



International Journal of Business Innovation and Research

ISSN online: 1751-0260 - ISSN print: 1751-0252

<https://www.inderscience.com/ijbir>

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Dag Øivind Madsen

DOI: [10.1504/IJBIR.2021.10041533](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJBIR.2021.10041533)

Article History:

Received:	04 November 2020
Accepted:	20 May 2021
Published online:	10 January 2024

One marketing metric to rule them all? An examination of the emergence and rise of net promoter score as a marketing fashion

Dag Øivind Madsen

School of Business,
University of South-Eastern Norway,
Bredalsveien 11, 3511 Hønefoss, Norway
Email: dag.oivind.madsen@usn.no

Abstract: Net promoter score (NPS) is heralded by its proponents as the quintessential marketing metric for measuring customer and brand loyalty. The popularity of NPS is currently very high, especially in North American companies, and the frenetic interest has led some commentators to state that it resembles a religion. In the current paper, the emergence and rise of NPS is examined using management fashion theory as an interpretive lens and organising framework. The findings indicate that the NPS concept exhibits several of the key characteristics and hallmarks of management fashions. However, in recent years, the concept has attracted more scrutiny and negative publicity. Therefore, it can be argued that the NPS concept, at least to some extent, has fallen victim to its own success. The paper discusses these findings about NPS's evolutionary trajectory and lifecycle in light of theories about management fads and fashions.

Keywords: net promoter score; NPS; marketing metric; management concept; management fashion; emergence; rise; evolution; lifecycle.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Madsen, D.Ø. (2024) 'One marketing metric to rule them all? An examination of the emergence and rise of net promoter score as a marketing fashion', *Int. J. Business Innovation and Research*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp.77–100.

Biographical notes: Dag Øivind Madsen is a Professor at the University of South-Eastern Norway. He holds a PhD in Business Administration from the Norwegian School of Economics, as well as MSc in Accounting and Finance from the London School of Economics. His research is associated with two main areas: management control systems, and diffusion and use of management tools and techniques.

1 Introduction

Over the last 20–30 years, a laundry list of new marketing concepts, metrics, and best practices have been introduced (Ambler, 2000; Bendle and Bagga, 2016a, 2016b; Farris et al., 2017, 2010, 2006; Ling-Yee, 2011; Uzma, 2018). Examples include integrated marketing communications (IMC) (Schultz, 1992), customer relationship management (CRM) (e.g., Winer, 2001), customer lifetime value (CLV) (Berger and Nasr, 1998), and net promoter score (NPS) (Reichheld, 2003). This paper focuses on NPS, a metric that

Frederick Reichheld introduced in a *Harvard Business Review* article titled ‘The one number you need to grow’ (Reichheld, 2003). Building on insights from consumer marketing, Reichheld presented NPS as a marketing metric that could be used to measure brand loyalty and characterise different levels of customer loyalty.

As noted by Picoult (2019), NPS has become “standard vocabulary in the halls of many organisations, not to mention annual reports and earnings presentations.” The concept has spread like wildfire and has been adopted by several high-profile companies such as American Express, IBM, and Vanguard (Colvin, 2020; Safdar and Pacheco, 2019). The concept has been embraced in corporate America to the extent that the *Wall Street Journal* has referred to NPS as having a ‘cultlike following’ (Safdar and Pacheco, 2019) and resembling a ‘religion’ in terms of the strong beliefs in the merits of this metric (Murray and Dunn, 2020).

1.1 Purpose and contributions

This paper aims to provide an in-depth examination of the emergence and rise of the NPS concept. This involves critically reflecting on why it has attained such a strong position in the marketing practitioner community. In doing this, the paper attempts to make at least two contributions to the literature on NPS and, more broadly, the literature on the history and evolution of marketing thought.

First, it provides one of the few applications of management fashion theory (MFT) (e.g., Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020) in the context of marketing. MFT is well-suited for examining the supply and demand side forces shaping the lifecycle of a management concept, from initial emergence and growth to maturity and decline (Madsen and Slåtten, 2015a). However, apart from a few dispersed studies (Aimé et al., 2020; Cornelissen and Lock, 2000; Madsen and Johanson, 2016), MFT has so far received little attention in the field of marketing. A detailed study of the emergence and rise of NPS can provide new knowledge about the dynamics shaping the supply and demand for what Cornelissen and Lock (2000) call ‘marketing fashion’. For example, actors such as consulting firms can be considered entrepreneurs and merchants of management knowledge (Fincham, 1995; Heusinkveld, 2013; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005), and the case of NPS illustrates how these processes and dynamics play out in the context of popular and fashionable marketing concepts.

Second, an in-depth study of NPS can also provide more knowledge about the historical evolution of the marketing field. Schwarz (2015, p.499) has noted that it is important to study the evolution of management concepts and ideas since “[w]e can increase our knowledge of these important management concepts by understanding their historical roots and how the ideas surrounding the concepts have evolved over time.”

