Channels explicitly dedicated to women and focused on lifestyle programming or female scripted contents represent an increasingly relevant phenomenon within contemporary Italian television, as confirmed by their pervasive presence both on free and pay TV and by the progressive rise and consolidation of their ratings. In recent years, the Italian television market has witnessed the launch and consolidation of some multi-channel platforms, which have significantly restructured the market and the entire competitive landscape. This major shift in the domestic television industry reflects a general dynamic characterising the evolution of the television industry throughout Europe into a Multi-TV environment that provides its consumer an extensive possibility of choice. In this extended setting, one of the most evident strategies conceived by the broadcasters to prevent audience fragmentation is to intercept some audience subdivision through a thematic offer. In this sense, gender-based programming represents a useful strategy, albeit not a completely innovative one.

Nowadays channels specifically targeting women constitute a rich and multi-faceted group, whose development dates back to 2004. This was when the channel Fox Life was launched on the Sky satellite pay platform, as a spin-off of the corporate brand Fox (already part of Sky’s bouquet) specifically targeting women. After Fox Life, numerous other female channels were devised, and the switch to digital terrestrial television, fully accomplished in 2012, has increasingly been marked by gendered narrowcasting, profitably practised both by media industries and advertisers. This exponential rise, occurred in the last few years, leads to a number of theoretical and empirical questions over the concept of “television for women”, e.g. the need for a new possible definition of this idea, rekindling a debate in Italy extensively flamed abroad.

Therefore, this paper aims at mapping how the female gender is used in the con-
temporary Italian television industry as a tool to establish channel identities. The paper will firstly reflect on the historical pattern that has led to this specific configuration of Italian “female channels”. After explaining how the meaning of TV for women has changed over the different stages of television history, it will consider how creativity takes part in communication and branding strategies of contemporary digital female channels, in order to differentiate the general and classic idea of “female audience”. An analysis of significant channel brands will be carried out in order to highlight how, in the field of an only apparently homogenous digital “TV for women”, different standards of content managing emerge, alongside different ideal female targets. Moreover, the paper will deal with the set between creativity and standardisation in the ways in which television, traditionally the leading medium in representing femininity, features the various images of women.

2. TELEVISION FOR WOMEN IN ITALIAN TELEVISION HISTORY

But what exactly is “TV for women”? In fact, the idea of some gendered programming has taken on different meanings over the years, according to the various typical features (technological, institutional and textual) of the medium in a specific stage of its own history, and according to broad social phenomena and changes.

If we look back at the history of television in Italy, the concept of “TV for women” represents a strong and traditional trend in the medium development, first used in the Fifties and Sixties to accomplish the pedagogic mission of the Public Service broadcasting, Rai, by means of some educational programmes. For instance, in January 1954, just as television started its regular programming, journalist Maria Grazia Puglisi produced and hosted the show Riservato alle signore (For Ladies Only), aired on Saturdays in the late afternoon, all year round. It was promoted by Rai’s house organ, the “Radiocorriere”, as a “program for women” aimed at familiarising the housewife with her domestic duties and at giving a basic education on etiquette and manners. Rai’s approach was mainly devoted to utility, and its strongest point of reference was the model of women magazines, with their regular columns written by experts on wellness and beauty, cooking and dinner hosting, child-rearing, home economics, and interior décor. The daytime slot was, since the very beginning, the privileged moment where female contents were collocated (alongside kids TV), as examples of “ordinary television”⁴, leaving the primetime to some more prestigious productions, ideally addressing the whole household.

It was not until the late Seventies that the concept of television for women was totally redefined by the aggressive thrust of commercial television, just as the monopoly of the Public Service collapsed and new players entered the market, above all the media company Fininvest, soon owner of three channels. The paternalism typical of the first Rai management, evident also in the way female contents were handled, yielded to a more strategic and somehow cynical use of the concept of television for women. TV for women became a “marketing tool”, vigorously used to reach out to a specific target of viewers, also (and most importantly) to consumers and decision makers over the family budget. This operation was carried out using various strategies: the first one was the massive importation of scripted series from the US, including a prominent investment

