



## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE TAKING AND THE SELF IN ONLINE COMMUNITY DISCUSSIONS

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates how members of an online community engaged in historical perspective taking in their discussions of the events and figures portrayed in a historical television show. As a means to justify their interpretations and situate themselves inside the possible mindsets of historical figures, members drew on three aspects of the “self” in their practices: the *experience-self*, the *identity-self*, and the *abstract-self*. Members challenged one another’s views and provided counterarguments to support challenges to their perspectives, while simultaneously failing to acknowledge the problematic elements sometimes inherent in their views. This article extends the literature on perspective taking, content analysis, and historical interpretation in community discussions.

The study of online discourse is important not only because of its ubiquity in our everyday lives, but the use of digital tools and platforms are a defining shaper of modern communication that increasingly allows for interactive “talk” to occur in asynchronous formats (Gernsbacher, 2014; Meredith, 2019; Paulus et al., 2016). Discussions via direct messages, posts, tweets, video conferences, and other digital forms do not require participants to exist in the same physical space or time zone. Discourse psychologists have studied the cognitive processes that support the understanding of text (e.g., Graesser et al., 1994; Kintsch, 1988; Sparks & Rapp, 2011; Van den Broek & Helder, 2017), but much of this rich work has focused on the synchronous experiences of individuals or smaller groups. Online settings provide a means to explore larger groups not bound by time or physical location, opening new avenues to study how people construct and contest meaning together. Research in these spaces has often used participants and data generated from experimental and in-school contexts (e.g., Shi, 2020; Tudini, 2015). It is equally critical, however, to understand what people in self-generating online spaces do on their own, which may help to inform a variety of interventions (Jeong & Joung, 2007; Loncar et al., 2014; Nami & Marandi, 2014; Wei et al., 2015)

Historical perspective taking (HPT) draws from both the perspective taking literature in psychology and the historical thinking literature in education. *Perspective taking* is “the process of imagining the world from another’s vantage point or imagining oneself in another’s shoes” (Galinsky et al., 2005, p. 110). *Historical perspective taking* is the attempt to understand the thoughts and actions of *people in the past* from the viewpoint of how they lived in their historical world, rather than imposing modern-day judgments and values – *presentism* – on who and what have come before (Endacott, 2010; Hartmann & Hasselhorn, 2008; Huijgen et al., 2014; Lee et al., 1997). This can be difficult to accomplish (Brooks, 2008; Downey, 1995; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Nilsen, 2016) as attempts to consider the historical “I” can often become subsumed to their present-day, personal “I” (Brooks, 2008; Nilsen, 2016), or turn into a stereotyped “I” based on pre-conceived notions about people outside of one’s time and identity-group (Wheeler et al., 2001).

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

This article examines an online community's use of historical perspective taking (HPT) in members' discussions about the figures and events in a historical television show, and how members invoke their identities, backgrounds, and experiences to argue, negotiate, and justify their views. Research on HPT has tended to be researcher/educator-initiated writing assignments or think-aloud protocols based on sources given to students (Brooks, 2008; Colby, 2010; Doppen, 2000; Nilsen, 2016). This study looks at HPT as a discourse process "in the wilds" of an online, interest-driven community.

## DEFINING HPT

A key development in youth is the eventual comprehension that one's perceptions of the world are not exact, accurate representations of reality, and that others can and do have different perceptions and beliefs (Epley et al., 2004; Kuhn, 1999). However, even adults continue to have difficulty setting aside their own viewpoints and bias in their judgments and beliefs about others, or themselves (Epley et al., 2004; Krauss & Fussell, 1991; Pronin et al., 2004, 2002). People of all ages take a more egocentric approach to others' perspectives than they believe they do (Krueger & Clement, 1994; Royzman et al., 2003). Their perceptions become a "starting point, or judgmental anchor" to engage in perspective taking whereby they make "a series of discrete mini adjustments" from their original, personal perspective to a perspective they *believe* "plausibly captures the other's perception" (Epley et al., 2004, p. 327). These adjustments or "jumps" tend to be more necessary the farther removed the "other" is from individuals' lives – not family, friends, or people known to them whose perspective they may directly ask, or whose worldview they already know to a degree. These jumps can also lead to increase overlaps and blurring between perceptions of the self and perceptions of the other (Galinsky et al., 2005). By its nature, HPT is the type of perspective taking that requires considerable mental jumps, as the "other" is typically someone long dead. A goal of this current study is to explore the types of jumps made by participants in an online community when discussing historical figures.

Historical perspective taking (HPT) literature, like perspective taking literature broadly, has grappled with whether to consider the process as cognitive, affective, or a combination of both – that is, an intellectual endeavor with a focus on evidence as well as an emotional call to connect with figures in the past (Endacott, 2010; Galinsky et al., 2005; Lee et al., 1997). Huijgen et al. (2014) defined HPT as involving three components: 1) *contextualization* (Britt & Aglinskas, 2002; Wineburg, 1991), which is the situating of historical figures within their historical world; 2) the *need to draw on empathy* for understanding why figures may have acted as they did; and 3) *avoiding presentism*. For Huijgen et al., HPT was a primarily cognitive process, with the affective a subset in the empathy component than an equal to the cognitive. Lee et al. (1997) also leaned toward giving primacy to the cognitive, claiming the "only reliable way of finding out what someone believed or wanted in the past is by appeal to evidence", although they did "not rule out intuition" (p. 233). In contrast, Endacott (2010) saw the cognitive and affective as interdependent and equally necessary; HPT requires the use of evidence and is always an intellectual endeavor, yet Endacott acknowledged that people do not and cannot wholly divorce themselves from their emotions, just as they are never entirely free from bias and their personal perspective influencing their judgments. This concept echoes research in text comprehension that participants' emotions can affect their processing of information (Bohn-Gettler & Rapp, 2011). Another goal of this current study is to explore online members' use of the cognitive and affective in their HPT practices.

Lee et al. (1997) designated three complexity levels for reasons given by participants in their attempts to consider the perspective of historical figures. The first level is HPT based on *assumptions about the figures' personal reasons and goals*, without further contextualization of the figures' positions in their historical world. The second level is HPT based on a *figure's position* (e.g., the person is an emperor) but in terms that are more generic (e.g., this action is what emperors generally do). The third and most complex level is a *situational analysis* (based on Popper, 1972) that contextualizes a figure's actions to their specific situation in their specific historical world at a specific moment in time.

