Stand with the Banned: Credibility bias and the Fetishization of the “Classic” Banned Books on Etsy
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Abstract
Recent efforts at book banning in the United States’ schools and libraries have produced a number of material iterations of anti-banning sentiment in online retail spaces like Etsy. Most scholarship on banned books comes from an education or library science perspective, with little book or media studies scholarship focused on how banned books are represented in online spaces. In this paper, we examine the top 50 results from searching “banned books” on Etsy to understand how merchandise that engages with the topic visually represents banned books. We find that banned book imagery often ignores more recent banned books, especially those featuring LGBTQ+ characters, in favor of older or more “classic” banned books. We also find that the banned book merchandise under examination here, like other social media reading spaces such as Instagram and BookTube, participates in glorifying the physical book as an object of credibility, despite the role digital reading devices play as both objects of banning and as a means of resistance. The results of our examination show ongoing disconnect between the perceived threat and the realities of book banning, as well as a desire to maintain an aesthetic of the “classic” as under attack.

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Introduction
The phrase “I stand with the banned” and its variants have been a recurring expression of solidarity in response to ongoing book banning, primarily centered around classrooms and libraries in the United States. The U.S. classroom bookshelf is a site of constant debate and dispute, and one whose contents have perhaps never been more subject to removal: as viral photos from Florida teachers of covered and empty libraries intone, any book’s welcome can be precarious at best. Historically, censorship and book banning of this kind in the U.S. has focused on eliminating perceived vice and obscenity: in the 1920s, “vice societies” campaigned for stricter laws on obscenity (such as the infamous Comstock Act of 1873, which criminalized the mailing of “obscene materials”) with an emphasis on their value for the protection of youth [1]. The
books famously challenged under such laws in some cases now hold the status of classics: James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for instance, was initially “seized and burned by the U.S. Postal Service on the grounds that its content was deemed ‘obscene’”[2]. The book is still the subject of controversy — a comic adaptation was originally censored in its Apple iPad release (Flood, 2010) — but it is also a frequently taught work of literature. A summation of the most banned books in the U.S. since 1990 reflects a similar history of disputed classics from John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (Curcic, 2023). The visibility of challenges to such works align well with a history of what children’s literature scholar Kenneth Kidd has described in an analysis of the connections between censorship and awards: “The ALA has long been a passionate and successful advocate of civil liberties, taking on the FBI and generally aligning itself with liberal policies and politics. But it’s telling how firmly the freedom to read is linked with a fairly traditional, meritocratic understanding of literature”[3]. This historical linkage can also make book-banning feel like a problem of the past: essential hubs such as Project Gutenberg and the Internet Archive host such works as part of a commitment to access to cultural heritage and have demonstrated a willingness to do so in defiance of some interpretations of copyright law historically. As Michael Rimmer once described Project Gutenberg: “its civil disobedience is not just rhetoric, but practical”[4].

The two most-challenged titles from the above-mentioned set, Alvin Schwartz’s *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* and Phyllis Reynolds Naylor’s *Alice* series, are even more in line with current trends in challenges though less likely to be viewed as classics. In 1982, Banned Books Week was established by Judith Krug and the American Library Association (ALA) as a way to acknowledge and encourage engagement with banned titles: the week “stresses the importance of ensuring the availability of those unorthodox or unpopular viewpoints to all who wish to read them”[5]. A *Time* magazine article covering the rise in book challenges that inspired the initial event described the emphasis of that era’s book challengers on controlling morality and makes particular note of attacks on classics: “The books that are most often attacked would make a nice library for anybody with broad-gauged taste. Among them: Catcher in the rye, Brave new world, Grapes of wrath, Of mice and men, Catch-22, Soul on ice, and To kill a mockingbird,” going on to note “a Florida organization called Save Our Children, has simplified its censorship goals by proposing to purge from libraries all books by such reputed homosexuals as Emily Dickinson, Willa Gather, Virginia Woolf, Tennessee Williams, Walt Whitman and John Milton”[6]. These classics are grouped together by a broad concern with queerness that is echoed throughout the history of book banning efforts in the United States.

