



Influencer Marketing Strategies in Digital Media

A Case Study of Authenticity, Audience Alignment, and Professionalization in the Career of Ilya Varlamov

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Abstract:

This thesis critically examines how Ilya Varlamov, a prominent Russian influencer, navigates authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization in influencer marketing. Through a thematic analysis of interviews with Varlamov, his team, and industry experts, the study explores the interplay of these dimensions, highlighting both strategic successes and underlying tensions.

The findings reveal that while transparency and ideological consistency strengthen audience trust, they also limit brand partnerships. Data-driven strategies enhance engagement, yet algorithmic pressures shape content decisions. Professionalization enables scalability but introduces structural constraints that can distance influencers from their audiences.

By situating these insights within Parasocial Interaction Theory, the Source Credibility Model, and Two-Step Flow Theory, the study challenges assumptions about influencer marketing, particularly in non-Western contexts. It underscores the role of cultural, political, and platform dynamics in shaping influencer strategies, offering a nuanced perspective on the evolving digital media landscape.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, authenticity, audience alignment, professionalization, digital media strategies, Ilya Varlamov, case study

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and context

The rise of influencer marketing has transformed digital media and reshaped how brands connect with audiences. Unlike traditional marketing, which often relies on impersonal mass media and celebrity endorsements, influencer marketing capitalizes on the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of social media personalities. These individuals cultivate dedicated followings through consistent and engaging content on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, positioning themselves as relatable figures rather than distant celebrities (Abidin, 2016; Kapitan et al., 2021). Influencers act as intermediaries who convey brand messages in a more personal and engaging manner, blending personal narratives with commercial partnerships (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). This approach has fostered a multi-billion-dollar industry, projected to exceed \$24 billion globally by the end of 2024, driven by shifting audience preferences toward authenticity, trust, and direct engagement (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

However, while authenticity is often cited as a cornerstone of influencer success, it remains a highly contested and complex concept. Influencers must maintain a carefully curated balance between personal expression and financial sustainability, as frequent brand collaborations risk being perceived as inauthentic or overly commercialized (Audrezet et al., 2018). Research suggests that audiences are highly sensitive to perceived insincerity, and influencers who fail to maintain credibility can experience significant reputational damage (Moulard et al., 2014). This presents an inherent dilemma: how can influencers maintain an image of authenticity while engaging in commercial partnerships necessary for financial stability? Despite extensive research on influencer marketing, there is a gap in understanding how influencers navigate these competing demands in practice.

This study examines this question through the case study of Ilya Varlamov, one of the most influential bloggers in the Russian-speaking media landscape. A journalist, architect, and urbanist, Varlamov has built a loyal audience by addressing socially relevant and often controversial topics, including urban development, political issues, and social activism (Library of Congress, n.d.). Unlike lifestyle influencers who predominantly focus on

entertainment or consumer trends, Varlamov engages with substantive, issue-driven content, making his case particularly valuable for analyzing the role of authenticity in influencer marketing. His career illustrates the challenges and strategies of aligning personal values with commercial imperatives in a media environment shaped by political sensitivities and evolving audience expectations.

Beyond academic interest, this topic is personally relevant to me as I have worked with influencers for over seven years, managing advertising projects and witnessing firsthand the trade-offs influencers must make between authenticity and commercialization. Many influencers face situations where they must accept compromises due to financial necessity, navigating the tension between staying true to their values and sustaining their careers. My professional experience, combined with direct access to Varlamov and his team, provides unique insights into this issue, allowing for an empirical examination of how influencers balance personal integrity with financial sustainability.

By focusing on authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization, this thesis seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on influencer marketing, offering both theoretical insights and practical applications. It aims to bridge the gap between scholarly discussions on authenticity and the real-world challenges influencers face, using Varlamov's career as a lens to explore how digital creators sustain credibility while engaging in brand collaborations. The following chapters will further contextualize these dynamics through existing literature, qualitative research, and empirical analysis.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how influencers navigate the tension between authenticity and commercialization, using the case of Ilya Varlamov to explore the strategies that enable long-term success in influencer marketing. While extensive research highlights the role of authenticity in building audience trust, fewer studies have explored the practical challenges influencers face in maintaining credibility while monetizing their content. This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization intersect to shape an influencer's career trajectory.

To achieve this, the thesis focuses on the following key objectives:

1. **Authenticity:** To investigate how Varlamov cultivates and maintains authenticity in his influencer career, particularly in balancing personal values with commercial partnerships. This dimension explores the role of transparency, credibility, and strategic brand alignment in fostering audience trust.
2. **Audience Alignment:** To analyze how Varlamov tailors his content to meet audience expectations while maintaining creative autonomy. This dimension examines the role of data-driven decision-making, cross-platform strategies, and audience segmentation in sustaining engagement.
3. **Professionalization:** To assess how the professionalization of Varlamov's operations including the role of agencies and structured workflows facilitates scalability, brand collaboration, and content consistency. This dimension explores how influencers integrate business-oriented strategies while retaining authenticity.

By addressing these objectives, this study aims to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of influencer marketing. Theoretically, it expands the discourse on authenticity labor and influencer-follower congruence by offering empirical insights into how influencers maintain trust while engaging in commercial activities. Practically, it offers valuable lessons for influencers, marketing professionals, and agencies seeking to develop sustainable influencer-brand collaborations without compromising credibility.

1.3 Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the following research questions are formulated:

1. **How does authenticity shape Varlamov's approach to influencer marketing, and what strategies does he employ to maintain audience trust?**

This question explores how Varlamov navigates the complexities of sponsored content while staying true to his voice and values, drawing on insights from interviews and literature on authenticity in influencer marketing.

2. **Which strategies does Varlamov use to align his content with audience interests, and how do these strategies influence audience engagement and brand partnerships?**

This question investigates audience engagement theories, particularly influencer-follower congruence, using evidence from interviews and research on influencer-audience dynamics.

3. **How has professionalization shaped Varlamov's career as an influencer, and what role do intermediaries play in structuring his brand collaborations?**

This question examines the contributions of agencies and intermediaries in professionalizing influencers, leveraging literature on influencer marketing and insights from Iulian Kheirbeik, Chief Commercial Officer at Avtorsiye Media.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into the following chapters, each contributing to the exploration of authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization in influencer marketing, as outlined in the research objectives and questions:

- **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of the research topic, purpose, objectives, and structure of the thesis. It introduces the concepts of authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization as key dimensions of influencer marketing, framing their relevance to the case of Ilya Varlamov.

- **Chapter 2: Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

This chapter examines existing research on influencer marketing, focusing on authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization. Foundational theories, including the Source Credibility Model, Two-Step Flow Theory, and influencer-follower congruence, are discussed to establish a theoretical framework for analyzing Varlamov's strategies. This chapter directly supports the investigation of how influencers maintain audience trust, align content with follower interests, and navigate professionalization in their careers.

- **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter outlines the qualitative research design and data collection methods, which include a literature review and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in Varlamov's professional network: Ilya Varlamov, Maya Volf-Kats (YouTube Channel Director), and Iulian Kheirbeik (Chief Commercial Officer at Avtorsiye Media). The chapter explains how the methodology is tailored to address the research questions concerning authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization.

- **Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis**

This chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis of interview data, integrating these findings with theoretical perspectives. It explores how Varlamov balances authenticity with commercialization, aligns his content with audience values, and leverages professionalization to sustain his career. The findings address the research questions by providing detailed insights into Varlamov's strategies.

• **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This chapter situates the findings within the broader context of existing literature, highlighting both consistencies and unique contributions. It discusses how Varlamov's strategies exemplify or challenge established theories of influencer marketing, offering implications for both theory and practice. This chapter also evaluates the limitations of the study and suggests areas for future research.

• **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

This chapter synthesizes the main findings, emphasizing the broader transformations shaping digital influence today. It reflects on the implications for content creators, brands, and audiences, discussing how the institutionalization of influencer marketing affects authenticity, content diversity, and professionalization. Finally, it outlines future research directions, encouraging scholars and industry practitioners to critically engage with the evolving nature of influencer marketing.

Each chapter is designed to build upon the previous one, leading to a comprehensive analysis of Ilya Varlamov's influencer marketing strategies. Through a combination of theoretical perspectives and practical insights from the interviews, this thesis aims to contribute to the growing body of research on influencer marketing, providing valuable lessons for both scholars and practitioners.

2 Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Influencer marketing has emerged as one of the most impactful strategies in digital media, enabling brands to connect with audiences through trusted personalities. While extensively studied, the nuances of how influencers navigate critical dimensions like authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization remain areas ripe for further exploration. These factors are vital for understanding both the strategic effectiveness of influencer marketing and its ethical implications. This chapter synthesizes key themes and theoretical frameworks that underpin influencer credibility and audience engagement, laying the groundwork for analyzing Ilya Varlamov's strategies and their broader significance.

2.1 The Evolution of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has undergone a remarkable transformation, evolving from casual endorsements by early bloggers to a professionalized, data-driven industry. Initially, influencers were individuals who shared content centered on niche interests, building trust and connection with small but loyal audiences. With the advent of platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, influencers gained unprecedented reach, leveraging their credibility to collaborate with brands (Vidani & Das, 2021).

By 2024, global spending on influencer marketing is projected to surpass \$24 billion, underscoring the field's growing importance within advertising (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). This rapid growth reflects a broader shift in consumer behavior: audiences now gravitate toward relatable, "authentic" endorsements rather than traditional celebrity advertisements. Unlike conventional media figures, influencers blend personal narratives with promotional messaging, fostering stronger emotional connections with their followers (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017).

The increasing demand for authenticity is a defining trend in modern influencer marketing. The Influencer Marketing Hub (2024) emphasizes that transparency and sincerity have become critical metrics for campaign success. Influencers who effectively balance personal expression with brand partnerships often achieve higher engagement rates and sustained audience trust. Studies, such as those by Jun and Yi (2023), further emphasize the role of interactive communication in fostering loyalty, as it enhances emotional connections between influencers and their audiences. As audiences become more discerning, strategic collaborations that align with an influencer's identity and values are pivotal for maintaining credibility.

Simultaneously, the professionalization of influencer marketing reflects its maturation as an industry. Structured partnerships, often facilitated by agencies and intermediaries, have introduced a level of standardization and scalability. These entities handle crucial functions such as contract negotiations, performance analytics, and campaign management. This evolution underscores a growing reliance on data-driven approaches to measure campaign effectiveness through engagement metrics, conversion rates, and audience insights (Vidani & Das, 2021; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024).

However, professionalization presents challenges, particularly in balancing structured processes with the spontaneity and relatability that audiences value in influencers. As influencer marketing becomes increasingly data-driven, the tension between maintaining authenticity and meeting commercial objectives has emerged as a critical area of focus in both academic and industry discourse.

2.2 Key Concepts in Influencer Marketing

2.2.1 Authenticity

Authenticity is widely regarded as a cornerstone of influencer marketing, playing a crucial role in fostering trust, loyalty, and long-term audience engagement. It encompasses an influencer's ability to align their personal values with their content, avoiding overtly commercialized messaging that may alienate followers. Audrezet et al. (2018) introduce the concept of "authenticity labor," which refers to the strategic efforts influencers make to cultivate and sustain a genuine image. These efforts often include maintaining consistency in tone, transparently sharing personal experiences, and selectively endorsing brands that align with their values.

Transparency is a critical element of authenticity. Influencers who openly acknowledge mistakes and remain candid about their partnerships enhance their credibility, as followers perceive them as relatable and trustworthy (Kapitan et al., 2021). Conversely, studies emphasize that perceived insincerity, such as endorsing brands misaligned with the influencer's values or engaging in excessive promotion, can erode audience trust and harm the reputations of both the influencer and the associated brand (Moulard et al., 2014).

As audiences become increasingly adept at detecting inauthentic behavior, the challenge for influencers lies in balancing personal expression with the demands of commercial partnerships. Abidin (2016) argues that maintaining authenticity involves more than appearing genuine; it requires influencers to consistently align their messaging with their established personal identity, fostering a sustainable, trust-based relationship with their followers.

In this thesis, I adopt the following preliminary definition: Influencer authenticity is the degree to which followers infer that influencers create content on the basis of intrinsic and self-

gratifying motivations (Audrezet et al., 2020; Jun & Yi, 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2021; Moulard et al., 2016). However, authenticity in influencer marketing extends beyond a fixed theoretical concept; it is a dynamic process of maintaining credibility and audience trust while engaging in commercial partnerships. It is shaped by an influencer's ability to align their personal values, content strategy, and audience expectations while transparently managing brand collaborations. Authenticity is neither absolute nor static; rather, it requires ongoing negotiation between personal expression and professional obligations. In practice, it is reinforced through consistent self-presentation, selective brand partnerships, and transparent communication about sponsorships, ensuring that promotional content remains congruent with the influencer's established identity.

2.2.2 Audience Alignment and Influencer-Follower Congruence

Audience alignment, often conceptualized as influencer-follower congruence, is a critical factor in fostering trust, engagement, and loyalty within influencer marketing. Influencer-follower congruence refers to the extent to which an influencer's identity, values, and content resonate with the expectations and interests of their audience. Research by Venciute et al. (2023) emphasizes that such alignment strengthens trust-based relationships, making influencers more credible and effective communicators. Similarly, Jun & Yi (2023) argue that congruence enhances emotional engagement and loyalty, as followers are more likely to trust influencers whose values and messaging align with their own self-concept.

Within niche communities, audience alignment plays an even more significant role. When influencers are perceived as relatable advocates for their audience's values and lifestyles, they cultivate deeper, more meaningful connections. Lim et al. (2017) and Jun & Yi (2023) highlight that congruence not only enhances audience loyalty but also solidifies the influencer's role as a trusted voice, distinct from overtly commercial entities.

Furthermore, congruence amplifies the perceived authenticity of endorsements. Audiences are more likely to trust recommendations from influencers whose partnerships align with their established identity and values. This alignment mitigates skepticism surrounding commercial collaborations, ensuring that endorsements are perceived as sincere and relevant rather than purely transactional.

2.2.3 Professionalization and the Role of Intermediaries

The professionalization of influencer marketing has fundamentally reshaped influencer-brand relationships, introducing structured dynamics through the involvement of agencies, platforms, and advanced technological tools. These intermediaries formalize partnerships by offering scalable and efficient approaches to campaign management, bridging the gap between influencers and brands while ensuring accountability and brand safety (Stoldt et al., 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019). This evolution has made influencer marketing a reliable and data-driven avenue for businesses (Vidani & Das, 2021).

A cornerstone of professionalization is the integration of advanced analytics tools, such as Instagram Insights and YouTube Analytics, which provide detailed metrics on engagement rates, audience demographics, and conversion performance (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). These data-driven insights allow brands to assess influencer effectiveness with precision, aligning campaign objectives with measurable outcomes and optimizing return on investment (Abidin, 2016).

However, professionalization also presents challenges, particularly in balancing structured workflows with the authenticity that audiences value. Influencers must navigate the tension between adhering to formal requirements and maintaining a personal brand that resonates with their audience. Research emphasizes that collaborations rooted in shared values, where influencers align with brands that reflect their identity, are more likely to sustain audience trust, even within professionalized frameworks (Audrezet et al., 2018; Kapitan et al., 2021).

The interplay between professionalization, audience alignment, and authenticity underpins the success of influencer marketing. Together, these principles shape the trust and engagement essential for sustained operational success. The next section introduces theoretical frameworks that further illuminate the mechanisms through which influencers, such as Ilya Varlamov, achieve credibility and loyalty in the professionalized digital landscape.

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks

2.3.1 Source Credibility Model

The Source Credibility Model, developed by Ohanian (1990), posits that the effectiveness of a message is significantly influenced by the perceived credibility of its source. Building on earlier work by Hovland and Weiss (1951), this model identifies three key dimensions of credibility: trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. Trustworthiness refers to the perceived honesty and integrity of the source, expertise denotes the knowledge and skill associated with the source, and attractiveness encompasses not only physical appeal but also likability and relatability, which contribute to the source's ability to persuade (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

In influencer marketing, these dimensions play a crucial role in shaping audience perceptions of authenticity and trust. Studies by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) highlight that influencers perceived as trustworthy and knowledgeable are more effective in fostering audience engagement and driving purchasing decisions. Furthermore, influencers who align their content with their followers' values and expectations enhance their perceived credibility, thereby solidifying trust-based relationships (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

The importance of trustworthiness is particularly evident in the context of sponsored content. As highlighted by Lim et al. (2017), transparency in disclosing brand partnerships can mitigate skepticism and reinforce the audience's trust in the influencer's recommendations. Expertise, meanwhile, strengthens an influencer's authority, particularly when they address topics in which they are perceived as knowledgeable. For instance, influencers with demonstrated expertise in niche areas, such as urban development or environmental advocacy, often enjoy heightened credibility and influence within those domains (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

The Source Credibility Model has also been used to examine the role of attractiveness in enhancing relatability and audience engagement. While physical appeal may play a role, modern applications of the model emphasize likability and emotional connection as critical factors. Research suggests that influencers who demonstrate relatability and emotional resonance with their audiences are more effective in establishing long-term loyalty (Lou &

Yuan, 2019). This underscores the multifaceted nature of attractiveness in the digital media context, where personal connections often outweigh superficial attributes.

By applying the Source Credibility Model, this thesis explores how these dimensions, trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, interact to shape the effectiveness of influencers like Ilya Varlamov. This framework provides valuable insights into the mechanisms through which influencers build and sustain audience trust while navigating commercial collaborations. Understanding these dynamics offers a foundation for analyzing how influencers balance authenticity and professionalization in the evolving landscape of digital media.

2.3.2 Two-Step Flow Theory

The Two-Step Flow Theory, introduced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), emphasizes the pivotal role of opinion leaders in shaping public discourse. According to the theory, mass media messages do not directly influence audiences but instead reach them indirectly through opinion leaders who interpret, filter, and personalize the information before relaying it to their followers. This mediation process makes the message more accessible and relatable, enhancing its impact (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). The theory highlights the importance of trusted intermediaries whose credibility and alignment with audience values play a crucial role in determining how messages are received and acted upon (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009).

In the context of influencer marketing, the Two-Step Flow Theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how influencers act as intermediaries between brands and audiences. Influencers serve as modern opinion leaders who reinterpret brand messages through their own unique lens, making them more engaging and relatable to their followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This intermediary role is particularly relevant in digital spaces, where influencers leverage their credibility and close connections with audiences to amplify brand messages while ensuring they resonate with their community's expectations and values (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Recent studies have explored the implications of the Two-Step Flow Theory in digital media environments, where influencers operate as key opinion leaders across multiple platforms. Research by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) underscores the importance of influencers'

credibility in determining the effectiveness of their endorsements, aligning with the theory's emphasis on trusted intermediaries. Similarly, Chung and Cho (2017) note that influencers enhance message impact by creating a sense of intimacy and relatability, further solidifying their role as opinion leaders.

This thesis integrates the Two-Step Flow Theory to analyze how influencers, such as Ilya Varlamov, mediate brand messages and broader social discourses. As an opinion leader, Varlamov filters and contextualizes complex information for his audience, aligning it with socially relevant discussions and audience values. By applying this theoretical lens, the study will uncover the mechanisms through which influencers balance their role in shaping public opinion with the commercial demands of brand partnerships. This dual responsibility underscores the nuanced influence of opinion leaders in the contemporary digital media landscape, where their credibility and authenticity are critical for maintaining audience trust and engagement (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009).

2.3.3 Influencer-Follower Congruence

Influencer-follower congruence refers to the degree of alignment between an influencer's identity, values, and lifestyle with the self-concept and interests of their audience. This alignment plays a pivotal role in fostering trust, engagement, and loyalty within influencer marketing. Research emphasizes that when followers perceive an influencer as an authentic reflection of their own values, they are more likely to trust the influencer's recommendations, enhancing both the credibility and effectiveness of the influencer's endorsements (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Such congruence strengthens the perceived authenticity of the influencer, mitigating skepticism about their motives and increasing the likelihood of positive audience engagement.

Studies by Venciute et al. (2023) highlight the critical role of congruence in building trust and influencing purchasing behavior. Their findings indicate that congruence is particularly significant when followers closely identify with the influencer's values and lifestyle choices. In such cases, followers view the influencer as a trusted advocate who genuinely understands and represents their interests. Similarly, Lim et al. (2017) argue that alignment between influencers and their followers not only enhances loyalty but also positions influencers as credible and relatable intermediaries, distinct from overtly commercial entities.

The concept of influencer-follower congruence also intersects with theories of authenticity and parasocial interaction. As noted by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), congruence amplifies the perceived genuineness of endorsements, ensuring that promotional content resonates as sincere and relevant rather than transactional. This alignment creates a sense of shared identity between the influencer and their audience, fostering deeper emotional connections that are central to sustained trust and loyalty.

