



Digital marketing strategies for startup success

A case study of Kairos

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Abstract:

In today's competitive startup environment, effective digital marketing is crucial to overcome resource constraints, build brand awareness, and achieve growth. This study explores the digital marketing strategies that contributed to the success of Kairos' "Ethereal" project, a Spanish startup initiative focused on creative social workshops. Using a qualitative case study approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with the owner, CEO, and lead marketer of Kairos. Thematic analysis revealed that Ethereal's success was driven by the strategic application of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) and the PESO model, combined with emotional storytelling, viral marketing techniques, user-generated content (UGC), and relationship marketing practices. The findings show that consistency across channels, emotional resonance, community-building, and agility in adapting to audience feedback were key to attracting and retaining customers. Ethereal effectively used viral content and social proof to increase organic growth without significant financial investment. In contrast to other Kairos projects, Ethereal kept a clear message, niche audience focus, and participatory branding approach, resulting in stronger engagement and customer loyalty. This study highlights that authenticity, emotional connection, and strategic use of shared and earned media are more effective for startup marketing than traditional paid approaches. The research contributes to business marketing literature by providing a practical framework for startups aiming to optimise digital marketing while facing resource constraints. Limitations of the study include the single case study design and reliance on internal stakeholder perspectives. Future research could expand by incorporating customer viewpoints and cross-industry comparisons to improve the findings' validity.

Keywords:

Startup, Digital marketing, Integrated Marketing Communications, PESO model, User-generated content, Viral marketing, Social proof, Product-market fit, Kairos.

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1 Introduction

In today's dynamic business environment, startups face unique challenges when establishing themselves and achieving growth. Digital marketing has become a cost-effective and powerful tool, allowing startups to connect with target audiences, build brand recognition, and compete despite resource constraints. The rise of digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram has revolutionised marketing, offering direct and cost-effective consumer reach. Recent trends indicate that digital marketing continues evolving rapidly, with 76% of marketing professionals increasing their spending on such platforms in 2023 (Statista, 2023). However, many startups struggle to use digital marketing effectively, leading to issues with their product-market fit and growth.

Understanding how startups can use digital marketing strategies effectively is crucial. While digital marketing offers advantages, not all strategies give the same results. Some startups succeed, achieving customer engagement and growth, while others fail due to poor targeting, ineffective messaging, and misallocated resources. This gap shows the need for research on successful digital marketing strategies adapted to startups.

A compelling case study is Kairos, a Spanish startup, and its Ethereal project. Ethereal's remarkable success, compared to other Kairos projects, leads to questions about digital marketing's role when overcoming limited resources and achieving rapid growth. Examining Ethereal's marketing strategies can provide insights for startups facing similar challenges. Moreover, there is limited academic research focusing on how startups optimise their digital marketing despite resource limitations, further justifying the need for this study.

This thesis analyses how digital marketing contributed to Ethereal's success, aiming to identify strategies that can provide a replicable framework for other startups looking to maximise their marketing efforts. The findings will contribute to entrepreneurial success by offering insights that support business growth, innovation, and economic development.

1.1 Problem statement

Startups face significant challenges when establishing themselves in competitive markets due to limited resources, lack of brand recognition, and the urgent need to attract customers (Conway, 2019). Digital marketing helps with these challenges, but there is no specific formula for success. Many startups struggle with product-market fit, a key survival factor. Studies indicate that 24% of startup failure in their first-year result from an inability to find the right market fit (Cantamessa et al., 2018). Poor market fit often comes from ineffective digital marketing, such as poor audience targeting, unclear messaging, and insufficient data-driven decision-making (El-amine & Mohammed, 2023).

The growing importance of digital marketing is evident, with 80% of buyers searching online before purchasing (Singade, 2022). Social media has transformed information flow and consumer decision-making (Nasdaq, 2019). Its expansion has quickened consumer behaviour shifts (Aggarwal, 2021). For this reason, businesses and researchers are interested in understanding how Generation Y and Z interact with digital marketing (Mude, 2023).

Despite its advantages, many startups fail to use digital marketing effectively, leading to imbalances between products and market demands. Research shows social media can enhance startup innovation by facilitating digital interactions that promote learning (Corral de Zubielqui, 2019). Understanding the factors that lead to valuable interactions is crucial for building strong customer relationships (Kaur, 2020). However, startups often misuse these tools, wasting resources and missing opportunities.

High failure rates among startups highlight the urgency of these challenges. In Spain, one in five new businesses fail within a year, and 45% close within five years (Right Casa, 2023). Understanding how digital marketing contributes to startup success is therefore essential.

This study explores how startups can optimise digital marketing to strengthen product-market fit, increase customer engagement, and improve sustainability. Kairos' Ethereal project has achieved significant success, but its marketing strategies have not been

thoroughly analysed or compared to other Kairos projects. Looking into this gap can help develop a framework to guide startups toward marketing success.

While much research exists on digital marketing for established companies, studies on how startups navigate resource constraints for marketing success are limited. Existing research focuses on large enterprises, leaving a gap in understanding how startups can effectively use digital marketing despite limited resources. Filling this gap is essential to develop an effective marketing framework for startups.

To achieve this, this study investigates the following research questions:

1. What specific digital marketing strategies contributed to the success of Kairos' Ethereal project?
2. How were these digital marketing strategies implemented to attract and engage customers effectively?
3. Why were these strategies more effective and successful compared to those used in other Kairos projects?

1.2 Aim of the study

This research aims to identify and analyse the digital marketing strategies that contributed to the success of the Ethereal project by Kairos. By examining how these strategies were implemented and why they were effective, the study aims to develop a framework for successful digital marketing in startups. In addition, the study compares Ethereal's strategies with those of other Kairos projects to identify key differentiators that can benefit similar businesses. The findings aim to contribute both academically and practically by offering actionable insights for startup founders, marketing professionals, and researchers interested in digital marketing effectiveness.

1.3 Demarcation

This thesis focuses on analysing the digital marketing strategies used by Kairos, with a focus on its most successful project, "Ethereal". The study specifically investigates the factors contributing to Ethereal's ability to attract customers and generate profit through its workshops. It is limited to the context of digital marketing practices within Kairos, excluding broader aspects such as operational or financial strategies.

Focusing on Ethereal allows for an in-depth analysis of successful digital marketing strategies within a controlled context. While studying multiple startups could provide a broader perspective, this research prioritises depth to generate more detailed insights. Furthermore, traditional marketing strategies and external macroeconomic factors influencing startup performance are beyond the scope of this study, ensuring a concentrated analysis on digital marketing in startup environment.

1.4 Definitions

Startup: A newly established company that is young in age, highly innovative, operates under high uncertainty and risk, and has the potential for rapid growth. (Ehsan, 2021)

Digital marketing: The marketing of products or services using digital technologies, mainly on the Internet, but also including mobile phones, display advertising, and any other digital medium. (Desai, 2019)

Product-market fit: The alignment between a solution and the identified customer problem, achieved through an iterative process that balances product viability, feasibility, and usability/desirability, ultimately leading to the creation of products that meet genuine market needs and customer desires. (Dennehy et al, 2016)

Integrated marketing communications: The process of coordinating and sequencing a brand's multiple communication tools and channels, across both traditional and digital media, to consistently deliver clear, compelling brand messages, with the aim of efficiently moving consumers along their decision journey and achieving both short-term sales and long-term brand equity. (Batra et al, 2016)

PESO model: A framework for categorising media strategies, where paid media refers to content that is commercially contracted, earned media refers to publicity generated through media relations, shared media refers to open, interactive platforms for user engagement, and owned media refers to content and channels controlled by the organisation itself. (Xie et al, 2018)

User-generated content: Any kind of text, data, or action performed by users of online digital systems, published and disseminated through independent channels, that produces an expressive or communicative effect either individually or when combined with other contributions. (Santos, 2021)

Viral marketing: Any marketing strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence, typically using digital media like email, websites, or mobile phones. (Klopper, 2002)

Social proof: A psychological phenomenon where individuals assume the actions of others represent the correct behaviour to follow, particularly in uncertain situations, with collective information from a social community influencing and conditioning individual decisions. (Talib et al, 2017)

Relationship marketing: All marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges with customers, suppliers, partners, and other stakeholders, with the aim of achieving mutual value and long-term benefits. (Hunt et al, 2006)

1.5 Presentation of the case company

Kairos (an ancient Greek word meaning “the right or critical moment”) is a Spanish organisation that describes itself as an “umbrella of projects”. Founded in 2023, the company has had 32 active projects, which included a sock brand, escape rooms, Spanish gastronomy events in Berlin, Christmas ornament workshops, and soccer and tennis tournaments.

