

INDIGENOUS DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP:  
*THE VOICES OF KICHWA WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS*

A THESIS

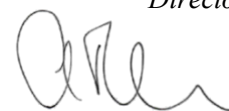
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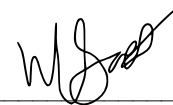


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***Indigenous Digital Entrepreneurship: the voices of Kichwa women entrepreneurs***

*Abstract:* Indigenous entrepreneurship in Latin America has taken various forms. In what is now called Ecuador, Otavalo, an indigenous community in the northern Andean highlands, has become an entrepreneurship hub due to the prolonged economic activities performed by its inhabitants. Historically, technology and, currently, digital technologies have influenced the way that entrepreneurship is embraced inside Kichwa Otavalo households. In this context, indigenous Kichwa women (Kichwa *Warmis*) have been at the forefront of entrepreneurship activities. They have negotiated their racial and gender identities in relation to neoliberal capitalist narratives of entrepreneurship activities. In doing so, they have created spaces to contest Eurocentric notions of modernity and tradition. In these discourses, modernity is portrayed as a category opposed to tradition, in which indigenous peoples must abandon their traditions to participate fully in modernity. However, this study, through the voices of six Kichwa *Warmis* entrepreneurs, shows that modernity co-exists with tradition because indigenous entrepreneurship is transformative, adaptive, and flexible. As an indigenous scholar, this is my humble attempt to bridge modernity and tradition narratives while amplifying the voices of other indigenous women contesting hegemonic notions of identity, entrepreneurship, and gender.

*Keywords:* indigenous entrepreneurship, digital technologies, modernity, tradition, indigenous women, identity, neoliberalism

*Indigenous Digital Entrepreneurship: the voices of Kichwa women entrepreneurs*

*Introduction*

One chilly December day in 2019, my partner and I were walking down one of the main streets of Washington, DC. It was my first time visiting the city. We found ourselves at a holiday art fair outside the National Archives Research Center. As we looked at the product booths, I said to my partner, "There must be some *tiyu*<sup>1</sup> from Otavalo around here." As I finished speaking, we saw a man with a hat and long braided hair. We recognized him immediately as an artisan from Otavalo. He offered his products, the classic Andean textiles, colorful ponchos, wool caps, and scarves with Andean patterns, among others, the ones I had sold myself while growing up with my parents years before. I quickly experienced a mixture of excitement and curiosity.

About three years later, while revisiting the same city at a Salvadoran festival, I found myself in a similar situation. This time, I recognized a woman at one of the booths wearing her anaku, walkas, chumbe, alpargatas, and shirt—the traditional indigenous regalia we wear in Otavalo. She was selling handmade Kichwa handicrafts. She was a Kichwa-Otavalo woman like me. This time, I approached her and asked her what community she was from, and she told me: "I am from Agato," which is a community near the town of Otavalo. It was June 2022, and our most important Andean celebration, "Inti Raymi," was approaching. She asked me: "Are you going back for Inti Raymi?" I answered: "Of course! I am flying in three days". She said, "I will see you there. My daughters, and I are going in a week." Meeting someone Kichwa-Otavalo outside the

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<sup>1</sup> *tiyu*: a respectful way to refer to older indigenous men. As Kichwa people, we don't use "señor" or "don", we use *tío*.

territory is common. I have met my fellow *paisanos* in almost every new place I have been to, yet every time I do, I am curious, excited, and nostalgic.

Kichwa-Otavalos have been widely recognized for our entrepreneurship activities since the 1940s, which has drawn the attention of several scholars worldwide who have studied and published about our community. In this context, some Kichwa-Otavalos have become successful entrepreneurs by exporting their products—textiles, music, and crafts—to the Global North (See Meisch 2002; Kyle 1999; D’Amico 2014; Ordóñez and Colmenares 2019). As a *Kichwa-Otavalo* woman growing up in the twenty-first century, I have observed and experienced firsthand the substantial transformations that a historical economic activity—Otavalo indigenous entrepreneurship—is facing as a result of digital technologies.

Otavalo is an Andean valley located at 8,307ft in the northern highlands of what is now known as Ecuador. We, the *Kichwa-Otavalo* indigenous people, the inhabitants of this valley, come from a long tradition of textile production as a form of economic activity. “*Mindalae*,” for instance, is a widely known Kichwa term of self-identification inside Kichwa-Otavalo communities to refer to someone who has ventured into economic activities based on producing and selling products, locally and internationally. In the twentieth century, government officials and scholars classified this practice, which distinguished Kichwa-Otavalos from other indigenous groups in Ecuador, as entrepreneurship. Kichwa-Otavalo indigenous entrepreneurship in the XX century allowed Kichwa-Otavalo entrepreneurs to navigate and negotiate indigeneity while globalizing indigenous identity through Andean textiles, music, and handicrafts (Meisch 2002).

In this context, technology, and more recently digital technologies, have become a fundamental part of innovation and accessing larger international markets. For instance, historically, Kichwa-Otavalo *mindales* have appropriated technological advances, such as electric looms, communication technologies, and transportation, to expand their textile Andean markets to different corners of the world. Additionally, in Otavalo, digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Tik Tok have become a new arena and tool for indigenous entrepreneurship. In this context, indigenous *Kichwa-Otavalo* women, who are fundamental actors in Kichwa-Otavalo entrepreneurship but are less recognized as such, are exploring the opportunities and challenges that digital technologies present for their entrepreneurship projects.

Scholars Wilson and Chivers (2017) explain that neoliberalism narratives such as “scarcity, competition, valorization, and capital accumulation no longer only characterize economic markets; they constitute a social ontology.” (p.2). In other words, neoliberalism imposes a social order based on scarcity that requires constant competition in which individuals’ lives evolve around self-appreciation and survival. In this way, individual life itself has become an enterprise that needs to be managed with efficiency to survive; Wendy Brown explains this phenomenon as an “economization of previously non-economic spheres.” In this context, entrepreneurship activities played a fundamental role in reinforcing this kind of violent neoliberalism. Entrepreneurship studies, as we know them today, arose in the 80s with the expansion of neoliberal narratives of free-market, state-independent citizens, and self-sufficiency (Portales 2018) and as the “discovery of profitable opportunities” (Shane y Venkataraman 2000 in Guzmán and Trujillo 2008). In this context, entrepreneurship has been defined as “the act that endows resources with a



new capacity to create wealth” (Carlen 2016) and an *entrepreneur* as “the individual willing to embark on an adventure in pursuit of economic goals” (Robert F Hébert and Link 2008).

Entrepreneurship studies have distinguished different entrepreneurship models, such as corporate entrepreneurship, ethnic entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship, and, in recent years, indigenous entrepreneurship. Indigenous entrepreneurship has been defined as ‘the creation, management, and development of new ventures by Indigenous peoples for the benefit of Indigenous peoples’ (Hindle & Lansdowne, 2005: 132 as cited in Croce 2017). According to Francesca Croce, this definition emphasizes “indigenous ownership and benefit as central to indigenous entrepreneurship” (Croce 2017, p. 888). In Latin America, academic work around indigenous entrepreneurship has taken place under the umbrella of "social entrepreneurship," which encompasses entrepreneurship processes based on public policy, gender, sustainability, environment, and ethnicity (see Portales 2018, Guzmán and Trujillo 2008, Mora et al. t. 2018). Latin American scholars have produced work on different kinds of entrepreneurship activities in which indigenous peoples, mainly in rural areas, were direct leaders or participants of the business model. Studies in Mexico, Peru, and Colombia (Mora et al. t. 2018; Rueda and Gonzales, 2021; Vázquez-Maguirre 2019) have explored how social entrepreneurship has occurred in primarily rural indigenous communities and its economic and social implications on the entrepreneurship environment itself. In this way, “social entrepreneurship” studies have focused primarily on the entrepreneurship models themselves rather than on the personal stories of the indigenous entrepreneurs. In turn, this approach has ignored, in some cases, the agency of

indigenous peoples while focusing the majority of the time on evaluating the entrepreneurship models in the face of poverty to promote public policy and build a collective national identity (Rueda and Gonzales, 2021). Therefore, in this thesis, I aim to bring the stories of indigenous women entrepreneurs to the forefront of how we think about indigenous entrepreneurship studies, not just about models but rather about lives that constantly negotiate layers of race and gender in the midst of neoliberalism.

