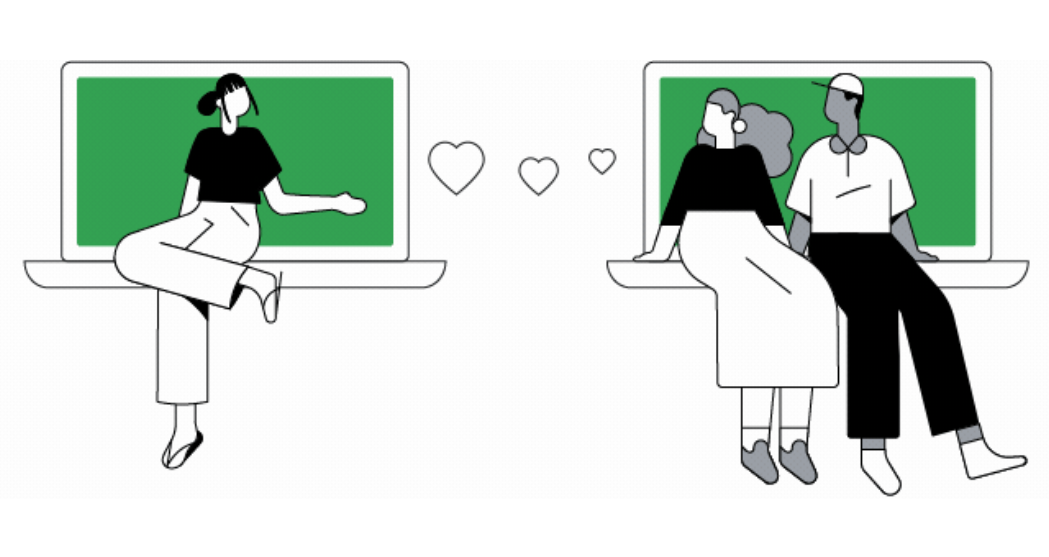
Bridging distances

The pandemic kept countless people physically apart, and consumers quickly found ways to adapt. But in 2021, we saw the sense of separation deepen. As a result, consumers **moved beyond finding brief moments of connection**, to finding **new ways to express themselves and nurture deeper, more ongoing relationships**, both online and offline.



As more COVID-19 variants emerge, it's clear that the pandemic isn't quite over yet. COVID-19 is still a top concern for people, and consumers in APAC remain wary of being in close physical contact with others. In fact, people in India, Japan, and South Korea feel more anxious about resuming normal activities compared to the global average.[24]

But fears of resuming in-person activities haven't overridden basic human needs for personal connection and belonging. Regardless of physical distance, rising searches show us how people will continue to find new ways to connect, and how they are increasingly open to using digital to do so.

One example is how people have started to adapt the way they express their affection. In lieu of physical touch or time spent together, people are searching for gifts they can send their loved ones, and inspiration for the right words to wish them a happy birthday or anniversary.

An October 2021 survey found that one in two APAC consumers are still choosing to meet their loved ones virtually instead of in person,[25] and searches for online group activities like escape rooms, races and concerts are seeing consistent growth.

As the world grows more dependent on digital technology to form meaningful human connections, brands need to move on from thinking of digital platforms as purely functional channels or just an online front end. Instead, consider how you can get longer-term value out of connecting meaningfully with your customers online.

In marketing, we often say the medium is the message. But that doesn't mean that a channel should do all the hard work for you. How are you ensuring you're reaching the human behind every channel strategy? More importantly, what can you do as a brand to help facilitate better, deeper, more meaningful relationships for your consumers?

