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# Employee Perceptions of Hotel CSR Activities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study adopts Carroll's CSR pyramid framework as a theoretical lens for examining employee perspectives on South Korean hotels operating as quarantine facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study adopted a qualitative approach consisting of the following components: (1) in-depth interviews with employees and stakeholders of quarantine hotels, including frontline staff, government officials and medical staff, (2) field observations and (3) data from one researcher's direct experience in a quarantine hotel.

**Findings:** Six themes regarding the experience of operating quarantine hotels emerged from the in-depth interviews and field observations. The findings also showed an interplay between the hotel employees' perspectives, the four components of the CSR pyramid, and the benefits and costs to hotels of operating as quarantine facilities.

**Practical implications:** The findings suggest that strategic partnerships can help to protect local communities while alleviating the hotel industry's financial difficulties. They also explore an opportunity for business revitalisation in the midst of a global pandemic.

**Research limitations/implications:** This study focuses on the particular case of quarantine hotels in South Korea, and therefore caution is required in generalising the findings.

**Originality:** This study finds that the voluntary decision of hotels to operate as coronavirus quarantine facilities is aligned with CSR, because its ultimate aim is to protect the community from the risk of coronavirus from overseas arrivals. This study broadens the CSR literature in the fields of COVID-19 and hospitality.

**Keywords:** hotel operation, COVID-19, hotel employee, quarantine hotel, global crisis, CSR

## Introduction

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has affected a wide range of industries, the damage to the hospitality industry has been particularly devastating (Lai and Wong, 2020). The World Travel and Tourism Council (2020) has forecast a worldwide loss of 180 million jobs in this industry, with a US\$2.7 trillion loss in GDP. In response to the global pandemic, a number of conceptual and empirical studies have examined the effects of COVID-19 on hospitality and tourism (Qiu *et al.*, 2020), including studies of the effects of the pandemic on the operations of hospitality and tourism businesses (Hao *et al.*, 2020; Jiang and Wen, 2020; Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021), the adoption of advanced technology to deal with crises (Kim *et al.*, 2021; Shin and Kang, 2020; Zeng *et al.*, 2020) and the management of crisis and recovery at the destination level (Altuntas and Gok, 2020; Ioannides and Gyimóthy, 2020).

However, relatively little research has been done on CSR activities (*e.g.*, Aguinis *et al.*, 2020; Gürlek and Kılıç, 2021; Qiu *et al.*, 2021) in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic. In particular, there have been few empirical studies of how frontline employees perceive hotel CSR activities, despite the fact that employees' commitment to their firms' CSR is a key to success (Filimonau *et al.*, 2020; Teng *et al.*, 2020). Aguinis *et al.* (2020) argued that top-down CSR has been ineffective during the COVID-19 pandemic, as this approach requires the employees' participation rather than inviting voluntary action. Thus, it is important to explore how employees perceive their firms' CSR activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since 1 April 2020, the South Korean government has been forcibly isolating all overseas arrivals for 15 nights to prevent the spread of COVID-19, regardless of the travellers' origins or nationalities (Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, hereafter KCDC, 2020). Due to the lack of government quarantine facilities, local

governments have negotiated business agreements by which hotels are temporarily designated as coronavirus quarantine facilities. Such designations were not mandatory or commandeered, and they applied only to hotels that voluntarily accepted the local government's proposals (KCDC, 2020). This project was the first attempt to use hotels as quarantine facilities in South Korea, and due to a mix of expectations and concerns, very few hotels participated in the initial phase of the project. Some hotels embraced this project, viewing it as both an extended CSR activity and as an opportunity for business revitalisation. Other hotels were reticent due to concerns about the effects on their corporate brand names and workplace safety (Noh, 2020, June 8).

The operation of hotels as coronavirus quarantine facilities is aligned with CSR because its ultimate aim is protection of the community from the risk of COVID-19 transmission from overseas arrivals (Hao *et al.*, 2020; Teng *et al.*, 2020). According to Hao *et al.* (2020), voluntarily offering hotel accommodations as quarantine facilities for inbound tourists, medical staff and key workers is a kind of CSR activity, as it is an act of social responsibility. A CSR activity is a voluntary endeavour to create social benefits that meet a firm's ethical standards and the social expectations of its stakeholders and consumers (de Grosbois, 2012). CSR encompasses "the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary (philanthropic) expectations that society has of organisations at a given point in time" (Carroll, 2016, p. 2). In other words, CSR involves conducting business in socially responsible ways. It involves meeting the needs for generating profit, complying with laws and regulations, maintaining ethical standards and contributing to the community.

Engaging in CSR has helped firms to protect their value during the COVID-19 pandemic (Qiu *et al.*, 2021) and employees have been essential to these efforts. As Aguinis *et al.* (2020, p. 422) explained, "the way employees perceive and react to CSR actions are key determinants of CSR's implementation and success". Therefore, it is important to explore

how employees perceive their hotels' CSR activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially if their hotel is being used as a quarantine facility.

This study adopts Carroll's (2016) CSR pyramid framework as a lens to explore the temporary use of hotels as quarantine facilities from the perspectives of the employees. The objectives are the following: (1) to examine how hotels operate as quarantine facilities, (2) to identify the benefits and costs to the participating hotels during the quarantine period, (3) to uncover the hotel employees' perspectives on their workplace's temporary operations as quarantine facilities and (4) to investigate the interplay between the hotel employees' perspectives, the four components of CSR (economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities) and the benefits and costs of hotels operating as quarantine facilities.

This study broadens the scope of research on COVID-19 and the hospitality industry, particularly in terms of hotels' contributions to their local communities. The study also makes meaningful methodological contributions to the literature on hotel CSR. The findings have practical implications for the hotel industry and for local governments in terms of how their partnerships can protect local communities while alleviating the industry's financial difficulties. It also presents an opportunity for business revitalisation in the midst of a global pandemic.

## **Literature review**

### ***Carroll's pyramid of CSR***

Carroll (1991, 2016) viewed CSR as the sum of a corporation's economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities. A firm's economic responsibility involves maximising shareholder profit and providing products or services that meet society's needs while maintaining profitability, efficiency and competitiveness (Carroll, 1991, 2016; Carroll and Buchholtz, 2009). Economic success is an enterprise's primary social responsibility, and

all of its other actions are based on this fundamental assumption (Carroll, 1991, 2016). A firm's legal responsibility involves providing products and services that meet the expectations of the government and the local community, and it means managing the business in a manner consistent with laws, regulations and any other legal requirements (Carroll, 1991; Carroll and Buchholtz, 2009). If a firm's legal expectations are only based on clearly defined legal requirements, then its legal responsibility would be nothing more than compliance with the law. However, if legal responsibility also involves adherence to the spirit of the law beyond the regulations, then the firm's legal responsibility overlaps with ethical responsibility, as in Carroll's framework. Carroll (2016) also considered fulfilling contractual obligations to be an aspect of legal responsibility, as contracts are protected by law.

A firm's ethical responsibility involves acting as a good corporate citizen by complying with the broader community's social customs and ethical standards, beyond the requirements of legal regulations (Carroll, 1991; Carroll and Buchholtz, 2009). Finally, philanthropic responsibility involves support for activities that enhance the quality of life in society, such as support for public health initiatives, educational institutions or community arts programmes (Carroll, 1991; Carroll and Buchholtz, 2009).

