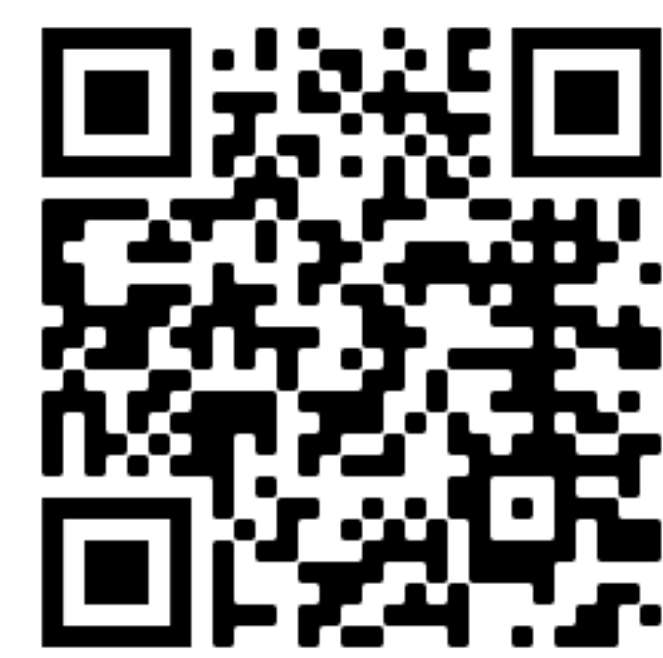


A Booming Online Presence: Examining Older Adult Online Presence and Activity



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Overview

Despite older adults being stereotyped as passive internet consumers, the number of older adults who have an active online presence is higher now than ever before. Traditional differences between the digital presence of “young” and “old” are only becoming more outdated. What’s more, research on the “digital divide” (inequitable access to digital technology and its associated benefits) is prone to collapsing older adults into a single category of internet users. However, an intersectional approach to examining who is online among older populations reveals diversity among adults in their internet access and skill level.

Who’s Online?

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed, all of us, older adults included, to use social media more than ever before. While those in the highest age brackets (80’s, 90’s, 100’s) maintain a limited online presence, online content consumption and creation from people in their 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s rose significantly during the pandemic and has only continued to rise.

