



## Case study

## Communicating paradox: Uncertainty and the northern lights

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- *Aurora borealis* is a temporally/spatially discontinuous phenomenon that creates risk for the provision of tourism products.
- Tourism providers mitigate risk through diversifying activities and by using rhetorical strategies in promotional material.
- Rhetoric are: 'best' location; mobility; 'expert' guide; 'patient' tourist; serendipity; weather; and science.
- Narratives of the 'hunt' or 'chase' are incorporated to reconstruct uncertainty in a positive way.

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## ABSTRACT

While many characteristics of tourism products are well known, relatively little work has explored elements of uncertainty and risk. Little is known about how tourism operators communicate aspects of uncertainty. This qualitative study uses content analysis to explore the language used in promotional material of tour operators and destination management organisations to communicate the unpredictable nature of northern lights. The study involves two Norwegian destinations (2004–2014). Three rhetorical strategies are identified: first, the rhetoric of technology, enhanced mobility, and adding additional activities; secondly, through 'hiding' or obscuring the uncertainty; and thirdly, through employing culturally and geographically appropriate metaphors (i.e. 'hunt') to embrace the element of uncertainty. This study advances our understanding of how tourism operators rhetorically address temporally and/or spatially uncertain attractions by demonstrating how the operators negotiate and minimise uncertainty through the narrative of 'the hunt'. This rhetoric implies that uncertainty can enhance value in a touristic experience.

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism in the Arctic has been increasingly associated with the Aurora borealis or Northern Lights (NL) which are a major motivator for visiting destinations in the north in the winter (Edensor, 2010; Heimtun & Viken, 2016). But to date little research has been conducted on NL as a tourism product (Bertella, 2013; Edensor, 2010), despite the fact that gazing at northern/southern lights is an important component of what Weaver describes as 'celestial tourism' - 'the observation and appreciation of naturally occurring celestial phenomena' (2011, p. 39).

While NL has been a boon in terms of helping to address seasonality issues in northern regions the last decade (Heimtun, 2015),

to the extent that the industry now uses the label northern lights tourism (NLT), the display of NL is difficult to forecast locally as they depend upon the solar wind (University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2015), clear sky and local climate. Tourists may therefore have to visit a region for a number of nights until they get an opportunity to see the lights. That sightings of this celestial phenomenon cannot be controlled by the tourism industry constitutes a major challenge to the marketing and delivery of NLT, and there are implications of this risk or uncertainty for a number of stakeholders in NLT, including the tourist, the tourism provider, and the indirect beneficiaries of tourism expenditure within northern regions.

In a similar way to some other tourism attractions, (e.g. wildlife tourism), NLT relies upon a naturally occurring phenomenon that is temporally and spatially discontinuous. But even though sightings of the lights, other celestial phenomena, and wildlife such as whales, penguins, and so on can be rare, tour operators still offer these forms of tourism and tourists continue to buy such products.

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Although some of the tourists' excitement lies in the anticipation of the possibility of seeing a natural phenomenon (Curtin, 2010), the possibility of non-sightings adds to the challenge of selling such 'uncertain' tourism products and experiences – defined as those where the aspect of supply cannot be guaranteed, or where there is a low possibility of the tourist actually experiencing the 'promised' phenomenon.

Such tourism operators need to deal with this uncertainty in both the promotional (pre-visit) and operational (visit) phases of the tourist experience. In this paper we focus on the former by examining how destination management organisations' (DMOs) and tour operators in Northern Norway communicate the uncertainty of their product in sales brochures through the language of marketing. We also consider how such messages may have changed over a period which has seen considerable growth in the market and in the number and diversity of NLT products. This knowledge will contribute to our understanding not only of celestial tourism, but more broadly about what rhetorical strategies the tourism industry uses to manage uncertainty in the supply of 'temporally and spatially uncertain tourism products'. We continue by examining relevant literature and methods used in the study, before exploring and discussing the seven rhetorical strategies employed by the tour operators and DMOs.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Uncertainty in supply of tourism products/experiences

Here we explore the marketing and delivery of NLT through a broad framework of risk. Our understanding of risk in tourism has been considerably advanced by the recent contribution of Williams and Balaz (2015) who make a number of points relevant to NLT and similar temporally/spatially risky tourism products. First, risk and uncertainty are inherent to tourism, and can provide lenses for deepening our understanding. The authors highlight the difference between risk and uncertainty, citing the work of Knight (1921) who associated risk with 'known uncertainties', and uncertainty with 'unknown uncertainties'. To simplify, risk may be quantifiable, whereas uncertainty is not. A central premise concerning risk "is that this begins where knowledge ends" (Williams & Balaz, 2015, p. 272). As Mauboussin (2007) writes, "Risk has an unknown outcome, but we know what the underlying outcome distribution looks like. Uncertainty also implies an unknown outcome, but we don't know what the underlying distribution looks like". While the manifestation of the Aurora may be unpredictable on a night-to-night basis, we know the underlying outcome distribution. This for the purposes of this paper, we focus upon the element of risk, which is clearly more applicable to the phenomenon under investigation.