The four components of CSR may be fulfilled simultaneously, and there is a constant dynamic tension between them. As these components are not mutually exclusive, their boundaries may change or become ambiguous, although each boundary is represented by a line in the 'CSR pyramid'. The pyramid suggests that an enterprise is a basic economic unit of society and that each firm has an implicit contractual relationship with society. In addition, CSR is generally understood as basically being a good corporate citizen.

### ***CSR in the hotel business***

The word “hospitality” comes from “hospice”, which is an old French term meaning “to provide care/shelter for travellers” (Walker, 2017, p. 36). The medieval lodging facility, or “hospitale”, originally had a monastery at the centre and it served two functions (Weidenfeld, 2006). First, a “hospitale” was a treatment facility that protected and nursed the injured, the sick, orphans and elderly people while providing them with a place to stay. The second function of these facilities was to serve as rest stops that provided accommodation and meals for travellers. Today, “hospitality” implies providing the comforts of home. This suggests a level of emotional support that goes beyond the practical level of service to guests (Weidenfeld, 2006). One common definition of hospitality is “kindness in welcoming strangers or guests” (Brotherton, 1999, p. 166). The spirit of hospitality is rooted in the concept of “human service” and it is characterised as timely, voluntary, mutually beneficial assistance (Brotherton, 1999).

In recent years, CSR has become an integral part of the business model of hotel firms. Researchers have analysed hotels’ CSR reports from over the past two decades and have found that increasing numbers of local and global hotel companies now incorporate CSR into their mission/vision statements, business philosophies and organisational identities (de Grosbois, 2012). The driving force behind CSR in the hotel business comes not only from the managers’ philanthropic and ethical motives, but also from the prospect of non-monetary and financial rewards for themselves. Hotel owners and managers increasingly perceive the practical benefits of CSR involvement and activities (Supanti *et al.*, 2015). Studies have reported that hotel CSR enhances relationships with employees (Aguinis *et al.*, 2020; Kim *et al.*, 2020; Supanti *et al.*, 2015) and with the local communities (Tsai *et al.*, 2010). CSR can also enhance a brand’s reputation (Levy and Park, 2011) and customer loyalty (Martínez and

del Bosque, 2013). It can even produce financial gains through cost reduction and increased profitability (Njite *et al.*, 2011).

In the past, studies of hotel CSR have mainly focused on the welfare of employees, communities and society in general, on economic contributions and on environmental concerns. In their study of the CSR practices of Chinese hotels, Huimin and Ryan (2011) found that the ethical principles of hotel owners and managers frequently invoke the three pillars of CSR: human resource management, community involvement and environmentally friendly practices. In his analysis of the CSR reports of the top 150 hotel companies in the world, de Grosbois (2012) articulated five main themes of CSR commitment and performance: environmental goals, employment quality, diversity and accessibility, community well-being and economic prosperity. Wong and Kim (2020) found that hotel employees perceived hotel CSR in terms of five domains: environmental, social, legal, ethical and financial/economic. However, despite the increasing emphasis that hotels have placed on CSR, little attention has been paid to the important roles that hotels play in serving their host communities and societies during times of crisis and uncertainty.

Among all business sectors, hotels are one of the most vulnerable to the effects of crises such as economic downturns, terrorism or natural disasters (Baum *et al.*, 2020). For hotels, such crises often lead to financial difficulty due to rapid declines in room occupancy followed by staff layoffs. Several studies have investigated the effects of crises on hotel performance and the recovery mechanisms that hotels use to mitigate damage (Campo *et al.*, 2014). However, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only a few studies (*e.g.*, Henderson, 2005, 2007; Lauesen, 2013) had explored the CSR practices that hotels use in crises. Since the pandemic began, scholars have increasingly begun to examine CSR in the hospitality sector. Recent studies on CSR have explored diverse topics such as the operation of firms' CSR practices (Gürlek and Kılıç, 2021; Hao *et al.*, 2020; Rosemberg, 2020; Teng *et al.*, 2020), the effects of



CSR on firm value and business performance (Qiu *et al.*, 2021; Shin *et al.*, 2021) and employee perceptions of CSR practices (Aguinis *et al.*, 2020; Filimonau *et al.*, 2020).

Some studies have suggested ways that hotel firms can practise CSR towards tourists and local communities during national pandemic lockdowns. For example, hotel CSR can play an important and innovative role in offering accommodation for medical staff or essential workers (Hao *et al.*, 2020; Teng *et al.*, 2020). Hotels can also serve as quarantine facilities for international tourists and travelling residents as a way to sustain their businesses in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rosemberg, 2020). These approaches to CSR during a pandemic are consistent with Henderson's (2007) proposal that during crises, CSR practices should play leading roles in the sustainable development of hotels, local communities and society in general. Henderson (2007) further argued that CSR should be a strategic tool for a hotel's crisis management, as CSR efforts can enable collaboration between diverse stakeholders in the community.

However, various researchers have taken opposing views regarding the effects of CSR on a firm's value and performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Qiu *et al.* (2021) argued that CSR can protect firm value and business performance, Shin *et al.* (2021) identified negative effects of hotel CSR on consumers' booking behaviour and on market value. Thus, hotels' CSR practices should be evaluated from the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, with consideration for the nature of each particular business environment (Shin *et al.*, 2021).

### ***Employees' commitment to hotel CSR***

Hotel CSR is difficult to practise without the support and commitment of the frontline employees who have direct contact with customers (Aguinis *et al.*, 2020; Filimonau *et al.*, 2020). When the public faces a threat from an epidemic, the frontline employees may need to

compromise their personal safety and health for the sake of the public good and the organisation's interests (Filimonau *et al.*, 2020; Teng *et al.*, 2020). Hence, to initiate hotel CSR in a health-related crisis, it is crucial to understand the employees' views, particularly when conflicts exist between the basic needs for health/safety and the workplace rewards/responsibilities. According to Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, physiological and safety needs have to be met before higher-level needs (*e.g.*, belonging, self-esteem, self-actualisation) can be pursued. However, Max-Neef (1992) argued that a systematic approach is required to understand the dynamic relations between diverse human needs, which are not necessarily related in an hierarchical way. Rupp *et al.*, (2006) argued that employees' needs for control, belonging and meaning tend to mediate the effects of CSR on their emotions, attitudes and actions.

Previous empirical studies of hotel CSR have supported non-linear relationships between the employees' various needs. For instance, Kim *et al.* (2020) applied needs satisfaction theory, and found that both instrumental CSR (direct impact on employees) and voluntary CSR (non-direct impact on employees) produced positive effects for meeting the hotel employees' basic needs, along with their needs for personal growth and quality of work life. These positive effects in turn distinctly improved job satisfaction. Zientara *et al.* (2015) found similar results, indicating that hotel employees' self-related CSR and other-related CSR (for colleagues, community members, suppliers and the environment) both had positive effects in terms of job satisfaction, commitment to the organisation and work engagement.

Various researchers have proposed different strategies to enhance employees' commitment to CSR. For instance, advancing social accounts to explain organisational justice (Rupp *et al.*, 2006) and increase employees' awareness of CSR (Raub and Blunschi, 2014) were found to promote the employees' engagement and personal CSR initiatives. Levy and Park (2011) found that positive perceptions of hotel CSR could result in stronger

commitment and organisational identification, particularly for frontline employees. Other studies have indicated that community involvement by hotel employees is the key to amplifying their CSR commitment, and that such involvement can be generated through internal workshops, social activities and incentives (Filimonau *et al.*, 2020; Mackenzie and Peters, 2014; Teng *et al.*, 2020).

Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced both the organisational management and the workforce of the hospitality industry (Baum *et al.*, 2020). Many observers expected an increase in turnover among senior hotel managers because of job insecurity and uncertainty (Filimonau *et al.*, 2020). However, organisational resilience and CSR activities can help to maintain an effective workforce and strengthen the employees' commitment to their organisations (Filimonau *et al.*, 2020). This potential was confirmed by Mao *et al.* (2020, p. 1), who found that "CSR had positive impacts on employee self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism through employee satisfaction with corporate COVID-19 responses". In other words, their findings demonstrated that CSR helps to build up the employees' psychological capital, which strengthens their commitment to their hotels (Mao *et al.*, 2020).

## **Methods**

This study of hotel CSR implemented a qualitative approach by (1) conducting in-depth interviews with employees and stakeholders of quarantine hotels, (2) making field observations and (3) analysing data from a researcher's direct experience in one of the quarantine hotels. In-depth interviews were considered an opportune method for this type of research as they elicit the perspectives, attitudes and emotions of diverse stakeholders. Interviews also help to develop comprehensive understanding on the topics concerned (Taylor *et al.*, 2015). In addition, field observations were conducted during one researcher's

15-night stay at a quarantine hotel, because such direct experience could provide insights into hotel operations and customer service in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic.

### ***Study site and participant recruitment***

The participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Thirty quarantine hotels across South Korea were initially considered. Invitations presenting a brief overview of the study were sent to potential participants by phone and e-mail. Many of the hotels politely declined the invitation, either due to internal company policies or for personal reasons. Follow-up calls were made to the respondents who showed interest and requested more information about this project. The study's purpose, interview process, designated data collection period and data protection procedures were all clearly explained. The researchers also emphasised that the participants had the right to withdraw from the interviews at any time throughout the research process and that all of the interviews would be conducted anonymously.

As Table 1 shows, 13 participants were finally recruited for the interviews. These participants included 10 hotel employees from four hotels, plus one nurse and two local government officials who were dispatched to a quarantine hotel. No incentives were given to the participants. The four hotels used for data collection are located in Seoul (the capital city of South Korea) and Busan (the second biggest city in South Korea). The three hotels in Seoul are local franchises with 3-star ratings (100 to 150 rooms per hotel) and the hotel in Busan is a multinational franchise with a 4-star rating (446 rooms). All of these hotels are located in the city centres and they target both domestic and international tourists.

The participating medical nurse, who usually worked for a local health centre, had been temporarily assigned to a hotel and worked there as a full-time staff member from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday to Friday. The local government officials had also been dispatched to that hotel, and they were responsible for monitoring the hotel's operations and overseas

arrivals. Thus, these three participants' opinions contributed to achieving the study's first objective of examining how hotels can operate as quarantine facilities in partnership with local governments and public health centres.

Insert Table 1 here.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

The in-depth interviews were conducted between May and June 2020. These individual semi-structured in-depth interviews were done by phone to ensure mutual safety from COVID-19. The interviews with the hotel employees considered general questions on hotel operations, benefits/costs to the hotels, the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic components of CSR (*i.e.*, Carroll's pyramid) and the employees' personal perspectives. The key interview questions were the following. (1) In what way does the hotel operate as a coronavirus quarantine facility? (2) What benefits/costs, if any, does the hotel encounter as a result of being used as a coronavirus quarantine facility for overseas arrivals during the COVID-19 pandemic? (3) Do you think that using the hotel as a coronavirus quarantine facility for overseas arrivals is economically beneficial to the hotel? (4) In serving as a coronavirus quarantine facility for overseas arrivals, what policies and procedures does the hotel apply and how do government laws and regulations affect hotel operations? (5) Do you think that the use of the hotel as a coronavirus quarantine facility meets the expectations of society and the local community? (6) Do you think that the use of the hotel as a coronavirus quarantine facility for overseas arrivals contributes to the local residents' well-being and community protection? (7) Overall, how do you feel about working in a hotel that is used as a coronavirus quarantine facility?

All of the interviews were conducted in the subjects' native language (*i.e.*, Korean) at times of their convenience. The conversations were recorded with their consent for

subsequent analysis. The audio files were transcribed by a researcher who is fluent in Korean and then cross-checked by another researcher. The researchers thoroughly checked the interview transcripts to make sure they accurately represented the original audio files. To avoid loss of meaning during data analysis, the interview transcripts were not translated into English. In accordance with the data analysis procedures suggested by Colaizzi (1978), the transcripts were manually analysed and the extracted meanings were sorted into colour-coded themes by two researchers. These assessments were confirmed by comparing the colour-coded themes between the researchers. Later, the participants were asked to verify the descriptions of their interview themes. The final relationship/structure of the data with its emergent themes was then translated into English, and bilingual academics confirmed the translation.

With the approval of one quarantine hotel in Seoul, field observations were made during a 15-night stay at the hotel in May 2020. This visitation contributed to the study's first objective of exploring how hotels operate as coronavirus quarantine facilities. In selecting the field observation site, the hotel's location, accessibility and availability were considered. The room was booked and paid for through the hotel's central reservation system. Field observations were made concerning the main staff tasks such as check-in and check-out processes for overseas arrivals, food and amenity delivery services, hygiene and sanitation practices, cleaning, waste management and wake-up call service. The duties of the medical staff were also observed, and the researcher conducted daily informal conversations with the hotel and medical staff, both on site and by phone. All of the noteworthy processes, issues and events were observed and recorded in the field notes. At the end of each day, summarising notes were composed, with comments on emerging themes.

## **Findings**

### ***Observation: Check-in process at the quarantine hotel***

Due to the high demand for reservations, overseas arrivals were required to contact the hotel and complete the reservation procedure before entry to South Korea. After confirming the place of quarantine, the overseas arrivals travelled from the airport on a designated shuttle bus that took them directly to the hotel. In accordance with the ‘*Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act*’, the ‘*Immigration Act*’ and the ‘*Quarantine Act*’, the overseas arrivals filled out the ‘Facility Quarantine Agreement’ and the ‘Self-Quarantine Agreement’ during their check-in procedures. The quarantine guidelines were clarified, emergency contact numbers were given and payment was made on site.

All of the hotel employees were required to wear personal protective equipment, and barriers were erected in the hotel lobby for mutual safety. In addition, markings on the lobby floor indicated the two-metre social distancing requirements. After their check-ins, the overseas arrivals were directed to their rooms via designated routes and elevators. Each room was equipped with basic amenities such as shampoo and soap in sufficient quantities for 15 nights. Additional amenities and meal boxes were delivered to the rooms daily, and the overseas guests collected these items from sterilised vinyl boxes placed outside their doors (see Appendix B).

### ***Observation: Roles of hotel employees and medical staff***

The hotel employees sought to provide sincere, responsive service to the overseas arrivals. Although face-to-face interaction was not possible, interaction was established via alternative channels such as phone and e-mail. The hotel employees made daily calls to greet their guests and ask if there was anything they could do to help. In addition, a delivery service was provided for the guests’ convenience, whereby the hotel employees collected food or any

other products ordered by the guests via delivery apps or online shopping, and then delivered these things to the rooms promptly. A confirmation call from the front desk was made prior to each room delivery. Hotel employees were available 24/7 and they made an effort to offer a relaxing, home-like experience during the challenging quarantine period. The medical staff offered telephone consultations on ‘stress management’ and arranged for a further COVID-19 test before the check-out process. These observations confirmed that the role of the quarantine hotel was to provide accommodation, meals and care to overseas arrivals.

