

Defying the Norm: An Analysis of Book Banning

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify common themes in banned books and determine how they compare to the stated reasons they were banned. This study analyzed 10 classic books (*Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *Sula* by Toni Morrison, *1984* by George Orwell, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain) that are typically seen as notable banned books for five identified themes (Sex, Drugs/Violence, Minorities/LGBTQ+, Religion and Politics). The results of these thematic analyses were then compared with the found reasons they were successfully banned in the United States. The results of the thematic analyses revealed that while no particular theme was overly common among the books, there was an underlying message of defying societal norms. With this, the results of the comparisons revealed a number of inconsistencies, indicating censors' use of *explicit content* to limit access to substantively controversial materials. Implications of this study could suggest the previously mentioned mindset of censors, in turn strengthening the messages of defiance within the literature. Future researchers could use a different set of books, reasons for banning in different countries, different forms of literature, etc.

Introduction

Between July 1, 2022 and December 31, 2022, 1,477 books were banned in United States (U.S.) libraries and classrooms (Friedman & Meehan, 2023). Book banning is not new. Many scholars detail the history of various genres and themes being banned throughout the centuries. This includes everything from: fantasy and occult books, with banning increasing in the last 20 years and how this relates to the First Amendment (DePollo, 2011), to books by and about LGBTQ+ individuals (Sapp, 2010) in young adult (Savage, 2004) and children's literature (Steele, 2022), to subsets as niche as 16th-century Hebrew books (Phillips, 2016). But despite the many histories and thematic analyses of these censored materials, one still wonders if the specified rationale for these books being banned align with the common themes pervading them. Given the stark increase in book bans, with the American Library Association tracking the greatest number of attempted book bans in 2022 (2,571 unique books) since beginning their data compilation 20 years prior, it seems, now, more than ever, is the time to address the issue (*Censorship by the...*, 2022). What are common themes among banned books and how do they compare to the stated reasons they were banned?

This research project proposes to answer that question, determining whether there is a discrepancy between the most pervasive themes in novels and novellas banned in the U.S. and the official reasons for which they were banned, basing the analysis of the books on the study "YA Banned Books Analysis" which discusses the common themes in banned young adult books using content analysis, analyzing 15 young adult novels banned between 1990 and 2016 (Birro et al., 2018). As a high school student, the researcher analyzed 10 classic books routinely banned from high school curriculums. The books chosen are typically viewed as notable banned books.

Literature Review

This research aims to identify inconsistencies between the official reasons books were banned and the persistent themes within them. The thematic analysis was conducted with the history of censorship in mind to identify potentially “offensive” material. This mindset was based on literature such as professor of English and legal studies Joan DelFattore’s book *What Johnny Shouldn’t Read: Textbook Censorship in America*. Anecdotes from the court cases revolving around attempts at banning literary materials in school, particularly those found to be anti-religious, were used in this determination. This includes protesters objecting to any literature containing a single use of the word “damn,” (DeFattore, 1992, p. 100) stories that promote children’s imagination, independent thinking and problem solving since it would encourage them to disobey their parents and the word of God (DeFattore, 1992, p. 49) and any fairy tale or folk story as fantasy elements including magic castles and dragons, since these elements prompt “children to create worlds inside their own minds instead of concentrating on the Word of God” (DeFattore, 1992, p. 48).

Religious-based censorship is a heavily studied topic for historical analyses of book banning. Fantasy books, in addition to *distracting children from God*, as discussed in DeFattore’s work, are often seen as fostering witchcraft and the occult. As noted by Alison DePollo of East Tennessee State University, fantasy novels are seen as satanic by many adults, being described as anti-family, pro-socialist and inspiring “women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft and become lesbians” by Christian leader Pat Robertson (DePollo, 2011). In other cases, the reasoning behind religious censorship is more apparent, such as with the censoring of Hebrew texts in 16th century Italy due to Christian domination; for example, desires for the downfall of all nations attacking Israel being removed from Ashkenazi prayer books (Phillips, 2016). Similarly, the work of associate professor of philosophy, theology and religious studies Cees Leijenhorst details the censoring of scientific discoveries in Jesuit communities when they conflicted with their religious orthodoxy, such as heliocentrism and various physics properties going against previous explanations for phenomena such as color and light (Leijenhorst, 2006).

In addition to frequent analysis of religious causes for book banning, censored literature often analyzes various aspects of LGBTQ+ themes in banned materials. According to Professor of Education Jeff Sapp, many libraries self-censor their LGBTQ+ content, especially children’s literature (Sapp, 2010). A similar analysis by Assistant Professor of Library and Information Science Jennifer Elaine Steele determined that the *sexual content* in children’s books that is deemed offensive by censors would be unchallenged if the interaction was heterosexual (Steele, 2022). These historical analyses, and the many similar investigations in the field, provide important context for the history of book banning as a whole. They also add to the dialogue around religious-based censorship due to many religions’ negative relationship with the LGBTQ+ community.

