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**Impact of attentional focus on motor performance  
within the context of “early” limb regulation and “late” target control**

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## Abstract

Directing attention to the effect of one's movement (external focus) has been shown to aid performance compared to directing attention to the movement itself (internal focus). This finding has been predominantly explained by an external focus promoting action planning and automatic movement control, and while an internal focus acts to constrain movement (constrained action hypothesis [CAH]). In a separate line of research, the multiple control process model states that early movement phases involve anticipated, ~~effortful,~~ planning and feedforward ~~mechanisms~~ processes, while late movement phases explicitly incorporate ~~automatic processing of online~~ external afferent information. **We hypothesised that the enhanced planning and automatic movement control would manifest from an external/distal focus compared to internal/proximal focus associated with adopting an external focus would result in both greater and more effective planning and enhanced online control in external compared to internal focus of attention conditions.** The present study had participants execute fast and accurate movements to a single target using a digitizing graphics tablet that translated movements to a screen. Participants were instructed to focus on the end target location (external-distal), movement of the cursor (external-proximal), and the movement of the limb (internal-proximal). It was found that the external-distal focus generated a shorter time to initiate and execute movements (representative of indicating enhanced movement planning) compared to the external- and internal-proximal conditions. In addition, only the external proximal focus revealed a reduction in spatial variability between peak velocity and movement end (representative of greater indicating greater online control). **These findings indicate that increases in action planning and online control occur when adopting an external-distal focus of attention. However, there were some benefits associated with enhanced to online adjustments control when appear to be specific to adopting an external-proximal focus. Whereas, adopting an external-distal leads to enhanced**

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~~action planning.~~ We propose that an external-proximal-distal conditions focus promotes  
action-effect principles, where there is a greater contribution of anticipatory feedforward  
processes that limit the need for late online control~~the need for reflexive processes involved~~  
~~in the 'fine tuning' of movements via the use of afferent information online are reduced due~~  
~~to enhanced feedforward movement planning.~~

**Keywords:** attentional focus, constrained-action, early and late control, online, aiming

## 1 Introduction

2 As early as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (James, 1890), research has demonstrated that directing  
3 attention on the effect of one's movement (external focus) is more efficacious than directing  
4 attention to the movement itself (internal focus) (for a review see Wulf 2013). Indeed, the  
5 benefit of an external as opposed to internal focus has been reflected in a number domains  
6 including sport (golf: Wulf & Su, 2007; pedalo racing: Totsika & Wulf, 2003; soccer: Wulf,  
7 McConnell, Gärtner, & Schwarz, 2002; dart-throwing: Marchant, Clough, & Crawshaw,  
8 2007; basketball: Zachry, Wulf, Mercer, & Bezodis, 2005; jumping: Wulf, Zachry, Granados,  
9 & Dufek, 2007), muscular control (maximum force production: Marchant, Greig, & Scott,  
10 2009; strength endurance: Marchant, Greig, Bullough, & Hitchen, 2011), and patient  
11 populations and rehabilitation (Fasoli, Trombly, Tickle-Degnen, & Verfaellie, 2002; Johnson,  
12 Burridge, Demain, 2013; Landers, Wulf, Wallmann, & Guadagnoli, 2005).

13 The principle explanation for the benefit of an external focus is adapted from the logic  
14 of the *degrees-of-freedom problem*. Here, multiple muscles, limbs and joints may be  
15 incomprehensibly utilised to deliver a single or set movement goal (Bernstein, 1967). Indeed,  
16 it is suggested that an external focus accommodates automatic control processes –  
17 synonymous with self-organization (Kelso, 2012; Wallace, 1996) – whereas, an internal focus  
18 causes the performer to “freeze” the degrees-of-freedom. This “freezing” effect results in the  
19 decomposing of individual movement elements, which inadvertently attenuates performance  
20 (see also, Beilock & Carr, 2001 and Masters, 1992). This notion is referred to as the  
21 *constrained-action hypothesis* (CAH) (Wulf, McNevin, & Shea, 2001).

