

# DOPE LABS

Transcript of Lab 052: Retail Apocalypse

**Zakiya** I don't know if you've been paying attention, Titi, but I feel like fashion and shopping is everywhere.

**Titi** Yeah, it feels like every social media site is incorporating shopping onto it now.

**Zakiya** Yes.

**Titi** Like you can shop on Facebook, Instagram. I'm accidentally shopping on Instagram. I was like, Oh, did I just purchase that?

**Zakiya** I thought I was liking this post, I'm viewing a shop!

**Titi** This has happened so quickly. And how did I get here?

**Zakiya** Yes, and I have to admit I have really trained my algorithm to give me the outfits. Now you see what I have on, but I'm somehow in fashion instagram. OK, I'm seeing amazing articles about the life of Andre Leon Talley. A lot of stuff about Virgil. I don't own anything Off-White, but the people I follow, do.

**Titi** I know? And then you see so many up and coming folks that are making their own brands. Hanifa? Yes, that came up on my feed. And now I'm obsessed. I don't know if I can afford anything, but, it's ovely to look at.

**Zakiya** Telfar just dropped a new bag too, and it's about \$600. My timeline is in a tizzy about it, so it's only right that we put shopping and fashion under the microscope.

**Titi** I'm Titi.

**Zakiya** And I'm Zakiya. And from Spotify, this is Dope Labs.

**Titi** Welcome to Dope Labs, a weekly podcast that mixes hardcore science, pop culture and a healthy dose of friendship.

**Zakiya** This week we're talking all about fashion. Now it's no secret that we love to shop.

**Titi** Yes, a lot of our bonding in the early stages of our friendship was sending each other links or screenshots of different outfits that we saw on Tumblr. That was like, Ooh girl, this would look cute on you.

**Zakiya** Yes. Tumblr. So in today's episode, we're going to do a deep dive on shopping. And specifically, we're taking a look at how retail has changed in the past decade.

**Titi** It seems like it's gone through a lot of changes, and then the pandemic came and really shook things up. So we're really curious about what those changes are and why they're happening.

**Zakiya** So let's get into the recitation. I think if we take all of our recent shopping experiences, there are probably some key takeaways of what we know about shopping lately.

**Titi** Yeah, I think that we're doing a lot of online shopping to distance ourselves from people and for convenience.

**Zakiya** Right, and if we do shop online, it's more likely to be a hybrid. We're not just walking around aimlessly in the store. I do my research ahead of time, baby. I'm checking multiple sites, so I'm able to make a beeline to exactly the right rack in the store for the exact item.

**Titi** I love that feature, you could say, is it in this store that is near where I live?

**Zakiya** Yes.

**Titi** And then say, yes or no? It's not within 30 miles. OK, well, I'm not going.

**Zakiya** There you have it.

**Titi** There's a lot of ads on social media and influencers are constantly pushing product, especially with the changes in social media like Instagram has made some updates to its platform that prioritizes shopping. So Instagram is slowly but surely morphing into an online retail store, along with your best friend's photos from their wedding.

**Zakiya** There's just a lot less judgment around shopping than there used to be. The pandemic saw people really leaning on some retail therapy.

**Titi** When things started to open up too, I think people really started buying a lot and also disclosing that they were buying a lot. I saw a meme that was like my budget for next month is zero dollars. Do not invite me anywhere.

**Zakiya** Yes, I think this is great anecdotal evidence that things that we've noticed and trends we've noticed in our own friend groups, but there are still other things that I want to know, like how has retail changed not just in the pandemic, but in the past decade? And then how the pandemic changed it even further?

**Titi** That's a really good question. And how has the shopping experience changed because of it? And what are people looking for?

**Zakiya** And what's motivating people to shop these days? We saw we could do it all from home. So how are they being marketed to was convincing them to go in the stores now.

**Titi** And I would really like to get a snapshot of today's biggest retail trends fast fashion and affordable luxury. These are new terms that I hear a lot of people throwing around. Yes, I'm not entirely sure what they actually actually mean. What we always hear in the same sentence as fast fashion is sustainability. How fast fashion might be impacting our environment and our carbon footprint. So I think this would be a great opportunity for us to kind of split this episode into two so that we can make sure that we hit all of the major points.