Kichwa *Warmis* (indigenous women), for instance, have been historically at the core of Kichwa's entrepreneurship and identity processes. From Rosa Lema, an iconic woman entrepreneur figure in Otavalo in the 1940s, to activist leaders such as Tránsito Amaguaña and Dolores Cacuango in the 1960s and 1980s, to current young professionals such as my interlocutors and myself, Kichwa *Warmis* have found ways to weave our identity as indigenous women within racialized western spaces such as the academia and business. In the context of Kichwa *Warmis* entrepreneurs, I argue that neoliberalism in the digital economy has materialized as digital marketing, business management, and unpaid labor practices toward individual entrepreneurship projects. In this way, the education, technological infrastructure, and identity of Kichwa "*Warmis*" entrepreneurs have played a fundamental role in how they navigate the contradicting social ontology of neoliberalism, such as freedom, precarity, autonomy, competition, and survival while negotiating their identities as Kichwa "*Warmis*" entrepreneurs. In doing so, Kichwa *Warmis* have contested Eurocentric modernity/tradition paradigms that placed modernity as a concept opposed to tradition. Instead, by embracing more transformative indigenous entrepreneurship practices, they have shown that modernity and tradition can and need to co-exist together.

Additionally, in the Global South, especially in Abya Yala, educational and business spaces are highly racialized, resembling regional structural inequalities that reinforce inaccurate or non-existent portrayals of indigenous communities. Eurocentric Western academia has extracted knowledge from indigenous communities in the form of essays and books published in academic European languages directed to scholarly audiences. Cusicanqui (2012) denounces this phenomenon by arguing that Latin American decolonial theorists have privileged themselves from extracting knowledge from Latin American social movements and indigenous activities and published them in North American and European academia with minimal recognition of where the knowledge came from. In this context, indigenous peoples who are not part of this privileged sphere of knowledge have not benefited or even actively participated in the construction of knowledge. For instance, personally speaking, no one in my family and my social circle in Otavalo would be able to read this thesis. However, there are exceptions from community-engaged research, mainly in Latin America, that are working to reduce this gap between the communities on the ground and academic work. In this context, I wish to add to the work of indigenous collectives and scholars who have used technology to expand their knowledge to their own communities, as is the case of the indigenous video movement in Colombia. I then propose that digital technologies can be a venue to bring knowledge back to the communities where it came from. Therefore, I am also working on producing a podcast for indigenous entrepreneurs in order to create spaces for people to speak in their own voices so that their stories can be shared inside their own communities, which can have a high impact on the way they see themselves.

Moreover, by being a Kichwa *Warmi* myself, I aim to elaborate on how my own positionality has influenced this analysis and my methodological approach. For instance, being a Kichwa *Warmi* has allowed me to connect with my interlocutors in ways that non-indigenous scholars are limited. They felt comfortable around me since the very first interactions. In turn, this has helped me drive my research from a more personal standpoint, which has become another layer to interpret this study. This research includes ethnography and autoethnographic elements. I visited Otavalo, my own indigenous community, where I participated in the Saturday *feria*. I had conversations with six indigenous Kichwa women entrepreneurs. I also observed and participated digitally on the entrepreneurs' social media accounts, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok. I want to point out that I am aware that my own presence and identity shaped the way I related to the other indigenous women I talked to and my positionality as an insider but outsider at the same time. And as such, my main interactions with my interlocutors were genuine interactions of curiosity rather than actions to collect data for this thesis. Likewise, when navigating through the social media accounts, I found myself getting excited and nostalgic about the posts, images, or reels that I found. It was impossible for me to disconnect myself from the data collection process because this research is highly tight to who I am—to my own existence.

I reviewed the academic literature on indigenous entrepreneurship in English and Spanish in order to access a more broad understanding of what the scholarly discussions say about this topic. I understand that Latin American academia has written a wide variety of content on entrepreneurship and indigenous communities. However, since I am a student in the United States academia, I have mainly had access to English-written

articles that specifically mention “indigenous entrepreneurship” as their main topic of analysis. I have tried my best to include Latin American scholarly research, but I recognized I have not been able to include as much as I would have liked. Lastly, I have also used media news and creative literature to integrate data from sources that indigenous people consume in their everyday life.

The terminology I use in this thesis was chosen according to the way other young indigenous professionals are re-labeling terminology as a tool of resistance. I use *Kichwa* terms when I consider it necessary to affirm our indigenous languages inside academic work. For instance, I will refer to my interlocutors and myself as ‘Kichwa *Warmi*.’ “Warmi” is a common term used among ourselves to refer to indigenous women. This word in the Kichwa language means “woman.” Recently, the usage of *Warmi* has been increasing among young professionals and youth because it represents a way of reclaiming our own language and identity instead of reinforcing foreign terms that have been imposed on us by academics and the state. However, I still use the term “indigenous,” even though it is a foreign term imposed on us. I believe that using this term will help readers to access and understand this study more easily.

This research will add to past literature on indigenous entrepreneurship, neoliberalism in the digital economy, labor, and race studies, digital technologies, and Latin American studies. I hope this article will contribute to discussions around the contradictions that neoliberalism in the digital economy represents for ethnic and gender minorities in the entrepreneurship sphere. Therefore, I aim to contribute to the conversation by outlining how indigenous women entrepreneurship is being developed in the Global South, the motivations and impacts on themselves and their social circles, and

the instruments they are using to achieve their economic and social goals. In doing so, I aim to contribute to increasing the indigenous scholarly written work from an indigenous perspective—my own perspective as a Kichwa-Otavalo woman.

*Otavalo: a historical entrepreneurship hub*

In the last five hundred years, discourses around modernity and development have assimilated indigenous peoples into homogenous national cultures. In Ecuador, the XX century reinforced these notions of modernity by investing in the tourism industry and the folklorización of indigenous communities, particularly Kichwa-Otavalos. In this context, Otavalo became an exotic laboratory where the media, tourists, anthropologists, politicians, and indigenous entrepreneurs negotiated their social, economic, and political status alongside the modernization narratives that situated the traditional as static in time history as opposed to modernity. However, by appropriate technological innovation, indigenous entrepreneurship in Otavalo has challenged the imaginary of the “traditional” and “modern” as opposing categories. In similar ways that Budka (2015) explains how the re-appropriation of technology has served to de-marginalize First Nations in Canada, in Otavalo, technology has facilitated the creation of an unimaginable phenomenon of indigenous entrepreneurs who have taken advantage of modernity for their own traditional thrive through music, textiles, and currently throughout a wide range of products and services.

Mora et al. (2018) study explored how entrepreneurship programs run by outside organizations can impose economic activities from a top-down perspective instead of including indigenous women's desires and ideas for entrepreneurship programs. The main difference between the indigenous women in Mora et al. (2018) study and this thesis is

that most of the Kichwa-Otavalo indigenous women entrepreneurs I interviewed come from families with a long tradition of entrepreneurship activities. They did not depend on external government programs to conduct their entrepreneurial activities. “*Mindalae*,” for instance, is a widely known Kichwa term of self-identification inside Kichwa-Otavalo communities to refer to someone who conducts entrepreneurship activities. According to the American anthropologist Salomon (2011), the ‘*mindalae*,’ the self-affirmation of indigenous merchant identity of the Kichwa-Otavalos, comes from the Inca period, where *mindalae*s were

“a special elitist group...that their tributary regulations did not resemble those of any of the other natives. It did not involve payment to the Spaniards in labor or even in products, but rather only gold. They formed an indivisible corporate group residing in a privileged district of the Inca city” (Salomon 2011, 191).

According to him and other scholars, this *mindalae* status allowed Kichwa-Otavalos to increase their social, economic, and political mobility compared to other indigenous groups inhabiting what-is-now-called Ecuador. However, according to the testimony of Kichwa-Otavalo scholar Lema (1995), lands outside of Otavalo served as haciendas where indigenous labor continued to be exploited through the *obrajes* system. The Kichwa-Otavalo people started migrating before the 1940s to the capital city of Ecuador, Quito, due to its proximity to the Otavalo valley (Ordóñez Charpentier 2014) to sell handmade textiles (anacos, bayetas, ponchos). In his testimony, Lema narrates how when going to the capital city to sell their handmade textiles, some Kichwa people stayed working at textile factories run by *mestizos or criollos*. In these factories, indigenous workers learned other ways of producing textiles through electric looms and other technological devices.

The first international Kichwa-Otavalo migrations took place around the 1940s, and in the following years, Kichwa entrepreneurs traveled to countries such as Venezuela and Colombia (Meisch 2002). In these countries, they found large markets and demand for their products, and as a result, they created the first manufacturing centers outside of Ecuador, in Bogotá, Colombia (Meisch 2002; Kyle 1999; Ordóñez and Colmenares 2019). However, the Kichwa-Otavalo entrepreneurship migration cannot be perceived as homogenous. In *'Como el agua vuelve al mar, volvemos'*, Ordóñez Charpentier (2014) argues that the Kichwa-Otavalo migration is complex and cannot be homogenized, as other scholars have portrayed it in the past. She explains, "The difference in the Kichwa-Otavalo migration reflects the social differentiation that already exists in the social environment in which they develop. This difference is determined by their access to resources, specifically land, technology, and the handicraft market, but also by their access to networks and migratory capital" (Ordóñez Charpentier 2014). Understanding that indigenous Kichwa-Otavalo entrepreneurship is diverse depending on the networks, socio-economic status, and access to technology is fundamental. For instance, Kichwa-Otavalo entrepreneurs living abroad had more access to top technology, created networks, and increased economic resources to build factories back in Otavalo, such as the case of Lema and other members of his family. They had access to resources that other members of Otavalo did not have.

