

Is Reading “Banned” Books Associated With Behavior Problems in Young Readers? The Influence of Controversial Young Adult Books on the Psychological Well-Being of Adolescents

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Many books targeted toward young readers are “banned” or challenged in school and public libraries because of “edgy” violent, sexual, or occult content. Little is known about the possible relationship between such books and negative outcomes in children. Exposure to banned books and outcomes related to civic behaviors, internalizing and externalizing mental health problems, school grade point average (GPA), and violent and nonviolent crime were assessed in a sample of 282 adolescents and preadolescents aged 12–18. Control variables included child age and gender, parent and peer influences, neurotic and antisocial personality traits, and general reading for pleasure and required reading for school. Results indicated that relationships between banned books and negative outcomes were complex. Banned books were associated with increased civic behaviors concurrently. Banned books did not predict GPA, or commission of violent or nonviolent crimes. However, banned books were associated with increased internalizing and externalizing mental health symptoms. This relationship was driven by a small number of individuals, and was not linear in nature. Further, this relationship was true for girls, but much weaker in boys. GPA was predicted by increased reading for pleasure, but not required school reading. In regards to social outcomes, reading of banned books is associated with both increased civic behavior and little risk of antisocial behavior. A relationship does exist between banned book reading and mental health symptoms in a small subsample of readers although whether that relationship is causal or cathartic requires further research.

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The degree to which media influences the behavior of children or adolescents continues to be disputed in the academic community. The tragic 2012 shooting in Newtown, CT, perpetrated by a young male, renewed debate over media effects . . . although his consumption of violent media was subsequently revealed to be unremarkable. (State’s Attorney for the Judicial District of Danbury, 2013). Much of this concern focused on video games, although the evidence for whether video games do or do not have negative influences has been mixed (von Salisch et al., 2011; Willoughby, Adachi, & Good, 2012). At times during which society is experiencing a pressing social problem (real or imagined) it is not uncommon for media to come under criticisms, whether rightly or wrongly (Gauntlett, 2005). In the past, books ranging from translation of the Bible, through dime novels, erotica such as *Tropic of Cancer*, through *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Harry Potter* have been either censored or challenged based on their perceived harms to society. At the same time, some advocates of censorship or regulation of newer media may advance claims that new media are *more* harmful than books, arguably

attempting to distance themselves from past book burnings and censorship efforts (such as the censorship of *Tropic of Cancer* in the United States in the early 20th century). Related to concerns about video games, in 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that video games were no more harmful than other media such as books whereas others have suggested that the interactive nature of video games may render them more harmful than books (e.g., Rockefeller, 2012). However, these various comparisons between video games and books have advanced despite very little being known about books themselves and their potential impact on behavior. Compared with research on video games and TV, research on the effects of books is almost entirely lacking.

Many books marketed toward adolescents contain “edgy” content including violence, sex, profanity, and other potentially objectionable content (Coyne, Callister, Stockdale, Nelson, & Wells, 2012). As a result, a number of such books are commonly “challenged,” that is to say, parents, politicians or activists groups seek to have them removed from public or school libraries (American Library Association, 2013). Often referred to as “banned” books, most such attempted bannings are, in fact, unsuccessful. A 2011 Wall Street Journal book review set off considerable debate by strongly criticizing the dark content of many young adult books (Gurdon, 2011). Despite this, few studies have actually examined the potential influence of books on behavioral outcomes.

Books that are challenged are very often books that are targeted toward youth, yet still contain edgy content such as sexuality (such

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as in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*), violence (such as the child-on-child violence of *The Hunger Games*), occult themes (such as *Harry Potter*), profanity (including use of the racial slurs in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), and drug references (such as *Thirteen Reasons Why*). Books that highlight homosexual relationships such as *And Tango Makes Three*, a children's book that highlights a same-sex pairing between two male penguins who raise a chick together are also commonly challenged. In writing on the controversies over such attempted bannings Alexie (2011) notes that the motivation for doing so appears to stem from desire to "shield" children from edgy material. Alexie notes that this may be counterproductive in many instances, however, losing the opportunity for adults and children to discuss issues and material they will inevitably be exposed to and also because many children have already been exposed to these difficult situations in their real lives and books may provide an opportunity for children to explore their own conflicts with relatable characters.

In one study on books, Coyne and colleagues (2012) examined for the influence of reading book passages on physical and relational aggression in two laboratory experiments. Results indicated that participants tended to model what they had read. This study represents an important and well-done first step in this field. However, its ability to answer questions about the influence of books on youth is limited in several ways. Most notably, this study was conducted with college students, who may be well aware of media effects theories, in a laboratory environment that may be subject to demand characteristics. Further laboratory aggression measures often have difficulty answering questions about real-life aggression, given the limitations of these measures (Elson, Mohseni, Breuer, Scharnow, & Quandt, in press). Furthermore, the experiments considered passages from books taken out of context rather than the actual experience of reading a coherent literary work for pleasure. The intent is not to be unduly critical of an important and illuminating study, far from it. Rather, the intent is to acknowledge that there is certainly room for more research examining the potential influence of content in books in other ways.

