

Silence in the Stacks: An Exploration of Self-censorship in High School Libraries

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School libraries in the United States of America have recently experienced an unprecedented number of external censorship attempts. Some censorship attempts, however, quietly occur when the school librarian engages in self-censorship, removing or refusing to purchase materials they consider to be controversial. This collection analysis study explored the extent of self-censorship in 90 Texas public high school libraries based on the exclusion of 55 controversial books in their collections, examining (1) possible relationships between a school's characteristics and the absence of controversial books, (2) the extent to which the librarians are engaging in self-censorship, and (3) the controversial topics least likely to be included in collections. Findings suggest campus enrollment and district size were moderate to strong predictors of the number of expected books in a school library. More than half of the school libraries had the number of books one would expect based on their district size and campus enrollment. Books with transgender or LGBTQIA+ content were less likely to be found in school libraries, whereas titles featuring profanity, drinking, and drug use were most likely to appear, regardless of campus, district, and city size.

Introduction

Censorship attempts in libraries have been occurring since the 1850s, with variations in frequency (Steele, 2020). Recently, school libraries in the United States of America have experienced a significant increase in censorship attempts, particularly around books about Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and LGBTQIA+ issues and experiences. The American Library Association (ALA) described 2021 as "unprecedented" in the number of book challenges to titles in libraries (ALA, 2022a). In 2021, ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) reported 729 challenges to 1,597 individual books, and between January 1, 2022 and August 31, 2022, they had recorded 681 challenges to 1,651 individual books (ALA, 2022b). Of course, it is estimated that the majority of challenges go unreported, so these numbers do not reflect the extent to which books are truly being challenged (ALA, 2022c). In 2021, school libraries received more challenges than any other institution for the first time since ALA began collecting data in 1990 (ALA, 2022d).

However, not all attempts to censor are external; some acts of censorship occur as perceived preventative measures. Self-censorship occurs when a librarian engages in a self-preserving, self-defense mode to prevent potential conflicts and challenges with materials they consider to be

controversial (Bellows, 2005). The act of self-censorship in school libraries is problematic for a multitude of reasons. Self-censorship often violates core tenets of librarianship, ignores collection development policies and procedures, and results in not only a loss of meaningful discussion about books (Huston, 2004), but limits diverse and inclusive perspectives that students need to process their changing worlds (Williams, 2020). Self-censorship can be intentional or subconscious, and as a result, gaining a true understanding of the problem's extent can be difficult (Hill, 2010), especially when coupled with self-reporting bias (Mertens, 2005) when surveying or interviewing people. A library's collection can provide insight into the possibility of a librarian self-censoring.

The state of Texas has experienced more book bans from external entities, such as parents and government officials, than any other state in the United States (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). As a result of the drastic increase in challenges throughout Texas and due to the dearth of research on self-censorship in school libraries (Dawkins, 2018), the research team explored the extent of self-censorship in Texas public high school libraries. Inspired by Coley's 2002 study examining 100 Texas high school library collections to determine the extent of self-censorship occurring based on the absence of "YA books, which contained content that made them potentially subject to challenges" (p. 5), this study explores the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: What, if any, are the relationships between a school's characteristics and the absence of controversial books?
- Research Question 2: To what extent, if any, are high school librarians engaging in self-censorship?
- Research Question 3: Which controversial topics are least likely to be found in high school libraries' collections?

Review of Literature

The American Library Association (ALA) defines censorship as "the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous" (2007). Within the library, results of successful attempts to censor materials range from materials being restricted to certain groups of people to all patrons being denied access to said materials. Asheim, in his 1953 pivotal article "Not Censorship but Selection," explained the differences between censorship and selection, the former being positive and the latter negative. Selection involves "reasons to keep the book... look[ing] for values, for strengths, for virtues which will overshadow minor objections" (p. 66). Censoring, however, involves "find[ing] reasons to reject the book... seek[ing] out objectionable features, the weaknesses, the possibilities for misinterpretation" (p. 66).

ALA has long advocated for the right to read. They actively promote the protection of intellectual freedom, maintaining that the First Amendment protects the right to read as it ensures access to information. Their *Library Bill of Rights* (LBOR) provides guidance and direction for libraries and librarians to maintain these fundamental rights for their students and patrons. Specifically, the LBOR states that "Libraries should provide materials presenting all points of view on current and historical issues" and that "Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation," nor should "Materials be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval" (ALA, 2019).

While the LBOR applies to all library types, ALA provides guidelines specific to school libraries. In their *Access to Resources and Services in the School Library: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*, ALA specifies that school librarians advocate for intellectual freedom, developing and maintaining collections presenting diverse perspectives and “that support the intellectual growth, personal development, individual interests, and recreational needs of students.” Additionally, both teachers and students should have access to resources and services free of constraints resulting from personal, partisan, or doctrinal disapproval” (ALA, 2014).

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of ALA, identifies intellectual freedom as one of their six common beliefs. Their *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* (2018), Shared Foundation II. Include specifies “The school library builds empathy and equity within the global learning community by: 1. Ensuring that all learning needs are met through access to information and ideas located in a diverse collection of sufficient size for the learner population...” (p. 77). ALA, AASL, and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) collaboratively developed the *School Librarian Preparation Standards*, in which they emphasize the need for school librarian certification candidates to “model and promote the ethical practices of librarianship, as expressed in the foundational documents of the library profession including the American Library Association Code of Ethics and the Library Bill of Rights” (ALA, AASL, & CAEP, 2019, p. 68).

Self-censorship

Although ALA’s LBOR describes the importance of intellectual freedom and the right to read, myriad factors contribute to librarians not purchasing or removing materials perceived as controversial from their school library collections. While physical and budgetary restraints do affect the selection process, librarians themselves can act as censors if they do not purchase a book even though it has “every legal right to representation on the shelves” (Asheim, 1953, p. 63). Self-censorship in school libraries is commonly defined as a librarian’s decision to refrain from purchasing a title due to fear of a challenge, objection, or other backlash that may arise (Dawkins, 2018; Hill, 2010); however, a librarian choosing to quietly remove a book without going through a reconsideration process or other attempts to restrict, relabel, and otherwise impede access have also been deemed self-censoring behaviors (Dawkins, 2018; Dawkins, 2017a; Hill, 2010; Moeller & Becnel, 2020). Dawkins (2017a) called the latter type of self-censorship “ex post facto self-censorship” because the behavior occurs after the items have already been purchased.

