

When the First Choice Is Unattainable: A Study on the Value Reconstruction Process and Behavioral Intention of Functionally Substitutive Tourism among Generation Z

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Abstract: The global tourism industry is shifting from “destination accessibility” to “experiential substitutability.” Amid consumption moderation, the continuous upgrading of tourist demand has rendered functionally substitutive tourism a key solution to mitigate the supply–demand imbalance in tourism, with the “pingti” (affordable alternative) tourism market developing rapidly. Focusing on functionally substitutive tourism, this study constructs a value reconstruction model involving substitute satisfaction, value reconstruction, expected gap compensation, and behavioral intention, and proposes relevant research hypotheses. Empirical analysis was performed through questionnaire surveys, using SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 23.0 for data processing. The findings show that substitute satisfaction exerts a significant positive effect on value reconstruction; value reconstruction plays a mediating role between substitute satisfaction and behavioral intention; and expected gap compensation positively moderates the relationship between substitute satisfaction and value reconstruction. Finally, practical development suggestions are proposed based on the research results, along with discussions on the study’s limitations and future research prospects.

Keywords: Pingti Tourism (affordable alternative tourism); Substitute Satisfaction; Expected Gap Compensation; Value Reconstruction; Behavioral Intention.

1. Introduction

As tourism consumption becomes increasingly diversified, traditional mass tourism is constrained by accessibility, cost, time, and policy conditions. Functionally substitutive tourism has therefore become a practical option for Generation Z when preferred destinations or experiences are unattainable. According to the China Generation Z Tourism Consumption Trend Report, more than 60% of young tourists have chosen alternative tourism forms, such as urban micro-vacations and cultural immersion experiences, due to time, budget, or policy restrictions. The rise of county tourism and “pingti” tourism also reflects young consumers’ demand for affordable, emotionally meaningful, and socially shareable experiences.

However, many functionally substitutive tourism products remain homogeneous and lack experiential depth. They often imitate popular destinations without fully meeting Generation Z’s needs for meaning, uniqueness, emotional resonance, and self-expression. As a result, their emotional value and value reconstruction potential remain underdeveloped. This raises important questions: why does Generation Z choose substitutive tourism under resource constraints, how do such experiences generate emotional compensation and value reconstruction, and how does expected gap compensation affect this process?

Existing studies on alternative tourism have mainly discussed its distinction from mass tourism, behavioral characteristics, and economic value, while paying insufficient attention to the psychological mechanism of functionally substitutive tourism. Most research focuses on ecotourism, volunteer tourism, or reverse tourism, with limited consideration of Generation Z’s socio-cultural context, including social media influence and changing consumption

concepts. The roles of substitute satisfaction, value reconstruction, and expected gap compensation have therefore not been systematically tested.

Functionally substitutive tourism is not merely a cheaper replacement for conventional tourism. For Generation Z, it may involve reinterpreting limited resources, transforming regret into discovery, and converting alternative experiences into identity expression. Therefore, it should be examined as both a tourism consumption pattern and a psychological adjustment process. To address this gap, this study constructs a model in which substitute satisfaction, including functional, emotional, and symbolic dimensions, influences behavioral intention through value reconstruction, while expected gap compensation acts as a moderator. Using questionnaire data and empirical analysis, this study extends alternative tourism research from behavioral description to psychological value transformation and offers practical implications for designing substitute tourism products that better meet young tourists’ emotional and identity needs.

2. Theoretical Basis and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Substitute Satisfaction

Substitute satisfaction originates from psychoanalytic psychology. It refers to the subjective experience through which individuals transfer unfulfilled desires to substitute objects when a preferred goal is blocked, thereby reducing psychological discomfort and obtaining compensation [1–4]. Previous studies have extended this concept from art and media consumption to digital scenarios, such as beauty short videos and mobile games, where users obtain psychological compensation through symbolic or virtual experiences [5, 6].

In tourism, related discussions have appeared in studies of reverse tourism and pingti tourism, but specialized research on Generation Z's functionally substitutive tourism remains limited [7, 8].

In this study, substitute satisfaction is defined as Generation Z's multidimensional psychological experience when they choose functionally or emotionally similar tourism alternatives because their first-choice experience is unattainable. It includes functional satisfaction, generated by the landscape, service, and practical adaptation of the alternative destination; emotional satisfaction, generated by compensation for disappointment and regret; and symbolic satisfaction, generated by identity expression and self-confirmation. Together, these dimensions form the psychological basis for later value reconstruction and behavioral intention.