**Zakiya** You're right, Titi. We can start out here talking about how the trends of shopping have changed and later we can come back and really dive into sustainability, manufacturing, really getting into understanding what has to happen now and in the future. Let's jump into the dissection.

**Titi** Our guest for this episode is Barbara Kahn. She's the author of The Shopping Revolution.

**Barbra Kahn** I'm Barbara Kahn. I'm a professor of marketing at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. And for the last 15, 20 years, I've been following the retailing industry and following fashion.

**Zakiya** Let's go back pre-COVID, back to when shopping was a thing. When I think back, Titi, I can remember when we used to go to the mall.

**Titi** Yes, in grad school, going to the mall was a great pastime.

**Zakiya** And now we are going right to iMessage and sharing those links.

**Titi** Yes, I'm only on my phone.

**Zakiya** Yeah, it really makes me wonder what's been happening to stores.

**Titi** We asked Dr. Kahn to give us an overview of the retail industry in recent years.

**Barbra Kahn** In 2017, that was the year that was dubbed the retail apocalypse because eighty six hundred stores closed that year. Macy's department stores, for example, were closing, and those were really important stores to close because they anchor a mall. So you kind of saw this reverberating effect where a lot of these other stores closed, then you might remember Toys R US closed, Circuit City closed, RadioShack closed. A lot of people were saying it was the retail apocalypse, the end of physical retail. Now I wrote a book and I called it the shopping revolution. And my point at the time was not that this was the death of physical retail, but that it was the death of bad retail.

**Titi** So what does she mean by bad retail? What exactly caused the stores to start closing in 2017?

**Barbra Kahn** You're not allowed to just sit around and do nothing and hope the customers come to you.

**Zakiya** Dr. Kahn says that the retail apocalypse happened for three main reasons.

**Barbra Kahn** One was the online reason we definitely saw the rise of Amazon and the rise of people instead of shopping in physical stores, some people were shopping or doing some of their shopping, at least in e-commerce.

**Titi** Economists call this the Amazon effect.

**Barbra Kahn** The other thing that we were seeing was people weren't shopping in Macy's because they were going to TJ Maxx. They were going to Target. They were going to Wal-Mart. They were going to Ross, to Burlington.

**Zakiya** Yes, I am they. They are me.

**Barbra Kahn** The clothes aren't that different in Target or in TJ Maxx. They're exactly the same clothes, actually, but they're much cheaper. Why would I want to pay that price in a department store?

**Zakiya** Listen, we're all about the deals, baby.

**Titi** It's also really great when you can find something affordable and you don't have to pay high ticket price just to get this thing. So like going through the racks at Target and you find something that you feel like is just perfect. Yeah, and it is affordable. That always feels good.

**Zakiya** So the retail apocalypse happened because people were buying more online and they're looking for better deals. What's the third reason?

**Barbra Kahn** The other thing and this one, I think, is really interesting, fundamentally interesting. A lot of what sold in department stores is cosmetics and beauty, and people were not shopping for their beauty and cosmetics in the Macy's anymore. Where were they going? They were going to Sephora. They were going to Ulta.

**Zakiya** And since the pandemic hit, the rate of stores closing has dramatically accelerated, according to Dr. Kahn. 200000 stores closed in March and April 2020, when COVID led to a ton of shut downs.

**Titi** Yeah, and a lot of stores didn't survive the pandemic, but that doesn't mean people stopped shopping. Pandemic or not, people still want new clothes. Dr. Kahn mentioned Sephora a minute ago, and I want to talk about that a little more because it seems like the experience of shopping has really changed. And Sephora has been a main driver of that. So what's the difference between shopping at Macy's, for example, and Sephora?

**Barbra Kahn** What I would argue is that Macy's was selling in when I'm going to call a product-focused or a sales-pushed approach. So if you think about shopping for cosmetics in Macy's, what happens? You go into the store, if you want to try something on, you got to talk to a salesperson. She's got to get it from behind the counter. Now these salespeople are on commission. You don't have to be too sophisticated to instantly know they're pushing product at you. They're upselling you, They're crossselling you. Sephora is nothing like that. The salespeople are not on commission. They're honestly there just to help you. And all the product was out. You could try anything on yourself. You could bring all your friends, put on makeup and leave, and nobody would give you any pushback.