Few investigations have thematically evaluated censored and banned literature with the majority of the literature revolving around the history of the topic. DeFattore’s novel provides information on the often-times arbitrary reasoning behind various texts being removed from classroom textbooks, but only goes into surface-level detail on the actual content of the literature and the validity or ludicrousness of the actual claims. The foundational source of this study, “YA Banned Book Analysis,” for example, details the content analysis on 15 frequently banned books conducted by researchers from the City University of New York in their attempt to determine why books could potentially be banned (Birro et al., 2018). This study takes the structure of this source but aims toward a greater purpose by instead attempting to find an underlying cause for censorship through a comparison of the censored literature’s themes and the official reasons they were banned.

Methods

The thematic analysis in this study is based on the research paper “YA Banned Books Analysis” with its themes to be analyzed and method for analysis. This source analyzed 15 young adult novels, whereas this research analyzed 10 commonly banned novels and novellas in the U.S. (Birro et al., 2018). The 10 books analyzed for this study (see Appendix A) are: *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, *The Great Gatsby* (*Gatsby*) by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (*TKAM*) by Harper Lee, *Sula* by Toni Morrison, *1984* by George Orwell, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *The Catcher in the Rye* (*Catcher*) by J.D. Salinger, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (*Huck Finn*) by Mark Twain. These books were specifically chosen for their perception and prevalence in the public eye as notable banned books. The five themes (see Appendix B) used for the thematic analysis of these books, based on the work of Birro et al., are: (1) Sex, (2) Drugs/Violence, (3) LGBTQ+/Minorities, (4) Religion and (5) Politics. After reading and annotating the 10 books for these themes, they were analyzed individually and collectively to determine the most prominent themes (see Appendix C) of each book and as a group. The stated reason(s) each book was banned (see Appendix D) were then compared to the themes determined to be most prevalent.

For this study, a *banned book* is a book removed from a school’s classrooms and librar(ies) for cause. This study also takes into consideration *temporarily banned books*, regarded here as books removed from the school to be reviewed and/or pending the decision of a challenge that were eventually returned. Unsuccessful challenges to books, instances in which students were provided censored copies, restricting access of books to specific classes, removing books from required reading lists and bans from public libraries were not used in the analysis of reasons the books were banned. Additionally, this study, in its analysis, only considered book bans in the U.S. It is important to note that the bans included in this research may not be fully representative given the lack of full and complete documentation regarding the banning of these books in some cases.

Findings

Before being analyzed holistically, each book was individually analyzed for the five defined themes either as present or prominent. Then, each thematic analysis was compared to all available information on the reasoning behind all successful instances of the book being banned. Once these analyses were completed, the data was analyzed and compared as a whole. For this section, an overview of the information gathered on each book will be presented, followed by a joint analysis of the books as a whole.

Title	Author	Year First Published
<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>	Ray Bradbury	1953

The researcher’s analysis of *Fahrenheit 451* determined the themes of Drugs/Violence are present and Politics is prominent in the novel. The drug use in the book is limited, primarily shown through Guy Montag’s wife, Mildred, and her overdose of sleeping pills at the beginning of the novel (Bradbury, 1953, p. 13). This suicide attempt could be interpreted by censors as anti-religious, however, this was not considered substantial enough to be interpreted as a theme in the novel. Violence was far more prevalent, given Montag’s profession as a fireman in the story, ironically meaning someone who starts fires to burn books. Other instances of violent behavior can be seen throughout the novel, notably with the description of Montag killing his boss, Captain Beatty, wherein the protagonist lights Beatty on fire with a flamethrower (Bradbury, 1953, p. 119). However, the story does not promote violent behavior. Montag’s inner conflict revolves around his regret over burning the books, which is why this was not considered a prominent theme.

Politics, however, was considered to be prominent in the novel. Criticism of society and the government is largely inherent to the dystopian genre, but *Fahrenheit 451* takes this a step further by specifically

tackling censorship, among other issues, thus making it all the more ironic as a banned book. The story's message is one against government-sanctioned censorship, encouraging rebellion through the many defiant actions of Montag.

"It was a pleasure to burn"

Stated Reasons		Citation	Comparison
State (Year)	Reason		
Florida (1987)	Vulgarity	(<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> by..., 2018)	"Vulgarity" can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a comparison for this section.
Texas (2023)	For violating HB 900 as "sexually explicit material," "pervasively vulgar" or "educationally unsuitable" literature	(Patterson, 2023)	"Pervasively vulgar" and "educationally unsuitable" can be defined as practically anything, so the comparison for this section will only consider the ban being for <i>Fahrenheit 451</i> containing "sexually explicit material." While the book contains minor references to pornography and sex in passing, there is nothing explicitly sexual, as both the text of HB 900 and the definition of Sex for this research require the content to be considered in any way prevalent (Bradbury, 1953, p. 57-58).

Title	Author	Year First Published
<i>The Great Gatsby</i> ("Gatsby")	F. Scott Fitzgerald	1925

The researcher's analysis of *Gatsby* determined the themes Sex, Drugs/Violence and LGBTQ+/Minorities to be present and Politics to be prominent in the novel. Sex is not uniquely explicit in the story, with the most prevalent example being Tom Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson's affair. There is frequent use of illicit

substances throughout the novel, most notably the title character's bootlegging during Prohibition (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 133). The multiple murders and instances of domestic violence, though not described graphically, additionally contributed to the consideration of Drugs/Violence as present in *Gatsby*. LGBTQ+/Minorities was considered present as well due to the repeated inferences that the narrator, Nick Carraway, was in love with his neighbor, Jay Gatsby. This, however, was secondary to the main commentary of the book, which revolved around capitalism.