This multidimensional definition also distinguishes functionally substitutive tourism from simple destination substitution. A tourist may accept an alternative destination because it is affordable or accessible, but substitute satisfaction is formed only when the alternative experience provides practical usefulness, emotional relief, or symbolic meaning. This distinction is essential for explaining why some substitute experiences generate continued behavioral intention whereas others remain one-time compromises.

2.2. Expected Gap Compensation

Expected gap compensation is rooted in compensation psychology and refers to the psychological adjustment through which individuals respond to the gap between ideal goals and actual conditions [9]. Consumption research shows that when individuals face self-threat, disadvantage, or an ideal-actual discrepancy, they may use symbolic or hedonic consumption to repair self-worth and restore psychological balance [10-12]. In tourism, this concept is relevant because the unattainability of a preferred destination may produce regret, disappointment, or perceived loss.

This study focuses on the positive and approach-oriented aspect of expected gap compensation. In functionally substitutive tourism, Generation Z does not simply accept a lower-level alternative; instead, they may actively reinterpret the alternative as a meaningful way to compensate for the expected gap. This psychological tendency may strengthen the transformation from substitute satisfaction to value reconstruction.

Thus, expected gap compensation is treated not as a negative escape mechanism but as an active meaning-making process. When tourists perceive that a substitute experience can repair the gap between expectation and reality, the experience may become a source of self-adjustment rather than a reminder of failure.

2.3. Value Reconstruction

Value reconstruction refers to the process through which individuals re-evaluate and integrate their value systems when facing environmental changes or cognitive conflict. In consumption contexts, individuals may use specific objects or experiences to redefine self-worth and compensate for the gap between reality and ideal expectations [13]. Baudrillard's discussion of instrumental and symbolic value further indicates that consumption may satisfy practical needs while also reconstructing identity and meaning [14]. Related studies have examined value reshaping in digital knowledge production and rural revitalization, yet tourism research has

not fully explained how Generation Z reconstructs tourism value through substitute experiences [15, 16].

In this study, value reconstruction refers to the process by which Generation Z redefines the meaning of tourism through scene construction, social interaction, and cultural identification in functionally substitutive tourism. It includes instrumental reconstruction, which involves recognizing the practical value of substitute experiences, and symbolic reconstruction, which involves rebuilding self-identity and emotional meaning.

This construct is central to the present model because it explains how an initially constrained choice can be transformed into a meaningful tourism experience. Without value reconstruction, substitute satisfaction may remain temporary and situational. With value reconstruction, however, the tourist may form a new understanding of what counts as worthwhile travel, which then strengthens revisit and recommendation intention.

2.4. Behavioral Intention

Behavioral intention, proposed in the Theory of Planned Behavior, refers to an individual's readiness to perform a future behavior and is influenced by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control [17]. In tourism research, it is commonly operationalized as revisit intention and recommendation intention [18, 19]. Prior studies confirm that satisfaction, perceived value, emotional attachment, destination image, and positive experience can significantly affect tourists' behavioral intention [20-22].

This study defines Generation Z's behavioral intention toward functionally substitutive tourism as their willingness to revisit similar alternative destinations and recommend such tourism forms or destinations to others. This definition provides a clear outcome variable for testing the psychological mechanism from substitute satisfaction to value reconstruction and behavioral intention.

Revisit intention and recommendation intention are especially suitable indicators in this context. Revisit intention captures whether tourists are willing to repeat similar substitute choices, while recommendation intention reflects whether they are willing to publicly legitimize such experiences through interpersonal or online communication.

2.5. Research Hypotheses and Framework

Substitute satisfaction may directly promote behavioral intention. Functional satisfaction provides practical travel benefits, emotional satisfaction compensates for the disappointment of unattainable first-choice tourism, and symbolic satisfaction strengthens identity expression and belonging. Positive psychological experiences have been shown to support loyalty, revisit intention, and recommendation intention [20]. Therefore, this study proposes H1: substitute satisfaction has a significant positive impact on behavioral intention. H1a-H1c further propose that functional, emotional, and symbolic satisfaction each have significant positive impacts on behavioral intention.