22 Since its inception, the CAH has been heavily tested for its explanatory power. One of  
23 the first studies to do so showed that undertaking an external focus during a balancing task  
24 led to shorter amplitude and faster frequency iterative adjustments in movement, as well as  
25 shorter probe reaction times in a secondary auditory task compared to an internal focus (Wulf

1 et al., 2001). Indeed, it was theorized that if an external focus of attention accommodates  
2 automatic control processes, then there may be more reflex-like adjustments made to the  
3 movement in comparison to conditions promoting an internal focus of attention (see also  
4 McNevin, Shea, & Wulf, 2003; Wulf, Mercer, McNevin, & Guadagnoli, 2004). This  
5 increased automaticity has been shown to result in reduced cognitive demands, and thus leads  
6 to a larger pool of attentional resources that are available for a secondary task (*cf.* Poolton,  
7 Maxwell, Masters, & van der Kamp, 2007). Recent evidence demonstrates how an external  
8 focus may also result in a greater efficiency in the recruitment and activation muscles  
9 compared to an internal focus of attention (Marchant, Greigg, Bullough et al., 2011;  
10 Marchant, Greig, & Scott, 2009, Vance, Wulf, Töllner, McNevin, & Mercer, 2004). Taken  
11 together, these findings present strong support for the CAH.

12 While the peripheral motor processes underlying the CAH offer a viable explanation  
13 for the differences in performance outcomes, it is prudent to consider the neuropsychological  
14 processes that underpin such effects. That is, does adopting an external focus more greatly  
15 accommodate automatic control via the accumulation of large degrees-of-freedom compared  
16 to an internal focus? With this in mind, it may be useful to revisit the ideomotor principle of  
17 movement control as **movement** are a direct consequence of their representation (James,  
18 1890; see also Hommel, Müsseler, Aschersleben, & Prinz, 2001; Prinz, 1997; Wulf & Prinz,  
19 2001). These representations are built-up and contingent upon the **movements** themselves  
20 (e.g., basketball free-throw) and their subsequent consequences to the environment (e.g., ball  
21 reaching the basket). **Thus, once these links have been established, then they can be**  
22 **innervated in the reverse direction as the presence or attention to relevant stimulus features**  
23 **(e.g., basket) can awaken the action that was once responsible for interacting with these**  
24 **features in the first place (e.g., basketball shot). This perspective is reflected by evidence of**  
25 **an enhanced pre-potent response when in the presence of specialised stimulus features that**

1 have been previously correlated with motor-execution (Elsner & Hommel, 2001; see also  
2 Heyes, 2001). Although the present study does not depict the coupling between actions and  
3 their effects, it is relevant to consider as a framework when trying to explain attentional focus  
4 effects. That is, an external focus of attention may cause performers to accrue stimulus  
5 features (distal cues) that are more readily correlated to the movements required for skilled  
6 execution. Alternatively, an internal focus may cause attention to be distributed to sources of  
7 information (e.g., body centred proximal cues) that do not necessarily elicit a skilled  
8 response.

9         With this in mind, it is relevant to consider the role attentional focus in visuomotor  
10 control in light of the potential multiple processes at-play (Elliott et al., 2018; Glover &  
11 Baran, 2017). That is, the early portion of target-directed movement manifests from pre-  
12 response planning, where an internal representation or motor program that models the  
13 efferent and reafferent (response-produced) signals is configured (Desmurget & Grafton,  
14 2000; Wolpert & Ghahramani, 2000; Wolpert, Miall, & Kawato, 1998). During the  
15 movement, and in the event of a discrepancy between the anticipated and actual efferent and  
16 reafferent signals, performers can quickly adjust their movement (Grierson & Elliott, 2008;  
17 see also, Cluff, Crevecoeur, & Scott, 2015; Smeets, Wijdenes, & Brenner, 2016). These  
18 online adjustments unfold very made very early on (<100 ms) and without conscious  
19 awareness, which suggests they are automatic in nature (Goodale, Péllisson, & Prablanc,  
20 1986; Proteau, Roujoula, & Messier, 2009; Slachevsky et al., 2001; see also, Cressman,  
21 Franks, Enns, & Chua, 2006; Pisella et al., 2000). In this regard, the priming of a sensory-  
22 motor representation when adopting an external focus may influence the early phases of  
23 movement, which implicates movement planning and automatic rapid adjustments  
24 (feedforward-control).

