



From Book Rating to Book Bans

A Critical Content Analysis of BookLooks.org's Report Cards on LGBTQIA+ Titles

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When attempting to enact book bans, challengers often rely on book reviews and rating sources that are designed and authored by people working outside the field of librarianship and who may have little to no professional qualifications in the field. These sources, while presenting themselves as impartial, can be biased and steeped in partisan positions. BookLooks.org is one of the resources used to support efforts to remove books from K-12 public schools. However, an empirical examination of these rating sources has not been undertaken. In this manuscript, we use critical content analysis to examine the “report cards” created for Stonewall award-winning (and honored) LGBTQIA+ titles included on the BookLooks.org site. While the site’s mission statement claims to uncover “objectionable content, including profanity, nudity, and sexual content,” our analysis of annotations pulled from the report cards of LGBTQIA+ titles reveals a more widespread effort to warn parents/caregivers of any content related to gender and sexuality that would be considered non-normative. Findings from our study suggest that these report cards promote skepticism about factual data and objective definitions of terms, undermine allyship and support for LGBTQIA+ students, and systematically target gender presentation that lies outside of a masculine-feminine binary or sexualities other than heterosexuality. By discussing and naming the rhetorical implications of resources like BookLooks.org, we offer support for practitioners looking to defend their school and public library LGBTQIA+ collections.

To support the book-banning attempts sweeping across districts and communities in the US, book challengers have cited BookLooks.org in support of their positions. This has occurred, for example, during public comments sections of school board meetings, and as justification on material reconsideration forms. During the public comment section of one school board meeting for Beaufort County Schools (South Carolina), a local Moms for Liberty representative cited the BookLooks.org website as her source when she, along with others, created a list of 97 titles that the superintendent promptly removed from every school in the Beaufort County Schools district pending review (Kukulich 2022).



This mass removal of texts sparked a debate as removing the titles was a violation of the school district's policies and procedures for challenged materials. Similarly, in another district in Iowa (Mason City Community Schools), a parent and other Moms for Liberty-affiliated residents cited the BookLooks.org website as a source for the list of books they demanded the school district evaluate (Schmidt 2023). In this case, the superintendent in Mason City did not immediately remove the books and instead adhered to the process for reconsideration of specific titles.

Challenges to diverse material in libraries and classrooms are not a new phenomenon. However, while students and their rights to access ideas have always been a contested issue, organizations like the American Library Association (ALA) and PEN American Report (2022) have documented a record number of challenges over the past two years within this current movement of book challenge attempts. ALA documented 1,269 (reported) instances of book challenges in 2022, which nearly doubled the 729 reported in 2021 (ALA 2022). Additionally, preliminary data for 2023 demonstrates that challenges are up 20 percent from 2022 (ALA 2023). Moreover, most of the challenged titles were books by and/or about Black, indigenous, and other people of color, as well as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. This is noteworthy because, as GLSEN notes, the presence of LGBTQIA+ books in a library can have a positive impact on young readers (2021). Because of the use of the BookLooks.org website in multiple justifications for the removal of these texts, this trend is worth examining, as the book-rating website has clear ties to partisan and politically motivated organizations (such as Moms for Liberty) and has given way to other book rating sites like No Left Turn in Education's RatedBooks.org and other sites that use BookLooks.org's report cards to encourage parents to challenge specific titles (e.g., the Pave-mentEducationProject.org and BetweenTheBookCovers.com).

In Library and Information Science graduate programs, librarians are taught to rely on professional review sources and avoid book review and rating sources like BookLooks.org, because they are created by consumers and untrained advocates. The ALA has addressed this issue within its professional position statement on rating systems stating that rating systems pose "distinct challenges to intellectual freedom principles" (ALA 2015). Our research builds on this conversation by empirically examining the ideological and rhetorical implications of the BookLooks.org website that has been used to challenge materials in youth collections. Through a critical content analysis (CCA) of the book reports compiled for selected LGBTQIA+ titles included on the BookLooks website, we ask the following questions:

1. What content in young adult literature related to gender and sexuality do the report card creators on BookLooks.org find objectionable?
2. What do the BookLooks.org report cards reveal about what the website's creators value and what they deem as acceptable or unacceptable in regard to gender and sexuality in young adult literature?

Using a critical content analysis of selected BookLooks.org book reports, we identified three themes to elaborate on. These themes suggest that the mission of the BookLooks.org site is more than identifying and banning "profanity, nudity, and sexual content," and in fact, works to subtly but surely maintain gender and sexuality norms.

In the sections that follow, we identify and elaborate on our data analysis process and present three themes that were gleaned from that analysis: 1) factual data and resources about gender and sexuality are noted as controversial; 2) allyship and support of LGBTQIA+ youth is considered objectionable; and 3) normative expectations about gender and sexuality are considered acceptable.

Background

Historically, the use of reviewing and rating sources for book selection in public school libraries is not new. School librarians learn in their preparation programs to use professional review sources (e.g., *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*) that determine the book's audience and potential fit for collections. Online sites like Common Sense Media have been around for decades and have prompted questions among librarians about how useful ratings are within collection development processes (Kenney 2010). In library material selection processes, the workings of Common Sense Media, the review process, and the team of people who contribute to and manage the site are provided in a transparent way. However, the speed at which BookLooks.org (and other similar websites) grew and then has been utilized in support of book bans, coupled with a lack of transparency within the BookLooks.org processes, make it an important site to examine regarding bias. A visitor to the BookLooks.org site would find it challenging to locate credentials for the creators or any systematic process for determining which books are selected for review, who reviews them, and who determines the categories they deem as "aberrant" or "minor restricted" (Jensen 2022).

