

COMPLAINING COMPLIMENTING AND WORD-OF-MOUTH IN THE DIGITAL AGE: TYPOLOGY AND TERMS

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ABSTRACT

The rise of digital platforms has changed how, when and where consumers communicate with each other (consumer-to-consumer, C2C) and with firms (consumer-to-business, C2B). Word-of-mouth (WOM) behavior has evolved in the digital age. Complaints and compliments are no longer just words. C2B and C2C Marketing communication is increasingly played out in other media and in view of others. An updated typology of complaint channels is proposed.

The rise of incentivized and solicited C2B and C2C communication creates new challenges to both consumers and marketers. This paper provides unambiguous definitions that encompass the various types of communication methods, motives and channels.

Keywords: *Word-of-mouth, eWOM incentivized WOM, inorganic WOM, inorganic UGC, false WOM, false UGC*

INTRODUCTION

As online commerce explodes, consumer communication to the firm (C2B) and word-of-mouth (C2C) activity evolves. In 2015 on Black Friday/Thanksgiving weekend more people shopped on online than in brick and mortar stores. In the USA, 103 million went online versus 102 million who visited stores. The emerging dominance of e-commerce portends great changes not only to how Americans shop, but also how they communicate about products, services and consumption experiences. In 2016, consumer to consumer (C2C) and consumer

to business (C2B) communication is very different than in the past. In today's digital age, consumers are inundated with requests to share their opinions with firms (C2B) or with others (C2C).

Changes in how, when, where and the motives behind C2B and C2C Marketing communication are addressed along with proposed definitions of new forms of WOM and UGC that have arisen in the marketplace.

WOM

In 1967, Arndt defined word-of-mouth (WOM) as 'face-to-face communication about a brand, product or service between people who are perceived as not having connections to a commercial entity'. Word-of-mouth marketing, also called word of mouth advertising, is an unpaid form of promotion—oral or written—in which dis/satisfied customers tell other people how much they dis/like a business, product, service, or event. Voice was coined as an alternative behavioral response following a negative consumption experience (Hirschman 1970); the study of complaining behavior began. C2C and C2B communication became important topics of study.

eWOM and UGC

The value of WOM is well documented (Brown and Reingen 1987; Mangold et al. 1999; Lang and Hyde, 2013). WOM in the digital age has only increased in importance as communication has expanded beyond interpersonal channels to eWOM and other media (user generated content, UGC).

With the advent of digital channels, WOM has become more important and complex. An early definition of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) by Hennig-Thurau, et al (2004) states “positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet.” This definition of eWOM expands WOM in two ways. First by recognizing that strangers can see statements. Second it recognizes ‘institutions’ as an audience. The rapid growth of the Internet and ecommerce has created enormous change.

The definition of eWOM does not capture all online complaining and complimenting. It fails to recognize that communication is not limited to written statements. Videos, Images or audio, can also communicate a complaint or compliment. While all Marketing eWOM is UGC, not all Marketing UGC is eWOM.

User-generated content (UGC) is defined as “any form of content such as video, blogs, discussion form posts, digital images, audio files, and other forms of media that was created by consumers or end-users of an online system or service and is publically available to others consumers and end-users.” (Beal). UGC is a broader concept. Well-known examples of UGC to register a complaint include the “United Breaks Guitar” YouTube video (Carroll,

2009) The video currently has over 16 million views.

UGC fills a need for consumers to engage with, and communicate, about brands. Sixty four percent of Millennials feel that companies should offer more ways to share their opinions online. Of the Millennials who share, 71% report they’ll continue to share opinions because they feel other consumers value their opinions (Bazaar Voice). UGC has been reported to be 35% more memorable and 50% more trusted than other media (Ipsos Media)

Burberry provides an example of a successful UGC company-owned-site (www.artofthetrench.burberery.com). Consumers load their photos and comment on photos of other people wearing the brand. Burberry ecommerce sales rose 50% the year following the website launch in 2009 (Siu, 2015).

UGC can also be used to generate promotional materials. Target, in 2014, launched a college-acceptance letter video contest. The best videos were used in a commercial to build awareness of their philanthropic activities. These examples reinforce the differences between eWOM and UGC. eWOM is the written word. UGC, on-the-other-hand, can be other mediums and doesn’t necessarily address positives or negatives about the brand or consumer experience. Engagement plays a role (Haven, 2007; Christodoulides, 2012).

