

The Diffusion of a Contested Metric: Net Promoter Score as a Managerial Innovation

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Abstract

This paper examines the diffusion of Net Promoter Score as a managerial innovation. Drawing on Rogers’s diffusion of innovations theory, organizational diffusion research, institutional theory, and management-fashion scholarship, it argues that NPS spread rapidly not because its evidentiary foundations were uniquely strong, but because it was simple, visible, portable, and supported by a powerful technology cluster including consulting services, benchmarking systems, dashboards, training, books, and professional networks. The paper traces NPS from its origins in Reichheld’s “one number” formulation through its adoption across private firms, healthcare, higher education, public administration, and employee-experience measurement. It also evaluates scholarly critiques of NPS validity, response bias, scoring logic, and incentive effects. The paper contributes to diffusion and management-fashion scholarship by showing how a contested managerial metric can become institutionally durable when it is simple, observable, benchmarkable, and supported by a reinforcing technology cluster.

Keywords: Net Promoter Score; diffusion of innovations; management fashion; customer experience; organizational change; performance metrics; employee Net Promoter Score

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The Diffusion of a Contested Metric: Net Promoter Score as a Managerial Innovation

In a world of “seemingly ubiquitous customer surveys” (Donnelly et al., 2025), one stands above the rest: the Net Promoter Score, or NPS. Over the past two decades, NPS has rapidly grown from a nascent concept to a managerial best practice, spreading across industries and sectors ranging from higher education to healthcare. Bain & Company (n.d.), the management consulting firm closely associated with the diffusion of NPS, claims that thousands of companies, including two-thirds of the Fortune 1000, calculate the score, emphasizing how widely the metric has spread in practice. Unlike more established approaches to end-user satisfaction, which commonly rely on lengthy surveys or focus groups, NPS is built around a single question: how likely respondents are to recommend a company, service, or institution to others on a 0-to-10 scale (Reichheld, 2003).

This popularity, however, sits uneasily alongside sustained criticism. Scholars in marketing, healthcare, and statistics have questioned NPS’s validity, reliability, and scoring logic, while others have raised concerns about its practical usefulness, incentive effects, and susceptibility to gaming (Kristensen & Eskildsen, 2014; Krol et al., 2015; Fisher & Kordupleski, 2019; Dawes, 2023; Nunan, 2024). Simultaneously, the widespread use of recommendation surveys across email, text messaging, websites, and kiosks has fueled wider concerns about end-user survey fatigue and the quality of feedback these systems generate (Donnelly et al., 2025). NPS, therefore, presents a diffusion puzzle: why did a metric with contested evidentiary foundations become so institutionally durable?

This paper examines how NPS became widely adopted as a managerial innovation despite sustained criticism of its evidentiary foundations and organizational consequences. Rather than treating NPS primarily as a question of measurement validity, the paper asks: What

factors and mechanisms explain the broad diffusion of NPS despite persistent doubts about its evidentiary foundations and organizational consequences? Using diffusion theory as its principal analytical framework, and supplementing it with organizational diffusion research, institutional theory, and management-fashion scholarship, the paper argues that NPS became institutionally durable because it was simple, visible, portable, and adaptable, and because it moved through consulting, software, benchmarking, and accountability systems that made it easy to adopt across sectors. The paper contributes to diffusion and management-fashion scholarship by showing how a contested managerial metric can diffuse as both a measurement tool and a legitimacy device, and to the customer-experience measurement literature by explaining why weak or contested validity does not necessarily prevent widespread organizational adoption.

This paper uses a conceptual and narrative, literature-based approach to synthesize research on NPS, diffusion of innovations, organizational adoption, institutional theory, management fashion, and customer experience measurement. It combines scholarly sources with selected practitioner and corporate materials that illustrate how NPS has been promoted, benchmarked, and operationalized across sectors. The goal is not to empirically test NPS but to explain why the metric became organizationally attractive and how simplified indicators can become embedded in accountability systems, redirecting managerial attention and reshaping employee behavior and definitions of organizational success.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on four complementary bodies of theory: Rogers's diffusion of innovations theory, organizational extensions of diffusion theory, institutional theory, and management-fashion scholarship. Rogers (1962/2003) provides the core vocabulary for explaining how innovation attributes such as relative advantage, compatibility, complexity,

trialability, and observability shape adoption. Lundblad's (2003) organizational critique extends this framework by emphasizing leadership, internal decision structures, and "innovation champions." Institutional theory explains why organizations adopt practices that signal legitimacy under conditions of uncertainty (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), while management-fashion scholarship stresses the role of consultants, gurus, business media, and professional communities in circulating managerial ideas (Abrahamson, 1996; Clark, 2004).

