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Capstone

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Colton's Got Daddy Issues: Dads, Daddies, and the Heavenly Father in *Coming Out Colton*

Abstract:

Coming Out Colton premiered in December 2021 as a Netflix-original series that documents the events taking place leading up to The Bachelor star Colton Underwood coming out as homosexual. The series shows Colton coming out to family, friends, other celebrities, and the public. This paper uses an intersectional lens to identify and analyze unacknowledged messages of heteronormativity and homophobia that exist within the show, specifically through Colton's interactions with others on the show. This paper also investigates the narratives and identity performances that occur in Colton's interactions with his family, his experiences playing American football, and the Christian faith that are portrayed on the show. Because Colton was engaged in the church and football, where homophobic, patriarchal, and heteronormative narratives and cultures thrived, it is easy for an informed communication studies critic to see why Colton might have felt uncomfortable coming out and embracing his homosexuality. That is, the intersections between what Colton identifies as the most significant parts of his life -his family,

football, and his faith- are all spaces in which Colton initially felt uncomfortable embracing his sexual identity, and took extreme measures to fit within the heteronorms that were expected of him.

Keywords: masculinity, heteronormativity, reality TV, internalized homophobia, coming out

Coming Out Colton is a Netflix-Original television series released on December 3rd, 2021. The series features former professional football player and former *Bachelor* star, Colton Underwood. The series documents Colton's experiences of coming out and embracing his identity as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. *Coming Out Colton* is broken into six thirty-minute long episodes that display Colton coming out to different groups of people and meeting other gay athletes and celebrities. Scandal emerged surrounding Colton after he first publicly came out as homosexual in a *Good Morning America* interview in April 2021, following season 23 of *The Bachelor*, where he was the starred as the bachelor, the star of the heterosexual dating show. In this paper, I will utilize an intersectional perspective in order to identify messages of heteronormativity and homophobia that exist within the show *Coming Out Colton*, specifically through Colton's interactions with others on the show.

Intersectionality refers to how social categorizations and identities intersect, how they overlap and interact with each other within an individual or a community. Acknowledging diverse identities and social categorizations that are outside of the norm is significant because heterosexual identities and standards are broadcasted all over

the media, such as seen when Colton starred on *The Bachelor*. For this paper, I will use intersectionality in this paper as a tool to investigate and identify different places and spaces where homophobic narratives and ideologies exist. Heterosexuality is a concept that has become so intrinsically woven into and normalized in American society, media, and culture, that it has caused an incredible lack of representation of people from the LGBTQIA+ community in television media. When we (scholars, general audiences, and media consumers) "call out", or hold accountable, places, spaces, and people that are excluding minority communities, we work towards creating a more inclusive and diverse future.

In "Use of an Intersectional Framework to Understand Black Women's Racial and Gender Identities," author Isis H. Settles uses an intersectional approach in studying identity and experience through examining the relationships built between race and gender (Settles, 2006). Similarly, I want to use an intersectional approach to studying *Coming Out Colton*. Understanding and identifying race, gender, status, sexuality, religion, class, and cultures of not only Colton, but also his experiences, aids me in understanding how he and his experiences that are depicted on the show could be relatable to a diverse audience. The experiences that Colton is depicted going through and identifying on the show are complex and multifaceted, and utilizing an intersectional lens will aid me in understanding how this piece of media makes represents homosexual identities.

Coming Out Colton - A brief overview of the show

Coming Out Colton is broken into six episodes, each episode covering a different group of people that Colton comes out to. The episodes are titled "Family," "Football," "Friends," "Church," "The Public," and "The Past & The Future." Colton comes out to his mom in the first episode, and to his dad and his high school football coach in the second episode. The show depicts Colton interacting with other celebrity members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The show features Gus Kenworthy, a British-American Olympian and activist for homosexuality in sports. Kenworthy acts as a guide for Underwood as he explores his new identity. Kenworthy introduces Underwood to other homosexual athletes and celebrities such as Michael Sam, David Kopay, and Esera Tuaolo in the second episode of the show. Kenworthy even throws a coming out party for Colton in Nashville, attended by gay celebrities for Colton to make connections with. The series shows the events leading up to Colton coming out to the public during a *Good Morning America* interview with Robin Roberts in April of 2021. This documentary series was created to give Colton a voice to defend his coming out, to explain his actions and his thinking, and to give a timeline of him coming out to friends and family prior to coming out to the public in the *Good Morning America* interview.