From a theoretical perspective, congruence aligns with the principles of the Source Credibility Model, particularly trustworthiness and relatability. When influencers align their brand collaborations with their established identity, they reinforce these credibility factors, enhancing the effectiveness of their endorsements (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Additionally, congruence contributes to the development of parasocial relationships by creating a sense of familiarity and emotional closeness, further solidifying the influencer's role as a trusted figure (Chung & Cho, 2017).

This framework will be applied to analyze how influencer-follower congruence has shaped Varlamov's career, with a focus on how his alignment with his audience's values and self-concept has driven both brand partnership success and audience engagement. By examining the mechanisms of congruence in the context of digital media, this thesis will provide insights into how influencers like Varlamov leverage shared identity and values to sustain long-term trust and loyalty in a competitive and evolving influencer marketing landscape.

This framework will be applied to analyze how audience alignment and influencer-follower congruence have shaped Varlamov's career, assessing the extent to which these factors contribute to his success in both brand partnerships and audience engagement. Understanding how Varlamov's identity aligns with his audience's self-concept offers valuable insights into the mechanisms that drive sustained influencer-follower relationships in the context of digital media (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lim et al., 2017).

2.3.4 Parasocial Interaction Theory

Parasocial Interaction Theory, introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), explains how audiences form one-sided, seemingly personal relationships with media figures, creating a sense of

familiarity and emotional closeness. These relationships are particularly relevant in the context of influencer marketing, where followers often perceive influencers as “friends” or trusted individuals within their social circles. Such parasocial bonds enhance the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of influencers, making audiences more receptive to their recommendations, especially when they share personal narratives or relatable experiences (Chung & Cho, 2017).

In modern digital media, parasocial interactions have evolved beyond passive engagement to include active participation, with influencers fostering two-way communication through comment sections, live streams, and other interactive platforms (Venciute et al., 2023). This shift highlights the dynamic nature of parasocial relationships, where influencers cultivate a sense of community and mutual involvement, thereby deepening audience trust and loyalty.

Chung and Cho (2017) emphasize that parasocial interactions not only foster loyalty but also enhance the perceived genuineness of influencers’ content. Audiences who feel an emotional connection with influencers are more likely to trust their recommendations and view their endorsements as authentic rather than purely commercial. However, maintaining this trust requires a consistent balance between personal storytelling and promotional activities to avoid perceptions of inauthenticity.

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to understanding how influencers navigate the tension between commercial objectives and audience engagement. Parasocial Interaction Theory provides a lens through which to examine how influencers establish and sustain trust-based relationships, especially in contexts where authenticity is critical.

2.4 Summary and Implications for the Study

This chapter has outlined the evolution of influencer marketing, emphasizing the critical roles of authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization in shaping successful influencer strategies. By examining these interconnected concepts and applying theoretical frameworks such as the Source Credibility Model, Two-Step Flow Theory, Influencer-Follower Congruence, and Parasocial Interaction Theory, it has established a robust foundation for analyzing how influencers build trust, foster audience engagement, and balance personal values with commercial objectives.

This theoretical groundwork informs the subsequent analysis, which will explore how Varlamov's strategies address the challenges of maintaining audience trust while navigating the professionalized landscape of influencer marketing

2.5 Implications and Research Contributions

The reviewed literature provides valuable insights into influencer marketing but reveals several critical gaps that necessitate further exploration, particularly in contexts like Ilya Varlamov's career.

2.5.1 Identified Gaps

First, much of the existing research focuses predominantly on influencers in lifestyle, fashion, and beauty industries, with limited attention paid to influencers engaged in socially and politically charged topics. Studies such as those by Abidin (2016) and Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) extensively document lifestyle influencers, but this emphasis overlooks the unique challenges faced by individuals like Varlamov, who operate in high-stakes, ideologically complex environments. Understanding how these influencers maintain credibility while navigating brand partnerships remains underexplored.

Second, the literature is heavily Western-centric, focusing on influencers in cultural and economic contexts distinct from regions like Russia. For example, research by Kapitan et al. (2021) and Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) examines Western influencer dynamics but does not account for the cultural, political, and economic factors shaping influencer strategies in non-Western contexts. This lack of contextual diversity highlights the need for studies addressing how influencers adapt their approaches to align with unique local conditions.

2.5.2 Research Contributions

This thesis addresses the identified gaps by presenting a culturally specific case study that examines the interplay between authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization within the Russian media landscape. By focusing on the career of Ilya Varlamov, this study provides valuable insights into how influencers navigate complex and dynamic environments while maintaining their credibility and audience trust.

One key contribution of this research is its exploration of how influencers balance controversial content with commercial viability. Few studies have examined how influencers manage sensitive or ideologically charged topics while sustaining successful brand partnerships. Varlamov's career exemplifies how personal authenticity and professionalization can coexist, offering actionable strategies for influencers operating in similarly challenging contexts.

Another significant contribution lies in the integration of professionalization and authenticity. While existing research has extensively documented the professionalization of influencer marketing (Stoldt et al., 2019), its nuanced impact on authenticity remains underexplored. Through an analysis of Varlamov's collaborations with agencies, this thesis highlights how structured workflows and professional support can enhance an influencer's credibility rather than compromise it, demonstrating that operational efficiency and trustworthiness are not mutually exclusive.

By addressing these critical aspects, the study broadens the understanding of influencer marketing in culturally specific contexts and provides a practical framework for navigating the balance between personal values and commercial objectives.

2.5.3 Contrasting Perspectives

In addition to addressing gaps in the literature, this thesis engages with contrasting perspectives to provide a nuanced understanding of influencer marketing. A central debate in the field concerns the tension between authenticity and commercialization. According to Audrezet et al. (2018), excessive commercialization can undermine authenticity, leading to diminished trust among audiences. In contrast, Kapitan et al. (2021) argue that value-driven collaborations, where influencers align their partnerships with personal values, can help preserve trust. Varlamov's approach to brand partnerships exemplifies this balance; by carefully selecting collaborations that align with his social and personal values, he demonstrates how authenticity can be maintained while navigating commercial pressures. This strategic alignment not only reinforces his credibility but also highlights how influencers can integrate personal integrity into their professional decisions.

Another evolving perspective in the literature concerns parasocial relationships. Traditionally conceptualized as unidirectional connections, where audiences passively engage with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956), these relationships have been reconceptualized in recent studies as participatory and dynamic. Research by Chung and Cho (2017) and Venciute et al. (2023) emphasizes the interactive nature of modern parasocial relationships, where influencers actively engage with their audiences to foster deeper connections. Varlamov's interactive engagement style reflects this shift, as he frequently interacts with his followers through comment sections and live discussions, creating a sense of community and mutual involvement. This participatory dynamic enhances audience trust and loyalty, offering insights into how influencers can deepen their impact by fostering more active connections.

By engaging with these contrasting perspectives, this study extends the scope of existing research on influencer marketing. It sheds light on how influencers, particularly in culturally and ideologically specific contexts like Varlamov's, can sustain credibility and trust while navigating commercial objectives. These insights underscore the importance of examining the interplay of cultural, ideological, and professional factors in shaping influencer strategies, offering valuable lessons for academics and practitioners alike.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Approach: Qualitative Analysis

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the interplay between authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization in influencer marketing, with a focus on Ilya Varlamov's career. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring phenomena like authenticity and audience alignment, as it captures the nuanced and contextualized experiences of individuals in their professional environments. By prioritizing depth over breadth, this approach allows for an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena through the perspectives of those directly involved.

The primary data collection method consists of semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders in Varlamov's professional network, including Chief Commercial Officer of Avtorskiye Media, YouTube Channel Director, and Varlamov himself. These interviews provide rich, firsthand insights into the strategies and challenges associated with managing an

influencer career, offering nuanced perspectives on maintaining authenticity and audience trust while engaging in brand collaborations.

The interview data is analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that identifies, organizes, and interprets patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allows the study to uncover key insights into Varlamov's strategies, focusing on recurring themes such as the tension between authenticity and commercialization, audience alignment practices, and the role of professional intermediaries.

A comprehensive literature review complements the qualitative data by situating the findings within established theoretical frameworks and broader trends in influencer marketing. Foundational theories such as the Source Credibility Model, Two-Step Flow Theory, and Parasocial Interaction Theory provide the analytical lens for interpreting the interview data, enhancing the study's depth and contextual rigor.

By focusing on qualitative analysis and thematic interpretation, this study ensures a detailed examination of stakeholder perspectives while connecting these findings to wider theoretical and practical considerations. This approach allows for a robust exploration of Varlamov's influencer marketing strategies and contributes to a deeper understanding of how authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization intersect in the broader field of influencer marketing.

3.2 Data Collection: In-Depth Interviews

3.2.1 Role of Literature in the Theoretical Framework

While this study is primarily based on qualitative data from in-depth interviews, existing literature provides the theoretical foundation for analyzing key dimensions of influencer marketing. The literature review contextualizes core themes such as authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization, ensuring that the empirical findings are situated within established academic and industry discussions.

Rather than serving as a standalone research method, the theoretical framework acts as a conceptual guide, helping to interpret the strategies and challenges identified in the interviews.

Prior research on influencer credibility, audience engagement, and professionalization offers insights that complement the primary data collected. Additionally, industry reports highlight the increasing formalization of influencer marketing, reinforcing the relevance of structured, data-driven approaches.

By integrating these perspectives, this study aligns empirical findings with broader theoretical discourse, contributing to a deeper understanding of how influencers navigate authenticity, audience expectations, and professionalization in a commercialized digital landscape.

3.2.2 In-Depth Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key figures from Varlamov's professional network, offering valuable insights into the strategies and challenges involved in managing an influencer's brand and audience. Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to explore specific themes in depth while maintaining enough structure to ensure comparability across participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Specifically, I followed the seven steps outlined in *Doing Interviews: Thematizing, Designing, Interviewing, Transcribing, Analyzing, Verifying, and Reporting*. This structured approach ensured methodological rigor and consistency throughout the interview process.

Participants were selected based on their significant roles in Varlamov's career and their ability to offer diverse perspectives on the research themes. A list of seven potential participants was compiled, including Ilya Varlamov, the central figure of this study. Ultimately, I selected Iulian Kheirbeik, the Chief Commercial Officer of Avtorskiye Media, and Maya Volf-Kats, the Director of YouTube Operations, as key participants. I also intended to interview Ekaterina Patyulina, founder of Avtorskiye Media, but scheduling conflicts prevented this.

One of the interviews was conducted online via Zoom due to Iulian Kheirbeik's location in Boston, United States. In-person interviews were prioritized whenever possible and were successfully conducted with Ilya Varlamov and Maya Volf-Kats in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

The interviews, conducted in Russian, were transcribed and translated into English to ensure accuracy and accessibility for analysis. The semi-structured format enabled a rich exploration

of topics such as the interplay between authenticity and commercial partnerships, audience alignment strategies, and the influence of professional intermediaries, all while aligning with the study's primary objectives.

3.3 Interview Participants

The participants for this study were carefully selected based on their significant roles in Varlamov's influencer activities and their ability to provide diverse perspectives on his brand strategy. Each participant brings unique insights into the interplay of authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization in influencer marketing:

The participants for this study were carefully selected based on their significant roles in Varlamov's influencer activities and their ability to provide diverse perspectives on his brand strategy. Each participant brings unique insights into the interplay of authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization in influencer marketing:

- **Ilya Varlamov:** As the central figure of this study, Varlamov provides a firsthand perspective on his strategies for content curation, audience engagement, and navigating brand collaborations. His reflections are crucial for understanding how he maintains authenticity while balancing the commercial demands of influencer marketing. Varlamov's decisions, such as rejecting certain sponsorships to align with his values, illustrate the tension between authenticity and commercialization.

- **Maya Volf-Kats:** In her role as YouTube Channel Director, Maya offers an operational viewpoint that highlights the team's strategic approach to audience alignment. She oversees the creation and management of content for Varlamov's YouTube channel, ensuring that it resonates with the audience's preferences and values while integrating advertisements seamlessly. Her insights illuminate how content is tailored to maintain audience trust and engagement, shedding light on strategies to balance audience expectations with commercial objectives.

- **Iulian Kheirbeik:** As the Chief Commercial Officer at Avtorskiye Media, Iulian provides expertise on the professionalization of influencer-brand relationships. His role involves negotiating sponsorship deals, managing brand partnerships, and ensuring long-term

collaboration success. Iulian's perspective emphasizes the importance of structured approaches to professionalization, from establishing clear brand alignment to scaling operations effectively. His contributions underscore how professional intermediaries enhance efficiency and sustainability in influencer marketing.

The insights provided by these stakeholders are central to understanding the dynamics of Varlamov's influencer marketing strategies. By offering distinct but interconnected perspectives, they contribute to a comprehensive exploration of how authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization intersect in Varlamov's career.

3.4 Data Analysis Approach

3.4.1 Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

This study employed thematic analysis, a flexible qualitative research method, to identify, organize, and interpret patterns within interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis focused on three primary themes: authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization, reflecting core dimensions of Ilya Varlamov's career as an influencer. Table 1 summarizes the identified themes and sub-themes, with additional illustrative quotes available in Appendix 4.

The thematic analysis process followed six systematic steps to ensure methodological rigor:

1. Familiarization with the Data:

Transcripts were read multiple times to identify recurring patterns. Key observations included discussions on transparency, platform strategies, and team management. This stage laid the foundation for systematic coding aligned with the research questions.

2. Generating Initial Codes:

Codes were developed to capture specific concepts, such as:

- **Transparency in Content** under Maintaining Authenticity.
- **Reliance on Metrics** under Understanding Audience Expectations.
- **Role Delegation** under Building a Professional Team.

These codes formed the basis for clustering related patterns into broader themes.

Table 1. *Summary Table of Themes and Codes*

Theme	Sub-Themes	Codes
Authenticity	Maintaining Authenticity	- Transparency in Content - Personal Perspective - Selective Collaborations - Political Transparency
	Challenges to Authenticity	- Perceptions of Selling Out - Balancing Principles and Revenue - Advertiser Demands
Audience Alignment	Understanding Audience Expectations	- Reliance on Metrics - Avoiding Over-Catering - Sensitivity to Social Topics
	Cross-Platform Adaptation	- Platform-Specific Strategies - Building Platform - Specific Audiences - Algorithm Optimization
Professionalization	Building a Professional Team	- Role Delegation - Operational Buffers - Structured Workflows
	Agency-Influencer Dynamics	- Agency as Intermediary - Trust-Based Collaboration - Reinforcing Brand Fit

3. Searching for Themes:

Codes were grouped into overarching themes:

- **Authenticity:** Practices like transparency, selective collaborations, and balancing principles with revenue.
- **Audience Alignment:** Strategies such as data-driven decisions and cross-platform adjustments.
- **Professionalization:** Including workflows, team delegation, and agency collaboration.

4. Reviewing and Refining Themes:

Themes were refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research questions. For example:

- The theme “Balancing Principles and Revenue” was clarified to highlight tensions between credibility and commercialization.
- “Algorithm Optimization” was added under Cross-Platform Adaptation to reflect specific content strategies.

5. Defining and Naming Themes:

Themes were given descriptive names and clear definitions, emphasizing their relevance:

- **Authenticity:** Capturing audience trust through transparency and value-driven collaborations.
- **Audience Alignment:** Reflecting data-driven tailoring of content and platform-specific strategies.
- **Professionalization:** Highlighting the role of structured workflows and collaboration in scalability.

6. Producing the Findings:

The findings, presented in Chapter 4, are organized by themes and supported with illustrative quotes. These insights are contextualized using theoretical frameworks, such as the Source Credibility Model and Parasocial Interaction Theory, to situate Varlamov’s strategies within broader trends in influencer marketing.

This structured approach to thematic analysis offered valuable insights into the dynamics of authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization in influencer marketing. By systematically linking these findings to established theoretical frameworks, the analysis revealed how Varlamov’s strategies align with, and in some cases diverge from, established practices in the field, offering a unique perspective on influencer marketing.

3.4.2 Integration with Literature Review

The findings from the thematic analysis were compared and integrated with the insights from the literature review. This step highlighted consistencies, discrepancies, and unique aspects of Varlamov’s approach. By aligning the interview data with theoretical frameworks such as the

Source Credibility Model, Two-Step Flow Theory, and Parasocial Interaction Theory, the study situates Varlamov's strategies within broader trends and challenges in influencer marketing.

Where findings diverge from existing literature, they highlight unique cultural and professional dynamics in the Russian influencer marketing context, providing an opportunity to expand current theoretical perspectives. For example, Varlamov's strategies for balancing personal values with brand collaborations challenge conventional views on influencer-brand alignment, emphasizing the role of ideological congruence in sustaining authenticity.

By integrating the thematic findings with the existing literature, this study highlights how Varlamov's strategies align with and challenge established trends in influencer marketing, offering new insights into the balance between authenticity and commercial interests. His approach to maintaining authenticity, despite commercial pressures, aligns with existing literature on sincerity in influencer marketing (Audrezet et al., 2018), but his strategies for balancing personal values with brand collaborations provide unique perspectives that challenge conventional views on influencer-brand alignment.

4 Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the key findings from the case study of Ilya Varlamov, focusing on the interplay between authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization in influencer marketing. The analysis is based on three in-depth interviews with Varlamov, his channel manager Maya Volf-Kats, and his Chief Commercial Officer Iulian Kheirbeik, as well as additional insights drawn from industry reports on influencer marketing trends, challenges faced by influencers in monetization and platform policies, and practical experiences shared by industry professionals.

To ensure a rigorous and systematic interpretation of the data, the thematic analysis approach outlined in Chapter 3 was employed. This method identifies patterns and contradictions within qualitative data, allowing for a structured yet critical exploration of influencer marketing dynamics. The findings are categorized into three key themes: authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization. However, this chapter does not present these themes as static success factors, instead, it highlights contradictions, ethical dilemmas, and vulnerabilities that shape an influencer's ability to sustain their career. By examining both strategic successes

and setbacks, the analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of how influencers navigate complex brand relationships, audience expectations, and external pressures.

4.1 Authenticity

Authenticity is widely regarded as a cornerstone of influencer marketing. The Source Credibility Model highlights the importance of perceived trustworthiness and expertise in establishing authenticity. For influencers like Ilya Varlamov, authenticity extends beyond content creation, it encompasses values, transparency, and personal engagement with the audience. However, maintaining authenticity presents significant challenges and contradictions in an increasingly commercialized digital landscape.

4.1.1 Maintaining Authenticity in Content

Maintaining authenticity is fundamental to Varlamov's approach. He has built trust by being transparent about his views and staying true to his values, even when they come at a cost. As Varlamov stated, "People watch me because they're interested in my perspective; they want to experience my life from an observer's point of view" (Appendix 1/8(13)). His content is not merely informational but also a reflection of his personality, reinforcing a sense of parasocial connection with his audience.

Maya Volf-Kats reinforced this by explaining, "If you generally don't deceive people in your content or admit your mistakes... they trust the ads you record in the same way" (Appendix 2/6(15)). This demonstrates how an influencer's perceived honesty in editorial content can positively influence how audiences perceive their commercial collaborations. When an influencer is seen as authentic in their regular content, audiences are more likely to trust that their sponsored content is equally sincere. This is sometimes referred to as the spillover effect of authenticity (Lee et al., 2021).

However, authenticity is not an absolute state but a continuous negotiation. Influencers, including Varlamov, must navigate contradictions between maintaining their personal integrity and sustaining their business model. While Varlamov has successfully built a strong connection with his audience, his commitment to his political stance has directly impacted his commercial opportunities. He acknowledged this trade-off, stating, "If I had no principles, I could be extremely wealthy. My main problem is my political stance." (Appendix 1/10(13)) This

statement underscores a fundamental tension in influencer marketing: maintaining authenticity can mean sacrificing revenue, while excessive commercialization risks alienating audiences.

Moreover, this struggle is compounded by audience expectations and selective tolerance. While many followers admire influencers for taking principled stands, they may also react negatively to brand collaborations that appear misaligned with those principles. The paradox is that even the most authentic influencers must strategically manage their brand partnerships to sustain their careers. As later sections will explore, this challenge is particularly evident in cases where brands hesitate to associate with politically engaged influencers, even those with highly loyal followings.

4.1.2 Challenges to Authenticity

While authenticity is a key driver of audience trust, maintaining it becomes increasingly challenging as influencers grow in popularity and expand their commercial endeavors. For Ilya Varlamov, navigating the tension between personal principles and the demands of advertisers has been a recurring challenge throughout his career.