**Zakiya** Dr. Kahn calls this customer-focused experiential retail, meaning it's not about price or the product, but how you feel when you're in the store. So the shift from a store like Macy's to a store like Sephora is from product-focused to more customer-focused retail.

**Titi** It makes sense to me. I like to buy new makeup, and what I don't like is when I go into a store in the customer sales rep is trying to convince me to buy something that I don't want to buy. Or saying, oh, you know, that green blush is not going to look good on you. I saw Rihanna wearing green blush. I want to wear green blush, too. Mind your business. You're ruining my experience.

**Zakiya** And even if you want that green blush, Titi, it's not just that in-store experience that helped Sephora win, it's also about the online retail experience as well.

**Barbra Kahn** Sephora also, behind the scenes, was very sophisticated online. A lot of what's happened in makeup, beauty and fashion has come from the bottom up. So

some of the biggest opinion leaders in what's new and make up were 16 year old high school girls. And where do you see that? You see that in YouTube?

**Zakiya** YouTube, yes. And Instagram and Tik Tok really all over the internet.

**Titi** Every single corner of the internet. The shift from in-person to online shopping has really taken off in the past year and even faster than predicted because COVID. But it's not just because of COVID, it's also reflective of shoppers changing preferences and habits.

**Zakiya** And at this point, Dr. Khan actually flipped the script for a minute and asked some questions about our personal shopping habits online and how we make decisions about what to buy as customers.

**Barbra Kahn** I'm curious how much do you trust what the online experience would be? So they're using augmented reality a little bit. You can put makeup on your face, not for real, but like it seems like it's for real. And also Athleta or Lululemon or those. They'll have these different models in different shapes and sizes. They'll tell you what size they wear, and then you can see how clothes fit on them and maybe guess how they fit on you. I'm curious, is that working as sophisticated customers? Do you think that's a good experience?

**Titi** Yes, absolutely. That is exactly what I do. If I see something cute, the first thing I do is go down the page and look at all the details. I want to know the model's height, the material that this stuff is made from. If she's 5'11", I'm five five. I know that skirt might not hit me at the same part of my leg. What about you, Zakiya?

**Zakiya** Same, same, same. And it's not even just clothing, it's across multiple categories. I want to see what this lipstick shade is going to look like on my skin color, my skin tone. Sephora lets me do that. I'm laying in the bed. Putting on blush--it's not green--but I'm still trying it on, at home.

**Titi** I also like that now some places are even including like a short video of the model walking in the clothes you can see like, Oh, this actually isn't as flowy as I thought. This is actually a little bit more rigid or, oh, this doesn't really sit well or there's some bunching when you walk like these are all things that I would like to know before purchasing.

**Zakiya** Another feature that I'm really enjoying is augmented reality. I want to see what this is going to look like in my house. Is this too big? Is it too small?

**Titi** I do that with every pair of glasses that I buy. Before I purchase, I do the augmented reality and I put those glasses on my face like through my phone, like, you can upload a picture and then put your glasses on yourself. So I take a picture of my face straight on and then I upload that and I can see what each pair of glasses would look like on me.

**Zakiya** And that's exactly what Sephora is doing when I'm laying in bed putting on blush, it's augmented reality.

**Titi** And the other big thing that's changed for me is that shopping is definitely more of a solitary experience, whereas I used to go to the mall with friends. Now I do all of my shopping under the covers by the light of the Moon.

**Zakiya** And not only has the experience of shopping changed, but it feels like the ideas of fashion are also changing, and we're going to talk all about it right after the break.

**Titi** We're back, and now that we've talked about how things have changed both in stores and online. We're going to zoom in on the state of fashion today. We're noticing a lot of different trends in the world of fashion, so let's talk about it.

**Zakiya** One thing I've heard a lot about lately is the idea of affordable luxury or luxury items that are more accessible than how we typically think about luxury.

**Titi** That immediately makes me think of Telfar. So Telfar is a brand that was founded by a Liberian man named Telfar Clemens, and he started making these really beautiful bags, and everybody wanted to get their hands on them. But they're not luxury, luxury priced bags like Gucci bag or whatever. They're definitely more affordable, but people are classifying it as affordable luxury. I mean, even Beyoncé was seen wearing a Telfar bag.

