Book Challenges in Michigan Public Libraries

by

Katherine Polasek

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science
Information
in the University of Michigan
2024

Committee:

Professor Elizabeth Yakel
Professor David Wallace

Dedication

For my big sister Faye, I wouldn't be where I am today without you.

همچنین مامان من فارسی خوانده ام. سورپرایز!

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support, guidance and encouragement of Dr. Elizabeth Yakel. Your mentorship has been deeply impactful these past few years and I cannot thank you enough for opening the world of research to me.

There are many people I would like to thank for their support throughout this project. To Dr. Kentaro Toyama and Dr. Naomi Silver, thank you for the numerous rounds of feedback and for pushing this project forward. I would especially like to thank my peer reviewers from SI 511 and Writing 630, for being with me at every stage of the process. I would also like to thank Vivika Mathews for your willingness to help when I needed it. I cannot overstate my thankfulness to everyone who agreed to be interviewed for this project. Without their willingness to speak, this project would not have been what it is today.

Mom and Dad, thank you for all the support and groceries you have given me these past two years.

To the librarians facing book banning, I hope my work helps amplify your voices in the fight to protect intellectual freedom and against censorship.

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Abstract

Since 2021, public libraries across the United States have experienced a dramatic surge in book challenges and bans, reigniting national debates around intellectual freedom, censorship, and parental rights. This thesis investigates the current wave of book challenges as manifestations of larger cultural and political dynamics through qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with library directors, staff members, and community stakeholders, alongside supporting documentation. Findings reveal misunderstanding of library policies, political polarization and increased discussion of parental rights often fuel the targeting of predominantly LGBTQ+ themed titles. This increase in book challenges has significantly impacted the morale and mental health of library workers, transforming libraries from community centers into places of contention. Foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of library workers, this research highlights the shifting role of librarians as frontline advocates for intellectual freedom and explores how rhetoric around "parental rights" is reshaping public discourse around access to information. Adding to previous research this thesis discusses the emotional toll of book challenges on librarians, impact at libraries and how the organization of the physical library may be influencing challenges.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Book challenges and banning have increased in recent years sparking debates around intellectual freedom, censorship and parental rights or the legal right and responsibility "to direct the upbringing, education, and care of their children" (*Parental Rights*, 2025). While often framed as efforts to protect children or uphold community values, these challenges reflect broader cultural and political tensions, particularly concerning issues of race, sexuality, and identity (Ananthakrishnan et al., 2023). The surge in book challenges since 2020 represents an unprecedented shift in scale and intensity. According to the American Library Association (ALA), the number of book challenges in 2022 nearly doubled the number of reported book challenges from the previous year and reached a record high (American Library Association, 2024a). This increase coincides with cultural and political shifts including a rise of conservative activism around education policy, state-level legislation aimed at restricting certain materials or increasing control over learning materials, and the mobilization of parental rights groups seeking greater control over public institutions.

This study seeks to understand the forces driving these book challenges and their impacts on libraries and communities beyond. Public libraries, traditionally regarded as neutral community spaces of knowledge sharing, have increasingly become sites of ideological conflict. Individual actors and advocacy groups, such as Moms for Liberty and others, call for the book restrictions on certain materials that they argue expose children to inappropriate or immoral content. In contrast, librarians and advocates warn that book challenges constitute censorship and

threaten intellectual freedom. The increasing politicization of libraries reflects deeper anxieties about the shifting social norms, the role of public institutions, and the balance between parental rights and the right to information access.

Existing research into the topic of book challenges and censorship provides a strong background of the historical and political roots of this debate. Researchers have extensively documented the history of book banning in the United States, often tied to religious and moral concerns aimed at protecting public morality. Recent work highlights how contemporary challenges disproportionately target works addressing race, gender, and sexuality, particularly those by or about marginalized communities. Additionally, researchers have explored new legislation, such as Florida's CS/HB 1467 that prohibits educators from distributing certain materials to children, specifically calling out "pornographic" material, and aims to secure parental involvement in education, s (*2022 Bill Summaries - The Florida Senate*, n.d.). Critics of the bill asserted that the vagueness of the bill would lead to conflicts with First Amendment rights, raising questions about access to information and the democratic principles outlined in foundational American documents (Li, 2024).

While previous research offers valuable insights, it leaves significant gaps in understanding the recent surge in book challenges. The sharp increase in book challenges since 2020 demands further examination of the cultural, political, and institutional forces driving this phenomenon. More research is needed to understand how book challenges reflect social attitudes as libraries become more contentious spaces. Addressing these gaps will provide a more comprehensive understanding of book censorship and its implications for intellectual freedom in public spaces.

This thesis looks at the broader implications of book challenges at public libraries through qualitative research. By engaging with librarians, library workers, book challengers, and community members, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the motivations behind book challenges and their impact on public libraries. Unlike prior research, this research emphasizes the lived experiences of those directly involved in these disputes. This study addresses the following questions:

What are the underlying social and political factors driving the increase in challenges and bans of books, particularly those with LGBTQ themes or addressing issues of slavery and racism, in the United States post-COVID?

How do various stakeholder groups, including librarians, library workers, book challengers, and community members, perceive the implications of recent book challenges on free speech and censorship?

What is the impact of book challenges and bans on libraries and library workers?

By addressing these questions, this research aims to fill gaps in the literature and contribute to a deeper understanding of book censorship at public libraries.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

The rise in book banning across American schools and public libraries has renewed debates on censorship, freedom of expression, and the influence of personal beliefs in public institutions. This literature review examines the historical context of book banning in the United States, from its origins to contemporary practices. It will explore the cultural and political drivers of the phenomenon and discuss the implication of this on First Amendment rights. This review intends to provide a nuanced understanding of how book banning reflects and influences societal values and conflicts. In this literature review, the historical context, cultural and political influences, the role of libraries and librarians, the lasting impacts and broader implications of book challenging and banning will be explored.

Historical Context into Book Banning in the 21st Century

Book banning and censorship have a long history in the United States, with roots in religious and political movements aimed at protecting public morality and suppressing controversial ideas. Historically, book banning has stemmed from religious, moral, or political concerns, often framed as protecting societal values. Berninghausen (1948) likened book banning to "witch hunts" as the pursuit of new knowledge is shot down in favor of traditional ideals. This early fixation on preserving established traditions laid a powerful groundwork for subsequent actions against the spread of new ideas. In the United States many of these traditional ideals stem from religious ideals. The connection between religion and reading being traced to medieval Europe where the majority of the literate population were members of the clergy

(Knox, 2015). In that context, reading was not simply a private act but a communal one, often involving a leader reciting the word of God from books that very few could read. To this day remnants of these sentiments remain as reading is often perceived as very powerful with the ability to shape one's sense of morality. This historical perspective also helps contextualize book banning in the U.S. as a recurring phenomenon tied to a desire to uphold certain cultural and moral norms (Knox, 2015; Laats & Meehan, 2024). The first book banning in the present day United States happened in 1637 (Connolly, 2023) when protestant settlers did not like a book that critiqued their religion and government. This early example underscores a long-standing impulse to control societal narratives—a drive that persists today. This desire to control the narrative has carried on to this day where there is current political objection over new ideas, such as critical race theory (Burmester & Howard, 2022) which can be seen reflected in modern day book challenges and bans.

While these historical accounts provide valuable context, they also present a somewhat deterministic view of censorship as inherently regressive. It is worth interrogating whether such a perspective might overlook moments when culturally motivated bans inadvertently fostered counter-movements toward intellectual liberation. Ananthakrishnan et al. (2023), in exploring similar ideas, found that book banning often results in higher circulation of banned materials in the surrounding districts or states areas.

In recent years, the focus of challenges has shifted to themes of sexuality, gender, and race from overt political or religious reasons (Connelly, 2009). This evolution in focus not only demonstrates a shift in the challenges themselves but also mirrors broader societal debates over moral and cultural values. It is also important to note that while it has become generally less acceptable to argue censorship purely on religious or political grounds today, many of these

cultural arguments are underpinned by religious or political beliefs. This evolution reflects a shift in the challengers' motivations from overt political or religious disagreements to concerns over topics perceived as morally wrong or inappropriate for young audiences. The increasing topic-driven challenges also align with certain legislative trends, signaling a more formalized approach to restricting information access (Tylenda, 2024). This alignment between grassroots religious motivations and top-down legislative efforts reflects a coordinated push to influence the cultural landscape through policy.

This historical trajectory sets the stage for understanding the multifaceted motivations behind modern book challenges. As the societal landscape evolves, these challenges no longer merely reflect moral injunctions but also mirror contemporary struggles over race, sexuality, and political identity. This transition underscores the continuity—and the transformative shifts—in how censorship is enacted and perceived. It also highlights how challenges to reading materials function as a proxy for broader cultural tensions, positioning books as battlegrounds for identity, values, and political ideology.

Cultural and Political Influences on Book Banning

The motivations behind contemporary book challenges often reflect deep cultural, political, and religious divides, with challengers typically focused on issues of race, sexuality, and perceived moral decay. Religious fundamentalism and book challenges are also intertwined as highlighted by Tamney and Johnson (1997), where through a series of phone interviews, they made connection between how participating in an increased number of religious activities in fundamentalist communities resulted in participants being more likely to challenge books or more often, closely monitor their children's reading. "Challengers often fear that reading the

targeted texts will not only lead to short-term harmful effects but also puts the reader's souls in jeopardy" (Knox, 2015).

A common justification for book banning is the belief in protecting "childhood innocence." Tucker (2024) explores the historical roots of this notion, tracing it back to the 18th and 19th centuries, when children were viewed as inherently innocent and easily "corruptible" by exposure to controversial ideas. Hammer (2024) similarly notes that many modern-day challenges are driven by concerns leading to shielding children from issues related to sexuality, race, or social conflict, which some adults view as unsuitable or even harmful for developing minds.

Book challenges disproportionately target literature by or about marginalized communities, especially LGBTQ+ and racially diverse authors. The American Library Association book banning tracking data reveal that in 2024, there were a reported 821 challenges at libraries targeting 2452 unique titles in the United States (American Library Association, 2025) down from the previous year 2023, where 1247 challenges targeted 4240 unique titles (American Library Association, 2024b). During the peak of the challenges in 2023, a reported 47% of challenges titles contain LGBTQ+ or BIPOC themes (American Library Association, 2024b). Hammer (2024) and Tylenda (2024) note that works exploring themes of sexual orientation, gender identity, and racial justice are frequently singled out, often under the guise of protecting children but with the effect of suppressing minority voices. The geographic scope of these challenges is also notable as Sarles (2022) discusses how censorship of LGBTQ+ and race-related books is not limited to historically conservative areas but can be observed in more politically liberal regions like New York City (Sarles, 2022) however the majority of challenges come from Florida, Texas and Iowa (Pen America, 2024).

The Role of Libraries and Librarians in Combating Censorship

Libraries are community centers (Scott, 2011) functioning as a third space and one of the last free institutions in the United States, providing access to information of all kinds and offering a range of programming and events. Dedicated to serving their communities, libraries are instrumentally important pillars of communities for these services they provide. Berninghausen (1948) goes on to explain how libraries are a public good and that it is part of the social responsibility of librarians and library workers to prevent censorship as the library is for the whole community.

