Processes of differentiation and fragmentation within: South African textile designers

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Abstract

In South Africa, textile design used to be widely acknowledged as an expert occupation. After earning a recognised qualification, graduates found full-time, secure employment with good conditions in the thriving textile industry. This chapter examines how the economic and labour market challenges of globalisation and new technologies turned this story of "good jobs" on its head. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews, primarily with textile designers, it explores their different working experiences. They talk of increasing fragmentation, with four segments emerging. First are those who remained employed within organisations, despite finding their autonomy and professional status diminished. Second are those who also remained in organisations but used their professional knowledge and status to create new jobs for themselves. Third are those who left organisations and moved into freelancing and contract work; many of them found this existence precarious and insecure, but a few were quite successful. Fourth are designers who became self-employed in the online economy, again with variable outcomes: some were extremely successful, while others encountered continued precarity and marginalisation. This chapter contributes to the *within* dimension of professionalism as it demonstrates differentiation and fragmentation within what previously used to be a homogeneous expert occupation.

Keywords: Textile designers, Situated professionalism, Professionalism, Heterogeneity, New technologies

In their introduction to this book (CH 1), the editors point to increasing differentiation both *within* and *between* professions. They argue this process of differentiation goes *beyond* the professions and affects society as a whole, and that to understand the changes in the professional project, it is necessary to locate them within the broader processes of institutional and societal change.

This chapter contributes to the discussion of the increasing heterogeneity and differentiation occurring within professions, sketching the processes of *differentiation within* the expert occupation of textile designers in South Africa. Drawing on the results of a qualitative research study, the chapter analyses the differentiation processes that have led to increasing heterogeneity. It casts light on how technological change, a relatively unexplored area (Bellini & Maestripieri 2018, 7), joined by economic and labour market challenges exacerbated by globalisation, has been an important element that has contributed to the change in the professional status of textile designers. As the research demonstrates, these two aspects have fragmented the profession, extending the boundaries of professional expertise and contributing to growing inequality, poorer employment opportunities, and more precarious working conditions.

South African designers have had little control over how the industry has changed – to survive, they have had to adapt to the new situations as best they can. The chapter identifies four differentiated "segments" (Noordegraaf 2016) that have emerged from these changes. First, those who stayed within the ever-shifting textile industry even when it became more difficult to maintain their professional autonomy. Second come those who used their professional knowledge and status to create new jobs for themselves within organisations. Third, those who left organisations and launched themselves as independent professionals. And fourth are the "newcomers", the "self-employed" who never had the possibility of working in an organisation, since they entered the labour market when very few large mills were still in operation.

1. Methods

The chapter is based on a qualitative research study. In-depth interviews were conducted using a non-probability sample. I identified several cohorts which are key to the broader home textiles supply and

production chain. These cohorts are textile designers, stylists, retail buyers, manufacturers, suppliers of home textile products, convertors/wholesalers, importers of home textile products, and educators of textile designers. Key informants were identified within these different cohorts, and snowball sampling was used thereafter.

A total of fifty-six in-depth interviews were completed using a semi-structured interview guide. Thirty were with textile designers located in the three major industrial centres (Durban, Cape Town, and Gauteng). A further fifteen interviewees worked within the broader supply chain – chief executive officers of textile mills, suppliers, importers, convertors, and retail buyers. Some respondents fitted into more than one cohort, such as textile designers who became stylists or importers. Ethical clearance for the research was obtained, with informants giving informed consent to be interviewed. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the informants.

Within each interview, a work narrative was identified; this was situated in time and space and contextualised within the broader social, economic, and political frame. Points of transition or change were identified and a comparison established across the work narratives of all the designers.

2. Professions and professionalism

Chapter 1 highlights the discussions within the "professions" literature around the concepts of *professions* and *professionalism*. The term *professionalism* has become increasingly prominent in the literature, as Bellini, Maestripieri and Parding argue, not only because scholars have agreed on its heuristic usefulness, but also because societal transformations have pointed to the need to distinguish conceptually between "expert labour" and "profession" (CH 1).