Gatsby predominantly highlights how wealth leads to the corruption of the individual. Gatsby, himself, is a prominent example of this through his social ascendance which indirectly leads to his downfall. This can also be seen in his love, Daisy Buchanan, most notably with her crying over the beauty of Gatsby's shirts (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 92). The overarching theme of *Gatsby* is that the U.S.' capitalistic class system leads to the corruption of the people with the most wealth, as manifested through its characters' flaws.

"Her voice is full of money"

Stated Reasons		Citation	Comparison
State (Year)	Reason		
Alaska (2020*)	"Language and sexual references"	(<i>High School English...</i> , 2020)	Sex was identified as a present theme in <i>Gatsby</i> , however, the references were not considered overly prominent in the novel. It is important to note that the ban did state "sexual references," not sexually explicit as others have, meaning this statement does technically align with the researcher's analysis of <i>Gatsby</i> . That being said, Sex was not considered prominent in the novel, and therefore this is, in a way, a misalignment of the stated and analyzed reasons the book was banned.
*Temporary ban			

Title	Author	Year First Published
<i>The Outsiders</i>	S. E. Hinton	1967

The researcher's analysis of *The Outsiders* determined the themes Drugs/Violence and LGBTQ+/Minorities to be present in the novel with neither being deemed prominent. There is a notable amount of underage smoking and drinking in the novel, with a similar amount of violent and illegal behavior. Considering the book's main characters are all "greasers", the gang of boys living on the East Side, this makes sense (Hinton, 1967, p.

2). However, these activities are not painted in any particular light, shown simply as character traits that accurately portray the actions of gangs; they are not overly promoted nor do they in any distinct way contribute to the prevailing ideas, and therefore Drugs/Violence was not considered a prominent theme. It could be argued that these actions are even discouraged, to a point, given the fate of Johnny due to the fire in the church, presumably started by a lit cigarette (Hinton, 1967, p. 91).

LGBTQ+/Minorities was determined to be present in the novel due to many interpretations of the male characters being part of the LGBTQ+ community. It is important to note that S. E. Hinton has denied these claims, replying to a question about the nature of Johnny and Dallas' relationship on X (formerly Twitter) by saying "No. Where is the text backing this?" (Hinton, 2016). Regardless of Hinton's intentions, some of the story's relationships and interactions could be interpreted as homosexual, and therefore the book fits the researcher's definition of LGBTQ+/Minorities as a present theme.

Of the five themes analyzed for this research, none was considered prominent in *The Outsiders*. The overall message is one of friendship and perseverance even in the most unlikely of circumstances, none of which fit within the definition of any of the prominent themes of this research.

"Stay gold, Ponyboy. Stay gold"

Stated Reasons		Citation	Comparison
State (Year)	Reason		
Oklahoma (2021*)	For violating HB 1775's restrictions on sex or race-based discrimination	(Bullard & West, 2021)	The researcher's analysis of <i>The Outsiders</i> did not identify either form of discrimination to be so much as present in the novel and therefore certainly not prominent enough to be reasonably banned under this bill. One could even argue that this book highlights the issues of sex-based discrimination given the author's election to use her initials for publication to avoid sexism in the 1960's.
*Temporary ban			

Title	Author	Year First Published
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> ("TKAM")	Harper Lee	1960

The researcher's analysis of *TKAM* determined that all themes were present in the novel with LGBTQ+/Minorities considered prominent. Sex was primarily considered a present theme due to the accusation in the book's trial that Tom Robinson raped Mayella Ewell. While the trial occupies a large portion of the novel, included with the intent to highlight racism in the justice system, but, as the trial shows, the rape was purely an unfounded accusation, Sex was only considered a present theme, not a prominent one. Politics was determined present for the same reason, as the trial's biased outcome was a commentary on racism in the criminal justice system, not the law itself.

Drugs/Violence was similarly considered present, not prominent, due primarily to the threats to and

surrounding Robinson, which were intended to highlight race-based brutality, not violence for violence's sake. The most notable of these instances include the attempted attack on Robinson while he was in jail (Lee, 1960, p. 201-207) and the events toward the end of the novel in which Robert Ewell attacks protagonists Scout and Jem Finch, with Arthur Radley subsequently killing Ewell to defend the children (Lee, 1960, p. 350-357). Religion was additionally considered present in *TKAM* for its repeated inclusion of biblical aspects and depictions of individuals participating in faith-based activities, the most prominent being when the Finch children go to the First Purchase African M.E. Church with Calpurnia (Lee, 1960, p. 155-167).

LGBTQ+/Minorities was the only examined theme considered prominent in *TKAM* due primarily to the reasons mentioned above with the analysis of Sex, Drugs/Violence and Politics as present, in addition to various other racial elements in the book, for example, repeated use of the N-word and the portrayal of the African American community. African Americans are shown throughout the novel as more caring and reasonable than their caucasian counterparts, including the previously mentioned church visit and the willingness of Reverend Sykes to let Jem, Scout and Dill stand with him in the Colored section of the courtroom during the trial (Lee, 1960, p. 219). This, coupled with the accurate portrayal of the Jim Crow South, presents a clear and controversial stance against racial discrimination, making LGBTQ+/Minorities a prominent theme in the novel.