Now, Kairos has four ongoing projects, which include “Rehabilitate” (providing help to those affected by the “DANA”, a natural disaster that took place in Valencia in November 2024), “Secret Raves” (offering an experience with electronic music in a secret community), “Hazlotuyo” (home-made pasta workshops) and “Ethereal”.

The “Ethereal” project consists of weekly workshops where activities are carried out, such as making candles, tote bags, objects made with clay... enjoying a relaxed

atmosphere, fun conversations, good music, and unlimited wine. With this project, Kairos has managed to reach unprecedented numbers, gaining its first 10k in turnover in around 4 to 5 months. To achieve this, it used various digital marketing techniques and channels, with a special focus on social media, TikTok being its greatest success.

2 Theory

This chapter presents the theoretical foundation for understanding how digital marketing strategies contribute to startup success, particularly in the case of Kairos and its Ethereal project. The selected theories directly address key challenges faced by startups, including customer acquisition, brand credibility, customer retention, and product-market fit. By structuring this section around these critical areas, the framework establishes a clear foundation for analysing Ethereal's digital marketing strategies.

2.1 Startup marketing challenges

Startups operate in a dynamic and resource-constrained environment where marketing plays a critical role in survival and growth. Unlike established companies with brand recognition and substantial budgets, startups must build awareness, acquire customers, and achieve product-market fit with limited resources.

As mentioned, key challenges include limited marketing budgets (startups cannot afford large-scale advertising campaigns), brand awareness and credibility (new companies lack brand recognition and struggle to gain customer trust), customer acquisition and retention (finding and keeping customer is crucial for survival and growth) and market validation (startups must refine their offerings to ensure product-market fit).

To overcome these challenges, startups rely on strategic digital marketing techniques. The following theoretical models provide a roadmap for how startups can navigate these challenges and reach marketing success. Aligning with the research questions, the theories explain why and how digital marketing contributes to startup growth and what makes strategies successful.

2.2 Customer acquisition and awareness

First, for a startup like Kairos, acquiring customers is the first step toward sustainability. Digital marketing provides cost-effective methods to enhance brand awareness and attract customers. The following models help explain how startups can effectively reach and engage their audience.

2.2.1 Integrated marketing communications (IMC)

IMC (Schultz, 1993) ensures a consistent brand message across digital platforms (owned, paid, earned media) by integrating communication channels, helping startups maximise the impact of their marketing efforts. It unifies advertising, PR, direct marketing, and digital media to create cohesive brand storytelling and reinforce brand identity (Nadube, 2018) .

IMC focuses on brand consistency across marketing efforts, which strengthens credibility and trust. IMC seeks to have a company's entire marketing and promotional activities project a consistent, unified image (Nadube, 2018). This consistency is crucial for effective brand positioning and the development of consumer trust, as audiences receive a uniform message no matter what medium is used.

This approach ensures strategic and tactical alignment, with IMC encouraging long-term brand positioning and short-term campaign execution (Schultz, 1993). Effective integration of marketing channels ensures that messaging stays relevant, enhancing consumer trust and long-term success. This approach aligns with the PESO model by providing a strategic structure for multi-channel communication.

2.2.2 PESO model

Complementing IMC, the PESO model categorises media into four types: Paid, Earned, Shared, and Owned, enabling brands to integrate multiple channels for visibility and engagement (Xie, 2018).

Paid media includes all financially backed placements such as digital advertisements, sponsored content, and influencer partnerships, allowing brands to reach specific audiences quickly. Earned media is exposure gained through PR efforts, such as news articles and organic social shares, which enhance credibility as they are not directly

controlled by the brand. Shared media involves social media interactions (likes, shares, comments) and can be amplified through paid promotions, fostering real-time brand conversations. Finally, owned media consists of fully controlled assets like websites, blogs, and email newsletters, offering the highest level of messaging control.

The PESO model works with IMC to support strategic planning, audience engagement, and cultural adaptability. It helps companies design multi-channel campaigns, blending paid media's reach with organic engagement. As noted by Batra (2016), "Developing the optimal IMC strategy requires choosing the best set of media options and properly mixing and matching these options". By integrating these elements, brands can achieve greater message consistency and effectiveness in different platforms. Furthermore, earned and shared media are often perceived as more trustworthy than paid media, reinforcing brand authenticity (Nielsen, 2015).

By strategically combining PESO elements, brands can enhance credibility and message consistency across platforms. This model also supports AIDA and viral marketing by structuring communication strategies efficiently.

2.2.3 AIDA model

The AIDA model (Lewis, 1898) explains how marketing messages influence consumer behaviour, helping startups design marketing strategies that guide consumers from awareness to purchase, supporting the research question of how startups effectively attract and convert customers. The model outlines four stages of consumer engagement: Awareness, Interest, Desire and Action, providing a structured framework to attract and convert customers.

The awareness stage involves brands introducing products through ads, blogs, social media, videos, and email campaigns to attract a broad audience. The next stage, interest, happens when consumers seek more information, engaging via SEO, FAQs, webinars, and targeted advertisements. The desire stage aims to create emotional and rational conviction through free trials, demos, testimonials, and value-based pricing. Lastly, action focuses on closing the sale and post-purchase engagement through smooth payment processes, feedback collection, and referral programs.

The AIDA model is especially valuable in digital and social media marketing, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with financial constraints. Chakrabarty (2023) highlights that differentiation in social media marketing helps SMEs compete with larger firms. However, many SMEs lack a coherent digital marketing strategy: “One in five SMEs does not have a coherent digital marketing strategy. Without a proper strategy, the marketing effort is not worthwhile.” (Chakrabarty, 2023). AIDA complements viral marketing by strategically crafting messages that encourage user action and conversion.

2.2.4 Viral marketing

Viral marketing uses digital tools and consumer interactions to rapidly spread messages online (García-Salirrosas, 2020). It relies on emotional and social triggers, encouraging users to share content, and amplifying brand exposure at low cost. Viral marketing supports AIDA by leveraging social sharing to enhance awareness and action, being key for startups with limited advertising budgets. When combined with AIDA and the PESO model, viral marketing maximises brand exposure, crucial for startups.

Core elements of viral marketing include consumer-driven communication (users share messages organically, low-cost scalability), emotional triggers (content evoking joy, surprise, or fear spreads faster), and social network dependence (platforms like Instagram and TikTok drive distribution) (García-Salirrosas, 2020). Moreover, García-Salirrosas (2020) highlights that the key to a successful viral campaign starts with the creation of emotionally engaging content.

Viral marketing is a cost-effective method in comparison to traditional advertising, and leads to organic engagement and broad brand awareness, as well as involving a high potential for rapid message spread (García-Salirrosas, 2020). Still, viral marketing is not a standalone strategy. Klopper (2002) emphasises its integration with traditional marketing to keep credibility, encouraging brands to develop strong digital marketing, monitor and respond to audience reactions, and invest in creative content to maintain interest, all these using analytics to track campaign performance.

