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Video stars: Russian child bloggers score millions of 'likes'

Liza Anokhina was 11 when people started recognizing her in the street. Now a year older, she is one of Russia's most popular child bloggers with 2.3 million followers on Instagram. In a Moscow park, her producer jogs backwards, using his phone to film as Liza runs and blows raspberries. Tall and slim and wearing thick makeup for the shoot, she squeals with laughter when she views the result. "We've done (Instagram) 'stories', now we'll do TikTok," the 25-year-old producer Ivan Bushmelev tells her, referring to her main social media platform.

Russia counts some 40 million Instagram users, behind only Indonesia, India, Brazil and the United States, according to data firm Statista. And the photo-sharing platform is, as elsewhere in Europe, particularly popular among children, analysts say. Instagram and other platforms have spawned a generation of

unwrap toys or sweets. Older ones like Liza speak on camera and film sketches. They earn from ads and by promoting products, as brands value their connection with their peers.

Earnings a secret

Liza clutches her phone in a pink plastic case, admitting that she uses it eight hours a day. The clips on her Instagram *anokhina_elizabeth_2007* are ultra-polished and looping, with visual effects and music. Asked how her earnings have changed her family's life, she gives what sounds like a well-practiced answer: "It has changed our life for the better. I prefer to keep the topic of my earnings a secret."

Revealing few details, she says her mother is a lawyer while her father is a former military man. She vows to keep on creating content, even as social media platforms prepare to bring

aspires "to dress just as stylishly" as Liza.

For Moscow-based child psychologist Viktoria Karavayeva, top child bloggers, just like school sports stars, could develop "dependence on popularity—that is, likes, comments, people talking about them." This could lead to "dependence on outside reactions and approval, tunnel vision only on this," she said. While it is normal for teenagers to value their peers' esteem, those who are "very sensitive to comparisons and outside judgment" may come to crave online likes, she said.

Big earnings, many subscribers

At a video blogging class at Moscow's Cuddy programming school, 11-year-old Artyom Shalovey has big ambitions. "I'm constantly waiting for the moment when I get 1 million subscribers," he said, planning to blog on computer games, pranks and BMX bike stunts. He has a way to go, with around 130 subscribers currently. "For me, it's important both earning lots of money and having lots of subscribers," he says.

During the two-hour class, children discuss topics, write scripts and shoot with their phones. Their 23-year-old teacher, Amela Shabotich, is a student at Moscow's Higher School of Economics. She says she enjoys seeing children's blogs develop, with topics ranging from fashion modelling to learning English. Psychologist Karavayeva says parents tend to be more concerned with rationing the time their children spend on gadgets than with the content, and some children see material that scares them.

She "has encountered various fears (among children) after watching certain videos or films discussed in their social group." Parents should follow their children's favourite bloggers and "discuss things that bother them," she suggests. "I don't think simple restrictions or a ban can eradicate parents' fears or create understanding in the family. In general, I'm for talking."

A mother-of-three who gave her name only as Yulia admitted she was stunned by her children's viewing choices, such as videos showing children cracking open endless chocolate eggs to find toys. "Imagine my amazement when I found out what they were watching," she said of her children aged 7 to 10. "I always thought kids really liked Winnie the Pooh... but no, if you leave them on YouTube they actually end up with someone unwrapping hundreds of Kinder Eggs." — AFP

Russian child blogger Liza Anokhina, 12, participates in a shoot for her blog in a Moscow park. — AFP photos



young "influencers", leading to concerns that parents might exploit children for financial gain. Another risk is that the desire to accumulate "likes" may be psychologically damaging for children.

Such concerns have forced social media companies themselves to react, with YouTube and Instagram moving to make such blogs less attractive to advertisers and to make "likes" invisible to users other than the creators. Yet many Russian parents encourage their children to blog and even send them to classes to improve their skills. The youngest child bloggers

in changes that could hit her channels. To combat cyber-bullying, Instagram is experimenting with hiding the number of "likes" on others' posts. And from next year YouTube will bar targeted ads in videos aimed at children.

