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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
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Academic Instagram: How Latinas use Instagram to Navigate Doctoral Education

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Sociology

by

Jennifer Cabrera

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Glenda M. Flores, Chair
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2026

DEDICATION

Para mi ma y mi pa.
[For my mom and dad.]

Por creer en mí, aun cuando este camino era desconocido para todos nosotros. Por los sacrificios que hicieron al venir a este país y por seguir adelante para darnos a mis hermanos y a mí oportunidades que ustedes no tuvieron. Este doctorado lleva conmigo sus sacrificios, sus sueños y todo lo que hicieron posible para mí.

[For believing in me, even when this path was unfamiliar to all of us. For the sacrifices you made in coming to this country and for continuing to move forward so that my brothers and I could have opportunities you never had. This doctorate carries with it your sacrifices, your dreams, and everything you made possible for me.]

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This doctorate is for you.

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VITA

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- Gomez, V., & Cabrera, J. (2023). Theorizing virtual counterspaces: how Latina graduate students build community online. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 1-17.
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Academic Instagram: How Latinas use Instagram to Navigate Doctoral
by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology
University of California, Irvine, 2026
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This dissertation examines how first-generation Latina doctoral students use Instagram to navigate doctoral education and build supportive communities in response to persistent institutional barriers. Previous research has documented the challenges Latinas face in doctoral programs, including financial barriers, limited access to mentoring, unclear program expectations, and a lack of cultural representation. While institutional agents can provide important sources of guidance, their support is not always sufficient to help students navigate the hidden curriculum of doctoral education. Consequently, many Latinas turn to digital spaces to access information, develop relationships, and exchange resources that support their educational persistence. This dissertation investigates Instagram as a virtual counterspace through three related questions: (1) How do first-generation Latina doctoral students use Instagram to navigate the hidden curriculum of doctoral education? (2) How does Instagram function as a site for cultivating community cultural wealth among Latina doctoral students? and (3) How do Latina academic content creators create and sustain virtual counterspaces that support other Latinas pursuing doctoral degrees?

The analysis draws on qualitative data collected across three related studies. The first study includes 56 interviews with followers of the academic Instagram page *Academic Latina* and a content analysis of 30 Instagram posts. The second study draws on 36 interviews with Latina doctoral students who used Instagram throughout their doctoral journeys. The third study

consists of interviews with 15 Latina academic content creators who were either currently enrolled in doctoral programs or had recently earned their doctorates. Guided by the frameworks of Community Cultural Wealth and virtual counterspaces, this dissertation employs thematic analysis to examine how Latina doctoral students create, access, and exchange knowledge and support through academic Instagram communities.

This dissertation reveals several key findings across three stand-alone substantive chapters. In the first study, Chapter 2, I find that academic Instagram pages function as informal infrastructures through which Latina doctoral students expose and navigate the hidden curriculum of doctoral education. Participants used these spaces to share experiential knowledge about funding, doctoral milestones, and program expectations while normalizing the uncertainty associated with graduate education, making critical information more accessible to current and aspiring doctoral students. In the second study, Chapter 3, I demonstrate that Instagram serves as a digital site for cultivating community cultural wealth by enabling Latina doctoral students to exchange aspirational, navigational, resistance and linguistic forms of capital that support their persistence in doctoral education. I argue that digital platforms expand existing understandings of Community Cultural Wealth by demonstrating how culturally grounded forms of capital are collectively cultivated and mobilized across institutional and geographic boundaries. Finally, in the third study, Chapter 4, I examine how Latina academic content creators intentionally construct virtual counterspaces grounded in an equity ethic shaped by their own experiences navigating racialized, gendered, and first-generation barriers in higher education. I show that these content creators transform their lived experiences into publicly accessible resources that foster mentorship, cultural affirmation, and community.

Together, these findings demonstrate that when used this way, Instagram functions as more than a social media platform; it serves as a virtual counterspace where Latina doctoral students collectively generate, share, and mobilize knowledge and support that compensate for institutional gaps in doctoral education. By examining how digital communities facilitate the circulation of academic knowledge, resources, and social support, this dissertation contributes to scholarship on doctoral education, Community Cultural Wealth, and virtual counterspaces while highlighting the growing role of informal digital infrastructures in promoting educational persistence among historically marginalized students.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: Latinas in Doctoral Programs

Latinas currently represent one-in-five women in the U.S. and are expected to comprise nearly one third of women and girls throughout the country by 2060 (Gándara & White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics 2015, p. 2). Yet, in 2021, only 9.9 percent of conferred doctoral degrees were earned by Latinas compared to 61.4% by White, 11.6% by Black, and 13.2% by Asian women (NCES 2021). The majority of Latinas who do enroll into doctoral programs experience a series of challenges that lead to negative experiences. Some challenges have been identified by scholars as lack of representation among faculty, lack of representation among their peers, financial constraints, cultural clashes between academic and familial responsibilities, and unclear program expectations (Ramirez 2014; Souto-Manning & Ray 2007; Gildersleeve et al. 2011; Castellanos et al. 2023; Alcantar & Hernandez 2020; Cabrera et al. 2024; Espinoza 2010; Espino 2016; Hernandez 2025). As such, research has found that Latinas seek social networks of support, both internal and external, to the ivory tower that provide them with the necessary cultural validation and academic guidance required that are crucial to persist in their programs, but that their doctoral programs might lack (Jungbauer-Gans & Gross 2013; Weng 2020; Tobbell et al. 2010; Janson et al. 2004; Pilbeam et al. 2013). Social media has become one such space where students can access guidance, resources, and community from peers with shared lived experiences (Gomez & Cabrera 2023; Hernandez 2015). To understand how first-generation Latina doctoral students engage with these digital sources of support, I ask three central questions in my dissertation: How do first-generation college-going Latina doctoral students use Instagram to access, share, and make sense of knowledge related to the hidden curriculum of doctoral education? Further, what forms of community cultural wealth are cultivated, exchanged, and activated through Instagram, and how

do these forms of capital support Latina doctoral students' persistence and navigation through their program? Finally, how do Latina doctoral students construct virtual counterspaces that challenge dominant norms of knowledge production in doctoral education?

With these three questions, I investigate how Latina doctoral student content creators and Latina users leverage Instagram as an online tool to increase knowledge of graduate school and increase Latinas' retention and success in doctoral education. My findings suggest that these Instagram pages serve as spaces for exposing the financial realities of graduate education, as sources of practical advice for navigating program expectations, and for normalizing the lack of knowledge of doctoral education. Second, users also highlight developing different forms of capital through their engagement with the Instagram content. Finally, I identify the factors that lead Latina content creators to cultivate these Instagram pages as virtual counterspaces, and also highlight the substantial challenges involved in sustaining these spaces.

In this introductory chapter, I provide a snapshot of the experiences of Latinas in doctoral programs and the sources of support available to them or lack thereof embedded within their institutions. I begin by illustrating the various challenges Latinas face in doctoral programs. More specifically, I discuss challenges that are not only structural but also some that are expected behaviors placed upon Latinas like cultural familial expectations clashing with their doctoral responsibilities. Then, I provide information on the sources of support such as having supportive mentors, family, and peers, that have positive impacts on Latinas navigating and persisting in graduate school. Finally, I provide the frameworks that guide this dissertation.

BACKGROUND

Institutional Barriers and Sources of Support for Latina Doctoral Students

Research consistently demonstrates that Latina doctoral students experience doctoral education differently than their peers because of structural and institutional barriers embedded within higher education. These barriers include inadequate academic preparation, lack of mentorship, financial insecurity, negative and hostile campus racial climates, lack of sense of belonging, lack of representation among students and faculty, and non-inclusive campus environments that fail to recognize Latina students' cultural identities, resulting in discrimination and microaggressions (Solórzano et al. 2000; Flores 2017; Yosso et al. 2009; Gonzalez 2006; Souto-Manning & Ray 2007; Gildersleeve et al. 2011; Castellanos et al. 2023). Further, postsecondary institutions often operate with the assumption that students possess the knowledge and resources of the middle-class (Castellanos et al. 2023). However, most first-generation college students struggle to navigate higher education, and the unspoken institutional norms in and-outside of the classroom (Flores 2017). Navigating the academic culture of higher education, learning the rules and expectations of life as a student, and finding the elusive balance between personal and professional life, make for a challenging experience (Castellanos et al. 2023).

While Latinas face numerous challenges within their programs and institutions, challenges also exist for them outside of institutional spaces. For example, Latinas may struggle with the gendered familial expectations placed on them, which clash with their graduate careers. In Cabrera et al. (2024), I explored how the ethnic cultural script of *familismo* intersected with the demands of doctoral study for Latinas in doctoral programs. I found that Latinas negotiate what myself and my colleagues term as a gendered cultural tightrope given Latinas' desire to maintain closeness with their families amidst geographic separation when they move away from home for graduate school. I also found that Latinas valued the *consejos* [advice] their families offered them. Finally, Latinas also navigated the collectivist aspects of familismo within the

individualist values of the academy. Additional research also finds that Latinas struggle to maintain a balance between their familial expectations and the demands of graduate school. Espinoza (2010) finds that Latina doctoral students who value familismo also highly value being a good daughter. As such, when they are in pursuit of higher education, they may experience pressure of fulfilling the competing roles of daughter and student. Espinoza (2010) argues that Latinas effectively navigate their two worlds: they either become integrators who talk to their families about their school responsibilities and then enlist their families support to enhance their academic success, or, they become separators who separate their family and school lives to minimize tension and conflict. These studies highlight that navigating doctoral education extends beyond meeting academic expectations, as Latina doctoral students must also reconcile competing familial obligations and cultural values, often without institutional support.

Other scholarship has explored the factors that make for a positive experience for Latinas in doctoral programs. For instance, Crumb (2022) examined the experiences of Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. The study found that increasing faculty diversity, establishing peer networks, and creating class-conscious academic programs and new student orientations may contribute to the persistence of Latinas in doctoral programs. This is similar to another study that suggested that institutional investments in graduate peer mentorship yielded substantial rewards for student retention and degree completion (Lorenzetti et al. 2019). In fact, studies have found that peer groups aid in the retention of students in academia. For example, Winkle-Wagner & McCoy (2016) found that participating in graduate preparation programs were a key to increasing the socialization of graduate students in which students were able to acquire capital and learn about professional development. Additionally, campus organizations have also been found to lead to strong social connections amongst students that are advantageous

for their social mobility in higher education (Glass & Guessing 2018). Further, research also suggests that faculty mentorship could increase the support that Latinas receive when pursuing their doctorate. Rangel (2024) sheds light on the experiences of Latinas who earned their doctorate either with or without mentorship during their programs, finding that support in funding, finding postdoctoral positions in higher education, and giving emotional support alongside cultural competency, were all critical factors for mentorship. For some Latinas in the study, their priority was to be in a safe space where there were mentors who looked like them, as opposed to getting fully funded at an institution or program where none of their mentors looked like them (Rangel 2024). Whether it is peer mentorship or faculty mentorship, Latinas need to find these sources of support to better navigate their doctoral programs and receive all of the information needed to succeed.

The Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education

Previous research has regarded the formal curriculum in education as the learning that is acquired through official courses and workshops (Elliot et al. 2020). However, scholars have also examined a hidden curriculum beyond the classroom, which creates unspoken rules that students must decipher to succeed in academia (Sambell and McDowell 1998; Donnelly 2000; Portelli 1993; Calarco 2020). Research on the hidden curriculum reveals how the structure and culture of schooling advantage privileged students over their peers from systematically marginalized groups (Anyon 1980; Giroux and Penna 1979; Wren 1999). While the content of the hidden curriculum varies across different levels of schooling, scholars have found that some form of hidden curriculum exists from preschool (Peach 1994) through college (Margolis 2002), and even into graduate school (Cribb and Bignold 1999; Calarco 2020). The hidden curriculum in doctoral education consists of the unstated norms, rules, and assumptions that are typically

expected of students but are never explicitly taught (Calarco 2020; Hopkins et al. 2024). For example, funding is an important piece of graduate school, yet this isn't always part of a formal curriculum or available to students in a PhD handbook. Instead, there exists a hidden curriculum with knowledge on the type of funding that is offered during doctoral study, and how and when to apply for extramural funds. While the hidden curriculum can serve as a tool to maintain stratification in hegemonic structures through racial and class lines, for Latine students, these unspoken norms can be an oppressive and top-down form of Americanization that manifests into difficulties with learning course material, hinder access to opportunities, and even lead to struggles with their own ethnic identity and the deficit notion that their culture is a barrier to success (Flores 2017; Margolis 2002; Langhout & Mitchell 2008). Therefore, there is a need for spaces of shared knowledge that teach Latine students how to navigate higher education without blaming them for their lack of knowledge.

Counterspaces

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework that can be used to theorize and challenge the ways in which race and racism impact social structures (Yosso 2005). Scholars have theorized CRT within the context of higher education to examine how People of Color¹ experience racism and other forms of oppression within educational institutions (Gomez & Perez Huber 2019). Over time CRT has expanded to incorporate the racialized experiences of women and Latinas/os. For example, Latina/o critical race (LatCrit) theory extends from critical race discussions to address the racialized subordination that comprise Chicana/o and Latina/o experiences (Arriola 1998; Stefancic 1997). Scholars of LatCrit theory assert that racism and classism, as well as

¹ I intentionally capitalize "People of Color" to reject the grammatical norm. This practice is a political move toward language use that reflects the values of social and racial justice. It also applies to "Students of Color," and "Women of Color" (Pérez-Huber et al. 2026)

sexism, are experienced based on immigration status, language, phenotype, culture, and surname (Montoya 1998; Johnson 1999). By identifying how these intersecting forms of oppression shape the educational experiences of Students of Color, CRT and LatCrit provide a foundation for understanding how marginalized students create spaces that challenge dominant institutional environments and affirm their experiences.

Counterspaces represent one such response to these conditions. The existing literature provides a foundation for understanding how counterspaces may offer Latina doctoral students the tools necessary to overcome the challenges that exist for Students of Color within educational settings. Solórzano et al. (2000) define counterspaces as “sites where deficit notions of People of Color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (70). Counterspaces in education create a domain of liberation for marginalized oppressed members of society who are limited in their freedoms due to hegemonic power and barriers (Wiggin et al. 2023). Although counterspaces have primarily existed as physical spaces such as campus cultural organizations, academic support programs, and affinity cultural centers (Nuñez 2011; Mwangi et al. 2018), many counterspaces also exist outside of the realms of university campuses as “social counterspaces” (Solórzano et al. 2000). Counterspaces can be found on college campuses, and they can be created by Students of Color seeking community, validation, and a supportive environment, but can also be created by campus staff. Yosso et al. (2009) describe two types of counterspaces: academic and social. Academic counterspaces enable students to engage in the rigors of academia in a welcoming environment where their identities and culture are valued and celebrated (Yosso et al. 2009). Social counterspaces, on the other hand, provide sites outside of academia for students to develop community and share their experiences with racism and other forms of oppression (Yosso et al. 2009). The ultimate goal of

counterspaces is to promote the social and emotional well-being of Brown and Black students who experience marginalization and oppression (Case & Hunter 2012). While existing research has focused on these support spaces within the confines of institutional physical spaces, these systems founded and led by institutions are not enough due to the hierarchical top-down power arrangements that exist within them. For example, as institutions struggle to financially support their students, and as resources for diversity and inclusive programs contract, research has found that Latina graduate students turn to virtual platforms, like Twitter, for affirmation and validation (Hernandez 2015).

Virtual Counterspaces

My colleague and I built on Hernandez (2015) and defined virtual counterspaces as sites of resistance that transcend space and time and support the academic advancement and holistic wellbeing of People of Color via digital platforms like social media spaces (Gomez & Cabrera 2023). In doing so, we argue that virtual counterspaces serve as sites where students cultivate cultural affirmation, community building, knowledge sharing, resistance, and empowerment. Through cultural affirmation, virtual counterspaces encourage students to be their authentic selves and embrace their cultural backgrounds and identities through online connections. Virtual counterspaces allow for community building to happen since these digital spaces exist without geographical restrictions. Knowledge sharing in virtual counterspaces refers to students engaging in imparting wisdom and advice with one another about navigating higher education and validating the knowledge they possess and bring from their families and communities. Empowerment exists within virtual counterspaces when students have the ability to see beyond their challenges and imagine themselves with their earned degrees. Finally, through virtual counterspaces students are able to resist deficit-oriented assumptions about themselves and

create counternarratives that resist assimilation into traditional academic culture. Through virtual counterspaces, we show how Latina graduate students harness the power of social media to establish inclusive communities to honor and celebrate their unique identities, rich cultural heritage, and academic journeys. We also demonstrate how Latina graduate students use virtual counterspaces to challenge the individualism and competition prevalent in academia by building relationships that facilitate the exchange of knowledge, support, and resources, highlighting the importance of social capital in navigating graduate education.

Social Capital

Social Capital Theory, according to Bourdieu, describes the resources that a person can utilize as a result of their connection to social networks (Bourdieu 1986). For Bourdieu, social capital is relational and works strongly in conjunction with cultural and economic capital, meaning that it is conceptualized as a structural resource determined by class (Fuller 2014). For instance, Horvat et al. (2003) found that middle class families drew on a range of professional contacts for information and expertise when they wanted to contest judgements by school officials, such as in relation to special education needs. Some scholars attribute social capital emerging from civic engagement and an example in education would be parental involvement within the school (Putnam 2000). Lin's (2001) interpretation of social capital theory emphasizes the importance of social networks and the resources embedded within them, and posits that social interactions allow individuals to engage in transactional relationships, where they engage to produce profits, such as access to resources, recognition, and connections. According to Lin (2001), it isn't enough to be part of a big network; individuals must intentionally put the resources in those networks to work. Building on Lin (2001), Benbow and Lee (2019) further

define social capital as the valued resources that are accessed and mobilized through interpersonal relationships.

Community Cultural Wealth

In addition to the knowledge and support embedded in the spaces that are cultivated by students with their peers or institutional mentors, studies have also highlighted the importance of the different forms of capital that students possess. Yosso (2005) developed Community Cultural Wealth to challenge the narrow understanding of cultural capital by defining six forms of capital that People of Communities of Color bring with them to education. These capitals are aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistance capital. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams, even when faced with challenges. Linguistic capital includes the social skills attained through communicating in more than one language and/or style, placing value on bilingual education. Familial capital includes the cultural knowledge nurtured within families that carry a sense of community and cultural intuition, expanding the concept of family to include a broader understanding of kinship. Social capital are the networks of people and community resources that are available to People of Color. Navigational capital refers to the skills and strategies to maneuver through social institutions. Finally, resistance capital is the skills and knowledge fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. Together, these capitals acknowledge cultural and institutional contexts and value the assets and strengths of Students of Color (Cuellar 2024; 2021). Collectively, this body of scholarship underscores the need to better understand how Latina doctoral students access and mobilize culturally affirming forms of support to navigate the circulation of academic knowledge of doctoral education, particularly beyond the boundaries of their home institutions.

OVERVIEW OF THE METHODS

This dissertation uses a multi-method qualitative approach to examine how first-generation Latinas use Instagram to navigate doctoral education. Across three studies, I draw on interviews with first-generation Latina prospective and current doctoral students and Latina academic content creators, as well as qualitative content analysis and digital ethnography of Academic Latina posts and user engagement. Together, these methods allow me to examine academic Instagram from the perspectives of both those who create and consume academic content, while also observing how knowledge and support are shared and exchanged through the platform. The following section provides an overview of the dissertation chapters and how each study addresses different dimensions of these experiences.

OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation is presented in the form of three stand-alone chapters that address three questions: How do first-generation Latina doctoral students use Instagram to access, share, and make sense of knowledge related to the hidden curriculum of doctoral education? What forms of community cultural wealth are cultivated, exchanged, and activated through Instagram, and how do these forms of capital support Latina doctoral students' persistence and navigation through their doctoral program? How do Latina doctoral students construct virtual counterspaces that challenge dominant norms of knowledge production in doctoral education?

In the first substantive chapter, entitled *Demystifying Doctoral Education: How Latinas use Instagram to Uncover the Hidden Curriculum of Graduate School*, I examine how first-generation Latinas use Instagram to navigate the hidden curriculum of doctoral education, addressing gaps in institutional guidance and systemic barriers within academia. I address the following questions: How do first-generation Latina doctoral students use Instagram to access, share, and make sense of knowledge related to the hidden curriculum of doctoral education?

What forms of doctoral knowledge and support are circulated on Instagram to compensate for gaps in formal institutional guidance? This chapter draws on interviews with 15 Latina content creators, 56 interviews with followers from the Instagram page, *Academic Latina*, and a content analysis and digital ethnography of 30 Instagram posts from *Academic Latina*. I find that Latinas use academic Instagram accounts (a) To expose the financial realities of graduate education, (b) As practical advice for navigating program expectations, and (c) To normalize the lack of knowledge of doctoral education. These topics were highlighted as crucial pieces of information that needed to be shared as guidance for navigating a doctoral program, beyond the information that programs offered their students via the formal curriculum, such as through a PhD handbook or course curriculum. I argue that *Academic Latina* and similar virtual spaces function as informal infrastructures for uncovering the hidden curriculum, making funding structures visible, translating milestone expectations into actionable steps, and providing validation as first-generation Latinas navigate institutional ambiguity. These findings demonstrate that Latinas are relying on peer-created virtual spaces to obtain essential knowledge of the hidden curriculum that universities assume students already possess, as they report that their universities continue to leave critical informational and mentoring gaps that first-generation students must fill themselves. By analyzing how Latinas produce and circulate this knowledge online, this chapter reframes Instagram as more than just a social media platform, and instead as an important educational infrastructure that expands access to doctoral knowledge and challenges traditional assumptions about where graduate socialization occurs.

In Chapter 3, entitled “*The Nature of the Institution Breaks You Down Little by Little:*” *Latinas Cultivating Community Cultural Wealth Online to Navigate Their Doctoral Programs*, I narrow the perspective to the experiences of the users of *Academic Latina*. I investigate how this use of Instagram can operate as a digital infrastructure for cultivating community cultural wealth

among Latina doctoral students. Through interviews with 36 Latina doctoral students, I find that Latinas use Instagram to access and exchange culturally rooted resources that support their persistence in their doctoral programs. Participants shared experiences that demonstrate their need for and appreciation of various forms of capital that were cultivated through their engagement with academic Instagram content. I find that *Academic Latina* emerged as a valuable space for participants to network and access knowledge about additional skillsets necessary to succeed in their programs such as professional development through conference presentations, and accessing funding via fellowship and grant applications; topics that were necessary for the postgraduate success but not explicitly taught in their program's formal doctoral training. Further, *Academic Latina* made the information more accessible and filtered the information in palatable ways that encouraged reciprocal exchanges. The content that was created and shared by a first-generation Latina doctoral student, mirrored the identities of many of the users. As such, users of *Academic Latina* had a virtual space where they could ask questions without the hierarchical dynamics that often exist in academia between students and their advisors.

Chapter 4, entitled *From Consumers to Creators: Latina Doctoral Students and the Rise of Virtual Counterspaces*, uses virtual counterspaces as a framework to examine how Latinas became content creators of Instagram pages that deliver academic content. Drawing on virtual counterspaces literature (Gomez & Cabrera 2023), I interviewed 15 content creators to examine what form of content they delivered via their Instagram accounts and the perceived impact. Rather than simply sharing information, Latina content creators describe how they attempt to level the playing field through an 'equity ethic' grounded in their own experiences navigating racialized, gendered, and first-generation barriers in higher education. I find that Latinas built a community for themselves and others and increased representation of their multiple identities such as being first-generation students and also mothers, eldest daughters, and immigrants.

Latinas also shared knowledge on how to get to and through graduate school while cultivating cultural affirmation, which is defined as the validation and celebration of students' authentic cultural identities, lived experiences, and inherent worth within supportive online communities (Gomez & Cabrera 2023). Further, I also found that Latinas extended some of their online content to offline initiatives such as in-person mentoring and workshops to guide students in their graduate school trajectories. This study contributes to ongoing scholarship by showing how Latinas navigate doctoral education through informal digital infrastructures sustained by an equity ethic, whereby participants collectively generate and redistribute knowledge, mentorship, and support to address institutional shortcomings.

CONTRIBUTION AND CONCLUSION

My dissertation makes a number of contributions to the scholarship on Latinas in higher education. Previous literature examines the sources of support that Latinas use to persist in their doctoral programs which they receive from peers, mentors, or other institutional agents (Jungbauer-Gans & Gross 2013; Weng 2020). Additional research has also explored the counterspaces that students create to support one another through higher education (Mwangi et al. 2018; Hernandez 2015; Gomez & Cabrera 2023). By contrast, I utilize interviews and a content analysis to investigate how Latinas create and use Instagram as a tool for navigating doctoral education. My dissertation places a spotlight on first-generation Latinas who take it upon themselves to create these virtual spaces and the type of information they deem necessary to share with other Latinas to encourage them to persist in their doctoral programs. I also examine the labor that Latinas undergo in the facilitation of these virtual counterspaces, in addition to navigating their own doctoral program milestones and responsibilities.

The primary theoretical contribution of this dissertation is to demonstrate how virtual counterspaces facilitate the development of social capital by creating digital spaces where Latina

doctoral students collectively exchange knowledge, cultivate mentoring relationships, build professional networks, and foster culturally affirming communities. Given the lack of representation and lack of guidance in their programs, first-generation Latinas turn to Instagram to network with other Latinas who provide them with guidance beyond what their program is able to offer them. In addition to providing knowledge, academic Instagram pages are also providing Latinas with various forms of capital that embrace their cultural backgrounds and empower their identities outside of academia. Lastly, while virtual counterspaces contribute positively to the persistence of Latinas in higher education, this is a responsibility in addition to their academic duties which they fulfill out of a social responsibility to uplift their communities.

To conclude, this dissertation contains a methodological appendix. I reflect on my positionality as a Latina in a doctoral program who is also the creator and facilitator of an Instagram account aimed at demystifying the hidden curriculum of graduate school. I highlight how the intersection of my identity as a graduate student and content creator influence my interactions with the users of *Academic Latina* and the content creators, given my embeddedness in the setting of the study. I also discuss how my positionality gave me access to participants, trust from the participants, and insight into how the content from *Academic Latina* was received and interpreted. Finally, my role as a creator required ongoing reflexivity regarding the power I held in shaping the type of knowledge that was shared through the content.

CHAPTER 2: Demystifying Doctoral Education: How Latinas use Instagram to Uncover the Hidden Curriculum of Graduate School

INTRODUCTION

Several studies have explored the retention and attrition rates of Latinas in doctoral programs (Hernández 2025; Gándara 2015; Hernandez et al. 2014; McGlynn 2015). Despite the marginal increase of Latinas enrolling in doctoral programs in recent years, they continue to lag behind their White counterparts. Recent data by the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), indicate that only 10% of conferred doctoral degrees were awarded to Latinas, while 61.1% were awarded to White women. Latinas in doctoral programs often describe their program environment as not conducive to their success because of lack of mentorship, insufficient funding, unclear milestone expectations, and lack of cultural representation among faculty and students (Castellanos et al. 2023; Rodriguez 2016; Gildersleeve, Croom & Vasquez 2011; Bañuelos & Flores 2024). Having a clear guide in navigating their doctoral program plays a significant role in their academic trajectories, especially for first-generation college students (Flores 2017).

Central to this issue is the concept of the hidden curriculum, a set of unwritten rules, norms, and expectations that are crucial for academic success but are rarely explicitly taught (Calarco 2020). In doctoral programs, this includes knowledge about milestones, funding opportunities, professional networking, and research dissemination. While the formal curriculum provides a foundation for academic progression, the hidden curriculum often determines how effectively students can navigate institutional systems. For Latinas, who frequently lack generational knowledge of higher education, uncovering the hidden curriculum is essential for their persistence and success in their program.

This study explores how Instagram, a widely used social media platform, can be leveraged as an innovative space for demystifying the hidden curriculum of doctoral education for first-generation Latinas. This study builds on research that highlights the importance of financial support for doctoral persistence (Gonzalez 2006; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. 2014; Wu et al. 2025) by showing that first-generation Latinas often lack guidance on how to secure funding. In response to these institutional gaps, Latinas are building virtual counterspaces that make funding information more visible and accessible. Additionally, unlike traditional academic resources such as an academic handbook, this research elucidates how Instagram can be used for peer-to-peer exchange of experiences, strategies, and insights, often through personal narratives that resonate deeply with the first-generation doctoral students in this study.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Unequal Access to Doctoral Knowledge and Support

Research shows that Latinas encounter numerous challenges as they navigate graduate programs including imposter phenomenon, lack of funding, racial microaggressions, and lack of milestone clarity (Ahmad et al. 2025; Negrón-Gonzales & Barrera 2023; Guloy et al. 2020; Turhan & Karadağ 2019; Cohen & McConnell 2019; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. 2014; Souto-Manning & Ray 2007; Malcolm & Dowd 2012; Gonzalez 2003; Grady et al. 2014; Witt et al. 1992; Uysal 2021; Mosanya et al. 2022). Ramirez (2014) found that from the beginning of their graduate program, Latinas experienced challenges in their transitions into graduate school, such as feelings of isolation, racism and sexism, and trouble adjusting to the curriculum expectations. Students have also reported experiencing microaggressions by their faculty mentors, who as their institutional agents, leave them with feelings of shame and embarrassment (Alcantar & Hernandez 2020). Consequently, this leads to an “Am I going crazy?!” phenomenon that doctoral Students of Color experience representing the tentativeness, insecurity, and doubt

inhibited in them (Gildersleeve et al. 2011). While most of these aforementioned challenges exist within their institutions or their graduate programs specifically, Latinas also encounter challenges outside of institutional spaces as they navigate their graduate careers. For example, additional challenges arise for Latinas from familial expectations when their dual roles of being a student and a daughter interfere with the gendered expectations of familismo, creating a cultural tightrope where they have to prioritize between their home and school responsibilities (Cabrera et al. 2024). Studies have also shown that Latinas struggle to maintain a balance between their family relationships and the demands of school to maintain their status as “good daughters” (Espinoza 2010). In these cases, Latinas either learn to integrate the two worlds, or they keep the two social spheres separate, switching between the two to minimize conflict. Further, Espino (2016) found that the resistance to the vestiges of colonialism, cultural subjugation, and heteronormativity embedded within Mexican American women PhDs’ families, was imprinted on their identities by the time they entered the academic workforce. As such, most of them were not surprised to encounter race-gendered normativities in graduate school and were prepared to contest them.

