

DOPE LABS

Transcript of Lab 053: Unsustainable

Titi I'm Titi.

Zakiya And I'm Zakiya

Titi 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 So last week, we talked all about how the landscape of fashion and e-commerce and shopping has changed completely.

Titi Yes, but there was an aspect of this that we touched on very lightly that we knew that we needed to dig into in today's lab.

Zakiya And that is the idea of sustainability in fashion. So let's get into the recitation. Alright, so what do we know?

Titi One thing that I know from a McKinsey study that I read is that clothing production from the year 2000 to the year 2014 has doubled.

Zakiya What we also know is that a lot of the clothes that we purchase aren't made in the U.S.

Titi Right. A lot of it is coming from China, and China actually accounts for 30 percent of world apparel.

Zakiya Wow. So we know we have a huge clothing industry. There's a lot of clothes being made. People are buying way more, I guess, pieces or garments per person than they used to. How do we take all of that and make it tie into sustainability? How do we shift what's going on?

Titi That's a great question. Another thing I think we want to know is what's happening when the life of your clothing comes to an end. What are folks doing with their old clothes? And if we are generating waste from clothes, what is happening to it?

Zakiya Well, I know the global population hasn't doubled or increased 60 percent to match production or purchasing power that we see. So I want to know when we got so greedy. You know what's happening? If we're all buying so much more clothing? Are we just hoarding it or are we hanging onto it? Are we turning it over quicker? Is it wearing out? I have questions.

Titi OK, so we've talked about fast fashion. I want to know what is the opposite of fast fashion and how can we make things better for our global community?

Zakiya We're really focusing on ourselves as consumers. But what are the companies doing? Because at sixty eight garments a person, there's only so much impact that can make you know, right?

Titi It kind of has to start at the top, too. They have to be doing the right things and doing them ethically before it even gets to us for us to really have a major impact.

Zakiya That's right.

Titi And then what about accessibility to everyone? It seems like sustainable fashion is on the tip of everyone's tongue these days. But does everybody have access to these things?

Zakiya Let's get into the dissection.

Titi Today's guest expert is Drew Heifetz.

Drew Heifetz What's up, guys? My name is Drew Heifetz. I'm the owner of Frankie Collective and I have a couple other companies called F as in Frank Vintage and the Rag Machine.

Zakiya Franky Collective is an online retailer that sells vintage and reworked clothing.

Drew Heifetz So what that means is we take second hand and vintage clothing that typically would end up in the landfill or discarded or wherever it ends up. Most of the time, the landfill and we cut it and re-sew it into new clothing to give it a second life. Maybe update the fit, update to style, and bring it back.

Titi Another name for a reworked clothing is upcycling or upcycled clothing, and Frankie Collective estimates that they have saved or upcycled sixty five thousand pounds of clothes every year.

Zakiya That's a lot of clothes.

Titi That's probably more clothes than is in like Mariah Carey's closet.

Zakiya I'm really hoping we can help our listeners visualize what we mean when we say upcycling and specifically upcycling the way Frankie Collective does it.

Titi Hmm. They're taking old clothes and making them like brand new and not just brand new, but unlike anything you would see in the store. So you're getting something that almost feels one of a kind.

Zakiya So let's rewind a little bit here because I think to really understand why Frankie Collective is doing this, you have to kind of have an overview of the environmental impact of fashion, starting with your closet.

Titi How often do you do like a clear out of your closet, you know, a couple of years back-- was it at the beginning of the pandemic? Marie Kondo was-- I felt like she was in my house.

Zakiya OK, she needs to come to mine. She was not there. OK? She's not a friendly-- she's not welcome in my home.

Titi I was saying goodbye to some many things. I was having little conversations. "Listen, I appreciate you, shirt. You served your purpose and I'm grateful for you. But your time is done. You must go. Thank you."

Zakiya I think each season I kind of go through this purging process, but you also know this, Titi, that I move a lot.

Titi Yeah, my friend cannot stay in one place. She loves to be moving out of a place and moving in, it seems.

Zakiya Yes. And so, you know, just by that process, I'm purging quite a bit and going through things.

Titi I know that some people do like different things with their clothes. There's things where you can like sell your clothes.

