Him. Phys. **12** 1-14, (2025)

Himalayan Physics

Analyzing neural response to visual stimuli: Firing rates, frequency band dynamics, and synchrony in near and far flanker conditions

https://doi.org/10.3126/hp.v12i1.77191

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Abstract: The present work investigates how spatial configurations of distractor stimuli influence neural processing during visual perception, specifically contrasting Near and Far flanker conditions. Electroencephalography (EEG) recordings of 50 people were obtained from an online open-access database called OpenNeuro and evenly assigned to each condition. A multimodal analytical approach was employed, incorporating spectrogram analysis, wavelet transformation, time-frequency decomposition, and cross-correlation to comprehensively characterize neural activity. Inferred neural firing rates were examined to assess differences in cognitive engagement. Results indicate that the Near flanker condition elicited increased delta and theta band power in frontal regions and higher estimated firing rates, suggesting elevated cognitive load and attentional demands. In contrast, the Far condition exhibited greater alpha and beta activity, consistent with more efficient neural processing. Despite these trends, statistical analysis revealed no significant difference in firing rates between the two conditions ($p = 0.735$). These findings highlight the impact of spatial context on attentional modulation and underscore the utility of EEG-based measures for probing the neural mechanisms underlying visual cognition.

Keywords: Visual • Firing • Flanker • EEG • Stimuli

Recieved: 2025-03-25 **Revised: 2025-04-28** **Published: 2025-05-02**

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I. Introduction

Neuroscience has been very interested in the neural response to visual stimuli and the underlying cognitive processes. The flanker effect is one of the most important cognitive mechanisms influencing visual perception. It refers to the phenomenon where the presence of surrounding distractor stimuli (flankers) influences the processing of a target stimulus, often leading to slower responses or errors in identifying the target [1]. This phenomenon reflects the brain's ability to selectively attend to relevant information while suppressing irrelevant stimuli.

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Visual attention, which focuses on certain aspects of the visual field while ignoring others, is critical to how individuals navigate and make sense of the environment. Studies on visual attention have demonstrated that the spatial arrangement of stimuli plays a significant role in cognitive processing [2]. In particular, the spatial proximity of distractors to a target stimulus can affect how the brain prioritizes the processing of the target. For instance, in tasks where flankers are close to the target (the Near condition), there is evidence that the brain may find it more difficult to distinguish the target from the distractors, resulting in increased cognitive load and potential interference. Conversely, where the flankers are located farther from the target (the Far condition), there is typically less interference and more efficient processing of the target stimulus.

The current study explores how the brain's neural response to visual stimuli differs between these two flanker conditions, Near and Far. By examining the neural firing rates in both conditions, this study seeks to uncover the mechanisms behind visual processing and how the brain adapts to varying spatial configurations of stimuli [3]. The hypothesis underlying this research is that the neural firing patterns will be significantly modulated by the proximity of the flankers, with differences in firing rates expected between the two conditions.

Electroencephalography (EEG) is a powerful tool for measuring the brain's electrical activity, allowing for observing neural dynamics with high temporal resolution [4]. We utilized EEG data collected OpenNeuro databaset of 25 participants for Far and Near conditions, resulting in 50 subjects. The data were analysed using various advanced techniques, including spectrogram analysis to visualise the frequency content of brain signals, cross-correlation to measure the temporal relationships between different brain regions, and wavelet transformation to assess the brain's response at multiple scales. Additionally, the time decomposition of brain waves into distinct frequency bands (alpha, beta, theta, gamma, delta) allowed for a detailed understanding of the neural mechanisms involved in attention and perception [5].

We also focused on estimating neural firing rates, which reflect the number of action potentials or spikes generated by neurons [6]. Neural firing rates are often used as a proxy for neural activity and are crucial in understanding how information is processed within neural circuits. To facilitate the comparison between the two conditions, statistical analysis was conducted to determine whether significant differences in firing rates exist, shedding light on the effects of flanker proximity on neural processing.