"It is a problem because of the way viewers are: they're used to seeing numbers," Liza's producer says of the potential Instagram changes. "Not just viewers but advertisers, too." Fans, both girls and boys, come up to take selfies with Liza. "She speaks well, she's clever, she makes interesting videos," says Natalya Usacheva, 12, while Veronika Kosynkina, also 12, says she

The pirarucu: The giant prized fish of the Amazon

Its white flesh is tender and tasty, it can measure up to three meters long and weigh more than 200 kilograms: meet the pirarucu, one of the world's largest freshwater fish, and native to the Amazon. The enormous animal, once threatened with extinction, is now on dinner plates in Rio de Janeiro's fanciest restaurants, thanks to a number of chefs who have championed the delicacy, and the indigenous communities who ensure its continued survival.

"Without them, there would be nothing left," says Frederic Monnier, the head chef at the city's hip Brasserie Rosario. "What they're doing for the Amazon is priceless," adds Jessica Trindade, the Brazilian chef at Chez Claude, an institution in the city's restaurant scene. Chef Marcelo Barcellos uses pirarucu in his moqueca, a fish stew swimming in palm oil and seasoned with coriander that is a signature Brazilian dish originating in the northeastern state of Bahia.

Served with a toasted manioc flour mixture and nuts that come straight from the Amazon basin, the moqueca delights foodies' taste buds and eyes, as the white fish contrasts with the yellow flour and green spices. The

taste is akin to that of other saltwater whitefish like pollock or cod. Barcellos, the executive chef and owner of the restaurant Barsa, is one of several Rio chefs who have happily added pirarucu to his menu.

But not that long ago, before pirarucu made it to the top tables in the Marvelous City, Arapaima gigas—or Amazonian cod, as it is sometimes called—almost vanished from menus. It was brought back from the brink of extinction thanks to the establishment of a nature preserve of a sustainable fishing program with strict quotas. Pirarucu can only be fished from July to November, the non-mating season.

Superior fish

Raising the pirarucu's profile with Rio's top chefs has certainly helped. The Taste of the Amazon project has helped do that. Recently, nine chefs traveled to northern Brazil to observe how the Paumari tribe has established sustainable practices for harvesting pirarucu. Through their contact with the indigenous fishermen, the chefs learned which parts of the fish are the best. That knowledge ended up on their menus.

"It's an excellent product, with a fabulous flavor, without that earthy taste that some freshwater fish have," Trindade says. For Ricardo Lapeyre of the Michelin-starred Laguiole Lab, the experience surpassed his expectations. He figured he would take the trip just to learn a bit more about how to cook the fish, and bring some new ingredients back to his kitchen. In the end, he is on board the pirarucu train, and is one of its biggest fans. "It's a superior fish—the quality is largely superior to what we get from fish farms," he said. "I became aware of the importance of the forest and the support given to projects that benefit local populations."

Preservation

Adevaldo Dias, an official at ASPROC, the cooperative that manages the sustainable fishing of the pirarucu, was pleasantly surprised with how keen the chefs were to take part in the project. "I was struck by their commitment, their understanding of how this fish is good for the Amazon, and the need to pay fishermen properly," Dias explained. The sustainable fishing project for the pirarucu was put in place 20 years ago.

Since then, the giant fish population has soared, from more than 2,500 in 1999 to more than 190,000 last year. Thanks to ASPROC, the fishermen are paid seven reais (about \$1.75) per kilo (2.2 pounds), against the four reais they could count on by selling in local markets. But restaurants pay a whopping 48 reais a kilo, because of transportation costs. The dish is then sold for about 70 reais (\$17).

Leonardo Kurihara—the coordinator of Operation Native Amazon (OPAN), which is overseeing the Taste of the Amazon initiative—chefs are vital because "they are at the other end of the chain, presenting the product to the consumer." Felipe Rossoni, also at OPAN, explains that the initiative has cleared the way for new markets for the pirarucu. "Sustainable fishing helps preserve the environment, and reinforces the autonomy and clear identity of traditional communities," Rossoni said. — AFP



This file handout picture shows fishermen carrying a large Pirarucus (Arapaima gigas) fish at the Amana Sustainable Development Reserve, in Amazonas State, northern Brazil. — AFP photos