### ***Neoliberalism in the Digital Economy***

#### ***Autonomy and Freedom for indigenous women***

When I was talking to Tamia and Sisa, two Kichwa *Warmis*, about what it means for them to be entrepreneurs, I saw a big smile on their faces and a sense of pride in their



voices. Since Otavalo has been a historically indigenous entrepreneurship hub, Kichwa entrepreneurs such as Sisa traced back their entrepreneurship nature to their *mindales* identities. Sisa comes from a family of entrepreneurs that have traveled around the world. They have supported her and advised her on her own entrepreneurship journey and, to some extent, how she perceived entrepreneurship. She explained:

"I come from a family that travels. They are mindalaes, from my dad's side; he lives in Mexico, I have older brothers who are in Mexico, and all of them have always been dedicated to selling handicrafts. On my mom's side, my mom has a small entrepreneurial business right here, she sells clothes, and casual clothes along with my sisters, so we have always lived like that. But my mother is also a teacher, I mean, we all have careers, but we have always liked it, I think it is better to start a business so that we aren't employees of someone else". (Sisa M. p.13)

In this case, we can see how Sisa uses the term "*mindalaes*" to refer to their family's identity and economic activities. Then she proceeds to describe the members of her family. *Mindalae*, in this way, is a term to describe a sense of identity through entrepreneurship while also engaged in neoliberal values of individual self-appreciation "*so that we aren't employees of someone else.*"

In this study, 'entrepreneurship' or 'entrepreneur' are concepts that fluctuate depending on the person and their own historical context and identity. For indigenous Kichwa entrepreneurs, this can look like various forms to redefine the narratives of entrepreneurship. For instance, Tamia sees entrepreneurship as a way to contest societal norms of labor. She said

"Being an entrepreneur is, in a way, a rebel, because she doesn't want to conform to social standards, like studying, graduating and working for someone else. So that's where it comes from, where one begins and

says no, I don't want to work for someone else. I want to do my own thing. I want to escape from what society somehow calls the cycle of life, which is to study and work for someone else, so as an entrepreneur I didn't want that.” (Tamia, p. 2)

Tamia uses the term “*rebel*” to explain what entrepreneurship meant to her, while she explained that entrepreneurship activities for her were a way to disrupt “*what society somehow calls the cycle of life, which is to study and work for someone else*” Tamia, similarly to Sisa, expressed her unconformity in working for someone else. Tamia expressed that her primary fulfillment as an entrepreneur was to show other women that it is possible to work by themselves and avoid working for a boss. She said, “*I wish to teach more women, more girls that you can do it...that you don't have to work for someone else...you can do it yourself...for yourself and for your family.*” (Tamia p.2)

Neoliberalism promises ideals of autonomy, freedom, and individual success in the digital economy by self-appreciating one’s skills and in entrepreneurship, particularly in becoming “your own boss”. Luckács (2020) explains that feminine labor became crucial for developing the digital economy and transforming its human capital regime in Japan. Japanese net idols, for instance, found in digital technologies ways to create content that gave them a sense of autonomy over their bodies. However, human capital, then, is understood as the constant focus on investing and developing new skills that, in theory, will help to advance a professional career, avoid labor precarity, and define economic and social success (Lukács 2020). Digital entrepreneurship activities have provided spheres to exercise a sense of autonomy and freedom.

Sisa, the Kichwa owner of “Blusas Sisa”, an entrepreneurship project that offers handmade indigenous traditional women's Kichwa clothing, recognized that her

entrepreneurship activities have allowed her to have more control over her own time. She explained this as follows: *“Well, nowadays I am a mom, but I am always around, I go to the gym, I go here, even if I am sitting in the park, but it is my time, so I think that is what I like the most about owning my time.”* (Sisa M. p.14) Sisa affirmed that she appreciated “owning my time” in comparison to the time when she was working at an office with a nine-to-five fixed schedule. In this way, entrepreneurship offers opportunities for experiencing a sense of freedom that can look like having control over daily activities and creating your own schedule. Wilson and Chivers (2017) called this process ‘*mamapreneurialism*,’ a process in which digital technologies open opportunities for “rationalization, flexibility and resilience” (p. 73).

Additionally, Tamia celebrated that her entrepreneurship activities had given her the opportunity to work on what she likes and what she knows. She said, *“I am an entrepreneur, I like to work on my own, I like to create something with art, with the art that you learn from your ancestors, I am a person who likes to make manual art and I have been working with it since I was a child...”* (Tamia, p.1) These experiences represents what Duffy (2015) calls “aspirational labor”, highly gendered creative labour in the form of working in something that one loves with the promise of social and economic capital. Tamia, for instance, could connect her entrepreneurship activities to her childhood skills and to the art that she said she learned from her “ancestors.”

For Kichwa Warmis, entrepreneurship activities were an opportunity to construct their own ways of understanding autonomy, self-fulfillment, and freedom. However, they can also experience frustration and disappointment with the precarity of the labor conditions neoliberalism imposes on individuals. These are the contradictions of

neoliberalism. Self-appreciation, autonomy and freedom try to mask the more violent precarious side of neoliberalism, in which individuals take on entrepreneurship activities as a way to survive in a highly competitive privatized world.

*Labor precarity*

For indigenous women who have children, entrepreneurship provides a venue for mothering their families because they want space to spend time with their kids, make food, or just spend time at home, *mamapreneurialism*. In this context, I found that some indigenous women recognized and actively evaluated the labor precarity that neoliberalism represents in entrepreneurship activities. They admitted that entrepreneurship activities required extended periods of time and effort while also embracing it to fulfill their mothering needs. For instance, Sisa said, *“the entrepreneur's life is not something that you can do anything you want, I mean, you work 24/7, it is much worse, but the satisfaction of being here at home, well, since I am a mother I like to be at home, I like to make breakfast for my son, I like to make lunch, it is something that in the office, you can't really do...”* (Sisa M. p. 10) In this scenario, Sisa evaluated how precarious entrepreneurship activities can be by investing your entire time “24/7” in your business while also recognizing the benefits that entrepreneurship activities have brought her family. This kind of precarious work can be perceived in the form of unpaid labor and, in the digital economy, could also be camouflaged through social media content creation and marketing-related activities.

Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that the Instagram business profiles of the Kichwa Warmi entrepreneurs that I talked to were filled with highly-edited images, videos, and visual concepts. For instance, Akira, the owner of “Katichina,” a business

focused on producing sustainable designed artistic products, explained that she could spend about 24 hours straight producing a video to post on her Instagram business profile. She continued saying that *“I usually take about 30 to 40 minutes to complete the description.”* As of November of 2021, “Katichina” had 66 posts and 470 followers in the Instagram account. On a similar note, Tamia, as of September of 2022, had 3250 followers on her business Instagram account called “Artesanía LB.” While talking to Tamia, she showed me her business's Instagram profile on her phone. She scrolled down to show me the high-quality images and videos she posted daily. I then asked her if she had hired a professional photographer to take those pictures, and she responded that she was the person taking the pictures, editing, and writing the copy for the posts. She then proceeded to tell me the following story:

"then I switched from the BlackBerry to a Samsung, then the Samsung's camera is nicer, and the screen is also bigger, so you can take better pictures...I started. I'm going to put little things underneath it...they helped me a lot with the sunlight. At 10:00 in the morning, in my backyard, I would take out my cloth and take out my merchandise and I would hurry and take pictures so that the sunlight would help me because it looked nice". (Tamia, p. 9)

Tamia explained to me how she was the person in charge of administrating the business, creating publicity, finding providers, managing the physical store, and managing the digital store.

Akira and Tamia have spent hours and energy creating posts, editing images, and learning and improving digital marketing concepts to apply to their Instagram pages. In some cases, this form of unpaid labor can raise sentiments of frustration, fear, and anxiety as they depend entirely on the algorithm of the Instagram platform or have problems with

the infrastructure itself. For example, Akira shared that the process of managing her Instagram account has been very different from managing her personal profile because

“in your social media is another thing, because you need those likes, you need those comments, you need people to share... you need interaction, you need people to start moving through social media, you need people to engage, because if you don't work a lot of hours making the posts, making the content and of course, nobody pays you for that work, it is not remunerated. And the reason why you do it is precisely so that your business grows. So, of course, if you don't, you don't get enough interaction. It's like your hours of work haven't paid off, so it's very frustrating... I've learned from Instagram's algorithm that it's super violent.”

