



# Graphika

## Slash and Burner Accounts

Navigating a forest of fake friends, faces, and followers used to target Brazilian audiences and environmental groups during the pandemic

The Graphika Team

**04.2022**

**Takedowns**

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## Executive Summary

On April 7, Meta [said](#) it had removed a network of 14 Facebook profiles, nine pages, and 39 Instagram accounts in March that originated in Brazil and engaged in “coordinated inauthentic behavior” to target domestic audiences. The network gained minimal to no engagement among authentic communities but is the first covert influence operation Meta has removed that focused primarily on environmental issues. “Although the people behind it attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals associated with the Brazilian Military,” Meta said.

Before removing them from its platforms, Meta shared a set of Facebook profiles, pages, and Instagram accounts with Graphika for further analysis. Our investigation found what appears to have been a small and relatively contained operation that used deceptive behaviors in two distinct phases. The first of these, in April - June 2020, advanced narratives about domestic social issues, including land ownership and COVID-19. The second, which was the main thrust of the operation, took place in May - June 2021 and focused on environmentalism and deforestation in the Amazon rainforest. A number of posts from 2020 specifically criticized President Jair Bolsonaro, primarily over his handling of the coronavirus pandemic, an outbreak that has so far [killed](#) almost 660,000 people in Brazil.

The identified activity underscores the importance of analyzing influence operations within the broader offline social and political context in which they take place. The operation detailed in this report was primarily active in mid-2020 and mid-2021, a time of [political turbulence](#) in Brazil as COVID-19 deaths [soared](#), the Amazon rainforest [burned](#), and tensions [spilled over](#) between Bolsonaro and the country’s military. In March 2021, shortly before a third of the assets in the set were created, Brazil’s three most senior military officers [resigned](#) over Bolsonaro’s sacking of his defense minister and attempts to [exert control](#) over the security services. The military has itself come under [international pressure](#) over a [reportedly](#) unsuccessful effort to protect the rainforest, which Bolsonaro [launched](#) in 2019 and has been spearheaded by the armed forces.

This is particularly relevant in Brazil, which has a history of politically-motivated actors engaging in coordinated and harmful online behavior, and is due to hold a presidential election in October this year. Police investigators have [accused](#) allies of Bolsonaro of orchestrating a sprawling online

[harassment campaign](#) to target the president's critics, parts of which Meta [removed](#) in July 2020. The newly identified activity did not target the upcoming vote but does illustrate the range of actors attempting to manipulate Brazil's polarized and fragile [political landscape](#).

Below is a summary of our key findings:

- Graphika identified multiple open-source indicators that appear to corroborate Meta's attribution of the network to individuals associated with the Brazilian military. Most notably, Facebook profiles and Instagram accounts in the takedown set belonged to individuals who were actively serving in the Brazilian army as of December 2021, according to publicly available government records. Other assets in the set also shared posts from the army's verified Facebook page and congratulated their followers on Brazilian Army Day.
- Assets in the set showed clear and repeated signs of coordination and inauthentic behavior. These include creating accounts and pages in batches (sometimes over a series of successive days), operating fake personas that shared the same content and followed or liked other assets in the set, and possible signs of purchasing followers on Instagram.
- The operation centered around a series of fake entities, most of which presented themselves as environmental groups campaigning to protect the Amazon. Two additional entities engaged primarily in conversations about social issues, such as land ownership and COVID-19. These fake groups made efforts to appear genuine, including listing the address of a Greenpeace office in Brazil and using contact information connected to fake personas.
- Two assets in the set linked to the same thinly-developed fake persona used profile pictures that were likely generated using artificial intelligence techniques. We also identified multiple Instagram accounts that followed assets in the network and likely used artificially-generated pictures. However, there was no open-source evidence connecting these to the same actors as the takedown set.
- The campaign operated almost exclusively on Facebook and Instagram. The only high-confidence, cross-platform activity we identified was a Twitter account linked to one of the fake environmental groups and the use of Gmail addresses as public contact information. On Facebook and Instagram, the assets failed to gain significant followership, and most posts received little-to-no authentic engagement. By the time of our investigation, the only assets still active were those we assessed to be the personal accounts of real people.

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## Fake Friends, Faces & Followers

### The Takedown Set

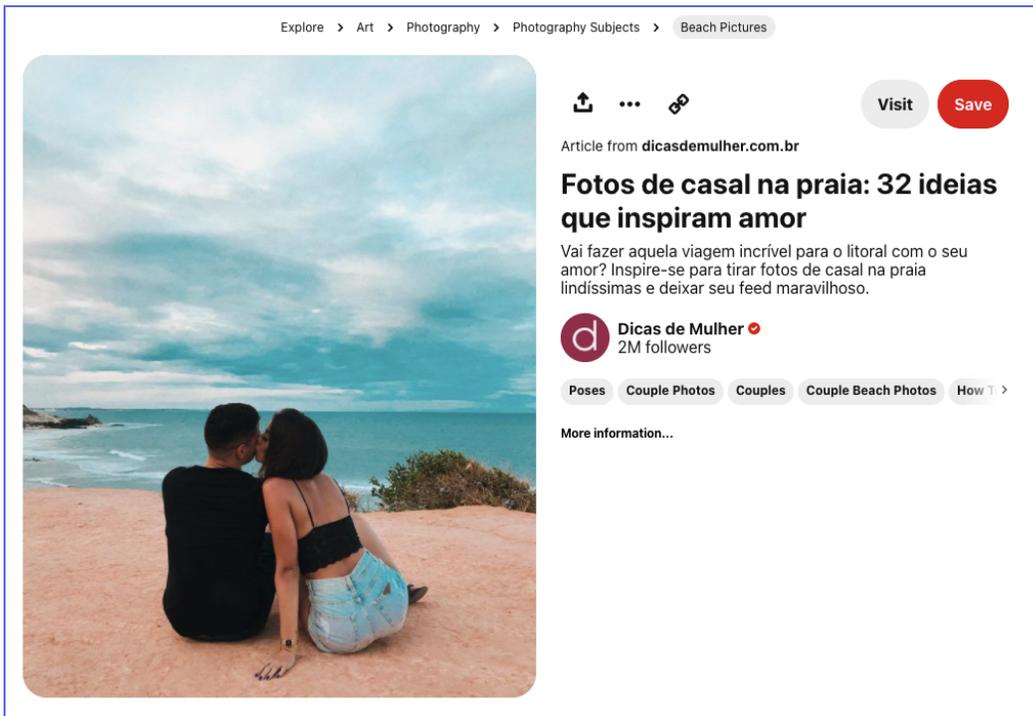
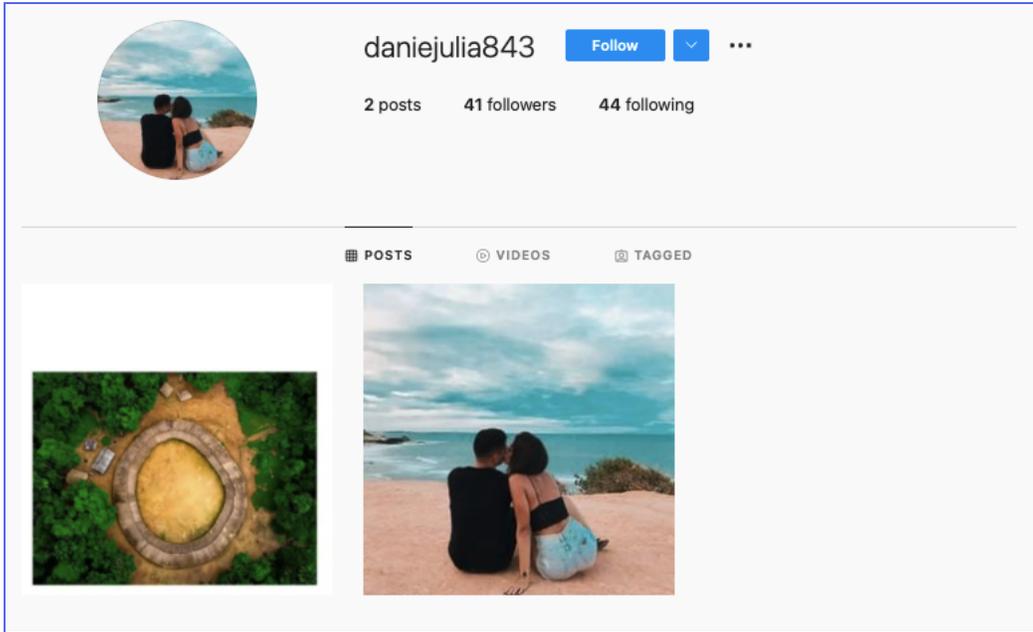
The set of assets Meta provided was relatively small compared to networks the company has previously removed for “coordinated inauthentic behavior.” Nevertheless, the network showed clear signs of coordination, with many of the assets created in batches in two distinct clusters in April 2020 and May - June 2021.