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view”

Stated Reasons		Citation	Comparison
State (Year)	Reason		
Minnesota (1977*)	Use of the words “damn” and “whore lady”	(Banned & Challenged Classics)	These words are used, though not to promote any particular message, which is why language was not included in this analysis nor that of any other book in this study.
Louisiana (1995)	Objectionable language and content		Profanity is repeatedly used, though not to promote any particular message, which is why this was not included in this analysis nor that of any other book in this study. “Objectionable” language and content can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a comparison for this section.
Virginia (2016*)	Racial slurs	(Titus, 2022)	While, as stated with the analysis of LGBTQ+/Minorities as a prominent theme, the book contains many uses of the N-word, the overall message is not one of racism, but rather one against

			discrimination, and therefore racial slurs. <i>TKAM</i> does not promote the use of the N-word by using it so many times. That being said, the ban was simply for containing the language, not the commentary around the words, meaning the slur-based bans on <i>TKAM</i> coincide with the researcher's analysis, despite the reason for these uses.
Florida (2021*)	Inappropriate for students	(Davis, 2022) (Sarmiento, 2023)	Material that is "inappropriate for students" can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a comparison for this section.
Pennsylvania (2023)	For violating Senate Bill 7's restrictions on "sexually explicit content"	(Aument et al., 2023) (Delano, 2023)	Sex was considered a present theme in the novel but, similar to the analysis of <i>Fahrenheit 451</i> , this was not a prominent part of <i>TKAM</i> , and as the language of the ban specified sexually explicit content, this is a misalignment.
*Temporary ban			

Title	Author	Year First Published
<i>Sula</i>	Toni Morrison	1973

The researcher's analysis of *Sula* determined the themes Sex and Religion to be present and LGBTQ+/Minorities to be prominent in the novel. There is a considerable amount of sexual content in *Sula*, notably with respect to the actions of the title character and her mother, Hannah Peace, including Hannah's realized desire to get "some touching every day," (Morrison, 1973, p. 44) as well as Sula's affair with her best friend's husband (Morrison, 1973, p. 104-111). However, similar to the determination of which themes were present or prominent in *TKAM*, Sex was only considered present due to the relative significance of the act in the story itself. In *Sula*, sex is the method by which the African American women of the Bottom free themselves. Without asserting their sexuality, Hannah and Sula would have been powerless. This commentary on the status of early 1900s African American women is the reason for this repeated use of sex, not as a message of hypersexuality or anything gratuitous or irrelevant to the character development. Therefore, Sex was only considered present.

Religion was also determined to be present in the novel, due primarily to the repeated reference to biblical ideas. These include referring to Sula as the devil (Morrison, 1973, p. 117) and describing Eva Peace's murder of her son as "some kind of baptism" (Morrison, 1973, p. 47). However, these are merely allusions that

do not counter religion in any way, meaning Religion was not considered prominent.

LGBTQ+/Minorities was determined to be prominent due to one of the main ideas in the novel, mentioned in the discussion of Sex as a theme, regarding African American women's lack of power. This concept is brought up over and over again, with Ajax's futile goal to be a pilot, (Morrison, 1973, p. 126) the gentrification of the Bottom (Morrison, 1973, p. 3) and Helene Wright's subservience while traveling in a segregated train (Morrison, 1973, p. 20-22), just to name a few. This accurate depiction of the time, coupled with the dialogue attendant to the use of sex in the story, is why LGBTQ+/minorities was considered a prominent theme.

"I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself"

Stated Reasons		Citation	Comparison
State (Year)	Reason		
Florida (2023)	For violating House Bill 1069's restrictions on "pornographic" or "sexual conduct" content or is "not suited" for student learning or "inappropriate" for certain grade levels	(Anderson & McClain, 2023)	As discussed, sex is a considerable part of the novel. It is important to once again note that sex was not included solely to depict the act, but rather to make a larger point. However, this is an alignment between the stated reasons for banning and the researcher's analysis of <i>Sula</i> .
Idaho (2023)	Sexual scenes	(Kidd, 2023)	As discussed, sex is a considerable part of the novel. It is important to once again note that sex was not included solely to depict the act, but rather to make a larger point. However, this is an alignment between the stated reasons for banning and the researcher's analysis of <i>Sula</i> .
Iowa (2023)	Descriptions of sex acts	(Hernandez & Webber, 2023) (Reynolds, 2023)	As discussed, sex is a considerable part of the novel. It is important to once again note that sex was not included solely to depict the act, but rather to make a larger point. However, this is an alignment between the stated reasons for banning and the researcher's analysis of <i>Sula</i> .

