

# Sociodemographics and Psychographics of Complainers and Non-Complainers: A Study of Malaysian Consumers

T. Ramayah, Universiti Sains Malaysia  
Osman Mohamad, Universiti Sains Malaysia  
Shishi Kumar Piaralal, Marconi (M) Sdn. Bhd.

## Abstract

*This study was conducted to determine the factors related to consumer complaint behavior on consumer durable products in the Northern region of Peninsular Malaysia. Findings from past research on consumer complaint behavior literature are also incorporated. Consumers who were dissatisfied had two alternatives either to engage public actions (complainers) or private actions (non-complainers). The results revealed complainers were males, married, better educated and white collared in terms of job profession. Complainers were found to be more assertive, individualistic, positive attitude towards complaining and greater self-confidence. Non-complainers on the other hand were found to be more conservative and having a negative attitude towards complaining.*

## Introduction

Consumer dissatisfaction and consumer complaint behaviors are becoming important issues nowadays. Consumers will not tolerate to certain extent poor service, poor quality products, and lack of concern for them. Basically consumers want value for their money. Surprisingly most Malaysian consumers do not complain to the organization or sellers but prefer to take private action such as boycotting the brand, switching the brand

and sellers and spreading negative words of mouth to their families, friends and other potential consumers. Usually when Malaysian consumers have dissatisfied experience with a product, they get angry with themselves and not with the manufacturer. They called it bad luck and blamed it on fate and therefore do not complain (CAP, 1994). In Malaysia, it is quite normal if consumers do not complain.

Organizations need to understand what influence consumers' choice of product, brands and/or retailers. Customers' needs and wants require to be understood better in line with the growing concept of total customer satisfaction which is the primary goal of today's successful organizations. A key factor to influence this decision is customer service. One of the criteria of customer service is complaint handling of dissatisfied complainants. If the complaint of a dissatisfied customer was handled successfully to turn the dissatisfied customer into a satisfied customer, then the organization or seller can be rest assured that the possibility of customer retention is high. On top of that, the organization or seller will gain free advertising through positive words of mouth from satisfied customers.

In Malaysia, the number of complaints received by Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) in 1972 was 55 and this increased to 14 700 cases in 1992 through the mail, over the phone and through visits by consumers (Consumer Association of

Penang, 1994). This shows that the outlook and values of today's consumers are different from consumers in the 1970s and 1980s. Today consumers are not only taking what is offered by the marketer but also looking at other issues before making a decision on the purchase. Firms that have developed a reputation for consistently remedying customer complaints are more likely to develop customer loyalty and over time, may increase their market share. Conversely, firms that have developed a reputation for not willing to remedy their customer complaints may slowly lose many of their customers.

## Literature Review

### Consumer Complaint Behavior

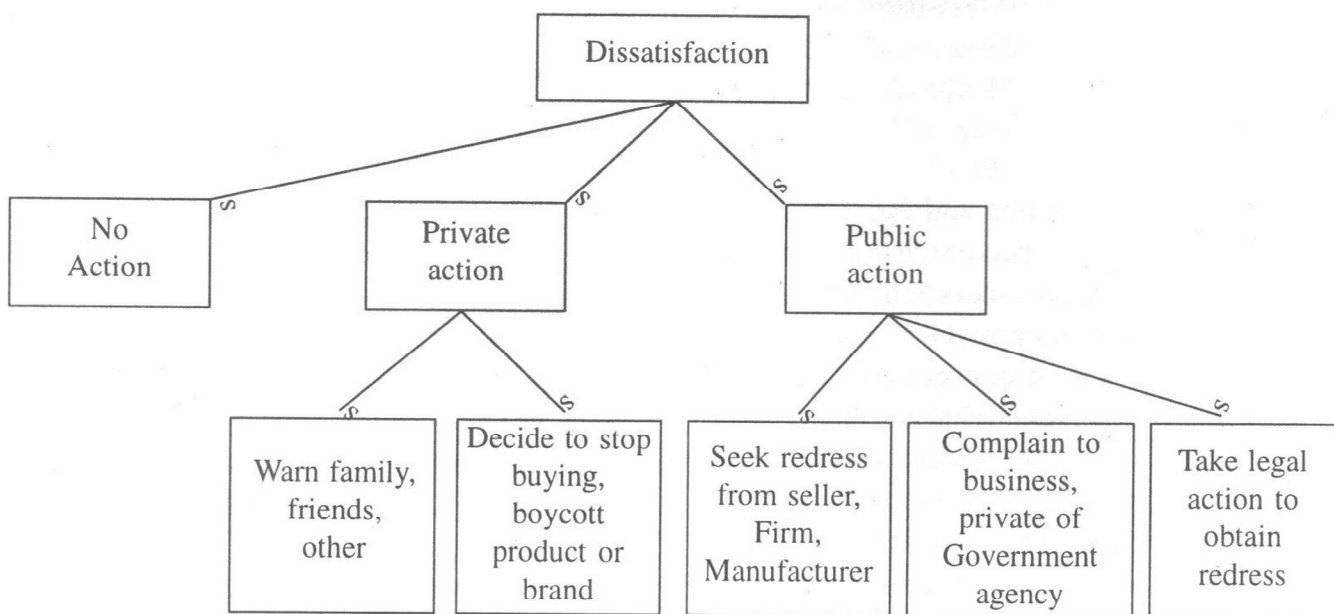
The nature of dissatisfaction and complaint process as conceptualized by Day and Landon (1977) is presented in Figure 1.