In doing research on this specific show, I have found that there is not any peer-reviewed scholarly work that analyzes or discusses *Coming Out Colton*. However, there are a few articles that briefly mention Colton, *The Bachelor*, and the controversy that sparked from his coming out. This documentary series is a significant artifact to study because it discusses coming out, internalized homophobia, narratives and ideologies surrounding sports and homophobia, as well as narratives and ideologies that surround religion (specifically Christianity) and homophobia. I also chose this

documentary series as my research object because of its newness. Because it was produced and released in 2021, its content is timely and relevant to popular culture. It is important to note that Colton is a celebrity, and his celebrity status allows him to do things that other non-celebrity LGBTQIA+ individuals cannot. For example, Colton's celebrity status allows him access to come out to the world via an interview on a popular television show, and then produce an entire documentary series explaining his coming out to the public. Colton's celebrity status makes his coming out story different from non-celebrity coming out stories and experiences. Colton coming out as homosexual in April 2021 sparked controversy in part because of his celebrity status - because he was made famous by starring on a reality television show that depicts solely heterosexual romance and relationships. If Colton was not famous and present in the public eye, perhaps his coming out would not have been so controvercial because it would have been more private.

Coming Out Colton reveals how Colton Underwood is full of interesting contradictions. He grew up in the church, in a space where homosexuality is a considered a sin, and is an adult who is active in practicing his faith while also learning how to embrace his sexuality. He loves all things football, but grew up feeling ostracized (and pushed deeper into the closet) by his coaches, his teammates, and in the locker room because of the homophobic language and anti-gay culture that exists in the world of sports. The most obvious contradiction is where Colton knew he was gay even at a young age and still decided to sign up for multiple seasons of The Bachelor shows, where he dated multiple women at the same time. It's these contradictions that make Colton Underwood and Coming Out Colton so interesting, but it is also where we see

homophobic narratives and ideologies at play and in practice. A limitation of studying *Coming Out Colton*, as is the nature of reality television shows in general, is that we (the audience) are unclear with how much of the show is truly "real" - how much of what happens in real life is shown on camera or if anything or everything that is being shown on camera is staged or scripted by the show's producers. This means that I (as someone who is analyzing the series) have to take everything that is portrayed on the show as reality. It means that I can't make assumptions about things that may have occurred off-camera or been cut out in editing, I have to comment solely on what is shown.

One of the major themes of the show is homophobia, masculinity, and sports. Before his time starring on reality television dating shows, Colton Underwood's career was football. He never played in a NFL game, though. He signed to play on the practice teams for the San Diego Chargers, Philadelphia Eagles, and Oakland Raiders in between 2014 and 2016 (Shapiro, 2019). In the second episode, Colton speaks with Michael Sam, David Kopay, and Esera Tuaolo about their experiences as gay men in the profession of professional football and toxic/homophobic cultures existing in the sports world. "The most toxic parts of the locker room were allowed by the coaches and the people who are supposed to be there to look out for these kids," says Underwood. "When I heard them be okay with homophobic slurs or a joke that had to do with homosexuality, it just drove me further into the closet."

Another major theme of the show is Colton exploring his internalized homophobia, and what made him decide to stay in the closet for so long. This is explored throughout the series, but most specifically within the fourth episode

surrounding the church, Colton's faith, and his personal shame for being not straight. In the episode, Underwood comes out to his religious friends, and their responses can be described as hesitant and careful. His friends do not embrace Colton for who he is; they do not celebrate Colton being comfortable with his sexual identity. Instead, they encourage Underwood to consult the pastor of their church. The pastor affirms to Colton that homosexuality is a sin, and that if Colton built his relationship to God that he would grow away from his homosexual tendencies. This causes emotional turmoil for Colton, because his faith is important to him and his sexuality is a part of who he is. Later in the episode, Colton describes the interactions to Esera Tuaolo and Gus Kenworthy, who introduces him to a LGBTQ-friendly church and Colton has a better experience there.

One of the biggest parts of *Coming Out Colton* that stuck out to me was how Colton identified the people, places, and spaces where homophobic ideologies and narratives were allowed to exist. He identified his high school football coach as an adult who allowed for homophobic narratives to continue in the locker room. The show depicts how the homophobic narratives and ideologies that he experienced in traditionally masculine sports (in this case, American football) and in religion (specifically Christianity) resulted in internalized homophobia for himself.

