

Topical themes and sentiment analysis of social media posts surrounding book bans during Banned Books Week 2024-2025

By Jin-A Choi, Laura Nicosia, Bond Benton and Yi Luo

Context

Every year, the American Library Association (ALA) sponsors “Banned Books Week” as an opportunity to celebrate free expression and open access to information. In articulating the importance of the event, the ALA states the following:

Banned Books Week was launched in 1982 in response to a sudden surge in the number of challenges to books in libraries, bookstores, and schools. Held in the last week of September or first week of October, the annual event highlights the value of free and open access to information and brings together the entire book community — librarians, educators, authors, publishers, booksellers, and readers of all types — in shared support of the freedom to seek and to express ideas (*Banned Books Week*, 2025).

Banned Books Week 2025 was held from October 5 to October 11. As this event seeks to foster conversation (both online and offline) about themes related to book banning and censorship, it represents an excellent opportunity to consider social media conversations related to these themes. To that end, this report will consider social media posts that focus on book ban related topics and their presentation in the social media space. To better contextualize this investigation, unpacking the meaning of “book banning” is essential.

Book Banning Definitions and Background

In recent years, discussions about what books belong in schools and libraries have turned into a broader conversation about representation, equity, and democracy itself. To begin, it is helpful to define what we mean by a “book ban.” PEN America states: “a school book ban [is] any action taken against a book based on its content and as a result of parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials, that leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished. Diminished access is a form of censorship and has educational implications that extend beyond a title’s removal” (PEN America). The organization emphasizes that this does not apply to initial

decisions about purchasing, grade-level appropriateness, or content-neutral collection maintenance. A ban occurs when objections to content override professional judgment and lead to withdrawal, restriction, limits, or delayed access.

Alongside outright bans, many districts also engage in what journalists and advocates call “soft banning.” According to *The 19th News*, “books aren’t removed from the shelves but are still kept out of students’ hands in other ways: educators stop recommending them, principals don’t approve them, or they quietly disappear from reading lists and class discussions.” This kind of soft censorship limits exposure to certain stories without officially removing them, producing a quieter but still consequential narrowing of students’ choices (*The 19th News*). By defining these terms clearly, we can better see how today’s restrictions—whether overt or subtle—undermine the choices made by educators and librarians to offer diverse materials to students.

Supporters of restrictions often say they want to shield young readers from inappropriate material. But the books most often challenged reveal a pattern: the stories being pulled are usually those that speak to race, gender, sexuality, or other parts of life that have historically been marginalized. The question is not just which books remain on the shelves, but whose voices we recognize as part of our public life.

Idaho’s House Bill 710, passed in July 2024, shows how far-reaching these policies can be. The law blocks anyone under eighteen from borrowing books labeled as having “sexual content,” regardless of their literary or educational value. Under this broad definition, works such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and even Alexandra Penfold’s picture book *All Are Welcome* have come under review (SLJ Staff “Publishers Sue Idaho”). The law empowers prosecutors—and even private citizens—to bring claims, leaving libraries uncertain about what they can safely offer. In February 2025, several major publishers and authors joined together in a lawsuit to challenge the constitutionality of the law (SLJ Staff “Publishers Sue Idaho”).

The federal government has been drawn into the debate as well. In January 2025, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights dismissed complaints about book bans, calling them part of “Biden’s Book Ban Hoax” (USDOE 2025). The American Library Association (ALA) pushed back, pointing to real examples: students unable to access required texts, parents finding even innocuous books pulled from shelves, and librarians losing their jobs for defending access. The ALA reminded the public that federal courts have long ruled that

removing books because of disagreement with their content is unconstitutional censorship (SLJ Staff “ALA Responds”).