Similarly, Tamia remembered how precarious her time was right after she and her family opened her physical store. She said

"The beginnings were difficult...I used to sleep here at the place, I practically lived here because we did not have money for me to go to the house and come back every day...my mother also accompanied me here many times and there were days when what we ate was yogurt and bread, yogurt and bread for lunch, yogurt and bread for dinner... I think that both my mother and I went through that, we both felt sorrow for each other because we didn't eat well, so those were hard times for us and there were also moments when you fell apart and said no, I don't want to do it anymore” (Tamia p.13)

Tamia and her mother had an extremely difficult time in the beginning when they opened their physical store. In this context, two conflicting narratives clashed in Tamia's life. On the one hand, she had control over her own time and was her own boss, as she had dreamed of since she was a little kid. But on the other hand, she was facing the precarity of her enterprise. In her context, the ideals of autonomy and freedom provided her, to some extent, with the strength to face her initial challenges while at the same time causing anxiety, frustration, and suffering. In a similar way to Sisa, Tamia also had a

critical perspective on her entrepreneurial experience. She recognized the precarious labor conditions she had to face in order to succeed in her entrepreneurship activities.

*It is not always about digital marketing: Infrastructure*

Digital marketing is a form of advertising using digital platforms. This kind of advertising can be paid or unpaid, depending on the platform and the business's resources. The digital marketing industry has grown rapidly in the past twenty years, especially during the current covid-19 pandemic due to the increase of e-businesses and the use of digital technologies. For indigenous women entrepreneurs in the Global South, digital marketing is unpaid labor that relies mainly on social media, Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok. It is performed by video posts, images, and live transmissions. In the case of Kichwa indigenous women, they deeply depended on Instagram posts, videos, stories, and live communications to advertise their products and access to physical infrastructure.

In Otavalo, internet connectivity varies depending on the urban and rural areas. The urban side of Otavalo, where most of my interlocutors resided, has a wider and stronger connection, however the smaller rural communities around Otavalo have limited access to high quality internet. In this context, infrastructure in the Global South is a challenge for indigenous entrepreneurs that depend on social media for their economic activities. Liz—the owner of “Riski-Conoce” a digital Instagram profile that advertises indigenous entrepreneurship activities around Otavalo—and Eli used Instagram to advertise “*Ilaya*” in a 30-minute live transmission, which I set myself up to watch along with 100 of viewers. After watching for almost 30 minutes, they continued to encounter problems with the sound; they finally solved them. Then, they showed the first blouse, and the internet connectivity failed, and we saw a blurred white image. As a potential

client, it was hard to admire the product, and I even felt frustrated for not being able to see it after waiting for so much time. Similarly, Tamia expressed frustration when creating reels for her Instagram business account. She said:

“Since we live in a country where electricity and water are not always steady, then the internet is connected to the electricity, so there are times when you are uploading a video and bam the electricity goes out, and the internet is gone, you will be uploading a video and well, then the application does not allow you to upload the video until you have internet and if it takes a long time you have to upload it again, then yes it has happened several times because of the electricity issue or also because sometimes when in the country, if it rains a lot the internet gets slow, then when it gets slow it uploads in bad quality, and then you don't want people to see it in poor quality, then that is also another problem, you have to be without rain, you have to pray that the electricity doesn't go out and so that everything flows well.” (Tamia, p.10)

Meanwhile, when I asked Eli about a challenge she has encountered since the creation of “*Ilaya*,” she said that “the greatest difficulty I have with this entrepreneurship is that I don't have a physical location because people are used to going to a store and saying what they want in a shirt...some people send me a message and say but I want to know where to find your store...I tell them it's only by appointment...some people stop writing.” She also explained that sometimes her production is affected because Eli does not have a sewing machine for herself. Eli borrows sewing machines from her sister, who owns a physical store that also produces traditional Kichwa-Otavalo blouses, where Eli works part-time. Eli explained that she could only use the machines to make her own blouses on Sundays when her sister's business is closed, and the machines are available to use.

On the other hand, Sisa has found that she did not need a physical store to offer her products because social media was the main tool she used for her business. She said



"I don't have a physical store, we have never created a physical store...I sell you the idea, and you buy from me and in the end, you see that it even looks much better, that it gives you a much better product than in the photographs, so I think that's what has attracted a lot of attention since, well, for the last 7 years we have been working on this". (Sisa M, p. 2)

The difference between Eli's and Sisa experiences can be drawn to the fact that they appeal to two different audiences. Eli's blouses are recycled low-cost blouses around \$30 USD to \$50 USD per blouse, while Sisa's blouses cost around \$180 USD. The digital experiences of Sisa and Eli differentiated because they audiences that Eli appealed to did not have as much internet access; they mainly resided in the rural areas. On the contrary, the clients that Sisa had were Kichwa women in the urban areas and residing internationally. They had more access to economic resources and to high-quality internet.

Digital technological experiences of the Global North have often been considered universal, thus depriving the understanding of other realities experienced in the Global South (Humphreys 2020), in this case, the Andean indigenous world. Infrastructure is understood as "networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space" (Larkin 2013, p. 328). The lack of economic resources to invest in digital, and physical infrastructure can represent a challenge to fully implement digital marketing strategies for Kichwa women entrepreneurs in the Global South depending on their clientele. Therefore, the experiences of the Global South with the use of technology continue to marginalize these communities due to poor infrastructure functioning (Larkin 2004).

Additionally, the technical skills needed to set up a digital marketing campaign also represented another challenge for Kichwa women entrepreneurs who were not

familiar with the advertising industry. For instance, digital marketing can be learned by exploring Instagram or other social media features. However, creating a digital marketing strategy, such as understanding how audiences work, what colors to use, what time of the day to post, writing the descriptions for each post, using emojis or not, etc., are more difficult skills to learn. These are skills that I learned when working for a digital marketing company. Akira explained that she paid herself for a short digital marketing course that she saw advertised on a blog site she read several months ago. She explained that the course helped her understand the basics of digital marketing but that applying them has been a difficult task. She described herself as “auto-didact,” meaning that she has been teaching herself through YouTube videos, digital marketing blogs, and other business profiles on Instagram. However, she still affirmed that “This [digital marketing] has been the most difficult thing because creating [her products] comes from the heart and soul...but of course, marketing is constantly being there.”

On the other hand, Eli, the owner of “*Ilaya*,” has an educational background in marketing and design from her university that has helped her navigate the marketing world. She shared “It also helps a lot, the fact is that I studied design and advertising, and I persuaded people...so, somehow, in a short time we were already more than two hundred followers [on Instagram].” Then, I asked her if she had not studied marketing; she thought she would have achieved the same. She replied, “No, not at all. I wouldn't have understood any of these things [about digital marketing] if I hadn't studied this. So in that way, I am also grateful for having studied all this. 'Ilaya' would not have been the same without the help of advertising strategies.”

Mora et al. (2018) explored, in their study, the conditions for indigenous women entrepreneurship in Mexico and Chile by analyzing the impacts that external government or private programs have on their agency, identity, and empowerment. A particular distinction that I found between that study and mine is that these Kichwa entrepreneurs were navigating the demands of entrepreneurialism on their own. They were not part of any program focused on women. By negotiating their entrepreneurship activities on their own, they did not have any safety net they could rely on if their entrepreneurship activities were unsuccessful. In this way, their entrepreneurship activities became a form of survival for them and their families, which also increased their sentiments of frustration, fear, and anxiety.

Despite the good reception these businesses have received, they have not allowed either Akira, Liz, or Eli to perform them as full-time jobs, though in the case of Sisa, Carolina and Tamia are full-time jobs. Additionally, the massive unpaid labor performed by these Kichwa entrepreneurs in each Instagram post has increased the frustration, disappointment, and emotional stress that they have to carry out while managing their businesses. For Kichwa *Warmi* entrepreneurs, digital marketing is just the tip of the iceberg that hides their challenges with the lack of resources to invest in infrastructure or human capital. Although they have found ways to face these challenges, I also noted that access to technical skills does significantly impact how they feel about their marketing efforts.

On the other hand, the indigenous women in Mora et al. (2028) study complained about their lack of agency and autonomy over their own entrepreneurial activities. For instance, Mapuche women wanted to focus on economic activities that

were more connected to their identity and their daily lives around the ocean. In the case of Kichwa entrepreneurs, they appreciated their agency and freedom to engage in entrepreneurship activities that are connected to their identities and their families. Indigenous Kichwa women entrepreneurs have been embracing their own community perceptions of understanding entrepreneurship while negotiating them with the individualist narratives that neoliberalism perpetuates. They are bringing their own skills that come from their “ancestors” and creating a way of living that allows them to embrace their motherhoods and identities in the ways that they want. It is essential to understand that indigenous women entrepreneurs in the Global South face digital and non-digital challenges that positively or negatively impact their entrepreneurship activities and individual/community success.