The bulk of the publicly visible activity for each asset occurred shortly after their creation dates, with a hiatus between late 2020 and early 2021. By the time of our investigation, the only assets still active were those we assessed to be the personal accounts of real people, at least one of which was posting holiday photos to Instagram up until a few days before being suspended.

Over the 18 months during which it was active, the operation failed to build a significant audience on either Facebook or Instagram and had just under 25,000 followers across both platforms at the time it was removed. The majority of assets in the set had minimal publicly visible activity and followers in the single digits. Most posts received little to no authentic engagement.

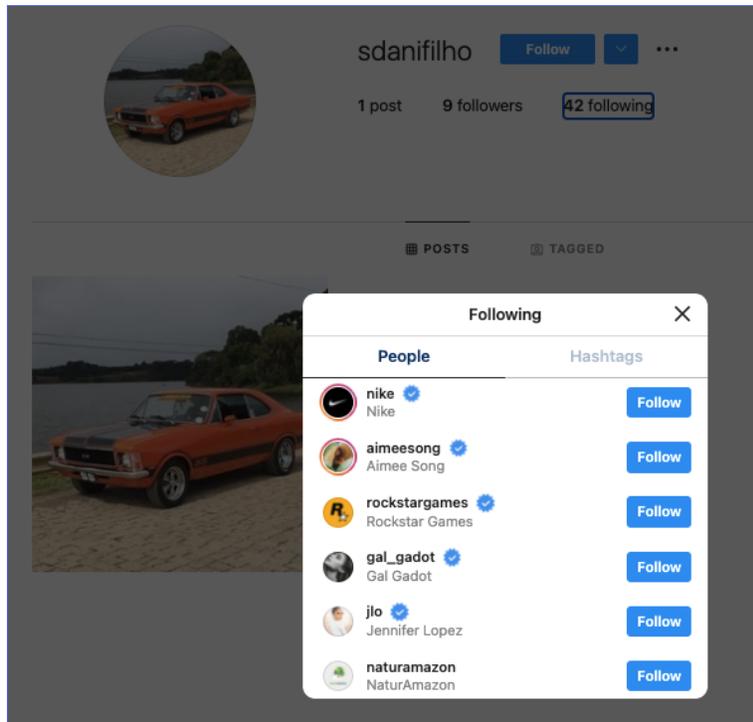
All of the assets provided by Meta fall into one of three categories: authentic social media accounts of individuals based in Brazil, thinly developed fake personas, and fake environmental organizations and political groups. These fake organizations appear to have been at the center of the operation and acted as its primary messaging vector. The corresponding Facebook pages and Instagram accounts were followed or liked by nearly every other asset in the set and regularly posted content that aligned with the operation’s overarching narratives.

The fake personas were often very thinly developed, in many cases updating their profile picture and adding a “life event” before ceasing all publicly visible activity. Often, these profiles and accounts posed as people in Brazil, listing locations such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro or claiming to have studied at local universities. In some cases, the personas used “stolen” profile pictures almost certainly sourced from elsewhere on the internet.

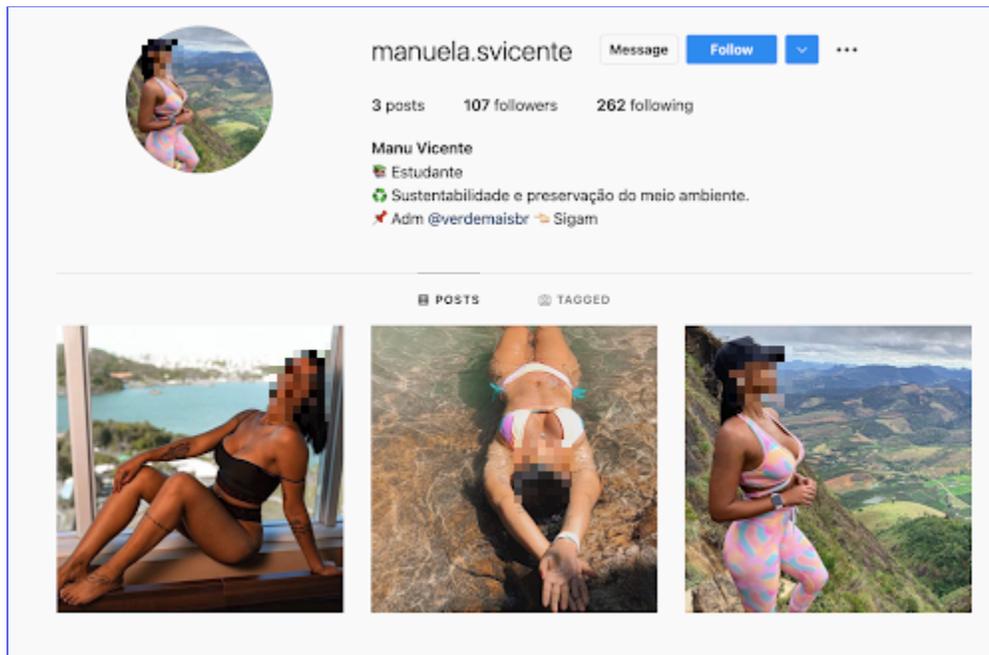


The profile picture used by Instagram account @daniejulia843 was previously posted to other [social media platforms](#) and [travel blogs](#) online

Each of the fake personas in the set served one of two purposes: either acting as a “backstop” for one of the operation’s fake entities (i.e. by posing as the authentic account of a page administrator) or following other assets in the set to artificially inflate their follower count. Indeed, around a third of the Instagram accounts we reviewed almost exclusively followed brands, celebrities, and other assets in the set.



