



Impact of perceived authenticity in micro-influencer marketing on purchasing intention in fitness sector: The mediation role of trust

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to examine the impact of perceived authenticity in Micro-influencer marketing on purchasing intention with the mediation role of trust in the fitness sector. This is an explanatory study and the primary data were collected through an online self-administered questionnaire. The sample consisted of 150 respondents who are already following micro-influencers in the fitness sector on social media platforms. Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling was performed with Smart-PLS to estimate the path coefficients and to test the hypotheses developed in the study. The study discovered that there is a direct impact of perceived authenticity on purchasing intention and the relationship is partially mediated by trust. Subsequently, the theoretical and practical implications of the study are discussed.

Keywords: *Micro-influencer marketing, perceived authenticity, purchasing intention, trust*

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1. Introduction

Most micro, small, and medium-sized businesses in Sri Lanka have begun to use social media as a platform to promote business with the emergence of social media applications by the general public. This has created a new market for business and has changed the traditional way of doing business including marketing activities. Hewage and Weerasekara (2020) emphasized that currently, 52% of marketing activities include sponsored content on social media, thus the influence of social media on consumer decisions is becoming significant. This influencer marketing uses

paid personalities for posting product-related information on social media (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), and it denotes a \$10 billion industry in 2020, especially in the B2C context (Haenlein et.al., 2020). Three categories of influencers can be distinguished based on the number of followers: Everyday influencers (those with more than 1000 followers), Premium influencers (those with between 10,000 and 100,000 followers), and A-list Influencers (more than 100 000 followers) (Bruns, 2018). The first two types are considered micro-influencers, while the third category is known as macro-influencers (Newman, 2016b). In particular, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram are the key social media sites where the current study focuses on fitness micro-influencers. The fitness sector is one of the rapidly growing sectors (Mulcahy & Parkinson, 2016) and fitness influencers can be classified into several niches like yoga, running, weightlifting, cross-fit, healthy lifestyles, weight loss, and more, as well as these influencers tend to endorse brands of sports, food & drink related to the health & wellness industry (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). Modern consumers, often look out for product and brand-related information and recommendations from trusted sources that can be easily and conveniently accessed (Landy, 2016).

1.1. Research Problem

‘Bruns-Siddiqui Intention-to-buy Model 2018’ was initiated by Bruns (2018) to identify the impact of influencer marketing on the purchase intention of generation Z (mid to late 1990s as starting birth years and the 2010s as ending birth years) in Ireland by considering the factors of trust and perceived authenticity. The model was developed based on the theoretical foundation of the original conceptual model introduced by Hajli (2014). Bruns (2018) recommends that testing this model in various cultures and industries is essential to validate the model. As such, the model was tested by a few researchers in different cultures based on different industries and generations (Abreu, 2019; Gautam, 2020; Mamhare & Mingyue, 2020). Abreu (2019) studied that perceived authenticity and trust in social media micro-influencers and their impact on the purchasing intention of millennials in Brazil based on the Apparel industry. Gautam (2020) tested the impact of influencer marketing on buying behavior of millennials in the Indian apparel industry. The same model was tested by Mamhare and Mingyue (2020) to

study the utilization of social media influencers for customer retention instead of purchase intention and this study has focused on both millennials and generation Z in China. Thus, the current study attempts to contribute to the theory by testing the model in the Sri Lankan context. Though some researchers have studied influencer marketing in Sri Lanka (Guruge, 2018; Lakmal, Hettiarachchi, & Anuranga, 2019) still much attention has not been given to empirical studies that follow the quantitative method. Though this is a new concept in Sri Lanka, most businesses have started to leverage influencers to support their business activities. Today, even SMEs have identified influencer marketing as cost-effective and very productive at communicating and promoting strategy (DailyFT, 2020). Thus, with the arising importance of influencer marketing, many influencer marketing agencies also have emerged to help both brands and influencers with their growth. As such, researchers identified the importance of examining the influencer marketing concept in the Sri Lankan context.

