

To Share or Not to Share: Exploring the depths of digital identity through an entrepreneurial lens

Study Overview

As founders build and grow their ventures, most establish an entrepreneur identity (Burke, 2016). Today, most founders create and make extensive use of a venture-specific website to support their firms. In advance of this study, we observed that some founders present a well-developed digital identity on their websites, while other founders do not. Existing identity research both online and offline offers little guidance to help explain this observed difference. Moreover, current research on online identity construction is highly fragmented (Huang et al., 2021). This study's focus is on answering the research question: What accounts for the observed differences in founders' digital identities online? We undertake to answer this question adopting a qualitative method, conducting 34 depth interviews with founders across Canada. This study's findings will inform identity control theory (Marcia, 1993), and will help entrepreneur support organizations to better prepare entrepreneurs in managing their digital identities.

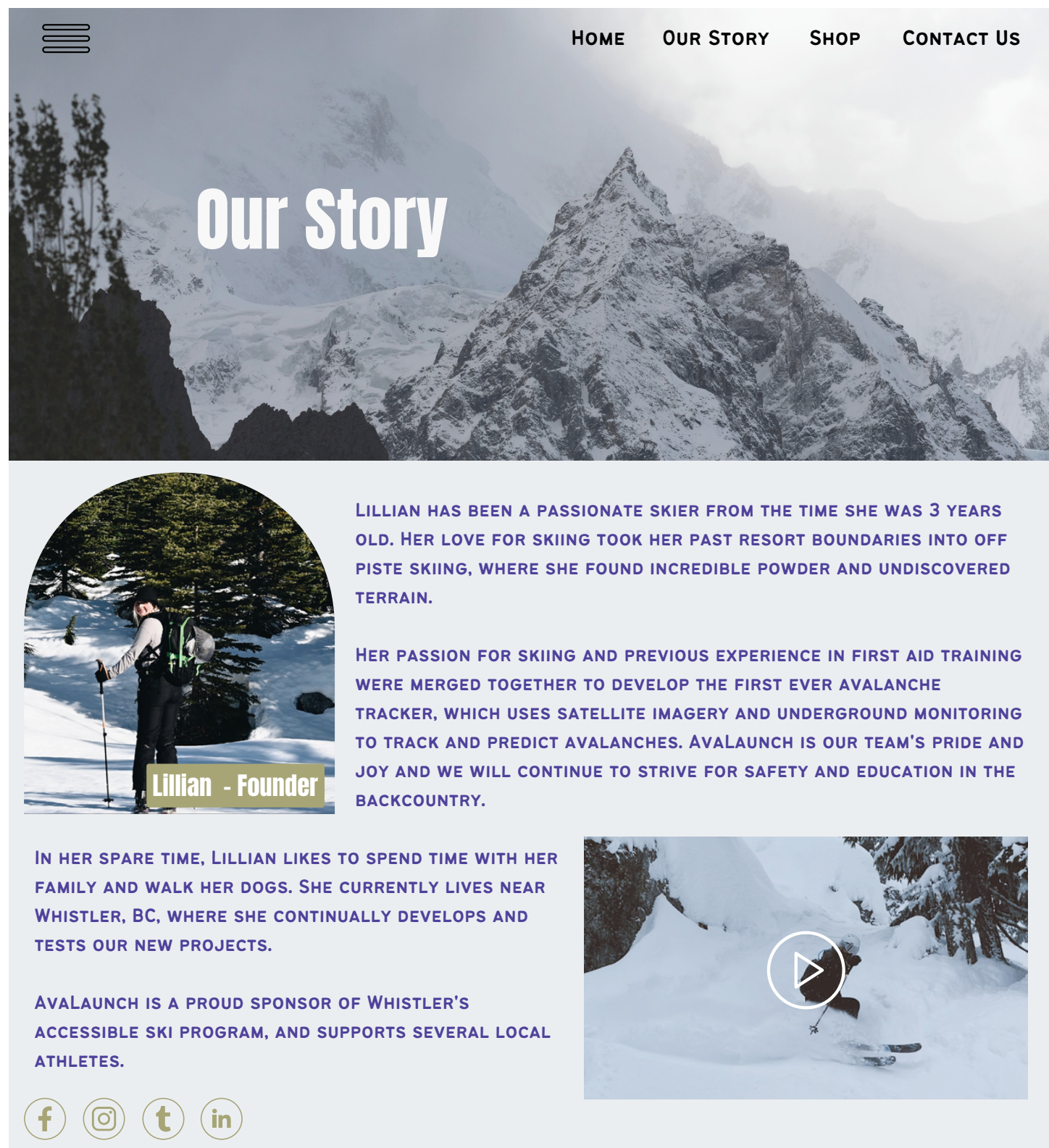


Figure 1: Example of website page with high depth of founder digital identity © Lillian Crowder, 2022

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Figure 2: Example of website page with little depth of founder digital identity © Lillian Crowder, 2022

What Is...