Dissatisfaction is recognized as a primary determinant of legitimate consumer complaint. As shown in Figure 1, the various actions that consumers take may be subdivided

into no action, private and public action. A dissatisfied consumer who never reacts in any manner and continues to behave normally towards the product is called no action. Private actions include decisions to stop further purchases (boycott the product or brand) and warnings to friends, family and others through negative word of mouth. Public actions on the other hand include redress seeking efforts directed toward the seller, firm, manufacturer and complaints to third party consumer affairs institution (Day and Landon, 1977; Bearden and Teel, 1983). Hirschman (1970) found that firms reaction to consumer responses will vary significantly depending upon nature of the industry involved in the dissatisfying experience. He had identified three typical industry structures such as: i) competitive; ii) loose monopoly; and iii) monopolistic.

One of the loose monopoly conditions occurs when consumers perceive that few alternatives to the offending product are available. Durable products in the subject of this study are considered a loose monopoly industry. Singh (1991) found that consumers

**Figure 1**  
**Consumer Complaint Behaviour**



are less likely to take public actions and more likely to take private actions against industries with characteristics of loose monopolies. Andreassen's (1985) findings were the same as Singh's (1991) also in loose monopolies but in medical services.

## **Demographics**

Few studies have indicated demographic variables are found to influence the types of complaint behavior. There is a difference within the demographic groups as they resort to different types of complaint behavior and this behavior varies. Demographic variables in this study are gender, marital status, income, age, job, education and ethnicity.

In a study of family decision making, Bettina et al. (1991) found that the Mexican-American male makes most of the financial decisions. This finding suggests that the male head of household may be more likely to initiate the complaint process. Kolodinsky (1993) examined public complaint actions, company response and subsequent purchase in a loose monopoly (medical industry) and found that woman and the elderly were more likely to use private actions rather than public actions. Keng, Richmond and Serene (1995) found females prefer to complain by using public actions rather than private actions compared to males.

Younger in age, better education and higher income consumers prefer to complain publicly (Warland, 1975; Day and Landon, 1977). Consumer complaint behavior is inversely related to age and positively linked to income and education was hypothesized (Bearden and Mason, 1984). Moyer (1985) found consumers with higher income, better educated, have professional jobs and are younger were significantly more likely to complain. Morganosky and Buckley (1986) also supported this finding in terms of age, in-

come and education only. Singh (1990) found in general, consistent results with respect to income, education, occupation and age.

Consumer scientists have long recognized the importance of sub-cultural differences in consumer behavior (Bettina et al., 1991). Bettina et al. (1991) have studied cultural differences between Mexican-American and general population of America towards consumer complaint behavior to a third party agency. They found that ethnicity is an important aspect of consumer complaint behavior.

Cicarelli (1974) has studied on differences in consumption behavior between blacks and whites in America. His findings suggest that blacks and whites differ in terms of consumer behavior toward consumption.