Electronic Word-of-Mouth

C2C or C2B

Statements

(-) or (+) Brand assessment

Possibly engagement



User Generated Content

C2C or C2B

Statements & photos, video, audio

Brand assessment and/or engagement

Channels Then And Now

Singh’s (1990) consumer dissatisfaction response styles provide a framework to response channels. Singh’s typology of *Passives*, *Voicers*, *Irates* and *Activists* has been expanded to include *Social Networkers*. Consumer complaints, or compliments, about products, services or consumption experience could be directed to the firm (C2B), social networks (C2C- friends, family, co-workers), or third parties (Figure 1).

In the good old days customer’s options for complaining were limited. *Voicers*’ options were telephone, write a letter, or complain face-to-face. *Activists* had consumer protection agencies, Better Business Bureau or the courts. The early definition of WOM (telling others) was through traditional social networks. Word-of-mouth (C2C) was spread through interpersonal channels. Before the advent of digital channels, *Irates* who wanted to

publicize their complaints could use newspaper ads, billboards, or picket. For example, in 1995, a very frustrated Starbucks customer took out four adverts in Western regional Wall Street Journal editions. His ads, featuring a toll-free number resulted in over 3,000 calls, 300 to 400 letters and cash donations (Finn, 1995).

In 2008, an irate jewelry store customer in Las Vegas picketed after a one-carat diamond she had set in a ring fell out not long afterward. Complaining publicly took time, money and effort. When the retailer had the picketer arrested for trespassing, news channels provided a far larger audience (Packer, 2008).

With the advent of the digital age, channels to complain or compliment dramatically increased. Today *Voicers* (C2B), *Activists* (C2B/C2C), *Social Networkers* (C2C) and *Irates* (C2B/C2C) can communicate with, or about, a firm

FIGURE 1: TYPOLOGY OF TRADITIONAL CONSUMER COMMUNICATION (C2B/C2C)

