Climate Action
Against Disinformation

Robo-COP29: Bots Boosted COP29 Petrostate Host's Propaganda

Introduction

Researchers documented an extensive network of thousands of bot accounts used to promote COP29 host Azerbaijan, which is expanded upon for this brief.

These bot networks are used to promote official Azerbaijan content, serving to make the #COP29 and #COP29Azerbaijan feeds across platforms appear more predominantly positive, instead of critical, with activity seemingly timed to respond to negative news.

While bot activity on X/Twitter remains the most straightforward to analyse, similar signs of coordinated inauthentic behaviour positively "brigading" pro-Azerbaijan propaganda have been identified on YouTube and Facebook.

That these accounts could be found by investigators before any proactive enforcement measures by the platforms were effective in addressing the campaign of (petro)state-promoting coordinated inauthentic activity. That said, many accounts continue to be active; and NGOs should not be responsible for identifying the harmful content Big Tech spreads in the first place.

By failing to protect users from coordinated state propaganda and industrial disinformation, Big Tech companies like X/Twitter, Facebook and Google/YouTube are helping Big Oil prevent effective action on climate change.

Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) - CAAD is a global coalition of leading climate and anti-disinformation organisations.

Summary

Even as fossil fuel pollution changes the climate, their digital disinformation is choking public discourse as a tool to help them evade accountability.

- Suspected bot activity spiked on October 23rd and 24th, the day of and after Guardian journalist Damian Carrington reported that Azerbaijan is set to increase gas production by a third in the next decade.
- There was an increase in activity on November 5th, when Carrington posted about the arrest of a climate activist in Azerbaijan, the Boston Globe published an op-ed demanding the world hold Azerbaijan accountable, and Human Rights Watch released a report about Azerbaijan's crackdown on critics.
- On Facebook, a post by Abzas Media - whose employees have been charged for economic crimes by the Azeri government - about COP29 bots, was "brigaded" by a network of bot-like accounts with few followers, odd posting habits, and profile pictures scrapped from other social media sites.
- On YouTube, two official videos, one a simple welcome message and the other about accessibility at COP29, were advertised enough to generate over 1.5 million combined views.
- The Washington Post reported on a network of 2,800 accounts and 10,800 retweets and replies, with an estimated 1,876 bot accounts promoting the petrostate host of the annual UN climate negotiations, Azerbaijan.
- Global Witness documented how bots were used to shift perceptions of #COP29 and #COP29Azerbaijan feeds, replacing critical voices representing 70% of the top posts, with positive content from the country's official COP29 account and content.

Methodology

Content posted with #COP29 and #COP29Azerbaijan on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube was collected, and documented indications of coordinated inauthentic activity were used to build a list of X/Twitter users with suspicious posting patterns, and followed up on the accounts identified by Global Witness to assess activity during COP29.

More detailed methodologies for technical approaches can be found in the hyperlinked reports.

Findings

On X/Twitter: Flooding the Zone

Ahead of COP29, Global Witness spotted that 7 out of the top 10 posts in July using #COP29 and #COP29Azerbaijan were critical of the country's role in the conflict in Armenia. But by September, all the top posts came from the official COP29 Azerbaijan account. Global Witness also found repeated use of the same profile and banner pictures in their analyses of accounts.

Among a collection of 554 suspicious X accounts (that routinely post "#COP29 #COP29AZERBAIJAN") 464 of these accounts posted this same text a total of 5,632 times in the two weeks leading up to COP.

The majority, 4,333, were quote tweets of the official @COP29_AZ account, while a further 481 were quote tweets of content from Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev, and 346 quote tweets of content from the Assistant to the President, Hikmet Hajiyev.

Two thirds of these tweets occurred in just a two day period, on October 23rd and 24th, the same days Guardian journalist Damian Carrington found that Azerbaijan is set to increase gas production by a third in the next decade.

We noticed another flood of activity on November 4th, the day Carrington posted about the arrest of a climate activist in the country, the Boston Globe published an op-ed demanding the world hold Azerbaijan accountable, and Human Rights Watch released a report about Azerbaijan's crackdown on its critics.

Accounts from the dataset that looked like bots were mostly created in bursts, as can be seen in Figure 1.

The vast majority of accounts set up in this grouped fashion in 2024 were created during Azerbaijan waking hours only posted within Azerbaijan waking hours.