Hill (2010) asserts that self-censorship is “the most complicated but least understood form of censorship” (p. 9). Many librarians view their self-censoring behaviors as shameful acts and are less likely to report self-censorship or document the incidents when they occur (Mosher, 2010; Moeller & Becnel, 2020). Some librarians may not be aware they are engaging in self-censorship, particularly when they decide to restrict, relabel, or “remove materials after purchase from their collection without going through a reconsideration process” (Dawkins, 2017a, p. 9) and/or may not comprehend long-term consequences of engaging in self-censorship (Hill, 2010). Engaging in self-censorship limits access to the diverse perspectives a library’s collection should offer. Not only does this contradict the core tenets of librarianship, it prohibits the growth of socially-inclusive collections benefiting students as they adjust to their changing world (Williams, 2020). Although librarians engage in self-censorship to avoid potential book challenges, self-censorship can actually have even more severe consequences than the challenge because a discussion about the book never occurs

(Huston, 2004). This means that patrons and students are not presented with the information and are not able to voice their opinions.

Censorship in libraries is frequently covered in scholarly and professional library literature. Self-censorship studies, however, are significantly fewer (Dawkins, 2018). Moeller and Becnel (2020) suggest that the lack of research can primarily be attributed to librarians perceiving self-censorship as a “secret, quiet, shameful practice” (p. 526). Evidence suggesting school librarians engage in self-censorship varies considerably depending on the study. Surveys and interviews offer the opportunity to solicit responses from practicing librarians, but surveys and interviews rely on self-reporting, which can be subject to bias (Mertens, 2005).

Surveys

According to the 2016 *School Library Journal* (SLJ) survey of 574 American school librarians, over 90% of elementary and middle school librarians and 73% of high school librarians decided against purchasing a book identified as potentially controversial (SLJ, 2016). In the 2022 *SLJ* study, a majority of the 720 surveyed school librarians in America admitted to engaging in ex post facto self-censorship by removing “a potentially problematic book from library shelves in the last two years without a formal review or challenge” (Yorio, 2022, p. 37): 58% on their own accord, 87% when asked by their administration, and 88% because of public scrutiny. Moodie & Calvert (2018) reported 56% of 80 survey respondents in New Zealand did not add graphic novels to their school library collections out of concern for a potential book challenge despite 80% of respondents claiming “libraries should adhere to the principles of Intellectual Freedom” (p. 135). Conversely, Rickman (2010) concluded that 4.8% of 1,069 American school librarians surveyed were engaging in self-censorship. Yitzhaki (2001) surveyed 98 school librarians in Israel about who censors books in their libraries' collections; 33.3% (n=7) of participants in non-religious schools and 69.0% (n=49) of participants in religious schools reported censoring their collections. In a 2016 School Library Connection's One-Question Survey, 11.44% of approximately 200 school librarians in America admitted to engaging “in self-censorship by consciously selecting materials to avoid challenges” (Cahill, 2016).

Interviews

Oltmann (2016) interviewed 31 school librarians in unspecified states in America, all of whom acknowledged LGBT materials are important to have in a library's collection; however, 12 were hesitant to discuss this area of collection development, and an unspecified number admitted to refusing to purchase specific titles to avoid controversy. Dawkins (2017b) interviewed 49 American school librarians, and an unspecified number admitted to not purchasing controversial titles also to avoid controversy. Garry (2015) interviewed 12 school librarians in the state of Ohio about their philosophies and experiences with selecting LGBTQ books for their library collections. Responses varied considerably, with some participants indicating they provide students with a robust collection, some participants expressing apprehension when purchasing LGBTQ books, and at least one participant limiting the collection to only resources reflecting the community's values. Similarly, Becnel and Moeller (2020) interviewed 10 school librarians in the state of North Carolina about the inclusion of potentially controversial graphic novels in their collections, concluding that eight participants intentionally curated their libraries' collections to avoid potential challenges, while two participants advocated for their students' right to read.

Collection Analyses

Collection analyses allow researchers to examine a library's holdings, or lack thereof, thereby eliminating self-reporting bias; however, collection analyses lack context and are limited to specific titles or keywords. Coley (2002) systematically reviewed holdings in the online public access catalogs (OPACs) of 100 Texas school libraries, ranging in size, and concluded that schools with smaller populations were less likely to possess titles identified as controversial, while larger schools were more likely to possess 50% or more of said titles. Coley concluded that self-censorship occurred at 82% of the 100 high school libraries examined. In a similar study, Bellows (2005) searched for 25 controversial titles in 102 Florida public high school OPACs and calculated that 75% of the collections had fewer than 50% of the controversial books. Bellows also concluded schools with a higher student enrollment were more likely to own more controversial titles than schools with lower enrollment.

Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris (2013) examined the OPACs of 125 high school libraries in one unspecified Southern U.S. state using specific subject headings and titles from "a core collection of highly recommended LGBTQ-themed literature" (p. 6) and concluded that LGBTQ collections were overall insufficient. Oltmann (2015) analyzed the collections of 137 school libraries in two unspecified American states, searching for 110 LBGT books, and concluded libraries on campuses with a higher enrollment held more titles than campuses with a smaller enrollment but that there was no statistically significant relationship between the community's political affiliation or the locale of the school, with the exception of non-fiction titles. Garry (2015) examined 120 public high school libraries OPACs in the state of Ohio to compare their holdings using a list of books deemed controversial for myriad reasons, including LGBTQ specific-titles, and found school libraries "are selecting significantly more controversial titles that are devoid of LGBTQ-themed content" (p. 81).

Methodology

Purpose

This study seeks to update Coley's (2002) often-cited work using his original methodology for selecting books and searching OPACs while aiming to provide additional analysis through quantitative statistical methods. Coley examined the online public access catalogs (OPAC) of 100 high school libraries (typically students ages 14 to 18) in Texas, searching for 20 books identified as addressing controversial topics. If a library owned fewer than 50% of the titles on the list, Coley determined the librarian had engaged in self-censorship. The collection analysis methodology used by Coley was previously used to examine holdings of controversial titles in public libraries (Serebnick, 1981; Rothbauer & McKechnie, 1999) and academic libraries (Harmeyer, 1995). For this study, the research team systematically reviewed library collections of 90 Texas public high school campuses, searching for 55 selected titles (Appendix A) to examine:

1. the relationship between a school's characteristics and the absence of controversial books;
2. the extent to which high school librarians are potentially engaging in self-censorship; and
3. the controversial topics least and most likely to be found in high school libraries' collections.

High School Library Sample

The schools were selected using the University Interscholastic League (UIL) designated divisions. The University of Texas at Austin first created UIL to encourage and promote athletic competition and to support teachers and schools with extracurricular activities. They divide individual high school campuses by the size of enrollment as a way to provide “equitable competition” during extracurricular activities (UIL, 2022a). Enrollment requirements for each division are included in Table 1 (UIL, 2022b).