There is also research that finds that with the right support, Latinas can have positive experiences in their graduate programs. For instance, Gonzalez (2006) found that when their doctoral programs are supportive of them in professional and financial ways such as providing them with assistantships, Latinas engage in positive academic socialization. Additionally, Crumb (2022) examined the personal and institutional factors that may contribute to working-class Latina doctoral students’ persistence in their programs at predominantly White institutions, and found that embracing familismo, increasing faculty diversity, establishing peer networks, and creating inclusive class-conscious academic programs and new student orientations were contributing factors. In another study, Rangel (2024) explored the role of mentorship for Latina

doctoral students and found that although Latinas reported experiencing racism, sexism, and classism in institutional spaces, they sought mentors who provided them with funding guidance, assistance in finding postdoctoral positions, emotional support along with cultural competency, and models who were in their scholar familial circle.

Hernández (2025) identifies a familismo paradox, which she describes as a phenomenon where although Latina doctoral students often face contradictions within their familial expectations (such as encouragement to pursue higher education, but also pressure to have children and form a family), the values instilled in their familial expectations provide unique support. As such, although Latinas encounter challenges that stem from familial expectations related to gender roles and marriage, Latinas also receive advice, or *consejos*, from their families in addition to nurturing care from their mothers and financial support from their fathers, which results in this familismo paradox reflecting the complex interplay between academia and the cultural values reflected in familismo. Further, a supportive community of peers and informal social networks also positively impacts the academic trajectories of Latinas in graduate school (Aryan & Guzman, 2010; Patton & Harper, 2003). For example, Garcia (2019) found that formal organizations like Latina sororities also served as a form of peer support and mentorship that was fundamental for academic success. While Latinas in the sorority reported experiencing culture shock at their predominantly White institutions, being part of the sorority helped them embrace their ethnicity and expand their academic network (Garcia 2019). With the right support, Latinas are able to feel more emotionally uplifted and academically guided, not only during their programs, but also in their post graduate careers. Thus, it is important for Latinas to find sources of support inside and outside of their programs to navigate their doctorates successfully.

Formal and Hidden Curricula

First-generation Latinas not only need emotional and cultural support, but they also benefit from academic guidance in navigating their doctoral program and its curriculum requirements. The question of curriculum is at the core of any educational endeavor. Whether it is K–12 or higher education, including doctoral programs, all these entities are guided by the question of what skills, knowledge, and attitudes students should be equipped with (Watson 2005). Elliot et al. (2020) regard the formal curriculum in doctoral education as the activities where learning is acquired via the official (or formal) doctoral courses, seminars, workshops, and supervisory meetings. It is fair to say that all parties concerned in doctoral education including the doctoral student, their supervisors, the institution, and the department staff play an important role in the completion of the degree. The doctoral journey often centers on the formal curriculum of the program, including seminars, conferences, research, and meeting with advisors. While many programs have a doctoral handbook describing the program milestones, which doctoral students often receive at the beginning of their program, this handbook may not always capture evolving, program-specific, and tacit knowledge students need to navigate doctoral education. Further, crucial pieces of the doctoral experience, such as conference attendance or academic publishing, which are part of a student's professional development, are not always taught in the classroom setting or included in PhD handbooks.

By contrast, scholars have investigated how the hidden curriculum of schools creates powerful, yet unspoken rules that students must decipher if they want to succeed in academia (Pensky et al. 2021; Mendoza-Denton et al. 2017). The hidden curriculum in doctoral education consists of the unofficial (and informal) channels of useful learning and the presence of unstated norms, rules, and assumptions that are typically expected of students but are never explicitly taught (Calarco 2020). Calarco (2018) finds that students from middle class families who are socialized and trained by their families to follow their school's hidden curriculum, are more

likely to reap rewards from institutional agents, such as their professors. Bañuelos and Flores (2024) find that professors served as institutional agents and supported first-generation Latinx² students' pathways into their doctoral programs by providing students with doctoral program information, instrumental support on their doctoral applications, and by leveraging their professional status and networks. However, this is most advantageous for middle- and upper-class students who have the capital to help them navigate higher education, whereas students who are the first in their families to navigate graduate education often have to learn the hidden curriculum on their own, generating self-doubt, costly mistakes, and frustration. For instance, first-generation doctoral students may know they need to apply for fellowships to fund their programs but might not have experience with this and lack an understanding of how to write a fellowship application. As such, the hidden curriculum is not merely hidden because information is omitted from formal training, but because access to that information is unevenly distributed across social class and educational backgrounds. Students from families with prior experience in higher education often inherit knowledge about graduate school through their social networks, whereas first-generation students must actively seek out this information elsewhere. While the formal curriculum is intended to guide doctoral students toward completion of their program, the hidden curriculum serves as a parallel mechanism that compliments the formal curriculum for an enriched doctoral learning experience. To assist first-generation doctoral students, knowledge sharing and guidance of how to navigate a doctorate has manifested itself in wider contexts, such as via social media platforms.

Academic Social Media

² Latinx is a gender-neutral term used for Latinos/as to be inclusive of non-binary people.

Previous studies have found that social media can be a powerful tool in higher education for disseminating knowledge and building community for Latinas (Hernández 2015; Gomez & Cabrera 2023). Gomez and Cabrera (2023) introduce the concept of virtual counterspaces, which describes how Latinas utilize Instagram to share academic knowledge, foster mutual support, and navigate higher education. My colleague and I identify five core tenets of virtual counterspaces: cultural affirmation, community building, knowledge sharing, empowerment, and resistance (Gomez and Cabrera 2023). By examining these tenets via Instagram, we find that Latinas receive the support online that is lacking in their institutions and programs to better navigate the challenges of graduate school. Additional research has found that platforms like LinkedIn also serve as a tool and a professional networking site where students can pursue academic careers (Healy et al. 2023). Other social media platforms like Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter) have also been found to be important in building communities of support (Quintana & Vida de Leon 2021). For instance, in a study exploring how Twitter could be used as a counterspace for Latina doctoral students who lacked faculty and peer support within their programs, Hernández (2015) found that Twitter decreased Latinas' sense of isolation by allowing Latinas to create an online identity that was more authentically themselves than what they might display in physical academic spaces. Further, by choosing who to follow and who could follow them, Latinas were able to hone their circles of influence and nurture online communities where their circles would be accepting of them. Given the ability of social media spaces to circumvent the marginalization that Latina doctoral students often experience in academia, more research is needed to further examine social media's potential as an academic tool for demystifying the navigation of doctoral education.

This study contributes to this gap in research by examining how Latinas use Instagram as a platform for illuminating the hidden curriculum of doctoral education. I find answers to the following research questions:

1. How do first-generation Latina doctoral students use Instagram to access, share, and make sense of knowledge related to the hidden curriculum of doctoral education?
2. What forms of doctoral knowledge and support are circulated on Instagram to compensate for gaps in formal institutional guidance?

METHODS

Established in 2010, Instagram is a social media platform with more than one billion members to date (Manovich 2017), and it served as the primary site for this study. The following three data sources were utilized: (a) interviews with content creators of Instagram accounts that shared academic content, (b) analysis of Instagram posts from one academic Instagram page, *Academic Latina*, and (c) interviews with Latina followers of *Academic Latina* who were in a doctoral program or applying to a doctoral program. All three data sources were collected between September 2023 and July 2024 and were analyzed at the completion of the study. I define academic Instagram pages as the accounts on Instagram that share content in alignment with the academic journey of the content creator. For example, an academic Instagram page facilitated in Sociology could share content regarding milestones and experiences specific to that Sociology student (e.g., their program milestones).

Interviews with Latina Content Creators

To identify what forms of doctoral knowledge and support were circulated on academic Instagram to compensate for gaps in formal institutional guidance, I recruited Latinas who identified as first-generation college-educated students, had at least five posts on their academic

Instagram page that illuminated the hidden curriculum of doctoral programs as a threshold, were a current doctoral student or recent graduate (in the last 8 years) of a U.S. doctoral program, and had created their account in the last 5 years. I reached out to content creators via direct message on Instagram after analyzing their pages and assessing that they were eligible based on their Instagram content. Given the low number of these academic accounts at the time of the study, I recruited a total of 15 participants; 13 current doctoral students and 2 recent graduates. Of the 15 participants, 20% were in STEM disciplines and 80% in social science and humanities disciplines (*Table 1*). Content creators identified with the following ethnicities: Mexican, Puerto Rican, Salvadoran, Cuban, and Ecuadorian. In July 2024, participants completed a short demographic survey that inquired about their personal identities, parental education level, and their own educational attainment history, as well as questions regarding when they created their Instagram pages, what other platforms they shared their content on, and what their follower count was on Instagram at the time of the interview (*Table 2; see Appendix B for the complete demographic survey*). They then participated in individual Zoom interviews lasting an average of 37 minutes. The interview guide focused on why they created their page, how they managed/decided which content to post, and the audience engagement on their accounts (*see Appendix A for the complete interview guide*). With the exception of Gema who preferred to remain anonymous and requested a pseudonym, all content creators were comfortable with publicizing the Instagram handles of their academic accounts.

Interviews with Latina Users of Instagram

To assess how first-generation Latina doctoral students used Instagram to access, share, and make sense of knowledge related to the hidden curriculum of doctoral education, I recruited followers of *Academic Latina* who identified as first-generation Latinas, were either prospective

Table 1: Latina content creator demographics (n=15)

Name/Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Parental education (Mother/Father)	Year in doctoral program	Program field of study
Aidé	Mexican	High School/Elementary	6th Year	Sociology
Mayra	Mexican	Elementary/Elementary	Graduated in 2022	School Psychology
Clarissa	Mexican	High School/High School	2nd Year	Education
Yvette	Mexican	Middle School/High School	Graduated in 2016	Theatre and Performance Studies
Idaliana	Puerto Rican	Some University/High School	1st Year	Community Engagement
Vanessa	Mexican	Elementary/High School	4th Year	Human Development
Yesenia	Salvadoran	High School/High School	5th Year	Counseling Psychology
Valerie G.	Salvadoran	Some College/High School	5th Year	Education
Valerie	Cuban	GED/GED	4th Year	Clinical Psychology
Lauren	Mexican	Some Trade School	2nd Year	Higher Education
Aeriell	Ecuadorian	Some College/High School	5th Year	Clinical Psychology
Gema	Mexican	High School/None	2nd Year	Political Science

Jennifer	Mexican	Elementary/Elementary	1st Year	Clinical Psychology
Stephanie	Ecuadorian	Trade School/University	Graduated in 2023	Chemical Engineering
Fernanda	Salvadoran	High School/High School	4th Year	Chemical Engineering

Table 2: Latina content creator Instagram information (n=15)

Name/Pseudonym	Instagram handle	Date Instagram was created	Number of followers at the time of interview	Other academic social media platforms	Type of academic content shared on Instagram
Aidé	@gradconmigo	Sept. 2021	10,600	TikTok	Application process, Milestones in my program, Personal Accomplishments, Personal downfalls, Encouraging/Motivating quotes, Academic coaching services
Mayra	@becomingadoctora	June 2020	16,500	None	Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments, Personal downfalls, Encouraging/Motivating quotes
Clarissa	@gradmija	May 2022	2,861	TikTok	Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments, Encouraging/Motivating quotes
Yvette	@gradschoolfemtoring	2019	3,083	None	Application process, Personal Accomplishments, Personal downfalls, Academic coaching services

Idaliana	@theengagedscholar	Aug. 2023	390	LinkedIn	Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments, Personal downfalls, Encouraging/Motivating quotes
Vanessa	@latinasgettingphds	June 2023	427	None	Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments, Helpful resources
Yesenia	@yesigetsaphd	July 2020	1,480	None	Application Process, Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments, Personal downfalls, Encouraging/Motivating quotes, Academic coaching services
Valerie G.	@latinagradguide	July 2019	42,600	TikTok	Application Process, Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments, Personal downfalls, Encouraging/Motivating quotes, Academic coaching services
Valerie	@phdwithvalerie	2023	2,499	TikTok	Personal accomplishments, Encouraging/Motivating quotes, Mental health and therapy-based content
Lauren	@laurenphdstudent	Aug. 2020	750	TikTok, Threads	Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments,

					Personal downfalls, Encouraging/Motivating quotes
Aeriell	@gradlifegrind	July 2020	21,200	Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Pinterest	Application Process, Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments, Personal downfalls, Encouraging/Motivating quotes, Academic coaching services
Gema	Preferred to remain anonymous	Aug. 2022	789	TikTok	Application Process, Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments, Personal downfalls, Encouraging/Motivating quotes
Jennifer	@firstgen.phd	April 2023	1,367	TikTok	Application Process, Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments, Personal downfalls, Encouraging/Motivating quotes
Stephanie	@latinaengineer_phd	Dec. 2020	1,117	TikTok	Application Process, Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments, Encouraging/Motivating quotes, Mentorship, Mental health, STEM

Fernanda	@fernsulantay	Jan. 2019	35,200	TikTok	Milestones in my program, Personal accomplishments, Personal downfalls, Encouraging/Motivating quotes, Helpful resources
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or current doctoral students, and had been following the content on *Academic Latina* for at least six months. By including both prospective and current doctoral students, I aimed to assess the benefits of *Academic Latina* in terms of both access to doctoral programs and persistence within programs. I recruited Latina participants by posting a flier on the feed and Instagram story of *Academic Latina*. The flier included an interest form survey which was filled out by 179 users. From those surveys, I randomly selected 56 participants using an online random-name drawing generator. Thirty-six of the participants were doctoral students (*Table 3*). Twenty of the participants were prospective doctoral students: 3 were undergraduate students, 11 held a bachelor's degree, and 6 held a master's degree (*Table 4*). Out of the 57 participants, 23% were in STEM disciplines and 77% in social science disciplines. Participants self-identified as Mexican, Dominican, Ecuadorian, Colombian, and Guatemalan. During the Winter 2024 and Spring 2024 quarters, participants completed a short demographic survey that inquired about their personal identities, parental education level, and their own educational attainment history, as well as questions regarding how they found *Academic Latina* (*see Appendix E for the complete demographic survey*). In the Spring 2024 and Summer 2024 quarters, users participated in individual Zoom interviews that averaged 43 minutes. The interview guide focused on their doctoral education experiences or aspirations of pursuing doctoral education, any obstacles in their doctoral program or recent higher education institution, and what they gained from following *Academic Latina* (*see Appendix C and D for the complete interview guide*). Depending on participants' experiences, some questions were omitted because they were not applicable.

Interview Data Analysis

All interviews were coded and analyzed on Dedoose qualitative coding software. Coding was guided by *a priori* areas of inquiry established through the study's focus on the hidden

Table 3: Latina Doctoral Students demographics (n=36)

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Parental education (Mother/Father)	Year in doctoral program	Program field of study	How did they find <i>Academic Latina</i>	How long have they been following <i>Academic Latina</i>
Adilene	Mexican	High school	6th Year	Special education	Other	More than 2 years
Alba	Mexican	High school	4th Year	Health Psychology	Instagram Suggestions	1 - 2 years
Alondra	Colombian	High school	3rd Year	Clinical Psychology	Searching/Explore Page	More than 2 years
Beatriz	Mexican	8th grade/Some college	3rd Year	Higher Education & Leadership	Searching/Explore Page	1 - 2 years
Cecilia	Ecuadorian	High school/College	3rd Year	Curriculum & Instruction	Searching/Explore Page	More than 2 years
Corina	Mexican	Some high school/Unknown	2nd Year	Special Education	Instagram Suggestions	At least 6 months
Dayana	Mexican	Less than middle school	3rd Year	Counseling Psychology	Searching/Explore Page	More than 2 years
Elena	Mexican	High school/Some high school	3rd Year	Education	Instagram Suggestions	1 - 2 years
Esperanza	Mexican	3rd grade/1st grade	4th Year	Public Health	Instagram Suggestions	6 months - 1 year
Estefania	Mexican	BA & Teacher	1st Year	Business	Searching/Explore Page	More than 2

		credentials/Middle school		Administration		years
Fabiola	Mexican	Less than high school	7th Year	Sociology	Friends or Family	6 months - 1 year
Gina	Mexican	9th grade/Bachelor's degree	3rd Year	Political Science	Instagram Suggestions	1 - 2 years
Glenda	Mexican	High school/Elementary school	2nd Year	Education	Searching/Explore Page	At least 6 months
Gloria	Mexican	6th grade	4th Year	Psychology	Instagram Suggestions	More than 2 years
Janitza	Mexican	Middle school/Unsure	1st Year	Hispanic Linguistics	Searching/Explore Page	At least 6 months
Joanna	Guatemalan	Middle school/Kindergarten	4th Year	Political Science	Other	More than 2 years
Juliette	Mexican	Some college/1st grade	6th Year	Health Science	Instagram Suggestions	1 - 2 years
Karely	Mexican	High school/Some high school	1st Year	Ethnic Studies	Instagram Suggestions	More than 2 years
Karla	Ecuadorian	Associate's degree/High school	3rd Year	Education	Searching/Explore Page	1 - 2 years
Leticia	Mexican	Elementary/High school	2nd Year	Urban Planning	Instagram Suggestions	1 - 2 years
Liliana	Mexican	Elementary	3rd Year	Education	Searching/Explore Page	More than 2

		school/High school				years
Lizeth	Mexican	High school/Some high school	5th Year	Education	Instagram Suggestions	At least 6 months
Lourdes	Mexican	Some high school	2nd Year	Educational Leadership	Instagram Suggestions	6 months - 1 year
Luz	Nicaraguan	Vocational degree/Some college	2nd Year	Clinical Psychology	Instagram Suggestions	More than 2 years
Maritza	Mexican	6th grade/5th grade	3rd Year	Cell & Molecular Biology	Searching/Explore Page	6 months - 1 year
Melina	Mexican	High school/Elementary	3rd Year	Biomedical Sciences	Searching/Explore Page	More than 2 years
Nadia	Mexican	Master's degree/Elementary school	5th Year	School Psychology	Instagram Suggestions	1 - 2 years
Paloma	Mexican	High school for both	6th Year	Public Health	Other	More than 2 years
Selena	Mexican	Middle school/High school	1st Year	Policy Analysis	Friends or Family	1 - 2 years
Sofia	Mexican	Elementary for both	2nd Year	Sociology	Instagram Suggestions	1 - 2 years
Sonia	Mexican	High school/Unknown	4th Year	Chemical Biology	Searching/Explore Page	1 - 2 years
Xóchitl	Mexican	2nd grade/6th grade	1st Year	Education	Instagram Suggestions	More than 2 years
Yari	Mexican	Elementary/Unknown	1st Year	School Psychology	Searching/Explore Page	1 - 2 years

Yvonne	Mexican	Middle school for both	5th Year	Sociology	Instagram Suggestions	1 - 2 years
Zitlaly	Mexican	High school for both	5th Year	Public Policy	Instagram Suggestions	1 - 2 years
Zule	Dominican	Some high school/High school	6th Year	Geography	Friends or Family	6 months - 1 year

Table 4: Latina Non-Doctoral Students demographics (n=20)

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Parental education (Mother/Father)	Highest Degree Obtained	How did they find <i>Academic Latina</i> ?	How long have they been following <i>Academic Latina</i>	How many other Academic Instagram accounts do they follow
Alicia	Mexican	Middle School/Elementary	Bachelor's Degree	Friends or Family	1 - 2 years	1 - 5
Ana Maria	Salvadoran	High School/Elementary	Master's Degree	Explore Page	More than 2 years	6 - 15
Bianca	Mexican	High School/High School	Bachelor's Degree	Instagram Suggestion	More than 2 years	6 - 15
Camila	Mexican	Middle School/Elementary	Bachelor's Degree	Other	More than 2 years	More than 15
Carmen	Mexican	High School/Middle School	Master's Degree	Explore Page	More than 2 years	6 - 15
Clara	Mexican	Community College/Elementary	Bachelor's Degree	Instagram Suggestion	More than 2 years	1 - 5
Daleyza	Mexican	Middle School/Middle School	Bachelor's Degree	Explore Page	More than 2 years	1 - 5
Delia	Mexican	Elementary/Elementary	Bachelor's Degree	Friends or Family	1 - 2 years	1 - 5
Elisa	Mexican	High School/High School	Master's Degree	Explore Page	More than 2 years	6 - 15

Isabel	Mexican	Elementary/High School	Master's Degree	Explore Page	More than 2 years	6 - 15
Isadora	Mexican	High School/Elementary	Bachelor's Degree	Instagram Suggestion	1 - 2 years	6 - 15
Mairany	Mexican	Certificate Programs/High School	Bachelor's Degree	Instagram Suggestion	1 - 2 years	6 - 15
Monica	Mexican	Middle School/Elementary	Undergraduate Student	Friends or Family	1 - 2 years	1 - 5
Rubi	Mexican	Middle School/University	Master's Degree	Explore Page	More than 2 years	1 - 5
Sarahi	Mexican	High School/Elementary	Bachelor's Degree	Friends or Family	1 - 2 years	More than 15
Veronica	Mexican	Elementary/Elementary	Undergraduate Student	Friends or Family	More than 2 years	1 - 5
Viviana	Mexican	Middle School/None	Undergraduate Student	Instagram Suggestion	1 - 2 years	6 - 15
Wendy	Mexican	High School/None	Bachelor's Degree	Explore Page	1 - 2 years	More than 15
Yolanda	Mexican	Elementary/Elementary	Master's Degree	Explore Page	1 - 2 years	1 - 5
Zoe	Mexican	Middle School/Middle School	Bachelor's Degree	Other	More than 2 years	6-15

curriculum and reflected in the interview guides. Initial coding focused on participants' experiences applying to, navigating, and persisting in graduate education; the institutional information and support available to them; and how knowledge accessed or shared through academic Instagram supplemented or differed from institutional sources of information. Within these *a priori* areas, I remained attentive to recurring patterns in the specific forms of hidden curriculum knowledge participants described and the institutional gaps that academic Instagram accounts revealed. From there, an iterative analytical process consisted of the codes being continuously refined into index codes and focused codes (Deterding & Waters 2021). For example, a code that originally started as "benefits of *Academic Latina*" was later refined as an index code which has multiple focused codes beneath it including but not limited to "hidden curriculum," "community building," "motivation." Five undergraduate research assistants trained by me over the course of an academic quarter, independently coded a subset of transcripts, allowing for further identification of inconsistencies and refinement of the codebook. To do so, I met with them to refine codes and reach intercoder agreement. Finally, Thematic Analysis was used to offer insight into the themes that appeared across the codes (Braun et al. 2019).

Academic Latina

The Instagram posts that were analyzed for this study were intentionally curated and shared on an academic Instagram page called *Academic Latina*, which originated in 2020 with funding from the National Science Foundation as part of a Graduate Research Fellowship Program. Given the underrepresentation of Latinas in doctoral programs, their unique needs as women and Scholars of Color, and the high prevalence of social media use nationally, the goal of the NSF grant was to examine if students consuming the academic Instagram page content showed an increase in their academic motivation. Thus, *Academic Latina* was the ideal online

setting to study how first-generation Latina doctoral students used Instagram to access, share, and make sense of knowledge related to the hidden curriculum of doctoral education.

Through photos and videos, *Academic Latina* provides its followers with the logistics of navigating a doctoral program from the perspective of a first-generation Latina and daughter of Mexican immigrants. While the content on *Academic Latina* started as formal posts (e.g., what is a gap year?), it slowly transitioned to more personal content reflective of the hidden curriculum of doctoral education through the creator's own narrative and experiences (e.g., what did I do during my gap year?). As part of the content analysis of *Academic Latina*, I intentionally curated Instagram posts targeting different aspects of the hidden curriculum of doctoral education that I considered were crucial to know based on the scholarship and my experiences as a doctoral student. I published thirty posts across a 9-month period in the Fall 2023, Winter 2024, and Spring 2024 academic quarters (10 posts per quarter), which were organized to reflect various aspects of navigating the milestones of a doctoral program. For example, posts targeted topics such as the PhD student stipend, the cost of attending academic conferences, the process of applying to fellowships, courses, advancing to doctoral candidacy, the process of writing and publishing a manuscript, attire for academic settings, and tools to navigate academic milestones, to name a few. The analysis of these posts centered on user engagement to assess commonalities in what the users were responding to.

Content Analysis

Five undergraduate research assistants, whom I met with to train, and myself, conducted the content analysis of these thirty posts. Content analysis refers to the examination of text and has been described as “an unobtrusive technique that allows researchers to analyze relatively unstructured data in view of the meanings, symbolic qualities, and expressive contents they have and of the communicative roles they play in the lives of the data's sources” (Krippendorff 2013

p. 49). Qualitative content analysis focuses on understanding meaning and identifying themes within the text (White & Marsh 2006). The content analysis was complemented by a digital ethnographic approach that treated Instagram not simply as a repository of textual data, but as a social environment in which interactions, exchanges, and meaning-making could be observed. Digital ethnography enabled the observation of interactions on Instagram as they unfolded, providing insight beyond participants' retrospective accounts of their experiences with academic Instagram (Hine 2015). Crooke (2026) argues that incorporating digital environments into ethnographic observation expands the “surface area” of observable interaction, providing access to social exchanges and networks that may otherwise remain outside the researcher’s view. In this study, examining posts, comments, and resource exchanges made it possible to observe how Latina doctoral students shared knowledge, offered encouragement, asked questions, and built connections through their everyday engagement with academic Instagram content. Digital ethnography therefore provided insight into how support and knowledge exchange were enacted on the platform, including practices that interviews alone may not have fully illuminated.

This combination of qualitative content analysis and digital ethnography was particularly well suited for the study because it allowed for both a systematic analysis of the content shared through *Academic Latina* and an examination of how users engaged with that content.

Engagement was examined through comments as well as platform metrics, including likes, saves, shares, and accounts reached. Rather than treating these metrics as equivalent forms of engagement, they provided additional indicators of how users interacted with and circulated particular forms of academic knowledge.

For the content analysis procedure, I first gathered the link to each of the thirty posts along with its type (static image, static carousel, video, 90-second reel³), the date the post was made, the caption, any hashtags used, and the engagement metrics provided by Instagram (likes, comments, saves, shares, accounts reached). Additionally, for each post, three documents were created: one document included all of the comments, a second document included a detailed description of the post, and a third document included an analytic memo. While the thirty Instagram posts were intentionally designed around key themes related to the hidden curriculum of doctoral education (e.g., applying to fellowships, graduate student stipends, attending academic conferences, academic writing tools), the analysis of user engagement through comments followed both inductive and deductive thematic coding approach, allowing patterns of meaning to emerge from participants' responses. The deductive component reflected the posts' intentional focus on dimensions of the hidden curriculum, while the inductive component allowed additional patterns of meaning to emerge from users' responses. Thematic Analysis was then used to identify, organize, and interpret patterns across the data (Braun et al. 2019). Examples of the codes included: representation in graduate school, motivation to persist, funding guidance, professional attire, and milestone clarity.

In what follows, I discuss the three themes that converged from the interviews and content analysis, which included (a) Exposing the financial realities of graduate education, (b) Practical advice for navigating program expectations, and (c) Normalizing the lack of knowledge of doctoral education. Consistent with previous research that recognizes the value of knowledge sharing online (Hernández 2015; Gomez & Cabrera 2023), all of the content creators

³ The dataset included four types of Instagram content: static images (single-image posts), static carousels (multiimage posts that users could swipe through), videos (long-form videos that could last up to 60 minutes long), and Reels (short-form videos that could last up to 90 seconds long, designed for quick engagement).

and users noted these topics as crucial pieces of information that needed to be shared as guidance for navigating a doctoral program, beyond the information that programs offered their students via the formal curriculum. Together, these themes show how *Academic Latina* and similar pages function as informal infrastructures for illuminating the hidden curriculum; making funding structures visible, translating milestone expectations into actionable steps, and providing validation as first-generation Latinas navigate institutional ambiguity. In doing so, this study contributes to the literature on Latinas in doctoral education by demonstrating that both the formal and hidden curricula shape students' access to critical knowledge and opportunities (Elliot et al. 2020; Calarco 2020). I further advance existing scholarship on virtual counterspaces by demonstrating how social media operates as a key mechanism for disseminating the hidden curriculum, thereby expanding pathways for first-generation Latinas to share knowledge that helps them navigate and persist in their doctoral programs (Gomez and Cabrera 2023).

FINDINGS

Content creators and users described numerous ways Instagram functioned as a resource for information diffusion of the hidden curriculum of doctoral education. While the comments on *Academic Latina* reflected the topics intentionally shared on the page, triangulation of the data revealed three recurring themes: exposing the financial realities of graduate education, practical advice for navigating program milestones, and normalizing the lack of knowledge of doctoral education. With respect to funding, both prospective and current doctoral students described learning about fellowships and other funding opportunities through Instagram, information that was often unavailable, unclear, or had never been relayed to them in their programs, yet has been noted as a crucial component leading to positive academic socialization (Gonzalez 2006). Participants also expressed appreciation for practical advice on Instagram when navigating their program's milestones, particularly in the absence of transparent guidance

from their departments. Finally, participants emphasized the importance of acknowledging that some of the challenges they encountered as first-generation students due to their lack of knowledge was not their fault and offered one another validation and support. While previous research has conceptualized access to the hidden curriculum happening through institutional agents such as professors (Calarco 2018; Bañuelos and Flores 2024), these findings demonstrate that first-generation Latinas leverage virtual spaces to collectively access and circulate this knowledge, expanding our understanding of where doctoral socialization occurs.

