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## **Corporate Social Responsibility During Covid-19: The Clean Zone Initiative in South Korea**

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## Corporate Social Responsibility During Covid-19: The Clean Zone Initiative in South Korea



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### Introduction

The novel coronavirus (hereafter Covid-19), first and foremost, has caused an unprecedented global catastrophe. Global tourism faced its worst year in 2020, with international arrivals falling by 74% (UNWTO, 2021) to 80% (OECD, 2020), according to the worldwide tourism data. Hospitality businesses and MICE (Meeting, Incentive tour, Convention, Exhibition and events) have been particularly struggling because these sectors rely greatly on international tourism demand. The hospitality industry is a vital part of a growing services economy and the world's most important sectors creating income, jobs, foreign exchange, and supporting local communities and developments (OECD, 2020). The sector directly contributed approximately 4.4% of GDP, 6.9% of employment, and 21.5% of service exports in OECD member countries in 2018 (OECD, 2020).

Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has hit the hotel sector hard, with unexpected effects on jobs and businesses caused by low occupancy and high overhead. Many hotel businesses have been forced to temporarily close, often falling into permanent closure due to the government policies and rules that restrict business activities to reduce virus infection (e.g., travel restrictions, social distancing rule, and staying-at-home orders) across the globe. For instance, the number of tourist hotels in Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, declined for the first time due to the Covid-19 pandemic since records began in 2008, according to the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism (MCST). As a result, during 2020, the number of the five-star, four-star, three-star, and two-star hotels decreased by one, six, fourteen, and seven hotels, respectively. For example, in 2021, the five-star luxury hotels – Sheraton Seoul Palace Gangnam Hotel, Le Meridien Hotel, and Millennium Hilton Seoul, which boasted a history of 38 years – were closed because of their vast fixed costs (MCST, 2021).

Due to the evolving nature of Covid-19, many governments are still keeping travel restrictions and social distancing policies in place, and customers are worried about visiting public spaces, including hotels and restaurants. At the same time, a recent novel Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activity, such as Clean Zone practices in hotels, is expected to help consumers feel safe and restore consumer confidence amid the Covid-19 anxiety. He and Harris (2020) also suggest that the pandemic offers a variety of meaningful opportunities to those businesses with a more insightful approach to CSR, particularly helpful to the fight against the Covid-19 virus for companies, suggesting that their efforts in fighting the virus can build a stronger rapport among their consumers during the crisis. In this context, many hotels in South Korea have participated in the activity called “Clean Zone” certification which establishes guidelines of a hygiene and disinfection standard (e.g., measuring body temperature, wearing a mask, cleaning hands, operating a Clean Zone, physical distancing, cleaning, and disinfecting, Choi, 2020; Park, 2020).

Several major metropolitan cities in South Korea, such as Seoul, Busan, and Incheon, have launched the Clean Zone program and provided the Clean Zone sticker (see Figure 1). Through the certification, participants receive a sticker to indicate that their property gets disinfected on a regular basis based on the authority’s guidelines (Seoul, 2020). Numerous hotels have conducted required disinfection practices to acquire a “Clean Zone” certificate and promoted this certification to hotel guests displaying this mark both inside and outside (see Figure 2). The participating hotels disinfect all reserved rooms and put a Clean Zone sticker that reads “Disinfected Room” on the door to help guests feel safe and comfortable. In addition, several hotels have started the promotion of “Kids Safety Clean Zone.” It provides an expensive nano-drone air purifier (approximately USD 5,500), which eliminates ultra-fine dust, harmful viruses, and

bacteria (Yoo, 2020). These activities greatly help satisfy consumers' higher expectations for safety and hygiene during the pandemic for the Korean hotel industry (Yoo, 2020).