For example, there is a lack of transparency on the BookLooks.org site about who is creating the report cards. The "About" page includes a section "Who We Are," stating:



We are concerned parents who have been frustrated by the lack of resource material for content-based information regarding books accessible to children and young adults.

We make no money and seek no recognition in our efforts. We believe sunlight is the best disinfectant and parents should have the information at their disposal to make informed decisions about the content their children consume.

We are not affiliated with any other groups, but we do support several groups by letting them use our materials and by taking suggestions for what we should review. If you would like to use or distribute our materials, or have books you'd like for us to take a look at, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Names are not provided on the site, and no report cards are attributed to any reviewer who assigned the book's rating. The site's founders have been identified as Emily and Jonathan Maikisch, who have been affiliated with Mom's for Liberty in Florida (Mechling 2022) and have spoken on conservative podcasts about their project (McBreairty 2023). Further, upon scrolling to the site's mission statement, the goals of BookLooks.org seem fairly innocuous; BookLooks.org purports to "write and collect detailed and easy to understand book content reviews centered around objectionable content, including profanity, nudity, and sexual content" and promote the ability of parents to "make informed decisions" ("About—Book Looks" n.d.).

We suggest, however, that this website—presented as an objective rating source—can be problematic given the lack of a specific method used to both identify titles for the website and in their creation of "book reports"—the format used to organize what has been deemed objectionable content for viewers.

The site consists of "book reports," wherein each book is given a content-based rating from 0-5 that loosely corresponds to the film industry's rating (G to NC 17+). Books rated a 0 have "mild inexplicit violence, no hate, no nudity, no profanity, no references to sexuality, gender ideologies, or sexual activities, and no drug and alcohol use," whereas books rated a five have "explicit references to aberrant sexual activities (sexual assault/battery, bestiality, or sadomasochistic abuse)." All books are rated, with most of the books falling in the middle of this spectrum. A very small number of books are rated 0, suggesting that the books included on the website contain some level of material which BookLooks.org finds objectionable. On the other end of the spectrum, creators state that books that receive a 4 or 5 would likely be "considered obscene by most standards," although they are careful to point out that they do not have the legal expertise and are therefore not making a legal determination about whether the books should be considered obscene. In fact, the

site relies on a definition of "obscene" that, as Jensen (2022) points out, cherry-picks language from the Miller Test, which the United States Supreme Court has established as a test for obscenity.

Previous Research on the Motivations of Book Challengers

Several scholars have examined the motivations of book challengers as they target diverse materials, particularly when it comes to young people and materials in schools (Dawkins 2017; Knox 2015; 2019; Magnusson 2011; Oltmann, Peterson, and Knox 2017; Price 2021). In her examination of the motivations of book challengers, Knox (2015) finds that several rhetorical arguments are used to justify book or material censorship, including a belief in the innocence of children and a moral imperative on the part of adults to defend children from ideas that some adults disagree with. Knox notes that some adults hold the belief that some parents are inherently good at parenting and equipped to guide the moral development of young people, while other parents are ignorant or neglectful. Thus, those who promote book challenges believe that public institutions like schools and librarians have a responsibility to be pillars of a community's morals because they are funded by public taxpayer dollars. Price (2021) builds on Knox's work, discussing two communities' objections to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and its inclusion within the high school curriculum.

Fun Home: a Family Tragicomic (Bechdel 2007) is a graphic novel that made it into many high school curricula and libraries after winning an Eisner award, Lambda Literary Award, and becoming a finalist for the National Book Award (to name a few). Bechdel's graphic memoir explores her relationship with her late father (after he committed suicide) and, in exploring the (often dysfunctional) family dynamics, also tackles the role gender and sexuality played in Bechdel's life. Price (2021) discusses these book challengers' belief that they sought to "preserve a moral citizenry." Specifically, while challengers rely on "parental rights" narratives and a belief that public institutions must represent the "dominant morals of the community," those that challenge books don't seem to provide any evidence of actually having the dominant morals of a community. Instead, they view their own morals and perspectives as so unquestionable and righteous that they see their desire to remove materials as the only legitimate response to that material.

In her research exploring a variety of book challenges to the popular children's picturebook *And Tango Makes Three* (a picture book about two male penguins living at the Central Park Zoo who raise a baby penguin together), Magnuson



(2011) examines the motives and arguments used by challengers of this title. One of those arguments uses a theory from the media and communications field, the “third-party effect,” or the tendency of book challengers to overestimate the power of the messaging in books to influence young people’s behavior. In other words, they suggest that children simply reading about an identity or action could influence a young person to take on that identity or repeat that action.

Challenges to diverse materials, specifically, remain particularly high, and Knox (2019) examines how challengers construct arguments against these materials. For example, this includes the argument that certain materials are not suitable for particular age groups, mostly younger children. In particular, Knox finds that LGBTQIA+ materials are often directly linked to sexual activity by these challengers, even when the text or the story doesn’t mention or allude to sexual activity at all. Additionally, as Knox argues, when discussing diverse titles, challengers often make the argument that another text could be used instead to teach the same concept or theme, or fulfill a specific need in a collection, which ignores the variety in these stories and relies on “single story” narratives; single story narratives has been challenged by intersectional authors and scholars. Books with LGBTQIA+ topics and themes continue to be some of the most heavily challenged books (ALA 2022), and as Price (2023) points out, challengers often rely on arguments that not only name LGBTQIA+ content as obscene but twist the legal definition of obscenity to suit their means.