Exposing the Financial Realities of Graduate Education

Content creator interviews consistently expressed a shared commitment to exposing the financial realities of graduate education, particularly the lack of transparency surrounding stipends, fellowships, and grants. These findings build upon previous research which has found that one of the challenges faced by graduate students in navigating the structural barriers of their academic institutions is balancing their financial realities with their education (Wu et al. 2025) and the importance of obtaining financial support to engage in positive academic socialization (Gonzalez 2006). One form of information that was routinely shared by content creators was how pursuing a doctoral education can be paid for by the institution that admits the applicant, whereas master's degrees are usually paid by the candidate. Aidé, who was in her last year of her Sociology PhD program and the creator of @gradconmigo, highlighted the importance of sharing the difference between funding at the master's level versus the PhD level. She shared,

As a first-generation student, I didn't know PhD programs were funded, but my Sociology PhD program is. And I don't think people know that we get a stipend. I mean, it's not a lot of money but it's better than nothing. I did my master's in Social Work and that was not funded so at first, I was really worried about pursuing a PhD, just like a lot of other students because it can get so expensive, but I did receive [a tuition waiver and scholarships] and I've shared about this on Instagram because I think it's important for others to know what funding could look like at different levels, especially as first-

generation students. I think a lot of times we get scared about the cost of education but there's a lot of funding opportunities out there even when the program isn't funded.

In her interview, Aidé highlighted the importance of letting first-generation students know about different ways that they could fund their doctoral programs, to alleviate their financial stress, which previous research has found burdens students pursuing graduate degrees (Wu et al. 2025). Other creators also described learning about funding opportunities as they were progressing through their doctoral programs and then intentionally translating that knowledge into accessible content for their audiences. Mayra, a recent graduate of a School Psychology program and the creator of @becomingadoctora, reflected on her first encounter with grant funding,

I applied for a grant, and I had no idea what a grant was. Nobody ever prepared me for that. It wasn't part of a class or anything, but somehow, I was told that I should apply to a grant. I remember, through some of the content, like sharing 'I'm applying for this grant and you have to do X,Y, and Z for the application.' A lot of people in the comments shared with me that they didn't know how to submit a grant, or how to apply for a grant [either], you know? And stuff like this needs to be shared because funding is so important.

Despite the importance of grant writing skills in graduate school, training in this area is often dependent on graduate mentors (Khan et al. 2016). Mayra reflected on her own lack of knowledge in applying to grants, having "no idea what a grant was," indicating the gaps in institutional guidance that often leave first-generation students like herself unprepared for essential aspects of their academic journey. In her interview, Mayra shared that she created her Instagram page in the third year of her PhD program during a time where she felt like she was encountering a lot of institutional challenges, including financial ones, and she wanted to use the page as an outlet for all the hardships she was overcoming. As such, although she struggled to complete the grant application, she recognized the importance of sharing this information. The comments on her post highlighted a common lack of knowledge among her peers in other

disciplines who commended having learned from her content. Similarly, Fernanda, a 4th year doctoral student in Chemical Engineering and creator of @fernsulantay, also emphasized the role of Instagram in circulating funding resources, given her own experience identifying specific graduate programs and scholarships as an undergraduate student,

So, a lot of people have messaged me on Instagram asking me about [funding] resources and they tell me about their specific situation sometimes their messages are really long, and I've replied to them with some information or usually I send them voice notes... and it's very cool how later they tell me, 'I got this scholarship, thank you for sending me this scholarship.'

As an immigrant in this country and a PhD student at a prestigious university, throughout her interview, Fernanda emphasized how she often felt like her peers knew a lot more about navigating graduate school than she did because their parents also had degrees in engineering, whereas she was the first in her family to pursue higher education. As such, she felt that it was essential to share everything she knew on Instagram. In taking the time to reply to those messages about funding, she also saw first-hand how her advice influenced other students' graduate journeys when they applied and received the scholarships she shared with them, perhaps a scholarship they may have not otherwise known about. By sharing information about scholarships, Fernanda aimed to alleviate some of the financial stress that previous research has shown doctoral students experience when they lack adequate funding (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. 2014). Her content extends institutional support by making funding information more accessible to students who may not otherwise encounter these opportunities.

Two sample posts from *Academic Latina* that demystified the funding of a PhD program were "Why am I Applying to so many Fellowships?" (*Figure 1*) and "My Teaching Assistant Stipend is not Enough" (*Figure 2*).



academiclatina Whether you need to apply to fellowships or not is really going to depend on the type of funding that your program has to offer. Personally, I've already been a teaching assistant and a research assistant and from 2020-2023 I was on a really nice fellowship (NSF GRFP). Being on a fellowship was such a game changer!! I miss not having to add additional responsibilities to my already busy schedule so I'm hoping that I get a fellowship next year so that I can go back to that lifestyle 🤔👉

Figure 1: Why am I Applying to so many Fellowships?

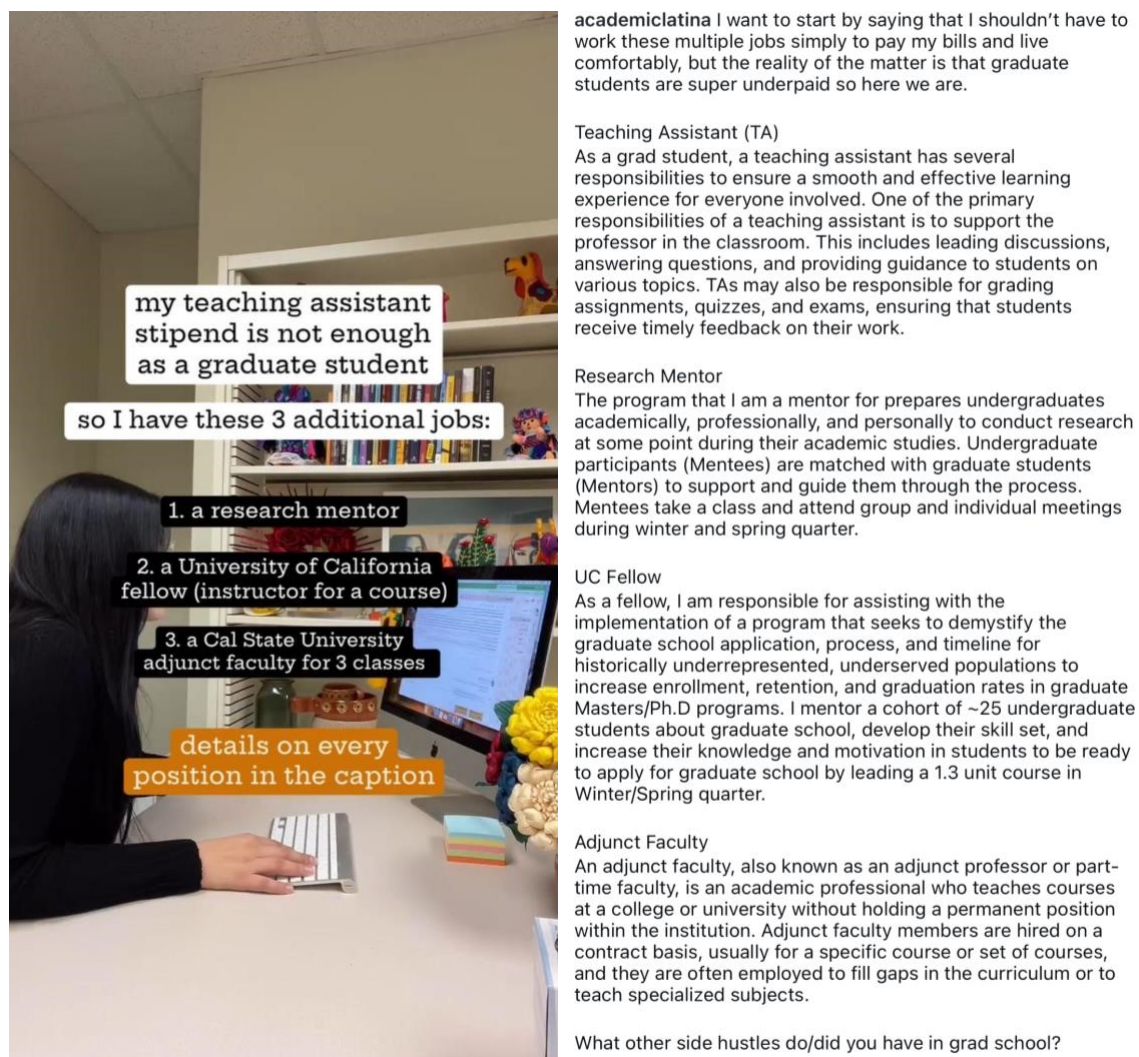


Figure 2: My Teaching Assistant Stipend is not Enough

In December 2023, a reel was shared on *Academic Latina* that clarified a question that had been asked via direct message regarding why applying to so many fellowships was necessary. The reel explained how even when a doctoral program is fully funded, funding happens through a teaching or research assistantship. It was made clear in the reel that while these assistantships are great learning opportunities, they take time away from writing and applying to jobs, especially at the dissertation stage of a PhD program. Nevertheless, it was explained that applying to fellowships was worthwhile given that being on a fellowship meant the program tuition was covered and students who received fellowships no longer had to worry about

teaching or research responsibilities. According to Instagram analytics, this reel reached 15,736 accounts. This number represented the number of unique accounts that saw the post and it meant that the post was being highly recommended by the Instagram algorithm, perhaps due to the engagement in the comments and because people were watching the reel all the way through. In the comments, some users asked additional questions such as “Do fully funded programs and fellowships only cover tuition, or do they also help with housing and food? Or how do you get that covered?” and “Thanks for sharing. I was wondering when you would recommend and not recommend to take the TA and fellowship route?” The responses to these questions were framed around the experiences of the content creator of *Academic Latina*. For example, the second question was answered by recommending that the funding experiences the user pursued should be in alignment with their end goal. As such, it was recommended that if the end goal was to be a professor, then teaching assistantships would provide a student with critical teaching experiences, in addition to providing funding. Other commenters expressed gratitude, “Thanks for demystifying the process for future grad students! Good luck to you!” and some commenters wished they had known this information when they were in their PhD program, “Where were you when I started grad school?! 😩” The use of the weary face emoji conveyed the commenters’ frustration and exhaustion upon realizing they had not learned about these funding opportunities sooner. These reactions reinforce prior research identifying financial insecurity as a significant challenge in doctoral education (Mosanya et al. 2022).

Given the engagement on “Why am I Applying to so many Fellowships?,” another reel posted on *Academic Latina* in January 2024, “My Teaching Assistant Stipend is not Enough” (Figure 2) offered examples of external funding even when the program was fully funded through teaching or research assistantships. The reel posted on *Academic Latina*, displayed a

graduate student working at their desk with text appearing on the screen listing three external jobs she had in addition to her teaching assistantship. At the end of the reel, text appeared saying, “details on every position in the caption.” The caption then described each role and the responsibilities within each position. This reel reached over 67,000 accounts and commenters shared having similar jobs of adjuncting, and full-time employment alongside graduate enrollment. In doing so, most commenters stressed the discrepancy between their own financial needs versus the financial assistance provided by their programs. For example, some commenters mentioned their own struggles to pay bills and fund basic living expenses such as, “Same! I am doing my [Doctor of Nursing Practice] at a local [California State University] and my loan just covers the tuition. I have 3 adjunct nursing instructor jobs in order to care for my 4 kids, mortgage, car payment, bills and groceries. It’s hard!!” Another commenter added, “My student debt and [family] obligations forced me to keep my full-time job in grad school 🥺.”

Research finds that Black and Latine students are less likely to have adequate information about higher education costs and financial aid (Gonzalez et al. 2003) and, as a consequence, might incur more debt than their non-minority peers (Malcolm & Dowd 2012). Other commenters explicitly named higher education as a system that disproportionately excluded first-generation and low income students by normalizing underfunding while restricting outside employment, “This [higher education] system is honestly so broken and keeps people like us, first-gen, from low income backgrounds, out” and “Universities love to talk about how they value diversity but do nothing to support Students of Color. Technically we aren't allowed to have jobs outside our assistantship but many of us need side jobs to survive so we have to be quiet about them.” With funding being a constant worry among graduate students, research finds that students who

cannot rely on familial generational wealth, have no other choice but to take on extra roles by combining multiple jobs to achieve sufficient earnings (Grady et al. 2014).

Interviews with users of *Academic Latina* further illustrated how Instagram content on funding reshaped their understanding of where they could find these opportunities outside of their universities, and what was financially possible and for whom. Some users emphasized how funding-related content on Instagram provided them with critical insights into fellowships that were otherwise inaccessible through formal curriculum structures, reinforcing scholarship that identifies funding knowledge as part of the hidden curriculum of graduate education (Calarco 2020). Alba, a 4th year PhD student in a Health Psychology program, shared how Instagram served as a resource to find external funding when the funding in her program was not enough,

My advisor has secured grants that he uses to fund a lot of our work. And so that's been nice, but that's not always possible. So, there are times where I would like to seek other funding. And so, to do that, I have to look even outside of the university, because in our department it's really hard to even find information, you know, that's something that nobody knows, nobody knows where to look or what to look for. So that's been really difficult but on Instagram I see so many Latinas sharing fellowships not only in my discipline but in other fields that I could also be eligible for because of my research or whatever so it's super helpful to see those fellowships shared on [Instagram].

Even though Alba's advisor offers some funding, that funding is not always enough and to supplement for the missing funding, Alba recognizes Instagram as a hub for knowledge on external fellowships. However, she emphasizes how when she seeks additional funding within her department, it's very difficult to get answers because "nobody knows," pushing her to seek guidance elsewhere. While previous research highlights institutional agents as helpful resources (Bañuelos & Flores 2024), my findings suggest that institutional support from institutional agents alone is not always enough to meet students' informational needs, especially when faculty time is limited, leading Latinas to search for guidance online. For other participants, like

Maritza, exposure to funding content challenged deeply held assumptions about who funding was “for.” Maritza, a 4th years doctoral student in a Molecular Biology PhD program shared about how she thought fellowships and grants were not attainable for Latinas,

When I heard about fellowships, about grants, I just, for some reason, I immediately thought of a White professor doing that. I thought only White professors could apply for that and get that funding. It wasn't until I saw the content [from Latinas on Instagram], that I was like, oh, okay students also do that, Latinas also do that. It was mind-blowing honestly. And so, after I learned that, I started digging deeper into ok, how do I find these scholarships and what do I need to apply for them.

During her interview, Maritza shared digging deeper into fellowships in her program and still feeling like some of those fellowships that her peers were getting were unattainable. Being at a predominantly White institution, she shared comparing herself to her peers,

After learning about fellowships on Instagram, I found out that my program exhibits the students that have gotten fellowships in my program and looking at those students on the website, I don't know why but for some reason I just don't feel like I'm at their level. I feel like, yeah, they've done all these things but it's mostly because they're not first generation. They've had so many more opportunities than me. I could tell by looking at their bios. So, I can't relate to them. I don't feel that connection, that shared identity with them. And so the fellowships seem unattainable. But when I see Latinas share fellowships on Instagram, it's so motivating for me. I feel like Ok if she is also first generation, if this person is also sharing some of the identities that I have, and they get funding, then I feel more connected, I guess, or reassured to doing something like that.

Maritza identified barriers of knowledge and confidence, which developed into a sense of imposter phenomenon, which she questioned if she was worthy (Cohen & McConnell 2019). It was the fellowship content by Latina doctoral students on Instagram that offered Maritza identity validation and motivated her to apply. Other users like Sofia, a 2nd year doctoral student in a Sociology program, shared relaying the funding information she learned on Instagram to peers in her PhD program,

When you mentioned [on *Academic Latina*] that your school pays you for applying to fellowships, I sent that [Instagram post], because I'm one of the Graduate Student

[Ambassadors], I sent that [Instagram post] to the Executive Committee, and I was like, hey we should advocate for [graduate students in our program] to get paid as an incentive when they apply to fellowships too because applying to fellowships is so crucial but can also be really tedious.

Just like content creators took the knowledge they learned in real life and shared it on Instagram, Sofia took what she learned from Instagram and intentionally shared that funding strategy with peers in her doctoral program.

The information on funding was not only beneficial to doctoral students. Prospective doctoral students similarly emphasized the importance of early exposure to funding realities of doctoral programs. Alicia, a master's student, shared how the content on *Academic Latina* encouraged her to look for similar funding in her field of study, "I see fellowships [on *Academic Latina*] that you're applying to, and it does make me think well if there's this fellowship for her program, then there's probably fellowships like [that] for my program." Alicia used the content on *Academic Latina* to prepare herself ahead of time, prior to getting into a doctoral program, something that would put her at an advantage to other first-generation students who, as seen in the comments of *Academic Latina* content, are unaware of such opportunities. Additionally, Camila, a student taking a gap year after earning her bachelor's degree, shared how the content on Instagram taught her what funding in graduate school could be used for, "I feel like the content is teaching me things that I did not know I could do. Like, you know, I can apply for grants from my department to get paid for travel expenses for conferences and things like that. Nobody knows that." Because travel expenses can be influential factors on a student's decision to attend a conference (Witt et al. 1992; Uysal 2021), learning to apply for conference travel grants could equip Camila with strategies to reduce the financial burden as a graduate student. Alicia and Camila both discussed learning about how to go about seeking funding in their future programs. While Alicia was making note about different

fellowships, Camila was specifically identifying how those funds could be used for her professional development. Altogether, this knowledge on how to fund graduate school, how to apply to fellowships, and what external funding could look like was information that was not provided to Latinas by their programs and was instead learned through storytelling of other Latinas on Instagram.

Practical Advice for Navigating Program Expectations

Content creators often spoke about how formal doctoral program resources, particularly program handbooks, provided limited, outdated, or overly abstract guidance on program expectations such as academic milestones. For example, while a PhD handbook can serve as a comprehensive guide outlining the policies, procedures, and academic requirements of a doctoral program, creators described using their platforms to offer more detailed, timely, and personalized explanations of processes that their institutions assumed students would navigate independently. Gema, a 3rd year doctoral student in a Political Science program and the creator of an Instagram page that she preferred remained anonymous, emphasized her desire to provide more information to others than what her program offered her,

I think I provide more information than my institution because, I mean, I don't think other than at the beginning, very, very beginning, like when you get admitted and they send you, like the handbook of rules and guidelines and then it's outdated as hell, right? Like, other than that, we are just fucking left to fend for ourselves and figure things out.

Program handbooks are intended to be resourceful tools for graduate students (Eaton 2024), yet they might not always include the most up to date information to guide students in adequately navigating their program. When Gema realized how outdated and how little information was provided in her program's PhD handbook, she took it upon herself to teach others on Instagram what she knew. She did this in an effort to provide others not only with a community of support, but also with resources that would make their journey easier than to what she had gone through.

Similarly, Vanessa, a 4th year PhD student in a Human Development program and the creator of @latinasgettingphds actively tried to explain terms and break down milestones that were not well defined in her PhD program handbook,

If you look it up in the handbook, [comprehensive exams are] just an essay that you write and you get 60 to 90 days, and you either pass or fail, or you get a revise and resubmit. And that's kind of it in the handbook. But in my post, I explained what kind of questions I had to answer and how long the essays had to be and what kind of tips I could share based on my own comp exams experience and all of that. And so I think it just personalizes some of the messages that institutions might make neutral, or that are described in a way that might be too similar across everyone, but with my posts I want to share that it's not the same for everyone so here is how it has been different for me as a first-generation Latina.

Comprehensive exams are intended to assess students' mastery of a field of study or the academic community at large (Guloy et al. 2020), usually in the second or third year of a program. These comprehensive exams or "comps" look different in every program, with some programs not requiring comprehensive exams as part of the doctoral milestones. For Vanessa, it was important to not just define what a comprehensive exam looked like in her field, but also to share through her content how she approached this milestone. In doing so, she humanized the process, making the information more relatable and accessible to other students. This approach normalized the diverse ways students experience and navigate academic milestones.

Two sample posts from *Academic Latina* that demystified the milestones of a PhD program were "What is a Dissertation?" (Figure 3) and "Definition of a PhD in Spanish" (Figure 4).



academiclatina As a 5th year PhD Candidate, my next (and final step) in my program is to complete my dissertation. A dissertation is a substantial, in-depth research project that is typically required as the final component of a doctoral or postgraduate degree program.

In order to write a high-quality dissertation, we must follow a rigorous research process, which may include conducting a comprehensive literature review, developing a research question or hypothesis, designing a research methodology, collecting and analyzing data, and drawing conclusions based on the findings.

Throughout the process, we must adhere to ethical guidelines, maintain academic integrity, and engage in critical reflection to ensure the quality of our work. Dissertations are divided into several chapters, including an introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion. On average, a dissertation can be 150-300 pages, but it depends on your field, your questions, and your research methods.

At the end of our program, the dissertation is evaluated by a committee of experts in the relevant field, who assess the quality of the research, the depth of the analysis, and the overall contribution to knowledge. Once the university approves, your dissertation is available to the public!

Figure 3: What is a Dissertation?



academiclatina This is my VERY humble attempt at describing my PhD in Spanish. I tried to make it as simple as I could and I hope it makes sense! 🤔

Share this with friends and family if you wish to do so ❤️

Si me di a entender?

Figure 4: Definition of a PhD in Spanish

In January 2024, a reel was shared on *Academic Latina* that broke down the definition of a dissertation and everything that a dissertation entailed. The reel explained how the dissertation had multiple pieces embedded within it such as a literature review which included the existing literature around the topic of interest and how this often led to a student's own research questions using their preferred research methodologies. The reel also included examples of the kind of dissertation topics that might require surveys versus interviews as data collection. Finally, the reel also described what data analysis looked like in a dissertation and how the student connects these data and the themes from their study to existing literature. This reel reached 26,246 accounts and the comments in the post expressed how helpful the content was. One commenter who was about to start her PhD program shared, "Thank you for this! 🥰 I was

just accepted into a PhD program and haven't found such a clear answer to what exactly a dissertation is until now 😊👏." Other commenters who were current doctoral students also found the information helpful, "Sooo helpful. Thank you for this info! 🙏 Crazy enough I don't think anyone ever explained what a diss was to me 😞 I just had to figure out as people talked about theirs. Love the way you broke it down 🙌." Not only did this content provide knowledge for the commenters, but for some users, learning this information made them feel less alone in their program, "I am on this path with you and have not felt alone in this process because of pages like yours. Thanks for your content! It's very helpful and inspiring ✨." Previous studies have found that feeling lonely during the dissertation process has led students to feeling a lack of self-confidence, however students progress through their dissertation process when they rely on friends and supervisors for help to solve the problems they face (Turhan & Karadağ 2019), and in seeking guidance online. To see in the comments how many other commenters resonated with not having known this piece of information, was to feel seen and validated.

After sharing the reel defining a dissertation, some direct messages on *Academic Latina* requested the definition in Spanish, as many Latinas wanted to be able to share this with their Spanish-speaking families who did not quite understand what it was that their programs entailed. As such, in a reel later shared on *Academic Latina* in February 2024, the definition of a PhD was shared in Spanish. The reel broke down what a PhD in Sociology with an emphasis in Chicano/Latino studies and a PhD in education entailed, given the experiences of the content creator of *Academic Latina*. There was an emphasis on how the PhD requirements looked different depending on one's discipline. The reel started off explaining how both PhD programs included a masters in route and how that meant a master's degree was obtained in the process of completing the PhD. The reel then went into breaking down what the first year of a PhD in

education looked like such as the type of courses that were taken and what a research poster presentation looked like, which was the first-year milestone of that program. The reel also described how in the second-year students took more courses and had to complete a second-year milestone which was a manuscript that was submitted to a journal. The reel then compared the requirements of the education PhD to the requirements in a Sociology PhD and introduced comprehensive exams and what those were. Finally, the reel explained what a dissertation proposal defense looked like and what a final dissertation defense entailed. This reel reached 10,474 accounts and the comments in the post offered validation for the Spanish fluency and also recognized the importance of this content. For example, some commenters shared, “*Eso! Se entiende todo, lo hiciste genial!* [This! Everything is understood. You did great!]” reassuring *Academic Latina* that her message in Spanish was delivered clearly despite her doubt she did it properly. Other commenters emphasized the need for this type of content in Spanish, “You did amazing ❤️ My dad is always asking “*mija como se llamaba tu carrera?* [dear, what is the name of your career?]” So videos like this are what we need 🙌” and “YES 🍀 this is exactly what our community needed!!” While research has shown that the lack of ability to explain the PhD to their parents in Spanish leads Latinas to create a divide between their program and their families (Espinoza 2010), with videos like these, their families could better understand what it is that they are doing and offer support or at least understand how challenging the milestones could be. Additionally, the use of Spanish affirms participants’ linguistic capital by recognizing bilingualism as a valuable cultural resource (Yosso 2005). This post also encouraged other content creators in the comments, such as Aeriell from @gradlifegrind to do the same, “You did it soooo well! I love this! Def inspired more videos in Spanish for me 💜 I’ve explained to my grandma [on the phone] & she kinda gets me 🤔 just need to explain to the masses.” Aeriell is in

a Clinical Psychology program so her content in Spanish could be helpful to Latinas in that discipline, since the milestones of a Sociology and Education PhD program might be very different to her field of study.

Users of *Academic Latina* who were interviewed further emphasized how Instagram content filled in the gaps of navigating doctoral milestones, that their programs failed to explain in detail. Noelia, a 1st year doctoral student in a Comparative Literature program, highlighted that while her department may list their program milestones, they fail to explain what each milestone entails in practice,

[Instagram] does give us a lot of information that I don't think we would have had from our own department because there are things that [the program] hides from us, things that they just don't realize that we need to be told... I think the milestones are the biggest ones because even though they kind of tell us like what they are, they don't put it in explicit detail of what each thing entails. And kind of like the breakdown of each aspect. So, I have seen how with [*Academic Latina*] you kind of go through building your committee and then to the proposal that there were like a lot more steps and a lot of more things that are included in it. So, I learn a lot from you.

By watching content that documented broken down processes, such as committee formation and proposal development, Noelia gained insight into the additional labor, negotiations, and timelines involved, which were all pieces of information that exceeded what her program had formally communicated.

In addition to milestone clarity, users also shared how content offering advice on navigating program expectations helped provide clarity and foresight that were often missing from formal curricula, such as time management. For example, users described using Instagram content to gain tips and tricks on how to best navigate their daily responsibilities as a doctoral student. Gina, a 3rd year doctoral student in Political Science highlighted how content on *Academic Latina* helped her manage her own time,

Like time management. [*Academic Latina*] may not put it as, like, ‘oh, this is time management’ but sharing examples of how [*Academic Latina*] breaks down [her] day, that’s not something that gets taught. And that’s something that is extremely important to successfully completing your program because how do we know what we should be doing? Especially when it comes to no longer taking classes and being accountable for our own time working on our dissertation. It’s like, where do I even start, you know? And also, when do I have time for myself? It kind of shows how it doesn’t have to be a workday like a 9-5, but you still need to make time to get shit done.

Consistent with previous studies, Gina’s reflection underscores how something as simple as time management is a struggle for graduate students (Schlemper 2011) and how sharing daily routines in graduate school can address overlooked yet critical skills for a doctoral student, like time management. In her interview, she was referring to Instagram stories on *Academic Latina* that included time stamps of everything that was done in a day including things like having breakfast, going to meetings, conducting interviews, running errands, going to the gym, and writing time spent on the dissertation. By observing how *Academic Latina* organized her time, Gina identified practical strategies to structure her own daily routine, an essential component of academic success that is rarely explicitly taught within formal doctoral curriculum, and which could be difficult to plan for without parental or peer guidance as a first-generation student.

Prospective students similarly described how content that holistically represented all the responsibilities of a doctoral student helped them understand every component of doctoral education beyond the information that would be provided to them through formal curricula such as through their doctoral courses and supervisory meetings (Elliot et al. 2020). Ana Maria, a recent graduate of a master’s program who was considering doctoral programs shared,

I thought, like I don’t know, [doctoral students] go to school, they go to class, and they write a paper, they do some research project, and then they get their doctorate five years later, four to five years later. Seeing [*Academic Latina*] do the different aspects like [Teaching Assistant], do presentations, attend conferences, I’m able to holistically

understand all of the different pieces of what being a grad student is like beyond just taking classes.

Ana Maria's initial perception of doctoral education was that of a linear process that simply involved coursework, research, and a final paper leading to graduation, however, seeing the content on *Academic Latina* evolved that perception into a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted realities of graduate life, better preparing her for what to expect and exposing her to various roles. Similarly, Carmen, a current master's student considering continuing onto a doctoral program, shared how the content on *Academic Latina* allowed her to relate to the content and better understand the doctoral experience,

I think when you hear it from mentors, they can kind of prepare you. But I think in the posts, like in [*Academic Latina*], it kind of sets a more personal, like, this has been your experience, right? It's not that it's a universal experience, but I think I get the more detailed aspect of it where it kind of resonates a little bit better with me as a first-generation Latina. I think there's something about feeling like we're very similar that makes it easier for me to better understand what the PhD is going to look like for me.

Aspiring PhD students have limited formal channels for identifying programs, receiving knowledge on how to apply, or understanding application systems. While institutional agents may provide general guidance (Bañuelos & Flores 2024), I build on this work by demonstrating how the personal and detailed nature of content from Latinas navigating a doctoral program in real time and on a broader virtual platform, offered a relatable perspective that traditional mentoring cannot reach. By sharing individual experiences, Latinas on Instagram provided and broadcasted insights that felt more authentic and resonant, helping other students connect with the realities of doctoral education on a deeper, more practical level.

Normalizing the Lack of Knowledge of Doctoral Education

It was common for first-generation Latinas who entered doctoral programs without inherited academic knowledge to experience missteps due to their lack of knowledge of the

hidden curriculum of doctoral education. Latinas, however, did not blame themselves for their lack of knowledge and instead normalized these challenges as part of learning the ins and outs of the hidden curriculum of their program. Interviews with content creators revealed that many of their Instagram posts emerged directly from moments of confusion, error, or emotional strain. While these experiences are common in doctoral education, they are often rendered invisible within institutional narratives of linear progress and success. Vanessa, the creator of @latinasgettingphds, shared,

I feel like just naturally some of the experiences I share on Instagram might be just from being a first generation Latina, like not knowing, not having much experience in, like, the publishing process or the cost of publishing, or maybe not having, you know, that generational knowledge from like parents or uncles or families that could help me find the resources that I need and letting others know that it is ok to not know.