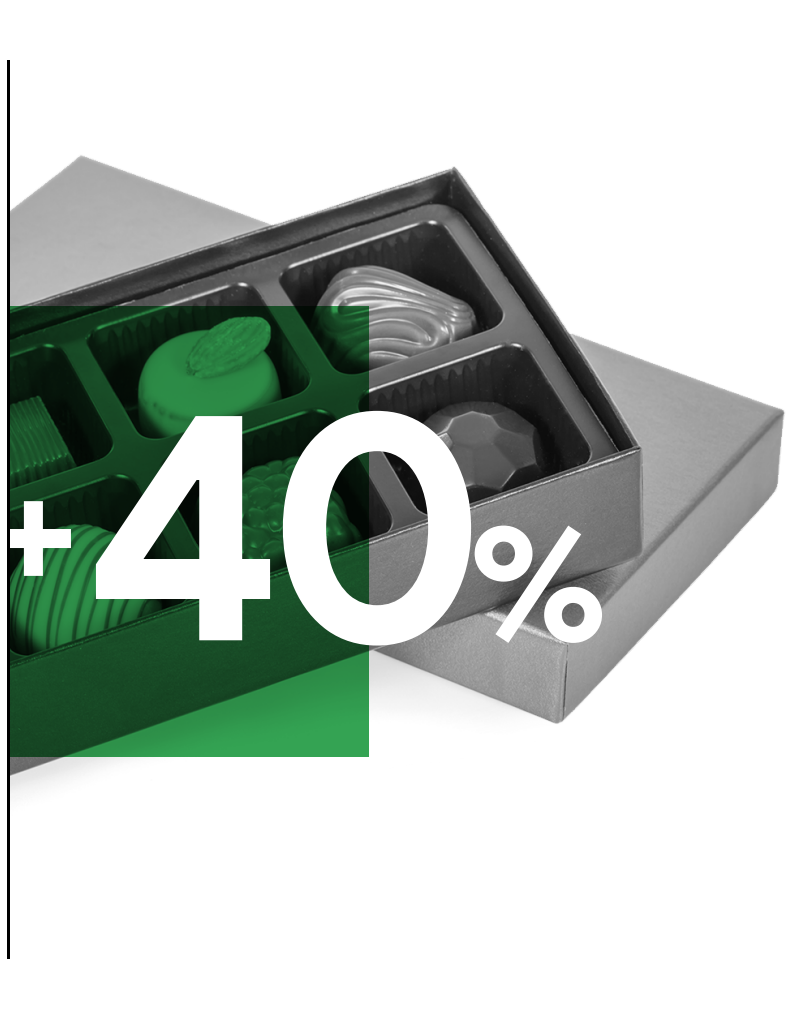
SEARCHES

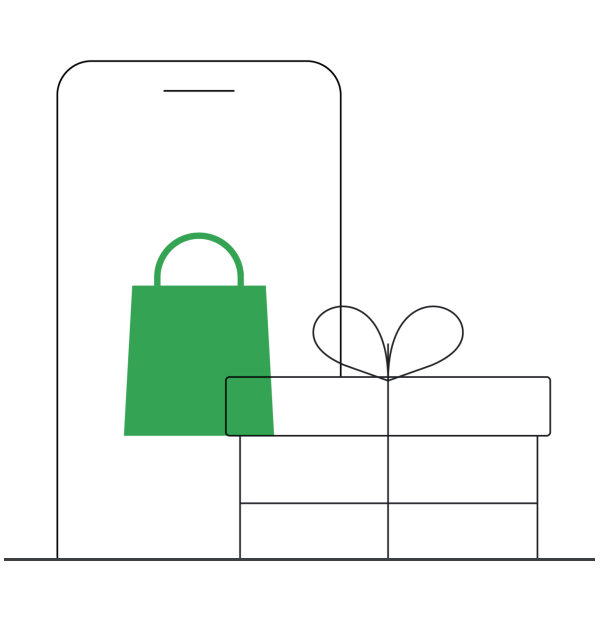
Online expressions of affection

Love languages are keeping up with the changing times, with people searching for ways to show affection without in-person interactions. Gift-giving has become particularly trendy in APAC, where more than half the online population has bought a gift for someone online, trending higher than any other region in the world.[26]

