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# Are Investments in Tricked-Out Virtual Experiences Actually Worth It for Shoe Brands in a Post-Pandemic Era?

By Samantha McDonald



Inside Ralph Lauren's Beverly Hills store, via the RL Virtual Store Experience.

CREDIT: COURTESY OF RALPH LAUREN

In recent years, a new online retail experience has been taking hold: virtual-reality shops — where consumers can view digital models of stores, complete with aisles, shelves and, in some cases, salespeople.

As the pandemic continues to accelerate the migration to online channels, the VR experience has become a competitive tool in a retailer's omnichannel arsenal. But is the investment in the costly technology actually worth it?

According to experts, it depends.

While VR presents myriad opportunities in a post-pandemic world, some data suggests that consumers are still slow to embrace the technology. A survey by Klarna showed that four in five shoppers were not interested in using VR or AR (augmented reality), and nearly three-quarters of respondents said they valued shopping in physical stores, which offer a human experience that can't be replicated online. (Meanwhile, 42% of retailers admitted they were more focused on developing their online technologies versus those in stores.)

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What's more, getting into VR is no easy financial lift: Retailers will need to build the proper infrastructure. This means devoting resources to user experience design, which would ensure that the technology is available and accessible to its customer base — ultimately enhancing, and not just supplementing, the company's digital offering.

Raghav Sharma, co-founder of interactive online fitting room Perfity, said the expense can be worthwhile. "It breaks up the monotony for the shopper," he explained. "For a brand that's more experiential and trying to re-create the store experience — that wants a unified omnichannel feel — it certainly makes sense, especially if your price point

is high enough. [Customers] can get a sense of the garment more so than they could from a product page."

That said, he added, "If I were a mass-market brand that relies on volume, and I didn't have a set of complicated products, I'm not so sure I'd focus on VR today."

## The Evolution of VR

Access to VR has improved dramatically in recent years. Initially available to gamers via headsets and hand controllers, the technology has since evolved for use on desktop and through mobile devices — allowing retailers to reach a broader swath of customers without requiring them to purchase expensive equipment.

"The early adoption we saw was largely dependent on needing a headset and extra equipment to experience VR, but now we have browser-based virtual experiences, where the phone doesn't need anything else other than a connection," said Robert Brown, managing director and client executive for BDO Digital. "You can now begin to virtualize the experience of navigating and shopping as you would in stores — and in some cases the ability to try on certain things."

Over the past few months, a number of brands and retailers have dabbled in the experience: Ahead of the holidays, Ralph Lauren introduced its brick-and-mortar/online hybrid via the RL Virtual Store Experience, which invited customers to virtually step into its flagships in New York, Paris, Hong Kong and more major metropolitan cities around the world. Farfetch also recently extended its pilot with startup Zeekit. Through the program, shoppers are able to "try on" products from the luxury fashion marketplace and see how they look on different sizes and skin tones.

According to Coresight Research, which cited data from Statista, consumer spending on reality technologies — including AR and VR — was projected to reach \$7 billion in 2020. (That study, released in May, was conducted before the pandemic, which has prompted a major shift toward tech adoption among both consumers and brands.)

"This catalyst we've had over the past year called COVID — along with the shutdowns of most brick-and-mortar locations, as well as the influence of mobile — [has led] retailers to rethink their strategies around omnichannel experiences, where both digital and physical integrate into a unified focus for the brand," added Brown.

## The Case for Footwear

For Que Shebley, a designer whose fashion-tech company Q by Qs sells luxury footwear and leather goods, the future could include more mass personalizations through the use of technologies like VR, AR and even 3D printing.

Currently, his brand allows customers to participate in the design process via a 3D customization platform they can access from the comfort of their own homes.

"Our clients love the idea that they can see the product is almost lifelike on their screen and be able to demand so much with just a few taps and interact with the design process that has been dictated by the fashion industry for so long," said Shebley, who explained that business has been "steadily increasing" amid the health crisis.

He added, "[With] their first experience, they may be hesitant since they can't try it on or feel it." However, Shebley added the feedback "has been great" and shoppers tend to be repeat customers.