These findings extend prior research on the financial aspect of publishing being a major challenge in doctoral education, often leading to a financial burden for students if not planned for ahead of time (Ahmad et al. 2025). In her interview, Vanessa compared her lack of knowledge to that of some of her peers who were not first-generation and who had parents with graduate degrees and inherited knowledge on how to publish their research, knowledge she did not inherit from her parents. By sharing her struggles, she not only brought visibility to these disparities, but she also provided validation for others who lacked similar access to these resources. Similarly, Valerie G., a 5th year PhD student in an Education program and the creator of @latinagradguide, shared,

In grad school, there are a lot of ups and downs. It's an emotional roller coaster being in these programs. And so, at one point I was in a stage where I was feeling really down, feeling like I didn't know what I was doing, and I, you know, leaned on my younger sister and my brother-in-law for support through this process. And I wanted to share a little bit about that feeling [on Instagram] and how I was going to move forward and continue to navigate my program and learn from every mistake because I know that it's

not easy navigating these PhD programs on our own so I wanted to motivate others on the same boat to keep going. I wanted to let them know that it's not our fault to feel lost or like we don't know what we're doing, that's just part of this process.

Valerie G.'s feelings of not knowing what she was doing build upon the work of Cohen and McConnell (2019) by illustrating how these feelings of imposter phenomenon were common among the participants in this study. In her interview, Valerie G. shared how although she felt lost navigating her program, she had experience working in higher education prior to starting her PhD program and she acknowledged how working in higher education offered her some insight into a lot of institutional gaps that students faced in pursuing higher education. Experiencing the institutional gaps herself, motivated her to create an Instagram account to share about her experiences in her PhD program and fill some of those gaps. She hoped that sharing how she too felt lost at times, offered others a sense of validation in their own experiences and motivation to battle the imposter phenomenon.

Two sample posts from *Academic Latina* that normalized the lack of knowledge in doctoral education were "Why I Quit my PhD Program" (Figure 5) and "How I Realized I Never Advanced to Candidacy" (Figure 6).

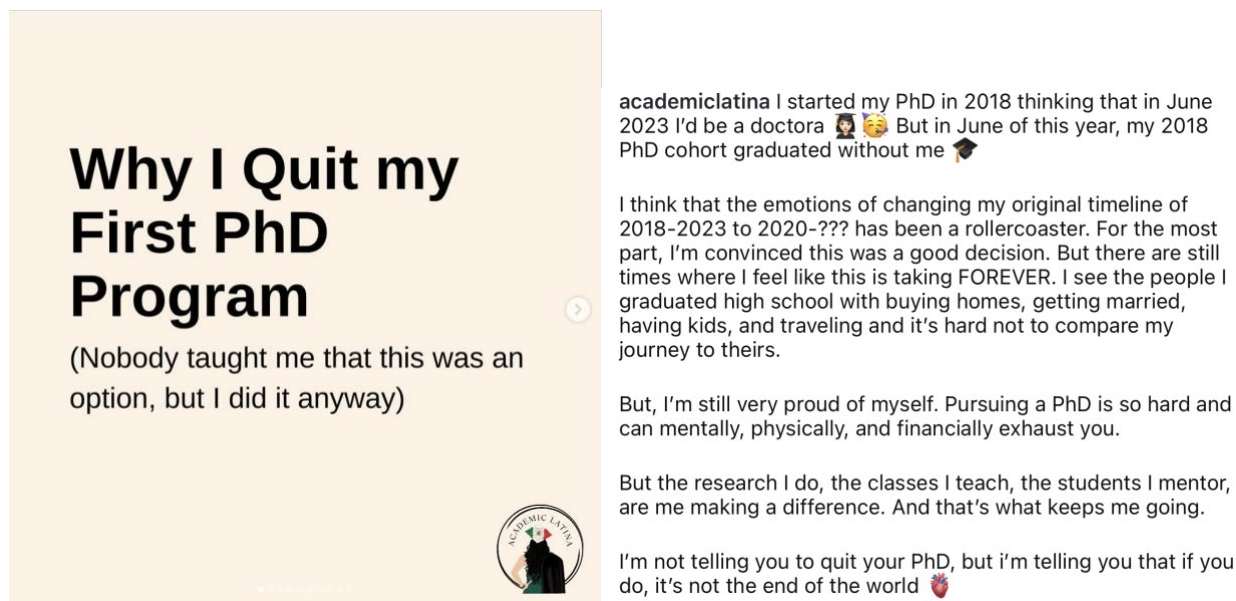


Figure 5: Why I Quit my PhD Program

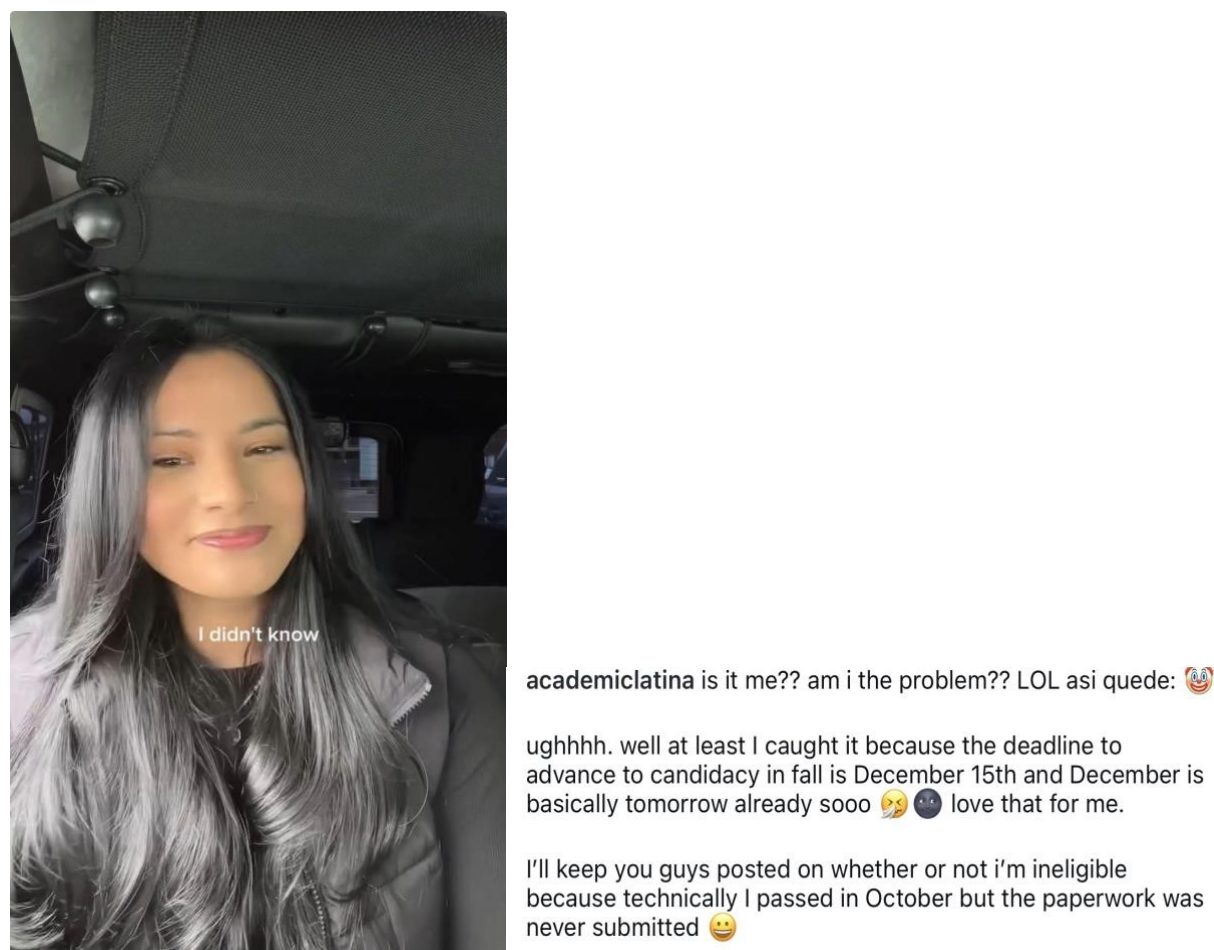


Figure 6: How I Realized I Never Advanced to Candidacy

A carousel post shared on *Academic Latina* in October 2023 detailed the decision to leave one doctoral program and begin another. The post on *Academic Latina* included 10 images of text that explained how oftentimes prospective graduate students pick their PhD programs because the program curriculum aligns with their research or career goals at the time, but those goals can change. Throughout the post, *Academic Latina* talks about how her own research goals changed and how difficult it was to make the decision to leave her former program and start over. The post reached 16,798 accounts and the users in the comments expressed admiration and encouragement such as, “The fact that you didn’t quit is truly amazing, I am proud of you 🤍” and “So proud of how far you’ve come! Thank you for sharing this info ❤️.” Other commenters emphasized the importance of openly discussing departure and redirection rather than framing this experience as failure, “It’s giving trailblazer and we love it 🙌 so many people stay (in many situations) for the wrong reasons and we need more people willing to say, ‘it’s okay to walk away’ 🙌.” While the comments offered *Academic Latina* reassurance in her decision to transfer to a new doctoral program, the conversations in the comments also included requests for practical guidance about switching programs, “Thank you for sharing! When you made the transition to Sociology, did any of your previous coursework transfer over? I know it may be different based on school policy, but if you can share your experience, that’d be great!” It was evident in the engagement of this post that while switching programs is not something that happens often in doctoral education, it was something that Latinas were curious to learn more about.

Additionally, in a reel titled “How I Realized I Never Advanced to Candidacy” (Figure 6), *Academic Latina* addressed bureaucratic breakdowns within the university system. In the reel, *Academic Latina* shared that she was in the process of applying to a fellowship and the

fellowship application required confirmation of advancing to candidacy from her department. She explained that when she went back to her advancement forms, which her dissertation committee had signed months ago, she realized there was a fee she needed to pay to finalize the paperwork, which she did not know about and had not completed. At the time of applying to the fellowship, it had been months since she thought this process had been finalized and unfortunately, she realized she might not qualify for the fellowship anymore. This reel reached 10,817 accounts. While the lack of knowledge about the required fee could be viewed as a bureaucratic barrier faced by many doctoral students, commenters emphasized that its consequences were particularly pronounced for first-generation students, who often lacked access to the informal networks that communicate these unwritten procedural expectations. Commenters on this post highlighted the shared struggles and systemic barriers faced by first-generation Latinas navigating doctoral programs. Comments like “1st gen problems!” and “Struggles of always being the 1st or the only in your family... no one tells you!!!” revealed the lack of guidance that often accompanies being the first in your family to navigate academic spaces (Castellanos et al. 2023). Other comments such as, “This is not your fault. This is a systemic failure. Somebody should have told you,” shifted the focus to institutional shortcomings, rather than individual fault, emphasizing the need for programs to provide clearer communication and support. Expressions of gratitude emphasized how hearing these stories validated their own experiences such as, “Thank you. You have no idea how valuable it is to hear these stories and not feel like I’m the only one making these kinds of mistakes.” Together, these comments highlighted the unique challenges of the first-generation experience, emphasizing both the collective frustration with institutional shortcomings and the transformative power of storytelling in addressing the gaps that disproportionately affect those navigating academia without prior guidance (Ramirez 2014).

Users of *Academic Latina* that I interviewed further expanded on what it felt like to lack knowledge of navigating higher education. One of the participants talked about the reel in Figure 6 in her interview. Glenda, a 2nd year PhD student in an Education PhD program, shared,

I remember a post where you didn't know you had to submit something to multiple people or something like that. And I was like, 'oh my gosh, let me make sure [I get everyone's signature].' Nobody tells you that it has to go to multiple people or to this person before this one. And so something similar was happening to me. But I mean, I made sure that after [I saw the post on *Academic Latina*], that I reached out [to my committee], because like the order that the chapter has to be signed, it's like, first you sign it, then it's the dissertation chair, then it's the committee member. So, it has to go through those three people and I was like, 'okay, wait, I need to make sure of the order. Because if the order is wrong, you have to resubmit everything all over again, or something like that.' So, I remembered that [*Academic Latina*] posted something about that and I was like, okay, that can't happen [to me too]. So, thank you. I'm grateful for that and for your whole page.

The process of advancement to candidacy can look different in every program (Negrón-Gonzales & Barrera 2023), for Glenda, the experience shared in the reel let her know to prepare for her own advancement to candidacy paperwork ahead of time. Something that was a mishap for *Academic Latina* and a learning experience, served as guidance for followers of the page. Other interviewees commonly shared the conflicting feeling of accepting that mishaps like these were not their fault and how they instead chose to learn from their mistakes unapologetically. Nonetheless, there was pressure in making sure they learned as much as possible and shared this knowledge with the younger generations in their families. Monica, an undergraduate student and aspiring doctoral student, shared the pressures she felt of navigating higher education,

Being a first-generation Latina has been challenging. I feel like everything I'm doing, I'm learning as I'm going. And I have to be okay with making mistakes, because I don't know. Like, it's okay, I'm figuring it out. It's also the pressure of like, I'm figuring it out for when I have my own kids, and for my nieces and nephews. And my nieces and nephews are in their 20s. So, I'm literally figuring it out for them as I'm going. So, it's really cool in the sense that I get to help others in my family but it's also like, Oh my

God, I need to figure this out, if not, like they're not going to know what to do. So, it's nice and hard.

While Monica was not yet in a doctoral program, she was already absorbing the type of content that would guide her when she got accepted into a program. She was also aware and making note of the tips and tricks she herself would be applying to share with her nieces and nephews who would follow her steps in pursuing graduate education. For first-generation Latinas, making mistakes, encountering setbacks, and having to keep going despite challenges that resulted from lack of knowledge was a normal and recurring part of their doctoral experiences (Castellanos et al. 2023), and having to persist was not just a personal trait but a necessary response to structural barriers. By making visible that doctoral trajectories for first-generation Latinas were often nonlinear, Latinas challenged dominant narratives of linear academic success and offered tools and tips to persist.

DISCUSSION

Several studies have examined the retention and persistence of Latinas in doctoral education, documenting how structural barriers like lack of mentorship, lack of funding, and unclear program expectations (Rodriguez 2016; Gildersleeve et al. 2011; Bañuelos & Flores 2024) make for a challenging doctoral experience. Much of this research has focused on institutional climate and advising relationships (Gildersleeve et al. 2011; Castellanos et al. 2023). This study adds to this literature by examining how first-generation Latina doctoral students navigate these barriers through academic Instagram spaces, focusing on digital peer interactions where Latinas access and interpret knowledge from the hidden curriculum of graduate education. By drawing on interviews with Instagram content creators and users of Instagram, alongside analyzing engagement of Instagram posts, this study highlights the

information that Latina doctoral students are missing from the formal doctoral curriculum (Elliot et al 2020).

This study advances the knowledge of doctoral persistence among first-generation Latinas by highlighting how Instagram, as a virtual space, serves as an informal infrastructure of information diffusion, where Latinas who have navigated doctoral education validate the common pitfalls that first-generation students encounter, and offer guidance to better navigate program funding, and milestone expectations. Importantly, the role of this informal infrastructure differed depending on where Latinas were situated in the doctoral journey. For Latinas already enrolled in doctoral programs, formal channels of information existed through program handbooks, advisors, faculty, and institutional offices; however, these sources did not always provide the informal knowledge necessary to interpret program expectations or understand how to successfully navigate them.

Prospective doctoral students, however, occupied a different informational position because they had not yet gained access to many of these formal institutional channels. For prospective students, understanding how to become a competitive doctoral applicant, including how to identify appropriate programs, develop application materials, secure funding, and understand unspoken expectations of doctoral admissions, often depended on informal knowledge that was difficult to access from outside academia. Academic Instagram spaces therefore served not only to fill informational gaps for students already navigating doctoral education, but also to make visible knowledge about entering doctoral education for those who had yet to obtain institutional access. First, prior research has shown that institutional guidance on financial assistantships can meaningfully shape doctoral persistence (Gonzalez 2006; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. 2014; Wu et al. 2025), however, participants' narratives demonstrated that access to information on where to apply to doctoral funding hinges on informal knowledge.

By centering Instagram content on program stipend transparency, where and how to apply to fellowships, and the necessity of multiple jobs to compensate for a graduate student stipend, the content on Instagram demonstrated pieces of an informal hidden curriculum that was unevenly distributed. As such, seeing Latina content creators narrate their own funding processes through Instagram posts, disrupted assumptions that prospective and current doctoral students had regarding who was eligible to receive funding in graduate school and where to find funding. Not only did the Instagram content offer Latinas knowledge of navigating program funding, but the content also offered Latinas a form of cultural affirmation (Gomez & Cabrera 2023) that made them feel that if Latina content creators could find funding, then they too, as Latinas, could apply to and receive funding.

Second, most participants shared that while their doctoral program handbooks described the program expectations in neutral terms, the narratives that were shared on Instagram offered personalized, up-to-date, and relatable context which demonstrated to participants how these milestones and expectations varied across programs, departments, and institutions. While PhD handbooks are meant to be a resource to students, several participants recognized that their programs' handbook was outdated, critiquing the programs for treating this form of formal curriculum as sufficient and leaving students to fend for themselves and identifying tips and tricks to best fill the gaps. Further, first-generation Latinas often struggle with explaining to their families what it is that they are doing as PhD students (Espinoza 2010). Content discussed in this study eased this conversation by breaking down the details of a doctoral program in Spanish. The use of Spanish valued a form of linguistic capital (Yosso 2005) that a lot of students use as assets in their careers (Zell 2014). On Instagram, however, Latinas used their Spanish language as a tool to immerse their families into their academic trajectories, increasing familial understanding of their education and eased familial and academic tensions (Espinoza

2014; Cabrera et al 2024; Hernandez 2025). In this way, Latina content creators strived to give users the language to explain doctoral studies to their families.

Third, participant stories of the challenges and emotional strain they faced when navigating their programs revealed how Latinas' persistence was shaped due to bureaucratic complexities rather than individual shortcomings. Through their content, Latina content creators reassured others that it was ok to not know everything and to lack self-confidence (Turhan & Karadağ 2019). Additionally, sharing stories of nonlinear pathways was received well by others who found themselves in similar situations and had a space to ask additional questions. Users of Instagram also learned from the content creators' mishaps and better prepared themselves to avoid making the same mistakes. By using Instagram as a platform to share their moments of mistake, confusion, imposter phenomenon (Cohen & McConnell 2019) and resistance, Latina content creators illuminated how they navigate nonlinear pathways.

Given their own experiences with outdated handbooks or lack of information provided by their programs, Latina content creators took it upon themselves to be as transparent as possible on Instagram so that others did not have to rely solely on outdated handbooks or lack of guidance from institutional agents and therefore lack critical knowledge to help them navigate their doctoral programs. While Latinas recognized these Instagram pages as successful in providing critical resources that were not available in formal curricula, formal doctoral education should not depend on a student's ability to create or find informal infrastructures outside of their program to fill these gaps. Doctoral programs should better communicate with first-generation students about funding and stipend structures as well as make milestone expectations explicit. Programs should also invest in practices that increase students' sense of belonging and retention in doctoral programs rather than relying on students to find this cultural affirmation elsewhere.

These data were collected on Instagram due to the platform's popularity among young adult users. While the findings highlight the benefits of virtual spaces, future studies should examine who might be excluded from these digital spaces. Various factors such as disability (Aljedaani et al. 2025) and caregiving responsibilities (Zacone 2024), in addition to algorithmic visibility (Cotter 2019) may shape who is able to access, engage with, and benefit from this type of content. Paying close attention to these factors is crucial in identifying when Instagram spaces might inadvertently reproduce educational inequities. Future research should also compare how different digital platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Discord, Slack) circulate knowledge of the hidden curriculum in distinct ways. Given that platforms vary in audience, visibility, and usage, comparative research could illuminate how public versus private digital spaces influence access to doctoral knowledge, and what type of information is shared. Further, scholars should look across institution types such as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) and non-HSIs, to explore how institutions respond to, or fail to respond to the forms of knowledge production occurring on Instagram. This might help illuminate program conditions and when these digital spaces emerge as a supplement to the formal curriculum versus as a necessity due to the lack of formal information received, shifting the focus to institutional accountability in doctoral education.

CHAPTER 3: “The Nature of the Institution Breaks you Down Little by Little:” Latinas Cultivating Community Cultural Wealth Online to Navigate Their Doctoral Programs

INTRODUCTION

Previous research finds that success in doctoral programs often depends on access to resources, mentorship support, established peer networks, and forms of knowledge outside of formal academic training (Nevarez 2025; Crumb 2022; Rosales 2023; Medina & Luna 2000). Social capital has been used to explain how students acquire the foundational skills and knowledge necessary to navigate academic institutions (Tyndall et al. 2019; Mountfound et al. 2020; Pilbeam et al. 2013). As such, scholars have paid considerable attention to how indicators of social capital relate positively with educational outcomes (Mishra 2020). For first-generation students, social capital networks other than their families are important to access concrete support in higher education (Wittner et al. 2023; Bañuelos & Flores 2024; Glass 2023; Anderson 2023; Heidari et al. 2023). Further, previous research has examined culturally grounded assets, such as familial knowledge and intergenerational wisdom, inherited within marginalized communities that are critical for their academic success (Espino 2014; Sterk & Olson 2024; Valdovinos Gutierrez & Ko-Wong 2024). Rather than viewing Instagram primarily as a tool for expanding professional networks, this study draws on a Community Cultural Wealth framework to demonstrate how Latina doctoral students use the platform to access and mobilize culturally grounded forms of knowledge, support, and resources. In doing so, Instagram emerges as a virtual space where community-based knowledge for navigating doctoral education can be collectively cultivated and exchanged.

Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) highlights the diverse assets of aspirational, navigational, linguistic, resistance, familial, and social capital cultivated within Communities of

Color (Yosso 2005). Rather than positioning minoritized students as lacking valued resources for academic success, CCW challenges this deficit orientation and highlights how individuals draw on culturally rooted strengths to navigate inequitable structures. Yosso (2005) argues that the traditional conceptualizations of capital in educational contexts often disregard the knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color. For instance, research has found that marginalized students who acquire knowledge on navigating their doctoral programs, share this knowledge as a form of giving back to their communities, often due to a feeling of responsibility as a person within their racial group (Renbarger 2025; Vallejo & Lee 2009). By focusing on first-generation Latina doctoral students, this study moves toward a holistic understanding of how intersecting facets of identity and experience shape the sources of capital that Latinas create and access on Instagram.

While there is limited research on Community Cultural Wealth in virtual spaces (Brown et al. 2022), as digital platforms increasingly shape how students access information, scholars have examined how online spaces function as sites where social capital circulates and is exchanged (Sanchez-Arrieta et al. 2021; Hwang & Kim 2015; De Zuñiga et al. 2018). Research shows that Latina doctoral students have turned to Twitter, now known as X, to circumvent the marginalization they experience in academia, as social media presents few barriers to creating and disseminating knowledge (Cha et al. 2010; Hernández 2015). Additionally, social media platforms like Instagram allow users to curate and disseminate knowledge through posts, captions, and comment interactions that extend beyond institutional guidance. Gomez and Cabrera (2023) found that Latina graduate students utilize what they theorize as virtual counterspaces on Instagram, to share knowledge, resources, and cultivate a network of support across programs and institutions. Additionally, virtual counterspaces also provide cultural affirmation, empowerment, resistance, and community building, all components that are closely

aligned with the capitals under CCW. Thus, Instagram can be a digital environment where culturally-grounded resources are not only shared but collectively interpreted and mobilized by Latinas navigating doctoral education.

By foregrounding the experiences of 36 Latina PhD students, this study builds on the traditional interpretations of social capital by highlighting how community cultural wealth is mobilized to generate capital among Latina doctoral students on Instagram. Through participant interviews, I demonstrate how Latina PhD students harnessed navigational, aspirational, resistance, and linguistic capital to navigate their doctoral programs while simultaneously sharing these forms of capital with others. In doing so, they transform individual cultural resources into collective social resources, using digital platforms through which Latina doctoral students access knowledge, guidance, validation, and support outside of their doctoral environments.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Social Capital

Social capital has been employed by Sociologists to study connections within and between social networks. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. In other words, social capital is made of the tangible and intangible resources that a person has access to, such as support, acquired through direct or indirect connections within a social network (Bourdieu 1986; Crossley et al. 2015). Hence, social capital is a measure of the resources that are available to individuals through their direct and indirect ties. Social capital can be defined in two ways: "bonding" and "bridging" social capital. When exploring the experiences of underrepresented students, Mishra (2020) defines "bonding social capital" as the advice and emotional support

that is provided to students by their family and close friends (Okpych & Gray 2021), whereas “bridging social capital” refers to the more formal network connections.

Further, Lin’s network theory of social capital defines social capital as the resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed or mobilized in purposive action (Lin 1999). This conceptualization of social capital focuses on the level of the individual person. This means that the strength of the individual’s relationship to the individuals in their social networks influences their access to resources. However, simply having a large social network does not ensure having a large “volume” of social capital. Lin defined three elements of social capital: availability, accessibility, and activation (Lin 1999; 2001). While it is important to have *access* to people who can link individuals to resources, individuals must purposely *activate* or put those resources to work. Therefore, according to Lin (1999; 2001), social capital is effective because it may: (1) enhance the flow of information, (2) influence individuals with decision-making power, (3) offer necessary or desirable social credentials, and (4) offer reinforcements of an individual's identity and recognition within a given group. Doctoral students benefit from having extensive social networks to learn all of the additional expectations required of them as students beyond what their formal curriculum might entail. However, the value of those networks depends on the resources they provide, as individuals may possess extensive social ties while still lacking access to relationships that communicate the institutionally valued knowledge necessary to navigate doctoral education.

The Importance of Social Capital in Doctoral Education

Social capital has important benefits on doctoral students’ academic trajectories. Social networks that consist of institutional agents as well as peers are valuable for their learning, for their sense of belonging (Pascale 2018; O’Meara et al. 2017), and for persisting in their programs. For example, connections to academic advisors matter as they are institutional agents

and gatekeepers who can provide or limit access to academic resources and professional contacts in academia (Jungbauer-Gans & Gross 2013; Weng 2020). Previous studies have found that having one's PhD advisor on a hiring committee for a faculty position doubles the student's chances of being shortlisted, whereas not having a social connection to the hiring committee, requires the candidate to have five additional scholarly publications to be as competitive as candidates who held those social connections with members of the hiring committee (Godechot 2016; Combes et al. 2008). When it comes to navigating the ins and outs of a PhD program, not all of the additional professional expectations of a scholar are taught through a formal curriculum. While the knowledge of how to navigate milestones of a doctoral program might be in a PhD handbook or taught to students by their academic advisor, there are other parts about professionalism such as navigating the job market, presenting at academic conferences, or applying for grants that are necessary to succeed after completing the doctorate.

Social networks with peers have also proven valuable for graduate education (Tobbell et al. 2010; Janson et al. 2004; Pilbeam et al. 2013). For instance, participating in preparation programs or campus organizations and student groups can also cultivate relationships and social capital for doctoral students. Graduate preparation programs might be a key context for marginalized students to experience graduate school socialization, learn about professional development, and acquire capital (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy 2016). Similarly, students' participation in campus organizations has proven to result in denser networks leading to social connections that are advantageous for social mobility (Glass & Gesing 2018). Further, participating in writing groups also serves as a strong social factor for increased writing productivity at the doctoral level, which teaches doctoral students how to advance their grant writing or manuscript publications (Tyndall et al. 2019). Whether it is a graduate preparation program or a writing group, these groups that students belong to may offer them the social

connections that are necessary to learn about the professional requirements of a PhD, which are not included in the formal curriculum, but will make them successful doctoral students.

While social capital has proven to be important, studies have also found that several factors such as gender, ethnicity, immigrant status, educational background, and socioeconomic standing may lead to inequalities in social capital (Lin 2000; Menjivar 2000). In a study of women in the field of medicine, Callander et al. (2025) found that women's traditional roles within the family, such as the unequal division of time spent on domestic work and childcare, limited their ability to build social capital through informal networking opportunities with colleagues outside of their workplace. Further research specific to first-generation Latinx college students demonstrates that they have difficulty developing social capital networks in unsupportive educational environments and rely on few institutional agents to obtain access to educational opportunities (Valenzuela 1999; Stanton-Salazar 2011). Although this body of research highlights important structural barriers to accessing social capital, it often emphasizes what marginalized students lack, rather than what unique resources and strengths they bring with them. While research has focused on marginalized students' deficits, studies should also focus on the assets that doctoral students carry with them which might promote their long-term success in academia (Espino 2014; Renbarger 2025).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Community Cultural Wealth

While Bordieuan interpretations can view certain individuals through a deficit lens regarding the forms of capital they do and do not possess, asset-based models like community cultural wealth (CCW) challenge these deficit-centered discourses, and applied to higher education, could help scholars reconceptualize how Latina students navigate academia. Yosso's community cultural wealth framework theorizes that minority communities possess high levels

of assets and resources with the potential to support students along their academic trajectories (Yosso 2005). The forms of capital within the community cultural wealth framework are aspirational, linguistic, navigational, social, familial, and resistant capital. Latinas in doctoral programs could rely on these forms of capital to better navigate their doctorates in addition to the guidance provided by their programs.

Yosso (2005) defines aspirational capital as “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of barriers” (p. 94). As students develop college aspirations, they are inspired by their familial journeys of immigration to the U.S. (Lopez 2016) and once in college, they resort to the aspirational capital instilled by their families to remain self-determined and navigate higher education (Kouyoumdjian et al 2017). Similarly, doctoral students use aspirational capital to access graduate school (Espino 2014). Linguistic capital is defined as the ability to communicate in various forms, including language, music, art, and poetry. Perez Huber (2009) found that Chicana college students credited their linguistic capital skills to the language brokering they did for their family members. Navigational capital refers to the skills that are used to maneuver social institutions that were “not created with communities of color in mind” (Yosso 2005, p. 80). For instance, Renbarger (2025) found that marginalized PhD students passed down navigational capital through mentoring that, in turn, helped others succeed in higher education and within their research communities. A common example was how doctoral students who were former participants of the Ronald E. McNair TRIO program mentored current undergraduate McNair scholars on their campus (Renbarger 2025).

