



**HAL**  
open science

# Impact of Public Lighting Intensity on the Feeling of Safety in Virtual Reality

Olivier Augereau, Simon Bruno, Ignacio Pérez Allub, Edna Hernández González, Nathalie Le Bigot, Ronan Querrec

► **To cite this version:**

Olivier Augereau, Simon Bruno, Ignacio Pérez Allub, Edna Hernández González, Nathalie Le Bigot, et al.. Impact of Public Lighting Intensity on the Feeling of Safety in Virtual Reality. Proceedings of the 2022 ACM International Joint Conference on Pervasive and Ubiquitous Computing, Sep 2022, Cambridge, United Kingdom. 10.1145/3544793.3563409 . hal-04005943v1

**HAL Id: hal-04005943**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04005943v1>**

Submitted on 1 Mar 2023 (v1), last revised 30 Mar 2023 (v2)

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Impact of Public Lighting Intensity on the Feeling of Safety in Virtual Reality

OLIVIER AUGEREAU, Lab-STICC, CNRS UMR 6285 & ENIB, France

SIMON BRUNO and IGNACIO PÉREZ ALLUB, École Nationale d'Ingénieurs de Brest (ENIB), France

EDNA HERNÁNDEZ GONZÁLEZ, Laboratoire de Géoarchitecture & UBO, France

NATHALIE LE BIGOT, Lab-STICC, CNRS UMR 628 & UBO, France

RONAN QUERREC, Lab-STICC, CNRS UMR 6285 & ENIB, France

Over the past decades the urban night landscapes have been associated with over-lighting, which has become the norm. Arguably, lighting systems play a major role in the city life (feeling of safety, development of a night time economy and various night practices). But the urge for reducing energy consumption and protecting biodiversity must be considered while designing public lighting, without compromising the feeling of safety. In this paper, researchers from Urban Planning, Psychology and Computer Science were gathered by the transdisciplinary research program "Noz Breizh". They are proposing an exploratory approach to use Virtual Reality to test different lighting intensities for studying its impact on the feeling of safety of pedestrians. As a first result we observed a logarithmic relation between the feeling of safety and the light intensity.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; **Virtual reality**; • **Applied computing** → **Psychology**; **Urban Planning**;

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Virtual Reality; Public Lighting; Well-being; Urban Planning; Psychology; Safety

## ACM Reference Format:

Olivier Augereau, Simon Bruno, Ignacio Pérez Allub, Edna Hernández González, Nathalie Le Bigot, and Ronan Querrec. 2022. Impact of Public Lighting Intensity on the Feeling of Safety in Virtual Reality. In *Proceedings of the 2022 ACM International Joint Conference on Pervasive and Ubiquitous Computing (UbiComp/ISWC '22 Adjunct)*, September 11–15, 2022, Cambridge, United Kingdom. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 6 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3544793.3563409>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This research is a part of a research program named "Noz Breizh" which was created in 2021 and launched with the help of the Foundation of the University of Western Brittany (UBO). This program aims to design transdisciplinary research and it organizes multi-partner scientific projects related to the night and nocturnal activities. Thus public lighting is a crucial part for the nightlife of cities: it encourages recreational and economic activities [Hobbs et al. 2005], and increases social and community interactions [Gaston et al. 2015]. Several studies also proved that public lighting has a significant impact on the reduction of traffic accidents [Jackett and Frith 2013; Wanvik 2009] and to some extent in the crime rates [Welsh and Farrington 2008].

Currently, the management of urban light is seeking to be more environmentally friendly and in line with the objectives of a more sober energy consumption [Saad et al. 2021]. Light pollution has a negative impact on local biodiversity [Pauwels et al. 2019], and it can also disturb the sleeping pattern and the circadian rhythm of people

---

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for components of this work owned by others than the author(s) must be honored. Abstracting with credit is permitted. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee. Request permissions from [permissions@acm.org](mailto:permissions@acm.org).

© 2022 Copyright held by the owner/author(s). Publication rights licensed to ACM.

Manuscript submitted to ACM

who are living nearby [Swaminathan et al. 2017]. However the literature is lacking evidence showing what lighting conditions impact on human well-being [Gaston et al. 2015].