The scope of the trend comes into sharper focus when looking at national figures. In the 2022–23 school year, PEN America reported 3,362 bans in public schools, a 33 percent increase from the previous year. These actions affected 1,557 unique titles by more than 1,480 authors, illustrators, and translators. Florida recorded the most bans at 1,406, with Texas following at 625, Missouri at 333, Utah at 281, and Pennsylvania at 186. The subject matter most often challenged included books that addressed race and racism, LGBTQ+ identities, depictions of violence or abuse, issues of health and puberty, and experiences of grief and death.

By the following year, the numbers had grown dramatically. Between July 2023 and June 2024, PEN America documented 10,046 bans, encompassing 4,231 unique titles across 29 states and 220 districts. Florida alone accounted for roughly 45 percent of these cases, and Iowa added another 36 percent, meaning that nearly four out of five bans nationwide occurred in just those two states. The pattern extended to individual authors and titles as well: Ellen Hopkins saw 19 of her books banned a total of 523 times, while Sarah J. Maas had 22 titles banned 481 times. Jodi Picoult’s *Nineteen Minutes* and John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* were the most frequently banned single works, each approaching one hundred instances. In all, nearly half of the banned titles featured characters of color, almost four in ten included LGBTQ+ identities, and many others explored themes of loss, mental health, or bullying (PEN America “Index”).

This recent wave builds on earlier actions, such as Texas legislator Matt Krause’s 2021 list of 850 books flagged for review in school libraries. That list included many works focused on race, gender, and sexuality, among them Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* and Aiden Thomas’s *Cemetery Boys* (Analysis of Book Banning Trends). Lists like these have guided challenges in multiple states, shaping which books remain available to students.

These developments raise clear constitutional questions. The First Amendment protects both the right to speak and the right to receive information. Courts have repeatedly found that removing books from libraries because of their ideas or perspectives violates these protections (Constitution Center). When schools and libraries are pressured to limit access, the freedoms that support open discussion in a diverse society are at risk.

But the consequences are not only legal. Schools and libraries are often the first places where young people encounter stories that help them understand themselves and others. Limiting

that access narrows opportunities for learning and empathy. In this way, access to books functions not only as a constitutional guarantee but as a democratic necessity. For authors, these bans are not abstract: they can mean real losses in readership, income, and reputation. Writers whose books are repeatedly challenged often find school visits canceled, royalties reduced, and their professional credibility unfairly questioned. In other words, censorship doesn't just limit what students can read—it directly affects the people who write those books and depend on sharing their work.

In today's highly polarized cultural climate, publishers may grow increasingly cautious about associating with authors who have been labeled "dangerous" or controversial. Rather than risk public backlash, legal scrutiny, or reputational harm, presses might quietly decline to acquire or distribute such works. This climate of "preemptive censorship" can result in the silencing of emerging or marginalized voices—not through overt bans, but through the absence of opportunity. By avoiding certain subjects or authors altogether, publishers participate in a subtler form of cultural gatekeeping shaped by ideological risk management.

To address this growing phenomenon, it is also worth exploring the role of social media. Platforms such as X, Facebook, and TikTok not only spread awareness of censorship but also generate data that can help us understand how communities respond to book bans. Tracking social media metrics and analytics provides valuable insight into which stories gain traction, how advocacy spreads, and where misinformation circulates. This kind of analysis can highlight the reach of censorship beyond local board meetings and illustrate its ripple effects in national and even global conversations.

The evidence shows that book bans are not random or evenly spread. They fall disproportionately on works about race, gender, and sexuality, and in the most recent data, are heavily concentrated in just a few states. The exclusions that result raise a larger question: whose stories are being silenced, and whose are left to speak? Addressing these patterns with care is vital if schools and libraries are to reflect the full diversity of our society and provide equitable access to knowledge for all.

Exploratory Topics and Research Method

In looking at the scope and impact of book banning, exploration of the treatment of the topic on social media merits consideration. Specifically, understanding the frequency of posts about book banning and related themes will be a focus of this report. With that in mind, several relevant questions emerge.