Initially the literature demarcated professions through the "taxonomic" approach (Saks 2012). However, over time the neo-Weberian paradigm, which defines professions "in terms of exclusionary social closure in the marketplace sanctioned by the state" (Saks 2012, 4), became dominant. The primary focus was on the traditional professions, such as doctors, lawyers, and accountants. Nevertheless, there was increasing recognition that perhaps the difference between the traditional professions and other kinds of expert occupations were "differences of degree rather than kind" (Evetts 2006, 134).

From the mid-1990s, shifts in the broader economy and society, particularly the tertiarisation of the economy and employment, have seen organisations becoming more significant as employers of professionals. This in turn has stimulated new debates within the literature, focusing on professionals within organisations and conceptualising professionalism in this context, as academics have sought to understand what these shifts meant for "the professions".

Evetts (2006, 140) suggested that the term *organisational professionalism* (in contrast to *occupational professionalism*) can be used to describe "discourses of control" used by managers within organisations. The concept of *hybrid professionalism* to describe professionalism in different organisational situations was introduced by Noordegraaf (2007). The development of these ideas and the accompanying debates are outlined in Chapter 1. However, the concept of *situated professionalism* (Noordegraaf 2007, 772–773) is not discussed. Noordegraaf suggests that situated professionalism illustrates situations where professionals can exert professional control while embedded within organisations and subjected to organisational control. This reinforces the point made by Evetts (cited in Noordegraaf 2007, 774) that "the meaning of professionalism is not fixed": as changes occur in the broader economy and society, so professionalism changes to accommodate these new situations. It is necessary to explore the broader "societal forces on professional work" (Noordegraaf 2016, 790) to wholly understand the impact of these and other changes on the professional field.

This in-depth analysis of the expert occupation of textile designer sheds some light on these discussions. Through tracing the impact of broader societal changes (in this specific example, the challenges associated with globalisation and digitalisation), it demonstrates empirically the challenges faced by situated professionals and illustrates the way in which these occupations have become fragmented by processes of differentiation.

3. South African textile designers, professionalism, professional values, and disruption

Textile designers are people who design (creatively conceive) the fabric used to produce apparel, furnishings, or even industrial textiles. Across these industrial sub-sectors, there are some common skills and knowledge required; but there is also great diversity related to technologies, products, and markets. All textile designers should be able to interpret a brief from a customer or manager and translate their creative concept (response) into a marketable product, using the design and production technologies available.

In South Africa, textile design was widely acknowledged as an "expert occupation" (see Dent et al. 2016, 1). Until the early twenty-first century, textile mills were dominant in the labour market, and were the primary employers of textile designers (Bonnin 2013). Most employed designers had graduated as textile designers (National Diploma in Textile Design, a three-year tertiary qualification), but some had other qualifications: in commercial art, fine art, or graphic design. Graduates quickly found full-time employment in South Africa's thriving textile industry. These were secure jobs with good pay and conditions.

> In the year that I graduated [1984], it was common that the best three students got taken up by David Whiteheads, who was the most prestigious textile mill in those days, the next three by Frame, and maybe the next three by Da Gama. […] Every single year, industry used to take them in. (Interview, Gil Anderson)

Management accepted that designers were "different" from other employees. As creatives, they needed to be nurtured in an artistic environment – a more "genteel" environment, separate from the factory. Most integrated textile mills had large design studios staffed by twenty to thirty designers headed by a studio manager. Designers were not "controlled" and monitored like the workers employed in other labour processes. The designers managed themselves – both their working schedules and their work processes. Designs and the different colourways were hand-painted. A designer could take two months to produce a design. They did not have to "clock in", and could leave the workplace to find inspiration, research, and "feed" the creative process.