1.2. Research Questions

- Q1: What is the impact of perceived authenticity on consumers' purchasing intention in fitness sector?
- Q2: What is the impact of perceived authenticity on trust in the fitness sector?
- Q3: What is the impact of trust on consumers' purchasing intention in the fitness sector?
- Q4: Does trust mediate the relationship between perceived authenticity and purchase intention?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Micro-Influencers

Abidin (2016) defines influencers as individuals who are active on various types of social media and often concurrent on several platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and other professional/commercial bloggers. The term 'Micro-influencer' is referred to influencers who have a finite number of followers (Abidin, 2016; Bijen, 2017; Zietek, 2016). They

are the real individuals who act as everyday experts while having a higher reach than the average person (Berger & Group, 2016). Most researchers categorized the number of followers for Micro-influencers between 10,000 and 100,000 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020; Newman, 2016a; Westwood, 2018).

2.2. Perceived Authenticity

Authenticity can be referred to as the level of genuine social media influencers acting within their community and being relatable with their followers (Hamann, 2014). If influencers are sincere, open, and honest with their followers, then they are authentic (Glucksman, 2017) and they induce to disseminate their thoughts, opinions, and their styles to other people to create user-generated content (Mains, 2017).

2.3. Trust

Trust is the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trust, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 20). The majority of successful influencers have created a higher degree of trust with their audience in order to make the feel of the content feel more authentic and genuine, even though these influencers received some payment for the content that they sponsored (Woods, 2016). Therefore, the trust level between a follower and an influencer is raised when the post discloses whether it is sponsored or not (Dahlqvist & Preiksaite, 2018).

2.4. Purchase Intention

Consumer’s buying intentions comply with their behaviour, perception and attitude and it can be served as the best predictor of the actual purchasing behaviour of customers (Brown, Pope, & Voges, 2003). Thus, the possibility that the customer buying the offer under some given conditions can be considered as the purchase intention (Morwitz, Steckel, & Gupta, 2007). Consequently, it may be a great desire to purchase a product very shortly (Cheung & Thadani, 2017).

2.5. Research Hypotheses

Some researchers use the term credibility instead of authenticity (Sertoglu, Catli, & Korkmaz, 2014; Silvera & Austad, 2004). Silvera and Austad (2004) emphasized that, when consumers are perceived as an influencer is more credible, the purchasing intention of such consumers is higher. Thus, the perceived credibility of Instagram influencers positively correlated with their intention to buy (Sertoglu et al., 2014). According to Chen, Nguyen, Klaus, and Wu (2015), purchase intention is enhanced when the perceived authenticity of a recommendation by influencers via the public perception of proper intention and the moment of truth of reviewing a product.

The researcher who developed the research model called, ‘Bruns-Siddiqui intention-to-buy Model 2018’, found a positive correlation between perceived authenticity and the intention to buy (Bruns, 2018). The study emphasized that, if the influencer is not authentic, most people do not like to make a buying decision (Bruns, 2018). Furthermore, other researchers who followed the same model also agreed with this relationship (Abreu, 2019; Gautam, 2020). Thus, perceived authenticity represented a positive correlation with buying intention (Abreu, 2019). Moreover, Gautam (2020) found that there is a significant and positive relationship between perceived authenticity and purchasing intention.

H₁: There is a positive impact of perceived authenticity on consumers’ purchasing intention.

Although the original conceptual model (Hajli, 2014) did not test the relationship between perceived authenticity and trust, Bruns (2018) tested this and concluded that there is a link between perceived authenticity and trust. Then, people were more willing to build trust with influencers when they and their advertising messages were perceived as more authentic (Bruns, 2018). Consequently, there is a link between the individuals’ personal preferences toward posts and the content created by the influencer (Bruns, 2018). Furthermore, this study emphasized that not only the connection should be a positive one but also perceived authenticity can harm the trust when an influencer was not felt as authentic. Thus, influencers’

perceived authenticity is very important because only then trust can occur (Bruns, 2018). In addition, Abreu (2019) also found that trust is built on perceived authenticity and perceived authenticity is positively correlated with trust.