2.3 Brand trust, credibility and engagement

Once customers are aware of a brand, startups must build credibility and trust to sustain engagement and loyalty. These are major factors in startup success, as new brands must

convince consumers to choose them over established competitors. This section connects to the research aim by understanding strategies that enhance startup credibility, answering how startups build trust and influence consumer behaviour.

2.3.1 User-generated content (UGC)

User-Generated Content (UGC) has become central to digital marketing with the rise of social media, enabling greater participation and self-publishing. According to Santos (2021): UGC is “any kind of text, data, or action performed by online users, published through independent channels, that incurs an expressive or communicative effect.” Key elements for this include having users as creators (not passive consumers), independent dissemination (differentiating UGC from traditional media), and expressive or communicative impact.

UGC enhances authenticity and engagement by allowing consumers to create and share content about a brand, reinforcing credibility through real customer experiences. Santos (2021) classifies UGC into four different types: Content-centric (videos or blogs with creative efforts), practice-centric (citizen journalism with digital participation), user-centric (users being consumers and producers), and platform-centric (social media and content-sharing structures).

Brands and companies can exploit UGC by encouraging customer reviews and testimonials, engaging with UGC creators on social media, and incorporating UGC into marketing for authenticity. As a key digital marketing strategy, UGC strengthens consumer-brand relationships, enhancing trust, engagement, and advocacy, and it aligns with social proof theory, reinforcing brand credibility and encouraging engagement.

2.3.2 Social proof theory

The Social Proof Theory explains how individuals rely on others’ actions to guide their own behaviour, especially in consumer decision-making and online shopping. It significantly influences trust and purchasing behaviour, suggesting that people look to others’ behaviours to determine their own actions (Cialdini, 1984). By integrating social proof, startups can build credibility and accelerate adoption, directly linking to the research question on how startups can build trust and influence customer behaviour.

Social proof plays a crucial role in online shopping by increasing credibility. Abdul Talib (2017) mentions that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) enhances consumer trust: “Online buyers’ reliance on social community shared information, a kind of social proof technique, is generally useful and effective at increasing consumer trust.” Reviews, ratings, and recommendations help reduce uncertainty, raising trust.

Companies can maximise social proof by increasing follower count to boost credibility, encouraging customer reviews to achieve trust, and selecting endorsers who align with their brand and audience. This aligns with previous research: “92% of respondents worldwide trust recommendations by friends and family, and 70% rank online consumer reviews as the second most trusted source of information” (Nielsen, 2014). The study also highlights that high engagement (likes, shares, and followers) increases trust, and social proof enhances viral marketing potential, strengthening brand credibility.

2.4 Customer retention and long-term growth

Beyond acquisition, startups must focus on maintaining customer relationships and encouraging repeat business, fostering loyalty to sustain growth. The following theories answer questions such as how to enhance brand loyalty as a startup.

2.4.1 Relationship marketing theory

The Relationship Marketing (RM) Theory (Berry, 2002) focuses on how personalisation and engagement help achieving long-term customer relationships. Digital marketing strategies that focus on meaningful interactions, loyalty programs, and customer support enhance retention and brand advocacy.

Möller (2000) argues that RM can be divided into two perspectives: Market-Based Relationship Marketing (MBRM), which focuses on consumer-oriented marketing (e.g., loyalty programs and customer satisfaction) and Network-Based Relationship Marketing (NBRM), which concerns inter-organisational relationships and business networks (e.g., supplier partnerships, B2B alliances).

Meanwhile, Hunt (2006) identifies eight key factors influencing RM success: Relational Factors (trust, commitment, and communication (Morgan, 1994)), Resource Factors (Unique competitive advantages (Das, 2000)), Competence Factors (Alliance and market-

relating capabilities (Day, 2000)), Internal Marketing (Employee engagement and internal market orientation (Gummesson, 1991)), IT Factors (Customer Relationship Management systems and interorganisational data sharing (Aaker, 1991; Henard, 2001)), Market Offerings (High-quality, innovative products), Historical Factors (Trust-building and switching costs (Anderson, 1990)), and Public Policy (Regulatory and legal influences on RM (Gundlach, 1996)). By integrating these elements, RM helps businesses strengthen customer loyalty, optimise marketing efficiency, and build sustainable relationships.

Relationship marketing emphasises long-term customer engagement rather than one-time transactions. By building emotional connections and trust, startups can improve customer retention and reduce churn.

2.5 Validation and product-market fit

Once a startup builds customer loyalty, ensuring that the product continues to align with market demand and needs becomes essential for long-term sustainability. This is where validation and product-market fit play a critical role.

2.5.1 Lean startup methodology

The Lean Startup Methodology (Ries, 2008) focuses on continuous iteration and testing in marketing strategies, promoting real-world experimentation, hypothesis testing, and customer feedback (Blank, 2003). Three components are identified: hypothesis formulation, customer probing, and market validation, and business idea convergence.

Hypothesis formulation involves structuring assumptions about the business model using (Osterwalder, 2010)'s Business Model Canvas, which outlines key areas like value proposition, customer segments, and revenue streams. Customer probing and market validation consist of engaging in stakeholder interviews to test hypotheses (Leatherbee, 2020). Empirical research confirms this is the most significant driver of business model refinement. Finally, Business idea convergence is when a validated hypothesis becomes a definitive aspect of the business model.

Post-hoc analysis of the NSF I-Corps dataset suggests that startups applying lean principles extensively, especially customer interviews, achieve better long-term success.

Those conducting more interviews and hypothesis tests were more likely to establish viable ventures and experience employment growth within 18 months (Leatherbee, 2020). These findings provide strong support for the lean startup approach in enhancing early-stage business risks.

This approach overall helps startups minimise risk and ensure alignment with customer needs, answering how startups refine their product-market fit.

2.5.2 Product-market fit

Andreessen's Product-Market Fit (PMF) theory highlights the importance of consumer feedback in digital marketing. PMF is crucial in lean product development, ensuring a product meets a significant market need. However, uncertainty in market needs, resource allocation, and design makes PMF difficult (Dennehy, 2016). Research shows 98% of new product ideas fail due to poor validation (Mullins, 2009). Traditional models focus on upfront planning but ignore early customer feedback, leading to market misalignment (Blank, 2012).

To address these challenges, customer-centric approaches prioritise iterative testing, customer feedback, and rapid adjustments to refine products (S. Blank, 2013; Ries, 2008). However, agile methodologies could fail to determine the right product to build. The Lean Startup Methodology (LSM), mentioned before, is related and integrates hypothesis-driven experimentation. The build-measure-learn cycle involves testing product minimum viable products (MVPs) to refine ideas (Eisenmann, 2012). If feedback is negative, startups are encouraged to adjust their business models.

Dennehy (2016) proposes the VFUD Framework (Viability, Feasibility, Usability, and Desirability) to guide startups to PMF. The framework assesses products in three dimensions: Viability (whether the product sustains a profitable business model), Feasibility (whether the product is technically and organisationally feasible), and Usability & Desirability (the product effectively meets user needs and offers an intuitive experience).

Product-market fit occurs when a startup's offering meets strong demand from a defined market segment. Key indicators include high customer retention and repeat purchases,

strong referral rates and organic growth and positive user feedback and market validation. Achieving product-market fit is a critical milestone, allowing startups to scale their marketing efforts effectively and addressing how they successfully position themselves in the market.

2.6 Theoretical summary

This chapter has established a comprehensive framework for analysing the role of digital marketing in startup success, specifically in the case of Kairos and its Ethereal project. By integrating key theories - IMC, PESO, AIDA, viral marketing, social proof, UGC, relationship marketing, and product-market fit – the framework provides a structured approach to understanding how startups can navigate marketing challenges with limited resources.