- **What is the frequency/volume of posts in social media related to book banning and connected topics?**
- **What sentiment is expressed in these posts?**
- **How has the volume of such posts fluctuated over time?**

To answer that question, this research employs the artificial intelligence (AI)-driven social media analytics tool, Brandwatch, to collect data in the forms of social conversations. Brandwatch was utilized as a social listening tool to understand the sentiment, perceptions, trends, and reactions of social media users' conversations pertaining to book banning and related themes. Social media posts containing the identified themes were collected from Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) during the period studied, specifically during Banned Books Week 2025 and the period immediately prior.

A Google Trend Analysis was also conducted in the same period to assess online search activity related to book banning and related themes. A key feature of Google Trends analysis is that it allows for identification of items of interest for internet users (Nghiem et al., 2016). These analyses are "normalized to the highest volume of searches for that term over the time period being studied. This index ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 recorded on the date that saw the highest relative search volume activity for that term" (Arora et al., 2019, p. 338). Search interest in a specific topic has reliably forecast social media posts and actions related to that topic (McCarthy, 2010).

Methods

A query was set up to collect data that include the word "book" in combination of the following stemmed* words: ban*, "book week", censor*, limit*, restrict*, moms4liberty, protect*, #weneeddiversebooks). After running the initial query, the collected data were cleaned

and irrelevant data were removed by adding stop words. The data collection spans two years, from September 2023 to October 2025.

For Banned Books Week in 2025 (October 5, 2025- October 11, 2025), this resulted in a total of approximately 70,000 social media posts largely from X, as well as Reddit, Tumblr, Bluesky, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook from 38,000 unique authors.

The volume of social conversations surrounding Banned Books Week in 2024 from September 22 to September 28 reached 53K, reflecting a 48% surge compared to the previous period. The majority of social posts, 60%, came from X (formerly Twitter) followed by Reddit (17%), blogs and discussion forms (11%), YouTube (6%), and other digital platforms (e.g., Tumblr, Facebook, etc.).

Results–2025 Banned Books Week

There were a number of identified emergent themes in social media discussion of 2025's Banned Book Week.

