

PERCEPTIONS ON THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE MALU: A CASE OF SAMOA

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ABSTRACT: *The art of Samoan tattooing or Tatau has been widely researched by scholars. Most scholarly, medical and artistic studies examine Samoan tattooing with greater interest on the male tattoo (pe'a) while the female tattoo (malu) is insignificantly explored. Traditionally, the malu was reserved for the taupou, (the daughters of high chiefs). Today, no such reservation seems to be in place and pretty much any woman or girl, Samoan, part Samoan or non Samoan may receive a malu provided they can afford the costs and tolerate the pain. Perceptions on the commercialisation of the malu are deeply debated and vigorously contested on social media and online discussion forums. Perceptions on the commercialisation of the malu from Samoans and non Samoans residing in Samoa are nonexistent in academia. This research paper presents the results of a small scale study that investigated the perceptions of Samoans, part Samoan and non Samoans living in Samoa on the commercialisation of the malu. The paper intends to highlight similarities and differences in perceptions amongst participants living in Samoa and bloggers residing outside of Samoa. The paper presents a number of interesting themes drawn from the study on the commercialisation of the malu.*

KEYWORDS: Commercialization, Malu, Tatau, Samoan Tattooing, Perceptions, Social Media, Online Discussion Forums

INTRODUCTION

The art of Samoan tattooing or Tatau has been widely researched by scholars. (Deihl, 1932; McGrevy, 1973; Marquardt, 1984; Vaa, 2006). Early studies focused particularly on the origins and ideology of Samoan tattooing, its relevance to the Samoan way of life, the process of getting a tatau and examination of the motifs and its detailed meanings. Later contributions examined Tatau as a symbol of Samoan identity in a diasporic context (Vaa, 2008), the globalisation of tatau, (Adams, Mallon, Brunt, & Thomas, 2010; Cole, 2003) and more seriously, life-threatening bacterial infections caused by traditional tattooing when performed in a non-sterile manner. (Korman, Grayson, & Turnidge, 2005; McLean & D'Souza, 2011; Porter, Simcock, & MacKinnon, 2005). Most recently, Samoan tattooing has raised concerns over cultural property, traditional knowledge and expressions of culture. (Forsyth, 2012). To date, most scholarly, medical and artistic studies examine Samoan tattooing with a primary focus on the male tattoo (pe'a) while the female tattoo (*malu*), is insignificantly explored. Of the very few that explored the *malu*, these studies examined different *malu* patterns, the tattooing process and perceived 'right' to receiving a *malu*. (McGrevy, 1973; Ryman, 2004).

Traditionally, the *malu* was reserved for the taupou, the daughters of high chiefs. (Hankefamily, n.d.; McGrevy, 1973; Vaa, 2006; Vaa, 2008). Today, no such reservation seems to be in place and pretty much any woman or girl, Samoan, part Samoan or non Samoan may receive a *malu* provided they can afford the hefty costs and tolerate the pain.

The commercialisation of the *malu* has received a large number of attention on social media, personal and public blogs, and online discussion forums as opposed to academic literature. A discussion forum created on activeboard.com under the topic “Where to get my Malu/Pea in Samoa” documents a wide range of debates and comments about who can and cannot receive a *malu*. A Facebook page called “Stop idiots from getting a Tatau or Malu” in March 2011 opened a discussion thread with the posing question: “What’s your opinion on the fact that our Master Tufuga (traditional Samoan tattooist) are tattooing anyone with money?” This online discussion generated a lot of heated arguments, and mixed views suggesting, the commercialisation of the *malu* is a topic heavily criticised and disputed by many Samoans living abroad.

The commercialisation of the *malu* is subject to many motivations and rationales. Within the last eight years, Samoans, part Samoan and non Samoans living abroad have utilised social media to debate, challenge and express their thoughts and feelings about the *malu* as a commodity of globalisation and commercialisation.