The theories discussed highlight the importance of strategic multi-channel communication, consumer engagement, and credibility-building in achieving sustainable growth. Furthermore, the integration of these theories shows the impact of digital marketing on startups, consumer behaviour, and brand development, and provides a good foundation for analysing digital marketing practices. Overall, this chapter provides a logical theoretical framework that supports the research objectives and provides a deeper understanding of digital marketing success in startups.

3 Method

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed in this study, detailing the research strategy, data collection methods, and analysis procedures used to investigate the digital marketing strategies behind the success of Kairos' Ethereal project. It also addresses the validity, reliability and ethical considerations of the research. The purpose of this chapter is to ensure the research design is transparent, well-justified, and replicable, aligning with the study's aims and research questions.

3.1 Choice of method

This study adopted a qualitative research strategy, employing a case study approach, and making use of interviews. A qualitative approach was chosen because of how well suited

it is for this research due to its ability to provide in-depth, nuanced insights into the specific marketing practices of Kairos and the Ethereal project, allowing for an intensive, detailed analysis of the case. As Bryman (2012) suggests, qualitative research excels in exploring complex social processes, uncovering participant perspectives, and understanding context-dependent phenomena, qualities essential to this study's goals.

A case study approach was chosen because it allows for an intensive examination of a single company's practices, providing detailed, context-specific knowledge (Bryman, 2012). Unlike cross-sectional designs or large-scale surveys, which prioritise breadth over depth, the case study method captures unique characteristics and strategic decisions that led to Ethereal's success. This approach is particularly useful when the research questions focus on understanding how and why specific strategies were effective, making it the most appropriate method for this investigation (Bryman, 2012).

Alternative methods, such as quantitative surveys or experimental designs, were considered but found to be unsuitable. Surveys, while effective for measuring general trends, would lack the depth needed to explore the strategic decision-making processes behind Ethereal's marketing success. Experimental designs, requiring controlled environments, would not capture the real-world complexities of startup marketing strategies. Therefore, the qualitative case study approach remained the most effective method for this research.

Interviews are a core data collection method in qualitative research because they offer flexibility and the ability to capture rich, detailed insights into people's perspectives, experiences, behaviours and meanings (Bryman, 2012). The type of qualitative interview used in the study is a semi-structured interview, which follows a list of pre-planned questions and themes while allowing flexibility and the possibility to explore emerging topics in depth (Bryman, 2012). It captures the complexity of the case by allowing the participant to explain their thoughts in their own words and allows the researcher to investigate deeper into issues, following up on responses to gain a fuller understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Plus, they support thematic analysis, where patterns and meanings can be obtained from the participant's responses (Bryman, 2012).

While participant observation is another popular method, interviews are often more practical, especially in case studies involving organisations (Bryman, 2012). Compared

to observation, interviews allow the researcher to gather personal interpretations and perspectives rather than just behavioural observations, access information about events or motivations that might not be observable and be less time intensive. In addition, qualitative interviews can be combined with other methods, such as document analysis, to enhance the depth and credibility of the findings (Bryman, 2012).

Overall, a qualitative approach is highly effective for case studies due to its prioritisation of in-depth understanding over broad generalisation. It provides the flexibility to explore context-specific and complex social phenomena. Interviews are an excellent data collection tool as they allow participants to share detailed, personal insights in their own words, making them invaluable for qualitative case study research.

3.2 Choice of respondents

The selection of respondents is critical to the credibility and depth of a qualitative study. This research employed purposive and critical case sampling, as recommended by Bryman (2012), to identify information-rich participants with direct relevance to the research questions. These types of sampling involve selecting individuals based on their experience, expertise and role in relation to the research topic, and focusing on participants who can offer deep and meaningful insights.

The primary respondents for this study are the owner, CEO and marketing team member in Kairos. These individuals were chosen due to their central role in the company's strategic decision-making and their firsthand knowledge of the Ethereum project's marketing practices. Kairos' owner provided strategic insights on overall company vision, the CEO detailed business operations and decision-making in marketing, and the marketing team member offered hands-on experience with digital marketing execution. As key informants, they overall provided valuable insights into the planning, execution, and outcomes of the digital marketing strategies employed.

The decision to focus on the owner, the CEO and a marketing member was driven by the need for a coherent and comprehensive perspective. Given their involvement in both high-level strategy and day-to-day operations, their insights involved both strategic intent and practical implementation. This approach avoids the risk of fragmented data and ensures the findings reflect an authoritative and well-rounded understanding of the company's

marketing practices (Bryman, 2012). Overall, this approach ensures clarity and coherence in the data while avoiding inconsistencies that might arise.

3.3 Interview guide

An interview guide is a structured yet flexible list of topics or questions that a researcher seeks to cover during an interview. It is not as rigid as a structured questionnaire but helps ensure that key issues are addressed in a consistent and systematic manner across multiple interviews (Bryman, 2012). Key features include a logical flow of questions, ensuring smooth conversation, open-ended questions that allow respondents to share their perspectives freely, and the ability to modify or adapt questions based on the interview's direction. The guide is particularly important in semi-structured interviews, where the researcher follows a set of topics but allows room for deeper exploration of emerging themes.

A semi-structured interview format was used for this study, allowing for a balance between consistency and flexibility (Bryman, 2012). This approach ensured that key themes related to the research questions were addressed while providing room for participants to elaborate on unexpected but relevant topics. The interview guide was developed following a rigorous process, beginning with the identification of core research questions. It was structured logically, covering areas such as the development and execution of digital marketing strategies, the role of social media (especially TikTok), challenges faced, and lessons learned. Open-ended questions were used to encourage detailed, reflective responses and avoid leading the participant's answers.

The interview guide was reviewed and refined to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's theoretical framework. It was designed to facilitate thematic analysis by generating rich and descriptive data. The full interview guide is attached in Appendix A.

3.4 Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which is well-suited for exploring in-depth insights into digital marketing strategies used by startups (Bryman, 2012). A case study design was selected, focusing on the marketing practices of Kairos, specifically its

Ethereal project. This allowed for detailed examination of marketing strategies in a real-world setting.

The data collection process was conducted through interviews, and involved participant selection, interview setup, and recording and transcription. Therefore, Kairos' owner, CEO and marketer were first identified through purposive and critical case sampling for their comprehensive knowledge of the Ethereal project, and the semi-structured interview was then conducted via Zoom, ensuring accessibility and convenience. Then, the interviews, lasting approximately 35 minutes each, were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed to ensure accuracy. Engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments, reach, impressions, and conversion rates were also commented on in the interviews.

3.5 Analysis of the data

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data (Bryman, 2012). This method involves a structured approach to identifying, coding, and interpreting recurring themes, making it well-suited for capturing patterns and insights from qualitative data.

The analysis process followed several key steps. First, data familiarisation, where the interview transcription was reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with the content and thorough understanding. Next, initial coding identified key phrases and concepts, highlighting patterns and notable responses. Codes were then grouped into broader themes, such as 'Viral Marketing Techniques,' 'Social Media Engagement Strategies,' and 'Challenges in Digital Marketing.' Themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency with the study's research questions.

3.6 Validity and reliability

Ensuring the validity and reliability of this study was a priority throughout the research process. Validity in qualitative research refers to the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings, while reliability concerns the consistency of the research approach (Bryman, 2012).

To enhance internal validity, a combination of interview data (direct insights from the CEO of Kairos) and existing literature (cross-checking findings with previous studies on startup marketing strategies) was achieved. This methodological approach ensured that findings were corroborated from multiple sources, strengthening their credibility. External validity, or the generalisability of findings, was addressed through analytic generalisation. While this case study focuses on a single company, the insights generated provide conceptual frameworks applicable to similar startup contexts.