With the recent increase in book challenges, librarians and educators are at the frontlines of the resistance to book challenges, often relying on legal protections and community support to defend the right to access diverse literature. Librarians are most often the ones encountering book challenges from the community members who are submitting the complaints, making their role vital in resisting censorship and advocating for intellectual freedom (Berninghausen, 1948; Clark-Hunt & Creel, 2024). For decades there has been a call for librarians to protect intellectual freedom, looking to the library bill of rights for guidance (Berninghausen, 1948). Clark-Hunt and Creel (2024) argue that librarians are increasingly called upon to protect the diversity of available literature, especially when specific books face scrutiny due to their subject matter related to race, sexuality, or social justice. Recently there has been a call for increased legislative protections for libraries due to the increase of book challenges with many states putting forth "Freedom to Read" Bills (Mikula, 2023; Murphy, 2024) with varying degrees of success. On November 7, 2024 the Michigan Freedom to Read Act was introduced into the State Senate. The proposed act would protect the right of access to information and literature in Michigan and help establish policies for the selection and removal of library materials based on valid reasoning and not censorship (Michigan Library Association, 2024; Mikula, 2023). These bills aimed to

safeguard intellectual freedom by preventing politically motivated censorship and protecting educators and librarians from legal consequences when providing access to diverse literature. In Illinois, House Bill 2789 also referred to as Public Act 103 was signed into law on June 12, 2023 taking effect on January 1, 2024. Illinois the first State to pass these types of protective measure for libraries with all subsequent bills being based off of it (Illinois Library Association, 2024).

In response to the increasing frequency and intensity of book challenges, librarians today require new skills to effectively manage conflicts surrounding book censorship. Niehoff (2023) highlights that librarians are now trained in conflict de-escalation, media relations, and public advocacy to address the heightened scrutiny and sometimes hostile environments they face. This evolution not only supports libraries in managing immediate conflicts but also positions them as critical voices in the national debate on information accessibility and public policy reform, urging lawmakers to consider the long-term impact of censorship measures on democratic engagement.

Impacts of Book Challenging/Banning

The recent rise in book challenges and bans in the United States has deep implications for access to information, cultivation of critical literacy, and the political and social influences on educational and public spaces. Together, these impact both the availability of diverse ideas and young readers' ability to develop understanding of complex issues, identities, and perspectives. Boehm and Bean (2024) note that exposure to diverse literature is crucial for developing empathy and critical thinking, allowing young readers to grapple with unfamiliar experiences and broaden their worldview.

With public spaces being inherently political, the increase in book challenges are strongly backed with political intentions. Ananthakrishnan et al. (2023) discusses the correlation between

increased political donation in conservative-leaning states and increased rates of book challenges that they argue demonstrates political motivations. Religious motivations also often play a role in book challenges, as works addressing topics like gender, sexuality, or alternative religious perspectives are frequently targeted. Studies by Teel (2023) and Tylenda (2024) reveal that many book challenges originate from religiously motivated groups seeking to preserve traditional moral values by restricting access to books that explore complex or contentious topics. Attempts to enforce religious beliefs over the wider community bring these topics into the political world especially considering the financial incentive that some politicians might have.

Paradoxically, book bans often lead to an increase in public interest and circulation of the challenged works, especially those by lesser-known authors. Ananthakrishnan et al. (2023) observe that, while censorship seeks to reduce the visibility of certain ideas, it can instead drive curiosity and create greater awareness of the banned books. This phenomenon, often called the "Streisand effect," (Jansen & Martin, 2015) can result in banned books receiving wider readership than they otherwise might have. The attention around banned books sometimes propels them to national bestseller lists, thereby amplifying the very voices and ideas that censorship aims to suppress. This unintended consequence suggests that censorship may, in fact, reinforce public awareness and demand for diverse narratives.

In summary, this demonstrates the paradox of book banning— attempts at censorship may amplify the very ideas they seek to suppress— and illustrates a complex interplay of cultural resistance and political ambivalence that merits further scrutiny in the context of democratic ideals. It emphasizes the need to assess not only what is being censored, but also how censorship shapes public awareness, civic engagement, and the power dynamics that govern access to knowledge.

Broader Implications of Book Censorship on Free Speech

The debate over book banning ties into larger discussions about free speech and constitutional rights, raising critical questions about the limits of censorship in a democratic society. Free speech allows for the free exchange of ideas which is vital for the democratic process which has been noted in many foundational documents on the topic (Mill, 1859). Strossen (2020) emphasizes the fundamental role of speech protections within a democratic framework, arguing that restricting access to controversial materials curtails public discourse, which is vital for a healthy democracy. Book challengers' desire to limit access to literature based on subject matter deemed "inappropriate" or "controversial" can therefore infringe upon other citizens' rights to freely explore ideas, a core tenet of free speech in a democratic society.

The introduction of new legislation such as Florida's HB 1467, which restricts the distribution of certain materials in school libraries, complicates understanding of First Amendment rights with its use of vague and broad language resulting in the law being up to interpretation (Li, 2024). It also sets a precedent of what might happen at public libraries. Strossen (2020) specifically comments on vague laws such as this one, deeming it impossible to write legislation that restricts speech in a manner not subjective.

In recent years, American public libraries have seen a surge of book challenges that while echoing previous challenges rooted in religious and political ideology now center on race, gender and sexuality. What was once framed as efforts to safeguard traditional values has morphed into a desire to protect children by silencing LGBTQ+ and BIPOC voices. Libraries, long hailed as community centers, are fighting against these challenges both at a local level and through state level "Freedom to Read" legislation. Paradoxically, challenges often increase the attention and

circulation of the titles it aims to suppress. The ongoing struggle over library collections reveal efforts to restrict access to information and the testing of boundaries for intellectual freedom.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach triangulating interview data and additional documentation to explore the complex social and political dynamics driving book challenges and bans in public libraries. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including librarians, library workers, book challengers (those who had participated in challenging a book(s) as a supporter of having a book relocated, removed or re-labeled), and community members (those who participated in preventing a book(s) from being removed, relocated or re-labeled), to gather diverse perspectives on the issue. Documentation collection involved gathering news articles, library board meeting notes, and one recommended documentary to provide contextual insights (Bowen, 2009).

Development and testing of the Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was designed to elicit in-depth responses to the research questions while allowing flexibility for participants to share their experiences and insights in regards to book challenges. The design of semi-structured interviews allows for guided yet open-ended questioning, which is effective in capturing the nuances of participants' perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Warren, 2001).

Questions probed participants' attitudes towards book challenges, their perceptions of contributing factors, and their views on intellectual freedom and free speech. The interview protocol can be found in the appendix. To reduce the risk of memory loss or distortion during

recall, questions were structured to prompt specific instances and experiences, a strategy recommended for enhancing the reliability of retrospective accounts (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

The protocol was piloted with one participant to assess clarity and flow. Feedback from this initial interview informed minor revisions to question phrasing and order. Piloting the interview protocol allowed for the enhancement of the reliability and validity of qualitative data collection (Patton, 2002).

Data Collection

Interviewees were recruited through a process of purposeful selection and snowballing in order to best identify participants with relevant experiences and insights (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The purposeful selection was aimed at libraries where official book challenges or significant pressures to remove books had occurred. The selection focused on libraries within Michigan, with an emphasis on diverse geographic representation including south-eastern, south western and the upper peninsula areas. One notable exception was made for a participant from Florida due to the significance of the case. During participant recruitment, all interviewees signed informed consent forms that detailed the voluntary nature of the study and participants ability to withdraw at any time. A copy of the consent form can be found in the Appendix.

The majority of interviewees were recruited through email, leveraging publicly available contact information and prior public statements about book challenges (Creswell, 1998). Additional interviewees were selected at the referral of other participants, leveraging snowball sampling to expand the participant pool (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). In total, ten (10) total participants were recruited, three Library directors (LD), three librarians (LW), three community members (CM) including one who was a challenger (CH). The interviews were conducted on zoom for the ease of participants and ranged in time from 30 to 70 minutes. To ensure

confidentiality, participants are referred to by a code consisting of their role abbreviation and a number.

Document Collection

In addition to interviews, news articles, library board meeting notes, and a recommended documentary, was collected and analyzed to complement the interview data and provide contextual insights (Bowen, 2009). Additionally notes taken during meetings at an organization aimed at combating book banning were incorporated. The organization meets on Zoom and connects individuals across the United States with the intention of sharing resources and support throughout book challenges and other infringements on the first amendment. Field notes from these meetings were treated as supplementary qualitative data, aligning with best practices in ethnographic and observational research (Emerson et al., 2011). Interviews were conducted between September-December 2025 and additional documentation was collected between September- March 2025.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were generated using Otter.ai and manually checked for accuracy, ensuring consistency with recommended practices for qualitative data transcription (Poland, 1995). Transcripts were then imported into NVivo for coding and analysis. An initial codebook was developed based on the literature and preliminary findings, employing deductive coding to identify theoretically driven themes or themes apparent in the literature and based on the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To ensure inter-rater reliability (IRR), a secondary coder was engaged, and coding proceeded until an IRR of 83% was achieved (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Subsequently, adaptive coding was conducted to accommodate emerging themes, with the codebook refined iteratively through coder discussions and consensus. To maintain the

trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis, the study adhered to criteria for qualitative rigor, including peer debriefing to discuss coding decisions and explore alternative interpretation.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the sample size was relatively small and primarily focused on libraries within Michigan. While efforts were made to ensure geographic diversity within the state, this regional focus may limit the transferability of findings to other contexts or states with different political, cultural, or policy environments. This includes the lack of challengers who accepted invitations to take part in this study, 30 invitations were sent out and only one participated.

Second, interviews were conducted via Zoom. Although this platform offered convenience and accessibility, it may have constrained rapport-building or limited the depth of disclosure compared to in-person interviews (Irvine et al., 2013). Technical issues or the lack of a shared physical setting may also have influenced participant engagement.

Additionally, while triangulating interview data with documents, such as news articles and library board meeting notes provided valuable contextual depth, these sources may reflect particular narrative frames or editorial biases, especially in politically charged environments.

Finally, the dynamics surrounding book challenges and censorship efforts are rapidly evolving. As such, this study captures a snapshot in time, and ongoing developments in policy and public discourse may influence the relevance or applicability of certain findings.

Positionality statement

As a graduate student in Information Science, I acknowledge that my personal views on book challenges may have influenced my data collection and analysis. I am firmly opposed to book banning and believe that the forcible removal of books from public libraries constitutes a

ban and is effectively censorship. However, I am committed to engaging with diverse perspectives to mitigate potential bias in my research and conducting interviews allowed for participants from a diverse range of thought to speak in their own voice. Positionality statements are essential to maintain transparency and reflexivity in qualitative research (Berger, 2015).

Ethics

Potential ethical issues for this research included the protection of participant confidentiality and informed consent. Ethical procedures adhered to established guidelines for qualitative research, including maintaining participant anonymity and informed consent (Salganik, 2019). In order to address these concerns, good rapport and trust was built with interviewees and participants in order to provide assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. Other confidentiality measures include assigning pseudonyms to participants, storing data securely and limiting access to identifiable information. This study has been deemed exempt by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (HUM00257477).

Chapter 4 Results

The following results detail emerging themes from the interviews and other additional documents covering the driving factors of challenges, the lived experiences of librarians and the larger implications of book challenging. The drivers of challenges include the underlying motivations and potential catalysts for challengers. Details of the experiences of librarians reveal how deeply communities can be affected by challenges and how damaging the high stress situations can be to library staff. Broader implications are then addressed looking into legislative and institutional responses.