The current political climate for book banning has only reinforced and furthered the agenda of those who wish to restrict young people’s access to complex ideas about gender and sexuality, and more research is needed that looks specifically at the tactics used to challenge LGBTQIA+ materials. Research suggests that there are a variety of other arguments and tactics used when stakeholders and challengers voice their objections to the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ materials, including a belief that gender and sexuality are topics that should be taught by parents in accordance with their own religious beliefs and values (Thein 2013) as well as efforts to silence and erase the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ people (Krutka 2024).

Analyses of the rationale behind the challenged materials have emerged in recent academic literature, including the particular avenues challengers use to object to materials. Researchers (Oltmann, Peterson, and Knox 2017) have discussed the “mechanisms of censorship” that are used to censor materials, including relying on and creating laws and regulations, self-censorship within the profession, such as librarians deciding not to purchase or make available certain materials based on their own biases and fears (see also

Dawkins 2017). Also, and perhaps most visibly in the current climate, they look at the objections from the public in the form of requests for reconsideration and passionate defense at school board meetings (e.g., Krutka 2024). Our article discusses an additional mechanism used by the public—a reliance on “objective” rating sources. While professional literature (e.g., Hill 2013; Martin 2015) and position statements (e.g., AASL 2021; NCTE 2018; ALA 2015) have warned against the use of rating sources to make determinations about whether a book’s content is appropriate, our study engages in an empirical investigation of how ratings systems are created and what that reveals about the motivations of the creators.

To date, research has not been undertaken that carefully analyzes the motivations of the book rating websites that have been highly influential in the recent wave of book-banning that started in 2021. In their schooling and practice, librarians are often warned about book review sources and rating systems that are not informed by professional expertise. Though some have advocated for book rating labels much like the film industry uses as an indication of a book’s appropriateness, professionals contest this, (Rittenberg 2022) suggesting that these systems are often reductive and do not take into account the very particular nature and impact of prose, as well as the tendency to take phrases and lines out of context. Our study adds to a body of scholarship that explores challengers’ motivations for attempting to restrict access to LGBTQIA+ books by explicitly examining the use of book rating systems that are currently being relied upon in school board meetings to challenge these materials.

Queer Theory and Youth

Much of what we draw on as we analyze the BookLooks.org site regarding their stance on gender and sexuality comes from our understanding of queer theory (Butler 2006; Marcus 2005). Queer theory challenges the idea that there are inherent, natural, or non-overlapping binary categories of male and female (or man and woman). Therefore, we do not assume that these categories are something that would need to be protected or preserved as children grow and come of age. Queer theory instead suggests that gender identity is not stable or permanent. Because the categories of male and female are not inherent or “natural,” queer theory offers an alternative to young people. The genders and sexualities of students and young readers are influenced by their lived experiences and realities, and the books they read inform the options they can draw from in terms of their own identity development (Moje and MuQaribu 2003). From this perspective, books presenting alternative gender or sexuality depictions would not be a danger to students or children



because alternative genders and sexualities would be considered just as valid as what we know as traditional categories: (cis)male, (cis)female (for gender), and heterosexual (for sexuality).

Queer theory also offers a way to think about the origin of contemporary conceptions of gender and sexuality that have led to our society believing that there is a natural link between gender and sexuality, and that a (cis)man and (cis) woman in a heterosexual relationship is considered normal and therefore, an image that must be protected. Compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) is the belief that heterosexuality is not “natural” or “normal” but an idea that gets reinforced and reproduced throughout one’s life and through practices and policies. An understanding of young adult literature based on queer theory undermines the binary categories of (cis)male and (cis)female, and heterosexual and homosexual. It also suggests that other identities of gender and sexual identity are just as valid and “normal” and natural as ones we think of as traditional today. Because of this, books that present these non-traditional identities of gender and sexuality are seen as subversive and dangerous instead of simply offering representations of other types of gender and sexuality out of a plethora of possibilities.

Critical Theories of Queer Youth

Queer theory intersects with constructions and conceptualizations of adolescence, particularly as it relates to queer teens and books. Those who work with youth in schools know that adolescence has functioned as a category and a developmental paradigm that is relied upon to make determinations about what youth in schools should have access to and what they need to learn, including what is appropriate, what is normal, and when these milestones should occur (Robinson 2012). Critical Youth Studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship (Lesko 2012) that questions the predominant belief system about teens that sees adolescence as simply a biological and developmental inevitability with attendant activities and milestones (e.g., queer teens “come out,” or sexually active teens “lose their virginity”). However, certain conceptualizations and beliefs about adolescence can also lead to the (mis)use of development models to further political ideologies. For example, if one assumes that it is a biological fact that adolescents are hormonally impulsive and susceptible to peer pressure, then it might also follow that restricting access to information about non-normative gender and sexuality in adolescence might have some consequences for the non-normative gender and sexualities practiced in adulthood. However, we know that a variety of sociocultural factors (i.e., race, class, ethnicity) play a role in adolescent behavior, and there is no evidence that

adolescents are motivated by material in books to engage in certain behaviors and activities. These same conceptualizations are at work in the current wave of book banning in the US; they cannot be unlinked from the way queer topics and identities are discussed in books, and thus why they are flagged and marked with warnings. Gender, sexuality, relationships, and age appropriateness are all constructed categories, not inherent ones.