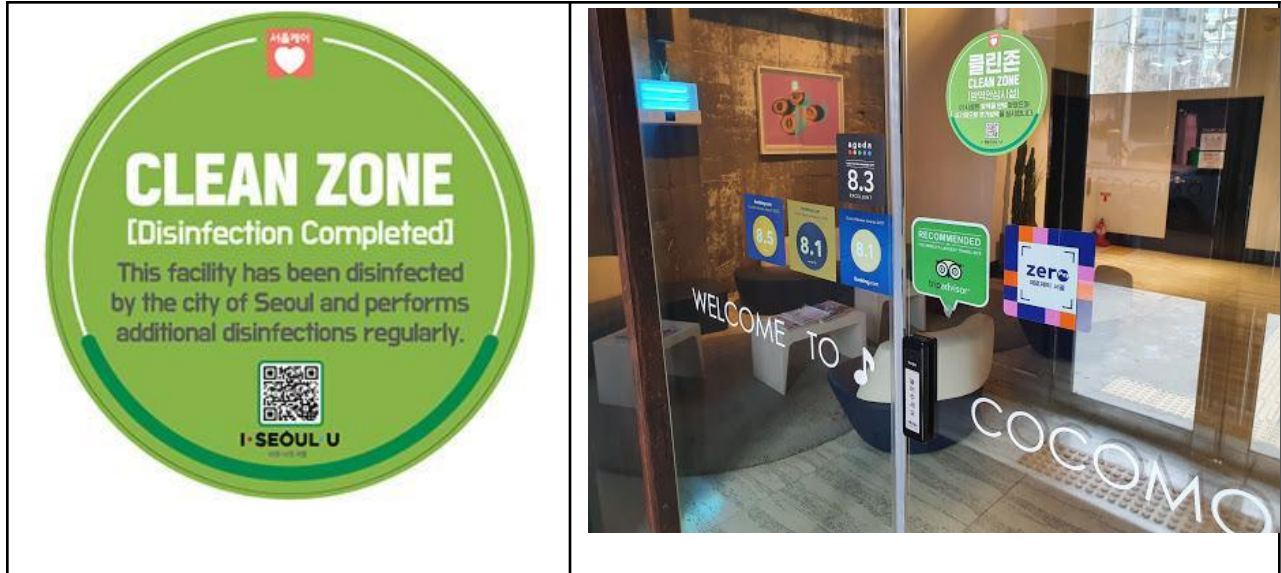


Figure 1. The Clean Zone certification and its use in hotels

Source 1: Seoul metropolitan government

(<http://english.seoul.go.kr/seoul-attaches-clean-zone-stickers-on-facilities-that-can-be-used-with-out-worry-about-infection/>)

Source 2: Cocomo hotel



Figure 2. The Clean Zone marketing and promotion

Source: booking.com

Similar to the Clean Zone certificate implemented in South Korea, several other countries (e.g., Portugal, Switzerland, Singapore, and Malaysia) have launched a campaign where tourism destinations, including hotels can become certified as clean and safe places that meet several requirements including frequent disinfection activities, and monitoring the health and practices of employees (Figure 3). Also, some hotel corporations started their own clean programs. For example, Marriott International has launched a global cleanliness council to promote its standards for cleanliness and other practices to meet the new safety and health expectations (Bohm & Miktus, 2020).



Figure 3. Clean and Safe certification worldwide  
Source: Portugal on the left (portugalcleanandsafe.com), Switzerland in the middle (myswitzerland.com), Singapore on the right (sgclean.gov.sg)

These certificate programs not only encourage the hotel industry to be more socially responsible, but also to satisfy their consumers' expectations. However, little is known about consumers' perceptions and attitudes on hotels' current adoption and efforts of the Clean Zone certification, as well as how effective they are. Therefore, this article aims to understand such perceptions.

