

#Aging: Mono-representation in Aging Content on Social Media

Social media platforms like Instagram have a significant impact on how old age and aging are socially constructed.¹⁻³ 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.³ 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.⁴

In this brief we consider the current “picture” of aging content and put it in relation to other forms of socially intersectional issues in aging.

Framing Aging

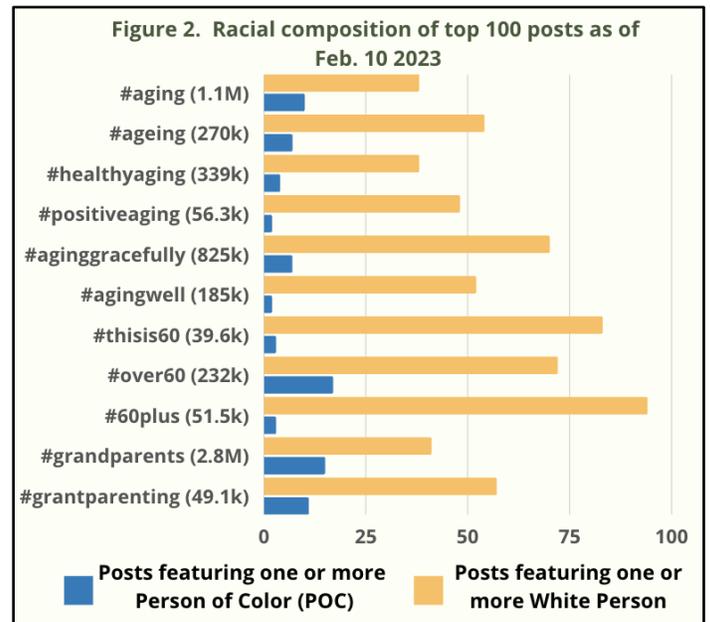
Hashtags include a tag symbol (#) that precede a keyword or phrase to create digital archives of content, allowing users to follow conversations about particular topics (e.g., #aging). We identified a set of 11 keywords and phrases hashtags related to positive perspectives on aging (e.g., aging well, healthy aging, Figure 1).⁵

Hashtag topic:	NUMBER OF POSTS
1. #aging	1,100,000
2. #ageing	270,000
3. #healthyaging	339,000
4. #positiveaging	56,300
5. #aginggracefully	825,000
6. #agingwell	185,000
7. #thisis60	56,300
8. #over60	232,000
9. #60plus	51,500
10. #grandparents	2,800,000
11. #grandparenting	49,100

Out of 1,100 posts

81 posts (7.3%) included a person of color

Our sample assessed the racialized composition of people in the top 100 posts for each hashtag, totaling 1,100 posts (Figure 2). #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.



Our research further demonstrates which hashtags return results that are more exclusively image-based versus which have a higher rate of posts that feature text only. Hashtags related to wellness and #grandparents tend to have a higher number of posts that are text-only, compared to posts that are more about body visibility (#aginggracefully; #thisis60; #60plus).

The two hashtags with the highest number of image-based posts also had the lowest proportion of posts featuring people of color. Out of 100 posts, #thisis60 returned 83 posts featuring at least one white person but only 3 posts featuring a person of color: 2 Black

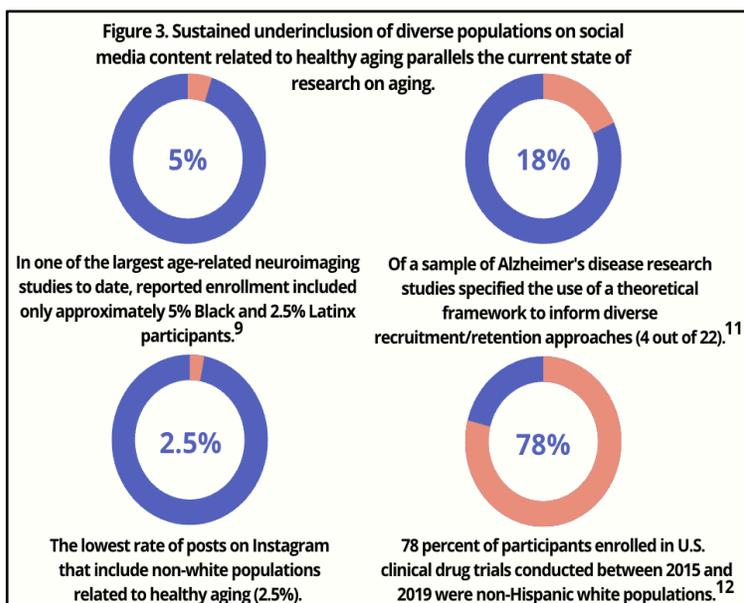
women and one Asian woman. #60plus returned almost completely image-based posts: 94 out of 100 posts included a photo of a white person, with only 3 posts featuring people of color: 2 Black older adults and 1 Latinx older adult.

The “Picture” of Aging

Aging is a unique and complex experience in which age, social class, race, disability, and gender exert a significant influence on access to essential resources (e.g., quality education, health care, retirement savings) across the life-course. Yet our findings demonstrate a lack of intersectional diversity among Instagram posts related to aging.⁶

Parallels in Research

Social media parallels the current state of research on aging. The experiences of Black, Latinx, AAPI, and Alaska Native populations are highly underrepresented in aging related research (Figure 3).^{7,8} In one of the largest age-related neuroimaging studies, reported enrollment included approximately 5% Black and 2.5% Hispanic/Latinx participants.⁹ This proportion closely aligns with the low rates of posts on Instagram that include non-white populations related to healthy aging (2.5%).



Social media is reflective of other diversity issues related to aging: health disparities, housing security, as well as lack of diversity in research about aging.¹⁰ Social media offers a visual narrative of current knowledge gaps in the field and echoes other calls for increased focus on the recruitment and retention of minoritized populations in research studies.¹¹

A Call for Representation in Social Media and Inclusive Research

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

As with research, social media largely leaves out the unique experiences of diverse populations, how the aging experience has common and unique themes, and how aging is conceptualized across diverse older adults.

Conclusion

The low rates of racial diversity among posts pertaining to aging on social media portrays an incomplete perspective on aging in the 21st Century. 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. Sustained under-inclusion of minoritized older adults in aging research may be perpetuated by other norms of social exclusion, such as social media visibility.¹³ An additional brief considers the importance of diverse, nuanced, and varied portrayals of aging on social media.¹⁰ This brief further reveals the need for diverse content production around healthy aging for *all* older adults.

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