



# Real Projects, Virtual Worlds Coworkers, Their Avatars and the Trust Conundrum

Michael F. Lohle, Ph.D.  
Trefz School of Business  
University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, CT

Steven R. Terrell, Ph.D.  
Graduate School of Computer and Information Sciences  
Nova Southeastern University, Ft. Lauderdale, FL

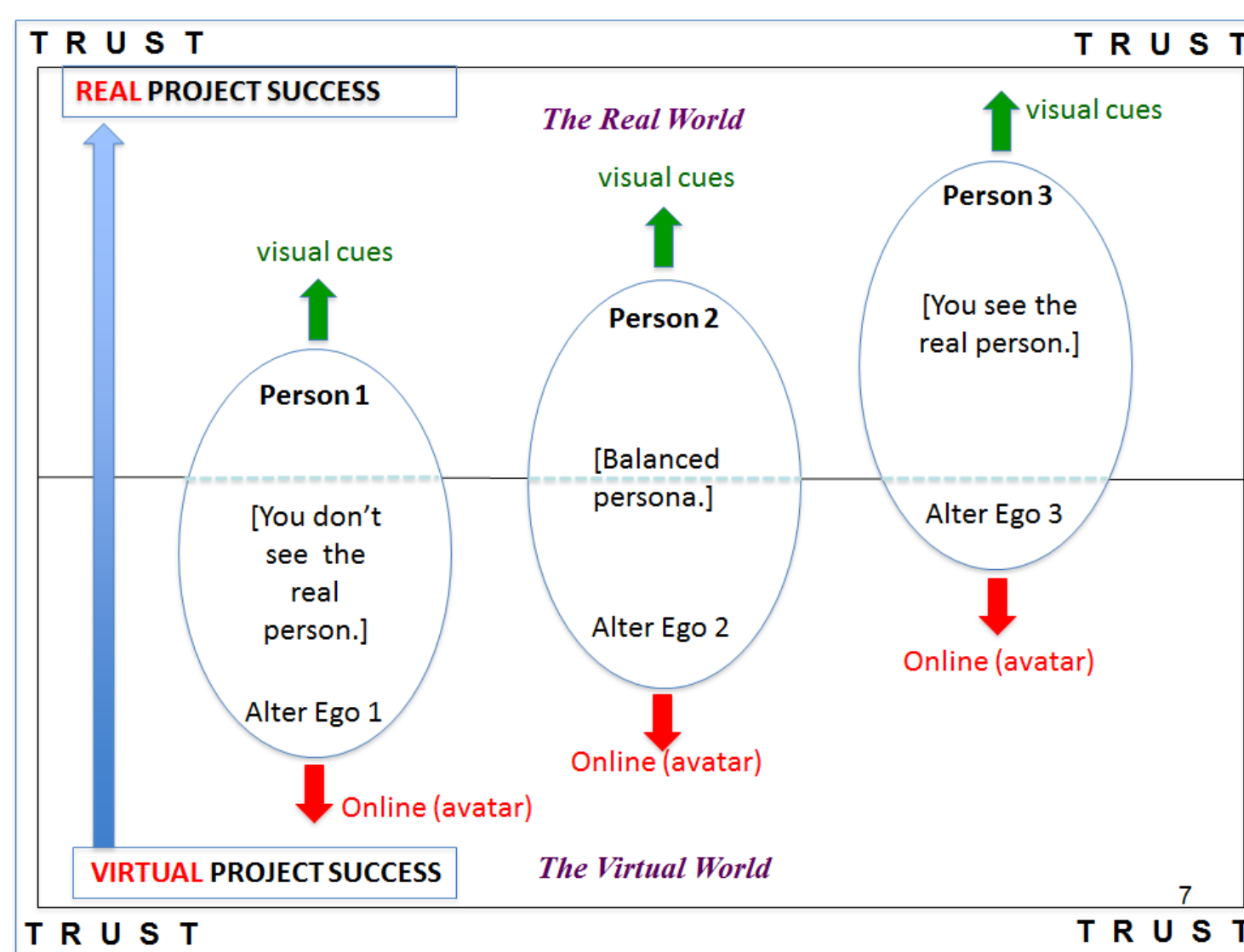
## Abstract

This qualitative study informs project managers of the impact that the authentic projection of coworker identity via avatars has on trust and potential project management success when teams use virtual worlds to collaborate. By exploring the common experiences and reactions of potential virtual team participants to a demonstration that showed how to customize avatars and use them to communicate with others, it facilitated the development of a grounded theory that confirms whether the projection of authenticity via avatars is an antecedent of team trust and real project management success. Real management success was the main objective, since it is vital for the enterprise to use all means possible for competitive advantage in an ever-expanding technological society.

