

# Research on Customer Conflict Management of Budget Hotels

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This paper applies conflict management theory to study customer conflicts in budget hotels. Utilizing investigations and data analysis from budget hotels in Guilin, Guangxi Province, China, it identifies the factors that influence the formation of customer conflicts and describes the characteristics of each stage in the development process, as well as the dual role of the conflicts. The paper also presents strategies for managing the transition from non-confrontational to confrontational conflicts.

*Keywords:* conflict management, non-confrontational conflict, conflict management strategy, budget hotels

## Introduction

As an integral component of the modern service industry, customer conflicts in budget hotels have garnered increasing attention alongside their rising prominence in the tourism market. Studying the customer conflicts of budget hotels not only helps to understand the nature and characteristics of conflicts but also provides effective conflict resolution strategies for managers. This, in turn, enhances service quality, elevates customer satisfaction, and propels the entire budget hotel industry towards a healthier and more stable development trajectory. Leveraging the theory of conflict management and drawing on case studies from budget hotels in Guilin, Guangxi, this paper examines the development patterns and management strategies of customer conflicts in budget hotels, aiming to offer valuable insights for industry development and management practices.

## Literature Review

### Conflict Definitions and Categories

Katz and Kahn (1978) argue that conflict is a continuous process of mutual obstruction, coercion, and opposition. Some scholars divide the nature and degree of the conflict, according to the nature and degree of the conflict, believing that the conflict is not always destructive behavior. Xu (2009) believes that non-confrontational conflict is one of the types of conflict. Its main characteristic is that there is no violent struggle between the opposing parties, and at least it still maintains a general relationship or superficial harmony. Zhou (2009) believes that it is relative, internal, latent, and implicit, but it can be adjusted for the conflict, which is called a non-confrontational conflict. Robbins (2013) regards conflict as a development process, which is a

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process in which one party intentionally influences or hinders the other party to pursue interests or achieve goals, and puts forward a conflict process model.

### **Conflict Management**

Conflict management is the mediation and resolution activities conducted to achieve the goals of individuals or groups (Thomas, 1976). Liu (2007) believes that conflict management is an important part of the strategy for responding to conflicts. Zhang and Lin (2012) elaborated on the types of host and guest conflicts in hotel guest services. By analyzing the inducing factors of host and guest conflicts and the process of their changes, they proposed corresponding mitigation strategies.

### **Conflict Management Strategies**

Based on the two dimensions of “satisfying the cooperation degree of others” and “satisfying their own proposition”, Thomas (1976) proposes a conflict handling mode: avoidance, collaboration, competition, adaptation, and tolerance, which are recognized by scholars and derived similar conflict coping strategies. Chen (2003) pointed out that conflict management involves three basic factors: material and psychological violence and coercion, third-party intervention, including mediation, conciliation, arbitration, and the use of force, as well as different forms of negotiation. Hu (1993) divides the development of conflict into four stages and proposes that conflict management could be implemented through conflict avoidance, conflict prevention, conflict resolution, or conflict elimination. Conflict avoidance, conflict prevention, conflict resolution, or conflict elimination can be regarded either as a static operation technique or as a dynamic management process, but the conflict management tactics used vary at different stages.

### **The Influencing Factors of Conflict Formation**

Brown (1983) suggests that conflicts originate not only from the competition for specific scarce resources but also from differences in interests, perceptions, and preferences. The manifestations of conflict vary from potential dissatisfaction and mild disagreement to refusal and intense debates, even physical confrontations. Hu (2002) believes that conflicts generally stem from three reasons: personality differences, structural disparities, and communication gaps. Personality differences arise from variations in individual characteristics and values. Barki and Hartwick (2001) identified emotion, cognition, and behavior as the three elements that define conflicts. Emotions, particularly negative ones, are often involved. Yu and Dou (2015) highlighted that emotional interaction is the essence of conflicts, with emotions playing a role in conflict initiation, progression, outcomes, and the cyclic nature of conflicts. Zhou (2002) classified five styles of conflict management: “cooperative”, “compromising”, “accommodating”, “controlling”, and “avoidant”. He emphasized the importance of adapting one’s conflict management style to meet changing environmental demands. In conclusion, factors influencing the occurrence and development of conflicts include interests, information asymmetry, communication, organizational structure, interdependence, individual differences, cognition, behavior, emotions, and communication styles.