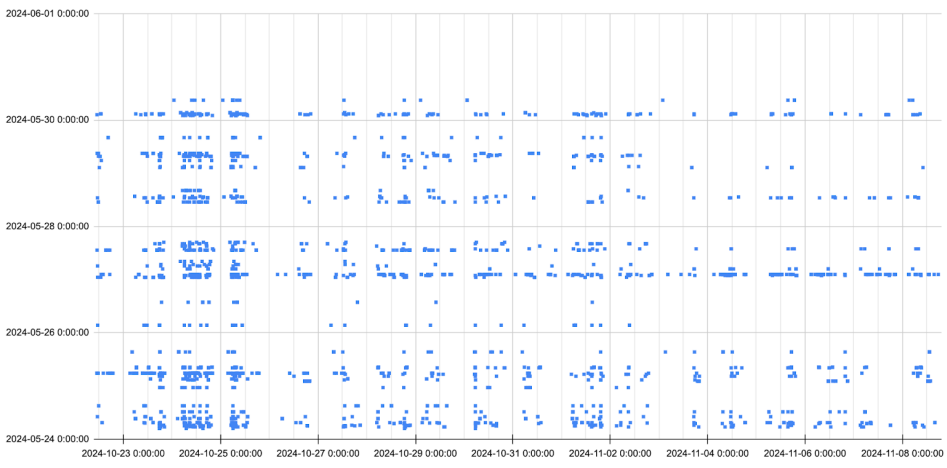


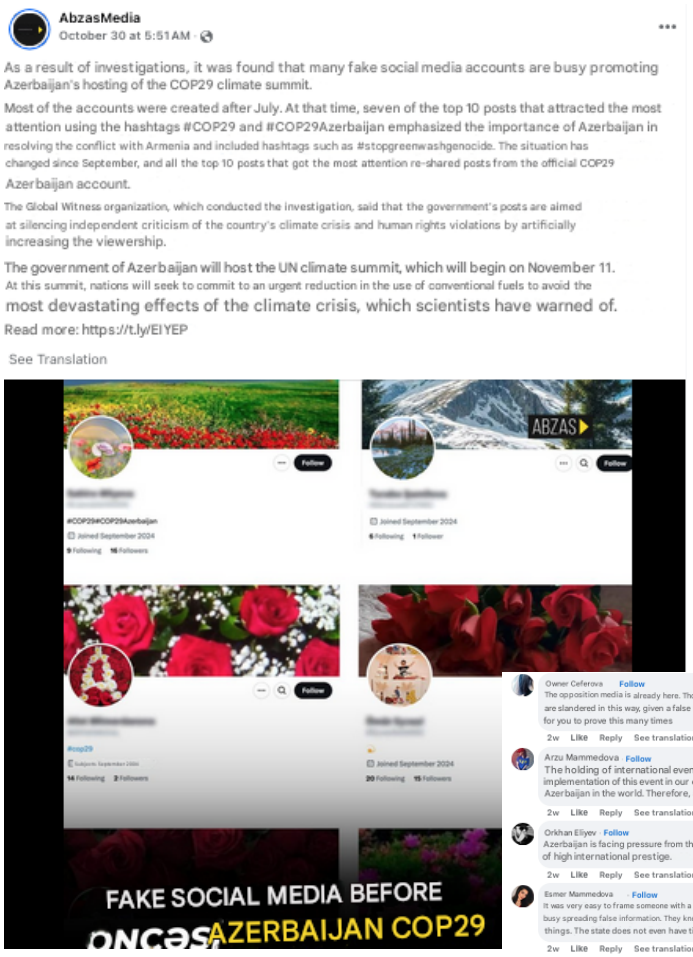
Figure 1: posting history of a subset of bot like accounts we tracked in the two weeks leading up to COP29.

On Facebook: Bot Brigade to silence critics

There was also suspicious activity on Facebook. At COP's opening, a host of Facebook accounts with identical banner images in their profiles shared an identical "welcome to COP29 post" - something that also took place on X on the same day.

Figure 2: AbzasMedia post, and sample of translated replies

There also appeared to be a bot-like Facebook 'brigade' that targeted a post from Abzas Media that only had 26 shares and 44 reactions, but 675 (hostile) comments.



(Six journalists from Abzas Media have been arrested in Azerbaijan and charged with economic crimes.)

The post, ironically, was about one of the investigations into COP29-related bot activity on X.

Many of these accounts all have a person's image copied from Russian or Turkish social media sites or Pinterest, and mostly have just 1-5 followers and little to no other posts.

Some have watermarks from professional image sites, others use AI-generated headshots, like this image where the AI only half-generated the glasses.

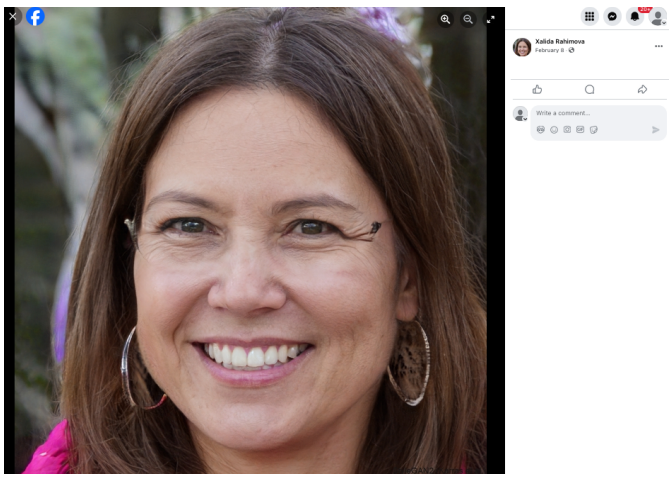
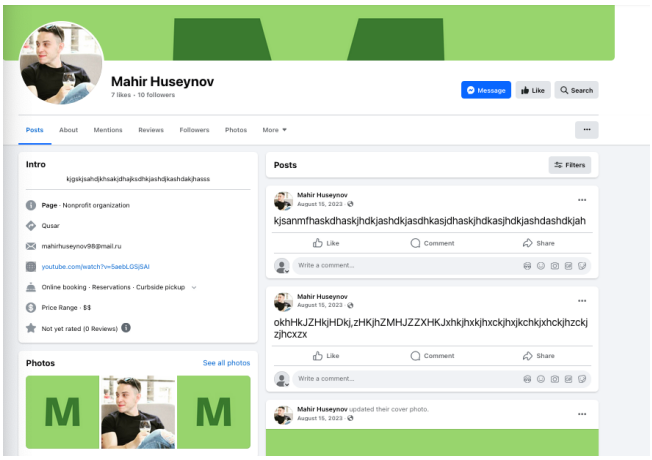


Figure 3: AI-generated profile picture of one brigading account.



Of the approximately two dozen top replies analysed, only two didn't fit a pattern of having posted a picture of a letter in addition to a headshot and not much else. One such account is named "Mahir Huseynov," the same name as a Baku-born parasitologist, the profile of which said it was a nonprofit organisation, and also included an email: mahirhuseynov98 @ mail.ru, as well as a link to this youtube video, and some gibberish text posts.

Figure 4: Brigading account "Mahir Huseynov"

Figure 5: Screenshots of a sample of 16 of the brigading accounts, demonstrating a consistent pattern of suspicious activity. The posts of a letter contained no additional information. See appendix section for a sample of 25 of these and additional similar accounts.

