A bunny hop from yesterday to today

Nostalgia never goes out of fashion. But when the going gets tough, we embrace a gauzy past even lighter, like toddlers white-knuckling their blankets.

The present is uneasy, and the future is uncertain. Now, it seems, nostalgia is not. We know how it turned out, and it can be further refined, streamlined, satisfy and comfort us in whatever way we like.

“We’re confused, what are we stressed, when we’re overthinking the past, because we imagine it to be simpler than the present, is appealing,” said Nina Diamond, an associate professor in marketing at DePaul University.

So it’s no accident investors are poised to launch a Playboy Club on Chicago’s Near North Side, resurrecting the physical identity of the 1960s that’s been gone from Chicago for a generation.

The reality of the old clubs is less sexy, sophisticated and hip than the marketing-driven recollections we know, a layer of “Mad Men”-style gloss and airbrushed out the bleachers.

Like “The Playboy Club,” NBC’s new fall drama set within the original Chicago nightclub, the new club will be free to play off the best memories we have, real or imagined, while avoiding whatever less pleasant aspects might turn us off.

The Playboy Club and “The Playboy Club” benefit from being pre-osed as being not what we know, while retaining the idealized promise of something new and unknown, which has yet to disappoint.

“I can’t imagine the show will be anything like the real Playboy Clubs,” producer and creator David Silverman told the Los Angeles Times this month.

(Playboy founder Hugh Hefner is always trying to make himself and the clubs seem glamorous instead of tacky)

Steinem, whose de-
Nostalgia takes short hop from yesterday to today

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Seeing a recent uptick in business driven by the brands of customers' youth, a phenomenon that also accompanied the beginning of the recession, said owner Terese McDonald. "It’s as if people are seeking a Provençal memory of the Mary Jane candies of their childhood.

“I do a huge Tootsie Roll and Tootsie Pop business, Bulls-Eyes, Chuckles,” said Mr. Back. He opened his North Southport Avenue store four years ago and a North Michigan Avenue outlet two years

Mary Ann McGrath, associate dean and professor of marketing at Loyola University Chicago’s Graduate School of Business. “There is something, I suppose, about the good old days, if you feel America has peaked and it is a valley right now, that you would like to go back and think about what life was like when it wasn’t a struggle. That’s a lot of what nostalgia is.”

McGrath recalls taking her grown children to see a revival of the musical “Hair.” What jumped out at them, viewing the 1960s story with modern perspective, was the subversive role of women, which didn’t seem quite so archaic at the time.

“Maybe that’s the fun of nostalgia, dealing with the positive and kind of ignoring the things that were uncomfortable.”

Practically in the shadow of the original Chicago Playboy Club, the American Girl Place has long been appropriating aspects of history to help sell dolls to girls and, just as important, their mothers and grandmothers.

“Some research shows that says girls play and think in reality, and boys play and think in fantasy, so that’s... I think that’s been so successful,” McGrath said. “(American Girl) uses the stories to talk about things that girls today think about.”

That’s what memories are about. They’re contextual. What we found with American Girl was (kids) used the stories that are presented to them in the form of these cardboard dolls as projective technics, and they attach all kinds of meaning to them and come up with ways their own lives are similar.

As far as Playboy Club’s revival goes, McGrath said, “We’ll just have to see if people really want that brand anymore.”

NBC describes the pilot episode of “The Playboy Club” as “In Chicago in the early 1960s, a young woman seeking adventure as a bunny in the glamorous world of the Playboy Club quickly finds herself in over her head.”

Steinem’s 1963 article quotes a co-worker scoffing at another who claimed to have had secretarial experience: “If you can type, what the hell do you want to be a bunny for?”

Which do you think is an easier sell in 2017? philrosenthal@tribune.com Twitter @phil_rosenthal