



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

IJRM

International Journal of Research in Marketing

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijresmar](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijresmar)

## Full Length Article

## Feeling disconnected from others: The effects of ambient darkness on hedonic choice☆

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

First received on May 25, 2016 and was under review for 5½ months  
Available online xxxx

## Keywords:

Ambient lighting  
Environmental influence  
Authenticity  
Hedonic choice

## ABSTRACT

This research documents a novel effect of ambient lighting on consumer choice. We propose and find that ambient darkness (vs. brightness) can result in consumers feeling disconnected from others. As a result, consumers become more authentic in their choices and they choose hedonic over utilitarian options because these choices reflect what they truly want (Study 1). Past research had suggested darkness increases hedonic choice by making choice less observable, but we find this effect emerges even when the choice is already anonymous and darkness cannot further increase anonymity. Rather, feeling disconnected from others and less weight to social norms heightened self-authenticity in darker (vs. brighter) surroundings (Study 2). When consumers are reminded of social connection, this difference is attenuated (Study 3). Thus, consumers making hedonic choices regulate their choices when reminded of their social connections. Implications of these findings and possible extensions are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Ambient lighting is an important aspect of retail atmospherics, but how might it influence consumer choice, especially the choice of a hedonic over a more utilitarian product? For example, imagine you are in a quiet bookstore. As you enjoy your anonymity and solitude while browsing, your attention is drawn to two different books. One is utilitarian, and it will expand your knowledge of world history. The other is hedonic, and it will be great fun to read. Would you be more likely to make a hedonic over a utilitarian choice if the store were dimly lit rather than bright? When and why might your choice be influenced in this manner?

The notion that atmospherics serve as a critical influence on consumer behavior is widely accepted in the marketing literature (Bitner, 1992; Kotler, 1973). Background factors such as lighting, scent, temperature, sound, or music provide sensory information and can stimulate the five senses. Surprisingly, despite ambient lighting being an inherent characteristic of retailing and service settings, there is very limited research examining its impact on consumers' responses and choices (for exceptions, see Areni & Kim, 1994; Dong, Huang, & Zhong, 2015; Scheibehenne, Todd, & Wansink, 2010; Xu & Labroo, 2014).

To fill this gap, we investigate the impact of ambient lighting on consumers' preferences for hedonic versus utilitarian options. We propose that ambient darkness (vs. brightness) can make consumers feel disconnected from others, and they assign less weight to what others might think of them. Consequently they become more authentic to themselves and to make choices that reflect what they truly want. As hedonic choices align more with what consumers want whereas utilitarian choices align with

☆ The preparation of this manuscript was supported by NTU Start-Up Grant (M4081651.010) awarded to the first author. All authors contributed equally to this research.

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what consumers think they should choose (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; O'Curry & Strahilevitz, 2001; Okada, 2005), in darker surroundings consumers become more likely to choose hedonic options over utilitarian ones.

In what follows, we first review the literatures on the influence of ambient lighting on consumer choice and on hedonic choice. We then elaborate on how and when ambient darkness may increase hedonic choice among consumers. We then report the results of three experiments testing our hypotheses, the underlying mechanism, and the boundary condition. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings.

## 2. Conceptualization

### 2.1. The literature on lighting effects

Lighting is an extremely important feature of the retailing environment, for two reasons. First, from the perceptual point of view, bright light facilitates visual acuity. Because bright light facilitates the ability to see things, consumers can examine and handle more merchandise (e.g., to read labels, check prices) when the lighting is bright than when it is dim (Areni & Kim, 1994). Conversely, in darker surroundings, due to the lower level of visual acuity, consumers become less accurate in their estimates and evaluations of products. For instance, in darker surroundings consumers underestimate the quantity of food portions that they consumed (Scheibehenne et al., 2010). Second, lighting is also one of the crucial factors in determining arousal level – brightly lit rooms are more arousing than dimly lit ones (Mehrabian, 1976). Marketers frequently use ambient lighting to create optimal levels of stimulation that will lead to more favorable consumer behavior. For example, marketers employ dim lighting in their stores in order to reduce the level of stimulation and slow down the pace consumers shop in the store (Markin, Lillis, & Narayana, 1976). In line with these findings showing that bright light increases arousal, a recent study showed that bright light can amplify consumers' affective responses towards products they are evaluating and dim light can reduce their affective responses. For instance, spicy foods are perceived as more enjoyable, and positive (vs. negative) words are perceived as more positive by participants in a brightly versus dimly-lit room (Xu & Labroo, 2014). Thus, brighter ambient lighting compared to darker lighting is known to influence consumer choices by changing their visual acuity and allowing them to examine products more accurately and also by changing their arousal levels and enhancing their affective responses towards the products they are examining.

In current paper, rather than focusing on consumers' perceptions of the stimuli present in the environment, we examine whether ambient lighting may shift consumers' choices between a utilitarian and a hedonic option. We elaborate on how and why ambient lighting might shape consumers' choices in the next section.

### 2.2. Ambient darkness leads to perceived disconnectedness from others

Of most relevance to our research is the finding that ambient darkness can reduce people's emotional reactions to external stimuli. In particular, prior research shows that darker (vs. brighter) lighting can lead people to experience less (vs. more) intense emotions towards stimuli present in their surroundings (Xu & Labroo, 2014), and affective intensity is likely to impact hedonic choice. Studies show that emotional intensity and psychological distance are negatively correlated – stronger emotional intensity corresponds with a lower psychological distance towards others whereas reduced emotional intensity corresponds with a greater perceived psychological distance from others (Van Boven, Kane, McGraw, & Dale, 2010). If darkness reduces affective response, and if consumers feel more distant from others when they experience less emotional response, then they may feel more psychologically distant from others when they are making choices in darker rather than brighter surroundings. Moreover, if darkness leads consumers to feel emotionally disconnected from others, consumers might assign less weight to opinions others might have of them (Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox, & Harrell, 1997; Shafir, Simonson, & Tversky, 1993; Simonson, 1989; Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). They may therefore be less likely to make choices they “should” make if they would like to adhere to social norms and behave in socially desirable ways. Instead, they may become more authentic to their own wants and desires. Because utilitarian choices adhere more strongly to what consumers should choose, but hedonic choices adhere more to what consumers want to do (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; O'Curry & Strahilevitz, 2001; Okada, 2005), in darker surroundings consumers might thus become more likely to make hedonic over utilitarian choices.

Existing research also supports the view that ambient darkness might increase hedonic choice (Gergen, Gergen, & Barton, 1973; Page & Moss, 1976; Zhong, Bohns, & Gino, 2010). This stream of research posits that darker surroundings reduce visual acuity, and as a result a consumer's actions become less observable by others (Gergen et al., 1973; Page & Moss, 1976; Zhong et al., 2010). Therefore, in darker surroundings, people feel they can get away with moral transgressions because others cannot see them or their transgressions (Zhong et al., 2010). For example, Zhong et al. (2010) found that participants seated in a dim rather than bright room were more selfish when making allocations to another participant in a dictator game, because they felt their actions were hidden from others and therefore did not need justification. To the extent that consumers feel they generally have to justify hedonic choices (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; O'Curry & Strahilevitz, 2001; Okada, 2005), and to the extent that darker surroundings make choice more hidden and anonymous (Gergen et al., 1973; Page & Moss, 1976; Zhong et al., 2010), they may feel they have to justify choice less in darker surroundings. Consumers might therefore become more likely to make hedonic choices in darker surroundings, similar to what we propose, but for a different reason – that consumers feel they will not have to justify their choice to people who would normally have observed it because the choice is hidden.

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