1.2 Research approach

Since this study aims to construct an overall historical narrative of the evolution of NPS from inception to the present time, this necessitates taking a qualitative case study approach with the NPS concept as the unit of analysis. With regard to data sources, the paper draws on a wide range of scholarly and practitioner-oriented sources, which are synthesised to piece together a mosaic picture of the historical emergence and evolution of the concept (cf. Morrison and Wensley, 1991). In practice, the literature search started by using Google Scholar to find influential books and articles on NPS (Reichheld, 2003,

2006b; Reichheld and Markey, 2011). These key books and articles can be considered the 'seed set' (Felizardo et al., 2016). The subsequent literature search aimed to identify additional papers on the topic of NPS. This literature search followed what can most accurately be described as a snowballing-type procedure, examining both bibliographies of the initial papers (backward snowballing) and recent papers that cite the initial papers (forward snowballing) (cf. Felizardo et al., 2016; Jalali and Wohlin, 2012; Wohlin, 2014, 2016).

This type of research approach is a pragmatic choice considering that there are multiple challenges associated with studying the diffusion and evolution of management concepts, particularly from a historical perspective (Madsen and Stenheim, 2013; Strang and Wittrock, 2019). As will be discussed in greater detail towards the end of the paper, this research approach has limitations related to, for example, the heavy reliance on desk research and secondary sources.

The rest of the paper is structured in the following way. Section 2 provides a brief history of the NPS concept, while Section 3 examines its framing and characteristics. Sections 4 and 5 analyse the supply and demand sides of NPS, respectively. In Section 6, the findings are discussed in the context of key debates in the literature on management fashion. The paper concludes in Section 7 with a discussion of implications, limitations, and future research ideas.

2 A brief history of NPS

2.1 What is NPS?

Before proceeding, it is appropriate to briefly define what the NPS concept aims to do and provide a clarification of the NPS nomenclature. NPS is a marketing metric that originated in the field of consumer marketing as a way to measure brand loyalty and characterise different levels of customer loyalty (Korneta, 2014). To measure customer loyalty, NPS surveys ask respondents to answer a simple question: *How likely is it that you would recommend our company/product/service to a friend or colleague?* NPS utilises a 11 point scale (0-to-10) where an answer of 0 indicates 'not at all likely' and 10 'extremely likely'. Respondents whose answers are between 0 and 6 are labelled 'detractors', 7 or 8 'passives', and 9 or 10 'promoters'. To calculate a NPS, the percentage of detractors are subtracted from the percentage of promoters. The range of NPS is from -100 (all detractors) to +100 (all promoters). In the case of a large portion of passives, the NPS will gravitate towards zero. A rule of thumb is that a NPS >0 is considered good and that >50 indicates excellent performance. Furthermore, NPS performance should not be evaluated in isolation. Instead, it can be useful to benchmark NPS performance against a peer group (Global Response, n.d.).

2.2 Emergence

It is relatively easy to pinpoint the origins of NPS. NPS's intellectual father is Frederick Reichheld, a Bain & Company consultant (Finnie and Randall, 2002). Reichheld (2003) introduced the concept in a *Harvard Business Review* article titled 'The one number you need to grow'. The concept was co-developed with Bain & Company and NICE Satmetrix (Global Response, n.d.). The NPS concept was based on previous work that

Reichheld had carried out on customer relationships and brand loyalty during the 1990s and early 2000s (Finnie and Randall, 2002; Gillies et al., 2002; Reichheld and Detrick, 2003; Reichheld, 2001; Reichheld and Kenny, 1990).

Why did NPS attract a lot of attention? In the management fashion literature, it has been highlighted by Grint (1994, p.193) that ideas that capture the zeitgeist or spirit of the times are more likely to prevail in the marketplace for management concepts and ideas. In other words, fit with the zeitgeist determines whether a novel concept will resonate with adopters and can catch fire. According to Kieser (1997), timing is a crucial factor determining whether a management concept appeals to managers and attracts their attention. In the words of Kieser (1997, p.61), the concept must hit the ‘nerve of today’s managers’.

In the case of NPS, it is possible to identify several favourable trends in the business and management environment around the time when the concept was introduced. During the 1990s, there was a new recognition that the business environment was becoming increasingly dynamic and that organisations needed to become more customer-focused to be able to compete effectively (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). In the field of marketing, there was a strong focus on the market orientation of firms (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990). The overall focus shifted from the traditional marketing mix towards relationship marketing and the cultivation of long-term customer relationships (Grönroos, 1994, 1997, 2004). In the field of accounting, there was a new recognition that customer loyalty and profitability are key performance measures in the management and control of firms (Kaplan and Norton, 1992, 1996). During the same time, related marketing-oriented concepts such as CRM grew in importance and popularity (Madsen and Johanson, 2016).

2.3 Evolution

In the years following the seminal 2003 *Harvard Business Review* article, Reichheld and colleagues wrote several related articles such as ‘Blowing the whistle on bad profits’ in the journal *Strategic Finance* (Reichheld and Markey, 2006) and ‘The microeconomics of customer relationships’ in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* (Reichheld, 2006a).