Today’s lists of most challenged titles maintain the emphasis on “saving children” but further reflect the shifting realities of which works warrant confrontation: in both 2021 and 2022, Maia Kobabe’s graphic novel *Gender Queer* topped the list due to “sexually explicit images” — notably, images depicting queer youth or love tend to be quite regularly placed in that category, as challenges of this type have even been brought against animal-featuring picture books[7]. An emphasis on queer content and sexuality echoes throughout modern lists: of the ALA’s top 13 most challenged books of 2022, seven were challenged for LGBTQIA+ content (American Library Association, 2023). All of the books were “claimed to be sexually explicit” by challengers[8]. Such books are not as easily brought into the aesthetics of banned book solidarity: their publications dates alone disqualify them from classic status, with *Gender Queer* in particular reaching the top of the list not long after its May 2019 release. As new laws (such as Florida’s colloquially-named “Don’t say gay” and “Stop WOKE” acts) further empower challengers, the diversity of books challenged is rising every year: in 2022, 2,571 different titles were challenged — a 38 percent increase from 2021[9]. The challenges across *Gender Queer* typically focus on a few pages, which are often circulated online with arguments about obscenity, filth, and vulgarity or conservative callouts about “grooming children” — an important reminder of how a book’s visual materiality can be weaponized against it[10].

This reception of *Gender Queer* emphasizes how social media and Web marketplaces have fundamentally transformed how books as well as the challenges against them are circulated and understood. The pandemic amplified the role of BookTubers and other online influencers in drawing online attention to reading on digital platforms: BookTubers are strongly performative, as “being a reader is not enough — you also need
to show yourself as a reader” [11]. This performance of readership has continued across platforms: communities like “BookTok” have become particularly critical for teenagers, creating space for “peer pedagogies” as well as queer community building among readers (Dezuanni, 2021; Boffone and Jerasa, 2021). Those same platforms that have become particularly significant for teen readers as spaces providing “social reading cultures” (Reddan, 2022) are also under attack in the same spaces where books are being regularly challenged: in 2023, Florida banned access to TikTok on university systems and networks (Paul, 2023) — the same year in which Florida became the national “hot spot” for book banning (Mazzei, et al., 2023). Historically, such bans have been particularly ineffective in access to the digital: Zubair Nabi noted that in the context of other authoritarian regimes, “censorship is futile,” often popularizing the very content it seeks to block [12]. At the same time, software controls and technological controls over book access have been a concern since the early rising popularity of eBooks: as Clifford Lynch warned over two decades ago surveying emerging technologies, “E-book appliances can build in geographical sensitivities that reflect not only regional marketing constraints, but also national censorship policies. And large multinational corporations can be very accommodating on these issues: consider the responses to the issues about Mein Kampf and Nazi memorabilia” [13]. Given trends in curricular redesign and content banning, such as Florida’s 2023 guidelines for the teaching of American history (Grundy, 2023), such technological trajectories warrant renewed attention.

One facet of the contemporary dialogue around banned books is the way that the current book-banning movement converges with other aspects of digital culture that enable the performance of readership: specifically, the ability for digital storefronts on sites like Etsy to capitalize on anti-banning sentiment by selling merchandise with phrases like “read banned books” and “I’m with the banned.” The wearing of such shirts is in some climates an act of resistance (DeGregory, 2023). The idea of grappling with the concept of book banning in a material way is not unique to these stores or merchandise; a Google search of “banned books crafts” turns up many ideas for how librarians and teachers can help students engage with Banned Books Week. These suggestions often involve making objects that use physical books themselves, like magnets, trading cards, and art work that use book pages (Darty, 2018; Buckley, 2016). While not all banned book activities involve using books, a telling statement occurs at the end of a Wired article linking to several banned book crafts: “Try doing that with a Kindle” [14]. This statement hints at a theme which seems to exist around banned book activities but goes unacknowledged: how material manifestations of anti-banning sentiment glorifies the book as a physical object. This is in spite of the realities of readership, which in the context of universities and libraries has shifted: as Barry Cull observed over a decade ago, “university students operate in a world immersed in digital text,” a trend that has only continued [15].

