

1 Full title: Effect of iris pigmentation of blue and brown eyed individuals with European ancestry on  
2 ability to see in low light conditions after a short-term dark adaption period.

3 Short title: Iris pigmentation and visual acuity in low light conditions.

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11

## 12 Abstract

13 The effect of iris depigmentation on ability to see in low light conditions has not been  
14 thoroughly investigated as an adaptive advantage that could have contributed to the  
15 evolution and persistence of blue eyes in Europe. In this study 40 participants took part in a  
16 simple eye test in increasing luminance to examine if there was a difference in capacity to  
17 see in low light conditions between blue and brown-eyed individuals after a brief adaptation  
18 period. Blue eyed individuals were identified to have significantly better ability to see in  
19 lower lighting after a short adaption period than brown eyed individuals making it likely  
20 depigmented irises provide an adaptive advantage ( $p=0.046$ ). Superior ability to see in low  
21 light conditions could be the result of increased straylight in depigmented irises, which in  
22 light luminance is disadvantageous but in low light conditions may provide an advantage.  
23 More research is needed to determine the specific association between melanin content  
24 and low-light visual acuity. Furthermore, more research is needed to establish that the  
25 improved capacity of blue-eyed individuals to see in low light settings seen in this study is  
26 attributable to iris pigmentation rather than corresponding pigmentation elsewhere.

## 27 Introduction

28 The human iris or 'rainbow membrane' is considered the most complex tissue visible on the  
29 exterior of the human body with its variation in pattern and colour enabling real time  
30 identification [1, 2]. Eye colours include brown, intermediate and blue, however, eye colour  
31 variation is almost exclusively found in individuals of European descent [3]. The iris is made  
32 up of five cell layers. Melanin, an inert light-absorbing biopolymer pigment associated with  
33 human eye colour variation [4], is stored and synthesised by melanosomes within the  
34 melanocytes of the iris. Iris colour is determined by the quantity of melanin pigment  
35 granules in the anterior border layer and stroma [2, 5-8]. Pigmented irises appear brown due

36 to their abundance of both forms of melanin; eumelanin (brown pigment) and pheomelanin  
37 (red-yellow pigment). Whereas blue (depigmented) irises contain very little melanin [4, 7].  
38 Melanocyte number and melanosome size are not factors contributing to eye colour as they  
39 are constant across eye colours [7, 9].

40 The blue colour of depigmented irises is due to Tyndall Scattering in the relatively melanin  
41 free collagen fibrils of the stroma, that scatter the short blue wavelengths of light hitting the  
42 iris, demonstrating blue iris colour as a result of structural difference and not chemical  
43 composition, such as blue pigment [10]. There has been found to be no significant benefit to  
44 having a physician measure eye colour [11]. As such, iris colours can be classified according  
45 to systems such as Mackey, Wilkinson, Kearns and Hewitt (2011) nine-category grading  
46 system [12]. This system takes into consideration the pattern of pigmentation to assign  
47 irises into specific intermediate categories within three broader classification categories.

#### 48 Role of the iris

49 The iris plays a key role in human vision as it dictates the pupil size according to the light in  
50 an environment, governing the amount of light let into the eye [13]. Light let through the  
51 pupil is focused on the retina to provide vision. Barlow (1972) hypothesised that varying  
52 pupil size may facilitate rapid adaption to darkness by reducing rhodopsin bleaching at the  
53 retina [14, 15]. Alternatively, Campbell and Gregory (1960) suggest varying pupil size  
54 optimizes visual acuity by maximising light entering the pupil in low luminance and reducing  
55 loss of contrast by optical aberrations, straylight and diffraction in increased illumination  
56 [16]. As the iris is acutely adapted to control light entering the eye to provide visual acuity in  
57 a variation of illuminance levels, it would be logical that iris pigmentation has adapted to  
58 facilitate this function. However, iris pigmentation has been found to be independent to

59 pupil size. Iris pigmentation was investigated as a factor affecting pupil size in a sample of 91  
60 white subjects and it was concluded that iris pigmentation does not affect pupil size [13].

61 Iris depigmentation is only significantly observed in European populations with the highest  
62 frequency in the most northerly latitudes of Europe, which would have been part of the  
63 Eurasian tundra belt 10,000 years ago [3, 17]. Depigmentation of the iris to give rise to blue  
64 eye colouring has first appeared in the human population in Europe by point mutation in  
65 *HERC2* which reduced the activity of the *OCA2* promoter [18]. This A to G mutation at  
66 rs12913832 in *HERC2* is the main determinant of blue-eye colour [19] signature of selection  
67 has been found for the derived G allele that is associated with blue eye colour [20]. Despite  
68 the evidence for positive selection on blue iris colour in Europe, it is still unclear why blue  
69 iris colour emerged and persisted within the European population as there are contrasting  
70 arguments suggesting adaptive advantages of both pigmented and depigmented irises.