LGBTQ Representation in the media

Over the course of history, homosexuality, queerness, and the LGBTQ+ community have been subject to discrimination from many sources. This has come from the teaching that homosexuality is unnatural because it is outside of the cultural normal that is heterosexuality. Mass media platforms, such as print media, broadcast media,

and digital media all demonstrate this by failing to represent homosexual individuals until relatively recently in history (Hart, 2000). The result is not only active discrimination but a heteronormative dominant culture where individuals are presumed to be heterosexual until proven otherwise. After decades of active social activism, scholars now suggest that a generational shift is responsible for increasing acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community, and credit mass media platforms and diverse representation and exposure for this shift in mindset (Bond and Compton, 2015; Trammell, 2015; Hart, 2000).

Communication studies scholars who study media have discussed how mass media platforms have the potential to "set social norms regarding sex and sexual identity and as such shape public opinion about homosexuality" when the platforms show accurate and relatable LGBTQ representation (Jacobs and Messusen 2020; Waggoner, 2018). The representation of LGBTQ identities on platforms such as television even has the "potential to help people with their own identities," (Waggoner, 2018). That being said, all representations are not necessarily positive representations, and while representation of LGBTQ people on highly visible media platforms are increasing, stereotypical or inauthentic representations of LGBTQ people contribute towards homophobic narratives (Bond and Compton, 2015; Hart, 2000).

Masculinity and homophobia

Masculinity refers to a set of gendered behaviors and roles that are culturally set for men and boys to subscribe to. Traditional and hegemonic masculinity reinforces gender binary constructs, gender roles, and a power dynamic between men and

women. Some identifiers of traditional and hegemonic masculinity include "physical strength, having the desire to attract the opposite sex (and succeeding), actively playing sports, and not showing emotion," (Rosenburg et al., 2017; Theodore and Basow, 2000). Masculinity is a standard that men and boys have to demonstrate over and over again (Zipp, 2007). Zipp states that "boys and men are always in danger of not living up to the demands of what it takes to be a 'real man'," (Zipp, 2007), which involves not only being heterosexual but distancing themselves from homosexuality.

One of the ways in which individuals prove their masculinity is by using homophobic terms (Rosenburg et al., 2017). Americans encounter and learn to understand the gender binary at a young age and even begin to demonstrate characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and homophobia, using homophobic terms to bully other children often as a way of not only criticizing others but showing that they themselves are not gay (Rosenburg et al., 2017; Rosen and Nofziger, 2019). These actions and ideologies can continue as the children grow to be adults (Horn & Sinno, 2014; Rosen and Nofziger, 2019). Boys learn at a young age that being gay is something that they do not want to be because of the anti-gay messages that they encounter at a young age (Anderson, 2011;Rosenburg et al., 2017). This applies to men who identify as gay as well as men who identify as straight.

Another way in which men prove their masculinity is through participating in sports. Organized sports, particularly traditionally masculine sports and contact sports such as football, have been identified as a place where "hegemonic masculinity is produced and defined," and as "organized by heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity," (Anderson, 2002; Lee and Cunningham, 2016). Locker rooms specifically

have been identified as environments where masculinity is demonstrated and homophobic language and narratives are experienced (Anderson, 2002; Kelly, 2018). Gay men who are in the closet regarding their sexuality (to themselves or to others) have used traditionally masculine sports as a tool to mask their homosexuality (Cooky, 2006). This is exactly what we see in *Coming Out Colton*, where Colton is so ashamed of his homosexuality that he "hides" that part of himself by engaging in very traditionally masculine and heterosexual environments - professional football and *The Bachelor*.

American culture is ingrained with messages and narratives of heterosexism and because of that, scholars state that "gay men often experience negative attitudes towards their own sexuality," which is referred to as internalized homophobia (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). We see this in *Coming Out Colton*, when Colton describes why he was in the closet for so long because of his own negative feelings about his sexual identity. Connecting the influence of mass media, masculinity, and messages of homophobia, scholars say that depictions of gay men in traditionally masculine sports are so few because the institution of sports encourages gay men to stay in the closet by spreading messages of homophobia and creating internalized homophobia within gay athletes (Kian et al., 2011).