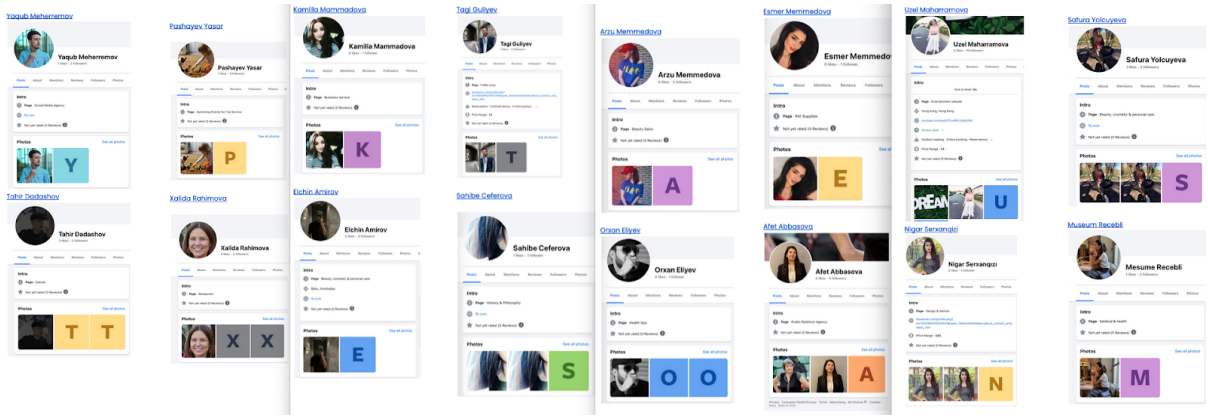
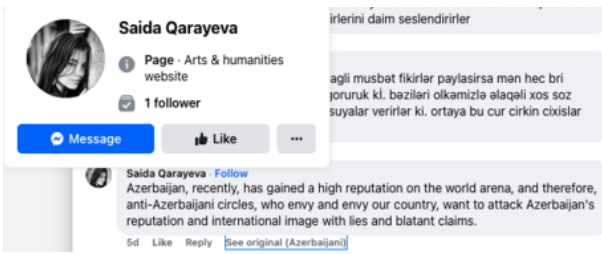


Figure 6: One of the over 600 accounts that replied to Azbas Media's post with strongly patriotic rhetoric.



On YouTube: Ads buy views, but few comments

There were also bursts of similar comments under some COP29 AZE Youtube videos with suspiciously high view counts. Though if these comments on Youtube are via bot activity, it is more sophisticated than on other platforms. However, the number of views, driven by advertising, means that what will likely be some of the most-viewed videos on COP29 are promotional content the host paid to promote.

Conclusion

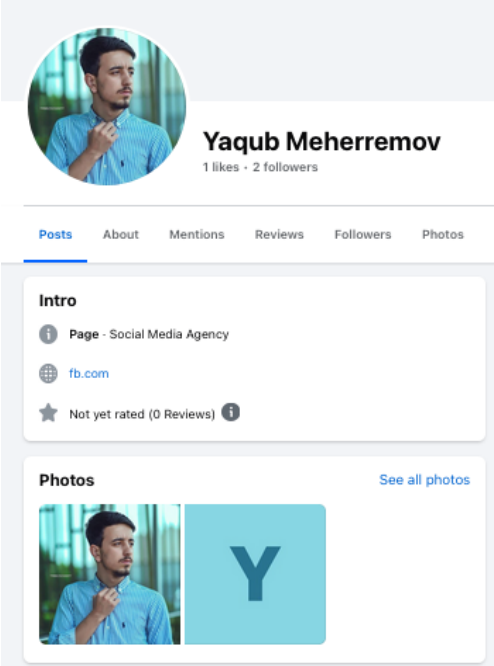
The use of bots to inflate perceived support, shout down dissent, and otherwise warp public perceptions of reality is not a new problem for social media companies. Yet year after year they fail to anticipate and ameliorate the predictable surge of bot-amplified propaganda that pollutes the information environment.

This unwillingness or incompetence to protect users from harmful false content is why nearly 100 experts and organizations have signed on to an open letter calling on governments to hold Big Tech accountable for climate disinformation.

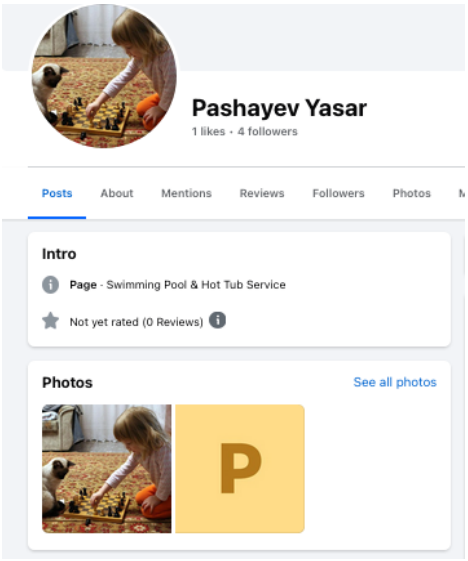
Appendix: Screenshots of Facebook brigade

The following is just a sample of 25 the 600+ accounts that replied to the Abzas Media post about bots being used for Public Relations purposes.