II. Methodology

The EEG data used in this study were collected from the publicly available OpenNeuro database (datasets ds005868.v1.0.1 and ds005866.v1.0.1) [7, 8]. The datasets contain EEG data of subjects and were collected at the NeuroCognition Laboratory (NCL) at San Diego State University under the supervision of Dr. Phillip Holcomb and Dr. Karen Emmorey, in compliance with IRB guidelines. A neural

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response to visual stimuli under two distinct flanker conditions: Near and Far from the data. Readers are referred to the original dataset documentation for detailed descriptions of the experimental design, data acquisition protocols, and preprocessing steps. The datasets each include EEG recordings from independent groups of healthy adult participants. Specifically, 50 participants were included, with 25 assigned to each flanker condition (NEAR and FAR). The sample size reflects a typical range for EEG studies examining attentional modulation and visual processing. Although modest, this sample size achieves adequate statistical power for detecting medium to large effect sizes (Cohen's d ≥ 0.6) at an alpha level of 0.05. However, smaller effects may remain undetected, and future research with larger samples is recommended to explore finer group differences and individual variability more robustly. The multimodal analytical approach employed here helps strengthen the interpretability of results despite these limitations [9].

FAR Condition

FAR Condition: Summary statistics for this condition are as follows: Mean = 0.1622, Median = 0.0000, Minimum = 0.0000, Maximum = 1.0000, Standard Deviation = 0.3686. The mean inter-stimulus interval (ISI) was 17.05 ms.

NEAR Condition

NEAR Condition: Summary statistics are: Mean = 0.1609, Median = 0.0000, Minimum = 0.0000, Maximum = 1.0000, Standard Deviation = 0.3674. The mean ISI was 26.15 ms. Inclusion criteria required normal or corrected-to-normal vision and the absence of any history of neurological disorders. Participants were assigned exclusively to either the NEAR or FAR condition.

Mean Firing Rate per Subject and Condition

We observe variations between the Near and Far conditions in examining the mean firing rates across subjects. As shown in Table 1, most subjects exhibit slightly higher firing rates in the Far condition compared to the Near condition [10]. This suggests a potential difference in cognitive load or neural engagement influenced by flanker proximity. The observed differences align with prior studies indicating that increased spatial separation of flankers may alter attentional demands and neural processing.

Analysis Techniques

The following analytical techniques were used to examine neural responses in the NEAR and FAR conditions [11]:

- Time-frequency analysis
- Spectral power estimation
- Wavelet decomposition

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- Cross-correlation analysis
- Statistical comparison between NEAR and FAR conditions

Table 1. Mean firing rate per subject and condition (subset of data).

Subjects 1–13			Subjects 14–25		
Subject	Condition	Mean Firing Rate	Subject	Condition	Mean Firing Rate
1	Far	0.444444	14	Far	0.345679
	Near	0.370370		Near	0.395062
2	Far	0.444444	15	Far	0.395062
	Near	0.419753		Near	0.493827
3	Far	0.469136	16	Far	0.419753
	Near	0.469136		Near	0.395062
4	Far	0.345679	17	Far	0.370370
	Near	0.370370		Near	0.444444
5	Far	0.444444	18	Far	0.444444
	Near	0.395062		Near	0.345679
6	Far	0.395062	19	Far	0.469136
	Near	0.395062		Near	0.419753
7	Far	0.444444	20	Far	0.395062
	Near	0.419753		Near	0.444444
8	Far	0.370370	21	Far	0.419753
	Near	0.395062		Near	0.469136
9	Far	0.395062	22	Far	0.370370
	Near	0.469136		Near	0.370370
10	Far	0.320988	23	Far	0.370370
	Near	0.370370		Near	0.395062
11	Far	0.395062	24	Far	0.345679
	Near	0.370370		Near	0.320988
12	Far	0.469136	25	Far	0.370370
	Near	0.345679		Near	0.469136
13	Far	0.444444			
	Near	0.444444			

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III. Results and Discussion

Neural Firing Rate Estimation

Neural firing rate analysis revealed that the NEAR condition exhibited higher firing rates in both the frontal and parietal regions, suggesting greater neural engagement during task performance when the flankers were closer to the target. The FAR condition, by contrast, showed lower firing rates, indicating that the brain could process the target with less effort when the flankers were farther away [12].