According to Yosso (2005), social capital is defined as the networks of individuals and resources in the families and communities where People of Color live and work. Latina/o/x doctoral students use social capital to persist in graduate school by networking with faculty to receive mentorship in the transition from graduate school to the professoriate (Acevedo-Gil &

Madrigal-Garcia 2015). Familial capital is defined as the cultural knowledge that is nurtured within and between families that carries a sense of community history and memory (Yosso 2005; Delgado Bernal 2001). Gonzalez (2012) found that familial capital was evident in the trajectories of Latina scholars who recalled the influential support of their family members as they persisted in the K-20 educational pipeline. Resistant capital includes the skillset that individuals gain when challenging inequality and which develop because of students' "resistance to subordination" (Yosso 2005, p. 80). Doctoral students practice resistant capital through the usage of information and skills to challenge racist, sexist, classist, elitist, or otherwise problematic systems, typically found within higher education and associated institutions (Renbarger 2025). Combined, the different capitals under CCW acknowledge both cultural and institutional contexts while valuing the assets and strengths of Students of Color (Cuellar 2024; 2021).

Research has found that Black doctoral students achieve success by leveraging community cultural wealth through the cultivation of villages that include their family, peers, often overlooked campus support staff, and counterspaces (Breedon et al 2024; Jaumot-Pascual et al 2021; McDaniel-Francis 2024). Additionally, studies have found that Women of Color in doctoral programs overcome a lack of traditional academic capital by leveraging unique forms of community cultural wealth such as maternal influence, spiritual resistance, and specialized survival skills (Brown 2019). Familial capital has been found to be a vital asset for the persistence of graduate students (Cochran et al. 2025) and aspirational and resistant capital have been found as important forms of capital to navigate the isolation and microaggressions prevalent in predominantly White institutions for Latinx and Black doctoral students (Pumacahua & Rogers 2023). Community cultural wealth has also served as a successful tool to augment graduate students' aspirational, navigational, linguistic, and social capitals through

peer-to-peer mentorship (Ransom et al. n.d.), as well as an asset in achieving persistence in their doctoral programs and actively serving others by leveraging their cultural assets (Renbarger 2025), and to increase knowledge of the hidden curriculum through navigational capital (Vance-Berg 2021). These forms of capital could also serve as important assets for Latinas navigating doctoral education.

Research shows that Latinas are activating culturally grounded assets collectively. Gomez and Cabrera (2023) and Hernández (2015) found that Instagram served as a virtual counterspace where Latinas found cultural affirmation, empowerment, knowledge sharing, resistance, and community building. However, there is very little research exploring the different forms of capital that are cultivated on Instagram and how they help Latinas persist in their doctoral programs. To address this gap, this article seeks to answer the following empirical questions,

1. How do Latina doctoral students use Instagram to cultivate community cultural wealth as they navigate their doctoral programs?
2. What forms of community cultural wealth are cultivated, exchanged, and activated through Instagram, and how do these forms of capital support Latina doctoral students' persistence and navigation?

METHODS

To examine how first-generation Latina doctoral students who were users of Instagram received specific forms of capital through Instagram as an aid in navigating their doctoral studies, I interviewed 36 Latina doctoral students enrolled in doctoral programs of various disciplines across the United States.

Participants

I recruited participants from an Instagram account, *Academic Latina*, that I created in August 2020 as part of an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program grant. Instagram was an ideal place to conduct the study because its multimodal structure enabled identity expression and storytelling through images, videos, and content captions. Instagram also allowed the knowledge shared on *Academic Latina* to travel beyond geographic or institutional boundaries allowing users to engage asynchronously regardless of institutional prestige. The content of the page was carefully created through static images, static carousels, videos and reels⁴ to reflect the creator's experiences as a doctoral student in an Education PhD program and later a Sociology PhD program. The content shared included such things as what funding in a doctoral program looked like, what it meant to attend academic conferences (e.g., what to wear, the cost, travel arrangements, presentation etiquette), among other topics like applying to fellowships for program funding. For example, when the creator was transitioning into a Sociology PhD program, the shared content was about the program transition including institutional dynamics. Beyond academics, content was also shared on the creator's personal life such as camping trips and visits to her hometown in México as a form of showing the balance between her school and personal life. Due to the consistent engagement of *Academic Latina* through Instagram posts, Instagram stories, and Instagram lives, the platform rapidly grew to an audience of over 32,000 users at the time of the study. Deciding which context was presented in each medium depended on the depth of the story being shared and the communicative affordances of Instagram. Digital ethnographers argue that online platforms are not neutral spaces; rather, researchers should attend to the platform-specific features and practices through which users create and

⁴ The dataset included four types of Instagram content: static images (single-image posts), static carousels (multiimage posts that users could swipe through), videos (long-form videos that could last up to 60 minutes long), and Reels (short-form videos that could last up to 90 seconds long, designed for quick engagement).

communicate meaning (Pink et al. 2016; Hine 2015). Accordingly, text-heavy information was presented through carousel posts with large text, allowing users to swipe through content at their own pace. Carousels were also used when sharing multiple photographs, such as documenting conference experiences. Instagram reels were used for shorter video content, including conference attire or teaching-related posts, while Instagram Lives were reserved for longer narratives, such as describing the transition from doctoral student to a lecturer role, including the responsibilities, time management, course preparation, and experiences teaching.

For recruitment for this study, a flier was posted as an Instagram story on *Academic Latina* for 24 hours, and as an Instagram post, which remained on the Instagram page feed for two weeks. At the two-week mark, the flier was taken down from the Instagram page feed and participants were chosen at random from the pool of people who completed the survey expressing their interest, using an online random-name drawing generator. To be eligible for the study, participants had to self-identify as first-generation Latinas of any Latin American origin and had to be enrolled in a doctoral program. Participants in the study self-identified as Mexican, Colombian, Ecuadorian, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, and Dominican, as depicted in Table 3. The 36 participants represented 24 disciplines; however, participants were categorized as belonging to either STEM (31%) or social science-humanities (69%) disciplines to protect their confidentiality. As first-generation college students, their parents' education ranged with 44% of the mothers and 42% of fathers completing high school as their highest level of education. One participant's mother completed her bachelor's degree in México but the participant expressed how her mother's degree did not transfer to the United States. When asked how long they had been following *Academic Latina*, 11% of the participants had been following the page for at least 6 months, 14% had been following the page for up to 6 months to one year,

39% had been following the page between one to two years, and 36% had been following the page for more than 2 years.

Procedure

The study procedures included individual Zoom interviews and a background questionnaire which asked participants about their former and current education, ethnicity, parent educational attainment, and questions regarding their Instagram usage, such as how many hours a day they spent on Instagram, how they found *Academic Latina*, how long they had been following *Academic Latina*, and how they engaged with the content on *Academic Latina* (see *Appendix E for the complete demographics questionnaire*). I conducted the interviews from March 2024 to July 2024. Interviews took place on Zoom, averaging 44 minutes. The interview guide included questions about their graduate school experiences, and about their engagement with *Academic Latina*. Depending on participants' experiences, questions were omitted if they were not applicable (see *Appendix C for the complete interview guide*). The questions on the users' doctoral experience included what resources they relied on to apply to their doctoral program, their relationship with peers and mentors, challenges and successes in their program, and participants were asked to describe their program milestones. The questions on participants' engagement with *Academic Latina* included questions about why they followed *Academic Latina*, what content, if any, they found most helpful in navigating their doctoral programs, and the various ways (comments, like, direct messages) that they engaged with *Academic Latina*. All interviews were video and audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. While all interviews were conducted primarily in English, some participants spoke in Spanish as well. All participants were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. My status as a first-generation Latina doctoral student and being the creator of *Academic Latina* helped to build rapport with participants (Zinn 2001). This was evident when, for example, participants referred to content that I had shared on

Instagram about my own challenges in comparison to the challenges they faced in their own doctoral program, as to make a connection between our experiences.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using the qualitative coding software, Dedoose. was informed by *a priori* areas of inquiry reflected in the interview guide (*see appendix C for the complete interview guide*). Initial open coding centered on these areas, while remaining attentive to patterns and concepts not anticipated in the interview guide. To strengthen the rigor of the analysis, five Latina undergraduate research assistants joined the project and were trained to open code and then individually coded transcripts. Their coding helped identify inconsistencies in the interpretation of the codes and informed revisions to the codebook, including codes being added or merged with existing codes to capture better meaning in the data. Through this iterative process, patterns in how participants accessed, cultivated, and mobilized resources were identified and subsequently examined through the framework of Community Cultural Wealth. In what follows, I discuss the most common forms of capital that arose from the analysis of Latinas using Instagram to mobilize community cultural wealth as they navigated their doctoral programs. It was evident through the interviews that navigating a doctoral program was not just about the milestone clarity that their programs provided them with to obtain their degrees, but about Latinas developing the professional skills often left unaddressed in doctoral training, including networking, communicating their expertise to broader audiences, and preparing for careers both within and outside academia. Throughout the interviews, participants highlighted other professional development skills they found on Instagram which were not directly taught to them in their programs. The findings suggest that while Community Cultural Wealth encompasses multiple forms of capital, navigational, aspirational, resistance, and linguistic

capital were salient in helping Latinas navigate their programs and were supported by their use of Instagram.

FINDINGS

Learning and Navigating Institutional Bureaucracies

In talking about the utility of *Academic Latina*, respondents shared how the content shared by a current graduate student served as a sort of roadmap for navigating their own doctoral programs. For example, Yvonne, a 5th year in her doctoral program, shared,

I kind of call it like the hidden curriculum kind of things...The things that aren't always expressed like in workshops or like in recruitment, so things like, going to conferences, applying for grant funding fellowships. I think there was a post on publishing in a journal, like if you want to publish a paper in a journal, I think you have to pay certain fees or things and I was like, I didn't know that. So, it's like those kinds of things. It's really interesting and valuable to see those kinds of posts. Because they're things that I don't necessarily get discussed in my program, or like, unless I actively reach out to people and ask about it, I don't get that information. But a lot of times, I don't know those things even exist for me to ask about.

Yvonne, and others, frequently discussed how their programs rarely provided information about typical components of graduate education. She recognized her lack of knowledge and compared it to what scholars have defined as the hidden curriculum of higher education (Calarco 2020; Hopkins et al. 2024; Sambell and McDowell 1998; Donnelly 2000; Portelli 1993). That is, going to conferences and how to apply for grant funding fellowships, that institutions assume students already know but are really forms of professional knowledge that students have never been explicitly taught. The hidden curriculum is more than just completing milestones. Success in graduate school involves being able to navigate the system which includes the 'institutional know-hows' that make individuals successful professionally. This includes other parts of graduate school such as publishing and networking that are expected and go beyond checking off the boxes and getting a degree. While each program's official handbook might provide

information on milestones and how to apply for graduation, the hidden curriculum teaches students the other parts, such as how to apply for conferences, and what is expected of them in those environments. Hence, while the topics that Yvonne mentioned learning on Instagram are not milestone-specific (e.g., how to write a dissertation proposal), it is through the Instagram content that Yvonne narrated that she acquired this form of navigational capital which allowed her to learn the skills that are important parts to a graduate career and accomplishments making her a competitive scholar. Zitlaly, a 5th year PhD student like Yvonne, shared learning about conference attendance through the content disseminated on *Academic Latina*,

Reels about conferences, how much they cost to attend and how to search for like academic conferences, and that's something that can help build your [Curriculum Vitae] That's something that most people don't really think of, especially first gen people, they don't really think about that when they're first submitting their application, you know? [First gen students] don't know there's other areas where they could research and they could present their research at conferences, that just seems like a very far off idea that they would do, like, much further down in their careers. But that's something that they can still do as students. And that was something that hadn't even really crossed my mind until I, myself, became a grad student.

Zitlaly specifically mentioned the first-generation student experience and lack of knowledge of academic expectations like attending and presenting research at academic conferences, which can be a crucial place for students to build social capital (Látková & Paulsen 2009). Content on *Academic Latina* also demonstrated the cost of conferences, what to wear, and the structure of academic conference sessions. For students like Zitlaly, this information provided practical guidance for navigating academic conferences that she did not receive in her program. In this way, access to knowledge about conference norms and resources, such as how to obtain travel funding, can build students' navigational capital by better equipping them to participate in academic spaces that may otherwise be unfamiliar or difficult to navigate. This is particular important given that access to travel funding can influence a student's decision to attend

academic conferences (Witt et al. 1992; Uysal 2021). Gloria, a 4th year student in her PhD program highlighted, like Zitlaly, the first-generation experience and lack of having others to look up to when navigating her doctoral program, yet finding that knowledge and guidance on *Academic Latina*,

I feel like [the doctoral journey] is a lot more digestible or a lot more simple, like broken down [on *Academic Latina*]. Where, I think I mentioned a lot through this interview, where at my school, [the doctoral journey] is not presented in a way that is easy to understand or broken down. It's thought about very broadly, like, oh, this is one thing you need to do. And then you have to be the one asking these questions or even finding someone who you feel comfortable enough to ask all these questions to. Because sometimes I feel like I should know these things, but it's like I don't [know these things] because I don't even know who to ask or it's not something that I can ask my parents or cousins, or even friends, like, I haven't had anyone who's gone through this [doctoral] experience. So, it's nice to see [the doctoral journey] broken down [on Instagram] in a way that it's easy to at least understand.

A part of navigational capital under community cultural wealth is finding the social networks that get you where you need to go. Utilizing Instagram and finding *Academic Latina* is a form of navigational capital within itself in how users like Gloria articulate how the content on *Academic Latina* helped them navigate their doctorate. As a first-generation student, Gloria recognized that she couldn't rely on her immigrant parents or cousins for help on navigating her doctoral program, something commonly expressed among first-generation students (Wittner et al. 2023; Anderson 2023). She also couldn't rely on institutional agents in her program because, in her words, she "didn't feel comfortable." However, by engaging with the content on *Academic Latina*, Gloria was able to better understand what was required of her as a graduate student and ways in which she could meet those expectations in her program. Similarly to Gloria, Gina, a 3rd year PhD student, highlighted another tip she found useful through *Academic Latina*,

The time management. I know [*Academic Latina*] may not put it as like, ‘Oh, this is time management,’ but just sharing examples of how [to] break down your day, that's not something that gets taught [in my program]. And [time management] is something that is extremely fucking important to successfully complete this program.

Time management is a crucial skill to succeed in graduate school (Schlemper 2011), and while it was not something intentionally posted on *Academic Latina* as a topic, it was a tool learned through observation. Through pictures and timestamps of *Academic Latina*’s day, Gina was able to better organize her own day and time as a doctoral student. Karely, a 1st year PhD student, highlighted another tip shared on *Academic Latina* on communicating with potential academic advisors,

I saw an email template on [*Academic Latina*] on how to reach out to faculty you're interested in working with. I didn't know that was a thing. I didn't know that was something you had to do necessarily [...] in terms of, just tips on, what to look for in a mentor and I think just liked the [email] template overall. It has been really helpful.

Proper email etiquette is important for a successful graduate school trajectory (Negrón-Gonzales & Barrera 2023) and the template shared on *Academic Latina* served as a helpful resource for Karely in reaching out to faculty and identifying what she should ask or communicate about with potential advisors to find a good match. In essence, interviews with users of *Academic Latina* identified ways that Instagram content helped them build their social capital in graduate school and foster relationships that will increase access to academic resources (Jungbauer-Gans & Gross 2013; Weng 2020), and these connections are also an advantage post-graduation when students navigate the job market (Godechot 2016; Combes et al. 2008).

Strengthening Aspirations Through Shared Affinities and Identities

By relating to the first-generation experience shared through the content on *Academic*

Latina, participants cultivated aspirational and resistance capital that supported their persistence in their programs. Participants like Maritza, a 3rd year PhD student, acknowledged the overlap in first-generation student experience as motivation for her own journey,

I feel like when my program exhibits the students that have gotten fellowships, I don't feel like I'm at that level, for some reason. I feel like, yeah, they've done all these things, and it is mostly because they're not first generation, per se. So, I don't feel that connection [to those students], [I don't] identity with them. So, it's more like, going back to the motivation. If [you] are also first generation, if [you] are also sharing some of the identities that I have, then I can feel more connected, I guess, to doing something like that. Especially for me that I struggle a lot with writing assignments, like writing for fellowships, like for my qualifying exams it was also really hard. But just kind of seeing that other people that look like me do it is also motivating me a lot.

The similarities in shared identities with *Academic Latina* encouraged Maritza to feel inspired and capable of applying to and receiving fellowships, whereas hearing the success stories of her cohort, who did not share her first-generation college identity, did not make fellowships feel attainable for her. Lack of sense of belonging is common among first-generation graduate students (Pascale 2018; O'Meara et al. 2017), but seeing a first-generation Latina online receive funding, offered her aspirational capital in a form of inspiration to also receive funding herself. Adilene, a PhD student in the final year of her Special Education program, shared a similar sentiment, “Honestly, just seeing someone like me going through it is nice. It's nice knowing that like, okay, these things are not just hard for me, like, I'm not crazy, other [Latinas] are going through this too, it's really helpful.” Similarly, Yvonne, who was the only Latina in her PhD program, shared, “Seeing other [Latinas on Instagram] go through [milestone] processes and talk about the struggles, but also the benefits of those processes is really helpful for me.” For Latina doctoral students who were the only Latina in their programs, they narrated seeing value in seeing another Latina succeed, who they only had access to virtually. This virtual connection expanded the participants’ sense of what was possible for them. Similar to Adilene and Yvonne,

Gina shared meeting other Latina doctoral students on Instagram that were at the same university as her, and how this made her feel like she wasn't alone, motivating her to persist in her program,

When I came here, even though I'm from Southern California and like, you know, [my university] is a Hispanic Serving Institution, I felt a culture shock. Like, it was just like, I had never been the only Latina in a room, right? And it was kind of scary. And when I say in a room, I mean, like in an academic class, right? Because I used to work at the law firm. And being the only Latina was the case all the time. But for some reason, like at school, it hit me harder. And so it started really messing with how I felt as a Latina scholar. I was trying to be true to myself as much as I could, but the nature of the institution, the nature of seminars, the field, it breaks you down little by little. And I think seeing [*Academic Latina*] just be [herself] and knowing [Latinas] are in this much proximity, like, we may not be in the same class, but we're existing at the same time in the same place, at the same school, for me was just so powerful that I was like, 'I may be the only one right now in this seminar, but somewhere on this campus, they're out there doing their thing, too.' And so the isolation for a long time made me feel less and less, but seeing others here too helped me feel less lonely.

Even though Southern California is perceived as a racially diverse region, Gina's surprise at being the only Latina in her course, suggested that regional demographic diversity did not translate into representation within elite academic spaces (U.S Department of Education 2023). Gina emphasized how graduate school in itself was already very challenging, and doing it alone felt a lot more difficult, building on prior research that shows how feeling alone is a challenge that a lot of first-generation students face in graduate school (Pascale 2018; O'Meara et al. 2017). Thus, knowing that there were other Latinas on her campus with a shared identity occupying academic spaces, reduced her feelings of isolation and inspired her to keep going. Through the lens of Community Cultural Wealth, these encounters illustrate the cultivation of aspirational capital, or the ability to maintain hopes and aspirations despite structural barriers (Yosso 2005). For Gina, seeing other Latinas persist within the same institution provided evidence that she, too, could continue occupying an academic environment in which she often

felt isolated. Their visibility did not eliminate the institutional conditions that made her feel “less and less,” but it helped sustain her belief that she could persist within them. As such, virtual exposure to other

Latina scholars allowed aspirational capital to be cultivated through representation and seeing Latinas “doing their thing” elsewhere on campus helped Gina imagine herself continuing to do the same.

Academic Latina also inspired followers of the page to facilitate their own academic Instagram pages. Some participants recognized the importance of the content on *Academic Latina* and felt that they could do something similar. Juliette, a PhD student in her final year, while not having created the page at the time of the interview, shared,

And like I said and I keep saying, after I'm done with school, maybe I'll create something, but I'm not quite sure. And I don't want to start something and then like, you know, drop it. So, I've been inspired to maybe do something more niche for others that are like me in the dental hygiene space.

While the content on *Academic Latina* centered on the experience of a Latina in a Sociology PhD program, Juliette recognized the importance of having a similar page that portrayed the experiences of a Latina in a dental hygiene program. A few months after the interview, Juliette received her doctorate degree and created a dental hygienist page where she shared about dental hygiene conferences, and the presentations and talks she attends, providing guidance to other Latinas in her field. Xóchitl, a 1st year PhD student, also shared feeling empowered to create her own page, but unlike Juliette, Xóchitl was already facilitating an academic Instagram page during the time of the interview,

[*Academic Latina*] was what encouraged me to create [an academic Instagram page] and I actually feel so guilty because the last time I posted on that Instagram page was when I defended my thesis. And I feel guilty because I haven't been [posting constantly]. And every time [*Academic Latina*] posts, I'm like, damn, Like, how does she do it? Like, she

provides so much content like a *mi me cuesta* [I struggle] to write a post, like, even on my own personal Instagram. But yeah, [*Academic Latina*] motivated me to create my page and share about my journey because I know how important it is for others to see what this looks like. You've made an impact for me and I wanted to do the same for others.

Xóchitl recognized that as a Latina in the academy, there was something critical about her sharing her knowledge and experiences to her community because she knew that just like she learned from the content shared on *Academic Latina*, it was important for others to see what her unique journey looked like to have more examples out there. In doing so, she acknowledged that pursuing a doctorate degree was not an individualistic journey, instead a collectivist one reflecting a cultural and community value (Turan & Duruhan 2025; Arevalo et al. 2016).

Resisting Through Authenticity

Participants also frequently described how engaging with content on *Academic Latina* encouraged them to resist the Eurocentric norms often expected within academia (Belton-Cardoza and Farmer 2024). Rather than feeling pressure to assimilate into dominant academic cultures, participants explained that the content on *Academic Latina* validated their identities and affirmed that they could remain authentic to themselves while pursuing their doctoral degrees. Dayana, a 3rd year PhD student in a Counseling Psychology program, shared,

The first time I applied to graduate school, I feel like I was very much influenced by that. Like, you need to dress a certain way and talk a certain way, you have to align with that Eurocentric academic thing. Versus, like, I feel like with the content on *Academic Latina*, it's very much like no, you can show up as your true self to these spaces and disrupt that comfort that other folks have and just be yourself and really represent your culture.

Dayana's comment revealed that what is often framed as "professionalism" in academia is culturally coded. Her statement that she initially believed she needed to "dress a certain way and talk a certain way" suggests that doctoral students quickly learn that success is associated with

Eurocentric forms of presentation, speech, and self-expression (Belton-Cardoza and Farmer 2024). This shows that while dominant groups experience academia as comfortable because the norms align with their identities, when Latinas show up authentically, they challenge the taken-for-granted norms that privilege dominant identities within academic spaces (Flores & Garcia 2009). Previous research shows that when Latinas are a minority at their institutions, a way to cope with feelings of alienation, isolation, and resist the standards of academia is to create space themselves and through the use of *testimonio* and discuss issues such as issues of body image, language, and how to navigate academia (Flores & Garcia 2009). Studies have also found that having peers with shared norms might help doctoral students counterbalance the isolation they often feel in their programs (Janson et al. 2004; Pyhältö, et al. 2009; Tobbell et al. 2010). In this study, respondents further shared how *Academic Latina* made visible the alternative ways of inhabiting academic spaces that did not require suppressing their cultural identities. Fabiola, a 7th year PhD student, further elaborated on this form of resistance by sharing,

I think I especially love just the full confidence [that *Academic Latina* expresses through her] identity as a Latina in [her] space through [her] videos about [her] Mexican office decor, for example, like seeing how proud [she is of being Latina], and to see that shared online contributed to making me more confident and just, this is who I am. This is my identity. And it informs every aspect of my work and my research. Quite literally given that that is my population of study. I mean, like my mom could have been a participant in my research, you know? And it was like I'm not alone out there. And the main thing was, I wanted to feel seen.

Through the content on Academia Latina, these forms of cultural visibility and cultural affirmation (Gomez & Cabrera 2023) allowed Latina doctoral students like Fabiola to collectively reinterpret the norms of academic participation and resist Eurocentric norms. Gina also expressed,

[*Academic Latina*] made me realize, like, I don't have to change. I can just stay. I can just be myself. I admire my Latina professors a lot, but I feel like their experience is a lot

different seeing the academic experience from [*Academic Latina*], because [*Academic Latina*] is still a current graduate student, and it just hits differently. [*Academic Latina*] is closer to me than my professor who's already got a job and is financially stable. Does that make sense? It's closer, it feels more relatable. And it just kind of like it gave me permission to just stop worrying about everything else. And just be me as I am.

Latina faculty are underrepresented in academia just like Latinas in graduate school and they also often have to build spaces for themselves to continue to honor their cultural identities (Olivia et al. 2013). While there may have been a level of admiration in having Latina professors to look up to, *Academic Latina* offered Gina something closer to a form of resistance, something that she could relate to as a graduate student herself, encouraging her to be herself and not assimilate into Eurocentric cultures. When Gina explained that *Academic Latina* made her realize, "I don't have to change," she described more than a sense of representation; she articulated a refusal to alter or suppress parts of herself to conform to expectations of who belongs in academic spaces. In this way, *Academic Latina* helped cultivate resistance capital by modeling that persistence in graduate education could coexist with maintaining and affirming one's Latina identity.

Linguistic Capital: Bridging Academic and Linguistic Worlds

Participants' use of Spanish and Spanglish in their interactions with *Academic Latina* further illustrated how cultivating their linguistic capital operated as a form of resistance within academic environments. Janitza, a 1st year PhD student in a Linguistics program, expressed in both English and Spanish how seeing the content on *Academic Latina* empowered her to keep pushing herself in her program,

Oh, yes. I think *como que me da como energia* [it gives me energy] to keep going like, Alright, *yo tambien puedo* [I can also do this], you know? So yeah, like before ... I mean, not that I don't have doubts now, but definitely not at the same level that I did before. Now, it's like, okay, it's not supposed to be easy, especially for like, you know, people that don't have any background or any, like, support. I think I view myself in a

more empowered kind of way, I guess I should say, like *sí puedo* [I can do this] and I watch [*Academic Latina*'s] struggles and I'm like, okay, yeah *yo tambien voy a pasar por esto seguramente* [surely, I will also go through that], you know? So, it's just, yes, I feel more confident *en que* [in that] I can do it.

While Janitza is referring to the struggles featured on *Academic Latina* encouraging her to feel more empowered in her own program, her use of Spanish harnessed her linguistic capital. It is important to note that her use of Spanish in this quote entails encouragement, pride, and affirmation, illustrating how linguistic capital is expressed through culturally meaningful forms of communication (Yosso 2005). Janitza's shift between English and Spanish is significant given that academic institutions have historically privileged English while the use of Spanish language is left largely to familial and community contexts (Colombi 2015). Rather than abandoning her Spanish language as she entered graduate education, Janitza drew upon Spanish to articulate some of her strongest expressions of confidence and affirmation, including *yo también puedo* [I can also do this] and *sí puedo* [I can do this]. Her code-switching therefore illustrates how language cultivated outside of academia can remain valuable resources within the educational trajectories of Latina doctoral students. By including Spanish in its content, *Academic Latina* helped to cultivate ethnic pride and encouraged others, like Janitza, to speak Spanish and see it as an asset as well.

Further, Esperanza, a 4th year PhD student in Public health, described her excitement when the Academic Latina page showcased Spanish-language content explaining doctoral education,

When Academic Latina shared the reel defining what a PhD was in Spanish, I was so excited to show it to my parents. I feel like they never really understand what it is that I'm doing in my program, but the video explained it so well. Even though there were still some pieces I had to explain, *ya no era tanto y se me hizo muy fácil explicarles* [it wasn't as much anymore, and it became much easier for me to explain it to them]. I

think that seeing videos like that not only makes me feel more welcome as a Latina PhD, but also my family felt included in my academic journey in a way, you know?

Here, Spanish served as more than a culturally affirming feature of Academic Latina, making knowledge about doctoral education accessible across generations, linguistic contexts, and serving as a bridge between to the home. By explaining the PhD in Spanish, *Academic Latina* provided Esperanza with a linguistic resource she could share with her family, reducing the burden of translating academic jargon on her own. Her comment that there was “not as much” left for her to explain demonstrates how the bilingual content helped her translate her academic experience into language that was more accessible to her parents. In this way, linguistic capital operated across academic and familial spaces, allowing Esperanza and other users to draw connections between their graduate education and the families and communities that remained central to their educational journeys. Importantly, Esperanza did not describe her family’s unfamiliarity with doctoral education as a deficit. Instead, the use of bilingual communication provided a resource through which academic knowledge could be translated and shared, allowing her family to become more fully included in her educational experience, something that is often communicated through the English language. Esperanza’s experience builds on existing research documenting the role of language brokering among first-generation Latinas, who draw upon bilingual skills to translate knowledge across linguistic and institutional contexts. Research on Mexican-origin first-generation college women, for example, demonstrates how Latinas mobilize bilingual language capital accumulated within their families and communities as they navigate professional and educational pathways (Garcia & Flores 2024). By producing Spanish-language explanations of doctoral education, *Academic Latina* provided a culturally and linguistically accessible resource that helped Esperanza bridge her academic and familial worlds.

Spanish also fostered a sense of familiarity and interpersonal connection among Latina graduate students who may not have otherwise known one another. Karely, a 1st year PhD student in Ethnic Studies, described how hearing *Academic Latina* speak Spanish during informal Instagram stories made her feel as though she were connecting with a friend,

Sometimes *Academic Latina* will go on her stories and just talk about her day, but she'll do it in Spanish, and I don't know why, but that makes me so happy. It just feels like a FaceTime call with a friend, and I'm so happy to hear about her day. It just hits different in Spanish, *¿sabes? Y como que me emociona escuchar español porque no hablamos español en nuestras clases, pero en línea es diferente. Es más personal.* [You know? And I get excited to hear Spanish because we don't speak Spanish in our classes, but online it's different. It's more personal.] Like, she understands me and I understand her.”