> Then we had the flexibility. We could just tell Dave [the studio manager] or one of the designers, I'm just going out to the bookshop. […] We would go there and look at the books, then we could take them [on account]. We used to buy a lot of books from Adams [Bookshop]. (Interview, Paul Nair)

The studio manager was less of a "manager" and more of a facilitator or bridge between the "factory" (sales and production) and the "studio". At some mills, the person heading the design studio had the job title Head of Design or Creative Director, suggesting their role was creative rather than managerial. The more junior or less skilled designers were given a "tight brief" by the studio or product manager. The more experienced designers were furnished with a "concept", and had the freedom to interpret the brief as they wished. Creative freedom was embedded in the organisational culture of mills supplying the higher-end market.

> The Creative Director used to brief us because he went overseas and he used to know what the trend was and come back and have this whole big thing [presentation] with us. And then he used to sit with our senior designers, and he would give you the brief and say, this is what I am looking for, and this is the type of thing that I have seen. So you went away, and you did that. (Interview, Serena Pillay)

Unlike other expert occupations (see Muzio et al. 2011), South African textile designers did not strive for professionalisation – that is, to create a formal association, to vet membership, and to develop a code of conduct. Perhaps this was because most textiles designers were women, and, as Butler, Chillas, and Muhr (2012) argue, occupations that are overwhelmingly dominated by women are less likely to be professionalised in the "pure" sense (Noordegraaf 2007, 765–768). Nevertheless, South African textile designers based their claim to being professionals on their qualifications, skills, expertise, competence, and autonomy in the workplace. Their place of work was an important component of their professional

identity – according to the type of work produced by a particular mill, its status was higher (or lower), as was the status of the designers who worked there. The "high-end" mills were known for outstanding, original designs, and the designers working there were held in similar esteem by their colleagues. There was a strong sense of professional community and a close network existed among designers. Many had trained at the same institutions, and the number of workplaces was limited; thus, they all knew the designers who worked in other studios and recognised their "handwriting" (design style).

In turn, the designers' expertise was acknowledged by their peers and by industry that employed them, with the "best" designers developing a professional reputation based on their individual expertise. Thus, while textile designers were subject to the organisational discipline of the company that employed them, they were still able to exercise their professional discretion and control, described by Noordegraaf (2007) as situated professionalism.

Over the two decades from the mid-1980s onwards, dramatic changes in the industry disrupted the professional status and reputation of South African textile designers and turned the labour market upside down. At the heart of these changes were two underlying forces: first, the introduction of new technologies that significantly changed how designers did their work; second, economic change within the South African economy and the effects of globalisation, which severely impacted the South African textile industry.

4. Changing "societal forces" transforming the professional work environment

As the work environment described above began to change, it became less leisured and autonomous and a lot more pressurised and controlled. At first the transformations came slowly, but from the mid-1990s, they began to have a significant impact on designers. From the 2000s, developments accelerated, and the textile industry and designers' work environment changed completely. Two dynamics were significant: technological advancements in the industry and a shifting economic-political environment post-liberation.

New technologies, ranging from photostat machines to scanners and Computer-Aided Design (CAD), as well as developments in printing technology (initially inkjet printers and later digital printers), altered the work environment. In combination these technologies facilitated the "speeding up" of the labour process of design. It allowed the product manager (or studio manager) to request designers to "play around with some ideas" which could then be used to obtain strike offs (printed fabric samples) almost immediately without having to set up the printing machines, a process that would previously have taken one to two weeks (Interview, Robyn Silver).

CAD technologies allowed for the separation of a design on computer (that is, the separation of the design into layers by colour). This eliminated one of the product development steps (thus making the process faster), but also made the job of the separator obsolete.

> When you are working on the design on the CAD, you work in separations anyway, so it's just a matter of then taking those, cleaning them, sending them off, and they can work with them immediately. […] Whereas before we would have to actually paint each separation by hand, scan it, work with it, put it on to the laser and then the laser would engrave the screens. (Interview, Susan Robbins)

Technological developments allowed managers to require designers to produce their work faster, enabling the organisation to be more competitive and profitable. These demands changed the work environment, and it became more pressurised.

