al., 2021). Additionally, implementing growth strategies can stimulate innovation in SMEs' business models, further enhancing their competitive edge in the global market (Matarazzo et al., 2020).

One strategy that has proven effective for managers is the adoption of growth hacking (GH) strategies, which are crucial for enhancing business growth and scalability (Ellis and Brown, 2017; Ries, 2011). The significance of GH and its various applications are increasingly being investigated in different contexts (Bohnsack and Liesner, 2019; Conway and Hemphill, 2019; Troisi et al., 2020). A recent study

explored the international markets arena, proposing several research propositions regarding the capabilities and routines that companies develop to tackle international markets and facilitate international expansion (Bargoni et al., 2023).

This highlights that adopting the right growth strategies, such as GH, especially during the scaling phase, and expanding into international markets can serve as powerful catalysts for SME growth. However, the existing literature in this research domain remains limited. Specifically, there is a lack of comprehensive knowledge regarding the impact and potential opportunities associated with GH in terms of scaling SMEs and enabling accelerated growth during their internationalization process. To the best of our knowledge, further research is needed to explore and elucidate the potential influence and opportunities of GH for SMEs during their internationalization journey. In addition, we urge studies to explore whether GH can foster firm's resilience and internationalization.

The objective of this research is to examine in-depth the role of GH in supporting SMEs during the internationalization phase, with a focus on its potential to facilitate faster growth and capitalize on opportunities arising from international expansion. By analyzing the influence of GH strategies, this research seeks to understand how these strategies can contribute to overcoming barriers and leveraging opportunities during SMEs' internationalization journey. The research question addressed is as follows:

RQ1: What is the impact of GH on the scalability of SMEs and the achievement of accelerated growth during their internationalization process?

RQ2: what is the role of GH in fostering SMEs' resilience through internationalization processes?

To address this research question, an inductive qualitative approach is proposed, involving multiple case studies (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Gioia et al., 2013). These case studies will investigate SMEs that have undertaken internationalization journeys or have utilized GH and associated or similar strategies for expansion. The study will also encompass open-ended essays to the collaborators involved in the internationalization process, across various business sectors to ensure a comprehensive analysis, thereby enhancing the overall validity and reliability of the research findings.

Based on the above, the expected results of this research are as follows. First, we expect to identify business development patterns and strategies adopted by SMEs during the internationalization process. Second, we expect to evaluate the effectiveness of GH and related strategies in accelerating the growth of SMEs during the internationalization process. Third, we expect to assess the impact of GH on the scalability of SMEs during the internationalization process. Finally, we expect to identify best practices and lessons learned from SMEs that have used GH to expand their international operations.

Our study will contribute to two different streams of research. First, it will bring new empirical evidence to the GH literature investigating the impact and prospective opportunities of the scaling process during SMEs' internationalization. Second, it will contribute to enrich current knowledge on internationalization and growth strategies of SMEs and, particularly, on GH.

As for managerial implications, our results may be useful for gather empirical evidence to investigate the impact that GH strategies has had on SMEs and the opportunities that have arisen. Firstly, SMEs might consider incorporating GH techniques into their international expansion plans to enhance growth results. Secondly, they could learn from GH best practices and adapt them to their own internationalization efforts. Finally, SMEs might explore and leverage digital technologies and innovative growth-oriented approaches to overcome barriers and reach global markets more effectively.

Keywords: Growth Hacking, Big data, Digital transformation, Experimentation process, Test, Growth strategies, Business growth

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