Table 1 Illustrative examples articles scrutinising the NPS concept

<i>Title</i>	<i>Reference</i>
‘The dubious management fad sweeping corporate America’	Safdar and Pacheco (2019)
‘It’s time to retire the net promoter score (and here’s what to replace it with)’	Shevlin (2019)
‘Where net promoter score goes wrong’	Stahlkopf (2019)

Some years later, NPS was further elaborated on and fleshed out in the book ‘The ultimate question’ (Reichheld, 2006b) and ‘The ultimate question 2.0’ (Reichheld and Markey, 2011). As NPS has grown in popularity and adoption, the concept has fallen victim to its own success. It has drawn greater scrutiny, as evidenced by, for instance, a *Wall Street Journal* article with the title ‘The dubious management fad sweeping corporate America’ (Safdar and Pacheco, 2019). This article generated much debate about NPS (Gregg, 2019; Grier, 2019; Temkin, 2019), and while some critics piled on,

supporters and proponents have rushed to the concept's defence (Sauro, 2014, 2018). Table 1 provides some illustrative examples of articles scrutinising the NPS concept.

3 The framing and characteristics of the NPS concept

This section starts by providing a brief discussion of whether NPS can be considered a management concept. Next, the focus turns to an analysis of the concept's framing and characteristics. This analysis is based on existing research on management concepts that have become popular and fashionable (Benders and Van Veen, 2001; Huczynski, 1992; Røvik, 2002). For the current paper, the focus will be on four key characteristics, which are related to:

- 1 labelling
- 2 promises of performance improvements
- 3 room for interpretation
- 4 universality.

3.1 *Is NPS a management concept?*

Before proceeding, it is useful to discuss briefly whether NPS fits the definition of a management concept. Management concepts can be defined as “prescriptive, more or less coherent views on management” [Benders and Verlaar, (2003), p.758]. These concepts “play an important role in shaping contemporary organizational processes, structures and organizational behavior” [Braam et al., (2007), p.868].

There is a laundry list of management concepts and ideas (Bort, 2015; Hindle, 2008), with well-known examples being *Total Quality Management* (1980s), *Business Process Reengineering* (1990s), and more recently, *Blue Ocean Strategy* (2000s) and *Industry 4.0* (2010s). A common thread is that these concepts occupy prominent places in the business community as prescriptive ideas to be followed by user organisations (Røvik, 1998; Sturdy et al., 2019). In other words, these concepts offer strong normative recommendations to managers on how they should design and organise different aspects of their organisations.

NPS arguably fits the definition of a management concept since it is presented as the marketing metric that will allow organisations to get a better understanding of customer loyalty and, ultimately, drive the financial performance of the firm (cf. ‘The one number you need to grow’).

3.2 *Characteristics*

The first characteristic is related to how the concept is labelled. Management concepts are known by a catchy label (Kieser, 1997; Røvik, 1998) and are often associated with a three-letter acronym such as TQM or BPR (Grint, 1997). When looking at the case of NPS, it is apparent that the concept exhibits this characteristic to a high degree. The label is arguably catchy and the acronym is well-established. Moreover, the word ‘score’ has positive connotations. As noted in the case of the Balanced Scorecard, managers like to be in control and know the score (Kieser, 2002). The perceived value of the label is also

reflected by actions taken by the creators of NPS (Bain & Company, Inc., Satmetrix Systems, Inc., and Fred Reichheld) to register it as a trademark.

Promises of substantial performance improvements are another key characteristic and hallmark of management fashions (Benders and Van Veen, 2001). Suppliers of new concepts tend to employ strong rhetoric and make hyperbolic claims about the performance-enhancing effects of adopting the concept. Sometimes managers are warned that the company will be at a competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis their peers in case of non-adoption (Kieser, 1997). In the case of NPS, it is easy to identify such claims. NPS is presented as the best single measure or indicator of a firm's ability to grow. Proponents of NPS highlight the superiority of NPS over other customer-type measures (e.g., customer satisfaction). This is best illustrated by the title of the *Harvard Business Review* article 'The one number you need to grow' (Reichheld, 2003). Related to this, it has been noted that NPS is a 'feel good metric' (Ferracone, 2019).

The third characteristic of management fashions is room for interpretation (Benders and Van Veen, 2001; Giroux, 2006). In the case of NPS, the interpretive space is relatively low and much lower than for many other comparable management concepts. As pointed out by Fincham and Roslender (2003, 2004), concepts vary in terms of how loosely defined they are. Several commentators have noted that NPS is simple and clearly defined. For example, Farris et al. (2017) note that NPS is a simple and easy-to-understand concept. In the words of Bendle et al. (2019, p.211), it is 'elegantly simple'.

The fourth and final characteristic is universality. In the literature on management concepts and ideas, researchers have pointed out that management concepts are presented as being applicable in a wide range of different contexts (Røvik, 2007; Wittrock, 2015). In the case of NPS, the concept is presented as near-universal and applicable across nearly all types of organisations. For example, the NPS concept addresses critical areas such as customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Satisfactory performance in these areas is important for nearly any business operating in a competitive market.