Reading spaces on social media like Goodreads and reading subcultures on YouTube and Instagram already engage in and perpetuate an occupation with “bookish” aesthetics, and banned book merchandise extends this preoccupation into the realm of wearable objects for sale, like t-shirts, tote bags, and hats. A trend existing across these items is how anti-banning imagery on these objects relies on the credibility of physical books, especially books now considered “classics” or “canon.” Instagram has become a particularly critical cite for reinforcing this type of materiality, as Willy Stastny (2021) notes in an examination of antiquarian bookselling on the platform: the visual sharing of book covers through tags such as “bookshelf” and “bookshelfie” places on emphasis on them as coveted objects. This echoes an emphasis on empty or covered bookshelves that has recurred in Florida coverage of classroom battles over banned books: in these, the absence of the material object is the source of outrage (Woodcock, 2023).

Are the new realities of banned books reflected back to us in online visual discourse and e-commerce surrounding banned books? Or have we in many ways crystalized the lists of noted authors echoed in Time, and in doing so objectified the “banned” book into a historical object rather than a current, constantly shifting target? Does our demand for credibility from banned books limit our defense and interest in the more frequent targets of today’s image-driven book bannings, which often seek to remove affirming images from the consumption of children from queer families? This paper contextualizes the material appeal of the credible banned book through an examination of Etsy merchandise featuring this theme. Through this study, we note an ongoing disconnect between the perceived threat and the realities of book banning, as well as a desire to maintain an aesthetic of the “classic” as under attack. Our focus is on the enduring notion
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of the “credible” book, and its fetishization as an object to defend and cherish.

Books as objects of credibility

The cultural assumption that physical books engender a degree of credibility that ebooks lack came to the forefront of social media discussions in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic popularized the use of Zoom for television interviews. In spaces like Twitter and in articles from the New York Times and other outlets, discussion of the “credibility bookcase” and how to cultivate a video conferencing background with appropriate books and bookish aesthetics signified how viewers and interviewees alike were concerned with what books and bookcases rhetorically signify about someone’s intellectual gravity (Hess, 2020; Waters, 2020). This association with credibility is in part a reflection of the entrenched association of scholarly reading with the material book: as Terje Hillesund’s study of expert reading noted, “all participants considered digital scholarly reading to be more superficial than paper reading” [16]. Although made more obvious by Zoom background discussions in 2020, the idea of the staging the book as a decorative item or an object to lend visual credibility dates back to the early twentieth century, when “Edward Bernays introduced fake books as décor for middle-class American homes as part of a marketing scheme,” and with fake books with ‘dummy spines’ being used by doctors and lawyers in the 1950s to lend an atmosphere of education and refinement to their offices [17].

Book studies scholarship shows how the roots of our current preoccupation with the role of the physical book can be traced to the 1990s, an era “replete with speculation about ‘the future of the book’ or, more pessimistically, ‘the death of the book’ and predictions that the codex would soon be eclipsed by the rise of digital technologies” [18]. Book studies scholarship also shows the various forms in which “demise of the codex” anxiety manifests in hierarchies around the book as a form of media: Murray points to the association of the codex with sacred texts and the deeply-embedded historical view of the printing press in the West as the “supreme achievement of Christian (Protestant?) civilisation” and how “Book Defenders,” those “ambivalent or even outright hostile to digital media,” believing in the “superiority” of book culture over other media forms” [19]. Attitudes about the supposed superiority of the codex were likely not helped by the associations of ereaders with other forms of media that emerged around the same time: Mark McGurl ties the Kindle to other forms of direct-download media devices, pointing out that a former Apple engineer was hired by Amazon to develop the Kindle in an effort to do for books what Apple had done for music with the iPod (McGurl, 2021). Another source of the supposed superiority of the codex is the perceived permanence of the physical book over that of the digital, a myth Amaranth Borsuck dispels when she describes physical books as a “vulnerable medium,” susceptible to both physical decay and, most notably for our purposes here, “their power to spread ideas makes them vulnerable to censorship, defacement, and destruction, particularly motivated by ideological and political difference” [20]. Returning to the quote mentioned earlier about how Kindles won’t work for banned book crafts, it’s clear that the rhetoric around banned book activities participates in continuing the hierarchy of physical books over other formats. Yet, a new obscenity law recently put in effect in Mississippi has had the effect of banning digital materials through sites like Hoopla and Overdrive to minors (Jensen, 2023). This law sadly indicates that those campaigning to suppress access to books understand that many people access books in digital formats as ebooks or audiobooks through their public or school library, even if anti-banning imagery misses this point. This law also shows how banning — not the supposed “impermanence” of digital objects — poses the greater danger for book access.
In addition to prompting conversations about “credibility bookcases” social media has also shifted how reading and books are shared and represented. A common theme in scholarship around social media reading spaces is how such spaces create conspicuous consumption and ownership of books. Lisa Nakamura argues that Goodreads encourages the public consumption of books in ways that attempt to mimic physical book ownership in virtual spaces, with features like “virtual shelves with images of books for others to see,” encouraging readers to “perform their identities as readers in a public and networked forum” [21]. Scholarship on BookTube, the reading and book content subculture of YouTube, similarly emphasizes this theme of performativity: Ehret, Boegel, and Manuel-Nekouei’s analysis of the affective dimensions of participation in BookTube among young people reveals how BookTube content creators feel “participatory pressure to buy and arrange aesthetically pleasing book displays interrelated with the culturally formed design literacies of BookTubing” [22]. A similar theme emerges in Kathryn Perkins’s analysis of BookTube celebrities, who have the resources to keep up with the “expectation that BookTubers do monthly book hauls, purchase new-releases, keep their bookshelves well-stocked, etc.,” whereas for other BookTube participants, not having the financial means to constantly acquire new books becomes a barrier to entry into such communities [23].