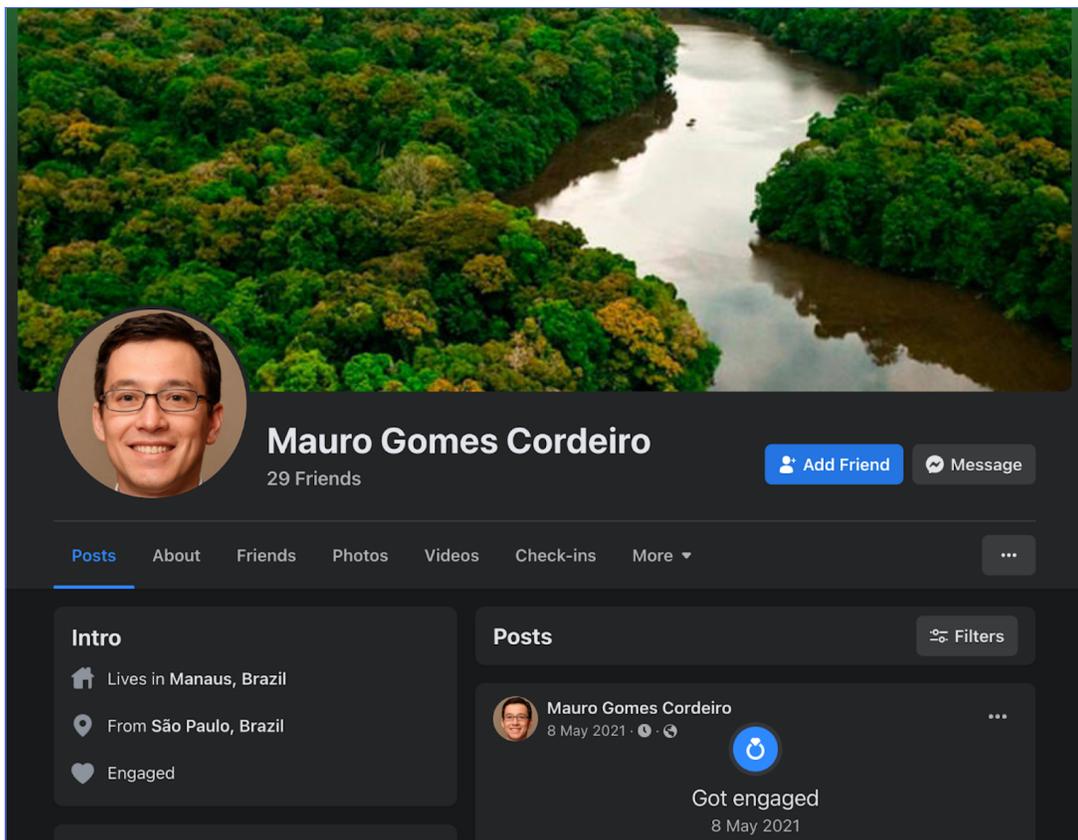
The Instagram account @sdanifilho only followed verified brand/celebrity accounts and @naturamazon, a fake environmental group included in the set



The Instagram account @manuela.svicente used stolen photos and described itself as the admin of @verdemaibr, another fake environmental group included in the set

## GAN in the Wild

Two assets in the set used profile photos that were likely generated using artificial intelligence techniques, such as generative adversarial networks (GAN). These assets were linked to the same fake persona who claimed to live in the city of Manaus and, implausibly, to have gotten engaged to an unspecified partner in May 2021. On both Facebook and Instagram, the only publicly visible activity beyond this low-effort persona building was following other accounts, pages, and profiles included in the set.

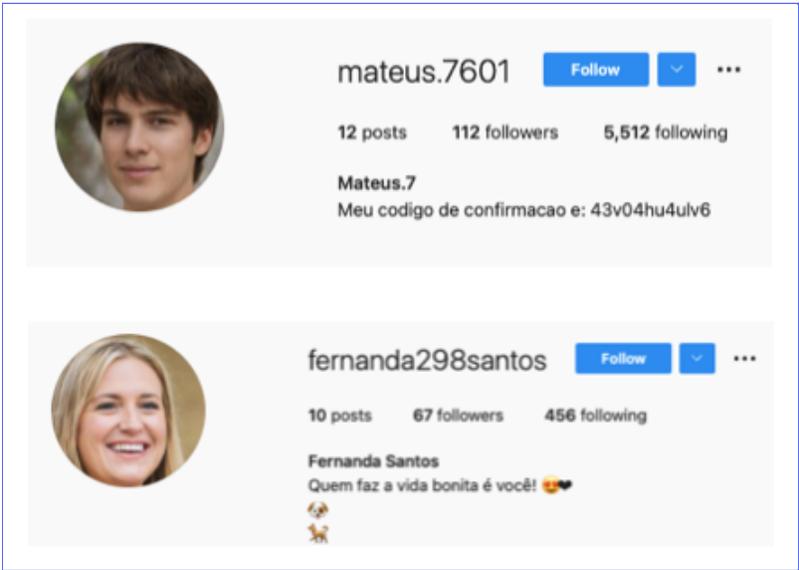


*The Facebook profile of Mauro Gomes Cordeiro, using a photo likely created using artificial intelligence techniques*

Multiple other assets in the set were also followed by accounts that likely used GAN-generated profile pictures and mostly posted innocuous landscape photos. Graphika did not identify any open-source indicators linking these additional GAN accounts to the same actors as the takedown set, but we did note other suspicious follower patterns on Instagram. Accounts in the set that posed as people in Brazil and posted exclusively in Portuguese, for example, were followed by large numbers of accounts that only operated in Arabic, Russian, and Albanian, suggesting that their operators may have purchased followers from a commercial service. On at least one occasion, an account in the set tagged the Instagram account @inste.likes, which appears to be a paid service that directs inauthentic likes towards posts that mention its handle.



The profile picture used by Mauro Gomes Cordeiro superimposed over eight other likely GAN-generated pictures belonging to followers of @naturamazon on Instagram. The alignment of the eyes in multiple different pictures strongly suggests the images were created using artificial intelligence techniques.



Instagram followers of @naturamazon using likely GAN-generated profile pictures

## #Amazon #instadaily

A distinctive feature of the operation was its eye-catching visual content branded with self-styled logos and slogans. The fake environmental organization NaturAmazon, for example, operated a Facebook page and Instagram account that consistently posted the same images, nearly all of which featured the entity's logo and links to its social media channels. This activity is typical of a traditional online-marketing campaign and was likely an attempt to build a following around the brand as well as present the organization as an authentic activist group.