**Zakiya** Yeah, I think I've seen something similar to that, providing the luxury experience of like unboxing and unpacking, getting it first. I've seen that with the Glamaholic brand, which is by a woman out of Detroit, Mia Ray, who I've been following for years since we were in grad school. And I've just seen her grow that brand over the past five or six years that I've been following. And it's just really cool to see. People are rushing to her page when she releases a new collection and selling out. And there's also a community very similar to the Telfar community. You see people like, Oh, so another person will Telfar bag. You know, there's this community around affordable luxury that makes it something that you want to be a part of.

**Titi** Yeah, it like takes the luxe out of the price tag, but you still get a really high quality product, which is amazing because sometimes you try and equate, you know, something not being as expensive with low quality, but what they're showing is you can have it all.

**Zakiya** We talked to Dr. Kahn about how luxury is being redefined.

**Barbra Kahn** Historically, luxury was very much top down and the industry told you what to wear. The designers told you what to wear. It was very high-end, it was very exclusive. People couldn't go to fashion shows. You had to be Beyonce, probably to go

to a fashion show and it made sense. What do you know about fashion? Nothing. What are these designers know about fashion? Everything. So I'm going to listen to what they say. Then the other thing that's going on is this bottom-up fashion. The influencers like Kanye West, you know, I mean, he really influences fashion. His his collaboration with Gap, whether that will work, I don't know. But it is interesting. And deciding who makes fashion now we're seeing everything happening.

**Titi** This is such a great point because what this does, this bottom-up approach that fashion is starting to shift a little bit towards is that it gives people access to luxury everyone. So no matter what your income level is, you might be able to experience that slice of life.

**Zakiya** I'd argue that fashion has always been bottom-up. Now, where that credit comes in can make it feel like it hasn't always been bottom-up, but we know where a lot of these influences are coming from. So it's great to be able to see everybody getting a slice of the luxury pie, like you said.

**Barbra Kahn** And there were tears. There were the very high-end, probably the highest is Louis Vuitton, Hermes, Chanel. Then there were the mid-tier, which is affordable luxury. I think of Tory Burch in that, some of the high-end luxury brands had an affordable line like Armani would have AX. Then there's the TJ Maxx's of the world and the outlets of the world.

**Titi** This reminds me of like when Vera Wang collabed with H&M. All those items sold out like immediately. I don't know how anybody got anything, but I know some people who did. But then it also reminds me of Christopher John Rogers, who has a collection with Target. So you're getting these really beautiful outfits, dresses, but at a more affordable price, at a Target price or an H&M price. So it gives everyone access to these really luxe brands like Vera Wang. I mean, honestly,.

**Zakiya** Come on.

**Titi** That's crazy.

**Barbra Kahn** The one I remember in particular was the Missoni one, and that crashed the website. Because Missoni is so identifiable, the fabric is so clear. People know what it is. And you think like, Wow, is that going to work? Is that a good idea? Why would Missoni want to go to target? And it turned out it was brilliant. It was great for Missoni, actually, because one of the things that makes luxury something people really aspire to is that people know about it. So even if you couldn't afford Missoni at the very high price level, you'd appreciate it. If you saw somebody else wearing it and having it come to target would broaden the appeal of the luxury play. Target became so trendy. So Target so fashion and you're seeing a lot of those kinds of things happen, interesting collaborations like Louis Vuitton, which is a very high-end brand partnering with Supreme, which is a street brand.



**Zakiya** When we talk about affordability, another thing that comes to mind is fast fashion,.

**Barbra Kahn** I think of fast fashion in two different buckets. One is what I think Zara does, which is go to the fashion shows, see what the designers are doing, instantly copy it and get it in the store as quickly as possible. Then there's the other things, which Forever 21 and H&M were more like, which I think of as fast fashion or almost the throwaway culture. So that idea was come up with the trends really quickly and cheaply make them in the stores so everybody can wear them really fast. Don't make them that well. It doesn't matter because it's so stylish, people aren't going to want to wear them for that long. And if they fall apart, they fall apart. Who cares?

**Titi** What Barbara is saying is that fast fashion can be considered fast in two different ways. It's how fast it's produced in and how fast it's consumed and then discarded. And those stores she mentioned in the latter example, Forever 21 and H&M, along with ASOS and Chinese retailer Shein are now being called ultra fast fashion brands due to the sheer speed at which they can produce new trends. Retailers like ASOS drop at least 5000 new styles a week.