Perceptions on the commercialisation of tatau and *malu* are openly discussed on social media and online discussion forums. On social media, the *malu* is interpreted as a symbol of grace, beauty, strength and commitment to the values of a good Samoan woman. (Fiafuatai, 2015; Hankefamily, n.d). A great majority of Samoans living abroad strongly believe the *malu* is Measina (treasured) and oppose non Samoans from receiving the *malu*. (Leota, 2012; Teine Samoa, 2012).

Expressions of shame, loss of honour, greed, insult to Samoan culture are conveyed towards Samoan tattooists’ who are tattooing non Samoans the tatau or the *malu* (Anonymous, 2009, Tufuga, 2009, Bloody Mary, 2009, Kat, 2009.) There is also a strong sense of ‘ownership’ of the *malu* and opposition to the commercialisation of the pe’a and *malu* to non Samoans. “If someone has the courage and the understanding for the *malu* and pe’a they have the right to get it done?, what right is that, you take away the sacredness, O Measina Samoa should not be for sale” (Anonymous, 2009). “Caucasians and foreigners getting Polynesian tattoos are, in a way stealing our culture by getting inked up with something 95% of people do not even know what they are wearing’ (Kawika, 2015).

Online discussion blogs, such as Sydneyfob.blogspot.com, activeboard.com, Samoa mo Samoa, 1Samoa.com, Facebook.com/stop idiots from getting a Tatau/Malu are dominated by Samoans, part Samoan and non Samoans living abroad. Clearly, these discussion forums have provided a platform for public opinions to be voiced and heard without having to worry about the consequences of expressing opinions.

This paper explores the perceptions of Samoans, part Samoan and non Samoans living in Samoa on the commercialisation of the *malu*.

For the purpose of this research, commercialisation is defined as: ‘the process of tattooing anyone (Samoan, part Samoan, non-Samoan living on Island and abroad) the *malu*. This woman or girl does not necessarily have to be the daughter of a high chief or fully understand the Samoan culture but has the money to pay for the tattoo’.

Background

In Samoan mythology, the origin of the Samoan tatau was founded by the twin goddesses Taema and Tilafaiga. This seems to be the accepted version in Samoa and the *Pese o le Tatau*

(song of the tattoo) which is still sung today elaborates this version. Before 1722, accounts of the origins of Samoan tattooing or Tatau were narrated in myths, legends and family oral history. There were also other versions added such as The Kramer version in 1902 and Deihl Version in 1932. Not surprisingly, all narrated and written accounts presented conflicting versions about how the tatau came to Samoa. In his article, 'The position of Woman in Samoan Culture', Deihl (1932), argues that the art of tatau was taught to the Samoans by the Samoan War-Goddess, Nafanua who with another woman had set out to learn the art of tattooing. Returning to Samoa, the two women had in mind to tattoo only women, but along the way, their thoughts were muddled up and upon their arrival they had in their mind to only tattoo the men. In spite of the various versions, all accounts shared three significant points: (1) men are to be tattooed and not the women, (2), two women are the main characters and (3), tattooing was brought to Samoa from Fiji. Kramer (1902) makes mention of the 'faletolu'; (three houses or branches of the tattooing guild) which all practitioners belong, Su'a, Tulou'ena, and Pauli, Vaa (2006), however argues, there are only two fale tufuga, (branches of the tattooing guild) the Sa Su'a on the island of Upolu and the Sa Tulou'ena on the island of Savai'i. These two families are also called *o le Falelua o le Aiga Tufuga Ta Tatau*. The two families trace their 'gift' back to a mythical story in which the twin goddesses Taema and Tilafaiga came to Samoa from Fiji and gave a basket of *au*, the tattooing combs and instructions on how to use them on their ancestors. (Vaa, 2006). However, Sa Tulou'ena's family's oral history on the introduction of the *tatau* is different to that of Sa Su'a. Furthermore, it appears, from the works of Marquardt (1984) and McGrevy (1973) that tufuga ta tatau who participated in research interviews provided various conflicting versions of how the guild came about and which branch had precedence. To date, there is no unified tradition of the guild as disagreement continues between the Sa Tulou'ena and Sa Su'a families over which family's representative was given the trade and the tattooing combs first.