H₂: There is a positive impact of perceived authenticity on trust.

The original model also tested the relationship between these two factors and the study found that trust has been ensured to have a positive impact on purchasing intention (Hajli, 2014). Moreover, trust can be considered as the signifier that plays a significant role in observing the real behavior of consumers (Akroush & Al-Debei, 2015; Dost, Illyas, & Rehman, 2015). Nishi, Jannach, bin Ibrahim, Esfahani, and Ahmadi (2016) also found that there is a relationship between the trust of customers and buying intention in electronic commerce recommendation systems. Furthermore, micro-influencers who are active on social media have a more positive impact of trust in a particular brand on purchase intention than usual social media influencers (Bijen, 2017). Thus, Oliveira, Alhinho, Rita, and Dhillon (2017) conducted a particular study to explore the fact that most of the online purchases were largely performed based on a higher level of trust. The study results concluded that 57.5% of all online purchases can be represented in terms of overall trust in the business company (Oliveira et al., 2017).

Bruns (2018) tested this relationship and found that trust has a direct and positive impact on buying intention. Then, when people are believing the influencer, they are more willing to purchase a product that has been advertised by the influencer. When influencers are more trusted, people tend to adapt to trends more easily and products that have been promoted by those influencers (Bruns, 2018). Abreu (2019) also showed that people do not consider buying brands or products promoted by micro-influencers when they do not trust them and then trust is positively correlated to the intention to buy (Abreu, 2019).

Although Gautam (2020) also tested this relationship, the study results did not present a significant relationship between trust and intention to buy,

implying that trust does not have an impact on the intention to buy (Gautam, 2020).

H₃: There is a positive impact of trust on consumers' purchasing intention.

With Bruns (2018) started to test the relationship between perceived authenticity and trust, it leads to creating a mediate impact between perceived authenticity and purchasing intention on the trust that beyond a just direct impact of perceived authenticity on purchasing intention and direct impact of trust on purchasing intention. Therefore, Bruns (2018) found that both perceived authenticity and trust of micro-influencers have a significant influence on purchasing intention. Finally, the results of the study emphasize that perceived authenticity bear a major role and have a direct impact on purchase intention. In addition, perceived authenticity has a positive impact on trust as well. Thus, trust and its impact on purchase intention are also identified as contributory factors (Bruns, 2018).

However, the same relationship was tested by Abreu (2019) and the results of the study show that even though trust is constructed on perceived authenticity, both these constructs (perceived authenticity and trust) were showing a positive correlation with purchasing intention, and the size of the impact of trust on buying intention is stronger than the size of the impact of perceived authenticity because trust showed a higher value of correlation than perceived authenticity (Abreu, 2019).

H₄: Trust mediates the relationship between perceived authenticity and purchase intention.

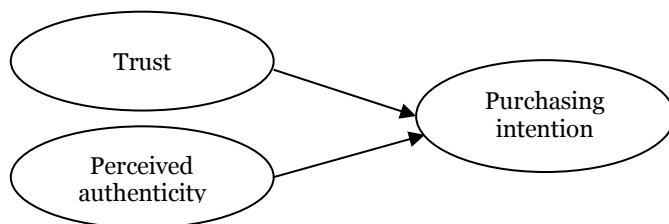


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

The researcher tested the pre-existing model (Bruns-Siddiqui Intention-to-buy Model 2018) by following the deductive reasoning approach with the positivist philosophy. The current study used the quantitative research method and cross-sectional design with an affordable and less time-consuming sampling technique namely, the convenience sampling technique that tries to grab a sample via using more convenient elements for the researcher (Malhotra, 2011).