The literature on NPS also shows that the concept has spread widely, and the adoption and use of the concept is no longer just confined to the private sector. The concept is increasingly presented as a possible solution for public sector and third sector organisations subject to new public management-related pressures. These types of organisations increasingly view their clients as customers (e.g., Hyndman and Lapsley, 2016). Finally, another indication that the concept has become broader and more universal is the fact that the concept has been reframed as Employee NPS as a way to measure the loyalty and engagement of employees (Mastrangelo, 2019). Another recent adaptation of the generic NPS concept is net innovator score (Nielsen, 2020), which provides an overview of an organisation's innovation capabilities. Finally, the net performance promoter score (Aguinis and Burgi-Tian, 2020) is presented as a way to measure performance during crises.

4 The supply side of NPS

This section provides a description and analysis of the supply side of the NPS concept. The supply side consists of the actors involved in the diffusion and dissemination of new management concepts (Abrahamson, 1996). There is a broad spectrum of supply side actors: consulting firms, management gurus, software developers, business school

professors, and various types of business media (Clark, 2004; Madsen and Slåtten, 2013; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002; Sturdy et al., 2019).

This group of actors is often referred to as the ‘fashion-setting community’ (Abrahamson, 1996) or the ‘management fashion arena’ (Jung and Kieser, 2012). While the different actors compete for a slice of the market related to a management concept (e.g., consulting gigs, software solutions, seminars and training sessions, certifications), they also benefit from working collaboratively to increase the size of the market related to the management concept and to sustain its popularity (Kliniewicz, 2006). As Perkmann and Spicer (2008) have shown, suppliers of management fashions need to perform different activities (e.g., training and education of users) for fashionable concepts to become institutionalised as more permanent organisational practices.

In the following, the focus will be on five types of supply-side actors who are deemed to have been particularly influential in the emergence and rise of NPS:

- 1 consulting firms
- 2 management gurus
- 3 software firms
- 4 business schools
- 5 business media.

4.1 Consulting firms

Consulting firms are often considered to be the most central group of actors involved in the management fashion arena (Heusinkveld, 2013; Jung and Kieser, 2012). Consultants typically assist organisations in the actual implementation of concepts (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2012). These advisory firms are knowledge entrepreneurs and merchants seeking to develop new marketable concepts and ideas (Heusinkveld, 2013), which will help establish and solidify their reputations as innovative thought leaders. In particular, the elite strategy consulting firms such as McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group, and Bain & Company (O’Mahoney and Sturdy, 2016) spend a lot of resources on the development of new concepts and ideas such as the McKinsey 7S framework and the Boston Matrix (e.g., Kiechel, 2010; Stern and Deimler, 2012).

In the case of NPS, consulting firms have played a key role from the get-go. The introduction and development of NPS has largely been spearheaded by Reichheld and Bain & Company.

4.2 Management gurus

Management gurus play an important role in the popularisation and legitimisation of new management concepts and ideas. Gurus often succeed in generating a lot of interest and attracting followers due to their charisma and ability to present and disseminate management knowledge in an easy-to-understand and captivating way (Collins, 2019, 2020; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 2001). Huczynski (1993) distinguishes between three different types of management gurus:

- 1 academic gurus who are associated with prestigious business schools (e.g., Michael Porter)

- 2 hero managers who are associated with high-profile organisations (e.g., Jack Welch)
- 3 consulting gurus who are affiliated with the elite consulting firms (e.g., Tom Peters).

In the case of NPS, Reichheld clearly stands out as the main guru, having authored and launched the concept via books and articles. Additionally, Reichheld should clearly be considered a consulting guru due to his affiliation to Bain & Company. There is anecdotal evidence that Reichheld has successfully connected with his intended audience, and NPS users have become ardent followers of Reichheld and believers in the concept. For example, in a recent article, Picoult (2019) writes that “I became a ‘Promoter’ of Fred Reichheld – a raving fan, if you will.”

4.3 *Software firms*

Software firms develop technical solutions that help organisations implement management concepts (Klincewicz, 2006; Madsen and Slåtten, 2013). Due to the oftentimes significant development costs, software firms tend to flock to concepts and ideas that are already popular in the market and have a critical mass of current and potential users. For example, there are numerous software applications related to the balanced scorecard concept (Marr et al., 2000; Marr and Neely, 2003).

In the case of NPS, it is possible to identify many firms specialising in, for instance, marketing research that offer NPS-related software solutions. Some websites have compiled long lists of vendors of NPS software (Bain & Company, n.d., Grigore, 2019; Softwaresuggest.com, 2020). In addition, Bain & Company is a key player in the market by offering The Net Promoter System™, which they describe as being more than just the NPS metric. Rather, it is framed and presented as a management system shaping how a firm does business.

