

Ep6 – Jamii

SPEAKERS

Claudia Winkleman, Khalia Ismain

Claudia Winkleman

Welcome to Business Unusual. I'm Claudia Winkleman. Hello. In this podcast in association with Vodafone Business. I'm meeting the UK is most inspiring entrepreneurs, the founders, creators, CEOs and MDs who had an idea, made it happen, and was unbelievably successful. In this episode, I'm meeting the founder of Jamii, a discount card and discovery platform, which champions black British business. It was launched in 2016, in response to the first wave of the Black Lives Matter movement, and is tackling the challenges that face black entrepreneurs in the UK, the biggest of which is a struggle to be noticed. The passionate customer base that the company has built up supports more than 200 black owned businesses, inspired by micro entrepreneurs in Kenya, Jamii's creator, Khalia Ismain is on a mission. The judges of last year's Great British Entrepreneur Awards called her the one to watch. She's joining me now. Hi, Khalia, thank you so much for talking to us.

Khalia Ismain

Thank you so much for the invitation. And I love that introduction. I might have to copy and paste that from my website.

Claudia Winkleman

I will send it to you, I will send it to you. And on the subject of your website, I'm going to be honest with you. I'm obsessed. I've already bought some candles. What a clever human being you are. It's an extraordinary thing that you've done. For anybody who's like, wait, what? What is it? Can you just explain Love Jamii please.

Khalia Ismain

Yeah, so basically, like he said, back in 2016, Jamii got launched. And essentially what it was for us was how can we make it super easy for people to buy from black creators and makers. And the reason why that was important to us is because you know, the first way to the Black Lives Matter movement had kind of really opened a lot of people's eyes to some of the issues and disadvantages that are faced by the black community. And for us, we were like, Okay, one thing that we can do is we can change our buying behaviour, we can start supporting these these small businesses to empower them to uplift them. But it was very much you know, me as an individual, I couldn't really find ones that I was buying, that making products that I would just be buying anyway. So things like candles. And so we were just like, Okay, how can we make it super easy for us? And then for everyone else too, and the reason why we came up with the idea of the discount card is because we were just like, how can we get people to make this a habit rather than it just be you know, something's trending. So therefore I'm going to make purchase, how can we make this something which is doesn't matter what you're looking for, you're like 'ooo' let me see if I can get it from a black creator, let me have a look. And we all have a discount. So

that was like a nice way to just get people thinking about that. But then also, if you don't know the business, you haven't heard of them before. If you get a nice little 15-20% off, you're much more likely to try them and then try it and then go back to them tell other people. And so that was very much like the the mindset that we had kind of starting it. And then as the years gone by, we've launched our online marketplace. So you can buy everything on the site too. We do pop up shops, we do real life marketplaces, and things like that. And literally everything that we do is all kind of tied together. To how can we make it super easy. Same way, it's like easy to buy milk from Tesco. How can we make it super easy to shop with black creators.

Claudia Winkleman

I have to tell you, it is super easy, because I bought candles yesterday, but possibly the most bit I like a candle don't judge me the most beautiful this sort of bubble glass. Extraordinary sounding smells. So anyway, I won't hang on about my love of candles. But what I'm saying is it's incredibly easy to purchase, you have this card you log on. And then there are these wonderful pull down buttons so you can get everything you can get shampoos so you can get soaps, you can get something for grooming, you can get something from your home when you envisaged it was it always going to be as big as it is? Because it feels like a massive snowball of fantasticalness.

Khalia Ismain

Yeah, so it is actually like from the start I think I always had it's probably a bit too ambitious with how much I thought we were going to be able to do I thought we were going to be able to be like you know an equivalent of Amazon where if you know you were looking for a hammer you get a hammer and but I kind of realised that actually no, the people that we're really speaking to that were really responding to us like certain types of things and so we decided right we'll focus on like beauty so you know, Afro hair care and things like that. But then also just lovely nice to have items like candles, candles is probably one of our best selling things especially when lock down here. Everyone was buying a candle and just you know nice things like people love to get our greetings cards because it's so difficult to get cards that represent like black culture. And they love to get like really nice things that plantain themed oven gloves and stuff like that which is just, you can't find it anywhere else. So that's kind of like the niche we're in. But no, when I first started, I was adamant that we were going to be able to everything, every single product you could think of. So this is probably a smaller version of what I originally wanted. But to be honest, it Yeah, it is still huge

Claudia Winkleman

It is. I love the fact that you accept that it is huge. And you never know, if I need to hammer in a light bulb, maybe I'll be going to Love Jamii in the future. And why is it called Love Jamii?