The researcher distributed 250 self-administered questionnaires among the social media followers who are following Fitness micro-influencers on any social media platform mainly, via Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. However, only 150 questionnaires were effective indicating a 60% effective rate which is a satisfactory level (Baruch, 1999). The questionnaire was created in both English and Sinhala languages for more convenience of the respondents. As recommended by Su and Parham (2002) cultural translation, back-translation iterative process, and pre-test were done in the translation process. The questionnaire consisted of a demographical section and close-ended questions with 5 points Likert scale for measuring independent and dependent variables. Both the two independent variables (trust and perceived authenticity) and dependent variables were measured based on 5 points Likert scale which ranges from 1 = 'Strongly Disagree' to 5 = 'Strongly Agree'. Each independent variable was measured by 4 items using scales that have been developed previously (Abreu, 2019; Bruns, 2018; Hajli, 2014) while Purchase intention was measured by 5 items that were already developed by scholars (Abreu, 2019; Bruns, 2018).

4. Results

4.1. Demographic Analysis

According to Table 1, 88 respondents represented females out of 150 respondents. Thus, a proportion of 58.7% has been represented by females while another proportion of 41.3% of total respondents been represented by males. According to the table, most of the respondents were in the age range of 18-28 years representing 115 respondents out of 150 respondents. As a percentage, it is taken as 76.7%. Secondly, 18% of the respondents were

represented by the age range between 29-39 years. While 4.7% of the respondents represented the people who are in between 40-50 years, only 7% of the total respondents were above 50 years of age.

Table 1. Demographic Information

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender;		
Male	62	41.3
Female	88	58.7
Age;		
Between 18-28	115	76.7
Between 29-39	27	18.0
Between 40-50	7	4.7
Above 50	1	0.7
Social Media Platform;		
Instagram	37	24.7
Facebook	70	46.7
YouTube	38	25.3
Other	5	3.3
Total	150	100.0

The study's goal was to determine which social media network the respondents utilized most frequently to follow fitness micro-influencers. Facebook is the most popular social media platform in the chosen sample, as seen in Table 1. According to that, Facebook carried 70 respondents out of the total respondents. While it presents 46.7%, YouTube has obtained a second place as the most used social media platform. Then, 25.3% of the respondents engaged with YouTube, and 24.7% of the respondents used Instagram. In addition to these three social media platforms, other social media platforms have also been used by 3.3% of the respondents out of the total respondents.

4.2. Measurement model

According to Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2016), the reflective measurement model was assessed by reliability and validity. Indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity were examined to ensure that the analyzed figures are at a satisfactory level in order to evaluate the path coefficients of the structural model (Wong, 2016).

4.2.1. Indicator reliability

Indicator reliability was initially checked by the researcher to prove that the related indicators have much in common with the latent variable (Wong, 2016).

Table 2. Outer Loadings & Indicator reliability

Items	Outer loadings	Indicator reliability
Perceived authenticity;		
I trust the Influencers who have a brand's sponsorship.	0.799	0.638
I believe that Influencers' recommendations are trustworthy when they receive a sample product from a company to test/review it but are not being paid to promote it.	0.786	0.617
I believe that Influencers' recommendations are more trustworthy when they are not being sponsored by the brand they are recommending.	0.738	0.544
Trust;		
I think the Influencers who communicate with their followers, (for example by answering questions asked in the comments) are more trustworthy.	0.740	0.547
Based on my experience with Influencers I know they care about their followers.	0.778	0.605
Based on my experience with Influencers I know it is honest.	0.812	0.659
I believe that the Fitness Micro-Influencer that I follow is committed to telling the truth about products/brands even if he/she is sponsored by that brand.	0.810	0.656
Purchasing intention;		
My favorite Influencers are important to me when it comes to new trends/products.	0.828	0.685
I am very likely to buy a product that has been promoted by an Influencer on Social Media.	0.731	0.534
I have already bought a product which has been promoted on.	0.703	0.494
I have become aware of a new Fitness brand/product through the Micro-Influencer that I follow.	0.720	0.518
I have felt more confident about buying a Fitness product after seeing the Micro-Influencer that I follow recommending/using it.	0.847	0.717

Hair Jr et al. (2016) stated that the outer loading size can be considered indicator reliability and the value of the outer loading of all items should be

statistically significant while standardized outer loadings being 0.708 or higher.

