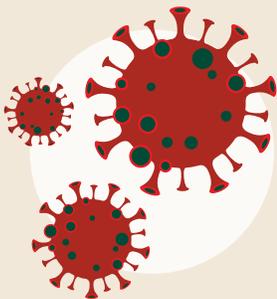


COVID-19 AND GAMBLING: MARKETING AND SOCIAL MEDIA



CONTEXT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of public health measures have had a significant impact on the gambling industry. With the closure of many gambling establishments, several operators were temporarily forced to concentrate their efforts on online gambling, while those operators that were already offering gambling online saw their revenues increase (see previous factsheet). With this intensification of gambling offerings online, important questions emerge in regard to the marketing strategies employed to promote online gambling and how they are regulated. As such, online gambling advertising is one aspect of the digital environment in which gamblers live that merits further attention, particularly in the context of a pandemic. The purpose of this fact sheet is to present an overview of the publicity and informational messages used by four of the most popular online gambling operators in Canada and Quebec on social media during the first six months of the pandemic.

Regulation of gambling advertising in the digital environment



Under the Criminal Code of Canada, only Crown Corporations are legally permitted to market online gambling in Canada. Furthermore, with the de-territorialization of the Internet, the marketing of online gambling by private operators located outside of Canada's jurisdiction makes the supervision and regulation of gambling offerings available to the Canadian public significantly more complex. The practices of private operators, who are not legally bound to comply with laws in the countries where they provide their gambling offerings, are regularly questioned about consumer protection issues and the potential harms of this unregulated market^{1,2}. Given the complexity of the legal framework for this online industry, unregulated operators are far less constrained in terms of their advertising strategies and content^{3,4,5,6}.

For the purposes of this factsheet, promotional messages broadcast via the social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) of four of the most popular online gambling operators in Quebec (*Loto-Québec*, *Pokerstars*, *888poker* and *William Hill*) were collected. The number and nature of promotional messages were then analyzed.

OVERVIEW OF THE FOUR OPERATORS UNDER STUDY:

	LOTO-QUÉBEC	POKERSTARS	888POKER	WILLIAM HILL
	Québec's state-owned online and offline gambling corporation (casinos, gambling salons, lottery sales outlets)	Online (although some in-person tournaments are held)	Online (poker)	Online (casino games, sports betting) and offline (in the UK ⁷)
	 82k+20k = 102k likes	 2M likes	 319k likes	 703k likes
	 18k+7k = 25k followers	 537k followers	 64.3k followers	 3.9 followers
	 8.7k followers	 266k followers	 79.5k followers	 225.6k followers

METHODOLOGY

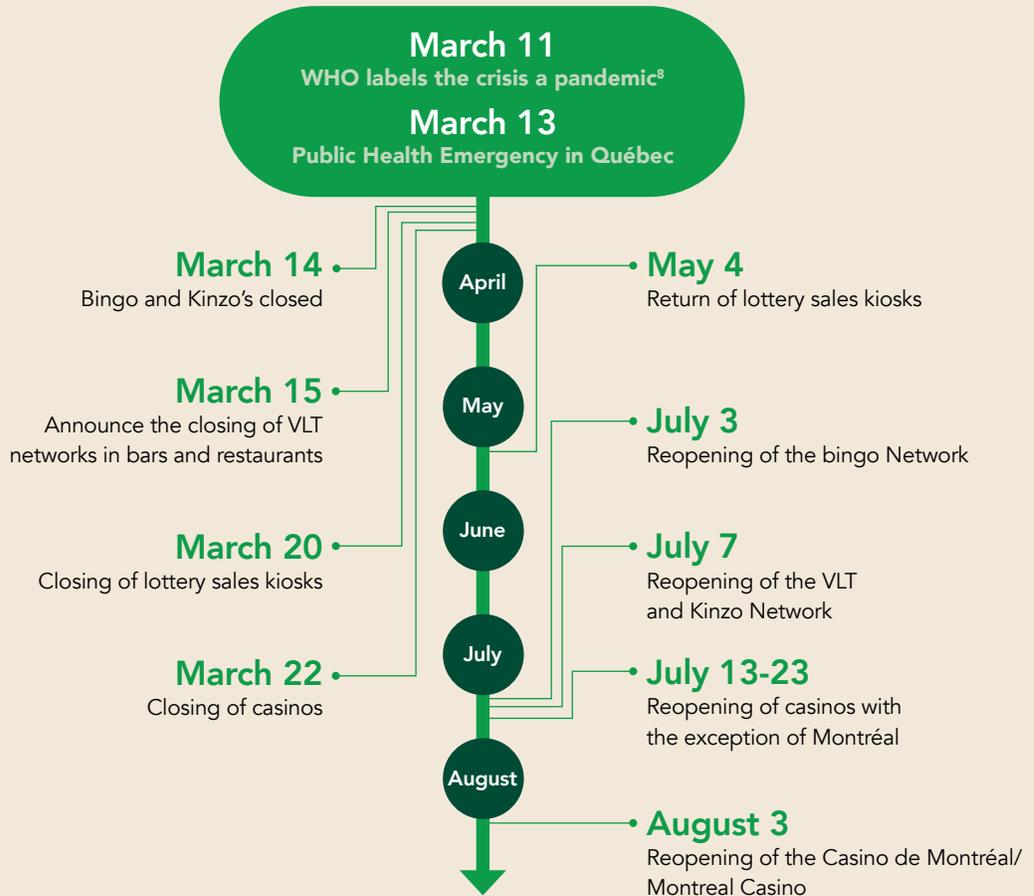
We collected the messages sent by the four operators under study (*Loto-Québec*, *Pokerstars*, *888poker* and *William Hill*) on three social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram on a daily basis between March 13, 2020 and August 31, 2020. By collecting messages directly from the operators' pages and accounts, we bypassed the phenomenon of targeted advertising based on users' preferences and profiles⁹. This would have otherwise limited the number and nature of messages to which the collector would have been exposed to by simply monitoring the operators' accounts. All posts were recorded and sorted to keep only those with publicity or an informational message, excluding responsible gambling posts. All operators have a general account¹⁰ (not specific to a country or region, nor to a type of game) on each social media outlet under study (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), ensuring the centralization of posts, with the exception of *William Hill's* official Instagram account, which is specific to the United States (@williamhillus)¹¹. Considering the absence of an alternative, and the cultural and geographical proximity between Canada and the United States, the messages posted via this account were collected. Likewise, the *888* operator has a Facebook, Twitter and Instagram account per game type (poker, casino, sports betting). For the purposes of this study and considering the popularity of poker at *888*, only messages broadcast via the *888poker* account were analyzed.