Watkins et al. (1996) have studied implications for consumer complaining behavior in a multicultural context. They found consumers behavioral responses to post purchase dissatisfaction have been strongly influenced by cultural differences among themselves. Therefore we may derive from here, in the Malaysian context; ethnicity can affect consumer complaint behavior. In other words, Malays, Chinese and Indians differ in consumer complaint behavior.

## **Psychographics**

Psychographics as mentioned earlier consist of opinion and personality factors. Personality variables are self-confidence, individualism, conservatism, assertiveness, risk-taking attitudes, attitude towards complaining and sense of justice. Some of the personality variables are also found to correlate with complaint behavior. Allison (1978) found complaint is correlated with personality orientations including assertiveness, self-confidence and self-monitoring. Consumers who preferred to be different (do things the way other people do not or individualism) were more inclined to be com-

plainers (Morganosky and Buckley, 1981). Morganosky and Buckley's (1981) research indicated that complainers valued uniqueness, individuality and had a greater sense of independence when compared to the non-complainers. Bearden and Mason (1984) found that complaint behavior is directly related to assertiveness and indirectly to feelings of powerlessness (low self-confidence).

### **Attitude towards Complaining**

Consumer attitude towards complaining will also influence whether he or she would resort to actual complaint behavior. Attitude towards complaining refers to an individual's disposition to seek redress when dissatisfied with a product (Richins, 1987). Attitude was significantly related to self-reported intention to complain (Bearden and Teel, 1983). Richins (1981) also examined the natures of attitudes toward complaining and discovered three dimensions of attitudes as follow:

- 1) The perception of societal benefits likely to result from complaining.
- 2) Whether complaining was worth the trouble.
- 3) The individual's consumer norms concerning complaining.

Richins (1981) showed the existence of a relationship between the above dimensions of attitudes and actual complaint behavior. Blodgett et al. (1995) found dissatisfied consumers who have a positive attitude toward complaining to use more public actions than private actions.

### **Attitudes toward Businesses**

Consumer attitudes toward businesses to a certain extent will also influence consumer complaint behavior. Factors such as seller's reputation for quality and service, the responsiveness of manufacturers and retailers to complaints and the amount of sale pressure

exerted by the seller have been found to be related with the lodging of complaints. Manufacturers or sellers can have complex effects on the manner in which the consumer responds to the dissatisfaction as reported by Day and Landon (1977).

Folkes, Koletsky and Graham (1987) found that consumer perception to the controllability of a problem by a seller positively influences a consumer to complain using public actions. Singh (1990) observed private actions are less common when the sellers or firms are perceived as responsive to consumer complaints. Larger companies and those that offered guarantees or warranties increase the probability of consumer to complain using public actions (Kolodinsky, 1995).

### **Product Attributes**

Product attributes or product importance refers to the relative "worth" an individual places on a product (Bloch and Richin, 1983). Durable product are considered more important because they are relatively expensive. Consumers rely heavily (i.e. functionally) on that product and the consumers derive greater enjoyment from using that product. Blodgett et al. (1995) hypothesized that consumers tend to use more public actions if product attributes are higher. Oster (1980) found a positive relationship between product attribute and public actions.

Consumers are less likely to complain under low harm failure conditions and redress seeking may occur less often than under high harm failure conditions (Richins 1983, 1987). Keng et al. (1995) found consumers tend to resort to public actions if the product price is high. They have found that if the product is defective and socially visible then the probability of making complaint is higher. They believed complainers are more prepared to take actions than non-complainers even

though product durability and frequency use of the product did not have strong relationship in their study. Tax, Stephen and Chandrashekar (1998) found that most complaints resulted from problems judged by the consumer to be highly important.

## **Objectives of the Study**

Dissatisfied consumers who fail to complain raise an important research problem. What factors increase or reduce the consumer complaint behavior?

This study is conducted to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To determine the impact of demographic variables such as age, income, marital status, gender and education level on the complaint behavior of consumers in Malaysia particularly in the Northern Region,
- 2) To determine the impact of psychographic variables incorporating values, personality, opinion and attitudes on the complaint behavior of consumers, and
- 3) To determine whether business related factors and product attributes are related to complaint behavior.