## Main Arguments

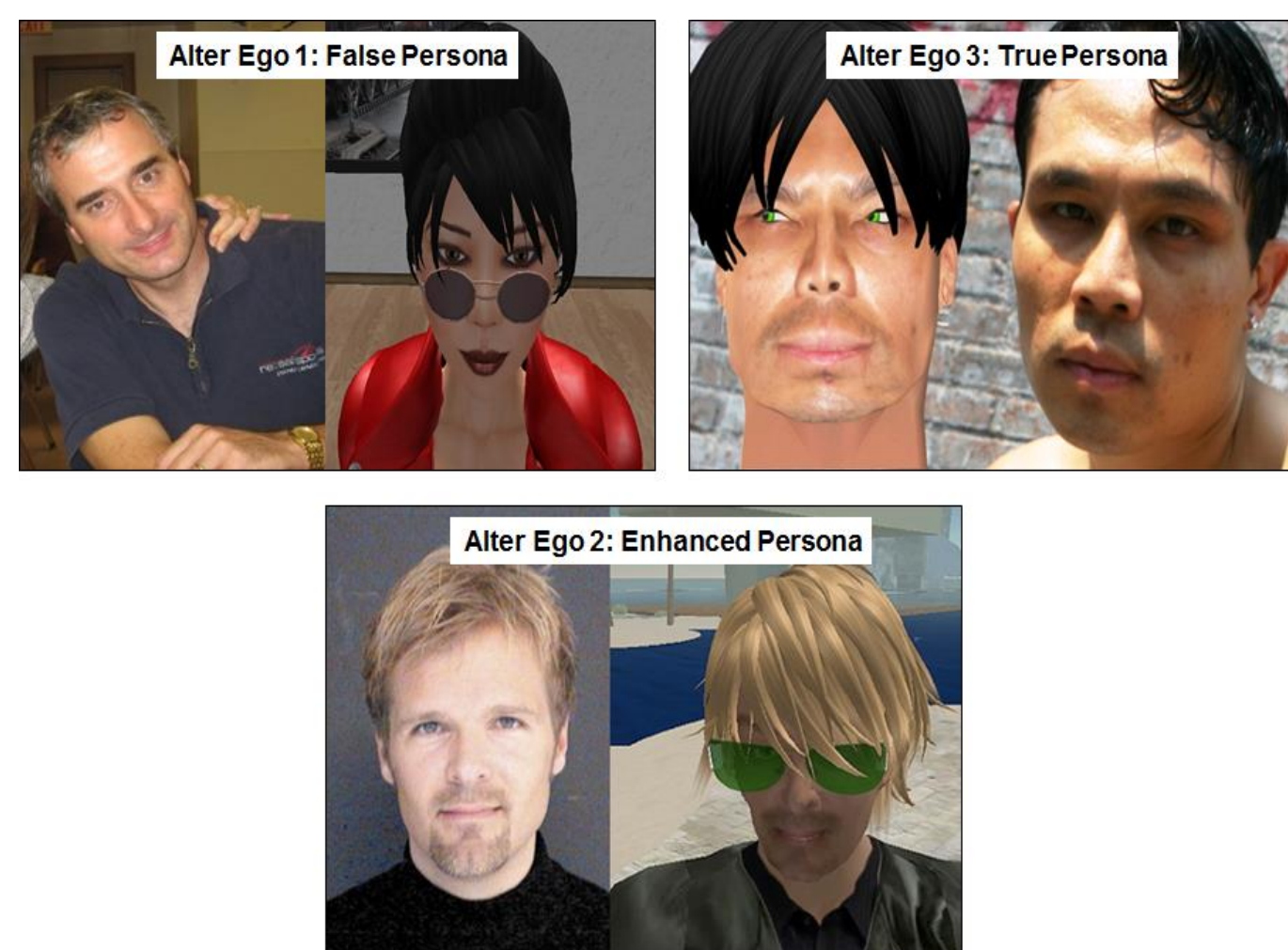
### Research Model

The researcher designed a model to synthesize the themes from this review of literature. The resulting *grounded theory* “fits” the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The researcher used this model to structure his research:



### Method

A demonstration of virtual worlds, avatar customization and these three avatars and their owners was shown to 21 participants:



### Analysis

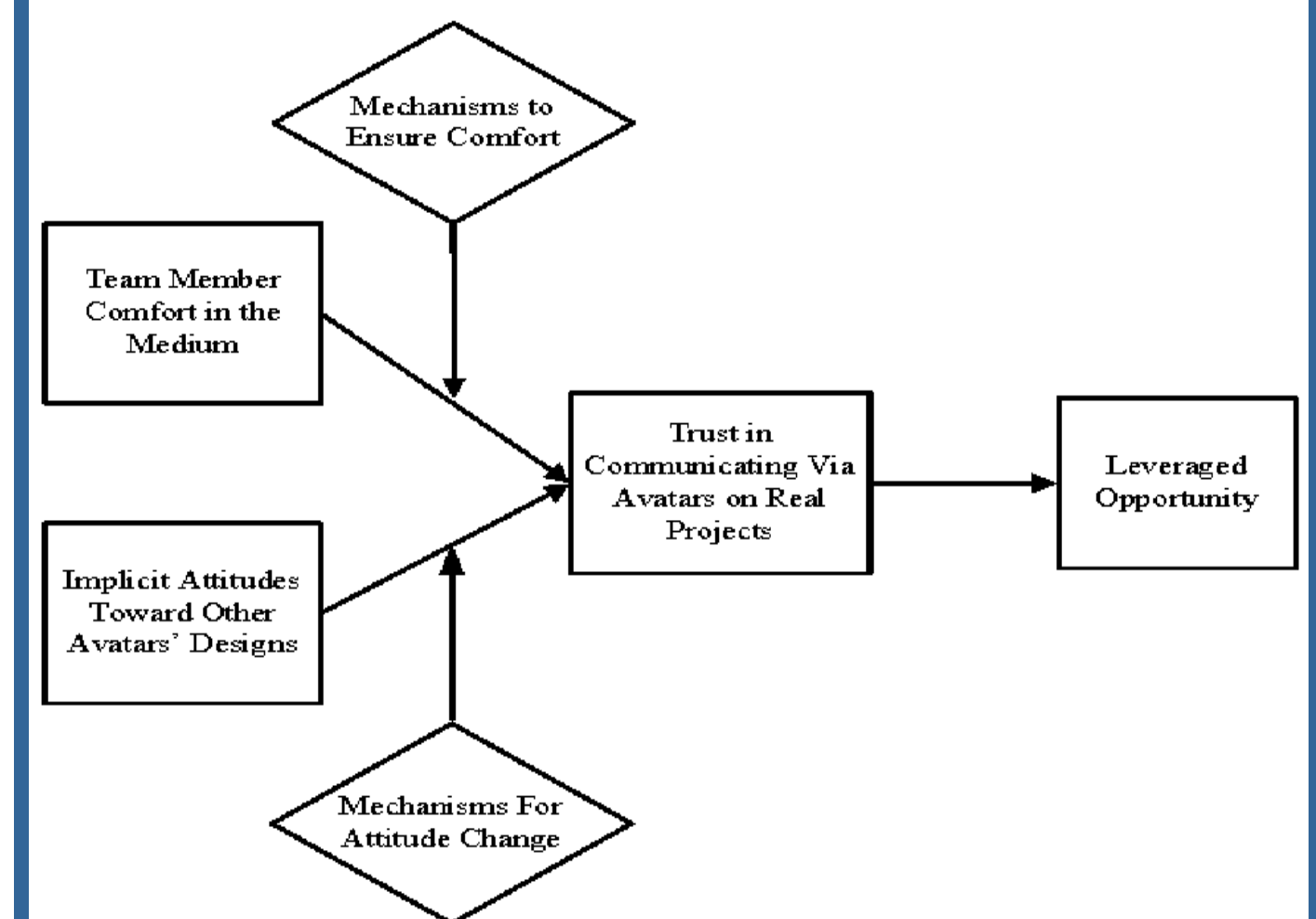
- 119 open codes
- 3 axial codes:
  1. Enhanced *opportunity* for effective project delivery
  2. Issues and improvements for *comfort* with the medium
  3. (Selective Code) Impact of *attitudes* toward avatar designs

### The Central Phenomenon

Participants confirmed an authentic avatar = trust, *until they saw the sample avatars, then they chose alternatives!*

## Conclusion

### Theoretical Model: Comfort and Attitudes Toward Avatar Design, Trust and Opportunity



### Study Strengths

- Field study with business practitioners
- Large sample for a qualitative study
- Generated a solid theoretical model
- Highlighted a compelling central phenomenon

### Implications for Project Management

- Virtual worlds present an opportunity
- This opportunity depends on the presence of trust
- Comfort in engaging via avatars fosters this trust
- Negative attitudes toward avatar designs hamper this trust

→ *Until a root cause of this negativity is understood, project managers should proceed with caution*

## Key Questions

This study addressed these **research questions**:

1. When the goal is real project success, what impact will communication using avatars have on team trust? If the impact is negative, how might it be improved? If the impact is positive, why?
2. When the goal is real project success, will certain types of avatar personas have more or less effect on the establishment of team trust and why? Will specific personas have more effect, less effect or a neutral effect on team trust?

## References

- Creswell, J. W. (2007). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Lohle, M. F., & Terrell, S. R. (2014). Real projects, virtual worlds: Coworkers, their avatars and the trust conundrum. The Qualitative Report, 19(15), 1-35.