### ***Theme 1: Innovative partnerships that protect the local community***

In June 2020, approximately 30 Korean hotels were operating as coronavirus quarantine facilities, and the number of participating hotels was increasing. The smaller hotels used their entire buildings exclusively for overseas arrivals, but the large hotels provide separated spaces to accommodate their local unquarantined guests and the quarantined overseas arrivals. Figure 1 illustrates how the quarantine hotels managed their partnerships with the government and the public health centres. The government’s key responsibilities were to designate and approve hotels as quarantine facilities and to monitor the overseas arrivals’ symptoms through a mobile application that was developed by the Ministry of the Interior and Safety (refer to Appendix A). Local government officials and medical staff from the public health centres were dispatched to each participating hotel to support the overseas arrivals and the hotels’ operations. The local government provided quarantine kits (including a thermometer, hand sanitiser, masks, sanitising spray and rubbish bags) to all overseas arrivals so that they could accurately report their daily symptoms and follow sanitary rules.

Insert Figure 1 here.

The participants explained that their quarantine hotels had to operate according to Korea’s ‘*Immigration Control Act*’, ‘*Quarantine Act*’ and ‘*Infectious Disease Control and*



*Prevention Act*'. Thus, the hotels' key responsibilities were limited to providing conveniences for overseas arrivals such as accommodations and meals and for cleaning and disinfection. All of the staff were required to wear personal protective equipment for mutual safety and to maintain social distancing when in the lobbies (refer to Appendix B).

The medical staff dispatched to the hotels from public health centres were responsible for the health-related tasks and for providing mental health counselling services (such as stress management) during the quarantine period. The overseas arrivals were required to sign an agreement to participate in the quarantine and a self-quarantine agreement as part of the check-in procedure. These agreements committed them to comply with the COVID-19 quarantine guidelines during their stays. For those who needed financial assistance, the local governments provided subsidies, depending on the budgets allocated. Overseas arrivals were also required to submit accurate daily symptom records to the local government officials twice a day through an app.

The interviews with hotel employees showed that they believed the ultimate purpose of their partnership with the local governments and the public health centres was to protect both the overseas arrivals and the local communities from COVID-19. The employees thought that their hotels' decisions to temporarily operate as quarantine facilities should be understood as a CSR practice. These views were consistent with the findings of previous studies showing that CSR is generally performed as a socially beneficial activity, rather than as a response to external pressure (Carroll and Buchholtz, 2009; de Grosbois, 2012; Henderson, 2007; Huimin and Ryan, 2011).

The participants claimed that their hotels accepted the government's commitments to maintain the employees' job security and the shareholders' profits, and ultimately to protect local communities. This stance towards public policy was consistent with the economic,

legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities of CSR (Carroll, 2016). All of the participants asserted that the hotel and tourism industries were extremely vulnerable to the pandemic, but their quarantine operations were good for both the hotel industry and for community protection. Other studies have also indicated that effective cooperation and partnership with governments was expected to make the hospitality industry more resilient and sustainable during the COVID-19 crisis (Jones and Comfort, 2020). For example, one participant made the following statement:

*When there was a very low number of hotel guests, our hotel started working on this partnership after consulting with the local government. I personally think that the hotel's operating as a coronavirus quarantine facility has worked well. It is meaningful for our hotel to contribute to preventing the spread of coronavirus in the community by utilising unused accommodation and manpower. (Participant J)*

## ***Theme 2: An effective way to manage financial challenges and job security***

All of the hotel staff interviewees agreed that operating their hotels as coronavirus quarantine facilities helped their hotels to alleviate financial difficulties during the pandemic. Due to the sharp decrease in visits by domestic and foreign guests, the average occupancy rates of major luxury hotels in Seoul fell from their previous average of 70% to only 10% in March 2020, just before the government initiative. Most of the participants indicated that one of the major reasons their hotels accepted the local government's proposal was to address their financial difficulties, in addition to making a contribution to protecting the community against the virus. The hotel industry is a service industry that involves high fixed costs and heavy facility maintenance. As such, it has a relatively weaker profit structure than most other industries (Choi *et al.*, 2021).

Participant B reported that on average 70 out of 90 rooms were occupied per week, and that many people were making inquiries about reservations. Other participants also agreed that the occupancy rates were higher than expected. Most of them reported that the

occupancy rates were approximately 65% in April of 2020. This rate was still lower than the rates before the COVID-19 crisis, but the hotel employees felt relieved that the occupancy rate had remained fairly high during the pandemic.

Unlike most tourists, quarantining overseas arrivals were long-staying guests who remained for 15 nights. Participant F mentioned that the average daily rate (ADR) for each guest was ₩100,000 (US\$82), including three meal boxes. Therefore, over their 15-day quarantines, each overseas arrival paid approximately ₩1,400,000 (US\$1,230) for the stay. This ADR was consistent with that of other hotels that have been used as coronavirus facilities in conformity with the local government's regulations. The key indicators of a hotel's financial performance include the ADR, the revenue per available room (RevPAR) and the occupancy rate (Xiao *et al.*, 2012). Recent studies have demonstrated that the negative impact of COVID-19 on the hotel industry has far exceeded expectations. The overall downward trend since the emergence of COVID-19 has featured substantial declines in occupancy rates, room rates and estimated margins (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2021; Hao *et al.*, 2020). Thus, the participants believed that the innovative initiative of offering quarantine services could offset their hotels' financial losses. The participants also mentioned that their hotels' temporary operations as quarantine facilities had substantially reduced the need for unpaid leaves or layoffs, which had become prevalent in the hotel industry as a whole.

In addition to maintaining front office staff, quarantine hotels needed to provide a concierge, housekeeping staff and chefs. Some of the participating hotels prepared meal boxes in their own kitchens rather than outsourcing them, so the employees working in food and beverage services were able to keep their jobs. Thus, by temporarily operating as quarantine facilities, the participating hotels fulfilled Carroll's (2016) CSR criterion for economic responsibility, as their initiatives involved production and sales leading to profit. The participants believed that offering this service helped their hotels to alleviate financial

difficulty and to realise an opportunity for business revitalisation in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. As Participant F commented,

*Honestly, using the hotel as a coronavirus facility was also a big challenge internally. However, unexpectedly, the occupancy rate was high, which helped us to solve the current extreme financial crisis. Of course it was lower than the occupancy rate before COVID-19, but considering the current situation, I think there were many benefits from the hotel operating as a coronavirus quarantine facility. (Participant F)*

### ***Theme 3: New opportunity to retain domestic consumers***

Although international mobility and the right to travel abroad have been substantially suppressed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Baum and Hai, 2020), the demand for domestic travel has continued to increase (Altuntas and Gok, 2020). Some participants asserted that their hotels should temporarily shift to targeting domestic tourists, as the effects of COVID-19 were expected to be prolonged. Under quarantine conditions, the overseas arrivals stay at their hotels for 15 nights, which is much longer than the typical stay of leisure tourists. Many of the participants said most of the overseas arrivals were Korean guests returning home due to COVID-19, and these people were potential domestic tourists who might stay in the same hotels in the future. The mandatory self-quarantine agreements stipulated that overseas arrivals were not allowed to leave their rooms until check-out, which meant that there were countless opportunities for the hotel employees to interact with them during their stays.