Taken together, these perspectives shift the analysis away from treating NPS as a purely technical metric and toward understanding it as a socially diffused managerial innovation. This combined framework enables analysis of NPS not only as a measure of loyalty but also as a practice that became authoritative through diffusion, packaging, and institutional reinforcement.

Origin and Design of NPS

The origin of NPS is generally traced to management consultant Frederick Reichheld's (2003) Harvard Business Review article, "The One Number You Need to Grow." In that article, Reichheld argued that firms relied too heavily on cumbersome customer-satisfaction systems and that a single recommendation question could serve as a more useful indicator of loyalty and growth. In the standard formulation, respondents who select 9 or 10 are classified as Promoters, those who select 7 or 8 as Passives, and those who select 0 through 6 as Detractors. NPS is then calculated by subtracting the percentage of Detractors from the percentage of Promoters (Passives are not included in the subtraction directly, although they remain part of the total response denominator), with aggregate scores reported on a scale of -100 to +100. This design gave the metric an important managerial advantage: it translated complex survey data into a score that executives could quickly interpret, compare across units, and communicate to employees and investors.

This design was central to NPS's later diffusion. Before NPS, customer loyalty could appear diffuse and difficult to operationalize: a composite of attitudes, emotions, experiences, repeat behavior, brand attachment, and interpersonal recommendation. By converting a range of customer responses into three categories and then compressing them into a single score, NPS translated this amorphous concept into a concrete managerial object. Loyalty became measurable, comparable, and actionable through recognized artifacts such as dashboards, benchmarks, executive reviews, and financial accountability. In diffusion terms, this reduced perceived complexity and increased observability for managerial audiences (Reichheld, 2003; Rogers, 1962/2003). However, the same simplification that attracted managers also later raised concerns about information loss, arbitrary thresholds, response-category collapse, and the exclusion of "Passive" respondents from the final score (Kristensen & Eskildsen, 2014; Fisher & Kordupleski, 2019; Dawes, 2023). NPS's diffusion, then, depended less on the strength of its measurement claims than on its ability to make customer loyalty visible, consequential, and administratively useful.

Mechanisms of Diffusion

Innovation Attributes

Rogers (1962/2003) argues that adoption is largely shaped by how potential adopters perceive five attributes of an innovation: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. NPS performed favorably on several of these dimensions: it appeared to offer relative advantage over more cumbersome loyalty and satisfaction systems (e.g., Baehre, 2024); was compatible with an increasingly data-driven managerial culture in which customer metrics were becoming more central to decision-making and accountability (e.g., Szukits & Móricz, 2024); reduced perceived complexity by translating customer sentiment

into a single, easily understood number; and was highly trialable because organizations could pilot the concept without major technological investment.

Because innovations tend to diffuse more rapidly when their outcomes are observable to others (Rogers, 1962/2003, p. 258), observability likely played a key role in accelerating the dissemination of the NPS. In contrast to more complex systems that generate multiple indices and extensive reports (e.g., customer lifetime value analysis), NPS produces a single, highly interpretable score that can be readily displayed on dashboards, monitored over time, benchmarked against competitors, and communicated effectively in boardrooms, annual reports, and internal performance evaluations. Its transparency also made it easy to translate into targets, dashboards, bonuses, and performance narratives, giving NPS a prominence within organizations that more complex customer-experience measures often struggle to achieve (Bain & Company, n.d.; Reichheld, 2003).