It is also important to note that recent research suggests that media is not something *done to* children (or adults) but rather that individuals select media based on preexisting personality traits and motivations. For instance Rentfrow, Goldberg, and Zilca (2011) have found that reading preferences are predicted by personality traits. Similarly, although most of this research has focused on video games, evidence is emerging that media use is often purposefully used to meet motivational needs left unmet in regular life such as for autonomy, competence, or socialization (Przybylski, Rigby, & Ryan, 2010). Media such as books may, in effect, allow readers to vicariously meet their needs unmet through real life through the actions of characters and heroes with whom they may identify. It may, thus, be more productive to consider book and other media uses from an active user-driven experience such as suggested by Uses and Gratifications Theory (Sherry et al., 2006) rather than by the traditional content-driven theories of traditional effects models such as those promoted by social-cognitive theories or other hypodermic needle models of media effects that imply a direct and passive modeling of media by unwary consumers.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory is a theory primarily associated with the field of communication that suggests that media use is an active agentic process in which individuals select media to promote mood states they wish to achieve (Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006; Sherry et al., 2006). According to this approach, media users are active in selecting, shaping, and processing media. Therefore, for example, an individual who is feeling depressed and wishes to improve his or her mood may select media they believe may enhance their mood state. Exactly which media they select may be a highly idiosyncratic choice. Uses and gratifications theory does not necessarily rule out the potential for media to have causal influences on consumers. However, under uses and gratifications theory, it would be expected that media effects would be user driven, subtle, and idiosyncratic, rather than content driven. Thus, a particular form of media such as banned books may be a positive influence for some individuals enhancing their mood states, while perhaps less helpful for other individuals (see Unsworth, Devilly, & Ward, 2007 for related evidence from the field of video games).

This approach differs considerably from the standard social-cognitive approach to understanding media effects that tends to focus on content, passive and automatic processes, and the mechanistic development of cognitive scripts. Social-cognitive theories are much more inclined to argue that media can have direct, predictable, and global effects on consumers that are unavoidable (see Ferguson & Dyck, 2012 for discussion). However, such theories, while comporting well with periodic societal concerns about media, have arguably had difficulty in adequately describing the media experiences of media consumers (Gauntlett, 2005). Thus, the need for new (at least to psychology) theoretical approaches to understanding media effects is considerable.

A somewhat related model of adolescent media use is the Adolescents' Media Practice model (Steele & Brown, 1995). Like Uses and Gratifications, this model posits that adolescents are active users and shapers of media but also that media use is important in the identity development process of youth. Youth are involved in selecting between media choices, interpreting media, and applying it to their own lives as an expression of identity, such as the display of posters, conversations about media with peers, and so forth. As with Uses and Gratifications Theory, the Adolescents' Media Practice model does not necessarily rule out media effects, but posits them as an interaction process of adolescent identity development that is more complex and idiosyncratic than that assumed under most social-cognitive models.

Potential Outcomes

In general, concerns about objectionable media content posit relationships between consuming such content and some form of "harm" related to mental health or behavior. Generally, these types of arguments have underlain most censorship arguments: namely that consumption of objectionable media will result in behavior problems at the social level (Kutner & Olson, 2008). The concern Gurdon (2011) expresses about edgy young adult books reflects these common worries particularly in regard to mental health and aggression related outcome.

Although little research has been conducted on books, concerns about media related adverse outcomes can be quite diffuse, although they include such issues as mental health (Tahiroglu et al.,

2010), aggression and delinquency (Kutner & Olson, 2008), civic and helping behavior (Tear & Nielson, 2013), and academic achievement (Courage & Setliff, 2009). Most existing research has focused on TV and video game effects and these effects remain hotly debated. At present, however, relatively little research has examined the potential impact of books with objectionable material on these outcomes in youth.

The current study is designed to help fill in considerable gaps in this area by examining the influence of exposure to banned books among a sample of youth. Outcomes related to civic behavior, criminal behavior, school grade point average (GPA), and mental health will be considered. Although taking no a priori view on whether banned books are harmful, the designs are meant to test the hypotheses that exposure to greater amounts of banned books will be correlated with decreased civic behavior, increased criminal activity, increased mental health problems, and decreased academic performance. All hypotheses are designed to test the negative view, although, in the case of academic performance, it might reasonably be argued that reading books would be expected to increase academic performance.