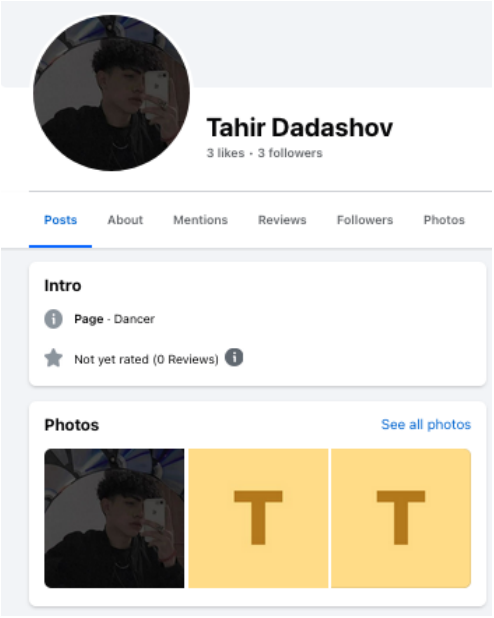
Yaqub Meherremov



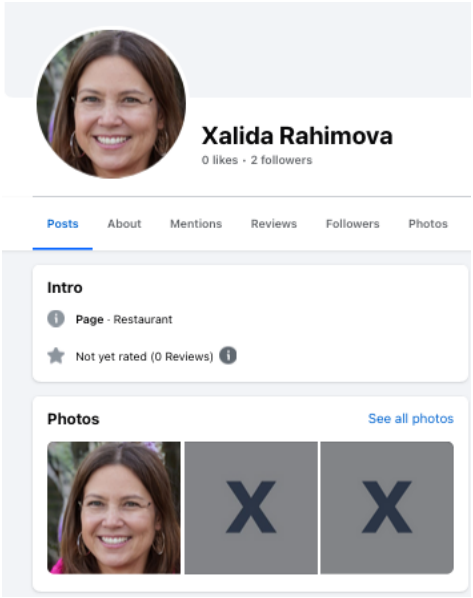
Pashayev Yasar



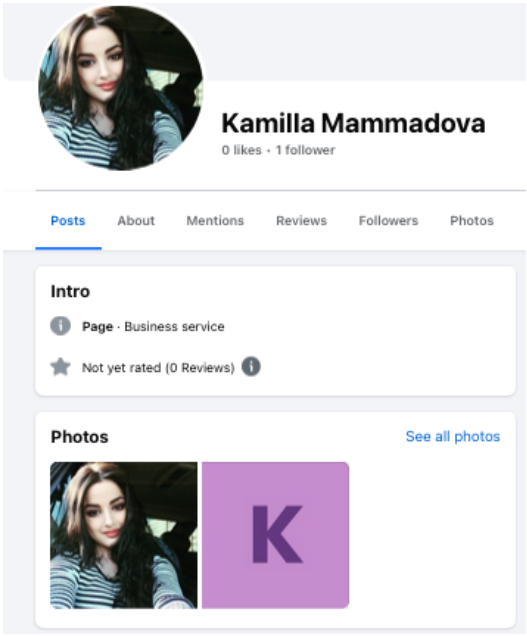
Tahir Dadashov



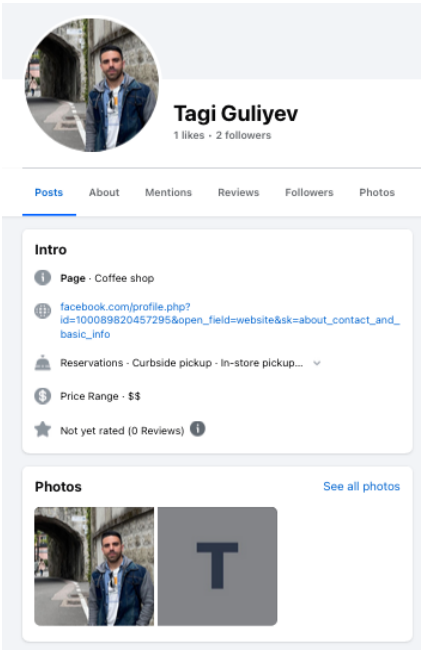
Xalida Rahimova



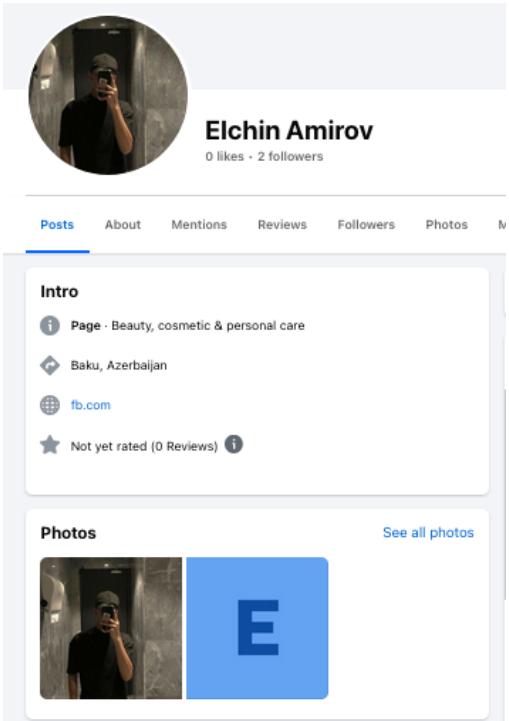