Hartmann and Hasselhorn (2008) also invoked the situational in their construction for how to measure HPT by drawing on Johnson's (1975) social perspective taking, which is "the ability to understand how a situation appears to another person and how that person will react cognitively and emotionally to the situation"; however, a difference between HPT and social perspective taking is that HPT attempts to "adopt the view of another person who acts in an entirely different situation, time, and/or culture" (Hartmann & Hasselhorn, 2008, p. 265). Although social perspective taking may involve trying to understand someone still considerably different from oneself, it does not involve the distance of time in the way HPT does. Moreover, HPT requires an additional degree of contextualization and engagement, which influences how people think about themselves and others.

## THE SELF, HPT, AND ONLINE MEDIA DISCUSSIONS

Nilsen (2016) identified four "selves" that people drew upon when engaging in HPT. These selves were:

- (1) The *now self*, which exists in the real, present-day.
- (2) The *hypothetical past self*, which was how participants may have reacted if they lived in the past but as their present-day selves.
- (3) The *imagined past self*, where individuals imagined themselves as a person who was actually part of the historical world and not of the present-day.
- (4) The *timeless, generalized other*, which were individuals' broadly defined assumptions about humanity and human nature.

While these four selves addressed how participants positioned themselves in terms of how they thought about the past, they did not address what *aspects* or *characteristics* of their "selves" they used to do so. For example, if someone imagines they may react a certain way in the past, does their religious or national identity, family background, educational, or relationship experience affect their answer?

Previous studies have explored the relationship between youth's understanding of the past and their identity and sense of self (Barton & McCully, 2005; Epstein, 1998; Goldberg, 2013; Goldberg et al., 2011; Santiago, 2017). Research has also examined how educators' identities influence their pedagogical choices for approaching the past (Kello, 2016; Klein, 2017; Vickery, 2017). Much of this work shows that consciously or subconsciously, students and educators attempted to portray their identity-group in a more positive, sympathetic light, highlighting the achievements and narratives of figures from their identity-group more often. Educators' identities played a role in how much they chose to avoid or address a topic, and how relevant they saw events to their and their students' lives in the present. Higher empathy for figures within an identity-group were evident for youth and educators, as was lower empathy for those outside of their identity-group.

Chin and Brown (2000) discussed a "deep approach" to learning as involving "an internal emphasis where the learner personalizes the task, making it meaningful to his or her own experience and to the real world" (p. 110). However, while personalization and relatability to one's life are beneficial, perhaps even essential to understanding content and being motivated to learn, learners should also be able to understand a task or issue from a perspective beyond their own – and not just as the opposing perspective being the one that they rejected in favor of another. Questioning, arguing, interpreting, and clarifying ideas in discussions are important skills (DeWitt et al., 2014; Gao et al., 2009), but it is especially important today that those skills help youth and the public to understand perspectives that differ from their own *and* recognize their own perspective is filtered through the personal lens of who they are.

Online discussions can involve people from various places and backgrounds. Fans of popular historical media must engage with the media, the real-life history behind the media, and with other fans' interpretations of the media *and* real-life history (Matthews, 2018). Youth and the public tend to

view media depictions of the past as more credible when those depictions match their prior assumptions about a historical figure or event, as well as that resonate with their personal beliefs, identities, and points-of-view (Matthews, 2018; Seixas, 1994; Wineburg et al., 2007). They can also uncritically approach media content as a straightforward and accurate source of information instead of as a “narrative that has been constructed by a particular person in a particular moment in time” (Schwebel, 2011, p. 12). This approach can lead to them subconsciously transferring elements from fictional portrayals of history into their writings and ideas about real-life figures and events (Britt & Aglinskis, 2002; Marcus et al., 2006; Matthews, 2016, 2018).

Fiction and other popular media entertain but also become sources for thinking, learning about, and understanding the real world (Burgoyne, 2008; Butler et al., 2009; Mar, 2018; Matthews, 2021; Rapp et al., 2014). This has implications for how people share, argue, and defend their perspectives in both in-school and out-of-school settings, and it is why research in online spaces is an important avenue for which to examine HPT as a discourse process.

## CURRENT STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study connects and extends previous literature on perspective taking and online community discourse, with two research questions.

- 1) How do members of an online community use historical perspective taking to discuss the figures and events in a historical television show?
- 2) How – or if – do members draw on the cognitive and the affective to make “jumps” from their perspective to the “other’s” perspective, and then justify their perspectives to the community in their fan discussions?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### *Site of the Study*

In-person book clubs and reader groups have provided rich ground to examine literacy and discourse practices in out-of-school spaces (Beach & Yussen, 2011; Radway, 1991, 1997; Twomey, 2007). Fan communities for popular media in television (TV) and film have a thriving culture where fans discuss, re-appropriate, and use their media of interest in multiple ways (Coppa, 2008; Jenkins, 1992; Matthews, 2018; Zubernis & Larsen, 2012). Today, youth and adults alike can gather in digital spaces around their favorite media, which includes popular historical dramas and pseudo-historical dramas offered by different network and streaming services, such as *Outlander* (Starz), *The Crown* (Netflix), or previous series such as *Game of Thrones* (HBO), *Downton Abbey* (ITV), or *The Tudors* (Showtime).

The Tudors wiki was<sup>1</sup> an online fan community formed around the television show, *The Tudors* (2007–2010), about the reign of King Henry VIII and his six wives in 16<sup>th</sup> century England. The show covers the English Church’s break with the Roman Catholic Church and its role in the Protestant Reformation. The Tudors wiki not only discussed the specific television show, but other novels, films, television programs, and media about the Tudors, as well as the actual historical era, and more. The discussion forum had subsections such as general discussion, the television show, Tudor media other than *The Tudors*, off topic, and introductions, as well as a history category for conversations about the “real history” of the show.

Tudor England remains one of the most famous eras in Western history, the figures and events of the dynasty’s reign discussed across nonfiction and fiction books, TV shows, films, documentaries, and other mediums into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (e.g., Bordo, 2013; Borman, 2016; Doran & Freeman, 2009; De Lisle, 2013; Mullin, 2019; Parrill & Robison, 2013; Robison, 2017; Russo, 2020). The latest Tudor TV

<sup>1</sup>[www.thetudorswiki.com/](http://www.thetudorswiki.com/) Note: After over a decade, the hosting site for the wiki closed in June of 2021. However, relevant data were saved before this closure, and the website can still be accessed by internet archive.

miniseries came out in 2021. Due to the nature of the events that occurred during their reigns, as well as the personalities of the Tudor monarchs and consorts themselves, a range of perspectives have emerged and still emerge in both academic and popular culture discourse spaces, which makes the dynasty a useful example for HPT practices because they are interpreted in multiple ways. Endacott (2010) noted that with students, cognitive approaches to HPT typically focus on prominent, political leaders or similar figures who often dominate attention in Western history narratives (usually adult white men) whereas affective approaches to HPT typically focus on underrepresented groups in history (e.g., women, children, people of color, and other non-dominant groups). As a focus of the current study is both on the cognitive *and* the affective, the Tudor Era is an appropriate choice due to the women of this period being as prominent as the men and because the personal lives and emotional motivations of its leaders directly impacted England's foreign and domestic policy in significant ways.