In that sense, NPS was not just simple; it was conspicuous. Its observability also reached beyond the organizational level. Public benchmarking services from Bain, Qualtrics, and Forrester encouraged companies to compare their scores with industry averages and rival brands (Bain & Company, n.d.; Jacques, 2026; Qualtrics XM Institute, n.d.). Some firms went further and used NPS performance in investor-facing materials as evidence of customer-centric leadership: WaFd's 2025 investor presentation described its Net Promoter Score as "approaching world class" (p. 8) and benchmarked it against peer banking scores, while Gen Digital, makers of Norton Antivirus and other software, listed doubling its Net Promoter Score to "world-class, greater than 70" as one of its long-term goals in its 2023 annual report (p. 5). Under those conditions, managers who failed to adopt NPS risked appearing out of step with prevailing norms of customer-oriented management, especially as competitors circulated surveys, publicly

tracked scores, and framed improvement as a visible leadership achievement, thereby amplifying normative pressure (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

NPS's compatibility with prevailing managerial thinking was not only a matter of broad familiarity but of elite conceptual readiness. Approximately a decade before NPS circulated widely in managerial practice, Heskett et al. (1994/2008) introduced the "service-profit chain," linking employee satisfaction, service quality, customer loyalty, and profitability, and demonstrating that even modest gains in customer loyalty could yield significant profit increases. That framework helped establish the logic that loyalty could and should be managed as a driver of financial performance. From a diffusion perspective, NPS likely became attractive to consultants, executives, and other fashion setters because it distilled this more complex framework into a simpler, more marketable form. Whereas the service-profit chain required organizations to track multiple constructs and relationships, NPS compressed the loyalty-performance relationship into a single, easily computed metric. In that sense, NPS's advantage was not that it introduced a new theory of customer loyalty, but that it repackaged an existing one into a form that was easier to communicate, benchmark, sell, and operationalize.

Institutional Channels and the NPS Technology Cluster

The diffusion of NPS also depended on institutional channels that converted a simple metric into a portable managerial system. Although Reichheld articulated the core idea, Bain & Company helped package NPS as a portable managerial system and circulate it through consulting relationships, client networks, benchmarking forums, and implementation infrastructure. Bain's own materials portray this process as deliberate, describing client engagements, forums, and broader support systems as mechanisms for scaling the concept across firms (Bain & Company, n.d.; Reichheld & Markey, 2011).

In this respect, NPS diffused as part of a technology cluster—a set of distinguishable yet closely interrelated elements that adopters perceive as belonging together (Rogers, 1962/2003, as cited in Sahin, 2006). This cluster generated synergies across channels, making NPS appear less like an exclusive tool for Bain clients and more like a widely circulating managerial standard. It also helped move adopters from awareness to how-to and principles knowledge (Rogers, 1962/2003, pp. 172–173) by surrounding the metric with books, consulting services, benchmarking forums, training, dashboards, and implementation routines.

This technology cluster also helped NPS compete for scarce managerial attention. Hilgartner and Bosk's (1988) public-arenas model argues that public attention has limited carrying capacity: issues rise or fall partly because they are framed, dramatized, and repeatedly circulated in ways that crowd out alternatives. Although developed to explain social problems, this insight also applies to managerial innovations, since managerial attention is scarce and innovations often diffuse by attaching themselves to compelling problem definitions.¹

By building this surrounding infrastructure, Bain likely increased NPS's salience in the marketplace of managerial ideas and may have made competing approaches less visible. This broader ecology may also have eased NPS's movement from innovators and early adopters into the early majority, because later adopters were not encountering an isolated concept but an increasingly institutionalized package of tools, endorsements, and routines that made adoption appear lower risk, more legitimate, and more standard. Table 1 summarizes the cluster of artifacts and practices that helped NPS diffuse as a managerial system rather than as a stand-alone survey item.

¹ Rogers's (1962/2003) discussion of automobile-safety innovations similarly shows how diffusion can depend on whether problems are framed as individual failures or as system-level conditions requiring structural remedies (pp. 119, 137–139).

Table 1*NPS as a Technology Cluster*

Cluster element	Example(s)	Function in diffusion
Foundational idea	Reichheld's 2003 <i>Harvard Business Review</i> article	Created awareness and framed NPS as a simple, memorable innovation
Business books	<i>The Ultimate Question</i> and <i>The Ultimate Question 2.0</i>	Extended NPS into mainstream managerial discourse
Consulting infrastructure	Bain client work and implementation support	Helped organizations move from awareness to adoption
Professional community	Forums, peer exchange, benchmarking	Diffused best practices through interpersonal influence
Training and certification	Later formal training ecosystems	Standardized knowledge and lowered implementation barriers
Business-school and executive-education channels	Course materials and management education circulation	Helped normalize NPS as teachable managerial knowledge
Incentive and reporting systems	Dashboards, bonuses, performance reviews	Embedded NPS into organizational routines

Note. The table summarizes how NPS spread not as a stand-alone metric, but as part of a broader innovation cluster involving publishing, consulting, training, and organizational routines (Bain & Company, n.d.; Reichheld & Markey, 2011).

