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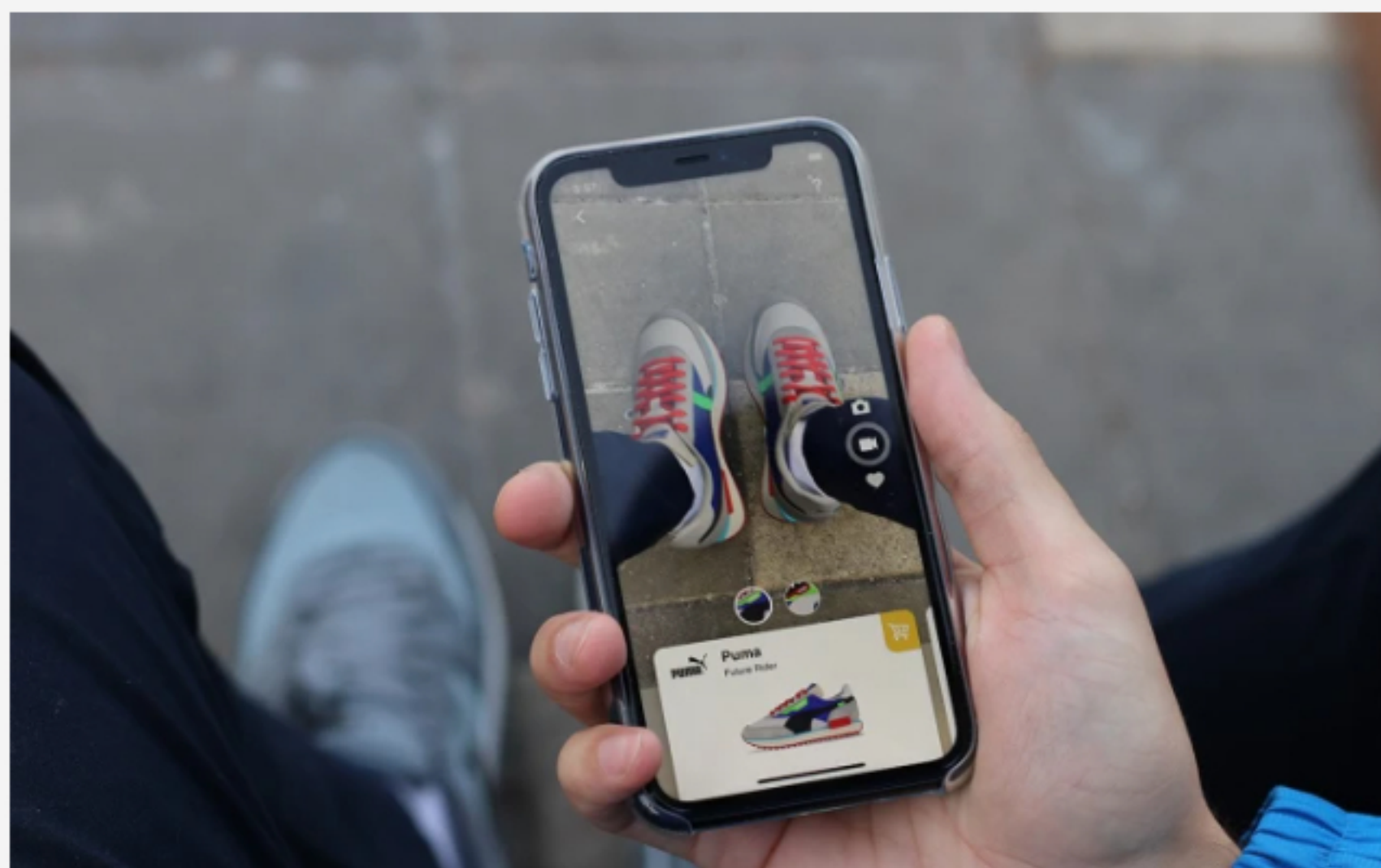
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# Now Could Finally Be the Time for Augmented Reality, As Retailers Look to Optimize E-Commerce

By Madeleine Streets



The Puma Future Rider sneaker is virtually tried on using the Wannaby AR function.