As a first step toward this direction, we propose to analyse the relation between the feeling of safety and the light intensity. In order to build an experiment that can be replicated with the same factors, we decided to setup a simulation in virtual reality (VR) as it allows to generate the scene of a selected street and to change the lighting configuration as other factors remains unchanged (weather, people walking around, sky illumination, etc.).

## 2 RELATED WORK

### 2.1 City Lighting

Traditionally, lighting systems have always had a practical objective as they only had to put light in dark places for people to see where they were walking or driving. But the urban light also has an important role in the configuration of a nocturnal sociability (festivities, leisure and night work) [Straw 2015]. The use of photometric units combined with techniques for detecting emotions, facial recognition, behaviours and perception are more commonly used in urban lighting studies [Scorpio et al. 2020].

Boomsma and Steg studied how physical factors such as lighting, entrapment, and individual factors—notably gender, affect the feeling of safety and the acceptability of reduced lighting levels [Boomsma and Steg 2014]. For their tests, they used movie-clip videos on a TV in a dark room. They found that lower lighting and higher entrapment were less desirable and that women felt less safe than men. But like Condon et al. showed in their research about the stated fears of women living in France, the women’s fears do not seem to restrict their nighttime mobility [Condon et al. 2007].

In parallel, some studies show that stray light can have effects on human health and mood [Zissis 2020]. As an example, people report negative sleep disturbances due to the intrusion of light into their homes [Blask et al. 2012]. Artificial lighting may also result in night-time glare, including disability glare, which affects driving and pedestrian safety. Thus, scientific evidence highlighting the negative impacts of artificial lighting on local society and biodiversity [Altermatt and Ebert 2016] contributed to an increase in awareness at a political level in many countries.

In terms of actual safety [Welsh and Farrington 2008], lighting is often seen as an excellent tool for natural surveillance. Still, the intensity of the street light might be reduced or adapted according to the uses of the public space while ensuring the well-being of pedestrian and the road safety.[Struyf et al. 2019].

### 2.2 Virtual Reality

VR has already been used for the design and development of urban planning [Luigi et al. 2015; Maffei et al. 2016]. By making a simulated environment instead of asking participants to walk in a real street, it opens the doors for more people to give their feedback. As compared to just presenting pictures, videos or 3D models to participants on a simple screen, it is more effective to present lightning environments in VR [Chen et al. 2019] as VR is more immersive and will have more impact on the participant’s feelings.

Felnhofer et al. used VR to investigate the effects of weather conditions on people’s emotions and moods. They created virtual models of five parks, each designed to induce different moods (joy, anger, boredom, anxiety and sadness). The virtual environments were displayed to the participant using a smartphone as an input device. For example, to induce sadness the scenario represented a gray and rainy day and one with different park lighting conditions was used to cause the sense of anxiety [Felnhofer et al. 2015].



Fig. 1. A 3D environment simulated in virtual reality representing an existing large pedestrian street at night. Multiple parameters of the public lighting can be tested to analyse its impact on the feeling of safety.

More specifically, Maciejewski studied the influence of light temperature on the feeling of safety [Maciejewski 2018]. The researcher presented a 3D scene based on pictures to 10 participants. The scene is virtually separated in two parts (South and North), where each part was lit with a specific value of temperature (expressed in Kelvin) among three: 3000K, 5000K or 6500K. Each participant saw all combinations (six pairs) in a random order. The participants were asked to indicate each time if they felt more comfortable having to walk into the north or the south part. On average, the majority of participants preferred higher color temperature light.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

Our research goal is to find the relationship between lighting intensity and the feeling of safety at night. We are interested to see how reducing the light intensity is impacting the feeling of safety.

The VR simulation was presented by using the HTC Vive device. We set a “room scale” playing area which allows the user to stand up and to explore the scene by looking around. The simulation used for the experiment is a 3D scene of a popular street named “Siam” located in the city center of Brest (France, Brittany). It is particularly known for bars, restaurants and nightlife.