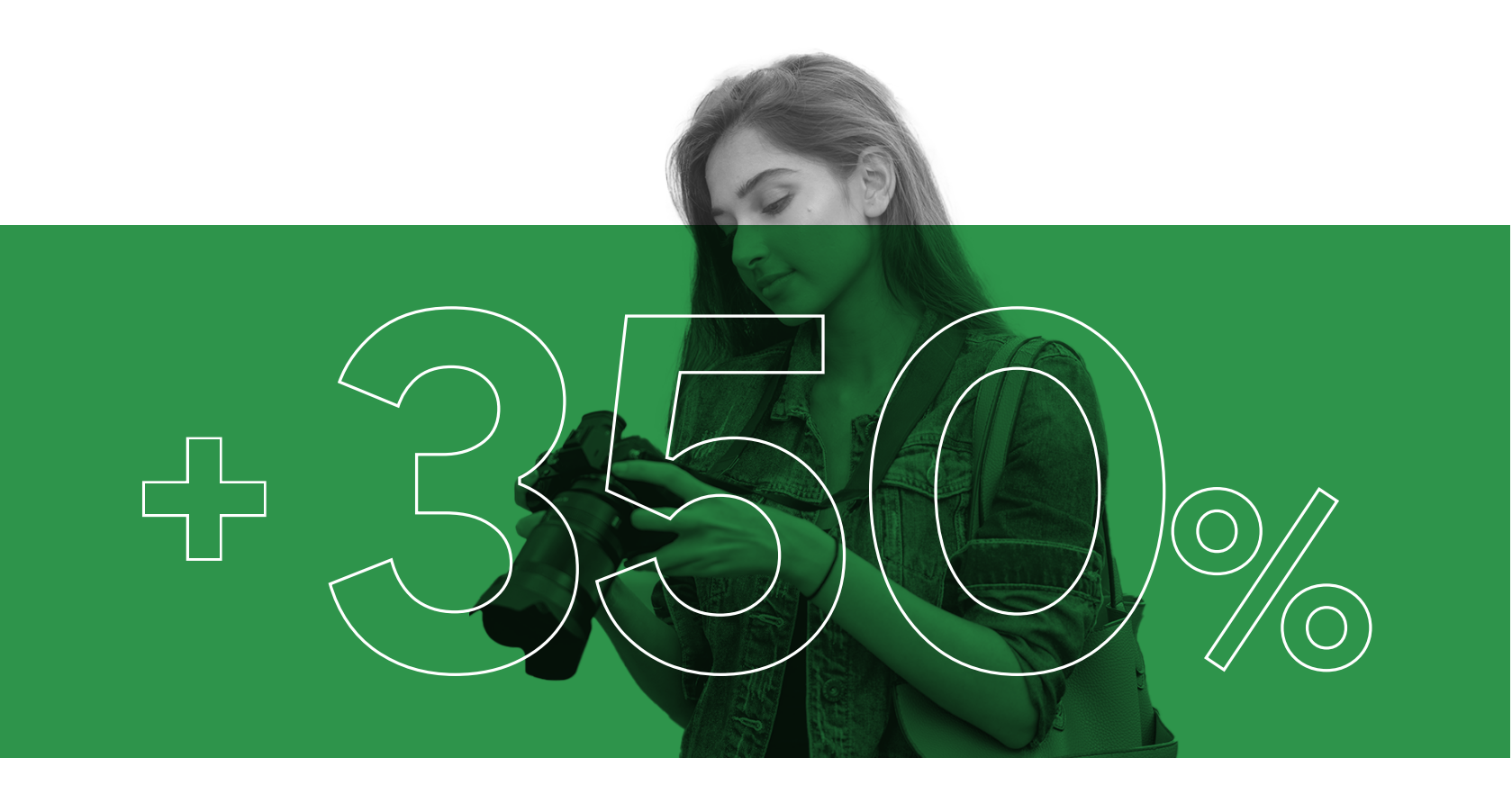
Many people across APAC are turning to Search for inspiration on birthday or anniversary well wishes for their loved ones. In Australia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines, search interest in (sinh nhật cho) (birthday wishes for), (คำ อวยพร วัน ครบ รอบ) (anniversary greetings), and **meaningful birthday message for best friend** have grown by up to 100%.

Gifting has become an important expression of connection during lockdown, with related interest rising across APAC by up to 40%.[27] Indonesians are looking for (gift box) and (snack gift box) and as Singapore sees the highest drop in non-residential population since 1950,[28] searches interest in (farewell gifts) have grown by 40%.





In Japan, shoppers are looking for ways to digitize gift giving experiences, with 40% more search interest in (オンライン ギフト) (online gift), and Australians are seeing 20% more searches for help to deliver gifts and hampers.



Photoshoots have seen more than 350% growth across APAC countries, as people are taking time to capture moments that others cannot be there in person for.[29]

Digital for personal connection

Technology is enabling people to connect in innovative ways, sparking interest in virtual versions of activities such as group meals, escape rooms, and concerts. Even holiday gatherings are going digital, with 53% in Australia and 61% in New Zealand expecting to celebrate Christmas 2021 with their loved ones via online video calls.[30,31]

We see 390% growth in search interest in **group order** in the Philippines as Filipinos look for ways to share meals together, even while apart. Correspondingly, top food service brands are offering send to many and multi-delivery services that allow customers to order online as a group and receive meals in different locations at the same time.

We see up to 520% growth in people searching for the online or virtual equivalent of offline experiences. For example, **virtual concert** in Singapore, **virtual tour** in the Philippines, **virtual race** in Malaysia, virtual escape rooms in Australia, and (オンライン コンサート) (online concert) in Japan.

+80%

People in South Korea are looking online for things to do outside with others: search interest in (등산 동호회) (hiking club) searches grew by more than 80%.

+25%

In the Philippines, we saw over 25% more search interest in the terms games plus friends like (online games with friends)

MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

The emotional value of digital

Faced with the physical distancing caused by the pandemic, people have adapted how they express themselves and increased their reliance on digital for building personal connections. As a result, brands that merely use digital as a functional channel are missing out on an **opportunity to build and nurture deeper relationships** with their customers, where both sides stand to gain and grow through emotional connection.

