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Online Education in the Age of Social Media Influencers: Applying Net Promoter Scores to Asynchronous Online Delivery

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Online Education in the Age of Social Media Influencers: Applying Net Promoter Scores to Asynchronous Online Delivery

Abstract

Online students are mobile and networked and expect quality online classes. Dissatisfied online students' educational choices are not limited to institutions with their geographical region. The ability of students to disseminate information about dissatisfactory educational experiences to potential student enrollees has increased with the growth of social media. Organizations wishing to use online enrollment as a growth mechanism or offset physical enrollment decreases need tools to understand their perceived market value and quality. A frequently used tool for consumer satisfaction, the Net Promoter Score (NPS), has rarely been applied to academia. This article highlights the application of NPS to online asynchronous education and its value beyond the traditional measures commonly used in higher education.

Keywords

Net Promoter Score, Student Satisfaction, Student Dissatisfaction, Online Education, Asynchronous Online Education, Theory of Dissatisfaction Contributors, Social Media, Influencers

Author Bio

Scott Sandok is a graduate student in the Ed.D. program at Minnesota State University Moorhead. He has been in higher education for 15 years, teaching economics at community and technical colleges. He has also worked as a data analyst for a Fortune 500 organization, focusing on cost, quality, and consumer experience. He is particularly interested in online education, accessibility, engagement, quality, and satisfaction.

Introduction

The growth of online learning puts higher education institutions in a precarious position. Online education can attract students geographically removed from the physical institution. However, decreased geographic constraints also mean that students have a greater choice in schools they can attend. The National Center for Education Statistics indicates that 75 percent, or 11.8 million undergraduate students, were enrolled in at least one distance education course in the fall of 2020 (2022). While that statistic is highly influenced by the coronavirus pandemic that disrupted education, the overall trend shows strong growth. The popularity of online courses is critical to an institution's enrollment, which is vital for the institution's sustainability. Institutions can recruit potential students from a wider geographic pool without being bound by proximal limitations. Improved technology provides online students with more enrollment choices than ever.

Online students, no longer bound by geographic constraints, are more mobile than traditional students. Having an ever-greater percentage of enrollment tied to a population that can be more responsive to dissatisfaction, namely transferring and withdrawing, requires administrators to take a greater interest in ensuring their online delivery is of high quality and aligns with student expectations. Students are connected via social media, with one report suggesting that 96% of students with internet access use at least one social media network (Wade, n.d.). In the current networked environment, one dissatisfied student can use social media to influence others on where to seek their education. An unhappy student has the potential to influence others well beyond their historical range of influence.

This article highlights the value of using the Net Promoter Score (NPS) within education. Further, the author suggests that the traditional course evaluation methods are fundamentally

flawed and offer NPS as an alternative that is used extensively in other industries. This publication uses data collected for and text revised from the author's educational doctorate dissertation (Sandok, 2023) to provide readers with examples of the user of NPS within education.

Current Measures of College Student Satisfaction

Many colleges collect student experience information near the end of each term using course evaluation tools. Colleges collect information near the end of each course to provide students with enough class experience to complete a meaningful evaluation. However, students no longer enrolled in the course are often missed, resulting in an incomplete sample. The most valuable information for improving student success and retention, the insights of those who are unsuccessful in completing the course, are not collected. The collected sample result is favorably skewed by unintentionally censoring the least satisfied students. As a result, using course evaluations is not an ideal measure for evaluating the experiences of those who had enrolled in the course.

Businesses attempt to control their brand reputation by managing individuals on both ends of the customer satisfaction spectrum. Those with favorable experiences provide valuable referrals and free word-of-mouth advertising, while those with negative experiences risk spreading reputation-damaging information to potential clients. Similar referral and recommendation feedback exists in education. Sites such as RateMyProfessors.com advertise ratings of "over 1.3 million professors, 7000 schools, and 15 million ratings," which suggests students are already broadly sharing their experiences (RateMyProfessors.com, 2023).