Khalia Ismain

So I basically got the inspiration and the confidence to start. Jamii when I was in Kenya for a few months, graduated uni, wasn't really sure what I was doing, but knew there was something in using business to create social change. So I went to Kenya for a few months worked with micro entrepreneurs, like help them work things out and stuff. It's basically an extra pair of hands. And then when I came back and I needed a name for this organisation, I was going to start a wanted something which links back to that time there, but also something that felt really inclusive, like anyone and

everyone could get involved. And so Jamii is the Swahili word for community. And for me that just felt really kind of like, yeah, that is it is that it's a community thing. Is everyone coming together? Is everyone working together? And Love Jamii is because I couldn't get the jamii.com domain.

Claudia Winkleman

Fair enough. I like your honesty. You could have come up with something else. My middle name is love. I love love.

Khalia Ismain

Exactly. That Love Jamii. No, that feels right. It does feel right. Yeah.

Claudia Winkleman

When you first told people so you know your family, you go off, you get this brilliant degree, you go to Kenya and you come back and you go, guys, I've got quite big news, I'm going to do this. What was their reaction at first? Because some entrepreneurs out there are sort of buoyed on by people going that's ridiculous. Go and get a job. Or yes, we believe in you, which did you receive and which works best for you?

Khalia Ismain

So originally, when I told my mom, I sat her down as I've got some news, and I said, I'm going to start a business and she was like, oh my god, I thought you couldn't tell me I was pregnant. And I was like, no

Claudia Winkleman

But interesting to know what your reaction would be?

Khalia Ismain

Yeah, that my family is the most supportive family in the world. They have just they're so behind everything that I've been doing and have been from the very start, my sister actually works for Jammie now. So they have been amazing, I would not have been able to do it without them. But I have had a lot of people say, you know, I don't think this is gonna work. It doesn't make sense. And I think a lot of it was because I was quite adamant about focusing on the black community. And, and because, you know, when I was starting in 2016, like it wasn't as understood, you know, why black and not, you know, BAME or, or just why not just small businesses and things like that. And for me, it was because of where my inspiration came from. And it was very important that I focus on the community that I come from, that I understand the most, and that I speak to that yeah, there was a lot of people saying, Oh, this is never gonna work, you should just give it up. You're wasting your time. But for me, I was just like, well, I will prove you wrong, if nothing else, and like, I just don't like it when people tell me I can't do something

Claudia Winkleman

to do. What I love the most is that you say that with a huge smile on your face, like loads of people thought it wouldn't work. But that's a brilliant way of tackling it, which was okay, thanks for your input. We'll see.

Khalia Ismain

Yeah, yeah, literally, I was just like, you know, I listened to what people said, and I was like, you know, okay, thanks for giving me something to overcome kind of thing. You know, your feedback is something I probably should take into consideration. But I'll just make sure I bear that in mind as I move forward, rather than like letting it get me down.

Claudia Winkleman

I think that's fantastic. Did you want to start a business? You know, when you were little, did you? I'm not saying age four. But when you University? Were you thinking I'd quite like to be a founder?

Khalia Ismain

No, not Not really. Like I think I always had a lot of admiration for people who built things from nothing and people who created things. But I never kind of set out to be like, oh, I want to be an entrepreneur just need to find the idea. I was more of a I suppose, an accidental entrepreneur, where I found a problem, I thought of a solution and realise that no one else was doing it. So I was like, well, I might have to, I might have to do it myself. It wasn't really something that I looked to do. But I've always loved small business. Like when I came out of uni, for the first few years of Jamii's life like I was I did have like a full time job. And I've just worked in small businesses all my life in like, a variety of different roles, like you come in as one thing and then you end up doing something completely different. But I've just found it so inspirational, that you know, you can have real impact when you work in small businesses. And I've really loved that

Claudia Winkleman

is that what attracts you and also just maybe a small team who are focused and unbelievably hard working rather than just gazillions of people?

Khalia Ismain

Yeah. Like I've never been very good in the kind of like, you're just the number in the machine type environments that I've always preferred. Having like my own little domain and autonomy within that, that region and then but I'm part of something bigger and we all move forward together. Like I've always loved that.

Claudia Winkleman

Let's talk about the characteristics in you that made you as a young woman come back and just get it done. Are you a go getter? Do you spring out of bed at 8am going and get something done today? Are you just that person like boof? I'm off.