#### 71 Selection for iris depigmentation

72 In the Eurasian tundra belt, depigmented irises could have been selected for through rare-  
73 colour advantage among females from increased pressure of sexual selection due to a  
74 skewed operational sex ratio (OSR) caused by high mortality in males [17]. Additionally,  
75 individuals with depigmented irises could have been selected for through reduced  
76 susceptibility to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a recurring mood fluctuation with a  
77 seasonal pattern. The higher rates of SAD in brown-eyed individuals can result in suicidal  
78 levels of depression and reduced offspring production by social withdrawal, providing blue-  
79 eyed individuals with an advantage [21]. Selection for individuals with depigmented irises  
80 through rare colour advantage and reduced susceptibility to SAD could have contributed to  
81 the emergence and persistence of blue eye colour in Europe.

82 Selection against iris depigmentation

83 Allowing more amount of light to enter the eye could act as a disadvantage by increasing  
84 susceptibility to disability glare. Blue/green-eyed individuals were found to have an  
85 increased straylight measure value compared to brown eyed individuals, increasing their  
86 disability glare [22]. Vos (2003) defined it as the “the masking effect caused by light  
87 scattered in the ocular media which produces a veiling luminance over the field of view”  
88 [23]. Disability glare could provide a selective disadvantage by impeding hunting abilities,  
89 particularly with light reflecting off snow in the Eurasian tundra. Furthermore, iris  
90 depigmentation could be disadvantageous through slower reaction times of motor response,  
91 to both auditory and visual stimuli, than individuals with pigmented irises. Landers *et al.*  
92 (1976) found mean reaction time to be 23 milliseconds faster in individuals with dark brown  
93 irises compared to those with blue irises in a sample of 48 Caucasian men and women [10].  
94 Iris pigmentation is believed to indicate melanin in other parts of the body, for example  
95 Neuromelanin, which has a function in the speed of nerve impulses [10, 24]. This is thought  
96 to be the mechanism behind people with pigmented irises having faster reaction times than  
97 those with depigmented irises. Slower reaction times and increased disability glare are  
98 disadvantages of iris depigmentation which could contribute to selection against iris  
99 depigmentation.

100 The study by Bartholomew *et al.* (2016) found no significant difference in scotopic (night)  
101 visual acuity between individuals with blue-grey, green-hazel or brown-black after full dark  
102 adaption [25]. However, 52.7% of participants in the study were not of European ancestry  
103 but they did not statistically control for ancestry when testing the effect of iris colour on  
104 visually acuity or contrast sensitivity. It would be worth focusing on participants with  
105 European ancestry only to minimise the influence of genetic background. Also, their study

106 examined visual acuity after complete adaption to low light conditions. Therefore, effect of  
107 iris pigmentation on visual acuity after a short adaption period warrants further  
108 investigation [26].

109 The aim of our study is to test a hypothesis that the ability to see in low light conditions was  
110 a selective pressure for depigmentation of irises in Europe by examining if pigmented and  
111 depigmented irises of living human differ in their capability to see in low light conditions  
112 after a short adaption period. This will be accomplished by measuring the capacity to read  
113 printed codes in steadily increasing light after a short adaption period. Improved visual  
114 acuity in low light settings after a short adaption period could provide a selective advantage  
115 when foraging between dark caves and daylight. The results of this study could help us to  
116 better understand the selective pressures acting upon the population of the Eurasian tundra  
117 belt during the emergence of depigmented irises.

## 118 **Methods**

### 119 **Study Design**

120 In this study, the ability of brown and blue eyes individuals to see in low light after a short  
121 dark adaptation period was compared by analysing participants' ability to read codes in  
122 increasing light . The light level at which the participant could read the code was recorded  
123 and compared between blue and brown eyed individuals. Data was collected at the John  
124 Moore's University Student Life Building between January and August 2022.

### 125 **Participants**

126 Participants were recruited in line with the LJMU REC guidance following ethical approval by  
127 BESREC (approval reference number: 2021/BES/023) between January 2022 and July 2022.  
128 The study was concluded to be minimal risk as there was no threat to the psychological or  
129 physical wellbeing, values or dignity of the participant. Periods of time spent in darkness

130 were kept minimal and intermittent to reduce potential distress to the participants. To  
131 maintain the investigation as minimal risk participants were not asked medical history, age,  
132 sex or other personal questions. Each participant was assigned a participant ID composed as  
133 a P and a number (P01 for example) to anonymise the data. Personally identifiable  
134 information was obtained in order to contact potential participants but no identifiable  
135 information was collected beyond this point and it is not possible to link any study data to  
136 participants. In advertisements and information sheets potential participants were asked  
137 only to apply if they meet the following criteria:

- 138 • Between 18-30 years old
- 139 • Of European descent
- 140 • Have blue or brown eye colour
- 141 • No history of laser eye surgery

142 Informed consent was attained from each participant by written consent form on the day of  
143 the test. A total of 40 individuals participated in this study. A larger sample size would have  
144 strengthened the results however there was not sufficient participant interest for this.