Through examining the outer loadings of three variables in the study, the indicator of “I think that the advertising messages do not affect the overall credibility of the influencer” has to be removed from the construct of “Perceived authenticity” due to the outer loading of that indicator (-0.513) is smaller than the standardized threshold level of 0.4 (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013). All other indicators are remained in the model since any other indicator, not in the range between 0.4-0.7 and outer loadings of all other indicators are higher than 0.7. Indicator of “I have already bought a product which has been promoted on” is showing the indicator reliability value (0.494) a bit less than the significance level (0.5), the researcher has remained that indicator in the model since 0.70 is considered close enough to 0.708 as acceptable (Hair Jr et al., 2016).

4.2.2. Internal consistency reliability

When measuring the internal consistency reliability of the measurement model via Smart PLS, Composite reliability is considered rather than Cronbach’s alpha. According to Bagozzi and Yi (1988), a threshold level of 0.60 or higher is needed to ensure standardized composite reliability. Thus, Hair Jr et al. (2016) stated that the composite reliability values of 0.60 to 0.70 are acceptable in exploratory research while values between 0.70 and 0.90 can be considered at a satisfactory level for more advanced stages of research. Therefore, composite reliability for the variables in the current study is on a satisfactory level as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Cronbach’s Alpha & Composite Reliability

	Cronbach’s Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Perceived authenticity	0.669	0.818	0.660
Trust	0.793	0.866	0.617
Purchasing intention	0.826	0.877	0.590

4.2.3. Convergent Validity

Convergent validity refers to which an indicator positively correlated with alternative indicators of the same variable or the construct (Hair Jr et al., 2016). It explains the ability of the model to explain the indicator's variance (Wong, 2016). Moreover, convergent validity can be established by measuring the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the value should be 0.5 or higher to ensure convergent validity (Hair Jr et al., 2016). When considering AVE for the three constructs in the current study, Table 3 shows that the ability of the model to explain the variance of the indicator is enough and acceptable to ensure convergent validity.

4.2.4. Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity can be established when the construct is truly distinct from the other constructs (Hair Jr et al., 2016). The researcher has used two approaches to evaluate the Discriminant validity in the study the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT Ratio approach. As a traditional approach, in the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the square root of AVE compares with the Latent Variable Correlation (LVC). Subsequently, the square root of each AVE value of the construct should be higher than its largest correlation value with any other construct (Hair Jr et al., 2016). Table 4 shows that discriminant validity can be established along with this approach.

Table 4. Latent Variable Correlations (LVC)

Variables	Perceived authenticity	Trust	Purchasing intention
Perceived authenticity	0.775		
Trust	0.565	0.786	
Purchasing intention	0.653	0.691	0.768

The Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) has also been utilized to ensure the discriminant validity in PLS-SEM (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). According to Henseler et al. (2015), the constructs in the path model are conceptually very similar when the threshold level is 0.9. Then, the HTMT value above 0.9 has been suggested to a lack of discriminant validity. Therefore, since all values are below the threshold level (0.9), this approach is also supported for establishing discriminant validity (Table 5). Therefore,

the researcher was able to conclude that the current study has ensured discriminant validity successfully.

Table 5. HTMT Ratio

	Perceived authenticity	Purchasing intention
Trust	0.767	0.839
Purchasing intention	0.855	

4.3. Structural Model

The capability of the research model to predict the variance in the dependent variables is considered the structural model (Hair Jr et al., 2016). The structural model has been assessed by examining the major assessment criteria, such as coefficients of determination, magnitude, and significance of path coefficients, after reliability and validity have been verified.