Kamilla Mammadova



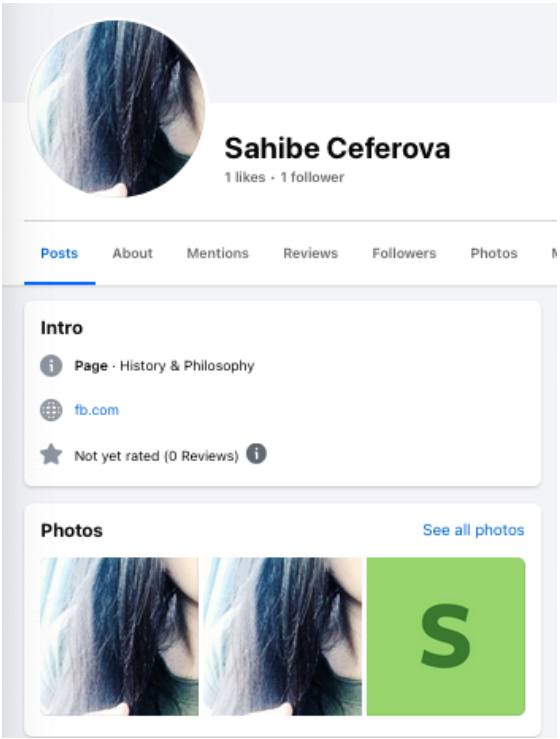
Tagi Guliyev



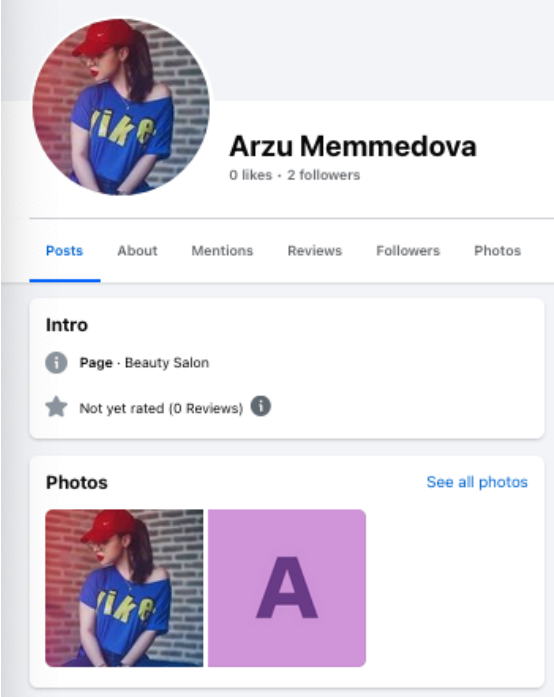
Elchin Amirov



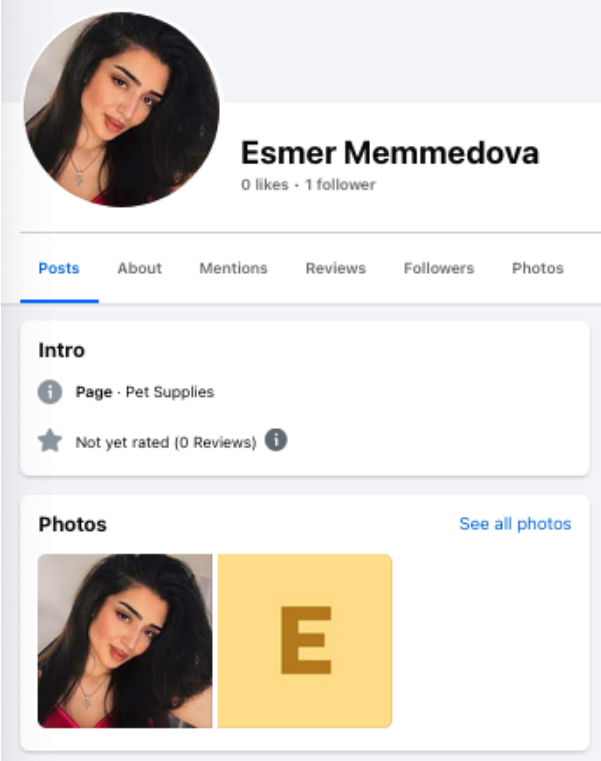
Sahibe Ceferova



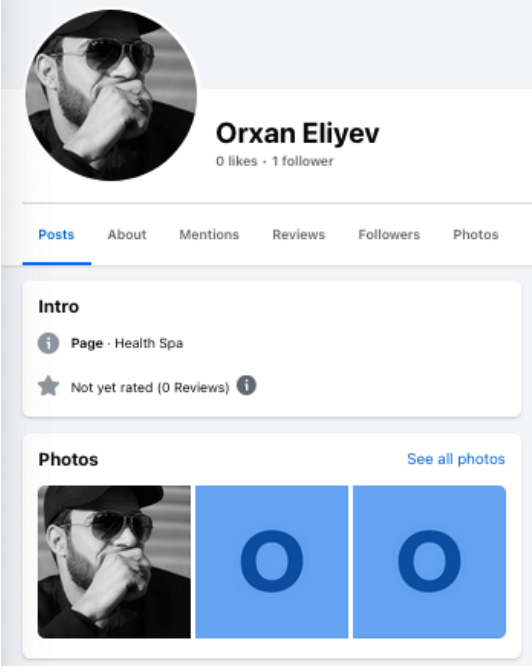
Arzu Memmedova



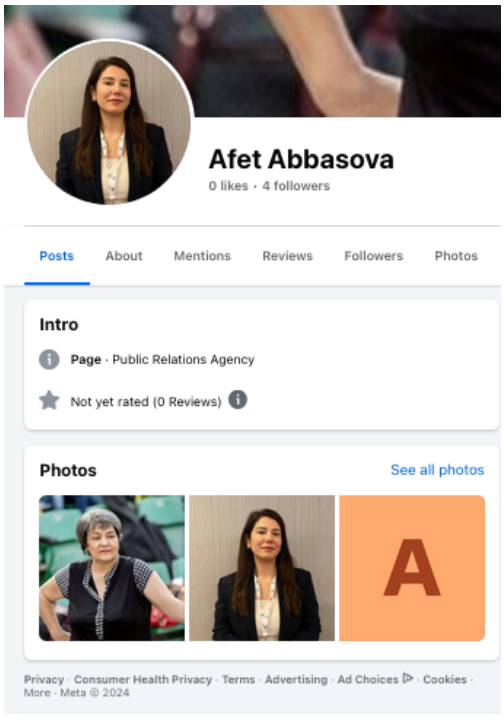