Lundblad (2003) argues that diffusion in organizational settings depends not only on innovation characteristics and communication channels, but also on internal decision structures, leadership, and the presence of “innovation champions,” who function as internal change agents to advance diffusion and overcome organizational resistance. NPS fits that pattern well: Reichheld's article and later books helped create broad awareness of NPS within managerial culture, while Bain's consulting, training, and client networks helped convert that awareness into

implementation by creating channels through which internal champions could carry the innovation into their organizations.

This layered pattern also closely corresponds to Rogers's (1962/2003) argument that mass communication is most effective at the knowledge stage of the innovation-decision process, whereas interpersonal channels are more influential in moving adopters toward persuasion and implementation (p. 304). Reichheld's 2003 article and later books created visibility, while Bain's consulting, forums, and professional networks created the interpersonal and organizational pathways through which NPS became routinized. The available examples suggest that, within organizations, NPS often spread through authority and collective decisions rather than purely optional individual decisions, with senior leaders endorsing the metric and embedding it within broader systems of reporting, training, and customer-experience management.

This interpretation is reinforced by management-fashion research (e.g., Abrahamson, 1996; Clark, 2004), which identifies consulting firms, management gurus, business media, and business schools as key "fashion setters" in the diffusion of managerial ideas. In Rogers's terms, as extended by Lundblad (2003) to organizational domains, these actors helped expose NPS to the kinds of early adopters most likely to embrace a new business metric: highly educated, cosmopolite, resource-rich managers and firms with the organizational slack (i.e., excess resources for experimentation and implementation), status, and external networks needed to trial, legitimize, and further diffuse new practices.²

² The relationship between firm size and innovativeness is more nuanced than a simple "larger firms adopt first" narrative suggests. While larger organizations often possess greater resources and slack that facilitate adoption, prior research (e.g., Damanpour, 1992) finds mixed results across industries, structures, and types of innovation.

Expansion Across Domains

The academic record suggests that NPS has moved beyond a passing management fad and into a durable research presence. Sartori's (2024) bibliometric review identified 464 scholarly publications on NPS indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, indicating that the concept has generated a substantial academic footprint across multiple fields and research traditions. In the public sector, Luoma-aho et al. (2021) found that NPS had become sufficiently attractive to be adapted to government contexts, even proposing a modified public-sector version after studying a large Finnish ministry. In higher education, Kara and Zeren (2023) examined whether NPS could meaningfully capture students' willingness to recommend a university degree program. In healthcare, Adams et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review and found that NPS had been used to measure patient experience across multiple settings. Taken together, these studies suggest that NPS is no longer purely a private-sector customer metric. It has crossed institutional boundaries and helped normalize the idea that experiences as diverse as public services, college programs, and healthcare encounters can be summarized through recommendation behavior.

The subsequent diffusion of Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) illustrates how the innovation continued to spread into adjacent domains. Once organizations accepted NPS as a legitimate external metric for customers, it became easier to apply the same logic internally and use recommendation behavior as a proxy for employee sentiment. Consequently, many organizations now use eNPS-style surveys to ask employees whether they would recommend the organization as a good place to work and administer them regularly as part of ongoing pulse or engagement measurement (Culture Amp, 2026; Lattice, 2025; SurveyMonkey, n.d.). Yaneva (2018) describes this shift as part of a movement from broader employee satisfaction and

engagement surveys toward eNPS, while Sedlak's (2020) study of more than 6,500 employees across three Polish companies found that eNPS correlated strongly with overall work-satisfaction measures. Those findings suggest that eNPS may function as a rough indicator of general sentiment, but they also underscore the diffusion argument: once a metric acquires legitimacy in one domain, organizations can transplant it into adjacent functions even before there is full consensus regarding its distinctiveness, precision, or measurement quality.