Businesses recognize that retaining existing relationships is far cheaper than establishing new ones (Thomas, 2001; Reinartz et al., 2005). Depending on the industry, acquiring a new

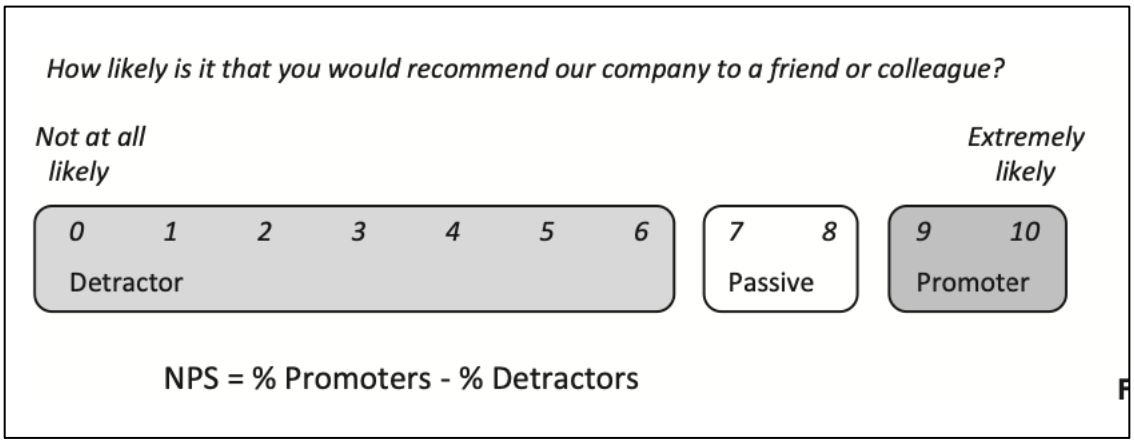
customer is “anywhere from five to 25 times more expensive than retaining an existing one” (Gallo, 2014). Education is not unique; estimates suggest recruiting new students is three to five times more expensive than retaining existing students (Cuseo, 2010). Students share their experiences with potential students on social media sites and other platforms. As such, the incentive to ensure a favorable reputation is increasing. Higher education institutions must strategically act to both increase the number of students who provide favorable advertising and minimize the number of students promoting unfavorable opinions.

Development of Net Promoter Score

Fred Reichheld introduced the Net Promoter Score (NPS) in 2003 to gauge the customer experience (Krol et al., 2014). NPS is based on a single question: How likely would you recommend the good or service to a friend or colleague? Participants provide a single-number response that ranges from ‘0’ (‘not at all likely’) to 10 (‘extremely likely’). Those who score on the “extremely likely” side of the distribution, specifically those who score a nine or ten, are identified as “promoters” and are most likely to provide positive word-of-mouth advertising. Participants who respond with a seven or an eight are considered “passive,” unlikely to promote or discourage others from the organization. Those who respond with a score of zero to six are considered “detractors” and will deter others from the organization being measured (see Figure 1). NPS is calculated as the percentage of promoters minus the percentage of detractors.

Figure 1

Interpretation of Individual Net Promoter Score Response



While the NPS has been used in many diverse industries, including healthcare, finance, television subscription, and internet retail (Krol et al., 2014; Gitlin, n.d.), no evidence has been found of its use within higher education. A large global benchmark study by Survey Monkey of more than 150,000 organizations found that the average NPS is +32 (Gitlin, 2023). Further, Gitlin highlights the distribution of the NPS as follows: the lower quartile has an NPS of 0 or lower, the median is +44, and the upper quartile has an NPS of +72 or higher (2023). Idiomatic suggests that a score between zero and 30 is "good," scores above 50 are "excellent," and scores above 75 are "world-class" (Idiomatic, 2023). No categorization name was provided for scores between 30 and 50. Benchmarks differ by industry and based on if the organization is business-to-consumer (B2C) or business-to-business (B2B). The average B2C benchmark industries (e.g., insurance, financial services, eCommerce, healthcare) is 47. The average B2B benchmark (e.g., consulting, marketing construction, logistics) was 41 (Idiomatic, 2023). For reference, as of February 2023, Starbucks had an NPS of 35, and McDonald's scored 27 (Comparably, 2023).

GroHawk, a customer experience market analysis organization, suggests that detractors publicly criticize their negative experiences (2017). These word-of-mouth criticisms have a disproportionately negative impact on the reputation of the organization. Grohawk claims:

- News of bad service reaches twice as many ears as news of good service.
- 13% of detractors will tell 15 or more people they were unhappy with their experience.
- It takes 12 positive experiences to negate a poor impression from one unresolved, bad experience.
- A typical business hears from just 4% of its dissatisfied customers.

