

A 1500-word reflection outlining how your project helped you to develop your leadership skills.

In this reflection essay, I provide a brief outline of my self-initiated LiA project, which primarily entailed developing and operationalising my venture ArtZzapp, and describe how this project has helped me develop my leadership skills, and achieve my LiA objectives. Before going into the structure of the essay, my three LiA objectives were: 1) expanding the artist database by including artists from underserved areas, 2) launching B2B and B2C marketing campaigns and 3) fulfilling actual customer orders.

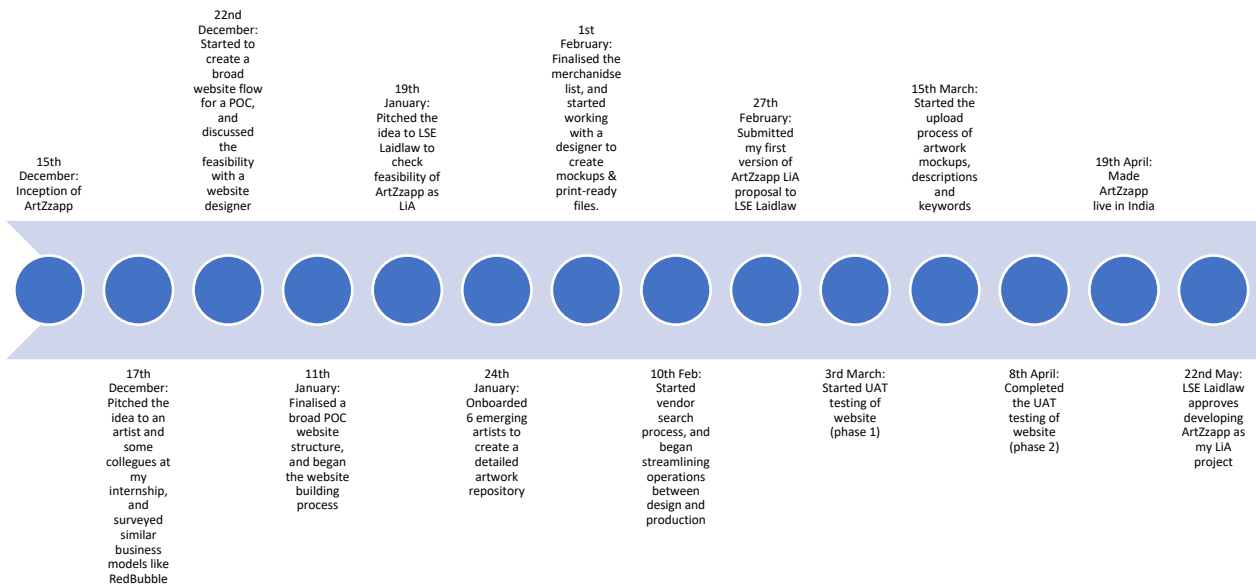
### **What is ArtZzapp?**

In simple words, ArtZzapp is a venture which aims to empower artists through print-on-demand (POD) services and its e-commerce platform. POD services enable the artists to convert the digital copies of their handmade paintings into aesthetically appealing merchandise like t-shirts, mugs, magnets and mouse pads, and the e-commerce platform helps artists to sell these merchandise to a global customer base. For each art-rendered merchandise sold, an artist earns a royalty which ensures that their unique artworks receive the recognition and the financial reward they deserve, and this is one of the ways ArtZzapp empowers artists and champions financial inclusion.

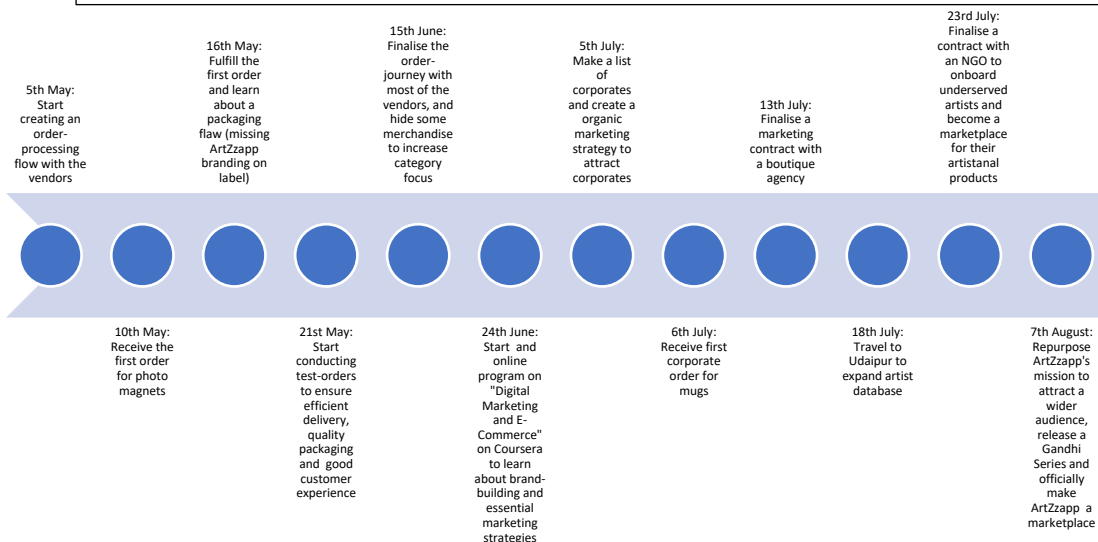
### **Genesis of ArtZzapp and Important Milestones**