Zakiya I would just take bags to Goodwill. What happens to that stuff? I'm always looking to see did somebody have on my outfit that I donated. What happens to it?

Titi I put my thing in that drop box, and it's just kind of like out of sight, out of mind. I'm like those clothes disappeared.

Drew Heifetz Most of our clothing gets donated. Everyone knows those bins you donate and it's like Salvation Army bin or wherever they are, or you can drop it at the back of a thrift store, right? This is where the public perception gets blurry because we typically think that all those clothes we're donating goes right into that thrift store and get sold. In reality, I think it's only something like five or 10 percent of what we donate goes into those thrift stores.

Titi Yeah, according to the EPA, about 84 percent of our clothing ends up in incinerators and landfills.

Drew Heifetz They get so much more clothing than they can actually process so that the public can consume. And also, they don't want to put out dirty things, stained things, ripped things, people donate one leg of a jean! You know, they're just like, "what do I do with this?"

Zakiya Then, I'm really curious about how these clothes end up in landfills. Like, what is the process from my donation? Who's judging them and saying, "Zakiya brought us this, not good enough?"

Titi This is trash.

Zakiya Yeah.

Titi That's rude!

Titi Drew says that many places that accept clothing donations will send unwanted clothing to facilities that will sort and package it by size and then sell the packages by the pound to international markets where it can be resold.

Drew Heifetz Pakistan, India, Africa have huge street markets where they sell primarily American and European secondhand clothing. Pop culture is so based in America. People could watch American movies and TV shows, and they want those brands that they're seeing on TV, in the movies, and all these things. But again, a huge portion of that stuff, like in this whole process, just gets tossed because it doesn't fit the grade that people want. It's damaged, whatever happens. They put them in these huge thousand pound bales, compress clothing, and they go to landfill. And there's whole clothing landfills in Africa that are like taking up massive amounts of space and then tons of it goes to American landfills.

Zakiya The Council for Textile Reporting estimates that the average U.S. citizen throws away or donates 70 to 80 pounds of clothing and other textiles annually, 70 to 80 pounds every year. How many pairs of jeans is that? And it says other textiles too, so that's like towels.

Titi Let's do the math. 84 percent of 75 pounds of donated clothing. That's sixty three pounds of clothing that I thought was getting resold at a thrift store, but it's probably sitting in a landfill somewhere, and that's really sobering to think about.

Zakiya What are some of the alternate things we can do with the clothes we don't want to use anymore, especially now that I know they're going to the landfill?

Drew Heifetz You're much better off giving your clothes to a friend who's going to use it, or if you have kids clothes, like give it to an expecting mom, whatever it is, because at least you know that it's most likely going to get used and passed on and not end up in landfill.

Titi Yeah, so sometimes I do that with my sisters, like if I have stuff that I'm like, OK, I've worn this once or twice and I don't want it anymore or I bought this thing. It's really nice. But it wasn't the right size. I might ask my little sister, "Hey, what do you think of this?" And I'll give it to her so she can have it. Also, you can donate to local shelters or nonprofit organizations in your neighborhood.

Zakiya So how do we accumulate all of these clothes in the first place? When you think about donating 60 or 70 pounds of clothes, that means you had to get at least 60 to 70 pounds of clothes.

Titi So that goes back to a lot of what we were talking about with Dr. Kahn. How we shop is kind of changing, and we wanted to get Drew's perspective on fast fashion and what it is.

Drew Heifetz First of all, it's driving down prices so, so deeply discounted that they can just have people buy and buy and not be concerned with the amount of waste they're creating. Quality gets compromised, which means that you end up throwing these things out after two, three, maybe one wear. They're putting out new stuff so fast, so fast. You know, weekly basis, daily basis. Typically, when we look at fashion from a historic perspective, companies would have seasonal collections. This is my spring collection. This is my summer collection. This is my fall collection. Now it's like, this is Monday's drop. This is Tuesday drop. This is Wednesday drop. This is Thursday drop. And you're like, "OK, you're coming at me so fast."

Zakiya You know? And I think the question becomes what's the opposite, right?

Titi Right?

Zakiya How do we slow down this train? How do I still look good? But--

Titi Right? Is slow fashion a thing?