Method

Participants

Participants include 282 youth from a small city in South Texas. Youth included in the present study ranged in age from 12–18, with a mean age of 15.71 ($SD = 1.94$). Although statistically both skew (-0.38) and kurtosis (-1.12) were minimal, a visual observation of the distribution of ages indicated some degree of positive skew, with greater frequency of 18-year-olds (25.2% of the sample) than 12-year-olds (6% of the sample). All other age units ranged between 11.7% of the sample (for age 14) through 18.1% of the sample (for age 17). Thus, older teens were somewhat better represented in the sample than younger teens. The majority of youth in the present study were Hispanic in ethnicity (96.8%). There were somewhat more females ($n = 172$, 61.0%) than males ($n = 110$, 39.0%) in the current sample. The current sample is a general sample of youth, not an at-risk sample. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling approach involving nomination by community members (McCrae et al., 2002). This approach, while nonrandom can be effective in reaching typically disenfranchised individuals.

Predictor Materials

All materials used Likert-scale items and demonstrate psychometric properties suitable for use in multiple regression. The variable related to banned book exposure demonstrated significant positive skew, but rerunning the analyses with a square root transformation did not influence outcomes.

Negative Life Events. The Negative Life Events instrument (NLE; Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994) includes the following scales used as predictors in this study:

- 1) *Antisocial personality* (e.g., It's important to be honest with your parents, even if they become upset or you get punished, to stay out of trouble, it is sometimes necessary to lie to teachers, etc.; $\alpha = .73$). This subscale included 11 items.

- 2) *Family attachment* (e.g., On average, how many afternoons during the school week, from the end of school or work to dinner, have you spent talking, working, or playing with your family, etc.; $\alpha = .79$). This subscale included seven items.
- 3) *Delinquent peers* (e.g., How many of your close friends purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to them, etc.; $\alpha = .86$). This subscale included nine items.

This measure tapped multiple constructs related to family and peer environment as well as delinquent behavior and beliefs. The NLE has been widely used, particularly in the criminal justice literature and has demonstrated good reliability and validity (Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994). Most scales described here are used as predictor variables, although those related to criminal behaviors (described below) function as outcome variables. There are no item overlaps between subscales.

Banned books. Youth participants were asked whether they had read any of a list of 30 books identified by the American Library Association (ALA) as a commonly challenged book over the past decade because of content. The current list of 30 books included were those challenged in recent years, during the past decade. The most recently challenged 30 books identified by the ALA were included in the current study (many books appeared concurrently across multiple years); thus, including books teens were most likely to read currently. The ALAs listings for each year were checked backward from the most recent year until a comprehensive list of 30 books was achieved. Books on the list ranged from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to the *Harry Potter* series. The questionnaire merely asked whether participants had read the books and did not identify them as banned or challenged books. Coefficient α for book exposure was .87. Exposure was based on a sum total of number of books read. Participants were also asked to report how many hours per week they spent reading books assigned by school and how many hours a week they spent reading books they had chosen for fun. The participants were explicitly told not to respond "yes" if they had seen only the movie version of the book. This measure is reproduced in full as Appendix.

Neuroticism. The neuroticism subscale of the International Personality Item Pool Junior-S personality inventory (Goldberg et al., 2006). Ten items assessed the degree to which participants' personalities disposed them toward negative moods. Sample items include "I worry about things" and "I am easily annoyed." This questionnaire was included as a control variable to control for personality influences on outcomes. Coefficient α was .64 with the current sample.

Outcome Materials

Mental health. Regarding mental health, youths' primary caregivers filled out the *Child Behavior Checklist* (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). The CBCL is a well-researched and validated tool for measuring behavioral problems in children and adolescents. Separate indices for internalizing disorder symptoms (depression, anxiety) and externalizing disorder symptoms (rule breaking, aggression) were calculated. With the current sample, the coefficient of the internalizing symptoms was .83 and for externalizing symptoms .88.

Civic behaviors. A three-item scale of civic involvement was developed based on the content domain used by Lenhart et

al. (2008). These three items asked about frequency of involvement during the past 12 months in volunteer activities, charitable causes and giving, and elections and electoral processes. Alpha for this scale with the current sample was .56. The low α is likely because of the relatively wide range of behaviors included. The measure was nonetheless retained, although with the cautionary note that the lower reliability may result in truncated effects estimates.

Delinquent behavior. The NLE questionnaire, described above has a subscale related to *general delinquency* (e.g., How many times in the following year have you stolen something worth more than \$50, etc.). The *general delinquency* scale can be further divided into nonviolent ($\alpha = .81$) and violent ($\alpha = .78$) criminal activities.

Grade Point Average. Parents were requested to report their youth's most recent reported school GPA.

Statistical Analyses

Main analyses consisted of hierarchical multiple regression equations. Separate hierarchical multiple regressions were run for each of the outcome measures. In each case, child age and gender were added on the first step, personality variables related to antisocial and neurotic traits were entered on the second step, family attachment and delinquent peers were added on the third step, and hours spent reading for school, for pleasure and exposure to banned books were entered on the final step. Multicollinearity was examined using tolerance and variable inflation factor (VIF) statistics and found to be acceptable in all cases. Highest VIF values were 1.5, and lowest tolerance values were .67.