While the art of Samoan traditional tattooing has been widely investigated, studies have primarily investigated Samoan traditional tattooing instruments, tattooing procedures, tattoo patterns and the pe'a. Notably, the *malu* is briefly mentioned in studies that explore the two forms Tatau and somewhat overshadowed by heavy analysis and examination of the pe'a.

Taking its name from the most singular of its motifs, a lozenge shaped designed, the *malu*, originally was only meant to be for taupou, (daughter of high chiefs). This reservation most probably explains why John Williams, pioneer London Missionary Society back in 1838 notes that only a few women were tattooed. (McGrevy, 1973). It is argued that the *malu* was intended to be decoration for taupou who performed siva (traditional Samoan dance) and represented a mark of distinction. In the early days, it was common that girls regretted getting a *malu* to a certain point on the basis that the decision to get one was not by choice but one they had to submit to. It was not something resulting from ones desire but something that represented status and a possession of distinction and rank. *Malu* is also interpreted to mean 'cover' or 'protection', upon this interpretation; Vaa (2006) considers the *malu* as a mark of modesty.

The most noticeable argument communicated on social media is the sentiment that the *malu* is owned by Samoa and should be restricted to the people of Samoa. "There should be some serious restrictions on who can and cannot get the *malu* and pe'a before it becomes the next 'taulima', a piece of crap that anyone can get and has no meaning whatsoever" (Virgin, 2009). There is also the view that both tatau and *malu* have lost their traditional meanings due to its commercialisation. "I feel that the malofie and *malu*, with all its designs and meanings

should be seen as something of high value and shouldn't be exploited for business and money gain" (Fiafuatai, 2015). "The *malu* and *pe'a* have defeated their purpose because many people define it a sexy work of art but it is very sacred". (Teine Samoa Moni, 2014).

Tufuga ta tatau (master tattooists'), are immensely ridiculed and criticised for the commercialisation of the tatau and *malu* and especially for allowing non Samoans to receive the tatau and the *malu*. "I blame the Suluape clan for tattooing any tom, dick and harry with the *pe'a*, they only see the money and not the importance of the *pe'a* to our culture" (Anonymous, 2009). A sentiment also reflected by Galliot (2008), that tufuga ta tatau have often been labeled 'people who make money from traditional craft'. The traditional tufuga ta tatau are amongst the most highly paid people in society. (Vaa, 2006). In the last decade, the impact of globalisation and commercialisation has influenced the increase in prices for receiving a *malu* both in Samoa and abroad. While the traditional payment consisting of cash, food and fine mats still exists, the modern method of monetary payment only is usually preferred by both the tufuga and bearers of the *malu*. (Vaa, 2006). This is clearly the case when one opts to have her *malu* tattooed at the Samoan Tourism Village by the Suluape boys.

On the other hand, there are also arguments that the commercialisation of the *malu* has helped to promote Samoa and its culture internationally, something worth being proud of. "In our western society, any one is going to get a *malu/pe'a* and its beyond our control, the least that we can do is just be proud knowing that yes it originated from our culture". (Frangipani kisses, 2009).

In justification, Tufuga ta tatau from both the Sa Tulou'ena branch and the Sa Su'a branch argue that they alone have the right over this custom because the *faiva* (trade) was given to the Falelua (Two Houses) for their exclusive use and was not given to the people of Samoa at large. In this case, as tufuga ta tatau of the Falelua, they have the exclusive right to tattoo anyone they so wish including foreigners. (Vaa, 2006). This view is also supported by some online bloggers given the switch to cash economy. "The tufuga, that's his occupation, the saying goes, you don't work, you don't eat". (Kuresa, 2011)

Social Media, online discussion forums, personal and public blogs have provided a convenient avenue for voicing public opinions that would otherwise not have been made possible through direct and traditional communication mediums. The growth of social media users in Samoa and the simplicity of creating, facilitating and maintaining online public discussion forums confirms that social media and blogs will continue to be mainstream in voicing public opinions.