This study builds on my (Matthews, 2016) work that examined members' source usage in The Tudors wiki community over a five-month period, spanning all active threads in the history subforum where they discussed the actual historical era. For the current study, I used data from the same subforum, but over a four-year period. Previously, I designated five response levels for discussion threads: *no response* (no responses), *low response* (1–10 responses), *medium response* (11–30 responses), *high response* (31–75 responses), and *monster* threads, which contained 76 or more posts. For this study, I focused on threads in the history subforum only classified as *monster*, which I chose over the shorter threads to assess how issues of HPT occurred in the lengthiest discussions.

Over the four-year data collection period, 1,173 threads appeared in the history subforum of The Tudors wiki. Of these, 30 qualified for the monster category, totaling 5,131 posts and an average response rate per thread of 171.03. The number of participants in each thread ranged from 7–53 individuals, with the average number of participants being 26.9. The total number of participants across all threads was 208 individual members.

## Analysis

Analysis comprised four phases of coding for: 1) *response commonalities across discussions*, 2) *members' HPT practices*, 3) *members' use of different aspects of the self*, and 4) *polarity in discussions*.

### Phase one: response commonalities

Scherer Bassani (2011) distinguished between a *unit of record* (one message in a forum) and “*units of record*,” which were instances when “different units of record are grouped together under a single discussion topic on the forum” (p. 935). Adapting the “units of record,” my unit of analysis was a *thread* in its entirety. Although individual posts were typically coded (not all), they were done so in accordance to their relationship with a thread's overall discussion as the focus. Thus, 30 “units of record” were subcoded into smaller pockets, as described in the following sections.

**Shifts.** Scherer Bassani (2011) looked “at the interactions between members” (p. 935) within a discussion, such as whether a message responded to the original topic or to another message under that topic. In this study, I coded for *shifts*, which were each additions to a thread that moved beyond the original topic or any other topic already part of the conversation. Shifts could veer slightly or totally from previous discussion points to be Tudor-related evolutions or non-Tudor-related tangents. After all shifts were coded, I revisited each of the 30 threads to assess what happened before, during, and following every shift to determine if there were common attributes that incited, were the result of, or were part of these occurrences across discussions. I then recoded the data for *response commonalities*, which were the elements associated with shifts that recurred in a thread's evolution I used to examine members' HPT in phases two and three. Commonalities were the personal and social dimensions of members' communicative practices that contributed to how they argued and interpreted historical individuals and events in their online discussions.

In my previous study on source usage in this wiki community (Matthews, 2016), I developed four categories around members' reactions to sources, as follows:

- (1) *Disciplinary*, which included members' use of three disciplinary heuristics that historians use to evaluate historical evidence. These heuristics are *contextualization* (situating a source and the figures featured within it in their historical world), *corroboration* (checking the accuracy of a source's information by comparing it against other sources), and *sourcing* (identifying the source behind a source, the author and her/his/their perspective, and when, where, and why a source was created) as defined by Wineburg (1991). Other scholars, including Britt and Aglinskas (2002), Endacott (2010), Lee et al. (1997), Hartmann and Hasselhorn (2008), and Huijgen et al. (2014), have also taken up disciplinary heuristics, with these traditionally considered cognitive processes.
- (2) *Critical* responses were members' critiques or challenges of a source or another member's interpretation of a source.
- (3) *Personal/emotional* was when members framed their reaction to a source around their personal feelings and/or experiences, with these typically considered affective processes.
- (4) *Surface* reactions were superficial, frequently humorous, "one-liners" or "cheeky" statements when members did not evaluate a source in any extended way.

I adapted the critical and personal/emotional reaction codes for this study to consider how members responded to one another's interpretations and arguments more broadly in their discussions, as opposed to when related to sources. I describe these news codes in the next section, with examples.

**Personal details** were adapted from the personal/emotional code and included any information members shared about themselves. This could be an experience they had or background information about their family, education, religion, nationality, or profession, or when they referred to some perceived aspect of their own personality, emotions, or beliefs they connected to historical figures and events. The explicit invoking of "I," "me," "my," or "mine" was required in posts. I intended for this code to help me explore members' affective processes in their HPT discussions.

The following example is from a thread in which a member in the community asked about celebrations in England to commemorate the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ascension of Tudor monarch Elizabeth I (daughter of Henry VIII and his second wife) to the throne. Another member answered the original question with a personal story about a visit to Hatfield House in England, where Elizabeth I learned she had gained the throne. All posts in this article preserve members' grammar and spelling mistakes.

*Hatfield house where she learned that she was now queen is having a banquet on the 20<sup>th</sup>... Many years ago, I went to a banquet there... They have a "Queen Elizabeth"... She kissed my husband (ex now) LOL...*

This post was coded as a personal detail because the member shared an anecdote about an experience at an Elizabeth I celebration. Similarly, in a different example, a member compared themselves to Anne Boleyn, the second wife of Tudor monarch Henry VIII and the mother of Elizabeth I.

*Anne is very feisty like me. I have a lot of her ways that's during this season 2, I can identify w/ her.*

**Counterpoints and challenges** were adapted from the critical reaction code as instances when members challenged or offered counter arguments to one another's perspectives, or they questioned the accuracy of members' claims and/or asked for details on the source of someone's information. The following examples are from a thread about Catherine (also spelled "Katherine") of Aragon, the first wife of Henry VIII, and whether she could have lied about the non-consummation of her marriage to Henry's brother Arthur, before Arthur died, after which she married Henry. The consummation (or not) of Catherine's first marriage had huge political and religious implications when Henry later attempted to dissolve his own union to Catherine so he could marry another woman. A member in the community brought up that, because Catherine had once lied to her father about a miscarriage she had, she could have lied about the marriage consummation with Arthur as well. Another member

countered that Catherine “really didn’t lie” about the miscarriage but rather withheld or “kept the news” from her father until she was pregnant once more, to which the member who originally brought up the lie made the counter:

**Post #60:** *Saying she lost the baby a “few days” ago when it was 3 months ago, I would say was more than just stretching the truth. I understand why she did it . . .of course . . .and therefore, it gives us reason to doubt her.*

The member who had said Catherine “didn’t really lie” then made the second counter:

**Post #61:** *Withholding news of the miscarriage until she was pregnant again from a critical uncaring father who refused to support her after Arthur died is only a lie in the strictest sense of the term. I would call it prudence.*

To which the writer of Post #60 further countered with the perspective:

**Post #63:** *. . . and it would be prudent to say she had never consummated her marriage with Arthur.*

I considered counterpoints and challenges to be both a cognitive and affective process because members could use evidence *and* emotion in their arguments.