Procedure

As noted above, participants were recruited via snowball sampling. Families who were nominated were provided with parental informed consent and minor assent forms in both English and Spanish. When consent was given, they were then provided with the study forms that were taken in the home and returned to the university in a sealed envelope. All procedures were approved by local Institutional Review Board (IRB) and were designed to comport with APA standards for ethical research with human participants.

Results

Means and SDs for study variables are presented in Table 1. Intercorrelations between study variables are presented in Table 2. Standardized regression coefficients are presented with 95% confidence intervals for statistically significant effect sizes.

Regarding the outcome of civic behavior, such behaviors were more common among older children ($\beta = .14$) and those with more attached families ($\beta = .14$). Reading of banned books also was positively related to civic behavior ($\beta = .23$). Given the low reliability of the three items on this scale, results were reanalyzed using logistic regression and the same covariates with each of the individual items. Reading of banned books was found to be specifically related to interest in politics and elections ($B = .10$, Wald = 6.23, $p = .013$) and involvement in charitable causes ($B = .10$, Wald = 6.36, $p = .012$) but not volunteering in the community ($B = .06$, Wald = 2.11, $p = .147$). These results are presented in Table 3.

Table 1

Means and SDs for Included Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD
Neuroticism	29.41	7.33
Antisocial personality	19.72	5.71
Family attachment	20.78	5.18
Delinquent peers	13.48	5.01
Hours reading for school	3.10	4.22
Hours reading for fun	2.27	3.45
Banned books	4.50	4.58
Civic behaviors	1.27	1.04
GPA	3.35	0.54
Nonviolent crimes NLE	1.38	3.33
Violent crimes NLE	0.61	2.15
Internalizing symptoms	7.02	8.52
Externalizing symptoms	6.87	9.49

Regarding the outcome of GPA, GPA was predicted by female gender ($\beta = .22$), family attachment ($\beta = .23$) and hours spent reading for personal pleasure ($\beta = .20$). No other outcomes, including assigned school readings or readings of banned books predicted GPA. These results are presented in Table 4.

Regarding the outcome of nonviolent crime commission, only association with delinquent peers was related to this outcome ($\beta = .22$). Reading of banned books did not correlate with nonviolent crimes. These results are presented in Table 5.

Regarding the issue of violent crime commission, this outcome was predicted by antisocial personality only ($\beta = .18$). Reading of banned books did not predict violent crime commission. These results are presented in Table 6.

Regarding the outcome of internalizing disorders on the CBCL, this outcome was predicted by neuroticism ($\beta = .20$) and reading banned books ($\beta = .21$), and inversely related to family attachment ($\beta = -.15$). No other outcomes predicted internalizing disorders. These results are presented in Table 7.

Regarding the outcome of externalizing disorders (behavior problems related to aggression and rule-breaking) on the CBCL, this outcome was predicted by neuroticism ($\beta = .18$), antisocial personality ($\beta = .19$), association with delinquent peers ($\beta = .13$), and reading of banned books ($\beta = .31$). Externalizing disorders were also inversely related to family attachment ($\beta = -.15$). These results are presented in Table 8.

The regressions discussed above were then rerun separately for boys and girls. Results did not differ for most outcomes. However, predictive relationships between banned books and internalizing symptoms held only for girls ($\beta = .24$, $p = .006$) but not boys ($\beta = .14$, $p = .25$). This same gender difference was also seen for externalizing symptoms with a significant predictive effect for girls ($\beta = .37$, $p = .001$) but not boys ($\beta = .18$, $p = .08$). Results for boys trended in the same direction as for girls but were considerably weaker.

Further Examining the Relationship Between Banned Books and Mental Health

Results indicated that banned books were either positive or neutral on most outcomes related to civic behaviors, GPA, and criminal behavior. However, banned books correlated positively with mental health symptoms, both externalizing and internalizing.

Table 2
Intercorrelations Between Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1) Neuroticism	1.00	.13*	-.03	.14*	-.07	.00	-.07	.02	-.05	.13*	.08	.16**	.18**
2) Antisocial personality		1.00	-.27**	.44**	-.08	.04	.08	-.07	-.10	.14*	.23**	.24**	.32**
3) Family attachment			1.00	-.18**	.16**	.06	-.01	.16**	.20**	-.09	-.13*	-.21**	-.23**
4) Delinquent peers				1.00	-.09	.08	.12*	.02	-.11	.21**	.17**	.27**	.30**
5) Hours reading for school					1.00	.27**	.34**	.12	-.04	-.01	-.02	.08	-.02
6) Hours reading for fun						1.00	.51**	.17**	.13	.08	.00	.13*	.10
7) Banned books							1.00	.26**	.02	.05	.06	.34**	.34**
8) Civic behaviors								1.00	.08	.05	-.05	.05	.00
9) GPA									1.00	-.25**	-.06	-.06	-.16**
10) Nonviolent crimes NLE										1.00	.52**	.19**	.27**
11) Violent crimes NLE											1.00	.20**	.23**
12) Internalizing symptoms												1.00	.76**
13) Externalizing symptoms													1.00