Karely’s description of Spanish as feeling “more personal” demonstrates how linguistic capital facilitated a sense of cultural familiarity and connection within a virtual space. Her comparison of watching *Academic Latina*’s Instagram stories to a “FaceTime call with a friend” suggests that the shared language helped reduce the social distance between two Latina graduate students who did not share a classroom or interpersonal relationship. Importantly, Karely contrasted these interactions with her academic courses, noting, “we don’t speak Spanish.” While Spanish was largely absent from the formal academic spaces she occupied, it became a resource through which she could connect with another Latina scholar online. In this way, linguistic capital was not only a resource rooted in bilingualism but also a relational resource that allowed Latinas to recognize shared cultural experiences and cultivate connections with one another. Karely’s experience aligns with prior research demonstrating that linguistic capital can facilitate camaraderie and trust among Latinx students who share Spanish as a linguistic resource (Mein et al. 2023). Karely’s experience, however, demonstrates how this can extend into virtual spaces. Although Karely and the creator of *Academic Latina* did not share a classroom or an interpersonal relationship, hearing Spanish transformed what could have been a one-directional

interaction with an academic content creator into something Karely described as resembling a “FaceTime call with a friend.” Taken together, these experiences demonstrate that linguistic capital within virtual counterspaces operated in multiple directions. Spanish and Spanglish provided participants with culturally meaningful ways to affirm themselves, facilitated the translation of academic knowledge between doctoral students and their families, and fostered familiarity and connection among Latinas navigating academic spaces. Through social media, bilingual practices became shared resources that circulated across academic, familial, and virtual spaces, allowing Latina graduate students to maintain connections to their cultural and linguistic communities while navigating institutions where those practices were less visible.

DISCUSSION

The narratives of the first-generation Latina doctoral students in this study suggest that digital spaces supplement resources beyond what institutions can offer. I examined how Latina doctoral students used Instagram, an online forum, to harness and cultivate different forms of capital as they navigated their doctoral programs. I also assessed what forms of community cultural wealth were cultivated, exchanged, and activated through Instagram and identified how these forms of capital supported Latina doctoral students’ persistence and navigation in their doctoral programs. While the types of capital in Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth framework were evident through the participant experiences, this study expands on Yosso’s framework by looking at how these types of capital appear online, something that is understudied in the existing research. By examining how community cultural wealth is harnessed by Latinas in one virtual platform, I found that navigating doctoral education involved more than simply understanding program milestones required for degree completion. For many Latinas in this study, success also depended on acquiring professional development skills

necessary for securing employment after graduation. *Academic Latina* emerged as a valuable space for participants to network and access professional knowledge that was not explicitly taught in their program's formal doctoral training. This success in disseminating knowledge and finding value to online spaces of shared resources is different to what Pillbeam et al. (2013) found with networking in their study being most valuable to doctoral students when it is face to face. In their study, loss of formal structures over time contributed to a disconnect in social networks. However, for the participants in this study, following *Academic Latina* was beneficial and supplemented the networking that they narrated they lacked face to face, or felt uncomfortable cultivating, in their programs and institutions.

Participants in this study shared cultivating navigational capital through the content on *Academic Latina*. For example, given the importance of attending conferences in graduate school (Látková & Paulsen 2009), users learned about conference funding sources outside of their programs like fellowships, how to present their research at academic conferences, and how to include it in their CVs. Participants also shared having learned how to navigate institutional bureaucracies such as the signatures required when advancing to candidacy. Latinas recognized the importance in finding *Academic Latina* as first-generation students who could not rely on their families or cousins to navigate their doctoral programs (Wittner et al. 2023; Anderson 2023). Further, the shared identity as first-generation students with *Academic Latina* offered participants a form of inspiration and resistance in persisting in their programs. For example, participants described feeling seen and validated when content on *Academic Latina* openly discussed challenges they had also encountered, demonstrating that struggles within doctoral education did not necessarily indicate that they did not belong. At the same time, *Academic Latina* modeled that persistence did not require abandoning their cultural identities. For

participants like Gina, seeing another Latina graduate student openly embrace her identity demonstrated that she could also retain her ethnic identity while continuing to occupy academic spaces. Thus, representation functioned not only as a source of inspiration, but also as a form of resistance to dominant academic norms that can pressure Students of Color to assimilate. Linguistic capital was another form of Community Cultural Wealth that participants cultivated through their engagement with *Academic Latina*. Participants' experiences demonstrated how Spanish and Spanglish served as culturally meaningful resources within academic spaces where these linguistic practices were often absent. For some participants, Spanish was used to express encouragement and affirmation, while for others, Spanish content allowed them to explain aspects of doctoral education to their families. Thus, the linguistic capital cultivated through *Academic Latina* extended beyond bilingualism itself, with Spanish and Spanglish becoming resources through which participants could affirm their cultural identities, connect their families to their academic experiences, and develop a sense of connection with other Latinas navigating academia.

Most of the participants did not share a cultural overlap with their program advisors and some students, like Yvonne and Gina, were the only Latinas in their program leading to a lack of cultural overlap with their peers as well. It is probable that this cultural mismatch (Guan & Vasquez-Salgado 2023) led to participants not feeling comfortable asking their advisors questions due to the lack of cultural representation. On the contrary, sharing cultural identities with *Academic Latina* as a Woman of Color and first-generation student, may have offered participants the level of comfort to ask questions. The use of Spanish and Spanglish may have further contributed to this cultural familiarity by allowing participants to engage with academic content through linguistic practices that reflected their experiences outside of academia. Studies

have found that knowing that a community of peers with shared norms of reciprocity and trust exists, might be enough for doctoral students to counterbalance the isolation they often feel in their programs (Janson et al. 2004; Pyhältö et al. 2009; Tobbell et al. 2010). This might be the case with the Latinas in this study who felt that their shared identities with *Academic Latina* empowered them and validated their own experiences. Additionally, while some of the institutions that participants were studying at were labeled as Hispanic Serving Institutions, Latinas still shared having a cultural mismatch with faculty and peers in their programs. Future research should examine whether the forms of Community Cultural Wealth cultivated through Instagram are experienced differently by Latina doctoral students attending Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) compared to those enrolled at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), where institutional contexts may shape students' needs for and engagement with online support. Doctoral programs should also consider the implementation of support programs that guide graduate students, whether it be transition programs the summer before starting their program or affinity groups that exist for student support throughout their program (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy 2016; Glass & Gesing 2018; Tyndall et al. 2019).

Limitations

A limitation to this study is that participants were all recruited from one Instagram page. Instagram is a diverse platform where pages may offer various forms of information and content. While this study highlights the benefits of cultivation of capitals on *Academic Latina*, not all Instagram pages or other social media offer positive resources. Some research on social media has found that anxiety, low self-esteem, false information, and hate speech can also result from social media usage (Hunt et al. 2018; Keles et al 2020; Daniels 2013). Thus, it is important to recognize that while *Academic Latina* cultivated these powerful forms of capital that assisted

Latinas to persist in their programs, not all Instagram pages might produce similar outcomes.

The benefits observed in this study may depend on the values, practices, and community norms fostered within a particular digital space.

CHAPTER 4: From Consumers to Creators: Latina Doctoral Students and the Rise of Virtual Counterspaces

INTRODUCTION

Research has highlighted the importance of cultivating social relationships that provide access to critical academic resources needed to succeed in doctoral programs beyond simply completing program milestones (Valenzuela 1999). On top of the systemic barriers that Latinas face in doctoral programs, such as lack of representation and feelings of isolation (Alvarez-Minor 2025), familial obligations (Hernandez 2025; Espinoza 2010), gendered expectations (Cabrera et al 2024; Espino 2016), and experiences of stereotypes, racism, and discrimination (Gloria et al 2005; Gutierrez et al 2022; Gildersleeve et al 2011), first-generation Latina doctoral students often struggle with achieving what is expected of them in their programs. Even with the completion of the required coursework in their programs and meeting the expectations of the program milestones, success in a doctoral program is also heavily reliant on knowledge that is informal, on various forms of mentorship, and on establishing peer networks (Nevarez 2025; Rosales 2023; Crumb 2022), which may not be equally accessible to all students. The hidden curriculum in doctoral education has been defined by scholars as a set of unspoken norms and customs (Calarco 2020), such as how to pick a PhD advisor, resolve interpersonal conflicts, or access financial resources, that are essential for success but rarely taught in formal curriculum or resources like a PhD handbook (Hopkins et al 2024). This hidden curriculum is necessary for students to successfully navigate their programs and check off all the boxes expected of them as scholars beyond what is required in a formal curriculum. As such, for many first-generation Latinas pursuing a doctoral degree, navigating their doctoral programs requires additional networks of support that will aid them to obtain these alternative pieces of knowledge to persist

in their programs (Nevarez 2025; Crumb 2022; Rosales 2023; Medina & Luna 2000). For instance, research has found that participating in writing groups with peers increased doctoral students' sense of belonging in their program (Naidoo et al. 2023). While some students described being plagued with feelings of imposter syndrome at the beginning of their programs, participation in the writing group offered them opportunities for mastery in writing which brought them joy and in turn made them competitive writers and scholars. Additionally, Pilbeam et al. (2013) found that doctoral students' social capital networks provided them with academic discussion, benchmarking progress, and personal support. These forms of social networks that doctoral students find, either through institutional agents like their mentors or advisors (Bañuelos & Flores 2024) or through their peers, often increases their sense of belonging and persistence in their programs. However, oftentimes these forms of social capital are not easily accessible or available to all students.

As a response to these challenges, research shows that doctoral students often feel a communal responsibility to serve and uplift their peers (Dortch 2020; Felder et al. 2014; Leigh et al. 2020; Louque 1999). McGee (2022) calls this having an “equity ethic” to serve their peers through multiple settings. Marginalized Students of Color have taken it upon themselves to build on this communal responsibility and equity ethic to cultivate counterspaces that provide their peers with affirmation, shared knowledge, and resistance to dominant academic settings, known as counterspaces (Solorzano et al 2000; Yosso 2009). These counterspaces have existed in traditional settings within institutional contexts (Yosso 2009), but the rise of social media has expanded the possibilities for connection, knowledge sharing, resistance, and community building in virtual counterspaces as well (Gomez & Cabrera 2023; Hernandez 2015). While prior research has explored the role of social media in higher education (Vincent 2016) and the importance of online community for healing and resistance (Mwangi et al. 2018), less is known

about how Latina doctoral students transform these social media platforms and mold them into spaces of academic support (Gomez & Cabrera 2023). In particular, less research has looked at how Latinas go from consuming academic support on social media to actively producing it themselves and their reasons for doing so.

Drawing on interviews with 15 Latinas currently enrolled in doctoral programs or graduates with a doctorate, this study examines how participants encountered, engaged with, and cultivated spaces on Instagram where they disseminated knowledge through their personal doctoral experiences in graduate school as a guide for other Latinas in doctoral programs. In doing so, I demonstrate how Latina doctoral students identify missing knowledge within their institutions and create virtual counterspaces that create networks of support outside of traditional institutional and informational structures. Findings from this study show that Latina doctoral students moved from initially consuming academic content on Instagram to creating their own pages aimed at building a community, sharing knowledge and offering cultural affirmation. Their equity ethic reflected a collective orientation toward educational mobility where individual educational attainment carried an accompanying responsibility to create pathways for other Latinas. This research underscores the importance of examining how Latinas navigate doctoral education through informal infrastructures that compensate for institutional gaps by producing and redistributing critical knowledge and support across marginalized networks. However, creating and sustaining these spaces also required Latina content creators to take on additional labor alongside the demands of doctoral education and their personal lives. The challenges they encountered in maintaining these spaces reveal some of the tensions involved in taking on responsibility for addressing gaps in support that their institutions did not adequately fill.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Latinas Navigating Doctoral Education

Success in doctoral programs is not just about admission into a program; it's about access to social networks to persist. Lack of preparation and skill, representation, role models, information on graduate school, and experiences with gender and racial discrimination are all inhibitors to doctoral students' success (Solorzano 1993; Vargas et al. 2020; Abraído-Lanza et al. 2022). Due to the lack of representation in doctoral programs some Latinas might find themselves being the only Latina in their program. When this is the case, research finds feelings of isolation and cultural dissonance for Latina doctoral students (González et al. 2001). For instance, González et al. (2002) found that doctoral students considered the academy to be conservative, restrictive, and racist due to restrictions on conducting research on Latinas/os which, according to their institutions, did not fit the criteria of being “acceptable” or “appropriate” research topics. Additionally, Holloway-Friesen (2019) found that institutional level challenges such as stigmatization and lack of mentors hindered the experiences of Mexican American women in doctoral programs. Hernandez et al. (2024) examined the experiences of Mexican American women pursuing PhDs and found that several of the participants expressed a low of sense of belonging due to the lack of access to a clear roadmap, misunderstandings with their families, and underrepresentation in their program as well as feelings of imposter syndrome which led to participants grappling with self-doubt and questioning their competence in the program. Similar to other studies, participants also expressed a struggle in embracing their Mexican heritage and adopting the mainstream academic culture. The women drew motivation to persist in their programs from honoring their families, who supported them amidst struggles and limited opportunities (Espino 2016).

Despite these negative challenges, Latina graduate students remain resilient in the face of adversity. González's (2007) qualitative study explored twelve Latina faculty members' reflection on their doctoral experiences. As previous studies have demonstrated, these women

also dealt with isolation and oppressive behavior from faculty and peers. However, they found ways to cope and succeed in the face of this adversity through finding supportive mentors outside of their own fields, finding solace in their sense of purpose, and ultimately using their experiences to help future doctoral students in their current roles. The importance of finding supportive peers, mentors, and building an informal social network has been found as a key in helping Students of Color persist through graduate school (Aryan & Guzman, 2010; Patton & Harper, 2003). McGlynn (2015) found that inclusive campus atmospheres, mentors and support networks, and professors who motivate and validate them are what helped Latinas complete their doctoral degrees. Additionally, research shows that Latinas who experienced active validation in both interpersonal and academic areas developed enhanced skills that enabled them to persist in graduate school until graduation (Castellanos et al. 2023). Previous literature also emphasizes the importance of mentors in assisting Latinas through academic, personal, and professional development. These institutional agents such as mentors and advisors, helped students navigate hostile campus climates (Solorzano 1993; Gándara 2015). Further research has also recognized how mothers of Hispanic women are strong mentors and role models (Gándara 1982; 2010). In addition to these networks of support, Latinas also succeeded in their programs with knowledge of the hidden curriculum, which offer additional skills to be competitive scholars in graduate school and the job market after.

Scholars find that success in graduate education is not only determined by the completion of formal curriculum, like coursework and program requirements/milestones, but also by a “hidden curriculum” of implicit expectations, norms, and practices that students are expected to learn but are rarely explicitly taught (Calarco 2020). Within doctoral education, the hidden curriculum is particularly salient as graduate students are expected to independently navigate complex milestones, professional norms, and career pathways with limited explicit

guidance. Access to the hidden curriculum is often mediated by students' access to mentorship and institutional agents, placing first-generation students who do not inhabit these networks at a disadvantage, producing social inequalities (Gonzalez et al. 2015). While prior research has emphasized the role of institutional support and mentorship in transmitting hidden curriculum knowledge, less attention has been given to how students leverage social media platforms to disseminate this information.

Social Media as Sites of Academic Support

Consistent with Vallejo's (2009) use of giving back among the Mexican origin middle class, who do so via economic and social support, working class and first-generation college students often feel a responsibility to use the knowledge they gain to support others pursuing similar pathways (McGee 2022; Dortch 2020; Felder et al. 2014; Leigh et al. 2020; Louque 1999). This commitment to giving back is enacted through an equity ethic. McGee (2022) found that "Marginalized students often demonstrate a social conscience ... They feel a communal responsibility to serve their neighborhoods, communities, and society at large, encouraging young people to dream beyond the limited futures they might feel bound by" (p. 10-11). McGee (2022) describes minoritized students possessing an "equity ethic" when challenging the academic inequities they face on a regular basis. Previous research shows that doctoral students have an equity ethic for uplifting their communities and that they practice their equity ethic by serving others through multiple settings, such as by teaching peers and students about microaggressions (Dortch 2020; Felder et al. 2014), by being involved in activism calling out racist acts (Leigh et al. 2020), and by working in their communities through political groups (Louque 1999). Wingfield (2019) argues that an equity ethic is evident among health personnel, in which Black health personnel frequently work to provide support for patients when institutional resources are scant. Latinas have also used their equity ethic in interpretation labor

when they serve as translators to their families during parent-teacher conferences (Flores 2017). This equity ethic may also be a contributor to cultivating counterspaces, in which students foster positive racial climates where their experiences are validated, and they can connect with their peers through their shared experiences of experiencing racism and microaggressions (Yosso et al. 2009)

Students have also turned to social media to uplift their communities. Researchers have found that Black women, queer folks, and People of Color use social media to build community and connect with like-minded peers (Cha et al 2010; Hernández 2015; Lopez-Leon & Casanova 2023). In doing so, students are creating these online communities as forms of healing and resistance (Mwangi et al 2018) and to challenge feelings of anxiety and depression, which is common among graduate students (Evans et al. 2018). Latina doctoral students utilize Twitter (now known as X) as a counterspace to ease the marginalization they experience in academia, as Twitter presents few barriers to creating and disseminating knowledge (Hernandez 2015). Education scholar Valerie Gomez and I theorize virtual counterspaces as sites of cultural affirmation, community building, knowledge sharing, empowerment, and resistance where Students of Color collectively make sense of hostile campus racial climates while generating and circulating the knowledge, resources, and support that facilitate one another's success in academia (Gomez & Cabrera 2023). Within these virtual counterspaces, Students of Color impart wisdom on their peers, engage in role modeling, and provide mentorship and a space for honest dialogue (Hernández 2015). In doing so, these virtual counterspaces make implicit academic expectations more visible while challenging dominant notions of what counts as legitimate knowledge in academia (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando 2002).

Existing research on *digital* counterspaces on social media platforms shows how these spaces serve as sites where users can challenge institutional racism, embrace their identities, and

empower one another (Perera et al. 2021). For example, Perera et al. (2021) found that Western women of South Asian descent used Instagram to express their gendered ethnic identity by sharing content that celebrated their cultural heritage, challenged restrictive gender norms, and affirmed alternative representations of South Asian womanhood, as a way to resist media stereotypes, oppression, and cultural pressures. In their study, Instagram was used as a counterspace where participants engaged in intragroup questioning, built alliances, and shared narratives of the possibility to promote representation and collective well-being. Although Instagram users often curate what they share online, curation does not necessarily preclude authenticity. Lopez-Leon and Casanova (2023) argue that users embraced their identities and expressed authentic aspects of themselves through profile pictures, usernames, and the ability to control who could access their profiles. Instagram has also been described as a counterspace that offered space for active resistance, counter-narrative formation, and empowerment for Black girls to advocate for themselves (Anderson 2022). Additionally, Mwangi et al. (2018) analyzed the “I, Too, Am” student activist campaigns to understand how Black students used social media to expose and navigate everyday racism on college campuses in the U.S. and the U.K. They found that social media platforms allowed Students of Color to share their experiences, challenge institutional racism, and affirm their identities. Further, Pinckney (2024) explored how People of Color navigated and constructed their socioemotional identities on Instagram and challenged systemic inequalities and found that Instagram was used to foster empowerment by promoting self-awareness, agency, authenticity, influence, and activism. Other scholars have explored the creation of Instagram accounts by Black students and alums of Predominantly White Institutions to share personal experiences with racialized trauma on campus (Russell & LePeau 2025; Russell 2022). These Instagram accounts served as online counterspaces to facilitate resilience and demand accountability from university stakeholders to improve the

Black student experience. Overall, research on digital counterspaces reveals that these spaces provide students with support, validation, and resistance to their negative experiences on campus.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Counterspaces

Counterspaces are sites that challenge dominant, exclusionary institutional norms that provide validation, belonging, and resistance. Grounded in Critical Race Theory, scholars have defined counterspaces as academic and social safe spaces that allow students to promote their learning wherein their experiences are validated and viewed as critical knowledge, where they can vent frustrations by sharing their stories of isolation, microaggressions, and overt discrimination, where they can challenge deficit notions of People of Color, and where they can establish and maintain a positive collegiate racial climate for themselves (Solorzano et al. 2000; Solorzano & Villalpando 1998). Counterspaces have been found to counter harm caused by racial microaggressions (Huber et al 2021), which are everyday slights and degradations that can lead to mental and emotional consequences like stress and trauma for Students of Color (Pierce 1970). Counterspaces are valuable for marginalized individuals within academia, as they reduce feelings of isolation and provide resources for advice and emotional support (West 2018), and serve as sites of empowerment (Yosso & Lopez 2010). Additionally, Yosso et al. (2009) found that Latina students seek counterspaces as sites that value their cultural knowledge as strengths, bolstering their sense of belonging, nurturing resilience, and developing skills to navigate academic communities.

Virtual Counterspaces

Gomez and Cabrera (2023) build on Yosso and Solorzano's definition of counterspaces and define virtual counterspaces as sites of resistance that transcend space and time and support

the academic advancement and holistic wellbeing of People of Color. Gomez and Cabrera (2023) argue that virtual counterspaces are sites of cultural affirmation, community building, knowledge sharing, and empowerment. First, virtual counterspaces are sites where Students of Color have the opportunity to be their authentic selves and embrace their cultural backgrounds, an identity different to what they might display in academic spaces (Hernandez 2015). Second, given that virtual counterspaces transcend space and time, allowing students to connect across geographical boundaries, they enable community building in which Students of Color can see themselves as members of the academic community with peers who might share similar cultural values and language (Hernandez 2015). Third, through virtual counterspaces, Students of Color also engage in knowledge sharing where they can impart wisdom and *consejos* [advice] on one another about the hidden curriculum of graduate school and validate the knowledge they possess and bring from their homes and communities. Fourth, the knowledge and shared experiences shared through virtual counterspaces can help empower Students of Color to persist in academia and take charge of their academic trajectories as agents of change. Virtual counterspaces offer Students of Color the ability to see past their challenges at the moment and imagine themselves with their earned advanced degrees. Finally, virtual counterspaces are sites through which students can resist deficit-oriented assumptions about themselves and create counternarratives that resist assimilation to traditional academic cultures of individualism and competitiveness and instead embrace students' culture and communities.

While virtual counterspaces are powerful sites that offer students cultural affirmation, resistance, community building, knowledge sharing, and empowerment, there is limited research exploring the creation and maintenance of these virtual counterspaces by Latinas in doctoral programs. Drawing on interviews with 15 Latina doctoral students who are academic Instagram content creators, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Latina doctoral students construct virtual counterspaces?
2. What forms of support are generated in these virtual counterspaces, and how do they reshape how Latinas navigate doctoral education?

METHODS

Participants

Participants for this study were content creators on Instagram recruited from an account specifically targeted to Latina doctoral students, *Academic Latina*. *Academic Latina* was founded in August 2020 with the mission of demystifying the hidden curriculum of graduate school. While the page content started off as facts about graduate school, the content soon evolved into the shared experience of one Latina doctoral student and the ways she navigated her doctoral program. While online content addressed key PhD milestones, such as the dissertation proposal, these topics were grounded in the unique perspective of a first-generation Latina doctoral student who shared the structure of a dissertation proposal defense and also offered practical guidance based on her own experiences. At the time of the study, *Academic Latina* had over 30,000 followers.

To be eligible for the study, participants had to (1) self-identify as a first-generation college student, (2) have at least 5 posts on their Instagram account that shared tips on navigating doctoral programs, (3) be a current doctoral student or have graduated with a doctorate, and (4) have created their academic Instagram account within the last 5 years. I contacted content creators in this network via direct message on Instagram. Given the low number of Latina content creators with content centered on doctoral education, only fifteen content creators qualified for this study and all consented to participate.

Participants self-identified as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Salvadoran, Cuban, and Ecuadorian, as depicted in Table 1. The 15 participants represented 11 different disciplines with

40% of the participants belonging to STEM fields and 60% to social sciences and humanities. Twelve of the participants were enrolled in a doctoral program at the time of the study with three participants having already graduated with a doctorate. Three of the participants created their account in 2019, five of them created their account in 2020, one of them created her account in 2021, two of them created their account in 2022, and four of them created their account in 2023 (*Table 2*). The number of followers that the participants' Instagram pages had at the time of the interview ranged from 390 followers to 42,600 followers.

Procedure

The study procedures included individual Zoom interviews and a background questionnaire which asked participants about their ethnicity, parent educational attainment, former and current education, and questions regarding their Instagram account such as when they created their account, what other social media platforms they shared academic content on, what kind of academic content they shared (e.g., PhD milestones, personal accomplishments), how many followers they had, how often they posted on Instagram feed and Instagram story, and how many hours a day they spent on Instagram (*see Appendix B for the complete demographic survey*).

Interviews were conducted in July 2024 and averaged 43 minutes. One interview lasted 23 minutes because the participant had only recently created her Instagram account and, while balancing the responsibilities of motherhood and doctoral study, had fewer content creation experiences to discuss. This resulted in 493 pages of interview transcripts. Interviews were guided by an interview guide that included thirty open-ended questions about the development of participants' Instagram accounts. The interview guide included questions about how the content creators came across academic Instagram, what the mission of their page was, how their content was different to guidance from a doctoral program, strengths and challenges of

facilitating an academic Instagram account, and what additional initiatives grew from their platforms (*see Appendix A for the complete interview guide*). All interviews were conducted primarily in English, with some participants incorporating Spanish. Interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim. While most of the content creators were comfortable with publicizing the Instagram handles of their academic accounts, Gema preferred that her account remained anonymous and requested a pseudonym. As a first-generation Latina doctoral student and the creator of *Academic Latina*, my positionality eased building rapport with the content creators (Zinn 2001). Because the network of Latina doctoral student content creators is relatively small, I was already acquainted with most participants through Instagram and academic spaces prior to the interviews. This familiarity was evident when participants compared content on their own pages to content posted on *Academic Latina*.

Data Analysis

All interviews were imported into Dedoose for qualitative analysis. The analysis was guided by *a priori* areas of inquiry established through the interview guide while remaining open to patterns and concepts that were not anticipated prior to analysis. Initial open coding was informed by these *a priori* areas of inquiry (Saldaña 2013). Through an iterative analytical process, codes were continuously refined, with new codes introduced and merged to reflect patterns from the data. To strengthen the coding reliability, five undergraduate research assistants trained by me independently coded a subset of transcripts, allowing for the identification of inconsistencies and the refinement of the codebook. Thematic Analysis was used to identify, organize, and offer insight into the themes that appeared across the codes (Braun et al 2019). After themes were established, they were interpreted through relevant theoretical frameworks, including virtual counterspaces, to contextualize how Latinas in doctoral programs used Instagram to navigate doctoral education.

In what follows, I discuss the themes developed from the analysis which included (a) Building academic content creators; (b) Equity ethic: Knowledge sharing to get to and through graduate school, (c) Cultural affirmation for Latinas in academia, and (d) Paid equity ethic endeavors: Extending online support into offline initiatives. The findings suggest that Latina doctoral students of various racial/ethnic backgrounds and of various fields of study encountered academic Instagram pages as consumers before recognizing their value and creating their own page to serve as a virtual counterspace that supported other Latinas also pursuing doctoral degrees. The Instagram posts that content creators shared with followers offered a sense of community, knowledge on navigating a PhD program, and cultural affirmation. Following these themes, I also examine the challenges content creators encountered in facilitating and sustaining these virtual spaces, particularly as they balanced this work alongside their academic and personal responsibilities.

FINDINGS

Becoming Academic Content Creators

Most content creators first encountered academic Instagram pages by chance, yet the support they received through these online communities inspired them to create their own spaces as a way of giving back and supporting other Latinas navigating doctoral education. For example, Vanessa, a 4th year PhD student in a Human Development program, shared having come across Latina Instagram accounts on her feed and enjoying the content about their day-to-day lives, such as sharing about their meetings with their advisors. Another respondent, Yesenia, a 5th year PhD student in a Counseling Psychology program, shared that having come across one academic page and being intrigued by the content shared about the content creator's academic journey she appreciated how the posts boiled down a lot of the expectations within their program. Along the same lines, Jennifer, a 1st year PhD student in a Clinical Psychology

program, came across academic content on Instagram through her personal Instagram account and realized that there were multiple pages that were sharing academic content. She shared, “I just started following them on my personal page and then I realized, oh, this is a community. Like, people become friends, they know each other.” While Vanessa, Yesenia, and Jennifer stumbled across this content coincidentally, other creators had sought academic content intentionally. For instance, Lauren, a 2nd year PhD student in a Higher Education program, went to Instagram to try and build her social network in academia and she slowly started following multiple academic Instagram accounts. Having moved to another state for graduate school, Lauren experienced feelings of loneliness and homesickness, which are not uncommon among graduate students (Pascale 2018; O'Meara et al. 2017), motivating her to create an online community for herself and other Latinas.

Other content creators turned to Instagram to look for resources on how to apply to their doctoral programs. For instance, Gemma, a 2nd year PhD student in a Political Science program, shared that her first encounter with academic Instagram was when she was looking for content on Instagram that would prepare her to apply to graduate school. She mentioned having found *Academic Latina*, and how that led her into what she described as a “rabbit hole of academic pages,” creating her own account in August 2022. Finally, other content creators like Valerie, a 4th year PhD student in a Clinical Psychology program who created her page in 2023, were not expecting to find academic pages on Instagram but searched anyway. Valerie recalled being at a time in her program where she felt like she was the only one struggling and she decided to “search up ‘PhD Problems’ as a hashtag to see what came up.” This led to her finding pages with dissertation tips and memes which led to the creation of her own page in 2023. In addition to exposing content creators to graduate school resources, the experiences of discovering these academic Instagram pages modeled a form of reciprocal sharing that the content creators sought

to replicate. In benefitting from these academic Instagram pages themselves, content creators felt a responsibility to “give back” and create their own spaces to support future generations of Latina scholars (Vallejo 2009; McGee 2022).

Participants were intentional in creating online spaces that helped students see themselves less as outsiders and more as members of the academic community, whether it was through building community or increasing visibility of their identities, similar to what Gomez and Cabrera (2023) described as foundational to virtual counterspaces. Similar to what previous studies have found, for some content creators, moving away from home for their doctoral programs and losing the closeness to their familial and friend networks, led to feelings of isolation and wanting to build a community for themselves online (Hernández 2015; George Mwangi et al. 2018). As a doctoral student, Gemma shared that she experienced a lot of loneliness as she moved away from her hometown and away from her friends who had either decided to pursue a master’s degree or who were going to remain living back home.