When a consumer experiences unsatisfactory purchases, he/she can resort to 2 types of action ie; public actions and private actions. Public action is defined as when consumers choose to react on their dissatisfaction and seek redress through voice actions and third party actions. Voice actions are through sellers, firms and manufacturers. Third party actions are through Consumer Associations such as Consumer Association of Penang and Badan Berniaga Beretika, writing to the press and taking legal actions if voice actions do not satisfy the consumer. A private action is defined as when consumers choose to react on their dissatisfaction toward unsatisfactory products by warning

families, friends and others through negative words of mouth and also boycotting the product or brand. Negative words of mouth is something negative about the product (dissatisfaction to the consumer) which is raised through communication medium such as email or verbally to potential consumers. This study includes 'no action' or 'did nothing' as part of private actions. Complainers in this study are consumers who chose public actions towards a dissatisfied product, whereas non-complainers are consumers who chose not to take any action or taking only private actions towards a dissatisfied product.

## **Method of the Study**

Since in this kind of studies it would be nearly impossible to use a probability sampling due to cost and time constraints data was collected using a questionnaire which was distributed to working people consisting of office workers and factory workers in and around Penang, Kulim, Prai, Butterworth and Sungai Petani. The distribution follows the intercept survey technique where working people were conveniently approached to answer the questionnaires distributed personally, or through e-mail and friends who are working in other organizations. Although this study used a convenient sampling, care was taken to get a representative sample in terms of demographics. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed and 183 questionnaires were received. Only 122 questionnaires could be included in this study because the rest was either incomplete or unusable.

The questionnaire has been adapted from the study done by Keng et al. (1995). Some parts of the questionnaire were removed, revised or changed to suit the Malaysian setting. The questionnaire has gone through a pilot test even though it was adapted just to check the suitability to the

Malaysian environment.

The questionnaire used for this research is divided into five sections. Section A has 27 questions and measuring psychographics statements relating to constructs such as attitudes toward complaining, risk taking attitude, assertiveness, self-confidence, individualism, conservatism and sense of justice. Each of the questions was measured on a five point Likert scale which is coded and described as 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neither Disagree nor Agree), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly agree).

Section B has 10 questions measuring the respondent's opinion about business practices and perception of business responsiveness in Malaysia. A five-point Likert scale was used and coded as above. Section C has 4 questions measuring product attributes. Each of the questions was measured on a five point Likert scale and coded as above again.

Section D has 5 questions. Question 1 and question 5 are divided into 10 sub questions. Question 1 is asking the respondent's actions whether the respondent has encountered any unsatisfactory purchase. All the 10-sub questions in question 1 need to be answered. Each of the questions is measured on a four-point Likert scale, which is coded and described as 1 (Very unlikely), 2 (Unlikely), 3 (Likely), 4 (Very likely). The respondents were asked to recall if they had encountered any unsatisfactory product (durable product) for the last 12 months in question 2. The respondent has to answer Yes or No. Those who purchase dissatisfied product will have to name the product in question 3 and the price of it in question 4. Question 5 is the list of actions consisting the various types of public and private actions according to Day's taxonomy of complaint actions (Day and Landon, 1977). The respondent has to circle at least one or more action

that was taken in response to the dissatisfaction. This question shall determine whether the respondent is a complainer (**a consumer who chose public actions towards a dissatisfied product**) or a non-complainer (**a consumer who chose not to take any action or taking only private actions towards dissatisfied product**)

Whereas in section E there was 7 questions eliciting information on demographic characteristics of the respondent such as gender, marital status, race, age, education level, monthly income and occupation.

## Findings and Discussion

### Demographic Profiles of Complainers and Non-Complainers

Table 1 shows the percentage distribution of complainers and non-complainers by demographic variables. As can be seen from Table 1, the variables that show significant differences are sex, marital status, educational level and profession. The last two variables are supported by findings of studies done in the United States. The differences in sex are in line with the findings of Keng et al. (1995). Although income did not seem to be significant, a closer analysis will show that a bigger percentage of complainers are from those with incomes above RM2,500. Males are more inclined to complain compared to women. This finding contradicts that of Keng et al. (1995) who found women are more inclined to complain in a Singaporean study. This can be attributed to the advancement of equality of gender in Singapore which has brought about a bigger percentage of women who are more vocal as compared to Malaysia where the movement for equality is still struggling to be accepted. Those who are married are more inclined to complain as in the Malaysian context family shopping is a common