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

To examine the pattern of relationship more closely, the variable related to banned book exposure was broken into quartiles (in this case even 25% quartiles, rather than based on means and *SDs*, which produced skewed pools of participants). The first quartile included those who had read either zero or one banned book, the second quartile between 2 and 3 banned books, the third quartile between 4 and 6 banned books, and the fourth quartile all those who had consumed more than 6 such books. As expected, one-way ANOVAs with banned book quartiles as the independent variable, and outcomes related to externalizing symptoms [$F(3, 278) = 8.74, p < .001$] and internalizing symptoms [$F(3, 278) = 10.02, p < .001$] were statistically significant. However, an evaluation of the plot of means reveals that this relationship is nonlinear. In the case of both externalizing symptoms and internalizing symptoms reading banned books to a moderate level, at the 75% percentile (corresponding to ~6 books from the list of 30) was unrelated to mental health symptoms. However, small clusters of participants both consumed large numbers of banned books and had considerable mental health symptoms. Thus, this relationship appears to be driven by a small number of participants, and is not linear in nature. The linear and curvilinear (Quadratic) regression lines for

banned books and externalizing and internalizing symptoms are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

To assess this further, the regression equations were rerun after eliminating those at the top 95th percentile of banned book consumers consuming 15 books or more from the list (resultant sample size = 264). With the smaller sample, relations between banned books and mental health outcomes for externalizing ($\beta = .11$) and internalizing ($\beta = .02$) symptoms dropped to nonsignificance. Thus, the relationship between banned books and mental health outcomes are being driven by a small subsample (7% or 19 out of 283) who were, generally, extremely high in both banned book consumption and mental health symptoms relative to their peers.

Several interaction effects were tested in subsequent regression models, particularly focusing on violent and nonviolent crimes. First, the basic regression model described above was retested including an interaction term between banned book consumption and antisocial traits. The interaction term did not prove to be significant. Then, interaction terms were built for internalizing and externalizing symptoms and banned book consumption. These were included in new regression models with basic

Table 3
Multiple Regression Results for Banned Books and Control Predictors on Civic Behavior

	β	95% CI	<i>t</i> -value	Significance
Study variable				
Age	.14*	(.02, .25)	2.24	.02
Female gender	.07		1.09	.28
Step 1 $F(2, 249) = 5.51, p = .005 \Delta R^2 = .04$				
Neuroticism	.02		0.34	.73
Antisocial personality	-.04		-0.57	.57
Step 2 $F(2, 247) = 0.29, p = .75 \Delta R^2 = .00$				
Family attachment	.14*	(.02, .25)	2.21	.03
Delinquent peers	.04		0.56	.58
Step 3 $F(2, 245) = 3.25, p = .04 \Delta R^2 = .03$				
Hours reading for school	-.01		-0.07	.94
Hours reading for fun	.03		0.48	.63
Banned books	.23*	(.12, .34)	3.06	.002
Step 4 $F(3, 242) = 5.09, p = .002 \Delta R^2 = .06$				
Total model $F(9, 242) = 3.91, p < .001$ Adjusted $R^2 = .10$				

Table 4
Multiple Regression Results for Banned Books and Control Predictors on GPA

	β	95% CI	<i>t</i> -Value	Significance
Study variable				
Age	.01		0.12	.91
Female gender	.22*	(.11, .33)	2.81	.006
Step 1 $F(2, 164) = 5.03, p = .008 \Delta R^2 = .06$				
Neuroticism	-.03		-0.35	.73
Antisocial personality	.00		-0.01	.99
Step 2 $F(2, 162) = 1.15, p = .32 \Delta R^2 = .01$				
Family attachment	.23*	(.12, .34)	2.89	.005
Delinquent peers	-.12		-1.49	.14
Step 3 $F(2, 160) = 3.44, p = .04 \Delta R^2 = .03$				
Hours reading for school	-.12		-1.55	.12
Hours reading for fun	.20*	(.09, .31)	2.28	.02
Banned books	-.14		-1.55	.12
Step 4 $F(3, 157) = 2.75, p = .04 \Delta R^2 = .05$				
Total model $F(9, 157) = 3.18, p < .001$ Adjusted $R^2 = .11$				

Table 5
Multiple Regression Results for Banned Books and Control
Predictors on Nonviolent Crimes