## Survey

The self-administered survey questionnaire was used to first ask respondents for their knowledge about the Clean Zone. Afterwards, the survey provides a description of the Clean Zone, which is then followed by questions about participants' perceptions about the Clean Zone and their demographic information: age, gender, education, marital, household income, number of children, and the star rating of the hotel that they most frequently visit. Well-established multiple-items with 5-point or 7-point Likert scales, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5 or 7), are the adopted measures

for the study variables except for demographic information. The data was collected from December 4, 2020 to January 13, 2021 in Korea. The questionnaire was distributed using a web-based survey system by a research company. A quota sampling method, based on the hotels' census figures of the Korean population, was the basis for selecting the participants in the study. The quota sampling procedure applied to age and gender as the primary control characteristics.

## Results

### *Sample profile*

The sample profile is presented in Table 1. Among 215 respondents, 47.9% were female, and 52.1% were male. The age distribution includes the two largest groups of 50-59 years (30.2%) and 40-49 years (26.0%), while 23.7% and 20% belong to the age group of 30-39 years and 20-29 years, respectively. About 60% of the respondents were married in terms of marital status, whereas 38.1% were single. Regarding education levels, 73.0% held bachelor's degrees, and about 15% held graduate degrees, while about 12% of the respondents were high school graduates. In terms of yearly household income before taxes, the largest group earned above \$66,000 (34.0%), followed by \$44,000-\$65,999 (26.5%), \$30,000-\$43,999 (25.1%), and under \$29,999 (14.4%). Approximately half of the respondents have children. With respect to the hotel star-rating frequencies, about 40% of the respondents visit 4-star the most, followed by 3-star (31.2%), 1 or 2-star (15.3%), and 5-star (14.0%), respectively.

Table 1. Sample Profile

Variables		Number	%	Variables		Number	%
Gender	Male	112	52.1%	Marital	single	87	40.5%
	Female	103	47.9%		married	128	59.5%
education	high school	26	12.1%	Age	20-29	43	20.0%
	bachelor	157	73.0%		30-39	51	23.7%
	graduate	32	14.9%		40-49	56	26.0%
children	have	111	51.6%		50-59	65	30.2%
	do not have	104	48.4%		Frequently used hotel	below 3-star	33
household annual income	21,000-29,999	31	14.4%	3-star		67	31.2%
	30,000-43,999	54	25.1%	4-star		85	39.5%
	44,000-65,999	57	26.5%	5star		30	14.0%
	66,000-	73	34.0%	<b>Total</b>		215	100%

### Main results

This study conducted a descriptive analysis about consumer’s perception (skepticism and clean zone) of hotels. As a result, most respondents significantly agreed on the impact of Clean Zone certification on consumers’ skepticism perception (Table 2 and Figure 4).

Table 2. Results of consumers’ perceptions about the Clean Zone

Variables		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	Total
It is certain that this certificate is concerned to protect the risk of coronavirus infection	Number	2	3	20	14	92	77	7	215
	%	0.9%	1.4%	9.3%	6.5%	42.8%	35.8%	3.3%	100
It is sure that this certificate follows high standards of cleaning and hygiene	Number	2	6	17	10	90	77	13	215
	%	0.9%	2.8%	7.9%	4.7%	41.9%	35.8%	6.0%	100
It is unquestionable that this certificate acts in a good infection-controlling way	Number	4	5	38	27	83	48	10	215
	%	1.9%	2.3%	17.7%	12.6%	38.6%	22.3%	4.7%	100

Note: (1) Strongly disagree (2) Moderately disagree (3) Slightly disagree (4) Undecided (5) Slightly agree (6) Moderately agree (7) Strongly agree