4.3.1. Collinearity Assessment (VIF)

The structural model's possible issue with collinearity can be assessed by examining the value of the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). In the PLS-SEM context, a tolerance value should be 0.20 or higher and a VIF value should be 5 or below to prevent the collinearity issue, according to Hair et al. (2011). As a result, VIF values are determined by doing the following linear regression using SPSS software. Table 6 is a summary of the collinearity assessment. The researcher can infer that there is no issue with collinearity between independent variables because all VIF values are less than five and tolerance values are more than 0.20.

Table 6. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

Model	Collinearity Statistics		Collinearity Problem? (VIF>5?)
	Tolerance	VIF	
Perceived authenticity	0.681	1.469	No
Trust	0.681	1.469	No

4.3.2. Coefficient of Determination

The main component of structural model evaluation is the examination of the coefficient of determination (R^2). The threshold values of 0.25, 0.5,

and 0.7, according to Hair et al. (2013), are typically useful to interpret a weak, moderate, and strong coefficient of determination. As shown in Table 6, two constructs—perceived authenticity and trust—have combined to account for 57.9 percent (0.579) of the variance in consumers' intentions to buy. As a result, the R^2 of perceived authenticity on trust can be calculated at 31.9%. (0.319). As a result, perceived authenticity has a sufficient impact on trust, whereas perceived authenticity and trust both have a moderate to significant impact on the intentions to purchase.

Table 7. R-Square

Variables	R^2
Purchasing intention	0.579
Trust	0.319

4.3.3. Path Coefficients

Through the use of bootstrapping, path coefficients and associated t-values are investigated to ascertain the correlations between constructs. Every association in the structural model is significant, as shown in Table 8, ensuring that all p-values were 0.000. Thus, corresponding t-values of 5.735, 7.856, and 7.511 were observed. Because all p-values are lower than the significance level (0.05) and all t-values are higher than 1.96, all hypotheses can be accepted (Wong, 2016).

Perceived authenticity has a significant impact on trust (0.565) when the values of the path coefficients between the variables are examined, although trust's influence on purchase intent is only minor (0.473). Additionally, the direct impact of perceived authenticity on purchasing intention has drawn attention to a weak effect (0.386).

Table 8. Path Coefficients

	Path Coefficients	t-value	p-value
Perceived authenticity → Purchasing intention	0.386	5.735	0.000
Perceived authenticity → Trust	0.565	7.856	0.000
Trust → Purchasing intention	0.473	7.511	0.000

4.3.4. Mediation Effect

By taking into account both the direct and indirect effects on the path model, the influence of mediation can be quantified. The current study examined the direct effects of perceived authenticity on purchase intention (without the use of a mediator) as well as the indirect effects of perceived authenticity on purchasing intention via the trust-mediated mediation effect. Because the t statistic (5.410) is higher than 1.96 and the p-value (0.000) is lower than the significance level, it can be inferred from the PLS output (Table 8) that perceived authenticity has a direct impact on purchasing intention (0.05). In addition, because the t statistic (4.296) is higher than 1.96 and the p-value (0.000) is below 0.05 when evaluating the particular indirect effect, there is an indirect impact of perceived authenticity on purchase intention via the mediation effect from the trust. Because both the direct and indirect effects are substantial, trust has a partial mediating effect (Baron and Kenny, 1986).

Table 9. Mediation Analysis

		t-value	p-value
Direct effect without mediator	Perceived authenticity → Purchasing intention	5.410	0.000
Indirect effect with mediator	Perceived authenticity → Trust → Purchasing intention	4.296	0.000

4. Discussion

The current study focused on the impact of micro-influencer marketing in fitness. As such, two objectives were developed as to identify the impact of perceived authenticity on purchasing intention and the role of trust in the relationship between these two variables. To achieve the research objectives, four hypotheses were postulated based on existing literature and tested by partial least square structural modeling. The study confirms that there is an impact of perceived authenticity on purchasing intention and trust partially mediates the aforementioned relationship.