In their work, Owen (2020) examines the development narratives about youth that have come to constitute a “logic” about young people used across a variety of interdisciplinary settings in everything from education to library science:

The developmental narrative is one we impose on experience, locating moments of transition, change, and rebellion in adolescence and locating moments of arrival, stability, and conformity in adulthood. Queer sexualities and transgender phenomena suggest a much more varied and complex range of possibilities for bodily experience and gendered subjectivity, drawing our attention to the contingency of any subjective arrival, whether it be normative, queer, or trans-identified. (17)

This logic is often employed in discussions about what literature is appropriate or inappropriate and for what age. Owen further points out that “the idea of impressionable youth has survived to this day alongside notions of youth as unreasonable and uncontrollable” (74). In attempts to ban and challenge reading materials, young people are positioned as being both empty vessels that adults have the responsibility to fill with moral information, and on the other hand, rebellious and unable to appropriately handle any information that is given to them. This contradiction is essential for understanding the interminable nature of any kind of debate about what is appropriate content in youth literature. As Owen suggests, ideas about gender and sexuality (and how to influence the formation of gender and sexuality in these young people’s lives) are always inextricably linked to ideas about adolescence.

Our core tenets, drawn from queer theory and critical youth studies, guided our critical content analysis in this paper:

- Gender identity is not stable or concrete (Butler 1999), and the presence of gender identities or sexual identities outside the traditional categories of male, female, and heterosexual can be liberating for readers, especially those who don’t fit neatly into these categories, to see how gender norms shape us in both positive and negative ways.



- Books presenting gender or sexual identity representations outside traditional categories are not a danger to students or children because all gender and sexuality identity categories are just as valid as what we know as the traditional categories (male, female, heterosexual) (Kedley and Spiering 2017; Thein and Kedley 2015).
- Queer theory intersects with constructions and conceptualizations of adolescence because adolescence is seen as a time when gender and sexual identities are formed and, thus, a space to contest conceptualizations and exposure to nonnormative genders and sexualities (Thein and Kedley 2015).

Methods

To gain a clearer picture of the strategic and rhetorical tactics of the website's creators, we engaged in a critical content analysis (CCA) (Johnson, Mathis, and Short 2017) of the site's book reports with a specific focus on the way the values of the reviewers are revealed through these specific aspects of queer theory and CYS. This was done through the process of compiling and including report cards on the BookLooks.org website for award-winning LGBTQIA+ titles. Content analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify themes and patterns within a text through a coding process, and this method has been used to examine book challenges in other studies. CCA, a method traditionally used within literary critique, has been taken up in recent years by scholars in the social sciences (and particularly within education) to understand how these texts function among those who use them in schools, classrooms, and libraries (Short 2017).

Critical content analysis is distinct from content analysis in that the scope of the research and the research questions are crafted within a particular theoretical lens and this lens is used to interpret themes and patterns "locating power in social practices in order to challenge questions of inequity" (1). In other words, in CCA our theoretical perspective is used as a tool to design our study and make sense of the data by setting the data within social structures giving special attention to the issue of power. We use these core tenets from queer theories of youth to make sense of frequently occurring codes that we marked in our analysis of the report cards.

Our CCA focused on uncovering the nuances in reviewer values through their identification and subsequent inclusion of "objectionable" material in the book reports we examined. It is important to note that we were not interested primarily in the frequency of the codes, and that is not how we determined themes. For example, intimate acts between queer characters were coded across 8 report cards—one of the higher instances across our data. However, the BookLook-

org site's mission statement clearly states it would identify and flag intimate acts, and thus this was not part of our analysis. In sum we are not interested in the *authors'* (of the reviewed book titles) intentions when writing the passages, nor were we solely interested in the quantity of times themes came up; we were instead interested in how and why the BookLooks.org contributor decided to identify the particular passage as objectionable. We asked: What makes the content objectionable to the BookLooks.org contributor? And what kind of ideological beliefs would one have in order to deem that content objectionable?

Data Sources

Data for this study include *book reports* for LGBTQIA+ titles that are included in the BookLooks.org database. We first made a list of all titles that were selected as Stonewall winners and honor books from 2012–2022. The charge of the Stonewall award-winning committee is to honor books with "exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/ transgender experience" (ALA). We chose the Stonewall Award as a source for selected titles to ensure that the books being evaluated were deemed of high literary and aesthetic value by a professional body of experts and, therefore, likely titles to include in library collections. Then we cross-checked those titles with the BookLooks.org database and pulled report cards for any titles on both the winner lists and the site. It is important to note that the website continues to add book reports, and our search for titles ended in February 2023. It is possible that more Stonewall-recognized titles have been added since our analysis concluded. The charge of the Stonewall award-winning committee is to honor books with "exceptional merit relating to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/ transgender experience" (ALA). We chose the Stonewall Award as a source for selected titles to ensure that the books being evaluated were deemed of high literary and aesthetic value by a professional body of experts and, therefore, likely titles to include in library collections. We located 16 BookLooks.org report cards that fit the criteria detailed above (appendix A).

Contributors to the website created book reports for each of the included titles. Each BookLooks.org book report contains a summary of the book, a rating from 0–5 suggested by BookLooks.org, a list of objectionable passages and page numbers, and a profanity counter (a tally of every time profane words are used). The reports vary in length but include a table with direct quotes and page numbers for the passages in the book that are flagged as objectionable and, presumably, are used to determine the book's rating. For our purposes and analysis, we are focused on the objectionable passages included in these reports.