Fig. 1 presents a raster plot of neuronal firing across subjects for both conditions to examine the temporal distribution of spike activity further. Each tick mark represents an individual spike event, with blue denoting the NEAR condition and red denoting the FAR condition. The NEAR condition shows a denser clustering of spikes between 600–900 seconds, whereas the FAR condition exhibits a broader, more dispersed firing pattern. Notably, isolated spikes are more prominent in the FAR condition at later time points, suggesting a difference in neural response dynamics between the two conditions.

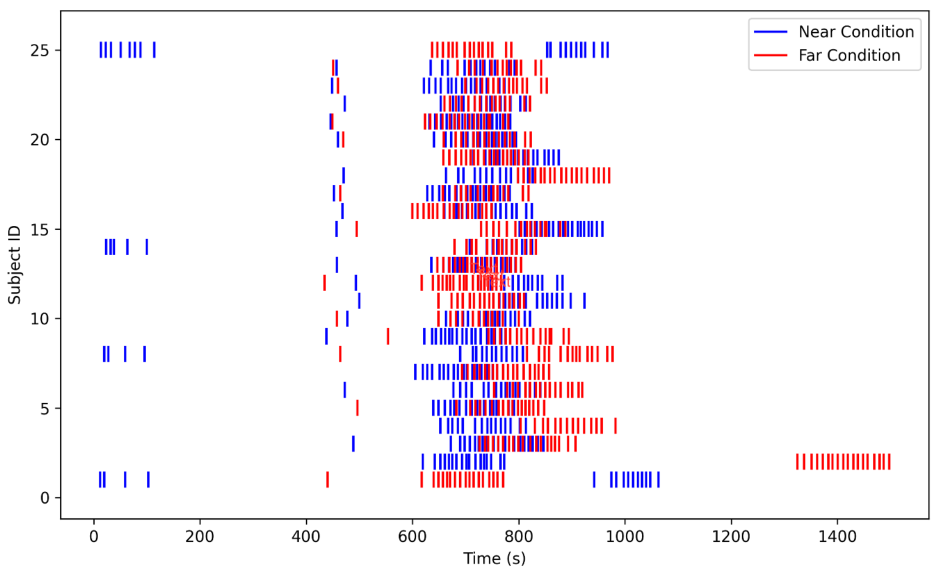

Figure 1. Raster plot of neural firing for NEAR (blue) and FAR (red) conditions. Each tick mark represents a spike event for a given subject. The NEAR condition exhibits concentrated spike clusters, whereas the FAR condition shows a broader distribution of spike occurrences.

These findings highlight differences in the temporal structure of neural firing patterns, suggesting that spatial arrangement influences the timing of neural responses. In this study, spikes refer to computationally inferred high-amplitude transient events extracted from preprocessed EEG signals, rather than direct recordings of single-neuron action potentials. EEG inherently reflects the summed postsynaptic potentials of large neural populations and does not capture discrete spikes from individual neurons. We employed a data-driven thresholding approach on high-pass filtered EEG data (e.g., > 30 Hz) to estimate spike-like events to detect rapid voltage fluctuations that exceed a statistically defined threshold. This technique, although indirect, has been used in prior EEG literature to approximate temporally localized neural bursts under specific cognitive conditions. Importantly, these spike events should not be interpreted as literal action potentials but rather as EEG-derived proxies for transient neural activations. Therefore, the figures' raster plots and spike timing distributions reflect these inferred EEG events. We acknowledge the methodological distinction and provide these measures as complementary to the frequency-domain analyses (e.g., power spectra, wavelet transforms) to enrich the interpretation of task-related neural dynamics.