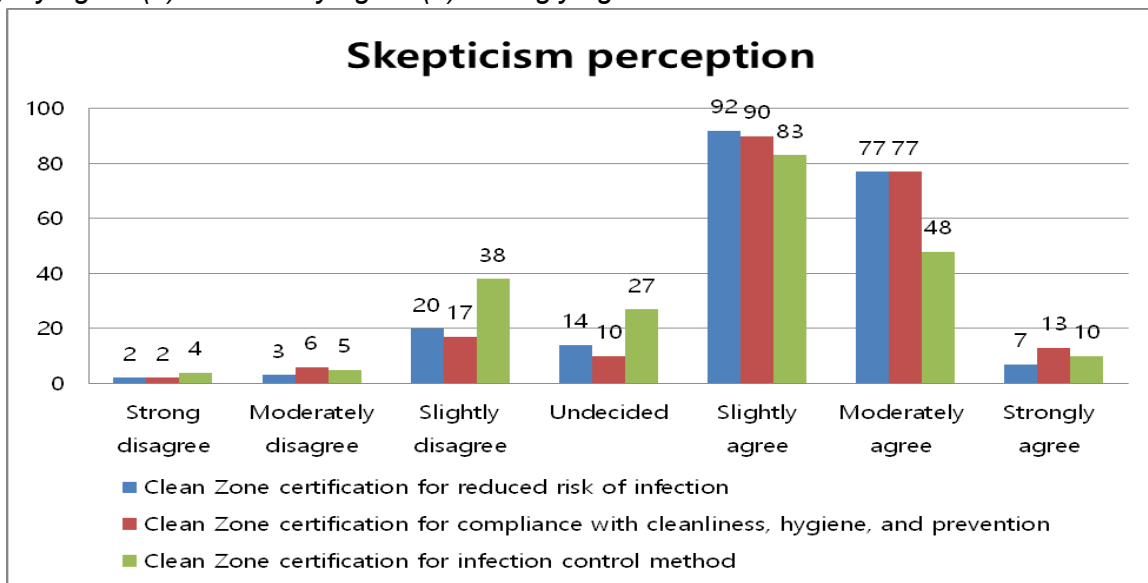


Figure 4. Visualization on Consumers’ Perceptions about the Clean Zone



Also, most respondents clearly agreed on the need and expansion of the Clean Zone certification as shown in Table 3 and Figure 5.

Table 3. Results of Need and Expansion of the Clean Zone certification

Variables		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Total
<b>The necessity on Clean Zone certification</b>	Number	1	3	10	<b>109</b>	<b>92</b>	215
	%	0.5%	1.4%	4.7%	<b>50.7%</b>	<b>42.8%</b>	100%
<b>The necessity to expand Clean Zone certification</b>	Number	1	4	8	<b>100</b>	<b>102</b>	215
	%	0.5%	1.9%	3.7%	<b>46.5%</b>	<b>47.4%</b>	100%

Note: (1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree (3) Undecided (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