The genesis of ArtZzapp lies in the experience of and exposure to the printing and the custom product industry which I gained through the first half of an internship, from September 2023 to December 2023, with a vertically-integrated e-commerce company specialising in signages, covers and home décor. During this period, I was assigned on an operations-heavy project which required me to understand their supply chain and conduct an analysis of their stickers, decals and labels category. Throughout this project, I was required to frequently visit their manufacturing plant in Gandhinagar, Gujarat which exposed me to cutting-edge printing machines; to a list of printing vendors; and to the intricate relationships and processes underlying the interactions between the customer, the design team and the manufacturing team which lie at the heart of their operations. These exposures along with my long-standing interest in art and entrepreneurship, motivated me to conceptualise an enterprise which would lie at the intersection of art, technology and manufacturing and driven by the ethos of “Empowering Artists”. Hence, it was officially in mid-December 2023, ArtZzapp was born and the following timelines give a glimpse of ArtZzapp’s journey since inception to being approved as an LiA project to present:

## ArtZzapp timeline from inception to being live: December 2023 to April 2024



## ArtZzapp timeline from order-processing to present: May 2024 to August 2024



## Evolution of ArtZzapp's mission statement

Initially when I started ArtZzapp and I would explain ArtZzapp to anyone, I would more or less give the following description: ArtZzapp aims to empower artists through POD services and its mission statement is "Empowering Artists: Printing with a Purpose". Based on this positioning, one could infer that ArtZzapp is more like a printing company which has one vertical through which a consumer can purchase the already displayed art-rendered merchandise on the ArtZzapp platform, and for every merchandise sold, an artist would earn a royalty. However, now, 8 months in this journey, I would explain ArtZzapp in the following way: ArtZzapp's mission statement is "Empowering Artists" and it offers artists a global platform where their creativity transforms into high-quality merchandise through customised POD services, and also acts as a marketplace for institutions and organisations selling artisanal products. In this newer positioning, I would emphasise that ArtZzapp is an online marketplace having two verticals i.e. a

POD vertical and a marketplace vertical, and within the POD vertical it has three distinct divisions to cater varied corporates and consumers. From this newer and more precise positioning, it was clear that my audience perceived ArtZzapp more as a consumer technology consumer company with a wide-range of custom product offerings.

## **Leadership Lessons**

If one had asked me whether I had this newer description planned when I started ArtZzapp, then the answer would have been a flat “no”. So, what made me arrive at this newer description and sharpen the vision and focus of ArtZzapp? The answer lies in rolling up my sleeves and learning from the experiences at each stage of growing ArtZzapp, some of which have helped me developed the four skills essential for today’s leader.

Embracing uncertainty and getting started: Since inception, there have been umpteen uncertainties which I encountered, from the uncertainty of artists onboarding to the uncertainty of artists willing to share their paintings to the uncertainty of engaging with the right vendors to the uncertainty of attracting customers and actually getting orders. However, if I had tried to find an ideal plan or a strategy to address these uncertainties in the beginning, I would have likely become overwhelmed or arrived at a wrong theoretical/preconceived conclusion like the artists not willing to share their paintings, and might not have taken the first steps required to start ArtZzapp. Instead, embracing uncertainties at each stage without thinking too much into the future and getting started to address these uncertainties after some strategic thinking, not only led to better and faster execution but also refined the focus and shaped the direction of ArtZzapp.

For instance, when I travelled to Udaipur to onboard new artists, although several artists were hesitant to share their paintings on the platform, a few by excited by the concept of ArtZzapp and willingly shared some of their paintings. Similarly, I faced some rejections when I tried to onboard artists from a local NGO, but I ensured that these rejections did not affect my enthusiasm to attract another artist from the same NGO, and in that way, not making any preconceived conclusions and embracing uncertainties helped me expand my artist database, and achieve my first LiA deliverable.

