Bridging distances

3

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, Malaysian 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. While most of Malaysia's adult population has been fully vaccinated, Malaysians are still substantially more worried about COVID-19 than the global national average.[4]

But fears of resuming in-person activities haven't overridden basic human needs for personal connection and belonging. Rising searches indicate that Malaysians will continue to find new ways to connect, and they are increasingly open to using digital means to do so, even as the country lifts movement restrictions and reopens its borders.

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, and searches for online group activities like escape rooms, races, and concerts are seeing consistent growth.

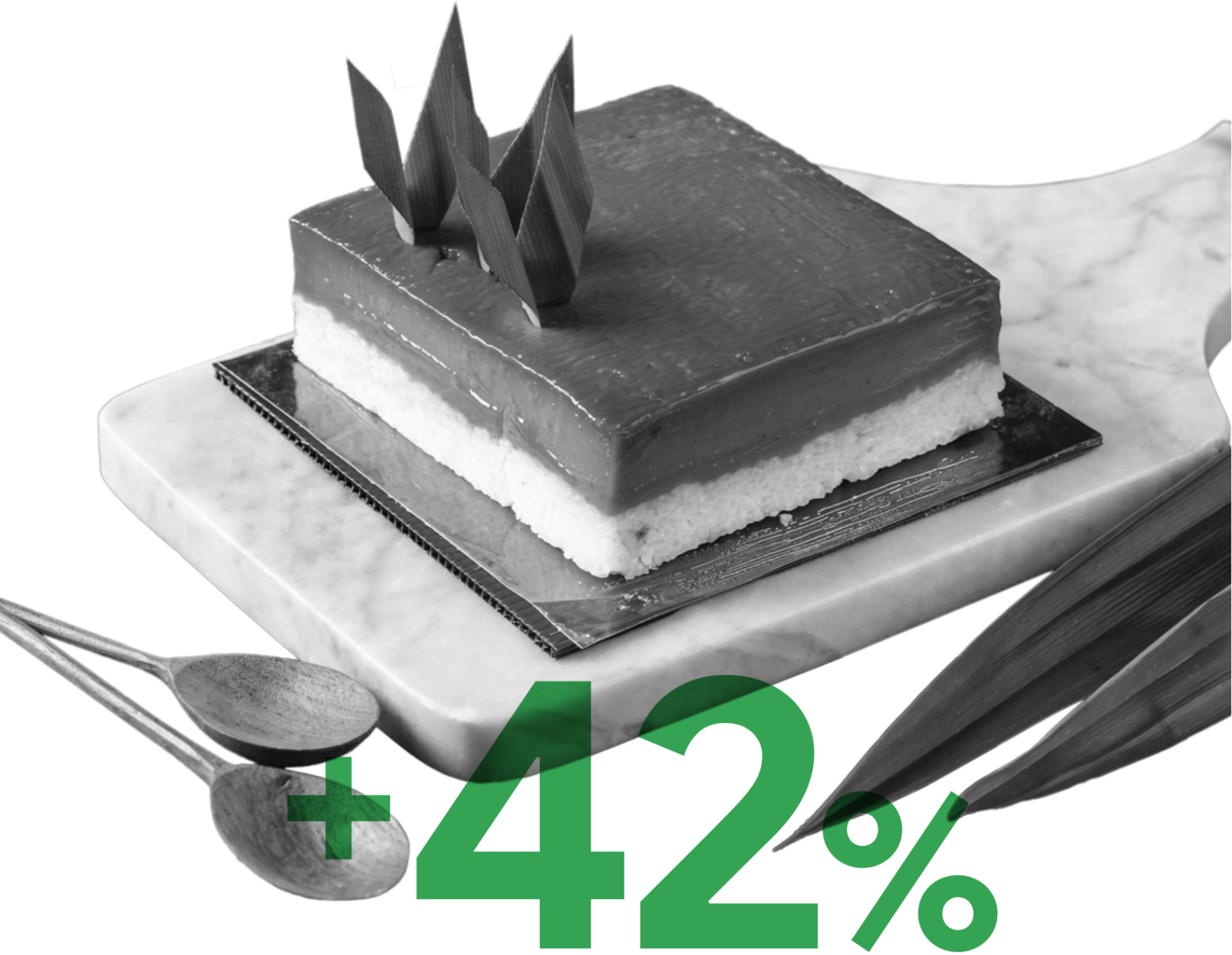
As the world grows more dependent on digital technology to form meaningful human connections, brands need to move on from thinking of digital platforms as purely functional channels or just an online front end. Instead, consider how you can get longer-term value out of connecting meaningfully with your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



+42%

Many people across APAC are turning to Search for inspiration on birthday or anniversary well wishes for their loved ones. In Malaysia, search interest in ucapan hari lahir (birthday wish) increased by 42%.

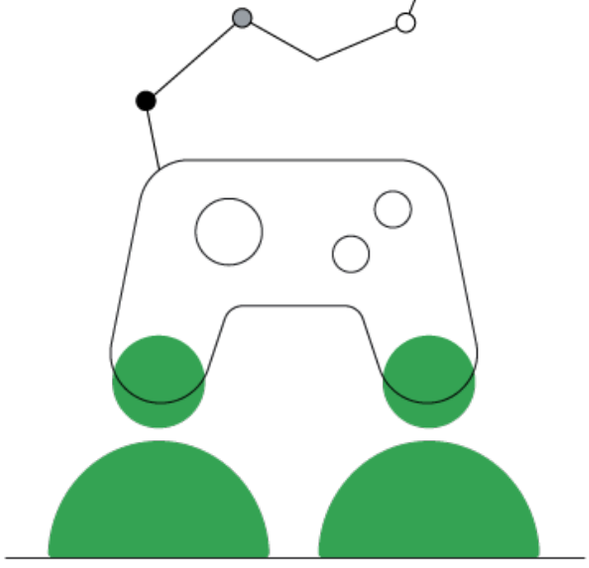
Gifting has become an important expression of connection during the lockdown in Malaysia. Search interest in hadiah untuk (gift for) and gift box saw an increase of 30% and 100% respectively.