In addition to the notion of performativity and public consumption of books, social media and digital reading devices have ushered in a new era of “bookishness,” defined by Jessica Pressman as “creative acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture, in modes that may be sentimental, fetishistic, radical” [24]. One manifestation of bookishness is the propagation of bookish aesthetics on social media, where images of books, bookshelves, and objects depicting or related to books circulate on sites like Instagram and Pinterest. Engagement with “bookish aesthetics” in these spaces varies from shelves, which are images of bookshelves that include “all manner of bookish vignettes” to memes depicting a “comfortable armchair, with a pretty mug or a cup of tea and a careful arrangement of books” to #bookstagram posts on Instagram, which often involve a book “surrounded by various props” [25]. Bookishness and bookish aesthetics are not confined to books themselves, though. Both Pressman and Rodger’s definitions of “bookish” include other objects that convey the image of the book, including but not limited to jewelry, home décor and household objects like “book vases, book teapots, book socks, and imitation leather book covers to protect electronic devices” [26]. These objects participate in a phenomenon Pressman defines as “bookish fakes,” an extension of what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin term the remediation of the book, in which the design and aesthetics of older media forms are “remediated” into their newer iterations [27]. These fakes, according to Pressman, provide a “means for establishing a bookish identity and also of fostering community formation around books, when books just might not be real things or actually be there” [28]. As a specific manifestation of the twenty-first century fixation on book and book imagery, banned book paraphernalia operates as a form of bookish fakery, connecting readers, wearers, and viewers of the object around what is perceived as a common ideological stance in opposition to book banning. While analog banned books can’t be attached to a T-shirt, their image can be.

Scholarship on banned books tends to come from an educational and library science perspective, with focus on the implications of book banning for America’s public-school students. One issue identified by these scholars of relevance here is how the language arts classroom has historically perpetuated the “universality of canonical literature,” with scholars critical of this trend calling for “anti-racist pedagogies of linguistic and literary pluralism” [29]. Book bans and anti-CRT legislation, Samuel Burmester and Lionel C. Howard argue, are one way in which parents and politicians have pushed back against such efforts to decenter white supremacy in teacher training and pedagogy, yet as we argue here, merchandise with imagery supporting efforts to overturn book bans also participate in perpetuating a white heteronormative literary canon. The focus on the impact of banned books on public school kids among banned book scholarship is not without its critics: Stephanie Birch argues that in the American Library Association’s focus on what banned books mean for K-12 schools, they have overlooked the issue of book banning for the United States’ incarcerated population (Birch, 2022). Although, unlike Birch, we are focusing here on books that are banned rather than those impacted by bans, the critique that “discourse on book banning efforts and practices needs to push beyond the usual surface-level talking points” [30] is relevant here in that the banned book paraphernalia we examine in this article fail to move beyond the surface-level anti-banning clichés and imagery to meaningfully engage with the content of currently contested books.
Contextualizing Etsy