NaturAmazon and other assets in the set also regularly used hashtags in English and Portuguese to promote their content. Some of these hashtags were related to topics that the assets posted about, such as #amazonia, #preserve, #jungle, and #deforestation. Others, however, were unrelated and possibly part of an effort to generate engagement, including #naturephotography, #insta #instadaily, and #travel.



A post by the NaturAmazon Instagram account featuring the group's logo and links to its social media channels. The image says, "protecting the environment is everyone's responsibility."



A post by the NaturAmazon Facebook page featuring the group's logo and links to its social media channels

## Military Matters

Graphika identified multiple open-source indicators that appear to corroborate Meta's attribution of the network to individuals associated with the Brazilian military. Most notably, we determined that two Facebook profiles and two Instagram accounts in the set belonged to two real individuals in Brazil who were actively serving in the army as of December 2021, according to Brazilian government [records](#) of federal employee payments. Our assessment that these assets are authentic accounts and not fake personas is based on their publicly visible activity, which includes photos of the same men from over a period of more than ten years. All four assets also regularly interacted with other accounts that likely belong to the men's colleagues and relatives.

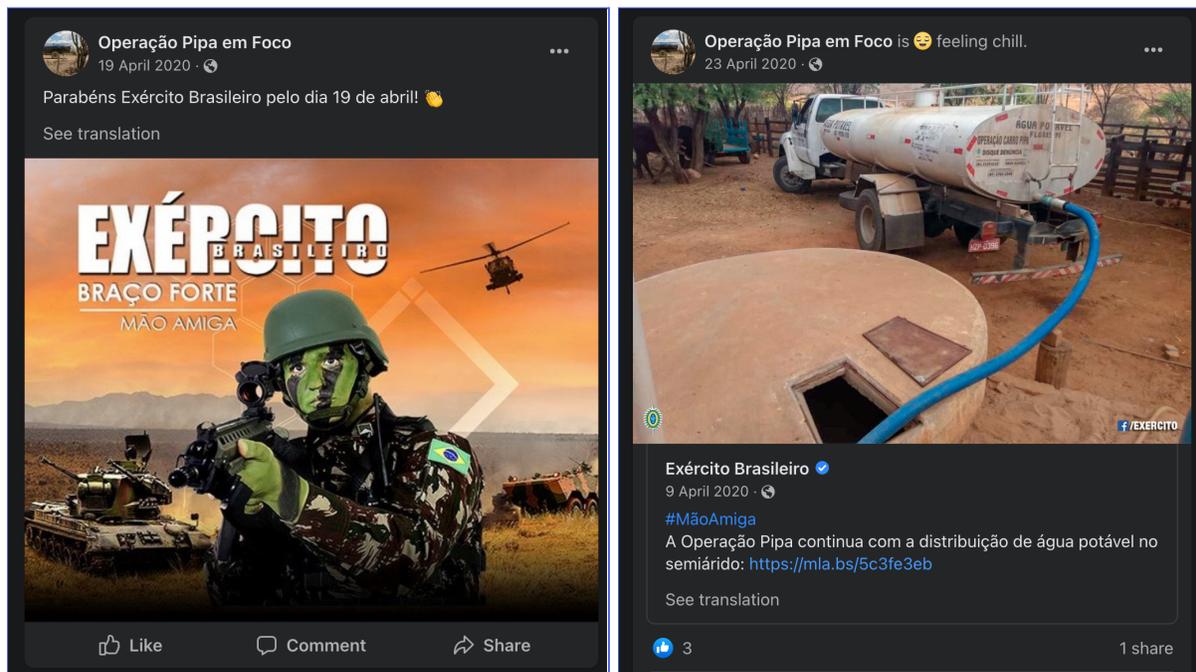
Personal information that the men made public on social media further supports our assessment that they are connected to the Brazilian army. Both men, for example, have posted multiple photos on Facebook in which they appear in military uniform, and relatives have congratulated them in social media posts for their achievements at army training courses and military academies. Their names also matched with Brazilian government records and publicly available

military documents – including results from army entrance exams and a military school graduation thesis – allowing us to trace their careers back to 2012 and 2014. While Graphika could not establish the exact nature of their army work, we believe that both men have previously specialized in functions related to the cavalry.

Unsurprisingly, both men liked multiple military pages on Facebook, including [Brigada de Infantaria de Selva](#), [50 BIS](#), and [Exército Brasileiro](#). A Twitter account tied to one of the men followed verified accounts belonging to the Brazilian air force and defense ministry. Given the anti-Bolsonaro narratives which other assets in the set advanced, it is interesting to note that the two men liked the president’s verified page on Facebook.

## Happy Army Day!

Further ties between the takedown set and the Brazilian military came from the Operação Pipa em Foco Facebook page. This page presented itself as a “news & media website” dedicated to promoting [Operação Pipa](#) [Operation Water Truck], an [army-led](#) program to transport potable water to drought-hit areas in northeastern Brazil. The page was active for only four weeks between April and May 2020, but during that time posted content supporting the army’s drought-relief program and shared posts from verified military accounts on Facebook. On April 19, 2020, it even congratulated soldiers on Brazilian Army Day.



Post by the Operação Pipa em Foco Facebook page congratulating the army on Brazilian Army Day (left) and a shared post originally from the verified Brazilian army Facebook page (right)

## Keyboard Eco-warriors

Based on the behavior described in this report, we believe the takedown set identified by Meta centered around a series of fake environmental organizations that operated on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Each of these is detailed below.

### NaturAmazon

NaturAmazon was the most well-developed of the fake environmental organizations in the set and claimed to be "an independent group seeking to raise awareness on the importance of preservation." NaturAmazon was primarily active on Instagram, where it amassed nearly 6,650 followers – the second most-followed account in the set – and posted almost daily between May and September 2021. A second NaturAmazon Instagram account was active between June and July 2021, but exclusively reposted content from its sister account and only had 55 followers.

A Facebook page created on the same day as the main NaturAmazon Instagram account – May 8, 2021 – only had 14 likes and 16 followers but appeared to have made a more deliberate effort to present itself as an authentic organization. The page listed an email address connected to one of the fake personas in the set, a Brazilian phone number, and a physical address leading to an abandoned store next to a pet shop in Manaus.



Google maps view of the address listed by the NaturAmazon Facebook page

As previously noted, the NaturAmazon cluster regularly posted visual content branded with the fake organization's logo and links to its social media channels. The accounts also engaged in basic audience-building techniques, such as captioning posts with blocks of hashtags and tagging other users, including Greenpeace Brazil.