Once the environment is set up and configured, an experiment was carried out with participants to analyze their perception of safety in that environment. Twelve people participated in the experience: 5 men (41,7%) and seven women (58,3%). The age of the participants was between 19 and 24 years-old with an average of 21,3 years. All participants were familiar with the environment that was presented to them as it is quite a popular street. In addition, all participants were unfamiliar with VR technology and have never used it before the experiment.

#### 3.1 Simulation

The original 3D environment was created by the city of Brest. The data is open and available online<sup>1</sup>. We used an improved version of this 3D model which was made by Anne-Gwenn Bosser and some students that she supervised. Then we added the lights and changed the parameters related to natural ambiance light at night, to have a resemblance with reality<sup>2</sup>. The way light is perceived in VR is quite different from what we can see in Fig.1. The light setup was achieved with two different types of lamppost, according to the real disposition. The light intensity was set to be the same in all lampposts. One important parameter in the configuration of street lights is the temperature. In studies

<sup>1</sup><https://geo.pays-de-brest.fr/zapp/Pages/Donnees3D.aspx>

<sup>2</sup>The simulation was created with Unreal Engine 4.23

mentioned before, typical scenarios for light testing are green areas and urban areas. In our case, we considered the test scenario to be more of like a green area, even though there are not many trees, but because it is a large pedestrian area with no cars in this section of the street. The chosen temperature was 4200K according to these studies [Maciejewski 2018; Scorpio et al. 2020].

### 3.2 Procedure

The participants were asked to fill a consent form explaining the purpose of the experiment. They were free to stop at any time. Then the participants were equipped with the VR headset to start the experiment. The experience consisted of multiple periods of 15 seconds in which we lit the scene with a random light intensity selected from an array of preset values. When the time has elapsed, we switch to a completely dark scene and show an image with a question asking the participant "How safe do you feel?" with a Likert scale going from 1 to 10. From 1 to 5 the indication "not safe" was written on the image, from 6 to 10 the indication "safe" was written. The experimenter wrote the answer and proceeded with the experiment.

As we want to reduce light intensity, we chose rather low values in order to find the specific area in which we observe a shift in the perceived safety. With that in mind, we made an array of six intensities expressed in Lumens: [100, 400, 800, 1500, 3000, 5000]. These values were carefully selected based on the literature and on pretest. We knew that it is not necessary to test with higher values of intensity as it will be too strong. Each intensity was shown in a randomised order and four different times to prevent any influence of any particular sequence. So each participant saw a total of 24 scenes. At the end of the experiment, the participants were asked to fill a questionnaire on the technical quality of the simulation, and a short interview was done.

## 4 RESULTS

First, we analyzed the participant's feeling of safety relatively to the light intensity. Each participant gave four answers for each light intensity. We computed the normalized feeling of safety by subtracting to each participant's answer the average answer of this participant (see Fig. 2). The relation between the feeling of safety and the light intensity seems to follow a logarithmic law. However, not all users follow this law, especially participant 6 which tends to have a decreasing feeling of safety when the light intensity increases. The participant 4 seems to follow the logarithmic law but with a stronger growth factor.

During the interviews conducted with the participants, participant 6 explained that she is very familiar with this specific area of the city and that she was not feeling comfortable with the place from her experience, independently from the lighting conditions. In our sense it explained why this participant data did not follow the general trend.

In order to see how the values were spread out among our participants, we plotted a box plot for each lighting condition based on the normalized feeling of safety in Fig. 3. In the box plot the outliers appear as circles. The outliers are found by the interquartile range rule with a 1.5 factor. Most of the outliers come from participants 6 and 4. The fitted log function is  $y = a + b * \log(x)$ , where the optimal set of parameters was found as  $a = -7.6$  and  $b = 1.1$ .

This logarithmic relation between the light intensity and the feeling of safety shows that if the light is low, changing it will impact much more the feeling of safety than if it is high. With this specific lighting setting, it seems that an intensity of 800 Lumens could be an optimal compromise between the feeling of safety and the light intensity.

In order to see if the simulation was realistic, the participants were also asked on a Likert scale going from 1 to 7 "how much the experience in the virtual environment was similar to the real environment". An average answer of 5.33 were given by the participants. As the participants knew the real scene, we considered that the score was satisfying.