The Etsy platform promises an idealized marketplace of creative content: it is large, well-known, and strongly associated with the aesthetic appeal of the handmade, even though the realities of structural inequalities have resulted in tensions over whose labor qualifies as “craft” (Close and Wang, 2020). Drawn largely on racial lines, such tensions reflect the economics of scale and production that drive the type of products we are interested in here: objects that are most often printed on demand on pre-manufactured garments or totes, and exist as an outlet for rapid political expression. Previous studies have noted the appeal of these types of Etsy products for literary merchandise: for instance, Shakespeare’s “seeming popularity on Etsy (or at the very least the expectation thereof; we cannot be sure how many of these items are ever sold) thus speaks to his ability to be at once a reliable source of income, a recognisable brand and a mass-commodified item and the occasion for individual, handmade, small-scale specialist production in accordance with the Web site’s purpose” [31]. A similar literary drive enables niche sellers such as “Out of Print,” described as having a “mission has been to spread the joy of reading by transforming literary classics into bookish apparel and accessories,” as the go-to accessory line for small bookstores [32]. Out of Print’s own Banned Book line is fairly limited, but like the company’s mission is highly focused on the classics. The Banned Books tote bag that features the most specific titles (Figure 1) is particularly familiar, operating as one example of “bookish fakery.” The notion of perceived authenticity or “realness” pervades both bookish culture and Etsy: as Susan Luckman points out, “in the digital age ... the analogue becomes Othered, different, desirable” and it is this “broader return of credibility to previously disparaged women’s craftpractices” that initially helped power Etsy’s popularity in response to the pervasiveness of the digital, similar to how “bookish fakes” have emerged in response to our perceived distance from “real” books in the digital age [33]. Yet, concerns about Etsy’s “hipster” and “indie credibility” emerged in response to Etsy’s 2013 decision, under new leadership, to allow previously prohibited practices like hiring workers and outsourcing labor, a decision critics blamed for “open[ing] the floodgates to a wave of mass produced trinkets” [34]. The ability for Etsy sellers to quickly turn around cheaply-produced objects combined with easy access to public domain texts means that objects like fabric with the text of *Pride and prejudice* or tote bags with images of the Bronte sisters are easy to make and easy to obtain. But as the racial lines around what is considered “handmade craft” on Etsy shows, the notion of authenticity or credibility is fraught with privilege: glorification of the “real” book minimizes what digital reading forms afford elderly and disabled individuals or those without the space or means of collecting a physical library or what digital publishing affords authors in genres that are often dominated by women authors, like romance. Etsy’s more on-demand offerings should allow for a step away from this credibility marker, and thus the platform is a compelling space for examining and critiquing the aesthetics of the banned.
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Figure 1: Banned books tote bag from Outofprint.com.

Positioning banned books through Etsy
A search for “banned books” on Etsy in July 2023 returns nearly 40,000 results. The suggested sub-searches reflect an emphasis on displayable materials: banned books shirt, banned books svg, banned books t-shirt, banned books png, banned books sticker, banned books poster, banned books tumbler, and banned books tote appear on the top banner (Figure 2). The SVG and PNG results likely reflect classroom and library promotional usage as part of banned book events, which is also consistent with the emphasis on posters and stickers. Several of the files are for home craft usage: for instance, a “Ban bigots, not books” SVG file advertises its suitability for cutting with the Cricut and similar devices. This vast ecosystem does seem to have some fans: sorting those results by “Top customer reviews” reveals some outlying and unusual designs among the favorites, such as a patch reading “Banned Book Badger Says / come and take them” (https://www.etsy.com/listing/1265953596/banned-book-badger-come-and-take-them) while another top-rated shirt reads “What’s more punk than the public library?” in striking, magazine-cutout style letters.