Data Analysis

We used values coding (Saldaña 2012) in our first pass through the data to identify discourses related to “participants’ values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” (110). We created a codebook (appendix B) that included codes representing what aspect of the passage we believed the reviewer thought was objectionable. To illustrate how we applied values coding to the BookLooks.org book reports, we offer an example from the children’s book *Julian is a Mermaid*. The BookLook.org book report for *Julian is a Mermaid* flagged the illustration on page 7 of the children’s book and includes the commentary from the report card creator:

The illustration on this page depicts Julian and his Abuela sitting on a subway. Julian is looking at three women dressed as mermaids. The text at the bottom of the page read: Julian LOVES mermaids.

At first read, it is challenging to determine why the content would be flagged as objectionable. The text simply notes that Julian and his grandmother sit on the subway together and that Julian loves mermaids. However, its inclusion on the BookLooks.org report card indicates the BookLooks.org contributor wants to give a warning about this specific content. Given what we, the researchers, know about the aims of the group creating this site, we coded the passage within a “gender norm subversion” category because the most likely reason this passage was flagged was that the contributor wanted to highlight that a young boy, Julian, likes mermaids – and mermaids in our contemporary understandings of children and gender, is a character that is typically reserved for girls. To minimize personal bias (for transparency, one author is cisgender and heterosexual while the other is a member of the LGBTQ community and identifies as queer), we collaboratively coded each passage on each of the 16 report cards. We discussed together to determine which codes were most appropriate to assign to each passage. As needed, we added codes to the codebook to capture the reviewers’ intent fully.

After coding each passage, we conducted a second round of analysis. We then applied the tenets of queer theory and CYS to make sense of and organize the codes into themes. For example, recall that one of our core tenets is that “books presenting gender or sexual identity representations outside traditional categories are not a danger to students or children because all gender and sexuality identity categories are just as valid as what we know as the traditional categories (male, female, heterosexual).” Thus, the codes that highlighted passages as objectionable simply because they

describe gender or sexualities outside of what we understand as traditional categories are notable because they reveal the underlying motivations of the website’s creators. We discuss this further in the results and discussion section that follows.

Results and Discussion

Here, we elaborate on three themes that emerged through our critical content analysis of the report cards on the BookLooks.org website. We identified these themes because they were salient across multiple report cards and were worthy of further discussion in order to fully understand the workings of the BookLooks.org site, specifically as it pertains to their evaluation of LGBTQIA+ materials.

Inclusion of Factual Data and Resources About Gender and Sexuality

The first finding from our data set addresses the presence of factual data in the young adult literature. Many of the young adult texts we looked at, both nonfiction and fiction, include factual data or information and statistics about diversity and equity issues. For example, in *Beyond Magenta*, which is a non-fiction book, there is a plethora of information about gender and sexual identities, including medical and mental health resources and interviews with relevant professionals. The inclusion of this type of data is not limited to non-fiction texts; there are also facts and information about LGBTQIA+ communities in novels. For example, in the young adult fictional novel, *If I Was Your Girl*, a statistic is included in the narrative that notes (accurately among the millennial generation, according to Gallup data (Jones 2022)) that about ten percent of the population can be assumed to be queer or LGBTQIA+ identified. Though in this paper we specifically present data related to gender and sexuality, there were other instances of factual data flagged for the BookLooks.org report cards. For instance, in the non-fiction young adult text *The 57 Bus*, this sentence was flagged:

In 2013, the year Sasha was burned, Oakland ranked seventh among American cities in income and inequality—just below New York. (7)

This demonstrates that data about diverse topics beyond gender and sexuality (such as income inequality or socioeconomic status) are deemed flaggable by the report card creators in order to meet the goal of empowering parents.

Because the mission statement of the BookLooks.org site suggests they provide information for parents in order to protect children to “make informed decisions,” it is notable that our data included codes from the reports that were



related to information that is meant to share information with young readers. These topics included information on themes such as diversity, activism, and statistics, and presumably, the book's author included this information for the benefit of young readers. In other words, even efforts to support young people in the LGBTQIA+ community by sharing basic, factual information are highlighted as something that parents may deem objectionable and want to protect their children from. The website's creators and contributors presumably believe that access to this information must be flagged and explained to parents in order to protect children from legitimizing these gender and sexual identities.

In another instance in *The 57 Bus*, the following passage is flagged by the BookLooks.org book reports:

Legal documents in the United States only recognize 'male' and 'female' as genders, leaving anyone who does not identify as one of these two genders with no option. Australia and New Zealand both allow an X in place of an M or an F on passports for this purpose, and the UK recognizes 'Mx' (pronounced 'Mix') as a gender-neutral title.

Here, the book *The 57 Bus* offers information that is factual: it is a fact that there are countries in the world that offer alternatives to M(ale) and F(emale) on legal documentation. However, BookLooks.org contributors flag this fact as something that parents should be notified of and that children and young readers must be protected from.