**Sources**, the final commonality code, were instances in posts when members’ invoked a primary document or image, a secondary nonfiction work by a scholarly or popular historian, novels, films, and television programs, Web sources, and other works that did not fit into the previous categories such as information from a teacher or family member. Categories were based on the source codes from my previous study on this community (Matthews, 2016), although for this article, when a member referred to any of the above in a post it was simply coded under the umbrella category of *sources*. Having extensively covered source usage in my previous study, the code here was merely to see how sources fit into the larger dataset of members’ interpretive and argumentative patterns around their HPT practices. Although often considered part of the cognitive process, the interpretation of sources can rely on the affective depending on how members engage with the source, so I considered this commonality to speak to both processes.

### **Phase Two: HPT**

I next coded for members’ use of *historical perspective taking*. Adapting the contextualization heuristic from the disciplinary code beyond its use for sources, in this study, I coded HPT as any members attempt to interpret and situate the actions and mindsets of historical figures within the context of the figures’ historical world, although the attempt to interpret and situate did not necessarily mean the endeavor actually or fully occurred. I tracked every instance when members attempted to interpret and/or place themselves in the mindsets of historical figures across all 30 threads. Returning to the earlier counterpoints and challenges example involving Catherine of Aragon, these posts also highlight how members tried to situate Catherine’s actions within the context of her historical world. The wider discussion in the thread had explored Catherine’s position as a former princess of one country who then became a royal widow and eventually queen of another country, and the pressure on her to produce an heir that would seal the alliance between her two nations together.

**Post #61:** *Withholding news of the miscarriage until she was pregnant again from a critical uncaring father who refused to support her after Arthur died is only a lie in the strictest sense of the term. I would call it prudence.*

**Post #63:** *. . . and it would be prudent to say she had never consummated her marriage with Arthur.*

In these two posts, both members attempted to situate and justify their perspectives of Catherine’s behavior through their individual interpretations of her possible mindset. The member in Post #61 perceived “the lie” as a justifiable “withhold” given Catherine’s prior interactions with her “uncaring” father, along with the need for an heir to be in place after she had lost the previous one. In contrast, the member of Post #63 flipped the notion of “prudence” by claiming that Catherine’s actions with her father leave open the chance that she could have exercised “prudence” by lying about the consummation of her marriage to Arthur, which made it easier for her to marry his younger brother, Henry VIII.

All posts could be coded for multiple commonalities, such as in the examples given, which were coded as counterpoints and challenges *and* HPT.

### **Phase three: the self**

Linking to Nilsen's (2016) four "selves," I returned to posts coded for both *personal details* and *HPT* to examine when members directly connected some aspect of their "selves" to their HPT practices, to explore the cognitive and affective together. Using an inductive approach (Kyngäs, 2020) for this phase, three aspects or characteristics of the "self" emerged from the data: the *experience-self*, the *identity-self*, and the *abstract-self*.

The *experience-self* was when members drew upon a specific experience in their lives to relate to the mindset of a historical figure. The next example is from a discussion about Mary I, daughter of Henry VIII and his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. Members attempted to contextualize the effect Mary's childhood traumas – due to the lengths that her father went to dissolve his marriage to her mother – may have had on the violent actions she made as a monarch in later life. One member connected their own experience of separation from a mother who died to the separation of Mary I from her mother (Henry VIII kept the two apart before Catherine's death). The *experience-self* became a bridge for this member to interpret the potential mindset of Mary I.

*... the separation from her dying mother is something I can relate to, and understand the hell she must've been in, and my own separation from my own dying mother wasn't forced. I was just a long, long way away from her, and I did make it home for the last few months of her life (after a separation of two years). Yeah, the relationship to her mother is something, I think, I can understand ...*

The *identity-self* was when members referenced an identity-ascribed characteristic, such as their religion or nationality, academic major, or career, which often served to support their perspective on a historical figure or event. In the following example, a member used their identity as a "former student of Psychology" to bolster their interpretation for why "Liz" (as in Elizabeth I, Henry VIII's second daughter by his second wife, Anne Boleyn) may have remained a virgin throughout her unmarried life. The thread's discussion had centered on members' arguments for why Elizabeth had or had not been a virgin.

*It's hard for people to understand today, but being a former student of Psychology I know that psychological factors can entirely override sexual desire for an entire lifetime ... Liz must have had quite a few issues tallied up – the deaths of her mother and stepmother, the Seymour liason, etc etc. "Affection is false."*

In another example, members had discussed Henry VIII, his six marriages, reign, and overall character. A member invoked their identity "as a Brit" when highlighting that they were still "proud that he was our King," even if he [Henry VIII] "had a lot of faults."

*He [Henry VIII] had a lot of faults and was indeed a complex man. But as a Brit I am proud that he was our King.*

The *abstract-self* was when members referred to a generalized, abstract self with certain values and knowledge not tied to either a concrete experience or identity characteristic. In the following examples, members in a thread had discussed whether Henry VIII's fifth wife, Katherine Howard [also spelled "Kathryn" or "Catherine"], "deserved" to die [note that wives #1, #5, and #6 had the same first name, using either a C or K due to the non-standardization of spelling at the time]. The television show *The Tudors* and a number of other Tudor media typically portray Katherine Howard as a "promiscuous adulteress" who was executed for her infidelity (Byrne, 2019). However, the actual historical evidence has not definitively proven Katherine Howard *did* commit adultery. Rather, it was made treason for a queen not to have disclosed her sexual history before her marriage to the king; that Katherine admitted to not being a virgin when she married Henry VIII was the proven crime, along with the assumption she *intended* to commit adultery (Byrne, 2019; Russell, 2017). Yet the member of this online community who wrote the following posts seemed to treat the adultery as fact, as did other



members in the thread, including those sympathetic to Katherine. This highlights that if a particular version of the past is presented frequently enough in popular media, it can become the dominant narrative despite that historical reality contains more nuance and uncertainty.

