

Fashion for social innovation: fashion designers as facilitators, activists, strategists, and cultural promoters

Amanda Queiroz Campos  ^a *

^a Santa Catarina State University, Department of Fashion Design, Florianópolis, Brazil

* Corresponding author: amanda.campos@udesc.br

ABSTRACT

This study examines design practices for social innovation in fashion through Ezio Manzini's four modes of designer engagement: facilitator, activist, strategist, and cultural promoter. Using a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach based on literature review and comparative case analysis, the research investigates how designer engagement may contribute to social innovation and sustainability within the fashion system. The study analyses the practices of Stella McCartney, Ronaldo Fraga, Eileen Fisher, and Nalimo Atelier. The findings indicate that Manzini's modes operate as predominant and overlapping orientations rather than as fixed categories and reveal mechanisms of resource recombination, collaboration, and capacity to act across the cases. They also highlight differences in scale, continuity, and potential replicability, showing that socially relevant design interventions should not be equated with industry-wide systemic transformation. By applying Manzini's framework through comparative analysis attentive to transformative potential and limitations, the study contributes to a more critical understanding of fashion design as a practice of social innovation.

Keywords: Fashion Designers, Social Innovation, Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable fashion is an approach that spans all stages of the garment life cycle. From a systemic design perspective, it seeks to mitigate the negative impacts of one of the world's most polluting industries. According to Lucy Siegle (2018, n.p.), "if the apparel industry were a nation, it would be the fourth-largest climate polluter on Earth." Despite growing awareness of the sector's unsustainability, consumption and resource use continue to rise. Boykoff et al. (2021, p. 2) predict that the fashion industry's resource consumption may triple by 2050 if current trends persist.

Although sustainability debates in fashion often prioritize environmental impacts, Fletcher and Grose (2011) argue that sustainability is a systemic challenge that requires transformations in the industry's underlying values. From this perspective, material and technological improvements alone are insufficient; sustainability also requires attention to social responsibility, diversity, labour conditions, and the broader systems of production and consumption that structure the fashion industry.

In this context, Manzini (2015) offers a seminal theoretical contribution by conceptualizing design for social innovation as a strategic approach to fostering more sustainable futures. Rather than limiting design to product development or technical problem-solving, his

perspective emphasizes its capacity to mobilize actors, establish collaborative relationships, and support social change. Within this framework, design experts may engage in social innovation as facilitators, activists, strategists, and cultural promoters.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to identify and analyze practices of design for social innovation in the fashion sector through the four modes of engagement proposed by Manzini (2015), considering their manifestation in different fashion contexts as well as their scope, continuity, and potential for broader transformation. The study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach combining literature review and comparative case analysis.

1. METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The literature review addressed three interconnected areas: the socio-environmental unsustainability of the fashion industry, systemic approaches to sustainability, and design for social innovation, with particular emphasis on Manzini's (2015) framework.

The cases of Stella McCartney, Ronaldo Fraga, Eileen Fisher, and Nalimo Atelier were purposively selected to document practices related to sustainability and social innovation; predominant correspondence with one of Manzini's four modes; relationships with actors or communities beyond the individual designer or brand; availability of documentary evidence; and diversity in geographical context, organizational scale, and forms of intervention. The cases are therefore not treated as equivalent in reach or impact, nor as exclusive manifestations of a single mode. Rather, each represents a predominant orientation within Manzini's interrelated field of design practice.

The analysis combined academic literature, specialized media, independent reports, and institutional materials, the latter used primarily to document declared programs and practices and, whenever possible, contrasted with independent sources.

Cases were comparatively examined through five dimensions: resource recombination; collaborative relationships; capacity to act; scale, continuity, and potential replicability; and limitations or tensions. Evidence of reach and outcomes was considered when available. The study does not seek to measure causal impact or represent the fashion industry as a whole, but to examine the possibilities and limits of different design practices in contributing to broader processes of social innovation.