What is important, however, is the "lack of control that most tourism firms exercise over the tourist experience, which is shaped by a range of other actors and external events" (Williams & Balaz, 2015, p. 275). However, strategies may be employed for *managing* risk. At the firm level, these include: acquiring and utilising knowledge; trust; diversification; and insurance/hedging. Similarly, addressing supply chain risk is an important management task (e.g. Olson & Dash Wu, 2010).

Risk also manifests at different scales, from the individual to group and destination scales (Williams & Balaz, 2015). Importantly, this opens the discussion to consideration of how the perceptions of risk may differ between the tourist and the tourism provider. Central to these differences may be the role of knowledge, which may determine how the degree of risk (financial, performance or time) is perceived (Laroche, McDougall, Bergeron, & Yang, 2004; Quintal, Lee, & Soutar, 2010). This will influence

tourists' purchase decisions and firms' marketing and delivery approaches.

Our point of departure, however, is that risk of failure can be 'good', which is somewhat counter-intuitive. Typically, risk has been cast in a negative light - notwithstanding the growth of adventure and risk-seeking tourists (e.g. Elsrud, 2001; Laviolette, 2010). This latter category of tourism, however, relates more to the provision of sensations to tourists in ostensibly risky, but really risk-managed environments. Williams and Balaz (2015) in their review of tourism risk and uncertainty research provide little room for interpretation of risk in a more positive light, for example around monetary/financial and performance risk (Solomon, 1999), the areas of risk which are more relevant to NLT.

However, others have identified a link between risk and authenticity of the tourism product - and by extension, with visitor satisfaction. Wang (1999) for example identifies the need for individuals to turn to tourism and the risk or uncertainty that this entails in order to counter the over-predictability of everyday life, and how this is an essential component of desired 'intra-personal authenticity' in tourism. Similarly, Hinch and Higham (2001) write about how the uncertainty of sporting outcomes is essential to the authenticity (and thus attractiveness and success) of sport tourism.

To gain a better understanding of the importance of risk in the tourism experience we can draw upon the experiences associated with other forms of temporally/spatially risky tourism products, in particular, wildlife tourism. Sighting elusive wildlife is unpredictable due to the vagaries of animal behaviour and other ecosystem interactions. So how important is this for the tourist? Some wildlife viewers accept that finding animals is unpredictable "and value the experience even when they don't get to observe the animal, while appreciating actual sightings all the more for their rarity" (Knight, 2009, p. 168). Evidence (e.g. from whale watching (Orams, 2000; Valentine, Birtles, Curmook, Arnold, & Dunstan, 2004)) suggests that while sighting the target species is important, visitor satisfaction is not solely linked with this, and that other elements (of the 'hunt') contribute to visitor satisfaction in the absence of a sighting. Despite this, for many wildlife tourists there is an expectation of a sighting. And in a similar way to our NLT operators, as we discuss below, many commercial operators market their tours "with a promise of close-up views" (Knight, 2009, p. 168). While such promises may be seen by operators as a means of managing their risk (in this case financial risk) it is unlikely that such a strategy will be sustainable, as inevitably the gap between visitor expectations and experience will lead to discontent and likely negative word of mouth (and social media) messages about these operators.

The notion that risk can enhance customer value (outside of specific niche adventure tourism activities) has not really been explored. Boksberger and Craig Smith (2006), for example, in their 'risk-adjusted model' of customer value and risk, portray risk (objective or subjective) as something to be minimised. They suggest that operators address perceived risk on the part of potential customers, through managing their marketing communications. So, indeed, it is little surprise that providers of temporally risky tourism products such as wildlife tourism, or NLT, through such communications may promise more than they can deliver.

In summary, this review portrays little positive in terms of risk for the tourist or the tourism provider, despite inklings that it may be related to authenticity of experience. Strategies for managing risk in the supply of temporally/spatially unpredictable tourism products are unclear. Our study explores strategies that two destinations and their tourism operators have adopted, focusing on, as Boksberger and Craig Smith (2006) suggest, marketing communications.

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