God and the gays - homophobic ideologies found in the church

Throughout history, right-wing or conservative leaders have interpreted the Bible in a way that views homosexuality as unnatural and as sin (Tate, 2003; Hicks and Lee, 2005). This anti-homosexual perspective depicts homosexuality as taboo, a religious offense, a sickness, an unnatural abomination (Berliner, 1987; Hicks and Lee, 2005). A

more contemporary and accepting perspective of homosexuality is that God created gay people, and God loves all of his creations, and so the act of loving another of the same sex is not sin (Tate, 2003; Theim, 2014). Scholars who have studied religion and Christianity recognize how divisive anti-gay preachings in the church can be, and how harmful the homophobic messages are to gay Christians (Tate, 2003; Trammell, 2015; Theim, 2014). Trammell argues that Christian LGBTQ-aligned individuals should not be silent in relation to the discourse surrounding their sexual identity within the church, saying that "these believers should become active participants in the debates of their sexualities within the evangelical subculture in order to 'counter such negative rhetoric'," (Trammell, 2015).

In the United States, legal recognition of same-sex marriages is relatively new. Countries other than the United States have a much longer history of accepting same-sex relationships and marriages (Redman, 2018). It is interesting to see how conservative politics govern evangelical Christians' views and perspectives regarding homosexual relationships, even though the law and government are working towards acceptance of LGBTQ-aligned identities. Scholars state that it is imperative that "Christology be queered, as well as queried, in order to question hetero-patriarchal complexities," (Ivey, 2014). The identities of being gay and being religious (particularly Christian) do not necessarily work against each other, so a person who is gay and also a Christian is not a contradiction of ideals. Normalizing homosexual individuals who have a strong relationship with their faith, such as Colton Underwood in *Coming Out Colton*, works to dismantle homophobic ideologies that exist in the church.

Coming out of the Closet

The term 'coming out' is the shortened term of 'coming out of the closet' (Haltom and Ratcliff, 2021). This language is used to refer to when an individual discloses their sexual orientation or gender identity. Historically, the practice of coming out has been reserved for members of the LGBTQIA+ community because of heteronormative cultures that make heterosexuality seem natural and any deviance form that to be noteworthy. These heteronormative cultures allow for straightness to simply be assumed. Heterosexual people do not have to "come out" because their sexual orientation is aligned with what is culturally accepted and assumed about them. Coming out is not a one-time action; it is a process because a LGBTQ individual has to come out to every person that they meet (Haltom and Ratcliff, 2021). The action of coming out comes with risks because identifying outside of heterosexuality continues to carry stigma from a history of hate and discrimination. Individuals who decide to come out face many risks in doing so; positive reactions to coming out are not guaranteed (Corrigan, 2003). Therefore, coming out does not come without risk. Identifying outside of the cultural norm of heterosexuality continues to carry stigma from a history of hate and discrimination. LGBTQ-aligned individuals face the possibility of rejection or discrimination on the basis of their sexuality. Some risks include but are not limited to physical harm (by oneself or by others) and social avoidance by others (Corrigan, 2003; Corrigan and Matthews, 2003). Colton coming out as homosexual in April 2021 sparked controversy because he was previously on a reality television show that depicts solely heterosexual romance and relationships.

Colton coming out to his father

The show positions the audience to feel as though Colton is going to be rejected in some kind of way each time he comes out, specifically when he reveals his sexuality to his father. The show builds it up to be a conflict, an internal turmoil that Colton is anxious about. Each person that Colton comes out to in the first episode (his mother, brother, and childhood friend) all ask Colton how he is feeling about coming out to his dad, which suggests that Colton's dad is someone to fear coming out to. Colton also expresses how he is the "most nervous" to come out to his dad ("Family" 00:09:34-00:09:34). This pattern signals to the audience that maybe Colton should be nervous to come out to him, that perhaps Colton's dad will not be accepting of his son's sexuality. When Colton comes out to his mom, she directly asks "so, are you afraid to come out to your dad," and Colton responds "yes," ("Family"00:07:48-00:07:50). Following that, in a voiceover Colton says that his dad "was a little more coach than he was father, and I think he'll even admit that. In college and in my first couple years professionally, I would come home and the first thing he'd want to know was about next season and about my stats and my playing time, not about how I was doing as a human," ("Family" 00:08:21-43). While I cannot make any direct conclusions about how Colton talks about his dad off camera, but with his dad's perceived masculinity through coaching and sports, and Colton's fear that his dad wouldn't have been accepting of his homosexuality, I do not think that all of those things are necessarily unrelated.