Table 1. UIL Divisions and Enrollment Requirements for 2021-2022 School Year

Division	6A	5A	4A	3A	2A	1A
Enrollment	2,220 +	1,230 - 2,219	515 - 1,229	230 - 514	105 - 229	< 104

UIL provides a publicly available, downloadable list of individual high school campuses grouped into divisions. The 2020-2022 list, which included 1,492 high school campuses, was used for this study. Although the list included public, private, and charter schools, none were identified as such, so the exact number of public high schools on the list at the time of publication is unknown. The research team used a random number generator to select 15 high schools from each of the six divisions, representing approximately 6-7% of the total number of schools currently ranked by the UIL. School libraries without publicly available OPACs, in addition to private and charter schools, were eliminated, and another number was generated for an alternate school within the same division.

Selection of Books

The final booklist included titles from three individual lists: 12 young adult books from American Library Association’s Top 10 Most Challenged Books from 2016-2020 (ALA, 2022a), Coley’s (2002) original 20 titles, and 25 newly published titles replicating Coley’s criteria. After eliminating two duplicate titles, the master list consisted of 55 titles (see Appendix A).

List one included 12 books published on ALA’s Most Challenged book lists spanning 2016-2020 (Appendix A). The 2021 list was excluded as it was published after study data was collected. Only books published specifically for a young adult (YA) audience were included. Various reasons for the challenges to these books included topics like sexually explicit material, profanity, drinking and drug use, and LGBTQIA+ content.

List two included Coley’s original list of 20 books (Appendix A). This list was included because the majority of these books were published more than a decade ago and could account for budget limitations. One of Coley’s criteria required books to have received a minimum of four positive or starred reviews, which increased the likelihood of being purchased.

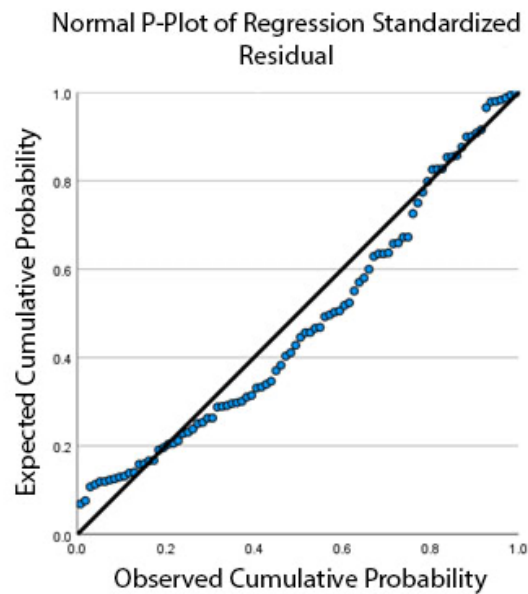
The third booklist comprised 25 books that met clearly defined criteria first introduced in Coley’s 2002 study. The search for books was completed on the online vendor Baker and Taylor’s website and filtered to show only books receiving positive reviews from VOYA and/or starred

reviews from *Kirkus*, *Booklist*, *School Library Journal*, *Publisher's Weekly*, or *Library Journal*. Since many librarians consult these selection resources before purchasing, numerous reviews increase the visibility of these books. The initial search yielded 2,137 results. The research team examined each title individually and selected only those that met the following criteria: a minimum of four positive and/or starred reviews; published between 2017-2021; published by a major publishing company to ensure ease of accessibility; and currently available for purchase. Additionally, the book had to contain at least one controversial topic, theme, or idea from the ALA's collection of Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists (ALA, 2021). The presence of a controversial topic was determined by Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC) heading, journal reviews, Goodreads reviews, and its presence on a well-known website that lists book contents by controversial themes such as sexual references, drinking/drugs, and profanity. The publication date range was limited to the last five years to mitigate factors such as weeding of older books and budgetary restrictions. Using these criteria as a filter resulted in a total of 25 books (Appendix A).

Data Analysis

While descriptive statistics were used to determine the frequency of each book title appearing in OPACs and the frequency of the controversial themes identified as challenge potential, using those results alone were not indicative of self-censorship. School libraries of varying sizes often have different resources, including budgets and space; thus, analyzing school libraries with equivalent comparisons was necessary. Employing quantitative statistical analysis identified relationships and uncovered potential instances of self-censorship. Examining a linear relationship provided a guideline for the number of controversial books expected to be included in a collection. If budgets are expected to increase with larger school sizes, a librarian at a large school spending 10% of their school budget on controversial titles may allow them to procure 20 titles, while a librarian at a small school spending the same 10% of their total budget on controversial titles might only have 2. This indicates they are purchasing controversial titles at the same rate.

This study included statistical analysis to identify possible relationships between the schools' characteristics and the presence of controversial books. Specifically, multiple linear regression was used to determine if district size (DS), enrollment (EN), or population of the city/city size (CS) were predictors of the number of controversial books that the school library held. This analysis method was successful in studies conducted by Davis and Shaw (1979) and Pierce (1979) to determine the relationship between size of a library and number of titles. Initial data screening identified no outliers in the data. Linearity was evaluated using a normal P-Plot (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Normal P-Plot of Regression Standardized Residual

Linearity was also evaluated by assessing skewness and kurtosis (Table 2).