in high budget soap operas. In 1981, the main Fininvest channel, Canale 5, aired the soap *Dallas* that very soon became its schedule pivot and the first mainstream success of Italian commercial television. A second strategy consisted of the creative use of the schedule as a strategic instrument to address a specific audience: since the female audience was soon acknowledged as the pillar target of the newborn commercial television, a daytime slot called *Pomeriggio con sentimento* (*Afternoon with Feeling*) was devised and filled with Hollywood movies, mainstream Italian movies and, after a while, fully dedicated to soap operas. This phase of the history of the Italian “TV for women” represents an interesting observatory on a crucial and mutual connection between gender, temporality (the daytime) and TV genres, based on some “social constructs” that Byars and Meehan have described in this way: “first, that culture industries target gendered audiences, aiming specific artefacts and particular genres at either men or women; second, that particular audiences, defined by gender, seem to have special relationship with particular genres”. Utility and pragmatism gave way to escapism and entertainment as the main means of audience engagement.

Although *Pomeriggio con sentimento* was gradually phased-out, the custom of filling a coherent slot with gendered programs in the daytime has lasted ever since and Canale 5 has based its weekday schedule on domestic and international soap operas, alongside daily talk shows, in an open struggle with the Public Service to control the female viewership.

### 3. Contemporary “TV for Women” and Digital Channels

TV for women is not just a historical trend, but it is also one of the main factors of innovation and change in the contemporary Italian digital television environment, due to both technological and cultural change, as occurred in the US with the launch of gendered narrowcasting in the cable environment. In the Nineties, American brands such as Lifetime, Oxygen, and The Women’s Entertainment Network featured a new approach to women television. Since 2004, openly female channels make their first appearance in digital television both as branches of international media corporations localised in Italy (such as Diva Universal, E!, Real Time, Fox Life), and as Italian-specific attempts (Lei, La5, La7d, Lady Channel). They now represent the main and most evident expression of women’s television.

Each channel presents its specific case history: each of them have had a different starting point and has been developed for different reasons – both concept and industrial – some of which were strategic reasons while some others were more random and not entirely planned. Strategic ones for the conscious use of the gender as a tool of brand identity were behind the launch of Fox Life, Diva Universal and Real Time, tactically planned by international media groups since their very beginning. Femininity in these cases had a thematic segmentation function and all channels have had to come to terms with the requests from Sky Italia media company, that own the pay TV platform and

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host them in its entertainment basic bouquet. Sky requests all of its “non-proprietary channels” to meet specific requirements as to both target audience and contents: those of matching stick to the gender and age audience profile provided by the platform and to the agreed TV genres, in order to avoid internal competition. This strict mandate made it easy for a few channels to deal with femininity as a thematic tool. It is the case of Diva Universal (the only female channel focused on vintage scripted contents), or Fox Life (which mixes factual entertainment and contemporary American TV series), or again Lei, owned by RCS media company, publisher of many female magazines. Lei case is partially different from the others, since it was initially conceived as an ideal extension of the magazines (already representing part of the media group expertise), mixing high-brow talk shows with vintage TV series, and it has later converted to a channel entirely dedicated to factual entertainment, when the genre had become a staple of women’s television.

Real Time, after inaugurating its regular programming in 2005, rapidly became a standard-setter in terms of both editorial decisions and audience ratings, being the most successful of the multi-faceted group of female channels.

In the context of digital terrestrial television, female channels have gone through more spontaneous and unplanned processes, adapting to the gradual definition of the new setting and to the arrangements of direct competitors. Albeit one of the main intents behind the institutional decision of switching from analog signal to digital terrestrial was to open-up the access to new players, a few consolidated operators of mainstream television colonised the new available frequencies and established new digital channels mainly as “placeholders” to occupy free slots. It is the case of La7d, companion channel of the mainstream network La7, which was initially launched as a mere “placeholder” to occupy a frequency in the new environment of digital terrestrial television, to gradually turn into a female channel, as the competitive scenario was becoming more evident. Another interesting case is La5, owned by Mediaset and companion channel of commercial network Canale 5. This channel was launched to combat audience erosion in mainstream television and to make the most of the valuable library of Mediaset’s rights while attracting a young and hip target which was less and less interested in the programming of the main channel Canale 5, now an old-fashioned approach to female television.

From this overview, it is clear how “female channels” represent a homogeneous group, although riddled with differences and specificities peculiar to each brand, as the paper will now further investigate.