Virginia (2023)	For violating IIAD: Sexually Explicit Content in MCPS Library Materials's restrictions on "sexually explicit content"	(Phillips, 2023)	As discussed, sex is a considerable part of the novel. It is important to once again note that sex was not included solely to depict the act, but rather to make a larger point. However, this is an alignment between the stated reasons for banning and the researcher's analysis of <i>Sula</i> .
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Title	Author	Year First Published
<i>1984</i>	George Orwell	1949

The researcher's analysis of *1984* determined the themes Sex and Drugs/Violence to be present and Politics to be prominent in the novel. Sex is repeatedly referenced, primarily with Winston Smith and Julia's relationship. In the world of *1984*, sex is highly discouraged, with Julia even being a part of the Junior Anti-Sex League "which advocated complete celibacy for both sexes" (Orwell, 1949, p. 65). Sex is one of the main ways the two rebel against the Party, *1984*'s government, with Winston even describing Julia as "a rebel from the waist downwards" (Orwell, 1949, p. 156). However, since these sexual activities were done as an act of rebellion against the government, Sex was only considered present, with this motivation being a factor in Politics as a prominent theme. Drugs/Violence was also considered a present theme largely due to Winston's torture in Room 101 (Orwell, 1949, p. 282-287). Once again, since this was not senseless violence, rather it was included in the novel to illustrate government corruption, this theme was merely present, not prominent.

The entirety of *1984* is a dystopian depiction of a totalitarian society, naturally leading Politics to be a prominent theme. The looming threat that "Big Brother is watching you" is central to the story, with the entire plot revolving around Winston's desire for independent thought (Orwell, 1949, p. 2). There are a plethora of story beats that contribute to the ongoing dialogue concerning government control, with one of the most chilling moments at the story's conclusion in which Winston and Julia's rebellious spirits are broken, the book ending with the line, "he loved Big Brother," (Orwell, 1949, p. 298).

"Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four"

Stated Reasons		Citation	Comparison
State (Year)	Reason		
Florida (1981)	Pro-communist views and explicit sexual content	(Baldwin, 2020)	While Politics was considered a prominent theme in the novel, this was for being a criticism of totalitarian societies, not promoting Communism. While this research only considers bans in the U.S., the researcher

			felt it important to note in this analysis that 1984 was banned in the Soviet Union in part for being anti-communist (Koga et al, 2016).
Idaho (2018*)	Violent and sexually explicit	(Titus, 2018)	Sex was considered a present theme. However, as stated in previous cases, this was not determined to be explicit, meaning this is a misalignment. Violence was also identified in this analysis, however, similar to the discussion of Sex, while this can be considered an alignment, violence was not determined as prominent in 1984, and therefore not significant enough to be justifiably used as a reason for banning the novel.
Iowa (2023)	Descriptions of sex acts	(Hernandez & Webber, 2023) (Reynolds, 2023)	Sex was considered a present theme. However, as stated in previous cases, this was not determined to be explicit to the point of fitting the definition of a description of a sex act, meaning this is a misalignment.
Pennsylvania (2023)	For violating Senate Bill 7's restrictions on "sexually explicit content"	(Aument et al., 2023) (Delano, 2023)	Sex was considered a present theme. However, as stated in previous cases, this was not determined to be explicit, meaning this is a misalignment.
Texas (2023)	For violating HB 900 as "sexually explicit material," "pervasively vulgar" or "educationally unsuitable" literature	(Patterson, 2023)	"Pervasively vulgar" and "educationally unsuitable" can be defined as practically anything, so the comparison for this section will only consider the ban being for 1984 containing "sexually explicit material." Sex was considered a present theme. However, as stated in previous cases, this was not determined to be explicit, meaning this is a misalignment.

***Temporary ban**

Title	Author	Year First Published
<i>Animal Farm</i>	George Orwell	1945

The researcher's analysis of *Animal Farm* determined the theme Drugs/Violence to be present and Politics to be prominent in the novel. Violent behavior is minimally present in the novella, memorably with Boxer being sent off to a "Horse Slaughterer and Glue Boiler", (Orwell, 1945, p. 113) Napoleons' takeover of the farm through the use of dogs (Orwell, 1945, p. 57-58) and the initial run-out of Mr. Jones from his farm (Orwell, 1945, p. 29). None of these instances are graphic in any sense of the word, making Drugs/Violence only a present theme. Politics was considered prominent due to the novella being a political allegory for the beginning of the Soviet Union, specifically the 1917 Russian Revolution.

"The only good human being is a dead one"

Stated Reasons		Citation	Comparison
State (Year)	Reason		
Florida (1987*)	Vulgarity	(<i>Florida Officials Yield...</i> , 1987)	"Vulgarity" can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a comparison for this section.
Iowa (2023)	Descriptions of sex acts	(Hernandez & Webber, 2023) (Reynolds, 2023)	The only reference to sex in the novella is in a rumor of the farm's animals having "their females in common" (Orwell, 1945, p. 45). There is no way to reasonably consider this a description of sex acts, meaning this is a misalignment.
*Temporary ban			

Title	Author	Year First Published
<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> ("Catcher")	J.D. Salinger	1951

The researcher's analysis of *Catcher* determined the themes Sex and Drugs/Violence to be present with Religion and Politics being prominent in the novel. Sex is repeatedly referenced throughout the book, notably with the main character Holden Caulfield's repeated discussion of others relationships and with his hiring of a prostitute, though it is important to note that he does not go through with the act (Salinger, 1951, p. 102-110). While it is frequently referenced, sex is by no means a major part of *Catcher*, and therefore Sex was

not considered a prominent theme. Drugs/Violence was similarly considered present due to Caulfield's propensity to smoke, drink and get into fights. Since this is not a large part of the plot, nor is it particularly encouraged, just described as occurring, this theme was only considered present.