Unfortunately, she moved far enough from home to pursue her doctorate degree where she could no longer meet up with her close friends spontaneously; it had to be planned and she shared,

I was feeling very, very fucking lonely when I got to graduate school, and then it was like I was seeing all these other pages, like [*Academic Latina*], and just like other pages that I had found that were like further along, like they had been already established for at least a year or two at that time, and I was just seeing how people had found, like, a strong community online. And I was like, oh, maybe if I start my own page then I can make my own friends, or, like, not my own friends, but you know what I mean? Like, make friends that way.

Gemma discovered an advantage in not only creating a community online for others, but also for herself to persist in her program, she shared,

It was always to develop community, and help others not feel lonely, like, not just myself, but also others. I know I'm not special and there was no way that the experiences that I was facing of loneliness and being homesick were, like, I was the only one that

was experiencing them. So, it was like trying to find friends online that we could have that support of not feeling alone, you know? Just building a community.

Gemma described her online community as a space that helped her battle loneliness but also as a space that circulated positive reinforcement amongst Latinas in graduate school and where they were constantly uplifting one another. In alignment with previous research that shows the benefits of students creating communities of like-minded people (Cha et al 2010; Hernández 2015; Lopez-Leon & Casanova 2023), she shared how she often got positive and encouraging messages from followers telling her that they appreciated her content as guidance in their own academic journeys and how rewarding it felt to be able to help strangers on the internet.

Other content creators wanted to build a community by highlighting their identities and increasing cultural representation as doctoral students in that way. For example, Idaliana, a 1st year PhD Student in a Community Engagement program, created her page at the start of her program in August 2023 with the intention of creating a community of academics who were also mothers like her. She shared wanting to show her followers her experiences as a parent- scholar to, “show people that you could do it all and, do all the things and succeed in all the things all at the same time.” As a mom, she was aware of how challenging it was to balance parenting and academic responsibilities, but she wanted to let others know that it was possible to do by showcasing her day-to-day life online and showing others how to manage their time, a skill that is important to succeed in graduate school (Schlemper 2011). Further, Clarissa, a 2nd year PhD student in an education program, created her page to build a community to motivate and uplift other eldest daughters. Through her content, Clarissa expressed her gendered ethnic identity (Perera et al. 2021) being the eldest daughter in her family and how she fulfilled this role in addition to her role as a scholar in academia. The name of her page, @gradmija, detailed the experiences of a *mija* [a combination of the words my daughter], a daughter, and her mission

was to bring attention to the different hats she wore not only as a PhD student, but as the eldest daughter in an immigrant family who is often expected to take on a parentified role. In doing so, Clarissa brought power to her identities like previous research has shown that Students of Color have done when constructing their online socioemotional identities (Pinckney 2014).

Content creators also wanted to increase representation of the first-generation experience. For Jennifer, she did a play on words on her Instagram handle and called it @firstjen to combine her first-generation experience and her name into it. She created her page in April 2023 with the goal of offering resources to other first-generation Latinas in academia. Part of her mission was also to highlight her unique experience as a neurodiverse Mexican student with ADHD navigating a PhD. In embracing her neurodiverse identity online, Jennifer had control over constructing her authentic identity, which research has found is sometimes easier online than being authentically yourself in person (Lopez-Loen & Casanova 2025). Fernanda, a 4th year PhD student in a Chemical Engineering program, was the first to establish her page amongst the content creators interviewed, launching it in January 2019. However, her content creation journey began prior to Instagram, as she had already been producing similar content on TikTok. After posting on TikTok, Fernanda was inspired to transfer that same content to Instagram and continue to share her experience navigating higher education as a first-generation immigrant student and mom in a STEM field. For Fernanda, her first-generation experience was at the foundation of her page's mission. As an engineering student, she recalled,

I didn't have those opportunities, like, you cannot go to your parents. For me, a lot of people that I've met in engineering, they have told me, for example, in a senior design project, they were like, 'Oh, I'm going to ask my dad' you know, like everyone's dad did engineering, I feel like, and to me, my parents didn't even graduate college, so I started seeing that difference.

Fernanda was aware of the social capital that some of her peers brought with them, given their social networks (Yosso 2005). While Fernanda was an engineering student, her mission targeted all first-generation students, beyond those in STEM. On the other hand, Stephanie, who had graduated in 2023 from a Chemical Engineering PhD program, created her page in December 2020 and specified that the mission of her page was to “incentivize underrepresented Hispanic students to go into STEM fields.” As such, Stephanie’s content centered entirely on navigating the requirements and expectations of STEM programs.

Building on the first-generation experiences of Latinas, Lauren, who created her page in August 2020, also created content shining light on the importance of mental health in doctoral education. She shared,

My mission is about normalizing that academia doesn’t have to be our full identity, because I feel like as first-generation Latinas, we have to work ten times harder than our white counterparts and so I feel like being able to normalize that, yes, it's important to have an identity within academia, but also normalizing having a life outside of that and enjoying it and how it's all part of the process, especially in regard to talking about mental health, that's huge for me. We need to take care of ourselves.

Research shows that graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population (Evans et al. 2018). Given these statistics, Lauren shared about her experience as a PhD student, but she was also intentional about resisting hustle culture and reminding her followers to also take care of themselves offering them support to challenge the trauma from their programs. Whether they were the only Latina in their program, or the eldest daughter in their families to pursue a doctorate, Latina content creators in this study found it crucial to build a community online and validate these identities among others. In doing so, they promoted cultural affirmation (Gomez & Cabrera 2023) and helped others see themselves as members of the academic community, pushing one another to persist in their program.

Equity Ethnic: Knowledge Sharing to get to and Through Graduate School

Beyond cultivating representation and community, Latinas also enacted one of the central tenets of virtual counterspaces, knowledge sharing, by intentionally disseminating information about the hidden curriculum of graduate school. In doing so, they enacted an equity ethic by transforming the knowledge they had acquired through their own experiences into a collective resource intended to reduce barriers and expand access for other Latinas navigating doctoral education. For example, Yvette, who had graduated from her doctorate program in 2016, had prior experience working in higher education and she used that knowledge to create her Instagram page in 2019. She shared,

The mission behind my page is to support more first gen students in learning about the hidden curriculum of higher education and also in fostering what I call sustainable productivity and personal development. For me, it's not just about helping people to navigate higher education; It's also about helping them navigate their career and life in ways that feel good to them. It's about honoring their full selves and finding ways to do the work that we do that's meaningful to us in ways that still promote our well-being.

As a former Associate Director of a McNair Scholars program, Yvette met with a lot of students with questions about graduate school. The McNair Scholars Program aims to empower and prepare low-income and first-generation undergraduates with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities needed to confidently pursue a Ph.D. program after graduating from undergraduate programs (Renbarger et al. 2023). In her position as Associate Director meeting with students constantly, she felt like students were often asking the same questions about applying to and navigating graduate programs, and after ten plus years of supporting students in this matter, she decided to create a podcast where she answered the frequently asked questions. However, recognizing that potential listeners might not discover her podcast organically, Yvette decided to create an account on Instagram to expand its reach. There, she shared short video clips highlighting key insights from her podcast episodes, focusing on what she described as the

hidden curriculum of graduate school, including strategies for pacing progress toward degree milestones, prioritizing competing academic responsibilities (e.g., coursework, research, publishing, teaching, and service), and avoiding burnout while navigating the often-unspoken expectations of doctoral education. These Instagram reels were an invitation for followers to engage with the full podcast episode and explore these topics in greater length. Yvette also shared having published a book titled *Is Grad School for Me* (2024) in which she provided first-generation, low-income, and non-traditional Students of Color with insider knowledge on how to consider and navigate graduate school, which she also promoted on her Instagram. Yvette highlighted how unlike other guides, her book paid attention to the first-generation Students of Color experience, and she did so with a culturally relevant and community-based approach. Unlike most of the content creators, Yvette had received her doctorate many years before creating her Instagram account and, for her, that distance in time, granted her the ability to be more transparent in sharing knowledge to students. She shared,

I like to say that I share the good, the bad, and the ugly. And a lot of times institutions are trying to share their best selves, and they're trying to share, you know, only the pros and not necessarily the cons. And because I'm no longer affiliated with an institution, I don't have to worry about having to censor myself or mute certain parts of me and my experiences. So, I can talk about certain aspects of toxicity, certain aspects of neglect, certain aspects of exploitation, and about white supremacy in ways that maybe other creators who may still be affiliated with an institution may be worried about their safety or about their ability to maintain their jobs.

Yvette's experience differed from that of many other content creators because she was no longer embedded in academia, allowing her to speak more candidly about institutional challenges. In contrast, content creators who were still doctoral students or early-career academics were more discrete in what they shared publicly, balancing authentic self-expression with the need to maintain professional relationships. In essence, knowledge sharing presented itself through

various topics and at different levels of transparency but the wisdom and *consejos* [advice] that were imparted provided valuable mentorship and guidance, similar to the *consejos* that Latinas receive from family to persist in their educational pathways (Espino 2016).

Valerie G., a 5th year PhD student in an Education program, was another content creator who had worked in higher education previously. She shared two primary reasons that led to the creation of @latinagradguide in July 2019. First, following her master's degree completion, she felt like she had acquired a lot of knowledge navigating graduate school on her own as a first-generation Latina and she was motivated to demystify the hidden curriculum of the graduate school application process for others by creating content on the components that make up a graduate school application, sharing scholarships for graduate students, and organizing networking events for Latinas in higher education. Second, as someone who worked in higher education throughout her master's program and prior to her doctorate, she noticed many information gaps when it came to pursuing graduate school, especially among the transfer students whom she worked with in higher education. Her experiences with transfer students, who oftentimes realized it was too late for them to apply to graduate school, prompted her to start thinking about what she could do to help students achieve this earlier in their undergraduate trajectories. A virtual counterspace felt like the right platform for her to share information on graduate school because she considered it to be a platform that a lot of undergraduate students spent time on.

The knowledge that was shared by content creators was not only centered on the equity ethic of helping other Latinas apply to graduate school, but also on navigating, and persisting in their doctoral programs. For example, Aeriell, a 5th year PhD student in a Clinical Psychology program, created her Instagram page in July 2020 and had a goal of demystifying the hidden curriculum of graduate school not only about how to get into a program, but how to complete

the degree. She shared, “The main mission [of my page] is to increase representation of Students of Color in higher education and in order to do that, I help people get into graduate school, and then I support people who are in graduate school make it out of graduate school.” In identifying the importance of retention of Latinas in doctoral programs, Aeriell’s content was also about sharing the ins and outs of her Clinical Psychology program to guide others through the entire journey. Through her content, she shared a lot of tips, for example, how to prepare for internships in her field, where to look for them, and what her own internship experience was like. Additionally, Mayra, a recent PhD graduate in School Psychology, had posts on her page about applying to graduate school covering the multiple pieces that go into a graduate school application including letters of recommendation, personal statements and statements of purpose, a resume, official transcripts, and, on occasion, standardized tests. In her post, she broke down what each application piece looked like in her discipline and also offered tips on how to work on each of those pieces. Further, Aidé, a 5th year PhD student in Sociology, described a post on her page where she taught her followers how to revamp their Curriculum Vitae (CV) and document their research experiences. Unlike a resume, which is primarily used for general employment, a CV serves as a comprehensive record of academic achievements and is expected for many graduate school, fellowship, and academic job applications. Yet, knowing what a CV is, how it differs from a resume, and how to organize it are rarely taught explicitly in doctoral programs, making this another example of the hidden curriculum. Aidé included examples from her own CV to provide followers with a template for describing their research experiences. In demonstrating pieces of the hidden curriculum of graduate school, these content creators enacted an equity ethic through their commitment to giving back, ensuring that the knowledge they learned along their journeys came easily accessible to other Latinas.

Content creators also had unique resources and pieces of knowledge to share based on their identities besides being a student. Gemma, who was a first-generation college student and mom shared being a bit older than peers in her program and older than other academic content creators in her social network on Instagram. As such, she had a lot of advice to offer to her audience given her multiple responsibilities. Specific to her stipend as a graduate student, she shared content on how she managed funding as a parent scholar. She highlighted the multiple jobs she had to take on to sustain her family, despite it not being encouraged by her program to have additional jobs. She shared, “My parents and family don’t have any kind of generational wealth or even, white collar jobs, so to speak, like they’re very, very working class.” This led to her having the responsibility to care for her family financially in addition to caring for her child. While not all Latina doctoral students are parents or caregivers to their families, by openly sharing her experiences as a parent scholar, Gemma enacted an equity ethic by giving back through representation and creating a digital space for other mothers and normalization of parenthood for others. Recognizing the absence of visible examples of Latina mothers in doctoral education, she intentionally made her experiences public to reassure current and future parent scholars that they belonged in academia and that success was possible alongside caregiving responsibilities.

For other content creators, developing their page and sharing knowledge came from their own struggles in graduate school. Mayra, who had graduated from her School Psychology PhD program in 2022, recalled being in her 3rd year of her PhD program following academic accounts and experiencing a lot of hesitancy in creating her own page. Ultimately, it was the stressors in her program that led her to create the page in June 2020 as an outlet to share her academic challenges with others. From there, she described how her page transitioned into a resource where she shared all of her experiences, both positive and negative. Mayra wanted to

share her knowledge of graduate school and the topics she covered evolved along with her own academic journey, so the content she shared was always in relation to her own journey. This reflects an equity ethic in which giving back was not reserved for after achieving success, but occurred simultaneously with her own educational journey, allowing others to benefit from the information as she learned it herself. For instance, when looking back to her posts during our interview, a lot of her earlier posts were about applying to graduate school and closer to the time of the interview she was posting tips on studying for a licensure exam in her field, which she was preparing herself for.

Cultural Affirmation of Latinas in Academia

All Latina content creators embraced cultural affirmation, encouraging Latinas in doctoral programs to embrace their cultural backgrounds, and be their authentic selves. Cultural affirmation is defined as the validation and celebration of students' authentic cultural identities, lived experiences, and inherent worth within supportive online communities (Gomez & Cabrera 2023). While Fernanda felt that she was in between two worlds, having come to the United States as a 20-year-old from El Salvador, this in-betweenness motivated her to share content that culturally affirmed Latine ethnic capital by incorporating a lot of Latin music, like *cumbia* on her page, to represent her culture and represent her Salvadoran identity. She emphasized incorporating the use of Spanglish in her videos and it being her way of bringing her culture to this digital space and hoping to empower others to do the same. By openly celebrating her ethnic and immigrant identity, Fernanda enacted an equity ethic through cultural affirmation, recognizing that although Latina immigrants are often underrepresented or marginalized within academia, they have a place in doctoral education. Similarly, Valerie G., a 5th year PhD student in Education, shared how her page was unique to other content creators due to her inclusion of her Salvadoran immigrant family in her content. Valerie G. emphasized how sharing about how

her family and her bicultural experience shaped her as a human and her academic aspirations, was a distinction to other academic pages which centered the content on the content creator's individual experience alone. For example, Valerie G. shared a reel on her page where she visited El Salvador alongside her parents who had not been back to their home country in 20+ years. Valerie G. recalled the many direct messages and comments she received from fellow Salvadoran Latinas who shared how their parents had not been back to their country in years as well and how emotional it made them to see Valerie G. share this video with her audience. Valerie G. attributed a lot of her academic successes to her parents' sacrifices in coming to this country and this was a shared sentiment amongst other Latinas who followed Valerie G.'s content and felt seen through her posts. By sharing her family's return to their home country after so many years, Valerie G. extended cultural affirmation beyond herself to include her family members whose sacrifices made her educational journey possible. In doing so, she enacted an equity ethic by honoring the experiences of immigrant families that are often absent from academic narratives, and creating space for other Latinas to see their own family histories reflected in her content. Clarissa also mentioned the importance of sharing about her culture and a sense of cultural wealth being transmitted through her content on Instagram. She shared,

I hope that it influences others to really appreciate and lean on the support systems that they have and recognize that they have their own forms of cultural wealth. I mean, we're not really calling it cultural wealth [or cultural affirmation] in these posts, but I hope to inspire others to lean on the support they have from family and to recognize that they have a lot of strength, knowledge, and resilience, and tools from their own backgrounds and communities.

Here, Clarissa was highlighting the importance of familial capital (Yosso 2005), and her family's cultural assets. An example of this was a video on Clarissa's page which was a short clip of a news report where Clarissa is seen in the kitchen with her mom and says that her mother's teachings went beyond baking. She highlighted how women in her family did not have the

chance to pursue their academic goals, and how knowing this motivated her to complete her degree and honor their stories. In the video Clarissa also compared her experience at a prestigious institution with peers who were not first-generation and recognized that it was up to her and others to reimagine what higher education looks like to continue to increase the number of Latinas in high education.

Another way of using Instagram as a way to cultivate cultural affirmation as a first-generation professional, was seen with Mayra, who incorporated Spanish into her videos and included Spanish-language music. In her content, Mayra also posted photos showing Mexican elements in her office décor, such as an Otomí table runner and a Lele doll. By speaking Spanish and incorporating culturally familiar music and decor, she created a space that was linguistically and culturally resonant for other Latinas. This practice reflected an equity ethic rooted in giving back through linguistic inclusion. Stephanie remembered feeling completely lost at the start of her program, but in sharing her identity as a Latina, she emphasized, “I think having someone who looks like you and who you know has gone through the program [is important]. We can provide key suggestions, like this is what you need as an underrepresented student.” Valerie G. further emphasized this by saying, “When a person is able to put a face to that experience, or see themselves in someone else they believe in, they can see themselves doing that too.” Both Stephanie and Valerie G. recognized that simply seeing a Latina scholar who shared their ethnoracial background on academic Instagram could be deeply affirming, intentionally providing the representation they knew other Latinas lacked.

Paid Equity Ethic Endeavors: Extending Online Support into Offline Initiatives

Some content creators offered knowledge and resources that went beyond their online content. One of the offline initiatives created by Aeriell was called Pathway to PhD. She

described it as an online workshop outside of Instagram that targeted people pursuing health psychology because it was what her expertise was on. She described the content of the workshop as,

It's on what you need to do before you decide to apply to [a clinical psychology program], to know that you're competitive for clinical psychology, because there's a number of doctorates you can get that are research focused and patient facing, which is what I'm doing. So that's a workshop where we talk about, like, where do you get research experience? Where do you get clinical experience? What do you need to do? Like, how do you determine 'Am I competitive enough? Should I go ahead and apply?'

Aeriell described having created this workshop with her younger self in mind. She wanted to share knowledge that could have been helpful to her ten years ago or two months ago. Having known in the present the problems she encountered and the questions she had, she used that as motivation to teach others what she wished she had known. At the time of the interview, Aeriell was also facilitating a paid 12-week program which she described as “an incubator for graduate school applications.” While doctoral students are usually provided with an academic stipend that ranges from \$25,000 to \$50,000 per year, depending on discipline, institution, and geographic location, some postgraduate programs are not funded, and graduate students find ways to defray these costs. For Aeriell, this meant taking on the role of an academic consultant and developing a 12-week program where she met weekly with a cohort of approximately ten prospective students to teach them how to write a personal statement and statement of purpose, develop other application materials, and meet one-on-one for accountability. While many content creators demonstrated an equity ethic by freely sharing knowledge and resources, others, like Aeriell, complicated this notion by transforming their expertise into paid services. Rather than viewing monetization as contradictory to an equity ethic, Aeriell shared that participants described it as a response to institutional shortcomings, arguing that when universities fail to

provide sufficient guidance and mentorship, the labor of demystifying graduate education is shifted onto those who have already navigated these systems. Because of this, Aeriell's followers were willing to pay for mentorship, workshops, or educational consultations because they did not feel seen, valued, or adequately supported within their own institutions, or because comparable resources simply did not exist. In this sense, monetized services emerged as an extension of an equity ethic, allowing Aeriell to provide guidance that universities failed to offer while simultaneously generating income to support her own educational journeys. As Aeriell explained in her interview, the revenue from these services helped fund her own doctoral education in a program that was not funded and did not provide any financial support.

Similarly, Fernanda shared how a lot of her initiatives surrounded networking and conferences in STEM. She recalled how in 2021, she hosted an online engineering conference and she and another woman whom she met on social media were able to raise \$30,000 from that conference from registration fees and additional donations and create scholarships. During the conference, she and her co-facilitator also allocated enough funds to pay the speakers who attended the conference and they also connected with multiple businesses on social media who hosted a career fair. Beyond preparing students for academic careers, the STEM career fair exposed attendees to diverse post-graduation opportunities, including positions in industry, government, science policy, consulting, and research administration, broadening their understanding of how doctoral training could translate into multiple career trajectories. At the time of the interview, Fernanda shared that she was working with other Salvadoran creators in STEM to raise money to host her first in-person STEM conference in El Salvador.

During the pandemic and remote work, Valerie G. saw a great need to build community. She shared, "Partly, it was also very selfish on my end, because I was isolated too and needed that human interaction and connection and community that is so critical for persistence." As

such, she used her experience organizing events in higher education to put together virtual graduate school application workshops. She also organized events on Zoom where women from different fields such as master's in social work and law school, came online to share their academic experiences with women who aspired to follow their steps in academia. Once the pandemic was over, Valerie G. formed committees to plan in person events in the larger Los Angeles area, for instance, networking events for Latinas in higher education. Nevertheless, one of Valerie G.'s proudest accomplishments is the creation of a scholarship for Latinas in which she partnered with The East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU), an organization based in Los Angeles with the purpose of making a difference in the communities they serve including first-generation college students. To raise funds for the scholarship, Valerie G. launched an Etsy shop where she sold crewnecks that represented Latinas in doctoral programs. In addition to using the crewneck funds for a scholarship, Valerie G. also used the funds to cover expenses such as food, decorations, and rental spaces to host the events. Given her knowledge of the experiences of Latinas in graduate school and the lack of financial assistance, her goal was to raise funds and create networking events that would assist Latinas in their doctoral programs. She had successfully awarded this scholarship to multiple Latinas.

Further, some of the content creators had collaborated with one another to host networking events across the United States during academic conferences. For example, Aidé talked about how she partnered with other content creators to plan and host dinners during the annual American Sociological Association (ASA) or American Educational Research Association (AERA) conferences. On one occasion during AERA, Aidé and Mayra worked together to search for a restaurant with Latin American cuisine where they could host a dinner and when they found a Peruvian restaurant that was willing to work with them, they shared a

flier online for Latinas to sign up to attend. Close to 25 Latinas attended from different disciplines and universities networking with one another. By leveraging their digital platforms to organize in-person events, Aeriell, Fernanda, Valerie G., Aidé, and Mayra actively cultivated a community where Latinas could receive mentorship, share knowledge, and build relationships with others sharing similar academic journeys.

The Challenges of Sustaining Virtual Counterspaces

While the content creators recognized the value of their spaces in promoting doctoral program persistence, some of them also highlighted the challenges of balancing their online presence with being a doctoral student having to meet their program milestones at the same time. Some of these challenges included negative feedback and hate comments online. For example, although not a common occurrence, Aeriell shared having received racist and sexist comments about being a Latina in academia. For Aeriell, receiving these kinds of hate comments came with the territory of having an online presence, so she would simply turn off the comments on her posts so that her followers wouldn't see them, as she wanted to avoid a space with negativity. Similarly, Aidé talked about how oftentimes men left comments claiming she was in so much debt because of her degrees and how she should be a housewife instead. Unbeknownst to these men, Aidé had not accrued any debt throughout her program (which she had shared through her content multiple times). Unlike Aeriell, Aidé did not delete the comments left on her page because she felt it was tedious work and she refused to spend time on something not worthwhile. Further, Fernanda received direct messages criticizing her physical appearance and although these comments did not affect her at her stage of life during the time of the interview, she mentioned how these kinds of comments could have affected her self-esteem when she was younger.

Another challenge that content creators faced was balancing the time they dedicated to content creation with the responsibilities of being doctoral students. For instance, Valerie G. shared a difficulty in balancing content creation with academic job market materials. At the time of the interview, Valerie G. was focusing on the academic job market and she highlighted how spending time looking for jobs and writing her materials was very time consuming on top of her dissertation writing, and that content creating was her last priority during that time. Similarly, Jennifer shared how during finals week she would delete the Instagram app from her phone to concentrate on her studies. By temporarily stepping away from Instagram, Valerie G. and Jennifer acknowledged that sustaining a virtual counterspace depended on successfully navigating their own doctoral responsibilities first. Additionally, a subset of participants in this study were parent scholars, for whom caregiving responsibilities introduced additional time management challenges. For example, Idaliana shared how even though she had tons of ideas of content to share, she had a toddler to take care of and this additional responsibility constrained her ability to be consistent on Instagram. Although being a mother limited the frequency of her content creation, her continued investment in sharing knowledge and building community reflected a commitment to giving back whenever her circumstances allowed.

Finally, Instagram, like all social media platforms, has an algorithm that decides what kind of content gets pushed to what audience. Yvette talked about how making content sometimes felt like being on a hamster wheel having to push through the unpredictable algorithm and the vanity metrics, making her feel like she needed to be online 24/7. Although she knew that spending more time online could help her platform grow, she also recognized the importance of taking time off social media and having a schedule that felt good for her. As such, the labor of giving back also relied on navigating Instagram and the norms of the algorithm that shaped whose voices and expertise were amplified.

DISCUSSION

A few studies have examined counterspaces online (Perera et al. 2021; Lopez-Leon & Casanova 2023; Anderson 2022; Mwangi et al. 2018; Pinckney 2024; Russell & LePeau 2025; Russell 2022) and have highlighted the impact that these spaces play in the persistence of Students of Color in higher education. I add to this literature by arguing that the creation and maintenance of virtual counterspaces (Gomez & Cabrera 2023) are sustained through an equity ethic, whereby Latinas leverage their own educational experience to give back by supporting the persistence of other Latina scholars. This study improves the knowledge and understanding regarding the creation and maintenance of virtual counterspaces in three key ways. First, the findings demonstrate that the Latina doctoral student content creators were first consumers of these virtual counterspaces themselves and in seeing the value of sharing resources online, they created their own virtual counterspace in an effort to level the playing field. McGee et al. (2022) define an equity ethic as a commitment to reducing racial inequities through often invisible and undervalued labor intended to uplift marginalized communities. Rather than being motivated by financial gain, this work is rooted in a commitment to collective advancement and expanding opportunities for others. Building on McGee et al. (2022), I show that Latina content creators enact an equity ethic through culturally grounded forms of labor. Whereas McGee et al. (2022) emphasize Black STEM scholars' use of disciplinary expertise to advance racial justice, Latina content creators draw on their cultural expertise, such as their biculturalism, linguistic capital, and lived experiences navigating doctoral education, to translate the formal and hidden curriculum into accessible knowledge and sustain virtual counterspaces for other Latinas. Consistent with this equity ethic, the Latina content creators in this study intentionally cultivated academic Instagram spaces to support other Latinas. While only a few content creators entered

these spaces by chance, most deliberately created and maintained them to share knowledge, build community, and affirm Latinas' cultural identities. Their intentional commitment to these practices is what transformed their Instagram accounts into virtual counterspaces. By incorporating aspects of their ethnic backgrounds and the intersections of their other identities into their content, they fostered ethnic relatability and cultural affirmation that encouraged other Latinas to persist in their doctoral programs. When doctoral programs are unable to provide this ethnic relatability and cultural affirmation, Latina content creators fill that gap despite the often invisible and uncompensated labor required to maintain these spaces. Importantly, sustaining these virtual counterspaces was not without challenges. Content creators balanced this labor alongside doctoral milestones, caregiving responsibilities, online harassment, and the demands of maintaining visibility within Instagram's algorithm. These challenges demonstrate that enacting an equity ethic through virtual counterspaces required content creators to negotiate their commitment to supporting other Latinas alongside their own academic and personal responsibilities.

Content Creators had various missions in mind in the creation of their pages which hinted at various tenets of virtual counterspaces (Gomez & Cabrera 2023). For some of them, it was important to increase representation through cultural affirmation as first-generation students to empower others who might also be first-generation students navigating a doctoral program. Content creators also had intersecting identities that they shared through their content such as being mothers, the eldest Latina daughter, immigrant, or having neurodiversities like ADHD, and advocates for mental health among graduate students. Some of the content creators had former experience working in higher education where they learned about the institutional gaps that existed for students and were adamant about creating spaces where they could disseminate

that missing knowledge. Other content creators centered their mission on sharing knowledge about the hidden curriculum of graduate school, which often evolved in topics alongside their own academic journey. Other content creators incorporated additional resources like external mentoring opportunities for students either in the summer or throughout the application season. Their missions collaboratively targeted increasing the knowledge and sense of belonging for Latinas in doctoral programs.

Second, Latinas demonstrated an equity ethic to cultivate virtual counterspaces that challenged dominant norms of knowledge production by relying on cultural affirmation. Cultural affirmation reshaped how Latina doctoral students navigated their programs by offering other Latinas multiple resources and by affirming and validating their presence and their identities in academic spaces. For example, Fernanda enacted an equity ethic by intentionally centering her ethnic and immigrant identities to provide the representation she wished she had encountered during her own academic journey. In doing so, she leveraged her lived experience and cultural identity as resources for community uplift, creating visibility and cultural affirmation for immigrant Latinas who were often underrepresented in higher education. Further, Valerie G. honored her family's sacrifices in coming from El Salvador and in doing so honored the stories of other immigrant families that are often absent from academic narratives. By introducing content in Spanish and about their families, the content creators placed value in their culture and the role these played in their program persistence. Third, content creators shared knowledge on applying to different sources of funding, knowledge that they recognized their programs had not taught them and which they considered part of a hidden curriculum (Calarco 2020). Other content that provided knowledge included a breakdown of the different pieces of a graduate school application and sample interview questions as well as how to build your CV.

Further, some of the content creators extended their services to other initiatives like accountability workshops during application season, conferences and dinners for networking, and designing scholarships for Latinas in graduate school.