4. COMMUNICATION IN CHANNELS FOR WOMEN, BETWEEN STANDARIDATION AND CREATIVITY

As seen, the contemporary television industry has not abandoned its strategy of providing an offer based on associating specific types of programming to variables of gender. Over time, the change has affected the connection between certain programmes and specific target audiences, which were considered suitable for that kind of content. The current rise of a set of channels targeting the female segment does not as much represent an element of creativity and innovation, as rather a fairly predictable outcome of the the-
matic organisation of television programming. Creative work is rather activated in the definition of branding and communication strategies capable of promoting and render highly recognisable each channel among those belonging to the world of the “channels for women”. In effect, the editorial choice to thematise a channel based on the variable of female gender always entails the same type of objective, namely to communicate clearly that the programmes on offer have been designed and conceived to appeal to women, to attract them with contents that always promise to reflect their interests and passions. Therefore, the available combination of female channels tends to take the shape of a swarm, which at first glance appears indistinct and homogenous as well as characterised and specific: it is indeed a group of channels transversally present on the satellite and digital television platforms. This presence is the expression of a television offer which is somehow ‘secondary’ compared to the ‘premium’ channels (both pay and free), yet capable of generating that sense of diversification/thematisation and fragmentation/abundance of contemporary television. On closer examination, this swarm shows different internal elements, starting from the profiling strategies used by the networks case by case; this means that, if the female gender is the logical reference, each channel has its own creative approach to modify the categories and boundaries which define and make this femininity recognisable as a key point. This approach entails the way in which this focus is communicated and in which the image of one’s own ideal audience of reference is depicted. In the scenario of Italian “television for women”, three channels in particular describe different ways in which a channel balances the normal standardisation of certain editorial processes with the necessary innovative and creative thrust which strengthens a brand. For example, the case histories of Diva Universal, Fox Life and Real Time display some common and very distinct traits which can be identified in the different trajectories assumed by the creative forces of each editorial line. Let us look at them in detail.

4.1. The communicative creativity of the Diva Universal brand

Among the ways in which television content is nowadays organised, the thematisation of a channel based on the selection of “certain” products for a “certain” target is considered a traditional mechanism, especially in the world of pay TV.

Diva Universal represents an example of this mechanism, with its name making explicit reference to the female world with an offer based only on products of scripted entertainment. Diva is an example of the ability to mediate the many constraints that define its editorial line and the creative pursuits promoted by editorial marketing to strengthen the channel.

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9 The issue of creativity in television production has been studied by approaches focused mainly on the operating conditions and the daily professional practices in media industries. See, for instance, M. Deuze, Media Life, Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007; T. Havens, A.D. Lotz, Understanding Media Industries, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.


A first constraint is linked to the mandate imposed by the Sky Italia platform: to win a precise segment of the Italian female target market of mature women over the age of 45. Since Diva Universal is a pay per view channel, more priority is given to the selection of the target market than to the mere results of the average audience share information provided by the quantitative data.

In the face of the obvious appeal of the female target market in television in recent years, Diva has implemented a further segmentation of the target as an instrument of further connotation within the gender channels: the communication of the channel shapes the image of a selected audience with style, personality, wit. As a second constraint, Diva Universal has to define its programming by means of a library of serial products only, and not even the most popular ones: costume dramas, also dated ones; American dramas already shown on mainstream television; American and European TV movies. The channel appeals to an ideal female viewer who approaches television programming with a relaxed attitude based on the enjoyment of a slower narrative pace compared to the contemporary series. Necessary creativity and innovation have been achieved with the production of Donne nel mito, a series of brief documentaries produced by NBC Universal Global Networks Italia, in which each episode deals with the story of a “diva” (from Maria Callas to Margaret Thatcher), to “reveal the other side of history, the one written by women.” In the scenario of female channels available on free and pay TV, which is so rich and competitive, the mission set for “Diva” is to celebrate femininity and elegance, every “Diva like you”, as the pay off claims.