**Post #9:** *I am hard pressed to excuse her [Kathryn] behavior because she was young because I personally was not a dumb teenager . . . well I was dumb but not that dumb. I think Henry had to be the most selfish and idiotic king when it came to marriage.*

In Post #9, a member invoked an abstract-self who was a “dumb but not that dumb” teenager, to justify the perspective that Katherine’s actions should not be excused. This highlights a challenge of HPT and perspective taking broadly; people struggle to separate mental representations and perspectives of the self from representations and perspectives of the other (Galinsky et al., 2005). Here the member conflates personally not being a dumb teenager to Katherine should have knowing better. Other members offered counter arguments that Katherine’s “lack of education,” combined with her young age, should let anyone sympathize with her, to which the member who wrote Post #9 returned to write:

**Post #24:** *One reason I do not feel sympathy for her is I know longer buy the “oh she/he is just a child” excuse . . . Like Ive said before, I didnt have to be educated by anyone not to put my hand in a flame because I would get hurt. So why should Kathryn’s lack of education justify her adultery . . .*

The member referenced not putting a “hand in a flame” to presumably show that people can and should be able to exercise common sense in certain matters, which the member likened to Katherine and her “adultery.” However, the member failed to acknowledge that common sense still has to be learned from someone and/or comes from a (survivable) experience at one point or another, even if the when, how, or from whom the “common sense” was learned is no longer recalled. The member also did not acknowledge that adultery/execution versus a hand in a flame/burn are perhaps not fair comparisons.

#### **Phase four: polarity**

After completion of the first three phases of my analysis, I explored whether these extended discussions with HPT actually led to members changing their perspectives by the end of a thread. Myers (2010) saw perspective taking or stance taking as a means of self-expression and alignment (or disalignment) with other people’s stances, especially in online spaces. I again coded all 30 threads for when members took a declared stance on an issue that had an explicit opposing stance within the same discussion. A thread could have multiple polarities of opinion as discussions evolved. I did not code each members’ stance as a separate polarity unless they were the only person in the thread to have that perspective.

As an example of how polarity of opinion was examined, the following excerpts derive from a thread entitled “Defending her honor.” Members argued about the reasons why Henry VIII’s first wife Catherine (or Katherine) of Aragon vigorously fought against the annulment of her second marriage to Henry. Initially, the thread focused on whether it was Henry’s accusation Catherine lied about the consummation of her first marriage that motivated her opposition. However, the issue of whether her daughter Mary was the primary motivation eventually became the focus, with verging perspectives by members.

**Post #4:** *. . . As a mother, I believe the most important aspect for K of A, if I were to guess, involved her only child who was going to lose her right as sole heir to the throne . . . From Princess to royal bastard at the whim of the King, her father.*

This stance presented Catherine as a mother defending her daughter’s rights against the “whim” of her daughter’s father (Henry). This viewpoint was Position A. In the next post (#5), another member countered that Catherine was “no better” than Henry as a parent, for had she agreed to the annulment when Henry first proposed it, Mary would have remained a princess, challenging the interpretation that Catherine’s actions were for her daughter’s benefit. This viewpoint was Position B, supported by

another member in Post #7. Both Posts #5 and #7 would have been coded as counterpoint and challenges, and Post #4 would have been coded for the identity-self (“As a mother, I believe . . .”) and for HPT. Post #7 also received a code for HPT.

**Post #5:** *But one could also argue that what Katherine did in that case was no better . . . if she had retired to a nunnery like was asked of her, Mary would still be considered legitimate . . .*

**Post #7:** *Henry wanted to let Katharine go; this does not mean that Mary automatically becomes illegitimate . . . if KoA’s action was basically for Mary, one would have to argue how well she knew the law and Henry . . . She was a smart woman . . . her only reason could be that she wanted to maintain her status.*

I distinguished between threads that contained: 1) *intense polarity*, in which positions were diametrically apart, and 2) *mild polarity*, where members sometimes agreed with points the other side made while maintaining overall separate positions. Polarizing stances were tracked from beginning to end within every thread for whether members had: 1) *no explicitly stated change* in their opinion, 2) a *modified explicitly stated change* where they conceded/alter part of their original position or admitted they may have been wrong while not fully changing their perspective, or 3) an *explicitly stated change* to their stance.

Additionally, I coded for whether members in a thread stated they were: 1) *willing to read more* on the subject on which they disagreed, 2) maintained their perspective, but were willing to *respect others’ opinions*, or 3) noted that dissension may have been due to *miscommunication* than actual differing views.

### Reliability

A second rater coded 10% of posts in each of the 30 threads. Agreement was determined using Cohen’s kappa coefficient, as follows: commonalities ( $k = .81$ ), HPT ( $k = .83$ ), the three selves ( $k = .79$ ), and polarity ( $k = .76$ ).

### Demographic Constraints and Why Does This Matter?

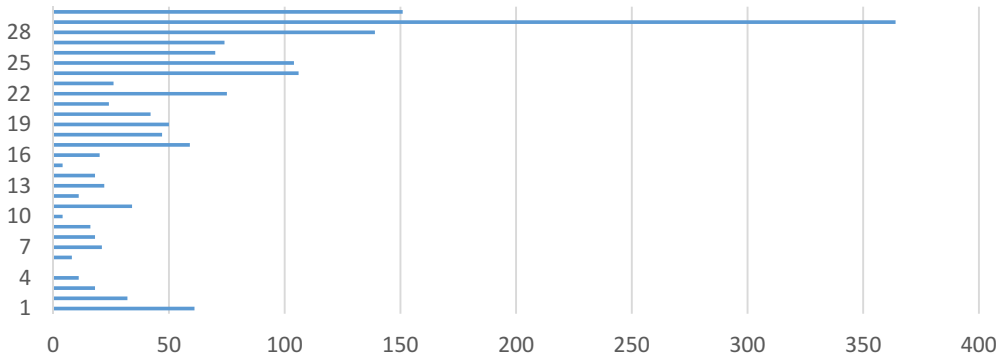
Members of The Tudors wiki could and sometimes did refer to specific demographic information about themselves, but they were not required to do so in their profiles or as part of discussions generally. This meant there was no systematic way to collect demographics on all participants. Race, sexual, political, and religious identities, among others, are central to how people interpret the past (Barton & McCully, 2005; Epstein, 1998; Goldberg, 2013; Gottlieb & Wineburg, 2012), especially in popular culture (Matthews, 2018, 2021). Demographics are crucial to research broadly, as *whose voices* are recognized and privileged has implications for how ideas and beliefs disseminate and might be internalized (Matthews, 2020). Yet no group is monolithic. It is worthwhile to explore how multiple aspects of the “self” influence understandings of the past that can lead to differing perspectives from people who belong to the same general demographic group. While acknowledging a lack of systematic demographics on participants, this study nevertheless takes a step toward understanding how the multi-faceted nature of the self operates in relation to HPT.