Furthermore, the new technologies impacted the designers' skills and knowledge and "broke" their control over their expertise. CAD, in particular, undermined the expertise, skills and autonomy of some textile designers. Some interviewees reflected on this transition:

> There were a couple of girls sitting and working, but on computers, and it was actually so sad. They scan a thing from a magazine and then sort of place it, your ability to draw and things fall away. […] We belong to the older school: we had no computer background. And

everything that we did [was] with hand drawing. (Interview, Serena Pillay)

While CAD required a different set of skills to those of a designer who drew and painted designs by hand, most of the people interviewed, from designers to mill managers, refer to a loss of skill. They agree that the most basic skill required by a designer is the ability to draw, and many people who now work as designers are no longer able to draw.

The technological developments, particularly CAD, undermined the occupation's boundaries – it was no longer necessary for a designer to receive a formal qualification to work as a designer. It became possible for those with "creative ability" but little technical knowledge of textile design to be employed as textile designers.

> I started […] doing communications and visual merchandising. Obviously I know the programs that are used for design, and then I wanted to move into a more creative role, and they moved me across to design. […] Because I haven't studied as a textile designer, I don't, can't, paint like Steph. […] But what I can do is, I can take Steph's art work and step it up, clean it up, manipulate it, change colour, do all that kind of thing on computer. […] I can also create designs and patterns on computer. I can draw things and manipulate them, do pattern repeats. (Interview, Cathy Baines)

The second force that dramatically changed the industry occurred in the wake of political liberation and the end of sanctions: after 1994 the South African economy was integrated into the global economy. Macro-economic policy moved from import-substitution to export-orientated policies; in accordance with WTO directives, tariffs were dropped and industries deregulated, particularly in the textile sector (Roberts & Thoburn 2003). Ultimately, some imported products became cheaper than those manufactured in South Africa (Roberts & Thoburn 2004, 129), resulting in an overall increase in imports that provided robust competition for South African mills. Alongside this came significant changes in the market. The end of the decade saw a mushrooming of mass-market retail stores focused on the home furnishings sector, not only forcing a change in the mills' main product –from "fabric-on-the-roll" to "ready-mades" (mostly bedding and curtaining)– but also facilitating a shift from a production-led supply chain to a retail-led supply chain. Over ten to fifteen years a major restructuring of the textile sector took place as it attempted to respond to these changes. Several mills downsized, closed sections, and/or focused on one aspect of the production process; ultimately, many mills closed their doors permanently. From a scenario of many large, vertically integrated firms employing thousands of people, there emerged a landscape of fewer, smaller, more specialised companies (Bonnin 2011).

As the economic circumstances of the industry changed and mills downsized, they cut back their design studios.

> Basically, as a designer left, they were not replaced, and that is kind of how it went. (Interview, Susan Robbins)

When a mill closed, so did its design studio. Subsequently, the employment and labour market for textile designers changed significantly. Many designers lost their jobs. They were forced to rethink what it meant to be a textile designer and how they could continue their careers.

The consequences were increasing differentiation and fragmentation within the occupation. To cite Noordegraaf (2016, 793), "'differentiated' segments […] appeared" within the labour market. There was a temporality to the "appearance" of this differentiation in response to changes in the industry and the economy. Furthermore, as Noordegraaf (2016, 794) has argued, the tendencies towards fragmentation were not neutral; not only were some of the segments viewed as more prestigious than others, but they offered better conditions and more secure employment.

5. Staying within the organisation

Several designers attempted to continue working within the textile industry. They adapted as the industry changed its technologies, markets, and products. They learnt new skills, took on new

responsibilities, and moved from company to company, endeavouring to stay ahead of retrenchments and closures. Within this group, two different segments were formed.

5.1 Intensifying managerial and technological control

In the first segment were the designers who remained employed despite the downsizing and restructuring of the sector.