Khalia Ismain

Yeah, I've always been quite ambitious. My sister over the weekend was like you, you're the kind of person who be like, I've got an idea. And then a week later be like, the whole thing's done is sorted. It's all finished. I've always been quite ambitious, I think I've always known that I can achieve quite a lot. And so I'm always in some kind of competition with myself to be like, Oh, can I exceed my potential? Can I push myself further? Can I go harder?

Claudia Winkleman

How do you work out what impact Love Jamii has had on black British business? Can you see that in any way?

Khalia Ismain

Yeah, so one of the ways that we can see that is literally sales. So kind of sales that comes to the platform, or like when we do physical retail and stuff. Another way is like, we have good relationships with everyone that we work with. And so we ask them, like, you know, from your perspective, like, you know, what has the impact been? We've had people come back and say I was I've been able to hire people because of like the work that you guys have been doing, I was able to move from, you know, everything being in like my cupboard under the stairs to now I've got a warehouse. Yes, yeah. Like and, and things like that, like people being able to actually take on their friends and family, which is beautiful, and, and expand their businesses into new areas into shops, like we, when we do our pop up shops, so many of the guys that we have stopped, they've never been in a shop before. So they've been able to take that data, take that experience, and then say, look, go they go to other stores. And they look, this is what we did here. So here's what we could do with yours. And it opens up new opportunities for them as well. We've also got a lot of businesses national media coverage, which is like been incredible. They've been featured in like the Metro and the Stylist and BuzzFeed and things like that, which again, just opens new doors for them.

Claudia Winkleman

When you I'm just going to ask you a personal question, and then we'll get but I'm just when you get into bed, do you or when you're chatting with your Mum, do you go? This is happening? This has happened. This is what I wanted to do. And PS not that long ago might feel like a long time ago, but five minutes ago, I went to Kenya then I wanted to do this. And this is the impact it's having. Do you feel really proud or not?

Khalia Ismain

Um, this is a really good question. I think my mum is very good at making sure that I feel proud. My mum's like you've done so much you've done this. I think on a day to day I think I always looking forward more than I'm looking back. I'm always like, there's so much left for us to do. There's so much more work to be done, which is obviously not a great thing because it's like weed like you said, we've come so far from when it was just an idea in the back of my mind. But I am trying to practice more kind of like gratitude and, and recognising that like we have done so much. And we have had a really great impact. And in a way like we have we are doing what we set out to do at the beginning, which is not something I could have said you know two years ago, which is really exciting.

Claudia Winkleman

More from my chat with Khalia in just a moment. First I want to introduce a great new initiative from Vodafone Business. In the last year, there's been a huge rise in the need for businesses to get online. Small and Medium Enterprises make up 99.9% of the UK business population. Founders and entrepreneurs have never had so many decisions to make when it comes to technology. Digital skills are more important than ever, but at least a third of small business owners in the UK said they aren't sure which tools will best suit their needs. Many haven't invested in any digital support. Some have only

the most basic cybersecurity. That's why Vodafone have introduced business dot connected a free online training programme to support 100,000 businesses across the UK. It offers free webinars, workshops and online training modules. There are different levels of upskilling to cater to those just starting their online journey, as well as businesses looking to build on existing experience. Find out more via Vodafone Business, online knowledge and Resource Centre V Hub where you can sign up to business connected and connect your business to the free tools and training. You need to digitally transform search Vodafone Business, the hub. Tell me about Love Jamii and Pinterest.

Khalia Ismain

Last year, we had an idea I had no idea rather. Because we saw everything that happened last summer. And there was a huge wave of support. But then what happened and this is kind of what we all kind of knew was going to happen was that towards the end, things started to kind of trail off and people you know just got interested in different things and social media hashtag moved on. But when we looked at you know who done really well and who'd been able to maintain that energy and kind of keep those sales going and things like that. We realised that there was something in storytelling like if people connected with the owners of the business and they realise it's not just about you know, buying this pair of shoes or buying this that or the other, if you actually understood like what that sale does to a person, then there's a way that we can really kind of harness that energy. So how did that idea about doing the short film and then spoke to Pinterest about it? And they were just like, oh my god, this is amazing, like, absolutely. So for the last six months or so, we've been working on this short film called Legacy seven minutes long, which just tells the stories of nine black creators with all kinds of different stories like some of them set up with their mums, their sisters that are with their daughters, they're creating different types of products, you know, African print homeware, puzzles, haircare, and it's just the chance to say like, This is who this is what happens, like when you make that.

Claudia Winkleman

This is who you're buying from? This is yeah, you just think your in bed going? Yeah, right. I'll just take that one of those. But this is where it's going.