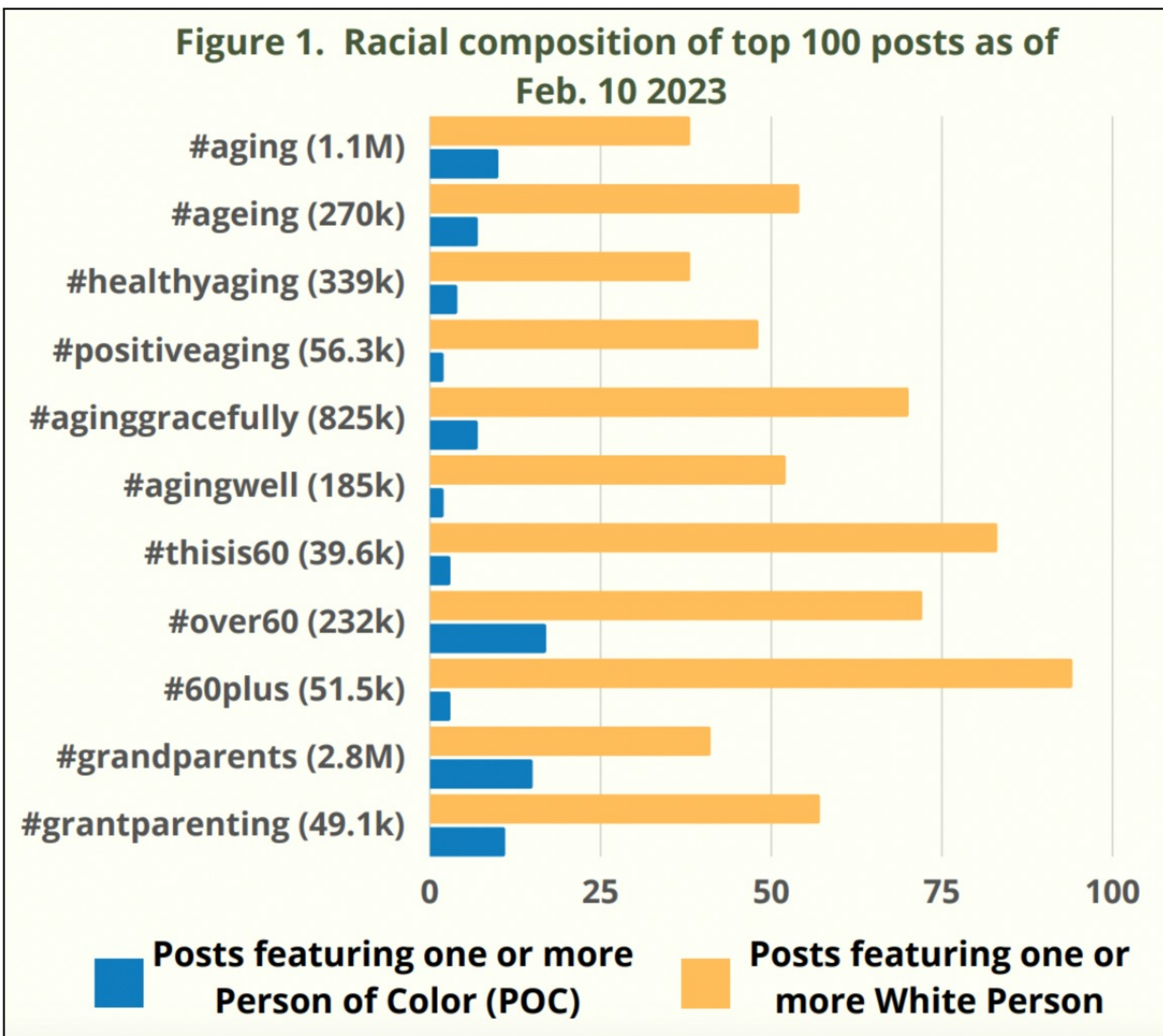
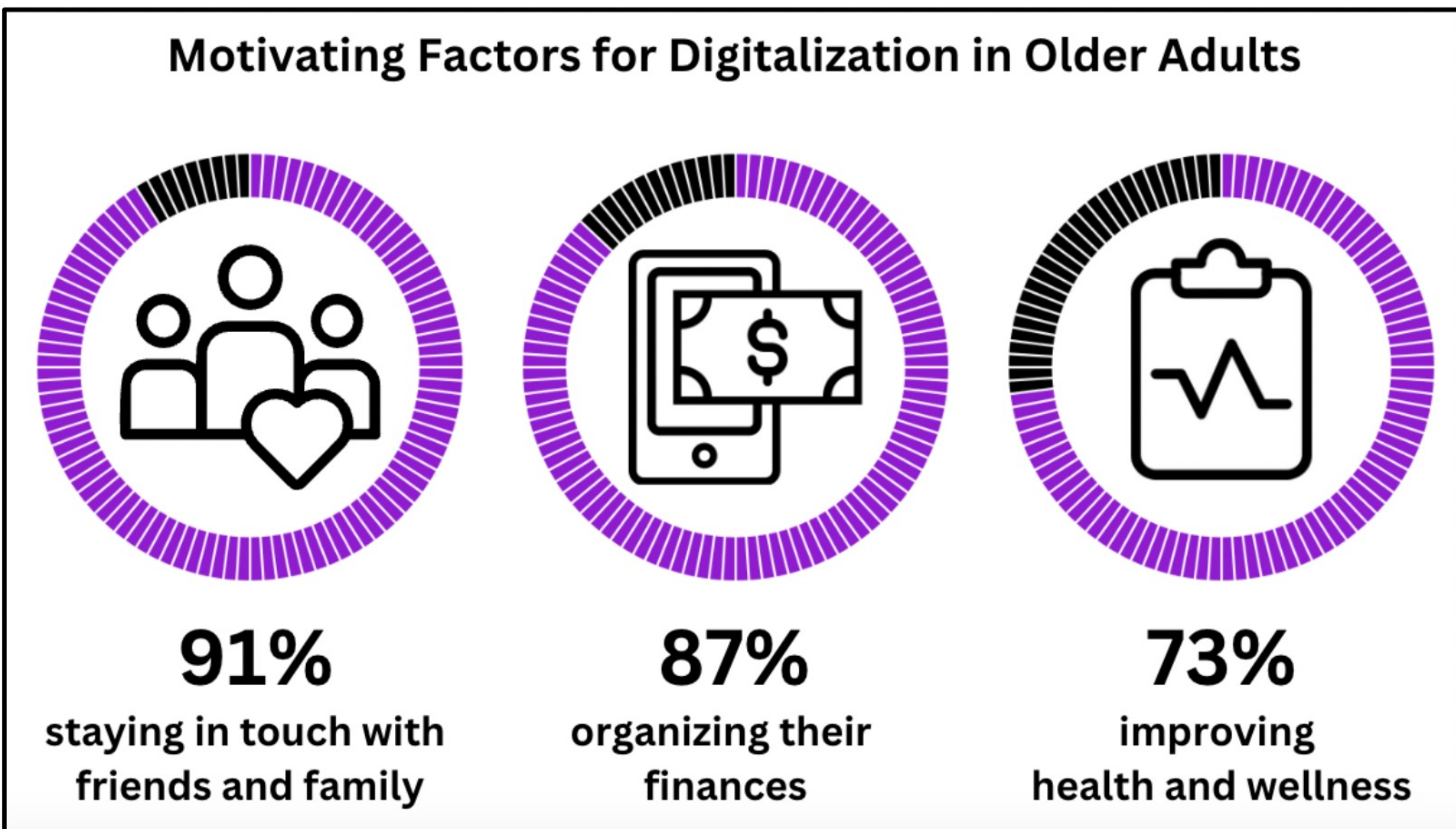
As of 2021, 4 out of 5 of those age 50+ rely on technology to help mitigate loneliness and social isolation. The most popular social media platforms among older adults include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Pinterest. Facebook (62%) and YouTube (66%) are by far the most adopted of these platforms among older adults and can play a crucial role in their social and psychological wellbeing.

