

Trust goes beyond imagery: Interview with Jacqueline Kusamotu, cofounder Candour Beauty

Maddyness spoke to Jacqueline Kusamotu – cofounder of Candour Beauty, which is transforming the way Black women buy beauty and personal care products, and founder of The Black British Census, a data platform that will allow businesses to adequately understand the Black British population.

In a survey by *Stylist* earlier this year, 51% of Black British women said their self esteem was affected by how difficult it was to access the correct products for their hair and skin tone. We spoke to Jacqueline Kusamotu, who's been a beauty fanatic since her teenage years, about addressing the beauty industry's failure to cater for Black women and women of colour, and how the uproar surrounding Sainsbury's' recent Christmas advert proves racism remains alive in the UK.

[Maddyness] Was Candour a 'lockdown business' or conceived beforehand?
Could you tell me a bit about the genesis of the idea and your partnership with Abi?

[Jacqueline] The concept of Candour Beauty was born in August last year, and officially launched March 2020, two weeks before the national lockdown.

Myself and Abi worked together for a digital telecommunications company before this. We had a number of similarities, especially when it came to the business we wanted to pursue and our experiences with regards to the lack of services available to the modern day Black woman.

We were frustrated with the beauty industry, how we and so many others who look like us have to shop in two different worlds, and with retailers who did not have our best interest at heart.

In one world, we shop with mainstream retailers who do not authentically cater to the Black skin market, or fully understand our needs. And in the second, we shop with smaller, independent retailers who specifically target Black women but are predominantly owned and run by South Asian men, who offer us a very low level of service, and have little knowledge about the products they sell or how to recommend them.

In both these scenarios Black consumers are left to try and figure things out on their own. Candour Beauty aims to merge these two worlds, but do it better. We are passionate about serving our customers with the best products, accompanied with providing expert advice and a community alongside. All the way through the shopping journey we also aim to ensure excellent levels of customer service, that this market typically does not receive.

You say Black women are ‘unseen, misrepresented, unheard and misunderstood’ in certain spaces. Could you elaborate on how you noticed this within the beauty market, and what the mainstream offering was/is like for Black women/women of colour?

I noticed this because I’ve been buying beauty since I was about 13. My first introduction to ‘proper’ skincare was with Clinique’s 3-step system at the age of 15. From that point on I was completely consumed by the world of skincare and make-up. And I can confidently say that in my 20+ years of buying beauty from major retailers such as Superdrug, Boots, John Lewis, and up to Harrods Beauty Halls, I’ve seen very few brands who have equal representation and understanding.

Authentic representation from the start is key. Brands need to understand that trust goes beyond imagery. It has to be intrinsic to a brand’s/retailer’s DNA. They should value *all* customers and show that in *all* areas. Not just as a performative action.

Having shopped with approximately 80-90% of beauty brands, and discussed these experiences far and wide, I know I have experiences which are not unique to myself as a Black consumer. One thing these all have in common is a lack of familiarity with Black beauty and skincare needs. Generally, assistants in stores are very standoffish and unwelcoming. There are very few stores who train staff on Black beauty and skincare needs; it’s often a generic blanket service of advice; especially when it comes to colour cosmetics.

The mainstream offering for Black women and women of colour in the make-up industry is now expanding, and skincare is always a little slow to follow, but it’s growing. It’s now a question of getting those brands or products created with Black skin in mind into the eyeline of the right market, and creating that trust between brand and shopper.

What is the benefit of having a beauty

space specifically for Black women/woc, rather than being a 'range' stocked by bigger outlets?

Both are equally beneficial, but only if they serve the needs of the customer.

Candour Beauty is more than a retailer; it's a platform that authentically understands and serves a demographic that has been overlooked and misrepresented.

As well as providing beauty products and expert advice we are building a community where Black women are at the heart and can share their experiences, tips, product matches and routines etc. as well as concerns with skin-types or ingredients.