Motivations and Justifications of Challenges

The results reveal a multifaceted landscape in which book challenges at libraries are not isolated incidents but rather manifestations of broader cultural, political, and institutional dynamics. Respondents consistently framed these challenges as emerging from frustration between parental expectations and library capability, polarized political climates, and the strategic use of fear—mechanisms that not only target controversial content like LGBTQ+ themes but also intensify the personal and professional burdens on librarians. Despite mounting external pressures and the historical echoes of censorship, library professionals exhibit collective resilience, advocating for robust institutional support and legislative protections to preserve access to diverse ideas and information.

Cultural, Political and Ideological Forces

Librarians consistently reported that book challenges, especially those targeting LGBTQ+ content, appeared to be motivated by ideological opposition rather than concerns over content appropriateness. Many of the challenges seemed to be rooted in a broader cultural and political climate that increasingly polarized views on topics, such as gender identity, sexual orientation, and diversity. This polarization not only reflects a clash of values but also manifests in a rallying cry to “protect children” by those seeking to restrict access to diverse narratives. This framing to "protect children," often disproportionately targeted books that highlighted marginalized communities. In many instances, the call for protection was less about shielding children from harmful content and more about pushing a specific ideological agenda.In context of this politically charged environment, my participants addressed parental rights, content concerns and protecting children. Many librarians who faced book challenges expressed that the increased polarization of libraries also led to some shifts in the foot traffic seen in the library, a sentiment echoed by those initiating the challenges. The changing demographics and visitor patterns at libraries further underscored the profound impact of cultural and political forces on public spaces. One librarian highlighted the ideological drive behind challenges when describing one disgruntled patron who was upset about the content in the library:

> “What he said was, Do you have any of those books? And started to provide some colorful adjectives. And I said, I don't know what books you're talking about. What titles do you mean? And then he proceeded to say, Oh, those books.” (LD01)

Parental rights

Challengers stated a significant concern was the perceived threat to parental rights in overseeing their children’s reading, particularly regarding the presence of inappropriate content

in library materials. One primary issue was the presence of visual depictions deemed pornographic, which led some parents to avoid library visits altogether. One challenger shared their personal experience of reducing visits to the local library after a challenge involving explicit content:

> "I really don't want my kids combing through books that have these pornographic images in it, and that's the main reason why I don't take my kids there. I really feel unsafe taking my kids there because, you know, they're of the age where they're in the adult section now. So that's when we stopped going to the library. And I would, I don't want to assume for other local people, but I think that was a pervasive thought with parents with young children like we don't really feel comfortable taking our kids there anymore. You know, if they're toddlers, I think the kids section is still certainly safe, but kids like my 14 year old, who's definitely in the adult section all the time. I just, I'm not comfortable with what could be. You know, it's more the fear of the unknown, or that one book in particular, I know it's there. I don't want my daughter seeing that. That's not something that I want her to see." (CH01)

Due to the increased attention on parental rights, some libraries have begun to or further highlight this in their policy with the intention of having standing policy to further strengthen the library's own position in the event of a challenge. As one Library Director put it:

> "What we say is ultimately the responsibility of what a child reads rests with parents and guardians. Public libraries cannot be expected to interfere with parental obligations and responsibilities when it comes to deciding what a minor might read, listen to or view, it's the right of the parent or guardian to determine what materials are available for their children to read. So I feel very comfortable holding on to that concept and that policy that

we do defer to the parent to make that decision when we're talking about a minor." (LD02)

This tension between parental rights and the role of the library was further highlighted by comments from librarians on inconsistencies in parental expectations. One librarian captured this dichotomy:

> "They'll tell you, well, we don't want our kids to read that. They shouldn't have access to it, to which I say, okay, so be the parent and tell your kid, no. You don't agree with the book, they don't have to read. We're not responsible for that. But then, in the same sentence, in the same breath, they will also say, well, you shouldn't allow my child to check this out. So it's that they want parental control, but they also want us to be the parent, and that's just not going to work out, because if I'm not legally responsible for that child, I respectfully, I don't care. I don't have the time to sit and be like, Oh, actually, it says right here on your account. Mommy doesn't want you to have this. I'm not going to vet every single book. I don't have the time. We don't have the time for that." (LD04)

This anecdote encapsulates the practical difficulties that arise from contradictory expectations and sets the stage for understanding the broader debate on material access and content labeling. This desire to control what children read is compounded by a tension between parental responsibility and the role of the library. Some parents expect libraries to enforce their preferences regarding children's reading materials, yet libraries are not equipped to serve as gatekeepers—and that would require tracking data that many libraries are reluctant to keep due to concerns of intellectual freedom.

Another librarian expanded on this point, sharing how parents specifically singled out LGBTQ+ books in their library but wanted librarians assist in enforcing their parental dictates:

> “No, it's just that most of our stuff is just LBGTQ related. That's it. I mean, everything else that has seemed to be purchased through our library are fine. It's more of a general like they're upset that we do have LGBTQ books in our children's area, but nobody's ever said anything specifically, other than they don't want to be the parent and parent their child.” (LW03)

Some librarians recounted situations in which parents struggled to manage what their children were exposed to. For example, one librarian described a scenario regarding LGBTQ+ literature:

> “One parent said they were forced to bring their child with them to the children’s section to avoid certain books with rainbow covers. They felt uncomfortable when their child was drawn to these books. As a mother myself, I would suggest another book instead, but we try to remind parents that it’s their responsibility to decide what’s appropriate for their children, not the library’s.” (LW03)

Moreover, several librarians noted that while some parents desire to control what their children read, they also expect the library to monitor and police that reading. As one librarian summed up:

> “It’s about control at the end of the day. Some parents want the freedom to decide what their kids can read, but they also want us to enforce those decisions for them.” (LD04)

The framing of book challenges often revolves around the desire to "protect children," yet the expectation that libraries enforce these parental decisions remains contentious.

Content Concerns and LGBTQ+ Materials

Challenges on books involving LGBTQ+ content, especially narratives featuring transgender individuals, have become increasingly prevalent and are often the primary target of

modern book banning. Unlike earlier challenges that predominantly focused on homosexuality in literature, recent objections have disproportionately targeted gender nonconformity. Respondents noted that while explicit heterosexual content was generally tolerated, books addressing gender identity or trans experiences faced heightened scrutiny.

One respondent highlighted this shift, emphasizing that earlier concerns focused on books like Daddy's Roommate, while more recent objections centered around transgender representation:

> "I mean, I gotta call as I see it, really a good chunk of the population is, like, really confused or angry about transgender people. You don't really see a whole lot of challenges for books like, what was the one that was in the early 90s, it was Daddy's Roommate. About, you know, you don't see many challenges for something like that. It's not about homosexuality, most of them are about people who don't fit in, fit into the gender binary. It seems to me, like almost all the challenges have to do with that particular demographic, or books that represent those people. … I mean, occasionally, some of the YA novels get a little spicy with, like, heterosexual spicy, but those aren't being challenged to the same extent. It's Genderqueer, it's All Boys Aren't Blue." (LD03)

This shift reflects larger social trends where transgender issues have become a focal point for ideological debate. Many interviewees suggested that these book challenges were less about the appropriateness of content and more about opposition to LGBTQ+ identities and the perceived threat of non-normative gender expression.

In addition to ideological objections, challengers have also raised significant concerns about the nature and presentation of content in library collections. These concerns were often expressed in moral or protective terms, especially regarding perceived explicit or sexual content.

Some challengers described frustration with what they saw as hidden, inappropriate material in youth-accessible sections. One respondent voiced concern about sexually explicit illustrations in a graphic novel:

> "This book I really didn't like because it was hidden, right? It was hidden pornography. … And again, this was a visual pornographic, if it were a Playboy magazine, you would know that you don't want your kids looking at it, right?" (CH01)

The debate on content often extended to how materials were shelved and labeled. In the case referenced above, the challenger was referring to an erotic graphic novel that was shelved in the library's general graphic novel section. This sparked concern that it would be easily accessible to children, especially since the front cover did not reveal the explicit nature of the material, even though it was clearly labeled on the back.

Additionally, differing views about parental responsibility versus librarian oversight emerged in discussions about culturally or ideologically sensitive materials. One librarian explained a broader pattern of censorship:

> "When we look at it a little bit closer, we know that books highlighting LGBT issues, especially trans issues, books highlighting people of color, books highlighting, you know, disabilities tend to be the target of a lot of these challenges." (LW02)

Furthermore, content-related challenges have sometimes been fueled by commentary from blog posts and online forums, which frame the presence of diverse materials as part of a broader ideological shift. For example, a challenger in one blog post stated:

> "Over the years, our local library has been slowly including more and more materials geared toward the homosexual community and the ideas of CRT and white privilege."

This type of commentary reflects broader societal debates regarding the inclusion of diverse or culturally specific materials, often standing in contrast to the more nuanced and professionally guided collection development policies practiced by librarians. In response, many librarians have emphasized the importance of transparency in their collections. They have sought to clearly communicate selection processes and point patrons toward detailed collection development policies available on their library websites.

Reorganizing Spaces

The physical layout of library spaces also influenced public perceptions of collection development. In some cases, library patrons expressed concerns about where certain books were placed, particularly in relation to children's and adult sections. One challenger, referring to the book they had challenged, described:

> 'It was in the, what was called the graphic novel section. So it wasn't on the children's side. It wasn't on the adult side necessarily. It was kind of in the middle where all the other graphic novels are." (CH01)

This challenge highlighted the discomfort some patrons felt with a "gray area" that blurs the traditional boundaries between age-specific content. In that specific challenge, one of the proposed solutions was creating separate graphic novel sections for children and adults. Librarians would also go on to describe how in the event of library reorganization due to construction on the building, bringing displays or other materials into a more visible or trafficked area of the library increased challenges. For instance, one librarian recounted an episode involving a pride display:

> "We had, we had put up a pride display for decades…We ended up starting a construction project. So we moved everything from that big open space into what's called the round

room, because it's literally round. So into a smaller, round space. So whenever you walked in, suddenly, everything is there more in your eye-line. So we had a board member's wife wrote a letter to the editor complaining about it. (LD01)

This example illustrates how changes to spatial organization—intended to adapt to physical constraints—can inadvertently amplify the visibility of politically sensitive displays, thereby sparking further controversy.

Challenges to Books as a Form of Control

Librarians and challengers both raised the theme of control throughout discussions . Some respondents believed that library policies did not offer enough transparency on parental oversight; however, many of the challengers did not seek out additional information about library policy. Others suggested that book challenges were rooted in an attempt to exert influence over public institutions rather than genuine concerns about content appropriateness. As one librarian succinctly put it, the underlying motivation seemed to boil down to control:

"I just think it generally comes down to control at the end of the day." (LD04)

The parents' desire for control was evident not only in the challenges themselves but also in the larger cultural and political debates surrounding libraries' role in managing access to information. Participants expressed concern that book challenges were not just about individual objections but were part of a broader attempt to control narratives and restrict access to diverse perspectives. One community member specifically framed the issue within a larger cultural and political shift

"I think that this got bigger because conservatives got bored during COVID. I think that it's always been a problem that they desperately want to parent other people's kids. And I just don't, I did not anticipate it ever exploding like this." (CM01)

Similarly, others underscored the importance of parental choice while rejecting the idea that one group should dictate what is available to everyone:

> "No, we're not going to tell you have to read something, but we're not going to tell you you can't read it. [...] You don't have a right to tell my child what they can and cannot read. That's my job as their mother."

