

IATL project summary report: Nutume (“new to me”) Marketplace and App Prototype

Project aims:

The project will enlist 5-10 students at the University Of Warwick into focus groups, gaining insight into people’s thoughts on the concept for my business – nutume (“new to me”), developed through Warwick Enterprise. nutume is a free to use marketplace, in development, permitting the give and take of stuff between people with shared wants and needs.

The focus groups will be run by the founder of nutume, Joshua Shephard, to understand what people think about the visual aspects of the app: imagery, iconography, and fonts, alongside our language and tone of voice used to convey our business’ mission throughout the app screens.

Should the focus groups yield positive results, it will confirm that the app has been well thought through and is well-designed. This will enable nutume to enhance their pitch by including external validation from students at the University of Warwick, supporting their business development journey as they seek further investment to fund full app development.

What did I do?

Due to the timing of my project, being conducted at the end of term three, it was not possible to coordinate in-person focus on a date and time that could suit all people. I tried to pivot to virtual focus groups; however, with many people having booked their summer holidays, it was once again impractical to coordinate focus groups. It was therefore important to design an alternative way of collecting the information.

After confirming with my peers that, despite the focus groups not going ahead, they were still willing to provide feedback, I created a PowerPoint presentation which walked the recipients through our app prototype. The presentation was annotated to explain the user flow and was designed to replicate the flow of the app. This was sent out to my peers, via email, along with some additional questions for them to think about with the expectation that they respond to me via email.

What were the outcomes: *what did I learn and why does it matter?*

The visuals of the app

When the app first loads up, people thought that the visuals were very appealing and give a clear sense of the user purpose. The colours of the app were liked by all people, matched by an easy-to-read font and complementary colours. This was reflected by most of our users stating that the app seemed like it would be easy to use and accessible to a lot of people. Many people noted the minimalistic look of the app, which, when accompanied by our cartoon-style imagery; however, some of the imagery could be replaced to be more specific about waste to more clearly promote our company mission.

User interface

Continuing the positive feedback, the app’s design was thought, by university students, to be easy to use. For example, having all the tabs at the bottom of the app was seen as a sensible choice, making each of the features easy to access from the homepage. Additionally, the search bar at the top of the homepage was seen as a useful addition to allow users to fast-track the time it takes to reach the area of the app that they want to visit. Furthermore, with both features

commonly seen across popular apps, it should mean that nutume will be easily adopted by its users. Even though our app showed similarities with other apps, with similar purposes, the nutume specific language such as swapping using the term “nu” in place of “new” was seen as a nice way to reinforce the brand throughout the app and stand out from the crowd. Furthermore, the ability to skip certain steps during the setup makes the app even more appealing, compared to competitors who sometimes make it mandatory to share a lot of personal information.

In terms of the most useful features of the app, the feedback emphasised the importance of the local, community-centred focus of the app, making it easy to acquire things you need or clear out things you no longer want. Acquiring items, you’d like was also seen as a unique selling point of nutume, with this function not seen on other commonly used marketplace apps – another way that nutume stands out from the crowd. Similarly, the map function was also very useful as it would incentivise the users to collect an item or list an item if they know that other users are nearby, whilst the forum was seen as a great way to increase the sense of community within the app.

Where could the app be improved at present?

In the nutume app prototype, we proposed a service whereby pre-loved items could be listed for free and items which were desired could be requested, these functions were termed listings and wanted, respectively. Our focus group members thought that it would be useful if the wanted and listed items were on separate pages as they could get lost in each other. Alternatively, it was suggested that the one page in the app could be separated into two columns such that the two similar functions are distinct. Furthermore, this distinction should be highlighted more clearly when the featured items are shown on the app homepage. People also felt that the homepage was a little overcrowded and that it could be simplified to create a more enticing interface, giving emphasis that the app is free to use and that all items are listed and exchanged for free. It is important that the free-to-use aspect of the app and the ability to request items are highlighted and these features permit nutume to stand out from their competitors.

Where could the app be improved in the future?