But such technologies might not be the answer for all omnichannel-focused companies. According to experts, luxury could stand to benefit more than mass merchandise brands due to the nature of their product offerings. For instance, shoppers eyeing a \$500 pair of shoes online might prefer a curated experience that justifies their digital purchase. In addition, VR serves apparel better than it does footwear. "There's so much that is tactile in a shoe," Sharma posited. "Is it slipping from your heel when you walk? Is the upper too stiff? Is it hitting your toe in the wrong place?"

Experts stressed that it might not be in every retailer's best interest to adopt VR — particularly those that have yet to experiment with other digital technologies (think in-app shopping, smart vending machines and more). Instead, they advised that companies ensure their online and brick-and-mortar stores work seamlessly before adding another channel into the mix.

Plus, if their target market doesn't already interact with the technology, the investment behind hiring the knowledge and building the infrastructure to set up a VR experience could ultimately prove detrimental to a brand or retailer.

"The opportunity for virtual success has to be grounded in what we're going to deliver to our customers and why. The 'why' is not the sex appeal of the technology, but what the technology contributes terms of converting [a sale] and how it builds on the value of our brand," Brown said. "[Retailers] shouldn't go at it from a gimmicky standpoint; they need to combine the brick-and-mortar with the digital and virtual to give customers the options they expect — otherwise they'll go someplace else."