These perspectives highlight how book challenges often extend beyond individual concerns and become a tool for ideological influence.

The reception of LGBTQ+ books varied by community. Some areas experienced strong resistance to challenges, while others saw persistent opposition to LGBTQ+ themes alongside other sensitive topics like diversity and coming-of-age issues. As one librarian explained:

> “In my previous position in [Michigan city], they did not want any books that covered topics of LGBTQ, diversity, coming of age, tough subjects, rape, suicide, you know, murder, whatever. And it was always portrayed to the ones that are 18 or younger, the youth. But again, that's such a wide- that's like every book” (LD04)

In contrast, other communities offered stronger support for LGBTQ+ books, making it more difficult for challenges to gain traction. A librarian shared their experience in a community where challenges were met with significant pushback:

> “We have people who don't particularly like [LGBTQ+ books], but they're not starting any trouble with it again I think there's enough people that it would be a pretty strong pushback in this community” (LD04)

Fear and the Preservation of an Idealized Childhood

Along with control, book challengers actions were aimed at engendering fear , with respondents suggesting that it was being leveraged as a political tool. In several cases, book

challenges were framed as part of broader efforts to create fear to exert control over educational and public institutions. Some librarians observed that local library board elections had become increasingly influenced by national trends in fear-based governance, where fear was manipulated to sway voters.

> "Fear. I don't know how else to say it… I think people have figured out that you can use fear as a wedge issue, and you can manipulate people into voting for someone who can then control aspects of society. I think we're seeing that at a hyper-local level when it comes to things like, you know, being elected to a library board, or you're seeing it at a national level when it comes to federal elections, and how much fear mongering plays a role in our politics as of late." (LD02)

At one library board meeting—a video of which was posted to Facebook and collected for this study—a challenger began his arguments by quoting scripture, then labeling the book "evil and demonic" for its inclusion in the children/teen section due to its explicit content. The challenger would go onto speak:

> "This is mental rape. This is mental molestation of our children. It's brainwashing them. It's perverted sexual grooming… I mourn and I fear for our youth to have leaders in this area that are totally fine with opening a demonic gate upon them."

A pastor in a different community gave similar comments to a local newspaper after helping circulate a petition for "age appropriate" standards a the library

> "We just started checking into it and realizing that any child walking up would see those books and then be exposed to things that, if somebody gave those books to our kids on the street, they would be called groomers and people who are preparing kids for sexual exploits." (Alpena News, 2024)

Another dimension of this fear was highlighted by a librarian who described the broader thematic concerns raised by challengers. One interviewed librarian would go on to describe how challengers at their library did not like to see the tough topics at all and feared that they could "corrupt" children.

> "There's no exact title that they were mad about. They referenced titles, but for public purposes. Technically, I can't say that they were truly challenged, because they never filled out the proper documentation for it. So it was just themes. And the themes spanned from diversity, LGBTQ, coming of age, big topics, like rape, suicide, drugs, you know those, those big, tough, tough subjects, is just the umbrella to use." (LD04)

In contrast, one librarian highlighted the importance of having diverse resources available to all ages. Describing posters in the teen section of her library:

> "A lot of times people are embarrassed about sex, puberty, just being queer, all of that, and they don't want to come up and ask, right, because it's very sensitive information. So we have posters on our end caps. Hey, if you're interested in this topic, go to this section, and we have that around. …and not everybody's comfortable with verbalizing what they're going through… So if we can lessen the struggle for somebody else, I'm happy to do that." (LW03)

This statement underscores the contrast between a fear-based approach that idealizes an innocent childhood and an alternative model that supports informed exploration as part of healthy development. Both explicitly and implicitly, these narratives reinforce the notion of childhood innocence and the perceived need to protect it.

Taxpayer Contributions and the Library

In many communities, challengers invoked their status as taxpayers to assert authority over library collections, framing public funding as a justification for individual influence. This rhetoric reinforced a sense of entitlement over shared resources and governance, often disregarding the pluralistic mandate of public libraries. One library director described a book challenger as saying, ““Our taxes pay for this, and I don't agree with it, so I don't want my taxes to be buying it.” But, then they noted, “But on the flip side, so is, you know, John and David's, who are married, their taxpayer money is also going and they do want that.” (LD04)

After facing a book challenge, multiple communities reported having the challengers themselves or other members of the community, who were pro-removing objectionable materials from the library, run for library board positions to varying degrees of success. This dynamic reflected deeper efforts to assert control over public institutions, particularly by leveraging local governance structures. A librarian recalled:

> “And then the next election cycle, [The Challenger] ran for a seat on the library board because he was unhappy with the conclusion of that challenge attempt, and he was unsuccessful in his bid for a library board seat.” (LW01)

Two hours away in a more conservative community, coordinated efforts by ideologically aligned groups led to successful takeovers of library boards:

> “So [Organization] is known to infiltrate boards, and that is what happened. They got one onto the board, and then they got their second onto the board, and then they got someone who was a supporter, and that person was already on the board, so now you have majority of [Organization] affiliations onto the board, and that's just how they work. (LD04)

These examples illustrate how challenges can evolve beyond individual objections into broader campaigns aimed at institutional control. By reframing challenges as stepping stones toward governance influence, these actions become part of a larger strategy to reshape library policies and values.

Experiences and Responses at Local Libraries

At the local level, the impact of book challenges and censorship efforts revealed a complex interplay of misunderstandings, operational responses, and shifts in public engagement with libraries. The data indicate that many challenges arise from misperceptions about collection development—for example, the mistaken belief that the American Library Association directly provides libraries with materials for their collections—fueling distrust and prompting administrators to modify displays and practices. At the same time, librarians reported varied responses ranging from enhanced efforts to policy adaptations, even as some communities experienced declines in patronage while others maintained ongoing engagement despite vocal objections. Current book challenges are often coordinated through social media networks, local political organizations, and religious groups which seems to be intensifying the issue. These findings illustrate not only how local libraries navigate the immediate pressures of censorship and ideological scrutiny but also highlight the broader challenges involved in preserving community access to diverse materials while upholding principles of intellectual freedom.

Misunderstandings, Responses and Collection Development

My analysis revealed that there were significant misunderstandings between the librarians and challenger groups. Many book challengers mistakenly believed that the American Library Association (ALA) directly controlled library collections or provided pre-selected books without

local oversight. These misconceptions contributed to public distrust and, in some cases, policy changes aimed at severing ties with ALA.

Some individuals assumed that libraries received shipments of books pre-selected by ALA, rather than curating their own collections based on local policies. As one challenger noted,

> "I didn't get this confirmed, but I assume the American Library Association gives batches of books to our library, and our library accepts them" (CH01).

This assumption reflects a broader lack of awareness about how libraries make purchasing decisions. The ALA does not send books to the library in that interviewees community nor do they send books to any library. The ALA does however promote that libraries follow the Library Bill of Rights in regards to collection development:

> "Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation."

Throughout the interviews, all librarians and library directors were able to describe their library's collection development practices with ease. And while many of the librarians focused on the collection development of a particular section or sections of the library many of them had very similar responses to how the library purchased books for their collection

> "I would start by looking at the lists that the service at the library was using put out for what was being published every month. So I was looking at releases coming up in the next couple of months. And I started my search from there, because I was trying to buy as current materials as possible. Then I would search for reviews in publications like Library Journal. Kirkus Reviews School Library Journal. Because I was buying for a younger

audience, I would also look at Goodreads and Storygraph for like user reviews, as opposed to professional reviewer reviews. And I was also... I was going to say that I was, I was trying to buy for what the teens that were attending my programs, what I saw them reading. I was trying to match at least a portion of what I saw them picking up week to week with what I was buying, as well as trying to build a stronger, more well rounded collection." (LW01)

In contrast, one challenger when asked about collection development said:

"I do know that there's like a board, not the library board, but there's, I think, employees within the library that oversee the selection. I'm not sure if they read every page of every book that comes through, but I know there are people in place to review the books that come through locally." (CH01)

The Michigan Library Association as well as many of the surveyed libraries in this study directly speak to serving the needs of all community members. This has been further highlighted in the response many library organizations have had to the increase of challenges (Michigan Library Association, 2022).

Another belief seen was that ALA provided financial incentives for libraries to promote specific books or themes. One participant noted concerns in their community that book displays featuring ALA branding would be perceived as evidence of outside influence, leading them to alter promotional materials to avoid controversy:

"I don't mind having the display, but let's take the ALA logo out of it, because I don't want anybody looking at that and saying, 'Oh, you're getting funding to put that display up'" (LD01).

To address public misunderstandings, multiple libraries have taken steps like LD01 described, such as modifying posters or other displays to reduce controversy.

Preserving the library as a community center has become more important as libraries have become contentious spaces filled with misconceptions. Interviewed librarians reported mixed responses to the effects of book challenges on library usage. While some libraries experienced no decline in patronage, others—particularly in conservative-leaning districts—saw a decrease in visitors during and after challenges. For example, one librarian director from a historically conservative district observed a significant drop in library usage during a challenge:

> "At [Conservative leaning district], we saw a huge drop in people coming through the door. Our programs kind of stopped being well attended. The teens that were going in and doing their homework, they weren't going in anymore, or they would out of rebellion. But no, it became a really big dark cloud, and it was a constant topic." (LD04)

However, in more politically mixed districts-as reported by interviewee and confirmed with election data-, responses were more nuanced. One librarian described how a group of challengers vowed never to use the library again if the contested books were retained. Yet, even after the library chose to keep the books, those same individuals continued to use the library:

> "I mean, they still use our library. They still come in. I still see them all the time, even though 'I'm never using you.' Okay, that's your choice. They're in here, and I still welcome them in every day, the same as I do with everyone else, because they are a member of this community, and I just know I will direct them to materials that I think that they would more prefer to read, and I'm not going to flaunt those materials in front of them, because I know that makes them upset." (LW03)

Social and political organization

My evidence found that book challenges are often not isolated events but rather coordinated efforts involving social media networks, political organizations, and religious groups.

Social media

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) have played a crucial role in spreading awareness about book challenges and mobilizing individuals. Several participants described how challenge lists were shared within online communities, leading to coordinated efforts to remove certain books from library collections.

One librarian recounted an incident where a patron arrived with a Facebook printout of Genderqueer with the intention of banning the book, seemingly acting on guidance from an online group or post.

> "They came in with a printout of Genderqueer that I believe was from Facebook. So they were in some sort of social media group that had told them about the existence of Genderqueer and that it should not be in libraries generally." (LW01)

A community member reinforced this idea, noting that many challengers appeared to be part of Facebook groups dedicated to monitoring books in public schools and libraries.

> "I assume that they are in Facebook groups together. I've heard that there is a Facebook group called like [redacted] or something or other." (CM01)

Throughout my research, several of these Facebook groups were examined. These online communities enabled individuals to quickly disseminate challenge lists and coordinate library visits, often guiding members on which books to target. Posts in these groups frequently cherry-picked the most explicit passages or pages, presenting them without full context to

emphasize the alleged dangers these books might pose. Additionally, many posts called out specific libraries and used vague language about the need to “protect children.” Organizations, such as Moms For Liberty, have been reported to utilize a rating system to scale content in these books and track their presence in libraries, often from a website called Booklooks.com (Bookslooks, 2022). As of March 2025, the website is no longer active and the content has been taken down.