A Digital Divide

Findings on digital inequality demonstrate correlations between a person’s societal privilege and their ability to tap into online resources. The higher someone’s relative social position, the more likely they are to be able to engage in further capital-building internet activities. The digital divide mirrors other inequities: factors such as race, education level, and socioeconomic status are all predictors of internet access, adoption, and skill level.

Compared to the 70% of US adults age 65+ who use the internet in a typical day:

- 17% of low-income and disabled adults in this same age group have internet access.
- Black older adults are 25% less likely to begin using the internet than white older adults.
- Hispanic Americans age 75+ report the lowest rate of technology use among same-age peers.



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Social Constructions of Aging on Social Media

Social media platforms like Instagram have a significant impact on how old age and aging are socially constructed. These online environments reproduce assumptions spanning race, disability, gender, and perceptions on age, socioeconomic status and health, and often the intersection of these social constructs. While social media has rapidly increased awareness of social issues, online content about aging remains largely monochromatic and monolithic, often promoting an image of aging that is white and female.

We identified a set of 11 hashtags related to positive perspectives on aging (e.g., aging well, healthy aging). Our sample assessed the racialized composition of people in the top 100 posts for each hashtag, totaling 1,100 posts **Out of 1,100 posts, 81 posts (7.3%) included a person of color.**

#over60 had the highest number of people of color per 100 posts (17 posts) which featured older Asians (12 posts), Latinx older adults (2 posts), a Black older adult (1 post), and mixed race/multiracial individuals (2 posts). Other hashtags had as little as 2 posts per 100 that included a person of color.

The low rates of racial diversity among posts pertaining to aging on social media portrays an incomplete perspective on aging in the 21st Century.

Looking Ahead

The number of older adults who have an active online presence is higher now than ever before. Getting to know this audience as they adopt new technologies will help increase inclusion of this population in electronic communication and outreach. **Countering ageist stereotypes that reinforce the idea that older adults have not moved online is necessary to reaching this demographic.**

Fully embracing older adult digitalization requires attention to *inclusivity and accessibility* of online materials. As the population ages the number of older adults who are using electronic and social media will only continue to grow.

At present, social media offers a homogenous view of how aging is conceptualized with little inclusion of how racially minoritized individuals experience the aging process, resulting in a missed opportunity to identify common and unique experiences to inform social policy and programming.

There is a need for more research and representation in the mono-representation of race in aging content on social media.

This includes a need for diverse content production around healthy aging for all older adults.