One of the most significant challenges is the perception of “selling out” when incorporating advertising into content. Maya Volf-Kats recounted the initial audience backlash when ads first appeared on Varlamov’s platform: “The audience initially reacted negatively... comments like, ‘Oh, Varlamov has sold out, he’s advertising games now.’” Despite this reaction, she noted that “the audience didn’t shrink, and our subscriber count didn’t drop” (Appendix 2/3(15)), suggesting that while audiences might initially resist advertising, a consistently authentic approach can mitigate negative responses over time.

Varlamov’s political stance further complicates his commercial opportunities. He openly admitted, “Because of [my stance], I probably make 100 times less than I could otherwise” (Appendix 1/10(13)). While this reinforces his commitment to authenticity, it also reveals the financial consequences of maintaining strong ideological positions. Brands and advertisers often avoid working with politically engaged influencers due to concerns over controversy, leading to lost sponsorships despite the influencer’s strong audience loyalty.

Although this particular case was not covered in the interviews, it serves as an illustrative example of the broader challenge discussed by Varlamov and his team regarding the risks associated with political engagement in influencer marketing. The interviews highlighted how brand partnerships can be jeopardized by an influencer's public stance, and this real-world example further underscores the tangible consequences of such tensions.

This case highlights the vulnerability of influencers to external political and commercial pressures, even when their expertise and audience reach make them an ideal fit for collaboration. The insights from the interviews emphasize that brand partnerships are often influenced by reputational concerns beyond simple audience alignment. Despite an influencer's credibility and engagement levels, corporate decision-making processes tend to prioritize risk aversion, particularly when political sensitivities are involved.

The project involved a Georgian real estate developer seeking to promote its properties, including flats, houses, and apartments, to a broader audience. The client initially approached our agency, expressing interest in working with Ilya Varlamov as a brand partner. After negotiations, the developer's marketing director approved the collaboration, and we proceeded with contract discussions. The campaign was designed as a long-term engagement, with a proposed one-year agreement and a detailed content plan. As part of the project preparation, we developed a video concept, and Varlamov booked his tickets to Georgia in anticipation of the campaign launch.

However, despite the marketing team's approval, the company's founder ultimately rejected the partnership, leading to the abrupt cancellation of the project. The marketing director informed us that, following an internal discussion, the founder decided that Varlamov's political stance made him an unsuitable representative for the brand. This decision underscores a fundamental challenge in influencer marketing: even when an influencer aligns with a brand's audience and marketing goals, external factors such as political sensitivities, corporate risk management, and internal decision-making can override strategic considerations.

This case further illustrates the vulnerabilities influencers face, even when they align well with a brand's target audience. It exemplifies how corporate decision-making is influenced not only by audience engagement metrics but also by broader reputational and risk considerations, a challenge echoed in the interview findings. This example reinforces the study's broader

argument that maintaining authenticity and audience trust does not always translate into commercial security. Instead, influencers must continuously navigate an industry where external pressures, such as corporate caution and political sensitivities, can override purely strategic marketing considerations.

Iulian Kheirbeik highlighted another challenge: the pressure from advertisers to alter content to fit brand messaging. He explained, “Once new demands emerge... that limit the creator’s expression or creativity in any way, then it starts having a negative impact” (Appendix 3/8(15)). This tension is a central paradox in influencer marketing: brands seek out influencers for their unique voice and credibility, yet often attempt to modify their messaging to fit corporate standards. According to Kheirbeik, this creates a delicate negotiation process, where influencers must push back against excessive restrictions while ensuring continued revenue from sponsorships.

These challenges illustrate the delicate balance required to maintain authenticity while pursuing commercial opportunities. By adhering to clear personal principles and fostering transparent communication with both advertisers and audiences, Varlamov and his team demonstrate that authenticity can be preserved, even in a highly commercialized influencer landscape. However, as the next sections will explore, this requires strategic decision-making, adaptability, and, at times, significant financial trade-offs.

4.2 Audience Alignment

Audience alignment is essential for ensuring sustained engagement in influencer marketing. This concept refers to an influencer’s ability to understand their audience’s preferences and adapt their content, delivery style, and platforms accordingly. The Two-Step Flow Model emphasizes that influencers serve as intermediaries, tailoring messages to their followers in ways that resonate deeply. For Ilya Varlamov, audience alignment is achieved through a combination of data-driven strategies and an intuitive understanding of his audience’s needs, ensuring relevance while maintaining his unique perspective.

4.2.1 Understanding Audience Expectations

Audience alignment is a critical factor in sustaining engagement within influencer marketing. The Two-Step Flow Model posits that influencers act as intermediaries, filtering and shaping

information to make it more relevant to their audiences. However, aligning content with audience expectations presents both strategic advantages and risks, particularly in balancing creative autonomy with audience demands.

Varlamov's team prioritizes data analytics over direct audience feedback, using viewer retention and watch-through rates as core performance indicators. Maya Volf-Kats explained this approach: "We focus on metrics instead. We don't read comments but pay attention to retention, the watch-through rate" (Appendix 2/6(15)).

This strategy enables the team to refine content based on behavioral trends rather than individual opinions, minimizing the influence of outlier feedback. However, this exclusive reliance on metrics raises potential concerns. Studies on digital engagement suggest that while quantitative data provides broad insights, it may overlook sentiment, context, and deeper audience motivations (Audrezet et al., 2018; Kapitan et al., 2021). In practice, even creators who emphasize data-driven decision-making still engage with audience feedback through direct interactions, private messages, and niche community discussions.

Varlamov himself acknowledges the need for independent creative direction, resisting excessive audience-driven content shifts. He compared this to artistic performance, arguing: "A truly great artist can't focus on the crowd" (Appendix 1/8(13)). Yet, this claim presents a paradox: while he insists on creative independence, his team's adaptation strategies indicate an awareness of audience reactions. The decision to deprioritize certain socially charged topics, such as LGBTQ+ issues or disability discourse, suggests that they do, in fact, selectively interpret audience sentiment. Although these topics are not explicitly avoided, they are not a primary focus due to lower audience engagement levels. This raises the question of whether this approach is purely a pragmatic strategy for optimizing engagement or an implicit compromise to maintain a broader audience base.

At the same time, an important ethical dilemma emerges: Does avoiding low-engagement topics compromise Varlamov's journalistic integrity? While pragmatism is necessary for audience retention, it also risks filtering out socially significant but less commercially viable topics. Over time, prioritizing audience-driven content selection may lead to narrower editorial choices, potentially limiting content diversity.

Moreover, while Varlamov’s team dismisses comment sections as unreliable, their content strategies indirectly reflect audience preferences. This contradiction suggests that even self-proclaimed independent creators must negotiate the commercial realities of digital influence. While audience alignment enhances engagement, it also introduces editorial compromises that may influence long-term content strategies.

4.2.2 Cross-Platform Adaptation

Adapting content to different platforms is a cornerstone of audience alignment in influencer marketing. Each platform serves distinct audience needs and requires tailored approaches to maximize engagement. Varlamov’s ability to navigate these differences has been instrumental in his sustained relevance as an influencer.

Iulian Kheirbeik emphasized the importance of platform-specific strategies: “It’s very important that... content there must be different. Audiences vary, and the reason they’re on a given platform also differs.” (Appendix 3/14(15)) This insight highlights the necessity of adapting not only the format but also the tone and style of content to align with the unique characteristics of each platform.

Varlamov himself acknowledged the challenges of audience migration between platforms: “Audiences don’t actually transfer between platforms. You need to build a new audience from scratch.” (Appendix 1/7(13)) This realization guided his approach to creating platform-specific content, ensuring that his messaging resonates with new and diverse audiences. For example, his YouTube channel focuses on long-form, in-depth video content, while his Twitter presence prioritizes concise and timely commentary.

Maya Volf-Kats provided a practical example of this adaptation process during the early days of Varlamov’s YouTube channel. Initially, the team treated YouTube as a simple video hosting service, uploading content without optimizing for algorithms or audience preferences. However, with guidance from YouTube’s creator support program, they learned to tailor content for the platform’s recommendation system. Maya explained, “We started listening and learning to work with analytics... YouTube nowadays isn’t a battle of the best content; it’s a battle of analysts.” (Appendix 2/3(15)) This shift in strategy led to exponential growth and positioned Varlamov’s channel as a leading platform for engaging video content.

Cross-platform adaptation is not limited to technical optimizations; it also involves reinterpreting core messages to suit different audience expectations. Iulian highlighted this balance, noting that while an influencer’s “ideas and values should remain the same” (Appendix 3/14(15)), their delivery must evolve. Varlamov’s ability to maintain authenticity while repackaging content for diverse platforms underscores his mastery of cross-platform audience alignment.

4.3 Professionalization

Professionalization in influencer marketing refers to the development of structured workflows, specialized roles, and formalized partnerships that enable influencers to scale their operations. For Ilya Varlamov, professionalization has been a key factor in managing his growing platform, ensuring efficient content production, and maintaining his values while navigating a complex media environment. This section examines how professionalization manifests in team dynamics, agency collaborations, and strategic planning within Varlamov’s operations.

4.3.1 Building a Professional Team

As influencers expand their reach, the need for a dedicated team becomes essential. Varlamov’s channel operates with a clear division of roles, allowing each member to focus on specific aspects of the production process. Maya Volf-Kats highlighted the importance of this structure: “From the very beginning, we’ve had a clear division of tasks” (Appendix 2/15(15)).

This approach ensures that Varlamov can dedicate his energy to content creation while relying on his team for logistical and technical support. Varlamov emphasized the critical role of delegation in sustaining his operations: “I always had a project manager as a ‘buffer’ to absorb everything from the client, process it, and then deliver it to me in a nice, digestible form” (Appendix 1/10(13)).

This setup minimizes the burden of client communication and streamlines workflows, allowing him to focus on creative content rather than administrative tasks. However, while this structured approach enhances efficiency, it also raises concerns about control over content decisions. To what extent does delegation impact Varlamov’s editorial autonomy? Does

reliance on a professional team distance him from direct audience interaction, thereby weakening his authenticity?

Additionally, while Varlamov's team structure appears optimized, the reality of influencer-led media production often involves trial and error. Maya admitted that early on, their workflow lacked efficiency: "A channel of this size cannot operate without a manager" (Appendix 2/14(15)).

This suggests that professionalization was not an immediate or seamless process but rather a response to operational challenges as the channel scaled. The transition from an informal blogging practice to a structured media operation reflects a broader shift in influencer marketing, where content creators increasingly resemble digital enterprises.

Moreover, professionalization does not guarantee immunity from operational issues. Despite a well-defined team structure, challenges such as internal miscommunication, creative conflicts, and external pressures from advertisers remain. The effectiveness of professionalization, therefore, depends not just on delegation but also on adaptability and crisis management within the team.

4.3.2 Agency-Influencer Dynamics

The collaboration between influencers and agencies plays a pivotal role in professionalization, particularly in managing brand partnerships and mitigating conflicts. Varlamov's long-standing relationship with Avtorskiye Media exemplifies how agencies can act as intermediaries, ensuring smooth interactions between influencers and advertisers. Iulian Kheirbeik emphasized this dynamic: "The value of the agency is precisely in reminding the brand of why they initially came to the blogger" (Appendix 3/10(15)).

Agencies like Avtorskiye Media also serve as a buffer, shielding influencers from potential conflicts with clients. Kheirbeik explained: "If a client was unhappy about something, most of the time the blogger never even heard about it... because we absorbed that" (Appendix 3/5(15)).

This protective role allows influencers like Varlamov to focus on content creation without being burdened by the complexities of client negotiations. However, while agency involvement can streamline processes, it also raises critical questions about creative autonomy. How much influence do agencies have over content decisions? Are influencers pressured to conform to agency priorities, potentially compromising their personal brand identity?

The strategic value of agencies is further evident in their ability to secure projects that align with an influencer's values and audience expectations. Kheirbeik noted the importance of trust in these relationships: "If we come to a blogger with a project and say, 'Look, this is amazing... it will work,' and if the creator trusts us... they're more likely to agree" (Appendix 3/5(15)).

While this highlights a collaborative decision-making process, it also suggests a potential power imbalance where agencies act as gatekeepers to commercial opportunities. As influencer marketing becomes institutionalized, creators may find themselves negotiating between independent content production and agency-imposed brand expectations. This paradox underscores the complexities of professionalization: while agencies facilitate growth, they also introduce external pressures that may challenge an influencer's creative and strategic independence.

4.4 Synthesis of Findings

The findings from this study highlight the interplay between authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization as core components of Ilya Varlamov's influencer marketing strategy. However, these elements are not static success factors but dynamic and often contradictory forces that require careful navigation. This section synthesizes the key insights from the study, critically examining the tensions, trade-offs, and structural challenges that emerge in sustaining an influential digital presence.

4.4.1 Interplay Between Authenticity and Audience Alignment

The relationship between authenticity and audience alignment is complex, as maintaining credibility requires both consistency and adaptability. Varlamov has built his brand on transparency and independence, yet his team's reliance on data-driven audience analysis suggests a degree of strategic alignment with viewer preferences. For instance, Maya Volf-

Kats stated: “We focus on metrics instead. We don’t read comments but pay attention to retention, the watch-through rate” (Appendix 2/6(15)).

While this approach minimizes reactionary responses to individual audience members, it also raises concerns about algorithmic influence on content production. As platform analytics increasingly shape content visibility, influencers may prioritize high-performing content over subjects that align with their original vision.

This paradox is particularly evident in the selective engagement with socially sensitive topics. While Varlamov’s journalistic persona suggests editorial independence, the avoidance of low-engagement themes, such as LGBTQ+ issues and disability discourse, indicates a subtle responsiveness to audience sentiment. This raises an important ethical question: Does strategic audience alignment ultimately shape content in ways that limit diversity of discourse?

While this pragmatic content selection enhances engagement and sustainability, it also demonstrates how influencers operate within structural constraints, negotiating between journalistic integrity, audience expectations, and platform optimization.

4.4.2 Role of Professionalization in Sustaining Growth

Professionalization plays a dual role in influencer marketing: it enables scalability but also introduces bureaucratic and commercial pressures that can impact creative autonomy. Varlamov’s team structure reflects a shift from independent blogging to a media enterprise, where distinct roles facilitate efficiency. He acknowledged the importance of delegation: “I always had a project manager as a ‘buffer’ to absorb everything from the client, process it, and then deliver it to me in a nice, digestible form” (Appendix 1/10(13)).

The commercialization of creative labor introduces constraints on content decisions. Maya Volf-Kats stated: “A channel of this size cannot operate without a manager” (Appendix 2/14(15)).

While this highlights the necessity of professionalization, it also underscores how digital influence increasingly resembles traditional media structures, with editorial calendars, sponsorship strategies, and corporate-style risk management shaping content production.

The structural contradictions within this model become evident in influencer-brand relationships. While agencies facilitate professional negotiations, they also act as gatekeepers, shaping the types of partnerships influencers pursue. As Iulian Kheirbeik explained: “If a client was unhappy about something, most of the time the blogger never even heard about it... because we absorbed that” (Appendix 3/5(15)).

This protective function helps sustain influencer credibility by shielding them from direct commercial conflicts, but it also raises questions about transparency and editorial independence. Are certain sponsorship-related criticisms filtered out before reaching the influencer? And if so, does this create an echo chamber where only brand-friendly narratives are reinforced?

4.4.3 Challenges of Scaling Without Compromising Values

One of the most pressing challenges in influencer marketing is scaling while maintaining core values. Varlamov’s case illustrates how increased visibility attracts both opportunities and vulnerabilities. His political stance, for example, has positioned him as an authentic voice, yet it has also led to lost commercial opportunities: “Because of [my stance], I probably make 100 times less than I could otherwise” (Appendix 1/10(13)).

This demonstrates that authenticity can be a liability in commercialized digital spaces, where brands prefer neutrality over ideological positioning. The case study of the failed project in Georgia (see Section 4.1.2) exemplifies how external stakeholders like corporate sponsors, project founders, and governmental bodies ultimately determine an influencer’s commercial viability.

Moreover, reliance on platform algorithms for audience growth and engagement creates structural dependencies that can limit creative risks. Maya Volf-Kats reflected on this shift in strategy: “We started listening and learning to work with analytics... YouTube nowadays isn’t a battle of the best content; it’s a battle of analysts” (Appendix 2/3(15)).

While this data-driven approach enhances growth potential, it also reinforces the risk of algorithmic conformity. The content creators optimize for platform logics rather than personal

vision, adapting their style, frequency, and subject matter to maximize engagement rather than foster substantive discourse.

Thus, the challenge is not just about maintaining authenticity but about navigating a commercial and algorithmic system that inherently privileges engagement-driven content. This raises a final critical question: Can influencers meaningfully resist platform incentives while still remaining financially sustainable?

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the interdependent and often contradictory forces of authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization in influencer marketing. While these elements contribute to sustained success, they also introduce structural limitations that require constant negotiation.

Varlamov's approach illustrates that authenticity is not an absolute state but a strategic process that involves maintaining core values while adapting to audience and platform constraints. Audience alignment strengthens engagement but also introduces editorial compromises, raising concerns about content homogenization and ideological filtering.

Professionalization enables influencers to scale operations, yet it simultaneously distances them from direct audience interaction and increases reliance on corporate structures. This, in turn, reshapes the power dynamics within influencer marketing, blurring the lines between independent creators and media enterprises.

Ultimately, the findings underscore that influencer marketing is not just about personal branding but about navigating systemic forces, including platform algorithms, commercial pressures, and audience expectations. As the industry continues to evolve, these structural tensions will remain central to discussions about the sustainability of digital influence.

Together, these themes illustrate a cohesive framework for understanding the mechanisms behind Varlamov's success, offering valuable insights for influencers and marketers navigating the evolving digital media ecosystem.

5 Discussion

5.1 Key Findings and Their Interpretation

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the dynamics of influencer marketing, with authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization emerging as central themes in Ilya Varlamov's career. These themes highlight the nuanced strategies he employs to navigate the complex relationship between maintaining audience trust, meeting brand expectations, and scaling his operations. However, the findings also expose structural challenges and contradictions inherent in influencer marketing, such as the trade-offs between authenticity and commercialization, the tensions between audience engagement and editorial independence, and the influence of platform algorithms on content strategies.

5.1.1 The Role of Authenticity for Varlamov

Authenticity plays a pivotal role in Varlamov's approach, serving as the foundation for sustaining audience trust and engagement. Thematic analysis revealed that his transparency in content creation and selective brand collaborations reinforce his perceived authenticity, as supported by Parasocial Interaction Theory. By aligning his endorsements with his personal values and addressing criticism candidly, Varlamov builds a strong emotional connection with his audience. His openness about mistakes and willingness to engage in honest dialogue resonate with his followers, fostering trust and credibility.

However, the findings also underscore the contradictions of authenticity. While Varlamov insists on creative independence, his content strategy selectively responds to audience preferences. The decision to deprioritize certain socially charged topics, such as LGBTQ+ issues and disability discourse, suggests that his team interprets audience sentiment strategically. This raises an ethical concern: Does avoiding low-engagement topics align with journalistic integrity, or does it contribute to a broader trend in which influencers prioritize commercially viable content over socially significant discourse?

Additionally, authenticity can become a liability in commercialized digital spaces. Varlamov's political stance limits his sponsorship opportunities, demonstrating that ideological positioning, while reinforcing trust with loyal followers, can restrict financial growth.

These findings highlight that authenticity is not merely a personal trait but a negotiated and constrained process, shaped by audience expectations, platform structures, and brand partnerships. Rather than being an inherent quality, authenticity functions as a strategic asset that influencers must continuously recalibrate in response to external pressures.

5.1.2 The Role of Audience Alignment for Varlamov

Audience alignment emerged as a critical factor in Varlamov's content strategies. The study found that he employs a combination of data-driven decisions and creative independence to meet audience expectations. Metrics such as retention rates and watch-through analytics guide his content development, ensuring relevance and engagement. However, this reliance on performance metrics over direct audience interactions introduces a paradox: While his team dismisses comment sections as unreliable, their content strategies indirectly reflect audience sentiment through engagement data. This contradiction suggests that even creators who claim full editorial independence must negotiate the commercial realities of digital influence, where platform analytics act as implicit audience feedback mechanisms.

Cross-platform adaptation further highlights the complexity of audience alignment. Varlamov tailors his strategies to suit the unique characteristics of each platform, recognizing that audiences do not automatically migrate across platforms. However, as platform algorithms dictate content visibility, influencers are incentivized to optimize for algorithmic preferences rather than journalistic or creative priorities.