The first part of the conversation between him and his father is played in the "Family" episode, and ends before the audience can view Colton's father's reaction to him coming out - ending the episode with a classic reality television cliffhanger. There is dramatic music that is added to suggest that something "bad" is going to happen, that

Colton's dad will not be accepting of his coming out. In the second episode, "Football",
we see how Colton's dad is actually supportive of his decision. It is an interesting choice
to include him coming out to his dad in the "Football" episode and not the "Family"
episode, but in the first episode in a voiceover Colton discusses the role that his father
played in his life, framing his dad as a very masculine, traditional man.

Locker rooms, masculinity, football, and homophobia

Colton coming out to his father in the "Football" episode is only the first part of
the episode. Later, we see Colton with his high school best friend Cassidy returning to
their high school, where Colton comes out to his high school football coach. The camera
follows Colton as he walks through the halls, the gym, and the locker room. In this
episode he recounts his experiences as a closeted individual experiencing messages of
homophobia growing up and in the hyper-masculine space of American football.

When Colton comes out to his high school coach, he directly addresses how
narratives that are found in the locker room and were perpetuated by coaches and
teammates encouraged him to stay in the closet. Colton says directly to the coach "it all
started with the jokes, with the name calling. The homophobia found in the locker room,
for me, was the hardest thing to digest and to go through," ("Football"
00:34:58-00:35:03). Connecting Colton coming out to his coach and coming out to his
father, I do not think that it is a coincidence that the two people that he identifies as the
most difficult people to come out to happen to be two individuals who perpetuate and
expect the most hegemonic masculinity from him, and have a history of framing Colton
pretty much primarily through the lens of performance in American football.

Also in the "Football" episode, Colton talks more about his experiences as a closeted gay man in the world of football when Gus Kenworthy introduces him to Michael Sam, David Kopay, and Esera Tuaolo, some of the first openly out professional football players. They are shown playing golf together and sharing conversation over drinks. Sam, Kopay, and Tualo all recount their experiences coming out and being out in their personal lives, and their professional lives as some of the first openly out professional football players. Colton relates his own experiences to theirs, and describes how he had never felt like he would have become comfortable with his own sexuality, saying that he thought that he was going to die before ever coming out publicly. Sam, Kopay, Tuaolo, and Underwood all identify football as a place where being gay is not acceptable. Colton tells Sam, Kopay, Tuaolo how he was even more nervous to come out to his coaches than he was his parents ("Football" 00:12:12-00:12:20). Tuaolo shares with the group how when he "walked into the locker room, I transformed myself into a straight guy," ("Football" 00:12:59-00:13:06). To some extent, this tells me that hiding one's homosexuality in the world of sports (specifically in professional American football) is a shared experience.

Places, spaces, and talking about feelings - how Colton talks with other men

Connecting some of the episodes together, it is interesting to me to see how the different groups of men on the show are depicted talking about emotions and feelings. When the groups of men on the show have to talk about feelings or emotions or even having a tough conversation, they are depicted doing activities together, more specifically sports. Colton talks to Gus about being gay during a ski trip, comes out to his dad while they are fishing together, meets and talks to Michael Sam, David Kopay,

and Esera Tuaolo over golf, comes out to his high school football coach after a football practice, comes out to his church friends after a game of basketball. An element of traditional masculinity is the inability or uncomfortability surrounding discussing and embracing feelings. It is not a coincidence that Colton brings in an element of traditional masculinity when he is put into scenarios where he is doing something inherently un-masculine - talking about feelings and emotions.

Colton and internalized homophobia

Even at the very beginning of the series, we see Colton uncomfortable talking about his own sexuality. A big pattern that I see within the show is in the language, specifically how Colton comes out to his family and friends. He only specifically says the words "I am gay," once, and it is during his public coming out tell-all interview with Robin Roberts on the *Good Morning America* show. I find it interesting how he only uses those words once, and it is when he is coming out to the world, not to his close family or friends. Whenever he comes out, he tends to use phrases such as "I wanted to talk to you about me coming out," or "I wanted you to know that I'm going to be talking to Dad about coming out,". This trend in the language suggests to me that Colton does not claim his identity as a gay man, that he is not confident in expressing his homosexuality.