Religion was determined to be prominent due to Caulfield's strong stance against spirituality. He describes himself as "sort of an atheist," repeatedly criticizing faith (Salinger, 1951, p. 111). Though Caulfield condemns most aspects of society, which, as later described, was a major factor in determining Politics as a prominent theme, this was considered significant enough to have Religion be seen as prominent. Politics, as mentioned, was analyzed as prominent due to Caulfield's incredibly apparent dissatisfaction essentially with respect to all aspects of society, with this dialogue being the driving force of the story.

"That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all"

Stated Reasons		Citation	Comparison
State (Year)	Reason		
Oklahoma (1960)	"Liberal use of swear words, its preoccupation with teen sexuality, and its intensely dark meditations on society"	(Gree, 2023)	Swear words are repeatedly used, though not to promote any particular message, which is why this was not included in this analysis nor that of any other book in this study. As for teen sexuality, Sex was identified as a present theme, however, as stated, much of this is only referenced, certainly not to the extent that the book could be considered preoccupied with teen sexuality. The commentary on society, as discussed, is overly prominent making this the sole truly accurate alignment of themes for <i>Catcher</i> .
Washington (1978*)	Profanity and that teaching it would be "part of an overall communist plot"	(Reiff, 2008, p. 80)	Profanity is repeatedly used, though not to promote any particular message, which is why this was not included in this analysis nor that of any other book in this study. Similar to 1984, while Politics was identified as a theme, neither story was in any way directly defending Communist ideals.

Ohio (1980)	Dangerous due to vulgarity, violence, occultism and sexual content	(Taggart)	<p>“Vulgarity” can be defined as practically anything, so the comparison for this section will only consider the ban for <i>Catcher</i> being dangerous due to “violence, occultism and sexual content.” Violence, while considered present in the researcher’s analysis, was not considered prominent enough to be reasonably used as a reason for banning due to the lack of encouragement for the behavior. However, this could be considered an alignment. Occultism is in no way present in <i>Catcher</i>, though if the meaning of this was to indicate an objection to anti-religious content, then this could be seen as an alignment. However, at face value, the occult is not present by any means in the novel. Sex was identified as a present theme, however, as stated, much of this is only referenced, certainly not to the extent that the book could be considered dangerous due to sexual content.</p>
Alabama (1982*)	Religion	(Whitfield, 2002)	<p>This ban for simply “religion” is incredibly broad to the point that it is nearly meaningless. Religion was identified as a prominent theme due to Caulfield’s atheism and religious criticisms but, as stated, the character finds fault with everything.</p>
Florida (1985)	“Unacceptable” and “obscene”	(<i>The Catcher in...</i> , 2016)	<p>“Unacceptable” and “obscene” can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a comparison for this section.</p>

California (1989)	Profanity	(Banned & Challenged Classics)	Profanity is repeatedly used, though not to promote any particular message, which is why this was not included in this analysis nor that of any other book in this study.
Iowa (1992)	Sex and profanity	(Sova, 2006, p. 169-170)	Sex was identified as a present theme, however, as stated, much of this is only referenced, certainly not to the extent that the book could be reasonably banned in this context. Profanity is repeatedly used, though not to promote any particular message, which is why this was not included in this analysis nor that of any other book in this study.
Georgia (2000*)	Sex, violence and profanity	(Banned & Challenged Classics)	Sex was identified as a present theme, however, as stated, much of this is only referenced, certainly not to the extent that the book could be reasonably banned in this context. Violence, while considered present in the researcher’s analysis, was not considered prominent enough to be reasonably used as a basis for banning due to the lack of encouragement for the behavior. That being said, this could be considered an alignment. Profanity is repeatedly used, though not to promote any particular message, which is why this was not included in this analysis nor that of any other book in this study.
South Carolina (2001)	Because it “is a filthy, filthy book”		“Filthy” can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a comparison for this section.
*Temporary ban			

Title	Author	Year First Published
<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	John Steinbeck	1937

The researcher's analysis of *Of Mice and Men* determined the themes Sex, Drugs/Violence and LGBTQ+/Minorities to be present with none of these being deemed prominent. Sex was considered present due primarily to the characters' discussions regarding Curley's wife, the majority of which revolved around her promiscuity. These references are just that, making Sex a present, not a prominent theme. Drugs/Violence was identified as present due to the instances of brutality in the novella, including the putting down of Candy's dog, (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 49) the multiple fights and threats of violence made by Curley, the death by a broken neck of Curley's wife (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 91) and the death by gunshot of Lennie (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 106). However, none of these are described graphically nor is the behavior promoted, making the theme merely present.

LGBTQ+/Minorities was included as a present theme due to the dialogue around the African American character Crooks. Though not a major character, he is presented as somewhat wiser than the other caucasian workers. Even before he is formally introduced, Crooks is described as reading a lot. In the same description, it is said that the boss wished to give the stable hand Hell, explained to George by referring to Crooks with the N-word (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 19-20). His only real scene shows him engaging with Lennie, someone who only truly felt comfortable talking with George (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 66-83). Additionally, though sparsely referenced, the other characters in the novella repeatedly question the nature of protagonists George and Lennie's relationship. For example, the boss asks George what his interest in Lennie was as he had "never seen one guy take so much trouble for another guy," with the other workers expressing similar thoughts by asking George how he continuously kept the company of another man, particularly the mentally challenged Lennie (Steinbeck, 1937, p. 22). All of this factored into LGBTQ+/Minorities being considered a present theme.