Given the wide use of NPS in both B2B and B2C industries, it is unusual for this tool to have not been applied to education. To increase an NPS score, you must either increase those who are promoters (scores of nine or 10) or decrease the detractors (scores below six), or both. This measure highlights the need to minimize the sources of dissatisfaction in addition to focusing on satisfaction.

Methodology

As a part of a previous research project, the NPS was collected through a survey that attempted to estimate the perceived dissatisfaction with asynchronous online education among community colleges and identify the causes of that dissatisfaction. The survey asked students who had ever enrolled or were currently enrolled in asynchronous online learning to provide their NPS score based on the following question: How likely is it that you would recommend asynchronous online education to a friend or colleague? (Sandok, 2023). Unlike course evaluations, which are distributed only to students enrolled at the time of distribution, this survey was distributed by 11 instructors teaching 11 academic disciplines using multiple delivery

methods. Students could be offered the survey numerous times if they were enrolled in multiple courses that distributed them; those students were instructed to participate only once. The survey was distributed to courses that used five different delivery methods with the intent to include students who intentionally avoid online asynchronous courses after a negative experience. Further, the survey was distributed to students in the developmental, Freshman, and Sophomore level courses.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, as only students who volunteered to participate based on an embedded questionnaire into the students' online learning management system (LMS) were recruited. There was no requirement for the students to have completed an asynchronous online course; instead, they only had to have had some experience with the asynchronous delivery method. This intentional decision allowed students who enrolled and withdrew from an online asynchronous course to participate in the research.

Results

See for general breakout of participating classes represented in the sample.

Table *1* for general breakout of participating classes represented in the sample.

Table 1

Information of Participating Classes Survey

Category		N	%
Number of Instructors Distributing Survey		11	
Number of Disciplines Taught		11	
Number of Sections		41	
Students Enrolled*		936	
Class Size			
	Min	8	
	Max	40	
	Median	23	

Category		N	%
Sections by Course Level			
	Developmental	2	4.9%
	Freshman-level	37	90.2%
	Sophomore-level	2	4.9%
Sections by Delivery Type			
	Face to Face	16	39.0%
	Hybrid	2	4.9%
	Mostly Online	2	4.9%
	Online - Asynchronous	18	43.9%
	Online - Synchronous	3	7.3%

*Students can be enrolled in more than one section: thus, this number likely overcounts the distribution to unique students.

See Table 2 for demographic characteristics and Table 3 for additional participants' quantitative information.

Table 2

Demographics of Survey Participants

Survey Demographics	N	%
Age		
Under 18	1	3%
19-24	28	85%
25 and Older	3	9%
Unknown	1	3%
Gender Identity		
Male	11	33%
Non-Binary/Third Gender	1	3%
Female	21	64%
PSEO Status		
PSEO Student	21	64%
Not PSEO	12	36%
First Generation Status		
First-Generation Status	12	36%
Not First-Generation	21	64%
College Status		
Freshman	20	61%
Sophomore	11	33%
Junior	2	6%
Asynchronous Experience		

Survey Demographics	N	%
1 course	9	27%
2 courses	9	27%
3 courses	4	12%
4 courses	1	3%
5 or more courses	10	24%
Asynchronous Withdrawal		
No withdraws	26	87%
1 course	3	10%
2 courses	1	3%
3 courses	0	0%
4 courses	2	7%
5 courses	1	3%

Table 3

Quantitative Characteristics of Survey Participants

Survey Participant Characteristics	*n*	*M*	*Mdn*	*SD*	*Min*	*Max*
Age	32	21.4	19	6.1	14	50
Asynchronous Course Experience (Completed or in-progress)	33	4.1	2	4.3	1	17
Asynchronous Courses Dropped	33	0.5	0	1.3	0	5

A single question, “how likely would you recommend an online asynchronous course to a friend or colleague” was used to collect information necessary to generate a Net Promoter Score (NPS). Participants responded using a slider response tool from zero to ten in the survey. The NPS was then calculated by subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promotors. Based on the convenience sample, the NPS for online asynchronous learning at the research site was -19. This indicates that the population sampled is likely to discourage others from taking asynchronous online learning and indicates a problem. See

Table 4.