The idea of influencer marketing existed for years in both offline and online environments, even though the micro-influencer marketing notion is relatively new. Prior researchers have studied and repeatedly demonstrated the beneficial association between perceived authenticity/credibility of

influencers and purchasing intention (Chen et al., 2015; Sertoglu et al., 2014; Silvera & Austad, 2004). The researcher who created the conceptual model on which it is based has investigated this connection and discovered a favorable link between perceived authenticity and purchasing intent (Bruns, 2018). Additionally, other researchers who used the same model concurred that these two constructs have a positive and substantial association (Abreu, 2019; Gautam, 2020). Despite having been discovered in other nations before, the current study also establishes this association in the Sri Lankan setting. When perceived authenticity and trust were put to the test, Bruns (2018) discovered a strong correlation between the two concepts. According to Abreu (2019), perceived authenticity and trust are positively correlated. Trust is a foundational element of perceived authenticity. The results above are supported by the current study.

In studies based on many industries and nations, prior literature has demonstrated the beneficial association between consumers' trust and their inclination to purchase (Akroush & Al-Debei, 2015; Bijen, 2017; Dost et al., 2015; Nilashi et al., 2016; Oliveira et al., 2017). Additionally, the underlying conceptual model's original model investigated this link and discovered that trust had a favorable impact on consumers' intent to purchase (Hajli, 2014). Bruns (2018) established this connection by showing that trust has a direct and advantageous impact on purchasing intention. Additionally, Abreu (2019) found a favorable correlation between trust and purchase intention. This conclusion is supported by the current study when applied to Sri Lanka.

For the first time, Bruns (2018) tested the mediate impact of trust, between perceived authenticity and buying intention. According to Bruns (2018), perceived authenticity has played a major role and there was a positive and significant indirect effect of perceived authenticity (with the mediation role of trust) on purchasing intention. A scholar who tested the same relationship found that, even though trust is constructed on perceived authenticity and both perceived authenticity and trust were correlated as positively to buying intention, the size of the effect of trust on purchasing intention is higher than perceived authenticity because trust showed higher correlation value than perceived authenticity has (Abreu, 2019). There was a positive, specific indirect impact of perceived authenticity on purchasing

intention via the mediation effect from the trust. Therefore, the researcher discovered that there was both direct and indirect impact (with the mediation effect of trust) of perceived authenticity on purchasing intention. Although Bruns (2018) has emphasized perceived authenticity as the key factor that affects purchasing intention, the current study has shown that trust played a major role in the high path coefficient value rather than perceived authenticity. Then, the trust of fitness micro-influencers is affected strongly by consumers' purchasing intention in the Sri Lankan context. It may be due to the cultural and social background that exists in the Sri Lankan context. Sri Lankan consumers usually depend on trusted sources and it largely impacts their purchasing patterns and intention (Athapaththu & Kulathunga, 2018; Wijesundara, 2008). Especially, in the industries like Health and wellness or fitness, most things depend on the trust of such influencers or their advertising message or whatever they have promoted. Therefore, the trust might be the most influential factor in purchasing intention rather than the perceived authenticity of such micro-influencers.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Theoretical Implications

Since the idea of micro-influencer marketing is still somewhat new in Sri Lanka, there isn't much solid academic study on it. By observing the effect of perceived authenticity in Micro-influencer marketing on consumers' purchasing intention with the mediation role of trust in the context of Sri Lanka, the researcher has attempted to test the conceptual model that has previously been tested in other contexts and support the previous literature.