It is critical to mention that this fact sheet does not aim to provide a comparison between pre and post pandemic communications or the operators. Rather, this factsheet offers a portrayal of how online gambling was promoted during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESULTS

Publicity and informational messages disseminated via social media during the first months of the pandemic

CHART 1 – PUBLICITY OR INFORMATIONAL MESSAGES POSTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA BY ONLINE GAMBLING OPERATORS BETWEEN MARCH 13 AND AUGUST 31, 2020¹².



The first marked increase in the number of social media posts occurred during the week of March 13, 2020. This coincided with the date of the declaration of the COVID-19 health emergency in Québec that followed the World Health Organization's official declaration on March 11, 2020¹³. However, around mid-April, during the period of widespread lockdown in Québec and most of the world, there was a decrease in the number of messages.

The month of May, a period where several health measures were relaxed, was marked by an increase in the number of messages, particularly from the operator *Pokerstars*. The number of social media posts by *Loto-Québec* and *888poker* was relatively stable for the months of June and July when health regulations continued to ease in Quebec and elsewhere. However, from the end of July there was a marked increase in messages from the operators *Pokerstars* and *William Hill*.

In proportion, *Loto-Québec* was the operator with the least amount of advertising content via social media between mid-March 2020 and the end of August 2020. *Pokerstars* is the operator that used the most publicity messages via social networks with marked periodic increases.

Nature of the publicity and informational messages disseminated via social media during the pandemic

A thematic content analysis of the publicity and informational messages identified four broad categories: a) messages that provide information about health measures implemented by operators, b) messages that include a quick reference to the pandemic, c) messages that use the pandemic to promote gambling, and d) standard gambling publicity messages¹⁴.



A) Messages that provide information about health measures implemented by operators

This category refers to all elements related to health measures. It also includes the cancellation of events as well as the opening and closing of sales outlets or casinos. The main purpose of this category is to inform.



B) Messages that include a quick reference to the pandemic

This category refers to elements that mention the pandemic but are not directly related to gambling or public health measures. The purpose of these quick references is not to use the pandemic to promote gambling, nor to inform the public about the measures, but simply to adapt the message to the current context. This includes, for example, a message using solidarity symbols (#solidarity, rainbow emoji) or some mention of the new reality caused by the pandemic (e.g., lockdown, quarantine, wearing a mask) without making a link to gambling.



C) Messages that use the pandemic to promote gambling

This category refers to messages that appear to use the health crisis, its effects and the measures in place to promote gambling. For example, using the lack of social interaction due to confinement to promote gambling or a specific product. This category can also refer to the use of symbols of solidarity (e.g., the rainbow), in order to sell or promote gambling.



D) Standard gambling publicity messages

This category refers to publicity messages that do not contain any element related to the pandemic or the health crisis context.

The thematic content analysis of the messages first reveals significant differences in the quantity of references to the pandemic in the messages between the four operators studied. For example, the state corporation referred to the pandemic in about 38% of all messages collected, while private operators referred to it in a much lower proportion, just under 11% for 888poker and under 1% for Pokerstars and William Hill.