1       At the same time, it is possible that sensory feedback may be incorporated later on  
2       and enable adjustments to be made to the movement with respect to the intended target. This  
3       adjustment is substantially different to the form of online control that was previously  
4       mentioned as it relies on unanticipated and external sources of afferent information, which is  
5       often exploited by early learners (e.g., Elliott, Hansen, Mendoza, & Tremblay, 2004; Proteau,  
6       Martenuik, Girouard, & Dugas, 1987). In a similar vein, the limited priming of a sensory-  
7       motor representation following an internal focus may restrict the contribution of feedforward  
8       processes, and thus require deliberate and inefficient guidance of the movement (feedback-  
9       control) (e.g., Hodges et al., 1995; Mottet et al., 2017; Welsh et al., 2007).

10       To this end, the following study aims to re-examine the influence of attentional focus  
11       within the context of the multiple control processes. We consider the notion of multiple  
12       control processes to be highly informative for our understanding of attentional focus effects.  
13       That is, the action-effect principle may be conceivably enhanced by an external focus, which  
14       promotes both enhanced movement planning processes, and the automatic control of  
15       movement compared to an internal focus. To investigate, we had participants execute a  
16       discrete target-directed movement that was translated to a computer monitor courtesy of a  
17       digitizer tablet. At the same time, attention was oriented to the hand (internal-proximal) or  
18       target (external-distal), which is synonymous with the standard cues adopted for an internal  
19       and external focus, respectively. In addition, focus was directed toward the cursor  
20       (responsible for translating the limb movement to the screen) (external-proximal), which de-  
21       coupled the proximity to the body and task features. Indeed, if the benefits of an external  
22       compared to internal focus are attributed to priming motor codes from task-relevant, distal  
23       cues then there should be minimal gains served by an external focus toward other, more  
24       proximal, features (e.g., Bell & Hardy, 2009; Castanada & Gray, 2007; McNevin et al.,  
25       2003).



1           Because the influence of an external focus is primarily attributed to the priming of an  
2 embedded representation that corresponds with the distal stimulus cues, **we predict that the**  
3 **external-distal focus should elicit enhanced feedforward-control that sees a shorter time to**  
4 **initiate and execute the movements. On the other hand, by incorporating an external-proximal**  
5 **condition we are able to mediate the action-effect principle by bringing the external focus**  
6 **away from the intended target. Here, we predict that a more proximal focus should limit**  
7 **feedforward contributions, and enforce feedback-based control that deliberately reduces the**  
8 **discrepancy between the limb and target locations.** Additionally, we incorporated a control  
9 condition where there was no attentional focus instruction in order to observe whether the  
10 potential changes in performance were the result of enhancing or negating said processes.

11

## 12 **Method**

### 13 *Participants*

14           Fifteen volunteers agreed to take part in the study (age range = 18-21 years). All were  
15 self-declared right-hand dominant, had normal or corrected-to-normal vision and clear of any  
16 neurological condition. The study was approved by the University Research Ethics  
17 Committee, and designed and conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki  
18 (1964).

19

### 20 *Task and Apparatus*

21           Participants were tasked with executing a left-to-right movement toward a digitized  
22 target with their right hand as fast and accurately as possible. The movements were detected  
23 using a stylus-pen on a digitizing graphics tablet (GTCO Calcomp Drawing Board VI,  
24 temporal resolution = 125 Hz, spatial resolution = 1000 lines per inch) and translated for  
25 display on a computer screen (temporal resolution = 60 Hz, spatial resolutions = 1024 x 768).

1 A custom-written computer program was designed to draw stimuli to the screen. A single  
2 home (1 cm) and target (1 cm) circle would appear left and right of the participant midline,  
3 respectively. The distances between the two circles varied randomly between trials at 16, 20  
4 and 24 cm (centre-to-centre). There was also a cursor circle (0.5 cm), which represented the  
5 hand-stylus position. The limb movement coordinates on the graphics tablet directly  
6 overlapped with the cursor movement coordinates on the screen (i.e., limb-to-cursor  
7 movement ratio = 1:1).

8

#### 9 *Procedures*

10 Each trial commenced with the presence of a home position (red). Participants  
11 positioned the cursor (white) over the home position using the stylus-pen. They would then  
12 indicate whether they were ready by depressing the stylus button, which following a variable  
13 foreperiod (800-2300 ms; 500 ms steps), caused a target circle (green) to appear. The  
14 appearance of the target circle acted as the trials imperative stimulus and informed  
15 participants that they should begin the response of aiming for the target as fast and accurately  
16 as possible. Upon reaching the end target location participants would again depress the stylus  
17 button to progress to the next trial. In the event that participants selected to end the trial  
18 without the cursor being inside the target then they were informed of the error and forced to  
19 repeat the trial.