## RESULTS

All but one of the 30 threads (29) contained HPT activity in posts. The thread with no HPT focused on the nonfiction work of a popular Tudor author than on the historical figures themselves, unlike the other threads.

Figure 1 presents the full breakdown of HPT across all the threads. Three threads contained less than 10 posts with HPT, and 15 threads had 10–50 HPT posts. Six threads had 50–100 HPT posts, and four threads contained 100–200 HPT posts. One thread had more than 300 posts with HPT. The vertical axis in Figure 1 represents each of the 30 threads (e.g., 13 is the 13th thread, 22 is the 22nd). The horizontal axis represents the number of posts within each thread that contained HPT. This means that the first thread in the dataset had 61 posts with HPT whereas the 29th thread contained 364 posts with HPT.

## Number of HPTs across Threads

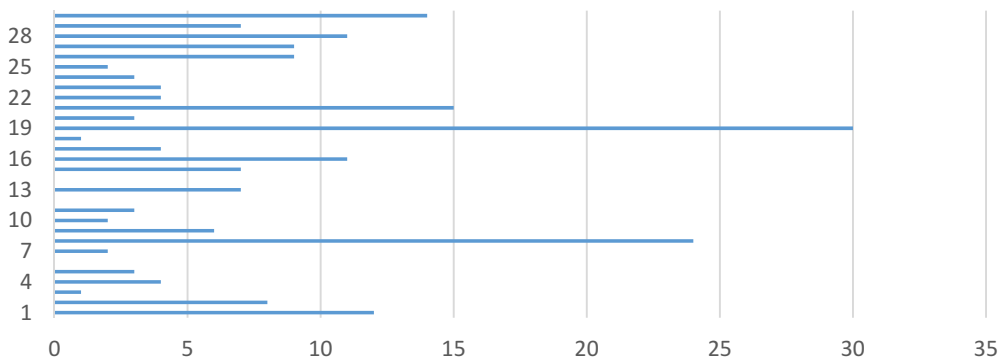


**Figure 1.** Historical perspective taking posts.

Members engaged far more in HPT than they did in sharing personal details, although there was overlap between the two codes. Of the 27 threads that contained personal details, 20 threads had less than 10 posts with personal details, five threads had 10–20 posts, and two threads had more than 20 posts with personal details. [Figure 2](#) shows the full breakdown. As with [Figure 1](#), the vertical axis represents each of the threads. The horizontal axis is the number of posts with personal details in each of the threads.

However, HPT and personal details by the numbers do not provide the full story. Across all threads, 49 separate members **combined** HPT with personal details in their posts across discussions. Of these combined posts, the distribution among the three dimensions of self was fairly even, with 36% of members connecting HPT to their experience-self, 35% connecting their identity-self to HPT, and 29% of members' referencing their abstract-self with HPT. Only two of 49 members at any point invoked an experience-self *and* abstract-self in their posts. All other 47 members invoked only one of the three dimensions (the majority at 63%), or they paired their identity-self with their experience-self *or* abstract-self. Not one member used all three aspects of self even once across all the threads.

## Number of Personal Details across Threads



**Figure 2.** Personal details posts.

Members' experience-selves primarily focused on: 1) romantic relationships and 2) family history, with travel, professional, and educational experiences to a lesser degree. The identity-selves invoked by members were their: 1) religious affiliations, 2) nationality, 3) family role such as child, parent, spouse, or sibling, and 4) educational or professional background for credibility purposes. The abstract-self was whatever generalization individual members wanted to make that they related to their HPT.

The variety of HPT practiced by members led to more counterpoints and challenges in threads. Figure 3 shows the complete classification of counterpoints and challenges across all 30 threads. Nine threads had less than 10 counterpoints and challenges posts, 11 threads had 10–30, five threads had 30–50, three threads had 50–100 posts, and another three threads had over 100 counterpoints and challenges posts.

Members' "selves" could be used to challenge one another's perspectives while providing support for one's own view, too. The following posts are from a thread about the actions of Thomas More, a minister of Henry VIII, beheaded in 1535 and canonized by the Roman Catholic Church in 1935. A member of the community's opinion of More had changed after re-watching the television show *The Tudors* (2007–2010) and the Oscar winning Tudor-era film *A Man for All Seasons* (1966). The member sought to understand how a man "so good, so just" could "let his family suffer" by refusing to acknowledge Henry VIII as supreme head of the English Church instead of the pope after England had broken from Rome, which cost More his life. The member now saw More as "selfish" instead of a "saint." Polar stances developed across the thread, such as in the next examples where two members drew upon their identity-selves (having a Catholic background) to support their counter perspectives of the "selfish" versus "saint" interpretation of More.

**Post #23:** . . . I was raised a Catholic and I understand the mind-set . . . he could not accept Henry as head of a Church over which he believed only God could choose and had chosen the Pope as the leader.

**Post #26:** I was raised a Roman Catholic also . . . I think that if I were in Moore's position, I would have tried to do what was right in my own conscience, and that would have been to keep my family whole. God forgives and knows our hearts better than we do . . .

Later in the thread, another member entered the conversation to argue:

**Post #63:** . . . I took him [More] up as my patron saint . . . Sir Thomas sought every means possible to avoid martyrdom without betraying his conscience. I suppose that might be selfish if you go by the modern western value that life on earth is the most important thing, but obviously for More and those of us who still cling to old-fashioned views on afterlife, ere are other factors in the equation.

The member in Post #63 revealed a religious background and that More was the member's "patron saint." The member then proceeded to argue that judgments of More as "selfish" were rooted in "modern western value[s]" in contrast to "those of us who still cling to old-fashioned views on afterlife."

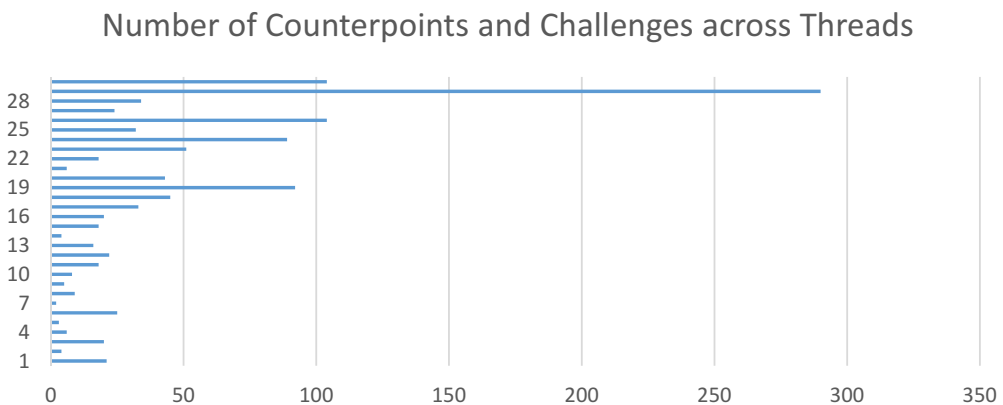


Figure 3. Counterpoints and challenges posts.