Khalia Ismain

Yeah, it's real people that you're buying from. And when you make a purchase, like, this is where that money goes, it doesn't just sit in someone's account. It's not just buying them, you know, brand new shoes or whatever. Like it goes into building something incredible. These people with visions, who want to create their own impact, create their own legacy.

Claudia Winkleman

I'd love to take you back to Kenya and talk to me, if you don't mind about the micro entrepreneurs and what you found out.

Khalia Ismain

One of them was amazing. She moved to this this part of Kenya called Kericho. And everything was just about getting her children's school fees paid. And she was an amazing cook. So she just make food. And then she take it round to the offices. And she would always sell out before she finished her route to the point where she would be we'd be walking around with her and people would be coming up

to her upset that she hadn't come round to deliver the food. And it became such an issue. Like she was really trying to work out like how to increase her supply. She was getting up at like four in the morning every day in order to make these lunches. But uh, but yeah, she had a supply problem, not a demand problem. But it was just incredible working with her because she it would have required a bit of investment for her to actually expand that capacity. And so we were working out what was the best thing to do. But in the meantime, she was starting new product line. She started doing like desserts and yoghurts and stuff. And it was just like everything she touched turned to gold. She was ambitious. But she was so grounded. And she was like, she was just so kind of diligent in everything that she did. She wants to make so talented. Yeah, she was really talented. And it was that lesson of when she said to me, you know, I think I want to do some desserts. And then I think two days later, she would starting to do the dessert. And it was just it just something clicked with me when I was like, it really is that simple. And that kind of inspired me when I came back just to start to break things down into simple tasks like step one, call a business owner, see if they want to work with you. Like yes, two call another.

Claudia Winkleman

If you feel like overwhelmed, like yes, if you feel like you're gonna drown in admin, but lots of people will be listening to this and we budding entrepreneurs, and they'll be very interested. And I think, spurred on by that, like, just sort of do it just like this wonderful woman in Kenya.

Khalia Ismain

Yeah, I think that's like probably the best advice I could give to anyone who hasn't, who's got an idea but hasn't started the business yet. Just do it. You've got literally nothing to lose. And you'll learn so much from just having something out in the world.

Claudia Winkleman

I mean, you certainly do. Are you very tech minded? Are you quite techie? Are you guys, I'll take care of this.

Khalia Ismain

I'm not super techie. I mean, I'm as techie as a millennial can be. But I'm not like you can't write code or or any of that kind of stuff. That's more what Jamii is co founder, my partner's very good at that kind of stuff. And like and like helping to streamline the site and all of that. Yeah, I wish I could say that. I was like, a super wizz but no, sadly.

Claudia Winkleman

Most of us have been working remotely. For the last what seems like 500 years? How have you found it? And how have you stayed connected with some of your partners?

Khalia Ismain

So I've had a really love hate relationship with it. So at the start, I didn't mind it. Because obviously like now I don't have to travel anywhere. I've got so much time back. Oh, wow, this is amazing. And then I was like, oh my goodness, I just need to leave the house. In terms of keeping in contact, so when we when the lockdown first hit, we did a lot of like lives like Instagram lives, we did a lot of workshops and stuff because one of the things I was really concerned about is you know, making sure that the people

that we work with are able to survive through through the pandemic, because a significant stream of income is like literally selling, you know, there's going to marketplaces going to events and things like that. So we did a lot of lives about accounting about marketing and all of that kind of stuff. And then keeping connected with them that way. We did like kind of Google Hangout stuff, you know, everyone just everyone was just online. And so we were trying we got into that as much as possible. Then we weren't able to do too many physical events, but we did like a marketplace last month, which was amazing because so many of them came down it was just nice to see people in real life. Because other than that like Generally it's about you know, email and stuff, which can definitely get you down after a while you just saved from your inbox and you just got like 200 unread emails.

Claudia Winkleman

And 200 I want to be your assistant. Oh, not that I'd know how to reply to them. Khalia, there's been a global conversation about race in the last year. What impact has that had on your business?

Khalia Ismain

Really interesting question. It has had it, it's been a positive impact, because now people have been a lot more open than they ever have been to discuss race to discuss systemic disadvantages that are faced by the black community, which is amazing. But I think there has also been people don't quite understand what's going on yet. And so we've had a lot of people coming to us just to be like, Hey, can you do something with us? And what do you want to do? And they're like, We don't know. But yeah, something. Something, anything. So yeah, that's been interesting to navigate. But all in all, like it has been positive, because prior, they didn't quite get it. They didn't quite understand why it was so important. And when this conversation got sparked, everything started to click for a lot of people as to why it was so important. And so it will be it remains to be seen about like how deep the commitment is, but the fact that we're 12 months on, and still having those conversations is a good thing.