#### 145 Glasses/contact lens wearers

146 The effect of wearing glasses/contact lenses on ability to see in low light conditions was  
147 explored as an independent variable because there was an unequal distribution of  
148 glasses/contact lens wearers between the eye colours. It was noted if the participant wore  
149 glasses or made the investigator aware they wore contact lenses. During the test, these  
150 individuals were required to wear their glasses or contact lenses. The procedure for  
151 glasses/contact lens wearers was the same as the test for participants who did not wear  
152 contact lenses or glasses.

153 Light Levels

154 The light levels were adjusted using the light box. The light box is a 29.5×25.0×18.0 cm  
155 cardboard box with 25 holes in the lid and contained 120 Lezonic string LED lights (Aaronic  
156 Tech Co., Ltd; Xiamen City, China). Each bulb was 3.6 watts . The light level was increased  
157 between each level by pulling another bulb up through the top of the box. The first light  
158 level was complete darkness with no lights exposed from the box in the light proof test  
159 room (40.55cm<sup>3</sup>).Light was prevented from leaving through the unoccupied holes in the box  
160 lid.

161 Lux was measured using the HoldPeak HP-881D Digital LUX Meter (HoldPeak instruments).  
162 The lux at the code at each light level was measured with the sensor of the luxmeter  
163 132.5cm from the ground under the same conditions as the participant set up shown in Fig  
164 1.

165 **Fig 1. Participant set up for code reading test. A) birds eye view, B) side view: LB= light box**

166 Table 1 displays the average lux after 3 repetitions at the code based on the number of  
167 lights exposed from the box. A regular increase in lux was observed as more bulbs are  
168 added, each contributing an average of 0.068 lx ( $R^2=0.9983$ , Fig 2).

169

170 **Table 1. Average Lux output of the light box measured on a vertical plane at the code after**  
171 **3 repeats with an increasing number of bulbs.**

172

No. of Bulbs	Average Lux (lx)	Standard deviation	Lux per bulb (lx)
0	0.01	0.00	0
1	0.05	0.01	0.04



2	0.13	0.00	0.08
3	0.19	0.00	0.06
4	0.28	0.01	0.09
5	0.32	0.00	0.04
6	0.43	0.01	0.11
7	0.48	0.01	0.05
8	0.50	0.00	0.03
9	0.56	0.01	0.06
10	0.68	0.01	0.12
11	0.75	0.01	0.06
12	0.79	0.01	0.04
13	0.84	0.01	0.05
14	0.94	0.00	0.10
15	0.99	0.02	0.05
16	1.12	0.01	0.13
17	1.17	0.00	0.05
18	1.22	0.01	0.05
19	1.30	0.01	0.07
20	1.38	0.01	0.09
21	1.42	0.03	0.04
22	1.50	0.01	0.07
23	1.56	0.01	0.06
24	1.61	0.01	0.06
25	1.67	0.01	0.06

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Weighted average lux per bulb:	0.07
SD lux per bulb:	0.03

173

174 **Fig 2. Average lux according to the number of lights exposed from the light box after 3**

175 **repetitions.** The graph shows an increase in the average lux at the code with the number of

176 lights exposed from the light box ( $y=0.0684x - 0.0809$ ,  $R^2=0.9983$ ).

177 Procedure

178 The process of the test is illustrated in Fig 3. Each test took approximately 30 minutes.

179 During this time the participants had the test explained to them, signed consent forms, had

180 their iris photographed and undertook the test.

181 During the test, participants were asked to read a code on the adjacent wall 3 meters from

182 them with the light box on the floor 120cm from the wall with the code, as illustrated by Fig

183 1. The distance from the code was chosen to be 3 meters following the Pelli-Robson  
184 contrast sensitivity chart test that uses the identification of letters to test visual acuity [27].  
185 The test was comprised of 30 seconds of full light (with the main ceiling lights of the room  
186 on) followed by 30 seconds of the next light level (with the main ceiling lights of the room  
187 off) controlled by the light box. As complete rod and cone adaption to darkness after bright  
188 lights can take between 20 to 40 minutes, this study does not compare complete dark  
189 adaption between blue and brown eye colours [28-31].