Purpose

This paper aims to explore the perceptions of Samoan, part Samoan, and non Samoan people living in Samoa on the commercialisation of the *malu*. The research intends to record the thoughts and feelings of on Island respondents on the issue of commercialisation, who they believe should be entitled to have a *malu* and their thoughts about tufuga ta tatau. Since the *malu* is commonly considered Measina a Samoa (treasured), accounts on the perceptions of people on its commercialisation do not exist in academia except on social media and public discussion forums. The research intends to contribute to the existing literature from this perspective.

Research Design

This paper, based on a small scale research administered both in Savaii and Upolu, is an investigation of some of the perceptions of local respondents on the commercialisation of the *malu*. The focus is particularly on the perceptions of respondents on who the *malu* is for, their thoughts about Samoans, (full and part) and non Samoans that have a *malu* or are planning to get a *malu*, their views on the fact that anyone wanting to get a *malu* can get one and their thoughts of *tufuga ta tatau*.

Research Question

What are some of the thoughts and feelings of Samoans, part Samoan and non Samoans living in Samoa on the commercialisation of the *malu*?

METHODOLOGY

The Sample

The sample size was 50 respondents of which 15 were from Savaii and 35 were from Upolu. The selection of respondents was based on two criteria: 1), fluency in English both written and oral, 2) has knowledge and understanding of Samoan culture, the concept of *fa'a Samoa* and the art of Samoan tattooing to include the *malu*. Non Samoans that participated in the research have resided in Samoa for more than one year and also have some knowledge of Samoan culture to include Samoan tattooing. Of the 15 respondents from Savaii, 5 were non Samoan aged between 28-76 and 10 were full Samoan aged between 30-60. In Upolu, 20 respondents were full Samoan aged between 23-60, 15 of which are high school teachers and university lecturers and 5 government employees in management level. 15 were university students aged between 20-30, 6 of these students were part Samoan and 9 full Samoan. 5 respondents were non Samoan aged between 22-46.

The Survey Instrument

Data was collected using in-depth interviews. Additionally, the respondents were also given a sentence completion test to fill in at the end of the interview. Each respondent was informed of the purpose of the study and all responses were anonymous. All respondents were informed that the study was guided by the University's research code of human ethics and that the data collected would be used only for the purpose of the study. The sentence completion test had 8 incomplete sentences that each respondent was asked to complete in their own words in the hope that they will reveal some hidden or additional insights about their thoughts and feelings towards the commercialisation of the *malu*. Thematic analysis was used to interpret both the responses from the in depth interviews and the sentence completion tests to identify meaningful themes and concepts.

RESULTS

Perceptions on what and who the *malu* is for:

Status: From the interviews, a common theme was observed from the responses of research participants – the *malu* is a symbol of status. To these individuals, the *malu* is solely for the daughters of the high chiefs and therefore only the daughters of the high chiefs who become the village taupou should be tattoo the *malu*. The village taupou has a higher status and the *malu* is a symbol of that status.

“Back in the days, the malu was only for the daughters of the high chiefs, it wasn’t something you can get out of interest, so unless you were the daughter of a high chief or a village taupou you could never have one done’.

“The village taupou played a greater role in village activities such as performing the Siva samoa and making of the ava, the malu was a stamp of differentiation and a mark of greater importance”

Fashion accessory: Fashion accessory was uncovered as another representation of the *malu* to explain the increasing growth in *malu* tattoos being done. Some individuals believe that the traditional prerequisite for getting a *malu* had long disappeared and feel that the *malu* is simply a fashion accessory hidden behind the common excuse of identity representation. These perceptions were confined to individuals who were younger as the older individuals. In the current study, younger respondents appreciated the *malu* as a representation of cultural identity which they felt any Samoan woman proud of her culture should be allowed to receive.