**Figure 2:** Suggested sub-searched from “banned books” on Etsy, 24 July 2023.

For this study, we saved and coded the top 50 results for a search on “banned books” conducted using Etsy’s Web site on 18 July 2023. These results are influenced by Etsy’s internal algorithms for marketing but were not further customized through a logged-in account, and results were fairly consistent across two different systems pulling results. The 50 results were saved as screenshots and coded for thematic usage of text and images. The majority of the results were shirts, which was consistent both with the ease of production of shirts (allowing sellers to reach highly niche markets) and the role of shirts as a wearable activist marker. Several of the shirts were also tagged with markers suggesting particular audiences, such as “teacher gift” or “library shirt.” Repetition was a common theme among these results: of the 50, there were four pairs of repeat listings (i.e., result number 1 has the same item and listing number as result number 34). But image repetition across multiple listings was also common: for instance, one particular image featuring 17 books lined up in a row reappeared on 10 different listings, paired with varied stylistic features, like different fonts for the caption “I’m with the banned” or the presence of flowers behind the books (Figures 3 and 4). In fact, just three book images accounted for the designs on 22 of the 50 listings (including repeated listings), and the frequency of these same images meant that the variety of titles circulated on these objects was limited.
Figure 3: Sweatshirt featuring one of the most common book images in the dataset.
Over half (27/50) of the designs featured the phrase “I’m with the banned.” One Etsy seller, Stella Jane Studio, claims ownership of the design in their item description: “Stella Jane Studio is proud to be the original designer of the I’m With The Banned tee. Show your support of the First Amendment, freedom of speech, and the freedom to read with our I’m With The Banned t-shirt. Perfect shirt for teachers, librarians, or anyone celebrating Banned Books Week” (https://www.etsy.com/listing/1410744114/the-original-im-with-the-banned-shirt). While the claim of being the original is difficult to verify given the realities of e-commerce imitations and replications, the shirt is particularly interesting for its selection of 17 titles including *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, *The Giver*, *Harry Potter*, *Go ask Alice*, and
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_Forever_ in addition to more marked “classic” volumes. Other shirts influenced by this style tend to include fewer, more literary-coded titles: _The Color Purple, To Kill a Mockingbird, 1984_, and _Of Mice and Men_ are all well-represented across the dataset. This is consistent with an emphasis on the material book across the entire set: of the 50, 38 depict books in some fashion as part of the design.

**Representation of titles**

Among the 38 shirt designs that featured books with titles, we counted 27 different books titles that were represented. The most frequently recurring title, with 29 appearances, was _A Wrinkle in Time_, followed by _To Kill a Mockingbird_ and _Of Mice and Men_ with 28 appearances. _The Handmaid’s Tale, The Bluest Eye, The Catcher in the Rye, and The Kite Runner_ also featured heavily, with 27, 25, 26, and 26 appearances respectively. The bottom of the list comprises books that appear only once, including _The Sun Also Rises, Les Miserables, and The Count of Monte Cristo_. One particular shirt design (result 15) accounted for most of the one-off titles, and vagueness and inaccuracy were features of this particular design: _Of Mice and Men_ is depicted as _Mice and men_, “wrinkle” in _A Wrinkle in Time_ is misspelled, and one volume is depicted with the title Sherlock Holmes, without specifying a particular story. These features, along with the aesthetics of the image and its staging — such as the coordinating colors of book covers and the flowers and the shirt’s staging next to an open physical hard copy of an unspecified book and other “readerly” paraphernalia like a candle, coffee mug, and throw blanket — indicate that bookish aesthetics, more than accuracy, were prioritized.

PEN America’s update on book bans of the 2022–2023 school year revealed the extent to which the books included in these shirts misrepresent reality: of the 11 most banned books from 1 July 2022 through 1 December 2022, only two were represented in shirt designs: _The Bluest Eye_ and _The Handmaid’s Tale_ (of note, PEN America specified that _The Handmaid’s Tale: The Graphic Novel_ was subjected to 12 bans in this timeframe, whereas the shirts depicting _The Handmaid’s Tale_ did not specify a version of the book [Meehan and Friedman, 2023]). While the two most banned books in PEN’s data collection, _Gender Queer_ and _Flamer_, were targeted for their LGBTQ+ representation, this kind of representation was conspicuously absent in titles like _To Kill a Mockingbird_ and _A Wrinkle in Time_ despite their popularity in banned-book merchandise (Tolin, 2023b). Not all of the books represented in images were out-of-step with current bans; in fact, _The Kite Runner, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, Lawn Boy, and The Hate U Give_ appear in this set 26, 20, 7, and 7 times respectively, and all four titles were included in the 10 most banned books for the 2021–2022 school year (Tolin, 2022).

