

ARÊTE

Case Study

Arête

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In an age of globalization, interconnectivity via social media, new technology options, and increasing consumer awareness, the fashion industry is in a state of flux. Recent years have seen an explosion of small designers catering to niche audiences, bolstered by the growth of social media communities around specific trends, aesthetics, and interests. Meanwhile, customers have become more invested in particular aspects of fashion, such as sustainability, ethical sourcing, and the quality of materials.

Historically, consumers and the smaller brands who meet their interests have faced an uphill battle of finding each other. An interested shopper might have to click through hundreds of links to find what they're looking for, and emerging designers must overcome stiff competition from the big brands that dominate mainstream stores. However, CSAIL Startup Connect Plus member Arête is aiming to change that with their AI-powered marketplace app. As they cultivate a growing community of small-to-medium sized brands focused on quality products, Arête uses a machine learning recommendation engine to match users to items that fit both their individual tastes and evolving trends. In other words, Arête wants to make it easier to “discover the next big thing in fashion.”

ABOUT THE COMPANY

It was a love of fashion that brought together Arête co-founders Kotryna Juknevičiute and MJ Perez. Both of them have a passion for discovering new brands that align with their personal vision and aesthetic, but shared a frustration with the way things have typically been done. Juknevičiute says that traditional fashion websites are “not tailored to you. It's a very inefficient system that lacks personalization. If you want to discover some new designers, it's hard to know where to go. And then if you actually want to know more about the designer or their story, there's really no resource for that type of information.”

After connecting at a panel focused on sustainability in fashion, Juknevičiute and Perez started working on a way to streamline this process using the power of AI and ML. Juknevičiute had already been working on the concept behind the company, so together they were able to accelerate the process of finalizing the app, which launched in early 2024. They used focus groups to design the platform with their customer base in mind, consolidating brands, aesthetics, trends, and purchasing options into one location. The aim, as Perez explains, is “closing the gap between the content that [Arête customers] are interacting and engaging with on Instagram and then making sure that when they come to us and shop for it, they don't have to search for something explicit. They can just go on our app and see a carousel of items that are super aligned with their style and aesthetic.”

Since launching the app, Arête has continued to grow and add new features, such as the option to search for specific occasions. As a fashion company based in New York City, they've had no shortage of interest when it comes to job applications, with Juknevičiute joking, “We don't even have a job posting out there, but we get applications every day of people asking to work for the company.” However, being a startup is never without its trials.

With designers located around the globe, onboarding new brands can be a logistical challenge. Many of the designers might not have a big inventory, shipping times can vary widely, and country-specific website regulations often require creative workarounds. Furthermore, getting people to download an app is notoriously difficult. Juknevičiute says the current thinking is that “someone has to see an app seven times to download it,” which means their company has to put significant effort into marketing and outreach. As a relatively new startup with limited resources, this means taking a community-centered, boots-on-the-ground approach. Despite being a more time-intensive process, Juknevičiute believes their approach has been beneficial to Arête as it’s created a loyal base and a network of invested brands which, when combined, will give them a solid foundation going forward.

Since launching the app, Arête has doubled down on the things they believe they can do well. This means continuing to cultivate their cohort of brands, getting feedback from users to make sure they’re delivering the best quality product, and refining their personalized discovery platform with the latest AI technology. For that, they’ve decided to engage with MIT CSAIL.

CONNECTING WITH CSAIL: ANNUAL MEETING, STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, AND MORE

Cassie Huang, a member of Arête’s founding team, was the one who introduced the company to CSAIL Alliances. Huang connected with MIT while at the Wharton School and was impressed by the university and, specifically, CSAIL. She realized that CSAIL resources matched the needs of Arête and advocated that they join Startup Connect Plus.

Soon after joining, Juknevičiute and Huang came to campus for the Alliances Annual Meeting, a three-day event which allows members to engage with the CSAIL community and meet researchers, students, staff, and other industry and startup members. Arête participated in the startup showcase, which allowed them to share their company with the CSAIL community, and Juknevičiute says that through the meeting “we connected with some great people.” For Juknevičiute, it was informative to see what other startups were doing, especially since Arête is different from so many of the other technology startups. “We brought a very different angle to the CSAIL community during that meeting,” Juknevičiute says.

The Annual Meeting was also useful as a way to kick off one of the major ways Arête is looking to interface with CSAIL, which is student engagement. At the event, Juknevičiute and her team were able to meet PhD candidates and learn about their interests. While their company attracts plenty of applications, Juknevičiute and Perez say finding the right fit for Arête isn’t easy. They’re looking for a “specific type of personality,” someone fully invested in fashion but also informed and excited about technology. As part of the growing “fashion tech” world, Arête wants to attract the best talent available to them, and they see CSAIL as a good place to do that.

Toward that end, Arête took advantage of another CSAIL Alliances opportunity by hosting a Tech Talk on October 16th, 2024, called “Leveraging AI in Fashion.” This event invited students to learn about the technical advances behind Arête’s platform—such as semantic search, name entity recognition, and object detection & segmentation—and weigh in on upcoming challenges like personalization and AI styling. Several students and members of the broader CSAIL community attended, giving Arête a chance to “brainstorm together,” as Perez said during the talk. They hope that this and future engagements will continue to raise awareness about their company and interest students who might be a good match for Arête.

LOOKING AHEAD: PIVOTS, GOALS, AND A GROWING COMMUNITY

According to Perez, the company has undergone a major pivot recently, narrowing their focus to “two or three things where we really believe we can shine.” For example, Arête is working to improve the shopping experience and make it as easy as possible for their users to follow trends. They’re also excited to prominently share the stories and backgrounds of the brands they feature. Perez says, “because we have such personal relationships with a lot of these designers, that’s something that we can easily bring into the platform.”

On the business side, Arête’s goal right now is to have a hundred brands by the end of the year, a target Juknevičiute hopes will be facilitated by their participation in 2024’s Fashion Week in NYC. Also, Arête plans to introduce new aspects in the app, such as subscription programs for designers which would help support smaller brands. Broadly speaking, Juknevičiute says that Arête will be intently focused on fundraising this fall to support the next steps of their vision.

Overall, both Juknevičiute and Perez are excited to be innovating in this industry. Perez explains, “fashion has always been a very important form of self-expression” for her, and “being part of the future of this space, and also with the intersection of my other passion, which is the technical side, is why I love to work here and why I’m committed to seeing it succeed.” Juknevičiute agrees, adding how enjoyable it is to work with like-minded people with similar interests. “I love the designers, I love the creators, I love our team,” she says, and they both hope to broaden that community through their association with CSAIL Alliances.