2. UNSUSTAINABILITY IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

Although fashion has structured modern societies since the fourteenth century (Lipovetsky, 2009), it became fully consolidated as an industry during the Industrial Revolution, when textile and apparel production expanded in scale, speed, and complexity. This industrial model, later intensified by global capitalism, promoted continuous growth in consumption while generating environmental and social impacts that were historically treated as externalities within the fashion system (Boykoff et al., 2021, p. 2).

In the contemporary context, these dynamics have intensified under the fast fashion model. This model is characterized by accelerated cycles of design, production, and consumption and by increasingly fragmented global supply chains. Its impacts are reflected in the rapid increase in global fiber production, which rose from 125 million tonnes in 2023 to 132 million tonnes in 2024, equivalent to approximately four tonnes of fibers produced per second worldwide

(Textile Exchange, 2025). Such growth illustrates the scale of a production system still strongly dependent on expanding material throughput.

The fashion industry has significant environmental impacts due to excessive consumption, intensive resource use, and greenhouse gas emissions (United Nations Environment Programme, 2023; Niinimäki et al., 2020). Fossil-based synthetic fibers, such as polyester and polyamide, contribute to persistent waste and microplastic pollution, while textile dyeing and finishing are major sources of industrial water pollution. Conventionally produced cotton also requires intensive water use and pesticide application, affecting ecosystems, biodiversity, and human health (Kant, 2012; Chapagain et al., 2006; Fletcher & Grose, 2011).

Sustainability, therefore, remains a central challenge for the industry. Fashion accounts for approximately 3 to 8 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and faces growing climate-related risks affecting supply chains, employment, and exports (McKinsey & Company, 2025). These risks are compounded by the limited adoption of effective climate governance mechanisms, revealing persistent tensions between sustainability commitments and the operational logic of the dominant fashion model (Fashion Revolution, 2025). This gap suggests that incremental improvements at the level of materials, products, or individual organizations may remain insufficient unless they address the structural conditions that sustain accelerated production and consumption.

Addressing unsustainability in fashion requires more than a critical diagnosis or isolated technical interventions. It demands integrated systemic solutions to reshape design practices, production processes, business models, social relations, and value systems across the sector. Accordingly, the relevance of sustainable initiatives must be considered not only in terms of their innovative character, but also in relation to their reach, continuity, potential for replication, and capacity to influence broader structures within the fashion system. The following section builds on this premise by examining sustainable approaches and possible pathways for change.

3. SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS AND ALTERNATIVE PATHS

Despite the challenges facing contemporary fashion, there have been notable advances toward sustainability. Addressing these challenges, however, requires moving beyond isolated changes in raw materials or production technologies toward approaches that consider the garment life cycle and the interconnected environmental, social, and economic dimensions of the fashion system. Following Rodrigues et al. (2025), these possible pathways can be organized into three interrelated axes.

The environmental axis includes the adoption of certified, renewable, and lower-impact materials, alongside traceability and more transparent production systems (Textile Exchange, 2025). Circularity and zero-waste approaches further seek to extend product life cycles, reduce waste, and promote regenerative and recyclable resources (Rissanen & McQuillan, 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2025).

The economic axis involves governance, transparency, and corporate responsibility, particularly in a sector where accelerated production and cost pressures can negatively affect labor conditions (Campos & Gomez, 2016; Sipari, 2022). It also encompasses the strengthening of local productive networks, waste reintegration, and more transparent supply chains (Rodrigues et al., 2025; Alves, 2023).

The social axis addresses labour conditions, inequalities, inclusion, and the recognition of local cultures, knowledge, and productive capacities. These dimensions are particularly relevant within globalized supply chains marked by low wages, occupational insecurity, and uneven distributions of value (Rodrigues et al., 2025).

As Fletcher and Grose (2011) argue, however, fashion's unsustainability also derives from a productive and cultural paradigm based on continuous growth, acceleration, and planned obsolescence. Environmental, economic, and social interventions are therefore insufficient when implemented in isolation; their transformative potential depends on their articulation across actors and stages of the fashion system. In this context, Manzini (2015) and Gwilt (2014) position design as a practice capable of articulating technical innovation, social responsibility, and economic viability. Rather than assuming systemic transformation, this perspective directs attention to the conditions under which design interventions may influence broader production and consumption systems.