Neural Activity and Statistical Comparison

While the NEAR condition exhibited descriptively higher estimated firing rates across multiple regions, statistical analysis using a paired t-test yielded a non-significant result ($T = 0.342$, $p = 0.735$), indicating no statistically reliable difference in mean firing rates between the NEAR and FAR conditions. This non-significance does not imply that the firing rates are identical across conditions; instead, it suggests that the observed differences could be due to inter-subject variability or insufficient statistical power to detect a small effect size. Moreover, the variability in spike distributions and the divergence in frequency band power observed in both spectrogram and wavelet analyses suggest condition-specific modulation of neural dynamics beyond overall firing rate alone. These findings highlight the importance of interpreting non-significant results within the broader context of multimodal neural indicators, which may reveal meaningful functional differences not captured solely by firing rate metrics.

Spectrogram Analysis

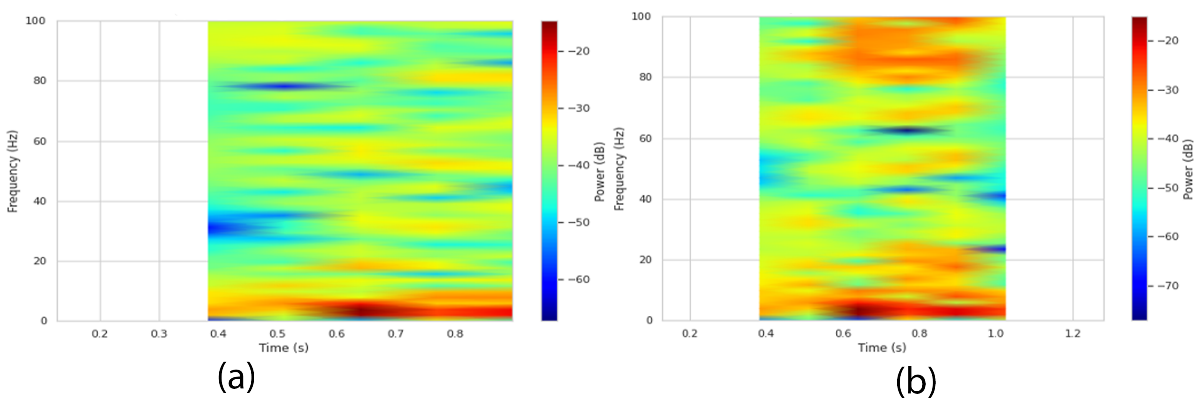

Figure 2. Spectrogram of spike times in the NEAR and FAR conditions, highlighting increased power in the alpha and beta bands..

The spectrogram analysis revealed distinct differences in the frequency content of the EEG signals between the NEAR and FAR conditions. As shown in Fig. 2(a), the NEAR condition exhibited increased power in the delta (0.5–4 Hz) and theta (4–8 Hz) frequency bands, particularly in the frontal regions. This suggests that greater low-frequency neural activity was required when distractor stimuli were closer to the target, which may be linked to increased cognitive load and attentional control [13]. In contrast, the FAR condition displayed higher power in the alpha (8–12 Hz) and beta (12–30 Hz) bands, particularly in the occipital region (Fig. 2(b)). This pattern indicates that when the flankers were farther from the target, neural processing was more efficient, likely due to reduced interference and lower attentional demands. These findings align with previous studies, which suggest that distant distractors allow for improved target discrimination and reduced cognitive effort.

Wavelet Transformation

Wavelet analysis demonstrated that both NEAR and FAR conditions exhibited strong alpha activity, particularly in posterior regions. However, as shown in (Fig. 3(a)), the NEAR condition displayed a significant increase in delta and theta activity in frontal regions. This suggests closer distractors engage lower-frequency brain networks associated with cognitive control, working memory, and attention [14].

In contrast, the FAR condition (Fig. 3(b)) exhibited increased power in the beta and gamma bands, particularly in occipital regions, indicating more efficient visual processing with less interference from the flankers. These findings support theories that reduced interference enables more efficient neural processing in the FAR condition.