CREDIT: COURTESY OF WANNABY

Augmented reality was first imagined as an e-commerce tool years ago, but widespread adoption didn't catch on — until now. In partnership with Snap Inc. and its Lens Studio, a number of AR companies are scaling their technologies so that brands and consumers can explore products in a 3D way, as they increasingly shop online.

While the technology itself has improved, a main factor in the popularity of AR has been the need for footwear companies to provide a more compelling e-commerce experience. Online shopping had been growing year over year, but the pandemic accelerated this phenomenon while also eliminating the option to view products in person. Without a brick-and-mortar component, merchants had to find a new way to accurately represent their inventory.

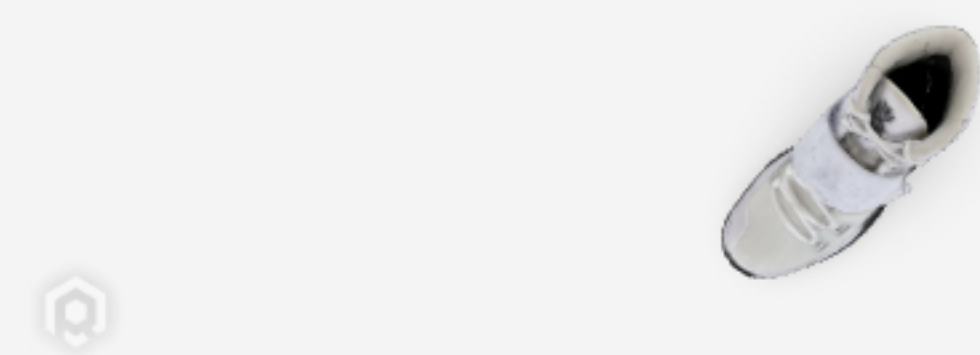
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"People are stuck at home with their phone, only able to view still product images," said Shayne Smith, chief business development officer at RestAR. "This provides a good sense of how the product should look, but it sometimes lacks the full confidence the consumer needs in order to complete the purchase."

This has created a welcome environment for a crop of AR companies, such as RestAR and Wannaby, to promote their technology as a way to bridge the confidence gap. By partnering with Snap, these companies have been able to extend the reach of their filters and showcase the interactive nature of augmented reality to a large — often younger — audience. Notable footwear products available through Snap Inc.'s AR partnerships include Gucci's sneaker collection and Nike's Kyrie 6 basketball shoe.

Using the AR filter allows a consumer to access a high-resolution, 3D render of a desired product through their smartphone. The footwear can then be virtually "tried on" when the phone camera is positioned over their feet, as the technology maps the product to the user's body. While this does not replicate the feel of the product, it can help provide a clearer idea of the aesthetics in a real-world environment.



Dmitry Rogozhkin, head of business development at Wannaby, explained why AR has finally found its moment: "There is a combination of conditions: a mobile-native audience (Gen-Z), a hardware revolution and new game-changing rules brought by COVID-19," he said, adding that the technology is altering the buying experience. "Sneakers become not only footwear, but a new culture with its masterpieces. AR try-on allows users to experience the models they can't get in-store."

E-commerce companies that leverage AR can use it to boost both marketing efforts and online conversion. The interactive, gamified nature of augmented reality lends itself to product launches and digital experiences — a critical part of brand engagement now that many retail interactions are limited to online. Shoppers who use it to confirm their confidence in a purchase are also less likely to return the product, according to Wannaby.

But Smith warns against jumping into AR too quickly, suggesting that 3D assets are a good middle ground for e-commerce companies that are exploring this area for the first time. These can be easily created through tools like RestAR and then later used for augmented reality applications if needed.

Then, once a company is ready to launch AR, he said a number of factors should be considered. "With great power comes great responsibility. Escaping the confines of the screen enables creating incredibly rich experiences, but it is a balancing act," said Smith. "Good graphics, surprising ideas, engaging content and clean, understandable interfaces are key to providing a functional application of AR, while keeping the user fully immersed."

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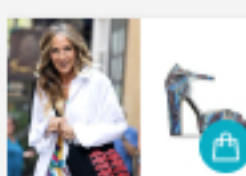
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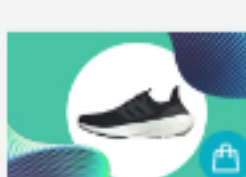
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