Censorship Awareness

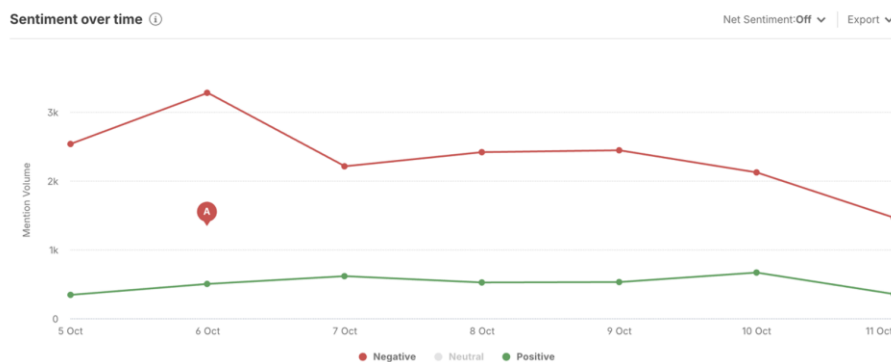
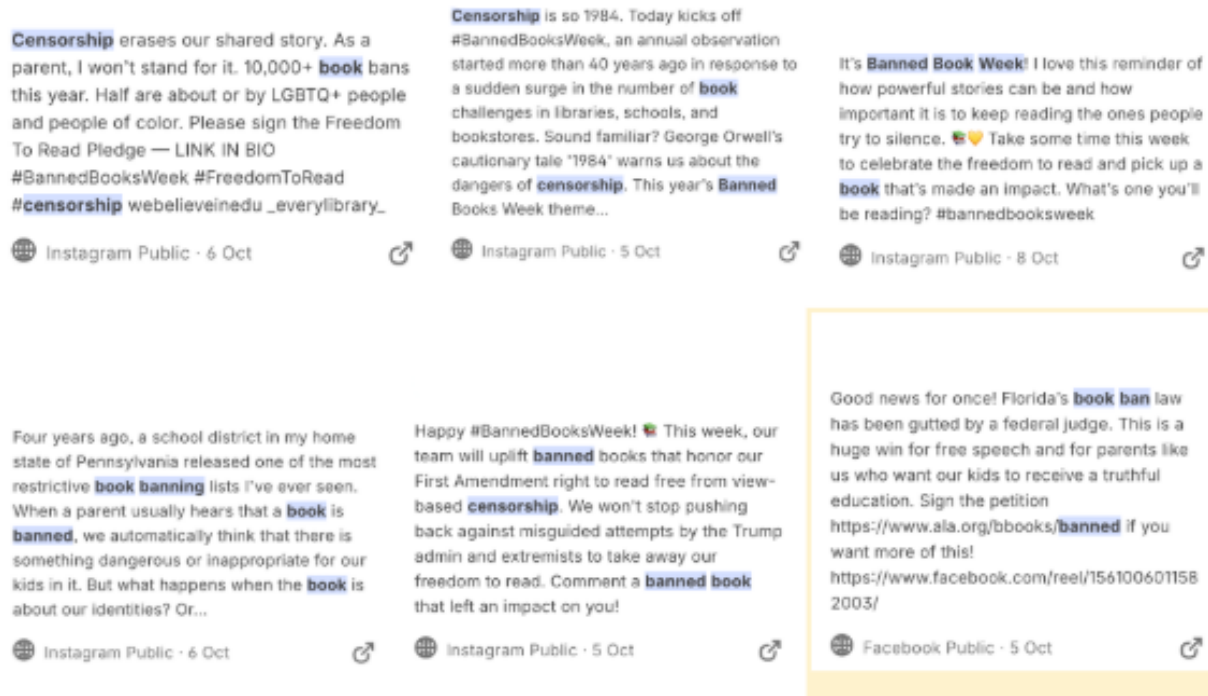
This 2025 Banned Books Week's social media discussion highlights the ongoing issue of censorship in literature, with a focus on the alarming rise in book bans across the United States. This year's theme, "Censorship is so 1984," draws attention to the dangers of limiting access to diverse narratives, particularly those that address identity and social justice. Activists and educators are rallying to protect the freedom to read, emphasizing the importance of diverse voices in literature and the need for community engagement to combat censorship. The power of stories and the necessity of defending intellectual freedom are discussed most frequently. The social media conversations reveal concerns about the implications of censorship. Many argue that banning books undermines educational integrity and limits students' exposure to diverse perspectives. Community advocacy and pushback against censorship, largely initiatives aimed at promoting the freedom to read and encouraging open dialogue, are on the rise.

Concerns over increasing book bans

The statistics surrounding the rise in book bans, with PEN America reporting over 6,870 instances of book censorship in schools during the 2024-2025 academic year, marks one of the biggest concerns surrounding book bans. The social media conversations note that bans are particularly targeting books that discuss LGBTQ+ themes and racial issues. The discussion also highlights that a small number of individuals are responsible for the majority of book bans, raising concerns about the influence of a few voices over the entire educational landscape for the United States. Movements, such as calls for action to protect the rights of students and educators alike, are on the rise.

Societal and Historical Impact of Bans

The impact of book banning extends beyond the classroom, affecting authors, publishers, and the broader society at large. Many authors were found to respond to censorship by offering their works for free or engaging in public discourse about the importance of literary freedom. Events like Banned Books Week serve as platforms for advocacy, encouraging readers to explore challenged texts and support libraries facing censorship pressures. The conversation around book bans is tied to larger societal issues, such as fighting for civil rights and the representation of marginalized communities in literature. Compared to the Nazi book burnings, the contemporary book banning is seen as a tool for controlling narratives and suppressing dissent. Historically speaking, from lessons learned from the past, it seems social media users find it important to protect intellectual freedom and a collective action to resist censorship.