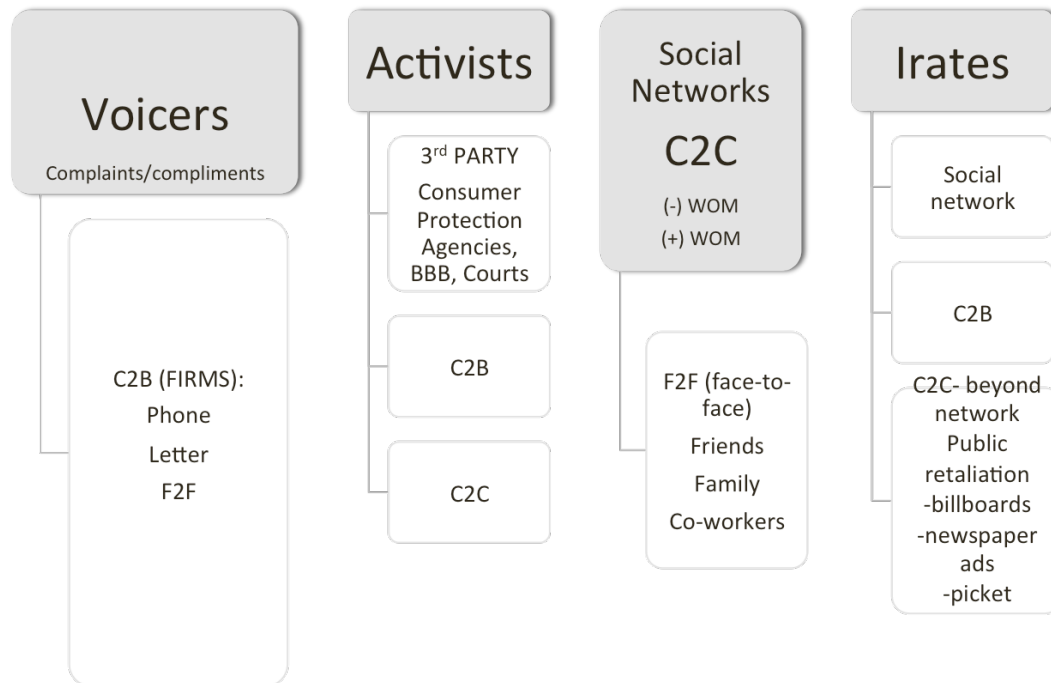
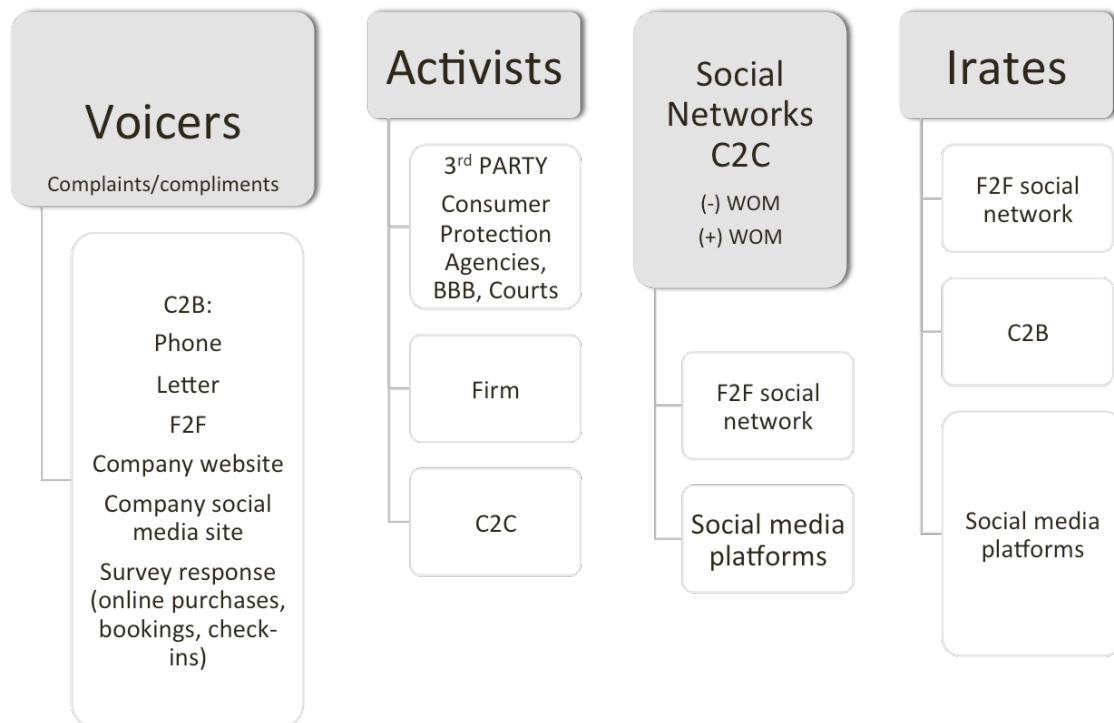


FIGURE 2: TYPOLOGY CONSUMER COMMUNICATION (C2B/C2C) IN THE DIGITAL AGE



across a wider array of platforms and media. (Figure 2). This has created a double-edged sword.

C2B

It has never been easier to reach a firm to complain or compliment. C2B options have grown dramatically. Firms have noticed; there is a surfeit of firm-solicited feedback options. Surveys, check-ins and consumption reviews abound. For example, one transaction on Amazon can generate multiple requests for feedback. Consumers can be asked to separately evaluate the product, delivery and packaging. Consumers can be inundated with requests to *voice* their opinion to, or about, the firm (Kaplan, 2016).

C2C

The impact of the internet as a social networking tool begins to appear in the literature in the mid-90s. Wright, Larsen, 1997, for example, examine online complaining on a discussion group, accessible to all who were devoted to a specific college sports team. Small social networking sites first appeared around the same time. SixDegrees.com was launched in 1997. It was the early 2000s when social media networking took off. Friendster, originally named *social networking service website*, began in 2002. Facebook appeared in 2004. While Facebook was originally limited to individuals with university accounts (.edu) until 2006, there are now 1.79 billion monthly active users¹. In 2016, there are 140 million Facebook users over

the age of 18 in the United States ⁱⁱFacebook represents a 42% share of social media website visits. The potential exposure and impact of eWOM/UGC across platforms was unfathomable in the early 2000s.