Political Organizations and Coordinated Efforts

Beyond social media, local political organizations have also played a role in coordinating book challenges. Multiple librarians and library directors observed clear evidence of organized efforts rather than independent individual actions. One library director in speaking of a challenging instance said

> "It definitely felt like there was a coordinated list that they were working from. The fact that two members presented the exact same list as part of their objections let me know that there was some measure of coordination." (LD01)

Several participants mentioned groups, such as Republican Clubs, Tea Party Clubs, and Moms for Liberty, or other affiliated groups, which have been very active in library-related discourse as many of those groups have campaigned for increased parental rights and for more control over their children's education. One library director spoke of engaging with their local republican group in an attempt to educate community members about the role of the library and its stance on intellectual freedoms.

> "I have now spoken at [Republican Club] three different times. [...] It was an opportunity to talk about things like parents’ rights, which is something that we actually talk about here in the library." (LD02)

These interactions highlight ongoing dialogue between libraries and political organizations, reinforcing how book challenges are not just individual grievances but part of a broader cultural and political conversation.

One councilmember of a town in Michigan motioned for the removal of all books discussing LGBTQ+ and political themes. His motion included

> "Materials for children under age 18 that discuss sexually explicit themes including but not limited to sex acts, sexual activity, sexual abuse, sexual perversions, sex-based classifications, sexual preferences or aversions, sexual identity, gender identity, or other topics of a sexual nature …Materials that glorify or normalize gender dysphoria, often called transgenderism, shall be prohibited under all circumstances." (Bridge Michigan 2024)

The following day, in an email to the town's residents, he would continue on to write, "the city's library director has begun to fill the library with CRT, LGBT and sexually promiscuous books and displays." (Bridge Michigan 2024). This correspondence demonstrates how local government officials are also exerting pressure on libraries.

Religious affiliated challenges and objections

Religious organizations, particularly churches, have also played a role in book challenges. In a notable instance, a challenger listed a church's address instead of a home address on a materials reconsideration request, suggesting organized efforts within faith-based communities.

> "One of them put down the address of a local church and did not have an active library card." (LW02)

In that situation, it was further suggested that pastors and church leaders may have encouraged challenges

> "We were fairly certain that this church had kind of activated them [...] into going and challenging these materials."

Church-led activation is not unique to this library district and has been observed in multiple locations across Michigan. Multiple religious leaders, who reportedly spoke positively about removing materials from libraries, were contacted for this research; however, all declined the interview request.

One council member who also declined an interview request has previously publicly commented on his local library. Throughout the blog post -- which was cross posted on Facebook -- he evoked explicitly religious language that supports the evidence in previous sections of LGBTQ+ material, desire to protect children and religious motivation behind some challenges.

> “This moral collapse came to a head when the librarians set up a prominent display in the children’s section of at least two picture books that included children having either two dads or two moms. The subtle nuance appears innocuous, but concerned citizens turned out to express their extreme displeasure at such repugnant, and politically charged material prominently displayed targeting five-year-olds! Since homosexuality cannot procreate naturally, the slippery slope toward indoctrination into this aberrant lifestyle is evident and unwelcome.”(Facebook post)

Additionally, homeschool groups have leveraged libraries for both resource access and advocacy. One librarian noted that a local homeschooling community was highly engaged in library programming and had also organized efforts around book challenges.

"Yes, they are a homeschooling group that uses the Library, but they are very active…And so that's how they have met, and they have been able to get together and band together and get this going." (LW03)

Psychological and personal impacts on librarians

Throughout the interviews many librarians reported a significant emotional toll during and after challenges. This was driven by the intensity of some challenges and the resulting harassment many librarians faced. In extreme cases, librarians reported long-term mental health repercussions with some librarians leaving the profession all together.

Harassment

Many librarians experienced direct harassment and hostility in response to their professional efforts to uphold intellectual freedom. Reports included feeling unsafe in the workplace, facing aggressive questioning from community members, and in extreme cases in Michigan, the threat of violence or jail time. One participant described working extensive hours under extreme stress, during one of the challenges they faced.

"You put that on top of your shift that you worked, and that's a lot of time. Plus, I lived at the time about an hour from [Library] So like, you know, you get out at eight, drive home, it's nine, throw yourself in bed, get up, and then you're back at the library for the morning shift because someone has to open. So it just, it was, it was a lot" (LW02)

"Library staff always work extremely hard, often for not a lot of pay, and have to deal with the brunt of issues that are really political battles being forced on them." (LW02)

Another participant detailed the personal toll of extended workdays:

"So, yeah, I mean, it became hostile. My work days became, you know, instead of eight hours, they were anywhere from 12 to 14 hours. You know, I was getting up at 5:30, I get

to work at seven, and I'd be there until eight, nine—and now it's just… It was exhausting" (LD04).

The climate of fear and intimidation led some librarians to question their ability to continue in the profession. Beyond psychological stress, many librarians faced direct harassment from community members, experienced hostile work environments, and even threats of violence. Some described the fear of entering the library each day, uncertain about what awaited them. One librarian recounted the intimidation they experienced:

> "It became pretty hostile... it was hard to want to go into work. You didn't know what was going to happen when you opened the door." (LD04)

In more extreme cases, librarians were followed to their cars or confronted aggressively. One librarian described an unsettling encounter with a challenger who pursued them outside the library:

> "I noticed someone was following me… by the time I got to my car, he was right there, angrily asking why the doors were locked." (LW02)

This climate of fear and persistent scrutiny not only took a toll on individuals but also raised concerns about the safety of library professionals in an increasingly polarized environment. One librarian specifically requested for a police officer to be present at a library board meeting due to particularly aggressive challengers.

> "[City Council] they didn't believe me when I said, Hey, this is happening, and this is what's gonna happen from it, they did not believe me, so they didn't want to put a police officer in our board meeting. And I said, well, that's just too bad if I don't have one, I will refuse to start like I will refuse to agree to start the meeting until a police officer is in our meeting. So they did, they had a police officer there. And then later I got a phone call,

> Hey, we're sorry we didn't believe you. We will continue to have police presence at your meetings. And then, you know, have heavier police presence around your building throughout the day, to which I said, told you so," (LD04)

Morale of librarians

Librarians facing book challenges and censorship efforts reported significant emotional distress, often describing their experiences as draining, exhausting, and anxiety-inducing. The psychological toll of these conflicts manifested in various ways, including stress, burnout, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). One librarian director captured the intensity of these experiences

> "This was emotionally charged when the book challenges started to happen. And it's a draining, laborious act of going through and defending a decision that you've made. As a result, I knew that my team would feel burned out really fast if I didn't do some things." (LD02)

To mitigate these effects, some libraries implemented mental health support measures, such as hiring a licensed therapist. This approach provided a release valve for staff dealing with the ongoing stress of book challenges, whether through group or individual sessions. As great as this support is, it is a rarity in the data. Many libraries are unable to provide this type of support to employees. This support also did not eliminate the long-term psychological burden of these battles.

> "It became pretty hostile. You know, it was hard to want to go into work. It was hard, you didn't know what was going to happen when you open the door." (LD04)

Retention and Institutional Support

The ongoing strain of book challenges and politically charged disputes significantly affected workplace morale. Several librarians expressed a sense of exhaustion and frustration, often working extended hours and feeling uncertain about their professional stability (LD04).

> “Library staff always work extremely hard, often for not a lot of pay, and have to deal with the brunt of issues that are really political battles being forced on them.” (LW02)

One participant described the workplace environment as "hostile," noting fears of backlash from community members and the library board. In some cases, librarians chose to leave their positions due to a perceived lack of institutional support. One individual specifically cited a board member’s failure to uphold professional values as a reason for their departure.

> “I did have at least one staff member choose to leave because they did not feel that the board was going to support long-term planning. They didn't want to tie themselves to this library any longer…. So I guess where I'm going with that is, it has been problematic, and it's hard to even retain quality staff sometimes when the outcome is a board member who is not voting to uphold the values of the profession.” (LD02)

Multiple librarians also described how support from their library directors was greatly impactful (both positively and negatively) when facing a challenge:

> “The director was very absent at this time, so it kind of felt like there was a lack of physical presence in leadership at the time, even though the director was communicating via email, I think that the staff banded together to support each other.” (LW01)

Library directors who implemented supportive policies, such as remote work options, saw some improvement in morale, but these measures were not always sufficient to prevent attrition.

In order to combat the long-term effects of these challenges and preempt future conflicts, some libraries also strengthened their collection development and reconsideration policies. As one librarian noted:

> "We just updated the policy to kind of be a little more stern on that [...] We made the reconsideration form a little more detailed. [...] There's homework that they have to say that they did before they can just do it, so they can't just be like, 'I hated the cover.'" (LD04)

Beyond internal policies, participants suggested that broader educational efforts could reinforce the importance of intellectual freedom; this type of education did seem to benefit the challenging situation at one library location.

> "Maybe education by libraries and library organizations about First Amendment rights and how they pertain to libraries [...] would be helpful." (LW01)

Lasting Psychological Effects

The impact of these conflicts extended beyond the immediate workplace, with librarians reporting ongoing stress, self-doubt, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their experiences.

> "I have been diagnosed with PTSD from all this, as have other librarians who have been through it. It's extremely traumatizing. So if it ends that, that's all that I care about, is just ending the trauma, ending the hate." (LD04)

Some participants emphasized that the emotional burden did not simply dissipate once they left a particular position or library system. The lasting nature of these experiences underscored the need for broader systemic support and policy changes to protect library

professionals from sustained psychological harm. Even years later, librarians found themselves reliving past confrontations, replaying conversations, and struggling with lingering self-doubt.

> "A lot of people think, well, you're out of it, you're done. That's not true... The nightmares don't stop, the moments of thinking, 'I should've said that,' don't stop." (LD04)

This continued psychological impact calls for not only immediate interventions but also long-term strategies to support the emotional well-being of library staff.

Broader Implications and Future Directions

The evidence suggests that while librarians persist in their commitment to intellectual freedom, their practices and professional well-being are increasingly challenged by coordinated censorship efforts that leverage both the First Amendment and broader socio-political dynamics. As the data demonstrate, these challenges are not merely isolated incidents but are deeply embedded in public debates over the role of libraries in democratic societies—debates that extend to legislative initiatives and historical parallels. In exploring both the promise of policy reforms, as seen in discussions around the Michigan Freedom to Read Act, and the paradoxical invocation of free speech by censorship advocates, this section sets the stage for considering future directions that may fortify internal support systems and external legislative safeguards for library professionals.