Online Identity? Online identity refers to “a configuration of defining characteristics of a person in the online space” (Kim et al., 2011).

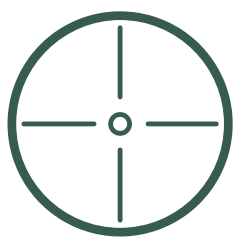
Digital identity? Digital identity can refer to a host of things (Leibbrandt and Goldscheider, 2022). It can be defined as “an electronic way for an individual to create and manage their online identity” (Bekman, 2021).

Online Self? Individual users create visual representations, personal narratives, and storytelling (Papacharissi, 2015) as part of their digital footprints in social networks and online communities (Feher, 2019). Targeting optimal online self-promotion or self-expression, users manage their impressions using a wide range of means of expression (Ellison et al., 2006).

Grounded theory? For this study, we adopt a grounded theory method. First developed in 1965 by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory is a method of comparative analysis. The method involves the discovery of theory from said data systemically obtained from social research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In layman's terms: the theory is “grounded” in actual data (Chun Tie et al., 2019), meaning that the analysis and development of theory happens after the data is collected. In our application, a brief examination of extant literature informed the research design (Suddaby, 2006).



VKURA Scope



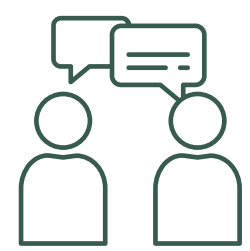
While there will be multiple phases undertaken to answer the research question posed, within the scope of the VKURA internship, I focused mainly on the literature review and conducting actual interviews with entrepreneurs. Alongside this study, I began a literature review for a study researching about indigenous identity through the lens of entrepreneurship.

Developing a Script



In the process of interviewing 34 founders, I learned a lot about establishing an effective interview guide. When developing the questions, it is important to remain cognizant that the interview guide and structure should evolve, and that the questions should be altered or ejected altogether as the interviews progress and data is analyzed. The guide should remain fluid, such as restructuring a question in two ways to account for founders who share lots of information or none.

Interviews



I really enjoyed the interview process. Each conversation unveiled new themes and ideas that would spark new thoughts and questions we had about our research. In the beginning, interviewing founders I had never met was intimidating, and I was nervous that the discussions wouldn't yield the necessary data.

As I progressed through the interviews, the enjoyment of learning from every individual quickly alleviated my nerves. It was a privilege to hear from so many founders when I hope to be one someday myself. The process of research interviews was fascinating to experience and it was incredible to watch the research unfold in front of me.

Top Tips



Interviewing

- Adapt to the language and energy the informant offers. If the informant you are interviewing uses casual humour, do the same, or if they use professional jargon try to reflect that in conversation. Reflection and mirroring establish a sense of trust quickly, which helps people to share their own values and beliefs.

- Let the informant ramble a little, it can help to uncover hidden insights.

- If you want to dig a little deeper into something that seems obvious to the informant acknowledge that the question may seem obvious or simple.

Literature Reviews

- Look in the citations of all your top tier journal articles, this will lead some other useful or related papers.

- “Command F” is your friend when quickly assessing if a paper is worth the entire read or not. Plug in your key terms and ideas, if the paper comes up with several results it is worth your time.

Themes Throughout Preliminary Findings

Authenticity

There is growing evidence outside of entrepreneurship that an individual's online identity differs from their real one (Bessière et al., 2007; Toma and Hancock, 2010; Jackson and Luchner, 2018), but throughout our conversations with founders there didn't seem to be a theme that founder's presented inauthentic information on their websites. However, a pattern emerged in the data that many founders appear to cherry-pick information represent a certain lens of the founder's real identity presented on their websites. While founders' identities are part of their internal self-concept (Farmer and Yao, 2011), we find that how they present “who am I” online differs based on their authenticity-alignment motivation.

Disclosure and Relevancy

Our analysis revealed that founders varied widely in the depth of their digital identity presented on their website. Some founders shared only information that they thought was directly related to their product or service offerings, and did so with shallow details. Others shared details about themselves that extended well beyond their products and services. We found that this individual difference was related to their concerns for personal privacy.