Negative Sentiment

The sentiment surrounding the 2025 Banned Books Week is 5 times more negative than its counterpart. This year's theme, inspired by George Orwell's '1984', emphasizes the dangers of censorship and the importance of intellectual freedom. A large portion of the banned titles are books that address topics such as race, gender identity, and sexuality, which authors, educators, and activists argue that these actions threaten democracy and the right to free expression. This has led to a growing movement advocating for the freedom to read as well as lawsuits arguing

that their constitutional rights have been violated. The fight against censorship is becoming increasingly urgent as more voices join the call for literary freedom, especially in educational settings. Led by the American Library Association and other organizations, the combat against the restrictions and freedom of diverse voices in literature is highlighted. The implications of censorship are another theme that was discussed frequently as well as the importance of representation in literature. Activists are celebrating the stories that have been silenced and calling for solidarity in the fight against censorship. Finally, censorship reflects broader societal tensions regarding freedom of expression and the right to access information. Social media users argue that these bans are a form of political censorship aimed at controlling narratives around race, gender, and sexuality and advocate for legislative changes to protect literary freedom.

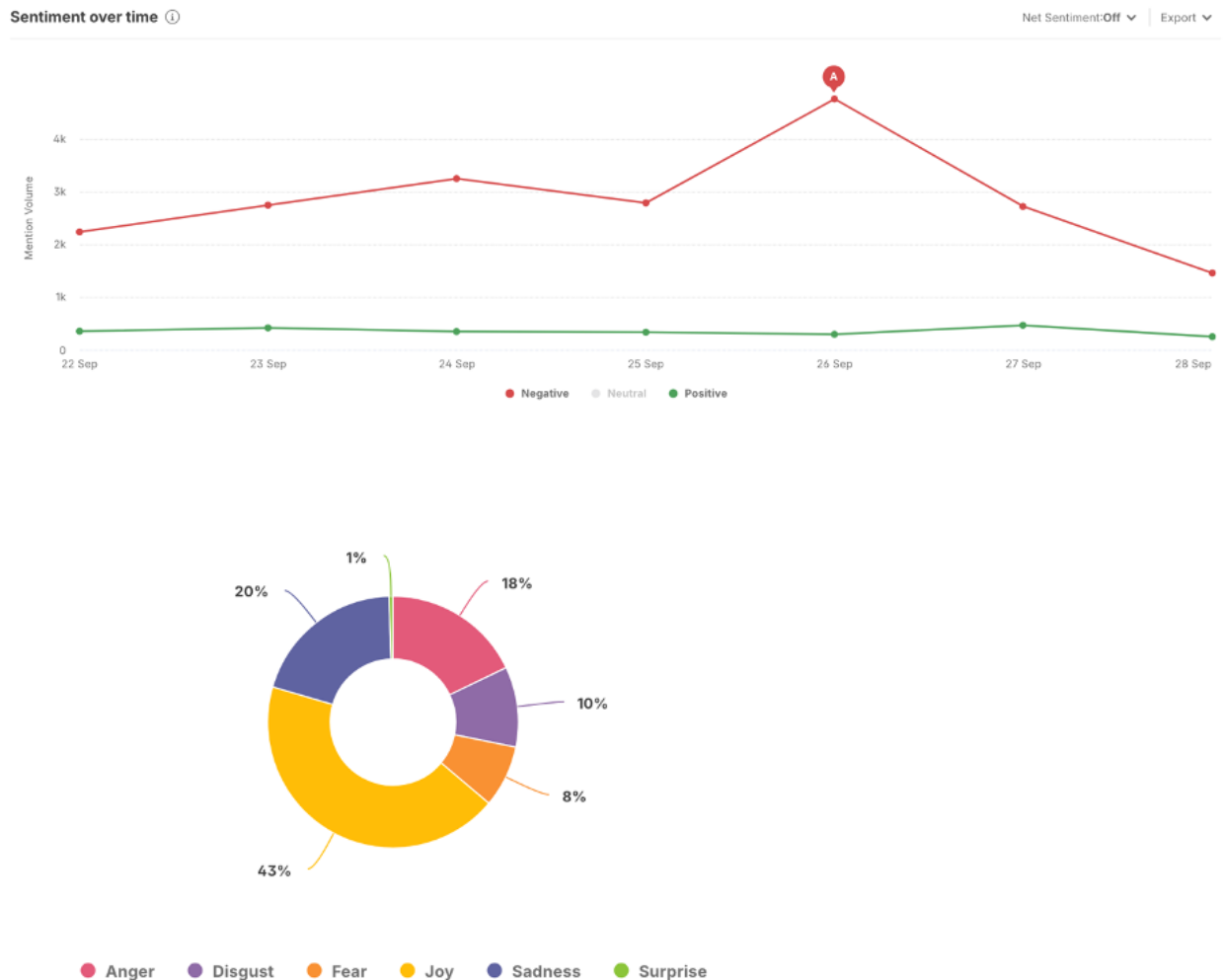
Positive Sentiment

A small yet pronounced positive sentiment (5%) was found in social media users celebrating the freedom to read, engagement and community during Banned Books Week as well as small victories and progress. Events and discussions were organized to foster community engagement and to advocate for the rights of readers to access a wide range of literature. The theme of the 2025 Banned Books Week revolves around celebration of diverse voices and the importance of resisting censorship. Many libraries and bookstores hosted events to promote banned books, encouraging patrons to explore literature that has been challenged or removed from shelves. The week is a call to action for individuals to engage with and support the freedom to read.

Additionally, the recent federal court ruling in Florida, which struck down the state's book ban law, marked a significant victory for free speech advocates. This decision marks a crucial step for providing children with a truthful and comprehensive education. Activists are encouraged to continue to challenge unjust restrictions on literature

Results—2024 Banned Book Week

Sentiment & Discrete Emotions