Esmer Memmedova



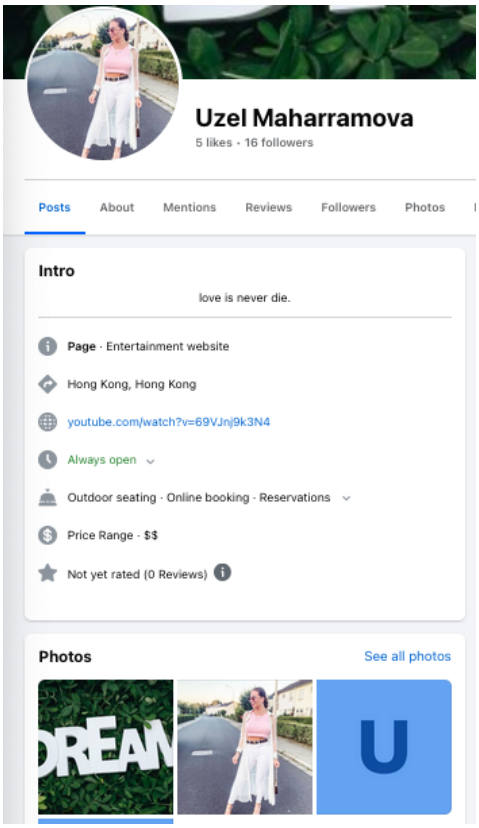
Orxan Eliyev



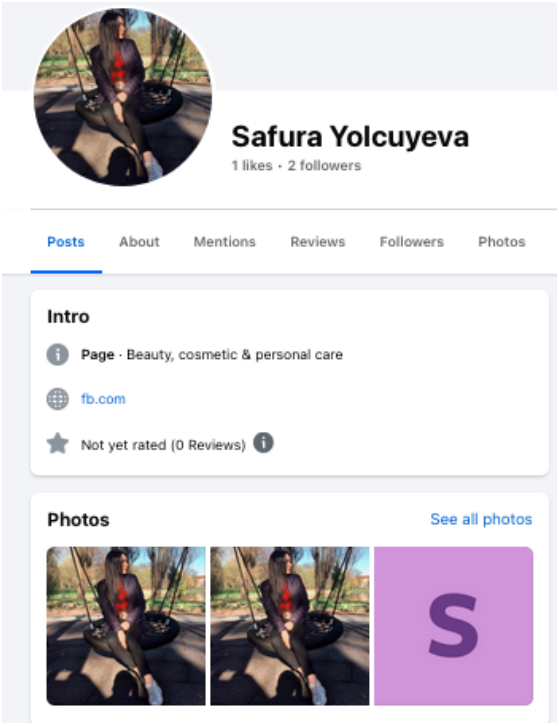
Afet Abbasova



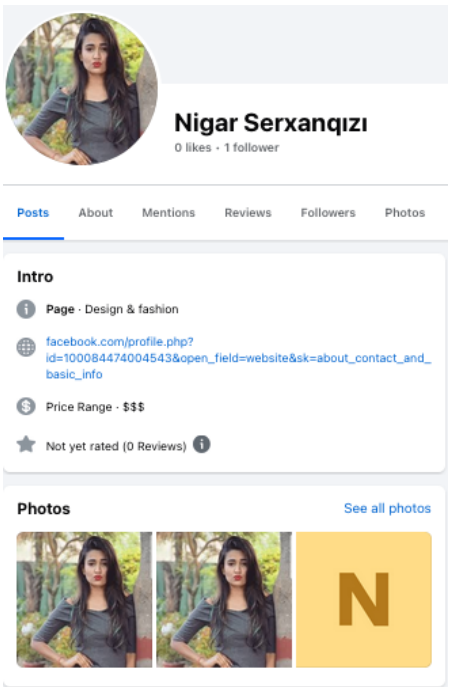
Uzel Maharramova



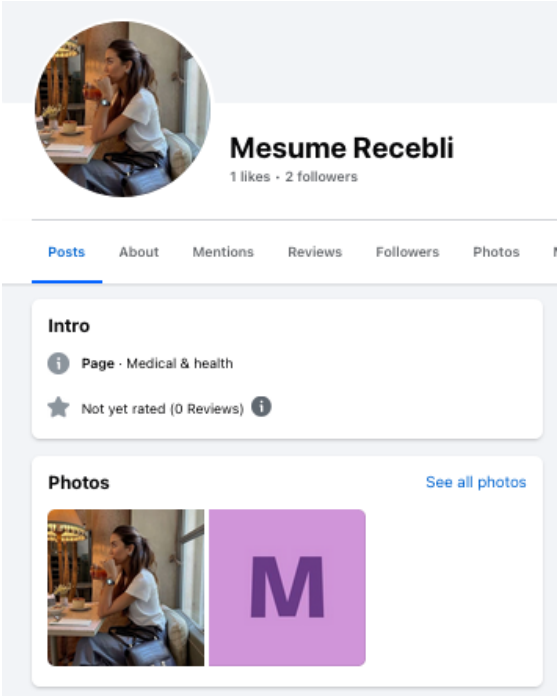
Safura Yolcuyeva