The expansion of C2C has created a lot of interest from marketers and academicians. The two definitions of Social Network highlight the differences between social networks in the past and now:

1. a network of social interactions and personal relationships.
2. a dedicated website or other application that enables users to communicate with each other by posting information, comments, messages, images, etc. (Google.com)

The range and scope of C2C is unprecedented (Tables 1 and 2).

**TABLE 1:
C2C and C2B - PUBLIC PLATFORMS**

Micro-blogging (ex: Twitter)
Blogging/personal website (ex: http://www.kayture.com/category/beauty)
Social network - (ex: Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest)
Content community (YouTube)
Brand community (ex: PlayStation, Harley Owners Group)
Review Sites (ex: Yelp, TripAdvisor)
Company Website with review option - (Amazon)
Search engines (Google reviews)
Feedback /Consumer Complaint sites (ripoffreport.com; ***sucks.org)
Social news aggregation, web content rating, discussion website - Reddit

**TABLE 2
LEADING SOCIAL MEDIA WEBSITE SHARE OF VISITS
IN US – OCT 2016ⁱⁱⁱ**

Facebook	42%
YouTube	24.9%
Twitter	5.2%
Reddit	5.2%
Pinterest	1.8%
Instagram	1.8%
Tumblr	1.3%
Linkedin	1.2%
Yahoo!Answers	0.9%
Yelp	0.7%

Message Then And Now

With the increased public forums to share eWOM and other UGC, messages have changed. Complaints can have more flair. The use of creativity and humor has surfaced. Humorous Complaints work for individuals who have the motive to warn, entertain or impress (McGraw, Warren, Kan, 2014). The “United Breaks Guitars” humorous video generated a lot of awareness but left United looking indifferent. In contrast to United, Southwest Airlines matched the humor. SWA responded to an online complaint (Dearsua.com) that used images from popular movies to describe damaged luggage, with their own humorous response. Resolution was promised in the response (Tuttle, 2015). A music video *Close This Loan* directed at Bank of America for their slow processing encourage viewers to tweet: @BofA.Helpcloseourloan (Tuttle 2015). Not only did the message use humor it also encouraged other consumers to engage in C2B.

Timeliness Then And Now

Consumers can now communicate in real time. An ever-increasing number of consumers shop and communicate via their smart phone or other hand held devices. According to the Pew Research Center 68% of Americans have smartphones; 45% have tablet computers. The percent goes up to over 83% with individuals between the ages of 18 and 49 (Anderson, 2015). Sixty five percent of Americans are using social networks (Perrin, 2015). UGC via emails, tweets and posts can be sent immediately.

Accessing, or creating, UGC has become almost instantaneous. For example, Trip Advisor.com reports 72 percent of connected travelers use their smartphones to look for restaurants while on vacation. Restaurant ratings, and information, are built from customer reviews. Businesses can weigh in on public eWOM also. JetBlue

responded, in six minutes, to a customer’s tweet praising his ability to send a tweet at 34000 feet. Consumer’s can readily engage in creating or accessing C2B and C2C content across a range of devices, online platforms and media.

Online firestorms illustrate both the speed and reach of negative WOM via social media channels. Defined as a “sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative Word-of-Mouth and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks.” (Pfeffer, Zorbach and Carley, 2014), online firestorms are new phenomena. The authors liken firestorms to rumors. New Balance was recently on the receiving end of a firestorm after its Vice President of Public Affairs issued supportive comments about the President-elect. In response, consumers were encouraging other consumers to burn their New Balance Shoes (Harris 2016). The speed of which (-)eWOM can spread is unprecedented.

Motive Then And Now

There are several theories about the motives for engaging in WOM. Berger (2014) reports impression management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding, and persuasion are all motives (Berger 2014). Others suggest it is not all self-serving. Sundaram, Mitra and Webster (1998) find altruism is also a factor in engaging in positive and negative WOM. These motives are all intrinsic; they occur naturally. Naturally occurring eWOM has been called organic (WOMMA 2011; Kulmala et al. 2013). Not all C2B and C2C communication, however, is internally motivated. C2B and C2C is also being motivated by the marketer.