20 There were four different focus conditions contingent upon the instructional set issued  
21 by the experimenter: control, internal-proximal, external-proximal, external-distal. In order to  
22 avoid biasing participants' automatic or default focus-set, we issued the control condition  
23 first where participants had to simply execute fast and accurate movements toward the target.  
24 While it is possible that an order effect may manifest from always having the control block  
25 first, it is highly unlikely due to the prior number of practice trials (see later for detail) as well

1 as the small number of total trials across the experiment. Indeed, adaptations to similar speed-  
2 accuracy trade-off tasks have revealed comparatively scarce effects (Zelaznik, 2018) or  
3 require a much larger series of days (Elliott et al., 2004) or trials of practice (Khan, Franks, &  
4 Goodman, 1998; Proteau et al., 1987). For the experimental trials, participants were  
5 instructed to primarily focus on the moving hand, moving cursor or end target location for  
6 each of the internal-proximal, external-proximal and external-distal conditions, respectively  
7 (for similar designs, see Lohse et al., 2010; Zachry et al., 2005). In addition, the stimulus  
8 screen would display text to remind participants of the designated focus-set (“**FOCUS on the**  
9 **HAND/CURSOR/TARGET**) both before the first trial, and again at mid-way (i.e., before trial  
10 13) for each block of trials. In order to avoid potentially contrasting sources of visual  
11 information that are associated with each of the experimental conditions (Russell, 2007),  
12 while remaining consistent with standard oculomotor responses during manual limb  
13 movements (Helsen, Elliott, Starkes, & Ricker, 1998; see also, Helsen, Feys, Heremans, &  
14 Lavrysen, 2010), we instructed participants to retain their fixation on the target once it  
15 appeared. While there are some suggestions that the initial saccade to fixate the target may  
16 unfold during the early portions of the movement (before peak acceleration) (see Elliott et al.,  
17 2018), it is negligible when considering there is sufficient time to accrue retinal and extra-  
18 retinal information from the remaining portions of the limb trajectory.

19 There was an initial familiarization period where participants would move as fast and  
20 accurately as possible to each of the three possible amplitudes (16, 20, 24 cm; 12 trials). The  
21 experiment for real showed the different target amplitudes in a fully randomized order. The  
22 attentional focus blocks were delivered in a pseudo-random counter-balanced order with the  
23 exception of the control block appearing first. There were 24 trials per block, which  
24 accumulated to a total of 96 trials (4 blocks). Participants were issued a two-minute break  
25 after each block of trials.

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## *Data Processing and Analysis*

Movement position data were processed using a second-order, dual-pass Butterworth filter at a low-pass cut-off frequency of 8 Hz. Velocity was obtained by differentiating the resultant position data using a three-point central difference algorithm. Movement onset was defined as the first moment resultant limb velocity reached >20 mm/s, while movement offset was defined as the moment velocity returned to <10 mm/s and >-10 mm/s (for examples of similar procedures, see Khan & Lawrence, 2005; Lawrence, Khan, Buckolz, & Oldham, 2006).

The dependent measures of interest could be categorised into two areas: performance outcomes and movement trajectory. The performance outcome measures that encompassed the temporal domain included reaction time (RT; time difference between stimulus target onset and movement onset) and movement time (MT; time difference between movement onset and movement offset). The endpoint spatial accuracy was quantified courtesy of radial error (RE; distance between movement attempt and target centre) and variable error (VE; population standard deviation of radial error scores). The movement kinematic measures were designed to isolate the planning and control phases of the movement by identifying the moment of peak velocity. Herein, we calculated the time to, time after, magnitude and displacement at peak velocity.

For a more fine-grained assessment of limb trajectory adjustments via feedback-based control, we additionally measured spatial variability of peak velocity and the end of the movement. This measure is adapted from the logic that fast and large-amplitude movements subtend larger amounts of within-participant spatial variability (see Schmidt, Zelaznik, Hawkins, Frank, & Quinn, 1979) meaning the presence of a delayed intervening control process must assume a decline in variability between the early (peak velocity) and late

1 (endpoint) stages of the movement. More precisely, the spatial variability profiles should  
2 differ in form as indicated by a variability ratio between experimental and control conditions  
3 (e.g., Khan, Franks et al., 2006; Khan, Lawrence et al., 2003). That is, we separately divided  
4 spatial variability for the experimental focus conditions at peak velocity and movement end  
5 by the control values at the corresponding kinematic landmarks. To corroborate the spatial  
6 variability findings, we calculated Fisher z-transformations of within-participant correlations  
7 between the distances travelled to- and after peak velocity. Indeed, strong or robust negative  
8 relations would indicate that participants accommodated for the initial limb position by  
9 updating the subsequent distance required to accurately hit the target (for similar logic, see  
10 Elliott, Binsted, & Health, 1999; Roberts, Elliott, Lyons, Hayes, & Bennett, 2016).