4. DESIGNERS AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Contemporary approaches to sustainable design increasingly recognize that the environmental and social challenges of fashion cannot be addressed through product-level or technological interventions alone. Instead, design must be considered in relation to the broader systems of production, consumption, governance, and social relations within which products and practices are embedded (Fletcher & Grose, 2011; Gwilt, 2014). Within this perspective, designers may connect actors, knowledge, resources, and values, facilitating collaboration without being understood as autonomous agents of systemic change.

4.1 Design for social innovation

Manzini understands design as a cultural and strategic practice capable of envisioning possibilities that do not yet exist and producing new meanings. Within this framework, social innovation may emerge through the creative recombination of existing resources and capabilities, the creation of new collaborative relationships, and the expansion of society's capacity to act (Manzini, 2015, pp. 11, 25, 45).

Social innovation concerns processes through which alternative ways of living and acting can become possible and, potentially, more probable (Manzini, 2015, p. 91). Rather than depending exclusively on entirely new resources, these processes may emerge through the creative recombination of existing resources and capabilities to achieve socially recognized goals in new ways (Manzini, 2015, p. 25). Manzini further emphasizes that social innovations can generate new relationships and forms of collaboration while expanding society's capacity to act (Manzini, 2015, p. 11). Taken together, these three elements—resource recombination, collaborative relationships, and expanded capacity to act—provide the principal theoretical dimensions through which the cases in this study are comparatively examined.

Manzini describes design as a culture and practice concerned with how things acquire desired functions and meanings, emphasizing that social innovation develops through open processes of co-design involving multiple participants rather than through the autonomous action of professional designers (Manzini, 2015, p. 68). This relational understanding can be broadened through Escobar's (2018) conception of design as a world-making practice and his defense of pluriversal approaches attentive to multiple ways of being, knowing, and doing. Similarly, Tunstall (2023) argues for the decolonization of design theory and practice by recentring

cultures and lived experiences historically excluded from design institutions, particularly those of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities. These perspectives extend the discussion beyond the creation of socially desirable solutions toward consideration of whose knowledge, values, and ways of life participate in defining those futures.

Design for social innovation is therefore understood here as a collaborative, culturally situated, and relational practice whose transformative potential depends on the interactions it establishes and on the contexts in which it operates. While resource recombination, collaborative relationships, and capacity to act derive directly from Manzini's framework, the analysis also considers scale, continuity, potential replicability, and limitations as complementary dimensions for assessing how far particular initiatives extend beyond their immediate contexts. This distinction makes it possible to examine the contribution of design to social innovation without assuming that individual initiatives necessarily produce systemic transformation.

4.2 Modes of Designer Engagement in Social Innovation

Drawing on Ezio Manzini's (2015) contributions, design for social innovation can be understood not as an autonomous discipline requiring an entirely new set of skills and methods, but rather as a design culture oriented toward social transformation. In this sense, it offers a way of reconsidering what design can do for society and for the people who inhabit it (Manzini, 2015, p. 69). Within this framework, Manzini identifies four principal modes of engagement for design experts: facilitator, activist, strategist, and cultural promoter.

The designer functioning as a facilitator supports and strengthens existing social innovation initiatives, helping them become more effective, accessible, and potentially replicable. The activist designer intervenes where such initiatives are weak or absent. The strategist designer connects initiatives, actors, and resources across different levels, developing frameworks capable of fostering coordination and long-term change. Finally, the cultural promoter contributes to social debate by introducing new meanings, values, imaginaries, and critical perspectives through design (Manzini, 2015).

These modes should not be interpreted as fixed, mutually exclusive categories. Rather, they describe different orientations of design practice that may overlap within the same initiative or trajectory. Designers may move between them according to the context, actors involved, available resources, and the type of transformation being pursued. For analytical purposes, the cases examined in this study are therefore associated with the mode that most clearly characterizes their predominant form of engagement, while overlaps with other modes are acknowledged throughout the analysis.