The confirmation of all proposed hypotheses is one of the main contributions of this study. It means that the conceptual model that has previously been tested in other countries is applicable as it is in the Sri Lankan context as well. Therefore, the research findings of the current study make a contribution to the literature regarding this particular area. Although the micro-influencer marketing concept is a very effective, cost-efficient and high engaging approach, it is a rather new marketing concept in the Sri Lankan context. So that, the knowledge created by this study supports the development of the micro-influencer marketing concept. Since this study has

quantitatively proven the impact of two affecting factors of micro-influencers on purchasing intention, the knowledge created from the current study is useful and important for future academic work in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the current study has succeeded to prove that the micro-influencer marketing concept can be utilized to influence customers' purchasing intention in relating to the Sri Lankan context. Additionally, the scale that was used to assess how both of the dimensions affected purchase intention was capable of meeting the requirements for indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. As a result, subsequent investigations can also use the same scale. By properly utilizing the research findings, this study may be applied to both undergraduate and graduate research since it creates more theoretical benefits for upcoming academics.

5.2. Managerial Implications

When considering managerial implications, influencer marketing can be explained as one of the best forms of digital marketing in terms of generating a high ROI (Landy, 2016). As Influencer Marketing Hub (2020) stated, for every dollar expended on influencer marketing, such brands can earn up to \$5.78 in return. Additionally, most companies that engage with influencer marketing concepts believe that it is an effective communication technique (Nielsen Catalina Solutions, 2016). When it comes to micro-influencers, can be viewed as relatable and engaged to their audience. The high engagement rates of these micro-influencers make it easier for companies to create specialized sponsorship with these influencers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020).

Furthermore, the results of the current study have demonstrated that micro-influencers influenced consumers' means to purchase. Six reasons why businesses should use these influencers can be outlined, especially because the current study focused on fitness micro-influencers. The emergence of several credible health and wellness influencers, practitioners moving to online healthcare, the ability to connect fitness influencers at scale, and strong ROI are all mentioned by Landy (2016) as reasons why influencers in the health and wellness sector are more trusted and qualified. People are also

more motivated to take action to improve their health. These factors allow managers in the relevant industry to include influencer marketing in their marketing strategies. Influencer marketing is currently a growing trend for businesses looking to engage with their clients in Sri Lanka as well. Companies should consider factors other than the number of followers when choosing the influencers who will be most effective and suited for promoting their brands. Micro-influencers can then be used to effectively influence a certain niche. Although recommendations from trusted sources are more effective, managers have previously faced certain difficulties as a result. In the modern world, Sri Lanka is a prime example of the social network period since it offers the chance to spread the electronic word of mouth by interacting with the right influencers rather than only watching and analyzing these interactions. Therefore, using the micro-influencer marketing concept, marketers in the Sri Lankan context have made two-way contact possible. Managers should focus more on the influencers' genuineness when creating marketing plans that use them. According to research, consumers' buy intentions will decrease if they believe influencers are not real or spread false information. As trust partially mediates the influence of authenticity on purchase intention, consumer trust is also important when building marketing strategies.

6. Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

The number of aspects connected to influencer marketing has been revealed by numerous conceptual types of research, but the current study was only able to examine the effects of two constructs (perceived authenticity & trust) on consumers' intentions to purchase. Future research can then include more micro-influencers that affect purchasing intention, expanding this conceptual model. Despite the fact that a number of elements or qualities have been identified by earlier researchers in various contexts, four traits are picked to suggest for exploration in future studies because they were associated with the Sri Lankan setting. The top four "REAL" attributes are Relatedness, Engagement, Authenticity, and Loyalty, according to a recent qualitative study carried out in Sri Lanka (Lakmal et al., 2019). As a result, the researcher suggests doing a quantitative study to determine how these additional factors—relatedness, engagement, and loyalty—affect consumers' willingness to buy in Sri Lanka. Additionally, factors like expertise,

attractiveness, and interaction can be tested (Guruge, 2018). The current study is restricted to concentrating just on three social media platforms that have been used by micro-influencers (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube). Future research can concentrate on other viral social media platforms run by similar micro-influencers to draw deeper insights. Due to time and financial restrictions, this study only used a quantitative approach to complete the research. As a result, to produce both general and focused results, future research can be carried out using both quantitative and qualitative methods. To yet, no concrete model has been developed to assess the efficiency of micro-influencers, though. Therefore, future research investigations should fill in this study vacuum.

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