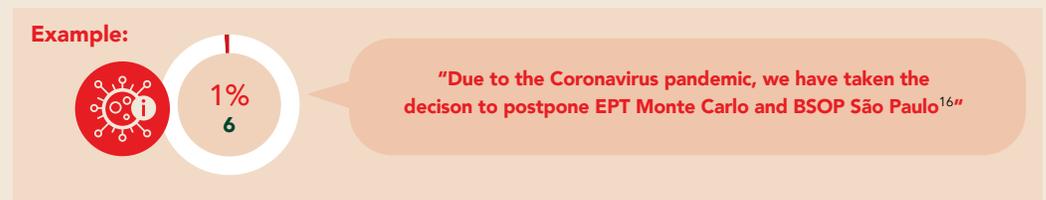
TABLE 1 – DISTRIBUTION OF MESSAGES ACCORDING TO THE NATURE OF THE CONTENT

	LOTO-QUÉBEC (N=217)	POKERSTARS (N=682)	888POKER (N=582)	WILLIAM HILL (N=527)
Public health measures (A)	26% 57	1% 6	1% 5	0% 0
Quick reference to context (B)	6% 12	0% 0	5% 31	0% 0
Instrumentalization of the pandemic (C)	3% 6	0% 0	2% 13	0% 0
Normal publicity messages (D)	62% 134	99% 676	90% 521	99% 522
Health Measures + Quick Reference (A + B)	4% 8	0% 0	2% 9	1% 5
Quick Reference + Instrumentalization (B + C)	0% 0	0% 0	1% 3	0% 0

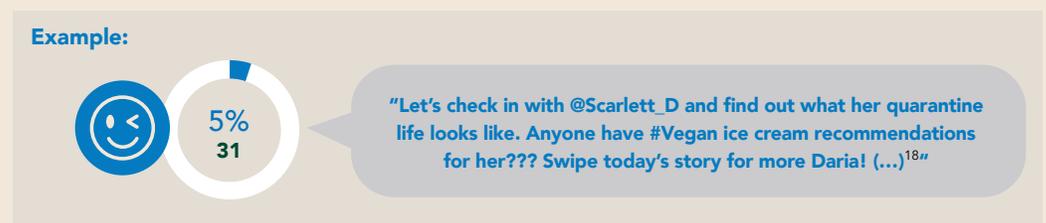
A second difference is noted in the way operators refer to the pandemic. For example, *Loto-Québec* is the operator that referred to the COVID-19 pandemic the most in their messages sent on social media, mainly to disseminate *information about health measures in place*. This result is not surprising since *Loto-Québec* is the operator with the largest land-based gaming sector among the four operators studied, with the other three operators concentrating most of their activities online. Nevertheless, out of all the messages sent by *Loto-Québec* that refer to the pandemic (83), **7% (6/83) suggest a certain instrumentalization of the health crisis to promote online gambling.**



Otherwise, nearly all of the messages sent by *Pokerstars* (676 out of 682) fall under the category of *normal publicity messages* with the remaining messages that incorporate references to the pandemic falling under the category of **information about the health measures implemented by the operators**. These messages are very few in number and are limited to the announcement of the cancellation of tournaments due to the pandemic.



From *888poker*, the majority of posts referring to the COVID-19 pandemic fall into category, **quick reference to the pandemic** (13 out of 61), while about **21%** fall into the category of instrumentalization of the pandemic (13 out of 61).



Finally, all of the *William Hill* operator's promotional messages refer to a combination of health measures with a quick reference to the pandemic. Although small in number, these messages all relate to the opening or closing of outlets due to the pandemic, with an added and brief reference to solidarity and to the hardships related to the pandemic.





FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS

The state operator, **Loto-Québec**, sent the least number of messages through social media during the first six months of the pandemic and also the most embedded pandemic-related content. The main purpose of the pandemic-related content messages was to inform players of the public health measures related to the land-based gambling offer. In contrast, **Pokerstars** was the operator with the most messages on social media during the first six months of the pandemic. Regardless of context, these messages made no reference to the pandemic and fell into the category of *normal publicity messages*. **888poker** stands out as the operator that most instrumentalized the pandemic to promote gambling.

Although limited, these initial results analyzing online gambling promotional messages reveal the diversity of promotional strategies used by operators during the first periods of the COVID-19 pandemic and remind us of the importance of establishing a legal framework and tighter regulations surrounding gambling offers and promotional practices in the digital world.

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7. *William Hill* however, opened a point of sale for sports betting in a casino, in the E-U (Grand Victoria Casino Elgin, Illinois), Instagram page «williamhillus», 1st August, 2020.
8. <https://www.who.int/fr/news/item/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>
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10. Note that *Loto-Québec* does have a specific account for online gambling. We have combined those with the general accounts for the data collection.
11. Note that this is the only official Instagram account for *William Hill*.
12. Note that the first and last week are incomplete.
13. <https://www.who.int/fr/news/item/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>
14. Note that the first three categories are not mutually exclusive, which means that a message can fit into more than one category. The fourth category, however, is exclusive, as it is defined by the absence of elements from the first three categories.
15. Facebook page «Jeux en ligne – Loto-Québec», 6th July 2020
16. Facebook page «Pokerstars», 13th March 2020
17. Instagram page «888poker», 29th May 2020
18. Facebook page «William Hill», 21st March 2020

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