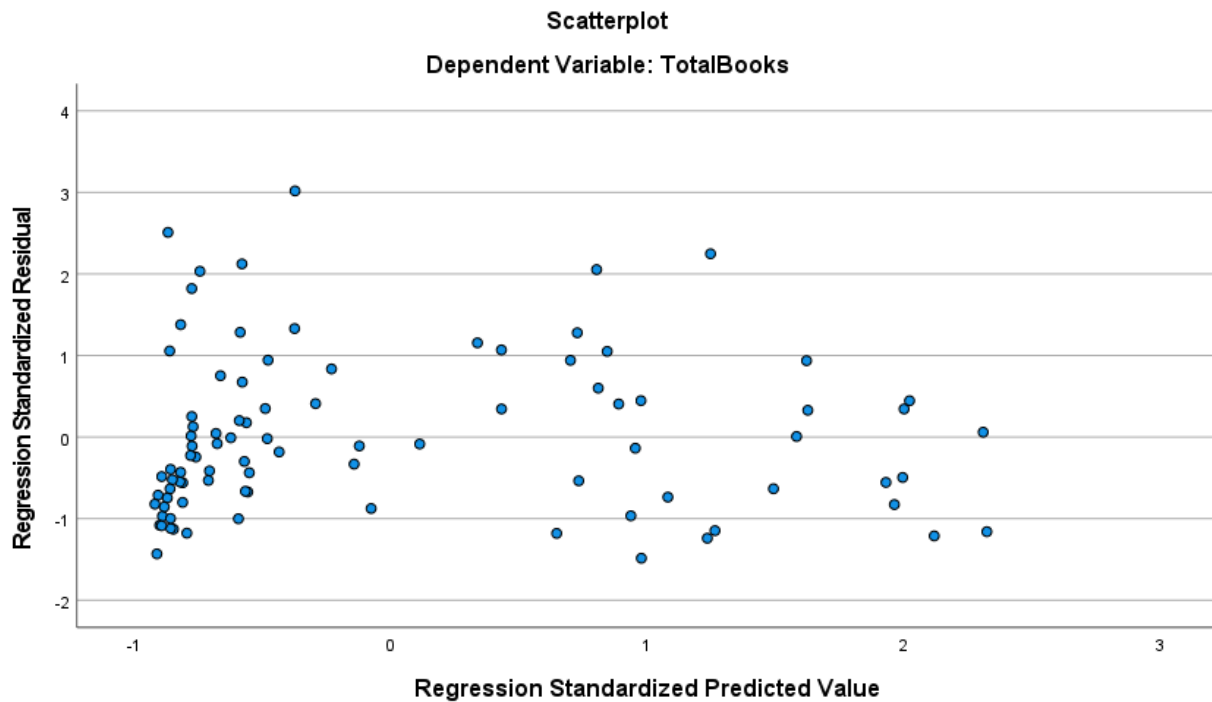
Table 2. Skewness and Kurtosis

Variable	μ	σ	Range	Skew	Kurtosis
Books Found	18.82	11.17	0 - 47	.38	-.785
District Size	15,670.38	28,572.36	70 - 143,558	2.72	8.25
Enrollment	1,091.63	1,150.15	19 - 4,089	1.13	.30
City Size	161,234.60	441,577.83	100- 2,320,268	3.60	13.30

The normal P-Plot was found to be within an acceptable range, and the number of books found and enrollment were both within the traditionally accepted ranges for skew and kurtosis. However, district size and city size were outside those ranges, which was unsurprising since population data is often skewed, with many locations having small populations and few locations with large populations. The multiple linear regression model was tested using a log transform for these two variables. As the results were not very different, these variables were used in their original form. Homoscedasticity was evaluated using a standard residual and standardized predicted value scatterplot (Figure 2), and the assumption of homoscedasticity was met. Collinearity was assessed, and little was present.

Figure 2. Scatterplot of Regression Results

Plot showing the relationship between the predicted values for the regression model and the standardized residuals.



A regression analysis was then conducted with the independent variables of district size, enrollment, and city size to predict the number of controversial books found. The predictor variables accounted for 46.8% of the variance in the overall model ($R^2 = .468$). The overall model was found to be statistically significant ($F(3,86) = 25.24$, $p < .001$). Beta weights indicated that the district size ($\beta = .00009356$, $p = .026$) and the school's enrollment ($\beta = .005$, $p < .001$) were both statistically significant predictors of the number of controversial books found. The city size was found to have no statistically significant effect on the number of books found ($\beta = -.00000003355$, $p = .990$).

Because city size was a poor predictor of the number of controversial titles held, the regression was re-run without that variable. This had little effect on the overall significance of the model, but the beta weight of district size changed slightly to $\beta = .00009328$ ($p = .010$), and the beta weight of enrollment did not change. The final equation was:

$$BF = 11.700 + .00009328 * DS + .005 * EN$$

In conclusion, for every 10,720 more people in a district or 200 more students enrolled in a school, the number of controversial books found would be expected to increase by one. This formula was then employed to examine each school library to determine the extent of self-censorship.

Findings

This study explored the extent of self-censorship in 90 Texas public high school libraries based on the inclusion/exclusion of 55 controversial books in their collections.

RQ 1: What, if any, are the relationships between a school's characteristics and the absence of controversial books?

Linear regression results indicated a positive relationship between district size and the number of controversial books found and a positive relationship between enrollment and the number of controversial books found. This statistically significant relationship indicated district size ($\beta = .00009356$, $p = .026$) and enrollment ($\beta = .005$, $p < .001$) to be moderate to strong predictors of the number of controversial books one would expect to find in a library based on the size. Unexpectedly, city size, or population of the city, was found to have little effect and was determined to be a poor predictor of the number of expected controversial books. When city size was eliminated as a variable, the beta weight of district size changed slightly to $\beta = .00009328$ ($p = .010$), while the beta weight of enrollment did not change.

RQ 2: To what extent, if any, are high school librarians engaging in self-censorship?

Using the regression results, the research team created a formula to predict the number of controversial books expected to be found in a high school library's collection. This formula utilized the moderate to strong predictors of district size and enrollment. The final equation was:

$$BF = 11.700 + .00009328 * DS + .005 * EN$$

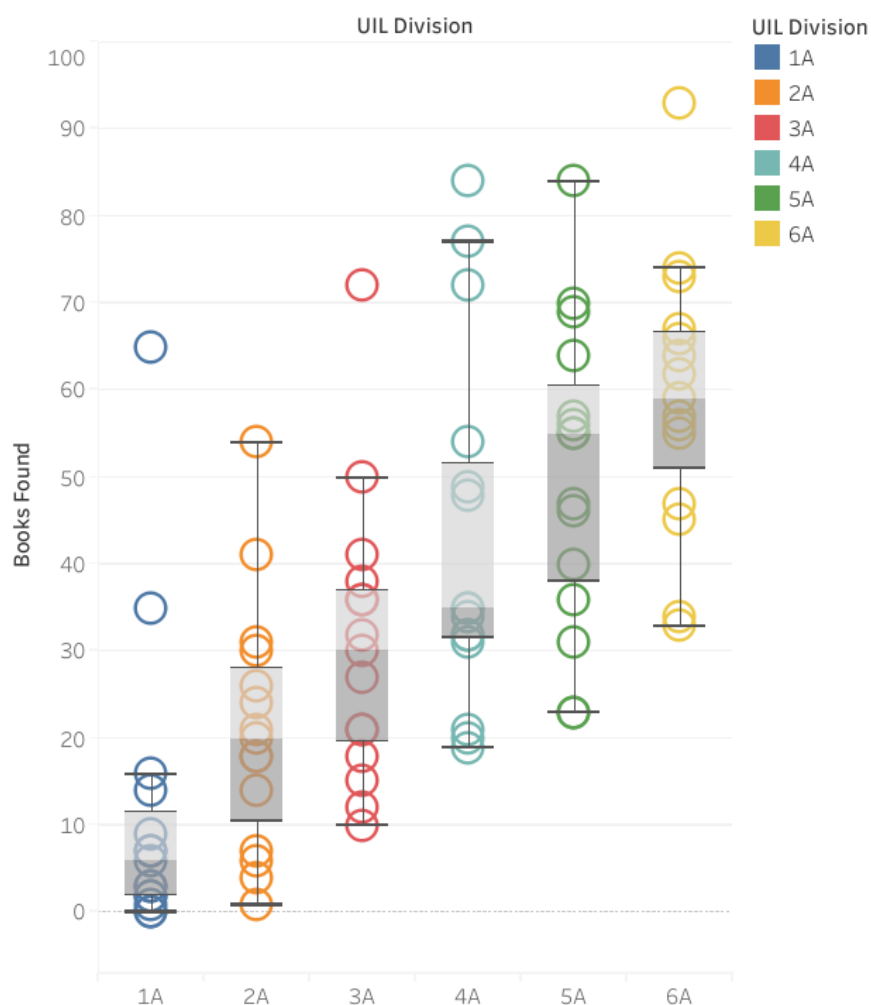
Using the formula, findings indicate 63% ($n=57$) of school libraries had the number of expected books based on their enrollment and district size. For all school libraries, 18% ($n = 16$) of school libraries were above the expected range, while 19% ($n = 17$) of school libraries fell below the expected range. The final percentages are almost balanced on each side, meaning almost as many school libraries had more controversial books than expected as there were school libraries that had fewer books than expected. Table 3 details findings by district size, the number of school libraries, and if they had more, fewer, or the expected number of books. These findings suggest self-censorship is far less common than prevalent; however, selected titles were still noticeably absent from one-fifth of the collections.