### **Indigenous Entrepreneurship Practices**

#### *Negotiations between western-capitalist perspectives and Andean epistemologies*

As an indigenous woman, I have witnessed discourses that place Indigenous communities as pieces of museums whose “traditions” must be preserved to avoid being contaminated by modernity. One day while talking to a friend from Brazil, she told me that some people in her country say “Look at that person using that smart cellphone. They are not Indians anymore”. Likewise, after I graduated from an American college where I got my bachelor's degree, I moved back to Ecuador where I was applying for jobs. During one of my job interviews at an English language institute, I was told by the manager that I didn't have the ‘profile’ of someone who could teach English. He told me “I think you should teach Kichwa, that is more according to your tradition.” I grew up with similar comments at my elementary school, where my music teacher told me that I should wear blue jeans and a red t-shirt for performing at the Christmas concert that we

were practicing for months. I told her that I wanted to wear my indigenous clothing because I felt more comfortable in that. She then responded angrily, “Wear the jeans and the t-shirt because everyone in the band will do so. Tell this to your tribe, so they don’t get offended.” On a similar note, when I went back to visit my community, some family members always reminded me that I had an outsider accent when speaking Spanish and that my Kichwa was not good. When I became a teenager, I started embracing what they call a more “Western” look by wearing jeans and not braiding my hair, among other activities, as a way of survival. I was told that I was losing my indigenous identity. “Te estás *amestizando*, ya no llevas nuestra tradición.” - some of my cousins said to me.

Navigating a society that made me choose between my “tradition” and the “modern” look, language, or technology hurt me deeply. For many years, I felt that If I chose the Western “modern” side, for instance, wearing jeans and listening to English music, among other activities perceived as non-indigenous. I was betraying my own identity. On the other hand, if I decided to only embrace my so-called “indigenous traditions,” I would feel left out and isolated from the white-mestizo society I was surrounded by. I was then experimenting with a dilemma of understanding myself because I had to choose between two supposedly opposed categories, “tradition” and “modernity.” Then I started to travel around the world and re-defined my own identity as a global indigenous Kichwa woman. In my personal journey and throughout the research I have been conducting for this thesis, I have come up with narratives that have brought me peace and understanding about my personal experiences and the transformations occurring in the society I live.

For instance, modernity and tradition are concepts that have historically been thought of as opposite, especially when applying them to indigenous communities. Francesca Croce drafted models to understand indigenous entrepreneurship by engaging in indigenous entrepreneurship literature in her study of 25 relevant articles about indigenous entrepreneurship. This study helped to synthesize three indigenous entrepreneurship models—urban, remote, and rural—that contribute to understanding the processes and experiences of indigenous entrepreneurs. Despite the usefulness of these models, which is not the objective of this study, she categorizes them based on the narrative that “modernity” is a process opposed to “tradition.” In her mapping of indigenous entrepreneurship studies, she defines urban indigenous entrepreneurship as being more connected to narratives of “modernity,” while rural indigenous entrepreneurship is associated with narratives of “tradition” (Croce 2017).

Yet other studies around indigenous entrepreneurship and indigenous studies led by indigenous scholars or Latin American scholars have shown that tradition and modernity can “co-exist” and be “re-defined” (Cusicanqui 2012), contributing to a process of “de-marginalization” of indigenous communities (Budka 2015) and to inserting indigenous epistemologies (Coral 2018; Vázquez 2019 ) into entrepreneurship activities. As such, Indigenous scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui also proposes that Indigenous peoples can create their own ways of exercising “modernity.” She argues that “we indigenous were and are, above all, contemporary beings and peers, and in this dimension [*aka pacha*], we perform and display our own commitment to modernity” (Cusicanqui 2012, p.96). She then suggests that indigenous modernity “can emerge from the present in a spiral whose movement is a continuous feedback from the past to the

future” (Cusicanqui 2012, p. 96). In other words, we, indigenous people, can re-imagine and construct our own ways to define “modernity” that is not opposed to the “traditional.” In this thesis, this paradigm looks like indigenous Kichwa entrepreneurs navigating digital technologies. However, it can also be applied for different instances in the lives of many indigenous peoples, who are negotiating what modernity and tradition mean for our lives.

Indigenous entrepreneurship and digital technologies provide us with a space to analyze how the new generation of indigenous people, especially women, negotiate the “tradition/modernity” paradigm. It is fundamental to understand that indigenous entrepreneurship in Latin America must be seen as a field of study separated from ‘social entrepreneurship’ or ‘endogenous entrepreneurship’ because indigenous entrepreneurship introduces questions about identity, modernity, tradition, transformation, and practices, particularly when it is done from an indigenous lens. Suppose indigenous entrepreneurship, on the contrary, is solely seen under other entrepreneurship umbrellas from non-indigenous perspectives per se. In that case, it has the potential to perpetuate the hurtful narrative that for indigenous peoples, “modernity” is opposed to “tradition.” In doing so, we are reduced to folkloristic museum pieces that need to be preserved.

The different perspectives on understanding entrepreneurship can also cause internal conflicts between family members with conflicting perspectives on how they interpret “entrepreneurship.” For instance, Sisa explained that she had some issues with her siblings because they expressed that she was taking too long to ‘succeed’ as an entrepreneur. Sisa explained that her family had a “boom de superación” meaning they had large financial gains from their entrepreneurship projects. She contrasted these

experiences to her own because, in her words, “mi proceso ha sido muy lento.” The main point of conflict was the material gains that Sisa had not been able to fulfill. She said

"But they [her brothers] focus on the fact that I don't have a house, I don't have a car, no, there are no bank accounts, and so they focus on that, but they don't analyze the time. For them, entrepreneurship is to sell and sell and sell and sell and own and own, but I don't see it that way...For me, entrepreneurship is first to learn, to have perseverance, to help others so that we all are successful...as I tell all my workers, if I win, you will also win because if I get a sale, I will pass it on to you. Then there is a balance for everyone. I see it that way. I mean, for me, that is what entrepreneurship is, but on the other hand, in the case of my brothers, no, as I said, what they want is to sell, sell, sell, and make money, which is supposedly the idea of entrepreneurship, but for me that is not the way it is. So sometimes we have had some kind of hostility, like "you better go to work, go to an office, you will have more money there." (Sisa M., p. 14)

For Sisa, her entrepreneurship activities meant she could learn and help her community of Kichwa women. Sisa sought equilibrium in the way her business grew. In a way, Sisa sought a communal benefit from her own private entrepreneurship activities. This indigenous value was lost by her brothers, who, in Sisa’s words, “they want is to sell, sell, sell and make money” only sought an individual benefit. Indigenous and Eurocentric-capitalist narratives are constantly at play when carrying out entrepreneurship activities. On one side, neoliberalism had reinforced through western entrepreneurship narratives individual capitalist values. On the other hand, indigenous Kichwa women entrepreneurs valued a more communal approach to their entrepreneurship activities.

Additionally, another relevant way that indigenous entrepreneurship and digital technologies can deconstruct the tradition/modernity dichotomy is by actively exercising



indigenous epistemologies during entrepreneurship activities. For instance, Vasquez-Maguirre (2019) and Coral (2019) explored how indigenous social, and organizational narratives, such as horizontality in decision-making practices for collaborative entrepreneurship projects, and indigenous worldviews and practices, such as *Sumak Kawsay*, are leading focal points of indigenous entrepreneurship in Latin America. This thesis also aims to support this perspective by focusing on Kichwa indigenous practices such as *Minga or Ranti-Ranti*. *Minga* is a term used by Kichwa communities to describe the action of working together towards a common goal. Everyone collaborates, with no remuneration, so that one person or family benefits from the communal work. Afterward, when one of the people who helped in the *minga* needed support, the community would get together and do the same thing. There is a common understanding of reciprocity that we call *Ranti-Ranti*. Reciprocity (*Ranti-Ranti*) and communal work (*minga*) are crucial social values we have learned as Kichwa people. These values determine our actions. Throughout this research, I have noticed how these values are central to indigenous Kichwa women entrepreneurship activities.