Value reconstruction is expected to mediate the relationship between substitute satisfaction and behavioral intention. Substitute satisfaction is an external experiential response, but behavioral intention requires internal cognitive transformation. When tourists shift from passively accepting a substitute to actively recognizing its value, substitute experiences can become meaningful and behaviorally influential [18, 23]. Accordingly, H2 proposes that value

reconstruction mediates the relationship between substitute satisfaction and behavioral intention. H2a-H2c propose the same mediating effect for functional, emotional, and symbolic satisfaction respectively.

Expected gap compensation is expected to moderate the relationship between substitute satisfaction and value reconstruction. When the gap between the desired and actual tourism experience is stronger, tourists' compensatory needs may become more salient, increasing the likelihood that substitute satisfaction will be transformed into reconstructed value [23, 24]. Accordingly, H3 proposes that expected gap compensation moderates the relationship between substitute satisfaction and value reconstruction. H3a-H3c further propose this moderating effect for the three dimensions of substitute satisfaction.

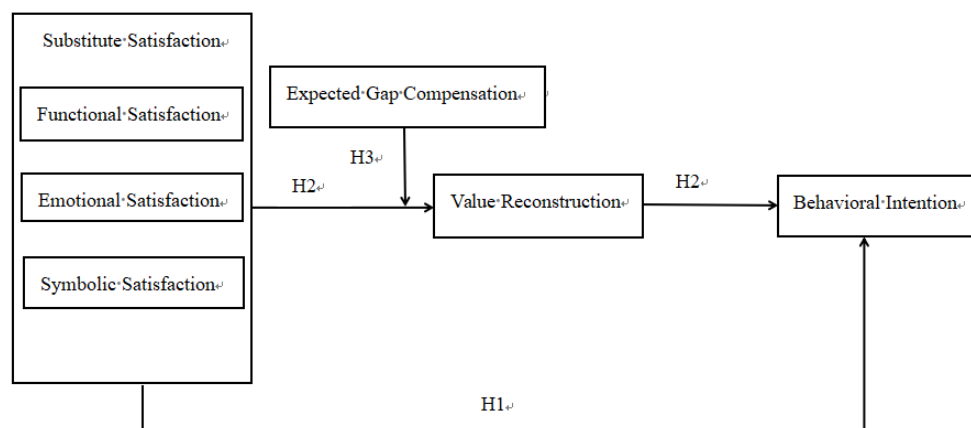


Figure 1. Research Model of Behavioral Intention Formation Mechanism

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Sample and Formal Survey

A questionnaire survey was conducted via the Questionnaire Star platform for distribution and data collection. To ensure sample randomness and quality, a dual recruitment method was adopted: one group included reliable contacts (friends, classmates) from the author's network, and the other consisted of online individuals who had posted content related to "pingti tourism" and had substitute tourism experiences, ensuring data fit the research context and scientific reliability.

Questionnaires were strictly screened to exclude invalid ones (excessively short completion time, high answer consistency, or missing information). A total of 134 questionnaires were distributed, with 123 valid ones confirmed after screening, achieving an effective response rate of 91.79%. This sample size met the basic requirements for subsequent structural equation modeling-based empirical testing.

Descriptive statistical analysis of the 123 valid samples showed a reasonable structure: gender ratio was nearly 1:1 (49.6% males, 50.4% females); all respondents were aged 18-30 years, consistent with Generation Z characteristics; 67.5% had a bachelor's degree or above, ensuring sample quality; 69.9% were students; 69.1% had a monthly income/allowance of 2001-10000 RMB; and 51.2% had a balanced travel budget, aligning with the target population's consumption characteristics.

Based on these hypotheses, this study constructs a model with substitute satisfaction as the antecedent, value reconstruction as the mediator, expected gap compensation as the moderator, and behavioral intention as the outcome. The model clarifies both the direct path from substitute satisfaction to behavioral intention and the conditional indirect mechanism through value reconstruction.

The framework therefore integrates three levels of explanation: the experiential level represented by substitute satisfaction, the cognitive-value level represented by value reconstruction, and the conditional psychological level represented by expected gap compensation. This structure allows the study to test not only whether substitute tourism is satisfying, but also how and under what conditions satisfaction becomes behavioral intention.