In the third episode of the series, titled "Friends", Gus Kenworthy takes Colton to a sex shop. In an interview, Gus describes how "Colton is not totally comfortable talking about sex, and I can see that Colton gets so bashful and shy," ("Friends" 00:08:32-00:08:33). Colton is visibly uncomfortable in the sex shop, using body language like crossing his arms to convey his nervousness. This is not the only place

that we see Colton uncomfortable embracing his homosexuality or displaying internalized homophobia. Throughout the series, Colton displays body language that suggests that his is uncomfortable when he is in spaces that are coded as non-heterosexual. For example, later in the same episode Gus throws a coming out party for Colton in Nashville, attended by gay celebrities for Colton to make connections with. Many of the attendees make sexual references and jokes with Colton which make him blush, avoid eye-contact, shy away from conversations. He even discusses his discomfort with Kenworthy about feeling pressure to "hook up" with someone, anyone at the party. In an interview, Colton even directly addresses him being uncomfortable at the party, saying that "I'm already struggling with trying to find where I fit in, in this community and tonight I feel a little defeated. This was my first time hanging out in a room full of gay men and I did not feel comfortable. I don't know if I'm ready for this," ("Friends" 00:22:44-00:22:57). In response to this, later in the episode Kenworthy introduces Colton to a gay married couple who live in the suburbs with a house and kids. Colton expresses that he is much more comfortable in this setting, and expresses how he "definitely" wants a marriage and kids in the near future. Even his body language suggests that he is much more comfortable in this setting than at his coming out party that Gus threw for him. This all sticks out to me because it makes me consider how Colton perceives his own sexuality. In the series, we see Colton coming out to family and friends and trying to embrace his homosexuality - at the same time he is still confining himself to the traditional, heterosexual relationship milestones of marriage and children. That being said, while marriage and kids is something that couples of all sexual orientations consider to be socially acceptable, and that is their choice, it is ironic

to me how Colton was seemingly so comfortable with dating multiple women at a time while on *The Bachelor*, but he was visibly uncomfortable at his own coming out party in a room full of gay men.

Colton, Cassie, and pretending to be a straight man on reality television

Even though Colton was nervous about it, all the individuals that he came out to in the first and second episodes were accepting of him and his identity. All of his family and friends that he comes out to express their surprise regarding his sexuality and remind him of his experiences on *The Bachelor* and dating Cassie Randolph from the show. My thought is that because he was represented on *The Bachelor* shows where he was actively dating multiple women at a time, his family and friends only know his sexuality to be straight, because that is his dating history. Colton addresses his experience of being a closeted gay man on *The Bachelor* in a voiceover in the "Family" episode, saying that he felt himself "becoming more of a straight man," when he was a contestant on *The Bachelor* ("Family" 00:18:07-00:18:08). When Colton is talking in the voiceover, the screen shows flashback-style footage of Colton with Cassie from season twenty three of *The Bachelor* with dramatic background music. Colton reflects on his time being in the closet, saying that he thought that "maybe it will just take one really good girl to change me," and then talking about Cassie and saying "I felt like I had finally found someone who could change me," ("Family" 00:17:50-00:17:51, 00:18:17-00:18:18). Colton then begins to talk about the end of his relationship with Cassie, saying that he was on depression and anxiety medication that "made me into a paranoid freak," ("Family" 00:19:00-00:19:01). Then he discusses how he made a

mistake, and the screen shows photos of documents that show stalking charges against Colton.

While Colton says that he takes ownership of his actions, it's interesting to me to see how quickly Colton changed the narrative from "I was on meds that made me crazy and do bad things" to "I fucked up and take ownership for my actions". Discussing the medication's supposed impact on him is not him taking responsibility for his actions but rather making an excuse for why he acted the way he did. How Colton talks about himself is important and I want to note how even though the stalking charges and restraining order were placed against him, he uses this show in a way to frame himself as the victim instead of her because of his sexuality.

Praying the gay away - Colton and the church

In the episode titled "Church" Colton tells us in an interview that "one thing that I'm not willing to give up, one thing that I'm not willing to sacrifice is my faith," ("Church" 00:01:11-00:01:14). This episode shows Colton meeting with a small group of his religious friends and are shown playing basketball together. In an interview, Colton describes his nervousness about not being accepted by these people who he looks to for support. When he comes out to his religious friends, their responses can be described as hesitant and careful. Their body language almost immediately closes off after Colton comes out, they cross their arms in front of them and look away. One of his friends says "we don't see eye to eye on that necessarily," ("Church" 00:08:58-00:09:04). When the friend says "that" he means homosexuality. Colton responds with "I just don't want me being me to be a sin," ("Church" 00:09:18-00:09:21).