## **Manifestations and Types of Customer Conflict in Budget Hotels**

### **Current Situation of Budget Hotel Development**

Budget hotels are establishments that offer economical and convenient accommodations to fulfill the basic lodging needs of customers. They typically provide standardized room types and services to ensure a consistent check-in experience. Situated primarily in city centers, commercial districts, or other easily accessible locations,

they cater to the needs of business travelers, vacationers, and budget-conscious individuals.

According to a market analysis report by *Hengzhou Chengsi*, a publisher specializing in customized services tailored to clients' business needs across various sectors such as chemicals, energy, automotive, healthcare, large-scale machinery, durable consumer goods, agriculture, cosmetics, and services, economic brands dominate the top 20 categories of Chinese hotel brands. Budget hotels command approximately 66% of the market share, solidifying their position as the backbone of the hotel industry.

However, budget hotels also encounter significant pressure and challenges stemming from customer conflicts. Information regarding conflicts among hotel guests spreads rapidly online, tarnishing the hotel's reputation and fostering negative word-of-mouth. Moreover, customers' expectations of budget hotels are on the rise, with demands for enhanced services and higher quality. Additionally, during peak travel seasons, customers who fail to secure reservations at their preferred hotels may turn to budget hotels, leading to disparities in the expected and actual service quality.

This study focuses on economic chain brands of budget hotels in China rated below two stars, such as *7 Days Inn*, *Hanting Inn*, *Home Inns*, *Jinjiang Star Inn*, among others. These hotels are known for their emphasis on affordability, facilities meeting basic lodging needs, cleanliness, and convenience, as well as standardized procedural management, cleanliness and safety protocols, and cost-effective operations.

### **Performance and Type of Budget Hotel Customer Conflict**

Most conflicts involving hotel customers are non-confrontational, with only a small portion being confrontational. Let's take the budget hotel in Guilin, Guangxi, China, for example. Non-confrontational conflicts primarily manifest as negative evaluations of the hotel. Hotel customer conflicts often appear in the form of non-confrontational conflicts, such as leaving negative comments or giving low scores on the hotel booking platform, or causing disturbances in hotel room facilities. However, when the interests or goals of one party or both the hotel service personnel or customers are not reasonably resolved, leading to an escalation of the conflict rather than seeking alternative channels to vent or endure, the resulting struggle and hostile behavior constitute antagonistic conflicts among hotel customers. Confrontational conflicts in hotel settings may manifest as face-to-face confrontations, fierce quarrels, verbal abuse, or physical altercations on online platforms. Confrontational conflicts are significantly more intense than non-confrontational ones.

A video taken by a blogger in a hotel in Guilin, Guangxi province shows:

The needs of female customers during the check-in process were not met for an extended period. She booked two rooms, but only one room was allocated to her, and the hotel reception staff informed her that the availability of the other room was uncertain. When the female customer raised concerns about the room, the hotel staff responded with indifference and understatement, causing the female customer to feel angry and helpless. Ultimately, the female customer requested to check out, but the hotel refused a refund and left the issue unresolved for the customer to handle, further intensifying the dissatisfaction of the female customer and leading to the outbreak of conflict<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Main Factors Influencing Customer Conflicts in Budget Hotels**

This study focuses on the negative comments of three budget hotel chains in Guilin, Guangxi (*7 Days Inn*, *Home Inn*, *Hanting Inn*) from July to October in 2023 on five hotel booking platforms (*Ctrip*, *Meituan*, *Feizhu*, *Qunar*, and *Dianping*). Low scores are defined as ratings below 2.5 out of 5. A total of 300 negative comments