“Some girls are getting the malu because they think it completes the look of a real Samoan beauty, the fact that anyone, Samoan or not who can afford to get a malu can get one has really stripped away the real meaning of the malu, it’s now just a fashion accessory because girls get it done and show it off”

“When I joined the siva group, all the girls had a malu, I was actually encouraged to get one because I performed the siva Samoa quite a lot, and having the malu done completed my attire as a taupou”

Protection and Service: To some individuals, the *malu* represents protection and service. These individuals believe that the *malu* is only for Samoan women who understand, respect and value their Samoan culture and play a role of service in their extended family or village community. The *malu* is also seen as a representation of alofa, (love) which mirrors Figiel’s (1999) interpretation of the malu: to protect, to shelter, fa’amalu, (like an umbrella). An umbrella of alofa, of love, stained with a little blood, A little pain. But it is alofa that preserves.

Sign of acknowledgement: Some participants felt that a non Samoan woman is deserving of the *malu* if she has served and developed strong relationships with families in the Samoan community. The *malu* in this case is a representation of acknowledgement and appreciation of her services to the Samoan Community and it is often a decision initiated and supported by the family and village chiefs.

‘I remember back in the 1970’s when an American by the name of Elsie Bach who worked as a Peace Corps volunteer received a matai (chiefly) title and a malu in acknowledgement of her services to the Samoan community, to me, she deserved that for all the good work she did for our community’.

‘Tupa’i Bruno Loyale of the Magic Circus of Samoa received his tatau and matai (chiefly) title as acknowledgement of his close relationships with a family in Savaii, yet he is not Samoan, so if our people can gift a matai title and the tatau as a form of appreciation to a non Samoan man, then why not to a non Samoan woman?’

Treasured: Generally, most individuals expressed that the *malu* is Measina (treasured) a Samoa and of great cultural significance. The notion of importance extends to the general expectation of the *malu* to be covered, not to be shown off and reserved only for special occasions. It was argued that through the commercialisation of the *malu*, it’s importance and significance has been lost. However on the contrary, there was also the view that the *malu* represents courage and endurance therefore those who decide to show off parts of their *malu* deserve to do so.

‘I am sick of seeing young girls especially, showing off their malu in public places, to have a malu and wear very short miniskirts or shorts shows they don’t respect and honour what the malu represents’

‘I have a malu, and I am proud of my malu, I had to put up with a lot of pain to get it done traditionally so I will show off parts of my malu whenever I feel like it’.

Symbol of cultural identity: Most individuals felt that increasingly, the *malu* has gradually become an important symbol of Samoan cultural identity rather than a signifier of service.

‘Whether you live in Australia, New Zealand or USA, anyone who sees that you have a tatau or a malu would immediately know you are Samoan’

‘I am a New Zealand born Samoan, no one in my family has a malu, but I decided to get one because I am proud to be Samoan, I am proud of my culture, and I am proud to take an element of my culture with me to my grave’

Perceptions of the Commercialisation of the Malu:

Disgrace: The majority of individuals, except those that are non Samoan felt non Samoans who already have a *malu* are a disgrace to Samoan Culture. These individuals felt offended and believed non Samoans should never have been allowed to receive the *malu*. There is a strong sense of ownership in that the *malu* is owned by Samoans for Samoans. Some non Samoan participants however believed that a non Samoan choosing to get a *malu* is an indication of how much value and respect they have for the Samoan culture.

‘Non Samoans regardless of how much they know and understand our culture should never be allowed to get a malu, its an insult to our culture and an insult to our people and fa’a Samoa’

While the majority of respondents are sad, angry and disappointed about non Samoans receiving the *malu*, there is also a large number of Samoan and part Samoan respondents that feel non Samoans wanting to get a *malu* should first undergo extensive consultations with the village chiefs to get consent and approval. This to some extent contradicts the strong views

that non Samoans should never be allowed to get a *malu*. The perception that one must experience and understand the Samoan way of life to warrant a *malu* suggests leniency towards non Samoans wanting to get a *malu* simply because they understand the Samoan culture and have provided some form of service to the village or Samoan community.