4.4 *Business schools*

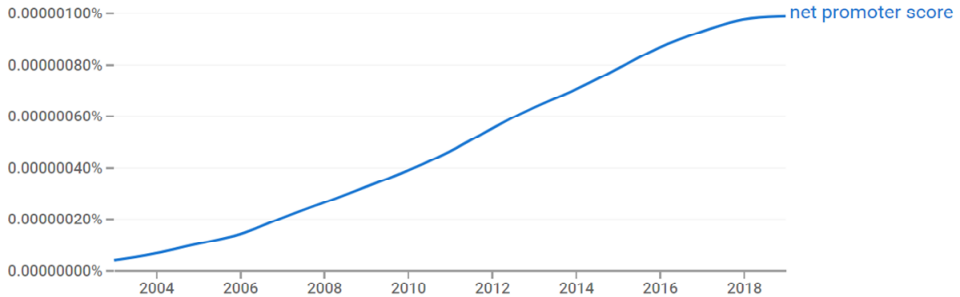
Business schools play an important role in legitimatising and anchoring management concepts and ideas as part of the knowledge base and vernacular of business (Engwall and Wedlin, 2019; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). In the case of NPS, the network around Harvard Business School played a particularly influential role in the introduction and legitimisation of the concept. As noted previously, the seminal article was published in the *Harvard Business Review* (Reichheld, 2003). In addition, several of the subsequent NPS books have been published by Harvard Business Publishing (Reichheld, 2006b; Reichheld and Markey, 2011). In addition, other business schools have also contributed to the diffusion and acceptance of NPS by publishing various types of educational materials about the concept. For example, a simple search on The case centre website yields several hits for case studies, teaching notes, and articles about NPS.

Over time, the concept has attracted more attention from the academic marketing community and has been subject to scrutiny and criticism. Already the year after seminal 2003 NPS article, there were two critical commentary articles in the *Harvard Business Review* (Kristensen and Westlund, 2004; Morgan and Rego, 2004). In the years that followed, several marketing researchers have examined fundamental issues related to the concept’s validity (Bennett and Molisani, 2020; East et al., 2011; Fisher and Kordupleski, 2019; Fornell et al., 2020; Grisaffe, 2007; Keiningham et al., 2008, 2007; Kristensen and Eskildsen, 2014; Mandal, 2014; Zaki et al., 2016). For example, Lewis and Mehmet

(2020) examine whether NPS reflects consumer sentiment. Academics are generally skeptical of the validity of the strong claims that NPS is the single best measure (Keiningham et al., 2007; Kristensen and Eskildsen, 2014).

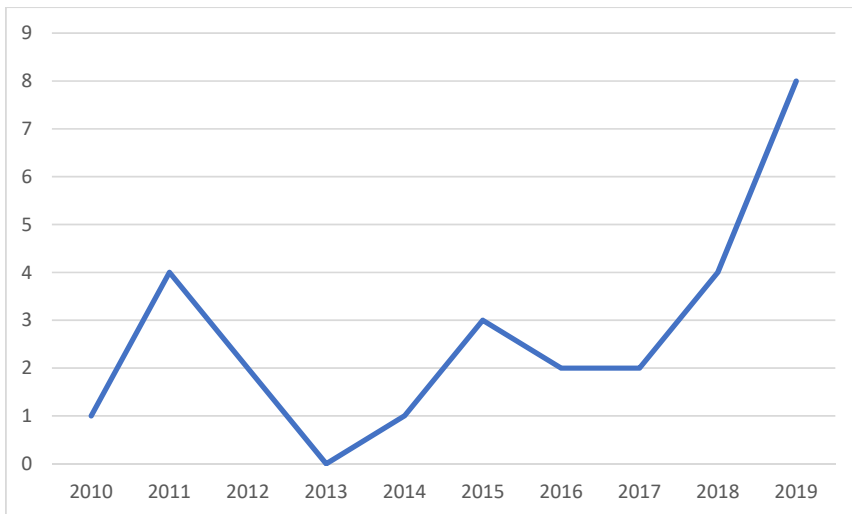
One possible way to gauge the interest in the concept by the academic community is to look at how often NPS is mentioned in books. Google nGram is an analytical tool that can be used to obtain an overview of the occurrence of specific terms in books (Michel et al., 2011). The nGram curve shows that NPS is on a steady upward trajectory in terms of how often the term is mentioned in books (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Google nGram for ‘NPS’ (see online version for colours)



Source: Google nGram (accessed 25 August 2020)

Figure 2 Scopus-indexed publications with ‘NPS’ in the article title (see online version for colours)



Source: Scopus database

Another way to gauge the role of business school in the diffusion of NPS is to take a look at academic research on the topic of NPS over time. For this purpose, a simple search of the Scopus database was carried out. Figure 2 shows that the total number of Scopus-indexed publications with ‘NPS’ is low, but there has been an uptick in the number of published articles during the last few years.

4.5 *Business media*

Business media are influential channels for the dissemination and diffusion of management concepts and ideas (Barros and Ruling, 2019; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). Traditionally, most of the discourse around popular management concepts took place in print-media outlets such as journals, magazines, and books. In the digital era, however, the discourse is increasingly shifting online to social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter, as well as blogs (Madsen and Slåtten, 2015b; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020).