Most of NaturAmazon's posts on Facebook and Instagram were pictures of wild animals, scenic shots of the Amazon rainforest, and snappy environmental-themed infographics. The cluster promoted a core narrative about the need to protect the rainforest and its biodiversity, regularly lauding government efforts to combat deforestation. Posts asserted that Brazil is a global leader in environmental protection and included [disputed claims](#) that the Brazilian government and army have been successful in fighting deforestation, which NaturAmazon said has been the fault of private citizens. Overall, NaturAmazon only posted statistics and news about deforestation that portrayed the Brazilian government and military in a positive light.

Paradoxically, the accounts also warned about the dangers of disinformation about deforestation in the Amazon, urging users to seek out information from official government sources.

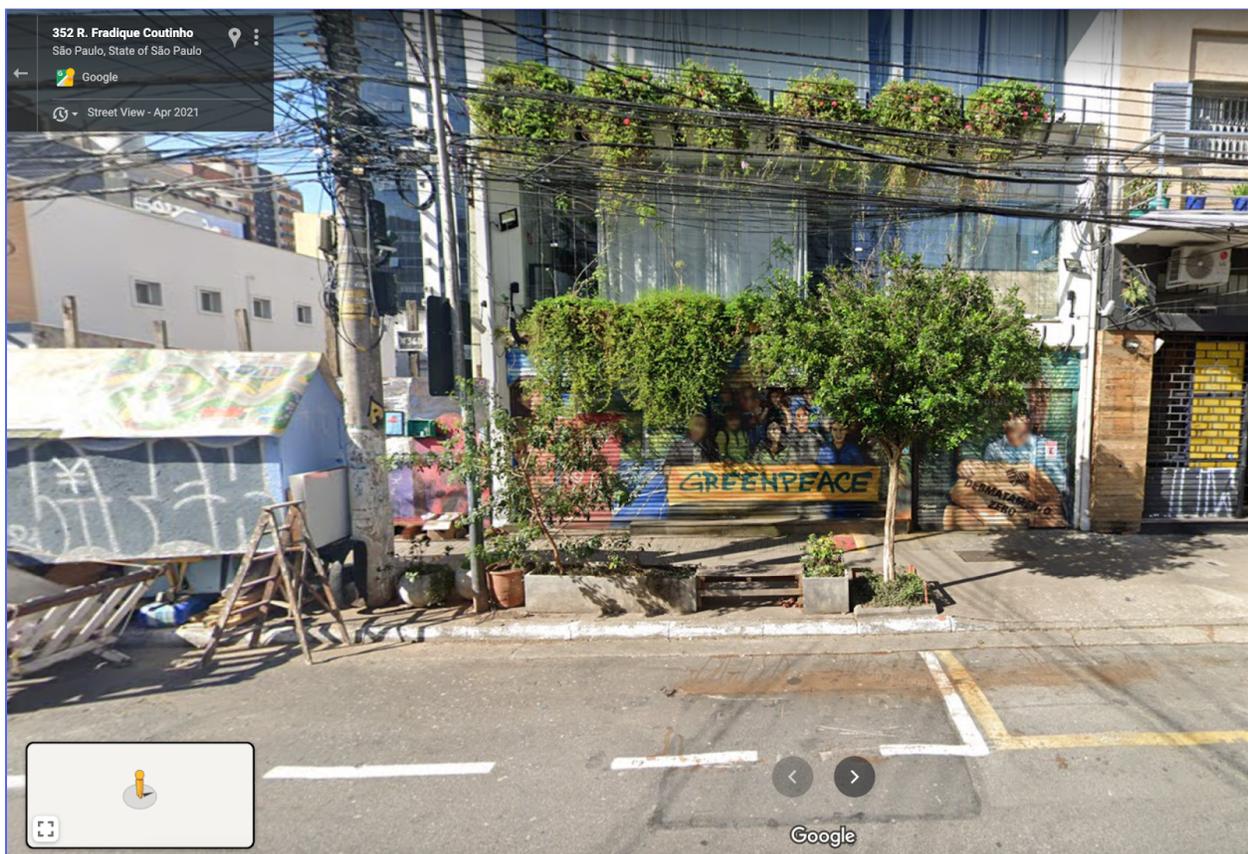


*Still from a video posted by the NaturAmazon Facebook page, which highlighted the role of the military in combating deforestation and the dangers of online disinformation*

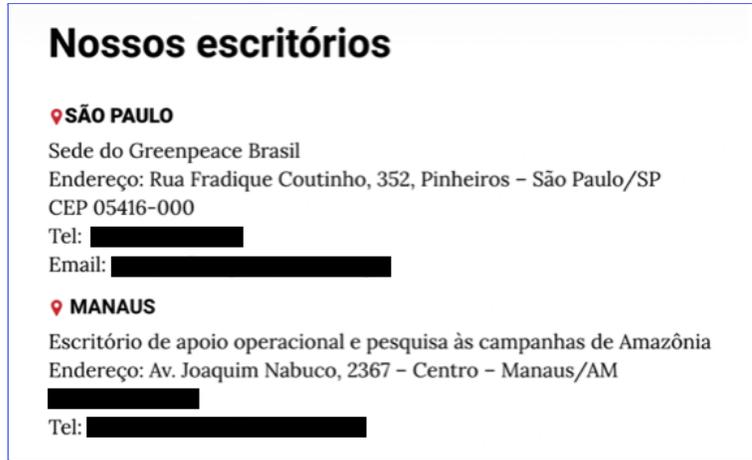
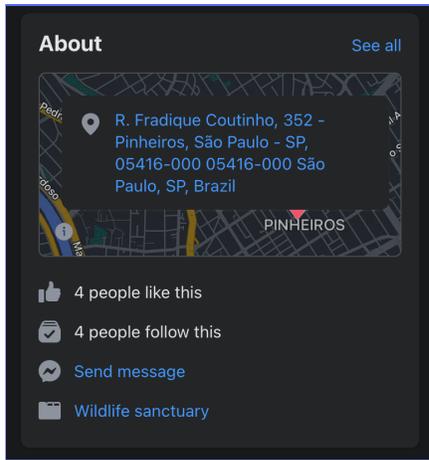
## Amazônia Sustentavel

A second fake environmental group used the name Amazônia Sustentavel [Sustainable Amazonia], which closely resembles those of two real organizations working to preserve the rainforest: the Rede Amazônia Sustentável research network and Fundação Amazônia Sustentável.

The Amazônia Sustentavel cluster comprised two Facebook pages, one Facebook profile, and an Instagram account. The assets only garnered 40 followers between them and barely conducted any publicly visible activity before going dormant shortly after being created in April 2020. One of the Facebook pages, however, did go so far as to add a profile picture of a jaguar and list an address that matched the [location](#) of Greenpeace's São Paulo office.