Claudia Winkleman

You're leading the way, I would say by increasing the profile of black owned businesses, how, how does that make you feel?

Khalia Ismain

It makes me feel it, you know, what, it's actually quite bittersweet for me because like, on the one hand, it means that we're doing something amazing and incredible, and, and all of those things, and, you know, we're doing what we set out to do, which is amazing. But on the other hand, for me personally, sometimes I do find it quite overwhelming. When I get named on lists, and all of these things like sometimes I do just want to run and hide, because I didn't start because I wanted to be famous or because I wanted to, you know, build my my own personal brand or anything like that. And so when it feels like a lot of people are looking at me, I'm just like, oh my god, stop, guys. Just yeah, yeah, literally, I just want to like, pull my jumper over my head and just like, sit in the darkness or something like that. I mean, yeah, it's great. And I really do love the fact that, you know, we've been working on this for like, five years, and people are starting to recognise all the things that that we've been doing. But also, I'm just like, Stop looking at me. I don't know what I'm doing.

Claudia Winkleman

Like it's happening. But look over there. Look over there. Jamii is a digital business. And how much did you know about digital platforms before you started?

Khalia Ismain

I knew nothing. I really knew nothing about anything before I started, like everything I've learned has been on the go. It's been as we've been doing it. And literally when, when I went to get the website done, I was talking to a website developer, who was asking me about things like API's and all this stuff. And I was like, what is that? Like? What are you talking about? So I had no clue. And then when we did contracted developer, he like went AWOL. 10 days before you're supposed to launch. So I ended up having to redo the whole site myself on like a Website Builder, which was a learning experience, to say the least, so no, I didn't know anything. It's one of those things where I wish that I had taken a little bit more time to maybe do some research about all of these different things. But there yeah, there's no substitute for learning on the go and getting it wrong out loud.

Claudia Winkleman

So I can't even imagine what those days were like in the lead up. Just going. Right. Okay. Everyone, as the business grows? What are you looking forward to? What are you? What's your vision?

Khalia Ismain

Oh, such a good question. What am I looking forward to part of me is looking forward to having that personal assistant. So I don't have to deal with all the admin, I would love to be able to go out the team a little bit more just so that we can like get deeper on things, you know, on the workshops that we do have, the more regularly and all of that kind of stuff. But really what I'm looking forward to is more impact. So, you know, it's been amazing that we've been able to help businesses, you know, expand their teams and build their capacity. But we want to do much more of that we want to be creating really measurable impact and learn like how to do that. So in terms of like, and what I mean by that is like starting with some experts for how to grow different types of businesses, how to really empower creators to do these things. Which is something which I know is coming we've got a lot of data that we're like sifting through all the time to be like, Okay, so when we did this, that happened, so what happens? Yeah. And so just starting to become experts about that is something I'm really really looking forward to. But something that keeps me motivated on dark days is I just picture us having a float at Notting Hill Carnival I'm just like, if I stopped now, how would I get the float? How would I get that bright orange float?

Claudia Winkleman

You need to be on a bright orange float. Like that's going to happen. That's and we're all gonna be just applauding on the sidelines.

Khalia Ismain

It's part of the five year plan.

Claudia Winkleman

There you go. I like it. I've never heard a better plan. Lots of people go, Yes, I need to do this. I need to do that. But an orange float at the carnival that will do. Callie, thank you so much for talking to us today.

We're so grateful and we wish you all the luck in the world. And anybody who's listening, they want to do it. Just go to Love Jammi dot com and sign up and you will find unbelievable products.

Khalia Ismain

Thank you so much for the invitation. It's been such a great conversation.

Claudia Winkleman

I had the most fantastic time talking to Khalia. Her energy is infectious. She didn't think twice about setting up Love Jamii, it was instinctive and truly entrepreneurial. If you think it, do it, I'm going to think that to myself many times. In our next episode, she is the winner of 15 major awards, including being named as one of the leaders of tomorrow. Today the company that started in her kitchen is worth millions. Her brand Izzy Wheels customises wheelchairs to help young people who use them show their personality. Thank you so much for listening to Business Unusual from Vodafone Business. Please rate and review the podcast and subscribe to hear lots more from the UK most invigorating entrepreneurs for me for now. Goodbye