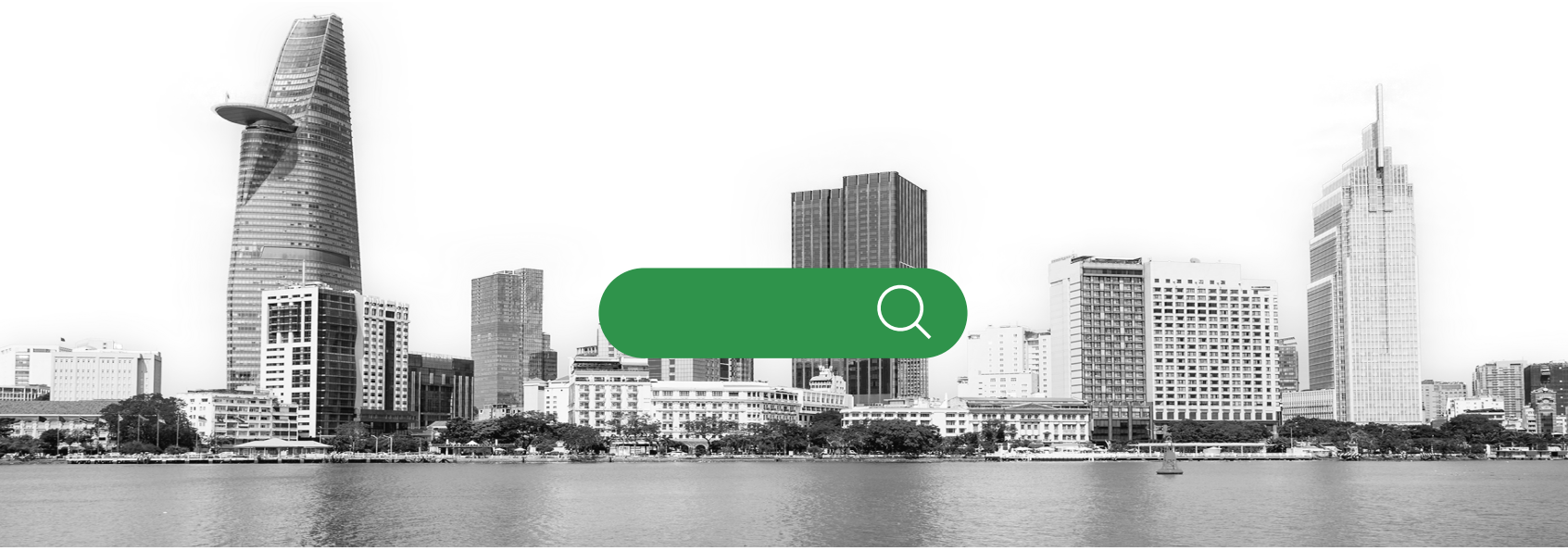
Bridging distances

In 2020, 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 cultivate deeper, ongoing relationships**, both online and offline.

As new 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, South Korea, and Vietnam feel more cautious about resuming normal activities compared with the global average.[11]

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.