> I started working in 1981. I walked straight into a job at Frame Fabrics, […] that is when we had like 30 designers, and over the years, it dwindled down to like two left. Number one was, computers took over, […] and, gradually, people were just retrenched, one after the other. And CAD took over from textile designer. (Interview, Candice Brown)

As a result of digitisation and restructuring, jobs were scarcer, and, simultaneously, competition increased as those with other qualifications (graphic designers, illustrators) entered the sector. The changing market meant that mills did not need many designers to "feed" production. They employed one or two designers, offering a design facility to their customers (primarily large South African retail chains).

The designers that remained within the sector saw their working conditions change considerably. There was less opportunity to create original design work. Their task was to carry out the customers' instructions and ensure the designs supplied were ready for production.

> You are briefed by the customer as to, you know, what they want; because they are looking for a specific thing, or they have got a specific look. You know, like [Company X], they have an artist who does their work, and then all I do is interpret that on the computer so that we are able to print it. […] Most of the time, it's not in a repeat, so then we have to put it into the correct repeat. (Interview, Ingrid Smith)

> The customer sourced this pillowcase, where there are bits and pieces of design, and so I've had to draw it and fill in the missing bits. So we draw on our old design expertise from that stage, but we don't sit and endlessly create like we used to. (Interview, Melanie Thompson)

These designers worked under intensifying managerial and technological control – their work became increasingly standardised and their autonomy and status was greatly diminished.

> Even though we have jobs, and we are working in the industry, it's not you being creative, you know. […] Some of them try to play designer and tell you, no, put that texture on or that colour […] or you get told, here is your fabric. […] It's a piece of fabric or a picture of a piece of fabric that they couldn't get. (Interview, Salt River Designers)

The chief executive of one of the few remaining print mills explained:

> We have a different calibre of designer today who doesn't have to be the interpreter, the originator, innovator. They really have to copy what they are told or given to make. (Interview, Solly Brand, cited in Bonnin 2013, 126)

While these designers were still embedded within an organisation, they were now subject to strict organisational and market-driven controls, and it was increasingly difficult for them to maintain their professional autonomy. They retained their skills and their expert knowledge, albeit different from those of textiles designers of an earlier period, but institutional closure (in the Weberian sense) no longer held any purchase. I suggest that for this segment of designers, the organisational context eradicated professional control (Noordegraaf 2007, 772).

5.2 Taking on managerial roles within organisations

The second segment of designers also remained employed by the large textile mills (for as long as possible). However, some moved to new organisations and found employment with convertors or in retail. They managed the changing conditions by using their professional knowledge to create new roles

(jobs) for themselves (Kirkpatrick 2016; Muzio et al. 2011; Noordegraaf 2007). They took on managerial roles within these organisations – their new jobs as stylists or product managers were grounded in their professional knowledge as designers. One of the designers who left designing to enter these new spaces explained:

> I wouldn't have had a job otherwise. […] I learnt to flex and change, and I think I am still surrounded by people that I have known in the industry that can't do it; […] they land up with no job, basically. Whereas I always have, I have looked at the thing; I have said okay, that era is finished. […] What can I do now. […] I thought to myself, okay, in a few years' time there isn't going to be a mill left in this country. Do I want to carry on working in manufacturing until there isn't a mill left to go to, earning less and less and less because they can't afford to pay me, or do I look at what is working, which is "ready-mades" and retail and […] try and make a living out of that? And if you can't do that in this industry, well, then you will find yourself waitressing. (Interview, Gil Anderson)

This segment comprises designers who were considered to be (more) talented and, most importantly, aware of the market. Jobs as stylists or product managers required professional design knowledge plus technical knowledge of the design and production process. Using these skills and this expertise, stylists liaised with customers, briefed designers (either freelance or employed by the company), conceptualised ranges, and oversaw processes at the mill.

The work story of Andrea Campbell illustrates this trajectory. Andrea trained as a textile designer, graduating in the mid-1980s. After two years working in one of the largest mill-studios, she asked to move into a production-linked position. Here she learnt about production, oversaw the development of products, and liaised with customers.