None of these themes fit this research's definition of prominent with the overall message not aligning with any of the five topics. *Of Mice and Men* is a story commenting on the rashness of men, seen through the flaws of almost all the characters, the only true exception being Lennie, whose innocence sharply contrasts with the brutality of Curley and the other workers. With this, the inclusion of Curley's wife, a character who does not even get a name, also touches on the issue of sexism. The novella's message is a complex one, telling the tale of violent men whose dreams inevitably die.

"Le's do it now. Le's get that place now"

Stated Reasons		Citation	Comparison
State (Year)	Reason		
Indiana (1974)	Vulgar language	(Joe, 2021)	As mentioned, there are uses of racial slurs, but they are included in an accurate depiction of the time to describe a character painted as intellectually superior. Additionally, "vulgar" language can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a full comparison for
Pennsylvania (1977)	Vulgar language		
Michigan (1979)	Vulgar language		
Ohio (1980)	Vulgar language		

			this section.
Alabama (1983)	“Profanity”	(Banned & Challenged Classics)	Profanity is used, though not to promote any particular message, which is why this was not included in this analysis nor that of any other book in this study. Additionally, as mentioned, there are uses of racial slurs, but they are included in an accurate depiction of the time to describe a character painted as intellectually superior.
Tennessee (1984)	For being a “filthy book” that contains “vulgar language”		“Filthy” can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a full comparison for this section. As mentioned, there are uses of racial slurs, but they are included in an accurate depiction of the time to describe a character painted as intellectually superior. Additionally, “vulgar” language can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a full comparison for this section.
Arkansas (1989)	Objections to language		As mentioned, there are uses of racial slurs, but they are included in an accurate depiction of the time to describe a character painted as intellectually superior. Additionally, objectionable language can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a full comparison for this section.
Alabama (1989)	Because it "has profane use of God's name"	(LaBeaf, 2022)	Religion was not seen as even being present in the novella, making objections to profanely using God’s name largely irrelevant.

Florida (1991*)	For being “indecent”	<i>(Banned & Challenged Classics)</i>	“Indecent” can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a comparison for this section.
Tennessee (1994*)	“Due to language”		As mentioned, there are uses of racial slurs, but they are included in an accurate depiction of the time to describe a character painted as intellectually superior. This reason is also incredibly vague, so there cannot be a full comparison for this section.
Florida (1997*)	For being “inadmissible” with “racial slurs” such as the N-word		“Inadmissible” can be defined as practically anything, so the comparison for this section will only consider the reason to be for “racial slurs” such as the N-word. As mentioned, there are uses of racial slurs, but they are included in an accurate depiction of the time to describe a character painted as intellectually superior.
Illinois (1997)	“Age inappropriate”		“Age inappropriate” can be defined as practically anything, so there cannot be a comparison for this section.
Mississippi (2002)	“Profanity”		Profanity is used, though not to promote any particular message, which is why this was not included in this analysis nor that of any other book in this study. Additionally, as mentioned, there are uses of racial slurs, but they are included in an accurate depiction of the time to describe a character painted as intellectually superior.
Florida (2021*)	Inappropriate for students	(Davis, 2022) (Sarmiento, 2023)	“Inappropriate for students” can be defined as practically

			anything, so there cannot be a comparison for this section.
Oklahoma (2021*)	For violating HB 1775's restrictions on sex or race-based discrimination	(Bullard & West, 2021)	As discussed, the novella touches on the problem of sexism and racism, highlighting the issues of both, making this an incredibly unreasonable ban.
*Temporary ban			

Title	Author	Year First Published
<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> ("Huck")	Mark Twain	1884

The researcher's analysis of *Huck Finn* determined the themes Drugs/Violence and Religion to be present with LGBTQ+/Minorities being prominent in the novel. There is a limited amount of violent behavior in the novel, mostly with the feud between the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, which results in the presumed death of almost everyone in both families. This feud is presented ironically as neither family knew why they were feuding (Twain, 1884, p. 104-116). This commentary on the nature of senseless violence is why the theme was only deemed present, with the other considerable reference to violence being the ongoing threat of lynching the runaway slave Jim. Religion is brought up sporadically, the most notable reference occurs when the title character denounces his faith to justify his relationship with Jim (Twain, 1884, p. 214). However, this is more a commentary on the perceptions of African Americans at the time, not religion itself, which is why the theme is only present.

LGBTQ+/Minorities was identified as prominent due to the central relationship in the novel revolving around the white boy, Huckleberry, and the runaway slave, Jim. Their bond is presented as the only truly healthy one in the novel, with Jim being portrayed as a father figure to Huck, whose biological father is repeatedly shown to be violent when present, invariably absent and incredibly ignorant. Most of the characters, the vast majority of whom are white, are depicted as deeply flawed, shown most prominently in Tom Sawyer's attempt to rescue Jim. While setting him free would have been incredibly simple, Sawyer's insistence on making the plot as convoluted as possible is contrasted with Jim who at first finds fault with the plan, eventually backing down since Sawyer is white, reasoning that he must know better. This, coupled with the fact that Jim goes on to risk his life to save Sawyer when the escape inevitably goes wrong, shows Twain's clear intent to highlight the flaws in racism (Twain, 1884, p. 234-283).