Our feedback showed that if the app progressed, it would be nice to be able to interact directly on the listings through a comment section, allowing general queries to be answered and seen by all. Increasing the interactions between the users via the forum was also requested by our focus group members, with a pivot to bringing nutume closer to a social media platform being a way to raise awareness about the issues of waste, allowing passionate people to connect. This was reinforced by a quotation from a PPE student at the University of Warwick who said *“I think you’d get more traction if you were able to connect people who share a passion for this issue and raise awareness/campaign for change (like the Warwick Vegan society does in the WhatsApp group chats). Starting discussion and raising awareness about the cause is going to be important if you want to grow your app.”* Interactions between users could also be promoted through a user rating functionality as *“if someone had a particularly negative/positive experience receiving an item from another person, this may influence the next person’s attitude towards getting an item from them.”* This was mentioned again by another member of our focus group who said that such a rating system could be integrated into a monthly ranking system to incentivise our users. Furthermore, specific notifications would be useful – like a job search - where you choose to be notified if items within specific categories were uploaded.

Where would the app work best?

Thankfully, in line with our company's values, people thought that the app would work best in communities, especially ones where many peoples' needs are linked and there's a constant turnover of goods. Consequently, we have validated that the app would be great for Universities, especially on campuses, where people will be more inclined to look for some freebies. Interestingly, people did think that the service could be improved if nutume were to connect with local businesses, offering another way to help reduce waste whilst also potentially helping to solve the problem of some people not being inclined to list items for free. Furthermore, expanding the nutume users across the wider area, expanding to all young people (not just students) could increase the level of engagement.

Concerns following the focus group

Despite seeking to understand the strengths of our app, it was also important to understand potential flaws of the app and the concept of nutume. Our primary concern was that none of our group members mentioned using the app to list their items; therefore, there is the potential that getting the app started and populated with listings, could be challenging. This was further validated by a student who said that *"I wouldn't get much value from giving stuff away for free because if my item was in useable condition (as I imagine it will have to be if it gets listed on your app) I would rather sell it. I would only really be using the app to get stuff for free that other people wouldn't want."* Moreover, acquiring users may also be challenging due to the close similarities between nutume and Olio, a free-to-use marketplace which already has millions of users; nevertheless, the concern with competitors isn't too large as we are entering an untapped market by looking to deploy nutume within connected communities rather than focusing on localities, as Olio do.

App development was also a concern, with the process being a very expensive one, whilst there not being a clear way of monetizing the app to both profit as a business and afford the servers to host the app.

Finally, people also raised the issue that there may be scammers/bots/inappropriate users who violate the community aspect; therefore, monitoring the exchange of items, and direct messages, and making users empowered to report inappropriate behaviour will be important.

My experience of student enterprise at Warwick

Being involved in student enterprise is an extremely exciting venture to follow. The best thing about starting a company is that it is yours to take it in whatever way you feel; therefore, you can decide how the final product looks, what purpose it serves, and what YOUR company stands for – this originality is something that I love about entrepreneurship. As a student, it is also an amazing way to learn so many new skills, whether that be how to pitch a concept, network with like-minded individuals, or begin to understand accountancy and finance. Not only do these skills help you grow a business, but they also look amazing on a CV when applying for other jobs – helping you stand out from the crowd.

Despite the glamorous picture that I have just painted, student enterprise is also extremely challenging. Firstly, it requires a lot of time, effort, and commitment. This means that you may have to work early mornings and late nights to balance the business and your university commitments. Furthermore, it can feel very much like you're a small fish in an enormous ocean, with a lot of the challenges that you face seemingly being outside of your (limited) expertise.

Unfortunately, I found that at Warwick, there was limited entrepreneurial support, specific to small start-ups; therefore, it often required discussions with my co-founders and our wider network to try and receive support. The lack of specific help for immediate start-ups is even more frustrating as it often means that a lot of time is spent making unnecessary mistakes; however, this is all part of being an entrepreneur.

Finally, raising finances to support your endeavours is also challenging at university, with funds already stretched by university life, limiting the investment that one can make in their own company. Fortunately, nutume was successful in many national funding opportunities; however, constantly applying for all of these made business development a very slow process as it seemed like a mountain had to be climbed just to raise the funds to begin building the foundations of a business. Such a struggle is why we were so thankful to receive the funding from IATL to help us host a website, create some digital content, and run these focus groups – accelerating our journey towards achieving proof of concept for nutume. In my opinion, it would be amazing if universities gave more support to budding entrepreneurs with targeted support, rather than the generic accelerator-style groups that are run, as I think that this would give many more people the confidence to begin their entrepreneurial journey.