A number of studies have confirmed that consumers' behavioural intentions and word of mouth are affected by the quality of the service and the interactions between employees and guests (Kandampully *et al.*, 2018; Padma and Ahn, 2020). In other words, serving as a quarantine facility could be a new opportunity to build firm relationships with overseas arrivals by providing sincere, high-quality care and service. The participants mentioned that their hotel staff made daily calls to check on the overseas arrivals' health and their mental

conditions. According to the participants, many overseas arrivals found it difficult to stay in a small hotel room for 15 nights. Unlike being quarantined at home, these overseas arrivals were confined to one room, which made some of them extremely anxious. Thus, the hotel employees were available at all times, and they made an effort to offer the guests a relaxing, home-like experience during the challenging quarantine periods.

Several participants mentioned that the current COVID-19 crisis could provide new opportunities for cultivating domestic consumers for the future financial recovery. In their perspectives, providing quarantine service could enable the pursuit of economic responsibility, *i.e.*, seeking acceptable profits while providing goods and services that were needed or desired by consumers (Carroll, 1991). The following quote exemplified the participants' comments on this theme:

*I found some online reviews of the experience at a hotel used as a coronavirus quarantine facility, like our hotel. The blogger described the daily life and events he experienced during the stay in detail, and evaluated every single feature such as bedding, cleaning, amenities, meal kits and staff attitude. Well, ... many overseas arrivals have shared their experience on social media, as it is a rare experience. If COVID-19 lasts for a long time, we will need to target domestic guests and promote our hotel domestically. I think the detailed reviews left by long-term guests could be a valuable opportunity for future promotions. (Participant A)*

#### ***Theme 4: Concern about brand image***

Several of the participants expressed concerns that their hotel's brand image might be affected by serving as a coronavirus quarantine facility. Brand image is the consumers' overall impression of a brand and the psychological qualities that each consumer associates with that brand (Balmer *et al.*, 2020). Any direct or indirect elements of information related to a brand are combined with consumer emotions to form a brand image (Anisimova *et al.*, 2019). The participants mentioned that COVID-19 is associated with 'pandemic', 'death', 'crisis' and 'fear', and they considered that such associations might negatively affect their

hotel's brand image. They wondered if prospective consumers might prefer to avoid their hotel, and if they might refuse to sleep in rooms used by overseas arrivals during the pandemic. Balmer *et al.* (2020) argued that the more positive a brand image is, the more stable its current or future profitability will be. However, activities that might have a negative effect on brand image can still harm a hotel's performance. Therefore, such activities can contravene the principle of 'economic responsibility' that forms part of the CSR pyramid, because these activities can ultimately conflict with the need for maximising profit. For instance, one participant expressed concern about the long-term costs of participating in the quarantine service initiative:

*It may sound a bit contradictory, but our hotel has been involved in this partnership to solve current economic problems and for the public good, yet I'm also very worried about the negative impact on the hotel's image in the long run. (Participant D)*

### ***Theme 5: Low empowerment and authority***

As shown in Figure 1, quarantine hotels must operate in accordance with the '*Immigration Control Act*', the '*Quarantine Act*' and the '*Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act*'. The restrictions imposed by these laws inevitably meant that the hotel employees were not empowered to handling unexpected issues that arose during the quarantine period.

'Empowerment' is an organisational management method that involves assigning important tasks to subordinates, delegating responsibility for decisions, expanding the scope for work performance and autonomy of judgement, and giving employees the authority to act without prior approval of a manager (Hewagama *et al.*, 2019).

Several of the participants mentioned that the most frequent complaints from overseas arrivals concerned disposal of waste, and in particular food waste. The '*Quarantine Act*' requires that all waste generated during a quarantine stay must be collected by local

government officials after the travellers' check-out times, as the coronavirus's incubation period is up to 14 days. Thus, the wastes of overseas arrivals should stay in the guests' spaces during their quarantine periods. This requirement contradicts the finding by Jiang and Wen (2020) that high standards of hygiene and cleanliness are particularly necessary at hotels during the COVID-19 crisis. Another issue arising from the hotel employees' low levels of empowerment was the problem of how to deal with emergencies occurring on a weekend or at night, when the designated medical staff and local government officials were off duty.

A number of studies have confirmed that employee empowerment has a positive impact on service quality, customer satisfaction and organisational performance in the hospitality industry (Hewagama *et al.*, 2019; Karatepe, 2013). In terms of the CSR pyramid, low empowerment and low authority are related to the CSR aims of legal responsibility and economic responsibility. For instance, one participant pointed out that improvements should be made to enable the quarantine hotels to operate more flexibly and effectively:

*Imagine that you cannot throw out waste when the weather gets hot, like in early summer. Meals in disposable food containers and two bottles of water are delivered three times per day and the amount of waste continues to increase. Well, ... even though food waste is collected every five days during a stay, the disposable food containers and general waste accumulates in a small hotel room .... Unfortunately, I cannot help this problem. It would be great if the regulation could be more flexible, depending on the situation. (Participant B)*

#### ***Theme 6: Sense of duty and enhanced teamwork under ethical management***

Many of the participants reported that they took pride in their work, although they sometimes became nervous and had to give extra attention to the overseas arrivals. The overseas arrivals were often more demanding than general guests. Many of them expected personalised care and service, as they grew weary of isolation in a small room. Some participants mentioned that they were extremely busy resolving the overseas arrivals' requests and making individual calls to check on their health and emotional condition every morning. These services were

not compulsory under the quarantine facility guidelines, but were part of the staffs' efforts to provide hospitality. A hotel is a service business that is expected to provide guests with 'service', 'sincerity' and 'care' (Choi *et al.*, 2021). The role of front office employees is especially vital, as the front office is the hub or nerve centre of the hotel (Hewagama *et al.*, 2019). Many of the participants mentioned that company standards and a sense of duty motivated them to engage actively with the visitors. One participant said,

*We are hotel employees with a mission to protect our guests and provide sincere service and care. I am very proud of supporting overseas arrivals who need a helping hand and I have no doubt that it is my job to do so. I am very happy to work here; this is a very special experience for me. (Participant C)*

Workplace stress induced by safety concerns is a major cause of turnover intention, and this is especially the case for many workers during the COVID-19 crisis (Khawaja *et al.*, 2021). Thus, it is essential for managers to meet their employees' needs for health and safety, and to ensure the quality of work life (Kandampully *et al.*, 2018; Zhang *et al.*, 2020). In general, ethical management involves protecting rights and fulfilling obligations while adhering to market ethics (Wong and Dhanesh, 2017).

Many of the participants shared their views on ethical responsibilities and on how their managers had treated them since their hotels were transformed into coronavirus quarantine facilities. All of the participants were clearly informed of the risks that could arise from operating as a coronavirus quarantine facility and they were apprised of contingency plans. Receiving this information made the participants feel more psychologically secure than they had at first expected. For example, to ensure the safety of the housekeeping employees, the disinfection of the hotel public spaces and the rooms after check-outs was handled by specialist companies. The hotels' housekeeping employees then completed the room maintenance. The participants mentioned that all amenities provided to the guests were thrown away to avoid the possibility of indirect infection.