Institutional and Legislative Considerations

Despite the challenges, many librarians remained committed to their professional values, continuing to advocate for intellectual freedom and resisting ideological control over public institutions. In the midst of ongoing censorship debates, several librarians expressed cautious optimism that institutional and legislative reforms might help mitigate the impact of these

challenges. Some expressed hope that new legislation would provide greater protections and alleviate some of the hostility surrounding censorship debates. With one librarian discussing their hopes for the Michigan Freedom to Read Act:

> "I'm hopeful in the Act passing. If that passes, we will see what happens. You know, who knows. But I also think that will help end the fire, and maybe we can move on to someone else. You know, there's always going to be something, but, yeah, I'm extremely hopeful with this new Act, that it'll help end it, or at least give us a leg to stand on and just not be this huge traumatic thing. So I have been diagnosed with PTSD from all this, as have other librarians who have been through it. It's extremely traumatizing. So if it ends that, that's all that I care about, is just ending the trauma, ending the hate. And I think this, I'm really excited about this new act coming into play. So, yeah, watch the bill. Call your legislators." (LD04)

Though these hopeful sentiments illustrate the potential for change and policy influence, the Michigan Freedom to Read Act ultimately died in the State Senate. Several participants noted that a lack of sustained institutional and legislative support contributed to the ongoing challenges they experienced, suggesting that stronger systemic backing might have alleviated some of the professional and emotional strains. In light of persistent censorship efforts, it's increasingly clear that protecting librarians requires a dual strategy: robust internal support systems combined with external policy reforms that uphold intellectual freedom.

Libraries as a Target & The First Amendment

A prominent theme among participants was the belief that libraries have become a prime focus for censorship efforts due to their public nature and the perception that library

professionals would not push back. One librarian reflected on how some individuals may have viewed libraries as an easy target:

> "I sometimes wonder if [Challengers] thought this would be an easy group for me to come in and dictate how I want to see this library sort of function, the books that are on the shelf. This would be an easy win for somebody who had, you know, censorship goals, basically." (LD02)

In spite of this perception of libraries as "soft targets," many librarians underscored their collective resolve and capacity to unite against such efforts.

> "I do think it's been fascinating how much this field has coalesced and come together and fought back as a group." (LD02)

This resistance underscores the profession's unwavering commitment to intellectual freedom even as libraries face mounting external pressures.

While librarians frequently cited the First Amendment as a core defense against book bans, they also noted that opponents of certain materials invoked free speech to justify their efforts.

> "It's interesting because people on both sides of this issue think that they are exercising and protecting their First Amendment rights." (LW01)

This paradox of competing interpretations often led to situations where challengers, despite invoking free speech, overlooked the broader implications of their actions.

> "And then I think they can get a little bit blindsided in terms of forgetting that they also tend to talk about first amendment rights, and that this would be railroading to, you know, their First Amendment if they decided to then ban books from the collection." (LD02)

Some interviewees drew stark historical parallels to underline the gravity of the situation.

"It was scary, because there's so many similarities between what is going on right now and what has happened over [in Nazi Germany] in the past that make me a little worried for our country, because information is key." (LW03)

These reflections illustrate how debates over free speech and censorship are deeply intertwined with historical and political contexts, reinforcing that while the First Amendment serves as both a protective shield and a battleground, its interpretations continue to evolve in response to contemporary challenges.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Introduction & Historical Context

The contemporary surge in book challenges is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is deeply rooted in longstanding debates over censorship, morality, and the control of public knowledge. As Beringhausen (1948) compared book bannings to “witch hunts” and Knox (2015) traced the roots of the issue back to medieval practices, today's challenges mirror these historical efforts to regulate what is acceptable reading (or knowledge). This historical perspective stresses that the struggle over public knowledge has always involved attempts to control narratives and define moral boundaries. This study focuses on the book challenges in the State of Michigan and demonstrates how the current climate—amplified by digital media and heightened political polarization—adds a new dimension to these struggles. In this context, modern book challenges reflect broader ideological battles that extend well beyond the protection of children, influencing public discourse and threatening intellectual freedom. In this discussion, I first outline the historical and ideological underpinnings of book challenges, then examine the findings including diverse motivations among challengers, building towards how these efforts collectively operate as mechanisms of control. I end by examining the impact at the local library level and implications for the future of intellectual freedom.

It is important to note that the challengers discussed throughout this chapter are not a single, uniform group, but rather comprise individuals and organizations with varying underlying motives and objectives. While some challengers were driven by sincere concerns over content appropriateness for young readers (including the challenger I interviewed), others operated from more ideologically extreme or conspiratorial standpoints. These distinctions point to a spectrum

of motivations rather than a singular, monolithic challenger profile. This research centers on motivations and impacts that are broadly observable in public library contexts, as these represent the most common and institutionally significant forms of challenge.

This study is also specific to Michigan due to the unique political and social dimensions present. Demographics, legislation and more influence the experiences of librarians and challengers alike and influence the result to be unique to Michigan. Unlike other states there seems to be a lack of focus on library materials that contain racial diversity or critical race theory and while those materials were mentioned throughout the interviews the primary target of challengers is on LGBTQ+ content. Michigan historically being a "swing" state demonstrates the political diversity within the state and further highlights the mixed responses to book challenges seen throughout the state.

With this foundation in mind, the following sections examine how contemporary book challenges operate within politically polarized climates, are mobilized through digital platforms, and are justified through the rhetoric of parental rights.

Political Polarization and Ideological Battles

Libraries in Michigan have increasingly become battlegrounds for ideological disputes, particularly in politically polarized areas. This polarization reveals how book challenges extend beyond individual objections to become public manifestations of ideological conflict. Libraries, as community spaces, are forced to navigate these clashes while striving to uphold their commitment to access and inclusion. Results indicated that communities with a strong conservative political identity exhibited more pronounced defensive reactions, resulting in a decrease in library engagement during periods of heightened library controversy. Challengers often invoked cultural and political values to justify their actions, changing the perspective of

public libraries from established community centers to controversial spaces. The effects of this are more visible in politically homogeneous library districts where some libraries saw a drop in patronage during challenges which was evident in the interview data. The transformation of libraries from neutral public spaces into battlegrounds for free speech highlights the ongoing tension between traditional community values and contemporary demands for diversity and inclusion. Spanning from Mill (1859) to Strossen (2020) we are reminded that a healthy democracy depends on a robust exchange of ideas—a principle increasingly at risk in the face of censorship.

When public institutions like libraries are weaponized in ideological battles, the stakes go beyond the books themselves—they challenge the fundamental principles of open access to information and diversity of thought.

Social and Political Dimensions of Challenges

These challenges are not new phenomena but an echo of the historical patterns of censorship aimed at upholding dominant social norms (Knox, 2015). Today, conservative groups such as Moms for Liberty, Mary in the Library, and local political groups continue this legacy by targeting books that challenge traditional narratives, particularly those centered on LGBTQ+ identities and marginalized voices from racial and ethnic groups (Burmester & Howard, 2022; Teel, 2023). My interviews as well as other reports particularly highlight the focus on LGBTQ+ content in Michigan where while in many interviews topics of race were brought up, challengers overwhelmingly were concerned with LGBTQ+ topics (ACLU of Michigan, 2024).

It is crucial to emphasize that not all challengers operated from the same ideological standpoint; some are driven by genuine concerns over content suitability for young readers, while others pursue broader agendas of intellectual control. The data reveal that the rhetoric of

"protecting children" often serves as a façade for broader ideological conflicts, a dynamic that has long been documented in the literature (Tamney & Johnson, 1997), as many challenges utilized thinly veiled religious or political reasoning to support their claims. This can be seen in the data as many challengers described objectionable materials as "morally wrong" or "demonic". Further, the results indicate that regions with politically homogeneous communities are more prone to intensified challenges, resulting in observable declines in library patronage and engagement as summarized by LD04 in discussing experiences at their library where local pressures and challenges transformed the library environment. While challengers may genuinely perceive these restrictions as protective—believing that limiting access to diverse voices safeguards their children's moral and political worldview—this framing ultimately obscures the broader consequences: a restriction of intellectual freedom, diminished trust in libraries, and a chilling effect on community engagement.

Ideological Motivations and Targeted Content

Book challenges in Michigan did not focus solely on content suitability; they were often driven by a perceived moral imperative to protect children from ideas challengers believed threatened established social and cultural norms. My findings indicate that many challenges specifically targeted books with LGBTQ+ themes or content highlighting marginalized communities. This aligns with Hammer's (2024) observations that such works are frequently singled out under the guise of shielding children from "inappropriate" content. The analysis of the interviews displays that even vague criticisms carry an underlying intent to silence narratives that contest established cultural standards. Importantly, many challengers view these efforts not as acts of censorship, but as necessary measures to uphold what they consider to be moral order and protect children from ideological harm.

Rather than isolated objections, these challenges represent coordinated attempts to reinforce dominant ideologies and exclude dissenting perspectives. This observation further supports the notion that challengers exhibit diverse motivations: some focus narrowly on perceived content appropriateness, while others are engaged in a broader bid to shape public discourse and control intellectual access. This pattern of targeting extends beyond individual titles to encompass entire categories of literature, suggesting that challengers in the latter category seek to systematically constrain the ideological diversity available in public spaces.

The language used by challengers—even when vague—revealed a broader desire to suppress narratives that challenge dominant cultural values. In the interviews, one librarian described a patron who referred vaguely and disdainfully to "those books," unable to name specific titles but clearly signaling disapproval of a certain type of content. While the rhetoric may appear imprecise, it reflects a deeply held belief that certain narratives are inherently dangerous or corrupting. From this perspective, restricting access becomes an act of protection, not repression. However, such emotionally charged and ideologically motivated interventions function as a form of soft censorship, signaling which voices do not belong.

These findings suggest that book challenges are part of an ongoing struggle to shape social and cultural norms through public institutions. When challengers dictate what should or should not be available, they assert power over community knowledge, effectively narrowing the scope of intellectual freedom.

Clarifying Misconceptions and "Hidden" Content

An important characteristic of the book challenges in Michigan emerging from the results was the pervasive misunderstanding regarding how library collections are developed and an idea of "hidden" material in the libraries. Interview and document data revealed that many

challengers erroneously believed that organizations, such as the American Library Association, directly curated and supplied books to local libraries as mentioned by the challenger I interviewed and in documentation surveyed for this research. This misperception has fueled distrust, as some community members assume that controversial content is imposed from outside, rather than being the product of locally governed collection development practices. Additionally, claims regarding "hidden" content in library materials—where explicit aspects of a work are claimed to be obscured—have further complicated public debates. The analysis suggests that these misinterpretations contribute to a broader narrative in which libraries are cast not as open forums for diverse ideas but as opaque institutions susceptible to external manipulation. To counter these misconceptions, librarians spoke about the need for enhanced public education on collection development practices and transparency in labeling methods.

Parental Rights as Ideological Tools

The invocation of parental rights functioned as both a protective measure and an instrument of ideological control. While challengers claimed to advocate for children's wellbeing, the underlying goal often appears to be the removal of narratives that conflict with the dominant cultural values for everyone. This positioned libraries not just as community resources but as battlegrounds for moral and cultural authority.

Parental Rights as Justification for Challenges

The invocation of parental rights was a central tactic in many book challenges in Michigan as elsewhere. While challengers claim to be acting in the interest of their children's welfare, previous research (e.g., Tamney & Johnson, 1997; Tucker, 2024) reveals that these claims often mask deeper ideological motives. Likewise, my findings showed that parents not only demanded the removal of controversial materials but also expected librarians to serve as de

facto gatekeepers of moral standards. This contradictory expectation—where parents seek both freedom to choose and blanket censorship—mirrors critiques in the literature regarding the paradox of parental rights as a tool for enforcing the parents' worldviews (Tylenda, 2024). Such contradictions place librarians in untenable positions, tasked with upholding intellectual freedom while facing mounting pressure to conform to restrictive community standards.