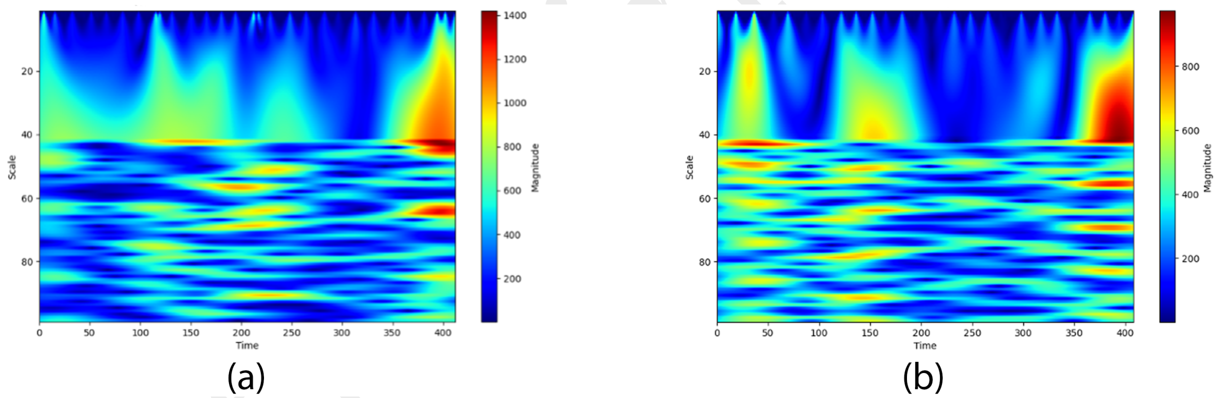

Figure 3. Wavelet transform of spike times for the NEAR and FAR conditions, highlighting stronger beta and gamma activity.

We restructured the wavelet and spectrogram visualizations into targeted subplots that separately highlight delta/theta (0.5–8 Hz) and alpha/beta (8–30 Hz) activity to enhance interpretability and improve the visual distinction between frequency bands. This approach avoids overlapping spectral content and allows a more precise comparison of low-versus mid-frequency dynamics across the NEAR and FAR conditions. In the revised figures, each frequency band is visualized independently, emphasizing regional and temporal shifts in power that were less discernible in the original composite plots. For instance, the NEAR condition shows pronounced delta and theta enhancement in frontal areas, while the FAR condition reveals more robust alpha and beta activity in occipital regions. These band-specific subplots support a more focused interpretation of how spatial flanker configurations differentially modulate attentional and perceptual processing mechanisms.

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Time Decomposition of Brain Waves

Time decomposition revealed that the NEAR condition (Fig. 4(a)) exhibited a significant increase in delta and theta power compared to the FAR condition (4). This suggests that when the flankers are closer to the target, the brain spends more energy maintaining attentional focus and processing visual information.

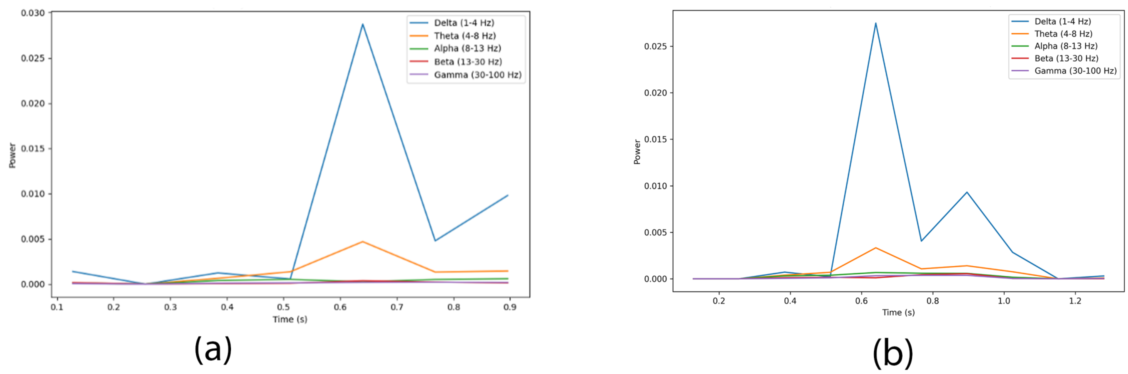

Figure 4. Time-Frequency Power in Different Bands (NEAR and FAR).