190 Before the first light level each participant went through a preliminary 30 seconds of  
191 complete darkness followed by 30 seconds of full light. During the 30 seconds of full light  
192 the investigator would prepare the light box for the next light level by exposing another  
193 bulb from the top of the light box. Across the lux measurements the lights were exposed  
194 from the centre outward in the regular pattern shown in Fig 4. During the following 30  
195 seconds of the next light level the investigator secured the code 122cm off the ground and  
196 the participant was asked to look ahead at the code and particularly avoid looking at the  
197 light box to avoid disability glare. When prompted by the investigator at the end of the 30  
198 seconds the participant would be asked to read what they could see of the code which was  
199 noted by the investigator. The code was then removed from the wall before starting the  
200 next 30 seconds of full light to prepare for the next light level. Also, during the 30 seconds of  
201 full light, note was taken if the participant had been able to correctly read the code in the  
202 pervious light level. Once the participant had correctly read the code the test was continued  
203 for three more light levels before the participant was informed the test was complete. The  
204 variable used in this study is the light level score which corresponds to the number of  
205 exposed lights at the light level they were first able to read the code.

206 **Fig 3. Diagram of the process during the participant test (s=seconds).**

207 **Fig 4. Diagram showing the pattern of bulb exposure from the top of the light box.**

208 Codes

209 Each light level had a specific code for the participants to read. Each code was composed of  
210 five randomly generated capital letters in Calibri font size 190 in black (RGB: 0,0,0). The  
211 letters were horizontal on A4 dark grey paper (RGB: 51,51,51). In order to get the code  
212 correct the participant had to read all five letters in order.

213 Iris Classification

214 Irises were photographed with the participant stood against a white wall. Photographs were  
215 taken on an iPhone XR (Apple Inc.) back camera using flash from approximately 6 cm away  
216 from the eye. To remove subjectivity from determining iris colour, six colour samples were  
217 taken from the iris photos and their RGB values were analysed using the eyedropper tool of  
218 Photoshop, version 3.0 (Adobe Systems, 2021). Average RGB values for the peripupillary ring  
219 area and periphery iris area (overall eye colour) were generated from three colour samples  
220 from each area in a triangle shape (Fig 5). The RGB value (Red, Green or Blue) present in the  
221 highest quantity reflected the unobjective colour of that part of the iris. Brown eye colour  
222 was represented by red, blue eye colour by blue, and green intermediate colours by green.  
223 Irises were categorised by the colours of these areas according to Mackey *et al.*'s (2011) Iris  
224 colour classification grading system [12].

225 **Fig 5. The six colour sampling points on the iris. The RGB values of the six colour samples**  
226 **from the iris photos were analysed with the eyedropper tool of Photoshop, version 3.0**  
227 **(Adobe Systems).**

## 228 Statistical analysis

229 Descriptive statistics of the participants score were calculated using Microsoft Excel version  
230 2108 .

231 Outliers were identified within each eye colour group using the outlier labelling rule with  
232 the standard 1.5 multiplier suggest by Tukey (1977) [32]. The outlier labelling rule was also  
233 used with a 2.2 multiplier as recommended by Hoaglin and Iglewicz (1987) for more  
234 accurate outlier labelling in smaller sample sizes [33].

235 Due to small sample size nonparametric tests were employed. SPSS Statistics version 27  
236 (SPSS, IBM) was first used to conduct a test of homogeneity to ensure the data fits the  
237 assumptions of Mann–Whitney U; same distribution of data across blue and brown eye  
238 colour. A Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to compare differences in light level scores  
239 between blue and brown eye colours, again using SPSS. A second Mann–Whitney U test was  
240 conducted to compare differences in light level scores between glasses and contact lens  
241 wearers and non- wearers.

## 242 Results

### 243 Iris colour analysis

244 The iris of one participant did not fit into blue or brown eye colour groups by Mackey *et al.*'s  
245 (2011) Iris colour classification grading system [11]. This participant was excluded from  
246 further analysis. Therefore, self-reported eye colour was 97.5% (39/40) consistent with  
247 colour analysis. The results of colour analysis are displayed in Table 2 . The original data are  
248 available in S1. Within the sample used in this study, 36% (14/39) of participants had brown  
249 eyes and 64% (25/39) had blue eyes. The colour category with lowest and highest mean  
250 light level score was light blue and brown with peripheral green respectively.

251 **Table 2. Eye colour classification category according to Mackey et al.'s (2011) and mean**  
 252 **light level score (number of bulbs) of participants.**

	Eye colour classification category	Quantity	Mean Light level score
Blue (25)	Light Blue	12	10.08
	Dark Blue	8	10.5
	Blue with peripuillary brown	5	10.2
Brown (14)	Brown with peripheral green	2	13
	Light Brown	5	12
	Dark Brown	7	11.71

253 Light level score according to eye colour

254 Descriptive statistics of the light level score according to eye colour are found in Table 3. The  
 255 mean light level score of brown eyed individuals was 1.76 light levels (0.12lx) greater than  
 256 blue eyed individuals and 1.13 (0.08lx) greater than the combined mean. Blue eyed light  
 257 level scores ranged from 7 to 17, which is corresponding to an average lux of 0.43lx to 1.12  
 258 lx at the code. Brown eyed light level scores ranged from 8 to 19, which is corresponding to  
 259 an average lux of 0.48 lx to 1.22 lx at the code.