3.2. Questionnaire Design and Variable Measurement

To ensure measurement reliability and validity, this study adapted mature scales validated by domestic and international scholars to the context of Generation Z's functionally substitutive tourism. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: 24 items measuring four latent variables—substitute satisfaction, expected gap compensation, value reconstruction, and behavioral intention—and demographic items covering gender, age, education level, occupation, monthly income, and travel budget.

All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, with each variable measured by at least five items. Substitute satisfaction was divided into functional, emotional, and symbolic dimensions, respectively measuring destination/service adaptation, emotional compensation, and self-identity reinforcement. Expected gap compensation measured approach-oriented psychological compensation, including relief from disappointment and regret. Value reconstruction covered instrumental and symbolic dimensions, reflecting destination cognition, updated travel perspectives, and identity reconstruction. Behavioral intention measured revisit and recommendation intentions toward similar alternative destinations or tourism forms.

4. Empirical Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 23.0, including descriptive statistics, reliability and validity tests, correlation analysis, regression analysis, mediation testing, and moderation testing.

4.1. Reliability and Validity

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The results showed good internal consistency for all scales: substitute satisfaction (0.858), expected gap compensation (0.942), value reconstruction (0.944), and behavioral intention (0.822). All coefficients exceeded 0.8, indicating acceptable measurement stability. Item-deletion tests also showed that removing any item would not substantially improve reliability.

Validity was tested through exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. For the substitute satisfaction scale, the KMO value was 0.803 and Bartlett's test was significant ($\chi^2 = 1878.819$, $p < 0.001$), indicating suitability

for factor analysis. Three factors were extracted, corresponding to functional, emotional, and symbolic satisfaction, with a cumulative variance explanation rate of 81.987%. All factor loadings exceeded 0.5. Confirmatory factor analysis further showed good model fit: $\chi^2/df = 1.762$, GFI = 0.960, AGFI = 0.925, RMSEA = 0.057, IFI = 0.985, NFI = 0.966, TLI = 0.977, and CFI = 0.985. CR values exceeded 0.8, AVE values exceeded 0.6, and the square roots of AVE were higher than inter-construct correlations, confirming convergent and discriminant validity.

These results indicate that the measurement model was acceptable for subsequent correlation, mediation, and moderation analyses.

Table 1. Reliability and Validity Test Results

Variable/Dimension	Number of Items	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE	$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$	Pearson Correlation Coefficients (with Corresponding Variables)
Substitute Satisfaction	9	0.858	-	-	-	0.677**
Functional Satisfaction	3	0.82	0.88	0.711	0.843	0.652**
Emotional Satisfaction	3	0.81	0.87	0.701	0.837	0.613**
Symbolic Satisfaction	3	0.79	0.85	0.659	0.812	-
Expected Gap Compensation	5	0.942	0.945	0.798	0.893	0.586**
Value Reconstruction	5	0.944	0.946	0.802	0.895	0.575**
Behavioral Intention	5	0.822	0.825	0.621	0.788	-

Note: $p < 0.01$; Pearson correlation analysis, $n=123$. The correlation coefficients in each row are corresponding to: Substitute Satisfaction - Value Reconstruction, Functional Satisfaction Emotional Satisfaction/Symbolic Satisfaction, Emotional Satisfaction Symbolic Satisfaction, Expected Gap Compensation - Value Reconstruction, Value Reconstruction - Behavioral Intention.

Note: ** $p < 0.01$; Cronbach's α = Cronbach's Alpha coefficient; CR =Composite Reliability;

AVE = Average Variance Extracted; $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ = Square root of AVE.

4.2. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine preliminary relationships among substitute satisfaction, expected gap compensation, value reconstruction, and behavioral intention.

Results indicated that all three dimensions of substitute satisfaction had significant positive correlations with value reconstruction (correlation coefficients: functional=0.621**, emotional = 0.653**, symbolic = 0.687**). Value reconstruction was significantly positively correlated with behavioral intention ($r = 0.575^{**}$), and expected gap compensation had a significant positive correlation with value reconstruction ($r = 0.586^{**}$). Additionally, expected gap compensation showed a positive correlation with substitute satisfaction, laying the foundation for subsequent moderation effect testing (all correlation coefficients were significant at $p < 0.01$). Specific inter-variable correlation coefficients are presented in Table 1 above (Reliability and Validity Test Results Summary Table).