Table 1  
Percentage Distribution of Complainers  
and Non-Complainers

Variable	%		n	$\chi^2$
	Com-plainers	Non-Com-plainers		
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	40.3	59.7	67	5.80**
Female	20	80	55	
<b>Marital Status</b>				
Single	18.2	81.8	33	3.55*
Married	36	64	89	
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
Malay	30.8	69.2	52	1.21
Chinese	30	70	40	
Indian	35.7	64.3	28	
Others	0	100	2	
<b>Age group</b>				
15 - 24	23.1	76.9	13	2.54
25 - 29	20.8	79.2	24	
30 - 34	37.8	62.2	45	
≥35	32.5	67.5	40	
<b>Educational Level</b>				
SRP	0	100	1	12.32***
SPM/STPM	4.5	95.5	22	
Cert/Diploma	25.8	74.5	31	
≥Degree	42.6	57.4	68	
<b>Income</b>				
≤RM1000	18.2	81.8	11	4.21
RM1001 - RM2500	27.5	72.5	51	
RM2501 - RM4000	29.7	70.3	37	
≥RM 4001	47.8	52.2	23	
<b>Profession</b>				
White Collar	17.8	82.2	45	5.94**
Blue Collar	39	61	77	

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$  and \*  $p < 0.1$

phenomenon. The buying for family use is a big portion of the consumer spending, so it is not surprising that married ones are more in-

clined to complain.

Also those with educational levels of certificate and above are more inclined to complain compared to those with lower education. This can be attributed to the increased awareness that was gained through their academic achievement and also their readings. The lower educated also find it more difficult to complain as the channels of complain are limited and there is also the language problem which many of the lower educated consumers have. The interesting finding here is that blue collared workers are more inclined to complain. This could be related to the more outspoken nature of the profession itself which opens their eyes to the avenues available for complaints and are more prepared to exert their rights as consumers.

### Psychographic Profiles of Complainers and Non-Complainers

Table 2 presents the t-test results of the 27 psychographic items between complainers and non-complainers. Of the 27 items, 9 items were significant at the 1% level, 10 items were significant at the 5% level and 1 item at the 10% level. There were no differences between the 2 groups for 7 of the psychographic items. As can be seen from Table 2, complainers were more confident and more individualistic whereas the non-complainers were more conservative. The non-complainers were also conforming to social norms and listening to the advice from elders. The complainers were found to be more assertive compared to the non-complainers who were more risk averse.

Complainers showed a more positive attitude for complaining and perceived that complaining was a part of their rights as a consumers whereas non-complainers found complaining distasteful, done by people with

nothing else to do and find it embarrassing to complain. Complainers also found a sense of justice when as they thought it was their right to complain if the product was unsatisfactory. The non-complainers exhibited a lower mean with all three items in this dimension.

### Attitude Toward Businesses

Table 3 presents the t-test results of complainers and non-complainers in their attitudes towards businesses. Of the 10 items, only 2 items were significantly different, will-

Table 2  
Tests of Means Between Complainers (C) and Non-Complainers (NC)

Psychographics Statement	Mean		t-value
	C	NC	
<b>Self-Confidence &amp; Individualism</b>			
I like to receive attention.	3.69	3.14	3.72***
I like to be different from others.	3.72	3.37	2.04*
I prefer to be different rather than do things the way other people do	3.46	3.25	1.14
I like products that are different and unique.	3.64	3.46	1.15
I will not buy anything that my friends dislike.	2.41	2.96	-2.01*
I have more self-confidence than most people	3.72	3.4	2.21*
<b>Conservatism</b>			
I always listen to advice given by my elders.	3.98	4.23	-1.81
Everything is changing very fast.	4.28	4.11	0.89
I like to stick to the usual ways of doing things.	4.05	3.7	2.83**
It is wrong to have sex before marriage.	4.17	4.44	-2.27*
Conforming to social norms is very important to me.	3.81	4.15	-2.33**
<b>Assertiveness</b>			
I always stand up for what I believe in.	4.13	3.67	2.79**
I like to leave everything to fate.	2.23	2.73	-1.48
Complaining is a consumer's right.	4.13	3.54	2.79**
I feel unable to determine my future and destiny.	2.77	2.78	0.02
I am an assertive person.	3.44	3.33	0.52
<b>Risk-Taking Attitude</b>			
I like taking chances	3.9	3.35	3.83***
I like people who take risks in life without fear of what happens.	3.64	3.08	3.67***
If you want big gains, you have to take risks.	4.03	3.45	4.44***
Investing in the stock market is too risky for me.	3.1	3.81	-3.00***
<b>Attitude Toward Complaining</b>			
I always complain when I'm dissatisfied because it is my right	3.85	3.2	3.09**
Complaining is done by people with little else to do.	2.33	3.01	-2.04*
Complaining about anything is distasteful to me.	2.97	3.51	-1.66
I find it embarrassing to complain.	2.15	2.73	-1.89*
<b>Sense of Justice</b>			
Complaining about unsatisfactory products is my duty	3.82	3.43	1.99*
It bothers me if I don't complain about an Unsatisfactory product	3.92	3.45	2.60**
People have a responsibility to inform the seller About a defective product	4.31	3.8	2.65**