	β	95% CI	<i>t</i> -value	Significance
Study variable				
Age	-.01		-0.11	.91
Female gender	.09		1.34	.18
Step 1 $F(2, 252) = 0.66, p = .52 \Delta R^2 = .01$				
Neuroticism	.10		1.57	.12
Antisocial personality	.07		1.05	.29
Step 2 $F(2, 250) = 6.83, p = .001 \Delta R^2 = .05$				
Family attachment	-.09		-1.47	.14
Delinquent peers	.22*	(.11, .33)	3.16	.002
Step 3 $F(2, 248) = 6.31, p = .002 \Delta R^2 = .05$				
Hours reading for school	.01		0.13	.89
Hours reading for fun	.04		0.48	.63
Banned books	.02		0.29	.77
Step 4 $F(3, 245) = 0.24, p = .87 \Delta R^2 = .00$				
Total model $F(9, 245) = 3.19, p < .001$ Adjusted $R^2 = .07$				

externalizing and internalizing symptoms controlled on step 2 of the regression. Although externalizing and internalizing symptoms both predicted both nonviolent and violent crimes (with standardized regression coefficients ranging between .34 and .42, the exception being internalizing symptoms for non-violent crimes with a nonsignificant coefficient of .16), no interaction terms were statistically significant.

Discussion

The degree to which media influences behavior continues to be hotly debated in the social sciences. Although books receive less research attention than do other media such as TV or video games, some activists endorse restricting books with objectionable content for young audiences, and many books are regularly challenged at school and public libraries nationwide based on violent, sexual, occult, or other content. Little research has examined the issue of whether banned books contribute to negative outcomes in youth, however. The current research project sought to address these gaps in

Table 6
Multiple Regression Results for Banned Books and Control
Predictors on Violent Crimes

	β	95% CI	<i>t</i> -value	Significance
Study variable				
Age	-.01		-0.14	.89
Female gender	-.01		-0.16	.87
Step 1 $F(2, 252) = 0.17, p = .84 \Delta R^2 = .00$				
Neuroticism	.06		0.92	.36
Antisocial personality	.18*	(.06, .29)	2.58	.01
Step 2 $F(2, 250) = 6.24, p = .002 \Delta R^2 = .05$				
Family attachment	-.03		-0.40	.69
Delinquent peers	.04		0.62	.54
Step 3 $F(2, 248) = 0.25, p = .78 \Delta R^2 = .00$				
Hours reading for school	.01		0.14	.89
Hours reading for fun	-.03		-0.38	.71
Banned books	.03		0.46	.65
Step 4 $F(3, 245) = 0.10, p = .96 \Delta R^2 = .00$				
Total model $F(9, 245) = 2.23, p < .04$ Adjusted $R^2 = .03$				

Table 7
Multiple Regression Results for Banned Books and Control
Predictors on Internalizing Symptoms

	β	95% CI	<i>t</i> -value	Significance
Study variable				
Age	.10		1.59	.11
Female gender	.03		0.50	.62
Step 1 $F(2, 252) = 2.43, p = .09 \Delta R^2 = .02$				
Neuroticism	.20*	(.08, .31)	3.24	.001
Antisocial personality	.10		1.52	.13
Step 2 $F(2, 250) = 10.26, p = .001 \Delta R^2 = .07$				
Family attachment	-.15*	(-.03, -.26)	-2.40	.02
Delinquent peers	.10		1.42	.15
Step 3 $F(2, 248) = 3.16, p = .04 \Delta R^2 = .02$				
Hours reading for school	.06		0.91	.37
Hours reading for fun	-.01		-0.13	.90
Banned books	.21*	(.10, .32)	2.98	.003
Step 4 $F(3, 245) = 4.99, p = .002 \Delta R^2 = .05$				
Total model $F(9, 245) = 5.45, p < .001$ Adjusted $R^2 = .14$				

the literature. Results indicated that the relationship between banned books and behavioral and mental health outcomes is complex.

On the positive side, reading banned books was positively associated with civic and volunteering behaviors. Although no causal attributions can be made from a correlational study, one possibility is that reading challenging books may be "eye opening" and move individuals to help others once they understand the difficulties some others may face. Some research has suggested that reading literature can promote ethical development and this may extend to edgy literature as well as milder literature (Hakemulder, 2008). The opportunity to expose oneself to and consider ethical dilemmas may foster higher-level thinking about these issues and promote more civic mindedness, even if the material itself is dark. For instance, some evidence has suggested that children who play violent video games, particularly with their parents, have more prosocial and civic behaviors related to children who play less (Ferguson & Garza, 2011). This may be because consuming edgy material, particularly with parental guidance, may provide teachable moments to discuss ethical issues

Table 8
Multiple Regression Results for Banned Books and Control
Predictors on Externalizing Symptoms