260 **Table 3. Descriptive statistic of light level scores (number of bulbs) of blue, brown and**  
 261 **combined groupings.**

	Sample		
	Blue	Brown	Combined
Mean	10.24	12	10.87
Standard Error	0.55	0.8	0.47
Median	10	11.5	10
Mode	9	11	9
Standard Deviation	2.76	2.99	2.93
Range	10	11	12
Minimum	7	8	7
Maximum	17	19	19

Count	25	14	39
Percentage	64	36	100

262

263 The light level scores of P26 (Score=17) and P27 (Score=17) were identified as outliers using  
 264 the outlier labelling rule with a multiplier of 1.5. However, they were not identified as  
 265 outliers using a multiplier of 2.2 that is suitable for a small sample size. Using a 1.5 or 2.2  
 266 multiplier, no brown-eyed outliers were found.

267 The test of homogeneity of variance showed equal distribution demonstrating the data fit  
 268 the assumptions of the Mann-Whitney U test ( $p=0.651$ ). The Mann-Whitney U test revealed  
 269 a significant difference in light level score between brown eyed individuals (Mean=12  
 270 bulbs/0.82lx) and blue-eyed individuals (Mean= 10.24 bulbs/ 0.70lx;  $U=107.5$ ,  $n_1=14$ ,  $n_2=25$ ,  
 271  $p=0.046$ ). The results of the Mann-Whitney U test remained significant after the exclusion of  
 272 the two outliers ( $U=81.5$ ,  $p=0.012$ ). Distribution of participants light level score according to  
 273 eye colour can be seen in Fig 6.

274 **Fig 6. Distribution of participants light level score according to eye colour.**

275 Light level score according to whether glasses/contact lenses are worn  
 276 Within this study the percentage of glasses wearers was 1.43% higher in brown eyed  
 277 individuals ( $3/14 = 21.43\%$ ) than brown eyed individuals ( $5/25 = 20.0\%$ ) (S1 Table)..

278 **Table 4. Descriptive statistic of light level scores of glasses/contact lens wearers, non-**  
 279 **glasses/contact lens wearers and combined.**

	Sample		
	Wearers	Non-wearers	Combined
Mean	11.5	10.7	10.87
Standard Error	1.25	0.5	0.47
Median	10.5	10	10

Mode	9	9	9
Standard Deviation	3.55	2.8	2.93
Range	9	12	12
Minimum	8	7	7
Maximum	17	19	19
Count	8	31	39
Percentage	21	79	100

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280

281 Descriptive statistics of the light level scores according to whether glasses/contact lenses  
282 are worn are found in Table 4. The mean light level score of wearers was 0.8 (0.05lx) light  
283 levels greater than non-wearers and 0.63 (0.04lx) greater than the combined mean. Non-  
284 wearers light level scores ranged from 7 to 19, which is corresponding to an average lux of  
285 0.43lx to 1.22lx at the code. Wearers light level scores ranged from 8 to 17, which is  
286 corresponding to an average lux of 0.48lx to 1.12lx at the code.

287 A Man-Whitney U test revealed insignificant differences in the light level score of  
288 glasses/contact wearers (Mean=11.50 bulbs/ 0.79lx) and non-wearers (Mean=10.70 bulbs/  
289 0.73lx; U=111.5 p=0.661). This justified the inclusion of glasses and contact lens wearers in  
290 the investigation into iris pigmentation. The test of homogeneity of variance showed equal  
291 distribution demonstrating the data fit the assumptions of the Mann-Whitney U test  
292 (p=0.651).

## 293 Discussion

294 The results of this study reveal that blue-eyed individuals can read codes in significantly less  
295 light than brown-eyed individuals, with blue-eyed individuals reading the code with an  
296 average of 10.24 (0.70lx) light exposed from the light box compared to 12 (0.82lx) lights  
297 exposed for brown-eyed individuals (p=0.046). This infers blue-eyed individuals have an  
298 ability to see in low light conditions that is superior to that of brown eyed individuals.

299 Providing blue eyed individuals with a selective advantage could be the basis of  
300 depigmented irises become a prominent trait within the European population.