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<sup>1</sup> Summarized from weibo video on 24-10-17: <https://weibo.com/6371991098/5090612200870896>.

were collected from 30 brand stores (10 from *7 Days Inn*, 12 from *Home Inn*, and eight from *Hanting Inn*). After excluding 17 negative comments that lacked clear reasons, 283 valid data points remained. Among them, there were 108 valid data points for *7 Days*, 85 for *Hanting*, and 90 for *Home Inn*, accounting for 38.16%, 29.96%, and 31.75%, respectively.

Table 1

*The Involved Aspects and Scope Affecting the Occurrence and Development of Conflicts*

|  |
|--|
| 1. Internal condition quality: lobby room decoration; facility quality, old and new, appearance, hygiene, odor problems, sound insulation problems, small room space utilization, etc.   |
| 2. External environment: surrounding noise problems; geographical location, traffic and parking, environmental safety; air quality; surrounding catering service; surrounding community environment, etc.  |
| 3. Staff service professionalism: polite communication skills, emotional intelligence; time of service response, professional quality and service attitude of reception staff, Mandarin and dialect, etc.  |
| 4. Policy and process factors: check-out policy, cancellation policy, reservation policy, cancellation policy; preferential policies; Preferential check-in procedures and time restrictions, check-out procedures and time restrictions; registration policies; payment methods and policies; different service quality standards, etc. |
| 5. Price: higher offline than online; higher in peak season than off-season; compensated price difference; cost performance mismatch; inflated price during activities, etc.   |

Based on the aspects involved in the occurrence and development of conflicts as shown in Table 1, keywords were extracted from 300 data points, and the frequency of occurrence of corresponding aspects of hotel customer conflicts was calculated. The proportions of these aspects in the total number of problems are presented in Table 2. After sorting the problems in descending order by percentage, it was found that the issue of dilapidated hotel facilities ranked first, followed by hygiene problems and the professionalism of hotel staff service attitudes, accounting for 23.59%, 17.29%, and 12.60% of the total negative feedback comments, respectively.

Table 2

*Key Word Extraction and Analysis of Negative Comments*

| Key words extraction                      | Name of the hotel and the number of problems involved |         |          | Total times | The problems percentage |
|---|---|---------|----------|-------------|-------------------------|
|   | 7 Days  | Hanting | Home Inn |             |                         |
| The decoration facilities are dilapidated | 58  | 42      | 46       | 146         | 23.59%                  |
| Sanitation problem                        | 38  | 37      | 32       | 107         | 17.29%                  |
| Service attitude and professionalism      | 22  | 28      | 28       | 78          | 12.60%                  |
| Internal and surrounding environment      | 28  | 22      | 20       | 70          | 11.31%                  |
| The room is too small                     | 16  | 19      | 16       | 51          | 8.24%                   |
| Rare delicacy                             | 22  | 11      | 7        | 40          | 6.46%                   |
| Noise problem                             | 13  | 14      | 11       | 38          | 6.14%                   |
| The price is high                         | 13  | 7       | 11       | 31          | 5.01%                   |
| Sound insulation is poor                  | 11  | 13      | 7        | 31          | 5.01%                   |
| The location is not good                  | 7   | 1       | 3        | 11          | 1.78%                   |
| Unsafe                                    | 4   | 2       | 1        | 7           | 1.13%                   |
| Check-out policy                          | 2   | 1       | 1        | 4           | 0.65%                   |
| Cancel the policy                         | 1   | 2       | 0        | 3           | 0.48%                   |
| Scheduled policy                          | 0   | 0       | 1        | 1           | 0.16%                   |
| Check-in discount                         | 0   | 0       | 1        | 1           | 0.16%                   |