**Zakiya** That's crazy.

**Titi** And Shein offers 700 to 1000 new styles daily.

**Zakiya** That's too much fashion. I'm sorry, that's too many outfits.

**Titi** And then when you see the people purchasing from Shein, they're getting huge bags of clothes. Their shipments are just huge because it's really, really affordable and they can get a lot of trends basically overnight if you see Marsai Martin wearing a really cute dress, chances are you can go on Shein and find a knock off of that same dress for a fraction of the price and get it in a few days.

**Zakiya** That's really wild to me, though. How are they producing the stuff so fast? Now, granted, I'm no dress maker, I'm no seamstress, but I have taken a sewing class, and it feels like it should take a long time to just sew in general, and that's assuming you already have the fabric made. This is wild to me. I think the other side of the fast fashion and ultra fashion lanes on social media is this countering kind of slow fashion, really curated closets, kind of sustainable consumption of style that I've been seeing with some of the influencers on Instagram, too? This was like my introduction to OK, girl, get it together. Do you ever see people and they just look like they always have their look together, like they have a staple style? Those are the people I started following, and I was like, How can I do that? But a lot of this really depends on different factors, including budget, right? So if you're trying to buy things that are sustainably made, you have to have some sustained dollars. It costs more.

**Titi** You got to have sustainability pockets.

**Zakiya** Yes. You know, you have to kind of get in where you fit in and find what works for you.

**Titi** It's not to say that if you purchase from Shein, you're automatically not sustainable. Yes, probably in the production of the clothing, it's not sustainable. But if you were to purchase something from Shein and you keep it and you wear it or when you're finished wearing it, you repurpose it for something else. There's another way that you can be sustainable on the back end. Not everybody has the dollars to be able to say, Oh, I'm going to go into this store and buy this top that is \$200 because it is sustainable, not everybody has that.

**Zakiya** I think that's a great point. There are a lot of ways to think about sustainability, and we have to save that for part two.

**Titi** It's clear that the motivation and influences or influencers behind our purchases have also been changing. We talked to Dr. Kahn about what and who is driving our shopping decisions.

**Barbra Kahn** So let's talk about it a bunch of different levels. So one level is the TikTok level that you're talking about, which is very interesting. It's starting to happen here in the US, but it was rampant in China. So one of the things that happened during COVID in China was an incredible acceleration of live streaming. And you're seeing these people who live stream that are these what they call key opinion leaders. So those are the KOLs and they're the big influencers, and they're some really, really big, tremendous ones in China that live stream every single day, maybe for four hours a day. It's absolutely a business and they are communicating with their customers in real time.

**Zakiya** You know, the live streaming part is really an interesting development because that makes it feel really personal, like I'm on face time with this person.

**Barbra Kahn** And really, what characterizes these KOLs is authenticity. You kind of have to really believe them and trust them in order for them to be so influential, which is a little bit of an oxymoron because as they get to be so big and probably rich, how authentic are they? So you have seen the move to what in China are called KOCs, which are key opinion customers, and that's different than the KOLs. Maybe they have 5000, 10000 followers. It's not nearly as big and they're not being paid, but they are sophisticated customers and they're quite influential because people like to hear what other customers say.

**Titi** Right, I always read the reviews hearing from customers who aren't getting paid to tell me what to think is a huge motivator. And I think a motivator for everybody these days.

**Zakiya** Yes. I don't know about you, but when I'm looking through the reviews I like when people post photos, people are now uploading videos and reviewing things. I feel like all of that is part of the community of shopping.

**Titi** Absolutely.

**Zakiya** So even though the actual act of like purchasing clothes in some way has become more isolated or like an individualized experience, we're not necessarily making our decisions in isolation. We're constantly being influenced online. Even if his social media advertisements or we're seeking guidance from someone on YouTube or you're writing me back and saying, No girl, that looks crazy, you know, we're getting input from all these places.

**Titi** Yeah, and it also makes me think about another big trend we're seeing in today's fashion climate, which is drop culture and sneaker culture. Beyoncé will put out some Instagram photos and videos, whole campaign ads for another line, and then they drop it for one day. It's online and then maybe in some select stores. And so everybody is in a mad rush to get their hands on those items.

**Zakiya** We asked Dr. Kahn to explain to us the principle behind drop culture and just how much power it has for brands.