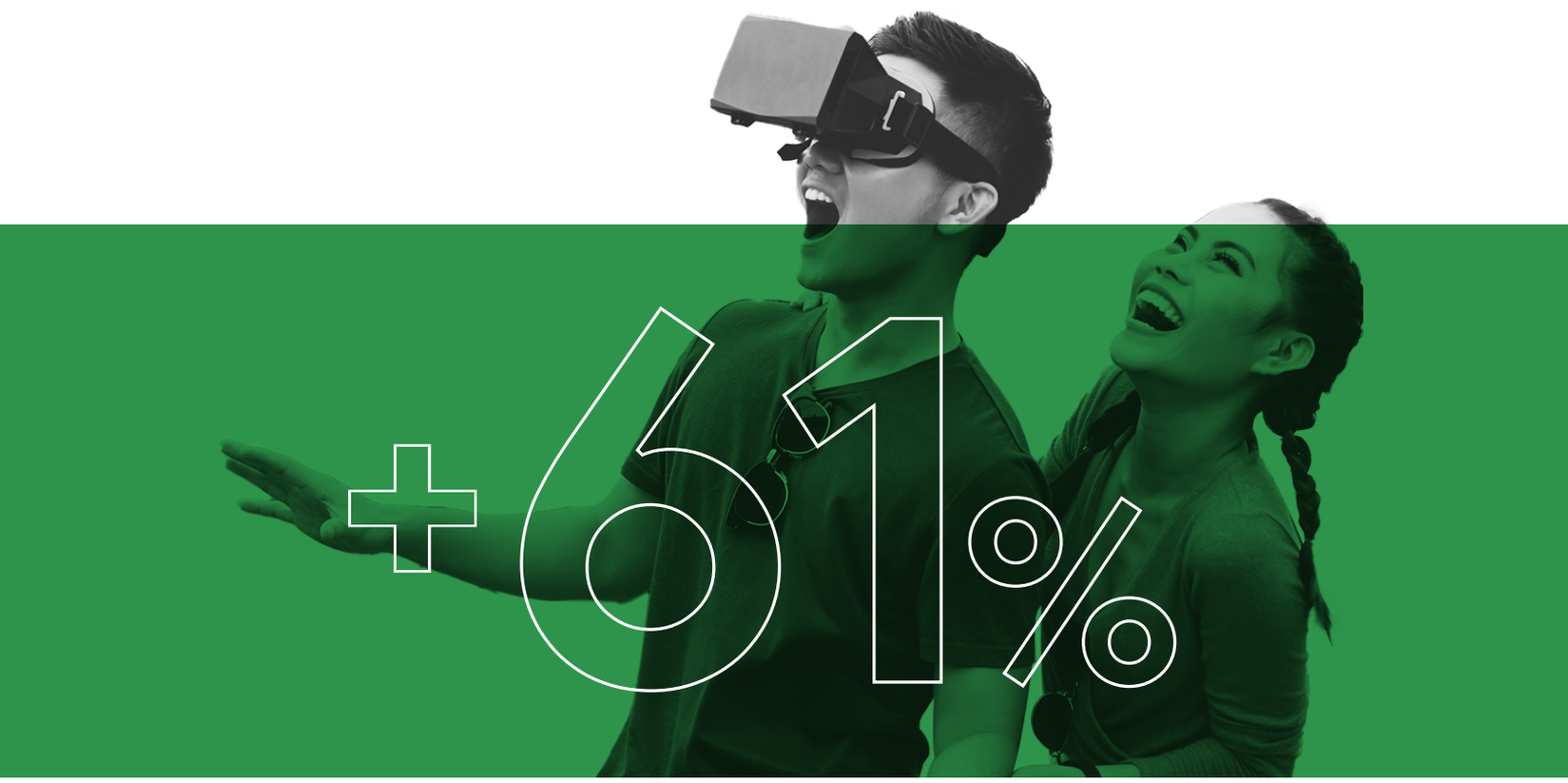
One example is how people have started to adapt the way they express their affection. In lieu of physical touch or time spent together, people are searching for gifts they can send their loved ones, and inspiration for the right words to wish them a happy birthday or anniversary.

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?

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.[12,13] In Vietnam, 95% of those surveyed plan to celebrate Tết 2022 with one or more digital solutions



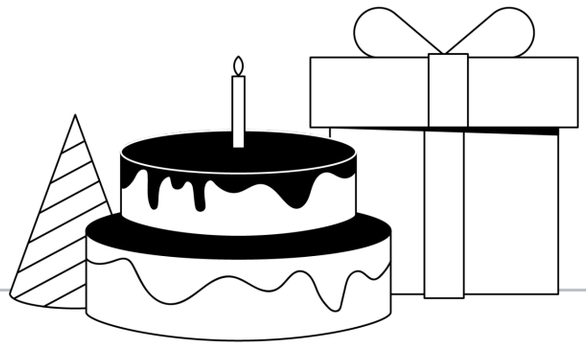
People are searching for the online equivalent of offline experiences, with searches for virtual games such as Kahoot! seeing over 61% growth.

+11%

Search interest in với bạn (with friends) has grown by over 11% as Vietnamese look for activities to enjoy with friends online.