A further intervention to innovate and update the channel has been carried out with the aim of conveying a female image that reflects the current times. This is the DIVA Social project, an active form of social commitment towards important women’s issues such as breast cancer research, Alzheimer’s disease, violence against women, environmentally friendly issues. The project was launched in 2011 with the aim of qualifying the target audience of the channel by implementing a female brand. The history of Diva Universal as a “traditional thematic” channel illustrates a path of progressive characterisation of the independent variable represented by its target reference gender: mature, over forty-five women have been created and conceived by the channel brand through a female image capable of redefining some common stereotypes regarding female life and age. In this way the brand try to work at a social level values the viewers through the image of women who are self-aware and mature thanks to their ability to go beyond themselves. Therefore, the “limits” of age, envisaged in order to target the segment of mature women, turn into a distinctive feature for a traditional thematic channel like Diva, which is capable of leading brand communication to creatively innovate the images of women portrayed on television: the woman that Diva Universal has in mind knows what she wants, she is very self-confident, she is relaxed enough not to be on top of the world, a woman with a leading role, independent, informed.

4.2. The creative mix of Fox Life broadcasting

Fox Life is the only channel in the Fox Italia group that explicitly uses gender as a characterising feature of its identity and as an editorial compass. The channel profile outlined by Sky advertising describes its offer as “an eclectic mix of fiction and reality, designed to satisfy its female target with an innovative, irreverent channel for the modern woman: gifted, independent, who knows what she wants and is not afraid of taking
risks. It is the channel that combines life with fiction to provide intelligent, relaxing and fresh television entertainment”\(^\text{13}\).

The percentage of unscripted programming today is not particularly high (approx. 20-25% depending on the period), but it preserves and confirms a predominant feature in the historical identity of Fox Life – namely, being the first channel of the Sky platform to experiment the “modern” factual in Italy. First of all, the audience profile entrusted to the channel basically coincides with the female subscribers to Sky, with a core target identified in 35-44 year-old women with a middle or high socio-economic and cultural profile, and an extended actual target that includes the range between 25 and 54 year old women. This target can be rendered through the image of “the modern woman” who realistically experiences life in the contemporary world, i.e. that may reflect different female subjectivities (being a mother/wife/worker...). Similarly, also the choice of the name of the channel, Fox Life, strengthens its mission to embrace female “everyday life” by always focusing on the household environment. Fox Life aims at being the “unique” destination for the series devoted to a female audience thanks to the appeal of the Fox brand. Secondly, the channel presents a competitive factual offer represented by strong and “unique” product brands: the Italian productions represent the creative attempt and the financial investment necessary to beat competition, to avoid that for Fox Life get lost or end up overwhelmed by predominantly serial programming. The mission of Fox Life, compared to its competitors aiming at the same female target, is to guarantee the offer of a range of products that have a female target, and, at the same time, open up to some family access. This approach to understanding the segment of the targeted audience entails the planning of the management of the factual genre, starting from the selection of some thematic areas which are more in line with the family segment and are covered by ready-made and original Italian products: sexuality (like Sex education show), maternity (the long-running Reparto Maternità), weddings (Quattro matrimoni in Italia), formats totally made in Italy; family (SOS Tata), cookery (In cucina con Giallo Zafferano, Cucine da incubo Italia). A final thematic area of sustained investment for Fox Life is fashion, with the Italian production of the format Project Runway. On Fox Life, the factual sector aims to resemble a serial product yet avoiding forms of snack fruition, also in the day time slots, which would generally promote a practice of “unfaithful” consumption. In this regard, Fox Life extra television offer has been oriented towards populating the social networks, cross-mixing with other areas by exporting its peculiar marketing and promoting trends and female audience target entertainment. Above all, these brand loyalty programmes have exported a female-oriented concept on multiplatform sets.

4.3. The creation of Real Time as a female channel model

Real Time is the most significant case among female channels, and from many perspectives: in terms of audience figures, of the social relevance of its brand, of its talent shows and its programmes in collective public discourse, and, not least, its ability to affect the strategies of direct competitors. Since its outset the channel has been oriented towards a female target audience, namely women of high socio-economic level, in line with the