Zakiya I think it kind of is.

Drew Heifetz Slow fashion to me would be brands where you could buy something and you can guarantee that they're going to last you. You know, maybe something that has a lifetime warranty that they'll fix it for you if it doesn't stand up to your standards or a brand where the clothing is built to last you a few years. So it's like you can go buy one pair of pants that you know is going to like, hold up for like three or four years or two years, or you could buy 10 pairs of fast fashion pants. Right? And in the end, you would spend less on the one good pair than the 10 cheap pairs, even though in the moment you're like, "Well, I only paid 30 for those jeans."

Zakiya And it feels like some brands are trying to right the ship. One that I've seen is like Universal Standard, and they are super size inclusive, and they even have a program where if you order things and let's say your weight changes or your size changes within a year, they will ship you the size you want. Like you can ship it back, they will exchange the sizes for you. I think there's also been a push by folks on Instagram who have been talking about capsule collections. And that's something that I really am kind of into. It's like, these are the things that I'm going to wear. I have, you know, a good pair of black jeans, a pair that I know I can go to not like, "Oh, this doesn't look right. It kind of fits. But sometimes--you know how that is."

Titi Yeah, I've seen people do that, and one of the people that I follow, she has like a clothing rail. And those are like her staple things like she's like, I always have a nice jean jacket. These are my staple blue jeans. This is a blazer that I really like. This is a button down shirt that I really like. And so she has like eight or nine pieces that she loves that are really good quality.

Zakiya So then you're not really buying for the trends. If leopard is in, you may accessorize with leopard, you know, or you may do something like that, but you don't find yourself moving through each season. You're "now I got to get polka dot pants, now it's time for bootcut jeans," which are those back?

Titi I saw somebody wearing low rise jeans, and I felt like I could weep. No way will I ever go back.

Zakiya I like my jeans that fit like a turtleneck. In addition to the efforts on the consumer side around like, you know, capsule collections than just buying things that really fit, yeah, you know, we're seeing a lot more marketing like the little green leaf brands saying that they are selling us clothing that's sustainable or ethically sourced.

Titi And ethically sourced means that the workers, the people that are making the clothing, are not in environments that are unsafe. This non sweatshop situation and that, like if they're working with anything that has to do with dye or chemicals, that they have the right personal protective equipment or PPE to do their job safely.

Drew Heifetz So when you actually break it down, something that is sustainable means we can do it forever and ever and ever and ever. And the resources for that are never going to be depleted and it will keep replenishing itself. Right. I don't think any of it is sustainable. I don't think the whole industry, I don't think what we're doing to a degree is completely sustainable. You know, there's always some kind of waste and there's always something that's not perfect.

Titi Some people in the clothing industry are trying to steer away from using the term sustainability.

Zakiya And a lot of environmental scientists and researchers are encouraging them to do so.

Drew Heifetz Because sustainable term is a blanket term where everyone's like, "Ooh, that sounds great. That's cool. Maybe I'll buy that." That doesn't say anything, right? And then when you break it down, like you said into sustainably sourced or organic or nontoxic dyeing, or all the other things that people use, that kind of gets more specific. And I think that's probably a better way to go.

Zakiya You know, I really like that more of a spectrum of sustainability. So even if you can't upcycle or rework or trade old clothing, there are things you can do from the jump to increases lifecycle.

Titi Right? I had all these old sweatshirts, and recently I was like, OK, I need to get rid of some of these sweatshirts, Zakiya, you know I own what feels like mountains of sweatshirts. I wear sweatshirts all year round. And so I decided I wanted to get rid of some of them. And so I was like, OK, what can I do? I know that, you know, after talking to Drew that donating them probably isn't the right thing to do. So I went on Twitter and I asked, you know, have all these old clothes, what should I do with them? And someone suggested that I just cut them up and use them as like cleaning supplies. So like stuff that I can use to like dry off dishes, you know, to like clean windows or clean floors. And I thought that that was such a great idea. And so it's cool to imagine a second or third or fourth life for your clothes when you're finishing wearing them.

Drew Heifetz We just all have to be looking to produce less waste and think about the things we're doing in every facet of our lives all the time.