This raises a critical concern: Does platform governance, rather than audience engagement, ultimately determine content strategy? Varlamov's adaptation strategies, particularly his shift toward data-driven YouTube content strategies (Section 4.2.2), illustrate how influencers must balance editorial independence with algorithmic optimization to maintain audience reach. While audience alignment is framed as a strategic choice, it is increasingly mediated by platform constraints, raising questions about the long-term editorial autonomy of digital creators.

5.1.3 The Role of Professionalization for Varlamov

Professionalization has been instrumental in scaling Varlamov's operations and ensuring the sustainability of his career. The findings identified three key components of professionalization: task delegation within his team, collaboration with agencies, and the establishment of structured workflows. Delegating responsibilities, such as project management and content editing, allows Varlamov to focus on creative work while reducing burnout. However, reliance on a professionalized team also raises concerns about loss of control over content and audience relationships.

Parasocial Interaction Theory suggests that audience trust is built on perceived direct engagement with the influencer, yet increasing reliance on intermediaries weakens this personal connection (Abidin, 2018). As influencers transition from independent creators to structured media brands, their engagement with audiences becomes increasingly mediated through teams and agencies, shifting influencer-follower dynamics from direct interaction to managed communication. This shift reflects a broader trend in influencer marketing, where professionalization enhances efficiency but distances influencers from their audience base.

Collaboration with agencies, such as Avtorskiye Media, further supports Varlamov's professionalization. Agencies play a crucial intermediary role, managing advertiser expectations and content negotiations, thereby shielding influencers from direct commercial pressures. However, this also introduces a structural power imbalance, as agencies influence which brand partnerships influencers pursue. While agencies facilitate aligned collaborations, they also act as gatekeepers, filtering opportunities based on corporate risk aversion and brand priorities.

This gatekeeping function raises important concerns about creative autonomy. As influencer marketing becomes increasingly formalized, content creators must navigate tensions between independent content production and external commercial pressures. While professionalization enables financial stability and operational growth, it may also introduce constraints on creative freedom, subtly pressuring influencers to align their content with advertiser expectations. This paradox highlights the double-edged nature of professionalization: it strengthens an influencer's ability to scale and sustain their career, yet it also subjects them to institutional frameworks that influence content choices.

Thus, while professionalization enhances sustainability and scalability, it also transforms influencer careers into bureaucratized media operations, requiring constant negotiation between creative freedom and commercial viability.

5.2 Answering the Research Questions

The findings of this study offer detailed insights into the dynamics of authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization in Ilya Varlamov's career, addressing each research question comprehensively.

1. How does authenticity shape Varlamov's approach to influencer marketing, and what strategies does he employ to maintain audience trust?

Authenticity is central but not static in Varlamov's strategy; it requires continuous negotiation between transparency, audience expectations, and commercial viability. His selective approach to brand partnerships, refusal to promote products misaligned with his persona, and candid engagement with audience criticism reinforce audience trust. However, the findings also demonstrate that authenticity has commercial costs as seen in the Georgia real estate project rejection, where brand hesitancy stemmed from political risk aversion rather than audience reception.

This case highlights a structural contradiction in influencer marketing: while authenticity strengthens long-term engagement, it may simultaneously alienate risk-averse advertisers. This reinforces prior research suggesting that corporate stakeholders, rather than audiences, often shape commercial opportunities for influencers. Thus, authenticity, while valuable, is increasingly mediated by brand perception and reputational considerations, challenging the notion that influencers operate with full creative independence.

2. Which strategies does Varlamov use to align his content with audience interests, and how do these strategies influence audience engagement and brand partnerships?

Varlamov employs data-driven content adaptation while maintaining a degree of creative independence. His reliance on retention analytics and watch-through rates ensures that his content remains engaging, yet this also raises editorial concerns. The findings suggest that

algorithmic optimization may incentivize influencers to prioritize high-performing content, potentially at the expense of socially significant but lower-engagement topics.

This aligns with concerns about a broader trend in which platform metrics subtly dictate content strategies. While Varlamov resists overt audience pandering, his team's pragmatic approach to deprioritizing certain socially charged topics (e.g., LGBTQ+ issues or disability discourse) suggests that even independent creators adjust content choices based on engagement data.

Moreover, cross-platform adaptation is another core strategy in audience alignment. However, as platform algorithms determine content visibility, influencers must navigate the tension between platform optimization and editorial intent. The findings suggest that while adaptation enhances reach, it also deepens dependence on platform infrastructures, introducing long-term constraints on content diversity.

3. How has professionalization shaped Varlamov's career as an influencer, and what role do intermediaries play in structuring his brand collaborations?

Professionalization has enhanced operational efficiency but also introduced structural dependencies. By delegating logistical and administrative tasks, Varlamov has been able to focus on content creation while mitigating burnout. However, findings suggest that increased reliance on a professional team distances him from direct audience interactions, shifting his parasocial relationship into a more mediated experience (Abidin, 2018).

Agencies, such as Avtorskiye Media, play a pivotal role in streamlining negotiations and securing brand partnerships. Yet, this involvement also introduces potential influence over content choices, as agencies filter sponsorships through a corporate risk-management lens.

This transformation raises concerns about the shifting power dynamics in influencer marketing. While agencies facilitate economic stability, they also introduce editorial gatekeeping, influencers may be subtly encouraged to favor advertiser-friendly narratives over riskier, more critical content. Thus, professionalization, while beneficial for career longevity, also reshapes influencer autonomy, reinforcing the corporate mediation of digital influence.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

This study reinforces and extends key theoretical frameworks, while also identifying emerging dynamics in influencer marketing that require theoretical expansion.

Parasocial Interaction Theory

The findings illustrate how professionalization, through task delegation and agency involvement, may weaken the perceived personal connection between influencer and audience. While Varlamov's brand is built on authenticity, increased reliance on intermediaries (such as managers, editors, and agencies) mediates direct audience engagement, potentially reshaping parasocial relationships. This aligns with Abidin's (2018) argument that as influencers scale their operations, their perceived accessibility and intimacy with audiences may diminish. The study suggests that future research should examine how professionalization alters audience perceptions of authenticity and engagement.

Source Credibility Model

This study reinforces the dual role of expertise and transparency in establishing credibility. Varlamov's authority in urban planning and social commentary strengthens his perceived expertise, while his transparency in acknowledging mistakes enhances audience trust. However, the findings also reveal a critical limitation of the Source Credibility Model in influencer marketing: credibility is dynamic and shaped by external pressures, particularly commercialization. Excessive monetization, especially when advertising misaligns with an influencer's persona, can erode audience trust. This underscores the need to refine credibility models to account for commercial pressures and algorithmic influence in digital media.

Two-Step Flow Theory

The study highlights the growing role of agencies as intermediaries in influencer marketing, aligning with Two-Step Flow Theory's emphasis on opinion leaders as information gatekeepers. Agencies like Avtorskiye Media not only facilitate brand collaborations but also filter sponsorship opportunities based on corporate risk management, influencing which messages reach audiences. This challenges traditional notions of influencer autonomy, as external stakeholders increasingly shape influencer-brand dynamics. Future research should explore how agency involvement impacts influencer editorial independence and whether influencers can resist commercial pressures while maintaining credibility.

5.4 Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide several practical insights for stakeholders in influencer marketing, including content creators, agencies, and brands. By understanding the interplay between authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization, industry practitioners can develop more effective influencer marketing strategies that foster sustainability, audience trust, and commercial success.

For content creators, the study highlights the importance of transparency in sponsored content as a key factor in maintaining audience trust. The findings suggest that audiences are highly sensitive to perceived “selling out,” particularly when influencers promote brands that do not align with their persona. Varlamov’s approach demonstrates that selective collaborations and open engagement with audience concerns help preserve authenticity and credibility. At the same time, content creators must balance audience-driven strategies with creative independence to avoid over-reliance on algorithmic optimization. While data-driven content adaptation improves engagement, excessive reliance on algorithmic performance metrics, such as watch-through rates and retention analytics, risks homogenizing content and discouraging risk-taking. Content creators should strategically integrate audience insights while maintaining a distinct creative identity. Additionally, cross-platform adaptation requires platform-specific strategies, as Varlamov’s experience shows that audiences do not automatically migrate between platforms. Instead, influencers must tailor content formats, messaging styles, and engagement tactics to each platform’s unique audience and algorithmic environment.

For agencies, the study demonstrates the critical role they play in mediating relationships between influencers and brands. Acting as buffers between influencers and advertisers ensures smoother collaborations, but balancing commercial interests with influencer integrity is crucial. Agencies help shield influencers from direct commercial pressures, as seen in Avtorskiye Media’s role in managing brand negotiations for Varlamov. However, they must ensure that their role does not compromise an influencer’s editorial independence by prioritizing commercial viability over content authenticity. Trust-based collaboration emerges as essential for long-term success, as the study highlights how successful influencer-agency relationships depend on mutual trust. Agencies must advocate for influencers’ creative freedom while also managing brand expectations, ensuring that both parties benefit from aligned marketing objectives. Additionally, negotiation strategies should account for external risks, as

demonstrated by the failed project in Georgia, where a last-minute decision by a company's leadership led to the cancellation of a partnership despite prior approval. This example underscores the need for agencies to anticipate political, reputational, and brand-safety concerns when securing partnerships. Developing risk assessment frameworks can help agencies navigate potential conflicts before they escalate.

For brands, the study emphasizes the importance of aligning influencer partnerships with an influencer's established persona to enhance campaign credibility. The findings reinforce that authenticity is a core driver of audience engagement, and brands that partner with influencers based on long-term alignment rather than short-term reach are more likely to build sustainable and trust-based connections with audiences. Allowing creative freedom in brand collaborations also strengthens audience engagement with sponsored content. The study indicates that audience reception to advertising depends on how well the influencer integrates brand messaging into their content. When influencers retain editorial control, brand collaborations appear more organic and engaging, ultimately leading to higher audience trust and campaign effectiveness. Furthermore, understanding influencer-audience dynamics is essential to prevent backlash. Brands must research an influencer's audience demographics, preferences, and sensitivities before launching a campaign. Ignoring audience expectations, for instance, by partnering with a politically vocal influencer without anticipating potential controversies, can lead to negative brand perception.

By applying these insights, content creators, agencies, and brands can navigate the evolving landscape of influencer marketing with a stronger emphasis on authenticity, audience trust, and sustainable professionalization.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of influencer marketing through the case of Ilya Varlamov, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations and outline directions for future research. These limitations highlight the scope of the study while suggesting opportunities for further academic inquiry into influencer marketing strategies.

One key limitation of this study is its reliance on a single case study. While the in-depth examination of Varlamov's career provides rich qualitative insights, the findings may not be

fully generalizable to influencers operating in different industries, cultural contexts, or media environments. Influencer marketing strategies vary significantly depending on content niches, audience demographics, and regional market conditions. Future research could adopt comparative case studies, analyzing multiple influencers across different sectors, such as fashion, technology, and activism, to determine whether the themes of authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization hold universally or exhibit industry-specific variations.

Another limitation is the lack of direct audience perspectives. While this study relies on interviews with Varlamov's team to understand audience engagement, it does not include primary data from Varlamov's followers. Audience perceptions of authenticity, content adaptation, and advertising partnerships remain a crucial dimension of influencer marketing. Future research should incorporate audience surveys, focus groups, or social media sentiment analysis to explore how audiences interpret influencers' authenticity and brand collaborations. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of influencer marketing strategies from the audience's perspective.

Additionally, influencer marketing is a rapidly evolving industry shaped by changing platform algorithms, regulatory frameworks, and audience behaviors. This study captures a specific moment in Varlamov's career, but the strategies identified may shift over time due to technological advancements and industry trends. For example, the increasing role of artificial intelligence in content creation, the rise of new social media platforms, or changes in advertising policies could significantly impact influencer practices. To address this limitation, future research should consider longitudinal studies that track influencers' careers over extended periods, examining how their strategies evolve in response to external pressures and industry transformations.

Finally, this study primarily focuses on the Russian-speaking media space, where political and regulatory factors play a significant role in shaping influencer marketing opportunities. The findings regarding brand hesitancy due to political positioning, as seen in the failed Georgia project, may be more pronounced in politically sensitive environments. Future studies could examine how these dynamics compare in other regions with different media regulations and cultural attitudes toward influencer marketing. Cross-national research could provide insights into how geopolitical contexts influence influencer-brand relationships and audience perceptions of authenticity.

In conclusion, while this study offers valuable contributions to the understanding of authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization in influencer marketing, further research is needed to expand its generalizability, incorporate audience perspectives, track long-term influencer strategies, and explore regional variations. Addressing these limitations will deepen academic and industry knowledge of the evolving influencer marketing landscape.

6 Conclusion

This study examined the evolving dynamics of influencer marketing through the lens of Ilya Varlamov's career, exploring how authenticity, audience alignment, and professionalization intersect to shape a sustainable and credible influencer brand. The findings reveal that successful digital influence is not solely a matter of content creation or audience reach but rather a carefully managed balance between personal integrity, audience expectations, and structured professional strategies.

The research demonstrates that authenticity is both an asset and a challenge, a quality that fosters deep audience trust but also requires continuous negotiation with commercial pressures and public expectations. Audience alignment, meanwhile, is not just about following trends but about strategically engaging audiences in ways that preserve creative independence while optimizing engagement across multiple platforms. Finally, professionalization is a crucial mechanism that allows influencers to scale their work efficiently, but it also introduces institutional constraints that require careful navigation to maintain editorial independence and credibility.

More broadly, this study highlights how influencer marketing has matured into a structured industry that mirrors traditional media in its reliance on strategic management, data analytics, and brand collaborations. However, it also underscores that influencers are not just content creators. They are cultural figures whose work influences public discourse, shapes consumer behavior, and contributes to broader media ecosystems.

As influencer marketing continues to evolve, this research invites marketers, academics, and content creators to think critically about the tensions between authenticity and commercialization, the impact of platform algorithms on content diversity, and the growing

institutionalization of digital influence. It challenges industry stakeholders to develop more ethical, sustainable, and audience-centered approaches, ensuring that authenticity remains a guiding principle rather than a marketing tactic.

Ultimately, this study is not just an exploration of Ilya Varlamov's career but a reflection of the broader transformations shaping digital influence today. In an era where platforms dictate content visibility, audience expectations shift rapidly, and commercial pressures intensify, influencers must continuously renegotiate their role as both independent voices and commercial entities. As the field of influencer marketing continues to evolve, the lessons drawn from this research will remain relevant in shaping best practices, informing industry standards, and fostering a more transparent, accountable, and engaged digital media landscape.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Transcript of Interview with Ilya Varlamov, 25.10.24

Originally in Russian, translated into English

Mitja: Let me briefly explain what this interview will be about. Right now, I'm working on my master's thesis on the topic of "The Impact of Influencer Marketing on Blogging" and it's based on your case. Initially, I wanted to focus on the transition from blogger to influencer, looking at how a small blog on LiveJournal could evolve into an influential platform. But I was told that's more suited for a Ph.D. So for now, I'm writing a master's thesis with the general theme of "The Impact of Marketing on Blogging," using your experience as a case study. The purpose of this interview is to explore how influencer marketing has influenced your career development and to examine the strategies that have helped you maintain authenticity and influence over time.

Ilya: Damn, you're speaking in some smart words here, aren't you?

Mitja: In reality, the interview should be pretty relaxed. It'll have three sections. The first one is about your personal journey from blogger to influencer. The second section is focused on strategies for working with audiences and brands.

Ilya: All that sounds really smart. Keep it simpler.

Mitja: In short, yes. Let's start with how you began your journey in blogging. Let's start from 2005 since next year will be the 20th anniversary of your LiveJournal. What motivated you to share your thoughts online back then?

Ilya: Well. As for how it all began, sure. Look, there's an issue here again because, since so much time has passed, the story might have changed a bit. So, let's make a disclaimer: what I'm saying now is just how I remember it. But since memory is a bit flexible, there may be slight differences compared to what I've said in past interviews or comments. So, as I remember it now, I never really took LiveJournal or anything else like that seriously. At some point, I just started traveling around. I remember, back then I used to read Artemy Lebedev's LiveJournal before I even created my own blog. I read Dmitry Khil, and there was also the "Norwegian Forest." So, there were some interesting blogs I followed. Then I started traveling and moving around. I was working in business and had never studied journalism. I

graduated from the Moscow Institute of Architecture. And friends gave me a camera. I think it was a Canon D450, or maybe 450D? Yeah, the 450D with a lens. I started taking some pictures. Those were my first trips abroad, places like Cuba and Vietnam. Then I noticed that when you return from a trip, you spend a lot of time sharing your impressions. You sort through and show your photos to friends, family, and even coworkers. By the fifth time I was showing the same photos, I thought, “This is kind of silly; I need to simplify this somehow.” So instead of showing the same photos to everyone, I decided I’d just post them online, add some comments, and then send the link to everyone. This way, whoever was interested could look without me retelling the whole story. So, I just went to Yandex, searched for the most popular platform where I could post photos, and found that LiveJournal was recommended. That’s where I started posting. It wasn’t 2004 or 2005 exactly, as I registered much earlier. At first, it was just fooling around; I registered mainly to read other blogs. If I posted anything, it was just random stuff, nothing serious. I don’t remember exactly which year it was when I started posting seriously; I’d have to check the release date of the Canon 450D because it was new then, and my friends gave it to me for my birthday. That’s how it all started. So, I started posting there. Of course, I had no followers or anything like that at first. Then, little by little, I noticed new followers showing up. Back in the 2000s, it wasn’t like today where you’re on TikTok or Instagram and gain tens of thousands of followers. Back then, every follower was unique. I remember reaching 100 followers, it was like a family; I knew everyone’s name. When someone subscribed, I’d check them out, look at their LiveJournal, see where they were from.

Mitja: A closed circle of shared interests.

Ilya: It wasn’t closed; it was open, but it was very small. It’s not like today. Today, imagining that you would keep track of every new follower, greet each one, and start conversations with them all would be hard. But back then, these were truly your friends. They weren’t just called “friends” on LiveJournal; they really were. Those friends were much more like real friends than friends today. Today, friends are just followers; they’re viewers on YouTube. But on LiveJournal, they were “friends” in the truest sense. There was a big difference because you really viewed them as friends. Behind every avatar was a real person with their own personality. You knew where they were from, and the level of connection was totally different from what it is now. Today, you don’t know if a person is real or a bot, if they’re rational or irrational. You don’t even care where they’re from. So now, there’s so much nonsense, hate, and other things. But back then, you had an individual relationship with every subscriber; you knew them, and they knew you. You watched your language; you would even

meet them in real life. I made many friends specifically through LiveJournal. That's how it all started and kept growing. It took me quite a while to reach 100 subscribers, and at that time, reaching 1,000 subscribers was considered an almost unreachable milestone. Back then, when someone was called a "thousandaire," it meant something.

Mitja: Said with admiration, right?

Ilya: Yes, like how we compare prices from pre-revolutionary times to today's currency. In today's terms, that 1,000 subscribers was like 1 million. It was like the equivalent of a YouTube Gold Button.

Waiter: [says something]

Ilya: Yes, the exchange rate from the early 2000s to today would be 1,000. So, 100 subscribers was like having 100,000 on YouTube, a Silver Button. Not everyone could reach 100 subscribers on LiveJournal. And 1,000? A "thousandaire" was like having 1 million followers today. It was an elite status, and you could count these people on your fingers. They were like stars when they had 1,000 subscribers.

Mitja: At what point did you realize that your blog was starting to grow, that you were gaining influence and becoming a thought leader?

Ilya: You know, I don't remember exactly when I fully realized it. At some point, when I had around 200-300 followers, things started growing, and people began to recognize me. I started to become somewhat of an authority. In the 2000s, LiveJournal was a very personal space, so when I followed someone, I could see people thinking, "Oh, Ilya followed me," because I was already becoming notable. People I used to read, people who were somewhat of an authority to me, even mentors, started talking to me. Rustem Adagamov, Viktor Borisov, or Viktor "Professor," as he was known. Alexander Popov, who photographed for the metro. There were people who weren't exactly my idols but definitely benchmarks I looked up to and learned from. And when they started talking to me as an equal, I began to realize I was growing. That was very motivating, pushing me to improve. Back then, it was an endless competition. If you think back to early LiveJournal, that was what shaped me. It was all about competing and wanting to be better. I remember there was this group that formed, made up of myself, Viktor "Professor," and Dima Chistoprudny, and we were all into urban photography, rooftop shots, industrial images. We later founded a photo agency called 28-300, which I think still exists. Despite us doing the same kind of work, there was always a competition to take the best shot. We'd go to a rooftop at sunrise or sunset to take some shots, and it became this rivalry over who could get the best photo.

Mitja: It was about quality back then. Nowadays, it's more about quantity, but not then.