Validity, Bias, and Organizational Consequences

The critiques of NPS fall into three overlapping categories: biases that helped legitimate its diffusion, concerns about measurement quality, and concerns about organizational consequences. The first helps explain why NPS was adopted despite unresolved evidence; the second addresses whether the score measures what it claims to measure; and the third considers what happens when organizations embed the score in incentives, accountability systems, and managerial routines.

Biases Supporting Adoption

The concept of pro-innovation bias is especially relevant to NPS. Rogers (1962/2003) warned that diffusion research, and the change agents who sponsor it, often assume that an innovation should spread rapidly and widely, with minimal resistance (pp. 106–110). NPS was frequently promoted in precisely that way. By the late 2010s and early 2020s, discussions in the business press often treated NPS as a foundational or even “gold standard” customer metric (Lee, 2012; Mazur, 2025; Samuel, 2020; Stahlkopf, 2019), while alternatives such as customer satisfaction (CSAT) and Customer Effort Score (CES) were more commonly framed as complements, refinements, or correctives to NPS rather than as equally iconic stand-alone measures (“Beyond Net Promoter Score,” 2022; Dixon et al., 2010; Wiesel et al., 2012).

That framing likely reduced managerial skepticism and helped cast adoption as a mark of organizational sophistication rather than a debatable methodological choice. Lundblad's (2003) critique strengthens this point by noting that organizational diffusion is shaped by leadership, structure, and internal decision-making systems, rather than by the intrinsic merits of the innovation itself. In the case of NPS, the discourse surrounding the metric often made adoption appear self-evidently desirable before its evidentiary foundations were fully settled.

Rogers's (1962/2003) concept of individual-blame bias describes the tendency to hold individuals responsible for problems that may actually arise from the larger system in which they operate (pp. 118–119). Applied to NPS, the metric can make customer loyalty and “delight” appear to be the product of frontline behavior alone, even when many of the underlying drivers of dissatisfaction lie higher up the organizational chain in pricing, product design, staffing, or policy decisions. This risk becomes greater when organizations operationalize NPS through incentives and compensation. Bain & Company (Reichheld & Markey, n.d.) has noted that firms often link NPS goals to bonuses, sometimes from the CEO down to frontline employees. In that sense, NPS may diffuse quickly not only because it is simple and visible, but also because it offers leaders a convenient way to externalize and redistribute responsibility for loyalty outcomes across the organization, especially onto customer-facing staff.

Measurement Quality: Validity, Reliability, and Scoring Logic

Rogers (1962/2003) writes that “most individuals do not evaluate an innovation on the basis of scientific studies of its consequences.... Instead, most people depend mainly upon a subjective evaluation of an innovation that is conveyed to them from other individuals like themselves who have already adopted the innovation” (pp. 18–19). That observation is particularly pertinent to NPS. The available evidence suggests that the metric has practical utility,

but its reliability and validity are more limited than its reputation implies. Comparative validity studies are skeptical. Using patient-experience data from six Dutch hospitals, Krol et al. (2015) found that NPS was less valid as a summary measure than alternative overall ratings. Kristensen and Eskildsen (2014) argued that NPS is highly sensitive to response distributions, has relatively low precision, and performs poorly as a predictor of customer loyalty and satisfaction.

NPS may be especially limited when applied to credence services, where customers are asked to evaluate outcomes they may not yet be able to judge. In contrast to search goods, whose qualities can be assessed before purchase, or experience goods, whose qualities become clearer after use, credence goods and services involve attributes that are difficult or costly for consumers to evaluate even after the transaction (Darby & Karni, 1973; Nelson, 1970). This issue is especially relevant for services such as auto repair, lawn treatment, medical care, or legal advice, where customers may lack the expertise to evaluate technical quality and where outcomes may emerge only over time. In these contexts, an NPS survey administered immediately after a service encounter may capture courtesy, confidence, communication, or frustration more than the quality of the underlying service. The consequence is both measurement error and a temporal, epistemic mismatch between what the survey asks customers to evaluate and what they can reasonably know at the time of response.