Table 3. School libraries Above, Below, and Meeting Expectations for Number of Books

Division	# Above Expected	# Below Expected	# Meeting Expected
6A	13% ($n=2$)	0% ($n=0$)	13 (87%)
5A	13% ($n=2$)	20% ($n=3$)	67% ($n=10$)
4A	13% ($n=2$)	13% ($n=2$)	73% ($n=11$)
3A	20% ($n=3$)	20% ($n=3$)	60% ($n=9$)
2A	6% ($n=1$)	20% ($n=3$)	73% ($n=11$)
1A	6% ($n=1$)	20% ($n=3$)	73% ($n=11$)
All School Libraries	18% ($n=16$)	19% ($n=17$)	63% ($n=57$)

Most school libraries remained within the quartiles for their division. (Figure 3). Interestingly, no outliers fell below the lower hinge of the box plot; all outliers were school libraries having more than the expected number of controversial titles for their district category. Notably, two school libraries in the 1A category were upper outliers, including one 1A school's library that included the number of controversial titles expected to be found in a 6A school.

Figure 3. Box Plot of Books Found in Each UIL Division



Tables 4-6 provide descriptive statistics for each booklist by UIL division, including mode, range, and mean. Schools were most likely to have the books appearing on the ALA Most Challenged List (Table 4), which contained 12 young adult books. Across all divisions, school libraries owned on average 16% ($n=7.34$) of the books included on this list with a range of 0 to 12 books. Multiple modes exist depending on the UIL division with a mode of 8 when all schools are combined.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of School Library Holdings of Booklist 1: ALA List by Division

Division	Mode	Minimum number of books found	Maximum number of books found	Average (mean) number of books found
6A	11	7	12	81% (n=10)
5A	5, 9	3	12	67% (n=8)
4A	8	6	12	72% (n=9)
3A	9	2	12	68% (n=8)
2A	8	2	10	52% (n=6)
1A	1	0	11	24% (n=3)
All School Libraries	8	0	12	61% (n=7.34)

School libraries overall held 31% (n=6.38) books of the 20 titles on Coley's (2002) list, with a range of 0 to 16 books. Multiple modes exist depending on the UIL division with a mode of 5 when all schools are combined.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of School Library Holdings of Booklist 2: Coley List by Division

Division	Mode	Minimum number of books found	Maximum number of books found	Average (mean) number of books found
6A	6	3	14	38% (n=8)
5A	8, 9, 10	3	16	40% (n=8)
4A	5, 6, 9	2	12	30% (n=6)
3A	5	4	12	28% (n=6)
2A	5, 7	2	14	30% (n=6)
1A	4, 5, 6	0	12	23% (n=5)
All School Libraries	5	0	16	31% (n=6.39)

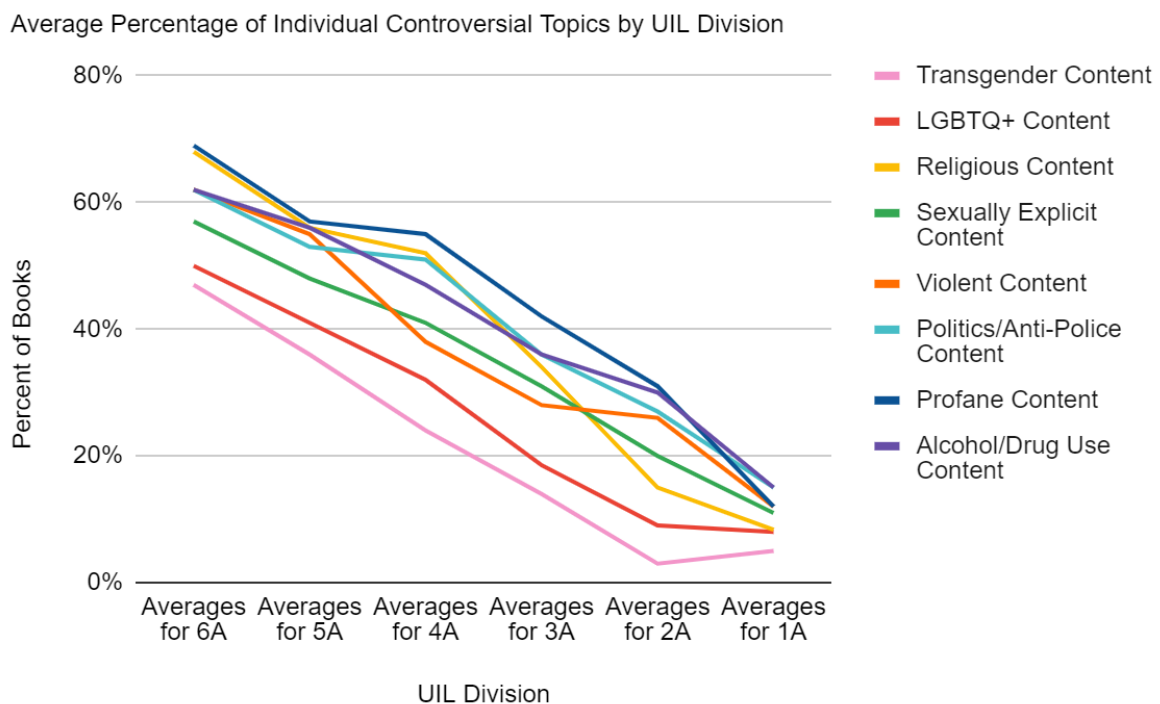
The third list included 25 newly published books that were selected replicating Coley's (2002) criteria (Table 6). School libraries, on average, owned 27% (n=6.82) of the books from this list, with a range of 0 to 25. Multiple modes exist depending on the UIL division with a mode of 0 when all schools are combined.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of School Library Holdings of Booklist 3: Newly Published Books by Division

Division	Mode	Minimum number of books found	Maximum number of books found	Average (mean) number of books found
6A	16	1	25	58% (n=15)
5A	5, 8, 9, 14	3	24	45% (n=11)
4A	20	1	20	33% (n=8)
3A	0	0	14	15% (n=4)
2A	0	0	13	5% (n=1)
1A	0	0	18	5% (n=1)
All School Libraries	0	0	25	27% (n=6.82)

RQ 3: Which controversial topics are least likely to be found in high school libraries' collections?