Secondly, based on the aspects and scope involved in the occurrence and development of conflicts as shown

in Table 1, the issues mentioned in negative comments were categorized, and the total percentage of the aspects affecting the occurrence and development of conflicts among Quick Hotel customers was calculated, resulting in Table 3. Among them, the most prominent aspects of internal conditions in Quick Hotels, including dilapidated decoration facilities, sanitary problems, poor sound insulation, and small rooms, account for 60.58%. Following this are issues related to the external environment of the hotel, such as noise, unfavorable geographical location, safety concerns, parking, and dining, which account for 20.35%. Subsequently, the professionalism of hotel customer service staff accounts for 12.60%, followed by price issues at 5.01%. Lastly, process and policy-related matters, including various cancellation policies and check-in procedures, account for 1.45%.

Table 3

*Classification of Factors Affecting Customer Conflict in Budget Hotels*

| Key word extraction                  | The problems percentage | Total percentage | Hotel customer conflict factors            |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|--|
| Facility is dilapidated              | 23.59%                  | 60.58%           | Quality of the hotel's internal conditions |
| Sanitation problem                   | 17.29%                  |                  |  |
| Sound insulation is poor             | 5.01%                   |                  |  |
| The room is too small                | 8.24%                   |                  |  |
| Rare delicacy                        | 6.46%                   |                  |  |
| Internal and surrounding environment | 11.31%                  | 20.35%           | The external environment of the hotel      |
| Noise problem                        | 6.14%                   |                  |  |
| The location is not good             | 1.78%                   |                  |  |
| Unsafe                               | 1.13%                   |                  |  |
| Service attitude and professionalism | 12.60%                  | 12.60%           | Service professionalism                    |
| The price is high                    | 5.01%                   | 5.01%            | Price                                      |
| Check-out policy                     | 0.65%                   | 1.45%            | Policies and processes                     |
| Cancel the policy                    | 0.48%                   |                  |  |
| Scheduled policy                     | 0.16%                   |                  |  |
| Check-in discount                    | 0.16%                   |                  |  |

Based on the analysis of the above data, the main factors influencing conflicts among Quick Hotel customers can be summarized as the quality of internal hotel conditions, the external hotel environment, service professionalism, pricing, and policies and procedures.

Guests' dissatisfaction with the hotel's internal conditions and service quality mainly stems from differences in their interests and values. The quality of accommodation services directly impacts customer satisfaction, word-of-mouth reputation, overall reputation, competitive advantage, loyalty, and the hotel's operational performance. When the hotel fails to meet the expected professional standards, guests perceive a mismatch between the money they've spent and the value they've received, resulting in disparities in interests and values. If these disparities are not adequately addressed, they may escalate into conflicts. Guests may express their dissatisfaction through negative reviews, leading to non-confrontational conflicts, or in severe cases, intense confrontations.

In addition to interests and values, the impact of the external environment on the guest experience also includes informational disparities. The convenience of Quick Hotels often leads them to be situated in strategically convenient locations, typically close to public transportation hubs such as subway or bus stations, as well as major transportation centers like railway stations and airports, along with downtown areas, commercial

districts, and popular tourist spots. The surrounding amenities, including restaurants, shopping centers, medical facilities, and banks, cater to various guest needs, enhancing customer satisfaction and convenience. However, convenient transportation may also come with issues like noise, congestion, and clutter, and the variance between the actual experience and static representations in photos may lead to conflicts.

Service professionalism is influenced by various factors, including individual differences, communication styles, organizational structures, interdependence, cognitive and behavioral disparities, emotional states, and communication methods. Service represents the primary point of contact between the hotel and guests. Guest satisfaction with service directly impacts booking rates, word-of-mouth referrals, and brand perception. When hotel staff exhibit friendliness, enthusiasm, and professionalism, guests feel respected and valued, thereby increasing satisfaction. Conversely, poor service attitudes, inefficiency, or a lack of professional knowledge and skills can lead to guest dissatisfaction and potential conflicts. Additionally, guests and employees come from diverse social backgrounds, each with unique personalities and communication styles, which further contribute to conflict dynamics.