Reliability was ensured through transparent and consistent data collection and analysis procedures. Recorded interviews and documented data provided a clear record, enabling replication of the study under similar conditions. Notwithstanding, this qualitative case study approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of a unique business context, making it not generalisable to all startups or companies.

3.7 Research ethics

Ethical considerations are treated as a crucial element of social research (Bryman, 2012). Research ethics primarily deal with the relationships between researchers and participants, ensuring that participants' rights, well-being, and dignity are protected throughout the research process. This is done following ethical principles including harm to participants (researchers must avoid physical, emotional, and psychological harm), informed consent (participants must fully understand the research purpose, methods, and any potential risks before agreeing to participate), invasion of privacy (researchers must respect participants' privacy and confidentiality) and deception (if used, deception must be justified and not cause harm) (Bryman, 2012).

This research adhered to ethical guidelines set by Arcada University of Applied Sciences and the principles of Good Scientific Practice . Informed consent was obtained from the interviewee, who was briefed on the study's purpose, methods and potential risks. A consent form was signed, affirming their voluntary participation and informing them about their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The template for the informed consent document is shown in Appendix B, with the signed version being kept confidential.

Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising responses and excluding sensitive business strategies from the published findings. All data was securely stored, and access was limited strictly to the research team. Data will be retained for a period of five years following the study's completion and will then be permanently deleted in accordance with data protection regulations. By maintaining ethical transparency, this study ensures credibility and upholds academic research standards.

Overall, this chapter has detailed the research strategy, data collection, and analysis methods employed in the study. By justifying methodological choices and addressing validity, reliability, and ethical considerations, the chapter ensures the research design is robust, transparent, and well-suited to achieving the study's objectives.

4 Results

This chapter presents the key findings from the qualitative interviews conducted with the CEO, owner, and lead marketer involved in the Ethereal project by Kairos. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and insights in the interview data, guided by the research questions and theoretical framework established earlier in this research. The findings are categorised into four themes: Digital Marketing Strategies Implemented, Factors Contributing to Ethereal's Success, Comparison with Other Kairos Projects, and Challenges Faced and Overcoming Them. Each theme integrates the interview insights and shows how digital marketing supported the project's outcomes and success. The results presented here do not include interpretation or theoretical analysis, as these are later discussed in Chapter 5.

4.1 Digital marketing strategies implemented

A central factor of Ethereal's success was the use and implementation of a cohesive digital marketing strategy. The interviews revealed that this strategy was based on two guiding principles: Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) and the PESO (Paid, Earned, Shared, and Owned) model. The team's goal was to achieve an emotionally engaging and shareable experience that resonated with its target audience, which were mainly members of Generation Z.

All three interviewees emphasised that TikTok was the primary marketing platform due to its alignment with the target demographic and its strong potential for organic reach.

According to the CEO, “TikTok was our main focus from the beginning, and it certainly turned into some sort of engine for our campaign and strategy” (Kairos’ CEO, 2025). The platform’s tools and viral nature made it suitable for spreading Ethereal’s message without significant spending on advertising or promotion. Furthermore, the decision was reinforced by the lead marketer, who explained: “Our strategy focused on TikTok because it’s where Gen Z lives, and because of its potential for organic discovery. We complemented that with Instagram, which was better for visual storytelling and community interaction”.

The lead marketer expressed how the team focused on storytelling, behind-the-scenes clips, and participant reactions. The content that performed best included short-form videos capturing the sensory and social essence of Ethereal, such as DIY activities, relaxed vibes, and behind-the-scenes moments. Testing a variety of content formats helped the team understand what resonated best with their audience, and optimisation occurred in real time based on engagement metrics. “What worked best were formats following trends, behind-the-scenes clips, and user reactions. We constantly tested content styles to find the most reaching ones.” (Kairos’ CEO, 2025).

“We didn’t just want visibility, we wanted participation. So, we designed content that was visually rich, emotionally resonant, and easily shareable” (Kairos’ owner, 2025). The lead marketer noted: “The content that worked best was emotional and visual, something people wanted to share because it felt like a memory.” In addition, they used a casual and relatable tone, using TikTok trends and adapting them to Ethereal’s message.

Ethereal's digital marketing approach followed the Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) model and principles to ensure brand consistency across platforms. “We ensured that every customer touchpoint, from TikTok and Instagram to our DMs and live event experiences, communicated the same brand message” (Kairos’ CEO, 2025). The marketer added to this by stating: “Whether someone found us through a TikTok video or an Instagram carousel, they encountered the same Ethereal identity: calm, creative, inclusive”. Ethereal’s TikTok, Instagram, and direct customer communications all achieved a unified brand image focused on creativity, relaxation, and community. “Even our captions and DMs followed the same tone” (Kairos’ marketer, 2025). This consistency strengthened the brand’s credibility and recognisability.

In addition, the PESO model was applied and naturally integrated, with paid media involving TikTok and Instagram to increase reach during key moments and earned media being organic content from users that helped extend reach and credibility. Shared media was also used, and content was widely shared by followers, with high levels of engagement including comments and re-shares. Finally, owned media was seen in Ethereal’s official TikTok and Instagram accounts, which were used to maintain consistent branding and storytelling, as well as their online webpage (shown in Figure 1.1). “Our paid media were mostly Instagram and TikTok ads, earned media came from people reposting their experiences. Shared media was huge, with users tagging friends, sharing their stories, commenting... and owned media included our official social accounts and pages. Each played a role in different phases of the customer journey” (Kairos’ CEO, 2025).

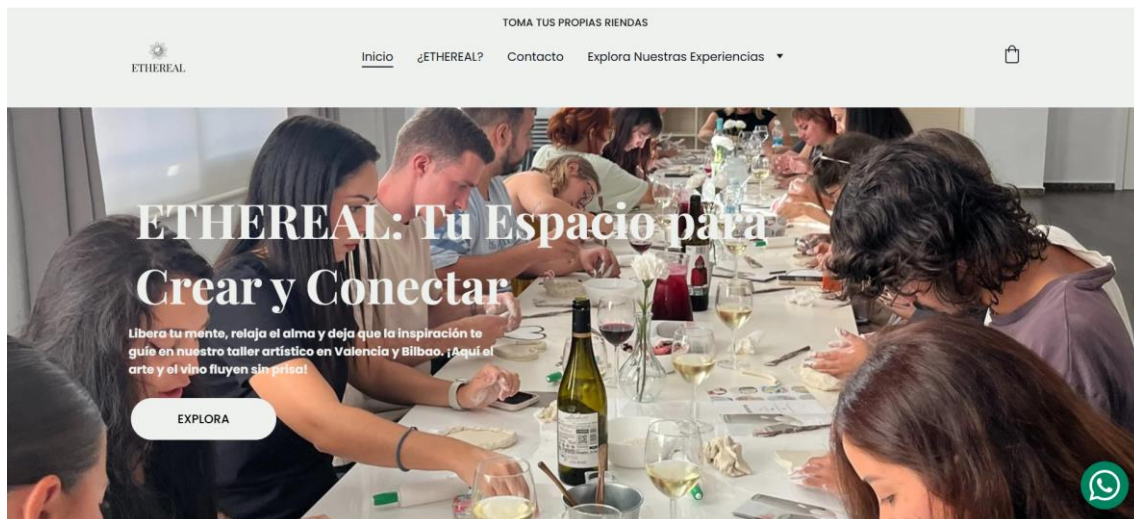


Figure 1.1 Ethereal’s Online Homepage

Viral marketing also became a key element and played a major role in user acquisition. Several videos reached hundreds of thousands of views, directly impacting workshop sign-ups, and confirming the effectiveness of content virality. “Viral content got us visibility we couldn’t afford to pay for. Storytelling, timing, and trend adaptation made our videos shareable, but it wasn’t luck entirely — we studied TikTok trends and adapted rapidly” (Kairos’ CEO).