In the case of NPS, it can be seen that business media have had different roles at different stages of the concept's lifecycle. During the early phase, many business media actors were enthusiastic boosters and cheerleaders of the NPS concept. For example, the bestselling books on NPS such as 'The ultimate question' (Reichheld, 2006b) and 'The ultimate question 2.0' (Reichheld and Markey, 2011) were published by the Harvard Business Press. Moreover, articles about NPS were published in high-profile business newspapers and magazines such as the *Harvard Business Review* (Cornfield, 2020; Stahlkopf, 2019), *Wall Street Journal* (Safdar and Pacheco, 2019; Samuel, 2020), *Fortune* (Colvin, 2020; Lashinsky and Pressman, 2020), and *Forbes* (Ferracone, 2019; Hyken, 2020; Netzley, 2020; Picoult, 2019).

However, in recent years, the coverage in the business media has become increasingly critical, and several articles have sparked much debate about why the concept has become so popular in corporate America (Safdar and Pacheco, 2019; Stahlkopf, 2019; Weinstein, 2018).

The discourse around NPS has taken place both in traditional print and social media. Since NPS is a relatively nascent concept that emerged in the early 2000s, the rise of NPS has coincided with the rise of social media. Therefore, it can be argued that the Internet and social media have played a much more important role in the popularisation of NPS than for an older concept such as total quality management which reached its apex of popularity before the digital era (see Madsen, 2020b). NPS is widely discussed on social media platforms as well as various marketing-related blogs and websites (e.g., Egol, 2019; Fessenden, 2016; Koss, 2020; Rogers, 2019; Somani, 2020; Spool, 2017).

5 **The demand side of NPS**

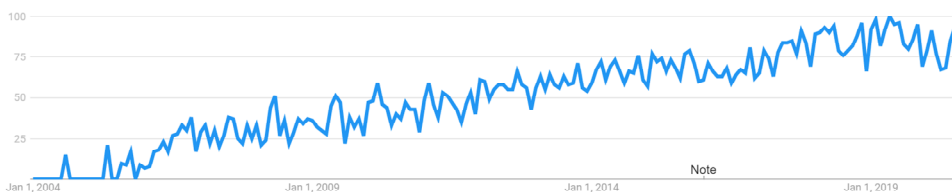
This section focuses on the demand side of NPS, i.e., the organisations and managers that are potential adopters and consumers of the concept. The concept's impact on the demand side is gauged from three angles:

- 1 interest, using Google Trends data
- 2 adoption and diffusion, by examining existing studies that have looked at the spread of NPS in different settings
- 3 implementation, by looking at organisations' experiences with NPS, both in terms of benefits and problems.

5.1 Interest

Google Trends (Choi and Varian, 2012) is an analytical tool that can be used to measure the Interest in management concepts and ideas (Madsen, 2016b). Google Trends contains search-related data dating back to 2004 and therefore covers nearly all of NPS's lifecycle. The Google Trends curve for 'NPS' shows that the search interest has been increasing steadily since 2004 (Figure 3). Although the interest appears to be plateauing, it has not declined considerably, which typically happens as management concepts become well-known and more established. The relatively high and stable interest can be seen as an indication that NPS is still generating new interest by potential adopters who are searching for information and news about the concept. Another possible explanation for why the search interest has not declined is the recent media debate about NPS, which may have sparked a new interest in the concept.

Figure 3 Search interest for 'NPS' in the period 2004–2020 (see online version for colours)



Source: <http://www.trends.google.com> (accessed 18 July 2020)

5.2 Adoption and diffusion

Generally, it is hard to find data about the adoption and diffusion of NPS, and much of the available evidence is anecdotal and from non-scholarly sources. For example, Weinstein (2018) notes that “NPS is popular. I mean very popular. Tons of companies ask customers the NPS question.” There is also indications that NPS has become part of the vernacular of business. Picoult (2019) notes that NPS “has become standard vocabulary in the halls of many organisations, not to mention annual reports and earnings presentations.”

When it comes to the knowledge of the concept, Bendle et al. (2010) found that the knowledge of NPS is relatively low, and that about a quarter of the respondents did not know the metric at all. Moreover, only 19% found NPS to be very useful (Bendle et al., 2010).

Viewed as a whole, the data about adoption and diffusion are generally mixed. Various newspaper and magazine articles suggest that the use of NPS is high in corporate America (Colvin, 2020; Murray and Dunn, 2020; Safdar and Pacheco, 2019; Samuel, 2020). For example, Colvin (2020) writes that two-thirds of Fortune 1000 firms use NPS.

That said, some studies suggest that adoption is not as high as has been reported in the articles mentioned above. In one study of marketing metrics, Bendle et al. (2010, p.23) noted that “[t]he lack of widespread adoption of some of the more recently developed metrics such as net promoter and customer lifetime value may be a function of a slow adoption process.” Another study found that NPS is often not used in build-your-own dashboards (Mintz et al., 2019).