Zakiya Well, we're going to take a break, but there's a lot more to come, including how the global labor shortage is affecting the fashion world and some surprising news about those popular clothing rental services to.

Titi We're back and we've been talking with Drew Heifetz, the owner of Frankie Collective, about fashion and how to be more eco-conscious consumers of clothing.

Zakiya And we can't really have this conversation without talking about access, because that's also a big factor in making the right decisions for ourselves, you know, so true. If I have to drive across town to get where the more ethically sourced clothing is, that's already putting it out of bounds for me. That's already a barrier. What if I don't have a car and if I do have a car, am I concerned about contributing to pollution in another way? And the elephant in the room that we're not talking about is that often organic or responsibly sourced clothing is more expensive. These are all these different filters you have to assess your decisions through.

Titi This is just like what we were talking about when we talked about food and about access to healthy food. Like if it's so expensive, then only certain groups of people of a certain status have access to it.

Drew Heifetz The system has to change, where doing the right thing is the same price, right? Where it's the same for everyone and everyone has accessibility to it.

Titi Like Drew said, accessibility is so important, and that goes for accessibility to information, too. The more we know about our clothing and where and how it's made, the better equipped we are to make choices about what we wear. One thing that a lot of people don't know about clothing fabric is that a lot of our clothing contains plastic and through the degradation of our clothes, whether it's through washing or wherever our clothes end up, if we aren't reusing them, it introduces tiny particles into our environment called microplastics.

Drew Heifetz Microplastics are a huge problem, right? When we wash our clothes, microplastics come off any synthetics, so basically fleece, polyester, nylons. These products are made of petroleum, plastic based materials, and then they shed these tiny particles. The particles get washed out into the ocean, eventually through our system. They're too small. This is kind of like out of sight, out of mind problem that not a lot of people think about or know about.

Titi We, as humans on this planet, use a lot of plastic. There is plastic in everything. There's plastic in our clothes, there's plastic in everything that's around us. And so that creates a lot of plastic waste. And then the thing about plastic is that it doesn't degrade. It lives forever, essentially. And so that creates a problem with the environment because we're putting these things in landfills. There's a lot of plastic that goes into our wastewater, and that wastewater makes its way out to the ocean. And then as we talked about with Ayana Elizabeth Johnson in Lab 28, that water evaporates, goes into the sky and then rains down upon us.

Zakiya And I think the thing I really want everybody to remember, you know, is when we say plastics, we think about plastic bags and plastic that we can see, you know, and that plastic is already like film plastic hard enough to capture. But you're talking about plastic that is so small that it's difficult to recapture, right?

Titi You would only be able to see them if they are grouped up in large groups. But what also is happening is that when it's in the ocean, those microplastics because they're so small, they get carried up with the evaporated water from the ocean, which goes into the clouds. And then as either rains or snows, the microplastic comes down from the clouds and then back onto the earth. So while it's in the water, we have fish that are eating microplastics unknowingly. So I saw a study a while ago that was saying that probably every piece of fish that we consume at this point has microplastics in it. Mm-Hmm. And then there was a study from two thousand nineteen where these researchers were in the Arctic and they were collecting snow samples from the Arctic. And they said per liter of melted snow, there were ten thousand microscopic particles of plastic in it, 10000 per liter. And so it just lets you know that our our water and our plant life and our animal life and even just ourselves, we are consuming so much plastic.

Zakiya You know, microplastics are harmful. You get bioaccumulation. So, small little organisms consume these microplastics. Bigger organisms consume lots of microplastics. Fish consume those bigger organisms. We consume fish, you know, so then you have microplastics circulating throughout our entire ecosystem. And when they're in the body, they're harmful. They're physically harmful, and they can disrupt biological function like of your immune system and affect your growth in reproduction.

Titi Frankie Collective has been trying in their own way to make a huge dent on the problem of clothing and textile waste. And Drew says that over the past few years, they've really taken off.

Zakiya The conversation has also really grown on social media and through several documentaries like The True Cost, which came out in 2015, which highlights not only the devastating environmental impact of fast fashion, but it also highlights the human rights abuses that are happening due to the rising demand of cheap clothing.

Titi Yeah, it feels like now everybody's talking about it.