## Number of Sources across Threads

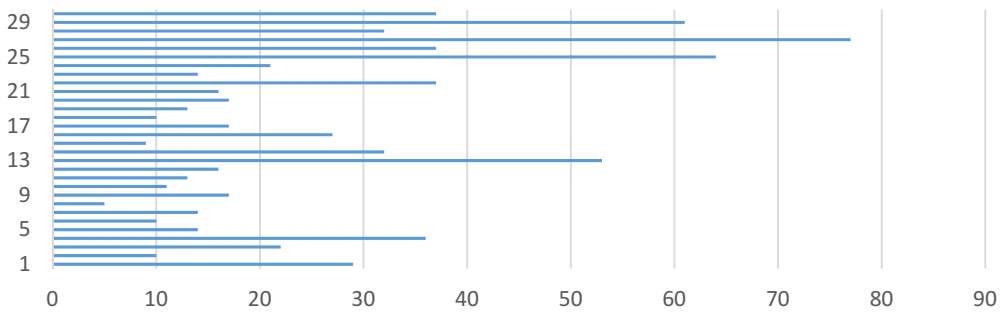


Figure 4. Sources posts.

Another member, who identified as an atheist, entered the thread to challenge the argument that people who criticized More only did so from a modern perspective.

**Post #65:** *I admire him [More] for refusing to sell out on his beliefs, yet I'm highly skeptical about those beliefs (and not just from an atheist's point of view) ... even Cardinal Wolsey sent so-called heretics into exile, rather than burning them ... that's judging More by the standards of one of his contemporaries.*

Though owning an identity as an atheist, the member nevertheless claimed to judge More within the context of his historical world, and he was still found wanting when compared to one of his contemporaries who “sent so-called heretics into exile, rather than burning them,” as More sentenced those he saw as religious heretics to be burned alive.

Members invoked sources in all 30 threads. Figure 4 shows that two threads had less than 10 source-invoked posts, 12 threads had 10–20, four threads had 20–30, six threads had 30–40, and four threads contained more than 50 source posts.

Members used sources to support their perspectives, but they also discounted other members' use of expert sources that contradicted their own views. In the next example, a member offered a more positive perspective of Anne Boleyn, citing a scholarly biography by historian Eric Ives to support the view. Another member dismissed both the member and cited expert's perspectives in Post #89:

**Post #89:** *Interesting that you discount everything that Ives says which adds balance to Anne's character as being an excuse but I guess if you have made up your mind ahead of time then there is no way you would give credence to anything except your blinkered view.*

In response to this point (Post #92), the member charged with the disregard returned to say that rather than discounting Ives, the evidence provided “reinforces what I had read before,” and that Ives provides “excuses” for Anne's behavior or “bend[s] the facts to suit his interpretation.” Never addressed was that the member may interpret evidence to suit an already formed perspective about Anne, too. Instead, all historians had their “prejudices,” yet the member's prejudice appeared not to be a factor.

**Post #92:** *I'm not discounting what Ives says, but it reinforces what I had read before ... and yes, I see Ives as trying to excuse her or bend the facts to suit his interpretation, but then as we have noted before, all historians write with their own prejudices.*

All 30 threads contained polarity of opinion, with 23 having intense polarization and seven mild. There were *no* full changes in members' perspectives across the 30 threads and only *four* instances of modified changes. Members did state they were willing to read/learn more about the polarized subject in nine of 30 threads, even if they did not change their opinions within the thread. Another nine of 30 threads had members who agreed to respectfully disagree with one another, and an additional four threads contained some reconciliation between members due to misunderstandings than opinion changes.

## DISCUSSION

As stated in the introduction, online spaces provide a unique lens through which to explore the meaning making practices of a larger group of people not bound by time, physical space, or spoken communication who can nevertheless engage in a highly interactive discourse community (Gernsbacher, 2014; Meredith, 2019; Paulus et al., 2016). This study focused on *HPT* (Endacott, 2010; Hartmann & Hasselhorn, 2008; Huijgen et al., 2014; Lee et al., 1997), but the results and points here apply to perspective taking and discourse studies more broadly (Epley et al., 2004; Galinsky et al., 2005; Krauss & Fussell, 1991; Paulus et al., 2016). People do not separate themselves from who they are – their beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences intrinsic to how they see the world, themselves, and others – even when they claim to approach a situation or information through an “unbiased” lens (Krueger & Clement, 1994; Pronin et al., 2002, 2004; Royzman et al., 2003). Just as it is useful to consider the many facets of the self that shape people’s perspectives of the past, it is useful to consider how the various dimensions of the self might affect perspective taking in different history communities, or in another discipline. The patterns found in The Tudors wiki are relevant to how people argue, represent, and interpret information widely. It would be interesting to examine, for instance, how people might invoke the experience-self, identity-self, and abstract-self in contemporary political or various current events’ discussions.

Research on perspective taking and historical interpretation practices has frequently concentrated on characteristics that would fall under the identify-self, such as religious, ethnic, national, gender, and political affiliations (Barton & McCully, 2005; Epstein, 1998; Goldberg, 2013; Gottlieb & Wineburg, 2012). In this study, members frequently invoked these characteristics. However, people can share an identity yet come to different interpretive conclusions, as in the Thomas More example where members were both Catholic but had opposite views on More. What else in people’s backgrounds influences their views? The member who was sympathetic to Mary I because of a perceived mutual separation from their mothers illustrates how family experiences can come into play. Members of The Tudors wiki allowed the “self” and “other” to overlap (Galinsky et al., 2005). Their personal perspective became a “starting point, or judgmental anchor” for their HPT, but their “jumps” or “adjustments” to “plausibly” move to the other’s perspective were not always successful (Epley et al., 2004, p. 327).