This study highlights how content creators translate their own academic experiences into sources of support for other Latinas by relaying the formal and hidden curriculum as a form of an equity ethic and challenging assumptions about who belongs through virtual counterspaces. These findings point to the need for doctoral programs to be more intentional in incorporating more of the hidden curriculum into their formal program curriculum and more guidance on navigating formal and informal expectations to further support their doctoral students. For instance, while most program curricula emphasizes disciplinary knowledge like research methods and theory, Alkathiri & Olson (2019) highlight an alternative approach through a course titled “The Professoriate” which is designed to assist students to make meaning of their careers as professors and to support their well-being by teaching them how to maintain balance between life and work. The goal of this course is to support doctoral student preparation for future roles in higher education. Alkathiri & Olson (2019) find that doctoral students who participated in the course had a better understanding and realistic views about the professoriate, and the course facilitated doctoral students’ abilities to reflect on their own practices and plan for their future career paths. Universities should consider incorporating courses like “The Professoriate” into their curriculum to help first-generation students better navigate the ins and outs of doctoral education.

Additionally, the significance of virtual counterspaces is particularly evident when considered alongside the limited representation of Latinx faculty within higher education. Even at Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Vargas et al. (2020) found an average ratio of 146 Latinx students for every Latinx faculty member, compared to 10 White students for every White

faculty member. Such disparities constrain opportunities for Latinx students to access co-ethnic faculty who may serve as mentors, role models, and sources of academic knowledge. Moreover, underrepresented scholars may have less access to the mentoring, academic socialization, and networks through which social capital is developed and exchanged (Abraído-Lanza et al. 2022). Virtual counterspaces do not resolve the structural underrepresentation of Latinas within academia; rather, they alter the conditions under which some of the resources embedded within these relationships can be accessed. Through academic Instagram, Latina scholars who may be absent from a student's immediate institution become visible and their experiential knowledge becomes accessible to users beyond their direct interpersonal networks. In this way virtual counterspaces expand access to culturally relevant social capital without requiring Latina scholars and students to share the same institution or maintain an individualized mentoring relationship. While conferences, professional organizations, and email have long enabled scholars to develop relationships across institutional boundaries, these forms of networking often require individuals to first gain entry into academic networks and establish interpersonal ties. Social media differs not because cross-institutional connection is new, but because knowledge embedded within these networks can become visible and accessible to users who have not yet developed direct relationships with the individuals who possess it.

These data were collected in 2024 from content creators whose Instagram pages had been created within the previous five years and were fairly active accounts with frequent posts. Thus, this study does not capture how the facilitation of these spaces may have evolved over time as content creators navigated changing responsibilities within their doctoral programs and onto their post-graduation careers. Additionally, because this study centers on Latinas in doctoral programs, it does not examine how gender might shape the creation and maintenance of academic content creation. Future research should examine how gender shapes the enactment of

an equity ethic within virtual counterspaces. Investigating Instagram pages created by men or other genders could illuminate whether commitments to giving back are expressed similarly or whether it takes a different form across gendered experiences of higher education. Further, it is important to note that while I searched heavily across Instagram for content creators, the sample size of Latina doctoral students facilitating Instagram accounts centered on doctoral education was small and in my network. All things considered; however, this study still offers useful data for academic institutions to rethink the mentorship and belonging happening in their doctoral programs and identify gaps in institutional support as well as understanding why students turn to virtual counterspaces for academic guidance and support.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

At a time when universities are scaling back diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Jackson 2025; Harper 2025; Jones 2025), many students face diminishing access to institutional support systems that provide academic guidance, mentorship, and a sense of belonging necessary to persist in their programs (Jungbauer-Gans & Gross 2013; Weng 2020; Tobbell et al. 2010; Janson et al. 2004; Pilbeam et al. 2013; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy 2016). Doctoral students increasingly turn to one another through digital spaces for mentorship, guidance, and affirmation (Cha et al. 2010; Hernández 2015; Lopez-Leon & Casanova 2023; Mwangi et al 2018; Hernandez 2015; Gomez & Cabrera 2023). This dissertation demonstrates that for many first-generation Latina doctoral students, Instagram has become one of those spaces.

This dissertation examined how first-generation Latina doctoral students used Instagram to access, share, and make sense of knowledge related to the formal and hidden curricula of doctoral education; what forms of community cultural wealth were cultivated, exchanged, and activated through Instagram; and how Latina doctoral students constructed virtual counterspaces that challenged dominant norms of knowledge production in doctoral education. Across three empirical studies, I find that academic Instagram operates as more than a source of graduate school information. It functions as an informal infrastructure through which Latinas make academic knowledge more widely accessible, mobilize culturally rooted forms of capital, build social capital beyond their immediate institutional networks, and construct culturally affirming spaces of belonging and resistance. Taken together, these findings demonstrate how the digital environment changes not only where academic support occurs, but also who can access it, how continuously it's available, and how knowledge traditionally exchanged through interpersonal academic relationships can circulate among broader networks of Latinas.

Chapter 2 examines how first-generation Latinas use Instagram as a digital tool to share information on how to navigate the hidden curriculum of doctoral education. This chapter relies on a mixed-methods approach drawing on interviews with 15 Latina content creators on Instagram, 56 interviews with followers from the Instagram page, *Academic Latina*, and a content analysis of 30 Instagram posts from *Academic Latina*. I find that Latinas use academic Instagram accounts to expose the financial realities of graduate education, provide practical advice for navigating program expectations, and normalize not knowing the unwritten rules of doctoral education. This was consistent across users of *Academic Latina* who were both prospective doctoral students either undergraduate students, those with a bachelor's degree, and those with a master's degree, and also among current doctoral students. Importantly, the latter often lacked access to even the formal institutional channels of information available to students already enrolled in doctoral programs. Chapter 2 advances scholarship on the hidden curriculum by demonstrating that academic knowledge does not circulate solely through faculty advising, peer relationships, or other institutionally bounded networks. Instagram can serve as a supplemental and informal infrastructure of knowledge diffusion through which information about funding, milestones, professional norms, and other unwritten expectations becomes visible to users who may not know what information they need or whom to ask for it.

Chapter 3 demonstrates that the resources circulating through these digital networks extend beyond information alone. Drawing on interviews with 36 Latina doctoral students and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso 2009), I find that participants accessed and exchanged navigational, aspirational, resistance, and linguistic capital through Instagram. These findings extend Community Cultural Wealth into digital environments by demonstrating that culturally rooted forms of capital can be mobilized and circulated beyond geographically or institutionally bounded communities. In doing so, these exchanges also generate opportunities for social capital

between Latinas in doctoral programs and also have the capacity to reach the family. I use the virtual platform of Instagram to provide a window into how Latinas pursuing doctoral study engage with and develop digital content to reach co-ethnic audiences. I argue that in doing so, Latinas imbued their academic Instagram accounts with elements of cultural affirmation, in an effort to share what they have learned to lift as they climb. I found that *Academic Latina* emerged as a valuable space for participants to network and access professional knowledge that was not explicitly taught in their program's formal doctoral training, such as learning about funding sources like fellowships, and how to present their research at academic conferences and include it in their CVs.

Chapter 4 shifts attention to the aims of the academic Instagram accounts that Latina content creators intentionally constructed. Using a virtual counterspace framework, I find that Latina doctoral students demonstrated an equity ethic by using knowledge acquired through their own navigation of academia to uplift co-ethnic peers. Content creators built community, increased Latina representation, shared knowledge about getting into and through graduate education, provided culturally affirming content, and, in many cases, extended their online support to offline initiatives like mentorship and workshops. These findings demonstrate that virtual counterspaces are not simply in-person counterspaces transferred online. Their digital form changes the accessibility, persistence, and potential scale of counterspace practices. Users do not need to attend the same institution, belong to the same organization, or maintain an individualized mentoring relationship with a content creator to encounter culturally affirming representations or benefit from the knowledge being shared. Content can remain available beyond the original interaction, be saved for later use, shared with others, and generate additional exchanges through comments and other forms of engagement. Importantly, virtual counterspaces can also extend into the home. Because these spaces are accessible through

personal devices, Latina students can engage with culturally affirming academic communities and knowledge from their homes and other spaces outside of their programs. This allows the support of counterspaces to travel with students rather than requiring students to physically enter a particular campus to access it. Virtual counterspaces therefore enable practices of cultural affirmation, knowledge sharing, community building, empowerment, and resistance to extend beyond the physical and institutional boundaries that have traditionally shaped access to counterspaces.

Taken together, the three studies show a progression from knowledge, to resources, to community. Chapter 2 demonstrates how Latinas make the hidden curriculum visible; Chapter 3 shows how this exchange mobilizes Community Cultural Wealth and expands access to social capital; and Chapter 4 demonstrates how Latina content creators embed these practices within virtual counterspaces sustained by an equity ethic of community uplift. Across these processes, Instagram provides what many traditional academic support structures cannot consistently provide: continuous access to accumulated experiential knowledge, and culturally affirming support that does not depend entirely on who happens to be present within a student's department or university.

These findings also clarify why the experiences examined in this dissertation are specifically important for understanding Latinas in doctoral education. The need for mentorship, academic information, and belonging is not exclusive to Latinas, nor are academic Instagram platforms used only by Latina students. Rather, these processes take on particular significance within the racialized, gendered, and cultural conditions under which Latinas navigate academia. Participants entered spaces in which Latina representation was often limited while simultaneously navigating first-generation uncertainty about academic expectations and cultural commitment to family and community. The collectivist culture evident in content creators'

desire to “lift as they climb” further demonstrates that their use of social media was not solely oriented toward individual advancement; knowledge acquired through navigating academia became something to redistribute to other Latinas. Academic Instagram therefore illustrates how culturally rooted commitments to collective advancement can shape not only how Latinas navigate academic institutions, but also how they respond to their exclusion by building alternative infrastructures of support for one another.

The significance of these virtual infrastructures is heightened in the current political context. As universities face political and institutional pressures to eliminate or scale back DEI programs, culturally affirming networks and counterspaces persist outside the formal organizational structures of universities. This does not mean that virtual counterspaces should replace institutional DEI initiatives, Latina faculty representation, culturally responsive mentorship, or universities’ responsibility to create equitable environments. To the contrary, relying on informal digital networks illustrates the consequences of institutional gaps in support. Yet virtual counterspaces are less dependent on the policies of any single university: Latina scholars can continue to make themselves visible, share knowledge, affirm one another’s experiences, and build community across institutional boundaries even as formal opportunities for such work are constrained. In this way, academic Instagram represents both a response to institutional shortcomings, and a form of resistance to the unequal distribution of knowledge, representation, and support within doctoral education.

Ultimately, this dissertation demonstrates that virtual counterspaces matter because digital platforms alter the conditions under which resources like mentorship and networking can be accessed and circulated. Academic Instagram makes experiential knowledge more visible, persistent, searchable, and shareable. It enables individuals to encounter knowledge without first possessing the social ties necessary to obtain it, and it brings geographically dispersed Latina

scholars and students into a culturally affirming network. For first-generation Latinas navigating institutions in which people who share their racialized, gendered, and cultural experiences may be limited, these affordances expand the possibilities for accessing both academic knowledge and community. Academic Instagram thus represents an important contemporary form of collective resource-building through which Latinas transform individual experiences of navigating academia into shared resources for those coming alongside and behind them.

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX: A Latina Sociologist Doing Digital Ethnography

Prior to beginning this research project on academic Instagram accounts, I spent three years growing the platform, *Academic Latina*. My experiences as a Latina content creator led me to researching the overarching question of how Instagram could be used as a resource for Latinas pursuing a doctoral degree. I wanted to examine if other content creators existed and how they used their platform as well as the content they shared and why. In this methodological appendix, I reflect on my experience as a first-generation Latina sociologist conducting research that draws on both traditional sociological methods, interviews and emerging work on digital ethnographies that uses content analysis. In this section I discuss the path that led me to this research.

Academic Instagram

When I was attending my first PhD program, one of the requirements was to conduct a first-year research poster. In taking the required qualitative courses of the program, we learned about the different forms of qualitative studies and were tasked with conducting our own research project. I decided that my project would explore the experiences of Latinas in doctoral programs because at the time, I had joined an online private Facebook group for Latinas in doctoral programs. Because the target population was geographically dispersed, the Facebook page served as an effective recruitment site where potential participants were already connected. After contacting the page administrators and requesting permission to post a recruitment flier, I posted my flier seeking participants to be interviewed and tell me about their experiences in graduate school. Once enough participants were recruited, I conducted the interviews with an interview guide that included questions on the type of support they received from their peers and faculty, and also about their participation in the Facebook group. Through the interviews, the majority of the participants lacked representation in their programs and relied on the Facebook

page to provide them with a sense of belonging. As first-generation students, participants also lacked a lot of knowledge in navigating their doctoral programs and were intimidated by their non-first-generation peers and faculty, whereas in the Facebook page they felt comfortable asking any questions to the Latinas in the group. In seeing the positive impact of Latinas finding a supportive community of resources on Facebook, I thought about how this could be implemented on Instagram. As such, when I went to Instagram to look for similar spaces, there were very few. I decided I wanted to create a space similar to the space on Facebook, but I'd create it on Instagram, to target more students in doctoral programs since that demographic was not as engaged on Facebook. Thus, *Academic Latina* was created in August 2020.

I initially created *Academic Latina* with the intention of sharing facts about graduate school and making content on frequently asked questions such as "What is a gap year?" However, as I continued to engage in the content by posting photos, videos, and live streaming, I began to create a community of peers whom I felt comfortable sharing more about my personal academic journey with. Soon, the content changed from being formal content to more personalized content. For example, instead of defining what a gap year was, I was soon talking about what it was that I had done in my own gap year, what I felt had worked best for me, and what I recommended that others do. Additionally, given my content, I was part of a social network of other Latina content creators who were also graduate students and with whom I collaborated on content with, including livestreaming videos. Some of those networks developed into close friendships, which then resulted in hosting community events together both in person and online, presenting research together at academic conferences, and publishing articles together. For my dissertation proposal in 2023, I decided that I wanted to know more about the impact that *Academic Latina* and other academic Instagram accounts had on students and therefore this research was developed.

As *Academic Latina* grew, the nature of my interactions with followers shifted in meaningful ways. Reflexivity in qualitative research is often dependent upon whether the researcher shares the participants' experience (Berger 2015). An intersectional lens (Crenshaw 2013) complicates assumptions of insider status by recognizing that identities such as race, gender, class, immigration history, and first-generation status intersect in ways that produce both shared and divergent experiences between researchers and participants. What began as a platform for sharing graduate school resources gradually evolved into a community characterized by reciprocal engagement. Followers increasingly sent direct messages sharing deeply personal stories about their educational journeys and sought individual guidance regarding graduate school, career decisions, and navigating institutional challenges. Responding thoughtfully to these messages often required extensive time and emotional investment. As conversations became more nuanced, I frequently invited followers to meet over Zoom rather than continuing lengthy exchanges through Instagram's direct messages. These interactions transformed the account from a space primarily focused on disseminating information into one centered on mentorship and relationship building.

Community building also extended beyond the digital platform. As I shared upcoming conference presentations, followers frequently expressed excitement about attending the same conference and reached out to arrange opportunities to meet in person over coffee to discuss graduate school. Recognizing this interest, my colleagues and I began organizing informal dinners alongside academic conferences, creating spaces where Latinas could meet one another, expand their professional networks, and build relationships that extended beyond social media. These gatherings reinforced that *Academic Latina* functioned not merely as an online resource but as a catalyst for cultivating meaningful academic and social connections among Latina scholars. Across both online and in-person interactions, followers consistently expressed

gratitude for the transparency of the content, describing the community as one in which they felt seen, validated, and supported.

Over time, *Academic Latina* evolved beyond a platform centered on my own content creation and became a community sustained through collective participation. Followers not only sought guidance from me but increasingly offered encouragement, advice, and validation to one another through comments and direct interactions. When I shared challenges related to graduate school, followers frequently responded by sharing similar experiences, prompting others within the community to offer support and reassurance. Likewise, the conference dinners that began as opportunities to meet followers fostered lasting professional and personal relationships among attendees, many of whom remained connected long after the events concluded. As relationships developed among followers and between Latina content creators, community members increasingly referred to us as role models, reflecting that the value of *Academic Latina* extended beyond any one individual to a broader network of Latina scholars committed to supporting one another. These interactions fundamentally shaped my understanding of *Academic Latina*. Rather than functioning solely as a platform for disseminating information, *Academic Latina* became a space where Latinas collectively exchanged knowledge, cultivated relationships, and affirmed one another's experiences. Observing this transformation prompted the central questions that guided this dissertation.

More broadly, this study demonstrates the value of integrating traditional qualitative methods with digital ethnography to study contemporary forms of community building (Murthy 2008; Forberg & Schilt 2023). Interviews provided rich accounts of participants' motivations, experiences, and interpretations of Instagram, while digital ethnography enabled observation of the interactions, practices, and exchanges occurring within the platform itself (Hine 2015). Rather than relying solely on participants' retrospective accounts, digital ethnography captured

the dynamic ways support was enacted through comments, shared resources, and ongoing interactions among Latina doctoral students. Observing these practices as they occurred revealed dimensions of virtual counterspaces, including community building, knowledge sharing, cultural affirmation, empowerment, and resistance, that may have remained less visible through interviews alone. As scholars increasingly examine social life mediated through digital platforms like social media, combining traditional sociological methods with digital ethnography offers a more comprehensive understanding on how online communities function and how marginalized groups mobilize support across virtual spaces.

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APPENDIX A: Content Creator Interview Guide

1. How did you come across academic Instagram to begin with?
2. What led you to create your Academic Instagram account?
3. Why on Instagram?
4. Why did you start posting academic content on Instagram?
5. Would you say there is a mission behind your Academic Instagram page? Why or why not? Probe: If so, what is the mission?
6. How would you say your experiences, current and present, (academically and professionally) influence the kind of content you deliver on IG?
7. Would you say your page is any different from others that share academic content? How?
8. How do you think that the academic content you share on your page differs from the academic information from academic institutions including the one where you are completing/competed your PhD? Is it similar? Probe: Can you give me an example?
9. How do you think that sharing your academic journey influences others pursuing higher education?
10. What would you say are some of the strengths that AIG brings to students pursuing higher education?
11. Research defines the hidden curriculum as the things you're expected to know or do but won't explicitly be taught. Do you believe that your content illuminates the hidden curriculum? Probe: Why/why not?
12. What are some experiences or initiatives that have grown from you creating this platform?

13. How do you portray your identity as a first gen Latina through your content?
14. Can you give me an example of how you tailor the content for your Latina/o/e followers?
15. What are the benefits of facilitating this account?
16. What are the challenges of facilitating this account?
17. Please describe what interactions, you have with followers of your page.
18. What is your perception of how the audience responds to the type of content that you post?
19. Tell me about an academic experience that you shared on IG.
20. What does the future look like for your academic page?
21. Do you think this space has influenced your career trajectory?
22. What was the thought process behind your Instagram handle?
23. What is your process for creating and posting content?
24. How frequently do you post, and why? Probe: Breaks from posting?
25. What tools do you use to create your content? (Canva, Professional camera, etc.)
26. Can you give me an example of a post that you designed with the intention of teaching others how to apply to graduate school? Probe: why did you decide to post this?
27. Can you give me an example of a post that you designed with the intention of teaching others how to navigate graduate school? Probe: why did you decide to post this?
28. Can you give me an example of a post that you designed with the intention of teaching others how to persist in graduate school? Probe: why did you decide to post this?
29. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

APPENDIX B: Content Creator Demographic Questionnaire

1. First and Last Name
2. Email
3. What is your country of birth?
 - a. If you were born in another country, at what age did you move to the U.S.?
4. Race
5. Ethnicity
6. Age
7. What are your preferred pronouns?
8. What is your mother's country of birth?
9. What is your mother's highest level of education?
10. What is your father's country of birth?
11. What is your father's highest level of education?
12. What year are you in your doctoral program?
 - a. I am in my 1st year of my program
 - b. I am in my 2nd year of my program
 - c. I am in my 3rd year of my program
 - d. I am in my 4th year of my program
 - e. I am in my 5th year of my program
 - f. I am in my 6th year of my program
 - g. I am in my 7th year of my program
 - h. I've already graduated with my doctorate

13. If you have already graduated with your doctorate, what year did you receive your degree?
14. What is the name of the university and program where you are receiving/received your doctoral education?
15. To your knowledge, what is the status of your doctoral institution?
- a. Hispanic Serving institution
 - b. Predominantly White Institution
 - c. Alaska Native-Serving Institution
 - d. Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution
 - e. Historically Black College & University
 - f. Not sure
16. What month/year did you create your Instagram page?
17. If applicable, what other social media platforms do you share academic content on?
- a. Facebook
 - b. Twitter
 - c. TikTok
 - d. Pinterest
 - e. Other: ____
18. What kind of academic content do you share on Instagram?
- a. Application process
 - b. Milestones in my program
 - c. Personal accomplishments
 - d. Personal downfalls

- e. Encouraging/Motivating quotes
- f. Academic coaching services
- g. Other: ____

19. How many followers does your page currently have?

20. On average, how often do you post on Instagram feed?

- a. Every day
- b. At least once a week
- c. 2-3 times per week
- d. At least once a month
- e. Other: ____

21. On average, how often do you post on Instagram story?

- a. Every day
- b. At least once a week
- c. 2-3 times per week
- d. At least once a month
- e. Other: ____

22. On average, how many hours a day do you spend on your academic Instagram account?

(This includes brainstorming/editing/posting content, replying to DMs, replying to comments)

- a. Less than 1 hour
- b. 1-2 hours
- c. 3-4 hours
- d. 5 hours or more

APPENDIX C: Doctoral Student interview Guide

1. Let's talk about when you were applying to graduate school. What were three things you were considering when looking for doctoral programs?
2. How many times did you apply to doctoral programs?
3. How many programs did you apply to?
4. Did you get any help or support with applying to graduate programs (e.g., institutional, familial)?
5. Did you participate in any graduate school preparation programs? If yes, tell me about it. Probe: What parts of grad school was the program helpful for?
6. Did you know that students can negotiate the details of their graduate school offer? Did you negotiate your admission?
7. What program are you in and what year are you?
8. Why did you choose this doctoral program?
9. What do you hope to accomplish with your PhD? What career do you hope to pursue post-grad?
10. I know each grad program has different requirements like program milestones. What do the milestones in your program look like?
11. Does your program help explain these milestones?
12. Are there things you must figure out yourself?
13. I am interested in the types of support you get in your program. What support, if any, do you receive from your program advisor?
14. Do you have cultural overlap with them?
15. How about support from your cohort peers or other graduate students?

16. What are two or three challenges you have faced in your program and how did you handle those?
17. What does racial diversity look like in your program including students, faculty, staff?
18. Are you involved in any programs geared toward diversity, being first gen, etc on campus that help you navigate your program? What kind of resources do you get?
19. What is it like being a first-gen Latina in your program?
20. Do you feel that you can show up as your authentic self in your department?
21. Have you ever experienced any form of microaggression in your program?

Page Engagement: People engage with social media in diverse ways. I am curious if and how you engage with *Academic Latina*. The following questions are about your impressions and practices on the account.

1. Around what time in your academic trajectory did you first start following *Academic Latina*?
2. What made you follow *Academic Latina*?
3. If you could describe *Academic Latina* to someone who is unfamiliar with the page, how would you describe it?
4. Tell me about the kind of content that you enjoy seeing shared on *Academic Latina*.
5. *Academic Latina* posts a range of things such as daily activities, professional clothing, applying to grad school or navigating programs. Has anything on *Academic Latina* been helpful for your specific academic trajectory. Like what?
 - a. Can you think of a specific post that helped you navigate your graduate program? If not, what could *Academic Latina* share that would help with applying/navigating?

- b. Do you think *Academic Latina* could influence others in pursuing higher education?
6. There is an idea of a hidden curriculum. These are all the things that students are expected to know or do but are not explicitly taught. Do you think that the content on *Academic Latina* provides info on the hidden curriculum? Like what/how?
7. Does the content of *Academic Latina* compare or differentiate to the information you receive in your department?
8. What have you learned online that your department did not mention?
9. Has *Academic Latina* influenced how you view/feel about yourself as a Latina academic scholar?
10. Do you feel like you could show up as your authentic self online?
11. If there was an academic Instagram page tailored to your identities, what would the content of that page include?
12. Have you ever recommended *Academic Latina* to anyone? Why?
13. Please describe whether you believe *Academic Latina* offers a safe space.
14. Do you think *Academic Latina* fosters a sense of community for followers?
15. Has *Academic Latina* helped you build community for yourself?
16. Let's talk about your interactions on *Academic Latina*.
- a. In your survey you mentioned you ____, what do you think encourages/keeps you from engaging in these ways?
17. Can you name a few of the other academic Instagram accounts that you follow?
18. Can you compare *Academic Latina* to those other pages?

19. Have you ever met anyone through *Academic Latina* or other Academic Instagram accounts? Any friendships or support groups?
20. Have you participated in any in-person or virtual initiatives?
21. Do you believe that there are any negative outcomes of following academic IGs?
22. Is there anything else you wish I would have asked you about your doctoral experience and/or the Instagram account?

APPENDIX D: Non-Doctoral Student Interview Guide

1. You're an undergraduate/master's student, what are you studying?
2. Why are you interested in pursuing a doctoral degree?
3. What do you hope to accomplish with your PhD? What career do you hope to pursue post-grad?
4. What were three things that are important to you when considering a doctoral program?
5. Have you applied to doctoral programs?
 - a. How many programs did you apply to?
 - b. If not, when do you plan to apply?
6. Are you getting any help or support with applying to graduate programs (e.g., institutional, familial)?
7. Did you participate in any graduate school preparation programs?
 - a. If yes, tell me about it.
 - b. Probe: What parts of grad school was the program helpful for?
8. Do you feel like you fully understand the grad school application process?
9. I am interested in the types of support you get in your undergrad/master's program. What support, if any, do you receive from your faculty and/or counselors?
 - a. Do they also identify as Latine?
10. How about support from your peers?
11. What is one academic challenge you have faced as an undergrad/master's student?
12. What does racial diversity look like in your program including students, faculty, staff?
13. Are you involved in any programs geared toward diversity, being first gen, etc. on campus that help you navigate academia?

- a. What kind of resources do you get?
- 14. What is it like being a first-gen Latina in your program?
- 15. Do you feel that you can show up as your authentic self in your department?
- 16. Have you ever experienced any form of microaggression in your program?

Page Engagement: People engage with social media in diverse ways. I am curious if and how you engage with *Academic Latina*. The following questions are about your impressions and practices on the account.

- 1. Around what time in your academic trajectory did you first start following *Academic Latina*?
- 2. What made you follow *Academic Latina*?
- 3. If you could describe *Academic Latina* to someone who is unfamiliar with the page, how would you describe it?
- 4. Tell me about the kind of content that you enjoy seeing shared on *Academic Latina*.
- 5. *Academic Latina* posts a range of things such as daily activities, professional clothing, applying to grad school or navigating programs. Has anything on *Academic Latina* been helpful for your specific academic trajectory. Like what?
 - a. Can you think of a specific post that helped you in applying or considering doctoral programs? If not, what could *Academic Latina* share that would help with applying/navigating?
 - b. Do you think *Academic Latina* could influence others in pursuing higher education?
- 6. There is an idea of a hidden curriculum. These are all the things that students are expected to know or do but are not explicitly taught. Do you think that *Academic Latina* provides info on the hidden curriculum? Like what/how?

7. Can you compare the informative content on *Academic Latina* regarding grad school application to the information you receive from your department?
 - a. What have you learned online that your department did not mention?
8. Has *Academic Latina* influenced how you view/feel about yourself as a Latina academic scholar?
9. Do you feel like you could show up as your authentic self online?
10. Have you ever recommended *Academic Latina* to anyone? Why?
11. Please describe whether you believe *Academic Latina* offers a safe space.
12. Do you think *Academic Latina* fosters a sense of community for followers?
13. Has *Academic Latina* helped you build community for yourself?
14. Let's talk about your interactions on *Academic Latina*.
 - a. In your survey you mentioned you ____, what do you think encourages/keeps you from engaging in these ways?
15. Can you name a few of the other academic Instagram accounts that you follow?
16. Can you compare *Academic Latina* to those other pages?
17. Have you ever met anyone through *Academic Latina* or other Academic Instagram accounts? Any friendships or support groups?
18. Have you participated in any in-person or virtual initiatives?
19. If there was an academic Instagram page tailored to your identities, what would the content of that page include?
20. Do you believe that there are any negative outcomes of following academic IGs?
21. Is there anything else you wish I would have asked you about your undergraduate experience and/or the Instagram account?

APPENDIX E: User Demographic Questionnaire

1. First and Last Name
2. Email
3. What is your country of birth?
 - a. If you were born in another country, at what age did you move to the U.S.?
4. Race
5. Ethnicity
6. What are your preferred pronouns?
7. What is your mother's country of birth?
8. What is your mother's highest level of education?
9. What is your father's country of birth?
10. What is your father's highest level of education?
11. What is your highest level of education?
12. What is the state and country of your K-12 education?
13. What is the state and country of your undergraduate education? (leave blank if not applicable)
14. What is the state and country of your master's graduate education? (leave blank if not applicable)
15. What is the state and country of your doctoral education? (leave blank if not applicable)
16. On average, how many hours a day do you spend on Instagram overall?
 - a. Less than 1 hour
 - b. 1-2 hours
 - c. 3-4 hours

- d. More than 5 hours
17. How did you find *Academic Latina*?
18. How long have you been following *Academic Latina* on Instagram?
- a. At least 6 months
 - b. 6 months - 1 year
 - c. 1 - 2 years
 - d. More than 2 years
19. In total, how many pages do you follow that share academic content?
- a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5
 - f. 6
 - g. more: _____
20. When you're scrolling on Instagram, does *Academic Latina* content typically show up on your feed/stories or do you have to look for it?
- a. It shows on my feed/stories
 - b. I have to look for it
 - c. It varies
21. Have you ever commented on *Academic Latina* posts?
- a. Yes
 - b. No

22. Have you ever "liked" *Academic Latina* posts?

a. Yes

b. No

23. Have you ever had a private conversation with Jennifer, the creator of *Academic Latina*, via direct messages?

a. Yes

b. No