Unsurprisingly negative emotions (e.g., fear, disgust, anger, and sadness)—55% out weighted positive emotions. Taking a closer look at the emotion of joy revealed a nuanced picture. The positive sentiment, mostly expressed through expressions of joy and hope, actually did not reflect disregard to censorship or denial of attacks on intellectual freedom. Instead, these positive emotions derived from a shared spirit of resistance and celebration. Social media users often expressed joy in celebrating LGBTQ+ authors and books addressing racial, ethnic diversity as well as transgender rights. Using hashtags of resistance such as #ReadBannedBooks, #FreedBetweenTheLines, #ResolveToRead, and #FreedomToRead created a shared sense of solidarity and community among educators, readers, and activists.

Considering the drivers of these positive emotions, joy acted as a means of public defiance, reflecting ardent affirmation of the critical need to have open access to diverse perspectives despite suppression. Positive emotions, therefore, signal empowerment and community solidarity rather than indifference, as shown in this exemplary post with 182k of impressions: “Joining with @SenBrianSchatz, literary organizations, authors and readers alike during #BannedBooksWeek to reject far-right book bans across America. Let’s protect the freedom to think, read and write.” Social media users employed art and reading challenges to combat narratives on banned books, turning anger and outrage into advocacy. These users thus transformed digital media platforms into active digital sphere of resistance. As most emotions conveyed in social posts remained negative, indicating strong fear, anger, disgust, and frustration toward the surging censorship. The following themes emerged related to the negative sentiment.

Denouncing Censorship. Authors, educators, and civil rights advocates have denounced the rise of book bans, viewing it as a direct violation of free speech and intellectual freedom. Feeling angry and sad, many social media users expressed their disgust against censorship. As indicated from these social posts, exposure to a wide range of ideas from diverse narratives in literature is critical to foster understanding and tolerance in society, which constitutes the hallmarks of democracy. Especially, many social media users raised alarms about limiting access to these books not only harms students’ ability to understand the world from an inclusive perspective. The grim reality seemed to create a shared commitment among social media users to unit and fight against such censorship in order to preserve the integrity of educational institutions. Many social media users are calling for a collective fight against the escalating wave of censorship.