Defining Marketer-Initiated C2B/C2C Communication

Because eWOM can influence both attitude (e.g., Hsu et al. 2013) and recipient behavior (e.g., Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006), firms have been looking for ways to influence consumer attitude; incentivized C2C content has become one of their tools. Promoting and managing UGC communication has become increasingly a part of a firm's communication strategy mix. With incentivized UGC, the origin of a message, or action, is marketer-initiated; it's extrinsically motivated. Incentivization can be pay, or free products (Mayzlin et al. 2014). Consumers receive incentives for spreading the marketer's message (Leskovec et al. 2007; De Bruyn and Lilien 2008).

Incentivized UGC is not a new phenomenon. It has been around for years in the familiar form of 'refer a friend' or through guerilla tactics. It does not, however, fully encapsulate all types of marketer-initiated UGC. Many calls to provide feedback offer intrinsic rewards. For example, TripAdvisor sent out the following email text:

"You have 1,197 readers. Impressive! Did you realize how many travelers you've guided with your good advice? Keep going... even reviewing places near home can be a big help to people planning a visit to your town."

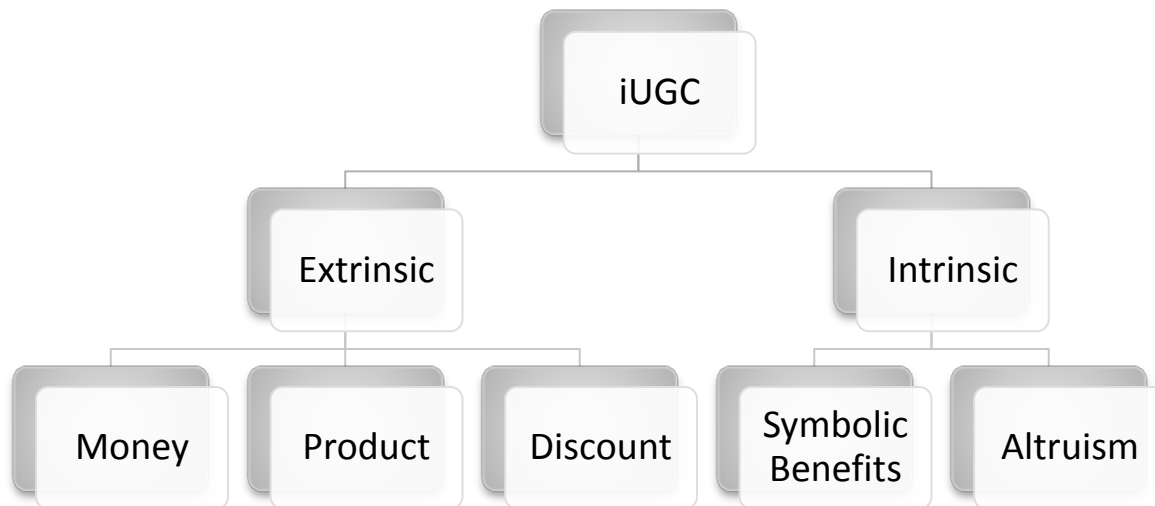
The call to action provides symbolic benefits. Praising the recipient fills a symbolic need: self-enhancement, role position, group membership or ego-identification (Park et al., 1986). The firm is appealing to the impression management motive. Consumers are asked to share word of mouth to shape the impressions others have of them and of self (Berger 2014). The desire to help others fills an altruistic need.

With the growth of marketer-initiated eWOM/UGC, clear nomenclature for UGC and eWOM is needed. Currently there is a disparity with the terminology for marketer-initiated eWOM. eWOM that is motivated by the actions of a marketer has been referred to as inorganic (Kim et al. 2015), amplified (WOMMA, 2011) or incentivized (Buttle 1988). Two of the terms do not completely represent the full scope of marketer-initiated communication. Amplification, by definition, is an enlargement or increase. The definition precludes communication that is initiated by the marketer. Likewise, incentivized does not cover the full range of marketer-initiated communication. Money or discounts are clearly extrinsic motivated. Appealing to intrinsic motives is not typically perceived as an incentive in a marketing context.