A large portion of guests choose to stay in budget hotels due to their attractive prices and cost-effectiveness. However, when they arrive and find that the actual prices differ from their expectations, or during peak seasons when hotels increase their rates significantly, the guest experience can be severely impacted. This discrepancy can lead to potential conflicts and a decline in guest satisfaction.

Policy and procedural issues often involve the initial impressions and immediate perceptions of guests, which are influenced by factors such as communication, information discrepancies, and individual differences. Budget hotels are expected to provide quick responses and standardized procedures. The typical clientele of budget hotels includes frequent business travelers, backpackers, young travelers, and small tour groups. When guests have had satisfactory experiences at one location, they tend to transfer those positive experiences to other hotels within the same chain. However, if the service experience at another location within the same chain differs—for example, in terms of cancellation policies, check-out procedures, payment methods, deposit requirements, or security measures—this can lead to disparities in guest experiences and potential conflicts. In cases where communication is ineffective and conflicts arise, latent antagonism may escalate into non-confrontational or even confrontational conflicts.

Non-target customer group factors should be the unique influencing factors of budget hotels. When economically affluent groups planning to travel originally intended to book high-end resort hotels, but due to late booking, there were no available rooms in high-end hotels, they opted for cheaper budget hotels downward compatible. However, customers considering value for money are more sensitive to price changes and rarely upgrade to book high-end hotels. Therefore, for those who have to book budget hotels due to peak travel hours, there will be a gap in the check-in experience. Customers forced to stay in company-designated brand chain budget hotels will find it extremely uncomfortable due to differences in service quality and various policy procedures, failing to meet their psychological expectations. For some individuals, such as those needing short-term accommodation due to home renovations, visits from relatives and friends, or temporary relocations, noise from the family or couples may become the hotel's secondary environment and alter the original setting. When changes occur, and there is a gap in expectations, adaptation issues arise, leading to potential opposition. Without a fixed target customer group, there is no fixed coping mode, resulting in the presence of potential conflicts, with non-target customer group factors being a major influencing factor.

### **Strategy for Managing Customer Conflicts in Budget Hotels**

There are two types of non-confrontational conflicts among hotel customers. One is when customers are unwilling to directly express their dissatisfaction and instead choose to vent their grievances through the hotel reservation platform after leaving the establishment. The other is when customers express their dissatisfaction to the hotel, and the hotel either avoids or compromises to prevent the conflict from escalating. While these situations may not lead to significant conflicts, they do reduce customer satisfaction and may have a long-term negative impact on the hotel's reputation and staff.

Customer dissatisfaction can damage the hotel's reputation, leading to customer loss and the potential loss of future customers. Additionally, it increases staff pressure and leads to a decline in service quality, creating a vicious cycle. If the hotel fails to properly handle customer dissatisfaction, it may escalate non-confrontational conflicts or even evolve into confrontational conflicts, causing greater harm to both parties. Therefore, it is essential not only to prevent, address, and resolve conflicts but also to consider the subsequent negative effects. Hence, the positive transformation of conflicts is also crucial.

Lewis Coser (1956) has pointed out that hostility and conflict differ, and that the release or transfer of hostility can help alleviate hostility, thereby reducing conflict. In other words, if viewed from the perspective of "allowing customers to overlook the various flaws of the hotel and instead focus on their own vested interests," when hotel customers engage in proactive activities to address factors that could potentially lead to dissatisfaction with the hotel, they inadvertently create a conflict safety valve. Proactively addressing factors that may influence conflict, prioritizing customer needs, and guiding positive feedback are also important strategies.

During check-in, there exists a close interdependence between customers and hotels. However, this dependence decreases after check-out, leading to non-confrontational conflicts between customers and hotels to avoid conflicts. Therefore, conflict management is not merely a temporary solution but also requires daily, regular management to achieve sustainable development in a virtuous cycle.