Instrumental & Strategic Digital Identity Crafting

Our analysis revealed that individual founder differences, in the scope of the digital identity they presented online, is related to the extent to which founders articulate a well-developed, instrumental thought-process about crafting what is and what is not posted to their websites about who they are.

Market Differences

We found an emerging pattern in the data of differences in the digital identities of founders in B2B versus B2C markets. Throughout the interviews, it was a trend to see that the B2C companies' founders shared more information online and had more substantial digital identities than the founders of B2B companies. It also seemed that most B2C founders were willing to share more information in general or more information that was about them versus the product or service they were selling

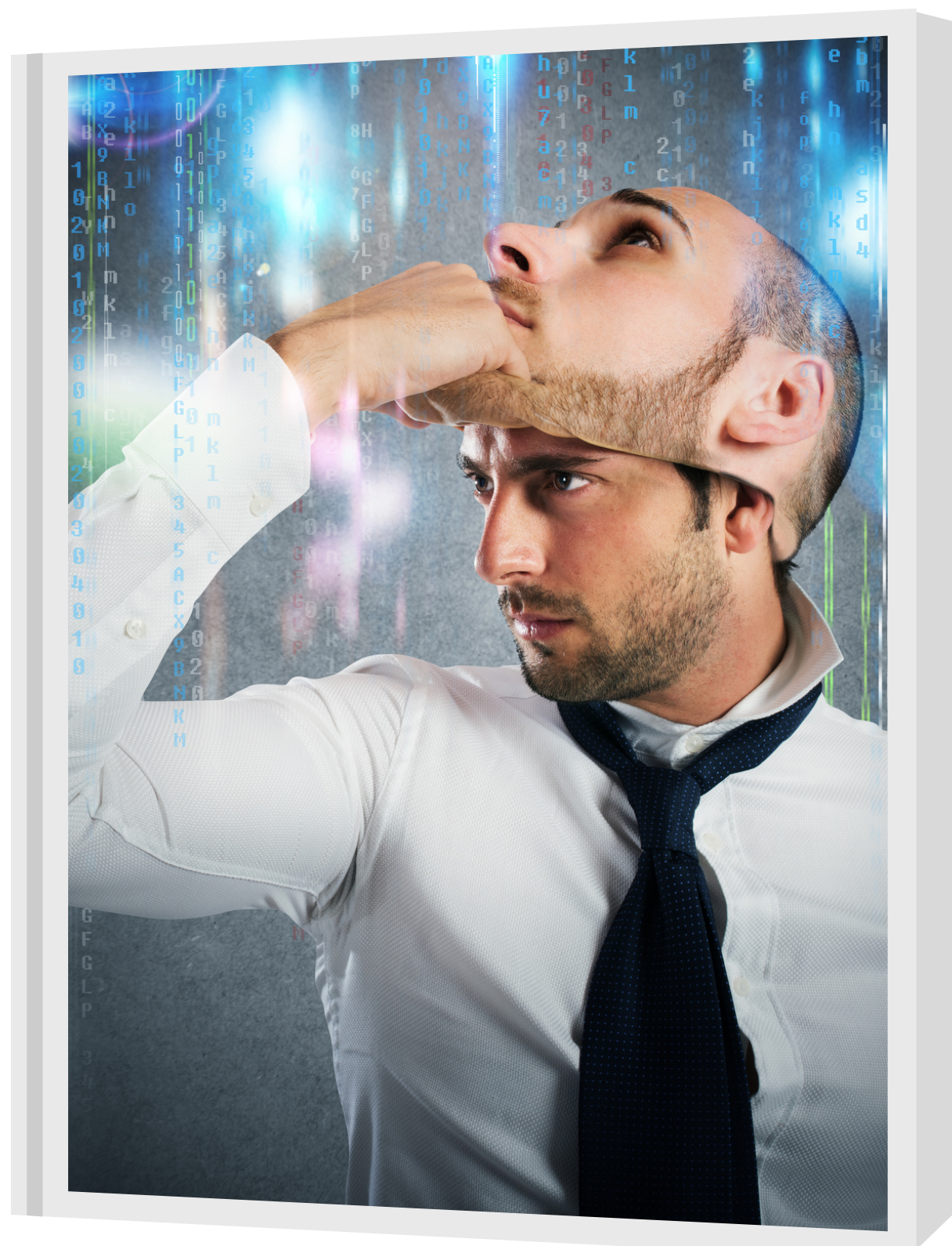


Figure 3: Hacker Changes Identity © Alphaspirt via CanvaPro

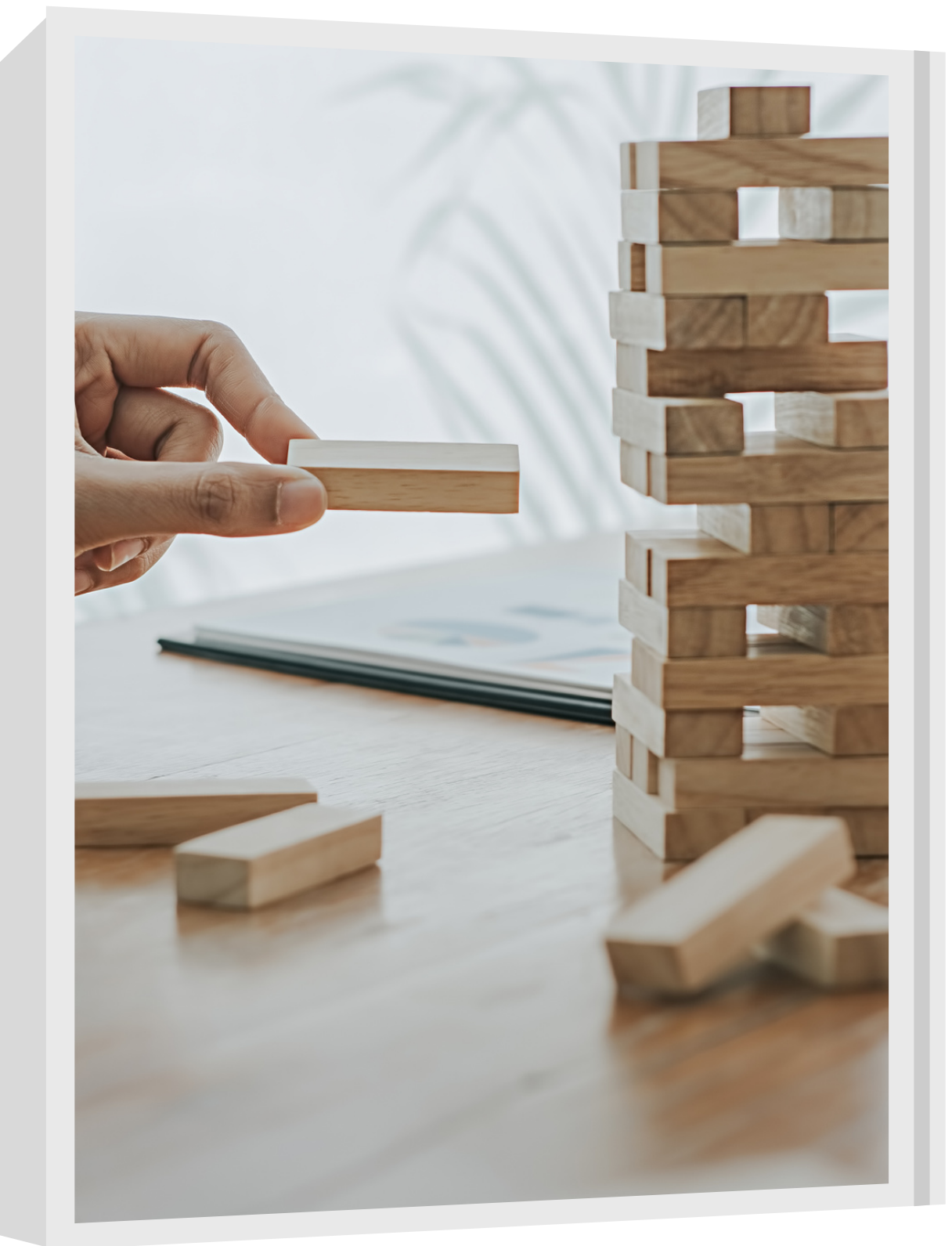


Figure 4: Hand of business people planning, risking, and strategy in business © Suwanar Kawila via Canva