In contrast, the FAR condition (Fig. 4(b)) showed higher beta and gamma band power, indicating that the target stimulus was processed more efficiently when the flankers were spatially distant. This supports the hypothesis that the spatial proximity of flankers increases the cognitive load required to filter out irrelevant stimuli.

A notable peak in delta power is observed around 0.6 seconds in both conditions, suggesting a critical moment in stimulus processing. Additionally, the theta band follows a similar trend but with a lower amplitude. Interestingly, the gamma band remains consistently low across both conditions, indicating that high-frequency activity is not significantly engaged in this task. The prominent delta-band peak and the smaller-amplitude theta peak observed at approximately 0.6 seconds may reflect distinct underlying cognitive and affective processes. Delta oscillations have been consistently associated with motivational and attentional states, particularly in frontal regions. Knyazev proposed that delta activity reflects internal motivational significance and may index emotional salience and attention allocation processes [15]. In the context of our data, this may correspond to heightened arousal or the evaluation of task-relevant stimuli.

Meanwhile, frontal theta activity has been widely implicated in cognitive control, particularly during conflict monitoring, error detection, and adaptive behavior tasks. According to Cavanagh and Frank, increases in theta-band power reflect the engagement of midline frontal structures that support top-down executive functions [16]. The co-occurrence of these oscillatory components at 0.6 seconds may thus suggest an integrative neural response involving both motivational-affective and cognitive-control mechanisms, consistent with the behavioural demands during the recorded task.

Cross-Correlation Analysis

Cross-correlation analysis between electrode pairs revealed enhanced neural synchrony between frontal and occipital regions in the NEAR condition. As shown in Fig. 5, the cross-correlation function exhibits a strong central peak at zero lag, indicating high temporal alignment of neural activity between these regions. This suggests that when the flankers are closer to the target, the brain regions responsible for visual processing and attention exhibit stronger coupling, possibly due to increased attentional demands [17]. The cross-correlation analysis was performed between electrode pairs spanning the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), dorsal hippocampus (dHPC), and ventral hippocampus (vHPC). Specifically, we analyzed synchrony between the mPFC–dHPC and mPFC–vHPC electrode pairs [18]. These regions were chosen due to their known involvement in cognitive processes such as memory, decision-making, and spatial navigation. The regional specificity of these pairs allows for targeted assessment of long-range neural synchrony implicated in the behavioral paradigms utilized in the datasets.

Conversely, the FAR condition showed reduced synchrony, as evidenced by a lower peak in the cross-correlation function. This indicates that neural activity in the frontal and occipital regions was less temporally coordinated when the flankers were farther away. These results suggest that the spatial proximity of distractors influences the degree of coordination between different brain regions involved in task performance, with closer distractors requiring more synchronized neural processing [17].

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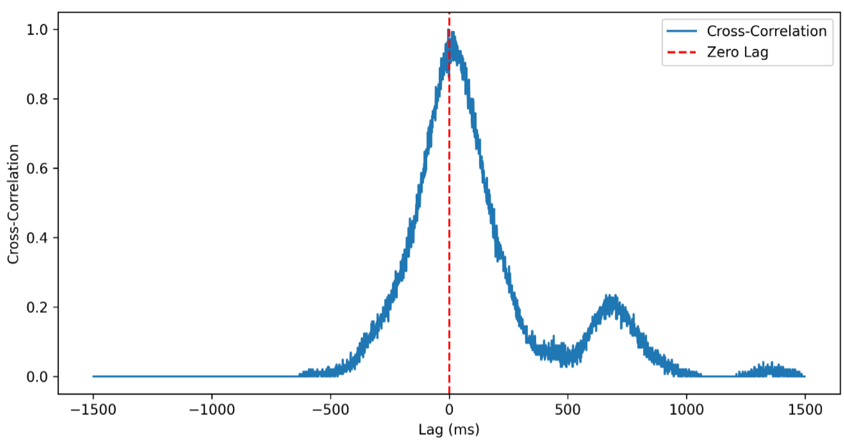

Figure 5. Cross-correlation of spiking activity between NEAR and FAR conditions. The peak at zero lag indicates strong neural synchrony in the NEAR condition.