	β	95% CI	<i>t</i> -value	Significance
Study variable				
Age	.01		0.02	.98
Female gender	.02		0.38	.71
Step 1 $F(2, 252) = 0.19, p = .83 \Delta R^2 = .01$				
Neuroticism	.18*	(.07, .30)	3.13	.002
Antisocial personality	.19*		2.96	.003
Step 2 $F(2, 250) = 17.64, p = .001 \Delta R^2 = .12$				
Family attachment	-.15*	(-.03, -.26)	-2.63	.01
Delinquent peers	.13*	(.01, .24)	2.03	.04
Step 3 $F(2, 248) = 5.36, p = .005 \Delta R^2 = .04$				
Hours reading for school	-.06		-0.92	.36
Hours reading for fun	-.05		-0.79	.43
Banned books	.31*	(.20, .41)	4.49	.001
Step 4 $F(3, 245) = 7.41, p = .001 \Delta R^2 = .07$				
Total model $F(9, 245) = 8.18, p < .001$ Adjusted $R^2 = .20$				

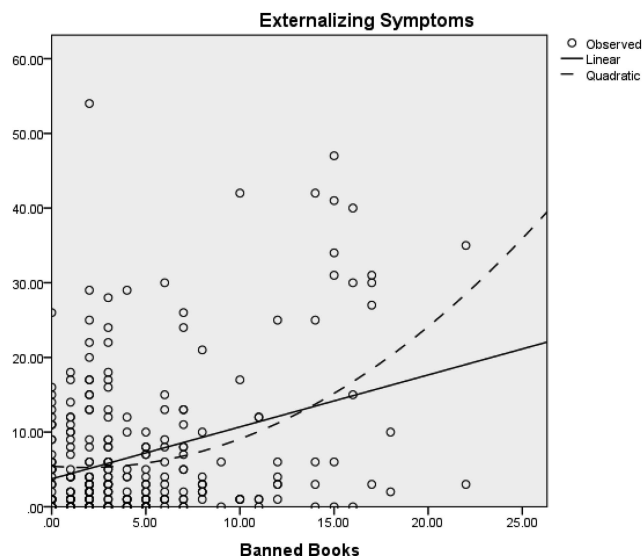


Figure 1. Banned books and externalizing symptoms.

between parents and children. Banning such material may be counterproductive in removing these teachable opportunities. By contrast, it is also possible that more conscientious youth may both read more edgy books and be more involved civically. Reading banned books did not predict nonviolent or violent crime or contribute to school GPA. Taken together, these results suggest that the influences of banned books on behavior are not worrisome, and may be positive overall.

By contrast, banned books were associated with greater degrees of mental health symptoms, both externalizing and internalizing, mainly in girls. This relationship was nonlinear in nature, however. For the vast majority of participants, reading banned books was not related to mental health symptoms, and moderate consumption of banned books was, overall, not associated with mental health. However, a small percentage of the sample (~7%) was high in both the consumption of banned books and mental health symptoms. As with the relationship with civic behaviors, it is not possible to draw causal attributions from a correlational study. It may be possible that youth with higher levels of mental health symptoms may select books that speak to them, offer them a chance for introspection or a release from their symptoms. This would be consistent with a “uses and gratifications” theoretical model of media use (Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006). Whether this approach is effective or not, however, is not possible to discern from a cross-sectional study and would require prospective analysis. It could reasonably be argued that banned books either provide a cathartic release, or result in unhelpful ruminating.

On balance, however, results from this study do not indicate that, for the majority of readers, banned books present a significant behavioral problem. Indeed, given the results for civic behavior, it could be argued that efforts to restrict banned books from the majority of youth are misguided. However, for a subset of youth, heavy consumption of edgy prose may indicate deeper mental health issues that parents may wish to be alert for. It is not yet known whether banned books contribute to symptoms in this subset, but they may serve as a “red flag” for parents.

Several other outcomes are worth discussing, although they do not pertain to the study’s main purposes. First, reading for pleasure, but not assigned school readings were associated with higher GPA. This result suggests that particular emphasis should be placed on encouraging children to read stories that they enjoy. Assigning a particular set of “classic” readings in school may be less productive. Furthermore, with the exception of crime commission, results of this study affirmed the value of parental and family involvement in promoting positive behaviors and decreasing mental health symptoms in youth. Above and beyond concerns for media, encouraging parents to be active with youth, including being involved in their media consumption where possible, is likely more productive than are suggestions to restrict media.

As with all studies, the current project has limitations that must be discussed. First, the study is correlational in nature and no causal attributions can be made from the data presented here. Second, lack of a prospective design does not allow for the examination regarding whether consumption of banned books helps or worsens the small group of participants with highly elevated mental health symptoms. Further research may wish to consider prospective designs to examine this issue. Third, the current sample is primarily Hispanic, limiting generalizability to other populations of youth. Lastly, measuring media exposure is always tricky. The current measure of banned book exposure focused on overall consumption of such books. Although respondents were asked not to endorse a book if they had only seen the movie version, the contamination of movie exposure into book consumption may be difficult to disentangle. Novel approaches to assessing book consumption would certainly be welcome.