11         Statistical analysis of select performance outcomes (RT, MT, RE, VE) and movement  
12 kinematics (time to, time after, magnitude and displacement at peak velocity), including the  
13 within-participant correlations, involved a two-way repeated-measures Analysis of Variance  
14 (ANOVA) with 4 levels of focus (control, internal-proximal, external-proximal, external-  
15 distal) and 3 levels of amplitude (short, medium, long). Spatial variability ratios were  
16 analysed using a three-way repeated measures ANOVA with 2 levels of kinematic landmark  
17 (peak velocity, movement end), 3 levels of focus (internal-proximal, external-proximal,  
18 external-distal) and 3 levels of amplitude (short, medium, long). Maunchly's test was used to  
19 test the assumption of Sphericity, where in the event of a violation ( $p > .05$ ), the Huynh-Feldt  
20 correction was adopted when epsilon was  $>.75$ , and Greenhouse-Geisser was adopted in the  
21 event epsilon was  $<.75$  (original Sphericity-assumed degrees of freedom were reported  
22 irrespective of a violation). Significant main and interaction effects featuring more than two  
23 means were decomposed using a Tukey HSD post-hoc procedure. Significance was declared  
24 at  $p < .05$ .

25

## 1 Results

2 Because the multiple target amplitudes were merely designed to force the re-  
3 parameterization of movements without anticipation, as well as being independent of our  
4 primary research question and hypotheses, only the statistical main and interaction effects  
5 featuring the factor of focus are reported.

### 7 *Performance Outcomes*

8 As shown in Figure 1, there was a significant main effect of focus for RT,  $F(3, 42) =$   
9  $9.23, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .40$ , with control and external-distal conditions generating shorter  
10 times to initiate and execute movements compared to the internal-proximal and external-  
11 proximal conditions ( $ps < .05$ ). In a similar vein, there was a significant main effect of focus  
12 for MT  $F(3, 42) = 11.03, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .44$ , with both the control and external-distal  
13 conditions being shorter than the external-proximal condition, while the shorter times  
14 compared to the internal-proximal condition only reached significance for the comparison  
15 with the external-distal condition ( $ps < .05$ ) (see Figure 2). There was also significant main  
16 effect for RE,  $F(3, 42) = 5.04, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .27$ , with less error generated by the  
17 external-proximal condition compared to the control and external-distal conditions ( $ps < .05$ )  
18 (see Table 1). In addition, there was a significant main effect of focus for VE,  $F(3, 42) =$   
19  $2.96, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .17$ , although the post hoc analysis failed to reveal any significant  
20 differences ( $ps > .05$ ).

21 Further to this analysis, we brokered the endpoint variability into the x-axis (primary)  
22 and y-axis (secondary) to gauge potential influences on the control of amplitude and  
23 direction, respectively (Paillard, 1996; Khan & Lawrence, 2005). Variable error in the x-axis  
24 revealed a significant main effect of focus,  $F(3, 42) = 4.03, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .22$ , with  
25 smaller endpoint dispersion in the external-proximal condition ( $M = 4.67, SE = .51$ )

1 compared to the control condition ( $M = 6.18$ ,  $SE = .69$ ). In a similar vein, there was a  
2 significant main effect of focus for variable error in the y-axis,  $F(3, 42) = 5.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  
3  $partial \eta^2 = .28$ , with the external-proximal condition ( $M = 2.08$ ,  $SE = .32$ ) generating smaller  
4 dispersion than both the control ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SE = .31$ ) and external-distal ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SE = .24$ )  
5 conditions.