For instance, kinship relationships inside indigenous entrepreneurship activities are fundamental for successful entrepreneurship projects. Tamia explained how her family was the main cornerstone of her entrepreneurship project. She said:

“We were a family of four people. There were four of us, my parents, my brother and me. We were four, and then my little brother came along... My parents buy supplies and manufacture, my brother also manufactures. He helps me run the store, so we are a small business, and each one does his own little things so that everything flows together to make the handicrafts. Our handicraft is growing with the four of us, and my brother is the youngest, so he is also dedicated to making little balls in the threads, so he is

passing his little balls in the threads and so on, so he has been learning, so now he knows how to make his own little bracelet. He knows how to make his bracelet completely and my parents gave him the finished ones... I dedicate myself to take care of the store and not neglect the social media". (Tamia, p. 11)

Akira also explained that her mother and sister helped her create the packages for her entrepreneurship project. "We all get together in the house to talk and make a minga to be able to finish the orders for my business." (Akira, p. 5) Likewise, Liz also told me that she gets treated differently when she goes to entrepreneurship projects run by Kichwa entrepreneurs compared to those run by non-indigenous people. She said

"Yes, they treat you differently when you go to Kichwa entrepreneurship; for example, they send you a little something as appreciation for your time or they send you something later if they don't have it at that moment. I don't ask them for anything, but I appreciate the recognition of my time. When I go to mestizo enterprises on the other hand, there is nothing like that." (Liz, p.7)

Finally, some indigenous Kichwa women entrepreneurs are contesting the modernity/tradition dichotomy by offering products that are transformative and adaptive to new fashion trends while maintaining the importance of our indigenous regalia. Sisa explained

"We have an internal and external audience. There are many, many Kichwas, many Kichwas who are located internationally who are always interested in being fashionable and traditional...a client told me 'I went all over Otavalo, I went to the market, I went to all the stores that I was told are the best, but nobody has the design that you have.' We don't have something extravagant, that is, we have kept traditional, but we have added a little touch of fashion trend so that you feel more elegant, sexier..." (Sisa M. p. 8)

In this quote from Sisa, we can perceive the two key features of this section. She first refers to the *mindalae* identity that Kichwa-Otavalos have as international entrepreneurs, and then she refers to how indigenous Kichwa women can indeed “be fashionable” and “traditional.” In a way, Sisa’s experience of selling indigenous regalia to local and international Kichwa clientele places her in a position where she negotiated what it means to be “fashionable” in indigenous “traditional” regalia. Therefore, Sisa deconstructed the established narratives that modernity and tradition cannot coexist. Sisa, Akira, Liz, Tamia, and I are constantly deconstructing this modernity/tradition dichotomy from our own spaces and in our own terms. By doing so, we are rejecting hegemonic notions that situate us as museum pieces that are static in place and time, and that must be preserved.

Rueda-Rodríguez and González-Campo (2021) emphasized, based on qualitative research on southwestern Colombian indigenous communities, the importance that indigenous cultural roots have to the national culture, in this case, Colombia, by building a collective identity that can be introduced to the citizens, and therefore the need to preserve these traditions. Besides, the article tries to engage on the importance of supporting indigenous entrepreneurship activities, but they still fall into paternalistic and capitalist perspectives of understanding indigenous communities by perpetuating a dualistic way of seeing tradition and modernity, in which tradition needs to be preserved to survive modernity, instead of evaluating that they can co-exist together.

Indigenous entrepreneurship is modern and traditional because it is transformative, exploratory, and adaptive, especially when working closely with technology. Kichwa-Otavalos entrepreneurship has shown that indigenous communities

do not preserve traditions by being static passive subjects. In contrast, we are part of the transformation of society. We are taking advantage of modernity for our own lives and communities while holding to our traditional identity through our artistic, economic, personal, political, and social activities. We are currently in the middle of another adaptation of indigenous entrepreneurship with digital technologies that will inform the relationship between indigenous communities and technology itself. Indigenous peoples are reinventing and reimagining their own ways of perceiving modernity differentiated from the one imposed by the hegemonic mestizo and white society. In this way, indigenous entrepreneurship serves as an instrument to negotiate these apparent opposing categories, “tradition” versus “modernity.”

### **Being a *Warmi* Entrepreneur**

#### *Education and Identity*

*Warmi* is a Kichwa term, the direct translation of the Kichwa word is woman, but we indigenous peoples in Otavalo only use it to identify indigenous women. Access to higher education provides spaces for developing digital literacy, such as acquiring digital marketing or business management skills. However, these same spaces reproduce western hegemonic discourses that lead Kichwa *Warmis*, such as Carolina, Sisa, Tamia, Eli, Akira, and myself, to find ways to negotiate our Kichwa identity. In this context, our Kichwa identity shows in various forms. This last section will explain how Kichwa *Warmi* entrepreneurs negotiate their identity as indigenous and women inside entrepreneurship spaces that tend to carry deep white Western capitalist narratives. These negotiations can appear in the name of the entrepreneurship project itself, in the products they offer, their business logos, and in how they perform indigeneity when offering their

products through social media or in the Otavalo streets. In this context, we have had to define what it entails to be a *Warmi* entrepreneur. Additionally, entrepreneurship spaces have provided a venue for *Warmi* entrepreneurs to navigate their own personal processes of healing their past struggles and trauma. By engaging in entrepreneurship activities, Kichwa *Warmis* have found paths to canalize our struggles while creating a project that allows us to fulfill our roles as older sisters or single mothers and simultaneously contest the gender norms that have been imposed upon us.

Akira was a college student studying design at the University of Buenos Aires in what is now known as Argentina. She explained that her entrepreneurship project, *Katichina*, originated from her personal process of recognizing her Kichwa identity in an educational space that did not acknowledge Kichwa narratives. She said,

“After I started my career, I began to ask myself many questions about how I could design as a Kichwa. This was a major challenge for me because, of course, at my university, they don't teach me Kichwa design, they don't teach me about Andean indigenous identity, everything they teach me is based on Western history.”  
(Akira, p. 2)

Likewise, Eli recounted an event with a *mestizo* professor during a class about Andean indigenous architecture at her university—Universidad Técnica del Norte, located 40 minutes away from Otavalo. She explained

“he [the professor] was explaining about the *chakana*<sup>2</sup> and saying things...in some ways, it was kind of true, but he didn't see it from the side we actually understand the meanings of each of our graphs and he just got confused.” (Eli, p. 7)

Both Akira and Eli have felt uncomfortable in their educational spaces, which have failed to recognize their indigenous identity as part of the university curriculum. These

scenarios have made them consider integrating their *Warmi* identity into their cutting-edge entrepreneurship activities. Therefore, Akira and Eli needed to be creative in the ways they included their own identity as Kichwa *Warmis* in the activities that they were developing as new entrepreneurs.

Conversely, educational spaces can also provide opportunities for indigenous Kichwa women to learn skills that can support their entrepreneurship projects. Tamia, Sisa, and I, for instance, have taken advantage of their educational opportunities to embrace entrepreneurship practices. Tamia explained

"When I was around 16 or 17 years old, we started taking entrepreneurship classes at school, and then I started to like it... and my teacher realized that I liked doing things, even my first, my first company started at my school, it was a school project, and they said, "create a company". My company was called "DJ, a clothing company, and then we created, we created an entire world I remember that I started and I said, for a clothing company, you have to have machines, you have to have threads, you have to have clothes and you have employees, and that's how we created a company." (Tamia p.2)

"DJ" was the first entrepreneurship idea that Tamia explored inside her educational space. Similarly, Sisa told me that her entrepreneurship project originated as part of her bachelor's thesis at her university, where she studied "Business Administration." These past two experiences resembled my own when conducting a digital project, an indigenous entrepreneurship podcast, as part of my master's thesis at my current university-Tulane University. In a way, education spaces have provided us with the tools to produce our own projects. However, we cannot ignore that educational spaces have also perpetuated Western capitalist narratives, the lack of representation of indigenous scholars, and educational materials from indigenous lenses, which have profoundly affected indigenous

communities and each of us individually. As a result, we all have found ways to insert our Kichwa *Warmi* identity while carrying out entrepreneurship activities.

The data I collected during my participant observation and interviews show that Kichwa *Warmi's* identity was portrayed in the concept behind the products they offer, the language they use, its advertisement, and its embracement of indigeneity. For instance, Akira named some of her collections using the Kichwa language and explained to her audience the significance of some Kichwa words when she released a new collection called “Mutantes.” I asked her if she always uses the Kichwa language to name her collections and if they represent her Kichwa identity, and she said

"Whatever I can write in Kichwa, I write in Kichwa...it is part of my identity, of my design, and of me. In the end, my design is me...for me it has been a challenge to be a Kichwa designer...because I wouldn't like to be limited to staying in the traditional style, and that is a challenge as a Kichwa woman". (Akira, p. 15)

Similarly, Eli recycles traditional Kichwa blouses that are part of our Kichwa regalia and transforms them into modern designs for young Kichwa-Otavalo *Warmis*. In doing so, she affirmed that she carries the legacy and honor of her mother and grandmothers through the blouses while providing a “fresh look” to them. During her Instagram Live transmission, she held her mother’s blouse, showed it to the camera and said, “It's like a treasure [this shirt] is like a story that's behind it and for me, it's like giving it that second chance.”

Business advertising is another way to insert identity into entrepreneurship activities. Logos particularly provide venues to be creative about visually representing indigeneity. Tamia, for instance, explained that her audience needed to know about her identity since the products she offers do not reflect that. She offered jewelry such as

handmade earrings and necklaces. Therefore, her business logo shows the “sun” as the main symbol. She explained

“The idea had always been to design a sun. That was always the idea because that is what represents us... Then I met a friend of mine who is a graphic designer and he told me, you know what? I am going to design the logo for you and see if you like it... because the logo has to be a story and you have to identify with it... So that's when I told him, look, I want you to design it with a sun... so when people ask me, why a sun, I can tell them, the sun is because of what we are, we are Kichwas... so he told me, well, I get you. He is also Kichwa-otavalo” (Tamia, p. 6)

Similarly, Liz has a well-developed logo in her entrepreneurship project “Riski-Conoce,” an Instagram account with 1,214 followers and 58 posts focused on advertising entrepreneurship business. The logo illustrates a Kichwa-Otavalo *Warmi* wearing our traditional regalia, facing backward, and in the background, we can appreciate the *Taita Imbabura*<sup>2</sup> next to colorful flowers. In this case, the main symbol of their entrepreneurship project, the logos, emphasizes their indigenous identity as Kichwa *Warmis*.