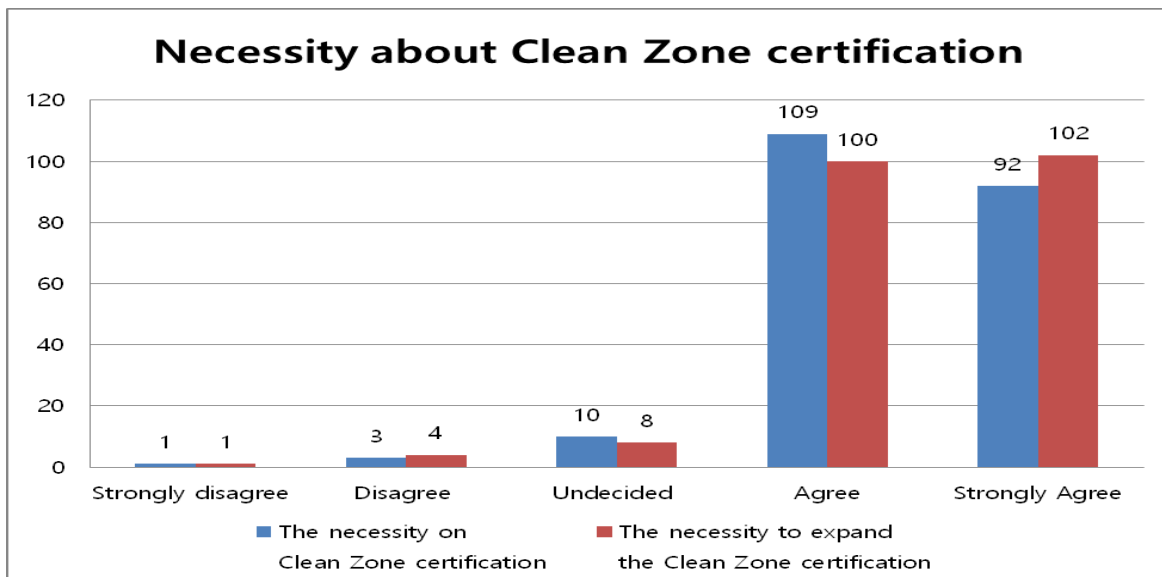


Figure 5. Visualization on the Necessity of Clean Zone Certification

This study further compared some groups regarding their perceptions about the Clean Zone certification, using means analysis (e.g., t-test, ANOVA) on the following characteristics: gender, marital status, and the hotel star-rating they visit the most. First, when we compared customers' perceptions about **the effect of the Clean Zone certification between males and females, our analysis shows no significant difference**. Next, we compared customers' perceptions between the married and unmarried, and our results present that **the married group believes more strongly about the positive effect of the Clean Zone certification than the unmarried group**

for two questions: “It is certain that this certificate is concerned to protect the risk of coronavirus infection” and “It is unquestionable that this certificate acts in a good infection-controlling way.” We then compared customers’ perceptions between the group with and without children in their household, and our results show that **the group with children clearly demonstrates more positive perceptions about the effect of the Clean Zone certification** for several questions: “It is certain that this certificate is concerned to protect the risk of coronavirus infection,” “It is unquestionable that this certificate acts in a good infection-controlling way,” “The necessity on Clean Zone certification,” and “The necessity to expand Clean Zone certification.”

### **Conclusion and practical implications**

Findings of this study, in general, support the positive effectiveness of the Clean and Safe certificate implemented in many countries. The Clean Zone certification adopted in South Korea appears to play a vital role in improving hotel customers’ perceptions about the effectiveness of hotels’ cleaning practices, thus enhancing their confidence about staying in a hotel. Our findings provide some implications for the hotel industry. First, hotel operators are strongly encouraged to consider implementing an official certificate regarding cleaning and disinfection activities as part of their CSR strategy. When they engage in such a program, hotel operators should also consider clearly making evidence of the certification visually available to their customers so that the customers can clearly see it, thus be well informed of the practice of the hotel’s efforts of combating coronavirus. Second, hotels may consider putting in more efforts to assure the confidence of particular groups of their guests, such as married couples and families who have a child/children, by establishing and reinforcing clean activities through adopting an official certificate, physical evidence, and a marketing campaign. Hotel operators should also be aware that there is no gender difference in customer’s perceptions about the effectiveness of the clean-related certificate. As a result, the hotels may continuously develop, operate, and update a clean and hygiene program and plan even after the Covid-19 pandemic. Such high-standard ethics and practices should be physically and diligently delivered and further informed (online and offline) to all current and potential customers so that they will feel safe and comfortable with their decision to stay at a hotel.

While this paper found that the positive impact of the Clean Zone certification on hotel customers’ perceptions and attitudes may lower levels of health risks, hotels require a certain level of capital investment in CSR practices (i.e., the Clean Zone certificate, González-Rodríguez, Díaz-Fernández, & Font, 2020; Millar & Baloglu, 2011). As a result, they may need to increase their average daily rate to make up for their investment. Therefore, further investigation is needed to examine customers’ willingness to pay premium prices for Clean Zone certified hotels. Also, future research

needs to expand the topic in the contexts of individual or branded hotels, leisure or business travelers, and different cultural backgrounds of hotel customers.

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