6  
7 [Insert Figure 1 and 2,  
8 and Table 1 about here]  
9

#### 10 *Movement kinematics*

11 There was a significant main effect of focus for the time to peak velocity,  $F(3, 42) =$   
12  $8.43$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $partial \eta^2 = .38$ , with the control and external-distal conditions being shorter in  
13 time compared to the internal-proximal and external-proximal conditions (see Figure 2). In a  
14 similar vein, there was a significant main effect for the time after peak velocity,  $F(3, 42) =$   
15  $8.84$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $partial \eta^2 = .39$ , with both the control and external-distal conditions being  
16 shorter than the external-proximal condition, while the shorter times compared to the  
17 internal-proximal condition only reached significance for the comparison with the external-  
18 distal condition ( $ps < .05$ ). There was a significant main effect of focus for the magnitude of  
19 peak velocity,  $F(3, 42) = 17.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $partial \eta^2 = .55$ , indicating a large magnitude  
20 impulse for the control ( $M = 598.34$  mm/s,  $SE = 34.51$ ), and external-distal ( $M = 650.25$   
21 mm/s,  $SE = 34.27$ ) conditions compared to the internal-proximal ( $M = 534.73$  mm/s,  $SE =$   
22  $44.49$ ) and external-proximal ( $M = 502.26$  mm/s,  $SE = 34.73$ ) conditions ( $ps < .05$ ). In  
23 addition, there was a significant Focus  $\times$  Amplitude interaction,  $F(6, 84) = 6.44$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  
24  $partial \eta^2 = .32$ , indicating differences also between the control and external-distal conditions  
25 at medium and short amplitudes, and the internal-proximal and external-proximal conditions

1 at short and medium amplitudes ( $ps < .05$ ). There were no significant main or interaction  
2 effects featuring the factor of focus for the mean displacement at peak velocity ( $M = 88.14$   
3 mm,  $SE = 1.61$ ),  $F(3, 42) = .23$ ,  $p > .05$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 = .02$ , and  $F(6, 84) = .77$ ,  $p > .05$ , *partial*  
4  $\eta^2 = .05$ , nor movement end ( $M = 199.96$  mm,  $SE = .41$ ),  $F(3, 42) = 1.70$ ,  $p > .05$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 =$   
5  $.11$ , and  $F(6, 84) = 1.04$ ,  $p > .05$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 = .07$ , respectively.

6

#### 7 *Online Adjustments*

8 As a principle indicator of adjustments made to the trajectory, the Kinematic  
9 landmark  $\times$  Focus  $\times$  Amplitude repeated-measures ANOVA on spatial variability ratio  
10 revealed a significant main effect of kinematic landmark,  $F(1, 14) = 213.59$ ,  $p < .05$ , *partial*  
11  $\eta^2 = .94$ , and no significant main effect of focus,  $F(3, 42) = 1.19$ ,  $p > .05$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 = .08$ .  
12 Most importantly, there was a significant Kinematic landmark  $\times$  Focus interaction,  $F(3, 42) =$   
13  $6.91$ ,  $p < .05$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 = .33$ , indicating a significant decline in variability for the external-  
14 proximal condition ( $p < .05$ ) (see Figure 3). In order to corroborate these findings, the  
15 analysis of within-participant correlations between the distances travelled to and after peak  
16 velocity revealed a significant main effect of focus,  $F(3, 42) = 10.90$ ,  $p < .05$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 = .44$ ,  
17 with smaller negative relations for the control ( $M = -1.77$  mm,  $SE = .11$ ) and external-distal  
18 ( $M = -1.84$  mm,  $SE = .09$ ) conditions compared to the external-proximal condition ( $M = -2.29$   
19 mm,  $SE = .12$ ) ( $ps < .05$ ), which did not differ from the internal-proximal condition ( $M = -$   
20  $2.03$  mm,  $SE = .14$ ) ( $p > .05$ ).

21

22 [Insert Figure 3 about here]

23

#### 24 **Discussion**



1           It has been frequently demonstrated that an external focus of attention elicits greater  
2 motor performance than an internal focus; a finding that may be explained by the CAH (Wulf  
3 et al., 2001). The CAH suggests that an external focus enables the performer to undertake  
4 automatic control of their movement courtesy of the relation between stimulus information  
5 and the anticipated response effects (Wulf & Prinz, 2001). The present study reasoned that  
6 this internal representation may render a greater influence during the early phases of  
7 movement where the performer models the efferent and reafferent signals (Wolpert &  
8 Ghahmanani, 2000; Wolpert et al., 1998). Meanwhile, the latter phases of movement, which  
9 incorporates external afferent information, may accommodate limb-target adjustments  
10 independent of the fore mentioned representation (Elliott et al., 2018). Thus, it was  
11 hypothesized that focus directed toward the target (external-distal) during aiming movements  
12 should manifest in a shorter time to initiate and execute responses. However, the advantage  
13 served by an external focus may be overturned once external afferent information becomes  
14 accessible to deliberate or conscious control (internal-proximal, external-proximal).