Another example again occurs in *Beyond Magenta*. The author includes an interview conducted with a medical doctor who provides gender-affirming care for trans teens. The interview with Dr. Manel Silva (a board-certified internal medicine doctor who specializes in adolescent care) was flagged almost in its entirety. The interview with Dr. Silva included specific passages that contained factual information, as well as an elaboration on the doctor's expertise regarding trans- and gender-affirming medical care. For example, when answering questions about the risk of hormone therapy, Dr. Silva responded:

There are rare contraindications. There's no medical interaction between most common drugs and hormones. . . . If a person's suicidal, we worry that hormones could increase that. But half the time, the reason trans folks are suicidal is because they can't access hormone therapy. . . . To learn more about the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center, visit their website at. (Owens 2020)

In this example, the text *Beyond Magenta* not only includes an interview with a medical expert but also a direct link to

a community health center where teens who would like to actively seek information beyond the book can do so.

These examples illustrate a contradiction in the BookLooks.org report cards. Though the BookLooks.org creators and contributors suggest that their mission is to protect children and youth by restricting access to "objectionable content," in some cases people would argue they do just the opposite. For example, the information and resources flagged here actually increase the chance of harm done to children and youth, especially gender non-conforming youth. While young people are constructed as being irrational and unable to act using reason, they are simultaneously denied access to information that can help them make informed decisions about their own lives. Trans and gender-nonconforming teens already have some of the highest risks of suicide among their peers (Price-Feeney, Green, and Dorison 2020); access to information such as the data and resources flagged in our coding is one way to support and protect these youth. Suggesting children need protection from and then restricting access to that information in actuality has the potential to cause harm rather than prevent it.

By including passages on the BookLooks.org report cards that present data, factual information, expert medical opinions, and resources, the website's contributors suggest this information should be exposed to concerned parents, who in turn might restrict access of the material to young readers in order to protect them. The inclusion of this information—specifically related to gender and sexuality on various titles' report cards—signals to parents, children, readers, and those who use BookLooks.org's report cards that the mere mention of a fact about gender or sexuality is so potentially offensive that it must be noted and considered as something to protect youth from. By flagging representation, data, and resources relative to non-traditional (but, according to queer theory, entirely normal and natural) identity categories, BookLooks.org also conveys specific ideas about what are "normal" or "acceptable" gender categories: LGBTQIA+ identified communities are not, and neither are anyone who is not cisgender or heterosexual

Presence of Allyship and Support

The second finding that emerged from our research and analysis demonstrates that support and allyship of LGBTQIA+ people and communities are flagged as notable within the report cards. Several flagged passages included instances of characters either supporting their friends, peers, and family members who had marginalized gender or sexual identities and thus were demonstrating allyship. Given this scenario, the report card creators believe that young people should be protected from reading about portrayals of allyship or



instances of support given to or from within LGBTQIA+ people or communities.

To illustrate, the nonfiction text *Beyond Magenta* includes stories and quotes from trans teens. In one narrative, a trans teen advocates for coalition building between oppressed communities. We marked the following selection as a code related to allyship:

What's interesting is that the straight, non-trans population seems to think that trans people automatically have allies in gay people. And that gay people automatically have allies in the trans community. And they do Not, capital N. We need to stand together to fight the system. If trans people stand alone, we have no chance. No chance at all! I think all people who are oppressed in one way or another should stand together—women, queer people, people of color, disabled people, whatever. All the special-interest groups, minority groups, have a much better chance of effecting change if we stick together. . . . Life goal: be part of the revolution! It's on my bucket list—I don't have a bucket list, but if I did, revolution would be on it. . . . I want to be a doctor, I will find a queer organization and work with queer kids and prescribe hormones to trans kids. It's going to be so cool We have so much potential. Together we have the potential for dynamic change. A revolution. I hope a revolution happens. And I want to be in it.

It is hard to pin down exactly what part of this selection caused it to be flagged by the BookLooks.org contributors. The mention of gay and trans people and the inclusion of other “oppressed groups” are all possibilities. There is language he included about hormone therapy and also affirmation for the identities of trans kids. However, those topics only cover part of the passage, yet the first half of the passage is flagged as well. This instance shows that a selection that signals support and allyship for young LGBTQIA+ identified people is marked for parents to review and decide the level of access children should have in order to protect them, as indicated by this example.

In another report card for the nonfiction text *The 57 Bus*, the following passage is flagged on BookLooks.org:

We hope that there are programs in juvenile detention that can at least help Richard with this and that he can become an ally who will stand up against the bullying and hatred of gay and trans people.

The event described here from *The 57 Bus* tells about a person named Richard who was convicted of a hate crime after setting Sasha's (a nonbinary teen who uses they/them pronouns) skirt on fire. This happened on a public bus in

Oakland, California (hence the title *The 57 Bus*). The flagging of this passage by BookLooks.org contributors is particularly revealing. The example with Richard involves extreme and almost deadly violence directed toward a person who is gender non-conforming, and then a rehabilitation program Richard had access to while in detention. This example seems to support all youth in that it suggests restorative justice for offenders and protection for the LGBTQIA+ community. But even this initiative to stop physical violence against LGBTQIA+ identified people is something flagged for parents so they can protect young readers. This begs the question: what type of youth are they purporting to protect? It isn't LGBTQIA+ youth, for example, and it doesn't even seem to be Richard and the efforts at his rehabilitation. The mention of this kind of support and allyship, in this case, is potentially just as problematic as the actual physical violence done to SashaViolence, for example, is not a criterion that BookLooks.org website creators use to determine a book's rating of a topic that is flagged.

Finally, an example from Kyle Lukoff's middle-grade novel *Too Bright to See* mentions allyship and LGBTQIA+ affiliated student groups. One passage reads:

I read about the different student organizations I could join, and check out the instructions for how to start a new one—there's no LGBTQ group yet, but there could be.