> [I] worked in the mill on the creative side, colouration, getting involved with projects and designs, and coming to present them to [wholesalers and convertors]. (Interview, Andrea Campbell).

As the industry began to change and became more retail driven, stylists like Andrea left the mills and were employed by convertors (convertors "convert" base cloth or greige into printed fabric), who had themselves set up design capacity.

> Obviously, I had a background in design: I could style, I could colour. So we started to create our own collections and try to not be as dependant on [the mills]. […] Basically, the business just, you know, changed, and I took on more and more responsibility. So, today I look after designer marketing. (Interview, Andrea Campbell)

The question is: can people who are in this segment still be considered professionals? In their positions, they draw on their professional reputations and use their professional knowledge. They are in management positions but are also recognised within their peer group as being very successful professionals, not only in terms of their craft but also as having escaped being crushed by a collapsing industry. They wield professional power and, in the "new" world of design, serve as "points of entry" into the labour market.

6. Operating outside organisations

When mills closed or downsized, many designers lost their jobs. Since the sector had contracted, these designers and other, newly-qualified ones found it difficult to (re-)enter the labour market. They either had to leave the profession altogether or to find alternatives. This group also formed two segments, each with a slightly different relationship with their clients.

6.1 Freelancers

As a result of retrenchments or lack of formal employment opportunities, some designers moved into freelancing and contract work. They used their existing networks to find business, often with organisations where they had previously been employed. Their ability to secure contracts was dependent

on their reputations for excellence and on their existing networks, as well as the broader business environment. "New organisations" that opened up in the sector provided opportunities for freelance work. These included recently established cut-make-and-trim firms and retail (some large retailers like Mr Price Home or Sheet Street started developing their own design capacity). Freelance work was hard to obtain, and many designers found life increasingly precarious.

One freelance designer explained that after she left her job at a design studio, she contacted retail store buyers. One of them offered her work, and she expanded her network over time. Soon she became quite busy, but as the industry changed and retail stores developed in-house design capacity, freelance work opportunities diminished (Interview, Sally Oliver). Other freelance designers described similar experiences:

> In the beginning, we did very well, and then as time went and this whole recession thing hit, and that is what happened. Like nobody wants print. (Interview, Devi Perumal)

> We had a bit of a problem when the bottom fell out of the market, and people weren't doing anything. (Interview, Fey Clarke)

Freelancers were also dependent on the vagaries of their customers, who pressurised them for design changes but refused to pay for the additional work.

> It would sit for weeks, and it had to go through, I don't know, another four or five selections before they decided, yes, I want this. And then […] they would send it back to you and say, no, I would like this thing to change because I don't want a circle there, I want an oval there. And after that, no, I don't think the oval works; put it back into a circle. […] Eventually, like, you get fed up, and they don't know what they told you to do, and it has to sit again in the pile to get back through that whole selection process and then eventually they will take it. (Interview, Devi Perumal)

> I had enough, […] enough of all the buyers just changing stuff because they could […], and young buyers had come in. And often [they] didn't know what they wanted, so they would brief you, but didn't really give you a good solid brief because they didn't really know what they wanted, and so they would constantly make changes. (Interview, Sally Oliver)

Income levels varied, and most designers found freelance work precarious and insecure.

> When we did freelance, we were not well paid. Because they feel that you are doing it in your spare time. They forget all the stuff involved, and yet art work is so expensive. (Interview, Devi Perumal)

As stated by Maestripieri and Cucca (cited in Bellini & Maestripieri 2018, 7), "being on the market, however, is not always sufficient to ensure adequate income levels".

Some freelance designers were more successful, and managed to build a secure relationship with one or more organisations. They enjoyed the "freedom" of freelance work. However, despite this, their creative autonomy was diminished, their professional power diminished, and they had to abide by the logic of the market (see Bellini & Maestripieri 2018).