In addition, the participants mentioned that the hotel entrances were firmly controlled by hotel employees, who allowed only relevant parties to enter as necessary to ensure the residents' safety and to reduce the potential for the spread of coronavirus. The participants also mentioned that the hotels did their best to conduct internal risk assessments and to develop contingency plans. The staff were not forcibly placed in frontline roles, and the work shifts were evenly allocated with respect to the employees' preferences. These actions were related to the hotels' ethical responsibilities to be good corporate citizens by complying with social customs and ethical standards, beyond the standards required by legal regulations (Carroll, 2016).

Finally, the participants believed that their working environments in quarantine hotels fostered enhanced teamwork. This development can be explained by the findings of Supanti *et al.* (2015), which indicated that CSR tends to enhance the employer–employee relationship through enabling staff members to have fun, feel pride, develop skills and build teamwork. A recent study (Goh and Baum, 2021) on Generation Z employees working for quarantine hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic produced similar findings. The desire for 'meaningful work' such as hospitality service motivated Generation Z employees to work in the quarantine hotels despite the risk of exposure to the virus. Figure 2 synthesises the findings of the in-depth interviews and the field observations. This figure shows the interplay between the hotel employees' perspectives, the four components of the CSR pyramid, and the hotels' benefits and costs from operating as quarantine facilities.

Insert Figure 2 here.

## **Conclusions and discussion**

### ***Conclusions***

Using Carroll's (2016) CSR pyramid framework as a lens, this study explored employee perceptions of hotel CSR activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings showed how hotels have adjusted to operating as quarantine facilities in partnership with local governments and public health centres. In addition, the findings revealed the benefits and costs to the hotels of participation in this service. Through interviews and daily interactions with participants, this study identified six themes related to the experience of offering quarantine service: (1) the need for an innovative partnership to protect the local community, (2) the need for effective ways to manage financial difficulties and protect job security, (3) the use of quarantine service as a new opportunity to attract and retain domestic consumers, (4) the concern over the negative effects that offering quarantine service could have on brand image, (5) the staffs' low degrees of empowerment and authority in dealing with pandemic-related problems and (6) the enhanced sense of duty and teamwork in performing an ethical task. In summary, the findings showed a pattern of interaction between the hotel employees' perspectives, the four components of CSR (economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities) and the benefits and costs of hotels operating as quarantine facilities (refer to Figure 2).

### ***Theoretical implications***

First, the findings of this study broaden our understanding of the CSR practices of hotels during periods of global crisis or disaster. By investigating hotels operating as coronavirus quarantine facilities in South Korea, this study provides an example of how hotels can strategically incorporate CSR practices into new forms of business innovation in conjunction with local governments. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many hotels around the world have transformed themselves into quarantine facilities for overseas arrivals, medical staff and essential workers (Hao *et al.*, 2020; Rosemberg, 2020; Teng *et al.*, 2020). Quarantine hotels have served to reduce public concerns about the transmission of COVID-

19 to local communities and helped to meet the need for government-approved quarantine centres in each country (Goh and Baum, 2021). Thus, when hotels function as quarantine facilities, this should be recognised as a CSR activity that has the ultimate purpose of assuming social responsibility for protecting local communities (Hao *et al.*, 2020; Teng *et al.*, 2020). Similar findings by Rosemberg (2020) have confirmed that providing hotel quarantine packages is an effective way to both control COVID-19 and maintain financial viability for the hotel industry. Like Goh and Baum's (2021) study of the perceptions of Generation Z employees of working in quarantine hotels, this study broadens the hospitality literature by providing insights into the underlying CSR practices performed by hotel employees who work for quarantine hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, in line with previous studies (Lauesen, 2013; Martínez and del Bosque, 2013; Nguyen *et al.*, 2017), this study finds that collaboration between the hotel industry and local governments is important when initiating hotel CSR, particularly during times of health-related crisis. The study's findings support those of Henderson (2007) and Nguyen *et al.* (2017), which indicated that hotel CSR should play a leading role in supporting a hotel's profitability, the host community's safety and the hospitality industry's long-term viability. The study by Nguyen *et al.* (2017) made a relevant exploration of public-private collaboration during a natural disaster in Japan. In that situation, the outcomes of collaboration between the hotel industry and the local government included "sharing of technical, financial and human resources, reducing stakeholder conflicts, [promoting] mutual understanding, improvement of trust and improved resiliency towards disasters" (Nguyen *et al.*, 2017, p. 132). This study makes similar findings concerning the formation of strategic partnerships between hotels, local governments and public health centres (refer to Figure 1).

Finally, this study makes a meaningful methodological contribution to the literature on hotel CSR. As this study's purpose was to investigate the role of CSR in the immediate

responses of hotels to an ongoing crisis, an ethnographic approach was considered adequate and advantageous. By directly examining one of the study sites, the study was able to obtain practical insights and gain a better understanding of the rapidly changing situation for hotel operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without such direct field observations, certain issues and themes would not have been identified. The field observer noted the meticulous care and the general counselling services provided by the hotel employees, the monitoring from government officials, the stress-management counselling offered by the medical staff and the difficulties imposed by waste disposal regulations. In addition, this approach made it possible to directly observe sudden or subtle changes in the hotel's business environment. While staying in the same hotel for 15 consecutive nights, the researcher was able to build rapport with gatekeepers and key interviewees who could help with purposeful sampling and could obtain sensitive information about the hotel's operation and management during the pandemic (*e.g.*, worries about brand image, financial performance, job security and safety). Thus, this study suggests an optimal methodology approach for conducting research when exploring the interplay of various parties' interests in the management of complex situations.

### ***Practical implications***

This case study of hotels operating as quarantine facilities has implications for diverse stakeholders in the hotel industry within South Korea and throughout the world. First, local governments should consider forming partnerships with local hotels to provide coronavirus quarantine facilities. The overseas arrivals who need such facilities include not only foreigners, but also nationals who have travelled to foreign countries for business or study purposes. Local governments can use unoccupied eligible hotel facilities to protect both overseas arrivals and local communities, while helping to revitalise the local economy and support the hotel industry. In providing such services, the financial and operational support of

local governments is vital for reducing the burdens that quarantine facilities place on hotel operations.

Second, this study provides empirical findings that can benefit hotels suffering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As some pioneering hotels have had considerable success in providing quarantine services, partnerships between hotels and local governments have been increasing. Hotels can use unsold rooms for both the public good and for generating profit during health crises. The designated hotels in Korea include facilities of various sizes. Small hotels use their entire buildings exclusively for housing overseas arrivals. In large hotels, spaces are separated to accommodate both general guests and overseas arrivals. Large chain hotels in the U.S. can allow different areas or wings of their facilities to operate independently, thereby allowing more effective operations.