Angry and Sad: Almost all Samoan and part Samoan participants expressed anger, sadness and disappointment towards the fact that currently, anyone wanting to get a *malu* can get one provided they can afford to pay for it. While there are no set rules to prohibit the commercialisation of the *malu*, the concerns raised relate to the protection of an element that represents Samoan culture and identity.

“I am very angry and disgusted that the malu is tattooed on people that know nothing about the true meaning of the malu”

“The malu was traditionally precious, respected and treasured; it’s not for everyone. I am disappointed to see parts of our culture for sale and its sad that we can’t do anything to stop non Samoans from receiving the malu”

Fault of the Tattooists: While some recognise the tattooists’ need to earn a living and see the commercialisation of the *malu* a positive way to promote the uniqueness of Samoan culture, the majority of individuals felt the commercialisation of the *malu* is largely the fault of the tattooists. Many view tattooists as selfish and money driven individuals who treat traditional tattooing as a ‘get rich quick scheme’. The respondents at large observe tattooists as greedy business individuals and strongly feel the tattooists, in respect of Samoan culture should stop tattooing non Samoans the *malu*.

“What ever happened to the malu being reserved only for the daughters of the high chiefs?, I am sad the tufuga ta tatau have been blinded by their greed to see and decide what is best for our people and our culture”.

“Our culture is important, but tattooing anyone and everyone the malu has made our culture cheap”.

Neutral: There were a few that did not seem bothered by the notion of commercialisation. These individuals argued, the knowledge and skills of Samoan tattooing was not given to the people of Samoa at large but to specific families. On this note, the branches of the tattooing guild can tattoo whoever they wish. They also recognised the tufuga needed to support his family too meaning, commercialisation would offer financial stability and support for his family. Furthermore, these participants also felt, commercialisation of the *malu* is a good way to promote Samoa and Samoan culture internationally.

“We must remind ourselves that the world we live in is a cash economy world and the tufuga needs to eat too”

“The tattooist from the lines of Sa Su’a and Sa Tulouena should be able to tattoo whoever they wish, after all its was them that introduced tattooing to Samoa and to our people”.

Fault of the Samoan people: Several convey, the Samoans themselves are liable for the commercialisation of the *malu*. They believe the commercialisation of the *malu* was influenced by the growth in migrant Samoans living abroad that used the *malu* as a unique cultural identifier. These proud migrants wanted a mark to represent their cultural identity

attracting traditional Samoan tattooists to travel abroad to meet their demands. Dance groups and performance organisers were also to blame. The pressure to deliver an authentic Samoan experience through Samoan entertainment compelled these organisers to encourage female performers to get a *malu* to complete traditional *taupou* attire. Parents were also criticised for their contribution to the commercialisation of the *malu*. A few respondents believe the girls especially younger in age were burdened into getting a *malu* to satisfy the yearning of their parents.

“I know of a few girls who got their malu when they were still in college only because their parents wanted them to get one for family and village activities”

“These days, you don’t need to be a taupou to get a malu, if you are a Samoan and proud of your culture, then the malu is that lifetime representation of your identity”

“Tourists and visitors are intrigued by our culture especially our siva Samoa, they love our Samoan tatau and enjoy watching a performance or siva Samoa performed by a taupou who has a malu”

Exclusivity: Although some individuals blame the Samoan people for the commercialisation of the *malu*, all Samoan and part Samoan individuals viewed the commercialisation of the *malu* negatively when non Samoans are tattooed the *malu*. Full and part Samoans recognise the traditional reservation of the *malu* for daughters of the high chiefs no longer exists. They also observe the *malu* represents different things to different people. The commercialisation of the *malu* is perceived very sad, disappointing, irritating leaving many furious when non Samoans are tattooed the *malu*. This suggests that full and part Samoans somewhat indirectly accept the commercialisation of the *malu* and perceive commercialisation negatively when non Samoans are tattooed.