Discussion

The results of this study provide strong evidence that the spatial proximity of distractor stimuli significantly modulates neural processing during visual tasks. The increased low-frequency power (delta and theta) and elevated firing rates observed in the NEAR condition suggest that when flankers are positioned closer to the target stimulus, the brain experiences heightened cognitive load and neural engagement [19]. This finding is consistent with prior research on the flanker effect, demonstrating that closer distractors increase interference, necessitating greater attentional control and cognitive resources.

A central finding of this study is the difference in spiking activity between the NEAR and FAR conditions. As illustrated in Fig. 6, the NEAR condition exhibits a higher frequency of spiking events, with dense clusters of neural firings occurring over time. This increased activity suggests that closer flankers demand greater neural engagement, likely due to heightened inhibitory control mechanisms required to suppress interference. In contrast, the FAR condition shows more dispersed and less frequent spiking, indicating that the brain processes the target stimulus more efficiently when distractors are positioned further away.

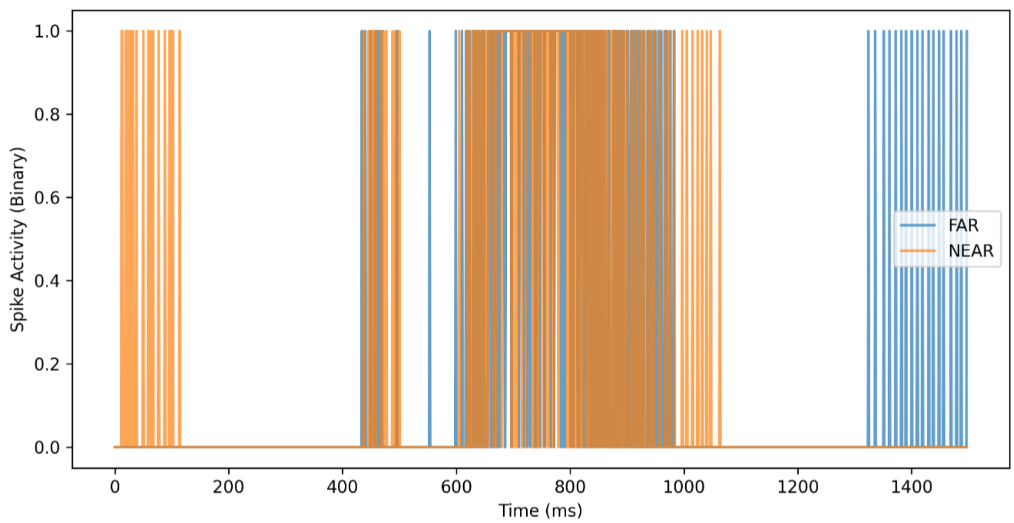

Figure 6. Spiking activity for NEAR and FAR conditions. The x-axis represents time in milliseconds, while the y-axis represents binary spike activity. The NEAR condition (orange) exhibits more frequent and clustered spiking activity than the FAR condition (blue), indicating higher neural engagement when distractors are closer to the target stimulus.

Further supporting this finding, the distribution of spike times presented in Fig. 7 highlights the variability in neural responses under both conditions. The violin plot demonstrates that the NEAR condition exhibits a broader, more irregular distribution of spike times, suggesting increased neural variability and sustained activation. This result aligns with the interpretation that closer distractors generate greater cognitive load, leading to heightened but inconsistent neural firing patterns. Conversely, the FAR condition presents a more concentrated distribution of spike times, implying more stable and efficient neural processing with reduced interference [20].