His friends do not embrace Colton for who he is, they do not celebrate Colton being comfortable with his sexual identity. Instead, they encourage Underwood to consult the pastor of their church. In an interview after the scene Colton says "I just feel like they're intimidated or scared to actually take a stance," ("Church" 00:09:42-00:09:46). I think that there is a deeper narrative that is represented in this scene. Colton's friends are unsure about their stance on homosexuality and look to leaders in their faith for answers. I believe their inaction to take a stance is harmful in of itself to Colton. His friends who consider him to be "like a brother" can't find the words to support him in this emotionally vulnerable situation, and tiptoe around phrases that they've heard before because they are uncomfortable with Colton's sexuality, at least to some degree.

In the next part of the "Church" episode Colton describes to his pastor how he has tried to "pray the gay away" for almost his whole life, how his internal struggle with accepting his homosexuality is strongly tied to his faith ("Church" 00:11:49-00:11:53). The pastor affirms that homosexuality is a sin, directly telling Colton that "homosexuality is really, really bad," ("Church" 00:13:49-00:13:51). He goes on to say that if Colton built his relationship to God that he would grow away from his "homosexual tendencies". This conversation causes emotional turmoil for Colton, because his faith is important to him and his sexuality is a part of who he is. Later in the episode, Colton describes the interactions to Esera Tuaolo and Gus Kenworthy, who introduces him to a LGBTQ-friendly church and Colton has a better experience there. This scene stuck out to me particularly because this narrative of non-heterosexual individuals being shamed away from the church is a common experience, and something that queer audiences

might relate to Colton. That being said, not all LGBTQIA+ individuals have the resources that Colton had to find accepting spaces such as this church.

Coming Out Colton is littered with interviews and voiceovers throughout the series. The only time that Colton addresses the audience directly is during the "Church" episode. In an interview he says directly to the camera "you have to live your life. If you are wondering 'can you be gay and can you be Christian?' the answer is yes," ("Church" 00:33:32-00:33:37). One of my lingering questions while watching this series has been *who is the assumed audience?* Colton addressing the audience in this way suggests that the audience is members of the LGBTQIA+ community who are maybe struggling with their identity and fitting in with the values of Christianity.

Connecting football, the church, and family - Daddy issues

Organized religion and American competitive sports have many similarities. Think of the playbook as religious text, coach as religious leader, and a team as a congregation of sorts. They also are both places where homophobic and heteronormative narratives exist and are even encouraged. Team sports, like American football, are also frequently referred to as 'families' - think of the coach as a father, the team members' children. In *Coming Out Colton*, Colton refers to his football friends and coaches as his family, and his dad as a coach rather than a father. Like I stated previously, Colton was most nervous to come out to his father and his high school football coaches. I suspect he was nervous to come out to them because he was fearful of disappointing two very masculine male leaders in his life, disrupting their preconceived notions of his false heterosexuality. Another 'father' that Colton fears

disappointing is God. Throughout *Coming Out Colton* he struggles with whether his homosexuality is acceptable in the eyes of his religion. The series documents Colton's internal turmoil surrounding the church's acceptance of his sexuality. In Christianity God is a religious figure that is characterized as a creator, a supreme higher being, but more specifically, God is characterized as (and referred to as) a father and a man (Whitehead, 2014). God is just one more masculine figure that Colton is afraid of disappointing with his homosexuality, just like his father and football coach.

Studies show that the roles that fathers play have an essential role in child development and specifically in how male children perceive and learn gender identity and masculinity (Van Doorn et al, 2020). The role of father does not have to be necessarily played by a biological father, father figures are able to fill the role if they are active and present in the child's life (Kvaran, 2017). Fathers and father figures "provide advice, protection, and mentoring" (Kvaran, 2017). Boys learn what actions are acceptable through their fathers and father-figures. I have identified Colton's father, his high school football coach, and even God as fathers and father-figures in Colton's life. What happens when one of the lessons that these men instill into Colton is that homosexuality and deviance from heterosexuality is unacceptable, a sin? Because these figures are so impressionable on him, it makes sense that he would internalize homophobic narratives and to try his hardest to be straight. I believe that this is why Colton was repeatedly placing himself in excessively-heterosexual spaces, such as *The Bachelor*, dating many women at the same time when he was actually homosexual. He was trying to fit his father's ideas of what kinds of actions are acceptable - dating women instead of men. Are Colton's actions to try to be straight excessive? Yes. But

perhaps that is a product of feeling pressure from not one father, but from multiple father-figures that have impressed ideals onto Colton from young childhood all the way into adulthood.