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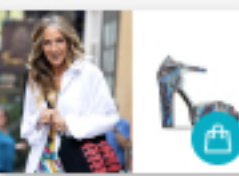
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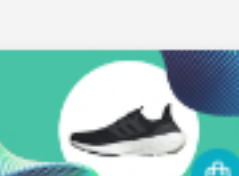
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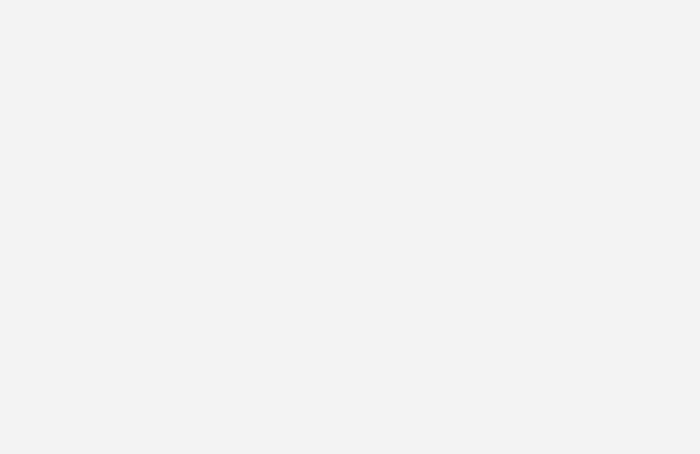
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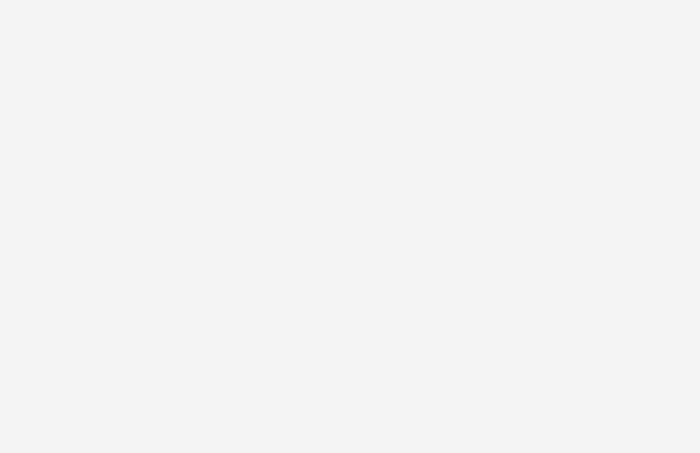
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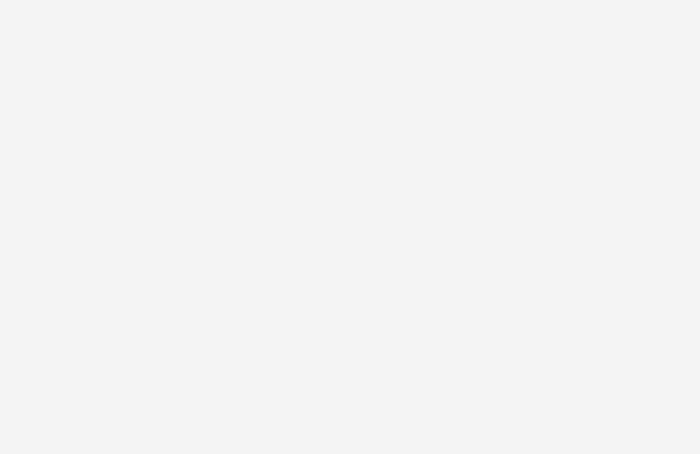
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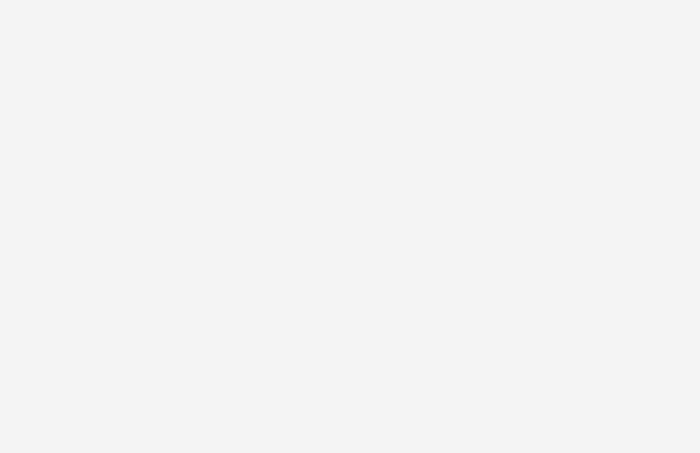
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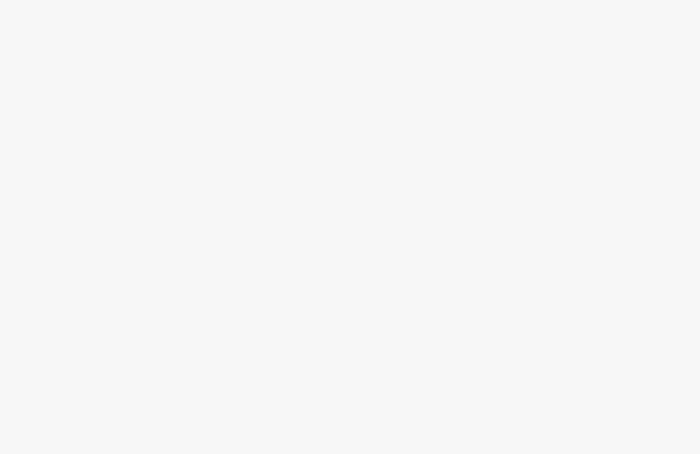
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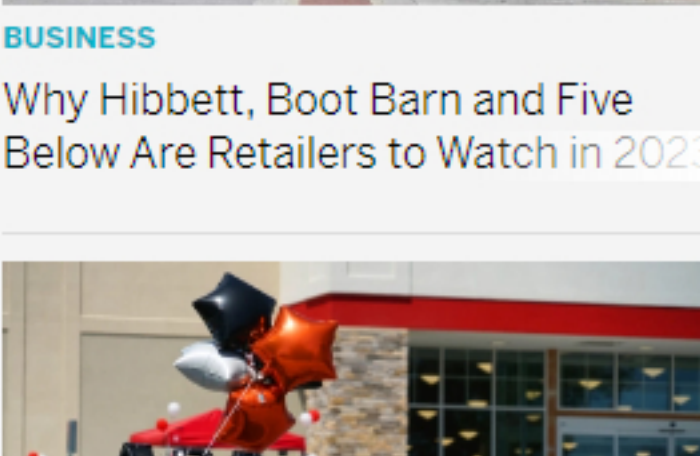
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