Anger against LGBTQ+ Pushback. In response to rising pushback against the visibility and representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in literature and education, social media users showed anger and disdain toward the disproportionate book bans on books with LGBTQ+ themes. LGBTQ+ advocates argued that such an increase in the removal of books addressing LGBTQ+ issues reflected a broader cultural backlash against queer representation in education and media, which threatened the First Amendment rights and shattered the foundation of democracy. Social media chats related to this topic sparked ongoing debates about the role of libraries and educators in fostering an inclusive environment for youth. Many social media users viewed librarians and schoolteachers as symbols of resistance against censorship, defending

access to diverse literature. Supporters of free expression emphasized the need to secure access to diverse literature in schools. Limiting access to these narratives not only restrict education opportunities but also silences crucial conversations about identity and social justice for young readers.



BANNED BOOKS WEEK 2024

Graphic showing book covers for:

- You Bright to See* by Kiyoko Sue
- FLAME* by Mike Curato
- STONE WALL* by Ron Mueck
- THE HATE U GIVE* by Angie Thomas
- BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- ME AND WHITE SUPREMACY* by Layla F. Saad

- ▶ Bans continue to disproportionately impact **LGBTQ+ stories**, frequently by labeling any gay or trans content as “obscene” or overly sexual.
- ▶ Books about **race and racism**, and books featuring characters of color have been disproportionately targeted.

PEN AMERICA

Polarizing Ideologies. A sharp divide appeared among social media discussions surrounding book bans. Supporters of book bans framed the issue as a means to protect children from inappropriate content. However, the American Library Association has noted that almost half of the books targeted for censorship focused on themes of race, gender, and sexuality. Many critics thus viewed the protection rationale as a pretense for broader sociopolitical agendas erasing the experiences and existence of marginalized groups, representing an attack on free speech and education integrity. Based on the social posts, such discord seemed to reflect wider cultural and political tensions regarding gender, race, and sexuality. Many opponents argued that ideological motives instead of genuine concerns for student welfare were key drivers behind

book bans. These debates on book bans appeared to emerge as a symbolic manifestation of deeper sociopolitical conflicts in this country.

Celebration of Banned Books. A salient trend across social media discussions during Banned Books Week centered on celebrating the restricted and challenged books. Instead of focusing just on outrage or censorship, many social media users reframed the week as an opportunity to honor the voices that censorship seeks to silence. This year's theme – "Freed Between the Lines" – served as a creative device by authors and readers to highlight the importance of diverse voices in literature. Posts frequently spotlighted literature amplifying perspectives from LGBTQ+ community and exploring the intersections of race, gender, and identity. Many libraries, schools, and community organizations played an important role in promoting this celebratory discourse on digital platforms. They actively promoted the right to read freely and encouraged public participation in activities such as book displays, read-aloud events, or online discussions featuring challenging titles. These initiatives transformed the conventional act of reading into a collective form of civic engagement, affirming intellectual freedom and inclusion. At the individual level, educators, readers, and authors also shared their experiences (e.g., personal connections to the banned books) on social media to raise awareness and rally support for freedom to read. These organizational and individual initiatives underscored the ongoing cultural importance of protecting literary freedom and ensuring that all voices, especially those from historically underrepresented communities, remain visible and valued in the public arena.

Search Trends Results

Looking at results from Google Trends, several interesting items emerge. Specifically, search interest related to the ALA's "Banned Books Week" event increased by 4% from 2024 to 2025.