Larger campuses were statistically more likely to own titles with controversial subject matter ($r^2 = .523$, $p < .001$); however, when analyzing individual topics, certain topics were notably less prevalent than others (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Average Percentage of Individual Controversial Topics by UIL Division

Titles with transgender characters were least likely to appear in collections, with only 22% (n=1.98) of the books appearing in school libraries, followed by 27% (7.28) of titles identified as LGBTQIA+ on shelves. Conversely, titles featuring profanity, drinking, and drug use were most likely to appear on school library shelves, as 41% (n=4.13) of the books were found, regardless of campus or district size. The maximum range varied considerably, while the minimum range was 0 for all topics. Table 5 provides a list of controversial topics identified by ALA, the number of books on the list, the range, and the mean.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics of Controversial Topics Found in All School Libraries

Controversial Topic	Number of books on the list	Minimum number of books found	Maximum number of books found	Average (mean) number of books found in all libraries
Transgender Content	9	0	9	22% (n=1.98)
LGBTQ Content	27	0	26	27% (n=7.28)
Sexually Explicit Content	24	0	23	35% (n=8.43)
Violence	10	0	9	37% (n=3.7)
Religious Content	6	0	6	39% (n=2.37)
Political/Anti-Cop Content	12	0	10	41% (n=4.94)
Drinking/Drug Use	10	0	9	41% (n=4.13)
Profanity	11	0	11	45% (n=5.01)

Limitations

The research team acknowledges this study's limitations. Myriad factors influence a librarian's decision to purchase newer titles, such as budgets and physical space. Multiple linear regression was used to minimize budgetary and space differences between libraries. At the time of data collection, Texas had 1,492 high schools (UIL, 2022b), the number of school libraries unknown, but only 90 OPACs were examined. The research team searched for 55 titles; other titles about similar controversial topics may have been included in the collections. Because this study examined only library collections, the human element was absent; excluded titles are known, but why they are excluded is unknown. Were the books in the collection prior to data collection and removed by an administrator, the librarian, or through a formal process, or had the books never been purchased?

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between the characteristics of school libraries and the number of controversial titles available, the extent to which school librarians are engaging in self-censorship based on collection holdings, and the controversial topics least likely to be found on school library shelves through a systematic review of 90 school library collections. Although this is not the first study to analyze collections to examine the possibility of self-censorship in school libraries (Coley, 2002; Bellows, 2005; Garry, 2015), this study moved the line of inquiry forward through a new facet of analysis using linear regression in addition to descriptive statistics to provide a deeper understanding of self-censorship in school libraries.

Research Question #1: What, if any, are the relationships between a school's characteristics and the absence of controversial books?

A statistically significant positive relationship was found between both district size and enrollment of a school and the number of controversial books in a school library. Although this finding was not particularly surprising, as it was expected that larger schools would have more books than smaller schools, given that they generally have larger budgets and more space, the findings highlight a gap in the overall access to books and the inequality that exists between schools of varying sizes. Students attending larger schools have a wider selection of books available to them, including a larger selection of controversial books. In addition, consistent with our findings, multiple research studies conducted over the past 60 years have concluded that self-censorship occurs more frequently in school libraries located on school campuses with smaller populations than on school campuses with larger populations (Moon, 1962; Coley, 2002; Garry, 2015). One possible explanation, other than self-censorship, is that librarians may have smaller budgets at smaller schools and must be more discerning in their book selections. They may opt for a book that does not contain controversial material over one that does if they are only afforded a limited selection of books. Future studies could uncover the intent behind selection decisions when budgets and space are limited.

One surprising finding was that the size of the city in which the school is located did not affect the number of controversial books found in a school library. The lack of relationship might be explained by the composition of the sample, as more than half of the schools were located in areas with a population of 10,000 (n=51) compared to 22% (n=20) of schools in an area with a population greater than 100,000. A future study could use a stratified random sample to equalize this variable to compare the city size more accurately.

Research Question #2: To what extent, if any, are high school librarians engaging in self-censorship?

Findings indicate that the majority of school libraries had the number of controversial books expected based on their enrollment and district size. The school libraries at the largest schools (6A schools) were most likely to have the expected number of controversial books based on their size. In the other divisions (1A-5A), the number of school libraries owning more than the expected number of controversial titles was almost identical to those owning fewer than expected, 18% (n=16) and 19% (n=17), respectively.

Previous studies have analyzed collections to determine if librarians were engaging in self-censorship. Both Coley (2022) and Bellows (2005) developed multiple lists, at least one list with titles identified as controversial, and both analyzed data using descriptive statistics, determining that if the collection contained fewer than 50% of the identified controversial titles, then that librarian was most likely engaging in self-censorship. Coley (2022) and Bellows (2005) both concluded the majority of school librarians in their sample were engaging in self-censorship. Garry (2015) focused specifically on LGBTQ content and used a Rasch model, concluding "the bulk... are still hesitant to buy materials with LGBTQ content" (p. 84). This study approached data analysis differently than did others, employing linear regression, as it would be expected most larger schools would have higher budgets and more space than smaller schools. Findings indicate 81% (n=73) of school library collections contained either the expected number of controversial titles or above the expected range based on their enrollment and district size, and 19% (n=17) contained fewer than the expected

number of controversial titles; thus, the large majority of school librarians at the selected schools do not appear to be engaging in self-censorship. Interestingly, the only outliers were collections holding more than the expected number of controversial titles for their district category. Of course, a larger sample size might reveal considerably different results.

When examining the three booklists individually, findings varied. Larger schools (4A and above) were more likely to have books on the ALA list and the booklist featuring newly published controversial materials. The school libraries, on average, owned approximately the same number of titles from the Coley list. The ALA list and newly published booklist averages were less consistent, and each had considerable ranges, as some schools owned zero titles while other schools owned all of the possible titles. The findings from each list revealed key information about the possible self-censoring behaviors of school librarians. For example, books featured on the ALA list are all highly publicized and well-known, such as *Harry Potter*, *Eleanor*, and *Park*, and *The Hate U Give*, and are likely to be requested by students and familiar to a librarian; however, several schools did not own more than one of these titles and two schools did not any of them. The books included on the ALA booklist have also been frequently challenged in libraries. This documented history of past controversy could increase the level of scrutiny placed upon these books during the selection process. Although most of the divisions owned a large number of these books, the exclusion of these highly popular books from a school library warrants further questions and could be indicative of self-censorship in certain cases, including ex post facto self-censorship, if the librarian had removed them after purchase.