**Table 3**  
**Attitudes towards Businesses by Complainers (C) and Non-Complainers (NC)**

Attitude toward Business	Mean		t-value
	C	NC	
Store employees are often quite unpleasant to customers who return unsatisfactory products.	3.54	3.83	-1.31
Firms usually are willing to replace faulty products.	3.74	3.43	1.28
Most firms make an effort to ensure good condition of their products.	3.59	3.39	1.05
Firms do not take notice of complaints made.	3.21	3.19	-0.06
Most businesses will cheat you if you don't stand up to your rights.	2.79	2.43	1.66
Firms are usually willing to provide refunds for faulty products.	3.33	2.72	2.93**
Advertisements usually present a true picture of the product.	2.74	2.46	1.09
Firms take a long time to respond to a complaint.	3.59	3.93	-1.37
Most stores say they want their customers satisfied, but they are not willing to stand behind their word.	3.51	3.98	-2.1**
Firms are usually willing to provide repairs for faulty products.	3.15	3.42	-1.63
<b>Product Attributes</b>			
The higher the price of the product, the more likely I'm to complain.	4.21	3.61	3.16**
If the product is meant to be used for a long time, I'm likely to complain if it is faulty.	4.08	3.47	2.97**
If the faulty product is one which is often seen by my friends, I'm more likely to complain.	3.67	2.87	4.04**
The more frequently I have to use the product, the more likely I'm to complain if it is faulty.	3.79	3	3.59**

Note: \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$  and  $\dagger p < 0.1$

ingness of firms to provide refunds and firms not willing to stand by their words. As can be seen the complainers generally believe that firms are more willing to provide refunds compared to non-complainers who think that firms will not be willing to provide refunds. On the other hand the non-complainers distrust firms and think that firms do not do what they promise they would do, so complaining would be futile and why bother with the long winded process, but just keep quiet.

The complainers and non-complainers both agree that firms will cheat them if they do not stand up for their rights and also think advertisements do not show the true picture of the product. They also felt that

most firms do not take heed of their complaints.

### Product Attributes

Whether a consumer would make a complaint with regard to a purchase made is to a large extent affected by certain product attributes (Keng et al., 1995). As can be seen from Table 3 (Product attribute), all four attributes were significantly different at the 1% level. Complainers would more likely to resort to complaint actions if the price of the product was high, if the product had to be used for a long term, if the product was socially visible and also if the product had to be used frequently.

These findings supported the work done by Ken et al. (1995).

## Conclusion

While complainers may provide the much needed information and feedback for further improvement of products and services, the non-complainers' seemingly indifferent attitude should also be tackled. Marketers should make an attempt to maintain contact with non-complainers. Non-complainers appear to be female, and those who are still single. Given the demographic structure of our society where the young and singles form the largest percentage of our population, the views of this group cannot be taken lightly. If their reluctance to complain is an indicator of low patronage or loyalty, then the behavior of this group needs close monitoring. The most worrying part is the possibility of negative words of mouth communication to their immediate friends and relatives which may be damaging.

For the betterment and well being of the nation, the members of the society must be educated to appreciate their rights to complain. The service providers too must respond positively. The consumer welfare must be treated as an important agenda. Prompt response and acting responsibly can be an effective method to sustain competitiveness.

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