Quantitative Ranking

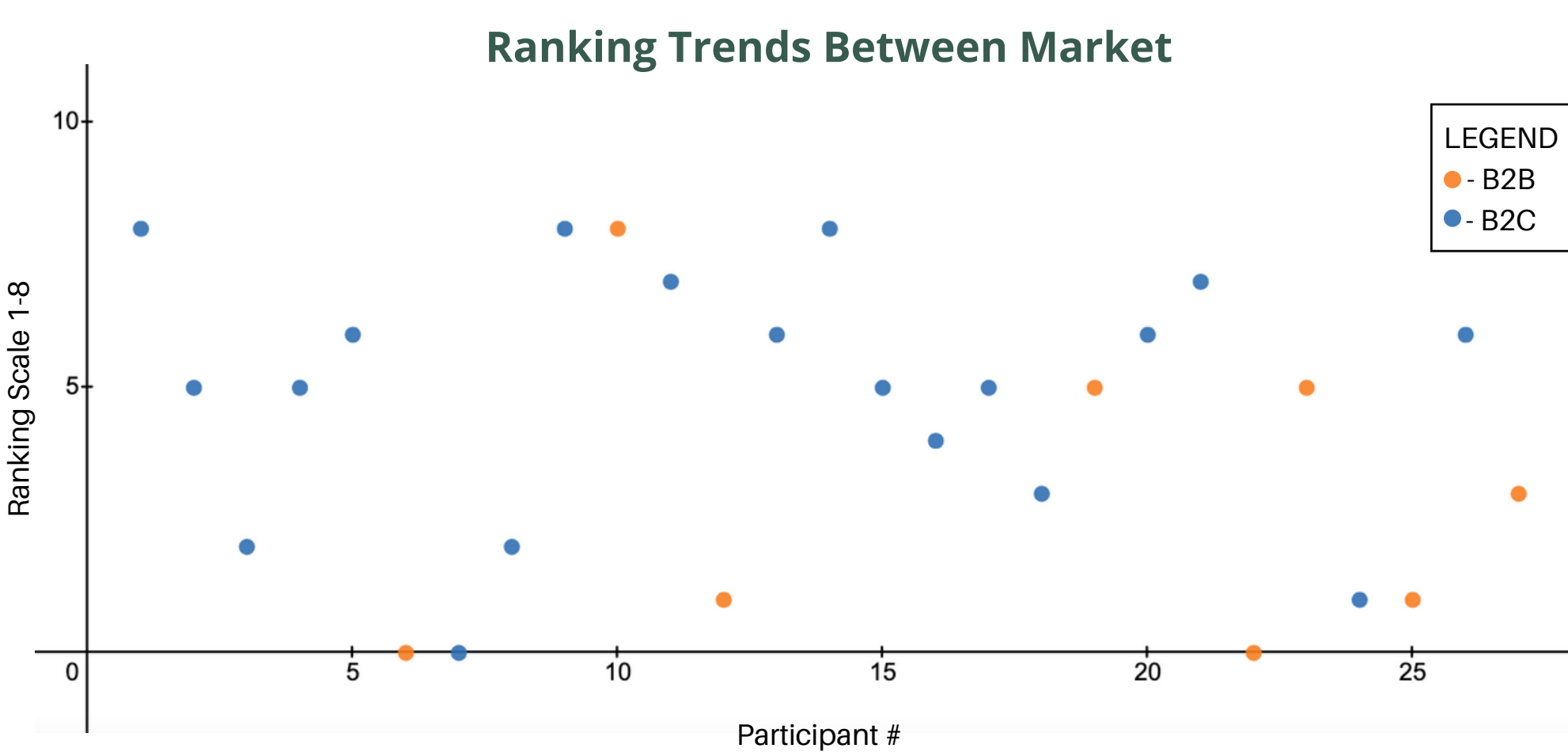


Figure 5: Dot Plot: Depth of Digital Identity © Lillian Crowder, 2022

Moving Forward



This study is currently in the data collection and analysis period. While there are some insights, themes and patterns emerging, final analysis of the data still needs to be completed. To do this we will utilize NVIVO software to assist in the grounded theory analysis process. A journal article aimed at the Journal of Business Venturing is the stated outcome for this study

Ranking Trends Between Market

In order to classify our informants' levels of depth in regard to digital identity prior to interviews we developing a website ranking guide. Informants were ranked on a scale of 1 to 8 based upon if they had the following elements present on their website:

- Facial recognition
 - More than one facial recognition
 - Personal bio
 - Role title
 - Additional media (soundbites, video, etc.)
 - Social media shared
 - Team Story that used individual names
 - Team Story that uses collective language
- 0 = no level**
<3/8 = low level
>4/8<6/8 = moderate
>7/8 = high

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Citations

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