6.2 The post-crisis designers

Many designers in this segment completed their training and entered the field as the industry went into decline post-2000. Some had studied textile design, but many had obtained qualifications in related fields–for example, fine art, illustration, graphic design, and printmaking. They had never worked as designers in the mills and had never designed commercially or produced long-runs in textile mills.

Upon qualifying, many of them were not employed as textile designers. Some began their careers in other areas; for example, Monica Church worked in sales for various convertors and fabric houses before starting her own small design business. Others, like Andi Burger, designed and printed fabrics at home to produce craft-like items, such as tea towels or cushion covers, to sell at local markets.

The designers who set up small businesses were unknown; however, they were able to build their

professional reputation and expertise through the internet and e-commerce. Many of them created blogs, enabling them to showcase their talent, thus creating a professional network and establishing an international reputation.

> [I] started blogging at the very beginning […], and that's how a lot of the shops have found me. (Interview, Sharon Spence)

By presenting themselves in the online space, they came to the attention of larger retail companies searching the web for new talent and products. Their next step was to create online stores, securing clients and building up their reputation. Initially, they used services like Etsy (which started in Brooklyn, New York), which provided an (international) online platform to sell unique, home-crafted items. Later, they set up online stores tailored to South African customers. These strategies allowed their businesses to grow, and brought them to the attention of the media, which developed their reputation further.

All these designers resisted establishing relationships with large organisations, whether as permanent and secure "collaborations" or as temporary relationships. They argued that such relationships compromised their independence and autonomy; they would not have been able to set the conditions of a contract, which would always have been on the larger organisation's terms (Interview, Monica Church). They preferred to make their own way, slowly building up and controlling their own businesses and reputations.

Some designers in this segment became extremely successful, eventually opening small businesses. An element in their success has been the organisational strategy of creating networks and sharing resources with other professionals in similar positions (see also Maestripieri & Cucca 2018), enabling them to mediate market pressures. Overall, these were informal networks made up of people who held a similar position in the market who felt that they would all benefit by sharing information and resources.

> Sometime last year, I thought it might be nice if all the local independent fabric designers and producers got to meet each other. Part of the reason was that a large cotton mill in Cape Town had closed all of a sudden, and most of us found ourselves floundering a little and in need of some support and advice. So we met, and immediately there was a generosity of spirit. […] We all shared our contacts, advice, experience, and enjoyed echoing each other's moans about our problems with printers/CMTs/etc. Soon enough, we were meeting more often, and the Threadcount Collective was born: a loosely woven group of independent textile designers and producers who meet to help and support one another. (Skinny la Minx 2010)

The Collective is seen as a source of support:

> It's been great to have support – somebody you could call. I mean, we all are kind of similar in our experience, which I realised. We are all doing pretty much the same thing, […] you may be struggling too, instead of feeling like odds and competing with each other as it were, helping to support and grow the industry. (Interview Sharon Spence)

> Besides meetings, there have also been collective projects – for example, sharing space at the Cape Town Design Indaba and pop-up shops in their early days. Ten years later, the collaboration was still active. (Skinny la Minx 2019)

Although organised with a different purpose, a similar informal network existed in Durban. When the mill they worked at closed, a group of designers pooled their resources and set up a design "collective". One of the members who had experience as a designer and stylist took on the role of liaising with customers.

> So I said to them, why don't we all go freelance. […] I will be a consultant and you get paid consultancy fees, and in order to provide a service to my customers, I will sell your artwork and pay you for it. (Interview, Gil Anderson)

The designers in this segment have found spaces within the new economy and have successfully adapted their ways of working. They have deliberately avoided being incorporated into large organisations; ironically, in time many of them have become (successful) organisations themselves. While their

success is subject to having "mastered" the market, they can still exercise their professional discipline and retain control.

