

Why Net Promoter Score Spread

A concise guide to the working paper The Diffusion of a Contested Metric

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Central argument: NPS became durable because it is simple, visible, portable, and easy to connect to dashboards, benchmarks, incentives, consulting, software, and executive narratives—not because the evidence established that it was uniquely superior to other customer measures.

What NPS does

Customers rate their likelihood of recommending an organization from 0 to 10. Scores of 9–10 are Promoters; 7–8 are Passives; 0–6 are Detractors. NPS equals the percentage of Promoters minus the percentage of Detractors, producing a score from –100 to +100. Passives remain in the denominator but do not enter the subtraction directly.

Why it spread	What the evidence cautions
• A single number reduced perceived complexity. • Dashboards and benchmarks made performance visible. • Pilots required little technical investment. • Consulting, books, training, software, and professional networks formed a reinforcing technology cluster. • Adoption signaled customer-centric, data-driven management.	• The category thresholds and score compression remain contested. • Low and selective response can distort results. • Immediate surveys may measure courtesy or confidence before outcomes are knowable. • Scores can redirect responsibility toward frontline staff. • Bonuses and targets can encourage selective surveying, pleading, and gaming.

Practical implication

Use NPS as a signal, not a verdict. Interpret it alongside qualitative comments, behavioral and operational data, and other measures. Avoid treating a movement in the score as proof that the underlying customer or employee experience improved—especially when the score affects frontline pay or continued employment.

Scope of the paper

This is a conceptual and narrative synthesis, not an original empirical test or systematic review. It integrates diffusion theory, institutional theory, management-fashion research, NPS scholarship, and selected practitioner examples to explain organizational adoption and consequences.

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