Ilya: Back then, it was all about quality, who had more comments, more views, especially when we were working on the same topic. And I realized that I lacked a certain talent in landscape photography, urban landscapes, architecture, and all of that. My colleagues, like Dima Chistoprudny, were much better at it. He was more skilled, more talented, you know? But I was better at capturing events, like protests or other things. And by chance, I noticed an interesting detail when I was covering protests. Alongside the technical photos I'd include, I started writing text to go with them. This combination of photos with text began to spark a new kind of resonance. I realized that people were interested not just in my photos, but also in my thoughts. Until then, it never even crossed my mind that anyone would be interested in my opinions or ideas. I hadn't even considered myself in that role. In fact, Russian language and literature were among my least favorite subjects in school. I was always more drawn to math. Math came easily to me, while Russian felt like a struggle. The same in college, I preferred drawing and precise subjects, things I understood better.

Mitja: So that's why you chose MARHI (Moscow Architectural Institute).

Ilya: Yeah. I wouldn't say I exactly chose it myself, but the ability to use language and express something...

Waiter: [says something]

Mitja: Okay. And when did you start doing advertisements? The very first ads appeared on LiveJournal, right?

Ilya: Yeah, the first ad appeared in LiveJournal (LJ). Honestly, I don't remember exactly when it happened. Obviously, it was when I already had followers, but I don't recall who the advertiser was or how it all started. Back then, in the 2000s and early 2010s, advertising wasn't like it is now. Today, it's totally normal for a blogger to post ads. But at that time, it was kind of strange, almost nonsense. There were certain formats that just didn't imply ads. If you think about LJ, it was more like a family thing. Imagine going to a friend's party, a wedding, or birthday, and the host suddenly stands up and says, "Dear guests, we're taking a break for a commercial. Look at this awesome Philips blender. It's amazing, and I recommend everyone buy one. Okay, that's it, back to the party." Everyone would continue partying, thinking it was just absurd. So, if there was advertising, it was perceived more as friendly advice. You could say, "Hey, I bought this new camera, and it's awesome," or "it's garbage," and it would feel genuine because it wasn't paid. But as soon as you started accepting money, it changed things. People would immediately question it, wondering if it was genuine or "sponsored." The main pioneer of this ad space was Artemy Lebedev, who began to teach people that advertising wasn't shameful and could exist. But I remember that

people reacted poorly; they'd accuse you of doing "paid content" and "selling out." Even if you were transparent, saying it was an ad, people just didn't accept it.

Mitja: So did Artemy initially use ad disclaimers? But even then, there was backlash?

Ilya: Yes, of course, there was backlash. I don't remember the exact year of the first ad post. It's probably impossible to verify now, and maybe it didn't even survive. There were some experimental formats, like sponsorships and other things, because, again, audiences weren't receptive. The temptation to hide that it was an ad was high. But over time, we managed to break through that resistance.

Mitja: Well, do you remember any specific ad campaign after which you thought, "Wow, this is amazing!" Like, you felt you were becoming a big influencer, clients were coming to you, and you were doing something major?

Ilya: Well, there wasn't anything quite like that in LiveJournal, but there was a format of sponsorship. Again, Artemy Lebedev was a pioneer in this area. He started these trips, these expeditions, and other things. He would find sponsors, and then he'd cover the cars with sponsor stickers and everything. Maybe he wasn't the one to invent it, but for me, he was the first; I hadn't seen anyone else do that before him. Maybe it existed in some form before, but he was the first to do it specifically in the LJ format. I think he was the first. And just the idea that you could travel somewhere, get paid for it, and even make a profit, this was something incredible. My first trips where we started getting some sponsors and doing things were like that too. They'd give you a car, for example. Some car manufacturer would sponsor the trip, or someone would cover the tickets. It was really cool.

Mitja: And when did the shift from text to video formats start? Probably around 2015. But Maya appeared back in the LiveJournal days.

Ilya: Maya appeared when LiveJournal was still around. I had a very bad relationship with Google. A million years ago, back in the early 2000s, I used to make websites and put up banner ads with AdSense. Somehow, I ended up clicking on my own banners a few times, or maybe something else happened. It wasn't that I had any real plan, but they blocked me for violating AdSense rules. Honestly, I don't remember the exact reason, they might have said it was some kind of technical violation. Maybe I'd messed up the code because I was coding the sites myself. Or I'd clicked a few times on my own banner to test it out. Anyway, it was a vague situation. But they blocked me, and with that, I got banned from AdSense as well.

After that, there were about 10 years of me trying to get the ban lifted. I wrote to them and everything, but they kept responding, "Look, you committed a serious violation. You might

as well have done something as bad as, I don't know, assaulting an orphan and eating their heart. So naturally, we don't want you on our platform." Because of this, I didn't start on YouTube, as you can't run a YouTube channel if you're banned by Google. But at some point, I realized that I had to start focusing on YouTube somehow. Naturally, I was late to it. Maybe if it weren't for this, I would've joined YouTube five years earlier, during what were essentially the golden days. I ended up joining in the Silver Age, when the big names were already established, but I managed to lift the ban, and I registered there. Again, I didn't take YouTube too seriously. Even when I joined, I had this thought that while I traveled, I'd do my regular photo and text format in LiveJournal and make some short videos to embed in the blog. I thought, well, if each of these videos gets about 10,000 views, that would be awesome. Since, generally, each post had 10, 20, or even 100,000 views, well, 100,000 rarely, but 10, 20, or 30,000 was common, I figured if the videos got about 10,000 views, I could even make around \$100 from them. Amazing.

Mitja: So, there was no actual strategy when you started on YouTube? Just making videos?

Ilya: Right. I saw it more as just a video hosting service, a place to upload videos that I was still primarily posting to LiveJournal. I didn't think YouTube would become the main platform.

Mitja: And when did you realize it was working? What changed to make YouTube start growing?

Ilya: It was very gradual. Everything grew organically, with more and more views over time. We experimented with different video formats, like the Kinder Surprise unboxing I did for 10,000 subscribers. I had some totally crazy formats, and it was quite a challenging creative journey to find what worked. To clarify, we never focused exclusively on YouTube. But at some point, we realized that YouTube had grown to 100,000 subscribers, which meant the silver play button. They sent us the silver button, the old-style one. The new ones are flat. And then we realized that advertising started selling separately on YouTube. Eventually, I noticed that YouTube was bringing in more views than LiveJournal, that the ads on YouTube earned more than those on LiveJournal, and that advertisers preferred YouTube over LiveJournal for placing ads.

Mitja: And how did your attitude toward working with YouTube start to change? You mentioned that in LiveJournal, you had a very high-quality approach, treating your subscribers almost like friends. How did your interaction with your YouTube subscribers evolve?

Ilya: Naturally, it was different because the environment was completely new and felt more hostile to me. First, YouTube already had a well-established community. It's very similar to immigration, you come from your own village, city, or country, where you have a name. People know you, respect you. Like, for example, in Russia, I had recognition. If I draw a parallel to today's times, it's like leaving Russia, as I left LiveJournal for YouTube. It's a similar feeling. In Russia, everyone knew me. I met governors, worked with leading Russian companies. I didn't need to explain who Ilya Varlamov was; people read me, I had some authority, a name, and was a kind of opinion leader. All of that existed. But then you leave, say, Russia for Europe, and suddenly the market is much bigger, the world is bigger. So, you have a larger market, more significant people around, but you're a nobody there. You have to start from scratch, build your name up again, prove yourself again. You can't just say, "I'm Ilya Varlamov; give me a car," like I could in Russia if I had an expedition or a project. There, I could just go in and say, "Give us this and that," and people would work with me. Or, "I want to meet or interview someone," and I could. Now, if I approach the mayor of some small town, I can't just walk in, they wouldn't even know who I am. They'd say, "Who are you, and why should we give you an interview?" And probably add, "Plus, you're from Russia, no thanks." They'd tell me to get lost. So, I had to start over because audiences don't actually transfer between platforms. There's a big misconception that when you move from one platform to another, your audience will follow. In reality, they won't. You have to build everything from scratch on any new platform. Only if you're someone like Ksenia Sobchak, a hundred percent recognizable figure, will you instantly attract people wherever you register.

Mitja: But they're more like celebrities now. Your journey, after all, started with a blog, so it's interesting to know how that developed. And how do you maintain your connection over time?

Ilya: Well, you could say I'm a celebrity too.

Mitja: You started as a blogger and became an influencer, yes. But even now, years later, you've moved abroad, and yet your audience continues to watch and trust you. You've kept your authenticity. How do you manage to do that over so many years?

Ilya: You see, I've never really thought about it. And honestly, when I talk about how to behave, how to manage a blog, and so on, the key is to never cater directly to the audience. The moment you start working specifically *for* the audience, you become ordinary, banal, boring, predictable. The biggest threat to creativity is predictability, and if that happens, the audience will just lose interest, and you'll fade into obscurity. If you look at any great artist,

and I don't mean to compare myself to great artists, that may sound immodest, but if you look at any true talent, like a dancer, for instance, or the way Zemfira sings, you'll see that when she's on stage, she's not thinking about the audience. She's singing for herself, experiencing the music deeply, letting the emotions flow through her. It's like she's in another dimension. The audience just observes, like watching a fire, a hurricane, something beyond their control. They can only watch, gasp, and be amazed, but a hurricane, which may even destroy your city, isn't communicating with you, it's just doing its thing. A creative person on stage, or someone in LiveJournal or elsewhere, if they start catering to the audience, they become like performers at some bar, taking requests. A truly great artist can't focus on the crowd. If they do, the magic disappears, and without magic, true success is impossible. So when I create something, I do it solely for myself. Of course, I keep some things in mind, but I try to adapt to the audience as little as possible. I do what interests *me*.

Mitja: So you stay as true to yourself as possible.

Ilya: Of course. It's the only way to work, because otherwise, especially in today's world, you simply can't compete with AI. There's so much content out there, and it's only increasing every year. Neural networks are creating exactly what people want to see. They analyze what people want to hear and produce content to match. AI makes the videos, provides the voice-over, and does the editing. You don't need to be there. People watch me because they're interested in my perspective; they want to experience my life from an observer's point of view.

Waiter: (says something)

Mitja: Have there ever been moments when working with brands threatened your authenticity? How did you handle situations when, for example, a brand came to you and said, "We want to see this from you," but it clashed with your vision? How do you communicate with your audience in those situations?

Ilya: That happens a lot. Here's a basic example, like when we had a project in Kazakhstan. I don't know where this will be published, so it might be better to keep this story brief. I'll tell you as it happened, but let's keep the location vague. So, in Kazakhstan, we were invited to talk about a new city, Alatau, that will be built near Almaty. It's an interesting project, and it would have been fun to cover it. This was a commercial project, which we, of course, disclosed to the audience. I didn't see any conflicts or issues with it initially.

As we started working, though, it turned out the client had their own vision. We wanted to approach it the way I would usually do, but the client said, "No, we're not going to criticize

here, and we won't talk about environmental concerns." I asked for certain interviews, and they replied, "All of those interviews are canceled. You can't speak with this person, nor that person. We'll provide our own spokespeople." And at every step, they just shut down 90% of our creative ideas. We were left with a choice: either we refuse to work with them and walk away, or we treat it as just a technical task. So, I chose to treat it as a technical project. There are projects you don't enjoy, ones that don't satisfy you creatively, that you'd approach entirely differently. But if the client wants it and it doesn't cross any personal boundaries, it's okay.

Mitja: So you see it as stepping out of your comfort zone?

Ilya: Comfort zone?

Mitja: By that, I mean, when you get a brief, you follow it. The client says, "Great job, project's done, money's paid. On to the next."

Ilya: That happens often as well. Again, going back to artists... There are times when you perform for a stadium or create something of your own, which is very fulfilling. And then there's the commercial work, like performing at corporate events. Some artists, like Shevchuk, won't do corporate gigs on principle. Others do and just see it as part of the job. It might not always be enjoyable, the audience, the setting may not be ideal, but you still try to be yourself, even if you're not entirely satisfied with the creative outcome. But it allows you to earn money, and with that money, you can then do the projects you really want to.

So, to create what you love, you need money, and that money has to come from somewhere. All this is a balance between making a living and pursuing your passion. For example, any travel content I produce goes deep into the red financially. I have a film about Burning Man coming up. It's a non-commercial project from the start, as Burning Man prohibits any kind of profit, no YouTube monetization, no ads, nothing. Filming it cost around \$30,000 when you factor in tickets, fees, and everything else. It's something I've wanted to do for a long time, but the money has to be earned elsewhere. So, you compromise in one area so you can truly enjoy yourself in another.

Mitja: So, it's a question of compromise.

Ilya: I don't really see it as a compromise. It's just how life works: if you want to eat something tasty, you have to work it off at the gym later. Most people don't enjoy sweating it out at the gym, sticking to a diet, or making sacrifices. Only a few genuinely find joy in that, like bodybuilders who take pleasure in watching their biceps grow. But that's a different story. Life is just set up this way. To enjoy good food, you have to put in some work.

Ideally, we'd want our work to always bring us pleasure. But that's not always the case. Sometimes work is technical and not particularly enjoyable, but I try to make sure it's never something I actively hate. For instance, I never take on projects that cross my personal boundaries or conflict with my beliefs. I get offered these kinds of projects often, but I have my principles. If I had no principles, I could be extremely wealthy. My main problem is my political stance. Because of it, I probably make 100 times less than I could otherwise. If you follow me, you know what I mean. I could take a more neutral position, like Minaev, who keeps his content safe and uncontroversial on YouTube. He's got a great audience and gets sponsors in every video, making around a hundred thousand dollars per video, with sponsors paying twenty thousand each. And he releases videos twice a week.

Mitja: He's doing quite well for himself.

Ilya: No, I just can't do that. For example, there have been so many times when people have told me, "Listen, everything's great, but we need it without any politics." And that's it for me. As a blogger, I could have kept working. I had potential contracts with places like Dubai and elsewhere, but they would always fall apart because of my political stance. "You talk about politics, so we can't work with you." You know what I mean; you've dealt with this too. It happens a lot, but that's the kind of comfort-zone stretch I'm not willing to make.

Mitja: Okay, so when a project is already in progress, everything's going well, the client is a good fit for you and your audience, what are the most challenging parts of the collaboration during the project itself? Could it be logistical issues, organizing the shoot, or something else? What's the most annoying part for you?

Ilya: There's nothing annoying for me because my team handles all those challenges. I don't deal with them myself. For me, it would probably be a nightmare to communicate with clients or manage approvals directly. That's what the managers handle. I've always removed that unpleasant part from my work, where there could be friction or unpleasant conversations. I always had a project manager as a "buffer" to absorb everything from the client, process it, and then deliver it to me in a nice, digestible form. They acted like an adapter between us, making everything smoother. Sometimes plugging in directly can hurt, but when there's an adapter, everything works fine.

Mitja: How do you see the impact of influencer marketing in general? By influencer marketing, I mean the strategy of promoting products or services through influencers. What impact has influencer marketing had on you and the growth of your YouTube channel?

Ilya: I'm not sure I fully understand the question.

Mitja: Look, let's talk about all the advertising you do, your approach to it, and the compromise involved in maintaining audience trust. How has advertising affected your content, career, and personal development overall? For better or worse, has it changed you? Has influencer marketing, in particular, changed you?

Ilya: You know, I wouldn't say it's necessarily changed me. Maybe in a broader sense, yes, naturally, my work impacts me, but there are many aspects that aren't always directly related to advertising. There's a certain responsibility that comes with it, which affects all your behavior. For example, if I'm driving and need to park, I know that normally, maybe I wouldn't think twice about parking poorly. But now, I can't do that, because if someone sees me park on a sidewalk, takes a photo, it'll be a mess. They'd call me a hypocrite: "You called out bad drivers, and now look at you." Same with drinking. I haven't had a drink to the point of losing control in maybe 10 years. Every time the urge hits, I know I can't go overboard, which is a positive. With brands, it's similar. Say you have a bad experience with a brand. Normally, I'd be tempted to say, "Yandex is crap" or "Google is the worst!" But then I think, "Well, life is long..." You might burn that bridge if you speak out like that. It's a downside, you need to be careful not to come across as toxic, even when dealing with brands. But that's also good; it keeps me from doing things I might regret. Often, we act in ways we later regret simply because there's nothing holding us back. Let's say you go out, get really drunk, maybe make a fool of yourself; tomorrow, you might laugh it off, feeling a bit embarrassed. But I don't have that luxury, there are consequences for me. So, on one hand, I am more in control of myself, it's this constant self-monitoring. On the negative side, you end up having to think about how you communicate with brands in daily life, what you say about them, how you use them, etc. And you start realizing that it limits your freedom a bit. For instance, consider some countries, even if it's not commercial. Let's take Dubai, for example, the UAE takes criticism very seriously. You could mention certain unpleasant realities happening there, but if you do, you might find yourself banned from returning. There are cases of people being banned. Or, say you want to cover a certain topic in Dubai. One blogger, (we won't name names directly), covered issues like the illegal sale of alcohol and the labor camps for migrant workers. They nearly banned him; he quickly hid the footage and managed to get out of the situation, but he understood it was better not to go down that path. This situation isn't unique to Dubai, many countries have similar issues, and you have to take them into account. The same goes for brands. Remember the situation in Karabakh? If you went there, you wouldn't be allowed to enter Armenia afterward. Your work then depends not just on your creative ideas and goals but on these

sorts of restrictions. On a national level, it's like that, but it's the same with brands. You're aware of all the sensitive areas. For example, if you smoke, certain health-conscious brands won't work with you, which I guess is for the better.

Mitja: Yes, there's something good in that. Limits can be helpful.

Ilya: But once again, I don't smoke. And if I did and wanted to quit, I wouldn't want to do it solely out of fear of losing a contract.

Mitja: Okay. What lessons would you give your younger self to avoid certain problems or mistakes early on? Or what could have changed your approach to influencer marketing and working with brands?

Ilya: I think, overall, I did things correctly. And, well, to this day, I don't really feel ashamed of anything. There were some mistakes that experience helped me understand, especially in terms of content creation, learning the right way to do things. I spent a lot of time carving my own path. I started late. If I could go back to the beginning, I'd certainly have joined YouTube earlier, but I just bet on the wrong platform and, honestly, left it way too late (I'm talking about LiveJournal). I didn't pay attention to trends, and I was quite set in my ways. You have to be more flexible; you need to look closely at new formats and not fear them. It's really damaging when you start to seal yourself off and stop evolving, when you isolate your blog... that's it. In today's world, when new formats and platforms appear, if you want to stay successful, you need to stay tuned to where the wind is blowing and adapt, not to the audience, but to the context of the time, the way people consume information. Otherwise, you may end up on the sidelines, with your train going nowhere. By then, everyone else has already moved on, and you're left behind. Unfortunately, a lot of creative people overlook this. Usually, producers manage these shifts for artists. But most creators have to do this themselves. If you don't want to end up like a musician who's only remembered as "Hey, didn't you sing those great songs? Come on, do an encore," then you need to stay relevant, work with new formats, reach new audiences, and all the rest.

Mitja: And maybe the final question. What are your thoughts on influencer marketing in today's industry? What do you foresee in the near future? Are there any trends that have caught your attention?

Ilya: I think the main trend is that all these finicky influencers will likely be replaced quickly by a wave of AI and neural networks. Ultimately, the world runs on money, and money wins over chaos. Brands, companies, and corporations aim, above all, to minimize risks and simplify everything. With the rise of social media, there's a strange situation now where large companies and brands rely on some very unpredictable people. Just look at Kanye West's

situation with Adidas. They partnered with him like he was a regular person, only for him to end up making bizarre statements about Hitler. Then Adidas had to handle the backlash, wondering what he'd say next. This "cancel culture" impacts brands significantly. It's more intense in the West than in Russia, but it's also relevant here. For instance, when Nastya Ivleeva held a wild, controversial party, her brand partners were left wondering how to handle the fallout from this "unorthodox" behavior. This problem isn't necessarily caused by the brands or the influencers themselves; it's just how things have developed. For any brand, a single inappropriate comment from an influencer can lead to a massive drop in stock prices, which is, of course, a huge issue. So, companies are naturally looking for ways to avoid relying on these unpredictable influencers. Right now, relationships between brands and influencers are a bit like a village dealing with a dragon, they keep the dragon happy with offerings, just hoping it doesn't devour them. But they're actively looking for ways to do away with the "dragon" altogether and focus on running their business without the risk. I think we'll start seeing predictable, obedient influencer avatars created by AI. There's already significant investment in this area, with AI models making money on platforms like OnlyFans, engaging in artistic endeavors, and even gathering their own fanbases. I think this trend will keep growing, especially as brands like Coca-Cola would rather invest in a predictable avatar than in a live influencer like Ilya Varlamov, who could say or do something controversial tomorrow. So, influencers who have built their income around being intermediaries between brands and the public will likely see this role taken over by AI, a much more predictable and manageable "middleman."