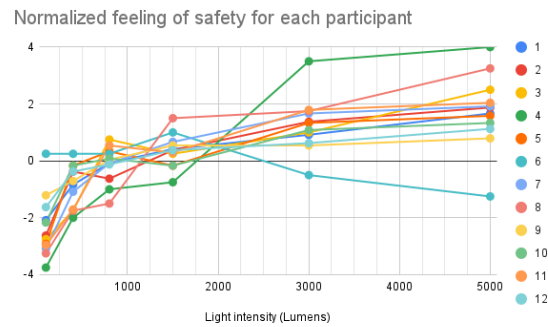


Fig. 2. Each line represents the normalized answer given by the participants. The feeling of safety seems to follow a logarithmic growth as a function of light intensity. We can also see that participant 6’s feeling was not following the general trend.

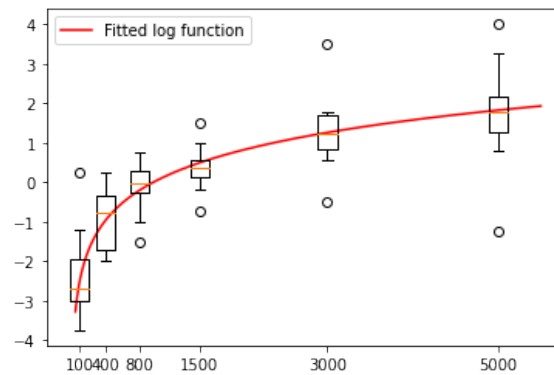


Fig. 3. Box plots with light intensities in x axis (Lumens) based on the normalized feeling of safety of the 12 participants. A logarithmic function  $y = a + b * \log(x)$  was fitted to the median values.

## 5 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

We presented in this paper an experiment to estimate the relation between the feeling of safety and the light intensity. This is a first experiment gathering the data from only 12 participants but a clear logarithmic trend could be observed.

The fact that the participants were familiar with the area helped to prove that the quality of the experience was high enough. Still, further work will be done to improve the quality of the simulation.

However, the participants’ personal experience influenced their answers. Of course even in a totally unknown area, the personal experience will influence the answers but maybe in a less strong way. Still, to address this problem we are now setting up another experiment with a “handcrafted” street that participants will not be familiar with. The area we tested was rather large, so we will experiment with a narrower street which tends to stimulate the feeling of entrapment.

For now, only questionnaires have been used as a subjective measurement of the participants’ feeling, we will include physiological sensors to capture objective measures such as the electrodermal activity or the heart rate variability which are related to stress [Augereau, Tag, et al. 2018] and cognitive load [Augereau, Brocheton, et al. 2022].

