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The graying of the boomers

The Baby-Boom generation has always championed honesty. But when it comes to gray hair, they're perpetrating a massive cover-up.

By Eve Glicksman

There's trouble in Baby-Boom paradise. My tell-it-like-it-is generation has resorted to hiding what they are: gray.

Today, "Love our body, ourselves" means "call the plastic surgeon." The youth culture we triggered has backlashed. With gray our hair apparent, looking thirtysomething has become a multibillion-dollar industry.

Like our parents who complained about our frayed jeans and straggly hair, we haven't learned how to separate who we are from how we look. It's not that a silver wisp so diminishes our attractiveness. It's what it all

means in a gerontophobic society: The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be.

We are not fooled by this myth of the Golden Years. In the workplace and social arena, the perception is that young is smarter than old, more attractive than old, more creative than old, more competent than old. If you want to pay us a compliment, don't praise us for any real accomplishment — act surprised when you find out how old we are.

Midlife crisis? Not. Think of us as conscientious objectors to aging. "We have stumbled into that apostrophe in time between the end of growing up and the beginning of growing old," writes Gail Sheehy about 35- to 45-year-olds in her book "Passages."

"The Deadline Decade," Ms.

Sheehy calls us. Not ones to relinquish control, we battle to push back the age deadlines for pregnancy and marathons, career changes and crow's-feet. Going gentle into that good night was never the Boomer way. Like Peter Pan who doesn't want to grow up, we have an inkling that what's to come isn't to our advantage.

Baby boomers promote bias

Ironically, baby boomers have probably done more to promote the "young is better than old" bias than any other generation. Our gross consumption of denim and rock 'n' roll provided the ultimate proof that "youth sells." Since then, young and old, have become so polarized that

Eve Glicksman, a Philadelphia writer, has 19 grays and counting.

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Hair: An obsession rooted in our fear of growing old

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middle age barely exists and the old are invisible.

To soften the blow of maturity, we make patronizing allowances for older adults in expressions like "young at heart," "looks great for his age," or "still spry." The implication is that those over 50 who are attractive, dynamic and worth our interest are astonishing exceptions.

Unlike other dishonesty, we seem to forgive people who lie about their ages. And devil-may-care about political correctness when it comes to good hair days. Shampoo-in color — or toupes, for that matter — is no less than a realistic response to a world where age and appearance clearly matter.

As for survival of the fittest, "Women on TV don't get older, they get blonder," Barbara Walters once quipped. That, or they wind up in ads for dentures and Depends.

A 20th-century invention

Artificial haircolor first became vogue in the 1920s when Madison Avenue spurred on our insecurities about sex appeal. Concealing gray is a 20th-century invention that gained momentum when average life expectancy passed 50. In the 1700s, when we minded our elders, a white wig was a favored marking of aristocracy.

We've discovered since then that money can't buy us love, but it does get us "Loving Care." The median age for patrons of haircolor products is 43, with Americans spending more than a half-billion dollars a year on the elixir. You can dye and go to heaven, too, commercials suggest. Who among us wants to be the younger sister

who looks older, or the older sister whose Clairol dependency (and real age) could be exposed?

The gender gap

According to Clairol, 46 percent of women and 8 percent of men color their hair. Note, here, the peculiar gender characteristics of gray that make women age and men look distinguished. It was reported in *The Times of London* (and refuted) that British Prime Minister John Major is not naturally gray, but uses a rinse to get that seasoned look.

Then there are people like Barbara Bush who dip into the dye and bravely proclaim abstinence 10 years later. "People who worry about their hair all the time are boring," she said of her foray back to silver. Indeed, the time and money involved in upkeep can be substantial when multiplied over several decades. (Another thing our no-tell hairdressers know for sure.)

Society's expectations

But being mistaken for your husband's mother is not something we're all willing to endure with the grace of the first lady. Society expects us to look youthful. We should rush out to buy the dishwashing liquid that will give us hands as young-looking as our daughters'. If we don't bow to such salvations, we are censured for "not looking our best," or worse, "letting ourselves go."

Try as we might, we're a generation that still can't get no satisfaction. Haircolor is more than a rinse — it's another way of inhaling. One more drug that allows us to stave off reality for a time. Nice 'n Easy.