Mitja: Okay. Thanks so much! I think this turned out really well.

Ilya: If anything I said is useful to you, then great.

Appendix 2: Transcript of Interview with Maya Volf-Kats, 25.10.24

Originally in Russian, translated into English

Mitja: Let's start by outlining the goal of this interview. The purpose of this interview is to explore your role as the manager of Ilya's channel and discuss how strategy and marketing impact Ilya's approach, his work, and the content. The interview will be divided into three sections. The first is about channel management and the influence of influencer marketing on the channel. The second section will focus on audience and brand engagement. The third section will cover industry trends and lessons that can benefit emerging bloggers. By "influencer marketing," I'm referring to the strategy of promoting products and services through influencers for future growth.

Maya: For example? So, there's a company that advertises with Ilya, and you want to know how I influence that?

Mitja: Yes, that's basically the idea behind influencer marketing. It's marketing that affects the blogger, their organization, environment, and how you, as the manager, see influencer marketing's impact on him, both positive and negative. How does he find a balance between advertising and maintaining his audience's trust? Let's start from the beginning, then. Could you tell me how you started working with Ilya's channel, and what motivated you to take on this project?

Maya: I'm not sure if this will be relevant to you, but we actually met through a cat, literally, through a cat, yes. He was giving away cats, and it so happened that one of them came to me. That's how I started working with Ilya. It was my first job; I didn't have any previous projects. Before this, I was a photographer and illustrator, and Ilya became my first employer. When I joined the team, there was no YouTube yet; there was just the blog (LiveJournal). I was helping with the blog and doing anything else that was needed. I wrote articles, formatted posts, translated some materials, and helped decide what equipment to buy as we started trying new things.

Mitja: What year was that, 2015?

Maya: Yes, so I was handling everything. And if we had any advertising projects, I was the one finding photographers for those projects, trying to organize everything somehow. Sometimes, I even went as a correspondent to the production site or something like that,

filming it. Then it became clear that text formats were becoming less relevant, and video was gradually capturing the audience's attention. Ilya suggested starting a YouTube channel. Since I was already managing all these media projects, organizing them, searching for contractors, and so on, I took it upon myself to start looking for people to make videos. I found an editor and a designer, the designer to make the thumbnails, and the editor to edit the videos. Ilya recorded the first video himself. He came up with the idea, filmed it himself. We just edited it, uploaded it, without giving much thought to packaging it correctly, having the right title, tags, or anything like that. I treated YouTube like Google Drive, just uploading the video, not understanding that there were systems, recommendations, that we could optimize it to reach a new audience.

Mitja: So there was no strategy?

Maya: There was absolutely no strategy. As a result, nothing worked, and it couldn't start working. Ilya himself was also very uncomfortable on camera. He wasn't used to speaking to the camera, he didn't have a trained voice or set intonations, and it was all quite embarrassing. Most of the videos from that time are hidden because they're honestly quite embarrassing. Then, at some point, through these experiments, we reached a somewhat acceptable number of subscribers, say, 30,000 or 50,000. That's when I began to study, to take it more seriously. Up to that point, it was more of a test, but then I realized that without a strategy, we couldn't move forward, and we needed to plan our next steps.

YouTube had just launched a creator support program, so I applied for it. They assigned us a manager from YouTube, who literally started teaching me. We had calls where I opened Google Analytics, YouTube Analytics, and this manager explained to me, "Look, here's recommendations, here's views. One affects the other." We started listening and learning to work with analytics. And then, there was exponential growth, everything started working. Our whole subsequent experience has been, how should I put it? A journey of trial and error, as they say. Through trial and error, we kept testing, adjusting, testing, adjusting, testing, and adjusting. That's how we got to the current state.

Mitja: So, what was the strategy that the YouTube manager instilled?

Maya: It was understanding that YouTube is not just a video hosting platform. It's not a place where you simply upload a file, right? You have to work within the analytics. You need to figure out what affects what because everything influences everything. There are two pivotal points. In the past, you didn't necessarily need to understand how algorithms worked because, for example, if you had a popular Twitter, LiveJournal, or Instagram, you could tell your audience, "Hey friends, check out my video," or post it on Twitter. And people would

actually go there. Now there are so many platforms that, in their battle for audience attention, they don't want Twitter users going to YouTube. They want their audience to stay on Twitter, consume ads there, and not leave.

Therefore, today, if you post a YouTube link on social media, it gets deprioritized. This results in almost no traffic from social media, even if you have a presence everywhere. Out of, say, 30 million views a month, only about 100,000 come from social media. That's almost nothing. So, the focus should be on the recommendation system, that's what the manager explained, and that's what my entire approach is based on. You're trying to cater to the algorithms, and all the work revolves around optimizing for those algorithms.

For instance, what's the optimal video length for viewers? If it's too long, like four hours, it could scare off the audience. What colors should be on the thumbnail? Blue is calming, while red is more attention-grabbing. For example, red thumbnails get about 1% more clicks than blue ones. There are many such nuances, and my job is to study all of them to appeal to the algorithm as much as possible. YouTube nowadays isn't a battle of the best content; it's a battle of analysts, essentially. And we're doing well in this battle because we've embraced analytics and have been following this path for a while. Many bloggers still don't understand this and create content purely by intuition, as best they can. That's all. I hope I answered the question correctly.

Mitja: This is very interesting. I'll go back to influencer marketing for a moment. I want to discuss this topic separately because it's incredibly fascinating. In your opinion, how has influencer marketing affected the content and development of Ilya's channel? Did advertising appear right from the start, and what impact did it have?

Maya: Advertising didn't appear right away. For a long time, there was none simply because there was nothing to sell to clients, there were no stable views, and we didn't fully understand who our audience was. Later, advertising began to appear, and I remember it well. The audience initially reacted negatively. There are always some who are unhappy, and while they stand out, they're actually a small percentage. In terms of numbers, the presence of ads didn't affect us. Views didn't decrease because of advertising. However, there were some negative comments like "Oh, Varlamov has sold out, he's advertising games now" or "How awful, there's advertising, it used to be so nice without it." Those kinds of comments. But the audience didn't shrink, and our subscriber count didn't drop.

For us, of course, it was incredibly beneficial because we finally had funding for production. The more money you have, the more exciting and high-quality content you can create. We started expanding our team. When we started, it was just two people, but now we have

around 70 people working with us, or something close to that. None of this would have been possible without advertising. Additionally, since the war started, Google has stopped monetizing Russian-speaking users, which has affected our income. Without ad sales from Avtorskiye Media, we're barely breaking even. This means that if our views decrease, we won't be profitable, and we might have to cut some segments or produce less content, which we don't want to do. Like any media outlet or creator, we want to try new things, create more content, and reach new audiences. And you can't do that without advertising revenue. So, advertising is crucial.

Mitja: Do you think there were any advertising projects that really influenced Ilya's development and his approach? I mean, any super large projects that you remember?

Maya: I clearly remember the Cherehapa project; I really liked it. It was really great. I always enjoy when we can integrate a client deeply into a video. We have this stance that we don't do hidden advertising; we don't hide ads. Finding the right balance, where the ad is visible, fits organically into the video, and doesn't feel overdone, can be challenging. But when we manage to hit that balance or play around with it creatively, I think it's fantastic. When we did Cherehapa, everyone loved it so much that even our employees became customers. There was even some music that played during these integrations, and people would hum it and miss it after the project ended, even though it was a big campaign. They sold, well, I don't remember exactly, but let's say, 30 ad integrations. When I first heard that number, I was terrified because I thought, "It's impossible not to..."

Mitja: You can swear, go ahead.

Maya: I thought, "It's impossible not to annoy people with 30 ad integrations." Imagine being a subscriber and hearing the same message 30 times, it's awful. This was an ad for an insurance company, so we came up with the idea to use Ilya's travel videos, where he's always doing some risky stuff that viewers don't always notice. For instance, he might cross the street at a red light or walk down a busy street while looking at the camera instead of the road. Every time moments like this happened, we'd freeze the frame. We created a scenario where a mascot, a little blue monster, would message Ilya, saying things like, "What are you doing? Start watching the road. Insurance doesn't cover this, so be careful." Or, on the contrary, "Actually, this insurance does cover such incidents, so if you drop your phone, the company will compensate you." It was fun, subtle, and informative. During the video, you'd learn something new about insurance and how it works. It was natural, fun, and really well done. I don't know how much it impacted Ilya, but it influenced me a lot. Now I know that integrating ads in a fun and interesting way is definitely possible and valuable.

Mitja: That's a great example. How do you think the content on YouTube has changed as the channel has grown? How does audience interaction and feedback affect that content?

Maya: Could you repeat that?

Mitja: How has the content on Ilya's channel evolved as the channel grew? And how has audience feedback influenced this content evolution? Do you interact with your audience? Do you listen to them?

Maya: Yes, the content has changed a lot because, as I mentioned, the more ads we have, the bigger the channel becomes. And the bigger the channel, the more ads it attracts, which in turn gives us more opportunities to create interesting projects. Before the war started, you could say the channel was in a kind of golden era. There were no restrictions yet. We still had monetization with Russia, there was a lot of advertising, and Ilya hadn't yet been labeled as a foreign agent, so we felt very free. At one point, our budget even allowed us to do some almost television-level projects. For example, we have a project called *USSR*, where Ilya traveled around former Soviet republics. Usually, Ilya travels alone, but this time, we had the budget to send a full crew with him, a director, a cameraman, and more. It was a big production team. And of course, you could see the difference; it looked like a professionally shot project that you wouldn't be embarrassed to show on National Geographic. It turned out super impressive and high-quality. If the channel had been smaller, with less monetization and fewer ads, we simply wouldn't have had the technical resources to make it happen. Or look at someone like MrBeast, who can afford to create elaborate sets, like for that one series, I forgot the name, where people were being eliminated. It's a Korean show.

Mitja: *Squid Game*?

Maya: Yes, *Squid Game*. He was able to recreate the entire *Squid Game* set to full scale in America. I can't even imagine how many millions of dollars the production of such a video cost. I wouldn't be surprised if we're talking about figures in the millions. And again, he can do that because of the size of his channel. So, the bigger your channel, the more opportunities you have. You either become very wealthy and keep doing the same thing, or you can invest the money back into content and continue to grow bigger and bigger. That's more our approach. When we have the funds, we try to do something interesting. So that's in response to how our content has evolved. And what was the second part of the question?

Mitja: How do you work with your audience?

Maya: That's a tricky question. Where do you see the audience's reaction? In the comments? We try not to rely on comments too much, because comments are left by a small percentage of viewers. And besides, if we compare it to online reviews, for instance, how often do you

leave a positive review on Amazon or Wildberries? Usually, we leave reviews when we're unhappy with something. Like, if a broken vacuum cleaner arrives, we write "the vacuum is garbage." But you're unlikely to write, "this is the best vacuum I've ever owned, thank you so much, I'll buy the next model." That kind of thing is pretty rare. It's the same with comments, you mostly see negative feedback. But it's incorrect to think that if all you see in the comments is negativity, then people don't like your content. So, we focus on metrics instead. We don't read comments but pay attention to retention, the watch-through rate. For example, if we see that 100% of viewers started watching a video, but only 15% finished, then something clearly went wrong in that video, and we need to address it.

YouTube provides tools for this. There's detailed analytics that lets you see the exact segments where people skip ahead, rewind, or leave the video. Our editors and analyst look at this data. We also watch the ratio of likes to dislikes. If there's an average number for the channel, and we notice that a video has more or fewer likes than usual, we take note. For instance, we realized, for a sad reason, that our audience didn't like a video about people with Down syndrome, a theater where actors with Down syndrome perform. It was disappointing, but we understood that this kind of social content, even though we like it, doesn't resonate with our audience. So if it doesn't resonate, we shouldn't keep making it.

Currently, we plan content knowing that topics like social issues, people with disabilities, or issues around addiction and the LGBTQ community resonate less with our audience. That doesn't mean we avoid them completely. For example, if there's an important event, like a new anti-LGBTQ law in Russia, we'll cover it, because as journalists, it's our duty to report on significant issues. But we probably won't make as much content on these topics as we'd ideally like, because we listen to our audience.

Mitja: How do you manage to maintain authenticity and audience trust when collaborating with brands?

Maya: Well, first of all, we have sponsorship markers, which kind of signal that for the next two minutes, there definitely won't be any negativity. And people understand that perfectly. Besides that, I think it's all about building trust with the audience. If you generally don't deceive people in your content or admit your mistakes, for example, if we made a mistake, we usually post in the comments that at a certain timestamp we were wrong, that this is fake, or that the wrong photo was used in the video, or something like that. We always acknowledge our errors.

Ilya doesn't like the term "blogger," but he has been working online, doing journalism, online journalism specifically, for about 15 or even 20 years, basically, a very long time.

Throughout this time, he has consciously avoided cheap hype or outright distortions. When people know how you approach your work, they trust the ads you record in the same way. Because it's unlikely that a person who has been honest with you for 10 years would suddenly start lying in an ad.

Additionally, we have a principle regarding ads, we don't talk about it with the audience, though maybe we should. We have a very strict approach to advertising. We have a person who checks our clients. If we know a client has deceived people or has had projects that ended poorly for their own clients, we won't accept them for advertising. I think this matters because our audience obviously uses the services of those who advertise with us, otherwise, they wouldn't be advertising here. Since we take responsibility in vetting, it means our viewers are likely satisfied with the quality of the services they receive because we don't advertise garbage. And if they're happy, their trust in our advertising increases. For instance, if they had a good experience using Cherekhapa's services, they'll assume that if Ilya advertises Ingosstrakh's insurance next time, it's probably a good company too. Otherwise, he wouldn't advertise it. I may be overthinking it on behalf of the audience, but I think this is how it works on a larger scale.

Mitja: Can you give examples of companies where a brand wanted to do something that Ilya was against, and as a result, you refused or decided not to compromise, or perhaps did compromise?

Maya: Look, I don't remember the name of the company, but this kind of thing happens quite often. Most frequently, it's related to crypto investments. Some crypto company comes along, promising crazy returns in an incredibly short time, and we just check. It turns out things aren't exactly as they claim; the client is exaggerating. Often, we manage to find a compromise on some of the wording, because sometimes a client does offer a legitimate service. For example, companies that help people get citizenship or residency permits in the UK. They actually provide this service, but for some reason, maybe their marketer isn't well-informed, they come to us claiming "100% guaranteed residency permit in London, UK." And we're like, "Guys, we checked, you do offer this service, but there's no way you can guarantee 100%. We can't say that." Or they say, "Oh, can you also say that Ilya got his residency through us, too?" Sometimes clients don't understand our relationship with our audience and ask us to embellish things.

In most cases, we're able to find a compromise, because our sales team explains how we work. We offer alternative phrasing, like, "Let's say you provide this service, that Ilya appreciates what you do, that you have no complaints against you, all things that are true."

But we won't make things up. And usually, we reach a compromise. That's how it works most of the time. But sometimes, we notice that a client is outright unreliable. Or maybe they're trying to be reliable but have terrible reviews. We simply won't work with them for the reasons I mentioned earlier. Our subscribers might use these services, be dissatisfied, and then it would impact future sponsorships.

Mitja: And am I right in understanding that Ilya still doesn't advertise a service or product unless he personally uses it?

Maya: No, he will advertise it even if he doesn't personally use it.

Mitja: So he's not always speaking from personal experience now.

Maya: If he hasn't used the service, he won't say he has. He can simply talk about it. For example, I haven't personally used a UK residency service, but I can say, "Friends, I just found out there's a company that helps people get residency in the UK, and 95% of their clients succeed, and they have excellent reviews. I've checked it all out. So, if this is relevant to you, they're currently having a sale, take a look, right?" There's no deception in this approach. Ilya won't say he received something if he hasn't. But simply talking about it doesn't hinder him.

Mitja: So one of the most important things is not to lie. Admit mistakes.

Maya: Yes.

Mitja: And communicate your stance to the brand.

Maya: Yes.

Mitja: So, finding a compromise but without deception.

Maya: Of course.

Mitja: Alright, let's move on to the third section: industry trends and lessons for beginners. How do you see the future of marketing in the next two or three years? The industry is evolving very quickly, so it might be more relevant to focus on the near future. What trends do you think will play an important role?

Maya: I need to think about this because I'm primarily focused on our development in terms of content, expanding our audience, and ad sales, and I don't pay as much attention to the broader picture. Right now, I see a clear trend of brands increasingly becoming influencers themselves, or trying to. This wasn't the case before.

Mitja: When the client's side has someone, or several people, who speak on behalf of the brand.

Maya: Yes, that's emerging. This is a completely new phenomenon, especially effective for selling specific physical services. Vertical formats are performing well for this. And, overall,

it seems that vertical video formats have an advantage. Maybe I'm wrong, but for companies, they seem more beneficial. It's easier to sell vertical videos than horizontal ones. For example, if you're a brand selling Birkin bags, I constantly see Birkin bag ads. If you have a YouTube channel about Birkin bags... Well, actually, it's fairly easy to make Birkin reviews like "How to tell a fake Birkin from a real one." But it's clearly harder for brands to promote on YouTube than on TikTok. In TikTok, your recommendations work automatically, and there's a convenient link to start shopping directly from your phone. So, vertical video seems to be more suited for sales, and that's a clear trend.

That's probably also an area where we could improve, we clearly need to pay more attention to vertical content and learn how to make it effectively. What else? It seems that audiences are generally becoming more accepting of ads. When we started, there was some negativity about ads on these bloggers' channels, or complaints that there was too much of it. Now, there's actually a lot more, and people seem to have gotten used to it and react just fine. I haven't seen any significant negativity from audiences for a while. It's a complex issue.

Mitja: Do you use artificial intelligence in your daily work?

Maya: I use it all the time, almost every day, and I constantly encourage my team to do the same. Oh, I just realized... Sorry, that's the courier.

Mitja: No problem.

Maya: Yes, sorry, I got distracted again. What was it? About artificial intelligence? Yes, I use it regularly. I encourage the whole team to use it, and I believe there's absolutely nothing shameful about it. I've heard of companies that are against it and even forbid their employees from using ChatGPT, which I completely disagree with. I think AI can significantly boost work efficiency. ChatGPT, for example, is great for brainstorming. We can discuss new format ideas with the team, and then give ChatGPT these formats to see if it can spin new ideas or suggest something we hadn't thought of. It handles this really well.

Neural networks can also create animations, bringing photos to life. Just a few years ago, we had to pay quite a bit to motion designers to animate photos slightly, like to make it look like the person is moving a little. Now neural networks can handle this quickly and efficiently.

Well, not always perfectly, but if you invest in a premium version and figure out how to use it, it's really helpful. Most of our thumbnails are created with neural networks. It's amazing because now YouTube allows for multiple thumbnail versions. Before, we'd only have one thumbnail per video, but now we can quickly create seven different ones and test them. Each thumbnail still gets refined by a designer, as they're not always perfect, but it saves a ton of time and money.

Mitja: So, something that used to take a week or two can now be done in just a couple of hours.

Maya: Yes, of course. It's incredibly helpful; it allows us to analyze large amounts of information. For example, recently Ilya went to shoot at Burning Man, and they sent over these enormous, incredibly complex contracts in English, at a C3 level, detailing what could and couldn't be filmed. It was impossible to read through. To understand it, we would have needed to hire a translator, then have a lawyer review the translation, and then translate the lawyer's comments back into English to communicate with them on the agreement. Now, you can simply feed these 50 pages into ChatGPT and ask it to summarize the key points in Russian, and it does an excellent job. Honestly, it's like a blessing.

There's also an amazing tool by Yandex that helps with video timestamping. For example, when we publish a four-hour video, an SMM manager used to have to watch the whole thing, marking main points for easier navigation, like noting where the introduction to the news segment starts, when a certain topic is covered, and so on. Now, you can give the video to an AI, and it provides ready-made timestamps. That's four hours saved for the SMM manager, who can now work on other, more valuable tasks. It's amazing. I'm really glad this exists. That said, I don't believe it will completely replace people, but it's a powerful tool for increasing efficiency.

Mitja: So we've identified artificial intelligence as a trend, along with vertical video. By the way, do you think the trend for vertical video is due to content simplification? Because vertical videos are objectively quicker and easier to make than complex horizontal videos, which are more artistically demanding.

Maya: I don't think that's the case. It's not that creators find it easier to make vertical videos. It's more that there's now so much content, so many competing creators and products, that there's an intense battle for attention. TikTok came along as a kind of compromise, allowing viewers to consume a lot, watching something about you, about you, about Birkin bags, about everything, by shrinking videos to 15 seconds. I doubt TikTok planned it that way, but it's become a compromise in this battle for attention. Now, everyone gets a share of attention, but it's much shallower than before, which I find problematic. But I might just be sounding a bit like a boomer here.