Accordingly, Stella McCartney is examined primarily through the facilitator mode, Ronaldo Fraga through the activist mode, Eileen Fisher through the strategist mode, and Nalimo Atelier through the cultural promoter mode. This classification does not imply equivalence among the cases in terms of organizational scale, reach, or impact. Instead, their differences provide a basis for examining how design for social innovation operates across distinct contexts and scales of the fashion system. As established in the methodological procedures, the cases are examined through a common analytical framework that also considers their scale, continuity, potential replicability, and limitations.

4.2.1 Facilitator

Within Manzini's (2015) framework, the facilitator mode concerns design interventions that strengthen existing processes of social innovation by contributing specialized knowledge, creating connections among participants, and helping initiatives become "effective, accessible, and potentially replicable" (p. 70). Facilitation is therefore not a passive form of support. Design experts may introduce scenarios, proposals, and perspectives that mediate dialogue, foster convergence among different actors, and expand the possibilities available for collective action.

Stella McCartney was selected as the predominant example of this mode because her practice combines sustainability-oriented experimentation with sustained engagement in institutional and industry networks. The eponymous brand was established in 2001 in partnership with the luxury group Kering, which held a 50% stake until McCartney acquired full ownership of the company in 2018 (Kering, 2018). From its inception, the company rejected the use of leather and fur and progressively incorporated lower-impact, recycled, and alternative materials into its collections, alongside initiatives involving traceability and supply-chain practices (Sipari, 2022). Rather than treating these material innovations as evidence of systemic transformation in themselves, their relevance to the present analysis lies in how experimentation with alternatives has been incorporated into broader discussions of sustainability within luxury fashion.

The facilitator dimension becomes more evident in McCartney's participation in initiatives that connect fashion companies, institutions, and sustainability agendas. In 2018, she became a signatory of the Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action, launched under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to promote collective climate action across the fashion value chain (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], 2018). In 2019, LVMH acquired a minority stake in the company, and McCartney became a special advisor on sustainability to the group's executive committee and chairman and CEO, Bernard Arnault (Ang, 2019). These forms of institutional participation expand the designer's activity beyond decisions made within her own brand, placing her in networks through which sustainability-related knowledge, proposals, and practices circulate among different actors in the luxury sector.

McCartney's practice recombines material experimentation, the visibility of luxury fashion, and institutional platforms, while collaborative relationships emerge through industry coalitions and partnerships. Her influence derives primarily from introducing sustainability concerns and alternatives into broader networks. Although this practice overlaps with the strategist mode, facilitation remains predominant.

The scale and impact of this influence, however, require qualification. McCartney's participation in international industry initiatives provides considerable institutional reach and continuity, but visibility and network participation should not be equated with measurable industry-wide transformation. The Fashion Industry Charter, for example, relies on voluntary participation rather than legally binding obligations, while independent assessments of climate action in fashion continue to identify insufficient accountability, limited supply-chain transparency, continued production growth, and a pace of change that remains incompatible with the scale of the climate crisis (Conlon, 2021). The dissemination of alternative materials and sustainability practices within luxury fashion similarly indicates

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potential for replication and influence but does not in itself demonstrate adoption at a scale capable of transforming the dominant production system.

Stella McCartney therefore illustrates both the possibilities and the limitations of the facilitator role. Her practice demonstrates how a designer can combine technical experimentation, public visibility, and institutional relationships to connect actors and sustain discussion around alternative practices. At the same time, the case reinforces a central distinction of this study: expanding networks, circulating alternatives, and influencing sustainability agendas can create conditions for broader change without constituting evidence, in themselves, of systemic transformation proportional to the scale of fashion's socio-environmental challenges.



Figure 1. Stella McCartney with then Prince Charles (now King Charles III) at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) (Stella McCartney, 2021).

4.2.2 Activist

Within Manzini's (2015) framework, designers may assume an activist role when existing processes of social innovation are weak or absent, triggering new collaborative organizations, practices, and discussions that can lead to collective action. Design activism therefore extends beyond publicly communicating a social or political position to creating or strengthening conditions through which alternative practices and relationships can emerge.