To be totally clear, Candour Beauty is not about excluding others, or just creating the reverse of current retailers. We want to be explicit with our offering because we understand the layers of systemic racism and microaggressions that are experienced by Black women on an everyday basis. It's not as easy as just buying a product off the shelf. Shoppers want an experience, and that's what Candour is trying to build, alongside trust between shopper and retailer.

Are Black women unseen, misrepresented, unheard and misunderstood in other markets as well? Could you give some examples?

This is certainly the case in many if not all markets, and unfortunately is not just Black women; it's men also, and can extend to everyone of colour. Unfortunately racism does still exist, and is a part of Western everyday life. A perfect example is the Sainsbury's Christmas advert, and how much

controversy that has caused when advertising for a supermarket.

How is The Black British Census working to overcome this? What tangible impact do you hope to see it have on the world?

The Black British Census (TBBC) aims to provide insights and understanding to allow education and conversations and create tangible solutions for retailers to some of the most pressing challenges they are faced with, and gaps in the market.

Mid this year, *Stylist* ran a nationwide survey for Black British women. The results showed that 72% of Black women believe they are seen negatively in society, and 51% said their self esteem is affected by the limitations with accessing products for their hair and skin tone. These are absolutely appalling statistics but they confirmed our thoughts around the conception of Candour Beauty, and about the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of those consumers.

The Black British Census initiative came out of the frustrations of Black women like myself constantly asking 'why are we so misunderstood?' 'Why do brands/organisations get it wrong?' I could only come to the conclusion that it's due to miscommunication, and the gap in understanding between the Black population and the C-suites and owners of the majority of these organisations.

Essentially TBBC is a platform that will allow businesses to understand the Black British population better. As a business owner, my mission is to serve my customer. However when I tried to research how best to reach them, I was unable to see any real or useful data specific to this demographic. And when I did finally come across some data it was often listed under the 'BAME' category. Which, for Candour Beauty, was of no use because of course all minority racial groups under this term are very different. The needs of various cultures, and their experiences, are different.

To add to this, I am a Black woman who loves beauty, so I can identify with my target audience to a certain extent – however, any population is not

homogeneous. This is unfortunately a big hurdle for some brands.

The data gathered by The Black British Census will give Black consumers a platform to demand relevant representation and appropriate goods and services, be it from brands or local governments.

And finally, a more personal question. We've started asking everyone we interview about their daily routine and the rules they live by. Is it up at 4am for yoga, or something a little more traditional? Perhaps you could tell us about your beauty routine as well – as it seems topical!

Pre-pandemic I was a very proud member of the 5am club. However, the balance of working from home with young children didn't last very long. My actual working hours have really been impacted, as I allocate a lot of the day time to my children, while just doing the basic tasks. It is in the evening when I am able to get down into the weeds and work quite late. As a newly launched company Candour Beauty is still very much hands on, and our days are varied, generally being split between developing on the site, marketing, customer service and logistics.

I have always been strict with my calendar, so during this 'new pandemic normal' I have split my calendar and colour coded it in categories: family time, homeschool activities, Candour Beauty, TBBC, downtime, reading and meetings. This allows me to really be present in the different areas of my life, and stop me from getting too consumed by work.

In the morning my beauty routine is very simple with just three or four products which include: cleanser, toner, serum or moisturiser, then always SPF. Depending on the type of meetings I have that day I'll wear a 'no make-up make-up look' to stay professional.

My evening beauty routine is where all the magic happens. I double-cleanse to ensure my make-up and sunscreen is removed, then continue on with acid-based toners and serums. This is often a seven step routine: a double-cleanse with two different cleansers, followed by toner, a specific serum to treat any hyper-pigmentation, followed sometimes by a Retinol serum. As it's now winter, my skin is a little dryer, so I add extra moisture with a Hyaluronic Acid serum, then finish off with a night balm.

Discover Candour Beauty

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