Drew Heifetz I would say, even like the last five years have been the biggest movement in that kind of realm of public perception that we need to be more sustainable. It has a whole following now, a whole sector of people, a whole group of people that really like, again, there's levels to it but are looking for it, demanding it. And that's the basis to everything. If the people want it, the people demand it, the people buy it, then it all falls into place because you literally vote for everything with your money. It's like so simple. So you've got to put your money where your mouth is and you got to vote with your money.

Titi You know, this also makes me think of?

Zakiya What?

Titi Renting clothes. So services where you can rent clothes like Rent the Runway Nuuly, or Gwynnie Bee. These services provide users access to some of the top fashion brands without the financial commitment and without having to go on to the store. So for a flat rate or a monthly fee, you can go on to their website, you pick what you want and then you wear it for, you know, whatever event that you have or whatever you need that clothing for. And then you send it back and the cost varies. You can expect to spend anywhere from 60 to \$200 per month. So it seems like a great way to keep your look looking fresh, you know, without creating a lot of waste. Right?

Titi I mean, you would think.

Drew Heifetz The rental market is fairly new like Rent the Runway or Urban Outfitters has a rental program now, I believe, from a perspective of convenience and fashion. It's kind of dope because you're like, you can every month get a new box of stuff, put in your closet, send it back, get a new box and rotate it out.

Zakiya But a new study that came out in July in Environmental Research Letters actually argues that renting and recycling clothes is less sustainable than just buying them.

Titi We can't win.

Zakiya We can't win. In this study, a group of research scientists in Finland calculated the greenhouse gas emissions connected to five different ways of consuming clothing. The main issue is that the way these companies are currently operating, there's a lot of transportation required to deliver rented clothes from the warehouse to your doorstep. And so that really adds up in terms of emissions.

Drew Heifetz I don't think it's much more sustainable than producing clothing market, to be honest. And then that argument also travels over to like e-commerce in general. Everything, everything's getting shipped. Everything is getting shipped, right? One garment, one T-shirt is getting shipped around the world, maybe a couple of times, three times. So again, it's like, where do we draw the line? What is right for you?

Titi This goes back to fast fashion and slow fashion. Renting clothes is still based on cycling through the newest trends and sending clothes back when they're no longer in style. This is kind of like fast fashion following us. No matter how hard we tried to act sustainably, we can't escape it. Scientists say that the most sustainable thing you can do is buy less clothes and wear them for longer. There's also things that rental companies can do to improve their missions, like using forms of transport that are low to zero emissions. But that hasn't happened yet.

Drew Heifetz Obviously, you have to be happy and get the cool stuff that you want, but you also want to do it in the best way. It's like that is such a massive umbrella of

opinions and arguments and facts and oil consumption and all these things. So I'm just going to say like, you've got to make that call for yourself.

Zakiya You know, maybe you draw the line at regularly renting your day to day wardrobe. So maybe you decide I'm only going to rent something for this really special event. You know, I want this one of a kind vintage dress for my cousin's wedding, right? Then you do your research and you decide what's best for you. I remember when something similar happened to you, Titi, from our food episode.

Titi We had talked about all these different things. You know, they were saying, cows milk, you know, it's bad for agriculture in the way that it's produced and all these things like that. So it's like not ethical to drink cow's milk. So, I said, "OK." I no longer drink cow's milk. I am now one of the elites. Now I drink almond milk, you know? And so me thinking, now I'm fancy and I'm with it and I'm helping the environment and I'm a better person. I go on Twitter, "Hey, ya'll, I drink almond milk now." And then people were like, "You drink almond milk? Do you know how much water it takes to make one almond? That's so bad for the environment." I was like, well, dang, what am I supposed to do now? And they were like, You have to drink oat milk. And I was like, Well, probably in six months, you going to tell me that oat milk requires the blood of your first child to get the oats or something like that. I feel like I can't win. You can really end up driving yourself crazy, trying to keep up with some of these things.

Drew Heifetz You know if it doesn't sit right with you. Look it up, get the facts. Figure out what works for you and your own life, and just do the best you can.

Zakiya You know, one thing we've been hearing a lot about lately is the global labor shortage, which low key is tied to the global low wage issue. So, you know, there are a lot of industries that are in a state of constant flux as companies struggle to find applicants and demand is just expected to continue to rise.