Harvard Business Review
An Emotional Connection Matters More Than Customer Satisfaction

> "Emotionally connected customers buy more of your products and services, visit you more often, exhibit less price sensitivity, pay more attention to your communications, follow your advice, and recommend you more — everything you hope their experience with you will cause them to do."

---

1 Build customer love and loyalty by consistently delivering at each touchpoint

Research shows how the consumer's path to purchase is driven by emotions. At each and every touchpoint, shoppers want to feel reassured and empowered, rewarding brands who help them navigate the messy middle.

Leverage the emotional power of digital to provide timely, accurate and relevant information across your organic and paid communication channels.

---

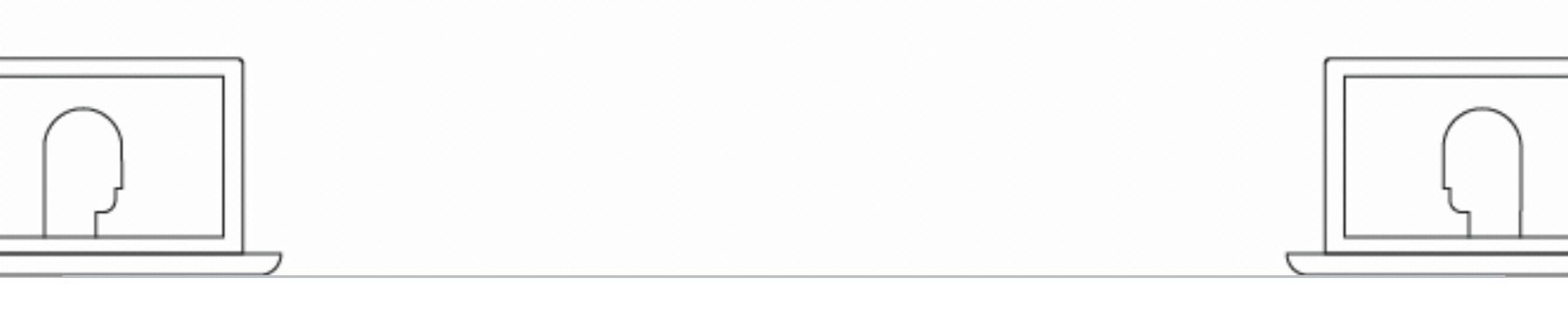
2 Tap into the value of virtual to augment real world experiences

Not everyone prefers in-person experiences, especially during a pandemic. Consider the value of virtual channels as a means of complementing or augmenting physical experiences, allowing the freedom of choice between online or offline events.

October 2020 saw Tiger Beer Malaysia launch The Tiger Street Food Virtual Festival, an online street food experience that could be enjoyed from home.

Heydoor marketplace allows customers in Australia to shop in cafes, restaurants, pharmacies, and more, without having to go indoors. It aims to help people who use wheelchairs and mobility scooters, people with prams or pets, or those who find crowds overwhelming or unsafe.[32]

Google Project Starline is a new 3D technology that combines advances in hardware and software to enable friends, families, and coworkers to feel like they're together even when they're apart.



3 Invest in ad creatives that can connect and inspire

Your advertising efforts can be a key lever to build emotional connection and simultaneously drive campaign performance. In fact, creative is the dominant ROI driver across all media platforms, and especially so on digital.[33]

To bring your brand and products to life, ensure your ads showcase how your brand can help people in their everyday life in an authentic way.
Explore creative best practices to unlock better performance across Google Ads solutions.

Sources:
All Google Search data points included in this report are from Google Trends, Sep 2019 - Aug 2020 vs. Sep 2020 - Aug 2021, unless otherwise indicated.

[24] Ipsos, Essential Report, Oct. 7 , 2021-Oct.10, 2021.
[25] Ipsos, Essential Report, Oct. 7 , 2021-Oct.10, 2021.
[26] GWI, Wave Q2, 2021
[27] Google Trends, AU, BD, HK, IN, ID, JP, MY, NZ, PK, PH, KR.
[28] Singapore Department of Statistics, Population in Brief, 2021.
[29] Google Trends, AU, HK, IN, ID, JP, MY, NZ, PK, SG, KR, TH, VN.
[30] Pureprofile, Christmas Report, Australia, n= 1052, 2021.
[31] Pureprofile, Christmas Report, New Zealand, n= 535, 2021.
[32] Trendwatching Premium
[33] Nielsen Catalina Solutions, 2017.