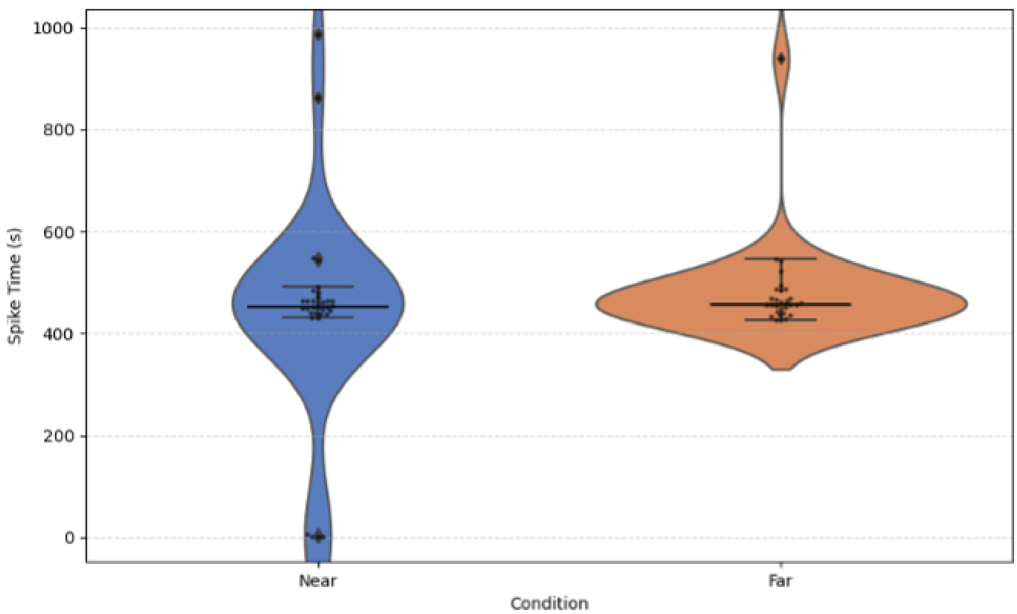

Figure 7. Violin plot showing the distribution of spike times for NEAR and FAR conditions. The NEAR condition (blue) exhibits a broader distribution with higher variability, indicating irregular neural firing patterns. In contrast, the FAR condition (orange) shows a more concentrated distribution, suggesting more stable and less frequent spike activity.

The correlation analysis of spiking activity [21] quantitatively measures the relationship between the NEAR and FAR conditions. The computed correlation coefficient r=0.4283 indicates a moderate positive relationship between the two conditions, suggesting that while neural firing patterns in NEAR and FAR conditions share some similarities, substantial differences persist. This moderate correlation reinforces the interpretation that spatial proximity of flankers induces distinguishable neural processing patterns, with NEAR conditions exhibiting more pronounced variability and intensity of neural activity [22].

These findings further support the hypothesis that the NEAR condition imposes greater cognitive demands. The elevated firing rates observed in this condition likely reflect the increased burden on neural circuits associated with attentional control and inhibitory processes. This finding aligns with theoretical models suggesting that the spatial proximity of distractors affects neural engagement, with closer distractors requiring greater effort to filter out irrelevant stimuli.

IV. Conclusion

In this study, we conducted a comprehensive multimodal investigation of neural responses to visual stimuli in near and far flanker conditions. We analysed EEG event data across multiple subjects and examined key neural activity markers, including spectrograms, cross-correlation, wavelet transformations, and time-frequency decompositions across alpha, beta, theta, gamma, and delta bands. Additionally, estimated neuron firing rates, spike activity distributions, and comparative statistical visualizations were utilized to discern meaningful differences between the two conditions [23].

Our findings indicate that neural responses exhibit condition-dependent variations, with distinguishable firing rate patterns and spectral signatures between the near and far flanker stimuli. These results support the hypothesis that the spatial configuration of visual stimuli influences neuronal processing dynamics. The statistical analysis of estimated firing rates further reinforces the observed differences, providing evidence of condition-specific neural engagement.

This research contributes to the broader understanding of neural mechanisms underlying visual perception and cognitive processing in competitive attentional environments. Future work will focus on refining computational models to enhance the interpretability of neural activity, integrating advanced machine learning techniques, and expanding the dataset to explore inter-subject variability more extensively [24].

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