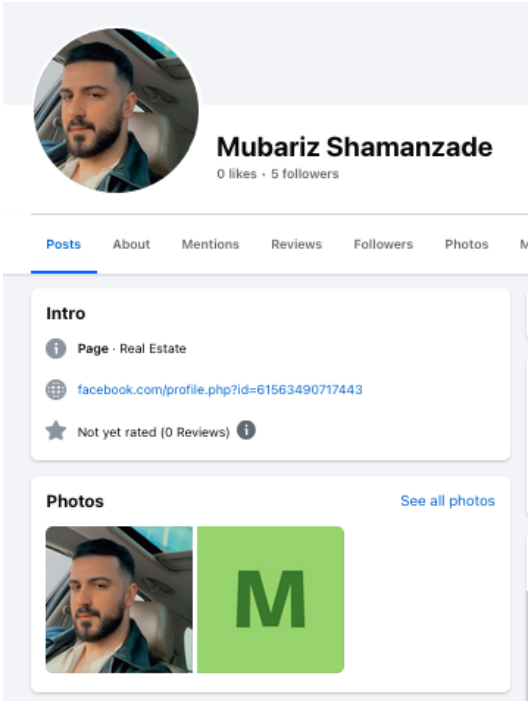
Nigar Serxanqizi



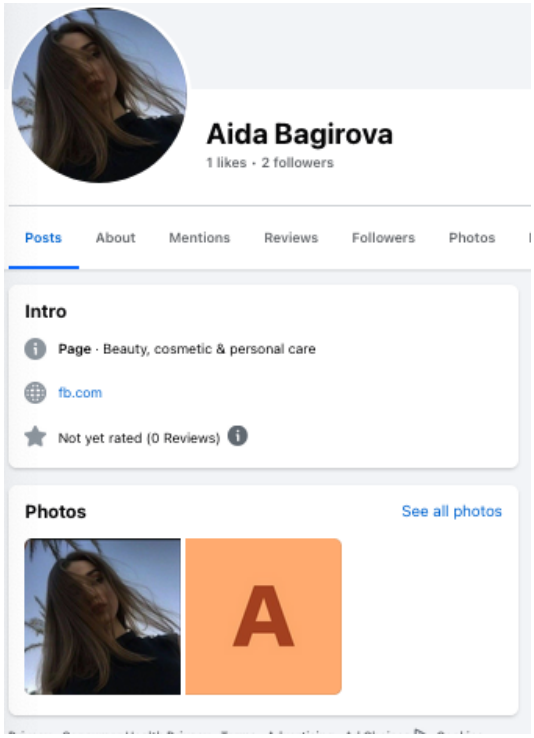
Mesume Recebli



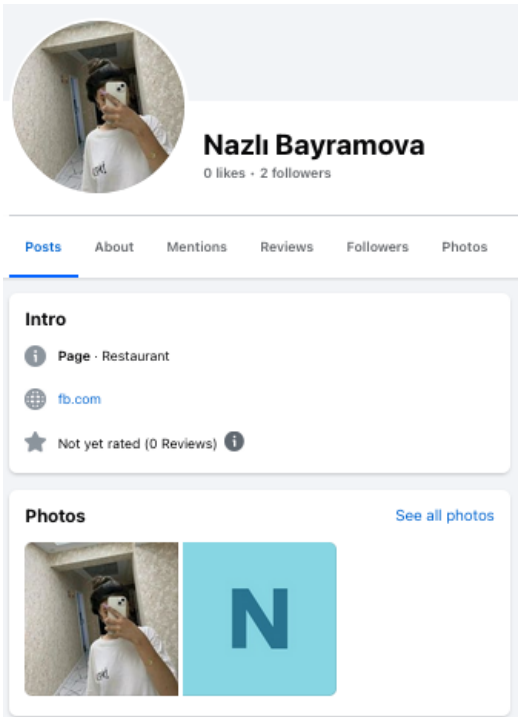
Mubariz Shamanzade



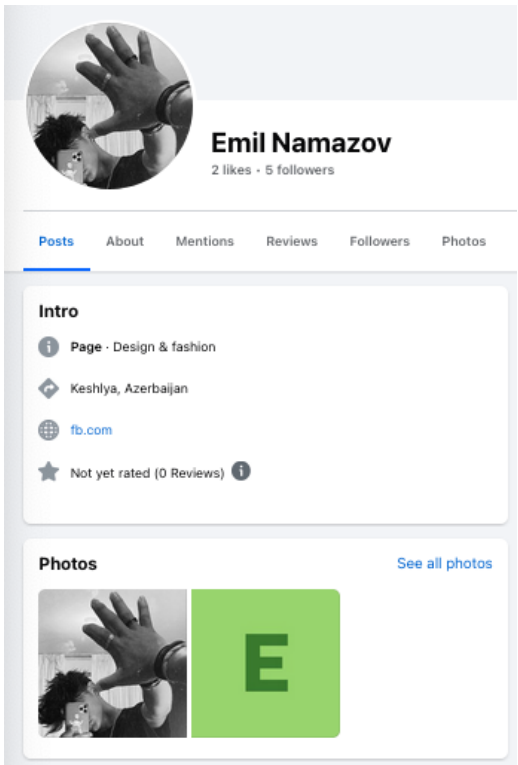
Aida Bagirova



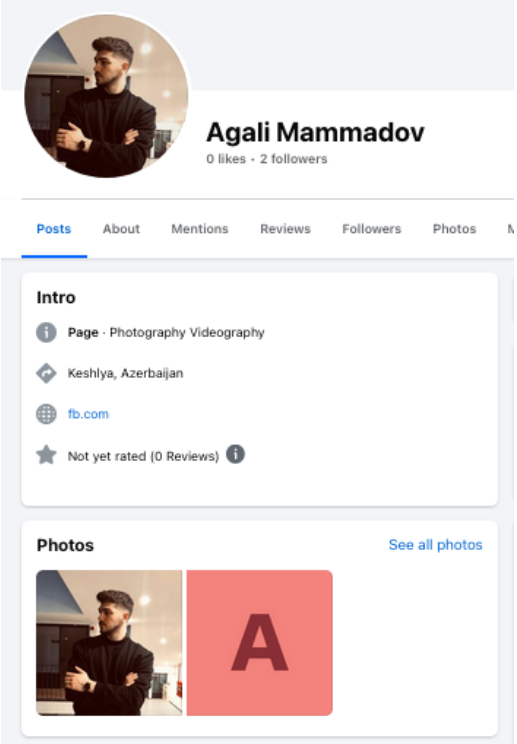