The following definitions are proposed as the terms to best characterize marketer-initiated C2B or C2C communication:

Inorganic UGC (iUGC) – Any communication (statements, audio, video, images) to the firm (C2B), or other consumers (C2C) that is encouraged by the marketer. Inducements can be extrinsic (money, product, discount) or intrinsic (symbolic benefit or altruistic).

Inorganic WOM (iWOM) – Written consumer communication to the firm (C2B), or other consumers (C2C) that is encouraged, or incentivized by the marketer. Inducements can be extrinsic (money, product, discount) or intrinsic (symbolic benefit or altruistic).

FIGURE 2: iUGC APPEALS***Impact on Trust***

While it is likely common knowledge that bloggers are receiving free products to provide their eWOM (reviews), incentivization on other sites might not be as apparent to consumers. Amazon recently announced a ban of incentivized reviews (Perez, 2016). Third-party companies, such as Snagshout, were offering products for free, or at significant discounts, in exchange for a review on Amazon. The reviewer ratings tended to be higher than non-incentivized reviews. This drove up the average consumer rating. Even though the reviewer had to acknowledge they received compensation in their review, consumers might be unaware of that information. Consumers relying on the numeric average rating would not know that incentivized reviews drove up that rating unless they read the reviews.

C2B/C2C communication might not be genuine. Helping others, hurting others,

helping self and helping others all provide a motive for false or exaggerated UGC. Incentives, desire to hurt competition, desire to help own business, or desire to hurt businesses that have expressed opposing political or ideological views can prompt false WOM/UGC. While these motives existed prior to the explosive growth of social media and shopping platforms, acting on them was difficult.

The following definitions are proposed as the terms to best characterize C2B or C2C communication that is not an honest reflection of the consumer experience:

False UGC (fUGC) – Any communication (statements, audio, video, images) to the firm (C2B), or other consumers (C2C) that is intentionally untruthful. It can be motivated by reward or desire to damage other individuals or businesses.

False WOM (fWOM) – Written consumer communication to the firm (C2B), or other consumers (C2C) that is intentionally untruthful. It can be motivated by reward or desire to damage other individuals or businesses.

The unknown number of ‘false’ or ‘questionable’ reviews/complaints appears to have eroded trust. A recent study found that for 88% of consumers, an online review is equally as important as a personal recommendation, if there is trust. Trust was dependent on authenticity and number of positive reviews (Anderson 2014). There are many examples in the media that has caused trust to erode. Individuals left negative book reviews on Amazon because the professor’s husband harassed Ivanka Trump on a flight (Richardson, 2016). Personal beliefs, not product experience, drove the false UGC. More needs to be learned about the scope of inauthentic C2B and C2C communication and its impact on trust of eWOM/UGC.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a lot that has been learned, but so much more to know. The recent shift of consumer inundation with requests to provide iUGC suggests the need to study the phenomenon. About the same amount of Boomers (73%) and Millennials (71%) say companies care about customer opinions simply because they impact how other consumers will view the brand, rather than truly caring what their customers think (Bazaar Voice). Thus, what is the impact of the inundation of marketer requests for feedback on the consumer? Firm? What conditions enhance the likelihood of consumers providing feedback? How does the rise of iUGC affect response rates? Is it the extremely satisfied/dissatisfied who respond? It is more likely with prestige

products/services? To what motive should marketers appeal to get feedback?

More needs to be learned about the scope and impact of false WOM/UGC. What is happening to trust? How can marketers overcome the issue? What can be learned about the motives and outcomes of individuals rating a business or service they did not use?

CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to provide an overview of complaining and complimenting in the digital age. A review of the literature and popular press revealed the need for clarity of terms. Surreptitious, or false, eWOM/UGC needs to be defined and understood. Likewise, increased marketer-initiated demand for providing eWOM/UGC reveals the need for a consensus of definitions. This paper provides definitions for inorganic UGC (iUGC), inorganic WOM (iWOM), false UGC (fUGC) and false WOM (fWOM) along with directions for future research.

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ⁱⁱ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/398136/us-facebook-user-age-groups/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/265773/market-share-of-the-most-popular-social-media-websites-in-the-us/>