The BookLook.org site lists this selection as noteworthy. Its inclusion here among a list of controversial passages suggests that mentioning this kind of school support group may be considered controversial, and children would need to be protected from it. The presence of this group and its inclusion in a young adult novel legitimizes the gender and sexual identities of characters attending a school. The inclusion of this selection in BookLooks.org, however, suggests that youth many need to be protected from the knowledge that allyship and support groups exist, or at least warned of its potentially offensive presence in a young adult book.

When considered collectively, the passages that BookLooks.org flags on report cards that mention LGBTQIA+ community building, activism, allyship, and resource sharing suggest that the contributors believe parents need to be warned about these themes and children should be protected from them. However, it is a hallmark of professional practice for librarians and educators to support all students, regardless of sexuality or gender identity, encourage them to find groups/clubs to align with their interests and passions, and connect them to resources that they can use to address challenges they are facing in their lives (AASL 2019). It is common for adults in school spaces to encourage



students to support other student groups, such as allyship. However, allyship and support for LGBTQIA+ communities and people are flagged in the BookLooks.org website, suggesting that contributors deem this topic controversial enough that it should be brought to the attention of parents in order to protect their children. Furthermore, the inclusion of these passages proposes that young people need to be shielded from information that may support or help them to elucidate aspects of their identity, suggesting that they are not ready to do so, or they are not ready to support friends, peers, or family members who have diverse gender or sexual identities.

Normative Expectations about Gender and Sexuality

The BookLooks.org book reports intend to contribute to conversations about what books are appropriate or not for different ages about the topics of gender and sexuality. This, according to their own website, allows parents to protect their children from objectionable content. In this manner, these report cards present some genders and sexualities as “normal” and unremarkable and others – non-normative genders and sexualities – as identities readers must be warned about or even protected from. The simple act of flagging a phrase or selection from a book draws negative attention to what has been framed as potentially offensive content. Because the phrases and passages are without context (from the book) and are based on opinions (from the BookLooks.org report card contributors), mentions of gender or sexual identity outside the norm are painted as objectionable with the same broad stroke.

Many of the codes we assigned and the passages included on the report cards were included because they depicted conversations about gender and sexuality. These passages had different aims ranging from more graphic descriptions of sexual acts to the more mundane commentary and acknowledgment that LGBTQIA+ people exist in the world. Upon closer look, we became more interested in what the inclusion of these passages, taken as a whole, convey through the process of creating report cards on BookLooks.org. Many of the passages flagged by BookLooks.org described a character’s gender identity depicted through narrative or dialogue (their personal thoughts and feelings about their own gender), descriptions of gender as non-static (evidence a character’s thoughts about their gender changes or evolves), gender language (how characters describe their gender, including pronoun usage and name changes), and gender norm challenges (characters who present their gender in ways that are outside traditional gender norms).

In the titles that we looked at that were written explicitly for children and middle-grade audiences, the gender norm

subversion code was particularly noteworthy. As we noted earlier in this article, in a book report for *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love, the following description of an illustration was included:

The illustration on this page depicts Julian and his Abuela sitting on a subway. Julian is looking at three women dressed as mermaids. The text at the bottom of the page reads: Julian LOVES mermaids.

BookLooks.org includes this first passage suggesting that it is noteworthy and that it would not be OK for a boy to love mermaids as there is nothing else included on that page other than three women dressed as mermaids. Later, in another annotation that is included on the same report card, the following is described:

The illustrations on this page depict Julian with a fern and flower headdress and make-up on his face, in different stages of dress as he takes a curtain from the window and wraps it around his waist. He has tied the end of the curtain, thereby creating the appearance of a mermaid’s tail. In the final illustration on the page, he has his arm in the air and his head looking up.

At this point in the story, Julian has taken a curtain from the window and is dressing up as a mermaid at home. The inclusion of this passage suggests that this kind of dress-up is controversial and potentially that boys should only have access to gender-normative dress-up.

In a passage pulled from Kyle Lukoff’s *Too Bright to See*, the main character simply states,

But people being LGBTQ was something I always knew about.” and then later, “She knows that Uncle Roderick was gay, of course.”

These excerpts acknowledge the existence of gay people and, in no sense, convey a sexual act. Yet, these passages from Lukoff’s book are included in a listing of controversial passages on the report card, suggesting a much more far-reaching effort to warn about any content related to sexuality that is included in books published for youth (even if no sexual act of any kind is present). Another passage comes from Kyle Lukoff’s *Too Bright to See*:

Boys can wear nail polish. And makeup. Maybe I’ll want to be that kind of boy. . . . But I’m sorry for trying to turn you into someone you’re not.



In this book, the main character is transgender and is transitioning before starting middle school. In this conversation with his friend Moira, he reminds her that even boys can present their gender in various ways, including by wearing nail polish. By suggesting that these ideas could be controversial, the website contributors offer their perspective on what and who is normal, acceptable, and worthy of receiving social goods (like access to healthcare) and inclusion in the school curriculum. They reinforce the idea that gender should be presented in specific ways. They suggest that the lives of those who do not follow that way are controversial and, in the larger context of book banning here, are not worthy of having their stories included in classrooms and libraries. To reiterate what Price suggests (2021), it is not within the contributors' frame of reference that there are others who see these presentations of gender as normal or appropriate because they position their ideas as morally superior.