Ronaldo Fraga was selected as the predominant example of this mode because his design practice combines the use of fashion as a platform for political and cultural debate with direct engagement in collaborative initiatives involving local communities. In a self-authored visual essay published in *DAT Journal*, Fraga (2021) presents his fashion shows as dialogues between contemporary issues, bodies, garments, and images, addressing urban development, displacement, authoritarianism, prejudice, homophobia, transphobia, and cultural conflicts, among other issues. Activism in his work operates both through the fashion's symbolic and communicative dimensions and through interventions developed beyond the runway.

A significant example is the *As Mudas* collection, developed in collaboration with embroiderers from Barra Longa, Minas Gerais, following the 2015 *Fundão* dam disaster. Rather than using

the disaster solely as a thematic reference, Fraga worked with local embroiderers to incorporate memories, traditional techniques, and narratives of the affected territory into the collection. The collaboration strengthened the visibility and continuity of the *Meninas da Barra Longa* group, using embroidery to articulate memory, cultural identity, and reconstruction (Viggiani et al., 2023). Independent press coverage of the project also documents Fraga's intention to preserve local knowledge and provide visibility to cultural practices threatened in the aftermath of the disaster (Estadão Conteúdo, 2018).

This collaborative approach continued through *Minha Casa em Mim*, in which Fraga acted as curator within a broader initiative involving artisans and small producers affected by the disaster. The project worked with 13 groups and approximately 175 participants, combining local knowledge with design, product development, management, packaging, and commercialization practices (Hama, 2021; Tolipan, 2020). In this process, Fraga described his role as establishing bridges between community-based production and broader consumer markets, while the initiative also involved other designers, consultants, associations, and institutional actors (Hama, 2021).



Figure 2. Designer in the community of the “My Home Within Me” project of the *Culturas de MG* Association (Hama, 2021).

Viewed through the analytical framework of this study, Fraga's practice demonstrates resource recombination by connecting traditional knowledge, local memories, artisanal techniques, and professional design expertise. This articulation resonates with Escobar's (2018) pluriversal perspective, in which design emerges from situated territories, relations, and ways of knowing rather than from universally prescribed models of development. Collaborative relationships emerge through networks involving artisans, designers, associations, and institutional actors, while the capacity to act is strengthened through increased visibility, technical and organizational development, and access to new forms of circulation and commercialization. These practices also overlap with the facilitator and cultural promoter modes, although activism remains predominant because Fraga actively stimulates practices around issues that extend beyond conventional product development.

The scale of these interventions nevertheless requires qualification. Their continuity across successive projects and the participation of 13 groups and approximately 175 people provide evidence of meaningful intervention at the community and territorial levels (Hama, 2021; Tolipan, 2020). However, the available documentation neither demonstrates structural

transformation of the fashion industry nor establishes the long-term economic effects of the initiatives. Their relevance therefore lies primarily in their capacity to create relationships, reactivate local knowledge, and expand participants' possibilities for action within specific contexts. Fraga's case thus demonstrates how designer activism can generate socially relevant territorial effects while also revealing the limits of localized initiatives when confronted with the scale of systemic unsustainability in fashion.

4.2.3 Strategist

Within Manzini's (2015) framework, the strategist mode involves the development of framework projects capable of coordinating multiple initiatives, articulating coalitions, and connecting different actors and scales of intervention. Rather than operating through isolated solutions, strategist designers mobilize economic, technical, social, and cultural dimensions to create synergies among projects and sustain longer-term processes of change (pp. 70–71).

Eileen Fisher was selected as the predominant example of this mode because the company has progressively structured sustainability through interconnected initiatives addressing material sourcing, workers, product longevity, take-back, resale, and textile recovery. Founded in 1984 by the designer of the same name, the company is a Certified B Corporation and has progressively incorporated environmental and social criteria into its business model (B Lab, n.d.).

At the upstream level, this strategy includes regenerative sourcing and supply-chain partnerships. In 2019, Eileen Fisher partnered with the Savory Institute to support regenerative practices in wool production, linking material sourcing to broader questions of soil health and ecosystem regeneration (Savory Institute, 2019). The social dimension of this strategy has also expanded through the company's partnership with Fair Trade USA. The social dimension of this strategy also extends through the company's work with Fair Trade USA, through which brand-funded premiums contribute to Community Development Funds managed with worker participation (Fair Trade USA, 2025). These initiatives extend the company's sustainability strategy beyond product attributes toward relationships with suppliers, workers, and certification organizations.