It seems like we're in an era of ADHD, and TikTok fuels that. For Gen Z, it's genuinely hard to watch anything longer than 15 seconds. Even I've noticed that after watching a lot of Reels, when I switch to YouTube and a vlogger has a two-minute intro, I'm already like, "Please, just get to the point."

Mitja: At what speed do you usually watch videos on YouTube?

Maya: I watch YouTube videos at 1.5–2x speed. If it's something artistic, like Ptushkin or similar, I might watch at normal speed. But if it's information-based content, I tend to watch at a higher speed. That, too, is a trend, though it's more about the audience than the content itself. There's a clear trend of audience attention being harder and harder to hold. In that sense, our four-hour episodes really stand out, which is why we have an older audience. Gen Z doesn't watch us; it's too hard for them. We need to start offering them something if we want to continue growing.

Mitja: So one of the challenges for Ilya's channel and content is attracting a younger audience, right?

Maya: Yes, without dancing on TikTok.

Mitja: That's a tough one; it's a whole project on its own. What lessons would you say can be drawn from managing Ilya's channel when it comes to working with brands and engaging audiences?

Maya: Lessons, yes. What problems did we encounter, and what did we learn?

Mitja: For example, what would you tell your beginner self to help avoid many issues and challenges?

Maya: Hire an advertising producer. For a long time, I resisted this for some reason and treated the sales team as if they were also advertising producers, which created issues for the sales team. But I now believe the role and value of a salesperson is really in establishing client communication. Managing communication with my production team isn't really their job. I used to see it differently, but it's a personal lesson, not really an industry-wide one.

Mitja: Some behind-the-scenes insights.

Maya: Yes, yes, exactly. I'm the kind of person who, if I'm leading a project, I usually know everything about it and tend to obsess over even the smallest details because I feel it's important to understand every aspect. But actually, that's unnecessary and probably not right. Some people are talented at selling but not at management, and that's completely normal. Previously, we had a fairly complex Trello setup, where salespeople managed their own projects. But recently, we finally hired an advertising producer. Now, all the sales reps communicate with this producer, who knows our team, our resources, who's handling what, and who's facing challenges. This producer manages the projects on our side. It's made everything better. Our team is less stressed, because sales have a big team too, and building personal relationships with everyone, there are about 70 of us, is tough. The sales reps worry less too, because there's now a dedicated person trained in effective, ethical

communication who knows how to get things done faster and more efficiently. This was something we should have done five years ago.

Treating advertising with care is essential; that's something I really learned. It's about creating a process that's comfortable for everyone, the client, the sales team, and the production crew, because the most important thing is how the ad turns out. Wait, I forgot the question.

Mitja: The question was really about what lessons you learned to help avoid mistakes. And also, what advice would you give now to bloggers who are building their careers and want to keep their audience's trust?

Maya: Never deceive your audience, that's truly the most important thing. No matter how big your reach is, even if you're making sensational videos about alien invasions, you'll still run into problems because of it. If your content is built on lies, it will be hard to sell ads since your audience won't believe in your ads any more than they believe in your alien content. Also, censorship on YouTube and other social networks is increasing. If you're spreading unscientific nonsense, the algorithms will start de-prioritizing your content as AI develops further. This happened, for instance, with anti-vaccine channels or people who denied COVID-19. If you made videos denying COVID, even if you genuinely believed it, YouTube's algorithms would bury your content. I think this trend will continue, and clearly unscientific content or outright lies will be suppressed. Although I personally think censorship is more negative than positive, it's something that you can't escape. It's going to happen. So yes, honesty is crucial in every sense.

Pay more attention to algorithms. YouTube is no longer just about creativity or making the funniest video; it's about understanding what the social platform needs. It's essential to understand why you're valuable to the platform. Let's be honest, YouTube makes a lot of money off bloggers, so YouTube wants your videos to be longer because that means more ads and ad slots. They also want strong viewer retention so that people don't leave your channel and continue spending as much time on the platform as possible. If you understand this and make content that aligns with these goals, you're more likely to get into recommendations than if you ignore the platform's needs and just use it however you like. This isn't about creativity; it's about understanding and aligning with the platform's goals. Delegating is also crucial. If you want to become a truly successful, large-scale blogger, look at the most popular bloggers worldwide. I would compare PewDiePie and MrBeast here. PewDiePie represents the old-school approach, the way things used to work. He makes video game reviews and tells jokes, that's YouTube of the 2010s. Those days are over. MrBeast is

the creator of the future. Look at his huge team, his approach to algorithms, and so on. That's the future. We can't look to PewDiePie as a model anymore.

Mitja: Okay. I think I've asked everything I wanted to. Is there anything else you'd like to add or discuss about marketing in relation to the growth of Ilya's channel and career?

Maya: Let me think. Well, what can I say? I think it would be great if we could study ad conversions more thoroughly. Unfortunately, YouTube doesn't really offer that capability. For instance, if you launch targeted ads through Google Ads or another platform, you can see how many times the ad was shown, how many clicks it received, the conversion rate, and the cost per lead. But right now, if you're running ads directly without Google Ads, you don't have access to this data. I don't think YouTube will develop this further because it's not in their interest; they don't profit from it, so it makes more sense for them to develop their own ad offerings. But I do think there are ways to do it by alternative or indirect methods: for example, by tracking how many people skipped an ad, then seeing how many still clicked on the link. Collecting this kind of sophisticated analytics is technically possible, and I think it would be really valuable if we could learn to do it.

Mitja: Kind of like how Instagram figured it out.

Maya: Yes, exactly. Like Instagram did. I don't think YouTube will go down that path, but if some YouTubers manage to do it, it could be a huge advantage for the sales teams, who could present more concrete data to sell ads. This is one of those directions it would be amazing to reach someday. Right now, it's difficult since Russian-speaking creators are primarily focused on survival, and our channel is no exception. Once we're able to move beyond mere survival and feel more secure, we'll have the chance to develop this further.

Mitja: It's certainly a harsh learning experience, one you wouldn't wish on anyone, really.

Maya: Yep. So, do you think that worked? Did we cover everything well?

Mitja: One last question: what role do you think the agency and your team played in Ilya's channel growth?

Maya: I think I've already touched on this.

Mitja: So, do you think he could have achieved this success without the team and the agency?

Maya: Of course not. Definitely not without advertising. And absolutely not without Avtorskiye Media. For a long time, in the first few years, we had practically no monetization on YouTube at all. You know, YouTube has three types of monetization icons: yellow, red, and green. For a long time, most of our videos were marked with a red icon, and we weren't particularly trying to change that. Honestly, we weren't focused on it because we didn't think

we'd see any real revenue from YouTube. For a while, we simply didn't give it much attention.

Actually, here's another piece of advice I'd give my past self: take monetization seriously. When we finally started to focus on monetization, we were already a pretty big channel, about a million subscribers, really significant. And for a long time, we relied solely on external advertising to support the team and hire more people. Without it, we would never have been able to grow our team.

Now, the situation has completely changed. Since Ilya was labeled as a foreign agent, at one point, we almost had no external advertising at all, maybe just one slot here or there. But the internal monetization we receive now is substantial enough to support the team entirely. Even if there was no external advertising at all, we wouldn't make a profit, but we could still keep going. So, once again, advertising is incredibly important. Sorry, what was the question again?

Mitja: Would Ilya have been able to keep going without Avtorskiye Media?

Maya: No, he wouldn't have. Absolutely not.

Mitja: Definitely.

Maya: Or without, well, without advertising. Or without the team.

Mitja: Without your team, yes.

Maya: Well, no, I mean (blushes), I guess you'd have to ask Ilya. It's not about me personally. But a channel of this size cannot operate without a manager. Absolutely. It doesn't matter if it's me or someone else. The amount of content Ilya produces requires such an investment of time, resources, and energy that it's simply impossible to be both the channel's manager and the channel's creator. They're two entirely different roles. So, there has to be a manager, right? Whether it's me or someone else, that's another question. But big channels definitely need someone in this position.

And here's some advice for beginners: the sooner you find a partner, the easier it'll be. You need to divide responsibilities so that someone focuses on content, and someone else handles everything else, organizing the team, finding and interviewing editors, and so on. This work takes so much time. Or, imagine if I suddenly became a blogger and the new creator of the "Varlamov" channel. I would have to choose, either I manage the content, or I do everything else.

For example, Katya Patyulina handles advertising. I think this is the most efficient setup. So, in this respect, I think we've been doing it right from the start. Some people try to handle everything themselves, selling ads, filming, hiring people, conducting interviews, and giving

video feedback. It's hard on them, and they often abandon projects. From the very beginning, we've had a clear division of tasks. I never dealt with ad sales, Katya Patyulina never handled production, and Varlamov has never been responsible for either. It's a highly effective setup. This is also a tip I'd offer to bloggers.

Of course, there are rare exceptions, like Yuri Dud, but he has a small team of three people. If you're lucky and manage to get popular with simple content that doesn't require a large team, that's great. But since the trend is moving toward the scale of something like MrBeast, I doubt it's possible for most people.

Mitja: Okay, thank you so much. This was a fantastic, really insightful interview.

Appendix 3: Transcript of Interview with Iulian Kheirbeik, 10.10.24

Originally in Russian, translated into English

Mitja: Let's start with the purpose of this interview. I want to explore, first and foremost, your experience in marketing, your views on Ilya Varlamov's role in the industry, and how marketing impacts the career development of bloggers. I hope we can fit this into an hour. Do you have an hour?

Iulian: Yes.

Mitja: The interview will be divided into three sections. The first part will focus solely on you, your journey into the industry. The second section will cover influencer marketing and Ilya Varlamov. And the third section will look at general industry insights and lessons that you have learned, or that we can learn.

Iulian: Sounds good.

Mitja: Let's start from the very beginning. Can you please tell me how you came to work at Avtorskiye Media and what attracted you to this company?

Iulian: In 2018, after finishing my fourth year of university, I started looking for a job that wasn't related to my field of study. I graduated from medical school in 2020, but I was looking for something that would be a new challenge and a new area of interest for me. I considered absolutely different fields. I saw a job vacancy at Avtorskiye Media, and the agency piqued my interest because it worked with bloggers I was familiar with, bloggers I watched, maybe not regularly, but from time to time. At that time, it seemed to me, and it still seems to me now, that they were gaining popularity. So, it was a growing, emerging market that I didn't understand but found interesting. I applied, went through the interview, and joined as a sales manager or project manager. That's how I started working, including with Ilya Varlamov. Since 2018, the number of exclusive authors I had the opportunity to work with increased. My first project with Ilya was in 2019. In 2022, I became the head of sales at Avtorskiye Media. By 2024, Avtorskiye Media parted ways with Ilya Varlamov due to market conditions and legal constraints, as certain authors were designated foreign agents by the Russian Ministry of Justice, making it impossible to continue working with them.

Mitja: OK. Could you tell me more about the beginning of your collaboration with Ilya? How did he, as a blogger, influence your perspective on marketing? Could you share your

first experience working with him? And was he, for instance, someone you admired when you started working? Did you have a conscious desire to work with him, and how did it align with your expectations?

Iulian: I knew about Ilya as a writer and media figure, probably from around 2011 or 2012, but I can't say I was a regular reader. I would check in occasionally, mainly reading his text or following him on Twitter. As I mentioned, I first worked with Ilya around 2019. He gave the impression of a very busy person, extremely productive, but it wasn't clear how he managed to do everything because whenever I wrote to him, he responded briefly and not immediately. By 2018, Ilya had already started developing his YouTube channel and was becoming more of a video creator. His platform was growing rapidly. During that time, I observed that he was constantly growing. I couldn't work with Ilya right away because working with a blogger is primarily dependent on the clients you have. At the time, I didn't have clients who could afford to work with him, simply because it was too expensive. In 2018, the influencer marketing market was just emerging in Russia. There were a few large brands with substantial budgets, but I didn't have such clients. Despite Ilya's high productivity, when I worked with him on projects, I realized that his productivity was the result of the team around him. To work with Ilya, you need to provide a clear, time-structured action plan. Otherwise, given how busy he is, he'll simply move on to the next task if there's any downtime.

Mitja: Okay, so when you started working with him, at the time of your first projects with Ilya, he was already a big blogger working with large brands and big contracts, so to speak. His ads were expensive, and he had his own team.

Iulian: Yes, as I said, the result of his high productivity is a very high degree of organization. It's Ilya himself, it's his assistants, and it's the channel's producer. By 2012, Ilya was already a major author, but as I said, primarily a text-based author, though he was already influential. Actually, I misspoke earlier: before becoming a text-based author, he was already a notable photographer. And from 2012, I believe, there's that famous photograph of the presidential change in the Kremlin, which, if I'm not mistaken, Ilya took. That was one of the very important media moments for him. As for video: his text ads were already expensive. There was already a set market for this, and he was working with pretty large brands. Both Russian and international companies. The video market and influencer marketing in Russia were just emerging in 2018-2019. Or rather, in 2017, 2018, 2019 it was just beginning. And the major brands, the same ones who were already buying text ads, hadn't yet moved into video ads.

Mitja: So it was the transition from text to video. Okay, let's talk about another transition, your role as commercial director at Avtorskiye Media. Tell us, please, what changes happened in your work compared to the time when you were only a sales manager?

Iulian: The short answer: I had less time. The real answer: In 2022, the market structure changed significantly. First, the market itself was changing, and the structure in terms of the companies represented was changing. Second, the market structure changed in terms of long-term planning. The planning horizon shortened drastically. Third, the market was forced to change under the influence of the news agenda and legislative restrictions. I actually took on this role as a kind of crisis manager, to try to find ways to minimize market share losses in the face of all these changes.

Mitja: Okay. And then, based on your experience as a commercial director, could you tell me the main aspects of working with bloggers like Ilya? For example, what success criteria do you use when evaluating advertising campaigns with such bloggers?

Iulian: Here, you need to look both from the ground level, like from the field, what managers evaluate, and also more strategically, which is what decision-makers in business, that is, advertisers, are looking at. From the perspective of managers, from the field level, the parameters for effectiveness remain unchanged. Ultimately, the key measure of effectiveness is sales. After that, it's just a question of what tool you use to measure it. When it comes to long-term planning, or evaluating effectiveness on a higher, more strategic level, the first issue is reputation. The second issue is the association between the blogger and the brand. What I mean is, when an influencer collaborates with the same brand or product over a long period, there's a psychological effect where a strong connection forms in the viewer's mind. Whatever happens to the blogger or celebrity, and here, we consider Ilya Varlamov as something between a regular blogger and a celebrity, a strong association is established between the brand and the influencer. On the one hand, any negativity directed toward the company, for whatever reason, will be reflected on the blogger by the audience, even though it's not his fault. He didn't make those decisions, he didn't develop the product, and if there were mistakes, they weren't his. On the other hand, if the blogger takes a position on an issue, whatever that issue may be, and a blogger cannot avoid taking a position because he's a person, not an editorial board, this, too, will be projected onto the company by the audience. And this is something the company considers as a reputational risk. Why? Because they cannot directly influence what the influencer says, as that would be censorship, nor what he does, as that would amount to the same thing. They can terminate their partnership with

the influencer, but these are risks weighed not just by the marketing department but by other people as well, including lawyers and PR specialists.

Mitja: By the way, in connection with this, it's very interesting to discuss the role of the agency in the work between brands and bloggers. I think we can move on to the second section, which concerns influencer marketing and Ilya's experience. So, the main question in this regard: can you please explain how relationships between an agency and an influencer are built? And could you give examples of successful campaigns with Ilya, and what made them successful in the partnership between the agency and Ilya?

Iulian: The question is rightly posed, because it's indeed about relationships. It's about the relationship between the person who is the author and the person from the agency, whether it's one of the dozens of employees, whether it's a sales manager or the agency director, it doesn't matter. It's always a matter of human relations and trust. To work with a blogger for a long time, all parties must feel comfortable, and all parties must achieve their goals. The very first goal, although I wouldn't say it's the simplest, is probably the most straightforward to define: financial gain. If the author is making money, for him, that is the simplest and most obvious indicator that we are working efficiently and correctly. But here, it works according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs: once the basic need is met, new needs emerge. There are examples of other bloggers, not Ilya, with whom we parted ways because they felt we weren't meeting their other needs. In fact, it's most logical to compare the blogger market to the film industry. In what sense? An actor, a director, or a screenwriter has two representatives: an agent and a manager. The agent's job is to ensure that the person they represent has work, that is, to bring in projects, bring in money. The manager is the person who helps the author, helps the celebrity in various ways.

Mitja: With everyday tasks.

Iulian: They satisfy other requests, any other requests. The manager doesn't have the specific task of bringing work to the actor. It's the same with bloggers. Blogger agencies, sales houses like ours, we focus solely and primarily on bringing in projects and thereby bringing in money. There are other agencies, called talent agencies, which perform more of a manager's function. This could involve taking someone to a party, introducing them to someone, organizing an event, finding a house, anything. This type of work is broader in scope, and its KPIs can vary greatly.

Mitja: Like a concierge, you could say, but with more integrity.

Iulian: In a sense, yes. For some, that's enough. And this doesn't depend on the level of popularity or demand of the celebrity, I'll use the word "celebrity" here because I'm

comparing it to a related field, the film industry. It doesn't depend on how big, important, in-demand, or wanted you are. It depends on what you need. We parted ways with some smaller creators who sold well but wanted us to also take on a managerial function, which we don't do because it's not our specialty, it's not what we focus on. We continue working with larger creators who get invited to participate in TV projects or other ventures that only boost their image. But we keep working with them because they see value in us as those who bring in the money. It's all about relationships. Our relationships with Ilya have always been good with everyone. There have been rare production issues, but those are perfectly normal, they can happen anywhere, whether at a steel mill or on a film set. It doesn't matter. But he understood the value of us as the ones who bring in projects, who negotiate with advertisers, and who act as a filter between him and the advertisers. A crucial point is that our agency has always been on the bloggers' side, always protecting their interests. If a client was unhappy about something, most of the time the blogger never even heard about it or the extent of it, because we absorbed that. As for successful projects, in the case of Ilya Varlamov, it wasn't so much about sales, but about the fact that people talked about them. I think Ilya's most successful projects were up until 2020. These were large-scale image campaigns, when he hadn't yet fully transitioned into being a video blogger. One memorable case was his work with Alfa-Bank, where he even changed his image and wore a suit for the campaign. He had a neat hairstyle, which was uncharacteristic for him. It looked strange. It was surprising for him, for the client, and for the audience. That's why it was a memorable ad campaign. But in order to convince him, many clients would come with requests like, "let's style Ilya" or "let's gift Ilya a suit." A huge number of such requests were rejected. Not because there wasn't enough money, but because the suggestion involved taking him out of his comfort zone. Getting someone out of their comfort zone is always a matter of trust and relationships. And this brings us to the point that, as an organization, we build trusting relationships with our creators. If we come to a blogger with a project and say, "Look, this is amazing. It's unusual for you; it's out of your comfort zone, but it will work," and if the creator trusts us, and if they're working with us, we assume they do, they're more likely to agree. So, the first project that came to mind was the one with the bank.

Mitja: By the way, that's an interesting point, that Ilya made a compromise in the Alfa-Bank project. And this is also an interesting topic about the connection between influencer marketing and bloggers. How do you see the influence of influencer marketing on the career development of bloggers, for example, on Ilya's career?

Iulian: Here, we need to define what we mean by influencer marketing. I assume in your question you're referring to advertisers. Advertisers, businesses, the source of money, right? Then it's quite simple: you need to view media and bloggers as people who do something in their spare time, but also as people who do it full-time as their job. And the work should yield some return, ideally commercial. Why? Because making money allows you to keep doing this work and developing it in one direction or another, releasing more content, making it more complex, and so on. This is what leads to the growth of a platform and the progression from a small blogger to a mid-sized one, to a large one, and even to a celebrity. Though, it's important to distinguish between big bloggers, even those with a million subscribers, and celebrities. There's a difference. Celebrity is about "street credibility", recognizability beyond the platform. Some define it as offline recognition and value. You might be very popular, but other businesses or people may not be interested in inviting you, for example, to host their event. Why?

Well, because, well, he's famous there, but not famous here. The issue of compromise is very important here because, as I said, in the audience's mind, a strong connection forms between the image of the blogger and the image of the business. The business has its own image; the business has its own style. In Russia, it's become customary that every bank has its own color. And even if you look at their technical specifications, at what they ask for in advertising, what they want and what they don't want, there's often a request that no competitor's color appears in the frame. They don't outright say, "don't wear the colors of this or that bank"; it's just understood. Like a regular traffic light, there's red, yellow, blue, green, and so on. Now, if a blogger is always wearing green in the frame, does that mean he can't work with a red bank? No, it doesn't, if both parties can reach a compromise. Finding this compromise is essentially the work of Avtorskiye Media, our agency.