Eli, Akira, Tami, and I, in our own terms, have found ways to connect our traditional narratives to a modern “fresh look” by engaging with digital technologies that have provided us the space to contest hegemonic educational narratives that ignore our own existence and agency. In this way, we have continued the legacy of past Kichwa Otavalo entrepreneurs while embracing the new digital tools that our current society is proving to us. In this context of transformation, we also have to negotiate the ways we perform indigeneity in our everyday lives.

### *Performing indigeneity*

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<sup>2</sup> Taita Imbabura: We call *Taita* which means father in Kichwa to refer to the volcanoes.



Moving to New Orleans from Otavalo has represented a big challenge for me in very different layers. Today in my new context, I have had to incorporate the migrant identity to my own existence as an indigenous woman. In the American society where I now live, Latin American migrants are all lumped together under the label "Latinx, latino, Latina,". But, what happens when we are indigenous migrants? In my case, understanding myself as an indigenous woman who is labeled as Latina and yet internally rejects that label has been very challenging. In this context, my Kichwa clothing turned out to be a way to hold on to my territory, my family, and my identity, thus contesting this label. When I look at myself in the mirror, I notice that when I wear my *anaku*, *walkas*, shirt, *chumbe* and *alpargatas*, I feel more like myself. "I am more powerful,"- I usually say to my partner when I try to explain the feeling of wearing my clothing. It is impossible to get those clothes in the United States, I can only get them in Ecuador. Therefore, I try to take care of myself and not wear out the Kichwa clothes I brought with me when I moved here.

While watching Tik Tok one day, I saw videos of "Sisa's" entrepreneurship showing embroidered shirts from Otavalo and saying that they shipped internationally. Entering the comments, I saw how many other Kichwa Warmis was asking about shipping to various cities such as Chicago, New York, Madrid, Milan, and Amsterdam. Reading those comments alone gave me a sense of community, as I realized that even though no one else here dresses or looks like me, there are other Kichwa Warmis who find themselves, like me, looking to connect with our territory through our clothing. We, as Kichwa-Otavalo women, carry the legacy of our identity through our clothing, while the men do it through their long braided hair. Currently, I am very intentional about wearing my Kichwa clothing while I am occupying spaces in my university as, for me, it

is a form to contest the western impositions that are imposed on me from the educational spaces.

In this context, products like those of Sisa, Eli, and Silvia, Kichwa clothing and accessories, become networks of connection between the Kichwa *Warmis* living away from the territory and those who are in Otavalo. It gives us a feeling of belonging even though we are miles away. The reasons and ways in which Kichwa *Warmis* perform indigeneity vary according to the context of each of us. Throughout my participant observation in the Otavalo Saturday day and night feria, I saw significant differences between the Kichwa *Warmis* that sold their products. In the daytime, most of the vendors of indigenous traditional textiles were Kichwa *Warmis* wearing their indigenous regalia. The foreign tourists took pictures of the market, especially of the women wearing the regalia. At night time, it was more common to see indigenous Kichwa *Warmis* wearing Western clothing because their clients were local people. I myself felt more comfortable wearing Western clothes at night than during the day.

In the Otavalo market, indigenous Kichwa women wear regalia to portray their identity and legitimize their indigenous products to foreign tourists. It is an agency that Kichwa *Warmis* have to advertise their entrepreneurship projects on their own terms. My father is an indigenous entrepreneur that, during the indigenous entrepreneurship boom in Otavalo about thirty to twenty years ago, he traveled to various countries in Europe with his entrepreneurship activities. He used to tell us stories about *Kichwa Warmis* entrepreneurs in Europe who wore our traditional regalia even during high summer temperatures or low winter temperatures. He used to say that they were more likely to sell their products if they were wearing their regalia. I also used this strategy when working

with my parents as a child and teenager. I wear my regalia more intentionally when we go to sell products in tourist places. My father and my mother used to say, “así nos tienen más confianza y se acercan más” when they referred to the tourists. Likewise, when I saw the videos of Akira, Eli, and Sisa, they all wore their regalias, but when I interviewed them, none of them wore them. In this scenarios, the Kichwa indigenous regalia appears in contradictory ways. On one side, it helps to “legitimize” Kichwa products to outside tourists, while on the other hand it also represents a way to empower and reassert identity of Kichwa women.

### *Racial and Gender Challenges*

Kichwa *Warmi* entrepreneurs also faced different challenges regarding the condition of women and indigenous. Diversity and inclusive initiatives have occurred inside entrepreneurship spaces and media outlets. Ecuadorian media portrays diverse news about the indigenous culture that folklorize indigenous ways of existing. For instance, Sisa explained that Ecuadorian media made her uncomfortable because they described Sisa’s entrepreneurship activities as a show. They treated her as an object for their content instead of a subject with the agency over her entrepreneurship activities. Sisa said:

“I stopped giving interviews, as I said, because they were already making it more of a show as if we [indigenous people] could not undertake projects, and that is something that I did not like so much.” (Sisa M, p.4)

I looked then at the media articles that Sisa referred to when expressing her discomfort, and I found that, for instance, *Diario El Comercio* refers to Sisa’s designs as “moda étnica.” The article describes Sisa's entrepreneurship activities as the only Kichwa *Warmi* that has innovated their entrepreneurship activities. The article also described

that “*moda etnica*” can be served for non-indigenous people to show their “indigenous” roots. In the same way that Rueda and Gonzales (2021) saw indigenous identities as a commodity to serve the construction of Colombia’s common national identity, the media article also emphasized how indigenous regalia, in this particular case, can also serve non-indigenous people.

Similarly, Sisa described a moment when she felt discrimination in entrepreneurship spaces. She described her experience participating in a major national fashion show in Ecuador. She said she felt excited to participate in that event but discriminated against when the organizer did not allow her to bring indigenous models to show her designs. The designs she showed at the festival were Kichwa-Otavalo regalia designs that only Kichwa Warmis knew how to wear. There was a technique for wearing the regalia and braiding the hair. However, the non-indigenous models wore the regalia in a disrespectful way that made Sisa feel disappointed. She recalls this story as that.

“When we were in the news I was invited to a very important fashion show...I had the hope that indigenous women would model my designs, but they didn't allow me...They brought other models...Obviously, the models have no idea how to wear our traditional clothes. So one came out with her hair down, another without walkas, and others just wrapped the anaco, I mean, they have no idea, so I felt pretty excluded. I was the newcomer at that time, but they didn't give me the importance I would have liked to be given and I felt like I was in the middle of many racists, I felt that I was the guinea pig.” (Sisa M. p. 8)

Sisa felt frustrated participating in entrepreneurship spaces that folklorized her identity and business.

Indigenous women entrepreneurs have taken on various responsibilities aside from their own entrepreneurial activities. They constantly have to negotiate between the conditions of older sisters or single mothers with the responsibilities to manage their entrepreneurial activities. In this context, the economic vulnerability was the main reason for the indigenous Kichwa women I talked to carrying out their entrepreneurial activities. For instance, Sisa and Carolina explained that they divorced their partners. The partners did not take any economic responsibility for their children, and as a result, they found themselves in a deep financial crisis. Seeking a source of income for their children motivated them to start their entrepreneurship activities. Sisa said

“As a mother, you have to get by somehow, and money was the least thing I had, and I had a son, so when this worked out, it was really a joy for me that it worked out and today it is, I mean, the income of my house.” (Sisa M, p.4)

In the case of Carolina, she explained that since she did not have any formal educational training, she could not get hired for any formal job. Therefore entrepreneurship became a way to open herself a path to bring income to her home. She explained that she learned to make indigenous traditional instruments and other kinds of art when she lived with her ex-husband’s family. His family came from a long tradition of indigenous entrepreneurs, and as a result, they were familiarized with entrepreneurship activities. However, she came from a family with an agricultural background, and as a result, she had no idea how to dive into entrepreneurship activities. When she separated from her husband, she moved back to her mother’s community and started to apply the entrepreneurial skills she had learned. She said

“When I divorced my husband I went back to live with my mother in our community and there I began to start my own business because I had the need to feed and educate my children. Their father did not help me at all, and I had to be the only one responsible for their education and living expenses.” (Carolina, p.2)

Indigenous entrepreneurship has not only offered the opportunity to find sources of income for indigenous women, but it has also empowered them as women. Finding community and working together towards a common goal has become a healing process for their struggles. Sisa explained,

“I have met many women who have helped us, such as single mothers, and abused mothers. So, at times I know a woman who tells me that she loves to come and says: "the payment is the least of it", maybe that's how she says, " it is something therapeutic to come, to talk, to be here, to share with me, that is to say, how do we go to the colors, what, what design are we going to do." So it gives them, as I believe, that healing experience and at one point, I was like that too. I mean, I took refuge in this for a while, time went by, years went by, and I am another woman. I could tell you how they have made an effort, this brand, for me it is like another little child, another little daughter.” (Sisa M. p. 4)

Sisa affirmed that for one of her workers, the entrepreneurship activities had become “something therapeutic” that helped her to heal. Sisa resembled her worker’s experience because, for her, during the most difficult times, her entrepreneurship project became a refuge, and since she started, Sisa said, “ I am another woman.” In this context, indigenous entrepreneurship activities can potentially heal indigenous women who invest their time, emotions, and energy in their projects.