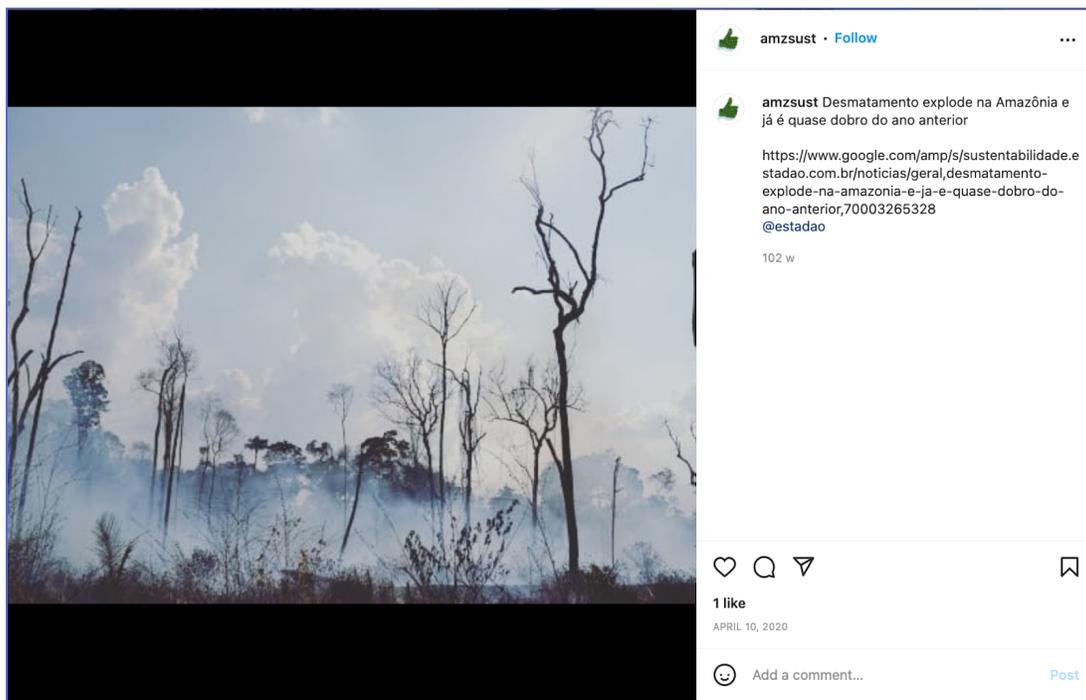


Google maps view of the address listed by the Amazônia Sustentavel Facebook page



Left: The address listed on the Amazônia Sustentável Facebook page. Right: Contact information listed on the website of Greenpeace Brazil for its office in São Paulo (redactions by Graphika)

Similar to NaturAmazon, the little content Amazônia Sustentável posted to Instagram featured pictures of animals and life in the rainforest, often in the form of short videos and infographics that promoted environmental-related news, including about deforestation in the Amazon. Most of this content appeared to have been lifted from Brazilian media outlets and sustainability blogs.

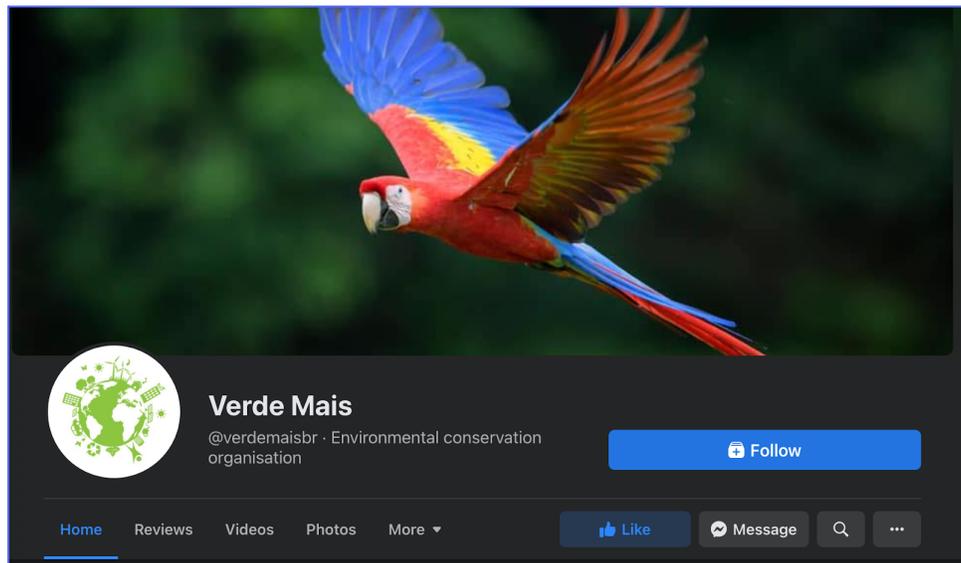


The @amsust Instagram account shares an article about deforestation from the Brazilian newspaper Estadão

## Verde Mais

Verde Mais [More Green] presented itself as an "environment conservation organization" on Instagram and Facebook, where it amassed only 951 followers before ceasing all public activity in mid-October 2021.

The Verde Mais accounts posted a range of environmental content, including wildlife videos and photos, that called for awareness about sustainability practices and deforestation due to forest fires and human activity. These posts often shared articles and content from NGOs and other environmental groups. A smaller subset of posts denounced illegal gold mining in the Amazon and private companies burning forested areas belonging to Brazil's indigenous people.



The Verde Mais Facebook page (above) and Instagram account (below)

## The NGO Inspector

One of the most intriguing assets in the set was the Instagram account O Fiscal das ONG's [The NGO Inspector], which described itself as an "environmental service" that would share "the truth that nobody tells you about NGOs in Brazil." The account was the most popular asset in the set, with over 7,000 followers. However, it rarely achieved more than 40 likes on its posts before it stopped posting in September 2021. The account's description linked to an associated Twitter profile, which had just 59 followers before the platform suspended it on April 1, 2022.