4.3. Hypothesis Testing

This study used multiple regression, hierarchical regression, PROCESS regression, and Bootstrapping to test the direct effect of substitute satisfaction on behavioral intention, the mediating effect of value reconstruction, and the moderating effect of expected gap compensation. All analyses were

conducted in SPSS 26.0 at a significance level of 0.05.

Multiple regression was conducted to examine the effects of functional, emotional, and symbolic satisfaction on behavioral intention. VIF was used to test multicollinearity, with values below 5 indicating no serious multicollinearity. The results showed that the model was significant and well fitted ($R = 0.631$, $R^2 = 0.398$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.382$, $F = 25.552$, $p < 0.001$). Functional satisfaction ($\beta = 0.138$, $p = 0.032$), emotional satisfaction ($\beta = 0.140$, $p = 0.013$), and symbolic satisfaction ($\beta = 0.159$, $p = 0.006$) all had significant positive effects on behavioral intention. Tolerance values (0.540, 0.688, 0.704) and VIF values (1.851, 1.453, 1.421) indicated no multicollinearity. Therefore, H1, H1a, H1b, and H1c were supported. Specific regression results are shown in the table below.

4.4. Mediation and Moderation Tests

The mediating effect of value reconstruction was tested using PROCESS Model 4 and bootstrapping with 5000 resamples. Substitute satisfaction had a significant positive total effect on behavioral intention ($\beta = 0.575$, $p < 0.001$) and a significant positive effect on value reconstruction ($\beta = 0.677$, $p < 0.001$). After value reconstruction was added to the model, both substitute satisfaction ($\beta = 0.329$, $p < 0.001$) and value reconstruction ($\beta = 0.364$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predicted behavioral intention, indicating partial mediation. The indirect effect was 0.246, and the 95% confidence interval [0.116, 0.374] did not include zero. Dimension-level tests also supported the mediating effects for functional, emotional, and symbolic satisfaction. Therefore, H2 and H2a-H2c were supported.

The moderating effect of expected gap compensation was tested using PROCESS Model 1 and hierarchical regression. Control variables were entered first, followed by main effects and the interaction term. The interaction between substitute satisfaction and expected gap compensation had a significant positive effect on value reconstruction ($\beta = 0.060$, $t = 2.65$, $p = 0.042$). The model R^2 increased to 0.048, with $\Delta R^2 = 0.017$,

confirming the moderating role of expected gap compensation. Dimension-level tests showed that expected gap compensation also positively moderated the relationships

between each satisfaction dimension and value reconstruction. Thus, H3 and H3a-H3c were supported.

Table 2. Summary of Regression Analysis

Model Type	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	β	p	VIF	R ² /Adjusted R ²
Multiple Regression	Behavioral Intention	Functional Satisfaction	0.138*	0.032	1.851	0.398/0.382
		Emotional Satisfaction	0.140*	0.013	1.453	0.398/0.382
		Symbolic Satisfaction	0.159**	0.006	1.421	0.398/0.382
Hierarchical Regression	Value Reconstruction	Control Variables	—	0.048	—	0.023
		Main Effects	—	0.076	—	0.031
		Interaction Term (Substitute Satisfaction × Expected Gap Compensation)	0.060*	0.042	—	0.048; $\Delta R^2=0.017$

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, ns = not significant; β = Standardized Regression Coefficient; VIF = Variance Inflation Factor; $\Delta R^2 = R^2$ change.

4.5. Summary of Hypothesis Test Results

Summarizing the above hypothesis testing process, all 12 research hypotheses in this study were supported. The testing method, test result, and key supporting data for each hypothesis are summarized in the table below, clearly presenting the verification status of all hypotheses and providing solid empirical support for subsequent research conclusions and implications.

5. Research Implications, Limitations, and Prospects

5.1. Research Implications

Based on the findings, practical implications are proposed from the perspectives of tourism destinations, enterprises, and practitioners.

5.1.1. Deepen the Development of Emotionally Compensatory Tourism Products

Tourism destinations should develop emotionally compensatory products targeting Generation Z's "unattainable first-choice" psychology. Functional compensation can be

provided through cost-effective local in-depth experiences; emotional compensation through healing and social micro-vacation products; and symbolic compensation through niche check-in spots and personalized expression spaces. Tourist feedback mechanisms can further optimize compensatory experiences.