In Kichwa indigenous communities, older sisters are fundamental pillars of the family structure. When both parents work, they take on the role of the mother by being in

charge of house chores and raising their siblings since they are young. I am the oldest of four children my parents had at a very young age. When I lived in Ecuador, my typical day consisted of going to school in the morning and returning in the afternoons to cook for my siblings, help them with their homework, and put them in bed until my parents got home. I remember always taking care of the house, my siblings, and my education during my childhood and teenage years. When I left Ecuador and became an adult, I realized I never had time to develop hobbies or sports or get to know myself. I developed a trauma. I had no idea who I was outside my role as an older sister. While talking to Tamia, I realized that my experience resembled hers. She said

“As an older sister, I also had a very important role where growing up fast was fundamental, if I did not grow up fast, I could not take care of my siblings, nor could I teach them things, so I can also say that in a way I grew up fast, and I grew up alone and I had to decide on my own, so I, I was alone.” (Tamia, p. 11)

In the case of Tamia, entrepreneurship activities have helped her to create a source of income for her family and to contest power relationships between her family members. She explained that in the past, she felt insecure about assigning her father activities for the entrepreneurship project. She said that “se sentía raro decirle a mi papá que hacer” (Tamia, p11), but now she said

“Now I can tell my dad to go and buy it. Not before because I was ashamed, I was a little embarrassed, I don't know how to say it. But now it's different, now I tell him to go and buy.” (Tamia, p. 11)

Creating a podcast as part of my thesis has allowed me to think about my dreams and desires outside my role as an old sister. It has provided me with the opportunity to learn

skills that can empower my life and career for myself. It has provided a space for my own voice and myself. This has also become a healing project for me.

Indigenous Kichwa *Warmis* have found ways to negotiate their Kichwa identity while reinventing western discourses through digital technologies. They have challenged inaccurate or non-existing representations of indigeneity in their educational and business spaces. Young Kichwa *Warmis* entrepreneurs have re-configuring what it means to be a *Warmi* entrepreneur in the digital arena. They are contesting narratives of modernity and tradition that place indigenous communities as static objects instead of transformative subjects.

Additionally, by engaging in entrepreneurship on digital platforms, indigenous Kichwa women have found ways to heal past traumas and create a sense of belonging when they are away from their territory. In this way, indigenous entrepreneurship has also served as an avenue to canalize emotions and experiences so that Kichwa *Warmi* entrepreneurs can access spaces of community, understanding, and support. The nature of *Warmi* entrepreneurs as women and indigenous had placed them in areas where they have to negotiate their own social roles as women and older sisters while venturing into a position such as entrepreneur.

### *Conclusion*

<p><i>Kichwa Warmi</i></p> <p>Ari, warmimi kani!, kichwa warmi tullpu allpashna, ñukapak kara kanmi ñukapak ñaupakawsakkunapa kawsay yuyaycha, ñukapak shimi kanmi</p> <p>Ñukapak hatun mamakunapa ñan purishka,</p>	<p><i>Mujer Kichwa</i></p> <p>Sí, soy mujer! mujer kichwa, mi piel, color tierra, de memoria viva, de mis ancestros, es mi idioma.</p>
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<p>ñukapa ñanmi kan, ñukapa churanakuna, ari ñukapa churanakuna! paykuna saminay karashkami kan, ñukapa muskyukuna, ari ñukapa muskuykunaka! waka pukyukunashina kan, achik atikaywan allillamanta kallpan.</p> <p>(Pagina 74)</p>	<p>El recorrido de mis abuelas, mi camino. Mi vestimenta, sí, mi vestimenta! Es lo que ellas me han heredado. Mis sueños, sí mis sueños! Son como vertientes sagradas, que fluyen con un desafiante brillo.</p> <p>(pagina 75)</p>
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"I am a Kichwa woman", said my great friend, the Kichwa poet Lourdes Túquerrez Maigua. The above poem reflects our essence, the Kichwa Warmi. The poem shows how our path has been traced by our grandmothers, the ones who were there before us. Our "churanakuna" (clothing), the anaku, fachalina, espadrilles, walkas, and blouse, is a powerful legacy that we have inherited from them. Our language is "ñukapak ñaupakawsakkunapa" (living memory). I did not want to conclude this article without including such an important part of our existence as Kichwa Warmis, our language. For this reason, I decided to include one of my favorite poems that creatively, in words, encapsulates the essence of this thesis.

This thesis is my humble attempt to synthesize the experiences of Kichwa Warmis, who, by engaging in entrepreneurship activities, has found ways to canalize their emotions, dreams, struggles, and identity as indigenous women. In this context, digital technologies, specifically Instagram, Facebook, and Tik Tok, have become a tool for expanding their entrepreneurial activities and for connecting with other Kichwa Warmis in order to create a space for healing and belonging. Additionally, despite the rapid technological acceleration, particularly in the digital sphere, that we have experienced in the last 20 years, infrastructure systems and labor precarity represent large issues in the Global South. In this context, the covid-19 pandemic has signified an

exponential growth of the digital economy. Neoliberalism narratives of the XXI century have promised individual economic and social success by investing time and resources in human capital development. However, these same neoliberalist narratives have promoted an immense increase in unpaid labor, especially in social media content creation, promising individual economic and social success. In this context, only three Kichwa Warmis who have shared their experiences on this thesis have been able to fully depend on their entrepreneurship activities as their main source of income. In other words, only three Kichwa Warmis performed their entrepreneurship activities as full-time jobs. As I am writing this thesis, one of the Kichwa Warmis told me that she decided to migrate to another country because she realized that the income from her entrepreneurship activities was not enough to save money for her children's education. She will be leaving the country in one week. The two most economically successful Kichwa Warmi entrepreneurs continue to increase their presence on social media. One of them is creating online classes to teach how to make the products she offers.

When I started my master's program, I encountered a major crisis because I felt that the knowledge that we produced as scholars had only stayed within the formal academic walls. As a Kichwa *Warmi* scholar, I deeply felt the need to tighten my work to my community, which provided me with the knowledge I have to be writing this thesis. However, who in my community was going to read a paper written in an academic language in English? Nobody. Throughout my program, I have felt isolated and unheard of because I was one of the few indigenous scholars navigating a white educational environment. It was weird to be sitting in a class about indigenous communities in Latin America being taught by a non-indigenous professor who continuously asserted her

authority over issues that I not only read in the books assigned but lived through them in my everyday life as many indigenous women in my territory. Therefore, in contestation to this experience, I decided to create a podcast that I want to share on the local radios back in Otavalo and to share it with the *Kichwa* Warmis who opened their hearts and lives to me.

This digital project, my podcast, has become my own way of channeling my identity, struggle, and healing through digital technologies. One part of my great academic crisis was not knowing how to transition from the books to the grassroots. Now, this is my personal attempt to do it on my own terms and with my own autonomy. The first episode of this digital project is about the story of Sisa Morales, who tells us, in her own words, how her trajectory has been since the beginning of her entrepreneurship. With this project, I hope to enable the creation of a network of indigenous women entrepreneurs so that they can learn from each other that they feel that other women have lived or are currently living similar experiences that we can all nourish. I decided on the podcasting format because I think it is easier for a beginner like me to navigate. Additionally, it is the format that most closely resembles the oral traditions of storytelling. I have also included some of my own music created by my father as part of this project. This format allows me to combine digital technologies with the traditions of my community and family.

In June of 2022, three days after saying goodbye to the *Kichwa* Warmi whom I met at the Salvadoran fair in Washington, DC, I returned to Ecuador in the midst of a historic indigenous uprising. Somehow, that abrupt return reminded me that the struggle of our people takes place from the grassroots, from the streets, and not just from books. I don't know what happened with the *Kichwa* Warmi; we never talked again. Upon returning to

Ecuador, it was all chaos, violence, profile targeting, and racism from the media, police, and government. It reminded me why we, Kichwa Warmis, are, from our own spaces, contesting the hegemonic society that silences, invisibilizes, and violates us.

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