Gender norm expectations can be limiting for students and can reinforce dynamics that are dangerous for youth. What about students who come from other cultures that do not value certain gender expressions in the same way? What about boys who like to dance (or like mermaids), or girls who want to be mechanics? What if a boy wants to date another boy? BookLooks.org has an interest in warning parents and adults about cultural and social instances in books that undermine those normative expectations about gender and sexuality. The mission statement for the website claims to warn parents of "objectionable content including profanity, nudity, and sexual content." The excerpts we analyzed contain none of these, rather it is the mere mention of non-normative genders and sexualities that causes these selections to be flagged. Their inclusion in the book reports suggests a broader goal for BookLooks.org and those that challenge different variations of gender and sexuality—that traditional and normative understanding of gender and sexuality are the "natural" and appropriate ones.

Conclusion and Implications

Through the use of CCA, we can see how the book reports created by BookLooks.org reveal a more widespread effort to control the kind of information our students can access through books. While the mission statement claims that the site seeks to share information with concerned parents about "profanity, nudity, and sexual content," an analysis of the report cards reveals that the website's contributors go further by flagging any mention of gender and sexuality, even when it is related to objective data and the simple presence of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Carefully considering how the report cards are crafted is informative in understanding, beyond the site's stated mission, how the creators render

certain books, lives, and identities significant while others are deemed reprehensible.

Content analysis and other qualitative methods have been used as a tool to analyze the rhetoric of book challengers, including the justifications teachers and librarians themselves make for why specific titles are not appropriate (e.g., Kimmel and Hartsfield 2019; Thein 2013)). Others have found that challengers rely on reductive views of children and a belief in their own righteousness, saying that they are not trying to "ban" books, only making the titles less accessible to those who are not ready for them (Knox 2019). This study uses CCA to contribute to this body of work by looking specifically at resources used to challenge LGBTQ materials and the kind of "objective" rating and review systems challengers call on to support their complaints. Through a better understanding of how these rating and review systems are constructed, a more complete picture of the motivations of book challengers comes to light. While BookLooks.org's mission statement claims to support the goal of uncovering "objectionable content, including profanity, nudity, and sexual content," the analysis of annotations pulled from the report cards of included titles demonstrates the variety of other topics that the website deems objectionable. Information about data and statistics related to the lived realities of LGBTQIA+ people, resources and efforts to engage in allyship, and gender presentation outside of the normative binary have no connection to profanity, nudity, and sexual content. Yet, these passages are repeatedly marked and included in report cards for use during public comment sections of school board meetings and in justifications within book challenges. This indicates that the motivations of the website's creators (and their followers) are not simply to restrict sexual content but to deny the existence and realities of certain identities they deem inappropriate.

By trying to restrict the ability of young people to access these titles, the website creators are essentially advocating for the erasure of LGBTQIA+ identities rather than "every" parent's ability to make decisions for their own children. By uncovering and discussing some of the rhetorical and ideological implications of resources like BookLooks.org, we intend to lend empirical support to practitioners defending their school and public library LGBTQIA+ collections. Rating systems developed by parent groups and political lobbyists are not helpful in professional decision-making in determining the kinds of stories and experiences the diverse students and teens have access to. When one group renders its moral code more righteous than another, we enter dangerous terrain that ultimately seeks to deny social goods from some groups and positions children and young adults in ways that deny them access to information about their lives.



This work also joins continuing conversations within scholarship about the arguments being made by those who seek to ban books and restrict access to specific ideas. While this phenomenon is not new and has been the focus of research for decades, the present moment is essential to consider as we encounter new rhetorical tactics and strategies being used to argue against queer books. More research in this area could be useful that examines how discourses

and rhetoric about gender, sexuality, and adolescence are circulating in various other venues, including school board meetings, talking points, and conversation guides circulation among political groups and organizations, communications between administrators and teachers and parents, within all aspects of the curriculum in schools, and amongst young people themselves.

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Appendix A: List of Report Cards Located

1. *Beetle and the Hollow Bones* by Aliza Layne
2. *Beyond Magenta* by Susan Kuklin
3. *Black Flamingo* by Dean Atta
4. *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier
5. *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callendar
6. *The 57 Bus* by Dashka Slater
7. *George* by Alex Gino
8. *If I Was Your Girl* by Meredith Russo
9. *I'll Give You the Sun* by Jandy Nelson
10. *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love
11. *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* by Melinda Lo
12. *Pet* by Akwaeke Emezi
13. *Sex is a Funny Word* by Cory Silverberg
14. *Too Bright to See* by Kyle Lukoff
15. *Two Boys Kissing* by David Levithan
16. *When Aiden Became a Brother* by Kyle Lukoff

Appendix B: Codebook

Codes	No. of Book Reports Where This Code Appeared
abortion	1
allyship	4
anti-gun	1
access to resources	1
body parts	3
bullying /teasing	4
coming out	8
communism	1
data	3
definitions of terms related to gender/sexuality	5
description of intimate activity	7
drug use / Alcohol	6
gender identity language	9
gender norm subversion	8
hate crime	2
intimate act between queer characters	8
masturbation	3
nudity	3
physical transition	3
profanity	5
queer attraction	5
queer nonhuman representation	1
race language	3
sex act between queer characters	6
sex in Conversation	7
sexual assault, sexual violence	2
sexuality language	10
suicide / suicidal intent	4
trans identity	3
politics	1
divorce	2