15           Consistent with the vast majority of the attentional focus literature (Wulf, 2013), there  
16 was an advantage served by the external-distal focus compared to an internal and/proximal  
17 focus. This advantage was highlighted in the shorter time to initiate (RT) and complete (MT)  
18 aimed responses, which was distributed in both the time to, and after, peak velocity. Because  
19 rapid targeted movements require the succinct handling of efferent and afferent signals  
20 (Woodworth, 1899), this may be taken as coarse evidence in favour of the CAH, where  
21 performers adopting an external focus are more readily able to control their own movements  
22 (Wulf et al., 2001).

23           Notably, the differences in attentional focus conditions were depicted by the  
24 proximity of task features as opposed to the classic differentiation between internal (focus  
25 directed to the movement itself) vs. external (focus directed to the movement effect). That is,

1 an external-distal focus (target) additionally rendered superior temporal performance  
2 compared to its proximal counterpart (cursor movement). This finding is reflected in previous  
3 other studies, which have revealed differences as a function of task features. For example,  
4 focus directed to the flight or trajectory of the ball in golf (Bell & Hardy, 2009) and baseball  
5 (Casenada & Gray, 2007) have respectively yielded superior spatial and temporal accuracy  
6 compared to focus on the motion of the external hitting device. As a result, it is imperative to  
7 consider that while an external focus can advance performance relative to an internal focus, it  
8 is contingent upon externally focusing on distal features that are somehow related to the task.

9 Alternatively, nearing the end of the movement, it was found that the advantage  
10 served by an external-distal focus was reversed for endpoint accuracy and precision (see  
11 Pelleck & Passmore (2017) for similar other findings of the influence of attentional focus on  
12 endpoint variability). At first glance, this sudden enhancement in internal- and external-  
13 proximal focus may seem to conflict with the frequent message that is to avoid such focus in  
14 motor performance and learning. However, the dissociable effects of early temporal (RT,  
15 MT) and late spatial variables substantiates our claims of differing contributions of  
16 feedforward and feedback processes that underpin attentional focus. That is, the early time to  
17 initiate and reach peak velocity, as well as the larger magnitude impulse, generated by the  
18 external-distal focus condition may result from the priming of an embedded sensorimotor  
19 representation. The innervation of this representation is contingent upon the presence of distal  
20 stimulus cues that can be closely matched to movement-execution (Elsner & Hommel, 2001;  
21 see Hommel et al., 2001; Prinz, 1997). Herein, the performer may undertake feedforward  
22 control, where they can more readily control the early trajectory by comparing the anticipated  
23 and actual reafferent signals. Meanwhile, the more refined endpoint response for the proximal  
24 focus groups (internal/external) suggests performers were less reliant on priming a

1 sensorimotor representation, and instead, undertook late online adjustments that were related  
2 to an explicit comparison between limb and target locations.

3       With this in mind, it is reasonable to gauge the possibility of dual-task interference,  
4 which so often plagues the attentional focus literature (e.g., Poolton et al., 2007). Indeed,  
5 providing instructions that cue performers to proximal sources of information could limit the  
6 resources that are required to deal with the main distal information. Meanwhile, providing  
7 instructions that cue performers to the distal features may allocate resources to something that  
8 is already required to be focused on. Nevertheless, the present findings of reduced error and  
9 enhanced endpoint control for each of the proximal focus groups would appear to run counter  
10 to the potential contaminating influence of a dual-task scenario. Indeed, previous evidence  
11 has shown there to be an increase in endpoint error when performers are simultaneously  
12 engaged in an independent dual- compared to single-task setting (Khan et al., 2006; Zelaznik  
13 et al., 1981). Thus, the present findings could offer a more definitive insight into attentional  
14 focus effects by demarcating the movement control processes, and subsequently identifying  
15 dissociable influences of attention focus – a distal focus manifests in more automatic  
16 feedforward contributions, whilst a proximal focus renders more explicit feedback-based  
17 control.