Celebrity status - Colton's image and coming out on television

Colton Underwood was made into a celebrity because of his participation and representation on highly visible reality television shows. LGBTQIA+ celebrities choose to come out to the public in varying ways. Some use social media posts, some choose to come out on television. Some never "officially" come out using a media platform, leaving the general public to just assume their sexual orientation. In the episode "The Public", Gus asks Colton how he is planning on coming out to the public, suggesting that he utilizes a television interview instead of a post on Instagram. Kenworthy says "you kind of have some explaining to do for a lot of different choices you've made and things that you've done and *The Bachelor* and all of that," then saying "I think it'd be good for you to sit down with someone to have a tell-all interview and explain where you're coming from and what you're dealing with," ("The Public" 00:01:32-00:02:01). This scene is important because it gives the audience some background information and understanding as to why Colton decided to come out to the public in the way that he did. It also is a clear example of how LGBTQIA+ celebrities are privileged to access certain platforms that non-celebrities do not. This choice to come out through a tell-all interview on *Good Morning America* with Robin Roberts reveals the celebrity privilege that Colton wields.

There is an interesting reaction to Colton coming out as gay, where people think that he is coming out as a distraction to the stalking charges and restraining order that Cassie Randolph placed against him. Colton admits in an interview that there was a very "mixed reaction" on Twitter following his coming out. The negative comments primarily focus on calling Colton out for his behavior against his ex, specifically that him being gay does not excuse or erase his previous actions against her. The final episode of the show, titled "The Past & The Future" shows Colton immediately after coming out publicly, reacting to the social media reaction, and them returning to the LGBTQIA+ friendly church to speak with a transgender pastor. He addresses how the negative social media posts make him feel guilty for his actions against Cassie and they discuss how to move forward with his feelings and embracing his gay identity.

We see this shown in the episode the "The Public" in an interview where Colton is telling the camera how he thinks that the public will believe that he is coming out to "save his image" and to "bury the drama that I had with Cassie," ("The Public" 00:09:44-00:09:47). He then says "that is the furthest thing from the truth. If anything, the reason that I am coming out is because I'm ashamed and I'm sort of mortified of what got me to this position in the first place," ("The Public" 00:09:51-00:10:03). The episode later reveals how Colton's prediction was exactly right - there were very mixed reactions to Colton's coming out on *Good Morning America* and this is portrayed in the show. What is interesting is how many of the negative reactions to Colton coming out are not directly against him as a gay man, but rather condemning his actions if he is coming out to distract attention away from the stalking charges and restraining order that Cassie Randolph placed against him, that him being gay does not excuse or erase

his previous actions that were against her. The episode shows screenshots of posts on Twitter that went viral following Colton's interview with Robin Roberts. One of them in particular stands out to me when Colton read's it in an interview. It says "hang on isn't Colton Underwood the guy who harassed and stalked his girlfriend and put a tracking device on her car? Why does he get an exclusive interview on Good Morning America," ("The Public 00:29:28). So, *why does* Colton have access to this? Colton is a celebrity who became famous via a heterosexual reality dating show. He has crafted his public image around being a heterosexual man. So, his coming out is not only his declaration of his identity to the public, but it is a spectacle and a source of entertainment for the public. And, him choosing to make his coming out so visible in the media (on *Good Morning America* and making this *Coming Out Colton* series) only enables the public to see it and talk about it. We see this happen through how his coming out goes viral on Twitter immediately following it airing.

Conclusion

Looking at the places, spaces, and people that Colton surrounds himself with (as depicted in the show) it is no surprise that he was in the closet regarding his sexual identity for almost the entirety of his life. Because Colton was engaged in the church and football, where homophobic and heteronormative narratives and cultures thrived, it is easy to see why Colton might have felt uncomfortable coming out and embracing his homosexuality. *Coming Out Colton*, like all reality television shows, builds up the dramatics for the factor of entertaining the viewing audience. That being said, the drama that was built up between Colton and his father about Colton coming out was unnecessary, and promotes the association between masculinity and homophobia,

despite Colton's dad being accepting of his son as a gay man. The intersections between what Colton identifies as the most significant parts of his life - his family, football, and his faith - are all places and spaces in which Colton initially felt uncomfortable embracing his sexual identity, and took extreme measures to fit within the heteronorms that were expected of him.

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I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not. -Maddie Brent