Third, the highlighting of themes identified in this study, especially those related to finding an ‘effective way to tackle financial difficulty and job security’ and a ‘new opportunity to retain domestic consumers’, may help to increase the voluntary participation of hotels in all countries that have adopted voluntary participation strategies. This study’s findings also have practical implications for countries that are mandating quarantine hotels. As shown in Figure 1, it is critical to maintain partnerships among quarantine hotels, local governments and public health organisations. These partnerships are more sustainable when the hotels are voluntarily participating in the initiatives. Thus, the themes identified in this study (*e.g.*, innovative partnerships to protect local communities and the two financial themes) suggest that governments can adopt a strategy of choosing quarantine hotels from among volunteer firms in the hotel industry. Finally, this study can help customers and local communities to understand how hotels are fulfilling their social responsibilities. The findings can be of great help in maintaining a sense of mutual benefit between hotels, local

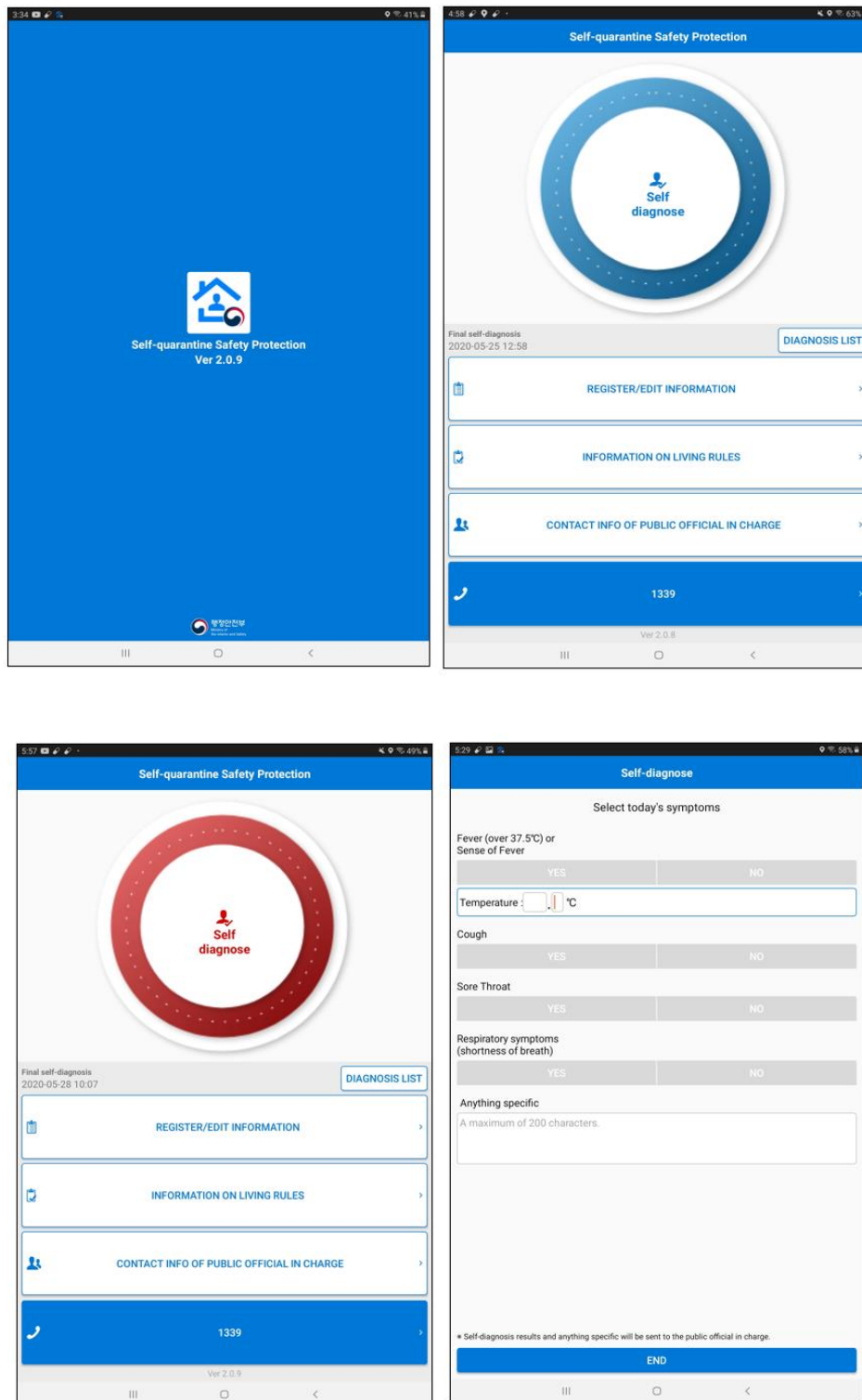
communities and prospective customers, especially by showing that the hotels are working to protect the public interest.

### ***Limitations and future research***

Despite this study's academic contributions and practical implications, certain limitations in the methods and results should be noted. First, caution is required in generalising the findings, given that the study was conducted in South Korea. Clearly, the methods used for designating and operating hotels as quarantine facilities are not consistent around the world. Some countries such as Singapore have imposed mandatory designations of quarantine hotels during the COVID-19 crisis, and other countries such as South Korea have opted for voluntary participation. The notion that such services involve hotel CSR is relevant only to situations of voluntary participation. Caution is also required when interpreting the findings, as they are generated from discussions with frontline staff. Although frontline staff play vital roles, the successful operation of hotels as coronavirus quarantine facilities depends on the cooperation of employees in every department. It is therefore worthwhile for future studies to explore the viewpoints of operational and back-office employees.

Second, although the study's findings highlight the economic benefits/costs and economic responsibilities of operating hotels as quarantine facilities, specific key performance indicators such as RevPAR are not available in this study. Future studies can seek more detailed data to further explore how hotels fulfil their economic responsibilities through CSR-related efforts. Finally, roles in hotel operations vary widely among stakeholders. Future research can explore the dynamic interrelationships between various stakeholders (hotel owners, employees, customers, suppliers, local communities, local government, local institutions and hotel associations) and their relationships to CSR activity during crises.

## Appendix A. Self-quarantine safety protection app



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## Appendix B. Hotel used as a coronavirus quarantine facility