+14%

Vietnamese are turning to Search for inspiration on birthdays or anniversaries wishes for loved ones. Search interest in sinh nhật cho (birthday for) has grown by over 14%.



MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

The emotional value of digital

Faced with 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."

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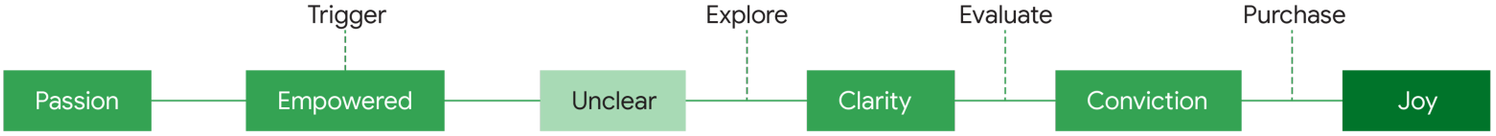
1 Build customer love and loyalty by consistently delivering at each touchpoint

Research shows how the consumer's path to purchase is driven by emotions. At each and every touchpoint, shoppers want to feel empowered, and will reward brands that help them navigate all the information available and provide them the reassurance they need to make a decision.



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

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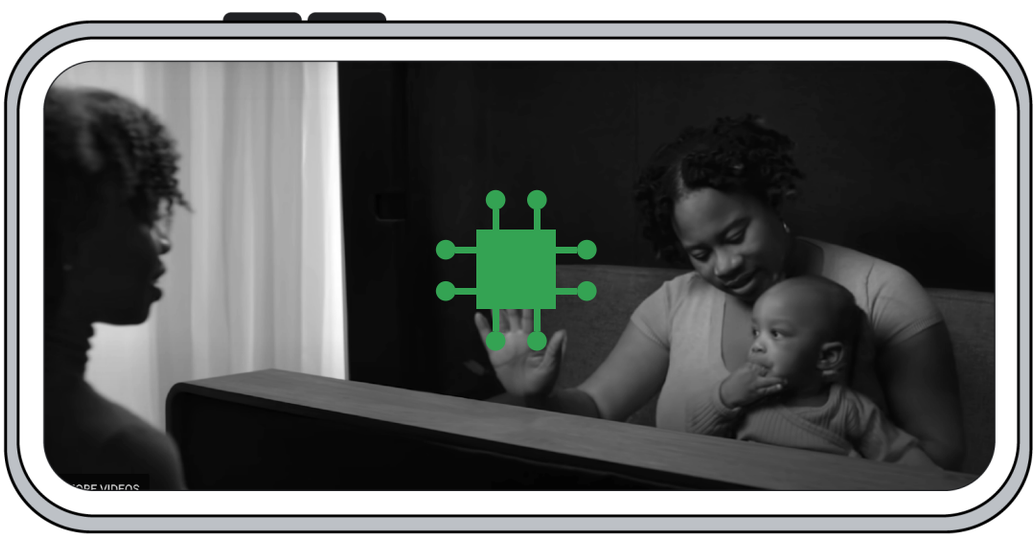
2 Tap into the value of virtual to augment real world experiences

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

To celebrate the Mid-Autumn Trung Thu festival in Vietnam and keep traditions alive despite COVID-19 restrictions, snack company Mondelez Kinh Do released an AI-based genealogy platform that aimed to deepen family bonds by bringing people's old photos to life. The augmented reality experience enabled users to see their ancestors smile, blink, and turn their heads in the photos.

In December 2020, PONDS started to integrate its Skin Advisor Live chatbot into its Shopee storefront. The AI chatbot offers on-demand skincare analysis and recommends effective products which customers can purchase directly on Shopee. This feature has launched across Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam.



Google Project Starline is a new 3D imaging 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 return on investment (ROI) driver across all media platforms, and especially so on digital.[14]

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.

11. Ipsos, Essential Report, Oct. 7, 2021–Oct. 10, 2021.
12. Pureprofile, Christmas Report, Australia, n= 1052, 2021.
13. Pureprofile, Christmas Report, New Zealand, n= 535, 2021.
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