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COVID-19 Might be Your Time to Go Gray

By: Laura Allen, Wenqian Xu, Hanna Köttl

Social distancing brought on by the novel coronavirus has suddenly interrupted the services that we routinely use, and hairdressing is no exception. Globally, many people do not have access to their regular hairstyling services, such as hair dyeing. This is problematic for people (especially women) who typically upkeep the coverage of their gray hair with hair dye. On one hand, this has prompted creative thinking from the grooming industry; hairdressers are creating tutorial videos and are organizing take-home hair dye kits for clients. On the other hand, some clients are choosing to embrace their natural roots: actress Tamera Mowry-Housley and talk show hostess Kelly Ripa are both [documenting their natural hair on Instagram](https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/03/9606263/celebrities-with-gray-hair-coronavirus-quarantine) (<https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/03/9606263/celebrities-with-gray-hair-coronavirus-quarantine>) during the Coronavirus. More and more people are embracing gray hair and documenting the transition on Instagram under the hashtags of #gogrombre, #embracethegray and #grayhairmovement.

Gray hair occurs naturally and genetically, as hair turns white when pigmentation cells stop producing melanin. Most people in their 30s will see a few silver hairs. Yet the majority of people dislike it and tend to cover or dye the hairs. Why is it so common to dye naturally gray hair?

Stereotypes of older people and visible signs of aging

Stereotypes of older people (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8056949>), are widely held by all age groups. . For example, the depiction of a man as an advice-giving, sage-like grandfather in a television series plays on a stereotype of wisdom associated with older age. Women with short, curly, white hair, otherwise known as the “pensioners’ hairdo,” might be seen as “sweet, little old ladies.” The physical signs of aging, such as the graying, changing, or losing of hair and the development of wrinkles, become a visual part of the stereotypes. Because visual signs of aging are apparent to us at first sight, they function as myth-consistent cues for perceivers while they process the information about older people. When we see these visible signs of aging on a person, whether in public or in the media, we may be “triggered” and attach the stereotypes we have about older people to that particular person.

Hair suddenly takes on a new meaning if it grays with age, signaling a sort of “entrance” into later life. Our aversion to looking older reflects our negative perceptions and attitudes towards aging and old age, and causes us to strongly discourage physical signs of aging. As we move through life, we internalize ageist messages about looking older and aging, which adversely impacts the physical, mental, behavioural and social functioning of older people.

The intersectionality of age and gender

The stereotypes and beauty standards are not influenced by ageism alone but have a gendered component as well. While men also experience changes in the aging body, women often face more pressure to look younger. In her book, *Learning to be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*

(https://books.google.com/books/about/Learning_to_be_Old.html?id=gleiqHJlwMMC), Margaret Cruikshank (2013) points out that while men are thought to grow more distinguished and mature with age, women's

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appearance “is valued for staying the same” (p.149). They should work very hard to maintain a youthful look. In a study in the UK (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ageing-and-society/article/if-i-look-old-i-will-be-treated-old-hair-and-laterlife-image-dilemmas/0CB62403645FEF4CC8EFF18C9D47CE70>), women reported feeling socially invisible once they let their hair go gray and said they were no longer a subject of sexual gaze. Many women fear that they will lose sexual attractiveness if they choose to embrace the color change and “look their age.” This historical cultural narrative that strongly ties female sexuality with younger adulthood appears to be rooted in humankind’s evolutionary and reproductive drive. Nevertheless, it should be noted that men are also increasingly concerned about the pressure to look young in today’s western societies.

Coloring hair is connected to a sense of personal control. Advertisements pressure people to be proactive and fight visible aging with box dyes, tweezers, and creams, otherwise you are “giving up” or “letting yourself go.” The beauty industry creates the picture of the active, healthy aging woman that takes care of her body. Hence, productivity and power status seem strongly connected to youthful appearance as well. Even powerful women like Hillary Clinton (<https://www.politico.com/story/2015/05/hillary-clinton-hair-118381>) stress the importance of hair and hairstyles. Women in positions of power or status (usually in a male-dominated work environment) are most pressured to fulfill the societal expectation of what a woman looks like.

If you have been hesitant to go gray but want to, now is the perfect time to stop dyeing and embrace your natural color. Our contact with the public is much more restricted currently, and social distancing has given us the opportunity to try out new ideas. When we emerge from the other side of the coronavirus, we may be in a society less restricted by social pressure. If letting your silver come in will make you feel more authentic, use this chance to free yourself and make the transition. Going gray could be considered another way to take care of yourself during this prolonged time at home. If video chat obligations make you reluctant, you can blame it on your inability to see a hairdresser right now. And if you find that your natural color doesn’t strike your fancy, you can always go back to coloring when salons open back up!

Still not convinced?

In some corners of the Internet, the beauty standard is changing, and many people with naturally gray hair are choosing to be visibly free in their choices. Women like Lyn Slater (@iconaccidental (<https://www.instagram.com/iconaccidental/>)) and Suzi Grant (@alternativeageing (<https://www.instagram.com/iconaccidental/>)) have entered the modeling and fashion scene in recent years, as well as other older models boosted by the *Advanced Style* photographer, Ari Seth Cohen (@advancedstyle (<https://www.instagram.com/advancedstyle/>)). The Internet has also provided a way for people who are making the transition to come together. With Facebook pages and Instagram accounts like @Grombre (<https://www.instagram.com/grombre/>), women now have access to a community of people encouraging each other and sharing tips for making the transition.

If the gray-hair revolution continues to gain more ground, perhaps it could mitigate ageist stereotypes related to appearance and build confidence to embrace natural beauty. We simply want to contribute to the conversation and empower people who want to let their silver make an appearance but have felt uncertain about it. There is no shame in going gray or continuing to color! We believe that choosing a more authentic self, whether or not that includes dyed hair, should be applauded.

Photos by Samuel Greenhill www.samuelgreenhillphotos.com (<http://www.samuelgreenhillphotos.com>)

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visit: <https://euroageism.eu/projects/addressing-ageism-through-empowerment-and-awareness/>
(<https://euroageism.eu/projects/addressing-ageism-through-empowerment-and-awareness/>).



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