7. Conclusions

The chapter demonstrates the process of differentiation that has taken place over the last forty years within the expert occupation of textile designer, resulting in great heterogeneity. It shows how transformations in the broader economy and society disturbed the status quo and sparked a series of disruptions that undermined and fragmented the profession, creating differentiated segments with higher or lower status. Existing forms of closure were eradicated by digitalisation and social and economic changes in the sector. The outcome was significant changes to the labour market, locations, and employment conditions of textile designers.

As a result, four different segments formed – some retained their professional status with good, secure jobs, while others were left in marginal and precarious situations. Two segments of designers remained employed within organisations: the first became subject to increasing organisational and market-driven controls and consequentially diminished professional control; the designers in the second segment were able to use their professional knowledge to transcend professional boundaries and create new jobs for themselves within organisations – these were jobs that used their professional expertise but were outside the boundaries of the profession strictly speaking. The third and fourth segments exist outside the traditional labour market. Many freelancers, the third segment, are in precarious positions, with their professional power reduced by the market. Designers in the fourth segment have found spaces within the new digital economy and have been able to exercise professional discipline and control despite the powerful logic of the market.

This discussion highlights several issues for the broader literature. The chapter has argued that situated professionalism best describes the position of textile designers: they are embedded within organisations but still able to exert professional control. However, for most South African textile designers, this status has changed due to social and economic changes and digitalisation. While digitisation has played a key role in disrupting the position and status of textile designers, taking over some of their work and undermining the skills that used to confer them their status, it has been significant in allowing the "post-crisis designers" to establish themselves as "new professionals" and build up their reputations. This suggests that professionals located within organisations might be particularly vulnerable to processes of change: while some (e.g. segment two) were able to use their positions to promote their professional projects, many others were forced to capitulate to the market logic and surrender their professional autonomy.

Segmentation within the textile designer occupation provides insights into the debates around changing notions of professionalism and, in particular, the role of organisations. While some of these outcomes might be interpreted as resulting in deprofessionalisation, this ignores the agency of textile designers (in all segments) in attempting to position themselves to promote their professional projects. Designers accept the "discourse of professionalism"; but while it might be a means of social control, as Evetts suggests (see CH 1), it has also been used by designers as a means of positioning themselves in the face of digitisation and a shifting labour market. We can see how designers (particularly those in segment two and four) have played an active part in creating a "rhetoric" to protect their professional positions. Organisational collaboration has been central to creating both the discourses of professionalism and this new rhetoric.

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9. Annex: List of interviews

Pseudonym	Profession	Place and date of interview
Anderson, Gil	Textile designer, colourist, stylist, supplier	Durban, February 2009 and March 2009
Baines, Cathy	Graphic artist/textile designer	Durban, 9 June 2011
Boyd, Tricia	Textile designer	Durban, 15 March 2011
Brand, Solly	CEO in a division of a large textile mill	Cape Town, 23 August 2011
Brown, Candice	Textile designer	Durban, 14 July 2011
Burger, Andi	Fine artist, illustrator, designer	Cape Town, 25 August 2011
Campbell, Andrea	Textile designer, colourist, stylist, convertor	Johannesburg, 17 October 2011
Clarke, Fey	Textile designer	Durban, 16 February 2011
Church, Monica	Textile designer, sales, convertor	Cape Town, 22 August 2011
Nair, Paul	Textile designer	Durban, 1 March 2011
Oliver, Sally	Textile designer	Durban, 31 May 2011
Perumal, Devi	Textile designer	Durban, 18 June 2011
Pillay, Serena	Textile designer	Durban, 18 February 2011
Robbins, Susan	Textile designer and product manager	Durban, 26 May 2011
Salt River Designers	A group of young textile designers working at a manufacturer	Cape Town, 13 June 2012
Silver, Robyn	Textile designer, product manager	Durban, 5 March 2011
Smith, Ingrid	Textile designer	Cape Town, 23 August 2011
Spence, Sharon	Teacher, illustrator, textile designer	Cape Town, 24 August 2011
Thompson, Melanie	Textile designer	Durban. 14 March 2011