At the same time, there are findings that suggest that NPS has spread widely and that the use of NPS is not confined to the private sector. In recent years, the concept has spread to non-profits (Burnham and Wong, 2018; Goldberg, 2020; Schulman and Sargeant, 2013) and the public sector (Vochin et al., 2020). While Goldberg (2020) finds that non-profits are lagging in terms of the use of analytics, it is possible that the use of metrics such as NPS is increasing among these types of organisations. Due to trends such as new public management (Hyndman and Lapsley, 2016), there is a greater pressure for public sector organisations to be more customer-oriented and adopt modern management concepts developed and designed for private sector organisations. Vochin et al. (2020) find that NPS is diffused in the public sector as well.

5.3 Implementation

Finally, the issue of implementing NPS will be discussed. As noted previously, the NPS concept has a high degree of universality. An examination of the literature on NPS also reveals that the concept is implemented in wide variety of different industries and sectors (Table 2) such as health, sports, tourism, and higher education. Another related issue is whether NPS is applied successfully (Owen, 2019), but the body of research on NPS is still too small to reach a clear conclusion on this question.

Table 2 Examples of applications of NPS in different industries and sectors

<i>Context</i>	<i>References</i>
Tourism	Lewis and Donnelly (2019)
Software	Ziegler and Peisl (2020)
Health care	Alismail et al. (2020), Hamilton et al. (2014), Hollander and Neinstein (2020), Koladycz et al. (2018), Krol et al. (2015), Simpson et al. (2020), Stirling et al. (2019)
Sports	Stander (2016)
Transportation	Korneta (2018)
Higher education	McKnight et al. (2019)
Libraries	Juntumaa et al. (2020), Laitinen (2018, 2019)
Non-profits	Burnham and Wong (2018), Schulman and Sargeant (2013)
Public sector	Hakola (2016), Vochin et al. (2020)

6 Discussion

6.1 Emergence

NPS is a relatively nascent concept, and that its short history can be traced back to the early 2000s. Compared with a management concept such as SWOT analysis (Madsen, 2016a; Puyt et al., 2020), it is easy to trace the NPS concept's history and pinpoint its origins. As shown in the historical review, Reichheld and Bain & Company played pivotal roles in the popularisation of the concept. The involvement of an elite consulting firm such as Bain & Company is not surprising since other recent studies have shown that elite consulting firms such as Boston Consulting Group and McKinsey & Company often

play influential roles in the diffusion and legitimisation of management concepts and ideas (Madsen, 2017; O'Mahoney and Sturdy, 2016).

The network around Harvard Business School has also been influential in disseminating and legitimising the NPS concept. After all, the 2003-article was published in the *Harvard Business Review*, and several of the bestselling books have been published by the Harvard Business School Press. In this way, the emergence of NPS resembles other management concepts such as activity-based costing (Berg and Madsen, 2020; Jones and Dugdale, 2002), balanced scorecard (Cooper et al., 2017), and *Blue Ocean Strategy* (Madsen and Slåtten, 2019). The popularisation of all these concepts has been facilitated by strong associations with the network around Harvard Business School.

6.2 Evolution

The findings also show that the NPS concept has evolved in different ways, both conceptually and in terms of popularity. When it comes to the conceptual evolution of NPS, the concept has been much more static than most other management concepts. To some extent, this can be explained by the characteristics of the concept, such as the relatively low interpretive space. As noted in Section 3, the concept is relatively concrete and simple, at least in comparison with other more vague and flexible concepts such as agile, lean, and Industry 4.0 (Benders et al., 2019; Madsen, 2019, 2020a; Madsen et al., 2017). Therefore, there are relatively few NPS-related neologisms and little versioning. In contrast, there is a large number of definitions of the Industry 4.0 concept and a laundry list of related neologisms (Bongomin et al., 2020; Madsen, 2019).

Bain & Company's choice to make NPS open to others could be a decision to avoid a repeat of the so-called 'metric wars' where consulting firms developed and branded similar metrics to position themselves and fight for a slice of the market (Myers, 1996). By making the concept 'open source' they have increased the market around NPS. In the cases of the BCG matrix and economic value added (Madsen, 2017; Madsen, et al., 2020), there was much stronger competition between different metrics than what can be seen in the case of NPS. That said, some differentiation points can still be identified. For example, there are variations in terms of how NPS-inspired survey questions are formulated (Weinstein, 2018). In addition, some variations of NPS, such as 'customer experience awareness', are promoted by influential companies on the demand-side such as Ericsson (Spiegel, 2018).

In terms of popularity trajectory, the concept has been on a steady upward trajectory since its inception during the early 2000s. However, the NPS concept has, at least to a certain extent, fallen victim to its own popularity and success. The NPS craze in Corporate America has attracted more scrutiny by the business media (Safdar and Pacheco, 2019) and various marketing scholars who have been critical of the concept. In this way, the evolutionary trajectory of NPS bears similarities to what has been observed in the context of the BCG matrix, a concept that started attracting negative business media attention during the 1980s as well as some scholarly disdain due to its simplicity (Madsen, 2017).