"I knowed he was white inside"

Stated Reasons		Citation	Comparison
State (Year)	Reason		
Massachusetts (1885)	For being "trash" and "suitable only for the slums" as well as	(<i>BANNED: Adventures of...</i> , 2017)	"Trash suitable only for the slums" that is "coarse, trashy,

	“racist, coarse, trashy, inelegant, irreligious, obsolete, inaccurate, and mindless”	(Purdy, 2023)	inelegant,” “obsolete, inaccurate, and mindless” can be defined as practically anything so the comparison for this section will only consider the reason to be that <i>Huck Finn</i> is “racist” and “irreligious.” As discussed, the novel depicts Jim as one of the most morally sound characters, with the objections to racism in the novel included as a historically accurate depiction of the time. While it could be interpreted that Huck’s resolve to save Jim, even if it means he goes to Hell, promotes an irreligious message, the point of Huck’s inner conflict is to, as mentioned, highlight the period’s inaccurate racial perceptions.
Louisiana (1988)	Racially offensive passages	(Sova, 2006, p. 31-32)	As discussed, the novel depicts Jim as one of the most morally sound characters, with the objected to racially offensive passages in the novel included as a historically accurate depiction of the time.
Michigan (1991*)	Made African American children “uncomfortable”		As discussed, the novel depicts Jim as one of the most morally sound characters, with the criticized racism and use of the N-word in the novel included as a historically accurate depiction of the time.
North Carolina (1992)	For students being too young to read works containing the N-word		As discussed, the novel depicts Jim as one of the most morally sound characters, with the criticized racism and use of the N-word in the novel included as a historically accurate depiction of the time.
New Jersey (1997*)	Racial language and depictions	(<i>The Adventures of...</i> , 2016)	As discussed, the novel depicts

	of African American characters		Jim as one of the most morally sound characters, with the criticized racism and use of the N-word in the novel included as a historically accurate depiction of the time. Additionally, the ban was simply for depictions of African Americans, not for any specific or substantive content.
Michigan (2007)	“Liberal use of common racial slurs”	(Titus, 2022)	As discussed, the novel depicts Jim as one of the most morally sound characters, with the criticized racism and use of the N-word in the novel included as a historically accurate depiction of the time.
Virginia (2016*)	Racial slurs		As discussed, the novel depicts Jim as one of the most morally sound characters, with the criticized racism and use of the N-word in the novel included as a historically accurate depiction of the time.
Pennsylvania (2016)	The N-word		As discussed, the novel depicts Jim as one of the most morally sound characters, with the criticized racism and use of the N-word in the novel included as a historically accurate depiction of the time.
*Temporary ban			

Overall, while none of the five themes analyzed for this research were overwhelmingly identified as prominent, there does seem to be a commonality between the books’ messages: go against the norm. *Fahrenheit 451* encourages defiance against a censoring government; *Gatsby* discourages the greed of capitalism; *The Outsiders* highlights an atypical family structure; *TKAM* promotes a message of inclusivity to the extent of criticizing the justice system; *Sula* supports the freedom of African American women; *1984* predicts the horrors of a totalitarian government; *Animal Farm* shows the flawed nature of man; *Catcher* criticizes the phony nature of society; *Of Mice and Men* illustrates the judgmental and irrational temperament of men; *Huck Finn* depicts an interracial relationship as healthier than that of two white individuals. All of these ideas go against some standard, finding fault with everything from the government to racism. Yet, these books were banned for superficial reasons, with all, except *Huck Finn*, being banned, at least once, for sex. So many of the reasons the books were

banned are vague—“unsuitable,” “trash,” “inappropriate”—potentially because the true reasons are themselves controversial.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to determine underlying themes in banned books compared to the reasons they were successfully banned. The analysis of these 10 books (see Appendix A) for the five identified themes (see Appendix B) revealed an underlying idea throughout the prominent subjects of promoting a controversial idea. This contrasts with the vast majority of stated reasons the books were banned which predominantly involved “explicit” content with varying degrees of relevance to the story. Given the underlying themes of societal defiance throughout the analyzed literature, the excuse of objectionable content was used to limit access to thematically controversial materials.

This could give insight into the underlying mindset of censors while also strengthening the messages of the books. All of the books encourage going against the norm—what accomplishes this defiance more than reading a banned book? It is important to note that, as a thematic analysis, the findings of this study are subjective. Additionally, this study only covers successful bans in the U.S., limiting the applicability of its conclusion. In some cases, information on specific cases and reasons the books were banned was limited, which could also impact the accuracy of the findings.

Future researchers could expand the scope of this research by analyzing other books, forms of literature or other countries. This could include the first book banned in America, *New English Canaan* (Connolly, 2023), *Alice in Wonderland*, a political allegory banned for drug use (Rosenthal, 2014), *Lord of the Flies*, another political allegory that was banned for being inappropriate (Plutchak, 2023), *Feed*, a criticism of technology banned for sex (Reynolds, 2023), *The Crucible*, an allegory against McCarthyism challenged for being demonic (*The Crucible by...*, 2018) and *Les Misérables*, a criticism of the class system banned for prostitution (Baldassarro, 2012), just to name a few. The amount of research that could be done on book banning is endless, as are the lengths people will go to to censor controversial ideas.

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