Another concern is response bias. Although response rate alone is not a complete measure of survey quality, low participation can still threaten representativeness when respondents systematically differ from nonrespondents (Elston, 2021; Halbesleben & Whitman, 2013). In customer-rating settings, researchers have also identified underreporting bias, in which customers at the extremes—especially the most satisfied or most dissatisfied—are more likely to submit ratings than those with more moderate views (Hu et al., 2017). Donnelly et al. (2025)

illustrate how this risk plays out in the NPS ecosystem: one participant reported an average survey response rate of roughly 1%; another said he mainly completes surveys when he has a complaint; and Reichheld himself acknowledged that the small minority who respond may not be typical of the larger customer base. Under those conditions, NPS can become as much a product of self-selection and survey design as of the underlying customer experience. Recent practitioner research identifies a related selection-and-timing problem: Forrester's journey benchmarking analysis (Schmidt, 2026) suggests that post-journey surveys may overstate loyalty because they exclude customers who do not complete the journey and often arrive before customers know whether they achieved their goal.

The evidence for eNPS is thinner still. Legerstee (2013) found that the Employee Promoter Score overlaps heavily with existing constructs such as affective commitment, person-organization fit, job satisfaction, and intention to leave, while Sedlak (2020) concluded that eNPS correlates closely with general work satisfaction yet may still yield misleading numerical values due to scale asymmetry. Taken together, this literature suggests that NPS and eNPS diffused more quickly than consensus formed around their measurement quality.

Questions also remain about the scoring logic of NPS, whose public technical rationale is incomplete and contested. In the original 2003 *Harvard Business Review* article, Reichheld stated that the approach emerged from two years of research in which multiple survey questions were tested by linking responses to actual customer behaviors, such as purchasing patterns and referrals, and ultimately to company growth. That provides at least a broad behavioral rationale for the metric. However, the public record does not provide a fully transparent technical validation showing why the 0-to-10 scale should be divided specifically into Promoters, Passives, and Detractors across contexts. Later academic work has criticized NPS for relying on

arbitrary cut-off points, allowing Passive responses to affect the denominator without contributing directly to the Promoter-minus-Detractor subtraction, and collapsing an 11-point scale into only three categories (e.g., Kristensen & Eskildsen, 2014). A fair conclusion, then, is that Reichheld offered a behavioral explanation for the categories, but the publicly available evidence falls short of a complete psychometric defense.

Organizational Consequences: Incentives, Gaming, and Control

The consequences of NPS adoption are not limited to measurement error: once embedded in dashboards, compensation systems, and performance reviews, the score can reshape organizational behavior. Organizations may begin to treat a contested “directional” score as gospel or as a substitute for deeper understanding. Baehre (2024) notes that managers continue to rely on NPS despite sustained scholarly skepticism, suggesting that the metric’s organizational convenience has helped preserve its influence. Nunan (2024) similarly points out that the term instantly captures executive and board attention, in part because it is closely tied to managerial priorities and incentives. A case study of a large UK furniture retailer reinforces that point: Stephenson (2020) found that employees “gamed” the NPS system, even “before any possibility of pay, reward or sanction was considered” (p. 156), but also surfaced more supportive peer behavior after compensation changes tied part of the sales team’s commissions to NPS-related outcomes (p. 196).³ That example illustrates how diffusion can produce mixed organizational consequences, including distortion, compliance, and new forms of social control.

³ Experts, including Reichheld himself, warn against tying NPS directly to compensation because doing so can encourage burying, selective surveying, and begging for top scores (Reichheld et al., 2009). More recently, Reichheld told *CX Dive* (Wassel, 2025) that linking NPS to compensation would “destroy the business in 95% of the cases” unless it were limited to senior executives and tied to relative performance; the same report also noted Forrester research indicating that about half of customer experience leaders say their firms pay employees for hitting NPS targets.

Discussion

NPS illustrates that managerial innovations do not diffuse solely because they are technically superior. They diffuse when they are legible, portable, observable, and supported by organizations capable of packaging them as legitimate practice. In the NPS case, Reichheld's formulation supplied the memorable metric, Bain and related professional networks supplied the diffusion infrastructure, and dashboards, benchmarks, training, and incentive systems helped embed the metric into organizational routines. The result was not only the spread of a survey question but the institutionalization of a managerial language for representing loyalty, customer-centricity, and performance. This helps explain why NPS became durable even as scholarly doubts about its measurement quality persisted.