Books from the Coley (2002) list appeared more consistently than the other books throughout all six divisions. The highest percentage was the 5A schools at 40% (n=8), while the lowest percentage was the 1A schools at 23% (n=5). The overall average for these books was 31% (n=6.39). The findings for this list indicate school libraries own approximately the same number of titles across all divisions. Since many of these books are more than ten years old, standard weeding and collection analysis may explain why some books were missing from the shelves.

The third list included recently published books featuring controversial topics. Books on this list were least likely to be found in school libraries. Their absence could be attributed to self-censorship but could also be due to budgetary or space restrictions. Interestingly, several titles on this list have been recognized with prestigious awards and honors but were noticeably absent from collections. For example, Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*, challenged for religion, sexually explicit scenes, and rape, won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature, the Carnegie Medal, and the Golden Kite Award; however, it appeared in only 55% (n=50) of the collections. Jen Wang's *The Prince and the Dressmaker*, challenged because of gender dysphoria content and LGBTQ content, won the Eisner Award, which is the highest honor bestowed upon a graphic novel. This title appeared in 41% (n=37) of the collections. One criterion for selecting books often included in collection development policies is looking at the accolades and awards a book has won. The absence of these notable books warrants further discussion.

Research Question #3: Which controversial topics are least likely to be found in high school libraries' collections?

Books featuring transgender characters were least likely to appear on the library shelves, followed by books featuring any LGBTQIA+ content and sexually explicit content overall, which is consistent with similar studies' findings. Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris (2013), Oltmann

(2015), and Garry (2015) conducted collection analyses and concluded the number of LGBTQIA+ titles in school library collections was insufficient. Additionally, Garry (2015) concluded schools with smaller enrollments were less likely to own LGBTQ books than schools with larger enrollments. Multiple studies using interviews and surveys have also indicated that most school librarians are hesitant about purchasing books with sexual content (Whelan, 2009; SLJ, 2016; Williams, 2020; Yorio, 2022), including LGBTQ content (Dawkins, 2018).

The controversial topics least likely to appear on the shelves are closely aligned with the topics most likely to be challenged in school libraries. ALA publishes an annual infographic that includes a word cloud featuring the most challenged controversial topics. The words “Sexually Explicit” and “LGBTQIA” appear in the largest fonts, identifying these topics as being challenged more frequently than other controversial topics. Aucoin (2021) analyzed the most frequently challenged topics from 1990-2019 and concluded challenges to LGBTQ content more than doubled from 1990-2019. Between July 1, 2021 and July 30, 2022, 41% (n=674) of titles banned in school libraries and classrooms featured LGBTQ content (PEN America, 2022). Since self-censorship is usually done to preemptively avoid a potential challenge, it is not surprising that the most challenged controversial topics are also least likely to be found on library shelves. When examining analyzed data from the three booklists collectively, findings suggest self-censorship is not prevalent; however, the analysis of individual controversial topics and their notable absence from collections suggests an increased hesitancy to purchase certain materials and possible increased tendency to self-censor only specific topics.

Book challenges have historically targeted marginalized and underrepresented voices (ALA, 2022). By refraining from purchasing books that feature voices of transgender and LGBTQIA+ youth and diverse, multicultural backgrounds, students are denied the opportunity to experience a worldview that is necessary to combat stereotypes and negative racial misconceptions (Harper, 2010), in addition to gaining a deeper understanding of differences in people (Kim et al., 2016). Not only is it important for children and young adults to understand others, but students need books to which they can relate and thus help them understand their changing world (Garry, 2015).

Implications

In most instances and ideally, school librarians decide which reading materials are added to their collections. Budgets and space can, of course, affect their decisions. A librarian with an annual budget of \$200 must make significantly different decisions than a librarian with a budget of \$4000, although the research team did attempt to equalize the schools by employing linear regression in the data analysis. While this study examined the relationship between a school’s characteristics (district size, campus enrollment, and city size) and the absence of controversial books, multiple studies have identified additional variables contributing to a librarian’s decision to include or exclude controversial titles in their collection. People working as school librarians but who are not certified school librarians (Rickman, 2010; Garry, 2015) and librarians early in their careers (Rickman, 2010; Dawkins, 2018) are more likely to engage in self-censorship than certified school librarians and librarians with longer tenure. School librarians involved in professional library associations were less likely to censor than those who are not involved (McNicol, 2016). Responses to challenges and abilities to resist censorship efforts have been found to depend on the librarian’s perceived support from their community (Moeller & Becnel, 2020), perceived support from their administrators

(Dawkins, 2018), and local community values (Garry, 2015). Additionally, previous challenges to library materials further influence future purchasing decisions (SLJ, 2016).

Myriad variables potentially affect a librarian's decision to censor, some of which are within a school librarian's control and some of which are not. For example, a school librarian cannot control campus enrollment or local community values, but they can develop relationships with various stakeholders. There are actions a librarian can employ to mitigate the variables beyond their control.

Policies and procedures: Both the American Library Association (2014) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (Schultz-Jones & Oberg, 2015) promote intellectual freedom for students and emphasize the necessity of school libraries having policies focusing on selection, reconsideration, and weeding. According to the most recent School Library Journal survey on censorship, 51% of survey respondents did not have a formal selection process, and 21% did not have a formal policy for reconsideration requests. It is essential for school libraries to have formal policies in place, although such policies do not completely prevent administration from violating policy and removing books without due process (Yorio, 2022).

Collection analysis and development: School librarians should regularly analyze their collections, noting both strengths and areas for improvements. Identifying gaps offers librarians the opportunity to reflect on why certain topics have minimal or no presence in the collection; reflecting can assist in recognizing self-censoring behaviors. When reading book reviews from professional sources, librarians should be cognizant of the language used. Is the language neutral, or does the language subconsciously discourage the reader from purchasing the title by suggesting the title would attract a limited audience or identify the content as controversial (Spiering, 2017)?

Advocacy: Librarianship has evolved rapidly over the past few decades, but some stakeholders continue to possess incomplete or in some cases incorrect understandings of the role of the library and school librarian. School librarians must advocate to change the perception of the librarians' role and the purpose of the school library program, including its collection, by developing positive relationships with stakeholder groups (Everhart & Mardis, 2014; Lewis, 2020). Burns (2018) provides four advocacy actions for changing stakeholder perceptions about the school librarian and library: provide evidence to stakeholders about (1) the contemporary role of the school librarian; (2) the library program's positive relationship to student achievement; (3) innovations in the school library; and (4) authentic and relevant learning experiences.