Table 4

Net Promoter Score Responses

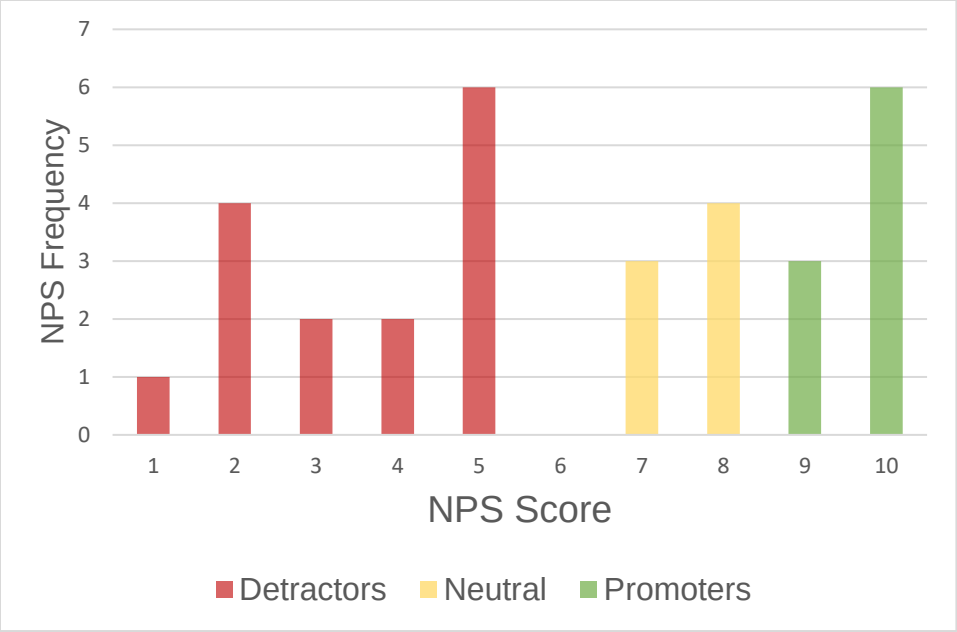
Net Promoter Score	Category	*N*	Category *N*	%	Category %
null	N/A	2			
0	Detractor	0		0%	
1	Detractor	1	15	3%	48%
2	Detractor	4		13%	
3	Detractor	2		6%	
4	Detractor	2		6%	
5	Detractor	6		19%	
6	Detractor	0		0%	
7	Neutral	3	7	10%	23%
8	Neutral	4		13%	
9	Promoter	3	9	10%	29%
10	Promoter	6		19%	
Total/NPS		33	31	100%	-19

The distribution of the NPS responses of student perceptions and experiences with asynchronous online courses is highly variable. Net Promoter scores had a mean of 6.25 points, a median of 7 points, and a standard deviation of 3.0 points. This is especially notable as many dissatisfied students are excluded from course evaluation as they have withdrawn by the time student course evaluations. See .

Figure *2*.

Figure 2

Net Promoter Score Distribution



Interpretations and Implications

No benchmarks within the education industry were identified, but a negative score indicates a problem in any industry. A negative NPS, here a score of -19, suggests that the population who completed this survey is likely discouraging others from taking online asynchronous courses at the research site. It is unclear if the site or the delivery mode influences the negative score more. Additional benchmarks would need to be created to determine the relative position of the college overall and the satisfaction with each delivery method.

A negative NPS indicates that a greater percentage of students had a negative perspective than a favorable one with their experience with asynchronous online courses at the research site. A strategy focusing exclusively on increasing the share of promoters without attempting to decrease the percentage of detractors is likely less effective than a two-part strategy that seeks to improve both areas. While it is unlikely to move the detractors to promoters, it is feasible to

move detractors to a neutral stance, which would still impact the NPS and the school's market reputation.

Conclusion

Enrollment growth and retention are critical to institutes of higher education. Since online education is a primary growth tool for institutions, ensuring a positive reputation and keeping students satisfied is essential to any college's strategic plan. Students who experience courses that do not meet their expectations can identify alternative educational sites and communicate their dissatisfaction with other potential enrollees. Using the NPS can help create a two-part strategy of increasing satisfaction and decreasing dissatisfaction. Further research to identify the sources of dissatisfaction with asynchronous online education is needed to minimize the impact of the detractors on an institution's market reputation. The use of NPS to monitor market reputation can be a valuable new tool to be used in the education industry.

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