**Ensuring customer interests.** Starting from the "values" of customers, the enhancement and rectification of internal hotel conditions are the primary strategies for conflict management. Whether a "conflict" or "perfect customer" reputation arises depends on whether the customer's "interests" are compromised, whether there is "information asymmetry", whether it aligns with the customer's values, and whether the hotel and customer perceptions of the standard for budget hotels are consistent. When the essential service benefits that customers expect are assured, or when online reservation images accurately reflect reality without any discrepancies, or when the brand standards of budget hotels resonate with customers, the factors causing conflict dissipate, and the grounds for conflict vanish. Therefore, renovations and facilities must keep pace with the times, aligning with the evolving needs and preferences of customers.

**Coordination and enhancement of the hotel's external environment.** The hotel serves as a home for its guests while they are away. The experience they have during their stay is greatly influenced by the hotel's external environment. To meet guests' basic needs and avoid encroaching upon their interests, thereby generating pleasant surprises and positive emotions, the external environment must be carefully managed. Considering that budget hotels operate on tight margins, the feasibility of significant renovations to improve the natural environment and infrastructure of guest rooms depends on the specific assets and decisions of each establishment. However, there are opportunities to enhance the hotel environment without significant financial investment while also promoting environmental sustainability. One approach is to collaborate with environmental organizations to creatively

repurpose industrial waste, design cost-effective solutions for soundproofing and odor control, and mitigate noise pollution through partnerships with neighboring businesses. Alternatively, transparent communication policies and competitive pricing can reduce information asymmetry and improve value for guests.

Furthermore, it is crucial to standardize staff training in budget hotels. Variations in communication styles and behavior between staff and guests can lead to misunderstandings and negative experiences. Standardized training ensures that employees are proficient in reception, check-in, and check-out procedures, providing consistently high-quality service. It also ensures that employees are trained in the technical operation of self-service equipment and automated systems to enhance user experience. Safety training is equally important to protect both guests and staff from hazards such as fire, theft, and emergencies. Finally, employees should be equipped with the skills to promptly address customer needs and collaborate with other departments to resolve issues efficiently. Clear guidelines and training materials can help build customer trust and loyalty.

Policies and procedures have been optimized and standardized. Eliminating information asymmetry, all information is now transparent and openly available. Economy hotels need to ensure customers are well-informed about various policies and procedures in advance, including check-in procedures and advance time restrictions, activity pricing policies, cancellation and refund policies, delayed check-out procedures and time restrictions, registration policies, payment methods, and other aspects. The standardized configuration and policy procedures are the key selling points of economy hotel chains, closely linked to their reputation and sustainable development. Utilizing self-service machines for check-in and check-out can streamline operations, avoiding disruptions between day and night shifts and enhancing efficiency. Employees are required to adhere to uniform cleaning standards to ensure room consistency. Maintenance plans are established to promptly address equipment failures and scheduled room maintenance, delivering a superior customer experience. Enhancing policy transparency by offering online check-out options expedites processes. Meanwhile, flexibility in policies is crucial for economy hotels to accommodate special circumstances.

Conflict management is applicable to measures taken during the planning, design, or organizational stages aimed at reducing or avoiding potential conflicts. This type of conflict management involves identifying potential conflict points and taking steps to plan, design, or organize systems, projects, or processes to minimize conflict occurrence. Managing potential conflicts aims to prevent conflicts before they arise. It encompasses managing conflicts that have already emerged, including actions such as coordination, negotiation, mediation, or other methods to achieve conflict resolution.

Robbins' conflict process model divides conflict into five stages: potential opposition, cognitive intervention, conflict intention, conflict behavior, and conflict outcome. Additionally, Robbins identifies three categories of conflict causes: communication, structure, and personal variables. This implies that any aspect or combination of communication, structure, and personal variables can influence conflict development at different stages and may result in different conflict outcomes.