301 Increased straylight in blue irises as a potential advantage in low light conditions

302 As previously stated, straylight is thought to cause a visual disadvantage since it reduces  
303 contrast and commonly manifests itself as disability glare [22, 34, 35]. However, this may  
304 not be the case in low light, as demonstrated by our finding that blue-eyed people have a  
305 better ability to see in low light after a short adaption period. Straylight is dependent on iris  
306 pigmentation as Ijspeert *et al.* (1990) found blue eyes to have a mean straylight measure of  
307 0.949 across three glare angles compared to brown eyes with a straylight measure of 0.858  
308 [22]. In fact, brown irises transmit approximately 100 times less light than blue irises [35]. It  
309 could be hypothesised that, in brown eyed individuals, melanin in the anterior border layer  
310 and stroma of the iris absorbs straylight that would otherwise pass through the pupil and  
311 cast a veil of light on the retina. For blue eyed individuals, in low light conditions after a  
312 short adaption period, this veil of light contributes enough luminance to provide blue-eyed  
313 individuals with a visual advantage to make out shapes. This phenomenon is demonstrated  
314 by blue-eyed individuals being able to read codes in less light than brown eyed individuals in  
315 our study. We demonstrated that illumination is the limiting factor of visual acuity in low  
316 light conditions, where blue eyed individuals have the advantage. However, contrast  
317 sensitivity, hindered by straylight, is the limiting factor which provides brown eyed  
318 individuals with the visual advantage in average to high light conditions [36].

319 Sturm and Larsson (2009) speculated that iris pigmentation influences visual acuity in low  
320 light conditions [8]. The findings of our study are contradictory to this as blue and brown-  
321 eyed individuals had significantly different light level scores ( $p=0.046$ ). It has been reported  
322 that brown irises transmit significantly less straylight than blue irises and are less susceptible



323 to disability glare [22, 26, 35]. Since our study hypothesises that increased light level score  
324 (needing more light to read the code) is the product of decreased straylight, the findings of  
325 our study are consistent with the findings of the previous studies [22, 26, 35].

#### 326 Influence of glasses and contact lens

327 To justify the inclusion of glasses/contact lens wearers in the sample comparing light level  
328 score between brown and blue-eyed individuals, the light level score between  
329 glasses/contact lens wearers and non-wearers was investigated. Because the number of  
330 individuals who use glasses or contact lenses was not evenly distributed between blue and  
331 brown eyed individuals, this investigation was necessary (Blue=25% and Brown=27.27%). If  
332 wearing glasses/contact lenses affects light level score, an unequal proportion of  
333 glasses/contact lens wearers may cause one eye colour to be influenced more than the  
334 other. According to Van Der Meulen *et al.* (2010), rigid contact lenses cause more straylight  
335 during and after use. According to the concept that more straylight leads to a lower light  
336 level score, wearing glasses or contact lenses could lower the light level score [37]. Also,  
337 glasses and contact lenses have blue light filters which could affect light level score, which  
338 was not controlled in this study. However, a study by Hammond (2015) suggested no effect  
339 of blue light filtering lenses on visual acuity [38]. Also, our study shows no significant  
340 difference ( $p=0.661$ ) in light level score between glasses and contact lens wearers and non-  
341 wearers. In light of this, the current study warrants the inclusion of glasses/contact lens  
342 wearers in the investigation into ability to see in low light conditions between blue and  
343 brown eye colour.

#### 344 Other factors

345 As this is a preliminary study with a small sample size, we have only recruited individuals  
346 with blue or brown eye colours. In the future, a study with a larger sample including

347 intermediate eye colours and measuring melanin content will be able to provide further  
348 insight into the direct relationship between iris pigmentation and ability to see in low light  
349 conditions.

350 Apart from iris pigmentation, other factors could have contributed more to visual acuity. For  
351 example, diet has been linked to vision in darkness, particularly the effect of malnutrition  
352 and vitamin A deficiency [39]. It is not unexpected that vitamin A plays a role in night vision  
353 as it is a precursor of rhodopsin; a photopigment found in rods within the retina [40]. A  
354 questionnaire on diet could be added to the procedure to control for the effect of dietary  
355 factors. Further study is required to isolate pigmentation of the iris as the source of  
356 variation in ability to see in low light conditions observed in this study.

## 357 Conclusion

358 The findings of this study show that after a short adaptation period, blue eyed individuals  
359 have greater capacity to see in low light conditions than brown eyed individuals. The  
360 advantage of greater visual acuity in low light conditions after a short adaption period could  
361 have been the basis of the emergence and persistence of blue eye colour within the  
362 European population. Through comparison with other studies comparing blue and brown  
363 irises, increased visibility in low light conditions could be the product of increased straylight  
364 in blue irises which casts a veil of light over the retina. Further study is need to fully  
365 understand the relationship between the iris pigmentation and ability to see in low light  
366 conditions.