Circularity constitutes another central component of this framework. Eileen Fisher's Renew program collects used garments for sorting, cleaning, repair, resale, donation, or remanufacturing, while textiles that cannot return to use in their original form may be incorporated into remaking and recycling initiatives, including Waste No More. More importantly for the present analysis, the different initiatives operate as connected stages of a broader strategy rather than as isolated end-of-life interventions.

Available indicators provide some evidence of the reach and continuity of this model. Between 2009 and 2023, Renew collected more than two million garments, of which 660,885 were resold, while other returned items were donated, repurposed, recycled, or stored for subsequent processing (Wenzel, 2025). These figures demonstrate a sustained organizational infrastructure for garment recirculation rather than a short-term experimental initiative. At the same time, they should not be interpreted as evidence of industry-wide systemic transformation. The available data document the reach and continuity of the program but do not establish the extent to which garment recirculation reduces overall resource use and environmental impacts or whether the model can be replicated at a scale capable of substantially transforming the broader fashion system.

Eileen Fisher's strategy recombines materials, existing garments, organizational infrastructure, and external partnerships across different stages of the garment life cycle. Collaborative relationships involve producers, workers, certification bodies, circularity partners, and consumers. Although these practices overlap with the facilitator mode, the strategist orientation predominates because they are coordinated through interconnected and continuous programs.

The case therefore demonstrates how strategic design can integrate sustainability initiatives over time while also revealing the limits of extrapolating organizational practices to industry-wide transformation. The strategist role is understood here as the capacity to coordinate actors, resources, and programs toward longer-term change rather than as evidence of completed structural transformation.



Figure 3. Garments collected through the Eileen Fisher Renew take-back program (Herndon, 2023).

4.2.4 Cultural promoter

Within Manzini's (2015) framework, the cultural promoter contributes to social debate by introducing new meanings, values, imaginaries, and critical perspectives through design. Cultural promotion thus involves not only questioning existing conditions but also proposing alternative ways of interpreting and imagining society.

Nalimo Atelier, label founded and creatively directed by Indigenous designer Dayana Molina, was selected as the predominant example of this mode because its practice challenges dominant representations of Indigenous cultures while foregrounding Indigenous authorship, and contemporary forms of expression. Molina is of Fulni-ô (Pernambuco) and Aymara (Peru) ancestry, and her work has been examined as an Indigenous decolonial fashion practice articulating cultural identity, political positioning, and sustainability (Bandeira & Cavalcanti, 2024). Independent fashion coverage similarly describes Nalimo's minimalist aesthetic as a departure from stereotypical representations of Indigenous identity, emphasizing contemporary authorship rather than externally imposed cultural codes (Sordi, 2022).



Figure 4. Dayana Molina, founder and designer of Nalimo Atelier (Garcia, 2024).

This approach extends sustainability beyond environmental performance toward questions of culture, representation, and epistemic recognition. Nalimo combines natural fibers and textile-waste reuse with design narratives informed by memory, ancestry, and Indigenous knowledge (Sordi, 2022; Alcantara e Silva, 2026). In this sense, Molina's practice resonates with Escobar's (2018) understanding of design as a world-making activity and with his pluriversal perspective, which challenges universalizing models in favor of situated, relational, and place-based ways of being and knowing. From this perspective, Indigenous knowledge is not incorporated into fashion merely as an aesthetic reference; it participates in defining what fashion can mean, whose worlds it can represent, and which forms of knowledge can shape its futures.

This dimension becomes particularly relevant when considered through Tunstall's (2023) decolonial approach to design. By calling for Indigenous cultures and histories to be recentered within design theory and practice, Tunstall challenges the historical positioning of Indigenous peoples as objects of representation rather than agents of design. Molina's practice can be read in this direction: Indigenous identity appears not as a source of motifs to be appropriated by external designers, but through Indigenous authorship, decision-making, and the production of contemporary cultural narratives. Cultural promotion, in this case, therefore involves not only increasing representation but also questioning who holds the authority to produce meanings within the fashion system.