Thinking strategically: After having experienced the different functions of scaling up an e-commerce business from website development to operations to marketing, I can now appreciate what Michael Porter, a renowned business theorist, meant when he wrote, “The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do”. This framework of identifying what not to do for a business function made me quickly arrive at what to do for that function. For instance, a common question which confronted me across these functions was what to and not to delegate?

To answer this, I had to not only think through the most crucial priorities to have control over for each function but also do my mental SWOT analysis to arrive at which priorities would align with my strengths, and, hence, should not delegate. Some of these crucial priorities aligning with my strengths included writing artwork descriptions, setting up the content and UI/UX of website, formulating the pricing strategy/unit economics, reaching out and pitching ArtZzapp to corporates, interviewing artists and

translating their answers to English and streamlining the dropship operations with the vendors. Most of the other priorities like customising and setting up the website on Shopify, creating design/creatives for our marketing, setting up social media accounts, creating merchandise mock-ups and print-ready files and arranging the logistics, were either outsourced or managed by our vendors.

Adopting a hybrid approach to marketing, based on this SWOT analysis, in which I controlled the content while outsourced the design of the social media posts to a boutique marketing agency, helped me launch attractive organic B2B and B2C marketing campaigns highlighting artist stories/products, gain some followers, and achieve my second LiA deliverable.

Mastering execution: While listening to a podcast on brand-building in June 2024, I found Ananth Narayan's, founder of Mensa Brands, advice on building brand credibility useful. In short, what he said is that when a product company has a turnover of INR 0 to 20 Crore, the company should focus on execution and customer satisfaction rather than burning a lot of money in inorganic marketing. He emphasised the positive network effects which occur in community-driven organic marketing, if the customers see value in and are satisfied with the company's product.

Following this advice, I started to focus on conducting test-orders, perfecting the order-processing flow with the vendors, making the website look appealing, adding appropriate SEO keywords, highlighting artists's journeys and stories and delivering custom art-rendered merchandise and artisanal products to corporates in time. This focus on the execution of the controllables not only helped me save marketing money/lowered my customer acquisition costs but also allowed me to analyse customer feedback and incorporate some of the customer suggestions into the business model of ArtZzapp.

Most importantly, this pursuit of mastering execution helped me fulfil six customer orders worth approximately INR 45,000 in a timely manner and, hence, achieve my third LiA deliverable.

Having a North Star: Lastly, having a North Star is crucial as it not only brings focus to the organisation but also makes the organisation adaptable in a way in which it does not lose sight of its core mission. For ArtZzapp, its North Star mission has been "Empowering Artists" and all the verticals and divisions are peripheral to this. Having this mission in mind while analysing customer feedback or pitching ArtZzapp to a corporate, allowed me to clearly distinguish between what aligns with this mission and could potentially strengthen ArtZzapp's resolve towards its goals.

For instance, it was after a two-hour long meeting with a managing director of a medical device company where I sought his guidance on what type of corporate gifts would sell in the market, I decided to break up the POD vertical into three divisions and offer custom art-rendered POD services. Another instance is when I met one of the trustees of Manav Sadhna and she showed me the idle inventory of finished artisanal products made by underserved children that I thought of launching a marketplace vertical for ArtZzapp and create meaningful Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) gifting opportunities. Both these instances not only strengthened

ArtZzapp's resolve but also transformed ArtZzapp's positioning from a printing company to a consumer technology company.

### **Future Plans and Legacy**

To summarise, throughout this journey of operationalising ArtZzapp I have learnt the following two lessons about the nature of leadership i.e., 1) in today's world where people revel in making complex strategies and theoretical plans about leading organisations, I have realised that true leadership is "hands-on" and 2) to effectively lead organisations and yield positive results, a leader has to keep the consumers' or the target audience's interests before their interests.

In terms of the future plans for ArtZzapp, since I could devote about three months to actually fulfill orders of my artists, it is too early to see any significant results in terms of improvement income generation or other metrics. However, it is clear that marginalised and differently-abled artists have an additional stream of income which over time can improve, if I continue my work with ArtZzapp. Moreover, given the nature of my platform, there is a potential of scaling ArtZzapp globally since many of my vendors back in India have global shipping arrangements in place. Scaling up ArtZzapp would entail forging more partnerships with global NGOs and art-related institutions, onboarding marginalised artists from across the world and even partnering with local vendors—all of which would aid in creating employment and generating additional income streams.

Although for the next year, ArtZzapp will be in a dormant phase, given my other university commitments, spending about eight months on ArtZzapp has made me more empathetic and humbler but also bolder and more audacious. I could develop these former two traits mainly because of the societal and inclusive nature of ArtZzapp and the latter two traits given the business-oriented nature of ArtZzapp. Finally, I would like to thank Laidlaw Foundation and the LSE Laidlaw team, for their support in allowing me to pursue a self-initiated LiA during my time in India.