However, it is unclear how the more critical tone in the coverage of NPS in the business media will affect the future trajectory of the concept. Research on fashionable management concepts and ideas suggests that negative business media discourse could be more harmful to the perception and reputation of a popular concept than critiques in academic journals. The evolutionary trajectory of Economic Value Added suggests that

this might be the case. The EVA concept went on a big downswing in popularity as it faced intense scrutiny in the business media during the 2000s and 2010s (Madsen et al., 2020). Moreover, in the case of the balanced scorecard, Madsen (2011) found that none of the interviewed managers who were using the concept had heard of Nørreklit's (2000) widely-cited (in academic circles) critique of the Balanced Scorecard concept.

7 Conclusions

7.1 Theoretical implications

The current paper has examined the emergence and rise of NPS as a fashionable marketing concept. In doing this, the paper has attempted to make at least two contributions to the literature. First of all, it is one of only a handful of applications of MFT in the context of marketing (Aimé et al., 2020; Cornelissen and Lock, 2000; Madsen and Johanson, 2016). There is generally little research on why some marketing concepts become popular while others do not. A reason for the lack of MFT-inspired research is the dominance of technical-rational thinking in the field of marketing, which can be attributed to the field's roots in economic theory and its orientation towards practical relevance (Bartels, 1988; Varey, 2010). Even though the field of marketing has borrowed theories from sociology (Grønhaug and Kleppe, 2010; Jonassen, 1959), the influence of sociological theory has been weaker than in, for instance, organisation studies [Ketchen and Hult, (2011), p.481]. While marketing scholars increasingly recognise that marketing decisions are influenced by external pressures from the institutional environment (Grewal and Dharwadkar, 2002; Hillebrand et al., 2011; Homburg et al., 1999), the role of fads and fashions has to a large extent been overlooked. This paper could, therefore, spur new interest in studies of popular and fashionable marketing concepts and ideas.

Second, an in-depth study of NPS can also provide more knowledge about the historical and intellectual evolution of the marketing field (Bartels, 1988; Jones et al., 2009; Shaw, 2009; Shaw and Jones, 2005). In particular, it provides a needed outside-in perspective on the NPS movement. There is a need for a better understanding of the relationships between marketing academics and practitioners, and NPS is a particularly interesting case in this regard (Bendle et al., 2019). The findings in this study indicate that there is a discrepancy between the concept's strong standing in practice and its relatively low level of recognition by the academic marketing community. This study's detailed examination of the emergence and rise of NPS shows that this theoretical lens can provide new knowledge about the dynamics shaping the introduction and popularisation of new marketing concepts. Moreover, it can provide a better understanding of why some concepts catch on and become popular in the marketing practitioner community while others do not.

7.2 Managerial implications

While it may not be evident at first sight, this research also has implications for managers and practitioners in the field of marketing. The historical examination of NPS's emergence and rise provides new knowledge about the dynamics shaping the introduction and popularisation of new marketing concepts. The study suggests that the field of

marketing, at least partially, is subject to fashion swings. Therefore, managers need to become more critical consumers of marketing knowledge and should not automatically adopt the latest concepts and ideas promoted by merchants such as marketing gurus and consulting firms. Since consultants sell solutions to problems, managers should ask themselves whether they really have an actual organisational problem that needs to be addressed. In general, organisations should identify a problem before looking for a solution (cf. Cohen et al., 1972). For example, research on CRM indicates that managers who adopt marketing concepts as a result of a more rational decision-making process may obtain better results than those who only imitate best practices (Hillebrand et al., 2011).

7.3 Limitations and further research

Just like any piece of research, this study has its limitations, and it is important to discuss them. In general, given the exploratory approach taken in this paper, the findings and conclusions should be interpreted with some caution.

The paper has utilised a desk research approach synthesising the findings of a wide spectrum of academic and practitioner-oriented sources. Therefore, the study has relied heavily on data collected from secondary sources. To a large extent, this was a pragmatic choice given the myriad of challenges associated with researching popular and fashionable management concepts (Madsen and Stenheim, 2013; Nijholt and Benders, 2007; Strang and Wittrock, 2019). In future work, researchers could collect primary data using methods such as surveys/interviews to obtain a better understanding of the adoption, diffusion, and implementation of the concept.

The findings of the paper show that more research on fashionable marketing concepts is needed to better understand the dynamics between the academic marketing community and the marketing practitioner community. In the future, researchers could study in greater detail the different actors involved in the supply and demand sides of the market for marketing concepts by following and tracing their activities in diffusion channels such as conferences, seminars, and social media.

Another avenue would be to follow the future trajectory of the NPS concept. The NPS concept appears to be near the pinnacle of popularity, but the current intense scrutiny and criticism of the concept could be an inflection point, shaping its future popularity trajectory. Will the concept weather the storm and largely sustain its popularity, or will it become associated with negative perceptions and become ‘worn out’ (Benders and Van Veen, 2001)? Since NPS is still a nascent concept, these processes and events are very much still unfolding and playing out. Therefore, the answers to these questions will have to be left to future research.

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