Virality was not accidental, it was a result of ongoing testing and quick adaptation, and the owner emphasised this and the deliberate creation of emotionally charged content to drive virality: “We were intentional about creating content that caused emotion and

curiosity” (Kairos’ owner, 2025). Figure 1.2 shows Ethereal’s TikTok page, with some of its most viral content.

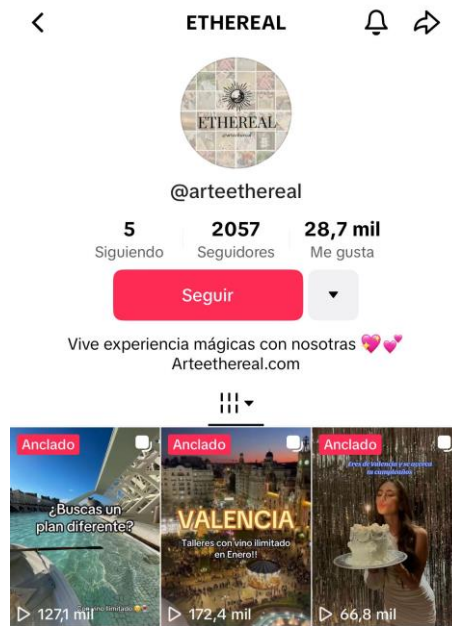


Figure 1.2 Ethereal’s TikTok page

4.2 Factors contributing to Ethereal’s success

Several critical factors emerged as key drivers behind Ethereal’s standout performance, and the interviews identified three core ones that contributed to this success. First, the emotional and experiential value proposition, with emotional storytelling becoming key. According to the owner, Ethereal’s aim was to create “a unique and shareable experience” that left a lasting emotional impression. This objective shaped all marketing and branding decisions, and Ethereal’s content prioritised emotion over product features. “With Ethereal, we flipped the script and focused on making people feel something before trying to sell anything” (Kairos’ owner, 2025).

Storytelling was central to Ethereal’s marketing. Instead of focusing on sales or offers, the team highlighted friendship, creativity, laughter, and a relaxed atmosphere. Therefore, videos celebrated moments of joy, creativity, and connection, making the experience the product. According to the lead marketer, this storytelling resonated deeply with users, especially through TikTok. As the CEO summarised: “It wasn’t just a product, it was an experience” (Kairos’ CEO, 2025).

Another success factor was User-Generated Content (UGC). Participants shared their own videos and photos from the workshops, which created a significantly positive effect on organic promotion, and created an authentic narrative around Ethereal. “Nothing beats real people sharing real moments” the owner emphasised. “Seeing participants post their own content, laughing while making candles or showing off clay creations, instantly built trust.” (Kairos’ owner, 2025). The marketing team engaged with UGC by responding to comments and reposting high-quality content, which helped build authenticity and trust. “Every time a participant posted a TikTok or Instagram story, it created a great effect of trust” (Kairos’ marketer, 2025). UGC not only built trust but expanded Ethereal’s reach, and the team actively engaged with this, reinforcing brand identity.

“The more we showed the real experience, the more people wanted to be part of it. It became more than marketing; it became a community.”

- Ethereal’s CEO.

Community-building, supported by relationship marketing, played a key role in customer retention too. Ethereal succeeded in converting customers into loyal ones, as well as brand advocates. “We weren’t just retaining customers, we were turning them into ambassadors” (Kairos’ CEO, 2025). The CEO also noted that customers returned for additional workshops and brought friends with them, reinforcing a sense of belonging. “Many customers became our best marketers because they felt part of the experience and community, and some returned for workshops and brought friends with them! It’s great.” (Kairos’ CEO, 2025). This helped Ethereal grow beyond the reach of paid promotions. By focusing on emotional connection, storytelling, and customer-driven promotion, Ethereal was able to achieve high engagement and loyalty, even as a startup with limited resources.

Qualitative feedback from comments, story shares, and direct messages was as important as engagement metric. As the lead marketer pointed out: “We didn’t just look at numbers, we paid attention to whether people were tagging friends, expressing emotions, and asking for ticket links” (Kairos’ marketer, 2025).

4.3 Comparison with other Kairos projects

All interviewees agreed that Ethereal’s digital marketing strategy differed significantly from previous Kairos projects and initiatives. Ethereal had a clearly defined audience, message, and emotional offer, while past projects lacked focus, a clear audience segment, or message tone, leading to inconsistent messaging and lower engagement. “Ethereal stood out because of its clarity... We weren’t guessing, we were communicating with purpose.” (Kairos’ owner, 2025). Ethereal targeted a clearly defined niche from the beginning, this being young adults looking for creative and social weekend experiences. The CEO stated: “Ethereal had a consistent identity from day one. It wasn't just a product; it was an experience.”

Other Kairos projects relied more on paid media, with less emphasis on organic content, community involvement or UGC. As a result, they lacked the strong community engagement and retention seen in Ethereal. “We realised that traditional ad strategies didn’t work as well for our audience. Ethereal taught us the importance of letting the audience shape the brand with us”, the owner stated in the interview. This reinforces the idea that strategic clarity, emotional resonance, and community participation are key differentiators in startup digital marketing success. Focusing on emotional resonance and community involvement, these were major differentiators. The lead marketer summarised: “Other projects tried to appeal to too many people or lacked a consistent voice. Ethereal felt personal, and it created trust” (Kairos’ marketer, 2025).

“We didn’t just tell people about Ethereal, we showed them real reactions, stories, and moments. That transparency really was what built trust and made people join” (Kairos’ CEO, 2025).

4.4 Challenges faced and overcoming them

Despite its success, the Ethereal project and strategy involved challenges. The most frequently mentioned issue was budget limitations. The CEO and marketer both emphasised that financial limitations meant that traditional advertising could not be a primary strategy. “We didn’t have the money to tell people we were good, so we had to show them”, as noted by the lead marketer. The team marketer elaborated: “We used quick edits, mobile footage, real voices... We planned ahead with a lot of content and reused UGC where possible.” Therefore, the team had to rely on organic reach, creativity,

and social proof. Content creation had to be both cost-efficient and have a high impact. The team made use of trending TikTok formats to maximise visibility, while authenticity and relatability were prioritised over production quality.

Another significant challenge mentioned was maintaining consistency in content creation, which is essential for algorithmic visibility on platforms like TikTok. The marketer mentioned that keeping a regular posting schedule was difficult with a small team but was essential for continued growth. “TikTok rewards consistency, and that’s tough when you don’t have a full-scale content team” (Kairos’ marketer, 2025). Agility was also vital, with the team continuously monitoring performance metrics and making real-time adjustments to content strategies. When a specific type of video did not perform well, the team experimented with new formats. This adaptive mindset enabled Ethereal to stay aligned with platform trends and audience expectations.

Identifying the ideal customer and the right target audience was another difficulty at first. “In the early days, we were trying to appeal to everyone” (Kairos’ owner, 2025). The team initially targeted a wide audience, but through content testing and participant feedback, they were able to refine their targeting quickly, leading to more effective engagement. In addition, the team highlighted the importance of social proof. By sharing real participants, testimonials, and experiences, Ethereal built credibility without relying on high-budget promotions. “What really moved was everyday people sharing their experiences authentically” (Kairos’ owner, 2025).

Finally, all respondents mentioned that early community-building could have been started even earlier for potentially greater impact. As the CEO noted: “I would have started building the community even earlier, even before the first launch”.