Challengers frequently spoke of parental rights as a means to justify the removal of certain books from library collections much of which had an undercurrent of maintaining childhood innocence. In their view, libraries exposed children to inappropriate content—ranging from explicit imagery to mature themes—that should be shielded from young readers. Participants shared accounts of parents expressing discomfort with children encountering content they found offensive, especially when that content related to sexuality, gender identity, or other culturally sensitive themes. Some challengers explicitly asserted that library materials will corrupt young readers on the library reconsideration forms. This directly correlates with ideas of childhood innocence however this innocence is not so straightforward as children age and deal with increasingly complex issues (Tucker, 2024). LW03 specifically spoke to how providing materials to assist youth and teens with sensitive issues was particularly impactful however those materials were also the ones being targeted specifically topics of sex, puberty or queerness.

In many cases, parents did not want to be responsible for monitoring their children's reading but instead expected the library to remove potentially objectionable materials altogether, regardless of whether their own children would encounter it. However, librarians also noted a disconnect between challengers' stated concerns and their expectations of library staff. Librarians described patrons expecting them to proactively restrict access to controversial books, essentially outsourcing parental responsibilities to library staff. Librarians found this expectation

problematic, especially as many emphasized that their role is not to police access based on individual family preferences. This expectation shifted the burden of responsibility from families to public institutions.

In interviews with librarians, they recounted public meetings where challengers labeled certain books as inherently wrong or harmful, arguing they had no place in the library regardless of who accessed them. This absolutist approach reveals the ideological nature of many challenges, in which concern for children functions more as a rhetorical shield than a genuine focus. Interviewees consistently shared examples where the language of "protecting children" was used to target materials centered on LGBTQ+ topics or stories from marginalized communities particularly on the topics of race. The rhetoric of parental protection, as discussed by Tucker (2024), is thus a dual-edged tool—it mobilizes community support while reinforcing an exclusionary moral framework. In doing so, challengers echo the historical use of censorship to preserve a narrow vision of social and cultural order. By framing the issue as one of protecting children, challengers seek to mobilize community support and influence library policy decisions, even when the concern is less about the actual content and more about controlling public discourse.

This attitude revealed a contradiction: parents would argue for the right to make decisions for their own children while simultaneously demanding that certain materials be removed entirely to prevent access by any child. This dual expectation places librarians in a precarious position—expected to respect parental authority while also being asked to enforce ideological restrictions on behalf of others. This tension was especially evident when librarians were criticized for not preventing children from accessing certain books, even though no system exists to enforce such selective control on behalf of all families. Librarians emphasized their

commitment to parental involvement, noting that they deferred to parents regarding what their own children could read. However, the librarians felt the expectation that libraries remove options entirely undermines their values of access, choice, and neutrality.

These contradictory demands not only impose an unrealistic burden on library staff but also raise significant ethical and logistical concerns, particularly in the context of already overworked employees and the potential privacy implications of tracking reading habits (Niehoff, 2023).

The interplay between parental rights rhetoric and institutional responsibility reveals a nuanced power dynamic; while some parents appear to genuinely care about content exposure, others use parental rights as a vehicle to enforce broader ideological constraints on a public institution. This dual expectation exposes a deeper disconnect between parental desires and the practical role of libraries. On the surface, the desire to protect children is understandable; however, when combined with the expectation that libraries enforce these protections, it conflicts with the core mission of libraries—to provide access to information for all community members. Such contradictory demands not only confuse the responsibilities of library staff but also undermine the principle of intellectual freedom and the role of librarians by effectively outsourcing censorship to librarians.

Coordinated Efforts and Social Media

A recurring theme in the data was the highly coordinated nature of modern book challenges. In this way a more national movement influenced local challenges in Michigan. Social media platforms have become crucial tools for disseminating pre-compiled lists and rallying community members to act. Many librarians described patrons entering the library with specific printouts—most often sourced from Facebook or similar platforms—highlighting titles

many of which the challengers had not personally read. The analysis of the results indicates that this coordination transforms what might be isolated incidents into a broader, more sustained effort aimed at redefining public knowledge.

Throughout the interviews, librarians recounted times when patrons would call in after reading online about concerning materials in the library. Other librarians shared how challengers would come into the library prepared, often working from a list. These lists are often circulated by conservative groups with censorship goals, such as Moms for Liberty. This coordinated approach, facilitated by online platforms, suggests that local challenges are part of larger, national efforts aimed at influencing library collections and publicly available information. The results highlighted that social media platforms have become a critical mechanism for organizing and amplifying book challenges. Platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), enable the rapid dissemination of pre-compiled lists of controversial titles, serving as rallying points for like-minded individuals. Analysis indicated that these digital tools not only facilitate communication among individuals or groups with censorship goals, but also transform local disputes into part of a broader, nation-wide coordinated effort. This digital mobilization further illustrates how varied, local motivations can converge into a concentrated force for exerting control over public discourse. The convergence of political, ideological, and digital activism in this space underscores a significant transformation in the way public discourse is shaped. With challengers using social media platforms to disseminate pre-compiled lists and mobilize support across different communities, local incidents become part of a larger national effort. Additionally, the involvement of conservative political and religious groups further amplified the ideological stakes of these challenges, urging libraries to adapt their outreach and communication strategies to better address online misinformation and polarization.

Fear and Control: A Broader Struggle

Book challengers seek to control library collections as a part of a larger struggle over public knowledge and representations. Historically, as early as the first recorded book banning in the United States in 1637 (Connolly, 2023), moral authority has been used to dictate public discourse. The stakes of these debates were higher than just deciding what books should be available in libraries, and ideological divides were not merely about protecting children—they were about which ideas and stories were considered acceptable or dangerous. Ultimately, these challenges represent broader struggles over the representation of ideas, diversity, and intellectual freedom.

While challengers often frame their actions as a means of protecting children or preserving moral standards, these justifications mask a deeper ideological motive. The invocation of parental rights and moral authority was frequently employed to legitimize efforts to restrict content that challenges the dominant perspective, particularly with stories involving LGBTQ+ themes or other marginalized communities. These strategies often relied on a fear-based framing of these communities as inappropriate or threatening. Analysis of the results indicated that such tactics are intentionally used to narrow public discourse, as librarians noted attempts not only to remove specific titles but also to influence the overall direction of collection development. Some library staff observed that challengers appeared intent on influencing library collections in ways that aligned with their personal worldviews, suggesting a broader attempt to assert control over public spaces and access to diverse perspectives for all citizens. These sentiments were consistent with previous literature, which argues that the appeal to parental rights is less about moral standards and protecting children and more about enforcing

ideologically narrow narratives (Hammer, 2024; Tylenda, 2024). To this sense, fear has become a tool used to rally support around book challenges, amplifying moral panic.

In summary, the drive to control library collections, as evidenced by coordinated digital strategies, the selective targeting of materials, and contradictory parental expectations, underscores a complex, multifaceted effort to dominate public discourse. This striving for control reflects a broader cultural struggle. Libraries, as public institutions, are being drawn into ideological battles over representation and identity, leading to conversations about intellectual freedom. Not only is the availability of diverse perspectives at stake but also the fundamental principle that libraries should serve all members of the community, rather than only those of the more vocal and motivated groups. Ultimately, these findings pave the way to understand how various strategies converge to assert control over public knowledge—a central argument of this discussion.

To counteract these pressures, librarians in this study have reaffirmed their commitment to intellectual freedom by actively resisting ideologically driven censorship, as evidenced by their proactive stances in public forums and internal policy discussions. This resistance pushed back against a culture of fear seeking to include diverse voices and representation.

Impact on Library Professionals and the Emotional Toll

The repercussions of these challenges extended beyond intellectual debates—they took a significant toll on library staff in the MIchigan libraries I studied. Librarians described the emotional and professional burden in the interviews, including increased workloads, harassment, and burnout. Clark-Hunt and Creel (2024) and Niehoff (2023) previously found similar results of challenges when librarians are not only on the frontlines of defending intellectual freedom but also bear the brunt of community backlash. My results highlight that the cumulative emotional

labor and operational disruptions caused by these challenges severely undermine both staff well-being and the library's capacity to serve its community effectively. This situation was exacerbated when institutional support is lacking, leaving staff vulnerable to the dual pressures of managing conflict and maintaining service standards. This research supports previous literature consistently calling for enhanced training, clear policies, and mental health support to mitigate these challenges (Clark-Hunt & Creel, 2024; Niehoff, 2023).

Beyond the visible operational challenges, the psychological toll on library professionals emerged as a critical concern. The interviews revealed that sustained exposure to harassment, extended work hours, and community backlash has resulted in significant emotional and professional strain. Librarians reported not only immediate stress responses but also longer-term impacts, such as burnout, chronic anxiety, and even PTSD. These outcomes underscore the vulnerability of those tasked with defending intellectual freedom in increasingly hostile environments. The data suggests that these challenges compromise both personal well-being and the broader institutional capacity to maintain public service standards. The findings point to an urgent need for comprehensive support mechanisms, including mental health resources, effective leadership training, and clear, standardized protocols for handling censorship challenges. Addressing these issues is essential for safeguarding the commitment of library professionals and ensuring the continued functioning of libraries as bastions of intellectual freedom.

The emotional toll of these challenges emerged as a pervasive theme across participant responses. Librarians not only reported acute instances of harassment, threats, and community backlash but also chronic stress and anxiety that permeated their daily work lives. This sustained emotional labor often culminated in burnout and, in some instances, resignations. findings further reveal that these pressures not only diminish individual well-being but also have

cascading effects on team dynamics and overall institutional morale. Beyond interviewee accounts, external reports have documented severe outcomes—including library directors losing their jobs (Demillo, 2025), forced resignations (Rios, 2022), and even threats of legal repercussions (French, 2025)—underscoring that the stakes extend far beyond intellectual debates.

These experiences were especially troubling considering that librarians are on the frontlines of resisting censorship (Berninghausen, 1948; Clark-Hunt & Creel, 2024). The dual pressures of managing both the emotional impact of hostility and the heightened responsibility of upholding intellectual freedom compounded the stress experienced by these professionals. Additionally, librarians reported a significant increase in workload. Handling formal complaints, attending public meetings, and defending collection decisions not only diverted time from core library duties but also contributed to the emotional burden experienced daily.

Due to the increased workplace pressures, workload and other emotional stresses, participants described colleagues who left their positions due to lack of institutional support or escalating community hostility. These departures not only disrupted operations but also demoralized remaining staff who often faced increased workloads, at least temporarily..

Retention and Staffing Challenges

The long-term impact of sustained ideological challenges has implications for staff retention. Participants spoke about the difficulty of retaining skilled employees in environments marked by political tension, inadequate compensation, and inconsistent leadership support. Results suggest that these conditions create an environment where the already heavy burdens on staff are exacerbated, leading to increased turnover and destabilized workforces.

Some librarians noted that institutional leadership was not always prepared or willing to offer robust defenses against censorship efforts. In situations where leadership was passive or risk-averse, staff felt more vulnerable to community pressure and professional burnout, further discouraging long-term commitment.

These findings reveal the urgent need for libraries to implement clear institutional policies and proactive support systems. Robust policies that include mental health resources, leadership training, and clear protocols for handling censorship challenges are essential to protecting staff well-being and sustaining the core mission of intellectual freedom (Urban Libraries Council, 2024).