Mitja: I can probably add something here. Let's not hide it, right now, I'm working with Alfa-Bank. I didn't work on that particular project, but we did have a project where, for an Instagram post, we completely changed the background behind Ilya in the photo. The background was originally blue, and we changed it to red. We had a similar situation with Otkritie Bank, where we made the mug in the frame blue to match the bank's branding. That happened too.

Iulian: Totally unbiased party here (laughs). I also worked on a project with Otkritie.

Mitja: The issue of compromise is complicated, multifaceted, but let's discuss what opportunities influencer marketing opens up for bloggers and for Ilya specifically, opportunities that might not have arisen otherwise.

Iulian: Influencer marketing is about advertising with bloggers. The simplest definition is that when a business buys ads, it gives the blogger money. And, as I said, money is needed to develop content. For some time, you can, as a text-based creator, write just for yourself, what we call “writing for the drawer.” Maybe someone will read it, maybe not. But there’s likely no real continuation from this, no development or career ladder.

Businesses bring money into this market. Money, which is a necessary resource, as I’ve said, to make the production more complex, the visuals more beautiful, and to hire more scriptwriters. In doing so, we also create new jobs around what seems like just one person talking on the internet, but who actually has an editor, a producer, someone scouting for beautiful locations, a cameraman, and someone negotiating for the shoots because you need not only to find a location, but also to get permission to film there. Try finding a beautiful shot in Saudi Arabia. You might find one, but getting the necessary permission will take a long time unless you can negotiate. For Ilya, some advertising projects even involved traveling somewhere to talk about the place, show it, and promote it. This gives you a chance to travel somewhere you wouldn’t normally go. You can create additional content beyond the scope of the advertising project. This way, you don’t just get one video, but several clips that you can share with your audience over the next month, or even weeks.

Mitja: So, for you, influencer marketing primarily gives bloggers the chance to try things, visit places, or use products that they might never have experienced if a brand hadn’t provided the opportunity in the form of money. Do you see this primarily as a financial opportunity, or is it a broader issue?

Mitja: Let’s return to the question of what opportunities influencer marketing opens up for bloggers, particularly for Ilya. Opportunities that might not have arisen otherwise.

Iulian: You asked a clarifying question: does this mean I see influencer marketing as purely about money? About financial opportunities? The answer is “Yes.” A very simple answer, yes, it is indeed financial. It’s a financial opportunity because business provides a resource that, as I’ve said, can be directed in different ways for the creator’s development. Let’s look at a blogger, at this kind of individual media, as a product. It’s often perceived as a “jack of all trades” , someone who does everything themselves. But that’s not always the case. Even if the creator is initially able to do all of this, like Ilya, who wrote his own scripts, traveled, and found locations himself. Well, Ilya takes his own photographs, frames his own shots, and speaks on camera. In theory, he could do it all himself, but to be more efficient, he hires specialists, other people, each of whom takes on a part of this work, freeing up Ilya’s time to work on more topics for his content, whether it’s text or video. At the same time, as I said

earlier, this also means pouring more money into the economy. So, the money in the economy circulates because new jobs are created. For example, the bank pays you for advertising, and you pay someone to edit the video with that bank's advertisement. That person then goes to a local store and buys groceries. In this way, the money continues to flow. And at the same time, perhaps the bank also profits, thanks to payment processing and the ability to pay by card at that same store. That's how this cycle of money in the economy works. From an overall economic perspective, that's the point. Of course, we can also consider the creative meaning and creative opportunities for the individual. But I believe that creative opportunities without financial resources are impossible in any case. I just don't subscribe to the very old idea that the artist must starve. That's it.

Mitja: Tell me, then, could you answer this question: How do you think marketing changes a blogger? For better or for worse? There probably isn't one single answer, but in your opinion, how does a blogger change under the influence of influencer marketing?

Iulian: First of all, it depends on who the blogger is working with. What does a "good" advertiser mean? A company with a good reputation, whose managers don't get too tough with demands, who don't restrict the content, and understand that the advertising break is limited to one and a half minutes, and their requirements don't extend to the content surrounding it. In such a case, the influence is purely positive. But once new demands emerge, ones that limit the creator's expression or creativity in any way, then it starts having a negative impact. But it's important to note that influencer marketing affects not just the individual creator directly. Influencer marketing and the money that comes into the market through this tool create more and more creators. Because people who would like to pursue creativity but understand that they need to pay rent and buy groceries, and work takes up all their time to do this, they end up at the bottom. The Maslow pyramid. They see that if there is money in this market, then they can try their hand at creativity. What if their creativity is needed by someone? If it turns out that it is in demand, then influencer marketing, willingly or unwillingly, creates new bloggers, new creators.

Mitja: A factory-kitchen.

Iulian: Yes. And it's not even intentional, it's simply because if someone succeeded, then maybe I will too. Well, yes, at least I will try. That's the logic.

Mitja: Let's return a bit to the topic of advertising agencies, including Avtorskiye Media. Could you tell us what the main challenges are when working with bloggers? And first and foremost, how do we as an agency overcome them?

Iulian: My connection ate the word. What challenges or problems arise?

Mitja: What challenges does the agency face?

Iulian: Challenges. We are a sales house. We're almost a talent agency. Almost, in what sense? As I mentioned earlier, we don't perform management functions, we only sell advertising. We are agents, and we work only with a specific pool of bloggers. What does this mean? We can't just go to anyone and sell them advertising. We can only offer advertisers those we have contracts with. The first challenge is signing a contract. Expanding the pool of authors, expanding our assortment, so to speak. The first challenge is to find a new author, negotiate with a new author. If we've completed this step, it means the author is already working with us. The next step is to sell them well. This matter goes to the sales department of Avtorskiye Media. After that, regardless of whether we are selling the author well or not, we sell the author. More often than not, we sell the author well. The key issue is for the author to stay with us. And here, we must work with the author's expectations and their needs. I repeat, even if the author is doing great, growing, everything is going well, and seemingly, there's nothing more to wish for, they may still have a need not just to be sold, but to be nurtured. And for the umpteenth time, this is not our responsibility. It's not our profile. So, to find an author among the vast number of authors out there, especially with the rise of influencer marketing, which is allowing more authors to emerge because there is money in the market, this becomes the first challenge. Then, you have to sign them. This means reaching an agreement and getting the person to accept our terms, our rules of engagement. And here we go to the sales department. So, okay, we've signed them. What happens next? After that, we sell them. More often than not, successfully. But the success of the sales department depends not only, and, unfortunately, not so much, on the sales department itself. It depends on the market. If there are geopolitical upheavals, economic turmoil, or other problems in the market, these can turn into threats or weaknesses for us. For example, a new content topic might emerge on the market that advertisers are looking for, but we don't have that in our assortment. So, we need to rush and find someone who could fill this gap in our offering for the advertisers.

Mitja: Now, specifically regarding the actual work. The agency is working with the blogger. What challenges arise when working with them? And, for example, were there any specific challenges when working with Ilya during the process?

Iulian: The most common challenge we faced was the difficulty in organizing time. Because, more often than not, they wanted Ilya to be somewhere he wasn't at that moment. So, we had to bring him there. And then the logistics begin: by plane, train, or car. How to make it

happen, when to do it, and at whose expense, it's always a matter of negotiation. The pressure was often on to move Ilya to a location and meet advertiser deadlines. For example, okay, the flight is on Thursday, the shoot is on Saturday, but the output needs to be by Friday. How do we make this happen physically? So, we start looking for other ways to organize logistics. That's the first challenge. The second main challenge is probably external factors. All external factors primarily relate to legislation, specifically laws that affect the industry. But before getting to legislation, there are some internal limitations. For instance, when Ilya has a news release. News can be good, bad, or about natural disasters, which he didn't choose but reports on. Some advertisers don't want to be associated with such news, so they prefer not to appear alongside them.

Mitja: So, you mean communication challenges? In the first place, the agency and its managers must build bridges between the blogger and the brand, explaining to the brand why they should be included in specific content, such as Ilya's news agenda. And how that might positively affect their sales, their video reach? Essentially, the brand must understand the blogger's position. So, the main challenge seems to be acting as a good buffer.

Iulian: Let me take a step back. It's not about conveying the blogger's position but reminding the brand of the blogger's value, why they wanted to work with this particular blogger in the first place, why they wanted to advertise with them, and why they approached their audience. That's a very important task. Imagine, you're an author, traveling, writing a lot of texts, shooting videos, and taking photos. An advertiser tells you, "We want to work with you, but please don't say this or that," and the first thing you'd say is, "Guys, I don't have time for this. Thank you, goodbye." And that's perfectly logical. It's a matter of time. You don't have time to argue, and you need to focus on other things. The value of the agency is precisely in reminding the brand of why they initially came to the blogger and why they wanted to purchase ads with them. Because if they didn't want to buy, there wouldn't even be a question.

Mitja: Okay. But I think I've received the answer I wanted to hear. Yes, I agree with your assessment here because I hold the same view. The issue of value and the point about how, as agency representatives, we need to deliver the second validation to the client, basically, we need to revalidate it for them. The client already knows which blogger they're working with, but we have to validate the post for them again, perform a two-factor authentication, so that they can confidently say, "Yes, we're going with this blogger." Not necessarily Ilya, anyone. Okay, let's move on to the last section. Your thoughts on the industry and the lessons we can learn from today's marketing. Could you tell me how you see the future of marketing in

Russia and abroad? What trends do you think will define the development of this field in the next couple of years?

Iulian: It's very different. Why? Very different. This is really serious. It's very different. Why? Because, for example, in America, brands are seriously concerned about losing one of the platforms where they effectively spent money, TikTok. They're looking for where to redirect this budget. It's not just about moving money, but reaching the same audience. Advertising on TikTok was cheaper than, for example, on Instagram Reels. So, they have their own challenges. Now they need to find a replacement.

Mitja: And we've already found it. Are you suggesting that they're a step behind? Because in Russia, that stage is already considered passed. After all, TikTok has been blocked since 2022.

Iulian: No, I don't even assess it. We have other platforms. It doesn't matter that they're ineffective, and they don't have an audience, but they are considered as tools, forgetting that they're not working. But I don't assess it. The future of internet marketing globally is actually going through some deglobalization. It will really be different because there will be different platforms in different regions, and brands will have to learn to work with them in different ways. So, the new role of regional marketing departments will be: knowing how to work in their market. Because, for example, in America, they don't look at Russia's experience with TikTok being blocked or Instagram being banned. They look at India's experience, where brands moved their TikTok budgets to Instagram and are trying to figure out what to do with that. They see that it will cost them several times more, meaning that their effectiveness will be much, much lower. This will drive the search for new tools. Essentially, there's an opportunity here for developers to create such tools for each market.

Mitja: So, you believe that deglobalization will be a significant milestone in the current decade? So, right now, it's a trend, a major trend, and there won't be a sharp shift back to globalization anytime soon?

Iulian: I think so. Because we see that in different countries, various social networks are being blocked for different reasons. And this trend will be solidified by the potential TikTok ban in the U.S. That will crash through the wall of this deglobalization and push it further.

Mitja: And what do you think about the most hyped topic of last year, artificial intelligence? Will it be implemented in the work of bloggers, agencies, and influencer marketing? Or have we just accepted it as something new, like we did with the iPhone? It's here now, we have ChatGPT, and we move on.

Iulian: It's hard to deny the role of artificial intelligence and the fact that it already exists in one form or another. After all, this interview is not being taken from a human (laughs). Yes, this is about tool development. Artificial intelligence does not replace the author, meaning the blogger or celebrity, nor the person writing texts, nor the marketing department. Artificial intelligence gives them a tool, for those who are ready to learn and who are qualified enough to apply it properly. AI is about optimization. AI is about doing in five minutes what could have taken five evenings and a whole team. But that doesn't mean these people won't have work. It's not about replacing someone; it's a new profession, a new profession with new tools. So, I believe that AI is, first and foremost, about optimization. And secondly, a person is needed to minimize errors. It might seem like a machine shouldn't make mistakes, unlike humans, but that's why the human factor exists. However, AI has its "hallucinations." It's a similar human factor error, it's a mistake that comes from nowhere for no reason. It's just called something else and comes from a different source. So, a person will double-check AI, and AI will double-check the person. It's about symbiosis, not replacing one with the other.

Mitja: Okay. And yes, the topic of AI mistakes is certainly fascinating. We can see a lot of funny things in there. But please, continue.

Iulian: Before asking the next question, I'll go back to the previous one. As we were talking about AI. As I said, the market is changing very quickly. In Russia, it's changing so fast that every two and a half months, there's a significant shift. Well, it's not just once a quarter, it's every two months. It's changing a lot. We need to find ways to adapt to these changes. AI is one of the opportunities, for example. Let's say, take America. Take a cosmetics brand's marketing department, whose quarter has just begun. Let's say it's October. The quarter has just started. Great, they've allocated money for TikTok and they know how much will be spent on TikTok to generate certain sales. But then, at the end of October, TikTok gets blocked, and they don't know what other platform to use. A quick, not necessarily high-quality, but at least a quick minimal research will be done by AI, like ChatGPT, not by a person, simply because of the massive data volume. I repeat, it's about optimization.

Mitja: Okay.

Iulian: Our deadlines are tight, but we need to meet the KPIs somehow.

Mitja: So, in relation to that, how do you think the most significant change has occurred in the way brands approach working with bloggers since you started? It's been more than six years now. Probably in the last six years, what do you think has been the most significant change?

Iulian: Most significant for whom? For brands or for bloggers?

Mitja: Probably, first and foremost. For bloggers. So, have bloggers become more responsible?

Iulian: Yes, the emergence of influencer marketing as a tool, the expansion of this market, and the arrival of a large number of advertisers who are trying, the list is growing.

Mitja: The arrival of capital. So, since 2016, the size of the market has grown to colossal numbers worldwide. I'm afraid to be wrong, but roughly speaking, the market has grown from around three or five billion dollars to 20 billion, and it will continue to grow.

Iulian: It's growing. Yes.

Mitja: Yes. So, in that context, don't you think there's a shift toward a more professional approach, both from brands and from bloggers? Or is it still the same chaos, horror, noise, and shouting? Which, in principle, is characteristic of many marketing industries.

Iulian: In influencer marketing, there are definitely more screams, hustle, and confusion compared to, for example, advertising in mobile games. Because on both ends of the project, there are people. In a game, you just run some ads and finish. As a brand, you press the Play button, and then the Stop button. But that doesn't mean influencer marketing is disorganized. No, it just means that it's entirely made up of people. But we can't say that medicine is disorganized because of all the shouting, yelling, and weirdness.

Mitja: Probably more creative people. That's why the creative aspect leads to a more emotional approach to work.

Iulian: More chaos? No. Because people in a hospital, the patients, they also cause mayhem, not following instructions, getting discharged too early, not reporting important symptoms. You can't say that it's disorganized or not institutionalized. No, influencer marketing is also an institution; it's just that it entirely depends on people, it's completely people-driven. So yes, professionals in the market have naturally increased and are still growing. They're becoming more experienced just because the market has appeared, it exists, it's growing, and this market will be necessary in one form or another. Influencer marketing has always existed. There are a lot of stories about how it began, even going back to ancient times. Personally, I prefer the story of the bartender and cigarettes. How tobacco brands became popular, not just by using their representatives but by hiring bartenders to promote the brand. I personally want to trace influencer marketing as a business and market back to that, just with nano-nano-nano influencers.

Mitja: Okay. So, what lessons can be drawn from Ilya Varlamov's experience as an influencer, especially in terms of engaging his audience and his sustainability as a

personality, as an influencer? After all, we're talking about him, and he has been in the media field for about 15 years now. He hasn't exactly become a less significant figure, he keeps up with the times, and he doesn't fade into the background. So, how can such a result be achieved? And what role does influencer marketing play here?

Iulian: The question of demand is about how he goes to new platforms, new sites, and doesn't become less popular. He doesn't stay where he was once popular, in places where there are no more users. No, he sees where the audience is, and he follows that audience. It's very important that, from the very beginning, he developed content across different channels, different platforms, and knew that it's wrong to do the same thing across different platforms. Lesson number one is very simple. There are different platforms, they serve different purposes. Therefore, content there must be different. Audiences vary, and the reason they're on a given platform also differs. The only thing that remains unchanged is your ideas and your values as an author. But how you deliver them? That will change. Then, these platforms need to be searched for. One must watch where audiences are moving, where they're going, and why they're coming, and from there, adjust your content, not necessarily to improve it, but to repackage it.

Mitja: So, I understand from your words that it was important for Ilya not just to mimic new platforms, not just adapt to new ones.

Iulian: Not mimic, find the right approach.

Mitja: Yes, find the approach. But at the same time, he never lost his authenticity. So, how can one combine authenticity and adaptation? "Adaptation" seems like a silly word. But I think I'll find a more suitable term in English.

Iulian: Well, I started by saying that your ideas and values should remain the same, but you package them in different formats. And basically, why does an author become a thought leader? Because they have their own opinion. They have that core. When you have that, it seems unlikely that you'll go to another platform, say one thing here, say the same thing across four other platforms, but on a fifth one, say something completely different. That seems unlikely. It's a matter of the author, not just being a talking head, but the author as a person, when they have their own worldview, their own value system, or some other system of coordinates inside their head, then they will continue to move forward with that and express it. That's it. This way, they stay true to themselves. Of course, we can't rule out that something might happen to a person, or something might happen around them that radically changes their views. For example, in the last two years, people have been losing their profession as journalists while still being journalists. But in fact, journalism as a form of

propaganda is fading. This is happening in all countries. The same people in the same roles are doing the same thing, but the profession is changing, and the value system has changed. This is due to external factors.

Mitja: Okay.

Mitja: Do you think there's anything else you'd like to add or discuss that we haven't touched on?

Iulian: I think we've covered everything here, the main points.

Mitja: Alright, quick lightning round. How would you assess the influence of marketing on your career and Ilya's career? Just in two sentences.

Iulian: Both my career and Ilya's career have turned out well in this regard. This is how I assess the market: you have to follow the market. The market created the career, and it worked.

Mitja: All great! Excellent. I'll pause it here.

Appendix 4: Detailed Thematic Analysis Summary with Illustrative Quotes

Theme	Sub-Themes	Codes	Illustrative Quotes
Authenticity	Maintaining Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transparency in Content - Personal Perspective - Selective Collaborations - Political Transparency 	<p>“People watch me because they’re interested in my perspective; they want to experience my life from an observer’s point of view.” – Ilya Varlamov</p> <p>“If you generally don’t deceive people in your content or admit your mistakes... they trust the ads you record in the same way.” – Maya Volf-Kats</p>
	Challenges to Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perceptions of Selling Out - Balancing Principles and Revenue - Advertiser Demands 	<p>“The audience initially reacted negatively... comments like, ‘Oh, Varlamov has sold out, he’s advertising games now.’” – Maya Volf-Kats</p> <p>“Once new demands emerge... that limit the creator’s expression or creativity in any way, then it starts having a negative impact.” – Iulian Kheirbeik</p>
Audience Alignment	Understanding Audience Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reliance on Metrics - Avoiding Over-Catering - Sensitivity to Social Topics 	<p>“We focus on metrics instead. We don’t read comments but pay attention to retention, the watch-through rate.” – Maya Volf-Kats</p> <p>“A creative person on stage... if they start catering to the audience, they become like performers at some bar, taking requests.” – Ilya Varlamov</p>
	Cross-Platform Adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Platform-Specific Strategies - Building Platform-Specific Audiences - Algorithm Optimization 	<p>“Audiences don’t actually transfer between platforms. You need to build a new audience from scratch.” – Ilya Varlamov</p> <p>“We started listening and learning to work with analytics... YouTube nowadays isn’t a battle of the best content; it’s a battle of analysts.” – Maya Volf-Kats</p>
Professionalization	Building a Professional Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Role Delegation-Operational Buffers - Structured Workflows 	<p>“From the very beginning, we’ve had a clear division of tasks.” – Maya Volf-Kats</p> <p>“I always had a project manager as a ‘buffer’ to absorb everything from the client, process it, and then deliver it to me in a nice, digestible form.” – Ilya Varlamov</p>
	Agency-Influencer Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agency as Intermediary - Trust-Based Collaboration - Reinforcing Brand Fit 	<p>“If a client was unhappy about something, most of the time the blogger never even heard about it... because we absorbed that.” – Iulian Kheirbeik</p> <p>“The value of the agency is precisely in reminding the brand of why they initially came to the blogger.” – Iulian Kheirbeik</p>