5.1.2. Construct a Value Reconstruction Guidance System

Tourism enterprises should strengthen value guidance through storytelling interpretation and immersive design, helping tourists shift from "regret" to "discovery." Value reconstruction sessions, such as local culture workshops or travel meaning-sharing activities, can be integrated into itineraries.

5.1.3. Innovate Digital Emotional Connection Channels

Tourism practitioners should leverage technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and the metaverse to develop "digital twin" tourism experiences. A hybrid model of online virtual tours and offline on-site visits can provide transitional compensation for Generation Z tourists facing objective constraints. Additionally, establish traveler community platforms to encourage users to share substitute tourism value discovery stories, fostering an emotionally resonant communication ecosystem.

Table 3. Hypothesis Test Results

Hypothesis No.	Hypothesis Content	Test Method	Test Result	Supporting Data
H1	Substitute satisfaction has a significant positive impact on behavioral intention.	Multiple Regression	Supported	$R^2=0.398$, $F=25.552$, $p<0.001$
H1a	Functional satisfaction has a significant positive impact on behavioral intention.	Multiple Regression	Supported	$\beta=0.138$, $p=0.032<0.05$
H1b	Emotional satisfaction has a significant positive impact on behavioral intention.	Multiple Regression	Supported	$\beta=0.140$, $p=0.013<0.05$
H1c	Symbolic satisfaction has a significant positive impact on behavioral intention.	Multiple Regression	Supported	$\beta=0.159$, $p=0.006<0.01$
H2	Value reconstruction plays a mediating role between substitute satisfaction and behavioral intention.	Process Regression, Bootstarp	Supported	Indirect effect=0.246, 95% CI [0.116, 0.374]
H2a	Value reconstruction plays a mediating role between functional satisfaction and behavioral intention.	Process Regression, Bootstarp	Supported	Indirect effect significant, 95% CI does not contain 0
H2b	Value reconstruction plays a mediating role between emotional satisfaction and behavioral intention.	Process Regression, Bootstarp	Supported	Indirect effect significant, 95% CI does not contain 0
H2c	Value reconstruction plays a mediating role between symbolic satisfaction and behavioral intention.	Process Regression, Bootstarp	Supported	Indirect effect significant, 95% CI does not contain 0
H3	Expected gap compensation plays a moderating role between substitute satisfaction and value reconstruction.	Hierarchical Regression	Supported	Interaction term $\beta=0.060$, $t=2.65$, $p=0.042<0.05$
H3a	Expected gap compensation plays a moderating role between functional satisfaction and value reconstruction.	Hierarchical Regression	Supported	Interaction effect significant, $p<0.05$
H3b	Expected gap compensation plays a moderating role between emotional satisfaction and value reconstruction.	Hierarchical Regression	Supported	Interaction effect significant, $p<0.05$
H3c	Expected gap compensation plays a moderating role between symbolic satisfaction and value reconstruction.	Hierarchical Regression	Supported	Interaction effect significant, $p<0.05$

5.2. Limitations and Prospects

Despite its theoretical and practical significance, this study still has several limitations. First, the empirical analysis mainly relied on questionnaire data and adapted mature scales to the context of substitute tourism, which may involve a certain degree of subjectivity. The sample was also constrained by the author's social network, with a relatively high proportion of university students. Second, Generation Z's behavioral intention and value formation toward substitute destinations are influenced by multiple internal and external factors, while this study focused mainly on the psychological path from emotional satisfaction to value reconstruction and did not fully consider objective destination factors such as service quality and price. Future research could expand the sample scope, incorporate more influencing factors, and examine substitute tourism satisfaction and revisit intention from broader perspectives to construct a more detailed and scientific research framework.

6. Conclusion

Set against the context of substitute destination tourism, this study examined how substitute satisfaction influences behavioral intention, with value reconstruction as the mediator and expected gap compensation as the moderator. The results show that functional, emotional, and symbolic satisfaction all significantly promote value reconstruction, with symbolic satisfaction exerting the strongest effect. Value reconstruction further has a positive effect on behavioral intention and mediates the relationship between substitute satisfaction and behavioral intention, indicating that tourists' willingness to revisit and recommend substitute destinations depends not only on satisfaction itself but also on their reinterpretation of the value of substitute experiences. In

addition, expected gap compensation positively moderates the relationship between substitute satisfaction and value reconstruction, suggesting that stronger compensatory needs enhance the transformation of substitute satisfaction into reconstructed value.

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