Indeed, a metric intended to democratize feedback and foreground customer focus may, in practice, function as an instrument of managerial control. By reducing complex, multifaceted customer experiences to a single, legible score, NPS facilitates the downward allocation of responsibility for organizational performance and diverts scrutiny from broader systemic or structural issues. As a result, improvements in NPS may reflect closer management of survey administration—such as increased efforts to elicit favorable responses or to target the distribution of surveys—rather than genuine improvements in the customer experience. This phenomenon is documented in reports such as Donnelly et al. (2025), which describe tactics including selectively withholding surveys from likely detractors and having coworkers submit positive reviews. Although such accounts warrant cautious interpretation, they highlight a broader risk: organizations may conflate advancement in the metric with substantive organizational progress, thereby privileging the management of appearance over actual change.

The NPS case also reflects Meyer and Rowan's (1977) insight that organizations may adopt formal structures to confer legitimacy, even when their relationship to technical performance remains uncertain. By translating customer-centricity into a visible score, NPS allows organizations to signal responsiveness and accountability without necessarily demonstrating deeper operational change. NPS serves not only as an internal diagnostic measure but also as a ceremonial marker of modern, data-driven management.

This critique does not require treating NPS as inherently harmful. Its simplicity and visibility can promote accountability and encourage systematic attention to customer feedback, particularly when the score is interpreted alongside qualitative evidence and other performance indicators. The risk arises when NPS becomes the dominant measure of customer experience, encouraging organizations to manage the appearance of improvement rather than the underlying conditions that produce satisfaction, loyalty, or dissatisfaction. One further question is whether standardized, customer-administered metrics have displaced richer forms of service evaluation, such as direct observation, mystery shopping, or sustained frontline feedback. The present review cannot establish such displacement, but the possibility merits empirical study, as changing who observes service quality may also alter what organizations can see.

Several limitations should be noted. This paper uses a conceptual and narrative synthesis rather than an empirical or systematic review, so it does not comprehensively assess all available research on NPS adoption, and the included sources may reflect selection bias. The corporate and practitioner examples are illustrative rather than generalizable, and because NPS has been adopted across sectors with different measurement cultures, accountability systems, and organizational structures, its consequences are likely heterogeneous. Existing research has examined NPS in specific contexts, including healthcare, higher education, public

administration, and managerial practice, and bibliometric work has mapped the growth of NPS scholarship more broadly. Future research should build on that work by comparing how NPS is adopted, adapted, and institutionalized across sectors rather than studying each context in isolation. Longitudinal case studies could clarify whether organizations that rely heavily on NPS experience substantive improvements in customer or employee experience, or whether they primarily become more sophisticated at managing the metric itself. Additional research could examine how NPS interacts with organizational learning, performance evaluation, compensation systems, and work culture, including whether qualitative feedback or multidimensional measurement systems reduce the risks of gaming, superficial compliance, or appearance-focused management. Such inquiry would extend existing research on NPS use and help clarify when simplified metrics support organizational learning and when they reinforce narrow forms of accountability.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Net Promoter Score diffused widely not simply because it provided a superior measure of customer loyalty, but because it combined simplicity, visibility, portability, and institutional support. Its single-number structure made it easy to communicate, benchmark, and embed in dashboards, incentives, and executive narratives. At the same time, Bain's consulting infrastructure, business media visibility, professional networks, and later software and benchmarking systems helped transform NPS from a survey question into a larger managerial system.

The NPS case illustrates a broader pattern in the diffusion of managerial innovations. Organizational adoption is not determined solely by evidentiary strength. Innovations may spread because they are legible to executives, compatible with prevailing managerial norms, and

supported by influential intermediaries who convert ideas into routinized organizational practices. In this sense, NPS became durable not despite its simplicity, but because of it.

The case also prompts a more critical reflection on the use of simplified metrics. When recommendation scores are used as proxies for complex constructs such as customer experience, employee sentiment, or institutional performance, organizations risk conflating improvements in the metric with genuine advances in the underlying domain. Future research should examine not only whether NPS predicts loyalty or growth, but also how its adoption reshapes accountability, employee behavior, organizational learning, and managerial definitions of success.

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