4.5 Summary of key findings

The findings from the interviews with Kairos’ leadership and marketing team highlighted various essential success factors for Ethereal’s digital marketing strategy. First, TikTok’s organic reach and emotional storytelling being central to customer acquisition, and a cohesive brand identity being maintained through IMC and PESO frameworks. User-generated content and relationship marketing significantly enhanced engagement and loyalty, and Ethereal succeeded while other Kairos projects did not due to a clear niche

focus and community involvement. Challenges such as limited budget and evolving trends were addressed through creativity, adaptability, and social proof mechanisms.

These findings form the empirical foundation for the following chapter, where the results will be analysed through established theories such as IMC, PESO, viral marketing, and relationship marketing, to understand how digital strategies drive startup success.

5 Discussion

This chapter analyses and interprets the findings presented in the previous section, making connections between empirical data and the theoretical framework. The purpose is to reflect on the implications of the results and how they relate to the established models in digital marketing, specifically for startups.

5.1 Discussion of results

The discussion analyses how the empirical findings align with or differ from established theories and prior research, and it reflects on how the different elements interacted to produce the Ethereal project's success.

5.1.1 Integrated marketing mix (IMC) and brand consistency

The findings show that Kairos applied IMC principles very efficiently throughout Ethereal's marketing strategy. The consistent brand identity and emotional storytelling observed across TikTok, Instagram, event communications and customer interactions supported a unified brand image and reinforced consumer trust. This directly reflects Schultz's (1993) emphasis that IMC strengthens brand credibility by ensuring consistent messaging across all customer touchpoints. "Whether someone found us through a TikTok video or an Instagram carousel, they encountered the same Ethereal identity" (Kairos' marketer, 2025). This coherence was critical to fostering trust, especially for a new brand lacking prior recognition, therefore validating Nadube's (2018) claim that consistent messaging enhances credibility.

5.1.2 PESO model and strategic media use

Ethereal ensured strategic alignment between platforms, with all media forms (paid, earned, shared, and owned) supporting a unified message, illustrating the complementary nature of the PESO model. The application of this model was also evident, with Ethereal blending paid ads, earned media (via user reposts), shared media (user interaction), and owned media (their own profiles). They managed to minimise reliance on paid media, focusing on organically driven credibility instead. This aligns with Batra's (2016) observation that an optimal IMC strategy requires careful balance across media types. The strong role of shared and earned media suggests that authenticity and community perception were significantly more important than traditional paid reach, confirming Nielsen's (2015) finding that consumers trust earned/shared media more than paid advertising.

5.1.3 AIDA model and consumer journey

Ethereal's marketing content followed the AIDA model (Lewis, 1898) stages: attracting attention through visually compelling TikToks, generating interest and desire through emotional storytelling, and leading viewers to action with workshop sign-up links. The use of trend-adapted content highlights Chakrabarty's (2023) claim that AIDA is especially powerful in social media marketing for SMEs. Plus, it also shows a practical application of his point that social media marketing must intentionally design pathways to conversion, not leave outcomes to chance. Moreover, the resonance of this content with Gen Z users also confirms Lewis's (1898) statement that attention-grabbing and emotionally rich content drives higher consumer engagement, something that Ethereal achieved through storytelling, and which emphasised creativity, connection, and fun.

5.1.4 Viral marketing and emotional triggers

Ethereal success heavily depended on viral marketing strategies, making emotionally compelling, easily shareable videos that followed trending TikTok formats. Following García-Salirrosas (2020), emotional and socially driven content was intentionally designed to trigger sharing behaviour. The CEO highlighted: "Storytelling, timing, and trend adaptation made our videos shareable, but it wasn't luck entirely". This proactive adaptation to TikTok trends reflects Klopper's (2002) argument that viral marketing requires strategic management, not accidental virality. By consistently evoking emotions such as joy, creativity, and belonging, Ethereal used viral potential while maintaining

brand authenticity. Ethereal's ability to achieve over 100,000 views on some videos shows how strategically crafted content can result in exponential organic reach.

5.1.5 User-generated content (UGC) and authenticity

User-generated content (UGC) also played a critical role in Ethereal's strategy, proving Santos' (2021) view that UGC strengthens consumer-brand relationships by enhancing brand trust and reinforcing authenticity. This authenticity was added through the inclusion of participant experiences and testimonials. Kairos' owner captured this: "Nothing beats real people sharing real moments." By encouraging and increasing UGC, Ethereal built trust and emotional resonance, making the brand seem human and relatable, which are the benefits highlighted by the Social Proof Theory (Cialdini, 1984).

5.1.6 Social proof theory and credibility

The use of UGC directly relates to Social Proof Theory, where seeing others' positive behaviours influences new consumer decisions. As Abdul Talib (2017) found, social proof significantly enhances trust, and Ethereal's marketing created strong social validation loops. "Every time a participant posted a TikTok or Instagram story, it created a great effect of trust" (Kairos' marketer, 2025). By prioritising organic testimonials, Ethereal changed traditional advertising credibility to social credibility.

5.1.7 Relationship marketing and community loyalty

The findings show that Relationship Marketing was crucial to Ethereal's long-term success, especially regarding retention. As stated by the COE: "We weren't just retaining customers, we were turning them into ambassadors." This aligns with Berry's (2002) and Hunt's (2006) theories that trust, emotional connection, and engagement form the basis of loyalty. Ethereal's personalised interactions (e.g. responding to DMs, remembering names...) supported Gummesson's (1991) concept of internal marketing, creating a customer experience based on emotional commitment, not transactions. This approach differentiated Ethereal from other Kairos initiatives that lacked strong community dynamics, further supporting the idea that relationship marketing is crucial for startup sustainability.

5.1.8 Product-market fit and customer validation

Finally, Ethereal's ability to refine and validate its market fit and content strategy through data and feedback follows the Lean Startup Methodology (Ries, 2008) and Product-Market Fit (Andreessen, 2007) frameworks. The process described by the respondents, this being testing content, adjusting audience targeting based on analytics, and refining the emotional messaging, reflects Leatherbee's (2020) findings that lean startups succeed through hypothesis testing and customer feedback cycles. "Using analytics like engagement patterns, age demographics, location insights... we refined our persona" (Kairos' owner, 2025).

Behavioural feedback (repeat bookings and organic referrals) provided empirical proof of product-market fit, demonstrating an agile, customer-driven model of growth. This adaptability also aligns with Mullins' (2009) observation that customer feedback is essential for aligning offerings with market needs. Unlike past Kairos projects, Ethereal's feedback-driven strategy ensured better alignment with user expectations, leading to sustainable growth.

5.2 Discussion of method

The chosen qualitative case study method proved appropriate and highly effective for this research, finding insights into Ethereal's marketing practices. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for deep, flexible insights into the marketing strategies behind Ethereal's success, and for the exploration of emerging themes like UGC use and emotional branding strategies. This approach was consistent with Bryman's (2012) recommendation for case studies, where complex social and strategic processes need to be understood in context.

All respondents (CEO, owner and marketer) were highly cooperative and provided rich, in-depth responses and data that aligned well with the research objectives. Their firsthand experience ensured the reliability of insights, while triangulation with theoretical concepts strengthened the study's internal credibility and validity. Also, the use of thematic analysis enabled the identification of clear patterns linked to theoretical concepts such as IMC, PESO, and Viral Marketing.

Nevertheless, some limitations did exist. For example, the scope was restricted to one startup and one successful project. While this allowed for in-depth analysis, it may limit generalisability. However, as Bryman (2012) notes, the goal of case studies is analytic rather than statistical generalisation, and so, the insights are valuable as conceptual tools for similar contexts. In relation to this, given the small number of respondents (three), there is potential for bias or missing perspectives.

Notwithstanding, validity and reliability were strengthened through cross-verification with theory and the consistent use of established academic frameworks. No major methodological obstacles occurred, and the data collected was sufficient to answer the research questions thoroughly. Finally, the semi-structured format enabled spontaneous and relevant statements, reinforcing the method's appropriateness for this type of research.