## 367 Supporting Information

368 **S1 Table. Recorded number of light bulbs required to read a code by participants with**  
369 **their eye colours and glasses wearing status.** The 'specific eye colour' was determined

370 using a photograph of each participant's iris by Mackey et al.'s (2011) Iris colour  
371 classification grading system [12]

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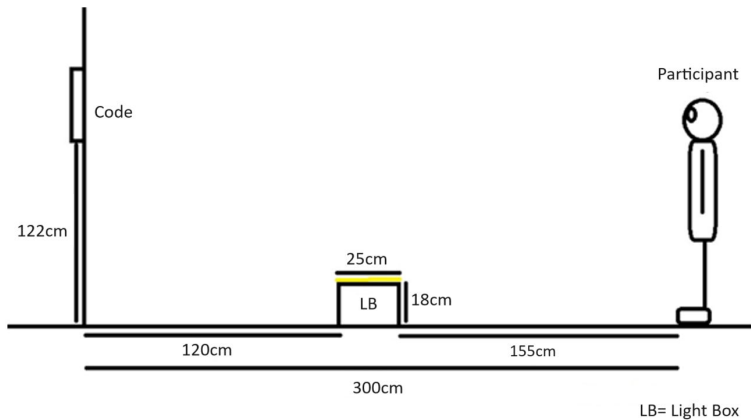
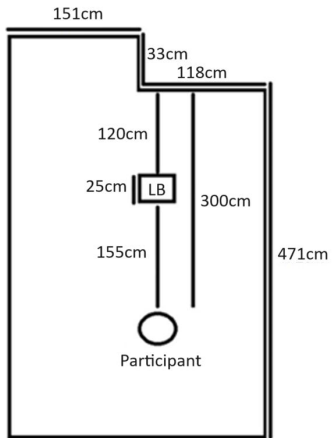
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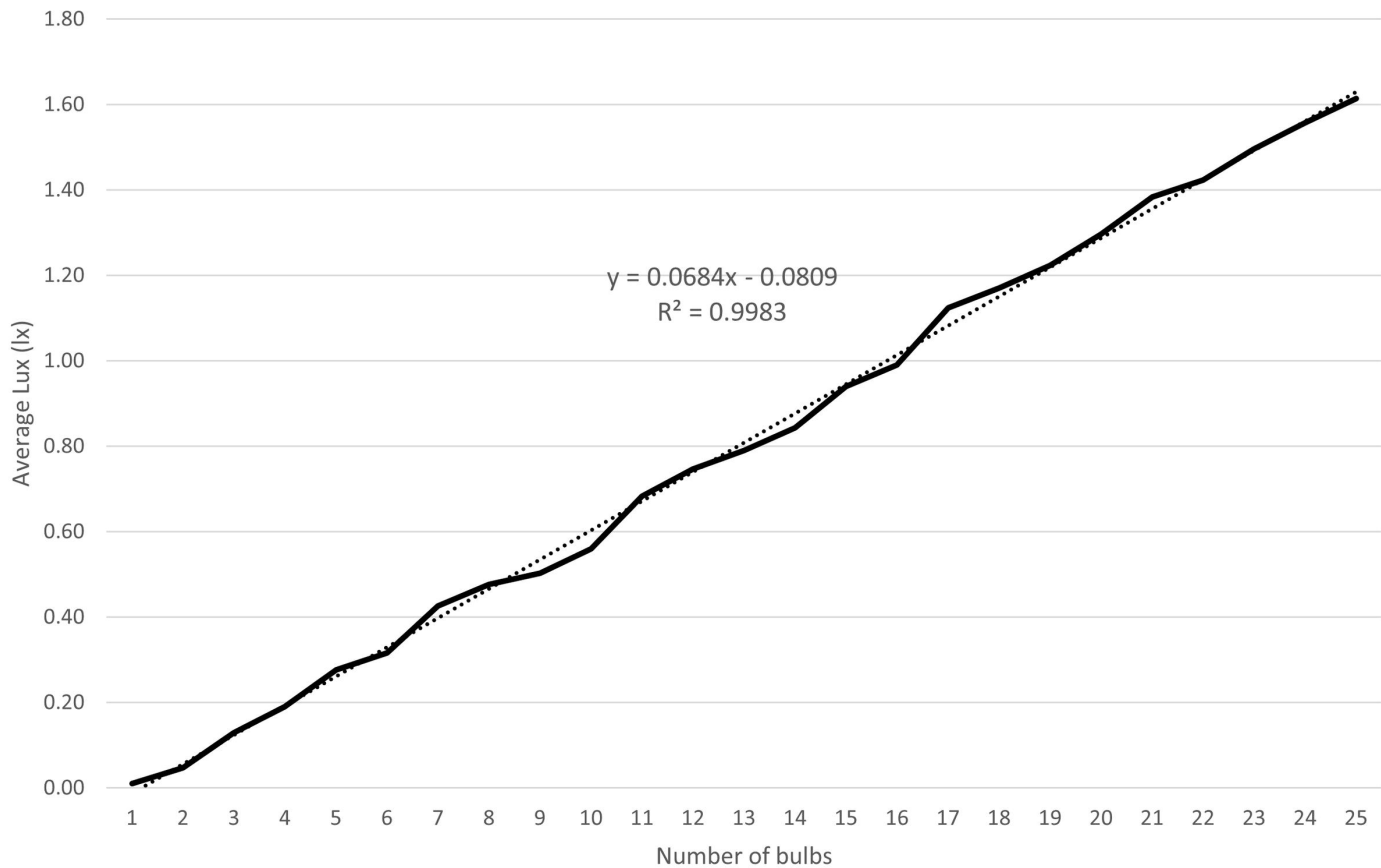