Education: Ideally every school library should be staffed by a certified librarian; however, earning the certification is not always possible, and not all school districts hire certified school librarians. Continuing education opportunities, including webinars about collection development, are readily available. Additionally, social media offers librarians opportunities to learn from their peers through school library groups, synchronous chats, and school library-specific hashtags. Even with access to learning opportunities, both formal and informal, one issue remains: the disconnect between knowing and doing. Just because a librarian knows what to do does not mean they will do it (McNicol, 2016).

Conclusion

Self-censorship is problematic. Primarily, it limits, if not denies, access to information. Librarians refusing to purchase materials or removing materials after purchase for fear of a challenge denies their students opportunities to expand their worldview and build empathy. ALA's Library Bill of Rights (2019) encourages information provision that is free of limitations for all patrons and for librarians to resist censorship attempts, including self-censorship (ALA, 2019). Secondly, knowing the extent of self-censorship is difficult, as instances often go unreported because some librarians are unaware that they are engaging in self-censorship in the first place. This may be from lack of training and experience or because of some librarians' feelings of shame or guilt associated with the act. This study explores the current landscape of self-censorship in Texas public high school libraries and can be used as a practical guide to assist librarians as they monitor their collection for both intentional and subconscious acts of self-censorship.

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Appendix A: Booklists

Table A1. ALA Most Challenged YA Books from 2017-2021

Title	Author	Year Published	Controversial Topic(s)
All American Boys	Reynolds	2015	Violence, Anti-Police, Profanity, Drinking/Drugs
Beyond Magenta	Parnell	2014	Transgender, LGBTQIA+, Sexually Explicit
Eleanor and Park	Rowell	2012	LGBTQIA+, Profanity
Melissa (previously published as George)	Gino	2015	Transgender, LGBTQIA+, Religion, Sexually Explicit
Harry Potter	Rowling	1997	Witchcraft/Occult
Looking for Alaska	Green	2005	Sexually Explicit
Speak	Anderson	1999	Sexually Explicit, Rape, Politics, Profanity
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian	Alexie	2007	Religion, Sexually Explicit, Violence, Profanity, Drinking/Drugs
The Hate U Give	Thomas	2017	Sexually Explicit, Anti-Police, Profanity, Drinking/Drugs

Thirteen Reasons Why	Asher	2007	Suicide
This One Summer	Tamiki	2014	LGBTQIA+, Sexually Explicit, Profanity, Drinking/Drugs, Graphic Illustrations
Two Boys Kissing	Leviathan	2013	LGBTQIA+, Sexually Explicit

Note: Harry Potter has been challenged as a series, in addition to the individual books.

Table A2. Books featured in Coley's 2002 study

Title	Author	Year Published	Controversial Topic(s)
Bad	Ferris	1999	Drinking/Drugs
Blood and Chocolate	Klause	1997	Sexually Explicit
Dancing on the Edge	Nolan	1997	Suicide
Hard Love	Wittlinger	1999	LGBTQIA+
I was a Teenage Fairy	Block	1998	Sexually Explicit, Rape, Drinking/Drugs
Love and Sex: Ten Stories of Truth	Cart	2001	LGBTQIA+, Sexually Explicit, Abortion
Making up Megaboy	Walter	1998	Violence, Politics
Monster	Myers	1999	Anti-Police
Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned	Winick	2000	LGBTQIA+
Rundown	Cadnum	1999	Suicide, Rape
Smack	Burgess	1996	Sexually Explicit, Violence, Rape, Profanity, Drinking/Drugs
Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy	Sones	1999	Drinking/Drugs, Mental Illness, Suicide
Tenderness	Cormier	1997	Violence
The Buffalo Tree	Rapp	1997	Anti-Police
The Facts Speak for Themselves	Cole	1997	Suicide, Rape
The Perks of Being a Wallflower	Chbosky	1999	LGBTQIA+, Suicide, Sexually Explicit, Violence, Rape, Drinking/Drugs, Abortion
The Shared Heart: Portraits and Stories Celebrating Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young People	Mastoon	1997	LGBTQIA+

When She Was Good	Mazer	1997	Rape
Harry Potter	Rowling	1997	Witchcraft/Occult
Speak	Anderson	1999	Sexually Explicit, Rape, Politics, Profanity

Note: Harry Potter and Speak are duplicate titles found on the Coley list and ALA most challenged list.

Table A3. 25 Newly selected books based on Coley's methodology for selecting books

Title	Author	Year Published	Controversial Topic(s)
A Very Large Expanse of Sea	Mafi	2018	Religion, Politics
Are You Listening	Walden	2018	LGBTQIA+, Rape
Autoboyography	Lauren	2017	LGBTQIA+, Religion, Sexually Explicit
Birthday	Russo	2019	Transgender, LGBTQIA+, Suicide
Cemetery Boys	Thomas	2020	Transgender, LGBTQIA+
Dangerous Art of Blending In	Surmelis	2018	LGBTQIA+, Profanity
Felix Ever After	Callender	2020	Transgender, LGBTQIA+
Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue	Lee	2017	LGBTQIA+, Sexually Explicit
Miles Away from You	Rutledge	2018	Transgender, LGBTQIA+, Sexually Explicit, Rape
Odd One Out	Stone	2018	LGBTQIA+
Pulp	Talley	2018	LGBTQIA+, Politics
Punching The Air	Zoboi	2020	Violence
Release	Ness	2017	LGBTQIA+, Religion, Sexually Explicit, Anti-Police
Sanctuary	Mendoza	2020	Violence, Rape, Politics, Immigration
Something Like Gravity	Smith	2019	Transgender, LGBTQIA+
Stay Gold	McSmith	2020	Transgender, LGBTQIA+, Sexually Explicit
The Fall of Innocence	Sanchez	2018	Sexually Explicit, Rape, Profanity
The Last to Let Go	Smith	2018	LGBTQIA+, Sexually Explicit, Violence, Profanity, Drinking/Drugs
The Music of What Happens	Konigsberg	2019	LGBTQIA+, Sexually Explicit, Rape
The Nowhere Girls	Reed	2017	LGBTQIA+, Sexually Explicit, Rape, Profanity

The Poet X	Acevado	2018	Religion, Sexually Explicit, Rape
The Prince and The Dressmaker	Wang	2018	Gender Dysphoria, LGBTQIA+
Tyler Johnson Was Here	Coles	2018	Anti-Police, Politics
We Are Not from Here	Sanchez	2020	Sexually Explicit, Rape, Politics, Immigration
What Kind of Girl	Shienmel	2020	Violence, Drinking/Drugs