Given that librarians are increasingly called upon to manage conflict and advocate publicly in hostile environments (Niehoff, 2023), future research should evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions. Exploring comprehensive support models—possibly drawing on successful frameworks from other public service sectors—could offer valuable insights.

Institutional and Legislative Considerations

Institutional Responses and Preparedness

There is a wide variation in how libraries have responded to the increasing challenges. In Michigan, some librarians reported updating their policies and broadening staff training, while others remain underprepared. This variation exposes the lack of a standard approach to handling these conflicts. While the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom offers support through helplines, workshops, and legal assistance (American Library Association, 2008), my findings indicated that these external resources are often insufficient compared to the tailored, internal support provided by proactive library leadership. In recent years, additional supporting organizations

have acted to assist librarians facing challenges, such as the development by the Michigan Library Association of an Intellectual Freedom Toolkit (Michigan Library Association, 2022). There has also been an increase of workshops and panels at library conventions or other types of furthering education on the topic that offer advice and support to librarians and many of the librarians I interviewed had attended such events. The interviewees indicated that while these resources were helpful, challenges often remain so specific to local communities that internal support—from library directors or peer networks—proved most impactful.

Participants emphasized the need for proactive planning, including staff training and standardized policies. Where clear procedures were in place, the burden on individual librarians was reduced. Institutional preparedness can alleviate the emotional burden on staff and foster a more supportive working environment.

Legislative Protections

Some librarians expressed cautious optimism regarding new legislative measures that could protect libraries and staff from ideological pressure. While there is hope that legislative changes might ease the pressure, skepticism remains about whether these measures will be sufficient in the face of persistent book challenges. The data suggest that while legislation may offer some relief, it is unlikely to fully resolve the deep-seated ideological conflicts that drive book challenges.

Due to the interviews taking place between September-December of 2024, multiple interviewees mentioned their hope for the passing of the Michigan Freedom to Read Act. Many were hopeful that with the bill's passage there would be additional protections against those attempting to challenge books. Unfortunately, this bill died in the State Senate in late 2024.

Advocacy for robust legislative protections is crucial. Policymakers and library associations should work together to craft laws that not only defend intellectual freedom but also ensure the safety and well-being of library professionals. While these data illustrate a clear need for such frameworks, the challenge remains to develop legislation that addresses both localized community dynamics and overarching ideological conflicts. Comprehensive legal frameworks can serve as an essential support system in times of political and ideological conflict. However, these should not be seen as a panacea and should not be the sole focus of action.

Implications and Paradox of Free Speech Advocacy

At the center of these debates lies a paradox in free speech advocacy. While challengers asserted that removing certain books upholds moral values and parental rights and protects their intellectual freedom, librarians contended that intellectual freedom requires access to a diverse range of perspectives. My analysis revealed that this contradiction is not merely rhetorical but has real implications for which voices are amplified within public spaces. This contradiction highlighted the complexity of free speech issues in modern society and suggests that a more nuanced understanding of intellectual freedom is needed.

This conflict is emblematic of a broader ideological divide described by Mill (1859) and Strossen (2020) that is essential to the functioning of a democratic society. My analysis reveals that censorship, rather than silencing dissenting voices, can inadvertently amplify them in what has been termed the “Streisand effect” (Ananthakrishnan et al., 2023). These findings suggest that attempts to restrict information may paradoxically contribute to greater public attention and debate, thereby challenging the efficacy of censorship as a tool for ideological control. This unintended consequence not only challenges the efficacy of censorship but also reinforces the need for nuanced public discourse around free speech.

Participants on both sides saw themselves as defending free speech, albeit in radically different ways. On one hand, challengers argue that free speech includes the right to protect parental interests and moral values by limiting controversial materials. On the other hand, librarians maintain that true free speech entails unimpeded access to a wide range of perspectives, ensuring intellectual freedom and fostering democratic discourse. This conflicting usage of free speech reveals deeper ideological divisions regarding whose perspectives should be elevated and whose should be excluded. This paradox reflects deeper ideological divisions about whose perspectives should be elevated and whose should be excluded. This conflicting usage of free speech reveals that the debate is not simply about freedom of expression but about whose perspective holds power within public spaces. Many challengers' interpretation of free speech is inherently self-serving—seeking not just to avoid materials but also to silence perspectives that challenge their worldview. Regardless if the challengers are genuinely concerned with content appropriateness or enacting larger ideological ideals, removing materials from the library has the same end result.

Future Directions and Recommendations

Looking ahead, my results highlighted how imperative it is for libraries to take a proactive stance in clarifying free speech as stated in the First Amendment and intellectual freedom. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of targeted interventions that bolster the resilience of library professionals while simultaneously addressing public misperceptions. Such interventions might include comprehensive digital literacy campaigns, specialized staff training programs, enhanced institutional communication strategies designed to demystify collection development processes as well as education surrounding intellectual freedom in libraries.

Longitudinal studies are also needed to trace the evolving impact of book challenges over time, particularly in politically polarized communities. Researchers should focus on the long-term outcomes of these challenges on patron engagement, community trust, and staff retention. In doing so, studies can assess whether proactive institutional measures—such as the implementation of clear, standardized policies and proactive leadership support—reduce the incidence or severity of coordinated challenges.

Conclusion

This study provides a timely and necessary examination of the recent escalation in book challenges and bans within U.S. public libraries, situating these events within broader sociopolitical dynamics around censorship, parental rights, and the public's understanding of library processes. Through qualitative interviews with library workers and community members, this research reveals how conspiracies surrounding libraries, often spread via social media, plays a critical role in fostering mistrust and fueling organized efforts to challenge materials. This study also adds to previous literature by discussing how challenges, having direct impact on library usage or circulation, also deeply affect the mental health and professional stability of library staff, forcing many into roles as public advocates and defenders of intellectual freedom.

The findings illustrate how a widespread lack of understanding about collection development and reconsideration policies leaves room for conspiracy theories and suspicion to flourish. As library workers become the target of panic over parental rights, their traditional roles as community educators and facilitators are evolving into those of frontline defenders of democratic access to information. Simultaneously, the rhetoric of "parental rights" has become a powerful ideological tool, reframing censorship as care and positioning public institutions like libraries as contested spaces in ongoing culture wars. Challengers in Michigan were

overwhelmingly concerned with LGBTQ+ -largely transgender- themes and concerns over materials featuring racially diverse perspectives or critical race theory were of less importance.

Libraries and librarians should continue in building robust procedures and tightening of internal policies to fall back on in the event of future book challenges. Having a strong and clear course of action strengthens the library's position and can reduce strain on library staff. This coupled with internal support systems that take into account the mental load of challenges and address the emotional toll of book challenges could improve the overall outcomes of challenges on libraries and library staff.

Ultimately, this research underscores the urgency of supporting public librarians not only through clearer communication and policy transparency, but also through institutional and legislative protections. As public libraries continue to serve as critical hubs for information access, education, and community engagement, defending their autonomy and values becomes a matter of public interest. Continued inquiry into these evolving dynamics—and deeper public engagement with the realities of library work—will be essential to safeguarding the role of libraries as inclusive, democratic spaces.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol - Librarians

Could you describe your role and responsibilities in the library?
Are you a member of the X community?
If so, how long have you lived in X?

Are you involved in collection development in the library?
If yes, can you tell me your strategy?
Do you select books for library activities (storytime, summer reading programs, adult book clubs, literacy classes, displays)?
    If yes, can you tell me a bit about the selection process?
As there has been a significant increase of book challenges, has this affected your collection development or selection for library activities at all?
Can you tell me about the book challenge(s) and how you were involved?

Do you feel supported by the library profession in book challenges?
Have you taken any seminars/continuing education workshops on countering book challenges?
Were there any resources provided to you from the library?
How have book challenges affected your day-to-day work?

What do you believe is driving these challenges?
How have book challenges affected the culture of the library (morale, member usage, etc)?
Has community perception changed?
What do you think about book challenges as a trend that has been increasingly happening across the country?

Is there anything we didn't cover that you would like to mention?

Do you have any recommendations for anyone else I talk to?

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol - Challengers

Would you tell me a bit about yourself?

How long have you lived in X?

Where are you involved in your community (Clubs, Volunteering, Church)?

Do you use the public library?

If yes, how often would you say you attend?

What types of services do you use at the public library?

What do you see as the value of the public library for the community?

How familiar are you with how books are selected at the library?

What do you think about the collection and access to materials provided by the library?

Could you walk me through the challenge that happened at your library from your perspective?

At what point did you become concerned about the library?

Is there content or library programming (books clubs, children's storytimes, etc) that sticks out to you as a concern?

Any specific books, genres, characters or themes in books?

Should these books be removed or placed in a different library section?

How have you voiced your concerns about this?

Where? (Library board meetings, social media, etc.)

What have your goals been with voicing your concerns?

How much time would you say you have spent on this?

How have book challenges affected the community culture?

Knowing that book challenges have been on the rise in the last few years, what do you think of this trend?

Is there anything we didn't cover that you would like to mention?

Do you have any recommendations for anyone else I talk to?

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix C: Interview Protocol - Community Member

Would you tell me a bit about yourself?

How long have you lived in X?

Do you use the public library?

If yes, how often would you say you attend?

What types of services do you use at the public library?

What do you see as the value of the public library for the community?

How familiar are you with how books are selected at the library?

What do you think about the collection and access to materials provided by the library?

Were you aware of the book challenge(s) at the library?

Were you involved in any community meetings, actions, etc. concerning the challenge?

To what extent?

How much time have you spent on these meetings/actions?

What books have you seen as being the most contentious in your community?

Has the community perception of the library changed?

How have the challenges affected the community in general?

What do you think about book challenges as a trend that has been increasingly happening across the country?

Do you have any proposed solutions to the increase of challenges that have been happening nationwide?

Is there anything we didn't cover that you would like to mention?

Do you have any recommendations for anyone else I talk to?

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix D: Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Book Challenges in the United States
Katherine Polasek, University of Michigan School of Information
Faculty Advisor: Elizabeth Yakel, Ph.D., University of Michigan School of Information

Description of research.

You are invited to be a part of a study on book challenges in public libraries in Michigan. Interview questions will focus on your role in the community and perspectives on public library collections. The interview will last approximately one hour.

Confidentiality.

Although there are plans to publish research results, you will not be identified in any reports on this study. All research records will be kept confidential to the extent provided by federal, state, and local laws. Data from the study will be kept in a secure location. Your real name will not appear in notes, transcripts or audio file names.

Consent.

Your participation in this study involves no more than minimal risks or discomforts.

Interviewees will get no direct benefits from this research. This session will be recorded with audio. If you prefer not to be recorded, you may still participate in the interview.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Subsequent to your consent, you may refuse to answer specific questions or withdraw from the study prior to its completion. You may also ask questions concerning the study before, during, or after the study.

Please direct your questions to: Katherine Polasek (polasek@umich.edu) or faculty advisor Elizabeth Yakel, Ph.D.,(yakel@umich.edu).

The University of Michigan Institutional Review Board Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences has reviewed this study and determined that this study is exempt (HUM00257477) by IRB oversight. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences, (734) 936-0933, irbhsbs@umich.edu.

I agree to participate in the study.

_____
Full Name

_____ _____
Signature Date

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