Digital for personal connection

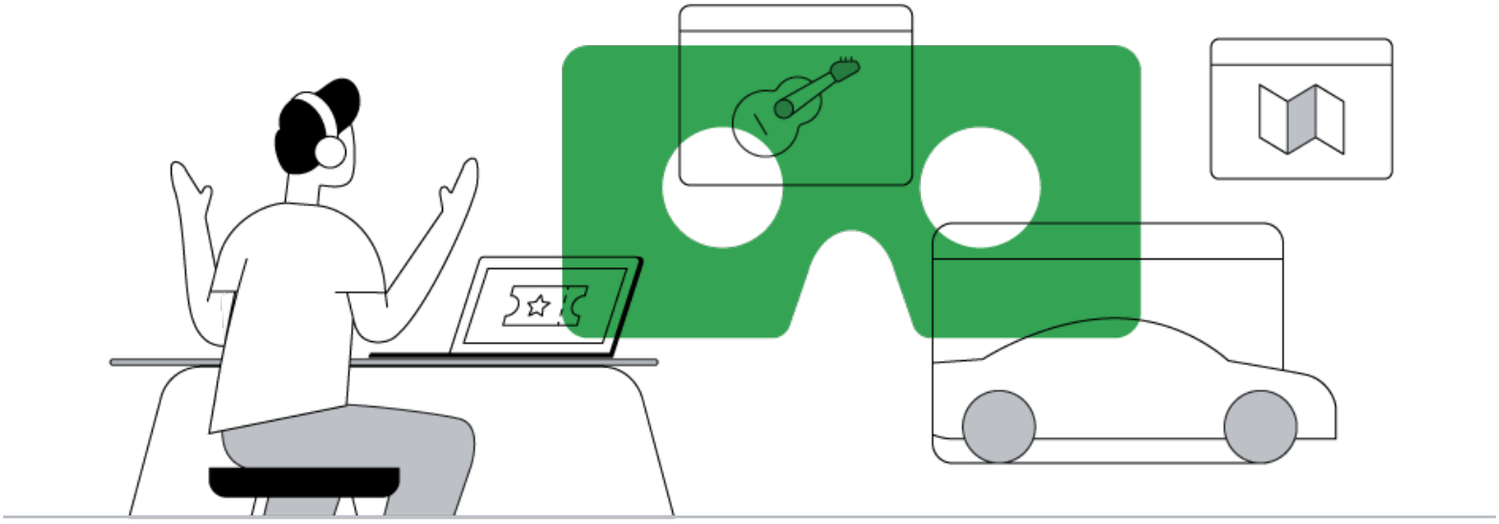
Technology is enabling people to connect in innovative ways, sparking interest in virtual versions of activities such as group meals, escape rooms, and concerts. Even holiday gatherings are going digital, with many Malaysians celebrating Chinese New Year, Hari Raya, and Deepavali with their loved ones via online video calls.

+135%

Malaysians are using digital solutions to find more engaging ways to spend time with one another, especially during periods of lockdowns. Search interest in games to play with friends online saw a spike of 135%.



People searching for the online or virtual equivalent of offline experiences, such as virtual race in Malaysia, virtual concert in Singapore, virtual tour in the Philippines, virtual escape rooms in Australia, and オンライン コンサート (online concert) in Japan, grew by up to 520%.



MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

The emotional value of digital

3

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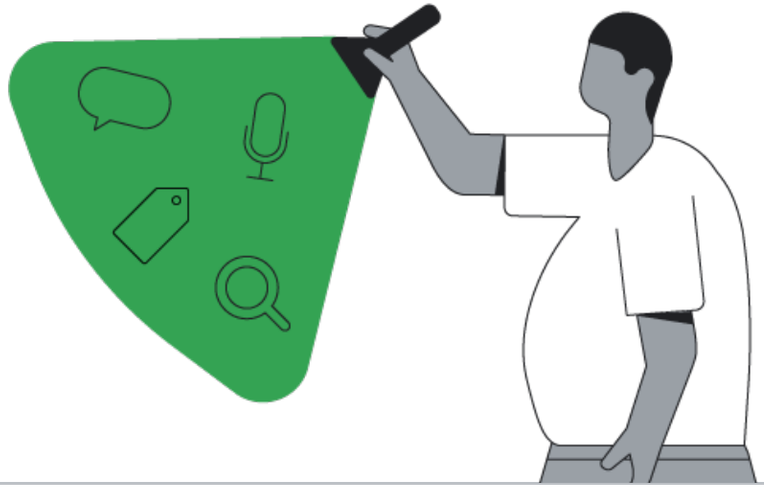
1 Build customer love and loyalty by consistently delivering at each touchpoint

Research shows how the consumer's path to purchase is driven by emotions. At each and every touchpoint, shoppers want to feel reassured and empowered, and will reward brands that 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.

In October 2021, Taiping Zoo and Night Safari made virtual tours of its premises available via its MyZooTaiping web application, inviting people all over the world to visit the zoo.

When it comes to beauty products, an in-store experience is key to influencing purchase decsisions. L'Oreal's Virtual Try On feature offers this experience by letting customers virtually test out the brand's makeup products.

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.

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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.

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.

4. Ipsos, MY, What Worries Malaysia, June 1, 2021.