While most of the books depicted in these shirts are aimed at adolescent or adult audiences, one children’s picture book that has been a frequent target of bans, _And Tango Makes Three_, was represented 11 times. _And Tango Makes Three_ was tied with _The story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag_ and _I am Jazz_ for the most frequently banned children’s picture books in the 2021–2022 school year (Tolin, 2023a). In this instance, though, it is important to note that how these books were represented in this merchandise is equally as important as the fact of their representation. _And Tango Makes Three_ was included in the selection of 17 titles featured in the most popular book imagery design, depicted in Figures 3 and 4, but as a slim volume, its name was not discernible in the images without zooming in, unlike thicker volumes with bolder type, like _A Wrinkle and Time_ and _The Kite Runner_. _And Tango Makes Three_’s real book cover features baby penguin Tango with his two dads, but the fact that this book (and all the covers in this dataset) are shown from the side, with only the binding visible, means that the visual representation of the penguin family is non-existent in the shirt. This theme continues throughout the dataset: certain titles were much more discernable than others based on book size, legibility of the font, and recognizability of covers. _Of Mice and Men_, consistently depicted with a black font, was one of the most legible and recognizable covers across these designs, and was, according to a 2017 _American Experience_ article, “amongst the most challenged books of the last few decades,” yet it does not appear in the PEN America’s most banned lists from the 2022–2023 or 2021–2022 school years [35].

Gendered depictions of books and anti-banning sentiment

The choice of models or featured styling often codes the banned books apparel as for women: of the 50 sampled, only one was shown on a male-presenting model. That shirt was also an outlier in its design: it featured a single book talking to the viewer with an exaggerated expression: “Ooo! Look at me! Look at me! I tell the kids the truth! I’m so scary! Boo!” More frequently, the designs themselves implied gender with items or symbols associated with femininity either present on the shirt or in the setting: the most common choice was some type of floral pattern or plants. A single shirt in the set linked to broader political discourse, featuring the letters “VOTE” with “T” shaped as a uterus. Only a small subset used queer-coded coloring or imagery: one version of “I’m with the banned” featured a rainbow above the book collection, while another used rainbow book spines without any titles. The more common choice was rainbow lettering (featured on four shirts), which was particularly striking on a shirt reading “Books Save Lives / stop book bans / protect libraries.” The gendered marketing of these products was further entrenched by marketing text, with several descriptions advertising these shirts as librarian gifts or teacher gifts, thus deepening an association between women and these occupations.

Only a subset of the shirts engaged this directly and politically with the theme of banning. Two shirts exemplifying this theme read “Tell me a time in history when it was the good guys banning books.” Another reads “FREADOM” with “READ” in red and includes search optimizing phrases aligning it with political intentions, including “Social Justice Bookish.” Another including no book imagery reads “Free Societies Read Freely” and includes keywords indicating an alignment with current areas of contention including “Florida” and “DeSantis.” More targeted options found elsewhere on Etsy were not as highly ranked in a general search: for instance, a rainbow stack of books reading “Live your best life so when it’s turned into a book Florida will ban it” was among the highest reviewed in the same category. The print-on-demand nature of these objects was particularly effective for allowing this type of rapid-response merchandise design, which often featured popular memes and was intended for brief periods of consumption.

Notably, none of the 50 selections or other sampled search results highlighted the materiality of the books most frequently at stake today: e-readers and digital books were absent in the set, as instead every book featured was a physical object. Even the title-less abstractions of books often included styling suggestive of the hardcover, a decision that carried with it both a temporality and a set of class indicators.

Conclusion

The aesthetics of book-banning merchandise has not kept up with the realities of the threat. It may instead contribute to a perception that book banning today is focused on classic works, rather than more contentious, current, and frequently queer texts. The effort to make banned books messaging consumer-friendly (and, dare we say it, “Instagram-worthy”) risks flattening the political and social stakes of current trends in book-banning, and anchors us with a historical materiality that risks further painting the library as a space of history rather than of current discourse.

Meanwhile, while the material object is disputed, digital communities and methods of access to banned books are of increasing importance. The Digital Public Library of America’s new platform, “The Banned Book Club,” uses geolocation to make banned books available to users based on what has been targeted in their local communities (Maher, 2023). Such a project makes use of the same technologies that can be used to restrict our access to books, offering a powerful reminder of how the ebook can potentially subvert these histories of restriction.
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Press.


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**Editorial history**

Received 2 August 2023; accepted 25 November 2023.
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Stand with the Banned: Credibility bias and the Fetishization of the “Classic” Banned Books on Etsy by Abigail Moreshead and Anastasia Salter. 
First Monday, volume 28, number 12 (December 2023).
doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i12.13284