Titi Just in the U.S., job openings hit a record of 10 million in June of 2021.

Titi And then as of July, the overall unemployment rate was 5.4 percent. But it was even worse in the retail industry, specifically because there, it was 6.4 percent unemployment. Wow. And so that's just retail in the stores. That's not counting labor shortages in factories where clothes are being made. Shortages and distribution, shortages with cargo ships and truck drivers who deliver clothing to the stores to be sold. You know, Christopher Mims, from The Wall Street Journal and our guest from Lab: 039, has a book that talks about that shortage, especially around truck drivers and transportation. It's called Arriving Today. So we asked, Drew, how should we be framing this issue within the context of sustainability? And is there some way we might need to think about restructuring fashion overall when we're considering these shortages?

Drew Heifetz When you look at used clothing and resale projections, it's going up, it's going crazy. There's been some like numbers put out that include sneakers, which is a

huge part of it. Luxury streetwear and then say secondhand. The numbers projected for the next five years are like going to quadruple right because it's close to home, it's becoming more accessible. Like you said, we're so reliant on supply chains from Asia, from China and other Asian countries like Korea and Vietnam and other places. We're so reliant on those supply chains that if they shut down on us, on America in particular, I mean Canada's same, we're screwed, heavily screwed. What can we do in our lives to kind of help and get around that or try to help more local things do better? If you have the option to buy a product that somebody in your town made or somebody in China made to maybe buy it someone in your town, because that way it'll increase the demand for that locally, that will eliminate a supply chain issue.

Titi But the other thing that Drew pointed out is that it's our responsibility as consumers to educate ourselves about what efforts a company is making to become more sustainable and environmentally friendly. Because even if a company is marketing itself as, quote unquote sustainable, that doesn't always mean they're actually doing the work.

Drew Heifetz Greenwashing is very prevalent now, and we sort of said how a lot of companies are jumping into the space of sustainable or eco friendly and all these different ways. And the marketing is coming out so fast and heavy companies will market whatever works. They're, a, b testing on you. They're throwing ads at you, whatever you like, they're going to throw it at you harder. We really should be doing a little bit more research.

Zakiya This isn't that different from when you see foods in the grocery store marketed as natural. What do you mean by that? Or even organic? But organic is just part of the brand name, right?

Titi It'll be like organic, but with a K at the end. Like, Come on, baby, we know that's not right. That ain't organic.

Drew Heifetz Again, voting with your dollar, but voting with your eyes and what you view and what you choose to acknowledge. And if you're going to buy something, maybe just do a little more research to see if that marketing was actually correct and stands up to your personal filter of what you decide is good for your own life.

Zakiya And that's something that can really get behind, Titi.

Titi Me, too. It's your personal filter. You can't change every single thing. It's going to be what matters most to you. It's not just about, you know, once every four years or every two years, you can every day be making a statement with how you place your money.

Zakiya Because that's exactly what shopping is if you break it down, voting with your dollar.

Titi All right, it's time for one thing. Zakiya, what's your one thing?

Zakiya My one thing is a book this week. It is Stop Telling Women to Smile: Stories of Street Harassment by visual artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh. You can find her at tlynnfaz.com.

Titi Love that, and I will definitely be purchasing. My one thing this week is also a book. It's by Aja Barber, and it's right in line with what we've been talking about over the last couple of episodes. It's called Consumed: The Need for Collective Change, Colonialism, Climate Change and Consumerism. It is so good. So definitely pick that up as well.

Zakiya That's it for Lab: 053 and a wrap on our episodes on fashion. Call us at 202-567-7028, and tell us what you thought, or if you have an idea for a lab we should do this semester. Tell us that too. 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'll 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 Special thanks to today's guest expert Drew. Heifetz.

Zakiya You can find him on Instagram @DrewHeifetz and @Frankie Collective.

Titi You can find us on Twitter and Instagram @DopeLabsPodcast.

Zakiya And Titi's on Twitter and Instagram @dr_tsho.

Titi You can find Zakiya on Twitter and Instagram @zsaidso. Dope Labs is a Spotify original production from MEGAOHM Media Group.

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