general characteristics of Sky subscribers. Unlike the other two channels, Real Time has used gender as a criterion to thematise its offer in a brand new way, soon becoming a model of inspiration for other female channels. Real Time has indeed moved away from the traditional relationship between TV and female audience into a new direction, introducing narrative programs, formats and formulas unprecedented in the Italian context. Since its inception, the channel has provided viewers with a combination of contents that seem both familiar and related to the daily lives of women and, at the same time, innovative when compared to the traditional formulas of television programmes aimed at women. New formats and new production styles offer the female target a more condensed television fruition. Such a fruition mode can appeal to a younger audience and enhance the reference target of 25 to 44-year-old women who work, are busy and curious, open to becoming interested in different issues, to getting involved in both the practical dimension of everyday life as well as the ideal sphere of feelings and relationships. The channel’s winning strategy is to avoid, like the other networks, the construction of a service based on the acquisition of factual products, while focusing instead on a line-up of programmes almost exclusively consisting of original productions set in Italy and hosted by Italian “talents”, which guarantees a fundamental link with local national culture. Similarly, the international acquisitions are in some way connected to the national context (for instance, higher quality dubbing of programmes compared to competitors, or the Italian-American origin of the baker Buddy Valastro in Il boss delle torte). The tag line Live your time accompanied the launch of Discovery Real Time, and profiles the image of a viewer that is positive, socially active, with many interests, with a busy but balanced life in its many aspects, careful but not obsessed with her looks, with her own tastes and style. When Real Time began broadcasting on digital terrestrial television in 2010, a new process of change also began, aimed at conquering new segments of the female audience both stretching towards a more mature audience of over 50-year-old women and involving more the ‘provincial’ audience of southern Italy.

5. WOMEN AND TELEVISION: SIGNS OF CHANGE?

The three case histories outlined above have demonstrated how the female gender is still a productive label for studying television and have shown, once again, how the concept of “television for women” cannot be considered to have only one interpretation. During the medium’s history in Italy, this concept has taken on different meanings and mirrored different ideals of what television for women should be, at least from the media industry’s perspective.

The consolidation of the digital channels with a female-oriented identity has followed a well-trodden path while testing out some experimental approaches. An otherwise homogeneous and standardised environment is relieved by a variety of channel identities, which have arisen to address a target that is by no means uniform but multifaceted and very complex in demographics such as generation, geographical location, social class, and other variables.

In this new scenario, the proliferation of the various channels’ brand identities has created an explosion of different female images corresponding to the imaginary construct of each channel’s ideal target woman (not to be confused with the actual women

14 Lotz, Redesigning Women. Television after the Network Era.
watching at home). The broadcaster’s role in portraying these imaginary constructions, thus establishing each channel’s identity, has emerged strongly as a new form of creativity in the television industry, accompanied by a reworking of standard practices such as acquisition, programming, scheduling and brand communication, all at the service of the female audience. In the rich environment of multiplatform television, strengthening the brand identity as a “clear promise” to engage the viewer, is one of the TV industry’s most delicate and important tasks. In this sense, channels for women also represent an interesting research arena for analysing marketing and branding, crucial in the convergent environment.

Despite this sense of variety characterising brands and channels, the programmes on Italian female channels are highly formulaic. They are mostly based on similar genres (factual entertainment and its sub-genres), similar formats (often common to other countries) and, most of all, identical themes (a “celebration” of the domestic and individual sphere). Therefore, the creative processes in contemporary TV for women not only play out in traditional routines of authorship – i.e. the act of “writing” or producing programmes (very often relying on international formats and recurrent mechanisms) – but also find more powerful expression in branding strategies aimed at shaping the channels’ core values.

Contemporary TV for women offers an interesting viewpoint on the classic dynamic between standardisation and innovation that has marked every phase of television history. Indeed, it is standard practice for the TV industry, and more broadly, for the cultural industries, to address a specific gender audience (male or female) with specific products, although the industry is innovative in devising a new strategy to better qualify this target and build suitable “TV experiences” for each of its subdivisions.

SUMMARY

“TV for women” represents both a strong, traditional factor in the medium’s history and one of the main components of innovation and change on Italy’s contemporary television scene. On one hand, female audiences have always been the core target of mainstream television; on the other, the new digital thematic channels now consider them a specific, strategic target. Although strong elements of continuity between older and more recent forms of “TV for women” are evident, a new creative process emerges from behind the strategies and standards of producing, scheduling and managing content typical of today’s broadcasters.

This article aims to map three models according to which the female gender is used in the contemporary Italian television industry as a tool to build content and to establish channels’ identities. In the (only superficially homogeneous) field of digital “TV for women”, what content-management standards emerge? How do communication and creativity contribute to branding strategies to differentiate the general and classic idea of a “female audience”? And how are specific channel identities built for different female targets?