Gao et al. (2009) developed a model for productive online discussion, believing that four components were necessary to maximize the benefits of exchange. Participants should do the following: 1) *comprehend* through “interpretation, elaboration, and making connections to prior knowledge”; 2) *critique* to “examine other people’s views, and be sensitive and analytical to conflicting views”; 3) *construct knowledge* to “negotiate and construct meanings, and reconsider, refine, and sometimes revise their thinking”; and 4) *share improved understanding* about the topic (p. 69). A productive online discussion around knowledge construction especially:

... should offer opportunities for social interaction and collaboration, where individuals can compare different perspectives, negotiate personal interpretations with those of others, and construct a richer understanding of the topic” (Gao et al., 2013, p. 472)

From thoughts on queens to disagreements about wives’ motivations to whether Thomas More was “selfish” or a “saint,” members of The Tudors wiki *comprehended* by interpreting historical content, elaborating on their positions when questioned by other members, and making connections based on whatever prior knowledge (whether accurate or inaccurate) they brought to the discussion. They *critiqued* one another through counterpoints and challenges, and while they “examined” other members’ views, they may not have been as “analytical” to “conflicting views” at the level advocated by Gao et al. (2009). Additionally, the ways members did or did not *construct knowledge* needs attention. Members “negotiated” their meanings through their differing perspectives, as well as by responding to others’ counterpoints and challenges, but how they potentially “reconsider, refine, and sometimes revise their thinking” may be more problematic, as is how to assess an *improved understanding* about a topic.

On the one hand, members of the wiki synthesized their knowledge by turning threads into a collective resource created by and for the community. Yet members mostly retained their original stances with only four modified changes of opinion – at least within the discussions of this study. A consensus or change of opinion may not be necessary for an “improved understanding” of a topic, but what *should* count if members’ positions do not even become more self-reflective or nuanced after interpreting, critiquing, and negotiating meanings together? This study looked at what members wrote in threads, not at how their thinking about these topics may have changed over a longer time as they participated in the community as a whole. One limitation for this research is that the text neither easily nor automatically reveals when and where self-reflection and improved understanding may take place after a discussion. A longitudinal analysis of individual members may show improved understanding overall, but limits to studying self-reflection and change persist when confined to collecting data produced “in the wilds” without researcher intervention. This point is not to say the goal of a discussion is to convince participants to change their minds, especially because this is often difficult to do, but what *is* important is when and why they do or do not become more nuanced and/or self-reflective in the perspectives they take (Kuhn et al., 2020). Perhaps this focus is another element needed in productive discussion. Participants must recognize and become more aware of the issues in their own thinking and not just of the issues in others’ perspectives.

In the Katherine Howard example, a member expressed no sympathy for the historical figure by invoking an abstract-self who was a “dumb” but “not that dumb” teenager” who knew without needing “to be educated by anyone” not to put a “hand in a flame.” As such, the member felt Katherine should have known better than to commit adultery, which led to her execution. As noted earlier, Katherine’s adultery is not definitive in the historical record. It can be furthermore “tricky” to attempt to understand a historical figure from the perspective of a “self” removed from any experience and context at all. The wiki member likely drew on the abstract-self presumably because there was no personal experience or identity-affiliation for which they saw themselves as able to compare with Katherine. By removing the self from any concrete experience, the member seemed not to realize that the comparison to Katherine becomes tenuous, especially because Katherine’s situation was highly contextualized given her position as a 16<sup>th</sup>-century English queen. This example also highlights that by the TV narrative reinforcing the adultery, audiences may tend to remember what the fictional narrative and characters believe than what occurred in reality (Houghton & Klin, 2020). That members challenged one another’s perspectives yet were not necessarily able to see the inconsistencies or problems in their own viewpoints speaks to a potential lack of *self-reflection* in their process.

Still, the abstract-self, like Nilsen’s (2016) “timeless, generalized other,” continued to be used by members to make claims about the past. It can be easy to fall back onto stereotypes and/or generalizations about groups outside of one’s time and identity-group affiliation (Downey, 1995; Lee & Ashby, 2001). The abstract-self, if not checked, can be a means to dodge the issue of contextualization. Youth and adults need to understand and critically think about situations in which they may not have an immediately recognizable identity-self or experience-self to rely on as a bridge in interpreting figures and events. A goal of this study was to look at how the cognitive and affective played into community discourse processes. Much like Endacott (2010), the results of this study suggest that both are interdependent and necessary for participants’ HPT processes. Members used sources and attempted to contextualize, but they also relied on personal stories, emotional connections, their own attitudes, and the human element to make sense of the past, at least when it came to historical figures’ actions.

Again, from the start of this article, Lee et al. (1997) designated three complexity levels for reasons given by participants in their attempts to engage in HPT. The first level is HPT based on assumptions about the figures *personal reasons and goals*, without further contextualization of the figures’ positions or their historical world. The second level is HPT based on a figure’s *position*, but in terms that are more generic, as in this is what all people in this position would do. The third and most complex level is a *situational analysis* (Popper, 1972) that contextualizes a figure’s actions to their specific situation in their historical world. Members of The Tudors wiki engaged in all three levels. In the Thomas More

example, a member perceived More's actions as a selfish personal choice. Defense of More by different members occurred through the general perspective of More's position as a Catholic who could not accept Henry as the head of the Church over the pope. Finally, another member engaged in a situational analysis by discussing More's specific position in his specific time by comparing More to a contemporary of his in England, with the member finding More "deficient" by these standards. The Catherine of Aragon example about whether she could have lied about the consummation of her marriage is another instance when members maneuvered across reasoning levels for their perspectives.

Individual members' posting patterns across threads and over the four years were not tracked for this study. A future line of research could return to these discussions and examine whether: 1) particular members engaged in only one type of level in all their discussions, 2) everyone moved fluidly across levels, depending on the thread, or 3) members' levels evolved the longer they were in the community. The lack of longitudinal data on individual members' trajectories is a limitation of this study but is a future direction to consider, as is looking at batches of threads by year to determine if there are differences in conversations as members' participation in the wiki progressed over time.

Most members referenced only one of the three dimensions of self when combined with their HPT, suggesting they may select a representative facet of themselves to make connections with historical figures. This finding could also be due to space constraints in how much they could write, or any number of reasons not explicitly evident in their written posts. Future research should unpack how much of the three selves are or are not consciously or subconsciously considered by participants in their HPT, perhaps in an interview or other format in which the researcher can probe participants further.

Perspective taking is a skill and a mindset, and it must look inward as well as outward. That the members of The Tudors wiki differed in their HPT is neither surprising nor concerning in itself. Historians and the discipline of history thrive on competing interpretations. This does not mean history and the practice of historians (or other disciplines with competing views) are arbitrary and merely based on someone's "opinions." People must strike a careful balance between applying a critical eye to an expert or any perspective and the outright dismissal of evidence that accompanies a view because it is contrary to one's own. It is also imperative to ensure there is some attempt to reflect on the range of factors that influence someone's perspective, especially when it comes to individual beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences. The self is always multi-faceted and present in all discussions.

## Disclosure statement

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