18       Through further consideration of the spatial endpoint findings, it is relevant perhaps to  
19 mention that despite the larger tendency to veer away from target centre, the margin of error  
20 generated by the external-distal condition continued to subtend short of the target boundaries  
21 (<5 mm) (see Table 1). Hence, it is more likely that the greater accuracy administered by the  
22 proximal conditions reflect an unnecessary or overly cautious attempt to avoid an error. This  
23 interpretation is supported by the within-participant correlations between the displacements to  
24 and after peak velocity, where it was found that the proximal conditions more negatively  
25 correlated, and thus, generated more adjustments toward the end of the movement (see Elliott

1 et al., 1999, for similar interpretation). In a similar vein, an internal (proximal) focus directed  
2 to the arms during golf-putting has been shown to elicit more overt adjustments to the  
3 movement trajectory in an attempt to enhance performance outcomes (Lawrence, Gottwald,  
4 Khan, & Kramer, 2012). Indeed, this pattern of motor behaviour is reminiscent of the short-  
5 term maladaptive corrections that are evident when performers receive frequent augmented  
6 feedback (see Bjork, 1988; Wulf & Shea, 2004). As a result, we may conceive the attempts to  
7 correct the limb position following an internal or proximal focus as a negative effect, which  
8 in turn, reinforces the constrained-action view that attentional focus negatively influences  
9 automatic movement control.

10         While we have so far focused our discussion on the experimental conditions, it is  
11 important to recognise the influence of attentional focus with respect to the control condition  
12 (where no focus instructions were issued). Indeed, the provision of a control condition may  
13 allude to an advantage or disadvantage of experimental focus conditions. In other words, the  
14 typical performance benefit following an external or distal focus compared to control  
15 assumes a direct benefit of this particular focus-set. Alternatively, a decline in performance  
16 following an internal or proximal focus compared to control assumes an attenuation of this  
17 particular focus-set. For the most part, it appeared the external-distal and control conditions  
18 were equally advanced in their time to pursue the target and less proficient in endpoint  
19 accuracy. These findings would appear to contest any suggestion of an order effect granted  
20 the control block was always received first, and thus we may conceive the focus directed at  
21 the target as the default focus-set. Meanwhile, the differences in attentional focus throughout  
22 the present study allude to alterations that were primarily imposed by the internal and  
23 external-proximal focus conditions.

24         In conclusion, we have extended upon the vast attentional focus literature by further  
25 elucidating the sensorimotor processes that underlie attentional focus effects. That is, the

1 focus directed toward the movement or proximal features rendered a less automatic response,  
2 which primarily manifested in the early phases of movement. Following the uptake of  
3 delayed afferent information, the same focus-set culminated in a more cautious approach to  
4 end the movement compared to the control and external-distal focus conditions. In addition to  
5 substantiating previous attentional focus effects, and the related CAH (Wulf et al., 2001), we  
6 have highlighted influences of attentional focus that may be differentiated as a function of  
7 early and late control processes (Elliott et al., 2018). Indeed, the early phases that are  
8 attributed to efferent and reafferent processes are contingent upon a primed response evoked  
9 by corresponding stimulus information (Prinz, 1997), which we believe is more greatly  
10 exposed by an external focus. Alternatively, the latter phases that are attributed to delayed  
11 afferent processes are more accessible to conscious intervention, which is synonymous with  
12 an internal focus.

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## References

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### Figure captions

**Fig. 1** Mean ( $\pm$ SE) reaction times as a function of attentional focus. (\*) indicates a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ).

**Fig. 2** Mean ( $\pm$ SE) movement times demarcated into the time to (*grey*) and after (*white*) peak velocity as a function of attentional focus. (\*) indicates a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ).

**Fig. 3** Mean spatial variability ratio at peak velocity and movement end as a function of attentional focus. Scores  $<1$  indicate less variability than control.

## Tables

Table 1. Mean ( $\pm$ SE) scores for radial error (RE) and variable error (VE) as a function of attentional focus. Presented symbols (\*, †) indicate specific pairwise comparisons where there was a significant difference ( $ps < .05$ ).

	<i>control</i>	<i>internal-proximal</i>	<i>external-proximal</i>	<i>external-distal</i>
<i>RE</i>	4.61* (.64)	4.35 (.70)	3.56*† (.52)	4.49† (.61)
<i>VE</i>	3.51 (.44)	3.14 (.48)	2.86 (.43)	3.46 (.37)