DISCUSSION

Participant responses shed light on various perspectives concerning the commercialisation of the *malu*. Many of the established themes from this paper resemble thoughts vigorously contested and debated upon on social media and public discussion forums. While majority of the respondents strongly claim ownership of the *malu* as belonging only to the Samoan people, (including part Samoans), this sense of ownership is flexible and somewhat contradicted. Currently, there are no rules or regulations that prohibit non Samoans from receiving a *malu*. Furthermore, there are no village rules that restrict a Samoan family from gifting the *malu* to a non Samoan as a sign of acknowledgement or appreciation of service. In this case, although the *malu* is rightfully perceived as something belonging only to Samoans (including part Samoans), the concept of ownership and ‘right’ to receive a *malu* is left to the discretion of Samoan families and village chiefs. It is through these personal or family orientated decisions that the transfer of ‘ownership’ is accepted if the *malu* is gifted as sign of acknowledgement. It also became clear that the traditional reservation of the *malu* for the daughters of high chiefs is no longer in place as the *malu* is increasingly recognised as a symbol of cultural identity rather than a representation of service or status.

Debates on social media expressed frustration, anger, sadness and disgrace towards tattooists and non Samoans receiving the *malu* and these emotions are clearly conveyed in this study. Conversely, this study pointed out an important perspective not noticeable on social media

debates and online discussion forums. This study also highlighted, the Samoan people themselves are also considered at fault for the commercialisation of the *malu*. The majority of participants believe, recognition and pride gained from affiliation with groups such as the Malofie Association, Cultural Dance groups, and the use of the *malu* as a marketing tool to promote Samoan Culture has intensified the commercialisation of the *malu*. The *malu* is therefore considered a prerequisite to group and association membership. Furthermore, participants also believe younger Samoan women are pressured to receive a *malu* to satisfy the yearning of their parents.

The findings in this study confirm the intensity of opposing views on the commercialisation of the *malu* to include non Samoans receiving the *malu*. The findings also indicate, the traditional meaning and significance of the *malu* still exist, however contemporary representations of the *malu* and its significance as a symbol of Samoan cultural identity is more significant. Although the reactions, thoughts and feelings of participants in this study mirror the perceptions noticeable on social media, this study highlights that ownership and exclusivity are open to interpretation and very much left at the discretion of tufuga ta tatau and the Samoan people.

Limitations of the Findings

Although the in-depth interviews captured the perceptions of Samoans, part Samoan and non Samoans living in Samoa, the selection criteria limited respondents to only those that could communicate and write in English. This excluded full Samoans living in the villages that would appear to have more knowledge and understanding of Samoan culture to include Samoan tattooing and the *malu* and as such, there is obviously a need for more investigation. The researcher did not have the skills and capabilities to conduct the in depth interviews in Samoan and chose to collect the data only in English. This introduces bias into the research. The researcher was primarily interested in exploring the views of the general public whose thoughts and opinions seem to be absent in current literature. The study excluded the views of academic scholars who have written extensively on Samoa, and the views of the traditional tattooists residing in Samoa. Future research is needed to capture other important views significant to the commercialisation of the *malu*.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this small-scale study reveal and confirm issues and perspectives debated and contested upon on social media and online discussion forums. This study also supports the findings by recent researchers that the contemporary meaning and significance of the *malu* these days is very different from its traditional meaning and representation. Some participants still believe the *malu* should be reserved for the daughters of high chiefs; however the majority of participants feel the *malu* is a significant cultural identifier. The majority of participants disputed the commercialisation of the *malu* when the recipient is non Samoan. They did not consider the commercialisation of the *malu* among Samoan or part Samoan recipients an issue of concern on the belief that the *malu* is owned by Samoa for the people of Samoa. Future studies are encouraged to include a larger sample and expand its scope to include a cross-cultural comparison. Although the views from tufuga ta tatau, and villiage chiefs is beyond the scope of this paper, further insights would provide richness to understanding other perceptions not explored in this study.

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