**Barbra Kahn** That's based on the psychological principle of scarcity. You know, things are scarce, you value it more and sometimes you want it just because nobody else can have it. Drop culture was pretty interesting because, yes, it was about getting one of the few products that were available. But the drop culture also was an experience. Waiting on that line and waiting for the drop was fun. So the other idea about luxury is not only owning the material product, but being part of this exclusive experience.

**Zakiya** Even though I would say we are sophisticated consumers, I still feel like I learned a lot. There was a lot I didn't really pay attention to and we need to give Sephora its flowers.

**Titi** And yes, they are blazed the trail for all things online shopping.

**Zakiya** One of the things that I'm appreciating a little bit more is just how much more inclusive mainstream fashion, at least, is becoming, just how many different types of experiences brands are now catering to. I'm all for it, whether that means affordable luxury, whether that means a variety of shopping experiences in-store, a hybrid version, all online. Whether you want a big influencer to tell you what to do or you want to be in a small little community with a micro influencer. It just feels like everything is possible now. It's all on the table.

**Titi** Yeah, and defining luxury for yourself. I feel like back in the day, luxury was defined by not just the top down process like we were talking about, but just like, you know what

you see on television and what all of the cool kids are wearing and everything like that. I know I couldn't afford that stuff, so I didn't have any of those things. But now it's like changing the game where everybody, no matter what walk of life you're coming from, can experience things that are luxe. And so I think it's really great and it's a really great experience for everybody to be able to experience that part of consumerism.

**Zakiya** OK, it's time for one thing, where we share something we liked or loved with you. Titi, what's your one thing?

**Titi** My one thing this week is a woman named Imani Barbarin, and she goes by crutches and spice on Tik Tok. And she's at Imani Underscore Barbarin on Twitter. She is black and disabled, and she has really been blazing the trail for disability awareness, especially during the pandemic. That's when she was put on my For You page on Tik Tok. She's amazing. She's very smart. You should definitely be following her on all of her socials because she is a thought leader and very thought provoking. She is giving it to the politicians and making sure that disability awareness is at the forefront. I've learned so much from her. What's your one thing?

**Zakiya** My one thing is the Institute of Black Imagination. And so this is a virtual hub that you can find at [blackimagination.com](http://blackimagination.com). And it is the brainchild of a lot of great artists, thought leaders. But specifically, I think it's the brainchild of Dario Calmese. Dario is like a photographer, just a mastermind.

**Titi** Everything.

**Zakiya** Everything. OK, yes. So recently, [blackimagination.com](http://blackimagination.com) launched, and there's so much to explore there. I love it. That's it for lab 52. Call us at 202-567-7028 and tell us what you thought. Or, give us another idea for a different lab you think we should do. We really love hearing from you. That's 202-567-7028.

**Titi** And don't forget, there's so much more for you to dig into on our website. There will be a cheat sheet there for today's lab and additional links and resources in the show notes. Plus, you can sign up for our newsletter, so check it out at [dopelabspodcast.com](http://dopelabspodcast.com). Special thanks to today's guest expert, Barbara Kahn.

**Zakiya** You can find her on Twitter @barbarakahn.

**Titi** And make sure you check out her book *The Shopping Revolution* the updated and expanded edition: *How Retailers Succeed in an Era of Endless Disruption Accelerated by COVID 19*. You can find us on Twitter and Instagram @dopelabspodcast.

**Zakiya** And Titi's on Twitter and Instagram at [dr\\_tsho](https://twitter.com/dr_tsho).

**Titi** And you can find Zakiya on Twitter and Instagram @zsaidso. Dope Labs is a Spotify original production from MegaOhm Media Group.

**Zakiya** Our producers are Jenny Radelet Mast and Lydia Smith of Wave Runner Studios.

**Titi** Editing and Sound Design by Rob Marczak.

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**Zakiya** Mixing by Hannis Brown.

**Titi** Original Music composed and produced by Taka Yasuzawa and AlexSugiura from Spotify. Creative producers Candice Manriquez Wrenn and Corinne Gilliard. Special thanks to Shirley Ramos, Yasmeeen Afifi, Kimu Eloia, Teal Kratky and Brian Marquis.

**Zakiya** Executive producers for MegaOhm Media Group are us.

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