## REFERENCES

- Florian Altermatt and Dieter Ebert. 2016. “Reduced flight-to-light behaviour of moth populations exposed to long-term urban light pollution.” *Biology letters*, 12, 4, 20160111.
- Olivier Augereau, Gabriel Brocheton, and Pedro Paulo Do Prado Neto. 2022. “An Open Platform for Research about Cognitive Load in Virtual Reality.” In: *2022 IEEE Conference on Virtual Reality and 3D User Interfaces Abstracts and Workshops (VRW)*. IEEE, 54–55.
- Olivier Augereau, Benjamin Tag, and Koichi Kise. 2018. “Mental state analysis on eyewear.” In: *Proceedings of the 2018 ACM International Joint Conference and 2018 International Symposium on Pervasive and Ubiquitous Computing and Wearable Computers*, 968–973.
- D Blask, G Brainard, R Gibbons, S Lockley, R Stevens, and M Motta. 2012. *Light pollution: Adverse health effects of nighttime lighting, Report 4 of the Council on Science and Public Health (A-12), American Medical Association*. (2012).
- Christine Boomsma and Linda Steg. 2014. “Feeling safe in the dark: Examining the effect of entrapment, lighting levels, and gender on feelings of safety and lighting policy acceptability.” *Environment and Behavior*, 46, 2, 193–212.
- Y Chen, Z Cui, and L Hao. 2019. “Virtual reality in lighting research: Comparing physical and virtual lighting environments.” *Lighting Research & Technology*, 51, 6, 820–837.
- Stéphanie Condon, Marylène Lieber, and Florence Maillachon. 2007. “Feeling unsafe in public places: Understanding women’s fears.” *Revue française de sociologie*, 48, 5, 101–128.
- Anna Felnhofer, Oswald D Kothgassner, Mareike Schmidt, Anna-Katharina Heinzle, Leon Beutl, Helmut Hlavacs, and Ilse Kryspin-Exner. 2015. “Is virtual reality emotionally arousing? Investigating five emotion inducing virtual park scenarios.” *International journal of human-computer studies*, 82, 48–56.
- Kevin J Gaston, Sian Gaston, Jonathan Bennie, and John Hopkins. 2015. “Benefits and costs of artificial nighttime lighting of the environment.” *Environmental Reviews*, 23, 1, 14–23.
- Dick Hobbs, Simon Winlow, Philip Hadfield, and Stuart Lister. 2005. “Violent hypocrisy: Governance and the night-time economy.” *European journal of criminology*, 2, 2, 161–183.
- Michael Jockett and William Frith. 2013. “Quantifying the impact of road lighting on road safety—A New Zealand Study.” *IATSS research*, 36, 2, 139–145.
- Maffei Luigi, Masullo Massimiliano, Pascale Aniello, Ruggiero Gennaro, and Puyana Romero Virginia. 2015. “On the validity of immersive virtual reality as tool for multisensory evaluation of urban spaces.” *Energy procedia*, 78, 471–476.
- Wojciech F Maciejewski. 2018. “Using Virtual Reality in Quantifying the Relation between Colour Temperature of Public Lighting and Perceived Personal Safety.” *Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, Faculty of Industrial Design: Krakow, Poland*.
- Luigi Maffei, Massimiliano Masullo, Aniello Pascale, Gennaro Ruggiero, and Virginia Puyana Romero. 2016. “Immersive virtual reality in community planning: Acoustic and visual congruence of simulated vs real world.” *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 27, 338–345.
- Julie Pauwels, I Le Viol, Clémentine Azam, Nicolas Valet, J-F Julien, Yves Bas, Clément Lemarchand, A Sanchez de Miguel, and Christian Kerbirou. 2019. “Accounting for artificial light impact on bat activity for a biodiversity-friendly urban planning.” *Landscape and Urban planning*, 183, 12–25.
- Rami Saad, Boris A Portnov, and Tamar Trop. 2021. “Saving energy while maintaining the feeling of safety associated with urban street lighting.” *Clean Technologies and Environmental Policy*, 23, 1, 251–269.
- Michelangelo Scorpio, Roberta Laffi, Massimiliano Masullo, Giovanni Ciampi, Antonio Rosato, Luigi Maffei, and Sergio Sibilio. 2020. “Virtual reality for smart urban lighting design: Review, applications and opportunities.” *Energies*, 13, 15, 3809.
- Will Straw. 2015. “The urban night.” *Cartographies of place: Navigating the urban*, 185–200.
- Pia Struyf, Els Enhus, Tom Bauwens, and Lucas Melgaço. 2019. “Literature study: The effects of reduced public lighting on crime, fear of crime, and road safety.”
- Krithika Swaminathan, Elizabeth B Klerman, and Andrew JK Phillips. 2017. “Are individual differences in sleep and circadian timing amplified by use of artificial light sources?” *Journal of biological rhythms*, 32, 2, 165–176.
- Per Ole Wanvik. 2009. “Effects of road lighting: An analysis based on Dutch accident statistics 1987–2006.” *Accident Analysis & Prevention*, 41, 1, 123–128.
- Brandon C Welsh and David P Farrington. 2008. “Effects of improved street lighting on crime.” *Campbell systematic reviews*, 4, 1, 1–51.
- Georges Zissis. 2020. “Sustainable lighting and light pollution: A critical issue for the present generation, a challenge to the future.” *Sustainability*, 12, 11, 4552.