*The O Fiscal das ONGs Twitter account*

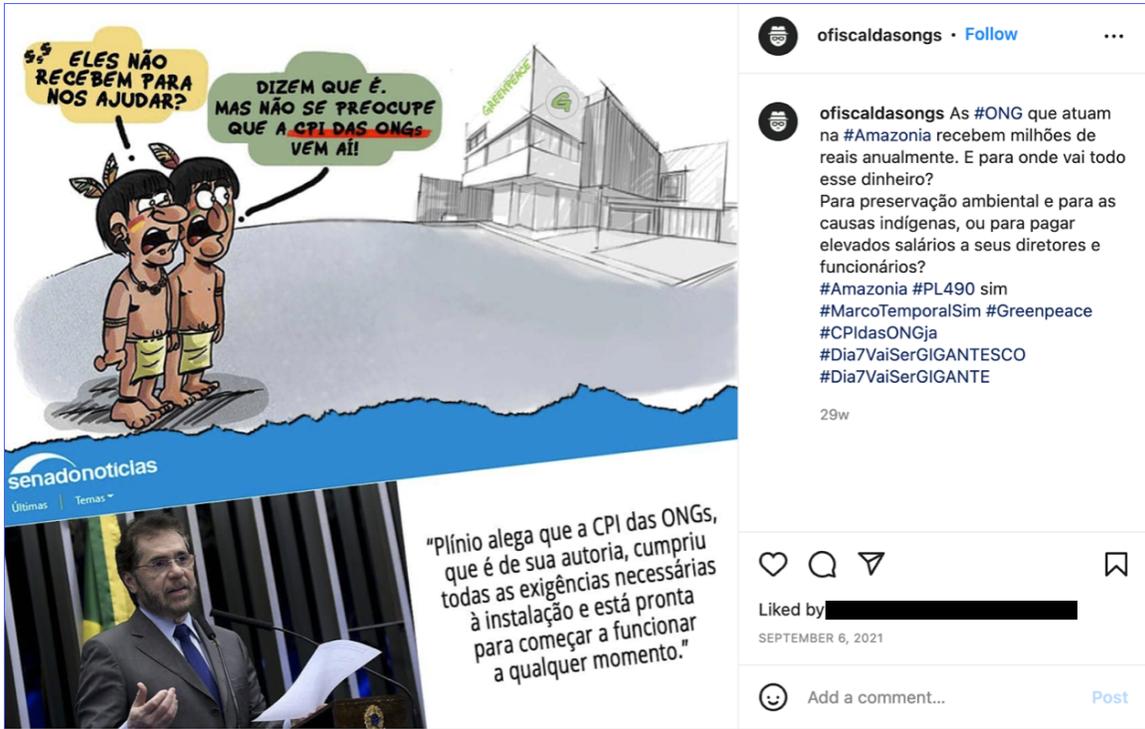
O Fiscal das ONG's posted content on Instagram and Twitter that sought to undermine the credibility of environmental NGOs working in the Amazon region. The account explicitly targeted local groups IMAZON and Instituto Socioambiental, as well as international organizations Greenpeace and the World Wide Fund for Nature. The accounts accused senior executives at NGOs of embezzling money raised to help indigenous peoples in the Amazon, and of manipulating data on deforestation trends to serve foreign interests and "promote disinformation in the country."

Accordingly, many posts featured the hashtag #CPIdasONGs [#InquiryIntoNGOs], which has been used to support calls for a congressional inquiry into NGOs operating in Brazil. Two posts promoted claims from Brazilian Social Democracy Party Senator Plínio Valério that he had evidence that NGOs were attempting to acquire land in the Amazon to benefit foreign interests.

Brazilian right-wing political circles have [made](#) the alleged "lack of transparency" surrounding environmental NGOs a common talking point, and conservative media in the country regularly cover the issue. Multiple posts on the O Fiscal das ONG's Instagram account included short video clips from the conspiratorial film "[Cortina de Fumaca](#)" ["Smokescreen"], which conservative media outlet Brasil Paralelo released in June 2021. The O Fiscal das ONG's Twitter account also appeared to deliberately engage with conservative audiences, regularly liking tweets by right-wing politicians and media outlets.



*An Instagram post by O Fiscal das ONG's alleging that senior executives at environmental NGOs have been pocketing money raised to protect indigenous populations*



An Instagram post by O Fiscal das ONG's using the hashtag #CPIdasONGs [#InquiryIntoNGOs]



An Instagram post by O Fiscal das ONG's criticizing Greenpeace with the caption, "Behind beautiful words, with the same rehearsed speech, they want to turn lies into truth"

## Bashing Bolsonaro

In addition to the cluster of fake environmental organizations detailed above, the network also operated two entities on Facebook and Instagram that posted in 2020 about social issues in Brazil, including land ownership rights and criticism of Bolsonaro's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Resistência Jovem

The first of these entities was Resistência Jovem [Youth Resistance], which used the same name, pictures, and description on Instagram and Facebook. The fake organization described itself as a group designed "to combat any type of inequality. We are young people who fight for an inclusive education for everyone." On Facebook, Resistência Jovem listed itself as a "political organization," and used a profile photo referencing [Marielle Franco](#), a Rio de Janeiro councilwoman and human rights campaigner murdered in 2018.

The Resistência Jovem assets were created in early April 2020 and gained only 531 followers between them before ceasing publicly visible activity on June 9. Posts on Instagram averaged around 60 likes, while those on Facebook barely registered any engagement.



Screenshot of the Resistência Jovem Facebook page. The sign in the profile picture reads: "Marielle Presente Hoje e Sempre" [Marielle is here today and forever].

Resistência Jovem appears to have sourced most of its content from external sources, usually posting political cartoons and infographics that had been previously shared elsewhere online or uploading screenshots of media headlines with a link back to the original article. The majority of this content was critical of Bolsonaro and the Brazilian government, specifically their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. One cartoon posted to Facebook, for example, depicted the offices of

the Brazilian health ministry filled with skeletons. Another reimaged the Brazilian coat of arms with a skull at its center.

A smaller subset of posts targeted Bolsonaro over issues unrelated to COVID-19, including allegations that he was a racist, a fascist, and had interfered in federal police investigations. These posts frequently used popular anti-Bolsonaro hashtags, such as #ForaBolsonaro [#OustBolsonaro] and #ImpeachmentBolsonaro.

Resistência Jovem also shared some generic content that aligned with its purported position as a progressive youth group fighting against inequality. These posts called for efforts to combat racism in Brazil and awareness about domestic violence against women during the pandemic.



A cartoon posted to Facebook by Resistência Jovem shows the Brazilian Health Ministry filled with skeletons



A cartoon by Brazilian political cartoonist [Carlos Latuff](#) that was posted to Instagram by Resistência Jovem