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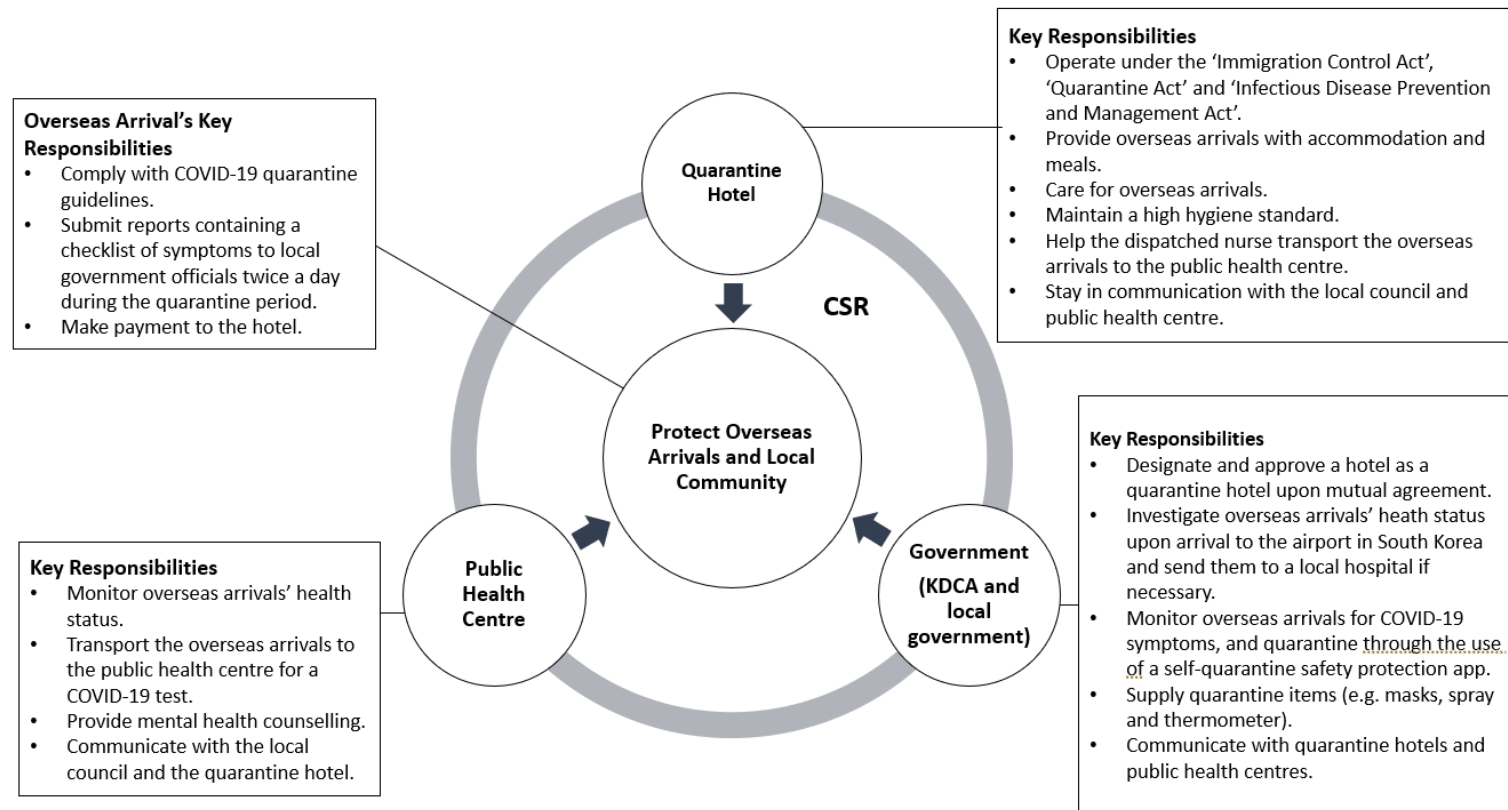
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**Table 1. Profile of Participants**

<b>Participant ID</b>	<b>Job Title</b>	<b>Work Experience</b>	<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Gender</b>
A	Front office clerk	Up to 5 years	20–29	F
B	Front office manager	5 years or more	40–49	M
C	Front office manager	5 years or more	40–49	M
D	Reservation clerk	5 years or more	30–39	F
E	Reservation clerk	Up to 5 years	20–29	F
F	Front office manager	5 years or more	30–39	F
G	Front office clerk	Up to 5 years	20–29	F
H	Front office clerk	Up to 5 years	20–29	F
I	Front office clerk	Up to 5 years	30–39	M
J	Front office manager	5 years or more	40–49	M
K	Nurse	5 years or more	50–59	F
L	Government official	Up to 5 years	30–39	M
M	Government official	5 years or more	50–59	M

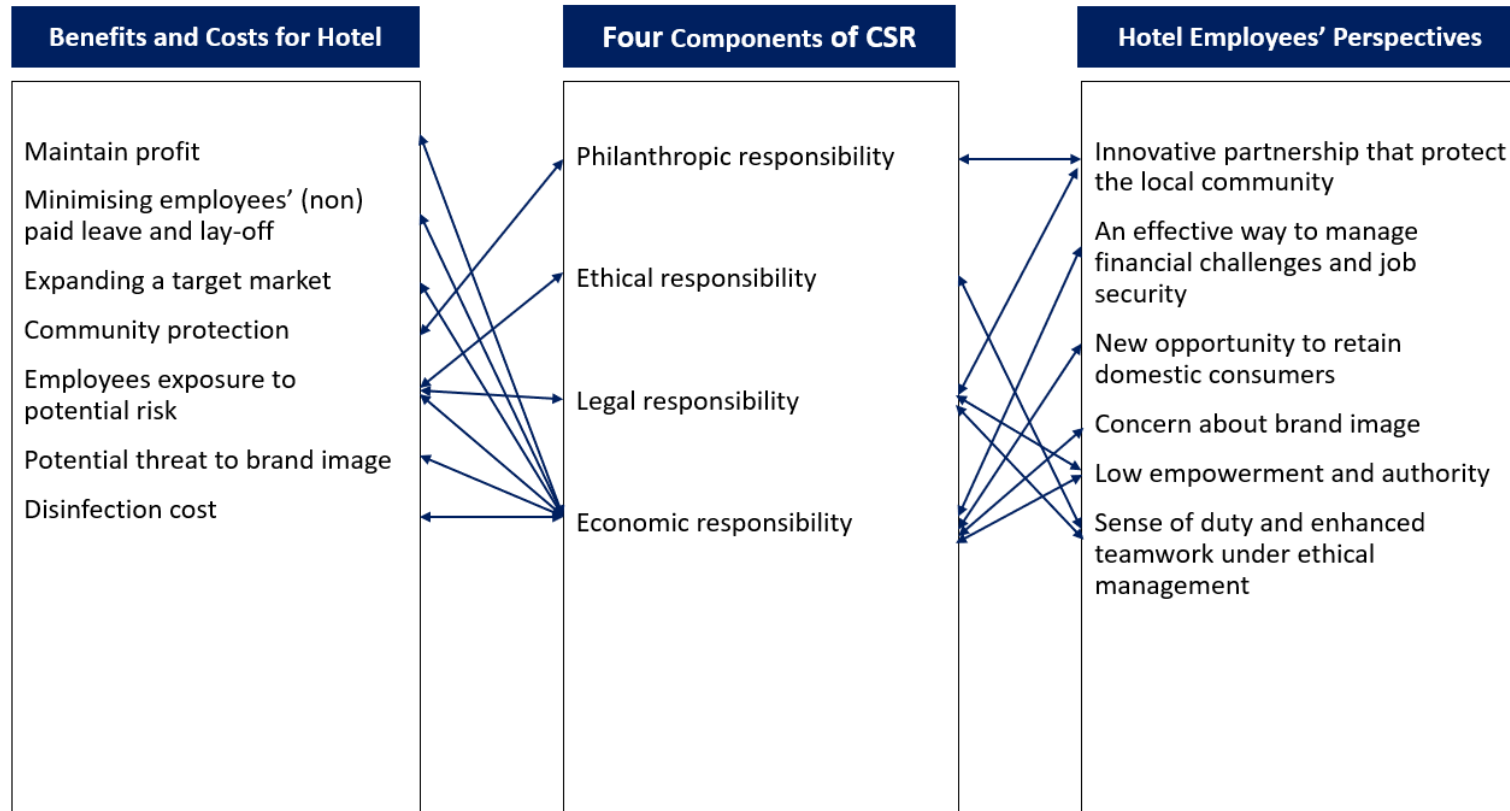
Note: The participants were from four hotels and one of the authors stayed at one of the hotels.

**Figure 1. Innovative partnerships that protect the local community**



Note: Based on the participants' responses.

**Figure 2. Interplay between the benefits and costs to hotels of operating as quarantine facilities, the four components of CSR and the hotel employees' perspectives**



Note: Based on the participants' responses.