Nazli Bayramova



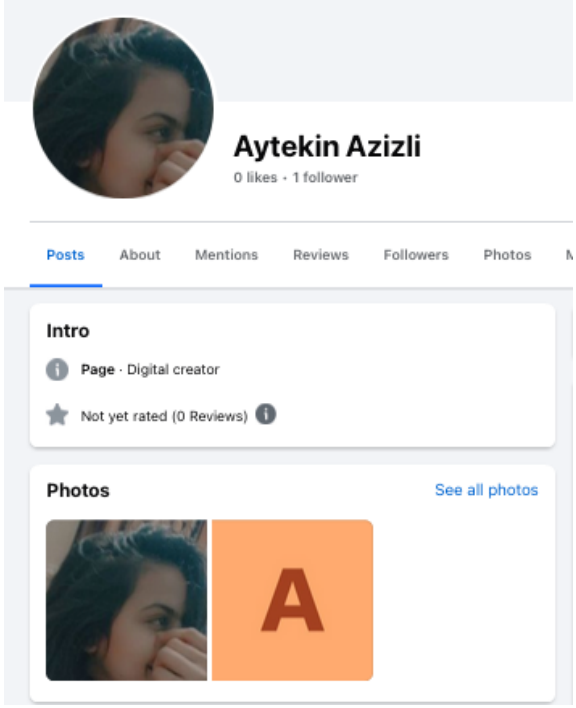
Emil Namazov



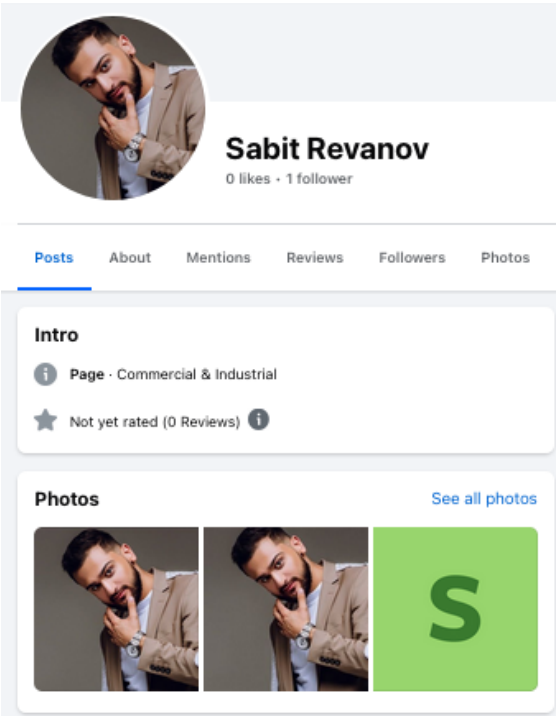
Agali Mammadov



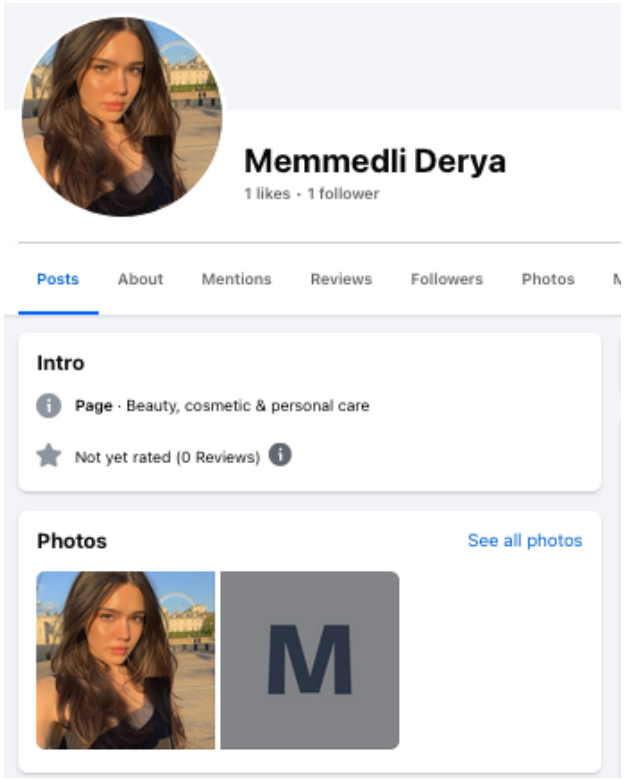
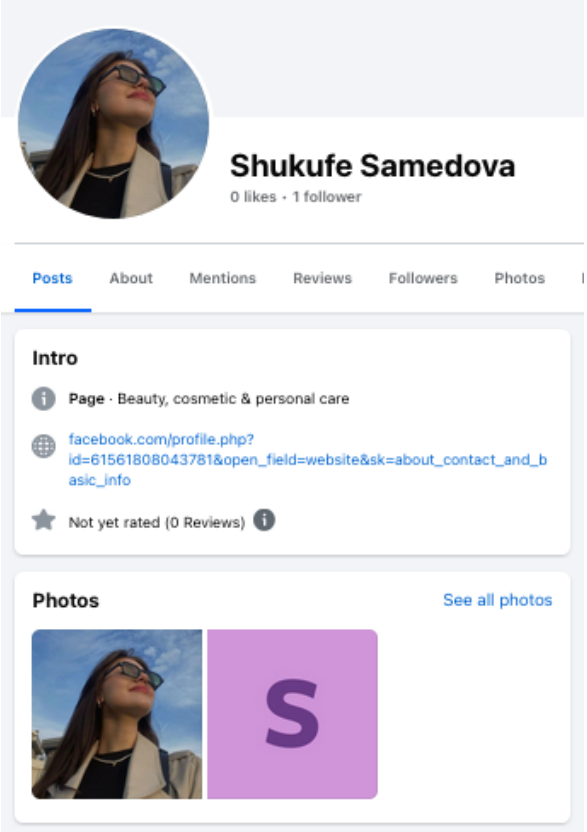
Aytekin Azizli



Sabit Revanov



Memmedli Derya



Shukufe Samedova