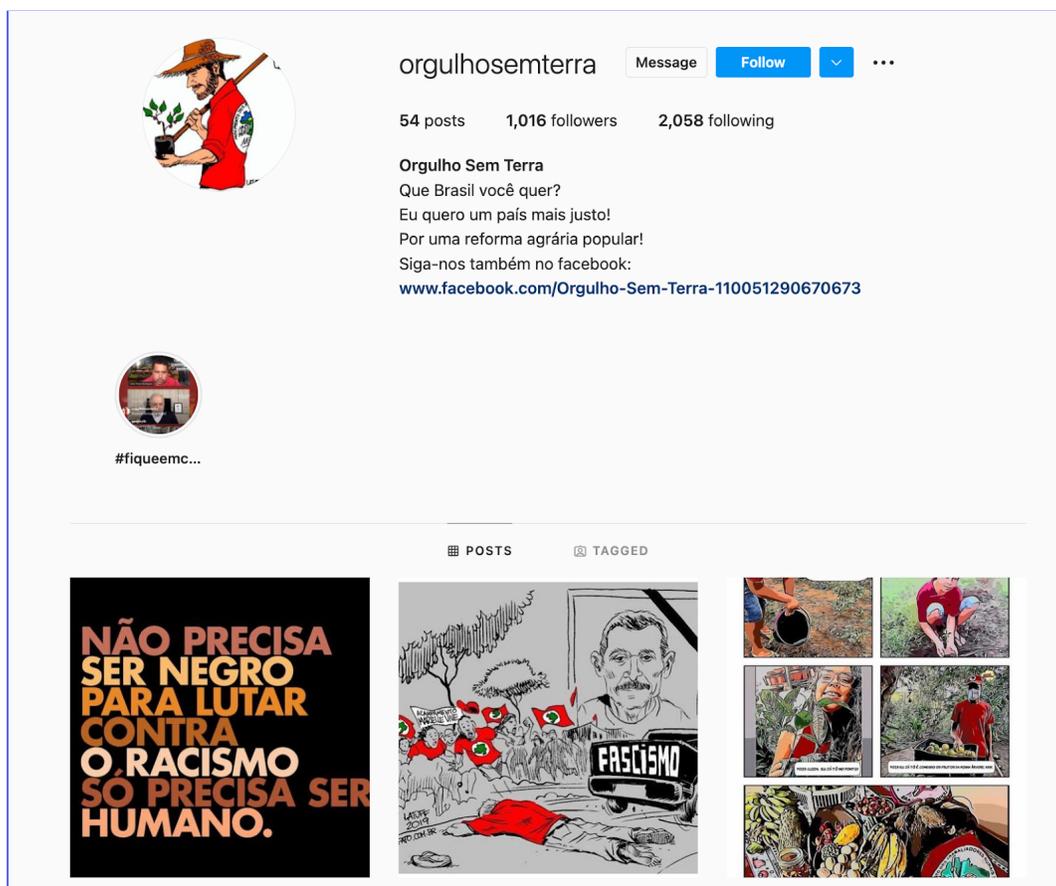


A cartoon posted to Facebook by Resistência Jovem shows Bolsonaro and former U.S. President Donald Trump as members of the Ku Klux Klan, alongside the English-language caption "Black lives matter!"

## Orgulho Sem Terra

Like Resistência Jovem, Orgulho Sem Terra [Landless Pride] was active on Instagram and Facebook between April and June 2020, during which it acquired fewer than 1,500 followers. Orgulho Sem Terra may have been an attempt to mimic Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) [The Landless Rural Workers Movement], a [group](#) that campaigns for the rights of rural workers in Brazil. As well as using a similar name and near-identical branding, Orgulho Sem Terra consistently shared content from official MST accounts and directly referenced the movement in its Facebook page description: "Página em homenagem a todos que lutam por um país mais justo, igualitário, pessoas que apoiam as causas do Movimento Sem Terra!" [A page in honor of everyone who fights for a fairer and egalitarian country, people who support the causes of the Movimento Sem Terra!]

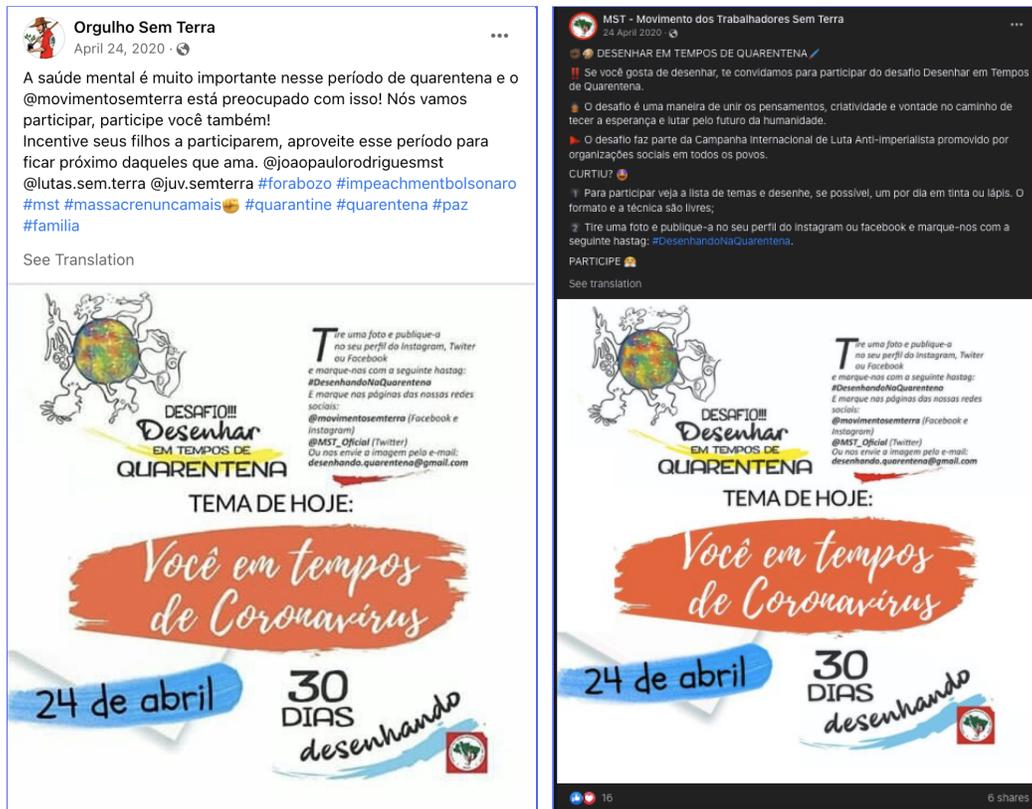
In a possible attempt to present itself as genuine, the Orgulho Sem Terra Facebook page also listed a Gmail address that used the same name and profile picture as one of the inauthentic profiles included in the takedown set. That profile liked the Orgulho Sem Terra page on Facebook and the official MST page as well as other related causes.



The Orgulho Sem Terra Instagram account, which included a link to the fake entity's Facebook page

Nearly all of the Orgulho Sem Terra posts on Facebook and Instagram consisted of pictures and videos featuring the MST branding and logo. Many appeared to be reshares of posts by official MST social media accounts. As a result, the core messaging narratives closely aligned with those of the MST, celebrating the lives of small land workers in Brazil, arguing for land reform and equal rights, and sharing information about donations and fundraising campaigns.

The Orgulho Sem Terra posts regularly featured MST-related hashtags, such as #movimentosemterra [#landlessmovement] and #reformaagraria [#landreform], as well as tagging the verified MST Instagram handle and accounts of senior figures in the movement.



The Orgulho Sem Terra (left) and MST (right) Facebook pages share the same infographic about MST social media campaigns during the pandemic. The Orgulho Sem Terra post includes anti-Bolsonaro hashtags.

However, some of the content was reminiscent of narratives promoted by Resistência Jovem, including criticism of Bolsonaro over the COVID-19 pandemic and calls to end racism in Brazil. These usually featured popular anti-Bolsonaro hashtags and included memes or images that MST social media accounts had previously shared. Orgulho Sem Terra also shared content featured in Resistência Jovem posts and tagged the @resistencia.jovem Instagram accounts in its posts.



The Orgulho Sem Terra (left) and MST (right) Facebook pages share the same image criticizing Bolsonaro's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which they refer to as a "genocide" against the Brazilian people



Resistência Jovem and Orgulho Sem Terra share the same popular anti-Bolsonaro image on Instagram and Facebook. The banner reads: "Stay at home! Only Bolsonaro out."



**Graphika**

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