Future research would do well to focus on prospective studies to disentangle the relationship between banned book consumption and mental health. Although it may be that youth with greater mental health issues are particularly inclined toward edgier books, whether this is a positive or negative influence remains unknown. Further, research that examines the effects of books in comparison with other media such as TV or video games would be welcome.

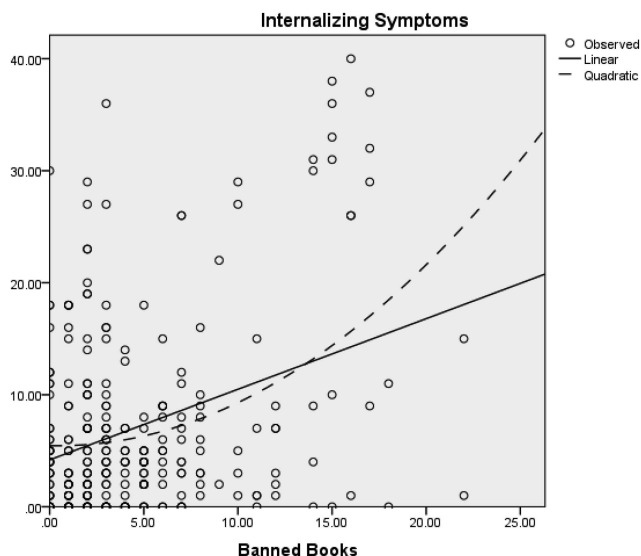


Figure 2. Banned books and internalizing symptoms.

Research that examines youth reading books *because* they are controversial or banned may also be valuable. That is to say, motivations for the choice to read edgy books may be more critical than the content of books themselves.

Debates over the appropriateness of edgy content in books written for youth are likely to continue into the foreseeable future. Results from the current study suggest that the relationships between banned books and youth well-being are complex and defy easy definition. It is hoped that the current study will offer some small insight into the use of banned books among youth.

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(Appendix follows)

Appendix

Banned Books Questionnaire

Books

Please indicate yes/no (circle one) whether you have EVER read the following books. You may have read the book either for fun or been assigned the book by a teacher. Circle "yes" only if you have read the book, movie versions do not count. For book series, indicate whether you have read ANY book in the series:

- 1) *ttyl; ttfn; l8r; g8r* (series), by Lauren Myracle. Yes/No
- 2) *The Color of Earth* (series), by Kim Dong Hwa. Yes/No
- 3) *The Hunger Games* trilogy, by Suzanne Collins. Yes/No
- 4) *My Mom's Having A Baby!* by Dori Hillestad Butler. Yes/No
- 5) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie. Yes/No
- 6) *Alice* (series), by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. Yes/No
- 7) *Brave New World*, by Aldous Huxley. Yes/No
- 8) *What My Mother Doesn't Know*, by Sonya Sones. Yes/No
- 9) *Gossip Girl* (series), by Cecily Von Ziegesar. Yes/No
- 10) *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee. Yes/No
- 11) *And Tango Makes Three*, by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson. Yes/No
- 12) *Crank*, by Ellen Hopkins. Yes/No
- 13) *Lush*, by Natasha Friend. Yes/No
- 14) *Nickel and Dimed*, by Barbara Ehrenreich. Yes/No
- 15) *Revolutionary Voices*, Edited by Amy Sonnie. Yes/No
- 16) *Twilight* (series), by Stephenie Meyer. Yes/No
- 17) *The Perks of Being A Wallflower*, by Stephen Chbosky. Yes/No
- 18) *Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger. Yes/No
- 19) *My Sister's Keeper*, by Jodi Picoult. Yes/No
- 20) *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big, Round Things*, by Carolyn Mackler. Yes/No
- 21) *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker. Yes/No
- 22) *The Chocolate War*, by Robert Cormier. Yes/No
- 23) *His Dark Materials* trilogy (i.e., *The Golden Compass*), by Philip Pullman. Yes/No
- 24) *Scary Stories* (series), by Alvin Schwartz. Yes/No
- 25) *Bless Me, Ultima*, by Rudolfo Anaya. Yes/No
- 26) *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, by Sarah S. Brannen. Yes/No
- 27) *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini. Yes/No
- 28) *Flashcards of My Life*, by Charise Mericle Harper. Yes/No
- 29) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain. Yes/No
- 30) *Harry Potter* (series), by J.K. Rowling. Yes/No

A.) How many hours per week do you read fiction because of school requirements:

B.) How many hours per week do you read fiction for fun:

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