Hotel customer conflicts have a detrimental impact on the hotel, but effective conflict management can transform negative impacts into positive ones. Conflict management allows hotels to promptly identify existing issues, understand factors influencing conflicts, communicate with customers, relevant internal and external entities, and individuals, and address conflicts accordingly. This shift transforms negative impacts on the hotel into positive ones conducive to its development.

The following non-confrontational and confrontational conflict transformation management model for customers of budget hotel is proposed in this paper based on Robbins' conflict process model:



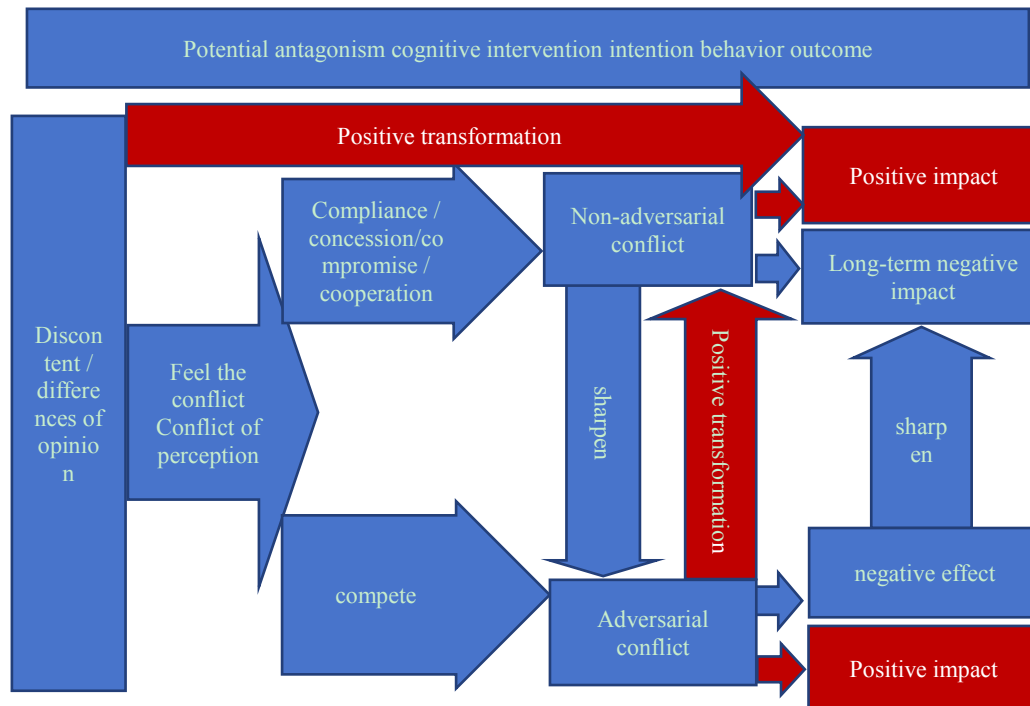


Figure 1. Transformation management model of non-confrontational conflict and confrontational conflict of budget hotels customers.

### Epilogue

The main issues involved in customer conflicts at budget hotels include internal facilities, the external environment, staff service expertise, prices, and hotel policies and procedures. The influencing factors causing these conflicts include the interests of both parties, information asymmetry, poor communication, organizational mechanisms and structures, interdependence among hotel customers, individual personality differences among customer employees, cognitive disparities, behavioral variations, emotions, communication styles, and the influence of non-target customer groups.

As the dependence of hotel customers is limited to the check-in period, most conflicts among budget hotel customers are non-confrontational, although confrontational conflicts can also occur. When facing hotel customer conflicts, it is essential to analyze and understand the influencing factors leading to conflict for different types of conflicts (non-confrontational and confrontational), different stages of conflict development (potential conflict, conflict occurrence, and intensification), and manage the conflicts. Conflict management should become a daily and standardized practice. Furthermore, special attention should be given to the positive role of conflict, transforming it from negative to positive. Through these measures, budget hotels can better handle conflicts, enhance customer satisfaction, and continuously improve service quality, thus establishing a virtuous cycle.

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