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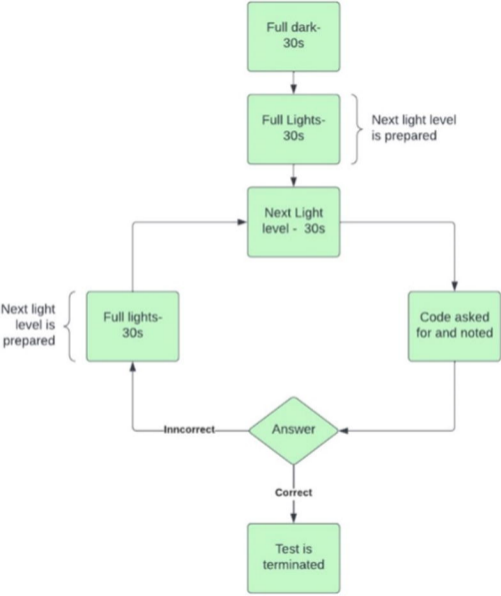
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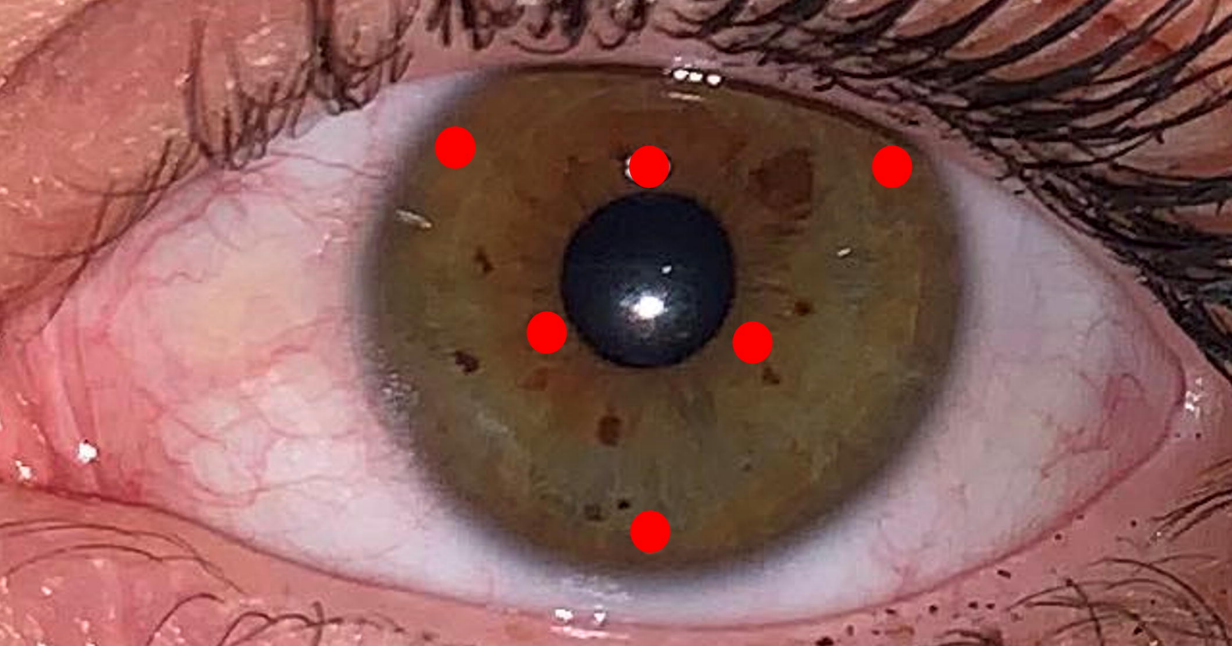
Average lux accordig to the number of lights exposed from the lightbox





A 5x5 grid of 25 numbered circles, each containing a number from 1 to 25. The numbers are arranged in the following order from top-left to bottom-right:

22	18	10	14	24
20	8	2	6	16
13	5	1	4	12
17	7	3	9	19
25	15	11	21	23



No. Participants