Molina extends this cultural action through #DescolonizeAModa, Indígenas Moda BR, and Aldeia Criativa Design do Futuro, initiatives that question Eurocentric fashion standards, strengthen Indigenous creative networks, and support professional participation in the sector (Naito et al., 2021; Alcantara e Silva, 2026). These initiatives indicate that her practice operates through networks and educational activities as well as through the symbolic production of garments.

Viewed through the analytical framework of this study, Nalimo recombines ancestral and situated knowledge, contemporary fashion practices, materials, and cultural narratives. Collaborative relationships are developed through Indigenous creative networks, educational initiatives, production partnerships, and collective platforms, contributing to professional participation and cultural visibility. The case overlaps with the activist mode through its collective and decolonial initiatives; cultural promotion nevertheless remains predominant

because Molina's central intervention lies in reconfiguring meanings, representations, authorship, and epistemic authority within fashion.

The scale of this intervention must nevertheless be qualified. Available evidence demonstrates continuity, network formation, educational activity, and cultural visibility, but does not establish transformation of the fashion industry at a national or global scale. Its impact is therefore more clearly identifiable at cultural, epistemic, and network levels than at the scale of industrial production. In dialogue with Escobar (2018) and Tunstall (2023), the case demonstrates how design for social innovation can challenge dominant fashion narratives by expanding whose knowledge, values, and worlds are recognized as legitimate within the field.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As Ezio Manzini (2015) argues, the modes of design for social innovation—facilitator, activist, strategist, and cultural promoter—should not be understood as rigid or mutually exclusive categories, but rather as interdependent and frequently overlapping forms of practice. In practice, designers move across these modes according to the specificities of each context, mobilizing different competencies, sensitivities, and design repertoires. The cases analyzed reinforce this understanding, suggesting that these modes are most productively interpreted as predominant orientations of practice rather than as fixed designer types.

Based on this theoretical framework, the study presented a design for social innovation as a strategic approach that articulates technical innovation, social responsibility, and cultural transformation. From this perspective, the designer no longer acts solely as a product creator but also as a mediator, network articulator, and meaning-maker who may contribute to broader processes of change.

The cases revealed different predominant modes of engagement: Stella McCartney as facilitator through institutional networks and sustainability agendas; Ronaldo Fraga as activist through collaborative practices and political-cultural debate; Eileen Fisher as strategist through integrated and continuous sustainability programs; and Nalimo Atelier as cultural promoter through Indigenous authorship, epistemic recognition, and decolonial narratives. These orientations nevertheless overlap across the cases.

The findings indicate that design for social innovation functions as a situated, relational, and process-oriented practice that can connect environmental sustainability, social inclusion, economic innovation, and cultural mediation. The research also reinforces that the socio-environmental crisis in fashion derives not only from material choices or isolated management failures, but from a production paradigm grounded in acceleration, continuous consumption, and obsolescence. In this context, design may contribute to changes in supply chains, business models, labor relations, and consumption practices, although the extent of such influence depends on wider economic, institutional, and political conditions.

The comparative analysis also reveals an important limitation. Although the cases provide evidence of continuity, network formation, institutional influence, community-based action, and cultural visibility, none independently demonstrates transformation at a scale proportional to the global socio-environmental challenges of the fashion industry. Their relevance therefore lies in showing different mechanisms through which design can contribute to change while also exposing the distance between localized or organizational

innovation and industry-wide systemic transformation, as well as the limited evidence, within the cases analyzed, of replication at such a scale.

By articulating Manzini's four modes with the analysis of resource recombination, collaborative relationships, capacity to act, scale, continuity, potential replicability, and limitations, this study contributes to a more critical understanding of fashion design as a practice of social innovation. Rather than claiming that designers independently produce systemic transformation, the analysis identifies different ways through which design may create conditions, relationships, and meanings that support broader processes of change toward more sustainable, inclusive, and pluriversal futures.

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