Interest over time



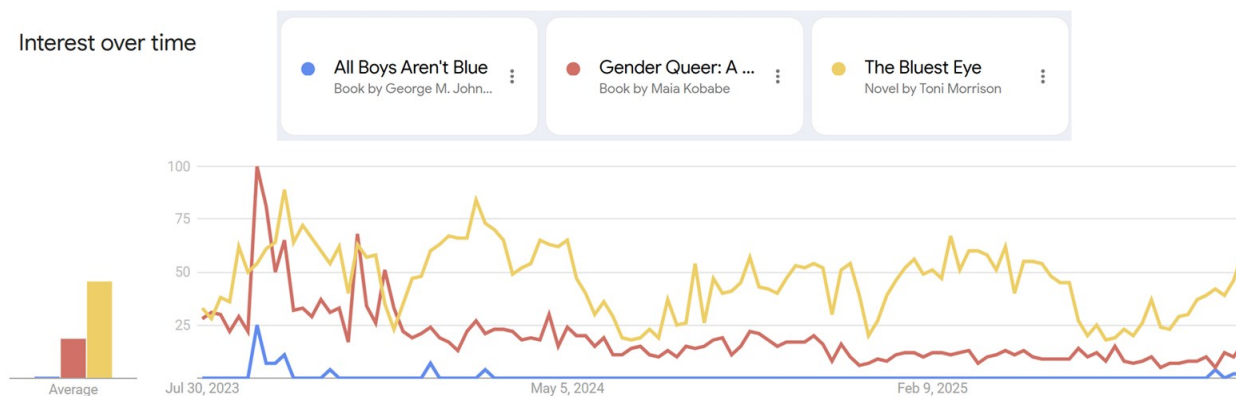
When looking at a longer period of search frequency, however, results for 2025 are 50% lower than search activity in 2023.

Interest over time



Similarly, when looking at the three most challenged books identified by the ALA (*Banned Books Week*, 2025), Trends Analysis suggests there was notable search activity in the period studied in 2025, however results for each still reflect 2023 as being the highest period of search interest.

Interest over time



Overall, this reflects that 2025 activity related to banned books and connected topics was substantial. It appears, however, that engagement with topics related to book banning has decreased in the online space.

Discussion

In looking at decreases in activity related to the studied topics, it is important to note that establishing the reasons for these decreases is beyond the scope of this project (which is primarily focused on reporting). That said, potential explanations can be discussed in terms of future research directions on book banning related themes. It is possible that a climate of self-censorship has caused people who would otherwise be invested in the topic to self-censor their social media activities. This has been noted in recent scholarship and in surveys reported on by media outlets (Daruwala, 2025; Quinn, 2025). Engaging or advocating with content related to book bans may now be seen as risky in the current social and political climate, potentially mitigating online behavior. As provocative content in many challenged books may create an association with sanctioned themes, self-censorship and reduced engagement with ban related topics may be an outcome. Also notable is that social media platforms have broadly moved towards better reflecting the priorities of the current U.S. government (Frenkel, 2024) which is frequently more aligned with limiting book access (particularly in relation to LGBTQ+ themes). Social media algorithms play a significant role in affecting individual values and beliefs and if platforms are potentially de-emphasizing content related to book bans or portraying access limitations favorably, it may also be contributing to reduced activity noted in this report.

What is clear, however, is that from 2022 to 2025, there has been a surge in book access limitations and outright bans. Looking at online activity from 2023 (for example), it would appear that the online space has demonstrated significant interest in this topic. That this interest has decreased in 2025 during a period when conversation would seem to be most essential is an important disconnect that merits exploration by researchers, free speech advocates, and concerned citizens.

Resources for more information about Book Banning, Censorship, and Limiting Access

American Library Association: Office of Intellectual Freedom

<https://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>

PEN America: <https://pen.org/report/beyond-the-shelves/>

American Psychological Association: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2025/07-08/fighting-book-bans-censorship>

National Council of Teachers of English: Intellectual Freedom Center:

<https://ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center/>

International Literacy Association: <https://www.literacyworldwide.org>

American Civil Liberties Union: <https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/protecting-free-speech-in-the-face-of-government-retaliation>

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