6 Conclusions

This chapter summarises the key findings by directly answering the research questions, presenting the study's conclusions, acknowledging its limitations, and offering suggestions for further research. The aim of this study was to investigate how digital marketing strategies contributed to the success of Kairos' Ethereal project and what differentiated it from previous initiatives. First, the study manages to answer the research questions stated at the beginning of the research.

RQ1: What specific digital marketing strategies contributed to the success of Ethereal? Ethereal's success came mainly from the strategic use of the IMC and PESO models for brand consistency, emotional storytelling, TikTok-centric viral marketing for credibility, and strong reliance on user-generated content, as well as maintaining agility through constant feedback adaptation. These methods created a consistent, engaging brand identity that resonated with the target audience.

RQ2: How were these digital marketing strategies implemented to attract and engage customers?

Strategies were implemented through organic, emotional storytelling aligned with audience values. In addition, TikTok and Instagram helped with discovery and community building. UGC, rapid trend adaptation, emotional triggers, and personalised

engagement

were

crucial.

RQ3: Why were these strategies more effective compared to other Kairos projects? Ethereal differed in its clarity of purpose, niche targeting, and participatory branding approach. They maintained a sharp audience focus, a clear emotional message, and strong community involvement. On the other hand, other projects lacked this clarity, consistent branding and user involvement, often relying more heavily on traditional paid advertising without emotional resonance.

These findings demonstrate that even startups with limited budgets can achieve impactful marketing results through strategic integration, adaptability, and user engagement. This study concludes that emotional authenticity is more impactful for startup marketing than polished professionalism, and that strategic use of shared and earned media builds deeper trust than relying on paid media only. Furthermore, UGC and social proof mechanisms can significantly increase brand growth without large financial investment, and consistency across customer touchpoints (IMC) reinforces trust and brand credibility. Finally, agile feedback loops are essential to refining product-market fit and optimising customer engagement.

6.1 Limitations of the study

While the findings are insightful, several limitations exist. First, this study is based on a single case, Ethereal, which limits the ability to generalise findings across all startup contexts or industries. In addition, the perspectives gathered were from internal stakeholders and workers, being only internal perspectives (Kairos team), which may lead to some bias or limit critical external feedback. While efforts were made to ensure validity, broader insights could have been obtained with customer interviews or survey data. Finally, time constraints and the evolving nature of digital platforms mean that findings could shift as trends evolve. Digital marketing strategies evolve rapidly due to changes in platform algorithms and consumer behaviour. The findings reflect strategies that were successful at the time of study but may need adaptation in the future. These limitations should be considered when applying the findings more broadly.

6.2 Suggestions for further studies

Future studies could expand on this research in numerous ways. First, exploring similar case studies across different industries or geographic markets to identify universal success factors, or conducting cross-case studies of multiple startups applying similar strategies. Together with this, including customer perspectives to triangulate insights and better understand audience perceptions, which could be done by incorporating direct customer interviews. Moreover, further studies could conduct a longitudinal study tracking the long-term impact of early digital marketing strategies on brand sustainability and customer retention. Finally, they could explore how emotional branding evolves over time as startups scale and professionalise.

Overall, these studies would help strengthen the generalisability of findings and further develop practical frameworks for startup marketing success, providing even richer insights into the dynamic relationship between digital marketing strategies, emotional resonance, and startup success.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview guide for case study on Ethereum's digital marketing

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of this interview is to gain in-depth insights and understandings of how Kairos has used digital marketing strategies to drive the success of the Ethereum project. Your responses will help analyse effective startup marketing methods, particularly in overcoming challenges related to limited resources, brand awareness, customer engagement, and product-market fit. Your participation is voluntary, and your responses will remain confidential and used solely for research purposes. You can withdraw at any time from the research, with no consequences. Thank you.

Section 1: Background and role (Icebreaker)

1. Can you briefly describe your position and role at Kairos?
2. How long have you been involved in Kairos' projects?
3. What has been your experience with startup marketing, and how has it evolved over time?

Section 2: Marketing strategy for Ethereum

4. What digital marketing channels has Kairos used for Ethereum, and why were they chosen?
5. How was TikTok used to increase brand awareness and engagement? What specific types of content performed best?
6. How did you incorporate Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) to create a cohesive brand message?
7. How did you implement the PESO model (Paid, Earned, Shared, and Owned media) in Ethereum's marketing strategy?
8. What role did viral marketing play in Ethereum's growth, and what were the key success factors for achieving virality?
9. What were the most successful digital marketing strategies used, and how did you measure their effectiveness?

10. Where there any digital marketing approaches that did not work as expected?
What lessons were learned from these experiences?

Section 3: Comparison with other Kairos projects

11. How does Ethereum's marketing strategy differ from those used in other Kairos projects?
12. What key factors made Ethereum's marketing approach more successful compared to previous projects?
13. Have you observed differences in customer engagement and conversion rates between Ethereum and other Kairos initiatives?

Section 4: Customer insights and market fit

14. How did Ethereum identify and target its customer base? What data-driven insights guided audience segmentation?
15. What role did social proof (User-Generated Content, customer testimonials, influencer mentions) play in building credibility and trust for Ethereum?
16. How did you use customer engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares, feedback) to refine marketing strategies?
17. How did Ethereum validate product-market fit using customer feedback and digital analytics?
18. What role did relationship marketing play in fostering long-term customer loyalty?

Section 5: Challenges and lessons learned

19. What were the biggest digital marketing challenges faced by Ethereum?
20. How did you overcome budget and resource constraints in executing the marketing strategy?
21. What were the major obstacles in customer acquisition and retention, and how did you address them?
22. If you could change one aspect of Ethereum's marketing strategy, what would it be and why?
23. What key advice would you give to other startups using digital marketing with limited resources?

Section 6: Closing questions

24. What do you think is the most important takeaway from Ethereal's digital marketing success?
25. Is there anything else you believe is relevant to this study that we have not covered?
26. Would you be open to a follow-up interview if needed?

Closing statement

Thank you for your time and valuable insights. Your responses will greatly contribute to understanding how digital marketing strategies drive startup success. If you have any additional thoughts you would like to share, please feel free to do so. If needed, we may reach out for a follow-up. Once again, we appreciate your participation in this study.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Template

Agreement on Informed Consent

Research: Natalia Student's bachelor's thesis.

This research aims to identify and analyse the digital marketing strategies that contributed to the success of the Ethereal project by Kairos. By examining how these strategies were implemented and why they were effective, the study aims to develop a framework for successful digital marketing in startups. In addition, the study compares Ethereal's strategies with those of other Kairos projects to identify key differentiators.

Through semi-structured interviews with the company's owner, CEO, and marketer, qualitative data will be collected to explore how strategic use of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), the PESO model, emotional storytelling, and viral user-generated content shape the project's growth and engagement. The interview data will be analysed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns and insights related to audience connection, authenticity, and media strategy. Data will be retained for a period of five years following the study's completion and will then be permanently deleted in accordance with data protection regulations.

- I have received, read and understood the information given to me about the research and its goals.

- I have received sufficient information on the gathering, processing and reporting of data.
- All participants have the right to withdraw themselves and their data from the research at any point with no consequences.
- All answers and other divulged information will be treated as confidential.
- All the gathered information will be securely erased five years after the study's completion.
- I am aware that the interviewer is recording the interview in order to improve the reliability of the research.
- I understand that the interviewer may contact me after the interview in case clarifications are needed.

I hereby consent to being interviewed in accordance with the above (the interviewee signs):

Signature:

Name and contact information:

I hereby promise to treat any information divulged by the interviewee in accordance with the above (the interviewer signs).

Signature:

Name and contact information:

Time and place:
